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Book review of 'The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama' by Thomas Laird

Sienna Craig
Dartmouth College

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issue was debated during the heyday of the “ecosystems” approach in anthropology (Moran 1990). I am reminded here of Netting’s claim (1981) of systemic closure in the Alps, a claim refuted by Viazzo (1989) on the grounds that Netting had not fully accounted for the impacts of out-migration on local communities. Those impacts are not only generated by the formation of social networks outside of the village, but also by the ensuing flow of information, technologies, and remittances between those who leave and those who remain. Conservative and inward-looking as the Tepas may be, they have certainly been exposed to a wealth of information by community members who moved elsewhere (according to Ramble, out-migration is not a new phenomenon and has intensified in recent decades). I am not suggesting that the author implies Te’s inhabitants existed in a hermetically sealed environment of their own creation. What I am suggesting is that Ramble underestimated the impacts on village life that out-migrants have exerted on Te, for example, from people who settled in places such as Pokhara and Kathmandu yet who continually interact with Te’s residents either in their new locales or during return visits.

The fact that this quibble is my main critique is a testament to Charles Ramble’s achievement in researching and writing *The Navel of the Demoness*. This is by far the best and most detailed study of local governance in the Himalayan region. The attention to detail is extraordinary, resulting in a highly nuanced and ethnographically informed analysis of conflicts and their resolutions at the village level. Although the book focuses primarily on the small community of Te, it cannot be relegated to the status of a mere “case study.” For one, Ramble positions the analysis on a sturdy theoretical framework, thereby imbuing this work with comparative implications. Furthermore, he uses his considerable research experience throughout Mustang to continually identify regional similarities and differences in ritual practices, social organizational principles, and so forth. He also situates the analysis within nested layers of political complexity that extend from the local (Shöyul and Baragaon) to the district (Mustang) to the state (Nepal and Tibet). Ramble navigates these layers through a skillful reading of primary historical sources and a careful presentation of ethnographic data.

In summary, Charles Ramble’s holistic account of overlapping economic, social, religious, and political spheres is clearly written, convincingly argued, and permeated with a luxuriant texture of cultural detail that could only be achieved by a master ethnographer. *The Navel of the Demoness* is an exemplary work of scholarship, one that can rightfully aspire to a lofty status in many regards: as an inspirational template for conducting diachronic research, as a solid contribution to local and regional history, and as an unparalleled statement on political organization in the Himalayas.

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Geoff Childs is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis. His research centers on demographic and social changes in Tibetan communities of India, Nepal, and China. He can be reached at gchilds@wustl.edu.

THE STORY OF TIBET: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DALAI LAMA

BY THOMAS LAIRD

New York: Grove Press, 2006. 470 pp. illus. bibliog. notes, index, \$ 27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8021-4327-3.

REVIEWED BY SIENNA CRAIG

In recent years we have witnessed a new wave of books by, or about, Tenzin Gyatso the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. The books range in topic and scope, from autobiography and social history to Buddhist self-help titles and treatises on the inner connections between cognitive neuroscience and tantric meditation practices. *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama* is a nice addition to these other books, yet also unique in its perspective. If the book were to be viewed as a piece of art, it would be decidedly “mixed medium.” The narrative fluctuates between a variety of genres. Through both Laird’s voice and that of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the reader is presented with aspects of both textual and oral Tibetan history and myth, as well as social commentary on this history. Yet what makes this book unique is that these stories / histories are told as a dialogue, a correspondence, between an insightful journalist and one of the 20th and 21st century’s most

remarkable individuals.

In *The Story of Tibet*, Laird compiles materials from more than sixty hours of candid, one-on-one interviews with His Holiness over a period of three years. The result is a readable account of a complex place and its people. Laird is a seasoned reporter, photographer, and author (*Into Tibet: The CIA's First Atomic Spy and His Secret Expedition to Lhasa*; *East of Lo Monthang: In the Land of Mustang* with Peter Matthiessen; and *The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple: Tantric Wall Paintings from Tibet* with Ian Baker). He is also someone who knows Tibet, and greater South Asia, well. To the uninitiated, the author is able to communicate not only the story of Tibet but also something of the ethnographic and even the sensory context in which this story has unfolded, from the cerulean skies and communist flags framing the Potala Palace, to the bouganvilla vines and tumult of clouds that surround His Holiness's residence in Dharamsala in the midst of monsoon. To those who are more informed about this region of the world, the book does a good job of not slipping into sentimentality or easy simplifications of Tibet's social and political history, vis-à-vis China, India, Mongolia, and the West. As *The Story of Tibet* unfolds, Laird succeeds in presenting a non-specialist with a readable and lively account of Tibet's history – from origin stories and details from the Tibetan Plateau's archaeological record to stories of the Dalai Lama's favorite Buddha image. This is accomplished, in great part, by Laird's ability to navigate through these hours of interviews, deftly interspersing context and commentary. It is not an easy task to move from the stories of an ogress mating with Chenresig, the *bodhisattva* of compassion, to a tour through the Tibetan Imperial era and the lives and times of all fourteen Dalai Lamas, but the narrative does a fine job of making these transitions overall. However, there are some historically questionable passages in the text. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one gets a sense that Laird's allegiance lies squarely within the exile community, including its politics. This is especially true in passages in which Laird takes the reader with him to Lhasa.

Some of the most memorable passages in the book are reminiscent of *My Land and My People*, the autobiography that Tenzin Gyatso first wrote in 1962, fresh on the heels of his arrival in India, and that was republished in the wake of his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. But unlike *My Land and My People*, Laird's book mixes many of the Dalai Lama's personal experiences not only with the perspective gained by the decades that many Tibetans have now passed in exile, but also with a more extensive treatment of the historical, economic, political, and social conditions that have produced the current political and social impasse between the Dalai Lama, the Government-in-Exile, and Beijing. In this sense, the latter half of *The Story of Tibet* would make an interesting companion piece to Melvyn Goldstein's *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

One of the book's main strengths also begets its greatest weakness. As an anthropologist, I deeply appreciate the labor-intensive nature of interview transcription and the process of reconstructing a literarily interesting and ethnographically accurate representation of reality through the cobbling together of speech. However, the vacillations between less personal and more historical narrative and these conversations is sometimes rough. Also, the conversational style of the narrative works best when we actually hear the Dalai Lama speaking. The reader comes to appreciate – in a way that media soundbites can never accomplish – the range of Tenzin Gyatso's emotional and intellectual register, and also his perception of reality not as a pop icon, nor as a Buddhist master, but simply as an individual. But when Laird tries to comment on the Dalai Lama's approach to conversation and to history, the tone becomes at once quaint and somewhat hollow. This is reflected in moments when Laird tries to couch the Dalai Lama's deeply personal read on historical events or spiritual practices with a certain kind of awe or an aura of mystical complexity. No doubt the reverence is deeply felt, but it is rhetorically unconvincing and somewhat intellectually unsatisfying. In strictly editorial terms, the book could have used another iron-fisted edit. Some passages, and even chapters, are repetitive.

In sum, this book makes a fine read about a complicated topic, particularly for a popular audience. However, for teaching purposes, I would recommend Matthew Kapstein's *Tibetans* (reviewed in *Himalaya* vol. 27), part of Wiley-Blackwell's *People of Asia* series (Malden, M.A.: Blackwell, 2006) along with the seminal book *My Land and My People: The Original Autobiography of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet* (New York: Warner Books, 1997), over Laird's text. And if one is looking for insight into the Dalai Lama as a person and a public figure, I would recommend Pico Iyer's *The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

Sienna Craig is an assistant professor of anthropology at Dartmouth College. Her research and teaching focuses on health and illness across cultures, social studies of science, and global health. She is the author of *Horses Like Lightning: A Story of Passage Through the Himalayas* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008).