

Book Review

Journal of Global Buddhism 2 (2001): 116 - 118



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**(Traumwelt Tibet – Westliche
Trugbilder.)**

By Martin Brauen with Renate Kolle
and Markus Vock.

Reviewed by

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Book Review

The Twisted Paths of Dark Dreaming (Traumwelt Tibet — Westliche Trugbilder.)

By Martin Brauen with Renate Koller and Markus Vock. Berne/Stuttgart/Vienna:
Paul Haupt, 2000, 296 pages, ISBN 3-258-05639-0, EUR 38.86.

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Dreamworld — Western Illusions represents a remarkable accomplishment. A luxuriously crafted coffee-table book, this also is a historical guide to some of the major myths and misconceptions about Tibet in Europe and in America, as well as a carefully researched update on some of the hottest topics in studies of Western interests in Tibet. In several ways, this volume is complementary, rather than parallel, to similar endeavors in recent years, such as Donald Lopez' *Prisoners of Shangri-la* (1998), Frank Korom's *Constructing Tibetan Culture* (1997), or Thierry Dodin and Heinz Raether's *Mythos Tibet* (1997). While confirming or correcting some of the insights gained by these authors, Swiss anthropologist Martin Brauen and his two collaborators primarily pursue a project of their own in the present volume. Brauen's interests are ideological genealogies. The book therefore focuses on tracing main lifelines of stereotypes and images on Tibet through their various forms, stages, and transformations. The final outcome is reconstructive as much as deconstructive. Brauen cares less than others about (allegedly) Tibetan icons in Western art, kitsch, or New Age paraphernalia. To the great benefit of his readers, Brauen is much more aware than some of his predecessors of the political ideologies encoded inside "Western illusions" about Tibet.

The impressive result is Brauen's critical, historical gallery of quasi-Tibetan, Euro-American imagery, which he has organized along four main periods. Beginning with the seventeenth century, "Utopia" is the era of missionaries and travelers who often went searching for legendary realms, such as Priest John's Kingdom, in Central Asia. By contrast, Brauen's era of "Shambha-La" and its "Aryan Lamas" indicates the influence of theosophy and of its founder, H. P. Blavatsky, reaching its peak in the first quarter of the twentieth century. With biting irony, Brauen shows how stereotypes from a theosophical background, such as "white Lamas," then found their way not only into Neo-Nazi literature, but also resurfaced in much more popular genres, for example, Hollywood movies. In Brauen's classification, this period of "Shangri-La" leads on to the present "Dharma-La" era: the center of sacred Tibet had to move to India and into the West, while Buddhist teaching became increasingly commodified and commercialized. To an extent, Brauen acknowledges, the present era implies some emancipation

from an orientalist legacy. Before, Western imagery spoke instead of Tibetans about Tibet. Today, Tibetans — mostly men, rarely women — have a certain voice of their own in the public commodification of their culture, while the process is expanding around the globe. Hundreds of Dharma centers and thousands of Lamas and monks on all continents testify to that. They have become active agents within a wider, Western Tibet-related industry. This global, industrial Tibet-sector ranges from TV commercials, media reports, cartoons, and the book market, on to Hollywood film productions, tourism, and commercialized forms of religious and sectarian teaching. Thurman's paths to a new "Buddhiverse," in Brauen's opinion, have turned sacred Tibet into a plethora of degenerated market items on sale (Brauen, p.225).

Throughout these chapters, Brauen ruthlessly assesses, compares, exposes, ridicules, defends, and clarifies. Brauen is not a writer of sexy and shallow essays, but by contrast, he is a competent professional analyst. As an American living in Austria, I found Brauen's treatment of the "Harrer affair" and the "Seven Years in Tibet" Hollywood movie (featuring Brad Pitt as Heinrich Harrer) particularly fascinating.

In his Shambha-La chapter, Brauen exposes how Neo-Nazis of all kinds claim a specific, spiritual link between Tibetan Buddhism and Hitler or other leading Nazis. After having meticulously deconstructed that aspect of the story, Brauen moves on to provide readers with the most recent insights on the Third Reich's Tibetan research and its 1938/39 expedition, led by Ernst Schäfer and sponsored by Heinrich Himmler. Brauen shows that although a number of serious questions about the expedition still remain open, its aims primarily were of a war-preparing, military kind. They concerned more refined methods of meteorological forecasting, breeding techniques for super-ponies, and enduring crops for a wartime economy. In addition, the expedition of course pursued the racist kind of research that was inspired by its Nazi patrons. Bruno Beger, today an Austrian citizen living near Salzburg, carried out most of these "anthropological" activities, measuring bodies, searching for skeletons, and speculating about the history of "Aryan immigration into Tibet." Beger later became a leading race expert in Himmler's "Ahnenerbe"; "some evidence indicates that he acquired 115 skeletons of Auschwitz concentration camp inmates for his anthropological investigations in the framework of his Mongolian research. He was primarily interested in Mongolian types, of whom there were only four in Auschwitz, however, which led him to expand his "research" on Jews." (Brauen, p. 81, my translation). A large part of the sources consulted by Brauen in this context has emerged only in the late 1990s, partly as a reaction to the "Harrer affair," most of these sources so far being widely unknown to readers in the English-speaking world. Brauen is explicit and straightforward about Schäfer's and Beger's role, which makes his assessment of Heinrich Harrer even more convincing. It is true that Harrer became a Nazi party and an SS member in 1938, and that he had been a member of the Nazi teachers' association in Graz since 1933, which was illegal in Austria until the country's annexation by Germany in 1938. He certainly was not the noble idealist portrayed by Brad Pitt. Nor can he, however, be accused of personal involvement in criminal activities or of any active anti-Semitic practices (Brauen, p. 179). Until today, it still remains highly doubtful whether Harrer had any connections with Schäfer's and Beger's earlier

activities. In the post-1945 decades, Harrer nevertheless remained silent about his Nazi membership, denied it for a long time, or indulged in rhetorical apologies.

When my American father saw me reading "Seven Years in Tibet" as a boy in the early 1960s in Vienna, he asked me: "So, what do you think about this book by an old Nazi? Isn't it strange that he's so popular these days?" Quite obviously, many people then knew about Harrer's background. But just as in the Waldheim affair, or as in the case of NASA's Wernher von Braun, it seemed advantageous during the Cold War years to officially "forget" the past of Harrer, who had now become useful in new contexts.

Martin Brauen has to be thanked for an important, rich, and path-breaking work. It should soon find its way into an English edition.

References

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