



Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 26

Number 1 *People and Environment: Conservation and
Management of Natural Resources across the Himalaya*
No. 1 & 2

Article 18

2006

Lhasa: Streets with Memories by Robert Barnett; reviewed by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Heimsath, Kabir Mansingh (2006) "Lhasa: Streets with Memories by Robert Barnett; reviewed by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 26: No. 1, Article 18.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol26/iss1/18>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



LHASA: STREETS WITH MEMORIES

ROBERT BARNETT

REVIEWED BY KABIR MANSINGH HEIMSATH

Robert Barnett has been among the keenest observer of current Tibetan affairs, previously as the primary force behind the Tibet Information Network and more recently through a number of scholarly articles. His analyses are always sophisticated and often unique because Barnett has access to considerable information that most foreigners either do not receive or ignore when it is around them. *Lhasa: Streets with Memories* pushes his talents to book length and attempts "to scrape a little of the topsoil off the affective history of a city" (xii). Such a study should be a valuable contribution toward understanding recent developments in Tibet, as well as a rare discussion of urban life and modernity in a culture normally associated with monasteries and mountains. Unfortunately, instead of dedicating himself to the claimed "excavation" of the city, Barnett presents an extended apology for his personal interaction (or lack of interaction) with the town and its people.

In addition to the imposing superstructure ("Preface", "A Note on History", "A Note on Terminology", "Acknowledgments", "Notes", "Glossary" and "Index" make up over half the pages of the publication), the main chapters provide essays ranging from the mythical origins of Lhasa (chapter 3), to foreign representations of Tibet (chapter 1 and 2), and economic development (chapter 7). These relatively independent chapters are woven together with a chronological first-person account beginning with Barnett's presence during the Lhasa protests of 1987 and ending with his most recent visits as the director of a summer language study program.

Barnett is an artful writer and has a talent for bringing together bits of disparate information with flashes of insight and analysis. The "archaeology" of the city includes stories such as the blinding of Lungshar (11-13) or the clandestine meetings of the progressive Tibetan Baba Phuntsog Wangyal (19-20)

that are compiled from secondary sources, as well as original points such as the business acumen of "maybe" Tibetan monks (68-69), or a prominent lama whose townhouse was financed by stolen statues (125). The latter observations offer intriguing glimpses of Lhasa, but Barnett is a conversational flaneur and all too soon the subject changes and the shade closes before we can retain any sustained view. The interpretations offered in this book are often insightful, but also problematic on occasion. Linking the private housing boom to government salary increases and retirement options in the late 1990s (97) begins to illuminate the association of city planning to its inhabitants' lifestyle. But attributing the 1950 invasion and subsequent occupation of Tibet by China, as well as the current political atmosphere in Lhasa, to the invasion by Colonel Younghusband in 1904 (xxi, 27) is over-simplified and misleading. Comparing foreign Christian students in Lhasa to the Chinese Communist Party (36, 106) becomes negligent when an overwhelming and suppressive power differential is deliberately glossed for the sake of an interesting theoretical connection.

I suspect that observations and assertions such as these are intentionally contentious, but there is not enough discussion within the text or relevant notes with which the discerning reader might evaluate his position. Is this a generally accepted perception or an original discovery? Is this an arbitrary rumor or an obscure fact? We have no way of knowing. It would be possible to concede these oversights and provocations in the interest of readability and originality if this were fiction or travelogue, yet the scholarly tone and academic publishing arrangement give the false impression that these are all well-researched conclusions.

But there is something more disturbing lurking beneath the narrative that Barnett weaves, and that

Lhasa: Streets with Memories

Robert Barnett

Columbia University Press (2006), 219 pp.

is the resounding lack of living Tibetan voices in Lhasa. His first-person accounts begin during the violent protests and crackdown in 1987 and there is an atmosphere of extreme tension. Interactions with locals occur in a jittery combination of whispers "amchi, amchi" (doctor), concealed gestures ("the movement of my head would have signalled to any watcher that I had been spoken to, and by whom"), and speculation ("perhaps someone in the crowd was watching, but we were too conspicuous") (42-43). The fear and anxiety he felt during violent crackdowns in 1987 continues to affect his current attitude: "I rarely dared to enter these unfamiliar places, not certain about the perimeters of safety for those living there" (108).

This caution might be justified if not for its glaring inconsistency. Barnett obviously does talk to Tibetans, does so continually and systematically during his visits to Lhasa, and does not mind using his informants' stories as material for this book and his other publications. Barnett justifies the lack of Tibetan voice by claiming it is impossible or dangerous (theoretically and politically) for a foreigner to truly understand the locals, yet this does not prevent him from seeking out and utilizing resident accounts at his own discretion. Repeated allusions to an inaccessible Lhasa do not help to understand the city or to protect sources, but rather serve to guard the author from accountability in portraying another place and people. By combining this apparent "inability to comprehend" with his aspiration as an "archaeologist of the urban soul" (24), Barnett effectively claims to do what cannot be done. The paradoxical, yet self-fulfilling, contention helps to sensationalize his topic as well as his role as author.

Another problem, and one on which I do not need to dwell, is that there are other foreigners (students, development workers, business people, scholars, and others) who interact frequently, professionally, and sometimes intimately over repeated visits for many years with their Tibetan friends and acquaintances in Lhasa. These foreigners live and work in an environment that is always changing, often frustrating and often welcoming, but clearly not in the crisis mode of the late 1980s. Barnett knows many of these foreigners, frequently has discussions with them, is ever curious to hear of new gossip, and gets much of his

information channelled through them. It is not clear whether he really feels all these foreigners are endangering their Tibetan friends on a prolonged and regular basis, whether he thinks they should really refrain from contact with locals, or if he feels the secret world of "histories and desires" (125) is simply beyond their intellectual reach.

In Barnett's Lhasa buildings and courtyards are off-limits, there are spectres lurking in the concrete, Tibetans do not speak, and a shroud of darkness drapes over a city that enchants but yet again mystifies its visitor. This book offers an alluring travelogue of a singular and sophisticated imagination visiting an exotic and politicized city. This would be fine and fun if there were not a facade of scholasticism that "is about the effort to know through memories the inner language of a foreign city" (xiii). By making this claim Barnett falls into a long lineage of would-be anthropologists who wrongly present their own perceptions as if they were the "inner language" of others. In this case the perceptions perpetuate a widely held but damaging view that Lhasa is still some kind of forbidden city and Tibetans still live in a shadow of their past. Barnett's more scholarly articles address issues of life in Tibet more directly and successfully; unfortunately this particular attempt at genre-bending travelogue, journalism, history, and cultural commentary conceals more than it reveals.

¹See, for example, "Beyond the Collaborator-Martyr Model: Strategies of Compliance, Opportunism, and Opposition Within Tibet," also published last year in *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development, and Society in a Disputed Region*, eds. Barry Sautman and June Dreyer. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006.

Kabir Mansingh Heimsath has been working, studying and living in Lhasa regularly since 1997. He is currently researching urban space in Lhasa for his DPhil in Anthropology from University of Oxford.