

# **Review of *The Tibetans: A Struggle to Survive***

by Peter Brown

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## **Book Info:**

The Tibetans: A Struggle to Survive

Steve Lehman

Introduction by Robert Coles

Essay by Robbie Barnett

Umbrage Editions

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\$29.95

Steve Lehman's The Tibetans is beautiful and complex, a book that with controlled passion and great thoughtfulness, describes Tibet's struggle for self-determination. Through photography, design, engaged historical writing, interviews, and the commitment of both foreigners and Tibetans, a book has been created that in many ways is transporting.

Lehman, a photojournalist whose work has appeared in international magazines over the past decade, and whose photography in Tibet has been similarly long term, started this book almost by chance. In 1987, while shopping in Lhasa for supplies for an anthropological study, he happened on a demonstration that changed his life, and the lives of many Tibetans. It was small, a political action that included only a handful of monks - but it was the first public outcry against the Chinese in decades, and thus became one of historic dimension. It was immediately apparent to Lehman, and to others (including Robbie Barnett who wrote the historical essay for this book) that the participants were risking their lives. Lehman, camera in hand and moved by their courage, started to photograph.

Previously, like many, he had held romantic views of Tibet: beautiful mountains, rushing streams, spiritual thrall - an otherworldly Shangri-La of a place, populated by industrious people whose lives were grounded in a compelling religion. It's a view still promulgated by many photo books, films and by a style of Western religious questing that often does not include much political content. And it's a view that this book tries to deepen. Back in 1987, Lehman understood little of the turmoil that lay beneath the surface of Tibet, but since, he has uncovered much, and this complex knowledge - both that of contemporary Tibet and of its political history is communicated well here.

The mix of voices he enlists to help tell this story is astonishing. We are spoken to by many, shown places and people, written to, and even offered up bits and pieces of paper. Lehman, (standing in for any of us), begins the book with the history of his own connection to the place. He is followed by Robert Coles, the writer/psychiatrist and professor of social ethics, who, in his introduction, writes of the fascination that many westerners seem to take in Tibet, and for the need that their interests be more fully informed. A beautifully told oral history by the monk, Jampel Tsering follows. Tsering is

the man who conceived the 1987 demonstration, and in very personal ways, tells of his family's history - what has occurred to him since his political work began and what has happened to other Tibetan resisters over the years.

And then the bulk of the book: Lehman's photography, his writing, quotes from a wide variety of Tibetans and a good number of pages that contain collages of sorts - the kind of printed matter that one accumulates over the course of travels: tickets, advertisements, newspaper clippings and the like, all of which place the work in a tactile everyday environment.

Lehman's writing includes both printed captions and a fair amount that is handwritten, scrawled, in haste it seems, over the photographs themselves. Initially, to me, this handwritten work seemed irritating. Lehman's penmanship (I feel like his fourth grade teacher), while legible, is often difficult to make out, and occasionally there is an unedited "cuteness" to some of the commentary. But as I struggled through the writing, which at times even forces one to rotate the book, an interesting thing began to happen.

First, I was simply slowed down, which was good, because much of this material was new to me, and secondly, more and more, it felt as though Lehman himself were speaking, sometimes strongly, sometimes with hesitancy, but always with passion about the things he had witnessed: the demonstrations, the destruction of indigenous Tibetan architecture, the ecological devastation of the land, the co-option of a culture, and the occupation (or as Barnett puts it), the colonization of a country. In this, a personal connection, similar to that experienced through the collages is made. Importantly, the photographs, which are skillfully framed, though often intuitively grabbed, also have this dashed-off quality (some clearly taken just before being chased off a scene). And stylistically this is congruent with the writing as well. Overall, there is a scrapbook quality to this part of the book, as though one were encountering a very personal political/travel journal. Lehman's photography and writing proceed from his own point of view - that of witness. And this interpretive touch, along with the Tibetan voices, make the events and people photographed all the more real.

Ultimately there is an artlessness to the work, in the best sense, that lets the story be told without the sanitization that "art" inspired photojournalism often imposes. While many of these images are beautiful in shape, form and color, conventional photographic aesthetics, in politically charged work like this, often get in the way of content, creating a sumptuousness that undercuts the difficult point being made. In Lehman's case, gorgeous Tibet is tempered by photographic framing, by spontaneity, by the haphazard, by text, by handwriting and by design - all to good end.

I must also say something about the design of the book, by Francesca Richer - which is inspired. With the advent of scanners and an easier placement of objects on a printed page, a potential for inclusion has emerged in book design that is exciting (if not overwhelming). It's particularly appropriate in documentary studies such as this one, which can then draw on, manipulate and juxtapose images from the commonplace more easily than

before, with text. (Another fine example of this is Susan Meiselas' book, Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History.)

The book concludes with a lucid essay by Robbie Barnett, which places all we have experienced in The Tibetans in historical context. It's an essay that makes the confusing history of Tibet understandable, and an essay that while possessing a personal point of view, is balanced. A time line of Tibetan history follows.

In all, the book is a fine introduction to contemporary Tibet, demythologizing in important ways, popular conceptions that have grown around it. The complexity of Tibet's story benefits from the multiple points of view Lehman uses, and his varied way of communicating, coupled with a faceted visual approach give feeling and thought equal emphasis. The result is information that has emotional depth. And through this, Tibet's place in one's interior map changes in important ways.