

**Janet Gyatso, and Hanna Havnevik, eds. *Women in Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 436pp. Illustrated. ISBN 0231130996 (paperback).**

‘Women in Tibet’ shows how far the region’s women have travelled in the space of 1400 years. Compulsory child production was the main contribution to Tibetan society made by 7<sup>th</sup> century aristocratic women. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century women have become some of Tibet’s outstanding personalities, using the prominence gained by active participation in their chosen fields, particularly in spirituality (as Buddhist nuns), medicine and the performing arts. Indeed, they have achieved a measure of social and political standing and have even become involved in political demonstrations.

The book is divided into two parts: Women in Traditional Tibet (three articles) and Modern Tibetan Women (five articles). Nearly half of the chapters deal with Tibetan women currently living in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) either in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) or in several western provinces previously belonging to the ethnic Tibetan areas. The main focus is on the lives of individual women, constructed through texts or anthropological data.

Tibetan women have traditionally enjoyed more freedom than most of their counterparts in other Asian societies. This is the prime reason for the success achieved by most of the subjects of this book. Yet for the majority, their successful choice of profession has also been strongly influenced by family (or foster family) affiliation.

In spite of a scarcity of sources *Helga Uebach* (‘Ladies of the Tibetan Empire’) demonstrates how 7-9<sup>th</sup> century male rulers used high-ranking women as tools to establish political stability through matrimonial alliances. Although Tibetan Buddhism has played a significant role in Tibetan society since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the clerical perspective of the Annals and genealogies only allows for mention of imperial women, and only then in connection with marriage, childbirth and death. Biographical information on outstanding spiritual women in leading positions is minimal compared to that of men, and accomplished Buddhist women were marginalized in a male dominated clerical sphere. *Dan Martin* (‘Research into the Lives of Spiritually Accomplished Women Leaders of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries’) and *Kurtis R. Schaeffer* (‘The Autobiography of a Medieval Hermitess: Orgyan Chokyi 1675-1729’) present several such spiritual Tibetan women, of whom the most famous, Machig Labdron, is the founder of the Buddhist ‘Cutting’ (*gCod*) lineage. An interesting point raised by male clerics is that an ‘inferior’ birth as woman (physical and with low social status) subsequently producing ‘a gendered’ suffering could provide a stronger motive for the Buddhist quest for attaining enlightenment (pp. 79, 87, 269).

In both the pre-1959 period and in contemporary Tibet the majority of oracles are believed to be women. The study by *Hildegard Diemberger* ('Female Oracles in Modern Tibet') shows how political repression has given way to a revitalization of traditions to such an extent that contemporary oracles have influence as healers and even political advisors, depending on the degree of community acknowledgement. *Tashi Tsering's* study ('Outstanding Women in Tibetan Medicine') shows that women trained in Tibetan medicine enjoy a similar level of social acknowledgement to men and that they are now educating themselves in the formerly male dominated profession. In the world of the performing arts, *Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy* ('Women in the Performing Arts: Portraits of Six Contemporary Singers') points out that women are neither absent nor prominent in the sense 'that they equally share the spotlight with men' and do not outnumber them. The performing arts are not a major expressive field for women (pp. 196). 'Women, like men, sing many songs in Tibet, but can a song be called a 'female song' just because it is sung by a women?' (pp. 197). A singer's role is also to mediate past and present, and while some female singers entertain, others may become political singers and gain political recognition. *Charlene E. Makley* ('The Body of a Nun: Nunhood and Gender in Contemporary Amdo') maps the gendered boundary between lay households and the monastic community and demonstrates how nuns' bodies represent a direct challenge to the gender ideals of the local community. Despite their devotion in studying Buddhism, nuns are generally regarded as inferior, and are seen as an annoyance by crossing into a traditionally masculine gender status (pp. 284). *Robert Barnett* ('Women and Politics in Contemporary Tibet') illustrates one group of exceptions. Activist nuns in the Lhasa area have enhanced their (traditionally low) reputation by demonstrating against the Chinese regime, and, at the personal cost of imprisonment, have managed to attract worldwide attention to their cause. Additionally, some lay Tibetan women have gained positions as political leaders, although their influence is somewhat disputed within the local community.

The book includes a valuable transliteration of phoneticized Tibetan terms and an extensive bibliography on Tibet with Tibetan, Chinese, and Western language sources, short NGO publications, press articles, governmental and other documents, discography, and cassette tape albums produced in Tibet. While in some ways convenient, the shared bibliography for all articles does have its disadvantages. Readers wanting to trace one particular author must read all three bibliographies as Chinese and Tibetan authors nowadays publish in all three language areas (Tibetan, Chinese and Western languages).

With contributions from recognized Tibetologists, 'Women in Tibet' is an excellent collection of scholarly research. All articles are well documented and informative, collecting and analyzing former research as well as presenting new findings. While the large amount of footnotes will satisfy a reader with knowledge on Tibet, someone new to the subject could conveniently read the book and skip the footnotes. Overall 'Women in Tibet' is a valuable and much needed contribution towards an understanding of both ancient and modern Tibetan society, viewing the lives of several remarkable women through a gender lens. In their introduction the editors bemoan: 'the field of Tibetology has produced few studies of Tibetan women' (pp. 1). This book makes a significant contribution towards remedying this.

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