



TIBET: CHINA'S GAZA?

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Introduction

Some may consider that my title is either inflammatory or silly. Obviously, there are few Muslims, and no Jews or Arabs involved in Tibet, but I chose the title because the Tibet issue is another of those situations in the world on which the international community takes sides very ardently. It is almost impossible to come to any agreement about the nature of the contention, or the struggle, or about the facts. Although it is true that Tibet is a huge place, constituting one sixth of the land mass of the whole of China, Tibet, like Gaza, has very few people. There is a huge power disparity, the Chinese are numerous and powerful, while the Tibetans are few and weak. There is a dispute about the nature of the relationship between these two groups and there are big ethnic and religious differences as well. Moreover on both sides there is a certain amount of ethnic disdain. I have almost never met a Chinese who thinks that Tibetans are the equal of the Chinese culturally, and I have never met a Tibetan who thinks that Tibet is a part of China.

For all sorts of reasons, there is no other place in the Chinese penumbra that is as important to China as Tibet. The Chinese made all kinds of concessions when Hong Kong went back to China. Many people, including me, thought that the Chinese would ruin the city. On the contrary, it is much the same place I knew from the late-1950s onwards. There is a red flag over Government House, but Chinese soldiers are never seen on the streets. In terms of the press, trade unions, how people behave, nothing much has changed. I was thrown out of China in 1991, but I can go to Hong Kong any time I want. Beijing is willing to be flexible on Hong Kong. Similarly, while the Chinese have said that they are in theory at war with Taiwan, and while every now and again there is a collision between the Chinese and the Taiwanese, Beijing has not for many years tried anything that looks like an invasion. Indeed, they are now saying that perhaps now is the time to make an accommodation over Taiwan.

Tibet is different. It is very big, it borders on a number of other countries, and it has the Dalai Lama, whom the Chinese call a 'criminal splittist'.

In Tibet, there are lots of Chinese soldiers all over the place and every so often a Tibetan is shot. But except for the events of March 2008, to which I shall revert later, the worst thing the Chinese have to endure from the Tibetans is occasionally being pelted with rocks. From the standpoint of the Chinese, Xingjiang, a largely autonomous Muslim area in Central Asia, is objectively much more troublesome because the Muslims there can be violent. In Xingjiang, the Muslims kill Chinese. They blow up their buses in Peking, they kill them in other places, they ambush them and there are regular violent uprisings. The Chinese can do what they like in Xingjiang, the world pays very little attention: there is no Dalai Lama.

Given that the Dalai Lama is, with Nelson Mandela, one of the two most admired people on the planet, why are the Chinese doing what they are doing with Tibet? They are doing it because Tibet is very, very important. Historically, the Chinese have been having trouble with Tibet since the 7th century. The Chinese like to say that in the middle of the 7th century they sent a princess to Tibet who brought Chinese culture to Tibet. She is often referred to, with great admiration, as an example of Chinese goodness towards Tibet. But there is another way of looking at this story. In the 7th century, the Tibetans were actually very frightening and the Chinese were forever sending off princesses to various places in the same way people in New York used to pay protection to the Mafia. 'We send you a princess and you leave our borders alone.'

The Chinese 'cultural' attitude to Tibet

A further factor is that Han Chinese have a denigrating, even contemptuous view of non-Hans, i.e. people not originally of Chinese culture: they think they may be quaint, they may be colourful, they may be interesting, they may be sexy, just as particular tribes in India were regarded by the British as 'martial' or 'entertaining'. The Chinese look on their ethnic minorities in much the same way, in a kind of amused, patient condescension. This runs very deep. Most Chinese don't really believe what their government tells them. Their reaction to a strong government statement is usually to believe the opposite, or to assume that something is wrong. But on Tibet most Chinese are in tune with what their government is telling them. Just after Tiananmen, I went to Paris to a meeting of Chinese people who had left China in disgust at the crack-down after Tiananmen. These were well-educated, well-meaning Chinese who wanted China to be democratic. In response to their invitation, the Dalai Lama sent two very senior representatives to meet them and there followed an interesting and illuminating exchange between one of these Tibetans and one of the Chinese, the former private secretary of ex-premier Jiang Zu Yang. It went like this:

"How would a democratic China treat Tibet?"

"Tibet would get much more autonomy".

"Why not independence?"

“If we lost Tibet, I would feel as if my liver had been torn out.”

“Have you ever been to Tibet?”

“No”

“Why do you feel like that?”

“That is just how we Chinese feel. Tibet just is part of China”

“Tell me one thing, just one thing about Tibet which is culturally identical with China: written language, spoken language, birth, death, food, position of women. Name a single Chinese thing”.

“We do not need to discuss these matters. They are arcane. Tibet has always been part of China. That is the way things are. But a democratic China would be nicer to the Tibetans than the present government.”

I subsequently attended another meeting of dissident Chinese democrats. One of them was explaining how a democratic China would behave. He said that Tibet would be treated more kindly, with much more autonomy etc. At which he was interrupted by a Tibetan woman, the daughter of a senior communist party member who spoke perfect mandarin. She made it very, very clear that in her view kinder Chinese administration was still rape, albeit more sensitive rape. What the Chinese needed to do was to stop messing with the Tibetans and leave them alone.

It is hard to know how representative these sentiments are, but it is worth repeating that between my first visit to Tibet in 1983 and my last trip in 1988 I never met a Tibetan who thought that Tibet was part of China, including those Tibetan officials who worked for the Chinese, providing they were talking to you off the record.

There is another reason why the Chinese treat the Tibetans as they do, but it is not unique to the Tibetans. If you watched the Olympic ceremony, you may have noticed that at one point 57 people ran on to the stage in the Birdcage dressed in ethnic minority costumes. They were described, wrongly, by the BBC and others as representatives of the 57 ethnic minorities in China. But they were all Han Chinese. The Chinese simply could not take the chance that one of these people would unroll a picture of the Dalai Lama or a photo of dead Muslims in Xinjiang, or something else like that.

The 50th anniversary of the uprising

In the spring of 2009, the Dalai Lama, China and Tibet were all over the newspapers. That is not surprising. The 10th March is the anniversary of the great Tibetan uprising, which coincided with the flight of the Dalai Lama to India. Interestingly, 28th March is what the Chinese call “Serfs Emancipation Day”, which is a couple of weeks after the date of the uprising. On that day, according to the Chinese, the Tibetan people finally stood up. Ever since then the Chinese insist that Tibet has become a much better place, that the Tibetans are very happy under Chinese rule and that any disagreement about this is sparked by the Dalai Lama, whom the Chinese refer to as the criminal Dalai. This is not the view of many Tibetans.

In 2009, on the 50th anniversary of the uprising, which ended up with a lot of dead Tibetans, it may be worth recalling the reason for the uprising. The Chinese had invited the Dalai Lama to come to a cultural event, and although he had been advised that if he went there the Chinese might kidnap him, he decided that he would go. When Tibetans heard that the Dalai Lama was intending to go to what many people in Lhasa considered to be the Chinese headquarters, they were afraid that the episode would finish with the Dalai Lama in prison, or worse. So they surrounded his residence and would not let him out. Then some foolish Chinese gunner fired a single shot. As a result the Dalai Lama finally decided to leave Tibet. He disguised himself, left his residence, left Lhasa, and undertook that astounding long trip to India. That was the end of the Dalai Lama in Tibet and the continuation of a long period of very bad relations with China.

March was also the month of some very unpleasant events in Tibet in 2008, which as far as I know, is almost the only time when Tibetans displayed violence against the Chinese. But that does not alter the fact that a number of Chinese were killed, perhaps a couple of dozen, including five young Chinese women who were burnt to death when a Molotov cocktail was tossed into a small shop and they could not get out. That was a very unusual event. I do not call it unusual to excuse it, but simply to note that it was unusual. News of that event went all round the world, for there happened to be quite a lot of tourists in China then and in those days there was a small number of journalists and they reported it. It looked bad on television and it sounded bad and the Chinese did not want any repetition. The Chinese have always referred to that day as the only one when the Tibetans rose up. But there have been hundreds of disorders of various sizes since then, all over Tibet and in the areas of China proper inhabited by many Tibetans. So Lhasa and many other parts of Tibet, including those parts inside China proper, have really been 'locked down' to use the technical term. And again, in a little echo of Gaza, no journalist can go into Tibet, unless he, or she, goes in with a guided tour, of which there have been two in the last year.

What do I mean by 'lock-down'? There are security forces around the major Tibetan monasteries and monks are now confined to the monasteries. But it is very hard to know exactly, because the only way you can know with any degree of accuracy is to have journalists present. However it seems from a number of reports that there is quite a lot of suppression at the moment. Even temporary residents of Tibet, like NGOs, have been required to re-register. The Chinese have drafted in an enormous number of policemen and members of the armed police to go into those parts of China where there are many Tibetans. There have been a lot of arrests, but we do not know how many.

The change in the position of the British Government

The British Government has said, many times, that the human rights situation in Tibet is deplorable and they have often said that the Chinese must meet with the

Dalai Lama. That became more difficult on 29th October 2008, when Foreign Secretary Miliband said that the British had decided to declare that Tibet IS a part of China, and he apologised for not having said so before. What was the earlier British position? It was a British way of putting things which had existed for decades. They said that China had a particular responsibility for Tibet. For many decades they used the word 'suzerainty'. So the official British position relied on the words 'special position' – never quite defined, and there was no other country which used that circumlocution. In fact, as the Chinese have pointed out for years, most major powers just say that Tibet is a part of China, although they often urge that there be discussions, better negotiations and the like, with the Dalai Lama. Mr Miliband said that the previous British position was, as he put it, 'an anachronism' and a legacy from colonial times.

It quickly became apparent, almost within minutes, that in terms of timing, the statement constituted a serious miscalculation. The Dalai Lama's envoys were about to begin what would have been the eighth round of talks with the Chinese. These talks are very remarkable. They have been going on for a couple of years and they almost never take place in Peking, but in some southern town, often rather near Hong Kong. The Dalai Lama sends his most senior officials, the Chinese send the lowest possible level officials they can without being completely crass, usually from the Minorities Commission. The talks themselves, which are not secret, concentrate from the Chinese standpoint on the Dalai Lama himself – his statements, his lies, his misrepresentations, his raking-up of trouble, and, of course, his role in causing the international community to misunderstand what China is trying to achieve in Tibet. Two days before the scheduled eighth round of these talks, the Foreign Secretary made his statement. It was said afterwards that it was designed to encourage the negotiations. In fact, the Chinese then promulgated probably their most deadly attack on the Dalai Lama yet, saying that his autonomy plan was really a way of promoting what the Chinese called 'ethnic cleansing', that the Dalai Lama really wanted all the Chinese out of Tibet, that it was really a call for independence, and that it would have meant the re-introduction of 'serfdom and theocracy'. The Tibetans, as always, tried to nudge the talks in a different direction, but once again the talks were really about the Dalai Lama.

So, why did the British do this? The Chinese analysis was straightforward. "It is obvious to us" they said "these European countries are in a jam. Their governments are running out of money. Who has a lot of money? We, the Chinese, have trillions of dollars in our sovereign wealth funds and these Western powers want that money more than they want to buff up what they call their consciences." This bears comparison with the remarks recently made in Beijing by Secretary of State Clinton to the effect that America would be putting its human rights concerns on the back burner where they would not be at the forefront of the talks with the Chinese. In fact, on the basis of numerous discussions over many years with American and British officials, I think that human rights do not come up very much anyway, but on this occasion, instead of having to face reporters asking whether human rights had been raised, Mrs Clinton said that on this occasion they would not be at the forefront of the talks.

Robert Barnett, a Tibet expert at Columbia University, has said that Britain's concession could be China's most significant achievement on Tibet since American support for Tibetan guerrillas ended just before President Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972. (Support for the CIA-sponsored guerrilla movement, though modest, caused difficulties for the Chinese. It was stopped rather abruptly to facilitate the Nixon visit).

The content of the statements made by the Dalai Lama

Perhaps at this point it would be useful to examine what the Dalai Lama has actually said. Firstly, he has said, and reiterated in London not very long ago "Take Buddhism, it got to China some centuries before it got to Tibet, and in that respect, the Chinese are our elder brothers. Also, Tibet is a land-locked place. It needs modernisation in many fields. No Tibetans want to return to the old system. We were spiritually advanced but materially backward. But we also need the preservation of our culture, our values and our religion."

You would have to be a very obtuse Tibetan to say "medical care is not important". You would have to be stupid to say "better roads are not important, schooling is not important". All those things are important. It does not mean that the culture has to be swamped. It is one of the oldest rationales for colonialism – we bring law, we bring medicine, and all the rest. It is often true. But even though the "look what we have done for you" justification is often true, it seems to me to be not enough. The Dalai Lama often says that Tibet was feudal, it was oppressive, the poor people didn't get a look-in, that it was very dirty, with terrible hygiene, lack of education. He was brought up in the remnants of that system and he thinks all that was awful and he is opposed to it. But he does not accept that it constitutes a justification for the only voice about the direction of the development of Tibet going to the Chinese, who are scarcely a model society. The Dalai Lama says "Why not let us do this development. We, too, would like all the benefits of modernisation". But what is happening in Tibet? The Han Chinese are swamping the place. In the last two years or so Tibet has become a tourist destination for the Chinese. It is seen as exotic, it is becoming a theme park for Hans. On 11th March 2009, in Dharamsala, on that famous anniversary, and on the only occasion on which anyone has ever seen him angry, he said: "The Chinese are very cruel, for the Chinese are wiping out the identity which makes Tibet such a special place. They are turning Tibet into a living hell".

But perhaps his most important remarks related to the relationship between China and Tibet. Contrary to the belief of many people, he does not say that Tibet has always been part of China. He says "We think Tibet is a part of China now. History is history, the past is the past. We concentrate on the present and on the future. I have said one thousand times we do not seek independence. The Chinese should manage defence and foreign policy for us. Inside Tibet, Tibetans should be responsible for education, religion and the environment. We want the preservation of Tibetan culture, inside the People's Republic

of China.” It is worth pointing out that his statement that Tibet now is part of China is really an unpopular view. It causes significant problems with some of his followers, especially the younger ones. But he says that he articulates it to try to save what is left of Tibet.

So what are we to think about the Dalai Lama? He is 73. He recently whispered into my ear in Oxford, “I have just consulted my doctor who tells me that I shall live until I am 102.” That is the Chinese nightmare. Yet, despite what they say, I think the Chinese are lucky that the Dalai Lama is still alive and that the Tibetans really, really do listen to the Dalai Lama saying that the Chinese should not be resisted with violence, firstly because it is morally wrong and secondly because there is no chance of success. So the Dalai Lama is not merely the charming, spiritual, interesting man that lots of people have met; he is responsible for keeping the lid on in Tibet, though he has admitted many times that his influence on younger Tibetans is waning. As he has said, again and again, young Tibetans would like to go after the Chinese. There are thousands of young Tibetans, a lot of them in Dharamshala, where the Dalai Lama has his headquarters, or further south in India proper, who would like to take up arms against the Chinese. The Dalai Lama knows that and he feels that when he dies there may be a real uprising and he knows perfectly well what the result of that uprising will be. It will be like the Soviet Union and the Chechens. It will be a bloodbath. Sad, but true. That is why he has repeated endlessly that he hopes for greater autonomy for Tibet, but not, definitely not, independence. He makes no attacks on the Chinese as a people; he reserves his criticisms and condemnations for the way in which their leaders have treated Tibetans and the way in which Tibetan culture is under immediate threat. He has said that what worries him is the prospect that on his death the Chinese will ‘discover’ another child who will be named as the 15th (incarnation of the) Dalai Lama.

It is one of the great curiosities about the godless, materialist, Marxist-Leninist Chinese that they go to a great deal of trouble to act as if the Dalai Lamas really are incarnations of their predecessors. What the Dalai Lama fears is not impossible because of what happened a number of years ago, after the death of the tenth Panchen Lama, the second highest religious figure in Tibet. When the tenth Panchen Lama died, the Dalai Lama agreed with the monks of the Panchen’s monastery in Tibet that the child they had identified as the new incarnation was the real thing, so that little boy was named as the 11th Panchen Lama. That little boy, and his entire family, and the abbot of that monastery were all made to disappear and have never been seen again. Then the Chinese found another boy and said that he was the 11th Panchen Lama. He has been introduced to the top Chinese leaders, taken to Tibet a bit and he has gone to the Panchen Lama’s main monastery. So a lot of people thought that the discovery by the Chinese of a new little Panchen Lama was a rehearsal for the next Dalai Lama. What shows the vigour of their ambition is that when a Dalai Lama dies the (living) Panchen Lama plays an important part in certifying that the child who has been found is indeed the incarnation of the predecessor. The Dalai Lama plays a similarly important role in certifying the new Panchen Lama. When the Chinese are asked where the original little boy is, they always

reply “he is where he is supposed to be.” That is the same answer as is given to questions about the whereabouts of the famous man who stood in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square, waving at them and stopping them. He, too, has disappeared and is apparently “where he is supposed to be.” So I think that the Chinese will try very hard to find the 15th Dalai Lama. The present Dalai Lama has tried to counter this by saying there does not have to be a Dalai Lama. There were no Dalai Lamas really until the 17th century, there does not have to be another one, it may be that the Tibetans will not want one.

Conclusion

Tibet is a sensitive area and I fear China is winning. Other countries step back from the Chinese because they are big and important; people would rather not think about Tibet – it’s a bit embarrassing – and in the meantime Tibet has been flooded with Han Chinese and much Tibetan culture is vanishing, diluted or destroyed by Hans in a process which began during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. It remains to be seen how all that will play out, but I do not disguise from you my pessimism. I fear that Tibet, like Gaza, will rumble on for a long time.

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