

“SERF EMANCIPATION DAY” AND CHINA’S NEW OFFENSIVE ON TIBET

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The Tibetan revolt that culminated in Lhasa on 10 March 1959 began in eastern Tibet in 1956 in response to China’s so-called Democratic Reforms instituted there but not in Central Tibet. The Lhasa revolt resulted in the flight of the Dalai Lama on 17 March 1959 and China’s dissolution by proclamation of the former Tibetan Government on 28 March. On 31 March the Chinese organized a “spontaneous demonstration” of Tibetans in Lhasa to condemn the revolt and to support the “people’s government.” Similar rallies “spontaneously” occurred at several other places in Tibet at the same time and expressed unanimous themes of condemnation of the rebels and support for the PLA. “Patriotic and progressive” Tibetans parroted CCP slogans emphasizing the class rather than national nature of the revolt and the interests of Tibetans in preserving their “national unity” within China. Also praised were the forbearance of the people’s government in tolerating, against the actual wishes of the people, the upper strata’s opposition to social reform, and the PLA’s restraint in quelling the revolt.

These rallies were intended to counteract the popular demonstrations in Lhasa accompanying the revolt, particularly the organization of a “People’s Assembly” on 10 March that had declared Tibet’s independence and a “Women’s March” on the 12th. “Democratic Reforms,” by means of which the Tibetan serfs were supposedly emancipated, were not initiated until July. Nevertheless, the Chinese Government has decided to celebrate 28 March, the date that the “Tibetan local government” was dissolved, as “Serf Emancipation Day.” The fact that 28 March was chosen, rather than 2 July, the day that the Preparatory Committee for the Tibet Autonomous Region announced the Democratic Reforms, indicates that Serf Emancipation Day is intended as counter-propaganda to the uprising of 2008, as the 31 March 1959 demonstrations were counter-propaganda to the uprising of 1959.

Serf Emancipation Day was announced as a celebration intended to “strengthen Tibetans’ patriotism and expose the Dalai clique.” The Democratic Reform by which the serfs were supposedly emancipated was said to be “the people’s revolutionary movement, in which the Party led the one million Tibetan serfs to topple the dark rule of the serf owner class.” The emancipation of the Tibetan serfs was also equated with the emancipation of the slaves during the American Civil War. Other commentaries hailed the liberation of the Tibetan serfs as “a milestone in the world history of human rights.” The event was put into the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” By recalling the past and comparing it with the present Tibetans were supposed to see “a sharp contrast between the evil history of old Tibet when the human rights were trampled on and today when every one is entitled to equal rights.” The celebration was preceded by many testimonies by former serfs as well as other propaganda, including a film on the suffering of the serfs and an exhibition in Beijing intended to show “the darkness and

backwardness of old Tibet and the development and progress of new Tibet in a touching and tremendously convincing display.”

Such propaganda has long been a prominent part of Chinese policy on Tibet. Some of the most notorious examples of this type of propaganda are the famous film, *Serf*, and the museum exhibit in Lhasa, “The Wrath of the Serfs.” The *Serf* film, produced by a PLA film company in the 1960s, paints a dark picture of suffering serfs before liberation by the PLA, whom they supposedly called the “Army of Bodhisattvas.” It was shown all over China and had a significant influence on Chinese audiences in the formation of their opinions about Tibet and the Chinese role there. It was in many cases the only source for many Chinese in forming their impressions about Tibet.

The “Wrath of the Serfs” museum exhibit was created in Lhasa in the early 1970s by Chinese art students. It contained a series of 106 life-like clay sculptures of serfs in all of their sufferings. The exhibit lasted only until the reform period began in 1979, but during the 1970’s it was required viewing for all Tibetan school children. There were smaller museums in other places, particularly in the former dungeon of the Potala, the old Lhasa jail and at several former manor houses in rural areas. All had examples of torture implements used on the serfs and photos of serfs and beggars in poor condition. Another propaganda tactic was the public recitations of former serfs of their sufferings. Some former serfs, their stories suitably elaborated, became semi-professional performers who were taken around to almost all Tibetan villages and towns.

The popularity of the evils of the serf system theme for the Chinese is explained by the fact that it obscures the other issue of Tibet, the political issue of the legitimacy of Chinese rule over Tibet. China claims that there is no such political issue, Tibet having “always” been a part of China. The popularity of the serf issue for the Chinese is not only because it obscures the political issue but because it is one of the fundamental tenets of Communist liberation ideology. Marx held that economic conditions determined political consciousness, or, in other words, that class issues were predominant over national issues and proletarian internationalism would prevail over nationalism.

In the PRC the class theory of nationalism was taken to the point that a slogan, attributed to Mao, “the national issue is in essence a class issue,” characterized the most leftist periods of PRC history and the periods when assimilation of nationalities was most openly pursued. According to this ideology the interests of the working class of any nationality should reside with the multinational proletariat rather than with its own exploitative upper class. In Tibet, the serfs should identify with their liberators, the Chinese workers represented by the CCP, rather than with their own aristocracy, feudal government or religious establishment. The Chinese Communists seem to have imagined that this would really happen, that the Tibetan serfs would support the CCP in overthrowing their own ruling class. Some former serfs who were elevated to high positions without power did so. However, the failure of the “Tibetan masses” to support the Chinese was obscured with propaganda that they actually did. Thus, in regard to the suppression of the revolt and institution of “Democratic Reforms,” Chinese propaganda claims that this was all done by the Tibetans themselves who had “stood on their own feet” and achieved “self-rule.”

Where the Chinese Communists miscalculated was in underestimating the strength and persistence of Tibetan culture and national identity. The Communists’ ideology told them that nationalism was a phenomenon of a former period of history that

would be superseded by the advent of Socialism. They believed that their nationality policies, perfected by Lenin and Stalin, would defuse nationalities' resistance until they could be seduced by the attractions of Chinese culture and the advantages of the socialist system. And they had a typically Chinese chauvinistic opinion of Tibetan culture, which they regarded as really no culture at all. They therefore had little understanding why any Tibetans would want to retain or preserve their "barbaric" culture, and they could imagine no reason for the persistence of Tibetan national identity or nationalism except as manipulated by foreign influences. China miscalculated the ease with which it would be able to annex and assimilate Tibet. Propaganda was used both to promote assimilation and to conceal its failures.

In order to justify the ideology that foreign rule is preferable to self-rule by its own upper class, the Tibetan "feudal serf system has to be portrayed in the worst light. Thus, Chinese propaganda resorts to the most negative depictions of the "Hell on Earth" that they claim was old Tibet before "liberation." Chinese propaganda depicts the sufferings of the "serfs and slaves" as unrestricted by any rules or traditions and unrestrained by any religious morality or human compassion. Chinese depictions of the absolute evils of old Tibet are so fantastic as to be preposterous. Certainly they do no accord with an image of Tibet consistent with the ideals of Buddhism or with the accounts of those travelers who reached Tibet before 1950. Several foreigners undertook heroic and lifelong attempts to visit Tibet and those who were successful usually wrote accounts of their travels. In none of these is Tibet pictured as the "Hell on Earth" of Chinese propaganda.

The Italian scholar and Buddhist, Guiseppi Tucci, travelled thousands of miles, mostly on foot, across Tibet during eight visits between 1927 and 1948. During this period almost no Chinese travelled so extensively in Tibet. Tucci was the founder of Tibetan academic studies and is uniquely qualified to comment on what Tibet was like before the Chinese invasion. He wrote:

On a likely estimate, 30 percent of the landed property belonged to the state, 40 percent to the monasteries, and the rest to the nobility. Usually, the relation between the landlord and his dependants was fairly humane. Caste did not exist in Tibet, and in religion all found that equality which poverty or social customs denied them. Monastery life was open to all, and even if the love of all living creatures and the spirit of sacrifice for the suffering, inculcated by Buddhism, remained generally theoretical, a fundamental humanity governed social relations throughout the country.

Chinese depictions of the events of March 1959 are similarly distorted for propaganda purposes. The Tibetan revolt was not a "revolt of serf owners," who were against reforms. In Central Tibet the reform program had been postponed by Mao in 1957; therefore, the serf-owners had no reason to revolt at that particular time. The Tibetan serfs were not demanding "Democratic Reforms" nor did they rise up in revolt against the feudal serf system. Democratic Reforms were also not what the Chinese claimed. The main principles of democratic reforms were redistribution of wealth and class divisions leading to class struggle. Redistribution of wealth involved the division of feudal estates, with the serfs acquiring title to the land. Class divisions and class struggle

were intended to liberate the serfs' mentality from the class oppression of the feudal system. However, the lands the serfs acquired were soon confiscated again under the rubric of "socialist transformation" and collectivization. Class divisions and class struggle were employed to identify and repress all opponents to Chinese control. Tibetans were forced to endure intensive investigative processes to ascertain their loyalties and opinions and they had to denounce each other as exploiters or reactionaries or counter-revolutionaries, which allowed the Chinese to turn Tibetans against each other and to identify those willing to cooperate and those less than willing. It was this repressive aspect that was revealed by the CCP's characterization of Democratic Reforms as part of the repression of the revolt and Tibetan resistance.

An aspect of the redistribution of wealth during Democratic Reforms was that all property now theoretically belonged to "the people." Tibetans were told that "the people" were Han and Tibetan without distinction. Thus Tibetans had to support the Han in Tibet. Tibetans also had to support the people in other provinces who were suffering from famine due to the Great Leap Forward of 1959-61. Grain was exported from Tibet even though thousands of Tibetans also died of starvation at this time, as was described by the Panchen Lama in 1962 in his petition to the Chinese leaders. One of the most culturally destructive effects of Democratic Reforms was also the result of the "redistribution of wealth" principle. In the three years of Democratic Reforms almost all temples and monasteries were closed. Some were closed due to their participation in or support of the revolt. Many monks and nuns fled to India, further depopulating the monasteries. Virtually all of the remaining monks were forced to secularize under the "freedom of religion" aspect of Democratic Reforms, meaning that monks and nuns whom the Chinese claimed had been forced into a religious life now had the freedom to leave.

As monasteries were depopulated and closed they were systematically looted by Chinese state agencies. The most valuable artifacts were identified by art experts and metallurgists in advance. Then, the relics of each monastery were removed and trucked to China. The most valuable articles were taken first and then all articles of metal were taken to China where they were melted down. Many of the most precious and valuable Tibetan sculptures and paintings disappeared, only some of which ultimately reappeared on the international art market. All of this was justified according to the principle of redistribution of wealth to all of the people. The wealth of Tibet belonged not just to the Tibetan people, for whom it was the expression of their national culture, but to all the Chinese people, of whom Tibetans were claimed to be a part. The Chinese Communist Party claimed that it represented the people; therefore, it felt justified in confiscating the wealth of Tibet for its own purposes. Under the rubric of Democratic Reforms, Tibet's national wealth was looted for the benefit of the Chinese state and Tibet's culture was irreparably damaged. The magnitude of this disaster for Tibetan culture was increased because of the fact that almost all Tibetan artistic and cultural expression was devoted to Buddhist art; Tibetan cultural wealth and wisdom was devoted to Buddhist scholasticism, all of which was destroyed.

Far from being the emancipation of the Tibetan serfs, Democratic Reforms were the means by which the Chinese enforced their control over Tibet, identified and repressed any opponents and significantly destroyed the symbols of Tibetan culture and national identity. Now China insists that Tibetans must celebrate the day that their self-

constituted government was dissolved as the day of their emancipation, and it will use all its coercive powers to make them do so.

China's declaration and celebration of a "Serf Emancipation Day" is, like many aspects of Chinese policy in Tibet, intended for propaganda purposes, both to "educate" Tibetans and to propagandize the outside world. The class theme of China's justifications for its rule over Tibet has become the most fundamental of its arguments. It is China's denial of Tibetan self-determination that the class argument is employed to obscure. If Tibet before "liberation" can be depicted as an orgy of suffering, then perhaps Chinese rule can be justified. However, in order to achieve this, the evils of old Tibet have to be exaggerated to the point of absurdity. No society could have been as awful as Tibet is portrayed by the Chinese. And no one but the Chinese, few if any of whom had any knowledge of Tibet before 1950, describes it in this way. The Chinese motive in denigrating Tibetan society in such terms is obviously to justify the "liberation" of Tibet and the imposition of Chinese rule over a non-Chinese people. This is China's favorite argument because it obscures the real issue and it is founded upon real inequalities in old Tibetan society. If China can confine the argument to the question of what old Tibet was really like then China thinks it can win the debate about Tibet.

China's Current Policy and New Diplomatic Offensive

China's current policy on Tibet, as invariably expressed by its officials and spokespersons, is that Tibet is not an issue of "human rights, ethnicity or religion," but rather a fundamental issue of China's sovereignty over Tibet. What this means is that China does not believe that the Dalai Lama has really given up independence. The Dalai Lama's Middle Path policy, by accepting Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, assumes that other issues of Tibetan autonomy, like human rights, ethnicity and religion, can then be discussed. However, the Chinese maintain that the Dalai Lama really wants independence or "semi-independence" or "independence in disguise." His proposal for "genuine autonomy" and a "greater Tibetan autonomous region" are the means by which he denies Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and intends to eventually seek Tibetan independence under the principle of national self-determination. China says that Tibetans already have autonomy based upon their ethnicity and they have human rights and freedom of religion; therefore, these are not subjects for discussion. These issues have already been resolved by Tibet's "liberation" and "democratic reforms."

What the Dalai Lama really wants, then, is the restoration of the feudal serf system and his own rule. What China does not want is any real autonomy in Tibet, under the Dalai Lama or not, because autonomy would allow for the survival of Tibetan culture and national identity upon which Tibetan separatism is based. China's experience has been that whenever it has allowed even minimal autonomy it has led to a revival of Tibetan separatism. China believes that its retrenchment policy in 1957 led to the 1959 revolt and its liberalization during the 1980s led to the riots of 1987-89. In contrast to foreign critics who wonder why China does not realize that autonomy is in China's best interest, and that only autonomy can create real stability in Tibet, China knows that autonomy is not in its best interest. China knows that autonomy only creates instability and therefore cannot be allowed. China cannot allow the existence of a separate national

entity within its national territory. The solution to the Tibet issue is not autonomy but the traditional Chinese solution of repression of Tibetan national identity and economic development accompanied by colonization.

China has clearly indicated that it will not dialogue with the Dalai Lama about Tibetan autonomy. The March 2008 uprising produced international pressure on China to dialogue, which it pretended to do in May and July. This was sufficient to defuse threats of some international leaders to boycott the Olympic opening ceremony. Since then, after another meeting with the Dalai Lama's representatives in November, Chinese officials have scornfully rejected any dialogue about Tibetan autonomy and chastised the Tibetans for bringing up the same issues that had been rejected since the early 1980s. China clearly imagines that it won the propaganda battle about Tibet that began in March and it has since begun an unprecedented diplomatic offensive.

This offensive is based upon the belief that Western countries do not really care about Tibet and are only exploiting a non-existent issue in order to denigrate China and prevent its rise to its rightful status as a great world power. Since Western countries do not really care about Tibet, and anyhow they do not really know the "truth" about Tibet, these countries will not jeopardize their diplomatic and economic relations with China for the sake of Tibet. Tibet has always been an issue of extreme sensitivity for China, perhaps even more sensitive than Taiwan because it involves the question of Chinese rule over a non-Chinese people. However, the uprising of 2008 and the protests against the Olympic torch relay aroused a strongly nationalistic reaction among the Chinese government and people. In the past, China has often imagined that the Tibet issue was resolved and has reacted with surprise when Tibetans reveal that they are still not reconciled to Chinese rule and that they still revere the Dalai Lama. They were surprised again in 2008. The difference this time is that China feels it has the economic and political clout to mount an offensive of its own to coerce international acceptance of its position on Tibet.

China has always reacted strongly to the Dalai Lama's international travels and world leaders' meetings with him. However, it has typically made angry statements about "hurting the feelings of the Chinese people" but has not allowed any such incidents to damage its relations with other countries. This situation began to change in 2007 when several important countries' leaders, including those of Austria, Germany, Australia, Canada and the United States met with him officially for the first time. In the United States he was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and in Canada he was made an honorary citizen. China singled out Germany for economic pressure and demanded that Germany apologize in order to restore good relations.

France was the next subject of China's ire after French President Sarkozy threatened to boycott the Olympic opening and Paris was the site of one of the worst protests against the Olympic torch. Sarkozy declined to meet with the Dalai Lama in August when the Dalai Lama was in France, but he did so in November at a meeting of Nobel Prize winners in Poland. Sarkozy perhaps thought a meeting in another country on the sidelines of a meeting with a different purpose might not be too offensive to the Chinese. However, China reacted in an unprecedented manner, canceling an already scheduled and important economic summit with European leaders.

China's cancellation of the European meeting may in the future be seen to have been the first move in its new offensive on Tibet. Tibetans and their Western supporters

thought that the 2008 uprising put them on the offensive. But China's belief that it won the subsequent propaganda battle and that its successful Olympics marked its emergence onto the world stage as a new economic and political power apparently convinced the Chinese leaders that they could take a more aggressive position on Tibet. China now seems to be willing to demand that other countries adhere to its position on Tibet at the risk of damaging their good relations with China. The financial crisis in the United States and other capitalist countries has also seemed to give China the impression that its own economic and political system is superior and that it can be more demanding in its international relations. The manifestation of this new attitude has been new demands that its critics cease their complaints about Tibet.

Recent articles in the Chinese press have suggested that not only must other countries not criticize China about Tibet but they must revise their beliefs about the issue. This is very typical of the Chinese political and cultural mentality. It reflects a type of thought control that is a characteristic of Chinese political history and a specialty of Communist regimes. China now feels that it is in a position to demand international conformity to its version of the reality of Tibet, much like the ideological conformity the CCP demands of the Chinese people. The precedent for this new strategy is China's coercion of almost all countries in the world to adhere to its "One China" policy in regard to Taiwan. China often interprets the "One China" policy to apply to Tibet and demands statements from other countries of recognition that Tibet is an inseparable part of China. China's recent propaganda indicates that it will similarly require conformity to its view on Tibet as a price for good relations and it will use its political and economic power to enforce this demand.

A 5 March *China Daily* article was explicit about China's strategy to coerce conformity in regard to Tibet:

Some Westerners long harboring ill intentions toward China have taken advantage of the Tibet issue in an attempt to force their misconceptions upon China. It is known that the Tibet issue is in essence not an issue of ethnicity, religion or human rights, but one of several Western infringements on China's sovereignty, territorial integrity and core national interests. Western nations should recognize that Tibet is an inalienable part of China and stop interfering if they want to remain on good terms with China. ...

Relations between China and the rest of the world have experienced a historic transition. China's development is now tied to the world's, while the rest of the world also needs greater cooperation with China. It is impossible for any Western country to not interact with China. However, it is impossible for the West to cooperate with China unless it develops an objective and unbiased stance on Tibet.

Another *China Daily* article on 12 March called on China to develop its own diplomatic doctrine. The "China Doctrine" would make clear to the world that China claims the right to have its own say in the international community. The world should be made clear about what are China's core interests and bottom lines. The article said that the world did not yet understand that Tibet was one of China's core interests. It quoted Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's statement that China would make it a core interest that

other countries not interfere in China's internal affairs by entertaining the Dalai Lama. At a news conference summarizing diplomatic achievements in the past year, Yang's countenance was said to have "suddenly stiffened" when he urged the international community "to not allow the Dalai Lama to visit their countries" and "to not allow him to use their territories to separate Tibet from China." Refusing visitations by the Dalai Lama should become one of the "basic norms of international relations" of any country cultivating ties with China, Yang said, "clenching his hand into a fist." Clearly, *China Daily* said, the foreign minister was "erecting a post" to delineate its bottom line on Tibet, as a part of its diplomatic doctrine.

China was successful in its campaign to coerce conformity to the "One China" policy, often from countries for which this policy had little or no meaning. Now, it clearly imagines that this is also the solution to the Tibet issue, an issue the existence of which it denies except as invented and exploited by "hostile Western forces." China believes that its international critics have no real interest in Tibet and will abandon the issue if the alternative is bad relations with China. The tone of the new White Paper on Democratic Reforms and much of recent Chinese propaganda reveals a confidence that China now has sufficient economic and political power to coerce international conformity to its position on Tibet. China perhaps expects that it will not be too many years before it will have representatives of Western countries at its annual celebrations of "Serf Emancipation Day."

China has gone on the offensive about Tibet. Western countries previously supportive of Tibet may be vulnerable to China's coercion. Much will depend upon the future "correlation of forces," as the Soviets used to say, especially on the economic front. China has resisted the offensive mounted by Tibetans and their supporters to convince it to dialogue with the Dalai Lama. China has countered with its own offensive, and supporters of Tibet may have to go on the defensive to oppose China's coercive strategy. China has said clearly and bluntly that it will not dialogue with the Dalai Lama about Tibetan autonomy. It has openly revealed its new strategy on Tibet. Tibet's supporters, including those in the United States, may have to contemplate a shift in their own strategy from the futile attempt to put pressure on China to dialogue to a defense against China's new diplomatic offensive.

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