

Book Reviews

Sienna R. Craig. 2012. *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Anthropologist Sienna Craig's book *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine* is the result of multi-year and multi-sited ethnographic research. Craig offers social and cultural understandings to the question of efficacy in the context of *Sowa Rigpa* (Tibetan medicine). In doing so, she takes into account both micro- and macro-social processes and explores how Tibetan medicine (TM) figures into the globally connected world; how actors involved in it negotiate its meanings and pragmatics; and how its potency and efficacy is shaped by the 'social ecologies' it encounters. *Healing Elements* investigates the processes through which TM comes into being and how its particular forms of knowledge and practices are produced and legitimated in relation and response to diverse social ecologies.

In this book, Craig weaves together the stories of different people, places, events, and things (i.e., medicine). The book teaches us what an engaged ethnographic project is like as each chapter informs us about Craig's rigorous engagement with and careful presentation of the subject matter. The hallmarks of anthropology – participant observation, taking part in everyday life of people, paying attention to actors' point of view, and collaboration with research participants – are well evident in this book. *Healing Elements* not only characterizes the rigorous methodological and conceptual basis Craig has laid out but also demonstrates her successful presentation of the ethnographic details with a pithy, engaged, and illustrative writing style.

Chapter One looks at how *Sowa Rigpa* is practiced, used, understood, and encountered in the remote district of Mustang, Nepal through the eyes of two practitioners: Gyatso and Tenzin. Craig carefully sheds light on their long practice of TM in a country where it receives somewhat ambiguous status and rare state priority. Such ambiguity, however, does not exist in isolation because "remote people and places are connected to regional and global ideas, practices, goods, services, and values" (p. 46). Craig believes that mono-dimensional and dichotomous treatments of 'tradition' or

‘modernity’ are not enough to grasp the variant social ecologies influencing Tibetan medicine.

Chapter Two presents *Arura*, an institution of TM, as a case to demonstrate the strong institutionalization and commercialization of TM knowledge and practice in China. TM’s status in China lies in stark contrast to what it enjoys in Mustang. Whereas in China TM, amid challenges, has already made its way to commercialization and institutionalization, and has been able to claim a level of legitimacy, sustainability, and identity, in Mustang there is still a struggle for basic institutionalization and government support. These two chapters together present how different social ecologies – government support, social relationships, political economies, peoples’ “shared allegiance to place” (p. 70) – shape the epistemologies and ontologies as well as the production and reproduction of TM.

Chapter Three starts off with an account of Nepali *Amchi*’s attempts to make TM legitimate and legible, at least within the state agency represented by the Ministry of Health and Population. The chapter offers insights into the countless challenges facing TM practitioners in Nepal in their efforts to institutionalize and legitimize their knowledge and practice (i.e., through making curricula and guidelines). These challenges include government health officials’ interpretations of TM as inferior to biomedicine and donor agencies’ contribution to making biomedicine’s dominance possible in health landscape. Other challenges include the TM practitioners’ “positions as marginalized citizens of Nepal” (p. 88); recent graduates’ disinterest in practicing TM in rural mountains due to their changing aspirations; and the linguistic limitations in translating TM across languages. In China, the challenge noticed by Craig’s informant is that TM is “being swallowed up by Chinese medicine and Western medicine” (p. 106).

Chapter Four explores the illness narratives, therapeutic encounters, and peoples’ judgments based on their physio-psychological conditions as well as “cultural interpretations of what causes illness” (p. 126). Craig contends that health-seeking behavior is a complex phenomenon involving a range of social ecologies. She notes that “[s]eeking care is like making a map – a set of experiences that can be charted, that occur in many different locales, and that involve instinct, direction, guidance, tools. Reading such maps requires weighing evidence generated from diverse systems of thought” (p. 130). She wants her readers to believe that a healing sensibility constitutes an embodiment of different therapeutic options and none of these options (TM,

biomedicine, Chinese medicine) exists dichotomous to each other. She points out that complex meanings and practices regarding TM shape and are shaped by the understandings and practices of multiple actors.

Chapter Five discusses attempts to modernize TM in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China so as to catch up on the pace of and compete with other forms of medicine. Such modernizing efforts, as Craig quotes her informant as saying, “must use the traditional wisdom combined with modern technologies and knowledge” (p. 152). The chapter also examines the transformations that TM is undergoing regarding its production, circulation, and use. These transformations come in the form of “new pharmaceutical governance regimes,” one of which is good manufacturing practices (GMP) that “impacts the value, meaning, and structure not only of Tibetan medicine production, but also of Tibetan medical education” (p. 162). The requirement of new and skilled workers, fancy machines, and big wage payment are challenges facing TM as its trajectory to modernization and commercialization is underway. This massive transformation, in turn, leads to “changes in labor relations” and to the loss of strong sensory relationship with plants, minerals, and animal products which, in fact, “changes the embodied nature of producing Tibetan medicine” (p. 162). These new practices, Craig notes, “illustrate the changed social ecology of medicine production” and have “transformed the spaces of medicine making” (p.163). The introduction of GMP, in particular, not only makes TM encounter new forms of regulations deemed as scientific, it also indicates conflict and contradiction of “the old knowledge of Tibetan medicine with these new rules” (p. 144). This might result into what Craig calls, borrowing Foucault, “the ‘biopolitics’ of pharmaceutical governance” (p. 166).

Chapter Six sheds light on the discussion of conservation and development arguing that NGOs and states engage in conservation programs that do not reflect local understandings and practices. Craig is not only concerned about the complex relationship between donor organizations and practitioners of TM but also “aware of the interconnection between political will and the present and future practices like *Sowa Rigpa*, as well as the far-reaching effects of a vision of the world in which nature is at once deeply revered and heavenly marketed” (p. 200). She writes that Tibetan “medicinal plants represent pathways to healing and to profit; they remain paragons of traditional culture even as they are clinically tested for safety, quality, and efficacy according to technoscientific standards” (p. 202). This is her way to

see ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ not as dichotomous entities but as those that go hand in hand.

Chapter Seven points out that medicine is socially and culturally produced and it has to be understood beyond its pharmacological composition. In this chapter, Craig draws on Appadurai’s notion of the ‘social life of things’ (1988) as well as the ‘social lives of medicine’ by Whyte et al. (2002), to talk about how Tibetan medicine (*Zhijé* 11, for example) means different things to different people as it embodies different values across time and space. Focusing on its social life, Craig writes that efficacy “arises when a doctor’s ability, a patient’s condition, the innate power of specific medicines, and the social-ecological circumstances of treatment are positively aligned” (p. 224).

In her Conclusion Craig provides a synopsis of the central points and arguments echoed throughout the book. Craig discusses change in the *Sowa Rigpa* tradition due to its need to adapt to the diverse circumstances it encounters. One of its adaptations is through institutionalization and legitimization. She presents Tibetan medicine as both “*process* and *product*: material substances, repositories of meaning, forms of practice, objects and value” (p. 256) whose medical imaginaries are constantly changing.

Healing Elements is a book that explores the encounters and entanglements facing TM today. While the buzzwords in the book are ‘efficacy’, ‘healing methods’, ‘standardization,’ it also delves into the ideas of cultural authenticity and representation, religion and science, belief and rationality. Similarly, it also underscores the issues of medical pluralism, practice, and knowledge. Throughout the book, Craig has remained very observant and strong in capturing people’s body language, tone of voices, emotions, narratives and mundane comments and practices which together make her ethnography so visual that readers might feel very comfortable walking through the landscapes, cultures, and people she has discussed. At times, she has been brave enough to offer judgments on her interlocutors’ way of viewing the phenomena. For example, in response to a critique of a Tibetan doctor that biomedicine works under one-medicine-for-one-problem approach, she writes, “[T]his comment reveals an interesting bias by this Tibetan doctor, in that biomedicine also relies on multiple approaches to therapy” (p. 224).

This book sheds light not only on how medicine works but also on how it works in different cultural landscapes; how its production, use, and efficacy are affected by the social ecologies; and how local/national and global,

tradition and modernity, religion and science, past and present, morality and economy are enmeshed in each other. This is as much a book about meanings and practices as it is about Tibetan medicine. Craig helps readers closely understand the epistemological and ontological grounds of Tibetan medicine and its production, transformation, and adaptation. The relevance and use of this book goes far beyond anthropology, i.e., sociology, social studies of science and technology, international health, and history. The ethnography is useful for regional studies – Himalayan studies, Nepal studies, Tibet and China studies – and understanding the regions’ cultures, societies, and transformations as well.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun, ed. 1988. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Whyte, Susan Ronalds, Sjaak van der Geest, and Anita Hardon, eds. 2002. *Social Lives of Medicines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Healing Elements explores Tibetan medicine within diverse settings, from rural schools and clinics in the Nepal Himalaya to high-tech factories and state-supported colleges in the People's Republic of China. This multi-sited ethnography explores how Tibetan medicines circulate as commercial goods and gifts, as target therapies, and as panacea for biosocial ills. Healing Elements examines the ways traditional medicine interacts with biomedicine: from patient-healer relationships and the cultural meanings ascribed to affliction, to the wider circumstances in which practitioners are trained, healing occurs, and medicines are made, evaluated, and used. Sienna Craig's book *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine* makes a rich, timely and rewarding contribution to several lively fields. Growing interest in Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan medicine) over the last decade or so has seen the release of numerous edited volumes. *HIMALAYA XXXII (1-2) 2012*. The same period has also seen significant growth in social scientific studies taking medicines and the pharmaceutical industry as their central objects of investigation. Several excellent collaborative volumes have started to map out the theoretical terrain and the contemporary dynamics at play in the making, assessment, valuation, circulation and use of pharmaceuticals, although ethnographic grounding of the main ideas remains patchy.