

June 2017

Review of *The Dragon's Voice: How Modern Media Found Bhutan* by Bunty Avieson

Michael Givel

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Givel, Michael (2017) "Review of *The Dragon's Voice: How Modern Media Found Bhutan* by Bunty Avieson," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 26.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss1/26>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

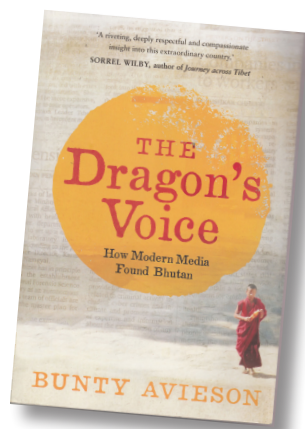
This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized

Dazzling photos of the Himalayas can be seen almost anywhere, unlike the gripping, quotidian detail that Bubriski provides.

Jim Fisher on Nepal: 1975-2011

framed world” (p. 299). And finally, and with a light sense of irony, he notes that new technology today has shrunk the longstanding chasm between photographer and subject, as “cameras that make phone calls are found throughout the country. Nepalis have countless photos of events large and small documenting their individual lives, and thousands of Nepalis have very active social media pages. The foreign visitor now meets village youth with cameras of their own. Nepalis are shooting back, taking back, sharing images among each other, and sending photographs to friends and relations in Kathmandu, Delhi, Dubai, or Jackson Heights” (ibid.).

Jim Fisher served in the first Peace Corps group to Nepal in 1962, and later conducted research in Dolpo (Trans-Himalayan Traders), Solu-Khumbu (Sherpas) and a person-centered ethnography on Tanka Prasad Acharya (Living Martyrs). He is presently finishing a ‘44 Years Later’ book (Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed), an updated edition of Living Martyrs, and is beginning a large-scale collaborative project on Sherpas with Pasang Yangjee Sherpa.



The Dragon's Voice: How Modern Media Found Bhutan.

Bunty Avieson. St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2015. 240 pages. ISBN 9780702253577.

Reviewed by Michael Givel

In a number of recent news stories by foreign media and promotions by tourist agencies, Bhutan is commonly framed in the social construct narrative as a modern-day far away and happy Shangri-La. The actual Shangri-La is a mystical place that was first described in 1933 in the fictional novel *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton (James Hilton. *Lost Horizon*. Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1933). Shangri-La in the novel is an earthly paradise governed by benevolent Buddhist lamas blissfully isolated from the rest of the world. Bunty Avieson's 2015 book, *The Dragon's Voice: How Modern Media Found Bhutan*, documents the

important role of Bhutanese media reporting since 2008 on why Bhutan is not equivalent to a modern-day Shangri-La. That said, the story of Shangri-La strikingly parallels Bhutan's past historic isolation, impetus to seek collective happiness and well-being based on Mahayana Buddhist tenets, and influence or guidance by Buddhist religious figures. Nevertheless, Bhutanese media has documented in a more realistic fashion, versus the ideal of Shangri-La, that Bhutan has problems like the rest of the world, such as poverty, health issues, corruption, and domestic violence. This book analyzes, describes, and incorporates in crisp and clear fashion these differing narratives of Bhutan as Shangri-La or as a society with the same types of problems found around the rest of the planet. As the book aptly points out and describes in a series of interesting examples, both narratives carry grains of truth, but both overreach. This can result in non-nuanced or skewed understandings of actual trends influencing and shaping modern Bhutan.

The era of modern journalistic reporting began on July 18, 2008 when a newly written Constitution of Bhutan was approved, creating a Constitutional Monarchy that provided democratic elections and freedom of expression and the press. With the adoption of the first written Bhutanese Constitution (Constitution

This book analyzes, describes, and incorporates in crisp and clear fashion these differing narratives of Bhutan as Shangri-La or as a society with the same types of problems found around the rest of the planet.

Michael Givel on *The Dragon's Voice: How Modern Media Found Bhutan*

of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008), “[a] Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech, opinion and expression” (Article 7, Section 1 related to Fundamental Rights) and, “[t]here shall be freedom of the press, radio and television in media outlets in Bhutan reporting on numerous topics” (Article 7, Section 5). Freedom of the press has included robust reporting of such topics as scandals, culture, religion, human interest, social problems like alcoholism, and politics. Only three topics are not currently covered in Bhutanese news accounts: the Nepalese refugee issue, the royal family, and border discussions with China.

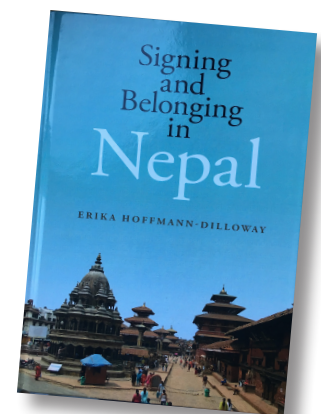
Prior to the adoption of the written constitution in 2008, Bhutan from 1907 to 2008 was a hereditary monarchy. In relation to the modern trend since 2008 of independent and vibrant media coverage and due to long-lived cultural traditions of respect for hierarchy, some Bhutanese are uncomfortable with reporters questioning authority as reporters now routinely do. Nevertheless, as the book documents in a thorough manner, traditions of social hierarchy are slowly breaking down. And, not surprisingly, those in power are not always happy with this new dynamic of the press reporting on their actions and dealings. For readers in nations where this has been happening on a long-term basis, this should sound familiar.

Politicians in any nation with an independent press are often not pleased when some of their actions and maneuverings are exposed for public perusal and review. All of this is an indication that Bhutan is democratizing. Adding to this is the fact that several Bhutanese newspapers now exist with differing perspectives on current affairs. Interestingly though, most Bhutanese still do not read newspapers. Only a number of the educated class regularly or even occasionally read news stories. Bhutan is still very much an oral society. So, the role of media reporting is evolving slowly, but operates in tandem with long held cultural trends in Bhutan.

All of these complex and nuanced trends are documented in this fascinating book that successfully opens a window for a general audience as well as Bhutanese, Asian, and Himalayan studies scholars on the development of modern trends in Bhutan. The reports by the Bhutanese media, as author Bunty Avieson clearly and carefully shows in this timely book, is one important source to comprehend how modern Bhutan, with issues like all other nations in the world, continues to develop and democratize.

Michael Givel is Professor of Political Science at The University of Oklahoma. He was the first US Fulbright in Bhutan in 2009, and is the curator for the University of Oklahoma Bhutanese digital rare and historical document collection. His

research and teaching specialization includes: comparative public policy, Himalayan area studies, policy theory, complexity theory, social movements, and health policy.



Signing and Belonging in Nepal.

Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2016. 135 pages. ISBN 9781563686641.

Reviewed by Theresia Hofer

This book offers the first full-length ethnography of Deaf people and their varied communication practices in Nepal. Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway has engaged with Deaf people and studied Nepali Sign Language (NSL) since 1997, when she came to the country through a study abroad program. Based on long-established friendships and work with members of the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NFDN), she tells a fascinating story of how Deaf activists countered their plight of being seen as karmically