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The Noodle Maker of Kalimpong: The Untold Story of My Struggle for Tibet

by Gyalo Thondup and Anne F. Thurston.

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Gyalo Thondup is the elder brother of the fourteenth (current) Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, and for many years his close advisor. This important and poignant firsthand account of the life and times of his family and the Tibetan people sheds light on religion and politics in a mysterious land few people have access to. Tibetan Buddhism recognizes two spiritual leaders—the Dalai and Panchen Lamas—each held to be the reincarnation of his predecessor going back many generations. Three to four years after the death of a Dalai or Panchen Lama, a group of senior lamas (monks) is appointed to find his reincarnation in a small boy of Tibetan heritage born after his death. They do so by following prescribed directions and omens. Four years after the thirteenth Dalai Lama died in 1933, an illiterate farmer's son was chosen as his successor. The new Dalai Lama is the son of an ethnic Tibetan from Qinghai province in western China, the home of several ethnic/religious groups (including ethnic Han, some of whom are Muslim, and Tibetans) then governed by a Han Muslim general, Ma Pufang.

The boy Dalai Lama was taken to the Potala Palace in Lhasa to be educated, while a regent ruled until he attained adulthood. The rest of his family also moved to Lhasa; his father became a high nobleman and was given several large estates worked by serfs; his mother received the title of "Great Mother." While three of the new Dalai Lama's brothers also became lamas, elder brother Gyalo was given a secular education so he could become his advisor. Since, as Gyalo recalls, "there was no such thing as modern education in Lhasa" (57), the Dalai Lama's regent, Renting Rimpoche, considered to be pro-Chinese, decided to give Gyalo a Chinese education, hoping thereby to gain the Chinese government's backing in a looming power struggle against a pro-British faction in Tibet.

After some tutoring in Chinese by Renting's Chinese interpreter, sixteen-year-old Gyalo arrived at the Chinese capital Nanjing in 1946, together with two Tibetan officials and the chief officer of the Chinese central government stationed in Lhasa, as part of a mission to congratulate President Chiang Kai-shek on China's victory against Japan. Though Gyalo remained in Nanjing, ostensibly to study, by his own admission, he did not qualify to enroll in a Chinese university and, in any case, preferred having a good time, living in a fully staffed house provided by the government, complete with a chauffeured car. He began dating a Han Chinese girl who had a BA in social work and married her in 1948. The couple fled China for Hong Kong in 1949 after the Communists won the civil war.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, as Great Britain consolidated its Indian Empire, it had become interested in neighboring Tibet because of its long border with India and to forestall any Russian advances in the region. Britain, however, lost interest in Tibet after 1948 when it granted India and Pakistan their independence. Heir to most of the British Empire in South Asia, India also inherited Britain's ambitions and concerns in neighboring Tibet, particularly a fear that the People's Republic of China would reassert its dominance over borderlands that the previous weak Chinese state had lost since the late nineteenth century. Thus, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru invited Gyalo and his wife to India, where he might be useful in transmitting messages between India, China, and the United States. They were sent to Kalimpong, a small town near the India-Tibet border. Unable to establish contact

with Tibetan authorities, who were apparently in complete disarray, Gyalo, his wife, and newborn daughter soon left for Taiwan, where he came under the wing of his old patron Chiang Kai-shek.

In October 1950, a twenty-thousand-man Chinese army marched into Khampa in eastern Tibet, crushing minor local resistance in two weeks. Fearful that Chinese forces would continue toward Lhasa, the Dalai Lama fled the city in disguise, headed for the Indian border and left his deputies to deal with the Chinese. Negotiations in Beijing produced a Seventeen Point Agreement between the Chinese central government and the Dalai Lama's deputies, in which China guaranteed to maintain his authority and the Tibetan political and religious system, whereupon the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa.

Gyalo and his family stayed in Taiwan for sixteen months and were well treated. Then the Nationalist government issued him a passport, arranged for his family to go to the United States, gave him $50,000, no small sum at the time, and advised him to use the money to pursue a university education. It helped him contact the US State Department, which also gave him money and counseled him to use the funds to study at Stanford University. Gyalo, however, was not interested in studying; he quickly spent a good portion of the money he had received and then left for India, where he deposited his wife and daughter and returned to Tibet. As he writes,

> I believed that Tibet was badly in need of reforms, and had some ideas of my own about how to bring them about. I believed that the time had come for a major restructuring of Tibet's thousand-year-old system of land ownership. Monasteries and wealthy aristocrats needed to begin dividing up their estates, giving land to the people who farmed them…. In Taiwan another type of land reform was being implemented based on Sun Yat-sen's principle of land to the tiller. The process was peaceful and gradual, bringing greatest benefit to the poorest farmers while not greatly reducing the incomes of the landlords. (129–30)

Gyalo's vague notions of reform, however, had no place in China's plans, but luckily for him Mao Zedong asked him to lead a delegation of Tibetans to attend a conference of the Communist Youth League scheduled to be held in Vienna, thus giving him an excuse to get out of the country. Assured he would be welcomed by Prime Minister Nehru, with the help of the Indian consul-general in Lhasa he crossed the border into India instead of heading for Europe.

From India, Gyalo began a quixotic quest for international help to free Tibet from Chinese control. He asked President Chiang for help and wrote to US President Harry Truman, urging him to convince the Chinese to withdraw from Tibet. Naively, Gyalo was shocked when Indian authorities prohibited him from engaging in political activities and suggested he instead go into the import-export business as many Tibetan refugees had done in border towns like Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Nonetheless, the Indian and Pakistani governments turned a blind eye to many Tibetans' clandestine activities in India.

The CIA also became interested in Tibetan affairs. Starting in 1957, with the Dalai Lama's secret approval, more than 270 Tibetans were selected from the refugees in India and sent to a meeting place in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), whence the CIA flew them to Camp Hale in Colorado for training in mountain warfare, radio operations, and guerrilla tactics. They then infiltrated Tibet in 1958 to lead an insurrection against the Chinese. The enterprise failed miserably, not only because the Tibetans were hopelessly outmatched by the Chinese forces and the United States failed to air-drop enough arms and supplies, as Gyalo charged. More significantly, the Tibetan guerrillas' technical deficiencies made it hard for them to pinpoint air-drop locations. Nor did they grasp the importance of stealth in guerrilla operations. As a result, the Tibetan uprising failed completely and the CIA project came to an end.

Gyalo, understandably devastated by the failure of the uprising, wrongly claimed that "if the CIA had given us enough weapons, the resistance would have had a chance. Had I understood how paltry the CIA's support would be, I would never have sent these young men for training. Mao was not the only one to cheat the Tibetans. The CIA did too" (202). Obviously, he underestimated the difficulties of delivering

materials into Tibet by air-drops; he also failed to mention that the wrong coordinates provided by the Tibetans caused many of the air-dropped weapons to fall into Chinese hands. In 1959, the Dalai Lama and a small entourage fled Lhasa for India, which granted them political asylum. According to Gyalo, captured Chinese documents stated that "between March 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled and October 1960, the People's Liberation Army had 'wiped out' eighty-seven thousand Tibetan 'bandits' in central Tibet alone" (180–81).

The Indian government permitted the Dalai Lama to establish a government in exile in India (he eventually settled on Dharamsala, a small town in the Himalaya Mountains) and to maintain several offices in New Delhi. Gyalo's initial responsibilities in the government in exile concerned foreign affairs, dealing with various governments and international organizations. When China and India went to war in 1962 over border disputes, India permitted the Tibetan exiles to form a military contingent to fight alongside the Indian army. Six thousand Tibetan men joined this secret unit called the Special Frontier Force, which continues to the present. In 1964 the CIA, Indian Intelligence, and Tibetan exiles set up a Joint Operations Center to share intelligence.

Gyalo continued his involvement with the Tibetan cause in a murky intelligence world. His contacts with Soviet intelligence representatives in India came to nothing. He also visited Hong Kong and Taiwan and, with the Dalai Lama's permission, went to China in 1979–80, where he had discussions with the Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, who allowed several delegations of Tibetan exiles to visit Tibet. According to Gyalo, Deng ultimately reneged on his promises to grant certain concessions to Tibetans.

Gyalo ended his official involvement with the Tibetan government in 1999 for unspecified reasons and has since had few private contacts with his brother. He and his wife returned to Kalimpong, bought some land, raised a few cows to sell milk, and set up a noodle factory. Sadly, he continued to blame the CIA and the United States for not giving the Tibetans sufficient help to win their independence. Moreover, the present book exposes his spotty and inadequate understanding of world politics and international realities. Like many other Tibetans, Gyalo argues that, because Tibet was a powerful state in the eighth century, present-day Tibetans have a valid claim to be a modern independent nation. So, too, China unrealistically maintains that Tibet should remain a part of China because the Qing government brought Tibet under its control in the eighteenth century.

Though many Americans and other westerners sympathize with Tibetans' hopes for independence and cultural autonomy, going to war with China to attain them is unimaginable and logistically impossible. There is also the underlying problem of reconciling modern ideas of statehood with those of a theocracy that selects its political leaders based on reincarnation and makes policy based on divination. Additionally, international law forbids interference in another nation's internal affairs. Thus, even at the nadir of Chinese power in the late nineteenth century, the British Empire still recognized Chinese suzerainty over Tibet and sought China's consent when negotiating trade and other agreements with the Tibetan local authorities. This helps explain why there has been only one attempt (by two small Central American countries) to introduce a motion to discuss the Tibetan issue in the United Nations General Assembly despite much worldwide sympathy for the Tibetans in their struggles under China's heavy-handed rule.

In her afterword, historian and China specialist Anne Thurston (Johns Hopkins Univ.) critiques at length Gyalo's many controversial, provocative, and unverifiable statements, noting that her misgivings were shared by the Tibetans she consulted. She adds, "Hopefully future historians and social scientists will continue exploring and weighing the competing and contradictory evidence to tell the tragedy of Tibet in all the complexity and nuances it deserves" (312). Meanwhile, Gyalo's autobiography offers students and historians a useful addition to firsthand accounts of modern Tibet.