

**Goldstein M.C., *A History of Modern Tibet volume 3 :  
the storm clouds descend 1955-57***

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**Matthew Akester**

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## RÉFÉRENCE

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- 1 The keenly awaited third volume of Melvyn Goldstein's 'History of Modern Tibet' comes as no disappointment to his loyal readers, and if anything surpasses the earlier volumes in its depth of research and insight. The preface explains that two volumes have become necessary to cover the period 1955-1959 due to the wealth of material available to the author, and his presentation is indeed illustrated with detailed citations from an impressive array of sources, notably internal CCP documents, the Kalimpong diaries of Tsipton Shakabpa and Professor Goldstein's unique collection of interviews with key players on the political scene.
- 2 Goldstein's work is conducted within a highly conventional narrative style of political history, focussing on close examination of the words and deeds of élite actors in the supposed main events of the period – in this case, the conspiracies of émigré aristocrats in India, the launch of Socialist Reform in Kham/Sichuan, the Dalai Lama's visit to India and decision to return, and the debate within the CCP leadership over the pace of reform in central Tibet. These narratives are constructed with diligent and competent attention to the available sources, clarifying and revealing information barely covered by the existing literature.
- 3 Moreover, this volume is the first to venture much beyond the corridors of power in Lhasa, Beijing, Delhi and Washington, by describing the Litang uprising, which the

author takes as representative of the situation in Kham following the premature introduction of reform, and in my view, the charting of tensions between the central and provincial leaderships over this process is the book's most substantial contribution.

- 4 In brief, it argues that Leftist cadres in Sichuan rushed into Socialist Reforms in early 1956 in spite of cautions from the central leadership, sparking the revolt they had sought to avoid (Chapter 3). Deng Xiaoping could have averted this situation, but declined to do so, partly for personal reasons (p. 109, 476). Chapter 8 is a fascinating chronicle of the centre's attempts to alleviate the damage, sending two missions to reprimand local cadres and reassure local élites, and calling a high-level meeting in July 1956 which called for peace negotiations with the rebels. When these failed, and renewed calls came from the Sichuan provincial and Ganzi prefectural committees to push ahead with reform, however, the centre acquiesced (March 1957).
- 5 Goldstein is unusually ambivalent about this decision, ostensibly a critical setback for 'Mao's gradualist policy', praise for which is the dominant theme of volumes 2 and 3 of his work : after describing the decision as "ill-conceived" (p. 265), and even accepting that the revolt had popular support (p. 243), he appears to endorse Mao's justifications that 'Tibet' (*i.e.*, the Lhasa government's domain) and 'Ganzi' (Chinese nomenclature is used for Tibetan territories outside that domain) were historically different, and that the process of cancelling ongoing reforms was logistically tiresome and demotivating for the revolutionary cadre force (p. 270, pp. 475-476).
- 6 It was a 'pivotal moment in Sino-Tibetan history', to use Goldstein's words, and for the handful of Tibetan progressives who went along with CCP ideology, the moment when hope and trust in its nationality policies ebbed into doubt and foreboding. 'Mao's nuanced Tibet policy was seriously undercut by the bloody events in Sichuan', he writes (p. 292), with evident sympathy for Tibetan cadres like Jambey Gyatso, who 'came from a poor family and thoroughly approved of implementing democratic reforms, but nonetheless was shocked by the wanton destruction of [Batang Choedé] monastery...' Many readers will more readily sympathise, especially with the benefit of hindsight, with the sentiments of the 'common people' in Batang, as recalled by Jambey Gyatso and usefully cited here (p. 239), that "One cannot trust anything the Chinese have said. Who knows what will happen in the future ? The policy of the CCP is [like] a wet skin hat."
- 7 This is all interesting and informative material, it is just that the broader argument within which it is presented here is overstated and ideologically driven. Goldstein's argument is of course richly nuanced, but it shares some basic assumptions with the historic CCP position on Tibet, chiefly that 'democratic reform' was necessary and desirable for Tibet, and that had the reactionary Tibetan ruling class not obstructed reform in the attempt to preserve their privileges and way of life, all would have been well. This view tends to confuse 'democratic reform' – violent expropriation of the upper classes, 'struggle' against counterrevolutionaries of all classes, and institution of a class dictatorship run by the Party – with modernisation itself, as if Tibet were doomed to remain 'feudal' and 'backward' forever without the CCP's intervention. Based on these assumptions, the present volume argues that Mao's 'gradualist policy' was derailed in Sichuan after zealous local cadres provoked Tibetan resistance by introducing reform prematurely, but still his decision to indefinitely postpone reform in proto-TAR was enlightened statesmanship that 'pulled Tibet back from the brink of

disaster' (p. 466). It concludes with a chilling piece of logic, blaming the unholy alliance of Khamba rebels, reactionary Tibetan aristocrats and the CIA for '...bringing about the total destruction of traditional Tibet's institutions' (p. 487) by staging an insurgency !

- 8 The problem with this interpretation is simply that Mao's Tibet policy and the debates within the leadership over the speed of reform were entirely tactical – there was no debate about whether Tibet should enjoy autonomy per se, just over how long concessions to the traditional ruling class should be maintained, in order to smooth the transition to full incorporation in the PRC under the CCP's undivided authority. Mao in particular was in a win-win position on this question, having the authority to hold out for a magnanimous approach, confident that if it went wrong, the issue could always be resolved militarily in China's favour, and that is, as we know, what eventually happened.
- 9 It is quite misleading to suggest that the outcome of this debate, or the willingness of Tibetan élites to be peacefully won over, were such decisive factors in shaping Tibet's fate under Chinese rule. Mao's speeches and directives (*e.g.*, p. 339, 455) make it clear that at least from the outbreak of resistance in Sichuan, the 'gradualist policy' was liable to be cancelled or trumped by hardline approaches as soon as it ran into trouble, and this was inevitable, given that Tibetan opposition to 'democratic reform' was far more popular and engrained than Tibetan enthusiasm for Communism. So when Goldstein postulates that 'Tibetan history would have taken a very different turn' had Deng Xiaoping intervened to restrain the Sichuan leadership, one wonders how different things could really have been, especially on the eve of the Anti-rightist campaign and 'Great Leap Forward'.
- 10 Professor Goldstein writes in his preface that his research was motivated by a determination to 'disprove entrenched beliefs and widely held stereotypes', a laudable and welcome endeavour, but one that seems not to extend to the CCP's claims. For example : despite acknowledging the relevance of events and personages in eastern Tibet in volume 3, his discussion is prefaced by a laboured and confused defence of the Chinese government's position that areas of Tibet outside the effective borders of the latter-day Ganden Potrang state are only ethnically Tibetan and cannot be considered part of the same country (p. 79-87). He marshalls support for this view from mid-20th century foreign observers and scholars (Kolmas, Petech, Ekvall, Teichmann, Richardson, etc.), who confirm that Tibetan polities east of the Dri Chu river in Kham were not under Lhasa's direct authority during the later Qing era, but this is hardly in dispute, and none of these authors seem to have shared his conclusion that eastern Tibet's identity was somehow less Tibetan than other parts of the plateau.
- 11 The historical details of war and diplomacy that produced the state of affairs prevailing between China and Tibet in 1949 are naturally complex, but simply put, the fact that eastern Tibet was not part of Ganden Potrang territory does not mean that it was part of China either. The territory ruled by the Lhasa government was larger and grander than other Tibetan polities, and had a long border with British India, but it was no more intrinsically Tibetan than those in the east, nor had it been any less prone to imperial hegemony under the Qing. The distinction between territories ruled by Lhasa and those under other Tibetan rulers, all with varying degrees of independence from neighbouring powers, needs no introduction ; but the claim that the former should be designated 'Tibet' while the latter should not, because they were vassals of late imperial China, does not bear historical examination.

- 12 Having raised it, I should mention one other instance of this intellectual gerrymandering, although it is incidental to the subject of the book. In the preamble to his discussion of the Sino-Indian agreement (p. 158), Goldstein writes that at the 1914 Simla Convention 'British India acquired an area of about fifty thousand square miles from Tibet that was then called NEFA...' In fact, the territory ceded by Tibet at Simla was known to Tibetans as 'the three valleys under the passes' (La 'og yul gsum), including the Tawang valley, an area of about three and a half thousand square miles, or 7 % of NEFA, the present Arunachal Pradesh. If one includes the little Pachakshri enclave in West Siang district, which also came under Lhasa's jurisdiction in the 18th century, Tibetan-controlled territory in NEFA before 1950 could amount to 8 %.
- 13 It could hardly escape an historian that none of the remaining 92 % or so of NEFA/ Arunachal had ever been controlled by Tibet, nor was it claimed by Tibet at Simla. It has however been claimed by the PRC, without discernable justification, since the late 1950s. Goldstein's elision of Tawang with NEFA, backed up by a map (no. 5) showing Tibet's pre-1914 border running along the north bank of the Brahmaputra, seems far removed from the spirit of historical enquiry, never mind any quest to 'disprove entrenched beliefs', and is the kind of thing that unfortunately undermines the overall integrity of his work.
- 14 To conclude, volume 3 is a great contribution to knowledge of the period. Apart from the tensions over Tibet policy within the CCP discussed above, it gives us fly-on-the-wall coverage of the amateurish attempts by Shakabpa and Gyalo Dondrup to woo the Indian and US establishments, the most detailed portrait of Alo Chondze yet published, a Chinese perspective on the Litang uprising, and a preliminary account of the dismantling of Fan Ming's reforms in proto-TAR, among other readings, based on rare Chinese and Tibetan language sources. If one ignores the presumptuous title of the series, and the axe-grinding tone of the narrative, it is an informative read for anyone with a sustained interest in the subject.