
Encountering Tibet: The Ethics, Soteriology, and Creativity of Cross-Cultural Interpretation

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DONALD LOPEZ'S *Prisoners of Shangri-La* is a book about encounters. As is standard for the genre of critiques of orientalism to which it inescapably belongs, the encounters charted are not merely between the West and another culture (in this case Tibet) but also between the West and the West. In contrast, encounters *within* the culture in question, that is, between Tibetans and Tibetans, largely fall outside of its purview. We thus have encounters between the public and the academy, between Christians and Buddhists, between occultists and religious studies professors, students and professors, Tibetans and non-Tibetans, Tibetans and their western-mediated doubles, and ultimately the West and its own fantasies of an encounter with Tibet that perhaps never takes place. These encounters are cultural in character, such that the book is a meditation on the nature of culture or, more accurately, on the encounter of cultures. Finally, this meditation is framed by ethical reflections pertaining to our interpretation of another culture, particularly one in a politically fragile situation.

THE ETHICS OF CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

The book's central argument is that the western encounter with Tibet—at least as reflected in our literary discourses—has been largely not

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about Tibetan places and cultures with all their particularity but, rather, about the inversion of place, the universalized no-place that Tibet inhabits in our fantasies, aspirations, and fears. The author divides this encounter into two historical phases: (1) an initial period of demonization of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly by missionaries and other colonial agents; and (2) a subsequent period of glorification of Tibet during the twentieth century as the last bastion of an ancient wisdom tradition. The author links these two phases in a common trajectory of idealization that elides an encounter with Tibet as a distinct culture with its own history, agency, illumination, and darkness. The author thus raises ethical and political questions that pertain equally to both interpretive tendencies.

Most controversially, he calls into question the validity of contemporary presentations of Tibetan society as a lost paradise, which must idealize and distort Tibetan culture to repress its own darkness, its own internal problems and deficiencies, so that it becomes more than human but also, perhaps, less than human. He argues that such cross-cultural interpretation idealizing a culture can have ethically problematic and politically damaging effects, no matter how well intentioned. Thus, Tibet is rendered into “a service society for the white race, preserving a wisdom that originally belonged to it but in the meantime had been lost”; it “becomes increasingly symbolic, ethereal, and epiphenomenal, a surrogate society, even a sacrificial victim” (Lopez: 201–202). It is “a surrogate state, a fantasy for the spiritualist desires of non-Tibetans” (206), where “Tibet operates as a constituent of a romanticism in which the Orient is not debased but exalted as a surrogate self endowed with all that the West wants” (202). The author goes even further to suggest that these fantasies, these doubled Tibetans, are increasingly beginning to dominate even the horizons of refugee Tibetans. As they create a “culture” (199) in the most impoverished of western senses, that is, as a bounded zone with essentialistic characteristics, their own cultural memories, constructions, and representations have become contaminated with our predatory fantasies. In one of the most provocative sections of the book, he extends this analysis to the Dalai Lama, suggesting that this process has heavily influenced the Dalai Lama’s own presentation of Tibetan culture.

Shangri-La thus signifies this idealization of Tibet, both demonic and angelic, and constitutes a prison that we and Tibetans—at least those in exile—are both forced to inhabit. For the author, it denies Tibetan culture its own representation on the world stage, undercuts attempts to help Tibet politically, and even exercises a corrosive effect on the integrity of Tibetan culture itself. The author thus sees his role as performing an uncomfortable critique to suggest another path we might follow whereby Tibet’s history, darkness, reality, and agency are retrieved. He suggests that

it is a more ethical scholarship than the immediate rewards of repressing the negative aspects of Tibet. He also suggests that realism has political advantages, for fantasies always end up betrayed, shifting from today's anchor to another cultural anchor, as it is the fantasy and not the actual culture or people that is important. His inquiries are driven by a fear that, in our indulgent encounters with ourselves through the terrain of an imagined Tibet, actual Tibetans are lost in the equation, the sacrificial victims required for the creation of our own excluded demonic other in an earlier century or a hoped-for utopia in the just passed twentieth century. Finally, there is an implicit argument that this stance pedagogically impoverishes us as well, for we deprive ourselves of the chance to learn from an encounter with the otherness of another culture, instead only using that culture to view ourselves in an imperfect mirror.

At times the book seems to suggest a cultural version of the Kantian dilemma, namely, whether we can ever encounter the culturally other or perhaps only make the gesture of tracing the vanishing horizon of an encounter that always recedes to the far shore of the other, demarcate the boundaries of our knowledge, and acknowledge its limits. Thus the book's title, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, defined in its framing introduction and final chapter, suggests that the ultimate terrain within which this encounter takes place is at once the no-place, Shangri-La, in which we place Tibet and a prison within which Tibetans and Westerners are mutually trapped. So the promised, dreaded, and dreamed of encounter only "takes" its place nowhere in an amorphous site of absence created through the sacrifice of Tibet itself, a grim prison where Tibet and Tibetans are constrained by chains of foreign manufacture, indeed of our own manufacture from the linguistic flotsam of fantasies that are largely western in origin: Made in Europe or in the USA. It suggests that the boycott of Chinese goods might profitably be expanded to a boycott of our own cultural exploration, or exploitation, of Tibet.

THE SOTERIOLOGY OF THE FILE

What, then, is the constructive vision of *Prisoners of Shangri-La*? What would be a more adequate way of encountering another culture? What is a contrasting vision of Tibetan studies? Does the book offer a vision beyond the unmasking of a problem? An initial indication of the book's task, and its hope, lies in the introduction's concluding on an eschatological rather than pessimistic note, though it is a characteristically postmodern eschatology. It begins by characterizing the task of the book as epistemological, namely tracing "how knowledge takes form." Lopez offers us neither a vision of life outside of the prison nor a key to its padlocks; rather,

he offers the possibility that "hidden in [the book's] pages . . . some may find a file with which to begin the slow work of sawing through the bars" (13). It is an eschatology modest in scale and contrasts attractively with the eschatological visions of Tibet offered by the series of Westerners chronicled by the book.

What is this file both hidden and revealed within the turning pages of the book, and how might we assess its value? Clearly, at some level the file is a reflexive and historically informed inquiry into the nature of cultural construction and interpretation on the multiple sites of Tibet, whether the agent in question is western or Tibetan. How is knowledge created? It is a hermeneutical question, and while its agenda may seem modest, it is one of peculiar power in a field of prolific cultural activity in the West remarkable for its lack of self-reflection, hermeneutical caution, and sense of the local origins of cultural meaning. In the rush to attack, defend, and appropriate Tibet, Tibet and Tibetans have often been lost in a cultural shuffle that has far more to do with ourselves than anything else. In the current portrayal of traditional Tibet as an enlightened zone of peace and idyllic paradise devoid of religious strife, disease, and neurosis, Tibetans are denied their own multiple places in history, which is created in the interplay of dark and light, conflict and community, doubts and resolution, similarity and difference. They exist only as an ideal and, thus, in an important sense do not exist at all.

The author's file is a gesture toward giving us Tibet as something that resists us, that differs from our projections, fears, and hopes, as well as allowing Tibetans to emerge as complex agents of admirable and reprehensible motivations. And he does so by tracing the manifold ways in which we have denied that difference and complexity. It is an important gesture of not converting Tibet into a place having problems for which we have the solutions or having the solutions for problems that we pose but, rather, revealing it as a culture with its own complex histories of problems, solutions, and the troubled and inspiring lives that transpire on the bridges between.

TRACES OF A MORE GENUINE ENCOUNTER

Because the book is largely about the West, and not Tibet itself, its promised file appears to be the deconstructive clearing of a space for new inquiries and encounters rather than actually articulating the structure of that space. And yet the book does offer glimpses of this clearing. Strangely, they are clearest in "The Eye," a chapter that weaves together the academic and the popular, the West and Tibet, in a highly reflexive encounter that throws each side of the equation into question with humor and insight.

In this exposé of the most outrageous of all fantasies about Tibet—that of the British son of a plumber who claimed in a series of best-selling books to be the transported soul of a Lhasan aristocrat named Tuesday Lobsang Rampa—the author takes the occasion suddenly to interrogate his own authority and place vis-à-vis Tibet, imagined or real, and put his credentials into conversation with specifically Tibetan notions of authority, legitimacy, agency, and, indeed, *history*, with their assumptions of reincarnation, emanation, and multiple identities. It is a moment of encounter between the academic and the rest of his or her culture and between Euro-American and Tibetan assumptions. The chapter critiques western academics in their ideological assumptions and daily practices, and it does so in part through Tibetan conceptions and practices regarding death, birth, and identity posed as a counterpoint. It creates an uncertain but genuine encounter that crisscrosses fluid cultural boundaries in an exchange mediated through the seminal—if also farcical—figure of Tuesday Lobsang Rampa.

In the same vein, I would quote the conclusion of chapter 2, which links western reinterpretations of Tibetan culture to traditional Tibetan revelatory practices:

But, ironically, perhaps each of these modern interpreters was in his own way traditional. For the Tibetan work called the *Bar do thos grol* is a treasure text (*gter ma*) said to have been written long ago, in the eighth century, during a time when the people of Tibet were unprepared to appreciate its profundity. So it was hidden away, only to be discovered six centuries later. Even then it was revealed to its discoverer in the secret dakini language, a kind of code that only he was able to decipher and translate into a public language. It was necessary, then, for the discoverer, finding the text at the prophesied moment, to become a kind of embodied ghost writer, translating it in such a way as to make it meaningful for its time, creating a text that is original because it is already a copy. (85)

This theme of the ghost continues in chapter 3, “The Eye,” in which we are told Lobsang Rampa’s success meant that “the ghostwriter could go on to concoct a story that would allow the ghost to become flesh” (103). After the death of his supposed Tibetan spirit, the British author Cyril Hoskin, “who wanted only to be a ghostwriter, became a ghost” (110), and this “unlaid ghost was left to wander from England to Ireland to Canada.” Because he came to believe he was the spirit of the Tibetan about whom he wrote, “he was not a ghostwriter in this sense, because he came to assume the identity of the one in whose name he wrote” (111). And finally, his corpus in the Occult section of American bookstores often sits side by side, or back to back, with our own academic corpus, a corpus

founded on his sacrifice, and thus “the ghost of Rampa continues to haunt us, sometimes looming behind, sometimes shimmering at the periphery.”

These fulfillments also run throughout the rest of the book, particularly in the manner in which frequent Tibetan narratives and images are interwoven with critical analysis of western cultural materials. Examples are the Kalacakra narrative/prison metaphor and many other Tibetan stories and images used to articulate lines of inquiry. These create a cross-cultural conversation threading its way throughout the book which bypasses the sterile pattern of question posed and answer delivered, particularly in the style of western problems eliciting Tibetan solutions or Tibetan solutions eliciting western problems. Finally, the book performs an important function of identifying in blunt terms the absurdist streams of fantasy that continue to run throughout the academic production of books and knowledge on Tibet. In doing so, the author raises an important question that is at once ethical and political, entirely distinct from purely academic questions of the worth of such materials: does this willful distortion of Tibet which idealizes its past and universalizes its future enhance the present and future welfare of Tibet or damage it? It is a question that runs deeper than the book suggests with its focus on the most outrageous of offenders, for there is a myriad of ways in which academics turn away from the realities of Tibetan past and present in sympathy for the plight of Tibet and Tibetans in the face of the ongoing cultural damage wreaked by the Communist government. It is a question of the boundaries between academic truth and political support, between historical inquiry and religious commitments, between refugee Tibetans and Tibetans living within the PRC, between conservative documentation and interpretive creativity.

QUESTIONING THE BOOK

It is my task, however, to question the book by turning its own ethical and hermeneutical questions back onto itself. There are moments in the text, particularly the conclusions of chapters, when a seemingly non-western Tibet and Tibetans briefly surface and then recede. These form wandering subtexts marking the author's own vanishing horizon, where he disappears into his own discourse, only to reemerge, a troubling cipher posing questions to his own story. Often this self-questioning is admirably explicit, such as the brilliant chapter “The Eye,” yet at other times it seems to wander on the fringes of the author's own textual awareness. It is to these moments and the questions that they pose to the book, from within the book, to which I would like to turn.

The book is an excellent example of both critiques of orientalism and the limits of such critiques, that is, its limitations are inherent to its genre of inquiry. These limitations can be summarized into two overarching points: (1) a tendency to privilege accuracy and earlier meanings over creativity and reinterpretation in assessing interpretation, especially the cross-cultural variety; and (2) a tendency to see contested (mis)interpretive activity and cultural (mis)appropriation as largely a western activity—even if a condemned one—and Tibet as more pragmatic and homogeneous on these points, such that Tibet's own long history of cultural contestation, (mis)interpretation, and cross-cultural (mis)appropriation is obscured.

Both of these limitations are explicitly acknowledged by the author, and yet the course of his text remains bound within them. On the one hand, the ethical outrage at the hermeneutics of exploitation across cultures of unequal political and military strength often undergirding critiques of orientalism—while admirable in its own right—ends up interpretively confining the possibility of cross-culturally inspired creativity. Simultaneously, the hermeneutics of suspicion necessary for such a critique tends to gather momentum and assume a life of its own, making it difficult to say anything constructive, to generalize, or even at times to interpret at all. I agree with the aim of clearing a space beyond new age appropriation for the retrieval of a specifically Tibetan world and agency with all its rich social and political contexts, but the very activity of clearing that space with hermeneutical conservatism and skepticism can result in a paralysis inhibiting any further activity from taking place within its pristine boundaries of negation. I will thus now turn to those passages in the book that seem to call themselves into question—or at least my questioning.

INTERPRETIVE WESTERNERS AND PRAGMATIC TIBETANS

There is a consistent pattern in the book implicitly to portray interpretive agendas—however flawed—as western and to portray Tibetans as more literal and pragmatic in hermeneutical orientation. The academic and popular figures (students, occultists, and the general masses) in the West are united in being intensely interpretive, concerned with issues of meaning, and caught up within hermeneutical and political patterns of contestation that change over time. In contrast, Tibetans are repeatedly associated with a lack of concern for meaning, homogeneity, pragmatism without systematic interpretive agendas on their own part, and a lack of historical contextualization within Tibet itself. It is *we* who interpret, and

there is an element of cultural self-loathing in the book for our fantastical excesses of interpretation; in contrast, Tibetans primarily live their lives. Yet our self-condemnation for patterns of misinterpretation reinscribe our interpretive character, while Tibetans are largely objects of interpretation with a more passive agency. Thus we are in danger of the same old vanishing Tibetan being evoked, instead of a portrayal of a rich and specifically Tibetan history of internal contestation, craziness, and conservatism.

This is most clearly hinted at in “The Book” and “The Spell,” wherein we are told that the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is for Tibetans literally about funerary rites for the dead, but we persist in these highly interpretive attempts to psychologize it via symbolic codes; and that the national mantra *om mani pad me hum* is for Tibetans a hymn to a god which liberates, but we load in symbolic meanings and definitions. At the conclusion of the former chapter, the author argues that for western authors “the [Tibetan] text is always read away from itself; it is always pointing at something else, at a meaning that requires so much elaboration” (85), and that in particular a text socially used as funerary rites has been primarily interpreted by Westerners in terms of the psychological use of metaphors of death and rebirth. Is the author’s criticism that these other social uses of the *Bar do thos grol*—its Tibetan title—are ignored by these contemporary exegetes, or is there a stronger claim, namely, that these highly interpretive, symbolic, and psychological readings of the book of the dead are not traditional at all in their hermeneutical approach to the book? The latter reading is questionable, for not only does this material originate in a highly interpretive, symbolic, and one might even say “psychological” tradition in the eleventh century (the “ground” of being from which these visions flow is identified with one’s own heart/mind, etc.), but even in this later packaging it was understood within the context of these broader materials that surrounded and accompanied it on the ground in transmissions. The author performs an important function by stressing the quite different social contexts of how this book was actually used in Tibet, but his tendency to neglect the fact that these social uses were accompanied by a long-standing highly symbolic use of the text’s doctrine as well is problematic.

Similarly, in chapter 4, “The Spell,” the author begins with a story of Tolstoy about a bishop who teaches three isolated hermits how to recite the Lord’s Prayer. After criticizing western attempts to interpret the national mantra *om mani pad me hum* and instead emphasizing its evidently *original* Sanskrit meaning and its simple recitation practice in Tibet, he concludes with Tolstoy:

In Tolstoy's story, the bishop gazes back at the island as the ship resumes its course. He is startled to see a white light in the distance moving toward the ship at high speed. Looking more closely, he sees that it is the three hermits, hand in hand, gliding across the surface without moving their feet, surrounded by gleaming light. As they reach the ship, they say in unison, "We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. As long as we kept repeating it, we remembered, but when we stopped saying it for a while, a word dropped out, and now its fallen to pieces. We can remember none of it. Teach us again." (134)

Who is the bishop? Who are the hermits? And what is it expressing about interpretation, historical accuracy, misinterpretation, and the boundary of the West and Tibet? The bishop in Tolstoy's story—whatever the author's intention in invoking him—inexorably is associated with both the learned American Professor and the West in general; meanwhile the saintly but somewhat confused hermits are at once the American Occultist and Tibet herself.

There are problems with these two chapters verging on the factual, for the Tibetan Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition in particular has a 1,000-year-old literary tradition of intensely psychological and existential reflection on both "the Book" and "the Spell" into which many of the western patterns of interpretation criticized by the author could be assimilated. This is not to deny the validity of his criticism of those who completely sever Tibetans' literal acceptance of such things as rebirth from their symbolic interpretation, but at times the author seems to be embracing an inversion of this severance, namely, the priority of the literal over the symbolic in the specifically Tibetan reading of "the Book" and "Spell," among other things. In addition, the consistent contrast between the interpretations of western authors—already an elite group—to the pragmatic and limited interpretations of the Tibetan populace at large is problematic.

This line of associations worries me, for the trajectory of the book should be to retrieve a vision of Tibetans as deeply enmeshed in a long and complicated history of their own interpretive, social, and political agendas and machinations, histories both inspiring and depressing. It is not that they lack these but, rather, their cultural arena and the events transpiring within it differ in their details and self-conceptions. Controversies between academics and popular interests, contestation between conservative reproduction and outrageous populist appropriations, and interpretive manipulation overall have a long history in Tibet itself independent of the West and its fantastic doubles. In retrieving the diversity of Tibetan interpretive strategies and contestation, we avoid the danger of deconstructing western misinterpretations of Tibetan culture yet col-

lapsing Tibetan manipulations of world opinion into an ironic and ultimately passive complicity with those misinterpretations. Otherwise it seems the West poses problems and Tibet refuses our questions, leaving Tibetan culture faltering in the balance, without its own internal interpretive excesses and dialect of difference.

THE INTERPRETATION OF INTERPRETATION

At times a certain nostalgia for origins and fatigue with the unfortunate necessity of interpretation surface in the book, fatigue at the constructedness of human culture, despite the concern in other parts of the book to move away from these bugaboos of western discourse. What I have in mind is a tendency to prioritize Tibetan cultural phenomena in an originary or at least earlier meaning and view with suspicion later constructions or alterations, especially if the interpreter in question is non-Tibetan. And yet this interpretive conservatism at times seems also to attach to Tibetans' own culture in itself, as revealed in the emphasis on the "original" meaning of *om mani pad me hum* in its Sanskritically correct grammatical explanation, the "original" intent of the Kalacakra mythos, the original meaning of the *bla* in *bla ma*, and the original funerary sense of the *Bar do thos grol*. Common to all these is a tendency to see an earlier meaning as more true, authentic, and hence a standard against which to criticize later interpretations.

Now surely this is an issue of which the author is aware, and the book itself suggests the irresponsibility of merely celebrating misinterpretation without a concern for its political and cultural implications, especially when the power relationship is so uneven between the two parties and the interpretation must cross difficult cultural boundaries. Some of the most powerful moments in the book involve its reflexive questioning of its own authority vis-à-vis the target of its critiques or vis-à-vis Tibetans' own quite different conception of power, authority, and legitimacy. Yet the consistent negative tone adopted toward these *misinterpretations* is reinforced by odd moments in the text that suggest a certain interpretation of interpretation that is perhaps not at home with the text's own postmodern sensibilities. Yet this tendency may linger at the very foundation of critiques of orientalism.

For example, at the conclusion of "The Name" chapter, which deconstructs western portrayals of Tibetan Buddhism as "Lamaism," "Tibetans are said to believe that if the *bla*, the soul, leaves the body, the person becomes unbalanced or insane. With the formation of lama from *la*, the original meaning of *la* left lama, causing a loss of equilibrium that resulted finally in 'Lamaism.'" My purpose here has been to attempt a belated ritual

of 'calling the *la*' back to its lost abode" (45). Thus the author seems to suddenly identify Buddhists in Tibet—people who have been defined by their absence within the book—as partial agents in this European defiguration of Tibet under the label "Lamaism," and he then positions himself as the person who surpasses both in bringing Tibet back to itself beyond the mediating interpretations, reinterpretations, and misinterpretations that have alienated it from its own soul (*bla*). What is being said here about the historical process of Buddhism, which suddenly emerges from nowhere? A contemporary Tibetan scholar, Samten Karmay, argues in his *The Arrow and the Spindle* that historically Buddhism did precisely this to Tibetans, namely, deprive them of their soul (*la/bla*), that is, their self-assertion, sense of national identity, and so forth (x, 429, 447). In many ways Karmay seems to be arguing implicitly that Buddhists in Tibet had already begun this process of idealization and universalization that sapped Tibet of its own national vitality long before western fantasies began. Is the author here alluding to such a concept by suggesting that Buddhists in Tibet had already primed the pump, so to say? And what might be our agency as western scholars in retrieving a soul Tibetans evidently lost long ago? How does a ninth-century Buddhist reinterpretation of an ancient Tibetan word, *bla*, lead to Tibet's disfiguration by European imperialists? Even if the author embraced a conception like Karmay's, surely it requires argumentation beyond this causal allusion. What is the connection, except perhaps submerged skepticism about the inevitability and volatility of interpretation itself? Why should we fix on this Tibetan group, at this time, and with this interpretation as having primacy over others? "Reading away" from the text is one side of interpretation, and Tibetans were doing it to *The Book of the Dead* long before Timothy Leary ever fixed it in his drug-enhanced, or drug-blurred, gaze.

This raises hermeneutical issues pertaining to the reinterpretation of traditions and the validity of those reinterpretations. What is truth amid these constant interpretations that destabilize and pluralize a so-called tradition? And what is truth in historiography in relationship to this, especially once the changing interpretations become bound up with our own cultural encounters? An alternative vision the book hints at is a celebration of the artifice and its continuing truth—and the creation of Tibet in a series of encounters, by Tibetans as well as by ourselves. This suggests that all we have is creations out of encounters and their constructions, even if at times these creations pose dangers and go astray. These wandering subtexts lead us to the interpretation of interpretation, a hermeneutical question. What is the value of interpretive accuracy and mistakes and the ethical questions that hover over each when the interpreted lies in another culture, particularly a politically fragile one? What

is this unspoken complicity between academics and occultists, between we scholars who “correct” (Lopez: 107) with footnotes and scholarly references pervaded by fear and loathing and who authorize ourselves via our own lack of popularity, ascetically denying students what they want, and our own hidden, guilty pleasures?

The author is led by admirable ethical considerations to an interpretation of interpretation at odds with his own sensibilities but one to which orientalist critiques seem often to bring us. I admire his intuition that a Bakhtinian celebration of the carnivalesque quality of interpretation may be fine in theory but in practice can fail to address the ethics of application when talking across cultures that are politically unequal. Yet I would also note a counterpossibility—and one opened by the book itself—that such ethical concerns can trivialize the importance of cultural misinterpretation as well as undercut the internal agency and diversity of the culture one is trying so urgently to rescue or protect. Thus I would point to an ethical questioning that challenges the book, as a partner to its own ethical questioning of other books charting our encounter with Tibet, so that we might swing the rhetorical pendulum back to the undecidable point to which the book’s questions rightly call us.

TIBET’S OWN ENCOUNTERS

The book’s own references to a practice of ongoing revelation known as “Treasures” (*gter*) lead us back to the eleventh century, the temporal home of its origination. Indeed, the wonderfully and tragically insane twentieth-century romance of the West with Tibet evokes eleventh-through thirteenth-century Tibet itself as it underwent a dramatic cross-cultural encounter of its own, namely, with India. We have the same crazies with their visions, misrepresentations, and outrageous distortions of Indian Buddhism—the nudies, the four children of Pehar, the Star King, warlord lamas, promises of self-liberation, and flying books and *vajras* from outer space (see Martin for some of these references). And we have the same outraged voices of moral superiority, cultural critics, and conservative academics like Sakya Pandita and his ilk (see Jackson). Perhaps the scale is grander than today’s dharma centers and university classrooms, but again we have a culture (India) that is being culturally translated and fantasized in another culture (Tibet) and a tremendous debate transpiring about the boundaries between the two. This involves a similar agonistic, charged, and diverse series of encounters and unfinished conversations between Tibetans and Tibetans against the horizon of an encounter with India that often seems *never to take place* (translators who never arrived in India as claimed, Indian “treasures” that never descended from

Indian manuscripts or authors) or takes place in an imperfect, highly constructed, and dialogical environment. Yet, historically, Tibetans' distortions, fantasies, and at times illusory claims of encounter with India resulted in a creative synthesis that surely should be valued. This is not to deny the points of difference—such as a lack of balance in power relations (though one might point to the endangered nature of Indian Buddhists at the time)—or the argument that in our case fantasy has far outweighed accuracy. Rather, I would stress that this is a process already present in Tibet, with a character that questions some of the demarcations between Tibet and the West which the book draws to try to pry Tibet out of the death grip our fantasies have often exercised on it.

And when I think of the religious scene in urban China surrounding Tibetans, my mind goes back to the United States as well as to eleventh-century Tibet (see Germano). It is crazy, frustrating, and often supremely irritating, sometimes deeply sincere and other times clearly insincere; yet it is a charged terrain of cultural understanding and misunderstanding where Tibetans and Chinese, and Tibetans and Indians, encounter each other amid a web of projected fantasies, contested representations, and interpretations spinning in and out of control. In these historical parallels another path opens up that embraces the vigor of Tibetans as agents bent on articulating, and manipulating, self and other on a domestic and international scale, even if economic and military realities at the close of the second western millennium entail that they are often on unequal terms in the resultant encounters. And in this recognition we can begin to recognize specifically Tibetan agencies with their own long history already at work in encounters with the West, engaging in their own subversive efforts at colonization even as China continues to attempt to colonize their bodies, minds, and life forces.

CULTURES AND THEIR BOUNDARIES

The book's tendency toward interpretive conservatism links itself to problematic notions of bounded cultures that it in general is concerned to critique. At the conclusion of the introduction the author says, "The book then is an exploration of some of the mirror-lined cultural labyrinths that have been created by Tibetans, Tibetophiles, and Tibetologists, labyrinths that the scholar may map but in which the scholar also must wander. We are captives of confines of our own making, we are all prisoners of Shangri-La" (13). The book thus begins with the metaphor of a universal high-security prison for understanding cultural encounters gone awry, which in part explains the vanishing figure of Tibet and Tibetans within the book itself. Yet I worry about an implicit portrayal of cultures

as bounded, homogeneous wholes, which such a metaphor unintentionally reinforces and which is also indicated in the specific associations that demarcate the boundaries of the resultant entities labeled "the West" and "Tibet."

The litany of abusive fantasies about Tibet documented by the book could be read as suggesting that cultures are bounded wholes separated by vast abysses and that encounters across the boundaries between two cultures are inevitably bound up with misinterpretation, exploitation, or pure silliness; the participants of cultural dialogue, at least in the terrain of encounter between Tibet and the West, appear correspondingly exploitative, manipulated, or simply foolish. While many of the incidents described in the book clearly fall into one of these categories, I wonder nonetheless about the constructive model of culture, and cultural exchange, that is implicit. See, for example, lines such as the following: "In this way the legendary oral tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, long locked in its Himalayan keep, appeared, as if magically, in a classroom in Charlottesville, Virginia. Tibetan lamas, long absent, were now present" (165). And with the PL 480 collection of Tibetan literature delivered from India to America via Gene Smith and the Library of Congress, "the long mysterious Tibetan archive became, as if magically, manifest in the stacks of American University libraries" (165) in exchange for American wheat to India. One response to a Tibetan monastery being reproduced in the 1980s in the basement of Cocks Hall at the University of Virginia (the locus of the Religious Studies Department) or secret archives manifesting in U.S. libraries for food would be to see something wonderful in these bizarre creations of history across time and place. Yet the book insistently focuses instead on the cultural misinterpretations involved in these events, which it condemns as ethical transgressions linked to missionary and colonial agendas of controlling another culture's representation and agency and political failures undercutting our own attempts to support Tibetan independence.

While I often agree with the ethical critique, and the political issue at least raises difficult practical questions, the litany of negativity directed at misinterpretations does raise the specter of the value of misinterpretation as a vehicle of cultural exchange and a vehicle of cultural processes in general. Admirably, it is an issue the author raises himself, namely, in the final chapter when he refers to Oscar Wilde's promotion of "the art of lying, of making fearless, irresponsible statements that show disdain for proof of any kind" (183), which is "particularly important in art," perhaps also in the art of cultural interpretation. The author thus says, "It is in this sense that we might regard Tibet as a work of art, fashioned through exaggeration and selection into an ideal with little foundations in history" (183). "Art" is contrasted with "nature," with nature often following after

art—art is “incomparable” and “unique,” but nature becomes “wearisome” in its repetition of the innovations of art. The author uses this reflection to segue into a discussion of how refugee Tibetans have become contaminated by western fantasies, saying, “If we extend Wilde’s theory, it would seem that Western enthusiasts of Tibetan Buddhism are more authentic in their Buddhism than Tibetans precisely because they are more intimate with the simulacrum of Tibet that is the invention, that is the artifice. But what happens when the people of such an invented land leave it and come to the place of its invention? This chapter will consider certain of the consequences of the Tibetan diaspora” (183–184). He argues that the central issue is “the historical agency of Tibetans” and suggests that since 1959 Tibet itself is “left with nothing” in its “inside” (184).

Looking at refugee Tibetan populations, and above all the Dalai Lama, the author shows how the themes of the previous chapters—the idealization of Tibet—have been permeated with rhetoric from those parties and suggests they have thus become unwittingly involved in their own betrayal as historically situated agents. In conclusion, he suggests that the Dalai Lama, however, might be playing a “traditional role” (206) and points to his securing of foreign patronage by deploying religious teachings and protection. He suggests, “Tibetans have quite literally incorporated foreigners into their patronage sphere through their own version of colonialism, which might be termed a spiritual colonialism” (206). He then ends on one of the most puzzling notes of the book, referring to the Dalai Lama’s “Kālacakra for World Peace” tours, in which the Dalai Lama associated a tantric teaching with a martial mythos of coercively imposed peace with the contemporary movement for world peace. He ends, thus, “The Dalai Lama may have found a more efficient technique for populating Shambhala and recruiting troops for the army of the twenty-fifth king, an army that will defeat the enemies of Buddhism and bring the utopia of Shambhala[,] hidden for so long beyond the Himalayas, to the world. It is the Dalai Lama’s prayer, he says, that he will someday give the Kālacakra initiation in Beijing” (207).

Is there something wrong with the Dalai Lama reinterpreting the Kālacakra mythos to associate it with contemporary desires for world peace in line with its traditional agenda of “spiritual colonialism”? For the author, is this another brick in the wall of the prison, or does this point to another facet of that promised file? In other words, is this final note one of irony at the complicity of the Dalai Lama with our own corrosive fantasies, and even hinting at sinister agendas, or is it one of hope that Tibetans despite all appearances still retain historical agency and pursue traditional strategies even among the clouds of fantasies and oppression that threaten to deprive them of place? Is this a celebration of the Dalai Lama

exerting Tibetan agency in such a way that impossibly, yet actually, there “is a long term strategy . . . that serves Buddhist universalism, the freedom of Tibet, and the utopian aspirations of Tibetophiles around the world” (207); or should we understand this with a tone of sadness, gentle mockery, or even bitterness and sarcasm? If the author intends the former, why is it that many readers have assumed the latter? Indeed, it seems to me that these concluding pages outline a marvelous persistence of Tibetan agency in the face of overwhelming odds—that they might colonize *us* even as they face possible extinction at the hands of one of the twentieth century’s strongest military forces. And yet the book’s many subtexts undercut this possible reading and instead inexorably pervade the interpretive space with irony, ambivalence, and skepticism.

This is the critical moment of the book because ultimately the file of simple deconstructive reflexivity is not sufficient. We must have an alternative view of the historical and interpretive agency of Tibetans and how that agency can be genuinely encountered within our own academic study of Tibetan religious culture. This view must take into account ethical considerations as well as the need for an undecidable balance between precision and creativity, between the ethical demands another culture places on our scholarship and the demands of our own position within our own culture—in other words, to give both an encounter with an other who stands outside of our frameworks but also to yield part of that otherness and its reproduction to the creative lines of inquiry it might spark within our own cultural arena, even if these lines eventually diverge from the original framework of an encounter with otherness. As a complement to the book’s veins of dark irony and regret, I note the other submerged current hinting at celebration of the glorious and messy exchanges that we have interpreting ourselves and others. While certainly the other sometimes gets lost in the exchange, and often in quite tragic ways, the other and self also stand revealed and constructed, with the line between the two as indistinct as a Tibetan treasure text. Because, while we may never completely know the other, or the thing in itself, communication and knowledge still take place as the other speaks to us.

I would thus suggest that the prison and the file ultimately create a questionable metaphor because the prison becomes a metaphor reinforcing the bounded cultures within which we live. In this sense, we could see Shangri-La as the fabled promise of being beyond culture, a promise that ultimately binds us within the prison of bounded cultures, forever isolated unto themselves. And perhaps, also, there is another vision of these imperfect, partial, confused encounters which places them and us outside a prison, less than pure liberation or pure encounters

with the other, yet more than conjugal visits with a spouse who always recedes from view.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental question is whether the book offers us an alternative vision of cross-cultural encounters or whether its own critique perpetuates the elision of the very encounter for which it hopes to clear an opening. The best place to ask this question lies in the boundary between western and Tibetan culture that each chapter constructs and in the nature of the associations constituting this boundary. In the very act of deconstructing the boundaries of our fantasized Tibet, what is implicitly suggested about the boundaries of the Real Tibet that we might still hope to encounter? The author rightly calls attention to the worrisome portrayal of Tibet as an empty site awaiting resolution by refugees and Westerners. This consistent rhetoric is deeply offensive to the Tibetans who live in Tibet and who continue to represent most authentically the culture—past, present, and future—of Tibet, whatever shape that culture might take. And yet I worry that even as the ghosts of *sprul sku*—reincarnate saints—are allowed their own questioning stance within the book's pluralistic pantheon, Tibetans themselves remain ghostwritten. The ghost haunting the book may thus again turn out to be the vanishing Tibetan, a possibility also raised by the final chapter's focus on refugee Tibet to the exclusion of Tibet itself. Tibetans have been constructing Tibet to and for each other, and for the outside world, for centuries; and this construction has been highly contested, agonistic, and interpretive in conservative and innovative ways. They are not the nature for the art of the West, and the activities of figures such as Khenpo Jikphun (see Germano) or the Dalai Lama can thus be seen as the continuation of this centuries-old practice of Tibetan agency even in the face of the increasingly troubled vicissitudes of their history.

Prisoners of Shangri-La often seems marked, somewhat ironically given its larger thesis, by the vanishing nature of its author, leaving us in some doubt as to his own position, another ghost haunting the margins of the book. It is for this reason that at crucial textual points our interpretive instincts falter, and we wonder as to the author's own positionality and how that might lead us to construe these points. The deconstructive energy and wonderful humor defining the architecture of the book threaten to become deanchored from specific points and become a sarcasm and a sadness that pervade the book. While this danger may be intrinsic to critiques of orientalism at large, it threatens to undermine the very possibil-

ity of the encounter for which the book so eloquently attempts to clear a space.

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