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Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development and Society
in a Disputed Region

New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2006, 349 pp+index

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/3123>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.3123

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 November 2006

Number of pages: 66-67

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Fabienne Jagou, « Barry Sautman, June Teufel Dreyer (eds.), *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development and Society in a Disputed Region* », *China Perspectives* [Online], 68 | november- december 2006, Online since 06 January 2009, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/3123> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.3123>

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated by Michael Black

- 1 This book, with fourteen analyses based on Chinese and Tibetan interpretations of political theories and facts, gives us a contemporary history of Tibet on the themes of the politics, the economy, the sociology and the culture as well as the internationalisation of the situation in Tibet. It provides a vision of contemporary Tibet which seeks to be impartial (and in this the authors are often successful) and considers the question of Tibet's present political status (both factual and theoretical) while envisaging solutions for its resolution (perspectives).
- 2 The first part, devoted to the subject of internal politics, begins with a questioning of the exercise of autonomy through the Tibetan representation and its strength within the administration set up in the Autonomous Region of Tibet (T.A.R.). Robert Barnett shows how much the Tibetan participation in government decision-making and action depends on the historical and political hazards to which China is subjected. He draws a subtle picture of the Tibetan participants (both state and civil), which differs from that provided by many Westerners and exiled Tibetans. This is a model article, which makes possible the subsequent approach to the theoretical aspects of autonomy, brilliantly synthesised by He Baogang. He first provides the point of view of the Tibetan government in exile (which calls for real autonomy for Tibet according to free market

principles), and then the evolution in the Chinese government's point of view (regional autonomy deriving from the Marxist principles of class struggle, which would lead to the abolition of the notion of nationalities in favour of that of classes according to Mao Zedong, to which Deng Xiaoping added the market economy as a factor for the development of the nationalities). Amy Mountcastle pursues this train of thought in an analysis of the definition of "The Question of Tibet", in which she argues that the real problem is the independence of Tibet, to which the Tibetans in exile have added the question of Human Rights in order to internationalise it. Lastly, Wang Lixiong considers, in a highly pragmatic fashion, the practicality of the solution put forward by the Dalai Lama, while keeping to the guiding principle that in order to satisfy both parties, some form of freedom and autonomy which guarantees the unification of China must be found.

- 3 The status of regional autonomy does not favour the development of the Tibetan economy, which is the theme of the second part of the book. June Teufel Dreyer and Dawa Norbu, while emphasising the lack of reliable statistical data, manage to recount half a century of economic history, and conclude that notwithstanding the disasters and the grandiose projects, Tibet remains the poorest region in China. However, there has been considerable progress, particularly since the decollectivisation period (Melvyn C. Goldstein et al.). Hu Xiaojiang and Miguel A. Salazar analyse the development of private business in Lhasa. They suggest that henceforth the flow of Han migration to Tibet should be studied on a sociological basis, no longer as a deliberate policy but rather as one fact of migration among many others. They also provide excellent analyses of this population of migrants and of their economic activities in the T.A.R. In the third part of the book, Barry Sautman questions the demographic data put forward by Westerners and Tibetans in exile, and shows the extent to which the occupation of Tibet has not been harmful to Tibetans in terms of the number of its inhabitants.
- 4 In the final analysis, the international dimension of the "Question of Tibet" is approached from a historical and political point of view, including, in particular, an update on the utilisation of various concepts used to define the status of Tibet and the importance of the role played by the British in this definition (Dibyesh Anand and Xu Mingxu). Lastly, A. Tom Grunfield emphasises the importance of American perceptions and interpretations in understanding the contemporary history of such a definition.
- 5 The book, while occasionally repetitive, manages to provide a summary of the stumbling blocks in the path of the T.A.R., and examines the feasibility of a number of political solutions. It seems however, that in seeking distance themselves from the dichotomy between Tibetan victim and Chinese oppressor, the authors have also made villains of the Tibetans in exile and their determination to internationalise the "Question of Tibet". For example, not until page 298 is there a reference to the Tibetan government in exile "which was created in a democratic fashion in order to obtain legitimacy in the West" rather than to "the Dalai Lama", who up to that point appears to be the autocratic leader of an abstract community. The book thus lacks a presentation and contextualisation of the achievements and failures of this government in exile, as well as an analysis of its possible, but unlikely transposition to the T.A.R.