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*Spirited Women: Gender, Religion, & Cultural Identity in the Nepal Himalaya.* By Joanne C. Watkins. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Pp. xii, 347. ISBN 0-231-10215-1 (paper), \$ 18.50

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This is an impressive book that examines common assumptions about the universality of Western constructions of gender and power. Joanne Watkins, in her ethnographic study of the Nyeshangte, an ethnic Tibetan Buddhist group from north central Nepal, acknowledges the shortcomings of western analytical categories (equality/inequality, domination/ subordination) for understanding the social reality of non-western men and women. Watkins describes Nyeshangte notions of gender in terms of a fluid continuum of traits rather than as mutually opposed categories. Nyeshangte society offers individual men and women a wide range of choices that vary with an individual's age, seniority, and household resources—"variables that are often more important than gender per se in shaping individual lives" (140). She maintains this focus on individual lives ("traders, nuns, kick boxers, and assorted others") while exploring the larger issue of how this small community has preserved its traditional culture and an egalitarian social organization despite the changes brought about by migration from their rural homeland to the urban areas of Kathmandu, Singapore and Hong Kong. Her study persuasively argues that the case of Nyeshangte women refutes the assumption that when small-scale societies are incorporated into global market economies women become subordinated through the devaluation of their work and their social status. She demonstrates that the power of Nyeshangte women has increased in recent years as the Nyeshangte struggle to reconcile their Buddhist beliefs with the aggressive demands of the free market economy.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One ("Kaleidoscope") serves as a general introduction and prepares the ground for book's focus on gender. A society's gender system is closely associated with its central institutions, which for the Nyeshangte are international trade and Buddhist religion. These two institutions define Nyeshangte highest goals and provide avenues of social power for individual men and women. "Individuals, Watkins reports, "may exchange some of their trade profits for prestige and religious merit by making donations to the monastic community, building Buddhist monuments, or sponsoring village celebrations and religious performances" (5). She explores in subsequent chapters the historical and cultural forces that have shaped Nyeshangte egalitarian gender relations, and the impact of social change (migration to Kathmandu and exposure to Hindu and western capitalist values, for example) on these relations.

Part Two ("Transformations at Work") looks at the economy and gender-based work practices. Watkins maintains that Buddhist perspectives on the nature of work and traits of a good person have influenced the development of egalitarian gender relations. Nyeshangte believe that good people avoid sinful behavior (lying, stealing, killing, vices of greed, selfishness

and laziness), bring their minds under control and develop compassion and wisdom in equal measure. They raise their children in an environment that values cooperation, nurturing, and kindness. This prevailing ethic which values similar qualities in men and women enables individuals freedom to pursue their own ends (44-52). Since no cultural prohibitions restrict women's mobility to immediate village area or to their own homes and courtyards, women take on agricultural and pastoral responsibilities, and engage in craft production and petty trade. Individuals are seldom barred from specific occupations, although few women engage in international trade or the "risky business" of smuggling and the black market. Women who cross gender boundaries, do so because of personality characteristics: "they have minds like a boy's" (92). Success in international trade has enabled some families to maintain permanent residences in Kathmandu; the land they leave behind allows women who want to remain in the village to earn a living farming. The increase in female-headed households because of urban migration and the frequent absence of men engaged international trade has strengthened Nyeshangte women's role in village society.

Watkins examines the social arrangements that play a role in structuring gender relations and in preserving the egalitarian quality of Nyeshang life in Part Three ("Social Realms"). The preference for marriage within the village, the relatively late age of marriage, lack of concern with controlling female sexuality, the "processual" nature of marriage (the time between the initial stages of marriage and final rites varies from a year to five years or more), and the ease of divorce all contribute to Nyeshangte women's ability to effectively control their own lives (112-19). Most divorces take place in the early stages of the relationship; there is no loss of social status and most women remarry successfully. Nyeshangte women insist that domestic violence is unheard of ("No man would dare beat a Tibetan wife"); and Watkins observes that Kathmandu newspapers seem to indicate that "only young Hindu women had a predilection for ingesting rat poison or catching on fire while cooking dinner"(124). Adult women are perceived by men (and themselves) to have the moral authority to uphold Nyeshangte values and notions of what constitutes a good person. Women's networks are channels for the redistribution and circulation of material and labor resources to any poor Nyeshangte villagers (149-150). Both urban and rural Nyeshangte take pride in their willingness to look after the well-being of elderly and of handicapped individuals by donating food, labor, and money. Watkins concludes that women's support of traditional economic and social practices in the homeland, such as labor exchange groups formed during agricultural season, and ritual ties formed during spring and harvest festivals "constitutes a form of resistance against cul-

tural and social forms associated with urbanization, global market economies, and the state, with its dominant Hindu order” (170). Their actions ensure that the homeland remains a welcoming haven for urban dwellers who return.

All members of the Nyeshangte community regard adult women as preservers of the traditional Buddhist values. The oral history of Nyeshang related in part four (“Enduring Visions”) explains the genesis of women’s religious authority. Nyeshangte women were first to receive and embrace the Buddhist teachings brought by Tibetan lamas. Their initial acceptance of these teachings is seen as evidence of their innate virtue and their inclination for doing good works. Men, however, are more inclined to be immoral, violent, and fearless—characteristics derived from their warrior-hunter forebears (203-13). Increasing numbers of young women drawn to the prestige of a religious vocation have revitalized the monastic tradition in the Nyeshang valley. The exodus of monks attracted by lifestyle, wealth and adventure of international trade has at the same time created new opportunities for these nuns. The scarcity of monks and the increased demand for ritual specialists from villagers who commission rites (with trade wealth sent back by their urban relations to be converted into “spiritual capital”) permits nuns to assume the ceremonial roles traditionally held by monks. Lay women’s generous support of local Buddhist institutions also contributes to the vitality of religious life in the valley. Watkins concludes that women’s increased involvement in religious activities in Nyeshang and in Kathmandu “has prevented any loss of prestige or authority and offset any gains made by men, given the increasingly male dominance in international trade”(251).