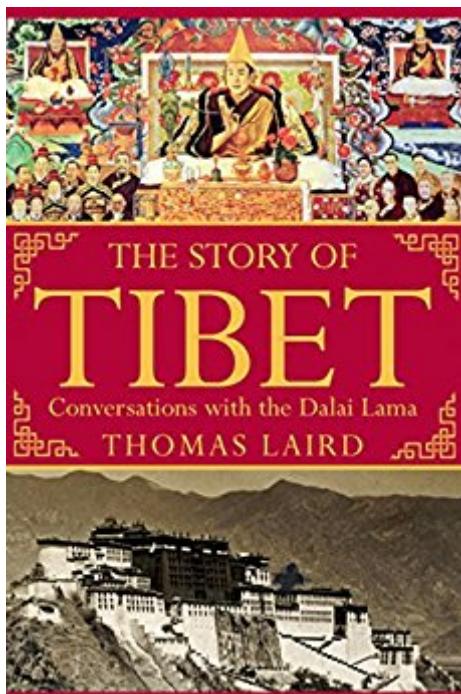


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The Story Of Tibet: Conversations With The Dalai Lama



Synopsis

Over the course of three years, journalist Thomas Laird spent more than sixty hours with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in candid, one-on-one interviews that covered history, science, reincarnation, and Buddhism. Laird brings these meetings to life in rich, vibrant, and monumental work that outlines the essence of thousands of years of civilization, myth, and spirituality. Tibetâ™s story is rich with tradition and filled with promise. It begins with the Bodhisattva Chenrizi (The Holy Oneâ•) whose spirit many Tibetans believe resides within the Dalai Lama. We learn the origins of Buddhism, and about the era of Great Tibetan Emperors, whose reign stretched from southwestern China to Northern India. His Holiness introduces us to Tibetâ™s greatest yogis and meditation masters, and explains how the institution of the Dalai Lama was founded. Laird explores, with His Holiness, Tibetâ™s relations with the Mongols, the Golden Age under the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, Tibetâ™s years under Manchu overlords, modern independence in the early twentieth century, and the Dalai Lamaâ™s personal meetings with Mao just before His Holiness fled into exile in 1959. The Story of Tibet is a tenderly crafted study that is equal parts love letter, traditional history, and oral historyâ• (Publishers Weekly).

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Customer Reviews

This is a very unique, though sometimes problematic, historical study of Tibet. Thomas Laird had the opportunity to interview the Dalai Lama dozens of times while constructing this book, while His Holiness heartily endorsed and encouraged the project. Thus, we get a very eye-opening combination of corroborated historical data and religious conviction. Granted, this pattern isn't always successful, and the book gets off to a rocky start with the ancient history (and pre-history) of Tibet, for which information is scarce. In the early part of the book, Laird depends more on the Dalai Lama's mythological and faith-based creation tales and his interpretations of sketchy historical and archeological evidence (or, in his view, interpretation of history at different spiritual and mental levels). While it is always fulfilling to hear directly from His Holiness, the result here is a rather confusing and dubious history. Laird doesn't help much with googly-eyed reactions to the Dalai Lama's wisdom like "this is vast and complex," or "this is very difficult for non-Tibetans to understand." Meanwhile, Laird exhibits the standard Western devotee's simplistic amazement at having his mind blown by Tibetan philosophy, and while his feelings are surely sincere, he doesn't articulate them very well. Fortunately, the book gets much better as it moves into the modern era, in which Laird can analyze concrete historical data and the Dalai Lama can give his own unique perspective on his country's developments. Laird also gained confidence by this point, actively debating His Holiness on contradictions in Tibetan philosophy or mistakes he may have made as a political leader.

I read this book a week after going to Tibet for the first time in October, 2007. It confirmed everything that I experienced in Tibet with a former monk as the guide for our group of 20 (China Focus Tours), and enriched our experience enormously. I'm glad I read it soon after the trip so the place names, experiences, history and relationship with China were so fresh. We had been warned in China not to ask about or comment on politics or religion while we were in Tibet. I did ask one mild question and got a reply from our guide that clearly told me that he could not respond. The book will probably tell general readers more than they want to know about the intricacies of the changes of rule over the last fourteen hundred years but it helped me understand the richness of Tibetan Buddhism. I found it well written and fascinating throughout. The author clearly has a pro-Dalai Lama bias (how else could he have arranged the many interviews with the Dalai Lama?). We found China to be virulently anti-Dalai Lama and this book helped me understand that. The personal details of the Dalai Lama's life and the lives of his predecessors gave me a full sense of what it has meant to be Tibetan both recently and in the long history. We knew that China had changed Tibet

enormously in recent years but we were astounded on our visit to see how they have been moving Han Chinese into Lhasa and changing the face of Tibet. "The Story of Tibet" helped us understand how the incursion of China since the 50's has changed the culture that visitors will see--as long as the Tibetans aren't completely submerged by the Chinese. It seems about 50/50 now.

Subtitled if boldly "Conversations with the Dalai Lama," this combines interviews and commentary about Tenzin Gyatso's homeland with Laird, who offers a popular history of the embattled nation. I stress "nation": this collaborative work stresses the claims that Tibet's entitled to its own independence, as it was taken over somewhat as a client state by the Mongols and then the Manchu rulers in tandem with China, not as a vassal of China itself, but around the same time, if in different contexts, from the larger subservient entity around present-day (if greater) Mongolia. This may smack of nitpicking, but in fact it distinguishes Tibetan rights to be recognized as its own sovereign state, rather than the dubious PRC (following the Kuomintang Nationalist government) argument that China should incorporate Tibet "back" into its empire. If you have little interest in such a treatment, you'd best go elsewhere for more romantic or more propagandistic fare. This book, written for a wide audience, nonetheless devotes considerable space to debunking not only the illusion (held by some New Age admirers today) that a strife-free, non-martial Shambhala materialized in medieval times, but the common leftist riposte that it was a corrupt realm of cruel monks, feudal savagery, or serf-perpetuated ignorance. It's not always a grippingly narrated tale, especially in long stretches of tedious medieval and early modern sections, but the novelty of hearing Tibetan history echoed and elaborated by the Dalai Lama via Laird's own knowledge, interpretations, and comparisons to Western models makes this an inherently valuable document. Laird's careful to assert his own Western understanding of how politics can infiltrate into the purportedly religious condition into which the Dalai Lamas have been born.

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