

1995

Book review of 'Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life. Photographs by Thomas L. Kelly.' by Carroll Dunham and Ian Baker

Ron Davidson

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

Recommended Citation

Davidson, Ron (1995) "Book review of 'Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life. Photographs by Thomas L. Kelly.' by Carroll Dunham and Ian Baker," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 15: No. 2, Article 12. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol15/iss2/12>

This Book 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 administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

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

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

(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

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

energies were averted through offerings or sacrifices. Their essential nature, however, remained ambiguous and uncertain, keeping Tibetans in uneasy intimacy with their land. At the founding of the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet in the eighth century, the indigenous spirits were unappeasable and thwarted all attempts at construction. King Trisongdetson sent to India for the powerful Tantric sage Padmasambhava, whose power of insight and awareness subdued Tibet's belligerent deities, converting them into protectors of the Buddhist path to enlightenment (p. 132)

Perhaps the most curious aspect of the selection and production of this material is that it largely mimics the representation of Tibet developed by Tibetans since 1959 as an explanatory system to non-Tibetan speaking foreigners, preeminently Buddhist converts. Rather than recognizing the problematic nature of the origin of so many Tibetan institutions and the generation of systematic mythic systems from the twelfth century on, the text sets forth a highly reified schematism of "Buddhist and pre-Buddhist culture." For example, while discussing a particularly brutal gang-rape "custom" sometimes enacted in areas of Khams, the book simply claims that, "Elements of the pre-Buddhist culture of Tibet continue to influence Tibetan sexuality." (p. 57) Such an assertion sidesteps the clear disparity between the Buddhist claims of non-harming and the aggression frequently encountered both inside and outside of Buddhist monasteries. It supposes a metaphysical "Buddhism" which somehow exists beyond the practice of real Buddhists, many of whom have been willing enough to fight the Chinese. At one point (p. 123) the text acknowledges this disparity, but reproduces a fundamentally two-truth rationalization which is not completely acknowledged as Buddhist.

Perhaps the most worthwhile aspect of the text is its unintended call for our reflection on the history and sociology of Tibetophilic prose. The book's production would be inconceivable (cost alone) without the international celebrity status of the Dalai Lama, the development of the Nepal tourist industry, and the rise in popularity of Tibetan lamas as religious preceptors over the last thirty years. Indeed, the dominant representations in *Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life* are not directly derived either from material written in Tibetan or from most academic literature but exist in the quasi-touristic Dharma-center literature of Nepal, Europe, and the U.S. While the book occasionally steps outside of this literature - and demonstrates academic awareness in its bibliography - it supplies us with little new information beyond the anecdote. Some of these, however, are certainly worth reading, even if they are distressingly devoid of provenance. It is perhaps a most unfortunate reality that, in the media-driven culture of Europe and the U.S. today, such books are not simply unavoidable, but essential. Without the photographic work of Galen Rowel, without the new guidebook literature to Tibet, without the trekking industry, the climate of silence which enveloped Tibet in 1959 would do so again. Academically, too, such books afford a degree of sympathetic understanding to the taxpayers who elect officials to vote in favor of esoteric programs which have no bottom line. If *Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life*, then, homogenizes Tibet and does not reveal the ambivalence that many Tibetans feel towards their culture's inability to hold their own homeland, it also operates as a sign-post for academics, informing us that the position of popular literature on Tibet is secure.

Ron Davidson