
Reviews

Tibet in Agony: Lhasa 1959, by Jianglin Li, translated by Susan Wilf. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. vii+410 pp. US\$29.95/£22.95/€27.00 (cloth).

Tibet in Agony consists of 21 chapters and an epilogue, and covers not only the events of 1959 but also some of the events that preceded it, for example, the Tibetan uprising in Sichuan in 1956 and the Dalai Lama's trip to India the same year. This new study utilizes a large number of Chinese primary and secondary sources, as well as Tibetan written and oral history accounts.

However, while scholars will welcome these new materials, the book's overall analysis of the period, particularly its analysis of the Chinese side, is incorrect. *Tibet in Agony* argues that Mao Zedong intended to use the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to forcibly transform Tibet from early on, but could not do so because conditions were not ready until 1959. For example,

This book will document and show that Mao had active plans from very early on to *impose* his policies throughout Tibet despite the promises of the "Seventeen-Point Agreement," *even though he was aware that this would entail bloodshed*. By the mid-1950s, he had directed his subordinates in Tibet to begin laying the groundwork for this goal, and by mid-1958, he was signaling his clear readiness to get started in earnest. His explicitly stated view was that he welcomed Tibetan unrest and rebellion—and even hoped that it would increase in scale—as it would provide him with an opportunity to "pacify" the region with his armies. (xi, emphasis added)

Also: "PLA preparations for war in Tibet had begun in 1956 and reached full swing by the start of 1959" (110); "Mao's readiness for war in Tibet had developed over the latter half of the 1950s. As early as 1955, he directed the CCP Tibet Work Committee to prepare Tibet for reforms" (165); and "By early 1959, the conditions were finally ripe for completing the Chinese takeover of Tibet" (165).

However, that was not Mao's and the Party's policy in Tibet. Chinese government documents reveal clearly that Mao was not simply waiting to use the PLA

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to impose socialist land and class reforms. Rather, Mao consistently employed a moderate Tibet strategy that gave priority to a gradualist policy: that is, a policy that allowed the traditional government of the Dalai Lama to continue to administer Tibet internally and to maintain the feudal-like manorial estate system. Mao was hoping to create positive conditions in which the Dalai Lama and Tibetans would be persuaded to genuinely accept being part of China and accept major socioeconomic reforms. Mao believed that this trajectory would provide China with far greater long-term strategic security in Tibet than simply using the PLA to forcibly implement change, although this would take time.

Moreover, he faced serious opposition in Tibet from Fan Ming, a senior Party cadre who argued that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan elite would never change and accept reforms, so force should be used to implement reforms quickly. When Fan became acting head of the Communist Party in Tibet during the second half of 1956, he used that opportunity to make preparations to start reforms in Tibet in 1957. Rather than welcome this, Mao disagreed strongly and intervened decisively to stop Fan Ming's plans. Starting in September 1956, Mao and the Party Central Committee took reforms off the table for the near future, while also reducing the number of Han troops and cadres in Tibet by thousands.

Mao's Tibet policy was nuanced and always had a second dimension—the use of the PLA as a last resort if the gradualist approach failed. If Tibetans revolted, Mao asserted clearly that he would use the PLA to destroy the rebels, wipe out the traditional manorial estate system, end the Tibetan “local” government, and quickly implement forced reforms and create a socialist Tibet under direct control by the CCP. Moreover, Mao rationalized that such a failure was really an alternative path to success since it would enable the CCP to end the traditional system and “liberate” the Tibetan masses much sooner than under the gradualist policy. Mao therefore presented his Tibet policy as a no-lose strategy for China.

The documentary evidence in support of this includes an important cable that was sent by the Central Committee to Lhasa on May 14, 1957. It deserves to be quoted at length:

In today's Tibet, the separatists are still quite popular, and can still stir up troubles on the issue of reforms. This is not accidental. Rather it has its historical and social causes. Although Tibet became an inseparable part of China a long time ago, *it has maintained an independent or semi-independent status [duli huozhe ban duli] in its relations with the motherland. . . .*

The fact that it had achieved long-term independence and semi-independence historically distinguishes Tibet from other minority nationality areas in China. First, this is reflected in Tibetans' centrifugal tendencies away from China and their distrust of Han Chinese. Not only does this exist widely among the upper classes, but also has a considerable influence among the masses. When the imperialist forces

penetrated into Tibet toward the end of the 19th century, they instigated distrust between Tibet and China, nurtured pro-independence forces and created an impetus for separation, all of which exacerbated the Tibetans' centrifugal tendencies away from the motherland. . . . Historically, the tendency to separation among Tibetans has to do with the oppression of a minority nationality, but generally speaking, the tendency more importantly reflects the independent or semi-independent status of Tibet that existed for a long period of time in history. . . .

Serfdom and feudal rule in Tibet have remained intact until now. The upper classes still retain the ethnic banner and the religious banner, and they can still use these banners to influence the masses in order to maintain the old system and rule that is harmful for the development of the Tibetans. This is the reality we are facing. Besides the issues with the upper classes, we also have the issues of the masses. When we do work in Tibet, this reality is the first thing we need to consider. The Tibetans will not make progress without social reforms, but due to the reality we are faced with, we must carry out peaceful reforms and apply this policy to our decisions regarding the timing, sequential steps, and methods of reforms. The democratic reforms that we advocate, no matter how peaceful they are, will inevitably touch the foundation of feudalism because the main goal is to transform the system of Tibetan serfdom into a people's democratic Tibet. . . .

If we use force, it very likely will create a situation in which not only the majority of the elite will oppose us but also the separatists' conspiracies will succeed, the leftists will be isolated, and a considerable portion of the working class under the elite's influence and control will follow them to oppose us. If this situation occurs, either it will force us to stop reforms and place us in a passive political situation, or we will need to start a war to mobilize the masses and implement reforms. This is the last resort in nationality areas. . . .

If imperialists and traitors start an armed rebellion, that is something different; and then we will have to use armed forces to suppress the rebellion. The Central Committee has made repeated instructions about this.

Having considered the historical and current situations in Tibet, the Central Committee has decided that we will not carry out democratic reforms in Tibet for at least six years, or even longer. Whether or not to carry out reforms after six years pass will be decided by us based on the actual situation at that time.¹

Mao and the Politburo were still pursuing the gradualist policy in late 1958 and even in early January 1959, albeit with the caveat that if the nascent insurgency in-

1. "Central Committee's Instructions on the 'Tibet Work Committee's Decisions on Our Future Work in Tibet,'" dated May 14, 1957. From my private collection. For a discussion of Mao's total reversal of Fan Ming's actions, see Melvyn Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, Volume Three: 1955-57* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), chap. 10, 306-83.

creased to a full-scale revolt, the PLA would have to be used. On October 11, 1958, for example, the Central Committee sent a cable to the Party's Tibet Work Committee (TWC, *Xizang gong wei*) in Lhasa that said,

1. According to the situation in Tibet and in the Chamdo area, there exists the possibility for the local rebellions to develop into a full-scale rebellion. There is also the possibility that for quite a long period to come, there will only be local rebellions rather than a full-scale rebellion. We should be cognizant of both of these as possibilities. But no matter which direction the situation is going to develop, we should be fully prepared both politically and militarily. Thus, when the local rebellions develop into full-scale rebellions, we can firmly put down the rebellions and thoroughly liberate the working people in Tibet. . . .

2. However, under the present circumstances where rebellions are only occurring in certain local areas, . . . when it comes to the issue of using our armed forces to put down the rebels' armed forces, you should act according to the Central Committee's instructions of September 10 [1957] that stated, "Attack the armed rebels only when they are directly threatening our troops and the main transportation routes, and when we are sure that we can win." (cable dated October 11, 1958, from my private collection)

And on January 6, 1959, a cable from the Central Committee to the TWC on the "future work in Tibet" declared:

As to our work now and in the future, in the May 14, 1957 instructions of the Central Committee [partly quoted above] . . . the Central Committee pointed out five things that can be done and four things that cannot be done. *This instruction still applies to the present situation in Tibet* [emphasis added]. The TWC can plan its work and make specific arrangements according to this instruction and the Central Committee's . . . instructions of October 11, 1958 [cited above]. It is not necessary to make a new plan and design a new policy for our work in the next four years. (January 6, 1959, from my private collection)

However, by mid-January 1959, Mao and the Central Committee had concluded that the Tibetan insurgency had crossed the threshold from local uprisings to a full-scale revolt, and the Tibet policy began to shift toward the "last resort," that is, the military component. Consequently, Mao now thought that it was likely that the PLA would have to be used to put down the rebellion, albeit not for some years to come. This can be seen in a comment Mao made on January 22, 1959:

The next few years in Tibet will be a period when our enemy and we both will try to win over the masses, and both will try to reinforce their military power. After a few years, three or four years, five or six years, even seven or eight years, *a big battle*

will definitely come, so we can solve the problems thoroughly. In the past, the rulers of Tibet only had a weak army. Now they have an armed force of 10,000 with high morale. This is a serious problem for us. However, it does not mean it is a bad thing. On the contrary, it is good, since there is a possibility for us to solve the problem militarily. However we must do the following: 1) we must win over the masses during the next few years, and isolate the reactionaries; 2) train our army to be strong fighters. These two things should be done during our struggle with the armed rebels.²

Two days later, the Central Committee instructed the TWC: “the armed uprisings have expanded to the next level. . . . The uprisings will continue to expand unless we have a one-time decisive battle. Then and only then will the problem be resolved thoroughly.”³ Consequently, it is clear that Mao and the Central Committee pursued the gradualist policy until mid-January 1959, when the growing Khamba revolt in Tibet led them to shift to their backup strategy of using the PLA to put down the revolt and forcibly implement land reforms.

There are also a number of small errors in the book that space does not permit mentioning, but there is one major mistake that requires clarification. The book states that, “on August 18 [1958], Deng Xiaoping . . . instructed Commander Zhang Guohua and Vice-Commander Deng Shaodong to consolidate their positions and increase vigilance, while allowing the ‘rebellion’ to build up a head of steam. The idea was that the bigger the uprising, the harder the Party could crack down, and the more ‘thorough’ the ‘reforms’ could be” (66, cited from *Jiefang Xizangshi* [History of liberated Tibet], 346). However, *Jiefang Xizangshi* (346) actually says something very different: “on August 18th in Beijing, when Deng Xiaoping . . . talked with Zhang Guohua . . . and Deng Shaodong, . . . Deng gave an important instruction on the Tibet situation and the guidelines that should be implemented. Deng Xiaoping said: You should strengthen your position and maintain transportation; if [the rebels] threaten the transportation [network] or threaten you, when you are sure [you are able to defeat them], you should attack them, yet when you are not sure, you should not attack them; PLA troops should not start the attack without careful consideration; you should not dispatch troops to start the attack without careful consideration.” In other words, Deng at this time was continuing Mao’s policy of using the PLA in a limited and defensive capacity.

In conclusion, while this book cites many documents that are not available to most scholars and adds new details on the events surrounding the Tibetan uprising, because of its inaccurate analysis of Chinese policy in Tibet and a less than critical examination of the Tibetan side, it sets back rather than enhances our un-

2. *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Mao Zedong’s manuscripts since the foundation of the PRC], vol. 8 (Central Party Literature Press, 1993), 10 (emphasis added).

3. *Zhonggong Xizang Dangshi Dashiji* (1949–66), 1990, entry for January 24, 1958, p. 83.

derstanding of the complex and confusing history of Sino-Tibetan relations in the 1950s, and thus it should be used with care.

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Learning to Be Tibetan: The Construction of Ethnic Identity at Minzu University of China, by Miaoyan Yang. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. ix+275 pp. US\$110.00/£75.00 (cloth).

Learning to Be Tibetan presents a nuanced, refreshingly forthright description of the ways of being Tibetan within the Minzu University of China (MUC). Miaoyan Yang observes that the ethnic identification of Tibetan students is meaningful when they strategically negotiate with the Han-Chinese-dominant narratives. Four different patterns of ethnic identification are described. The first is associated with students in Tibetan studies who have received bilingual education in Chinese and Tibetan prior to their admission to MUC (*min kao min* students). Yang asserts that for them, “being Tibetan means assuming an ethnic mission of promoting Tibetan language and culture” (233). For the *min kao min* students in other majors, Yang maintains that “being Tibetan embodies having a different physical appearance, wearing different clothing, engaging in different religious practices, holding cultural beliefs and generally under-achieving academically in Han-dominant settings” (233). For “inland Tibetan school graduates” (Tibetans educated in schools outside the Tibetan region, in the Han Chinese “heartland”), “being Tibetan means having a reflective awareness of their cultural and language loss due to their dislocated schooling and a determination to make up for the past by innovatively initiating, organizing or participating in Tibetan cultural programs” (234). Finally, for students who have received mainstream Han Chinese education while living in their native area (*min kao han* students), Yang claims that “being Tibetan is simply a symbolic identity that they sometimes utilize to gain preferential treatments” (234).

Ethnic identity is here understood to exist in a dialectical process between internal identification and external categorization, in which construction of ethnic identity can involve negotiation, resistance, and rejection. Some of the students may internalize the ethnic identity assigned by the state, while others may resist and assert other identities instead. At the same time, Yang recognizes that the state plays a “determining role” in ethnic identification by shaping ethnic boundaries and through the state’s ethnic policies. Inspired by Richard Jenkins’s *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations* (1997), as well as Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann’s *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (2007), Yang seeks to include both the nominal and the virtual and the assigned and the asserted