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Review of *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment* by Dan Smyer Yü.

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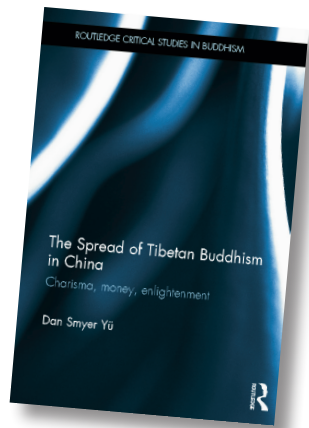


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Book Reviews



The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment.

Dan Smyer Yü. London: Routledge, 2012. 222 pages. ISBN 9780415575324.

Reviewed by Robert E. Beazley

Dan Symer Yü's book *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment* is a welcome addition to the literature on Tibetan Buddhist studies as it is one of the few books to deal with the increasing trend of Han Chinese conversion to Tibetan Buddhism in China. Other scholars have dealt with this subject but none have chosen it as the sole focus of a book length publication until Yü's book.

Yü's extensive ethnographic research in Qinghai and Sichuan provides vivid lived experiences with both Chinese Tibetan Buddhists and indigenous Tibetan Buddhists as well as with their teachers or *tulkus*

(reincarnate Tibetan Buddhist masters). Yü opens the book with an extensive account of *tulkus* and their charismatic characteristics. He makes the argument that their charisma is linked to the landscape in which their communities are embedded, as opposed to being a purely personal characteristic. This is an important and welcomed distinction, as all too often writings about *tulkus* ignore this aspect, preferring to focus on the charismatic personality to the exclusion of other influential elements. Yü elucidates how a *tulku's* charisma is part of a wider territorial charisma.

Yü begins by following the rise of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok and his founding in 1980 of one of the largest Buddhist learning centers in the world, the Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Academy (a.k.a. Larung Gar) in Sertar County of the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (western Sichuan). It is inhabited by over 12,000 monks, nuns, lay practitioners, including 2,000 Han Chinese monks, nuns, and lay practitioners. Its fame has grown to the point that it is now often on the list of domestic and international tourist destinations in Sichuan. In 2016, it was closed to tourists due to the state's attempt to shrink its size and the exponential growth of its accommodations and facilities.

After grounding the book in the charismatic *tulku* aspect (Chapters 1-3), which helps to explain one of the reasons why non-Tibetan

Chinese have become increasingly interested in Tibetan Buddhism, he devotes the remainder of the book (Chapters 4-8) to investigating the intricacies described of *charisma*, *money*, and *enlightenment* with respect to Han practitioners. This fascinating account takes us inside the inner workings of this new Buddhism with the authority of one who has received teachings and personal interviews with many of the charismatic *tulkus* that are stimulating these recent conversions. Tellingly, as a well-trained anthropologist he maintains a sense of objectivity while at the same time giving the reader an insider's perspective. Not content with a cursory explanation of this phenomenon, he delves into the in-depth political economic, multi-cultural, and geo-political contemporary and historical evolution of the current spreading of Tibetan Buddhism in China, couching the contemporary in terms of globalization and market economy. In particular, his account of Chinese monks entering Tibet during the Republican period (1912-1949) is enlightening and crucial context for following the modern trajectory of Tibetan Buddhism in China.

Yü explains how the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism has been able to expand its teachings in China by focusing on the transmission of Tibetan Buddhist teachings rather than on the Tibet independence movement; in essence, it has been flying under the radar of the state's hyper focus

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Beazley on *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment*.

on controlling monasteries, monks, and nuns who they identify as part of the Dalai clique separatists. Yü credits Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok and Larung Gar for the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in eastern Tibetan areas of present-day Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces. Several thousand Han Chinese and a few Western practitioners reside at Larung Gar, which has become the center for the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhist teachings in urban Chinese centers through an information grid based in the Internet and cyberspace. He writes, “Virtual Tibetan Buddhism has become popular in the mid 1990s. Those who are responsible for this unique cyberspace of Tibetan Buddhism in China are mostly a handful Chinese pilgrims who studied at Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok’s Larung academy in Sertar” (p. 80). Within this current context he emphasizes the importance of the Internet in spreading charismatic *tulkus*’ teachings within China and in the formation of self-organizing Chinese Tibetan Buddhists groups who often hold clandestine *dharma* meetings, embark on *tulku* tours to receive teachings and empowerments, and facilitate the wider discourse on all things Tibetan Buddhist. Here, the use of virtual technology cannot be overstated as a fundamental driving force behind this spreading of Tibetan Buddhism in China.

Interestingly, the newly accumulated wealth in China has also been instrumental in lay Chinese finding access to *tulkus* and receiving

teachings and empowerments. This has fueled many reconstructions/renovations of old monasteries and the construction of new ones. As he notes, “In contemporary China, the price of religious freedom increasingly refers to the purchasing power of the individual who yearns for such freedom from state control” (p. 123). Not surprisingly, this has led to contention within the lay practitioner community as practitioners vie for favor and entrance into the rarified personal spaces of *tulkus* in their attempts to find meaning in life amid China’s rapid modernization and urban migration, leaving many indigenous Tibetan Buddhist feeling marginalized. As a result, Tibetan Buddhism has become a highly commoditized product. Tellingly, he writes, “Tibetan Buddhism is being accessed as both an object of consumption and a medium of Buddhist spirituality in contemporary China” (p. 125).

The temptation to draw parallels with western Buddhism’s evolution since the late 1970s in this regard is striking but must be tempered as Yü’s account has distinctly Chinese characteristics entrenched in the administrative socialist system as well as in Han Chinese culture. Yü explains, “Unlike their North America counterparts who openly congregate at their Dharma centers without government interference, Chinese tantric practitioners are not permitted to establish Dharma centers. Instead the space of

their small businesses creates a shelter for gatherings of their peer practitioners” (p. 122). And this in reality is changing the way Tibetan Buddhism is practiced. “Meanwhile, many Tibetan monasteries, especially those of the Nyingmapa are changing their monastic routines to accommodate their urban Chinese students’ needs,” he concludes (*ibid.*).

One addition to the book that would have been useful is some mention of Yarchen Gar in Baiyu County, Garze Tibet Autonomous Prefecture (approximately 300 km southwest of Larung Gar), a Tibetan Buddhist monastery and enclave founded by Achuk Rinpoche in 1985. It was here that many of the residents of Larung Gar came after the first state downsizing attempt at Larung Gar in 2001 and during the most recent attempts starting in 2016. When this reader visited Yarchen Gar in 2016, the local and only hotel was full of Han Tibetan Buddhists and daily busloads of organized Han Tibetan Buddhist tours were arriving. While not essential, including some mention of Yarchen Gar and updating the ongoing downsizing of both Larung and Yarchen Gar would add more context and nuance.

Yü uses Western, Chinese, and Tibetan sources to make his arguments, thereby producing a well-researched and nuanced approach to his subject. Having witnessed this trend myself during recent tours of Kham (eastern Tibet), where I encountered busloads of enthusiastic and star-struck Chinese

Tibetan Buddhist religious tourists, pilgrims, and practitioners as well as Taiwanese practitioners with their *tulkus*, this reader finds Yü's analysis both salient and timely. *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China* is a welcome addition to the fields of Buddhist studies, Chinese culture, and globalization that both Tibetan Buddhists scholars and anyone interested in Tibetan Buddhism will find readable and authoritative.

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