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- 1 Over a long period, classical Tibetan literature drew extensively upon Indian Buddhist sources; but there is one genre, autobiography, in which it has given undeniable proof of creativity. Autobiography, always rare in India, has been widely practised in Tibet. Yet, for several centuries, its exclusive focus was the spiritual masters and a few important public figures, people whose religious or political careers were considered exemplary. Common people, lay figures, were not deemed suitable subjects.
- 2 Since the 1950s, however, the historic and often tragic upheavals that Tibetans have experienced have inspired the publication of autobiographies by lay people, mainly exiled aristocrats and high-ranking figures and, to a lesser extent, ordinary Tibetans.¹ Even so, the non-Tibetan-speaking world has generally had to be content with “semi-autobiographies”; indeed, most of the texts published in Western languages have been co-authored with Westerners who were more or less well acquainted with Tibetan affairs, and written in English. Very few autobiographies have been written in Tibetan, by Tibetans and for a Tibetan readership (a brief list of them is to be found in the translator’s introduction, pp. xvi-xvii); still fewer have subsequently been translated into English. In this regard the present text published by Columbia University Press is exceptional.
- 3 The work originally appeared in India under the title *Dka’ sdug ’og gi byung ba brjod pa* (An Account of Painful Events). Until now it had gone relatively unnoticed, even by specialists. Matthew Akester’s excellent translation gives us access to a unique testimony of “Life in Lhasa under Chinese Rule,” to quote the title of this rich autobiography with its wealth of dates, place names, figures, and named people. Moreover, it documents a period in Tibetan history (1959-1980) that has rarely been described and remains obscure.
- 4 Some of the facts reported in this work may not be new to readers familiar with Chinese accounts of the two dark decades, the 1960s and 1970s; but testimony from Tibetans themselves, relating specifically what happened in the Tibetan region, has been sparse. Tibetans inside Tibet, for many reasons, rarely speak of these matters, in public or in

private, and few older Tibetans have left their country since the Cultural Revolution (a few thousand, some of whom had been in prison since 1959 or 1966). This largely explains our meagre acquaintance with the events of 1959-1966 in the Lhasa region (or, for that matter, in the whole of Tibet). We may estimate the vast memory work still to be accomplished in the field of Tibetan contemporary history by recalling that not a single Western historical study has yet been devoted to the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: the first book on this subject is expected next.²

- 5 The present work is precious for a further reason: it teems with references to events that until now were scarcely reported or, indeed, were completely unknown even to specialists: the revolt by the Hui Muslims of Lhasa in 1961-1963 (ch. 12), the pro-Chinese paramilitary organisation administered by the Tashilhunpo monastery (ch. 13), the denunciation campaign against the Panchen Lama waged in Lhasa in 1964 (ibid.), the formation of three Tibetan resistance groups during the Cultural Revolution (ch. 21), and the attempt, swiftly abandoned as a failure, to publicly defame the Dalai Lama in 1971 (ch. 29). Then there was the campaign to re-evaluate class groups in 1974:³ all Lhasa's inhabitants were grouped into nine categories according to their past history. Seventy percent of the population fell into a bad category from the revolutionary point of view, signalling the failure of Chinese policy in Tibet after 15 years of frenzied reforms (ch. 30).
- 6 Apart from the new light it throws on Lhasa's historical and political background during this period, this autobiography may be considered to reflect the fate of a lost generation. Indeed, Tubten Khétsun believes that around 1960 the Chinese authorities labelled up to two thirds of the men in Lhasa as "counter-revolutionaries" or "class enemies" (p. 141). Many were condemned to harsh penalties (up to 20 years in prison), but those who, like the author, received "light" sentences (four years' re-education in a labour camp) were stigmatised for their "infamy" until the end of the Cultural Revolution. It is their fate that is here described.
- 7 Tubten Khétsun was born into Lhasa's minor aristocracy in 1941. He was the nephew of a high-ranking official in the Tibetan government and played a part in the Lhasa people's uprising in March 1959. It had been rumoured across the city that the Chinese were plotting to eliminate Tibet's religious and political leader, the Dalai Lama, and people from all social classes — Khétsun among them — formed a defensive cordon in front of his summer palace, the Norbulingka. This first 18- year period of Khétsun life is quickly summed up in the book's first three chapters (pp. 1-33). But the most important is what follows. After his arrest, Khétsun spends four years in a labour camp before being "freed." The account of his four years of forced labour in captivity evokes images of the Gulag and the concentration camp: interrogations, privations, denunciations, betrayal (and, more rarely, comradeship), exhausting work (15 hours a day) — to which is added long sessions of political re-education — hunger, the struggle to survive, and ever-present death these make up his everyday ordeal. Spending a night squeezed between the corpses of others who have died of hunger in their sleep does not affect him unduly: "I was as unaffected by this as a young child, for... [there] were regular deaths from starvation in every group at that time" (p. 108). In the end, the death toll caused by illtreatment is so high at Drapchi prison (Lhasa's largest) that the authorities become alarmed and take measures to reverse the trend (p. 112).
- 8 The large number of prisoners (six detention centres were opened in Lhasa, a city of 30,000 inhabitants in 1950) were treated as slaves for the edification of socialist Tibet under Chinese rule. They worked all hours, to the point of exhaustion and beyond,

building roads, making bricks, toiling in the hydroelectric power stations (for example, the Nangchen plant, where the author was sent) and labouring in the fields. While human beings suffered, Tibet's delicate vegetation was not spared. With the Chinese occupiers and the prison population to "feed," the demand for fire wood destroyed the fragile local ecosystem around the towns. Tibet has hardly any trees, so bushes were gathered in widening circles. Then the roots were dug up, transforming the landscape into a huge expanse of grey, tortured earth. Hermitages on the mountain side were ransacked for the smallest pieces of wood (p. 95). The shortage of food in 1962-1963 also led to the ravaging of wildlife: any living creatures were fit prey for the Chinese settlers and soldiers (p. 124).

- 9 Lastly, Tibet's traditionally Buddhist civilisation paid its dues to the revolution: in 1963, Khétsun was put in charge of finding food supplies for his labour camp. As he travelled around he observed that the monasteries, already stripped of their furniture, were being used as warehouses, and that their occupants had disappeared. Later he learned that the monks and nuns had been forced into marriage with each other according to a lottery system (p. 127). When, five years later, two monks were caught on New Year's Day giving a service in their home, they were dragged into the central square of Lhasa. The author writes, "It had been many years since anyone wearing the full uniform of the noble sangha had been seen in our country, and many of those who witnessed the procession that day spoke of experiencing a sensation of joy at seeing those robes, mixed with the unbearable sorrow of the circumstances in which they had come to light" (p. 204).
- 10 We have been accustomed automatically to attributing to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the vast enterprise of destroying traditional Tibet in the name of the socialist revolution; but here we can see that the Tibetans, their environment, and their culture had since 1959 been under attack by politicians aiming to transform the "old society" into a socialist paradise on earth. As early as 1962, the Panchen Lama's Petition in Seventy Thousand Characters⁴ addressed to Mao had sounded alarm bells for Tibet and particularly for the north-east regions. Such frankness cost the Panchen Lama a term of 14 years in preventive custody. Thus we have access to some absolutely riveting material on what happened in the Lhasa region. Although the author's personal experience inclines him to focus on events in the urban areas and in the labour camp, he devotes chapter 32 to the successive political campaigns in rural areas between 1959 and 1978. The picture there is hardly more cheering: in 1974, many villagers from the valleys neighbouring Lhasa and Shigatse were flocking to Lhasa in flight from the povertystricken countryside. The description of the living conditions endured by the family of Khétsun's sister speaks volumes: these "liberated" peasants remind him of the photos of "serfs" from before 1950, whose plight was cited by the Chinese occupiers to justify their humanitarian intervention.
- 11 Khétsun was released in March 1963, severely tested by his four years of captivity and suffering. But those around him had also endured hard times, which he summarises on pages 138-145: political campaigns ("Three rejects, two reductions" and "democratic reforms" in 1959, and a campaign to exterminate insects, in which monks and nuns — despite their vows never to kill any living creatures — were obliged to take part), denunciations, forced collective labour, the confiscation of public and private possessions . . . this was the fate of many townspeople. Very quickly, Khétsun's life "at liberty" was beset with trials: although he had served his time, he was still marked out as an ideological criminal. He was a perpetual outcast and could not live a normal existence. He had to report daily to his neighbourhood "supervisory sub-committee" and to write a

weekly account of his thoughts (p. 138); he was paid a starvation wage prescribed for troublemakers (p. 147); he could still be forced to work all hours, and was sent by the “neighbourhood committee” to labour on the construction of a new canal, working 12 to 13 hours a days with two five-minute breaks during which quotations from President Mao were read aloud. And then there were the evening work-sessions (pp. 175-177). Far from being forgotten, his being labelled as a class enemy became still worse for him once the Cultural Revolution began. Now he could work only for the local cooperatives, for pay that was derisory, even non-existent, and under inhuman conditions (p. 188). The label clung to him even in hospital, where he was denied access to free treatment and was ignored by the doctors (p. 209).

- 12 Chapters 16 to 31 cover the first eight years of the Cultural Revolution in Lhasa. The historical and political background at the national level is briefly sketched, but the movements and the campaigns that agitated the city and its inhabitants are minutely described: people’s homes were searched for precious or simply traditional objects, temples were ransacked (Lhasa school children and students at the teacher training college were forced to destroy the precious objects in the Jokhang Temple, pp. 171-172), there were collective humiliation sessions for counter-revolutionary “crimes” (such as that committed by the neighbour who filled a porcelain cup with chang—Tibetan beer—on New Year’s Day 1968), public accusations, and suicides (the victims’ names are given). The struggles between the “Gyenlok” and the “Nyamdrel,” the two main factions of Red Guards in Lhasa, is also fully reported (p. 178 et seq. and ch. 17). It reached its peak in outright civil war (pp. 188-189) and what Khétsun calls the “massacre of June 7 1968,” when the holiest of Lhasa’s temples, the Jokhang, became a scene of tragic carnage between the factions and was afterwards turned into a pigsty, being used as toilets and slaughterhouses by the Chinese soldiers (ch. 17). A mass execution is precisely detailed in chapter 22: in October 1970, about 20 young people in Lhasa accused of underground activities were tortured and then taken to the place of public execution. Their families were forced to attend the killings and to thank the authorities for this “just” punishment. In the author’s view, an episode of this kind helped to open the eyes of Tibetan sympathisers regarding the true nature of the regime.
- 13 The account of the destruction of the Ganden monastery (ch. 24), Tibet’s third largest, founded in 1409, deserves special attention because it has never before been documented. In 1982, the monastery’s head gave his account to the Buddhist Association of China, and Khétsun tells us what he said. Thus we may also understand how the great monasteries of Lhasa (and certainly others too) were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution: after the desecration of the ritual objects in the name of the “Destruction of Four Olds” and the looting of anything valuable from the decorations, the authorities gave the “communes” permission to use all the woodwork from the monasteries to build their meeting places or else to share it among themselves like bonuses. What is more, each commune had to build its own canteen, and the “class enemies” were ordered to demolish the holy places. The author contends that, for many Tibetans, despite what is sometimes said, it was under compulsion that they took part in destroying their own sacred and architectural heritage, and even then only after Chinese soldiers and officials had desecrated the buildings (p. 237).
- 14 Khétsun makes no attempt to hide the fact that Tibetans were included in China’s drive to socialise Tibet—on the contrary, he cites many cases of people zealously supporting the regime or collaborating with it. Even so, the ethnic rift between Tibetans and Chinese is

ever-present: on the Tibetan Plateau, political reforms are inspired and managed exclusively by non-Tibetans. It is not a matter of determining who, Tibetans or Chinese, suffered the most. Quite simply, the Maoist Revolution in Tibet was guided and carried out from the very outset by the Han Chinese, and this fact has to be taken into account today if we are to understand how the two communities interacted with each other.

- 15 Lastly, Khétsun specifies at several points that none of the reforms imposed and the work carried out by Tibetans (as prisoners, class enemies and their families, and peasants drafted into labour gangs) was for their benefit. The Tibetans are mainly a rural people, and everything was done, he says, for the cities, the townspeople, the Chinese. Thus, the hydroelectric power station that he helped to build provides electricity only for Chinese enterprises; it does nothing for the local people, who cope with more than their share of blackouts (p. 198). A Chinese official admits that of the hundreds of lorry-loads of wood from the Kongpo forests, a relatively low and wooded region in the south-west of Tibet, 20 percent is intended for building motorway service stations between Tibet and the rest of China, and 80 percent for the Chinese “interior” (p. 245). The bridges, the factories, the roads, all these symbols of modernity, serve only Chinese interests and those of the cities; they do nothing for the rural majority scattered throughout the countryside. In 1976, Khétsun was given permission to visit his sister. He writes: “By that time a lot of motor roads had been built in Tibet, but they were exclusively for the benefit of the Chinese, and only served their main centers, so in out-of-the-way village areas like Yakdé there were only mule tracks, and the Chinese government had not provided so much as an arm’s length of modern road (pp. 267-268).
- 16 ” This indispensable autobiography shows quite clearly that between 1959 and 1980, the Chinese authorities could rely only on coercion, paying little heed to (or even despising) the century-old values that underlay Tibetan culture, and proposing a development model based on ill-conceived and locally unsuitable policies. In China, as the Cultural Revolution reached its end, the general atmosphere became more liberal; this was reflected in Beijing’s loosening grip on Tibet, where people gave full vent to their frustration and anguish (demonstrations in Lhasa in 1987-1989 leading to martial law in 1989-1990). Twenty years later, the same mistakes seem to have produced the same results. The young Tibetans involved in the 2008 uprising utilise their mobile phones and access the Internet and have no problem with notions of “modernity” or “development” — on the contrary, in fact. Like Tubten Khétsun and his generation, however, they feel themselves ignored and despised by the central authorities. To them it seems all the more incomprehensible and unjust when China, on the one hand, claims its right always to be the exception on the world stage (pursuing “Chinese approaches” to capitalism, socialism, development, and human rights) while on the other showing little respect for the peculiarities of the “ethnic minorities” who people the “nation” that is officially describing as “multinational” (*duo minzu*). As long as this contradiction persists, the Tibetan Plateau is likely to remain a terrible headache for Beijing.

NOTES

1. The few autobiographies by Tibetan people still living in Tibet, often approved by and in praise of the Chinese administration, are of little value.
2. Melvyn Goldstein, Ben Jiao, Tanzen Lhundrup, *On the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: The Nyemo Incident of 1969*, Berkeley, University of California Press (expected January 2009). The few sources in any Western language available at present are Chapters 12 and 13 of *Dragon in the Land of Snow: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, by the historian Tsering Shakya (Penguin, 1999), and the translation of a personal account of the destruction of holy places contained within China's Tibet? *Autonomy or Assimilation*, by Warren Smith (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008). Here we should mention *Sha jie: Sishi nian de jiyi jinqu*, by Woeser (Weise), which includes previously unpublished photos of the Cultural Revolution in Lhasa (Taiwan, 2006). It is soon to be translated from Chinese into French and was reviewed by Yu Jie in *China Perspectives* No. 2008/1, pp. 98-103. The book has been clandestinely circulated in Lhasa ever since it was published, and several of its illustrations have been posted on the Internet. The only book to have appeared in Tibetan in "Chinese" Tibet is *Nags tshang zhi lu'i skyid sdug* (Boyhood Joys and Sorrows in the Nags Tshang family), by Nus Blo, published privately by the author in 2007. More than 10,000 copies were clandestinely sold, a record in Tibet for a text in this field. The text is autobiographical and sprinkled with passages in the Amdo dialect, which makes it complicated to read. It recounts the great 1958 Tibetan revolt in Amdo (Qinghai, south-west Gansu and north-west Sichuan) against the People's Liberation Army. The revolt was little documented and never included in official Chinese history. It resulted in tens of thousands of deaths in this scattered community, and even today, it haunts people's memories even more than the Cultural Revolution because of the mass atrocities perpetrated by Chinese troops, the harsh treatment meted out to the surviving Tibetan forces, and the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward, which cruelly afflicted Qinghai.
3. Known as *Gral rim dpung khag gtsang bsher* in Tibetan, this campaign was probably similar to that waged in China in 1968-1969, called *Qingli jieji duiwu*, "purification of class ranks."
4. *A Poisoned Arrow. The Secret Report of the 10th Panchen Lama*, London, TIN, 1998. The 10th Panchen Lama (1938-1989) was then the senior Tibetan leader in China. He had been named interim Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for the Tibet Autonomous Region after the Dalai Lama's flight into exile. This document remained secret until 1996, when it arrived in the West and was translated into English.