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Reporter

SOME FACTS ABOUT TODAY'S TIBET

EXCERPTS FROM
"THE TRUTH ABOUT TIBET"
By
STUART and ROMA GELDER

30¢

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Excerpts from
"The Truth About Tibet"
by
Stuart & Roma Gelder

INTRODUCTION

Almost completely false "information" about Tibet is presented to the American people in the interest of Washington's anti-China policy: that the Chinese are "invaders", that "genocide" is being practiced there by the Chinese, that the Dalai Lama was "forced" to exile himself, that religion is being desecrated - by this insult to the "god-king", by "destruction of temples", by "massacre" of lamas and monks, and that the people are "suffering" under their new regime. None of these "pictures" are true.

FAR EAST REPORTER is happy to present the facts as seen by two British authors who were privileged to spend five weeks in Tibet, traveling where they wished, making a documentary film, taking recordings and photographs. A part of their picture was reported in three issues (August, September, October 1963) of EASTERN HORIZON (Hongkong). The publisher and the authors have given Far East Reporter permission to reprint these few excerpts from the magazine. Their book on the subject will be published in London.

PEKING EVANTUALLY SANCTIONS THE GELDERS VISIT TO TIBET

When Prime Minister Chou En-lai and Foreign Minister Chen-Yi said we couldn't go to Tibet in 1960 they explained that if we could spare only ten days for the return journey from Peking it wouldn't be worthwhile. People at home would say, "Oh yes, the Chinese let you go there, but what could you expect to find out in such a short time?" They also said that they were short of suitable aircraft, and it would be inconvenient to place one at our disposal at such brief notice. Then again, the weather was so unreliable over the China-Tibet mountain barrier that we might be held down at airfields on the way and perhaps have only two or three days in Lhasa.

These could be sensible reasons. They could also be diplomatic excuses for not letting us into a country they didn't wish us to see. The Communists might not be committing genocide as the Dalai Lama said they were...but there might be unrest and if the country was stiff with troops and police, repressing a resentful population, it would be impossible to pretend to us that Tibetans welcomed reunion with "the motherland".

An invitation to return in another year when we might go for as long as we wished and travel where we liked - this might be a polite way of playing for time. Since the Chinese leaders knew we always paid our own way, so none could say we were under obligation to them as their guests, perhaps they were counting on us to not have enough money to make a 30,000 mile journey a second time. Even if we had, perhaps we might be unable to leave England again.

Two years later we were ready to ask for visas for Lhasa and the Premier and the Foreign Minister kept their promise and granted them.....

THE POLITICAL HISTORICAL FACTS

If there is an effort more tiring than travelling and working at 15,000 feet, taking 1000 still pictures, exposing 8000 feet of movie film, and flying, jeeping and walking 30,000 miles to find out what is happening in Tibet, it is to persuade the people at home to find out what happened before the Communists ever got there, by going to the local library and borrowing

history books, which wouldn't cost as much as a coach ticket to London airport.

Nine out of ten English people (and doubtless many of other countries as well) don't doubt that in 1951 the Chinese invaded Tibet in an act of aggression....that Tibet was a sovereign state whose independence was always recognized by the rest of the world. They believe this because they have been told so by newspaper leader writers and politicians, who write and speak as if they had never read a line of Tibetan history, and judging by their opinions couldn't pass a school-child's examination in it. The facts - and they are recorded in the files of the British Foreign Office - are that Tibet has been a part of China when this suited British policy and a semi-independent state under "Chinese suzerainty", a British-invented phrase to suit our imperial convenience, when we were concerned with defending our Indian and Asian possessions against 19th century Russian imperial expansion.....The historic truth is that the authority of Peking or Nanking over distant Chinese provinces has always been as weak or strong as the central government itself.....Publicly the Americans denounced Chinese "aggression" in Tibet. Diplomatically they are as embarrassed as the British and Indians in doing anything about it in the United Nations. For Washington which now pretends that the Chinese Communists are usurpers in Peking and that Chiang Kai-Shek's "government" is the rightful ruler of China, ignores the fact that America's ally, the Generalissimo, also claims that Tibet is an integral part of China.....

GENOCIDE?

In Hongkong we read the Dalai Lama's accusations. The Chinese, he said, had killed "tens of thousands" of Tibetans. They had been put to death without trial because they were suspected of opposing Communism, or for no reason at all, but mainly because they wouldn't renounce their Buddhist faith. His people, he said, had been shot, beaten to death, strangled, hanged, scalded, buried alive, disembowelled and beheaded-publicly..... Small children had been made to shoot their parents...Lamas had been humiliated before being tortured.....If this was the world to which we were now travelling, Chou En-lai and Chen Yi must be crazy if they ever let us out again to describe it.

We were reassured when we reached Peking. Chen Yi told us he hadn't been to Lhasa for some time and looked forward to hearing what we thought of Tibet on our return. He knew that much progress had been made in social reform, but provincial officials sometimes tended to exaggerate their successes, and he said he would be obliged if we would let him know where we thought anything had gone wrong.

THE JOURNEY INTO TIBET

After a long flight to Lanchow we were at the edge of the Tibetan mountain barrier....We went to see the monastery of Kumbum, gateway of Tibetan Lamaism, where the Dalai Lama's brother, Thupten Jigme Norbu, was abbot before he went to America soon after the Chinese Communists came.....The Peking Government has spent thirty thousand pounds (\$84,000) restoring its faded glories....Its thirty temples and their courts shone with new gold, blue, brilliant red lacquer and turquoise paint.....

Then came the flight over vast gorges into bottomless valleys...frozen walls...awesome steeples of rock.... The ride in an ancient bus on the last stretch of the Sining-Lhasa road...the edge of the land of the nomads and more than ten million yaks, horses and sheep which outnumber humans in Tibet by ten to one....For more than a hundred miles between the airfield and the city (Lhasa) we had seen no soldiers. There was no need of sign posts to point the way to our destination as we came down from the mountains: dominating the landscape and to be seen from every horizon the mighty Potala, winter palace of the the Dalai Lama, towered over Lhasa, which lay like a doll's village at its feet.....

When we arrived (at Lhasa.) we were drained of all emotion and had hardly enough strength to sit up and look at the most fascinating building on earth, which only a handful of foreigners has ever seen but of which all travelers have dreamed.Next morning we wakened in the twelfth century, seven hundred years before we left London, in a world where characters out of Shakespeare didn't look at us from a theatre stage, or pictures in books, but walked with us in the streets of the city and stood patiently while we photographed them and talked with them about their lives.....

FIRST MORNING INTRODUCCATION TO NEW TIBET

On that first morning in Lhasa we were awakened by a pretty demure girl in pigtaails...She wore neat blue tailored trousers and a flowered cotton jacket. In her hand she carried a black plastic satchel. This school-child announced that the doctor was ready to take our blood pressures and test our hearts at our convenience. We said we should be glad to see him at any time. Upon which our visitor walked into the room, put her satchel on a table and took out a stethoscope and a blood-measuring kit....."If one of you will allow me to examine you, I will see how you are"....With a brisk precision she manipulated the apparatus....She gravely informed us that although our pressures were a little above normal this was usual for new arrivals....."I would advise you that you don't smoke too much up here" and added "Alcohol at this altitude isn't advisable"... We expressed surprise that one so young was a doctor. With a reassuring smile she replied, "I am 27. I was trained in Sian Medical College and volunteered to come to Tibet because the people here need our services so much".....She warned us to rest for three or four days until our bodies had become accustomed to the thin air.

WHAT WE LEARNED AT AN ANCIENT RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL

But after breakfast a cadre came to tell us that the 551st anniversary celebrations of Drepung, the biggest monastery in the world, was taking place next day and we should be the first foreigners to be able to film and record them.....

Before 1949 the only wheels in Tibet were prayer wheels...except two cars which had been brought in from India in pieces on the backs of yaks for the 13th Dalai Lama..., for rides in strict seclusion in the Norbulingka (Jewel Park) which was his summer home. Now hundreds of families were jogging to the monastery in rubber tyred carts drawn by ponies, donkeys and mules....The grassy slope before the monastary walls was a living Bruegel canvas; thousands of folks jostled amongst the stalls of the fair where happy vendors were doing a brisk trade in bricks of black tea, dried fruits, sweetmeats for the children and hair ribbons. Every one was buying thick bundles of long incense sticks and the still air was heavy with their pungent scent as the pilgrims lit them before beginning the long climb to the temple. Shaven-headed, rancid smelling monks,

their brown habits shiny with butter spilt from votive lamps and bowls of tea had joined the crowds and were keenly enjoying the bargaining with local peasants for fresh fruits and vegetables...

A tall lama who had noticed our strange faces in the throng came towards us and offered to guide us through the maze of narrow precipitous lanes to the Chanting House, more than two hundred feet above, where the great prayer services of the day were about to begin.....The main Chanting House on the roof of Drepung overlooks the wide Lhasa Valley. Fifty miles away knife-edged outlines of tall mountains were etched in the crystal pure atmosphere with such clarity that they appeared to be forty miles nearer. It would not be difficult for those unaware of another world to imagine that these majestic horizons encompassed the physical universe.....

As we reached the terrace a white-and-gold booted dignitary wearing a gold-embroidered tunic beneath his brown robes came down to invite us to meet the Abbot.....The room where the Abbot and his senior Lamas entertained guests was furnished with luxurious carpets and like the temple itself, with low thickly carpeted benches.....The Abbot, or Kambu, was a quiet portly man, dressed in a brown robe like his monks, but with a more sumptuously embroidered undercoat....We quoted to the Kambu the accusation of the Dalai Lama that the Chinese had killed tens of thousands of Buddhists because they would not renounce their religion. He shook his head and replied, "He cannot be speaking of Lhasa and I cannot think he believes it. But you hardly require me to deny it. You have come with thousands of people to the festival today, and there they are, taking part in the service beneath our feet".

But of course, religion wasn't what it was, in this greatest monastery in the world. Before 1959 more than 7000 monks lived at Drepung. When they were given the choice of staying or leaving, more than 6000 who had not chosen this life but were given to it as children had gone. Some had become farmers, others who were literate were now teachers or clerks. A great number had married and brought their wives and children for their old brethren to see. But some who had taken up arms against the government were still imprisoned.

The Kambu said that, like all monastic lands, the farms of his monastery had been distributed to the serfs who had worked on them to support the community. As much land as was required for the needs of those who remained had been retained, but the

monks must now earn their own living. The infirm were given small pensions. No religious object had been disturbed and there was no interference with the normal religious life of the priests.

The Kambu declared that he was personally glad that religious reform had taken place and that he and his brothers no longer lived on the labours of serfs. But as he played with his rosary, did we imagine that in this gesture the venerable prelate betrayed the nervous uneasiness of a child who isn't being quite truthful, and crosses his fingers behind his back to expunge a lie on his lips? For although the Dalai Lama had been deceived, or deceived himself, only a naive visitor could accept that men who had exercised an unquestioned and unquestionable authority over their land and their people and for whom the old world was ideal, would so willingly and without regret renounce their power.

It was not surprising to us that so many younger monks had left, for who would wish to live this celebrate monotonous life when the privilege of being maintained by others was gone? If they had to earn their own keep they might as well earn it in the freedom of the outside world and get themselves wives and families as well. The accusation that these men were forced out of a life they loved is ludicrous, for in Tibet as elsewhere, children between the ages of seven and fifteen do not normally announce that they have religious vocations and ask to live in monasteries for the rest of their lives. These were the ages when these monks were given to Drepung and other monastic institutions by their pious parents. Of course a monk enjoyed special social status. It was a better life than a serf's. But with this distinction gone, there are brighter prospects outside.....

The men we were now filming and recording would soon be seen and heard by millions of English people, sitting before their television screens in a world as remote from this fabulous sanctuary as that of Kublai Khan in which none of the monks would have felt a stranger. They would also be watching the last priests of the last and most strange theocracy of history singing the nunc dimittis of Tibetan Buddhism. In a few years when they would all be dead, none would come to take their places.....

The children standing in awed silence with incense in their hands would be at school again next week. There they

would learn that the dieties whose images at one of these jewelled altars could not protect them from the demons embroidered on the temple banners and marvellously sculptured in wood and stone, because all such gods and devils existed only in the imagination of lamas and monks. They would learn that they are not born rich or poor, strong or weak, because of their virtues or vices in their previous lives, which they could not remember. They would hear in their new science classes that the gods would not permit demons to ravage Tibet with flood or earthquake, or give them smallpox or cancer, because their behavious displeased the heavenly spirits. They would no longer believe that devils would take over the world if they did not pray to appease their wrath as these old men were praying. And when the last of these children ceased to believe in them, the last gods and the last devils in Tibet would also be dead.

But today was a great holiday, a feast day on which every one could enjoy the sun and the pageantry and a joyous meeting of friends and neighbors, like Christmas in the West.....

When the long service was over, it was time for the festival play to begin.....The audience sat on the ground or on surrounding roofs.....There were no intervals and for more than four hours the monks, who had the stamina of Olympic athletes, danced, sang and mimed their way through a riot of opera, pantomime, ballet and broad farce.....Grown-ups who had been coming here every year since they were infants knew every line of the play by heart and greeted every popular and unpopular character with cheers and groans....After twenty or thirty acts we went for a walk around the monastery....We came to the private apartments of the 14th Incarnation. Lamps were burning before a picture of the bland, gentle-faced Dalai Lama.....We asked the monks if they expected to see the Dalai Lama again. They replied they were sorry he had been persuaded to go away. In the meantime they were behaving as though he might walk through the door at any moment.....

We never saw one young person sharing their religious exercises....It is true that the Chinese Communists are killing religion in Tibet, but they are not persecuting it to death. It is dying because its gods, demons and devils cannot survive the exorcism of truth. For children who are being taught that by their own knowledge and enterprise they can determine their own destinies, the metal gods are ceasing to be the arbiters of their

lives, and becoming what in fact they have always been, inanimate idols of superstition with no power to influence the course of events, What kind of a religion was this which produced a social system in which the majority were serfs or officials and landlords who owned them?.....

THE GOD-KING MYTH

It has been possible to present the "invasion" of Tibet by the Chinese not only as a political outrage and brutal suppression of one sovereign state by another but as a blasphemous act because a god had been dethronedThe truth is that god-kings are a comparatively new invention in Lhasa. It was not until the 13th century that the Emperor Kublai Khan created the first Grand Lama as the "pope" of Tibet. But the people had to wait another 300 years before his successor decided that he was a god. In 1622 the Abbot of the Gaden Monastery installed a seven-years-old boy, Nag-wan Lo-zab, as Grand Lama. When he was 25 the ambitious young man invited the Mongol prince, Gusri Khan, from Koko Nor, in Chinghai, to invade the country and make a present of it to him. With this gift Nag-wan Lo-zab accepted the title Dalai (The Ocean) Lama and in 1650 the Emperor of China confirmed his title. He became known as the Great Fifth, but in fact he was the first of the Dalai Lamas.

However, human authority could be disputed and overthrown. Nag-wan Lo-zan therefore announced that he was the incarnation of the Buddhist diety Avalokita (known to the Tibetans as Chen-rezi); and on the red hill above Lhasa he built the Potala, naming it after the legendary home of Avalokita in India. Before Nag-wan Lo-zan invented his own diety there was no record of any Grand Lama claiming to be a god.....Within 170 years five Dalai Lamas were murdered. Not one was killed by the Chinese. All were done to death by Tibetan priests who had their own practical political reasons. Regents ruled the land during the infancy of the Dalai Lamas who only assumed their full powers when they were 18. Grew so the custom of killing the Incarnations before they attained their majority so that the regents could continue in power for another 18 years. It is understandable that those who see in Tibetan Buddhism a gentle creed of tolerance and Tibetan lamas as a host of Albert Schweitzers dedicated to "reverance for life", should see tragedy in the despoilation of this ideal by Communists dedicated to materialism. But this imagined religion and these imagined priests had nothing to do with the creed and its preachers on the roof of the world.....

Apart from the fact that the priests no longer have any secular authority over the people, and their numbers in monasteries have been greatly reduced since they are free to continue their religious life or abandon it, the teachings of Buddhism in Tibet remain as they were before the Chinese brought social and economic reform.....

The Dalai Lama could have remained as a man and the chief priest of his religion, but as a god there was no future for him in Tibet where men and women are now learning to shape their own ends.....

WE SEE THE NEW TIBETANS IN THE MAKING

As They Were Before. Wherever we went in Tibet and listened to the people describing the world in which they lived until the Chinese came to transform it, we could think of no words which more accurately described it than those of Aldous Huxley, who had never been there: he wrote -

"In moments of complete despair when it seems that all is for the worst in the worst of all possible worlds, it is cheering to discover that there are places where stupidity reigns even more despotically than in Western Europe. where civilization is based on principles even more fantastically unreasonable....The spectacle of an ancient and elaborate civilization of which almost no detail is not entirely idiotic, is in the highest degree comforting and refreshing. It fills us with hopes of the ultimate success of our own civilization; it restores our wavering self-satisfaction in being citizens of industrialized Europe. Let us cherish the comparison".

Huxley's informant about Tibetan civilization was a Japanese monk named Kawaguchi who spent three years there in the early days of this century. We do not have to suspect former lamas of being treacherous apostates or see in former serfs victims of Communist subversion when they deplored their past and welcomed their present condition with pleasure. More than fifty years ago Kawaguchi had used stronger language about this spiritual kingdom than the Chinese Communists would consider polite. This formidable traveller learned Tibetan and walked from the Himalays to Lhasa where he hoped to find an enlightenment unrevealed to those living beneath the roof of the

world. He pretended to be Chinese and in the three years he stayed there came to know the Dalai Lama and the ecclesiastical and lay nobility. He also made friends with the poorest and the lowliest. When he came away the best he could say of them was that

"The Tibetans are characterized by four serious defects, these being: filthiness, superstition, unnatural customs (such as polyandry) and unnatural art. I should be sorely perplexed if I were asked to name their redeeming points".

He listed these redeeming points as the fine climate in the vicinity of Lhasa, the sonorous and refreshing voices of the monks reading the scriptures, the animated styles of their catechisms and ancient art. In fairness he might have added the indomitable endurance of the people, for surely none survived adversity with such cheerful courage. They were superstitious - many of them still are. They were dirty - most of them still are. They were ignorant - the majority of the adults we met will die illiterate.

As They Now Are. But if Kawaguchi had seen the former lamas who are now school teachers, former serfs who are now nurses in modern hospitals and clinics, children who wash every day, peasants who until 1951 had never seen a wheeled vehicle driving five ton lorries, others, who until three years ago had never seen a tool more complicated than a hoe or a sickle, working an electrical technicians, he might have been excused for thinking they were impostors like himself - Han immigrants posing as Tibetans.

What They Have That They Didn't Have Before. A friend asked us, "But what practical progress have the Communists brought to Tibet? Are they industrializing the country? What have the Tibetans got that they didn't have before?".

Well, it is easier to say what the Communists have undone than what they are doing. Before you can grow food in a wilderness you have to free it of the weeds which would choke the seed. Before the Tibetans could create a new country they had to be made free to do it. They have been free for only four years since 1959 when they were liberated from serfdom and the feudal system (which the ecclesiastical and lay nobility hoped to preserve by the rebellion in 1959) was abolished.

The Communists came to Lhasa in 1951. For 8 years they imposed no reforms. They built roads. They introduced the first modern medical units, they founded the first modern schools. They tried to ease the burdens of the peasants by trying to persuade the landlords to reduce interest on loans and by providing interest-free loans for seed themselves. But there was no social or economic revolution. They left this to the feudal owners of the country to work out for themselves. Eight years later these showed they had no intention of forfeiting their powers and privileges if they could help it. There had never been any question but that drastic reforms were expected (and who can deny that they were desirable?). But the Communists didn't force progress because they wanted the Tibetans to make their own pace so that the violent conflict of interest (which was finally to occur in 1959) would not be provoked. They cannot now be blamed because when they did take over the administration of the country, after the suppression of the rebellion, it was almost as backward as they had found it. They ought to be praised because, since they have been in complete control, more progress has been made than in the previous thousand years.

What practical improvements has it been possible to achieve in so short a time? There have been three major advances from which all progress can develop. First, the feudal system which paralyzed the country and the parasitic power of the church which dominated it have been overthrown by the liberation of the serfs, the distribution of land among the people and the disestablishment of the monasteries which can no longer live on the taxation of the laity. Second, the introduction of a national education system which is essential if the people are to be able to use the agricultural and industrial techniques which can now be made available to them. Third, a modern medical service which will maintain the people in better health and increase the birth rate in a country where the population is too low to exploit the potential wealth of Tibet.

The hard labor of serfs and the primitive methods of agriculture were adequate to provide a minority with immense wealth compared with the poverty of the majority. But they could never give a decent standard of living for the present population, let alone a good standard. But by abolishing the feudal system and breaking the economic power of the monasteries the new government released resources of food which,

however thinly spread, have raised standards to a more tolerable level. The human energy and enterprise released in freeing the serfs is incalculable and perhaps the most important contribution to the increase of production.....Drepung monastery was the biggest landlord in the world. It owned 185 manors and 25,000 peasant serfs, as well as 300 vast pastures and 16,000 herdsmen. There was a saying that in Tibet there were as many taxes as hairs on a yak.....

Tibetans don't yet count progress in Western terms. It is enough for them to have been delivered from the bondage of debt and servitude, and if the Communists had done nothing else they would have done enough for one lifetime. But they have done much more.

The New Education. The stability of this feudal society was dependent on the ignorance of the people, the majority of which could neither read nor write.....Of course, there was no state education. Literacy is now a priority.....Mass education is as essential in the new Tibetan socialist state as it was unnecessary and undesirable in the old culture. It is not compulsory because parents cannot be compelled to send children to schools which don't exist. But nearly 50% of children of school age are now receiving some form of instruction. Five middle schools and 41 state primaries have been established; 1300 primaries have been organized and are being financed and managed by parents themselves. The local authorities provide the accommodation, usually old houses formerly belonging to dispossessed landlords, or disused farm buildings. The Culture and Education Department advises on the curriculum and teaching methods, but apart from this help the people are responsible for running their own school affairs.

The New Medicine. Before the Communists came to Tibet in 1951 the most highly prized medicine was the excreta and urine of the Dalai Lama and other Living Buddhas.....At the traditional hospital....from simple herbal remedies and prescriptions which would not seem strange today in an English village and which are sometimes still recommended by the most up-to-date practitioners, Tibetan medicine departs into a world of legend and superstition where all contact with exact knowledge is lost.....Less sensitive people than the Chinese might have discouraged the traditionalists or put them completely out of business. But they didn't, because although a great deal of

Children at People's School in the Lhasa Valley. Besides state schools people contribute a few pennies a week to maintain schools, usually employing literate Lamas who have left monasteries as teachers. The Government provides buildings.

