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The lead-up to the Dalai Lama’s meeting with President Barack Obama at the White House last week received a great deal of attention from the press, and there was also a considerable amount of after the fact assessment of the event. In order to place what happened into a broad historical perspective, I put a few questions to A. Tom Grunfeld, who is a past contributor to “China Beat” and the author of The Making of Modern Tibet. Here are the results of our interview via e-mail, and if you live in New York and want to hear him talk about the subject live, he’ll be giving a couple of lectures on related issues in early April through a program sponsored by that state’s Council for the Humanities.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom: What did you think of the media coverage of the Dalai Lama’s meeting with President Obama and the general tenor of commentary on the event?

A. Tom Grunfeld: It’s not very good in that it is largely uninformed. General news reporters, or those with White House beats, cannot be expected to know much about Sino-Tibetan history or the nuances of the current state of affairs between the Dalai Lama and Beijing. But, of course, they could take some time and consult someone who has this knowledge.

I suspect that for the US media the Dalai Lama is more of a symbol than anyone of real importance. He has become a cultural icon rather than a political player. This is understandable when we keep in mind that apart from the moral issues of human rights Tibet is not very important to the US politically, strategically, economically or militarily.

JW: Do you have any thoughts on how this meeting was similar to or different from past interactions between the Dalai Lama and American presidents?

ATG: President Obama is the fourth president that the Dalai Lama has met. George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton met him privately, not in the Oval Office where official guests are taken. There was no press allowed and pictures were few, if any.

George W. Bush changed that by meeting with the Dalai Lama publically, in front of the press and presenting him with a Congressional Medal of Honor.

President Obama’s meeting reverted to past practice. And, in spite of the public condemnations, I suspect the Chinese government, knowing it couldn’t prevent the meeting, was satisfied with how it played out.

JW: One point that various people made, including me when I was interviewed about the visit on NPR, was that there were many aspects of the Dalai Lama’s trip to Washington, as well as the official Chinese reaction to what took place, that were predictable and stuck to familiar scripts. Was there anything about the event or the discussion it generated, on either side of the Pacific, which surprised you?

ATG: The photos of the Dalai Lama exiting the White House through the backdoor and having to pass by mounds of garbage. They could have done something a little more dignified. The entire episode is like a Kabuki play where the actors use scripts agreed to long ago and play their parts accordingly and the outcome is known long before the event itself.

The real question is what good does it do? Meeting the president in the White House (regardless of the room) gives the Tibetan exiles and their supporters a moral boost. But it doesn’t help the Dalai Lama-Beijing talks.

If anything, it hinders them because Chinese officials see it as a renewal of the Dalai Lama-CIA collaboration of the 1950-1960s, which was intended to destabilize the Chinese government.
In addition it gives Tibetans inside the PRC the erroneous notion that Washington supports the Dalai Lama politically, if not militarily. This can only lead to disappointment and feelings of betrayal much like how Tibetans felt when China became an American ally after the Kissinger-Nixon visits and the CIA abandoned their Tibetan allies.

If the goal of the Dalai Lama and the Tibet Lobby is to further the interests of the Tibetans inside the PRC and to facilitate the Dalai Lama-Beijing talks, then presidential visits have been failures.

JW: If you were able to pose one question to the Dalai Lama about the meeting, what would it be?

ATG: How far are you willing to go in compromising your positions if the Chinese are also willing to compromise some of theirs?

JW: Is there any question you wish you’d get asked by members of the audience when you speak about Tibet—or by people like me who interview you about it—but your interlocutors never bring up?

ATG: The complications of the internationalization of Tibet and the involvement of the US government and Congress. The extraordinary success of the public relations campaign on behalf of the Dalai Lama and the independence of Tibet has masked the effect that this campaign has had inside China. It has strengthened the political positions of the hard-line Chinese officials who wouldn’t mind assimilating all the Tibetans, and who are opposed to dealing with the Dalai Lama in the belief that all their troubles will go away when he is no longer alive.

Yet the Dalai Lama has few resources and very little leverage against China. The campaign has given him prominence and publicity, which he can use to some extent in his negotiations. So his internationalization of the Tibet issue has created a double-edged sword, which has complicated the relationship between the exile Tibetans and the Chinese government.