



Ester Bianchi, Weirong Shen, eds. *Sino-Tibetan Buddhism across the Ages*. Leiden: Brill, 2021. xiv + 378 pp. \$156.00, e-book, ISBN 978-90-04-46837-5.

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Published on H-Buddhism (January, 2022)

Commissioned by Lucia Galli

Esther Bianchi's and Weirong Shen's 2021 edited book, *Sino-Tibetan Buddhism across the Ages* explores the long history of Sino-Tibetan interactions through the medium of Buddhism in various social, cultural, economic, and political forms. The book is divided into three parts: "Early Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Encounters," "Tibetan Tantra in the Modern World," and "Modern Forms of Sino-Tibetan Hybridity." These three sections aptly reflect the title of the book, revealing both the significant continuities and changes in Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interaction from the Tang Dynasty (618-907) through to the twenty-first century. Each of these sections and the contributions within them are of high quality, offering a wealth of insightful research and observations on both the historical and contemporary context of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interaction.

The first section in particular, which explores early Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interaction and is largely reliant on Chinese sources such as those discovered at Dunhuang (786-848), will likely be of significance for non-Chinese readers interested in Tibetan Buddhism in China during the early period. Weirong Shen's excellent chapter on the Samye (Tib. bSam yas) debate, for example, provides many insights into how and why the

teachings and figure of the Chinese monk Hvasang Mahāyāna have been marginalized and portrayed as heretical in Tibetan historiography, in comparison to earlier documentation from Dunhuang and elsewhere suggesting that Chan Buddhism in fact had greater influence in Tibetan society than previously thought. Shen's chapter further contextualizes the Samye debate against the backdrop of some other early Chinese influences such as the importation of Chinese astrology and astronomical divination books and Confucian classics during the Tang Dynasty. Similarly, Linhui Zhang's chapter on Sinitic iconography being appropriated in the Tibetan context provides the reader with insight into the wide cultural field from which Tibetan Buddhism has appropriated as it has developed. Penghao Sun's chapter explores economic connections between China and Tibet through an examination of a main thoroughfare between the two territories, the network centers formed by Amdo Buddhist communities and the interconnectivity resulting from these as exemplified in the stories of Gyi ljang's life and later historical writings such as Cha gan's 1304 history. This economic activity provides a backdrop for the Tanguts' adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism. This first section on early Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interaction concludes with Fan Zhang's fascinating

chapter on imperial steles in Lhasa, including the Smallpox Stone Stele of 1794, the Kundeling Stone Stele of 1794, and the Gurkha Edict Stone Stele of 1793 by the Qianlong emperor. Zhang examines in considerable detail the imperial rationale for erecting these steles, their reception and translation by Tibetans, and the reception of their message by the Tibetan masses. Of particular interest to me was the way in which Confucian and Tibetan Buddhist ideals were brought into contrast in the Chinese and Tibetan translations engraved on these steles; for example, we learn of imperial efforts to reform Tibetan funerary and quarantine practices during the outbreak of smallpox based on Confucian ideals of familial piety, while Tibetans from their perspective saw their own quarantine and funerary practices as compassionate. Zhang also explores the ways in which Confucian terms such as the “Way” (道, *Dao*) and “Heaven” (天, *Tian*) were Buddhicized in the Tibetan translations, and how from the mid-eighteenth century the Qianlong emperor, together with Tibetan elites, sought to bring Manchu identity to the fore and to minimize Confucian cultural influence. Zhang further examines the Tibetan reception of Chinese cultural ideas, such as in the Tibetan interpretation of the Qing Guandi Temple and Longevity Temple in Lhasa. The chapter is therefore well contextualized from Tibetan and Chinese perspectives, showing how Sino-Tibetan religious hybridity was negotiated and interpreted differently within Chinese and Tibetan contexts.

The next section, “Tibetan Tantra in the Modern World,” is similarly insightful, providing an outline of Sinitic understandings, reception, and practice of Tibetan Buddhism in the mid-1800s through to the early twentieth century. Urs App’s chapter on Blavatsky’s sourcing of “Tibetan” materials and contrasting Western opinions provides a fascinating unwrapping of the lineage of early modern Western interest in Tantrism and Tibetan Buddhism, the imagining of which has some striking similarities with current Han Chinese imaginings of the same. This is due, it seems, to inadvert-

ent borrowing of ideas inherited from this earlier period in current popular Chinese writings on Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, and Tantrism in general. Martino Dibeltulo Concu’s chapter on the lineage of Lü Cheng’s philological method from late Qing Chinese, Japanese, and later Western sources situates the modern Chinese understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and Tantrism in relation to Tibetan Buddhism. Esther Bianchi’s chapter continues the contextualization of Tibetan Buddhism in modern China with an examination of Nenghai’s (能海, 1886-1967) emphasis on the combination of Vinaya and Tantra, sourced from both the Tibetan Gelugpa school under Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) and the wider revitalization of Chinese Buddhism that was occurring during Nenghai’s time. Wei Wu explores Nenghai’s contributions to Sino-Tibetan Buddhism from another angle, examining how he used the commentary of the *Ornament of Realization* to make the Perfection of Wisdom corpus approachable and understandable to his Chinese followers. Alison Jones’s ethnographic research in the next chapter brings the reader forward to the twenty-first century, with an examination of how Tibetan Buddhism has been incorporated into the practices of Han Chinese in Nanjing who are not specifically looking for Tibetan Buddhism—their experiences with the Tibetan tradition being “accidental” in the majority of cases, and driven by availability. Her chapter points to the ubiquitous nature of Tibetan Buddhist rituals and materials in urban China, from which religious practitioners appropriate without necessarily becoming Tibetan Buddhists themselves. Isabelle Charleux’s final chapter on Tibeto-Mongol and Chinese Buddhism in present-day Hohhot brings into focus some of the tensions as well as interaction that are at play in the town between Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism, demonstrating, in the contemporary context—as Shen’s chapter does in the historical context—that Sino-Tibetan Buddhist hybridity has not always been of a celebratory nature, with real friction intermittently surfacing. This is, of course, common, as seen from any num-

ber of hybrid religious examples from around the world, and these authors do well in pointing out that hybridity is not only a celebration of religious harmony and exchange, but instead includes conflicting perspectives and attempts to distance or align these perspectives.

The editors and authors are to be congratulated on this comprehensive work. There are, however, a few points which I think the editors and authors may have considered further. First, the definition of what is meant by “Sino” is never clearly pointed out, but the impression throughout the book is that the term refers to ethnic Han Chinese religious and cultural influence. The editors note that the term “Sino-Tibetan Buddhism” (*HanZang fojiao*, 漢藏佛教) used throughout the book is a relatively new term inherited from Republican China (1911-49), when “Sino-Tibetan Buddhist studies” (*HanZang foxue*, 漢藏佛學) became a field of study. However, as is clear from several chapters, Manchu, Tangut, and Mongolian religious and cultural interactions with Tibetan Buddhism have been as much or more of a focus than Han Chinese interactions with the tradition. Presumably the authors equate “Sino” with “Sinitic”—that is, Chinese as well as Chinese-influenced traditions rather than specifically Han Chinese—but this probably requires more nuanced qualification. Another important point that I think is not sufficiently touched upon is the Chinese state’s involvement in Tibetan Buddhist affairs, particularly in the current context. For example, the deliberate recent introduction of Sinicized Buddhist works in Tibetan monasteries and, even more recently, Xi Jinping’s directive to have Tibetan monastics learn their own tradition in the Chinese language instead of Tibetan are important points to consider. Certainly the political climate does not need to take center stage, but it surely cannot be ignored either, given the ongoing implications for how Tibetan Buddhism will continue to be received and practiced both within Tibet itself and the wider Chinese cultural context. Tied to this point, the book as a whole tends to celebrate Sino-

Tibetan religious hybridity, without looking at the real tensions which were and especially now are present due to the political climate. And perhaps also related to this point, some of the opening chapters of the book tend to overly emphasize Chinese cultural contributions to Tibetan Buddhism as the reason for its early advancement, while paying little attention to Indian, Nepalese, and even Bengali contributions. That is, one is left with the impression at times that everything progressive and rich about Tibetan culture has roots in the more “civilized” culture of China, when in fact China was one of several important sources for Tibetan culture, religion, and civilization.

In all, this book will be of great value to scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism, and especially those with an interest in Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interactions. It is highly readable and therefore will also be useful to a less academic readership interested in Asian religion in general and Sino-Tibetan religion in historical and current contexts in particular.

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Citation: Joshua Esler. Review of Bianchi, Ester; Shen, Weirong, eds. *Sino-Tibetan Buddhism across the Ages*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. January, 2022.

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