



## Book Review

**Mitra Härkönen:** *Power and Agency in the Lives of Contemporary Tibetan Nuns: An Intersectional Study*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2023, 252 pp.

Mitra Härkönen's ethnography offers a much-needed insight into the reality of Buddhist nuns in Tibet and the multiple structures of oppression within which they are caught. The book is based on Härkönen's PhD dissertation research. In her own words the goal of the study was to 'provide a voice to a largely marginalized group of Tibetan Buddhist nuns', as well as to 'extract different dimensions of disadvantages and opportunities in the intersection of their female *gender, religion and nationality*' (p. 5, italics preserved). Indeed, the book fulfils both goals in an excellent piece of scholarly writing.

The introduction is dense with theoretical and methodological considerations. It also provides a detailed and much-needed description of 'Tibet', its boundaries as seen for the study's purposes, its history and culture, and the intricacies of the Tibetan national identity. With respect to the actual subject of the book, Härkönen's introduction contains several illustrative quantifications based on the previous literature and data, convincingly showing that the group in question is indeed marginalized. From the first pages Härkönen demonstrates an intimate familiarity with the subject and the

available research, providing the necessary background for a reader who may be unfamiliar with the situation in Tibet.

Theoretically, Härkönen's book presents a fresh insight into intersectionality in a non-Western context. It duly explains the relevant critical frameworks, disambiguating the understanding of intersectionality and arguing in favour of Patricia Collin's theory (2000; 2015), at the same time showing an awareness of alternative definitions. Mitra's presentation of her methodology and data collection adds to the credibility and reflexivity of her work on this highly politicized topic. She critically reflects on her position as a researcher and student of Tibetan Buddhism and the ethics of data collection and analysis. The participant observation and ethnographic detail are impressive: 49 interviews with lay and monastic Tibetans, several trips to Tibetan regions of the PRC, visiting 'dozens of nunneries and monasteries' (p. 37) and participating in public events. The interviews were collected in Tibetan by Mitra herself when they were in the Central Tibetan dialect, with the help of a translator when they were in a local dialect, and three were conducted in English.

The book's most important feature and strength is already reflected in the contents. Härkönen's research goes way beyond the phenomenological accounts of her monastic respondents; instead, it is based on a detailed picture of the structural,

cultural, religious, economic, and political features that shape their experience. The nuns' accounts are collected with impressive fidelity. For example, the first appendix contains a short biography of each. In addition to these encounters and interviews, however, Mitra analyses her conversations with other members of this milieu: teachers; and lay men and women. She also explores relevant texts, previous research, and ethnographic observations. This results in a multifaceted depiction of high quality, which places the reader in the context, allowing the depicted reality to speak for itself, rather than spurring the reader to draw conclusions. She shares unadorned opinions of lay Tibetan men to demonstrate the societal perception of nunhood, for example: 'Then, the other type is those, who become nuns due to personal problems' (p. 70). The ethnographic account is thus believable and forceful precisely in its multifaceted realism.

*Power and Agency* highlights the monastic path not only by describing the conditions of nuns but by going into a deep analysis of alternatives to monasticism, education, marriage, and the conditions of working life women face in Tibet. In particular, in talking about marriage and motherhood as seen by the nuns and by lay respondents, Härkönen paints a comprehensive picture of the push and pull factors that affect a woman's decision to be ordained. In this analysis she alludes to the narrative of opportunity, showing how the women navigate

the forces of oppression as they seek to fulfil their personal and spiritual ambitions, and how this pursuit is embedded in the societal circumstances. For example, her analysis of the interconnection between communist modernity and religion for changing gender roles in Tibet, and especially its nunneries, based on Charlene Makley's research (e.g. Makley, 2005), is truly remarkable. She summarizes this elegantly: 'As Tibetan women they can find themselves as representatives of both tradition and modernity. As female religious practitioners, they are observed by other Tibetans. And as Tibetan religious practitioners, they are monitored by the Chinese state' (p. 152).

Among the possible limitations of this study is the age of the data. The interviews were collected in 2008–2009 and 2011. Many circumstances may have changed since, as Härkönen herself mentions: 'I could witness some of the dramatic changes that took place in the Tibetan regions during the course of my research project' (p. 208). The beginning of the data collection, for example, coincided with increased political attention on Tibet from both Chinese Communist party officials and the Western media because of the protests that were taking place alongside the Olympic Games in Beijing. The book reflects the impact of those events and the political backlash on activists, in which the structures of oppression were manifested at their cruellest. Section 7, *Life as a nun*, contains

detailed accounts of imprisonment, torture, and rape. While representing a relevant truth that merited public attention, the depictions call for a trigger warning. As Härkönen points out on page 120, the accounts were preserved and shared in their entirety at the request of the narrators (the nuns). In this regard, the data, unfortunately for the Tibetan people, remains painfully relevant and timely. While the specific events and circumstances may change annually, stirring up more facets and angles of oppression and opportunity, the societal structures take a long time to change, as Härkönen aptly shows in her analysis.

Overall, the book represents an ethnographic insight into the lives of Tibetan Buddhist nuns and an empirical advance within intersectional theory beyond the West. The premises of *Power and Agency* remain important and germane. This book may be of interest to a broad range of readers. The intertwining of theoretical references with the empirical observations will be useful for an academic reader but will also be accessible and transparent to someone reading this out of human, political, or personal interest. *Power and Agency* is definitely a piece of academic scholarship of a high level that will be useful for scholars and students of anthropology, Tibetan and Asian studies, gender studies, and so on. However, its value is at least equal outside the academic realm. For those interested in Tibet from the perspective of activism and human rights, this book provides a reflexive

and accurate account of the ongoing oppression that is unconstrained by a specific political agenda apart from basic humanism and empathy. A keen practitioner or sympathizer of Tibetan Buddhism would find the book enlightening in terms of how gender affects religious life in the Tibetan community, and the cultural and religious mechanisms involved. *Power and Agency* will be a valuable item for a university library. However, despite its academic references, the book reads smoothly and will also feel accessible and engaging for the lay reader.

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