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Editorial

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This issue of HIMALAYA upholds the journal’s commitment to diversity, both in terms of geographical region and academic discipline. In the pages that follow, we explore the meanings and manifestations of the secular in Tibetan cultural worlds. Guest editors Holly Gayley and Nicole Willock have thoughtfully curated these contributions—a series of articles that crosses vast territory, from Mongolia to northern India, from the seventeenth century to contemporary social movements and artistic expressions.

This special issue invites us to consider the future of religious practice in a world that seems increasingly polarized, if not secularized. It also encourages us to contemplate how secularism, in its diverse and specific forms, is not necessarily the antithesis of religiosity but rather lives in interdependence with understandings of the sacred and, certainly, with ethical frameworks that give shape to local moral worlds. This themed issue theorizes the relationship between religion and secularism in ways that move beyond simply highlighting disjuncture between an idealized spirituality—such as Gayley and Willock’s reference to “the fantasy of Tibet as a hermetically sealed Shangri-la”—and the realities of modern life. Instead, each contribution to this issue shows the gray areas, the hybrid forms, and the blurred boundaries between religious expression and social action, or, put another way, between lived experiences of practice that might, at various times, be understood as religious or secular in orientation. We see such dynamics in each of the research articles included in this issue, as well as in Tseng Gonkatsang’s Perspectives contribution, a translation of Dungkar Rinpoche’s treatment of the political-economy and social structures behind Tibetan woodblock printing of the Buddhist canon, and in Françoise Robin’s translation of Lhashamgyal’s short story, Entrusted to the Wind.

Moving through space and time, these articles challenge simple renderings of religion as the realm of tradition and secularism as a wholly modern domain. In the process, we are asked to reconsider what ‘modernity’ might mean if we look deeper. The durability—from the 17th century to the present—of Tibetan social institutions such as choi zungdrel (chos srid zung ‘brel), the fusion of spiritual and temporal realms, teaches us something important about the relationship between religion and politics more broadly. What role does nationalism play in acknowledging or effacing sacred from secular? How do the specific contours of Tibetan social history—including the backdrops of Chinese communism, globalization, democratic movements, and the nature of diaspora—shape what is at stake in combining or disentangling religion from politics? And what impact does this have on social identity and civic society?

As a wonderful illustration of these themes, we are fortunate to have a Gallery Sketchbook featuring the works of established and emergent contemporary Tibetan artists. We are grateful to Leigh Miller, an expert on contemporary Tibetan art, for her contributions to realizing this part of the journal. With this cover, featuring the work of female contemporary artist Dedron, we continue a pattern of acknowledging the work of women artists in the pages of HIMALAYA. Dedron’s piece is reflective of a Tibetan Mona Lisa, signaling cosmopolitanism and the blurred boundaries between tradition and ‘modernity,’ mythological projections and self-representation.

The other works of art in the Gallery Sketchbook illuminate different aspects of the relationship between religious and secular spaces, through symbol and metaphor: from the prayer beads spiked with nails in Chimei Yangchen’s work to Benchung’s Meditator: Beware. According to Miller, Benchung has said that the bandage in this painting represents covered up wounds (at once physical and emotional) and the diaper signaling the loss of Tibetan autonomy in the context of Communist Party leadership.

Sonam Dolma Braun’s abstract work, Yishen No. 24, and Tenzing Rigdol’s arresting and beautifully rendered Wrathful Dance speak to the recent waves of self-immolation among Tibetans. Although not an explicit theme of this volume, this act of political protest brings to the fore the relationship between religious and secular forms of being human. Since 2009, more than 150 Tibetan individuals have immolated...
themselves. Most of these people have done so within the People’s Republic of China, but several have occurred in exile, most recently with the deeply tragic death of 16-year-old Dorjee Tsering in India. The vast majority of self-immolations have been performed by monastics, but laypeople have also participated in this act—an act that confounds even as it demands response.

These and other works in the Gallery are powerful reminders of the complicated relationship between religion and politics, between acts of offering and acts of sacrifice, between civic aspirations and spiritual belief, between social policies and their embodied effects. All of the works of art featured in this issue of HIMALAYA—including the focus on Tibetan artist Gadé in Miller’s article—and each written contribution ask that we contemplate what it means to act with secular or religious authority. Such issues resonate with what it means to be Tibetan in local and global contexts, throughout history and in contemporary terms.

While this issue was going to press, we learned of the passing of a legendary figure in Himalayan studies, David Snellgrove (1920-2016). An emeritus professor at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, Snellgrove made enormous contributions to our understandings of Himalayan lifeworlds and Tibetan civilization. We plan to carry an obituary of Professor Snellgrove in a forthcoming issue.

As always, this issue of HIMALAYA represents hours of work by many individuals, from authors and themed issue editors, to copyediting and layout assistants. In particular, we would like to thank Jessie Del Fiacco and Erin Porter, undergraduates at Macalester College who have worked under the guidance of Library Specialist Jacki Betsworth on the layout for many of our recent issues. Both are graduating this year. Jessie and Erin have been terrific and invaluable members of the HIMALAYA team, and we wish them well in their next steps. This issue, we also welcome Bridget Chase at the University of British Columbia to the collective of editorial assistants, and thank UBC designer Lenkyn Ostapovich for his kind work on this issue.

Finally, we wish to draw your attention to the fact that we are beginning to search for the next editor (or editors) of HIMALAYA. Our tenure runs through Volume 37, Issue 2, scheduled for the end of 2017. In order to ensure a smooth transition, we hope to have the next editor selected by early 2017. A detailed job description is available on the ANHS website and letters of inquiry and interest can be directed to ANHS President Heather Hindman: president@anhs-himalaya.org.

Sienna Craig and Mark Turin Editors, HIMALAYA