

Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet. By Jane E. Caple. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 218. \$65.00.

In the study of China, the state invariably looms large; the state is not only the main temporal unit of much sinological scholarship, but the state-society question is a key theoretical framing device as well. This is even more so the case when dealing with issues related to the so-called minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少數民族) in terms of historical “China,” but especially in terms of the People’s Republic of China, so much so in fact that all too often almost everything—from religion to education and birth rates to video gaming—is interpreted along an axis of “accommodation” and “resistance.”

Thus, on one level it is easy—and no doubt correct—to argue that the current revival of Buddhism in Tibet is a local means of resisting the hegemony of Chinese modernity. It is also no doubt correct—and just as easy—to observe that many of the facets shaping this revival are in fact defined by the dictates of the Chinese Communist Party. As a result, making such arguments really tells us nothing new. As Marshall Sahlins has pointed out, the accommodation and/or resistance framework that drives so much scholarship in the modern academy can “cover any and every historical eventuality.”¹ So, by default, it actually offers little in terms of explanatory power, much less in terms of theoretical insight. And as such it invariably plays its bit part in the ongoing demise of the humanities.

These are no doubt weighty issues, and thankfully Jane Caple deftly engages with them in her fascinating ethnography of the ongoing monastic revival in northeast Tibet. In particular, she does so by shifting the focus away from the state to local questions of morality. Or in other words, by focusing on questions of right and wrong—in all their complicated and contradictory aspects—her work opens up the particulars to the universal. And central to this project is how Tibetan moral values are not only historically contingent (and thus shaped by such unavoidable realities as Communist Party policies), but also an ongoing process of negotiation. Or as she explains:

[M]y interlocutors’ conceptions of the good were related to their experiences of the world, including the judgments and evaluations of others, and to the way in which they mediated and interpreted these experiences as social and moral subjects. Moreover, they were not operating within a closed system of meaning or in relation to just one clearly defined moral community. They were relating to multiple moral communities imagined at different levels (local, translocal,

¹ Marshall Sahlins, “What Is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 281, no. 1 (1999), p. v.

national, universal). What they felt to be “good” in one context or relationship was not necessarily “good” in another. Attempts to do what seemed to be “right” could open up new moral dilemmas. Not only do such contradictions thicken our understanding, showing the complexities, ambiguities, and ambivalences of local moral worlds, but that can also . . . make visible central moral assumptions. (p. 9)

And it is by unpacking this moral universe through the lens of monasticism that Caple is able to explore the changing assumptions that define Tibetan ethics during a time of unprecedented social transformation.

To this end it is vital to understand the historical context in which these moral debates are situated. As such it is possible to say that in the area where Caple did her research—Repgong and western Bayen in what is now Qinghai province—the monastic community has experienced four distinct historical phases. The first is invariably the idyllic benchmark of the pre-1958 era; the second is the nightmare of the Mao years (1958–1979); the third is the explosive revival that occurred during the liberalization of the 1980s; and the fourth and ongoing period begins in the late 1990s and in essence is grappling with the forces of neoliberalization. Indeed, as Caple points out, for many Tibetans the pre-1958 era and the 1980s are now conceptualized as essentially the same moral universe, while the Mao era and today’s neoliberal authoritarianism are two wholly different ones. And key to this most recent shift is the introduction of free market ideology—especially the rhetoric of “self-sufficiency”—into the millennia-old lay-monastic ritual relationship based on the theory of karma and the production merit.

Thus, as Caple reveals, it was largely this earlier moral system—and its “web of monasticism” related to local communities funding “their monasteries” (p. 34) through alms collections—that fueled the explosive growth of monasticism in the 1980s. So much so that “by 1997 there were more than 3,000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, 120,000 Tibetan Buddhist monks, and 1,700 reincarnate lamas in China” (p. 24). And by large measure these developments—and their financial costs—were apparently supported by the traditional Buddhist logic of *dana* (giving), most notably through annual “alms tours,” during which monks would canvass their local communities for donations. Whereby the laity, who understood the moral logic of this relationship, supported the re-establishment of their local monasteries.

However, with the introduction of free market ideology—and Beijing’s assertion that alms collecting was a form of “coercion”—the inherent “value” and “goodness” of this system was challenged. In a neoliberal age of individualism and economic self-sufficiency, what had earlier been understood as a foundational soteriological blessing for both oneself and the community was now instead interpreted as an economic “burden,” something bad. Monastics, therefore, had to come up with new ways to

support themselves, which invariably entailed entering the market. They then not only went back into the old monastic tradition of moneylending, but also opened shops and medical clinics, and started engaging with the tourist trade.

Doing so was invariably a moral quandary. Yet as Caple shows, while monks may have initially grappled with the righteousness of these issues, they eventually came to justify them as good. And, thus, while it is clear that one driving force fostering these changes was the mandates of the Communist Party—and more broadly the neoliberal world order—that is not how it was explained by the monks themselves. Rather, they had their own threefold moral logic. They first noted that Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India—with the blessing of the Dalai Lama and his embrace of Buddhist modernism—had become self-sufficient through business and tourism. And if the exiles could do it, we in Tibet should do the same. Similarly, at this time of widespread marketization, there was also an increase in so-called fake monks, who were only in it for the money and preyed on the unwitting, and the age-old tradition of begging had become tainted. Thus, to be good monks, they argued that they had to be self-sufficient. And even more importantly, since monks believe that they are the soul and core of Tibetan culture and identity, it is vital that they not only continue to exist, but that in doing so they are also good moral subjects. It is only from the position of virtuousness that both monasticism and, thus, the Dharma, as well as Tibetan culture, can survive the onslaught of Sinicization.

With this new moral order established, monks, therefore, entered the market. Whereupon they quickly realized that one avenue to achieve all these goals was through tourism, since it could not only bring in money, but also showcase Buddhism and thereby potentially “convert” visitors into pilgrims. Yet, as the case of Kumbum Monastery confirms, this was a fool’s game. So much so that nowadays Kumbum—the birthplace of Tsongkhapa, the founder of Gelukpa Buddhism—is now a cautionary moral tale of tourism run amok by immoral money-grubbing monks. Indeed, as many leading monks—including those who pushed for self-sufficiency in the 1990s—came to realize: tourism is morally bankrupting. Not only does it make the monastery beholden to outside agencies (e.g., the Chinese Communist Party), but it also, by default, turns the monastery into a museum—a dead relic—rather than a living Buddhist community. In short, by becoming enmeshed in tourism and the market world, monks were no longer really monks. Thus, by not living up to the high ethical demands of monkhood—which is the very reason they are both respected and worthy of financial donations—these market-oriented monks had lost their socio-religious “value.”

With their reputations in tatters, monks realized they had new moral problems. And this was not only in terms of ethics, but also in terms of monastic enrolment and retention. The number of monks in both exile and Tibet has been steadily decreasing since the boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Of course, this decrease is not solely the result of perceived moral turpitude. Rather, as with the falling number of Catholic

nuns, there are a whole host of reasons for the decreasing number of Tibetans entering the monastic order: from lower birth rates to secular education to the social and economic transformations wrought by global modernity. Nevertheless, for many monks—even those who initially supported the drive for self-sufficiency—they now realize that they have lost their moral standing in the community. And, as such, the very foundation of the ritual relationship between monks and laity is at threat, since the “normative basis and efficacy of the ritual relationship are predicated on the faith of the person requesting the service and the virtue and power of the person providing the service” (p. 108).

To rectify matters, leading monks in Qinghai are now advocating a return to education and discipline. Or, as one could put it: make monks moral again. And in making this argument, the monks do so not in terms of their own survival, but rather for Tibet as a whole. Since, by their logic, it is only through them that Tibetan identity and culture will survive. As they see it: it is only faith in the Dharma that makes them Tibetan. Thus, it is only through the continued existence of monastics—and the lay-monk ritual relationship that defines Buddhism—that they can hold off being subsumed within the maw of Chinese modernity.

Whether this is true can certainly be debated; however, it does segue into the next set of moral questions that Caple explores, namely how to enrol and retain monks. As noted above, the numbers are going down; thus, this is not simply a demographic and moral exercise. Rather, as with the question of self-sufficiency, the monks—and lay Tibetans as well—are looking for answers beyond their local traditions. In particular, they are exploring whether the Tibetan tradition should adopt some of the practices of Theravada monasticism, such as monkhood not being a lifetime commitment. Or else, to actually insure commitment, why not raise the age limit of acceptance to eighteen? Or, even more broadly, some are even questioning whether in this day and age mass monasticism is viable, much less sensible? Indeed, how about quality over quantity?

These questions remain far from answered, but it is these questions as well as the very future of mass monasticism that are the focus of this book’s penultimate chapter. And as this chapter makes clear—as do the preceding chapters and their moral arguments outlined above—the question of Tibetan monasticism is not only an ongoing project, but also one that ties in with a host of larger ethical issues, such as questions of religion and secularism, education and culture, identity and economic systems, which are obviously questions pertinent to many beyond the realm of north-east Tibet. Thus, by exploring in rich ethnographic detail how one community has dealt and continues to deal with these issues in terms of an expanding moral universe, Caple shows us how and why Tibet is good to think with.

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