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BLOOD IN THE SNOWS

Reply to Wang Lixiong

THE STARTING POINT of Wang Lixiong's 'Reflections on Tibet' is the proposition that the Tibetan people have been active participants in the destruction of their own culture.¹ The logic of the argument is one often employed by those responsible for injustice—that is, to heap the blame on the victim. It is reminiscent of the view once advanced by apologists for the apartheid regime in South Africa: since blacks made up the majority of the police force, and since hundreds of thousands of black people flocked from neighbouring countries to work in South Africa's dust-choked mines, the system could not be as bad as its critics supposed. But colonialism and injustice are never consensual: they are always achieved through the use of force, and perpetuated through the brutalization and degradation of the native people. It was, after all, Mao who announced that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.

It is true that Tibetans played an active part in the Cultural Revolution, and this fact cannot be wiped out of history. It should, however, be put into proper perspective, and the actual nature of their participation subjected to examination. The Cultural Revolution is a difficult topic not only for Tibetans but also for the Chinese. The strategy of China's leaders has been to blame it all on the Gang of Four, with nothing more being said about the others who plundered or killed. The question, 'What did you do during the Cultural Revolution?' is not an easy one to put to Chinese of a certain age; it tends to bring any conversation to a halt, with much being left unspoken or passed over in discomfort. Tibet was swept up in the fervour of the times, just like the rest of China;

many did go on to destroy religious buildings, to denounce friends and neighbours as reactionaries, or to revolt against their teachers. It was a mass movement from which no individual was exempt. Nor was there any question of watching passively from the sidelines: it was either denounce or be denounced—the Party allowed no other option. The brave few who refused to participate in the madness paid the price of being branded as enemies of the people and subjected to mass-struggle sessions. Only the crudest notion of freedom could suggest that such participation was a ‘choice’ for the ordinary men and women of the time.

Millenarian insurgency

Nevertheless, as Wang should know, there were Tibetans who resisted, and faced the full wrath of the Party. In 1969 there was widespread rebellion throughout Tibet, eventually crushed by the PLA. The best-documented episode is the revolt led by Thrinley Chodron, a young nun from the *xian* (county) of Nyemo, who marched her followers—armed with swords and spears—to the local Party headquarters, and slaughtered both the Chinese officials and the Tibetan cadres working for them. At first the Party ignored the massacre, thinking it was a manifestation of the Cultural Revolution—as we know, murders could be exonerated if they fell under the rubric of class struggle. But the authorities soon realized that these Tibetan peasants were rebelling not in the name of the ‘newly liberated serfs’ but in defence of their faith. What was more, they targeted only Chinese Party officials and those Tibetans seen as colluding with the colonizing power. The revolt spread from Nyemo through eighteen *xians* of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), and the Party was forced to send in the PLA to suppress it. Thrinley and fifteen of her followers were eventually captured and brought to Lhasa for public execution. Even today, the Party has expurgated this episode from the historical record as it fails to conform to their image of liberated peasants—or, indeed, to Wang’s portrayal of Tibetans joyfully ‘casting off the spectre of the afterlife that had hung over them for so long’.

Wang concedes that there was widespread revolt in 1969—although this contradicts his perception of a docile and submissive Tibetan peasantry—but attempts to portray it in a very different light. His

¹ See Wang Lixiong, ‘Reflections on Tibet’, NLR 14, March–April 2002, translated by Liu Xiaohong and A. Tom Grunfeld.

account secularizes the rebellion, explaining it in utilitarian terms—the peasants wanted to protect the gains of the initial land reforms from the extension of People’s Communes—while stripping it of the cultural and religious elements that reveal its nationalist content. In doing so, he grossly distorts the historical record. For example: Thrinley Chodron told the PLA after her capture that she had been visited by a bird who had come as a messenger from the Dalai Lama, and who had told her to drive out the Chinese. Other rebels claimed to be reincarnations of Ling Gesar, the mythical hero-king of Tibetan epic who fought for the Buddhist religion. There can be no mistaking the symbolism here. Indeed, we can describe the revolt of 1969 as a millenarian uprising, an insurgency characterized by a passionate desire to be rid of the oppressor.

Before Wang claims this as fresh evidence of the retarded mind of the native, he might wish to consider the broader historical record of peasant and national revolts that have begun with visions and voices. If the Maid of Orléans is the best-known European instance, similar cases are to be found even in Chinese history. The leader of the Taiping Rebellion Hong Xiuquan, from rural Guangxi, was said to be the Son of God and the younger brother of Jesus Christ. His illiterate disciple, Yang Xiuqing, claimed to have spoken with the Holy Ghost while in a trance. Foreign gods thus inspired the Chinese uprising against what they saw as alien and despotic Manchu rule; the Tibetans can at least claim to have heard native voices. Wang is surely familiar with the heroic status attributed to such psychotic figures as Hong Xiuquan and Yang Xiuqing within Chinese national narratives—their promotion to the pantheon of modern revolutionary heroes. Yet he balks at Tibetans hailing the revolt of 1969 as a national movement against a colonial oppressor. Wang tries to suggest that the Cultural Revolution was a ‘liberating’ experience for the Tibetans, who could now cast off their gods and spirits. But the millenarian nature of the revolt suggests something else: that it was induced, rather, by the deep fracturing of the self caused by the Cultural Revolution, which attempted to erase every trace of Tibetan identity.

Wang’s argument that the Red Guards could not have reached remote areas of Tibet because of the lack of transportation and manpower also needs qualification. The Red Guards were charged with such revolutionary fervour that they would have walked barefoot through the mountains to get to Tibet, so desperate were they to bring revolution to its snowy peaks; but there was strong pressure from Beijing not to let them go.

Far from being a period of mindless chaos, the Cultural Revolution was a carefully orchestrated affair in Tibet, and the Party was always in control. There were sound strategic reasons for keeping the Red Guards away from the border areas. This was the height of the Cold War in the Himalayas, India and China were on a war footing after the Sino-Soviet rift, the Russians had moved closer to the Indians and the CIA was still aiding several thousand Tibetan guerrillas based in Nepal. Tibet was a flashpoint and the Party did not want any disturbances in such a militarily sensitive region. Order reigned in the midst of disorder. Another aspect that Wang ignores was the overall division of the Cultural Revolution into two main factions. In Tibet, these consisted of the Rebel Group—supported by Red Guards from China, and seeking the overthrow of the ‘power holders’—and the Alliance group, made up mainly of the Party leadership and cadres in Tibet. The Rebels were strong in urban areas, with Lhasa, the capital, more or less under their control, while the Alliance dominated the countryside, forcibly preventing Chinese Red Guards from venturing into its zones. Members of the Alliance faction actually blocked the road leading from Chamdo to Lhasa, and Red Guards trying to enter the region from China were held and beaten up by organized Party mobs. These were the practical political realities of Tibet at the time.

Wang’s assertion that most of the destruction in Tibet took place during the Cultural Revolution also fails to tally with the historical record. As he himself admits, the monasteries and temples had been emptied long before, and ‘the PLA had bombed them as it re-established control’ after the 1959 Rebellion. In fact, the destruction of religious sites in Eastern Tibet—outside the TAR—had begun in 1956, under the guise of suppressing local uprisings in Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan and Sichuan. In May 1962, the Panchen Rinpoche submitted a long memorandum to the Party Central Committee, detailing the terrible failures of Chinese government policies throughout the entire Tibetan region. Two passages prove categorically that much of Tibet’s cultural heritage had already been destroyed. The Panchen Rinpoche writes:

Our Han cadres produced a plan, our Tibetan cadres mobilized, and some people among the activists who did not understand reason played the part of executors of the plan. They usurped the name of the masses, they put on the mask [*mianju*] of the masses, and stirred up a great flood of waves to eliminate statues of the Buddha, scriptures and *stupas* [reliquaries]. They burned countless statues of the Buddha, scriptures and *stupas*, threw

them into the water, threw them onto the ground, broke them and melted them. Recklessly, they carried out a wild and hasty [*fengxiang chuangru*] destruction of monasteries, halls, ‘*mani*’ walls and *stupas*, and stole many ornaments from the statues and precious things from the *stupas*.

Referring only to the area within the boundaries of the TAR when he speaks of ‘Tibet’—the situation was probably worse in other Tibetan districts—the Panchen Rinpoche goes on:

Before democratic reform, there were more than 2,500 large, medium and small monasteries in Tibet. After democratic reform, only 70 or so monasteries were kept in existence by the government. This was a reduction of more than 97 per cent. Because there were no people living in most of the monasteries, there was no-one to look after their Great Prayer Halls [*da jing tang*] and other divine halls, or the lodgings of the monks. There was great damage and destruction, both by man and otherwise, and they were reduced to the point of collapse, or beyond.²

This memorandum to the Central Committee was written four years before the Cultural Revolution.

There is no need to resort to the kind of cheap psychological analysis Wang adduces to explain why Tibetans turned against the sacred symbols of their religion during the Cultural Revolution. The real reasons are far more straightforward. One of these lay in the Party’s need to restrict the inter-factional struggle in an area which, as we have seen, was highly sensitive militarily. As soon as things looked like getting out of hand the Central Committee issued an order that, in these zones, the struggle should not be formulated as a fight between the ‘two lines’. Such conflict was thus essentially confined to the towns, especially Lhasa. The result was that, in most rural areas of Tibet, the ferocity of the Cultural Revolution was shifted away from the battle between the two factions and directed instead towards an attack on tradition, under the call to smash ‘The Four Olds’. In this effort, no stone was left unturned. The Red Guards may not have entered far into the countryside but CCP rule penetrated every crevice of the vast Himalayan landscape. The Party’s hegemony was so deeply entrenched at this time that even the way a peasant slept was said to indicate ideological orientation—some-

² ‘Seventy-Thousand Character Petition’, in *A Poisoned Arrow: The Secret Report of the Tenth Panchen Lama*, London 1997, pp. 51–2 (translation modified).

one who lay with their head towards the west was accused of turning away from Chairman Mao, since he was ‘the Sun that rises in the East’. One of the crimes of which the Panchen Rinpoche was accused during his trial by Red Guards in Beijing was of having anti-Party and reactionary dreams. (The Red Guards here, it should be noted, were not Tibetans but Chinese students.)

The Cultural Revolution was exported from China to the High Plateau by the Communist Party, much as opium was forced upon China by British gunboats—and eagerly consumed by the Chinese. Do we condemn the starving coolie for resorting to narcotics to escape the pains of his empty stomach, or do we censure the drug-pushing masters of a foreign empire who, despite endless pleas and petitions, directed the expeditions? There is no doubt that individual Tibetans committed despicable acts in the course of the Cultural Revolution; and many of them today hold senior posts in the regional Communist Party. In fact, such deeds are now viewed as a badge of party loyalty. Wang fails to mention the fact that in China, in the 1980s, the CCP purged ‘three categories of people’ who had committed crimes during the Cultural Revolution, but that in Tibet, despite repeated appeals by leaders such as the Panchen Rinpoche, no such purge took place. Hu Yaobang noted in his speech at the Tibet Work Forum in 1984 that he had received written submissions from both traditional leaders and CCP members, urging the Party to expel such people; instead he promoted them, saying they could be reformed. The real reason was that the Communist Party could not find anyone else they could trust to run Tibet so dutifully. The stark contrast between the policy implemented in the TAR and that applied to the rest of China highlights the classic colonial tactic, often observed in Western imperial practice, whereby the hegemonic power seeks to cultivate loyal and servile natives to guard its interests. China rules Tibet differently from China, because there it faces the problems of being a colonial power.

Colonial attitudes of the Chinese intelligentsia

How, Wang asks, was it possible for supposedly devout Tibetan Buddhists to destroy their temples and smash their holy statues? The answer he urges upon us is that the Cultural Revolution was a liberating experience for the Tibetan peasantry, who now ‘forcefully asserted that they would rather be men in this life than souls in the next’—a

fine phrase but utterly meaningless, since it ignores the fact that such choices were made by people with bayonets at their back. Wang is, indeed, quite unable to explain the actions of these newly liberated men once the bayonet was removed and—as Wang himself attests—the peasants rushed to rebuild the temples and monasteries and reinstate the Buddha’s statue among the ruins. Complaining that ‘the Tibetans’ reaction to the liberalization of the eighties is hard to understand’, he offers some convoluted remarks about how the native now needed to atone for his sins.

Given Wang’s current stature among the Chinese intelligentsia, such propositions raise a much more serious and pervasive issue. It seems that asking some Chinese intellectuals—be they Communist Party officials, liberal democrats or dissident writers—to think about Tibet in an objective and reasonable manner is like asking an ant to lift an elephant; it is beyond their capabilities and vision. Their perception is impaired by racial prejudice and their imagination clouded by the convictions and certainties of all colonial masters. Wang’s essay exhibits the same arrogance of reasoning and contempt for the native mind—into which he purports to have delved deep, and to have felt the heartbeat of a simpleton. His Tibetans are governed by demonic gods and live in a permanent state of fear, in awe of terrifying spirits—a state Wang ascribes to the Himalayan ecology:

Encountering, alone, this savage expanse of earth and sky inevitably produced a feeling of being overwhelmed by such preponderance, a terrifying sense of isolation and helplessness, repeated down the generations. Fear provoked awe, and awe gave rise to the totem of deities and monsters . . . Fear formed the core of the Tibetans’ spiritual world.³

This approach will be familiar to anyone who has studied the implantation of Western colonialism in Asia and Africa, or read the works of early Christian missionaries on the religions and cultures of the peoples they subjugated. The strategic positioning of the natives as living in ‘fear’ and ‘awe’ of the gods drains the people of agency. It is a device used by colonizers to strip their subjects of their humanity and of the ability to reason. Wang’s text accordingly reveals next to nothing of the native worldview but divulges a great deal about the mindset of the colonizer. This seeks to reduce the native’s status to that of an infant—allowing the

³ ‘Reflections on Tibet’, p. 92.

colonial master, by contrast, to assume the position of a wise adult, and thus justify his rule. The crude environmental determinism of Wang's imagined Tibetan *Weltanschauung* is, in fact, a redaction of the works of such early Western colonial cadres as Austin Waddell, whose book on 'Lamaism', as he disparagingly called it, was published in 1904—the year of the British invasion of Tibet, in which Waddell played a leading role. It is still used as an authoritative source in China. Wang's use of language and tone are strikingly similar to Waddell's. Yet the concept of an awe-inspiring and terrifying physical geography begs an obvious question: is it really the native who is intimidated by the surroundings in which he and his ancestors have lived for thousands of years, or is it rather the foreign visitor to the Tibetan plateau who is struck by the unaccustomed expanses of the grasslands or the scale of the mountains? If anything, history suggests that human beings, far from being intimidated by their environments, have always sought to control their different natural surroundings in order to carve out a living. Wang's theory of Tibet is a romanticized description of his own urban *ennui*—little more than pop psychology, presented as serious thought.

Mao worship

What is more worrying is Wang's failure to reflect upon his own culture and society. His description of the Mao cult is typical of this. Mao, he argues, 'replaced the Dalai Lama as the god in [the Tibetans'] mind' in a process of religious substitutionism—the natives were in awe of the new foreign god, and saw him as more powerful than the local deity. Such simplistic reasoning is, again, reminiscent of Western colonial and evangelizing views—Wang's version of Friday, worshipping the footsteps of his white master: the native is struck dumb with wonderment at what befalls him. As evidence, Wang cites the ludicrous examples of Tibetan peasants marching behind portraits of Mao at harvest-time, and of Mao's picture adorning every household wall—as if this was unique to the Tibetan peasantry. Was it they alone who elevated Mao to the level of a god? Wang—who, as a citizen of China, has had to live in the midst of totalitarianism for much of his life—is peering so deep into the native soul here that he loses sight of where he's standing. In a delirious moment, he is akin to the man so entranced by the buttercup in front of him that he has no perception of the forest he is in.

In fact, there was nothing peculiarly Tibetan about the ritualistic treatment of Mao. Every schoolchild in China sang:

The sun rises in the East,
No, it is not the sun,
But the brilliant rays of the Chairman.

Didn't everyone in China sport a badge of Mao? Didn't the Chinese peasant labour in the paddy field with a banner of Mao fluttering in the wind, and didn't the Chinese, too, recite quotations from Mao when they jumped out of bed every morning? Such behaviour was to be found throughout the People's Republic, carefully choreographed by the CCP. Wang can hardly be unaware that Mao worship was not simply a Tibetan experience. Indeed, the fanatical devotion extended towards the Great Helmsman and the Party by elements of the Chinese population—where we find instances in which the corpses of 'class enemies' were cannibalized, as proof of dedication to Mao—exceeded anything in Tibet. If we applied Wang's own logic, not to the colonized natives but to these members of his own society, we would apparently have to conclude that their preference for eating each other, rather than living in filial obedience to their ancestors, was a sign that they were liberated men.

Wang's argument that the Tibetans were attracted to Mao's totalitarianism because they were, by nature, submissive is identical to that used by Western Sinologists when they explain Mao's sway by essentializing the Chinese peasantry as, again, naturally obedient and submissive to authority. In fact, it was a young Tibetan, the Panchen Rinpoche, who put forward by far the most extensive criticism of Mao's policies of comunization and the Great Leap Forward—when millions of Chinese apparently accepted that melting down their household utensils would enable them to overtake Britain in steel production. Similarly, it was the people of Eastern Tibet who staged the most extensive revolt in China against the imposition of People's Communes. This hardly suggests a subservient people, taking Mao into their hearts.

Far from seeing Mao as a god, in some rural areas of Tibet the people did not even know who he was. Their first encounter with the colonizer was usually through the local PLA and Party cadres. There is a scene—fictional, but revealing—in a Tibetan novel, *Joys and Sorrows of an Ordinary Family*, by Tashi Palden, which describes a meeting convened by the

Party to initiate the Cultural Revolution. The stage is decorated with portraits of Mao and, as the crowd gathers, the heroine asks the person sitting next to her who he is. A local Party activist has to inform her that he is Mao Zedong. Later in the narrative, when Mao dies, the local Party issues a decree setting out the exact form of behaviour and mode of dress required. In the evening, Party activists secretly spy on every house to make sure the correct rituals are being observed.

Such uniformity of behaviour, dress and outward expression of loyalty is clearly indicative not so much of a peculiar Tibetan mindset as of life under a totalitarian regime. When the Tibetan peasants carried pictures of Mao and red flags to their barley fields, they were merely going through the motions required of them. If they really found this behaviour as emotionally gratifying as Wang suggests, we would have to ask why they discarded it as soon as they had the opportunity to do so. The fact that, the instant it was permitted, Tibetans not only shook off the uniforms of the Cultural Revolution but pulled down the red banners and hoisted prayer flags in the valleys, discarded the Chairman's 'Thoughts' and brought out long-hidden prayer-books, restored their native gods to their altars and sent thousands of young people to join the monasteries, hardly supports the notion that Maoist rituals were psychologically irresistible to them. It rather suggests that, given the choice, Tibetans will prefer their own religion.

Manichean iconographies

Frantz Fanon has famously described the colonial mentality as dominated by a Manichean set of oppositions—white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and others, subject and object. Wang offers a rather neat illustration of this type of perception in a footnote in which he contrasts the Chinese representation of the Buddha of Compassion as 'a beautiful woman' to Tibetan pictures of her as 'a dark giant wearing a necklace of skulls'—the classic colonialists' view of their own deity as benign, while their subjects' god is dark and wrathful. As well as a total ignorance of Tibetan Buddhist iconography, the comparison reveals a sad lack of knowledge of Chinese cultural history and tradition. The religion prevailing in Tibet was also the court religion of Chinese emperors for several dynasties, and many in China shared the

same faith and pantheon. In fact, hundreds of Chinese came to study in Tibetan monasteries throughout the centuries; some still do.

The religious icons Wang finds so alien were therefore the same as those propitiated by many Chinese followers of Buddhism. The worship of Mahakala, a wrathful form of the Buddha, was introduced to China during the Tang Dynasty, and Chinese monks at the time recorded its widespread popularity. For centuries there existed a Mahakala temple in Beijing, decorated with murals and statues of the same fierce deities that Wang finds so abhorrent. It was destroyed by the Communists in 1970; the Capital Stadium stands on the site today. Such religious imagery is therefore not as alien to the Chinese mind as Wang supposes, and his portrayal of these practices as peculiarly Tibetan only reveals how successful the Communists have been in erasing China's memory, so that the younger generation now suffer from a sort of amnesia in respect to their own traditions.

The great Urdu–Hindi writer Premchand wrote in his novel *Godan* ('Gift of a Cow') that when one is being trampled by a giant tyrant, there is not much one can do except tickle his foot. The mass adoration for Mao in both China and Tibet was the product of a frenzied fervour, generated by the Party and ritually reinforced by its propaganda machine. Besides the coercion from above, there was overwhelming group and social pressure to conform, coupled with a dismissal of any individual sentiments. A similar, uniform outward loyalty can be found among all those who endure life under a totalitarian regime—it is a form of foot-tickling. The speedy rejection of the Mao cult is the clearest indication that the Tibetan peasants were feigning compliance. I agree that there may have been moments of fervour or frenzied emotion and that, under such circumstances, deep and long-buried resentments can resurface. Indeed, the Party clearly sought to provoke such feelings, and it could be argued that its entire mobilization strategy throughout both China and Tibet was in large part based on them. But as we know, such behaviour is often temporary and does not necessarily indicate a deep shift in people's sentiments or in what they hold sacred. In his discussion of Malay peasants in *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott makes a more perceptive point about the behaviour of those who face overwhelming odds: they resort to 'everyday forms of resistance', which typically involve a fake compliance and dissimulation. The Tibetan peasants went along with the demands of the Party largely because they knew very well that to do otherwise

would meet with cruel punishment. It was not that they felt 'liberated' from their religious bondage, but rather that their fear of the wrath and retribution of the Party was greater than their fear of the afterlife. Visiting temples and monasteries in Tibet today, one often finds old statues and paintings reinstalled on their altars with notes that indicate which ones survived the Gang of Four's destruction because the local people had hidden them away. In other words, the outward display of compliance concealed strongly held values and strategic decisions.

Shadow suzerainty of the Qing

The present Chinese government's claim of sovereignty over Tibet has been acquired by military conquest; its rule rests on might—brute facts, which Wang's highly selective account of the historical relations between China and Tibet effectively blurs. Wang chooses to begin his discussion of Sino-Tibetan relations with the Qing dynasty—which was, indeed, the period when contact between the two was at its most developed, and imperial engagement in Tibetan domestic affairs most marked, although Chinese imperial involvement with Tibet can be traced back to the Mongol era. In practice, however, there was no direct imperial administration, and when the Emperors did intervene it was at times of great internal turmoil there. The establishment of the office of the Amban, or Imperial Commissioner, occurred at a time when Tibet was suffering invasion by the Gurkhas, in 1788 and 1792. For the Tibetans this was a costly war, and they sought the support of the Qing to repel the intruders. The Qing, fearing foreign incursion in such vulnerable frontier regions, naturally sided with the Tibetans, and the Manchu general Fu Kang'an recommended the establishment of a permanent imperial resident in Lhasa. This marked the beginning of the first attempt at direct rule of Tibet, with the Amban being given equal status to the Dalai Lama and the power to supervise the appointment of Tibetan government officials and high-ranking lamas.

The relationship between the Qing Court and Tibet did not, however, amount to the establishment of sovereignty by one country over another. Luciano Petech's detailed study *China and Tibet in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1950), drawing upon both Tibetan and Chinese sources, argues that the Qing position in Tibet can, at best, be described as a protectorate—the Chinese authority of the time a 'shadowy form of suzerainty'. Similarly, William Rockhill, a scholar and American diplomat at the

turn of the last century, writes in his study of the relationship between the Dalai Lamas and the Manchus that 'he [the Dalai Lama] had been treated with all the ceremony which could have been accorded to any independent sovereign, and nothing can be found in Chinese works to indicate that he was looked upon in any other light'.⁴ Imperial influence in Tibet depended on domestic conditions and external threats: the Tibetans were quite happy to seek the Emperor's support when faced with intrusions from the south, but Qing authority was quickly discarded once the borders had been secured.

At the time of the Gurkha Wars the Tibetans were in no position to reject the imposition of Manchu rule by the army they had invited to assist them. But it is clear that the establishment of the Amban's office was never seen by the Tibetans as signalling their acquiescence to rule from Beijing. As Wang's own account shows, the Amban's role had little effect either on Tibet's domestic or its external relations, and his presence in Lhasa was largely disregarded by the Tibetans as long as their own borders were not menaced. Indeed, three Ambans were assassinated by Tibetans, in 1750 and 1905—contradicting Wang's portrayal of an amicable if ineffectual co-existence. The Qing clearly recognized the impotence of their position, and more than twenty of the hundred or so Ambans appointed by the Emperor never even took up their posts—some failing even to begin the perilous journey and others dying on the way.

The lack of Qing authority in Tibet was most glaringly demonstrated in its dealings with British India. By the late nineteenth century, the British were pushing for trade routes into Tibet, and land routes from India to China. At the Chefoo Convention of 1876 the Chinese granted British access to Tibet, leading to the signing of the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 between the Amban and Lord Lansdowne. This gave the British the right to trade and to send missions to Lhasa, as well as fixing the boundary between Tibet and Sikkim. The Tibetans, far from acquiescing in the agreement, proceeded to fortify the border, advanced troops up to the frontier and refused to allow the British to implement the rights conceded by the Chinese. The British soon found that the Chinese were in no position to enforce terms on the Tibetans, who simply would not

⁴ W. W. Rockhill, *The Dalai Lamas of Lhasa and their Relations with the Manchu Emperors of China, 1644–1908*, Leyden 1910, p. 18. Rockhill's work draws only on Chinese sources.

accept Beijing's right to sign any agreement regarding their territory. It was incidents such as these that led to Lord Curzon's exasperated remark that Chinese suzerainty over Tibet was a 'constitutional fiction'. British frustrations eventually led to the full-scale military invasion of Tibet under Younghusband in 1904. This broke the Tibetans' power to resist the Chinese and, once again, forced them to seek the aid of the Qing court, leading to a disastrous but short-lived retaliatory invasion by the Chinese in 1909. When the Qing regime collapsed in 1911 the Tibetans severed all ties with China, expelled the Amban and his military escort and declared independence, thus ending nearly two centuries of Qing authority in the region. Between 1911 and 1950 Tibet enjoyed total control over its external and internal affairs.

'Under compulsion of circumstances'

On the eve of the Chinese Communist invasion in October 1950, Tibet was to all intents and purposes an independent state. Chinese Nationalist attempts to regain power over the territory had been unsuccessful, partly because of internal problems in China but mainly because the Tibetans were determined to oppose any Chinese presence. After 1904, the British were also prepared to counter any extension of Chinese power in the region, and every mission that the Nationalist government sent to Lhasa was balanced by a similar British delegation. Whatever the nature of the polity that prevailed in Tibet during this period, its authorities were determined to preserve their independence from China and initially did everything they could to secure international support. But by 1950 the situation in the world—and in Asia—had dramatically altered. With Indian independence the British renounced any imperial interest in Tibet, while the new administration in India lacked the military capability of its former colonial master when it came to countering the CPP government in Beijing. The other relevant power was, of course, the United States; but because of Tibet's geographical situation as an isolated, landlocked country, the Americans offered only limited, clandestine support.

The tiny, ill-equipped Tibetan Army was no match for the 40,000 battle-hardened PLA soldiers that invaded in October 1950. After its capitulation the Army's commander, Ngabo Ngawang Jigme, was appointed by the Lhasa government to negotiate with the Chinese. On 23 May 1951 the Chinese authorities and the Tibetan delegation signed the

Seventeen-Point Agreement—more formally known as the ‘Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet’—which formed the basis for the incorporation of Tibet into the People’s Republic of China. As Nehru remarked, it was signed ‘without joy and under compulsion of circumstances’. The Agreement virtually guaranteed a special status for Tibet within the PRC, since no other province, nationality or region reached such a formal accord with Mao’s newly established government. It placed Tibet in a unique position, theoretically entitling it to enjoy the same status as Hong Kong and Macau today. It pledged that Tibet’s traditional polity would be protected and that, above all, the institution of the Dalai Lama and his administration would continue to be the functional government. The only two conditions of real importance to Beijing were that China would conduct Tibet’s foreign relations and station PLA troops in the region; these were designed to erase Tibet’s international personality and to consolidate China’s geo-political advantage.

Wang is right to argue that, in the early period, the CCP’s primary objective was to establish the strategic and legal integration of Tibet within the new China, and that Beijing was willing to make concessions to this end. Nine years later, however, the whole of the Tibetan region erupted in revolt. The causes of this uprising were manifold, but its primary source was Beijing’s failure to appreciate the ethnic dimension of the Tibetan issue. The Seventeen-Point Agreement and the promise not to impose reforms applied only to the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the area under the immediate control of the Dalai Lama and his government in Lhasa. The Tibetan population in Eastern Tibet, situated in the present-day provinces of Gansu, Yunnan, Sichuan and Qinghai, were subjected to the same reforms and political campaigns as the rest of China. The Tibetans in these areas—Amdo and Kham—rebelled in 1956, and it was not until 1960 that the Communists were able to subdue the revolt. As a consequence, hundreds of refugees from the eastern areas poured into Central Tibet, turning it into a theatre of anti-Chinese resistance. The fact that the CCP had retained the previously existing social and political system in Central Tibet, under the control of the Dalai Lama, did not allay apprehensions about China’s ultimate goals. Despite the Party’s characterization of the revolt—as upper-class resistance to social reform—the Tibetan Rebellion was a national one, supported by all classes. In fact, the bulk of the protests came from ordinary people and the poor, resentful not only of the Chinese but also of what they saw as the Tibetan ruling class’s surrender of the interests of the nation. The Communists, after all, had done everything they could to appease the

Tibetan elite and absorb them into their infrastructure by promising them a role in the new regime.

Despite the inequalities of the traditional Tibetan social system, there had been few popular peasant uprisings in the country's history. Struggling to come to terms with this, Wang falls back as usual on his conception of the awe-struck native mind:

What explains such an unusual degree of deference and obedience? The answer surely lies in the deeply rooted religious traditions of Tibet . . . if they [the peasantry] committed the crime of 'defying their superiors' or 'enriching themselves with dubious wealth', the dreadful punishment that awaited them would far outweigh any earthly gains.⁵

Wang's colonial assumptions forestall any serious empirical investigation of Tibetan social reality. The peasantry were certainly badly treated and the system of land distribution unjust; yet because of Tibet's vast size and scant population, there were not thousands of peasants without land or a right to livelihood, nor were they plagued by economic uncertainties about their future. In this sense, they were better off than vast layers of the urban and rural poor in pre-revolutionary China, who proved more open to the CCP's promises of reform. The Tibetan peasantry lived in isolated, sparsely populated areas; traditional society consisted of village and nomadic communities, with few political tensions between the various groups. Down to the middle of the twentieth century Tibet had an essentially pre-modern economy, based on agricultural self-sufficiency. The vast majority of peasant families produced their own food and clothing, and there was little trade or market development. Before the 1950s, it was almost unheard of for *tsampa*—barley flour, the staple diet—to be bought and sold in the market. Even in a city like Lhasa, families relied on relatives from the countryside to supply their basic needs.

This is not to paint a picture of happy smiling peasants—their life was full of hardship. In addition to economic inequalities, the social system was sharply delineated between commoners and aristocracy, with the former totally excluded from state affairs and burdened with heavy taxation by aristocratic and monastic landlords. There was much resentment, resulting in petitions to the Lhasa government from individual

⁵ 'Reflections on Tibet', p. 91.

families. The reasons why this never led to open socio-economic rebellion are complex—as are the causes of the failure of working-class revolt in the industrialized West. But economic grievances alone are rarely sufficient to spark an uprising; a sense of injustice can be perceived on different levels, and the development of class consciousness is many-sided, involving cultural, social and economic factors.

Politics of reincarnation

The question of how the Tibetans' belief system has impinged upon their social and political attitudes is, indeed, a vital one, but demands far subtler treatment than Wang is able to provide. Certainly, a belief in *karma* and reincarnation would have a discernible influence both on people's everyday behaviour and in their response to larger issues. Reincarnation is based on the idea that the beneficial effects of working hard and doing good deeds in this life will accumulate in the next one. This does not have to imply passivity—on the contrary, it can inspire one to play an active role in order to alter one's position. The implication of Wang's argument is that the Tibetans' beliefs paralysed any capacity for social change; this is far from true. While not experiencing upheavals on the scale witnessed in some parts of the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Tibetan society has undergone a continuous process of change and redefinition, clearly visible in the religious reformation that took place. There were also many political conflicts, involving mass mobilizations—often very violent—on the basis of regional or sectarian interests. Assassinations of Dalai Lamas were common—only three lived to maturity; others died in mysterious circumstances, sometimes on the verge of assuming political power. Far from being a paralysing factor, the belief of retribution in their future lives did not even stay the Tibetans' hands in murdering their highest religious authorities. The Rebellion of 1959 is further proof, should it be needed, that the Tibetans have no natural aversion to violence, or resistance. But the uprising was carried out in the name of nationalism and in defence of cultural autonomy, rather than as defiance of economic conditions.

In fact, the rhetoric of modernity had most appeal for the young aristocrats and sons of wealthy merchants who had travelled outside the country and had the opportunity to witness changes abroad. As in most parts of the non-Western world, the call for reform was primarily generated by external influences and supported by the new urban intel-

ligentsia. In 1943, when a group of radical Tibetans met in Lhasa to found the first Tibetan Communist Party, they were all children of wealthy merchant or aristocratic families. The bulwark of a reactionary religious community with mass peasant support meant there was very little chance of internal reform. Earlier attempts—such as the thirteenth Dalai Lama's invitation to English educationalists to run newly established schools, in the 1930s—had been similarly thwarted. The students were all children of Tibetan aristocrats, but the institutions were eventually closed down as a result of opposition from the monasteries, who mobilized the masses through such slogans as: 'In the Holy City of Lhasa, there is an unholy school'. The religious community—the Gelugpa Monastery in particular—viewed any reform as a threat to its hegemony.

Once the Communists took over, there was even less chance of reforms succeeding without coercion. However liberal the early measures of the CCP may have been, they were seen by the vast majority of Tibetan people as colonial impositions. While in some respects the peasantry might have welcomed land reform or the abolition of feudal labour service, the Party's anti-religious policies antagonized them. The positive effects of the early reforms were also undermined by the indiscriminate assault of the Anti-Rebellion Campaign, in which thousands of ordinary people accused of involvement in the 1959 Rebellion were sent to labour camps. The question of reform in such a traditional society is a complex one; but it is impossible to abstract it from the national element in the relationship between China and Tibet. As long as criticisms of 'backward' Tibetan practices were seen as coming from an alien source, the response would naturally be a defensive one. As Lu Xun said, 'If a man slaps his own face he will not feel insulted, whereas if someone else slaps him, he will be angry'.

Wang depicts the traditional society of Tibet as dark and corrupt, with the common people living on the brink of a precipice. This was also the perception of the CCP. Yet their response to the situation when, in 1959, they seized the reins for themselves, was to plunge Tibet into depths of misery it had never known before. The economic and living conditions of the people plummeted sharply between 1960 and 1979; in many areas people were forced to live on a single meal a day. It was not until the 1980s that living conditions began to improve, under the new leadership of Hu Yaobang. But although Hu's reforms were welcomed, for many Tibetans they did not go far enough—as was evident in the wide-

spread unrest of the late 1980s. As Wang rightly suggests, the new reforms were seen as merely redressing the wrongs done in the previous decades. Even liberal leaders like Hu were not prepared to address the fundamental questions of Tibetans' rights. In retrospect, the reforms of the 1980s could be seen as placating Tibetan resentments at a time when the new leadership in Beijing was seeking legitimacy, and the position of the Party in Tibet was growing more precarious.

The limitations of Party hegemony were demonstrated by the popular welcome afforded to the delegation sent by the Dalai Lama in 1979, which was mobbed by hundreds of people in the areas it visited. Their reaction shocked the Chinese leadership; it gave a clear sign that, in the hearts and minds of the people, the Dalai Lama still ruled Tibet. It was while the delegation was in Eastern Tibet, on its way to Lhasa, that Chinese officials finally realized there might be an uncontrollable show of loyalty to the Dalai Lama and suggested to Ren Rong, the Party Secretary in Lhasa, that the visit to the TAR should be cancelled. Ren confidently replied that the people of the Region had a heightened sense of class consciousness. Like Wang, he had badly misjudged the situation. The Cultural Revolution, far from liberating the peasantry, had fuelled deep resentment towards Beijing's authority.

Party marionettes

Many of the reforms initiated by Hu have now been discarded and a new process of colonial rule enacted in their place. The 'autonomy' of regional bodies such as the National People's Congress and the Political Consultative Conference is utterly spurious, existing only on paper. It is true that the 1980s saw a steady rise in the number of Tibetan cadres and senior Party officials, and that Tibetan was made the official language of the region. But it was comrades such as Raidi and Pasang—who had held senior posts in the regional Party since 1967 and who were both widely known to be illiterate in Tibetan—that the CPP appointed to leadership positions. The overriding objective of 'Tibetanization' was to place faithful *apparatchiks* in positions of power. In fact, many of the senior Tibetan Communists cultivated by the Party since the 1950s—or, in the case of Tian Bao, since the Long March—were incapable of reading their own language. Tibetan leaders both inside and outside the Party complained bitterly about these appointments, but even Hu Yaobang could not dismiss them. As he told the Tibet Work Forum in 1984,

they were the ones considered most loyal to the Party and Fatherland. Hu's attempts at reform were further confounded by resistance from the Chinese cadres who refused to surrender their power in the region, or to accept that the last thirty years of their work in Tibet had been, as Hu termed it, 'a mistake'. When Hu and Wu Jinghua later fell from power, these officials celebrated openly and seized the chance to undo all the liberal policies they had established.

Tibetans are indeed well represented on bodies like the National People's Congress and the People's Consultative Conference. In fact I would go further and say that they are over-represented, given the size of the Tibetan population. But their presence in such august institutions does not mean that they have either the power or the voice to articulate the actual views of the people. It is a symbolic gesture, designed to show the inclusiveness of the Fatherland. Tibetan members of these bodies are selected and approved as model citizens by the CCP, and very often their positions are given as a reward for loyalty to the Party. Among most ordinary Tibetans, they enjoy neither respect nor trust. There is a joke about these people, which goes something like this. What are the responsibilities of the People's Congress representatives and the People's Consultative Conference members? They are three: one, to shake hands when they enter the meeting hall; two, to clap hands after the speech; and three, to raise hands when the vote is counted. It would be utterly naive to suppose that the Tibetan presence on these bodies demonstrates a genuine inclusiveness. Whether at regional or national level, these Tibetans carry out only what I would call a 'messenger' role: they serve as a caste whose duty is to provide a symbolic presence, and to act as mouthpieces for the CCP. Their role is not to voice the will of the Tibetan people, but to disseminate the Party's will to them.

Today, the Party has managed to subdue the Tibetans' anger not through gaining their consent but by instituting a greater degree of integration within the PRC. The policies of the last few years show that the Chinese government has adopted the classic colonial strategy of containment and absorption. The most vocal opponents of Chinese rule over the last decade have come from the religious community. Monks and nuns have been virtually confined to the monasteries while the Party has carried out purges of religious influence in public life. However, this has not been an easy matter, with thousands of followers in religious groups presenting a formidable challenge to the CCP. The Chinese authorities

know that religion represents a powerful nationalist ideology in Tibet, with the ability to mobilize the public and to contest the authority of the Party. This was starkly highlighted during the selection of the new Panchen Lama in 1995. While Beijing was able to impose its own candidates, Tibetans refused to acknowledge the Party appointee. The incident may have caused the final loss of CCP authority over the religious groups, united in their opposition on this matter. Even Tashilhunpo Monastery, the traditional seat of the Panchen Lamas and always seen as loyal to the Party in the past, refused to co-operate or provide an abode for the official candidate. All senior Tibetan lamas have spurned the Party's decision and have refused to endorse the appointment, except when made to do so by force. This showed the ability of cultural groups to organize and mobilize their members for a common purpose. Religious followers have remained loyal to their faith.

The problem is heightened by the fact that, although almost all Tibetan religious leaders are in exile, the Party knows that they occupy the people's hearts and minds. Furthermore, religious faith is closely associated with ethnic identity and nationalism. Monks and nuns have been at the forefront of anti-Chinese demonstrations and are viewed as defenders of Tibetan culture and traditions. They command the loyalty and respect of the local population, while the local CCP leaders are seen as alien and corrupt. Beijing is engaged in a contest with the public, with the issues of leadership and legitimacy at stake. It fears above all the loss of control in terms of social, moral and political authority. But it knows that the people have lost any faith in Communism or in the Party, which can no longer generate support by appealing to its past revolutionary achievements or to the evils of its predecessors.

Dissolving the spell

The combination of religious faith, ethnic identity and social and economic disadvantage, real or perceived, provide fertile soil for Tibetan nationalism. Despite economic improvements over the last decade, the majority of Tibetans view their position as marginalized and disadvantaged in today's China. In this sense, Wang is right. While on the surface the Party has managed to contain the latent nationalistic aspirations of the Tibetan people, these factors, together with the presence of a powerful leadership in exile, do indeed provide a major threat to the CCP. The solution to the Tibetan problem, however, is neither complex

nor difficult; nor does it require any major concession by the Chinese government. The notion of Tibet as an integral part of China is a recent invention by the Communist Party in its process of nation building. Tibet has never been central to the Chinese imagination. There was never any Chinese Woody Guthrie to warble, 'This land is our land, from the crest of the Himalayas to the shores of the South China Sea': the Party conjured up this sentiment after 1950. The spell can vanish as quickly as it was made to appear. Tibet is not Palestine or Kashmir, with extreme passions on both sides backed by centuries of religious bigotry.

In fact, China's main interest in Tibet is strategic. But since the Dalai Lama has declared that he does not want independence for Tibet and is willing to meet China's concerns by agreeing to relinquish control of foreign affairs and defence to Beijing, China should recognise that giving Tibet genuine autonomy would not endanger either the PRC's security or its position in the world. If Tibet were to be granted this autonomy tomorrow, or even independence, China would not collapse. The Chinese leadership should be wise enough to accept that the Dalai Lama's offer would meet their own concerns and at the same time allow Tibetans the genuine freedom to practise their culture and tradition.