
DECLINE OF POTALA PALACE

By Woese

The changes Tibet has seen in the last half-century are evident in Lhasa's grand palace, the Potala. Tibetan writer Woese examines the way tradition and history have been erased by the Chinese-initiated economic development.

Is it necessary to describe Potala Palace? This great piece of architecture, like a thousand beams of light illuminating the ancient city of Lhasa, is seen as the symbol of Tibet by people throughout the world. Straddling the peak of Marpo Ri at the center of the Lhasa Valley, whether by its appearance or in the eye of the beholder, it holds an irresistible attraction. At the beginning of the 20th century, an English correspondent who entered the rooftop of the world with armed troops invading Tibet, on seeing Potala Palace from a distance “like flames shining brilliantly under the sun,” sighed with emotion, “This is not a palace sitting on top of a mountain; it is a mountain of a palace.”

The history of Potala Palace extends over a millennia. One thousand three hundred years ago, Potala Palace had already taken on its citadel shape during the period of Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo. In 1642, the Fifth Dalai Lama established the Ganden Phodang authority and unified the country, becoming the highest religious and secular leader in all of Tibet. Another of his great achievements was to build the Potala Palace on the site where (according to Buddhist sutras) Avalokitesvara preached his sermons. Since then, the magnificent Potala has been the political and religious center of Tibetan theocracy, and its sacred status lasted until 1959.

Once upon a time this song was written and became popular among Tibetans:

*On the golden roof of the Potala, rises the golden sun
It is not the golden sun, but the precious face of the Lama
On the slopes of the Potala, starts the sound of the
golden oboe*

*It is not the sound of the golden oboe, but the voice of
the Lama chanting*

*At the foot of the Potala, multi-hued khatak are
fluttering*

They are not multi-hued khatak, but the robes of the Lama

It is obvious to everyone that the Lama glorified in the song is none other than the Dalai Lama, for Tibetans the embodiment of Avalokitesvara, worshipped by Tibetans living in the snow land. But then, 1959 arrived. Late in the night of March 17, the Dalai Lama was forced to escape from another of his palaces, the Norbulingka. Two days later, in the midst of unprecedented shelling of Lhasa, the Norbulingka and Potala Palace were turned into killing fields, silent witnesses to this earthshaking event in Tibetan history. A soldier from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) who took part in “pacifying armed rebels in Tibet” recalls that the PLA's 308th Artillery Regiment, which had been stationed for years at the foot of Bumpa Ri on the far bank of the Lhasa River, had long been targeting several howitzers at Potala Palace. So finally, during the “pacification of the rebellion,” every single shell was shot precisely through the red-framed windows edged in black and exploded inside the palace. Yet a one-time “rebellious villain” of that era recalls that they gave up on their resistance because they could just no longer bear those demon-like shells damaging the Potala. Therefore, in some surviving photos and documentaries we can see “rebellious villains” walking down from the smoke-blackened Potala, holding white khatak above them, to surrender their weapons to the Liberation Army who was “liberating” Tibet. (Actually, this scene was filmed after the “pacifying rebellion”; those captives who were marched back to the Potala to reenact the scene were then all thrown in jail.)

Potala Palace has been an empty building since then.

In the years that followed, the Potala was no longer the center of Lhasa; it has been turned into a backdrop by

the occupiers of each period and for each situation. It is a backdrop of unlimited interest, a must-have backdrop, but also a backdrop that is a mystery to people. The Potala has never been, with the changing of time and space, so colorful, so odd, and even so helpless and sad, as it has been during this last half century.

Backdrop to revolution

At first, the new offices and dormitory buildings of the government and the assembly hall, called the “Cultural Palace of Working People,” were built on the vast meadows, parks and swamps in front of the Potala. All these buildings looked exactly like a military camp, without any sense of beauty. Furthermore, as described in the songs of revolutionary singers, Lhasa had by then “been connected” with Beijing. Every political movement that started thousands of miles away in Beijing would be energetically responded to in Lhasa, often with the same zeal and excitement. Since the Cultural Palace of Working People could no longer hold the thousands of “liberated serfs” who had been mobilized, the location for staging 100,000-person assemblies had to shift into the open, still with the silent Potala Palace as its backdrop.

In 1966, the red terror and madness of the Cultural Revolution swept across Tibet. Under the call of Mao Zedong to “destroy the old and launch the new,” one after another monasteries were damaged, one after another stupas were toppled, one after another statues of buddhas were crushed, one after another stacks of scriptures were burned to ash. Even Potala Palace—scathingly denounced as “one of the feudal castles of the head of the three feudal lords who cruelly oppressed



A Tibetan pilgrim spins a prayer wheel during her Kora, or pilgrim circuit, around Potala Palace on August 3, 2005. Photo credits: Guang Niu/Getty Images.

the working class people”—nearly met a disastrous fate. It survived because throughout the vast Qinghai-Tibet plateau, there is no other more suitable backdrop than Potala Palace. It was probably for the same reason that, although the Norbulingka was re-named “People’s Park,” and although someone suggested renaming Potala Palace as the “Red Palace of the East,” the Potala still retained its old name, which is also a primary asset for the backdrop. Revolution needs targets; revolution needs backdrops. With the five-star flag raised over Potala Palace, and with the portrait of Mao hung high on its façade, a new Tibet of a “changed world” was born. Therefore, the effect of the Potala as a backdrop is incomparable.

However, while being extolled as the “true treasure of

Tibet,” the Potala was almost robbed empty. According to records, over 100,000 volumes of scriptures and historical documents were amassed in Potala Palace, many of which were written with powders of gold, silver, turquoise, and coral; also, there were many storerooms for housing precious objects, handicrafts, paintings, wall hangings, statues, and ancient armour, etc., from the various eras of Tibetan history, all perfectly preserved. Everything was priceless. Yet, nearly nothing remains in Potala Palace where flourishing art and treasure were once collected. Those precious, those superlative, those countless and priceless objects, all that could be taken was taken away, leaving behind only those heavy stupas, since the relics of eight generations of Dalai Lamas preserved in the stupas were of no use to the atheists; leaving behind only mural paintings, though they too were painted red and quotations from Mao were written on them; leaving behind only those immovable statues and mandalas and some thangkas and ritual objects, to be displayed solely as decoration; leaving behind only the appearance of Potala Palace, which—while still looking magnificent—was almost an empty shelf.

A real story can be proof. In 1988, a budget of \$5 million was allocated by the Chinese government to renovate Potala Palace for the first time. At the ceremony launching the renovation, an official from the finance department repeatedly emphasized that, despite the central government having financial difficulties, they still tightened their belts to allocate a large amount to Tibet. Meanwhile, Ngabo Ngawang Jigme, vice-chairman of the National People’s Congress, the only high official from old Tibet accepted by the Chinese Communist regime and a well-known political vessel, made this remark: “Since the nation has its difficulties, we shouldn’t ask money from the central government. There’s a storeroom called Namsay Bangzod in the Potala where a large quantity of gold and jewels was deposited annually from the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama. This never stopped for over three hundred years, nor was it used. So let’s just open the storeroom today and use the treasure there to renovate Potala Palace. That would be more than sufficient.” In fact, this storeroom had been emptied, nothing was left there. It is said that Ngabo knew this fact, and made this remark deliberately. So, someone responded immediately: “The

storeroom has already been emptied. So, how could there be gold and jewels? They were all taken away by the nation and transferred to government treasuries in Shanghai, Tianjin and Gansu.” Then the official from the finance department stopped talking and kept quiet.

Forget about the material loss. Potala Palace—used only for the purpose of a backdrop—has been heavily painted with the colors of ideology. No matter whether to criticize “the darkest, the most reactionary, the most barbaric, the most cruel” old Tibet, or to eulogize the “brilliant” new Tibet, Potala Palace is needed for performances of this kind; as a result, the revolutionary stage simply sits at the foot of the Potala.

For instance, the once very popular “Revolution Exhibition Hall of Tibet,” in order to show “all sorts of astonishing atrocities committed under the old system,”¹ dramatically displayed more than a hundred extremely tragic sculptures, augmented with music and captions, dioramas of unbearable misery designed to provoke anger in visitors. In 1976, *China Reconstructs*, the magazine created to publicize achievements of the new China to foreigners, commented on the exhibition: “As soon as one pushes open the black curtain of the hall, one enters a hell-on-earth of old Tibet.”

In addition to an exhibition hall, there is a square, exactly the site needed for the revolution. The bigger the square, the higher the excitement at gatherings of what is called the “ocean of the masses.” The effect thus produced is unique. Hence the scale of the square kept on expanding, and the village of Shol, once situated below Potala Palace, with its traditional houses and typical Tibetan lifestyle and customs, was demolished in 1995. The 30th anniversary of the founding of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was celebrated on “Potala Square,” constructed with a huge allocation of money. This “Great Celebrating Project” was one of the 62 “Aid Tibet Projects”—very huge, inappropriate and out of proportion. Moreover, right at the center of the square, a platform was built, an imitation of the national flag platform in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. Since then, whenever national holidays are celebrated, the flag-raising ceremony is held there by fully-armed soldiers.

Due to construction of the new square, the exhibition

hall also required relocation; it had completed its historic mission and it is said that the hall is due for reconstruction. The Tibet Museum, built in 1999, is located exactly between two historic landmarks, with the Norbulingka in front and Potala Palace to its rear. The purpose of the museum is to display Tibet's history and culture through thousands of antiques and works of art, yet it does not compare to Potala Palace. Additionally, though there is now no revolutionary exhibition hall, there is a revolutionary memorial, called the Memorial to the Liberation of Tibet, erected on the square in 2002 and directly facing Potala Palace. It claims to be "an abstract representation of Mount Everest," yet it has no sense of beauty at all; on the contrary, it looks more like a shell being shot into the sky, deeply piercing the hearts of Tibetans. It is exactly as the Czech writer, Klima, observed: the goal of building memorials is "to evoke people's loyalty towards the ruler," but the armed soldiers guarding the square are a stronger warning, all the time intensifying the real situation of the Potala and that of Tibet.

The square's unlimited potential for fame and profit

Of course, nowadays Potala Palace is no longer used merely as a political symbol. Because of changing times, because of the Western Development Program, and because "development is the absolute rationale," the world-renowned Potala Palace has become—as it is described in the hip lingo of advertisements—a mine of "unlimited commercial opportunities." The place where once upon a time the Great Religious King and many high lamas gathered, the center where the power of secular and religious leaders was concentrated, is now a tourist site, like a bustling market. Deyang Shar, where the sacred and mysterious religious dances used to be performed, is now full of tourists yelling, shouting and having their photos taken as they wish. While the fragrant smoke of incense lingers, the atmosphere in the most sacred halls is no longer quiet and solemn; tourists, pointing their fingers at everything, brush shoulders with pilgrims carrying their butter lamps. In several rooms marked as the "White Palace" in tourist pamphlets, one can hear the voices of tour guides everywhere reciting in Chinese, English, and other languages: "This was where Dalai chanted, this was where

Dalai slept, this was where he ate, this was where he met with his guests, this is his radio, this is his teacup." This is similar to what happens in the newly opened Takten Mingyur Palace in the Norbulingka, where everyone can tour through the secrets of someone else's life by simply spending a few *yuan* for the entrance ticket and can even make uninhibited comments. "The dignity of the past has all gone." On a visit to Tibet in 1979, Lobsang Samten, elder brother of the Dalai Lama, made this heartbroken remark as he looked at Potala Palace—still shining brilliantly under the sun, but not the same as before.

According to a 2003 report, the Potala has received over half a million tourists and pilgrims annually in recent years, around 1,500 per day on average, and the number is increasing at the rate of 20 percent. Even though the entrance fee has been raised to over \$12, the highest record of visitors is up to 5,000 on a single day. The pressure generated by such a heavy flow of people has made Potala Palace, constructed from clay, timber, and stone, sag; various parts of the structure have cracked and even collapsed. Even though a new regulation restricts the number of visitors to no more than 50 every 20 minutes within morning opening hours, and 50 visitors every half hour during the two-and-a-half hours in the afternoon, the number of visitors is still as high as 850 per day. The Potala Palace is on mobile phone advertisements, on 50 *yuan* currency notes, on MTV, and on T-shirts. Potala Palace has even been miniaturized into models made from very cheap materials for use as window displays in hotels, restaurants, and shops, decorating the vulgar landscape of this commodity-driven society. Potala Palace, through such a process of endless reproduction, has been thrown down into the world of mortals from the heights of heaven.

In this world of mortals, all kinds of political slogans—"An Open Tibet Welcomes You!" "Creating An Excellent Market Environment" or "Oppose Splittism; Unify the Motherland"—appear one after another on the high walls around Potala Palace. As for the square in front of the palace, it has been put to use in more ways. In order to display "modernized" new Tibet, there are real estate promotions and car exhibitions, or various kinds of commercial fairs. Sleek, sexy girls in Tibetan dress—though not necessarily Tibetan—are enthusiastically

promoting the sale of real estate in far away Chengdu or Chongqing, as well as various models of sedans and SUVs. Amidst yelling and shouting, daily necessities from inland China are hawked at double their price, some of which are inferior-quality fakes. Furthermore, lottery tickets in this or that name are also sold here, luring people with monetary or material rewards, making them greedy.

Under the dizzying Lhasa sunlight, the material desires of Tibetans have never been fueled with such excitement; but, after all, how many average Tibetans can actually afford those luxurious cars and houses? Look at those shops and restaurants that stretch along the two wings of the Potala Palace wall and spread around the square: they all look like clones of large or small cities in inland China. Together with the “modern” buildings covered in porcelain tiles, with windows framed in aluminum inlaid with dark blue glass, they are the culture of “contractor troops,” made up of peasants-turned-construction workers from the inland.

Most of the old willow trees have been felled, most of the prayer flags that used to fly above the pond have all gone, transforming the Zonggyab Lukhang (also called the Pond of the Dragon King) into a place for playing mahjong and cards, drinking tea, and eating kebabs, further rendering Potala Palace a lonely island isolated in the center of a secular ocean. But, rather complacently, the officials in the TAR declare to the world that “the rooftop of the world” has reached its greatest period as never before in history.

So, shall we all sing and dance to celebrate this greatest time in history? Shall we add more functions—entertainment or circuses—to the Potala, which has been insulted through politicization and commercialization for over half a century? Specifically speaking, this square, with Potala Palace as its backdrop, has become the stage for tourists arriving from all around, to use for publicity, for fame, and for fishing around to make profits. This trend has gone too far to control.

A performing arts group called “Hearts Joining Hearts” came from Beijing, bringing with them the utmost solicitudes of the central government. A group of TV stars, with khatak presented by Tibetans hanging

around their necks, ran out of breath performing a program eulogizing the solidarity of all the nationalities. It is said some of them even had to perform with oxygen bags because of altitude sickness. This pampered performance was finally met with thunderous clapping in the midst of them singing “Fifty-six Nations, Fifty-six Flowers,” and those masses who were energetically clapping were as usual selected from respected units, schools, and military establishments in Lhasa.

This was also the location of a modeling contest. As reported, “Fifty-one models from different parts of the nation gathered here, with the brilliant Potala as the backdrop, to the unique rhythms of Tibetan music, in their modern apparel, with their model gaits, displaying astonishing modern styles on the huge T-shaped stage.” What’s more interesting is that the high-ranking officials and military leaders of the TAR were also there to “deliver their congratulations,” and “offer the highest Tibetan honor, the sacred khatak, to the winning models.”

Known as “Asia’s Number One Flying Man,” Ke Shouliang, a Taiwanese actor, offered a special gift on the national holiday, to the people who celebrated the holiday, by means of a flying car performance in a domestically-produced Jili on the Potala Square on October 1, 2002 (before his sudden death). Although this was not his best record, Ke felt very honored to be performing in Potala Square—particularly on the nation’s birthday. “The two sides of the Strait belong to the same family; China will become stronger if all the nationalities gather together in solidarity,” he said to a reporter.

What is a pity is that the pop singer Han Hong, who has half-Tibetan blood, also took the Potala as the backdrop for her publicity. She made plans to hold personal concerts on the Potala Square in the summer of 2004. To hype up the program, she told the media that she was going to “ride in a helicopter” and “land on Potala Palace.” Of course, the landing place—rather than being the golden roofs of the Potala Palace—was the Potala Square. Yet, such an explosive headline is shocking enough.

Please, ladies and gentlemen! Please respect the Potala! Please respect this sacred religious place, this miracle of the human realm! Simply because the Potala has been

listed as a “World Heritage Site” by the United Nations—not even considering the fact that the palace is actually the soul of a race—everyone who is rushing over to the Potala is repeatedly requested: please respect Potala Palace. Or else it is not unimaginable that there will be a day that, driven by the motivation of extreme greed, Potala Square will even become the playground for the world’s most famous circus. And the great magician, David Copperfield, who once “disappeared” the Statue of Liberty in New York, would also visit, reenacting the same program that captured the eyes of the world: making Potala Square disappear. Once such a day comes, TAR officials would again proudly declare: the rooftop of the world has been successfully “hooked up” to the world, and “globalization” has been achieved.

Inside story of the renovation

Yes, authorities have indeed invested \$7 million, gold, precious stones, and five years of labor to renovate Potala Palace. Yes, authorities have again invested a large sum of money, and again for the renovation of Potala Palace. Yes, all that is fact, but some facts that

have been disguised, revised and forgotten are also worth mentioning.

For instance, who knows whether the shells that were fired at Potala Palace in 1959 to “pacify the rebellion” did not also at the same time destroy rooms full of statues, of buddhas, mural paintings, and other traditional artifacts; after all, the destruction to the building’s structure of clay and timber was not minor.

For instance, the agitation of “destroying the Four Olds” at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution also spread to Potala Palace. The general circumstances were similar to those outlined above.

After 1969, to carry out Mao Zedong’s strategic guidelines to “dig holes deeply, collect crops widely, and not claim to be a superpower,” Lhasa, along with other provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, initiated construction of the so-called “Civil Defence Project,” which launched trench-digging and air raid shelter construction. These shelters can even be seen today, right beneath Marpo Ri on which Potala Palace

A paramilitary soldier on patrol marches past a crowd gathered in front of a replica of Tibet’s most revered landmark, Potala Palace, on September 26, 2006, built as an attraction on Tiananmen Square in Beijing for the National Day holidays. Photo credits: FREDERIC J. BROWN/AFP/Getty Images.



stands. While the one to the eastern side of the mountain has been sealed, the other to the west has been turned into a bar selling barley beer. The headquarters of air raid defense used to be across the road from Potala Palace, next to Chakpori, where a water company is today. It is said that there are also air raid shelters beneath Chakpori. According to popular belief, the reason for building them there was that since the location is close to the compound of the TAR Party Committee, if there was an air attack by enemies, officials could quickly run into those shelters. Of course, it is well known among Lhasans that digging holes under Marpo Ri, and using explosives to excavate the mountain, has damaged the foundations and the Potala building itself. A Tibetan who studied at Lhasa Middle School in those days can still remember the deafening sound of explosions during class. “When you passed by the area, sometimes you could feel the ground shaking.” So the renovation of the Potala Palace in recent years is precisely the result of the deeds of that time.

Yet even the renovation itself has created many problems and still further destruction. According to a February 3, 2004, broadcast on Voice of America, a cassette recording smuggled out of Tibet denounced the project: “The renovation project of the Potala was left to Chinese construction workers who know nothing about the delicate and complex nature of traditional Tibetan architecture and technology. It treated the renovation of the world-famous cultural heritage as a children’s game.” For instance, “According to Tibetans’ traditional architectural technology, a special wooden beam must be inserted into the wall; but, to make things easier, the Chinese used concrete and steel instead of it. Everyone knows that the history of concrete and steel used as construction material is only around a hundred years old. Using those materials for the renovation of Potala Palace, which is over 1,300 years, is a travesty of history. Not only that, these new materials are not compatible with the original ones, so the structure of the palace has been damaged.” This kind of renovation destroys the cohesiveness of the traditional Tibetan architecture of the Potala.

Potala Palace was built by Tibetans, so it should also have been renovated by Tibetans. Why has it been left to Han Chinese construction teams? The subtlety within is

just as the cassette recording pointed out. “The renovation project has been entangled with the phenomenon of corruption and wasteful spending,” which is the result of some kind of deal. As a matter of fact, the winds of corruption are prevalent in China, as are bribery and corruption everywhere in Lhasa, displayed to the full. But in all these years, they have never been laid bare. Isn’t Tibet really the last land of purity on earth? In fact, on “the rooftop of the world,” evils under the sun have never been extinct and stop at nothing under the cover of power. But there are reasons for the cover; one of the most tangible reasons is that “stability overrides all.” Therefore, in order not to disturb the “stability” of Tibet, even if the income from selling entrance tickets to the Jokhang, Drepung, or Sera Monastery was shared among the children of high-ranking officials, people would not dare voice their anger to stop this robbery. Even though Potala Palace is a World Heritage Site, it has been stained by black hands behind the curtain.

“Defeated, but never cried”

Today’s Potala Palace, still standing atop the mountain, is without its previous height. Today’s Potala Palace, still appearing as a land of purity, is wounded by time-weathered changes. To Lhasans who live their lives in communion with the Potala, the inherited lifestyle has been changed, replaced—what’s done cannot be undone, this is a reality. But on the other side of this reality there is a hidden, continuous and indomitable spirit being sustained. Nowadays, early in the morning, and even earlier, exactly during the darkest time before dawn, Tibetans walk out of their houses one after another for the fulfillment of faith in their hearts. Those Tibetans who are rolling the beads of their rosaries; those Tibetans who are turning prayer wheels; those Tibetans who are doing full body prostrations; those Tibetans who are making offering with tsampa, grains and juniper incense; those Tibetans who are circumambulating with their dogs and sheep whose lives have been saved, all are like whirlpools in a river circling around Lhasa. At the center of the river, like a lonely island, the Potala stands silently. A few dim lights shining from the Palace highlight its loneliness and vastness, but even though the path of light is slow-moving, nothing can stop its course.

In the summer of 1994, two giant, precious thangkas were displayed on the outer white wall of Potala Palace, which is dotted by many windows with red and black frames. This great ritual had not been held for over 40 years, and has not been celebrated since 1994. A Chinese poet from inland China recorded the scene on that day: “Every spot in Lhasa from where one could catch a glimpse of the Potala was crowded. I saw many country-folk. From where they were standing, there was no way they could see the thangkas, yet they silently shed their tears facing towards the direction of the thangkas . . . on that day thousands upon thousands of people moved clockwise, circumambulating Potala Palace. Dust was everywhere. Yet everyone—Tibetans, Chinese, Westerners, monks, and everyday folk . . . carrying babies, helping the elderly—looked like a great migration in human history.”

As 1999 was about to come to an end, nearing the start of the 21st century, and after 40 years of the Dalai Lama’s exile, the 14-year-old tulku Karmapa² suddenly left his country, becoming another famous Tibetan exile. India, a country of freedom that accepted the Dalai Lama and so many other exiled Tibetans, also became the shelter of the Karmapa.³

In India, he wrote a profound poem about Potala Palace:

Moon-like flowers,
in the majestic medicinal land of snow,
bubbles of joy now mounting up.
Amidst the melancholic flute of a drizzle,
in the arched drum of the rainbow
blow the winds of truth
chasing the clouds to the far north

Ah . . .
Now then,
Flowers of our prayers in thousands bloom.
The pain of our suffering slowly wanes
as the south wind of solidarity blows.

In the clear blue sky
once again,
flipping, flopping
white clouds of joy start to dance.

Hey,
neither being rich,
nor being a beggar,
sparkling spectacle Potala,
in the illuminated small window
dazzles your face like a blossom.

Oh . . . the grand mellowed sun,
now in serene golden rays.

The heart that bled inside
was all for truth to prevail.

Defeated, but never cried

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The original essay was posted online: Woesser, “Decline of Potala Palace,” *TibetWrites* (September 2006), www.tibetwrites.org.

Notes

1. Editor’s note: Author is quoting from official PRC documents.
2. His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, was born to nomadic parents in 1985 in the Lhathok region of Tibet. The first such reincarnation (tulku) was recognized in 13th century Tibet. His name was the Gyalwa Karmapa, “The Victorious One of Enlightened Activity.” The Karmapa is said to embody the activity of all the buddhas of the past, present, and future. “The Karmapa,” *Karma Triyana Dharmachakra*, [no date], <http://www.kagyu.org/kagyu/lineage/karmapa/index.php>.
3. On December 28, 1999, the 14-year-old Karmapa left Toling Tsurphu Monastery with a handful of attendants and secretly escaped from Tibet. He arrived in Dharamsala, India, on January 5, 2000, where he was met by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.