Contacts between Dharamsala and Beijing

The Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala published a series of documents covering the exchanges with Beijing during the years 1981–1993 and the various missions which were allowed to visit Tibet. In 1979 China’s premier Deng Xiaoping told an emissary of the Dalai Lama, Gyalo Thondup, that “the door to negotiations remains wide open” and “except for the independence of Tibet, all other questions can be negotiated”. Thereafter five fact-finding delegations were allowed to visit Tibet. In July 1993, fourteen years later, two representatives of His Holiness got the same message, which was reaffirmed in August by a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman. Yet, very little had happened in the intervening years, which led the Tibetan Department of Information and International relations to compare political negotiations with China to “a long term exercise in futile expectations”.1

The first delegation left India on 5 August 1979 with the aim “to try to understand the new leaders of China and to greet the six million Tibetans in Tibet”. They stayed for three months, shot miles of film footage, but only gave oral reports in Dharamsala. In their view the people’s belief in Buddhism was far from shaken, the vast majority still cherished the Dalai Lama and dreamt of an independent Tibet under him, and their economic condition was incredibly poor.2 Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama in 1980 in his annual 10 March address on the anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising talked about “the present period of leniency”. In 1980 the second mission made a long journey into various parts and reported that 99 percent of all monasteries and temples had been destroyed. In towns there were more new houses than old ones, yet no ordinary Tibetan lived in those houses. In the same year a third delegation led by Jetsun Pema, sister of the Dalai Lama, was given a mass of educational statistics, which appeared to them as very uneven. The second mission ended with the Lhasa incident of 25 July 1980 when one of the delegates shouted to a crowd in front of the guest house “Tibet is independent” and the crowd responded emotionally. As a result the two delegation were asked to cut their

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2 Dawa Norbu, Tibet, the Road Ahead, Prospero Books, 1997, pp. 279–284, covers the missions, but some dates seem inaccurate.
mission short and official contacts were suspended. On 10 March 1981 the Dalai Lama quoted the Tibetan proverb: “Before your eyes they show you brown sugar, but in your mouth they give you sealing wax”.

A few days later, on March 23, 1981 the Dalai Lama wrote to Deng Xiaoping about the sad state of the Tibetan people as ascertained by the missions. His tone was conciliatory and even agreed with the Communist ideology “which seeks the well-being of human beings in general and the proletariat in particular, and in Lenin’s policy of equality of nationalities” and “If the Tibetan people’s identity is preserved and if they are genuinely happy, there is no reason to complain”. However, in reality ninety percent of Tibetans are suffering both mentally and physically and are living in deep sorrow. Therefore the time had come “to apply, with a sense of urgency, our common wisdom in a spirit of tolerance and broadmindedness in order to achieve genuine happiness for the Tibetans”.

In a note attached to the letter some concrete issues were discussed. The first was the fourth fact-finding mission which was about to leave, but according to a message to Gyalo Thondup, the Special Envoy of the Dalai Lama, received through Xinhua in Hongkong, China wanted to postpone it that year. Equally, the opening of a liaison office in Lhasa should be deferred and instead more contacts should be made through Hongkong and the Chinese Embassy in Delhi. The Tibetans agreed on both points but made a plea for continuing with the envisaged attachment of fifty Buddhist teachers to Tibetan schools. The Chinese were backtracking on the agreement in principle (which they recognised) with the pretext that the teachers would find it difficult to live in Tibet where facilities were lacking at the moment. This could harm their morale. “For the time being, some teachers may be deputed to nationality schools inside China from where they could gradually be sent to Tibet”. Apparently, Beijing had vetoed the earlier concessions, which in themselves were quite remarkable, both in opening a formal channel of communications and allowing outsiders into the sensitive field of education. The note the Tibetans sent in reply refuted the Chinese anxiety: the teachers were already aware of the difficult conditions and they would be concerned solely with educational matters and not indulge in any political activities.

Gyalo Thondup received a note from CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang on July 28, 1981, entitled “China’s Five-point Policy towards the Dalai Lama”. It was succinct and read:

3 The English translation appeared much later in *Beijing Review*, No. 49, 3.12. 84.