

Tibet in the early 20th century

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[Editor's Note: A series of draft essays (in English) were recently discovered in Seattle by Larry Epstein among the papers of the late Professor Turrell V. Wylie. Written by the late Surkhang Shape while he was a member of the Inner Asia Project of the University of Washington (in the late 1960's), they were translated at that time into English by his brother, Surkhang Rimshi. Surkhang Shape was a key member of the Kashag in the late 1940's and 1950's, and was a brilliant student of Tibetan history.

This issue of TSIN presents the first of these essays as it was found, i.e., with no editing for English meaning. It deals with the period spanning roughly from 1904-1914 and presents a fascinating and important new Tibetan perspective on several important issues occurring in that period. TSIN will publish the other essays in subsequent issues.]

In 1904, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama fled before the advancing troops of the Younghusband Expedition and after a stay of four years in Mongolia and China managed to meet the Emperor and the Dowager. He arrived in Peking in 1908 on the eighth day of the third Tibetan month, at the age of 33. The question of why the interview was delayed so long might be answered when one considers the fact that the Ch'ing Dynasty was nearing its end and was at this time very weak. Thus the Dalai Lama realized somewhat disappointedly, that no help against the British invasion would be forthcoming from the Chinese. I am of the opinion that the real reason the interview with the emperor was granted at all was because of the imminent danger that Russian influence over the Tibetans would undermine Chinese intentions in Tibet. The Dalai Lama was accompanied throughout his sojourn in Mongolia and China by the Buryat Dorjieff. The latter, though nominally mtshan-zhabs of the Dalai Lama was in fact a political figure and acted as a channel to and from the Tsar. When the Dalai Lama was residing in Mongolia the Tsar had sent the Russian ambassador to Peking to the Dalai Lama and the latter granted him an audience: what was discussed is not known.

At any rate when the Dalai Lama finally arrived at Peking he was treated in a manner as befitted his rank, that is as was the Fifth Dalai Lama on his visit centuries earlier; some 10,000 taels per diem, were spent on hospitality. When the Dowager inquired of the Dalai Lama about how the days of his journey fared, he replied that he was unable to remember the individual days but that he could recall the four years easily. The Dalai Lama and the Dowager discussed each other's health and the state of their religion, but apparently not a word passed between them regarding the political situation in Tibet, and the reason of the Dalai Lama's visit, although well known to the Chinese, was not mentioned. Since all political matters relating to Tibet were handled through the Officer of the Grand Councilor [Chinese characters] the Tibetan grievances were presented to that office, but again, there was not much interest taken there either. The Tibetan emissaries were told that the Chu'n chi ta ch'en (Grand Councilor of Military Affairs) would deal with the matter in time, and that they were awaiting the reports of their special amban who was known to the Tibetans as Chu-thog amban (Chang ta-jen or Chang Ying-tang) who had been dispatched to Tibet in 1908 (?1906).

The Dalai Lama was anxious to return to Tibet after that; I think that having seen what was taking place in China, he changed his mind in trying to enlist their help. He considered it a wise political move thereafter to try and establish friendly relations with the British Empire instead of China or Russia. Further evidence of this shift in sentiment may be seen in the following chain of incidents. Just before the Dalai Lama left in late 1903, he dismissed from their posts and had imprisoned in the Nor bu gling ka the four bka' shag members (Bshad-grwa, Zhol khang, Byang khyim, and Hor-khang) for their failure to deal with the British in a proper manner and their pro-British leanings. On the day when the British expeditionary forces arrived at Snang dkar rtse Rdzong, they were further deprived of their posts and exiled to their respective estates. Furthermore when the four disgraced ministers were being interrogated by the Tshongs-'du, the Dalai Lama found that several members of the Assembly were sympathetic towards the ministers and rather lenient in the procedures of investigation. The Dalai Lama also had seven of these persons arrested. In 1908 the Regent Blo bzang rgyal mtshan, who may be described briefly as a good man, but politically naive, under the influence of the special Chinese envoy Chang empowered the Bka' blon Tsha rong to sign the Tibet Trade Regulations in Calcutta. One article of this agreement permitted the Chinese to station some 6000 'policemen' in Tibet [MCG: Surkhang is mistaken regarding such a clause]. This was done without the knowledge of the Dalai Lama. Upon the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet that same year he appointed the three former bka'-blon (Hor khang had committed suicide shortly after he was imprisoned) as srid skyongs phyag rogs, a new post, purportedly to act as assistants to the regent. When the latter got wind of the new appointments he convened the Full Assembly and broke all precedents by attending the meeting. In an even more surprising move he tried to prostrate himself before the members of the assembly, saying that he had served his country honestly and well in time of difficulty, but now that peace had returned to Tibet the Dalai Lama apparently thought that he needed assistance in his work; he therefore wished the assembly to allow him to retire. But he received the answer that the assembly could neither presume that they had the power to let him do so, nor could they delay the appointment of the three ministers.

The Dalai Lama was in a hurry to return to Tibet and take steps to prevent the Chinese troops from, invading Tibet. He was met in the vicinity of the Tshwa'i-'dam by his elder brothers and the bka' blon bla ma Blo bzang phrin las all of whom contracted an epidemic fever on the trip and died. From the time that he returned his relationships with the amban Lieu-yu steadily deteriorated. He was met by the latter and other officials on 8/2/09 at Nag chu kha, but due to the actions of the amban during the Dalai Lama's absence (see below), the Dalai Lama snubbed him by making him wait until last for an interview. In retaliation the amban created a traffic jam on the way back to Lhasa which caused the Dalai Lama and his retinue to arrive late for a great reception in the Gtsug lag khang. Within a few days of the Dalai Lama's arrival the Tibetan government stopped providing rations of rice, wood, oil and fodder to the Chinese garrison in Lhasa, one that had been given since Pho lha nas's time. Among the amban's hostile actions were general interference with internal politics. He had on several occasions exposed 'corruption' among Tibetan officials, notably the giving of bribes to obtain political posts, and more seriously had interfered with the duties of the late bka' blon bla ma. The latter was accused of looking too much like a Moslem. Several years earlier, following a revolt in Ch'inghai, it was proclaimed that Moslems could no longer hold high posts, and the amban had not allowed the minister to go to the Kashag meetings. Furthermore the Dalai Lama was now using a seal presented to him by the National Assembly in place of the Emperor's seal (see Shakabpa, frontispiece). The amban considered these things good reason to expedite the movement of the 6000 troops into Tibet, due to the change of climate regarding the growing attitude of Tibetan independence.

The Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa in December of 1909, about the same time that the news of the Chinese troops approaching Kong po was heard. Tibetan officials in Khams, Dwags po and Kong po fled towards Lhasa. Last to flee were the mkhan chung Gdam snyan and the mda' dpon Lha sding from Sho pa mdo. The sde [sic. mda'] dpon made his escape good but the mkhan chung, along with 16 of his servants and escort were caught and taken to Gyamda by some Chinese advance troops and then beheaded. When the news of their murder reached Lhasa it produced a generally felt stronger antagonism towards the Chinese and frightened both the Dalai Lama and other high officials including the three new srid blon. Tsha rong zhabs pad and the dza sag Rgyal mtshan mkhan mchog, one head of the newly-formed Phyi rgyal las khung, along with several other officials were dispatched to Ru thog (?) with 200 troops to halt the Chinese advance. On the first day of the Tibetan New Year the troops were preparing to have their evening meal, when an advance scout arrived with news that he a-lid seen a large Chinese force, both cavalry and foot soldiers. The Tibetan troops decided that, because they had no modern arms and were so drastically outnumbered, resistance would have been folly, and they deserted their position. Crossing over towards 'Bri gung, they took a northerly route back towards Lhasa. News arrived that the Chinese had now crossed through Ru thog, and on the third day of the New Year they arrived at the outskirts of Lhasa. The cavalry troops arrived first, firing into the air. Entering Lhasa

they killed two police troops, one government official (mkhan chung Dka' gdong 'Jam dbyangs) and wounded Phun khang The'i ji. The Dalai Lama and the three srid blon then decided to leave Lhasa once again. The Tsho smon gling hutuqtu, who was the Dga' ldan khri pa, was appointed regent. I think that the decision was a wise one since he was an incarnation of Se ra, which was the most strongly anti-Chinese of the large monasteries and also the Khri rinpoche, who could therefore command the authority of all the Yellow Church. But since he was not highly skilled in political matters the Dalai Lama also appointed as his assistant the mkhan che Snye'u shag Mkhayen rab phun tshogs whose conservatism and strong character would not likely be influenced by the Chinese.

At midnight of that same day the Dalai Lama and his retinue left the Potala for Nor bu gling ka and thence to Lcags zam Ferry some 40 miles southwest of Lhasa. Crossing the ferry, he left in charge of some 210 Tibetan regulars his 23 year-old spyang gsal Zla bzang dgra 'dul who had traveled with the Dalai Lama in China and was a man of excellent character, while he proceeded to the monastery of the Rdo rje phag mo, Bsam lding, where he remained for three days. On the fourth day the amban discovered the Dalai Lama's absence and sent soldiers in pursuit, numbering about 1000. At Lcags zam Zla bzang dgra 'dul was able to hold the Chinese for two or three days. He later told me that he had fallen into a heavy sleep, not having slept for several days, and was awakened by a sharp slap in the face. The source of the blow could not be found and he regarded it as an omen to stay on the alert. In a while he noticed that there were flames coming from a wood-pile next to a small monastery at Lcags zam. Thinking that the Chinese had crossed he sent a messenger to the Dalai Lama and advised his men to hide their weapons and disperse. The Lama left Bsam lding immediately and made for the British trade agency at Chumbi via Gyantse, where he was received by MacDonald. He escaped not a moment too soon, because without the knowledge of Zla bzang dgra 'dul, part of the Chinese pursuit force had crossed the river at Snye mo and arrived at Bsam lding one day after the Dalai Lama had departed. The Chinese frontier guards at Chumbi had not received word of the events at Lhasa and the Dalai Lama was allowed to proceed unimpeded to India, whither he was followed by his favorite some days later.

The Dalai Lama proceeded to Kalimpong where he remained for the time being. The new bka' shag, whose members were Glang mdun, Rgyal mtshan mkhas mchog, Bde dge gling and Tsha rong, who was the only member of the previous cabinet (he had been left behind after returning from the defeat at Ru thog, and had thus been unable to join the Dalai Lama), worked for about a month. In dealing with the amban only Tsha rong would go; the others were apprehensive since they had been appointed only recently by the Dalai Lama. At that time the Kashag received word from the amban that he had heard that there was one man working in the Kashag that belonged there and three others that did not; hence the amban could not give his approval for them to go to the Kashag, and that those men should work for whatever position they were appointed. But no clear response was given the amban by the Tibetans and they continued their work, thinking that since they had legitimately received the appointment from the Dalai Lama, they had the right. One day there arrived a message from the amban that the ministers should come to the Chinese residence. At first they thought that the approval of their appointment by the amban would be forthcoming, but at the same time orders for the arrest of Mr. Snye'u shag, assistant to the regent, were issued. He was led to the yamen with his hands tied behind his back, held there for a while and later sent to Chang tu, all this without apparent reason. The Kashag members were held there for one night and released the next day with the stern warning not to continue their work at the Kashag.

At that time, about four months after the Dalai Lama had fled, two Chinese military officials Generals Shih (?) and Chung-yin, had a quarrel, first instigated by Chung, which reached the attention of the amban. The latter called both of them into his presence and telling them that for two high officers to quarrel in public brought shame upon the Chinese, ordered their execution. Such a severe sentence for such a seemingly small offense was to say the least surprising, but Lien-yu" offered only a cryptic statement, telling them that he was an old man and that when he died they would discuss the reasons of their execution when they met at the place of judgment of Gshin rje chos rgyal, the god of death. Shih thereupon was executed, but Chung-yin was released without further punishment. It was thereupon understood that there was another matter involved in the execution. It was generally supposed that Shih had released military secrets inadvertently through his wife who was the daughter of Thang smad the mayor (zhol pa) of Lhasa. Also the execution had the practical purpose of restricting the relationships of the Tibetans and Chinese, who had been relatively friendly and had mixed freely on a social level up until this time. After 1911, however, Chinese documents fell into the hands of my uncle, then the secretary to the Kashag which throws light on the whole affair. One letter from China stated that Shih was the leader of a revolutionary movement in Tibet and that he should be executed, preferably on another pretext. Thus it is apparent that the quarrel with Chung-yin was fixed.

From that period on suppression of the Tibetans increased. Tibetan officials at all levels had to be appointed through the amban, and this tended to increase the level of corruption in some cases, since Lien appointed persons to many new posts upon the receipt of a sufficient bribe. For instance the case of the appointment of Byams pa bstan dar as Drung yig chen mo: Byams pa bstan dar had previously been a candidate for that post along with a monk of the Phun rabs pa family, The Dalai Lama had chosen the latter and Byams pa bstan dar bore a grudge against him. A sufficient bribe caused the amban to create a parallel post for him.

Towards the end of 1910 Chung left Tibet with the main body of Chinese forces to suppress an uprising in the principality of Sbo. Upon the successful of their campaign they retreated slowly and reached Kong po; Lien retained only the old Yung (?) Regiment of about 500 troops and some 300 artillery troops stationed at Gra bzhi dmag sgar near Sera. Upon arrival of the news that the emperor had been deposed, those 300 troops paraded into Lhasa and "escorted" the amban to their encampment. The fact that he entered his palanquin without shoes though made it plain that he was being placed in arrest. The majority of the troops stayed behind and looted the Chinese treasury in order to procure funds to return to China. Further to the north of Gra bzhi was the Rlog bde power station and mint, guarded by 100 troops of the amban's old guard. The troops of the artillery regiment proceeded there bearing the palanquin of the amban, and when the guards came to meet them, the others threw the palanquin down and showed them that it was empty; whereupon the old guards joined forces with the looters. The looting troops had so much silver that they could not carry it, and they converted it to gold, jewelry, etc., also selling their weapons, and departed for India.

When news of the changes in China reached the main forces in Kong po one Chinese officer (Shay? ((Hsieh))) called the troops in his command and explained that the establishment of the republic in China now required him to abolish the use of military titles, etc., and henceforth they would be equal among themselves. The chief commander however retained his power, claiming that if the Chinese were to leave Tibet in small groups they would be killed by the Tibetans; hence they would remain together for the time being for mutual self-protection. Chung appointed many new men from the ranks in order to assist him. In Lhasa once again Chung and his newly formed cadre confronted the now powerless amban. Chung claimed that he had Tibetan secrets that the Chinese would be attacked and wanted to attack Sera in a surprise move. Lien-yu on the other hand warned against such a move as he now considered fighting the Tibetans futile. Instead he proposed that the Chinese troops be divided and stationed in vital places: the Potala, the Gtsug lag khang (central cathedral), Lhasa, Shigatse, and Gyantse. The operation of the Tibetan government could be left to the Tibetans themselves, that is by deploying Tibetan collaborators in vital posts. But Chung and the others considered Lien and his ideas somewhat outmoded and cowardly and opted for military adventurism instead, whereupon the Chinese attacked Sera monastery. Lien's reported remarks on the affair was something like: I have blown up this balloon well but the children have stuck pins in it. Lien, in a state of despair, fled to 'Bras spungs and remained there in seclusion.

The Chinese, before they carried out their attack, had hoped to receive from the Tibetans more than half a million tranga in silver bouillon so that they might leave the country. The Kashag, headed by Tsha rong, raised the money by requesting that the aristocratic families donate whatever they could. Tsha rong placed his son in charge of the collection, and he soon raised the money which was given to the Chinese. This was regarded by some persons as a traitorous act, but I think that was not the case. Tsha rong's main object was to preserve the power of the Kashag and hence Tibetan

independence through friendly relations with the Chinese, whom he knew were too strong militarily for the Tibetans. Had Tsha rong been thinking of his own welfare he could have fled Lhasa and joined the Dalai Lama in India. Besides it was due mainly to Tsha rong's efforts that an effective Tibetan underground had been formed. But unfortunately for him, the Chinese remained in Lhasa and Tsha rong was suspected of treason. He was opposed mainly by the rabble, and politically uneducated monks of Sera and Ganden; in addition he was borne a personal grudge by the minister Bshad grwa, then in India, who took advantage of Tsha rong's position by instigating rumors. Bshad-grwa's gru dge probably stemmed from the time that he was in prison, during which Tsha rong rose to power, A political song was spread:

Nyin mo ser bya yin zer
Bka' shag nang la 'gro gyi
Mtshan mo rma bya yin zer
Ya mon nang la 'gro gyi

'By day he is called a yellow bird and goes into the Kashag;
By night he is called a peacock, and goes into the yamen.'

After the fighting at Sera the Kashag and Regent met in the Potala at the same time the Assembly was in session. At this time the Assembly was all-powerful in Tibet: arrangements for fighting, etc., were made through the Assembly, as they were in possession of the various seals through which communications were controlled. Furthermore there was a good deal of internal distrust towards the Kashag and the Regent. At that time the Dalai Lama made his spyan gsal Zla bzang dgram 'dul the commander-in-chief (spyi mda') of the Tibetan military forces and sent him to Lhasa. There he joined forces with Khri smon zhabs pad and Byams pa bstan dar and they plotted the assassination of Tsha rong, et al. Two weeks before his murder Tsha rong had become the object of the rumors afoot in Lhasa and had gone to the Regent, requesting that he be given leave to depart to India, but the regent told him that whatever was being said about Tsha rong was being disregarded by those persons in high position who knew the facts, and he guaranteed his safety. But the regent apparently had no knowledge of the plot on Tsha rong's life. Tsha rong kept a pistol under the cushion of his seat at the Kashag and on the morning of his assassination a gsol dpon of the regent came and told him that the Chinese soldiers who held the Lcags po ri had been firing at the Potala and that the Regent requested the loan of Tsha rong's pistol in order to protect himself. Tsha rong thereupon lent the hand gun. Later in the day there appeared a delegation from the military headquarters near Rmu ru rnying pa, led by one officer, Bying pa and some monks from Sera, looking like a routine mission. Upon making their report to the Kashag, however, the speaker mumbled and Tsha rong leaned forward, telling the man to speak up: whereupon a monk from the back of the group jumped forward and seized his topknot. They accused Tsha rong of treason and tying his hands behind him they dragged him bodily down the steps of the Potala and shot him. The other Kalons, Ram pa and Lha thog pa (Glang mdun had since expired) were imprisoned in Zhol. Tsha rong's son and the Bka' drung Zhag pa were also arrested and executed by Sera monks, along with the drung yig chen mo, Phun rab pa. The reason for the murder of the latter was reportedly his cooperation with the pro-Chinese monks of Bstan rgyas gling, but in fact, I rather suspect that Byams pa bstan dar, who had obtained the same post by bribing the Chinese, seized upon the excuse to do away with his rival. Other assembly members were killed: the Bla phyag Mon drong, an intimate friend of Phun rab pa and his brother, the Lha gnyer Lozang dorje, who it was feared, would avenge his brother's death. The effects of the execution were to produce a lull in the fighting spirit of the Tibetans, who were now unsure of the direction of their leaders. It was bitterly said of Zla bzang dgra 'dul's arrival:

Sku zhabs spyi mda' phebs byung
Dpyid nyin ring po shar byung.

'The honorable commander in chief had arrived
the long spring day has dawned.'

When the events of this bloody day were reported to the Dalai Lama he was aggrieved, but because of the fighting in Lhasa, he was forced to hold his tongue. The regent appointed Byams pa bstan dar as the Bka' blon bla ma, but the Dalai Lama neither gave his approval nor disapproval to the appointment. He showed his displeasure by appointing as lay bka' blon the unknown figures of Mkhyen brtse'i phun tshogs, the assistant foreign secretary as assistant bka' blon, Sman dod, the governor of Gartok as Kalon, and Shekarlingpa as bka' blon. Furthermore when he returned to Tibet, the Dalai Lama was seemingly unimpressed by the bravery of the fighters against the Chinese and he made only a few presentations by way of reward, but nothing to individual leaders. (Sera gained 'Dam brgya shog brgyad and Ganden got to appoint a governor of Mtsho nag.)

After the Dalai Lama's return there were several important changes in the government structure. The Tsho smon gling regent was retired and Bshad grwa was made the Srid-blon. The cabinet consisted of Byams pa bstan dar, who was sent to Khams to fight the remaining Chinese there. Bde skyes gling pa filled the position of the deceased Shekarlingpa. Zla-bzang-dgra 'dul was ennobled by marrying him to the wife of Tsha rong's son and Tsha rong's youngest daughter, thus becoming the new Tsha rong. The office of the Srid-blon had become the dominant force in the government. Bshad grwa instituted the custom of Phur pu rgyas tshogs, which was a general meeting of the Kashag and the Premier. Formerly the Kashag had sent their files of weekly business to the office of the premier or Regent, but now the weekly face-to-face confrontation allowed the premier to have a more direct control over the decisions of the Kashag. Some semblance of a balance of power was restored with the appointment of Tsha rong as Kalon, but he concerned himself mainly with the building of a modern army for Tibet and appeared only occasionally at these meetings. [Editorial clarifications have been placed in square brackets]