

An Interview with Melvyn Goldstein

By Shree Pandya and Kevin Wallentine

This semester, students at Claremont McKenna College were fortunate to meet Dr. Melvyn Goldstein, one of the leading world experts on Tibet. An anthropologist by training, Dr. Goldstein's varied career has also included publishing the first comprehensive accounts of Tibetan history and evaluating the effect of the Chinese government's policies on Tibetan farmers and nomads.

Dr. Goldstein first began to study Tibetan culture in 1965, in the Indian city Mysore. "I was at the first Tibetan refugee camp," he said. "It was an incredible place. They took a forest that still had wild elephants in it, and they bulldozed it down. Everyone got one acre." There, he spent two years studying Tibetans' old way of life – dubbed the "old system" – before heading to Nepal to conduct more research.

In 1979, the United States and China signed a bilateral exchange agreement, and Dr. Goldstein finally saw his chance to get into Tibet via a government to government exchange program. "I applied in 1981 and got funded in 1982," he began. "Yet for three years, the United States embassy couldn't get permission from the Chinese." Luckily for Dr. Goldstein, by the late 80's a multitude of tourists were already beginning to visit China. In the wake of their arrival, the Chinese government could hardly justify keeping Goldstein out. "After that, I invented the safest project I could think of and claimed that I wanted to explore new vocabularies in Tibet."

Finally, in 1986 Dr. Goldstein arrived at the Academy of Social Sciences in Lassa, Tibet. "I had no idea what to expect. I was shocked because I found out that rural culture was still intact. I thought there'd be nothing left after the Cultural Revolution, but it was pretty vibrant, which led me to start many of the projects I've worked on." Tibetans were equally surprised by Dr. Goldstein, having never met a Westerner who spoke fluent Tibetan.

The relationship between Dr. Goldstein and the Tibetans flourished to the extent that, after his two month stay, they gave him a gift that would change his life. He recalled, "They said, why don't you take a two week trip? We'll give you a driver; go wherever you want." Since arriving, Dr. Goldstein had wanted to see Mount Kailash – and so he did. "That was the first time I saw the nomads. They looked like they were right out of National Geographic." Upon returning, he proposed a joint-research initiative to the Academy in Lassa, and after a period of wrangling and negotiating, the proposal was accepted. To this day, he continues to focus his research on Tibetan nomads.

Over the course of his career, Dr. Goldstein also maintained an interest in writing a history of modern Tibet. In the 80's, he spent a year in India interviewing Tibetans about the old society. Characterized by Dr. Goldstein as pre-modern, the system featured feudalism and serfdom, with

people hereditarily bound to land. “It was a socially regressive system,” he argued. “Life in the old days was hard.”

The first volume of history spanned the years 1913 to 1951, up until the end of the old society, and the second volume covered the initial interactions of the Chinese and the Dalai Lama. He’s currently finishing the third volume of the series, which “ends up with the Dalai Lama in India, trying to decide if he should stay in exile or not.” Of the book writing process, he says, “It’s just broadened my outlook. When I do history, I have a certain style. I like to include plenty of documents, spend a lot of time interviewing people, and merge the documents with the oral history I hear.”

In his books and his talk, Dr. Goldstein carefully constructs an image of Tibet that isn’t as black or white as common rhetoric portrays. “Much of what you hear here in the United States is exile propaganda. You have to realize that the Chinese and exiles here are in a competition to win public opinion. We hear every bad thing the Chinese government does. Now, in reality, all the bad things are there. But things have also never been better.”

Indeed, his books frequently deal with the challenge of historical what-if’s. Of these, one of the most thought-provoking circumstances arises in 1950, when Mao Zedong had all the means necessary to conquer Tibet. “He could have taken over Lassa, ended the old system, and killed all the aristocrats. But he didn’t. He thought the best route was to incorporate Tibet itself, working through the Dalai Lama and landlords to make Tibetans all consider themselves as part of China.” According to Dr. Goldstein, because of Mao’s “relatively moderated” policies, the Chinese government has been fighting to win over Tibetans since 1951. In a conflict that’s lasted several decades, the Chinese government’s desire to win the hearts and minds of Tibetans gives them a certain amount of agency.

In Tibet today, Dr. Goldstein’s books are bestsellers, surprising many – including him. “The Chinese see Tibet as a spiritual center, so many come to visit Tibetan monasteries, which plays a huge role in their funding.” The tourists usually want to buy a souvenir, leading them to purchase Dr. Goldstein’s history books. “Will they actually read all 800 pages? Absolutely not,” he said, laughing. “But it certainly looks good.”