

NOTES

A PURE LAND

This broadcast was given by Mr. Hugh Richardson, C.I.E., O.B.E., in June 1951, before the Communists had gained control over Tibet and it may be considered out of date. Nevertheless it is hoped, and indeed may well be, that the age-old conservatism of the Tibetans will not be too deeply impaired, and that future generations from non-Communist nations will be able to visit, without undue restriction, that fascinating land with its lovable people—ED.

A VERY early fragment of Tibetan verse dating from the eighth century A.D. which I shall quote because I hope you will like the sound of it, describes Tibet as KANG RI THÖN PO NI Ü; CHHU BO CHHEN PO NI GO; YÜ THO SA TSANG: 'The centre of high snow mountains; the head of great waters; a lofty country, a pure land.'

That is an apt description of a country bounded by the Himalaya, Karakoram, and Kuenhun mountains, and containing the sources of many of the greatest rivers of Asia: the Indus and the Sutlej, the Ganges and Brahmaputra, the Yellow river, the Yangtse, the Suleveen, and the Mekong. But I like also to see—perhaps without justification—in that word which I have translated as 'pure', the earliest expression of the idea of Tibet as a holy land. For that is the conception which explains the exclusion of outside influences. Indeed, it explains most of Tibetan thought and actions today.

Tibetans are always careful to tell one, in explaining their policy, that 'Tibet is a Religious Country'. That is no mere form of words. State and Religion are one and the same. The single conscious aim of the administration is the maintenance of religion which automatically means the maintenance of the State.

That idea sends its roots deep into Tibetan history—perhaps as far as the great days of the Tibetan kings—1,300 years ago. It has certainly dominated Tibet for about 900 years and since the sixteenth century has unified the country under the present line of Dalai Lamas.

The Tibetans see the justification of their system in its long survival. They see threats to it in change of any sort. And, as the ideas of all other peoples are now different from their own, they seek to keep all new ideas out of their country. They have succeeded so well that they have preserved a form of government and a social structure unchanged for 300 years and containing elements that go back many centuries earlier.

The Dalai Lama is sincerely believed to be a divine reincarnation; the feelings of awed but affectionate devotion which surround him dominate the minds not only of the peasants but also of the most

intelligent nobles. This devotion is largely responsible for the ready acceptance by the Tibetan peasantry of a position that must be described technically as 'feudal serfdom'. But if the Tibetan peasant is technically a serf he certainly does not groan under any intolerable hardship. However strange it may seem to would-be reformers, he is in general well contented. I would add that signs of real poverty are very rare. The peasant and his family get enough food and clothing in return for their work; they have time for holidays and for idling. And there seems to be something in their nature that satisfies them with their life and with the belief that by accepting their destined place in the scheme of things they are serving the Dalai Lama and upholding the Religious Government.

In political matters Tibet has always been more closely involved with China than with her other neighbour—India. The Tibetans have at no time been willing to be absorbed by the Chinese Empire, but they had a common ground with China so long as the emperors were Buddhist or made a show of Buddhist sympathies. It was for centuries a political theory convenient to both sides, that the Chinese emperors were the disciples of the great Tibetan lamas and that their interest in Tibet was in the role of Defenders of the Faith. In fact, for a very long time there was no real danger to Buddhism in Tibet; for the Muslim conquerors of India, although feared and hated by the Tibetans as persecutors of religion, did not stretch out more than tentative hands to the fringes of the Himalaya. The Jesuit missions in Tibet in the eighteenth century represented no more than a mild and scholarly invasion of religious argument which was met by an equally resolute logic and a polite but adamant opposition. Mere persuasion was no danger to Tibetan Buddhism on its own ground.

Heretical force first broke into the seclusion of Tibet with the Younghusband Expedition of 1904. The Tibetans were surprised to find that the invaders didn't want to occupy their country and upset their religion but were in fact moderate, humane, and tolerant. So, apart from some new light on the British character, little in the way of new thought came in with the Expedition and, as soon as the party withdrew, the puncture in Tibetan spiritual defences sealed itself automatically.

The next shock to the established order in Tibet came from the east. Foreign infections suddenly jerked China from the Middle Ages to the threshold of modernity; and the collapse of the Chinese Empire before the Republican Revolution in 1911 carried off Tibet's last spiritual ally against innovation. The disappearance of the Divine Emperor, the Protector of Buddhism, removed the one bond with China which Tibetans had been prepared to accept. With that gone, Chinese political influence, which had always been distasteful,

appeared suddenly as a threat to the Tibetan form of government. The Tibetans took the opportunity of confusion in China to shake off the last remnant of Chinese control; and since then, Chinese approaches to Tibet were viewed with bitterness and suspicion because of the revolutionary outrage to religion and constitutional propriety.

In order to support their reasserted independence, the Tibetans were glad to cultivate closer relations with the government of India. The expedition of 1904 had left no hard feelings. Indeed the moderation with which it was conducted and its speedy withdrawal from Lhasa are still remembered with appreciation. Moreover, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had come into close and friendly contact with a British official. This was Sir Charles Bell, an officer of the Political Service of the Indian Government who was then in charge of relations with Tibet. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama was a man of strong will. He had seen something of the world as an exile, first in China when he fled from the British expedition, and then in India when he had to escape again, this time from the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1910. From his friendship with Sir Charles Bell he acquired sound and reasonable ideas of where the best interests of Tibet lay and of methods by which he might gradually bring the country on to a more progressive way of government. His efforts to put his ideas into practice were simple enough—some training in India for a few army officers and men, a small police force for Lhasa, a simple hydro-electric lighting plant. He was an ardent Tibetan and did not want to see Tibet managed or influenced by any other government, and his aim was to make it possible for Tibet to stand on its own feet and defend its independence against China.

The Dalai Lama's modest reforms were the first deliberate introduction of western ideas into Tibet; and the system rose up silently and overwhelmingly and blotted them out. No one openly resisted the innovations and there are faint material traces of them visible to this day. But anything likely to change the existing social system or alter the balance of power inside the country was soon reduced to a shadow. The reception of these reforms showed clearly from where a Dalai Lama derives his power and on what conditions. It was the monasteries that put on the brake and asserted themselves as the guardians of conservatism against all forms of change.

Now the monasteries in Tibet are believed to contain between 200,000 and 300,000 men. In a population which may number about 3,000,000 that is a large proportion. But it was at least a threat that a well-armed and well-trained army—even if it were not increased beyond its existing size of about 10,000—could be an effective check on the influence of the monasteries and could make it possible for a Dalai Lama to be independent of their support.

I do not intend to suggest that it is thoughts of personal advantage which lead the monks to oppose all forms of change. All goes back to the idea of the Religious State which commands an especially fanatical devotion from those who feel that by taking part in the religious order they are protecting and perpetuating the flame of the faith. Hatred of change is so much a part of their thought and habit that the monastic order would protect their conservatism even against a Dalai Lama.

Since the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama there has been an acceleration of the speed with which western ways have become known in Tibet. It is no new thing for Tibetans to visit India. They have gone there for pilgrimage and for trade for many centuries. But in the war of 1939 to 1945, as all other approaches to China became blocked, Tibet found itself a busy channel of trade between India and China. Tibetans are naturally traders, and all classes—monks, yak-herds, farmers, noblemen turned to this promising business with enthusiasm. The number of Tibetan visitors to India increased greatly and the range of their visits extended beyond Calcutta and the places of religious pilgrimage, to Delhi and Bombay. And I am afraid that contact with war-time India led the Tibetans into ways of black marketing and undesirable business sharpness.

In Lhasa itself the presence since 1936 of a political mission representing the Government of India must have given many Tibetans some insight into the ways of life and thought of other peoples. Tibetan officials also have been on missions abroad and have seen the ways of industrial countries and have exchanged views with British and American business men and officials.

All those new contacts must have had some effect on the Tibetan mind. Perhaps the successful business men would like some change that would give them a more active part in the direction of affairs. Perhaps some of the younger officials see difficulties in the way of maintaining Tibetan isolation in a world of modern communications. Perhaps—and I hope this may be so—some officials have begun to appreciate that some liberalization of the land-tenure system could ensure that the government continues to rest on the loyalty of a contented people.

But in the background still looms the restraining authority of the monasteries—still resolute against new ideas, still strong to impose their will on the country by the power of faith and ancient tradition. So I would say that the tide of new ideas is only washing round the shores of Tibet. It has made no breach yet.

The danger point lies, of course, in the expressed intention of the Chinese government to 'liberate' Tibet. In pursuance of that purpose, Chinese troops have entered Tibet; and although they have halted just inside the borders and have not followed up their initial

success, it is clear that matters cannot rest like that. Some change in Tibetan internal affairs seems inevitable.

The Chinese have only to study the centuries of their relations with Tibet in order to recognize the power of religion in that country. Their alternatives—to put them roughly and in an over-simplified way—are to break that power as the Russians did in Mongolia, or to use it as the Chinese Empire did under the Yuan and Ch'ing dynasties.

An attempt to break the power of religion quickly would need the use of force on a considerable scale. The successful use of force might leave the country in a state of chaos; so a body of administrators would have to be ready to restore order. There is no sign that the Chinese want to follow so violent a course even if they were in a position to commit men and money on a task so far from home for the sake of an uncertain reward. On the contrary, they seem deliberately to have restrained various forces and elements which could be used to create internal dissension in Tibet. And they have been making conciliatory offers to the existing régime, promising to maintain the political status of the Dalai Lama and the property of the monasteries. Liberation, it seems, is to be the delivery of Tibet from the entirely imaginary threat of Anglo-American imperialism. So one gets the impression that, for the present, the Chinese hope to re-establish in Tibet a form of control similar to that which existed under the Ch'ing dynasty and to exert their influence through a Tibetan government based on the old model. To be successful in such a plan it would be necessary to secure the co-operation or obedience of the Dalai Lama. A comparatively moderate programme of that sort does not rule out the possibility of measures to reform the social system from within, but it does imply the adoption and continuance of an old method of government. A good deal could be done under that old method to improve the conditions of the agricultural class without directly challenging the power of the monasteries; but if any considerable social changes were to be proposed and if a government headed by the Dalai Lama were used to put them into effect, there would be the probability of a clash between the executive and the monasteries.

In the field of foreign affairs the maintenance of a traditional Tibetan government would indicate that professed Chinese fears of 'imperialist intrigue' in Tibet were either a blind or a mistake. If the Chinese government has genuinely feared external interference in Tibet, it should by now have realized that there is no cause for anxiety on that score. Unless, therefore, the Chinese have aggressive designs on India, we may see Tibet continuing for some time to fulfil the function for which it is peculiarly well fitted—that of a buffer—with the difference that the present amicable links with India may be replaced by a closer control from Peking. I do not propose to speculate about Chinese intentions towards India.

That would lead us away from Tibet, from one hypothesis to another and from one continent to another. It will be easier to look for indications of those intentions by watching what the Chinese seek to do in Tibet.

For myself, I think that what we are now seeing is a swing of the political pendulum which, regardless of social ideas, in the long centuries of relations between Tibet and China has brought the two countries now nearer together and now farther apart. Perhaps the Chinese approach to Tibet is still explanatory and the first aim is the restoration of Chinese face. Of course, the threat of a new and revolutionary way of society and of government lies behind any approach from Communist China. But so far, it is the fear of new ideas and not their power that has entered Tibet.

Western minds accustomed to the complex, impersonal administration—should I say over-administration?—of modern countries may find it difficult to appreciate the simplicity and intimacy which are among the merits of the ancient and still surviving Tibetan form of government. The local official knows personally almost every one under his control; anyone with a grievance can, by persistence, bring it personally before the Cabinet; anyone can go to the throne of the Dalai Lama and receive the blessing of his divine ruler.

It is not, of course, all purely idyllic. There is no lack of imperfections. But it would, I think, be short-sighted and over-exacting to concentrate doctrinaire criticism upon the inequalities and to deny strength and virtue to a system through which Tibetans have lived for nine centuries at least in the enjoyment of internal peace and absence of poverty to a degree which I do not think any of their Asiatic neighbours could equal. In all those centuries, too, the Tibetans have never threatened the peace of their neighbours.

It may be even more difficult for Western minds to comprehend the survival into this cynical age of sincere religious devotion as a living and unifying national force.

We have become used to seeing attempts to inspire unquestioning faith in the rulers of Russia and now of the new China by voluble propaganda, supported by the removal of those whose loyalty is doubted. But in Tibet such faith in the ruler is traditional and habitual. It is woven into the life of every Tibetan from his childhood up.

Communist planners may hope to make use of that habit of faith for their own ends by providing it with a new object. Perhaps such hopes are not impossible. But before they could be fulfilled it would be necessary to break down or melt away the barriers set up by that firmly entrenched, uncompromising defender of the faith—the Tibetan religious hierarchy.

HUGH RICHARDSON

Very recent reliable information from Sikkim indicates that the Chinese are not interfering in internal administration in Tibet.—ED.