

BOOK REVIEW

Tibet the Sacred Realm Photographs 1880-1950.
Preface by Tenzing Gyatsho, His Holiness The Dalai Lama. Chronicle by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa. Philadelphia Museum of Art/Aperture 1983. (Price not stated).

This is indeed a thoughtful, wise and much needed publication for which we must thank Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, the erstwhile monk official and currently the leading Tibetan scholar settled in the West. For several years prior to this publication and for the years thereafter, Lhalungpa has been quite busy with decipherment and accurate reproduction of a number of little noticed but substantial literary sources on Dharma and Tantra in Tibetan tradition. That the author could take sometime off from his heavy academic preoccupations and participate in not so academic endeavour bears testimony to the author's loyalty to his homeland and his cultural heritage.

Recently for about fifteen years many Western visitors enjoying hospitality and instruction of Beijing authorities have spoken and written about Tibet. I have not found their accounts objective or authentic. In 1980 autumn I had the opportunity to meet several such American travellers in Washington. None of them were Orientalists, nor spoke Tibetan; they were mostly experts in flora, fauna and geology. A geologist explained two slides on Tashilhunpo as of ancient deserted township ! An ornithologist made a categorical statement that water fowl was rare if not nil in Tibet. In 1955-56 I found Tashilhunpo a crowded monastic city. I had also noticed varieties of water fowls in the lakes and rivers of Central Tibet. If the sponsored American tourists were speaking truth they no doubt spoke unpleasant truth, without being conscious. It is therefore a welcome publication on Tibet till 1950 in words and illustrations both authentic. There is no fake photograph as there is no brief to hold for "the Tibet Region of China".

Lobsang Lhalungpa, because of his background and scholarship, is eminently qualified to write the text on these illustrations about what was Tibet before 1950. The Chronicle gives in outline the history and heritage of Tibet, not certainly from Chinese viewpoint as doled out to the sponsored visitors hosted by the Beijing authorities for more than a decade now.

The author in lucid style narrates the history of his country and fits into this narrative events from his

family history and his own life in a modest way with minimum words. I wonder whether it is this modesty or a sheer lapse that no reference is made to his home township's great son, the monk Lhalungpal Dorji who killed the renegade king Langdarma (842 A.D.). I consider it a serious omission. Lhalungpal Dorji was later apotheosized as incarnation of Chana Dorji (Vajrapani).

I have also to point out a serious omission in the illustrations. There is no photograph or picture of the Ganden Monastery which was built around the mausoleum of Tsongkhapa. This monastery was destroyed in 1970s and the Chinese reports publicised the fact. Even photographs of the ruins were issued to the Western journalists; I remember to have seen in summer 1982 one in London Times Sunday Pictorial. The author could have located a picture of Ganden in some books published before 1950.

In the Chronology are several omissions like visits of Tsybikov and Dorjiev at the end of the last century. I must also point out the misplacements of the names of Ninth and Tenth Dalai Lamas in the Chronology. In the Bibliography I miss some important titles. Books of Fosco Maraini and Pietro Mele have some magnificent photographs of landscapes and monasteries. Austine Waddel's Lhasa and Its Mysteries (1905) has drawings of monasteries and monks not found elsewhere. For the theme "Sacred Realm", as the sub-title of the book goes, the Bibliography should have included The Way and the Mountain by Marco Pallis.

His Holiness The Dalai Lama puts in neat and concise form the values which the Tibetans prized and practised for twelve centuries. These values the Tibetans in exile are determined to guard and preserve for posterity. The Preface introduces the reader to the Sacred Realm which for three decades now is encountering alien values imposed by alien rulers.

It was for me a nostalgic experience to read Lobsang Lhalungpa's book. All who want a glimpse into the grand panorama that was Tibet must read the book.

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To be reviewed

Catalogue of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives
Vol I Historical Works by Jampa Samten Shastri
(Dharamsala 1983).