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Cécile Ducher’s recent volume offers not only new insights into the life of Mar-pa (1000?-1081?) but also goes some way toward presenting us with a new methodological approach to the complexities of the Tibetan biographical tradition. The author situates herself between the approach of Peter Alan Roberts, who, in his study of the life of Ras-chung-pa (1083–1161), sought to “present the successive parts of Rechungpa’s life through the stages of their narrative evolution in a succession of texts” and to establish “the complex relationship between the numerous variants” (p. 41), and Andrew Quintman, who seeks to trace “the literary transformations of a seminal Tibetan life story—that of Milarepa … from its fragmentary origins to the standard version published nearly four centuries later” (p. 41). Ducher seeks rather to “order the corpus of biographies … clearly and logically” and to compare “the information … gathered in order to investigate specific issues concerning the translator’s life” (p. 42). Her approach also seeks to examine who the authors were, what they were likely to have known at their time of writing, where they resided, what might have been their sources, and what their sectarian affiliations might have been. All these things have long been core to the understanding of Tibetan biographical material, but Ducher adds certain dimensions to them that make the book come alive.

The author likens her discovery process to that of building a house, from the siting of the structure to the excavations to laying the foundations to setting in place floors, load-bearing walls (in Ducher's analysis representing lengthy and authoritative biographies) and dividing walls (representing short biographies and works that are part of larger, broader texts), supporting timbers, beams and rafters, and finally capping off the process with impressive roof structures that are the outer, visible, public orientation of the work. Throughout the book the author carefully informs the reader about precisely which part of the house-building process her discoveries have taken her to, thereby assisting the reader in the extremely complex process she has undertaken. Her main goal is not to recreate a biography of Mar-pa, but rather to explore his biographical tradition. This building theme is helpfully illustrated in a chart on p. 44.

Ducher notes (p. 13) that after reading several versions of Mar-pa’s biography we might well feel that we actually know less than if we had just read that of the so-called authoritative version of gTsang-myon-He-ru-ka (1452–1507), which in itself is a problematic but outwardly plausible text. Despite this sensation, we still remain without firm dates and with a huge number of conflicting
datas in the various texts she examines for which ultimately offers no solution.

Mar-pa lived at a time in Tibet's history when Buddhism had started a process of decline, and Ducher observes that “no contemporary historical document attests to his (Mar-pa’s) existence, and what we know about him is limited to hagiographical accounts given by his spiritual heirs” (p. 23). She then examines a range of problems that arise in hagiographical writing, which she locates within the biographical tradition of Mar-pa. These areas of concern in hagiography range from the observations of Frank E. Reynolds, who discusses the myth-orientation of early scholars of the Theravāda tradition, to those of John McRae (pp. 33, expanded on pp. 237-38), who in three short epithetical statements gives Ducher a basis for her own observations on Mar-pa’s biographical tradition. McRae says, “1) Precision implies inaccuracy; 2) It’s not true, and therefore it’s more important; 3) Lineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong” (pp. 237–238).

The author’s analysis of the texts shows a keen awareness of the vagaries of those who created various versions of Mar-pa’s biography. Following the points of both authors cited above, she charts a path through the complexities of the many versions and contradictions, without necessarily attempting to suggest that the contradictions are part of some “dharmic ploy” or are simply the work of people with poor understanding. She makes an eminently sensible decision to simply chart and compare what textual knowledge we have about Mar-pa and to avoid positing the existence of a “best” version.

Ducher demonstrates the fallibility of the modern predilection for scanning hagiographies for historical data, and she observes that this activity tends to ignore a text’s literary qualities and structures, which have much to offer. In the case of Mar-pa, the various versions possess a specific context that to an extent influenced how the life was understood and recorded. She says that was partly determined by the prevailing political and other purposes, of which the authors needed to be aware. She also notes that “different waves of biographies … surge during periods of power vacuums, that is to say, when the various sects … are competing to supply their own transmissions … in a market where demand by disciples and patrons is strong” (pp. 33-34).

In her discussion of the importance of gTsang-myon He-ru-ka’s biography of Mar-pa (pp. 136-37), Ducher observes that it is certainly the one that “reads best.” According to one of the criteria raised by McRae, “Precision implies inaccuracy,” it might well be a “good read,” but it must also fall under some suspicion as being something of a congeries of the earlier works on Mar-pa’s life. For example, it seems probable that gTsang-myon He-ru-ka might well have invented certain of Mar-pa’s songs for narrative reasons, a point discussed by Ducher on p. 183. According to her house-building metaphor, gTsang-myon’s “standard work” is certainly “a roof visible from afar” (p. 145), but which roof is it exactly? It seems from the analysis that while it might well have been a glistening golden roof, the fact that it was largely ignored by other writers on Mar-pa after its publication suggests that it could be a mirage of a roof rather than a real roof.

On p. 165 Ducher presents an analysis of the Rosary of Crystal Gems (Nor bu'i chu shel gyi phreng ba) by ‘Be-lo Tshe-dbang-kun-khyab and the 8th Si-tu, Chos-kyi-'byung-gnas (1700–74), from the eighteenth century, and notes that the text uses details concerning Mar-pa vouchsafed to Tāranātha (1575–1634) by his Indian informant and guru, Buddhaguptanātha (c. sixteenth–seventeenth century), whom the young prelate met in 1590. Whether Tāranātha’s doubts concerning the oft-recorded incident concerning Rwa’s “murder” of Mar-pa’s son Darma-mdo-sde were genuine concerns based on Buddhaguptanātha’s stories or simply due to Tāranātha’s pride in his family ori-
gin in the Rwa lineage is a question requiring much more research.

This impressive and detailed work of scholarship contains a diplomatic edition and translation of Ngam-rdzong-ston-pa's (twelfth century) biography of Mar-pa as well as one attributed to rNgog mdo-sde. Ngam-rdzong's text contains details not found for example in the later version of gTsang-myon, and that of rNgog mdo-sde contains a number of lists and instructional details features, an aspect that Ducher thinks might be “the first occurrence of a trope that became widespread in later accounts, that of Mar-pa’s quest for Nāropa” (p. 241). If nothing else is taken away from this dense and provocative book, it makes it abundantly clear that biographies are living and malleable entities.

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