

The prayer wheels of hope

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"The Times They Are A-Changin'", said the poet. Nowhere as in China, do these words ring so true. A few days ago, I had a shock: on a French blog I saw the picture of a replica of the Potala Palace in the Tiananmen Square. What was the Dalai Lama's palace doing in front of the Great Hall of the People? Wanting to display some buildings of China on the occasion of the People's Republic Day, the Beijing authorities had selected the Potala. This exhibit is indeed symptomatic of the new passion for Tibet in China.

It immediately brought to my mind an interview in 2001 with the Dalai Lama. I had asked him whether he thought that the Chinese would come to his teachings if one day he was to go to China. He surprised me by answering that he had always had the 'desire or vision' to perform the Kalachakra Initiation on Tiananmen.

Fifty years earlier, during a visit to China, the Tibetan leader often received Mao Zedong in the evenings at his guest house. Mao always spoke of Tibet's backwardness. The Dalai Lama agreed with the need

for reforms, but when Mao told him, "Religion is poison", he "felt a violent burning sensation all over my face and I was suddenly very afraid"; he realised that Mao was "the destroyer of the Dharma." This idea that Tibet was a barbaric and ignorant nation has not always been held in China; for several centuries, the Tibetan Lamas were the State gurus of the Yuan and Manchu Emperors. But with the Communist rule, things changed drastically and the contempt for the 'remote borders provinces' increased over the years.

There was an exception: Hu Yaobang. When the Chinese Chairman visited Tibet in 1980, he was so disgusted by the abject poverty of Tibetans that he called a meeting of top functionaries and asked them if "all the financial assistance earmarked for Tibet had been thrown into the Yarlung river (Brahmaputra)."

But Hu Yaobang was himself overthrown and the old perception persisted. In the early eighties, a few Chinese dissidents began 'opening' up to Tibet. A book written by one of them, Ma Jian, was recently published in English and reviewed by The Guardian: "Without the Tibetan context in which *Stick Out Your Tongue* was written (in 1985), the stories can seem stark, even brutal. ...For Tibetans, Han Chinese are the occupiers of their land and destroyers of their culture. For those Han Chinese who find Beijing's propaganda less appealing, Tibet can seem like the romantic locus of a profound spirituality and a place of exhilarating, if dangerous, beauty." The book was banned in 1987 because the authorities felt, "Ma Jian fails to depict the great strides the Tibetan people have made in building a united, prosperous and civilised socialist Tibet."

In the 1980s, it became fashionable for Chinese artists and writers to visit Tibet. It was a way to demonstrate their own nonconformity. The 'capitalist roaders' as the Great Helmsman would have called them,

were now at the helm of affairs and the great economic big-bang had begun. Probably as a reaction to the diehard materialism, 'spiritualism' became 'cool' for the few who dared to not ride the new economic wave. But in the official circles, the perception of 'backward' Tibet remained.

The present Chinese President Hu Jintao who was posted as Party Chief in Lhasa at the end of the 80's, was then known in Beijing as 'Hu the Malingerer'. He hated Tibet's harsh conditions and would always manage to spend several months in Beijing where he would have to check into a hospital. There was a joke in Party circles: "If you want to find Hu, go to Beijing Hospital."

But among the ordinary people, the new wave continued to grow. One pole of spirituality was the Serthar Buddhist Institute in Kantse prefecture (Sichuan province). With around 7000 permanent residents at the beginning of the 90's, it was the largest monastery in Eastern Tibet.

Unfortunately, in the mid-90's Beijing ordered a crackdown and most of the monastic buildings were razed to the ground. The interesting part of the story is that the demolition was triggered by the presence of more than 1000 Chinese monks. The regime in Beijing simply did not know how to deal with this new phenomenon. Despite its sad end, Serthar's case shows that something deeper was moving in the Middle Kingdom.

Today the Tibet phenomenon is taking new shapes and expressions.

Take the Potala in Lhasa. Tourism has grown so much that the Palace is threatened by the large number of Chinese visitors. Authorities had to increase the entrance fee for Chinese tourists to 100 yuans (14\$) and the number has to be restricted to 2,300 people a day: 'an absolute ceiling' according to the authorities who are quick to explain

"It's just a museum — a tourist attraction. It is an abandoned home containing Dalai Lama's relics. No religious activity takes place."

But for the tourists reaching Lhasa by train it is a must. Stephanie Hoo of Associated Press who visited Tibet last year, wrote: "There's a new type of pilgrim spinning the prayer wheels at Tibet's holiest sites. Along with the Tibetans who prostrate themselves before the vacant throne of their exiled leader, the Dalai Lama, swarms of Chinese tourists rub crisp Chinese money on their foreheads and then cram the bills into collection boxes."

A few weeks back, the South China Morning Post published an eye-opener: "Tibet fever, which started spreading throughout the west more than a decade ago, is finally catching on across the mainland, where people are embracing just about everything Tibetan."

The Post correspondent adds: "Walk anywhere in Beijing and you will be confronted with the phenomenon."

Many shops are stocked with Tibetan thangkas, statues, clothing, jewellery and even battery-operated prayer wheels.

Today in Beijing, you can even find Lhasa Beer, yak butter (salted) tea, chang (barley beer) or dried yak beef; and of course the latest DVDs on Tibetan themes in the shops. Zhu Zheqin, better known as Dadawa in China, is one of the most popular Chinese singers; all her albums have a Tibetan inspiration.

Yi Zhi, who sold 115,000 copies of his book on Tibet finds that "Tibet is something mysterious, lofty and desirable" and Albert Ng, of Wild China travel company told the Post: "Tibet is the cool place to go to. If you've been there, you've got bragging rights."

Examples could be multiplied. Even reincarnated Lamas are leaving Tibet to teach wealthy patrons and students living in the mainland. This frenzy is double-edged. Many China watchers feel that the

Chinese tourists will simply swamp Tibet and eradicate what is left of her 2000-year-old civilization; others, more optimistic, believe the new trend will transform materialist China and that the Dalai Lama can certainly be a bridge in this process.

Earlier this year during an interview, Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama's Special Envoy negotiating with Beijing told me how positive he finds these new changes: "One of the most decisive factors in the Tibetan issue is this newly found interest for Buddhism in China. Thirty years back, for the Chinese, Tibet was the most backward piece of land of the planet and Tibetans were the most retarded people." Gyari believes that the times are changing: "Today in places like Lhasa, you see young and erudite Chinese walking shoulder to shoulder with Tibetans nomads. For them, it is very auspicious; they are on pilgrimage."

Today it is probably the only hope for Tibetan culture to survive.