FOREWORD

Mao Zedong was fond of analyzing political situations in terms of their “contradictions,” but he was also enamored of the notion of “the unity of opposites.” As he wrote in “On Contradiction” in 1937, “All contrary things are interconnected; not only do they coexist in a single entity in given conditions, but in other given conditions they also transform themselves into each other. This is the full meaning of the unity of opposites.”

When trying to make sense out of the highly politicized and polemicized debate that has raged over recent events in Tibet, Mao’s notion of the unity of opposites is not a bad analytical mode to call into service. For if contemporary Tibet is anything, it is contradictory. While the atrocities committed by Mao in carrying out his grand plan to reunite China by occupying Tibet with the People’s Liberation Army and the savagery visited on Tibetans subsequently during the Cultural Revolution are undeniable and unpardonable, the Chinese Communist party’s policies toward Tibet became more nuanced with the death of Mao and Deng Xiaoping’s enunciation of his reform platform late in 1978. While political and religious repression continued, a pulse of reform-minded sentiment from Beijing in the early 1980s did presage a period of hopeful liberality that harkened back to the early 1950s. The party’s revised policies allowed for a recrudescence of Tibetan Buddhism and traditional culture, albeit under the ever-watchful eye of party overlords. To understand the past two decades is to understand a paradox of alternating currents—interludes of what the Chinese refer to as *fang*, loosening up, and *shou*, tightening down.

Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet is organized around this paradox that even as things have gotten better in Tibet, they have also gotten worse; even as Beijing has “loosened up” and allowed a religious revival to arise, it has also relentlessly “tightened down,” especially whenever this same religious revival has manifested politically dissident or separatist tendencies. Just as Deng and other architects of

China's reform post-Mao movement imagined that they could keep politics detached from economics, so they hope that religion and politics in Tibet can be kept separated into two discrete universes. As Matthew T. Kapstein writes in his "Concluding Reflections," "The religious revival in Tibet following the Cultural Revolution has . . . been a matter of great delicacy: to the extent that it appears to foster Tibetan national identity, within the context of Tibetan inclusion in the multinational Chinese state, it remains (in principle at least) ideologically unobjectionable, and on this basis local governments have been able to protect and in some cases even support revival movements. At the same time, when religious revival has provided the background for the emergence of genuinely nationalistic expression, the Chinese state has brought its instruments of control, and, if it deems necessary, repression, to bear."

With this book Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew T. Kapstein, two Tibetologists who know the culture, language, people, and geography of this unusual land, have added another important volume to the small but growing collection of work that offers readers informative scholarly research rather than nostalgia or polemics. By doing so, they have helped to refoliate the landscape of Tibetan studies—a landscape that had been denuded by China's earlier reluctance to grant access to outside researchers and that had consequently become overrun with bitter polemics rather than concrete information about what has actually been happening within Tibet's religious institutions.

Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet is cultural anthropology at its best. It provides a rare doorway through which ordinary people and specialists alike can enter Tibet and learn something of what has been happening behind the shroud that separates most visitors from Tibetan reality. Be forewarned, however, that because it is presented in an even-handed unapologetic way, what lies through this doorway may sometimes seem contradictory and confusing. In this sense, it is a perfect embodiment of the notion of the unity of opposites that Mao sought to describe in his 1937 essay. It is also a realistic representation of the contradictory nature of China's relationship to Tibet.

One thing is clear. This book will make interesting reading not only for Westerners who are trying to discern what has been happening in Tibet over the past two decades but for Tibetans and Chinese as well.

Orville Schell