Schrempf, Mona (ed.) 2007, *Soundings in Tibetan Medicine: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives, PLATS 2003: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, Oxford, 2003. Series Editors: Henk Blezer, Alex McKay and Charles Ramble, Leiden and Boston: Brill. Pp. 449. €85. ISBN 9789004155503

This is a collection of edited papers which were presented at the medicine panel of the 2003 International Association of Tibetan Studies conference at Oxford. That it contains both historical and anthropological papers serves as an important methodological position. This position, briefly presented by Schrempf in her introduction, stipulates that history and anthropology may inform each other in various fruitful ways, which they do indeed in this volume.

That historical research is essential for anthropological studies is almost taken for granted. What is often not taken for granted is the importance of anthropological research for historians of medicine. The themes that arise in this volume ought to convince those who have not been convinced yet: the inherent impossibility to speak of a certain (Tibetan, Chinese, etc.) monolithic 'medical tradition', but rather the necessity to retain awareness of diversities arising due to relations between centre and periphery; political and religious agendas, processes of institutionalisation etc., all of which are generally much more apparent in anthropological than historical research, but are equally important in the latter.

The book is divided into four parts arranged in a sort of a flash-back. Part one examines the impacts of modernity in Tibet, its borderlands and in exile. Alex McKay provides an overview of Tibet's encounter with biomedicine during the first half of the twentieth century and analyses its failure to institutionalise a modern medical system. Following the Younghusband's mission in 1903, the British sought to use biomedicine as a means to enhance the British imperial project, establishing the first biomedical hospital in Gyantse in 1904. McKay notes that the main objection to biomedicine came from monastic powers, which had a great economic and socio-political interest in the Tibetan medical system. What emerges from his analysis of the interaction between biomedicine and traditional Tibetan medical systems in its early days is that often the perception of whether these two systems are compatible or not is not necessarily a medical one, but rather a political and economic one (obviously, these two are intertwined).

Similar issues are also at play 100 years later in the Lhasa Mentsikhang, as discussed by Vincanne Adams, who analyses the processes of 'integrating medicine'. Set around the political agenda of stripping out any features which might be taken for being Buddhist, or even 'vague', she analyses the process in which Tibetan medicine is being 'translated' into scientific jargon. This certainly has important economic implications on clinical research, and the commercialisation of Tibetan medicine. As Adams mentions, these processes of adaptation are comparable to what we know of the history of Tibetan medicine. This has been, from its very inception, an integrative medicine, incorporating elements from a wide variety of different systems.

Audrey Prost deals with the way the Dharamsala Mentsikhang has been reinterpreting traditional Tibetan medical concepts like *'bu* and *srin bu* in line with biomedical concepts, and examines the way in which many illnesses of the exiled community in India have been constructed as 'diseases of place', a subject of prominent concern within popular discourse on illness among the exiled community. She argues that the ability to identify and treat diseases of exile is at the core of the Dharamsala Mentsikhang's success as a health care provider in India. She notes the different influences at play with respect to the re-interpretation of traditional concepts in the Tibetan exile community in India, the TAR and globally. The differences in the ways Tibetan medicine is changing in these three contexts is a key issue that emerges from the overall picture presented by this volume. The 'exilic condition', described by Prost as having a crucial impact on both theory and practice of Tibetan medicine in India, is obviously significantly different from that of Lhasa. Also, with the Dalai Lama's promotion of Tibetan medicine as a system of public health care, the

process of negotiating the role of Buddhism within Tibetan medicine is fundamentally different from that which is happening at the Lhasa Mentsikhang.

Another aspect of integration, that between biomedicine and Sherpa traditional perceptions of health and illness, is discussed by Susan Heydon in her article dealing with the Khunde hospital set up by Sir Edmund Hillary at Khumbu (Nepal) in the 1960s. The hospital has been viewed by Sherpas as only one of multiple medical choices, mostly preferring other, traditional treatments over biomedical ones. Within this overall context, Heydon provides illuminating examples of how the overseas volunteers at the Khunde hospital have opted to integrate local perceptions into their biomedical practice in order to make it more 'palatable' for local Sherpas.

Part two of the book investigates the transmission and professionalisation of medical knowledge and its role in Tibetan identity construction. Mona Schrempf, exploring the complexity of the local networks of Bon lineage doctors in two rural counties of Nagchu, discusses some key issues in the tension between centre and periphery, such as the different forms of education (master apprenticeship vs. centrally-governed medical education; for instance, the Mentsikhang); various economic factors (local, hand-picked production of medicines vs. factory production). She raises the important issue of redefining Tibetan medicine's links with religion, noting how the religion-medicine delineation has a significant socio-political component. Schrempf's article also raises important issues of what might be termed as medical sustainability: the importance of the survival of rural lineage doctors as the only medical treatment accessible, affordable and reliable in rural areas. Her study also offers glimpses into processes of standardisation of medical practices—the marginalisation of certain practices in the centre, whilst they are upheld in the rural (for example, the case of *thur ma*).

Sienna Craig, like Schrempf, deals with aspects of transformation which current instruction is presently undergoing, focusing on how and why Tibetan medical education is undergoing changes in Nepal and the TAR. Craig discusses the various factors which influence these changes, such as the role of the state and other funding bodies in shaping curricula, the changing relationships with religion and the process of negotiating its relationship with bio-medicine. Interesting points of differences arise in the comparison of Nepal and the TAR. All the factors of changes she discusses contribute, in different ways, to what Craig terms as the 'crisis in confidence' in *gso ba rig pa*—the way by which Tibetan medicine is viewed through the lens of biomedical concepts by practitioners and patients as well as by funding agencies—both state and NGOs.

A further aspect of the crisis, the financial one, is discussed by Florian Besch, presenting a village-based focus on 'amchi-medicine' in the western Himalayan valley of Spiti, and investigating socio-economic changes in the lives and work of medical practitioners. Besch explores the relatively new situation of rural amchi medicine—stripped from its monopolised position and faced with the demise of traditional reciprocal exchanges, rural amchis find themselves in a new economic set-up. Under these new circumstances, a more altruistic attitude towards their patients, which should be central to amchi practice, has at present lost much of its place in increasingly market economy-oriented medical practice. These aspects are intertwined with the problems amchi medicine has been facing since the 1960s, when free biomedicine was introduced. All this has led to a vicious cycle in which amchis increasingly could not earn any money from their medical practice, and thus lost the ability to find and prepare high quality medicines, hence reducing the number of potential patients. Analysing the extremely precarious situation of local medical knowledge, Besch concludes that it is only through the involvement of NGOs—as was the case with Ladakh, Nepal and Dharamsala—that traditional doctors in Spiti can continue to sustain local knowledge of medicinal plants and provide high-quality local medical care.

The theme of knowledge-loss in the domain of medicinal uses of plants is one of the main issues of Denise Glover's paper. Assessing medical knowledge at the household level in Zhongdian (newly named: Shangrila!) County, Glover suggests that the discourse of plant

knowledge-loss has been predominantly presented by her interviews as directly linked with the availability of prepared medicines. For instance, interviewees presented a clear causal link between the availability of prepared medicine and professional medical services—and the loss of knowledge of medicinal plants at the household level.

Part three of the book traces connections between various body images and practices and deals with the ways in which physical and mental illnesses are understood. Barbara Gerke deals with beliefs and practices of the *bla* (subtle life essence), discussing its multiple meanings both in medical and in ritual contexts, as well as the ways in which these two contexts inter-connect. She analyses the ways in which *bla* practices relate to multiple levels: the individual body, the social sphere and the spiritual one, all of which impact upon the way *bla* ought to be approached in anthropological perspectives. Analysing two ethnographic examples of *bla* rituals among the Yolmowa and the Tamang in Nepal, she discusses the way *bla* pervades its different spheres of meaning. Thus, she argues, when analysing the *bla*, it is necessary to take into account the multiplicity of its layers—including its shamanic and Buddhist aspects.

A fascinating example of a similar methodological approach put into practice is Geoffrey Samuel's contribution. Samuel considers which types of illnesses are explained as caused by spirits, basing himself both on the *rGyud bzhi* and ethnographic accounts among Tibetans in Dalhousie (north India). Distinguishing between illnesses of a spirit origin which originate from an Indian tradition, and those which seem to be Tibetan (such as the *gza'*), his fieldwork showed that cases of the latter were separate from medical practice, both in diagnosis and treatment. He then provides an illuminating analysis of spirit-derived illnesses from a number of more profound levels of meanings. Here, like in some of the other contributions in this volume, Tibetan medicine is analysed as a reflection of the current situation of the exiled Tibetan community.

Eric Jacobson is able to occupy a rare position in the scholarship of Tibetan medicine as he is versed both in biomedicine and in Tibetan medicine. Here he discusses the general category of 'wind illnesses' (*rlung gyi nad*), and particularly of 'life-wind illnesses', as they appear in the *rGyud bzhi*, as they are practised in Tibetan medical clinics in Darjeeling and Gangtok, and as they are treated in everyday lay usage. His research goes beyond the comparison, managing to analyse these different perspectives in a way that illuminates each other.

Colin Millard, who has studied approaches to mental illness within a clinic of Tibetan medicine in the UK (Tara Institute) and in a Tibetan medical school in Dhorpatan (Nepal), addresses some of the major debates in trans-cultural psychiatric studies. He analyses the differences between the way that mental illnesses are constructed by patients in these two settings, explaining the differences in fundamental cultural divergences between the two cultures.

Understandably, bridging the gap between western and Tibetan notions is perhaps the most re-occurring theme in this collection. While most contributions deal with some theoretical aspect of this gap, the contribution by Alejandro Chaoul—a version of which was published in *Asian Medicine* (Yoga Issue, vol. 3, no. 1, 2007)—is a study of a practical application: using a form of Bon yogic practices (*'phrul 'khor*) within a context of western Complementary and Integrative Medicine (CIM) for cancer patients. Research into the efficacy of Tibetan medicine (and indeed any other type of CIM) within western biomedical contexts entails enormous difficulties, primarily in methodology, but even more crucially in funding. Therefore the fact that this research even happened—let alone its positive results—is a laudable achievement, worthy of further reflection.

Part four of the book—roughly a quarter of the total—deals with the history of Tibetan medicine. Dan Martin presents the first study of an unstudied medical history. This unpublished manuscript by Che-rje is reputedly the first medical history (Martin dates it to 1204 CE) and is a highly important source for the history of early Tibetan medicine for many reasons—one of which is that it does not mention the *rGyud bzhi*. It presents the first account of what is later

found in many versions of Tibetan medical histories—of the Seven Schools (*lugs bdun*)—and contains important clues to be followed on the influence of foreign medicine on early Tibetan medicine.

Zhen Yan and Cai Jingfeng provide a preliminary comparison between Tibetan and Chinese pulse diagnosis. No doubt more work needs to be done on this very important subject. Olaf Czaja presents a fascinating, important and erudite study of the sources of Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's *Blue Beryl*. Theresia Hofer discusses textual and oral sources on the Northern School (*Byang lugs*) of Tibetan Medicine. The oral sources are based on her ethnographic work in the Ngam ring, where Byang pa rnam pa rgyal grags bzang, founder of *Byang lugs*, is said to have been born. She finds interesting inconsistencies between her textual and oral sources regarding the extent of the Byang lugs lineage, and raises some important issues on the processes of standardisation and centralisation, which are key to most of the contributions dealing with the current era.

Frances Garrett discusses embryology and embodiment—or rather, the topic of the 'formation of the body'—in Tibetan literature and argues that rather than treating this topic as 'medicine' or 'science' in a westernised sense, we ought to treat it as conveying 'narrative truths'. This highly erudite intriguing thesis is fully fledged in her recent book (*Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, Routledge, 2008).

The volume ends with Henk Blezer's overview of '*desiderata* in the study of the history of Tibetan medicine', based on the work of a group of eminent scholars. Given the nascent stage of research into Tibetan medicine, this is indeed an important endeavour. Research into Tibetan medicine is highly important not only, as Blezer points out, for the study of the history and culture of Tibet, but also for the study of history of medicine and the history of ideas as a whole. Some of what Blezer is calling for is slowly being achieved. The number of scholars working on the history and anthropology of Tibetan medicine seems to be on the rise. This was evident in the medical panel of the IATS conference which followed the one reported on in this volume (Bonn 2006). But while the amount of research on Tibetan medicine is rising, Tibetan medicine itself is facing a host of crucial difficulties, as manifest in many of the contributions here. Hence one more important point needs to be added to Blezer's *desiderata*: finding ways of helping Tibetan medicine. Otherwise, it might be that in several decades' time, there will be much less anthropology to report—and much more of it will have become history.

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