

## *Why is there no subaltern studies for Tibet?*

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In a recent discussion of Donald Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Tsering Shakya points out that "in the field of Tibetan or Buddhist studies, where much of the narrative relating to Tibet is enunciated, questions drawn from critical studies on the postcolonial discourse have never been raised. Tibetan studies still continues along the lines of an orientalist descriptive mode, with no trace of the new line of enquiry that has developed in western theory." (Shakya, 2001:183) While anthropologists working on the Tibetan borderlands have engaged with critical theories for many years, this point is well taken. As recently as 1998, Toni Huber noted that fluency in current theoretical frameworks is a "new development in Tibetan Studies." (Huber, 1998:79) Why has Tibet remained isolated from new approaches to knowledge that are well developed in other fields? To put the problem another way, one might ask why is there no "subaltern studies" for Tibet?

For almost 20 years, "subaltern studies" scholars have pursued innovative approaches to the condition and consciousness of subordinate groups in India, and subaltern studies has become very influential in many fields outside south Asian studies. Yet subaltern studies and other examples of postcolonial scholarship have not been as influential for the study of Tibet. The absence of subaltern studies is especially noteworthy for the period since 1950, when Chinese rule placed many Tibetans in a recognizably "subaltern" position.

The absence of subaltern studies in Tibetan studies is rooted in a belief in what might be called "Tibetan exceptionalism." By phrasing my question in this way—why no subaltern studies for Tibet—I want deliberately to echo questions concerning "American exceptionalism" which have been asked about similar absences in American studies.<sup>1</sup> Such counter-factual questions are necessarily heuristic and somewhat conjectural. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the insularity from theory in Tibetan studies is not the consequence of Tibet's geographical isolation. Orientalist traditions of colonial scholarship and the politics of knowledge about contemporary Tibet are much more important in explaining the absence of subaltern approaches in Tibetan studies. By illuminating the politics of orientalism and recent Tibetan history, Donald Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri-La* and Tsering Shakya's *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* provide implicit explanations for the absence of theoretical approaches to Tibetan Studies. The perspectives provided by their works also clear a space for newer post-colonial and post-nationalist histories of Tibet.<sup>2</sup>

This essay attempts to account for the absence of subaltern studies in Tibet, and to explore the assumptions of "Tibetan exceptionalism," in two parts. The first briefly summarizes the development of subaltern studies in India and considers factors that may explain why subaltern studies have not been as influential for Tibet. The second part considers, as a brief case study, how subaltern studies might illuminate a decisive event in Tibetan history, the Lhasa uprising of 1959. This essay

is not a comprehensive survey or history of the diverse field of Tibetan studies. Its goal is much more modest: to bring Tibetan studies and subaltern studies into conversation with one another.

#### SUBALTERN STUDIES

What is subaltern studies? Since the early 1980s, scholars of Indian history have periodically published essays under the title *Subaltern Studies*, and the “subaltern studies” approach now circulates widely in many fields of postcolonial scholarship. The intellectual history of the *Subaltern Studies* group has recently been the subject of an excellent survey by David Ludden, so I will summarize only some of its most prominent features.<sup>3</sup> Subaltern studies began in India as an effort to re-write history “from below” by historians on the left who were dissatisfied with prevailing Marxist and nationalist interpretations of Indian history. They adapted Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the “subaltern” to signify the subordinate position of peasants and other people subject to various forms of domination. Early work in subaltern studies was concerned with peasant insurrection, revolution, and “resistance” in many forms. Subaltern studies scholars soon shifted attention from recovering the agency and self-consciousness of peasants and workers to study of the *representations* of subalterns by the colonial state, nationalist movements and elite discourses. Michel Foucault’s perspective on power and Jacques Derrida’s critique of discourse were both influential as subaltern studies evolved into a broad postcolonial critique of knowledge and power. From these perspectives, “subalternity” was not an autonomous position outside dominant discourses, but rather an effect of the dominant discourses of colonialism, nationalism and modernity.

Subaltern studies employs diverse approaches to the history of subaltern peoples. These range from examining the workings of religion, gender, science, medicine, and memory, the “fragments” of the nation, critiques of Enlightenment practices of history writing, and much more. Subaltern studies has thus become part of the complementary and interdisciplinary repertoire of critical theories available to scholars of colonialism, cultural studies, historical anthropology, and post-colonial studies.<sup>4</sup> Begun in India as a critique of colonialist and nationalist historiography, subaltern studies now circulates throughout the global academy.

Subaltern studies has been influential elsewhere but not everywhere. The interdisciplinary study of colonialism has embraced subaltern studies, but the more narrowly defined field of “imperial history” has treated it with suspicion. (Howe, 2001) In part, this suspicion may be indicative of an antitheoretical bias among historians. (Duara, 1998) While subaltern studies has been used to pose questions for the study of China, Africa, Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East, it is in India and Latin America that subaltern studies has been most extensively institutionalized with scholarly collectives, academic journals, and course readers.<sup>5</sup> India and Latin America shared experiences of colonialism, revolutionary peasant movements, and Marxist intellectual traditions. By contrast, it might be tempting to suggest that subaltern studies has not developed for Tibet because Tibet is not India or Latin America. Tibet was not subject to direct European colonization, had no peasant movements before the 1950s, and the Marxism in Tibet has been printed with the label: Made in China.

Of course, the answer is not that simple. The politics of knowledge about Tibet appear to be much more important factors in explaining the absence of subaltern approaches for Tibet. Donald Lopez has provided fascinating accounts of the study of Tibetan Buddhism in the West by colonial diplomats, Oriental philologists, Theosophists, popular enthusiasts, and scholars of Buddhism as a world religion. (Lopez, 1995; Lopez, 1998) The tradition of studying Buddhism through the translation and interpretation of religious texts, and the typical institutional location of Tibetan studies in Oriental philology or religious studies, may go some way to explain the absence of a Tibetan subaltern studies. The complex interplay between Tibetan Buddhism and New Age spiritual movements in the West has also revived older orientalist representations of Tibet.

More importantly, Chinese occupation since 1950 has rendered all kinds of research about Tibet politically sensitive. The polarized positions of the Chinese government and the Tibetan Government in Exile have reduced the space available for scholarship that is not explicitly framed as political advocacy. Robert Thurman's intemperate suggestion that Lopez is an apologist for China because *Prisoners of Shangri-La* does not focus on Chinese atrocities and unequivocally defend the stance of the Dalai Lama, is a case in point. (Thurman, 2001; Lopez, 2001) While Thurman has clearly misread Lopez's book, his comments more importantly demonstrate the extent to which nationalism—Tibetan or Chinese—polices the boundaries of Tibet as an authorized subject of study, just as nationalism has defined "Tibet" as an object of art. (Harris, 1999) It is precisely at the boundaries of such nationalist discourse that subaltern studies offers an opportunity to break out of the intellectual prisons established by orientalist or nationalist interpretations of Tibet.

Yet another response to the question, why no subaltern studies, could be that there has been a subaltern studies for Tibet—in anthropology or autobiography. Since political obstacles for many years prevented research in Tibet, anthropological work that otherwise would have been done in Tibet was displaced into Tibetan communities in Nepal, Ladakh, Sikkim, and Bhutan (and only recently into Amdo and Kham and the Tibetan Autonomous Region). Given the theoretical sophistication of anthropology since the 1960s, this is at the very least a plausible response to our hypothetical question.<sup>6</sup> However, the premise that "ethnographic Tibet" constitutes an object of knowledge that may be substituted for "political Tibet" is itself a problematic example of "Tibetan exceptionalism" that should be examined more critically. In particular, scholars of Bon and Tibetan folk religions have complicated the construction of either of these geographical spaces as synonymous with Tibetan Buddhism. (Karmay, Kvaerne, Snellgrove) The historical process whereby "political Tibet" and "ethnographic Tibet" have each taken form as objects of knowledge deserve further study along the lines developed by Thongchai Winichakul in *Siam Mapped*. (See also Millward, 1999)

Autobiographies also attempt to recover or preserve subaltern "voices" from Tibet, and these have appeared in increasing numbers in recent years. Some are motivated by the anthropological "salvage" strategy to recover the Tibet that existed before 1959, and a few record the knowledge gathering techniques of the British colonial state. (Ricardus, 1998; McKay, 1997) More frequently these

autobiographies provide narratives of hardship under Chinese rule, and serve as interventions in public debate over the Tibet Question.<sup>7</sup> These autobiographies combine elements of Tibetan hagiographic biography and life-writing with “western” models of bearing witness to the tragedies of the 20th century. Yet what is perhaps most striking is that Chinese publications about Tibet *also* use the voices of “ordinary” Tibetans as interventions in the Tibet Question (chapter title in Epstein, 1983: “Champa Gyaltzen—Serf Tailor to County Head;” also Strong, 1960) Indeed, much Tibetan historiography takes the form of competing representations of Tibetan “subalterns.”

This may be near the heart of the problem. The Chinese government and the Tibetan Government in Exile have both constructed official nationalist narratives that depend for their legitimacy on the incorporation of subaltern Tibetans. Yet subaltern studies scholarship posits a subaltern position that is resistant to domination by the state, and is intractable to incorporation in elite discourses of all sorts. Subaltern studies scholarship thus has the potential to destabilize the myths of Tibet promulgated by both Chinese and Tibetan nationalisms. To illustrate how this is so, I would like briefly to consider the history of the Lhasa uprising of 1959 in light of the “prose of counter-insurgency,” a concept developed in subaltern studies.

#### THE 1959 LHASA UPRISING

The Lhasa uprising in 1959 is perhaps *the* crucial event in Tibetan history during the 20th century. The uprising was also the profound expression of subaltern agency, but this agency has been obscured in most histories of the event. Tsering Shakya’s *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* adds significant new details, complexity, and depth to the history of the uprising. He brilliantly negotiates between previous nationalist interpretations and offers by far the best account of the Lhasa uprising. Yet if the historiography of the Lhasa uprising is considered in terms of “the prose of counter-insurgency,” even his account demonstrates the limits of scholarly discourses available to historians of subaltern uprisings and underscores certain assumptions about “Tibetan exceptionalism.”

Ranajit Guha’s “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” a classic essay from *Subaltern Studies*, examined historical writing about peasant insurrections in colonial India, especially the Santal uprising of 1855. He wanted to portray peasant insurgency as “a motivated and conscious undertaking,” and not, as historians usually depicted them, “purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs.” Historians typically treated the peasant rebel “as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion.” The omission of subaltern agency was often signified “by metaphors assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena: they break out like thunderstorms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wild fires, infect like epidemics.” When historians of insurgency attempted to provide an explanation in more human terms, Guha suggested, they either assumed “the identity of nature and culture, a hall-mark of very low state of civilization” or specified the “enumeration of causes.” Yet the causes identified by historians, such as economic and political deprivation, “do not relate at all to the peasant’s consciousness or do so negatively—triggering off rebellion as a sort of reflex action, that is, as an instinctive and almost mindless response ... or as

a passive reaction.” “Either way,” Guha commented, “insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant’s consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness.” (Guha, 1988:45-7) This last phrase is crucial, and I will return to it later.

Guha identified three types of discourse about peasant insurgency, and historical writing on the 1959 Lhasa uprising provides characteristic examples of each. The first type of discourse was usually written by officials reacting to news of the events, and was identified with the interests of the state. Take, for example, the exchange of letters between General Tan Guansan, commanding officer of the Chinese army in Lhasa, and the Dalai Lama, beginning on the first day of the uprising, March 10, 1959:

Respected Dalai Lama,

It is very good indeed that you wanted to come to the Military Area Command. You are heartily welcome. Since you have been put into great difficulties due to the *intrigues and provocations of the reactionaries*, it may be advisable that you do not come for the time being.

Salutations and best regards,

Tan Guansan

On the following day, the Dalai Lama reassured General Tan using similar language: “Reactionary evil elements are carrying out activities endangering me under the pretext of ensuring my safety. I am taking measures to calm things down.” (*Concerning the Question of Tibet*, 1959:28-9) The Dalai Lama later said his letters to General Tan were written to gain time, but their official character, contemporary context, and call for calming things down all suggest Guha’s category of primary discourse on insurgency.

In secondary discourse, the events of the insurgency are rendered as “history” in documents written for public readership with pretensions to neutrality. Guha discusses memoirs of colonial administrators, participants in the events, as well as official histories. The following two examples were published shortly after the Lhasa uprising for overtly political purposes, and they contain emergent interpretations of the insurgency typical of secondary discourse that are later elaborated on and developed in longer histories.

Chinese Communiqué. Xinhua, March 28, 1959

The Tibetan local government and the reactionary clique of the upper social strata began their armed rebellion in Lhasa on March 10. The Dalai Lama was originally scheduled to attend a theatrical performance in the auditorium of the Tibet Area Command of the People’s Liberation Army on March 10. The proposal was made by the Dalai Lama personally more than a month earlier and the date of March 10 was fixed by the Dalai Lama himself. On that day, however, the rebellious Tibetan clique spread wild rumours alleging that the army units of the Tibetan Military Area Command would detain the Dalai Lama; and using this rumour as a pretext, they staged armed rebellion, put the Dalai Lama under duress, and raised such reactionary slogans as ‘Drive out the Han people’ and ‘Independence for Tibet’ ... The Tibetan traitors have carried on their rebellious activities for quite a long time. These rebels represent imperialism and the most reactionary big serf owners.”

## The Dalai Lama's Statement in Tezpur, India, April 18, 1959

The relation of the Tibetans with China became openly strained from the early part of February 1959. The Dalai Lama had agreed a month in advance to attend a cultural show in the Chinese headquarters and the date was suddenly fixed for the 10th of March. The people of Lhasa became apprehensive that some harm might be done to the Dalai Lama and as a result about 10,000 people gathered around the Dalai Lama's summer palace at Norbulingka and physically prevented the Dalai Lama from attending the function. Thereafter the people themselves decided to raise a bodyguard for the protection of the Dalai Lama. Large crowds of Tibetans went about the streets of Lhasa demonstrating against Chinese rule in Tibet.<sup>8</sup>

In secondary discourse on insurgency, the events are narrated to demonstrate a sequence of causality. In the Chinese communiqué, for example, the uprising is the responsibility of the "reactionary clique of the upper social strata," who spread rumours; and then "using this rumour as a pretext, they staged armed rebellion." The Chinese statement is clearly an example of what Guha calls "the prose of counter-insurgency," a discourse in which the causality of events excludes any space for the consciousness of subaltern insurgents.

At first glance, the Dalai Lama's statement appears somewhat different. He assigns responsibility for the uprising to "the people themselves" who took action after they "became apprehensive." However, the Dalai Lama's narrative locates the cause of the uprising in a larger conflict. The Tezpur statement begins, "It has always been accepted that the Tibetan people are different from the Han people of China" and then enumerates a sequence of conflicts since 1950: signing the 17-Point Agreement under duress, the absence of promised autonomy, the revolt in Kham, destruction of monasteries, deaths of monks, and interference in religious freedoms. This pattern of events defines the context in which "the relation of the Tibetans with China became openly strained" in 1959, and frames the events of the uprising in Lhasa. Contemporary observers sympathetic to the Dalai Lama also promoted this causal sequence. The International Commission of Jurists, for example, named monks who had been killed or imprisoned after invitations to Chinese parties, and then closed the question of causality: "*In view of the stories mentioned above, as soon as the news of the invitation became known, a large number of people surrounded the Norbulingka Palace.*" (*The Question of Tibet and the Rule of Law*, 1959:13) Like other secondary discourse on insurgency, the statements by the Chinese, the Dalai Lama, or the International Commission of Jurists place the uprising in a context-event-perspective continuum.

In secondary and "tertiary" discourse—written at an even greater remove in time and place from the insurgency—Guha notes that some historians attempt to break away from the code of counter-insurgency and adopt the insurgent's point of view. These historians want the insurgents, not their enemies, to win. Yet both kinds of the histories—against the insurgency or sympathetic to it—"so very different from and contrary to each other in ideological orientation, have much else that is common between them." (Guha, 1988:72) Consider the unintentional similarities between these two statements: 1) "The militant uprising of the Tibetan people in Lhasa on 10 March 1959 against Chinese domination was the culmination and continuation of the Tibetan nationalist movement which started with the Chinese entry into Tibet in 1950." (Gashi, 1980:67); and, 2) "On 10 March 1959,

when they thought they had gathered enough strength, [members of the Tibetan upper strata] publicly tore up the 17-point agreement and staged an all-out armed rebellion.”(Ngapoi, 1988:380) Both statements incorporate the 1959 Lhasa uprising into movements that had reached a “culmination” or “gathered enough strength.” In such histories, Guha suggests, the subaltern insurgent is denied a place as the subject of history:

For once a peasant rebellion has been assimilated to the career of the Raj, the Nation or the People, it becomes easy for the historian to abdicate the responsibility he has of exploring and describing the consciousness specific to that rebellion and be content to ascribe to it a transcendental consciousness.(Guha, 1988:82)

Guha notes that histories in the mode of counter-insurgency are ill-equipped to cope with contradiction, betrayal, and the influence of localism and territoriality. In all these areas, Tsering Shakya’s *Dragon in the Land of Snows* is a major advance. He documents, for instance, conflicts between residents of Lhasa, refugees from Kham, and the aristocratic Tibetan government. One Tibetan official commented that had the uprising not taken place, a civil war between the Khampas and the Lhasa regime was quite likely in 1959. (Shakya, 1999:193) The most compelling complication in Shakya’s narrative of the uprising concerns the rumour that started it. He shows that there was no Chinese plot to kidnap the Dalai Lama, but that junior monk officials led by Barshi Ngawang Tenkyong (Bar zhi Ngag dbang bstan skyong) genuinely believed that there was. After they were unable to persuade the Dalai Lama to change his plans to attend the event at the Chinese camp, “the rumour was, in fact, deliberately disseminated by a small group of junior officials in order to mobilise the public.” Several of these officials went around Lhasa on March 9 telling soldiers and monks to gather outside the Norbulingka the following day, and “it was most likely that the news spread by word of mouth among the people.” He also carefully distinguishes between the motive behind the rumour (to stop the Dalai Lama from visiting the Chinese), and its unintended consequence (a “nationwide uprising”). (Shakya, 1999:190-2)

In between the Chinese and Tibetan elites, Shakya identifies in the Lhasa uprising a space for subaltern agency, which transformed the meaning of the rumour into something that was used against the very people who started it. “The thousands of people who turned up outside the Norbulingka were not only expressing their anger against the Chinese, but their resentment against the Tibetan ruling elite who, they believed, had betrayed their leader.”(Shakya, 1999:192) Slogans shouted by the demonstrators targeted the Tibetan elite, and a Tibetan official dressed in Chinese attire was killed and dragged around the Bar skor in Lhasa. Only in later days did the demonstration become more consistently anti-Chinese. “The demonstration thus displayed the gulf between the people and the aristocracy in Tibet. It also marked the irreparable breakdown of the relationship between the Chinese and the Tibetan masses.”(Shakya, 1999:195) The language used to describe the demonstrators—crowd, people, “masses”—has obvious limitations. Nevertheless, the people/masses/subalterns located in between the Chinese army and the Tibetan aristocracy exercised a great deal of power, something which frightened the Dalai Lama: “I felt as if I were standing between two volcanoes, each likely to erupt at any moment.”(Dalai Lama, 1962:173)

After describing the flight of the Dalai Lama to India and Chinese repression of the uprising, Shakya sums up.

For the Tibetan masses, the central issue was the question of the Dalai Lama's power and status, which the Tibetans commonly referred to as 'go-gnas'. ... The decline in the Dalai Lama's authority was more complex than a mere loss of political power in the Western sense; it was equated with the degeneration of Buddhist Tibet. (Shakya, 1999: 209)

This is clearly a plausible explanation for the uprising, and it is stated in terms of the motivation of the subaltern insurgents who spread the rumour by word of mouth and rallied in Lhasa. At this point, however, Shakya sets aside his evidence of divisions among Tibetans based on region, class, and sect<sup>9</sup> to identify the Uprising with the Ideal, a homogenizing "Tibetan identity" defined in terms of ethnicity, culture, civilization, and language:

The Tibetans' identity as 'the insiders' (*nang pa*), and their identification of others as 'outsiders' (*phyi pa*) overrode internal divisions and gave Tibetans the focus of their ethnicity. The essential weakness of the Chinese was their failure to see the homogenous nature of Tibetan culture. Tibet was not only a political entity, it was foremost a civilization, covering the whole of the Tibetan speaking world. (Shakya, 1999:209)

Shakya considers the revolt "essentially in defense of the value system of the ordinary men and women, to which the Dalai Lama was central." (Shakya, 1999:210)

Notably, Tsering Shakya's list of factors—ethnicity, culture, civilization, language, and "value system"—does not explicitly mention "religion." To be sure, religion must be implied in culture, civilization, or "value system." When Dawa Norbu attributed the rebellion to Tibet's "value system," he defined it as premised on Tibetan Buddhism, and said bluntly: "To a large extent religion was the basic cause of the revolt." (Norbu, 1979:91) Ranajit Guha notes that when confronted with evidence of religiosity in peasant rebellions, historians usually assign it to other forms of secular consciousness. (Guha, 1988:83) This was common among opponents of the Lhasa uprising. For example, at the Second National People's Congress in Beijing, Ngawang Jaltso (Ngag dbang rgya mtsho), a former Tibetan monk, said: "The Tibetan traitors disguise themselves as pious Buddhists and conduct their criminal activities under the cover of 'protecting religion.'" (*Concerning the Question of Tibet*, 1959:90).

It may be unremarkable that members of the Chinese Communist Party would show disdain for the uprising's religious motives, but even advocates for Tibetan independence share this blind spot. Take, for example, two responses to the testimony of Tibetan refugees. In 1960, teams of lawyers interviewed Tibetan refugees for the International Commission of Jurists, and their report presented summaries of some of the refugee's statements, including the following:

Statement No. 29: A farmer, aged 73, from Yatung.

He saw no fighting. When he left no religious ceremonies at all were held and monk's prayers at death were forbidden. There is a Tibetan ritual for driving out devils and the Chinese prohibited this on the grounds that it was a waste of expenditure unless they could be shown the devils. The person who came to pray for the purpose of driving out the devils was normally fed by the person who had called him and given a small offering. The monks were stopped from going to people's houses to say prayers.



In Kargu monastery there had formerly been about sixty monks but there were only six when the witness left. Religious belief as such was never discussed. (*Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic*, 1960:258)

Despite discussing funeral rites and rituals “for driving out devils,” the lawyers who interrogated this 73 year old peasant from Yatung concluded that in their conversation, “religious belief as such was never discussed.” After the Jurists’ report (including this statement) was published, Lois Lang-Sims was asked to write a synopsis for the Tibet Society in London. She did so with misgivings, which increased when:

I myself had to collect ‘stories’ from the refugees and failed to obtain one which I could conscientiously pigeon-hole as ‘authentic.’ ... The ordinary Tibetan is by nature truthful and honest. But, to rely upon this unquestionable fact without, at the same time, recognizing that his view of ‘truth’ bears no relation to what the West would regard as valid evidence is dangerous. The Tibetan peasant has been accustomed from his cradle to his grave to accepting legend and fairytale as literal truth. Having said so much, one naturally pauses in fear that one may have been unjust. (Lang-Sims, 1963:133-4)

Remarkably, the prejudice Lang-Sims exhibited during the twilight of the British empire against religious “legend and fairytale” has been used to deny the agency of subaltern voices in a recent history of Tibet written in the prose of counter-insurgency.(Grunfeld, 1987:143) Both Lang-Sims and the lawyers who gave an antiseptic interpretation to the fragmentary testimony of “Statement 29” confronted the difficulty of making analytical distinctions between religious belief and cultural practices that constitute a “value system” in Tibet. Indeed, the pervasive influence of “religion” in Tibet is very often represented as constituting the essential element of “Tibetan exceptionalism.”

But is Tibet really so exceptional in this regard? In the case of the Santal uprising of 1855, Guha notes that “it is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as religious consciousness.” The insurgents themselves claimed that they were fighting at the request of the Santal god, Thakur. The leaders of the rebellion, Kanu and Sidhu, for example, testified before a British magistrate that “Kanoo and Seedoo Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor himself will fight.”(Guha, 1988:78) The Santal rebels genuinely believed they could not come to harm because it was not them but their god who was fighting. In a commentary on Guha’s article, Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that when Guha identifies “the logic of that consciousness” as his subject of study, he marks the “analytical distance” that the historian must take from the object of research. Guha’s analysis “cannot offer the Thakur the same place of agency in the story of the rebellion that the Santals’ statements had given him.”(Chakrabarty, 2000: 103-4) To conform to the protocols of an academic discipline, the historian cannot invoke the supernatural to explain an historical event. Instead, “the Santal’s statement that God was the main instigator of the rebellion has to be anthropologized (that is, converted into somebody’s belief or made into an object of anthropological analysis) before it finds a place in the historian’s narrative.” (Chakrabarty, 2000:105) In Chakrabarty’s reckoning, the attempt to render the consciousness of the Santal insurgents into history tests the limits of the historical discipline.

There is no third voice that can assimilate the two different voices of Guha and the Santal leader; we have to stay with both, and with the gap between them that

signals the irreducible plurality in our own experiences of historicity. (Chakrabarty, 2000:108)

The Lhasa uprising can be remembered in many ways—in popular memories, national myths, and historians' histories. This discussion of historical writing about the Lhasa uprising has closely followed Guha's framework in the "prose of counter-insurgency," and thus focussed on descriptions of the uprising itself. I have given much less attention to historical continuities to events before and after the uprising. In the mid-1950s, the wider Khampa rebellion and Mimang Tsongdu (Mi dmangs Tshogs 'du), a movement founded to persuade the Dalai Lama not to visit China, were clearly important to subaltern consciousness of the 1959 uprising, and Shakya discusses them. Parallels with the more recent uprisings in Lhasa are also noteworthy.<sup>10</sup> Yet much of this history has been obscured by Tibetans or Chinese who "do not want to allow any complexities to intrude on their firmly held beliefs," resulting in what Shakya rightly calls a "denial of history." (Shakya, 1999:xxii) Tsering Shakya's success in confronting this complexity has made it possible to imagine subaltern interpretations of Tibetan history. The limitations of his work are in many respects the limitations of historical writing itself.<sup>11</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Let us return to the question, why is there no subaltern studies for Tibet? For it should be clear, by now, that there is not one, single answer to this question. The orientalism inherited from the British Raj, the politics of contemporary Tibet, and the "unique" role of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism in Tibet each have reinforced assumptions about Tibetan exceptionalism. Moreover, these assumptions have made it easy for scholars of Tibet to assume that critical theory is irrelevant to their subject. Perhaps the question should be put more positively: why is it now possible to envision subaltern studies for Tibet? The critique of Tibetan nationalism and Chinese colonialism suggested by recent scholarship is analogous in many ways to the critique of British colonialism and Indian nationalism that motivated early scholars of subaltern studies in India. This is emphatically not to suggest some kind of equivalence between Tibetan nationalism and Chinese colonialism; far from it.<sup>12</sup> Rather, I want to suggest that the politics of knowledge in the present have cleared a space for subaltern studies for Tibet.

Subaltern studies does not offer ready-made interpretations of Tibetan history. Instead, it offers a range of ways to think about Tibet's many histories, including the influence of "religion" in the lives of subaltern peoples. Subaltern studies is diverse, so there is no need to be prescriptive about what a subaltern history of Tibet might look like. Nonetheless, it is worth briefly highlighting three issues that arise from the discussion of the 1959 Lhasa uprising: the role of the Dalai Lama, the discourse of the "people," and alternative histories of Tibet.

Without question, the Dalai Lama is central to the "value system" of Tibetans. How have ordinary Tibetans represented their relationship to the Dalai Lama? The popular image of Gandhi as Mahatma offers an instructive parallel. Shahid Amin's "historical fieldwork" on the Gandhian politics of Indian peasants might serve as a model for understanding the Dalai Lamaian politics of ordinary Tibetans.

(Amin, 1988; Amin, 1995). Amin investigated the relationship between Gandhi and his followers in the Chauri Chaura riots of 1922, in which peasant demonstrators killed 23 policemen while shouting slogans such as “Long Live Mahatma Gandhi!” Gandhi was aghast that his non-violent principles had prompted acts of violence, and he temporarily halted the non-cooperation movement. Through fragments from judicial records, historical archives, and popular memory in oral histories, Amin constructs an intertwined web of narratives about the riots to recover the perspective of Indian subalterns. Of course, Gandhi and the Dalai Lama do not occupy directly comparable positions. However, connections between them are especially interesting since the Dalai Lama was inspired by Gandhi to adopt a policy of non-violence, and Indian officials often display toward Tibetans an elitism that is remarkably similar to their attitudes toward Indian subalterns.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the subaltern position of Tibetan refugees in India (including the Dalai Lama) in relation to Indian nationalism requires much more attention than it has received.

The recent history of Tibet also includes many examples of subalterns represented as “the people.” The Dalai Lama’s frequent references to “my people” and the Chinese discourse of “the people” (People’s Liberation Army, etc.) claim the same discursive space, and these acts of representation have created subaltern positions for Tibetans. Shortly after the Chinese invasion in 1950, groups in Lhasa began to organize in the name of the “people.” The largest of these was *Mimang Tsongdu* (People’s Assembly), founded in 1954, which is considered the first popular movement in Tibetan history. As Shakya notes: “The name ‘Mimang Tsongdu’ was deliberately defiant. The Tibetan term ‘Mimang’ had been coined by the Communists who had created it from Tibetan to mean ‘people’ as understood in Western political terminology.”<sup>14</sup> This raises an important question: did the Chinese import into Tibet not merely a set of reforms against which Tibetans rebelled, but also a set of discourses (people, class, strata, etc.) which enabled the articulation of subaltern positions crucial to Tibetan resistance? During the 1950s, many people negotiated between existing categories of “belonging” and newer categories of nation, “people,” and citizen. (Hansen, 2000) This is not to suggest that Tibetan categories of “belonging” did not exert political power. The “golden throne” movement of 1957 promoted religious rituals and ceremonies that had profound political consequences, including strengthening the Kham resistance.<sup>15</sup> This Chinese/Tibetan discourse of the “people” continues to be defiantly appropriated in acts of subaltern resistance. A Tibetan peasant who showed Ian Buruma photographs of the Dalai Lama and told him about hardships during the Cultural Revolution responded to a facetious, “Long Live Chairman Mao,” with the remark: “Bullshit, Long live us, the people.” (Buruma, 2000:25)

Finally, subaltern studies encourages scholars to take seriously the alternative histories, paths not taken, and the small voices of Tibet. Recent histories of Tibet in the 20th century have begun to make this possible (Shakya, 1999, Goldstein, 1989), and further studies of this kind are on the horizon (Tuttle, 2002). For example, Carole McGranahan’s account of Ragpa Pangdatsang’s (Rab dga’ sPang mda’ tshang) “Tibet Improvement Party” at the end of the British Raj makes excellent use of official papers, oral histories, and private diaries to explore the limitations of the colonial archive. (McGranahan, 2001a, and 2001b) Taking inspiration from

subaltern studies, McGranahan suggests the possibilities of remembering and narrating Tibetan histories “on the margins” of nation and empire.(cf. Pandey, 1995) The diversity of Tibetan experiences remains crucial. As Matthew Kapstein notes, “Tibetans are, as it were, suspended between Dharamsala and Beijing,” but the sources of tension within contemporary Tibet are also informed by “generational, regional, sectarian, and educational difference.”(Kapstein, 1998:146) Subaltern studies or other postcolonial discourse may yet become more influential for the study of Tibet. Perhaps someone will take another page from subaltern studies and explore the possibilities of a book about Tibet entitled *Dominance Without Hegemony*.

## Notes

1. “Why is there no socialism in the United States?” is the classic query, one which is illuminated by the related question, “why is there no soccer in the United States?” See, most recently, Markovits and Hellerman, 2001.
2. In a substantial essay, David Germano highlights limitations inherent in Lopez’s critique of orientalism. He recognizes the “space-clearing” gesture of the critique, but he underestimates its importance. (Germano, 2001).
3. Ludden, 2001, available on the web: <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~dludden/subaltvol-intro.htm>. See the eleven volumes in the *Subaltern Studies* series, and several collections of essays, including Ludden, 2001; Chaturvedi, 2000; Guha, 1997; and Guha and Spivak, 1988.
4. Consider the title of Ortner, 1996, as representative of the range of options: “Making Gender: toward a Feminist, Minority, Postcolonial, Subaltern, etc., Theory of Practice.”
5. For examples of readers, see Guha and Spivak, 1988; Guha 1997, Rodriguez, 2001. See also some of the many articles that have considered the implications of subaltern studies for other fields of study: Herschatter, 1993; Prakash, 1994; Mallon, 1994; Cooper, 1994; Cherniavsky, 1996; Webber, 1997.
6. This is a very wide field, mostly on the Tibetan borderlands, but increasingly in China and Tibet. See, for example, Ortner 1999, Huber 1999, Makley 1997, Adams 1996a, Adams 1996b, Samuel 1993, Goldstein and Beall 1990, Mumford 1989, Paul 1982.
7. See, for example, Pachen, 2000; Tapontsang, 1997; Goldstein, 1997; Carnahan, 1995.
8. For the Chinese communiqué, Tezpur statement, and related documents, see *Concerning the Question of Tibet*, 5, 77; Sen, 1960:133-140, 146; Hutheesing, 1960:49-50, 87, and *The Question of Tibet and the Rule of Law*, 1959:192-3.
9. Shakya points out that division into “sects” did not affect the laity in Tibet (Shakya, 1999: 134). It did, however, have significant effects on the monks.
10. In a perceptive review of *Dragon in the Land of Snows*, Martin Mills notes symbolic parallels to the more recent uprisings in Lhasa of the late 1980s. See Mills, 1999:211-12, and Schwartz, 1994.
11. As Gyan Prakash suggests, even when it falls short of its “impossible” aims, subaltern studies offers new possibilities for the writing of history. Prakash, 2000.
12. The diversity of opinions expressed in *Tibet Journal* is itself striking evidence of the tolerance of its sponsors toward independent viewpoints, and very different from conformity to a party line.
13. During the Lhasa uprising, the Dalai Lama thought about his visit to Rajgat and wondered what advice Mahatma Gandhi would have given him. (Dalai Lama, 1962:106) As an example of the subaltern status of Tibetan refugees in India, Nehru

said in press conferences that Tibetan refugees seldom gave accurate statements (e.g. Patterson, 1960:167) in terms that enunciated clearly the prose of counter-insurgency.

14. Shakya, 1999: 145. For similar politics of translation, see Shakya, 1994. A special issue of *positions* provides a useful discussion of the “people,” “popular,” and “masses” in modern China. (“Chinese Popular Culture and the State,” 2001).
15. Tsering Shakya persuasively argues that the “golden throne” movement stemmed from religious motives and had political consequences, rather than being a clandestine resistance movement from the beginning, as is sometimes suggested. See Shakya, 1999: 165, and Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang, 1973.

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