

BOOK REVIEW  
OF  
*THE TIMELY RAIN*  
BY  
STUART AND ROMA GELDER

A COMPILATION OF A SERIES OF PROGRAMS  
ON  
RADIO FREE ASIA  
TIBETAN SERVICE  
BY  
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## *The Timely Rain*

*The Timely Rain* is the title of a book written by an English couple, Stuart and Roma Gelder, about their trip to Lhasa in 1962.<sup>1</sup> The title refers to a poem written by the Dalai Lama for Mao in 1954 in which the Dalai Lama refers to Mao as the "timely rain" needed in Tibet. In a foreword, Edgar Snow declared that the Gelders were "well prepared to understand so much of what they saw," presumably because of their previous experience in China, and that they had narrated the experience "with honesty, humor and compassion." He said that their book was "an honest inquiry made with no political commitments to any organized powers that be." The dust jacket to the Gelders' book says: "Neither of these authors is or has ever been a member of any political party. They have made their journeys in China and Tibet not as guests of the Chinese Government but as completely independent writers."

The Gelders' previous book, about the Chinese Communist revolution, *Long March to Freedom*, published in 1960, was very sympathetic to that revolution and established their credentials sufficiently with Chinese officials, such as Zhou Enlai, that they were chosen to tell the story of the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet. Despite the claims of the dust jacket and their affecting of an objective attitude, they were clearly leftist in their political viewpoints and they were indeed guests of the Chinese Government. They were also very obviously flattered to have been the first foreigners allowed to go to Tibet since shortly after the 1959 revolt.<sup>2</sup> They were undoubtedly influenced by the treatment they received there and by the exclusive opportunity this gave them to interpret for the outside world the "reality" of Tibet. Everything the Gelders learned was through their Chinese interpreter, assigned to them by the government.

In their introduction the Gelders said that they had convinced their Chinese hosts to allow them to go to Tibet so that they could discover if the Tibetans were, as the Dalai Lama was claiming from exile, the victims of religious genocide. The Dalai Lama had written, in his autobiography, *My Land and My People*, that tens of thousands of Tibetans had been killed, not only in military actions but individually and deliberately, for many reasons, or for no reason at all, but fundamentally because they would not renounce their religion. They had not only been shot but beaten to death, hanged, scalded, buried alive, drowned, vivisected, starved, and strangled. These killings had been done in public; the victims' fellow villagers and friends and neighbors had been made to watch them; eyewitnesses described them to the International Commission of Jurists who compiled stories of refugees.<sup>3</sup> Men and women had been slowly killed while their families were forced to watch; small children had been forced to shoot their parents.

The Dalai Lama claimed that lamas had been specially persecuted. The Chinese had humiliated them, especially the elderly and most respected, before they tortured them, by harnessing them to ploughs, riding them like horses, whipping and beating them, and other methods too evil to mention. And while they were slowly putting them to

death, they taunted them with their religion, calling on them to perform miracles to save themselves from pain and death. The Dalai Lama said that many Tibetans had been imprisoned or rounded up and taken away to unknown destinations, great numbers had died from the brutalities and privations of forced labor, and many had committed suicide in despair and misery. He said that many Tibetan children had been taken away from their parents and sent to China. The Chinese had destroyed hundreds of monasteries, either by wrecking them or by killing the lamas and sending the monks to labor camps, forcing monks to break their vows, and using the empty monastic buildings as barracks and stables.<sup>4</sup>

The Gelders' rather skeptical recitation of the supposed atrocities that had taken place in Tibet reveals that their intention was to disprove the Dalai Lama's accusations. The argument they made to Zhou Enlai and other Chinese leaders to allow them to go to Tibet was presumably so that they could do so. The Gelders' claim of objectivity quickly unravels when, shortly after their arrival in Lhasa, before they even began their supposedly objective inquiry, they write:

In the onlooker who has never visited Tibet the self-exiled priests and lords may evoke sympathy as refugees from a happy country in which the people lived under their rule, inspired by a humane religious philosophy. The truth is that this society was a harsh and cruel tyranny in which, because they share the universal instinct for survival, the people made the best of their lot. Serfs of the European Middle Ages did no less. Jews in Hitler's concentration camps did no less. ... But the indomitable fortitude and optimism of oppressed human beings in Tibet or anywhere else can only be confused with contentment by those not personally involved in their lives or who profit by such subjection and exploitation.

One may wonder how the Gelders became such experts on the reality of old Tibet after only a few days of a visit to a society that had already been overturned under Chinese rule. One also wonders at the comment that only those not personally involved in the lives of Tibetans could mistake their oppression for contentment. The Gelders were not personally involved in Tibetans' lives, so perhaps they refer to the experience of the Chinese in Tibet. Their portrayals of the Chinese working in Tibet are entirely positive, while the Tibetans are portrayed as formerly oppressed and now liberated and making a new life, but still dirty and smelly. The Gelders make much of the eyewitness veracity of their own account of reality in Tibet, while dismissing the accounts of native Tibetans in exile in India. The Gelders seemed unaware and unconcerned about the fate of any, whether still within Tibet or in exile, who had opposed the Chinese "liberation."

The Gelders began their visit to Tibet at Kumbum, the monastery near Sining (Xining) in Gansu. They revealed that only 400 of the original 3,000 monks remained. They accepted the Chinese explanation that most of the monks had left the religious life because they had never voluntarily been part of it in the first place. They cited Chinese government financial support for the maintenance of the monastery and for old monks who were unable to work. They believed without question a Chinese official who proclaimed a generally benevolent attitude on the part of the Communist Party toward

religion and accepted that the monks had left, pilgrims no longer came, and donations were down because the lamas had lost their power to deceive and exploit the people.

The Gelders greatly exaggerated the dangers of their subsequent flight into Lhasa, in a chapter titled "Flight into Danger," in which they implied that the plane was nearly scraping the sides of mountains and battling ferocious winds all the way. They also glorified the PLA's pioneering of the air route into Tibet as well as their road building. They even portrayed the jeep ride from the airport (at that time at Damshung, near Yangpachen) as something like an expedition, all for the purpose of emphasizing the uniqueness of their journey. Throughout the rest of their account they adopt the "we were there, you weren't" attitude to bolster their opinions. They also took film equipment and made a film that they showed upon their return to England.

Upon their arrival in Lhasa they were advised to rest for a few days. However, a festival was to begin at Drepung Monastery the next day that they wanted to film. At Drepung they were taken in hand by a "tall lama who had noticed our strange faces in the crowd." They depicted this encounter as entirely serendipitous, without any possibility that it could have been stage managed, thus portraying the information they received from the lama as entirely objective and free of government interference. The Gelders made every effort to depict their visit as uncontrolled and they imagined that they were free to visit any place they wished or talk to anyone they wanted. However, as Paul Hollander's *Political Pilgrims* points out, visits to communist countries typically left nothing to chance. This was particularly the case in China. The guide was responsible for the impression the visitors received. Guides were not above misinterpretations or additions to interpretations in order to achieve the desired effect. Those to whom the visitors spoke were carefully selected, and even if they were to have an unscheduled encounter the local people were usually well aware of what they could and could not safely say.<sup>5</sup>

The Gelders were constantly accompanied by their Chinese interpreter and by local Chinese and Tibetan officials. The "tall lama" who so casually offered to escort the Gelders around Drepung was probably a carefully selected "patriotic lama" and a member of the monastery's "democratic management committee." They were not just casual visitors, after all, but the first foreigners allowed into Tibet since Anna Louise Strong three years previously. They were, like Strong, important to the Chinese for the impressions they would convey to the outside world. The Gelders, like Strong, would certainly write a book and they were making a film as well. Later, when they interviewed the remaining abbot of Drepung, they were joined by three monks who identified themselves as representatives of the National Minorities Commission.

The first thing they discovered was that only 700 of the previously 7,000 monks remained at Drepung, down from the 2,800 that Anna Louise Strong was told were there in late 1959. Besides those monks who had voluntarily left, in response to the new "religious freedom" policy, it was admitted that many Drepung monks had taken part in the revolt and had been killed or imprisoned or escaped into exile. They were told that Drepung's treasury had been seized by the government as punishment for its monks'

participation in the revolt, but that no religious object whatsoever was touched and there was no interference in the religious life of the remaining monks. They filmed the monks chanting, while commenting that the "stench of the monks, saturated with old sweat and dirt, mixed with the hot rancid fumes of burning butter and the sickly sweet and pungent smoke of incense filled their throats with nausea." They imagined that the recording they were making of the chanting might be the first and perhaps last such record of "the last and strangest theocracy in human history," because all the monks they saw were old and would not be replaced. They imagined that the Tibetan people would no longer believe in gods and demons because the lamas would no longer have the power to make them believe, and that when the last Tibetans ceased to believe in superstition the last gods and demons of Tibet would be dead.

The Gelders observed that many Lhasa Tibetans came to the festival at Drepung but that they had lost their subservience to the monks. This they imagined was better than before when the monasteries had all the economic and political power. It also, they thought, disproved the Dalai Lama's stories of religious persecution in Tibet. Seeing a young Tibetan wearing a pin with the Dalai Lama's image was for them a disproof of all his accusations. Seeing some Tibetans walking along the road with two Chinese soldiers as they left Drepung further confirmed to the Gelders the falsity of everything the Dalai Lama had said about PLA atrocities against Tibetans: "What would the Dalai Lama, with his horrific visions of torture and murder, have made of this encounter of the Communist conquerors walking unarmed on a country road with the sons and daughters or perhaps brothers and sisters of their victims whom they and their comrades had done to death, or humiliated only three years earlier because they wouldn't give up their religion." Leaving aside the real possibility that this scene was staged for the Gelders' benefit, they attempt to extrapolate far too much meaning from this one event. Like Anna Louise Strong, the Gelders were searching for evidence to prove their own bias, and they greatly exaggerated the significance of their own observations.

The Gelders were granted an interview with the Panchen Lama, who assured them that Tibet had been liberated from foreign imperialists, namely Britain and America. Taking this opportunity to demonstrate their objectivity, they reminded him that no British troops had been in Tibet since 1904 and that no American army had ever been there. They were interrupted by a Mr. Chiang, who was sitting quietly until that time in a corner of the room. Mr. Chiang, who turned out to be the deputy director of the Tibet Foreign Affairs Bureau, demanded to know why they defended imperialism. The Gelders, undeterred, questioned the Chinese justifications for being in Tibet. They even expressed the opinion in their book that the Panchen Lama was simply repeating political propaganda prepared for him by Mr. Chiang. They tried to change the subject by asking the Panchen Lama why he had become a Marxist, but this only produced a continued recitation of his prepared remarks. The Gelders then asked the Panchen if he would provide them with his written answer to the question of how Buddhism could coexist with Marxism. The Panchen appeared relieved to not have to continue his discourse, but Mr. Chiang furiously told them that they had been rude in not allowing the Panchen to say what he had wanted.

Somewhat to their surprise, a few days later the Panchen Lama sent them a written reply to their question. He said that although Buddhism and Communism were different, in that Buddhism was idealistic while Communism was materialistic, they were not inconsistent in their pursuit of a society free of oppression in which all can live an equal and happy life. He defended Buddhism against the charge that it was responsible for feudalism: "Many people believe that Buddhism was responsible for serfdom in Tibet and the oppression and exploitation of the people and that it hindered social progress. I cannot acknowledge that this is the nature of Buddhism. ... The fundamental spirit of Buddhism is that we should offer all our property and happiness to others and do our best to suppress the causes of unhappiness and pain to others. At the very least we should pray for the increase of happiness and elimination of suffering."

The Panchen Lama wrote that feudal serfdom was caused by people who were Buddhist only in name. This perversion of Buddhism had been wiped out by the Democratic Reform campaign that had ended oppression and exploitation and abolished the privileges of monasteries. The Panchen said that the government was now providing for the livelihood of all those who wanted to devote their lives to religion, including all old and invalid monks. Other able-bodied monks were required to support themselves by productive labor and they had been provided with lands for that purpose. The Panchen Lama assured them that he was there to supervise the new religious policies: "As a cadre of the People's Republic of China, I am performing my duties in accordance with the policies of the Chinese Communist Party and the Central People's Government. There is no question of any misunderstanding between me and them."

The Panchen Lama's last comment to the Gelders is tragic in retrospect. He wrote this in September or October of 1962. He had made his tour of eastern Tibet in 1961 and had seen the starvation and destruction there due to Chinese policies, none of which he conveyed to the Gelders, of course. He had written his 70,000 character petition to the Chinese Government and had submitted it in May of 1962. No doubt the reason Mr. Chiang was present at the interview with the Gelders was to ensure that the Panchen Lama would stick to the script and not reveal any of the results of his inspection tours. In fact, the tide had already turned against the Panchen Lama. Mao had criticized the Panchen in the summer of 1962 and by September he was already being criticized in Lhasa.

The Gelders next met with Ngawang Jigme Ngapo, the commander of the Tibetan Army at Chamdo who surrendered to the PLA and later signed the 17-Point Agreement. The Gelders repeated the false Chinese contention that Ngapo had full powers to negotiate with the Chinese and to conclude an agreement. In response to their question about why he fought against the PLA at Chamdo if he believed, as he then claimed, that Tibet was a part of China, Ngapo maintained that he did not want to assume the post of Governor of Chamdo in 1950 and instead had proposed that he negotiate with the "Central People's Government" at that time. He said that after being appointed to the post at Chamdo he "had not the slightest wish to conduct a war aimed at separating Tibet from the Chinese motherland." He said that he had done a great deal of work to make peace, including disbanding local militias.

The Gelders recognized that Ngapo might have been rationalizing his role. However, they preferred to believe that Ngapo was simply "persuaded by what he saw in China that only good could come to his people by socialist reforms in Tibet." They opined that it was possible that "there is no more to his defection from medieval Buddhism to Socialism than that." In defense of Ngapo's statement that Tibet was an inalienable part of China (and that he was therefore not a traitor) the Gelders cited the fact that no country had recognized Tibet's independence. The Gelders maintained that other countries' recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet was equivalent to an acquittal of Ngapo from the accusation of treason to Tibet and an acquittal of China from the accusation that it committed aggression against Tibet.

The Gelders visited the Jokhang, entering through a "rancid haze," where while tape recording the monks' chanting, in an open courtyard, Stuart Gelder nearly passed out due to the incense and butter fumes. "Overwhelmed with nausea," he had to be carried out, where his "throat retched until it was cleansed of the noxious mixture." Later he was able to recover sufficiently to visit the shrine rooms, while breathing the "smoky grease-drenched air as if through sodden blankets." The Gelders were told that the Tibetan rebels had taken refuge in the Jokhang in March 1959 and had desecrated it with their filth and rubbish. They had also supposedly injured some citizens with their random firing from the roofs. The PLA, in contrast, had cleaned up the temple and preserved its relics. All the monks they talked to said that the Chinese Communists did not believe in religion but that they treated the monks with respect and courtesy.

On the roof of the Jokhang, observing the Potala in the distance, the Gelders were moved to philosophize on the nature of Tibetan Buddhism and society: "Here, above the cloying stench of grease, butter and smoke, incense and old sweat, was a scene of natural beauty and unsurpassed human creation. It had been a world in which most human beings, enslaved by fear and ignorance, found life endurable only through the hope of a happier incarnation after death."

The Gelders descended to the streets around the Jokhang, which they found to be "a comfortless collection of mean streets flanked by flat grey stone and brown mud buildings completely bereft of charm. ... The overwhelming impression is still of dirt and squalor." However, this was better than before the Chinese came when the streets were "choked with heaps of putrid rubbish in which dead animals as well as household refuse were left to rot. Citizens squatted wherever they happened to be to defecate and urinate." The Gelders also visited the Potala, where they found that "the Chinese have confiscated the fabulous store of jewels, gold, silver and precious objects which the successive Dalai Lamas have collected through the centuries." This is in contrast to the information received by Anna Louise Strong who, in 1959, was told that the Potala treasury was intact.

Shortly after this, Roma Gelder became ill with a high fever and was treated by a Chinese doctor. The kind treatment of the Chinese doctors and nurses and the stories they told of their service in Tibet convinced the Gelders that their devotion to the health of Tibetans was evidence enough that the atrocities claimed by the Dalai Lama could not

have taken place. They remarked, "We could see for ourselves that stories of physical cruelty were ridiculous." In fact, "Chinese men and women, who according to their accusers had stood by without protest while children were forced to shoot their parents and defenseless people were cruelly done to death in the streets, were so solicitous of their patients' feelings that they were careful not to kill the vermin with which they were infested lest they should offend religious beliefs." The Gelders then told several stories of the Chinese doctors' and nurses' benevolent tolerance of their Tibetan patients' filth and stench. They commented that modern medical care, plus the abolition of monastic celibacy, would undoubtedly rapidly increase the Tibetan population.

The Gelders next visited a village in the Lhasa valley, which they maintained was chosen at random by them because they had insisted that there should be no arranged journeys. Whether this was so or not, one cannot say, since they were told things there that both confirmed and refuted typical Chinese propaganda about Tibet. In describing Tibet before the Chinese came, some of the villagers said that their landlord had essentially left them alone after they had paid their taxes. They could do what they liked with the land except that the landlord told them what crops to grow. The villagers denied that any of them had been punished for failure to pay debts or that any had been tortured or killed. They couldn't leave the land without the landlord's permission, but they didn't know anyone who had wanted to leave. They said that they were now better off, except that this year the crops had suffered from the worst rains for fifty years. They were told that the PLA had never taken any food from Tibetans and had helped the villagers with their harvests. The Gelders noticed that the PLA's horses and mules looked starved while those of the villagers were well-fed; they were told that this was not neglect on the part of the PLA, but because the PLA would not even take fodder from Tibetans.

In the next chapter, "Facts about Food," the authors attempted to address the issue of reported famine in China and Tibet and of Chinese migration to Tibet. In an interview with the Chinese head of the Tibetan Bureau of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry they were told that there were indeed food shortages in Tibet (TAR) but that this was entirely due to adverse weather conditions, supposedly too much rainfall (in arid Tibet, and for the past three years!). The official claimed that production had actually increased since the Democratic Reform campaign but was still held back by the Tibetans' reluctance to adopt advanced methods. Shortages were entirely due to weather, he claimed, and had nothing to do with the increase in the number of Han Chinese in Tibet, which he said was only 40,000 civilians, a surprisingly large number actually, given that military personnel presumably still outnumbered civilians just three years after the revolt.

Despite 1962 being the third year of the Great Leap famine, during which an estimated 30 million Chinese died of starvation, the Gelders were either unaware of this or chose to ignore it. Even in Tibet the Panchen Lama had witnessed starvation on a massive scale, mostly in Tibetan areas outside the TAR, where the Gelders did not visit, but also within the TAR due to the disruptions caused by the implementation of state control over all food production and distribution. Even the official whom the Gelders interviewed admitted that shortages had been made up by the confiscation of landlords' and monasteries' grain supplies. This evidence that there were surpluses in the past, in



contrast to the current shortages, was rationalized as simply due to the landlords' hoarding of grain while the serfs were starving. However, this was contradicted by the Panchen Lama and other Tibetans, all of whom denied that there had ever been famine in Tibet before the Chinese occupation.

The Gelders' only response to the admitted food shortages in Tibet was, like the Chinese, to contrast this situation with the supposed horrors of the past. However, in their attempt to maintain some semblance of objectivity they declared themselves able to see through the worst of Chinese propaganda: "The cruelty and rapacity of some landlords may have been exaggerated by the Chinese Communists. Obviously there were many who, while they saw no evil in a system which was in itself cruel and unjust, were not personally malicious and had pity on the condition of their people so that they would not treat them with the brutality which propaganda sometimes ascribes to all serf-owners."

The Gelders were introduced to the former mayor of Lhasa, the brother-in-law of Ngawang Jigme Ngapo, who was apparently intended to impress them with the fact that free speech was still allowed in Tibet. The mayor, "Cha Teh," (Tseteh) was portrayed as an independent intellectual, although he parroted the major themes of Chinese propaganda about Tibet. He said that the serf-owners had only themselves to blame for imagining that the serfs would support those who enslaved them in a contest with those who came to liberate them. The revolt in Tibet, he said, was "a revolt by the rich and privileged against the poor and underprivileged. It was not a struggle by one country against another. It had nothing to do with Tibetan patriotism." The mayor complained only that too many Tibetans had been arrested after the revolt, some 10,000 he said, some of whom were innocent of any desire to overthrow the government. Some of them were still being held, he said, without formal accusation or trial, and should be released. This openness was cited by the Gelders as evidence that freedom of speech was alive and well in Tibet: "In a country where any opposition was said to be ruthlessly and instantly crushed, here was an important Tibetan member of the local government who was not afraid of speaking his mind."

So impressed were the Gelders with this Tibetan's remarks that they conveyed his complaints upon their return to Beijing to Chen Yi, the then foreign minister who had inaugurated the Preparatory Committee in a visit to Lhasa in 1956, and to other Chinese officials. Chen and the other Chinese to whom they spoke were disappointing in their reactions: "Instead of welcoming his opinions as proof of free speech, [they] complained that "Cha Teh" was still a class-conscious nobleman who was mistakenly sympathetic to rebels."

Not content with the trouble they had already caused to "Cha Teh," the Gelders arranged to see him again (where is not clear). They found him "now certainly more concerned to excuse inconsiderate Chinese behavior than on the previous occasion." He was "anxious we should not assume from our first talk that he was accusing the government of deliberate injustice to innocent citizens who had been imprisoned after the rebellion and were still awaiting trial. He was sure that responsible officials were doing their best." Still, they found it impossible to believe that he would be diverted from the

truth for fear of falling into official disfavor. As they said in his defense, and could have said in defense of the Panchen Lama had they known of his similar criticisms, "his Chinese critics should have been grateful for a man whose denials of the atrocities they were accused of committing were more convincing than their own because he also didn't fear to protest against their lesser, but still objectionable, failings." Tseteh was, according to Jigme Ngapo, son of Ngawang Jigme Ngapo and nephew of Tseteh, persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, probably at least partly for these criticisms. Both he and his wife died during the Cultural Revolution, though due to precisely what circumstances is unknown.<sup>6</sup>

The Gelders prided themselves not only on their supposed objectivity and the uniqueness of their eyewitness accounts of Tibet but also on their preparation for their visit by studying Tibetan history. Unfortunately, a primary source for their study was the accounts of the participants in the British invasion of Lhasa in 1904, from which they picked out the most negative comments about Tibetan society and the evils of Tibetan Buddhism. Still, they found themselves better informed about Tibet than some of the young activists, both Chinese and Tibetan, with whom they came into contact in Lhasa: "To impress us with their achievements, both Chinese and Tibetans who supported the new order sometimes exaggerated the disadvantages of the old, but more often than not we found the younger Communists were not so much trying to deceive us with propaganda as being themselves deceived by their own ignorance of the past. For example, while the great majority of Tibetans were illiterate, more could read and write than some of our informants would have us believe. Some of them were recent arrivals themselves and before they came had probably read less about conditions in Tibet than ourselves." Presumably they were speaking not only of the Chinese but of the thousands of young Tibetans who had been schooled in China and returned to Tibet after the revolt. The Chinese students tended to be entirely ignorant of Tibet and even many of the Tibetan students knew little but the propaganda they had been taught in China.

While still imagining that all the places they visited and the people to whom they spoke were at their own choice, the Gelders continued to question the excesses of Chinese propaganda. As they wrote, "When we asked to look into any particular situation they made no attempt to divert our attention only to those things they wished us to see and which they thought would reflect credit on them. So when we wanted to see schools, they didn't select them for us but left us to make our own arrangements." By "us" of course they must have included their guides and interpreter, since the Gelders themselves would have had no idea about what places to visit or to whom to talk. Nevertheless, they questioned such excesses as the stories they, and Anna Louise Strong before them, were told about how villagers were forced to supply women for lamas and monks during their tax collection tours. They were told the same story of how one Drepung lama and his retinue had raped all the women of sixty families. They recognized that there was the possibility of some Communist exaggeration in such stories and that "rape is one of the most popular of propaganda weapons." They could believe that the Chinese were ready to believe the worst of lamas and monks, but they also credited some of this to "the exaggeration with which Tibetans delight to embellish their stories." They also recognized that "Tibetans were very ready to tell listeners what they think they would

like to hear," without knowing that those former serfs with the worst stories of abuse, or the best from the Chinese point of view, had been encouraged to elaborate their stories and had made careers out of telling their tales to Chinese, Tibetans, and foreign visitors.

Instead, the Gelders used this supposed Tibetan propensity for exaggeration to discredit the stories of Tibetan refugees in India about the atrocities committed by the Chinese. Elsewhere, they say that "it is not impossible that in suppressing rebellion human beings should behave with the savagery described by the Dalai Lama, who learned of it by hearsay," but, "we do not require evidence from Peking that the Chinese People's Liberation Army is one of the best disciplined and behaved in the world." The Gelders cite Robert Ford, the English radio operator who was captured at Chamdo in 1950 and who said that the PLA did not destroy any monasteries or mistreat Tibetans, at least at that time and in that area. By all accounts the PLA was well-behaved during its entry into eastern Tibet, but this is hardly evidence that they were so tolerant after the revolt began in that area in 1956.

The authors opined that if the Chinese had liberated the Tibetan serfs in 1951, instead of waiting for the feudal lords to accept reforms and thereby allowing them to foment rebellion, then "it is possible the revolt would never have taken place for then the serfs would have welcomed them as liberators from their bondage." Despite their purported objectivity the Gelders did not question that the nature of the serf system was as bad as Chinese propaganda claimed or that Tibetan nationalism was not really a factor. They also accept as fact that the Chinese allowed the Dalai Lama to escape to India:

When the Chinese discovered that the Dalai Lama had gone they made no attempt to pursue him. There was only one way for him to go—to India. The routes in this wild country over which it was possible to travel by horse were well known. There would have been no difficulty in overtaking his party, including his mother, other elderly people and children, who couldn't be expected to ride like cavalymen. In fact, his movements were followed by observation aircraft and his arrival in India was reported by Peking radio before it was known in Delhi.

All of this is merely the Gelders' speculation, informed by nothing more than their belief that the Chinese were all-competent and all-knowing while the Tibetans were too primitive to fool the Chinese even in an escape from their own country. Other authors have made similar assurances based upon the same assumptions. In fact, the Chinese did not know about the fate of the Dalai Lama until the revolt had ended. His escape was the international story of the year and a huge embarrassment to China. The Dalai Lama's escape route took him through territory entirely controlled by the Tibetan resistance and it was a barely used route that emerged to the east of Bhutan rather than the usual route that entered India between Bhutan and Sikkim. The only aircraft that flew over the escape party was one chartered by an enterprising British journalist out of India. Upon reaching the Indian border the CIA-trained radio operators who had joined his party contacted the Americans, who arranged for his entry into India. The announcement of his escape was made by the Indians, not the Chinese.

The Gelders ended their book by dismissing the accounts of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan refugees about Chinese atrocities. They wrote: "During our journeys we discovered no fact to justify the accusation that they were oppressing, let alone destroying the Tibetan people. Instead we saw how they had improved their condition." To discredit the accounts of refugees they reverted to the opinion that the average Tibetan's "view of 'truth' bears no relation to what the west would regard as valid evidence ... The Tibetan peasant has been accustomed from his cradle to accepting legend and fairy tale as literal truth." They imagined that the Dalai Lama had made such charges only because his life in exile could only have purpose if he could believe that his people were suffering such cruelties. However, based upon their superior knowledge from their eyewitness tour of Tibet, they hoped that "the day will come when he will know, as we saw, that this image of his country is as illusory as the happy Shangri-la which existed only in the imagination of those who have never been there and in which no Tibetan ever lived."

Such was the Gelders' confidence that they had discovered the truth of Tibet that they imagined they knew the situation there better than did the Dalai Lama, because they were eyewitnesses while his information was only hearsay, derived from unreliable Tibetan refugees whose tendency to exaggerate was well known. However, many of their "eyewitness" accounts came from those same Tibetans who were presumably still prone to exaggerate and who were under intense political pressure, unacknowledged by the Gelders, to parrot the Chinese point of view. The Gelders also neglected the fact that the accounts collected by the International Commission of Jurists in India covered the entire period of the Tibetan revolt, from 1956 to 1959, most of which time the Dalai Lama was in Tibet and in a much better position to understand the situation there than were the Gelders, based upon a two-month visit in 1962. Many of the atrocities of which Tibetans spoke took place in Eastern Tibet between 1956 and 1959.

The Gelders were so confident in their objectivity and perspicacity that they imagined they could not be deceived. However, this is disputed by at least one Tibetan who was there at the time. Kunsang Paljor was one of the young Tibetans sent to China for schooling in the 1950s. After the 1959 revolt he and many of the Tibetan students in China were returned to Tibet. He worked at the *Tibet Daily* from that time until 1969 when he fled to India. Kunsang Paljor revealed that a special notice was given to Tibetans in preparation for the Gelders' visit:

Some foreign visitors will come to Tibet from Peking very soon. No one is allowed to talk to them without a specifically approved reason. Only Chinese officials along the route of their visit have the authority to speak to the foreigners. If there are any unpleasant disturbances the criminals will have to bear full responsibility. Everybody must wear the *chuba* and look happy.<sup>7</sup>

According to Kunsang Paljor, when the Gelders arrived in Tibet many Tibetans wanted to pour out their grievances to them but were unable to do so:

Because of the intense suspicion that the Tibetans might seize a chance to hint at suppressed facts of life in Tibet, the Chinese were very particular about the

preparations for the Gelders' visit. To this end the Chinese succeeded in leaving the visitors ignorant about the real conditions in Tibet. The Tibetans, on the other hand, felt that since the foreigners did not know Tibetan, it was difficult to tell them about their grievances even if the opportunity was available.<sup>8</sup>

Kunsang Paljor said that the Gelders' interpreters were briefed to ignore any Tibetan who attempted to make unauthorized contact with them. He said that Drepung was reopened just for the Gelders' benefit. Thus, the ceremony there that was attended by many Lhasa Tibetans and presented by the Gelders as evidence of religious freedom was a staged event. This information substantiates the probability that their encounter with the "tall lama" was also staged. Another Tibetan, Chomphel Sonam, wrote that "during the arrival last year [1962] of some British newspaper reporters" the remaining monks of Drepung were allowed to hold religious assemblies in order to show the visitors that the Chinese were respecting religious pursuits of the Tibetans.<sup>9</sup> Kunsang Paljor said that some of the "liberated serfs" with whom the Gelders spoke were semiprofessional propagandists cultivated and instructed by the Chinese in the accounts they should relate. He said that many of the sites to which the Gelders were taken were showpieces specially set up by the Chinese for propaganda purposes. He also said that the Gelders shared the typical Chinese opinion of the uncleanness of Tibetans while ignoring many of the similarly unclean habits of the Chinese.

Kunsang Paljor wrote that he was astonished upon his arrival in India to find that the Gelders had written a book in which they "had swallowed the Chinese lies and glib talk without reservation." He said that the Chinese had exploited the Gelders in order to deceive the world about Tibet and that the Gelders were nothing more than apologists for the Chinese atrocities in Tibet. He said that the "timely rain" that the Chinese brought to Tibet was a "savage flood which destroyed our religion, culture, customs and everything dear to us." And he condemned the Chinese as "in the whole world the cleverest nation at lying and deception."

The Gelders were the victims of their own hubris but, no doubt, they could hardly imagine the lengths to which the Chinese would go to deceive them. As Paul Hollander has written in *Political Pilgrims*, foreign visitors to communist countries were usually carefully selected for their predisposition toward the socialist cause. They were seduced by being lavishly entertained and treated with the importance they imagined they deserved but did not receive in their own societies. Their guides were usually Communist Party members, and those to whom they were allowed to speak were carefully selected and prepared. Elaborate facades were created to impress them and events stage-managed beyond their ability to comprehend. Hollander wrote that local people were rarely willing to challenge the official version of reality in encounters with foreigners:

This is all the more the case since the guides and interpreters accompanying the visitors are more than just guides and interpreters; they are in effect

government officials with some authority of which the citizens are well aware. It is in totalitarian societies that the art of such impression management reaches its fullest fruition as a result of the prevailing official belief in the controllability and interdependence of all aspects of reality and the corresponding policies designed to maximize controls over the most diverse aspects of social existence. ... Of course, all societies prefer to show their brighter side to foreign visitors, but the eagerness and determination to do so increase with the growth of those areas and aspects of life over which the government claims authority and responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

Hollander also writes that such regimes resort to deception because of a fundamental belief in the ultimate superiority of their system, the evidence for which may have not yet become manifest:

Certain of the essential superiority of their regime, the leaders will spare no effort to demonstrate its excellence. They sincerely believe that blemishes and "temporary shortcomings" need not be displayed and may legitimately be denied. They will, at any event, disappear at some future date, so why not anticipate the future, as it were through the techniques of hospitality? ... The visitors should see things the way they are supposed to be, or going to be, not the way they are. And since there are no moral absolutes, no universal moral standards, "truth" and "reality" are relative and everything is moral that hastens the triumph of "socialism," including measures that will help to spread its good reputation to countries where the forces of progress have yet to succeed. Hence there will be no moral scruples in the way of rearranging reality.<sup>11</sup>

Those chosen to receive such tours were also chosen for their willingness to participate in this rearrangement of reality for the sake of the advancement of socialism. The Gelders certainly fell into this category of socialist sympathizers, despite their pretense to complete objectivity. Despite their belief that they had contributed to exposing the truth about Tibet, the primary effect of the Gelders' visit, their book and film, was to further obfuscate the issue. While it may have been hard for many impartial observers to accept that the account of two British journalists was more believable than that of the Dalai Lama and numerous Tibetan refugees, the Gelders did contribute to an attitude of dismissal of refugees' accounts as unreliable because of bias and exaggeration. Since China controlled almost all information about Tibet except that of refugees, it was difficult to disprove the Chinese and Chinese sympathizers' version of reality. This situation was to substantially prevail until the early 1980s when Tibet opened up to the outside world.

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1. Stuart and Roma Gelder, *The Timely Rain: Travels in New Tibet* (London: Hutchinson, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Anna Louise Strong, an American communist sympathizer, went to Tibet in late 1959. She wrote a book, *When Serfs Stood Up in Tibet* (Beijing: New World Press, 1960).

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2. This refers to the International Commission of Jurists, whose 1959 report, *The Question of Tibet and the Rule of Law* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1959), and 1960 report, *Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1960), interviewed the Dalai Lama and 55 Tibetan refugees in India and concluded that in regard to the question of genocide there was sufficient evidence to accuse China of attempting to destroy Tibetans as a religious group but insufficient evidence to conclude that China intended to destroy Tibetans as a national or ethnic group.
  3. Dalai Lama, *My Land and My People* (New York: Potala Press, 1983), 212.
  4. Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba 1928-1978* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1983), 372-389.
  5. Jigme Ngapo, personal communication, Washington, DC, 2006.
  6. Kunsang Paljor, *Tibet, the Undying Flame* (Dharamsala: Information Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1977), 71.
  7. Paljor, *Undying Flame*, 72.
  8. Statement of Chomphel Sonam, in *Tibet under Chinese Communist Rule: A Compilation of Refugee Statements* (Dharamsala: Information and Publicity Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1976), 89.
  9. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, 348.
  10. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, 389.