

# THE SHAME GAMES

China's record on human rights in Tibet is in the spotlight in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics. Here, three Tibetan women share their horrific tales of abuse with Claire Scobie



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Clockwise from below: deadly pro-Tibet demonstrations erupt in Lhasa on March 14 as a rioter burns a Chinese flag; police take cover from a hail of projectiles; monks rally in Tibet; and are linked in protest in India.



**A**s dawn breaks over Tibet's infamous Drapchi prison, Choeying Kunsang stands quietly in the barren courtyard, soil crunching under her small feet and the chill wind cutting through her thin robes. In the distance, against the brightening sky, she can see the snowy peaks of her beloved mountains. "Sing!" The barking voice of a young Chinese guard, the barrel of his rifle pointed at the assembled Buddhist nuns, breaks through the silence.

As soldiers begin raising the Chinese flag, Kunsang knows what is expected – the national anthem of her captors. Instead, a cry of "long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama", Tibet's famous exiled spiritual leader, rings out. Kunsang joins in the chorus of voices and the guards begin firing shots in the air. One young man, black eyes burning with rage, drags Kunsang down a stone corridor and into an interrogation room. Eventually, she raises her eyes to see 50 other nuns kneeling on the cement floor beside her, their heads bowed.

"The Dalai Lama is stupid," shouts the guard. He pulls the thick leather belt from around his waist and wraps it around a clenched fist. "You must respect China." He aims the belt at Kunsang's round, innocent face, whipping it until the flesh is torn.

Suddenly, the belt snaps. Kunsang prays that it's all over, but the guard walks to

the corner of the room and picks up a plastic hose filled with sand. He beats Kunsang until she wakes hours later, the room shines red, blood covering the walls and floor, like an abattoir.

Tales like Kunsang's are familiar in Tibet, a country sandwiched between India, Nepal, Bhutan and China. It's most remarkable for its mountain ranges that spear the sky, and its place in religious legend. It's known as "the Land of Shangri-la" – or heaven on earth. Home to around 2.5 million Tibetans (a further 3.5 million live in neighbouring provinces), it's a nation of devout Buddhists who revere the Dalai Lama as a "living Buddha", and who believe it's their duty to strive for enlightenment through selfless and compassionate actions.

Tibet has been occupied by China since 1950, when China's aggressive new Communist leader, Mao Zedong, sent troops over the border to reclaim what he saw as an integral part of the "motherland". Tales of political and religious persecution have been

rife ever since. Now, concerns about human rights abuses in the remote Himalayan region are squarely in the international spotlight, courtesy of the 2008 Olympic Games, which will be held in Beijing in August.

Angry protests flared worldwide as the Olympic torch relay – the so-called "Journey of Harmony" – made its way from Greece to Beijing accompanied by chaotic scenes of police battling anti-China protesters. In San Francisco, thousands of Tibetan supporters lined the streets in defiant protest, only for the relay route to be changed at the last minute. In Japan, banners bearing the words "shame on China" fluttered in the breeze, while in Paris, the flame was extinguished on at least five occasions. Even on its Australian leg through Canberra in April, Tibetan protesters accused Chinese students of intimidation and heavy-handed tactics.

In turn, the proud Chinese have expressed their anger at what they believe is a massive international misunderstanding.

Kunsang shudders when she talks about her time in Drapchi prison. She still has a scar from that morning; a jagged line that runs across her upper lip like a piece of barbed wire. Arrested in 1995, and sentenced to four years hard labour after participating in a peaceful



After surviving horrific beatings and a deathly trek to escape further persecution, Tibetan nuns Choeying Kunsang (far left) and Pasang Lhamo (left) now reside in New York. Below: Lhamo (on left) and Kunsang meet Prince Charles.



demonstration against the lack of human rights in Tibet, she knew the fate awaiting her. Around that time, there were said to be hundreds of political prisoners in central Tibet, incarcerated for defying the Chinese occupation.

"For three months, every day we had to stand outside in the sun with a bowl of water on our head, newspaper under our armpits and between our knees," she recounts. "The Chinese army told us it was exercise, but it was punishment. If we moved or fell, we were beaten." Her face and scalp burned in the harsh sun, and she survived on a diet of cabbage and dumplings. Some nuns died from exhaustion. Yet, even when she was stripped and tortured with electric cattle prods, Kunsang never cried. "My mind always stayed strong."

Strength is one thing the Tibetan people have mastered. On March 14 this year, a peaceful protest by Tibetan monks to mark the 49th anniversary of a failed uprising against Chinese rule turned violent when police clashed with protesters and resorted to gunfire and tear gas. In the aftermath, rioters set fire to shops and cars and, officially, 22 Chinese were said to have been killed, while other reports put the number of Tibetans dead at 150. They were some of the most violent scenes to emerge from the country in two decades and coincided with an international campaign by Tibetans in exile ahead of the Games.

Sonam\*, a Tibetan woman living in Australia, witnessed the violence while visiting her sick father. "All Tibetans were under house arrest. For one week, we couldn't go out. My 82-year-old daddy was dying and I couldn't even get medicines for him," recalls

the 36 year old, who works in a supermarket. "I was so sad and angry." As stories filtered through from close friends who had seen shootings and arrests, Sonam had to return to Australia despite fearing for her family.

Kunsang knows all too well the price of defiance. After that morning in Drapchi in May 1998, when she and other Tibetan prisoners were brutalised for refusing to sing the Chinese national anthem, she didn't think life could get any worse. But then, she whispers, her forehead furrowed, her hands twisting, "I was locked up for 24 hours a day with 11 others." Cameras were fitted in each cell to ensure inmates didn't talk to one another and food rationed, leaving the nuns weak with hunger.

"We couldn't even use the toilet and had to share one bucket," grimaces Kunsang. Until her release in the following May, she didn't see daylight. "We couldn't see the sky."

Ever after she won her freedom, life didn't improve. She couldn't leave home and the police made intimidating visits, harassing her family, who lived a simple, rural life. In another small Tibetan village, her friend Pasang Lhamo, a Buddhist nun who'd spent five years in the same prison, was also feeling trapped.

Ever since she was a child, Lhamo wanted to wear the nun's maroon robes, not unusual in a deeply religious country where thousands of young women become nuns. At the age of 16, Lhamo shaved her long, dark locks and joined a Lhasa nunnery. But instead of the life of contemplation and prayer she'd dreamt of, most of her time was spent in "patriotic education sessions", run by the occupying Chinese government, where

the nuns were ordered to denounce the Dalai Lama. After two years, she voiced her dissent. "I didn't mind if I got beaten," admits Lhamo. "I couldn't speak against the Dalai Lama."

The Dalai Lama has not lived in Tibet since 1959, nine years after Chinese occupation. After a bloody uprising against Chinese rule in which 87,000 Tibetans were killed, the Buddhist leader fled to India in the middle of the night, disguised as a soldier. About 130,000 Tibetans have since joined him and he now heads the Tibetan government-in-exile from the small Indian town of Dharamsala, as well as being Tibet's spiritual leader.

Lhamo is a slight, fragile-looking woman, and the lines etched on her face make her look older than her 35 years. Like Kunsang, she wears her sleek black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Both talk with a remarkable lack of bitterness over their treatment. "The Chinese guards were doing their job," shrugs Kunsang. "I didn't hate them."

But for Lhamo, the hardest part was watching her family suffer. "After I was released, I constantly worried about my parents. I thought that maybe if I leave Tibet, life will be better for them." After a year of constant surveillance, the two nuns decided to escape.

"Before I left my village, I felt very sad. My family didn't know I was leaving. They thought I was going to the doctor in Lhasa. That morning as I hugged my father, then my ►

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN HOFFMANN; CORBIS; PICTURE MEDIA. \*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

## TIBET THE STORY SO FAR

### 1720s

The emperor of China's powerful Qing dynasty ousts Mongolian forces that are occupying Tibet and appoints a Chinese commissioner as ruler.

### 1750

The Qing dynasty appoints a supervised Dalai Lama government. In the next 42 years, China twice sends troops to expel Nepalese invaders from Tibet.

### 1911-12

The Qing dynasty collapses and Tibet reasserts its independence. The 13th Dalai Lama returns from India, to which he'd fled in 1909.

### 1949-51

China's aggressive new leader, Mao Zedong, sends troops into Tibet to take full control of the country. Tibetan leaders sign a treaty under duress.

### 1956-59

China's rule leads to full-scale uprisings. About 87,000 Tibetans are killed and the 14th Dalai Lama flees to India. A UN resolution supports Tibet's right to self-rule.

### 1966-76

Tibetan monasteries and artefacts are destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution under the brutal direction of Mao Zedong.

### 1987

The Dalai Lama calls for talks with China about self-rule for Tibet without independence. Two years later, he's awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

### 1995

Chinese authorities appoint their own Panchen Lama after kidnapping the six-year-old boy the Dalai Lama had chosen.

### 2008

Riots break out in Lhasa after monks holding a protest clash with Chinese police. Protesters disrupt the Olympic torch relay in several countries.



Far left: support for Tibet spreads to London during the torch relay. Left: Chinese president Hu Jintao at Beijing's welcome ceremony for the flame.

mother ...” Lhamo breaks off, her eyes filling with tears. “My mother, she stood and waved; she kept waving. She didn’t want me to go even as far as Lhasa because I’m the youngest child and she hadn’t seen me for years while I was in prison. I didn’t know if I would die on the way or if I would see her again.”

An estimated 3000 Tibetans make the dangerous crossing through the Himalayas into India and Nepal each year. Many are children whose parents send them to be educated in Tibetan schools in India to learn their language, culture and history. Others are monks and nuns seeking a religious education that is no longer possible in Tibet, where worshipping the Dalai Lama is outlawed.

Lhamo and Kunsang joined a group of 24 others, including eight children, who were planning to escape. Their guide told them the journey would take several days, but he lied: they had to walk for almost a month through the mountains, sleeping by day and, by night, trudging through knee-high snow wearing only the clothes on their backs. After a few days, the food ran out, and they survived on *tsampa* – ground barley flour – and melted snow. About a week from the Nepalese border, one of the children fell sick. “He was this cute eight-year-old boy who always carried a photo of his uncle in India,” remembers Lhamo. “All the time, he looked at this photo. Then one day he said he couldn’t see it anymore. He had a temperature and couldn’t breathe. We gave him Tibetan medicine but he couldn’t swallow.

## Tibetans, who are mostly farmers and nomads, refer to the Chinese occupation as “when the sky fell to earth”

In front of our eyes, he died.” Weakened from their maltreatment in jail and with chapped and swollen faces from the cold, the nuns struggled to keep up. “It was very hard, very cold. We almost died,” adds Lhamo.

Yet their ordeal wasn’t over. After dodging the searchlights and armed soldiers at the Chinese checkpoint at the Nepalese and Tibetan border, they walked straight into a Nepalese army camp. For four days they were held under arrest. The men were punched; the women taken to the toilet at gunpoint. Their ordeal only ended when the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center in Kathmandu, which processes all Tibetan refugees, was notified.

“I was so happy when the bus came to pick us up,” says Lhamo. They spent two years at a nunnery in Dharamsala in India before travelling through Europe, Canada and the US talking about their experience as torture survivors. After addressing the US Congress in 2002, they settled in New York.

**T**ibetans, who are mostly farmers and nomads, refer to what came after the Chinese occupation as “when the sky fell to earth”. They endured devastating repression, including the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, which saw the wholesale destruction of their religion and culture. Out of 6000 monasteries, only 12 were left by the end of the revolution.

Tibetans argue that theirs has always been a country in its own right, with a distinct language, religion and culture. But the Chinese Communist Party maintains that the region has been a part of China since at least the 13th century. These days, Tibet is referred to as the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The Dalai Lama has repeatedly insisted he’s not seeking independence from the Chinese government, but genuine autonomy so Tibetans can freely practise their religion. The Chinese say they’re bewildered at the controversy over Tibet, claiming they brought it healthcare, housing, roads and education, freeing Tibetans from “inhuman serfdom” under the rule of the Dalai Lamas.

As President Hu Jintao told Prime Minister Kevin Rudd last April, what China does with

a part of its country – as it sees Tibet – is “internal affairs”, not to be interfered in by outsiders. “Our conflict with the Dalai clique is not an ethnic problem, not a religious problem, nor a human rights problem,” he insisted. “It is a problem either to safeguard national unification or to split the motherland.”

But while China brands initiatives such as the world’s highest railway, a multi-billion dollar project opened amid much fanfare in 2006, as an opportunity to connect Tibet to greater China and bring it prosperity, the Dalai Lama fears a darker motive. “Some kind of cultural genocide is taking place,” he argues. “In general, a railway link is very useful in ▶

## POLITICAL GAMES

Throughout their history, the Olympics have provided a political platform



### BERLIN 1936

The Nazis flood the Games with propaganda promoting white athletes. Some Jewish athletes refuse to attend. Ironically, African-American competitor Jesse Owens is the star, winning four gold medals. The Olympic torch relay – from Greece to the host nation – is founded.



### LONDON 1948

The first Games held after World War II. Japan and Germany are banned for their involvement in the war.



**MELBOURNE 1956** Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon boycott the Games because of the battle with Britain and France over the Suez Canal. The Cold War also casts a shadow: the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland refuse to attend after the Soviet Union invades Hungary.



### TOKYO 1964

South Africa is banned due to its racial segregation policy. It is allowed to compete at the 1992 Barcelona Games after it outlaws apartheid in 1991. ▶



Hundreds of Tibetans and their supporters rally in front of the White House in Washington DC.

order to develop, but not when politically motivated to bring about demographic change." Tibetans say the railway is leading to a "second invasion", bringing more troops and accelerating the migration of Han Chinese to Lhasa, where Tibetans are already outnumbered three to two, and speeding up the extraction of Tibet's rich mineral resources.

Continually squeezed out of the economic boom in their country, Tibetans feel they're being treated as second-class citizens. They complain of being restricted to low-income, high-labour jobs such as building roads, while the best jobs go to the Han Chinese. Photos of the Dalai Lama are banned and their language and traditions are gradually being extinguished as the Communist Party attempts to assimilate Tibet into the motherland.

Chinese is the main language taught at school, while curriculums are filled with Chinese and Communist Party culture. Tibetans fear this as the slow dissolution of their identity; China sees it as the only way for the Tibetan people to progress, especially as almost all businesses and state enterprises in Tibet require the Chinese language.

Decades of resentment finally boiled over in the Lhasa protests last March. "I heard one monk was beaten so badly that his eyeballs came out of his head," states Sonam. "This is when many lay people joined the monks. On that first day, March 14, my close friends saw three people shot dead."

As heavily armed troops poured into the region and tanks rolled down city streets, unrest spread across the Tibetan plateau into Chinese provinces populated by Tibetans. In Lhasa, the army locked down the main monasteries, starving monks of food and water. Since then, authorities say 4000 "rioters" have been detained; 400 charged and some already sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Horrifying photos have circulated online of young Tibetan students shot dead. Since Tibet is sealed off to foreigners and journalists, independent information is slow to reach the world.

Western countries, including Australia, have urged China to show restraint. On Prime Minister Rudd's visit to Beijing, he spoke directly – in Mandarin – to President Hu Jintao about his concern over human rights abuses and called on him to open a dialogue with the Dalai Lama. China has agreed to meet with

representatives of the Tibetan leader, but continue to accuse his "clique" of inciting the unrest. The Dalai Lama has continually denied the accusations and threatened to resign if Tibetans did not stop the violence. While he's welcomed the offer of a meeting with the Chinese, inside Tibet a round of "Cultural Revolution-like political campaigns" have been rolled out, according to Tibetans, forcing them to personally attack their leader.

Pressure is also building outside Tibet, as Chinese blogs have sprung up criticising Western media outlets for biased reporting and issuing online death threats to foreign journalists. It is, the young Chinese students claim, the West's way of stealing China's moment of glory during the Olympics. "We will never allow the West to intervene in our internal politics for their own political ends," wrote one blogger on [www.anti-cnn.com](http://www.anti-cnn.com).

This nationalism has worsened relations between Tibetans and Chinese. "I was very afraid when I left Tibet and spent one night in Chengdu in south-western China," concedes Sonam. "I was scared of the Chinese people as well as the authorities who interrogated me. Because I have an Australian passport, they can't do anything to me. I'm free, but my family aren't."

Kunsang and Lhamo understand how difficult it is to start again while fearing for family in a troubled and faraway homeland. "Since the demonstrations, I haven't spoken to my parents," reveals Kunsang. I called once and the phone was picked up by a Chinese person. I don't know who it was." Lhamo continually worries about her family. Last April, she had a brief phone call with her mother, who couldn't speak freely because a Chinese soldier was standing guard. "Since then, she's told me not to call."

Since settling in the US, the nuns have found work as nannies. They've learnt English and built a new life for themselves.

Yet their hearts will always remain in "the land of snows". Inside the house they share, they make offerings to Buddha at their altar, praying that one day they can return to Tibet. They cling to the hope things will change. "Because of the protests and the Olympics, more people know what's happening in Tibet," points out Kunsang. "Whatever happens, we will never give up." ■



**MEXICO 1968**

An estimated 300 students are killed when police and the army open fire on students protesting government repression 10 days before the Games begin. Two American sprinters, Tommie Smith (above centre) and John Carlos, are expelled after they raise their fists in a "black power" salute.



**MUNICH 1972**

Gunmen from a Palestinian terrorist group break into the Olympic village and take 11 members of the Israeli team hostage, demanding the release of prisoners in Israel and Germany. In the ensuing battle, all the hostages, five of the gunmen and a policeman are killed.



**MONTREAL 1976**

More than 20 African nations boycott the Games because New Zealand, which played rugby in apartheid-era South Africa, is not banned from competing.



**MOSCOW 1980**

Led by the US, more than 60 countries refuse to compete following the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan the previous year. (Australia officially supports the boycott, but athletes can decide for themselves whether or not to compete.) Russia retaliates in Los Angeles in 1984 by leading a boycott of the Games by 15 countries.