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A Review of The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947

The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947. By Tsering Shakya. London: Pimlico Original, 1999, xxi + 571 pages, ISBN: 0-71266-533-1, £12.50 (paper)

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The political theorist Eric Hobsbawm once wrote that historians are to nationalists what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin addicts. Certainly -- unlike some of their more cosseted academic colleagues -- few modern historians can allow themselves the comfort of seeing their work as anything but political in consequence, if not in intent. In Tibet, where possession of a copy of Shakapba's *Tibet -- A Political History* can reportedly earn you three years' imprisonment from the Chinese authorities -- and where a written declaration that "Tibet has always been an inalienable part of the Chinese Motherland" may well excuse you from such a fate -- Hobsbawm's assessment resonates loudly: indeed, much of the present political battle for Tibet's future is being fought over the nature of its past.

In such a situation, the publication of a new book on Tibetan history can never be seen as a merely academic event, one more neutral contribution in a search for some putative objective accuracy. In the last few years, however, an increasing number of academics writing on Tibet have come to realize the political potential of academic analysis itself, particularly in shattering the ideologies of entrenched interest groups and in challenging the increasingly dictatorial politics of identity. Tsering Shakya's mammoth contribution to the field of modern Tibetan history -- *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, published this year by Pimlico Originals -- joins this group, denouncing in its introduction the "denial of history" and politically motivated simplification of the Tibet issue by the Chinese, the Tibetans, and by a Western "audience" unwilling to entertain the possibility of political complexity.

As the title suggests, *Dragon* covers the period from the Chinese Invasion in 1949 through to the early 1990s. Concentrating very much on political history, Shakya's primary focus lies in the twists and turns of Chinese policy, elucidating not merely how Tibetans reacted to

Chinese rule, but also their growing involvement in the processes of Chinese governance and the tides of Chinese politics. As a result of this focus, his discussion of modern Tibetan history can be divided into three main periods:

- (1) 1949-1959, from the invasion to the 1959 Tibetan Uprising: the Chinese invasion and its immediate aftermath, characterized by the gradual collapse of the traditional Tibetan government in Lhasa and growing tension and instability in the region, and the final revolts in Eastern and Central Tibet;
- (2) 1959-1979, from the flight of the Dalai Lama into exile to Mao's death and the trial of the Gang of Four, marked by the traumatic years of the post-Uprising suppression, the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution;
- (3) 1979-1994, from Hu Yaobang's reforms to the present, covering the "relaxed" years of the 1980s, the Lhasa protests of 1987-1990, and the subsequent re-assertion of military and ideological control over Tibet.

Shakya's exclusive emphasis on political history means that *Dragon* can be fruitfully compared with two preceding contributions to the field, Melvyn Goldstein's ground-breaking *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) and Warren Smith's *Tibetan Nation: A History of Tibetan Nationalism and Sino-Tibetan Relations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996). All of these are voluminous and erudite tomes (although, on a more prosaic note, *Dragon in the Land of Snows*, at a mere £12.50 for 571 densely-packed pages, is considerably cheaper) and inevitably revolve around Tibet's relationship with China.

Of the two, *Dragon* is closest in tone and intent to *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951*, and chronologically it takes off where that work finishes (with a four-year overlap). Indeed, even beyond the issue of their shared title and complementary chronologies, it's difficult to overcome the impression that Shakya intended *Dragon* to be a companion edition to Goldstein's book. In many respects it fills that role rather well, with both works maintaining a density of scholarship which easily makes them core texts on the topic. Similarly, the two texts share in their description of the political circumstances of Tibet's downfall much of the bitter air of Greek tragedy, of opportunities missed and an almost deterministic inevitability to events, in which misjudgment and selfish folly, both within Tibet and on the wider international stage, are the order of the day, and no one really comes out smelling of roses.

They are however, far from identical. Readers of *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951* cannot help but be struck by the degree to which it is a "court history," tracking the intrigues and agendas of Lhasa high society as the early twentieth century progresses, very much a portrait of a self-obsessed elite utterly unprepared for and in general unwilling to contemplate the fate which awaits it; by its very nature, it is a work about the complex interaction of personalities and personal agendas. *Dragon* lacks much of this hothouse atmosphere, with Shakya choosing to paint a somewhat larger tableau, taking in the broader societal implications of the clash of Chinese and Tibetan governances. While there is an inevitable concentration on Lhasa, his awareness of the more general changes caused to the lives of nomads, farmers, and traders in Tibet as a whole adds a wider sociological dimension to his discussion.

As a corollary, however, *Dragon* lacks much of the intimacy of Goldstein's work. Indeed, one could easily accuse the book of a studious dryness toward key political figures. While Shakya discusses the political biography of certain key figures in modern Tibetan history -- in particular, the rise to political maturity and prominence of the present Dalai Lama and of the tenth Panchen Lama, and the complex and seemingly charmed political life of Ngabo

Ngawang Jigme Shape (commander of the doomed Chamdo defence, principal signature to the subsequently-denounced seventeen-point agreement, and first Chinese-appointed Governor of Tibet) -- he refrains from digging too deeply into their motivations; indeed, *Dragon's* dryness results largely from a dearth of explicit historical or biographical speculation (except perhaps concerning the 1959 Revolt, to which I will return).

To be honest, I found this approach rather refreshing, especially compared with works such as Warren Smith's highly politicized *Tibetan Nation*: while it is extremely informative, much of Smith's work is characterized by an interpretation of Chinese motives as uniformly machiavellian, and Tibetan involvement in Chinese policy as simple collaboration. By comparison, Shakya's discourse concentrates far more on the *instability* of the Chinese political agenda within Tibet, and of Tibetan *realpolitik* in the face of a militarily overwhelming force. Such a portrayal may well seem like apologism, but it is by equal measure a door to understanding.

Be that as it may, one could certainly not accuse the author of shying away from controversy. Indeed, Shakya's work has already caused quite a storm, largely *because* of his tendency not to divide the issue into blacks-and-whites. Indeed, there are key elements to Shakya's history which will cause some consternation in both Chinese and Tibetan circles. It's worth covering these in some detail, since they will almost certainly constitute the backbone of *Dragon's* lasting impact.

Firstly, there is the question of Tibetan "collaboration" in the Chinese invasion and later forms of governance. Shakya argues that rather than there being a small core of demonized Tibetan collaborators who effectively "sold out" Tibet to the Chinese (a list which usually consists of the Panchen Lama, Ngawang Jigme Ngapo and Geshe Sherab Gyatso), many members of the Tibetan populace, particularly among the land-holding elite, initially welcomed the Chinese invaders, some genuinely seeing them as a modernizing force (p. 116); some, in perhaps one of the twentieth century's profoundest ironies, keeping portraits of Mao in their household shrines); some seeing in the Chinese a means to bolster their own political standing within Tibet; and some seeing an opportunity to line their own pockets. Indeed, for Shakya, the first real signs of popular resistance to the new Chinese presence (in Central Tibet at least) occurred in response to the pressures that the Chinese military presence placed on local resources (chapter four).

For such responses to be understood, however, they need to be seen in the light of Chinese political strategy in the 1949-1959 period. Contrary to Chinese socialist claims that their principal purpose was to liberate the serfs of Tibet from feudal overlordship, Shakya argues that "the serfs" were largely ignored by the invading Communist forces; instead, the Chinese strategy was precisely to win over the traditional ruling elite, and progressively involve them in Chinese governance of the region (p. 93). This was accompanied by a policy in which the traditional Tibetan government in Lhasa was not initially abolished, but left to run side-by-side with a burgeoning, and vastly more substantial, Chinese administration (the PCART, or Preparatory Committee of the Autonomous Region of Tibet), within which Tibetan members, such as the Dalai Lama, held high, but effectively titular, posts. *Dragon* thus charts the progressive ensnarement of the Lhasa government over ten years -- a government which, even by continuing to exist, was trapped into the appeasement of the occupying forces, and increasingly caught between increasingly anti-Chinese feeling in Lhasa during the 1950s on the one side, and Chinese demands that they crush such "reactionary forces" on the other (pp. 96-111).

Perhaps most controversial of all in the long run, however, is Shakya's interpretation of the causes and constitution of the Tibetan Uprising in March 1959, a tumultuous event which led to the flight into exile of His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama and a radical hardening of Chinese policy in Tibet. Explanations for the 1959 Uprising are generally of two kinds: class

and ethnic. Chinese explanations, both at the time and subsequently, have blamed the Uprising on reactionary forces within Tibet's land-holding classes, who were resistant to China's emancipation of the masses. Those more sympathetic to the Tibetan cause have usually characterized it in terms of the ethnic solidarity of Tibetans -- an early form of nationalism aimed primarily at repulsing the Chinese presence. Shakya's description, however, points to a different mechanism at work.

Shakya's description of the 1950-1959 period concentrates on the Chinese's gradual emasculation of the traditional Lhasa regime -- one which had historically been dominated by the principle of *chos-srid-nyis-dan*, or "religion and governance combined" -- through the importing of more substantial parallel forms of governance (p. 116). Moreover, while the Chinese initially encouraged key members of the Tibetan elite to hold posts in the new administration, they would not countenance the maintenance of explicitly *religious* rule from Lhasa. Gradually, the traditional Lhasa government lost meaningful authority in Central Tibet, and many Tibetans saw the Lhasa government as selling out to the Chinese and failing to protect the authority of the Dalai Lama.

This was then compounded by increasing trouble in Eastern Tibet. While socialist reforms were postponed in Central Tibet because of its "special characteristics," the early stages of communalization were put in place in Kham and Amdo, which were considered by the Chinese to be already within their political fold as a result of their traditional political alienation from the Dalai Lama's government. These reforms quickly led to revolt and reprisals, forcing large numbers of refugees to flee towards Central Tibet and Lhasa, and putting further economic pressure on a region where Communist troop presence had already stretched food supplies to their limits. In Shakya's presentation, this led to increasing pressures between the Tibetan Government in Lhasa and the rebels in Eastern Tibet: indeed, Shakya follows key Tibetan figures in arguing that, "had the 10th March Uprising not taken place, there was every likelihood that civil war would have broken out between the Lhasa regime and the Khampas" (p. 193).

Before this could happen, however, the growing tensions led to revolt in Lhasa and across Central Tibet. The revolt was sparked by the famous Chinese invitation to the Dalai Lama to watch a visiting dance troupe at a nearby Chinese military garrison. Shakya questions whether such a move could ever seriously have been a ploy (p. 193), but the issue is moot at best: Lhasa Tibetans read it as an attempt to kidnap the Dalai Lama, and surrounded his Summer Palace, the Norbulingka, in an attempt to stop him leaving, a spontaneous group action which escalated into confrontation with the Chinese, and the flight to India of His Holiness.

These details are attested to by most modern accounts; what is different about Shakya's reading is that, unlike authors such as Smith, he does not see the Lhasa Uprising purely in terms of ethnic resistance to Chinese rule, but as having crucial class dimensions. These "class dimensions" were, however, precisely the opposite of standard Chinese presentations of the event: Shakya convincingly argues that the crowd outside the Summer Palace was composed primarily of members of the wider Tibetan "masses" (indeed, that most of Lhasa's political elite had by this stage gathered at the garrison camp to watch the dance troupe!), and were revolting as much against an elite who in their perception had betrayed the Dalai Lama as against the Chinese themselves (p.192-195).

For myself, I find Shakya's portrait of the 1959 Uprising highly plausible. The theoretical emphasis on a horizontally-shared Buddhist ethnic identity as the basis of Tibetan political action has been highly influential throughout the 1990s. Here, following Anderson's seminal analysis of nationalism in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, political identity is conceived in terms of a "deep, *horizontal* comradeship" (Anderson, B. London: Verso, 1983, pp. 15-16, my emphasis). Such an

approach, however, ignores the markedly *hierarchical* nature of Tibetan political and religious life. As theorists such as Gellner, Anderson and Hobsbawm have coherently argued, "nationalism" -- in the sense of a wide horizontal sense of fraternity mobilized around claims for self-governance -- is a relatively recent development even in the history of Europe, and marks an ideological and cultural shift away from more hierarchical polities, specifically those dynastic realms and sacral cultures organized around divine centers that gave access to theologically-conceived notions of political legitimacy.

In many respects, Tibetan political life seems far closer to these earlier modes than to latter-day ethno-nationalism. Rather than seeing themselves as a horizontally-shared collectivity of Buddhists, individual Tibetan claims to identity *qua* Tibetan Buddhists were constituted through established hierarchical links (of allegiance, respect and offering) with divinized centers -- either within households, or through teaching relations with gurus, or (for Central Tibetans, at least) through sociologically-wider hierarchies with politico-religious figures such as the Dalai Lama (commonly seen as a manifestation of the patron Buddhist deity Chenresig). To my mind -- and apparently to Shakyas', although I would not wish to speak for him -- such a hierarchical interpretation of pre-modern Tibetan political culture more accurately accounts for the manner in which the 1959 Uprising was initially more focused on the defense of the Dalai Lama than on the defense of a territorialized ethnic population.

Similarly, his description points to a marked *continuity* between "pre-modern" and "modern" Tibetan political life, in the mobilization of Buddhist ritual as a mode of political expression and resistance. In *Circle of Protest -- Political History in the Tibetan Uprising* (London: Hurst, 1994), an examination of the political unrest in Lhasa during the late 1980s, Ronald Schwartz (who is also in favor of a "horizontal-fraternity" understanding of Tibetan ethnicity) argued that the politicization of private Buddhist ritual is a relatively new -- by which I read post-1980 -- phenomenon, one brought about through constraints of modern Chinese rule, which allowed private acts of religiosity, but not public protest (Schwartz 1994, chapter three). Most particularly, Schwartz concentrates on the daily walking of the Barkhor circumambulation route around the Jokhang, Lhasa's central temple -- which in 1987 became the site of Tibetan protests against Chinese rule, with monks and laity carrying (banned) Tibetan flags around the route while shouting independence slogans and, as the demonstrations met with violence, carrying injured Tibetan protesters -- as a nexus in which Tibetans developed "a *new* and powerful way of understanding political protest: as action sanctioned by religion, accomplishing religious ends, and benefiting both the individual and community" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 32).

Key elements of Shakyas' account in *Dragon in the Land of Snows* discount this thesis of political modernity. For example, Shakyas describes the death of Khunchung Sonam Gyamtso, a Tibetan member of the Chamdo Liberation Committee and the Religious Affairs Committee of the PCART, during the initial stages of the 1959 Uprising, when a large section of the population of Lhasa was surrounding the Norbulingka (the Dalai Lama's Summer Palace):

Officials were often seen as traitors if they abandoned traditional dress and wore Chinese uniforms instead. Khunchung first came to Norbulingka for the morning tea ceremony, wearing traditional Tibetan monk's attire. Later, however, he returned to watch the crowd outside the palace, having changed to a white shirt, dark trousers and a Chinese cap with a white face mask of the sort the Chinese often use to keep out dust. This simple act seems to have enraged the public, who attacked him and beat him to death. *The angry crowd dragged his body all around the Barkhor, the centre of Lhasa* (p. 192, my italics).

Clearly, this incident suggests that the Barkhor circumambulation route had a strongly

political dimension even prior to the imposition of Chinese constraints on religion. Similarly, Shakya notes that the annual Monlam Chenmo (Great Prayer) festival at Lhasa, a massive annual event in pre-modern Tibet, which was banned between 1967 and 1985, served as a "focal point for Tibetan solidarity" (p. 317) as early as the 1950-1966 period, just as it did in 1988 and 1989, when its contested role acted as the spark for widespread protest and rioting in Central Tibet.

This is not, however, to say that nothing has changed in the articulation of political consciousness within Tibet. The initial Chinese concentration on the traditional elite did, after all, give way in 1959 to a more familiar socialist agenda of "consciousness-raising" among the masses (for example, pp. 240, 259, 348). For Shakya, one of the principal political dynamics of Chinese occupation is the degree to which it politicized the previously non-aristocratic or monastic classes, both in defense of the Dalai Lama's position, and later, in their (often forced) involvement in the Cultural Revolution. Here, there is a certain unevenness in the thoroughness of *Dragon's* description: the Uprising and the subsequent suppression of the 1959 rebellion receive quite extended coverage in sociological terms, while Shakya's description of the events of the Cultural Revolution is markedly political in flavor: we learn much about the activities of, and disputes between, Red Guard factions -- most of which derived their agendas precisely from machinations within the higher politics of the Communist Party in Beijing -- but there is only a cursory analysis of the manner in which such events affected or involved the wider Tibetan populace. By this, I do not mean that *Dragon* does not outline key distinctions -- such as that it was often young Tibetans themselves who aided in the destruction of so many of Tibet's monasteries -- but rather that it is difficult to see from Shakya's rendition what processes produced so great a transformation in certain young Tibetans' view of such institutions. By comparison, Tibetan resistance movements (in particular the Four Rivers, Five Ranges insurgency movement (chapter six), and the 1969 Nyemo Revolt (pp. 344-345)), as well as the CIA's clandestine support of the Tibetan resistance, are much more substantially covered.

Ultimately, Shakya's book may prove disappointing to Buddhist *aficionados*. There is, for example, no direct or substantive discussion of the dissolution of the monasteries, despite the fact that Shakya himself asserts that, sociologically at least, this single process was probably the most revolutionary event in Tibetan history since the thirteenth century (those interested in this issue may instead wish to look to Goldstein's recent discussion of modern monastic history in Tibet in Goldstein and Kapstein's *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet* (London: University of California Press, 1998). While such a discussion would undoubtedly add much to this work, to demand it would be churlish and to miss the point: one of the greatest strengths of *Dragon*, after all, lies in its portrayal of the gradual destruction of Tibetan modes of *governance*, and popular reactions to them. In this, Shakya refuses to be drawn into fitting Tibetan history into the procrustean bed of Western sociological theory, instead maintaining a rare sensitivity to the historical context of religious rule in the region. It is this sensitivity which arguably makes *Dragon* so controversial, since much contemporary Tibetan political discourse seems aimed at precisely the opposite: to fit the square peg of Tibetan theocracy into the round hole of Western nation-state ideology.

More generally, Shakya's work is alive to many of the nuances of Chinese policy regarding Tibet, and the way that policy is dominated less by Sino-Tibetan relations than by internal politicking within the Beijing hierarchy. This element is clearest in his analysis of the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, but has more wide-ranging implications in the degree to which it implies the *unimportance* of negotiations between Dharamsala and Beijing in determining Tibet policy. Many in the Dharamsala camp will find such an analysis disheartening, although the Dalai Lama has himself often commented that it is the internal state of China that will determine much of Tibet's future, and it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. Such an analysis does, however, point toward the probability that Dharamsala's future plans for an autonomous Tibet within China -- even if they were initially accepted by

the Chinese -- would easily be swept aside by subsequent political reversals in Beijing.

In this respect, what is perhaps most striking about Shakyas's rendition is his depiction of the manner in which such rule created of Tibet a society increasingly at war with itself. Such a picture belies the popular view of Tibetans as maintaining a strong internal ethnic cohesion -- a cohesion which has subsequently become a key element of Tibetan claims to nationhood. That such a picture should be surprising says more about our own ignorance of history and political naivete than about Tibetan political life itself. Claims to nationhood have always been problematic, and -- as authors such as Hobsbawm, Gellner and Anderson have shown again and again -- rarely stand up to sustained historical and social examination. Securing Tibet's historical claim of independent statehood has dominated the international policy of the Dalai Lama's government -- both in Lhasa and in exile -- for the greater part of this century. If social theorists such as Gellner are correct, such a claim is probably misguided, not because the Chinese are right, but because the practical authenticity of such claims is *not* based on objective social and historical facts, but on the pre-existing political, economic and military might necessary to lend such claims the weight they need to be internationally accepted. After all, few if any Western nations could stand up to the kind of tests of nationhood that are regularly demanded of the Tibetans, or that Tibetans regularly impose upon themselves; indeed, such tests are arguably red herrings, diverting attention away from the fact that the Western powers, which could have significantly swayed the issue in 1949, and could influence political life in Chinese Tibet now, simply did not and do not wish to, for their own reasons.

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