

4-1-2017

Jianglin Li. Tibet in Agony. Lhasa 1959. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press (translated by Susan Wilf), 2016.

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Recommended Citation

Grunfield, Tom Ph.D. (2017) "Jianglin Li. Tibet in Agony. Lhasa 1959. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press (translated by Susan Wilf), 2016.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 8 : No. 2 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol8/iss2/19>

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The history of Sino-Tibet relations goes back centuries and is fraught with ambiguity, providing ample historical evidence to satisfy both those who believe that Tibet has always been independent and those who support the notion that Tibet was an “integral” part of China. What is indisputable is that from 1913-1950, Tibet was a *defacto* independent state, a condition that ended with the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the subsequent consolidation of its borders to include Tibet, as determined by the late Q’ing Dynasty. The incorporation of Tibet into the larger Chinese state produced an entirely new and radically different chapter in Sino-Tibetan relations. Never before had Tibetans had such little say over their own fates, nor had Tibet been such an integrated part of China.

The advent of PRC rule led to revolutionary upheaval in Tibet as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched a series of campaigns to recast China and its people. When it came to Tibet, CCP policy played out very differently in Tibet’s central region (known to Tibetans as Ü-Tsang, now as the Tibet Autonomous Region) and the areas outside of central Tibet. Mao Zedong, China’s paramount leader, believed that Tibetan society and culture was so dissimilar to China’s that a radical upheaval would almost certainly result in widespread opposition to Chinese rule. In central Tibet, the CCP effectively managed to maintain the status quo. However, in the Tibetan-inhabited regions outside central Tibet, such revolutionary changes were initiated by local officials—against the instructions of the leaders in Beijing—causing, as Mao had predicted, a revolt against Chinese rule. This revolt, aided later by the US Central Intelligence Agency, spread until it reached the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, in 1959. In March of that year, residents of the city rose up to protect their spiritual and lay leader, the Dalai Lama, and to assert their opposition to the Chinese presence. On March 17 1959, the Dalai Lama, along with most of his court and government, fled to India, where he remains to this day. His departure led to the subsequent flight of tens of thousands of other Tibetans into exile.

Despite the historical significance of this event, its details have always been a puzzle and a source of considerable speculation to historians given the paucity of documentary sources. How did this massive protest start? What was the trigger; was it spontaneous? What was the role of Chinese officials, Tibetan officials, the Dalai Lama himself? Throughout the 1950s, the Dalai Lama and his government cooperated with the Chinese authorities in administering central Tibet. While the relationship was far from free of contention, it worked to some degree—until it didn’t. Presenting a detailed analysis and interpretation, Li explores the events leading up to the March 1959 uprising. She is particularly good at describing the differing interpretations of the various actors from both sides as well as pointing out the discrepancies in their respective accounts. An especially important highlight of her examination is an extensive discussion of two critical events that Li believes led to Lhasa protest and eventually to the Dalai Lama’s flight into exile: the decision regarding when the Dalai Lama was to attend a Chinese theatrical show and whether or not he would be allowed to bring his security detail. While she doesn’t come to a neat, full explanation of what happened, her account takes us a long way towards a clearer understanding of the factors that may have contributed to the incident.

Jianglin Li’s detailed, impressively researched endeavor based on Chinese documents, memoirs, and interviews with both Chinese and Tibetan participants is the first comprehensive history of these events. Indeed, most of her Chinese sources have not been used before. Her chapter on the situation in Qinghai province in the 1950s is particularly noteworthy for being the

first attempt to understand the related history of that province with its large Tibetan population. Published originally in 2010 in Hong Kong and Taiwan in Chinese, the English translation reads exceedingly well. Li visited the region multiple times from 2007-2012 to gather interviews and documentary source materials. Not surprisingly, Li believes she is no longer able to obtain a visa for China as a result of her research and probing of this still very delicate subject. The book is replete with vivid descriptions of people and their surroundings. For example, she describes protestors as “[looking] nervous. . .[or] scowling” (p. 100), and the physical environment “along the river valley [as] a drab olive-brown.” She describes the “men and their horses. . .[as] exhaling clouds of steam” despite a “brilliant sun” (p. 77). The descriptions are provided without footnotes, however, and while this level of detail is compelling because it allows for a more complete mental image, it remains unsettling. From where did she get these details? Perhaps this is literary license and, if so, then it is problematic in a history so dependent on primary sources.

Li’s depiction of Mao’s policies towards Tibet also leaves much unsaid. She portrays him as being keen on engaging in war with Tibet from the earliest days of the PRC, and every action is seen in this pejorative light. While there is no dispute that Mao’s ultimate goal was to fully integrate Tibet into the PRC, Li’s reductionist depictions of his policies as war-mongering and his motives as generally one dimensional mischaracterizes the situation. We know from a recent study based heavily on Chinese government documents (Goldstein, 2013) that Mao’s policies were far more complex and nuanced. As Goldstein posited, there was no doubt that any resistance would have been responded to fiercely, but “Mao believed that long-term stability and security in Tibet were best obtained not by forcing compliance but by gradually winning over Tibetans. This ambitious goal of transforming Tibetans’ attitudes was at the heart of Mao’s top-down ‘gradualist policy’” (p. 4). Goldstein also documents the arguments over these policies between officials on the ground and those in Beijing. This more complicated story is missing from Li’s study. While she could not have included Goldstein’s 2013 findings in her original 2010 manuscript, adding such findings to the 2016 English version of her work would have made it infinitely stronger.

All in all, Jianglin Li’s history of the March 1959 events in Tibet has broken important new ground, offered us considerable new insights, and produced an impressive body of research and analysis about a conflict and a history about which there has been much interest but little understanding. This will be the major reference for these events for some time to come.

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