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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 1930 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
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

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.

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