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- 1 Melvyn Goldstein, the leading Western scholar of twentieth century Tibetan language and political history, has always been exceptionally productive, and his latest work is a 600-page study of just half a decade – the first five years of the incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic. Much of his work has been controversial, with nationalist critics among Tibetans often impugning his intentions instead of taking on the much more productive task of trying to match his prodigious scholarship and knowledge. The climate of debate has improved as more Tibetan exile scholars have emerged, and the current volume is likely to stimulate important and productive debate rather than calumny.
- 2 It also contains much that will be new, perhaps startling, even to readers familiar with this critical period in Tibetan and Chinese history, for the early 1950s were the only years when Chinese efforts to win Tibetan cooperation were – almost – stunningly successful. In 1954 the Communist generals stationed in Lhasa persuaded the Dalai Lama, then 19 years old, to travel to Beijing, where Mao lavished on him attention and praise that were earnestly reciprocated. Goldstein sympathetically chronicles the admiration that the young lama developed for China's leader at that time, something that the older Dalai Lama has often since discussed. Goldstein also shows the extraordinary lengths to which Party officials went to assuage Tibetan doubts, especially in terms of protocol. We learn, for example, that after their first meeting Mao walked the Dalai Lama to his car and opened the door for him. But we are also shown the astonishing importance attached by the Chinese to winning over the Dalai Lama: when the then Party Secretary of Sichuan, Li Jingquan, refused to greet the Dalai Lama (who was furious) on his arrival in Chengdu in 1955, the Party's Central Committee immediately had Premier Zhou Enlai fly to the city on his way back from the Bandung Conference to repair the damage. On his return to Lhasa, the Tibetan leader

gave his first public political speech (the date and venue are not given), showing a positive commitment to the new situation, but carefully placing the emphasis on equality and gradualism: “The Chinese nationality cadres living here came to help us because we couldn’t manage secular matters well. They didn’t come to be our lord.” Within five years, trust between the two sides had collapsed and has yet to be restored.

- 3 *The Calm before the Storm* hints at some of the factors that in the author’s view led to the breakdown of relations. Its first part, drawing on the pioneering work of Tsering Shakya, John Kenneth Knaus,¹ and the previous volume of Goldstein’s history, *The Demise of the Lamaist State*,² shows that, except for the coterie around the Panchen Lama, Tibetans were forced unwillingly into China’s embrace. The British and the Indians had avoided responsibility when faced with the Tibetans’ last-minute effort to get international support in 1950 (a phenomenon that has only gotten worse: in 1950 the British described their treaty-bound recognition of Tibet’s autonomous status as wrapped in “legal obscurity” (67), whereas in 2008 they said it was “anachronistic” and “outdated”). The United States secretly offered support to the Tibetans, but, as Tibetan officials noticed immediately, the American letters were ambiguous, always conditional on Indian support, and never signed or on headed paper. This led to the reluctant but inevitable decision of the Tibetan leadership to finally accept the 17 Point Agreement with China in 1951.
- 4 If the first part of the book describes the dysfunctional response of the international community to China’s absorption of Tibet, the second part reveals the intense internal conflicts within both the Tibetan and the Chinese elites in Lhasa. The traditional Tibetan government in Lhasa was allowed to remain in office after 1950, but its cabinet ministers were trying to accommodate and soften Chinese demands at the same time as its prime ministers routinely had shouting matches with their Chinese counterparts. The Chinese side was even more divided: the officials sent to Lhasa by Peng Dehuai’s Northwestern Military Region waged an astonishingly bitter internal campaign against the dominant Southwest faction, originally led by Deng Xiaoping, demanding that what is now the TAR be divided into two regions, one for their protégé the Panchen Lama and the other for the Dalai Lama, with land reform to be carried out immediately by the former. Mao finally overruled that proposal in 1954 and gave the Dalai Lama superior status (Goldstein includes the internal report on that controversy in full, 436-50), but the dispute shows the willingness of the Tibetan officials around the young Panchen Lama to wreck any semblance of Tibetan unity. Mao’s decision to delay rapid change in Tibet in large part reflected practical military constraints: the Chinese troops faced enormous difficulties in trying to obtain sufficient food for their troops without triggering hyper-inflation in the newly occupied areas.
- 5 The last part of the book focuses on the efforts of the traditional Tibetan government to introduce social reforms in 1953 and the honeymoon visit to Beijing a year later. Hints as to why the efforts to achieve workable compromise were later to fail point mainly to the Tibetan leaders who “had no common voice and no clear strategy for dealing with their new status as part of the People’s Republic of China” (544), to a “fake” nationalist movement called “The People’s Association” that petitioned the Chinese to withdraw their troops, and to the shadowy anti-Chinese machinations of exile Tibetan aristocrats in India and America. Goldstein, in his most contentious account, suggests that letters sent by the three elder brothers of the Dalai Lama to the Americans and others could be read as falsely insinuating that they had the personal support of the Dalai Lama for

their efforts to organise anti-Chinese resistance. If so, it is a tactic that is still current in exile politics, including among Westerners. The author's full view of the causes of conflict will not become clear until his next volume, which can be expected to include the disastrous Chinese policies imposed in the eastern Tibetan areas, but one can sense unease at the rough methods used by Tibetans opposed to Chinese rule, perhaps not least because they failed.

- 6 The book includes numerous primary materials drawn from Chinese official sources, unique contemporary documents, and important oral histories, often quoted in full, making this collection of great value for the study of this era (despite the author's decision to provide most Tibetan words only as a rough approximation of their sound instead of the much more important transliteration). However, this work will not help those seeking to settle ethical disputes about China's role in Tibet – it is a critical account of decision-making by elites, not a study of ordinary Tibetans' experience of their uninvited rulers, and it does not include the eastern Tibetan areas. Its narrative framework centres on a pragmatist question: Could the Tibetans have acted more efficiently to avoid conflict and achieve a better compromise? That question presents itself as self-evident, because in those years Mao was astonishingly moderate in his policy instructions on Tibet, and because his machine was extraordinarily efficient. There is a kind of Weberian teleology to this perspective, in which the Tibetans, with their aristocrats and monasteries, disputes and conspiracies, necessarily appear as wanting. But if framed within, say, a comparison to the Qing attempts to incorporate Tibet 50 years earlier, or the British efforts in India in the nineteenth century, or the Soviets in Central Asia, a very different narrative would emerge in which the internal divisions among the Tibetans, and even their dissimulations and mimetic pleadings to foreign powers, might appear as effects of the power relations at the time rather than as cultural failings.
- 7 Incidental moments in the Chinese documents – such as General Zhang Jingwu's public mockery of Tibetans who suggested it was unsafe for the Dalai Lama to travel by plane to Beijing (482), or Mao's dreams of exploiting Tibet for minerals (510-11) – suggest other interpretations that later scholars will hopefully explore using these rich materials. Goldstein's fascinating work does not stray into such areas, but it leaves one to wonder just when scholars in China will finally start using the tools of post-colonial critique to understand their Tibetan project – and, for that matter, to ask why, as Peter Hansen pointed out six years ago,³ leading post-colonialist scholars in India and the West seem so reluctant to apply their own methods to Beijing's troubled efforts to incorporate Tibet into China.

NOTES

1. See Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*, London, Pimlico, 1999; John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival*, New York, Public Affairs, 1999.

2. Melvyn C. Goldstein, with the help of Gelek Rimpoche, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989.
3. Peter Hansen, "Why is there no subaltern studies for Tibet?", *Tibet Journal* No. 28:4 (Winter 2003), pp. 7-22.