

Thunder from Tibet

Saturday 19 July 2008, by [BARNETT Robert](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2008).

Review of *The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama* by Pico Iyer, Knopf, 275 pp., \$24.00.

1.

Every so often, between the time a book leaves its publisher and the time it reaches its readers, events occur that change the ways it can be read. Such is the case with Pico Iyer's account of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, the exiled leader of Tibet. The eruption of major protests in March in the former mountain kingdom has rendered Iyer's gentle study of spirituality in the global age one that is less likely now to be seen as an inquiring portrait of a major thinker of our times than to be scanned for any sign of political prescience or treasured for the recollection of an innocence since lost. Few predicted the intensity of recent events inside Tibet, nor can anyone now be certain of their outcome. [\[1\]](#)

On the afternoon of March 10, the forty-ninth anniversary of the failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959—Tibet had come under the control of the People's Republic of China following the Chinese invasion of 1950—three hundred or more monks from Drepung Monastery began an orderly march toward the center of Lhasa, five miles to the east. Instead of calling for independence as in previous protests, they made specific demands such as the release of five monks detained the previous October for celebrating the award in Washington of the Congressional Gold Medal to the Dalai Lama. They were still well outside the city center when they were stopped at a checkpoint, ringed with China's People's Armed Police (PAP), a special paramilitary force that deals primarily with internal dissent. Some fifty of the monks were arrested straightaway and their colleagues staged a sit-down in the street where, joined by another hundred or so monks during the afternoon, they remained for some twelve hours. A new form of protest had taken hold.

Tibetan exiles have long made the claim—denied by the Chinese government—that several hundred thousand Tibetans were killed by the Chinese between the 1950 invasion and the beginning of “liberalization and opening up” in 1979. Conditions improved markedly for several years after that, but a spate of official criticism of the Dalai Lama in 1987 led to a series of protests in Lhasa calling again for Tibetan independence. There were, according to unofficial reports I compiled during the nine years that followed, some 213 pro-independence protests in Tibet. Some 160 of these have been independently confirmed. Only five involved more than ten or twenty people in Lhasa, and four of those had escalated only when laypeople witnessed police beating the initial handful of protesters. In 1990 the police were ordered to switch from what Jiang Zemin, then Chinese Party secretary, called “passive” to “active” policing, the former meaning (crudely) that you beat or shoot protesters once they start their demonstrations, the latter that you take action against them in advance or within moments of their arrival. The authorities learned to handle these incidents within two or three minutes after they began, taking protesters out of sight quickly before a crowd could gather.

By 1996 Tibetans had largely given up street protests, perhaps sensing that the state was immune to them or that the foreign press would publish little or nothing unless violence was involved. Besides, the average prison sentence was 6.5 years for each participant, and upward of three thousand were

detained during this period for peaceful protests or possession of forbidden documents and videos. Alternatives were devised, but were rare—a solitary gesture in August 1999 by a Tibetan carpenter who climbed a flagpole with a Tibetan flag during a sports convention and later died in custody, apparently by his own hand; a protest in Lhasa by Drepung monks within their monastery confines in November 2005; a wave of protests against the wearing of fur from endangered species in 2006; and a march about the lack of jobs for graduates. But since the mid-1990s there had not been a political protest in the streets of Lhasa.

The young monks of Drepung Monastery meet each afternoon to practice their skills in philosophical debate, and it was one such session that spilled out into the protest on March 10. They had several reasons to be antagonized about China's policies in Tibet, besides what some probably see as nearly sixty years of foreign occupation. Many of these reasons can be traced to restrictions on religion and culture introduced in 1994 in order to erode the suspected sources of Tibetan nationalism.

Such measures include campaigns forcing Tibetans to denounce the Dalai Lama; an unprecedented ban on pictures or worship of him; a prohibition on the construction of new monasteries and on any increase in the number of monks; and a ban on students and government employees having religious possessions or carrying out religious practices. During the last two years, tension has been further increased by the forced relocation of 250,000 farmers to roadside houses, partly at their own expense; the much-publicized opening in 2006 of the Chinese railway line connecting Tibet to neighboring Qinghai Province, with its implicit encouragement of yet more Chinese migration to Tibetan towns; and the announcement by the Chinese government of a plan for the settlement of 100,000 Tibetan nomads. It was made clear by the Chinese authorities that public criticism of any of these policies would be unwelcome if not dangerous.

No doubt the monks were aware—through leaflets sent secretly from Tibetans in exile or foreign radio broadcasts in Tibetan—of exile protests taking place that day in India. They may have also calculated that heightened international attention on China because of the Olympics would deter the police from using lethal force. Chinese government claims of outside instigation are thus not necessary to explain why the monks chose to mark this anniversary with public action.

The police and the paramilitary forces that stopped the demonstration in Lhasa on March 10 were clearly under orders to use restraint. They did not open fire, and after some scuffles they allowed negotiators to talk the monks into returning to the monastery. Early that evening things got tougher in Barkor Square, in the center of Lhasa, when fifteen monks carried the forbidden Tibetan national flag and called for independence: all were dragged away and were later charged with “gathering to create a disturbance by shouting reactionary slogans” and “premeditatedly carrying homemade reactionary flags” (they are currently in detention awaiting trial).

The last two men to bear the flag in Lhasa had been shot dead on the spot by the People's Armed Police in December 1988—this time the protesters were arrested without immediate violence, at least in public view. When five hundred monks marched from Sera Monastery the following day on behalf of those fifteen arrested monks, the PAP used tear gas briefly, but did not open fire and the monks succeeded in holding a seven-hour sit-down in the street. It looked like a new era of protest had begun, one in which the monks had won themselves a little negotiating space within the Lhasa body politic. But within three days, what had at first seemed a Burmese form of peaceful protest turned into something much more violent. Tibet was about to experience its most serious unrest since the 1960s.

At around midday on Friday, March 14, four days after the initial Lhasa protest, a small group of monks at Ramoche, the temple founded in the seventh century by Wencheng, the legendary Tang princess and symbol of Chinese-Tibetan unity, set out from their compound to start a small protest

march. They were soon stopped by police in a minor confrontation—which appears to have been exacerbated by Tibetans’ anger at the presence of plainclothes police in the crowd. Unlike the great monasteries, Ramoche is in the heart of Lhasa, and opens onto a busy market street in one of the few areas of the city that remains a largely Tibetan quarter. Members of the public, apparently aroused by rumors that monks detained that Monday had been beaten in custody, began to attack the police and a small squad of PAP sent in to support them.

The police and soldiers were pelted with stones, their cars were burned, and, pursued by a group of stone-throwing youths, they fled. No reinforcements were sent into the area for at least three hours (one Western journalist who witnessed the events saw no police for twenty-four hours), though they were waiting on the outskirts. It was the traditional response of the Chinese security forces to serious unrest—to wait for orders from Party leaders on whether to shoot or not—but the hours of inaction left the citizenry unprotected and allowed the violence to escalate. (The government announced on April 9 that wily monks had “misled” them into sending the security forces to the city suburbs.)

In this vacuum, a number of Tibetans turned from attacking police to attacking the next available symbol of Chinese governance, the Chinese migrant population. The rapid increase of migrants in Tibetan towns (they already were 34 percent of the Lhasa population when official figures were last made available in 2000, and this figure probably excludes temporary residents and the military) had created uneasy resentment—until then silent—among the indigenous population. About a thousand Chinese-owned shops were set on fire by rioters who were seen by foreign tourists igniting cooking gas cylinders or dousing shops in gasoline. According to *The Economist*’s correspondent James Miles, the only accredited foreign journalist in Lhasa at the time,

“almost every [Chinese or Chinese Muslim] business was either burned, looted, destroyed, smashed into, the property therein hauled out into the streets, piled up, burned. It was an extraordinary outpouring of ethnic violence of a most unpleasant nature to watch.”

Miles saw Chinese passersby, including a child of about ten years old, pelted with stones, and several Western tourists described hard-core rioters beating random Chinese civilians with enough force to have killed them. Eleven Chinese civilians and a Tibetan were burned to death after hiding in shops set on fire by the rioters, and a policeman and six other civilians died from beatings or unknown causes, according to the Chinese government.

Later, the PAP moved in, shooting from time to time, leading to an unknown number of casualties. The exile Tibetan government has said that eighty Tibetans were shot dead in Lhasa, while the Chinese government says that its forces never opened fire; just what happened when the security forces moved in remains unclear because no tourists saw Tibetans being shot and most foreign reporters were allowed to visit Tibet only for three days in March and then only in a group under supervision. By the official count, one thousand Tibetans were detained in Lhasa alone, and the punishment of those deemed guilty of offenses is expected to be ferocious—to be handled according to the principles of “quick approval, quick arrest, quick trial, quick execution” (*kuai pi, kuai zhua, kuai shen, kuai sha*), [2] according to Zhang Qingli, the current Party secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The events of March 14 challenged any assumption that Tibetan Buddhists are necessarily nonviolent or that their political actions are limited to what Deepak Chopra has called “inert pacifism.” If the six rounds of talks between Beijing and the Dalai Lama’s representatives since 2002 had suggested that a negotiated solution for the Tibet issue might occur in the near future, such a solution remains unlikely.

or most people in China, the story of the Tibet uprising starts and ends with what is now called “the 3/14 incident”—what has been portrayed there as the brutal beating and killing of Chinese civilians by rabid Tibetan nationalists. Chinese television has shown images of only these events, setting off a fierce campaign among many of China’s Internet users against CNN and the BBC for having given a misleading account of the riot. Lacking access to Lhasa itself, the news agencies were accused of using images of Nepalese police manhandling Tibetan protesters in Kathmandu instead, and of supposedly understating the violence of Tibetan rioters. The campaign was fueled by short Internet videos made by Chinese students and posted on sites such as YouTube. These showed errors in Western media coverage of the Tibetan unrest or listed historical facts that, according to their authors, proved Tibet to be part of China. The two most prominent of these videos received over three million hits, most of them from users outside China (YouTube is often blocked there), in the week they were released. Each received more than three times the number of hits achieved by the most popular pro-Tibetan video on that site in a year.

Within China, 9.6 million people left messages in Chinese at a Web site expressing condolence for the Chinese civilians murdered in the Lhasa riot. By April, the campaign had expanded to include counter street protests by Chinese people in London, Los Angeles, Beijing, and other cities around the world against “distortions” in the Western news media; as well as a boycott of Carrefour, a French supermarket chain that was believed (wrongly, according to its executives) to have donated funds to the Dalai Lama.

But the anti-Chinese riot in Lhasa, ugly though it apparently was, could have been predicted: it was by no means the first display of ethnic unrest by Tibetans in Lhasa or elsewhere, and might have been expected in any city in the world that is pursuing a policy of rapid reversal of demographic balance while suppressing any form of local disagreement. The riot’s primary political significance should have been that it pointed to the long-term failure of governance of people who want to maintain their cultural identity. But it was not the last or the most telling incident. In the four days following the March 14 riot in Lhasa, Tibetans staged sixty-three protests throughout the Tibetan areas within China, and the number has since risen to ninety-six, as far as one can tell from news and unofficial reports. Chinese internal reports are said to have estimated that some 30,000 Tibetans took part.

Many of these subsequent demonstrations by Tibetans were peaceful vigils for those Tibetans who had died and none are reported to have involved attacks on Chinese civilians. But at least fifteen included major violence against state property, such as burning down rural police stations. In two incidents, according to official reports, a policeman was killed by Tibetan protesters, and in eight incidents Tibetans in the crowd were shot dead by security forces, leading to perhaps between forty and a hundred deaths outside Lhasa, according to exile reports. But more significant is the type of Tibetans involved in those later protests, according to my initial analysis of internal reports sent out by eyewitnesses within Tibet and mainly corroborated by media reports: half involved laypeople rather than monks or nuns alone; about a fifth of the incidents (mainly peaceful ones) were staged by students; and most involved largely rural communities of farmers and nomads, the historic base of Communist support.

In the county towns and rural incidents, the slogans in most reported cases called for the return of the Dalai Lama, and in at least ten places the forbidden Tibetan flag had been raised, implying that the protesters considered Tibet to have been independent in the past (the Dalai Lama has said for over twenty years that he no longer calls for Tibet to be independent in the future and accepts it being part of China). Most significantly, 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 recognize as Tibet, and where religious and cultural restrictions have been less severe than in Lhasa.

These areas had probably never flown the Tibetan flag before the Chinese came: despite endless enforced “patriotic education” campaigns, Tibetans in many towns in the east have decided to risk their lives to seek common cause with Tibetans in the heartlands (see the map on this page) [not reproduced here].

As the leading China analyst Willy Wo-Lap Lam has written, the question that now faces China’s leaders, if not the world, is “Who lost Tibet?”

Chinese authorities have been trying to prove that all these acts were instigated by “the Dalai Lama clique.” Within hours of the first incident, accusations of planning by exiles were made, along with the now infamous description of the Dalai Lama by Zhang Qingli, the Party secretary of Tibet, as “a wolf in monk’s clothing, a devil with a human face.” Fifteen days later, Beijing produced a list of evidence that the *Los Angeles Times* described as “little more than a schedule of international meetings by foreign Tibet activists” that “would pass for normal political activity in most countries.” The list cited a “coordinating committee” set up by Tibet’s exile government in India as a sinister apparatus arranging unrest in Tibet, when in fact it was created in late March (as Beijing had been carefully informed, and as all exiled Tibetans knew, to the discontent of many) to persuade exiled demonstrators to avoid violence and to stop calling for independence or even freedom.

There were other, calmer voices—most notably the open letter published in the May 15 issue of *The New York Review* by some 370 Chinese intellectuals, writers, and artists calling on Beijing to abandon such rhetoric and exercise restraint, and a single phrase in a similar spirit from China’s Premier Wen Jiabao calling on the Dalai Lama “to use his influence to stop the violent activities appearing in Tibet” (the usual language would order him to cease all secessionist activities), shown only on Phoenix TV, a Hong Kong outlet which often covers Chinese governmental news, and not reported in the domestic press. But the tone within China was generally one of anger at the violence against Chinese civilians and surprise at Tibetans’ lack of gratitude for Chinese economic aid.

China’s official literature, besides insisting that Tibetans were lifted out of feudal bondage by what China terms the liberation of 1950–1951, notes that the Tibetan Autonomous Region has received \$13.8 billion in the form of government subsidies from Beijing since 1965, and that its GDP has boomed at over 10 percent per year for the last decade. As a result, a new and wealthy middle class of Tibetans and Chinese has been created in the larger towns in the Tibetan region, and in 2007 alone the average annual urban income increased by 24.5 percent over the previous year to 11,131 yuan (\$1,588) per person in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

To say that Tibetan protests are driven primarily by people being economically disadvantaged thus seems hypocritical to those struck by highly visible economic gains in those towns. However, almost all Chinese migrants to Tibet live in towns and so are major beneficiaries of that growth, while 85 percent of Tibetans live in the countryside, where their average annual income, despite a 14.5 percent increase, reached only 2,788 yuan (\$398) last year, little over a dollar a day. There is thus a wide urban–rural gap, a result of China’s overrapid, skewed development strategies that focus on GDP growth instead of building human capacity, and which have increased the size of the Tibetan urban underclass.

The Chinese government’s distrust of those who speak out on behalf of Tibetans or Tibet, and the current spreading of that sentiment among China’s Internet-using population, is easily dismissed because of what to Western ears is the rhetorical rigidity with which it is expressed; but the distrust is based in part on the recollection of foreign interventions of the past from the Opium Wars onward, including a British invasion of Tibet in 1903–1904 and the CIA support of Tibetan guerrillas for fourteen years from 1959 (though neither gave unequivocal support to Tibetan claims for independence).

A century of intense polemic, initially set off by the British invasion, has convinced many Chinese people that Tibet has been an integral part of their motherland since at least the thirteenth century. The Chinese argument is indeed correct that Tibet was several times under the authority of Beijing, but it overlooks the fact that Tibet was never a Chinese province and was never under direct Chinese rule apart from a few months in 1910–1911, and that Tibet declared independence in 1913. The Tibetan government's position since that time, if not before, has been that China's earlier role in Tibet consisted of a "priest-patron" relationship, where Tibetan Lamas provided religious sanction to Mongol or Manchu emperors in return for political protection and support, in a way that did not affect Tibet's independent status.

It would seem that for many Chinese, and even some Westerners, the principal source of aggravation is the Dalai Lama. The Chinese authorities say that, although he has repeatedly declared support only for autonomy and renounced the claim for independence, he is concealing a continuing desire or a secret plan for independence. The government cites as evidence his refusal to say that Tibet was part of China in the past, his increasingly frequent journeys to the West, which are seen as a courting of anti-China feeling and a public shaming of China on the international stage, and his refusal to condemn those of his exiled supporters who continue to call for Tibetan independence.

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Pico Iyer's book, written over some thirty years of personal conversations with the exile leader of Tibet, is partly about the difficulties of intellectual engagement with an extremely mild-mannered subject. If it is hard for people of goodwill to dislike the Dalai Lama, it is harder still for those who get to meet him. The problem Iyer addresses is thus a difficult one: whether this amiability has a substantial spiritual or intellectual basis. Does it conceal a protean capacity for popularization or a deep perception of the human condition in contemporary times, or perhaps both?

Iyer takes the latter view, and presents a portrait of a world-class figure who, alongside such leaders as Desmond Tutu and Václav Havel, seeks to communicate important messages albeit through what may seem, to less attentive listeners, sometimes folksy means. Iyer illustrates this by descriptions of encounters with the Dalai Lama in Japan, where Iyer now lives; at the exile residence in northern India where he meets with the Dalai Lama's younger, apparently skeptical, brother; in Vancouver in 2004, where Iyer is moved to tears on hearing Desmond Tutu and the Iranian Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi speak alongside the Tibetan master; or with Iyer's father as a child in northern India some thirty years ago.

He describes the "fairy tale" penumbra surrounding the reconstruction of the Tibetan exile in "the Age of Image" and offers a modernist view of Buddhism as a form of rational analysis that aims to "explore the world closely, so as to make out its laws, and then to see what can and cannot be done within those laws." He describes the Buddha as "first and foremost, an empiricist, a scientist of self" and sees the Dalai Lama as a physician, noting that he keeps "a plastic model of the human brain with labeled, detachable parts on his desk at home" and recording his remark that "our master [the Buddha] gave us liberty to investigate even his own word, so I take this liberty fully!"

Throughout the narrative, we catch entrancing glimpses of Iyer's father, one of the first people to meet the Dalai Lama after his flight to India in 1959, and of Iyer's wife Hiroko. But Iyer's chief task is to show the Dalai Lama as a man who is both committed to his belief in human tolerance and unpredictable possibilities, and yet at the same time realistic, in his refusal "to take anything on blind faith or because we want it to be true" and in his call for people

"not to listen to doctrine, which can so often be a source of divisions of its own, but to push behind it

to something human, in which ideas of "clashing civilizations" can seem remote."

The Open Road is written with the unfailing elegance one expects from Iyer, and it is marked by that refined sense of spaciousness and lyricism that is the hallmark of much of Anglo-Indian literature—a refusal to be hurried into vulgar narrative or argument and a savoring of rich moments for their own sake. Thinkers as varied as Aquinas, Edison, Whitman, and Faraday are drawn on as sources of analogy and comparison to the Tibetan leader's thought; Bono and U2 in particular are hailed for sharing the Tibetan's "sense of global community" and the "challenging of his own assumptions." The result is a book that is pleasing, endearing, and a consolation in very difficult times; it also points to the success of the international Tibetan refugee community that the Dalai Lama has constructed (with Indian help), with its rich monasteries, its thirty-seven settlements around the world, and its quasi-Tibetan township, Dharamsala, in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas, an attraction for tourists of all kinds.

Iyer is too acute an observer not to pay attention to the cleavages that have emerged within the effort to reconstruct the Tibetan nation in exile. In his last section—aptly called "In Practice"—he shares some of them with us. He describes exiled Tibetan critics of the Dalai Lama who regard his abandonment of the claim to independence some twenty years ago as a betrayal, and the "sense of pervading sadness or frustration" among Tibetan youths who "will use Tibet whenever it suits them" in their longing to reach the West, as well as those who see the Dalai Lama's pacifism as impractical and his spiritual heritage as a resource enjoyed by Westerners while obstructing the political outcome that Tibetans hope for.

Iyer suggests that Tibetans have "paid a high price at times for being associated with movie stars and for seeing their predicament taken up as the fashion of the moment," since this has sometimes led to a loss of focus on those suffering in Tibet. And on a darker note, he reminds his readers that the spiritual achievements of previous Dalai Lamas did not prevent them from being at times the victims of political intrigue (or possibly even murder), concluding that they are "often as much a victim as a maker of the system" which they head. It is in these vignettes, where Iyer grapples with the difficulties that face the Dalai Lama, that his writing seems particularly energized and vivid.

Those difficulties have become exacerbated as a result of the recent protests in Tibet. The visual evidence of multiple horrors and anxieties has entered into our homes and minds, so that now such a book as Iyer's cannot be read without recalling fresh images of conflict: Tibetans beating and stoning migrant traders in their capital; bullet-ridden corpses of Tibetans shot by police in demonstrations; the emotion-laden slogans of Chinese and Tibetan nationalists; Tibetan exiles fighting with Indian and Nepalese policemen. Many journalists have asked if the Dalai Lama faces a significant challenge to his authority from young militants (answer: he did not until two months ago, but does now). But Iyer's questions are much deeper: for example, can a leader who aims to serve the spiritual yearnings of a world community deal with the specific needs of his nation?

The difficulty that most of us face in addressing such questions is that a pathway through them requires detailed knowledge of the Dalai Lama's constituency, its language, religion, and history. Iyer introduces us to some controversies within recent Tibetan history—the murderous dispute between different schools of Tibetan Buddhism over the fifteenth-century protector-deity Shugden, and the bizarre conviction of Indian officialdom that the seventeenth Karmapa, the current head of one of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, is a Chinese spy—but such events remain exotic oddities.

Some errors inevitably creep in: the population of Tibetans is not yet 6 million—it is only 5.4 million; the number killed or starved to death since Chinese annexation remains unverified, although estimates by exiles run into the hundreds of thousands; the term "Living Buddha" is a mistranslation

of *sprul sku*, not of *bla ma*; the Dalai Lama is not seen literally as a god; the first book of English poems by Tibetans appeared thirty years ago, not five; the Chinese prison for Tibetans who are forcibly repatriated to China from India and Nepal is in Shigatse, not Shanghai; the annual flow of Chinese tourists to Tibet last year was four million rather than one million.

These slips stem from a worthy concern for the accessible, but they also hint at an absence in the story. As Iyer puts it, some issues seemed to belong to “locked boxes...not open to the gaze of scientists” and “worlds I wasn’t in a position to enter or understand” because, as he acknowledges, he cannot fully describe the complex rituals and rigorous philosophies from which the Dalai Lama’s excerpted sayings and pieces of wisdom come. In the political discussions too there are enigmas, such as why, if Tibetan culture within Tibet is being “fast erased from existence,” so many Tibetans within Tibet still appear to have a more vigorous cultural life, with over a hundred literary magazines in Tibetan, than their exile counterparts. The intellectual maneuver of the book is similar to that which Iyer perceives in his subject, a capacity to reduce the highly complex for purposes of wider understanding, a kind of leveraged enlightenment through adages.

That is indeed how the Dalai Lama is experienced through condensed accounts such as television portraits: a pithy sentence here, a peal of reverent laughter there. But his serious audiences and his own community, including Iyer, probably gather meaning from him in very different ways: they hear long discourses in which these nuggets form part of complex arguments about global ethics or Buddhist rituals and studies, matters that Iyer notes can only be lightly touched on in this book. With compassion rather than contempt, Iyer ascribes a Western journalist’s scorn for the Dalai Lama to his not having had the chance to listen to the Dalai Lama’s longer discourses or take part in conversations with him in the Tibetan language. In politics too, the deaths of Chinese and Tibetans on the streets of Lhasa mean that a much deeper level of complexity now has to be engaged, and the political solutions proposed by the Dalai Lama (“meaningful autonomy” within China) and by China (a continuation of the status quo) have to be subjected to more searching inquiry and discussion.

The first days after the crisis in Tibet highlighted the acute complexities that the Dalai Lama faces. Less surefooted than usual, he was somewhat slow to express regret at Chinese deaths as well as those of Tibetans; he urged his followers not to use violence but he did not condemn it; and he publicly stated that Chinese soldiers had disguised themselves as monks to instigate the Lhasa riot, a claim that has turned out to be dubious. In the longer term, he has been unable to wrest any concessions from the Chinese to show his followers that his strategy might work, despite the very major concessions he and his government have made (including the demand by the exiles’ government last month that exiled Tibetans avoid using the word “independence” in their slogans). At the same time, he faces the dilemma that his increasingly frequent meetings with Western leaders, which are his only way to put international pressure on China, are seen by China as provocations and thus are used as an excuse not to meet with him.

At the same time he has shown his capacity to bring to his policies both spiritual conviction and a sense of global community. He kept open the door to negotiations with China despite the aggressive crackdown, arrests, forced denunciations, and summary justice set in motion in Tibet, let alone the vitriolic attacks on him by the Beijing press and television. He said that he would resign as political leader of Tibetans if the violence by protesters goes “out of control,” and he offered to open his files up to “thorough investigation by a respected body” into China’s claims that “the Dalai clique” had instigated unrest in Tibet.

On March 28, the Dalai Lama issued an appeal to the Chinese people that they “help dispel the misunderstandings between our two communities” so as to “find a peaceful, lasting solution to the problem of Tibet through dialogue.” At a meeting with the Dalai Lama on April 21, Under Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky reaffirmed the US government’s support for dialogue between him and

Chinese leaders as “the best way to resolve the longstanding issues with respect to Tibet.” For his part, he repeated his refusal to join calls for a boycott of the Beijing Olympics or disruption of the torch relay, lest the Chinese people be needlessly humiliated. At the same time he insisted on the right of people everywhere to stage peaceful protests, particularly within Tibet where almost all forms of public expression have been outlawed. Then on April 25, the Chinese authorities—possibly, as some analysts have said, because of concerns about the effects of the Tibet situation on the Olympics—agreed to meet with the Dalai Lama’s “private representative.”

Still, the events of the past two months have changed the political terrain significantly. At least forty Tibetans are believed to have been shot dead by Chinese troops during protests in Ngaba, Macchu, Kardze, Tongkor, and other places in the eastern areas of the Tibetan plateau, besides an unknown number in Lhasa (the exile government puts the total figure at 203). Estimates of the number of Tibetans detained range from 2,200 to 5,700, and Tibetans of all ages are being required to write formal denunciations of the Dalai Lama. Combined with the use of aggressive rhetoric and summary justice for even peaceful protesters in Tibet, this is certain to produce further animosity and conflict. Within the worldwide Chinese community, popular nationalism has arisen against what is seen as a hostile West, fueling international tensions. The Dalai Lama’s stature has gained in some ways: Tibetans seem to be acting as a single nationality covering the entire Tibetan plateau. This implies that there is wide support for him and his demand—strongly opposed by China—that Beijing create a single Tibetan administrative zone covering the plateau.

The extent of the protests means that Tibetans, instead of being talked about as victims of human rights abuses and economic inequities (codewords in international relations for the unimportant or the marginal), have now become important elements of regional strategy and a political priority for Western leaders. On the other hand, the use of violence by Tibetans in some protests, leading, by the Chinese government’s count, to the deaths of eighteen Chinese civilians and at least three policemen, raises a question about the ability of the Dalai Lama to persuade Tibetans to uphold his repeated calls for pacifism. This new situation is already producing different, competing views of the Dalai Lama’s historic position both as a political leader and as a global religious figure, views that may lead us to look back to Pico Iyer’s work as much with nostalgia as with admiration.

—May 1, 2008

P.S.

* From the New York Review of Books, Volume 55, Number 9 · May 29, 2008:

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21391>

Footnotes

[1] This is not true of the distinguished Chinese intellectual Wang Lixiong, until recently under house arrest in Beijing, and surely the most informed of all Chinese writers on Tibet. Wang, who is one of the signers of the letter concerning the situation in Tibet that appeared in the May 15 issue of *The New York Review*, wrote in 1998:

“Tibet is more prosperous now than ever before in its history. However, this has not gained the PRC the allegiance of the Tibetans, more and more of whom have become attached to the Dalai Lama.... It would be wrong to regard the present situation as more stable than in 1987 [when protests first occurred in Lhasa]. At that time, it was mainly monks and disoriented youth who led the riots. Nowadays, opposition lurks among cadres, intellectuals, state employees. In the words

of one retired official: "The current stabilization is only on the surface. One day people will riot in much greater numbers than in the late eighties."

Additional note from ESSF: on Wang Lixiong and the letter mentioned here, see on ESSF website: [Reflections on Tibet](#) and [Twelve Suggestions for Dealing with the Tibetan Situation, by Some Chinese Intellectuals](#)

[2] The word *sha* means "to kill," but may not be meant literally in the majority of cases. As of May 1, a Chinese court in Tibet had sentenced to prison thirty people accused of involvement in unrest in the Lhasa area, among them eight who were given sentences of fifteen years or more.