

## Tibet

---

**Theresia Hofer, *Medicine and Memory in Tibet: Amchi Physicians in an Age of Reform***

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018. 304 pages, 29 illustrations, 2 maps, 3 tables. Hardcover, \$90.00; paperback, \$30.00. ISBN: 9780295742991 (hardcover); 9780295742984 (paperback).

Theresia Hofer's *Medicine and Memory in Tibet* is an easy, engaging read with lively photographic illustrations. It is an important contribution to the study of Sowa Rigpa

for three reasons. First, Hofer managed to carry out extensive “official” and “unofficial” fieldwork in 2003 and between 2006–07 in the rural regions of Tsang in west-central Tibet in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, which has been largely inaccessible to researchers, especially since 2008. Second, she turns our attention to the understudied peripheries of Sowa Rigpa by offering original ethnographic data and oral histories on Sowa Rigpa practices from the perspective of Tibetan medical practitioners (*amchi*) in rural village areas outside the Lhasa-centered medical establishments of the Mentsikhang and other large-scale Sowa Rigpa institutions across China. Hofer achieves this by focusing on the physical and metaphorical dimensions of “medical houses,” where *amchi* live and work and where medical lineages are passed on. Third, Hofer fills a considerable gap in our knowledge of how Tibetan medicine was practiced during the “Reforms,” the “Cultural Revolution” (1966–77), and thereafter, when the barefoot doctor movement became part of rural public health care in Tibet. This movement predominantly spread biomedicine but also included Chinese traditional medical perspectives and practices such as basic acupuncture. Overall, the book presents rare and untold histories of Tibetan medicine that are frequently silenced in official state narratives.

Notably, the use of Tibetan medicines, *materia medica* publications, and the making of Sowa Rigpa formulas, which began again in 1972, add refreshing glimpses of medical histories to our slim knowledge of that period. The narratives, written in engaging prose, are based largely on the memories of *amchi* who lived through that time. Also, for the first time, Hofer presents *materia medica* works that were published in Tibetan at the end of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1970s and which represent an “increased confidence in the wake of official relegitimization of Tibetan medicine” (216). These publications also testify to how medical knowledge had to be restructured and reinterpreted for it to survive the changing political climates in Tibet.

In six strong and engaging chapters, Hofer takes the reader through the medical houses of Tsang via the living memories of her informants. Hofer contrasts these oral narratives with the PRC’s socio-political contexts from the 1950s to the present. She explores the concept of the medical house and how it has carried on through both male and female lineages (chapter 1). Her three ethnographic examples of medical houses offer thought-provoking detail on the role of women in the predominantly male medical lineages presented in existing literature. Women were trained in the absence of sons, and men without lineage affiliation could be adopted by medical houses. Her approach to medical houses as “moral persons” highlights how knowledge transmission is a prime social act deeply influenced by ethical thinking. Hofer’s focus on gender and the specific roles of female *amchi*, their training, and their practice (chapter 2) is a welcome contribution to Tibetan gender studies.

The strongest theoretical contribution of the book is found in Hofer’s insights on the impact memory has on oral histories (chapter 3). Memory and politics affect the ways history is told and written, and Hofer brings across previously untold stories from the past, specifically of the “losers” who usually do not write history. She also clarifies some of the political realities of the period surrounding the Cultural Revolution and its “medico-cultural revolution” (chapter 4). She observes: “The reason many *amchi* were unable to continue working in their accustomed fashion was not because of official opposition to the practices themselves, but because of official opposition to the class structures in which they were embedded” (215). What becomes evident in the

narratives is that only a few *amchi* fit the right class, while many were persecuted and “re-educated.” As we know, religion became one of the main hindering factors in the practice of Sowa Rigpa under Mao. In chapter 5 we learn how it was revived in the 1980s, albeit in more modern terms and in integration with biomedicine.

Hofer’s ethnography of rural medical camps with Amchi Yonten Tsering (chapter 6) vividly illustrates the poverty and harsh conditions under which Sowa Rigpa is still practiced early in the twenty-first century in rural Tsang, leading to a “moral economy” quite distinct from what Saxer (2013) describes for urban and institutionalized practices in the PRC.

While the conclusions raise some interesting questions about what the material could tell us beyond the Tibetan world and whether we can actually “distill methodological implications from this study that are useful to the wider field of Tibetan and modern Chinese studies” (219), one would have hoped here for broad answers beyond summaries of what was presented in the chapters. Some parts of the conclusions review literature on oral history approaches that would have been more helpful earlier in the book. Nevertheless, ending the book with an update on what happened to Hofer’s informants more recently (post-2008) rounds off this valuable monograph with a realistic picture of what has been lost but also what is gained through the increasingly institutionalized practice of Sowa Rigpa reaching rural areas of Tsang.

I highly recommend *Medicine and Memory in Tibet* as an insightful, well-written, and accessible read to everyone interested in Sowa Rigpa and the workings of memory in oral histories, and specifically to anthropologists, Tibetanists, area studies specialists, and researchers of traditional Asian medicine. With its accessible style, the book makes for good teaching material, introducing undergraduate students to the complex realities of Sowa Rigpa practice. The book left me especially pondering about and moved by the personal narratives of *amchi* in Tsang, realizing the extent of the rural Sowa Rigpa practitioners’ struggles to continue practicing their art. These aspects of Sowa Rigpa practice are easily forgotten with the Sowa Rigpa industry undergoing large-scale expansions elsewhere, where medicines and supplements have become commodities representing “moral economies” quite distinct from what Hofer observed in west-central Tibet. Thus, the book is also a strong reminder of the heterogeneity characterizing Sowa Rigpa practices in the twenty-first century and how deeply medical practice is not only embedded in political circumstances but also impacted by practitioners’ personal responses to them.

---

#### REFERENCES

- Saxer, Martin. 2013. *Manufacturing Tibetan Medicine: The Creation of an Industry and the Moral Economy of Tibetanness*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books.

Barbara Gerke  
*University of Vienna*