

# Reason for Optimism

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The visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and President Barack Obama has far more far reaching significance than many commentators are giving credit. The President, despite Chinese objections, is showing the Dalai Lama greater respect than any president before him and is also a meeting of two very special people.

First of all the Dalai Lama is meeting with the first African-American to hold that office, a symbol of how intolerance and repression can give way to freedom and high achievement. Secondly we see two men, both leaders of their people and both winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, sitting together. As they talked we cannot imagine them doing other than attempting to map a strategy of understanding between Tibet and China, two peoples of such character, learning and spiritual development. Thirdly, President Obama is the first American President to formally invite the Dalai Lama to the White House on an official visit. This meeting was not planned as a casual encounter during a walk in the park.

As I watched the interviews following the meeting my outlook for the results of this visit was optimistic. My sense is that Chinese government members and negotiators are feeling some pressure to make a breakthrough in their Tibetan stance. A few months ago while President Obama was in China talking with President Hu, many critics at home were complaining that our President was snubbing the Dalai Lama for economic and political reasons. My reading is different. The White House had already sent two envoys to Dharamsala to discuss and carefully plan a visit by His Holiness to Washington. These discussions did not seem like a haphazard, spur of the moment apology for a snubbing. Neither man is ever unmindful of what he must do nor what he must say to achieve the goals he desires and avoid the pitfalls that lie in wait.

Just last month in Beijing, the Communist Party of China Central Committee held a meeting on Tibet work issues. It was the most recent in a series of five conferences meeting to discuss Tibet. In 1980 After Mao died and Deng Xiaoping was leading the State in a new direction, a meeting was held to evaluate and formulate a new approach to Tibet. Until that time the policy had been to force everyone into the same mold. The state sought desperately to win over Tibetans and other nationalities, by propaganda, by force, and by socialist education, into becoming "Chinese" in mind, speech and body politic. Now the movement was to be toward liberalization, in which religious and cultural values like economic policies were encouraged to be more open. During that time we came to believe in the reality of social and political changes that would naturally accompany economic change. That view was further confirmed and widened by a similar meeting in 1984. It seemed like good times were on their way.

In June 1989 all that changed. Students and national minorities came to see liberalization as a prelude to democratization. Resistance to that dream by conservative Communist leaders led to the events in Tiananmen Square and the violent suppression of those hopes. The result of Tiananmen Square was to reverse the promise of hope and allowed hard-liners to regain power. It added fuel to the government fear of national minorities, and by 1994 at another meeting on Tibet Work formal policies were instituted allowing the state to reassert strict control over Tibetans.

Plans were announced to “develop the west”. The thought of the committee was that by bringing the benefits of modern, technological thinking and Communist Party capitalism to Tibet, Tibetans would come to appreciate the values and prosperity of modern life. And so began a series of projects: building dams, building roads and railroads, installing electricity and setting up libraries and museums featuring the virtues of modernism over the evils of the past. Education and wealth would “span the frontiers thereby bringing political stability”.

Oh, and by the way it was reasoned, resettlement of Han Chinese in these areas would serve as a model of modern life and add to political stabilization of the regions: the population and way of life would become truly integrated into one nation. That policy was reinforced in 2001. We have seen the consequences of the spanning the frontier movement in the sinification of Lhasa and the events preceding the 2008 Olympic Games.

Where, you might ask, do I find reason for optimism? Let me explain. I detected in the most recent Tibet Work Issues Meeting which occurred between January 18 and 20, 2010 a softening of tone in the rhetoric. I sensed a shift in nuance. Having grown into maturity as a Tibetan monk of the “exploiting class” and then risen in status in the government religious bureaucracy in the post Mao years, I learned to listen very carefully. In every society, “he who listens learns.” This was a lesson I learned well. Within the Chinese bureaucracy, it is a key to survival. In a society where culture frowns on showing personal feelings and where the notion of “face” is so important, accurately interpreting what you hear is a practiced skill, a skill I trust.

But there are harder clues, evidence for optimism that might be more convincing to skeptics. For one thing, a completely new leadership team is now running the TAR. Members have been appointed who have more favorable attitudes toward open policies. We shall see. All nine members of the Party’s Standing Committee including President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao, other Party leaders and the military leadership attended the 2010 meeting.

Also in a recent press release the vice chair of the United Front, the key organization in the area of religions and national minorities, began by wishing the Dalai Lama well! This is a remarkable break with most recent references to His Holiness.

And I recently heard that President HU made three points to his fellows:

1. He indicated that the present policy in Tibet has gone on long enough and should be softened.
2. He said a distinction has to be made between the official Tibetan Government in Exile and the Dalai Lama as a person, that his ideas are less confrontational and absolute. The Dalai Lama believes in a “middle way”
3. He called for a resumption of dialogue that had been halted in 2008 because of the pre Olympic demonstrations.

And last week, the talks between China and Tibetan representatives began again.

And so my optimism that suffers so often, but so often returns, refreshes me once again. The history of Tibet and China is one that has waxed and waned for centuries. Over the last 20 years freedom has waned; perhaps it is ready to wax once more. The present policy of repression and attempted cultural murder has never worked. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a bad enemy; he never strikes back. He won’t do what is expected of enemies. He has patience that seems endless. So I ask, how long can the government of China stand alone in the world believing that His Holiness represents

incarnate evil instead of the reincarnation of Chenresig, the deity of compassion? The Chinese are a practical people; how long can they stay attached to a lose-lose situation?

Yes I am optimistic: This is the new context within which His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and President Barack Obama were talking. As Bob Thurman explained: *The Dalai Lama Matters*.