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Lee Feigon. *Demystifying Tibet: Unlocking the Secrets of the Land of the Snows.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1996. xiii + 242 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-089-4.

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What is it about Tibet that it attracts such an extraordinary array of enveloping myths? There is no place in the world so wrapped in illusion and fantasy. This myth-making occurred (occurs) not only in the West through the misrepresentation of its religious traditions (by Madame Blavatsky and Lobsang Rampa, the Irish plumber turned self- anointed Tibetan monk, among others) or through utopian novels (James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* [New York: William Morrow, 1933]), but also in modern China which has mythologized and demonized Tibetan life and society prior to 1950 while glorifying it ever since.

While there has been no serious attempt to understand Chinese mythologizing, there have been two excellent studies of how we in the West do it: Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing, and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) and Christian P. Klieger, *Tibetan Nationalism: The Role of Patronage in the Accomplishment of a National Identity* (Meerut, India: Archana Publications, 1992). While both of these books are groundbreaking and provide much fuel for thought, they are not the final word.

So it was with considerable anticipation that I picked up Lee Feigon's effort to "demystify Tibet" for he promised to "unlock the secrets of the land of snows." And, if that were not enough, he commits himself to go further; promising "...to demolish myths not only about Tibet," but also "about China, especially the notion that China has always been the zhongguo or 'Central Kingdom' " (p. x). Putting China under the same microscope, Feigon argues, is imperative because "present-day Chinese claims to Tibet are based on an assumption of Han superiority and an assertion that other cultures and civilizations of the region gradually and inexorably have been absorbed into the Chinese nexus" (p. xi). It's a daunting task and Feigon, chair of the East Asian studies department and professor of history at Colby College, deserves praise for recognizing a need and taking it on.

I began eagerly reading and followed Feigon chronologically through the full sweep of Tibetan history from its geological origins to the present, anxiously anticipating the discussion on the demystification. Alas, it never materialized. Feigon has decided that rather than confront the issues directly he would address them in passing as he quickly skirted over the long history of this mountain dominion. He is calculating, I gather, that the historical narrative, along with his brief allusions to the myth-making, will enlighten the reader. It's an interesting strategy but, sadly, one that, in the final analysis, doesn't work. No serious scholar of Tibet would disagree with Feigon's hypothesis that Tibet and China must be

demystified or that China suffers from a severe case of Han Chauvinism, so the lack of an in-depth discussion of these issues simply states the obvious to those familiar with this history. As for the general reader, I tend to think that the lack of historical background and the brevity of the text will work against this strategy.

That is not to say the book is without merit, only to say that it does not deliver what is originally promised by the title and introduction. Fundamentally this is a brief history of Tibet compiled from sources used often enough by other historians and adding nothing that is not already well-known to specialists. There are, however, some thoughtful insights.

The most interesting observation Feigon makes has to do with the consequences of the Shangri-La image Tibet has in the West:

Unfortunately this sympathy for Tibetans strengthened the world's view of them as the purveyors of a kind of humble goodness, symbolized by the image of peace and wisdom. Although this image is meant to glorify the Tibetans, it really obscures them. It perpetuates a stereotype of Asians who are either all good or all evil, never real people. It contrasts the evil Chinese against the good Tibetans and accomplishes almost the opposite of what it seeks to promote. Instead of treating the Tibetans as a separate people, it casts them again into the shadow of China. (p. 22)

This is an important assertion and might have provided an opportunity for deeper analysis. Instead, Feigon leaves it there.

The effects of mythologizing is a subject written about even less than the mythologizing itself (the only source I am aware of is the study by Christian P. Klieger mentioned above). Feigon has thought a great deal about these issues and has some important contributions to make, but because they digress from the narrative history we are left only with these occasional observations.

Another observation that is noteworthy is Feigon's questioning of the official, and critical, histories of the revolt in Lhasa in March 1959 (particularly my book, *The Making of Modern Tibet* [Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1987], pp.129-134). This abortive revolt marked one of the major turning points in Tibetan history in the 20th century and documentation remains extremely sparse. There is, nonetheless, a great deal of speculation and Feigon broadens the cast of potential perpetrators of the infamous mortal shells fired in the Dalai Lama's direction which precipitated his flight out of Tibet into Indian exile (p. 160). "The Great Leap had undermined the control of the Chinese central government," Feigon writes, arguing the possibility of rogue Chinese soldiers as the culprits, "and caused its officers and officials to take unwarranted, unwise and often provocative actions all over China" (p. 160).

In reviewing the history itself, it must be said at the outset that this is not a neutral book. My complaint is not that Feigon makes historical judgments (we all do that) but that he either demonizes or ignores the side he disagrees with. Feigon clearly supports the historical analysis of the Dalai Lama and his supporters. Although he makes a concerted effort not to be polemical in his historical narrative (given the overheated state of Tibetology that is no small accomplishment), there is a distinct anti-Chinese bias to the text. For example, Feigon quite rightly makes much of how the Chinese government has created a misleading historical construct of the past to justify its present policies. Being critical of these endeavors is one thing, implying they are unique, which he does, is quite another. Is China the only country that puts a "spin" on its history to justify the current status quo? Doesn't the Tibetan government-in-exile do this? Has Feigon read an American high school history textbook lately?

He also adopts an angry tone when writing about Chinese government policies which have resulted in such offenses as the over-logging of some forests, the dumping of nuclear wastes, the establishment of a gulag, etc. I share his outrage but part company with him when he buys into the Dalai Lama's conception that these efforts are aimed directly at the Tibetans as a form of punishment. There is no evidence to demonstrate that Tibetans are targeted in this way; sadly the Chinese government abuses its environment equally within its boundaries and arrests dissidents of every ethnic persuasion. By ignoring the larger context Feigon diminishes his neutrality and clouds the historical picture.

The Chinese government and the Tibetan exiles dispute much of Tibetan history and Feigon, invariably, sides with the latter. That's fine. But when he neglects to inform his readers about the disagreements and possible alternative interpretations, he is not writing dispassionate history. For example, he writes that Chinese outnumber Tibetans in the cities of Lhasa and Xigaze (p. 70). The Dalai Lama asserts this and Beijing disputes it. There is no reliable evidence either way. Even the most comprehensive population study to date, *New Majority: Chinese*

Population Transfer into Tibet, by the London-based Tibet Support Group (1995), which agrees with Feigon, admits that there is no published reliable studies and that its fieldwork was based on "casual observation and conversation" (pp. 101-102).

Feigon also accepts the notion that the country of "Tibet" is the entire area of Tibetan inhabitation (p. 6). This is somewhat like drawing a map of Mexico to include the entire southwest of the United States. This is a subject of an extraordinarily heated debate, although readers won't know that from Feigon. The most clearheaded discussion of this matter, and one that effectively dispels this notion, can be found in Melvyn C. Goldstein, "Change, Conflict and Continuity Among a Community of Pastoralists: A Case Study From Western Tibet, 1950-1990," in Robert Barnett and Shirin Akiner, editors, Resistance and Reform in Tibet (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 76- 90. As Goldstein demonstrates, when the Chinese army was approaching the boundary of what is today the Tibet Autonomous Region (hundreds of miles away from the ethnic Tibetan border the Dalai Lama now proclaims), the government of Tibet issued an appeal to the United Nations on November 7, 1950 asserting that Chinese troops had just crossed the upper Yangzi River "which has for long been the boundary into Tibetan territory."

By not acknowledging these, and other, areas of dispute, by not informing readers that there are varying historical interpretations, Lee Feigon tilts the historical account toward one side and, inexorably, reinforces some of the "myths."

Other difficulties are to be expected. Inevitably, for someone who is not a Tibetologist, there are a number of historical errors. The Khampa revolt did not begin in 1959 (p. 32) but 1956, or even earlier. The life of Agvan Dorjiev is not a "mystery" (p. 108) thanks to John Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia: The Story of Agvan Dorzhiev, Lhasa's Emissary to the Tsar* (Longmead, UK: Element Books, Ltd. 1993) and the work of the Russian Tibetologist Nicolai S. Kuleshov, "Agvan Dorjiev - Ambassador of Dalai Lama," *Asian Affairs* 23:1 (1990): 13-19. Frederick W. Williamson did die in Lhasa in 1936 but it was a later British mission, led by Basil Gould, which "left a wireless machine and officer in Lhasa" (p. 129).

Brief histories are, by definition, meant to leave out a lot of detail but this sometimes means leaving out meaningful explanations. For example, Feigon says that "Sikkim voted to merge with India in 1975" (p. 106). While precisely accurate it leaves out the fact that the vote occurred only after the Indian government had encouraged a vast migration of Indians and Nepali to Sikkim until such a point as they outnumbered the indigenous population. Few historians, Feigon included, note the similarities with what is happening currently in Tibet.

After the 1959 revolt some aristocrats were jailed, even though, according to Feigon, "many of those who had remained had been loyal to the Chinese government" (p. 169). This is not quite accurate. Those aristocrats who supported the revolt and stayed were indeed jailed. Their estates, as well as those of the aristocrats who fled, were confiscated while the estates of aristocrats who supported China and those who remained neutral were bought by the Chinese government. This tiny latter group of aristocrats were not jailed after the 1959 revolt, although most were during the Cultural Revolution.

One of the most curious statements Feigon makes concerns the story of Princess Wencheng, the Chinese princess who married a Tibetan king and was said to have brought Buddhism to Tibet. This story "...often makes Chinese children uneasy," Feigon writes. "Chinese children weep over the idea of the beautiful princess spending her life among the strange and difficult Tibetans" (p. 26). He provides no source and my experience is that Chinese, young and old, are indifferent to Tibet and its history. The idea that Chinese school children would cry over this story seems inconceivable to me.

There is also some question about historical judgment. Again, brevity obliges difficult decisions as to what to include. But is it helpful, when writing a history of a theocracy in which religion permeated every aspect of life, to devote a single paragraph to an explanation of Tibetan Buddhism (p. 12) while devoting four paragraphs to a discussion of rhubarb (pp. 83-84), three pages to the physical geography (pp. 7-11), and almost four pages to Chinese and Tibetan eating habits (pp. 34-39)?

And while Feigon has done considerable research and quotes extensively from highly reliable sources, his terse identification of his sources detracts from the power of their observations. William Rockhill, for example, was not only an "American explorer" (p. 65) but a diplomat with long years of experience in China and one of America's first Tibetologists. Ekai Kawaguchi, to take just one other example, was not only "an explorer and a Japanese monk" (p. 45) but a Tibetan speaking ordained Buddhist monk of extraordinary intellect and powers of observation who spent years travelling throughout Tibet. (Scott Berry, *A Stranger in Tibet: The Adventures of a Wander-*

ing Zen Monk (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1990).

While Lee Feigon does not deliver what he originally promised, he has managed, despite its flaws, to write a concise, non-polemical survey of Tibetan history which will be useful for the general reader with little knowledge of this part of the world.

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