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*The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma,
Money, Enlightenment*

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The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment

Stuart Bucknell¹

The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment. By Dan Smyer Yü.
London: Routledge, 2012, xi + 222 pages, ISBN 978-0-415-57532-4 (cloth), \$138.00.

According to Dan Smyer Yü's informative new book, the "marketing era" of Tibetan Buddhism has begun (4). Charismatic Tibetan lamas and urban intellectuals, in concert with upper-class Chinese devotees and Western enthusiasts, are working to revitalize Tibetan religion and culture in contemporary socialist China, against the backdrop of economic globalization and religious commercialization. While Western observers typically lament the irrevocable loss of traditional Tibetan cultural institutions under the weight of modern Chinese economic expansion, both Tibetan Buddhists and Han Chinese converts are taking full advantage of the opportunities afforded by the growing market economy to recast Tibetan Buddhism as antidote to the "spiritual crisis" of post-Maoist China. This is the story told in Smyer Yü's *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China*, which focuses on the revivalist efforts of Chinese and Tibetan adepts of the Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma sect in and around the Kham and Amdo regions of Sichuan and Qinghai provinces, respectively. Based

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on extensive fieldwork in these regions as well as in several urban Chinese centers, Smyer Yü examines the new forms of Tibetan Buddhism that have developed through and within the growing counter-culture of Sino-Tibetan cyberspace. Smyer Yü illustrates how this Tibetan Buddhist revival is “trans-cultural, cross-regional, tech-savvy, conversant with modern science and familiar with the economic system” (5). And on this last count especially, he emphasizes how global market dynamics have both contributed to the growth of Tibetan Buddhism in China and led to the commodification and thus corruption of Tibetan Buddhist charisma.

After an introductory chapter that sets this *mise-en-scène* of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, Chapters two and three focus largely on the Weberian concept of “charisma” and how it is complicated by the case studies that Smyer Yü examines. In Weber’s classic formulation, charismatic authority derives from the unique force of personality displayed by individual leaders, both religious and secular, which draws crowds of followers and forms the basis for the development of traditions and institutions. With the rise of these institutions, then, the personal charisma of their long-departed founders becomes “routinized”—calcified into laws and dogmas that lead to the predominance of “traditional” and “legal” forms of authority. Smyer Yü argues that in several respects the case of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism contradicts these classic Weberian theories. In Chapter two, “*Tulkus*, genuine charisma, and its transmissible interiority in Kham and Amdo,” Smyer Yü emphasizes how Tibetan charisma functions as a “collective religio-spiritual phenomenon” (30). For one, given that the spiritual power of *tulkus* (reincarnate lamas) derives not from their individual personalities but from their claimed lines of reincarnation, Smyer Yü argues that Weber’s charisma needs modification to account for the trans-personal, karmic trajectory of *tulku* authority. Secondly, integrating an avowedly Durkheimian perspective, Smyer Yü describes Tibetan charisma as a “collective representation” of the “totemic bond” between lamas and their followers (36). In other words, a lama’s charismatic persona is (in part)

created and reinforced by his community of followers, as exemplified in the case of Sangye Tsering Rinpoche, an eminent Nyingma *tulku* of the Smyoshil Monastery in eastern Kham. This fact, Smyer Yü maintains, gives cause to re-evaluate Weber's model of "routinization" as a degradation of pure charisma into petrified institutional structures. Instead, these very structures often "guarantee the renewal of genuine Buddhist charisma," as "charismatic education in the Tibetan case is a rejuvenation rather than a process of demise" (38). And finally, this chapter argues that charisma is not just the province of individual holy figures; rather, it is "entirely transmissible, meaning that anyone who seriously wishes to acquire it can eventually become a *tulku* or a *tulku*-like Buddhist teacher" (41).

In Chapter three, "Spirit mountains, sacred sites, and territorial charisma," Smyer Yü continues his effort to complicate Weberian charisma, examining interrelated notions of Tibetan sacred space and this-worldly powers of charismatic holy men. Here he focuses on the case of Rachekyi Village in eastern Amdo, which is inhabited by tantric yogis that frequently engage the myriad spirits and deities populating the surrounding mountains. Illustrating how "the practice of Tibetan Buddhism on the folk level is inherently manifested in the ritualized, sentient tie between people, the earth, and local spirits," Smyer Yü here articulates his notion of "territorial charisma" as religious authority that is inherently connected with sacred space (51-52). He employs an Eliadian model of "hierophany" in his interpretation of Tibetan sacred mountains as *axes mundi* and sites of vertical transcendence of the profane, but he also posits a "horizontal" integration of beings with and within these natural landscapes: "spirit mountains in Rachekyi are what I call eco-theophany, as they and their spirits choose to dwell in the local landscape and intimately bond with both humans and non-humans" (61-62). In this way the charisma of the Tibetan holy man is fundamentally constituted, and shared, by his geographic environment—its sacred mountains and legions of resident gods, ghosts, and ancestors. This charisma is manifested in rituals of this-worldly orientation, in which

Rachekyi yogis serve as “shamanic weather workers” (66) who control storm clouds and thereby gain authority to assume broader regulatory roles in local communities and manage the practical needs of their constituents—in a manner akin to Melford Spiro’s notion of “apotropaic Buddhism” (73).

Having elaborated these theories of collective and territorial charisma, in Chapter four Smyer Yü sets his sights on examining how the “emerging cyber-version of Tibetan Buddhism in China” has amplified “the charismatic appeal of Tibetan *tulkus* and their communities for Chinese Buddhists” (76). This chapter, titled “Pilgrimage from Han China to high altitude enlightenment,” identifies a new foil for Smyer Yü’s analysis in Victor Turner’s theory of *communitas*, according to which pilgrimage participants jointly “embrace an ontology of undifferentiated relationship based on a common bonding with their religious/spiritual elders” (76). Highlighting the experiences of Chinese pilgrims to sacred sites in Kham and Amdo, Smyer Yü argues that the most salient characteristic of the relationships among these pilgrims is not comradeship but rather competition and infighting over the attention of resident *tulkus*. Nevertheless, these competing Chinese pilgrims together contribute to shaping popular, romanticized Chinese images of Tibet as a pristine and sacred land, replete with true Buddhist masters whose laudatory hagiographies proliferate through privately operated Chinese websites. In Smyer Yü’s analysis, this popular tendency to romanticize Tibetan Buddhism is further catalyzed by the general Chinese view of Chinese Buddhism as economically and politically corrupt, and by the socially marginalized status of Chinese religion in general. These idealized representations of Tibet also stand in marked contrast to the Chinese state’s derogatory evaluations of Tibetan Buddhism, a fact which indicates the limited reach of the political apparatus in the growing Chinese cyber-market.

In Chapter five, “Money, freedom, and the price of charismatic teachings,” Smyer Yü then examines how this Chinese cyber-market for

Tibetan *tulku* charisma has both increased religious freedom in China and prompted a deleterious tendency among Chinese devotees to commodify the Tibetan objects of their desire. Here Smyer Yü adopts a perspective akin to the classic Marxist notion of alienation, according to which the natural expressions of man's being, his virtues and measures of self-worth, are stripped from him through the forces of capitalist economy. For Smyer Yü, "individuals' inner yearnings for an authentically religious life are exteriorized" by being "transformed into objects of consumption," which "is destruction because it reverses the spiritual order of things" (100). Of course, Smyer Yü's "spiritual order of things" directly contravenes Marx's historical materialism and base-superstructure economic determinism, and Smyer Yü is much more sanguine about the positive creative capacities of this new Chinese religious marketplace: it generates "a spontaneously social space in which the forbidden is accessed and made available without overtly intrusive interruptions of the state. In other words, this creative aspect signifies an emerging freedom of religion not sanctioned by the Chinese state but provided... by the market" (101). Further, communities of leading Tibetan lamas have benefited greatly from the influx of cash brought about by this rising Chinese market demand, as in the case of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Academy in Sichuan (116). Nevertheless, in Smyer Yü's estimation, the "collective longing" among Chinese Buddhists for "something higher, loftier, more pristine and enlightening" cannot but be "entrapped by the market economy—where a profit-oriented value system saturates and adulterates" traditional Tibetan Buddhism (115).

In this last respect Smyer Yü echoes the perspectives of Tibetan lamas themselves, who have increasingly utilized modern Chinese media to voice their concerns about Buddhist commercialization and other problems resulting from the Chinese state's approach to religion. These voices are examined in Chapter six, "Re-understanding scientism, scapegoating, and the marginality of religion in China from a Tibetan perspective." Focusing on works like Khenpo Sonam Darje's *A Scientific Treatise on*

Buddhism and Dorzhi Rinpoche's *Wisdom Arising from Compassion*, Smyer Yü argues that Tibetan lamas' representation of their religion as fully accordant with modern science "is a delayed contention with the anti-religious ideology of the state" and "a sign of post-traumatic distress resulting from the attacks on Tibetan Buddhism" during the 1960s and 1970s (127). Smyer Yü couches this Chinese religious persecution in Freudian and Girardian theories (amongst several others), explaining how the state exhibits classic symptoms of "neurosis" in its irrational fear of religion and its resultant efforts to make religion a "scapegoat" for the perceived ills of society (134-5). In response, then, Tibetan teachers have spearheaded a "re-membering" of their tradition—a literal putting back together—by expressly recalling atrocities perpetrated by the Chinese state and by building images of Tibetan Buddhism as a modern, spiritual, "scientist" alternative to the "ideological belief in Marxism" and resultant rampant materialism that increasingly threatens Chinese society (139).

Chapter seven, "Buddhism, ethnic nationalism, and destigmatization of Tibet in the cyberspace of urban Tibetans," examines how Tibetan intellectuals have initiated a related campaign to counter negative images of Tibet by constructing a new ethnic nationalism emphasizing the primordial purity of Tibetan peoples. Often utilizing the same Chinese cyberspace in which virtual Tibet has become commercialized and Chinese Buddhists have found alternative social spaces, Tibetan authors like Yidam Tsering, Tsering Dondrub, Tsewang Norbu, and Oser have worked to overturn predominant Chinese stereotypes—actively constructed by the Chinese state since the 1950s—according to which Tibetans are "liberated serfs" (164): "backward, uncivilized, dirty, stupid" (159). Typically less concerned with expressly religious issues than with shaping notions of Tibetan cultural identity more broadly, and steering well clear of discourses about Tibetan independence from China, these Tibetan intellectuals are building an alternatively essentialized image of Tibet as a land of natural beauty, peace, and pure spirituality. This "neoprimalism"—a "modern ethnic nationalism in which the promotion

of a time-immemorial ethnic identity is also an instrument of resistant to external threats” (149, following John Comaroff)—has provided an avenue for Tibetan intellectuals “to sustain the collective memory of their past” and “cleanse the socialist stigmas attached to their identity” in China (171).

At the same time, however, it is not only urban Tibetans, lamas, and Chinese converts who are contributing to the growth and reconstitution of Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary China. Also implicated in these processes are the forces of globalization: “the world-wide market system, global discourses on local humanitarian issues, and the emergence of modern Buddhism” in the West (173). These are the dynamics explored in Smyer Yü’s concluding Chapter eight, “Globalization, performance religion, mindscaping the eco-Buddhist Tibet.” Here Smyer Yü argues that in pandering to Western ideals of the “spiritual exotic other” (181), Tibetan and Chinese participants in contemporary discourses on Tibetan Buddhism do more than just practice their religion; they also “perform” it—expressly promoting for global consumption romanticized images of Tibetan Buddhism in order to advance their causes in China. Similarly, economic globalization has prompted the Chinese state to reshape its image abroad as eminently tolerant of Tibetan Buddhism, constructing in the process what Smyer Yü terms “socialist Buddhism” and “tourist Buddhism” in China (178). And lastly, what is known as “modern Buddhism” in the West—with its emphasis on “spirituality,” egalitarianism, individualism, anti-ritualism, socially engaged practices, increasing lay over monastic authority, and so on—has played a major role in the revitalization of Tibetan Buddhism, as Chinese and Tibetan adepts work to incorporate these values into their own visions of Buddhism for the twenty-first century (184-5).

All in all, this book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of contemporary efforts to revive Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan Autonomous Regions and in mainland China. Smyer Yü does an admirable job of presenting the many different voices involved in this process,

and in illustrating the complexity of the various dynamics animating modern discourses on Tibetan Buddhism in China. I have learned a great deal from this book, especially concerning how a global market for Tibetan Buddhist charisma is being created by Tibetan and Chinese devotees, against the backdrop of fluctuating Chinese state stances on religion and Tibet. However, I find questionable Smyer Yü's claims, in Chapter five especially, to the effect that "the teleology of Buddhist spirituality" in contemporary Sino-Tibet "is no longer born of an exclusively soteriological orientation" (116). Here Smyer Yü laments the modern commodification of Tibetan Buddhist charisma, the recent transformation of Tibetan sacred sites into tourist traps, and the increasing control of rich (Chinese) lay donors over Tibetan lamas. But has it ever been any other way? No one would deny that increasing globalization has significantly changed the equation, but religion has nowhere and at no time been guided by "an exclusively soteriological orientation." Is it true that premodern Tibetan Buddhism was purely spiritual or "soteriological," while only in modern times has this tradition been corrupted by money? The historical record would surely seem to illustrate otherwise. Further, in so lamenting this modern materialist drive and commodification of Tibet, Smyer Yü sometimes adopts the confessional, normative stance of his Buddhist informants, employing heavily weighted and pejorative language that appears quite out of place for a social scientific study of this kind.

The main problem I have with *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China* is that his use of social-scientific jargon obscures his main points and interrupts the flow of his narrative. Smyer Yü certainly impresses with his breadth of knowledge and capacity to engage numerous scholarly discourses in the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies, among others. In the above summary I have tried to illustrate his efforts to apply these discourses in his analyses, especially vis-à-vis Weber, Durkheim, Eliade, Freud, and Turner. But I have not even scratched the surface in this regard. Smyer Yü also enjoins us to understand *tulkus* as "metaphors," as "a triad of mythos-mimesis-

catharsis,” and in terms of Paul Ricoeur’s “displacement” (48-9). In order to understand Tibetan sacred mountains we apparently need to know Roy Rappaport’s notions of “ultimate sacred postulates” versus “cosmological axioms” (55) and his “operational model” and “cognized model” (59-60). A *tulku*’s “territorial charisma” is said to make more sense in terms of Lee Rozelle’s “ecosublimity” (73). James Hillman’s “*mundus imaginalis*” supposedly helps us grasp the idealization of Tibet (80). We must not forego forays into the notions of “entelechy”; “vertical charismatic bonding” (93); “catallaxy” (117); “inner polarity” (121); “reconnaissance *sans connaissance*” (145); “masculine protest” (182); “topophilia”; “threshold”; “porosity” (192); “transcendental subjectivity” (193); “global ecumenical consciousness” (176); et cetera. Chinese religious persecution ostensibly needs theorizing in terms of Freud, Girard, Marx, Douglass, Jung, and Ricoeur, all at once (135-7). It apparently helps us to know that Tibetan self-representation “is what Anthony Smith calls a ‘myth-symbol complex’” (149), or that “nationality” in China relates to “what Frederik Barth calls ‘ascription by others,’” as well as “what Johannes Fabian calls the ‘denial of coevalness’” and “Typological Time” (163). And Smyer Yü further asks us to understand economic globalization in terms of Mike Featherstone’s “singular place” (175), “third cultures,” and “global ecumene” (176). The list goes on and on. Some readers may consider this an excellent model of scholarship—significantly enhancing theoretical nuance by engaging various novel ideas, and tying a specific subject of study into broader scholarly discourses in order to illustrate its relevance across disciplines. And, scholars who traffic in these same bodies of humanist and social scientific literature will perhaps appreciate Smyer Yü’s wide-ranging applications of them—indeed, one can only assume that this book is intended solely for such scholars. However, I also expect that any other readership will find this proliferation of jargon to be decidedly excessive; to my mind it makes the book unnecessarily abstruse and laborious to read, and ultimately serves to confuse Smyer Yü’s otherwise compelling analyses of Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary China.