

The Tibet Question - railroading the Olympics?

James Crowden takes a look at Tibet's complex history and the country's relationship with China and the outside world.

To many Tibet is a remote country with red cloaked Buddhist monks performing complicated rituals that evoke compassion and the need for enlightenment, a message that many in the west are very keen to hear. Many Buddhists recognise the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader but few fully understand the historical events that necessitated his sudden flight from his sacred homeland in 1959. Some black and white film footage still exists of a young Dalai Lama riding through mountain passes into a remote part of Assam. Since then he has set up a Tibetan Government in Exile in Dharamsala and has been courted by the world's media.

These days the television cameras normally show the Dalai Lama in jocular conversation with world leaders and film stars. His Holiness is a great admirer of Basil Fawlty and has met John Cleese on a number of occasions.

But this popular image of the Dalai Lama hides the real history of Tibet, the pain of exiles who have no access to their homeland and the pain of those still in Tibet who have no access to their spiritual leader. It also hides the pain of those families who lost relatives during the Tibetan uprising of 1959 and subsequent purges, as well as the disastrous agricultural experiments that followed in the 1960s. The Chinese tried to grow wheat at high altitude instead of barley and this resulted in six crop failures in a row. There was widespread starvation and what grain there was, was used to feed the Chinese troops. About half a million Tibetans died because of this forced collectivisation. But an estimated 30 million Chinese died in the same famine, so Tibet's suffering wasn't really noticed on the Chinese radar.

There are other important aspects of Tibetan history worth mentioning. In Tang poetry the barbarians on the border were often Tibetan cavalry who were very powerful and warlike. In 763AD they sacked Chang'an, the Chinese capital, and forced the Chinese to pay tribute. In 822AD there was a peace treaty to the Tibetans' advantage, something the Chinese have never forgotten or forgiven. In the 17th century Tibet also captured much of Western Tibet and was at war with Bhutan.

From 1727 the Chinese kept an Amban or High Representative in Lhasa and in the 18th century at least two Dalai Lamas were poisoned before they reached maturity. The Chinese tried to manipulate Tibetan politics from behind the scenes, bearing in mind that there were also the Panchen Lama, a prime minister, various cabinet ministers, generals and a Tibetan royal family to help run the country.

In 1904 the British invaded Tibet. If you go to Lytchett Minster in Dorset you will see the grave of Sir Francis Younghusband which has a relief of the Potala, the Dalai Lamas' palace, on his headstone. Sir Francis was the political officer in charge of the invasion yet like many British servicemen and diplomats he fell in love with Tibet's ancient and peculiar spiritual ways. The British army used machine guns on Tibetan soldiers who walked away at the first real confrontation.

In 1912 when the Chinese were again meddling with Tibetan affairs, the 13th Dalai Lama fled to Darjeeling and appeared in Simla disguised as a Tibetan salt trader. My great uncle witnessed this. The British then kept a small but very influential mission in Lhasa as well as a trade officer in Gyantse, just to keep an eye on things.

Unfortunately after partition in India Nehru did not acknowledge Tibet as an independent power. Between 1947-1949 there was a two year gap when an international treaty could have been signed, if only to recognise Tibet's border with India, but this never happened. Nehru was too busy fighting a war with Pakistan. The British also failed to recognise Tibet and so did every other country in the world. By the time Mao Tse-tong was in ascendance it was too late.

Many years ago in Bristol, I met Jigmet Taring, the Dalai Lama's foreign minister, who had taken the Tibetan case to the United Nations in the 1950s. The difficulty was that the UN was at war with the Chinese in Korea. So Jigmet's words fell on deaf ears. The UN politely nodded and did nothing. Jigmet showed me a photograph of his grandchildren in Lhasa. They looked half Chinese. It made him very sad.

That is the nub of the problem, the ancient Tibetan culture which protects not only its boundaries but more importantly the wise teachings of the Buddhist religion, are systematically being wiped out in many different ways. The Chinese do not understand the Tibetans but the Tibetans understand the Chinese only too well.

Sadly the events of the last ten days, marked by violence and deaths in Lhasa, are only the tip of the Tibetan iceberg. The Tibetan struggle for autonomy has been watched carefully by the West but real political help has been minimal. In the early 1970s the CIA was funding Tibetan guerrillas through Mustang in Nepal. Other guerrilla units drawn largely from the nomads were also based in Ladakh on Tibet's western border and many of these brought back useful information. The Chinese had invaded India in 1961 but once China and the US started holding trade talks the Tibetan question was put on the back burner where it has been ever since.

What is really important today is not just the Tibetan nation but the Buddhist teaching that extols the virtues of compassion not repression. If we are prepared to intervene in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of democracy why not Tibet?

The fate of Tibet is far more important than the Olympics. It is about human rights. The Chinese dragon which once extolled communism is now embracing capitalism with open arms, so why not Tibet and Buddhism? China was once Buddhist so maybe the Chinese should go to Tibet with an open mind and listen to the Buddhist teachings rather than

the propaganda of its own imperialist military machine.

There is no point in railroading Tibet. I once heard the Dalai Lama talking in London where he said that "the world would take far more notice of Tibet if they had found oil there." And then laughed.

The Olympic spirit does not allow for repression. Over the next two months the Chinese will have to listen to world opinion but have the world's politicians got the courage to play a serious game of ping pong? The sanity of an ancient nation is at stake.