



October 2011

Tibetan Modernities: Notes from the Field on Cultural and Social Change, Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz, Eds.; Reviewed by Geoff Childs

Geoff Childs
Washington University, Saint Louis

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

Recommended Citation

Childs, Geoff. 2011. Tibetan Modernities: Notes from the Field on Cultural and Social Change, Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz, Eds.; Reviewed by Geoff Childs. *HIMALAYA* 30(1). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol30/iss1/22>

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



the geography of sadhu travel may frustrate the reader unfamiliar with northern South Asian regions who wants to know where these sacred, wondrous places are.

The chapter on the body is the final descriptive chapter, and here Hausner synthesizes her findings on place and time to argue for a dualistic model of embodiment that recognizes two distinct domains of somatic body and non-material soul. Set at Pashupati temple and its grounds in Kathmandu, the chapter focuses mostly on the already familiar theme of the illusion of the body. This material is very interesting though it suffers from a minor weakness of the book, its repetitiveness. Also a focus on two women provides insufficient coverage of this vast topic, and gender is treated in only a cursory manner. Still the strength of writing and the sophisticated analysis provide an understanding of the aging and suffering sadhu body. From life-stages data of what the sadhus say about the body, Hausner interprets their negation and annoyance of their bodies as expressions of paradoxical experiences of illusion—that the body's physicality is an illusion of materiality that they must nonetheless accept. In this final chapter before the conclusion, Hausner revisits body concepts prevalent in South Asian literature that present tapas as mainly extreme austerities, whereas her participants see an alternative kind of tapas that is less extreme. Sadhus live a paradox in that the body is the vehicle by which they can transcend the illusion of material life, but the body is at the same time an embodied reality of dualism. Thus their separation from householder life is permanent yet their daily lives are lived within a body they must continuously experience as suffering from the wandering, non-attached life, but which they also attempt to transcend. The sadhus emphasize how the body is the means by which they reach the sacred places of religious festivals, or the instrument by which they meditate and perform tapas. This paradox is the basis for Hausner to argue that while the goal of the renouncer is transcendence of dualism, sadhus continuously refer to and acknowledge dualism explicitly and implicitly.

The book is thoroughly descriptive, at times becoming repetitious on themes somewhat contradictory to the title's implied meaning—that sadhus are wanderers, when in fact much of the time they stay in one place for often long periods—and not always getting below surface descriptions of the body until much later in the book. On the latter the reader is left wondering about body sadhanas like yoga and the presumed transcendence of suffering entailed in a sadhu's life. Did her participants reflect on this? Some of them were ill and had surgery yet lack of description beyond the stoic "body as illusion" aphorism and some brief descriptions in the final chapters leaves one wondering about the ordinary body and the suffering body—phenomena and experiences so central in cultural and medical anthropological theory on the body. Hausner could have probed her subjects more about their physical pain or their experiences of bliss when performing asanas. What kind of meditation do they practice? Is the body a vehicle of meditation, as in some forms of Buddhist medita-

tion, and if so, what is the technique they use? What is the role of the oft-mentioned marijuana and hashish in relation to the paradox of embodiment? A book that purports to advance our knowledge of body and culture could have pressed these issues more.

Hausner's application of ethnographic methods—observation, participation, interviews—to elicit information about such complex ideas as renunciation, illusion, transcendence, and power as lived experiences produces a groundbreaking study. That these are not tied more persuasively to the large literature on the anthropology of the body—she relies on a few dated religious studies references only, ignoring the work from medical anthropology, for example—makes the study less generalizable than it could have been. Still, the book's strength lies in the fluid way complex religio-philosophical ideas are rendered accessible in the description of the lives and practices of the sadhus.

Mary Cameron is professor of anthropology at Florida Atlantic University.

TIBETAN MODERNITIES: NOTES FROM THE FIELD ON CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

BY ROBERT BARNETT AND RONALD
SCHWARTZ, EDS.

Leiden: Brill, 2008. xxi, 456 p. : ill., map. ISBN
9789004155220

REVIEWED BY GEOFF CHILDS

Tibetan Modernities contains articles originally presented at the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies held in 2003 in Oxford. Contributors include professional artists and writers as well as representatives of several academic disciplines (e.g., anthropology, ethnomusicology, geography, linguistics, and sociology). Robert Barnett provides a preface that traces the development of modern Tibetan Studies through shifts in research locales (from exile communities to Tibetans living within China) and themes (from Tibetans as victims of oppression to agents of change). Most of the essays in this volume illustrate this thematic switch by portraying Tibetans as contributors if not initiators of many transformations currently sweeping through their societies. Ronald Schwartz's introductory essay then

points out where Tibet stands in relation to modernization in China, and discusses how the state projects itself as a reform-minded bearer of modernity's benefits.

Four essays are grouped under the heading Modernization and Social Change. Emily Yeh's innovative study ("Modernity, Memory and Agricultural Modernisation in Central Tibet, 1950-1980") traces the development of state farms during the 1950s. She argues, among other points, that these farms served a lasting function by establishing a foundation for extending state control over the populace through agricultural modernization. Susan Costello's article ("The Flow of Wealth in Golok Pastoralist Society") details how incorporation into a market-oriented system influences domestic production and patterns of consumption at the local level. An interesting section of this paper centers on the adaptive value of inter-household exchange relationships, mechanisms that help defray the impacts of major expenses. Heidi Fjeld's contribution ("Pollution and Social Networks in Contemporary Rural Tibet") deals with a paradox: the continuing stigmatization of butchers, blacksmiths, and corpse-cutters at a time when economic development is supposed to be eradicating traditional social hierarchies. She provides an interesting discussion of cultural issues that impede marginalized individuals from fully participating in rural community life. This is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of social hierarchies in contemporary rural Tibet. Jennifer Chertow's essay ("Embodying the Nation: Childbirth in Contemporary Tibet") is an example of the postmodernist style of ethnographic writing whereby vignettes and casual interactions substitute for data. As a result, generalizing claims remain unsubstantiated, and the paper reveals precious little about its purported topic (childbirth).

Three essays are grouped under the heading The Pedagogy of Modernity. Martijn van Beek ("Imaginations of Ladhaki Modernity") systematically approaches modernity by carefully grounding the analyses of development and education in colonial history and of recent political developments. This is an intriguing commentary on the dialectical relationship between scientific rationalism and visions of an idealized past. Ellen Bangsbo's essay ("Schooling and 'Quality Education' in the Tibetan Diaspora and Tibet") discusses education as a component of development, and provides interesting points of comparison between education among Tibetans in China and in exile. She points to the shortcomings both educational systems have in equipping students with skills relevant to contemporary societies, and highlights the difficulties of implementing modern pedagogical methods that foster independent thinking when such a goal may contrast with a state's agenda. Kalsang Yeshe ("A Preliminary Note on Chinese Codeswitching in Modern Lhasa Tibetan") uses conversations recorded in teashops, buses, and other public venues to document when, and under what conditions, codeswitching (using Chinese terms and phrases) occurs among Tibetan speakers in Lhasa. The author hypothesizes that the frequency of codeswitching is proportionate to location: speakers in

some contexts (e.g., at religious sites) are less prone to insert Chinese terms and phrases in conversation than in other contexts (e.g., sites and situations involving technical or cultural activities).

The next section contains two essays on art and cinema. Tsewang Tashi's sketch of modern Tibetan painting ("Twentieth Century Tibetan Painting") traces stylistic developments, notably the influence of social realism from the 1970s onward. The essay is written from the perspective of an artist and scholar who has been a contributor to these developments, and as such draws from both written sources and personal recollections. Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering ("Reflections on Tibetan Film") writes a heartfelt critique of the ways that Tibetans have been portrayed in films made in China, and laments the fact that Tibetans' voices have been muted in the construction of their own cinematic depictions. Robert Barnett's preface to the essay points out how the situation has changed in recent years as Tibetans have begun writing, directing, and producing films in China.

The final section is titled New Media, New Public Space. Yangdon Dhondup ("Dancing to the Beat of Modernity: The Rise and Development of Tibetan Pop Music") discusses the development of Tibetan pop music in China that is produced for consumer-oriented youths, and pays special attention to the ways Tibetans represent their own identities through music. The author details how a melding of indigenous forms and musical trends in China has contributed to the development of contemporary forms of music. Anna Stirr's essay ("*Blue Lake*: Tibetan Popular Music, Place and Fantasies of the Nation") centers on a popular song written in 1984 by poet Dondrub Gyal and composer Chopathar. *Blue Lake*, considered by many to be a nationalistic anthem such that it has been periodically banned in China, experienced a renaissance in the late 1990s through the medium of music videos. The author notes the ambiguity of the song's lyrics that allow for different interpretations, and highlights important differences in how the song's modern incarnations are received by Tibetan exiles and Tibetans within China. Tashi Rabgey ("*newtibet.com*: Citizenship as Agency in the Virtual Tibetan Public") uses Habermas's notion of the public sphere to analyze an ephemeral phenomenon: the meteoric rise and rapid extinction in 2003 of *newtibet.com*. This Chinese-language internet site became a forum for educated Tibetans within China to exchange views and opinions that could not be otherwise easily expressed. The author devotes particular attention to one posting, an essay titled *The Ugly Tibetan*, which criticized the modern Tibetan elite for "turning a blind-eye to social problems while enjoying a life of self-interested pursuits of entertainment." The ensuing discussions provide a rare glimpse into how some Tibetans express views about politically privileged members of their society. The final essay by Robert Barnett ("Authenticity, Secrecy and Public Space: Chen Kuiyuan and Representations of the Panchen Lama Dispute of 1995") centers on the disputed recognition of the Panchen Lama in 1995. Barnett highlights the complications

and contradictions that ensue when an atheistic state attempts to enhance its legitimacy and political standing among a minority population by promoting and participating in a religious ritual. Barnett discusses how claims of authenticity are established through visual portrayals of the event (paintings and documentaries), and the role that deliberate fabrication plays in creating a historical legacy. This is the most fascinating analysis to date of the Eleventh Panchen Lama's controversial selection.

In summary, grouping conference papers under a coherent theme is always a tricky proposition. It does not succeed with this volume because the editors have tried to impose an ill-defined concept (modernity) on disparate papers. As historian Frederick Cooper writes, "The word *modernity* is now used to make so many different points that continued deployment of it may contribute more to confusion than to clarity" (2005:113). Herein resides one of the shortcomings of this volume: a multivalent, nebulous concept is the purported unifying theme, and yet the editors neither provide a cogent definition of modernity nor discuss the term's intellectual history. As a result, the reader is often guided to the rather banal observation that modernity assumes different forms and is interpreted by different actors according to historical, political, economic, social, and cultural contingencies. In the absence of precise definitions or analytical frameworks, virtually anything can be (and often is) forwarded as evidence of modernity or, more annoyingly, multiple and alternative modernities. However, any qualm about using modernity as a unifying theme does not detract from my final assessment: this volume is an important contribution to Tibetan Studies because it contains some original, provocative, and insightful studies of culture change in contemporary Tibetan societies.

Geoff Childs teaches in the Dept. of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis.



Looking into the future. Photo: Emilia Sulek

PARADISE LOST?: STATE FAILURE IN NEPAL

BY ALI RIAZ AND SUBHO BASU

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. xiv, 220 pp. ISBN 978-0-7391-1426-1 (cloth).

REVIEWED BY SUSAN HANGEN

Paradise Lost?: State Failure in Nepal offers a unique interdisciplinary perspective on Nepal, as one author, Basu, is an historian, while the other, Riaz, is a political scientist. The book serves as a concise reference on the history of modern Nepal from 1768-2006, and a valuable primer on the social, political and economic issues that contribute to the ongoing political crisis of the country. The authors do not suggest that Nepal was a paradise at any point in history, except perhaps for its rulers or some foreigners who imagined Nepal as a Shangri-la. Rather, the authors paint a picture of a polity that has long been mired in problems and is currently facing an unprecedented crisis.

The book's central argument is that the Nepali state has failed, and that this failure has been evolving for a long time, due to the "extractive patrimonial" state which created a "disjuncture between the state and society" (2). The authors state that their intention in classifying Nepal as a failed state is to answer the question of "for whom the Nepali state failed and how" (17). As the authors note, the concept of state failure is plagued by blurriness and a lack of a commonly accepted definition. They attempt to clarify their use of the concept by outlining the "most conspicuous features" of failed states, including:

"the presence of enduring violence...; the predatory and oppressive nature of the state...; inability of the state to control its own territory; the growth of criminal violence and lawlessness...; deterioration and/or destruction of physical infrastructure; the decaying state of social services (including education and health); and providing economic opportunity for a few at the expense of the majority of the population. An equally important element of the failed state is the loss of legitimacy" (19).

The authors argue that state failure is a long-term process