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Book review of 'Global Tibet, Symbolic Tibet, Spiritual Tibet, and Tibet: Recent Resources Briefly Noted' by Todd T. Lewis

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Global Tibet, Symbolic Tibet, Spiritual Tibet, and Tibet: Recent Resources Briefly Noted

A Handbook of Tibetan Culture. Graham Coleman. Boston: Shambala Press, 1994. 430 pp. \$18.

Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture. Dargyab Rinpoche. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995. Pp. 150, 30 Drawings, \$14.95.

Inside Tibetan Buddhism: Rituals and Symbols Revealed. Robert Thurman. San Francisco: Collins Publishers SF, 1995. Pp. 110, 200+ Photographs, \$15.00.

Tibet Handbook: A Pilgrimage Guide. Victor Chan. Chico, CA: Moon Publications, 1994. 1099 pp, 200 maps and plans. \$30.00

Scholars in Tibetan studies have recently produced a number of new publications that aim to provide useful basic information on Buddhism, symbolism, the Tibetan diaspora, and pilgrimage sites in Tibet. Four of these works should prove of interest or utility to researchers involved in Himalayan studies who are not specialists in these areas.

Have you ever tried to give an overview of the major lineages of modern Tibetan Buddhism (or Bon) or trace their global diaspora? Needed the address of a refugee monastery in Nepal or India? Is there a Dharma Center in Chile? Exactly where does the respected visiting Rinpoche or Geshe fit into the modern pantheon of lineages or schools? These and many other questions can be answered by consulting **A Handbook of Tibetan Culture**, a valuable volume produced by Graham Coleman and the Orient Foundation. Attempting to provide a terse and comprehensive portrait of the global Tibetan world, it assembles terse biographies of contemporary lamas and scholars, a country-by-country directory of the myriad academic and cultural organizations involved with Tibet, a listing of the monasteries and teaching centers of the major lineages of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, as well as a guide to other libraries and museums with significant Tibetan holdings. The **Handbook** also devotes over 150 pages to a glossary of "key Tibetan, Buddhist, and Sanskrit" terms; the non-specialist will probably find it a helpful single reference.

The symbols of Buddhism are another realm of profuse and complicated elaboration in Tibetan culture, as these motifs adorn monastic decorations, *thankas*, clothing, and carpets. In Dargyab Rinpoche's **Buddhist Symbols in Tibetan Culture**, nine groups of symbols -- e.g. the "Eight Auspicious Things," "The Eight Bringers of Good Fortune," or "The Six Signs of Long Life," -- are nicely depicted via line drawings and tersely explained using a broad range of traditional sources. In most sections the historical and linguistic observations made by the learned Tibetan author (primarily in tracing Sanskrit parallels) should prove interesting for both specialist and any interested reader.

These core symbols offer important information regarding the popular ideals in traditional Tibet: in some instances, one finds how the adornment of even apparently mundane items points to more transcendental goals; one can also see how the great majority of these symbols relate to worldly prosperity (wealth, health, and long-life). In this concern with the pragmatic, we find grounds to critique the over-spiritualized construction of Tibetans in both popular and scholarly literature.

Sharing the intention of upgrading the presentation of Tibetan culture for English speakers is Robert Thurman's **Inside Tibetan Buddhism: Rituals and Symbols Revealed**, a work that is notable for its artistic synthesis of striking visual images and "dharma commentary." The chapters move through a simple program: an introduction to the basics of Buddhist doctrine (Chapter 1); an outline of the Tibetan path of "Taking refuge" (Chapter 2); terse summaries of preliminary practices including prostrations and visualization meditation protocols (Chapter 3); detailing the tantric empowerment of Chenresig (Chapter 4); various explanations of prominent cultural performances including the reincarnate lama system, New Year's rituals, sand *mandalas*, pilgrimage (Chapter 5). There is also a useful visual glossary.

Inside Tibetan Buddhism provides strikingly effective illustrated explanations of central doctrines and practices in what constitutes a remarkable missionary document. As the title indicates, Robert Thurman's text is addressed to individuals who want to "get inside" the elementary beliefs and practices to shape their own spiritual conversion to Buddhism or to provide a basis for understanding others who have entered into Tibetan Buddhist practices. The reader should not be surprised that the photographic ambiance and text provide a thoroughgoing idealization of Tibet's "Enlightened Civilization" (to use its Chapter 5 subheading). It is also interesting to note another subtext that marks this book's statement on the American domestication of Tibetan Buddhism: using western devotees to illustrate ritual and meditation practices asserts their legitimacy as mature exemplars in the tradition's perpetuation.

For traveling up to the highlands of Tibet today, there is no better resource available than Victor Chan's **Tibet Handbook: A Pilgrimage Guide**. One doesn't read guidebooks for their historical chapters or the language lessons, of course, and though Chan's efforts here are slightly uneven, they do provide generally reliable overviews that show awareness of fairly recent historical scholarship. This guidebook defines its main task as providing a sourcebook for western pilgrims and trekkers. As such, it is a treasure in a class of its own for its mind-boggling assembly of regional facts, maps, architectural drawings, site research, and travel suggestions on every region of the Tibet Autonomous Region. The information provided on the extant monuments and settlements has involved a vast amount of on-site observation and research and

such a synthesis exists nowhere else in European languages. Who can vouch for its wide-ranging accuracy overall? On the book jacket, the peerless peripatetic fieldworker Melvyn Goldstein calls the book "wonderful" and "invaluable," while Michael Aris lauds Chan as "a worthy successor of the great explorers of the nineteenth century." If so, it's hard to fault the cost or bulk (2" wide) for home reference or as travel companion.

Like all of these other works, **Tibet Handbook** provides a very useful synthesis and many new starting points from which to venture further into one's understanding of Tibet and its civilization.

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***The Golden Yoke: The Legal Cosmology of Buddhist Tibet.* Rebecca Redwood French. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995. Pp. xviii + 404, 64 Plates, 17 Figures.**

The Golden Yoke is the long-awaited result of Rebecca French's four years of field research among Tibetans in Tibet, Nepal, India, England, and the United States on the subject of Tibetan law. Based on over two hundred interviews with former government officials, lamas, chieftains, judges, mediators, prisoners, and other Tibetans knowledgeable about law, as well as on legal texts brought out of Tibet and stored in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, French's work is the most intensive treatment of the topic of Tibetan law to date. French's research is thus valuable to anyone studying legal thought and process not only in Tibet but also in the ethnically-Tibetan regions of Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, and northern Nepal.

French's main argument is that Tibetan law is best understood in terms of Tibetans' own legal cosmology, a system of thought about law, causation, intention, and morality, which is ultimately derived from Tibetan Buddhism. Tibet's legal cosmology is "so thoroughly Buddhist," she argues, that "none of the typical maxims [that] would apply to a bureaucratic legal system apply to Tibet" (1995: 343). Tibet's legal system is "unique" and is "incomprehensible" in terms of any context other than the Buddhist religion from which it derives (1995: 345).

Within the context of Tibetan Buddhism, then, French identifies "twelve major elements of the Tibetan cosmology of law" (1995: 17) which she presents throughout Part Two of her book. Central to the Tibetan cosmology of law is the concept of *sems*, or mind, the perfection of which, French argues, is the goal of the Tibetan legal system (1995: 76). The life of the Buddha serves as the model for the perfection of mind, a model which is contrasted with the "bargaining model" of Islamic law and the "reasonable man" model

of Anglo-American law (1995: 59, 77, 343). Other concepts which French examines include the "ten non-virtuous acts" (*mi-dge-wa bchu*), the law of karma (*chhos*), inner morality (*rang-khrims*), authority (*mnga'-og*), and appropriateness (*'os-pa*). Nine jurisdictions (1995: 115) and four legal rituals (1995: 121-7) are also identified and examined.

Four arguments emerge from the analysis: The Tibetan legal system was highly particularistic and case-specific; precedent did not play a role in the decision-making process (1995: 143). Tibetan legal cases were never considered "closed"; "even after a signed document had been issued by a conciliator or court, the case could be reconsidered by the parties at any later date" (1995: 139). "Truth" in the Tibetan legal system was based on "factual consonance" rather than "objective determination" (1995: 137-8). And the Tibetan legal system was characterized by "great flexibility in choice and level of forum" as well as "type of legal procedure"; "Tibetans could start a case at any of a wide variety of levels [using] any of the four different types of procedure... and then move back and forth between levels, forums, and procedures" (1995: 139). "The amount of leeway and play in the system," she writes, "was one of the key reasons that Asian scholars presumed for many years that no Tibetan legal system existed" (1995: 139).

Throughout the remainder of the book, French presents personal narratives that describe legal procedures and legal cases, as they were remembered by her informants, as a means through which to demonstrate how the Tibetan legal system operated in Tibet from 1940-1959. Part One of the book is a general introduction to Tibetan history, as told by Tibetan exile government officials. Part Three presents narratives about law "from the countryside." Part Four