



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

Volume 37 | Number 2

Article 25

December 2017

Review of *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine* by Teresia Hofer

Denise M. Glover

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

Recommended Citation

Glover, Denise M. (2017) "Review of *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine* by Teresia Hofer," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 37 : No. 2 , Article 25.

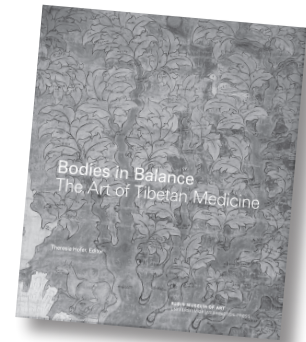
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss2/25>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

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





Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine.

Teresia Hofer. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014. 360 pages. ISBN 9780295993591.

Reviewed by Denise M. Glover

Every so often a publication crosses one's path that is truly extraordinary. *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine* is such a publication. What makes this book so remarkable are the concise yet in-depth chapters written in an inviting but scholarly style, discussions of some topics not included in other English-language books about Tibetan medicine, and the extensive and impressive use of images/photographs throughout. The book is nicely balanced into two parts, each with six chapters—this lends a complementary aesthetic that is more than fitting for the topics discussed, as well as the title of the work. Intricately connected to the 2014 Rubin Museum exhibit of the same name, the volume grew out of and is an expansion of the exhibit, as editor Theresia Hofer explains in her introduction. The exhibit was

also housed online through the Rubin Museum's website for approximately a year. While both the live and online museum exhibits included titillating interactive modules, one does not feel any lack of sensorial or intellectual engagement with the printed work. Although only 360 pages long, the book is weighty, due to the use of high-quality, heavy-weight paper, needed for production excellence. What is more, the list price of this volume is noteworthy: only \$75 USD (about \$75 less than I had guessed it would be). This low cost must be due to the successful fundraising involved for its production (several donors are mentioned by name, which include private foundations as well as the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs). This bodes well as an indication of interest in and support for scholarly engagement with Tibetan medicine.

Contributors to the volume include practitioners of Tibetan medicine as well as some of the leading international scholars in the field. The combination of these two main categories of authors enhances the recognition of Tibetan medicine as a lived tradition of practice with an extensive historical lineage and profound philosophical and cultural underpinnings. In the introduction, Hofer explains the important connections between Tibetan medicine, Buddhism, and the visual arts. This sets the stage nicely for two key themes that play out throughout the volume: the linkage, and often conscious reaction to this, between

Tibetan medicine and Buddhism, and the central role that medical paintings, and other forms of visual artistry, have played in the continued production of the medical lineage. These are not the only themes explored, as the topic of inter-cultural (and even global) exchange is covered, as are key tenets of medical theory and practice, and historical developments in the tradition. Each chapter builds on previous ones, and there is some cross-referencing between them, but each chapter can also function as a stand-alone article.

In Part I, Barbara Gerke provides a comprehensive introductory chapter on Tibetan medical theory and practice stemming mainly from the primary text of medicine in the tradition, the *Gyushi* (*Four Tantras*). Following that is Geoffrey Samuel's insightful contribution, which focuses on the centrality of key ideas from tantric Buddhism as related to Tibetan medicine—in particular the conceptualization of channels and *chakras*. Chapter Three is by Hofer and covers many fundamentals of pharmacology and the science of medicine composition; she includes descriptions of two contemporary sites of medicine production—one in Central Tibet (Tashilungpo) and the other in Switzerland (Padma, Inc.)—from her ethnographic work. Pasang Yonten Arya provides a detailed summary of the main forms of external therapies (massage, moxibustion, bloodletting, *horme*, golden needle therapy, etc.) used in Tibetan medicine and the connection

of these therapies to historical texts. Arya also has a fascinating discussion about surgery in the Tibetan medical tradition and why the practice fell away as the tradition developed (one exception being cataract surgery, which is still practiced at the Lhasa Mentsikhang). In Chapter Five, Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim explains the connections between Tibetan medicine, astrology, and other forms of divination (including in pulse and urine diagnosis); she also highlights the links between the Tibetan tradition of divination and the Chinese one, where many Tibetan texts refer to China as the land of divination, noting Confucius (of all figures) as a transmitter of Chinese divination. Immediately following this chapter is a pointed vignette by Inger Vasstveit on a day in the astrology department of the Men-Tsee-Khang in Dharamsala; amulet production is described, as well as various ritualized remedies for removing obstacles. The final chapter in Part I, by Sienna Craig, focuses on Tibetan medicine in a global context. Craig uses a creative structure, with five scenes, each having a different theme and taking place in a different place in the world (three examples are from the USA, one from Nepal, and one from the PRC) to highlight transformations that the tradition is undergoing in the contemporary world.

Part II is titled "Medicine, Buddhism, and Historical Developments" and begins with a chapter by Gyurme Dorje about the buddhas of medicine in the Tibetan tradition. There

Nothing was overlooked in the production of this volume, and it is a must-have for scholars as well as general readers interested in the topic of Tibetan medicine.

Denise M. Glover on *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine*

is an extensive inventory of known images and statues of these buddhas in Tibetan regions and beyond, and descriptions of key rituals involving some or all of these buddhas. Chapter Eight is an intriguing examination into the source—or sources—of the *Gyushi* (*Four Tantras*) and the question of its authorship, with analysis of other writings by Yuthog Yonten Gonpo (the presumed main author of the *Gyushi*) as points of comparison and analysis. Next, Frances Garrett considers the ways that Tibetan medicine was historically intertwined with Buddhism from the 12th to the 17th centuries, and discusses how Tibetan medical history has been constructed in regards to this history. Nicely juxtaposed next to Garrett's chapter is Chapter Ten, in which Janet Gyatso considers how the set of medical paintings in the important text *Baidurya Ngonpo* (*Blue Beryl*) is a representation of a supporting and confident Buddhist state, but also part of a lineage that has at times consciously debated the ultimate authority of religion in the field of medicine. Theresia Hofer's valuable contribution of Chapter Eleven builds on and significantly expands upon work by myself and others in the area of natural kind categorization and identification in Tibetan medical texts; I was particularly excited to see her analysis of two 19th century texts, one from Inner Mongolia and the other from eastern Tibet. The final chapter is Martin's Saxer's discussion of how Tibetan medicine journeyed from Buryatia to Russia through the Badmayev family; this

fascinating story is also captured in Saxer's film *Journeys with Tibetan Medicine*. Two other vignettes in Part II are Katharina Sabernig's examination of the tree murals in Labrang Monastery, as well as Hofer's and Knud Larsen's piece on the historic Chagpori and Mentsikhang institutions of Lhasa.

While the use of images is a feature of several key volumes on Tibetan and Asian medicines, the number, quality, and diversity of images in this volume is unprecedented, at least in English-language publications. Images include medical paintings, statues, institutional structures, texts, and photographs of patients and practitioners. Nothing was overlooked in the production of this volume, and it is a must-have for scholars as well as general readers interested in the topic of Tibetan medicine.

Denise M. Glover is an anthropologist and ethnobiologist who has conducted research in Tibetan areas of China on local plant knowledge, alterations in production of Tibetan medicine, and Tibetan ethnicity and identity. In addition, she has written about medicinal plant classifications in Tibetan medicine as well as cultural productions about people and place in China's southwest among British botanists of the 19th century. She teaches anthropology and Asian studies at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, WA.