

Looking Back at History

The Tenth Panchen Lama

Source: The Tenth Panchen Lama, Chökyi Gyaltsan, *From the heart of the Panchen Lama (Major speeches and a petition: 1962–1989)*. Transcribed from a tape of a speech given in Tibetan and published in English translation by the Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, Dharamsala, India. 2nd Edition, 2003 (1998).

The Tenth Panchen had a history throughout his life of challenging claims by the CCP concerning Tibet, including the famous 70,000-character petition submitted as a top secret document to Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in 1962, which led to him spending the following 15 years in prison or under some form of house arrest. Almost all of these statements were internal, and in public he was almost always strongly supportive of China's official positions on Tibetan history and politics. In 1988 and 1989, however, a small number of reports emerged in the official press that gave brief indications that the Panchen Lama had delivered internal speeches containing critical views of the early role of the CCP in Tibet, in particular of the damage done by "leftism" in Tibet.¹

Outside China, a number of translations were produced of these internal statements by the Panchen Lama criticising some of China's historical claims and the CCP's early policies. Among these was the following extract from a speech given by the Panchen Lama at Trashilhunpo monastery in Shigatse on January 24, 1989. In that speech, apparently referring to the Democratic Reforms, which had begun in some areas up to a decade before the Cultural Revolution, he appeared to challenge the claim that Liberation had been a source of unqualified benefit: as he put

1 "Bainqen pointed out that the development and study of the Tibetan language and Buddhism have now become a life and death problem for the Tibetan nationality. Under the guidance of the 'left' line, the neglect or even total abandonment of the Tibetan language in an attempt to replace all languages in China with the Chinese language has caused unimaginable damage to the Tibetan language" (Zhou Jiamin, "Ngapoi and Bainqen Talk About Tibetan Studies", *Zhongguo xinwen she*, December 6, 1988, translated into English and published by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), Daily Report—China (FBIS-CHI-88-238), December 6, 1988, p. 47). See also Peng Weixiang, "The Great Master Bainqen Says Tibet Has Paid More Dearly Than It Has Achieved in Its Development," *Zhongguo xinwen she*, January 24, 1989 (translated into English and published as "Bainqen Lama on Tibetan Economic Development," FBIS, Daily Report—China (FBIS-CHI-89-015), January 25, 1989, p. 55).

it, at that time “Buddhism was destroyed together with feudal serfdom.”² *The speech was delivered four days before he died.*



Looking back at history, one can see that most of the lamas and trulkus were conscientious. They were able to preserve and promote the Buddhist teachings. [...] A small number of lamas and trulkus did bring a bad name to Buddhism. But on the whole, positive elements far outweighed the negative ones. About forty or fifty years back, before the liberation, Tibet and Mongolia saw a decline in religious faith. Particularly, in the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s—after the liberation of 1959 in the case of the TAR—the destruction of Buddhism was carried out. I am saying this to drive home the point that the quality of lamas and trulkus started declining about fifteen or twenty years before the liberation. The decline did not start immediately after the liberation. But the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s saw a complete reversal in the state of Buddhism. In those decades, the leftists hijacked the Party's religious policy and did not implement it with fairness. [...]

In the past, most of the monasteries in the Tibetan areas enjoyed special authority. Particularly, the monasteries in the TAR became part of the Three Feudal Lords. The monasteries enjoyed special position as serf owners. They oppressed and exploited the masses of peasantry and serfs. This is against Buddhism. And the masses of peasantry and serfs were justified in wiping out this system.

When the rebellions in Tibet were being quelled in 1959, I told the Central Government to cleanse the monasteries by abolishing their special powers of

2 This translation was produced by the exile Tibetan administration based on a transcription it received of a tape recording of the Panchen Lama's speech given in Tibetan to a forum of Tibetan religious dignitaries and monks at Shigatse on January 24, 1989. As a result, it cannot be verified by checking against any published text. The Panchen Lama gave at least two other speeches during his final visit to Shigatse: one at the opening ceremony for the stupa to his predecessors on January 17 (see Xinhua, “Government Publishes Panchen Lama's Final Speech,” February 7, 1989, translated into English and published as FBIS, Daily Report—China (FBIS-CHI-89-024), February 7, 1989, p. 26; for unofficial translation see “The Panchen Lama's Last Speech: Full Text. Translation from Tibetan of the 10th Panchen Lama's Speech given at Shigatse, January 1989,” *TIN News Update*, Tibet Information Network, February 20, 1991), and another at a forum for Tibetan cadres from all the Tibetan areas on January 23 (mentioned in Peng Weixang, “Bainqen's Last Visit to Tibet,” *Zhongguo xinwen she*, January 30, 1989, translated into English and published as “Bainqen's Last Trip Viewed,” FBIS, Daily Report. China (FBIS-CHI-89-019), January 31, 1989, p. 15).

oppression and exploitation, which has stemmed from the corrupt influence of the feudal serf system. I hoped that this would benefit the common masses. I was certain that the bulk of religious personages would have accepted this. If our suggestion had been acted on, the monasteries would have been rid of the corrupt influence of feudal serfdom and would have lived up to the teaching of Buddhism, making them conducive places for religious practitioners and personages. It would have served to purify Buddhism.

Unfortunately, what happened was completely contrary to what we had requested. Buddhism was destroyed together with feudal serfdom. For those of us who believe in Buddhism the images are the medium through which we receive the inspiration of wisdom. But for non-believers, they are nothing more than spiritless clay sculptures. However, it must be accepted that they are works of art. Our religious texts teach us not only religion, they also contain a large body of knowledge in the form of history, arts, literature, astrology, meteorology, the natural sciences, and so on. All these were destroyed. Even the monastic buildings were destroyed. Certainly, buildings can never be 'the feudal serf system'. Similarly, religious texts cannot be 'the feudal serf system'.

Most of the monasteries in Tibet were destroyed. Only a small number of them were protected. But the monk population in these monasteries had greatly dwindled. Yes, although the monks were present, religion itself suffered destruction. I reported all these to the Central Government when I visited Beijing in the winter of 1959. There may have been monks that year in the remaining monasteries, but there were not enough practitioners. There were not enough prayer meetings, either. Therefore, I told the Central Government that it would not do to let this situation continue. I said: A section of practitioners must be looked after and their living expenses paid for by the State. The rest of the monks must be made to work and pay for their own expenses. If all the monks were made to work, no one would have the time to study religion.

Mao listened to my suggestion and approved it. In that year, there were a considerable number of monks in Tibet. Before the Democratic Reforms, there were about 100,000 monks in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Some put the figure at 150,000 while others put it at 200,000. However, after the Democratic Reforms the monk population was estimated at 20,000. The Central Government approved a plan to provide state grants to 5,000 monks, while the remaining 15,000 monks had to join the work force and fend for themselves.

When I returned to Tibet, we planned to distribute the grants to practitioners from all schools of Buddhism in an attempt to allow them to specialise in their respective disciplines. That was in 1960.

In 1962 I went down [to China] and submitted a long petition. It contained 70,000 characters and detailed my findings in Tibet, especially in the Qinghai region. The petition came to be called the 70,000-Character Reactionary

Document. In that document I wrote at great length about the state of Buddhism in the Tibet Autonomous Region, Kham and Amdo. When I first submitted this petition the Central Government held numerous meetings and promised changes in Tibet. Then came the Eighth Party [Congress]'s Fifth Meeting in August 1962. During this meeting, Mao launched his great slogan, "Never Forget Class Struggle". This campaign slammed the label "Revivalist of the Feudal System" on my head. Thus I came to suffer the first bout of [political] cold. Although my ailment was not noticeable in the beginning, I was sneezing silently.

In 1964 the Seventh Enlarged Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the TAR was held. During the meeting, I was criticised, struggled against and educated. I was confined in darkness. This is my personal story. Other spiritual figures suffered the same fate or even worse. My big name ensured me a slightly better treatment. The sincere practitioners of religion in monasteries and those with allegiance to religion were branded with different labels and jailed. Some of them were sent to education-through-labour camps and told to reform their thoughts. Of course, there is nothing wrong if we were told to reform our past feudal thoughts and our old social thoughts. There is nothing wrong if we were told to respect the leadership of the Communist Party and follow the socialist path. There is nothing wrong if we were told to develop solidarity with the proletariat and work for the unity of the motherland and nationalities. This is a good socialist attitude and I support it.

But such was not asked of religious practitioners. Instead, the practitioners were asked to oppose religion and criticise their spiritual masters. Those who burned scriptures and destroyed religious images were hailed as brave. What is the good of religious practitioners who indulge in these actions? What we are saying is that we cherish Buddhism more than our lives. We cannot give in to the exhortation to destroy religion. I feel that although we should reform our thoughts, it should be done discriminatingly. But the fact that we were exhorted to destroy religion is extremely ridiculous. It is evil and unachievable. Resistance to this exhortation led to long imprisonment of spiritual figures, lamas, trulkus and geshe. Poor food and living conditions in prison claimed the lives of many of them. Those who survived the prison ordeal were found to be suffering from mental trauma when they were finally released from prison. I need not go into this at great length as you all are well aware of it. Many lamas perished during those years. Since their trulkus have to be found, we are now having to recognise trulkus en masse.

One point is that the Democratic Reforms started in Kham and Amdo in 1957–58 and in the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1959. The lamas and trulkus who were in the age group from ten to twenty in that period were then barely able to read the Tibetan alphabet and could understand only the rudiments

of Buddhism. They were, of course, not imprisoned. But they had to bear the political stigma of belonging to the feudal and capitalist classes. This stigma condemned them to suffer a great deal of oppression and humiliation. Now in their forties and fifties, they have become a class of uneducated lamas. On the other hand, the lamas who had managed to study before the Democratic Reforms are very old now.

Thereafter the Party smashed the Gang of Four and the Eleventh CCP Congress held its Third Plenum. Before that, the Party had acted illegally for three decades. Some good things were definitely done in those decades. But serious mistakes were also made. We should reflect on those decades and rectify the mistakes while continuing to improve on the good deeds. The good deeds refer to the Four Cardinal Principles of the CCP. It was right to implement these cardinal principles and we should continue with this. The mistake was the leftist excesses, for which we should continue to make amends. Not only should we refuse to accept the Cultural Revolution, we should in fact criticise it. There were other campaigns which may have been considered right in the past. But they are now found to have had both right and wrong elements. This discrimination between right and wrong became possible as a result of the Party's new and sincere practices. The new practices led to the revival of the new religious, nationality and United Front policies. I use the word "revival" because these policies were put in abeyance during the Cultural Revolution. [...]

During the Cultural Revolution, the Fifth National People's Congress met in 1974. But it said nothing about the State Nationalities Affairs Commission. We heard only of the State Council and not of the State Nationalities Affairs Commission. So how could there have been a nationality policy then? Even the CPPCC meeting was not held. The CPPCC is a very important body where all the entities outside the Communist Party—i.e., the democratic parties, the nationalities, religious groups and non-Party personages—hold discussions and support the Communist Party as a United Front. Even this body was put on the backburner in 1974. This is how the United Front and religious policies were abandoned. It is for this reason that I say that the nationality, religious and United Front policies were revived after the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress.

The systematic implementation of the United Front policies, which followed the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress, was very important to us. The red robes we are now wearing are due to the development since then. We now have the right to read religious texts resoundingly. The monasteries are now allowed to have images. Although the images may not be like those in the past, we can at least have bronze ones. All these we owe to the basic change in policy since the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress.