# Tibet and China: the past in the present

Saturday 11 April 2009, by TSERING Shakya (Date first published: 18 March 2009).

**China's official commemoration of its "liberation" of Tibet in 1959 is underpinned by a colonial vision that denies Tibetan voice and agency, says Tsering Shakya.**

The Chinese government proclaimed in January 2009 that for the first time a festival called "Serf Liberation Day" is to be celebrated in Tibet, in commemoration of the events of 1959 when Chinese forces occupied Lhasa and established direct control over the country following the uprising of Tibetans against their encroaching rule.

The decision - a response to the widespread protests that engulfed the Tibetan plateau in March-April 2008 - was carefully crafted and presented as if it reflected the heartfelt sentiments of the Tibetan people. The announcement of this "liberation day" - 28 March 2009 - was made by the Tibetan members of the standing committee of the regional National People's Congress in Lhasa, a body that represents China's promise of autonomy to Tibetans but which in fact functions invariably as a conduit for the iteration of Chinese Communist Party directives rather than expressing local views.

It is indeed possible that such an initiative may have come from one group of Tibetans - senior party apparatchiks on the receiving end of internal criticism for their failure in 2008 to guarantee a loyal and docile populace. But this itself is telling of the nature of the Serf Liberation Day initiative: for in an authoritarian regime, the failure of a client administration leaves performance as one of the few options available. It is natural then that authoritarian regimes have a love of public displays of spectacle, engineered to perfection, in which the people are required to perform ceremonial displays of contentment.

The phenomenon is most evident in North Korea. But there as elsewhere, the local logic of such events may be quite different from the external message they communicate. When a North Korean refugee once told me that he had liked taking part in these performances, I thought he might have been appreciating their aesthetic merit; in fact, he said, the reason he liked performing was because the participants were fed during the rehearsal and on the day of the performance.

**China Tibet: the Sacramento dimension**

On Monday 16th March, China invaded California, landing in Sacramento like a precision SWAT team. Their mission? To influence enough of our elected officials to kill a resolution in the California State Assembly. They are getting close to accomplishing that mission.

For local Tibetan officials, the intended message of Serf Liberation Day will be the delivery of public mass compliance to the leadership in Beijing. A choreographed spectacle - in which former "serfs" will tearfully recount the evils of the past while locals in their hundreds march past the leaders' podium, dressed in colourful costumes and dancing in unison - will both reinforce the party's narrative of 1959 and convey the contentment of Tibetans today. This will allow the Tibetan officials to produce the performances required to retain their posts, and the local people to fulfil the needs of the local leaders so that they can be allowed to maintain their livelihoods. As Joseph Conrad

discerned in his evocation of the native predicament under European imperialism in Africa a century ago, the local subject learns to savour the “exalted trust” of the colonial master.

**The way to survive**

There are other and more immediate precedents. China itself experienced a similar situation under the Japanese occupation, when local collaborators - such as Wang Jinwei, a official in the early 1940s now known to most Chinese as a *hanjian* (“traitor to the Han”) - were forced to carry out orders to coerce the people on behalf of their rulers. Today, the party in its dealings with non-Chinese needs such local intermediaries to provide a semblance of native acquiescence; it reportedly holds regular meetings of such officials where for hours they are alternately praised and admonished by apparatchiks sent from Beijing for the purpose.

Tibetans do not accuse these people of treachery, but rather mock them using a slang word that refers to their need to say different things to different people: *go nyi pa* (“two-headed men”). At the same time, the local leaders are sometimes seen as immensely skilful, because many of them retained their positions decades longer than any Chinese counterpart; no other leaders from the cultural-revolution era were allowed to remain in power after the ultra-leftists of that time were purged in 1976. But there are also instrumental reasons for their survival: the party could not operate without them in the “nationality” areas.

**The routes of culture**

This longevity has had its semi-comical dimensions, particularly in the cultural sphere. The party, for example, has maintained a roster of acceptable Tibetan pop stars whose songs are considered exemplary. But the list has never changed: the official diva of Tibetan song is Tseten Dolma, who has since the 1950s been decreed the most loved of all Tibetan singers. She appears regularly at every political event even though many people despise her music. The reason is plain. What the party finds enchanting is the symbolism constructed around her life: the fairytale saga of a poor serf girl who was liberated by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), brought to national status through her voice, seen as a vindication of class struggle and an authentic sign of native approval for the state.

The difficulty with elaborate performances of loyalty such as Serf Liberation Day is that local interpretations are always impossible to control. As a child growing up in Lhasa, I remember when the epic Chinese film *Nongnu* (The Serf [1963], directed by Li Jun) was first shown in Tibet. The film depicted the harrowing life of a “serf” called Jampa whose parents are killed by an evil landlord and who is used as a human horse for his master’s child until freed from bondage by the arrival of the PLA. The film, meant to arouse indignation amongst the people against the Tibetan elite’s class oppression, is still seen in China as a powerful depiction of the Tibetan social system.

But when it was shown in Lhasa, nobody watched it with quite those sentiments. Many of the local audience had watched Li Jun and his crew shooting the film; they also knew the actors, and had heard stories that they were just following instructions and were not allowed to correct many of the inaccuracies in the film.

This didn’t affect the performance of sentiment. Everyone in Tibet was supposed to watch the film and cry; in those days if you did not cry, you risked being accused of harbouring sympathy with the feudal landlords. So my mother and her friends would put tiger-balm under their eyes to make them water.

In one famous scene, Jampa is shown being beaten by monks after hunger had forced him to steal food left as an offering on a temple shrine. Lhasa people at the time saw this not so much as a

moment of class oppression but as the karmic reward due to a sacrilegious thief. The film became known locally as J*ampa Torma Kuma* (Jampa, The Offering Thief): even today hardly any Tibetan uses the official title when referring to the film. The risk for China's officials is that Serf Liberation Day will face a similar fate in popular memory once the public spectacle is over.

The problem for the Chinese goes deeper, for the claims embodied in the 1959 anniversary commemoration require a cultural as well as a political rearrangement, where local gods are denigrated and local traditions are branded as redundant (even when being seen as "exotic").

**The homeland effort**

The Chinese government has been unable to establish good governance in Tibet, and to appoint cadres who are attuned to the people. The government's primary goal is the "life or death" fight against "splittism" and "the Dalai clique"; local politicians must repeat the appropriate slogans and demonstrate their anti-splittist zeal. But to establish these as the only criteria needed for survival and promotion is to create an obstacle to the development of good policy.

For a long period - ever since the "anti-rightist" campaign in the late 1950s, and even earlier in eastern Tibet - local Tibetan officials who could have brought genuine accommodation between the two peoples have been edged out of position. This too is a feature that is typical of colonial administrations, where legitimacy is created through public endorsement by local intermediaries and maintained through mass performances of native compliance. At the heart of this project is denial of indigenous agency, though it is typically presented as the opposite: a local populace's welcome to a foreign model of modernity.

This highlights the fact that a crucial priority in Chinese political calculations in Tibet is to convince a "home" audience (rather than the subject one in the occupied area). The act of possession - and the ritualised displays of power, ceremony and state symbolism that grow up around it - has to be explained and legitimated to key domestic constituencies.

The way this works can be transparent. The Chinese press, for example, often publishes articles about exhibitions (abroad as well as in China) that display the evils of Tibetan life before the Chinese arrived in the 1950s. The formula is to quote a Chinese interviewee attesting to the persuasiveness of the exhibits (rather than a Tibetan confirming their authenticity).

An official party paper, the *China Daily*, reported on a gory exhibition in Beijing of the Tibetan past hurriedly launched during the height of the 2008 protests in Tibet by quoting a Chinese visitor: "I feel in the exhibition the barbarianism and darkness that permeated old Tibet, and have a better understanding how the backward system of mixing politics and religion thwarted Tibet's development and progress." The uncertainty and anxiety that underlies the colonising project is indicated by the need to have the metropolitan centre persuaded of the merits of its mission.

This need to appease the home audience can have complications, however. When the protests in Tibet erupted in March 2008, Chinese state television repeatedly broadcast footage of Tibetans lashing out against innocent Chinese civilians in Lhasa and reported the death of shop-workers. The same images and the same reports were broadcast over and over again, arousing the wrath of Chinese people in China and around the world against Tibetans.

But the wave of support for the Chinese government and its crackdown that ensued also inflamed and licensed ethnic antagonism in China, further dividing Chinese and Tibetans, and undoing decades of rhetoric in China about the unity of nationalities and the harmony of society.

It also helped create tensions between aggressively nationalist and progressive Chinese citizens. A

group of leading Chinese intellectuals circulated a petition criticising Beijing's response to the protest, and the first point they urged on the government was to desist from one-sided propaganda. Zhang Boshu of the Philosophy Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing wrote that "although the authorities are not willing to admit it", the problems in Tibet "were created by the Chinese Communist Party itself as the ruler of China."

A further complication in the Chinese government's effort to ensure the consensus of the domestic audience is inscribed in the portrayal of the Tibet unrest as the work of outside forces - the Dalai Lama, the CIA, CNN, the west in general or other institutions. This deflective response - common to besieged administrations everywhere - allowed the government to avoid answering questions about its own policies. But it also insinuates a potent notion (again, one that echoes many other comparable situations): a denial of the "native's" reasoning capacity and in its place an assumption of his inherently violent character. The spectators are not asked to consider why the natives are restless.

Again, the Chinese themselves were long the target of the very same depictions. The Yihetuan rebellion of 1900 - which can be regarded as the Chinese people's first uprising against western imperialism - was portrayed by western powers as a kind of racial project of cruel, heathen masses. The reporting of Chinese residents in Lhasa applauding the government's action and welcoming the police's armed street-patrols echo those of the western press with regard to Europeans in Beijing in 1901: order is restored and life returned to normality.

But order and normality for whom? Today, citizens of Lhasa live under surveillance. Their houses are liable to be searched; every text they produce, every piece of music they record on a CD or download on a phone can be examined for its ideological content. Every local cadre has to attend countless meetings, and to declare loyalty to the party and the motherland. The central question is avoided: why are the sons and daughters of "liberated slaves" rising against the "liberator"? The only permissible answers are foreign instigation and an inherent ethnic propensity for violence.

---

**P.S.**

* This article was first published on 18 March 2009. From Open Democracy, 28 - 03 - 2009:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/articl...

* Tsering Shakya is research chair in religion and contemporary society in Asia at the Institute for Asian Research, University of British Columbia. He is the author of The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947 (Columbia University Press, 1999)