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BOOKS

In Exile from the Land of Snows: The first full account of the Dalai Lama and Tibet since the Chinese conquest

Review by Jim Stiak

Written by John F. Avedon; Alfred A. Knopf, 1984; 383 pages.

For over 13 centuries, Tibet rested blissfully on the roof of the world. A country almost twice the size of Texas, capped by the earth's highest peaks, it was the birthplace of Buddhism. Submerged in tradition and very isolated, it was totally unprepared for what was to come.

Five years before troops of Mao's newly formed People's Republic of China entered Tibet, somber events had been prophesied.

As early as 1945... the State Oracle had faced eastward in a trance, wildly shaking his head in warning.

The 14th Dalai Lama, head of both church and state, 15 years old and still being groomed for the office Tibetans believed he had been reincarnated for, hastily as-

sumed the powers of government when the Chinese invaded. But the antiquated army of Tibet was no match for the red troops. Their leaders had not heeded the oracles. Nine years of uneasy occupation followed, while the Chinese militarized the country, planning, apparently, for their move into India.

In 1959, after two previous aborted flights, the Dalai Lama sneaked out of his native country. "In a daze of sickness and weariness and unhappiness deeper than I can express," he and his disguised entourage journeyed through the first forests they'd ever seen, to the deadly lowland heat of India. And there they remain.

Through talks with hundreds of refugees, author Avedon reconstructs a story untold to the world, yet another sad tale of modern times—about a place where the life of even the peskiest mosquito is held sacred, about a people who had never known famine, struck by the modern world, imprisoned, tortured, and starved until over a million of them had perished. Hurt, but not beaten. The Chinese have failed to destroy the culture, and they know it. Soon after Mao's death, they admitted they had made "mistakes."

The prose is often dry, but the stories are unmatched. Weaving fact and myth, the book depicts a people, uninhibited and always ready to party, Tibetan-style. Here's the State Oracle, Lobsang Jigme, preparing for a trance:

On the night preceding a scheduled trance, the same odd event would inevitably occur. Past midnight, a loud banging would be heard in Lobsang Jigme's room, waking both him and his attendants. Unable to find a source for the commotion, the aides would turn to him, who by then would be staring at the door and laughing. After some time, he agreed to relate what others heard but only he saw. Scores of small monks, no more than three feet tall, would appear in a jovial mood, and rushing altogether through the doorway, collide with one another and fall to the floor. Those who reached his bed brazenly stared at him and then burst into infectious laughter. It was clear, Lobsang Jigme felt, that these visits were being paid as a welcome of sorts by the followers of Dorje Drakden, due to enter him in a trance in a few hours time.

While mopping the kitchen floor one Saturday, I heard author Avedon on the radio. It was his description of Tibetan medicine's incredible powers that made me track down his book. There is a chapter on it that should be required reading for any student of

the healing arts. I'd also like to see what his editors cut.

It was the mastery of pulse diagnosis that was the hallmark of a leading physician. . . . If the patient is male, the left arm is examined first; if female, the right. Switching hands, the physician then examines the patient's other arm. In both cases he uses the three middle fingers of either hand. Each of the six fingers used is to be divided into an "inner" and "outer" half. These twelve positions monitor the organs; hollow organs are read on the outer half, solid on the inner.

By this means, Tibetan doctors can discover, among other things, the sex of a child six weeks after conception, a person's life-span, the future course of an illness, or, in extreme cases, the amount of time left to live.

Their pharmacology is also slightly unbelievable. From the plants of Tibet they've concocted cures for cancer, memory pills, birth control pills (seldom used due to Buddhist ethics), rejuvenation pills ("a normal component of their medical practice"), and richen ribus, or "Precious Pills."

Seven types existed, the weakest composed of 18 ingredients, the strongest, known as the King of Medicines, of 165. Precious Pills, it was believed, could cure the most intractable of ailments. As their manufacture sometimes took up to three months of around-the-clock labor by a team of 20 druggists, they were extremely potent and administered only under strict conditions.

In his preface, the author tells of his meeting, on a high mountain pass, with a "formidable middle-aged man, a long knife hanging from his belt and a heavy rifle slung across his back." In a few minutes of gestures, he reveals he's a guerilla, still fighting fiercely for Tibet's freedom.

For 36 years the Tibetans have continued their fight, nurtured, not by U.S. or Soviet aid, but by the example of their leaders.

Beside this water, Queen Maya, the Buddha's mother, paused before giving birth. The child's sublime nature was already known from portents and a remarkable dream of a six-tusked white elephant, the supreme symbol of royalty, entering the queen's right side during conception. Pausing at the lake in the center of the Lumbini Gardens, Queen Maya entered labor and, attended by her younger sister and maidservants, delivered standing up, holding the bough of a palsa tree. According to legend, the child emerged from her right side, took seven steps in each of the four principal directions, raised a finger and spoke, saying, "This is my final birth."

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