

# China, Tibet and the left

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The riots and protests in Tibet earlier this year were the most significant since China’s takeover in the 1950s. Together with the protests that have accompanied the Olympic torch relay around the world, they have shown that Tibetan nationalism remains a potent force and that opposition to the Chinese occupation is still widespread. But the international left has been divided on whether to support the Tibetan protesters, with some openly backing the Chinese occupation, while others have raised important questions about the leadership of the Tibetan nationalist movement and about US support for Tibetan nationalism.

In this short article, I aim firstly to look at the extent of the 2008 protests and then give a sketch of Tibet’s history since 1949. I will then look at some controversial arguments over China and Tibet, and finally consider how Tibet fits into the wider analysis of China today. Crucially, I want to argue that the protests cannot simply be seen as part of the general pattern of protest in China. There is a particular dimension of national oppression (as there is in the Muslim-majority province of Xinjiang), which both the Chinese and the international left have to pay attention to.

## The extent of the protests

The protests in Lhasa, Tibet’s capital, began on 10 March 2008, the anniversary of a failed uprising in 1959 (see below). Small numbers of Buddhist monks and nuns staged peaceful demonstrations, which were met with heavy handed policing. As larger numbers protested against mass arrests, Chinese security forces first used tear-gas and cattle-prods, and then live ammunition. [1] By the end of the week thousands of people were fighting back with stones against a massive police and army presence, and rioters controlled substantial parts of Lhasa. The Chinese government claimed that 19 people had died, while Tibetan exile sources put the figure at over 80.

There were also protests in other parts of Tibet and, more importantly, in Tibetan areas of other Chinese provinces, in what is often called “greater” or “historic” Tibet. The government admitted opening fire and killing demonstrators in the towns of Luhuo and Aba in Sichuan province. [2] In Gansu province the BBC reported major unrest in the town of Hezuo, led by nomads on horseback [3] and the *Guardian*’s website showed video footage of several thousands of people demonstrating in the town of Xiahe, where protesters were tear-gassed. [4] The Free Tibet campaign reported large numbers of similar protests in Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai provinces, including further large-scale shootings in Kardze, Sichuan province, in April. [5]

One Tibetan expert from the London School of Economics argued that “in terms of the scale of the protests and the subsequent troop deployment, there has not been anything like this since the

1950s". [6] There were major riots in Lhasa in October 1987 and March 1989, but they were not substantially echoed outside Lhasa. [7] The geographic spread of these protests is unprecedented and poses a distinctly new problem for China's rulers. While it is impossible to know the relative numbers involved, Tibetan specialist Robert Barnett argued in the *New York Review of Books* that "roughly 80 percent of the protests came from the eastern areas of the Tibetan plateau—within Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu provinces—which China does not recognise as Tibet". [8]

The Chinese government has made much of attacks on Han Chinese and Hui Muslims by Lhasa protesters, [9] arguing that the riots were essentially a racist pogrom. While this is untrue—rioters' targets also included symbols of Chinese occupation such as the Bank of China and government buildings—there certainly were numerous attacks on Chinese businesses and some attacks on individual Chinese in the streets.

These attacks are a product of the rapid economic development of Tibet since the 1980s, which has seen Lhasa in particular grow very fast, but without benefiting the majority of Tibetans. Most of the new jobs and economic opportunities have been taken by Han and Hui Chinese migrants, who are at best indifferent to and at worst racist towards Tibetans. [10] In addition, the growing numbers of Chinese tourists (over two million last year) exacerbate the sense that Tibetans are being squeezed out of Lhasa, except as "exotic" tourist attractions. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that Tibetans should take out their frustrations on Chinese businesses, in much the same way as African-American rioters in the US in the 1960s targeted white-owned businesses that symbolised their oppression. But much greater violence was meted out by the Chinese police and army in "restoring order".

The stunning resurgence of Tibetan nationalism poses huge problems for the Chinese government. Huge numbers of Tibetans still look to Tibetan nationalism or independence as preferable to the present situation, and they see the Dalai Lama as embodying their aspirations (even though the Dalai Lama does not call for independence). The history of Tibet since 1949 explains why this is so.

## Tibet since 1949

"Historic" Tibet in 1949 was a cultural/linguistic entity, but not a political one. The two central provinces (which are now the Chinese province of Tibet) were ruled by an independent Tibetan government of senior landowners and lamas (Buddhist spiritual leaders). Amdo province to the north (now incorporated into Qinghai and Gansu provinces) and Kham to the east (now incorporated into Sichuan and Yunnan provinces) were in theory parts of China but in practice were ruled by local monarchs. Tibetan society as a whole accepted the Dalai Lama as the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, but there were major political differences inside the Tibetan ruling class, which the Chinese Communist Party initially exploited intelligently.

The Communist Party's armies took control of Amdo and Kham by early 1950. In 1951, following the entry of Communist troops into Lhasa, the Dalai Lama signed a peace agreement that essentially preserved the existing Tibetan ruling class on condition they accepted Chinese rule. As one Tibetan Communist remembered:

*"Our immediate priorities were to establish cordial relations with the Tibetan government and the elite... All thoughts of socialist reform, therefore, were put on the back burner, and we did not pay any attention to propagandising the masses about them, let alone issues of class struggle and exploitation."* [11]

Although there was some initial resistance—one history notes that "Chinese who were in Lhasa in

the early 1950 reported that the streets were unsafe for the Han" [12] —at this stage the Chinese occupation was passively accepted, not least because of the active collaboration of the Panchen Lama, the second figure in Tibet's religious/political hierarchy. In 1955 the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama and numbers of leading monks and landlords joined the committee set up to prepare Tibet's full integration into China.

But the honeymoon could not last, partly because of the "great Han chauvinist" attitudes of many leading Communist Party officials within Tibet, [13] but also because of the very different strategy in Kham and Amdo. In 1955 the government began enforcing land collectivisation, in the process forcing nomads to settle. From late 1955 fighting was general in Kham and Amdo, and in early 1956 a major rebellion erupted in Kham, centred on Yunnan province. [14] This was put down with great ferocity—the army at one point bombing a monastery that peasants had taken refuge in—and thousands of refugees fled to Lhasa.

The Guomindang government in Taiwan and the CIA gave a limited amount of support to the rising, but it was in no sense inspired by them, and the limited arms they delivered made no substantial difference. [15] However, the limited US involvement no doubt contributed to the Chinese Communist Party's determination to strengthen its control, and both this and the presence of refugees from Kham increased the tensions. In March 1959 Lhasa rose in rebellion, and following its defeat the Dalai Lama and thousands of refugees fled to India.

In Chinese accounts the rising is represented as directly organised by the CIA. Tsering Shakya argues convincingly that this is not the case, and that the original demonstrations were "not only expressing their anger against the Chinese but their resentment against the Tibetan ruling elite who, they believed, had betrayed their leader". He also points to the leading role played by the artisans' guilds and mutual aid societies of the (very small) Tibetan working class. [16] Following the revolt the Communist Party's cautious policy was abandoned, and full Chinese control was established over central Tibet.

Central Tibet was at least spared the Great Leap Forward, [17] but the effects in Kham and Amdo were among the worst anywhere in China. In one county in Qinghai province half the population may have starved to death. Across Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan provinces, the death toll was far higher than in the rest of China. The rural economy in these areas was desperately fragile and on the edge of subsistence at the best of times. On top of the repression of the revolts and the forced collectivisation, Chinese officials now forced peasants to give up their traditional crop of barley and instead grow wheat, which would not thrive at such high altitudes. [18] The Panchen Lama, who was born in Qinghai, wrote a long letter to Mao pleading for a change of policy, and was first criticised and then jailed for it.

Living standards fell across Tibet because of the Great Leap Forward, and the demands of the huge Chinese government and military presence. But far worse was to come in the Cultural Revolution from 1966 onwards. [19] In Tibet the campaign turned into a wholesale assault on Tibetan culture. As one generally pro-Chinese writer described it:

*"The damage caused by the wanton destruction and the fighting was awesome... Even if we discount stories of thousands of Tibetans killed...verifiable activities of the Red Guards are horrifying enough. There were killings and people hounded into suicide. People were physically attacked in the streets for wearing Tibetan dress or having non-Han hairstyles. An attempt was made to destroy every single religious item."* [20]

In 1969 a millenarian revolt broke out, marked by the wholesale slaughter of Chinese and Tibetan officials, which at its high point covered 18 counties. [21] The rebels were hunted down by the

Chinese army and their leaders publicly executed in Lhasa, but the revolt showed the scale of China's failure in Tibet.

Mao's death in 1976 allowed senior leaders around Deng Xiaoping to abandon his failed economic strategy in favour of "market socialism" and an opening to the world economy. Part of the new strategy involved allowing a greater degree of personal freedom in order to win back popular support. In Tibet this led to the government admitting that most Tibetans had become worse off. Hu Yaobang, a leading associate of Deng, pushed through a radical change of policy which delivered emergency relief, reopened monasteries and rapidly promoted Tibetan officials. Almost half of all the Chinese in Tibet left between 1980 and 1985. [22]

These partial reforms undoubtedly increased living standards and removed some of the worst restrictions on Tibetans' everyday lives. However, they also whetted appetites for much greater change. The demonstrations in September 1987 were staged to coincide with the Dalai Lama's visit to the US for maximum Chinese embarrassment and were followed by a series of smaller protests. Hu Yaobang was sacked at the start of 1987 because of arguments over national economic strategy, but this was widely seen as a repudiation of "liberalisation" in Tibet.

At the beginning of 1989 the Panchen Lama died, removing the most senior supporter of the Chinese occupation, a month after the Communist Party secretary in Tibet had been sacked for being too soft on Tibetan nationalism. Funeral marches for the Panchen Lama turned into scuffles with the police, and on 5 March 1989 the police opened fire on a demonstration, killing at least ten people. The riots that followed were the largest since 1959, and the centre of Lhasa was taken over for three days. Hundreds of people were killed and thousands jailed in the subsequent repression. [23] The protests were overshadowed by the much larger movement that began in Beijing in May 1989, and the "Tiananmen Square" massacre on 4 June 1989. Tibet was further hit by the nationwide crackdown that followed.

Finding the replacement for the Panchen Lama led to China losing yet more supporters in the Tibetan religious hierarchy. In Tibetan political theology the two most senior figures are the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama. [24] When one dies, their spirit is supposedly reincarnated in a young boy born at the time of their death. Monks from their monastery then find the reincarnation and bring them to the other person for their final approval. So the Dalai Lama chooses who will be the next Panchen Lama, and—crucially—the Panchen Lama chooses who will be the next Dalai Lama.

So the government organised a group of pro-Chinese monks to conduct a search for the reincarnation at the same time as the Dalai Lama was also searching. In 1995 both announced that they had found the reincarnation. The Dalai Lama's choice is presumed to be under arrest, together with his family. But the government's attempt to impose their choice on the Panchen Lama's home monastery in Shigatse, Tibet's second city, produced open revolt in what had been the base of religious support for Chinese rule. [25] That revolt was followed by the departure into exile of numerous leading monks who had previously supported Chinese rule. The attempt to capture the religious succession only succeeded in confirming the Dalai Lama as the pre-eminent religious and political figure in Tibetan society.

Economic development has similarly done little to reconcile Tibetans to Chinese rule. After 1978 Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms led to very fast economic growth, firstly through the privatisation of agriculture and the consequent growth of rural industry and then, after 1991, through the growth of export-orientated small-scale industry in south eastern coastal provinces. [26] Tibet experienced neither of these, and has become more marginal to the Chinese economy as the gap between western and eastern China has widened. Although the Tibetan economy has grown at a faster rate

than China as a whole, this is from an incredibly low starting point. And growth has been almost entirely in the state sector, either in government or construction work from which Tibetans are increasingly excluded. [27] The recent growth of tourism has similarly opened up far more job opportunities for migrant workers and traders from the rest of China than for Tibetans.

As the Tibetan Environmental Network pointed out:

*“What is exceptional about the growth since 2000 is that it has been fuelled by a sudden increase in government spending by about 75 percent in 2001 alone. As a result the provincial government deficit in 2001 was worth over 70 percent of the provincial GDP.”* [28]

But almost none of this went into agriculture, still the major source of employment for most Tibetans. However, “development” is fast coming to rural Tibet in the shape of a very ambitious forced rehousing programme. The government claims to have rehoused 10 percent of Tibet’s population in 2006 alone. In March 2008 the Channel 4 Dispatches programme “Undercover in Tibet” showed the reality of these settlements, which seem aimed at forcing the nomadic population to settle in reservations like those imposed on Native Americans or indigenous Australians: rural ghettos without employment ravaged by alcoholism. Partly motivated by security concerns, the government’s rehousing plan may also be the precursor to a greater exploitation of Tibet’s presumed mineral riches, which will further exclude Tibetans from economic development.

Marx famously argued:

“Religious suffering is at one and the same time, the **expression** of real suffering and a **protest** against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people.” [29]

That fits very closely with Tibet’s experience since the 1950s. Tibetan Buddhism has been, if anything, strengthened as it has become the primary vehicle through which Tibetans express their opposition to Chinese rule. It may seem paradoxical that violent protests against occupation should be powered by a religion which stresses the acceptance of fate and suffering, but this is to miss the real significance of religious ideas, which is that they express both alienation and the belief that change is possible. Fifty years of Chinese rule in Tibet have seemingly done nothing to change the belief that the return of the Dalai Lama would be preferable to what currently exists.

## Tibet and the left

The Tibetan protests provoked a wide range of responses on the left, not all of them expected. It was no surprise that the Cuban Communist Party should fully support China, [30] nor that almost all Communist Parties should echo them. The Sino-Soviet split is long over and for most Stalinists China at least still has a ruling Communist Party. Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez’s declaration—“We are strongly with the people of China. We fully support the People’s Republic of China on the Tibet issue. It has our complete and unrestricted solidarity”—could equally be explained by the growing oil trade between Venezuela and China. [31]

But it was a genuine shock to see anti-capitalists such as Michael Parenti [32] or Slavoj Zizek [33] defending Chinese rule as being good for ordinary Tibetans. Their arguments echoed a more widespread unease among some left wingers about any criticism of China, exemplified by this comment on a *New Statesman* article:

*“Until we no longer interfere or invade other countries and leave them in peace to live as they*

choose, we have no right to criticise China. The first step would be to leave Iraq and Afghanistan.” [34]

Of course, much of the press coverage of the protests was hypocritical, and it is important to expose such hypocrisy. But at the same time there is no contradiction between opposing the occupations of Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, and opposing the occupation of Tibet. The old slogan “Neither Washington nor Moscow”—that we can refuse to support either ruling class—needs dusting off in a context in which much of the left seems to see China as a bulwark against an all-powerful US imperialism.

The substance of left opposition to the Tibetan protests, the Tibetan independence movement and the idea of Tibetan independence (which are three quite different things) comes down to three main strands: China has a right to be in Tibet; the Dalai Lama is a reactionary who would restore feudalism; and the Tibetan movement is a pawn of US imperialism.

### **“Tibet is Chinese”**

In one sense, we can deal with this summarily, since the unspoken second half of this sentence is, “whatever the Tibetan people may think about it”. Even if the Chinese account of Tibetan-Chinese relations since the 8<sup>th</sup> century was correct in every respect, the Tibetan people would still have the right to self-determination. China’s claims to Tibet are based on imperial conquest, rather than any impulse on the part of ordinary Tibetans to become Chinese.

Yet this account of history is not correct. While it is true that Tibet was conquered on several occasions, it is also true that Chinese rule was either driven out or notional for much of Tibet’s past. Around 1250 Tibet was incorporated into the Mongol Empire, which had been established by Chinggis Khan (better known in English as Genghis Khan), and which later formed the Chinese Yuan dynasty. The overthrow of Mongol rule by the ethnic Chinese Ming dynasty in 1368 loosened these ties, and, according to one generally pro-Chinese historian, “from 1566 to the fall of the Ming in 1644, political relations between Beijing and Lhasa were apparently non-existent”. [35]

The Ming were in turn overthrown by the far more expansionist Qing dynasty, who reasserted Chinese control over Tibet, but this was essentially a diplomatic fiction. As Wang Lixiong argues:

*“Between 1727 and 1911, the principal symbol of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet was the office of the Residential Commissioner... The imperial presence in Lhasa, however, consisted “solely of the commissioner himself and a few logistical and military personnel”... Speaking no Tibetan, they had to reply on interpreters and spent most of their time in Lhasa, making only a few inspection tours a year outside the city.”* [36]

In 1904 British troops briefly invaded Tibet in what was essentially a prolonged looting expedition unsanctioned by London. The invaders withdrew after less than a month, leaving both the Tibetan government and Chinese control severely weakened. When the Qing empire collapsed in 1911 the Tibetan government saw its opportunity and expelled all Chinese troops and officials. From then until 1949 Tibet was effectively independent. In some histories this is seen as a period of British domination, but while the Tibetan government took some arms from Britain and increasingly traded with India, they refused to allow the British to open a permanent mission. On one count, by the late 1940s there were just six Europeans in Tibet, three of whom were employed by the Tibetan government. [37]

What the history shows is that, given the opportunity, the tendency was for Tibetans to reject

Chinese rule or influence. Defending China's "right" to rule Tibet means, in effect, defending China's right to impose its control over the population by force. This is often justified by the awfulness of the old Tibetan regime, and it is true that Tibet before 1959 was a desperately poor, disease-ridden society ruled by feudal slave-owners. But the same defence could be made of British, French, Spanish or Dutch colonial conquests in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Almost none of the societies they colonised were ones we would want to see re-established. And the claims of "historical progress" in Tibet seem increasingly difficult to justify.

## **The Dalai Lama**

Many people who would agree so far are nevertheless put off by the pro-Tibetan movement. This is even true of some who have previously been active in that movement. [38] It is certainly true that the Dalai Lama's government in exile doesn't look anything like "classic" national liberation movements such as the Algerian or Vietnamese National Liberation Fronts or the Sandinistas. It is also very easy to mock the celebrity hangers-on that the Dalai Lama attracts. And, as I noted above, the movement doesn't even demand independence, just greater autonomy inside China.

However, for socialists, the judgement about whether to support a nationalist struggle is separate from whether we support any particular organisation that claims to represent that struggle. So over the past 60 years Kurdish organisations in Iraq and Iran have variously allied with their own ruling classes, neighbouring countries' ruling classes, or Russian and American imperialism, depending on the shifting politics of the region. [39] None of this makes the national oppression of the Kurdish people any less real.

Similarly, supporting a particular liberation movement is not conditional on the politics of its leadership, still less on the likely nature of the society that might result from its victory (although it would be practically impossible to restore the pre-1959 society, and there is no evidence that the Dalai Lama or those around him wish to do so). What the Dalai Lama does think or want is curiously difficult to pin down. In one much quoted interview he argued:

Of all the modern economic theories, the economic system of Marxism is founded on moral principles, while capitalism is concerned only with gain and profitability. Marxism is concerned with the distribution of wealth on an equal basis and the equitable utilisation of the means of production. It is also concerned with the fate of the working classes—that is, the majority—as well as with the fate of those who are underprivileged and in need, and Marxism cares about the victims of minority-imposed exploitation. For those reasons the system appeals to me, and it seems fair. [40]

However, it seems unlikely that this is what he focuses on when meeting George Bush or Angela Merkel. In reality the leadership of the Tibetan movement is composed of people who want to form a government and are willing to do whatever deals necessary with other world powers in order to achieve that aim. They may look very different from, say, the leadership of the Irish Republican movement or the African National Congress, but politically they are remarkably similar.

## **A tool of US imperialism?**

This is the most serious of the arguments against supporting the Tibetan struggle, and it is a widely held view. The Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery summed this attitude up in a widely reprinted article:

*"I support the Tibetans in spite of it being obvious that the Americans are exploiting the struggle for their own purposes. Clearly, the CIA has planned and organised the riots, and the American media are leading the worldwide campaign."* [41]

Tsering Shakya has rebutted this specific argument in the Far Eastern Economic Review, [42] but the wider point about US involvement cannot be so easily dismissed. It is certainly true that the CIA was involved in training and arming some Tibetans who took part in the risings in 1956-8, though the numbers were small and their impact minuscule. The CIA also helped with the Dalai Lama's escape in 1959, though this involved just two agents. [43] But compared to what the US would later spend in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the amounts of money and equipment involved were tiny, and diminished throughout the 1960s as the Vietnam War escalated. Grunfeld notes that by 1970 "CIA money had totally dried up" and concludes that "American involvement did not alter the situation in Tibet in any discernable manner after 1959". [44]

Following Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1971, China and the US entered into a mutually convenient alliance against the USSR—something often forgotten by those who see China as a constant target for US imperialism. Part of the price for that alliance was ending all US support for Tibetan emigre groups. As tensions between China and the US have again risen, with US strategists becoming worried about Chinese economic, political and military competition, US support for some Tibetan organisations has started up again. The National Endowment for Democracy, which was heavily involved in the "colour revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia, seems to be one of the major conduits for this.

In 2006, the last year for which they have published figures, they admitted giving just under \$300,000 (about £150,000) to 11 organisations in Tibet—peanuts, essentially. More money was given to just one trade union project in Pakistan. [45] And both sums pale into insignificance when compared to the tens of millions given to the various Afghan mujahideen groups. In practical terms Tibet is irrelevant to the overall nexus of Chinese-American relations. As two supporters of the neoconservative Project for a New American Century wrote:

*"Americans need to recognise that, for better or worse, we have no practical alternative to Chinese sovereignty in Tibet... It would be pointless to make independence a goal when there is no chance that such a goal can be reached."* [46]

This could change. If the US seriously targeted China as a military opponent, it would undoubtedly try to use the Tibetan movement as allies in that strategy (the "Kosovo option"), and undoubtedly parts of the Tibetan movement would go along with that. But that is a very big if. While the possibility cannot be ruled out, it is a long way from the current reality. The Chinese and American economies are deeply enmeshed and each reliant on the other for future growth (or in the US's case a shallower recession), as well as being competitors. Politically, too, China and the US are both rivals and allies. China supports the continuing occupation of Afghanistan and the wider "global war on terror" (not least because it provides a cover for repression in both Tibet and Xinjiang), while the US relies on Chinese help in dealing with North Korea's nuclear weapons. [47] While that situation lasts, the US may give some token support to Tibetan organisations for their nuisance value towards China, but Tibet will remain peripheral.

And while the various Tibetan organisations will undoubtedly accept whatever they are offered, Tibetan nationalism, and the various organisations that represent it, cannot be reduced to a tool of American imperialism. Instead it draws its support from the harsh realities of Chinese rule in Tibet and from the fact that most Tibetans continue to refuse to accept it. Recognition of that national oppression and resistance is mostly missing from discussions of whether the Western left should support the Tibetan independence movement.

But this recognition should be the starting point. Whether we support particular Tibetan organisations, whether Tibetan independence is feasible, what the borders of an independent Tibet might be: these are secondary questions. What is important about the riots and protests of 2008 is



that they have conclusively demonstrated the vitality of Tibetan resistance to Chinese rule and an awakening of Tibetan national consciousness in Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan. Just as socialists welcome other challenges to the power of the Chinese state, so we should welcome these.

## **Conclusion**

The immediate reaction inside China to the Tibetan riots was a rise in Chinese nationalist sentiment, [48] and a flurry of demonstrations against the disruption of the Olympic torch relay (directed, for some reason, particularly against the French supermarket chain Carrefour). [49] An upsurge of nationalism inside China is not all good news for the government, however, as such demonstrations can easily turn against them. Even if they do not, the publicity they attract makes it easier to stage protests on other subjects.

The past ten years have seen a major escalation of public protests, strikes and riots in both urban and rural China, with the government effectively conceding both the right to demonstrate and the right to strike. [50] However, there are fundamental differences between these outbreaks and the Tibetan protests. One aspect of this is shown in the respective death tolls. Across China as a whole in the first half of 2005 about 100 people were killed in mass protests [51]—fewer deaths than in Tibet’s March protests. This reflects a fundamental difference in the “rules of engagement” for both the army and police. In Han-majority areas they very rarely open fire on demonstrators; indeed most protests do not attract the army or armed police at all. In Tibetan and Muslim areas an armed response is the norm.

In China localised protests are often aimed at local officials or managers, in the belief that the central government will put things right once they know the truth. As one peasant activist put it, “Some wicked officials have sealed off the centre from reality. If peasants do not lodge complaints, the emperor will never know what is going on. If I tell the emperor, he should thank me and take care of me”. [52] By contrast, protests in Tibetan (and Muslim) areas are directed, or seen to be directed, against the central state, and there is no ambiguity about whether local officials are carrying out the centre’s policy.

There has been some support for the Tibetan protests inside China. A group of dissident intellectuals circulated a petition accusing the government of fanning racism and calling for talks with the Dalai Lama. [53] And there are significant numbers of Chinese, often influenced by Buddhism, who respect Tibetan culture and will be to some extent sympathetic to the protests, if not to Tibetan independence. But for the moment these are very definitely minority views. A recent Muslim protest in Xinjiang may have been inspired by the Tibetan riots, [54] but this will, if anything, harden the Chinese response to future protests.

China’s rule in these areas is primarily motivated by strategic reasons and nationalist pride, rather than for the direct economic benefit they bring—indeed it is probable that the occupation of Tibet costs more than the profit Tibet produces, though this is less likely to be true of Xinjiang. Between them Muslim-majority and Tibetan-majority areas of China account for one third of China’s total surface area, though less than 2 percent of the population. The Chinese state will not concede control of these areas short of a major upheaval across China as a whole. At the same time the spread of economic development which marginalises the majority of the population is likely to deepen the resentment of Chinese rule. The potential for further clashes is huge, and so it matters that the left understands which side it should be on.

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\* From International Socialism # 119:

<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=457&issue=119>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] "Gunfire On The Streets Of Lhasa As Rallies Turn Violent", *Guardian*, 15 March 2008, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/1...](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/1...)

[2] "Paramilitaries Open Fire On Hundreds Of Monks And Nuns At Tibet Rally", *Times*, 25 March 2008, [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/worl...](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/worl...)

[3] "Tibetan Monk Speaks Out", BBC News, 21 March 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/as...>

[4] "Tibet Protests Spread To Neighbouring Provinces", *Guardian online*, 16 March 2008, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/video/2008...](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/video/2008...)

[5] "Tibet Demonstrations 2008", Free Tibet, [www.freetibet.org/newsmedia/2008-pr...](http://www.freetibet.org/newsmedia/2008-pr...)

[6] Cited in "Tibet Untamed: Why Growth Is Not Enough At China's Restive Frontier", *Financial Times*, 31 March 2008.

[7] Barnett, 2006, includes eyewitness reports of the rioting in 1987.

[8] Barnett, 2008. This is one of the best accounts of the spread of the protests that I have seen, and I quote details from it elsewhere in this section. See on ESSF: [Thunder from Tibet](#)

[9] According to China's official listing of nationalities, the Han are the majority ethnic group, making up over 90 percent of the population, while the Hui are ethnic Chinese who are Muslims.

[10] For Western accounts of how Tibetans are excluded from economic growth, see "Tibet: Death by Consumerism", *New Statesman*, 30 August 2007,

[www.newstatesman.com/200708300022](http://www.newstatesman.com/200708300022) [See on ESSF: [Tibet: Death by consumerism](#)

as well as Barnett, 2006, and French, 2003.

[11] Goldstein, *Sherap and Siebenschuh*, 2004, pp160-161.

[12] Grunfeld, 1987, p111.

[13] For graphic examples, see Goldstein, *Sherap and Siebenschuh*, 2004, pp169-184.

[14] For an account of the revolt, see Shakya, 1999, pp136-144.

[15] Grunfeld, 1987, pp144-160, and Shakya, 1999, pp 170-180, give very different accounts of the extent of CIA and Guomindang involvement. What comes out from both accounts is the tiny numbers of people involved and the lack of impact on the outcome.

[16] Shakya, 1999, pp192, 199.

[17] The Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) was a disastrous attempt to accelerate industrial development by collectivising agriculture, and massively increasing exploitation in both the cities and the countryside.

[18] Becker, 1996, is the best general source on the Great Leap Forward. He describes its impact on Amdo and Kham on pp166-182.

[19] The “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution”, which began in 1966, was launched by Mao and his close supporters to maintain his grip on power and remove their political rivals. It involved unleashing “Red Guards” (mainly young people) to attack “authority figures” and symbols of pre-revolutionary China in a movement that from early 1968 onwards spun increasingly out of Mao’s control.

[20] Grunfeld, 1987, pp180-181.

[21] See Shakya, 1999, pp344-347.

[22] See Wang Lixiong, 2002. Posted on ESSF: [Reflections on Tibet](#)

[23] There are very few detailed descriptions of the riots in print. The details here are taken from Hilton, 2000, pp197-198. For the death toll, see “Chinese Said To Kill 450 Tibetans In 1989”, *New York Times*, 14 August 1990.

[24] For the origins of these institutions see Grunfeld, 1987, pp37-45. Siegel, 1986, pp137-162, gives a good materialist account of Buddhism.

[25] Hilton, 2000, pp262-274.

[26] or more on this see Hore, 2004.

[27] The government’s figures are analysed by a Tibetan exile at:

[www.phayul.com/news/tools/print.aspx?id=8864](http://www.phayul.com/news/tools/print.aspx?id=8864)

[28] “Deciphering Economic Growth in the Tibet Autonomous Region”,

[www.tew.org/development/eco.growth.tar.html](http://www.tew.org/development/eco.growth.tar.html)

[29] Marx, 1844 (emphasis in original).

[30] See, for example, Aida Calviac Mora, "Cinco Preguntas Sobre Tíbet", Granma, 11 April 2008, English translation available online at:

[www.walterlippmann.com/docs1875.html](http://www.walterlippmann.com/docs1875.html)

[31] "We Fully Support China On Tibet: Hugo Chavez", *the Hindu*, 11 April 2008; "Venezuela And China Boost Ties With Refinery Deal", Reuters, 10 May 2008.

[32] Parenti, 2007. Posted on ESSF: [Friendly Feudalism: The Tibet Myth](#)

[33] Slavoj Zizek, "No Shangri-La", letter to *London Review of Books*, 24 April 2008,

[www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n08/letters.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n08/letters.html). Posted on ESSF: [No Shangri-La](#)

[34] Comment on *New Statesman* website,

[www.newstatesman.com/200805010020](http://www.newstatesman.com/200805010020)

[35] Grunfeld, 1987, p37.

[36] Wang Lixiong, 2002.

[37] Grunfeld, 1987, pp72-78.

[38] See, for example, French, 2003.

[39] See, for example, Chaliand, 1980.

[40] "Tibet and China, Marxism, Nonviolence", <http://hhdh.dharmakara.net/hhdhquotes1.html>

[41] Avnery, 2008. Posted on ESSF: ["Not You! You!!!" - Tibet and Palestine](#)

[42] Shakya, 2008. The article also traces some of the dividing lines between the various Tibetan exile movements and the resistance inside Tibet. Posted on ESSF: [The Gulf Between Tibet and Its Exiles](#)

[43] Norbu, 1994, p195.

[44] Grunfeld, 1987, pp157, 158.

[45] Figures available online:

[www.ned.org/grants/06programs/grants-asia06.html](http://www.ned.org/grants/06programs/grants-asia06.html)

[46] Bernstein and Munro, 1998, p214.

[47] For fuller details, see Hore, 2004.

[48] See, for example, "Sympathy On The Streets, But Not For The Tibetans", *New York Times*, 18 April 2008,

[www.nytimes.com/2008/04/18/world/asia/18china.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/18/world/asia/18china.html)

[49] "Protests In China Target French Stores, Embassy", *Washington Post*, 20 April 2008.

[50] I recently reviewed a number of books on these topics in Hore, 2008.

[51] Leonard, 2008, p73.

[52] Quoted in O'Brien and Li, 2006, p. 45. The reference is not to any particular emperor, but rather to traditional views about the social contract between rulers and subjects.

[53] "Chinese Intellectuals Condemn Tibet Crackdown", *International Herald Tribune*, 24 March 2008,

[www.iht.com/articles/2008/03/24/asia/chinasub.php](http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/03/24/asia/chinasub.php). Posted on ESSF: [Chinese intellectuals condemn Tibet crackdown](#)

[54] "Muslim 'Separatists' Protest As Unrest Spreads In China", *Guardian*, 2 April 2008,

[www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/02/china](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/02/china). Posted on ESSF: [Muslim 'separatists' protest as unrest spreads in China](#)