FOREWORD

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In the summer of 2011, I spent a month traveling through the Amdo region, making my way through the present-day provinces of Gansu and Qinghai in the northwest of China. This was about the time that Naktsang Nulo's book, which records in vivid and striking detail memories of his childhood in the 1950s, appeared in Chinese translation in Taiwan. I knew nothing then of this remarkable tale, nor did I know that Tibetans by the thousands had been reading the book, first written and published in a local Amdo dialect in 2007. The purpose of my journey was to visit the families of Tibetan friends in the south of Gansu. We traveled as well to the Labrang Monastery in Xiahe and then made our way overland to the Repkong valley in Qinghai Province. With my twelve-year-old son by my side, and always in the company of Tibetan friends, we traveled by bus and car across some of the very terrain recorded in Naktsang Nulo's book.

The 1950s were not much on my mind. I was making this trip to get a sense of what life was like in Amdo since March 14, 2008, when violent attacks on Han and Muslim shops and antigovernment protests ripped through the Aba region of Sichuan and the Amdo regions of Qinghai and Gansu. For so many in China outside of these regions, the protests and riots of 2008 are slowly being erased from memory. I recall meeting one young man from Beijing, making his way from Lanzhou in Gansu to Lhasa by bicycle, who told me: "I have never understood why the Tibetans were so angry and violent that March. In any case, it doesn't matter. Everything is back to normal. And besides, what we all remember now is the massive earthquake [in May 2008] that leveled towns and schools in Sichuan, and the many thousands who perished. We remember how all of the country wanted to help. It was a terribly

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sad time, but also a great moment for China." I encountered this sentiment again and again during my travels in 2011.

Within months of that summer trip, a new form of protest began to appear: the self-immolation. To this day, most people in China do not know that since late 2011 more than 120 Tibetans have self-immolated. These "criminal acts," as the Chinese state labels them, are purged from the press within China and forbidden to be discussed at academic conferences in China. It was impossible for me to not come away from my travels with a sense that memories of violence, in almost any period, are forbidden territory. Everything now must be about the future: the new towns built for resettled and displaced nomads, the endless miles of newly paved roads and new railways, the growth of the tourist industry, and the mines that allow minerals and other resources to be stripped from the ground. Harmonious Development and the Chinese Dream, it seems, have little use for certain kinds of troubled history, and certainly no use for Tibetan memories of struggle, protest, violence, forced relocation, and incarceration.

By focusing on the tumultuous decade of the 1950s, Naktsang Nulo beseeches us to remember the past, to resist a half century of enforced forgetfulness, as Robert Barnett puts it in his masterful introduction. As Naktsang tells it, the 1950s were a time of tremendous change: violence, war, exile, survival, and life and death defined so much of the everyday in Amdo and indeed across much of the Tibetan plateau. Told from the perspective of a child, his tale takes us into the complex and at times violent world of Tibetan clans and chiefs. We travel with him and experience the dangers faced on the road: bandits, soldiers, ferocious storms and cold fronts, and hungry wolves. We learn of a child's pain at losing a mother much too early, just as we are invited into the joy a child experiences when aunts and uncles tell him endless stories of the Naktsang family, or when meat or a coat of thick wool is shared to keep a small child from freezing. We learn of Tibetans' love for their domesticated animals, just as we encounter vivid descriptions of a Tibet once populated by wild yaks, antelopes, donkeys, bears, and wolves. We experience what it means for a child to learn the names of sacred mountain passes and peaks; why, for a family on pilgrimage, the places and the events that surround them must be committed to memory. Finally, we learn much of the violence that accompanied the "peaceful liberation" of Amdo and the subsequent "reforms" in the late 1950s, as the ten-year-old Naktsang unsuccessfully flees with his family on yet another dangerous journey across grasslands and perilous mountain passes.

With this powerful memoir of his childhood, Naktsang Nulo's book is a gift to us all. It reminds us that Amdo is alive with memories, especially those that do not fit comfortably into official state historiography. To be sure, his

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tale will challenge a lot of people in different locations and with different political sensibilities—the exile community, Han scholars of Tibet, the Free Tibet movement, the Western and Chinese media, and Western and Chinese tourists who too easily cling to colonial and neo-Orientalist images of an unchanging spiritual Tibet, the Shangri-la on the roof of the world. However one digests this work, it will force us to return to the forgotten 1950s. This return will stir debate. Most important, it puts Amdo where it properly belongs: at the center of the remarkable, and at times painful, history of China's ethnic borderlands.

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