Tibet

Jane E. Caple, *Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet*

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Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet is a nuanced account of Tibetan monks' moral deliberations concerning monastic economy, monastic tourism, and monastic recruitment and retention in the northeastern Tibetan area of Amdo between 1976 and 2015. Jane E. Caple's detailed ethnographic study captures the complexity of monastic revival and development.

Caple conducted extensive ethnographic research over a seven-year period (2008–2015) in sixteen Gelug monasteries in Repgong and western Bayen, located in the People's Republic of China's Qinghai Province, a region known to Tibetans as Amdo. She collected her data during formal interviews with eighty-two monks and fifty-five laypeople and during informal conversations with monks, nonmonastic religious specialists, farmers, herders, students, and government officials. The majority of Caple's interlocutors spoke with her in Amdo Tibetan, but a smaller number communicated with her in Chinese, English, or a Monguor language. Caple worked with research assistants and translators to conduct most of these interviews, although she conducted some of her follow-up interviews alone. Caple also analyzed a variety of relevant Chinese and Tibetan written sources, including governmental policies, legal documents, locally produced histories, and media reports about monastic revival.

In her thought-provoking ethnography of moral decision making, Caple persuasively demonstrates the value in "seeing beyond the state" when researching contemporary Tibetan social, religious, and cultural dynamics in China (155). To date, the preponderance of scholarship about Tibetan social and religious issues in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has emphasized the prominent role of the Chinese state. Subtle nuances are lost, Caple argues, when the complex process of Tibetan monastic revival in the post-Mao period is viewed as one of domination versus subordination or accommodation versus resistance. Building off of Sherry Ortner's theory regarding different modalities of agency, Caple insists that it is crucial "to both acknowledge the dominance of a hegemonic power *and* recognize local agency" (7), even when Tibetan monastic leaders make decisions that directly align with the Chinese state's agenda (Ortner 2006, 143). Caple contends that monks' practices are often shaped by relationships, priorities, and values that have very little to do with the state and far more to do with their evaluations of what would be best for their own "moral communities," which encompass the monastery, its resident monks, and an imagined Tibetan collectivity (6).

A skeptic might see a chance to critique Caple's conclusions, objecting that monks likely would make different decisions if they had the opportunity to do so under a more tolerant government. Caple is aware of such dynamics but emphasizes that her interviewees themselves expressed views that undermine such a simplistic assumption of coerced subjectivity. While the monks' decision-making ecosystem does not deny the context of state presence, Caple emphasizes that the state, per se, is not identified by the monks when they describe the complex webs of interpersonal dynamics and Gelug Buddhist ethics that most affect their moral dilemmas.

After describing the reconstruction of Gelug monasteries in the 1980s and 1990s in chapter 1, Caple turns her attention in chapter 2 to the issue of monastic economy. Since the beginning of the revival of religion after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Chinese government officials discouraged monasteries from resuming their previous practices of soliciting public donations, as the government viewed alms collection as an exploitative practice. Monasteries were required to implement a plan to become self-sufficient as part of their obligation to "serve the socialist modernization enterprise" (53). In Amdo, monks gradually stopped going out to collect contributions toward monastic activities from their patron communities. Instead, they began investing in self-supporting activities, such as opening medical clinics, shops, and transportation services, managing interest-bearing loans, and raising capital funds for real estate investments. While monks' moral rhetoric of self-sufficiency often echoed state discourse about the need for religious institutions to be self-supporting, monks did not cite government policy in their discussions. Instead, they identified the business activities of major Gelug monasteries in exile as inspiring and legitimating their reforms. Caple contends that "most monks placed agency for reforms within the monastic community" (54), and their passionate discussions involved "a continual evaluation and reevaluation of what was right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate for monasteries [and] monks," rather than for their monastic community vis-à-vis the Chinese state (2).

Concerns about the erosion of monks' agency and autonomy led some monastic leaders to eschew tourism as a potentially lucrative form of fundraising. In chapter 3, Caple describes how Kumbum Monastery was promoted by Chinese government officials as a "development model for Tibetan Buddhist monasteries under socialist conditions" (86), even as Tibetans increasingly viewed Kumbum as an exemplar of monastic decline. Despite their uneasiness about the commercializing and secularizing effects of tourism at religious sites, Caple's interlocutors insisted that monastic tourism was not inherently bad. Tourism could potentially function as a beneficial merit-making activity by introducing outsiders to Buddhism during visits to monasteries and other sacred sites. However, monks had also seen how state-sponsored mass tourism had transformed some monasteries into highly commercialized "scenic spots" where monastic events and rituals were marketed as "cultural performances" (74). There was widespread concern that due to the state's sponsorship of cultural heritage preservation, too much emphasis had been placed on the rebuilding and renovation of monasteries, and not enough attention had been given to the development of monastic education. "Temples," Caple concludes, "no matter how grand, are not what make a monastery" (81).

In chapters 5 and 6, Caple turns her attention to the demographic and socioeconomic transformations influencing monastic recruitment and retention. Family planning policies, which the Chinese government first implemented in the early 1980s to control population growth, led to extensive demographic transition across the country, including in Tibetan areas. Families with fewer children had fewer sons to send to the monasteries. Post-Mao economic reforms also created a wider range of educational and career options for Tibetans. Rising standards of living coupled with access to mass media and multimedia technologies provided young Tibetans with a growing awareness of a "wider set of possible lives" (134). Among those who had previously committed to the monastic life, disrobing gradually became more commonplace in the early 2000s. Tibetan parents worried about the karmic consequences, social stigma, and economic challenges their sons would face if they chose to disrobe and return to

secular life, and these concerns caused some families to opt out of sending their sons to the monasteries in the first place. Caple maintains that:

> the revival of monastic Buddhism on a large scale in post-Mao Tibet depended on the resurgence of certain shared assumptions and conceptions of the good, including three central ideas: that monkhood is a lifelong commitment; that boys should enter monastic life at a very young age; and that the mass form of monastic Buddhism, characteristic of Tibetan societies, is a good thing—that is, it is good (and indeed a marker of the relative virtue of a society or a community) that there are many monasteries and that each monastery has many monks. (145)

While conducting her fieldwork, Caple observed as monks and laypeople debated each one of these shared assumptions. During discussions about the appropriate roles of monasteries and monks in twenty-first-century Tibet, conversations frequently centered around the following questions: What is a monk? What is the role of a monastery in contemporary Tibetan society? If most monks do not conform to imaginings of the ideal Gelug monk, does this imply that there are too many monks at monasteries? Demographic pressures, rapid socioeconomic changes, and national imaginings of the ideal Gelug monk underpinned these conversations, contributing to a general anxiety about monastic decline.

Deliberations about morality within Tibetan monastic communities are complex, multivocal, and fluid, and Caple's detailed portrait of these debates contributes to the growing field of the anthropology of morality. Overlapping, contradictory, and contested conceptions by monks of the moral good do not stem from the monks' irrationality or inconsistency but rather due to "the complexity of the moral landscape through which these individuals are moving and the relational nature of morality" (160). Monks are continually in the process of negotiating not only state-defined religious space but also the "shifting moral contours of a rapidly changing social and economic landscape" (167). Caple's work demonstrates how monks' rules and boundaries about what is right or wrong remain grounded in Gelugpa Buddhist ethics, while simultaneously being deeply informed by local dynamics, the Tibetan exile community, and Tibetan intellectuals' opinions about the proper role of monasteries in modern Tibetan society. Debates about what is in the best interest of different moral communities at the local, national, global, and universal levels necessarily compete and contend.

Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet will make for richly informative reading for anyone interested in twenty-first-century Amdo or twenty-first-century Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. Caple's ethnographic snapshot of how monks wrestled with moral dilemmas surrounding monastic reform and decline between 2008 and 2015 contributes to the recent moral turn in anthropology. Combining carefully assembled ethnographic data with thoughtful theoretical contributions, this exceptional work will remain a valuable study of post-Mao Tibetan Gelug monastic reform for years to come.

References

Ortner, Sherry. 2006. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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