

---

*A Blessing for the Land: The architecture, art and history of a buddhist convent in Mustang, Nepal*, by John Harrison, Christian Luczanits, Charles Ramble, with Nyima Drandul

Christian Jahoda

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/375>

DOI: 10.4000/ebhr.375

ISSN: 2823-6114

**Publisher**

CNRS - UPR 299 - Centre d'Etudes Himalayennes

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 15 July 2020

Number of pages: 120-122

ISSN: 0943-8254

**Electronic reference**

Christian Jahoda, "A Blessing for the Land: The architecture, art and history of a buddhist convent in Mustang, Nepal", by John Harrison, Christian Luczanits, Charles Ramble, with Nyima Drandul", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* [Online], 54 | 2020, Online since 15 March 2022, connection on 22 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/375> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebhr.375>

---



Creative Commons - Attribution 4.0 International - CC BY 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## ***A Blessing for the Land: The Architecture, Art and History of a Buddhist Convent in Mustang, Nepal***

by John Harrison, Christian Luczanits, Charles Ramble, with Nyima Drandul. Kathmandu: Vajra Books. 2018, 143 pp., 56 colour photos, 56 b/w photos, 24 drawings, 1 map, ISBN 978-9937-9288-2-3, USD 40.

Reviewed by Christian Jahoda

This book brings together interrelated contributions by four experts who are well known for their studies in the fields of architecture, art, social anthropology and history of Tibetan and Himalayan societies. The result is an outstanding example of highly engaging work in terms of its scientific content, readability, fine design and wonderful illustrations and, above all, a wealth of information on a Buddhist convent, a nunnery, in Mustang, Nepal. Examined in three parts, each dedicated to a different disciplinary perspective: architecture (by John Harrison), art (by Christian Luczanits) and history (by Charles Ramble, with Nyima Drandul), Künzang Chöling nunnery is studied from its foundation, construction and decoration (1684-1695) under the direction of Lama Künzang Longyang (1644-1697) through the different religious, sociopolitical and economic developments that took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the twentieth century when monastic life there came to an end.

The account of the monastery's architecture is embedded in a description of the geographic setting and network of settlements (and caves, presumably predating the monastery) which surround the site on a ridge close to the Kali Gandaki River. The architectural description based on a measured survey by John Harrison in 2005 analyses the construction and the history of the monument and also extends to the function of the rooms, the materials used in the construction and the wood carvings therein. Overviews and architectural details of the building are illustrated through excellent black and white photographs, a large number of drawings of floor plans, sections and elevations (including a reconstruction of original views). The architectural design is in keeping with Tibetan criteria, such as the number of pillars

defining the size of halls. A short section briefly examines multistorey temples that house colossal Maitreya sculptures in other areas of the Tibetan cultural world, which might have been known to the founder, patrons, artists and craftsmen involved in the construction of the monastery.

The study of the artistic decoration, and in particular of the two-storey-high Maitreya image and the ground-floor mural paintings, both of considerable quality, in the assembly hall and the entry hall, is based on documentation collected by Christian Luczanits during a brief visit in 2012. These paintings, which bear witness to the founder's main religious affiliation, the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, reveal a substantial and unique iconographic programme that is described in great detail and illustrated through accompanying full-page colour photographs. The painting featuring most probably the founder of the monastery amidst his disciples and followers, which is rather well preserved and shown on a double spread, establishes a natural connection to the final part of the volume.

Under the title 'The Lama and the Nuns', the most essential events in the life of the monastery's founder are reconstructed based on information provided in his 31-chapter autobiography (photographed by Nyima Drandul in 2016). This includes in particular the founding process of the monastery, the various stages from fundraising, construction and the organisation of, expenditure for and overseeing or carrying out of works such as sculpture making, mural painting and finally consecration, all of which lasted twelve years. This biographical text is a wealth of information on the early life of the lama, his family, the religious masters he met and the pilgrimages he made to Central Tibet where he also received teachings from the Ngor branch of the Sakya school of Buddhism and was eventually ordained a second time as a Ngor pa monk. His personal encounters and activities are described with great attention to detail and in relation to the respective sociopolitical and religious circumstances and networks, such as the donations he received from his main aristocratic patron who lost his life when a great earthquake caused his fortress to collapse (1680) or the unceasing support by way of offerings and bequests from monks and the laity of the surrounding area. The forthcoming publication of this autobiography will constitute an even greater mine of information

on various aspects of his experiences and activities: first and foremost, the architectural, artistic and historical legacy of Künzang Chöling, as well as efforts to preserve and renovate it.

In addition to this biography, written sources kept in nearby villages and the convent archive collection (photographed by Charles Ramble and Nyima Drandul in 1993) are judiciously used to give accounts of the changing political and administrative context during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as an overview of annual ceremonial activities (rituals and prayers) and of the finances of the monastery, which were organised and maintained through an endowment system. The decline of the convent, which began in the early twentieth century, is described as having been linked to financial difficulties (caused – among other reasons – by additional expenditure for counter-ceremonies to compensate for Hindus' animal sacrifices during Dasain), to divisive activities by other lamas (leading to the secession of nuns) and to the slackening of monastic discipline (allowing a previously sanctioned half-nun half-lay-woman status). This is demonstrated by way of related contemporary documents that are illustrated in facsimile, in addition to the Tibetan *dbu can* script and in translated extracts.

**Christian Jahoda** is a Researcher and Deputy Director of the Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Hollandstraße 11-13, 1020 Wien, Austria.

[Christian.Jahoda@oeaw.ac.at](mailto:Christian.Jahoda@oeaw.ac.at)