Tibetan Interviews

ANNA LOUISE STRONG

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by

Anna Louise Strong

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INTRODUCTION

When rebellion against China flared in Lhasa, Tibet's capital, in mid-March of 1959, and the defeated rebels fled to India, taking with them the Dalai Lama, known to western headlines as "the god-king," discussion raged around the world, taking in every country typical forms.

Britain neatly sat the fence, saying: "We have always recognized China's sovereignty . . . on the understanding that Tibet has autonomy," a formula permitting advance or retreat in any direction, depending on how "autonomy" is defined. Christian Herter, for the U.S. State Department, went all out in a moral crusade for "the indomitable spirit of man," which seemed in this case to mean the serf-owners' insistence on keeping their serfs. Prayers for Tibet were held on U.S. vessels in the China seas. Committees for Tibetan refugees were set up under names like Lowell Thomas, who in 1949 did a world promotion job for Tibet's independence from China, and General Wedemeyer, a well-known figure in America's last attempt in the forties to keep military and economic hold on China for Washington and for Chiang Kai-shek.

Reactions in India were more complex. In India's northeast provinces, whose border with Tibet is long, there is a large population of Tibetans and a serfdom like Tibet's. Here the upper class furiously fears lest reform in Tibet arouse their own serfs. Other elements in India have long resented the agreement made with China by which India gave up the special privileges in Tibet which Britain had seized. Nehru would find politics easier if across that long, high border remained the living museum of the Middle Ages which Tibet presented, instead of a land reform exploding into modern farms and primary schools. A fairly acrimonious controversy rose for some weeks between spokesmen of China and India, which then somewhat moderated without bringing the rupture between these two great countries for which Washington clearly hoped. But controversy will be kept alive by the Dalai Lama's presence in India, and may again become sharp as the abolition of serfdom proceeds in Tibet.

A striking statement was given on May 6 in an editorial of the *People's Daily* of China, which said:

> At present public opinion in many countries of the world is quite vocal about the question of Tibet. This is an excellent thing. The 1,200,000 people living on the roof of the world, to whom no serious attention has ever been paid before, have every right to enjoy the honor of holding the attention of the whole world, and to be enlightened and steeled in the course of world-wide discussions.

This is a statement with which I heartily agree.

My contribution to the discussion comes from the fact that I was present in Peking during the first half of 1959, that I heard the Tibetan deputies speak in the National People's Congress of China and afterwards had exclusive interviews with the top figures in Tibet's present government, the Panchen Erdeni, who is Acting Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and Ngapo Ngawang-Jigme, its Secretary-General, who himself was a serf-owner of 2,500 serfs, but pledged to abolish serfdom through compensation to the owners. Further interviews were given me by Chang Ching-wu, representative in Tibet for the Central Government of China, by Captain Yang of the People's Liberation Army, who has been on duty in Lhasa ever since the Agreement between Peking and the Dalai Lama was signed in 1951. I also talked at length with many runaway serfs who had studied in Peking and were now hastening back to Tibet to help the reform. I visited the exhibition on the smaller preliminary revolts that took place in Szechwan, Chinghai and Kansu, and saw the type of air-drops from Chiang Kai-shek and the type of tortures used against serfs. Finally I consulted leading experts on Buddhism.

When I combined these interviews with a study of the news despatches on all sides of the controversy, I felt I had something to report that might help allay tensions and promote understanding among people who need to be friends.

Not all people will become friends through greater knowledge. Basic differences of philosophy exist. But these should not be aggravated or confused by misunderstandings over words. So one must first define some of the terms now loosely used in discussion, terms like "sovereignty," "autonomy" and "tragedy." Strange as it may seem, one must first define "Tibet." For the boundaries of Tibet have changed greatly through the centuries and have been fiercely fought over even in recent decades.

"Tibet," as the Chinese use the term and as I shall use it, is Tibet as it stood in 1911, at the fall of the Chinese empire, and as shown on most maps of this century, whether published in London or Shanghai. This Tibet includes the territory of "U," where the Dalai Lama directly ruled, and the territory of Houtsang, where the Panchen Erdeni ruled. To this Tibet, as mapped in the days of Chiang Kai-shek, the present Peking government added in 1955 a sizable area to the east called Chamdo, which since the last days of the empire had been part of a province called Sikang. Reasons for these changes will be given in subsequent chapters. Here we note only that "Tibet, including Chamdo" has 1,200,000 square kilometers and also 1,200,000 population. The figures are easy to remember: one person to a square kilometer, not very crowded.

When, however, the word "Tibet" is used by promoters of a "Greater Tibet," it includes much more. It may even go back to the days of the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century, when Kublai Khan, emperor of China, named Pagspa, the learned prelate of Tibet,

"King of the Law in the Western Land of the Buddha" as far as Kokonor. People today may thus use the word "Tibet," innocently or not so innocently, in different ways. When an Indian lawyer, for instance, accuses China of "genocide" against Tibetans, and claims that China has sent five million settlers to penetrate Tibetan lands, with four million more to follow, he is describing a process of centuries, but is willing that his hearers should think it was done in the past decade by deliberate malice in Peking. Not a single Chinese settler has been permitted in this decade to move to "Tibet, including Chamdo." But great mixed populations have grown in past centuries and are growing today in the adjacent provinces. The 1953 census, which noted in China some 2,800,000 Tibetans, also noted that only 1,200,000 of these were in "Tibet, including Chamdo," while a larger number, some 1,600,000, lived in adjacent provinces: Szechwan, Yunnan, Kansu and especially Chinghai.

When the Dalai Lama today asks for a "Greater Tibet," he is asking for large chunks of these provinces, possibly including the Tsaidam Basin where China's greatest oil-strike lies. We shall discuss this in subsequent chapters in greater detail. Some things cease to be practical politics. The Pope of Rome might with equal reason ask for all that Europe then once paid tribute through the monasteries to the Holy Roman Empire, or Mexico ask for Texas and California back with their present development and population.

This brings us to the question of "sovereignty" or "suzerainty" which are also disputed words. Is China

"sovereign" or only "suzerain" in Tibet? When Nehru says, with apparent casualness: "We have always recognized China's sovereignty — or suzerainty," he is choosing to be ambiguous. The term "suzerain" was introduced by the British, as a means of clouding China's "sovereignty." It applies to the relation that existed in the Tang Dynasty, when a king of Tibet married a Tang princess and paid tribute to the Tang. But ever since the thirteenth century, when Kublai Khan made Pagspa "Prince of Tibet," Chinese have always claimed "sovereignty," i.e. that Tibet is an integral part of China, with more rights than an ordinary province but without the right of secession.

I shall discuss this sovereignty at greater length in the chapter on "Gods as Rulers." That the sovereignty was at times loose and even contested can be easily proved, for all of China more than once in these seven centuries broke up into warring dynasties. I note here only three facts, which I shall use again in their related place. First, no nation in all these seven centuries ever recognized Tibet as a separate nation or sent an ambassador to Lhasa. Second, even when the British seized Lhasa and enforced a treaty in the Potala Palace in 1904, the bill for the 750,000 pounds indemnity was sent to the emperor in Peking and collected from him. Lastly, a leading Buddhist expert Chao Pu-chu stated to me: "All incarnations have to have the recognition of the Central Government of China."

No arguments from the past are final. Especially in our day nations long submerged are born from the

womb of old empires and declare independent life. Is this, then, the case with Tibet? It is the present Tibet that must answer. The long past has interest only as showing the source from which present decisions come. The long past shows a Chinese sovereignty never successfully challenged in seven hundred years. What does the present say?

The first answer from the present was given in 1951 when the Dalai Lama and the Central Government of China signed an Agreement, recognizing the long past of the Tibetan people "within the boundaries of China" and stating Tibet's present "return to the motherland." This has been confirmed by many acts and statements over eight years. It was defied on March 10 by the March rebellion in Lhasa, in which four of the six *kaloons,* the ministers of the Dalai Lama, took leading part and in which the Dalai Lama's own part is still not clear. Was this rebellion a valid demand of the Tibetan people for independence, or was it the attempt of a small clique of serf-owners, both lay and clerical, to perpetuate serfdom and their own power? This question must be part of the substance of this book.

In this context we consider another word over which controversy rages, the word "autonomy" in relation to Tibet. The word "autonomy" is here simpler to define than sovereignty, for it is defined in the 1951 Agreement itself. It is, as we shall see in the chapter "My Fathers Were Kings," a "national regional autonomy under the leadership of the Central Government . . . in accordance with the Common Program." This is not independence, nor half-

independence, nor a basis for a right to secession. It is a guarantee within a sovereign nation for the protection of local rights.

The nature of this autonomy and the extent of its fulfilment, are also of the substance of this book. Did Peking keep its promises? Did the local government of Lhasa keep its promises? On such questions knowledge must be sought and on such questions moral judgments are possible by individuals or groups of individuals within any nation, for any act of any nation is subject to moral review. Such judgment should be well grounded and properly expressed if it is to avoid inflaming war. No political action by a foreign nation is possible unless that foreign nation chooses to deny sovereignty and to intervene.

When questions of "sovereignty" and "autonomy" are settled, a deeper question remains. "Sovereignty" and "autonomy," however important, are only technical questions of man's techniques for attaining his goals. The deeper question was raised by Nehru when he called Tibet "a static society fearful of what may be done to it in the name of reform." And Peking gave its answer in the editorial which said that Tibet's basic reality is not a static, unified society, but 1,200,000 people, of whom 95 percent are commoners and mainly serfs, eager for reform, and that for them, the quelling of the rebellion has "turned a bad thing into a good thing" and opened the gate to hope.

The argument between these views must be carefully considered, for these are two different world views. Many liberals, especially those of the West,

will applaud Nehru's views as both "liberal" and "restrained." These are people in whose philosophy a nation, or a society, is seen as a unit, expressed by a single voice. That voice is the voice of its government; in Tibet it was the *kasha*, the Cabinet of Ministers. If the *kasha* split, two remaining loyal to Peking and four rebelling, then the four-to-two majority is seen as the voice of Tibet, especially when the voice of the Dalai Lama is added. From this view, it is deduced that what happened in Tibet is "a tragedy."

The opposing view sees Tibet not as a unit, expressed by a four-to-two majority of its cabinet, but as a society in acute class conflict, in which 95 percent are commoners while only 5 percent are of the upper class. The 1,140,000, who are 95 percent, are not "fearful of reform" but deeply crave it. The 5 percent who make up the upper class do not all oppose reform as a unit. Some are "progressive," and ready to abolish serfdom; some are neutral and waver, but may be won to agree. Only a few are "die-hards" who cling to serfdom against any offered terms. These must be fought, but they are a small minority.

For the vast majority of Tibetans, in this view, the quelling of the rebellion is no tragedy, but the open door to reform and so to a new Tibet which shall be truly a "Greater Tibet," not through extension of territory but by expansion of production and a prosperous life for all. This view also must be examined carefully, lest the holders of power mistake their own plans for "the will of the people." We must seek, if we can,

for the voice of the great masses of Tibetans, who have never had a voice in these thousand years.

I have talked to many of them, to the Panchen Erdeni, to Apei, the serf-owner, to lamas and ex-lamas, to runaway serfs who have become students, prepared to lead reform. Theirs is not Tibet's full story. There is never a full story. But it is the story as it appears to people in Tibet today who make the Tibet of tomorrow. Certain events reappear in almost every person's story. This creates for me a technical problem, for the same event will appear in many chapters each time from a different view. This difficulty cannot be avoided. For some events — the battle of Chamdo in October 1950, the Agreement signed with Peking in May 1951, the Lhasa Rebellion, launched on March 10, 1959 and basically ended by the counter-attack of March 20 to 23 — these were turning-points in Tibet's modern history and in the lives of every person there. If their appearance more than once impresses them on the reader, he will the better know Tibet. By placing the various interviews in a proper sequence, we may also gain, without too great interruption, a sense of the march of events.

I debated long with whom to begin the story. With the Panchen Erdeni? With Apei, the descendant of kings? With Captain Yang, who lived through all this modern history with his own view? But if Tibet's story is that of 1,200,000 people "living on the roof of the world, to whom no serious attention has ever been paid before," but who have now entered history as its makers, then I should begin with Lachi and

Gada. These were serfs in the Chamdo Area, a girl and a boy, whose initiative led them to run away at the ages of thirteen and fifteen to join the People's Liberation Army, and who now, because of their desperate daring in childhood and their nine years of education, go back to Tibet to help organize their people and their land.

I. THE RUNAWAY SERFS RETURN

The Central Institute of National Minorities lies well out in the suburbs of Greater Peking, on the road to the old emperor's Summer Palace. A well-known American educator, visiting it with me, said he thought no American university equalled its campus and buildings in beauty. I myself would not go so far. The main buildings, built in 1951, I find indeed unsurpassed in architecture; they follow the old Chinese style with sweeping curved roofs of tile in shining color. On later buildings they had to economize to handle the growing pressure of students: this forced a simpler style and I found it a pity. The trees are still too small for adequate shade; open-air classes crowd under them so closely to get out of the summer sun that they look a bit disorderly. This fault time will remedy. With these few lacks, it is a fine campus and a notable institution.

Founded in the second year of the Chinese People's Republic, it was clearly one of the first priorities. When I saw it in spring of 1959, just before graduation, it had 2,400 students of 47 different nationalities. These figures were given us by Peng Hua-an, director of the general office, as he offered tea in the large reception

room with cream walls and five big divans, set on a cream rug with floral design in rose and blue.

"Ours is a new type of institute of higher learning," he told us. "The forty-seven national groups live here in equality and mutual help. Each national group is supplied with food not too different from its customary diet. For this we have eight dining-rooms, two different kinds of Moslem diet, one Tibetan and five others. The Tibetans at first all wanted *tsamba,* the parched barley flour that is their staple: but now they also like rice and steamed bread. Each group that wants it is provided with facilities for its religion. We have a special Moslem room and also a room for the Tibetans, furnished with Buddha statues and scriptures. We have here a miniature of the kind of mutual relations that we want to build in our multinational country."

China has eight institutes similar to this in purpose, Director Peng told us. The others are on provincial scale: this is the central one. It is not very different from the others, but students take pride in it, because it is in Peking, the capital of the motherland. They study first their own language and then the Peking language, which is the national language of China. They study history, politics and current events. They learn especially the history of the Chinese revolution and the policy towards minor nationalities. No technical training for industry or farming is given at the institute: for this some of the graduates go elsewhere. This institute is the first stage in training civil

servants for the local governments of the different nationalities.

"The basic sense of national equality and mutual help between the nationalities is what we try here to instill," said the director. "Technical help can be furnished from outside for a time: they can acquire technique later. But many of them still have to learn to read and write in their own language." He added that the institute has a library of 470,000 volumes of which 70,000 are in minor nationality languages. It has also the newspapers and magazines of the various national groups.

"The students," he said, "usually go back to the place they came from. That is their purpose and ours: to train local leaders."

The largest national group here, I learned, was the Tibetan. Though Tibetans are only sixth in size among China's minor nationalities, being outranked not only by the Han majority, but by the Chwangs, the Uighurs, the Huis and the Yis, of whom outsiders have rarely heard, the Tibetans have been pouring into the institutes in recent years because of the situation in Tibet. Most of them are runaway serfs, who fled for protection to the People's Liberation Army, or to some of the civilian institutions of the Central Government in Tibet, to escape from servitude. There were 900 of them in this institute, of whom most were in the preparatory department, since they came not knowing how to read and write a word. Some, however, had had a bit of education with the army in Lhasa before coming to Peking. Two hundred were graduating, of