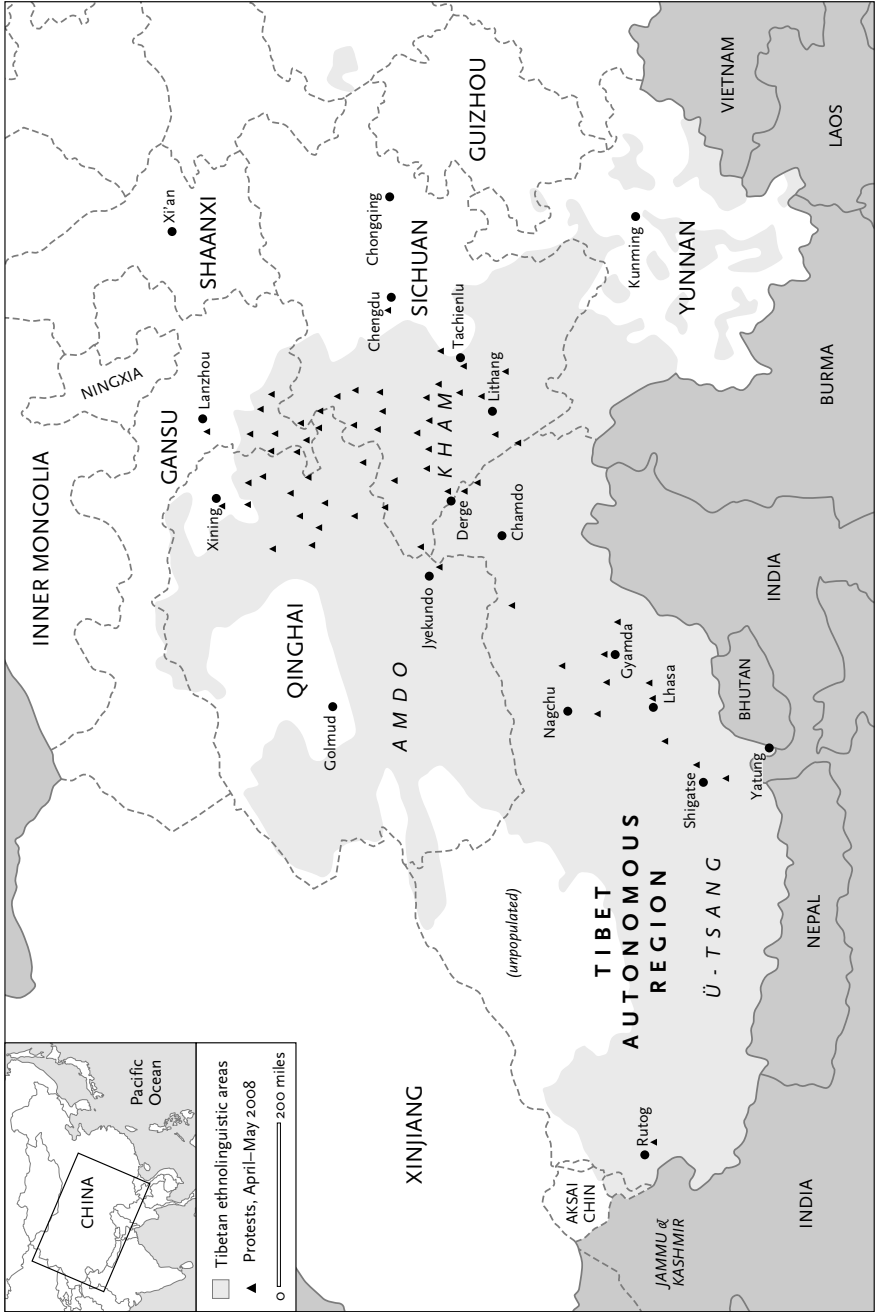


*Interview*

TIBETAN QUESTIONS

*Your landmark history of modern Tibet, The Dragon in the Land of Snows, suggests a broad four-part periodization for developments since 1951. During the first period, 1951–59, the Chinese Communist Party sought to work in alliance with Tibet’s traditional ruling class under the Seventeen-Point Agreement: a ‘one country, two systems’ arrangement, with autonomous rule by the Dalai Lama’s government. After the flight of the Dalai Lama and the crushing of the 1959 rebellion, the second stage, 1960–78, saw the extension of Communist reforms on the Plateau and the redistribution of monastic and aristocratic lands, accelerating with the collectivizations and mass mobilizations of the Cultural Revolution. Following 1980, there was an era of much greater liberalization and ‘Tibetanization’ under Hu Yaobang, accompanied by open-door trade and migration policies—followed by a clampdown after 1989. Looking back, how would you characterize the situation in Tibet in the 1980s, under Hu Yaobang?*

**T**HE 1980S REFORMS were welcomed by Tibetans, who saw them as a major transition, and still regard Hu as one of China’s best leaders. At the time, many said that things had never been so good. It marked the start of a period which people thought would bring a certain cultural and economic autonomy for themselves as individuals, and for the Tibetan region as a whole. It was seen as an opportunity to revitalize traditional cultures—the first noticeable sign of this being when people reverted to wearing traditional Tibetan clothes, instead of the blue overalls. Economically, the region also now emerged from a period of real deterioration, running from 1960 to 1980, which was even worse than the years leading up to 1959. The slump was partly due to a total mismanagement of the region’s



production, which had been drastically altered by the imposition of communes and co-operatives; these were disastrous for the indigenous economy. They were disbanded under Hu's reforms, and traditional systems were revived. Living standards returned to what they had been before 1960, a change that was naturally welcomed by the Tibetan Plateau's overwhelmingly rural population: at this time, 95 per cent were engaged either in herding or in agricultural production.

*So what accounts for the protests in the late 80s?*

The immediate trigger was the growing tension between the monasteries and the Communist Party. The government had expected the reforms to bring increased consumer spending, but in many cases people simply put the extra money they had towards rebuilding the monasteries. There was a big expansion in the number of monks, and in some rural areas there were more people going to monasteries than to local schools. The government was concerned at this growth, and also about the monasteries' funding: they received large quantities of donations which they did not have to account for. By the mid-80s, leftists in the CP were pointing to these developments as an example of Hu's liberal policies going wrong, and the government moved to restrict the number of monks and gain control of monastic finances. This created opposition, and it was the monasteries and conservative elements that were the main groups leading the protests in the late 1980s.

At the time, people were turning strongly to religion—something they were denied during the Cultural Revolution, but that they now had access to. There was a powerful impulse to fight for greater tolerance of religious practices. But the protests were also responding to changes taking place in Tibetan society under the reforms. There was a major debate at the time about the directions Tibet could take in the future—traditionalists believing that we must revert to time-honoured ways in order to preserve Tibet; younger, college-educated people feeling that it will only survive if we abandon such traditions, and seek a modernized Tibetan culture, creating new identities, new literature and art. In this view, it was Tibetan Buddhism and its traditions that had hampered the creation of a Tibetan identity that might have better resisted conquest and subjugation; and it was a new, stronger identity that was needed to overcome Tibet's current condition. This indigenous critique of the Tibetan past—a self-examination mainly proposed by the younger,

educated elite and writers—was seen by the conservatives as somehow a disguised attack by the Chinese on Buddhism. The two groups were not just divided by age, though: there were many young people who shared the conservative view. In general, those educated in the monastic community or through the traditional system were much more conservative than those who went to universities and colleges. These students did not join in the protests at all. Even now, many college-educated people tend to think the 80s protests were unnecessary—that the reforms were taking Tibet in the right direction, and the demonstrations did great damage in altering that course.

*To what extent were the protests of the late 1980s stimulated from outside—by the Dalai Lama’s addresses to the US Congress and European Parliament?*

The 1980s were a sort of opening for Tibetans—those inside Tibet were allowed to travel to India and go on pilgrimages to see the Dalai Lama. They established new links with the Tibetan diaspora and political leadership, and became much more aware of the organized politics of the Tibetan question. At the same time, the Dalai Lama’s speeches to the European Parliament and the US Congress gave them a sense that there was more support for the Tibetan issue in the international community than really existed. Western countries would make statements about some social issues, but their desire to engage China as it emerged from isolation in the 1980s meant that Tibet was never going to be a major obstacle for Beijing.

*How would you characterize Chinese policy following the imposition of martial law in 1989–90?*

There had been concerns within the Chinese leadership about the direction of the reforms: some felt Hu Yaobang’s policies were too extreme and were undermining China’s position in Tibet. When the monks’ demonstrations began in the late 80s, the hardliners saw it as proof that more liberal policies had led to heightened Tibetan nationalism, encouraging demands for independence. The period from the imposition of martial law to the present has seen a dramatic change in how Beijing deals with Tibet. There were to be no more compromises; Tibet was to be brought under tighter administrative control, and its infrastructure integrated more closely with the rest of China. The Plateau had been isolated from China by poor roads and communications, and the PRC leadership believed that

the separate provisions made for Tibet in the 1980s accentuated its difference from the rest of the country. So the first policies adopted under Hu Jintao, Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region from 1988 to 92, were aimed at economic integration—establishing infrastructural links by building roads, opening the Qinghai–Tibet railway, improving telecommunications and so on. Billions of dollars have been spent on the development of the region since 1990.

This means that the Chinese government is to some extent justified when it says that the Tibet Autonomous Region can only survive through government subsidies. The Regional government cannot even raise enough money to pay salaries to its own employees; its ability to levy taxes is very weak at present. All the major infrastructural initiatives—railways, roads, power systems—have been dependent on injections of funds from the central government. This chronic dependence on the centre is one of Tibet’s biggest problems—the region has no economic clout to negotiate with Beijing and has to follow its directives, because it is essentially the Central government’s money that is paying for the Region’s development.

*Have there been any moves towards self-sustaining development—in industry, for example, or increased agricultural production?*

This is one of the contradictions the Chinese government faces in Tibet. When you look at the statistics for government spending there, the vast bulk of the budget goes on infrastructure, and less than 5 per cent on agricultural development—yet even today, 85 per cent of the population is dependent on farming. This has to do with Beijing’s decision to prioritize industrialization over agriculture; but it is also because the authorities see that Tibet has economic potential, which cannot be realized until the infrastructure is built. For example, Tibet has huge quantities of mineral deposits, but they are useless unless you have the means to exploit them. You can mine for copper, gold, silver and so on, but without further developing the railways it will be too expensive to transport them, making them unaffordable on the international market. So the Chinese government’s long-term plan is to develop the mining industry, and in the last two years they have invited international mining companies to operate in Tibet. The idea is that, with the infrastructure and power systems in place, resource extraction will make the region

profitable. The real day-to-day needs of farmers and herders are not reflected in this planning process.

*How much of the infrastructural development involves Tibetan labour?*

The majority of the workforce in railway construction, for example, consists of Chinese migrants from poorer regions, such as Gansu and Shaanxi, where many farmers now do not have jobs. The Chinese government encourages them to go to Tibet as a way of letting off steam in these hard-pressed provinces, since if they remain it will create problems for the authorities there. For many people, going to work in Tibet is an opportunity to make a living for themselves: the regions they come from are in fact much poorer than Tibet. Generally, Tibetan farmers are far better off than most rural communities in China—the population is smaller, just under 6 million, and land holdings are much bigger. No one in Tibet will go hungry: people can produce enough for their own survival, although they may not have enough of a surplus to sell it on the market. But Tibetan farmers face another problem: what they produce, mainly barley and mutton, does not have much market value. For example, Tibet produces a great deal of barley, but it is actually cheaper for Chinese beer companies to buy it on the international market, from Canada or the US, than from Tibetan farmers.

*How many incomers are there in the Tibet Autonomous Region at present?*

This is a very complex issue, because the Chinese government has not produced any statistics on the number of migrants working in Tibet. The simple reason is that Chinese census data are compiled according to official place of residence, rather than where you are at the time the census is taken. Most of the migrants do not have permits to live there, and will instead be counted as living elsewhere in China; they are a floating population. The government also points out that many migrant workers in Tibet are seasonal—they go there to work in summer, and so could not be counted as permanent residents. But in any case, the census is only taken every ten years; the last figures are from 2000, and a lot has changed in Lhasa in the eight years since then. Change is so rapid and dramatic in China as a whole, the mobility of the population so great, that the figures we have are very unreliable. But it is certainly true that even to the casual visitor, Lhasa now feels much more like a Han city than a Tibetan one, in

terms of its population. Chinese migrants tend to be more numerous in urban areas, and used to be concentrated mainly in Lhasa; but now they have begun to penetrate into rural areas, opening restaurants or doing small trade as peddlers across the Tibetan Plateau.

*How does the development of the Autonomous Region compare with the other Tibetan areas—in Qinghai and Sichuan, for example?*

The Tibetan population in Qinghai and Sichuan is economically better off, because they are much more closely integrated with the rest of China, and they have more ways to supplement their income. The Autonomous Region also has the problem that there is very little border trade, from Tibet southwards to India and Southeast Asia. Historically, this was where Tibet's trade was focused, since its goods found much more of a market in South Asia than China. The nearest port is Calcutta, which is two days away, but if you go across the rest of China it is eight to thirteen days. So, for example, wool produced on the Tibetan plateau cannot be exported profitably today since it cannot travel southwards—the borders are closed. The India–China trade relationship is at present essentially based on maritime rather than land routes. The reason for this is that, despite some improvement in relations, the border dispute between the two countries has not been settled. It is partly a security question, but also, neither India nor China are quite sure what will happen if that region is opened to border trade—whether the Indian market will penetrate more forcefully into Tibet or vice versa.

*How would you describe the political and cultural atmosphere in Tibet over the last decade?*

The government's policy seemed to be that, as long as you did not talk about independence or human rights, everything was permissible. Many more magazines and newspapers started up, and the government allowed a lot of local, indigenous NGOs to emerge, which have been very effective in campaigning against poverty. Tibetan diaspora communities in North America and Europe were allowed to set up NGOs in their home towns, funding the construction of houses. The number of Tibetans going abroad to study—to the West, to Europe, to America—increased during the 1990s. There were more openings to the outside world. In that sense, it was quite a hopeful time.

Culturally, there have been two separate kinds of development. On the one hand, there has been a revival of traditional Tibetan culture and arts and crafts. On the other, a new practice is emerging of modern, figurative painting by Tibetan artists. There is a group of them in Lhasa who have established an artists' guild; they sell paintings and contribute to international exhibitions. There is nothing immediately Tibetan about their work; conservative elements in fact see it as somehow a rejection of Tibet, an imitation of the West—they do not see it as Tibetan art. But this is something new and vital in Tibet, produced by a younger generation whose outlook is very different from that of conservative elements in our society. Similarly in literature, the younger generation writing in Tibetan do not use traditional verse forms, but produce poetry in a free style, novels on new and different subject matter. Again, conservatives would not see this as authentically Tibetan unless it imitates an existing tradition. But for me, the emergence of modern Tibetan literature—novels, short stories and poetry, from 1980 onwards—is a very exciting development, expressing much more of what is happening in Tibet, the desires of ordinary people and the region's possible future direction, than various forms of political protest or movement. There are also a number of Tibetan novelists who write in Chinese, and since 1985 these have gained a real literary presence in China. The most famous is Alai, whose *Red Poppies* appeared in English in 2002; there is also Tashi Dawa, referred to as the García Márquez of China for his introduction of something like a magical realist style. Those who write in the Tibetan language, of course, do not have such a high profile. It is a similar situation to that facing Indian writers—if you write in English you have access to a world market, but if your work is in Hindi far fewer people tend to know about you.

For the traditionalists, what is important is the cultivation of the past; they see the continuation of traditional forms of art as vital for maintaining Tibetan identity. All over Tibet, such forms have re-emerged in painting and crafts, and are still very popular. They are popular in China as well, despite the recent patriotic fervour and hostility towards Tibetans. Since around 1980, interest in Tibetan culture and traditions has been growing there. Tibet is seen as being quite other, and having unique characteristics that China has lost. Its attachment to traditional forms of dress, painting and ways of life is seen as admirable. Many Chinese writers and artists have travelled to Tibet and drawn inspiration from it, as an example of how to live in harmony with nature. In fact,



a much more romantic view of Tibet has emerged among the Chinese population than in the West.

There has also been a flourishing of modern Tibetan historiography, including oral history projects on rural life, as well as recording proverbs and popular folk songs. There has been a lot of biographical writing, and some very interesting memoirs written by Tibetan women, who of course are always left out of the traditionalist conservative accounts; in Tibetan schools in Dharamsala, the history textbooks stop at the 10th century. In fact, I was attacked for dedicating *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* to my wife, instead of to the Dalai Lama. I am currently working on a historical project on banditry. There is almost a Wild West element to Tibetan history: travellers across the vast Plateau would be attacked and robbed by bandits. There are many oral sources and other accounts, and I am looking into who these people were—seeing them not as negative characters, but more along Eric Hobsbawm's lines, viewing banditry as a form of social protest. People often became bandits after running away from traditional Tibetan society, from feudal law. According to the master narrative they were bad people, but almost all of them were actually resisting local rulers or governments. When you identify who they were and what happened to them, you often find these were marginal groups in Tibetan society.

*Is Tibetan still the official language in the Autonomous Region?*

According to the constitution, the regional language of education and administration in the TAR should be Tibetan, but this has not been implemented in practice. The reason is that the leadership of the CP in Tibet, the party secretaries and undersecretaries, are all Chinese and do not speak Tibetan. In terms of education, in rural areas this is carried out in the native language, but in urban areas, and especially in Lhasa, there is an increasing use of Chinese in schools; at university level, courses in Tibetan literature and history are taught in Tibetan, but otherwise everything is taught in Chinese. This is not necessarily a matter of government policy: many parents prefer to give their children a Chinese-medium education, simply because in the long run they will have better job opportunities, and because the majority of Tibetans in further education—at present there are nearly 3,000 new graduates per year—tend to go to universities elsewhere in China. There are also now the so-called 'inland schools': boarding schools for Tibetan children, who

are recruited in Tibet and then sent to schools scattered across China—some of them as far away as Liaoning and Fujian. The ostensible reason they are not in Tibet is that the government cannot recruit enough teachers there, nor persuade qualified teachers from elsewhere to go to the Autonomous Region; it is also a way for the more developed coastal provinces to meet their obligations to aid the poorer ones, by paying for these schools to be built in their own area. This is part of an attempt to foster a sense of ‘national unity’ and loyalty to China. Of course, some Tibetans and outsiders see it as a sinister ploy, comparable to the way the British, Canadians and Australians tried to Christianize the natives by sending them to boarding school. Teaching in the ‘inland schools’ is almost all in Chinese, and the education is very good. But Tibetan students tend to come out of them much more nationalistic—on blogs and websites they are often the ones leading complaints against the Chinese government, for depriving them of their cultural identity and their language.

*How has the language itself changed since the 1950s?*

A new standardized literary Tibetan has emerged, much closer to colloquial language, along with a simplified writing system—the idea being that it should be easier to communicate with all those who are literate. But in everyday speech, there has also been an increasing use of loan-words from Chinese. A PhD student at Oxford was researching ‘code-switching’ in Tibet, where people would vary in their use of Tibetan and Chinese depending on the context, and he found that on average, 30 to 40 per cent of Lhasa Tibetans’ vocabulary is borrowed from Chinese. In general, now that fewer Tibetans are studying the language at a high level, the standard has declined. But it would be a serious mistake to think that it is disappearing. In fact, since 1985 Tibetan-language publishing has been flourishing. There are two newspapers in Tibetan, the *Lhasa Evening News* and *Tibet Daily*, and numerous journals and magazines have appeared, both in the Autonomous Region and in other Tibetan areas. In part this is because each province is required to have a literary journal, and under the PRC’s constitutional provisions on the right of association, in Tibetan areas there must also be Tibetan-language publications. Not only the TAR but also Qinghai and Yunnan have Tibetan literary journals, for example. Up until about 1995 these had large readerships—*Tibet Literature* used to print 10,000 copies, and because it was well subsidized it was distributed freely to schools and universities, and to anyone who wanted a copy. But state subsidies

have gradually been reduced or withdrawn, and these journals are now required to make money. *Tibet Literature* today prints something like 3,000 copies, and people have to pay for it.

The same applies to books: the withdrawal of subsidies has meant the price of books has gone up tremendously, making it difficult for Tibetan-language publications to break even. In the 1990s there was a real renaissance of Tibetan publishing, driven in part by the reprinting of more or less every title ever published in Tibetan, since the 7th century. That initial wave seems to have ended, and the lack of funding means writers have to seek patronage or pay for publication themselves. For example, a novelist writing in Tibetan might have to pay the publisher 10,000 yuan (\$1,400) to get his book printed; he would then be given half of the 3,000 print run and told to sell it himself. I have seen other cases where a village boy becomes a poet, and the village will club together to pay for the costs of printing his poems; other times it will be a local businessman who sponsors the edition.

*What about television and radio?*

There is vibrant television programming in Tibetan, but people tend to prefer watching Chinese shows, simply because Tibetan-language production is very small-scale, and seems to be much more heavily controlled and censored than the wealth of new Chinese channels that are available. This is also true of print media: none of the Tibetan-language journals or magazines are independent—they are all produced under the auspices of different government offices. Now that more and more people in Tibet are competent in Chinese, they have much more choice of what to read, and will turn to the huge variety of Chinese magazines. To a certain extent, this choice of language that people now have is responsible for a decline in readership of Tibetan publications.

*What has been the evolution of the monasteries since the late 1980s?*

New restrictions were imposed on the number of monks allowed in monasteries, and anyone wanting to become one had to seek permission from the county-level authorities; under the law, you have to be eighteen or over to become a monk or join a monastery. But no one pays the slightest attention to these restrictions. Anyone who goes to Tibet now will see hundreds of youngsters in the monasteries. The government

found itself caught in a dilemma: if it forcibly implemented its own policies and removed these children, it would have a wave of protests on its hands. So as long as the monasteries did not actively engage in politics, the government was willing to turn a blind eye to the situation. But relations between the monasteries and the Chinese authorities deteriorated after 1995, when the Chinese leadership insisted on selecting their own 10th Panchen Lama, disregarding all the wishes and conventions of Tibetan Buddhists. This has had a lasting effect.

As for the number of monks and nuns, it is quite complicated because the government only issues statistics covering those who have permission to be in the monasteries. Officially, the figure is 120,000 in all Tibetan areas, including 46,000 in the TAR. But the real number including those without permission is far larger; I would estimate the total at 180,000. The fact that the numbers are so large in some ways also reflects the economic changes that have taken place. Monasteries do not receive money from the government; they are totally dependent on alms given by the local community and pilgrims. With the economic reforms of the 1980s, people became wealthier and gave them more money. Economic success helped to generate the revival of the monasteries.

*Is there any social distinction between the children who go to monasteries for their schooling, as opposed to public schools?*

It is mainly children from rural areas who go to monasteries, whereas very few urban families will send their children to them. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, rural families tend to be much bigger, so parents will often send a child, or even two, to a monastery, and still have several at home; whereas urban families only tend to have one or two children at most. The second element is that people in rural areas are, broadly speaking, more conservative in their outlook and view of traditional Tibetan culture.

The fact that monastery schooling was free also became an important factor in the 1980s, when state provision of education was largely abandoned as part of the turn to the market. Across China, people were now supposed to fend for themselves in every area. School budgets were devolved to provincial governments and to the county level; these did not have enough money to run primary and secondary schools, so although education was supposed to be free, all kinds of fees were levied—for

textbooks, uniforms and so on—as a way of raising funds. In Tibet, many farmers could no longer afford to send their children to school. And because agricultural production had been privatized, in farming areas many parents kept their children at home—they needed them to work in the fields and increase their output, which was more urgent than getting them educated. School attendance had been compulsory during the Cultural Revolution and the earlier ‘leftist’ period, and literacy increased as a result. After 1980, there was a visible drop in the literacy rate.

In these circumstances, the monasteries acted as an alternative source of education. This was not just because they did not charge fees, as the public system had begun to do; parents also felt that the monastic tradition had collapsed during the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, and that they could contribute to its revival by sending their sons or daughters to a monastery or nunnery. It was seen not only as a way of getting an education, but of helping to regenerate Tibetan culture.

*What about the health-care system—do the monasteries provide an alternative here too?*

As in the rest of China, since the turn to the market, medical care in Tibet is no longer free. In many cases it has become extremely expensive: relatives of mine in Lhasa recently said it would cost them as much as \$15–20,000 to get treatment—ten years’ salary for a normal family. The Lhasa area has quite good, well-equipped government hospitals, but the cost has prevented most people from using them. The monasteries tend to have a doctor trained in traditional medicine, who may have a look at patients in exchange for payment in kind—a basketful of eggs or a leg of mutton. These practices have been very popular, again because there is no fee.

*Judging by Western reports, there seem until recently to have been fewer social protests in the Tibet Autonomous Region than in many other parts of rural China over the past decade.*

This is true to some extent. But one has to remember that Tibet is not like the rest of China, much as Northern Ireland is not like the rest of Britain. Because of the demonstrations that took place in the late 1980s, the level of police surveillance and control is far higher than in other areas of China.

*How would you compare the protests that began on March 10th this year—the 49th anniversary of the 1959 rebellion—to those of the 1980s?*

The first distinctive feature of the 2008 protests is their geographical spread—they seemed to take place simultaneously in almost all the areas where Tibetans live. I think the reason for this is the use of mobile phones and text messaging to spread news and mobilize for demonstrations; in China, it is a far more popular means of communication than the internet or email. It is noticeable that very few protests took place in Western Tibet, where there is no mobile phone network in operation, whereas many took place to the East and in regions on the borders of Sichuan and Qinghai, where the system is well developed. These demonstrations erupted within a matter of days, after the initial March 10 monastery protests were put down by the police.

Second, there is a major social difference: the 1980s demonstrations were essentially led by the monks, but this time the protests involved groups from across Tibetan society. There were schoolchildren, students, intellectuals, city workers, farmers, nomads—as well as Tibetan university students in Beijing and other cities. This level of involvement from different sectors of Tibetan society was unprecedented.

*How many people were mobilized in these protests?*

It is very hard to say how many people took part. The Chinese government say they detained over 6,000 people, which shows that the demonstrations were very intense, and involved large numbers of people. But they have also been sustained at a very high level for several months—they are still going on now, in mid-May—despite the repression. From the start, tear gas and baton charges were used against the protesters. The monasteries were surrounded by riot police. Armed forces were sent into Lhasa on March 15; prisoners were paraded through the streets in military vehicles the following day. But protests continued despite the mass arrests—there were student sit-ins in many schools and universities, and demonstrations outside government offices in Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan. A ‘Most Wanted’ list was issued daily from March 19, Chinese websites published pictures of ‘wanted’ Tibetans, and China Mobile sent a text message to all its users in Tibet asking the public to send any information on those participating in the protests. In a March 23 Xinhua report from the Gannan TAP in Gansu province, there were said to be

‘serious protests’ at the administrative buildings of some 105 county- or city-level work units, 113 town-level work units and 22 village committees. The protests included Maqu, Xiahe, Zhuoni, Hezuo and other counties and cities. The best reports on all this were on Woesser’s blog; they are translated into English on the *China Digital Times* website.

*Was the issue of Tibetan nationalism the overriding one, or were some of the protests focused on economic or social issues?*

People talked about many things, but if you look at the slogans and banners the protesters were carrying, there was no explicit demand for independence; I think the main issue was getting China to allow the Dalai Lama to come back to Tibet, as well as human rights. It’s true that the protests in Lhasa were against the Chinese government and the Party, but also against ordinary Chinese people who have settled in Tibet—Chinese shops were burnt, ethnic Chinese were beaten. But it was really only in Lhasa that this took place. In other regions the demonstrators rushed to government offices or Communist Party headquarters, taking down the Chinese flag and hoisting the Tibetan one, ransacking official buildings; there were very few attacks on ethnic Chinese. The reason they were the target of public anger in Lhasa and not elsewhere is that the disparity between the migrants’ success and the status of the indigenous is so glaringly obvious there—the Chinese own hotels, shops, restaurants, and are therefore much more visible. In rural areas, by contrast, the economic disparity between Tibetans and Chinese is minimal, so there was little resentment based on economic grievances. There are, of course, tensions between Tibetans and outsiders: in eastern Tibet, for example, farmers supplement their income in summer by collecting mushrooms, medicinal plants and *yartsa-gunbu*—the caterpillar fungus, much prized in traditional Chinese medicine. Now many Han migrants are also going into the hills to harvest these things, and though the government has tried to restrict this by charging them a fee, the profits are still large enough for them to continue. Locals object to what they see as the indiscriminate way the outsiders collect the mushrooms and fungus, claiming they are doing long-term damage to the pastures. This competition over resources has become more intense in recent years.

But personally I do not think the demonstrations were principally to do with economic disparities or disadvantages suffered by Tibetans. Rather, I think these were defensive protests, concerning questions of national

identity. Beijing interpreted the 1980s protests as not just stemming from religious differences, but as the expression of a separate Tibetan identity. Under Hu Jintao, as TAR Party Secretary, policies were targeted against any manifestation of national identity politics; even demands for Tibetan language rights were tarred with the mark of nationalism and separatism. Every Tibetan's loyalty to China was questioned. Everyone became a suspect. The campaign against separatism also became an excuse for clamping down on dissenting voices—within the Communist Party, anyone who opposed a government directive was often accused of being a separatist. But the policy backfired. The Chinese government became unable to distinguish between those who did actively oppose its policies and the rest, and so succeeded in creating a gulf between the government and the whole Tibetan population. The effect was to unify Tibetans, much more than would have been the case if the monastic community alone had been targeted. Indeed, the recent protests have expressed a much more unified nationalistic sentiment than those of the late 80s. The scale of Han immigration has also been a significant factor. Throughout their history, Tibetans on the Plateau have always lived in homogeneous communities, but this is no longer the case—they feel much more acutely than ever before that this land is no longer exclusively Tibetan terrain.

*March 24 also saw the start of the Beijing Olympics torch relay in Athens, where there was a token protest, followed by high-volume pro-Tibetan and pro-Chinese demonstrations along the torch's route in London on April 6, Paris on April 7, and San Francisco on April 9; and demonstrations against Carrefour supermarkets and CNN TV in the PRC. Since Berlin in 1936, the Games have been a byword for profiteering and political spectacle—what part has Olympomania played in the Chinese and Tibetan mobilizations this year?*

The Beijing Olympics were definitely an important element in the 2008 protests. The fact that there would be this spotlight on China internationally is crucial to understanding why similar protests did not happen previously. Both Tibetans within the PRC and exiled political groups understood the importance of the Olympics to the Chinese government, and sensed an opportunity to make a statement, to make their voices heard. In certain symbolic ways, China also politicized the Games, seeing them in part as a way to advertise to the world its ownership of the Tibetan Plateau—hence the plan to take the torch up Mount Everest and the adoption of the Tibetan antelope as one of the mascots for the Games. In



that sense, both the Tibetan protesters and the Chinese government saw this as an important moment to highlight Tibet, for different reasons.

Nevertheless, when China first lobbied to host the Games, I think they naively assumed that they were not going to be the focus of protest. But since their inception, the Games have always been a source of international tensions. In every one there has been some degree of confrontation—the Israelis and Palestinians in Munich in 1972, the boycotts of the Montreal, Moscow and LA Olympics in 1976, 80 and 84. All of them have involved a huge political gamble for the host country.

*How would you characterize the political spectrum of the pro-Tibet movement outside China, and its relation to Western governments' policies?*

The participants in protests in the West are quite a diverse set of people—not necessarily Buddhists or Tibetophiles. Pro-Tibetans tend to come from traditional middle-class, left-of-centre or liberal groups; in the 1970s and 80s they might have been involved in solidarity with the ANC, CND, Greenpeace and so on. The human-rights organizations have also shifted their focus: in the 1970s and 80s, Amnesty and Human Rights Watch were more concerned with what was happening in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and China did not figure much in their reports. Now they have directed their attention more to China, and Tibet as an underplayed concern. But I would separate Western government policy from popular sentiment. Most Western governments are essentially very pro-China. This is mainly connected to economic questions: Beijing and the West are in broad agreement on matters such as developing market economies, privatization and the globalization of trade. Since these governments' primary objective is to integrate China into the global economic order, the issues of human rights and Tibet are very much secondary for them.

By the same token, internet claims in the US and China that the Tibetan protests were engineered by Western NGOs, funded by the US National Endowment for Democracy, are wide of the mark. There are Western-funded NGOs in China—for example, the Trace Foundation, which supports health and education projects in Tibet—but the CCP obviously carries out rigorous security assessments of them. Trace is well known for distancing itself from any anti-government groups or activities, which is one of the reasons why it has been able to operate in the PRC

for decades. In fact it is often accused by pro-Tibetan lobbyists of being too supportive of China.

Tibetan exile groups in India do get NED funding, but that does not translate into an ability to mobilize in the PRC. There is a huge social and cultural gap between Tibetans in India and those in the TAR, illustrated even by their taste in music. Tibetans inside Tibet are comfortable with Chinese pop, while Tibetans in India prefer Bollywood. When Dadon, Tibet's biggest pop star at the time, defected from Lhasa to India in 1995, she was shattered to find that there was no audience for her music. She was virtually unknown, and the exiles accused her of singing Chinese-style songs. Even when the two communities meet in the West, there is often little interaction between them. The exiles in India sometimes see themselves as the 'true' representatives of Tibetanness, and the Tibetans inside as merely passive, oppressed victims—a patronizing attitude that does not go down well in Tibet. The largest exile organization in India is the Tibetan Youth Congress, most of whom were born in India. They have thoroughly absorbed India's long—and valiant—tradition of protest, and lead highly vocal demonstrations on the streets of Delhi, Paris and New York. But they have no means of projecting their words into actions inside Tibet itself.

One external influence that has had a significant effect on Tibetans was created by the Chinese authorities themselves. Their insistence on imposing their own selection as 10th Panchen Lama succeeded in antagonizing all the monasteries, even those which had previously supported the government. The Party then declared a patriotic education campaign, demanding that the monks and lamas denounce the Dalai Lama. The result was to drive into exile some of the most senior lamas, including the Karmapa and Argya Rinpoche from Kumbum (Ta'er) Monastery, who had often acted as moderate voices and Party mediators in the past. The pro-independence demonstrations in the 1980s did not spread much beyond Lhasa because most lamas were ambivalent and used their influence to restrain their followers. In 2008, almost all areas where protests occurred were in places where the senior lamas had left Tibet. There is a constant flow of devotees from Qinghai and Sichuan to the new monasteries these lamas have established in India; but most of their funds come from Chinese supporters of Tibetan Buddhism in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. If the Chinese authorities

want to point to a plot, it would have to be a Kuomintang conspiracy, not a Western one.

But the main outside influence on Tibetans is the Tibetan-language broadcasting on Voice of America since 1991, and Radio Free Asia since 1996. Again, it is not a question of clandestine organization; these services simply provide a source of news and ideas in a society where people are starved of alternatives. Because there is no independent news media, and people are automatically very suspicious of what they hear or read in government sources, they tend to turn to Voice of America and Radio Free Asia for their information. The two stations report on all the Dalai Lama's trips abroad, and on the activities of the exiles in India, giving Tibetans quite international and politicized coverage; the stations are very popular in Tibet, which helps to create a certain climate of opinion there. The Chinese government tries to jam the signal, but people somehow manage to listen to them.

*What is the current state of repression in the Tibet Autonomous Region?*

At the moment the situation is very bad. Because of the number of people involved in the demonstrations, and because they cut across all classes, the government cannot target one particular group, such as the monasteries; it seems that they have to target everybody. The authorities are trying to exert control at every level of the community, in a way that reminds many people of the Cultural Revolution. It is not only those who have been detained that are subject to punishment—the government is holding meetings in primary and secondary schools, in colleges, government offices, where everyone has to write self-criticisms; so do Tibetan students at university in China. The Tibetan population as a whole is bearing the brunt of this campaign.

*How would you characterize the recent wave of Chinese nationalist sentiment, in response to the Tibetan protests—would you say it marks a watershed in the mentality of the PRC?*

This is very interesting. The Chinese nationalism currently exhibited on the internet and abroad is essentially a middle-class phenomenon. It is strongly expressed by those who are the main beneficiaries of China's economic success, and who are most conscious of the country's global standing. They are also more exposed to what is happening outside. They

feel that, for them, the reforms are going in the right direction; they are afraid of anything that will hamper China's economic advance. But there is a great divide between coastal and inland areas in China. You do not find nationalism of this kind in the poorer provinces—in Gansu, Qinghai or other areas—where people have not benefited from the current policies. Then again, the terrible earthquake in Wenchuan on May 12 shattered the confidence in the Chinese state that many people had been expressing only weeks before. Simple questions are being raised about why school buildings collapsed but luxury hotels and private firms did not. There is much more discussion, new questions are being asked about China.

There is a debate among China scholars as to whether the upsurge of patriotic fervour that accompanied the Tibetan protests was engendered by the government, or whether it arose spontaneously from society. There are strong arguments on the side of those who claim it was engineered and manipulated by the government, since the state has evidently been involved. For example, any differing views posted in internet forums were almost immediately deleted, and people expressing them in chat rooms were shut out. Others argue that this nationalism arose not from within the PRC, but from outside, among Chinese overseas students, and travelled into China from there. Certainly, many of those studying in Europe or North America are much more mindful of recent changes in the PRC, and have clearly benefited from the reforms. They feel that the criticisms made are not accurate, and that Tibet has in some sense been used as a stick with which to beat China. They ask why protests in Tibet have got so much attention in the international media when similar protests happen every day in China, without being highlighted. There is some truth in this; but still, the geographical scale of the Tibetan protests is unprecedented.

I should also say that there is intense diversity within China—it is not as homogeneous as it might appear. Over three hundred intellectuals signed a petition circulated by Wang Lixiong criticizing the government's response to the unrest in Tibet and appealing for dialogue.<sup>1</sup> There were similar articles appearing in a range of publications. A group of Chinese lawyers announced that they would go to defend the Tibetan detainees; these people are risking their livelihood—the government

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<sup>1</sup> An English version was published as 'Twelve Suggestions for Dealing with the Tibetan Situation, by Some Chinese Intellectuals' in the *New York Review of Books*, 15 May 2008.

is threatening not to renew their licences. This is not what the media highlights, of course. Many of these dissenting voices were not heard amid the patriotic fervour.

*Have there been any attacks on Tibetans in Beijing or elsewhere?*

The Chinese authorities have actually taken great precautions to make sure this does not happen, because they are worried that there will be major repercussions. There are about 5,000 Tibetans in Beijing, and according to my own relatives there, there have been no attacks at all.

*How do you see Tibet–China relations developing, over the next months and in the longer term?*

In the immediate future, the Chinese leadership faces two problems. One is related to the Olympic Games, and to international as well as Chinese opinion. Beijing cannot be seen within its own country to be weakening under the pressure of international criticisms—to be forced into compromise because of protesting Tibetans. So the government needs to present an image of unity and strength, both internally and to the world at large. The second problem concerns President Hu Jintao and his followers. Hu came to national prominence as Party Secretary in Tibet, and is credited with ending the 80s unrest as well as successfully integrating Tibet and the whole western region with the rest of China. Tibet is intimately connected with Hu's leadership—and therefore the leadership of the CCP. A number of people in high positions made their names through their work in Tibet. Almost all the top figures in the Party today were Hu's underlings during his tenure there: Guo Jinlong, the present mayor of Beijing, was his undersecretary, and Hu Chunhua, the last head of the Communist Youth League—an important office, held at some stage by almost all Chinese presidents—and now acting governor of Hebei province, was also a former secretary of Hu's in Tibet. Now these people's successes are being criticized, and Hu Jintao's credibility as a capable leader is being put into question. Within the Party, discussions are taking place as to whether Hu will save himself by dismissing some of those he promoted, or whether his entire entourage will come under attack. Meanwhile Wen Jiabao, the Premier, has made a number of speeches seemingly making a concerted approach to the Dalai Lama. But everything now hinges on the Olympics. Until then the government is paralysed—if they take any action before the Games

it will bring doubts and uncertainty, and I think they will wait until they are over before making any major changes.

In the longer term, one has to understand that one of the Communist Party's strongest claims to legitimacy today is that it unified China territorially and made it strong. This has great power among the Chinese population. The Party therefore cannot afford to make any concessions on sovereignty with regard to Tibet, since any compromise would weaken the Party's legitimizing appeal. For this reason, I do not foresee the Party making any major policy changes after the Olympics.

*If Tibetans could articulate them freely, what would their essential demands be?*

One of the biggest grievances is that the Chinese authorities equate any expression of Tibetan identity with separatism. The government seems to think that if it allows any kind of cultural autonomy, it will escalate into demands for secession. This is something the government has to relax. In Tibet, everything from newspapers and magazines to music distribution is kept firmly under control, whereas all over China there are increasing numbers of independent publishing houses. The joke in Tibet is that the Dalai Lama wants 'one country, two systems', but what people there want is 'one country, one system'—they want the more liberal policies that prevail in China also to apply in Tibet.

## AFTERWORD ON TSERING SHAKYA

*Tsering Shakya was born in Lhasa in 1959. His father, the headmaster of a small Tibetan-language private school, died while he was still a child. The family was divided by the onset of the Cultural Revolution: an older brother and sister were strongly committed leftists, while another brother was imprisoned for opposition to it. In 1967, his mother left for Nepal with Shakya—her youngest child—and her other daughter. Shakya attended a Tibetan school in the northern Indian town of Mussoorie for several years; in 1973, he won a scholarship to a boarding school in Hampshire, and then continued his studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Between 1983 and 1990 he worked on anti-racist campaigns with Labour-run municipal councils in London. During the 1990s Shakya produced his outstanding history of Tibet since 1947, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, published in 1999. He also translated the autobiography of Buddhist monk Palden Gyatso (*Fire Under the Snow*, 1997), and co-edited the first anthology of modern Tibetan short stories and poems (*Song of the Snow Lion*, 2000). He now teaches at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and is currently working on a study of modern Tibetan literature.*

*In 2002 NLR published an exchange between Shakya and the Chinese dissident writer Wang Lixiong—a discussion that broke taboos on both sides. In ‘Reflections on Tibet’ (NLR 14), Wang emphasized Tibetan participation in the Cultural Revolution, and sought to explore the paradoxes of PRC rule in the region. Shakya’s response (‘Blood on the Snows’, NLR 15), by contrast, foregrounded recurrent Tibetan resistance to Beijing, and the colonial nature of the latter’s dominion over the Plateau.*