A Reader on Tibet

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Tibet has been much in the news the past few weeks, as China attempted to divert attention from the anniversary of last year’s riots and protests and reports leaked out of arrests and crackdowns in Tibet. Here are a few of the pieces from this week that we recommend.

In the current issue of The New York Review of Books, Pico Iyer writes about the Dalai Lama’s sinking faith in the Chinese leadership’s desire to resolve the situation in Tibet. Iyer points to the current situation in Tibet as the reason why—the title of his piece is “A Hell on Earth”:

“The situation inside Tibet is almost like a military occupation,” I heard the Dalai Lama tell an interviewer last November, when I spent a week traveling with him across Japan. “Everywhere. Everywhere. Fear, terror. I cannot remain indifferent.” Just moments before, with equal directness and urgency, he had said, “I have to accept failure. In terms of the Chinese government becoming more lenient [in Chinese-occupied Tibet], my policy has failed. We have to accept reality.”

Accepting reality—first investigating it clearly, and then seeing what can be done with it—is for him a central principle, and now he was about to convene a meeting of Tibetans in his exile home, in Dharamsala, India, and then another, in Delhi, of foreign supporters of Tibet, to discuss alternative approaches to relieving the ever more brutal fifty-year-long suppression of Tibet by Beijing. “This ancient nation with its own unique cultural heritage is dying,” he said later the same day. “The situation inside Tibet is almost something like a death sentence.”…

Over the decades I’ve known him, the Dalai Lama has always been adept at pointing out, logically, how Tibet’s interests and China’s converge—bringing geopolitics and Buddhist principles together, in effect—and at arguing, syllogistically, for how the very notion of enmity is not only a projection, nearly always, but, in today’s globally interconnected world, an anachronism. But now, with the skill of one trained for decades in dialectics and personally familiar with the last few generations of Chinese history, he seems more and more to be holding the Chinese government up against its own principles. “Chairman Mao, when I was in Peking, said, ‘The Communist Party must welcome criticism. Self-criticism as well as criticism from others,’” he noted pointedly in Tokyo. But now the Party seemed to be all mouth and no ears. Deng Xiaoping, he reminded another audience, always stressed “seeking truth from facts,” the very empiricism the Dalai Lama would love to see more thoroughly deployed. “When President Hu Jintao talks of a ‘Harmonious Society,’ I am a comrade of his,” he told the Chinese scholars. “Even today I have points of agreement with Marxist thought.”

His argument, unexpectedly, was that Communists in China today are not Communist enough, as they ignore Marx’s ideas of ethics and equality (which the Dalai Lama has long admired) and move ever further from the purity and self-sacrifice of their early years. “Mao Zedong was a true idealist, a real comrade, initially,” he told the Chinese students. “But in ’56, ’57, that disappeared.” The result, he said, was that “the Communist Party in China today is something very special; it is a Communist Party without Communist ideology.” At one point, he even said to his Chinese listeners, “Maybe in some ways I’m more ‘red’ inside than the Chinese leadership!”

The article is worth reading in full for its cogent assessment of the limited options for Tibet’s future, limitations that result not only from Chinese oppression but also from choices by the Tibetan people.

Those in Southern California may be interested to see Pico Iyer speak at CSULB on April 16.

Earlier this week, Evan Osnos discussed “Serfs’ Emancipation Day” (the CCP’s response to last March’s riots) at his blog, noting the similarities between China’s rhetoric on Tibet past and present:

Watching the Chinese government, this week, inaugurate “Serfs’ Emancipation Day,” to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Beijing’s direct rule of Tibet, I couldn’t help but notice how little of the Party’s message has changed since the 1963 film “Serfs,” a classic from the heyday of Party cinema…
Are Beijing imagemakers ideologically intoxicated enough that they don’t see how the West interprets an event like this? Not that simple. The central government encompasses a mix of real sophistication and demagoguery, and my guess is that many urbane diplomats at the Foreign Ministry were cringing at the sight of the event...But, ultimately, they don’t hold sway in China, so the celebrations continued.

A BBC report on Tuesday discussed the emerging public profile of the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama and China’s placement of him as a China-positive representative for the Tibetan people:

Although he is only 19, the Panchen Lama has already stepped onto the public stage to praise the Chinese Communist Party.

Tibet expert Professor Robert Barnett, of New York’s Columbia University, says this is part of China’s efforts to undermine the appeal of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism.

“He will never really replace the Dalai Lama, but his role confuses the picture and can gradually be used to weaken the Dalai Lama’s standing,” he said.

“I think [China’s] Panchen Lama is being built up very gradually as a public spokesman within the Tibetan Buddhist world.”

An excerpt from a piece by Elliot Sperling is up at the Far Eastern Economic Review website (the full article will appear in April’s print version), arguing that though China has painted a picture of a historically inequitable and cruel Tibet, actually the post-1949 years have been much harder on Tibetans:

When the Dalai Lama’s first representatives returned to tour Tibet in 1979 cadres in Lhasa, believing their own propaganda, lectured the city’s residents about not venting anger at the visiting representatives of the cruel feudal past. What actually transpired was caught on film by the delegation and is still striking to watch: thousands of Tibetans descended on them in the center of Lhasa, recounting amidst tears how awful their lives had become in the intervening 20 years. These scenes stunned China’s leadership and for some, at least, made clear the depths to which Tibetan society had sunk since the era of “Feudal Serfdom.”

It’s hardly likely that most Tibetans, after all these decades, are ready to buy into the government-enforced description of their past; such ham-handed actions may well make many view the past as far rosier than it actually was. It is also unlikely to win over large foreign audiences beyond those who already are, or would like to be, convinced. Most likely, it will simply reinforce a Chinese sense of a mission civilatrice in Tibet. The colonial thinking and arrogance inherent in such missions when entertained by European powers in the past is obvious. And it is precisely the kind of attitude that will likely exacerbate friction in Tibet and—justifiably—lead Tibetans to view China’s presence in their land as of a sort with the colonialism of other nations.

Though much of the coverage of Tibet in the media in past weeks has focused on politics, a few journalists took time out to look at Tibetan culture as well. Among them, those at The New York Times, who wrote about the growing market for Tibetan religious paintings or thangkas:

The artists here practice the Rebkong style of thangka painting that has flourished since the 17th century. Thangkas from this part of northwestern Qinghai Province are commissioned by monasteries as far away as Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. In recent years, thangkas have gained a following among some ethnic Han Chinese, and individual collectors from Chinese cities and foreign countries have driven up the prices. (For his painting of Chenresig, Lobsang was asking 3,600 yuan, or about $530, a fortune for most Tibetans.)

The commercialization will “drive thangkas far from their origins, from their use as religious objects,” said Zhang Yasha, a teacher of fine arts at the Minzu University of China who specializes in Tibet. “We see more young people learning the art because it’s lucrative.”

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