

Revolution Revisited

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There is a recurring nightmare, well known in clinical psychiatry, in which the sleeper belabours an enemy, but to absolutely no effect. The more furiously the enemy is beaten, or punched or kicked, the more infuriatingly untouched he remains. But now it seems Tibetans are finally waking up from this long nightmare and beginning to realize that what they do has effect, also makes a difference; that they can land a blow—a hard blow—against the Communist Chinese regime. And that although the common goal of Tibetan independence may not happen as soon as they would like it to, they can actually take concrete steps, make sacrifices if need be, to advance the time-table of its realization.

How can Tibetans adequately describe all that has happened (and is happening) in Tibet? The media has been calling them protests, outbursts, demonstrations, riots, even uprisings, which is perhaps adequate when describing one isolated event, but completely fails to encompass the significance of this year's 10th March mega-explosion. It is a revolution. Nothing less.

Consider how widespread the events were. In 1987- 89, the protests occurred in Lhasa and some surrounding monasteries and villages. But this year they took place as far away east in Amdo and Kham, within the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Sichuan and Qinghai. The names of these flashpoints : Ngaba, Bora, Labrang, Mangra, Ditsa, Yulgan, Tsekhog, Tsoe, Palung, Chentsa, Rebgong, Kyegudo, Dariang, Sershul, Machu, Chigdril, Chone, Luchu, Ngaba, Serthar, Palyul, Tehor, Drango, Barkham, Tridu, Kanze, Lithang, Nyakrong and many others, ring out in defiance. In Central Tibet, people have had protests and clashes in Sakya, Shigatse, Samye, Toelung Dechen, Ratoe, Phenpo, Gaden, Medrogongkar, and unnamed areas in Western Tibet. Even in Beijing and Lanzhou, in a sea of hostile Chinese, Tibetan university students courageously organized protests and sit-ins. Tibetans everywhere came out and flew the old national flag, shouted their commitment to *Rangzen* (independence) and their devotion to their leader the Dalai Lama. Even after the Chinese crackdown and mass arrests, thirty Tibetan monks protested in the Jokhang before visiting foreign journalists on a showcase tour of the city. Some days later when foreign government officials were taken on a publicity tour of the city, another major demonstration broke out in the Ramoche area of Lhasa.

Then there were the demonstrations, protests, marches and vigils by exile Tibetans and supporters in nearly every major city in the world. These have been unusually vigorous, even aggressive. A fairly common feature of these events has been the tearing down of the Chinese flag from the embassy or consulate flagpole and its replacement by the national Tibetan flag. It is yet to get over the video of the amazing Tibetan spider man who climbed up the walls of the Chinese embassy in Vienna with such speed and skill and pulled down the hated Red flag. And it's all still going on inside Tibet and elsewhere. A number of exile Tibetans in New York City have given up their day jobs and are living on their savings in order to keep the demonstrations and protests going. This writer was at a rally

organized by the only Tibetan in Nashville, the capital of Tennessee. Many Tibetans had come—students, monks and lay people—driving many hours from neighbouring Georgia and Kentucky.

The spontaneity of it all was remarkable. Yes, there was the common focus of the Beijing Olympics, but Tibetans everywhere, thousands of miles apart, seemed to be operating on a single wavelength. Some of more admiring dharma friends would say that native telepathic abilities were being brought into play. But Anne Applebaum, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and scholar (*Gulag, A History*) in her March 18 article in the *Washington Post* provides a more prosaic explanation—cell phones.

For Applebaum the events in Tibet represent one manifestation of a wider reaction of “captive nations”, Uighurs, Mongols, Tibetans, rising up against the tyrannical rule of an old imperial and foreign power that has long oppressed smaller countries and societies surrounding it. Applebaum includes even such independent nations as North Korea and Burma in this category, hence, quite accurately, relegating Kim Jong Il and the Burmese military junta to the role of Beijing’s surrogate dictators. As if in confirmation of Applebaum’s broad theory, *Reuters* reported, just a few days ago, that that major demonstrations had broken out in East Turkestan (Xinjiang).

On the events in Tibet Applebaum concludes that if Chinese leaders “... aren’t worried, they should be. After all, the past two centuries were filled with tales of strong, stable empires brought down by their subjects, undermined by their client states, overwhelmed by the national aspirations of small, subordinate countries. Why should the 21st century be any different? Watching a blurry cell phone video of tear gas rolling over the streets of Lhasa yesterday, I couldn’t help but wonder when— maybe not in this decade, this generation or even this century—Tibet and its monks will have their revenge.”

The Tibetans, clergy and lay, are not a vengeful people, but they are not going to settle for anything less than an independent Tibet, and this will probably happen sooner than Applebaum thinks. But Applebaum is correct in one thing, that this is much much bigger than most people are able to grasp. The Tibetan leadership does not seem to have grasped it at all.

GRAB THAT TORCH!

Countries have always boycotted the Olympics when it was in their political interests to do so. America and the West boycotted the Moscow Olympics when the Russians invaded Afghanistan. Then the Soviet bloc states boycotted the Los Angeles Games in retaliation. China completely boycotted the Olympics from 1948 to 1976, because of Taiwan’s participation in the games. In 1979, the International Olympic Committee, under pressure from China, declared that Taiwan athletes could only participate as representatives of “Chinese Taipei”, and not Republic of China or Taiwan. If this isn’t politicizing the Olympics, what is?

In Beijing’s case one important reason for hosting the Olympics is, without doubt, to rehabilitate its image; to reprogramme people’s memories about the past, especially the past concerning the Tiananmen massacre. The regime has worked hard to brainwash Chinese (and some Western) minds and in fact has been able to induce a kind of collective amnesia about these events that were

witnessed worldwide, even the famous image of the young Chinese man who stood in the way of advancing tanks. His lonely act of defiance astonished the world then, but incredible as it may sound, the regime has managed to erase the “Tank Man’s” image from Chinese memory. In a 2006 Frontline documentary film, *The Tank Man*, a retrospective on the events of ‘89, the filmmaker Anthony Thomas shows the iconic photograph to undergraduates at Beijing University, the nerve centre of the 1989 protests; none of them recognize it. The students appear genuinely baffled. Thomas concludes “... only one sensed that the photo had something to do with the events of 1989, but the Tank Man meant nothing to him.”

That is why, the torch started its global journey from China at Tiananmen Square and is going to end its world relay there. A new set of more agreeable, even glorious, images of the infamous square will replace the blood-drenched ones of 1989, in the consciousness of the world. Who is to say that this global brainwashing exercise will not be entirely successful?

The purpose of the Beijing Olympics is only secondarily about sports, and only remotely about world peace and harmony. In the case of Beijing ‘08 it is primarily a propa-ganda tool for the legitimization of a repressive Communist/Fascist state. Hitler wanted the 1936 Olympics in Berlin for much the same reasons. Even the Olympic torch relay, which was invented and “planned with immense care by the Nazi leadership”, has a fairly sinister story behind it.

To be fair, the Nazis hadn’t yet committed any of their major crimes against humanity in 1936. The PRC, on the other hand, has probably murdered more people to date (60-90million) than the total number of those killed (roughly 72 million) in WWII, military and civilian, including the victims of the Holocaust. Yet even at that early date Germany had, away from the gaze of visitors, already built concentration camps and filled them with Jews, Roma (gypsies), Communists, homosexuals, socialists, labour leaders, Jehovah’s Witnesses, people with disabilities, and others.

Present day prisons and Laogai camps in China accommodate a similar variety of victims: Tibetans-independence activists, Uighurs, Falun Gong practitioners, Catholic bishops, pastors of underground Protestant churches, lamas, mullahs, monks, nuns, labour organizers, democracy activists, human rights lawyers, dispossessed peasants and the like.

Hitler was determined to use the Games to legitimize the Nazi regime and to demonstrate German racial superiority. And nearly everyone went along blithely with this propaganda exercise: international athletes, national leaders, celebrities, religious leaders, intellectuals, artists, journalists and tourists. The CBS correspondent, William L. Shirer, reporting from Berlin that summer mentioned that the city was beautiful, the weather balmy and the sky blue. In line with his personal obsession with cleanliness the problem of pollution so concerned Hitler that he encouraged industry to work toward the complete elimination of noxious gases. Anti-pollution contrivances were already installed in a number of factories in the Ruhr basin, and new plants were required to construct preventive devices to avoid pollution of the waters.

Chinese leaders haven’t been as conscientious as the Fuhrer about such things, but they have nonetheless been equally ruthless in making sure the Olympic

Games serve the interests of the Chinese Communist Party in '08 as it did the Nationalist Socialist Party in '36. For quite a while now it seemed that Beijing would pretty much be allowed to do exactly that without any fuss or bother. The Dalai Lama's statement some years ago that China deserved to host the Olympics effectively deflated the efforts of those attempting to challenge China on this issue. Only a few groups, notably the Students for a Free Tibet, attempted some dramatic but small scale protests. But then on 10th March of this year, starting from the ancient Tibetan capital, Lhasa, protests, demonstrations and riots broke out all over Tibet, China and the world, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In San Francisco thousands of Tibetans from all over the United States and Canada (a few even from India and Nepal), marched with their brilliant red, yellow, white and blue national flags. The large contingent of SAVE DARFUR students groups were distinguished by waves of green flags and green tee shirts, while FREE BURMA was represented by a host of brown flags. The blue and white flags of FREE TURKESTAN and the yellow and orange stripes of the unexpected Vietnamese contingent, were no less gloriously eye-catching. In variations on the Students for a Free Tibet name, individual protesters carried signs declaring: Bikers for a Free Tibet, Humans for a Free Tibet, Taiwanese for a Free Tibet, Chinese for a Free Tibet, Americans For a Free Tibet, Greens For a Free Tibet, Italians For a Free Tibet, Armenians For A Free Tibet, Free Thinkers For a Free Tibet, San Franciscans For a Free Tibet, Sentient Beings For a Free Tibet, and in full camouflage uniform a solitary "Montagnard For a Free Tibet".

Unlike the 11,000 Chinese counter-demonstrators, whose idea of "One World" was presumably one dominated, if not ruled, by Beijing, and who had all been shipped in organized platoons, in chartered busses (with one lunch box per person) paid for by the Chinese Embassy, the multi-cultural, multi-racial, noisy but effective protesters on the Tibetans side were all there absolutely on their own initiative, time and money. The one common thread that tied disparate groups and people together was one sincerely and tenaciously held dream of freedom and peace.

At this stage of events no one really needs to be told that Beijing doesn't deserve the Olympics. But having the intellectual and moral arguments lined up and made clear, might that little extra motivation, that oomph, to the special person in the right place in Istanbul, New Delhi or Hong Kong to reach out a little further than he might otherwise have done, and grabbing that torch hurl it mightily into the Bosphorus, the Yamuna or Kowloon harbour. □□□