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The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-Modern Tibet

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A Review of *The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-Modern Tibet*

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The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-Modern Tibet. By Berthe Jansen. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018, xii + 284 pp., ISBN 978-0-520-96953-7 (Open Access e-book: https://www.luminosoa.org/site/books/10.1525/luminos.56), ISBN 978-0-520-29700-5 (Paperback), $39.95.

Berthe Jansen's *The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-Modern Tibet* makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the role of monasteries in Buddhist societies and in Tibet in particular. The title points to the primary source material used for the book—monastery rules or guidelines—and to the author's analysis and presentation of the administrative structure of Buddhist monasteries. This is slightly misleading, however, for the book does even more than that. The book pertains as much to Tibetan society and to Buddhist ethics as it does to monastery

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guidelines. The phrase "the monastery rules" has a double entendre, referring to the in-house rules or guidelines that prescribe monastic life and administration *and* the fact that monasteries *ruled over* much of pre-modern Tibetan society.

The Monastery Rules grows out of the author's dissertation (of the same title) initially completed under the auspices of the Buddhism and Social Justice research project based at Leiden University. This helps to explain the dual purpose of the book—to understand the structure of and life within monasteries and to investigate the place of monasteries in Tibetan society—as well as the theoretical questions driving the book: Jansen writes that she seeks "to explore the way in which social differences and relationships existed within a Buddhist society in practice and, subsequently, to examine whether—if at all—these differences were seen to be justified by aspects of Buddhist thinking by figures who had an active, authoritative role within monastic communities" (2). Readers of this journal will be especially interested to learn what Jansen has to say about Tibetan Buddhist attitudes toward social justice.

The engaging epigraphs with which Jansen opens the book provide a shorthand answer to this research agenda. The first, by George Bernard Shaw, suggests that ethics entails struggling against the outside world despite the odds: ". . . all progress depends upon the unreasonable man." The second is by the eighth-century Indian scholar-monk Śāntideva, who instead explains that it is futile to struggle against the totally flawed world. Instead, one needs to correct one's own mind in order to find liberation for oneself and others. In the case of Jansen's book, Śāntideva's approach represents the position of the monastery and of monastics in Tibetan society. As far as Tibetans are concerned, as long as the sangha is maintained, the welfare of society is guaranteed. One need not and indeed must not squander the precious resource that is the sangha by diverting its attention elsewhere. In other words, the sangha in pre-modern Tibet did not and was not interested in engaging with society in the way we

might expect charitable organizations today to alleviate poverty or suffering (38). This much we may already know, or at least have surmised, but Jansen demonstrates this by recourse to a most thorough reading of primary and secondary materials, and she also explains why this was the case.

Chapter One presents the primary source material for the book, known as "monastic constitutions," "customaries," or "guidelines" (Tib. *bca' yig*). Aside from the author's own dissertation and extensive list of articles on the subject, only a few others have touched on the genre, and Jansen presents here the most extensive study of monastic guidelines to date. She argues compellingly that, in the absence of archival materials, these monastic guidelines are some of the best historical materials available for understanding the relationship between Buddhism and social policy and practice (4).

Chapter Four is something of an outlier, but it grows naturally out of the content of the monastic guidelines utilized for the study. It presents the first ever systematic treatment of the administrative structure of the Tibetan Buddhist monastery, providing explanations of the various offices and officials within the monastery. Her familiarity with the source material as well as her access to resourceful informants (present-day monks) have positioned her to pen a chapter reminiscent of what Holmes Welch once did for our understanding of Chinese Buddhist Monasteries in *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism* (Harvard East Asian Studies, 1967).

The other chapters of the book—especially Three, Five, Six, and Seven—represent the heart of the book, as they trace monastic attitudes toward lay society, their obligations to lay society, and movement between lay life and monastic life. Throughout these chapters she presents countless examples to present a picture of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries as more inaccessible (Chapter Three) and less charitable (Chapter Seven) than popular or romantic imaginings of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries would have it. Moreover, Tibetan monks were more concerned with maintaining the financial stability (Chapter Five), social stability (Chapter

Seven), and image (Chapter Six) of the monastery than they were with attending to the inequities that existed in society and between monasteries and society.

This is not to say that Jansen is hostile toward Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. On the contrary, she generally steers away from such normative, evaluative claims, arguing that for many Tibetans in the past, accepting and actually supporting the sangha and its monasteries was the most reliable and viable option in an otherwise uncertain political landscape. "Tibetans, not unlike most people, were—and are—pragmatists at heart," Jansen states (112). Moreover, Jansen's goal and method are to consider Tibetan Buddhist attitudes and Tibetan society on their own terms. For instance, the Tibetan "Dark Ages" are remembered as a period during which the sangha was in disarray. This legacy, Jansen argues, has contributed to Tibetans' insistence on maintaining and supporting the sangha (34-5). This, together with the Buddhist idea of one's living in the end of times, when the dharma is in decline, as well as the pivotal role played by the sangha in negotiating relations with the powerful chthonic deities found across Tibet, contributed to a deep conservatism in Tibetan society (Chapter Two, Chapter Eight, and p. 138). Injustices in the world, when they were commented on by monks, "are highlighted not in order to encourage direct change, but to show the realities of *saṃsāra* and thereby the need to renounce concerns for the current life alone" (38). One might criticize Jansen for not going further by problematizing the role of Buddhist monastic ideology in thus normalizing and justifying monks and monasteries as "the most viable option;" nonetheless, she carefully and holistically presents a much-needed picture of Tibetan monasticism and society and their relation to Buddhist doctrine.

Jansen admits that her study is largely concerned with presenting a rich, synchronic picture of this pre-modern situation. "Change—the focus of most contemporary historical research—has not been the main concern of this research" (181). Moreover, she posits that "when viewed comparatively . . . Tibetan monastic policies changed surprisingly little. While

the political climate has now changed entirely for monks . . . , the monkhood is—for the most part—'a continuation of what came before in Tibet'" (5). Jansen's somewhat dubious claim that "detecting and understanding continuity has a greater effect on our understanding of any society" than does detecting and understanding change (181) leads Jansen to miss an opportunity to situate her primary source material within a diachronic narrative. We know very well that Tibetan society, including Buddhist monasteries and their position within that society, underwent significant changes over the centuries, not least of which was the rise and spread of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism and monasticism. That is not to say that Jansen completely overlooks time and history. She frequently notes the provenance and/or date of a text before quoting or citing it in the body of the text. In addition, she does make some very keen and important observations regarding historical change (91, 93-5, 106). Overall, however, examples from the thirteenth century are set alongside examples from the twentieth century with an eye only for similarity and stasis, and there is no attempt to systematically treat historical change.

Similarly, the regional provenance and the sectarian affiliation of the monasteries and the related monastic guidelines receive no systematic analysis. So, for instance, whereas most non-Geluk guidelines were written by lamas for their own personal monasteries and hence gave themselves significant positions of power (over appointments to office, for instance), Geluk guidelines in contrast were equally likely to be written for monasteries far off on the other side of the Plateau or beyond that bore no intrinsic relationship with the lama author (i.e., the lama was not necessarily the *dgon bdag* or "lord" of the monastery receiving the guidelines) (Sullivan, *Building a Religious Empire: Buddhism, Bureaucracy, and the Rise of the Gelukpa*, under review). Consideration of such temporal and sectarian parameters would reveal different strategies taken by lamas in different times and places.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, *The Monastery Rules* is one of the most important contributions to Tibetan studies to emerge in recent

years because of the author's ability to situate the story of Tibetan monasticism within mainstream Buddhist Studies as well as to address important questions in Buddhist ethics. The book does multiple things remarkably well. The reader will find in a single place an integrated discussion of the relationship between monasteries and societies in pre-modern Tibet, Buddhist ethics (specifically monastic attitudes toward social difference), and the structure of the Tibetan Buddhist monastery. In addition, the author's grasp of the secondary literature on the Indic/Vinayic background to Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the literature bearing on monastic organization in other Buddhist cultures, means that any scholar of Buddhist Studies, or indeed any scholar of monasticism or religious ethics, will find this book thought provoking and valuable.