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MY BALDNESS, TIBET'S BARENESS

By Tenzin Dawoe Tsewang '07

I gazed at the faces of people around me and felt a wave of sadness. Those of us who volunteered to publicly shave our heads, as a part of global solidarity with Tibetans in Tibet, were being called to the front of the crowd. "Father and daughter," announced one of the local Tibetan elders, causing me to stand up and make my way through people reciting Buddhist prayers. I sat down in front of the man who would shave my hair and glanced to my left to see the small figure of my role model—my father.

I have always admired his moral values and actions as a leader in the Tibetan community. He was exiled from his homeland at a young age and was forced to cross the treacherous terrain of the Himalayas along with thousands of other Tibetans. Soon after arriving in India, my father lost his parents and had to surrender his childhood.

By comparison, my sacrifice was insignificant. Wrapped in a white cloth with political demands printed in black and red, I closed my eyes and mourned—not for my hair, but for the cause. Tibetans inside Tibet were revolting against China's 50-year rule. What started as a protest led by monks in Lhasa, the holy city of Tibet, on March 10, had become a tidal wave.

In this year's protests, violence was perpetrated by both sides. After a number of monks were beaten and arrested, Tibetans took to the streets March 14. Video of Tibetan youths beating innocent Chinese civilians were broadcast throughout China, though the Chinese government did not show its harsh crackdown.

As I sat waiting for the razor, leaked images of Tibetans killed by the Chinese security forces flashed before my eyes. Buddhist monks, who had been debating philosophy outside monasteries, lay in pools of blood. The frigid air of Santa Fe in April glided over my virgin scalp, as swatches of my soft black hair fell to the concrete floor. Tears ran and, in a few minutes, the electric razor left me exposed and frail.

I am a first-generation Tibetan refugee born in exile in South India, home to pockets of Tibetan settlements. As a youngster, I eagerly anticipated March 10—the anniversary of the 1959 uprising during which the Dalai Lama was forced to flee for his life as his palace was bombarded by the People's Liberation Army. We painted banners and signs with political slogans and marched through the streets of India, demanding release of all Tibetan political prisoners and freedom in Tibet.

But this year's March 10 united the Tibetan diaspora like none other. Tibetans inside Tibet took to the streets, shouting, "We want freedom," "There is no freedom in Tibet," "We want the Dalai Lama to return." These demonstrations were a clear signal that the Tibetans preferred the Dalai Lama and a symptom of deep resentment of Beijing's hard-line policies.

At the same time, Chinese nationalist sentiments had escalated in the



Tenzin Dawoe Tsewang '07 has her head shaved at a protest in New Mexico, where she lives and works as a medical researcher.

months leading to the Beijing Olympics. These opposing views reflect the ongoing misunderstandings between Chinese and Tibetans and the need for dialogue. Chinese believe they have brought development, modern education, science, and technology to Tibet.

Tibetans see it differently. Unlike Han Chinese, they often do not have access to credit and government jobs and are thus unable to benefit from Chinese economic growth. There is deep anger over the way Tibetan neighborhoods are bulldozed to make room for Chinese stores, over the fact that Tibetan is not the language for education or government work, and over draconian restrictions that limit religious practices.

It was only when I left my family and the Tibetan community for Colby that I was exposed to the mainstream Chinese view of Tibet. Some of my Chinese classmates portrayed old Tibet as a backward, feudal country. But I knew that, though our system was similar to feudalism, my own family—nomads and farmers who led a sustainable life, the so-called "serfs"—never complained about their life in Tibet. Instead, they carry a deep sorrow over the Chinese invasion and occupation. I believe the root of disagreement between Chinese and Tibetan people lies in mutual misunderstanding.

Misunderstandings should be recognized and acknowledged. Tibetans must realize that not all

Chinese people support the hard-line policies implemented by Beijing and that some are victims of these policies. At the same time, Chinese people should look beyond the surface of development and dig deeper into how the policies affect Tibetans. They also need to acknowledge that Tibetans have never felt part of China, and that the forceful assimilation of Tibetans has always been seen as a foreign invasion. While we cannot bring change overnight, we can try to be open to differing opinions. Both sides need to engage in constructive dialogue that addresses and implements the basic needs of Tibet and the Tibetans who live there.

A Tibetan woman's hair is revered as a symbol of beauty. My baldness portrays my people's barrenness—void of freedom and liberty, the greatest symbols of beauty in the world. Being a bald woman for the first time in my life I feel vulnerable.

But gradually I have learned to turn such thoughts into something positive, which has empowered me deeply. I realize how important it is to educate myself on the issue and to engage in meaningful dialogue with those who hold opposing views. While there are ample differences between our cultures and societies, I am certain that there are more things that connect us than divide us.

Life became more beautiful and meaningful to me when I saw the potential for amity between Tibetans and Chinese.

My hair is but a small offering for this timeless cause.