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Darjeeling Hills, India. Reviewed by Theresia Hofer**

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LONG LIVES AND UNTIMELY DEATHS: LIFE-SPAN CONCEPTS AND LONGEVITY PRACTICES AMONG TIBETANS IN THE DARJEELING HILLS, INDIA

BY BARBARA GERKE

Leiden: Brill, 2012. 362 pp. \$144 (hardcover). ISBN 978-90-04-21703-4.

REVIEWED BY THERESIA HOFER

Based on long-term personal and anthropological engagement with Tibetans in the Darjeeling Hills and concentrated in and around the two local urban centers of Kalimpong and Darjeeling, Gerke offers the first comprehensive account and analysis of Tibetans' contemporary ideas and practices related to multiple 'life-forces' and the 'life-span'. In so doing she makes a noteworthy contribution to the study of Tibetans in Indian exile, outside of the well-documented Dharamsala-based communities. However, this work stands out for another reason: the author offers an innovative analytical approach, '*practices of temporalisation*,' through which to consider the disparate, yet highly interconnected, ideas regarding long life that are held by medical, astrological, divinatory, and ritual experts and lay Tibetans.

With *practices of temporalisation*, Gerke aims to enlarge anthropologists' conceptions and analyses of time by going beyond the oft-recurring temporal dichotomies of, for instance, qualitative and quantitative or cyclical and linear time. She argues convincingly that such binary categories do not offer an adequate framework for analysis and interpretation of the various engagements of her interlocutors with temporal events related to long life.

Following an excellent chapter on the field site and its peoples – a multi-ethnic setting within a politically fraught space – the reader is offered a clear yet detailed introduction and contextualization of the complex theories that underlie Tibetan medicine, astrology, divination, and Buddhist Vajrayana ritual. Although these aspects of Tibetans' lives are not clearly separated in practice, Gerke opts to then explore her ethnographic encounters in medical, astrological and divinatory, and Buddhist ritual contexts in three separate parts of the book. Due to their clear overlaps and the author's

focus on Tibetans' agency and choices, these contexts are, however, ultimately analyzed together.

In medical contexts, we learn how the main Tibetan physiological processes of the three *nyepa* (often translated as 'humours' by others) and their temporal frameworks (related to stages of life, seasons, and times of day) are recognized through general pulse reading and acknowledged through the application of treatment at certain times of the day, month, or year. Meanwhile, the various 'life forces' in the body – *bla* ('life-essence'), *srog* ('life-force') and *mdhang mchogs* ('supreme radiance') – are reckoned with by using astrological 'vitality charts' calculated annually, through *bla* tables that relate to its movement in the body along with the lunar cycles, as well as via a patient's pulse, not least the *bla tsa* (or *bla* pulse) which is palpated at a different location from the regular pulse. An interesting finding and also a recurrent theme here is the differential use and application of wider temporal frameworks and medico-cultural ideas (for instance of *bla*) by different Tibetan medical practitioners (*amchi*). Apart from distinctions in *amchi*'s training in India versus in Tibet, differing levels of interest and experience of practitioners – lay or monastic – also influenced engagement and skill in employing more subtle aspects of pulse reading, as well as more generally medical interpretations of life-forces and life-span.

Alongside medical understandings found during the encounters at the branch clinics of the Men-Tsee-Khang ('Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute'), the life-span is also assessed in a wide variety of divinatory and astrological contexts in the Darjeeling Hills. Here, Gerke draws our attention to the importance of what are known as 'five factors' and the so-called 'obstacle years', 'timely' and 'untimely' deaths, and 'maximum', 'remaining' and 'completed' life-spans. Merit and karma as crucial ideas of causation within Tibetan value systems are approached in a new way, the author analyzing them in relation to strengthening and prolonging *tshé* or the life-span. In this context, she gives welcome consideration to common Tibetan practices, including liberating animals, obtaining a divination, and the loss of *bla*, as well as learning about one's respective strength or weakness of the 'five factors' in a given year through consultation of almanacs. Gerke takes the reader on fascinating journeys. For instance, joining patients asking for divinations in order to ascertain whether the root of a problem can be medically remedied, or needs ritual intervention by monks or a lama. As in preceding and subsequent chapters, Gerke's treatment of these efforts and events in Tibetans' lives emphasizes peoples' 'situational agency' in relation to 'externally' created information (for instance as found in an almanac or a diviner's prediction).

The final part of the book describes the common practice of Tibetans attending large public long-life Vajrayana Buddhist rituals, which are carried out by respected high lamas. The differential understandings and benefits gained by the various groups of participants from the complex and

layered structures and content of the rituals are subsequently analyzed. Gerke identifies a unifying theme in this setting, that of the conferral of ‘blessing’ (*byin rlabs*) to various attending groups during the rituals. She goes on to show how these are, in turn, differentially interpreted with regard to their efficacy with respect to extension of the life span. Here we also find an important assessment of the wider social and political relevance of these rituals. Given the dispersed and legally difficult situation of the various groups of Tibetans, either as one of India’s various categories of “minority groups” or holding “refugee” status in the context of the thoroughly multi-ethnic north of the Indian state of West Bengal, such rituals serve to strengthen their cohesion somewhat, as well as adding auspiciousness (and real-world benefits) to recurrent events of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic calendar. Gerke rightly points out some continuity here with historical practices of the Tibetan Ganden Phodrang government in ‘old Tibet’. The wider political and social function of large Buddhist congregations and rituals in Indian exile could have perhaps been discussed more with regard to existing literature on this topic, and in as much as it relates to the long-life of Tibetan communities and their cultures and languages in exile at large.

One important empirical conclusion of Gerke’s work is that Tibetan ideas of the life-span are not necessarily and predominantly informed by a linear concept of ‘years lived’, but rather imply a “reservoir of an oil-lamp filled with oil that can, for example, be refilled to a certain extent when the oil runs low” (p. 3). A pertinent theoretical contribution is made with regard to “embodied practices by which people do time” (Mills 2005: 350, cited p. 290), which in the context of Tibetans in the Darjeeling Hills are discussed in the context of a unique interplay between their situational agency, wider temporal frameworks, and *practices of temporalisation*. Questioning or even discussing the ‘accuracy’ of some life-span predictions, although interesting for outsiders (including the author and reviewer), do not seem to be of much concern to her informants, for whom the need to know about practical ways to strengthen the various life-forces and eliminate obstacles is more relevant and important in their quest for a long and happy life.

This book will be fascinating and inspiring reading for the specialized scholarly audiences in anthropology of the Himalayas, (Tibetan) Buddhism, and Asian medicines. Some chapters will also be a welcome addition to students’ required readings in courses in these fields. The book overall would also appeal to a more general readership who is interested in a nuanced presentation of Tibetan societies in India, and especially their concerns with regard to health and long-life in a medically pluralistic setting.

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fractured temporalities in Buddhist Ladakh.’ In W James and D. Mills, eds., *Qualities of Time: Anthropological Approaches*. Oxford, New York: Berg.

Theresia Hofer is a postdoctoral fellow at the Section for Medical Anthropology, Institute of Health and Society at the University of Oslo. Her main research interests are the social and medical anthropology of Tibet and the Himalayas; the contemporary practices, history and art of Tibetan medicine; cross-cultural studies of health and illness and international development and global health. She is the author of a monograph on the history and contemporary practices of Tibetan medicine in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

THE INHERITANCE OF CHANGE: TRANSMISSION AND PRACTICE OF TIBETAN MEDICINE IN NGAMING

BY THERESIA HOFER

Wien, Austria: 2012. Pp. 418. Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, Vol. 76. €39.50 (paperback). ISBN 13: 978-3-902501-14-1.

REVIEWED BY SIENNA CRAIG

The past decade has witnessed a blossoming of scholarship across the humanities and social sciences that takes as its area of inquiry the Tibetan science of healing, or *Sowa Rigpa*. This body of work reflects not only different currents of scholarly tradition within the medical humanities but also the geographic, historical, and lived diversity of *Sowa Rigpa* itself. From the Darjeeling hills and Dharamsala to the Ladakhi Chang Tang, from Buryatia to Bhutan, from Kathmandu to Mustang, Nepal, from the South Indian Tibetan settlements of Bylakuppe to the grasslands of Golok or the cultural hub of Repkong in China’s Qinghai Province, this work is opening up our understanding of Tibetan medicine in action. This scholarship articulates through the lives of patients and healers, traces the ways Tibetan medicine and biomedicine intermingle, and shows how a *Sowa Rigpa* sensibility (Adams, Schrempf and Craig 2010) can impact health care policy, ideas of development, and modernity, even the formation of an industry around Tibetan pharmaceuticals (Saxer 2012). The field is rich, and growing richer by the year.

However, texts that have at their heart contemporary fieldwork in Central Tibet remain scarce. The reasons for this relative dearth in an otherwise expanding reservoir of scholarship are at once simple and complicated. Although people have been conducting research in Tibetan areas of