PART ONE:
TIBETAN MEDICINE AND MODERNITY
INTRODUCTION

One of the key factors that left Tibet unprepared to face the Chinese communist regime in 1950 was their failure to modernise state structures and social processes during the preceding decades. The period between 1913 and 1947, when the Tibetan state enjoyed de facto independence with some support from the British imperial Government of India, had offered Tibet a ‘window of opportunity’ in which to reform and reconstruct its institutions in line with the demands of modernity. During the 1920s, however, Tibet turned away from modernisation, and attempted to maintain its traditional socio-political forms, a decision which, in retrospect, can be seen to have left it fatally unprepared to deal with the modern Chinese state. While there were certainly economic restrictions on modernisation, the main opposition to modernity arose from the conservative nature of Tibetan socio-religious institutions and understandings. One area in which the Tibetan’s failed encounter with modernity may be examined in detail is the medical sphere; despite the presence of British biomedical institutions in Tibet throughout the period from 1904–49, there were, at the time of the Chinese invasion, no Tibetan biomedical practitioners or institutions in Tibet. The failure to institutionalise a modern medical system mirrored similar failures in spheres such as the military, educational, and political, and is thus a microcosmic example of the wider process.

This chapter is therefore designed to provide an overview of the Tibetan encounter with biomedicine during the first half of the 20th century, while the second part of the paper will briefly survey the issues

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1 Here I accept the conclusions of Dhondup 1986 and Goldstein 1989.
2 I use the word biomedicine (popularly known as ‘Western medicine’) to describe the medical system predominant among the various Western agencies involved in the British imperial project in South Asia.