



Ana Cristina O. Lopes, *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-Signification in Practice and Institutions*

London and New York: Routledge, 2015. 276 pages. Cloth, \$153.00; ebook \$38.00. ISBN 9780415719117 (cloth); 9781315738147 (ebook).

WHEN A FULBRIGHT grant in 2006 to do research in China allowed me an entrance onto the Tibetan Plateau, an area inhabited by more ethnic Tibetans than in Tibet proper, I paid special attention to Buddhist monasteries and local devotion to the Dalai Lama. When I entered monasteries I was surprised to always find photographs of the Dalai Lama. When I asked monks why they dared to show the Dalai Lama's photo, they replied that Chinese authorities would leave them alone as long as they went on with their lives and did nothing to provoke the Chinese.

My own feelings about the Chinese presence in Tibet were mixed. Tibetan university students whom I interviewed said that in traditional times Tibet, despite the glory of their civilization, was weak because of its deep isolation from the rest of the world. Although they deeply resented the presence of Chinese in their land, and hoped the day would come when Tibet would enjoy some degree of independence, they also credited China with opening Tibet to the modern world. At the same time, they feared that the growing presence of Chinese in Tibet would eventually doom Tibetan civilization through a process of deep assimilation.

Many sympathetic people outside of China have carried on a long campaign demanding an end to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, but I always tell them that it is no more than a pipedream. I ask them to consider a very similar parallel in the United States. The Navajo nation once ruled a large area of what is now the American southwest, but by the end of the nineteenth century the United States had taken over the region. There are still tens of thousands of Navajo in the area, but there is no way that the U.S. will return all this land to Native Americans. By the same token, the Chinese will never surrender Tibet.

Anthropologist Ana Cristina O. Lopes, a research associate at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, has written a fascinating book, *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora*, that offers bright hope for the survivability of at least some aspects of Tibetan civilization. Her thesis is that the “imperialist ambitions of China, which invaded Tibet in the late 1940s” (1) led to the diaspora of tens of thousands of Tibetans, and, as a result, “sparked the spectacular spread of Tibetan Buddhism worldwide, and especially in western countries” (1). Vajrayana, once an obscure branch of Buddhism hidden away in the Himalayas, did not die with the coming of the secular Chinese. Rather, it has taken on a spectacular new life with followers and communities throughout the world. Once a form of Buddhism tied mainly to ethnic Tibetans, it has become a global force with great influence in such activist arenas as world peace and environmental preservation. It is a perfect case study of how a certain cultural tradition can adapt itself to new contexts with a global following.

Lopes begins her monograph with a detailed study of the rise of modern Tibetan civilization where successive Dalai Lamas wielded both religious influence and political

power. We then get a detailed look at the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and the violent suppression of Tibetans throughout the 1950s and 1960s. But what seems like the hopeless destruction of a great civilization finds new life in the massive Tibetan diaspora that included the 1959 escape of the current (fourteenth) Dalai Lama to India. Lopes writes the following:

In many senses, the transformation undergone by the Dalai Lama—from religious and secular leader of a relatively isolated country to one of the most renowned religious figures in the world—can only be understood when contextualized within the broader phenomenon of the Tibetan diaspora. Over the last 50 years, the world has witnessed the spectacular dissemination of the Tibetan Buddhism, a religion that, until very recently, figured in the Western imagination as a mystical sect of lamas living in a magical universe.... Today, hundreds of ‘flesh and bone’ lamas travel around the world, founding dharma centers dedicated to the practice and study of Tibetan Buddhism. In the publishing market, dozens of titles explaining the principles, philosophy and history of the religion are launched annually. In universities, American universities in particular, chairs of Tibetan studies are being created. Finally, the numbers of Western followers of that religion is well beyond hundreds of thousands and continues to grow... [T]he life and activities not only of the Dalai Lama, but of other exile lamas too, strongly inflect the effects of globalization... [C]onstant travel, the creation of Buddhist centers in multiple countries, and a strong presence on the internet and in the publishing market characterize the interaction of Tibetan lamas with their disciples around the world... The transnational religious field of Tibetan Buddhism involves the formation of a ‘network of objective relations...’ by its global and fragmentary characteristics. (84–85)

One cannot, however, separate Buddhism in Tibet from politics. As Lopes notes, the interchange between Buddhist lamas and western disciples leads to strong support in the West for the political liberation of Tibet.

Lopes goes to great lengths to explain how both the Dalai Lama, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, and other Tibetan Buddhist lamas and monks, have brought forth many of the principles of their religion—such as peace, tolerance, and justice for all—and have succeeded in transforming the fight for the autonomy of Tibet into a generalized fight “for a more equitable and peaceful existence in an ode to nonviolence that echoes the seminal words of Mahatma Gandhi” (94). This drive for peace, or demilitarization, is also critical for the preservation of the environment. The Dalai Lama himself has said, “Demilitarization will free great human resources for protection of the environment, relief of poverty, and sustainable human development” (97).

Lopes in her *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora* goes into far greater detail on the worldwide role of Tibetan Buddhism than can be discussed here. Her book is crammed full with interesting arguments and information. It is brilliantly researched and clearly written. The author’s goal to investigate the “process of cultural re-signification” of Tibetan Buddhism in the context of its diaspora is clearly met.

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