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Book review of 'Labrang: A Tibetan Buddhist  
Monastery at the Crossroads of Four Civilizations'  
by Paul Kocot Nietupski,

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whom rights to waste and forests would inhere, thus abdicating governmental responsibility for the management of those resources initially considered a liability rather than an asset.

The last chapter, entitled "The Social Response," addresses broad questions of caste dynamics and resource control. The author provides an overview of landowning patterns in different sub-regions and caste and suggests that the physical environment limited the degree of inequality between dominant and subordinate groups by preventing gross accumulations of wealth and conspicuous consumption on the part of "nonproductive segments of society." While fine grained social analysis, for example of the complexities of western Himalayan timber extraction and trade or the tensions between the colonial revenue and forest departments over control of forests and the taxation of Gaddi transhumants, were no doubt beyond the scope of this environmental history, the book would be stronger if the social dynamics described in this chapter had been more thoroughly integrated into the whole study. This would have allowed, within the limits the historical record imposes, for more complete analysis of the equity effects of forest conservancy and the allocation of rights to wastelands to landholders, or the effects of marketization on patterns of wealth inequality. It would have enabled great clarification of terms such as "agriculturists," "farm servants," "village menials," "subordinate landlords," and "ordinary villagers," which are used in the text but whose meaning with regards to resource access and control are not well defined for the reader. No doubt, reconstructing complex historical intra-regional social relations is extremely difficult, and to some extent is not central to the author's aim of arguing that regionality is based on different inter-regional natural premises. However, integrating the "social response" into the rest of the book would help to emphasize the fact of intra-regional, as well as inter-regional difference.

**Natural Premises** is an important and valuable contribution to the scholarship on the western Himalaya, Himalayan studies, and mountain regions in general. Singh provides ample evidence to support his contention that exchange relations based on subregional differences integrate the western Himalaya into a single region and also link it to northern India and central Asia. This work constitutes valuable frame of reference within which to contextualize more detailed local level field research in the Himalaya. It provides an historical benchmark against which to gauge recent social, economic, and environmental transformations in the western Himalaya. And it challenges the notion that the "regionality" of mountain regions is based on homogeneity rather than difference.

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**Labrang: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery at the Crossroads of Four Civilizations  
(Photos from the Griebenow Archives, 1921-1949)**

Paul Kocot Nietupski. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1999.

A pleasure to read, this book is a visually rich and historically enlightening study of a Tibetan polity outside central Tibet. Nietupski's contribution to the growing body of photograph-based essays on the eastern Tibetan borderlands brings new depth to such works. In this tradition, **China's Inner Asian Frontier: Photographs of the Wulsin Expedition to Northwest China in 1923** (M. E. Alonso, ed., Cambridge, Mass.: The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, distributed by Harvard University Press, 1979) with historical text by Joseph Fletcher, was an early attempt to summarize the complex ethnic and historic background of this region. More recently, the late Michael Aris briefly introduced **Lamas, Princes, and Brigands: Joseph Rock's Photographs of the Tibetan Borderlands of China** (New York: China Institute in America, 1992). Yet unlike the compilers of these earlier publications, Nietupski was fortunate to be working with a set of photographs taken in a single region over a long period of time. For this reason, he is able to use these rare photographs to offer a glimpse into the history of a significant Tibetan polity in the early twentieth century.

For those who know something about the Tibetan borderlands, the complex history revealed here will not be shocking. However, for those who hold extreme views of the relations between China and Tibet, the detailed account of Labrang's modern history should upset closely held beliefs. Nietupski acknowledges the limitations of the book when he notes that trying "to present a massive amount of data in a short format recalls the tip of an iceberg maxim" (p. 7), yet he accomplishes much in this slim volume. Given the dearth of published information on Tibetan regions outside central Tibet, this book demonstrates the potential for local Tibetan history to sink "Titanic" conceptions—neither the propaganda of Tibetans being

under Chinese control for centuries past nor the myth of Tibet as a unified political entity can hold water in the face of this preliminary study of Labrang's history.

Nietupski has organized his materials along topical lines which move in a roughly chronological progression of chapters. His introduction includes a sketch of the administration of Labrang monastery and its affiliations with outlying temples and polities (p. 12). The first chapter, "Labrang in History" (pp. 15-25), describes the geographical and historical background of the Dge lugs monastery and the incarnation series of its founder, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa (1648-1721). In the next chapter, "The Ethnic Matrix" (pp. 27-37), Nietupski briefly describes the nature of and relationships between the Tibetans and Mongols (who largely shared Tibetan Buddhist culture), the Chinese, and the various groups of Muslims in the region. He reveals the importance of ethnic antagonism with the Muslims as the primary force that drove the Tibetans into alliance with the Chinese (pp. 32-37).

The harsh reality of the weakness of the Labrang Tibetans' position in these ethnic conflicts is all too little understood by those who wish to view Tibet as a single political entity. Central Tibet played no role in defending Labrang against Muslim military forces as its link to Labrang was largely religious, and even an alliance with the legendary Mgo log nomads was insufficient to protect Labrang. Nietupski makes admirable use of the growing secondary literature on the Muslims of China (one such article, by Hajji Yusuf Chang, appears only in footnote 66 and not in the bibliography). I offer here a few notices of relevant works published after Nietupski's book went to press, most notably two publications based on dissertations which he used. Most recently, Jonathan N. Lipman has published **Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China** (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997). In addition, Dru Gladney's **Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic** (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University; Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1996) makes mention of Joseph Fletcher's study of Tibetans near Xunhua converting to Islam. On this point, I should note that a draft of one of Fletcher's papers, prepared for a conference entitled "From Ming to Ch'ing: State, Region, and Individual in a Period of Conquest," is preserved in Harvard Yenching's library under the title of that conference.

The longest chapter of Nietupski's book (pp. 39-74) is devoted to the missionary family whose photographs illustrate the book. On the whole, given the Griebenow's almost quarter century in Labrang, the mission's archives do not yield the contribution that one might have expected. Rather than provide new information on the political history of the area, the missionaries' accounts describe many details of day-to-day existence. One can only hope that other missionary archives from the borderlands in Khams and Amdo will reveal more historical information than the Christian Missionary Alliance archive has. One interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the mission's presence at Labrang was the religious tolerance of the Dge lugs monastery under whose shadow the missionaries lived. However, it should not be forgotten that the very possibility of missionary penetration to this area was opened up by developments in China; missions were not permitted in central Tibet at this time. The missionaries themselves may have considered Labrang part of Tibet (p. 50), but it remains to be demonstrated that this meant to them that it was *not* part of China in a larger sense. As we are seeing again today, Christian missionaries—who now serve as reliably apolitical English language instructors in many Tibetan institutions of higher education—are only too eager to benefit from China's control of Tibet to spread their faith.

Nietupski's greatest contribution to our understanding of Tibetans who lived on the borders of China proper comes in the next two chapters: "Local Leaders" and "Labrang Under Attack." In a few short pages (pp. 75-93), Nietupski fulfills his promise (from the introduction, p. 12) to paint "an accurate portrait of Labrang and its people, letting the sources speak for themselves on issues of ethnicity [and] political sovereignty." He is frank about the Alo clan's association with the Qing militarist Zhao Erfang (p. 75) who invaded Khams early in the twentieth century, brutally suppressing Tibetan resistance and encouraging the wholesale transformation of Tibetan regions through education and colonization. Nietupski also describes the Alo family's ability to move in different cultural contexts (pp. 77-80) as illustrated in the Griebenow photographs (pp. 32, 76): sometimes the family members wear Tibetan dress, sometimes Chinese-style military uniforms, and when necessary a three-piece suit. Likewise, they were comfortable with moving between languages, demonstrated by the fact that they used both Chinese and Tibetan names.

One other aspect of Paul Nietupski's promise deserves attention here, and that is the question of whether the sources speak for themselves on the issue of nationalism. We should be grateful for Nietupski raising this difficult issue in the light of such a specific local history. In contrast to the sweeping portrayal of the Tibetan nation in Warren Smith's recent book (**Tibetan Nation**. Boulder: Westview Press, 1996),

Nietupski's work does offer a nuanced and complicated suggestion of what a Tibetan "nation" might mean. If, as Nietupski says in his conclusion, "the story of the Alos both typifies and emphasizes Labrang's evolution as a part of the Tibetan nation (p. 106)," what does this tell us about the nature of the Tibetan nation? His study of one Tibetan polity demonstrates that "especially in the modern period, its strongest allies were its Chinese neighbors, with whom the Labrang Tibetans managed to coexist (p. 106)." Was this alliance a betrayal of the "Tibetan nation?" Was it a mistake? Does it explain the willingness of the Chinese government to allow anthropological field work in this area?

The issue of the Tibetan nation is raised some half a dozen times in the course of the book, and only in the first instance does Nietupski use the word nationalism (p.12). Other occurrences include the adjectival form "national," as in "Tibetans, like others in this cultural matrix of people with strong and different ethnic, political, and religious backgrounds, asserted their national character at Labrang (p13)," "Tibetans . . . valued their national history with its mythical heroes and villains (p. 27)," and "the national pride of Tibetans in general and the independence of diverse groups of nomads in particular . . . (p. 28). These examples do indicate something of what Nietupski means by "nation": difference based on characteristics that define Tibetans in opposition to other peoples on ethnic, political, religious, mythic, and associational terms. The final quote above is the most revealing; it demonstrates that though Tibetans may have felt a sense of "nation" in opposition to other more clearly alien cultural or ethnic groups, this did not produce a unified, single polity among Tibetans. Furthermore, the very real independent and divided qualities of what Nietupski describes as the Tibetan nation go a long way towards explaining why it is that the "nation" was not unified in its response to external threats.

Nietupski also states that "there was a strong recognition of being Tibetan nationals first and foremost (p. 80)." Though this statement is supported by the photographic record—in which the "default" dress of the Alos appears to be Tibetan—the written record is not used as strongly to support this claim. If books produced in the People's Republic of China can be shown to demonstrate such an attitude on the part of Tibetans, it would indeed be interesting.

On a final note, and in the spirit of support for further research, I would like to suggest a few additional sources for the future study of this important Tibetan polity. The first, **Dbal mang pandita's Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil gyi gdan rabs lha'i rnga chen**. (Lanzhou: Kan su'i mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1987) might provide some useful background material for the history of the monastery though it does not cover the time period treated in Nietupski's book. The Tibetan scholar Danqu [Bstan chos]'s **Labuleng si jianshi [Brief history of Labrang monastery]** (Lanzhou: Gansu minzu chubanshe, 1994), contains a table of all the monastery's incarnation series—in Chinese, with Tibetan transcription—which lists monastic rank and notes status and influence (pp. 91-98). In addition, as an appendix, it contains a letter dated 1932 from the fifth 'Jam dbyangs incarnation to his Tibetan and Mongolian compatriots concerning the war between China and Japan, again in Chinese with a Tibetan transcription (pp. 148-155). By far the most interesting recent publication on this topic is **Labuleng si yu Huang shijiazu [Labrang Monastery and the Huang {Alo} Family]** edited by Chen Zhongyi and Zhou Ta ['Gro mthar] (Lanzhou: Gansu minzu chubanshe, 1995). An English abstract announces that "the book stresses the contributions to the Labrang Monastery of Mr. Huang Zhengqing [Apa Alo] and his family which actively responded to the Communist's party's policy towards the minority nationalities." The latter portion of the book records interviews and memoirs of Huang [Alo] family members and prominent incarnations of Labrang (pp. 244-409). This book also offers a long list—unfortunately only in Chinese—of Labrang's subordinate monasteries with details as to general location, the number of monks in each monastery, and the tribes (*buluo*) or villages which each monastery administered (pp. 29-33).

Another treasure trove of source materials on Labrang in the modern period is preserved in archival material from the period of the gradual incorporation of Labrang into the Chinese government administration during the Republican period. Joseph Rock (G. Tucci, ed. **The Amnye Ma-Chhen Range and Adjacent Regions**. Rome: *Serie Orientale Roma*, 1956) seems to have used Republican government investigation records (*diao cha ji*) compiled in the reorganization of Qinghai from 1928-1930 under the title of **Qinghai ji [Records of Qinghai]** (p. 8). It is possible that his sources are held in the Rock collection at the University of Washington. In any case, the bulk of archival material on Labrang is held in the Gansu Provincial Archives in Lanzhou. Recently, an index to the extant Tibetan materials in this archival collection was published in Chinese: Zhongguo Zangxue yanjiu zhongxin, and Gansu sheng dang'an guan, eds. **Gansu sheng suocun Xizang he Zangshi dang'an shiliao mulu**. Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, 1997. There are over 5,500 entries from the period between 1912 and 1949, and many of these deal directly with Labrang. The index on Labrang-related topics is extensive (pp. 456-460), while prominent Labrang incarnations and Alo family members have separate entries (pp. 498,

502-505). Many of these materials are in Tibetan, though to locate the relevant entries one must know Chinese. Obviously, the exploration of such an enormous body of material would require research far beyond the scope of Nietupski's current publication, but we can be happy that he has set the stage for further research. Having setting forth the basic framework and issues in his valuable study of this important Tibetan polity in the modern period, Nietupski will no doubt continue to reveal more of the "iceberg" in future publications.

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### **Tales of the Turquoise: A Pilgrimage in Dolpo**

Corneille Jest. Ithaca: Snow Lion: paper, 1999.

I once watched a man load 850 pounds of gear into a Ford Explorer in preparation to spend 48 hours in the woods.

Karma, a wise man of Dolpo, took a rather different approach to the task of readying himself for a walk on the wild side.

He gathered up a sack of tsampa, a ball of tea, a lump of butter sewn in goat skin, some salt, a handful of dried chilies, some freshly honed needles and some freshly printed prayer flags. This entire kit and kaboodle disappeared comfortably into the cavernous folds of his chuba.

Tibetans, you see, need no tips from Martha Stewart on the art of packing lite.

In 1961, Corneille Jest, Director of Research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, set out on a stroll around Dolpo. His companion, Karma, an elderly nomad from Western Tibet, turned out to be more than mere guide and mentor.

Karma was a window into an endangered species, the cultural heritage of one of the least understood corners of the Himalaya.

During his circumambulation, Jest, through the eyes, the ears, and—most eloquently—the stories of his companion, received an uncommon introduction to what he calls "the mental world of the Tibetan.

And what a world it was.

Cross-dressing transsexuals every bit as comfortable in 16th century Tibet as they might have been in 20th century San Francisco.

People who talk to the animals as efficaciously as any Dr. Doolittle.

Sons sliced in two by confused rulers. Who needs Jerry Springer?

And as for the regular doses of advice, heck, some of it might have come direct from Dear Abby in response to a plea from a troubled marriage.

A smoking fire can still give warmth.

A bone with a little meat is delicious.

Strange and enticing enough for you? And I didn't even get to the part about the purloined manuscripts that made their way home courtesy of some very determined, and very self-directed, yaks.

The meat of this book resides in the stories told along the route by Karma, one of those traveling companions who never met a tale he didn't like to retell. At every twist and turn, every monastery and morning, every bend and breeze, Karma find a prompt to launch himself into a yarn.

Some of the stories are dense, complex, non-linear. The reader at first risks the impression that there may be a lot less to these tales than meets the eye.

Then one remembers that in the Himalaya less is more.

And then the ride begins.

So much for the meat. But this volume also has a skeleton. One of the book's blessings is that, along the way, Jest intersperses these tales with his own observations, all related in simple, direct language,