

Tibetan studies in Australia

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research interests and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences and teaching, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a broad overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia in the region. Our preferred style is subjective and conversational. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and the region. In the current issue, we highlight the topic of *Tibetan studies in Australia*. We would like to acknowledge Gerald Roche's invaluable support for this collection of essays.

Articles are edited by Ana Dragojlovic ana.dragojlovic@unimelb.edu.au and Edwin Jurriëns edwin.jurriens@unimelb.edu.au, with assistance from Andy Fuller fuller.a@unimelb.edu.au, from the Asia Institute in Melbourne arts.unimelb.edu.au/asiainstitute

Tibetan studies in Australia: history and religion

Ruth Gamble

The study of Tibetan Buddhist texts and, by extension, Tibet's religious history, has been a fixture in Australian universities since the middle of last century. Tibetans' preservation of several versions of the Buddhist canon, and their society's intensive investment in the production of books, has made the study of the classical Tibetan language a priority for many Buddhist scholars.

The first Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in Australia was the philologist Willem de Jong, appointed to the Australian National University in 1965. The tradition of textual studies he started continues today, with the appointment of Jim Rheingans as the inaugural Khyentse Lecturer in Tibetan Buddhism at the University of Sydney. Rheingans, an expert in Tibetan texts, comes to Sydney from the University of Bonn in Germany, and joins a team with expertise in manuscripts from various Buddhist traditions.

Rheingans is the third scholar to have an ongoing position in Tibetan Buddhism in Australia, joining John Powers at Deakin University and Sonam Thakchöe at the University of Tasmania. Powers has conducted research into the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition and Tibetan history, producing more than ten books. Thakchöe has focused on Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and was part of the international collective 'The Cowherds' who investigated the common ground between Tibetan and Western philosophy. In a development from The Cowherds project, Thakchöe and a few other Cowherds teamed up with Powers to investigate the Indo-Tibetan presentation of the precept. They are now working together on a new project on the polemical writing of the fifteenth-century Tibetan author, Daktsang. Both projects hope to uncover the foundational discourses of Tibetan presentations of reality and inform contemporary discussions of metaphysics and epistemology.

Like Powers and Thakchöe, David Templeman of Monash University has been researching Tibetan history for decades. Most of his efforts have focused on the historical, philosophical, literary and

artistic contributions of the Tibetan polymath Taranatha (1575–1634). Templeman has translated, edited or written several books about Taranatha and related topics. In his most recent project, he has teamed up with Andrew Quintman from Yale University to investigate the production of art at Taranatha's monastery, Jonang Phuntsokling. This project is investigating not only the religious and artistic expertise of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artisans, but is also analysing the materials they used and the trade networks in their art supplies, which stretched across Central, South and East Asia.

In recent years, several junior Australian scholars have added to this core group, approaching Tibetan religious and historical studies from innovative perspectives. Tenzin Ringpapontsang recently completed his Ph.D. at the Australian National University. His doctoral research focused on the relationship between the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyal Phakpa (1235–1280) and the Mongol Emperor, Qubilai Khan (1215–1294). Ringpapontsang's research showed how Phakpa presented kingship as a Buddhist ideal and suggested that gurus were more important than emperors. He is now expanding his investigation by looking at the role a belief in magic played in the relationship between the two men, while also putting his study of Mongolian and Tibetan history to use on the ground in Mongolia, where he is involved in the development of historical education programs.

Elizabeth McDougal has just begun her Ph.D. studies at the University of Sydney, but brings to this role the experience of living as a nun and working in several monastic communities in Tibet and India for over fifteen years. Her doctoral research is focused on a group of nuns living in Nangchen, Qinghai Province, in the People's Republic of China. She is tracing the various impacts of modernity on the nuns' lives, from changes in their physical environment to those in educational norms that are forcing them to substitute their yoga-focused practice for

more easily quantifiable academic pursuits. McDougal is conducting this research through a combination of ethnography, doctrinal study, and oral history collection. Her language skills and longstanding relationship with this community have given her a unique perspective on the changes the community is undergoing, and her research will no doubt transform the way we understand Tibetan modernity.

My own work takes an environmental perspective on the impact of modernity on the Plateau. I recently completed my first book based on my Ph.D. thesis, completed at the Australian National University. This book, to be published by Oxford University Press, investigates the relationship between Tibet's reincarnation tradition and its sacred geography. I am now extending my investigation of Tibet's past spaces by researching the environmental history of the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) River. In this project, I am collecting data from traditional historical sources such as archives and biographical literature and then comparing this information with the results of scientific studies. It will not only produce another perspective on Tibetan history, but also provide context for the profound environmental changes that have occurred on the Plateau during the Anthropocene. In October 2016, I was selected to become one of the inaugural David Myers Research Fellows, a prestigious appointment based at La Trobe University. In early 2017, I was awarded a concurrent research fellowship at Yale University's Forestry and Environment School in order to continue this research.

By persisting with textual and philosophical studies, as well as opening up new areas of scholarship into the Plateau's political, social



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and environmental pasts, those pursuing Tibetan religious and historical studies in Australia will continue to make significant contributions to their fields. As the number of Buddhists in Australia continues to grow, it is essential for scholars of Tibet's religion and history to conduct high-quality research into the beliefs and practices of this religious tradition. Tibet's geopolitical location between the region's two largest nations, China and India, and its geographic position at the headwaters of Asia's largest rivers mean, moreover, that the research into these topics will become increasingly important to Australia's national interest.

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Notes

- 1 Hara, M. 2001. 'In Memoriam J.W. de Jong', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 24(1):1-6.
- 2 'Donation Supports Lectureship in Tibetan Buddhism', Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, accessed 7 August 2017; <https://tinyclips.com/dontibbud>
- 3 This project produced a recent publication: D. Duckworth, M.D. Eckel, J.L. Garfield, J. Powers, Y. Thakchöe & S. Thakchöe. 2016. *Dignāga's Investigation of the Percept: a Philosophical Legacy in India and Tibet*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 4 Gamble, R. (forthcoming) *Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: the Third Karmapa and the Invention of a Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.