The history of Tibet is a rather long tale, encompassing many different time periods and varying countries and religions. To cover the entire history in detail would take ages to compile and be told. Tsering Shakya’s *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* is an in depth review of Tibet’s history from 1947 to the present day and begins around the end of Second World War. To call the account thorough would certainly be an understatement, Shakya uses firsthand accounts and primary sources to paint the picture of modern Tibet. The story involves many major players in the world including China, India, Great Britain and the United States and conveys the interactions between these countries and Tibet early on as they struggled to be recognized as an independent country. *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* illustrates exactly how Tibet came to be the place that it is today and illustrates it so by breaking down the history into four main parts and mostly revolves around the region’s relationship with China.

The author of *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, Tsering Shakya, experienced much of the changes that Tibet underwent first hand as he was born in the capital city of Lhasa in 1959, and later fled to India following the invasion of Tibet by China (Shakya, 2000). His family was separated by the Cultural Revolution, he attended varying schools around India and Nepal before earning a scholarship to Study in England. From there, he finished his studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, England. He is considered by many to be the leading scholar on Tibet, namely Modern Tibet, with many published works on the topic including the afore mentioned *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, considered to be his masterwork (Shakya,
The aforementioned qualifications should make it readily apparent just how much of an expert Shakya is on the history of modern Tibet.

The story of Tibet becoming an autonomous region has a lot to do with its neighbors and the roles they played in this long process. China is often painted in a negative light when it comes to discussing their relationship with Tibet, and rightly so. For China, Tibet was in an important strategical position in relation to India and the rest of Asia, and in addition had lucrative resources that China wanted. Tibet, being a sparsely populated country, fell victim to the bullying of the great Communist giant that was China in 1950. The military prowess of China’s People’s Liberation Army severely outclassed that of Tibet’s military. Despite all of this, Tsering Shakya finds a way to give an impartial view to the relationship between China and Tibet at this time. He does this by delving deeply into the inner politics and motives of China in overtaking China, rather than taking the easy stance of China as an evil conquering Communist nation.

Shakya also illustrates just how Tibet searched for help just about everywhere they possibly could. The beginning of the book begins with India becoming an independent nation with the withdrawal of British rule in the region. They sought aid from India in protecting their interests, as China had long laid claim to the region of Tibet, though Tibet didn’t recognize this claim or it was never enforced on them. India had problems of their own and Tibet was the least of their concerns at this time. Tibet needed to be recognized as an independent nation and they couldn’t do so in their current state without some form of international support. To further seek support, they set up a mission in India and sent out radio broadcasts in an effort to draw support
from the United States (Shakya, p. 16). The great powers at the time all felt that the other should be responsible for the Tibet situation, thus leaving Tibet truly stranded and vulnerable to the claim that China had laid on their land. Despite all their efforts, help never came for Tibet, and Shakya illustrates this through use of telegrams sent between nations. The sheer amount of knowledge that Shakya has on Chinese politics is something to behold, and he exercises this knowledge quite thoroughly all through the book. The main point that is brought about by the thoroughness exercised by Shakya is that the political landscape of Asia at the time was not merely black and white and many factors played into events that took place.

Shakya appears to have no agenda in writing this book, besides to recount Tibet’s long history in as much detail as possible, but there is no point to prove or exemplify. Instead, he recounts pivotal events in the history of Tibet with strict focus to detail and does so with no bias what so ever. This is truly an amazing thing when one realizes that the author himself was ousted from his home country because of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. One such event of importance to the history of Tibet was the fleeing of the Dalai Lama from the capital city of Lhasa, which was a perplexing event to almost all involved. One of the more eye opening things that Shakya iterates in this part of the book is the recounting of the involvement of the CIA in the affairs of Tibet. Up to the time of this book’s release it had been widely an unknown fact that the CIA had any involvement at all. But the story claims that:

“The CIA had advised them to think in terms of a long-term guerilla war – Athar remembers that the Americans told them that they could never hope
Daniel Birkbeck
November 2, 2015
Professor Atwood

to oust the Chinese from Tibet and that the best strategy would be for them
to try to disrupt Chinese rule” (Shakya, p. 202).

The true value of this book is its insight into the history of Tibet and the new information
and insight it offers, such as this information about the CIA and Tibet. Shakya’s history of Tibet
is backed up almost entirely from first hand sources and accounts given by people during the
time both inside and outside of Tibet. What also makes this a definitive telling of the history of
Tibet is Shakya’s sheer amount of sources and the way he uses the facts to either refutes or
confirms them. Shakya works only with the facts and hard evidence in this book, and any source
that provides no evidence for their claims is cited in the bibliography as not doing so. From the
footnotes in the book regarding the CIA’s involvement with the Dalai Lama’s escape he states:

“L. Fletcher Prouty, 1973, writes that without the CIA’s help the Dalai
Lama could not have escaped to India, an assumption shared by Grunfeld.
They claim that the ‘logistics of the operation were too complex’ for the
Tibetans to have carried out. There is no evidence to support these claims”
(Shakya, p. 494).

Through all of this, the one thing that Shakya remains true to is his ability to be an
unbiased voice on the history of Tibet. Often when recounting the history, authors tend to
either sway to the Chinese or Tibetan sides. Shakya’s commitment to truly giving a
thorough and fact-checked account of Tibet’s modern history really shines through and
the end product is what could be considered the definitive history of Tibet from 1947
onward. It is hard not to find this story convincing given the sheer number of sources
provided and fact checking done by the author. Seeing the dedication that Shakya devotes to providing an unbiased history of Tibet is enough reason to find the book validating, but in addition, the knowledge within it is unmatched by any other account of Tibet.

The reason this account of Tibet is so essential and thorough is because divulges information that up to the publishing of the book was previously unknown. One such major event that is discussed in the book is that of the Cultural Revolution. According to Shakya, the leaders in Tibet didn’t feel that there was any fear of revisionist movements in Tibet, so there was no need for the revolution to spread to the area. Despite this, China still imposed itself on the region. Even Chinese people may not have stood by Mao Zedong’s choice to enact the class struggle that was the Cultural Revolution. Shakya describes it as: “…the cause and developments of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet are enmeshed with every twist and turn of politics in Beijing” (Shakya, p. 314). What this means is that Tibet’s leaders had little to no say on anything that happened to them and were forced to deal with the consequences of political choices made in China’s capital city of Beijing.

The Red Guards were Mao’s masses of youth who we encouraged to rebel against the feudal ways of Capitalism in China, Mao encouraged this so much that he closed the schools in order to have them carry out “the revolution” (Shakya, 2000). When the Red Guard spread to Tibet, they began hanging posters, which called out any feudal practices and directly prohibited many long-standing Tibetan traditions. The list included the following: “All observance of religious festivals should be abolished,” “No one should
recite prayers, circumambulate, prostrate. People should not consult oracles and diviners,” “All Muslims should also embrace the new society and destroy the old traditions” (Shakya, p. 321). These are only a few of the things listed and not all of them relate to religions but overall the goal was to eliminate feudal traditions of old. Shakya is under the impression that the Red Guard’s actions in Tibet shifted from a focus on fighting feudal ways and Capitalism to one on Tibetan society in general (Shakya, p. 321). The Cultural Revolution had a severe impact on Tibetan society and “Tibet’s Separate identity” (Shakya, p. 323).

Obviously whenever a group of people come under persecution, there is bound to be some backlash and dissent. The book recounts many previously unknown about acts of Rebellion against the local Chinese party. Factions began to form as some groups of people claimed to be true followers of Mao’s wishes and others dissented against the Regional Chinese Communist Party in Tibet. Eventually a number of these groups joined together to form a larger radical group, which referred to them as “the Gyenlog” and had a headquarters at what they declared the “Lhasa Revolutionary Rebel Central Headquarters” (Shakya, p. 327). In turn, those who dissented against this group formed another group, which was called “Nyamdrel.” These two factions formed and began a struggle in which Tibet outright had no control or say in, but were forced to be a part of nonetheless as it was in their homeland. The ensuing battles between these factions forced Tibet into utter chaos, only quelled by intervention from China who came in and restored Tibet to some form of order.
As time progressed, more and more Tibetans became elected to the local government in control of Tibet. What this lead to was reforms and overall a general push to reform the sorry state that the revolution left Tibet in following all the turmoil. Despite some changed brought about, China still stood firm on its religious policies in the region. Tibet is a largely Buddhist region and the leaders wanted to reintroduce a limited allowance for practicing religion in Tibet. “… Religion dominated every aspect of life in Tibet and that any attempt to undermine the centrality of Buddhism would be met with resistance” (Shakya, p. 402). Shakya highlights just how much fervor the Tibetan people felt for Buddhism and once the local Party allowed them to practice, they took full advantage. This set off a sort of domino effect in allowing the Tibetan people to gain a sense of identity once again, something they had lived without for a long time due to Chinese oppression. China tried hard to limit the religious practices of Tibet, but Tibetan culture goes hand in hand with Buddhism. To that end, the Tibetans saw the Dalai lama as both their religious and political leader and hoped for him to return after being exiled, but China stood firm on this issue. Following the reimplementation of religious freedom somewhat, Tibet was able to turn its attention to restoring its economy. Unfortunately through all of this, China still loomed large in the affairs of Tibet and created a bit of tension between the Tibetans and the Chinese, which still persists to today.

In conclusion, Tsering Shakya’s Dragon in the Land of Snows is the definitive history of modern Tibet and reveals much new information previously unknown to the general public regarding many events that went on during this time. Tibet as we know it today wouldn’t be the place it is without the events detailed in this book. China’s
involvement with Tibet, even to this day, continues to shape the region. Tibet felt that it was an independent state following the end of World War II, but lacked the necessary resource to make it independently. Many of the powerful countries at the time felt that Tibet was not worth the effort or simply ignored their requests for help. In turn China saw the value of Tibet as it sat in a strategically important position between India and China. Tibet wouldn’t be the place it is today without the impact that the surrounding countries had on it. Tsering Shakya covers every major detail of this time period in a thorough manner and cites many first hand accounts and documents that had never before even been accessed. The dedication to extreme detail shown by Shakya really shines in his retelling of major turning points in Tibetan history, such as the escape of the Dalai Lama and the Cultural Revolution in Tibet. Shakya is a native of Tibet before being moved out due to the revolution, where he further pursued his education and all of this culminates in his masterwork: The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947. Shakya set out to create a definitive modern history of Tibet and achieved that and much more, giving insight into events and information that was previously uncovered such as the CIA’s involvement in Tibet’s affairs during this time period. Shakya’s novel is a landmark achievement and one should look no further than it when seeking the most in depth source of information on modern Tibet.
Works Cited


