

BOOK REVIEW  
OF  
*WHEN SERFS STOOD UP IN TIBET*  
BY  
ANNA LOUISE STRONG

A COMPILATION OF A SERIES OF PROGRAMS  
ON  
RADIO FREE ASIA  
TIBETAN SERVICE  
BY  
WARREN W. SMITH



## WHEN SERFS STOOD UP IN TIBET

ANNA LOUISE STRONG

Anna Louise Strong was 73 years old in 1959 when she went to Tibet. Although describing herself as an American journalist, she was a proponent of the Chinese Communists from the earliest years, writing her first book about the revolution in China, *China's Millions*, in 1927. This was followed by *One-fifth of Mankind* in 1939, an account of the CCP's United Front policy with the KMT against the Japanese. In 1949 she wrote *The Chinese Conquer China*, an eyewitness account of Mao and other Chinese Communist leaders at Yenan. She took up permanent residence in the PRC in 1958 and wrote *Rise of the Chinese People's Communes* in 1959. After the 1959 revolt in Tibet she wrote *Tibetan Interviews*, the result of interviews with Tibetans in Beijing, which is described as "dealing with the exploitation and misery of the Tibetan people and their aspirations and struggles."

Jung Chang, author of *Mao: the Unknown Story*, describes Strong as a second-rate journalist and as "Mao's lackey." Strong was sent by Mao in 1947 on a world tour to promote him and the revolution in China. Jung Chang says that Mao hoped to repeat with Strong the success he had with Edgar Snow in creating a positive portrayal of himself outside China. She was given documents that Mao told her to pass to the world's communist parties. Strong used these documents and another book that she wrote, *Dawn Out of China*, to promote ideas such as that Mao had changed Marxism from a European to an Asian form in a way that neither Marx nor Lenin could have dreamed of and that the world would have more to learn from Mao and Communist China than from the Soviet Union. According to Jung Chang, this suggestion that Mao had improved upon Stalin made Strong less than popular in Moscow. She was briefly imprisoned in Moscow in February 1949 as an American spy. She was eventually deported to China.

After sufficiently ingratiating herself with the Chinese Communist leaders, particularly with *Tibetan Interviews*, she was allowed, despite her advanced age, to join the first group of international journalists, all from Marxist parties or communist countries, to travel to Tibet after the revolt. The group of nineteen journalists went to Tibet in August 1959, only five months after the revolt. Strong was accompanied by her own Chinese interpreter and assistant. Her book about Tibet is described by the publisher, Red Sun Publishers of San Francisco, as "an intensely moving account of a people, oppressed and tortured for centuries, taking their destiny into their own hands." Upon arrival in Lhasa the group of communist journalists was greeted by their Tibetan hosts with the words: "A million serfs have stood up. They are burying the old serfdom and are building a new Tibet. This land frozen for centuries has come to life and its people have taken their destiny in their own hands." This, and all the other statements by Tibetans, filtered through their Chinese and Tibetan interpreters, was taken by Strong and,

presumably, the other journalists, as the accurate, uncoerced, untutored, and sincere opinion of all Tibetans.

In their first briefing in Lhasa, the journalists were told that Tibet had been an integral part of China for seven hundred years, a fact that was believed by all Chinese and, they were told, by almost all Tibetans. They were told that the Dalai and Panchen Lamas were equal in Tibet and that their titles and positions all came by appointment by the Chinese emperors. They were given some interesting statistics in regard to the 1959 revolt. In justifying Beijing's abandonment of its pledge to leave the political structure unchanged, they were told that four of six Tibetan government ministers, seventy percent of the 642 noble families, and 2,136 monasteries had joined the revolt. The rebellion in Kham in 1956 was blamed, not on the Democratic Reform campaign, which attempted to overturn Tibetan society and persecute traditional political and religious leaders, but on the instigation of some of the Dalai Lama's entourage who went through that area after the 1954 trip to Beijing. The Chinese admitted that it was Democratic Reforms that had led to another, smaller revolt in Amdo in 1958, although they said that the reforms consisted only of some restrictions on monasteries' economic rights. After the revolt there was repressed, however, lamas were given "freedom of person," whereupon a large number of the lamas voluntarily left the monasteries. The actual reason is that the monasteries were deprived of their lands and their sources of income so that the monks could no longer remain there.

The Chinese claimed that the Tibetan rebels had abused the Tibetan people in a variety of colorful ways, that they were therefore hated by the people, and that many Tibetans who wanted to attack the rebels had to be restrained by the Chinese! The PLA was greatly assisted by many Tibetans in repressing the rebellion, the journalists were told. The fact that the rebels had so little support was evidence that the Tibetan revolt was not about nationalism or religion but was only the serf owners' attempt to preserve their feudal privileges. After the revolt, the Tibetan people helped the PLA to round up the remnant rebels, all of whom had abused the people terribly, in contrast to the PLA soldiers, all of whom had acted with benevolence and restraint.

After the revolt, the PLA and Chinese cadres were reportedly besieged by appeals from the serfs for Democratic Reforms. When, on July 17 the Democratic Reform was announced, the people of Lhasa sang and danced in the streets. Because the PLA patiently waited before repressing the rebellion until Tibetans could see that the rebels were just agents of the landlords, the Tibetan people did not see the repression of the revolt as a conflict between China and Tibet but as a struggle of the Tibetan people against feudalism. As Strong wrote, "The people, without conflict of loyalties, could realize how deeply they hated those old torments and how now they could be free."

The journalists were taken to the Dalai Lama's summer palace, the Norbulinka, to disprove allegations that it had been the scene of fighting and had suffered much destruction. Strong encountered a woman outside the park, whose dress identified her as a noblewoman, and who presented her with a few flowers. Strong reveals her lack of journalistic objectivity and powers of self-deception by putting words in the woman's

mouth and ideas in her head: "She could not speak my language nor I hers but she handed me her very neat bunch of flowers with a look that said, as plainly as speech: 'We are trying to build a good Tibet. Deal fairly with us.' I have seldom been more moved." The woman may very well have been trying to beseech her to tell the world the truth about Tibet, as Tibetans who approach foreigners in Tibet often do, but it may not have been the same truth that Strong imagined.

Strong later encountered a Tibetan woman at Lhasa's central temple, the Jokhang, whom she had known in Beijing and a monk who regaled her with stories of monastic abuse. These encounters she accepted as a fortuitous coincidence although such events are a characteristic of communist countries' control over every aspect of foreign tours. Throughout her visit to Lhasa, Strong met only Tibetans who told her of their sufferings of the past and their unbounded happiness at the prospects for the future. No doubt many of those who told of their sufferings had actually suffered, although even Strong was suspicious that many of the tales seemed to have been repeatedly told and suitably elaborated. She accepted that she received a true picture of reality in Tibet despite the fact that she met no one who had supported the revolt or even a single Tibetan who had any complaints about the situation at all. She did not question the truthfulness of any of the Tibetans who told her their stories, or of the accuracy of the translations of her Chinese and Tibetan interpreters. Perhaps because of her own need to believe that a new reality was being created in Tibet, she made no effort to ascertain if there were any alternatives to the reality being presented to her.

Strong was told that some of those who had participated in the revolt, and who "had expressed a desire to work for the Tibetan people," were working at the site of the hydroelectric power plant construction east of Lhasa at Nachen Trang. Although this site was only a few miles outside Lhasa, and their group visited a manor site nearby, neither she nor apparently any of the journalists asked to see for themselves how captured rebels were treated. Strong was told that about a thousand captured rebels were working there, "not even under guard but organizing their own supervision. They got a small sum of pocket money besides their food, and from time to time, a group was released." Such benevolence on the part of the Chinese toward Tibetan rebels Strong accepted without question. As she wrote, "The awakening of human beings from bondage to freedom has happened often before in human society. Usually it has been in bloody uprising at heavy human cost. Seldom has it been done with such careful social engineering as today in Tibet."

Tibetans who were there tell a considerably different story about Nachen Trang. There were "tens of thousands" of Tibetans working at Nachen Trang, male and female, and it was surrounded by barbed wire fence interspersed with guard towers manned by Chinese soldiers. Tibetan prisoners were tormented by harangues from Chinese officials the essence of which was that old Tibetan society had been extremely cruel, barbaric, dark, and backward and that the reactionary upper strata of Tibet's local government had not voluntarily accepted reforms, so the heroic PLA had put down their revolt, and now the reconstruction of Tibet could begin. The prisoners were told that they had exploited the masses for generation after generation and were guilty of opposing the state and the

masses by participating in the uprising. However, in accordance with the correct policy of the Party, they would be given the opportunity to become new people through labor reform. They were forced to endure political education after their lengthy workdays. At work they were made to sing songs like "Socialism is great, Socialism is good," and to engage in competition between work teams that led to exhaustion, death, and suicide.

The work was very dangerous; many prisoners were killed by rock falls and landslides. Any prisoner who failed to meet his or her quota of a certain number of baskets of rock rubble per day was subjected to group criticism or "struggle" (*thamzing*). All of the Tibetan prisoners had raw fingers and open sores on their backs. The only way some survived was because other Tibetans gave them more work points, on which the food ration was based, than they had actually earned. What Strong thought was a positive aspect of Nachen Trang, the system of self-supervision by Tibetans, was in fact one of the most oppressive aspects of the Chinese Communist regime under which Tibetans were made to spy on and inform upon each other, with each made responsible for the behavior of others. What Strong imagined was careful social engineering was confirmed by one Tibetan prisoner, but with a different purpose, as a "Chinese plot to break the spirit of the Tibetan people by enslaving them under the pretext of reform through labor."<sup>11</sup>

Strong and the other journalists also attended the *thamzing* of Lhalu, one of the large landowners near Lhasa and a former government official who had been the governor of Chamdo until shortly before the Chinese invasion. The journalists were told by a Chinese official that Lhalu's struggle was intended to be a cathartic experience for the Tibetans attending:

This meeting is not primarily to condemn Lhalu but to teach his former serfs that they are now the masters and need not fear their former lord. It is a first step towards organizing democratic self-government. The serfs must learn to speak out, to expose their injuries, to find the cause of their long misery not in some karma from a past incarnation as they were always told, but in the evil system of serfdom which must be destroyed.

Lhalu was condemned for a variety of abuses by some of his former serfs, from which Strong was able to gain some understanding of the realities of the feudal system: "It was clear that, even under serfdom, there were supposed to be limits to exploitation, enforced by custom. It was equally clear that when a master chose to demand more from the serf than was his due by custom, there was nothing the serf could do but obey." Strong and the other journalists were exposed to an endless litany of abuses by serf-owners that gave the impression, an impression that the Chinese wanted to convey, that all serf-owners had been horribly abusive of their serfs. However, even Strong had some doubts about the value of the accusations, saying that it was unclear in many cases if the serfs were directing their accusations against Lhalu or his steward, that there was no attempt to check the accuracy of the accusations, that some of the accusations seemed to be dramatized for effect, and that it was possible that some of those making the accusations were themselves guilty of transgressions or may have been hoping for some

reward from the Chinese. After Lhalu's struggle all the serfs' land deeds and debt papers were burned, an essential element of Democratic Reforms.

Strong and the others also visited the Dalai Lama's winter palace, the Potala, where they were shown that nothing had been destroyed and that the treasury was intact, which presumably was meant to prove that the PLA had not destroyed anything in the Potala or looted the Dalai Lama's treasury after the revolt. They also went to Drepung monastery where they were told that of the previous 5,687 monks there were now only 2,800, the reduction being due to that number having taken part in the revolt and subsequently having fled or been arrested. They were shown an exhibition organized at Drepung, presumably for the education of the remaining monks, which consisted of the arms and ammunition that had been discovered there, a display of the means by which the monastery had exploited its serfs, and another about freedom of religion, which maintained that most monks were involuntarily enrolled in Tibet's monasteries. There was also a section on the "crimes of the monastery," in which were displayed skull cups and thigh-bone trumpets, all of which they were told had been taken from living victims, and instruments of torture used by the lamas on monks and serfs. An account of a tax-gathering trip by higher lamas included mass extortion and rape. Strong, who had already revealed an anti-religious attitude, readily believed all that she was told about the evils of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism.

At Drepung the journalists witnessed another *thamzing*, this time of a "living Buddha," or *tulku*, who was accused of persuading many of Drepung's monks to take part in the revolt. His monk accusers said that he was guilty of a sin for persuading others to fight, which was a sin under Buddhist doctrine, for forcing lower-ranking monks to take up arms against the lawful government, and for giving them charms that had proved ineffective. He was also accused of having predicted that the PLA would be defeated, which presumably demonstrated his lack of religious powers. Strong interpreted the attitude of the monk accusers as one of "pain and confused anger," due to their long and unendurable suffering, the causes of which they were only beginning to be able to identify. Strong was told that the lama being struggled was far from the worst of the lot; others had been guilty of raping monks, women who came to the monastery, and even all of the women of surrounding areas. Young monks were said to have been in special demand by the upper lamas as sexual objects and fights between lamas and even killings were said to have been common "over the possession of handsome boys." Strong admits that there was "no way of checking such stories; nor did we try to. The mere repetition of such accusations ... testified to a 'way of life' in Drepung, if not to the precise incidents."

The journalists were given a briefing by Chinese officials of the Religious Affairs Department that revealed the process by which Tibet's monasteries were emptied during Democratic Reforms. They said that the PLA did not try to control or reform all monasteries. They had "picked the ten biggest rebel monasteries, put them under control and helped their lower lamas organize and we try to make them examples of what a democratic law-abiding monastery should be. We expect other monasteries to learn from them and copy them. Drepung alone has seven hundred branches that should learn from Drepung." The Chinese officials themselves, they said, as well as the monks, had learned

from this process the extent to which the monasteries had exploited the people. According to the Chinese officials, "We also learned through this how deeply the Tibetan people hate the monasteries. Drepung has committed so many crimes in the past that there is a wide demand in Tibet to abolish Drepung entirely." This demand had been resisted by the Chinese, who had decided to preserve Drepung and other monasteries as historic monuments, the ultimate fate of which would be decided by the Tibetan people. They were careful to claim that no monasteries had been destroyed and that none had been looted of their relics or treasure.

The Chinese officials claimed that they had not forced any monks to leave the monasteries; in fact, they had tried to persuade them to stay, at least temporarily, due to the difficulty of quickly absorbing so many of them into secular society. They said that the monks' desire to leave the monasteries at that time was very high, because the reputation of the monasteries was very low due to the extent of the crimes and exploitation that had been revealed. The benevolence of the Chinese officials in regard to the rebel monasteries was unchallenged by Strong, nor was the implausibility of their explanations for the great decrease in the numbers of monks. The real explanation is apparent from the fact that, according to Chinese statistics, 2,136 monasteries had joined the revolt. Presumably this number applied only to the TAR. All of these monasteries had their estates confiscated and therefore no longer had any source of food to feed their numerous monks. As the food stores ran out the monks obviously had no choice but to leave. Thus the depopulation of the monasteries was due to Democratic Reforms.

Strong also visited a harvest festival at a village near Lhasa. It came at the end of the first phase of Democratic Reforms in which land deeds and debt papers were burned. She saw Tibetans parading through the fields with portraits of Mao and Liu Shao-chi, who, she was told, had been voluntarily chosen by the Tibetans to replace the gods to whom they were used to praying at harvest time. While celebrating the harvest they sang songs such as this one:

The Dalai Lama's sun  
Shone on the lords.  
Chairman Mao's sun  
Shines on the people!  
Now the lords' sun sets  
And our sun rises!

At a subsequent exhibition of horse-riding and archery, Strong was recognized for her presence and her old age with the award of a *katak*. The Tibetan who so rewarded her reportedly said: "It is very good when a woman as old as you comes all this way to see our festival and our reform." This Strong interprets as evidence that the Tibetans were well aware of the historic significance of their release from serfdom and that they wanted the whole world to know. Not only is it questionable whether the Tibetan added the words "and our reform," but Strong once again put words into Tibetans' mouths that would confirm her own presuppositions. Strong also expressed the opinion that due to the land reforms taking place in Tibet, hunger would be forever eliminated: "For the land was now

in the hands of the tillers and would be sown in freedom, and everywhere a campaign was developing for a bumper harvest."

Anna Louise Strong left Tibet with the firm conviction that a new era of freedom and prosperity had dawned for the Tibetan people. Although the Tibetan harvest may very well have been good that year, it was not in the Chinese interior. This was one year into the Great Leap Forward, when many Chinese provinces were already experiencing famine. Despite Strong's predictions about Tibet's inevitable prosperity, the Great Leap famine would reach Tibet the following year. Also, in 1960, Tibet's monasteries having been depopulated, the systematic looting of their treasures, artworks, and relics by the Chinese state began. Tibetans who had so recently been awarded title to their own lands saw those same lands taken away from them by the collectivization process, the first stage of which, the formation of mutual aid teams, was an aspect of Democratic Reforms.

What Strong saw in Tibet was no doubt composed in some part of reality, but also of considerable portions of Chinese propaganda and her own delusions. Undoubtedly some of the Tibetans whose words were interpreted for her had actually suffered abuses as serfs. Others were presumably convinced by Chinese Communist ideology. Many others were opportunists who were attracted by the promise of an overturning of society. However, Strong was readily willing to believe that abuses of serfs by landlords and of monks by lamas were typical rather than aberrant. She was already a believer in the communist ideology. And she was ready to accept that the opportunists were truly awakened. Strong was ready to believe that the new world predicted by socialist doctrine was not only possible but inevitable.

Strong was, like the Chinese, willing to portray reality as it should be rather than as it actually was. Therefore, she was willing to portray the reality of Tibet as it was presented to her without questioning any of the Chinese assertions about Tibetan history or their interpretations of Tibetans' opinions. Given her strong socialist beliefs and her desire to realize the goals that socialism promised, she was ready to ignore the issue of Tibet's political status or their right to national self-determination. Like the Chinese she acknowledged no issue of the legitimacy of Chinese rule over non-Chinese people or of Tibetan conflict with the Chinese. She accepted the Chinese assertion that the result of the revolt in Tibet and Democratic Reforms was that Tibetans would rule themselves. She ignored all political issues in favor of the social or class issue of the liberation of Tibetan serfs from feudalism, and she accepted the Chinese assertion that Tibetan feudalism had been a malignant evil from which Tibetans were forever grateful to have been liberated.

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<sup>1</sup> Thupten Khetsun, Memories of Life in Lhasa under Chinese Rule. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).