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*Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives.* Edited by Frank J. Korom. St-Hyacinthe (Quebec): World Heritage Press, 1997. Pp. 230. ISBN 1-896064-12-4, US \$19.95.

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Remarkably, 1996 and 1997 witnessed a minor explosion of important new books and articles closely related to the topics discussed in the work under review, *Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Frank Korom. This book is one of three newly published volumes of conference proceedings devoted to questions concerning international representations of Tibetan culture, the ambiguous position of Tibetan exiles, and the changing Western consciousness of Tibet (see also T. Dodin and H. Rather, eds. *Mythos Tibet: Wahrnehmungen, Projektionen, Phantasien* [Köln, Dumont, 1997]; and F. J. Korom, ed. *Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora* [Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997]). Together, these volumes represent some of the first mature fruits of a relatively new research development in the scholarship on Tibet and Tibetan peoples, and one that had few major precedents prior to Peter Bishop's *The Myth of Shangri-La* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Bishop's study was about Western constructions and representations of Tibet and Tibetans in literature. However, many of the same issues of cultural construction and representation have also begun to be addressed ethnographically in relation to ethnic Tibetan societies. A good example is found in Vincanne Adams' *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Recent books like *Constructing Tibetan Culture* and these others embody a new development in Tibetan Studies primarily because they exhibit a keen interest and admirable fluency in current theoretical frameworks germane to the study of culture, identity and representation. Six of the seven essays composing *Constructing Tibetan Culture* are informed to some degree by the works of the gurus of contemporary cultural studies, literary theory, transnational studies, diaspora studies, certain (predominantly American-inspired) branches of cultural anthropology, and French post-structuralism. Such a willingness to engage with the agendas and larger critical frameworks represented here is something only very recently evident in Tibetan studies. The introduction and the essays in *Constructing Tibetan Culture* are all articulate, well-informed and cleanly edited pieces. They will satisfy the specialist but also engage the interested lay reader. They represent a selection of papers originally presented at the conference "Tibetan Material Culture in Exile" (Santa Fe, 1995).

The collection has been sensibly arranged into two coherent and complimentary parts by editor Frank Korom. Part one, "Imagining Tibetan Culture and Religion," consists mainly of historical inquiries into non-Tibetan (American, European, Chinese, and so on) constructs and appropriations of "Tibet" and its religious culture. In his insightful essay 'Lamaism' and the for a construction of Tibet and its "mystical" religious culture. As he traces

the travels of this abstract noun up to the present time, during which a bounded Tibet has disappeared, Lopez offers the sobering conclusion that “even among the partisans of the Tibetan cause, the focus remains largely on the unsited, on the ethereal and transhistorical, on Tibetan religion as the sole legacy, even the irreducible essence, of Tibetan culture” (p. 36). Peter Bishop’s “A Landscape for Dying: The Bardo Thodol and Western Fantasy” analyses the West’s continuing fascination with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Bishop considers the role of the imagination in this process, particularly in relation to how ways of imagining have changed in this present “media-saturated era” (p. 66). In his “Old Age Tibet in New Age America,” Frank Korom discusses the changing role of Tibet constructs in the history of the New Age movement. He concludes that although Tibet enjoyed nothing like the profile of India, China or Japan in the *imaginaire* of the movement, it nevertheless “served as an important metaphysical trope for the construction of an alternative spirituality” because of its more general place in Western culture as part of a “geography of utopia” (p. 85).

The final essay in this part, “Reading Negotiations in the Tibetan Diaspora,” forms something of a transition piece to part two. In it, Steven Venturino explores identity formation in the context of diasporas, which prompts him to ask new questions on this issue in relation to the Tibetan exile community and some modern Tibetan translators and authors (including one writing in China). It is here that the Tibetans themselves enter the picture; from this point on they remain the focus of the book.

The three essays in part two, “Unbound Canons: Aesthetics in Flux,” are ethnographically-based studies of artists, performers and ritual specialists and their works. Keila Diehl considers the complex advent and development of Tibetan exile rock-and-roll in a paper entitled “When Tibetan Refugees Rock, Paradigms Roll: Echoes from Dharamsala’s Musical Soundscape.” Next, Clare Harris’s “Struggling with Shangri-La: A Tibetan Artist in Exile” looks at the experiences of a painter trained in the modern capitals of Lhasa and Beijing who then goes to live and paint in the exile “capital” of Dharamsala. The final offering, “Grids and Serpents: A Tibetan Foundation Ritual in Switzerland,” by Mary Van Dyke, reflects upon the design and building of a Tibetan refugee monastery—the creation of a traditional sacred space and time—in the context of modern building codes and new architectural ideas. Mary Van Dyke’s piece is much less jargon-laden than the others—though every bit as valuable—and its thicker but well-crafted descriptive style makes a satisfying ending to the volume. All of these thoughtful studies should leave us in no doubt about the sheer multiplicity of possible “Tibet” constructions and versions of “Tibetanness” that are continually coming into being, and that are assumed to contribute to a complex

and dynamic “Tibetan Culture.” Refreshingly, there seems to be little room left for the complacent or strategic essentialisms which have often defined both popular and scholarly writings on Tibet. However, while I found all of the essays to be excellent, in the end I was left with some questions which might merit further reflection. These relate to possible assumptions about what exactly “culture” is, where and in what forms it might exist, whether there is a monopoly on its production, and so on.

Considering the Tibetan exile subjects featured in these essays, one notes that they form an unrepresentative group: intellectuals, artists and performers, lamas and administrators, many of whom are concentrated in the small exile “capital” of Dharamsala. And, with the sole exception of a publicly harassed female singer who is relegated to an endnote, the subjects are all male (are there any women in Tibetan exile “culture construction?” we are left to wonder). They are also those persons actively and publicly constructing and negotiating their own versions of Tibetan culture. Recent scholars in this field seem to be attracted by such research subjects and their representations. Partly this has to do with accessibility in terms of language and Western cultural fluency, partly with a willingness on the subjects’ part for the opportunity to represent their own views of Tibet and Tibetans to a wider (even global) audience. In my own experience, most Tibetan refugees are not like these persons, and certainly do not live in Dharamsala, but in rather non-cosmopolitan agricultural and craft communities. They tend to be humble and self-effacing, conservative, often uncritically devoted to their leaders, seemingly as avid about watching Hindi films as attending religious ceremonies, and they have Hindi or Nepali, not English, as their second language. Why are these many Tibetan exiles left backstage or merely out in the audience in the study of “Tibetan culture”? Frank Korom’s essay provides an interesting comparison here as he actually gives voice to his “ordinary” American informants.

Some of the essays do make it clear that sections of the Tibetan exile public as audience and consumers of culture (defined as rock music or paintings) can play a significant role by rejecting, accepting or redefining what is put on offer, and that negotiation is an ever-present factor. A key issue is that of authenticity, which is rightly raised as an analytical concern in various parts of the book. However, our particular selection of seemingly appropriate Tibetan subjects and objects as a window onto the construction of “Tibetan culture” can itself easily become a window back onto our own non-Tibetan standards of authenticity and assumptions about what passes for culture. Our choices as researchers embody our own judgments about authenticity and what is fit to study as culture, where it might exist and in which ways and by whom its production might be monopolized.

Along with its companion publications mentioned above, *Constructing Tibetan Culture* provides us with valuable theoretical food for thought and also interesting data both on modern encounters with Tibet and on Tibetan exile encounters with modernity. This material will form an excellent basis for comparison with what is bound to become another important aspect of this new development in Tibetan studies, the raising of all of the same questions about constructing culture in relation to the modern lives of the vast majority of Tibetans resident within the Chinese state. Although, as yet, not much has been published, this research work is already well in progress (for an articulate example, see Janet Upton's "Home on the Grasslands? Tradition, Modernity, and the Negotiation of Identity by Tibetan Intellectuals," in *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan*, M. Brown, ed. [Berkeley: University of California, 1996]).

Finally, I feel readers might have been better served by a more comprehensive index, although apart from this minor point I found the overall organization and production standard of this book to be excellent.