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## Review of *Refugees of Shangri-La* by Doria Bramante and Markus Weinfurter

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of Gurudev's constant spiritual circus, Shor is forced to confront that problematic association. The violent campaign for a Gurkha state and the inherently corrupt politics of Darjeeling move from backdrop to centre-stage as the author questions whether Gurudev is a part of that darkness, or whether he is trying to counter the politics of fear with the politics of love. It would be unfair to reveal the final conclusions. Suffice to say that the issues are resolved to the extent that this work is a satisfying and illuminating exploration of a very real human world and the universal issues that surround it. It will be enjoyed by Asian and Western readers alike, although not by the thugs who scar the lives of the people they claim to act for.

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### ***Refugees of Shangri-La***

**Doria Bramante and Markus Weinfurter.** USA. 2015. 55 minutes.

#### **Reviewed by Andrew Nelson**

*Refugees of Shangri-La*, a documentary film made in 2015 by Doria Bramante and Markus Weinfurter, achieves what no other representation of Nepali-Bhutanese refugees has thus far. It ambitiously traces their movement from southern Bhutan to refugee camps in southeastern Nepal and, finally, to resettlement in cities across the United States. Given the film's setting across these three disparate locations, it quickly identifies the importance of translocalism as a central theme. In the opening scenes, from a Nepali refugee camp, the harmonium-player/singer Pratap Subba provides the musical backdrop to images of Nepalis laboring and living in rural Bhutan. In this sequence, the filmmakers astutely identify how the refugees maintain and remake notions of place and 'home' across multiple locations.

The first half of the film concentrates on the complex question of Bhutan as home from the perspective of the refugees' exiled life in the Nepali camps. We hear older Nepali men nostalgically longing for the "happiness" of life in Bhutan juxtaposed with the Bhutanese Prime Minister extolling the virtues of Gross National Happiness. He jokes that in Bhutan "even the street dogs appear to be smiling." However, as we now know, state-instituted social policies based on a mono-ethnic vision of the nation have produced anything but happiness for the hundreds of thousands of Nepali-speakers since the late 1980s.

The film addresses the oppressive treatment that Nepalis received from the Bhutanese state in a very creative fashion. To the backdrop of voices narrating their expulsion from Bhutan, the film depicts state abuses (torture, harassment, land expropriation, house burning, intimidation, rapes, and ultimate displacement) through evocative drawings. Nowhere is the hypocrisy of the state clearer than through the clips from the interview with the Prime Minister. He excuses the state's behavior by recycling the disproven claim that few of the refugees were actually 'Bhutanese'; that the far majority were actually recent Nepali migrants to Bhutan. He attributes this claim to a rather twisted logic that the open India-Nepal border is responsible for

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letting Nepalis travel to (and, ostensibly, overpopulate) Bhutan.

While the drawings, interviews, and images from the camp make for compelling material, the filmmakers missed an opportunity to refute the Prime Minister's claims through an explanation of how the state systematically denied and revoked citizenship from its Nepali-speaking population through the bureaucratic discrimination of its 1958, 1977, and 1985 citizenship laws and 1988 census (see Michael Hutt. 2003. *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 134-137, 147-159). Similarly, the discussion of the 'peaceful rally' by the Nepali-speaking 'Lhotshampas' evades the more complex history of the (occasionally violent) tactics used by the Bhutanese People's Party (see Rosalind Evans. 2013. "The Perils of Being Borderland People: On the Lhotshampas of Bhutan." In *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*, edited by David N. Gellner, 117-140. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 125-133). These missing details aside, the film does an excellent job of providing the historical context of the disastrous effects of the One Nation, One People policy through an explanation of Nepali migration and economic contribution to southern Bhutan, as well as how India's annexation of Sikkim inspired the xenophobic policies of the Bhutanese state.

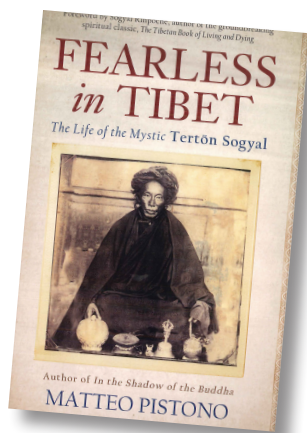
When the film shifts from the Bhutan story to the United States in the second half, its translocal approach changes its geographic orientation towards the refugee camp's expectations of their upcoming life in the U.S. The film presents, and later complicates, the refugees' narrative of recovering the good life in 'America' that they lost in the dislocation from Bhutan to Nepal. Images of refugees arriving at U.S. airports are ironically coupled with the song "In Shangri-La." The refugees' romantic view of America quickly fades to the reality of the struggle of resettlement. The film shows youth missing their friends, adults struggling to find work and create sociality in their multi-national neighborhoods, and elders worrying about language and cultural loss. As one resettlement agency caseworker states: resettlement can be a form of re-traumatization. This sentiment is balanced with nods to the banality and occasionally optimistic sense of everyday life for the refugees in their new home. In one particularly compelling sequence, we watch a group of Nepali-Bhutanese watching a small-town parade (complete with cheerleaders on a float throwing candy to small children) followed by the joy of teenage girls performing dances to Nepali songs in an apartment courtyard during Dashain celebrations.

While such images of resettled life are visually engaging, the content of the film's latter half leaves one wondering what is unique about the Nepali-Bhutanese resettlement experience. In the limited time of a one-hour documentary film, it is clearly difficult to show the full complexity of refugee life. Nonetheless, the challenges of resettlement emphasized here could be said of almost any refugee or migrant group in the U.S. I wish that the film had paid more attention, or at least alluded, to some of the many issues particular to Nepali-Bhutanese refugee society in the U.S., such as its struggles with mental health and suicide, identity questions concerning religion and conversions to Christianity, or debates regarding social and economic inequalities between castes. The lack of issues specific to resettled Nepali-Bhutanese stems, I believe, from the film's privileging of English-speaking upper caste male voices.

The specifics of the Nepali-Bhutanese experience in the United States will become increasingly clear as the group enters its second decade of resettlement. As Bramante and Weinfurter convincingly demonstrate, depictions of adjustment to their new life in the U.S. requires equal attention to the social and political contexts of their previous homes in Bhutan and Nepal. The film should be applauded for not only producing an engaging and

compelling documentary, but for also ambitiously covering the multiple spaces of relocation from Bhutan to Nepal and the U.S.

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### ***Fearless in Tibet: The Life of the Mystic Tertön Sogyal.***

**Matteo Pistono.** Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2014. 351 pages. ISBN 9781401941468.

#### **Reviewed by Alyson Prude**

Tertön Sogyal (1856-1926), also known as Lerab Lingpa, was a prolific Treasure-revealer from eastern Tibet who acquired the patronage of none other than the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. Sogyal's influence on Tibetan religion and politics did not, however, end in the early

20th century. A life-force stone discovered by Sogyal was worn by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama on his escape from Tibet in 1959, and the Vajrakilaya rituals that Sogyal revealed are practiced in Dharamsala today by monks at the Dalai Lama's personal chapel. *Fearless in Tibet* retells the spiritual life-story of the Treasure-revealer, combining the oral histories that Pistono collected during his decade of travels in Tibet, Nepal, and India with a Tibetan-language hagiography written by one of Sogyal's disciples.

The book begins with a reconstructed account of Sogyal's childhood, including elements common to the biographies of Buddhist adepts: Sogyal's father wanted him to become a strong hunter; his mother secretly supported his desire to practice the Dharma. Unfortunately, the narrative is embellished with trite dialogue, such as when Sogyal's father states, "My son... is not gonna be a monk—he's ridin' sidekick with me" (p. 2). After this rocky start, the story picks up with descriptions of Sogyal's numerous and fantastical Treasure discoveries. One night, for example, Sogyal gets up just after midnight to begin climbing to a mountain cave. He arrives at dawn to meditate, and when the moment is right, withdraws his ritual dagger causing the rock wall of the cave to open and reveal a bronze Treasure casket. Sogyal takes the casket and

later unseals it to discover medicinal pills and a scroll (pp. 74-5). In another episode, Sogyal elicits a reaction from a painting of Tibet's protector deity, Palden Lhamo. When he threatens the painting with his dagger, Palden Lhamo's mule comes to life and kicks its leg into the air, at which point an angry black serpent appears with yet another Treasure casket (p. 101). The accounts of Sogyal's Treasure discoveries make for a lively narrative, and brief excerpts from Sogyal's prophecies and revelations introduce the reader to the basics of the Tibetan Treasure tradition.

Sogyal's life-story includes numerous interactions between the unrefined Nyingma yogi from Nyarong and Tibet's political leader and highest-ranking Gelugpa monk, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. Over the course of his life, Sogyal is repeatedly summoned to Lhasa to perform rituals for the long life of the Dalai Lama and to ward off the advancing British army. Perhaps without exaggeration, Pistono describes Sogyal as "Tibet's tantric defense minister" (p. 88). Unfortunately, *Fearless in Tibet* does not attempt to contextualize Sogyal or his practices within larger social or religious movements, and thus it passes without comment that Sogyal seems to have encountered little resistance or competition as he traveled, revealing and propagating his Treasures. Instead, the book