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HEADLINE: Tibet's Endgame - Ethan Gutmann reviews Tragedy in Crimson: How the Dalai Lama Conquered the World but Lost the Battle with China, by Tim Johnson.

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BODY:

For many political and religious exiles from China, the past decade has been a bit like living in a lonely wooden tower on the west coast of Ireland back in the ninth century. You translate, you copy, and you count -- the passing days, the vanishing rituals, the broken laws, and, above all, the dead. Someday, there may be justice or a heavenly reward -- perhaps some expert will even proclaim that your work saved civilization -- but for now, a lawless enemy pillages freely, and seems poised to dominate the world within a generation or two.

If the house Christians, Chinese-democracy activists, Uighurs, and Falun Gong members hunkered down in their cramped Washington offices -- subsisting on iron rations of government funding, laboring over the odd footnote and the occasional congressional hearing -- are the monks, the Tibetan exile community is the Vatican: an oasis of relative fame, wealth, and legitimacy. If the most famous Europeans during the Dark Ages were popes, the most famous man from China in 2011 is clearly the Dalai Lama. And yet: Universal consensus is forming that the cause of Tibetan freedom is in dire straits.

Han Chinese and their oversized parcels take up residence in Lhasa, while nomadic herders are forcibly resettled in prefab housing. As outlets of expression contract, the Tibetan language is slipping into extinction. Through forced acts of daily betrayal, monastic resistance is methodically crushed, and it is far from clear that there will be a new Dalai Lama when the current incarnation moves on to the heavenly fields. It is this conundrum that Tim Johnson explores in his rather generically titled -- but brilliantly subtitled -- new book.

A 20-year-veteran foreign correspondent, Johnson served six years as the bureau chief in Beijing for Knight-Ridder newspapers and the McClatchy Newspaper Group. In his introduction, he refers briefly to a "ruckus" there: In 2007, a Hong Kong professor published an article in the Far Eastern Economic Review exposing what most everyone in the field quietly knew -- that China scholars are increasingly reluctant to publish content that offends the Chinese Communist party (CCP). Johnson says the charges have substance: "An experienced China hand who suddenly finds himself or herself on China's 'black list,' unable to get a visa to attend conferences or confronting cancellation of residency, may face a major career setback. While the number of such cases may be small, perhaps a dozen or two dozen people, they have a large impact, causing many others to hesitate to conduct sensitive research in China or speak out about events there." After Chinese diplomats began pressuring McClatchy Newspaper Group over Johnson's

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forthcoming book on Tibet (he suspects his e-mail and phone were monitored, and he's probably right), Johnson moved his family to Thailand and ultimately headed up a new bureau in Mexico City.

Readers can be grateful that Johnson has been able to complete his work. A current, objective, basic primer on the Free Tibet movement and the Dalai Lama was sorely needed, and he has provided exactly that. He has resisted the China-hand tendency to take relativism -- where absurd, tedious CCP statements are given equal billing with hard evidence -- and pass it off as fair reporting. Instead, Johnson takes an old-school approach: If someone is influential in the Tibetan world, Johnson doggedly goes through the hoops until he scores a sit-down interview. Along the way, he rides the bullet train to Lhasa, hangs out in Nepal and India, embeds himself briefly -- and illegally -- with nomads and activists, and explores several barely known religious retreats throughout Tibet and its restive neighboring provinces.

While Johnson's discussion of the byzantine scenarios concerning succession to the position of Dalai Lama is second to none, the "embedded" sections are not fully realized. One senses that Johnson is too polite to be confrontational and too honest to pretend to be a fellow activist or on a religious quest. He avoids romanticizing Tibetans and refers to the Dalai Lama's community in Dharamsala, India, as a "spiritual Las Vegas." Yet as he strips away the exotic clichés, an interesting new version of the Dalai Lama emerges: less a spiritual icon being held to an absurd standard, and more a three-dimensional political figure determined to create a working Tibetan democracy in the face of monumental challenges.

Perhaps the best chapter concerns the exquisitely beautiful, well-connected, and wealthy "Princess of Tibet," nicknamed Renji: the half-Chinese daughter of the tenth Panchen Lama, whose compound was a few blocks away from Johnson's home in Beijing. The Panchen Lama, traditionally number two in the hierarchy of Tibetan spiritual authority, believed in negotiating directly with the CCP on Tibetan autonomy. In 1968, his efforts were rewarded with a ten-year stint in prison. Released in Beijing, the then-middle-aged Panchen Lama met a Chinese medical student; their wedding appears to have been facilitated by the CCP as a long-term investment in harmonious relations between Tibet and China. (The bride went on to make friends with Hu Jintao, who became party chief of the Tibet Autonomous Region and is now president of China.) In 1983, the couple produced a lovely daughter, Renji; they subsequently had five full-time staffers helping them raise her. In 1989, the Panchen Lama died mysteriously in Tibet, and Renji's high-school years were largely spent in Los Angeles, under the spiritual tutelage of Steven Seagal (yes, that Steven Seagal). Meanwhile, the CCP kidnapped the Dalai Lama's pick to replace Renji's dad as Panchen Lama, and promoted their own nominee to the reincarnation.

According to Tibetan spiritual beliefs, Renji is the only person who can look in the eyes of the young Panchen Lama and see either her father or a CCP impostor. Oddly enough, that moment of truth has not yet occurred. "He needs me more than I need him," Renji declares, like a pawn asserting that it controls the chessboard; yet, because she accepts the party's benevolence -- money, status, and protection -- it might be said that Renji doesn't control anything at all.

Johnson quietly chips away at her glossy exterior, asking her whether she shares the Dalai Lama's opinion that her father was poisoned. "I really don't want to talk about it," Renji says: "Through my father's life, I've learned that working hard is great, but you have to take care of your health." Her expression offered little insight into her feelings about the death. If proven to be a murder, it would place her in a position of a heroine from Greek tragedy, fealty to a party that tore her family apart. But Renji curtly continued her story. Johnson's Pawn of Tibet parable should instruct us. Year after year, Tibetans debate whether the Dalai Lama should continue the fruitless negotiation with the Chinese authorities. Yet Johnson's fieldwork suggests that the discussion is irrelevant. China's rise and the CCP's freedom of movement can create new facts on the ground faster than these can be placed, however symbolically, on the negotiating table. Among those facts: the dual-purpose (civilian and military) high-speed rail line; the flood of Han Chinese; the relentless mining for rare earths; and the fencing in of the nomads and the thinning of their livelihood, the yaks (justified by the CCP's visionary green priorities, which Thomas Friedman supports so passionately).

In this context, negotiation with the Tibetans takes place chiefly as a sop to the West. The CCP's vision is clear: Let the Dalai Lama run his democratic experiments in Dharamsala, let Congress award him the Congressional Gold Medal

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in the Capitol Rotunda, let Hollywood produce tiresome, fawning movies -- meanwhile, the Western business class will act as a firebreak, and the succession dilemma will ensure that time favors the party. Ironically, even if the Chinese Communists were to lose power, the party has created such a daunting imperial infrastructure that there is little guarantee that a new Chinese regime would accept Tibetan autonomy.

So is the Dharamsala papacy futile? What could the Dalai Lama do differently? While Johnson does not tackle the issue systematically, he does generate two significant leads. The first is the disconnect between Dharamsala and Tibet. With a straight face, nomads ask Johnson whether the Dalai Lama will be coming back to Tibet this year, and in turn, Johnson does not have the heart to tell them the truth. That is the CCP strategy in a nutshell: prevent connectivity between Tibetans in exile and the Tibetan homeland, and closely monitor communication among those in the homeland. The strategy may be costly to Tibet's economic growth, it may feed discontent and riots, but the party isn't likely to alter it; following the Urumqi uprising of 2009, the Xinjiang Internet was simply unplugged for ten months.

The second lead emerges by elimination: While engaging the CCP may be ineffectual, engaging the Chinese people may not be. Understandably, that's a distasteful concept for Tibetans to embrace. In Beijing, a sophisticated Chinese couple might hire an exotic Tibetan singer for a fancy wedding, while the bachelor party might be held at a Uighur restaurant where the lads can eat the Chinese equivalent of soul food while the belly dancers shake. Either way, Tibetans and Uighurs are fetishized and belittled. One sees glimpses of a corresponding contempt: in the Lhasa riots, in the Tibetan-activist attack on a Chinese athlete wheelchairs the Olympic torch through Paris, even in Sharon Stone's grotesque remarks about karmic retribution following the Sichuan earthquake. While Johnson reports that the Dalai Lama conscientiously held a mainland Q&A session on Twitter, the Tibetan exiles have clearly aimed the lion's share of their relatively impressive resources at the West, so if the Tibetan cause garners little sympathy from the Chinese people, it's not clear that Tibetans have lobbied hard for it.

By contrast, it's instructive to look at a group that had no choice but to appeal directly to the Han Chinese -- Falun Gong. With a fraction of the financial resources the Tibetans have, Falun Gong adherents eschewed elaborate Western lobbying schemes; instead, when it became apparent after a couple of years of hair-raising persecution that a compassion-fatigued West was not going to intervene, they threw their savings and labor into media aimed at the heart of China: New Tang Dynasty Television, Sound of Hope Radio, Epoch Times, and the Global Internet Freedom Consortium. Falun Gong claims that, in response, tens of millions of Chinese have pledged to reject the party -- most anonymously, most through the Internet. While those numbers are unverifiable, and the CCP is no less determined to eliminate Falun Gong, the overall effect is indisputable. By positioning themselves as the source of alternative information and moral values, Falun Gong saved their movement from certain extinction. The Tibetans -- and, indeed, the Uighurs -- might consider diversifying their approach in a similar way, and piggybacking on Falun Gong's media, particularly the Internet initiative.

The Dalai Lama has lost the war with this incarnation of China. But just as the Vikings eventually receded, the CCP's power may wane too. The Tibetans must exploit the opening when it comes. Johnson wisely avoids speculating on collapse-of-China scenarios, but if there is anything hopeful and inspiring to take away from this book, it has little to do with Western resolve; rather, it is that democracy and moral civilization can grow under the strangest conditions. Whether they will take root in China -- and thus allow Tibet to thrive -- ultimately depends on the Chinese people.

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