

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Regarding Mao's Alleged Speech about the Dalai Lama on 15 November 1956

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Abstract

On 15 November 1956, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 delivered a speech at the Second Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Eighth CCP Congress. The official written version of this speech was published belatedly, in 1977, in the fifth volume of Mao's *Selected Works*. In this text, Mao was supposed to be talking about the Dalai Lama's forthcoming stay in India, and he had no difficulty in envisaging the Dalai Lama's eventual departure into exile. This passage, obviously, seems problematic as it contradicts the policy of the CCP leadership towards the Dalai Lama at that time. Tsering Shakya (*The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, Pimlico, 1999), Li Jianglin 李江琳 (*1959 Lhasa*, New Century Press, 2010), Melvyn Goldstein (*A History of Modern Tibet*, Volume 3, University of California Press, 2013), and Liu Xiaoyuan 刘晓原 (*To the End of Revolution*, Columbia University Press, 2020) have successively sought to understand the reason for this. The probable reason seems to be simply that Mao most likely never made these remarks about the Dalai Lama on the date in question, and that this passage was added later in the written version of the speech, to avoid Mao losing face.

摘要

1956年11月15日，毛泽东在中国共产党第八届中央委员会第二次全体会议上发表了讲话。这篇讲话的正式书面版本迟至1977年才在《毛泽东选集》第五卷中发表。在这段文字中，毛泽东应该是在谈论达赖喇嘛即将在印度逗留的问题，他不难设想达赖喇嘛最终会离开流亡。显然，这段话似乎有问题，因为它与当时中共领导层对达赖喇嘛的政策相矛盾。Tsering Shakya (*The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, Pimlico, 1999)、李江林 (*1959 Lhasa*, New Century Press, 2010)、Melvyn Goldstein (*A History of Modern Tibet*, Volume 3, University of California Press, 2013) 和刘晓原 (*To the End of Revolution*, Columbia University Press, 2020) 相继试图理解其中的原因。可能的原因似乎仅仅是，毛泽东很可能在上述日期从未发表过有关达赖喇嘛的这些言论，而这段话是后来在讲话的书面版本中添加的，以避免毛泽东丢面子。

Keywords: Mao and the Dalai Lama; intervention; China; 1956; rewriting the texts; not losing face

关键词: 毛泽东和达赖喇嘛; 干预; 中国; 1956年; 改写文本; 不丢面子

This article is in response to my reading of Liu Xiaoyuan's book, *To the End of Revolution*, Columbia University Press, 2020, which is, in my opinion, an excellent work on Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy in Tibet during the period 1950–1959. Liu Xiaoyuan was fortunate to have access to original archival material and is, I think, the first of the analysts of the contemporary Chinese–Tibetan question in the West to have been able to do so. He was also able to make excellent use of these original documents, often confirming certain analyses and previous studies, and invalidating many others. However, Liu's analysis, as presented in this book, of a comment about the Dalai Lama that Mao Zedong would have made during a speech on 15 November 1956 leads me to the conclusion that, in my opinion, Liu has probably made the same mistake on

this particular point as Tsering Shakya, Li Jianglin and Melvyn Goldstein in their analyses of this text by Mao.¹

The Historical Context

The year 1956 was a particularly difficult one for Mao Zedong. In 1955, he had launched the “first leap forward,” a vast collectivization movement in the countryside. This, just like the “second leap forward,” resulted in complete failure, generating scarcity and even famine in some regions of China. Leading to general discontent among the Chinese population, the PRC government, from April 1956, was forced to launch a policy of liberalization in the countryside as well as a relaxation of political control (the “Hundred Flowers” movement took place shortly afterwards and can be considered as a partial consequence of this failure). On an international level, the Khrushchev report to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February, which denounced Stalin’s crimes, sparked a crisis among the Chinese leaders. The fallout could threaten Mao’s control of the CCP; moreover, for the CCP leaders, rejecting Stalin was tantamount to calling into question the validity of the ideology on which their legitimacy was based. The Eighth CCP Congress in September 1956 was therefore a failure for Mao: the “first leap forward” was abandoned, the Party statutes omitted any reference to Mao Zedong Thought, and it was foreseen that Mao would step aside and be replaced by Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 as head of state.²

From a local, Tibetan perspective, Mao and other CCP leaders were clearly shocked by the scale of the 1955–56 uprising in Kham following the introduction of the region’s first “democratic reforms,” especially as the unrest coincided with other social and even insurrectionary movements in the rest of China. In their writings, Mao and the CCP leaders compare these rebellions to the those that took place in Hungary and Poland in 1956, and internal documents reveal a real concern and fear on the part of the CCP leaders of greater upheavals and even the possibility that the CCP might be overthrown in China.³ The Hungarian and Polish uprisings would also have partly motivated Mao to launch the “Hundred Flowers” movement.

In Tibet, the repression of the uprising in Kham obviously worried the Tibetan government as well as the Dalai Lama, who seemed to have lost much of the optimism he had gained following his stay in China in 1954–1955. On 4 September 1956, the central government sent a directive to the Tibetan Working Committee which was in the spirit of the policy of liberalization then being pursued throughout China, providing for the postponement of “democratic reforms” in Tibet to a later date.⁴

Beijing was faced with another, new local problem in 1956: the invitation extended by the Indian government to the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama to visit India for the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of Buddha. Owing to the delicate situation at the time, the Chinese government had initially tried to evade the issue several times. On the one hand, CCP officials were aware that there was a potential risk that the Dalai Lama might defect and remain in India; on the other, they did not want to damage relations with the Indian government at a time when China was in a weak position,

1 Liu 2020, 269–270.

2 There is a wealth of excellent work on this period. See, e.g., Domenach 1985; MacFarquhar 1974.

3 See, e.g., another extract from a speech by Mao in January 1957 (taken from the same reference that I will analyse later, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* 1969, 139). Mao, reviewing the year 1956, recognizes the rebellions in the Kham region to be one of the main challenges of the year. He blames the uprisings not only on the presence of “counterrevolutionaries” but also on “political and economic errors” as well as overly rigid working methods. He envisages that the rebellions could spread to other provinces, but seeks to reassure his audience because, according to him, even if the uprisings did reach Beijing and overthrow the CCP, the Party would rise from its ashes and be even stronger afterwards! See, also, the comparison drawn by Zhou in an interview with Nehru between the uprisings in Hungary and those in Kham (Nehru 2005, 36, 591).

4 *Xizang gongzuo wenxian xuanbian* 2005, 182–84. According to Liu Xiaoyuan’s analysis, this directive came from Li Weihsan and not from Mao (Liu 2020, 257).

both externally and internally.⁵ Despite the reluctance of several CCP leaders, Mao apparently finally intervened personally to allow the Dalai Lama to leave.⁶ His decision appears to have been made in February 1956. He is supposed to have even told Chen Yi 陈毅 a few months earlier that the Dalai Lama was not only a religious leader but also one of the leaders of the Chinese state, and that he was therefore free to move around and go to India if he wished.⁷ The permission was officially announced to the Dalai Lama on 2 November via a telegram from Zhou Enlai 周恩来.⁸ The Dalai Lama arrived in India on 23 November. He was greeted not only by representatives of the Indian government but also by two of his brothers as well as Tibetan exiles who wanted to persuade him to stay. In some ways, the situation was similar to the one the Dalai Lama was faced with in 1951 when he was in Yadong 亚东 on the border, with one part of the Tibetan elite urging him to go into exile and another demanding he return to Lhasa. Like in 1951, the US government was generally supportive of the Dalai Lama's move into exile; however, the Indian government wanted him to return to Lhasa, and the Dalai Lama vacillated between these two options. Mao sent Zhou Enlai to India twice (the first time on 28 November, the second time on 30 December) with the mission to do everything possible to persuade the Dalai Lama to return. Zhou went back and forth between the Dalai Lama, his brothers and Nehru, spending most of his days trying to prevent the Dalai Lama from going into exile.⁹ To reassure the Dalai Lama, and probably also to reassure Nehru, Zhou promised not only a postponement of the "democratic reforms" in Tibet but also a complete change of China's Tibet policy. This change was reportedly decided by Mao on 16 December and led to the subsequent withdrawal of the bulk of the PLA forces from Tibet.¹⁰ Zhou is said to have even suggested in private conversations with Nehru that the Chinese government would be prepared to accept the Indian government's territorial claims along the border (more precisely at the MacMahon line), as long as the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa as soon as possible.¹¹ Finally, on the basis of the promises made to him by Zhou Enlai, the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa in early March 1957.

The Texts

On 15 November 1956, a few days before the Dalai Lama's departure for India, Mao gave a speech to the second plenary session of the Central Committee of the Eighth CCP Congress. The full official written version of this speech was only published posthumously, in 1977, in the fifth volume of Mao's *Selected Works* (although some excerpts were published in 1970¹²). In this text, Mao was supposed to be talking about the Dalai Lama's forthcoming visit to India and, as we shall see, this extract is problematic. Mao divided his speech into four parts: the economy, where he was self-critical of the mistakes made during collectivization; the international situation, where he spoke essentially of the uprisings in Hungary and Poland; Sino-Soviet relations, where he criticized the Khrushchev report, albeit in a moderate way; and the Chinese system, which he defended and

5 Such was the level of apprehension among the Chinese leaders that they were even concerned that the Panchen Lama might defect to India as well. See the directive from the central government of 17 November 1956 in *Pinxi Xizang pan luan (neibu ben)* 1995, 61.

6 *Ibid.*, 121.

7 According to the biography of Chen Yi, as reported by Jambey Gyatso (Gyatso 2008, 17). This information was later officially confirmed in *Mao Zedong nianpu* 2014, 527. At that time, the Dalai Lama was vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China.

8 *Zhou Enlai yu Xizang* 1998, 75–76.

9 See, e.g., a description of Zhou's efforts in *Zhou Enlai yu Xizang* 1998, 326–338.

10 Liu 2020, 275–78 offers a good analysis of the circumstances that led Mao to issue this directive. Mao particularly emphasizes the importance of keeping the Dalai Lama on side with the CCP.

11 This concession is reported in Indian documents but is not confirmed in currently accessible Chinese sources (see Nehru 2005, 36, 600–1).

12 Kau and Lung 1993, 158.

claimed was more democratic than any Western democracy. It is in this last part, and without this passage having any direct connection with Mao's previous remarks or with the following ones, that Mao evoked the Dalai Lama, in the following terms:

Here is another question, about Dalai. The Buddha has been dead for 2,500 years and now the Dalai and his retinue want to go to India for a pilgrimage. Should they be allowed to go or not? The central government thinks that it is better to let him go, that it is not good not to let him go. He will leave in a few days. He was advised to fly, but he didn't want to. He is going to take a car and go through Kalimpong, where there are spies from various countries and agents of the Guomindang. It is to be considered that the Dalai Lama may not come back, not only will he not come back, but he will insult us, saying that "the Communists have invaded Tibet" and so on, and even declaring "Tibetan independence" in India. He could also instruct the reactionaries in the upper strata of Tibet to create major disturbances to annihilate us, while declaring himself not to be there and not to be responsible. This is a possibility, if we assume the worst. If this bad situation happens, I will be happy. Our Tibetan Labour Committee and our army have to prepare themselves, build fortifications, increase food and water supplies. We have only a few soldiers here. Anyway, everyone has his own freedom. If you want to strike, we will defend ourselves, if you attack, we will be on guard. We will never attack first, we will let them do it, and we will counterattack by crushing them without mercy! Am I sad that a Dalai is running away? If we add nine, and that makes ten who run away, I would not be sad. What we have learned from experience is that Zhang Guotao's running away was not a bad thing. You can't force a couple to get together. If he doesn't like it here and thinks of running away, then let him run away. If he leaves, what would be the disadvantage for us? There is nothing wrong with that, nothing more than being insulted. Our Communist Party has been insulted by others for 35 years, as being "extremely vicious," "collectivizing production and women" and "inhuman." What does it matter if we add a Dalai or someone else? If we continue to be insulted for another 35 years, it will only be 70 years! I don't think it's good for a person to be afraid of being insulted. Some people are afraid that our secrets will be disclosed, but Zhang Guotao knew so many of our secrets, yet no one saw our business going bad because Zhang Guotao disclosed our secrets.¹³

As the text shows, Mao was very harsh in his criticism of the Dalai Lama, even comparing him to Zhang Guotao.¹⁴ He also foresaw potential insurrectionary problems in Tibet.

This text is problematic because it clearly contradicts the policy followed by Mao and other CCP leaders towards the Dalai Lama at that time. On the one hand, Mao had always spoken positively about the Dalai Lama not only in previous years but also during the following two years, including in his private speeches. Moreover, it was Mao who had personally given the Dalai Lama permission to leave. Why would he suddenly, and just at that moment, have such a critical attitude? On the other hand, if, for Mao, the Dalai Lama's exile was of no importance and would even be potentially positive, why did he send Zhou to India twice with the mission of doing everything possible to persuade the Dalai Lama to return, even if this meant making very important concessions to both the Dalai Lama and Nehru?

This contradiction has not escaped the attention of various specialists in the field, who have successively sought to understand it. Tsering Shakya sees it as a sign of a hardening of Mao's policy and

13 *Mao Zedong xuanji di wu juan* 1977, 326–27. The official English translation of this passage can be found in *Mao Tse-tung Selected Works, Volume V* 1977, 346–47, and although differing slightly from my own translation, it corresponds to the Chinese original. This excerpt was later also published in *Mao Zedong Xizang gongzuo wenxuan* 2008, 152–53.

14 Zhang Guotao (1897–1979) was a founding member and leader of the CCP, who later joined the Guomindang and then went into exile in Canada. He was considered an important traitor by Mao and other CCP leaders.

a sudden distrust, for some unknown reason, of the Dalai Lama.¹⁵ Li Jianglin takes up Jambey Gyatso's argument that Mao was influenced by Fan Ming's 范明 negative and misleading report on the Dalai Lama. She suggests, however, that this was a bluff on Mao's part.¹⁶ For Melvyn Goldstein, the excerpt from Mao's speech is not proof that Mao distrusted the Dalai Lama, since he asked Zhou Enlai to persuade him to return, but rather a precautionary measure to avoid losing face should the Dalai Lama finally decide to stay in India.¹⁷ Last, Liu Xiaoyuan devotes two pages to analysing the text. He contends that if Mao did indeed want to avoid losing face in advance, there would also have been a change of attitude on his part, and that his judgement of the Dalai Lama as an individual would have changed radically in the last months of 1956.¹⁸

The issue arises from the fact that the first complete written version of this text was published in 1977, in the fifth volume of Mao's *Selected Works*. What do we know of this book? All Mao scholars are more than circumspect about the *Selected Works of Mao*, especially the fifth volume, which was published after Mao's death (Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 supporters are said to have even accused Hua Guofeng's 华国锋 supporters of imposing a transformed version¹⁹), but even the earlier volumes are considered mostly unreliable. Mao's former personal secretary, Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木, acknowledged in 1980 that if the CCP were to make public the original versions of certain of Mao's works from the 1920s and 1930s, it would become clear to everyone how "very heavily revised" the texts included in the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* were, and there would probably be "a very strong reaction."²⁰

On the surface of it, it appears that we have an extract of a speech by Mao on the Dalai Lama that seems to be out of line and even contradictory to Mao's policy (as well as perhaps his opinion) at that time. Further, the extract was first published more than 20 years after the speech in a collection of texts known to be mostly unreliable. The first question should be whether or not this extract is authentic. And, if there are doubts, we should investigate whether there might be a transcript of the oral version of Mao's original speech of 15 November 1956.

In fact, a transcription of Mao's original speech can be found in one of the volumes of the series "Long Live Mao Zedong's Thought."²¹ Known by specialists as the "Wansui" 万岁, the series was published clandestinely by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. The publication of this text in this collection does not necessarily guarantee its authenticity, knowing that the texts in the series are mostly based on contemporaneous notes taken by officials present during Mao's speeches. However, many recognized Mao scholars who have worked on these texts have come to the conclusion that there is a strong probability that the texts included in "Wansui" correspond to Mao's original speeches.²² For example, there are two versions, written and oral, of Mao's famous speech, "On the just solution of contradictions among the people," dated 27 February 1957, in which Mao also mentions the Tibetan question (this is where the postponement of the reforms in Tibet was officially announced for the first time), and there is evidence that the original, oral version of the speech is the one published in the same volume of the "Wansui" series.²³

Comparing the two versions of Mao's speech of 15 November 1956, any differences lie in form than in content. The four parts are the same, some sentences are identical, others are different, but

15 Shakya 1999, 150–53.

16 Li 2016, 37. This book is the English translation of *1959 Lhasa* (Li 2010). See Jambey Gyatso's view in Gyatso 2008, 172–73.

17 Goldstein 2013, 339.

18 Liu 2020, 269–270.

19 Kau and Lung 1993, 17.

20 Hu Qiaomu, 29 March 1980, in *Dangshi ziliao tongxun*, 70, as quoted in Schoenhals 1992, 114–15.

21 *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* 1969, 115–121.

22 See, e.g., Kau and Lung 1993.

23 See MacFarquhar, Cheek and Wu 1989.

the intention remains the same. The most essential difference seems to be in the section on Sino-Soviet relations, where Mao makes a rather radical personal criticism of Stalin.

With regard to the part where Mao is supposed to talk about the Dalai Lama, this is what it says:

Regarding national minorities, we certainly need to unite properly, but we should not think that this is a simple issue. In recent years, although work has been done for ethnic minorities and some problems have been solved, many problems remain. At the same time, ethnic questions will still exist for a long time. If we do the work properly, the problem should be less important. Among the problems of the relations between Poland and the Soviet Union and Hungary and the Soviet Union, there is also the fact that some ethnic problems have not been solved very well. In China, the ethnic problems in the Tibetan region have not been fully resolved either. For this reason, the central government has repeatedly asked to pay close attention to this aspect of the problem and not to think that it is easy to reunite ethnic minorities. On the one hand, we must oppose Han chauvinism, and on the other hand, effectively unite the ethnic minorities.²⁴

Here, Mao explains about the issues regarding minorities in general. He says the work has been good, but there are still problems. Mao again makes a comparison between the national issues in China and the uprisings in Hungary and Poland. He is probably thinking of the rebellions in Kham, and reports that in China, the nationality issues in the Tibetan area have not been fully resolved, and that the Central Committee has repeatedly vowed to attend to this problem. This is the only sentence Mao utters concerning Tibet and there is no reference to the Dalai Lama and his stay in India.

Finally, there is one last piece of information that provides compelling evidence of the authenticity of this passage. On 16 November 1956, the *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 devoted a front-page article to the second plenary session of the Central Committee resulting from the Eighth CCP Congress, which had been held the previous day.²⁵ The article summarizes the speeches of the various speakers and reports that: “Comrade Mao Zedong gave a closing speech on the last day of the meeting.” Among the points he addressed, “He asked the whole Party to resolutely oppose Han chauvinism in its relations with ethnic minorities.” Yet the only existing criticism of Han chauvinism is found in the “*Wansui*” version (in the paragraph translated above), There is no mention of this issue in the official written version published in 1977 (1956 was during a period of liberalization that would lead to the “Hundred Flowers” movement and when self-criticism of Han chauvinism was common among CCP leaders). This confirms that the text of Mao’s speech to which the *Renmin ribao* journalist had access the day after this session was the same as the one published in the “*Wansui*”.

It therefore seems highly probable that the passage mentioning the Dalai Lama was added later to the official written version, in place of the paragraph we have just seen, which was in the original text.

Conclusion

We can therefore conclude that when Tsering Shakya, Li Jianglin, Melvin Goldstein and Liu Xiaoyuan successively wondered why Mao could have said such things on that date, the likely answer is simply that he did not, or if he did, then not on that date.

24 *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* 1969, 120. An English translation of this passage can be found in Kau and Lung 1993, 189.

25 “Zhonggong zhongyang di er ci quanti huiyi gongbao” (Communiqué of the second plenary session of the CCPCC). *Renmin ribao*, 16 November 1956. Available at <https://cn.govopendata.com/renminribao/1956/11/16/1/#154778>. Accessed 20 May 2023.

If, therefore, as seems extremely likely, the passage concerning the Dalai Lama was added at a later stage, we then have to ask ourselves when was it added, by whom and why?

Concerning when this version of this text was written, if we are to believe Michael Kau and John Lung, it would probably have been at the beginning of the 1970s, after the dissemination of the oral version by the Red Guards at the end of the 1960s and, therefore, which is what interests us, long after the events of March 1959.²⁶

As for the author responsible for this rewriting, even if the text in its entirety was not published until after Mao's death, it seems likely that during Mao's lifetime it would have been modified by Mao himself, as he frequently rewrote his speeches with the aim of building his own reputation. Furthermore, a comparison of the two texts shows a similar use of vocabulary and syntactic turns of phrase that are characteristic of Mao's personal style.²⁷ These texts are also similar in style to others written by Mao on Tibet.²⁸ The compilation of Mao's texts on Tibet that was published in 2008, using the written version published in 1977, states that the source is the version of the text that was deposited in the central archives.²⁹ If this is the case, it would confirm that the author was probably Mao himself, or if not Mao, someone from within his very close circle.³⁰

Now, why would Mao (or someone in his very close circle) rewrite this passage in this way? On this point, I partly agree with Melvyn Goldstein's analysis. Mao did indeed want to avoid losing face, but, in my opinion, this was not before the Dalai Lama's departure for India but several years later. Indeed, what does the passage from the fifth volume of Mao's *Selected Works* want to convince us of? That Mao was an infallible leader who had understood and foreseen everything: he knew from the beginning that the Dalai Lama was in fact a double-crossing traitor and that he would seek to go into exile to work with the imperialists. Nevertheless, such an eventuality was of no importance to Mao. On the contrary, and thanks to that, democratic reforms could be introduced in Tibet, etc.

But what do we really know today? First of all, the personal relationship between Mao and the Dalai Lama was probably quite complex, as was Mao's opinion of the Dalai Lama. It seems clear that from 1951 onwards, Mao had decided to play the Dalai Lama card, and did so until 1959, probably on the understanding that this was the only way to control Tibet. The fact that Mao seemed to trust the Dalai Lama to the end was afterwards criticized by certain Party officials. Indeed, several internal sources from after March 1959 confirm that the Dalai Lama's departure at that time was considered by Mao as a personal betrayal and that he had been apparently caught off guard. An example of this can be seen in the interview Mao is said to have had with the Panchen Lama and Ngabö on 7 May 1959, in which we see a bitter, hurt Mao, who was clearly irritated by the Dalai Lama's exile which it appears he had not seen coming. Mao then accuses the Dalai Lama's entourage of having manipulated the Dalai Lama into believing that the Chinese government wanted to assassinate him. Mao swore to his audience that the Chinese government had not the slightest intention of doing so. Indeed, Mao then accused the Kalön Surkang and Chancellor Phala (both of whom Mao seemed to dislike in particular) of plotting to assassinate the Dalai, in

26 Kau and Lung 1993, 158.

27 On the style and vocabulary used by Mao in his speeches, see Marinelli 2009 or Schoenhals 1992, 111. Mao wrote in a distinct and direct style, which was inspired by the Hunanese dialect, often using the verbs *zhua* ("grasp," often in the metaphorical sense) or *gao* ("do" used as an all-purpose verb). There are many examples of this in *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* 1969 (115, 116, 118, 120, 121, which again confirms that the "wansui" version is very close to the original text that Mao must have written), and other examples can be found in the late official version included in *Mao Zedong xuanji di wu juan* 1977, 326.

28 See most of Mao's texts on Tibet in the collection *Mao Zedong Xizang gongzuo wenxuan* 2008.

29 *Mao Zedong Xizang gongzuo wenxuan* 2008, 153.

30 In the event that it was not Mao himself who wrote this second version, it could have been, e.g., Hu Qiaomu, who was famous for having greatly contributed to the "revision" of Mao's *Selected Works*.

much the same way as they had assassinated his father several years earlier. Mao concluded that it would be much safer for the Dalai Lama if he returned to Tibet and urged him to do so.³¹

Second, if there was one constant for all the leaders of the PRC, including Mao, in the 1950s up to and including March 1959, it was an apprehension, for obvious geopolitical reasons, of the possibility that the Dalai Lama would go into exile. This is something that was perfectly clear in 1950–1951, in 1956–1957, and also, contrary to the legend, in March 1959. Today, the majority of Chinese people believe that Chairman Mao, in his great benevolence, had let the Dalai Lama escape in March 1959. On this question, Liu Xiaoyuan's research confirms that at the time of the March 1959 events in Lhasa, there was indeed, after perhaps a few days of hesitation, a desire on the part of Mao and the Chinese leaders to try to prevent the Dalai Lama from leaving Tibet. It was too late, however: the Dalai Lama had fled.³² According to Liu's research, after Mao sent a telegram from Wuchang 武昌 to the central government on 12 March 1959 saying that the Dalai Lama had joined the rebel camp and that he should be allowed to flee, Mao then gave a counter-order on 16 March after understanding the situation better – thanks to the reports of his representatives in Lhasa – but this order was too late. The authenticity of Mao's famous telegram of 12 March is, I believe, debatable and could probably be compared with the extract we have just examined from the speech of 15 November 1956. In any case, Mao's justification and authorization of the departure of the Dalai Lama appears to have been invented afterwards to uphold Mao's reputation.³³ The fact that the Chinese government tried its utmost to stop the Dalai Lama from leaving, but without success, is also confirmed in documents found in the Soviet archives. During a famous conversation between Khrushchev and Mao in Beijing on 2 October 1959, Khrushchev strongly reproached Mao for letting the Dalai Lama go, even adding that it would have been better to kill him than to let him run away. Mao is said to have replied that they had tried to catch him, but it was impossible as the border was too long and porous, and the Dalai Lama could cross it at any point.³⁴ The excuse given by Mao for not being able to prevent the Dalai Lama fleeing seems to be confirmed in Chinese sources in a confidential report made by Zhang Jingwu 张经武 in April 1959.³⁵

The fact that from 1959 onwards, the Dalai Lama apparently chose to cross to the opposing side and could not be prevented from leaving Tibet could therefore be seen as a personal and perhaps humiliating failure for Mao. This was something unacceptable: Chairman Mao could not be seen to lose face and should not lose face! Thus, the texts – and history – had to be rewritten. It is therefore likely that this extract from Mao's speech is a good example of just such a rewrite.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Monique Abud, Michel Bonin and Yves Chevrier for their help in preparing this article.

Competing interests. None.

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31 *Pinxi Xizang pan luan (neibu ben)* 1995, 157–164. It would appear that in the months that followed, Mao, who had clearly become disillusioned, gradually became more and more critical and aggressive towards the Dalai Lama in his conversations with the Panchen Lama, for example describing the Dalai Lama and his entourage as enemies of China (see *Xizang gongzuo wenxian xuanbian* 2005, 240–43, 246–253).

32 See Liu 2020, 370–384.

33 See Li 2016, 216–225. Li Jianglin, although not having access to the PRC archives, had already come to the same conclusion as Liu Xiaoyuan in 2010 regarding the departure of the Dalai Lama (see Li 2010).

34 APRF 1959, 7, 11–12

35 Liu 2020, 383.

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