

PROFILES

THE NEXT INCARNATION

As the Dalai Lama turns seventy-five, what is Tibet's future?

BY EVAN OSNOS

The Communist Party chief in Tibet has called China's struggle against the Dalai Lama "a fight to the death." As a Buddhist, the Dalai



Lama says, "I visualize death every day." Photograph by Manuel Bauer.

The Dalai Lama's birthday party, an event he has never much cared for, was set to begin at 9 A.M. on July 6th, in the Indian Himalayan town of Dharamsala, where he lives. He skips the party most years, but he had promised to attend his seventy-fifth, so five thousand people turned up at the temple that morning, in a humid downpour, to await his arrival.

The exiled spiritual and political leader of Tibet—His Holiness to Buddhists, and HHDL to his Twitter followers—settled in Dharamsala half a century ago, after rejecting China's claims to his homeland and trekking over the mountains to India. He was followed by thousands of refugees, many of whom expected a short stay; when they were urged to plant trees in their settlements, they waved off the idea. "People said, 'We're going to be going back in a few years,'" Thubten Samphel, a writer and spokesman for the government in exile, recalled. "Trees will take fifty years to grow, so what's the point?"

Today, Dharamsala is the capital for more than a hundred and fifty thousand Tibetans in exile worldwide. Set high on a ridge, in the shadow of snow-bound peaks, the town is a mix of refugee community and hippie retreat, with dreadlocked Israeli backpackers jostling among freshly shorn monks. For the more than five million Tibetans living inside Chinese borders, the Dalai Lama remains a venerated figure, and he is surprisingly present in their daily conversation. Families in Tibet routinely contact his office with the request that he name their newborns.

A few minutes after nine, a band with drums and bagpipes marched into the temple courtyard, playing the Tibetan national anthem, which is illegal in Tibet. After the band came a throng of monks in maroon-and-saffron robes, and at its center was the Dalai Lama, ambling up the path from his office with a side-to-side gait, stooped forward "like a middle linebacker," as his friend the late Abe Rosenthal, of the *Times*, once put it. At the stage, he pivoted to face the audience with a look of wide-eyed astonishment, an expression that he applies to many things. He sat down beneath a banner inscribed in his honor: "The sun in the sky, the jewel of the world, the light of

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our hearts, may you live a long life."

The festivities that followed seemed to owe less to temple rituals than to those of a Midwestern ice-cream social. The Dalai Lama took in some school-dance-troupe performances, greeted members of the local Lions Club, and handed out public-service prizes. Then came some of the supremely odd moments that one has come to expect in the company of the Dalai Lama: A smiling Indian man approached the stage and unrolled a gift, a large portrait of the birthday boy, which the artist had painted in his own blood. Later, the Dalai Lama accepted a present from an eight-year-old Indian girl who is regarded as a prophet. She once predicted that he would fall ill, and he subsequently contracted a gallbladder infection. (Recently, she prophesied that Tibet would be an independent country by 2016.)

In the past decade or so, the Dalai Lama has also required hospital visits for a pinched nerve and dysentery, facts that are carefully recorded not only in Dharamsala but also in Beijing and Washington, D.C., where his future figures into some complicated political prognoses. When I asked him how it feels to have his aches and pains become a matter of geopolitical record, he smiled and said, "Some Chinese—I think, ten years ago—created a rumor: 'Dalai Lama is suffering from cancer, only a few months left!'" He said that he had been

having regular checkups. "According to physicians, my body is very good. But it seems the Chinese know more about my condition!" He erupted in laughter.

The Dalai Lama's death, which he calls a "change of clothing," is not a taboo subject; as a Buddhist, he says, "I visualize death every day," and the political stakes are too large to ignore. As a practical matter, he believes that the traditional practice of identifying a young Tibetan boy as his reincarnation may no longer make sense, not only because he lives in exile but also because times have changed. He has taken to musing aloud that he might be reincarnated as a woman, or that Tibetans might vote on whether the institution of the Dalai Lama should continue at all. Or, he says, he might select his own reincarnation while he is still alive—a theological twist known as *madhey tulku*—which would give him the chance to train a successor and avoid the gap in leadership that has always been a time of instability for Tibetans. Only one thing is certain, he says: his successor will be found outside Tibet.

China disagrees. The government has passed a series of laws stipulating that it has ultimate authority over the "management of living Buddha reincarnation," an act of remarkable intellectual flexibility for the officially atheist Communist Party. After the 1989 death of

the Panchen Lama, the second most prominent lama in Tibet, the Dalai Lama identified Gendun Choekyi Nyima, a Tibetan boy who was six years old at the time, as the reincarnation, but Chinese authorities were incensed by the Dalai Lama's involvement from abroad, and the boy and his family were placed in seclusion. They have not been seen since. The government says the Panchen Lama does not want to be disturbed. In Dharamsala, his face appears on flyers with the tagline "The World's Youngest Political Prisoner."

The Chinese government eventually named its own choice of a child as Panchen Lama: Gyaltzen Norbu, who now holds several official posts. Unless something changes, a comparable standoff is almost certain after the Dalai Lama dies, a scenario that is likely to fuel unrest in Tibet and, potentially, affect the behavior of the Chinese government, making it one of the few foreign-policy questions that hinge on matters of reincarnation. A senior Obama Administration official told me that the White House is expecting "something like the Avignon popes," the feud that upended Europe in the fourteenth century with a competition among multiple Catholic authorities.

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama—Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Losang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso, known to many Tibetans as "the Presence"—has a biography so ripe for mythmaking that Hollywood has sought to capture it on film several times—once directed by Martin Scorsese and once starring Brad Pitt. Despite his oft-stated intention to abandon political life ("Retirement is also my human right"), the Dalai Lama has served longer than Queen Elizabeth, Fidel Castro, and other durable leaders, having taken the throne at the age of five, notwithstanding the fact that, for most of that time, he has not had much to rule.

Officially, the Dalai Lama is the senior religious leader of Tibetan Buddhism, though most of his admirers know him from other pursuits. He has lent his name to at least a hundred books, on subjects ranging from ethics to the interaction between science and religion, and, more recently, "Business, Buddhism, and Happiness in an Interconnected World." (Some of these he wrote; many are edited collections of his



"It was just supposed to lift him gently into an upright position."

speeches.) He is the unlikely avatar of the global age: a reincarnate lama who didn't set foot in the West until he was nearly forty and, to this day, holds no passport. (He travels on the yellow document of a refugee.) He has evolved from an oddity to a sage and a reluctant icon of endurance. When he alighted in Vancouver in 2004, tickets for his stadium speech sold out within twenty minutes, a spectacle that seemed to his biographer Pico Iyer as if "a president was visiting, in the company of Mick Jagger."

Along the way, the Dalai Lama has prevented Tibetans from being relegated, with the Chinese Uighurs and the Nordic Sami people, to the fringes of history. In the words of Robert Thurman, the Columbia professor and former monk, Tibetans became "the baby seals of the human-rights movement."

That has poisoned his relationship with the one country he needs most: China. Its government considers him a "criminal" and a "false religious leader," intent on "splitting the motherland." The Communist Party chief in Tibet has called China's struggle against the Dalai Lama "a fight to the death." Just as his friend Pope John Paul II was once an icon of opposition to the Soviet empire, the Dalai Lama has become the face of resistance to Chinese rule.

The conflict has taken an especially bitter turn in recent years. On March 10, 2008, several hundred monks in Lhasa conducted a march to demand the release of Tibetans detained for celebrating the U.S. government's awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal to the Dalai Lama. Dozens of the monks were arrested and, on March 14th, a demonstration to protest their detention became violent: gangs of Tibetans attacked Chinese police and turned on other symbols of China's presence, throwing stones at Chinese civilians and burning and looting about a thousand Chinese-owned shops. The violence resulted in the worst riots in Tibet since the eighties; eleven civilians and a Tibetan were burned to death after hiding in buildings set on fire by rioters, and a policeman and six civilians died from beatings or other causes, according to the government. Security forces eventually moved in with armored vehicles to take over the city, and the authorities began a roundup of suspects, leading to hundreds of ar-

rests. Tibetan exile groups alleged that eighty Tibetans were killed in the crackdown in Lhasa and elsewhere, a claim that China denies. The Chinese government eventually blamed the riots on what it called the "Dalai clique," though the Dalai Lama called for calm and vowed to resign his political duties if the violence did not end.

The uprising was a turning point for both sides. For the Chinese, it shattered a fragile confidence in Tibetan loyalty. For the Dalai Lama, it forced him to confront a gap between Tibetans' rage and his own aversion to violence. Though he is sharply critical of Chinese policy in Tibet—especially the restrictions on religion and language—he disavows even nonviolent marches and hunger strikes, in the belief that they lead to confrontation. The violence left him shaken; in a remark that startled his supporters worldwide, he said, in October of that year, "As far as I'm concerned, I have given up."

His aides later softened the comment, but the Dalai Lama's patience was fraying, as was that of many of his followers. They revere him as a religious authority, but many exiles have concluded that his political strategy is hopeless. "It's time for His Holiness to recognize the reality that China has no need to talk to us. They are playing for time," Lhasang Tsering, an outspoken Tibetan exile who fought as a guerrilla against China in the early seventies, told me. "Soon, Tibet will be filled with Chinese. We will be wiped out." To invoke patience and virtue in the face of "genocidal and colonial rule," Tsering says, is akin to "national suicide, and that, to me, is the ultimate violence."

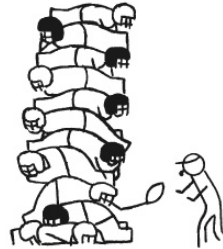
The Dalai Lama's predicament is especially striking because it reflects deep changes in the global balance of power. In 1989, his thirtieth year abroad, he won the Nobel Peace Prize and had recently been invited to address the Human Rights Caucus of the U.S. Congress as well as the European Parliament. China, meanwhile, was isolated and reeling from the bloodshed in Tiananmen Square, and straining to jump-start an economy that was smaller than Spain's. Craving international support, Beijing authorities invited the Dalai Lama to

make his first trip there in decades, to attend the funeral of a high-ranking lama. But his advisers worried that accepting the trip could weaken his bargaining position and he declined, a decision that senior aides now regret and some scholars say is symptomatic of the Dalai Lama's unwillingness to make the compromises needed to reach a resolution with Beijing. In the words of Melvyn Goldstein, a Tibet scholar at Case Western Reserve University, the Dalai Lama's ostensible successes at building support in the West "look more and more like Pyrrhic victories." Of the decision to appoint a Panchen Lama, Goldstein writes, "From China's perspective, once again, at a critical time, the Dalai Lama had thumbed his nose at Beijing."

By the Dalai Lama's fiftieth anniversary in exile, China had entered the World Trade Organization, invested heavily to raise the standard of living in Tibet, and emerged as an economic behemoth. In recent months, Chinese authorities have arrested Tibetan artists and intellectuals in a wave of suppression that activists describe as the most widespread in years. But the Dalai Lama and his advocates struggle to be heard. "It's almost impossible now," the actor Richard Gere, who chairs the board of the International Campaign for Tibet, told me recently.

Gere, since coming into contact with the Dalai Lama three decades ago, has helped turn Tibet into a favored cause in Hollywood. The Tibetan movement once lobbied to keep China out of international organizations. Today, Gere describes more modest goals: "We're working with every government and saying, 'You have to bring up Tibet. In every discussion, that's the minimum.' And they all say they do it." He added, "Whether it's just checked—'O.K., we spoke the word 'Tibet,'—or how deep are they getting into it? That's a state secret."

In recent years, China has declared Tibet a "core interest" of national importance, and has been remarkably successful in lobbying foreign governments to refrain from meeting with the Dalai Lama: since 2007, the leaders of Austr-



lia, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, as well as the Pope, have declined to see him. Between 2005 and 2008, he met with twenty-one national leaders; in 2009, that count dropped to two, according to Robert Barnett, a Tibet scholar at Columbia. In 1998, Apple annoyed the Chinese government by featuring a photograph of the Dalai Lama in a series of ads that included Muhammad Ali, Gandhi, and Picasso. These days, the online store for Chinese iPhone users does not offer such applications as “Dalai Lama Quotes” and “Nobel Laureates.” (“We continue to comply with local laws,” an Apple spokesperson said.)

One of the starkest measures of the Dalai Lama’s precarious position, however, has come from an unexpected source. When Barack Obama entered the White House, Tibet activists expected a swift embrace. As a senator, Obama had met the Dalai Lama, who is a rare crossover star in Washington, with advocates from both the Bay Area and the Bible Belt. (In October, 2007, he stood between George Bush and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in the Rotunda of the Capitol to receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the government’s highest civilian honor.) But, as he prepared for his first visit to the new Administration, the *Washington Post* broke the news that he and Obama would delay their White House meeting until after the President’s official trip to China, that November. It was the first time since 1991 that the Dalai Lama would come to the U.S. capital without seeing the President. Tibet supporters were taken aback. “We all had the first initial reaction: How could you possibly do that?” Gere said.

At the time, the White House was seeking China’s support on North Korea, Iran, climate change, and other issues. According to a senior Administration official, Chinese diplomats had privately and adamantly sought a delay in the Dalai Lama’s visit, arguing that a visit in the run-up to the Beijing summit would, in the official’s words, “prejudice the trip.” White House officials believed that if they delayed a meeting China would respond by resuming a series of talks with Tibetans and revitalizing the broader relationship with the U.S. “From our point of view, the timing was less important than the substance,” the

official told me, adding, “If we could get a resumption of dialogue with the Dalai Lama and get U.S.-China relations on a stable footing—which would enable us to have the Tibet issue less confrontational—we thought that was worth doing.” When the delay became public, critics faulted the White House for acceding to Chinese pressure in the name of broader objectives. In an interview with the *Times*, Václav Havel, the former Czech dissident and President, said of Obama, “With these minor compromises start the big and dangerous ones, the real problems.”

Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama’s special envoy and lead contact with the U.S. government, says the criticism of Obama was unwarranted: “The decision not to do the meeting beforehand was absolutely mutual.” Nevertheless, he added, in the months since, some foreign governments have used it as an excuse to avoid irritating China. “They said, ‘Look, if the big United States is shying away, then, please, give us a break,’” he told me. China did resume talks with the Dalai Lama’s representatives, but the talks were not fruitful; other hoped-for concessions from Beijing have yet to materialize.

The experience left the Administration bruised, though it stands by the decision. “If we facilitate dialogue, at some stage the Tibetans and the Chinese might find a way to actually make the dialogue fruitful,” the official said, adding that the domestic political cost was unavoidable. “From a foreign-policy point of view, it made sense. We knew we were going to take a hit. We took a hit, and we did it.”

The Dalai Lama eventually visited Obama in February of this year; the Administration said that the seventy-minute meeting in the Map Room was longer than any previous Presidential meeting with the Dalai Lama. The Chinese complained that it was “seriously damaging” ties between China and the U.S., and summoned the American ambassador to lodge a formal complaint.

The Dalai Lama wakes most mornings at three-thirty, at his two-story stone-and-concrete bungalow. First, he meditates, followed by full-body prostrations—part ritual and part exercise. Before breakfast, at five-thirty, he walks out-



The Dalai Lama walking to his office, guarded

side or on a treadmill. He tunes in to the BBC, and occasionally Voice of America’s Tibetan-language broadcast, before returning to meditation and readings in philosophy. After a day of work and meetings, he performs a final hour or two of meditation before bed, at 8:30 P.M.

High Tibetan lamas traditionally carry themselves as remote, commanding figures. The Dalai Lama, by contrast, usually runs late, because he has a Clintonian appetite for handshakes. “We were in this hotel in downtown L.A., and they’re trying to get him from point A to point B,” Ronny Novick, who has frequently filmed the Dalai Lama,



by Indian soldiers. For someone so involved in diplomacy, he is willfully unconcerned with status. Photograph by James Nachtwey.

told me. “And, all of a sudden, boom! He breaks off and goes into the gift shop, where they’re selling chewing gum and ‘I Love L.A.’ Teddy bears, just to say hello to the shopgirls.”

For someone so involved in diplomacy, the Dalai Lama is willfully unconcerned with status. He tugs the beards of sombre religious clerics and holds hands with heads of state. He cuts short meetings with dignitaries whom he finds overly self-impressed. (When he settles deep into his chair, aides warn, he has lost interest.) Oprah once asked him if the whole world should meditate, and he replied cheerfully that it was a “stupid

question.” He then answered it in detail.

He tires of what he calls the “old courtesies,” and one of the first changes he made after leaving Tibet was to declare, despite the protests of his retinue, that his visitors should henceforth be given a chair of equal height. Unlike many Buddhists, he eats meat, because, he says, his health suffered during a spell as a vegetarian. (Paul McCartney later wrote to him, urging him to reconsider. “It just doesn’t seem right—the Dalai Lama, on the one hand, saying, ‘Hey, guys, don’t harm sentient beings. . . . Oh, and by the way, I’m having a steak,’” he told the *Guardian*.)

The Dalai Lama’s romance with the

West makes him vulnerable to detractors: learned Buddhists who cringe at the sound of Scripture being boiled down to bromides; liberals who point out that although the Dalai Lama calls for full legal rights for gay men and women, he cites Buddhist doctrine, which condemns anal and oral sex, and considers it unsanctioned for Buddhists; decided atheists like Christopher Hitchens, who called the Dalai Lama’s following “a Hollywood cult that almost exceeds the power of Scientology.”

To get those around him to relax, he has honed a sense of “radical informality.” He giggles, makes jokes about digestion,



"As a potential lottery winner, I totally support tax cuts for the wealthy."

cleans his glasses with a handkerchief, and, if the meeting follows lunch, marches off to the washroom with a toothbrush and an admonition about oral hygiene. Spalding Gray, the late writer and performer, once asked him in an interview how he deals with distractions like "women in bikini bathing suits." The Dalai Lama, who has been bound by a vow of celibacy since childhood, responded, "Sometimes in my dreams, there are women. And, in some cases, fighting or quarreling with someone. When such dreams happen, immediately I remember, 'I am monk.'"

He tends to make a deep impact on those he meets not only because of his spiritual stature but also because he is unusually interested in what they say. "It's quite disarming, because he'll say, 'Well, what do you think I should do?'" Robert Barnett told me, adding, "I've always wondered whether he would ask the same question if I were a nutcase, because as far as one can tell he listens patiently to them, too."

The Dalai Lama's effect on others has drawn the attention of scientists. The psychologist Paul Ekman, a professor emeritus at the University of California at San Francisco, and a pioneer in the study of emotion, had long regarded

Buddhism as "another crazy cult that was attracting people in the Bay Area." Then, ten years ago, he met the Dalai Lama at a conference and experienced what he calls "a sensation I've never had before or since." The best way to describe it, he told me recently, was "when you get a CT scan and they inject you with a radioactive fluid that makes your whole body tingle." Ekman, who went on to co-author a book with the Dalai Lama, titled "Emotional Awareness," said, "It is a concept you can find described all the way back in history: there were people whom others wanted to be around because it just felt good to be in their presence. They were usually spiritual leaders of one kind or another, and that's what he is. From my vantage point, it's a mutation."

The Dalai Lama does one or two big U.S. tours every year, and in May he flew in for a two-week swing, starting in Bloomington, Indiana, which holds special significance for him, because his elder brother, the late Thubten Jigme Norbu, lived there for more than forty years, teaching Tibetan language and history at Indiana University. Bloomington sits on rolling hills that break up the un-Himalayan landscape of south-

ern Indiana, and it prides itself on a college-town broadmindedness that has accorded local sainthood to Bobby Knight, the homegrown violinist Joshua Bell, and the late sex researcher Alfred Kinsey.

Although the Dalai Lama's early visits were greeted by protest from a local fundamentalist church, that resistance subsided, and Indiana fans now describe him as a kind of management consultant for the soul. "There's a whole group of us out there who consider ourselves Christian Buddhists," Lisa Morrison, a local organizer, told me. "I believe in Jesus Christ—that he lived is not a question, it is a fact—but I have also been touched so deeply by His Holiness."

The Dalai Lama was booked for two days in front of a sellout crowd of about three thousand people. His success is due in part to the West's long-standing fascination with Tibet as the "cure for an ever-ailing Western civilization, a tonic to restore its spirit," as the Buddhist-studies scholar Donald Lopez said in his book "Prisoners of Shangri-La." Many Americans were introduced to Tibet by the novelist James Hilton, who conjured up an earthly paradise in the Himalayas which he called Shangri-La, in his 1933 novel "Lost Horizon."

After Bloomington, the Dalai Lama was booked at the Indianapolis arena that is home to the Pacers of the N.B.A. Signs advertised upcoming visits by the gospel singer Bill Gaither and the W.W.E. SmackDown World Tour. One of the Dalai Lama's strengths as a speaker is his ability to tailor different products for different audiences. In Bloomington, he gave a formal Buddhist teaching on "The Heart Sutra," but for the stadium crowd in Indianapolis he sat forward on a plush burgundy armchair with a tiny headset microphone protruding from under his left ear and deployed a reliable laugh line: "Some people may have the feeling that the Dalai Lama has some kind of miracle power. After 2008 October, I went through surgery. Gallbladder." Beat. "So that scientifically proves Dalai Lama has no healing power."

During the next hour and a half, he conducted a high-speed tour of his vision of the good life, rooted in his conviction that, "physically, mentally, emotionally, we are the same." He staked out

the widest possible circle of agreement—praising believers of all religions as well as believers of none. He was animated and jokey, folding his hands into paws to act out the role of a kitten whose survival depends on a mother's compassion. To drive home his point that a "happy life is entirely dependent on the rest of the community," he held his wrist in the air and said, "I love my watch, but if I kiss my watch the watch has no ability to return affection." It was vintage Dalai Lama: light on eloquence, and alive with energy and common sense. The crowd was absorbed.

Afterward, during a question-and-answer period, a woman in a yellow T-shirt and jeans asked about managing anger toward others, adding, "Like, maybe, in my instance, an ex-husband?" The Dalai Lama smiled, straightened his back, and answered by drawing a comparison between her divorce and the fate of Tibet. "We lost our own country, we lost our freedom. Everything. But then think about the situation: this is something beyond our control. No use for too much worry."

Later, I ran into the woman who had asked the question, a thirty-eight-year-old certified dog groomer named Erin Pattison. She was still beaming from the exchange, which, as she put it, confirmed that "what I'm doing is what I should be doing." After her divorce, she'd begun studying to become a veterinarian. "It's like what His Holiness said to me: The worst is nothing compared to losing your country. I'm blessed with what I have."

After the Dalai Lama wrapped up one afternoon in Indiana, I saw a flyer for a talk by the president of the Tibetan Youth Congress, an exile group. I followed signs to a classroom nearby, where fewer than twenty people were seated. Brochures were fanned out on a table. When it was clear that nobody else was coming, Tsewang Rigzin, the group's president, stepped up to the lectern and said, "We were expecting a few more people." He gave a short, forceful speech about Tibetans—"They're being tortured, they're being imprisoned, they're being executed, but they've never given up"—and, when it was over, I asked him what he made of the turnout. "If you look at all the teachings that His Holiness does, you have thousands of peo-

ple," he said. "But in terms of the support for us politically? It's, well, less." He added, "What we need is concrete support, not just sympathy."

Being the Dalai Lama has never been a guarantee of good fortune. Since the lineage began, more than six hundred years ago, only half of the men who held the title have lived to see their thirties. At least four are believed to have been killed amid palace intrigue. In 1682, a government minister hid the death of the Dalai Lama for fifteen years, secretly ruling with the help of a look-alike.

The current Dalai Lama was born to a family of farmers in northeastern Tibet. His mother bore sixteen children, seven of whom survived. His father was a horseman with a short temper. When the son was two years old, a search party was roaming the countryside looking for a toddler who might be the latest incarnation of the Dalai Lama. The family was not rich, but it was well established: the boy's elder brother and great-uncle had been recognized as high-ranking lamas. As the Dalai Lama wrote in a 1990 memoir, "Freedom in Exile," the search party proceeded under the guidance of mystical signs: the corpse of the previous Dalai Lama had turned its embalmed head to face northeastern Tibet; a senior monk peered into the waters of a sacred lake and saw letters that suggested "Amdo," the region in the northeast, as well as an image of the toddler's family house. When the party reached the home, they monitored the boy for days and then tested him by laying out prayer beads, drums, and other objects and asking him to identify which ones had belonged to the previous Dalai Lama.

He chose correctly and was eventually whisked off to Lhasa, to be "hidden away like an owl," as he put it, in the thousand-room Potala Palace, a childhood of lonesome splendor. Apart from tutors, and occasional visits with his family, his closest contacts were the sweepers who maintained the grounds, and whenever he was called to preside

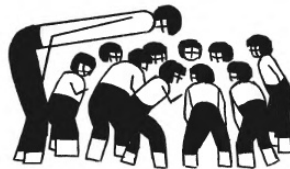
over long, elaborate ceremonies he worried, most of all, about whether his bladder would hold out.

For fun, he dissected watches, a music box, and other devices, and he spent so much time gazing at the night sky through a telescope that he concluded, contrary to Tibetan beliefs, that the moon was not illuminated from within. Though he remains intensely interested in science, he has never entered the computer age. "His Holiness finds it difficult even knowing where to press the button," his longtime private secretary Tenzin Geyche Tethong once said. His blog and other online accounts are tended by others.

The Dalai Lama was fifteen in 1950, when the newly triumphant Communist Party raided a Tibetan outpost, promising liberation. The conflict hinged on whether Tibet was a part of China or an independent country. Both sides agreed that China's Mongol rulers had amassed great authority in Tibet by the thirteenth century. But Tibetans say the bond was based principally on a shared religion, and they argue that the Mongols did not represent the Chinese. Historians in China consider the Mongol era the beginning of seven hundred years of political sovereignty over Tibet. One fact, however, is undisputed: by the time Communist forces marched into Tibet in the twentieth century, the former empire was ill-prepared to defend itself. It had a poorly trained army, no paved roads, and no more than a few speakers of any Western language. Had the country modernized earlier instead of shunning reforms, the Dalai Lama writes ruefully, "I am quite certain that Tibet's situation today would be very different."

By the end of the decade, he faced a stark choice: stay in Tibet or escape into exile. China was pressing a "socialist transformation"; the Dalai Lama was receiving reports of atrocities. For advice, he turned to what he calls his "supernatural counsels," a private world of divination and soothsaying that has helped him make difficult decisions ever since.

He relies most heavily on the "state oracle," a deity called Nechung, who communicates through a human medium, usually a monk. According to the Dalai Lama's description in his memoir, the medium slips into a trance "with bulging eyes and swollen cheeks. . . . His breathing begins to shorten and he starts to



hiss violently." The Dalai Lama poses questions, and the oracle responds with enigmatic advice. On complex affairs of state, he writes, "I seek his opinion in the same way as I seek the opinion of my Cabinet." For further help, the Dalai Lama relies on a form of *mo* divination, in which choices are written on pieces of paper and placed in balls of dough. He then swirls the balls in a cup until the right answer tumbles out.

This confidence in the supernatural is common among Tibetans, though not universally celebrated. Jamyang Norbu, a prominent writer and critic of the Dalai Lama, bemoans the practice of "burying our collective head in the sands of superstition and inertia." When I asked the Dalai Lama how he balances his trust in science with his faith in the supernatural, he said that he views the oracles as "consultants."

"After I consult human beings and these oracles, if there's something clear, something which I can now decide, then I decide," he told me. He said he had made "all major decisions" from the age of sixteen with the help of the oracles, and he had become convinced that they are correct.

These days, the Nechung medium is Thupten Ngodup, an amiable fiftyish monk who likes to garden in his spare time. When I visited him one morning in

Dharamsala, he explained that he'd been an ordinary monk, overseeing the sculptures and incense at a monastery, until one day, in 1987, when the deity suddenly chose him as the medium—a physical sensation that he compared to an electric shock. "My position is very difficult," he said. He had joined the monastery at the age of nine, never expecting much drama. "When the oracle chooses me, I'm just a normal monk." His job now requires him to be on call whenever the Dalai Lama needs a consultation. "Anytime His Holiness needs, he calls."

When it came to the crucial decision, in 1959, whether to stay or go, the oracle, in a trance, advised the Dalai Lama to escape, reached for a pen and paper, and drew a map of the route through the mountains. One night in March, the Dalai Lama donned a disguise—"unfamiliar trousers and a long black coat"—and slipped out the door of the palace with a group of guards who pretended to be on patrol. After two weeks of trekking and hiding in the Himalayas, the escape party reached the Indian border.

In exile, the Dalai Lama looked for allies, but no nations recognized Tibet's claim to independence. Some of the Dalai Lama's brothers pursued another strategy: the C.I.A. was eager to cause problems for the new Chinese govern-

ment, and by 1958 it was air-dropping weapons and tutoring Tibetans in guerrilla warfare. Some of them trained in Colorado, where they learned radio and parachute skills, and, for inspiration, watched the "The Bridge on the River Kwai." By the early sixties, the insurgents were attacking Chinese convoys, but U.S. priorities changed abruptly. President Nixon began to initiate diplomatic ties with Chairman Mao, and the C.I.A. dropped the operation. One of the Dalai Lama's brothers settled in Bloomington; another moved to Hong Kong; a third went to New Jersey, where, at one point, he worked as a school custodian known as Sam.

In the sixties, reports from inside Tibet told of ill-fated farming experiments and brutal ideological campaigns. The Dalai Lama focussed on absorbing refugees, while deepening his religious studies, especially Buddhist conceptions of compassion, interdependence, and "emptiness," according to which any person or phenomenon is by itself devoid, or "empty," of intrinsic identity. He studied the religious and political lives of Mahatma Gandhi and Baba Amte, and they left a lasting impression on him. At the time, Robert Thurman, of Columbia, was studying to become a Tibetan Buddhist monk and visited India. (He had ended a marriage to an heiress after deciding that he didn't want to spend his life, as he told the *Times*, "drinking Champagne and staring at Rouaults.") When he met the Dalai Lama, in the early sixties, he "wasn't blown over by him as a guru," Thurman told me. But when Thurman saw him again, in 1971, "he had come alive philosophically."

The Dalai Lama was travelling and lecturing, and he had discovered that esoteric teachings had a limited Western audience; he developed talks that focussed on a more accessible concept of "basic human values." One day in the late seventies, he asked for a meeting with Elie Wiesel, the author and Holocaust survivor. According to Wiesel, the Dalai Lama said, "I'm familiar with your work, what you wrote about the Jewish people losing a homeland two thousand years ago, and how you're still here. Mine has just lost its homeland, and I know it's going to be a very long road into exile. How did you survive?"

Wiesel replied, "When we left Jeru-



"Wolf! Wolf!" he cried for a third time. But this time no one came, and the wolf ate the sheep, and the shepherd boy never got into any of the really good schools."

salem, we didn't take all our jewels with us. All we took was a little book. It was the book that kept us alive. Second, because of our exile we developed a sense of solidarity. When Jews left one place for the next, there were always Jews to welcome and take care of them. And, third, good memory. Survival takes a good memory."

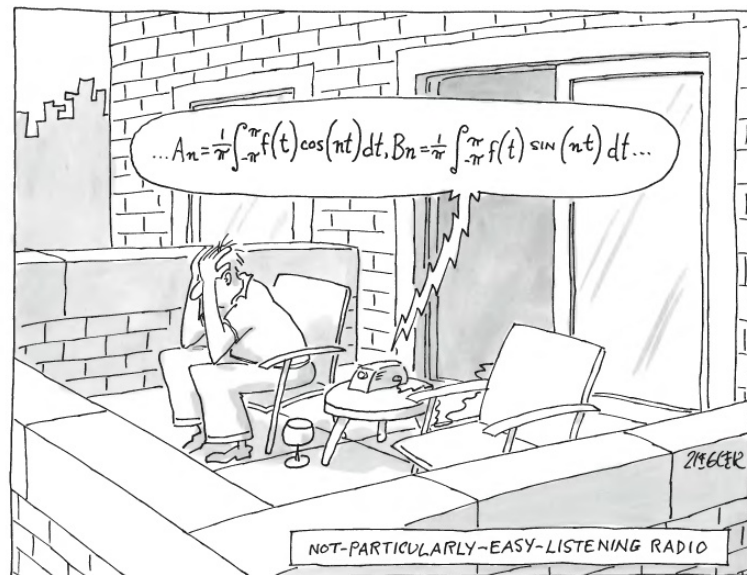
Then Wiesel took the Dalai Lama to Washington, where he met Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor in Congress and a vocal human-rights advocate. Lantos introduced him to other lawmakers (and, years later, to Nancy Pelosi, who became a stalwart supporter).

At the time that he was exploring Washington, the Chinese leaders were experimenting with a more relaxed policy in Tibet, and they opened talks with the Dalai Lama's representatives. Privately, some Tibetan officials argued for a bargaining strategy of demanding independence from China, even if they never expected to get it, as a means of obtaining at least some concessions. But the Dalai Lama rejected that idea, saying the approach was morally flawed. "They're saying something, but their real hope is for something different. It's wrong," he told me.

The talks failed, and, in the years since, many Tibetan leaders have looked back regretfully. "I think those of us serving His Holiness maybe could have been a little bit more bold," Gyari, the Dalai Lama's envoy in Washington, told me recently. He added, "Many decades later, with more gray hair, I sometimes pinch myself to say, 'Maybe . . .'" He trailed off.

But, in truth, China never expected much of the talks. "The dialogue between Dalai and the central government is not a dialogue between two political entities," Lian Xiangmin, a researcher at the government-supported China Tibetology Research Center, in Beijing, told me. "What is it? It came about because Dalai—as a Chinese citizen—has the right to inform the government of his pursuits. This is the way we look at it."

In 1984, when negotiations stalled, China made a momentous change: if the Dalai Lama could not be enticed back to China, then Beijing would buy stability in Tibet through economic development. It approved forty-two major con-



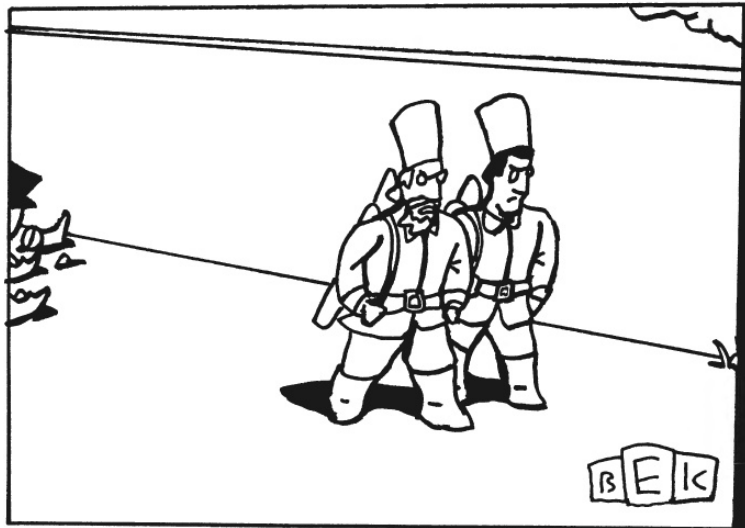
struction projects in Tibet and encouraged other ethnicities to seek work there. Thanks to what Chinese economists called a "blood transfusion" from the East, Tibet now has highways, bridges, and factories on a par with other parts of China. But the influx of non-Tibetans has become a leading cause of unrest. In March, 1989, Tibetans in Lhasa held the largest anti-Chinese demonstrations there in decades, in honor of the anniversary of the 1959 unrest that coincided with the Dalai Lama's flight into exile. The task of restoring order fell to Hu Jintao, a promising young cadre who was the Party boss in Tibet. He asked Beijing to declare martial law and cracked down on rioters. (He was rewarded for keeping the peace. Today, he is China's President and Party chief.)

The Dalai Lama became increasingly convinced that the quest for independence was doomed, not only because of his belief in pacifism but also because of simple demographics. "A holistic view brings realistic action," he told me. China is a "huge country. . . . So, therefore, the best way to deal with China is not confrontation but through reason." In 1988, he publicly abandoned the goal of independence in favor of what he calls the Middle Way, which seeks greater autonomy within Chinese borders. For the first time, he was at odds with many

Tibetans, including some of his closest advisers. "He often used to say, 'We have no hatred towards the Chinese,'" Tethong recalled. "So one day I gathered my courage and I said, 'Your Holiness, instead of saying 'We have no hatred,' say 'I have no hatred.'"

From afar, the Chinese government's comments about the Dalai Lama can sound like a relic of the Cultural Revolution. On the very day that one arm of the government is helping to craft a strategy for global economic recovery, another arm is likely to be denouncing the Dalai Lama as "a devil with a human face." But in order to understand the rationale and emotion that drive China's intense—and surprisingly polarized—views of the Dalai Lama, you have to get close enough to see what lies behind the vitriol.

In Beijing, I live a couple of hundred yards from the Palace of Peace and Harmony, better known as the Lama Temple. The largest Tibetan monastery in the capital, it is a quiet maze of shrines and cypress trees that is popular with Chinese and foreign tourists. The temple's history is entwined with that of the Dalai Lama, which makes for an awkward balance between celebrating the past and ignoring the present. I once bought a Chinese book from the gift shop on the history of the place. In a hundred and twenty-four



"You know what? I probably could have put Humpty Dumpty back together again but I was just too pissed."

pages, the current Dalai Lama—the most famous in history—is mentioned in two sentences.

Officially, China has fifty-six ethnic groups; Han Chinese are by far the most numerous, representing more than ninety per cent of the population, and, historically, the vast majority of Han are proud of their role in Tibet, which they see as a long, costly process of extending civilization to a backward region. The Han in the lowlands had little in common with the pastoral people in the mountains—no shared language or diet—and Chinese historians explained that a Tang-dynasty princess taught Tibetans about agriculture, silk, paper, modern medicine, and industry, and stopped them from painting their faces red. (Tibetan historians see things differently.) In the twentieth century, when China secured Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang within its borders, the move was hailed by the Chinese people as the end of a century of foreign invasion and humiliation. The Dalai Lama, from that perspective, stood in the path of history, and when he went into exile Chinese newsreels recorded images of farmers denouncing their former landlords and destroying records of hereditary debts.

Anyone over fifty years old in China

today has grown up with those scenes dramatized in influential films like "Serf," a 1963 drama about a freed Tibetan servant and his grateful encounter with the People's Liberation Army. Han Chinese who are only a generation or two removed from poverty are inclined to view China's investment as a sacrifice. A Chinese graduate student at Yale told me, "My father is an educated man. He has worked all over Tibet for years and, to this day, he can't really respect Tibetans. He doesn't see any intellectual output from them."

One of the most consistent and ardent beliefs among the Chinese I know is that Tibet is an inalienable part of their country. For many, Tibet is China's glamorous Wild West, a chic destination associated with spirituality and rugged individualism. "When I'm in Tibet," a young Chinese rock musician told me recently, "I can be free." That appeal has spurred interest in the religion, and a small but growing number of Han Chinese consider themselves followers of Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama believes this could eventually alter Chinese policy. "If thirty years from now Tibet is six million Tibetans and ten million Chinese Buddhists, then maybe something will be O.K.," he told Pico Iyer. The Dalai Lama is in-

creasingly intent on cultivating Chinese fans. In July, he answered questions on Twitter from Chinese users for the second time in two months, telling them that he hopes to "build up a big family that enables Chinese and Tibetans to coexist in a friendly fashion."

I know a number of Chinese adherents of Tibetan Buddhism, including two well-off friends in their late thirties, whom I'll call Feng and Liu. Feng has glasses and a medium build and works in private equity; Liu is an elegant stay-at-home mom who speaks with a serious, philosophical bent. She told me that she found Buddhism at a moment of anxiety around her thirtieth birthday. "I was in bad shape," she recalled with a chuckle. In college, Feng had gravitated toward psychology and religion, and later settled on Tibetan Buddhism, but with apprehension. "When I was learning from my Tibetan teachers, I used to ask them, 'Are you Chinese or Tibetan? Are you going to use my money to buy weapons?' I could sense that some of these masters really hated Han Chinese."

Over time, his nervousness subsided, and he became interested in the Dalai Lama. "He's written about sixty books, and I've probably read thirty of them," Feng told me. The Dalai Lama is one of the masters I admire the most." We were at an outdoor café in Beijing, and another friend at the table, who happens to be a Party member, gave a theatrical gasp, and said, "He is brave for saying that."

Feng rolled his eyes and continued, "I think the Dalai Lama is not actually a Tibetan separatist. If he were, Tibet would have been out of control by now." Even so, Feng urged me not to mistake his opinion for that of the majority. "I have a friend who is a lawyer at a private-equity firm, and he firmly believes that the Dalai Lama is a wolf in monk's clothing."

Indeed, the sheer force of China's official denunciation of the Dalai Lama makes any imminent change in public opinion hard to picture. A Tibetan monk in Qinghai Province estimated that eighty per cent of the visitors to his monastery are now Han Chinese, but he's not convinced that this will alter Chinese policy. "It's like pouring water over a stone," he told me recently. "It looks like it's wet, but nothing seeps in."

Recent Chinese leaders project a tougher line on Tibet and the Dalai

Lama than any leaders have since Mao. That's partly because officials have come to blame the collapse of the Soviet Union, to some degree, on a policy of granting too much ethnic autonomy to the reaches of the empire. When protesters in Kazakhstan took to the streets in 1986 to declare that "Kazakhstan belongs to Kazakhs," Mikhail Gorbachev, after sending in the military, tried to appease the rioters by installing a Kazakh apparatchik and changing unpopular language laws. Other ethnic groups eventually rose up as well. That chain of events "reminded the P.R.C. leaders of the political risk in managing ethnic relations, and made them very cautious," according to Ma Rong, an influential sociologist at Peking University.

"The former Soviet Union took a great risk by handling its nationality/ethnicity issues the way it did," Ma wrote in an academic journal in 2007. The Soviets wrongly assumed that Communism would bind their ethnicities together, but the "nation was at risk of disintegrating if the ideological linkage among the ethnic groups collapsed." Today in China, where Communism is only a wisp of an ideology, the fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups live side by side. In 2008, President Hu Jintao said, "Stability in Tibet concerns the stability of the country." When human-rights activists accuse Beijing of repressing Tibetan intellectuals, Chinese authorities counter that they face a grave threat to national security and stability, an argument that is persuasive to a population that recalls the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.

Chinese leaders see the Dalai Lama as an especially potent threat. Although he repeatedly renounces efforts to seek Tibetan independence, they say that he harbors a covert intention to split Tibet from the rest of China, as evidenced by his willingness to allow others in the exile community to call for independence. At times, China's leaders have been swayed so completely by their own newsreels that it has left them vulnerable. In 1979, when a delegation from Dharamsala was allowed to visit Tibet, Party officials urged Tibetans not to throw stones or spit at the Dalai Lama's representatives, out of hatred of the old society. But when the contingent arrived it was mobbed by thousands of adoring Tibetans, prostrating

themselves and clamoring to touch the Dalai Lama's brother. (A stunned Party chief complained that all the efforts of the previous decades had evidently been no more effective than throwing money into the Lhasa River.)

And, yet, offering an alternative perspective on Tibet is risky. In 1998, after months of research in Tibet, the Chinese writer Wang Lixiong noted that the region "is more prosperous now than ever before in its history. However, this has not gained the People's Republic of China the allegiance of the Tibetans, more and more of whom have become attached to the Dalai Lama." In another piece, Wang warned, "The present stability is superficial." For his writings on Tibet and elsewhere, he was eventually placed under house arrest.

When the 2008 protests erupted in Tibet, the world focussed largely on the drama in the capital, but at least a hundred and fifty incidents of unrest were rippling across other areas as well, including remote parts of neighboring provinces like Qinghai, where the Dalai Lama was born. One afternoon in July, I hailed a gypsy cab for a trip to his birthplace, a small town known in Tibetan as Taktser, an hour by car from the provincial capital of Qinghai. The driver was a genial thirty-four-year-old Tibetan whom I'll call Jigme. Though he was brought up in the area, he had never heard of Taktser. But he figured he could find anything eventually, and we set off at a fare of thirty dollars.

Jigme wore green cargo shorts and a black T-shirt with a mug of Guinness silk-screened on the front. He was an enthusiastic travel companion. His father was a traditional Tibetan opera musician who had received two years of schooling before going to work. When his father was growing up, he would walk seven days from his home town to Xining, the provincial capital. Jigme now makes the same trip three or four times a day in his Volkswagen Santana. A Hollywood buff, he was eager to talk about his favorites:



"King Kong," "Lord of the Rings," Mr. Bean. Most of all, he said, "I like American cowboys. The way they ride around on horses, with hats, it reminds me a lot of Tibetans."

Jigme spoke good Mandarin. The central government has worked hard to promote the use of standard Mandarin in ethnic regions like this, and a banner beside the train station in Xining reminded people to "Standardize the Language and Script." Jigme was married to an accountant, and they had a three-year-old daughter. I asked if they planned to enroll her in a school that taught in Chinese or in Tibetan. "My daughter will go to a Chinese school," Jigme said. "That's the best idea if she wants to get a job anywhere outside the Tibetan parts of the world."

We passed frequent reminders that China is determined to pull this region closer to the rest of the country. We saw a crew of hundreds of workers erecting pylons that will carry a new highway, and another team sinking a tunnel into a mountain. Jigme turned off the main road, and the buildings thinned out. The car climbed through a valley flanked by cliffs of brilliant red stone.

In his comments and appearance, Jigme seemed to be constantly negotiating what it means to be both Tibetan and Chinese. When I asked how the Han Chinese and the Tibetans were getting along, he said, "In some ways, the Communist Party has been good to us. It has fed us and made sure we have a roof over our heads. And, where it does things right, we should acknowledge that." After a pause, he added, "But Tibetans want their own country. That's a fact. I graduated from a Chinese school. I can't read Tibetan."

We threaded through tiny villages, with mud-brick homes and sheep moving in single file by the roadside, until we reached Taktser (known in Chinese as Hongyacun)—two hundred and fifty or so households clustered on a red-rock hill that villagers say resembles a crouching lion. Only after we were in town did Jigme ask why I wanted to visit in the first place. Neighbors pointed us to the nicest home in the village, a courtyard house with double-height red wooden doors and Tibetan scarves fluttering from the latches. I'd read that it had been partly destroyed during the Cul-

tural Revolution, but was later rebuilt, and is now maintained by a relative of the Dalai Lama's. The authorities keep him close; according to the state news agency, he receives a salary from the government and serves on a local political advisory body.

An old woman with silver teeth and a pair of braids opened the wooden doors. The courtyard was lined with cobblestones and flanked by flower beds; prayer flags fluttered overhead. When she saw me, she said, "Sorry, they've told us foreigners aren't allowed inside. If we let them, there will be problems for us." As I turned to leave, Jigme asked her if he could pray inside the threshold. The old woman ushered him in, and I saw him fall to his knees and press his forehead to the cobblestones.

That night, I stayed in the town known in Tibetan as Rebkong, and in Chinese as Tongren. During the uprising in 2008, local monks protested in front of government offices. An eyewitness quoted in a report by Human Rights Watch described a scene of "soldiers and police beating the crowd with electric batons." A man in his sixties reportedly began shouting, "May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for ten thousand years!" and "Tibet is independent!" According to the witness, "Five or six soldiers threw him to the ground and beat him so severely that he seemed close to death."

After the unrest, the government expanded the military presence in the

area. There is a sprawling military base of blocky white buildings on the edge of town. That was accompanied, as usual, by investments intended to demonstrate the advantages of peaceful development. Next to the base was a newly constructed five-story apartment complex in pastel colors; from a window hung a red banner inscribed with the phrase "Strengthen Ethnic Unity."

When I met the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in July, we sat in a spacious reception room decorated with paintings of the Buddha, in a complex of offices beside his house. His aides had told him that I was coming from China, and, before I could pose a question, he asked me for an update on ethnic regions such as Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. He seemed unnerved by the notion that Tibet might someday be as Sinicized as Inner Mongolia, where there are more Han Chinese residents than Mongolians.

"According to some Mongolian friends," he said, "now in Inner Mongolia the Mongol population is around three or four million, whereas Han immigrant population is nearly twenty million." He perched on a brown sofa chair, with a mug of plain hot water before him. He was still thinking about Inner Mongolia and asked, "So when you visit the appearance is of many Chinese?" Before I could answer, he said, "Lhasa is also now becoming like that: Chinatown."

I asked about his prediction that more

Chinese followers of Tibetan Buddhism might alter China's policies, and I said that, from my experience, Chinese citizens appear to separate political and religious attachments to Tibet. He shook his head and told the story of a Frenchman who became a Tibetan Buddhist monk but wanted nothing to do with political issues. "I asked him whether you are praying for the survival of Tibetan Buddhism, and Buddhism in general. He said yes, every day he prays for that. Then I mentioned that the Tibetan struggle is mainly for the preservation of Tibetan Buddhism. So if you pray, then actually you are involved!" He erupted in a belly laugh.

In Dharamsala, I bumped into Tsewang Rigzin, whom I'd last seen in Indiana, where he was trying, in vain, to attract Americans to his cause. Rigzin, who has a buzz cut and serious, heavy-lidded eyes, used to live in Oregon, where he worked for a bank before he was elected president of the Tibetan Youth Congress. He moved to Dharamsala, but his wife and children remain in the United States. The Chinese press says that he runs a terrorist organization. In April, 2008, the Xinhua news agency quoted a government spokesman who alleged that Tibetan advocacy groups, including Rigzin's, planned to "organize suicide squads to launch violent attacks."

Sitting at the group's headquarters in Dharamsala, a one-story office with the threadbare quality of an old union hall, Rigzin said the accusation was absurd. "I get Chinese people here all the time, and they laugh when we talk about the Chinese calling the T.Y.C. a terrorist group," he told me. "I tell them, 'If we are a terrorist organization, you wouldn't be here.' You would probably need to pass through a bunch of security guards with AK-47s and what have you. We are a democratic and a transparent organization. Everybody is welcome here."

Rigzin said the group has never condoned violence, and yet he is content to be ambiguous about the future. "As long as His Holiness is around, the struggle will be nonviolent," he said. "But we have to be realistic that there will be a day when he will no longer be with us. And then we don't know. We'll have to wait and see."

That sense of anticipation, I discovered, is brewing in China as well. As a Tibetan intellectual in China put it to



"I'm not sure. Fat compared to what?"

me, "The questions of Tibet and the Dalai Lama are separate issues. The Tibetan people have been here for thousands of years, and the Dalai Lama is just one man among many. The Tibetans and the Han will still have to live together. After he's gone, the stability will be harder to maintain."

He expressed deep admiration for the Dalai Lama, so I was surprised by what he said next: "The way that young people here see it, the Dalai Lama is received by foreign leaders. To do so, he has given up Tibet's independence, but what have the Tibetan people gotten in return? He had the right to protect independence, but who gave him the right to abandon it? There is a group of us who feel this way." He was growing excited. "People all over the world are the same," he said. "If they've lost everything, they don't fear death." Of the Chinese, he added, "They think they have succeeded. They are mistaken."

One way that the Dalai Lama hopes to prevent a violent future is by teaching younger figures to uphold his vision until a reincarnation comes of age—or a secular exile leadership can gain support. Among the people who might play a role is the Karmapa, a high-ranking Tibetan lama who was born in Tibet and was on track to become a "patriotic" religious leader, as Jiang Zemin, then China's President, said of him as a child. Instead, the Karmapa fled to Dharamsala at the age of fourteen, and now, at twenty-four, has matured into a calm, commanding figure who is sometimes seated at the Dalai Lama's side at public events. Compared with the Dalai Lama, the young Karmapa is a more earthly presence, quick to mention his fondness for the Internet, hip-hop, and video games. When I asked him if the growing numbers of Chinese followers of Tibetan Buddhism reassured him as it does the Dalai Lama, he sounded wary. "They have soft feelings, but I don't know if that means they support genuine autonomy," he said. "They are interested in the culture."

Another way that the Dalai Lama is trying to sustain the Tibet movement in the future is by promoting a secular Tibetan leadership. ("A religious leader having to assume political leadership—that period is over," he has said.) Through the years, he has called repeatedly for greater democracy among Tibetans in

exile, but his people hold fast to his leadership. In previous elections, only half of eligible voters turned out. For the first time, campaign posters were plastered around Dharamsala, in advance of an election for Prime Minister in October. But Buddhist voters were still becoming acclimated to the sight of so much self-promotion. "Some feel it is rather 'un-Tibetan,'" Thubten Samphel told me.

In July, a few days before the Dalai Lama's birthday, a Chinese court handed down a verdict in the latest case against a Tibetan intellectual: the Chinese authorities sentenced Rinchen Samdrup, a well-known Tibetan environmentalist, to five years in prison on charges of inciting subversion. He was accused of posting an article on his organization's Web site which referred to the Dalai Lama favorably.

In Beijing, the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, Qin Gang, when asked for comment on the Dalai Lama's birthday, replied that he did not bother to keep track of the date. Instead, he preferred to recall two other landmarks in history: the moment, in 1951, that the Chinese Army brought "peaceful liberation" to Tibet; and the day, in 1959, that the Chinese put down a rebellion and launched a political overhaul—a date that the government recently enshrined as Serf Emancipation Day.

As the Dalai Lama ages, the Chinese government grows more resolute in its determination to shun him. Nobody I spoke to—in Beijing, Dharamsala, or Washington—thinks this will change anytime soon. In part, that's because China has narrowed its own options: by educating its citizens to perceive any concession where Tibet is concerned as an existential threat, China has left itself little room to bargain. So, for the moment, the two sides remain locked in a war of patience: the Dalai Lama waiting to win over enough ordinary Chinese followers to alter Chinese policy, and the Chinese government waiting to win over enough ordinary Tibetans to keep Lhasa stable.

Chinese leaders are betting that, if they wait for the Dalai Lama to die, whoever comes after him will be less galvanizing to lawmakers in Washington and dog groomers in Indiana—and they are probably right. But they might be overlooking the disruptive potential of Tibetans,

which would not be the first time that Chinese decision-makers have been blinded by their own hopeful reading of Tibet. Wang Lixiong, the Chinese writer who has correctly predicted Tibetan unrest before, wrote not long ago, "While the Dalai Lama is still alive . . . Tibetans harbor hope. But once the Dalai Lama dies . . . grief will give rise to frenzy." And, yet, Lodi Gyari says that his Chinese counterparts across the table are more unyielding than ever. "They always say that the clock is ticking for you," he told me. "I say, 'Yes, it is certainly ticking for me. But it is also ticking for you.'"

When I visited the Dalai Lama at his compound, he had been wrapping up a meeting with a group of Chinese visitors, and he bid them goodbye with a few words in Mandarin. As we talked, China was on his mind. "So long as there is a separate Tibetan identity they feel fear," he said of the Beijing leadership. "The Chinese government must learn the experience of India: South Indians, East Indians, West Indians, North Indians—different languages, different scripts. Each is proud yet remains within one republic. No danger of separation if you realize a common interest."

Though he may have been idealizing India's fractious ethnic politics, his point was clear, and his faith in the power of a "common interest" reminded me of the Chinese sociologist Ma Rong's warning that the Soviet Union collapsed because it never united its diverse population around anything but a hollow economic philosophy. In this sense, the Dalai Lama and the Chinese leadership have unwittingly settled on a shared belief in the need to pull the country together. But on the best way to achieve this they differ fundamentally, and, probably, irreconcilably.

On the evening of the Dalai Lama's birthday, Indian television broadcast a talk-show-style interview with him, and the host, inevitably, inquired about his health. "If I don't commit suicide," he answered merrily, "then otherwise my body is very healthy. Another ten to twenty years . . . no problem. Maybe thirty years!" If his prophesy holds, he will be a hundred and five. ♦

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Evan Osnos talks about the Dalai Lama.