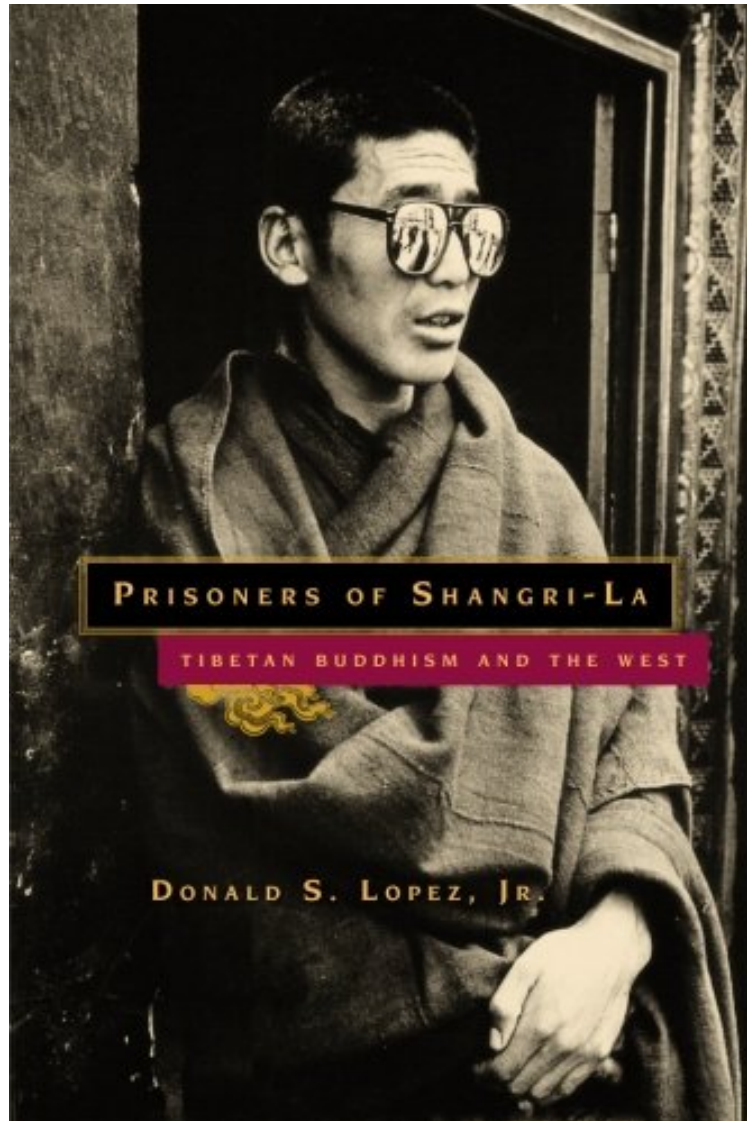


[Free pdf] Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West

Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West

Donald S. Lopez, Jr.

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Donald S. Lopez Jr. : Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West:

13 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Are we still prisoners of Shangri-la? By Magalini Sabina At ten years from its publication that flared many a fire from other Tibetan scholars and Buddhist adepts, Lopez's demystifying and deconstructive work can be coolly judged for its positive and negative aspects. The book was issued in 1998 at the peak of American "Tibetmania" by an academician who was probably greatly annoyed by the many

interpretations and transformations of what he deemed a field of knowledge worthy of a "scientific" study. With a solid even if slightly arrogant and according to some "biased" approach, the Author analyzes the cardinal points of Western misinterpretation of the Tibetan culture. Starting from the pejorative term of "Lamaism", leading us through the Hippy and New-Age popularity of the "Tibetan Book of the Dead", across Lobsang Rampa's global and successful hoax he shows us how, with a typical "Orientalism" approach, we tend to see in Tibet and its culture either a paradisiac or demoniac reality that does not exist and a great part of the confusion is due to the tools used for the interpretation of ancient texts. Eviscerating the formula "Om manipadme hum", attempting an esthetical and epistemological analysis of Tibetan art works and depicting, this time in severely personal perspective, the scenario of Tibetan studies in the US and in the rest of the world, he lands us in a territory where with clean and virgin eyes we can try to really look and appreciate a culture so different from ours. The last part of the book deals with the apparent complacency of Tibetan religious authorities with the Western misreading of a "Buddhist modernism" and a "diluting of dharma", in order to enforce anti-Chinese politics in the attempt of finding patrons in exile. Naturally this idea is strictly personal and has to be re-evaluated today that somehow the illusion of a Free Tibet seems as far away as ever before. Another point to make at a distance of ten years is the constant updating of the translations of the original sources of Tibetan knowledge, that have greatly contributed on their own to the demystification of this academic discipline and widespread religion. The book is easy to read also because the innumerable bibliographical citations are helpfully all at the end and can be consulted at wish (don't miss them for clues to further reading) and represents a milestone for the layman that is interested in this field. P.S. The apparently incomprehensible and complicated Shugden affair is still going on now! 9 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Rewriting History From the Roof of the World By EternalSeeker A thought provoking and well documented look at how Tibet and its people have been reformulated by the media for the West's consumption for nearly 200 years. Its isolation has made it the victim of spiritual and political charlatans selling a romantic and impossible image of it in the West, later to be followed by the total silence imposed by the Chinese as they carried out a ruthless policy of social genocide, further distorting the image of Tibet as a nation and a people. Anyone interested in the future of central Asia, and that is to say Asia, China and the world itself, should read this book, as should all those currently bewitched by Tibetan Buddhism. The historical reality of Tibet has much more to offer the world, than the fairy tale we have wistfully imposed upon it. 22 of 27 people found the following review helpful. Backstage pass By Saul Boulschett to one of the biggest gigs touring the world right now. The book, written in the best academese, presents a clear view of the West's distortion, and the history of that distortion-making, vis--vis Tibet and Tibet's version of Buddhism. The book is laid out into seven neat chapters, each bearing a single-word title that feels Borgesian in its cryptic minimalism. Each chapter deals with one of the events and objects that have structured for the West the illusion called Tibet. They are (and refer to): 1. The Name (the term 'Lamaism') 2. The Book (The Tibetan Book of the Dead) 3. The Eye (the book, 'The Third Eye' by T. Lobsang Rampa) 4. The Spell (the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum) 5. The Art (Thangkas, Mandalas, Wrathful Deities, Skull cups, etc) 6. The Field (of Buddhist Studies and Tibetology in the US) 7. The Prison (the collective illusion regarding "Tibet" and her mysteries) Yes, the debunking is sobering as well as entertaining, as it is done with solid scholarly information delivered with biting wit and even Wildean sarcasm at times. But the most interesting things the author mentions are questions and remain still as questions: Namely, the question of Tibetan clergy's willing "collusion" or co-option of the West's tendency to "psychologize" the Buddhist doctrine. For example, there is a marked tendency on the part of the Tibetan Lamas and American academics to veer away from interpreting the Six Realms as anything more than so many "psychological states" in this present incarnation but that is certainly NOT the way most Tibetans have been taught. Moreover, there is a Dalai Lama approved move to present to the West a user-friendly version of Tibetan Buddhism that is totally devoid of the really weird stuff that "formerly" took up (and still takes up for the average Tibetan) the bulk of what that faith used to be all about "back home": exorcism, magic, animistic rituals, etc., stuff that would be totally unacceptable in the modern West. The last chapter deals a bit with the so-called Shugden Affair that may have played a part in the murder of an old Lama and his two students who supported the Dalai Lama's new policy (after consulting an oracle) to outlaw Shugden (a protecting deity of the Geluk sect) worship. This was not widely reported in the media but apparently this was/is a big deal among the Tibetans in the dressing room backstage even as they continue to put on a great show on stage. No doubt, Tibetan Buddhism, even in its Americanized (low fat, low salt, Stuart Smalley) version has something to offer to some people - if not to the West as a whole, then at least to the Tibetans' image. But are we in the West willing, ready, and daring enough to meet the Tibetans on their own religious turf and do what they do and eat what they eat, so to speak? If not, maybe going back to church and listening to a familiar sermon may not be entirely a bad idea for those who must have religion. Let's not forget, nobody in China has ever heard of, let alone eat, Chop Suey.

Prisoners of Shangri-La is a provocative analysis of the romance of Tibet, a romance that, even as it is invoked by Tibetan lamas living in exile, ultimately imprisons those who seek the goal of Tibetan independence from Chinese occupation. "Lopez lifts the veil on America's romantic vision of Tibet to reveal a country and a spiritual history more complex and less ideal than popular perceptions allow. . . . Lively and engaging, Lopez's book raises important

questions about how Eastern religions are often co-opted, assimilated and misunderstood by Western culture. "Publishers Weekly" Proceeding with care and precision, Lopez reveals the extent to which scholars have behaved like intellectual colonialists. . . . Someone had to burst the bubble of pop Tibetology, and few could have done it as resoundingly as Lopez. "Booklist" Fascinating. . . [A] provocative exploration. Lopez conveys the full dizziness of the Western encounter with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. "Fred Pheil, Tricycle: The Buddhist Review" A timely and courageous exploration. . . . [Lopez's] book will sharpen the terms of the debate over what the Tibetans and their observers can or should be doing about the place and the idea of Tibet. And that alone is what will give us all back our Shambhala. "Jonathan Spence, Lingua Franca Book Review" Lopez's most important theme is that we should be wary of the idea . . . that Tibet has what the West lacks, that if we were only to look there we would find the answers to our problems. Lopez's book shows that, on the contrary, when the West has looked at Tibet, all that it has seen is a distorted reflection of itself. "Ben Jackson, Times Higher Education Supplement

From Kirkus sIn this fine scholarly work, Lopez (Asian Languages and Cultures/Univ. of Michigan) warns his readers away from romanticized visions of Tibet, which ultimately harm that beleaguered nation's prospects for independence. Buddhism, the religion of enlightenment, takes as its task the dispersal of human misconceptions of reality. It is only fitting that, in the wake of heightened popular interest in Tibet, Lopez should write a corrective to both positive and negative misconceptions of Tibetan Buddhism. Among the sources of misinterpretation he notes are: psychological interpretations of the Tibetan Book of the Dead; *The Third Eye*, by Englishman Cyril Hoskin, a fantastic (and popular) tale of Tibetan spirit possession published in 1956; mistranslations of the famous mantra, Om Mani Padme Hum; exhibitions of Tibetan art in Western museums; the institutionalization of the academic discipline of Tibetology; increasingly airy spiritualizations of Tibetan culture. What all these acts of interpreting Tibetan Buddhism share, says Lopez, is a whole or partial disregard for the concrete, living contexts of Tibetan religion. Elements of Tibetan Buddhism become abstract symbols onto which Western writers project their own spiritual, psychological, or professional needs. For example, the chant Om Mani Padme Hum, mistranslated as "the jewel is in the lotus," is allegorized into an edifying symbol of conjoined opposites when, in fact, it is simply a prayerful invocation of the Buddhist god Avalokiteshvara. The irony is that Tibetans affirm these Western misreadings in hopes of winning more sympathy for their struggle for independence. The danger, according to Lopez, is that the full particularity of Tibet will be lost in ineffectual platitudes. He is angry about many of the more outrageous manglings of Tibetan belief and culture; he can also be quite witty over the more ridiculous applications by New Agers of ostensibly Tibetan beliefs. As an interpreter of interpreters, Lopez functions here twice removed from the actual religion of Tibet; readers should approach with some prior knowledge of Buddhism. -- Copyright 1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. ...Lopez explores with skill, and a barely concealed delight in the debunkings... -- The Boston Globe, Michael Kenney

From the Back CoverIn this book, Donald Lopez provides the first cultural history of the strange encounter between Tibetan Buddhism and the West. Charting the flights of Western fantasies of Tibet and its Buddhist legacy, Lopez presents fanciful visions of Tibetan life and religion, ranging from the utopian to the demonic. He examines, among much else, the politics of the term "Lamaism", a pejorative name for Tibet's religion; the various theosophical, psychedelic, and New Age purposes served by *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; the strange case of the Englishman with three eyes; and the unexpected history of the most famous of all Buddhist mantras, om mani padme hum. Throughout, Lopez demonstrates how myths of Tibet pervade both the products of pop culture and learned scholarly works.