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Late in 1968, as Cultural Revolution-era factional struggle was winding down in many parts of China, in a rural Tibetan district not far from Lhasa, a remarkable gathering took place. At a meeting of the Revolutionary Rebel mass organization (Tib., Gyenlo), a young nun possessed by a powerful Tibetan deity proclaimed her support and protection for the leftists. “It was the gods from the old society integrated normatively into the new society under the imprimatur of Gyenlo” (p. 88). By the time events reached their crescendo in June 1969, the nun’s supporters had killed fifty-four people and hacked the limbs off twenty others, prompting authorities to label it a “counterrevolutionary rebellion.”

In bringing this story to light, Melvyn C. Goldstein, among the most proficient and prolific Western scholars of modern Tibet, and two Tibetologists from China, Ben Jiao and Tanzen Lhundrup, have not only written the first in-depth account of the so-called Nyemo Incident, but perhaps the most detailed examination of the Cultural Revolution in an ethnic minority region to date. Employing previously unavailable sources, in particular a collection of internal Communist Party investigations and numerous interviews conducted as part of Goldstein’s Tibet Oral History Archive, the story the authors tell is both riveting and rich in detail about political and economic life in rural Tibet during the 1960s. The end result is a microhistory with implications well beyond its locality, and an intimate tale full of individual agency and historical contingency rarely seen in studies of rural China, much less Tibet.

Starting with the formation of the two revolutionary mass organizations in Lhasa, the authors narrate the process by which the ambitions of the rebel faction to extend its power to the countryside came to intersect with the fortunes of a previously inconsequential nun, Trinley Chödrön. Initially, “Gyenlo adopted a pragmatic strategy that played to the widespread anger rural Tibetans felt over the excessive ‘sales grain’ obligation and their fears of the impending collectivization of agriculture” (p. 162). However, as Trinley Chödrön came to claim possession by a deity associated with King Gesar, the legendary protector warrior of
Tibetan Buddhism, Gyenlo sought to co-opt her growing charismatic authority. Tibetan villagers "now had a new and emotionally powerful motivation in addition to Gyenlo's more materialistic issues, such as taxes and land tenure," namely, the restoration of organized religion (p. 100). The stage was thus set for June 1969.

The authors' central argument, that "[t]he Nyemo disturbance was not a spontaneous Tibetan nationalist uprising against the Chinese 'oppressor,' nor was it a revolt aimed at creating an independent Tibet" (p. 162), is ably defended. However, their counterargument, that rural Tibetans were responding to the poor implementation of the 1959 "Democratic Reforms," rather than the reforms themselves, is not wholly convincing (pp. 60–64). After all, given that it was only with the 1959 flight of the Dalai Lama and the collapse of his government that Beijing directly governed places such as Nyemo, might not any protests against the reforms implicitly be considered resistance to Chinese rule? Moreover, despite a concerted attempt to tread a more nuanced path, at times, the authors' conceptual framework seems overly fixated on modern conceptions of states and sovereignties. This is most sharply seen in the person of the nun herself. They note, "Trinley Chödron, therefore, appears to have been perfectly comfortable simultaneously going into the medium's trances, praising Mao Zedong, and being a member of the Gyenlo revolutionary faction" (p. 83). As explanation, the authors suggest that in the discursive environment of the Cultural Revolution, opposing the local party apparatus while supporting Chairman Mao was a revolutionary stance. True enough. However, this might also be an example of actors caught between uneven temporalities. For instance, that the nun invoked Chairman Mao as an emanation of Manjushri is less difficult to reconcile if one recalls that Tibetan Buddhists have long associated rulers in Beijing with this very bodhisattva. That she is said to have proclaimed that Mao was in charge of the material world and she the spiritual, perhaps "reveals a desire to emphasize that her goals and actions were to be seen as falling within the Chinese state rather than within a separatist polity" (p. 105), or it might simply reflect a less state-centered epistemological orientation.

Scholars of modern China will note the authors' failure to engage the larger literature on the Cultural Revolution, to which this book has much to offer and vice versa. Nonetheless, by eschewing simplistic nationalist and materialist arguments and instead arguing that "there were multiple levels and multiple actors, Tibetan and Chinese, with different motives, using and manipulating one another for different end goals" (p. 170), a vital contribution has been rendered to the literature on both modern Tibet and the Cultural Revolution—two fields that have tended to emphasize generalized social groups (ethnic, class, occupational) to the detriment of the local and the individual.

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