




Book review

## Power and Agency in the Lives of Contemporary Tibetan Nuns: An Intersectional Study

By Mitra Härkönen. Equinox Publishing, 2023. 252 pages, ISBN: 9781800503007 (hardcover), \$100.00; ISBN: 9781800503014 (paperback), \$32.00; ISBN: 9781800503021 (eBook), \$32.00 (individual).

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This necessary and extensive ethnography of Tibetan Buddhist nuns living in Tibet, Tibetan areas of China, and India overlays an intersectional analysis of gender, religion, and nationality onto nuns' personal reflections on and perceptions of their religious lives amid social and political subordination. Mitra Härkönen builds on the work of intersectional theorist Patricia Hill Collins, arguing that the relationship between women and religion cannot and should not be reduced to gender. Instead, for the nuns, gender works in tandem with other social categories. To highlight the oppressive side of power as well as the intersections of agency that occupy nuns' experiences, Härkönen divides her analysis of unequal power distribution for contemporary nuns into five parts (24, 204).

In part one, Härkönen mitigates the tension between extreme stereotypes and essentialization of Buddhist nuns as being either “extraordinarily liberated” or “shockingly oppressed.” By applying intersectional theory and method, she underscores that being privileged, disadvantaged, or both at the same time are dependent on women's status, which is variable, relative, and inter-relational (9, 17). Part one concludes with clear contextualization of the different areas in her multi-sited fieldwork, which included forty-nine semi-structured interviews conducted between 2007 and 2011 in traditionally Tibetan regions of Amdo and Kham in the People's Republic of China (henceforward, PRC) and India (29). Härkönen's approach simultaneously avoids essentializing an idea of “Tibet,” while linking differences through shared notions of “Tibetanness” as defined mainly by Tibetan Buddhism, monasticism, culture, and nationalism (35).

Part two features nuns' narratives. Härkönen traces various aspirations behind nuns' ordination, challenges with donning robes, everyday experiences after ordination, societal difficulties, and nuns' adaptability. Härkönen's work extends earlier ethnographic studies that illustrated how the motivation for women to become nuns was called into question (69). Härkönen centers nuns' own descriptions and nuances their mundane and religious motives for ordaining. Her nuns' narratives show how they devote themselves to religious life for numerous, often intertwining, reasons: karma, inspiration from other monastics, “thinking about the well-being of others,” freedom from worldly suffering—especially suffering in lay life, particularly in marriage, motherhood, family needs, and work (68–69). Parental reluctance, family obligations, and the



scarcity of nunneries are among the challenges nuns experience before donning robes. Her interlocutors show how they navigate difficulties and adapt into to practice as nuns.

Regarding full ordination, the monastics in Härkönen's study frame their perceptions around individual capacity rather than technical institutionalized ordination (84). Härkönen's interlocutors commence their lives as nuns by leaving home, cutting their hair, and wearing robes rather than going through a formal ordination procedure, thus decentering ordination status (82). Härkönen reflectively mentions that a long-haired nun makes the differences between nuns and tantric religious practitioners difficult to identify. When noting these subtleties, she thoughtfully reminds the reader of one of the ethnographer's challenges: posing meaningful questions in the moment and contemplating these questions and distinctions in the process of writing. Given the emphasis on full ordination in scholarly literature, her terse weaving of this topic into the end of the fifth chapter leaves the reader wishing for more of the author's insights. It seems, however, that Härkönen wishes to stay true to her project of providing "a voice to a largely marginalized group of Tibetan Buddhist nuns," suggesting that further exploration on the topic of full ordination would detract from the features her interlocutors center in their life histories (5, 35).

Härkönen balances the inspired life stories of nuns with the difficulties they face in Tibet and Tibetan areas of China in her illuminating sixth chapter, "Finding a Place to Stay." This chapter aptly captures the nuances of nuns' communities, illustrating challenges they face in finding a place to stay and live as nuns in Tibet, the Tibetan regions under direct Chinese rule, and India. It also examines the recent intentional establishment and revitalization of nunneries in these regions. Nuns' stories reveal their determined efforts to ordain and practice even when family obligations would require they stay at home, or when faced with an absence of access to institutionalized nunneries. Even without access to local nunneries, nuns practice at home, establish their own smaller communities, travel for teachings to support their practice, or join nunneries far from their familiar surroundings (90–92). One of Härkönen's interlocutors skeptically reflects that China's support for rebuilding monasteries in Tibet was only "a showcase for the world" and not a place for proper education (93–94). Meanwhile, nuns in Indian exile deal with a host of other issues such as the difficulties of founding or refounding sister institutions, like Shugsep Nunnery, outside of Tibet (93).

Härkönen develops and substantiates her intersectional analysis in parts three and four. These illustrate the ways in which power structures are dynamic in nuns' lives (173). Part three examines oppression within the domains of social institutions under Chinese rule, internalized Tibetan cultural traditions, and the crossfire of competing hegemonic ideologies. Under Chinese rule, the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 requires every child to attend school. However, there are large educational gaps between Tibetans and ethnic Chinese. Additionally, there are differential gender practices prioritizing sons over daughters in attending school, but this also intersects with "age, family background, social status, and place of origin" (133–134, 138). When examining oppressive forces of gendered expectations and discrepancies in Buddhist institutions, Härkönen considers both internal Tibetan cultural parameters and external Chinese state monitoring of female religious practitioners. She notes that the most acceptable social roles for women in Tibetan culture are as wife and mother. Many of the nuns she interviewed actively rejected these roles because they saw family life with children as the source of a great deal of suffering. She notes that, "two of the most common reasons for becoming a nun were the avoidance of marriage and motherhood" (142). While becoming a nun offers certain social freedoms, nuns remain subordinate to their male counterparts within the monastic hierarchy itself. For example, nuns are held to different standards of morality and have varying degrees of access to Buddhist education (144, 152). Under Chinese rule, the nuns in traditionally Tibetan regions face a second level of subordination since the Chinese government restricts not only the number of nuns (and monks), but also

interferes with education (145). The nuns who decided to leave Tibet are forced to deal with the issues of living in exile instead of living in the crossfire of Chinese and Tibetan hegemonies (168).

In part four, Härkönen reflects on how her interlocutors may experience the aforementioned oppressive social structures, yet how the intersections of gender, nation, and religion also provide nuns with agency. Härkönen locates and examines three main types of agency monastic status provides: freeing nuns from customary expectations of laywomen, enabling participation in Tibetan nationalism, and facilitating soteriological benefit for oneself and others (174). First, monastic status elevates nuns because of their increasing opportunities for education and freedom from familial obligations. Even amid discrepancies in available monastic education, either because of scarce facilities or Chinese state monitoring, nuns generally have more opportunities and time to pursue studies when compared with laywomen who have to manage working and family life (176). Second, nuns' monastic lives provide the opportunity to practice Buddhism not only for the benefit of others, but also as a cultural defense. Monastic status affords agency in resistance to the Chinese government by either open participation in the Tibetan freedom movement or more subtle forms of support for the Tibetan cause. Thus, being a nun facilitates the preservation and transition of Tibetan religion and culture in the face of Chinese repression and Tibetan modernization (184–185). Third, inspired by Saba Mahmood's work on passivity and obedience as forms of agency, Härkönen renames Tibetan Buddhist nuns' piety as "compassionate agency" (182, 191–192). Her interlocutors spoke of the necessity of their wish to benefit all beings. Their interviews delineated how their lives as monastics best facilitate this aspiration and its embodiment. These modes of agency illustrate how religion influences their lives as women, makes way for their own nationalism and simultaneous cultural preservation, and centers their Buddhist aims to end one's own and others' suffering.

Part five briefly concludes the book with a firm reminder of the multifaceted status and position of nuns who are not "merely women and religious practitioners," but women located within interlocking social and economic positions and ethnic and national backgrounds (208). Among the strengths of this multi-sited ethnography is its balanced, reflexive, feminist approach that observes and accounts for the vulnerabilities and challenges of fieldwork. While Härkönen illustrates often contradictory experiences of nuns' access to education, levels of monastic ordination, religious practices, and societal roles, she emphasizes that what *she* perceives and analyzes intersectionally as unequal status and position may not always align with *nuns'* experiences of asymmetrical power in social and religious structures (24). Härkönen enables the reader to better understand nuns' complex and heterogeneous experiences within complicated structures and systems of domination and privilege. Most importantly, Härkönen brings nuns' agency and opportunity to the forefront in light of the unequal distribution of power within nuns' contemporary religious worlds.

This text is important reading for scholars and students of Tibetan religion, gender, culture, and history. Härkönen's text could easily be adopted into advanced courses that focus on Buddhist or gender studies. It is an affordable paperback that should be readily available in university libraries. Most importantly, its thoughtful, thematic divisions make it cohesive and adaptive for teaching its individual parts as stand-alone sections. These independent parts may be useful for introductory courses in Buddhist, feminist, gender, and religious studies, and/or for instructors in other fields interested in highlighting the nuances within professional religious women's lives, the Buddhist sangha, and/or the application of intersectional theory and method. By way of overall evaluation, Härkönen's much needed ethnography upholds its intent to provide space for previously underrepresented nuns' voices. The main body of her work clearly foregrounds Tibetan nuns' lives and thematically weaves them together. As she does this, she proffers an intersectional analysis of nuns' lucid oral histories and religious aspirations amid varied experiences in Tibet, the PRC, and India, while balancing religious, gendered, and ethnic subordination with opportunities for agency.