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INTRODUCTION

Pictures of the Dalai Lama

The old woman in front of the Jokhang temple shows two brown teeth. She mutters incomprehensibly and holds out her hand. Another beggar, I think. In Lhasa they follow you around; kids with home-made wooden musical instruments which they play for two seconds before asking for money; monks with a plastic bag full of change who want a contribution for their monastery, and now this old woman in front of the temple. Behind us, pilgrims throw themselves to the ground. First, they stand upright, hands crossed on their chests, and muttering prayers. Then they let themselves drop like planks. Their hands land on small rectangular pieces of cardboard, which slide forward producing scraping noises as their bodies fall.

I sigh and find an old five-mao note in my bag. According to the *Lonely Planet*, this is the acceptable amount. "Give just as much as the locals," was the stern warning. "You don't want beggars to think that Westerners give more." But when I stuff the dirty note into her hand, the woman gives me a bewildered look. What am I doing wrong, I ask myself. Not enough? Has there been inflation? Then a man next to me starts laughing. "She asked you for a picture of the Dalai Lama and you gave her money," he chuckles.

Have I started thinking like a Chinese? They also seem to be convinced that the Tibetans want money, while many of them just want their religious leader back. The day before my visit to the temple I listened

to a monologue from a very nice, albeit rather boring, Chinese official working in Lhasa. It took him three hours to explain to me that Tibetans want riches and development. "It's like that everywhere in the world and there is absolutely no reason why this would be different in Tibet," he said.

He was partly right, I discovered. Of course the Tibetans want to develop. But they are also deeply religious, and if they had to choose between their faith and the Chinese plans for development, the Chinese wouldn't stand a chance. The big problem is that the Tibetans were never given a choice. Ever since 1950, the year that the Chinese army invaded Tibet, the Chinese Communist Party has promised development. The Chinese built roads and schools. The leaders from Beijing claim to have invested three billion dollars in the 'Autonomous Region' over the last 30 years. According to the Chinese press, this investment has paid off and Tibetan GDP has increased tenfold.

In exchange the Tibetans gave up their independence and their cultural and religious traditions. The Chinese called this "the people's liberation from feudal monasteries and rich landowners." The region, which until then had been closed to foreigners, was governed by a religious and political leader, the Dalai Lama. After the invasion, the Dalai Lama tried to work together with the aggressors from Beijing. He sent a delegation, but the representatives were forced to sign a '17-point agreement'. The document stipulated that Tibet from now on would be part of China, but Mao Zedong also promised the Tibetans their freedom of religion and self-government.

It didn't take long, however, before the Chinese authorities started to breach the conditions of their own agreement. When rumors started going around that the authorities were planning to kidnap the Dalai Lama, the religious leader fled to India. Eighty thousand followers decided to go with him. Together, they started a refugee community and a government in exile. Tibet's second in command, the Panchen Lama, stayed behind.

He tried to collaborate with the new authorities and ended up in jail. Then, in the 1960s, the Chinese brought their Cultural Revolution to Tibet. Thousands of monasteries and temples were destroyed. A million Tibetans lost their lives. Not all Tibetans fared badly. Former slaves and farmers, who used to be owned by royal families and monasteries, were given the land on which they had been forced to work for generations. Hundreds of beggars, nomads and poor farmers were sent to school in Chinese provinces and were given jobs as government officials. Some of them became China's most faithful supporters. When their leaders talk about the Dalai Lama and his followers, they talk about "those separatist terrorists".

In Tibet itself, however, it's hard to find such a harsh opinion of the religious leader-in-exile. Simple farmers and nomads say that they hope their Dalai Lama will return. They don't like it that they're not allowed to keep his picture. These portraits are, of course, available on the black market; like all rules and laws in China, this one is also implemented with amazing inconsistency. The locals also know that Westerners will give you a free portrait. You just stick out your hand to one of these blond devils, and out comes a Dalai Lama picture. They are right, too. There are lots of tourists who give away the much wanted photos and even the biography of the Dalai Lama. Now that I know, I notice that everywhere I go people yell some version of "Dalai Lama picture" at me. Even the nomad kids, whom we encounter by the side of the road outside Lhasa, want candy and a picture. When I tell them that I have neither, they try to open my bag. They don't believe me. What else would I be carrying around?

Despite the promises of the Chinese government, economic development in Tibet has been slow, especially if you compare it to the incredible growth that has taken place in the rest of China. When China started to liberalize its policies in the 1980s, there seemed some hope for Tibet. The monasteries were allowed to open. Then party secretary Hu Yaobang visited Tibet and he stated that he was appalled by the poverty.

He promised to set things straight as fast as he could. But the liberal Hu Yaobang didn't stay in power long enough. He was toppled and, instead of liberalization, another round of political crackdowns followed. At the end of the eighties, monks and nuns organized a series of demonstrations for their independence. The Chinese sent the army and the soldiers shot at demonstrators and the public alike. Many people were arrested. The tourists, who had just discovered Tibet, were thrown out and the region was closed once again. And history keeps repeating itself. After a decade of relative calm, new riots in Tibet hit the headlines in the run-up to the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008. The exiled Tibetan leaders say 203 people died in the riots and subsequent government crackdown. China accused "rioters" of being responsible for 21 deaths.

The Chinese blame the "separatists" for the economic underdevelopment of the region. They still promise a Tibet free of poverty in the next few decades, if only those monks would stop demonstrating. The "separatists", on the other hand, declare that the Chinese are the only people who profit from any economic development in Tibet. In the beginning, they say, the Chinese built roads because the army needed to send its trucks. Now it's the Chinese immigrants who run all the new restaurants and who build the new buildings. Because of this, it's very difficult to help economic development in Tibet. Foreign governments set up projects to help Tibetans, only to discover a few months later that hundreds of Chinese laborers are imported from neighboring provinces to do all the work.

The Tibetans will never stop opposing the Chinese presence in their country, they say. They feel oppressed by a group of very bad people. They are also scared. In Tibet, people don't start talking about the Dalai Lama by themselves. If they say anything about him in the following interviews, it's because I specifically asked them. I wasn't looking for political views, though. I was much more fascinated by the unimaginably long roads these people had traveled during their lifetimes. From their upbringing in

isolated villages in one of the remotest places in the world, to adult lives as a unique group of people who have discovered the world around them, whatever side they are on now, the arrival of the Chinese army changed their lives forever. Not because they wanted it to, but because history washed over them.

I shared the idea of writing this book with Iliana, a French journalist with whom I lived in an apartment in Beijing. She brought the first Living Buddha – according to the Tibetans, someone who has, after going though all stages of reincarnation, obtained the spiritual level of a Buddha – into our house. He had lived in Switzerland for 20 years and spoke about five words of German. Now he was back in his hometown. The Dutch embassy funded a clinic for traditional medicine in his place in eastern Tibet. He needed to go see his sponsors, he said. Could I please go with him? He wanted to ask for money for a car to transport sick people, and his Buddha statues needed a new coat of gold. I arranged a meeting. The Living Buddha put on his traditional coat, took a bunch of white shawls and we went to ask for funds. The Dutch diplomats were very friendly. They politely draped the white shawls around their necks. After the visit to the embassy, the Living Buddha asked me to take him to the disco. We went home, where he exchanged his nomad coat for a modern suit and we had a great time on the dancefloor.

The next Tibetan who came was a scholar who worked in Beijing for a Tibetan research institute. He was married. Iliana soon found herself trapped in the same hopeless situation that almost every woman who dates a married man ends up in. He promised to divorce; his marriage had been arranged anyway. This never happened. Iliana gave English lessons to his 16-year-old son. When she, in a burst of emotion, gave the son enough money to escape to India, the whole family went on a nice holiday to Tibet and duly came back a few weeks later.

The father wanted Iliana to write a book about his life. This had to be done in utter secrecy. I'm not sure why, because the book was very pro-

China. It was the life story of a poor slave who had been educated by the Chinese. There was not one word of criticism in it. But it did give us the idea to report the different life stories of Tibetan people.

Iliana had sources enough. The next boyfriend was a Tibetan salesman from Chengdu, a provincial Chinese town bordering Tibet. He hated the Chinese and even refused to sit in the same room with one. He sold tangkas, religious paintings on silk. Iliana spent two thousand dollars on them and thought she could sell them at enormous profits in Beijing. It turned out that her prices were a bit over the top. However, I liked Tashi, the merchant. He stayed and tried to help her when she succumbed to drugs and alcohol abuse. In the end, she packed her bags and disappeared to Tibet, Nepal, India. Instead of writing the biographies of Tibetans, she went to study Buddhism. I don't know where she is now, but in the regions around Tibet I have met many lost souls like her, people who don't know what they are looking for. Some of them find a home in a Buddhist monastery or as a volunteer among the friendly Tibetan refugees.

All this had roused my curiosity about Tibet. I had lived in China for ten years, and knew all about the good and the bad sides of the Chinese. I know that the Chinese people are not a group of terrible monsters, as they are sometimes depicted by pro-Tibet activists. And the Tibetans I had met did not match the sacred-monk image that they are sometimes given in the Western press.

The Chinese are fascinating people, idealists at times, but after all their revolutions, mostly demoralized. They are also very proud, a people that longs for the greatness of long-gone imperial dynasties. Respect for the individual is not part of the culture. The idea that one should help the poor is also quite new in China. Instead, the Chinese tend to look down on anybody who has less than they have. Chinese farmers suffer from this greatly. When a farmer comes to the city – and they come in their millions – they are treated badly. This superiority complex gets even worse when city people meet members of what they call their national

minorities. One of my teachers at Peking University, the most prestigious educational institution in China, described the Tibetans to us, his students, as follows: "They are barbarians. They are very dirty. They wear these thick coats that never get washed. When they eat their huge pieces of fried mutton, the oil just drips down these disgusting coats." There's racism too. The Chinese look down on people with brown skin. Only farmers, who have to work in the sun, are dark.

Then there is the lack of understanding for culture and religion. The Cultural Revolution took care of that. None of this bodes well for the Tibetans: darker, poorer, with a deep attachment to their culture and faith. Put this together with the absolute power that was given to the local party officials in Tibet and the invasion of the country was a recipe for disaster.

But it wasn't easy to go and investigate all of this. For years it was impossible for a foreign correspondent living in Beijing to visit Tibet. This didn't change until the end of the 1990s. I applied immediately, in the month of May, but more important media people, like those working for CNN and the BBC, got to go first. Whenever I, as a representative of a Dutch newspaper, called the Ministry in Lhasa, the answer was that I was somewhere on the list and would receive a fax as soon as it was my turn. That fax never came. Somebody did tell me that I would probably get my turn in August. In August they said September. In October they declared that it was winter now, and much too cold, so there would be no more journalist visits for this year. I could try again in the spring. In the newspaper I read that there were special winter bargains to Tibet for tourists, so why was I kept out?

I complained at the Ministry in Beijing. A nice Chinese diplomat promised to help me. I renewed my application in February, but the answer stayed the same. That's when I decided that enough was enough, and changed my plans. I went to the Indian embassy to apply for a visa. Since I wanted to meet the refugees in Dharamsala in any case, but had

planned to go to Tibet first, I could change things around. The Indians promised me a visa by that Friday. But when I came to pick it up, the Chinese man at the visa bureau declared that my case "had to be discussed first." That same day there was a phone call from Lhasa – asking if I could be in Tibet by Monday.

Even though I spent a year asking, and even if it did cost five hundred dollars a day, the officials of the Foreign Affairs Bureau in Lhasa did show me what I wanted to see. We spent the days meeting people. By six o'clock they would drop me off at the hotel and I would go into town by myself. I never had the feeling that I was followed.

Tibet was open once more. Diplomats, officials working for the United Nations, NGOs, foreign investors and of course tourists could all go in. Tourism was declared one of the pillars of the new economy. The authorities tried to increase the number of tourists fifty-fold in the coming years – in 2008 up to three million visitors were expected. The Olympic Games in Beijing brought another wave of media attention for Tibet. All over the West there were events, concerts, demonstrations, interviews with the Dalai Lama and even lip service by Western politicians. In Tibet itself, of course, there was a political crackdown, swiftly followed by a new campaign to lure back the tourists.

Over the years, the Tibet promoters have had lots of help from Hollywood. When two movies – *Seven Years in Tibet*, a Hollywood tale of an Austrian mountaineer who befriends the young Dalai Lama, and *Kundun*, the personal story of the Dalai Lama – came out, there was an upsurge in tourism to the region. Neither of these famous films were ever shown in Tibet. That, after all, that is China's policy: Tibet gets some of the profits, but freedom is out of the question.

1.

Is the old always better?

Redi, vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, puts on his annual meet-the-press-face: small, round and annoyed. Exasperated, he stares at the rows of Western journalists in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. He looks them straight in the eyes. After the third question about human rights issues in Tibet and the Dalai Lama, he bursts out, "All of you think that the old Tibet was so great. But we didn't have anything to eat. My brother died of starvation. Myself, I was bitten by dogs while I begged in the streets. I still have the scars. You call that a life?"

This tirade is followed by the annual gush of insults against the "Dalai Lama and his clique." The spiritual leader gets blamed for organizing just about every uprising since 1959. Whatever is wrong with Tibet, from economic hardship to political problems, it is all the Dalai Lama's fault. A journalist from the *Times* thinks that Redi is going too far. "How can you accuse the peace-loving Dalai Lama of all this? Don't you think you're losing the propaganda war?" he asks.

Redi becomes livid. "Since 1959, when their armed uprising failed, the Dalai Lama and his followers haven't given us a day of peace. They have constantly organized violent riots and even placed bombs. From the 1980s onwards, the Tibetan people could have lived quiet and prosperous lives. But the separatist activities never stopped. How can you call these people peaceful?"

Redi is not only annoyed with the Dalai Lama. He also hates Western journalists who keep on defending the Dalai Lama and who portray him, Redi, as a traitor.

"During these last years, the most ridiculous statements have been published in the Western press. You journalists live thousands of kilometers from my country, and you don't know anything about the old or the new Tibet. What do you want? To bring back the medieval reign of the Dalai Lama? You make up the most preposterous rumors. And you insult the Tibetan party leaders, but you don't know what you're talking about. You complain that there are new buildings in Tibet and that they don't look Tibetan. Well, new buildings look the same all over the world. Why do you think that the old is always better?"

Redi has it wrong. Nobody is saying that the old is always better. Even the exiled Tibetans in India know that the old social system in Tibet needed to be reformed. How that old system worked is an important dispute between the two sides. The Chinese talk about cruel landowners, monks and aristocrats, who kept and mistreated their slaves. According to Chinese statistics, 90 percent of Tibetans were slaves in the old society. They worked for free on the lands of the rulers. In exchange for their labor, they got to work on their own plot of land. Those who couldn't pay their taxes became house slaves at their masters' homes.

According to the *China Daily*, old Tibetan administration records of 1950, kept at the Archive of the Tibet Autonomous Region, show that 90 percent of Tibet's one million people were homeless. Of the 20,000 inhabitants of Lhasa at the time, more than 1,000 families lived as beggars.

Before 1959, the *China Daily* writes, Tibet was a society of "feudal serfdom under the despotic political-religious rule of lamas and nobles. The masses of serfs in Tibet did not even possess fundamental rights. Serf owners, principally local administrative officials, nobles, and upper-ranking lamas, owned all of Tibet's farmlands, pastures, forests, mountains

and rivers as well as most of the livestock. The serfs lived no better than the slaves in the plantations in the southern states of America. The serf owners could sell or transfer their serfs, present them as gifts, or use them as mortgage payments for debts. They could even exchange them, molest them or maltreat them. When two serfs got married, the husband and wife still belonged to different owners and their children were fated to be serfs from the moment they were born."

This system was set in stone, the media state. "The statutory code of old Tibet stipulated that people were unequal in status by dividing people into three classes and nine ranks. In a peculiar law concerning the value of human life, it was written that the lives of people belonging to the highest rank of the upper class, such as a prince or leading Living Buddha, were calculated to be worth the weight of the dead body in gold, whilst the lives of people belonging to the lowest rank of the lower class, such as women, butchers, hunters and craftsmen, were worth a straw rope."

The judicial system of old Tibet gave monasteries and serf owners the right to judge, the media state, and punishment was cruel. "Punishments issued by the courts were extremely savage and cruel and included gouging out the eyes, cutting off the ears, hands or feet; pulling out tendons; throwing the criminal into water or shutting the criminal in a wooden case lined with nails facing inwards." (All quotes from *Chinatibetnews.com*, March 21, 2008).

The Chinese media also give plenty of personal evidence. "According to many original contracts preserved in the Archives of the Nationalities Cultural Palace and the Archive of the Tibet Autonomous Region, the manorial lords had the freedom to exchange serfs or present serfs to each other as gifts. Serfs had to pay high interest on their debts by doing corvée (unpaid labor) or by selling their own children. A certificate, written in the old form of the Tibetan language used before 1959 and kept as File no. MC 1015 at the Archives of the Nationalities Cultural Palace, reads: *Being unable to pay back the money and grain we owe Nedong Dekhang,*

we, Tsewang Rabten and my wife, serfs of the Dusong Manor, must give up our daughter Gensong Tonten and younger son Padma Tenzin to Dekhang to repay the debts. The descendants of their son and daughter will be Dekhang's serfs." (*China Daily*, April 10, 2008).

The Tibetan refugees in India have carried out their own studies of the old society in Tibet. In their publication *Truth From Facts* (one of Deng Xiaoping's favorite sayings) they state that Tibet's social system wasn't so bad, especially if you compare it to the situation in other Asian countries at that time. To start with, the most important leader, the Dalai Lama, was a reincarnation. That meant that he could be born into any kind of family, rich or poor. So leadership was not inherited, as it is in monarchies. Both the 13th and the 14th Dalai Lamas came from peasant families. Monks filled many of the lower government positions, and their nominations also had nothing do to with their backgrounds. Everybody, poor or rich, could enter a monastery and start a career.

The farmers – serfs, according to the Chinese – had legal status, the publication says. They possessed documents in which their rights were precisely stated. They could also go to court if they had a problem. There was no problem at all for a farmer to sue his master. The 13th Dalai Lama passed a law in 1909 that stipulated that all serfs who had a problem could come and complain directly to him. But, according to the Tibetans, such disputes didn't happen often, as the people treated each other decently due to their Buddhist principles. It was a religious duty for the rich to take care of the poor. Capital punishment didn't exist in the old Tibet and only the Supreme Court could hand out harsh punishments like dismembering hands. In 1898, Tibet enacted a law abolishing such forms of punishment, except in cases of high treason or conspiracy against the state.

According to the exiled Tibetans, monasteries were important institutions as they "performed religious functions for the state and served as schools, universities and centers for Tibetan art, craft, medicine

and culture. The role of monasteries as highly disciplined centers of Tibetan education was the key to the traditional Tibetan way of life. Monasteries bore all expenses of their students and provided them with free board and lodging. Some monasteries had large estates; some had endowments, which they invested. But other monasteries had neither of these. They received personal gifts and donations from devotees and patrons. The revenue from these sources was often insufficient to provide the basic needs of large monk populations in some monasteries. To supplement their income, some monasteries engaged in trade and acted as moneylenders."

A small section of the Tibetan population, the publication says, mostly in U-Tsang province, were tenants. "They held their lands on the estates of aristocrats and monasteries, and paid rent to the estate-holders either in kind or they sent one member of the family to work as a domestic servant or an agricultural laborer. Some of these tenant farmers rose to the powerful position of estate secretary. (For this, they were labeled by the Chinese as "agents of feudal lords".) Other members of these families had complete freedom. They were entitled to engage in any business, follow any profession, join any monastery or work on their own lands. Although they were known as tenants, they could not be evicted from their lands at the whim of estate holders. Some of the tenants were quite wealthy."

The exiled Tibetans have their own personal stories, like that of Ms. Dhondup Chodon, who comes from a family that was of the poorest social strata in independent Tibet. Remembering her life before the Chinese occupation in her book *Life in the Red Flag People's Commune*, she says: "I belong to what the Chinese now term as serfs of Tibet. ... There were six of us in the family. ... My home was a two-storied building with a walled compound. On the ground floor we used to keep our animals. We had four yaks, 27 sheep and goats, two donkeys and a land-holding of four

and a half *khel* (0.37 hectares). ... We never had any difficulty earning our livelihood. There was not a single beggar in our area."

In the end it is safe to assume that in the old Tibet there were good and bad masters, charitable and abusive monks. But, as the Tibetan exiles point out in their publication, whatever society existed in Tibet, it was not an excuse for China to invade the area. As they put it, "No country is allowed to invade, occupy, annex and colonize another country just because its social structure does not please it."

Real slaves and aristocrats from the old times are hard to find in Tibet nowadays, as these people are dying out. The stories they tell about their youths are not as bad as those that you read in the Chinese press. But at the same time their situation seemed worse than the portrayals of the exiled Tibetans.

In Lhasa I ask to interview a former aristocrat. The translator smiles kindly at me. "Aristocrats here don't like to talk about the past. I'm sure you can understand that?" What about a re-educated noble, one who is happy with the socialist state, I try again – but she just keeps shaking her head. In the end we find a former slave master totally by accident. It takes some careful coaxing before he agrees to talk about his youth.

This happens when we visit a school for orphans. A Tibetan orphan, who had been taken to India when she was small, founded it. Now she lives in Switzerland and there she does fund-raising to keep 30 kids in Lhasa in a house and in school. There are many street children in Tibet's capital, so those who get an education are lucky. The children in this house have an "acting father". He welcomes us into a small room, where the air is blue with burning incense.

The acting father used to be a teacher, he says. He worked at the local Tibetan school, earning a small salary but didn't build up a pension. So he is happy with his new job. At the orphanage he takes care of the

children, sends them to school, helps them with their homework. I ask him about the Cultural Revolution, and find out that he spent those years in the countryside cutting wood because of his family background. The interview becomes difficult after this revelation, as there isn't much he wishes to say about the past.

His parents didn't seem to be oppressive torturers. "Long ago, in the old Tibet, society was different," the teacher says. "The rich always tried to give something to the poor. Tibetans are Buddhists and our religion stipulates that you have to help others. During the traditional festivals, like Tibetan New Year, the rich used to give money to the monasteries and the monks. We still do that, we give one yuan for each monk. The 15th of April is a day to give to beggars. But most well-to-do-families gave something to the poor three times a month. Often they gave food."

So did something change for the poor children, like the ones he takes care of here at the orphanage? The acting father thinks that in those times, just like now, it was all a question of luck. If you were lucky, a rich family or a master would take care of you.

"In my family we had an orphan. The parents of the girl had died and the child was deaf and mute. My parents gave her money. She couldn't go to school, of course, but she helped us with the housework. She is old now and still lives with us. In those villages that belonged to monasteries, the masters were responsible for the orphans. So it all depended on what kind of monks there were. Some would take care of the poor children and others wouldn't. Nobody would have set up an orphanage like this one. People in those times didn't understand that education was important."

After speaking to this man, I am lucky enough to interview a former slave. He does remember how the monks from the local monastery used to beat people, but there is no tirade against the separatists. Most of all, the former slave wishes a different existence for his children. With or without a plot of land to work on, life as a peasant is never easy.

BINTSI, THE FORMER SLAVE

"Our life has really improved. We used to know nothing. Nowadays, we are much better informed. We know about politics. The name of the Chinese prime minister? No idea. Yes, I have a TV, right over there. But I don't have time to watch it. Plus, I can't remember those Chinese names. But I know that the Chinese prime minister is a good leader. He's not too young and not too old."

Bintsi may not remember the names of the Chinese politicians, but he is aware that his fate is in their hands. "I hope the policy of the Party doesn't change any more," he says. The farmer now has his own plot of land, some cows and a spotless white house. Our guide from the Foreign Affairs Bureau has some trouble finding the place. We walk for half an hour over little mud paths that seem to lead nowhere before he finds the house. The door is locked. Bintsi brings the key with him. Inside, there are pictures of Chinese girls on the wall, one of them a smiling Air China stewardess. The toilet, a hole dug behind a low wall at the back of the house, is empty. Did the people here clean everything up because they were expecting a guest or is this not their house? I wonder. During the interview, an old woman shuffles in, says something to Bintsi and leaves again. Bintsi nods silently.

"Now I have 8.5 *mu* of land. My wife and I grow tsampa, wheat and potatoes. That way, I can take care of myself. We sell the yams and potatoes on the market. I earn about 4,500 yuan a year. I have my wife and two children. The kids attend secondary school, right here in the village. I hope they will work for the government when they grow up. They can become *Ganbu* (Chinese officials). Then they'll have an iron rice bowl and won't have to work as hard as we do. It's hard to be a farmer.

"I was born and raised here. We used to be part of the Sera monastery which is close by. This whole village belonged to them. My family worked on the land of the monks. Then we had our own parcels where

we cultivated vegetables. There were different kinds of slaves. Some were called *Wula*, like we were, they had a low social standing and had to work for the monks the whole year round. Others had better positions and they only had to work during the harvest. The monastery had a special organization committee. The head of that group, a monk, was our master. We got a new master every three years.

"People hardly ever tried to run away. Where would you go? We had been living here for generations, so you didn't think about leaving. If you were caught running away, you could get beaten. There would be a kind of trial at the monastery and the monks would decide your punishment. Mostly you were beaten with a stick. Other slaves then had to carry out the punishment. When I was small, I never thought about running away. We had very little contact with people from other villages. The only way to escape being a slave was to become a monk.

"One day we heard that the Chinese army was on its way. People told terrible stories about them, how they killed everybody. But others said that if you went to work for the PLA, you would earn a good salary. In those times we were dependent on stories and rumors. We couldn't go and see for ourselves if we could work for the soldiers, the master wouldn't let us. We were also forbidden to say anything good about the approaching army.

"When they reached our village, we were scared to death. We all ran away into the mountains, where we camped for a week. The soldiers set up a meeting at the monastery. We sent a few delegates, whose task it was to see how dangerous the soldiers were. They came back and told us that the combatants were friendly, and didn't do anything bad. They had told them that we were liberated now. So slowly, one by one, we went back to our homes.

"Nothing much changed in the beginning. But a few years later, in 1959, the democratic reforms started. One day we heard that the masters had all been killed while trying to flee to India. The Chinese came back

to our village and told us that they were going to divide the land among us. We had another meeting and they set up a People's Committee. We were still afraid. We didn't understand why those Chinese wanted to give us land. And there were rumors that the Dalai Lama would come back soon and that we would have to give the land back again.

"The cadres told us that the Dalai Lama had run away because there had been a riot in Lhasa and that he didn't want to adhere to the 17-point agreement. We had no idea which agreement they were talking about. The Dalai Lama was our god, and we worshiped him. So those cadres tried to tell us that our god had done something wrong. We were worried something bad would happen to us, because the gods weren't respected any more and people said bad things about them. I thought that maybe the advisors and ministers of the Dalai Lama had done bad things. The Dalai Lama himself was very young, and didn't really have anything to say. He couldn't even decide what he wanted to eat. When he left for India, we were convinced that someone had kidnapped him.

"But the cadres told us that in front of the Potala Palace, there was a huge prison. The Dalai Lama was supposed to be the Buddha of compassion, they said, but he lived right next to an overcrowded jail. Because of their arguments, we slowly changed our ideas. We still believe in Buddhism, that's our tradition. But now we believe in the right way, we don't just follow blindly. I still think that the basic theory of Buddhism is good.

"Then the Cultural Revolution started, and I was made a Red Guard. I had the right family background for that. They told us that we had to fight against devils and evils. In the beginning, we still received orders about who or what to attack, but soon things got out of hand. In the end, we just destroyed everything that was old: yak butter lamps, for instance, and all old Tibetan things we could find. It was a very strong campaign. When I look back now, I think we were crazy in those times. We just bothered everybody without knowing why. We didn't know any political theories; I had never been to school. This whole revolution was

an enormous waste of time and energy. Luckily, the elders still worked the land, so we did have food. Not a lot, but enough to get by. At that time, the land didn't belong to us any more either. We had become a commune and were supposed to do everything together, so people didn't work very hard.

"In 1978 the head of our village committee told us that it was time for a new structure, the Household Responsibility System. So we got some land for ourselves again. With that, one of the hardest parts of my life was over. The hardest parts were before Liberation, when I was young, and during the Cultural Revolution.

"Nowadays I'm not scared any more that the Dalai Lama will come back and take away our land. Even if he comes back, the Communist Party will protect me. The party is very powerful. But the Dalai Lama is also our spiritual leader, so I would like to see him come back. Maybe we could have the same system here as they have in Hong Kong: one country, two systems. I do hope that the party policy stays the way it is now. We get money now if we work hard. During the Cultural Revolution, when there were communes, it wasn't like that.

"The monastery is open again, but I don't know the monks there any more. Even when I was small, we would only be in contact with the monk who was our master, and he ran away to India. The new monks are all young. There are just a few old ones, but I don't know them. I have heard that there are two kinds of monks nowadays: those who want to be like playboys, they trade, earn money and even get married. But there are also real religious people, who spend their lives studying Buddhism. I respect that last group. Nowadays, there is good organization in the monasteries. A Democratic Management Committee governs them. I never go there, but I heard that it's much better than in the old times."