Eat the Buddha: Life and Death in a Tibetan Town. Barbara Demick. New York: Penguin Random House, 2020. ISBN: 9780812998764

There are many reasons why you might wish to read *Eat the Buddha* by Barbara Demick. She served as an investigative reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and has won multiple awards for her previous works including being shortlisted for a Pultizer Prize; perhaps most compelling is the evocative title of the book itself—*Eat the Buddha*. Why "eat" and also why "Buddha" one might wonder. The title has been borrowed from an essay of the same name by Akester and Li which documents the Red Army's military retreat to the Tibetan plateau in response to the attacks from Koumitang forces during 1935, now famously memorialized as the "Long March." While the title refers to the Red Army soldiers' literal consumption of food votives or offerings (known as *tormas* in Tibetan) which are commonly found in Buddhist monasteries, the title also serves as a powerful allegory for the destruction of Tibetan culture by the Communist regime in its efforts to annihilate Buddhism amongst the Tibetan community and to replace it with unquestioning servitude towards another religion and its vanguards, Communism and the Communist Party of China.

Demick takes Ngaba, a small town on the eastern side of Sichuan Province, located roughly at the intersection of the Tibetan plateau and Chinese territories, as the site of her study. The choice of Ngaba as the focus of her work instead of Lhasa (the capital of Tibet) might seem peculiar from the outside, but Demick lucidly illustrates why Ngaba and not Lhasa has historically been at the forefront of pro-Tibet uprisings and is home to the highest number of self-immolators to date. *Eat the Buddha* introduces the reader to multiple protagonists who bring the dynamic town to life including the last princess of Mei Kingdom who recognized Ngaba as its capital or protagonists ranging from the erstwhile school principal and later private secretary to the Dalai Lama to monks and shop owners. The shift in perspectives ensures that the book

does not read like an official archival record but rather as a history of the town. It presents itself as a richly textured tapestry pieced together by individual life-stories which are balanced against one another, sometimes corroborating the historically important events and at other times contradicting individual timelines.

While there are many points of entry and debate that the book brings up, I wish to highlight three reasons that make the book particularly important both from a historiographic as well as a psycho-social point of view. First and perhaps most importantly, Demick's writing retains humaneness in its recounting of ordinary Tibetan lives. The stories remain free from moralistic judgments and retain their inherent ethical complexity. The life-stories of its multiple characters show there are no absolute heroes and no pure villains; human life resides somewhere between. Demick contrasts Princess Gongpo's comfortable life coming to a halt as the Red Army conquers the Tibetan plateau with the many low-ranked Tibetans who secretly rejoice at the conquest because they believe in the Communist promise of equal distribution of wealth and status. The author sensitively weaves these intersecting narratives and explains the hard choices that the inhabitants make through the lens of survivability and precariousness rather than through moral rights and wrongs.

Second, by providing a chronological history of the town through the individual life-histories of its inhabitants, the book allows the reader to view historical moments not as neutral events but as ones that impact and change the protagonists' personal lives. Throughout the book, readers will find themselves empathizing with the protagonists and feeling the burden of their hard choices. It is heart-wrenching to read about the advent of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and how once again it spells personal tragedy for Gongpo. Not only is she quietly informed about the death of her parents (labeled as counter-revolutionaries), but she is

subsequently exiled to northwest China for a life of hard labor to make amends for her family's feudal past. Yet, the same revolution offers immense opportunity for Delek, a poor street-smart teenager who is able to create a niche for himself as an intermediary businessman between the Tibetans and the Chinese.

Finally, this book offers a delicate and intricately layered portrayal of the everyday life of ordinary citizens of Ngaba. The book steers clear of grand narrativization that celebrates heroes and instead it focuses on ordinary lives and the everyday as the site of negotiation, resistance and moments of heroism. Despite decades of military control and ever-changing restrictions on education, worship, and movement, Tibetans are still able to find the cracks and carry out every-day acts of resistance. They hang the picture of Dalai Lama in their homes or listen to his lectures on their smartphones or simply pray to Avalokiteshvara (Boddhisatva of compassion) who is believed to have been reincarnated as the Dalai Lama when all else is banned.

Demick also illustrates how protests, especially the internationally covered self-immolations of Ngaba, do not represent "breaks" in everyday life of Tibetans but rather the spillover of years of frustration, helplessness, and anger experienced by the community under the restrictive Communist policies. Most of the self-immolators are not only monks from Ngaba but are also descendants of Tibetan resistance fighters. When seen through this lens, resistance and protests are not historic "one-off" events but are like trans-generational traumatic wounds which seem to express themselves differentially with each generation, lying dormant and internally seething for some while intensely exploding for others.

Eat the Buddha is an ocean of ordinary, everyday Tibetan lives, but everyday lives are also the sites of regeneration, hope, and, when seen from afar, an assemblage of tiny resistances that ever so often serve a mighty blow.

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