

TIBET AND THE OCCIDENT

The Myth of Shangri-la

TSERING SHAKYA

CANADIAN RESEARCH CHAIR IN RELIGION AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY IN ASIA INSTITUTE
FOR ASIAN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

It is a paradox that, while Tibet receives overwhelming sympathy and expressions of concern from individuals, nevertheless, the Tibetan political struggle remains marginalised and on the periphery of the international political agenda. Most people in the West are supportive of the Tibetan cause. Over the past years, Tibet support groups have flourished in most Western countries. Western governments have been deluged with letters of protest at their lack of action. The Western media gives extensive coverage to Tibetan issues, and countless numbers of editorials and leader columns have been written in support of Tibet.

Yet not a single government or institution has taken the Tibetan political issue seriously. Why is it that individual affinity with the Tibetan political cause has never been translated into institutional or governmental support? I have not read a single resolution passed by a trade union organisation supporting the Tibetan cause. Generally, student unions pass countless numbers of resolutions supporting every conceivable political cause, yet not a single student union has adopted a resolution on Tibet. Why is it that no major political party has dared to pass a single resolution on Tibet?

At one level, the answer seems simple, *realpolitik* dictates government policies. Western governments have always felt the need to appease China for political and economic reasons. There is nothing to gain by supporting Tibet, whereas China is either seen as a *de facto* military ally of Western power or a potential market for consumer goods. I believe that, although it is true that *realpolitik* has shaped Western government's policies towards Tibet, nevertheless, at another level, we need to look to some extent at the way in which the West perceives Tibet and, more importantly, interprets the Tibetan political struggle. The Western perception of Tibet and the images which have clustered around Tibet have hampered the Tibetan political cause. The constant mythologisation of Tibet has obscured and confused the real nature of the Tibetan political struggle.

Since Tibet is receiving wide coverage in the media and in the public domain, it is imperative that we should understand the way in which the Tibetan issue is debated, and the image that is formed. I believe that it may explain why public support has not materialised into political action. Tibet has been very useful to the West: it is a place which is being constantly discovered by the West. It has been unveiled and revealed for decades by travellers, explorers, missionaries, soldiers, scholars and colonial officers. Tibet has become a source of adventure and mystery in a world where there is little magic and mystery. Everything about Tibet is esoteric and beyond "ordinariness". Tibetans simply do not drink tea: it has to be qualified by adjectives, as in "rancid butter tea". The Tibetan landscape is sacred: one does not simply travel across it, one experiences and communes with the geography of Tibet.

The image of Tibet as something beyond ordinary experience is deep-rooted in the history of the Western relationship with Tibet. Each age gives a new dimension to this perception. During the age of imperialism, Tibet was the last unconquered and unpolluted land. While the West extolled the virtues of free trade, Tibet stubbornly remained protectionist. Tibet held a deep fascination for countless numbers of soldiers, travellers and colonial officers. It was the last mystical country in the world. It represented the last

challenge to the Western imagination. Tibet fulfilled the spiritual yearning of the world, Tibet was closed: only the brave of the bravest managed to sneak into the forbidden land.

The public was satisfied by Madam Blavatsky's revelation of telepathic messages from the mystics meditating in caves in the majestic Himalayas, In the age of depression of the 1930s, it was James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon* which captured the public imagination. The mythical kingdom of Shangri-la became synonymous with Tibet. Hilton's invention of Shangri-la became the final embodiment of Tibet as a mythical realm.

In 1950, when the Chinese invaded Tibet, the Western image of Tibet was firmly fixed in the imaginary realm of Shangri-la. It appeared that the *realpolitik* of the cold war was about to shatter the myth. But it was not to be; the myth proved to be insulated from reality. The exodus of Tibetan refugees and the destruction of Tibet became a part of the myth. It was the final chapter in the book of the revelation of Tibet to the West. The Occident was quick to recognise the prophesy of Guru Rimpoche "*when the iron bird flies, the Dharma will spread to the West*". In the 1960s, the age of love and peace, the tragedy of Tibet was a blessing for the West: finally, the sacred teachings of Tibet were unveiled to Westerners, Hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist centres emerged and flourished in unlikely places. The bright young men and women flocked to these centres and found solace from an uncaring world.

There was no need to save the sacred land from the ravages of totalitarianism. After all, now there was a good chance of encountering the all-knowing lamas in the towering streets of Manhattan, the bustling crowds of Oxford Street and the fashionable boulevards of Paris. Now for the first time, one can sit at the feet of a guru and hear a thousand years of the accumulated wisdom of Tibet. It was to influence popular culture. Thousands of people in their spiritual quest read the novels of Lobsang Rampa.

The mythic quality of Tibet infused popular culture: now the sacred teaching of Tibet was enthused about in pop lyrics. The Beatles sang about "floating gently down the stream"—an image drawn from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. While Tibetan culture was being erased by the insanity of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the image of lost Tibet and its revelation to the chosen few became a potent force of spirituality in the West. While the Chinese set out to destroy Mani Walls and erased "OM" from the stones of Tibet, it appeared as the Mantra of the bourgeois, and was sprawled like graffiti on decaying urban walls.

Tibet was not forgotten but there was simply no need for the real Tibet. Tibet was being re-created and re-formed into Western imaginations and enthused with psychedelic experiences. Therefore the suffering of Tibetan peoples in the labour camps became simply unimportant because Tibet was reborn in the West. The imprisoned Tibetans became mere biological beings whose Karma destined them to endure the ravages of totalitarianism.

For the left, Tibet was being transformed into a socialist paradise and Chinese actions were merely the irresistible progression of history towards modernity. Communism was the salvation of Tibet from feudal superstitions, The question of Tibet was reduced to the issue of modernity versus tradition. Tibet represented backward people, who stood in the way of history and did not know what was good for them. Those with superior intellect had a duty to speak for them. As the People's Army marched into Tiananmen Square, the Communist illusion was shattered.

In the age of Thatcherism and Reaganism, Tibet is no longer a sacred land. It is a potential market; Western capitalism found fertile ground in Tibet. The symbols of Western capitalism, Coca Cola and the Holiday Inn, were planted in the sacred city of Lhasa. Surely this must be the triumph of capitalism! To mark its victory, the enduring icons of capitalism, Coca Cola flags, were hoisted over the once forbidden city of Lhasa, while the Chinese security police gunned down a boy for carrying the Tibetan national flag.

In 1904, Lord Curzon dispatched a mighty imperial army to enforce the wisdom of free trade. Today Curzon can rest happily in his grave: the Chinese Communists have embraced free trade and have pronounced opening to the outside world to be one of the cardinal principles of modernisation. Now Western aid agencies and companies queue up to open leather factories, cement factories, etc. The United Nations Development Programme pumps in millions of dollars to improve tourism's infrastructure. The suffering and madness imposed by Marxist totalitarianism over the past thirty years have been

forgotten and, ironically, the ruined monasteries and the tortured faces of the people have become part of the tourist attraction.

The opening of Tibet to mass tourism in the 1980s meant that the West once again rediscovered Tibet. But this time, the revelation of Tibet is set against the canvas of Arthurian legend, in which good and evil battle to control a sacred land. Once again, the politics of Tibet is elevated to the unreal and mythical realms of Ling Gesar. The force of good is on the verge of extinction and tourists are mobilised into action, to fight and save the sacred land, and restore it to the vanquished and exiled King. In this process of mass mobilisation of the army of good, the voice of the Tibetan people remains at best the faint and distant calling of a trumpet, At worst, the call of the Tibetans is drowned under the shuffling feet of mass tourism.

Tibet has become a Disney World for the Western bourgeois. Tibet possesses all the thrills and adventure of a customised fantasy world: danger, romance, magic and cuddly natives. Tibet has become the most dangerous place, where aspiring journalists could play out their fantasies. Journalists will tell you that reporting from Tibet meant risking their lives, that being in Tibet is to experience the edge of death, that journalists play hide-and-seek with the Chinese police. The main thrust of their reporting is "look how brave I am in traversing the guarded land, dodging the wrathful Chinese police". Of course, Tibet had been always been a dangerous place for the white man. The 19th century traveller and adventurer, Henry Savage Landor, wrote: "A white man going into that country had no chance of coming back alive".

In reality, there is no danger for a Westerner. It is far safer to walk the length and breadth of Tibet than to walk a few yards down some streets in Western cities. Western travellers or journalists do not face any real threats from Chinese police. The worst possible situation will be that they escort you out. On the other hand, Tibetans are in real danger, for very often the adventurism of a film maker or journalist exposes Tibetans to the Chinese security police. There are many Tibetans who have been imprisoned by the Chinese for helping Westerners. Once the film maker or journalist returns home he (or she) remains oblivious to the fate of those who helped them.

The perception of Tibet as an adventure ground is nothing new in the Western imagination. Tibet had always been presented as an uncharted land; therefore, the confusion between geography and imagination was inevitable. Each individual who has traveled to Tibet feels that he (she) has the responsibility to reveal his (her) discovery to the world. Since the opening of Tibet by the Chinese, there has been an influx of mass tourism which has resulted in a publishing bonanza. A large number of books with most poetic titles but little substance have been published, recounting the tales of travellers. What is this Western infatuation with Tibet?

At a meeting in London about Tibet, I met an English girl who had lived in Tibet for a year. She said to me as I drove away in my car : "I can't get used to the idea of a Tibetan driving a car". In another instance, when I was speaking to a local Amnesty International group, a man came up to me and told me that he had been interested in Tibet for a long time and asked me if the Chinese still allow the practice of levitation. From these two seemingly unrelated statements, it is evident that there exists two Tibets. There is the real Tibet, what I have called the geographical Tibet, and the imaginary Tibet, which has a potent force of its own. In the Western mind the distinction between the two has merged to form a particular Western perception of Tibet and Tibetanness. In the process of mythologising, the real or geographical Tibet is subservient to the imaginary Tibet. The confusion is caused by the failure to distinguish between an object and a thought about the object.

Ever since European power encroached into the foothills of Himalaya, Tibet had excited the Western imagination, a kingdom hidden behind snowcapped mountains, which showed no inclination to contact the new rulers of India. Thus, the image of a forbidden kingdom was born. The transmission of this image of Tibet has been constant for centuries, partly due to the fact that Tibet was never conquered by the West. It has also to do with the question of ruled and rulers. While European powers were able to rule much of Asia and Africa, Tibet remained an anachronism in the age of imperialism. Unconquered territories are always interesting and have perplexed conquerors throughout History. It is interesting to note that the Tibetan-speaking people of the Himalayas—Sikkim and Ladakh, for instance—are less interesting because they were conquered and ruled by the White Man. Once a group had been subjugated by Europeans, it became backward and uninteresting.

This is, of course, the evolution of imperialism and European domination of the Non-White people. The subjects must be de-humanised to left ownership. In the Western mind, Tibet was mythogised precisely because it was never colonised and Tibetans were never subservient to European rule. Therefore, Tibet became Shangri-la in the Western mind.

The process of myth-making or the perpetuating of the myth of Shangri-la is not merely a harmless reverie. A myth has a power and reality of its own. In the case of Tibet, the myth of Shangri-la has influenced the Western perception of the Tibetan political struggle. The West has interpreted the Tibetan struggle within the frame work of Shangri-la.

Today, while major political changes are taking place in the Communist world, China is backtracking into totalitarianism. Since 1987, there have been major revolts in Tibet which briefly catapulted it into the world's headlines. It has not only proven to the West that there is a real Tibet, but it was a clear signal to the Chinese leadership in Beijing that after 40 years of Chinese rule they have dismally failed to win the hearts and minds of the Tibetan people. Long before the Chinese students protested in Tiananmen Square, young people in Lhasa erupted in protest, culminating in the fateful massacre in Lhasa and the imposition of martial law in March 1959, which lasted for more than a year. Yet despite the worsening human rights situation, the international community and particularly the Western governments have failed to take the Tibetan issue as a matter of urgency.

The politics of Tibet have been reduced to the question of the survival of a civilisation which is on Death Row. It is no longer a question of whether it can be revived or saved. The implicit assumption is that it cannot be saved; commentators are busily writing a "Requiem for Tibet" and predictions of "The last Dalai Lama". Therefore, the politics of Tibet are seen as how to preserve a dying civilisation, whether it is better to preserve it in jam jars or museums.

The West has always reserved the right to interpret events in the Third World and adapt them to the fashionable causes of the West. Tibet is no exception. Today, it is fashionable to speak of saving the world from ecological destruction. A flood of coffee-table books on Tibet has been produced, each preaching the need to save Tibet from ecological disaster. Yet these glossy books are the very cause of ecological destruction. Looking at these books is enough to convince one that we should not cut down trees to make paper.

The Tibetans have become merely the objects of Western perception. Thus, recent political events in Tibet have reinforced the traditional Western perception. *Save Tibet* has become the vogue slogan of the 1990s. Tibet needs to be saved because it is on the verge of shattering the fragile myth of Shangri-la. The colourful monks and nuns are no longer enclosed in caves in meditative contemplation, but now are marching with their fists raised in the air.

The West has always reduced Tibet to its image of Tibet, and imposed its yearning for spirituality and solace from the material world onto Tibet. In the same process, the West has sought to define the Tibetan political struggle. Tibetans are seen merely as victims who are unable to speak for themselves and, as a Westerner wrote, "we have a duty to represent the Tibetan people". After decades of being reduced to the status of mere recipients of charity and sympathy, the process of the reduction of the Tibetan people to an endangered species of the human family is nearly complete. At one level this has attracted sympathy, yet on another level the Tibetan issue is treated as an inevitable question of "backward nation resisting the march of modernity".

It is symptomatic that in the current cult TV series "Twin Peaks", which is a parody of traditional American soap opera, there is a scene where FBI agent Cooper pulls out a map of China and Tibet and proceeds to tell his bewildered police colleagues and the viewers that he is "moved by the plight of the Tibetan people". In another episode, Agent Cooper is lying shot on the floor and mumbles that his dying wish is to see the Dalai Lama back in Tibet. This is a very interesting juxtaposition of Tibet. In "Twin Peaks" everything is unreal and abnormal. Nothing is what it appears to be on the surface. David Lynch has succeeded in juxtaposing Tibet with normality. Therefore, Tibet is not real.

Once the myth has been sealed, it has an appearance of permanence and takes on a reality of its own. The danger is that Tibetans are also beginning to be seduced by the myth. The tendency is to promote

the Tibetan political struggle in terms of the populism of the West, rather than the daily concerns of people in the streets of Lhasa, or of the nomads living in the high plateaus of the Himalayas. This is precisely the reason why the Tibetan issue is totally unknown outside the West. Tibet has not made any significant impact in Asia, South America or Africa. Even our closest neighbours, Nepal, Bhutan, Burma and India, remain oblivious to events in Tibet. The majority of Third World countries see Tibet as merely an instrument of Western political interest. As long as Tibet is considered to be merely an issue concerning sentiments of white people, then inevitably the Tibetan issue will never progress and will remain at the periphery of international concern.

Whereas issues like South Africa and the Palestinian problem are seen as real political concerns, Tibet is seen as a lost cause, which from time to time pricks one's conscience. The Tibetan political problem is conflated with the myth of Shangri-la. Therefore, issues about Tibet are often treated as a question of sentimentality versus political expediency. If the Tibetan issue is to be taken seriously, Tibet must be liberated from both the Western imagination and the myth of Shangri-la.

About the Author

Tsering Shakya was born in Lhasa, Tibet. He fled to India with his family after the Chinese invasion. He then won a scholarship to study in Britain, and was later to graduate from London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) with a B.A. Honours in Social Anthropology and South Asian History. He received his M.Phil. in Tibetan Studies in 2000 and Ph.D. June 2004.

Today, Tsering is a world renowned and widely published scholar, on both historic and contemporary Tibet. His most expansive work to date *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947* (Pimlico, London 1999) was acclaimed as "the definitive history of modern Tibet" by *The New York Times*, and "a prodigious work of scholarship" by the UK's *Sunday Telegraph*. The book is the first comprehensive account of Tibet's recent history.

Copyrights

© Lungta and Tsering Shakya

This article was published in Lungta, Special Issue Tibetan Authors, pp. 20-23, 1991.

Offered with kind permission from the author.

© Bundesarchiv: Bild 135-KA-09-061, *Tibetexpedition: Sight towards the Bramaputra valley*. Photographer: Krause, Ernst / Licence CC-BY-SA 3.0.