Reviews


Life presents itself with intervals of weakness, illness and misfortune. This compact but well-written book presents an interesting study on how Tibetans deal with these vulnerable periods of time. Its main focus is on ideas and practices related to longevity and life-span (tshe) which, Barbara Gerke shows, are much more than a linear concept of years lived. Life-span, as presented in this book, is a negotiable entity that can be manipulated. Gerke therefore suggests that it is better understood as an oil lamp that can be refilled when the oil runs low. She writes, ‘Tshe can be exhausted, cut short, ritually modified, or snatched away by demons and spirits’ (p. 9) and, if tshe is not protected or strengthened, can lead to an untimely death. The material presented in the book is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted among exile-Tibetans living in multi-ethnic communities in the Darjeeling Hills, as well as textual materials (translated by the author) that are still in use among contemporary Tibetan professionals. The part on medicine especially shows an interesting interplay between text and contemporary interpretation.

The book contains in total 11 chapters that are divided into five sections, where the first two parts present the field setting. In chapter two, the author presents otherwise unavailable materials on issues of Tibetan identity in the multi-ethnic Darjeeling Hills. For example, the author shows that many Tibetans choose to acquire a ‘Scheduled Tribes’ status that gives them Indian citizenship and different benefits, instead of being registered as a Tibetan refugee. Gerke rightly points out the importance of avoiding stereotype images of a homogeneous Tibetan refugee community (p. 69). In chapter two, the author also sketches the medical syncretism that is a feature of the region. Gerke shows that biomedicine and religious practices, instead of opposing each other, are deeply interrelated, and that it is family economics, local medical concepts and religious faith which influence medical choices. Furthermore, the author also suggests that in ‘an environment which has multiple treatment schemes to offer’ (p. 292) Tibetans find difficulties making decisions without guidance. Although interesting, this argument could have been strengthened with more ethnographic material.

In general, the concepts of life-span and related life-forces are fluid and manifold, and the author has chosen to grasp it by looking at longevity practices in the context of three Tibetan areas of knowledge; medicine, astrology and divination, and Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayāna rituals, which each have been given a section in the book. In these contexts, Gerke finds a great variety of practices and ideas structured around questions of life-span and longevity, which are all related to time in one way or the other. To knit them together, the practices are analysed through the theoretical frame of temporality. This fits well with the context of the book, but some parts of the book could have benefitted from more in-depth analysis. Sometimes it seems the author is slightly scratching the surface on an analytical level.

Parts three and four of the book present professionals’ interpretation on life-span and life-forces from medical, astrological and divinatory perspectives. In part three, Gerke shows how the five elements and the three nyes-pa (‘humours’) are linked to temporal frameworks. For example,
Tibetan doctors use calendars and ‘vitality tables’ to make their treatments more effective. Certain aspects of these temporal frameworks are regarded by medical professionals as more important than others, and are hence used selectively and often in a simplified manner. Chapter five goes more into depth with regard to two life-forces that are linked to longevity, the movement of the subtle life-essence of bla in the body and detecting the life-span in the pulse beat. By analysing bla in the 17th century Tibetan medical paintings, Gerke is sketching an intricate relationship between bla and life-span, but she further shows the ambivalence of many contemporary Tibetan doctors regarding bla in contemporary medical practice. In addition, she investigates how Tibetan doctors can tell the life-span through pulse diagnosis. Interestingly, Gerke finds that Tibetan doctors who practised Buddhism had a greater interest in the life-span pulse diagnosis and astrological calculations, and that to a larger extent they integrated them into their medical practice. The part on astrology sketches how concepts of life-span are situated within divinatory and astrological contexts, and in the chapter a larger cosmological framework, including karma, merit and blessing, are added to life-span. A particular focus is placed on people’s practices in relation to illness, ‘untimely’ deaths, when the life-span is completed, and how ‘maximum life-spans’ can be extended. Gerke shows how life-span interpretations are not only individual concerns but also of social importance.

In part five of the book, the author’s main focus is on large long-life empowerment rituals, which are believed to strengthen people’s life-force. She looks at people’s (different) involvement in the rituals, and successfully offers a glimpse into the ritual layers and multiple voices related to the blessing (byin rlab) involved. In addition, she gives a preliminary study of the importance of visualisation. The book ends with a well-written ethnographic account of a particular long-life empowerment ritual, where she describes vividly different positions and understandings of the ritual, including her own. Gerke is able to grasp how people’s contemporary needs still fit into the content of the ritual’s structure. In fact, as Gerke argues, it is the ritual’s flexibility that makes different ways of engagement possible, and in the end, helps to maintain the popularity of the ritual.

A question that keeps coming up throughout the book is ‘accuracy’ in terms of life-span predictions. As Gerke writes: ‘To me, the interesting question is why, given the inaccuracies, these practices occur so widely in Tibetan societies’ (p. 226). Gerke argues that they continue to be practised because they fulfill other needs: ‘The various calculations and divinations are coupled with instructions on how to counteract negative results—and that is what makes them useful for people.’

In sum, this is a well-written and well-structured book that contains much information and covers a broad range of Tibetan cultural practices. The many topics covered could each have been more elaborated upon, and some arguments could have been strengthened with more material. However, by presenting so many topics, some more preliminary in nature, the author also opens up topics for future research. Furthermore, the broad-ranging context makes the book a great example of the complexity of health care and how people’s sense of well-being and efficacy is influenced and directed by a variety of factors.

Overall, the book can be read as coherent text, but it can also be read by section. It should be of interest to both academics and medical professionals. Although its focus is on issues of health, the book should also be of interest to students and scholars concerned with theoretical concepts of personhood, cosmology and rituals, and on Tibetan ways of being in the world more generally.

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