

## Book Review

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*The American Occupation of Tibetan Buddhism: Tibetans and their American Hosts in New York City*, Eve Mullen. New York: Waxmann Münster, 2001, 148 pages, ISBN 3-8309-1053-3 (paperback), EUR 19.50.

Reviewed by Daniel Capper, Ph.D  
*Department of Philosophy and Religion*  
*University of Southern Mississippi*

[u312788@usm.edu](mailto:u312788@usm.edu)

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*B*ased on the author's doctoral dissertation in Religious Studies at Temple University, this short book explores Buddhism among Tibetan refugees in New York City through ethnographic data and sociological analysis. The book focuses upon lay Tibetan Buddhists and their religious and political adaptations to what the book describes as the "occupation" of the Tibetan tradition by non-Tibetan Americans. The strengths of Eve Mullen's presentation include rare ethnographic data from immigrant Tibetans and an exploration of the roles of innovation in religions and in diaspora communities. Problems with the argument include a lack of a coherent methodology for acquiring ethnographic accounts and a need for greater data support for analyses.

The book begins with an account of the Losar celebration of 1998 in Philadelphia, PA, which was sponsored by a local world crafts store. Mullen describes the event as overwhelmingly attended by non-Tibetan Americans and thoroughly commercialized on an American capitalist model. She then describes how non-Tibetan Americans also constitute the majority of attendees at meditation centers. These same non-Tibetan Americans thus absorb the attentions and resources of the monks and lamas, or Tibetan spiritual teachers, who run the centers, thus excluding Tibetans from their

own tradition (p. 6-7). This dominance of non-Tibetans within Tibetan Buddhism in the USA, and the exclusion of Tibetans from it, represents, for Mullen, the "occupation" of Tibetan Buddhism by its American hosts. The rest of the book attempts to describe this occupation and discuss its ramifications for issues such as Tibetan acculturation in the United States, Tibetan refugee identity formations, and innovative movements within Tibetan Buddhism.

Chapter one of the book lays out the methodological tools Mullen uses to analyze ethnographic accounts. For data analysis the book relies considerably on concepts drawn from the work of Anthony Giddens, Stephen Warner, and Margaret Nowak. Giddens' concept of modernity's reflexive self provides the primary sociological framework in terms of identity construction. The work of Stephen Warner provides this book with concepts for understanding the roles of transnational religion in the United States in terms of the New Paradigm or "religious market model." Margaret Nowak's pioneering ethnographic work with Tibetan refugees in India discusses two identity "summarizing symbols" for diasporic Tibetans which Mullen critically appropriates: rang-btsan, or "independence," and the person of the Dalai Lama (p. 27).

Chapter two of the book explores sangha (meaning monks and lamas) and lay interactions in traditional Tibetan Buddhism, as these relationships remain central to the Tibetan cultural innovations that the book portrays (p. 34). The book correctly describes traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic and lay interactions as "complex, nuanced, and interdependent" (p. 42). Traditionally, monastics did not live entirely apart from larger Tibetan society, and in fact sangha members often were active social and political agents.

Unfortunately, the book's points could have been stronger had it defined the role of the lama as a religious teacher, rather than as a reincarnate being (p. 41), and thus more clearly discerned the differing roles of monk versus lama.

As described by the book, the close interaction between sangha and

laity in traditional Tibet has been severed in the American version of the tradition, at least for Tibetans. The sangha suffers from two constraints in New York City. First, sangha members, like all Tibetan refugees, must devote a great deal of time to issues of economic survival and have little time for other things. Second, Tibetan sangha members are overwhelmed by the demands created by their non-Tibetan congregation members who "occupy" the Tibetan tradition. Tibetan lay people, in turn, have no time to seek out sangha members, whom they sometimes suspect anyway of pursuing the power of religious trappings more than true dharma (p. 69). In light of this broken relationship between laity and sangha, lay Tibetans must forge innovative new personal and national identities. Therefore, as a result of foreign "occupation," Tibetan lay people are forced to become more self-reliant and independent in their religious pursuits as they adapt to their host culture.

The book's next chapter treats this process of self-reliant adaptation in more detail in terms of the ramifications for Tibetan identity formation. For Mullen, Tibetans need to innovate both politically and religiously and are doing so by intertwining the two tasks. The fusion of these tasks leads to new lay identity formations centered around nationalism, religiosity, and self-reliance (p. 65). The new lay ideal thematically involves "active compassion" as an innovation of the Buddhist tradition and as it is expressed in active political patriotism. "For Tibetans in America, being Tibetan means being innovatively religious and religiously patriotic" (p. 67). Tibetans understand these new values and practices in various ways, of course, and the book describes how the meanings of independence and the Dalai Lama are contested among immigrants.

The impact on Tibetans of the "simplified, deceptive constructions" (p. 91) of Tibet among non-Tibetan Americans is discussed next. The American occupation of their tradition leaves Tibetans "mute" and "trapped within" (p. 118) an imperialist, Orientalist discourse. The strength of the chapter arises from the author's ethnographic

discussion of Tibet House's presentation of a Tibet that is static, uncontested, and delightfully primitive. Following Donald Lopez, Mullen argues that such portraits of Tibet, even overtly sympathetic ones, actually harm Tibetans by creating impossible expectations.

Chapter five concludes the book. Here Mullen posits that religious continuity is vital for any immigrant community in terms of providing identity and empowerment. Tibetans retain continuity precisely by innovating their tradition, not in spite of innovating it, in their pursuit of "new authenticities" (p. 121). Innovations in the Tibetan refugee sphere, which embrace pluralism and modernity, emerge in response to local identity influences (from the American host culture) as well as global identity issues (resulting from China's invasion of Tibet and the resulting Tibetan diaspora). These innovations especially arise from the widened split between the laity and the sangha. Tibetan Buddhism has adapted by becoming two Tibetan Buddhisms, lay immigrant on one hand and sangha/non-Tibetan on the other, in the United States. The author ends with sympathetic perspectives on the success of these Tibetan experiments with culture and identity (p. 128).

The book offers helpful perspectives. The presentation of the diverse views that Tibetan immigrants hold toward political and religious symbols is perhaps its greatest contribution. Ethnographic narratives from Tibetans about the meaning of independence and the Dalai Lama are especially important, as little has been written about Tibetan refugee perspectives on their diaspora lives.

As well, the presentation of the disengagement between laity and sangha among refugee Tibetans highlights important issues. Mullen's presentation of these Tibetan realities helps to add nuance to our understanding of the applicability of the "Two Buddhisms" model of American Buddhism. In this book, ethnic Tibetans uniquely are split across the so-called immigrant/elite divide, as "occupied" lamas and monks are monopolized by non-Tibetans.

There are problems with the presentation, however. Perhaps the most glaring is a lack of a coherent ethnographic method. We know that the data derives from surveys and interviews with Tibetan and non-Tibetan Buddhists and social activists, frustratingly excepting non-Tibetan "serious American practitioners" who "are not the topic of study here" (p. 48). We know that Mullen interviewed twenty people and had "innumerable less formal conversations" (p. 61). We know that English was used for these conversations with Tibetan occasionally used for clarification (p. 10). Otherwise we know nothing about the gathering or organization of the ethnographic data that grounds the book's conclusions. There currently are many lively debates among anthropologists and Religious Studies scholars about proper methodological approaches to doing ethnography. This book, however, neither mentions nor takes any stands in such debates because it has no overt coherent ethnographic strategy for data collection and organization. Its data thus lacks a certain methodological grounding. This lack of ethnographic method is a problem given the importance, mentioned above, of possessing ethnographic accounts from Tibetan refugees. Further, the author sometimes seems to take Tibetan self-reports at face value, without any hermeneutic of suspicion. Perhaps this impression is an artifact of surveying ethnographic data without methodological context.

In the end this book contributes to our knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism and culture as well as the religious plights of immigrant communities in a helpful way. Further research could capitalize on the efforts of this book through more in-depth research into the religious lives of Tibetan refugees, through a greater focus specifically on the contested lives of Tibetan lamas and monks in the United States, or through an examination of the changing attitudes and behaviors of non-Americans pertaining to Tibetan people and their Buddhism. As well, a psychodynamic exploration of these Tibetan identity issues would provide a useful complement to this more sociological contribution.