10-3-2008

In Case You Missed It: Tibet Special, Part 4

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Robert J. Barnett, author of Lhasa: Streets with Memories, editor (with Ronald Schwartz) of Tibetan Modernities: Notes from the Field on Social and Cultural Change, and director of the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University, shares some of his favorite readings.

By Robert Barnett

There’s a nice thing about literature about modern Tibet, which is that it is wonderfully polemical. It’s not that I like polemic, which destroys lives and wreaks havoc with societies. But it does make it ever so easy to organize one’s books. So instead of tedious hours sorting them by topic or author, I can arrange my Tibet books according to two or three viewpoints, perhaps four at most. One case for the books with a China POV, some shelves for those from the exile perspective, a few for the “I was a Heroic Western Explorer and Discovered Totally Unknown Tibet/Everest/Himalayas/Central Asia Entirely On My Own Plus 50 Sherpas and a Cook” corpus, and perhaps half a shelf for the Western Buddhist books, though these are surely the most numerous in the field. Then the rest of the space is for the books by the scholars and commentators who are in the middle ground, or at least declare their biases and methods. Wish there were more of those.

This is a totally unprofessional system, which should be called SBP or Shelving By Prejudice, generally speaking theirs rather than mine. I guess it won’t replace the Dewey system for a while. It shouldn’t be possible to do in any well developed field of study, but sadly it’s all too easy in this case. Anyway, the system has great advantages, because if I really get annoyed with a book (like the ones that invent their own transliteration systems for Tibetan – please!), then I can shift it into the category the writer would most dislike and revel in the secret insult. Naughty but nice.

The categories are not divided by ethnicity, of course. Some of the very best of the scholarly “middle ground” books are by Tibetans (like Tsering Shakya, Samten Karmay, Tashi Rabgey and Tseten Wangchuk), and there are myriads of foreigners in the exile category. There are even a few modern-day fellow travelers in the China section. It’s easy to spot the exile-oriented books, because they have forewords by the Dalai Lama, in most of which he demonstrates his signature skill of appearing to say nice things about everyone including the author, while at the same time carefully avoiding saying very much at all (I guess he practices non-judgmental consciousness when it comes to us Western writers). These books use a lot of adjectives, ones that convey intensity and color. The other categories are also pretty straightforward to identify: the scholar-types like abstract nouns without adornment and don’t use a lot of adverbs, the Buddhist books like to have at least two Sanskrit words per paragraph, the China books like numbers, and the explorer books are keen on the “I” word and on photographs of mountains.

Of course, to be serious, we need to read from all these traditions, and all of them contain important insights, as Charlene Makley noted in an earlier posting. And some that seem obvious and even trite now will be of critical importance later. Owen Lattimore’s work on Inner Asia, for example, was marginalized for years, but is going to become increasingly important (his most important work, Inner Asian Frontiers, is available online through Questia). Some of the Tibet travel accounts, like the remarkable Hisao Kimura’s description of 1940s Lhasa in A Japanese Agent in Tibet (with Scott Berry) and Catriona Bass’s Inside the Treasure House from her time there in the mid-1980s, are going to be recognized as invaluable source books. If the pendulum of intellectual fashion swings again towards the CCP perspective and discredits critics and exiles as losers and complainers, which is not unlikely given the flow of rhetoric, finance and strategic interests, the Dharamsala (the capital of the Tibetan government in exile) point of view will become important: works from that stable will be the primary texts that the future equivalent of post-colonial and anti-colonial scholars should be reading word by word. They won’t, of course, because things just don’t work that logically. But they should.

In the middle category the most important books are well known – Tsering Shakya’s Dragon in the Land of Snow, and the two-volume History of Modern Tibet by Melvyn Goldstein. These are the
foundations of the modern field. Then lots of other extremely valuable works have appeared, including the ones Charlene Makley and Emily Yeh mentioned in their earlier China Beat posting, plus major writings by Matthew T. Kapstein, Heather Stoddard, Gray Tuttle, Fabienne Jagou, John Kenneth Knaus and others on history, and Emily Yeh, Ronald Schwartz, Toni Huber, Charlene Makley and Andrew Martin Fischer on contemporary issues.

But the real point of all this is obvious: if you divide everything by viewpoint, it shows what’s missing. It stands out immediately: there is almost nothing representing Tibetan voices from inside Tibet. I don’t need even a quarter of a shelf for books in English that represent that point of view. The Chinese authorities certainly do their best to sanitize or mute them, which doesn’t help. But it’s also clear that most of the pundits arguing over what the Dalai Lama and Beijing should or shouldn’t do inside Tibet are not much interested in the views of people living there. So the books I find most useful, after the histories by Shakya and Goldstein, are the few that have managed to squeeze between the cracks of other people deciding what’s good for Tibetans. The most prominent is the quasi-biography by Melvyn Goldstein and a colleague of Baba Phuntsog Wanggyal, who became the first Tibetan communist ten years before the Chinese arrived with their nationalist version of supposedly the same creed. If that doesn’t remind us that sometimes people want to be their authors of their own destinies, but don’t get given the chance by their liberators, then nothing will. A Tibetan Revolutionary: The Political Life and Times of Bapa Phüntso Wangye is very readable, and its strangeness in terms of genre – a biography which is written as an autobiography with multiple disclaimers, invented ghost writers, and all in the first person – is itself an indicator of the contortions a leading CCP official has to perform while disseminating his views, which are often buried beneath complex philosophical positions. Phuntsog Wanggyal’s own writings are extraordinarily difficult, such that an American philosophy professor at Columbia once assured me after reading some that Phuntsog Wanggyal was clinically insane. But anyone used to cross-reading Chinese political texts will be able to see easily what is happening, and why they are so crucial to the current dialogue process, after reading Goldstein’s highly accessible account of his life.

There is now another book by a Tibetan, also written originally in Chinese – the essays and poems of Oeser (often spelt Woeser or Öeser; or, in Chinese, Weise), the only Tibetan so far to publish openly critical texts while still inside China. Some of her essays appeared in Unlocking Tibet: A Chinese Author’s Perspective on Tibet Issue by her husband Wang Lixiong and her, but it’s hard to obtain and the translations have been queried. Some pieces from it and her blog are available at the website Tibet Writes. Her poems have just appeared in English translation in Tibet’s True Heart, trans. A. E. Clark, available at Ragged Banner Press, and very well worth reading. And the more recent work of Wang Lixiong on Tibet is also important, such as his debate with Tsering Shakya in The Struggle for Tibet. Shakya’s own views are also important too, as in his recent interview with the New Left Review.

That’s not a long list of Tibetan voices, but it will get longer as leading scholars like Lauran Hartley, Yangdon Dhondup, Riika Vertaanen, Françoise Robin and Patricia Schiaffini work on translations of Tibetan authors inside Tibet. I’m hoping to buy a new bookcase soon to fill it with translations of works from Tibetans in Tibet...