

BOOK REVIEW

LIFE IN THE RED FLAG PEOPLE'S COMMUNE

BY

DHONDUB CHOEDON

A COMPILATION OF A SERIES OF PROGRAMS

ON

RADIO FREE ASIA

TIBETAN SERVICE

BY

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LIFE IN THE RED FLAG PEOPLE'S COMMUNE

By Dhondub Choedon

Dhondub Choedon was born in 1942 in the Nyethang district of the Lhoka region of Tibet. Her family was what the Chinese would later call among the serf class, since they belonged to the estate of Dhargyal Ling Monastery, which was part of the Labrang (monastic estate) of Ling Rinpoche. They were one of twenty families who had to do labor for the Dhargyal Ling Monastery in order to provide food for the monks. In 1959 her family was favored during the Democratic Reforms Campaign because they were of the lowest class. She was made a member of a song and dance troupe and made to sing songs in praise of Chairman Mao and socialism. She became a member and then the leader of the Communist Youth League. She was then made the political representative of her village in 1962, and during the border war with India of that year she was a brigade leader of Tibetans made to carry supplies for the Chinese. In 1965 she became an administrator of the Red Flag People's Commune in the Nyethang area. In 1973 she and her husband escaped from Tibet, leaving behind two children. In 1978 she wrote this short account of her life in the Red Flag Commune.

Dhondub Choedon writes that when she was a child there were six members in their family. Three had to do what was called *wulag* service for the monastery, which meant doing seasonal farm labor or caring for animals that belonged to the monastery or carrying grain or trade goods for the monastery. Two did not have to do *wulag* service, so they worked as hired hands for pay, and the sixth member of the family, her grandfather, did the household chores. Those who did *wulag* labor for the Dhargyal Ling Monastery could escape from the work requirement by providing a substitute or by working for one full month and paying 3 *khel* of grain. (*Khel* was a volume measurement that varied somewhat but was about 28-31 pounds for barley.)

The family had their own plots of land that belonged to the monastery, on which they could grow their own grain and use to pay off their *wulag* requirement if they had a surplus. She says that the labor requirement, which was like a tax or rent on the land belonging to the monastery, was not too difficult. The worst part of the system was that they were tied to the land that belonged not to them but to the monastery. One could just run away, of course, since there was no enforcement mechanism to prevent anyone leaving or any means to make them return. There were also legal means to escape the bondage to the monastery by becoming a monk or joining the Tibetan Army.

The author says that those who were bound to render wulag service to the monastery were said to be the descendants of former monks who had married and thus forsaken their vows. The monastery was some distance from the fields and pastures that it owned, so a monk representative was sent to oversee planting and harvesting of crops. Those doing this wulag service for the monastery were given their meals by the monastery when doing so. She says that she had never seen a monk abusing any of the villagers and that except for this supervision and work requirement they were able to manage their own private lives.

Her home was a two story house with a walled compound. The ground floor of the house was used for their animals, which included 4 yak, 27 sheep and goats, and 2 donkeys. They killed about six sheep each year for meat. They had land sufficient to plant four and one half khel of seed and they harvested 70 khel of barley. Another 36 khel of barley was earned by the two members of the family who hired out their labor. They sold 3 khel of surplus butter for another six khel of barley. In their spare time they wove blankets and made bags for grain, which they sold for 10 khel of barley. They also made shoes which they sold for 6 khel of grain. The total income of the family was thus 126 khel of barley. Counting the food that was given by the monastery to those members of the family doing wulag service, they had about 42 khel of barley per year for each member of the family. They killed about six sheep annually and had plenty of milk, butter, and wool. They had no difficulty in earning their livelihood.

Dhondub Choedon says that they used to celebrate many festivals and enjoy themselves. Losar was a five day festival, during which they enjoyed meat, *khabzes* (fried bread), and *chang* (barley beer). In the evenings they drank chang and danced. During another festival in the fifth month, *Saga Dawa*, they were fed and entertained by the monastery for three days. They had freedom to visit relatives in other areas or to go on religious pilgrimages.

The Chinese came to her area in 1959. They declared that henceforth there would no longer be people either too rich or too poor. There were many rich and aristocratic families nearby, whose wealth would presumably be shared with the poorest, like her family, so she and her family were initially happy. But their hopes for a happy future were mixed with a certain fear, she says. They had never seen any Chinese before and they wondered if they spoke the truth. They also wondered how many soldiers they would bring and what their real aims were in coming to Tibet. Above all, they hoped that they would not stay long.

She was only 18 at the time and did not understand the political significance of the Chinese invasion. When they arrived in Nyethang they occupied the Dhargyal Ling Monastery and made it their headquarters. Some monks were executed, some were imprisoned, some sent to labor camps, and the rest were secularized and sent home. The Chinese declared that serf families like hers were liberated. They confiscated one nearby estate and redistributed the land. Her family got additional land sufficient to plant 4 and a half khels of grain. (The amount of seed

that could be planted varied according to the fertility of the soil.) They already had that same amount of land, which legally belonged to the monastery, but that they used as their own, so their land was doubled. However, the Chinese confiscated all of the wealth of the monastery and did not redistribute any of it. The valuable statues and metal implements were taken away in trucks and the Chinese used other items such as carpets in their offices.

Because she was young she did whatever she was told to do. She was made a member of a song and dance troupe. In 1961 the Chinese started a school at the former Bentzang Monastery and she underwent political indoctrination there for three months. She was then made the political representative of her village in 1962, and during the border war with India of that year she was a brigade leader of Tibetans made to carry supplies for the Chinese. Communes were introduced in her district in 1965 but were delayed until much later in most other places because of the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

Dhondub Choedon says that her account of life in Tibet is contrary to that of Chinese propaganda and also of the few foreigners who were allowed to come to Tibet in those years. She seems particularly critical of the foreigners, who she says blindly accepted whatever the Chinese told them about the reality in Tibet. She understood that the Chinese would lie about what they were doing in Tibet, but she expected that the foreigners would be more objective. However, the foreigners wanted to believe in the potential for the creation of a socialist paradise, which is what the Chinese said they were doing, so they were prepared to accept whatever they were told.

The first chapter of Dhondub Choedon's book is about the Democratic Reform. She and her family were the supposed beneficiaries of what the Chinese called democratic reform because they were of the former serf class. They remained in the same house and their land was doubled from that sufficient to plant 4 1/2 khels of barley to 9 khels. They still had 4 yak, 27 sheep and goats and 2 donkeys, but they also acquired one horse. They could now grow 140 khel of barley on their land, which was more than the 126 khel they made before from their land plus some side occupations. However, three of the six members of the family formerly did wulag service for the monastery during which they were fed, which essentially doubled the barley supply for the family to about 250 khel per year, or 42 khel for each member of the family.

The 140 khel they now had as a result of the Democratic Reform was already less than what they had before. However, from this 140 khel 7 khel were taken as *Chetral*, or Loving the Nation Tax. Another 35 khel were taken under what was called Surplus Grain Sales, which was supposed to be saved for years of low crop production but which was actually used to feed the Chinese cadres and the PLA. Her family was left with only 16 khel of barley per person, which was less than half of the previous 42 khel per person.

Redistribution of the property of landowners and monasteries was also of little benefit to her family. The Chinese divided all that was confiscated from the former exploiting classes into what they called “wealth of production” and “wealth of livelihood” categories. Wealth of production included livestock and farming implements. Out of this category her family got one horse. Wealth of livelihood included clothes, houses, and household implements. Her family got some of the tools of a butcher, which were not of much use to them. All other types of wealth, including all items made of metal and all gold, silver, and precious jewels from the monastery or private chapels was confiscated and taken away to China. Even the best of the horses, clothes, and household implements confiscated from private houses was kept by the Chinese for their own use. They justified this by saying that the wealth of the exploiters was confiscated for the benefit of the people, meaning all the Chinese people and not just Tibetans.

Tibetans who worked for the Chinese acquired some of the things confiscated from the so-called exploiters. They also ate better and had more money so they could buy things, including food and some of the confiscated articles that later appeared for sale. The Chinese in Tibet also used their position to acquire private wealth, which included some of the items confiscated from the aristocrats and the monasteries.

Dhondub Choedon was willing to work for the Chinese at first because of their promises to eliminate the inequalities in Tibetan society. However, she found that not only did the Chinese not eliminate the old inequality, but they instituted a new regime of inequality of which they and their collaborators were the primary beneficiaries. She learned that their real purpose in Tibet was not to liberate Tibetans from exploitation and inequality but to control Tibet and Tibetans and to impose themselves as a new ruling class.

Previously, her village had been poor, but it was in a beautiful place and almost everyone was happy. There was a great deal of personal freedom, limited only by the requirement to labor on the lands belonging to the monastery. However, after what the Chinese called democratic reforms there was no happiness and no personal freedoms.

Her village was at a relatively high altitude, filled with green meadows and surrounded in the distance by forests. It was a beautiful place. There were no beggars; starvation was unheard of and they had few worries. The land was quite prosperous and peaceful. They had their own language, religion, culture, and traditions. There was an obvious inequality in the serf system, which is why she at first cooperated with the Chinese and believed in their reforms. However, she saw that the reforms brought by the Chinese did not improve conditions for most Tibetans.

In the old days people worked hard but were happy and often sang and danced. People were able to freely express their thoughts and move about freely. Even the serfs had many freedoms. The relationship between the serfs and their masters was usually friendly, and the

masters usually took responsibility to feed the serfs in times of shortage. Whatever wealth there was, was owned by Tibetans. In times of shortage or hardship at least they knew that Tibet belonged to Tibetans and Tibet was an independent country. The importance of this could only be fully appreciated once their freedom was lost and they lived under an alien rule, in which there was nothing they could call their own and no ancestral heritage that they were permitted to value.

In late 1965 her area was made into one of the first communes in Tibet. There were 120 families, consisting of 675 persons, including 18 former monks and 7 former Tibetan Army soldiers. Since their commune, named the Red Flag Commune, was the first in their area, it was given some assistance from the government, including 10 pigs, 5 Mongolian sheep, 2 donkeys, and several carts. Whatever had previously been given to the poorest families during Democratic Reform was now included in the common commune property. Everything now theoretically belonged in common to the Tibetans, but the Chinese gave all the orders and made all the decisions.

Overall production in the commune area increased, mostly because Tibetans were driven to work harder, but they did not have any more food because the surplus was always taken by the Chinese in the form of a variety of taxes. The so-called great change that the Chinese had said would make Tibetans the masters of their own house actually resulted in the Chinese having power over everything in Tibet. In the commune everyone was under constant watch and anyone who criticized the commune was denounced during class struggle meetings and also subjected to individual “struggle,” or *thamzing*. Everyone was required to criticize and inform on others lest they also be publically subjected to *thamzing*. There was no more freedom of thought or opinion. There was no more leisure time in which Tibetans could engage in activities like religion or enjoy their usual cultural festivals with singing and dancing. Although they were constantly told that they had been liberated from the inequalities of the old social and political system, they now had no liberties at all and were instead essentially serfs of the Chinese.

Dhondub Choedon was particularly aware of the comparison between the old and new systems in Tibet. Her family had been among the lowest social class, having been serfs to the local Dhargyal Ling Monastery. She was recruited by the Chinese to serve as a local official and she was trained in the new social and political system. Her family was among the supposed beneficiaries of the so-called democratic reforms. However, she discovered that their condition did not improve due to the democratic reform or due to the institution of the commune. In addition, something far more important was lost. All of their personal freedoms were lost and the freedom of Tibet was lost to the Chinese.

In the commune system they had less to eat than they had before the Chinese came to Tibet. Everything was based on work points, and those who could not work, meaning children

and the old, got no work points at all. Each worker could get no more than 14 khels of grain, which was not enough for subsistence for a worker, plus they had to support the nonworking members of the family. Part of their work points was paid out in Yuan, which had to be used to supplement their food supply and to provide for all their other needs, including household needs and clothing. Since this amount was always insufficient, they had to borrow from the commune, leaving them in permanent debt.

Previously, poor Tibetans were indebted to landlords or monasteries. Now they were indebted to the commune, which supposedly they themselves had organized and which was intended to benefit each of the members equally. However, the commune members found they were forced to work harder and subsist on less, while the Chinese took all the surplus. Tibetans used to have money to spend on traditional festivals or for donations to the monasteries, but the Chinese had now prohibited all the traditional festivals and destroyed the monasteries. The Chinese claimed that Tibetans had achieved control over their own affairs and were no longer exploited by the upper classes and the monasteries, but the reality was that they now had less on which to subsist and fewer freedoms and were exploited by the Chinese.

The commune was run by Tibetan Communist Party members who took their instructions from higher level officials, who were almost all Chinese. The Tibetan commune leaders were a chairman and eight other members. The commune leaders were instructed to study Marxism-Leninism and Mao's Thought, to serve the Chinese nation, to abide by the rules of the CCP, to conduct criticism and self-criticism, to keep the secrets of the Party, to educate the non-Party members, to put the interests of the Party above their own personal interests, to analyze all matters from a Marxist perspective, to carry out the orders of the Party, to value the Party above one's own life and to follow the leadership of the Party to lead the masses from socialism to communism. They had no right to criticize the Party or any of its decisions.

Tibetan commune leaders were chosen by the Chinese. They were theoretically elected by all the members of the commune, but the Chinese arranged these so-called elections so that only their choices could be elected. Only those of the lowest of the six class divisions, the former serfs, were eligible for election as commune leaders. Each of the five production brigades of the Red Flag Commune were allowed to suggest candidates for leadership positions. All of the commune members were then divided into small groups to discuss the qualifications of each of the nominees. However, the Chinese authorities had already decided who they wanted to be elected, based mostly upon their loyalty to the Chinese administration. Each of the small group discussions was led by a higher official who led the discussion so as to praise and to favor the candidate they wanted and to criticize and reject those they did not want. The discussions in the small groups would go on until it was obvious to everyone who the higher authorities wanted, and then everyone would vote for the approved candidates. The Chinese could thus claim that

Tibetans had achieved democracy and self-rule, when in fact all decisions were made by the Chinese themselves.

The Chinese also appointed the leaders of other organizations in the commune. The members of these organizations were like the commune leaders in that they had to obey the orders of the Party and could not criticize the Party. Primary among these subsidiary organizations was the Communist Youth Party. There were about 33 of the youths in the commune chosen for this organization. They were supposed to lead other youths to support the revolution in Tibet and to appreciate the benefits of the socialist system. Their specific responsibilities were to study Marxism-Leninism and the Thoughts of Mao; to serve the Chinese people; to promote the Communist Youth Party by making friends with youths of other nationalities; to obey the rules of the Party and to put its interest above their own personal interests; to expose the faults of themselves and others by means of criticism and self-criticism; to pursue class struggle; to study politics and socialist culture; and to carry out their responsibilities given to them by the CCP. They were also supposed to criticize the Dalai Lama and the “three big serf-owners” and to praise the CCP for its liberation of Tibet from the old oppressive system.

The Tibetan youth leaders were instructed to lead the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution, which started in 1966. They were supposed to attack and destroy the old Tibetan culture and to spread the new Chinese Socialist culture. They were to lead the “Destroy the Four Olds” campaign (meaning old habits, old customs, old traditions, and old culture). They were to promote and enforce the ban on traditional Tibetan songs and dances and traditional festivals. They should discourage merry-making among friends or relatives. They were to enforce the ban on old Tibetan style clothes and hairstyles. Women were not supposed to wear jewelry. No one was allowed to practice religion by praying to gods, or doing prostrations, or telling prayer beads, or burning butter lamps, or consulting oracles, or putting up prayer flags. No one could have private shrines with *thangkas* (religious paintings in scroll form) or statues or any other religious articles. They should lead the others in learning Chinese and in introducing Chinese slogans and phrases into the Tibetan language. They were supposed to learn and to sing Chinese socialist songs and were not to sing Tibetan songs.

The youth leaders were also to lead the “Destroy the Four Pests” campaign. The four pests to be destroyed were usually enumerated as sparrows, flies, mice, and rats, but Dhondub Choedon says that in the Red Flag Commune the youths also had to kill all dogs, cats, and birds. This campaign was supposed to eliminate pests that ate food supplies, but it was also meant to teach the youth to be merciless rather than compassionate as Tibetan Buddhism taught and to commit the sin of killing that Buddhism prohibited.

The Tibetan youth leaders were told that they were the future leaders of Tibet because they were not corrupted by the old society like their parents. They were to be like a blank slate upon which the new culture could be written. They were taught that the CCP was more like true parents to them than their real parents. They were told to inform upon their parents for any old thoughts like practicing religion, or for any criticisms of the Chinese or the CCP.

Other organizations in the commune included a Youth League of younger Tibetans, a Poor Farmers League, a People's Militia, a Women's Federation, and a Commune School. The Communist Youth Party and the Youth League were supposed to lead other youth to support the Communist Party and to inform upon those who opposed the Party or the Chinese presence in Tibet.

The Poor Farmer's League, being composed of about 200 members, all of the former lowest classes, were supposed to naturally oppose the old society and favor the new because of their former class status.

The People's Militia was made up of about 120 members, both men and women, who were supposed to support the PLA and to expose class enemies and spies. Class enemies were anyone who opposed the Chinese and their reforms of Tibetan society; spies were any who expressed any support or even reverence for the Dalai Lama. The Militia was used during the 1962 border war with India to carry supplies for the Chinese PLA. Dhondub Choedon herself was one of those made to carry supplies during the border war. They were also intended to carry out guerrilla warfare against the enemy, but were never used in this way because the Chinese did not trust their loyalty.

The Women's Federation was supposed to promote women's liberation from the conservatism of old Tibetan society. Mainly this meant that women were supposed to "support half the sky" by doing equal work with men. They were also supposed to be liberated from marriage customs of the past, which meant that they could choose their own marriage partners rather than having them chosen by their families. However, what this meant in practice was that they were to choose partners of a good class and political status. Good class status meant lower class, while good political status meant loyalty to the Party. Tibetan women were also encouraged to marry Chinese since they were the most loyal to the Party and had supposedly selflessly come to Tibet to help Tibetans.

The Commune school had one teacher and about 70 students. None of the formerly upper class, who were often well-educated, were allowed to be teachers. Teachers had to be of lower class status and were therefore usually not well educated and therefore unable to be good teachers. Only about 10 percent of the students were selected for any higher education outside the commune and this was based upon their class status rather than on merit.

One chapter of Dhondub Choedon's book is titled "The Essence of the People's Commune." In this chapter she summarizes how the Chinese explained the communes to her as one of the designated leaders of the Red Flag Commune. The communes were promoted with slogans like "May the People's Commune flourish for ten thousand years," "The People's Commune is the Golden Bridge to Socialism where there is no oppression or exploitation," and "The People's Commune is a Socialist Paradise."

She writes that although the Chinese promoted the commune as an exercise of Tibetan democracy and self-determination, the reality was that all power resided with the sub-district Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and the Party branch within the commune. The CCP served the purposes of the Chinese rulers and not that of the local Tibetan people. In fact, no Tibetan could oppose the commune or any of the decisions of the Chinese officials without being accused of opposing Socialism and being an "enemy of the people," the people being the supposed beneficiaries of Socialism.

Dhondub Choedon says that the Chinese CCP chairman of the local sub-district, Tan Hru-chi, told her that her role as a chairman in the administration of the Red Flag Commune was like being a shepherd. As a shepherd she was supposed to look after her sheep and keep them well and protected, but she was also supposed to discipline wayward individuals for the benefit of the rest. The means of discipline were to include class struggle meetings and the discipline or purge of those who opposed or disrupted the smooth functioning of the commune.

Despite total Chinese control over the commune in regard to all policies, when problems arose the Chinese took no responsibility. Problems were supposed to be resolved by the Tibetan commune leaders. Dhondub Choedon complained to Tan Hru-chi about food shortages but was told that it was wrong to take local problems to the higher authorities. He said that the CCP authorities had bigger responsibilities, like promoting the liberation of the rest of the peoples of the world. Even though the local problems like food shortages were caused by the Party's policies, the solution to these problems was supposed to happen at the local level. Furthermore, this was supposed to be an example of local self-rule. She was told to explain this to the local Tibetans when they complained of food shortages.

Tan Hru-chi explained that the progressive and revolutionary Tibetan people should favor the commune because of its administrative advantages. He said that the commune allowed leaders to advise the people, to assign them work projects, to collect information about them, to lead them to reforms, to benefit the nation, to organize the people for collective labor projects, and to lead them to the socialist future. Dhondub Choedon says that all of these administrative advantages were actually about command and control, supervision, repression, and exploitation. The commune allowed the Chinese to control Tibetans, to tell them what to do, to supervise them and to punish those who resisted or failed to perform. The commune allowed the Chinese to

control all aspects of Tibetans' lives, to prevent their freedom of movement to other places, to expose opponents by means of criticism sessions, and to exploit the labor of the commune for their own use by means of confiscation of their produce under the guise of a variety of taxes.

The best workers in the commune got eight work points per day, while the worst got only five. Children got four work points per day. The absolute value of work points was uncertain since grain and other food was distributed to commune members only after taxes were taken out by the government. What was left was divided up according to the work points, but the total to be divided varied each year according to the harvest. Work points also varied from commune to commune.

The work schedule varied according to the agricultural season, with the most intense work being during harvest in the fall. In general, the work day was from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., then two hours for lunch, then work again from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Every evening there were political indoctrination and mutual criticism meetings from 9 p.m. to midnight. Dhondub Choedon says that the Chinese made the Tibetans work like machines, all the while exhorting them to work harder for socialism and to match the example of an idealized model commune in the Chinese interior named Tachai. Later it was revealed that Tachai had received many government benefits and then even then its production results were falsified in order to promote the achievements of the socialist system.

Dhondub Choedon writes that when the Chinese first came to Tibet they divided the Tibetans into only two classes, the rich and the poor. At first they befriended the rich and the powerful to make them their agents. Then, after 1959, when the rich and the powerful were overthrown, they befriended the poor to make them their tools.

They divided Tibetans into further classes after 1959 in order to make their rule easier. These classes were the former serf-owners, the agents of serf-owners, rich farmers, poor farmers, and the former serfs. The serf-owners were the former aristocracy, high government officials, and monastic leaders. The agents of the serf-owners included lower level monk officials, Tibetan Army officers, and lower level government officials. There were also differentiations within these two upper classes according to political status and wealth.

If a family had income above their expenses and if they had any hired labor, then they were classified as rich farmers. Farmers who had no excess income were classed as poor farmers. The two upper classes were to be opposed, the two middle classes were to be educated, and the lowest level farmers and the former serfs were to be relied upon.

There were both political and economic criteria for class divisions. Anyone who had participated in the revolt or who opposed the Chinese in any way was included into the classes of

those to be repressed. In the beginning the Chinese thought that the majority of Tibetans could be relied upon while only a small percentage needed to be repressed, but the percentage to be repressed constantly rose as the Chinese discovered that more and more Tibetans opposed them.

In the Red Flag Commune, 41 people in nine families were classed as agents of serf-owners; 70 people in 11 families were classed as rich farmers, 364 people in 70 families were classed as poor farmers, and 200 people in 50 families were classed as serfs. But Dhondub Choedon says that the Chinese classifications of the Tibetan social system did not correspond to the reality. The Chinese classification system intentionally misrepresented Tibetan social relationships of the past in order to fit within Chinese Communist ideologies and their class system. Also, the Chinese had greater difficulty applying their class divisions to the nomadic society, which, except for the tribal leaders, was very equalitarian, and in less socially stratified areas of Tibet like Kham and Amdo.

Those with elderly people in their families who couldn't work had to make their own allotment suffice for them as well. In addition, they had to buy all other essentials like meat and butter and tea and even clothes and household items from their grain allocations. However, they actually needed more grain than normal because they had less meat and butter. The Chinese had a scheme to subsidize prices for some clothing items, but what happened in practice was that the Chinese made Tibetans buy the clothes for them and they then sent the clothes to their relatives in China.

Traditionally, Tibetans used to barter grain for meat and butter from the nomads. However, the Chinese required the nomads to sell all their meat and butter to the Chinese state companies, which used these products to feed themselves and the PLA soldiers. Village Tibetans were not allowed to buy meat and butter from the nomads. The Chinese also paid reduced prices to the nomads. For instance, Dhondub Choedon says that the Chinese paid only eight Yuan for a large sheep, whereas in the Lhasa market a single leg of sheep sold for 15 Yuan. The Chinese exercised strict control over what the nomads could do with their animals, requiring them to get permission to slaughter any animal. They also taxed the nomads just like they did the farmers.

Tibetans whose grain rations were insufficient were required to search for edible roots and herbs, but these were sometimes also not enough. She cites the names and circumstances of several families in her commune whose food was insufficient and several people who died of starvation as a result. This was in the period around 1970 when Tibet again began to suffer food shortages due to the introduction of the commune system and the substitution of wheat for barley because the Chinese preferred wheat.

Each family in the commune was required to make a plan for their livelihood requirements for the coming year. They had to estimate exactly how much food supplies and

every other essential item they would need for the year, and they were required to ask for the absolutely minimum amounts. If the estimated amounts proved insufficient, as they often did, and Tibetans approached the Chinese with requests for more food, they were told that they themselves had said that they could live with the amounts originally estimated and that if that amount was incorrect then they themselves were at fault. They were often then accused of trying to deceive the Chinese government with their original faulty estimates.

The fallacies of the Chinese commune system were inherent in the attempt to control every aspect of people's lives and their production. The inefficiencies came from this strict control system, but the control was also necessary for the Chinese so that they could exploit the Tibetans for their own needs. By means of their control over Tibetan agriculture and nomadic production they could confiscate a large part of that production under the guise of a variety of taxes.

Given the inequalities and inefficiencies in the Chinese commune system, plus the obvious fact that the Chinese were exploiting Tibetans for their own food supplies and were living far better than the Tibetans, even the former serfs began to realize that the old system had been better than the new. In the old system the landlord would usually take care of the poorest in times of scarcity. There were other freedoms that had now disappeared, such as the right to marry whomever one wanted and to celebrate their religion and religious festivals as they wished.

One chapter of Dhondub Choedon's book is titled "Socialism in Practice." She writes that the Chinese tried to tell Tibetans that they had risen up and become the rulers of their own land and the masters of their own lives. However, the fact obvious to all Tibetans was that Tibet was now owned and controlled by China and every aspect of their own lives was controlled by the Chinese. The Chinese had taken away Tibet's independence as well as the personal freedoms of all Tibetans. In the communes Tibetans had no freedom to make any decisions for themselves. They had to subsist on a meager ration while most of their agricultural production was taken by the Chinese. Their subsistence requirements were determined and the rest of their agricultural production was taken away. No matter how much they produced, which increased due to their being forced to work at a frenzied pace, they still received the same subsistence rations while the rest was taken away to feed the Chinese.

Dhondub Choedon's production brigade of 29 households and 121 people in the Red Flag Commune was able to produce 3,900 khel of grain. After the Chinese took their taxes only 1,783 khel was left, which was barely sufficient for the Tibetans to survive. Nearby nomads also had their animal production strictly controlled. They were allowed to keep only the minimum amount of meat, milk, and butter for their own use while all the rest was taken by the Chinese for their own use and for export to the Chinese interior. Nomads were not even allowed to keep their own

wool. They used to make cloth for their tents and bedding and clothes by weaving their own wool with their own looms. Now, however, all wool was taken by the Chinese and used in weaving factories that they had built in places like Nyingtri in Kongpo. They made mostly blankets which were exported to China. Only the lowest quality of woolen cloth was made available to Tibetans. Tibetans either wore their old woolen *chubas* that were now patched and worn out or they wore Chinese cotton clothes.

Even the wild animals in Tibet no longer had any freedom. In the past big herds of wild animals had roamed freely. However, since the PLA had come to Tibet they had slaughtered the animals from their jeeps to feed themselves. Wild animal meat had also been exported in large quantities to China. The Chinese had created many small industries in Tibet using local materials, which they claimed as the result of their assistance in the economic development of Tibet, but Dhondub Choedon says that these served mostly the interests of the Chinese military and bureaucrats in Tibet or were meant for export to China.

Dhondub Choedon also complained about the restrictions on Tibetan cultural festivals. They were no longer allowed to celebrate *Losar*, *Choetrul Dhuchen*, *Saga Dawa*, *Zamling Chisang*, *Choekor Dhuchen*, *Lhabab Dhuchen*, *Gaden Ngachod*, and *Ngenpa Guzom*. The Tibetan youth had already forgotten about these traditional festivals because their parents could not even talk about them without being accused of trying to reestablish the old society.

The Chinese had even confiscated household utensils of brass and copper. They paid a small price for the household utensils they confiscated, but Tibetans had to pay inflated prices for Chinese-made aluminum pots to replace them. For instance, the Chinese paid 12 Yuan for a large copper pot, but an aluminum pot one fourth its size cost 25 Yuan. Some Tibetans simply could not afford to replace the household utensils confiscated by the Chinese.

Dhondub Choedon says that the Chinese claimed that Tibetans were still living better than most Chinese. She also says that Tibetan social structure was disrupted because no one could trust anyone else due to Chinese cultivation of informants, including one's own children.

The Chinese policy on religion proclaimed that anyone was free to practice religion and also free to not practice religion. However, in reality, the Chinese did everything to destroy the Tibetan Buddhist religion. They knew that Tibetan Buddhism was incompatible with Chinese communism in ideology and thus something that they had to destroy in order to get Tibetans to believe in communism. They claimed that Buddhism was superstition and thus backward and incompatible with modern science, but what was really the most intolerable aspect of Tibetan Buddhism to them was that it was such an important component of Tibetan national identity. The Chinese were intent upon transforming Tibetan national identity into Chinese identity and

therefore they had to eradicate Tibetan belief in Buddhism. The Chinese also characterized monks as parasites who must be made to work to earn a living and improve Tibet's economy.

Dhondub Choedon says that in her Nyethang district alone there were previously 37 monasteries with some 2,700 monks and nuns. Now, in all of Lhoka, of which Nyethang was only one district, there were only 30 monks. Even these 30 monks were not really monks but had been made to marry and now worked as farmers, herders, or construction workers. They were kept only to pretend that there was religious freedom. They were made to perform religious ceremonies on religious holidays at the Tramdub Dolma Lhakhang, which was the only one of the previous 37 monasteries that was not destroyed or transformed into military barracks or office buildings. Even the Yumbu Lhakhang, built by the first Tibetan king, Nyatri Tsanpo, was destroyed by the Chinese in 1968 even though it was not a real monastery.

In her book, Dhondub Choedon lists each of the 37 monasteries that were destroyed and the number of monks and nuns in each. She says that all scriptures were burnt, clay statues were destroyed, and all idols of gold and with precious gems were taken away to China. All statues of brass and copper and all religious implements and even kitchen utensils like the large brass pots used to make tea for the monks were also taken away to China. The destruction of monasteries was done to teach Tibetans that their gods were powerless and their religion useless, but it was also done with utter contempt for the feelings of the Tibetan people.

Despite their proclaimed policy of freedom of religion, the Chinese persecuted anyone caught with private religious articles like scriptures or statues or prayer wheels or prayer beads. Anyone found in possession of any religious articles or caught performing any religious functions for themselves or others was subjected to *thamzing* and deprived of their grain rations. Dhondub Choedon cites the examples of two former monks from her local Dhargyal Ling Monastery. One was a former traditional doctor and the other was a renowned astrologer. Each of them was found to have saved some religious scriptures and one of them had saved his monks' robes. They were subjected to *thamzing* and accused of "dreaming of reactionary restoration" and "waiting for the return of the reactionary Dalai clique." One of the former monks was beaten so severely that he died and the other was arrested and taken away to a prison in Lhasa.

Dhondub Choedon writes that the Chinese were constantly proclaiming that Tibetans had achieved self-rule and democracy. However, she says, democracy means the right to choose one's own culture and beliefs. Tibetans had believed in Buddhism for more than a thousand years. Was it believable, she asks, that they would have voluntarily destroyed their own religious monuments and persecuted their own monks and given up their own religion? She says that this is not believable despite the Chinese claim that Tibetans did all this voluntarily. She says that this involuntary destruction of Tibetan monasteries and abandonment of ancient traditions and

culture is evidence that all of this was done under Chinese coercion and is proof that Tibetans enjoyed no democracy or freedom of religion.

Dhondub Choedon says that democracy also means the right to choose one's own leaders, the freedom to live and work as one wishes, freedom to go where one wants, and the freedom to bring up one's children the way one wish and to teach them the values one wants. The Chinese had denied all of these democratic rights to Tibetans.

She also asks if it is credible that Tibetans would have willingly abandoned all other aspects of their cherished traditional culture in favor of Chinese culture. Would they have voluntarily given up all their traditions in favor of everything Chinese? The Chinese had proclaimed all Tibetan traditions and culture backward and reactionary, and Chinese socialist traditions and culture as modern and progressive, but was it credible that this was true or that all Tibetans were convinced of this voluntarily and without coercion and had adopted all aspects of Chinese culture democratically? Was it possible that Tibetans had democratically decided that their political system of government by the Dalai Lama was as feudal and reactionary as the Chinese said and that they had voluntarily decided to abandon their own government in favor of government by the Chinese?

Dhondub Choedon writes that when the Chinese wanted to be pleasant they would say that now that Tibetans had been liberated they were the owners of the nation, meaning not only Tibet but all of China. They were represented by the Chinese Communist Party, which was the provider of peace and prosperity wherever it went. However, when the Chinese wanted to be more coercive they would proclaim that the Chinese Communist Party had created a dictatorship of the proletariat, which no one was allowed to disobey.

Tibetans were supposed to be a part of the proletariat since they were workers, like all Chinese workers. However, the majority of the proletariat being Chinese, its leaders were also Chinese and all of its institutions that enforced the dictatorship, like the Communist Party, the PLA, the police, and the judicial system were also Chinese. Even in Tibet, all these institutions were dominated by Chinese and not Tibetans. What the dictatorship of the proletariat in Tibet meant was the dictatorship of the Chinese.

The Chinese explained that the dictatorship of the proletariat had been established by the people, including Tibetans, through the communist revolution. It was authorized to exercise dictatorship over the people because it was freely chosen by the people. It was also authorized to exercise dictatorship over any enemies of the people. Enemies of the people were any who opposed the Communist Party. Tibetans were also supposed to have voluntarily chosen the leadership of the Communist Party through their own liberation and democratic reforms.

Therefore, anyone who opposed or resisted those reforms was considered an enemy of the people.

In Tibet, everyone knew that Tibet's so-called peaceful liberation and the subsequent Democratic Reforms were not voluntarily chosen by Tibetans but were imposed by the Chinese. In Tibet, any opponents of Chinese rule could be and were characterized as enemies of the people and repressed as such. Tibetans were repressed as enemies of the Chinese people just because they preferred to be Tibetan rather than Chinese.

Dhondub Choedon writes that the Chinese considered the cultivation and training of Tibetan cadres as essential to their administration of Tibet. However, at the time that she was writing, the Chinese had failed to create very many loyal Tibetan cadres. They had sent thousands of young Tibetans to minority nationality schools in China but those who had been to the Chinese schools were not the ones that the Chinese trusted most and they did not place them in the most prominent and responsible positions. Instead, the most trusted Tibetan cadres were those of the lowest classes, most of whom still remained uneducated. There were several former serfs that the Chinese had elevated to symbolic positions based almost solely upon their loyalty to the Chinese and willingness to repeat all of their propaganda. These Tibetans had been cultivated by the Chinese based solely upon their former class status and willingness to collaborate. They were sometimes very clever and scheming in order to promote themselves, but they could only repeat Chinese propaganda without being able to understand it or to analyze it.

Those Tibetans who had been sent to the minority nationality schools on the other hand did not often rise to the most responsible positions. The reason was not that they were not smart enough or talented or educated. In fact the problem was that they were too educated. Many of those sent to the Chinese schools to learn the Chinese Communists' Marxist doctrine had become educated enough to question that doctrine. Their study of the Marxist anti-imperialist doctrine often led them to identify the Chinese conquest of Tibet as imperialist and its control there as colonialist. The more these Tibetans were educated, the more they learned to think and analyze the situation for themselves.

Even many of those of the former lowest classes, whom the Chinese thought should be most loyal to their doctrine, were able to see through the pretensions of that doctrine as applied to Tibet. They did not agree that the inequalities of the former Tibetan social system were sufficient justification for the Chinese occupation and control of Tibet. If the Chinese were so concerned with the welfare of Tibetans, then why did they not leave after the social system had been changed as they had previously promised to do? Tibetans who were not of the former lowest classes knew that their families had suffered during what the Chinese called democratic reforms and their property had been confiscated. Tibetans of all social classes were aware of the brutal Chinese repression of any and all Tibetan resistance and that many thousands of Tibetans

had been killed, imprisoned, or forced into exile. They also learned of the continual Chinese Communists' intolerance of any opposition among the Chinese people as well as among Tibetans. They could see that the Chinese claims of having brought freedom and democracy to Tibet were false.

The Chinese in Tibet tended to mistrust almost all Tibetans, especially those that they themselves had educated to be the future administrators of Tibet. They did not trust the returning students enough to put them into any ostensibly responsible positions, even though there were Chinese at every level who made the actual decisions. They could only trust the few former serfs who were the most loyal. The Chinese therefore declared that class status was always the most important factor. Only a former lower class status could make any Tibetan loyal to the Chinese and therefore trusted by them. The Chinese were therefore unable to cultivate many loyal and competent Tibetan cadres and were forced to rely upon a few former serfs that other Tibetans did not trust. Their only other collaborators were a few from the former upper class, and they were also not trusted.

Dhondub Choedon writes that the Chinese wanted to retain what they had gained by their conquest of Tibet. They perpetuated their rule by dividing Tibetans and setting them against each other. They did this by means of class divisions, political indoctrination, "speaking bitterness" campaigns and mutual criticisms, and *thamzing*.

She describes the political education given to all lower level cadres, of whom she was one. This education lasted two to six months. The subjects were natural science, which was meant to counter what the Chinese characterized as the superstitious and unscientific beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism; atheism, teaching the mythological nature of the belief in any god or gods; social evolution according to Marxism, from primitive societies like the Tibetan to the ultimate highest social system of socialism or communism; class consciousness, which meant that class identity always took priority over ethnic or national identity; national consciousness, which meant that Tibetans should identify as Chinese or as Chinese of the Tibetan nationality; socialist consciousness, which meant that Tibetans, like all Chinese, should strive to create the socialist society; and the unique role of the Chinese Communist Party and the correctness of its policies.

They were taught how to make revolution. The way to make revolution was to cultivate the lower classes and the serfs, to make friends with the middle class farmers, and to mercilessly repress and exterminate the serf-owners, agents of serf-owners, reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries. However, as Dhondub Choedon comments, the Chinese had first to cooperate with the upper class rulers in Tibet because their policy only applied to internal social change in China, whereas in Tibet it was a matter of the conquest of another country.

The way of making revolution that the Chinese taught to Tibetan cadres concentrated on a negative portrayal of old Tibetan society in order to disguise the foreign imperialist nature of the Chinese conquest of Tibet. Tibetans were taught an exaggerated story about the evils of the old society, with little regard for the truth. They collected instruments of torture and had former serfs recount tales of mistreatment at the hands of the serf-owners. Everything about the old society was denounced in public meetings and everyone was required to agree. Anyone who did not enthusiastically agree was subjected to criticism and *thamzing*. Tibetans were required to denounce the Dalai Lama and to renounce their own culture. Young Tibetans were not taught any of the truth about Tibetan history, but were only led to believe that everything about their own culture and history was backward and bad while everything about China was progressive and good.

Tibetans were made to shout slogans about how old Tibetan society was evil and how they had been liberated due to the compassion of the Chinese Communist Party. They were made to denounce their own past leaders like the Dalai Lama and to praise Chinese leaders like Mao. Dhondub Choedon says that such spectacles would strike any outside observer as absurd since no one can make anyone believe anything just by coercion and repetition. However, Chinese coercion, plus incentives for cooperation and a monopoly on all political power, did get Tibetans to collaborate. They were also successful in instilling in some the belief that the desire for Tibetan independence was equivalent to a hope for the revival of all the inequalities of the old society.

However, Dhondub Choedon says that the Chinese were unable to eradicate all Tibetan culture and all Tibetan pride in their own history. This, she says, was typical of all conquerors who try to eradicate another culture. They may be successful because they have a monopoly on coercion and the use of force, but they cannot completely change everyone's minds. The Chinese claimed to have given so much to Tibetans but, she says, the land already belonged to Tibetans and their wealth was their own before the Chinese came. What the Chinese actually did was to take away from them their land and their property and their cultural heritage.

Dhondub Choedon writes about the Cultural Revolution in the Red Flag Commune. She says that it began at the end of 1966. Two Chinese and six Tibetan officials came to the commune and selected 30 young Tibetans from the former serf class who were Party members. These 30 Tibetans were then declared to be Red Guards and were instructed in what they should do. Although Tibetan Red Guards in Lhasa were usually graduates of the various minority nationality training institutes, in smaller places in Tibet it seems that they were simply appointed by the officials.

The Red Guards were only youths, but were empowered to do anything they wanted, and therefore often became tyrannical in their actions. The Tibetan Red Guards patrolled the commune and denounced all Tibetan habits. All Tibetan signs and symbols written on house walls were eradicated and replaced by photos of Mao. All colorful house decorations were painted over in dull colors. Tibetans were not allowed to exchange *khataks* (greeting scarves). Tibetan songs and dances were banned and replaced with revolutionary Chinese songs and dances that they were required to learn. Tibetans had to replace their Tibetan dress and hairstyles with Chinese dress and hairstyles.

The Chinese tried to make Tibetans learn Chinese, and they even tried to alter the Tibetan language by incorporating Chinese words and phrases. This was called the Chinese-Tibetan Friendship Language.

The Red Guards pulled down prayer flags and destroyed shrines, *chortens*, and *mani* walls. They also destroyed any remaining monasteries and all their murals. They confiscated any remaining personal religious items like statues or thangkas. They burned any religious scriptures they could find. The Red Guards accused anyone attempting to keep religious items or any old traditional items of trying to resurrect the past and described them as the “enemy within.” Prayer beads were confiscated. Even those caught burning incense were charged with attempted arson and paraded with dunce caps. Old people praying silently were denounced for being superstitious.

The Red Guards went from house to house and forced everyone to buy portraits of Mao and they painted his sayings all over the walls. Everyone was required to carry Mao’s Little Red book with them at all times and had to recite quotations from Mao on demand. Anyone falling to correctly recite Mao’s sayings was subjected to criticism or *thamzing*.

Dhondub Choedon says that the Cultural Revolution was a time of great upheavals in Tibet. The Chinese tried to destroy Tibetan culture and replace it with Chinese culture, causing great cultural anguish for Tibetans. The Chinese Red Guards in Lhasa also fought amongst themselves in rivalries that degenerated into street battles that became increasingly violent as each side acquired weapons from the PLA stationed in Tibet.

Dhondub Choedon says that the Cultural Revolution in Tibet was a time when the Chinese tried to destroy Tibetan identity in what was essentially a cultural genocide. The violence and destructiveness of the Cultural Revolution lasted only a few years, but the anti-Tibetan policies lasted a full ten years, from 1966 to 1976. She says that the Cultural Revolution was just one of many political campaigns that were typical of the style of rule of the Chinese Communists. They meant to transform society and they did so by means of violent political

campaigns. In Tibet they meant not only to transform society but also to transform Tibetan identity into Chinese identity.

The last chapter of Dhondub Choedon's book is titled "The Haunting Memories." She writes that the Democratic Reforms campaign started by the Chinese right after the 1959 revolt began with what were called the "Three Cleanlinesses." These were things that had to be got rid of, or to be cleansed. The things to be cleansed were reactionaries, weapons used by the rebels and reactionaries, and religious scriptures. Tibetans were supposed to inform upon reactionaries and counterrevolutionaries, turn in any weapons belonging to the reactionaries or themselves, and turn away from religious scriptures toward the sayings of Mao. This was part of the Chinese campaign to simultaneously repress the revolt and begin Democratic Reforms. What Tibetans were to be cleansed of were their own government and religion and any Tibetans who opposed the Chinese.

Another part of the Democratic Reforms campaign was called the "Three Antis and Two Reductions." The three antis were anti-aristocracy, anti-forced labor, and anti-high interests. These were the slogans used by the Chinese to convince Tibetans that they were being liberated from exploitation by the aristocrats and feudal landlords, including monasteries, who exploited Tibetans by means of serfdom and by loaning grain or money at high interest rates. This was meant to convince Tibetans that the Chinese were there only to help Tibetans, not to rule Tibet or exploit Tibetans themselves.

Dhondub Choedon writes that the primary characteristic of the Democratic Reforms campaign was not liberation from exploitation but repression for any of the former exploiting classes as well as repression of any who opposed the Chinese or their political campaigns in any way. Tibetans had to attend public meetings at which supposed offenders were subjected to beatings and humiliations that often degenerated into public executions, or imprisonment that often led to death.

This repression by means of mutual public criticism and denunciations was called "struggle," or *thamzing* in Tibetan, and was meant to be a cathartic experience for Tibetans to teach them that they no longer had to be repressed by aristocrats or feudal lords or lamas. However, Tibetans usually did not share the Chinese characterization of those who were accused of exploitation. The Chinese grossly exaggerated the crimes of the aristocrats and landlords in order to denigrate the former rulers of Tibet and to justify the substitution of themselves as the new rulers.

Tibetans also did not often agree that their revered lamas were guilty of any exploitation at all and were shocked and horrified at the treatment that lamas received at *thamzings*. However, all present were required to participate in the denunciations and beatings lest they

themselves be denounced as reactionaries and subjected to *thamzing* themselves. All those who had opposed the Chinese by participating in the revolt or by helping those who had were also denounced as counterrevolutionaries or reactionaries and subjected to *thamzing* and usually imprisoned.

Dhondub Choedon writes that there was no law to protect the innocent and no one to protect their rights. Fear and desperation ruled their land, and the Chinese could do whatever they liked and Tibetans had no protections or recourse. She cites numerous examples in her own small area of Tibetans who were denounced, beaten sometimes to death, or imprisoned, or who committed suicide after *thamzings* or out of fear of being subjected to *thamzing*.

She says that many other Tibetans who were suspected by the Chinese of being opponents were executed in secret or imprisoned, where many did not survive. She later learned that the Chinese actually had a quota for each political campaign, usually five percent, of those who should be subjected to repression. Therefore, the only justification for repressing someone was often just meeting the quota of how many should be repressed in order to intimidate the others.

Dhondub Choedon says that for many years she tried to believe the Chinese promises and to participate in their campaigns. She did what they ordered, even participating in the destruction of monasteries and religious monuments. She says that it would not have done much good to have done otherwise since they held all the power and repressed everyone who opposed them. She acknowledges that Tibet was in need of some reforms in its social and political system and even that the religious system was in need of reform. She believed that Communism was not all bad, at least in theory. However, her experience finally led her to understand that everything the Chinese said was nothing but lies, and she felt that she had no choice but to attempt to escape into exile. She has many unhappy memories of what happened in Tibet and what she participated in, but she believes that the oppression and the suffering in Tibet cannot continue forever and that one day Tibet will be free again.

She explains why she fled Tibet even though she was among those so-called liberated serfs who were favored by the Chinese. Her husband, whom she had married in 1962, was also a former serf and had been made a local cadre. They had two children, born in 1962 and 1969. However, Chinese policy was that spouses were often separated because they were assigned to different areas. They first thought to escape in 1967 because of the disparity between what the Chinese had promised and the reality in Tibet. They realized that freedom and happiness were impossible without the independence of Tibet. Her husband soon fell into trouble because he said something about how Lenin's thoughts were superior to those of Mao. This was such an offense that she was encouraged to divorce her husband with the threat of *thamzing* if she refused. For

this reason, in 1973 they decided to escape even though they would have to leave their children behind.