



**Shokdung, *The Division of Heaven and Earth: On Tibet's Peaceful Revolution*. Trans. Matthew Akester**

London: C. Hurst & Company, 2016. xliii + 162 pages. Paperback, \$19.95, ISBN: 978-1-84904-6770.

The 2008 so-called “Peaceful Revolution in the Year of the Earth Rat,” also known as the “3.14 Incident,” was a turning point in Sino-Tibetan relations. Marking the fiftieth anniversary of violent protests in Amdo, and coinciding with the Beijing Olympics, it revealed that decades of development and integration had not assuaged Tibetan sentiments. In fact, the protests that followed the 2008 Revolution renewed discussions of independence within the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China (TARC). Many consider the period to be one of a Tibetan national awakening. Shokdung’s *Division of Heaven and Earth* was written at the height of these developments and has emerged as one of TARC’s most contentious political commentaries. Compared to the tenth Panchen Lama’s *Petition in 70,000 Characters* (1962), its bold assertions and distinctly Tibetan prose provide a rare glimpse into an emerging intellectual scene in the People’s Republic of China.

Shokdung (pseudonym; Tragya) argues that Buddhism, namely the doctrine of emptiness and no-self, contributed to the decline of the Tibetan polity. Citing Tibet’s “history of repeated capitulation, sectarian conflict, priest–patron alliances and closure to the outside world,” he asserts that Buddhist influences stunted notions of the individual, sovereignty, and territory needed to advance nation-states. Tibet could not achieve true autonomy until it reconciled its Buddhist heritage with modernity. In this background, Shokdung views the 2008 protests as a pivot away from this precedent. Advocating “freedom and rights in practice as well as in thought [and theory],” the Peaceful Revolution had adapted secular ideologies to justify political freedom.

While the book itself is not divided into general sections, it helps to imagine its four chapters as falling into two sections that expand upon the mentioned premises. The first section explores the author’s powerful, emotive response to the events of 2008 in three chapters: “Joy,” “Sorrow,” and “Fear.” Embellished with Buddhist analogies and proverbs, this section provides a coherent, albeit controversial, thesis fashioned in the style of Tibetan Buddhist commentaries. The first chapter on “Joy” bemoans the

suffering of Tibetan communities since the Cultural Revolution but celebrates the fact that, through suffering, Tibetans have discovered their political agency. In the second chapter on “Sorrow,” Shokdung elaborates upon political repression that followed the Peaceful Revolution. The third chapter on “Fear” comments on its aftermath, including both misconceptions about Tibetan terrorists and violent nationalism among Han Chinese. The second section then provides a way forward from these conditions based on the author’s experiences. Of note, Shokdung suggests that Gandhian *satyāgraha* (Tib. *denpe utsuk*), or non-violent protest, is a possible method for maintaining political momentum in the Chinese context.

The book merits distinction from political scientists and scholars of modern China for its subaltern and intersectional analyses of modern Tibet. Texts of this nature seldom receive attention outside of the region, particularly those that maintain their Tibetan character. Matthew Akester’s lucid translation upholds Shokdung’s poetics and presents his philosophical discussions in accessible English. It will prove to be a valuable resource for those interested in subaltern studies as well as social movements in the PRC.

Despite its indigenous value, *The Division of Heaven and Earth* has several shortcomings that are addressed forthrightly by Hurst Publications in the foreword and preface. These include overt, functionalist claims on the development of Tibetan society. For instance, Shokdung states that “the Tibetan psychology is a primitive one, in which many characteristics of pre-civilized peoples can be seen,” and that “[Tibetans are] primitive people still in the clutches of an old-world psychology of demons and spirits.” Those familiar with South-Central Asia will quickly understand that these arguments are the product of regional education systems. Shokdung was largely self-educated in political science; many available and accessible texts in this area cater to a hierarchy of civilizations. Even with these conditions in mind, however, Western readers may disparage other claims such as the following: “Tibetans have not so far made contributions to world historical progress, political, economic, cultural or, in short, human development.” Francoise Robin in his foreword to the book comments on this at length, elaborating upon Shokdung’s inability to understand that “religion is not an obstacle to modernity but a feature of it.”

Despite some tenuous claims, *The Division of Heaven and Earth* will undoubtedly provoke discussion on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from anthropology and religion to political theory and philosophy. I suggest that readers be familiar with the 2008 events, at least generally, before attempting to engage with Shokdung’s arguments. The author greatly downplays crimes perpetrated by Tibetans against non-Tibetan business owners during the protests. Also, his assessments are indeed subaltern, even radical, in many respects. The book could easily be paired with Emily Yeh’s *Taming Tibet* (2013) for a more holistic perspective on state space and power struggles that led to the Peaceful Revolution.

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#### REFERENCE

- YEH, Emily T.  
2013 *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*. New York: Cornell University Press.

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