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Kumbum Lamasery, Chinghai  
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Mailed From Ningshia City  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 18, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Yesterday I interviewed the Panchan Lama, a lonely eleven-year-old Tibetan boy who lives in a richly-furnished hilltop home overlooking Kumbum Lamasery. This small, bright-faced exile from Tibet is in many respects a symbol of the present vague state of Sino-Tibetan relations.

Kumbum Lamasery (or T'aersze, as it is known by the Chinese) lies in a snug valley in Eastern Chinghai in the village of Lushar, one day's cart ride from Sining, the provincial capital. Although it's a long way from the political border of Tibet, Kumbum lies along the fringe of ethnic Tibet in the territory which at one time belonged to the Tibetan province of Ando. A few miles to the West is Kokonor, the famous emerald lake from which Chinghai takes its name. One of the two main caravan routes between Tibet and China winds through Kumbum, and both Tibetan and Chinese influences have left their mark on the place.

Lushar is a small, brown-colored village completely devoid of distinction, but the gold-plated Chinese roofs of the two main Kumbum temples glisten in the sunlight, and the blood-red robes of the lamas and the multicolored ornamentation of the lamasery are accentuated by their drab setting.

A monotonous, droning chant rises from Kumbum, like the sound of a crowded bee-hive, and the reek of yak-butter lamps fills the air with a nauseating pervasiveness. Within the gloomy interior of the lamasery over a thousand lamas, Tibetans, Chinese, and Mongols, perform their rigidly-defined routine duties under the direction of a stern hierarchy of religious leaders. The three Living Buddhas, Aja, Saychr, and Minah, are the ranking chiefs within the lamasery, but a hierarchy of not-so-exalted personalities handles the routine administration. The Geitsu, or acolyte lamas, are kept busy with servant's duties in addition to learning their religious ABC's. The Gerun, who have learned the basic knowledge required of a lama, spend most of their time chanting services, reciting scriptures, twirling prayer wheels, or performing dutiful prostrations (as many as 2000 a day) to advance along the road toward the Buddhist conception of perfection.

In front of the main temple building of the lamasery laymen believers, as well as lamas, prostrate full-face with endless regularity. Devout followers come and go in inch-worm fashion, having journeyed tens or hundreds of miles alternately prostrating and walking three steps, prostrating and walking three more steps. The gifts of the many pilgrims (made in animals, butter, precious metals, and money), together with the

interest from loans issued, and rent from the large tracts of land and the many shops in Lushar belonging to the lamasery, make Kumbum an important economic and financial center as well as a religious one. Even more important, however, is its political significance.

Kumbum Lamasery stands on the spot where Tsongkhapa, the great Tibetan religious leader who founded the Yellow Sect of Lamaism, is reputed to have been born. Tsongkhapa, who has been called the "Luther of Lamaism", was a reformer who tried to restore the purity of early Buddhism. The Yellow Sect which he founded is predominant throughout the Tibet-West China-Mongolia homeland of Lamaism and might be called orthodox Lamaism. The other sub-divisions of Lamaism, such as the Black Sect, Red Sect, and Sorcerers Sect, are of only minor importance.

Leadership of orthodox Lamaism is shared by two persons who jointly occupy the apex of the religious hierarchy. These two leaders are the Dalai Lama, the temporal leader who maintains headquarters at Lhasa, and the Panchan Lama, who is spiritual leader and traditionally has lived at Shigatse, about seven days journey south of Lhasa. These two exalted posts are passed from generation to generation, according to the Buddhist theory of reincarnation, in unbroken succession.

During the middle 1920's relations between the Dalai and Panchan Lamas were severely strained by the injection of politics into their relations. The Dalai Lama, who was by far the more powerful of the two, stood for a pro-British Tibetan orientation and policy. The Panchan Lama came to stand for close Sino-Tibetan relations, an idea not at all popular in Central Tibet. When friction became acute, the Panchan Lama left Tibet and began a decade of exile in China. He toured throughout China and not only became a well-known international figure but gained Chinese sponsorship and support for his cause.

In the middle 1930's the Panchan Lama started back for Tibet, accompanied by a Chinese military escort, to reassert his rights and reoccupy Shigatse. On the way he died (it is generally believed that he was poisoned), and the complicated process of choosing his reincarnated successor began.

Choosing a Panchan Lama involves a good deal of esoteric hocus pocus, the object of which is to identify a child who has been born at the exact moment when the previous Panchan Lama died. Initially, three candidates were chosen, one of whom was to be selected ultimately as the only true reincarnation. Two of these candidates came from the province of Chinghai in China, a region which has always been famous among Tibetans for its religious leaders and its horses. The other came from Central Tibet.

Then a chaotic mix-up took place, and political rivalries again entered the picture. The boy first selected as the reincarnate Panchan Lama died. Soon thereafter the other two boys were both selected, by rival parties, as the true successor to spiritual leadership of Lamaism. One was set up as the protege of Lhasa in Tibet. The other became a protege of the pro-Chinese Tibetan group at Kumbum.

The Panchan Lama now at Kumbum was born at Hsünhua, Chinghai, and was brought to Kumbum in 1944. He lives an isolated, strictly-supervised existence. His day begins at 4:00 A.M., and most of his time is spent

learning and reciting the Tibetan scriptures. He is allowed no playmates, and his only companions are his pet birds and dogs - especially his favorite black puppy called "Little Lion". He is surrounded by a rather sinister-looking group of Tibetan teachers and advisors who literally hover over him. Probably the most important and powerful of these are his Regent, a shrewd, bearded old man named Lo Ch'ang Chien Chan, and his Political Advisor, Chi Ch'ing Mei (these are the Chinese forms of their Tibetan names).

The Panchan Lama has an intelligent face, but it is doubtful if he is aware of the aura of intrigue and power politics which surrounds him. When I asked him when he planned to go to Shigatse, he turned a pair of inquiring, boyish eyes toward a trio of elderly advisors encircling him. His Regent replied for him: "He has no plans".

It is almost certain that in his position the eleven-year-old Panchan Lama at Kumbum has no plans of his own. It is probable, furthermore, that even his advisors have no definite immediate plans for him. It is highly possible, however, that this small boy may be used in years to come as a pawn in the relations between China and Tibet.

China still claims suzerainty over all of Tibet, even though Chinese control over Central Tibet (or Tibet Proper) has been virtually non-existent for decades, and in many respects the Panchan Lama at Kumbum is the symbol of Chinese claims. He is backed by China's moral support - even though it is largely unofficial. The advisors who cluster around him are completely pro-Chinese (and represent only a small minority of Tibetans in this respect). And Kumbum Lamasery is protected by a special Tibetan People's Battalion composed of Chinese-trained and -equipped Tibetans who are directly under the command of General Chang Chih-chung's Northwest Headquarters in Lanchow, Kansu.

In China, Tibetan affairs are the responsibility of the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission of the Executive Yuan. This commission maintains representatives at Lhasa, but has no control over the governing of Central Tibet, which is autonomous and has looked to the British in India for moral support during the past few decades. The Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission has seen to it that Tibetan representatives from regions within China Proper have been brought to the National Assembly and other important national meetings, but it does not have a great many direct or close contacts with the Tibetan people, and the Tibetans are one of the most unrepresented and inarticulate sizeable minorities in China.

The Tibetan people within the boundaries of China Proper are directly controlled by two semi-autonomous, authoritarian, provincial governors, Liu Wen-hui in Sikang and Ma Pu-fang in Chinghai. Both Sikang and Chinghai are recent political creations (Chinghai became a province on January 1, 1929. See my letter-report No. 16 for data on Sikang.) containing slices of territory once under the control of Central Tibet, and both contain important Tibetan minorities (about 160,000 in Chinghai and five to six times that many in Sikang). West of Kangting, the provincial capital of Sikang ("Kuan Wai") and West of Lake Kokonor in Chinghai ("Kou Wai") the population is Tibetan and the topography and economy belong to the Tibetan plateau - "the grasslands".

Although both Liu and Ma have used a combination of conciliation and force in their dealing with the "unruly" Tibetans, they have had differing degrees of success. In Sikang, Chinese control ends

completely at the Yangtze River (or to be more specific, the Chin Sha River, which is a Yangtze tributary), and the rest of the province (the western half) is Chinese on maps only. Ma Pu-fang, who speaks Tibetan himself, has had more success in establishing and maintaining his control, and almost the whole province of Chinghai, including the Tibetan regions, is under his tight supervision. General Ma first established his control by a bloody military campaign, and he has maintained it by treating the cooperative Tibetans well and by suppressing oppositional elements harshly. In neither Chinghai nor Sikang, however, do the Tibetans under Chinese control have either effective representation in the provincial administration or autonomy over their own affairs.

Government throughout Tibet Proper is a complicated political mixture. The oligarchy at Lhasa controls the region in its immediate environs and exercises control to a lesser extent over all of Tibet. (In West Sikang, for example, the Tibetans are said to be oriented completely toward Lhasa and the Dalai Lama in both spiritual and other matters, and apparently the prestige of the Panchen Lama is at low ebb.) In places distant from Lhasa, however, a strong degree of localism still prevails, and local government is a mixture of secular feudal leadership and ecclesiastical rule.

Although Tibet Proper has a small regular army modelled on British lines and armed with British equipment, it is actually very weak and has only a semblance of political unity. It has been able to maintain its autonomy and to ignore Chinese claims of suzerainty because of a number of factors. One of these is its geographical remoteness and inaccessibility. Another has been the internal strife in China which has precluded an active policy in remote regions. A third and important factor has been the moral support which the British have given Tibet as a buffer state North of India.

The British have now withdrawn from India - and they are foreclosing on their stake in Tibet as well. It is too early to predict what effect, if any, this will have on Sino-Tibetan relations, but the British withdrawal certainly removes one of the most important props supporting Tibetan autonomy. Whether or not India will replace the prop is still a matter for speculation.

China's interest in Tibet is based upon a combination of geographic and economic elements together with the intangible but important factor called national prestige. Tibet is too distant and inaccessible to be of great importance strategically - it is a barrier rather than a passage region - but in peaceful times a profitable China-Tibet trade is possible. Chinese tea, cloth, miscellaneous manufactured goods, and grain (in small quantities) exchange for Tibetan musk, medicinal plants, animals, wools, hides, and furs. Most of Tibet's natural trade routes, which follow the rivers and the region's natural geographic orientation, flow into China rather than India. (The Brahmaputra and the one major Himalyan trade route affect only the southern fringe of Tibet.) China's principal interest in Tibet, however, appears to be one involving tradition and prestige. Chinese feel that Tibet "belongs to China" and that this fact is sufficient reason to reestablish control. Factors of

national prestige are important in Chinese policy as they are in the case of other countries.

Tibet is still remote, however, and China is still torn by Civil War, so it is unlikely that China will attempt to reassert her claims to Tibet in any effective manner in the immediate future. If, with the passage of time and changing conditions, any such attempt is made, however, by political or other means, the small boy at Kumbum who "has no plans" undoubtedly will become a focus of attention, for an alliance with the Panchan Lama would give religious as well as political legitimacy in the eyes of many to any Chinese efforts to reassert control over Tibet.

Sincerely yours,

*Doak Barnett*

Doak Barnett

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