Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese: Mediation and Superscription of the Tibetan Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Society. By Joshua Esler. Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2020. 314 pages. $115 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-4985-8464-7.

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Despite the rapid growth of Tibetan Buddhism in the last thirty years among Chinese peoples in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and throughout the international Chinese diaspora, Han practitioners and their Tibetan Buddhist teachers have remained a relatively understudied part of Chinese religious life. As the first monograph devoted to this subject in nearly a decade, Joshua Esler's *Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese* marks an important step toward filling this gap in our understanding of the contemporary Chinese religious landscape. Rooted in extensive fieldwork, including more than eighty interviews conducted in Beijing, Dechen/Diqing, Lijiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in 2011, Esler provides an intimate and richly detailed account of some of the ways in which Tibetan Buddhist teachers and Han practitioners are adapting Tibetan Buddhism to contemporary Chinese societies.

Primarily focused on the lived experiences of Han practitioners, Esler's aim throughout the book is to document how Tibetan Buddhism acts as a medium that does not so much actively erase Han practitioners' previous worldviews, but rather absorbs "their compatible elements, sharpening them into something that contributes to overall clarity within the new worldview this faith provides" (p. xv). In this way, Esler argues, Tibetan Buddhism does not displace "but is instead adapted in light of the remnants of other worldviews" (p. xv). Moreover,

drawing heavily on Prasenjit Duara's concept of superscription,[1] Esler explores how Tibetan Buddhism is being layered or written over "by both Tibetan monastics and Chinese practitioners as it encounters scientific rationalism and other modernising forces as well as a traditional Chinese cosmology of gods, ghosts, and ancestors in modern China" (p. xvi). These dual processes of mediation and superscription form the warp and weft through which Esler weaves a complex picture of the ways in which Tibetans and Han practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism are re-negotiating their religious traditions and mutually influencing each other's worldviews and identities in the early twenty-first century.

Each of the book's six chapters approach Tibetan Buddhist practice among Han practitioners through a targeted exploration of an issue relevant to contemporary religious and secular life in Chinese societies: the place of Guan Gong (关公) in Chinese traditions; the post-2004 Confucian revival; religion in Chinese urban societies; conceptions of the environment and its protection; and changing understandings of ghosts and ancestors in contemporary times. In each case, the chapters follow a similar structure: opening with a vignette from the author's fieldwork, followed by a contextual overview of the issue in Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist traditions and history, and concluding with an extended discussion of the diverse perspectives Esler's interlocutors offered on the issue. These thickly descriptive accounts from Esler's ethnography are particularly notable, being both enjoyable to read and conveying the deep complexities of Han practitioners' and Tibetans' religious identities.

In the first chapter, Esler contextualizes the modern meeting of Chinese and Tibetan traditions within the broader processes and policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on religion, the complexities of Tibetan Buddhism navigating these state structures, as well as Chinese popular imaginings about Tibet, its people, and its religious traditions. The only chapter without extensive reference to Esler's interlocutors, this chapter sets the broader scene on which the issues explored in subsequent chapters play out. Esler contends that the PRC party-state and Tibetan Buddhists today are engaged in mutual efforts, albeit from very imbalanced positions of power, to extend their influence over each other. The state, Esler articulates, enacts its power

1. Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

through ideological projects, such as constructing Tibetans as an ethnic "minority," advocating integration and national unity through the discourse on building Harmonious Society (和谐社会), and the forced participation of Tibetan Buddhist monastics in Patriotic Education (爱国主义教育) programs. Furthermore, the creation and promotion of Han tourism within ethnic parks, "little Tibets" outside of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), and ecotourism sites contribute to the state's project of promoting stylized presentations of Tibetanness, while reducing important markers of difference for the purpose of promoting national unity. On the other hand, Esler points out, Tibetan Buddhists have navigated many of these state policies and institutions (e.g., temples in ethnic parks, tourism areas) as they attempt to extend their own influence across the PRC. Charismatic reincarnate teachers (སྤྲུལ་སྐུ), in particular, have been critical to spreading Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese and re-centering Tibetan Buddhism as "super spiritual and the answer to Han China's spiritual crisis (*jingshen weiji*)" (p. 14).

In the second half of the first chapter, Esler draws some parallels between how Tibet has historically been imagined in the West and Han *imaginaires* of Tibet. Whereas most public discourse in the PRC largely continued earlier Confucian denouncements of Tibetans and their religious practices, Esler highlights how the growth of Tibetan Buddhism among Han peoples in the last thirty years has contributed to a serious re-imagining of Tibet. It is increasingly popular, especially among Han practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, to view Tibet as a pure land with pure religion and pure people. In this way, Esler argues, a sort of "internal orientalism" is enacted that presents Tibet as "modernity's lost 'Shangri-La,'" Tibetan Buddhism as "a lost pure, unbroken tradition and source of ancient wisdom," and Tibetan people as "pure innocence" (p. 27). In doing so, Esler contends, Han practitioners often engage in a type of reverse acculturation "that undermines long-held Chinese perceptions of Tibetans as backward and uncivilised, by ascribing to their supposed 'backward' and 'uncivilised' nature a pure spirituality detached from worldly pursuits" (p. 29).

Moving from shifting *imaginaires* to a specific religious figure, in the second chapter, Esler examines various layers of superscription of the Chinese divinity Guan Gong. Esler traces numerous superscriptions of Guan Gong historically within Chinese societies and his presence in Tibetan Buddhist lineages, especially within the Karma Kagyü (ཀརྨ་བཀའ་བརྒྱུད) tradition. Arguing that processes of superscription

continue today, for example with the 17th Karmapa's re-incorporation of Guan Gong as a dharma protector in 2005, Esler documents multiple perspectives of Han Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Taipei who view Guan Gong alternately as a dharma protector (护法神; ཆོས་སྐྱོང), as akin or even an emanation of the Tibetan mythic warrior king Gesar of Ling (གླིང་གེ་སར), as an emanation of Padmasambhava (གུ་རུ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ), or even as a bodhisattva. Although these perspectives differ from those of Esler's Tibetan monastic interlocutors in Lijiang and Taipei, who maintained that Guan Gong was either a Chinese martial deity and/or a worldly dharma protector, nevertheless Esler notes that both Tibetan and Han interlocutors agreed that the incorporation of Guan Gong was beneficial for bringing Chinese and Tibetan people together under the umbrella of Tibetan Buddhism. In this way, the historical process of superscription and contestations of Guan Gong continue as this deity is mobilized in order to connect Guan Gong with Tibetan Buddhism and as part of the spread of Tibetan Buddhism among Chinese peoples.

In chapter 3, Esler tracks the dialogue between Tibetan Buddhism and Confucianism, especially in the post-2004 era of Confucian revival and state discourse on creating a Harmonious Society. Following an overview of historical tensions and syncretism between Buddhism and Confucianism and a discussion of how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has increasingly mobilized selective elements of Confucian culture and tradition for the sake of national unity in the post-Mao spiritual vacuum, Esler examines how contemporary Han practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism negotiate both historical syncretism and current state policies that promote Confucianism. He outlines two broad approaches found among his interlocutors. On the one hand, some Han interlocutors in Beijing and Gyalthang saw Tibetan Buddhism and Confucianism as mutually compatible, espousing a complementary vision of Confucianism (sometimes along with state policy) as promoting social order, civil ethics, and Tibetan Buddhism as the key for individual cultivation. Alternatively, other Han interlocutors in the same locations did not feel it was appropriate to synthesize Buddhism and Confucianism. These individuals, the majority of whom Esler argues had started practicing Tibetan Buddhism following a particularly painful personal crisis, saw Tibetan Buddhism as a wholly different alternative to Chinese (and Western) societies and as "too pure—almost outside space and time itself—to be used in conjunction with

an anthropocentric Confucianism" (p. 103). Ultimately, Esler considers the two positions of pro- or anti-synthesis between Confucianism and Tibetan Buddhism not as novel positions, but as continuations of historical arguments in Chinese societies over the acceptability of religious syncretism.

Perhaps the most ethnographically rich chapter of the book and one of only two (along with chapter 6) largely based on fieldwork in Hong Kong, chapter 4 focuses on the diverse ways practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism meet their spiritual needs and expectations in a bustling Chinese metropolis. Esler argues that many Hong Kongers' religious life is devoted to addressing pragmatic concerns, such as good health, strong relationships, and success in employment and studies. However, a significant percentage of the population have also been heavily influenced by Protestant discourse around anti-superstition and private modes of religiosity promoted in Hong Kong's many Christian schools. Many bring these understandings of and approaches to religion to Tibetan Buddhism. With this background, Esler describes his interlocutors in Hong Kong as being largely one of three types. First, there are devotees who are mostly interested in requesting Tibetan Buddhist teachers for rituals, empowered objects, or blessed substances to help them pragmatically. Second, Esler describes practitioners, often middle-aged or older, who are both interested in material and soteriological goals. They frequently attend what Esler calls "traditional" Tibetan Buddhist centers, which have a rich array of statues and images as well as a ritual focus to their religious programming. Moreover, these practitioners along with the first type come largely from Chinese popular religious backgrounds and often continue to apply the practical approach of Chinese religions to Tibetan Buddhism. Finally, Esler describes practitioners who are most interested in Buddhist soteriology and may even look down at practitioners with more mundane foci. These individuals, who are mostly young, well-educated, and either from Christian backgrounds or were educated in one of Hong Kong's Christian schools, frequently attend "modern" Tibetan Buddhist centers that focus heavily on Buddhist meditation and philosophy and greatly limit ritual practice. The multiple approaches, interests, and aspirations of the Han Tibetan Buddhist practitioners Esler highlights illuminates the diverse spectrum of approaches to religious life in urban China today.

The only chapter to draw equally on Tibetan and Han interlocutors primarily based on Esler's fieldwork in Gyalthang, chapter 5 investigates Tibetan and Chinese discourses on environmental protection and how Han practitioners relate to Tibetan environmentalism. Here, Esler draws especially upon Coggins and Hutchinson's discussion of Tibetan "geopiety," or traditions of revering the surrounding landscape and its divine inhabitants,[2] as well as Yeh's work on Tibetan environmental subject formation.[3] As in the previous chapters, Esler first provides a helpful overview of how Tibet has been developed for ecotourism and highlights dissonances between Tibetan understandings of geopiety and Western-influenced Chinese and international NGO models of environmental protection. Subsequently, Esler discusses several different perspectives that Tibetans and Han practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism expressed regarding Tibetan understandings of human–environmental relations. Among his Tibetan interlocutors, Esler describes one group that experiences Tibetan ideas about the environment as superstitious and desires to be more rational, while others find the scientific materialist vision promoted by the state lacking and support an indigenous Tibetan geopious perspective. On the other hand, Esler notes that among Han practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, many long-term residents of culturally Tibetan areas tended to articulate environmentalism through a Tibetan geopious lens, while those who have only spent a short time or never visited Tibet are more likely to advocate a materialist approach or a rather general "spiritualized" approach to the environment.

In all of these cases, however, Esler argues that an essentializing gaze towards the "other" is a critical factor in articulating how his interlocutors understood human–environmental relations and environmental protection. Both Tibetans and Han, he claims, "see in the Other their own lack, and experience subsequent feelings of shame, and seek to address these feelings by emulating the Other to a degree. For some Han, such mimicry is perceived to bring fulfillment and provide

2. Chris Coggins and Tessa Hutchinson, "The Political Ecology of Geopiety: Nature Conservation in Tibetan Communities in Northwest Yunnan," *Asian Geographer* 25, nos. 1–2 (2006): 85–107.

3. Emily T. Yeh, "The Rise and Fall of the Green Tibetan: Contingent Collaborations and the Vicissitudes of Harmony," in *Mapping Shangri-la: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*, ed. Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2014), 255–278.

answers to their tormented pasts, while for some Tibetans, such mimicry enables them to critically analyse the imagined gaze of the Other looking at them" (p. 188). Similar to his discussion of Tibetan Buddhist practice in Hong Kong, this chapter further explicates the diversity of ways in which Tibetan Buddhism is being re-conceptualized today by highlighting different understandings that Han and Tibetans have of the role of local Tibetan deities and other non-human agents of the Tibetan landscape.

The book's final chapter addresses changing Han understandings of ghosts and how these do or do not fit in to their practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Esler notes that all of his Han interlocutors in Hong Kong and Beijing believed in ghosts and often maintained a belief in various types of spirit-writing and family ghosts, alongside a more orthodox Buddhist understanding of hungry ghosts. While many Han practitioners shared that their Tibetan Buddhist teachers did not often discuss ghosts, Esler points out that several modernist teachers, like Mingyur Rinpoche (ཡོངས་དགེ་མི་འགྱུར་རིན་པོ་ཆེ b. 1975), try to dissuade their followers from believing and fearing ghosts in ways reminiscent of the state's (largely failed) attempts to root out belief. Drawing on Feuchtwang's discussion of "archiving,"[4] Esler argues that even as both the Chinese state and modernist Tibetan teachers attempt to dissuade belief in ghosts, his interlocutors demonstrate a resurgence of this "erased archive" (p. 224) of understandings and practices related to the dead within Chinese religious life.

Esler's work mainly highlights the stories of middle-class writers, artists, and managers of small businesses in mainland China, as well as middle-class office workers in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Given the limits of any ethnography, there are a number of voices under- or not represented in this important study. First, with the exception of chapter 5 and, to a lesser extent, chapter 6, the voices of Tibetan Buddhist teachers and laity play somewhat of a supporting role to the Han practitioners at the heart of Esler's work. Second, although Han monastics, both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist, are increasingly active in dialogue and re-shaping both traditions, they are mostly absent from this work (the discussion of Master Hai Dao in chapter 2 standing as an important

4. Stephan Feuchtwang, *The Anthropology of Religion, Charisma, and Ghosts: Chinese Lessons for Adequate Theory* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010).

exception). Finally, Esler's limited fieldwork in Taiwan greatly circumscribes his inclusion of Taiwanese perspectives, and diasporic Chinese are almost completely absent from this work. Taiwanese and diasporic Chinese communities, especially in maritime South East Asia and Vietnam, compose a growing number of globally influential Han practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. As these regions have experienced vastly different religious, political, and social trajectories in the second half of the twentieth century than mainland China, however, the contexts and interests that shape Han practitioners' encounters with Tibetan Buddhism are also often different than those of Esler's interlocutors. While none of these omissions or under-representations significantly impact Esler's overall arguments about the roles of mediation and superscription in the contemporary re-interpretation and transmission of Tibetan Buddhism, it is important for readers to keep them in mind when encountering the terms "Chinese" and "Han" in the book.

Moreover, further discussion of the common textual sources that practitioners studied and read could have been used to greatly illuminate the authoritative Tibetan Buddhist voices influential among Han practitioners. For example, greater discussion of the "personal canon" of Tibetan Buddhist texts Esler describes as being shared by many practitioners in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (p. xviii) or of some of the works by highly influential contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teachers in the PRC, such as Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö (མཁན་པོ་ཚུལ་ཁྲིམས་བློ་གྲོས/慈诚罗珠堪布 b. 1962) and Khenpo Sodargye (མཁན་པོ་བསོད་དར་རྒྱས/索达吉堪布 b. 1962), would have further nuanced Esler's rich ethnographic data. Finally, the useful glossary would have been further enhanced by the inclusion of Cantonese and Tibetan terms, in addition to Mandarin terms, utilized throughout the book.

These few minor reservations, however, do little to detract from the overall value of this work. Indeed, Esler's carefully researched and eloquent study is an important contribution to the scholarship on contemporary Chinese religious life. Anyone interested in Chinese and Tibetan religious exchange, contemporary religion in Chinese societies, or global Tibetan Buddhism stands much to learn from the content of this work, while those working on trans-national religions or religious transmission more broadly would benefit from Esler's discussion and illustration of the processes of mediation and superscription.