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On top of the world

Clare E. Harris begins *Museum on the Roof of the World* by juxtaposing two striking quotes, one from a member of the British imperialist Younghusband Expedition of 1904, who declares: “Every Tibetan ... ought to be in a museum,” and the other from a Chinese blogger in 2008, who threatens that the Chinese will put Tibetan culture in a museum, “if you [Tibetans] behave badly” (1). Harris’ point is hard to miss: for some British then and some Chinese now, museums were/are understood to be effective tools of control over the Tibetan population.

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Tibetan man at a pass near Nyalam in Tsang. Photo reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of Desmond Kavanagh on Flickr.

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Harris, C.E. 2012. *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet*,
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Barbarians or Shangri-La?
Reflecting on this situation, Harris further notes that, “the position of Tibet in the twentieth century can be described as doubly colonial,” as most artifacts of Tibetan heritage remain to this day under the control of people other than Tibetans (5). Through extensive use of archival sources, as well as interviews with interested parties around the globe, and of course the ‘art’ itself (the volume is amply illustrated with black-and-white images throughout as well as a generous selection of color plates), Harris proceeds to investigate the contested nature of Tibetan art, culture and national identity. Although packed full with many fascinating asides, the main trajectory of the volume is to show how Westerners (usually the British) first used museums to create an image of a barbaric Tibet, which was later spectacularly transformed into its opposite: Tibet as ‘Shangri-La’. Just as this more positive, though equally mythic, construction was taking root in the West, Chinese nationalists picked up on the power of museum display and began to present and interpret artifacts in such a way to show traditional Tibet as a theocratic and oppressive land, in need of liberation from outside. Finally, Harris closes with case studies of several contemporary Tibetan artists, who are trying to resist the ‘museum effect’, and maintain instead a living Tibetan culture into the twenty-first century.

As Harris convincingly tells it, in the earlier stages of modern Western-Tibetan artistic encounter, Western art collectors and museum curators typically saw Tibetan artifacts as representative of a credulous people, a people totally given over to their superstitions. Museum displays in the West reflected this viewpoint. The image of the ‘superstitious’ Tibetan was born in part from Protestant missionaries of the late nineteenth century, who aimed to convert supposed Tibetan idolaters to their modernized, capitalist and nation-state-friendly version of Christianity. The superstition angle also fit nicely with more secular views in the West, prominent in other quarters, that societies could be ranked on a social evolutionary scale, with ‘superstition’ being one of the indicators of low status on that scale. So it was that Tibet was displayed as a backwards place in need of transformation.

The invention of art
Interestingly, the Younghusband Expedition marked something of a turning point to a more cheerful interpretation of Tibet. Harris carefully dissects the writings of members of the expedition who gathered Tibetan objects and shipped them back to Britain, and shows that in their view the former ‘idols’ could also be cast as native ‘art’, a category to be appreciated, not denigrated (though Harris also exposes the rampant looting that went on during the Expedition, in the name of knowledge production). This invention of ‘Tibetan national art’ eventually led Western scholars to suppose there might be a nation deserving of self-determination, which combined with the whimsy of post-WWI Western spiritual seekers to lay the groundwork for the more fantastic interpretations of Tibetan culture now famously emanating from Hollywood.

After China’s fancifully-named ‘peaceful liberation of Tibet’ in 1951, museum representation of Tibet once again soured. Tibetan artifacts, and eventually the Potala Palace itself, were, at best, “downgraded to the level of ‘folk culture’” and said to be the work of a “decadent elite” (157). In all displays there was and is a strong emphasis on the “inalienable connection between China and Tibet” (189), and Tibetans who think otherwise have no voice. Such being the case, Harris notes an odd twist on the debate of repatriation of artifacts, as there are currently very few Tibetans calling for the return of artifacts from Western museums to Tibet. The last two chapters consider the case of ethnic Tibetan contemporary artists, active both within and without of China, who attempt to use their art to challenge both Chinese control over their culture but also Western ‘Shangri-La’ distortions, and meet on equal footing with artists from around the world. Some of these oppose the idea of museums outright, as invariably restrictive to their ruminations on Tibetan cultural identity.

There is much to recommend and very little to criticize in Harris’ volume. If I were to nit-pick, Harris is plainly sympathetic (and with good reason) to the Tibetans who are not permitted to represent themselves. None-the-less, for the most part she remains even-handed in her description of Chinese interests and activities in the area, but occasionally she seems to see ethnic oppression where there may well be other explanations. For instance, that the Chinese state disapproves of ‘common people’ in Tibet possessing ‘relics’ may not be, as she suggests, a question of ethnicity, but one of state control over the past more generally, applicable to Tibetans and Chinese equally (185); or another, the desacralization of the Potala Palace could perhaps be juxtaposed with the desacralization of the Forbidden City, in which case the question would be one of the modern world’s attack on divine kingship, not China on Tibet (195-99). These points and others, of course, could be debated, and Harris’ writing style is clear and engaging, and the text would surely provoke fascinating and productive debate in upper level Asian History and Art History classes, and among educated laypeople in general. *The Museum on the Roof of the World* is a welcome addition to the literature on museums and nationalism, and makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of how the leadership of the modern Chinese state used European imperialist techniques, like building museums, to gain control of the multi-ethnic Qing territories.

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Ghosts of the past

From time to time, an edited volume comes along whose table of contents and list of authors are simply exciting. *Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand* is one such volume. Editor Patrick Jory is joined by twelve eminent scholars to uncover not only the history of southern Thailand, but more specifically, its historiography, noting how local nationalists approach the history of Patani.

Shane Barter

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THE AUTHORS ENGAGE with a great range of topics, from royal Malay symbols, to early Chinese sources, Islamic networks, and contemporary militancy. The reader is treated to newly-uncovered primary documents and fresh insight into older ones. But while the parts of the book are impressive, the whole of it is at times disappointing, suffering from some overlap and incoherence. The forest does not do justice to its trees.

Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand is much more than a recount of historical events. It provides in-depth analysis of historical sources, emphasizing how history has been written and then used by various writers in Patani, including those close to the Patani conflict. The chapters are grouped into four parts: historical pluralism, Islamic networks, perspectives on Patani’s decline, and contemporary uses of history. Anthony Reid’s opening contribution resituates Patani away from being a problematic borderland and toward being seen as a centre, a historical crossroads home to intensely cosmopolitan societies. Reid uses first-hand European descriptions, and includes one such primary account as an appendix, to communicate just how international the Patani Sultanate was in its heyday.

Christopher Joll’s chapter on Patani’s creole ambassadors extends this theme of pluralism. While we tend to understand