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CRAZY FOR WISDOM: THE MAKING OF A MAD YOGIN IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY TIBET

BY STEFAN LARSSON

Leiden: Brill, 2012. 354 pp. \$156.00 (cloth).
ISBN 978-90-04-20393-8.

REVIEWED BY CARL YAMAMOTO

In recent years, there has appeared among Tibetologists a renewed interest in that curious group of fourteenth-to-sixteenth-century Buddhist practitioners known as the “mad yogins” (*smyon pa*), so called because of their seemingly irrational and transgressive behavior. Much of this new scholarship has taken the form of doctoral dissertations,¹ which until now have not been available to the general reading public. The first of these to surface as a book is Stefan Larsson’s *Crazy for Wisdom: The Making of a Mad Yogin in Fifteenth-Century Tibet*.

The author has chosen as his subject the late-fifteenth/early-sixteenth-century yogin Tsangnyön Heruka, best known as the author and editor of *The Life and Songs of Milarepa*, perhaps the most popular hagiographic work in the Tibetan language. Larsson’s focus is on Tsangnyön’s startling transformation, in his early twenties, from an ordinary monk into a “mad siddha.” At this time, he began wearing the long hair and bone ornaments of a *heruka* (wrathful tantric deity) and became notorious for his shocking behavior in public places, particularly in the presence of respectable or authoritative figures. Larsson’s “main aim,” as he puts it, “is to describe how [Tsangnyön] was transformed into a mad yogin, and to investigate and depict his subsequent activities as a mad yogin” (p. xi).

The book is divided into three parts. Part One introduces the issue of the Tibetan mad yogins, briefly recounts the history of the idea up to the present, and discusses the sources used for Tsangnyön’s life. Part Two gives a detailed summary of that life based on biographical works written by three disciples—Götsangrepa, Lhatsün Rinchen Namgyal, and Ngödruib Pembar—then takes a brief detour through the issue of tantric justifications for mad behavior (more on this below). Part Three discusses Tsangnyön’s literary

1. See Andrew H. Quintman, “Mi la ras pa’s Many Lives: Anatomy of a Tibetan Biographical Corpus” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006); Stefan Larsson, “The Birth of a Heruka: How Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan Became gTsang smyon Heruka: A Study of a Mad Yogin” (Ph.D. dissertation, Stockholm University, 2009); David Michael DiValerio, “Subversive Sainthood and Tantric Fundamentalism: An Historical Study of Tibet’s Holy Madmen” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2011).

production—the texts he authored and the extensive and unprecedented woodblock-printing operation he founded, managed, and passed on to his disciples. Appendices include an English-Tibetan glossary, a Tibetan spelling key, a chronology of Tsangnyön’s life, and a brief summary of said life.

The author is a knowledgeable and skilled translator, and his writing is clear and jargon-free. The translations and expositions of the hagiographies are valuable because these works have not, to my knowledge, received extensive treatment elsewhere. That being said, I would like to give a little more attention to a specific chapter that I think raises important issues with wider implications for future scholarship on the themes the author has chosen to emphasize.

The chapter is entitled “Tsangnyön Heruka and Tantric Buddhism,” and it is tucked into the end of Part Two. The placement is perhaps not ideal, for it disguises its importance as the one chapter where the author ventures beyond translation and summarization of sources (a valuable undertaking, to be sure) and into something like an extended argument or thesis. Here he relates the mad yogin movement to the larger context of Indo-Tibetan religious literature and culture—going as far back as the Vedas and as far forward as the twentieth-century lama Dezhung Rinpoche. Much of the argument turns on an extensive and informed exposition of the tantric term *brtul zhugs spyod pa* (Skt. *vratācaryā*)—rendered by the author as “disciplined conduct.” Historically, the term has taken on a broad range of meanings, as the author notes, from religious behavior in general to more specific forms of ascetic practice. It is this more specific sense that is applicable here, for “disciplined conduct” was sometimes employed in Indian and Tibetan tantric materials to describe advanced practices that involved deliberately transgressive behavior. The aim of this somewhat technical discussion is made explicit by the author when he writes that such Indian and Tibetan precedents “clearly show that numerous authoritative scriptures and commentaries are available to support and explain Tsangnyön’s unconventional behavior” (p. 221).

This last statement, while clarifying the author’s intent, also throws into relief that aspect of the book’s approach that makes me uneasy. Can we really use an analysis of “authoritative scriptures and commentaries” to “explain Tsangnyön’s unconventional behavior”? My own inclination would be to answer: no more than we could use an analysis of the *Qur’an* to explain the unconventional behavior of Al Qaeda. Or an analysis of the U.S. Constitution to explain the unconventional behavior of Chester Arthur.

The canonical literature of Buddhist tantra contains within it a generous stock of personae from which a practitioner may choose—renouncer, yogin, monastic, enlightened ruler, forest-dweller, magician, householder, scholar, charnel-ground-dweller, etc.—but from a historical standpoint these exist only as abstract life-possibilities: bare potentials that

may or may not be realized in a particular place and time. That there exists scriptural backing for “mad” behaviors is unquestionable—as there also exists scriptural backing for social conformity, moral uprightness, and sanity. For the historian, the interesting question here is: why, when the “mad” role model has always been available, did a movement of mad yogins arise at this particular place and time but not others? While clarification of canonical sources is legitimate and necessary, it should not be confused with *explanations* of specific religious phenomena.

To be fair to the author, these historical questions are difficult ones for which there exists a dearth of reliable evidence, as he himself acknowledges. “[T]hese attempts at situating Tsangnyön historically,” he writes, “could be carried out much more exhaustively than I have been able to do in this book” (pp. xi-xii). It would of course be unfair to take the author to task for not writing a book he had no intention of writing. Still, we need to take care that the difficulty of obtaining historical information not tempt us to substitute scriptural exegesis simply because it is available.

With this reservation registered, all in all Larsson’s book offers valuable information on an immensely important player in Tibet’s pre-Ganden-Potrang religious culture, with promise for future scholarship. The volume should be seen as a fruitful beginning for a longer-term project. Among the issues it would be interesting to see addressed in the future would be:

- (1) The specific historical conditions that made Tibetan culture receptive to the idea of a mad yogin during that period.
- (2) The contribution of indigenous Tibetan culture to the model of the mad yogin. Larsson mentions, for example, native Tibetan “trickster” figures such as Akhu Tönpa. This would be worth following up on, as it promises interesting and specific information about local Tibetan culture and serves as an antidote to the very natural temptation to interpret every action of a Tibetan Buddhist as motivated solely by “Buddhism.”
- (3) More about Tsangnyön’s textual production—undoubtedly his most lasting legacy to Tibetan Buddhist culture. Not only did he write the best-known work of Tibetan literature but he also organized the technical means and human labor necessary to ensure an unprecedented distribution and afterlife for that work, as well as for others. It is in this regard that Larsson calls Tsangnyön “a pivotal figure in Tibet’s transition from a manuscript culture to a block-print culture” (p. 230).

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TEMPLES OF THE INDUS: STUDIES IN THE HINDU ARCHITECTURE OF ANCIENT PAKISTAN

BY MICHAEL MEISTER

Leiden: Brill, 2010. 85 pp. +149 plates. \$132. ISBN 978 9004 18617 0.

REVIEWED BY J. MARK KENOYER

This excellent and well-illustrated book represents a major contribution to the Salt-Range Temple Project, a long-term study of Hindu temples of the Salt Range in northern Pakistan, by Michael Meister, one of the leading scholars of temple architecture of the northern subcontinent. This study provides a detailed description of temple architecture along with a critical examination of the many theories proposed by earlier scholars regarding their relation to architectural traditions in other regions of the northern subcontinent, such as Kashmir. These temples provide a record of distinctive regional styles of temple architecture dating from the 6th to 11th centuries. The author concludes that these temples “represent the earliest surviving Hindu monuments in South Asia’s northwest and offer important insight into the processes of temple formation that led to the development and dissemination of Nagara temple architecture across Northern and Central India in the sixth and seventh centuries” (p. 34).

After the independence and partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the study of temple architecture continued in India, but only a few Pakistani scholars continued this type of research in Pakistan. The author is one of the few international scholars who have worked in both countries, and the research and interpretations that he provides in this book represent a major contribution to the field of temple architectural analysis as a whole. In addition to a descriptive art-historical and architectural approach, the author was able to analyze the chronological changes in temple construction through targeted excavations of specific temples. The excavations were carried out by faculty and students of Peshawar University under the aegis of the Pakistan Heritage Society led by Dr. Abdur Rehman and Dr. Farid Khan. In the five chapters of this book, he systematically covers the historical background for the discovery and early research on the Salt Range temples, as well as revisions to terminology and interpretations. The text is accompanied by 149 figures with maps, line drawings, and black and white photographs.

Chapter One provides a summary of the earliest studies