

Escaping a predicament: thoughts on the opportunities and considerations for communicating on Tibet in the “post-Dalai era”

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Abstract: This paper raises the concept of the “post-Dalai era,” and considers how this “era” can become an age of strategic opportunity for China to escape its passive situation in communicating on Tibet, and how we should plan ahead and seize this historic opportunity. On the basis of this judgment, this paper presents suggestions on such issues as China’s strategic planning for communicating on Tibet, public relations awareness, coordinating internal and external communications for countering “insurgency,” and agenda-setting and building the image of the Panchen Lama.

Keywords: Post-Dalai era Tibet communications Opportunities

The Tibet Question is an issue that touches on China’s core interests, but it is also one that has become known as “China’s sore point”¹ of the twenty-first century. Therefore, external communications on Tibet have become a huge log-jam in China’s overall external communications work. In recent years the centre has placed a high degree of attention on external communications work on Tibet with the relevant authorities and the media putting in a great deal of manpower and resources, and achieving a degree of success. But if we seek truth from facts and compare the Dalai clique’s public relations and their media skills, and compare the powerful impacts created by Western media, there is a sense with our Tibet communications that we are being bested and not keeping up with the times, and that sometimes we are seen by overseas observers and personages as “helpless.”

How do we escape this predicament in Tibet communications? In the aftermath of last year’s “3.14” incident in Lhasa, this has become the most important question for our study and consideration.

The severity and complexity of the struggle for Tibet communications has decided the difficulty of the challenges facing Tibet communications work. But it is not that we don’t have an opportunity, and this opportunity is getting ever closer to us, but it may be fleeting and we have to be prepared. This opportunity is: with the Dalai Lama’s old age, the “post-Dalai era” is already here.

The 14th Dalai’s 70th birthday was in 2015 and was a focus of broad international attention with a key talking point of a successor for the Tibet independence issue after the Dalai has passed away. In the last two years in particular, every time there is an issue with the Dalai’s health the western media cook up a storm and he himself is able to repeatedly express his opinions on his reincarnation and his successor.

As the general representative for the overseas Tibet independence forces and cliques, the Dalai Lama is a core figure in the Tibet issue, and in discussions with the private representative of the Dalai, the centre’s principles were made extremely clear very early on, namely, “Under the precondition that the Dalai Lama abandons his advocacy for and his actions towards splittism, all that can be discussed is the question of his personal future.” If the 14th Dalai Lama ultimately passes away overseas, his passing will represent the end of an era in the Tibet Question.

1. “Post-Dalai era” = a period of strategic opportunity

¹ Ch: *ruan lei*, lit., soft cartilage; not exactly a vulnerability like an ‘Achilles heel’ but a tender point.

The “post-Dalai era” could become an opportunity for us to transform our passive situation, with the following main manifestations:

First, there is “vanished idol” or “fallen idol” after the Dalai passes away.

The Dalai Lama is held up overseas as the “spiritual leader” of Tibet. He is an idol in the hearts of Western people and has many adoring fans. This is the reason why the long-term content of our Tibet communications, with its aim of directly criticizing the Dalai, has had difficulty being accepted in the West. After the death of the Dalai, no matter whom he himself chooses as his reincarnation or who the new generation of Tibet independence forces cliques may be, they will find it hard to immediately garner the same fascination that the 14th reincarnation once had, and this will undoubtedly lead to a period of “vanished idol” in the hearts of his Western supporters; not to mention if we go by what he has said and his selection is a female successor, an adult or even a non-Tibetan. Such a measure in contravention of Tibetan Buddhism’s traditions would not only likely give rise to genuine doubt and disgust towards Tibetan Buddhism, it could even cause a future Dalai Lama’s Western fans to drift away and create a “fallen idol.”

Second is contradictions and struggles within overseas Tibet independence forces and cliques.

There has always been disagreements within the Dalai clique on how to press forward on the so-called Tibet issue. After the Dalai dies, it is highly probable that overseas Tibet independence forces and cliques will be “many dragon tails without a head” and will become greatly splintered. And furthermore, for the purposes of power and interests, there will inevitably be a struggle over isolating the “government in exile” and the Dalai Lama’s method of reincarnation and his selection.

Third is the possibility that overseas Tibetan independence forces may move a step closer towards violence.

After the Dalai dies, the original so-called “Middle Path” will inevitably be called into further question and could even be abandoned. If the Tibetan Youth Congress totally dominates the “government in exile” and turns to violence, this will of course present a greater security challenge to the question of China’s security. But at the same time, it would help us pull the veil away from overseas Tibet independence forces and conversely help us to garner sympathetic opinion from the international community.

Fourth is the strength of China’s international position.

The “post-Dalai era” is also the era of China continuing to take great strides forward along the road of revival. China’s strength continues to grow and our international position continues to rise with our diplomatic strategies maturing, all of which is doubtlessly beneficial to resolving the Tibet independence force’s strategy of “internationalizing the Tibet issue.”

Of course, proposing that the “post-Dalai era” could become an age of strategic opportunity for the Tibet struggle and reporting on Tibet is not to deny that the Tibet issue will still be a great challenge for us after the 14th Dalai dies. It could even be said that the Tibet struggle in this age will be even greater. For example, for a period we will face great pressure from the international community on the question of reincarnation after the Dalai dies; the Tibetan Youth Congress’ tendency towards violence could bring us unprecedented challenges; and for another example, we must be aware that in their attempts to thwart China’s development or to impugn China in pursuit of their own national interests, hostile Western forces will make ever more noise about the “Tibet issue,” and the international weight of the Tibet issue is unlikely to lessen because of the passing of the Dalai era.

But putting forth the concept of a “post-Dalai era” can warn us to take the initiative in seeking out opportunities and to be good grasping opportunities, and thus as soon as possible cast off being passive in the struggle for Tibet and Tibet communications and improving the chances of breaking new ground. The significance of not recognizing this opportunity will be that the work will become even harder because the general trend in the situation being faced will be towards even more complexity.

2. The Three Imperatives

There are three problem areas that must become urgent imperatives when devising strategies for “post-Dalai era” Tibet communications work:

1: Formulate a national strategy and plan

“In all things, success lies in previous preparations.”² Having recognised the value of the strategic opportunity of the “post-Dalai era,” the first order of work is to be prepared, to summarise the past, and to quickly devise, formulate and implement a national strategy and plan for Tibet communications.

These should be systematic and based in the mid- to long-term, and be capable of steadily pressing forward a case and should cover all areas including the training of personnel, agenda setting, content selection, product design and propagation, media construction, extension of media channels, and audience analysis, with particular prominence given to personnel, media construction and the extension of media channels.

Even though at present a press conference is convened every year specifically for external propaganda on Tibet, it seems there is little summation of its shortcomings and the lessons drawn, and in addition the formulation of plans is limited to the short term (annually), focusing in particular on predictable major events and subjects from that year.

The consequence of lacking a concrete national strategy and mid- to long-term plan is being satisfied with reporting on a single event (such as the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway) or a certain subject, or the achievements of a certain activity (such as “Tibet Culture Week”), but being unable to press steadily on with the overall picture, and as soon as something happens, being only able to sink once again into a passive reaction. Specifically, this is manifested in the following ways:

First is being led by the nose by your opponent’s agenda, sinking into the trap of you saying “there is” and me saying “there isn’t,” me saying “it is” and you saying “it isn’t.” For example, people are saying today that we have destroyed Tibetan culture, and tomorrow we will stand up and deny it; another day, people will say that the Qinghai-Tibet railway could damage the environment, and again we’ll stand up and refute it. If we’re not careful we’re going to die before we stop playing such games with other people. And yet Tibet communications just like the Tibet issue itself is work that requires a protracted war. If our work is only going to be limited to counterattacking when we’re attacked or when there’s a “3.14,” it will be difficult for us to cast off our passive complexion.

Second is concentrated bombing-style exposure and criticism [Ch: *jizhong hongzha shi jiepi*]. Every time something happens there’s an indiscriminate bombing attitude of “kill them all in a single battle.” Of course, criticism must be levelled against splittist forces and Western hostile forces, but we must be smart, pay attention to strategy and act in moderation. Such stern pronouncements leave your own mouth dry, they are simple and repetitive and they are tantamount to being caught in the enemy’s trap. Not only is the effect limited, it can actually have the opposite effect, making you appear irritable and helpless, which is harmful to your image and actually gives others prestige. This also is just like having other people lead you by the nose.

2: Build public relations awareness

If you want to transform the situation on an issue about which a Western audience already has deep prejudices, it is obviously not enough to have determination, a firm stance and righteousness, because persuading other people takes art and skill.

Most important is that there has to be public relations awareness. The aim of public relations is to build a good image of oneself, because a person or an organization with a good reputation has the potential to get others to accept their position or their products. In the struggle of the Tibet issue,

² A partial quote from “The Doctrine of the Mean,” one of the four major Confucian classics. The full phrase reads, “In all things, success lies in previous preparations, and there will be failure without previous preparations.”

our opponent has been highly idolized in the West and his appeals have garnered broad sympathy. Under such conditions, if there is no public relations awareness and no talk of means or techniques and we blindly “report” the latest great successes in the construction of Tibet to Western audiences or simply spout off arguments, the [bad] effect of such communication can be imagined.

First, we must regard Tibet communications as an important engineering project or subject.

We should define targets and determine the points of appeal (particularly with regard to effective points of attack against overseas Tibet independence forces and hostile Western forces), research strategies and tactics and formulate an implementation plan. That is to say, the formulation of a national strategy and plan for Tibet communications must be integrated into the public relations idea.

Second, public relations awareness should be reflected in the handling of details.

No matter whether it using such emotionally colourful language as saying the Dalai has “a human mask but the heart of a beast” or whether it’s the problem of language being simplified when translated into English, such as “the Dalai clique” or “splittist elements,” previous facts have already shown that they will be discussed by Tibet independence forces and Western forces and used to level accusations and counterattacks against us. Such details decide success or failure, and future Tibet communications plans must include key, concrete details. Considering the passive lessons of the past, the most pressing task is how to position and what to call overseas Tibet independence forces in the “post-Dalai era” (this question is linked to determining effective attack points against overseas Tibet independence forces). This relates to whether the Tibet struggle and Tibet communications in the “post-Dalai era” can take the initiative in the first mode, because when the Dalai dies the “Dalai clique” will no longer exist at least in name.

It must be strongly emphasized that we have to establish a “Great Public Relations” awareness.

Along with the ever-deepening opening up and with the popularization of new communications technologies, there is in reality the possibility of everyone from all levels of leader and official down to translators and tour guides and even the ordinary people of becoming communicators, and therefore shouldering the duty of public relations on Tibet. Officials and workers in Tibet and other Tibetan areas and in other departments dealing with Tibet in particular must have public relations awareness, but their public relations awareness should not just be limited to those occasions when they are a source of a statement for the media, there must also be an “image-building” awareness in officials’ decision-making and in their daily work and what they say and do.

There is no shortage of counter-evidence for this. For example, Aid Tibet construction projects from some places in the interior are always headlined with the words “Such-and-Such Province Construction Aid” to the extent that they’re even named after the province or municipality. But something we think makes perfect sense is actually called a “colonialism” complex by some people overseas, and it becomes a landmark of “colonialism.” Another example is where officials at schools in the interior that accept Tibetan students keep saying things like, “Tibetan culture is backward, so we must thoroughly separate these Tibetan students from their original culture.” Although such people in such sensitive positions are just shooting their mouths off and exposing their own ignorance and bias, they nevertheless can create a bad effect on Tibet communications.

3: Fight overseas “rebels,” make comprehensive plans for internal and external communications, and create a favourable environment for public opinion on Tibet

Against the background of globalisation, the development of communications technology such as the internet and multimedia and the ever-increasing depth of China’s progress of opening up have all diluted and even washed away the traditional geographic boundaries of “internal and external” in communications, and created a situation where domestic and international opinion interfere with and influence each other. Overseas Tibet independence forces and hostile Western forces pay particularly close attention to information leaks from Tibetan areas and waste no time

internationally spreading information on Tibet that is harmful to us. This makes it all the more necessary for us to plan internal and external Tibet communications.

Traditionally it is considered that the main target of Tibet communications is overseas. But in recent years there have some prominent issues, phenomena and trends that require us to break free of such thinking.

First is the new era brought about by the Qinghai-Tibet railway connecting Tibet with the interior.

Following the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, tourism costs plummeted and a large number of tourists flooded into Tibet, and at the same time the number of Tibetan travellers going to the interior started to rise. At the same time as promoting exchange, there was also an increased risk of contradictions due to such differences as language and customs. This requires the media to strengthen its Tibet communications, to guide the masses to appreciate and respect Tibetan culture and customs, and to train the masses to uphold their awareness of the unity of the nationalities.

Second, following the “3.14” incident, there arose a domestic need to understand Tibet and the Tibet issue.

Last year’s “3.14” incident in Lhasa followed soon after by the storm over the progress of the overseas Olympic torch relay as well as the media’s skewed reporting led to an interest among the domestic audience to better understand Tibet. That is to say, in the domestic market, there was a need to understand Tibet and the Tibet issue.

There is also the problem of nationalist sentiment [Ch: *minzu zhuoyi qingxu*] among Tibetan youth.

Due to increased levels of education and the popularization of such information technologies as the Internet, and the diversifying effect of infiltration by overseas Tibet independence forces and domestic thought, there has inevitably been a rise in nationalist sentiment among Tibetans, particularly the new generation of Tibetan youth. Following the “3.14” incident, silent sit-ins and other reactions among students at such schools as the Central Nationalities Institute proved this trend. Obviously, simple classroom-based education on the unity of the nationalities is unable to satisfy the demands of this situation, while the media on the other hand has the responsibility to give guidance by providing content for consideration that has been adapted for the youths’ situation.

The Dalai Lama’s opinions are very confusing to the domestic masses, and in addition, overseas Tibet independence forces have already realised that they can use the domestic masses’ ideas and dissatisfactions on other issues to extract sympathy on the Tibet issue. This was precisely the aim of the Dalai Lama’s so-called letter to his Han compatriots following the “3.14” incident. It can be said that in the struggle we are facing with the Dalai Lama for people’s hearts that at this time, internal communications will make a difference.

Even more importantly, detrimental factors currently exist in domestic opinion on Tibet.

Along with the domestic environment for opinion and in particular opinion on the Internet becoming more free, and with the political awareness among media gatekeepers becoming more indifferent, some “cutting edge” media, scholars and online commentators have been putting out differing voices on the Tibet issue. For example, a newspaper once published an article that discussed “geographical Tibet and cultural Tibet,” thus actually peddling the idea of a “Greater Tibet.” Such voices have a degree of transmissibility and their ideological tendencies have already been noticed by the Dalai and Western media where they are regarded as evidence of mistakes in China’s Tibet policies.

At the same time as this, there is a new generation of audience who will be the future masters of China, and whose habits and means of having media and ideology communicated to them are vastly different from the past. Seeking differences and independent thinking have become the main characteristics of this generation’s thinking and acceptance of media communications. Domestic “traditional” media, particularly the media outside of Tibet, rarely carries reports about Tibet, but when something like “3.14” happens, the reports are mostly condescending criticisms, or there will be a series of articles with not enough viral power to compete with the “cutting edge” voices in the

media. Of course, handing different points of view that have already been communicated by “muting” them is obviously not a wise choice, but it will be very dangerous for the domestic media to collectively lose its own voice in front of these other voices.

The reason why the Tibet issue has become “China’s sore point” is to a great extent due to the domestic existence of certain hidden dangers, and it is only by properly carrying out domestic Tibet communications that we will be able to properly neutralize the “viruses” of foreign media, Tibet independence forces’ “rebels,” and the differing voices in some domestic opinion, and it is only in this way that a good domestic atmosphere for opinion can be created for engaging in the international struggle on Tibet.

However, it must be pointed out that this discussion about strengthening internal communications is most certainly not preaching for the regulation of communications. Following the “3.14” incident in Lhasa, certain series of domestic news articles denouncing the Dalai clique were described in international opinion and by scholars as a “media blitz.” This to a certain extent undermined the effect of external reporting that garnered recognition overseas after the incident because of its timeliness, its details and its vivid content, to the extent that international voices that are detrimental to us increased. Therefore, strengthening internal communications on Tibet, as with external communications on Tibet, must similarly favour skill and must favour means, whereas a simple “propaganda offensive” is not advisable.

3. Three Concrete Suggestions

By combining the realities of work, three specific suggestions are set out on the issues of public relations and agenda-setting.

First is image creation for the 11th Panchen Lama.

As far back as the 1980s when the Dalai Lama began appearing frequently on the international stage, due to various reasons – in particular the death of the 10th Panchen Lama – we have lacked a Tibetan spokesperson with an image who could compete with him. With the advent of the “post-Dalai era” and the 11th Panchen Lama’s majority, our opportunity has arrived. Of course, because of the issue of the Dalai’s private recognition of the “Panchen,” image-creation for the 11th Panchen Lama will not be an easy process, but we must grasp this opportunity and earnestly make the most of it.

How to position the image of the Panchen is an important question. For a long time, the Western media have described the 11th Panchen as the government’s “political tool,” and therefore our first target will be to break this stereotyped impression, or at the very least, we cannot give the Western agenda this “talking point.” Concretely speaking, we must mould him into a spokesman for Tibetans’ interests and a senior lama who promotes Buddhism, and not just a “mouthpiece” for Love the Country, Love the Religion. Such positioning would not only be beneficial to strengthening the Panchen’s authority domestically, particularly among believers in Tibetan areas, but also under conditions when the time is right, there is also the possibility that he could fill the “vanished idol” role created by the West after the Dalai dies. There will be great difficulty in achieving this goal, but if we do not plan and prepare beforehand there will be no chance or possibility.

Of course, if the Central Government chooses the next reincarnation after the 14th Dalai’s death, then the moulding of the 15th reincarnation’s image should be put on the agenda as soon as possible.

Second, we must prevent becoming a “cliché” in the foreign media.

As previously discussed, if we don’t take the initiative in agenda-setting we will only sink into passivity and be led by our noses. The issue that needs attention is that no matter whether it is an official’s speech or reports in our own media, they must not just fall into the foreign media’s agendas.

A typical example in recent years has been at various occasions during the Two Meetings. As soon as journalists from the foreign media ask questions about the Tibet issue or the Dalai issue, without a moment’s hesitation and in the spirit of being open with the foreign media, our officials will make opulent statements critical of the Dalai, but the content is all policies and standpoints

previously aired by the government numerous times at different occasions, to the extent that sometimes even literal repetition can't be avoided. This is in fact a classic example of what the foreign media calls " clichés": the problem lies in the fact that such speeches as these don't pack any kind of punch against the Dalai, but they do add a pretext for the foreign media to attack us, which amounts to helping the foreign media strengthen their own poor impressions, which on the contrary is not as desirable as simply saying, "Our policy position has never changed."

Third, we cannot be "ostriches," and we must actively respond to the concerns of foreign media opinion.

Such models of thought as "report the great achievements of Tibet's development" must be abandoned at the agenda-setting and topic selection and planning stage for external communications. It must be pointed out that being imprisoned for such a long time in this model of thinking will ultimately lead to the weakening of one's own resilience, and as soon as a challenging issue arises it's very difficult to avoid being hesitant and evasive.

The examples of such communications activities as "Tibet Culture Week" and "Tibet Scholars Delegations" describe this problem. Such projects as these which have a great element of "getting out there" have to be researched and packaged extremely well as a topic if they are going to achieve a breakthrough communications effect.

In academic exchange activities, the topics, content and wording must pay attention to academic colour [?] and comply with the scholars' status. In my experience of such similar previous activities, there was a suggestion from a participant that "Scholars cannot talk like a politician." We should integrate overseas points of concern when designing topics, which should be based on the exchange participants' areas of study and their expertise. For example, if a counterpart's area of interest is the environmental impact of the Qinghai-Tibet railway after its opening, then the title of a speech could be "The environmental challenges of the Qinghai-Tibet railway," or if the counterpart has a focus on the fate of Tibetan culture, then there could be a discussion about "The threat to the Tibetan language in the age of globalization and the Internet," and so forth.

With regard to high lamas and tulkus participating in exchange activities, they must not be allowed to discuss religious freedom. This is not their strength and it is not in their work. We should let ordinary lamas talk about life around them in their monasteries, and have lamas with high academic achievements and senior-level tulkus preach Buddhist ideas.

Which is to say, in the face of challenging topics, be evasive and do not blunder through headlong; look for points of breakthrough and use other people's agendas to our own advantage.

The above is an individual's rough ideas amassed during practical work, repeated here in the hope they are useful and in the hope they will be prompts for decision-making. As the saying goes, do not lose this opportunity. If the idea of a "post-Dalai era" is established, then this will a rare opportunity for us to turn things around.

(This was an outstanding conference paper presented to a communications forum in 2009)