

### **TIBET, RESISTANCE AT HEART**

The Dalai Lama recently visited Taiwan – a surprise visit, unexpected, which took more than one person unaware, even leading to a short-lived controversy on the spot. But this had more to do with the internal politics of Taipeh, insofar as the invitation came from the opposition, which is not in favour of a too close rapprochement of President Ma with mainland China. Moreover, Beijing understood well everyone's intentions, by showing itself unusually moderate in its protests, directed more towards the initiators of the visit rather than towards the Taiwanese President, who has sunk so low in opinion polls that refusal to accede to the demand for approbation of the visa would have in no way helped his situation.

Obviously, the wisdom of the Tibetan leader cannot be faulted; he who, by replying favourably to the invitation, hastened to make it very clear that the unique aim of this visit was to comfort bereaved families after the passage of a killer cyclone of rare violence, and to pray with the families for the eternal rest of their loved ones. And as usual, the Dalai Lama kept his promise, taking advantage of the occasion to point out to a handful of demonstrators how lucky they were to live in a democracy and freely express themselves. A masterly lesson of honesty and compassion, even if given in passing, which ought to cause many officials to reflect in a world that does not function very well all the time.

At the end of the journey, there was no doubt that all those who benefitted from this Presence – and there were a great many - had a feeling of gratitude, and perhaps also food for thought. So, the Dalai Lama spent several days in a territory loudly claimed by Beijing as theirs, and they did not hesitate to ostracize him, and the sky has not (yet) fallen on the Forbidden City? Could it be that the time has at last come to recognize that this pilgrim, not quite like the others, is an authentic factor for peace rather than a wicked trouble-maker? At a time when Eastern Turkestan is in flames again and Urumchi under tight surveillance by the army, like a kind of recording of Lhasa, the question is not necessarily impertinent.

#### *Sedentariness, Alcoholism and the Potala*

At the same time, in Tibet as well as in the Tibetan enclaves resisting in Kham and in Amdo, things are happening that arouse very little interest and do not create headlines in international news. For example, who takes any notice of the silent drama lived through by the nomads who are being forced to adopt a sedentary lifestyle? More than 50,000 of them have just been ousted from the "natural park" around the sources of the Yellow River, the Yangtze and the Mekong – under the pretext that overgrazing is endangering the ecological balance of the area, whereas from the beginning of time Tibetan farmers and shepherds have been the best guardians of this fragile environment. A vast programme of re-location was launched in October 2008, foreseeing within five years the enforcement of a sedentary lifestyle of half a million nomads re-located to Szechuan...

Or again, this insidious as well as official encouragement to drink beer in the towns and new "socialist" villages: with the appearance of obtrusive advertisements for beer and other beverages, alcoholism is growing amongst young people and abandoned marginals in their own land, to the point that a Chinese functionary, Deputy Mayor of Lhasa, Chen Zhi Chan, declared straight out to an Indian journalist passing through the Tibetan capital on the occasion of the Choeten festival, officially re-baptized "yoghurt". "Beer is in the nature of Tibetans, it is a kind of local culture. Tibetan beer made from barley, is a way of stimulate local economy". Oh really? This did not hinder the journalist from noticing that whilst visitors and tourists were drinking until they were drunk, the Tibetans themselves

were hurrying to the monastery of Drepung to attend the unfolding of the Great Thangka of the Buddha, fundamental element of the festival.

Another item passed unnoticed, nevertheless proclaimed by Xinhua, the successful (of course!) achievement of renovation work of the “three relics of Tibetan patrimony – the Winter Palace and the Summer Palace in Lhasa, and the Sakya Monastery”. But what the official Chinese Agency forgot to say, and which was picked up by the Times of India, is that the Potala and the Norbulingka have become museums, empty shells without a soul, and in vain does one seek the slightest image of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in the Potala. And no doubt enthusiasts for the modernization and development of Tibet will be delighted to learn that there is a possibility of digging an underground access tunnel to the Potala, “to alleviate the circulation and facilitate the journey of pilgrims...”

And who relayed the silent protest of a Tibetan and her children in front of the Police Station of village near to Chamdo, to demand the liberation of her husband arrested on 27 June for not having followed orders to apply a “new campaign of patriotic re-education” at the Pema monastery in the district for which he was responsible? So many kinds of information like this, so regular that they become lost in the thicket of routine, as if the fate of some leaves others indifferent... Even if the poignant testimony of a monk from La brang, clandestinely filmed on video, has hardly awakened any interest. All the same, he reminds “the United Nations and the international community that they have a moral obligation to speak out in the name of the Tibetan people inside Tibet, who live in constant fear and endure severe repression”. *Is this the way people live?* a poet once said...

Other news is also reported, without anyone really paying attention – the heavy tension that is insidiously mounting between New Delhi and Beijing concerning the old monastery of Tawang, and the Chinese claim openly posted up on Arunchal Pradesh, or the brusque outbreak of violence near Kokang at the northern frontier of Burma with China, to the great displeasure of Beijing, who demanded that the junta to take adequate measures to protect Chinese citizens. And the reminder of the injustice done to Aung San Suu Kyi, who resists by appealing against her iniquitous condemnation, whilst a rumour is circulating that the Burmese monks have had enough of the bad conduct of the generals.

As for the VIPs of this world, they are apparently out of reach, or on holiday, or looking elsewhere, bogged down in more urgent preoccupations, because above all it is not good to stir things up, nor to make trouble for the autocrats in place wherever it might be. It is as if they are deaf to this other rumour going round, *resist, disobey, do not fold your arms in front of the intolerable...* Because far away, up there, a flame is burning, that of Tibet.

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