

Happy Hearts for the Motherland?

A Review of Melvin Goldstein's book *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997

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Seventeen years after its publication, Melvin Goldstein's book *The Snow Lion and the Dragon* has lost little of its influence and appeal. Concise, well-written, and ostensibly "balanced" (page x) in its assessment of Tibet-China relations from the seventh to the end of the twentieth century, it remains part of many graduate and undergraduate reading lists on Tibet at Western universities. It has also been widely reviewed, and met with almost universal acclaim for its "fair" and "even-handed" approach (see e.g. Grunfeld 1998; Harrell 1998; Seymour 1998; Upton 1998; Karmel 1998-99; Garratt 1999; Mencin 1999;). Especially on a topic as fraught and emotionally charged as the Tibet issue, everybody agreed, the book's balanced approach seems to constitute a rare and important contribution.

So why yet another review, seventeen years later? There are two important reasons. Firstly, if to honor a book is to seriously and critically engage with it, then this book has not yet received its due respect, at least in print. While some reviews do go beyond the standard summary-and-praise (esp. Seymour 1998; Upton 1998), in all cases space-limits prevent a deeper discussion. Yet, I argue that this book is powerful and problematic enough to deserve more than that, which leads me to the second reason: precisely because of its continuing influence, it is important not to let some of its more tenuous assumptions pass unchallenged. Histories, and Goldstein's book is no exception here, are never simply factual accounts of past events, but representations (White 1978, 1987). Representations, in turn, are always made from a certain standpoint (e.g. Guha 1997), and always have ethical and political consequences (e.g. Bhabha 1994). This includes, most pertinently, the so-called "objective" position of science or the scholar, which has long been exposed as the product of culture, politics, and a whole range of other unacknowledged biases and interests (e.g. Fleck 1979; Latour & Woolgar 1979; Latour 1988). To uncritically assume such a position in the attempt to write a fair and balanced account of Tibet, as Goldstein does, is problematic because it defeats the purpose: it creates the illusion of neutrality while unwittingly taking sides.

As I will argue in the following, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon* systematically favors a Chinese point of view, despite the best intents of its author (which I do not question) and the reviewers' claims to the contrary. It is important to add immediately that this, in itself, is not the object of my critique: it would be perfectly legitimate (and, indeed, important) to write a book sympathetically explaining China's understanding of the problem. But this is not what Goldstein has in mind: rather, he aims to assess the Tibet question as a neutral observer in order to provide an objective analysis and, based on that, a feasible solution. Thus, we end up with a "fair and balanced" account that inadvertently adopts a Chinese bias in the over-all analysis of Tibetan political history and the Tibet issue – a combination that does not bode well for the Tibetans, let alone critical scholarship. To explain my argument, let me begin with a brief summary of the book.

The Snow Lion and the Dragon offers a tragic narrative of Tibeto-Chinese political relations from the seventh-century Tibetan empire under Songtsen Gampo onwards up to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's politics in exile at the end of the twentieth century. Two themes are woven through Goldstein's well-written and concise historical sketch. The first and obvious one is Tibet's political status in relation to China and to a lesser extent also the Mongol empire. From the narrative's starting point – Tibet's complete independence under Songtsen Gampo – the story focuses predominantly on Tibetan (and only to a lesser degree on Chinese) politics, telling a tale of decline and chaos, sectarian strife, bad politics and irrational decisions, with rare occurrences of internal unity and de facto independence. In the 30 pages devoted to the roughly 1300 years between Songtsen Gampo and the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, Tibet is portrayed as riddled with internal power struggles and sectarian violence, interrupted only by the unification of Tibet by the Fifth Dalai Lama, which also coincided with a spell of independence from outside powers. The general pattern emerging in Goldstein's history, however, is characterized by Tibet's all-too-ready willingness to call on outside forces – whether Mongol tribes, the Chinese empire, Russia or the CIA – to solve its internal problems or intervene on behalf of one rival power or the other. Goldstein interprets this at least partly in terms of the priest-patron relationship (*mchod yon*) that Sakya Pandita established with the Mongols in 1247 CE, which divided responsibilities between religious (the Tibetans') and temporal matters, i.e. the political (the Mongols and others).

All this highlights the second theme emerging from Goldstein's narrative, which is the Tibetans' political incompetence, manifested in "irrational" decisions, infighting, and many missed opportunities. Thus, Goldstein writes about the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's failed attempt at modernization during the brief spell of de facto independence after 1912: "Overnight, Tibet lost its best chance to create

a modern polity capable of coordinating international support for its independent status and defending its territory.” (35) For all the sympathy that Goldstein clearly has for the Tibetan cause, the blame is laid squarely on the Tibetans. After “Chinese troops moved peacefully into Lhasa in the fall of 1951” (51), and despite Mao Zedong pursuing, “contrary to popular belief in the West, ... a policy of moderation in Tibet,” (52) the Tibetans continued to annoy them with their political unreliability and incompetence, but above all with their continuous efforts to involve outside powers (the CIA, the international community) in their struggle for independence. No wonder, then, that in Goldstein’s narrative the initial Chinese moderation gave way to more hard-line attempts to modernize and govern Tibet. “Terrible times for Tibetans in Tibet” (60) followed, but Goldstein here conveniently skips the Cultural Revolution and jumps ahead to the post-Mao era, which saw “a return to Mao’s more ethnically sensitive strategy of the 1950s.” (65) At this point in the narrative, the Tibetans in exile with the Fourteenth Dalai Lama at their helm take over political agency from the Tibetans in Tibet (who didn’t have much left), continuing to frustrate Chinese attempts at “peacefully” settling the Tibet question. With the Tibetans in exile, also the role of the international community (especially Tibet sympathizers) became more important, or at least more visible, in the shape of “bad friends” who professed rhetorical support but did not follow this up with concrete political actions.

Given that it is hard to discount the validity of Goldstein’s historical data, what should one make of this account? Before analyzing the narrative framework and some of its key concepts in this regard, a closer look at the sources used in this book is in order. The focus of the book is clearly on the Tibetan side of the problem, and this is reflected in the sources. While the excellent, though necessarily selective rendering of the history of Tibet up to the middle of the twentieth century seems to rely on Goldstein’s expert grasp of both old Tibetan texts as well as newer Western scholarship (although the brevity and intent of the account here precludes a large number of footnotes concerning the exact sources), the more recent material is less clear. In the preface (xii), Goldstein mentions his own extensive ethnographic research in the TAR as one of his main sources, which besides the obvious advantages of such research also has the disadvantage of leaving the reader in the dark about who said what in which context, since due to the sensitive nature of the information, virtually all his informants requested anonymity. The obvious exception is the Dalai Lama, whom Goldstein interviewed several times. Other important sources mentioned by Goldstein are the Chinese media and materials issued by the Tibetans in exile or their supporters in the West. Unfortunately, Goldstein only used English translations of the former, which limits the usefulness of an already highly censored source. It is no surprise, then, that the narrative is at its most critical where it is based on a

relative wealth of Tibetan source-material (even if it is from anonymous informants), while it seems to remain satisfied with censored media reports when it comes to Chinese politics. It is easy to portray the Tibetans as politically incompetent in relation to their Chinese counterparts when rich sources inevitably reveal problematic decisions, “irrational” intentions, or chaotic political conditions on the one side, but heavily censored and translated material successfully blends out similar conditions on the other (e.g. MacFarquhar 2011 [1994]). As far as the Tibetan exile is concerned, the book offers some interesting insights into the political context there, but ultimately displays a similar lack of nuance as with Chinese politics. Given the relatively easy accessibility of information on Tibetan exile politics, and the book’s subtitle claiming to deal with “China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama”, this is rather odd.

I have just argued that the Chinese bias of this book can be partly explained by questioning Goldstein’s sources and his focus of analysis, the two being connected. However, I also argue that the analytic framework itself, through which the data material is organized and interpreted, systematically favors one side over the other. This framework and some of the book’s key terms are laid out in the preface. There, Goldstein frames the Tibet question as “a conflict about nationalism... [about] whether political units should directly parallel ethnic units. This question pits the right of a ‘people’ (Tibetans) to self-determination and independence against the right of a multiethnic state (the People’s Republic of China) to maintain what it sees as its historic territorial integrity.” (ix) Here, in the second sentence of the book, the main dichotomy structuring Goldstein’s argument is already outlined: a “people” (note the quotation marks) with all its connotations of culture and traditions, versus a state (no quotation marks here), which is the domain of politics. If the Tibet question is a “conflict of nationalism” – that is, if it is not a matter of human rights violations but of the governance of people and territory – then the question arises what people and what territory the author speaks about here, and what he means by Tibetan nationalism.

Goldstein defines “three Tibets”: 1) “ethnographic Tibet”, that is, all areas traditionally populated by ethnic Tibetans including Kham and Amdo; 2) “political Tibet”, that is, “the polity ruled by the Dalai Lamas in modern times” (xi); and 3) “Greater Tibet”, that is, the Tibet in the discourse of the Tibetan exile government, which extends political Tibet over the whole area of ethnographic Tibet. The latter is the Tibet of Tibetan nationalism, while the second – “political Tibet” – is the Tibet in Goldstein’s usage. These three Tibets are not only located in a geographical but also a chronological register. Ethnographic Tibet is the oldest, and does not depend on any political structure or community. Political Tibet, in Goldstein’s account, dates back to 1642, when the Fifth Dalai Lama unified a certain portion of ethnographical Tibet under his rule. Greater Tibet, finally, is

portrayed as the recent invention of Tibetans in exile, among who there are large numbers of Khampa and Amdowa whose interests the Central Tibetan Administration cannot ignore.

Goldstein further divides the conflict over Tibetan territory into one over its control and one over its representation. As he laments in the last chapter (The Future), it is the Chinese who wield the former and the exile-Tibetans who exert the latter. Thus, the dichotomy is extended: Tibetans are a “people”, evoking notions of culture and tradition, which are suitably located in “ethnographic Tibet”, and who control the representations of Tibet on the international level. China, on the other hand, is a state – the classical domain of politics – and controls the Tibetan political territory itself. Throughout, Goldstein thus separates culture from politics, associating the Tibetans with the former and China with the latter. From a contemporary anthropological standpoint, this assumption – shared by crude Marxism and Orientalism – of an apolitical culture is as problematic as that of purely rational politics. What makes it interesting and no doubt so compelling to Goldstein, however, is that it seems to reflect Sakya Pandita’s patron-priest arrangement, which is based on a similar distinction. Although Goldstein does not speak much about religion in this book, his concept of culture as the opposite of politics neatly falls on the side of the priest, that is, the Tibetans. By framing the Tibet question as the two separate struggles just mentioned – one over the territory itself, and one over representations of Tibet – he justifies the conceptual division with the real situation as he sees it. Indeed, it is hard to deny that the Chinese are controlling political Tibet, while in the international arena, the exile-Tibetans have long controlled the representations of Tibet as an occupied country and a human rights issue.

What are the implications of this dichotomy for Goldstein’s narrative and, in the last chapter, for his suggestions for a possible solution? The first problem is that “culture” in Goldstein’s sense can never acquire the same level of “hard reality”, and hence importance, as politics. Put in another way, the distinction between culture and politics usually ends up in the classic modernist distinction between irrational beliefs or feelings (culture), and rational decision-making based on utilitarian cost-benefit analyses (politics). This book is no exception, as following quotes demonstrate: “But such is the nature of the Tibet question. Even when both sides have a common interest in preventing a disaster, *emotion* and issues of “face” – political pride – easily derail them and *marginalize reason*. The Dalai Lama knows intellectually that he needs more friends and supporters in Beijing, not Washington or New York City, but he finds it *emotionally difficult* to take appropriate actions to achieve that end.” (110, emphases added) In the same breath as emotion here is blamed quite generally for derailing reason, it is associated with the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans. The word “ethnic” – always used for the Tibetans, never for the Han – is frequently coupled with “feelings”,

“emotions”, “hatred”, “sensibilities” and so on. The reader is informed that US support has “helped skyrocket the Dalai Lama’s renown in the West and have made the Tibetans both in exile and in Tibet *feel good*, but have not stopped the situation on the ground from worsening” (122, emphasis added). Similarly, the 1987/88 riots were caused, according to Goldstein, not by “poor material conditions” for which China might be responsible, but by the Tibetans’ “ethnic hearts” (86), unable to forget past injustices despite a materially improved present.

Despite Goldstein’s disapproval of such irrationalities, it is exactly the Tibetans’ alleged ethnic hearts that he suggests should be appeased by the Chinese. “Political freedom in the Western sense is secondary to preserving ethnic, demographic, and cultural homogeneity.” (128) Leaving aside the Orientalism shining through this declaration of what he presumes is important for the Tibetans, at the end of the book this almost makes sense. After all the ample documentation of Tibetans’ political incapacity and a good dose of alarm about the possible annihilation of Tibetan culture, all framed in a modernist version of the priest-patron arrangement, why not leave politics to the rational experts (the Chinese) and make the quaint, irrational Tibetans happy by allowing them to preserve their culture? Goldstein calls this “realpolitik”, as if to underline that politics is more real than his vision of culture. Indeed, a realpolitik approach is not only bound to define politics as the sum total of policies and favor them above other domains of life, such as questions of identity, beliefs or feelings; it is also bound to favor those in power by unquestioningly accepting the status quo as the reality that needs to be made the basis for all subsequent policies. While there is no doubt that political realities cannot be ignored, there is a danger that those in power are undeservedly portrayed as benevolent, and lesser evils (as compared to preceding bigger ones) are interpreted as progress rather than as evils.

If only the solution were as simple as Goldstein suggests. Politics in Tibet have never been separate from religion, and this is reflected even today in the struggle for a Greater Tibet, in which politics and ethnicity, culture, and religion would coincide. Goldstein’s suggestion, on the other hand, neatly combines Western Enlightenment ideals with a Chinese interest in keeping politics apart from ethnicity. No doubt, this position is more than understandable in a multi-ethnic state, especially one ruled by a single, autocratic party. As long as politics is firmly under the control of Beijing, who cares if the citizens follow depoliticized forms of culture, religion, or whatever other “irrational” things might keep them happy? Unfortunately, as just mentioned, such a separation exists only in the realm of party propaganda and scholarly imagination, and the resulting disconnect with social reality sadly manifests in cultural and religious oppression on the one hand, and the unfeasibility of suggestions such as Goldstein’s on the other. It even leads to seemingly plausible arguments against international pressure

on China concerning human rights in Tibet, for the supposed greater good of Tibet's cause in the long run. This not only discounts the number of political prisoners released due to such pressure in Tibet and elsewhere, or the fact that the Tibet question receives any attention at all today, but it also optimistically assumes that without such outside interference, China would treat the Tibetans better. A brief glance at the treatment meted out to minorities by autocratic governments throughout world history, even in the complete absence of any outside pressure, should suffice to quickly dispel such optimism. Indeed, a more realistic appraisal of the situation might show that exile Tibetan politics, together with the international support it was able to garner, was successful in so far as it managed to keep Tibetan nationalism as well as its cultural *and* political aspirations alive.

Of course, long-standing conflicts such as the Tibet issue tend to be too complex to be summarized and solved conclusively in one short book. Yet, one needs to start somewhere, and the flaws in Goldstein's attempt do not diminish its overall importance. Thus, the purpose of this review was not to dismiss this book for its ultimate failure to achieve its goal, or – to stress the point again – criticize it for its Chinese bias. Rather, this review hoped to dislocate this book from its authoritative position of scholarly objectivity, and contextualize it in a complex world where culture and religion cannot be neatly separated from politics; where rationality and irrationality cannot be assigned along ethnic lines; and where objectivity has long been relegated to the realm of myth. As scholars from Michel Foucault (e.g. 1977, 1978, 2007) to Homi Bhabha (1994) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) remind us, in such a world, theoretical work and analytical concepts inevitably have political and ethical consequences. Goldstein's book is a good illustration of how otherwise undisputed scholarly brilliance can be seriously compromised – and the political efforts of a whole nation (the Tibetans) discredited – if this is ignored or even denied. It is for this reason, then, that *The Snow Lion and the Dragon* still needs to be read seriously, not only for its historical content but also, much more importantly, for the lessons it holds about the importance of a reflective, postcolonial analysis. It is the latter, rather than the facile assumption of scientific objectivity, that opens the possibility for fair, balanced and respectful scholarship.

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