

*Tibetan Rituals of Death: Buddhist Funerary Practices* by Margaret Gouin. Routledge, 2010. 182pp., hb. £85.00/\$145. ISBN-13: 9780415566360.

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Tibetan Buddhist notions and practices regarding death have captured the interest of a wide range of western scholars, spiritualists, and psychologists ever since W.Y. Evans-Wentz first published the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in 1927. This Tibetan work (*Bar do thos grol*), now usually entitled *Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State*, is a ritual text designed to guide the consciousness of the deceased through the dying and after-death processes, and illustrates Tibet's religious paradigm of death as both complex and sophisticated.

The subject of death has developed into an entire genre of Tibetan literature, philosophy, iconography, and ritual. Funerary rites are perhaps the primary medium through which popular Tibetan culture directly conceptualizes the process of dying, death, and the post-mortem state. The Tibetan framework for comprehending death is little understood in the west, and although there exists a strong interest in the subject within the academic community, Margaret Gouin is the first to attempt a presentation of the full landscape of death-related beliefs and practices. Gouin's work can be characterized as a comprehensive literature review of western academic and popular treatments of Buddhist death practices in the Himalayan region. Utilizing observations made mainly by anthropologists as well as from travel accounts, she also considers Tibetan sources, primarily literature associated with the *Bar do thos grol*.

The first chapter is dedicated to addressing the sources used for this book, which is based on her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Bristol. The chapters that follow present a comparative picture of customs and perceptions regarding death that can be found in the Tibetan-influenced communities of the Himalayas. This is presented in a generally chronological order divided into chapters that include such topics as the process of dying, rituals which immediately follow death, body disposal, special cases, and finally post-disposal rituals.

When writing of Tibet-proper, Gouin primarily addresses surveys carried out in the Lhasa area and the 'Bri gung valley of central Tibet, which is a well-known area for such practices as the method of body disposal known as 'sky burial', for which she gives an informative account (see pp. 59–67). Gouin also regularly references studies and travel accounts that deal with death-related practices found in other culturally Tibetan areas such as the western Himalayan region of Ladakh, Mustang in northern Nepal, and Sikkim in north-east India, located between Nepal and Bhutan. Gouin, while attempting to give a generalized picture of death practices in the whole Himalayan region, lacks any methodical effort to investigate whether the practices addressed have their source in Buddhist, Bon, shamanic, or secular contexts. Also, at times it is hard to know whether Gouin's

use of the term 'Tibetan' is intended to imply 'Tibetan Buddhist' or 'culturally Tibetan' features.

Due to the subject-matter of this book, Gouin had the practically insurmountable challenge of summarizing the vast and pluralistic social phenomenon of funerary practices in 182 pages. Gouin herself does address the underlying problem with such an investigation, saying that, 'Information on funeral processions, like so much else to do with Tibetan death rituals, is disparate, fragmentary, and unsatisfactory. Obviously, there is considerable variation' (44). This is perhaps the reason why an academic work of this nature has until now not been attempted. Nevertheless, this book rather successfully and thoroughly presents western academic general perceptions of death-related rituals and perceptions in the Himalayas. Gouin also frequently notes where there is a current lack of available academic literature for particular topics, which at times feels almost countless in number, and poses thought-provoking questions that suggest a multitude of potential research projects for scholars. Gouin's book is an overall commendable work as a general introduction to the world of death in the Himalayas, particularly for students of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies.

