

BOOK REVIEW

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Tibetan Modernities: Notes from the Field on Cultural and Social Change. Edited by Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz. Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Oxford, 2003. Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2008, 456 pp., Hardcover, ISBN 9789004155220.

Described on its back cover as “the first major publication in the west to study...modernity and its impact on contemporary Tibet,” the present volume certainly lives up to its claim. Edited by two of this emerging field’s most productive scholars, Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz, *Tibetan Modernities* is a timely collection of writings on many aspects of socio-cultural life among contemporary Tibetan communities.

Barnett’s deftly written Preface charts the emergence in little more than a decade of what may be termed ‘modern Tibetan studies,’ despite the ideological, political and practical obstacles that have at times impeded the development of this fledgling discipline. When Barnett takes stock of the volume of research projects and their ensuing publications, one is struck by the realignment of Tibetan studies from a loose confederation of Buddhologists, historians and other textual scholars whose primary focus was on Tibet’s religious past, to a dynamic field represented by researchers from the region as well as those based in foreign universities, engaged with transformation, change and the challenges of modernity. While Tibetologists may still read Sanskrit and classical Tibetan, many now also speak and read Chinese, and can converse in a range of different Tibetan dialects. Contemporary music, art, education, development and the environment have all become objects of critical analysis and study. This historical shift in interest has been accompanied by increasingly nuanced positions on the political aspects of modern Tibet, informed by long-term fieldwork, and greater fluency in the linguistic and social forms that constitute present-day Tibetan communities. Rather than paraphrasing Barnett poorly, allow me to present his statement in full:

The discussion of Tibet in the international academy has therefore not been merely a shift from the southern to the northern slopes of Tibet, from exile to the inside, from reconstructional cultural anthropology to the politics of contemporary colonial-type tensions, or from a victimisation view to a recognition of agency. It has increasingly acquired the hue of a much more challenging inquiry into the nature of modernity within the context of late-socialism in Asia, and into its particular features in the Tibetan encounter. Such a project has required not just the study of Tibet or Tibetan culture but a self-reflexive assessment of the outsiders too, and of the contours of the fields within which they work. (xvii)

The present volume is both a tribute to and manifestation of the emergence of Tibetan studies as an areal speciality, with established international research centres and institutes dedicated to its progress.

The *Tibetan Modernities* volume is divided into four sections. After an introduction by Ronald Schwartz, to which I return below, there are four contributions on modernisation and social change, three articles on the pedagogy of modernity, two contributions on contemporary Tibetan art and cinema, and four articles on issues relating to new media and public space.

Schwartz's introduction is necessarily carefully worded. He takes care to unpack the historically inaccurate construction "of a binary opposition of tradition and modernity" which has become so emblematic in characterisations of Tibet (p. 3). Developing a discriminating understanding of modernity is particularly important given that for much of the 20th century, Chinese government philosophy displayed a 'virtual obsession' with the concept of modernity as a driving ideological force for change and progress. Schwartz marches the reader swiftly through theories and critiques of modernity, while at once keeping the discussion firmly grounded in the social realities of Tibet, before moving on to discuss the papers in the present volume. He concludes his introduction with an important disclaimer on the nature of the contributions—because modernity itself is by nature a decentred, mobile and chameleon-like force, the articles in the volume do not reflect a normative or systematic account of contemporary social life in Tibet. Modernity is in many ways also post-modern, and the volume's contributions are also by definition "local and site-specific enactments" (p. 31).

Emily Yeh's paper, the first in the collection, deals with the establishment of state farms in Tibet—'modern' agricultural institutions—after the arrival of the Chinese in Lhasa in 1951 through to 1980, and discusses how Tibetans experienced these institutions on a

day-to-day basis. Yeh argues that agriculture is a useful lens through which to view larger socio-economic questions on account of its central place in Chinese discourses of modernity and development, and that agricultural modernisation was a “key state project with its own regime of truth” (p. 38). The author charts the founding and the fortunes of two state farms, named 7-1 and 8-1, forerunners whose trajectories prepared the groundwork for a whole system of state farms across the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Yeh’s contribution is a model of the successful interweaving of ethnographic detail with remembered and recorded history. Her article also serves as a prudent reminder of the paradoxical nature of the modernist experiment which transformed the lives and livelihoods of Tibetans in the name of an idea, only to reconfigure and redefine that idea some years later in line with the principles of a market economy.

In her contribution on the flow of wealth among Golok nomads in present-day Qinghai province, Susan Costello shows how Tibetan pastoralists “are taking up the challenges and opportunities modernity brings without abandoning their traditional values” (p. 110). The details which she furnishes on per capita income and household financial strategies demonstrate that economic reform has significantly altered neither the traditional mode of production, nor the customary patterns of resource sharing that have long been predicated on hospitality and generosity. It may be, as Costello argues, that these enduring social welfare practices in fact make up for the “retreat of the state from [the] provision of these services” (p. 110), a fortuitous example of culture and tradition withstanding the winds of change.

Heidi Fjeld looks at changing perceptions of unclean, impure or polluting activities after the reforms of the early 1980s when land redistribution aimed to put farmers on an equal footing with one another. While the land reforms of this era did lead to an improvement in the socio-economic position of workers engaged in traditional and low prestige skills, the author concludes that these have not resulted in “any change in their positions in terms of ritual hierarchies” (p. 135). Fjeld’s paper is somewhat erratic, plucking from Louis Dumont on caste to Marcel Mauss on the social features of gift giving, and would have benefited from more careful editing.

The contribution by Jennifer Marie Chertow on childbirth in contemporary Tibet is a sobering reminder that changing approaches to health, and in particular to women’s health, are key components in the modernist agenda of the Chinese state. The author deploys a narrative device which alternates between case histories and analysis, and in so

doing effectively illustrates how gender is “at the forefront of questions regarding these variable modernities” (p. 145). Chertow’s contribution documents the ways in which the state exercises control over Tibetan women’s bodies and their reproductive health as part of a larger project to overcome the perceived backwardness of the community.

Martijn van Beek’s article on Ladakhi modernity is particularly instructive for a Sikkimese audience on account of the geo-historical similarities between Ladakh and Sikkim. The author points out the overlapping and interlinked waves of modernising projects that have impacted Ladakh, from British colonial agendas, Christian and Buddhist missionary activities, to schemes for social development introduced by the Indian government. Van Beek offers detailed historical examples to support his conclusion that despite drawing on regional, national and international influences, “Ladakhi modernity is very much a local project and product” (p. 185).

Ellen Bangsbo focuses her chapter on the different roles that education can play in larger social and political projects of modernisation, both within the PRC and among Tibetans in exile in neighbouring South Asian countries. Examining the “varying interpretations of cultural preservation and child-centred schooling” (p. 190) for Tibetans, she offers the reader a helpful history of different educational institutions from traditional Buddhist monasteries to the present. The author concludes by outlining the forces which determine parental choice in the education of their children in the Tibetan Diaspora: the desire for the preservation of the Tibetan language and cultural identity, on the one hand, while also ensuring that their children have access to the best possible education, often in elite English-medium boarding schools.

Through a careful analysis of twelve naturally occurring conversations, Kalsang Yeshe offer a preliminary assessment of Chinese codeswitching in modern Lhasa Tibetan by analysing the frequency, domains of use and typology of these linguistic forms. He makes a necessary distinction between ‘loanwords’ and ‘codeswitching,’ and concludes that the proportion of codeswitching varies greatly in the sample conversations depending on the location and topic of the verbal exchange. In certain cases, such as when telephone numbers are given, codeswitching “results from habitual usage of these Chinese codes in contemporary society” (p. 241), a clear indication of the impact of media and language on modern socio-economic life. As noted by Ronald Schwarz in his introduction, there is a belief that “Chinese codeswitching conveys a sense of being modern

and cosmopolitan” (p. 22), while speaking Tibetan does not. Kalsang Yeshe asserts that the increasing use of Chinese will continue to bring “new terms and concepts to the Tibetan language, as it already has done during the last five decades” (p. 244).

The two short contributions by artists Tsewang Tashi and Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering (Jangbu) focus on 20th century Tibetan painting and modern Tibetan film respectively. Identifying specific features of a distinctive Tibetan style, Tsewang Tashi nevertheless shows how “cultural hybridity and diversity have become important aspects of contemporary Tibetan art as Tibetan artists have come to face a greater number of challenges and influences from the outside world than ever before” (p. 266). Jangbu’s conclusion is more hard-hitting: for a variety of reasons, “up to now, not a single film representing what the Tibetans themselves wish to show and say has been seen or heard” (p. 279).

Yangdon Dhondup’s paper on the rise and development of Tibetan pop music is the first in the strongest section of the volume on new technologies of communication and media in contemporary Tibet. “Cultural production,” Yangdon Dhondup argues, “can inform us about new social transformations and identities emerging as a result of modernisation,” since for many Tibetans and scholars, modernity itself is “perceived as a threat to their history and tradition” (p. 285). Using the example of the Tibetan singer Tseten Drolma, the author convincingly shows how “what may seem paradoxical, incongruent or confused to a casual observer of the current Tibetan music scene is more precisely a process of cultural borrowing as many artists engage in what is in effect an effort to create a distinctive identity and an attempt to find a place within modernity” (p. 302).

Anna Stirr focuses her contribution on *Blue Lake*, a popular song which has come to be seen by some as the ‘unofficial anthem’ of Tibet. Many listeners hear a strong Tibetan nationalist message in the song’s lyrics, resulting in it being banned from 1989 to 1992. Through a discussion of the creation and nationalist history of *Blue Lake*, and drawing on the work of Slavoj Žižek, Stirr shows how this song has in many respects “come to embody a ‘fantasy’ of Tibetan unity” (p. 306). Stirr’s thesis is nuanced and elegant, underscoring the ambiguity and multivalence of modern messaging: *Blue Lake* remains both a “point of articulation for different, locally-influenced expressions of Tibetan national identity, and a sign that points in multiple directions” (p. 329).

Tashi Rabgey examines the social use of *newtibet.com* in the first few months of its existence, an “audacious website” which “provided a

provocative new forum for the public discussion of Tibet's contemporary predicament" (p. 333). Steering away from more traditional models of a Habermasian 'public sphere,' Rabgey instead turns to the idea of 'civil society' to help make sense of the new "virtual Tibet arena in Chinese-language cyberspace" (p. 334). In so doing, she addresses the "reproduction of power along networks of relationships throughout the social order" (p. 349). The reader is left pondering a question which she raises at the outset of her paper: has digital technology indeed "cleared a new discursive terrain for a self-conscious Tibetan public" (p. 333), and if so, in what ways is it constructed, maintained or constrained?

The final chapter, by editor Robert Barnett, is one of the most detailed in the entire collection. By studying a set of artistic, literary and media products pertaining to the selection of the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, the author is able to raise "questions about how modernity is currently being constructed and deployed within the political domain" (p. 353). A central component in his data set is an unusual book published in 1999 by Chen Kuiyan, the then Party Secretary of the Tibet(an) Autonomous Region, which reveals the coercive power of the state to influence public opinion. Barnett compellingly documents a "cynical realisation by the Party that the citizenry is incapable of effective response even if offered full disclosure that it has been manipulated" (p. 355). While this chapter starts out as a specific and historically contingent narrative on openness in Tibetan government messaging, it grows into a more general and profound discussion on the "fundamentally evolutionist paradigm underlying western notions of modernity and knowledge" (p. 408). By so doing, and referencing the writing of Adorno, Dean and Žižek along the way, Barnett once again illustrates the ways in which rigorous area studies scholarship can contribute to much larger theoretical and historical discussions.

In conclusion, then, both the content and the form of *Tibetan Modernities* are emblematic of elements of Tibetan modernity. To alter a popular maxim, in this diverse and interesting volume, the contributors are the message: non-Tibetans and Tibetans alike, presenting, representing and challenging some of the many features of modern communities on the plateau. I hope that a collected volume of this kind and quality may be one of the many published products of the Golden Jubilee celebration conference recently held at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in October 2008.

Whenever I read the phrase 'cultural and social change,' words contained in the subtitle of this collection, I am reminded of a damning comment made by the late Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. He remarked, almost as an aside, that it was impossible to study social change when 'one has never been there before.' In the case of *Tibetan Modernities*, though, this is no issue, as the contributors and editors are as historically well-grounded as they are theoretically well-equipped to do justice to the complexity of the subject matter. The volume heralds a new era for Tibetology, and will in no time be a core text for all scholars and students engaged with contemporary social life in Tibet.

