



HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 32
Number 1 *Ladakh: Contemporary Publics and
Politics No. 1 & 2*

Article 20

8-2013

Theresa Hofer, *The Inheritance of Change: Transmission and Practice of Tibetan Medicine in Ngaming*. Reviewed by Sienna Craig

Sienna Craig

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

Recommended Citation

Craig, Sienna. 2013. Theresa Hofer, *The Inheritance of Change: Transmission and Practice of Tibetan Medicine in Ngaming*. Reviewed by Sienna Craig. *HIMALAYA* 32(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol32/iss1/20>

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.



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.

REFERENCES

Mills, M. A., ‘Living in time’s shadow: pollution, purification and

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

China in earnest since the early 1980s, the ability to do so is shaped by what is politically possible: where one can get permission to work, under what auspices, with whom. Particularly since 2008, the ability to conduct research has been eclipsed by politics in many Tibetan regions of the PRC, nowhere more so than the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

For this and many other reasons *The Inheritance of Change: Transmission and Practice of Tibetan Medicine in Ngamring* emerges not only as a valuable addition to this growing scholarly field, but also as a thoughtful effort to document and analyze history and social life within the TAR, and to do so in collaboration with Central Tibetans themselves. The ethnographic research that undergirds Theresia Hofer's book commenced in 2003. Six weeks of field research in Ngamring (Shigatse Prefecture) and a great deal of textual research ground this book. Further ethnographic and textual study as part of Hofer's dissertation research in 2006-07 also contributes to her findings.

Hofer's narrative includes the perspectives of her Tibetan Academy of Social Science (TASS) research assistant as well as insights from Tibetan authors writing about medicine across an impressive range of centuries (15th – 17th and 20th – 21st). The book also gives voice to contemporary Ngamring *amchi* (Tibetan medical practitioners). Taken together, this combination of textual analysis and life history-oriented ethnography illuminate the dynamics of medical knowledge transmission and exemplify Hofer's central arguments about the meaning and nature of lineage (*gyü*), the relationship between textual knowledge and embodied practice, and the ways socio-political changes during each of these historical periods have influenced the lives of doctors. The transformations documented by Hofer's work include "shifts toward the institutionalization of Sowa Rigpa education in monastic and/or government schools and colleges, a standardization of the learning of medicine and the practice of doctors, the exposure to and integration of new medical ideas, shifting power relationships between various centers and peripheries, and the influence of the state in legitimizing or delegitimizing of medical practices" (p. 313).

One might be tempted to locate such change firmly in the contemporary and to see such transformation as inextricably linked to the Chinese annexation of Tibet in the 1950s and subsequent social and political upheavals. Hofer's book answers this claim by saying, essentially, *yes, but not only*. The book's early chapters engage contending histories of medicine in Tibet during the pre-modern era (7th – 15th c) and on the cusp of modernity (15th – 17th c), showing how these earlier codifications of medical theory and the formation of *Sowa Rigpa* convention involved regional variation and conceptual points of debate. The book goes on to ask: What does it mean to transmit knowledge? What kind of knowledge is transmissible, and in what forms? What happens when knowledge becomes threatened or suppressed by virtue of power plays and political circumstances? How are currents of medical knowledge and practice enlivened by

change, not just challenged by it?

For all the ways *Inheritance of Change* could be read as a technical, stepwise assessment of Tibetan medical lineage, the text retains an immediacy to it – as if we are discovering the biography of these Ngamring *amchi* along with the author. This is particularly true in the second half of the book. But it remains true in more subtle ways in the first half of the book, in which Hofer provides a thorough treatment of early Tibetan medical history including the development and eventual "unification" of two main schools of Tibetan medical praxis, the *jang* and *zur*, over the course of the 15th – 17th centuries. Hofer does a skillful job of bridging these two sections of the book: of making history relevant to contemporary practice and of showing how historical debates about the nature of medical authority, the scope of clinical practice, and the relationship between teachers and students continues into the present day.

This book puts medical, social, and political history in productive dialogue with anthropology. It allows us to explore what lessons we might learn from the *longue durée* of Tibetan medicine's history that might help us see the possibilities for a 21st century Tibetan medicine that does not lose itself in its efforts to standardize, modernize, and industrialize. The book also examines how current socio-economic and political circumstance in rural and urban U-Tsang (Central Tibet) and Tibetan medicine's engagement with Chinese-style biomedicine *do* involve points of serious adaptation, amendment, and revision to what it means to be a Tibetan doctor. The book observes how the form and context of medical training is changing. It acknowledges multiple possibilities for conferring expertise and points of conflict as well as possibility along the pathways *amchi* have to support their families and further their medical practice.

Both Hofer and her interlocutors are humble in the face of complexity. Take, for instance, the ways that that Rabgyal, one of her *amchi* interlocutors and also a monk, was able to requisition a large cache of *materia medica* that would have otherwise rot as their previous owners – doctors like him – were labeled 'high-class reactionaries' and put in prison in the early 1960s, and how he could then put these herbs to use treating patients, but only because he had found a position as an administrator for the Communists. Or doctors like Tashi, whose training included apprenticeship with his maternal uncle, service as a veterinary doctor, and instruction with a Chinese doctor in what he called 'Tangmen' – a Sino-Tibetan linguistic amalgam of the Chinese word for 'communist' (*tang*) and the Tibetan word for 'medicine' (*men*). I appreciate the subtle yet personal glimpses into Tibetan healers living through intense social and political transition. Rarely have I read a book of this richness to emerge from such a relatively short stint of fieldwork gathered at the beginning of a scholar's professional formation. This is a testament to Hofer's ability to listen – not only to what her interlocutors have to say but also to the overall scope of the stories she was first told in Ngamring – and to keep reaching for other "pieces of the

puzzle” as she puts it (p. 338). This, coupled with a selection of beautiful photographs and a valuable bibliography of Western and Tibetan sources, makes this book a must-read for scholars of Tibetan history and anthropology as well as audiences interested in stories about Asian medicine(s) in an era of globalization and change.

REFERENCES

Adams, V., M. Schrepf and S. Craig, eds. 2010. *Medicine Between Science and Religion: Explorations on Tibetan Grounds*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

Saxer, M., 2013 (forthcoming). *Manufacturing Tibetan Medicine: The Creation of an Industry and the Moral Economy of Tibetanness*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

Sienna Craig is a cultural anthropologist whose scholarship focuses on the cross-cultural study of health and illness, health-development interventions, Asian medicines and globalization, and experiences of migration and social change. She is the author of Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine and Horses Like Lightning: A Story of Passage through the Himalayas.

ORIGINS AND MIGRATIONS IN THE EXTENDED EASTERN HIMALAYAS

BY TONI HUBER AND STUART
BLACKBURN, EDS.

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012. 336 pp. \$136.00 (hardback).
ISBN 9789004226913

REVIEWED BY MÉLANIE
VANDENHELSKEN

Toni Huber and Stuart Blackburn’s edited book presents a multi-disciplinary study of both the historical and narrative aspects of origins and migrations. It explores people’s own origin narratives and their representations of their relation with the social and natural environment, as well as their role and transformations in relation to negotiations of identification with modern state policies. It also discusses the patterns of ancestral migrations that have shaped the settlement of the Eastern Himalayan area based on anthropological, historical, and linguistic analysis.

Origins and migrations have been an important area of focus in Nepal and northeast India studies since their beginning, particularly in relation to the study of settlement in the southern foothills of the Himalayan mountain range, as

well as to local cosmogonies¹. An original aspect of this book is its focus on an area that the editors label the ‘Extended Eastern Himalayas’ – stretching from far western Nepal to northeast India and Burma – apprehended as “meaningful units of comparison” (p.2), and where “a substantial degree of similarity” (p.2) can be found, notably on cultural practices related to the question of origins. This concept also enables bringing together migratory spaces crossing national borders, some of which have only recently been closed, like northern Arunachal Pradesh.

The contributions demonstrate the heuristic value of the study area, and offer significant findings on the subject of origins and migrations. From an analysis of the settlement history of the village of Sama in Gorkha district, Nepal, Geoff Childs brings out a pattern of migrations in the Himalayan region as small-scale and interrelated processes. He highlights social networks and other factors organizing these migrations, both in past and present, which form “a cultural template for migration” (p. 28) that includes in particular the notion of hidden land, and the role of itinerant yogis.

Martin Gaenszle presents aspects of the indigenous notion of the place of origin among two groups of Rai in eastern Nepal through an analysis of (mainly) ritual speeches. Rai myths also account for ancestral migrations that Gaenszle analyses as a “spatialised model of descent” (p. 39) linking the group to a particular territory. Origin as a metaphor of genealogical derivation explains its dangerous aspect: it is a place from which one should escape to gain autonomy.

Robbins Burling shows us how a set of presumptions, partly connected to the Bible, shaped ethnographers’ view of origins and migrations among northeast Indian tribes during British colonisation. Notably, an understanding of migrations as recent large-scale movements of coherent groups was shaped by using the notion of ethnic continuity and by equating language with ethnicity. Burling argues that the colonial ethnographer had an important role in the present-day notion of the permanence of ethnic boundaries in northeast India.

Alexander Aisher highlights the patterns organizing migration narratives of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, and shows how these narratives serve as more than just a means for preserving the group’s history. Nyishi migration narratives actually offer guides for human conduct, for relations between humans and their natural environment, and preserve memory of clan warfare and allegiances.

Toni Huber proposes a “non-speculative approach to understanding migrations in the far eastern Himalayas” (p.

1. Most of the studies on specific Nepalese and Northeast Indian ethnic communities address the question of its origins. Other studies mainly focus on origins and migrations, such as (to mention only one monograph) Martin Gaenszle, *Origins and migrations: kinship, mythology and ethnic identity among the Mewahang Rai of East Nepal* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 2000). In recent years, researches have focused on migrations outside Nepal, for example, Hiroshi Ishii, David N. Gellner and Katsuo Nawa, *Nepalis Inside and Outside Nepal: Social Dynamics in Northern South Asia* Vol. 1 (Delhi: Manohar, 2007), and the work of Tristan Bruslé.