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Erberto Lo Bue (ed.) *Il Tibet fra Mito e Realtà. Tibet Between Myth and Reality*. Atti del Convegno per i centenario della nascita di Fosco Maraini. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2014. 140 pp. ISBN 978 88 222 6292 9.

This book contains eight papers (five in English and three in Italian) presented at a conference in honour of the birth centenary of the Italian scholar, traveller and photographer Fosco Maraini (1912-2004). As befits the person commemorated the book is beautifully produced, including 57 well-chosen colour photographs. The papers are grounded in a scholarly understanding of Tibet's past. However, the subject matter is firmly—even fiercely—contemporary.

The editor, Erberto Lo Bue, opens the collection with a closely argued and carefully referenced introduction to the overall theme: “Tibet between Myth and Reality”. He begins by dedicating the book to “a Tibetan lay Buddhist countrywoman of humble condition” whom he met in 1987 as she was labouring to rebuild a chapel that had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. He then reminds us of Italy's tradition of Tibetan scholarship, which currently struggles in the face of government neglect. Throughout his essay, Lo Bue draws links and comparisons between the histories of Tibet and Italy, for example when he compares Tibetan protests against Chinese ‘liberation’ in 1959 to anti-fascist resistance in Italy only a few years earlier. His themes include the important role played by scholars equipped with the right linguistic skills in challenging ill-considered stereotypes.

In the first paper (in Italian), Mauro Crocenzi examines the *Bod yig phal skad kyi gsar 'gyur*, a newsletter in vernacular Tibetan which was published by the Chinese government's Office of General Mongolian Affairs in Peking. His analysis is based on 15 editions of the newsletter published between January 1913 and June 1914. We do not know the names of the Tibetan editors or translators but the newsletter was intended as a means of defining and propagating the nationalist ideology of the newly founded Republic of China. Among other objectives the newsletter sought to identify the historical roots of China's national identity and the role of Tibetans within that identity. The newsletter therefore provides an insight into evolving early 20th century perceptions of Tibet as seen through Chinese eyes.

Guido Vogliotti's paper is a review of “Western Visions of Tibet”, with an emphasis on the idealised images of ‘Shangri la’, as they have developed over the last three hundred years. The contributors to this image include writers

such as Madam Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Lobsang Rampa, the pen name of British writer Cyril Hoskins (1910-1981) who never visited Tibet but claimed paranormal powers. As Vogliotti points out, such romanticised images of Tibet are less defensible than ever. Nevertheless, all too many Westerners still cling to them.

Roberta Caminiti's chapter shifts the discussion from Western myth-making to the real-life challenges of education in Amdo, north-eastern Tibet, now administered as part of the Chinese province of Qinghai. There has been a dearth of state investment in village schools in the more remote areas. In 2009 the Qinghai authorities enacted a new education policy as a result of which many Tibetan parents have been required to send their children to boarding schools in regional centres. In the new schools, Chinese staff members outnumber Tibetan teachers, and Tibetan textbooks are unsatisfactory. However, the Ragya Girls School in Ragya, Golok Prefecture, offers an alternative educational model. The school was set up as a result of an initiative by a local monk in 1994, and it has benefitted from support from the Associazione per la Solidarietà Internazionale in Asia (ASIA), an Italian NGO. All subjects are taught in Tibetan except for the courses on Chinese and English languages.

Valentina Punzi presents an analysis of the cult of mountain-dwelling local numina known as *yul lha* or *gzhi bdag* in Amdo. As she points out, the cult of these mountain numina has been a persistent feature of the region's culture, and "draws an uninterrupted line from the past to the present". In contemporary Amdo, the cult serves as a means of affirming a local identity opposed to the "project of the Chinese nation-state inclusive policies". Ultimately, it may contribute to the development of a broader Tibetan national identity.

Ester Bianchi's paper (in Italian) examines a different aspect of China's relationship with Tibet: the 'Tibet fever' for Tibetan Buddhism among contemporary Han Chinese. While there are older precedents, the fever in its current form started to spread from the 1980s onwards. One prominent example is the Five Sciences Buddhist Academy in Sertar (Sichuan), founded by Jigme Phuntsok, which has attracted large numbers of Chinese disciples, often to the discomfort of the state authorities. These developments raise the question how far the new Chinese reception of Buddhist practices should be seen as an expression of 'authentic' Tibetan Buddhism. Alternatively, we may be seeing the emergence of a new Chinese variant of Buddhism as a 'global religion', alongside Chan, Pure Land, Theravada and other traditions.

Federica Grassi's paper (also in Italian) examines the role of 'cham ritual dance in contemporary Amdo, taking as a case study the practices of *sngags pa* (lay practitioners in the rNying ma tradition) near Repkong. She briefly

introduces the main figures represented in the dance, and highlights the importance of 'cham as a visual synthesis of Buddhist teaching that at the same time affirms Tibetan cultural identity across the generations.

Luigi Fieni takes us from Amdo to Lo Mōntang (Mustang), the Buddhist kingdom in northern Nepal. In the 1990s the American Himalayan Foundation visited the region looking for projects to sponsor. Its original intention was to focus on health or education. Instead, the King recommended that it concentrate on the restoration of temples and religious buildings as a means of reinvigorating Lo Mōntang's culture. A team of Italian specialists duly set to work on a project to restore 15th century wall-paintings in one of the most important monasteries, and they were asked to train local people in conservation techniques. Fieni outlines the challenges of what proved to be a highly successful project. The former trainees are now experts in their own right—"professionals deeply engaged in their own cultural preservation".

The final paper is by Mara Matta and discusses the search for "a new cinematic language" in Tibet. She starts by arguing that the challenge of finding an adequate cultural and spiritual response to contemporary social change is not unique to Tibetans. Indeed, "we are all 'lost in translation', as our languages attempt to keep up with the fast pace of modernisation". On a more hopeful note, she argues that, rather than seeing Tibetan as an endangered language, we should "see it as a language in transition, a language that is finding new empowerment through the works of contemporary Tibetan writers and film-makers". As an example, she cites *The Sun-Beaten Path* (dbus lam kyi nyi ma), a film directed by Sonthar Gyal (Srong thar rgyal). Tibetans may have come late to cinema as a form of artistic expression, but the medium offers stimulating new possibilities for envisaging change.

Each of these papers is worth reading on its own merits. Taken together, the collection offers an effective challenge to the most cliché-ridden myths of Tibet while at the same time presenting a diverse range of contemporary 'realities'. As Lo Bue says in the introduction, it is ultimately "up to Tibetans, not to Chinese or Westerners, to shape and define their cultural identity, and judge if their culture is extinct or not". On the evidence presented here, it is far from extinct. However, the forms that this culture—or cultures—will take in the future are both multiple and hard to predict.

—John Bray

