

8-2013

Sienna R. Craig, *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine*. Reviewed by
Calum Blaikie

Calum Blaikie

Centre for Research on Science, Medicine, Health and Society, Paris

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

Recommended Citation

Blaikie, Calum (2013) "Sienna R. Craig, *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine*. Reviewed by Calum Blaikie," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 32: No. 1, Article 18.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol32/iss1/18>

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.

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 21st 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

allows for multiple factors to be drawn out and placed in relation to one another, as contingent configurations with emergent properties. At the same time, such broadness of scope necessarily limits the depth to which each element can be explored. For example, Chapter Four adroitly employs observed therapeutic encounters and illness narratives to explore the interdependent socio-economic, political and environmental-spiritual dimensions of disease causation and the religious and ritual treatment in different social ecologies. However, there is little explicit discussion of the way ritual and religious dimensions are conceptualised by those concerned, how they can be brought together to produce desired outcomes, or how their relative importance may be shifting. Similarly, *mendrup* rituals for the consecration of medicines are identified as 'a crucial component of what makes a medicine efficacious' (p.159), but we learn little more about this until *mendrup* reappears in Chapter Seven in the context of a clinical trial, where it is put to different analytical use. In what is an otherwise carefully defined conceptual space, the 'intersection of ritual action and pharmacology' at which efficacy is produced (p.7) could perhaps benefit from some further clarification. Although these matters have been addressed by the author and others elsewhere (Adams, Schrempf and Craig 2010), the wide focal range adopted here at times sacrifices depth of field. Another challenge inherent to holistic analysis across multiple locations lies in accounting for each of the identified factors in each place, and for the many ways in which social ecologies are dynamically related. On the whole this challenge is well met, although when reaching for conclusions the framework struggles to show how linkages across social ecologies contribute to local level change as well as to larger scale transformation.

In stylistic terms, the author states her commitment to 'Geertzian thick description' and makes extensive use of dialogue as a way of 'writing theory through action' and placing herself within the text (p.20). The case for this approach is well made on methodological, theoretical and literary grounds and it bears up to the task well. Frequent vignettes and verbatim conversations allow the reader to follow several interlinked analytical avenues simultaneously without ever losing sight of the individuals, places, histories and contemporary narratives under discussion. The longer ethnographic sections in Chapters Two through Five exemplify this way of thinking, doing and writing anthropology - an effective approach itself at once traditional and contemporary. Core issues are neatly woven into the ethnography throughout and are brought together again in the closing chapters, although the paragraphs that close each chapter could perhaps revisit the overriding issues a little more thoroughly and reset the focus ready for the next snapshot. More than anything, however, this approach draws strong lines through contested epistemological and social terrain, while encouraging readers to pay close attention and make some of their own connections en route to the final analytical synthesis. The author makes the multi-sited

ethnographic scope of the study work to good effect, with the many parallels and contrasts both within and between the focal countries bringing a huge amount to the discussion. A non-linear and mosaic-like (p.18) narrative structure enables vital connections to be made and revisited and for the main arguments to be effectively developed, but inevitably sacrifices the anchoring of events in temporal relation to one another and to the historical processes which have unfurled over the period covered by the book. The concluding chapter goes some way towards addressing this, with reference to the recent recognition of Sowa Rigpa by the Indian government and to a Tibetan practitioner in today's USA, but the dynamism and momentum of transformation is somewhat obscured by the thematic layout.

In summary, *Healing Elements* is a highly accomplished and readable book, offering a great deal both to newcomers and old hands in medical anthropology, social studies of science, Himalayan and Tibetan studies. It does much-needed justice to the complex challenges faced by Sowa Rigpa practitioners and institutions as they strive to simultaneously defend and transform their tradition in ever-closer engagement with powerful forces of the state, transnational forms of governance, biomedicine, technoscience and the burgeoning traditional medicine market. The core arguments are effectively developed and amply evidenced, resulting in a strong, well grounded and subtly nuanced case for a more open, comprehensive and yet precise understanding of the concept of efficacy and its application in today's world.

REFERENCES

Adams, V., M. Schrempf and S. Craig, 2011. *Medicine Between Science and Religion: Explorations on Tibetan Grounds*. New York: Berghan.

Calum Blaikie is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Research on Science, Medicine, Health and Society (Cermes3) / EHESS / CNRS (Paris), as a member of the Pharmasud project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR). Working at the interface of medical, pharmaceutical, economic and environmental anthropology, his research primarily focuses on Sowa Rigpa in Himalayan India.