


Janet Gyatso. *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. xv + 519 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-16496-2.

Reviewed by

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his major publication, the fruit of many years' work and engagement with key sources in the historical development of Tibetan medicine, is likely to remain a landmark in the study of Tibetan medical thought. It traces a number of issues and debates through the literature of key figures who have had long-term impact on Tibetan medical traditions, from the production of the most important medical textbook, the *Four Treatises* (*rgyud bzhi*), probably in the twelfth century, through early commentaries, such as the *Small Myriad* (*'bum chung*), and later works, notably those of the fifteenth century Jangpa Tashi Pelzang (*byang pa bkra shis dpal bzang*), the sixteenth century Kyempa Tsewang (*skyes pa tshe dbang*), and Zurkhawa Lodrö Gyelpo (*zur mkhar ba blo gros rgyal po*), as well as the seventeenth century Regent of Tibet, Desi Sangyé Gyatso (*sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*). The most sustained attention is given to Zurkhawa and the Desi, who integrates much of Zurkhawa's material into his own famous works, yet who criticises and distinguishes himself from his predecessor. Gyatso's admiration for and engagement with the complexities of the arguments of these scholars comes through clearly in the pages of the book, and in particular, her sustained enthusiasm for Zurkhawa and his re-assessments of previous materials helps to bring alive the subject matter, which in some cases, is rather technical and abstruse.

The book starts with an exploration of the content and significance of the Desi's impressive project to illustrate his major medical commentary through the production of a series of medical paintings. There is a chapter which reviews milestones in the history of medicine in Tibet, and introduces the thinkers whose works the book will grapple with. Part II, entitled, "Bones of Contention", starts with a lengthy discussion of the various perspectives taken by the different commentators on the status of the *Four Treatises*, and whether – and in what sense – it is to be classified as "Buddha Word". The next chapter deals with differing understandings of the various bodily "channels" listed in the *Four Treatises*, including the tantric channels

used in Buddhist meditation and yoga practice. Then, the book tackles the issue of interpreting the *Four Treatises'* explanation of the position of the heart, which contradicts physical evidence, and a further Coda to the section considers various influences at play, including those of the political and cultural environment, in the scholars' various circumlocutions. Part III, "Roots of the Profession", adds two extremely interesting case studies. The chapter, "Women and Gender", deals with an area of studies in which Gyatso's previous contributions are well known. Here, a discussion of the medical literature brings out rather diverse attitudes on gender issues, even within the *Four Treatises* itself. Some of the commentators seek to move beyond simplistic stereotypical statements, Zurkharwa in particular, recognising that, "sexually associated personal style does not always line up with sexual identity" (p.341). A chapter on, "The Ethics of Being Human", covers rather more than medical ethics in a narrow sense, detailing the literature's advice on how to have a successful career as a physician. Some aspects, such as the teacher-student relationship, are essentially modelled on the norms within Tibetan Buddhism, but they are modified, with an ethos which is much more worldly than is found in comparable Buddhist teachings.

The particular issues elaborated on throughout the book all in some way relate to the theme which Gyatso is exploring, a theme which has two aspects. One is the increasing divergence and contrast between Tibetan Buddhist and medical approaches, as Tibetan medicine carved out its own autonomous systems of thought and professional specialisation. This story is complicated by the context of the Buddhist civilisation in which Tibetan medicine was placed, and the fact that it was supported by representatives of political rule defined by a Buddhist identity, which limited the extent or at least the open admission of medicine's conceptual independence, at the same time as promoting specialised medical institutions and learning. The second aspect is the development of a more "scientific" or empirical approach to medicine, coupled with an assumption – quite opposite to traditional approaches – that medical knowledge and practice could and should be improved upon, along with a willingness to rethink or discard parts of the traditional heritage which did not fit with the new understandings. While Gyatso recognises (p.4-5) that the intellectual developments she discusses in the book are not as straightforward as an opposition between "Buddhism" or "religion" on the one hand and "science" on the other, much of the thrust of the book is to merge the two aspects such that medical knowledge is shown to be progressing by shedding its restrictive Buddhist approaches. In particular, Gyatso argues for recognition of an emerging "medical mentality" (p.16 and elsewhere throughout the book) in

contrast to Buddhist thinking, a pragmatic approach to knowledge rooted in the empirical realities of everyday life. She implies that such a pragmatic approach is in fact inherent to the medical context and in some ways distinguishes medicine from religion from the outset, since it can be related to a focus on the physical treatment of disease and the necessity for the physician above all to keep patients alive and healthy. This means that the advancement of knowledge and medical techniques, or at least a common sense rationality in diagnosis and treatments, will pay obvious dividends for doctors. In this, they are unlike religious specialists, who can continue to thrive, whatever their impact on the ordinary everyday world, by emphasizing enlightenment or meditative goals inaccessible to empirical proof. She clearly has a valid point here, although perhaps the contrast she draws may be a little overstated. For instance, she contrasts the physician with the hermit, meditating in his cave (p.394), but most Tibetan Buddhist lamas are not hermits, or may only live as hermits for part of their careers. For much of the time, they may be actively serving their communities and have at least some involvements in helping people with their everyday life problems, even if the solutions they promote may be less empirically verifiable. And as Gyatso's chapter on ethics makes clear, the pragmatism of physicians does not only consist in empirical treatments, but involves other practical necessities not dissimilar from those faced by lamas, such as the need for careful and judicious handling of social and personal relationships, and the protection of one's public reputation. In one case discussed by Gyatso (p. 303-309), far from engendering a more empirical approach to medicine, a pragmatic orientation within the *Four Treatises*, taking on board the realities of Tibetan social and kinship structure, ignores the traditional understanding (and the *Four Treatises*' own explanation in its embryology chapter) of the female as well as male contribution to conception, to portray reproduction as though only the male contribution were important.

Overall, the discussion of a number of key Tibetan medical thinkers taking issue with understandings of the past, and moving analyses of the human condition forward, is persuasive. I am wondering, however, how far the developments consistently reflect a less "Buddhist" and a correspondingly more empirical or "scientific" approach. In some cases, it is possible that the critiques may at least to some extent have reflected Buddhist sectarian approaches. For example, in the debate over whether or not the *Four Treatises* represents Buddha Word, scepticism over accounts of it as a Treasure revelation (*gter ma*) may possibly have at least something to do with the New Tantra (*gsar ma*) affiliations of most of the medical commentators discussed. And the Desi's support of the Buddha Word thesis, conversely, may

possibly reflect on the Old Tantra (*rnying ma*) interests and associations of the Fifth Dalai Lama's circle, as much as the Desi's political role in a Buddhist State, which Gyatso emphasises in this context. In the debate over the tantric channels, Zurkhawa's apparently sarcastic dismissal of Tashi Pelzang's account (p. 258), which would imply that the two channels on either side of the central channel are on opposite sides in men and women (as described in many Old Tantra sources, and Tashi Pelzang has Old Tantra affiliations), might relate to Zurkhawa's own reliance on New Tantra sources, rather than representing part of a sustained argument designed to undermine Buddhist tantric accounts of the channels, on the grounds that there is no empirical evidence for them. By these few small points, I do not wish to detract from the impressive volume of data marshalled by Gyatso, and the intricacies of the arguments which she traces in detail, especially since it is these intricacies which give us a full picture, reminding us that matters are more complex than a simple move to more "scientific" approaches. There will be enough here to occupy scholars interested in the history of Tibetan medicine for a very long time, and Gyatso convincingly demonstrates increasing empiricism in the record. At the very least, the medical commentaries bear witness to an explicit acknowledgement of a problem where there is an apparent direct contradiction between a classical medical explanation – say, of the position of the heart, said to point in different directions in males and females, or of the existence of tantric channels – and the physical evidence. Yet often Gyatso's account makes it clear that that the commentarial responses, rather than positing an alternative more "scientifically" informed theory, or rejecting the classical analysis on empirical grounds, instead seek to explain away the discrepancy, and in practice, simply exclude these elements of the heritage from any meaningful place in medical practice. One possible exception to this may be the eighteenth century Lingmen Tashi from Eastern Tibet, who Gyatso informs us (p. 275) was clear in his rejection of these aspects of the heritage, at least for the medical context.

The unwillingness of most of the medical commentators to reject outright any key component of the *Four Treatises* or the inherited medical tradition is related by Gyatso to the need for caution in the context of Tibet's Buddhist civilisation. Gyatso describes considerable invective where one commentator is attacking a rival or a predecessor with whom they are taking issue. Yet, when the topic concerns an established Buddhist or medical doctrine, the indirectness and circumlocution of the arguments may be extreme. In fact, Gyatso tells us (e.g. p. 199) that in some cases, later thinkers have not understood the arguments correctly, and may even misinterpret them to imply the opposite of the intended point. Here, while lauding

Gyatso's exemplary determination to tease out the subtle meanings not obvious to all qualified Tibetan readers, I do find myself wondering whether she has always succeeded herself. Tibetan literature can often be ambiguous or difficult to understand, and in these instances, it would appear that many of the arguments are especially opaque. I would have appreciated the highlighting of points where/if the reading may still be uncertain. It could be that long familiarity with this literature has given Gyatso confidence. She also acknowledges Tibetan mentors and collaborators who have informed and guided her reading of the material, and such help would have been essential for her study. In bringing up possible uncertainties, I do not mean to cast doubt on Gyatso's analysis. I simply hope that future scholars of Tibetan medicine, in taking Gyatso's important work into account, will re-visit some of her key texts, to see if alternative or further significances can be found in the sometimes rather unclear or convoluted passages.

Unfortunately, continuing interrogation of the sources is hindered by the fact that the Tibetan of the passages concerned is almost never given in the book, not even for short citations, and in a few cases, not even for individual words under discussion, such as a discussion of the English word, "ramify" (p. 236, 239) without making it clear which Tibetan word it is translating. The notes generally refer only to the source texts, not all of which are readily obtainable for readers. It may be that the publisher insisted on the removal of the Tibetan in the notes in order to make the book more "accessible" to non-specialists, or to reduce the length and the cost of the book. But given that the passages discussed are not altogether straightforward or clear, the removal of the original evidence is unhelpful to scholarly readers wishing to consult the original and judge for themselves.

Generally, the prose of the book is measured, clear and engaging. However, very occasionally, the language used may over-simplify Tibetan cultural complexities. For instance, a rather dismissive tone is found in relation to religious perspectives, which seems surprising for a scholar specialised in Religious Studies, and especially one who herself has contributed important work on early revelatory (*qter ma*) traditions. The revelatory account of the origin of the *Four Treatises* is described as, "fiction" (p. 154), and she emphasises twice that its purpose was to avoid the difficulty of the inability to demonstrate a historical line of transmission prior to Yutok (p. 154; and 178, where she says this was "the entire reason" for "the Treasure theory"). It is of course possible that in this case, Yutok and his student were deliberately concealing their own role in the text's creation and fabricating a story with this clear agenda in mind, but this need not be the case, and we should perhaps be cautious in attributing mo-

tives when the actual history is uncertain. In the Tibetan context, a *gter ma* can be produced, transcribed, edited and polished, often with the involvement of several people, including the revealer, all of whom may be working in good faith, believing in the special status of the revealer and the revealed text. Perhaps the fact that several of the writers under discussion were ready to dismiss the revelatory status of the *Four Treatises* has influenced Gyatso's expression here. Another point at which Tibetan cultural mores seem at odds with the language of the discussion was when she accuses the Desi of "egregious... intellectual piracy" (271) in lifting a crucial section from Zurkhawa without attribution, implying the contribution to be his own. Of course, Gyatso is well aware of the differences between modern academic attitudes towards plagiarism, and Tibetan convention of repeating previous works within new commentaries, and it seems that this case may represent a particular example overstepping even Tibetan norms of writing, yet the language seems rather extreme in the context of the Tibetan cultural milieu.

Quibbles aside, the book is major contribution to the critical study of historical developments in Tibetan medicine. Of course, Gyatso concentrates exclusively on a number of key scholars, and their debates. It is hard to say how far her discussion of the developing "medical mentality", empiricism, and critical approach to established medical sources penetrated beyond the elite circles. It may be that – as Gyatso describes here – the particular orientation of the medical discipline in itself tended to engender a more pragmatic empirical approach. On the other hand, it is also quite likely that much Tibetan medicine in practice, often passed on in hereditary family lineages sometimes linked also to religious lineages, did not extricate itself to such an extent from Buddhism or from received wisdom.

