



**OP-ED**

## **Newton man needs support**

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A 29-year-old American lies severely injured - perhaps paralyzed - in China, a victim of the kind of political terrorism that should appall the world.

It certainly appalls those of us privileged to know Daja Meston.

The Newton resident was detained by the Chinese while investigating a dam project. His experience shatters the illusion that Americans are safe from the repression visited regularly on Tibetans.

I interviewed Meston --in 1995 when he was a student at Brandeis University. He was a soft-spoken young man, torn between two worlds, an American acculturated as a Tibetan, both courteous and deeply reserved. It was difficult to break through his shyness, yet at times he brimmed with inner amusement - mostly over my fumbling knowledge of Tibet.

Meston's parents were - for lack of a better word - hippies, free spirits who traveled to the East in the 1960s for spiritual inspiration. His mother was Feather Meston Greenburg (daughter of "Gunsmoke" TV producer John Meston); his father an artist who eventually suffered a breakdown.

In India, his mother became a Buddhist nun and sent her son at age 6 to be raised in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Nepal. It was a life of little food and constant prayer; he couldn't play outside for fear of accidentally stepping on a bug (the religion values all life) and was teased for his different appearance.

Meston showed me a faded article from People magazine about himself - the little Jewish boy (the progeny of celebrities) with a shaved head in monk's robes. He might still be wearing those robes, save for a visit in his teens to his grandparents in California, where he was dazzled by this strange new world.

Eventually, he settled in this area to study at Brandeis. Although he married a Tibetan woman, he seemed - or so I thought - ready to settle into the American lifestyle his mother so fiercely rejected.

His spare apartment featured pictures of the Dalai Lama, but when he told me he ate meat, I figured he couldn't be a "real" Buddhist. (This was before I found out the Dalai Lama enjoys a good steak now and then.)

I would later discover Meston's mild manner covered an abiding passion - his love for Tibet. Over the next few years he would call occasionally to tell me of events in Boston's Tibetan community. I got to know his wife, Phuntsok Dolma, a stunning, articulate and outspoken woman, who helped me understand the complicated issues of the Chinese occupation which divided even Tibetans.

It was a wry comment from the Mestons about "Tibetniks" - those earnest Americans with the "Free Tibet" bumper stickers who see the cause as another hip trend - that inspired a feature story. Still, Meston was gentle in his critiques; he knew American interest was crucial to Tibet's survival.

Over the years he seemed to grow more at ease with his path between the two worlds.

Meston spoke about his trips to Tibet, a place his wife (the daughter of exiles) had never visited. With his Tibetan fluency and status as an American, he accompanied reporters and a congressman on a fact-finding mission. He realized he was in a unique position to help the cause. When asked more recently about returning to Tibet he said he didn't think it would be a good idea since the Chinese were probably on to him.

So it was with shock that I heard about his "fall" from a third-story window during detention by the Chinese. Had this soft-spoken, committed man been resistant? Was he disoriented from hours of interrogation or terrorized or tortured? This sort of thing happens all the time in Tibet - but usually not to foreigners.

Comments from Gabriel Lafitte, Meston's Australian companion, indicated they believed foreigners were allowed to visit the site of a controversial dam project - to be funded by the World Bank.

The real question is why Meston took this risky trip at all. Perhaps he felt this was his path in life.

And while we don't know what really happened during Meston's interrogation by the Chinese, still his predicament deserves more than the bloodless response it got from the U.S. State Department.

An American, who combined the best of Western and Eastern traditions, lies badly hurt. He needs medical attention and unequivocal support. Those of you who think Tibet is just a hip trend, ditch those those "Free Tibet" bumpersticks. Free Daja Meston.

Stephanie Schorow is a member of the Boston Herald staff.

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