

China



Snying bo rgyal and R. Solomon Rino, *Deity Men: Reb Gong Tibetan Trance Mediums in Transition*

Asian Highlands Perspectives, 2008. 251 pages, b/w photos, illustrations, appendices, glossary, bibliography. Available through Lulu.com; Hardcover, US\$19.54; ISSN: 1835-7741.

DEITY Men is a study of Tibetan trance mediums in Reb gong, an A mdo Tibetan region of southeastern Qinghai province in the western areas of the People's Republic of China. The study is part of the occasional series of ethnographies issued by Asian Highlands Perspectives, edited by long time China resident Kevin Stuart and his associate, Gerard Roche. The book is available through the online publisher, Lulu.com. This pragmatic stance towards publishing is a reflection of the general editorial approach to the many ethnographic projects that have been fostered over the last two decades in western China by Stuart and company. Snying bo rgyal, a coauthor of the present work, studied English and ethnography with

Stuart in the Qinghai Normal University, and R. Solomon Rino has worked as a teacher at the university. Like many students associated with the program, Snying bo rgyal has carried out auto-ethnographic fieldwork in his native place. Most of the projects stimulated by the program deal with the very practical problems of the documentation of threatened or endangered folk traditions of several ethnic groups in the Qinghai-Sichuan corridor of western China.

As native ethnographers who speak the language, know the culture, and have kinship ties in the community, the products of such documentation are made from unique, emic perspectives. The use of English allows them the agency to voice their findings to a global audience. Stress is placed upon documentation and preservation. Interpretation depends more on a presentation and juxtaposition of insider accounts rather than the overt application of Western-based theory. Such theory is seen as a “second step” beyond the urgent goals of documentation.

The book specifically focuses on the activities of certain *lha pa* (mediums) in Hara pa thur Village, a farming community in the area of Reb gong (approximated by the official title *Tongren* in Chinese). Chapter 1 consists of a thorough and exacting review of the existing literature on trance mediums in Tibetan communities in China and particulars about the consultants interviewed in the study. Chapter 2 frames the later testaments of local practitioners by providing context that includes introductions to material culture, education, village clans, local deities, the ritual calendar, and life cycle events. Chapter 3 is specifically devoted to trance possession and ritual processes, roles, activities, “other activities,” and ritual garb and paraphernalia. Among the activities are spectacular practices that include the *lha pa* stabbing his belly with a pointed knife or spear to cure serious illness, first addressing his own organs that correspond with those of the afflicted patient. Chapter 4 offers “self-perceptions” by the several consultants listed in the introduction. After the concluding remarks are six appendices comprised of chant texts and information on the towns, clans, and succession of ritualists. The forty-five black and white photographs include many vivid portraits of trance mediums, mediums demonstrating ritual behavior, gods, local religious sites, and so on. Copious footnotes supplement the text throughout the work. Wylie Romanization for Amdo Tibetan is given for terms throughout the text, along with Chinese *pinyin* for place names. Tibetan script is provided in the glossary of names and terms, the bibliography, and in several appendices (for the texts of two key scriptures).

Chapters 3 and 4, dealing with the activities of the *lha pa*, employ accounts from locals to give insight into the process of “possession” and “de-possession” (114, 116) and specialized aspects of curing. The accounts describe the possession by certain deities, physical transformations of the *lha pa*, and their feelings (often ambivalent) about their roles as ones possessed. Many insights into the tradition are revealed in these personal testaments, which could be synthesized into a variety of studies in different research disciplines. One passage describes the psycho-physical effects of a participant named Sha bo tshe ring who in 1994 was recruited into the role of *lha pa* during a summer festival known as *klu rol*, which is held for the entertainment of the local deities and residents. He was reluctant to be initiated, being a *sngags pa* [tantric practitioner], the only male child in the family, and for the fact that “nobody wants

their son to be *lha pa*" (123). Other reasons (cited in several other accounts in the work) are the feelings that the role is a waste of time and energy with little economic return and is physically taxing due to blood-letting (including mouth-skewering) and exhaustion inherent in the rigorous practices of the entranced *lha pa*.

Each movement of the initiation is detailed from a first-person perspective, including the psycho-physical reaction to the initiating *lha pa* throwing wheat and spitting liquor on the initiate:

I felt different whenever the liquor and wheat touched me. I shook strongly. Sometimes the *lha pa* lifted me off the ground by my robe sash. Sometimes he grabbed my arms and shook me. Then I was possessed for a very short time. I jumped in the air. I felt like smoking *du nag* ["black cigarette," or opium]. I felt I was walking on cotton in air. I was told by other people that I jumped very high. I found myself de-possessed at the *bsang* [ritual offering of juniper, wheat, and so on] burner (125).

It is this sort of intimate detail that makes *Deity Men* a unique contribution to the literature on trance mediums in the Tibetan cultural orbit. The nativist perspective communicated through the voices of actual participants provides glimpses into a tradition that is both threatened due to the winds of modernization, yet still persists within the communities where belief and practice still find a place in community life.

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