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## **Review of Caple, J.E. (2019) Morality and monastic revival in Post-Mao Tibet**

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### **Citation**

Jansen, B. K. (2021). Review of Caple, J.E. (2019) Morality and monastic revival in Post-Mao Tibet. *European Bulletin Of Himalayan Research*, 56. doi:10.4000/ebhr.99

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3725204>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/99>

DOI: 10.4000/ebhr.99

ISSN: 2823-6114

**Publisher**

CNRS - UPR 299 - Centre d'Etudes Himalayennes

**Electronic reference**

Berthe Jansen, "*Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet*", by Jane E Caple", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* [Online], 56 | 2021, Online since 10 September 2021, connection on 22 July 2022.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/99> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebhr.99>

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# *Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet*, by Jane E Caple

Berthe Jansen

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## REFERENCES

*Morality and Monastic Revival in Post-Mao Tibet* by Jane E Caple. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press. 2019, xi pp + 218 pp, ISBN 9780824869847

- 1 The central question that drives this book is whether it is possible 'to see beyond the state in studies of Tibet, religion, and other highly politicized issues in contemporary China' (pvii). Until the publication of this landmark book, works that have dealt with the revival of monasticism and the general religious resurgence in Tibetan regions in the 1980s and thereafter have had a disproportionate emphasis on the politics of religion in contemporary China. In this book Jane Caple successfully demonstrates that state-society power relations do not entirely explain the dynamics of religious and social change among Tibetan communities in China. Based on fieldwork conducted in monasteries and among communities in north-eastern Tibet, the greater Repgong area in Amdo (nowadays part of Qinghai province), *Morality and Monastic Revival* discusses complex issues that are and have been bones of contention among many Buddhist societies for hundreds if not thousands of years: discipline, monastic economy, education, the recruitment of new monks and temple building. A slightly newer, but no less contentious topic, tourism and its effects on monasteries, is also broached.
- 2 The foundation of this highly original book is extensive ethnographic fieldwork, combined with a very careful consideration of the relevant literature available in English, Chinese and Tibetan. The author devoted more than two years to this endeavour over a total period of more than seven years spent in Amdo where she worked with monks belonging to various *Geluk (dge lugs)* monasteries – a multisite approach that allowed her to 'explore the relationships of monasteries to each other and the ways in which monks framed their decisions, actions, and identities in relation

to other institutions' (p11). The book contains a number of black and white photographs and a few useful tables but sadly lacks maps that depict the locations of the monasteries featured in the work. At first glance, *Morality and Monastic Revival* may look like it would appeal to a rather limited audience, but this review intends to show that this book is relevant to all those interested more broadly in monasticism and Buddhism.

- 3 The first chapter deals with monastic revival in the post-Mao era, sometimes referred to as the 'redissemination' (Tib *yang dar*) of Buddhism. Emic narratives of attempts to preserve Tibetan holy objects and temples during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the subsequent re-establishment of monasteries that were all but destroyed serve to assert the agency of particular communities and individuals. This emphasis on agency is further developed in Chapter 2, which describes in more general terms the extent of the reforms that have taken place since the 1980s. Here the typical attempt by monasteries to become financially self-sufficient, Caple observes, indicates a convergence of the intentions of the Chinese communist state and those of the monks themselves. The fact that monasteries were bringing economic practices into line with state designs is suspect, something that the author is well aware of: 'Were monks [...] rationalizing and reinterpreting monastic accommodation of state policy in a way that was acceptable and meaningful to them as monks? Were they making a virtue out of the necessity of operating within the limits of state-defined religious space?' (p38, 40) It is difficult, in this case, to determine agency, though Caple concludes that the monasteries' move away from collecting alms to other ways of generating income was mostly driven by the Tibetan monks themselves. There is some room for doubt here. While a number of monographs have been written on the Cultural Revolution in greater Tibet and beyond, our knowledge of how this dark page in the history of monastic Buddhism impacted on Tibetan monks is still insufficient. The term for self-sufficiency that Caple's monk informants use is 'to sustain your own mouth yourself' (*rang kha rang gso*). While this is mere anecdotal evidence, I interviewed a monk from Central Tibet who was forcibly re-educated during the Cultural Revolution. He was told by his communist indoctrinated 'educators' that he could no longer rely on others for his livelihood but that he had to become self-sufficient (*rang kha rang gso*). He used the exact same term as Caple's informants, a few hundred miles away from Central Tibet. Since this term is something of a neologism, I suspect – though more research is needed – that the initial drive towards monastic self-sufficiency and the associated language are products of communist ideology. This does not mean, of course, that monks in the post-Mao era did not support these ideas. Nevertheless, that the state's ideological language has been potentially co-opted by Tibetan monks is worth noting.
- 4 By contrast, the topic of tourism is something on which the state and the monks presented in the book do not see eye to eye. The author sees tourism as fundamentally different from other kinds of monastic development. Chapter 3 shows the extent of contemporary criticisms of the ever-increasing stream of mainly Han-Chinese tourists who flock to Tibetan monasteries. The main arguments seem to be that monasteries cede autonomy when tourists are allowed through their gates because this invariably incurs state involvement and because tourists are there merely to look around, thus resulting in an 'aestheticization of monastic space' (p72), with monasteries resembling museums or parks.

- 5 Other kinds of monastic development are more ambiguous in nature. Chapter 4 considers how Buddhist ethics and the more general Buddhist worldview mesh with monastic money-making enterprises. This chapter is of particular interest to those unfamiliar with Buddhist studies, in particular regarding the narrative of decline: a lens through which many Tibetan Buddhists see the rise and fall of monastic institutions. The following chapter continues to employ this decline narrative. By dealing with unremitting problems of recruiting and maintaining monks in monasteries, Chapter 5 highlights the challenges that restrictive state regulations, changing family structures and educational opportunities pose to monasteries. In pursuing the concerns highlighted in Chapter 5, the next chapter deals with the future of these monasteries, the number of monks and their educational programmes. Caple speaks of ‘mass monasticism’ here, a feature perhaps unique to Tibetan Buddhism. She accepts the notion propounded by other scholars that the large number of monks in historical Tibet was due not just to social and economic structures but to ideological ones as well (p23). I have demonstrated elsewhere, however, that while monk populations were at times very large, when examining historical documents that convey monastic managerial policy, there is no trace of the ideology of mass monasticism, of the idea that ‘more is better’ (p33). Rather, it appears that the monks’ concern about replenishing the monastic population described by the author mirrors the concerns a large number of 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century monastic policy-makers had: the issue of quality versus quantity (p149) has equally occupied the minds of past authors. This has unfortunately been left unaddressed by the author.
- 6 Throughout the book the state looms large in the background – accurately representing realities on the ground in Tibetan areas of China. Still, in the concluding chapter Caple again argues how the ‘state-society’ framework does not provide a full picture of the Tibetan agents involved in rebuilding and managing these monasteries. She convincingly demonstrates, by succinctly reiterating all the book’s major arguments, that the monks’ negotiations of moral boundaries and renegotiations of moral space do not constitute adaptation and accommodation to the state. Rather, monks and other Tibetans ‘are situated agents who have drawn on the socioeconomic, cultural, and moral resources available in pursuit of their own projects’, which they do not do on Chinese but on ‘Tibetan terms’ (p167).
- 7 When reading ethnographically based works – particularly when the area of research is such a rapidly changing field – one cannot help but wonder whether they will stand the test of time. Do they simply record a moment in time or do they provide materials, data, analyses and reflections that others can build and reflect on? These are important considerations, especially when dealing with a topic that is as subject to change as the Tibetan monastic world in China. I believe that this book will be of lasting value, not necessarily because of the ethnographic data it contains, but because *Morality and Monastic Revival* asks fundamentally important questions with regard to monastic life and organisation. Caple’s framework, therefore, would provide a good model that could be replicated in other Buddhist monastic contexts beyond the contemporary, beyond the Chinese state and even beyond the Tibetan cultural sphere. While the many interviews, the quantitative data and the historical background will be mostly relevant to a limited audience of Tibetologists and sinologists, the book is of significance for those interested in Buddhist monasticism and monasticism *tout court* due to the

author's focus on the interchange between morality and pragmatics, between the religious and the secular, between the agency of the state and that of individuals.

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## AUTHORS

### **BERTHE JANSEN**

Berthe Jansen is junior professor of Tibetan Studies in Leipzig and received a Dutch Research Foundation (NWO) VENI grant for a project on the relationship between Buddhism and Law in early modern Tibet.