THE QUESTION OF TIBET

Melvyn C. Goldstein
*The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama*
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In *The Snow Lion and the Dragon*, Melvyn Goldstein provides a succinct and readable account of the historical events since the 7th century that serve as foreground to the present-day predicament of Tibet. One of the strengths of this book, as with Goldstein’s earlier tome, *A History of Modern Tibet: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (California, 1989), is his use of wide ranging sources – Chinese, Tibetan and Western accounts, archives and interviews. The present work is concise, yet sweeping in its scope. Packed into a mere 130-page narrative are the complexities of Tibet’s relations with the Mongols (12th, 13th, and 17th centuries) and the Manchus of the Qing Dynasty (17th to early 20th centuries). It also provides a brief synopsis of internal Tibetan politics of the period after the demise of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries). While this makes Tibetan history quite accessible, the larger project of the book is to map out the parameters of what Goldstein terms the Tibet Question and to analyse the policies of the Tibetan government in exile within the context of the realities of Chinese and U.S. politics, and Sino-U.S. politics.

Goldstein defines the Tibet Question as essentially being about nationalism. He proposes a *realpolitik* framework, suggesting it provides a means of cutting through the rhetoric and emotions that surround the Tibet issue from both sides (Chinese and exile Tibetans), but particularly as it has become popularised in the West by the support of what he calls the ‘entertainment glitterati’ – Hollywood films and actors and pop musicians (p. 118). Much of what will follow here is an examination of this *realpolitik* framework and the use of the term nationalism and whether indeed these do accomplish Goldstein’s goal of an objective, dispassionate understanding of the Tibet Question.

We see from Goldstein’s discussion of Tibet’s past that there is a long and continuous history of the question of Tibet. What is not made explicit, if suggested at all, however, is the significance of asking for whom Tibet is a question; that is, who is doing the asking, and what the question entails. The present predicament of Tibet and certainly its persistence as a ‘question’ is clearly linked to foreign interventions (or lack thereof) and influences.

The author describes his understanding of the Tibet Question in the Preface in the following way: ‘…the long-standing conflict over the political status of Tibet in relation to China, is a conflict about nationalism…’ (p. ix). In my view, this description encompasses two definitions or different aspects of the Tibet Question. In the first, ‘the long-standing conflict over the political status…'
the question is about the history of political relations (although I think that the statement gives the false impression that it as a seamless, continuous, and singular ‘conflict’). This history includes the fragmentation and collapse of the Tibetan Empire, decentralisation, the relations between various Tibetan religious hierarchs and Mongol khans, and representatives of the Qing dynasty. The question of Tibet and the legitimacy of claims to ownership are often portrayed as bearing directly on specific points in this history. The People’s Republic of China points to the 13th century relationship between the Tibetans and the Mongols as the relevant period, while choosing to ignore the dynamics and substance of that relationship. Tibetans in exile view this as a ludicrous basis for assuming ownership in the 20th century, particularly as the Han peoples were themselves subjugated by the Mongols and also of course by the Manchus for significant periods. Tibetans in exile also point to the nature of the priest-patron relationship (mchod-yon) as the defining concept. This leads us to the second part of Goldstein’s statement, that the Tibet Question is ‘a conflict about nationalism’. This way of construing the problem suggests that the Tibet Question is about the politics of history and the rise of a defining global political context within which the question has been re-framed. Norbu (1992) discusses this with respect to the shift in the idiom of foreign relations from the mchod-yon (with its implied reciprocity and parity) to the colonialist/nation-state idiom of domination and subordination (see also Klieger 1992 on the significance of mchod-yon).

What is made quite evident is that the predicament of Tibet is and has been an international issue. This is suggested by Goldstein in (what I view as) yet a third definition of the Question offered in the Preface: that it is a failure of the international political system (the UN) to arrive at a consensus ‘about when a people is justified in demanding self-determination or when a multiethnic state has the right to prevent secession’ (p. ix).

It should be clear from the history laid out by Goldstein that the Question has been asked and defined not so much by Tibetans themselves as by the various outsiders who have their own interests in the question, from British India, to independent India, to the United States, and post-Qing China. Tibetans’ own attempts to influence the definition of the problem, not to mention possible solutions to it, have been thwarted since the first decade of the 20th century, when the 13th Dalai Lama and successive leaders requested protectorate status or intervention first from Russia, later from Great Britain, India, and eventually from the United States and the United Nations.

As a question of nationalism, the Tibet issue has been subject to a profusion of representations that, in Goldstein’s view, confound the Question. The perspective of realpolitik is employed to get at the root or essence of the Question. ‘Typical of nationalistic conflicts’, he says, ‘the struggle to control territory has been matched by a struggle to control the representations of history and cur-