

# Fire Under the Snow

Directed by Makoto Sasa  
USA/Japan, 75 minutes

**Regarding Film:**

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**[www.fireunderthesnow.com](http://www.fireunderthesnow.com)**

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Synopsis

Arrested by the Chinese Communist Army in 1959, Palden Gyatso spent 33 years in prisons and labor camps for the "crime" of peaceful demonstration. Tortured, starved and sentenced to hard labor, he watched his nation and culture destroyed, his teachers, friends and family displaced, jailed or killed. The film covers Palden's birth in 1933, and follows him through the Orwellian nightmare that began with the Chinese invasion. It explores the escalating cycle of interrogation and physical violation that ended decades later with Palden's escape from Tibet, and a cathartic meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India.

During his imprisonment, sometimes the mere thought of being reunited with the Dalai Lama was a beacon of hope for Palden and other fellow prisoners. The film investigates the basis of Palden's resilience, who claims that his faith in Buddhism, and education as a monk helped him survive. Despite the atrocities that befell him, he harbors no anger toward the Chinese, and believes it is part of his 'karma.'

At the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Palden participated in an indefinite hunger strike. Using this highly publicized and symbolic event, an attempt is made to draw public attention to Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics. We see first hand, Palden's dedication to the cause, his mentoring of the young Tibetan hunger strikers, and his emotional recollections of lost comrades.

**Fire Under the Snow** reveals the contours of an inspirational story: It is the survival of a mind and soul under unthinkable duress.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I am a Tokyo-born woman who has been trying to apply Buddhist philosophy to the challenges of hectic everyday life in New York City. One day, I heard an incredible story about a Tibetan Buddhist monk who was a political prisoner for 33 years, but finally escaped. Later, I read his remarkable autobiography Fire Under the Snow - and was hooked.

Palden Gyatso's traumatic life story, intertwined as it is with the tragedy of Tibet, began haunting me. Looking at his gentle face on the book cover, seeing him smile tenderly with hands joined in prayer, I struggled to reconcile this warm presence with the bitter life recounted in the book. I tried to imagine how a return to relative normalcy was even possible after spending more than half his life under nightmare conditions. How could he still smile with such compassion? It put the concerns of my small life in the big city into a completely different perspective.

Inside of three months I was in Dharamsala with my film crew, and I found Palden Gyatso. Palden is now 75 years old and lives alone. His kindness and gentle manner are not some Tantric magic, but spring from simple, daily Buddhist practice cultivated over a lifetime – an insistence on seeing the Buddha-nature of all sentient beings, and working for their liberation unto his last breath.

In our conversations, he was very humble regarding his own story, seeming almost removed from the events at times. However, reminiscences about friends who were starved or tortured to death or were driven to suicide or are still in prison causes Palden to break down into heart-rending sobs. This is a legacy of pain beyond pain.

Today, open international support of Tibet is declining in the face of a gold rush into the ascendant Chinese economy. World leaders do not feel they can “afford” to challenge Beijing on the basis of human rights, for fear of incurring economic retaliation. However, Palden Gyatso's life story transcends notions of religion or political movements, and speaks to our entire earthbound condition. He accommodated suffering, but did not capitulate to it.

This is not only his triumph, it is a story that needs re-telling in every generation. The pain and war of our own times and minds make this all the more evident.

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FILMMAKER BIOS

**Makoto Sasa — Producer / Director**

Makoto Sasa studied Media at Keio University in Japan, and moved to New York City in 1998, where she received the M.A. in Media Studies from New School University. She has made several short documentaries, worked as assistant editor for the 35mm features "Going Under" (2003) starring Roger Rees, and "LOVE" (2004). She was the editor and associate producer for a feature documentary about a Japanese photographer. It won the Best Editing Award at the Honolulu International Film Festival, and the Audience Award at the Brooklyn International Film Festival, got theatrical and TV distribution in the U.S., Japan, Canada, and the U.K. Recently, Makoto has been directing and editing several documentaries for Sony Japan's broadband streaming video website "World Event Village".

**Maura Moynihan — Executive Producer**

Maura Moynihan has been an advocate for the Tibetan people since 1973, when her father, the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, served as the United States Ambassador to India. Ms. Moynihan worked for many years with Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal, with support from Refugees International, the International Rescue Committee, the American Himalayan Foundation and the International Campaign for Tibet. Ms. Moynihan testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and published many articles and research papers about Tibet. In 1998 Ms. Moynihan started the Radio Free Asia Tibet Bureau in Kathmandu, Nepal, training young Tibetans in journalism, field research and media studies. She is a consultant to the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City, a cultural institution dedicated to the arts and cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas. Ms. Moynihan worked on all of her father's senate campaigns. Senator Moynihan served the people of New York in the United States Senate for 24 years, until his retirement in 2000.

Ms. Moynihan is a best selling author of two books, and speaks Tibetan, Hindi, Urdu and French, she earned a BA from Harvard University and an MS in Political Science from the New School.

**Vladan Nikolic — Co-Producer**

Vladan Nikolic is an award winning filmmaker and writer from Belgrade, Serbia, who now lives in New York. Before coming to New York, Mr. Nikolic worked as a director for Studio B, the first independent TV network in Yugoslavia, and wrote and directed films and documentaries. His awards include the TV Sarajevo Award and Zeta Film Award for Best Screenplay, Eastman Kodak Award for his film Serendipity, Telluride Indiefest Best film Award for his feature Burn, and others. Burn (2001) prompted Amy Taubin of the Village Voice to write that "Vladan Nikolic proves himself a director to watch with this intense, nightmare thriller about Yugoslavian refugees in New York." He recently produced the feature film Going Under (2004), starring Roger Rees, and wrote, directed, and co-produced the feature film Love (2005), which

premiered at the 2005 Tribeca Film Festival, and went on to play the Venice Film Festival. Mr. Nikolic also teaches Film Directing, Production and Digital Filmmaking at The New School, and at New York University.

### **Jim Browne — Co-Producer**

Jim Browne has been programming and producing film and video projects in New York City for the past 18 years. He currently runs Argot Pictures, a distribution/production company that specializes in theatrical releases and consulting for independent films. He is also Associate Programmer for the Tribeca Film Festival as well as the curator of Divine Lens, an on-line film series promoting the work of women documentary filmmakers that is part of [divinecaroline.com](http://divinecaroline.com). He is on the Board of Directors of Rooftop Films.

### **Lincoln Maguire — Associate Producer, Camera B**

Lincoln Maguire is a self-taught professional working as a freelance Videographer / First Assistant Camera for the past ten years. A native New Yorker, he graduated from Fordham University in 1998. His career began in 1992, working for a large broadcast video rental company. With a concentration in SD & HD video, his work encompasses a wide range of film genres including documentaries, narratives, shorts, music videos and a recent 48hr film festival competition. Some of his most memorable experiences working in the business include coverage of singer Bono Vox of U2 at the Simon Weisenthal Humanitarian Award dinner in 2002, an interview with Henry Kissinger for an Israeli TV documentary in 2003, and a private concert performance by Sir Paul McCartney at the Highline Ballroom in 2007.

### **Milica Zec — Editor**

Milica Zec was born in Belgrade, Serbia. She graduated with a degree in Film and TV editing at the University of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. After graduating she received "Slavko Vorkapich" award for Best Student Editor. Due to her successful editing work, Berlin Film Festival invited her to participate in Berlinale Talent Campus in 2005. She wrote scripts, edited and directed numerous short fiction and documentary films. She also worked as an editor on various projects from music videos, commercials and TV shows to fiction and documentary TV series. She is a member of The Association of Film and Television Artists in Belgrade. She currently resides in New York, where she is developing her international career.

### **Aaron Mendez - Co-Writer**

Aaron Mendez is a polymathic creative person whose work spans the fields of music composition, film sound, text editing and Internet technologies. His music has been heard worldwide via Public Radio International, in concert halls from San Antonio to Boulder to Boston, and in New York clubs and Off-Broadway theaters. Awards include: The Jazz Composers Alliance Julius Hemphill Jazz Composition Award (2001), The John Lennon Songwriting Competition (1999), The New England Conservatory Commencement Concert Competition (1994, alma mater). Mendez serves on the Advisory Board of the Creative Music Foundation (Woodstock), and has been a Screen Actor's Guild member since 1979.

### **Vladimir Subotic — Director of Photography**

Award winning cinematographer Vladimir Subotic was born in Belgrade, Serbia. His professional career began in 1995 in Cyprus with TV commercials and music videos. He has worked on short

and feature films, which have been screened at numerous international film festivals. He received the Kodak Visions of Light Best Cinematography Award at the 2004 Los Angeles International Short Film Festival.

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SUBJECT'S BIO

**Palden Gyatso**

Palden Gyatso was born in 1933 and raised in a small Tibetan village. At the age of eighteen he became an ordained Buddhist Monk at one of Tibet's most famous monasteries, Drepung Monastery. In 1959, Palden was jailed along with thousands of others.

Palden endured his suffering and remained in prisons and labor camps for the next 33 years, where he was a victim of severe oppression. He was exposed to various forms of indoctrination and torture aimed at trying to make him change his ways and accept the Chinese communist/socialist ideology. Throughout his imprisonment, Palden resisted the Chinese repression and served as an inspiration to his fellow inmates.

Released on August 25, 1992, from Drapchi prison in Lhasa. Soon after, he escaped Tibet into India on foot, at great risk. Palden Gyatso is a second longest serving political prisoner in Tibet. Since 1992, Palden has devoted his entire life to exposing the atrocities of the Chinese occupiers, especially amongst the political prisoners. He has traveled and spoken extensively to people around the world. In 1995 he gave evidence at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. He also testified before the United Nations and the U.S. Congress about the human rights abuses he had suffered, fulfilling his dream to tell the world about China's torture techniques and prison conditions in Tibet.

In 1997 Palden's story, The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk, was translated by Tsering Shakya and published by Grove Press. In his testimony, Palden describes China's penal system in Tibet and the ruthless tortures he and his co-jailers experienced. Palden's story, like many of his fellow Tibetans, shows the strength of the human spirit in the face of tremendous suffering.

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CREW LIST

Director/Producer	Makoto Sasa
Executive Producer	Maura Moynihan
Producers	Jim Browne, Vladan Nikolic
Editor	Milica Zec
Cinematography	Vladimir Subotic, Lincoln Maguire, Makoto Sasa
Associate Producers	Lincoln Maguire, Aaron Mendez, Tiffany Ryan
Sound Design	Aleksandar Protic
Music by	Chöying Drolma & Steve Tibbetts, Nawang Khechog, Yungcheng Lhamo, Aaron Mendez, Sakamoto, Techung
Ryuichi	

An Imakoko Media production in association with Argot Pictures and Surla Films.

[www.argotpictures.com](http://www.argotpictures.com)  
[www.surlafilms.com](http://www.surlafilms.com)

FIRE UNDER THE SNOW was shot in Tibet, India, Italy, Nepal and the United States.  
It has been in production for 3 years.

FIRE UNDER THE SNOW  
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CREDIT LIST

Produced and Directed by  
Makoto Sasa

Executive Producer  
Maura Moynihan

Produced by  
Jim Browne  
Vladan Nikolic

Associate Producers  
Lincoln Maguire  
Aaron Mendez  
Tiffany Ryan

Edited by  
Milica Zec

Cinematographers  
Vladimir Subotic  
Lincoln Maguire  
Makoto Sasa

Featuring Music by  
Chöying Drolma & Steve Tibbetts  
Nawang Khechog  
Yungchen Lhamo  
Ryuichi Sakamoto  
Sasa Simic  
Techung

Supervising Sound Editor / Sound Designer  
Aleksandar Protic

Sound Editor  
Nikola Zivkovic

Re-Recording Mixer  
Aleksandar Perisic – Spasic

Sound Studio

Prota i Drugari, Belgrade, Serbia

Location Sound Recording  
Lincoln Maguire

Additional Camera / Assistant Editor  
Tashi Dhondup

Tibet Still Photography / Production Stills  
Tiffany Ryan

Additional Still Photography Courtesy of  
Tenzin Choejor  
Steven Marshall  
Marcos Prado  
Tenzin Tsundue  
Alison Wright  
Tibet Centre for Human Rights and Democracy  
The GuChuSum Movement of Tibet

Translators  
(U.S.A.)  
Tenzin Palkyi  
Dasam  
Tashi Dhondup  
Tenzin Dorjee  
Thupten N. Chakrishar  
Passang Tsering  
Sonam Wangdue

(India / Nepal)  
Wanchuk Dorji  
Tashi Sharzur  
Tashi Dhondup

Production Coordinators  
Tashi Dhondup (India)  
Wanchuk Dorji (Nepal)  
Sonam Wangdue (India, U.S.A.)

Post Production Coordinator  
Tarek Salem

Story Consultants  
Fernanda Rossi

Aaron Mendez

Graphics / Animation  
Einat Gavish

Online Editor  
Eugene Lehnert

Colorist  
Alex Berman

Post Production Services  
Post Logic, New York

Legal Work  
Innes Smolansky, Esq.

Additional Footage Courtesy of  
DIIR, Dharamsala  
Ethnographic Museum of Zurich - The Heinrich Harrer Collection  
Milarepa Foundation  
PRO TV, Romania  
STRISCIA LA NOTIZIA, MEDIASET, Italy

Music  
“Sabotage”  
Written and Performed by: Beastie Boys  
Courtesy by Capital Records

“Palden Rangjung”  
Performed by Chöying Drolma & Steve Tibbetts  
Traditional; arranged by Steve Tibbetts  
Published by Rudra Music (ASCAP)  
Courtesy of Six Degrees Records  
[www.sixdegreesrecords.com](http://www.sixdegreesrecords.com)

“Four Immeasurable Kindnesses”  
Composed and Performed by  
Nawang Khechog  
“Universal Love”  
[www.nawangkhechog.com](http://www.nawangkhechog.com)

“Universal Love”  
Composed and Performed by Nawang Khechog  
“Universal Love”

[www.nawangkhechog.com](http://www.nawangkhechog.com)

“night”

Written, Performed, and Produced by Ryuichi Sakamoto

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Japan by EMI / Virgin Music, Inc.

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Courtesy of KAB America / Warner Music Japan [www.sitesakamoto.com](http://www.sitesakamoto.com)

“dawn”

Written, Performed, and Produced by Ryuichi Sakamoto

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“Dolma”

Music by Sasa Simic

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"Dream"

By Yungchen Lhamo

Courtesy of Real World Records

Sony/ATV Songs LLC (BMI)

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"Gi Pai Pa Yul Chola"

By Yungchen Lhamo

Courtesy of Real World Records

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“Desolate”

Composed by David O'Brien

Courtesy of Audio Network

[www.audionetworkplc.com](http://www.audionetworkplc.com)

“Fireflight 7”

Composed by

Nigel Glockler and Doug Scarratt

Courtesy of Audio Network

[www.audionetworkplc.com](http://www.audionetworkplc.com)

“Embers “

Composed by Evelyn Glennie

Courtesy of Audio Network

[www.audionetworkplc.com](http://www.audionetworkplc.com)

“Above Palden’s Room”

Music by Sasa Simic

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“Kham Lu (A Song to the Mountains)”

Traditional Song from Eastern Tibet

Performed by Techung

“Songs from Tibet”

“Zhi Wai Gang Seng (The Snow Lion of Peace)”

Written and Performed by Techung

“Songs from Tibet”

“Drifting”

Composed by Paul Mottram

Courtesy of Audio Network

[www.audionetworkplc.com](http://www.audionetworkplc.com)

“Echo Valley”

Composed by

Barrie Gledden, Richard Lacy and Simeon Wood

Courtesy of Audio Network

[www.audionetworkplc.com](http://www.audionetworkplc.com)

Trailer Music

“Hidden Mountain”

Composed and Performed by Aaron Mendez

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“Captive Karma”

Composed and Performed by Aaron Mendez

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## **History of Tibet**

### **History of Tibet Before the Chinese Invasion of 1949**

Tibet has a history dating back over 2,000 years. A good starting point in analyzing the country's status is the period referred to as Tibet's "imperial age", when the entire country was first united under one ruler. There is no serious dispute over the existence of Tibet as an independent state during this period. Even China's own historical records and the treaties Tibet and China concluded during that period refer to Tibet as a strong state with whom China was forced to deal on a footing of equality.

At what point in history, then, did Tibet cease to exist as a state to become an integral part of China? Tibet's history is not unlike that of other states. At times, Tibet extended its influence over neighboring countries and peoples and, in other periods, came itself under the influence of powerful foreign rulers - the Mongol Khans, the Gorkhas of Nepal, the Manchu emperors and the British rulers of India.

It should be noted, before examining the relevant history, that international law is a system of law created by states primarily for their own protection. As a result, international law protects the independence of states from attempts to destroy it and, therefore, the presumption is in favor of the continuation of statehood. This means that, whereas an independent state that has existed for centuries, such as Tibet, does not need to prove its continued independence when challenged, a foreign state claiming sovereign rights over it needs to prove those rights by showing at what precise moment and by what legal means they were acquired.

China's present claim to Tibet is based entirely on the influence that Mongol and Manchuk emperors exercised over Tibet in the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively.

As Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire expanded toward Europe in the west and China in the east in the thirteenth century, the Tibetan leaders of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism concluded an agreement with the Mongol rulers in order to avoid the otherwise inevitable conquest of Tibet. They promised political allegiance and religious blessings and teachings in exchange for patronage and protection. The religious relationship became so important that when Kublai Khan conquered China and established the Yuan dynasty, he invited the Sakya Lama to become the Imperial Preceptor and supreme pontiff of his empire.

The relationship that developed and still exists today between the Mongols and Tibetans is a reflection of the close racial, cultural and especially religious affinity between the two Central Asian peoples. To claim that Tibet became a part of China because both countries were independently subjected to varying degrees of Mongol control, as the PRC does, is absurd. The Mongol Empire was a world empire; no evidence exists to indicate that the Mongols integrated the administration of China and Tibet or appended Tibet to China in any manner. It is like

claiming that France should belong to England because both came under Roman domination, or that Burma became a part of India when the British Empire extended its authority over both territories.

This relatively brief period of foreign domination over Tibet occurred 700 years ago. Tibet broke away from the Yuan emperor before China regained its independence from the Mongols with the establishment of the native Ming dynasty. Not until the eighteenth century did Tibet once again come under a degree of foreign influence.

The Ming dynasty, which ruled China from 1368 to 1644, had few ties to and no authority over Tibet. On the other hand, the Manchus, who conquered China and established the Qing dynasty in the seventeenth century, embraced Tibetan Buddhism as the Mongols had and developed close ties with the Tibetans. The Dalai Lama, who had by then become the spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet, agreed to become the spiritual guide of the Manchu emperor. He accepted patronage and protection in exchange. This "priest-patron" relationship, which the Dalai Lama also maintained with numerous Mongol Khans and Tibetan nobles, was the only formal tie that existed between the Tibetans and Manchus during the Qing dynasty. It did not, in itself, affect Tibet's independence.

On the political level, some powerful Manchu emperors succeeded in exerting a degree of influence over Tibet. Thus, between 1720 and 1792 the Manchu emperors Kangxi, Yong Zhen and Qianlong sent imperial troops into Tibet four times to protect the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people from foreign invasion or internal unrest. It was these expeditions that provided them with influence in Tibet. The emperor sent representatives to the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, some of whom successfully exercised their influence, in his name, over the Tibetan government, particularly with respect to the conduct of foreign relations. At the height of Manchu power, which lasted a few decades, the situation was not unlike that which can exist between a superpower and a neighboring satellite or protectorate. The subjection of a state to foreign influence and even intervention in foreign or domestic affairs, however significant this may be politically, does not in itself entail the legal extinction of that state. Consequently, although some Manchu emperors exerted considerable influence over Tibet, they did not thereby incorporate Tibet into their empire, much less China.

Manchu influence did not last for very long. It was entirely ineffective by the time the British briefly invaded Tibet in 1904, and ceased entirely with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911, and its replacement in China by a native republican government. Whatever ties existed between the Dalai Lama and the Qing emperor were extinguished with the dissolution of the Manchu Empire.

### **1911 - 1950**

From 1911 to 1950, Tibet successfully avoided undue foreign influence and behaved, in every respect, as a fully independent state. The 13th Dalai Lama emphasized his country's independent status externally, in formal communications to foreign rulers, and internally, by issuing a proclamation reaffirming Tibet's independence and by strengthening the country's defenses. Tibet remained neutral during the Second World War, despite strong pressure from China and

its allies, Britain and the U.S.A. The Tibetan government maintained independent international relations with all neighboring countries, most of whom had diplomatic representatives in Lhasa.

The attitude of most foreign governments with whom Tibet maintained relations implied their recognition of Tibet's independent status. The British government bound itself not to recognize Chinese suzerainty or any other rights over Tibet unless China signed the draft Simla Convention of 1914 with Britain and Tibet, which China never did. Nepal's recognition was confirmed by the Nepalese government in 1949, in documents presented to the United Nations in support of that government's application for membership.

The turning point in Tibet's history came in 1949, when the People's Liberation Army of the PRC first crossed into Tibet. After defeating the small Tibetan army, the Chinese government imposed the so-called "17-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" on the Tibetan government in May 1951. Because it was signed under duress, the agreement was void under international law. The presence of 40,000 troops in Tibet, the threat of an immediate occupation of Lhasa and the prospect of the total obliteration of the Tibetan state left Tibetans little choice.

It should be noted that numerous countries made statements in the course of UN General Assembly debates following the invasion of Tibet that reflected their recognition of Tibet's independent status. Thus, for example, the delegate from the Philippines declared: "It is clear that on the eve of the invasion 1950, Tibet was not under the rule of any foreign country." The delegate from Thailand reminded the assembly that the majority of states "refute the contention that Tibet is part of China." The US joined most other UN members in condemning the Chinese "aggression" and "invasion" of Tibet.

In the course of Tibet's 2,000-year history, the country came under a degree of foreign influence only for short periods of time in the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. Few independent countries today can claim as impressive a record. As the ambassador for Ireland at the UN remarked during the General Assembly debates on the question of Tibet, "[f]or thousands of years, or for a couple of thousand years at any rate, [Tibet] was as free and as fully in control of its own affairs as any nation in this Assembly, and a thousand times more free to look after its own affairs than many of the nations here."

From a legal standpoint, Tibet has to this day not lost its statehood. It is an independent state under illegal occupation. Neither China's military invasion nor the continuing occupation has transferred the sovereignty of Tibet to China. As pointed out earlier, the Chinese government has never claimed to have acquired sovereignty over Tibet by conquest. Indeed, China recognizes that the use or threat of force (outside the exceptional circumstances provided for in the UN Charter), the imposition of an unequal treaty or the continued illegal occupation of a country can never grant an invader legal title to territory. Its claims are based solely on the alleged subjection of Tibet to a few of China's strongest foreign rulers in the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. If other countries were to make such tenuous claims based on their imperial past, how seriously would they be taken? Are we not, in even considering the merits of China's arguments, accepting the right of powerful modern rulers to invade foreign countries in order to recreate lost empires of their ancestors?

Michael C. van Walt is an international legal scholar and a board member of the International Campaign for Tibet. Reprinted from the Cultural Survival Quarterly.Vol.12 1988 Number 1

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PHOTOS

Ven. Palden Gyatso  
Photographer:  
Vladimir Subotic



Palden Gyatso with  
electric prods  
Photographer:  
Marcos Prado

