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# REVISITING RITUALS IN A CHANGING TIBETAN WORLD

BY KATIA BUFFETRILLE, ED.

Leiden: Brill: 2012. Brill's Tibetan Studies Series, Vol. 31. 386 pp. \$182 (cloth). ISBN 9789004232174. (Also available as an e-book.)

## REVIEWED BY DAVID TEMPLEMAN

Traditionally, rituals in the Himalayan region have been regarded as performances that serve to transform, empower, and control. In the past, they have also changed in response to circumstances, as may be noted in the many new rituals developed in 17<sup>th</sup> century Tsang designed to counter the Mongol invaders.

This remarkable book charts changes in ritual in a variety of more recent contexts. The book comprises ten chapters offering a broad spectrum of Himalayan scholarship, from ritual change among the Newar in Kathmandu (von Rospatt) to post-Communist ritual efficacy in Mongolia (Even) to the potentially subversive employment of ransom figures in contemporary Lhasa (Barnett).

In offering such a wide range of studies and covering a sufficiently broad period of historical time from the mythological origins of rituals to the present day, the book will be of considerable use to a wide range of scholars of ritual itself and, more especially, in its many forms found in Tibetan cultural areas and the Himalayas in general. Because all the authors have written on their topics in well-documented detail, each chapter adds to what we know of the many forms ritual might adopt within this broad range of clearly defined contexts.

The scope of the book is clearly extensive and a few examples of the contributions (although all merit discussion) might demonstrate why I consider it to be an indispensable guide to understanding ritual change.

As a reader, it struck me immediately that the chapters fit together very smoothly despite the geographic breadth of their topics, which effectively cover western Himalayan areas to Tibet's far northeast in Amdo. Perhaps the most obvious of the common themes that emerge through several of the contributions (Dodin; Pirie; Even; Barnett) is that ritual is described as acting not only as a binding agency to the past but also as a resistance to larger narratives. A second theme noted through the contributions (Diemberger; Helffer) is that of the tenacity of the old. That is, that rituals have

a way of retaining essence despite the addition of newer cosmetic variations. The final loose grouping (Jagou; von Rospatt; Schneider; Buffetrille; Barnett) is that of ritual being completely re-cast in light of newly emerged (and sometimes imposed) circumstances which may add a sense of the political to the ritual's newly shaped form.

In particular, Katia Buffetrille's contribution demonstrates clearly the points of political tension and areas of cooperation in what might be called the 'contested site' of the Halesi-Maratika caves in eastern Nepal. The tensions that exist are not solely between the local Hindu Giri families, who consider themselves to be the 'traditional owners' of the site, and the 'newcomer Buddhists,' who have appropriated it with their own claims that are of a considerable antiquity, but added to this complex mixture is the presence of the local Maoist groups, who also have an interest in the site. Buffetrille's analysis of the complex potentialities of the site is thorough and links neatly with Alexander von Rospatt's contribution, which examines the impact of various new competitors, such as Tibetans, upon Newar Buddhism and the deliberate revival and renewal of ritual practices within that community to re-invigorate its form of Buddhist practice.

Hildegard Diemberger discusses books as ritual objects in both their older historical setting and in the more recent impetus to print and preserve certain core texts in digital form and to return them to the place of their origin. Diemberger's discussion in the last part of her contribution touches on the important issue of how such texts are to be treated ritually in light of their modern format. This reminded me of my recent gift to a Tibetan friend of the entire Kanjur and Tenjur, the collected Tibetan Buddhist writings of 4,569 individual works in a total of 333 large volumes, on a USB flashdrive. His problem was whether or not it should be wrapped in the traditional silk 'robes' despite its miniscule size.

In her discussion of the Manchu emperor Qianlong's promotion of a ritual of drawing lots to determine rebirth, ostensibly to prevent centralization of power in a few ambitious families, Fabienne Jagou notes the 'bureaucratization' of ritual and the resultant unwieldy (and unhelpful) form such structured rituals eventually became mired in.

The chapters by Fernanda Pirie and Nicola Schneider deal with the quite different topics of the settlement of grassland disputes and the ordination of nuns as a challenge to ritual, respectively. But both offer compelling examples of how ritual can change in response to the urgent need for workable legal change, and how the 'old guard' resistance to ritual change and its continued reliance on textual authority continues to hinder all efforts for the ordination of nuns within the exiled community.

Robert Barnett's chapter, impressively long at 100 pages, deals with the Tibetan ritual use of ransom images, placed most often at crossroads, which serve to attract inimical spirits away from ill or otherwise vulnerable people. Barnett

contextualizes the various types of parameters in which these rituals may be shaped through a detailed historical and cultural study of the ways these ransom images are conceived and disbursed in older society. However his main focus is their employment in modern, urban Lhasa. In that context, after an abeyance of many decades, they have again appeared and have taken on new and powerful meaning. In his final section, 'Ritual as Political Metaphor' Barnett refers to them as a 'silent dissonance' (p. 349) and suggests that their placement in a modern urban setting implicitly questions China's entire state-building project. When Chinese motorists run over the ransom images, perhaps unaware of their purpose, Tibetans might see them as removing the unwanted spirits on the wheels of their vehicles, thereby asserting a sort of symbolic victory.

In summary, this book offers the reader a wealth of new information by scholars who are at the forefront of their respective fields. It is well produced, on good quality paper, is solidly bound, and sits well with the other volumes in this series. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library has firmly established itself as a pacesetter in the field and this volume enhances that status even further.

*David Templeman is an Adjunct Research fellow at Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Australia. He continues to work on Tibetan hagiography, especially the writings of the 17th century prelate, Taranatha and to supervise doctoral students. His latest book (with John Powers) is A Historical Dictionary of Tibet (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2012).*

## HEALING ELEMENTS: EFFICACY AND THE SOCIAL ECOLOGIES OF TIBETAN MEDICINE

BY SIENNA R. CRAIG

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. 344 pp. \$34.95 (Paperback), \$75.00 (Hardcover). ISBN 9780520273245

REVIEWED BY CALUM BLAIKIE

Sienna Craig's book *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine* makes a rich, timely and rewarding contribution to several lively fields. Growing interest in Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan medicine) over the last decade or so has seen the release of numerous edited

and co-authored volumes, journal articles and doctoral dissertations based in anthropology, history and other disciplines, shedding welcome light on many aspects of this diverse and rapidly changing medical tradition. Monographs and longer published works remain remarkably thin on the ground, however, presenting us with often finely detailed, but ultimately fragmented, pictures of Sowa Rigpa, and leaving several important concepts and processes widely acknowledged yet insufficiently defined or connected. The same period has also seen significant growth in social scientific studies taking medicines and the pharmaceutical industry as their central objects of investigation. Several excellent collaborative volumes have started to map out the theoretical terrain and the contemporary dynamics at play in the making, assessment, valuation, circulation and use of pharmaceuticals, although ethnographic grounding of the main ideas remains patchy. *Healing Elements* illuminates these dual lacunae to impressive effect. The author deftly weaves ethnographic material from a decade of engagement with Sowa Rigpa in Nepal and the Tibetan areas of China with astute analysis, offering fresh perspectives on complex real world processes and a robust contribution to highly-charged academic and public debates.

The author takes efficacy as her central focus, examining the construction and deployment of the concept within and around contemporary Sowa Rigpa along two closely linked lines of inquiry. First, she explores the various ways in which efficacy is determined, asking what makes a particular medicine "work" in a particular context. Second, she examines how assertions regarding efficacy are made, by whom and to what ends. Her main argument proposes efficacy as an inter-subjective phenomenon, constituting the 'measurement of micropolitical power, biopsychosocial effects, and cultural affect' (p. 7). Sowa Rigpa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is 'inextricably tied to global regimes of governance, from conservation-development agendas to technoscience and the business of global pharma' (p.22), which problematizes efficacy and contributes to the transformation of knowledge-practice linked to medicines and their use. Taking familiar debates a step further, the author also demonstrates how socio-cultural and biomedical definitions of efficacy are linked, mutually (if unevenly) shaping one another under particular environmental, political, economic, historical and epistemological conditions.

The adoption of a 'social ecologies' approach provides crucial conceptual framing. It demonstrates the author's holistic interest in the reflexive role the concept of efficacy plays in the entire process by which people fall sick, understand their sickness, take medicines, experience their outcomes, and make sense of these events within specific environments and social spaces (p.6). This broad orientation proves suitable for tackling the complexity inherent to studies of efficacy, while avoiding the micro and macro reductionism that has limited other contributions to the field. Situating efficacy within distinct social ecologies