



Identität in Exil. Tibetisch-Buddhistische Nonnen und das Netzwerk Sakyadhītā. By Rotraut Wurst. Edited by H.-J. Greschat, H. Jungraithmayr, and W. Rau. *Marburger Studien zur Afrika- und Asienkunde* Series C, vol. 6. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2001, 314 pages, ISBN 3-496-02711-8.

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This work is a revised doctoral dissertation whose main topic was to document the self-understanding of Tibetan Buddhist nuns as experienced in the Indian exile. Rather than focusing on the institution of the nuns' order or on individual monasteries, the study attempts to gain insight into the individual nun's understanding of her identity as part of the community of nuns united in the network of *Sakyadhītā*. The author intends to acknowledge the Tibetan nuns as speaking subjects by rendering their interviews verbatim. The book consists of twelve chapters: an introduction, a survey of existing research regarding Buddhist nuns and lay women, the cultural atmosphere of the 1980s, interviews as a research tool, the nunnery at Tilokpur, interviews at a Mahāyāna Buddhist nunnery, and complementary interviews, as well as a conclusion, appendix, glossary, list of abbreviations, and bibliography.

In the introduction, the author probes the theoretical ramifications of women in Tibetan societies as well as the institution of nuns encased within patriarchal structures. She sees in the nunneries — created in the Indian exile — a sanctuary where the nuns, marginalized as such within the traditional Tibetan monastic system, can develop their own group identity. Furthermore, the author asserts, the network of *Sakyadhītā* provides a platform where ordained nuns meet non-ordained but religiously active women in order to enhance their group identity. In the formation of such networks, the author sees the seeds for cultural innovation and transformation by asserting the subjectivity of Tibetan woman and Buddhist nuns. In my concluding remarks, I shall address to what degree the author has succeeded in demonstrating that this is the reality of contemporary Tibetan nuns' lives in the Indian exile.

The author adopts a feminist position throughout her work, which she foregrounds with a survey of existent research regarding women and nuns throughout the history of Buddhism as well as a summary coverage of various Chinese, Indian, and Tibetan sources referring to the ancient kingdom of women. In her discussion of the mythologized feminine, Wurst relies exclusively on secondary sources, a fact that sometimes results in an over-interpretation of the texts as well as in a negligence of sources that would modify the somewhat simplified picture. For instance, her assumptions about a conflict between the newly introduced Buddhism and the indigenous Bon religion is supported only by now-outdated sources. An engagement with more recent research presented by Samten Karmay and Ann-Marie Blondeau is missing. Equally simplistic is the rendering of Langdarma, the last of the Tibetan kings (assassinated in 842) as persecutor of Buddhism only, while recent research presents a much more diversified picture of a conflicted ruler. The lengthy introductory chapters that attempt to provide the reader with a historical and religious context for the subsequent interviews of Tibetan nuns distract

from the real value of the book, that is, the numerous interviews with Buddhist nuns of Tibetan descent. These introductory chapters are caught in a dilemma of conflicting disciplines: history of religion, feminist theories, anthropology, Tibetan history, and Buddhist Studies. The author avoids addressing these conflicts and utilizes sources from these different disciplines indistinguishably.

A survey of the events that lead to the creation of the nuns' network *Sakyadhītā* is informative and most welcome. In this section, the author utilizes and subsequently synthesizes various often hard-to-find publications, newsletters, and pamphlets issued by different groups addressing a consciousness raising among Buddhist nuns. Based on this material, Wurst develops a coherent picture of this nascent movement. The dominant attitudes among the Tibetan Buddhist monks become apparent when Wurst reports that the plans drafted in 1991 to call a monks' council to discuss the possibilities of re-introducing full ordination for nuns of Tibetan Buddhism still await realization a decade later! Not only did the order of monks embrace delaying tactics; the nuns sometimes refused to participate in activities that would enhance and improve their status, such as participating in public philosophical debates.

The interviews with the nuns in three different exile nunneries are the core of the book. Wurst presented the nuns with a structured interview because, so she says, the nuns were reluctant, if not unwilling, to tell their life stories and share their opinions about the roles of nuns with a foreigner. It is impossible to summarize the various voices of the interviewed nuns. But I was struck by the overwhelming tenor of these interviews exhibiting a self-deprecating attitude that took it as "natural" that reincarnate *lamas* have to be male, that not only women but also nuns are inferior and powerless creatures. Although the author tries to extricate a "feminist" identity among these nuns, some of them use "he" as a generic pronoun referring to their fellow nuns. Equally astounding is the common

assumption that monks are by nature superior to nuns because they are men, not because they are more learned (because their monasteries provide better education). The nuns' main concerns are the observation of the monastic rules, whereby they rank the disciple's obedience to her teacher as the highest, followed by abstention from killing and sexual attachment or acts. The nuns' responses invite an analysis against a background of critical theory and feminist theories, which, however, the author does not provide.

The book offers unique material: dozens of interviews with nuns of all ages living in the Indian exile. However, the reader who knows little to nothing about Tibetan nuns and Buddhist monasticism will find an array of diverse information, not always based on the best sources, that confuses rather than informs. The author tries to synthesize several distinct methodological approaches — feminist theories, sociology of religion, history of Buddhist Tibetan monasticism, and culture in general — but fails in this attempt. Although Wurst refers frequently to "feminism," she never details which branch of feminist theories and methodologies she would like to adopt in assessing the findings of her field studies. In the introduction (p. 23), she points out that the network of *Sakyadhītā* provides a worldwide framework within which Tibetan nuns can experience a new identity and find positive role models. However, in the paragraph concluding a discussion of this network of nuns and non-ordained Buddhist women (p. 246), Wurst admits that the work of *Sakyadhītā* rests on the shoulders of a few nuns and Buddhist lay women who are either European or North American women or who received a Western university education. Why did the author not reflect on this discrepancy? If *Sakyadhītā* claims to bring together "the daughters of the Noble One (i.e., Buddha)" and promote their objectives, why is the organization run by Western nuns and lay women? The interviews substantiate the impression that Western-style feminism is foreign to almost all Tibetan nuns and that it often is met with blunt rejection.

Although some of the Tibetan nuns admit an eagerness to increase their learning, they remain ignorant of the economic basis that could provide improved schooling for them. The clerical as well as economic superiority of Buddhist monks and reincarnated *lamas* is for these nuns a fact that cannot and should not be questioned.

Wurst mentions various analytical methodologies and usually relies on one or two authors of the field, but she does not apply these methodologies to her own findings. Theory and facts remain segregated. Furthermore, the different methodologies are not brought into a fruitful discourse with one another. How does Buddhist feminism (for example, Gross) affect and call into question the approaches and assumptions put forward by the sociology of religion or the history of Tibetan Buddhism?

The author's initial assertion that the network of *Sakyadhītā* as well as the exile nunneries provide a nurturing environment in which Tibetan nuns can develop a new and more assertive identity as religiously active women is defeated by the nuns' own statements. Although the book provides unique and otherwise unobtainable data, that is, the interviews, it fails in its intent to establish a feminist analysis and reflection on how the interviewed nuns construct an identity in exile that has embarked on a path of a feminist assertiveness. Furthermore, the lack of synthesis and coherence across the various chapters is a significant drawback.