

Bell, Christopher. *The Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

In *The Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle*, author Christopher Bell has written nothing less than the biography of a god. A rich and exceedingly comprehensive book that combines extensive fieldwork, detailed historical analysis, and textual dissection from a dizzying array of sources, the book traces the rise of the protector deity Pehar and his accompanying pantheon, the creation and renovation of Nechung Monastery, and the eventual establishment of the institution of the Nechung Oracle. As part of this, Bell spends especial attention on the relationship between the Nechung institution and the Dalai Lama. Bell demonstrates how the Dalai Lama—traditionally viewed as an incarnation of bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara—had a central role in bringing the cult of Pehar to prominence. The relationship is one of symbiosis; as a political and religious leader, the Dalai Lama has historically relied on the Nechung Oracle, who channels Pehar or associated spirit Dorjé Drakden, for guidance. In this way, this book is also about, as Bell so beautifully puts it, “two immortals and the friendship they have shared for over a thousand years.”

The book’s seven chapters are arranged thematically around four general topics. Chapters 1 and 2 consider the narrative origins of the protector deity Pehar, as well the various deities who surround him either as emanations or as separate deities in the mandala. These chapters spend rely on Paul Katz’ theory of reverberation, which looks at diverse ideas, narratives, or beliefs as a form of cogeneration, to frame the diversity of myths surrounding Pehar’s origin and eventual move to Nechung. Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the various ritual activities that form the heart of Nechung’s liturgical calendar. First, Bell details the ritual manuals that provide the foundation for the monastery’s practices to demonstrate how these texts and practices accrued over the course of centuries from competing sources of authority. Especially interesting in this chapter is the role of the Nechung oracles themselves in shaping the tradition through requesting specific texts and working closely with authors. Chapter 4 then examines the calendar of annual rituals performed throughout at Nechung Monastery.

The third thematic section of the book looks at the place of Nechung itself, first with a symbolic exploration of the vertical and horizontal mandalas produced by the monastery’s architecture and chapels (Chapter 5) and then the monastery’s place in a larger ritual and institutional network of monasteries across central Tibet (Chapter 6). As explored by Bell, these monasteries worked together to ritually support the Fifth Dalai Lama’s burgeoning political control in the seventeenth-century and remained important locales of charismatically reproducing his authority in future incarnations. The final thematic section, Chapter 7, continues this discussion of the relationship between the Nechung Oracle and the Dalai Lama through looking at the person and practice of oracular mediumship itself. This chapter, one of the most important in the book, not only provides a detailed investigation into the nature of spirit mediumship and possession in Tibet, but also teases out how the Nechung Oracle became a crucial component of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s claims to authority when establishing political control in Lhasa.

While the book is rich with information about the Nechung Monastery and the history of its interactions with the Dalai Lama’s government, especially useful is Bell’s efforts to make a

functional typology of Tibetan spirit beings. Such an undertaking has not been attempted since the 1950s work of Czech Tibetologist René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz—in whose footsteps Bell very much identifies himself throughout the book. Bell here builds on Nebesky-Wojkowitz' work with the benefit of fieldwork and an improved historical focus to lay the groundwork for identifying the various types of spirits that inhabit the Tibetan world and their relationship to the buddhas and bodhisattvas more normative to Tibetan Buddhist institutions. Although only a small part of the book, such work is invaluable for nuancing the study of Tibetan Buddhism as it is lived and practiced outside monastery walls and will be of particular interest for those who work in the diverse field of “Monster Studies.”

This book is most suited for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, though I anticipate a beginning undergraduate motivated by a particular interest in the topic would find the text stimulating. Despite a dense web of names, texts, locations, and traditions, Bell makes particular effort to welcome in non-specialist readers with gentle reminders of where in the book previously one may have heard a given name or how one could connect a given text to the larger historical context of Tibet. That being said, some familiarity with the basics of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan history will make this book especially fruitful. The book's seven chapters are focused, making them particularly useful in the classroom, where one chapter may be appropriate for a larger unit. Each chapter ends with vignettes of Bell's time living in Tibet, and the book has dozens of detailed, black and white photos that provide cultural context. Both of these attributes are sure to excite student readers and provide excellent windows into the lived reality of Tibetan religion.

The book especially demonstrates Bell's easy facility with and skill for applying theory to think about the narratives, rituals, and institutions surrounding the Nechung Oracle. Such a turn is welcome in Tibetan Studies, which has sometimes shied away from the heavy employ of theory as an analytical tool. However, as a reader, I found myself craving the development of Bell's own theoretical thinking. The conclusion sees Bell analyze the relationship between the Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle across four themes: ancestral, transmissional, institutional, and incarnational. I would love to see a sustained development of such theory throughout the book—How does relationality between humans and divine beings contribute to the continuation of an institution like the Dalai Lamas? How do we theorize divine friendship in Tibetan systems of authority? Such critiques are not necessarily faults with this book, which is an excellent analysis of how the Nechung cult developed and supported the political expansion of the institution of the Dalai Lama, but rather concrete arenas for further research. In this vein, I eagerly await Bell's future work to explore this angle further.

Natasha L. Mikles, Texas State University