

The Gulf Between Tibet and Its Exiles

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Two recent articles concerning the unrest in Tibet purport to prove that the March unrest in Tibet was the result of foreign instigation. As a result, they have since been heavily featured in official Chinese news media, including CCTV, as well as on the Internet. This episode tells us much about the government's efforts to influence domestic and international perception of the conflict in Tibet, as well as Chinese misconceptions about the nature of the linkage between Tibetans at home and in exile.

The first article was published on a Canadian Web site called Global Research and was written by U.S.-based writer William Engdahl, known for his views that both the Sept. 11 attacks and the theory of global warming are conspiracies. He cited publicly available information about funding of some Tibetan exile groups by the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy in order to argue that the recent events in Tibet were engineered by U.S. government-backed organizations. The same argument has now been repeated verbatim and published throughout the Chinese speaking world by the well-known journalist Ching Cheong, without any additional evidence or research.

Both authors discern a shadowy plot by the U.S. government to destabilize China by "fanning the flames of violence in Tibet." They both implicate a number of Tibet-related NGOs that have received funding from the NED in this effort. Neither article says what these plots were or offers any evidence of their existence, nor do they provide any evidence connecting the NGOs to the unstated plots apart from their funding source. As anyone who is familiar with these organizations and with contemporary Tibet can confirm, the accusations are simplistic arguments based on "guilt by association."

A further problem is that the authors neither explain nor demonstrate any knowledge of what these NGOs do or how they work. For example, the main organization fingered by the authors is the New York-based Trace Foundation, which supports education, development and health projects in Tibet. It is one of many NGOs that operate in China with the formal approval of the Chinese government, and there is no record of it ever having engaged in any activities that could be misconstrued as anti-China. China regularly conducts lengthy security assessments of such NGOs, and would have certainly made it known if there had been any evidence found. In fact, Trace, even more than other NGOs operating in China, is scrupulous in dissociating itself from any political groups or activities, which is one of the reasons why they have been able to operate in China for decades.

Trace Foundation is so rigorous in this respect that pro-Tibetan lobbyists and some exiles have accused it in the past of being too supportive of China because of its refusal to engage with exile politics or even exile symbols, and because it explicitly accepts and works within the Chinese system. If there was even the slightest indication of any involvement by Trace in Tibetan politics or unrest, these authors would certainly have told us. As it is, their only attempt at evidence is to tell us that the founder of Trace is related to the financier philanthropist George Soros, who openly supports democratization projects in various countries.

The arguments made by Mr. Engdahl and repeated by Mr. Ching are just insinuations; the only linkage is that established in their minds. Behind their thinking, and that of the Chinese authorities (who claim that all unrest in Tibet has been instigated by outsiders ranging from the CIA to the Dalai

Lama), is a larger set of presumptions that exile Tibetan groups are involved in political activities within Tibet.

This presupposes that there is a more or less free flow of information between India and Tibet. This, however, is true in only a limited way. To fully establish any kind of link between either the exile groups, events inside Tibet or Western interests, one needs to have some understanding of the culture and social milieu in which these groups operate. Also, there has to be some understanding of the nature and composition of Tibetans in India and abroad.

The refugees in India have developed an ideology and forged a nationalistic sentiment such that they have come to see themselves as defenders of Tibet and the Tibetan people. On some occasions this has verged on a view where they see themselves as the “true” representatives of the Tibetans and view the Tibetans inside Tibet as merely passive, oppressed victims. This has often led to a patronizing attitude towards the Tibetans in Tibet. As a result, the cultural and social gap between the Tibetans inside and those outside Tibet is huge.

The differences in situation are somewhat similar to those between Chinese from the mainland and those from, say, Taiwan or Hong Kong. For example, Tibetans inside Tibet are comfortable with Chinese pop music, while Tibetans in India prefer Bollywood. Even when the two groups meet in neutral places in the West, there is often little interaction between them. I frequently have to attend two parties in one evening, one organized by long-term diaspora groups, another by those coming from Tibet, since they cannot even agree on what music to play.

For instance, in the early 1990s when Dadon, Tibet’s biggest pop star at the time, defected from Lhasa to India, she found to her dismay that there was no audience for her music. She was virtually unknown, and the exiles accused her of singing Chinese-style songs. The gulf between the two groups of Tibetans may be merely cultural, but it is a significant barrier to substantive political exchange.

It is no secret that the Tibetan organizations in India and elsewhere have received funding from NED and other Western sources; Mr. Engdahl’s information is simply lifted from NED’s Web site. This is hardly smoking-gun evidence. Neither does it show that any funding sent to exiles in India was used inside Tibet. The exile organizations that have received funding from the West operate only in India; their ability to project inside is zero.

The conspiracy theorists assume a free flow and exchange of ideas and people between the Tibetans in India and Tibet, but there is no such traffic. It is virtually impossible for the Tibetans in India to travel to Tibet because the Chinese government insists on those wishing to travel to their homeland to obtain Chinese travel documents. Even those of us who have foreign passports find it difficult to obtain a visa for China, particularly if wishing to travel to the central Tibetan areas, now the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The Tibetan Youth Congress, which has been labeled by the Chinese as a terrorist organization, is the largest social and political organization for Tibetans in India. The membership is almost entirely made up of Tibetans born in India, and their political strategies are influenced by Indian political culture. This is not in itself a bad thing—whatever one may think of the Indian system, it has a long tradition of protest and the people march for the slightest infringement of liberty.

The TYC sees protest as the bread and butter of politics. Since they cannot protest in Tibet, they march on the streets of Delhi, New York and Paris. This is as far as they can go—the leaders of the TYC deliver bravura speeches and make polemical claims, but there is no way they can project their words into action inside Tibet.

The only group that could be said to have some degree of contact inside Tibet is Guchusum. The name of the group is made up of the Tibetan words for the dates of major demonstrations that took place in Lhasa in the late 1980s, and it was founded by people who had participated and then been imprisoned for their role in those events. Since they are relative newcomers from Tibet, they still have families and social networks inside Tibet. However, the group is small and functions mostly as a welfare and support network for ex-political prisoners and those newly fled from Tibet. Apart from this, there are few organizations with any internal links.

This is not to say that those inside Tibet are unaware of exile or foreign views and activities. One initiative taken by the U.S. that has had a major impact in Tibet and amongst the Tibetans was the decision to establish Tibetan language broadcasting services within Voice of America in 1991 and within Radio Free Asia in 1996. Here again, it is not a question of clandestine activities or of the secret coordination of unrest; these services simply provide a source of news and ideas in a society where people are starved of alternative sources.

But apart from radio broadcasts, if one wants to look for connections between outside groups and events inside Tibet, one should not look at Western style NGOs, whether Tibetan or not. There are linkages, but not where outsiders expect. This is a problem produced by ethnocentrism: Politics is seen as occurring only in organizations that resemble one's own. Tibetan political articulation is mainly situated in the traditional cultural space of monasteries and religion. This is not to suggest some kind of religious fundamentalism or Taliban-style movement; what is traditional about it is not its content but the channels through which it flows.

The most significant among the factors that ignited the recent riots and demonstrations in Tibet is the blunder the Chinese P.R.C. made in 1995 regarding the selection of the 10th Panchen Lama. The Party, disregarding popular Tibetan wishes and conventions, imposed and orchestrated its own selection. It thus found itself in opposition with the majority of the Tibetans and followers of Tibetan Buddhism in China. The Party also managed to turn all the monasteries against it, even those which had previously supported the government. Tashilhunpo, the traditional seat of the Panchen Lamas in Shigatse, Tibet's second town, refused to accept the boy as a permanent resident, and not a single lama or monastery is known to have agreed to take the boy into their monastery. The poor boy is left homeless, stuck in a palace in Beijing!

Whatever the feelings and arguments may have been about human rights and independence, there was a near universal agreement among the Tibetan population on the issue of the Panchen Lama: The Party was wrong. The Party's response was to declare a patriotic education and anti-Dalai Lama campaign in the monasteries. This required monasteries and monks to denounce the Dalai Lama and created an entrenched no-win situation for the Party. Here was a point no monk or lama—a lama is a senior teacher or spiritual figure—was going to compromise on.

By the late 1990s the monasteries found themselves in crisis—on one hand, the Party had begun to intrude into monastic space and on the other hand, many senior lamas had begun to pass away because of old age. The most senior lamas such as the Karmapa and Argya Rinpoche from Kumbum (Ta'er) Monastery fled abroad, and the absence of senior lamas left a leadership vacuum in Tibet. In the past, these senior lamas often acted as the moderate voice and as a calming influence on the monks and community, being used often by the Party as mediators.

The Party's initial reaction to the flight of senior lamas was embarrassment. But in the long term it saw their departures as a good thing, an opportunity to destroy traditional authority inside the country. It will be easier to control Tibet, officials reasoned, once these lamas are outside—as in the case of Chinese dissidents exiled in New York or Paris, once they leave their significance will be diminished and they cannot cause much trouble in the homeland. What the Party did not realize is

that lamas are very different from dissident intellectuals. No matter where a lama resides, his monastery and the faithful continue to listen to him and look to him as their leader.

Moreover, the Tibetan people in Tibet are scathing about Tibetan Communist Party officials. The people do not view the present Tibetan cadres as leaders, particularly in the tar. They cannot offer a calming influence or serve as mediators between the people and the government. At best, they are seen as opportunists and at worst as collaborators. Even Party officials see themselves as inhabiting a very uncomfortable space. A Tibetan official once told me a story about a group of Tibetan Party officials who watched a dramatic film about Kuomintang collaborators with the Japanese during World War II. There was a very uncomfortable feeling in the room, apparently because they saw themselves being portrayed in the movie.

The flight of lamas to exile had unexpected consequences. The pro-independence demonstrations within Tibet in the 1980s and early 1990s did not spread much beyond Lhasa because most lamas were ambivalent and used their influence to calm their followers. This year, almost all areas where protests occurred were in places where the senior lamas had left Tibet and gone to live in India.

It is the recent arrival of senior lamas from Tibet that has created some lines of linkage between those inside Tibet and those in India. By early 2000, more and more people from Tibetan areas in Qinghai and Sichuan began to travel to India. If you look at the number of Tibetans coming to India and where they come from, you see that in the 1980s and 1990s they were mostly from the tar, while in the last decade almost all those arriving in India are from Eastern Tibet, where most of the latest protests have taken place. This is partly explained by differences in policies and restrictive measures between the tar and the eastern provinces, but this is only a partial explanation.

Most came because their local lamas were in India and they needed to go there to obtain religious education and initiation. Tibetan Buddhism is complex, so that the practice of religion and the transmission of religious knowledge is not a simple matter of delving into a book. The transmission of knowledge is embedded in the notion of unbroken transmission of teaching from the first disciple who heard the words from Buddha through present teachers, and if such linkage cannot be shown the teaching has no legitimacy.

The lamas who left Tibet have established monasteries in India and, wherever they are, that place is seen as the legitimate seat of the lama. Therefore, all the monasteries in Tibet look to the outside for leadership and as the source of religious teaching. The flow of people between historic monasteries in Tibet and newly established ones in India has been constant since the 1980s. There is daily communication via phone and it is not uncommon for monks to spend a few years in India and then return to Tibet. Similarly, monks from Tibet have to come to India for their education, because there are only a tiny number of lamas in Tibet who can transmit knowledge and provide ordination.

It is here in this traditional setting that you will find the connections between the Tibetans in India and the Tibetan people inside China. There is a much stronger affinity within the monastic community between those in India and Tibet; the two groups have much more in common and feel at home wherever they go. Whereas secular youth argue and dislike each other for their differing tastes in politics, music and everything else, there is no such divide in the monastic community.

This interchange of people and ideas is cultural rather than political. In any case, the mother monasteries and lamas in India cannot impel the monks in Tibet to stage demonstrations, even if they wished to—such decisions can be made only at ground level. The monks in Tibet may look to lamas in India as their leaders, but they are no fools and know fully the situation on ground, and take their own decision on such matters.

The monasteries do not receive a single cent of funding from NED or other Western government agencies. In fact, the most significant and generous supporters of Tibetan Buddhism in recent years are members of the Chinese communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. The Chinese donors do not ask for budgets and accounts; they simply hand over thousands of dollars, in the usual manner of devotees. The supposed lines of transnational political and economic influence within Tibet do not point to exiles, or even to Westerners, let alone to development NGOs; they point to Chinese devotees.

If conspiracy theorists want to follow the money and look for a plot, they would have to see it as a Kuomintang conspiracy rather than a Western one. They would however learn much more if they studied the history of policy and its failures in Tibet or talked with actual Tibetans in Tibet instead of painting lurid fantasies of foreign power projection.

P.S.

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