News Updates



Information and analysis of developments in Tibet

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Retrospective: Political Statements by the Panchen Lama

New evidence has come to light about the political position of the 10th Panchen Lama, Tibet's most senior leader after the Dalai Lama. The Panchen Lama was a controversial figure, often regarded as a mouthpiece for the Chinese.

One of the documents, a booklet produced by a Red Guard faction in the 1960s, describes the remarks by the Panchen which led to his imprisonment and torture during the Cultural Revolution. He was imprisoned for 9 years in 1965, and rehabilitated only in 1978.

Another document, smuggled out of Tibet a few days after the Panchen Lama died in January 1989, gives the complete text of his final speech, delivered only hours before his death. The speech is highly critical of leftist excesses, and is thought by some observers to contain hints of nationalist convictions.

The speech includes a clear message that the Panchen Lama was not prepared to cooperate fully with the Chinese until the Dalai Lama had returned to Tibet and had been fully involved in any decision-making process.

The Panchen Lama had been used since an early age by Chinese politicians to justify the 1950 invasion of Tibet. In October 1949 he sent a long telegram to Mao Zedong and Zhu De in which "he expressed his eagerness for the achievement of the motherland's unification and Tibet's liberation at an early date", according to a leading Chinese textbook, 'Highlights of Tibetan History'.

In fact the Panchen Lama was a child of 11 years old when the telegram was written.

Call for Independence

The 45-page 1960s booklet is entitled "Deepen Refutations of Lin Biao and Confucius

through Criticising Dalai and Panchen - Reference Material". Produced at the height of the Cultural Revolution, probably in 1965, it provides short quotations in Chinese and Tibetan as material for use in criticism sessions of religious or reactionary Tibetans.

In the first chapter, which gives examples of how the two Tibetan leaders were "Harbouring the evil hope of resurrecting autocratic and feudalism serfdom", the Panchen Lama is quoted in the Chinese version as saying:

"I have planned to invite the Dalai Lama to come back to be the president, and I myself to be the Prime Minister and Defence Minister should Tibet become independent."

The Tibetan version of the statement is more specific:

"In the past my pleas has been that after Tibetan Independence, we should welcome the Dalai Lama back as President, and I myself would assume the role of Prime Minister and Minister".

The booklet reveals that the statement was made by the Panchen Lama during a confession made to the 7th Public Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the Tibet Autonomous Region - literally described as the "autonomous organizing committee" - in October 1964, according to the text.

The statement is important because it was made before the Cultural Revolution began, when confessions were extracted in public meetings by force. The quotation appears to correspond with a long-standing report from Tibet that the Panchen Lama was imprisoned in 1965 for calling for Tibetan Independence in a public speech to this Committee in around 1965.

Democratic Reforms "Violate International Law"

Other material in the text quotes from the Panchen Lama's famous but unpublished 70,000 petition of 18th May 1962, in which he is believed to have appealed to Mao Tsetung to restrain or reverse the "democratic reforms".

The reforms had already achieved the destruction of 80% of Tibet's monasteries before the Cultural Revolution began, according to official Chinese figures released in 1987.

"It has come as a shock to realise that not a small number of innocent people have been forced to wear the dunce hat of serious crimes and then been subjected to serious punishment and torture...", wrote the Panchen Lama in 1962 of the reforms then in process, according to the booklet.

In the same letter he criticised the Democratic Reforms then in progress, making ironic reference to the Party's mnemonic rallying calls, probably the five loves for the Party, the country, the motherland, socialism, the people, and the collective.

According to the booklet, in his petition to Mao he wrote, "the great movement of democratic reform ... includes some other six loves. They are; love of noise, love of carelessness, love of flattery, love of argument, love of trouble-making and love of attacking others."

He went on to write that "the nature of the `three oppositions and three rectifications' has changed to `It is more powerful of kill the innocent sheep than to kill the guilty wolf". The editors of the booklet added a note explaining that the `two threes' referred to "the democratic reforms of the monasteries".

In the same petition he looked back to the reaction of the authorities to the 1959 Uprising which followed the Dalai Lama's flight to India. 87,000 people are reported to have been killed in the year after the Uprising for their involvement, according to a reported broadcast on Radio Lhasa in 1960. "The indiscriminate arrest and detention of people after the [1959] Uprising ... is the violation of all decent norms of international law", wrote the Panchen Lama in his 1962 petition.

This quotation is in the section of the book reserved for examples of "Attacking the dictatorship of the proletariat in the name of `morality', `kindness and justice', `sincerity and conscientiousness`.

As another examples of this form of attack on the proletariat, the book quotes a saying by a well-known Tibetan Lama, Sakya Kunga Gyaltsen: "What you do not like for yourself, Do not inflict upon others".

On 19th May 1963 the Panchen Lama wrote what the book describes as a "Counter-Revolutionary Prediction Letter", in which he appears to have advised people to restrain themselves and wait for communism to wither away. The passage quoted is in verse form:

"The purposeful task, inspiring luck and joy, Keep to yourself under self-control. However intense the red flame, It cannot match the blueness of the water".

Final Speech

The Panchen Lama died during a rare trip in 1989 to the traditional seat of the Panchen Lamas in Shigatse. The trip was to inaugurate a memorial building constructed to house the tombs of the previous five Panchen Lamas.

The 51-year old Lama, who was not in good health, died a day later, apparently from a heart attack, according to Chinese statements.

His mother and father were taken to hospital with heart attacks the same day or the day

before, and his senior tutor, also travelling with him, died from a heart attack the next day. This series of incidents led to unresolved doubts about the incident. A British pathologist commented at the time, "there is no such thing as an epidemic of heart attacks".

The Panchen Lama's last speech, of which a hand-written copy was sent to the outside world by Tibetan activists in Lhasa, is a powerful and uncompromising attack on ultraleftist tendencies in Chinese, and perhaps Tibetan, politics.

Although many Chinese dignitaries were present, the speech appears to have been given in Tibetan.

The Lama goes to great length in his speech to attack the politics which led to the destruction of the monasteries in Tibet, and appeared to dedicate the Mausoleum as a memorial to the destructiveness of earlier Chinese policy.

"This has caused very bad consequences both inside and outside the country", he says. "These have all been systematically perpetrated under Leftist policies towards religion. This is a total mistake ... there is no doubt whatsoever that evil consequences will follow as a result of such mistakes," said the Lama, who did not suggest the mistakes or the consequences were already in the past.

Chinese leaders are allowed to criticise the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, although the language used here is unusually strong. But the Tibetan leader makes a number of insinuations which suggest that he thought the excesses were not limited just to the Cultural Revolution period. He says that "the despicable vandalism ... in Tibet and Tibetan-inhabited areas" had taken place "mainly during the 'Cultural Revolution' and other periods during the successive political upheavals."

"This is a total mistake committed both at the level of the collective and at the level of the individuals concerned", he said, in a phrase that could be read as a criticism of the Party as well as of the individuals involved.

The speech is deeply and powerfully religious in parts, and calls for a qualitative understanding of religious freedom which could be seen as an important critique of the Party's claim to have allowed religious freedom:

"It is neither a renovation work [intended] merely to hold religious functions, nor is it an attempt to follow the old society's traditional custom of renovating and opening monasteries. Rather than feel concerned about the number of monasteries in comparison to the past, ... my primary concern is not the numbers of monks and nuns but rather their quality in terms of their adherence to strict religious discipline ['dul Khrims gTsngs] and pure moral responsibility..."

Refuses to act without Dalai Lama

The Panchen Lama's choice of historical references are also ambiguous. In what is a clear signal of his attitude to the Dalai Lama, he repeats an otherwise entirely irrelevant quotation from a predecessor who, he says, refused to co-operate with, the British, depicted as an earlier set of imperialist invaders, in 1904.

He claims that the previous Panchen Lama told the British: "According to tradition, the major issues relating to Tibet concern both the Victorious Father and the Son. That is to say, it is necessary for both the Dalai Lama and Panchen Erdeni to confer. Since His Holiness Thupten Gyatso the 12th Dalai Lama is not in Tibet at this time, I alone cannot make a decision."

The Panchen Lama comments on this, "He has thus set a high personal example to future generations by his lofty character and by his clear understanding of the interests involved".

In an apparent attempt to describe the Cultural Revolution as a "periodic catastrophe" typical of great civilizations in world history, the Panchen Lama makes three unusual analogies to civilisations which collapsed without trace as a result of the "catastrophes" which were not at all periodic: "We have the remains of the Roman civilization, the Mayan Cultural remains and the Babylonian civilisation - all of which stand as testimony to the effects of evil winds of history or occurrences of periodic catastrophe".

Although the speech expresses unequivocal support of the Communist Party's Policies on Nationalities, it makes no other concessions to Communist propaganda or rhetoric. There are no references to socialism or to any named Chinese historic leaders, and there are no suggestions that there has been any economic or social improvement under Chinese rule. The benefits of the Party's current nationalities policy are described only in terms of their ability to repair the damage caused by the Party's earlier policies.

A number of critics of the Party's religious policies, including some Chinese scholars, have described them as repairing the damage done by Cultural Revolution without solving the fundamental questions of Chinese relations with other nationalities and cultures.

The Lama repeats several times that the Mausoleum is dedicated to the Party's religious policy, and to the friendship between the Tibetans and the Chinese. The dedication is somewhat ambiguous and can be read as a suggestion that the Mausoleum commemorates the destructiveness of Party policies and the contentious nature of its `friendship' with Tibetans.

"This well designed, majestic East Tashi Namgyal Mausoleum of the Panchen Lamas is a national and concrete testimony to the noble and correct Nationalities and Religious policy held by the Chinese communist party ... I feel justified to claim, without exaggeration or bragging that this is an achievement resulting from the joint efforts of the Tibetan people and the Chinese people," said the Tibetan Leader.

According to some Tibetans, the repeated insistence of the Dalai Lama on the notion of patriotism may have been a veiled signal to his Tibetan audience. Although he usually speaks of patriotism in terms of loyalty to the Chinese motherland, at one point he describes his predecessor as "an impeccable model of the power of Tibetan Nationalism and a standard bearer par excellence." It is not clear if this is a mistake or a cultivated ambiguity.

For the text of the last speech., see "The Panchen Lama's Last Speech: Full Text" in *Reports from Tibet, November 1990 - February 1991*, London: Tibet Information Network, February 1991