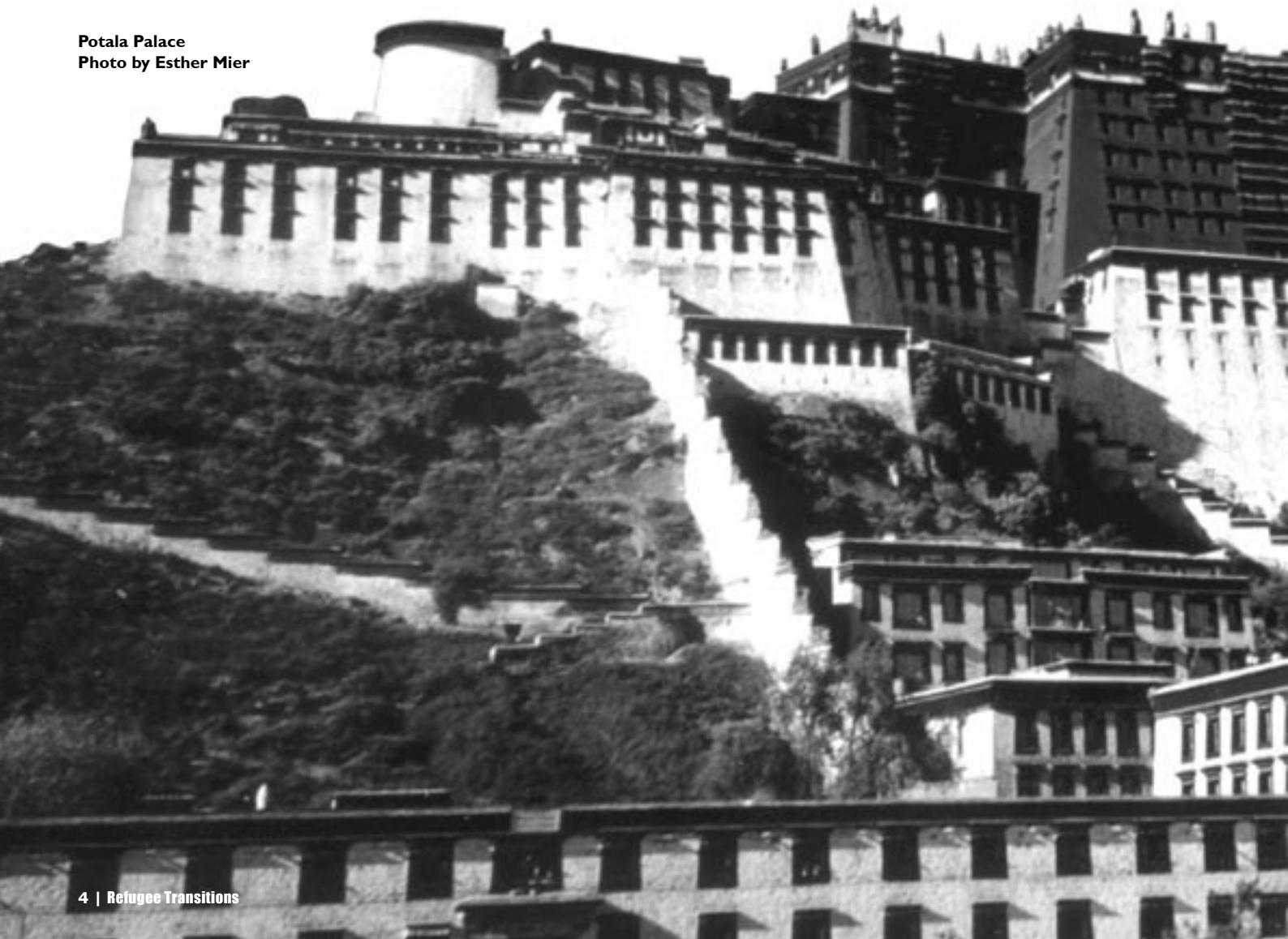


# TIBET

## and the progressive destruction of a unique culture

For centuries Tibet has cast its spell over the Western world. From early explorers who risked their lives crossing the Himalayas to modern tourists, Tibet is seen as an isolated, mystical land, inhabited by spiritual and peace-loving people. But like any fantasy Tibet also contains a harsh reality. **OLGA YOLDI** writes about fifty-two years of occupation.

Potala Palace  
Photo by Esther Mier



On a summer's night, during the Great Prayer Festival in 1933, a few months before his death, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet had a vision in which he saw the impending destruction of the Tibetan state. In his last testament he wrote:

“In my lifetime conditions will be as they are now, peaceful and quiet. But the future holds darkness and misery. Religion and government will be attacked from without and within... government will be destroyed, monks and nuns chased away. Lands and properties will be seized... People will be forced to serve their enemies or wander the country like beggars. All beings will be sunk in great hardship and overwhelming fear. The days and nights will drag on slowly in suffering. Such an era will surely come.”

Seventeen years later, in 1950, the Chinese communist forces invaded Tibet, claiming to be liberating the country from serfdom and repressive theocratic rule.

During the last years of his life, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, as Tibet's spiritual and temporal leader, had pleaded with his people to prepare for this threat. “Otherwise even the names of the Dalai and Panchen lamas will be erased forever,” he said, “as will be those of the other lamas, lineage holders and holy beings.”

Tragically there was nobody in Tibet at the time with sufficient power, vision and character to take up his challenge. Tibet was a feudal state, dominated

by the aristocracy and the monastic community. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama had made attempts to formalise the country's independent status, modernise the army and increase contact with the outside world. But his efforts at implementing reform and at ending Tibet's policy of isolation were met with great resistance by the aristocracy and the monks, who feared foreign influence would destroy the uniqueness of their culture and social reforms would end up undermining their power and authority. As a result, modernity never reached Tibet. It remained a remote mountain kingdom that relied on religious rites rather than on military strength to counter the growing threats of Chinese nationalist and communist incursions.

Apart from external threats, the period that followed the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama was fraught with internal power struggles within the Buddhist institutions. Historians have qualified those years as one of the most difficult periods in Tibetan history. In 1948 there was an attempted coup and the Chinese were asked to supply military power paving the way for the invasion. On the other hand, the State Oracle of Tibet had predicted that 1950 –the Year of the Iron Tiger- would be a dangerous year for Tibet. Ominous skies and rare astrological events seemed to suggest the imminence of violent conflict.

Theories abound as to why the newly founded People's Republic of China was lured to Tibet. It is believed that the Chinese were after Tibet's vast natural resources (forests,



gold, coal, oil, gas, uranium and lithium). Tibetologist, Lee Feigon believes that strategic reasons prevailed. In his book *Demystifying Tibet* he wrote: “it was China’s response to growing imperialist pressure from Britain and Russia. As these two nations expanded into Tibetan areas in the late 19th and 20th centuries, Chinese leaders felt it necessary to exert their position in Tibet to prevent the country from being used as a stepping stone for new European incursions into China.”

At the time of the invasion, a strong belief prevailed among Chinese nationalists that the smaller countries neighbouring China would gradually and inevitably be absorbed into what they called the “Greater China”, or “the Motherland.”

Sadly, Tibetans did not have a strong army with which to defend themselves and had no allies to whom to turn for help. “They had been so concerned about preserving their own identity that their government had not established formal trade relations with any other countries outside the region,” Lee Feigon writes.

Unfortunately, neither the UN nor any other western country supported Tibet’s quest for independence, so in such circumstances, the Tibetans proved no match for the invading People’s Liberation Army.

In 1951, following the invasion, China imposed the Seventeen Point Agreement for the peaceful liberation of Tibet, granting China military suzerainty over Tibet, while guaranteeing the protection of Tibet’s religious and cultural traditions: “The central authorities will not alter the political system in Tibet. The Dalai Lama can remain in office and Tibetan religious customs and institutions can be preserved.” The agreement promised that social and economic reforms would not be forced on Tibetans, but it called for the integration of the Tibetan army into the Chinese forces. The Tibetan delegation that had been sent to Beijing for negotiations signed the document without consulting its government.

During the first years of Communist rule the Chinese kept to the agreement and did not threaten Tibet. In 1954 the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who had been inspired by Mao’s reforms, accepted an invitation to visit China. “I met Mao for the first time,” the Dalai Lama wrote. “He said he was glad Tibet had come back to the Motherland...He said it was the mission of China to bring progress to Tibet by developing its natural resources and that the generals who were in Lhasa, were there to help, not to exercise any kind of authority.”

But Mao failed to keep his promises. By 1955 the Chinese government decided that the Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo would be absorbed into China’s provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan, and U-Tsang and western Kham would constitute the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

Tensions arose when increasing numbers of Chinese settlers arrived in Tibet, placing enormous pressure on Tibet’s land and resources and causing massive inflation and severe food shortages. Not only did the Chinese cause

widespread famine and increased taxation, but they soon started to attack the Tibetan establishment, violating the Seventeen-Point Agreement.

The Chinese army subjected monks and nuns to severe harassment. Believing in Karl Marx’s dictum, “religion is the opiate of the masses” the Communists started to destroy the monastic system, alienating the religious institutions. Nomads were persuaded to settle down, destroying a quintessential Tibetan way of life that had survived undisturbed for centuries. Land was confiscated and collectivised and forests were soon harvested. But when Chinese contractors employed Tibetan labourers in timber camps and in road construction, they introduced new work patterns, where serfs no longer depended on their masters, threatening the Tibetan elite’s authority. As the old Tibetan order became threatened and conditions deteriorated, an open resistance against the Chinese spread from Kham to Lhasa.

Finally, in 1959 the Tibetan government joined the popular leaders in an uprising against Chinese rule, but Chinese soldiers soon crushed all resistance. The Dalai Lama, aged 24 at the time and hoping to avoid violence, escaped across the Himalayas into exile. In the ensuing reprisal more than 87,000 Tibetans lost their lives and 25,000 were imprisoned. More than 100,000 followed the Dalai Lama to India.

With the Dalai Lama gone and the population in an uproar, Chinese troops entered Tibet in large numbers. “An era had ended.” Lee Feigon wrote, “for the first time since the thirteenth century, the Tibetans did not control their own country... Their attempt to preserve their traditional political system and culture had failed... By fleeing the country, the Dalai Lama and his followers woke up the world to the potential tragedy of Tibet losing its cultural and ethnic uniqueness.”

## THE DARKEST YEARS

Following the Dalai Lama’s flight, conditions in Tibet continued to deteriorate. But it was during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that swept across China from 1966 until 1970, that Tibetans learnt the true meaning of horror.

In his book *Tibet*, Ian Baker vividly describe human rights abuses during that time: “thousands of monks and nuns were crucified, vivisected, burned, buried alive, or had their tongues pulled out with meat hooks for expressing faith in the Dalai Lama. Men and women were publicly tortured to death, nails driven into their eyes and foreheads, or driven to suicide to escape the horror and humiliation...”

The Red Guards, under the leadership of Mao Zedong and Lin Biao launched a campaign “to sweep away the freaks and monsters,” waging war on the “Four Olds”- old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. The self-appointed guardians of the revolution wanted to amalgamate all Chinese, including Tibetans, into the Great Proletarian Culture. When the Red Guards arrived in Tibet in July 1966, they forced the population to study Mao’s teachings

and went on a rampage intimidating, beating and killing reactionaries, class enemies and spies. One million Tibetans died, thousands were persecuted and sent to labour camps. Two thousand monasteries were destroyed, palaces were looted, pictures of Buddha were replaced with Mao's. Only when Mao died in 1976 did the onslaught ease.

By the time the Chinese began to ease their harsh policies on the Tibetans, they had already caused massive devastation in Tibet. A deep and irreparable wound had been inflicted on its culture, religion and economy. The newly appointed leader, Deng Xiaoping did acknowledge the counterproductivity of the harsh policies imposed by communist hardliners, but while he steered China away from Maoism towards capitalism, he ended up being as repressive as Mao in his attitude to Tibet.

Deng Xiaoping's administration however, made some reforms and restored previously banned religious and cultural freedoms. Over the years it also invested resources to build the economy and the infrastructure. But because of a chronic lack of skilled Tibetans, these development projects attracted an even larger influx of Chinese immigrants, lured to Tibet by attractive economic incentives.

The Chinese expected Tibetans to be grateful for their "help" and were hoping that economic development would silence dissent. But even today, resentment of Chinese occupation remains undiminished. China continues to plunder and exploit Tibet's natural resources, clear-cutting forests, stripmining the soil and dumping nuclear waste. Development has mainly benefited the Chinese and preference given to Chinese settlers has resulted in economic marginalisation and widespread unemployment among native Tibetans, who are now a minority in their own land.

Since the late 80s peaceful demonstrations calling for an independent Tibet have been brutally repressed by the Chinese army. Such demonstrations resulted in arrests, public executions, new waves of refugees and martial law in 1989. The tenacity with which Tibetans have continued their non-violent resistance throughout five decades of occupation only demonstrates one thing: that China's claims to Tibet are artificial and need to be supported militarily.

## THE QUEST FOR A COMPROMISE

Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, (fourteenth in a line of incarnations), is the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people. He was born to a peasant family in 1935,



Photo by Esther Mier

in a small village in northeastern Tibet. He was recognised at the age of two, in accordance with Tibetan tradition as the reincarnation of his predecessor, the Great Thirteenth Dalai Lama.

For Tibetans the Dalai Lama is a living god. For the Western world he represents a union of spirituality and political action as well as a living embodiment of the magic and mystery of Tibet. Chinese leaders however see in him "a wolf in monk's robes." With amazing tenacity and perseverance, he has managed to recast Tibet from an obscure geopolitical issue into one of the greatest dilemmas of our time, winning as a result the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

The Dalai Lama, who describes himself as "just a simple Buddhist monk", has declared that he is not interested in power but in the well-being of the Tibetan people. He intends to play no role in the future government



Photo by Esther Mier

of Tibet. "The future government will be elected by the people on the basis of adult franchise." He said. "The struggle of the Tibetan people is neither to restore the past traditional system nor for the restoration of the status of a few individuals... our struggle is for the preservation of our nation."

A progressive thinker and a staunch believer in democracy and freedom, he drafted a Constitution in 1963 proposing a fully democratic system based on Western models for a future independent Tibet. "Democracy is the foundation for the free expression of human thoughts and potentials." He added that, "Tibetan democracy will derive its inspiration from the Buddhist principles of compassion, justice and equality. Apart from being a multi party system of parliament, the future Tibetan political system, I hope, will have three organs of government, namely legislature, executive and judiciary, with clear separation of powers between them."

But whether there will ever be a future government in Tibet remains to be seen. So far attempts at negotiations with the Chinese government have failed. To date Beijing has argued that Tibetan independence is not open for discussion. The Dalai Lama has complied with this demand, offering instead a 'Middle Way Approach' for a political solution, which does not ask for full independence but for autonomy. The Dalai Lama hoped that this approach of reconciliation and compromise would "create an atmosphere of mutual trust and exert a restraining influence on the repressive Chinese policies in Tibet." But the Chinese have constantly moved the goal posts, often refusing to meet with the Dalai Lama or his representatives after the initial agreement.

In his address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1996, he urged the international community to reassess their policies towards China. "The failure of the Chinese leadership to respond positively to my Middle Way Approach reaffirms the Tibetan people's suspicion that the Chinese government has no interest whatsoever in any kind of peaceful co-existence," he said. "The issue of Tibet can only be resolved through negotiation and not, as China would have it, through force, intimidation and population transfer."

The Dalai Lama argues that China's attempts to reduce the question of Tibet to a discussion about his own personal status dodge the real issue. He says that it has nothing to do with him but with the survival of six million Tibetans, along with the protection of their distinct culture, identity and civilisation. "The best the Dalai Lama hopes for now is that the next generation of Chinese leaders will deliver some autonomy. He bases his hope on a belief that Chinese politics will eventually follow its economics into a closer resemblance of the outside world. This means improved human rights for Tibetans as well as ethnic Chinese," journalist Lewis M. Simons wrote in his recent article, "Tibetans Moving Forward."

The Dalai Lama has pursued a policy of non-violence, which is not mere pacifism but is derived from Buddhist teachings. In a recent speech he said: "it is our enemies

who provide us with the challenge we need to develop the qualities of tolerance, patience and compassion... Destruction and violence only produce misery. Once violence gets the upper hand emotions can no longer be controlled. This is dangerous and leads to tragedy."

Given the Dalai Lama's philosophy it is not surprising that he refers to himself as "half Marxist and half Buddhist." Marxism's emphasis on social and economic equality impressed the Dalai Lama on his visit to Beijing in 1954. As he wrote in his autobiography, "The more I looked at Marxism, the more I liked it. Here was a system based on equality and justice for everyone, which claimed to be a panacea for all the world's ills." Nevertheless he does not consider the former USSR or China to have been true Marxist regimes. "The failure of these regimes was not the failure of Marxism but the failure of totalitarianism," he said.

Although Marxism and Buddhism hold many compatible ideals they were seen as two opposed philosophies, in conflict with each other. As Ian Baker writes, "The real tragedy of Tibet and, indeed, of China as a whole is that two systems promising to relieve human suffering - one based on changing the economic substructure of society and the other one transforming man's innermost consciousness - were perceived by their adherents as fundamentally opposed and not as potentially complementary. As the Dalai Lama has repeatedly emphasized, neither the exclusively spiritual nor the exclusively materialistic approach can address all issues of human existence."

## **SERFDOM PERPETUATED**

In today's Tibet landowners have been replaced by the state. Tibetans are now working like serfs, not for the divine oligarchy but for the totalitarian Chinese government. Today, 7.5 million Chinese live in Tibet, compared to 6 million Tibetans. Apart from the few farmers and pastoralists, Tibetans who are not forced to work in labour camps are lucky to find work in mining, logging or in the few industries established by the Chinese. The destruction of their own subsistence economy has created an economic void for Tibetans, causing unemployment rates to remain high.

Lewis Simons who recently travelled through Tibet, was surprised to find signs of the modern world spreading across the country. He has written about "a middle class, a breed of Tibetans that barely existed historically and is all but unknown to the outside world today." Nevertheless, Tibet continues to be the poorest, least developed (in terms of services and infrastructure) area of China. According to the International Commission of Jurists, more than 70 per cent of Tibetans are living in poverty. There are rumours however that perhaps one day Tibet will become an economic free zone, but until a radical change in policy occurs in Beijing, workers have little hope of significant reform.

Breaking the cycle of poverty, though, will never be possible without reforming the education system,

for without education Tibetans have little hope of emancipation. Although the Chinese have built many schools in Tibet, only 5 per cent of Tibetan children in the TAR continue their education beyond primary school. Tibetan children are taught in Tibetan in primary schools and in Chinese in high school, where they drop behind because of language difficulties. Children in rural areas are even more disadvantaged because of the fewer schools available and a chronic lack of teachers.

There is a Tibetan saying that “Knowledge must be burned, hammered, and beaten like pure gold before one can wear it as an ornament.” Education is highly valued and encouraged in Tibet, but Tibetan parents are concerned with the overt sinicisation of the school curriculae, and with the lack of a spiritual or religious dimension to their children’s education. So a growing number of Tibetans are sending their children to the Tibetan settlements in India and Nepal, with the hope that they will get a Tibetan education that will help preserve their culture and religion. Although the journey across the mountains is perilous and many do not survive it, parents are prepared to spend all their savings to buy their children’s passage to freedom.

As in education, standards of health in Tibet also lag far behind most of China. In spite of 50 years of rule by Beijing the infant mortality rate is three times China’s national average. *Human Rights Violations in Tibet*, a report published by Human Rights Watch in 2001 shows that malnutrition and tuberculosis are common among Tibetan children. High fees and lack of Tibetan medical staff make it difficult for Tibetans to access medical treatment. The report also warns on the potential for an HIV/AIDS epidemic in Tibet. Network UK announced that up to 10,000 commercial sex workers may be employed in Lhasa alone with much of the prostitution occurring at sites owned by the Communist Party and the military. Lack of access to testing facilities or medical treatment only exacerbates the danger.

Environmental degradation has also affected the health of nomads living near uranium mines and toxic waste sites. Scientists fear that environmental devastation in Tibet is not only causing illness and death but is also creating climatic change around the world. Today, barely half of Tibet’s ancient forests remain. Deforestation has been responsible for the destructive floods that swept through China, India and South East Asia in the last few years. The Chinese government also runs a top secret nuclear plant responsible for most of China’s nuclear activities called “The Ninth Academy”, located near Lake Kokonor - the largest salt-water lake in Tibet. Waste from the plant flows into the lake then into a watershed that eventually flows into the Yellow River of China.

The pollution of the great rivers by contamination at the source is a great concern to many environmentalists. Every major river in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia originates in Tibet: the Mekong, Yangzi, Yellow and Ganges rivers, to name a few. The source of all these rivers in one place means that the runoff from the mountains of Tibet affects the vegetation and agriculture of parts of India, Bangladesh and China. The contamination of all these

major rivers at the source could have a disastrous effect on some of the world’s most populated and fertile regions. Environmentalists warn that even minor ecological change in Tibet can have a major impact on large populations. But apart from some reforestation, China continues its nuclear program with impunity, particularly in Lop Nor, despite the moratorium that led to international boycotts of India and Pakistan.

## **SILENCE IN RETURN FOR TRADE**

Tibet has been rated as one of the worst areas in the world for civil liberties and political rights. According to Freedom House, the New York based freedom and democracy watchdog. In Tibet the justice system is not designed for the protection of its citizens. “The primary goal of the justice system in the TAR is the repression of Tibetan opposition to Chinese rule,” says the International Commission of Jurists. “A judiciary subservient to Communist Party dictates results in abuses of human rights in all China, but in Tibet the problem is particularly severe, due to China’s campaign against Tibetan nationalism. The recent *Strike Hard* anti crime campaign has enlisted the judiciary further in a campaign against “splittism”. Many Tibetans, particularly detainees, are deprived of even elementary safeguards of due process.”

Last year nearly 10,000 monks and nuns were expelled from religious institutions. The prevalence of torture, arbitrary arrests, Marxist indoctrination, the destruction of monasteries and the pervasive interference of the Communist party in all aspects of Tibetan life, have contributed to many Tibetans fleeing Tibet. In 2001 a total of 1,375 crossed the Himalayas, an extra 2,500 were arrested in the Tibetan Nepalese border and forcefully returned to Tibet or imprisoned for failure to produce travel documents. Ngawang Tobchen, a Tibetan monk who lives in Melbourne, escaped Tibet hidden in a truck after spending years in jail for participating in a peaceful demonstration.

“The Chinese police hit me so hard on the head, split my skull and broke my head... We were made to lie on our faces and they walked on us, and beat us with clubs, and shouted with contempt: “Is this what you call your Tibetan independence?” Our offence was political, so the Chinese were merciless.... On our release we were reduced to being beggars. None of us could return. The monasteries were under strict orders not to re-admit “splittists” as we were officially labelled... I managed to escape and reached Darhamsala. As for the future of Tibet, there is only one word: independence.”

An independent Tibet, however, does not seem to be within the realm of possibilities. Michael C Van Walt Van Praag, a member of the Peace Action Council, however, argues that from a legal standpoint Tibet has to this day not lost its statehood.

“It is an independent state under illegal occupation. Neither China’s military invasion nor the continuing occupation has transferred the sovereignty of Tibet to China... The imposition of an unequal treaty or the

No books, no pens, no pencils; a school in Tibet  
Photo by Esther Mier



continued illegal occupation of a country can never grant an invader legal title to territory. Its claims are based on the alleged subjection of Tibet by a few of China's stronger foreign rulers in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Such assertions, based on reinterpretations of the past imperialist or colonialist claims, would never stand in a court of law."

It is quite clear that no kind of compromise can really work as long as the leaders of China justify their power with the myth that they have created a greater China. "China has painted itself into a corner, and to enter negotiations, after insisting that the Tibetan Government in Exile and the Dalai Lama are "splittists", could be perceived as embarrassing for the Chinese," says Julie Smith of the Australia Tibet Council. "What Australia must do, is realise that we can continue to trade with China whilst demanding improvement in human rights. At present the Australian government is too scared to take a stand for fear of offending China."

Although China's widespread human rights abuses were a central feature of international opposition to its Olympic bid and its accession to the World Trade Organisation last year, so far international pressure has not been effective in bringing any significant change. A good example is the Australia China Bilateral Human Rights Dialogue which was established in 1997 as an alternative to publicly criticising China at the UN. At the time Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said: "I do not believe that it is productive to lecture other countries about human rights, but rather we aim to work together to achieve practical outcomes which actually improve the lives of individuals." In its four years of operation the dialogue has achieved

nothing. A similar unsuccessful dialogue is held between China and the European Union. However the European Union has recently made a commitment to hold a review "with the aim of achieving a more focused and result-oriented approach."

It is obvious that the international community is not ready to put in jeopardy trade links and access to the markets of the third-largest economy in the world. "As long as Tibetans can be encouraged to maintain their non-violent stance then governments can go on trading with China without too much protest from their own people," wrote Vanessa Baird in her article 'Exit the Dragon'.

The question is, will the people of Tibet be free one day? Although prospects for independence may be unrealistic, there is still hope. It was hope and resistance that brought about the collapse of apartheid, the end of colonial rule in India and the restoration of democracy in Eastern Europe. "Pessimism is our worst enemy," the Dalai Lama said when he received the Nobel Peace Prize. "With truth, courage and determination as weapons, Tibet will be liberated".

But if the influx of Chinese immigrants continues, it will soon erase all remaining traces of Tibetan life, and one day all that may be left of Tibet will be its magnificent mountains. As the Dalai Lama said, "the loss of Tibet's unique culture and spiritual heritage will not be only a loss to Tibet, but a loss to all humanity." ■