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In Case You Missed It: Tibet Special, Part 1

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It has now been six months since "China Beat" ran a series of reports about and suggested readings relating to the March unrest in Tibet. We thought this a fitting time to try to figure out what some of the best works out there are that deal with Tibet in general, not just a particular crisis involving the region and its people. So, we will be asking some people the following question: "Can you think of any particular article or book relating to Tibet that you wish more people had read?" We'll run the answers periodically, as they come in.

As a starting point, we put the question to the participants in a recent roundtable on Tibet, which was one of the most popular and talked-about panels on the program at the 2008 Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies Meetings held in Boulder at the University of Colorado. Here are two early responses, one from roundtable co-organizer Emily T. Yeh (who put the session together with Duke anthropologist Ralph Litzinger), the other from previous "China Beat" contributor Timothy S. Oakes.

Both Emily and Tim are faculty members in the University of Colorado’s Geography department. Emily’s recent publications include "Tropes of indolence and the cultural politics of development in Lhasa, Tibet," which appeared in 2007 in the Annals of the Association of American Geographers (vol. 97, no. 3, pp. 593-612). A recent work by Tim likely to interest many "China Beat" readers is a volume he co-edited with Louisa Schein, Translocal China: Linkages, Identities and the Re-Imagining of Space (Routledge, 2006).

Yeh: I haven’t really thought this through, but here are some initial thoughts.

In terms of understanding the background to the current political situation, I find very useful Robbie Barnett’s untitled essay in Steve Lehman’s The Tibetans: A Struggle to Survive, a book about the 1987-89 protests made up largely of photographs.

A book that has just come out that I think will be quite worthwhile, again for those specifically interested in China’s claims and counterclaims, is Anne-Marie Blondeau and Katia Buffetrille’s Authenticating Tibet: Answers to China’s 100 Questions, which was published by the University of California Press. As the title suggests, it is a scholarly response by multiple contributors to 100 Questions about Tibet, published in China in 1989. In addition to contemporary issues of population, policy, etc. It also has a substantial historical section.

Oakes: I wouldn’t be comfortable recommending anything as some kind of “expert on Tibet.” And I don’t do a great deal of reading on Tibet specifically, except concerning tourism, the idea of the frontier, and (of course) real and imaginary locales dubbed “Shangri-la” (a subject I mentioned in my last post for this blog).

But, I will offer one article that I’ve found useful in sorting out key questions regarding tourism, and heritage, in Tibet. In particular, it helps respond to one of the late questions we had in the session, but did not answer. He asked about whether there was a distinction being made among Tibetans in Tibet between the political question of autonomy/independence and the cultural question of preservation. Robert Shephard’s 2006 article, “UNESCO and the Politics of Cultural Heritage in Tibet” (Journal of Contemporary Asia 36:2, 243-257), should help people understand that this is a problematic distinction in the first place, that cultural heritage in Tibet is inherently political, and that cultural preservation is itself part of the Chinese state’s efforts to “develop” Tibetan culture as an object of tourist desire and marketing.