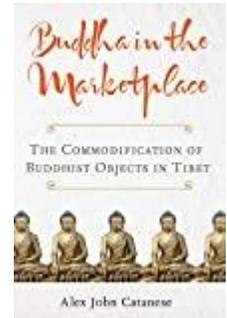


Alex John Catanese. *Buddha in the Marketplace: The Commodification of Buddhist Objects in Tibet (Traditions and Transformations in Tibetan Buddhism).* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019. 334 pp. \$39.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-8139-4318-3.



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The phenomenon of religious commodification across all religious traditions has become a subject of scholarly attention in recent years. Inquiries concerning the convergence of religion and market not only reveal certain tensions and contradictions between religious and market values but also uncover avenues of investigation in our contemporary religious and social life. As might be expected, Buddhist and Tibetan studies are also witnessing a growing interest in the study of the entanglement of Buddhism and business. *Buddha in the Marketplace* dates the commodification of religious objects by Tibetans to the 1980s, to the post-Cultural Revolution reforms period (*Ch. gaige kaifang*) when China officially and selectively embraced a market economy. Through a combination of textual, historical, and ethnographic investigation, Alex John Catanese argues that it was a response to both the introduction of free-market capitalism in China and the socioeconomic and political circumstances resulting from particular policies of the Chinese Communist Party that led to the commodification of religious

objects. Structured in seven chapters preceded by an introduction, Catanese's study is built upon a main theoretical framework in which several concepts from Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986) are skillfully employed.

Chapter 1 wades through a wide range of Indian and Chinese Buddhist texts to present the background of doctrinal positions on the sale of religious objects. Analyzing various texts from the sutra and Vinaya literature, the author offers numerous examples of scriptural evidence to illustrate how the selling or making of Buddha images for material gain is likened to ingesting poison. According to the author, there were two kinds of proscriptions against selling Buddhist objects that circulated in India and China. The first kind of proscriptive statements sought to prohibit the sale of monastic property, and the second type condemned the sale of such objects as a form of wrong livelihood. Catanese argues that it is the second type of proscriptive statements and its

variations that came to dominate Tibetan Buddhist literature.

Chapter 2 delves into different genres of Tibetan Buddhist literature—from stages of the path (Tib. *lam rim*) and refuge precepts (*skyabs 'gro*) literature to hagiographies (*rnam thar*) and commentaries—from as early as the eleventh century to contemporary works. Catanese provides many examples of how the works of influential Tibetan Buddhist figures like Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), Patrul Rinpoche (Dpal sprul rin po che, a.k.a. O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po, 1808-87), and Jigme Lingpa ('Jigs med gling pa, 1730-98) all prohibited buying, selling, or pawning religious objects (such as scriptures, ritual instruments, etc.) for material gain. Such activities were seen not only as karmically negative and sinful (*sdig pa*), but also as “wrong livelihood” (*log 'tsho*). The popular narrative of Kyergangpa (Skyer sgang pa chos kyi seng ge, 1154-1217) from Ngulchu Dharmabhadra (Dngul chu dharma bhadra, 1772-1851) illustrates how the karmic effects of participation in such unwholesome activities can even be *contagious*. Here, the author grapples with two interrelated theological concepts—*lu* (*blu* or *glud*, “to buy off, ransom, or redeem,” applied in an honorific sense to the buying and selling of religious goods) and *kor* (*dkor*, “wealth,” commonly used to indicate a mishandling of religious funds or faith offerings)—which could offer much to the investigation of Tibetan Buddhist attitudes toward the use or sale of religious objects. I shall comment on this in my concluding remarks.

Chapter 3 turns to the historical study of the nature and practice of the exchange of Buddhist objects in Tibet before the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Drawing on Appadurai's idea that commodities are primarily social in nature and that they can be regulated under specific social conditions, Catanese claims that religious commodification did not take place in Tibet before the Cultural Revolution. Relying on Tibetan narratives as well as accounts of foreign visitors, he argues that al-

though commissioning of Buddhist objects (such as thangkas, statues, scriptures, etc.) existed, pragmatic reasons and religious principles behind the process and tradition of commissioning resisted commodification. Thus, religious objects did not circulate as commodities but as socially regulated and religiously sanctioned items. When it comes to the circulation of religious texts, the author struggles to refute previous scholarship that maintains them to have been commodities for centuries. Catanese contends that such characterizations ignore the distinction between religious objects and mundane commodities; according to his view, religious objects were neither perceived as commodities nor were they exchanged like mundane goods like salt or wool. Arguing that it was the Chinese invasion and the Cultural Revolution that effectively altered the “commodity candidacy” and disrupted the patterns of exchange for Tibetan Buddhist objects, Catanese explores what Appadurai refers to as the “commodity context,” or the social, economic, and political conditions that assisted and encouraged their commodification in the next two chapters.

Drawing largely on his fieldwork in Rebgong, chapter 4 examines the evolution and dynamics of the market in Tibetan Buddhist objects in Amdo and finds that Tibetans are competing in a market that is dominated by Chinese and Muslim entrepreneurs. Tibetans remain economically marginalized in the business and even production of their own religious objects. While the Chinese government promoted thangka painting and encouraged other forms of cultural production, it also contributed to the commercialization and commodification of religious objects by investing in the creation of tourism as a development strategy.

In chapter 5, Catanese deals more explicitly with the sociopolitical context of commodification to elucidate the commodity context of Tibetan religious objects and their entrance into “new regimes of value” (p. 166). He argues that Tibetan participation in the market of Buddhist objects

was primarily prompted by the state's policy and promotion of ethnic tourism as a development strategy. In his line of reasoning, it was the government's control over Tibetan monasticism and monastic institutions that compelled the monasteries to contribute to economic development by exploring and developing markets for religious and cultural heritage. While Catanese considers the development of ethnic tourism and the accompanying state policies as the principal cause of religious commodification, he also perceives Tibetan participation in this market as both a reaction to the misappropriation of Tibetan Buddhist religious goods by non-Tibetan merchants and entrepreneurs and a desire to correct the ways of dealing with religious objects. This seems to be an avenue where Catanese could have unloaded some of the weight given to the victimhood narrative and restored a measure of Tibetan agency. Instead, it is development discourse and policies that propelled the commercialization of ethnic and cultural heritage that the author sees as responsible for the creation of a "context of encouragement" in which Tibetans have no choice but to participate for economic survival.

Chapter 6 analyzes how Tibetan painters, merchants, and monks make sense of these activities and religious proscriptions associated with the selling and pawning of religious objects. Relying primarily on his ethnographic work in Rebgong, Catanese pays special attention to the notion of *lu* to explore how painters, merchants, and monks made sense of, justified, or contested the activity of selling religious objects as a source of livelihood. Speaking with monks, painters, and merchants, Catanese finds out that the notion of *lu* requires a virtuous intention to alleviate the suffering of sentient beings, and the idea that one is selling merely one's time and labor, not the object itself. The insistence on the use of the term *lu* by people involved in this commerce indicates that, despite open and large-scale commodification, the language or rhetoric of exchange has not changed and proscriptions against the sale of religious ob-

jects continue to influence their religious lives in a free-market economy. From a sociological perspective, this chapter is the most interesting of the whole volume and a potentially productive arena for further investigating contemporary Tibetan religious and social life.

The last chapter tackles the consequences brought about by the transformation of religious objects from their historical status as "market-inalienable" and protected items into seemingly mundane and saleable goods. With the increasing exoticization of Tibetan culture in tourism literature and discourse, the commodification of Buddhist objects has become a highly lucrative enterprise for Tibetans, as showed by the increase in the salary of a craftsman in Rebkong, now more than thrice the income of an average farmer or herder in the region. Despite its financial prospects, there is also a sense that since nowadays religious objects like thangkhas are sold without proper consecration rituals, their quality and spiritual power have been diminished, if not desacralized. Notwithstanding this resemblance of resistance to religious commodification, Catanese contends that on the whole what we are witnessing is a shift in the way in which normative and historical views are articulated and understood, a change that has led a previously proscribed activity to be transformed into an acceptable livelihood. He maintains this transformation or diversion in the cultural and moral boundaries of Tibetans to be a result of their introduction to the free-market economy.

Given the vast temporal and thematic scope of the study, there is much to admire about *Buddha in the Marketplace*. But inevitably, there are also areas where it comes across as inadequately engaged or insufficiently argued. The absence of a concluding chapter and the lack of conversation across the chapters leave the reader somewhat perplexed. A concluding section would have allowed the author to recapitulate the findings and reinforce his arguments. One of the main presup-

positions Catanese makes is that commodification of Buddhist objects in Tibet had to go through the necessary steps of the cultural and political crisis of the Cultural Revolution and exposure to Western-style capitalism. Catanese insists on this periodization at the cost of overlooking obvious examples of religious commodification in Tibet prior to these events. For instance, we know from the accounts of Ekai Kawaguchi (1866-1945) that religious books were sold in bookstalls in Lhasa in the early twentieth century, but curiously, Catanese ignores such accounts by saying that “attitudes toward those who made their livelihood from such activities remained critical” (p. 99). There seems to be a confusion of two different temporalities: a temporality of attitudes toward religious commodification and one of actual commodification of religious goods. This attitude still persists today despite the surge in the commodification of religious objects. Part of the problem seems to stem from the desire to apply Appadurai’s concept of “diversion” to explain the movement of Tibetan religious objects from their sacred and protected status to mundane and saleable goods as engendered by the disruption and crisis of the Cultural Revolution.

Catanese recognizes the importance of the notion of *lu*, which he explores at length in chapter 6, but falls short of advancing the concept as an analytical lens for both probing into religious commodification in the recent decades and analyzing how it differs from the attitude toward religious goods prior to the Cultural Revolution. That seems to be a potentially more productive way of historicizing religious commodification in Tibet than the framework employed. Admittedly, the persistence of the idea of *lu* and its usage in contemporary Tibet works against his claim of a rupture or diversion brought about by Cultural Revolution. Another closely related concept, sadly relegated to a long footnote, is that of *kor*, translated by the author as “mishandling of religious funds or faith offerings” (p. 249). It seems that an opportunity for an in-depth engagement with these con-

cepts for a better understanding of the changes and continuities of religious commodification in Tibet has been sidelined in favor of an attractive theoretical model. Lastly, the author appears to have mysteriously left out of his study a crucial genre of literature, that of monastic constitutions, or *chayik (bca’ yig)*. These are an important genre of sources for the present work as they include doctrinally informed guidelines and rules that identify, delineate, and prohibit practices associated with the transaction of religious objects and monastic property. Despite these shortcomings, *Buddha in the Marketplace* is a much-needed and welcome addition to this emerging field of inquiry for anyone interested in contemporary Tibet, sociology of religion, and Buddhist studies.

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