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Book review of 'Servants of the Buddha: Winter in a Himalayan Convent' Anna Grimshaw

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Dr. Aryan had completed her efforts to provide tools for further study of the crafts. But here substantial editorial flaws lead to frustrating dead ends: footnote numbers are given in the text, but there are no footnotes; books cited in the text do not appear in the bibliography; and the bibliographic information itself is incomplete.

Beyond such editorial problems I find the overall tone of the book distressing. Dr. Aryan does not manage to convey a firm sense of the people behind the picturesque objects. Instead, they are repeatedly described with clichéd terms such as "colorful", "simple", "tradition bound" or "rooted in the soil". Even though there is no shortage of information to keep us interested, descriptions are often dry and factual. Similarly, the photographs tend to be passive and stilted with an over-emphasis on crafts found in museums. Himachal crafts are vibrant products of communities living now, not only in the past. These communities manage to maintain ancient traditions but are also adapting in the face of often overwhelming pressures to adopt other lifestyles and values. Although elucidating these themes is stated as an objective, little of this comes through in the book.

As a result of its flaws, this book represents a missed opportunity to take these crafts and the people that produced them seriously, or to show them as a "living tradition" of India worthy of further study. That said, the book does address a real need. I would have been delighted to find it ten years ago when I was pouring over census data in Delhi libraries and searching in vain for information on the people and craft production of Himachal Pradesh. At that time there simply weren't any books of this sort, and to the best of my knowledge, there is still nothing similar.

By presenting the sheer volume of crafts so attractively, Dr. Aryan and R. K. Datta Gupta seduce us, beckoning with one hand to come and see. With the other hand, however, they stop us by limiting our view of the people themselves and by failing to guide us with a cohesive approach to the subject or sufficient references to help us go further. In the end, the book is attractive and informative for anyone ready to sit back and be an armchair traveler but is of limited use for those with deeper interests.

Elisabeth Caspari, Berkeley

Servants of the Buddha: Winter in a Himalayan Convent. Anna Grimshaw. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994 [Originally published, London: Open Letters, 1992]. Pp. ix + 159, 9 Plates.

Servants of the Buddha recounts the daily life of a community of Ladakhi Buddhist nuns from the bustle of the late fall harvest into deep winter, ending shortly after the February Tibetan New Year. It is based on the author's sojourn sometime in the 1970's. As a Cambridge Ph.D. candidate, Grimshaw spent nearly a year in Dharamsala. Dissatisfied with what she was learning, and the project of anthropological research, she tells us that she gave away her notebooks when she departed for Ladakh. This book is not intended as a scholarly treatise, but rather an "imaginative re-creation" of her life with the nuns of Julichang, a nunnery attached to the Rizong monastery near Leh. It is an engrossing tale, and one that will interest scholars concerned with the social and economic aspects of celibate monasticism.

Grimshaw's detailed accounts of working in the monastery kitchen, of the tight rationing of provisions to the nuns, and of their agricultural and animal husbandry labor for Rizong provide a close-up view of labor relations between nunnery and monastery. Economic relations between surrounding villages and the monastery are recounted in somewhat less detail

since her vantage points include the monastery and nunnery, but not the villages. The provision of unpaid labor and a portion of harvests, in return for feasts on ritual occasions and year-long provision of spiritual protection is a familiar enough picture. What Grimshaw adds are interesting observations on the centrality of the nuns as mediators in the relationship between the monks and their lay client/patrons. In regard to both nuns and the lay populace, she veers between finding economic relations with the monastery exploitative and considering them symbiotic. Subtly present in her account are ruminations on the nature of Buddhist spirituality. She suggests that the nuns who, with their relentless round of physical labor, are afforded only rare opportunities to read a religious text, are perhaps closer to living the Buddhist ethic than are the relatively more comfortable monks who devote much of their days to devotional pursuits.

There are a few puzzling aspects to this book. Grimshaw presents herself as having tossed her notebooks, yet she has also written a dissertation and other scholarly publications based on her sojourn at Julichang. She tells us she found an anthropological

role "too closely associated for comfort with a colonial past" (p. 24), yet there is little reflection here on the consequences of her presence. The book begins and ends with sketchy accounts of her arrest (she was in Ladakh without permission). That the acting abbot of Rizong was not enamored of her presence is never considered in this light, nor do we learn whether the nuns suffered any consequences after her departure. The bursar of Rizong, with whom she frequently interacted, emerges as a somewhat comic, somewhat sinister character, and one wonders if this is a fair portrait. But this is perhaps a measure of her deep engagement in the life of the nuns

(for whom he was taskmaster and purseholder), and the feel for the tenor of these women's lives alone makes the book worth reading. There are hints at larger contexts and histories that affect the institutions described here (the abbots, for example, reside in South India for most of the year). A reader knowledgeable about the history of Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayas will be able to place these details in context. For the lay reader, this book is an accessible and thoughtful reflection on the monastic life of women.

Mary Des Chene

Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life. Photographs by Thomas L. Kelly; text by Carroll Dunham and Ian Baker. New York, London, & Paris: Abbeville Press, 1993. Pp. 203. \$ 49.95.

Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life is one of those coffee table books that most academics will love for its pictures and feel uncomfortable about for its text. The work has all the pedigree of a modern Tibetan apology: a foreword by the Dalai Lama, a series of outstanding images—both new and old—and a text which attempts to depict the Tibetan people in a variety of favorable terms. Its humanizing agenda is the result of essays by Carroll Dunham and Ian Baker; Ms. Dunham is described in the dust jacket as "an anthropologist, educator, and documentary film maker," while Mr. Baker is "a writer, photographer, and educator." Both work in Kathmandu, where they are associated with various educational projects, for both Tibetans and visitors. The five chapters are entitled "Between Earth and Sky," "Childhood," "Adolescence," "Adulthood," and "Old Age." Each of these chapters presents images of life—from the intermediate period before taking rebirth to the postmodern period—which are somehow identified as Tibetan. The book is illustrated profusely with over one hundred fifty images, mostly in color but also containing rare black and white pictures from pre-1959 Tibet.

Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life clearly takes its cues from the *National Geographic* visual and prose style. Its emphasis is on the people in positions of authority, with enough local color to make the mix believable. Some attempt is made to redress the all too familiar spotlight on the *sger-pa*, the aristocratic clans which are the backbone of Tibetan institutional life with the occasional pilgrims and nomads that are illustrated. Yet the text itself homogenizes Tibetan life for public consumption, giving the aristocracy pride of place. While the Dalai Lama is reported as giving great

credit to the Khampas and vice versa, the work pays scant attention to the minority political voices, either in Tibet or within the refugee community. I have met Tibetans from both Khams and gTsang, for example, who bitterly resent the Central Tibetan leadership's failures in the twentieth century, while the poisonings and assassinations continually rumored within the Tibetan diaspora sustain a climate of suspicion within certain groups about the heavy hand of Dharamsala.

From the beginning of the work the reader is treated to images of Tibet remarkably similar to that found either in works published long ago or in a specific apologetic milieu. In this model, Tibetan's cognitive life is largely self-developed: "So inescapable are the raw elements of Khawachen that Tibetans believe the elements themselves for the very flesh of their bodies." (p. 11) Such beliefs, however, are derived from both India and China, which have dissimilar ecologies. On the next page, the Bon-lugs is described as "the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet," a statement which does not acknowledge that the assessment of this diverse religious tradition is rapidly changing, in the literatures of both Tibetan intellectuals and modern academics. These representations are later brought together into the narrative for the founding of bSam-yas:

The intensity of the Tibetan landscape and the demands it exacted from its human residents shaped the consciousness of the Tibetan people long before the arrival of Buddhism. Treacherous, often malevolent spirits ruled over the elements of earth, air, and water, influencing and often undermining the aspirations of their human intercessors. These "lords of the earth" were enjoined for assistance, or their dissonant