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Women in Tibet (review)

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WOMEN IN TIBET. Edited by Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 436 pp.

Empowerment, transcendence, and the performance of identity are common themes in the study of gender and religion across cultures. As these themes are elucidated across cultures and in different historical moments, they are troubled by a persistent refusal of gender as a category of enduring symbolic and real meaning by both historical and contemporary cultural actors. In the cases of Tibetan and Buddhist studies, the approach to womanhood as a category is repeatedly subsumed by concerns with religious or ethnic and political identity. This trend has forced many scholars to appeal to the symbolic realm of the iconic female or the construction of womanhood from sparse individual accounts as representative of an artificial subcultural entity. In response to the impasse created by these methods, the editors of *Women in Tibet* have chosen an approach that seeks to level the field. In doing so, they have produced a work that combines textual and anthropological projects aimed at recovering the specificities of lived womanhood across a range of historical moments. Allying themselves with a historical versus a feminist agenda, they succeed in laying the groundwork for a new approach to the study of womanhood.

This approach surveys the vast artillery of historically embedded social dynamics available for Tibetan women to emulate, embody, or resist. In the diversity of their selections, Gyatso and Havnevik intentionally leave room for the possibility that women continue to perform as historical actors in spite of as well as because of their association with womanhood and the disempowering social and religious stereotypes attached to it. In leaving this issue open-ended, the editors sustain the tension between approaches that locate “specifically female” elements within traditions and those that posit the category of womanhood to be subservient to other cultural categories and phenomena. Exploring the participation of women in lineages as diverse as the oracular described by Hildegard Diemberger, the medical addressed by Tashi Tsering, and the imperial aristocratic presented by Helga Uebach, the essays in this volume represent an oscillation in the perceived relevance of femaleness. Inconsistency in the priority of the category of womanhood in historical interpretation reflects fluctuating attitudes on the part of Tibetans themselves as well as of European and American scholars as interpreters of the region’s religious, social, and political realities.

Asceticism in particular has been a highly charged site for the exploration of these themes in both Buddhist and Christian studies, along with determining the specific nature of female monasticism. As an instance of the deliberate embrace of a social category thriving upon the confluence of the ideal and the marginal, asceticism provides a lens for considering the ways in which women exploited opportunities to survive and excel spiritually and socially, often in spite

of female embodiment. Several of the authors in this volume address the tension between the socially sanctioned spaces for female asceticism within the nunnery or hermitage and the identities that individuals and communities of female ascetics strive to inhabit. Kurtis Schaeffer, for example, presents the tensions operating within acts of ascetic self-clarification in the autobiography of the medieval Tibetan hermitess Orgyan Chokyi. This account provides a rare glimpse of a historical woman defining her marginality and femaleness in relationship to Buddhist notions of suffering. Schaeffer reminds the reader that even from the hermetically sealed space of the cave, social, geographic, and historical elements play a fundamental role in constructing an individual's narrative identity and conditioning the terms of her self-realization.

Charlene Makley's astute observations on the identity of nuns in contemporary Amdo taps into the various power dynamics at play in the social construction of nuns as parasitic, marginal, and dispensable members of the Labrang community. These acts of identification occur in the enduring and influential discursive field of gossip centered upon the "inappropriate otherness" of female monastics and their rumored failure to perfectly embody what Makley, following Charles Keyes, terms the "third gender" of celibate monasticism. Makley uncovers the powerful signifiers of the body of the nun in this geographical and historical context as factors that have resulted in the lay community's refusal to support nuns socially and economically. Exploring the ways in which these nuns threaten the balance of lay and monastic relationships in the social climate of post-Mao eastern Tibet, the author demonstrates the subtleties of the laity's "re-sexing" of the nuns as tied to social unease with their attempts to perform as androgynous bodies.

Makley's work is emblematic of the editors' goal to exhibit the mutability of social categories available to women across time and space. The instability of such categories and the ascendance and diminishing of the possibility for women to use these social spaces to their utmost potential suggests that scholars must evaluate the relationships of women to social roles carefully. The successful performance of these roles and the freedom for self-definition they provide is dependent upon the social, spiritual, and political meaning ascribed to them in specific historical moments and places. Although general categories such as nun, oracle, noblewoman, and politician may be instrumental in defining the historical actor, these categories, like the category of womanhood itself, cannot be viewed in isolation.

In his comprehensive essay on the relationships of women, both lay and monastic, to the Tibetan political sphere, Robert Barnett reinforces the message that the performance of spirituality as well as of "nation" by Tibetan women has relied heavily upon the reviews they receive from their audiences. He locates the argument within the Tibetan Autonomous Region, in particular the Lhasa area, beginning in the mid 1980s to document women's political activities as narratives that function as the objects of highly charged social reinterpretation. These narratives or performances, much like those presented by Isabelle

Henrion-Dourcy in her study of female performing artists, also in this volume, gravitate much more strongly around ethnicity than gender. The use of the body in what Barnett sees as “ritualized” political acts in the case of both elite women in official state-sanctioned positions and activist nuns brings both categories of women into the dialogue on asceticism and difference. Both lifestyle and intention serve as stringent measures in the public interpretation of the success of these women in performing their “Tibetanness.” Material and emotional overindulgence often indicate an inauthentic performance, while emotional reserve and humility may communicate powerful messages about ethnic, religious, and communal identity. Furthermore, the symbolic picture created by these signs gives the performances of these women a significance that transcends the often liminal and highly regulated social stage upon which they are enacted. However, the divide between the symbolic and the social becomes troubled not only in lived political circumstance but also in the view of the scholar himself. In designating the nonviolent political activity of nuns as “feminizing,” Barnett walks a fine line, reminding the reader that the project of opening up new conceptual spaces for the narratives of individual females requires the scholar to conscientiously evaluate the potential of particular notions of femininity to clarify or obfuscate narrative meaning.

Dan Martin provides perhaps the most instructive account for the project of navigating the historical record to recover female spiritual virtuosity in his appropriately titled essay “The Woman Illusion?” In unrelentingly questioning the accessibility of roles of real or symbolic female empowerment within the religious and social climate of eleventh- and twelfth-century Tibet, feminisms themselves are revealed as historically contingent phenomenon always more reliably sought within the accounts of appropriately situated historians and actors than within those of their descendents.

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BEING BENEVOLENCE: THE SOCIAL ETHICS OF ENGAGED BUDDHISM. *By Sallie B. King.* Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005. 291 pp.

This discussion of the social ethics of Engaged Buddhism is organized into chapters on four basic issues: the relationship between individual and society, human rights, nonviolence and its limits, and justice/reconciliation. Setting the context for these issues are an introduction, a chapter on how Engaged Buddhist social ethics is built from Buddhist tradition, and another surveying Engaged Bud-