Le Théâtre Ache Lhamo, Jeux et Enjeux d'Une Tradition Tibétaine, by Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*, vol. 33. Peeters, 2017. 940pp. French. ISBN-13: 978-90-429-3339-2. Pb. €115.

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Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy is the foremost European-language scholar on *ache lhamo*, a theatrical tradition of Tibet. This opus, her first book-length work on the topic, is a tribute to the decades she has spent researching Tibetan performance. The text is organized into three major sections, which represent the three methodologies from which Henrion-Dourcy approaches *ache lhamo*: (1) textual and historical context from the pre-modern period, (2) a sociological overview of *ache lhamo* troupes, their major performances and relationships with monastic Buddhism, and finally (3) an ethnographic overview of the art of performance. The contribution that this work makes to the field of Tibetan and Asian performance studies is abundantly clear, so for the purposes of this review I focus on the contributions this work makes to Buddhist Studies more broadly.

Ache lhamo is often branded the secular performance form of Tibet (in opposition to the more formally religious performance form 'cham), but Henrion-Dourcy's work shows that this designation is anything but straightforward. *Ache lhamo*, often rendered in English as Tibetan Opera, is a performance form that includes sung arias (*rnam thar*), choreographed dances and movement, spoken monologues and dialogue, a small orchestra and complex costuming and gestural technologies. The form can be seen throughout cultural Tibet, but originated from and is most actively performed in Central Tibet. *Ache lhamo* has undergone immense transformation over the past sixty years, as its performances were banned in the 1960s and 1970s and its scripts and performance styles were modified beginning in 1978 to fit within a Socialist framework. Today, there is an amazing diversity within *ache lhamo* as an artform because its expert teachers and performers have set up troupes throughout the globe and the performance forms, scripts, techniques and language continue to change in response to new audiences.

Henrion-Dourcy's work shows in great detail that *ache lhamo*'s relationship with Buddhism is complex, at times facing interdiction by Buddhist clerics (pp.388–390), forcing artists and troupes into a low position in society. Simultaneously, *ache lhamo* is frequently utilized to perform the religious labor of propagating Buddhist teachings in an entertaining and accessible manner (cf. Chapter IV). Henrion-Dourcy points out that the popular narratives that fit *ache lhamo* within a certain Buddhist worldview (like Thangtong Gyalpo (*thang stong rgyal po*) as founder (pp.75–6) or its relationship with the land taming ceremonies of Samye (*bsam yas*) (pp.91–100)), work to the advantage of legitimizing the artform as part of proper Buddhist activity, even when the historical accuracy of these narratives is questionable. Henrion-Dourcy goes to painstaking lengths to understand the place of *ache lhamo* in the

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historical record, but the more salient and relevant aspect of the work is how she understands the use of these historical narratives as rhetorical. How has *ache lhamo* worked with and against the hegemony of Buddhist ontologies to find a place for itself as an artform?

Henrion-Dourcy's answer to this particular question is ambivalent: *ache lhamo* at times takes on the role of propagator of Buddhist ideologies, wherein the actors and troupes emphasize the largely Buddhist messages of the performance scripts (*'khrab gzhung*) and the relationship between the performances and important festivals of the Buddhist calendar. On the other hand, Henrion-Dourcy's ethnographic work shows that artists themselves are less concerned with the potentially liberatory power of performing the rituals surrounding *ache lhamo*. The artists are not primarily motivated to hone their craft in order to achieve spiritual gains. The actors and musicians are concerned instead with making good art. Henrion-Dourcy's work pushes against many of the popular binaries of Tibetan performance: elite vs popular, secular vs religious, Buddhist vs indigenous, and literate vs oral. Her work shows a detailed view of an artform that is both always changing in response to cultural feedback, as well as actively using the metaphors and power sources of tradition in order to make itself relevant to its audience.

Henrion-Dourcy's work also participates in the ongoing conversation within Buddhist Studies about the relationship between land deities, rituals of taming or subduing space and Buddhist doctrine (pp.473–494). Which rituals and deities are Buddhist, and which have origins in indigenous Tibetan religious traditions? How do these religious activities fit within the frame of Buddhist ideology? Henrion-Dourcy argues that many of the ritualistic elements surrounding performances of *ache lhamo* themselves utilize some of the symbols of Buddhism, but have closer relationships with indigenous Tibetan ritual. Although this is a difficult distinction to uphold in the contemporary moment of Tibetan Buddhism, in which local land deities and their rituals are inextricably integrated into what is considered contemporary Buddhism, the work clearly shows that there is no simple, one-directional relationship between theatrical rituals, Buddhist cosmology and indigenous religious practice. Instead, *ache lhamo* is an excellent example of the complicated nature of religio-cultural phenomena in contemporary Tibet. It simultaneously draws upon aspects of indigenous Tibetan religions, especially those that have been adopted by mainstream Buddhism, while also emphasizing the centrality of Buddhist liberation and working to entertain and move audiences. Henrion-Dourcy's sociological and ethnographic analysis of *ache lhamo* as an artistic phenomenon deeply entangled with political, economic and artistic interests highlights how living Buddhist practices in Tibet are dynamic and multi-faceted.

Although Henrion-Dourcy constructs a solid historical and textual grounding in the material in sections one and two, she is clearly most compelled by the artistry of performance. By working directly with performers during their rehearsal and performance processes, she has gained fantastic insight into the didactic processes involved in the memorization of complex texts and scores, as well as the transmission of choreography, costuming, gestures, vocal cadence, and emotional

expression. She is less interested in theoretical musings and more concerned with conveying the conditions of artistic creation (c.f. Section Three). Henrion-Dourcy does not believe, for example, that indigenous Tibetan understandings of possession and deity manifestation are appropriate lenses for understanding the process by which actors take on their characters in *ache lhamo* (pp.639–644). By working with performers directly, she comes to understand the labor of *ache lhamo* performance, although tinged with religious doctrine, is more about the art of the body, voice and mind of the actors.

Rather than seeing this concern with artistry as an indication that *ache lhamo* is somehow outside the purview of Buddhist Studies, I believe this study helps us to see the performative, artistic, creative, human aspects of religious ritual through a more complex lens. What motivations and intentions are involved in ritual practice? Can they be simultaneously creative and pious? Henrion-Dourcy utilizes a plethora of sources, engaging the scholarship of her Tibetan colleagues and including ethnographic material collected from artists in Tibet, as well as in the diaspora, to paint a picture of *ache lhamo* that is much richer than the simple museum artifact caricature of Tibet's past that is so frequently depicted. Henrion-Dourcy has also conducted extensive research and fieldwork within diasporic Tibetan communities and much of her research and scholarship touches on the complexities of Tibetan performing arts in transformation. These research interests are most prominently displayed by the extensive editorial work she has performed on three major publications: Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy and Tashi Tsering, *The Singing Mask: Echoes of Tibetan Opera* (Amnye Machen Institute, 2001); Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, ed., *Studies in the Tibetan Performing Arts*, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 40 (2017); Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy and Katia Buffetrille, eds., *Musique et Épopée En Haute-Asie: Mélanges Offerts à Mireille Helffer à l'occasion de Son 90e Anniversaire* (Paris: L'Asiathèque, 2017).

As the majority of Henrion-Dourcy's ethnographic experience with *ache lhamo* in Tibet took place prior to her doctoral dissertation in 2004, there is a great opportunity for new ethnographic studies to add to the picture Henrion-Dourcy paints of Tibetan performing arts. Scholars of contemporary Buddhism can find in this work an excellent case study in the overlapping and constantly changing boundaries between the secular and sacred in Tibetan cultural production.