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Janet Gyatso, Hanna Havnevik, eds. *Women in Tibet.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 436 pp. $70.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13098-1; $26.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13099-8.

Reviewed by Michelle Sorensen (Center for Buddhist Studies and Department of Religion, Columbia University)
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The Productions of Tibetan Women

Women in Tibet is designed to supplement the lack of academic attention paid to the status and experience of women in Tibetan history and modern Tibetan culture. The eight essays in the volume are diverse in topics, styles, and methodologies, but are unified by their efforts to supplement existing primary sources and contemporary academic studies of women in Tibet with new data and analyses. The bibliographies are substantive and excellent resources for future work. In addition to providing new material on Tibetan women, the volume is explicitly intended to offer a corrective to contemporary assumptions regarding women in Tibet, including the social parity enjoyed by Tibetan women relative to women in other Asian countries and the positive effects of female symbols in Buddhism on Tibetan women's status and experiences.

While the editors insist that the collection reflects "representative" Tibetan women, many contributors acknowledge that their choices of subjects were limited by availability of information. Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik intend the revaluations of the volume to be based on a wide range of Tibetan women's experiences, but researchers were generally constrained to writing about women who were prominent in their communities through access to economic and social power. This predicament is not unique to this study, of course, but it does qualify how representative this volume is of women in Tibet. And, while the editors stress the extensive consideration of Tibetan women currently living in the Tibet Autonomous Region and neighboring provinces of China, only one of the essays is written by a Tibetan. All of the women discussed in these essays are identified as Buddhist, so the volume does not consider Muslim or Bon Tibetan women's experiences. Nevertheless, *Women in Tibet* is pioneering in initiative and content, and will provide a stimulus for future research and theorization of historical and contemporary women's lives in Tibet. The project initiated by the publication of this collection will be complemented by the activities at the Institute of Women and Gender Studies at Tibet University, Lhasa, which has recently been established by the editors in collaboration with Tseyang Changngopa and Sissel Thorsdalen.

The first section of the volume, "Women in Traditional Tibet," includes three essays on women from the seventh to the eighteenth centuries. In the first essay, "Ladies of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th Centuries CE)," Helga Uebach provides an annotated catalogue of aristocratic women in the imperial period. Drawing on diverse historiographical texts, Uebach teases out and reconstructs brief biographies of many women during this era. Though Uebach laments the paucity of information on women in her sources, she does make some provisional generalizations about high status women in this period, noting that such women owned property, played active roles outside of society, and exercised power in vassal countries.

Dan Martin's essay, "The Woman Illusion? Research into the Lives of Spiritually Accomplished Women Leaders of the 11th and 12th Centuries," also reconstructs the lives of accomplished women through historical sources. Emphasizing historical methodology over a gender theoretical standpoint, Martin discusses female Buddhist adepts from the early period of the "new traditions." With the intention to portray a comprehensive picture of this period, Martin includes such well-known figures as Machig Labdron, Machig Zhama, and Nangsa Obum; however, he pays greater attention to lesser-known female prophets, lineage holders, teachers, and practitioners. Martin observes that the majority of women he discusses were influenced by Phadampa Sangye, who Martin insists was a sort of advocate for women's liberation. Given this context, Martin is surprised to discover that most of his sources denigrate women's spiritual potential.

Rather than weaving together data on historical

women's lives, Kurtis R. Schaeffer's "The Autobiography of a Medieval Hermitess: Orgyan Chokyi (1675-1729)" provides a critical reading of the earliest known Tibetan autobiography by a woman. Attentive to the potential strengths and weaknesses of the literary genre of life writing, Schaeffer considers the specific rhetorical strategies Orgyan Chokyi deploys as a Buddhist, a female, and an author in the cultural milieu of Dolpo. Providing a possible explanation for the dearth of writing by or about women in the Tibetan literary corpus, Schaeffer draws attention to Orgyan Chokyi's desire to write her life story against a proscription to do so by her teacher. Through close readings of several of Orgyan Chokyi's songs, Schaeffer explains her use of the trope of the female body as sa?s?ra, noting that this strategy authoritatively links Orgyan Chokyi's narrative to the Buddha's teaching of the first noble truth of the existence of suffering.

The second part of the volume, "Modern Tibetan Women," includes five essays with an emphasis on "contemporary" (generally meaning post-1959) Tibet. In an essay on "Outstanding Women in Tibetan Medicine," translated by Sonam Tsering, Tashi Tsering reconstructs historical women's lives, using a seventeenth-century text by sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho to provide a brief synopsis of female medical practitioners (many of whom were the wives of recognized practitioners). Tsering implicitly compares these women with three twentieth-century practitioners–Yangchen "Khando" Yanga, Lobsang Dolma Khangkar, and her daughter Tsewang Dolkar Khangkar–and he situates these women within their historical, cultural, and institutional frameworks. Tsering's essay concludes with two appendices: the "Fifty-eight Propagators of Tibetan Medicine," translated from the above-mentioned text; and a list of women trained from 1969 to 2002 at the Tibetan Medical Center in Dharamsala, India.

Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy explores another professional field available to Tibetan women in her essay, "Women in the Performing Arts: Portraits of Six Contemporary Singers." Henrion-Dourcy, who claims that this essay is the first formal study focusing on women in the Tibetan performing arts, examines modern Tibetan performance contexts that provide significant roles for women. The essay discusses six different singers within their social and political contexts, providing interesting perspectives on the complicated strategies deployed by individual Tibetans in Tibet and in exile. For these singers, music is a means through which to construct personal and national identities, as well as a tool with which to negotiate between traditional and modern senses of self and community.

In "Female Oracles in Modern Tibet," Hildegard Diemberger considers and theorizes the status of mediums, a vocation traditionally dominated by women. Drawing from her fieldwork in Lato, Tibet, as well as ethnographic and historiographic sources, Diemberger examines the relationships between local mediums and the communities and institutions in which they practice. She is particularly interested in the regeneration of these activities and practices after 1980, following decades of proscription and persecution. Although Diemberger is careful to note that not all mediums are female, she suggests that the functions of the medium may be associated with "a specific female competence" (p. 116), and she wonders whether the contemporary gendering of mediums as female is a recent development or a traditional circumstance.

In contrast to the positive potential of women mediums, Charlene E. Makley's "The Body of a Nun: Nunhood and Gender in Contemporary Amdo" discusses how gender constrains and troubles women pursuing a monastic vocation. At Labrang, in Gansu, China, dominated by its large Tibetan Buddhist monastic complex, Makley met with nuns who related their experiences of marginality and alienation. In a context of dramatic social and economic change, Tibetans in Labrang identified nuns as unwelcome foreign influences, analogous to Muslim Chinese and stray dogs. Informed by her four years of fieldwork, Makley argues that nuns' bodies became sites for contesting gendered social boundaries between lay households and the monastic community, and between sexuality and asceticism.

Robert Barnett explores how Tibetan women deploy gender to political ends, rather than becoming instruments of political struggle. In "Women and Politics in Contemporary Tibet," Barnett contrasts women (many of whom are Buddhist nuns) who are active as political dissidents in Tibet and women who have leadership roles in the Chinese Communist Party administration in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Barnett argues for a straightforward interpretation of the verbal expressions and physical acts of the political dissidents, while highlighting the ways in which the women nuance their political acts with conventional ritual overtones. In contrast, Barnett argues that our understanding of the ritualized statements of loyalty made by many Tibetan women working within the formal government establishment should be qualified by an appreciation of the institutional constrictions experienced by these women.

In their introduction to the volume, Gyatso and Havnevik contextualize the essays in the collection in

terms of contemporary feminist and gender theory, broaching questions of the influence of gender on agency, the gendering of social strategies, and the significance of the term "woman." Apparently the editors hoped that the contributions to the volume would engage directly with theoretical or sociological issues of women in Tibetan culture, but very few of the essays directly deal with issues specifically related to gender. Rather, most of the essays (with the partial exceptions of Diemberger and Makley) address particular women in particular situations rather than taking up the cultural problem of "women in Tibet." While Gyatso and Havnevik insist that the attention to Tibetan women in their volume corrects a gender imbalance in scholarship and "reflects a feminist agenda" (p. 4), the collection as a whole illustrates the ambivalence and occasional discomfort with which feminist standpoints and gender theories are received in the field.

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