An important and timely question lies at the core of Thomas Kauffmann’s book *The Agenda of Tibetan Refugees*: ‘how, after more than fifty years of exile, are the Tibetan refugees still able to attract such substantial assistance from Western governments, NGOs, other organisations and individuals, unlike other populations of refugees who are largely or totally forgotten?’ (p. 2) This success, Kauffmann argues, is due to a relational dynamic that has its origins in the ‘patron-priest’ (*mchod yon*) relationship which has been the template for Tibetan international relations since the thirteenth century. Extending Dorsh Marie De Voe’s argument that the *mchod yon* model had been integrated into the dynamics of development, Kauffmann provides a detailed description of how, through distinct political and religious agendas, Tibetan leadership has transformed this relationship in ways that resonate with the shifting spiritual demands of Western supporters. Kauffman traces this re-articulated patron-priest relationship back to the reorganisation of Tibetan Buddhism in exile, whereby it has been transformed into a ‘world religion, exportable to the Western religious market’ (p. 88). As such, by effectively conflating Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism, leadership has ‘transformed their supporters de facto into sbyon bdag, or sponsors’ (ibid).

In developing this argument, the book follows a chronological structure, starting with an outline of how Tibetan refugees settled in exile and then moving on to discuss the role of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and developments in Western-based organisations which support the diaspora in a variety of ways. Whilst in many places the book seems to lack a clear narrative – the subsections in each chapter often come across as being disjointed and there is some repetition – the
overarching argument is a persuasive one. A particularly compelling conception is that of the ‘re-enchantment’ of development that the exile community has fostered amongst its Western supporters. Kauffmann argues that by adapting the concept of chos srid zung ‘brel (religion and politics combined) the Tibetan leadership in exile has effectively framed their claims within two powerful Western discourses, or ‘Utopias’: a ‘lost spiritual paradise’ (ie Tibet) and ‘development’ (p. 141). As such, not only is this an unusual situation whereby Western NGOs have integrated a non-Western mode of relations, but it is also a relationship whereby both ‘sides’ benefit. Rather than the conventional relationship between a generous and powerful donor and a grateful and submissive recipient, here the ‘donor is indebted to the recipient because he [sic] can gain merit only through the acceptance of his [sic] gift’ (p. 144). Each party gains from this and, as a result, the development relationship is a balanced and arguably more successful and sustainable one. Where Kauffmann’s argument is less persuasive is in his insistence in the ‘uniqueness’ of the Tibetan case, based on the central role played by spirituality. This perpetuation of the narrative of Tibet and Tibetans as unique could perhaps have been countered by a more analytical engagement with a wider range of scholarship from development studies, political anthropology and refugee studies.

Kauffmann does, however, draw heavily on literature on the Tibetan diaspora itself and it is here that the book makes a significant contribution in building on and furthering existing understanding of this case. Nuanced arguments are articulated regarding the development agenda of the exile community, outlining both the victim and self-sufficiency narratives, as well as the role of CTA as a local partner for Western donors. One of the strongest sections of the book is the detailed overview of the role of myriad Western and Indian relief organisations during the early years of exile, and the various types of assistance provided, from human resource capacity building to welfare and political support (Chapter 2). Fascinating insights are drawn from documents produced by NGO officials in the 1960s, which add considerably to our understanding of the political and practical dynamics of the time. This is complemented by a detailed description in Chapter 5 of the operation of two Tibet Support Groups – one based in France the other in the UK – in terms of how they operate on the ground and their relations with CTA. Whilst the latter
provides an interesting perspective on the government in exile, the
other relations that underpin CTA’s work and legitimacy are somewhat
overlooked. There is no discussion of the shifting relationship between
CTA and the Indian Government (and overall the book paints too rosy a
picture of the legal and political status of Tibetans in India), nor is there
an analysis of the social contract forged between the government in
exile and its ‘citizens’ within the diaspora.

Empirically, *The Agendas of Tibetan Refugees* is based on fieldwork
undertaken in Tibetan communities in India, and interviews conducted
in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and in the offices of international
donor agencies. However, rather frustratingly, there are relatively few
direct quotations from interviews cited in the book. Instead, opinions
and accounts are often narrated second hand (eg discussion with the
Planning Commissioner on page 68). This paucity of empirical material
is particularly disappointing given that Kauffmann claims at the start
of the book that, in contrast to other scholarship, he is seeking ‘to give
the Tibetans a voice, and to study their own role in their successful
attraction of Western support’ (p. 2).

Whilst the book is primarily based on fieldwork undertaken in 2006,
given the publication date of 2015 it is surprising that there is only scant
acknowledgement of significant shifts within the community in the past
decade. Only passing reference is made to the Dalai Lama’s retirement
from political life in 2011, and the implications that this has for the future
leadership of the diaspora and the dismantling of *chos srid zung ’brel*. The
lack of updated empirics also means that there are some inaccuracies
in the text. A key example is the statement that Tibetans ‘cannot gain
Indian citizenship’ (footnote 14 on page 177) and that their only way
to claim citizenship is to pass as an Indian from a Buddhist ‘scheduled
tribe’ (p. 160). In reality, whilst Tibetans do struggle to acquire Indian
passports (as seen in Namgyal Dolkar v. Ministry of External Affairs,
High Court of Delhi 2009), under the Indian constitution, all Tibetans
born in India between 1950 and 1987 are Indian citizens.

The last two chapters of the book focus on a range of social
transformations occurring within the Tibetan diaspora, perhaps the
most important of which is the resettlement of Tibetans from South Asia
to the West. This ‘globalization phase’ is presented as bringing significant
challenges for the future of the community, with the argument being
that ‘Tibetans are scattered and have fewer opportunities to sustain their culture’ (p. 159). Whilst such concerns are important, no mention is made of recent initiatives to revive cultural and religious practices (such as the Lhakar movement) and to connect Tibetans in the West with communities in India and Nepal (such as the Tibet Corps and the Global Tibetan Professionals’ Network). Indeed, the Tibetan diaspora in the West is surprisingly absent from the book. In sum, this is an important and valuable book in its documentation of the shifting relations between the exiled Tibetan community and its Western supporters. Its accessible style and pertinent research questions should ensure a wide readership, and the key ‘lesson’ is an essential one: ‘development never works better than when the exchange is equal and balanced, when each party has something to receive from the other’ (p. 150).

Fiona McConnell is Associate Professor of Human Geography at the University of Oxford and author of Rehearsing the State: The Political Practices of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (Wiley, 2016).
Fiona.mcconnell@ouce.ox.ac.uk