

BOOK REVIEW
OF
TIBET TRANSFORMED
BY
ISRAEL EPSTEIN

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

Tibet Transformed

Israel Epstein

This is by far the most lengthy (550 pages), authoritative (although biased) and informative account in English of the 30-year period of Tibet's history from 1950 to 1980, when few but sympathetic socialist journalists had access. Epstein's book about Tibet, published in 1983, is the result of three trips there in 1955, 1965 and 1976, in each case as a member of a group of socialist journalists. Epstein was born in Poland in 1915, actually in a part of Lithuania that had been annexed by Poland. His parents were Lithuanian Jewish socialists who had been active in the failed Russian revolution of 1905. His parents, as members of the Jewish Bund, were at first enthusiastic about the 1917 Russian revolution, but the Bund soon fell out of favor and the family fled to China to escape persecution. Epstein grew up in China, educated in English in foreign schools and influenced by his parents' socialism, the Japanese invasion of China, and his sympathy for the Chinese Communist Party.

Epstein began his journalistic career before the Second World War, reporting from the Chinese Communists' headquarters at Yen-an. In 1944 he left China for the United States "to help the Western world understand the Chinese Revolution." With the success of the Communist revolution in China he returned in 1951, "to live and work in the new China."¹ He joined *China Reconstructs*, an English language pictorial meant to promote the Chinese revolution to the Western world. He became a citizen of China, a status that landed him in prison during the Cultural Revolution. He eventually became the editor of *China Reconstructs*, a position he held almost until his death in 2005. Epstein was, like Anna Louise Strong, a lifelong Communist. But, as a citizen of China and the editor of *China Reconstructs*, he was also a professional publicist, promoter, and propagandist.

Epstein's first visit to Tibet, in 1955, was a 15 day trip by road from Chengdu in Sichuan. His visit in 1965 was by air as one of more than 2,000 delegates and visitors invited to Lhasa for the founding ceremonies of the Tibet Autonomous Region. His third visit, in 1976, coincided with the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution. He claims that his account of Tibet is "self-told" by the Tibetans themselves, "based on hundreds of on-the-spot interviews, recorded in thousands of pages of notes."² Epstein's book suffers from being published in 1983, seven years after his last visit and long after the communes that he extolled as so successful had been abandoned. Epstein makes a rather awkward attempt to retain his conclusions of the previous visits while explaining how de-communization had produced greater prosperity than communization, and liberalization had resulted in a revival of Tibetan culture that he had proclaimed already vibrant due to the CCP's policy on nationality autonomy. Thus he declares that socialism has triumphed in Tibet and all the policies of the past were correct, but that the abandonment of the communes, the primary achievement of socialism, was also correct. He maintains that Tibetans were happy and prosperous before, but that they were more happy and prosperous once the policies that had made them so happy in the past were abandoned.

Epstein writes in his foreword that he hopes the reader will find his account "a true reflection of the essential nature and historically-determined direction of the great and basic process of change that has occurred, and is continuing, in Tibet." This sentence sums up Epstein's dilemma. All of what has happened has to be historically-determined, according to Marxist doctrine, as a natural social evolution having everything to do with class conflict and nothing to do with any national conflicts between China and Tibet. This historically-determined doctrine also has to explain the twists and turns in Chinese policies in Tibet, including the Cultural Revolution, and the eventual abandonment of the supposedly correct policies of the past. Epstein rationalizes that "despite all zigzags, there has been tremendous advance." He declares that the peaceful liberation, the defeat of the serf-owner revolt, and the achievement of democratic reforms, were all profoundly emancipatory for the majority of Tibetans who enthusiastically embarked upon the socialist path. The fundamental basis of those achievements, he says, is that Tibet is an organic part of multinational China, within which Tibet has its own distinct characteristics. However, he says, Tibet's particularities do not favor separatism because separatism has always been linked with plots by imperialists to weaken and partition China.

Epstein admits that there have been errors in the revolution in China, some of them specific to the minority nationalities, including Tibetans. The primary error, he says, was in deviating from Mao's doctrine that the contradictions between nationalities were non-antagonistic. Because of these errors, "Some of the fundamental achievements made in Tibet were accompanied by shortcomings needing correction." He maintains that nationality autonomy was not sufficiently developed in Tibet: "Two specificities had been ignored—that of the minority regions as distinct from the majority (Han) regions of China, and that of Tibet even among minority regions (its rather special history, its relative homogeneity, mixture of religious and national elements, and so on)." Other minority regions were more affected than Tibet, he says, "under the influence of the Gang of Four." He admits that "ultra-Left" errors had been quite serious in the cultural field, but he claims that the CCP was therefore (in 1980-82) concentrating on cultural preservation and development.

Epstein writes that the inauguration of the TAR in 1965 marked the beginning of the socialist revolution in Tibet, following on the success of the democratic revolution after the 1959 revolt. These, the democratic and socialist revolutions, were the stages of the inevitable course of history as predicted by Marxist doctrine. They were an "irreversible change" in a Tibet that had made a leap from medieval serf society to socialism in the short time of twenty years. This, he says, was a rebirth that the "old local rulers" could never have envisioned. They were unable to prevent this "mass-powered social leap," which the CCP sparked, but whose fuel was "the bitterness stored through centuries of oppression in the breasts of Tibet's serfs and slaves." By their resort to "reactionary violence" the serf-owners had assured that the change would come through "revolutionary counter-violence and mass action." Epstein quotes Mao to this effect: "If the reactionaries of Tibet should dare to launch a general rebellion, then the working people there will win liberation all the faster." In regard to strategy, "every major stage was initiated or directly approved by Mao Zedong with Zhou Enlai guiding the actual work from the center."

Epstein says that the CCP had been magnanimous to the former serf-owners: "The victorious working people in Tibet and throughout China are willing to forego historical scores with the serf owners, whether for their centuries of past oppression or for their foreign-backed

resort to arms against the revolution." This magnanimity included the Panchen Lama who, "pressed by the same class interests and forces as the Dalai Lama before him, was drawn into opposing the reforms," but who had "resumed public life in 1978, speaking in praise of the basic changes that had occurred in Tibet and calling on self-exiled upper-strata figures to return and see for themselves." The Dalai Lama could also be included, if he would accept the principles of the 17-Point Agreement in regard to the unity of China's peoples and non-obstruction of essential reform. However, "the unity of the multinational socialist country, with nationalities enjoying autonomy within this framework, is not subject to bargaining."

The bulk of Epstein's book is composed of his accounts of visits to various sites and interviews with former serfs he met in each place over a twenty-year period, which, he says, reflect the progress of socialist construction in Tibet. His interviews from 1955 are characterized by what he perceived as a tension between the desire of the serfs for liberation and the resistance of the "local Tibetan government." He describes a Tibet ripe for the socialist revolution but prevented from achieving it by the restrictions of the 17-Point Agreement. Han Chinese cadres are presented as chaffing at the restrictions but scrupulously respecting the provisions of the Agreement. The interviews of 1965 are mostly about the defeat of the rebellion, the success of Democratic Reforms and the establishment of the TAR. His interviews of 1976 are mostly about life in the communes and the prosperity achieved by communization. In particular, having already achieved Democratic Reforms by their own efforts and the first stage of socialism in the mutual-aid teams, the liberated Tibetan serfs were said to have been anxious to achieve full communization in order to avoid a reversion to capitalism and a revival of class exploitation.

Epstein's interviews are mostly about the suffering of the serfs and slaves under the former feudal system and their incomparably better life after Liberation, Democratic Reforms, and Socialist Transformation. He denounces old Tibetan society for its "unspeakable medieval squalor." The old ruling class, the aristocracy, and the monastic authorities are described as invariably brutal, vying to outdo each other in "cold-blooded and inventive cruelty." The primary theme of all his accounts is the natural, inevitable, historically-determined character of the revolution in Tibet, achieved by the Tibetan people themselves, with some benevolent assistance by the people of all nationalities in China. His interviews are so extensive that they cannot be dismissed out of hand; he undoubtedly encountered many Tibetans with legitimate grievances about the past and many whose lives were better under the Chinese regime. However, his interviews were exclusively with such enthusiastic spokespersons, all chosen for him by Chinese and Tibetan officials, whom he assumes to enjoy a freedom of speech that others have said was entirely lacking during the times of his visits, especially the latter two visits in 1965 and 1976.

He mentions the presence in 1965, at the inauguration of the TAR, of some 50 crippled former serfs who told their stories of abuse under the feudal serf system to the assembled delegates and visitors, and he says that they were "only a tiny fraction of the whole." Despite his belief that there were many more crippled serfs than those he saw, such Tibetans were cultivated by the Chinese to tell their stories as a semiprofessional career. Those who had suffered the most under the old system were prompted to "speak bitterness" against both the system itself and individuals who practiced oppression and exploitation. The atmosphere of these sessions, stimulated by Han comrades and Tibetan activists, was emotionally highly charged. The best

performers at these sessions, the ones whose sufferings were the worst or who were best able to elaborate their accounts, and especially those who were able to show physical mutilation, were promoted to semiprofessional status as raconteurs of the evils of the old society. The best fifty or so of them were taken around to tell their tales at virtually every school, town, or commune in Tibet. Their accounts became highly stylized and theatrical as they literally lived off the dramatic rendition of their past sufferings.

Epstein's interviewees cannot be assumed to be typical, nor can it be assumed that they spoke without practice or coercion. Their accounts undoubtedly reflect some of the reality of traditional Tibet, but not the totality or even the primary characteristics of old Tibet. Similarly, his interviews cannot be assumed to reflect the reality of Tibet under Chinese rule. Epstein begins his historical background with a bit of obscurantism:

Looking back, and forward, many Hans and Tibetans today do not measure their relations by just when, in what ancient dynasty, their unity began or was formalized. Rather, they see as the common meaning of their overall and particular histories, all China's nationalities contributing, from the earliest times to the formation and stability of the historically formed multinational entity.

Epstein invariably refers to the Tibetan polity as "local"; i.e., "Dalai Lama's local government," "Lhasa's local army," "feudal local government," "serf owner local regime," etc. China is invariably referred to as multinational: "historically formed multinational entity," "multinational socialist country," "socialist multinational family," "multinational polity," etc. The term "local" is repeated in reference to the Tibetan government thirty-six times, and "multinational" in reference to China seventeen times. No opportunity is missed, whenever speaking of China, to say "including Tibet." Tibet is always referred to as "within the larger unity" of China. Should anyone doubt that the final word has been spoken on Tibet's status, "historically determined direction," "irrevocable change," and "tide of history" are applied to characterize China's incorporation of Tibet.

Epstein repeats the Chinese argument that Tibet was "peacefully liberated" because the PLA did not invade Tibet: "From October 1950 until July 1951, the PLA did not advance from the Qamdo area into the areas traditionally under Lhasa's control. ... Only after Lhasa's ratification [of the 17-Point Agreement] did the PLA resume its march. It entered Tibet peacefully and in accord with the Agreement's provisions. There was no fighting within Tibet." He gives many glowing accounts of the virtually angelic behavior of the PLA as it entered Tibet, saying that Tibetans called it "Buddha's Army." Mao had instructed the PLA to maintain the most respectful attitudes during the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet. He implies that this attitude was a permanent and consistent part of the Party's policy toward minority nationalities; i.e., that this kind of behavior continued after the PLA became well-entrenched in Tibet and even during and after the revolt. He also praises the Chinese practice of paying fair wages for labor, especially for road construction work, and fair price for all purchases. Indeed, Tibetans say that during this period there was a "rain of Chinese silver dollars."

Epstein quotes Mao's statement about how the PLA should bide its time in Tibet and gather strength, particularly in regard to feeding itself. Mao predicted that the United Front

policy would cultivate enough upper class collaborators, while the reform policy would gain the support of the lower classes, in which case the Tibetan people would "draw closer to us."³ Epstein says that this shows Mao's "patience and faith in the Tibetan people." Epstein echoes the Chinese contention that it was the Tibetan serf owners who violated the 17-Point Agreement and brought on the revolt:

Ultimately, the work-style of the army, which exercised no compulsion for reform, proved to be a factor that led the people to demand reform. The serf owners who would not consult when they could no longer dictate, but instead rose in rebellion, tried to kill the people's hope by armed compulsion. It was they who destroyed the Agreement by taking arms against the PLA. Then, and only then, did the PLA act as the people's own force of compulsion, remove the obstacles to reform and help to carry it out.

Epstein denies that China practiced a "divide and rule" policy in Tibet. Instead, he says, the United Front accepted anyone who was anti-imperialist, who was patriotic to the multinational People's Republic of China, and who supported the 17-Point Agreement. He says that the CCP had not even tried to make class divisions in Tibet because the United Front accepted even serf owners if they were patriotic. The United Front had also done all it could to "mediate and reconcile the historic estrangements between the Dalai and Panchen groups and between the authorities in Lhasa and Qamdo." Epstein also denies that China in any way exploited Tibet:

Different indeed from any colonial or semi-colonial path is the road of Tibet within socialist China. As we have seen from facts and figures, Tibet is massively assisted, and in no way exploited by the majority nationality. Economic errors were made, involving waste of labor and funds, which was true in other areas of China as well, but nothing was taken away from the Region and its people for the material benefit of anywhere else.

In fact, Epstein says that Tibet's religious establishment lost only its political power, but otherwise the monasteries "continued to exist, retaining the buildings used for worship and residence." Internally, however, they underwent "revolutionary democratization," by means of which they achieved, for the first time, true religious freedom. For, in Tibet, "freedom of religion meant freedom to get out of compulsory confinement in monastic institutions." The government provided subsidies for the upkeep of monasteries, including the preservation of their relics, and for those monks who were old or unable to work. "Thus, not only was there freedom of belief, but monks and laity were assured the continuance and upkeep of places of worship." This was written in 1965, when most of Tibet's monasteries had already been looted and many destroyed. The rest were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, which Epstein surely must have been aware of by 1976, or at least by 1982 when his book went to press.

Epstein admits that the Jokhang, the Ramoche, and other religious monuments in Lhasa had been damaged during the revolt, but he blames this exclusively on their being used as strongholds by the rebels. All such damage had since been repaired by the government, he

says. He admits that Ganden monastery outside Lhasa had been destroyed, but he wrongly credits this to the Cultural Revolution and to Tibetan Red Guards. Epstein found only 300 monks at Drepung in 1976. He says that Drepung still received visitors, but not all of those came to pray; some, he says, came for "class education or as sightseers." Epstein also visited Tashilhunpo in Shigatse where he was told that during Democratic Reforms the monastery's monk population fell from 4,000 to 1,980, "through voluntary withdrawals under the policy of religious freedom." In a postscript written in 1979, Epstein says that monasteries in Lhasa were open for worship, or for the "historically-minded and the curious."

Epstein does not mourn the loss of Tibetan religious culture; instead, he lauds the development of a new socialist culture. He cites the development of the press and radio, language, theatre, and film, all devoted to the propagation of socialism. Printing presses were one of the first items brought to Tibet over the newly completed roads in 1955. These presses were devoted to the printing of Tibet's first newspaper, the *Tibet Daily*. He says that the progressive nature of this newspaper was revealed by the fact that it was a target of the Tibetan rebels during the 1959 revolt. Epstein also mentions as a positive development the wired radio network in Tibet. This radio, in Chinese and Tibetan, originated in Beijing and Lhasa and was propagated by means of loudspeakers in public places and even in private households. Epstein says that the number of loudspeakers was limited by the Tibetan Government before 1959 but that by 1965 there were loudspeakers everywhere and many hours of programming. In fact, these broadcasts did as much to change the character of Tibetan life as any of China's reforms and improvements. The broadcasts from the ubiquitous loudspeakers were loud, irritating, and inescapable, made worse by the poor quality of the loudspeakers, and of course they were exclusively devoted to Chinese propaganda. To outside observers, these loudspeakers, still present in 1982, were a symbol of the harshening and regimentation of Tibetan life under Chinese rule.⁴

The author cites the development of book publishing "with new content," including Marxist works and the works of Mao. Tibetan language was simplified to better reflect the common language and to incorporate Chinese terms. Song and dance groups were organized, also "with new content." These groups were modeled on the PLA propaganda groups that facilitated the PLA's entry into Tibet. The film *Serf* was produced as a stage drama, as was *Heroic City*, about Tibetans' resistance to the British invasion at Gyantse in 1904, and *Blood Accusation*, about feudal oppression and its final revolutionary overthrow. The song, dance, and drama groups were mobile and traveled all over Tibet giving performances and distributing Mao's works and other propaganda. Films were also shown by mobile projection units, often outdoors using the whitewashed sides of buildings or white cotton sheets. Most popular, he says, was the film *Serf*.

Epstein writes that by 1965 there were permanent theatres in every Tibetan city and town as well as 121 mobile projection teams. By 1976 there were 11 professional stage troupes, 1500 amateur troupes, and 429 film projection teams. Many Chinese operas had been translated and performed in Tibetan; traditional Tibetan operas had been altered to incorporate new socialist content. Epstein admits that this went too far during the Cultural Revolution, when "Jiang Qing and her cohorts denied the national character of the arts of the national minorities." He says that in 1979 many Tibetan cultural and art works that had been

repressed by the Gang of Four reappeared; their repression had been due to "anomalies" of the past and would not recur.

The author is most informative about the progress, and success, of Democratic Reforms and Socialist Transformation. He describes the process of Democratic Reforms and the formation of mutual-aid teams, the first stage of collectivization, as follows:

First came a preliminary campaign known as the "three againsts" (against the rebellion, personal servitude, and corvee labor) and "two reductions" (of rent and interest). Then the serfs and slaves divided their former masters' estates. Still later they united into mutual-aid teams to raise production for themselves and all Tibet. Steadily, the Communist Party was built from their ranks and the new state power of the oppressed set up in every village. It was in these campaigns, aided materially and morally by the people of all China, that Tibetan cadres were trained, and the masses won their understanding of what had happened in the past and what had to be done in the future.

Although Epstein describes the process of further collectivization as deliberate, democratic, and voluntary, his informants told him that most agricultural areas went directly from mutual aid to communes from 1967 to 1969, during the height of the Cultural Revolution: "In Tibet, as distinct from most other parts of China, there was generally no intervening stage—of agricultural cooperatives—between the mutual-aid team and the commune. There the transition from individual to semi-socialist and then fully socialist ownership took place within the commune form." Epstein thus reveals the key to understanding the actual process of communization in Tibet. Communes were formed for political reasons at the time of the political reorganization that took place during the creation of the TAR and during the height of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Communes facilitated Chinese control over all aspects of Tibetans' lives and their agricultural production.

Epstein presents the transition from the most basic level of collectivization to its ultimate stage, at least in administrative form, as having been voluntarily decided by the Tibetans themselves. He says that Chinese cadres attending the 1965 inauguration of the TAR were petitioned by Tibetans for the immediate establishment of communes. He describes the process as led by the poorest who had the most to gain by the most radical redistribution of wealth. He says that the poor referred bitterly to mutual-aid teams as "mutual aid without mutual benefit" and were the most eager for communes. This was said to be due to the contradiction, inherent in mutual aid, between individual economy and collective labor. Those who had more property and wealth, even if only slightly more, were reluctant to give it up to the collective. At each stage of collectivization there was always the danger of a polarization of property and wealth and the restoration of capitalism. The only way to prevent this, from the point of view of the poorest, was to achieve full communization as quickly as possible.

Epstein presents the choice as having been naturally made because of the superior performance of the communes, which were assisted by state aid, including the provision of machinery, fertilizers, and agricultural advice. He provides many pages of statistics to prove the amazing success of the several communes he visited in 1976. This makes it even more difficult for him to explain how the ultimate dissolution of the communes resulted in even greater

prosperity and was not an abandonment of the communist ideal. He writes that "subsequent reviews and re-examinations were to reveal many errors along the ultra-Left line, some common to the whole of China, some of a local character." It had been wrong to prohibit all individual production as capitalist. Some policies in regard to communization had been transferred from other areas of China without considering Tibet's particular conditions. Some class divisions had been too severe, particularly classifying some former serfs as rich peasants. Some aspects of Tibetan customs had wrongly been condemned as backward. He admits that the curtailment of constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom had occurred under the influence of the Gang of Four. Nevertheless, he says, despite these problems, Tibetans would never revert to the past, separatism would inevitably fail, and unity would prevail as the natural tide of history.

In 2005, the year of his death, Israel Epstein's autobiography, *My China Eye: Memoirs of a Jew and a Journalist*, was published. In it he describes his life in China, including his imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Israel Epstein and his wife, Elsie, joined a Red Guard unit composed of foreigners working in China. The unit was called the Bethune-Yenan Rebel Regiment of Mao Zedong Thought, after Norman Bethune, the famous Canadian doctor who worked in China. The Red Guard unit was proposed by some foreigners in China who wanted the opportunity to participate in the great cultural and political event of the Cultural Revolution. They, like all Chinese Red Guards, pledged their loyalty to Mao. They also insisted that they and their children should be treated not as foreigners but no differently than ordinary Chinese. The group obtained the endorsement of Mao and eventually Epstein became its leader. He gave speeches to many Red Guard units in 1966 and 1967, believing them to all be equally devoted to Mao and the revolution and disbelieving in the possibility of the factionalism that ultimately occurred. Epstein was greatly surprised when, in 1968, foreigners began to become victims of Chinese xenophobia. Epstein was, like many others, accused of being a spy for some unspecified foreign government. His many years of work at *China Reconstructs* were characterized as a foreign plot to dominate China's voice to the outside world.⁵

Epstein and his wife were imprisoned, separately, at the notorious Qincheng prison near Beijing. Epstein writes that at first he could not understand how he, who had devoted his life to China's revolution, who was personally known to China's leaders as the editor of one of its foremost official publications, who had followed every turn in Chinese politics, "right up to campaigns against 'revisionism' culminating in the Cultural Revolution in which I unquestioningly marched calling for the downfall of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping," could be accused of disloyalty. Even his leadership of the foreigners' Red Guard group had not protected him. He even questioned the historical propensity of Communist regimes to dissolve into factionalism and to persecute many of those who had earlier been revolutionary heroes. He thought: "Was it true that the class struggle by its objective laws, independent of human will and even perhaps of self-knowledge, turned friends into enemies as well as foes into friends?" However, he, like others so imprisoned by Communist regimes, soon rationalized that he could never abandon the socialist revolution to which he had devoted his life and that he would accept whatever fate the revolution had for him.

For the next five years he had no contact with any human being except his interrogators. He was never physically abused but heard sounds of abuse of prisoners in nearby cells. He was

questioned repeatedly and instructed that he must confess his crimes. When he asked what crimes he was accused of he was told that he himself knew and that he must examine his life and his thoughts to know what crimes against the revolution he had committed. This was typical of Communist interrogation techniques, intended to force confessions of real or imaginary crimes. Only when one was completely subservient to the Party's discipline could one begin to be reformed. Also typical was the requirement to reexamine one's life from an early age. Epstein eventually wrote 1500 pages of self-criticism of his life but was repeatedly criticized for failure to realize and confess his real crimes. Eventually, upon his release, his interrogators confessed that they also did not know what his crimes were supposed to have been but were told to pretend that they knew. He was released, along with his wife and many other foreigners, shortly after Nixon came to China, which he thinks not coincidental. Nixon's visit had been prepared by Edgar Snow, who was told by Mao in 1970 that Nixon was welcome. Snow had mentioned to Mao that he did not understand why so many foreigners sympathetic to the Chinese revolution were then imprisoned.⁶

After his release, Epstein rationalized that the interrogation techniques to which he and his wife were subjected may have been unjust when applied to them but were necessary to expose those who were actually guilty of harming the socialist cause. Soon, their previous enthusiasm for the revolution returned. Both returned to work at *China Reconstructs*. Israel Epstein remained active until his death in 2005. He remained a Marxist convinced of the ultimate success of socialism. He recognized many of China's mistakes but continued to believe that the revolution had many more positive achievements than negative. He bemoaned the mistake of the violent repression at Tiananmen in June 1989 but he suspected a CIA hand in exacerbating the crisis. In the end, he proclaimed satisfaction with his life as a proponent of the socialist cause.⁷

In his autobiography, Epstein renounces none of his previous conclusions about China's role in Tibet. Having updated his Tibet experience with another visit in 1985, he still thought Tibet's transformation the most dramatic in China: "A leap over a thousand years from theocracy, serfdom, and slavery to the building of Socialism." A chapter on Tibet in his autobiography does little more than reaffirm and update the successes he had previously claimed for Chinese policies. He continued to proclaim China's selfless assistance to Tibet and to deny any exploitation. He continued to maintain that it was the "serf-owning local regime" that tore up the 17-Point Agreement by launching a revolt. In retrospect, he analyzes the policy of the CCP in Tibet:

The policy of the Chinese Communist Party, as conceived and practiced by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, was to give the feudal elite leeway until, as was inevitable, the most hardcore elite element would expose itself to an increasingly aware majority of the commonality through overt rebellion. And when that happened, to strike down the old social order with the help of the oppressed majority.

Epstein extols the three generations of the new Tibetan social order: those who had joined the Long March in the mid-1930s, those who had become cadres in the 1950s, and those who had joined the revolution after the revolt. These Tibetans were, he said, "impressive examples of the abilities and human dignity latent in the ranks of the formerly downtrodden." He mentions high positions achieved by many of those he had interviewed in previous years, without any

acknowledgement that many Tibetans considered them little more than Chinese puppets without any real authority. He acknowledges no repression or destruction of Tibetan culture, during the Cultural Revolution or any other time. Instead, "Preserved and developed were the best cultural achievements of Tibet's warm, brave talented and hard-working people over the centuries—in architecture, medicine, arts and crafts, beautiful and vigorous songs, dances, operas and dramas, and literature."

He again admits to "errors affecting the whole of China as well as specific ones relating to minority nationalities—the Tibetans among them. . . . In the case of national minority regions, such Leftist actions sometimes even confused mere dissimilarities between ethnic groups with basic class antagonisms. Methods and tactics suited only to the Han areas were sometimes unduly copied." Nevertheless, "All these defects, from the 1980s on, were noted and being corrected." If there was any retreat, he says, it was not toward Tibet's old society, but to the policies of the early post-rebellion and post-reform periods, which he again claims that Tibetans remember as the "golden age" of democratic and socialist advance. And, he repeats, none of the mistakes of the past had anything to do with colonial or class exploitation: "Very significant funds were put into the region and no profits taken out."

Epstein dismisses the anti-Chinese demonstrations of the 1980s as instigated, as usual, from outside. He bemoans the international respect and praise for the Dalai Lama, without any mention of his serf-owning past. His conclusion about Tibet's fate is that Tibet is "an organic part of a multi-ethnic China, its woe and weal linked to those of its other areas and peoples. Within this larger entity, Tibet has distinctive features—historical, social, linguistic and cultural." However, "Secession is not a rational conclusion from these peculiarities." "Overall, the Tibetans are better off within the family of China's peoples than they would be with an 'independence,' which would not be real at all, but merely make them a satellite."⁸

Epstein's stubborn refusal to admit any but the most superficial faults in Chinese policy in Tibet reflects not only his slavish adherence to every incomprehensible twist and turn in Chinese politics but his inability to admit that the socialism to which he devoted his life was not the inevitable course of history. However, his refusal to acknowledge any Tibetan right to independence or national self-determination has more to do with an adopted Chinese chauvinism than with socialism. That he may indeed have had some doubts about China's role in Tibet is indicated by a message in response to a website article about Epstein's death in 2005. This person, who preferred to remain anonymous, claimed to be related to Epstein, and said that Epstein had realized that he had been wrong about Tibet.⁹ The fact that he could never admit so publicly is a testimony to his lifelong devotion to the socialist cause and his willingness to propagandize that cause even when contrary to the truth.

On the front cover of *Tibet Transformed* is a photo of the Potala, which appears strangely unfamiliar until one realizes that the photo negative has been reversed. It is perhaps symbolic that neither Epstein, who claimed to be so familiar with Tibet, nor his editors at New World Press noticed this error. Perhaps this is what he and the Chinese meant by "Tibet Transformed."

1. Israel Epstein, *My China Eye: Memoirs of a Jew and a Journalist* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2005), 11.

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2. Epstein, *My China Eye*, 271.
 3. Mao Tse-tung, "On the Policies of Our Work in Tibet," *Selected Works*, vol. 5 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 74.
 4. Personal observation, 1982.
 5. Epstein, *My China Eye*, 288-298.
 6. Epstein, *My China Eye*, 299-319.
 7. Epstein, *My China Eye*, 320-343.
 8. Epstein, *My China Eye*, 271-287.
 9. *Phayul.com* response to Warren W. Smith, "The Life and Death of Israel Epstein," *Phayul*, July 2005.