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From
Steve Lehman, *The Tibetans: Struggle to Survive*, Umbrage Editions, New
York, 1998.

The question of Tibet is complicated by the myths and uncertainties that surround its perception by foreigners. None of us who are outsiders can dispel those difficulties at a single stroke, and even Tibetans themselves must from time to time find it hard to separate the perceived from the experienced realities of their condition: they too suffer from the lack of layered, unemotive information necessary to better explicate this complex issue.

Much of the initial work facing any westerner considering the question of Tibet is, in a sense, archaeological. For more than a century there has been in the West and elsewhere a sort of small-scale industry generating romantic or contentious notions of one kind or another about Tibet. Such notions lie like debris scattered around the area of our inquiry, so that we have to dig through an accumulation of misconceptions and half-truths before discerning even faintly the outlines of some concrete, lived experience. Even if we find such solid traces, we need still to resist the temptation to elaborate these as certain proof of the character of an entire history or civilization. The clues uncovered during any such excavation may be partial, anomalous, or atypical of the wider community whose story we seek to describe.

To some extent it could be said that the question of Tibet's political status is itself part of the debris. An entire literature has emerged that recites facts about Tibet as proof that the country was or was not independent at the time of its invasion by Chinese troops just under fifty years ago, while relatively little has been written about the basic elements of life in Tibet—the condition of the people who live there, the texture of their political and social aspirations, and the intellectual and cultural makeup of their society as it adapts to the stresses and complications of modernity. This book is part of an attempt to offer information about the condition of life in Tibet, as well as about our concerns and conceptions of that country.

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One reason for turning to the society and the people who comprise it instead of focusing on the vexed subject of Tibetan independence is that it may in fact be impossible ever to give a definitive answer, in legal or historical terms, to the question of Tibet's political status. Supporters of each side in the dispute typically offer only the evidence that advances their case and ignore that which opposes it. The Chinese, on the one hand, claim that Tibetan leaders made their country a formal part of China in the thirteenth century, while the Tibetans argue that their leaders' historic links to China were merely those of religious teachers to their lay patrons. In fact the question of independence is even more complicated than the polemical accounts suggest, because the fundamental questions underpinning these discussions are rarely broached: who are the Tibetan people? And what are Tibet's boundaries?

Ethnographically speaking Tibetans are less homogeneous than one is led to believe. The Khampas from the east speak several dialects that are more or less unintelligible to the Amdowas from the northeast, and together the two ethnic subgroups outnumber Tibetans from the central and western regions. It is those central Tibetans who speak variants of the Lhasa dialect with which most Western students of Tibetan are familiar, but their dialect is initially incomprehensible to the two million or more Tibetans from Kham or Amdo.

These subgroups within the main Tibetan language family are clearly all Tibetan—they share common physical traits, a culture, and a written language which distinguishes them from others—but it is not so clear what defines them as a unified people. It is often argued, for example, that they can all be called Tibetans because of their shared commitment to the Tibetan form of Buddhism, but in fact Buddhism is a

relatively recent faith among Tibetans: although it dates back as a firmly established nationwide religion to approximately the eleventh century, Tibetans consider their history to have begun over a thousand years earlier. And there are significant communities within Tibet, such as the Lhasa Muslims or the Bonpo, who are not Buddhist but who are certainly Tibetan. Neither can we define Tibetans in terms of a distinctive lifestyle: the claim that Tibetans are a nation of monks and nomads conceals the facts that many rural Tibetans have always been settled farmers, that only 2 percent of the population are now monks or nuns, and that nearly 20 percent these days live in towns. The people we call Tibetans are more diverse than is sometimes suggested and the forces that bind them more complex than we might think.

This is not to say that Tibetans do not have a common sense of identity as a single nationality—the Chinese, for example, are more fractured by regional disparities in language and history than the Tibetans—but it does suggest that this identity is not so much a provable fact of history as a situation that Tibetans have created through their determination to be considered as a single people. This determination has been heightened by the Chinese claims to their territory. To some extent, therefore, the unity of Tibetans as a nationality is in part a political rather than a scientific fact, steered by the arrival of a common enemy and the attack of a supremacist ideology.

Changes in the way the Tibetans view themselves have led to considerable inconsistency in defining other aspects of the situation, in particular the question of where Tibet's borders begin and end. There is no doubt about central Tibet, the heartlands around Lhasa ruled by the Dalai Lamas since the seventeenth century. But eastern Tibet had for generations been composed of a complex of principalities of differing constitutionality and with equivocal loyalties, sometimes offering allegiance to Lhasa, sometimes to China, and sometimes to neither. Amdo, formerly regarded as the northeastern area of Tibet and now mostly subsumed within the Chinese province of Qinghai, had not had any sight of Lhasa rule for some two hundred years before the Chinese invaded Lhasa in 1951. When the Chinese Communists wrested control of Qinghai from the Chinese warlord Ma Pufang in 1949, the Lhasa government made no intervention and did not claim that this area was part of Tibet, as it now does. In Kham, however, the area that lies to the south of Amdo and which is now part of Sichuan province, Lhasa had fought frequent wars with Chinese armies in the early decades of this century and, in fact, had briefly gained title to part of that area by conquering the local Chinese—but still Lhasa did not protest when the Communist armies took over that area. The figures, much quoted by exiled Tibetans and westerners, that there are now 7.5 million Chinese in Tibet have been arrived at by including large areas and cities, such as Xining, which had not for centuries been part of political Tibet. Such uncertainty about the borders of Tibet further complicates the dispute over its political status.

There is general acceptance that Tibet was in some sense part of the Chinese Empire in the thirteenth century and again in the eighteenth century, when Chinese armies were sent to protect Tibet from internal conflict and to repel invasion by the Gurkhas of Nepal and when Chinese "Ambans" or imperial commissioners were stationed in Lhasa. But it is argued by many supporters of the Tibetan case that the Chinese Empire at that time was either a Mongol (in Chinese, Yuan) empire or a Manchu (Qing) one, and that the Chinese republicans who took over Beijing in 1911 did not inherit all the rights and respects that were due to their Manchu predecessors. It is a powerful argument in terms of Asian political traditions, but generally the international system accepts the transfer of rights between dynasties.

However one resolves this debate, it is clear that, if it is once admitted that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (for example) the Chinese emperors had a significant right to participate in Tibetan affairs, the claim to a full and total independence by Tibetans is not at all as definite as it is sometimes presented. Those facts that can be asserted with some confidence give, accordingly, a more complex impression. Firstly, the Chinese (or their Mongol and Manchu rulers) definitely believed themselves, rightly or wrongly, to be for considerable lengths of time in some way overlords of Tibet. Secondly, however, it is certain that these rulers and their citizens did not view their Tibetan territory as identical in status to their Chinese provinces, which were handled by a different government office from that which dealt with Tibet and Mongolia. Thirdly, it is clear that until this century, at which time the British began actively to encourage a sense of separation in Lhasa, the Tibetans, as was natural in the traditional political culture of the time, did little to disabuse the emperors of their belief in their sovereignty over Tibet. Fourthly, it is not disputed even by the Chinese that after 1912, when all Chinese officials and residents in Lhasa were

expelled by the Tibetan government following the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Lhasa thenceforth exercised full control of all its own affairs, internal and external, until the Chinese army invaded its eastern borders thirty-eight years later.

This last argument is persuasive to many people, especially because the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, in a 1912 treaty with Mongolia of which the original is lost, reportedly declared Tibet to be independent. Still, it is not as conclusive as it might appear, since large parts of China were also in effect autonomous during the first half of this century—Qinghai, for example, more or less governed itself under Ma Pufang during the same period. But this could be seen as a consequence of the weakness of the then Chinese government, beset by Japanese invasion and wracked by civil war; it was not necessarily a proof in itself of separate political status. Ma Pufang apparently did not see himself or his realm as historically or culturally distinct from other political entities within China.

In the final analysis lawyers and historians may not be able to come to a conclusive answer on this question. They may concede that the nature of Tibet's status before 1912 was not of a kind that can be exactly expressed by twentieth-century notions of statehood: it was not the same as a province of China, but, except when China was too weak to exercise central control, it did not define itself in modern terms as an independent state. The Tibetans like to express this by saying that there was a *chö-yon* or protector-patron relationship between the two governments before 1912, meaning that Tibetans offered spiritual guidance to emperors in return for political protection. This, however, seems more a description of a personal relationship between leaders than a resolution of the question of statehood.

There is, however, one negative argument that powerfully supports the Tibetan view: no one seems so far to have found any document in which the Tibetan people or their government explicitly recognized Chinese sovereignty before the invasion of 1950. The importance of this argument lies not in its role in the legal debate, but in what it indicates in terms of the political realities on the ground. Chief among these is the question as to how Tibetans perceived and perceive themselves. The fact is that most Tibetans seem to have experienced themselves and their land as distinct from China. Few in central Tibet had seen any Chinese before the invasion and almost none of the Chinese there now have lived in Tibet for more than fifty years. Although Chinese armies traveled to Tibet four times in the eighteenth century, they were probably regarded by Tibetans as allies assisting the Tibetan government to repel threats of invasion or insurrection, not as overlords. If Tibet was at any recent time part of China, this affiliation seems to have been for the most part a traditional construct that has no exact equivalent in our time, or an abstruse diplomatic technicality arranged among the elite that seemingly was never communicated to the Tibetan people.

Certainly there were few signs of Chinese influence, let alone rule, in Tibet. All the major indicators of culture and society were entirely different from those of their Chinese neighbors—the coinage, postage, language, dress, food, and taxation of Tibet were all distinctively Tibetan, and before the Chinese invasion Tibet had developed all the political and social institutions, from an army to a civil service, that a country needs to function as a separate entity. It is these simple, experienced realities rather than any legal considerations that are of political significance, because it is largely to them, and to religious beliefs, that we must attribute the decision of hundreds of thousands of Tibetans in the 1950s and 1960s to face death in defense of their perception of Tibet as a separate country. It is in this context that we should view China's current campaign within Tibet to oblige all Tibetans to undergo "patriotic education," a program that requires everyone to attend lectures or to sign a statement saying that Tibet has been part of China since the thirteenth century. The campaign suggests that what matters to Beijing is not expert adjudication so much as popular consent: the Chinese authorities also see the Tibet issue as shaped not by the decisions of lawyers and leaders but by the views and beliefs of ordinary Tibetans.

Strangely, few people, and fewer Tibetans, have chosen to argue that, given the distinct status that the Chinese emperors accorded to Tibet compared to their provinces, Tibet must at best have been something like a colony. If this argument was pursued—and it is hard to contest—the present situation could be described as one of colonial occupation. It is one of the mysteries (some people might say tragedies) of the Tibetan case that its leaders in exile and their advisers have sought to show that Tibet has a right to absolute statehood, perhaps gambling to attract Western support, rather than to seek its people's right to decolonization, an option that might have gained them wider support in the developing world.

But these are in essence questions of strategy and definition, matters that are decided by political elites. At the fundamental, everyday level at which most of us operate, the reality is that, as far as we can tell, the majority of Tibetans do not accept their current masters as legitimate rulers. It is difficult otherwise to explain the thousands of Tibetans who since 1950 have taken part in revolt, in the guerrilla war, or in civil protests, who have been to prison or have been executed for holding such views, or who have fled as refugees. The numbers involved in these actions are too great to be discounted as all members or beneficiaries of the political elite whose power and wealth was jeopardized by the Chinese advance to Lhasa. Indeed, it was the Tibetan aristocracy who were among the first to cooperate with the Chinese in 1950, attracted by offers of wealth and status: the Uprising of 1959 seems to have been more a popular movement than an agitation by dispossessed nobles. Whether we take a political or a humanitarian view of the Tibet problem, it is probably this general perception among Tibetans of foreign occupation that is the decisive factor in assessing their situation.

This is not to say that other questions, with all their difficulties of resolution, can be discarded as mere academic abstractions—we need to grasp them in their full complexity in order to equip ourselves with at least the rudiments of intelligent discussion. But most debate in the West on Tibet focuses either on seeking a politician's Holy Grail—the pure fact that will somehow prove that Tibet is or is not part of China—or assumes that somehow the moral force of Western opinion will lead to political change in Tibet and China. But from a political point of view the answer to such issues is relatively simple: reality and "truth" are largely decided by political determination and muscle, not by legal arguments or moral rectitude. The history of struggles for decolonization in this century suggests that if the Tibetan people living in these areas choose to assert their collective identity as a people and to exercise the political will to sustain it, even the Chinese might find it hard to stand in their way.

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Since the invasion, China's policies towards the Tibetans can perhaps best be described as a mix of brutality and concession. There were "hard" periods about which there can be little dispute, periods during which even the Chinese authorities now acknowledge that "serious errors" were made. But it is also important to recognize that these years of uncontested brutality were interwoven with periods during which few if any atrocities occurred. There is a tendency towards simplification in our perception of Communist regimes, which are often assumed to maintain power through force; in reality, gifts and promises are equally effective and as often used. But the complexity of Chinese rule emerges not so much from recognizing that China uses carrots as well as sticks to encourage subservience as from allowing that some of their concessions are genuinely well-intentioned. Like many colonial rulers, a significant proportion of the Chinese Communists sent to run Tibet after 1950 acted for largely altruistic reasons and believed they were offering to their new fellow-subjects practical and spiritual improvement in their lives. It is this anomaly that leads us into a bizarre hall of mirrors where Chinese officials appear simultaneously to be intent on assisting, seducing, or brutalizing their subjects.

There have been three hard periods, twenty years in total, during which Tibetans have suffered from the extremism of ultraleftist dogma in China; it is because of these periods that allegations of genocide or ethnocide have been made. The first such period was sparked by the Tibetan Uprising of 1959 and lasted until about 1962. During these years thousands of Tibetans were executed, imprisoned, or starved to death in prison camps. So far no officials have publicly acknowledged these atrocities, but we know that they took place and that the punishment was largely random because of a secret report written in 1962 by the Panchen Lama (appointed by Mao as the leader of Tibet) which was smuggled out to the West in 1996. This period also included (particularly in Kham and Amdo) the artificially induced famines that resulted from the policies of the Great Leap Forward, an attempt by Beijing to make the production of steel take precedence over agriculture and to set up communes overnight throughout China. In 1981, the Chinese leadership finally conceded that the Great Leap, which some writers now estimate led to thirty million deaths, had been a "serious mistake." A report by Beijing's Economic System Research Institute found that 900,000 people died during this period in Qinghai province alone (where a quarter of the population were Tibetan), probably from starvation. Tibetan nomads were particularly affected because the plan for the

communes required that all flocks be brought together in one place: the animals died en masse once they had exhausted all the available pasture. The plan did not allow them to be moved.

The second "hard" period was the Cultural Revolution defined by the Chinese as lasting from 1966 to 1976, although in Tibet it continued in effect until 1979. During these years, Mao Zedong set off a frenzied drive throughout Chinese territory to eradicate the "four olds": old thoughts, old culture, old customs, old traditions. For the non-Chinese peoples the campaign included an attempt to eradicate their culture and their distinctive identity as a people, since ultraleftist ideologists declared at that time that distinctions between nationalities and any form of religious belief were the results of the class system. The consequences for Chinese people, let alone for Tibetans, Mongolians, and other nationalities under Chinese rule, were terrible: they were forced to dress like Chinese, to profess atheism, to destroy temples, to burn books, and to condemn, humiliate, and sometimes even kill the teachers, writers, thinkers, and elders in their communities.

The period from 1987 to 1990 is still too recent for us to assess. During much of this third dark era, Lhasa was under martial law and at least one hundred people are believed to have been shot dead by police for taking part in demonstrations. Some three thousand Tibetans are estimated to have been imprisoned for joining protests during this period and a large proportion of them appear to have been tortured, often in brutal ways. It was a period of explicit repression by the security forces (in particular the People's Armed Police, a paramilitary body) and attracted international publicity, for the simple reason that it was the only one of the "hard" periods of Chinese rule to have been witnessed by foreigners. China had begun to open Tibet to tourism in 1981, so that in 1987 alone, the last year of that "open" experiment, there were forty-seven thousand foreign tourists in Tibet.

This period came to an end in May 1990, when civilian rule was to be reestablished in Lhasa after thirteen months of martial law. Unnoticed by the Western press, Chinese authorities announced that the security policy in Tibet was henceforth to shift from "passive" to "active" policing. This meant, in the obscure code used by Chinese politicians, that the practice of shooting demonstrators and of mass torture and detention would be replaced by more cautious and more restrained forms of control.

If we set aside these three "hard" periods, we are left with some twenty-seven years that cannot easily be categorized as periods of atrocity. The Chinese took over eastern Tibetan areas in 1949, those not under the rule of Lhasa, crossing into central Tibet a year later. Their army arrived in Lhasa in October 1951, by which time the Tibetan government had formally surrendered. But it was not until the Tibetan Uprising of 1959 that the Chinese authorities took over day-to-day running of the Tibetan government in Lhasa. In central Tibet those nine years from 1951 to 1959 saw no great difference for ordinary Tibetans between preinvasion and postinvasion Tibet, except that the Chinese introduced modern commodities, built some schools and nurseries, constructed small power stations, showed propaganda films, offered scholarships in Beijing, and spread new fashions.

If we find it hard to imagine how an invading army and a triumphant colonizer could behave in such a restrained way in its new acquisition, we have only to look at Hong Kong today: there also we can see a conscientious effort to avoid any visible sign of change in daily life, despite the fundamental change in status and governance that has taken place. In Tibet, too, the initial policies were in many ways driven by the same concerns. The Chinese, once they had gained a legally valid recognition of their claim to sovereignty, were extremely careful to leave the apparatus of traditional government in place, with the Dalai Lama at its head. But in actuality, the Dalai Lama and his ministers were powerless. There was a party committee for Tibet run by Chinese generals that decided what the Tibetan government could and could not do; however, except in cases of emergencies, its instructions were most likely communicated in untraceable ways through indirect channels, and would probably have been described as "advice." The Tibetan leaders would have felt themselves to have had no choice but to follow such advice, since their army was largely disbanded. But the new dispensation meant that on the surface Tibetans remained in charge; in Delhi, for example, Nehru believed that the Chinese really had achieved a peaceful transition and in 1956 persuaded the Dalai Lama, then seeking exile in India, to continue his alliance with Beijing.

The strategy of winning over potential enemies by offering concessions, such as allowing the traditional elite to retain the semblance of authority, has its own term in the vocabulary of Chinese Communism: it is called "United Front work" and there is even an agency in the highest ranks of the party, the United Front Work Department, whose sole task is to implement such concessions. In Tibet in 1950, traditional leaders had the option of very high office within the new Chinese system if they agreed to cooperate with their new rulers, as well as the perks of high office—chauffeur-driven cars, ceremonial privileges, luxurious accommodation, and high salaries. Today, for example, the Chinese authorities are said to be offering the Dalai Lama the post of vice president, once he accepts that Tibet is part of China.

Describing these swings in Chinese policy from left to right, or from suppression to co-optation, is a relatively simplistic analysis and does not fully reflect the complexity of Chinese politics. The Chinese, not unlike Western colonizers who believed that they were involved in a "civilizing mission" to bring Christianity and advanced culture to backward peoples, were part of an ideologically driven movement that had a self-appointed mission to liberate the poor and oppressed. During their softer phases the Chinese accordingly made much more of an effort than the European colonizers to bring practical improvements to their newly acquired territories, and in Tibet as in China those improvements were often to the benefit of the lower levels of society. China's invasion did, in part, lead to the ending of debt and serfdom, to the land reforms of 1959, and to the reform of the quasi-feudal system in Tibet.

The policies of the final "soft" period, initiated in the early 1980s, were in many ways similar to those of the 1950s. In May 1980, Hu Yaobang, then general secretary of the party, announced that Chinese cadres were to be withdrawn from the Tibet Autonomous Region and Tibetans allowed to take over their roles in the administration. At the same time there was to be a tax amnesty for the farmers and nomads; religion and Tibetan culture were to be allowed to flourish; and investment was to be poured into the area to help in education, infrastructure, and development. It was broadly welcomed by Tibetans in Tibet, who seized upon the opportunity to acquire a high level of modern education and to take up positions as cadres in the administration. While thousands of young men and women chose to rejoin monasteries and nunneries, others became teachers in schools or colleges, or worked as writers or academics. These two areas of activity—religious vocation and Tibetan language activities—emerged as of paramount significance during this sudden phase of cultural rediscovery. Over fifteen hundred monasteries were rebuilt, mostly by local Tibetans with their own funds, allowing the community to reestablish its links to its heritage as it had been in 1959. But at the same time writers, scholars, and administrators cooperated to produce with extraordinary rapidity a significant corpus of literature in Tibetan, including creative writing as well as academic, scientific, and religious studies. This emergence of a Tibetan literature was unique, not because (as the Chinese from time to time have claimed) there had been no previous literature in Tibet but because for the first time Tibetans were producing a Tibetan culture that was at the same time both distinctive and modern.

During that period, particularly in the eastern areas of ethnographic Tibet that are now subsumed within the provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, and Gansu, the opportunities offered by the concessional state were taken full advantage of by the coalition of reemergent Tibetan intellectuals, led by the Panchen Lama, and Chinese liberals, led by Hu Yaobang. This produced what one might call a new Tibetan intelligentsia—one could almost say, a Tibetan middle class. It was created with great speed, its members showed robustness and confidence, and they were, unlike most previous groups of educated Tibetans, fluent in Chinese and well equipped to deal with the modern world. In addition, they held positions within the administrative and cultural apparatus governing Tibet.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that some sections of the Chinese Communist Party became nervous about the growing signs of confidence among Tibetans in the mid-1980s. In 1987, when the Dalai Lama began a campaign to seek political support in the West, the propaganda units in Tibet were ordered to publish a series of statements condemning him in language that had not been heard since the beginning of the decade. That decision led to the pro-independence demonstrations of 1987, and more or less marked the end of the last phase of concessional government in Tibet.

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The situation in Tibet today requires a different understanding: it is neither a period of evident brutality nor of concession. The shoot-to-kill policy of the late 1980s has been dropped, and the number of political prisoners is (as far as we know) around seven hundred rather than three thousand. Far more Tibetans than ever before are allowed passports so they can travel abroad, and in 1992 the authorities announced a relaxation of tariffs and taxes on people setting up businesses in Tibet. The economy in the Tibet Autonomous Region has since grown by more than 10 percent each year, according to official government statistics, faster than the rate in China as a whole, and far above the world average. By the end of 1997, there had been almost no reported pro-independence demonstrations in Tibet for over twelve months, in contrast to the two hundred or more that had taken place during the previous nine years. Yet despite such indications of political calm, Tibetans currently living in Tibet say that the situation is worse than it has been since at any time since 1980, when the opening up to the outside world was first announced. How then are we to understand the apparently concessional stage that Tibet is now in?

To answer this question we have to adjust the set of concepts and presumptions that we bring to it. Generally we equate repression with certain visible incidents, such as political arrests, detention of demonstrators, or military patrols. But such signs may be typical only in the early phases of military occupations. If, for example, we were to imagine how France or Denmark might have looked to a casual tourist today had the Nazis never been defeated, we can be reasonably sure that it would not have remained as it was in 1945: there would be no need, one can imagine, for men to be patrolling in jackboots or for sentries with machine guns to be placed at each corner. Even during the war much of France was, as we know, run by French collaborators with a civilian police force, so there was little day-to-day sign of its military masters. Some fifty years after the onset of an occupation we would not expect much need for visible controls, since the opportunities for heroic resistance would mostly have been exhausted, and the activists probably long since eliminated or cowed. Indeed, what is striking about Tibet is that the Chinese still found it necessary until 1990 to use unsubtle methods of control, and that five decades after occupation the Chinese have not yet depleted the Tibetans' reservoirs of resistance.

Political arrests continue to take place in Tibet, armed police can still be seen in the streets whenever there is a possibility of unrest, and there are continued reports of brutal incidents in outlying areas—in December 1997, for example, a Tibetan monk escaped to Kathmandu after surviving ten days of torture in Ngari, in the far west of Tibet, where soldiers had suspected him of planning to flee the country. But in general the indicators of the political atmosphere should be sought not in visible incidents of abuse but in the signs of systemic, policy-led strategies of control—in such things as the identities and affiliations of policy makers, the language of administration, the degree of participation in the political process by people outside the elite or the administration, the breadth of cultural expression, and the syllabi of school and college history courses.

If we look at the first factor, the policy makers, we find that 66 percent of all regional-level officials in the Tibet Autonomous Region are, by one estimate, Chinese. Yet, according to government statistics, only 3 percent of the population is Chinese. Similarly, the percentage of Chinese students in technical education in the region is around 40 percent. No figures exist for ethnic participation in the economy, but it can be reasonably assumed that most capital investment and profit extraction is not in the hands of Tibetans.

These are the signs of a political structure that is organized toward the preservation of power and influence within the orbit of a subcommunity: the Chinese. In the "soft" period of the early 1980s this structure of minority dominance had been eroded by Tibetans who had taken advantage of the new concessions to launch their own cultural activity and to acquire positions in the administration. Chinese policy makers militated against this and related developments, warning about risks to the maintenance of the power of the party, so that by 1987 they had engineered, through the campaign against bourgeois pollution, the fall of Hu Yaobang, and, two years later, the crushing of the 1989 student revolt in Tiananmen Square held in Hu's memory. In China some of those reforms have been recouped, but Tibet is a different story: what we are witnessing in Tibet today is the dismantling, piece by piece, of the concessional regime initiated by Hu some twenty years ago, and the reconsolidation of power in the hands of the Chinese oligarchy. The sudden

death of the Tenth Panchen Lama in 1989, the last great religious leader still living within Tibet, removed the final remaining obstacle to revisionism.

The dismantling of concessions has been a gradual process. Its most obvious manifestation was the security operation of the late 1980s, which originally took the form of what the Chinese call "passive" policing, which meant mass arrests and street executions. This was followed in 1990 by a shift to a lower police profile, keeping troops in barracks, using video technology for surveillance, a growing role for the State Security Bureau, and a major increase in the funds allocated to establishing an informer network. These changes may have appeared as a form of moderation, but they were driven by a need for efficiency: we know that in 1990 a document was circulated among high-level cadres in Lhasa pointing out that the widespread torture of prisoners was counterproductive because it increased popular determination to fight the authorities. By mid-1993 the replacement of crude repression by more subtle and efficient methods had reaped its rewards: during that summer the majority of underground resistance cells in Lhasa were penetrated by State Security, and soon after most of their members were imprisoned or forced to flee.

By this time the authorities had already shifted their attention to a second front in their effort to reverse the liberal reforms of the early 1980s: the economy. Lhasa and the surrounding areas were to be opened up to entrepreneurial activity as a "special economic zone," under the banner of what was then being called Chinese market socialism. Thus Tibet became a frontier zone filled with pioneering entrepreneurs from areas such as Sichuan and Zhejiang, who began by mending bicycles in the street and who now run small shops, restaurants, and businesses in the towns of Tibet. And, although this "special economic zone" was never put into practice as such, it conveyed a simple message within China: a lot of money could be made in Lhasa very fast.

This radical change in the urban economy of Tibet did not come about unaided. In April 1992 every government office located on a main street was ordered to convert its street frontage to a row of small, garage-type shops; most of these were taken up by Chinese migrants, to the discomfort of Tibetans who perhaps saw the prospect of their newly revived culture slipping away under a wave of cheap modernism from which many of them did not even stand to profit. Later that year orders were passed removing any checkpoints on Tibet's intraprovincial borders: there were to be no restrictions on Chinese migrants into the region. By about 1995 the leadership decided that it should also offer economic incentives to the Tibetans and another policy emerged: large loans from the state banks became available at generous levels of interest to a number of Tibetan businessmen. The result has been the creation of a new appetite for wealth among urban Tibetans and a dramatic increase in the class of rich Tibetan entrepreneurs with home video systems, new houses, and all-terrain vehicles. At the same time there was a huge investment by the state (and by foreign states) in equipping Tibet with advanced telecommunications.

As far as one can tell from abroad, economic development has led to a surge in small businesses—usually karaoke bars and nightclubs, many of which are short-lived and in which much of the trade is prostitution—and has been sustained by the reinvestment of the cheap loans on the money market in Hong Kong. The current urban boom, with its fragile economic base, could in theory lead to a more stable development of the economy but is as likely to collapse once the state finds it can no longer afford to bankroll the loans. In the meantime a new plutocracy is emerging that is distanced from the majority of its fellow Tibetans, whose opportunities for trade and employment are unlikely to increase until, as the authorities promise, infrastructural development is sufficiently advanced to entice major investors. Even then Tibetans might find themselves without increased opportunities for labor, let alone profit, because Chinese workers are likely to be brought in to work on the oil wells and copper mines planned for Tibet.

If policy in Tibet were still focused on the development of this dynamic, if dubious, economy, it could be argued that the objective of the current regime was a well-intentioned, if misguided, effort to improve the economy and social wealth. But in fact, the economic liberalism of market socialism was really being used by the hard-liners in 1992 as a mechanism to encourage migration to Tibet—a demographic device to facilitate control. And in July 1997, it was made clear that this economic reformism also included a more unorthodox political agenda. China's main representative in Tibet, the party secretary Chen Kuiyuan, made a speech in which he announced that Buddhism was "foreign" and not part of Tibetan culture. It was not that he was wrong in absolute terms—as we have seen, Buddhism arrived in Tibet only a thousand years or

so ago. But the statement was clearly intended not as an academic observation but as a provocative criticism of the notion of Tibetan culture, the sustaining of which the Dalai Lama and many other leading Tibetans throughout the previous ten years had already declared to be their fundamental and overriding concern.

In November of 1997, Chen went on to identify a new form of enemy within Tibetan society, "the hidden reactionary." As examples he referred to unnamed individuals among the few great Tibetan intellectuals remaining in the universities and among the educated Tibetans who had secured relatively senior positions in the administration during the reform period of the early 1980s. These two announcements can be taken as the signal that China had opened its third front in the battle to regain control of Tibet: an attack on Tibetan culture. The police work of the early 1990s and the economic drive of the mid-1990s were now to give way to an attempt to redefine Tibetan culture.

It became clear that the unusual aggression discernible in China's religious policy in Tibet since 1995 has been part of a larger offensive. The banning of the public display of photographs of the Dalai Lama and the constant press attacks on him were a sign that he was now to be regarded as a religious fraud as well as a political outcast; this was a significant change in policy, because throughout the 1980s he had been attacked only in his political capacity. The campaign in 1995 against the child he had recognized as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama was the most strident part of this wider cultural offensive; by obliging hundreds of Tibetan officials, scholars, lamas, and intellectuals to declare public support for the state's right to appoint the new incarnation, the authorities were persuading them to renounce any claims to the promises offered by the 1980s era.

In 1996, another major campaign, this time the drive to bring "patriotic education" to the monks and nuns in Tibet, extended the attack beyond the senior officials and lamas to the lowest levels of the monasteries and nunneries: each was to be visited by a gongzuo dui, or "work team" of party cadres who would hold daily sessions for three months on the correct view of religion, law, history, and the Dalai Lama. Each person was required to give a formal declaration of loyalty by signing a statement denouncing the Dalai Lama and recognizing Tibet as part of China. That effort is still continuing in monasteries and nunneries across central Tibet, and by October 1997 had begun in the great monastic universities of Amdo as well. In March 1998, the program was extended to schools and to the "citizens" of Tibet, so that in the foreseeable future, all Tibetans will eventually be required to declare their allegiance to the new regime.

The third, cultural, front goes beyond the strategies of policing dissent or of economic buy-offs: both are relatively straightforward mechanisms to suppress dissent. The cultural attack appears to be aimed at the long-term elimination of ideas that could in the future lead to dissent, as well as at the dismantling of the concessions offered in the reform era. It has, however, an unfortunate resonance: in language and conception it is reminiscent of the thinking of the Cultural Revolution, perhaps the most brutal of the hard periods in Chinese Communist history. At the same time it also has an aspect that did not arise during the Cultural Revolution: the fear of assimilation from the immigration of Chinese attracted to the region by economic incentives. This apprehension is fueled by frequent rumors of plans to send settlers in large numbers, as the Chinese did in earlier times in Manchuria, Mongolia, and Xinjiang. Indeed, retired Chinese soldiers based in the region have, since at least 1994, been officially encouraged to settle in Tibet. In fact, many of the new arrivals in Tibet are temporary, staying for a few years rather than residing permanently, and they are almost entirely confined to towns and cities. Their impact, however, is significant.

The "new Tibetans" are entrepreneurs, usually Chinese or Hui (Chinese Muslim), who play a prominent role in the emerging private sector of the economy, now the leading edge of China's development strategy. They not only dominate economic life but have also introduced a powerful new culture that has made rapid inroads into Tibetan life, especially in the towns. Its detractors say this alien culture is Chinese, and it is certainly true that Chinese language, art, customs, and ideas are replacing their Tibetan equivalents in many areas. But it is also true that much of the new imported lifestyle is not Chinese, but rather part of modern, global commercialism: discotheques, pop music, Michael Jackson cassettes, Adidas trainers, video recorders, a stock exchange, motorbikes, mobile phones, satellite television, and E-mail, not to mention heroin and AIDS. The onslaught that Tibetans face now with the easing of barriers to trade and travel is as much Western in origin as it is Chinese; they are confronted with many of the same choices that Nepal,

Bhutan, India, and other developing nations faced as traditional societies forced to come to terms with the rough assault of modernity.

But Tibetans confront these developments with severe handicaps: except at the purely subjective level all the choices they now face—whether to regulate the inflow of modernity; what compensatory steps to take in terms of education or training; whether to adapt or to abandon Tibetan language, arts, and customs in the face of the new demands; whether to control or to encourage outside investment; whether to give preference to local, indigenous traders and initiatives—are made by their Chinese rulers on their behalf. And the signs are that the Chinese leadership in Tibet is deliberately making choices, such as encouraging the growth of prostitution and refusing to regulate immigration, that will stunt or destroy the nascent attempts of Tibetan culture, so successful in the early 1980s, to adapt itself to modernity. Thus we find that in the last two years Tibetan parents in Lhasa have started encouraging their children to study the Chinese language, because few if any jobs will be open to those children if they graduate proficient only in Tibetan. As if to emphasise the point, the University of Tibet has already closed admission to its Tibetan department.

What we are seeing is a strange, perhaps unique, hybrid, different from previous left-right swings in Chinese politics. Tibet today is a cauldron in which an experiment is taking place, where politicians attempt to achieve the intentions of totalitarians while pursuing the actions of economic reformers. The economic liberalism of market socialism was used by the hard-liners in 1992 as a mechanism to encourage migration to Tibet. The indicators of this political composite—what some Chinese refer to as "hard on the inside, soft on the outside"—are not visible to the casual observer. There are no tanks on the streets or machine gun posts on the rooftops, as there were at the beginning of this decade; there are tourist hotels, computer shops, public phone booths, and all the other signs of affluence and luxury familiar to us from our own societies. Even the growing presence of an underclass, of unemployed Tibetans, is to us a sign of normal social disparity. If we saw a political education session in a monastery or a school, it would not look untoward to us as visitors. But in fact these are the images and the indicators of what Tibet is today—an experiment in achieving targeted repression and cultural restrictions within a context of economic relaxation.

* * *

It can be argued that the perception of the Tibet issue has been confused or misrepresented by the form that popular sympathy in some Western countries has taken on the Tibet question. In the English-speaking world that interest culminated with the Hollywood films released in the late 1990s—Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Seven Years in Tibet* and Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*, to name the best known; it had previously been symbolized in the media by the involvement of American film stars like Richard Gere and Harrison Ford in support of the Tibetans. The surge of media and public interest reflected by those films (which attempted to express the exiled Tibetans' view of the conflict) took it for granted that there is a serious basis to the aspirations of the Tibetan nationalists and to the continuance of the Sino-Tibetan conflict. Such well-meaning support is influential in shaping the popular assessment of the Tibetan question; but it is also something of a chimera. In the long term there is a risk that support for the Tibetans of this kind could potentially do damage to the cause it espouses.

There are a number of aspects of Western coverage of the issue to date which give rise to concern. One of these is that the recent increase in media coverage gives the impression that there is popular support for the issue in the West, which in turn implies that Western governments support the issue; this is not necessarily the case. The Tibet issue in the West is a classic example of one of those legislature-executive struggles that figure frequently in the history of Western-style democracies: Tibet represents one set of interests to legislators and another set of interests to foreign policy decision makers. The implications of this disjuncture have not always been fully explored and have led to some apparently unnoticed consequences. While parliaments and congresses have been pulling in one direction, the executive branches (and the business interests to which they are much closer) have pulled in another, and the Tibetans have ended up with a small burst of publicity and occasionally a parliamentary statement that has no legal standing.

The U.S. Congress, for example, declared Tibet in 1991 to be an independent country under military occupation, but the resolution has no legal significance and has apparently been ignored by lawyers and

policy makers. In any case, what appears to matter now to the Chinese authorities is the position taken by governments in their implementation of foreign policy. This was not always the case: until about 1994, Beijing was in the habit of reacting quite strongly to parliamentary statements, apparently out of the belief that they must reflect, as in China, the views of their corresponding government, or that they might have some impact in shaping those views; a number of Tibetan political prisoners were released or saved from execution during that period, as a result of outside pressure as expressed by foreign parliaments and pressure groups. Experience has changed that misconception, however, and Beijing, which recently set up a research unit to study the anomalous ways of the U.S. Congress, now knows that the two units in the Western system can be treated quite separately, especially where peripheral or sentimental issues are involved. The eighteen-year sentence given in 1996, in defiance of congressional appeals, to Tibetan exile Ngawang Choephel, a graduate student from Middlebury College who was arrested for traveling in Tibet with a video camera, was presumably intended to make that clear.

Unless the Tibet issue is able to generate support more substantial than popular sympathy and media glamorization, statements by legislatures are not in themselves any longer of much concern to the leadership in Beijing, whose business is with governments and investors. It can of course be argued that in the past popular support has led to more significant institutional backing, and finally to government or financial action, but such a progression appears to happen because of a number of factors besides the extent of popular support. South Africa and Palestine, for example, became major issues, but they were of undisputed strategic significance, involved protracted military and terrorist struggles, had highly organized and sophisticated indigenous political parties representing them outside, as well as very large and active resistance movements inside the countries. None of these conditions, probably not even the last, apply at the moment in the Tibetan case.

A second weakness with the coverage of Tibet in the West is that the popular support it invokes is in fact more localized than it appears. After his escape from Tibet in 1995, the famous human rights activist Gendun Rinchen, who three years earlier had been voted Tibet's top tour guide, said that 80 percent of the tourists he escorted had little or no idea that there was any political problem in Tibet—and they were the ones interested enough in Tibet to pay to visit it. The Tibet question has remained corralled and specialized, a situation that is changed little by media coverage.

The miscalculation of the extent or significance of Western support is unfortunate, because it has communicated to Tibetans inside Tibet a false impression of international support; this has arguably encouraged them to stage demonstrations and protests in Tibet that courted publicity at great personal cost but that perhaps brought little concrete result. More importantly, it has contributed to the mood of disillusionment and frustration that now appears to be current among Tibetans who, perhaps thinking that Western support was substantive rather than marginal, expected improvements as a result of outside pressure but received few. Instead they have been left to find out that in the long run outside pressure has led to the increased sophistication of control that they now face in Tibet.

Perhaps more damaging has been the political message that Western support has communicated to the Chinese people and to those in other developing countries. The fact that foreign interest in the issue is mainly confined to westerners—and that the character of Western rhetoric about the issue is often polemical and anti-Chinese in tone, or self-evidently misinformed—has given the impression that Tibet is a Western preoccupation in part overstated to bolster the interests of the Western bloc. The unfortunate history of the Tibet issue, used by the Western powers, and by the United States in particular, in the 1950s and 1960s as part of their cold war strategy to destabilize China, has fueled the perception that criticism of Beijing's role in Tibet is a device raised by westerners to attack China in particular and developing countries in general. This has enabled Beijing to rally support from the developing world and led to the collapse of the last nine attempts at the United Nations to criticize China's human rights practices.

Another difficulty with the general presentation of the Tibetan case in the West is that the wrong elements have been condensed: the exciting things to westerners about Tibet are its exoticism and its mysticism, the colorfulness of its religion, the irrepressible charm of the Dalai Lama, the mystique of the mountains, and so on. Yet in terms of politics these factors are incidental—Kuwait, for example, was not given support against invasion because of the charm of its sheikhs. What should have been condensed in discussions of

Tibet, if those involved in creating the images wished to see a political outcome, are the same issues that we consider when dealing with other disputes over colonization or occupation—who holds power, who is not given access to power, what are the political demands and program of the people involved, how close are the representatives of the various groupings to the people they represent, and so on.

The trivialization of the Tibet issue has led a number of presumptions to accumulate that may need to be reconsidered if Western discussion of Tibet is to appear meaningful. For example, the perception of the Dalai Lama as supreme pontiff of Tibetan Buddhism is a recent phenomenon, reported to be an arrangement that other religious schools reached in the 1960s partly to simplify their relations with foreigners. The role of pacifism in Tibet has been overstated: it is true Tibetans have in general chosen to follow the advice of their leader not to take up arms, but this is also a recent phenomenon and not a condition of their culture. Until 1974, thousands of Tibetans took part in a fierce guerrilla war with the Chinese, which for a period was funded by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The clergy who destroyed the attempts of the Tibetan government and the previous Dalai Lama to enlarge and modernize the Tibetan army in the 1920s (and who thus destroyed any chance of Tibet ever resisting incorporation into China) were not motivated in the slightest by objections to violence, but by the fear that modernization might, by increasing links with the un-Buddhist British, lead to the diminution of the monasteries' power; indeed there were several insurgencies against the previous Dalai Lama or his regents this century led by monks in defense of that belief.

Today some ten thousand Tibetans are members of India's military forces, soldiers with a special aptitude for high-altitude warfare, posing a threat that China views with some seriousness. Neither is the level of political violence among Tibetans as low as some Western reports would suggest: at least seven bombs exploded in Tibet between 1995 and 1997, one of them laid by a monk, and a significant number of individual Tibetans are known to be actively seeking the taking up of arms; hundreds of Chinese soldiers and police have been beaten during demonstrations in Tibet, and at least one killed in cold blood, probably several more. Within the exile community itself there is a continuing streak of political intolerance, especially towards those who have made the slightest perceived criticism of the Dalai Lama, who risk beatings or threats of assassination. Neither is religion by any means above conflict: at least two of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism are at present wracked by disputes; both cases have led to murders or threats of murder.

The mythologized depiction of Tibetans as inherently religious and pacifist is attractive, but it is also reductionist. It implies that they are passive, and that their decisions are the result of tradition not choice, and it suggests that they are neither part of the modern secular world nor suited to the competitiveness of contemporary political decision making. The political presentation of Tibet has similarly tended to focus on the suffering experienced by Tibetans under Chinese occupation. Sometimes this is presented as a general phenomenon, such as by citing the total number of those believed to have been killed, and at other times an individual case is described, such as that of a nun or monk who has been imprisoned and tortured. None of these references are invalid (although the figures used are often inaccurate), but because there is often an absence of harder analysis, they have the effect of portraying Tibetans as victims who need to be helped, rather than as agents of political change who might be supported.

It is in this area, the role of human rights in the Tibet issue, where another disjuncture between sympathy and political action can be seen. Media, parliamentary, and governmental statements have tended to focus on the question of how individuals in Tibet are treated by the current regime. But in the hard world of international politics, human rights issues are of little relevance to the process of political decision making. Although statements on human rights issues are frequently made by governments of all hues, their policies are unlikely to be significantly influenced by them—not least because almost every country has condoned human rights abuses of one kind or another within its own borders.

Governmental statements about human rights in Tibet or China are thus usually bargaining chips to create leverage for issues higher up the agenda or smoke screens designed to impress the domestic constituency while at the same time causing minimum anxiety to Beijing. A sophisticated regime like China could, if it wished, have resolved overnight most human rights criticisms by foreign governments by offering to appoint a commission of inquiry, arresting a few police chiefs for torture, or inviting UN officials to visit

model prisons; that it has not done so, and that it has only recently started to respond at all to human rights criticisms, is because, among other reasons, it is in its interest, and in the interests of the Western powers as well, to keep public discussion and confrontation focused on such essentially marginal areas, thus avoiding issues of potentially irreversible conflict. The Tibetan activists inside Tibet have rarely (until recently) incorporated the issue of human rights in their protests or slogans—the language of human rights is largely a facet of exile rhetoric and Western simplification of the issue. Inside Tibet, the demands raised in wall posters have focused more on independence: rightly or wrongly, that has been to them the central issue.

No one can have been clearer about this than the Chinese leaders themselves: they have endlessly repeated the remark, usually unnoticed, that sovereignty is the main issue. When the Tibetan demonstrations in 1987 triggered a flurry of foreign criticism of China's human rights practices, the Chinese acted as if all allegations were veiled attacks on their territorial claims and demanded from each critical government assurances that its criticisms applied only to human rights practices and did not affect its acceptance that Tibet was part of China. In almost all cases the Western governments, apart from Britain, gave the required assurances to Beijing.

Thus, although China appears in the last ten years to have been battered in the Western media for its role in Tibet, in terms of the declared aspirations of its political leaders, in terms of power politics, and in terms of historical significance, it has emerged from those years of apparently stringent diplomatic attack with a wealth of political gains. Few if any countries apart from India and Nepal had specifically declared that Tibet was part of China before 1987; now most have been asked to do so and have complied. Tibet's claim to separate or at least ambiguous status was at least in part supported by the fact that few countries had specifically described it otherwise; that situation was reversed at the same time as Western criticisms of China were being popularly presented as assisting the Tibetans' situation. In other words, it can be argued that support from the West, which was anyway limited, may have damaged the political prospects of the Tibetan issue as much as it helped them.

If we have to generalize, therefore, it can be said that the Western perception of the Tibetan question has been burdened with a romantic inheritance, oversimplified information, and a blurred political presentation. It is because of such characteristics of the Western approach to Tibet, and its sometimes unfortunate consequences, that we need to seek another, more disciplined and more layered, view. That there is some resistance to this in Western discussion of the Tibet question may be due to its associations with Tibetan Buddhism, which many westerners see as antithetical to pragmatism or political thought; they have tended to invest in the religious aspects of the Tibetan situation, often as a conscious antidote to Western rationalism. The effects of this on the Tibetans have been quite concrete: since the exile of the Tibetans to India forty years ago, for example, large amounts of money and energy have been expended on the preservation of Tibetan culture outside of Tibet. A more pragmatic approach would have invested in encouraging that culture to develop rather than to remain static, equipping it in its encounter with modernity instead of helping it to become a museum exhibit. As the controversial American Tibetologist Melvyn Goldstein pointed out in 1990, Western funds have financed the production of much abstruse religious literature in Tibetan but not the writing by exiles of novels, stories, plays, or poems, so that (until the founding of the Amnyemachen Institute's translation project in India in 1992) there has been little other than advanced metaphysics for an exiled lay Tibetan to read in his or her own language. While there are thousands of Tibetan monks in exile who have received higher education in religious studies, few Tibetans in the exile community have been trained in technology or sciences. Among Western scholars of Tibet, too, the study of modern Tibet has been seriously considered only in the last eight years or so: the bulk of Tibetology was and still is focussed on classical studies. Even the contemporary study of Tibet or the writing of a modern, secular literature in Tibetan can scarcely be found anywhere outside China or Tibet itself.

The limitations of the general Western efforts to date do not mean that the Tibetan pursuit of national identity is trivial or doomed. Political change is not dictated by logical certainties, as the Soviet experience has indicated, and there is certainly nothing trivial about the Tibet experience, nor any reason why its quantitative insignificance should preclude it from having disproportionate regional impact. For example, in 1987, when Steve Lehman and I met by chance in a Lhasa backstreet during a wholly unexpected demonstration, the Tibet question was nowhere on the Chinese, let alone the international, agenda. If the

Chinese government had not chosen to conceal the details of that protest, to deny that they had shot a number of Tibetans dead when we and other tourists had seen it, or to close the country off from foreign journalists ever since, the Tibetan issue might not have received much attention in the last decade. The errors of Beijing on that occasion had an effect that could hardly have been foreseen and that has had lasting repercussions.

It was not so much that Tibetan discontent became known to the outside world: what was of lasting importance was that the events of that day propelled Tibetan resentment to develop into the deep and highly motivated alienation that resulted in the far greater turmoil that took place in subsequent months. Before the outbreak of protest in 1987, Tibetans had apparently been aware of the likely withdrawal of the concessions that Hu Yaobang had offered them some seven years earlier; but the response of the authorities to their demonstrations revealed the fear within the Chinese leviathan of the pinprick of Tibetan dissent. That fear, as seen in the decision to open fire on the protestors in Lhasa, was an indication that the dragon is more fragile than its fiery breath would have its subjects believe. It is in that perception that the potential for significant Tibetan impact resides.

In more technical terms, what the Chinese accomplished and are further fomenting as they move to attack Tibetan culture itself has been the stoking of a modern form of mass political consciousness among Tibetans. The politicization that several decades of explicit indoctrination had failed to inculcate is now being achieved by the same Chinese efforts that are currently directed against the rise of nationalist consciousness in Tibet.

Current Chinese policy in Tibet, replete with such examples of contradiction and extremity, has suffered ever since from a sense of fragility and insecurity, with a tendency to concentrate its attack on the apparently innocuous. Since 1995 it has banned the photographs of an amiable man in a skirt, run a state campaign ordering the denunciation of a six-year-old child, forced forty thousand monks and nuns to sign declarations concerning thirteenth-century history, and declared a thousand-year-old religious tradition to be a foreign import. Such decisions cannot be easily explained by the logic of realpolitik or national interest; we have to look elsewhere to explain the forces that drive Chinese leaders in Tibet.

It is as if China were operating, in its dealings with Tibet, in a universe sustained not so much by its army or its factories, as by its ideological constructions. After all, the central question for the leaders in Beijing may not be, perhaps has never been, their creditworthiness with international financiers or their standing with the international community, but their credibility with the people of China. They are a regime of considerable youth, scarcely fifty years old, whose power was achieved through conquest, through the incompetence and barbarity of their opponents, and through lavish, utopian promises to their followers. During their period of rule, despite some notable successes, they have committed atrocities that in many ways dwarf those of their predecessors—even Chiang Kaishek, for example, did not initiate a famine that killed a reported thirty million people. And the current regime has largely repudiated the aspirations and claims of its revolutionary progenitors—not so much because it clearly espouses capitalism and social disparity, but because it has also renounced the provision of free education, medical care, or guaranteed employment to its people.

Whatever else one might say about the Tibetans, the one thing they have in their favor is a substantial claim to legitimacy. As a nation-state, they may have failed to register their credentials, but they enjoyed all the characteristics of statehood; as a political force, they are unified to an exceptional degree in their objectives; as a movement they have a leader who enjoys unusual respect not merely in the West, where his significance is more symbolic than actual, but inside Tibet, where the political unity he commands may well be the final arbiter of Tibet's future. The strategic advantage of even partial pacifism is of great relevance not at all because of any moral virtues we may see in it, but because it can lay claim to legitimacy in a conflict where the Tibetans' opponent has little legitimacy and has depended on force.

This is not to say that there can be any predictable outcome to this dispute. The Tibetans are also capable of making strategic errors (as events have already indicated) on a large scale, just as the Chinese are. They could reject the leadership of the Dalai Lama, return to sectarian or regional conflict, decide to revive their autocratic tradition, or reach such a conciliatory compromise with the Chinese as to have no rights

remaining. Or they could, for example, decide on other objectives, such as the pursuit of immediate wealth, already currently on offer to a certain class in Lhasa.

But even in these scenarios, the history of nationalist disputes suggests that such tendencies are in a sense diversions. People may be distracted for a period by the attractions of modernization or by internal conflicts, but eventually their interest in asserting their identity will reemerge, and when it does it will be equipped with increased expectations and better resources. In other words the current Chinese (and Western) strategies for deflecting Tibetan aspirations are unlikely to succeed in the long run, and may serve only to exacerbate the dispute.

When Steve Lehman, I, and other Western tourists first saw protestors take to the streets of Lhasa in October 1987, an arcane dispute emerged amongst us as to the role of foreigners. Should we witness these events silently from the sidelines, some of us asked, or should we stand in the middle of the crowd to show support and to deter the soldiers from opening fire? In the event, those who decided to stand among the crowd and wave their fists found that they were shot at, too. More significantly, perhaps, their involvement was photographed and filmed by officials so that to this day they are cited as evidence that those protests were fueled by foreign provocateurs and not an expression of Tibetan belief. Perhaps that would have happened whatever we, the outsiders, had done, but the episode was a reminder that in the final analysis the role of the foreign journalist or observer may be more limited than we like to imagine.

Though the West's response will undoubtedly be a factor in the dispute, its outcome will ultimately be decided by Tibetans and Chinese, and whether they eventually resolve their differences will depend almost entirely on their ingenuity and tenacity. The landmark decision of the Chinese in 1990 to stop killing demonstrators in Tibet may have been seen as a consequence of international criticism of Beijing, but it was also to do with the realization in China that the shooting was further antagonizing Tibetans in Tibet. In other words, the Chinese were to a considerable extent afraid of Tibetan unrest. The bottom line in this issue is thus not the legal status of Tibet, the magnitude of the army, the stature of the Dalai Lama, or the moral power of the demands: it is the risk that determined Tibetans may decide en masse to actively oppose Chinese rule.

It is ironic, therefore, that it is the Tibetans in Tibet who are least often consulted by foreign journalists and politicians, and their opinions which are most rarely documented in any detail by observers and writers. It is also why a book of this sort, as an attempt to communicate something of the experience and thinking of those people, is neither a tribute nor an elegy: it is a demand that we, the observers, focus our attention on those who are in every sense the key to the future of Tibet and the only arbiters of the seriousness or otherwise of this issue—that is, the Tibetans themselves.