This book examines the life and lineage of the turn-of-the-century Tibetan Buddhist teacher Tokden Shakya Shri as well as presenting the reader with considerable detail about his remarkable ability to inspire disciples to carry his teachings throughout Tibet and the Himalayan chain.

However the book is far more than this. In her examination of the process of writing a “biograph-ization” Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (hereafter “Holmes”) proposes new and important ideas on that genre, drawn from the specific case of the biography of Shakya Shri himself. Among these ideas are the process whereby a life becomes idealized, the means by which the subject’s childhood may not be recorded at all, and the specific issues arising when the biographer has little actual connection with the subject he or she writes about. Indeed Holmes is quite clear in her discussion that the biography of Shakya Shri is far less concerned with his life in itself than with recording how his disciples wished to remember him. In themselves these ideas may be considered somewhat provocative, especially in light of the sheer number of “dharma” lives published over the last thirty-five years which to an extent have defined hagiographical writing as it is generally understood. However, Holmes discusses the complexities and nuances of biographic life-writing in a most convincing manner and this book offers us a range of new insights into what other factors might constitute a biography of a religious figure within Tibetan literature. Challenging the assumption that a spiritual biography necessarily must reflect a contemplative and quiet life, Holmes suggests that by placing the lives of such people within a broader social and political context we can sometimes see the workings of things such as legitimation strategies, teaching network, and constellations of disciples within what she calls a “cartography of legitimacy” (p. 191).

There is a theme that runs through this book to which the author continually returns and that offers the reader further new insights into the way in which a peripheral area may relate to a central area in terms of its own religious authority and its ability to foster new ideas. Holmes challenges the older idea that peripheral areas were merely “branch offices” of some central “head office,” and she argues convincingly that often the periphery in and of itself can become a new center. This tension between center and periphery is exemplified in the life of Shakya Shri and throughout chapter 2, where Holmes discusses the times in which Shakya Shri developed his curiously “non-charismatic charisma” within the fraught context of an eastern Tibet attempting to resolve its iden-
tity while stuck between several inimical and implacably opposed forces.

Demonstrating a perceptive awareness of current trends in Buddhist scholarship, the author engages in challenging discussion of the Tibetan term Rimé (usually mistranslated as “nonsectarian”) and claimed by some to be a sort of ecumenical “movement.” Instead she rejects the commonly held view that sectarianism was a root cause for Rimé’s existence and writes that those who were recognized as masters of a Rimé approach to Buddhism, including Shakya Shri himself, adopted it as an attitudinal approach to Buddhism in its widest possible form and that there was certainly no ideologically fixed “movement” as such behind its conception.

A brief list of topics covered by the author should give the reader of the review some idea of the ground covered in this book. These include the creation, fabrication, and the formation of the “optical illusion” of lineage; the place (or lack of it) of miracles in a biography; the art of trans-Himalayan fund raising; and the role of charisma in the creation of lineage. These fields are all brought to bear as the life of Shakya Shri is untwined. Here was no well-connected, ambitious, self-important figure. Rather we see a person with apparently little charismatic radiance yet an ability to inspire, one who was able to eschew lineage but who was well aware of his own teachers, a lama whose biography could be said to be almost an “anti-biography” in many respects.

The language style adopted by Holmes is well suited to this volume. She avoids an overly complex approach and delights in the whimsical. An example of this is in her term for the great number of rebirths of Jamyang Khyentsé in nineteenth-century Kham, which she refers to as a “gang of Khyentsés” (p. 152). Due to her sound connections to several of Shakya Shri’s living descendants, Holmes has shown herself well able to expand and add to the pioneering work of Elizabeth Stutchbury.[1]

On many occasions the narrative is enlivened by anecdote and memory, thereby adding to the sense that the life of Shakya Shri is still vital in both memory and practice in the Himalayas and beyond. What Holmes has presented us with is, in a manner of speaking, a thorough study of a highly unusual biography. The book is both of considerable value to scholars in the field as well as to those who study the “art” of religious biography.

Note


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