Kim on Wu, 'Common Ground: Tibetan Buddhist Expansion and Qing China's Inner Asia'

Review published on Wednesday, December 21, 2022


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Commissioned by Lucia Galli

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58269

Lan Wu's Common Ground: Tibetan Buddhist Expansion and Qing China's Inner Asia provides readers with a novel perspective for comprehending anew the role and location of Tibetan Buddhism in the formation of Qing Inner Asia. Built on a wide range of primary sources ably situated within relevant theoretical frameworks, the book argues that the development of Tibetan Buddhism in Qing Inner Asia was not the result of a top-down program of the Qing central government but the outcome of flexible and mutually influencing negotiations between Qing and Tibetan Buddhists to find their "common ground."

The main body of Common Ground contains four chapters bookended by an introduction and an epilogue. Chapter 1 focuses on two campaigns, the first military and the second missionary, to show that the early eighteenth century ushered in a new era for the Qing's advance into Inner Asia and the activities of Tibetan Buddhists. Chapter 2 centers on the imperial temple in the capital city, Yonghegong, which served as a site for manufacturing and exchanging Buddhist knowledge as the Qing expanded its Inner Asian territory. Chapter 3 takes the reader to Dolonuur, one of the nodes for multicultural activities on the verge of Inner Asia, the Buddhism-related functioning of which led it to become a hub for art production and commerce among Inner Asian travelers. Chapter 4 introduces and examines imperial house members whose agency in the mutual influence between Tibetan Buddhism and the Qing attests to porosity in any binary distinction between Inner Asian and Chinese ways of governance.

Reminiscent of Richard White's masterpiece The Middle Ground (1991)—although the author neither mentions the work nor acknowledges any influence from it—Lan Wu's book engages with current trends in studies of Qing China and Tibetan Buddhism that seek to overcome monolithic perceptions and metropole-centered approaches. In particular, the author's attempt to deconstruct some prevailing but ill-considered notions deserves attention. For example, her critique of the excessive reliance on Qianlong and his Imperial Preceptor (i.e., Changkya khutukhtu) in studies of Tibetan Buddhism during the Qing is perceptive. In chapter 4, perhaps the strongest part of the book, the author eloquently argues that the center of the Qing dynasty had been affected by its territorial expansion into Inner Asia, and that members of the imperial house played significant roles in the process of cultural exchange in their capacity as officials and lay practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.
Lan Wu astutely uses a wide range of primary sources, and in her theoretical apparatus the author weaves a range of secondary source materials—many from outside the fields of Qing history and Tibetan Buddhism—to place her work within larger scholarly discussions.

The book is full of new aspects too. An account of Dolonuur (chapter 3) has long been a desideratum for scholars of Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism in Qing Inner Asia. Exploring not just the site's two imperially sponsored Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, the author also details its commercial significance in art production, which expands our understanding of Qing cultural exchanges. Highlighting imperial house members such as Gombjab, Yunli, and Yunlu (chapter 4) and putting them together in a discussion of Tibetan Buddhist influence at the heart of the Qing empire is a novel and ingenious scheme.

Despite its contributions, however, the book also leaves much to be desired. What follows are a few issues worth noting.

Although Lan Wu persuasively challenges metropole-centered viewpoints in Qing studies and introduces the antithetical presence of the Ganden Podrang government, her conceptualization of the Lhasa regime seems to be itself reductionist in casting Lhasa as a metropole of its own. It is true that the year 1642 marks a triumph for the Ganden Podrang government, but the subsequent history of Tibet maintained pluralistic characteristics denominationally and politically. For instance, Derge's cultural development (described in chapter 4) was due to its Sakya, Kagyu, and nonsectarian positions, against which the Gelug regime stood. Amdo's eighteenth-century ascendance was indeed dominated by Labrang monastery, as correctly stated in the introduction, but its establishment was caused by its founder's split from the Lhasa regime. Similar reductionism is observed in the author's emphasis on monasteries and trülkus as the main agents for the formation of the common ground. While no one can deny these institutions' significance in the historical process, they were only a small part of the picture when we account for the wider, non-institutional Buddhism beyond the monasteries and the Buddhist scholars who did not have trülku status but earned their reputation by their scholarship per se. In chapter 3 the author even goes so far as to claim that monastics were studying under erudite trülkus in the monastery. However, not all the trülkus were necessarily good teachers and not all the erudite teachers in monasteries were necessarily trülkus.

Chapter 1 uses two "campaigns" to narrate the relationship between the Qing and Tibetan Buddhists, yet the nature and status of those two "campaigns" are obviously disparate and incongruous, and, as a result, their presentations are incompatible. The military campaign against the so-called Lobsang Danjin's Rebellion of 1723 was a one-time event even if it had ongoing ramifications, while Tibetan Buddhists' missionary campaigns were repeated actions that stretched over centuries. The military campaign was a well-organized and meticulously planned—and as a result also well-documented—operation led by the central Qing government, while the missionary campaigns were a dispersed and often leaderless enterprise pursued by individual actors whose records are comparatively difficult to trace. Probably due to these difficulties, chapter 1 gives the impression of lacking detailed accounts for Tibetan Buddhists' missionary campaigns, which, if provided, would have struck a good balance to the story of the military campaign.

As for the "manufacturing" in Yonghegong temple (chapter 2), it seems that the real core of the issue—namely knowledge and its production—has not been fully addressed. It would have been much
better if the author had dealt with a definition and category of Buddhist knowledge within the tradition and its evolution for the period under discussion. Without any exposition of such aspects of the knowledge in and of itself, it seems hollow to follow how such knowledge was manufactured and transmitted. In a similar vein, a more detailed examination of the process of knowledge formation in the academic activities at Yonghegong temple would have been desirable. What were the yearly curricula for the four monastic colleges at Yonghegong? What were the everyday teachings for those Mongolian monastics at the temple? Similar considerations apply to chapter 4, in which the written works of imperial house members are at the center of the narrative. The chapter keeps emphasizing the Buddhist knowledge transmitted through those writings, but the full aspect of the knowledge these works contain should have been addressed, rather than simply revealing how the ambiguous-at-best knowledge was transmitted. If not going so far as to trace genealogies of "knowledge" in the works, at least providing topic lists of the writings by each actor (i.e., Gombjab, Prince Guo, and Prince Zhuang) would have made the book more complete.

Minor typographic errors and more fundamental misunderstandings also exist in the work. The reviewer lists them below with the hope the author can rectify them in a possible future revision.

In a number of endnotes, the author does not provide specific page number(s) to guide readers to original sources even though they do not appear to be referring to whole monographs or articles. To make matters worse, some endnotes provide incorrect page numbers that made it impossible for this reviewer to find relevant information (e.g., p. 180n28: Zhao, 154; p. 182n61: Nietupski, 132; p. 182n69: Nietupski, 110; p. 190n57: The Third Tukwan, 140). There are also some simple typographical errors, such as “1670s” (to be amended to “1760s”) on p. 21; “Labsang” (to be amended to “Lobsang”) on p. 49; “Shanyi” (to be amended to “Shanyin”) on p. 87; “1734” and “1736” (to be respectively amended to “1634” and “1636”) on p. 126; “vommander” (to be amended to “commander”) on p. 139; “Qianlong emperors” (to be amended to “Qing emperors”) on p.142; “Hung” (to be amended to “Huang”) on p. 165n10.

There are also some cases of misinformation seemingly caused by the author's misunderstanding. For example, the author keeps referring to the large-scale monastery in Jianzha (Tib. Gcan tsha) county as “Lhamo Dechen,” but it should be “Lamo” (or Lāmo), which originated from the name of a valley located northeast of Lhasa and an oracle found therein (e.g., pp. 43, 51 figure 1.3, and 229).

Also, some biographic information should be corrected for the Seventh Dalai Lama's exile in Kham, as the exact year he entered Gartar (Tib. Mgar thar) was 1730, not 1728, since the Dalai Lama stayed in Lithang for one year after leaving Lhasa in early 1729 (p. 79). Similarly, the prince Guo Yunli's arrival in Gartar was in early 1735, not 1733, and Qing's decision to send the Dalai Lama back to Lhasa was not because it was "aiming to restore the power of Dalai Lama" but due rather to Pholhané's shrewd and successful management of Tibet and its relations with the Zunghars (p. 135).

The author's use of the terms "Qinghai" and "Amdo" is sometimes confusing and gives misleading geographical information as a result. For example, the author claims that "the new Qing prefecture was named Qinghai," yet the prefecture (Ch. fu) was never called "Qinghai prefecture" but "Xining prefecture" after the renaming of the Xining guard post (Ch. wei) in 1724 and maintained its name up to the end of the Qing dynasty (p. 35). The translated quotation from Nian Gengyao's report reads "monks in Amdo's monasteries," but the original wording for "Amdo" in the source is tellingly
“Xining” (p. 37).[1] These inaccuracies might seem trivial, but the author's arbitrary switch between terms hinders an accurate understanding of certain historical geographical concepts.

Some further minor errors: "Qianlong" was not a temple name—which was "Gaozong"—but an era name (Ch. nianhao); Yonghegong is not located within the palace but in the northeastern part of the capital city; Tongkhor is located not in an "eastern" but in a "western" suburb of Xining city (pp. 59, 60, 181n50).

All in all, although its proposed aims are promising and its theoretical framework noteworthy, Lan Wu's work has a great deal of room for improvement not only in its argument but also in the meticulousness of her source provision and cross-checking.

Note


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