

## Review

*Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, by Frances Garrett. Critical Studies in Buddhism; London and New York: Routledge, 2008. pp. 208, \$150.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-415-44115-5.

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With *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, Frances Garrett provides the first substantial account of how the disciplinary boundaries of religion and medicine were drawn in twelfth- to fifteenth-century Tibet. By focusing on the literature on early human development, she skilfully contextualizes the debates and dilemmas that Tibetan authors themselves have faced in reconciling these overlapping systems of theory, knowledge and practice.

Rather than using a scientific paradigm to evaluate the 'truth' of pre-modern Tibetan embryology, or to simply look for the 'facts' of how Tibetans understood early human development, Garrett confidently examines the writings on the subject as *narratives*, with particular characters, narrators, plots and story lines. This approach indeed reveals a rich tapestry of ways in which Tibetan authors have creatively crafted human identity across the overlapping domains of medicine, science and religion.

Chapter One, serving as an orientation to the book, raises fundamental theoretical concerns and includes a reflection on the Euro-American scholar's own cultural bias when exploring and writing on the boundaries of medicine, science and religion in a distant time and place. It is noteworthy that Garrett, despite her choice to use the term 'embryology', a word of Greek origin, is acutely aware and sensitive throughout the book to the Tibetan terminology used in native writings on human development and the human body.

Chapter Two explores various possible historical roots for some of the Tibetan embryological understandings. The obvious first places to consider are early Indian medical writings on the development of the human body. By tracing the transmission of various medical texts from India to Tibet, in particular the *Heart of Medicine* (*Aṣṭāṅgahrdayasaṃhitā*) attributed to Vāgbhaṭa, she adds to our general understanding of the process of medical transmission between these regions, showcasing this through a detailed and critical examination of their sections on embryology. Garrett's search across the Himalayas continues, when she looks at the discourses on early human development as found in the Nikāyas of early Indian Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism. An important work here is the *Entering of the womb sūtra*, which Tibetan writers

translated, making creative and selective use of it in their commentaries on embryology (p. 29). Then the embryology as encountered in the *Kālacakra Tantra* is explored, where the newly conceived embryo is understood to develop due to various winds. Also, the *Kālacakra Tantra* establishes an intimate relationship between the knowing of the cosmos and the knowing of the human being for the seeker of enlightenment (p. 32). When she considers the Chinese embryological traditions of ‘nurturing the foetus’, Garrett finds that although the overall aims of embryological writings may be similar to those in Tibet, their structure and detail vary considerably (p. 35). Nonetheless, while the understandings of the transmigration of the human mind diverge to a greater or lesser extent among all of the traditions examined, the desire for male offspring was a shared concern of all of them.

Chapter Three provides a detailed account of Tibetan medical history, consulting a broad range of Tibetan primary sources, including Tibetan medical historiographies. Garrett shows how their authors struggled in various ways with the relationship between medicine and religion. One problem centred on whether the fundamental medical text *Four Tantras (Rgyud Bzhi)* was originally taught by the Buddha, or whether it is a work compiled within the cosmopolitan environment in the centuries prior to the eleventh century, that is during and after the so-called ‘later period of the dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet’ (*pyi dar*), when Tibetan kings ruled vast parts of Central Asia.

Towards the end of Chapter Three, Garrett makes a most welcome first attempt to classify the Tibetan medical literature (pp. 54–55). Such classification, according to contemporary Tibetan authors, does not exist from within their own tradition of *gso rig* (or medicine) classified as one of the ten ‘arts’ or ‘sciences’ in Tibet. It is most interesting to learn in this section that out of several hundred Tibetan medical texts mentioned in the most well-known but not yet translated medical history, *Interior Analysis*, and from Garrett’s own survey of the medical literature, only a minor portion is exclusively dedicated to discussions of the human body; subjects we know as anatomy or physiology. A much larger proportion is made up of texts on nosology, pharmacology, *materia medica* and texts on therapeutics. Case histories, a large genre in the history of Chinese medical writings, appear to be completely absent until the modern period.

Chapter Four deals with the foetal body, gender and what is considered a ‘normal’ healthy being, in the author’s terminology, ‘the main characters in Tibetan narratives of embryology’ (p. 57). This chapter includes a concise exploration of different historically specific understandings of human bodies and embodiment in Tibetan medicine (pp. 60–64) and tantric Buddhism (pp. 64–67), showing how they overlapped and shaped each other. The tantric circulatory understanding of the body entered medical writings, for example the *Four Tantras*, as the various *rtsa* (often translated as ‘channels’ or ‘vessels’) more prominently than medical, humoral understandings of the body entered Tantric conceptions of the body. This chapter includes a lengthy discussion of how different medical and religious writings determined how a being becomes male, female or of indeterminate sex, is born healthy or unhealthy and how gendered characteristics are ascribed to the human body after birth. Recommendations on how to conceive a male child abound, even to the extent that certain behaviours and rituals were thought to override the forces of karma and could change the foetus’s sex at the time of conception and during gestation. What is striking, though, is that the pregnant mother is almost entirely absent in the stories of embryology. This supports Garrett’s

argument that embryology may not have been of much of interest to medical practice *per se*, but rather a way for religious and medical scholars alike to talk about religion.

Chapter Five deals with cases in the Tibetan literature when the embryo symbolically represents the practitioner of meditation. The symbolic and metaphorical importance of the development of the foetus for the religious practitioner necessitated more detailed understandings of gestation and growth. However, accounts of the monthly development in gestation that were consequently discussed in various domains of knowledge and practice, exhibit marked differences. Medical authors seem untroubled by citing contradictory views next to each other and make little attempt to reconcile them. This adds to Garrett's overall thesis that embryology was less about the knowledge of the 'actual' foetal development and growth, let alone about the mother's concerns or emotions (with the exception of changing the foetus's sex), but more that it provided a perfect metaphor to talk about religion: about karma and the causality of birth and, above all, about impermanence, change and growth, the topics of the concluding and excellent chapter six.

The strength of this book lies both in its wealth of historical information on Tibetan medicine, religion, art and literature and in its ability to make very clear just how difficult it is—and has been for Tibetan authors themselves—to establish the boundaries of their various knowledge systems. Garrett's translations of many of the relevant sections on embryology are skilful and evocative: at once clear to a modern reader, yet preserving some of the flavour of a distant time and place. The outcome is a concise, scholarly, rigorous and well-written book that will remain a valuable companion to any serious graduate student and scholar of Asian religion, medicine and culture.