



Peter Schwieger. *Conflict in a Buddhist Society: Tibet under the Dalai Lamas.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021. Illustrations. 352 pp. \$72.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-8848-0.

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General Systems Theory Applied to Tibetan History

In *Conflict in a Buddhist Society*, Peter Schwieger embarks on the difficult, and somewhat daring, endeavor of applying the methods and ideas of systems theory—as conceived by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927-98)—as a means of interpretation of Tibetan history, culture, and society during the Ganden Phodrang era (1642-1959). The author's goal is twofold. First, he seeks to examine Tibetan Buddhist society under an innovative lens, offering analytic perspectives to tackle “research questions of general relevance,” in this specific case about how the Tibetan society of this period dealt with conflicts (p. ix). Second, he aims to verify the applicability of Luhmann's theories—ostensibly universal—to the case of Tibet. The result is a book that, by offering a comprehensive view of Tibetan history and culture, identifies cardinal, recurring cultural paradigms without getting mired in a bramble of minor details, reveals brilliant insights on macro-aspects of traditional Tibet, and contributes original interpretive angles for reading Tibetan history. At the same time, however, the prevalence of theoretical discourses can slow the flow of reading, particularly for those who are not familiar with Luhmann's philosophy, its specialized terminology, and its often involved logic and hermetic language. Instances are too numerous to quote, and

Luhmann's definition of “memory” as “a function in constant but only present use that tests all incipient operations for consistency with what the system constructs as reality” will suffice (p. 9). With this type of obscure prose, it is understandable that the author's attempt to explain in condensed form Luhmann's complex ideas (mainly in the introduction, although various other concepts are introduced throughout the book, such as “cultivated semantics,” “unity of difference,” etc.) requires a considerable effort on the part of the reader.

For those who are not familiar with it, general systems theory arose in the mid-twentieth century out of a desire to create a model that could be used to encompass and describe all the different disciplines in existence, from the technical to the social sciences. Its principles were first developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901-72) and successively finessed for the discipline of sociology by Talcott Parsons (1902-79), and later by his pupil, Luhmann himself. The author of *Conflict in a Buddhist Society* is perceptibly at ease with Luhmann's notoriously intricate discourse and can add to the investigation the benefit of his experience as co-director of “Social History of Tibetan Societies” (<https://www.tibetanhistory.net>), a pro-

ject funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) and the German Research Council (DFG), which examines, among other things, how the legal, fiscal, and administrative structures of the Ganden Phodrang government affected the various layers of society and the relations between them. The composite nature of this project has clearly informed the scope of this book, which is divided into nine thematic chapters—bookended by an introduction and conclusion—illustrating the multiple forms of conflict and dispute resolution of the Tibetan Buddhist experience. The first chapter, “History and Memory,” elucidates how the memory of past events has affected the course of history. It includes an important section on writing, focusing on the class of people that had access to literacy and their choices in terms of what to write, and how this particular selection affected the worldview of an entire society. Chapter 2, “Domination,” observes the mechanisms used to integrate incompatible differences within Tibetan society in order to impose authority, while chapter 3, “Hierarchy,” looks in detail at the way the rather rigid hierarchical structure of the Ganden Phodrang period tended to reduce instances of intra-societal conflict. In the fourth chapter, “Center, Periphery, and Boundary,” the emphasis is on delimiting the extent of Tibetan society and describing the various relationships between its core and periphery. “Semantics” (chapter 5) examines the way conflict was conceived and recognized, while “Morality and Ethics” (chapter 6) centers on the interrelation between conflict and ethical systems of values. “Ritual” (chapter 7) and “Law” (chapter 8) examine the conflict-resolution function explicated by these two practices. Finally, in “War” (chapter 9), Schwiieger reflects on the various wars fought by the Ganden Phodrang, in an effort to understand at which point and for which reasons conflict could not be avoided further.

In many respects, this book is an ideal companion to Schwiieger’s *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China* (2015). Both volumes pay special

attention to the analysis of official archival material, but they do so with a different degree of perspective. While the earlier publication concentrates on the way these sources reflect the political history of Tibet during the Ganden Phodrang period, this new monograph ponders more deeply on the broader themes that had been only broached in the previous volume. Moreover, by combining a rigorous analysis of administrative sources through the examination lens provided by Luhmann’s theories and directing its attention to the Ganden Phodrang period without losing sight of connections to earlier or later periods of Tibetan history, it paints a panoramic view that allows the identification of major recurring traits through the centuries. Indeed, *Conflict in a Buddhist Society* does not limit its purview to the three hundred-odd years of the Ganden Phodrang period but offers compelling points on aspects of Tibetan culture that have proved recurring throughout the ages, from the era of the Tibetan Empire (seventh-ninth centuries) to the demise of the Tibetan Buddhist society at the hand of the People’s Liberation Army in the mid-twentieth century.

Among these, I would particularly highlight the broader issue of the conflict for primacy between secular and religious authority, which is developed in detail in the first two thematic chapters (“History and Memory” and “Domination”) but elements of which are interwoven throughout the book. The question of which of these two forms of authority should prevail upon the other is a persistent one in Tibetan history. As the Tibetan clergy acquired more and more temporal authority, secular undertakings became increasingly subordinate to religious goals, and especially so under the Gelukpa administration, which envisioned the Ganden Phodrang government as a salvific project aimed at extinguishing suffering not only for the inhabitants of Tibet but also for neighboring people in Inner and East Asia. At the same time, partnership with foreign secular authorities, such as the Mongols and later the Qing Empire, undertaken for protection and material

support, was not seen as problematic as long as they were Buddhist and operated as guardians of the Dharma. However, with the establishment of the Qing protectorate (1720), the enduring ambiguity of the borders between religious and imperial authority and the lack of definite spheres of primacy led to a dangerous game of deception and dissimulation unwittingly played by the religious authorities in their relations with the Qing imperial order. To avoid open conflict, Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs pretended to assuage the emperor's orders but in truth operated completely independently, as the emperor's measures were hardly implemented. With this reasoning, much abridged and simplified here, but expanded and highly nu-

anced in Schwieger's monograph, we have one of the clearest and least partisan explanations of the historical reasons for the current predicament of the Tibetan nation, which unwittingly sought and accepted foreign protection, without possibly being able to imagine its future consequences.

In brief, *Conflict in a Buddhist Society* can be highly recommended for specialists of Tibet, since the breadth and depth of its scope goes well beyond the mere category of "conflict" and encompasses history, religion, philosophy, social studies, politics, and law, not only within the narrower temporal confines of the Ganden Phodrang period but also through a wide-ranging vision that finds pertinent examples in all other historical periods.

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