



The First Tibetan Communist and Partition of Tibet

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"Divide to rule" is a well known concept in India. Was not the sub-continent divided in two parts by the colonial power to better retain control?

On the other side of the Himalayas, the Communists rulers also know this very basic rule of colonial politics. Fifteen years after invading Tibet in October 1950 (or 'liberating' in their jargon), they administratively partitioned the country. One part became the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR); other parts were amalgamated into the Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai. Half of historical (and ethnic) Tibet thus disappeared from the Asian map.

In September, Beijing celebrates with pomp the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the TAR. For the occasion, a delegation led by the Chairman of the People's Political Consultative Conference and China's No. 4 leader, Jia Qinglin has come to Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. State television showed the delegation of Chinese officials disembarking from a plane in Lhasa. They were greeted by children, dancers and about 300 Tibetan ladies dressed in traditional Tibetan costumes waving kathags, the white welcome scarves. To further adorn the ceremony, a small group of monks pounded drums.

Soon after his arrival, Jia Qinglin highlighted the "the significant progress the autonomous region has achieved in the last 40 years" and mentioned two targets for Tibet: development and stability.

But what is this significant progress? Has Tibet truly been liberated? What has Tibet (and Beijing) actually achieved during the last forty years?

A recently published book answers some of these questions. "A Tibetan Revolutionary: The Political Life and Times of Bapa Phüntso Wangye" recounts the remarkable life of the first Tibetan Communist who is in many ways responsible for the 'liberation' of the Land of Snow.

Bapa Phüntso Wangye was born into a middle-class farmer family in the small town of Batang ('Bapa' means 'from Batang' in Tibetan) located in the Kham province of Eastern Tibet. At that time, Batang was 'administered' by Liu Wenhui, the Chinese warlord ruling over Sichuan.

The unusual thing about Batang was the missionary school where local children could learn Tibetan, Chinese and a few words of English: it was a rarity in Tibet in those days. At the age of 7, Phüntso joined the school. He was a bright student, always keen to learn. A significant incident marked his school days. A friend of his father, Kesang Tsering, an official of the Guomintang regime tried to overthrow Liu Wenhui to establish a self-ruled Kham province. The attempt lamentably failed but for the first time, Phüntso came into contact through Kesang with another social philosophy: Sun Yatsen's "Three Principles of the People".

Inspired by Kesang Tsering and another uncle working for the Chiang Kai-chek regime, the young Phüntso decided at the age of 14 to leave for China to receive a modern education. His aim in life was to become a leader to overthrow the warlord who treated the people of Eastern Tibet so badly. His father accepted to take him to Nanjing where he joined Chiang's Central Political Institute. This new life in the great city

brought the young boy a lot of excitement and hopes, though the Institute was a military school with an extremely strict discipline.

With another Khampa friend, Phüntso decided to become pilot. They left the school with hardly any money boarded a train to Changsha, to meet the Governor of Hunan province. They wanted his recommendation to join the Air Force school. After a few days, the two penniless students roamed like beggars in the streets in search for food. Passing in front of a restaurant where rich people were dining, Phüntso had an experience which would influence his entire life: he was confronted with the deep contrast between the rich eating and living well and the famished poor sleeping in the street: "I felt a kinship with the people in the streets – Dawa's [his friend] and my situation was really only a step away from theirs."

They did not get admitted into the Air Force and eventually returned to their school where Phüntso started studying Marx, Hegel and Lenin. His readings convinced him to start the first association of Tibetan students in Nanjing which led to an expulsion from the Institute a few months later.

He spent the next couple of years in Chongqing with an uncle. He deepened his studies of Communist theory and repeatedly contacted the Soviet Embassy and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). His dream was to organize a revolutionary movement in Eastern Tibet.

Though sympathetic and generous with financial support, the Soviet authorities made him wait for months and months as 'the matter had to be referred to Moscow'. When the same thing happened with the CCP, (though the young man had good interactions with Zhou Enlai's Secretary), he decided to return to Batang and start the revolution in Eastern Tibet. He was then 20 years old.

During the following years, he managed to meet many 'progressive leaders' in the Kham province and made his first attempt to organize a movement which would have unified the different parts of Eastern Tibet. His objective was to establish a society where all citizens would be equal. One of the main obstacles was the "Great Han Chauvinism" of Chiang's regime. With the passing months, his activities began to be known to the Guomintang authorities and he had no alternative but to flee to Central Tibet.

Once in Lhasa, he spoke to many aristocrats and influential people of his vision of a new Tibet and the necessity to overthrow the Nationalist warlord of Sichuan, "The key of Tibet's future was major reform of her political system — a change that at the very least would get rid of the abuses and inequalities of the current system."

With some friends, he started an association called Tibetan People's Unified Alliance. They tried to enroll some young educated Tibetans who also wanted a change. They were however careful not to say anything about their Communist links. They even approached Surkhang Shape, a Cabinet Minister, and attempted to convince him of the idea to organize a revolt in Eastern Tibet to get rid of the remnants of the Guomintang forces. He needed 500 rifles for the purpose. But again, he was made to wait and the project did not go very far. He was too young and even the most progressive Lhasa leaders were not ready to change the system for which they were working.

As his plans were not materializing in Lhasa, Phüntso decided to go to India and contact the CPI. In August 1944, he arrived in Calcutta where he met one Comrade Basu (not Jyoti), the Party boss in Bengal. Phüntso requested the Indian Communists to help him to go to Moscow (via Kashmir and Xinjiang) or to support a guerilla warfare in Kham against the Nationalist regime. Again he was made to wait

before finally being told that the time had not come to carry out such a movement.

He returned to Lhasa in 1945, but was now labeled as a Communist and all the doors closed to him. He returned to Eastern Tibet to try once more to organize a rebellion. When his plans failed, he returned to Lhasa from where he was expelled from Tibet in July 1949 along with all the Chinese living in the Tibetan capital. He was accompanied to the Indian border and eventually flew back to China.

But the tide had changed in China, one province after another had fallen under the Communists' control and on October 1, Mao declared the People's Republic of China. In the meantime, Phüntso had founded the Chinese Communist Party of Kham and the Tibetan Border Area affiliated to the CCP.

Phüntso then became the main liaison between the Communists and the Dalai Lama's government. During the following years, his knowledge about the way the Tibetan government functioned was fully used by Beijing.

In May 1951, he was instrumental in brokering a deal (known as the 17-Point Agreement) between the 'local' government of Tibet and the 'central' government in Beijing.

A few months later, when the PLA entered the Tibetan capital, Phüntso rode with 2 Chinese generals in front of the troops. Between 1951 and 1954, he worked hard to make the Tibetan government accept the fait accompli: Tibet was a Communist province of China.

Though he became very close to the central leadership in Beijing, particularly Mao, he soon discovered that some Chinese officials suffered from the same disease as the Nationalists: The Great Han Chauvinism. This disturbed him a great deal.

When the Dalai Lama left for a 6 month visit to China in 1954, Mao ordered Phüntso to accompany the Lama everywhere. During his long talks with the young Tibetan leader, he managed to convince him that Communism was a good thing for Tibet. He remembers: "I explained to him about the Communist Party and the reforms that were taking shape in inland China. He was extremely interested, asked many questions and readily agreed that the Tibetan nation was backward and had to be reformed." The Dalai Lama was fond of his sincerity and love for Tibet.

Phüntso continued to work for the CCP as the main advisor for Tibetans affairs during the next four years. His dream to see a modern and socialist Tibet in his life time seemed to be coming true when one day in April 1958, he was unexpectedly arrested and told that he needed to 'cleanse his thinking'.

During the following 18 years, he was interrogated, tortured and jailed in the most atrocious conditions. The horror of these years cannot be described. After 9 years he was for the first time told that he was accused of being a 'local nationalist'. He would have advocated the transfer of some areas in Kham from Sichuan province to Central Tibet (now TAR) during a meeting in the National People's Congress in 1957. Though he had heard the accusation just after the meeting, he had immediately clarified with Deng Xiaoping that he never thought of such a solution.

Unfortunately, even though he never pronounced the condemning words, the 'crime' remained on his file. Phüntso spent 9 more years in solitary confinement. During the last years of imprisonment, he stopped speaking.

During his 18 years in jail, he did not receive a single visitor nor was he informed about his wife and children. The only way to not lose his

mental balance was to study. As he was allowed Communist literature only, he took the opportunity to deepen his knowledge of the Marxist theory and became a great expert on the subject of 'nationalities' within the PRC.

He was finally rehabilitated at the end of the seventies when Deng Xiaoping invited the first Tibetan delegations to see "the truth through the facts".

Later, he later advised Hu Yaobang, the General Secretary of the Party on the rights of the different nationalities and worked on the revision of the Constitution. Today, he still lives in Beijing.

What conclusions can be drawn from Phüntso Wangye's life and ordeals?

First, though a great believer in Communism, he defended the rights of the 'Tibetan nationality'. This was not permitted by the Communists. Then, Tibet's division into different parts, which is the stumbling block in the discussions between the Dalai Lama's representatives and Beijing has been and remains a hypersensitive issue for the Chinese leadership. Phüntso was imprisoned for 18 years at that account.

He fought for years against Chiang Kai-shek's regime and the Great Han Chauvinism, to discover that the Communist leaders were suffering from the same syndrome. In 1965, the creation of the TAR marked the official partition of Tibet. Forty years later, Beijing celebrates this anniversary though it is in complete contradiction with Lenin's theory on nationalities: "Real unity of nationalities is based on true national equality and is actually the product of the willing and self-motivated alliance between nationalities".

But today's leadership in China has probably forgotten Marx. And who is Lenin?