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Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet

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A Review of *Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet*

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Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet. By Jane E. Caple. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019, 232 pp., ISBN 978-0-8248-6984-7 (Hard Cover), \$65.00.

Jane Caple's brilliantly analyzed and meticulously researched new book explores the revival of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in the People's Republic of China during the post-Mao period. Many studies of Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary China focus—for good reason—on the dynamics of state control over religious life, presenting questions about Tibetan religious revival in terms of “the shifting public space for religion and the state-society relationship” (3). Caple's work likewise deals in sophisticated ways with the ongoing impacts of state power on monastic choices and strategies. Yet her book also offers a new and welcome intervention, by taking as its main focus the complex ways in which lay and monastic Tibetan Buddhists negotiate moral priorities and moral boundary-making within the shifting terrain of contemporary Tibet.

Underlying Caple's work is the provocative question: “Is it possible to see beyond the state in studies of Tibet, religion, and other highly politicized issues in contemporary China?” (vii; 155). This question, and

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Caple's richly textured and ethnographically detailed answer, is relevant far outside the field of Tibetan Studies.

Focusing on Gelukpa monasteries in the Amdo/Qinghai regions of Rebgong and Bayen, Caple's study combines geographic specificity and ethnographic depth with awareness of historical context and engagement in contemporary scholarly debates. As Caple describes, prior to 1958, Gelukpa monasteries in Amdo (and across the Tibetan region) maintained large populations of men with a lifelong formal commitment to "celibate monastic life" (23). This mass monasticism flourished within a socio-political context of Gelukpa political ascendancy and religious influence that took a variety of forms, ranging from the combined religious and secular rule of the central Tibetan state governed by the Dalai Lamas, to what Makley has called "interregional monastic polities" in Amdo (Makley 33; Caple 23). Such monastic polities linked religious and secular rule centered around the "legitimizing authority of a reincarnation lineage" (23), and incorporated men of many different personal capacities and orientations into ritual, scholarly and practical roles within a broader framework of Buddhist merit-making.

For Tibetans in Rebgong and elsewhere in Amdo, this social, ritual and political world was transformed in the mid-twentieth century by the arrival of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Caple identifies 1958 as the "pivotal moment in collective memory" when monastic life was halted. Caple recounts how the events of 1958 are remembered in Amdo today, as forming "a point of social rupture marking the end of the 'old' society" (19). During the ensuing Maoist period, monks were sent back to lay life in their villages or to prison; senior monastic leaders were imprisoned or killed; monastic education was brought to a halt; monastic ritual communities were disbanded and scattered; and libraries and temples were looted and often demolished.

A new chapter opened with the lifting of many restrictions on religion in the PRC at the end of the 1970s. Only a few months after the Chinese Communist party restored an official policy of religious freedom,

Tibetans in regions from Rebgong to Lhasa began to resume aspects of religious life, including not only personal religious practice but also the gradual revival of monastic assemblies. Since the early 1980s, Tibetans have rebuilt and revitalized Buddhist institutions of many kinds, in perhaps the most dramatic instance of religious revitalization in contemporary China. Tibetan lineage communities have embarked on extensive projects of Buddhist ethical and ritual renewal. Leading Tibetan Buddhist figures have resumed or recreated major networks of religious transmission and knowledge production.² Tibetan monastic buildings destroyed or damaged during the Maoist period have been rebuilt and re-consecrated. Longstanding Tibetan Buddhist networks of affiliation, pilgrimage, and patronage have resumed, although sometimes in new forms (as, for example, when rural villages with historic connections to specific monasteries continue to contribute to their financial support, albeit now within new frameworks of voluntary donation, as Caple describes). During this dynamic resurgence of Tibetan Buddhist activity, monasticism has flourished as a significant element of Tibetan religious revival.

Yet this monastic revival has brought with it its own challenges, challenges which highlight the interrelationship of political, socio-economic and moral concerns. In Caple's words, "Since the beginning of the revival of religion in China in the late 1970s, state policy has required monastics to make efforts to be self-supporting and engage in productive labor as part of a more general obligation to serve the socialist modernization enterprise" (53). Moreover, a series of shifts in Beijing toward an increasingly neoliberal market orientation has further shaped state directives for monasteries. From the late 1990s into the present, state policy directives and academic writing in China have "emphasized the need for monasteries to develop businesses in the interests of both self-support and local development, including tourism, animal husbandry, agriculture, shops, restaurants, Tibetan medicine, scripture printing, religious

²Gayley, Germano, and Kapstein, among others, examine related issues of memory and morality in Tibetan Buddhist revitalization.

product manufacturing, crafts, and transportation” (53). However, the pressure on monasteries to engage in such business activities also creates a host of moral complications and conflicts, which Tibetan monks and lay people must negotiate. In the course of this book, Caple examines how these negotiations have set the stage for new kinds of moral boundary-making with regard to monastic life.

Caple’s focus on monastic morality throughout the book allows her to go beyond binary accounts of Tibetan monastic revival that frame it either as driven by state dictates or as a form of resistance to the Chinese state. Both dynamics are clearly present and significantly entangled. Yet Caple’s engagement with monastic revival “from the ground up” (7) and her attention to monks’ own ethical concerns allow her to move beyond this binary, to “attempt to understand and take seriously the subjective perspectives,” and specifically the moral concerns, of lay and monastic Tibetans involved in the revival process. As Caple puts it, following John Barker, among her chief aims is to “better understand morality as ‘a motivating force, part of the dynamic by which societies renew and change’” (7, quoting Barker 21).

In seven chapters, an introduction, and a final coda, Caple explores the moral dynamics of monastic revival from multiple angles. Chapter one lays out the terms for the “social and moral reordering” that both make possible and are required by monastic revival. In the aftermath of the material and cultural violence of the Maoist years, monastic communities faced the task of rebuilding both in the physical sense and in the sense of reconstituting their social, intellectual, ritual and moral communities. Centering “local logics of the good and the desirable” (6), Caple describes how the widespread revival of monasteries after 1980 “was dependent on the resurgence of a moral community sharing common values about Buddhism and about society in general.” At the same time, monastic revival involved the resurgence of “relationships, and thus mutual obligations” between individual lamas, monasteries and lay communities that support them (37). Tibetan lay and monastic Buddhists negotiate the ethics of

these relationships and the “social and moral boundaries” that underlie them (37) through debates over monastic business activities, tourism, and questions about ordination and the value of mass monasticism itself.

Caple delves into these social and moral negotiations in chapter two, where she addresses the topic of so-called monastic “reform” in more detail. In the “reform” process as described above, monastic economies were restructured away from annual donations by lay communities with historic links to particular monasteries and toward a model of market-driven economic self-sufficiency, as required by Chinese state directives. Yet although state requirements are a key context for this process, Caple highlights the role played by local monastic and lay perceptions of the morally proper activities for monks. New monastic business enterprises involve ongoing negotiations for both monks and lay people of the questionable morality of monks’ involvement in for-profit enterprise.

Chapter three explores the closely-related potential problems and clashes of value that can occur when monasteries are remade as sites of state-promoted domestic and international tourism. Caple considers the ways in which monks evaluate different forms of tourism and various kinds of tourists as beneficial or negative, using Buddhist criteria of moral value connected to teaching, preaching, and pilgrimage. Monks with whom Caple spoke described certain aspects of mass tourism at monasteries as deeply problematic. They pointed to the “commodification” of famous monasteries such as Kumbum, and the serious negative consequences for monastic morality, for the clarity of monastic-lay boundaries, and for the flourishing of monastic scholarship that this commodification can involve. On the other hand, to the extent that individual tourists have the opportunity to encounter and learn about Buddhism through monastery visits, monks articulate a potential moral value for smaller scale and more personal tourism, building on longstanding Buddhist categories of pilgrimage and teaching. Monastics also identified the pragmatic benefits of building knowledge and support for Tibetan culture among visitors.

Chapter four builds on these previous chapters by examining the special role that monks and monasteries are understood to have as moral exemplars and custodians, in a context in which Tibetan culture and Tibetan identity are perceived by Tibetans as under existential threat. Caple describes how Tibetan accounts of cultural survival and continuity identify monastic morality as crucial. Monks and many lay people alike see monks as having a responsibility to embody and to transmit religious and cultural values encoded as authentically Tibetan. This in turn makes the stakes for the “quality” of monks and their perceived moral, intellectual and religious excellence particularly high.

Chapter five segues to the closely related question of the future of mass monasticism, which has played such a significant role in Tibetan history. Here, Caple examines contemporary challenges of recruitment and retention, demographic transition, and Tibetan debates about “quantity versus quality” of contemporary monks, as well as about what the role of monks should be. For both lay people and monastics, monastic morality is a central concern in evaluating the benefits and costs of mass monasticism. To the extent that monastics are seen to play a key role as Tibetan cultural guardians and moral transmitters, the continuity of monastic institutions has particular urgency. At the same time, in an era of declining birthrates and demographic transition, mass male celibacy does not always appear as a positive.

These concerns come to the fore in chapter six. Here, Caple turns to examine the high stakes implications of monastic revival for “the future shape of Tibetan Buddhism, and, by extension, Tibetan society” (145). Tibetan monastic and lay interlocutors suggest to Caple that monks and monastic communities play a pivotal role in Buddhist moral life and Tibetan cultural survival – but also that some individuals and communities see mass male celibacy as a potentially serious, even dangerous, demographic loss. In this context, a number of Caple’s interlocutors emphasized that if monks were not going to be excellent monastics in a moral sense (for example, if they were distracted by business opportunities, or did not

maintain their vows or take their studies seriously), they might be of more community benefit as fathers. Likewise, lay people might support mass monasticism in theory, but not want their own sons to become monks.

Threaded through all of these points of challenge and tension is the issue of monastic morality and the ways in which both monks and lay people conceptualize, measure and transmit it. For example, in talking about monastery-run businesses and clinics as a source of funding for monasteries that replaces traditional practices of soliciting donations, many monastics Caple spoke with presented the shift to self-sufficiency as an important moral choice consistent with Buddhist values, in which poor lay communities should be lifted up by their local monasteries rather than asked for money. Indeed, sometimes Caple's interlocutors framed monasteries' decisions to pursue economic self-sufficiency as originating from monks themselves, rather than centered in state requirements. On the other hand, lay people and monastics also expressed concern about the obvious potential for conflict between profit-driven and materialist market values and advertising, and core Buddhist monastic values of altruism and renunciation.

Throughout this book, Caple engages individual cases and communal debates not as instances of purely strategic economic or political calculation nor as matters of merely personal decision. Rather, by means of her nuanced ethnographic discussions, she also highlights broader patterns of Tibetan lay-monastic agency in which moral concerns are central and in which moral valuations are complex and dynamic, active as well as responsive. Even where, as Caple acknowledges, Gelukpa monastic actors are negotiating constraints imposed by the state, she argues that this is by no means all they are doing. "As well as negotiating public space, they have been negotiating the boundaries that demarcate the sphere of moral action for Geluk monasticism and monks in the contemporary world" (155).

By thinking about moral boundary-making, especially in her final chapter and coda, Caple suggests an analytic pathway beyond the

conceptual poles of resistance and accommodation, one that allows her both to look, and to see, beyond the state. Centering the agency and efficacy of Gelukpa monastics as members of “multiple and overlapping moral communities,” Caple centers “their negotiation and renegotiation of the shifting moral contours of a rapidly changing social and economic landscape” (167).

Caple’s insightful work should find a broad audience, not only among scholars of contemporary Buddhism, but also among a reading public concerned more generally with how religious communities negotiate political, economic, and moral priorities in the contemporary world. Accessibly and engagingly written, this volume would work well for advanced undergraduates as well as more specialized readers. One might say that this book itself makes a significant moral, as well as analytical, point, in its consistent refusal to de-center Tibetan priorities in all their moral force and complexity.

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