



Donald Lopez Jr. *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, Hardcover 272 pages, ISBN 0226493105, US \$25.00; Paperback 284 pages, ISBN 0226493113, US \$14.00.

*Reviewed by*

Tsering Shakya  
*Fellow in Tibetan Studies*  
*School of Oriental and African Studies*  
ts35@soas.ac.uk

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In the first episode of the American situation comedy “Dharma and Greg,” one of the characters asks the protagonist why she was named “Dharma.” She responds by saying that “my parents wanted me to be a Tibetan.” Apparently, the next best thing to being Tibetan is having a Tibetan-sounding name. This seems to illustrate the general American infatuation with all things Tibetan. Donald Lopez recounts a long list of references to Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism that have filtered into western popular culture. Today, the Dalai Lama’s smiling countenance appears in advertisements selling Apple computers, and Tibetan monasteries form an alluring backdrop for perfume ads in glossy magazines. In the last few years we have seen a Hollywood onslaught on Tibet. Donald S. Lopez’s *Prisoner of Shangri-La, Tibetan Buddhism and the West* is a history of this phenomenon.

Modes of representation of the “other” have become a pressing academic subject since the publication of Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), which address the fundamental way in which European culture has treated and represented the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. While many of these studies tend to concentrate on areas with which the West has had a direct colonial encounter such as India, Africa, and the Middle East, Tibet has remained outside the scrutiny of

post-colonialist discourse. There is a faint assumption that Tibet is immune from orientalist discourse, perhaps because Tibet was never annexed by a western power. However, it is erroneous to postulate that territorial conquest alone defines western imperialism. In fact, because it lay just above the “jewel in the crown,” British India, it was inescapable that Tibet would loom large in the British political and cultural imagination.

Donald S. Lopez’s treatment of the subject is a welcome departure from the usual approach to Buddhism in western academic studies. Here, the focus of study is not on Tibet but on the West and its romantic fascination with Tibetan Buddhism. Lopez writes that the point is not to posit a more “real” Tibetan Buddhism against the one constructed by the orientalist, but to draw attention to how images of Tibet, and particularly Tibetan Buddhism, are constructed in western culture (p. 13).

The book shows clearly how western attitudes to Tibetan religion vacillate between revulsion and attraction. The very act of naming the religion betrays the constructor’s mental conditioning. The early western travelers, who were mainly missionary and colonial adventurers with a purpose, were repelled by what they saw as demonic faith, but at the same time the piety of the Tibetans appealed to them as conducive to receptivity to the Christian faith.

Lopez’s first chapter is entitled “The Name.” Whether in the natural sciences or in phenomenal experience, naming becomes a means of understanding, of making the unfamiliar comprehensible. Lopez shows that earlier writers misleadingly borrowed the Tibetan term “lama” and appended “-ism.” Protestant chauvinism chose that term to signify “the corrupt priesthood,” as Catholicism was viewed by European protestants and Anglicans (p. 17). In the process of classifying, indigenous view is discounted as either unscientific or irrelevant. Today, the term “lamaism” has been more or less discarded in the academic field; nevertheless, it still creeps into popular literature and there is a residual trace in western perception that the religion of Tibet is a debased form of the original Buddhism. Today, this debate has openly resurfaced among Chinese sociologists and academics and it has incensed the Tibetans.

Early western writers perceived nothing but corruption and superstition verging on demonology in Tibetan religion. It was impossible for them to believe that the West could learn from Tibet. However, by the beginning of this century a complete shift in western attitudes had occurred. Lopez traces the history of publication of the misleadingly-titled *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which he terms “the book.” It is true that more than any other Tibetan text, *Bar do thos grol* has exercised a particular fascination in the West, and attracted many westerners to Tibetan Buddhism. The first Eng-

lish translation was published in 1927 and the reprint of 1935 carried a commentary from none other than the occidental deity Carl Jung. This no doubt made the text legitimate and sanctified it.

Tibet was mythified by travelers and visionaries like Alexandra David-Neel and Lobsang Rampa, alias Cyril Hoskin, who seized upon one particular aspect of Tibetan religion and made it representative of the whole. Thus every Tibetan is a lama and a guardian of deep spiritual knowledge. Lobsang Rampa's books became very popular. His authority was derived from his alien name and his readers believed that they were hearing the real voice of Tibetan Buddhism. His claim to authority alarmed a group of western scholars who, Lopez tells us, hired a private detective to expose the impostor (p. 110).

Even before "the book," others had turned Tibet into a repository of wisdom and enlightenment. It was the spiritual center for a host of fringe religious groups that emerged in the West, notably the theosophical movement led by Madame Blavatsky, whose wisdom was communicated to her by means of telepathy by a Tibetan mystic in the Himalayas. Later still, "the book" became required reading for a new generation, and new translations appeared with new meanings posited. A recent rendering by Sogyal Rinpoche has sold in the hundreds of thousands in many languages.

While Lopez presents a compelling story, it was never explained clearly why this shift in western perception occurred. What was it about Tibetan Buddhism that appealed to the western mind? Is it the "otherness" and the "exotic" which snared so many into the prison of their construction? Or is it through "otherness" that the West finds itself anew? These are the larger sociological questions which need to be addressed if we are to understand the romance of Shangri-la. There is no attempt to trace the milieu in which Tibet, in particular, was mythologized and embraced. Is it the decline of western humanism, dissatisfaction with modernity, and lost certainty which gave Tibetan Buddhism a special place in the western mind?

There was a parallel development in the academic study of Buddhism, which has accorded Tibetan Buddhism new respectability and posited it as one of the universal religions of the world. The field has brought its own problems. There is a friction between the world of the practitioner and the academic world, both seeking authenticity. For the practitioner, the Buddhist centers dotted over America and Europe are the seat of authentic Buddhism, while the academics are treated with suspicion. The academics see the converts as a disaffected generation lacking in rigorous academic scrutiny.

One of the solutions provided by Lopez's own teacher, Jeffery Hopkins, is to attempt to recreate traditional monastic curriculum and teaching meth-

ods within the confines of occidental academia (pp. 165–167). Today, Tibetan Buddhism provides comfort to the New Age philosophy embracing ecology and spiritualism, while at another level, it has become a religion of practice, busily converting disused churches and old manor houses into Buddhist centers inhabited by Tibetan lamas. The Dalai Lama’s teachings are attended by thousands in cities across Europe and America. Practitioners are catered to by a minor industry that has grown up around them, selling Tibetan items from charm boxes to meditation cushions and ritual implements. The publication of Tibetan Buddhist books has uprooted small forests and consequently killed thousands of insects. One hopes that the merit accumulated by the faithful practitioners will alleviate their combined negative merits. With Buddhism as an object of study, sacred texts are dissected by men in white coats and put under the microscope of western rationalist exegesis.

Lopez notes that the early phase of the infatuation was initiated by travelers and mystics who revealed the “hidden knowledge” of Tibet, but this changed with the flight of the Dalai Lama, along with hundreds of lamas who quickly found a fertile soil in which to plant their roots (pp. 185–186). Tibetan lamas appeared in western universities and centers. Now, hundreds sit at their feet to hear their authentic voice. The Tibetans were quick to realize that their religion could be exported and repackaged to suit the eager western audience. Lopez implies that Tibetan Buddhism was made palatable by de-emphasizing the esoteric elements and highlighting the humanistic, rational and universal themes (pp. 185, 200). Tibetan Buddhism was a friendly raindrop in the spiritually parched landscape of the western world. This made Tibetan Buddhism fashionable and provided a ready-made solution to the complexity of modern life.

Lopez charts the development of this interest, which he sees as an imprisonment, where the students and their gurus are both “the inmates and the guards.” It is the totality of the prison system which provides a new world and meaning; moreover, the prison regime is pitted against the outside world.

Recent unsavory developments in Tibetan Buddhism — the Karmapa controversy, the issue of the Panchen Lama, and Shugden affairs — have once again brought the esoteric and mystical elements to the foreground. Now, the converts are so thoroughly immersed in the belief system that they are prepared to engage in street battles. Lopez’s book is not about Tibetan Buddhism, and readers who are seeking a guide to spiritual development will be disappointed. However, those interested in western popular culture and imagination will find this book highly readable and sometimes even humorous.