

Remembering the Revolution in Tibet

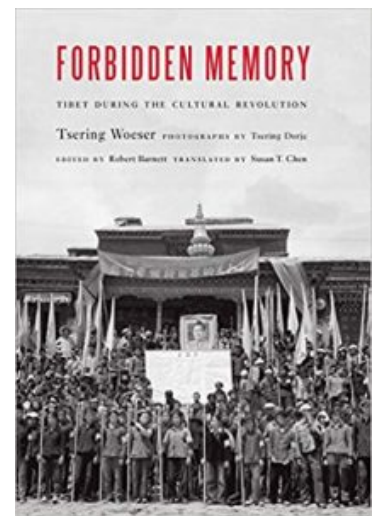
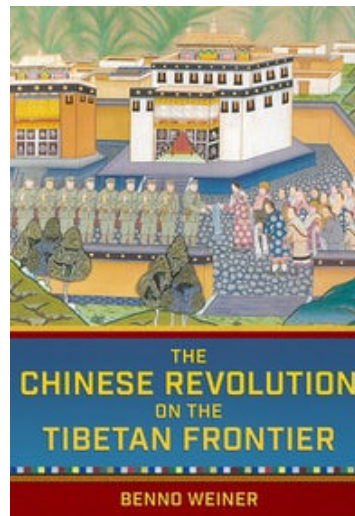
In this review essay, **Riga Shakya** reviews two recent books that make important and timely contributions to understanding the history of Sino-Tibetan relations and China's modern nation-building.

Remembering the Revolution in Tibet

***The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier.* Benno Weiner. Cornell University Press. 2020.**

***Forbidden Memory: Tibet during the Cultural Revolution.* Tsering Woeser, with introduction by Robert Barnett (translated by Susan T. Chen). Potomac Books (imprint of University of Nebraska Press). 2020.**

The twentieth century saw tremendous changes across the Tibetan plateau, none more sweeping than the turbulent revolutionary experiments of the Mao era (1949-76) of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The history of Sino-Tibetan relations is a fraught one, framed largely as a debate between advocates of Tibetan independence and the Chinese state over Tibet's rightful international status. [The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier](#) by Benno Weiner and the English-language translation of Tsering Woeser's [Forbidden Memory: Tibet during the Cultural Revolution](#), translated by Susan T. Chen with an introduction by Robert Barnett, are two recent books which make important and timely interventions in the field of Sino-Tibetan history and the PRC nation-building process in its borderlands.



The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier is an academic study of the transition between empire and nation state in the Amdo region of Eastern Tibet. It examines the ideologies, practices and negotiations that facilitated Communist Party of China (CCP) rule in a non-Chinese ethnic frontier region. It is written by Weiner, a historian of Modern China, Tibet and Inner Asia at Carnegie Mellon University.

Forbidden Memory is a collection of essays on a cache of previously unexamined photographs taken during the violence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) from the foremost China-based Tibetan dissident intellectual, Woeser. It is complemented by oral histories and a comprehensive introduction written by a leading scholar of modern Tibet, Barnett. While taking divergent approaches to the history of communist rule in Tibetan regions, both books firmly establish the critical study of the Tibetan encounter with the Chinese state during the Maoist era as a legitimate and urgent field of inquiry.



Image Credit: Photo by Tsering Dorje

Early CCP policy in Tibetan regions was one of mutual accommodation that hinged on the notion that the Tibetan populace was not ideologically prepared for fully fledged revolution. Following a decisive People's Liberation Army (PLA) victory at the Battle of Chamdo in 1950, the CCP sought to work with the local religious elite and landed aristocracy across Central and Eastern Tibet to establish so-called 'democratic reform'.

Building on previous work on the early CCP in Tibet by [Melvyn Goldstein](#), [Tsering Shakya](#) and, more recently, [Jianglin Li](#), *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* explores this process of cooperation in Zeku County (Tib. *Tsekhok*), a nomadic pastoral area in greater Repgong in the region of eastern Tibet known as Amdo. It examines the period when the CCP 'attempted to turn a culturally foreign and physically demanding corner of a former imperial borderland into an integrated component of the new, socialist nation state' (xv).

Restricted access to archives, the paucity and complicated nature of available materials, state censorship and the persistence of historical trauma are among some of the entangled factors that make studies of the early years of CCP rule in ethnic minority regions increasingly few and far between. Weiner utilises previously untapped resources from the Zeku County Communist Party and Committee archives and the Zeku County People's Government Archives to examine the anxieties and tensions between the county, prefectural and provincial levels of government bureaucracy and the local Tibetan populace, which culminated in the 1958 Amdo Rebellion and its brutal pacification by the CCP state.

This book is a remarkable contribution to our understanding of this era as state archival material from this period is rarely accessible to researchers. Weiner – ever reflective on the politics of knowledge production – handles this material with adroitness, taking state sources seriously while avoiding the reproduction of statist categories and drawing the reader's attention to elisions and inconsistencies.



Photo by [Evgeny Nelmin](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The introduction to *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* lays out the historical background of the Amdo region and a theoretical framework for understanding the transition from the multi-ethnic Qing empire to CCP rule. Chapters One and Two centre on the dynamics of CCP-Tibetan collaboration and the persistence of imperial ideology in the forging of a modern Chinese nation state. They examine the ways early CCP policy relied on Qing and Republican-era norms of interaction with the local Tibet elite.

Drawing on what [Uradyn Bulag](#) has termed ‘subimperialism’ – the way in which imperial strategies of rule were employed in the service of a nation-building project – Weiner demonstrates that incorporating feudal elements of society such as local chieftains and lamas into the party apparatus was a necessary course of action as the CCP realised it ‘did not have direct access to the Tibetan masses’ (52). From this point on, the focus narrows to the ideological and practical motivations of the Maoist ‘high-modernist project’ in Amdo, with Chapter Three paying specific attention to the creation of the Zeku Tibetan Autonomous County. For Weiner, ‘nationality autonomy was considered the key mechanism by which non-Han people would be both administratively and psychologically integrated into the new state and nation’ (66).

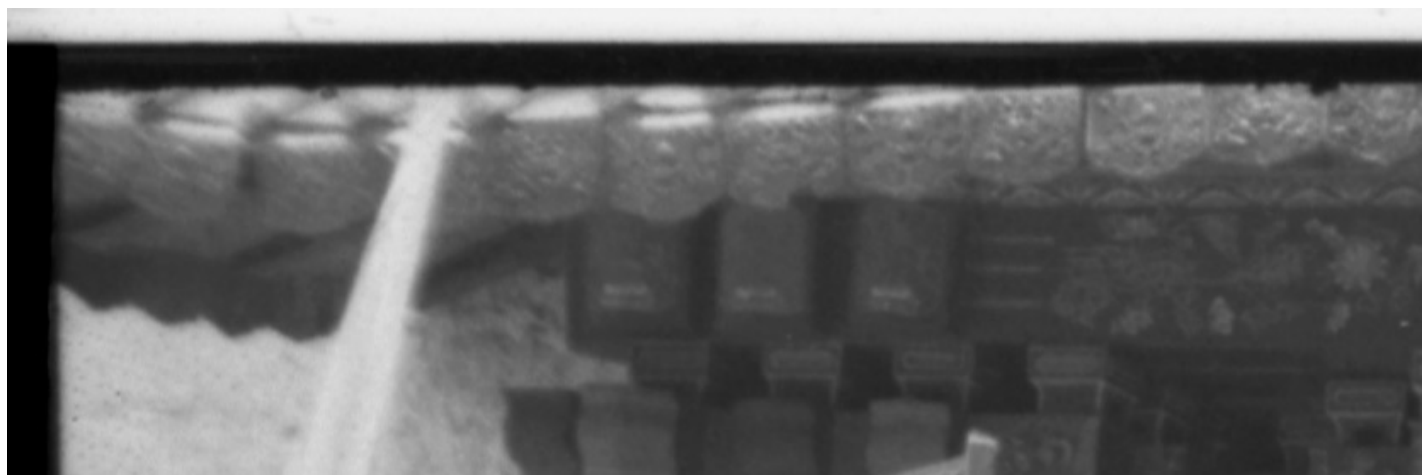
Chapter Four looks at how the state used the establishment of county joint committees and work groups that focused on industrial, agricultural and pastoral reform to build a more direct relationship with the general populace, while remaining aware of the importance of subimperial configurations of elite cooperation. Chapters Five and Six detail how the relationship between the state and local elites began to falter in the midst of the ‘high tide’ of socialist transformation between 1955 and 1956, with a particular focus on the implementation of collectivisation in Zeku. From this period onwards, class becomes an operative category in the official discourse identifying the region as a ‘feudal society with capitalist characteristics’ and rife with ‘exploitation and class oppression’ (131). Despite some retractions in policy, Weiner argues that it is from here that the relationship between the CCP and their elite partners became untenable.

Chapters Seven and Eight reflect this inevitable denouement, with Weiner describing the shift between the initial gradualist policy and the ultimate revolutionary goals of the CCP in the build-up to the 1958 Amdo Rebellion. The violence of this destroyed lives and imparted continued intergenerational trauma. It also ‘damaged [the] Party’s mechanism of nationality rapprochement and severed its narrative of national unity’ (208).

Among the many strengths of Weiner’s work is the centring of the United Front (Ch. *tongyi zhanxian*), an integral, bureaucratic institution of the CCP that sought to bring non-Party and nonproletarian elements into political processes as allies as an indispensable part of subimperialism (17). The United Front operates as an insidious institution to this day, maintaining its relevance for both Han and non-Han ethnic minority communities living abroad, yet studies of its history and practices are rare.

Weiner’s book is admittedly a project that looks at nation-building from the perspective of the CCP state. However, some attention to the role of Chinese-Tibetan translation and the linguistic mediation of the revolution in Tibetan regions may have contributed to show the incompatibility between indigenous Tibetan understandings of socio-political concepts and the high-modernist project of the Chinese nation. *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* is nonetheless a landmark publication in modern Tibetan history, early PRC history and the history of Chinese nation-building in its frontier regions. This book should be required reading for anybody interested in the history of Sino-Tibetan relations or modern Chinese nation-building.

Forbidden Memory: Tibet during the Cultural Revolution consists of Woesser’s literary commentary and reflections on eleven galleries of 284 monochrome photographs taken by her father Tsering Dorje in Tibet roughly between 1964 and 1976. The rich visual archive of Dorje, a PLA officer and photographer, represents one of our only windows into the devastation of the Cultural Revolution period in Central Tibet.





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Image Credit: Photo by Tsering Dorje

The period remains a contentious and controversial subject in China in general, and there are few written accounts of it from modern-day ethnic regions. Visual records from this time, both official and private, remain even more scant. Originally published in Taiwan in 2006 under the Chinese title *Shajie* – literally ‘Looting and Killing’, a reference to the Tibetan word for revolution – Woesser’s work was a shocking and powerful evocation of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution for Tibetans in China and in exile alike.

In the foreword, Wang Lixiong, Woesser’s husband and prominent Chinese dissident writer, reflects on the relationship between state power and historical memory. For him the gap in state records on Tibet between 1966 and 1971 recalls Czech writer Milan Kundera’s famous adage that ‘the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting’ (viii). Barnett’s comprehensive introduction to the book reminds us how the events depicted in Dorje’s photographs followed a period of negotiation and collaboration between the CCP and traditional Tibetan elites in Central Tibet between 1950 and 1959, which closely followed the script laid out in Weiner’s *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier*.

It was thousands of refugees under violent military suppression by the PRC in Eastern Tibet that invigorated the uprising on 10 March 1959. This precipitated the Dalai Lama’s flight to India. A line was drawn from this point on in PRC policy, with the appeasement of local elites giving way to more radical revolutionary policies of Democratic Reform (Ch. *minzhu gaige*). The violence of the Cultural Revolution stemmed from critical ideological divergences in the CCP between the gradualist policies of the United Front and the radical leftists led by Mao. Arguing that the party had been co-opted by bourgeois and counter-revolutionary elements, Mao called for students and activists around the country to recapture power by ‘carrying out a great cultural revolution and by openly and fully mobilizing the broad masses from the bottom up to expose these sinister phenomena’ (xxiii).

Woesser’s essays, which draw heavily on the collection of oral histories in Lhasa, are divided into five parts that take us from 1964 to 1976 through reflections on her father’s original photography. The first part centres on the early stages of the Cultural Revolution in Lhasa with four galleries of images on the arrival of Red Guards in Tibet, the sacking of the Jokhang temple, the first struggle sessions against class enemies who were termed ox-demon-snake-spirits (Ch. *niugui sheshen*) and the renaming of people, public spaces and municipal districts as part of smashing ‘the four olds’ (159).





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Image Credit: Photo by Tsering Dorje

Part Two, the bulk of the book, details the factional rift between grassroots activists, party members, bureaucrats and military personnel during the heady days of revolutionary destruction. Following the official remit to oust 'local emperors' or hidden counter-revolutionaries in high office, grassroots activists led by a local Han Chinese teacher Tao Changsong turned against Zhang Guohua, the highest CCP official in Central Tibet, forming the grassroots ideological faction Gyenlog (ch. *Zaozong*). Those loyal to Zhang in turned formed their own factional group Nyamdrel (*Dalianzhi*). The vicious armed conflict between these two groups would engulf all strata of society regardless of ethnic or class background. Which side one supported was a matter of life and death as each insisted 'its members alone were the true Marxists and true defenders of Mao Zedong' (206).

The violent images here are at once tragic, traumatic, disturbing and poetic. Woesser's voice is emotive and polemical, yet attuned to the cruel ironies of a mass movement that radicalised the local Tibetan populace to destroy temples and even inflict violence on each other. Her analysis extends to the formal elements of Dorje's camerawork. She draws our attention to the framing and composition, while also sharing deeply personal reflections on her father's role as witness and active participant in the events he was photographing as a military official.

Part Three focuses on the role of the PLA in Tibet in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. On 11 May 1967, a Military Control Commission was established in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) to restore law and order. Due to the sensitive nature of military archives, we know little about the PLA's involvement in Tibet during this period. Dorje's photos give us a rare glimpse into mass rallies of the Tibet Military region including their Cultural Work Troupes, who represented the literary and artistic wing of the army.

Another gallery documents the construction of local militias in Lhasa as well as in Kham in Eastern Tibet where Dorje was transferred. These images of Tibetan villagers – both men and women – holding rifles and marching under images of Mao are a fascinating insight into the construction of the socialist subject in Tibet. Part Four looks at how the dissolving of factional groups led to the establishment of a centralised Revolutionary Committee, the implementation of People's Communes and the near deification of Mao.



Image Credit: Photo by Tsering Dorje

Part Five, a coda to the volume, takes us to the post-Mao era and includes images of public mourning after Mao's death and the transition to rule under Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping. In the post-script Woeseer recreates some of her father's photos with shots of modern-day Lhasa, reflecting on the photographic image as witness. Hearing a 'red song' by the state singer Tseten Drolma in front of the Potala Palace in the present leads Woeseer to remark: 'the sense of temporal dislocation that I felt was absurd. It was deeply painful to realize, through such a small sign, that the Cultural Revolution had not finished' (326). An important appendix provides the full text of a valuable oral testimony by a remorseful Tibetan participant in the events of the period.

Forbidden Memory is a poignant and uncompromising consideration of one of the most violent, traumatic and transformative periods in world history. Woeseer's deeply personal essays, expertly translated by Chen, and Dorje's photographs provoke challenging questions about the role of remembering (and forgetting) political violence in the construction of national histories, the moral stakes of Tibetan involvement in the Cultural Revolution and the limits and value of photographs as historical sources. It is essential reading for anybody interested in modern Chinese history, Sino-Tibetan relations and the construction of historical memory in general.

Woeseer's attention to the way historical memory is produced, reinforced and contested through intimate visual materials and personal testimony is a fitting complement to the archival rigour demonstrated by Weiner's consideration of internal state documents. In their own ways, both works dislodge the prevailing state-centric frameworks for understanding the history of Sino-Tibetan relations and they privilege the agency of Tibetan historical actors. Read together, *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* and *Forbidden Memory: Tibet during the Cultural Revolution* may herald a new wave of compelling and nuanced scholarship about Tibet under Chinese rule.

Note: This review essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Thank you to Potomac Books (imprint of University of Nebraska Press) for giving permission to use Tsering Dorje's images in this review. Photos in this review should not be re-used without permission.
