

China's Dangerous Game

As rulers successfully crush sympathy for Tibet at home, they stir it worldwide.

Melinda Liu

NEWSWEEK

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/129615>

Updated: 2:12 PM ET Mar 29, 2008

It didn't take long after the outbreak of violent protests in Tibet two weeks ago before China's well-oiled propaganda machine roared into overdrive. Within days, the Web site of the state-run Xinhua news agency was offering neatly packaged facts and figures on the turmoil, while CCTV released a video of what it called "the March 14 beating, smashing, looting and burning incident." Domestic media painted a graphic picture of the Lhasa bloodshed—the blood shed by ethnic Chinese, that is. According to reports, rioters had killed an 8-month-old baby and severely beaten a woman before slicing off her ear. They'd attacked policemen and set fire to a clothing shop, fatally trapping five salesgirls inside. Chinese TV showed lingering shots of shopkeepers grieving for their dead co-workers. "We can't go to work normally," said one Chinese woman on CCTV. "This is destroying our prosperity."

With the 2008 Olympics just over four months away, Beijing is scrambling to repair its international image following the mayhem. To justify its crackdown, the government has portrayed the upheaval as a ruthless conspiracy spun by the exiled Dalai Lama, triggering bloody, racially motivated attacks by Tibetans against Han Chinese. So far, the tactic has worked: which is to say that it's prevented ordinary Chinese and most democracy advocates in China from questioning Beijing's behavior or taking up the Tibetans' cause. This media campaign has a dangerous downside, however. The demonization of Tibet has tapped a mother lode of chauvinism among the Han, China's main ethnic group. And as similar campaigns in the past—whether directed at Taiwan, Japan or the United States—have shown, the nationalist genie, once unstopped, can prove hard to force back into its bottle.

This could make life very awkward for Beijing if, as many assume, it decides between now and August that the only way to tamp down the Tibet issue is to agree to face-to-face talks with the Dalai Lama. The regime's dilemma, however, is entirely of its own making. By censoring media, imprisoning cyber-dissidents and employing sophisticated Web policing techniques, Chinese authorities have raised a generation of youth more or less accepting of the news that's spoon-fed to them. Most young Chinese know nothing about the Dalai Lama, who fled Lhasa in 1959 after a failed revolt—and thus have no trouble buying Beijing's portrayal of him as a nefarious "splittist." "A lot of people [in China] simply aren't aware of the complexities of the Tibet situation," says Rebecca MacKinnon, a Hong Kong-based expert on China's Internet.

This makes it hard for ordinary Chinese to evaluate official declarations. The government insists that security forces have used maximum restraint since the trouble began. A small government-selected group of foreign media brought to Tibet for two days last week were told that "lethal measures" were not employed in Lhasa, and that of the 22 deaths in the city, most were "innocents" killed by rioters. (Exiled Tibetan rights groups say more than 140 people died in the crackdown across a vast part of western China.) The yawning gap between the two estimates, and the restricted information accessible to most mainland Chinese—CNN and the BBC were blacked out in China when grisly photos of Tibetan shooting victims in Sichuan province were shown—has led many citizens to believe the Tibetans are simply fabricating the death toll.

The escalation of Tibetan-Chinese ethnic tension comes against "a backdrop of rising nationalism," says MacKinnon. But rallying citizens around the Chinese flag is not a new tactic for Beijing. The fever pitch of anti-Tibet, pro-Han sentiment now evident in the media, in ordinary conversation and on the Internet resembles eruptions of mass ire in the past, such as that following NATO's accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, China's downing of a U.S. spy plane on Hainan Island in 2001 and when Japanese officials refused to revise discussions of World War II in school textbooks in 2005. In all three cases, the Chinese government allowed angry youths to stage wild protests, letting them trash the U.S. and British embassies in 1999 and Japanese commercial establishments in 2005.

Stoking nationalism against purportedly internal targets, however, is a tricky business. Rabid demonstrations can spin out of control and turn on the government. In the case of Taiwan, moreover, the barrage of invective Chinese media and hackers directed at the island during the mid-1990s crisis backfired badly, ensuring the election of a defiant separatist (Chen Shui-bian) on the island.

China now risks similarly alienating Tibetans, making any future settlement that much harder to achieve. The last time serious Tibetan protests erupted was in early 1989; they sparked the pro-democracy marches that

began in Chinese cities a few months later. But inside Tibet, clashes were limited to the Lhasa area, making them easier to suppress. This time, by contrast, several remote Tibetan communities outside the Tibet Autonomous Region also erupted (see map)—suggesting that China's discriminatory policies and its antagonistic, racist rhetoric—in mid-March, Tibet party boss Zhang Qingli called the Dalai Lama "an evil spirit with a human face and the heart of a beast"—have managed to do something even the ancient court of Tibet couldn't manage: to unite Tibetans everywhere.

Tibetans' anger has many sources. One multilingual Lhasa resident, who insisted on anonymity for safety reasons, says Han Chinese discriminate against educated Tibetan jobseekers, and "push [them] away" because their loyalties are considered suspect. Rural Tibetans face even greater pressures. The rich-poor income gap is higher in Tibet than in any other Chinese province, and Beijing's economic modernization policies—which include the urbanization of Tibet, nomad resettlement and the construction of contemporary housing projects—have forced many nomadic herders and farmers into sterile "new towns" where jobs are few. (In 2006 alone, a quarter of a million Tibetans were moved as part of the housing scheme.) When they can't find jobs near home, displaced Tibetans head to Lhasa, where they wind up trying to compete against Han "who are better qualified and more skilled. So you get an underclass hanging around in the towns," says Robbie Barnett, a Tibet expert at Columbia University.

If Tibetans' anger at the Han is easy to understand, the reciprocal sentiment is less so, especially given that in recent years many Chinese yuppies and nouveau riche had started embracing "Tibet chic." Tibetan Buddhism had spread throughout the country and Tibetan turquoise jewelry and clothing had become the rage. No more. A Tibetan woman who sells earrings and trinkets in a Beijing subway station says no one buys her jewelry any longer because no Han "wants to be mistaken for a Tibetan." Then she added, "No one wants to be seen [even] speaking with Tibetans." She says Chinese commuters have cursed her every day since the protests turned bloody out west. She and her friends didn't dare venture outdoors for several days after March 14, fearing an anti-Tibetan backlash. "We heard [Chinese] were throwing stones and beer bottles at our women and trying to beat our children," says the vendor, who requested anonymity because she lives in Beijing illegally.

All this anger will reduce Beijing's chance of ever reaching a negotiated settlement with the Tibetans, since such a move could further inflame the now-roused Han majority. The Dalai Lama says that since the violence began, he's received expressions of sympathy from a conciliatory camp within the Chinese leadership, one that's willing to cut through the hateful rhetoric and talk rationally. But Beijing's done such a good job stirring mass hatred for his people that none of these moderates has dared to publicly stick out their necks and endorse negotiations. Even the relatively moderate Prime Minister Wen Jiabao has taken an uncharacteristically harsh line on Tibet, probably recognizing that any other approach would now be just too risky.

The only direct expression of ethnic-Chinese opposition to the crackdown has come from among the 29 intellectuals and writers who signed a March 22 public petition calling for an end to the media's one-sided propaganda campaign. But many of these figures were fairly marginal, due in part to their reputations as having been sympathizers of the 1989 pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square. It's worth noting that protests demanding human rights and religious freedoms actually started in Lhasa in March of that year, just two months before pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in Beijing and elsewhere in China. Such a process is almost impossible to imagine now, so toxic is the atmosphere Beijing has concocted.

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/129615>