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# Review of 'Vision and Violence: Lama Zhang and the Politics of Charisma in Twelfth-Century Tibet' by Carl S. Yamamoto

Stefan Larsson  
*Stockholm University*

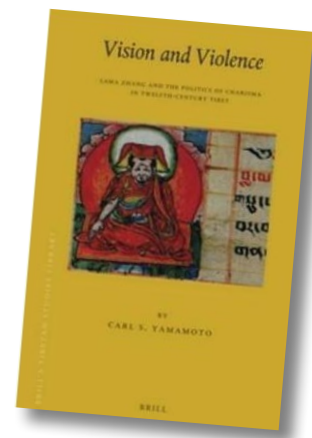
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Aside from the analytical shortcoming mentioned above, the adept use of datasets to explicate the concomitant expansion of Buddhism and trade distinguishes this book from start to finish. The only other criticism I would like to make is a stylistic one: the use of periods inside single sentences when citing bibliographic sources is hard on the eyes.

Chapter Seven, the conclusion, reiterates themes that run through the entire book. Paramount among these is that the ability of Buddhist traditions to adapt to change is rooted in the history of transcultural exchange, the result being a hybridization and cosmopolitanism (characterizing Buddhism to this day). *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, a skillfully conceived and executed compendium of Buddhist dispersal and economic growth in ancient times, is essential reading for all those looking beyond scriptural exhortations and pious explanations to understand the great and lasting success of Buddhism.

*John Vincent Bellezza is a senior research fellow at the Tibet Center, University of Virginia. His main area of research is the formation and development of civilization in pre-Buddhist Upper Tibet. Residing in India for many years, he also shares a keen interest in the history of religions on the Indian subcontinent.*

### ***Vision and Violence: Lama Zhang and the Politics of Charisma in Twelfth-Century Tibet***

**Carl S. Yamamoto.** Leiden: Brill, 2011. Pp. xiv+371. \$179.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-90-04-18159-5.

#### **Reviewed by Stefan Larsson**

Lama Zhang (1122/23–1193) is a somewhat overlooked figure in the field of Tibetan studies who deserves an in-depth study in his own right, rather than mere mention in passing. It is therefore highly appropriate that a full-length book dedicated to Lama Zhang has been published.

Lama Zhang personifies some central yet paradoxical and puzzling poles of tension within Tibetan Buddhism, tensions that also exist in other forms of Buddhism and in other religions as well. Lama Zhang's life epitomizes the complicated, and oftentimes intimate and interdependent, relationships between religion and politics, exoteric and esoteric forms of religion, non-violence and violence, meditators and scholars, and so forth. Lama Zhang is a controversial figure about whom there are different opinions: according to some, he is an enlightened *siddha* who benefitted beings and the Buddhist teachings, and, according to others, he is a violent leader who harmed beings and the Buddhist teachings.

Carl Yamamoto mentions how his own view of Lama Zhang shifted during the course of the work, from holding Zhang to be “a volatile—possibly psychotic—minor character” who “engaged in ethically suspect activities, and employed the less reputable forms of Buddhist tantra as a smokescreen for his misconduct,”

to the view that Lama Zhang was an important and influential figure and “more than just a marginal ‘crazy’ in the history of Tibetan Buddhism” (p. xi). An underlying motivation behind Yamamoto's study is an attempt to bring out Lama Zhang's importance and provide a more balanced picture of this fascinating and versatile figure. This is an important and needed endeavor since stereotyped presentations of Lama Zhang still abound, both in traditional and scholarly accounts.

Lama Zhang's impact as a political leader oftentimes overshadows his many other facets. Zhang was, for example, also an important literary figure, the founder of one of the four major suborders of the Kagyu tradition, the Tsarpa Kagyu, and an early advocate of the “Great Seal” (*mahamudra*) meditative/philosophical system. It is of course impossible to cover all of Lama Zhang's many facets in full detail in one book, but Yamamoto manages to cover many of them with both care and depth.

Although some of Lama Zhang's numerous facets have been touched upon in previous scholarship, there is a need to contextualize these, both within Zhang's own activities and within the larger historical, political, religious, and cultural milieu in which Zhang lived. Yamamoto's book provides us with such broader investigation and contextualization to a larger degree than done previously. With Lama Zhang as a vehicle, Yamamoto also sheds light upon several broader issues such as textual production, literary genre, the formation of traditions and lineages, and the relationship between politics and religion.

The introduction of the book contains significant background on Lama Zhang and the historical period in which he lived. The author stresses Lama Zhang's importance in the medieval Buddhist revival known as "the later spread of the teachings" (*bstan pa'i phyi dar*), a period which lasted roughly from the mid-tenth to the mid-thirteenth century.

The first chapter of the book outlines the various sources in which Lama Zhang's life can be traced. Yamamoto then provides us with an overview of Lama Zhang's fascinating and turbulent life.

The second chapter raises several interesting questions concerning "lineage" (*brgyud*) and "school" (*chos lugs*) in Tibetan Buddhism. The author also analyzes Lama Zhang's unique "religious style," arguing that it is in this regard that Zhang's influence on the history of Tibetan Buddhism is most palpable. Lama Zhang's style consisted of "doctrinal, meditative, ritual, and discursive" elements, and it was supported by a "pluralistic ethic of tolerance toward opposed practices and practitioners" (p. 79).

In the third chapter of the book, Yamamoto analyzes Lama Zhang's impressive literary corpus, making several thought-provoking observations regarding how Lama Zhang's literary works shed light upon the relationships between different genres within Tibetan literature ("genre families"). Besides analyzing how genres such as eulogies (*bstod pa*), supplications (*gsol 'debs*), biographies (*rnam thar*) and autobiographies (*rang rnam*) are related to one another and how they developed into distinct genres over time, the author calls attention to the fact that much of

the meaning of such texts derives from the circumstances surrounding their production, distribution, and use ("textual economies") (pp. 146-147). In this chapter, Yamamoto contributes with important new research and he also suggests areas of future research. One such area is the "spiritual songs" genre (*mgur*), which Yamamoto chooses not to investigate, since "it would require a whole other volume in itself" (p. 172). Yamamoto mentions that some of Lama Zhang's songs have autobiographical content, but does not acknowledge that spiritual songs in Tibetan literature also are related to biographies (*rnam thar*). I think the latter connection is just as significant. Songs are often found in *rnam thars* and biographical elements are often included both in the narrative frame surrounding songs in song collections (*mgur 'bum*) and in the songs themselves. The songs thus constitute a fascinating bridge between biographies and autobiographies, and could be considered to belong to the same "genre families," to use Yamamoto's term, as these. I look forward to further studies of this important but seldom studied area, and I hope someone (perhaps Yamamoto himself?) will translate Lama Zhang's songs and also investigate how they are related to other songs as well as other genres of Tibetan literature.

The fourth and fifth chapters investigate Lama Zhang's public life and his political involvements. These began when his main teacher, Gomtsul, charged him with the repair and administration of the important Jo khang temple in Lhasa in 1160. Zhang was suddenly thrown into the middle of a complicated and violent conflict, and in his role as "lord of the teachings" (*bstan ba'i bdag po*), he had to ensure that Lhasa, its temples,

and surroundings, became safe for pilgrimage. As the protector of the Lhasa area, Lama Zhang sometimes employed forceful and even violent means to obtain his goals. This made Zhang controversial and criticized, but he was also respected by major figures of the time, and he created a model of rule which became very influential and would be emulated by later leaders. Lama Zhang was, the author concludes, "larger-than-life," and "by means of charisma, magic, myth, symbol, and narrative" he pulled together a unity which would not see the likes again until the time of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama (p. 275).

In summary, Yamamoto's study of Lama Zhang is thoroughly researched and addresses many important questions which are relevant also beyond Tibetological circles. One thing that struck me when reading the book was that Zhang would render himself an excellent subject for a book addressed to a wider audience or even a movie. The first thing for the scriptwriter of such a movie to decide would be whether Lama Zhang should be presented as the villain or the hero of the story. If the scriptwriter would avail himself in Yamamoto's book when writing the script, Lama Zhang would likely be a hero of sorts, but a complex and many faceted hero, a person in whom, to use Lama Zhang's own self-characterization, "many contradictory acts arose" (p. 50).

*Stefan Larsson is a senior lecturer in history of religions at Stockholm University. His research focuses upon the non-monastic and practice-oriented aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly as evidenced in Buddhist songs and biographical literature.*