The Monastery Rules: Buddhist monastic organisation in pre-modern Tibet, by Berthe Jansen

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Although books on Tibetan religion, and in particular Buddhism, whether written for academic readers or a broader audience, probably far outnumber any other type of publication on Tibet, the way in which monastic life is organised – its rules and relations to lay society – has in fact been relatively little studied. Perhaps it has been too hastily assumed that monastic life in Tibet could be adequately described by referring to the Vinaya, the Indian Buddhist code of rules (translated into Tibetan) governing the conduct of monks and nuns within their respective male and female monastic communities, as well as in their interaction with laypeople. The Vinaya, of which several versions exist in Sanskrit and Pali, has been of fundamental importance for all monastic institutions in Tibet since the founding of the first Buddhist monastery in the Land of Snow in the eighth century CE until today, and has been the subject of numerous scholarly works. However, Berthe Jansen is probably the first scholar to make systematic use of the so-called chayik (bca’ yig), ‘monastic guidelines’, which can be understood in various ways: ‘regulations, constitutions, rules, codes, protocols, manuals, laws, rulebooks, regulatory texts, codified rules, regimens, monastic injunctions, standards, charters or edicts’ (p. 16).

The chayik constitute a vast corpus of texts, each of which establishes specific rules, supplementing the Vinaya, that regulate the manifold aspects of daily life in a monastery, based on the monastery’s size, economic resources, and, not uncommonly, the social realities of the local community. The sheer bulk of the chayik sources cannot be appreciated simply by glancing at the list of works in Tibetan, listed by Jansen in ‘Sources’. Although there are more than eighty titles, their size is not specified. However, to quote but one example, a collection of
*chayik* published in Lhasa in 2013 is simply listed by its title, and place and year of publication – there is no indication that this work contains the texts of 73 *chayik* and consists of 964 pages. Jansen’s study thus rests on a vast and solid textual basis.

The introduction and the eight chapters making up the book span a range of topics, are well structured and, moreover, are replete with insights and documentation that has not previously been available in a Western language. Chapter One on the genre of *chayik* gives a systematic overview of this textual corpus: its genesis, functions, style, relation to the Vinaya, authorship, and motivation. This is followed by a chapter that presents a historical and doctrinal overview of the basis of monastic organisations in Tibet, the author’s conclusion being that by ‘understanding the day-to-day organisation of the monastery it becomes easier to answer fundamental questions … the rights and duties ascribed to laypeople and monks’ (p. 43). To answer these questions, the *chayik* provide a rich source, ranging chronologically from the eleventh century CE to the present day.

Subsequent chapters discuss the practical application of *chayik* rules in various contexts and are illustrated on almost every page by quotations from *chayik* texts. These chapters deal with topics such as ‘Entrance to the Monastery’, ‘Monastic Organization’, ‘Monastic Economy and Policy’, ‘Relations with the Laity’, and ‘Justice and the Judicial Role of the Monastery’. No review can do justice to the wealth and diversity of the documentation provided by Jansen. Precisely because of this diversity, one might have preferred that the material be organised, to some extent at least, along chronological as well as sectarian lines. This might have made it possible to discern possible trends in the development of *chayik* – and hence in monastic organisation – over the long period in question. It might also have been useful if a complete translation of one or two *chayik* had been included to give the reader an idea of what this type of text actually looks like.

There are relatively few references to the life of female monastics. Neither ‘nuns’ nor ‘women’ figure in the index. It is very likely that research along the same lines as those presented in *The Monastery Rules*, but focusing on nuns, would be an interesting complement to Jansen’s book, even if the source material would be more limited.

Leaving aside these comments, it cannot be emphasised enough
that the work under review is not only a pioneering and carefully researched contribution to a rarely studied aspect of Tibetan society but also provides fascinating insight into monastic life in Tibet both as it actually was prior to the Chinese takeover in the 1950s as well as how, according to the monastic elite, it was supposed to be. To give just one example, one of the fundamental dilemmas of monastic life in its practical day-to-day reality was knowing how to maintain the autonomy and separateness of the monastic community, while at the same time interacting with laypeople. Benefactors and their donations were, of course, often an important source of income but laypeople could also be perceived as intrusive. Thus, a *chayik* from 1943 stipulates that, ‘Dogs and beggars are not to be let in the monastic compound, but food and drink is to be given outside to individuals’ (p. 121). One reason for this apparent lack of generosity was that gifts that had been given to monastics generated religious merit for the donor, which, so it was believed, would be lost if the gift was passed on instead of being used according to its original intention. However, although Buddhist values of love and compassion are not, according to Jansen, explicitly mentioned in the *chayik*, she points out that rules such as the one quoted above imply that ‘monks showed an inclination toward charity’ (p. 122).

This is but one instance, chosen at random, from among the innumerable topics dealt with in Jansen’s book. *The Monastery Rules* is an eminent and indispensable contribution to the study of Tibetan society, presenting the daily reality of monastic life in its hitherto undocumented diversity.

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