



Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

Volume 5 1998:453–457

Publication date: 18 November 1998

Tibetan Lives. Three Himalayan Autobiographies. Edited by Peter Richardus. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998, xxviii + 223 pages, ISBN 0-7007-1023-X (cloth), UK £40.00.

In the Presence of My Enemies. Memoirs of Tibetan Nobleman Tsipon Shuguba. By Sumner Carnahan Lama Kunga Rinpoche. Santa Fe: Clear Light Press, 1995, xvii + 238 pages, ISBN 0-9406-6662-6 (paper), US \$14.95.

Reviewed by

Toni Huber

Alexander von Humboldt Fellow

Humboldt University

Berlin, Germany

schrempf@zedat.fu-berlin.de

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu.

T*ibetan Lives* and *In the Presence of My Enemies* are both interesting examples of twentieth century Tibetan biographical writing. Biographies and autobiographies have long been one of the mainstays of indigenous Tibetan literature, as the hundreds of surviving examples testify. The traditional classification of such literature is religious: they are stories of “full liberation” (*rnam-thar*) in the Buddhist sense that the subjects achieve the religious goal, and as such they have a didactic purpose. As Janet Gyatso recently noted, they also often have a polemical agenda in asserting the achievements of certain spiritual masters in contrast to others, and thus they “reflect the competitive climate of Tibetan sectarian politics” (*Apparitions of the Self* [Princeton University Press, 1998], p. 103). Aside from the usual bulk of religious matters and claims, “mundane” material of more general historical or ethnological interest can also occasionally be found in such texts. However, life stories of lay persons which are not dominated by religious concerns, and especially biographies of persons from the lower ranks of society, are rare in traditional Tibetan biographical writings. It is for these reasons that the books under review here are of significant interest.

The early twentieth-century contacts of Tibetans with modernizing colonial societies in Asia, and later with Western societies during the exile, have led to the development of a new wave of biographical writings, of which *Tibetan Lives* and *In the Presence of My Enemies* are examples. Two salient features of these new biographies are that they frequently result from collaborative efforts, being written, compiled, or edited together with non-Tibetan (mainly Western) authors, and they are written specifically to present Tibet and Tibetans to the outside world. While members of the former aristocracy and the religious elite have been quick to adopt this new form of biography, a number of “ordinary” persons’ stories have also appeared. It is these often frank life stories which have opened up new vistas on a pre-colonial (that is, pre-1950s) Tibet seldom, if at all, represented in previously-existing sources. All such writings, regardless of their social origins, also have their own polemical intentions, which closely reflect modern Tibetan social and political concerns. These range widely from countering either earlier colonial prejudices or later Chinese propaganda about Tibet, to exposing gross inequalities in the old society or presenting it as a pre-modern “Shangri-La,” to the ongoing promotion of the Tibetan form of Buddhism and its various “great masters” for missionary purposes.

In *Tibetan Lives*, Peter Richardus offers us edited versions of three life stories whose original composition was a direct product of a colonial knowledge-gathering practice current in India in the 1920s: collecting na-

tive life stories, or, in this case, getting the natives to record their own. While stationed in Calcutta as the General Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the Dutch orientalist Johan van Manen (1877-1943) requested three of his literate native employees to record their autobiographies in Tibetan language, and then to render these into English. Significantly, one author, sKar-ma Sum-dhon Paul, states specifically that he has chosen to write in the “colloquial” (*phal-skad*) instead of the “classical” (*chos-skad*) Tibetan language which the overwhelming majority of earlier religious writers used for biography writing. Both Tibetan and English versions of the texts have been preserved in Dutch museums, and we are in a position to compare them with Richardus’s new presentation. It is clear that these stories have become successively abbreviated in translation and editing compared with their Tibetan originals. This is regrettable, as every detail they contain is (or could be) significant for students of Tibet. A typical instance of this is found at the beginning of the English version of sKar-ma Sum-dhon Paul’s life which mentions in passing that he had siblings (p. 79), while the original Tibetan gives the full names of each of them (*Karmayirnamthar*, I, R.v.V. Br 79-M69A, p.1).

Be that as it may, these three autobiographies are packed full of details about turn-of-the-century Tibetan life (confined mainly to the Himalayan borderlands and Central Tibet) which will fascinate some readers and provide new research materials for others. Of perhaps greater interest are those interludes during which the authors reveal their unique positions between two worlds, of being ethnic, traditional Tibetans but serving under and living on the fringes of British colonialism. Throughout his account, Phun-tshogs Lung-rtogs, a monk, is openly critical of the degraded morality and ignorance of the Buddhism he witnesses in Tibetan monastic institutions of his day (for example, see p. 44). The Tibetan authors consider the British to live up to their religious ideals more than the Tibetans do. Although each of them must confront Christianity and make some effort to personally understand or engage with it, ultimately all three authors opted for their own familiar Buddhist faith. sKar-ma Sum-dhon Paul criticizes the brutal and arbitrary nature of the Tibetan legal system compared with that of the British, and states: “I considered myself very fortunate to have been born on British territory [near Darjeeling] thereby not falling under Tibetan laws” (p. 108). On the other hand, he is quick to defend Tibetans and their customs against the bizarre misconceptions some colonial writers had published (for example, on p. 100). These three life stories are supplemented by original plates and clear maps, plus an interesting set of naive sketches which accompany Ts’an-chih Chen’s account.

In the Presence of My Enemies is the result of very different modern

influences upon Tibetan biography. It is the product of a ten year collaboration between Tsipon Shuguba, a layman and former finance minister in the pre-modern Lhasa government (the subject) and his reincarnate lama son, both of whom have lived in exile in the United States, and a professional American writer. There are now a growing number of Tibetan exile biographies like this, based upon the open interview method, with the Western scribe-editors producing a smooth product for final publication (this same basic approach is in fact not too different from that used to compose many traditional biographies and autobiographies in pre-modern Tibet).

Compared with other such biographies of members of the exiled Tibetan elite now available, which are often sanitized and suspiciously free of uncomfortable memories, *In the Presence of My Enemies* is welcome for its frankness and even-handed representation of both the positive and the less palatable aspects of the old society. The author bares details of his past which many Tibetan men would be too embarrassed or ashamed to dig up again in their old age. However, this is done in a sensitive way which only generates respect in the reader for the humanity of Shuguba. Insights into traditional social relations from a masculine point of view are seldom encountered in this type of literature, but here we learn of how such things as marital affairs, including having a mistress (pp. 109-111), are managed, how Shuguba's brother falls into an obsessive love affair with a Lhasa woman named "Mad Dog" and must be "rescued" by concerned family members (pp. 78-85), and also of the dream life of Shuguba and his family and how they interpret dreams as "signs" significant for social (rather than religious) life.

A constant theme is the highly competitive nature of the Lhasa government bureaucracy, through the ranks of which Shuguba gradually advances during his career (though not without setbacks and challenges). His official service takes him into the arena of some of mid-century Tibet's most poignant historical and political moments, including the storming of the rebellious Reting Monastery by the Tibetan army, Chamdo during initial Chinese military advances into Eastern Tibet, the Chinese bombardment of the Norbulingka palace, and the occupation of Lhasa. Although these incidents are now fairly well known, Shuguba's account provides the perspective and detail of an eyewitness. Some of his memories are of relevance to contemporary concerns, such as those of the religious crisis over the Dalai Lama's banning of the worship of the Tibetan Buddhist deity Dorje Shugden; Shuguba recounts earlier manifestations of the same problem in the early 1940s in eastern Tibetan monasteries (pp. 92-93). He is not without his biases, and usually the editor has allowed these to remain obvi-

ous. Non-specialists will of course have to read between the lines to critically consider what is taken for granted by these writers. For example, as an aristocrat and government minister, Shuguba had three sons who were recognized and enthroned as incarnate lamas — a completely normal occurrence in that day. But herein lay the mechanism for the successful reproduction of class and monopolization of power which supported the pre-modern Lamaist state. These are the same social features which Chinese Communist reformers went to extreme lengths to try to eradicate completely from Tibetan life, and Shuguba's account of his long years of imprisonment with hard labor and his witnessing so much destruction (chapter ten) are a testimony to the agonizing incarnation of modernity on the Tibetan plateau. The text is complemented by excellent original photographs.

As both historical documents and works of literature, these two books are recommended reading for anyone interested in twentieth-century Tibet and its encounters with external forces of change.