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Reading Round-Up: Barack Obama and the Dalai Lama

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There have been plenty of [news stories](#) recently about today's meeting between Barack Obama and the Dalai Lama. Here are some suggestions for further reading (and viewing):

1. Tibet expert Robert Barnett of Columbia University is [interviewed](#) by Deborah Jerome of the Council of Foreign Relations:

All American presidents since 1990 have met with the Dalai Lama, yet President Obama's scheduled meeting Thursday has drawn a sharp warning from China that the visit will undermine U.S.-China relations. Is China more irritated about this visit than it has been previously?

There is certainly a higher level of angry rhetoric from Beijing. . . . But in fact, behind the scenes, Beijing was far more disturbed by the previous presidential meeting, President George W. Bush's presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal to the Dalai Lama in October 2007—because that was the first and only time a U.S. president and the Tibetan leader had met in public.

So for Chinese diplomats, the real objective for the last six months or so has been not to stop the meeting, which their experts knew was impossible, but to get it to be private. That's been achieved, because the meeting will take place in a private room, the White House Map Room. But that's an obscure issue of protocol that, as the White House knows, makes a lot of difference to Beijing officials but none to American or Tibetan perceptions of the meeting. For China, the symbolic details matter, but for Tibetans in Tibet, it's only whether the two people meet that is meaningful.

2. ["Tibet Is No Shangri-La,"](#) writes Christina Larson at *Foreign Policy*:

The political and territorial stakes are serious, and not likely to be resolved anytime soon. But there is also a gauziness with which the region and the man who represents it to the West are most often discussed. Even in the fast-paced and cynical 21st century, talk of Tibet still elicits a 19th century aura of romanticism and melancholy. In general, sentiment veils critical thinking. In the case of Tibet, our collective nostalgia, inexplicably, for a place most of us have never seen lends itself to a striking absolutism with which we discuss the place, its people, its present condition, its future destiny. While most things in life are murky and grey, the Tibet of our imagination is pristine, and the lines between good and evil are as clear as a mountain stream.

3. We've mentioned Donald Lopez's ["7 Things You Don't Know About Tibet"](#) before, but it seems appropriate to call attention to it again this week:

Tibetans have never heard of their famous religious text *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. What is known in the West by that title is a short Tibetan work, the *Bardo Thodol*, meaning "Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State." It is a mortuary text, read over a dead or dying person to help him or her escape from rebirth or, if that's not possible, to have a good rebirth in the next life. It is an example of a genre of similar texts used in one of the four sects of Tibetan Buddhism. It became the most famous Tibetan text in the West after Walter Wentz, a wealthy American Theosophist, traveled to India in the 1920s, and commissioned a translation. Wentz then added his own commentary, transforming the Tibetan mortuary text into a Theosophical treatise. The text has lived on through several reincarnations, including one by Timothy Leary that uses the Tibetan text as a "flight plan" for an acid trip. Leary's book (*The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*) is best remembered for the line "Whenever in doubt, turn off your mind, relax, float downstream," which was lifted by John Lennon for the song "Tomorrow Never Knows" on the Beatles' 1966 album, *Revolver*.

4. At *Time*, Jeff Wasserstrom discusses the current Sino-U.S. relationship and declares it ["Too Big to Fail"](#):

While Washington and Beijing seem very much at odds just now, we shouldn't let their current state blind us to how intertwined they have become, nor to parallels between America's rise at the start of the last century and China's at the start of this one. Whether they like it or realize it, their relationship is truly one thing too big to fail.

5. "The Caucus" blog of the *New York Times* has [a short video](#) assembled by Ben Werschkul of statements Obama and the White House have made regarding Tibet during the past year — all of which are "notable for their caution."

Tags: [Barack Obama](#), [Dalai Lama](#), [Tibet](#)