

The Declaration of Independents



Let There Be Understanding: Tibet Vs. China

by Lloyd Lofthouse

Many in the West do not know the same China that I know. I am married to Anchee Min, noted author of *Red Azalea*, *Becoming Madam Mao*, *Empress Orchid*, and *The Last Empress*. Anchee was born in Shanghai and suffered through Mao's Cultural Revolution with everyone else in China, including Tibet. In fact, *Red Azalea* (a New York Times Notable Book that also won the Carl Sandburg Literary Award) is Anchee's memoir about the years she spent in labor camps where she was seriously injured and almost died.

Today Anchee is an American citizen. She loves this country. The United States gave her back her life. Since I met her I have immersed myself in Chinese culture and history while writing about Robert Hart, the Irish-born British subject who became Inspector General of China's Imperial Maritime Custom Service. He arrived in China in 1854, and before he left in 1908 he would be awarded honors from more than a dozen countries and the Vatican.

Before I met Anchee and started to learn about the real China, my opinion of that country came from news of Mao's Red Army joining the Korean conflict in the 1950s, then my service in Vietnam beginning in 1966 as a field radio operator in the United States Marine Corps. Communists were evil, to be feared and destroyed.

It is easy to distrust the Communists. But did you know that out of 1.3 billion people living in China, only seventy million belong to the Communist party? Many Chinese don't even trust what the Communists say most of the time. That's why I'm writing this. Since few believe anything the Communist government says about Tibet, I'm speaking out.

I won't rely on China's proffered evidence, because anything China says will be considered tainted in the West—not to be trusted.

Of course, I am not trying to claim that anything I say is easy to prove; I am simply trying to show the other side of the argument.

that by 2012, the new leaders of China will all have been educated in the West, just like Deng Xiaoping. Who knows, some of them may even be Christians. An evangelical friend of mine claims that Christianity is the fastest growing religion in China.



Tibet's Drepung Monastery, 2005. Photo by Philipp Roelli, used with permission pursuant to Creative Commons license.

My wife says that Mao lied to the Chinese people. They were told that most Americans were starving and were slaves of the capitalists. But after she arrived in the United States, Anchee learned the truth.

If you visit China with an open mind, you might also learn something different. Mao's China is not the China of today. Mao ruled like a modern emperor for twenty-seven years. After he died, China changed for the better. Deng Xiaoping replaced him and opened China's doors to capitalism. Members of China's government now have term limits—two terms of five years each. And an elected official cannot serve after turning sixty-seven; he must immediately step down. This means

Yes, China does allow limited freedoms in autonomous regions like Tibet, or the provinces of Xingjian and Mongolia where thirty million Islamists live. In Tibet, Buddhist monks worship at those monasteries that were destroyed by Mao's army because they were rebuilt after he died. Before the current outbreak of violence in Tibet, China had a hands-off policy regarding Buddhists. Most support for the Tibetan freedom movement stems from the fact that the Dalai Lama is a charismatic and noted public speaker. He has traveled the world for decades and won the hearts and minds of people like Richard Gere and Nancy Pelosi. What is there not to love about him? After all, the Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize.

But the Dalai Lama's platform is based on the position that China never ruled Tibet before 1951 when Mao invaded it (or reoccupied it, depending on your point of view). The Chinese government claims that China has a right to be there because China has ruled Tibet for hundreds of years. How can China compete with a charismatic individual like the Dalai Lama who goes on television and says, leave my peaceful people alone? When there was a choice between who to believe, the Dalai Lama or the Communists, who did you pick? If I hadn't married Anchee and started learning about the real China, I would believe the Dalai Lama too. The only people in the West who believe China's claims are those people who have lived in China.

By now if you are one of the Dalai Lama's supporters, you are thinking I have been brainwashed. Wrong. You haven't been paying attention. What I'm saying in this essay, about China's historic control of Tibet, is backed by respectable sources. One source is the correspondence of Robert Hart, written in *the nineteenth century* and published by the Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press. Robert Hart was a major historical personage in China, considered the 'godfather of China's modernism'. The other source comes from a piece in the October 1912 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, written by a doctor who stayed in Tibet from 1906 to 1907 handling a cholera outbreak. Both sources support China's claims that they clearly ruled over Tibet before Mao's brutal reoccupation in 1951. In fact, China ruled Tibet for almost a thousand years.

The Dalai Lama's supporters in the West have romantic misconceptions that life was ideal in Tibet before 1951. Reality is different. According to that piece in the October 1912 *National Geographic*, prior to Mao's admittedly brutal reoccupation of Tibet, Tibet was a feudal society controlled by a handful of powerful landlords with serfs and slaves working for them on huge estates. Families with sons were required to send all but one to a monastery to become

Lamas. Only the Lamas learned to read; everyone else in Tibet was illiterate and superstitious. This is the Tibet that Mao invaded.

The Dalai Lama has stated that what is taking place in Tibet is "cultural" genocide, but he offers no explanation for what that phrase means. Genocide is a powerful word and, used in this context, it is misleading. China has built public schools at great expense, so Tibetan children can learn to read and receive an education for the first time in history. There are still Buddhist monasteries in China and Tibet. I've been to one. Does that sound as if there is no religion in China? Buddhism has not died in China, so why should it vanish from Tibet?

Many Tibetans are not peaceful like the Dalai Lama. Life was short and brutal in this land that looks like a Hollywood Shangri-La. During China's long history in Tibet, there have been many rebellions—all extinguished by Imperial Chinese generals. What would the U.S. government do if California threatened to become an independent nation? Let it happen or quash the revolt?

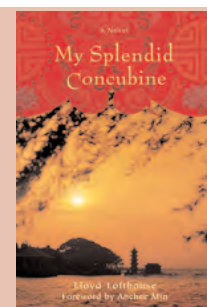
There is something dangerous happening here. More than a billion Chinese around the world know the truth, including most of the 3.6 million Chinese Americans. They are angry and pressuring China's government to ignore the West's misplaced ire and crack down in Tibet. If many in the West continue to show support for the Dalai Lama's so called freedom movement, will the price be worth it?

The economic backlash could be cataclysmic. China holds more than \$1.4 trillion of America's debt and trades almost \$400 billion in imports and exports with America annually. Imagine what would happen if China called for repayment and closed all trade to the West due to perceived insults? To the Chinese, "face"—dignity—is overwhelmingly important.

If Tibet becomes free from China and returns to its feudal state, there is another danger lurking in the shadows. There are four Islamic

separatist movements in the Xingjian province in the northwest of China. Thirty million Muslims who live there want to be free and create an independent Islamic state. If pressure from the West eventually creates a free and feudal Tibet, Islamic fundamentalists will want the same treatment. The result could be another Taliban controlled state in the northwest of China like the one we are still fighting to keep free in Afghanistan. As the old saying goes, be careful what you wish for; you just might get it. ■

Lloyd Lofthouse is a retired journalist and teacher. His book *My Splendid Concubine* is the fictionalized account of the life of Robert Hart, the Inspector General of China's Imperial Maritime Custom Service. Details can be found at www.mysplendidconcubine.com.



Websites For Fun and Non-Profit

by Trudy Schuett

I guess it's really true: if you want something done, you should ask a busy person. About a month ago I was deep into marketing plans for two of my books. They were two of three that had been previously published in e-book form about five years ago, and I was getting ready to release them in print.

I was also looking for a job to support all this marketing and publishing. When my buddy, Jan, at the non-profit Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men and Women e-mailed to tell me that their website traffic was at an all-time low and her webmaster had just jumped ship, I knew what I had to do: set everything else aside, at least for the moment, and get that website in shape!

True, it was a volunteer gig and not the paying job I was looking for, but I figured I'd get my reward in heaven or something.

Marketing for a non-profit isn't all that different from marketing a book. Your website needs to be pristine, must be reasonably in style, and has

to be fully functioning. We could all tell what the problem was with the website for the Domestic Abuse Helpline—it just plain sucked! It would've been fine if this had been 1995, but it was hopelessly outdated for 2008.

It had been two or three years since I'd attempted to build anything more complicated than a blog, so my expectations for advancements in website creation software were too high. After a good ten days' worth of false starts trying to use software that either didn't do what it said it would do, or was far too complex (in the industry they say "powerful") for our needs, I finally went back to my old standby software: Homestead. (<http://www.homestead.com>)

Comfortably back in point-and-click land, it still took all day, every day, for about a week until we had a site we could confidently present to the world. There was a lot of content that needed to be moved from the old site to the new one, and some of that content had to be updated or completely rewritten. Other things needed to be added, like links for items we thought had always been there but weren't, especially those all-important how-to-donate links.

Now they've got their shiny new site going, their website traffic is back where it should be, and those donation links are working (by the way, I am donating the proceeds of one of my books to DAHMW). Check it out at www.dahmw.org.

And now you, too, can make your own website. As for me, it's back to surfing Craigslist and Monster, and putting my marketing plans into action! Then there's the matter of that third book, which still needs to see paper.... ■

Trudy W. Schuett writes fictional tales about relationships that reverberate in the real world. Information on her books Sweethearts & Monsters and Friends To The End can be found at her website, <http://trudywschuett.homestead.com>.



BOOK REVIEW

Odin-Son: The Berserker Saga

by G. Alvin Simons

This tale of adventure in Norse garb is tightly and crisply told though it suffers from a few weaknesses. It follows the coming to maturity, training, and early adventures of a young Norse berserker dubbed Magnus Thygard. Berserkers were a certain category of warrior renowned in the Viking age for a battle lust which made them seemingly unstoppable in their attacks and impervious to wounds. No doubt they could be wounded like anyone else, but because of their prodigious strength (they were invariably very big men, which says a lot given that most Scandinavians were themselves pretty large), they could endure much more and simply felt little pain in the heat of the struggle. Mr. Simons, the author, seems to recognize this in his telling.

Young Magnus loses his father and is apprenticed to a berserker master in the book's first serious divergence from real history. Indeed, there is no evidence that being a berserker involved enrolling in a school of Norse martial arts as the author suggests. Magnus is delivered to a teacher who appears to be a cross between Yoda (with all his accompanying semi-mystical resonances) and a marine drill sergeant, living and training in a secluded boot camp tucked away in the mountains. Of course, little is actually known about berserkers in literature (though records of battle maddened warriors chewing on their shields and eschewing pain and wounds goes back at least to the Romans' accounts of the Celts) so Mr. Simons has room to invent in his tale. He does a very convincing job of it, too.

The novel is fast paced and furious in the best sense of these terms. Simons' writing has real narrative power (he never ends a scene or chapter leaving me with any doubt that I wanted to go on!) and he has an ear for dialogue. His characters' conversations are natural and well-paced and add to the narrative tension consistently. But I'm afraid this is marred by a tin ear for archaic verbiage. Too often, Mr. Simons relies on artificial locutions to evoke the era: rather than "it is" or "it's" he insists on using "'tis". In lieu of "yes", he invariably uses "aye." But worse than these, I fear, is his tendency to use "it matters not" instead of "it doesn't matter" or (and here I was really thrown off) "what means you?" for "what do you mean?" (At least he could have given us "What mean you?" to preserve the grammatical niceties!)

I found these, and similar turns of phrase, jarring throughout the tale. Occasionally, the author strays entirely out of the time period to import modern phrases and sentiments, such as when he has Magnus respond to another character's comment about Norsemen settling in parts of Ireland with an ironic "There went the neighborhood!" A high number of typos also worked against the tale's ability to impose verisimilitude.

I was also somewhat put off by the thinness of the characters. Magnus is an avatar of Robert E. Howard's legendary Conan the Barbarian, a killer with a heart of gold (revealed in Magnus' somewhat unrealistic obsession with "honor"). Every other Norseman we meet is a harder case than the next, whose typical sentiments echo those of Magnus' friend Helgi on page 256: "I'm content only with a deck under my feet, a drinking horn in my hand or a willing female in my bed." The Norse were human like the rest of us, and not all fierce warriors and bloody-minded killers, though you wouldn't know that from their portrayal here.



And yet I found myself reading the book greedily despite the pulp sensibility that pervades this novel and the jarring non-Viking moments. This book carries the reader onward in the best tradition of the adventure tale. Although there is violence

on almost every page and the characters are mostly of the stock variety, Magnus continues to hold his grip on us as he works his way through one predicament after another. In sum, I really enjoyed this one despite the fact that I am not a Robert E. Howard fan and generally like my Norse fare more closely tied to what seems historically accurate.

It's always a challenge to get the dialogue and background right in these kinds of period stories, and Mr. Simons has handled the background nicely even if he is yet a little weak on the vocabulary. Still, he compensates for the problems with a strong narrative engine that drives the tale onward, an ear for natural sounding speech patterns, and a knack for folding them artfully into the narrative flow. The story ends on an open note, leaving room for sequels. I expect we'll be seeing them soon and I look forward to them.

Review by Stuart W. Mirsky, author of The King of Vinland's Saga and A Raft On The River, and organizer of the VikingSail 2000 celebration in New York Harbor.

A Voyage Into the Unknown

by Aidan Lucid

It was a frosty December afternoon, three days before Christmas. I sat at a table, pen in hand, copies of my book of poetry, *A Viking's Prayer*, neatly laid out before me. The venue was Chapter Two Bookshop in Tralee, County Kerry, Ireland. Willie, the owner of the bookshop, placed a tray of coffee and cookies beside the table and I welcomed them, hoping the hot drink would counteract the cold from the draught that seemed to circle my feet. As the warm liquid slithered down inside my body, I gazed at the Viking on the cover and thought about how this joyous day came very close to not happening.

Six months before I was standing in my writing room, nervously tapping my toe. I anxiously awaited my best friend's opinion on the title poem of my book of poetry.

"Wow, that's great! Can I read more?" he asked. I was shocked by his answer. I showed him some more of my poems and, after reading the others, he suggested that I release a book of poetry. At first I laughed at the idea. I knew that poetry was a slow seller. But something inside of me was screaming "do it!"

Week after week Brian kept asking me, "When are you going to release that book of poetry?"

Sounding rather less confident, I would say, "I don't think I will. I mean, who'd buy it?"

"Well, nobody will even see it if it's on your computer, will they?" he would always reply.

I knew he was right, but if I'm to be honest, I was afraid of failure. Afraid that people would laugh at my poems or think that my verses were the ramblings of some moron.

Finally, after about two months of Brian's insistence, I decided to take the proverbial plunge. I hired a proof reader to edit my book and then I had Leonardo Borazio, an Italian artist, design the cover for me. I shopped around all of the local printers until I finally found one that charged a reasonable price.

With the aid of a web design program, *Serif Webplus 10*, I set up a website dedicated to the book: www.avikingsprayer.com. The program even allowed me to install a PayPal option on the site so people could buy a copy right there with a credit card.

I also obtained an ISBN number and barcode. With these on the book, a number of the shops in my town were kind enough to stock it. Some were very enthusiastic about there being a new author on the scene.

One thing remained to be done and that was the venue for my book launch. Some of the bigger named shops were not willing to allow an "unknown" to have a book launch, but Chapter Two was more than delighted to have me there.

So at the book signing table, I anxiously awaited the first customer. I was hoping that a radio interview and an article in the newspaper about my launch would draw attention. Thankfully I didn't have long to wait. Within two minutes, a former teacher arrived and bought two copies. Then a bloke who said he'd heard me on the radio earlier in the week bought another copy. I was off to a good start! By the end of the day I sold 25 copies, which wasn't bad considering it was my first launch.

That night I relaxed in my reclining armchair with my legs in the air. As I sipped my can of Guinness I reflected on the day and felt a great sense of pride in what I had achieved. There was a sparkle in my eye, and it wasn't from the fairy lights on the Christmas tree (or, indeed, the Guinness). It was from the fact that I finally had my own book on the shelves, something I thought would never happen. What a great way to end 2007!

Do I have any regrets? Nope, I've none. *A Viking's Prayer* is doing relatively well and, even though poetry can be a slow seller at times, I'm selling a lot more than I would have if the poems had remained on my computer.

My advice to anyone looking to self-publish is to ask yourself some very important questions. (1) Is there a market for my book? (2) Has it been done before? (3) If it has, how does mine stand out from the competition? Get opinions from brutally honest people about your book and if the overall response is positive, go for it! When I say "brutally honest," I don't mean naysayers or people who provide destructive criticism because more often than not, they are just jealous that you managed to do something they couldn't. I mean people who want to help but aren't afraid to tell you the truth, because if your work really isn't that good they will be doing you a big favour and saving you money. Most of all, make sure you believe in yourself. If you don't have faith in your own work, then how can you expect others to like it and, more importantly, buy it?

Also, do a bit of market research and create a plan for selling your book. A website does wonders for promoting your work as it allows people to have a taste of what your novel or poetry collection is about. It also lets them contact you if they have any queries or want to buy a copy. Networking with websites such as Bebo, Facebook, or MySpace, or joining multiple forums (like a Yahoo writing group), can dramatically boost sales.

If you think of an idea for marketing your book, *do it*. If you're not prepared to work your butt off to sell your book, then self-publishing is not for you. ■

Information on Aidan Lucid's poetry and his book *A Viking's Prayer* can be found at the author's website: www.avikingsprayer.com.



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