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# Far from Harmonious

The Chinese Authorities' Handling of the 2008 Tibet Crisis <sup>(1)</sup>

MICHEL BONNIN

**The Tibet crisis tainted the success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The handling of the crisis showed the CCP's rigid denial of genuine dialogue and compromise and adherence to a formula of repression and economic growth. Current leaders are enmeshed in this policy, but a new generation might well seek out policies more in tune with the quest for "harmony" at home and "peaceful rise" on the world scene.**

Officially, the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing were deemed a great success by Chinese authorities. There is no denying that the Olympics boosted the regime's prestige in the eyes of the public at home and, to a large measure, abroad as well. However, the events in Tibet a few months earlier tarnished this success, triggering negative reactions among a section of international opinion sympathetic to the ideas of freedom and human rights. Far from the picture of consensus conveyed by the Games' official slogan ("One World, One Dream") and the impression of a harmonious and peaceful power that the Chinese authorities sought to project in their new relations internationally, their actions and words during the Tibet crisis signalled to the world that China was still ruled by a Communist party, with the rigidity, intransigence, and aggressiveness this entailed in its political stance.

The biggest failure of the made-for-export Chinese propaganda was the attempt to pass off the Tibetan revolt as simply a conspiracy hatched abroad by the Dalai Lama and his supporters among Western "anti-China" forces, with not a shred of evidence of such a plot. Of course, it was well known that Tibetan exiles considered the approach of the Beijing Olympics as a dream opportunity to make their voices heard, but discontented Tibetans at home might have had the same idea. It is difficult to imagine that the government in exile would have been able to organise at least 150 protest movements, <sup>(2)</sup> occurring not only throughout the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) but also in every area with a significant Tibetan presence in the four neighbouring provinces. Even if that were possible, why had so many Tibetans responded to this supposed call and taken the risk – an especially serious one in Tibet – of staging protests, were it not for deep discontent and even despair? In major Chinese cities, why did Tibetan students at institutions for minorities risk endangering their cushy conditions in order to

protest? And what is one to make of the explosion of violence on 14 March 2008, when a small minority of Lhasa's population targeted Hans and Huis living there?

Before examining how the Chinese authorities dealt with the crisis, it is necessary to look at the deep discontent among a section of the Tibetan people that was expressed in March 2008. These two issues are related, because China's current leadership is responsible for the Tibet policy of the past few years and must deal with its consequences.

## The CCP's Tibet policy

I give below a very brief account of relations between Tibet and the People's Republic of China, as other articles in this issue cover the same ground in detail. The official position has always been that Tibet belonged to China and that the Chinese troops' entry in 1950 amounted to "liberation." But Mao had been at pains in 1951 to sign a 17-point agreement recognising in principle some measure of autonomy for what was deemed the Tibet administration, that is to say the future TAR. Of course, in practice, it would have been difficult to respect this autonomy at a time when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was imposing a totalitarian regime throughout the country in the name of "socialist transformation." This lay behind the 1959 uprising, the failure of which led to the Dalai Lama's flight into exile in India, followed by harsh repression and direct administrative control by Han Chinese sent by Beijing. This direct takeover of the government by the Hans had never happened before in the history of Tibet-China relations. In 1965, Tibet received autonomy

1. I am grateful to Françoise Robin for comments on the article's first version. Its title in the original French, "Au loin l'harmonie: la gestion de la crise tibétaine de 2008 par les autorités chinoises," was inspired by that of the Dalai Lama's memoirs in French, *Au loin la liberté*, Fayard, 1990.
2. See Robert Barnett's article in this issue.

A pro-Tibet activist is arrested by policemen as he protest prior to the beginning of the Beijing Olympics torch relay, on 7 April 2008 in Paris amid high security and threats of “spectacular” protests.

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status, as did other regions containing what were officially characterised as “minority nationalities.” Then followed the terror of the Cultural Revolution. But after the launch of the reform and opening policy in 1979, and in the early 1980s, CCP leader Hu Yaobang tried to correct the dreadful legacy of the Mao era in Tibet as elsewhere. Hu expressed the Party’s regrets over the excesses of the Cultural Revolution era. He introduced localisation of public jobs and initiated the first meetings with the Dalai Lama’s representatives in order to seek reconciliation. But after his ouster in early 1987, the situation became tense again, the “Hanisation” of public jobs resumed, and the first wave of protests broke out in October 1987, but in a big way in March 1989, marking the 30th anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s flight. The CCP secretary for Tibet then was Hu Jintao, now China’s president. He came down severely on protests: the army used live bullets on protesters, causing several deaths, and many arrests and sentencings followed. However, the troubles were limited to Lhasa and surrounding areas.

These events were soon followed by the Tiananmen protests and the bloody crackdown of 4 June 1989, and in early 1992 by Deng Xiaoping’s famous Southern Tour, which re-launched China on the reform and growth path, while leaving the political status quo untouched. Since then, the CCP’s dual track (strict political control and pursuit of economic growth) showed itself in its policy towards minorities, especially the restive Uyghurs of Xinjiang and the Tibetans. Another development from that period cannot be ignored in this context: the *de facto* if not *de jure* replacement of Communism by nationalism as the regime’s ideological bulwark and propaganda theme, especially aimed at the youth. The hardening showed up right from 1992 with the posting of the intransigent Chen Kuiyuan as the CCP secretary for Tibet,<sup>(3)</sup> and became harder still with Hu Jintao’s ascent to power in 2002, especially after he emerged from his predecessor Jiang Zemin’s shadow after 2005. This policy has three main facets: tight control, severe repression, and a focus on economic development demonstrated through massive investment.

Tight control has mostly taken the form of massive intervention in religious matters. For instance, the authorities issued an order setting out regulations governing the “reincarnation of Tibetan living Buddhas,” which took effect on 1 September 2007.<sup>(4)</sup> It stipulates that all decisions on this issue by religious entities have to be approved by China’s State Administration for Religious Affairs. In a way it formalised and made more explicit an older practice, as in 1995 the Panchen Lama chosen by the Tibetans was kidnapped (and

has not been seen since) and replaced by a young boy chosen by the Chinese authorities.<sup>(5)</sup> According to experts, this issue created resentment among Tibetan laity and monks, including those well disposed towards Chinese authorities. However, among the Han Chinese, including intellectuals and historians, I found that almost no one had heard of this interference by the political authorities. This shows the effectiveness of media control in China today.

Tight control also showed up in the form of a patriotic education campaign launched in 1996 and extended in 1998 to all Tibetan-populated areas outside Tibet, and which was reinvigorated by the new Party secretary in 2006. This patriotic education, reminiscent of Mao era indoctrination drives, consists essentially of getting Buddhist monks and nuns to publicly denounce the Dalai Lama during lengthy meetings or in writing. Tibetan officials were also subject to this treatment. One Tibetan monk told the cadres who had arrived to impart patriotic education, “Why don’t you try and make the Hui people eat pork? If you succeed, then we’ll denounce the Dalai Lama.”<sup>(6)</sup> Chinese Communists had tried to force Muslims to eat pork during the Cultural Revolution (a friend of mine witnessed this when he was a “sent-down youth” in Xinjiang), but that is no longer the case now. The CCP’s wish to replace an image they despised with one they revered was manifested when they tried to erect a Mao statue beside the Lhasa airport in 2006. Patriotism, in fact, was not just vague love for the country. An article by the China Centre for Tibetan Studies on the official policy towards Tibetans sets this out clearly: “To love

3. Of the same generation as Hu Jintao, whom he succeeded as the Party Secretary for Tibet in 1992, Chen had built his career in another minority region, Inner Mongolia. See Robert Barnett, “The Chinese Frontiersman and the Winter Worms – Chen Kuiyuan in the T.A.R., 1992-2000,” available at: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/ea/arc/barnett/pdfs/link29-chenpiece.pdf>.

4. The term “living Buddha” (*huo fo*) does not appear to hold much significance for Tibetan Buddhists, who only speak of “reincarnations,” but it is one the Chinese use.

5. See Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, Columbia University Press, 1999.

6. “La semaine qui ébranla le Tibet” (The week that shook Tibet), *Le Monde*, 4 April 2008.

the motherland is to love the socialist motherland led by the Chinese Communist Party.”<sup>(7)</sup>

The effort to capture hearts and minds has often taken provocative forms, especially in the statements of the current Party Secretary for Tibet, Zhang Qingli, who has doubled as political commissar of the People’s Armed Police in the region since he took office in May 2006. He said during the patriotic education campaign, “The Party Central Committee is the real living Buddha of the people.” According to *Tibet Daily*, he said the day after the 14 March 2008 riots that the Dalai Lama “is a wolf in monk’s robe, a devil with a human face but the heart of a beast; we are now engaged in a fierce blood and fire battle with the Dalai clique, a life and death battle between us and the enemy.” In an unreconstructed Maoist style, he called for “a people’s war against separatism.”<sup>(8)</sup>

What is worrying about this is that Zhang is neither eccentric nor off-centred, but has a direct link to Hu Jintao, under whom he worked in the Communist Youth League central committee from 1983 to 1986. He thus belongs to the League faction (*Tuanpai*), Hu’s main power base in the CCP. More specifically, he is among those who, like Hu himself in the 1970s and 1980s, became specialists in China’s western regions, which are economically backward, politically conservative, and home to minorities who have to be taken in hand. Zhang joined the Party in 1973 and began to steadily rise under Mao, effortlessly adjusted to the late 1970s reforms, and rose to the provincial leadership level in his native Shandong. In 1998 he joined the “western China clique,” and was made propaganda chief for Gansu Province and political commissar of the civil-military reserve division before being sent the next year to Xinjiang, where he rose to vice-secretary of the regional CCP and commander and vice-secretary of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, as well as general manager of its corporate arm, the China Xinjiang Group. The paramilitary Production and Construction Corps, mostly staffed by Hans, is the region’s economic heart, the major instrument of control, and a military strike force in case of conflict with minority nationalities or with Central Asian neighbours. Moreover, Zhang’s profile closely resembles that of leaders recently picked by Hu Jintao for three other western provinces: Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan. The heads of the Nationalities Affairs Commission and the State Administration for Religious Affairs are also members of the Hu-led Youth League clique, which favours strict control.<sup>(9)</sup>

Given this situation, the level of repression over the last few years is hardly surprising. The number of arrests rose sharply

in 2007.<sup>(10)</sup> This was partly linked to the celebration the monks organised over the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal awarded to the Dalai Lama, much to the authorities’ chagrin.

From a more positive point of view and in the Deng Xiaoping logic, Tibet has also been subject to a policy of investment. From 1965 to 2005, the region received 96.87 billion *yuan* of central funds. From 1993 onwards, 90 percent of revenues have come from Beijing. Moreover, China’s richest cities and provinces have been obliged to hand over aid quotas for Tibet. Thus, in 2007 Tibet’s GDP stood at 34.2 billion *yuan*, or 12,000 *yuan* per capita, which is a decent figure. The Beijing leadership certainly aims to douse ethnic and political conflicts through development, but this strategy raises more problems than it solves, due to a number of reasons that I will not go into here.<sup>(11)</sup> Essentially, the benefits from these investments have generally not accrued to the Tibetans themselves, and have led to a stepped-up Sinicisation or “Hanisation.” The clearest example of this is the Qinghai-Tibet railway, which opened in July 2006 to ferry tourists, of course, but also many Han and Hui immigrants, who have been assuming a dominant role in the economy of major cities to the detriment of young Tibetans. (Incidentally, the train also facilitates rapid deployment of troops to stamp out any rebellion.) Moreover, development often ignores environmental concerns as well as traditional Tibetan beliefs and lifestyles. For instance, the indiscriminate opening of mines for gold and other precious metals has destroyed the environment and shocked Tibetans with the disfigurement of their sacred mountains.

## Handling of the crisis

Thus the crisis erupted in the context of a political hardening that had come about over many years and with the exceptional background of the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, which the CCP wanted to turn into a triumphal show of strength as much at home as abroad. In this context it is all

7. Zhongguo Zangxue yanjiu zhongxin (China Tibetology Research Centre), “From ‘Two Approvals’ to ‘Three Adherings’: Central Government Policy towards the 14th Dalai Lama,” *Qiushi*, n° 479, 16 May 2008. The “Two Approvals,” set out by Mao, require the Dalai Lama to approve Beijing’s hold over Tibet and the necessity for democratic and socialist reform there; the “Three Adherings,” coined by Hu Jintao, are to the leadership of the CCP, to the socialist system, and to the autonomy of ethnic regions.
8. Pascale Nivellet, “La jeune garde tibétaine sourde à la modération du dalai-lama” (Tibetan youth deaf to Dalai Lama’s moderation), *Libération*, 20 March 2008.
9. See among others, Willy Lam, “Hope for a Better Tibet Policy,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 2008.
10. Geoffrey York, “Why Tibet Is Boiling Over,” *Globe and Mail*, 21 March 2008.
11. See Andrew Fischer’s article in this issue.

Tibetan activists chant anti-Chinese slogans during a demonstration in front of the consular section of the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu on 31 August 2008.

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the more amazing that the authorities' handling of the crisis smacked of improvisation and inattention. Much remains unclear to this day. In light of the high-profile Olympics round the corner, the authorities should have been prepared for more serious events on 10 March, the anniversary of the Dalai Lama's flight into exile in 1959. And if the region's two top officials were obliged to attend the NPC session in Beijing, they ought to have left behind detailed instructions. In fact, the police handling of protests between 10 and 14 March was out of all proportion. There was a certain restraint to begin with, but arrests took place nevertheless, and it was inevitable that there would be demands for the release of those arrested. A stepping up of protests could therefore have been foreseen. In any event, throughout the day on 14 March, the police let the rioters be, filming their actions all the while. This amazing passivity could raise suspicions of a Machiavellian trap, but might well have resulted from dysfunction in the police chain of command. Li Datong, a Chinese journalist out of favour with the authorities, observes: "A country ruled by law should guarantee its citizens' right to protest. In those circumstances, if citizens break the law, they should be stopped without hesitation. But China has things the wrong way around. The lawful right to protest of a number of monks was crudely taken away, and then when trouble started there was no timely intervention due to fears over international opinion. This allowed the riots to get out of control and resulted in loss of life and damage to property."<sup>(12)</sup>

After the inexplicable restraint of that day, the authorities came down with ruthless force. In many ways, the vigorous counter-attack by the military, police, and media resembled the crushing of the 1989 Tiananmen movement. Entire trainloads of military reinforcements arrived, mainly from Sichuan, and in the days following 14 March Chinese police arrested 953 suspects, indicting more than 400 of them.<sup>(13)</sup> As after Tiananmen, a massive publicity effort was mounted. An atmosphere of terror appears to have been created in all regions with Tibetan populations, with arrests and frequent police raids, and armoured carriers patrolling the streets of many cities. Tibetans accused the armed police of routinely beating people in the streets or in police stations.

That demonstrations continued even under these conditions indicates the Tibetans' determination. Chinese police admitted firing warning shots during some demonstrations in March, and the death of one Tibetan as a result, but Tibetan organisations in exile claim that more than 200 were killed. It is difficult to endorse either figure, but the information black-out imposed by the Chinese authorities, who also



expelled all foreigners, suggested they had something to hide. There is a Chinese saying: "Close the door before beating your dog." The fact that travel to Tibet (and Tibetan populated areas in other regions) remains difficult for foreigners, especially journalists, indicates that the situation is far from resolved more than a year after the events.

The news blackout was not limited to foreign media. Most Chinese media other than those under the most direct control were unable to report on the events in Tibet. Some Chinese journalists complained, and a few discordant voices succeeded in being raised, such as in the Guangdong-based Nanfang group of publications, the *China Youth Daily*, and the economic magazine *Caijing*. But Nanfang's Zhang Ping was sacked as deputy chief editor of *Southern Metropolis Weekly* because of an article entitled "How to find the truth about Lhasa?"<sup>(14)</sup>

Keeping Tibet off-limits to the media went against China's public assurances over the Olympic Games. It showed that in a crisis, the Chinese leadership fell back on its "fundamentals": repression and news blackout. Everything was banned as "sensitive," despite prior international commitments. Thus a world congress of anthropologists and ethnologists scheduled for July 2008 in Kunming was scrapped, although 6,000 scholars from around the globe had registered.<sup>(15)</sup> Given the mood then, ethnology had become a dangerous science.

In a major crisis, the regime's veneer of legality vanishes. Thus Chinese lawyers who had openly offered to defend jailed Tibetans and demanded that they be entitled to due process were immediately threatened with non-renewal of their licences, and the threat was carried out in some cases.

12. Li Datong, "China's soft power failure," *Open Democracy*, 19 May 2008, accessible at [http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/china\\_inside/chinas-soft-power-failure](http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/china_inside/chinas-soft-power-failure).

13. *Le Monde*, 9 April 2008.

14. "Chinese editor fired over Tibet commentaries," Reuters, 6 May 2008.

15. The conference was postponed for one year. See <https://www.icaes2008.org/defaultDo.jsp>.

The measure affected everyone sharing the offices of the targeted lawyers so as to exert greater pressure through the use of an archaic but frequently used method in China: collective punishment. The Tibetans who were tried were not allowed to choose their lawyers.<sup>(16)</sup> Extra-legal methods were used to block information. Thus the blog of Woesser (Weise in Chinese), a Beijing-based Tibetan writer who put out news using an Internet address hosted abroad, was hacked into and disfigured by a nationalist group calling itself “The Red Hackers Alliance,” and her list of Skype contacts was stolen in an apparent bid to trick them into revealing sensitive information.<sup>(17)</sup>

The regime’s basic traits include a penchant for aggressive propaganda: denouncing ill-intentioned enemies everywhere through the use of Mao-era hate words. Thus the “Dalai clique” alludes to various “anti-Party cliques” that were periodically denounced under Mao. The use of “Dalai” (without the “Lama”) recalls all the insults used against those who had the misfortune of being categorised as political enemies. The greatest propaganda “success” consisted of keeping a firm lid on the news of some 150 demonstrations that took place, while giving prominence in the official media to the 14 March riots in Lhasa.<sup>(18)</sup>

From the point of view of usage, the term *dazaqiangshao* (beating-smashing-looting-burning) used to describe the action of Tibetan rioters harks back to the Mao era, more specifically the Cultural Revolution. After having eliminated most of the leaders he deemed enemies, when Mao decided it was time to restore some order, a notice went out on 6 June 1967 to correct the “deviationist wind” consisting of “beating, smashing, looting, confiscating, and kidnapping” (*dazaqiangchaozhua*). The Red Guards who had gone too far with such actions had thus become “beating-smashing-looting elements” (*dazaqiang fenzi*). After Mao’s death and the arrest of the Gang of Four, these elements came to be considered one of “three categories of people” (*sanzhong ren*<sup>(19)</sup>) to be denied promotions and important posts. That term was specific to the period, and today’s protesters who use violent means or react against police violence are more typically depicted as “rioters” (*baotu*), “trouble makers” (*saoluan fenzi*), or “outlaws” (*bu fa fenzi*). Needless to say, troublemakers are invariably “a handful” (*yi xiao cuo*), while the overwhelming majority (*jue da duoshu*) supports the government. The incidents themselves are often depicted as *daza shijian* (“beating-smashing incidents”), but on occasion other actions are specifically labelled “looting” or “burning.” Whenever the authorities wish to discredit a challenge to public order from an otherwise non-violent demonstration, they use the term *naoshi* (troubles). As

demonstrations of discontent have proliferated in China in recent years, a new term has been coined: *qunzhong shijian* (“mass incidents”). But needless to say, this neutral term has never been used to refer to the Tibet events of 2008, although for the most part they were not violent.

Furthermore, official propaganda was especially virulent against foreign media, accused of deliberately distorting the reality on the ground in Tibet. Although the Chinese press was able to point out some stupid errors in the foreign media, it is highly ironic that a country such as China could go about criticising the press abroad, while its own remains under watertight control and is manipulated by the Communist leadership, letting no one criticise any possible errors or factual distortions.

With its incomparable monopoly over images, official propaganda was relatively effective. By constantly repeating a few chosen bits of footage from the 14 March riots and nothing at all from other demonstrations by Tibetans, and by highlighting the suffering of the riot victims, Chinese television was able to project a highly negative image of Tibetans in China and abroad, and above all to whip up a nationalistic reflex, which on the one hand rallied the population around the government and on the other sought to justify the brutal repression. Such exposure of ethnic conflicts goes against the CCP’s habitual response of denying or downplaying any inter-communal tension, but the Tibet situation seemed to warrant such a response in view of Western criticism. The strategy also included claiming with no shred of convincing proof that the “Dalai clique” was preparing suicide attacks and that police had seized from monasteries 176 firearms, 13,000 bullets, 3,284 kilos of explosives, 19,000 sticks of dynamite and 350 knives.<sup>(20)</sup>

Despite their rigidity and resistance with regard to pressure from abroad, the authorities agreed to resume negotiations with the Dalai Lama’s representatives.<sup>(21)</sup> But it transpired that this was merely a formal gesture, and the Chinese authorities did not use it to effect a gradual change in attitude.

16. “Public proposal to act for those accused in Lhasa riots draws flak,” *South China Morning Post*, 10 May 2008. The lawyers’ open letter of 2 April 2008 was widely circulated via the Internet.

17. See statement by Woesser, dated 27 April 2008, which was circulated widely on the Internet. See also Jill Drew, “A lone Tibetan voice, intent on speaking out,” *The Washington Post*, 6 May 2008.

18. See Robert Barnett’s article in this issue.

19. The other two categories were identified as those who made a career by following Lin Biao and Jiang Qing and people who had taken the “Gang spirit” too much to heart.

20. Chinese authorities have come up with various figures. See for example, “China lays out conspiracy claims against Dalai Lama,” Reuters, 1 April 2008.

21. “Beijing plays PR game with Tibet talks offer,” *South China Morning Post*, 28 April 2008.

## What does the future hold?

Since Hu Yaobang's ouster and especially over the last several years, the CCP strategy has been marked by intransigence. The Chinese leadership is still deeply mired in the Maoist conception of "contradictions," and it is clear that any Tibetan demand for genuine autonomy and greater religious or cultural freedom is viewed not as a "contradiction among the people" but as an "antagonistic contradiction" (between the people and the enemies), the latter precluding any compromise. This also leads the CCP to distort the position of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan protesters and present it as a simple confrontation between devilish separatists and valiant defenders of the motherland.

While helping to rally the greater part of the Chinese population behind the regime, this cynical policy courts disaster. By categorically rejecting the Dalai Lama's proposal for a middle way and rejecting his role of interlocutor by insulting him and forcing Tibetans to denounce him in public, the Chinese authorities are digging themselves into a hole where only force and violence work, and with no outcome possible apart from a forced assimilation with a few sops thrown to an obedient elite. There is growing suspicion, especially since the aforementioned order regarding "Living Buddhas," that the Chinese leadership is simply waiting for the Dalai Lama's death so as to replace him with someone less charismatic and more docile. The regime no doubt hopes that without the revered spiritual leader around, Tibetans would lose much of their capacity to unite and resist, and that with the Nobel Peace Laureate gone, the West would be less fascinated by the Tibetan cause. This might well be so, but as Wang Lixiong, the Chinese writer and husband of Woesser has said, should the Dalai Lama die in exile it could lead to a feeling of despair in Tibet, giving rise to more serious conflict than that of 2008. There are two examples in the PRC itself of unrest caused by the death of a leader: the April 5 movement after Zhou Enlai's death in 1976, and the Tiananmen movement after Hu Yaobang's demise in 1989. Of course, the balance of forces is such that the Chinese authorities can rest assured of easy victory – but at what cost on the ground and with how much damage to China's image abroad?

That is why it is necessary to conceive of a change in strategy leading to an acceptance of real autonomy for the Tibetan people. In theory, it is possible to envisage the CCP opting to create for Tibet a status similar to that of Hong Kong and Macao based on provisions in Article 31 of the Constitution.<sup>(22)</sup> That would only be proper, given that the 17-point agreement of 1951 on the future of Tibet served as the model

for Hong Kong's Basic Law. Many scholars have already discussed this idea.<sup>(23)</sup> But the balance of forces at play is different, as the orderly return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty could not have been taken for granted, whereas Tibet is already under Chinese control. Tibetan representatives in exile have often demanded that "greater Tibet" be accorded the same status as Hong Kong, but have been regularly rebuffed. There would have to be a change of heart within the Chinese leadership for things to move forward. Limited steps such as development of education for Tibetans in their own language, or making it compulsory for officials posted in Tibet to acquire a smattering of Tibetan, could level the ground just a little in the competition with Han immigrants and thus ease tensions. Chinese leaders aren't taken in by their own propaganda and are well aware of Tibet's real problems.<sup>(24)</sup>

In the near term, however, a change of orientation is well nigh improbable, as the deeper the regime digs in with its strategy of intransigence, the more difficult it will be to pull back, on the one hand because much hatred has been spilled on both sides, and on the other because it would be difficult for the leadership to admit to having lied to the people for 20 years regarding the Dalai Lama, his personality, and his actions. China's top leader, Hu Jintao, has been personally implicated in this policy for many years, and the careers of most cadres in charge of religion and minorities are based on it. Another fear is that such demands could spread to other minorities. More fundamentally, even if Tibet is an extreme case, the current policy towards Tibetans is symptomatic of the Chinese authorities' overall relations with society. I am persuaded by the words of a noted Beijing dissident, who told me after the 2008 events in Tibet, "The Tibetans should never forget that they'll never have human rights so long as the Chinese don't have it." I believe he was thinking not only of the Tibetans but also of their Western friends, who mobilise more readily over problems on the Roof of the World than over general questions of human rights in China.

Thus it seems to me that a significant policy change in Beijing is required before a new Tibet policy can emerge. I think such a change need not be ruled out in the medium term. Barring dramatic developments, possibly as a result of some crisis, the earliest date to watch out for is 2012, when

22. The article says: "The state may establish special administrative regions when necessary. The systems to be instituted in special administrative regions shall be prescribed by law enacted by the National People's Congress in the light of the specific conditions."

23. See, for example, Michael C. Davis, "Establishing a Workable Autonomy in Tibet," *Human Rights Quarterly*, n° 30, 2008, pp. 227-258.

24. See, for example, the report of a visit to Beijing at the time by Australian diplomats and academics in John Garnaut, "Rivers of money not flowing to Tibetans," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 2008.

a new generation of leaders will take office in Beijing. Members of the generation of Red Guards and of youth sent down to the countryside such as Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, and Wang Qishan mouth Maoist slogans with less conviction than Hu Jintao, and could feel obliged to usher in an *aggioramento* of Chinese socialism. Even the seemingly more conservative Xi Jinping is, after all, the son of the pro-reform Xi Zhongxun, who was close to Hu Yaobang.

But such change towards a less tense attitude towards the minorities and towards Chinese society as a whole is certainly not guaranteed. Current tendencies towards politico-ideological hardening and exaltation of nationalism reveal fascist leanings. But China is experiencing contradictory tendencies, and it cannot be ruled out that the population, as well as the political elite, have wearied of a conception of social and political stability based on absolute monopoly leadership, strict social control, and repression. Another conception of stability

based on dialogue and tolerance could help realise the stated aims of the Chinese leadership: social harmony at home and a peaceful rise to the status of a great power globally. Among Chinese leaders, Tibet is evidently a tough nut to crack for those favouring harmony, but its careful handling would be rightly regarded as a major achievement and mark a high point in the career of a political leader. •

• Translated by N. Jayaram

#### Glossary

baotu 暴徒 bu fa fenzi 不法分子 daza shijian 打砸事件  
dazaqiang fenzi 打砸搶分子 dazaqiangchaozhua 打砸搶抄抓  
dazaqiangshao 打砸搶燒 jue da duoshu 絕大多數 naoshi 鬧事  
qunzhong shijian 群眾事件 sanzong ren 三種人  
saoluan fenzi 騷亂分子 Tuanpai 團派 yi xiao cuo 一小撮

## China's "April Youth"

Lara Maconi

The term "April youth" <sup>(1)</sup> (*siyue qingnian*) refers to a community of "enthusiastic young patriots" (*fuyou jiqing de aiguo qingnian*), as they call themselves, or "neo-conservative nationalists," as labelled by foreign observers. They make up a section of a much larger and more diverse world of "angry youth" (*fenqing*), a movement with many more or less radical national and international ramifications.

The Tibet uprising of March 2008 and its coverage in the Western media were the impetus for the website [www.anti-CNN.com](http://www.anti-CNN.com). Launched on 18 March 2008 and registered at Tsinghua University in Beijing, it was the brainchild of Rao Jin, a 23-year-old engineer from the Tujia ethnic group, and Qi Hanting, a 19-year-old journalism student, both Tsinghua students. At first the initiators sought to maintain the website as an open discussion forum, but they soon began reflecting the views of official media reports. Indeed, the site received an official endorsement from China's Foreign Ministry spokesman on 27 March. <sup>(2)</sup>

In fact, the "April youth" community seems to be propelled less by students in China than by their compatriots studying in the United States. As early as 22 March 2008, overseas students addressed an open letter to the Western media and launched petitions objecting to reports they deemed hostile to China. A demonstration was held on 26 April at the CNN headquarters in Atlanta. Chinese youth abroad were the first to make use of cyberspace in responding to the issue, especially through the Anti-CNN site.

Their anger is directed at the West – the United States in particular, but also France and Germany – with accusations of conspiring against China, of seeking to block its economic resurgence, and of manipulating the Tibetan unrest as a means of ruining China. The "April youth" activists have a keen sense of language and knowledge of the world that brings a more moderate and less vulgar tone to the *fenqing* movement. They care about their own image and don't lose sight of their career prospects in the midst of their preoccupations. They invoke "reason," "truth," "love," and "peace." A "poem" attributed to an expatriate physics professor in the United States is typical of their sentiments:

*...When we were silent, you said you wanted us to have free speech. When we are silent no more, you say we are brain-washed-xenophobes... Enough is Enough, Enough Hypocrisy for This One World. We want One World, One Dream, and Peace on Earth. This Big Blue Earth is Big Enough for all of Us.* <sup>(3)</sup> •

• Translated by N. Jayaram