When Serfs Stood Up in Tibet

Report by ANNA LOUISE STRONG

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Foreword

When Serfs Stood up in Tibet is still the best book for understanding the startling transformations on "the roof of the world." This eyewitness account was written in 1959, at the decisive moment of change when the serf-owners' revolt was crushed and the democratic reform began. It is happily re-issued in 1965. For as the direct outgrowth of that moment, the long process of the setting up of the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China has just been consummated. With all the means of production transferred to the ex-slaves and serfs, and with elections at every level completed to establish their political power, Tibet's people are beginning their march from the victorious democratic revolution to the socialist revolution.

Reporting of a quality that lives on as history is rare, but with Anna Louise Strong it is a habit. Now in her eightieth year, she has forged from rich experience of the past an unerring sense of the future growing in the present. This is the "secret" of her own and her works' youthfulness. It has guided her since the time, almost half a century ago, when she first met up with revolution — the Leninist class rev-

olution — that recurrent glad confident morning of the peoples. Combined with a powerful gift of expression and determination to get close to the facts, it has made her a great chronicler of our stirring times. This is because her approach and the actual development of reality are in harmony.

Freshly back from a month in Tibet myself (my second visit) I have only to add a few notes to the rich background given in this book.

First, Anna Louise Strong was right about the nature, magnitude and irreversibility of the change. Western and other reactionaries still rumble their lies about "destruction of the Tibetans." Liberals have begun to expostulate, "Peking, after all, has brought some benefits to Tibet." But she, six years ago, took the argument right out of this context and put it where it belongs. Her book shows clearly how the liberation of the working people of all the rest of China, who are of many nationalities, sparked and helped the self-liberation of Tibet's serfs and slaves.

Second, the ensuing years have produced immense progress, some highlights of which I summarise below.

Physically, there are 1,321,000 Tibetans in Tibet, 10 percent more than in 1959. Culturally, at least 20 times as many can read and write their own language. In self-government, instead of a handful of ecclesiastical and lay serf-owners and their bailiffs, democratically elected working people run the region's affairs from the village up. Of the heads of the 71 counties, 11 are Tibetan women! Trained over the past few years,

16,000 Tibetan personnel, most of them former serfs and slaves, are now working in civil and economic administration, education, health and national defence.

In production, grain output is now 45 percent and the number of cattle and sheep 36 percent more than six years ago. Agriculture has been enriched by many new food crops, tools and methods. Animal husbandry has new breeds, veterinary services and ways of pasture management. Industrial growth has begun, with 67 factories processing local materials, and cement works and power plants serving construction needs. Tibet's working class, recently non-existent, now numbers 25,000 including many young men from poor families who have left the biological and productive sterility of enforced lama-hood.

As irrigation did elsewhere in China, the task of using Tibet's swift waters for local electric power needs is stimulating peasants and herdsmen to think of passing from their present mutual-aid teams based on private ownership to socialist collectives (whether these will be called co-operatives or at once become communes of a form suited to local conditions is still being discussed.) In any case, Tibet plans power generating facilities in every county, and in townships or communes where suitable sites exist, by 1970. Already such small units number over a score. I saw one serving three villages with a total of 80 households. It kept 400 bulbs burning in cottages, a school, clubhouse and meeting hall.

Lhasa is becoming a beautiful modern city. Not long ago, the Potala, the temples and a few mansions

stood amid hovels and cesspools of medieval squalor. Now there are miles of well-lighted asphalted streets and underground drains (not an inch of either in 1959). Electricity is supplied to 90 percent of all homes for illumination and often for cooking (ex-serfs and slaves get it free). A Working People's Cultural Palace, with a hall seating 1,200, is used for meetings, plays and films; there are also two other film theatres. A State Emporium built this year, the biggest of many new shops and stores, sells everything from needles and thread to sewing machines, bicycles and transistor radios — all now popular purchases with people who were themselves so recently bought and sold.

An air-line terminal sells tickets for flights to other places in China. At the long-distance bus station, one can get on coaches specially built in Shanghai and Tsinan, heated and equipped with oxygen for high-altitudes. Passenger services run not only along many of the region's motor roads, which now total 10,000 miles and reach 65 of the 71 counties, but also on the trunk highways to railheads in the interior provinces and the new international highway to Nepal.

The Museum of the Tibetan Revolution, built in record time in 1965 by the famous No. 4 Team of Tibetan construction workers, now fronts the Potala and attracts many more "pilgrims" than that famous edifice. From its 50,000 square feet of striking and authentic exhibits, one can see exactly what held back Tibet in the past and what is pushing it forward today. Here is a part of the Dalai Lama's treasure, brought for

the first time from the Potala vaults. Jewels, utensils of pure gold, vestments and furs match in magnificence those of the Czars in the Kremlin, but the Czars had hundreds of millions of people to exploit and the Dalai only a shrinking people of a million. Much other wealth was removed by him to India.

Here, too, are details of the serf-owner revolt and the foreign backing it received, of the redistribution of land and cattle to the people, of the immense aid they received from the rest of China (including the constructive achievements of the proletarian People's Liberation Army, which is a working as well as a fighting force) and of their own leap in productivity, skills and learning.

The progress so greatly beginning is not to be measured merely in material terms. Dawa, an ex-slave and blacksmith, the "untouchable" lowest of the low in Tibet's old society, is now a high-tension maintenance man on Lhasa's new construction. He said to me, "It is not just that we workers build, for we have always built, nor that we earn wages for it, which we never did before, but that the places we build we workers will enter and use."

In fact, in its present surge forward, Tibet is reincarnating itself in ways the Dalai never dreamed of. How could he? Since he ran off only six years ago, there has occurred one of those mass-powered jet-propelled acts of political nuclear fission which the Chinese Communist Party (now with a great many Tibetan members) knows so well how to build up and detonate.

The backthrust has pushed the old serf-owning society, smashed so recently that teen-agers still recall it, a thousand years into the past where it belongs, and the feudal theocrasy along with it.

Freedom of religious belief is honoured and temples are open, though the young prefer Marxism and science. But economic and political privilege for high clerics, as for aristocrats, is gone forever. In this connection one must mention that the Panchen Lama, given high position because he had pledged support for the people's advance, betrayed it by leading a new phase of serf-owner resistance. Where the Dalai had tried to prevent the beginning of the democratic reform by armed revolt, the Panchen headed a group which tried to frustrate its completion. In 1964, before the full establishment of the new region, he was sharply criticized by the people's representatives on the Preparatory Committee for Tibet's autonomy, who removed him from its acting chairmanship but kept him on as a member to give him a chance to change. In the 1965 elections, he was not chosen for any governmental post, though remaining a committeeman of the People's Political Consultative Conference, which discusses but does not decide policy.

Since the democratic reform in 1959, non-rebels from the former ruling class have continued to be given a place in Tibet. Economically, their feudal property has been bought out, not confiscated, thus enabling them to maintain their living standards. The Panchen and his group, for instance, were paid large sums for the

estates previously in their possession (his Tashi Lhumpo lamasery received 5,000,000 yuan). But the basic requirement for all such persons is that they co-operate in the advance of a Tibet now ruled by the former dispossessed — 95 percent of all the Tibetans. Anna Louise Strong records (p. 256) how she was told six years ago that while the reform the Panchen had promised in his clerical domains would be left to him, resistance to it would be corrected by the people, including the poor monks. This, in fact, has now occurred.

The revolutionary nuclear fission is also a fusion. Tibet, having burned out the age-old serfdom that sapped its vitals and the imperialist intrigues that backed that cannibal system, is more an expression of its people's virtues, passion and potentialities than ever before in history. At the same time it is more inseparably merged in the common crucible of revolution in multinational China.

Mao Tse-tung says, "The national question is, in the last analysis, a matter of class struggle." In line with this, China's Vice-Premier Hsieh Fu-chih, central government representative, declared to the first People's Congress of the newborn Tibet Autonomous Region:

"National regional autonomy is a system of people's democratic dictatorship . . . it must be the right of the working people to be masters of society, never a dictatorship of the serf-owning or any other exploiting class." In Tibet, the million emancipated slaves and serfs, united with other patriots and progressives, now

exercise their rights as masters of Tibet, as part of the socialist advance of all multi-national China.

Read Anna Louise Strong's book, and learn how and why Tibet's people irrevocably chose this road.

Israel Epstein

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I. TAKE-OFF FOR TIBET

"We urge you to take this trip seriously. When Comrade Chen Yi[1] went to Lhasa in 1956, he was ill for a considerable time afterwards. People have even died of this trip. We do not want to scare you — you have all been medically checked and a doctor will travel with you to take all precautions — but you should not take it lightly. If anyone wants to withdraw, phone us by noon tomorrow. Otherwise send in the money for your expenses."

We were meeting in Peking, nineteen correspondents, writers, radio and TV men who had applied to visit Tibet. We came from eleven countries, not counting the representative of the Peking *People's Daily*, who was going as our host. I myself had been accepted only three days earlier and had rushed for my check-up at the Peking Union Medical College, that handsome central hospital built long ago by the Rockefeller Foundation, that has seen so much history and is again a fine center of medicine in Peking.

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[1] Foreign Minister and Vice-Premier went to the formation of the Preparatory Committee for Tibet Autonomous Region in Lhasa in 1956.

My blood pressure of 130 over 65 was neatly within limits, but my age of seventy-three was against me. I would not adjust as easily as a younger person to the high elevation, which would range from 12,200 feet in Lhasa to 15,000 or more in the pastures and at least 21,000 in the flight. After an excellent electro-cardiogram the doctor gave a qualified permit: "Passed for Tibet if special care is taken and special arrangements made against over-exertion". He didn't want to be blamed if anything happened to me!

My hosts took his qualification seriously. The first "special arrangement" was that Chao Feng-feng, my own interpreter, would travel with me. She might also interpret for the group at times — on a group trip everyone is supposed to be helpful, — but her special job was to look after me. To relieve me of the weight of my camera, my Hermes Baby typewriter, my over-night bag on the plane. Above all, to watch me like a hawk and say: "You'd better go to bed now", and "I'll get the waitress to bring dinner to your room".

We went first for a rest at the beach in Peitaiho. It might be a week before we left for Lhasa, they said; we hoped it would be more. I needed a full month's rest, for I had been working day and night to finish my book "Tibetan Interviews" before the heat of August should make work impossible in Peking. The book had just gone to the printers; Feng-feng and I already had tickets and reservations at

Peitaiho. In fact I had been appalled when they phoned that I was accepted for Tibet.

"But I can't go until I have had a vacation", I protested. They replied: "It is up to you". So I had gone for my hospital check-up and left the next morning for the beach. "These group trips always have delays", I said comfortably to Feng-feng. "We might get even two weeks of rest".

The first night in cool air was marvellous; the first morning swim in that tepid sea was magic. Two weeks of this — even one week — would be a real rest. But after that wonderful swim, a phone call from Peking said we were leaving Saturday for Tibet. I got up at four the next morning and took the five o'clock train back, and went that afternoon to the first briefing, where they warned us to "take it seriously". I had had just twenty-four hours of rest in Peitaiho and just one swim. Could I face Tibet on that?

When I saw the group I was still more disquieted. They were all men and mostly young. Later I learned that there was another woman in the party, Eva Siao, doing photographs for the TV of the German Democratic Republic. They were youthful go-getters who would make three trips a day, morning, afternoon and evening. How could I keep up with that? Yet it would be unpardonable — as well as very unpleasant — to find myself a drag on the group. For we were the first correspondents — the first foreigners of any kind — to see the beginning of the new "democratic

Tibet". Serfdom had been less than a month legally abolished by the resolution issued July 17th, 1959 by the new local government of Tibet. The law's enforcement had yet to be organized. This was what we were to see.

Only five months earlier, rebellion had flared in Lhasa, led by four of the six *kaloons* — ministers — in the *kashag* (local government) and by most of the top monasteries. They had announced Tibet's secession from China and attacked all offices of the Central Government with armed force including artillery. The rebellion had been quickly suppressed. Some of the rebel leaders had been captured, others had fled to India, taking the Dalai Lama.

These events had opened at long last the road to reform. For on March 28th, just as those rebel leaders who constituted a majority of the *kashag* were about to flee into India, the State Council of China issued a special order dissolving the local government of Tibet — to wit, the *kashag* — and putting local government in the hands of the Preparatory Committee for the Tibetan Autonomous Region. This was the committee set up in 1956, with a wider representation than any Tibet government had yet had, since it united areas that had previously been in some conflict.

The Dalai Lama had been its chairman; he remained titular chairman even in absentia. The Panchen Erdeni was already its first vice-chairman; he was asked to become acting chairman while await-