

Not just nuns and oracles: contemporary Tibetan women

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With its concise yet broadly sweeping title, Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik's edited volume *Women in Tibet* is a definitive contribution to the literature on women's experiences in Tibetan culture. The volume's composition reflects the breadth of contemporary Tibetan Studies, with chapters written by historians, philologists, comparative religion scholars and anthropologists, all of whom apply their own methodological approaches to a range of chronologically and geographically disparate subjects. This diversity makes for an uneven read: some chapters are in themselves lengthy mini-monographs that present important new ethnographic research (Diemberger, Henrion-Dourcy and Barnett); others are tightly argued pieces clearly situated within the author's own discipline (Schaeffer and Makley); while the remaining chapters list notable women within certain domains of Tibetan life (Uebach; Martin and Tsering).

Although Gyatso and Havnevik's well crafted introduction tries hard to provide a coherent framework by raising overarching theoretical questions about cultural relativism in gender studies and the methodological challenges of accessing women's experiences, the book as a whole does not live up to its promising title as a comprehensive survey of Tibetan women. Instead, as Gyatso and Havnevik themselves admit, the volume 'only provides fragments of the history and diversity of women in Tibet' (p24).

A healthy corrective

In general, studies of the Tibetan world have over-emphasised religion, and the literature on Tibetan women is no exception. In particular, Western Buddhist women (Klein, Shaw, Gross, Simmer-Brown) have written a plethora of books and articles about the feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism but relatively little about the lives of actual women in Tibetan contexts. This book is a healthy corrective to that tendency, with chapters about women in medicine, the performing arts and politics in addition to the more predictable contributions on nuns, yoginis and oracles. The volume also enters new territory by including the work of several scholars conducting groundbreaking research within the contemporary Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), rather than relying solely on historical sources or field research conducted in Himalayan areas outside of political Tibet.

The book is divided into two parts, with Part I focusing on 'Women in Traditional Tibet'. Helga Uebach examines how noble women of the Tibetan empire of the 7th to 9th centuries are represented in texts. Of particular note are her analyses of their political roles and contributions to important monasteries such as Samye. Moving ahead chronologically, Dan Martin's article

begins by considering the methodological challenges of identifying religious women in the biographical literature of the 11th and 12th centuries. He then lists all those whom he has identified, placing them in the categories of Best-Known Women, Prophets, Disciples, Lineage Holders, Leaders of Popular Religious Movements, Teachers and Nuns. Finally, he argues that the male teacher Phadampa Sangye and his followers 'advocated a particular kind and degree of women's liberation with strongly Buddhist characteristics' (p 80), which we might even go so far as to call 'feminism'.

Picking up on such analytical themes, Kurtis Schaeffer suggests that the 'earliest datable Tibetan woman's autobiography' – that of the Dolpo hermitess Orgyan Chokyi, who lived from 1675 to 1729 – has a uniquely gendered 'rhetoric of the body' when it comes to the cycle of rebirth and suffering (p 84). In addition, Schaeffer's nuanced presentation of Chokyi's life story provides a fascinating window on the cultural history of 17th century women and men in the western Himalayas.

Real women, right now

Part II addresses 'Modern Tibetan Women', with all five articles focusing on women's experiences within the contemporary TAR (although several of them also incorporate material from exile communities). Hildegard Diemberger's in-depth article on female oracles will certainly become the definitive work on the subject, with discus-

sions of both 'old' and 'new' oracles based on oral histories and extensive fieldwork. Although not all oracles are female, Diemberger argues that 'the ability to resolve personal life-crises and to deal with social liminality by means of spirit possession seems to be connected to a female experience of life in a privileged and specific way' (p 167). Diemberger describes the experiences and practices of this powerful group of women and explores their relationship to contemporary religious and social movements.

Turning to a different but equally powerful role that several women have played within contemporary Tibetan society, Tashi Tsering focuses on the contributions of women doctors to Tibetan medicine. With biographies of Khando Yanga, Lobsang Dolma Khangkar and Tsewang Dolkar Khangkar, this chapter is translated from the original Tibetan and its rhetorical style echoes a traditional Tibetan religious biography. We learn about the key events that defined these three illustrious women's lives, and come to understand them as key figures in maintaining Tibetan medical traditions both in pre-1959 Tibet and in exile.

With a somewhat similar organisational structure, Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy's article profiles six contemporary female singers. The details of their life stories are skilfully contextualised in a broader discussion of the role of performing arts in asserting Tibetan identities, both within the TAR and in exile. Henrion-Dourcy con-

cludes that for the female performers in question, 'ethnicity issues have appeared to have precedence over gender issues' (p 258). This serves as a crucial reminder that even in studies of women, gender may not be the most appropriate single analytical framework; rather, gender identities must always be understood in relation to other identities. For the female Tibetan performers who Henrion-Dourcy describes, ethnic and national identity issues have often been so highly charged that they have eclipsed gender as defining categories.

By contrast, the nuns of Labrang, Amdo, who are the subject of Charlene Makley's theoretically sophisticated article, are defined and often limited by their female bodies. Makley argues that the seemingly androgynous, but ultimately female bodies of these celibate women came to symbolise the 'larger patterns of changing gender practices which locals experienced as baffling and multifarious' (p 284). In so doing, they were perceived as a dangerous affront to existing gender ideologies.

A wealth of data, but none from Tibetan women scholars

Robbie Barnett makes a similar argument about the politicisation of women's bodies, in his extremely detailed review of women in contemporary TAR politics, claiming that ultimately their bodies serve as 'symbols of their cultural distinctiveness and of their identity as a group or nation' (p 362). Owing to restrictions on expression, wom-

en's bodies have become a primary site for the performance of political ritual, the one location that cannot be policed. Barnett applies this argument to both female Communist Party members and anti-state protesters, and shows how women across a broad spectrum of political roles and affiliations have engaged in politics in an embodied manner. Both theoretically complex and ethnographically rich, Barnett's chapter provides a powerful conclusion to the volume.

On the whole, *Women in Tibet* offers a wealth of data about Tibetan women across time and space. One category that regrettably remains unrepresented is that of contemporary Tibetan women scholars: despite several mentions of the well known Lhasa scholar Tseyang Changngopa, there is not a single contribution from one of the several women of Tibetan origin producing fine scholarship in China, India and the rest of the world. Nonetheless, no single book can be all things to all people, and the excellent individual articles presented in this volume will pave the way for more integrated studies of women's experiences in Tibetan contexts, by scholars both Tibetan and Western, female and male. ■

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