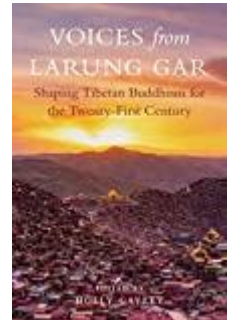


Holly Gayley, ed. *Voices from Larung Gar: Shaping Tibetan Buddhism for the Twenty-First Century*. Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, an imprint of Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2021. xxiii + 292 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-61180-894-0.



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Voices from Larung Gar, ably edited by Holly Gayley, offers a mosaic of translations and scholarly analyses of one of the most active religious sites of modern Tibet. The edited volume, which emerged from the 2017 American Academy of Religion panel of the same name, is comprised of ten chapters, each of which briefly introduces a current or former Larung teacher and provides a translation of an especially influential sermon or teaching. Both the translations and introductions are sufficiently robust that the volume can be utilized as either a reader of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist thought (in the locative as well as the ideological sense) or a collection of studies of Larung Gar as an institute.

Holly Gayley's concise and informative introduction acquaints readers not previously familiar with the institute to Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy. Larung Gar was founded as a retreat center in the early 1970s by the renowned teacher Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok (1933-2004), or Khenpo Jigphun. Khenpo Jigphun chose to stay in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution rather than

follow much of the Tibetan intelligentsia into exile, and he came to be seen by Tibetans as one of precious few links to the traditional Tibetan Buddhism destroyed to the point of extinction in the turbulent 1960s. Khenpo Jigphun actively cultivated this aura of authenticity, and soon his quiet retreat center attracted thousands of monks and nuns from all across Tibet in search of genuine religious instruction. The retreat center gradually systematized into a quasi-monastic establishment and was formally recognized as Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy in 1987 under the auspices of the Tenth Panchen Lama, Chokyi Gyaltzen (1938-89). Larung soon became the largest religious institution in Tibet and surely one of the largest in the world, at its peak housing almost twenty thousand monastics, with tens of thousands of additional laypeople and monastics inundating the Academy during the teaching season. Given the broader suppression of Tibetan religiosity by the Chinese government, it is obvious why a quasi-monastic institute championing a socially

oriented vision of Buddhism is worthy of scholarly attention.

Gayley's introduction provides a concise history of the Academy and identifies a striking paradox at the heart of the Larung mission and the volume itself: On the one hand, Larung Gar's authority and influence is derived from its perception as one of the last bastions of traditional Buddhism still present in Chinese-occupied Tibet—like Khenpo Jigphun himself, the existence of Larung allows Tibetans to imagine Buddhist and Tibetan identities that predate the cultural dismemberment of the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, teachers from Larung Gar have been instrumental in modernizing Tibetan Buddhist teachings and practices to remain relevant to the political and religious conditions of the twenty-first century. As Gayley asks in the introduction, "What can we learn about how Buddhists are maintaining the best of their tradition while adapting to changing circumstances and the demands of an increasingly globalized world? The voices from Tibet translated in this book offer compelling answers" (p. ix).

Gayley's conviction that the unique perspectives of the Larung teachers have something to offer both Buddhist practitioners and scholars of Buddhist modernism imbues the entire volume. Reviving a format that she previously used to great effect in *A Gathering of Brilliant Moons*, a similar reader-cum-scholastic overview of nonsectarian (*ris med*) discourse, each chapter of *Voices* consists of a translation of a work from a Larung teacher, e.g., Khenpo Jigphun or the current Larung abbots Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro, Khenpo Sodargye, and Metrul Tenzin Gyatso, that is discursively and socially situated by a translator.[1] I will treat each element in turn. The scholarly introductions are thoroughly researched, and, at only five to ten pages apiece, in many cases represent condensed versions of lengthier articles published elsewhere. But the contributors are well chosen, and it is undoubtedly valuable to corral

these treatments into a single volume instead of consulting disparate publications. Similarly, these scholarly introductions, especially when taken together with the volume's notes and reference list, amount to a comprehensive bibliography of current research on Larung Gar. It speaks to the expertise of the contributors that I often hoped for a deeper discussion or elucidation just as the introduction was ending, and I would have welcomed slightly longer articles.

But the trade-off in pages is certainly earned, as the Larung teachers themselves are the true stars of the volume, a testament to the contributors' skill in translation as much as their scholastic prowess. Although Buddhist modernism has already been extensively studied in a variety of historical contexts and theoretical lenses, the Larung teachers have been confronted with an especially complex blend of secularist discourses, and they must defend Buddhism on a variety of fronts—from the persecution of a formally atheistic Chinese government, from scientific critiques of religion associated with Western modernities, and from Tibetan intellectuals who view Buddhism as anti-modern and even responsible for leaving Tibet impotent before China. The responses to questions of modernity offered across these chapters reveal a discourse parallel to, but ultimately distinct from, that of Tibetan Buddhist teachers in exile whose writings are oriented primarily toward a liberal Western audience. Gayley says in the introduction that one of the goals of the volume is to publicize the writings and thought of various Larung teachers who are renowned in Tibet and China but have not received a Western audience (p. xi). It is a worthwhile aim, as the voices amplified here are fresh and likely to offer viewpoints different than those previously encountered by scholars of Buddhist modernities.

Indeed, one of the most welcome surprises of the volume is that *Voices from Larung Gar* is as useful to scholars of Buddhist modernism as to

Tibetologists specifically. Contributors tackle ethical and educational issues as diverse as the Buddhist response to vegetarianism (chapter 5), animal welfare (chapter 8), the preservation of Tibetan language and culture (chapters 1 and 2), and women's rights (chapters 9 and 10). Anyone looking to teach or research Buddhist modernism in non-Western or non-liberal milieus will find a number of useful sources in *Voices*.

There is little in this volume to criticize, but readers who are aware of Larung Gar primarily as a human rights issue or in the context of religious freedom might be surprised at the lack of discussion of the recent displacements and forced disrobings of Tibetan monastics, or of the Tibetan self-immolations offered in protest. Although individual authors obliquely address Chinese governmental policies, the volume lacks a systematic analysis of the relationship between Larung Gar and the Chinese government. In my estimation, this is undoubtedly the correct decision, as the safety of one's contributors and sources should supersede all other concerns, and a volume that seeks to amplify the voices of individuals currently housed at Larung is right not to jeopardize their safety through overtly political discussions. A political analysis of Larung Gar, though a worthy scholastic project, is the task of a different volume.

Even so, *Voices* still offers much to the reader interested in Buddhist negotiations of modernism in a contemporary Tibetan context. Holly Gayley continues to demonstrate the potential value of edited volumes as a gathering place of translations, a common venue for Buddhist and scholastic discussion alike. Larung Gar is not an easy place to conduct fieldwork, and the discursive analyses offered by the contributors add to the understanding of the current Tibetan religious *zeitgeist*. But the triumph of the volume is undoubtedly that the titular voices ring loudly and clearly through skillful translations; scholars of Tibet, Buddhist modernism, and secularization would do well to heed them.

Note

[1]. Holly Gayley and Joshua Schapiro, eds., *A Gathering of Brilliant Moons: Practice Advice from the Rimé Masters of Tibet* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017).

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