**Barstow Geoffrey, *Food of Sinful Demons. Meat,
Vegetarianism and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet***

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REFERENCES

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- 1 According to a widespread cliché, Tibetans, being Buddhist, do not eat meat. In this book, the first in-depth study of vegetarianism in Tibet, Geoffrey Barstow highlights a question that is currently being discussed in many countries as well as in Tibet itself, just as that of the status of the animals and the slaughter conditions. In fact, contrary to China where “by the fourth century, vegetarianism has become common among Chinese monks” (p. 28), most Tibetans monks ate (and liked) meat.
- 2 With this book, the author has a dual purpose: “to demonstrate that vegetarianism not only existed in Tibet before 1950 but was also an important aspect of Tibetan religion since at least the 10th century. The second goal is to situate the practice of vegetarianism in its broader religious and cultural context (p. 2, 184).”
- 3 The author, defining vegetarianism “not as a particular diet but as any practice that involves the intentional rejection of meat in one way or another” (p. 7), concentrates his study on the place of vegetarianism in Tibetan religion.
- 4 The book is composed of six chapters divided into two broad sections and includes an epilogue dedicated to contemporary Tibet.

- 5 In chapter 1, the author presents “A brief history of vegetarianism”, and the texts on which anti- and pro-vegetarians rely. He shows that if there is an Indian influence, the Chinese literature on vegetarianism does not seem to have had any impact in Tibet (p. 29). Regarding Indian sources, the meat-eaters quote mainly the *’Dul ba gzhi* (*The Foundation of the Vinaya*) in which the Buddha, being criticized for eating meat, lays down the rule of the threefold purity, namely that meat is allowed if one has not seen, heard, or suspected that the meat was prepared especially for the eater. As for the pro-vegetarians, they cite, among other Mahāyānasūtras, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, which explains that the “rule of threefold purity [...] was an expedient means used to help those who were unable to maintain a fully vegetarian diet”. He then makes a record of the mentions of vegetarianism he found in Tibetan literature. One appears as early as the 11th century (PT 126), but “the first detailed critiques of meat emerge by the 13th century”. He notices a decline of these mentions between the 16th and the 18th century followed by an upsurge in the 19th.
- 6 The three following chapters (2. “Meat in the Monastery”, 3. “The Importance of Compassion” and 4. “Tantric Perspectives”) deal with vegetarianism according to the three sets of vows that Buddhists make (monastic vows of individual liberation, compassionate vows of bodhisattva and vows of tantric practitioners) following the structure used by Tibetan authors when writing on the question of meat. A surprising formulation appears on this subject: “Many of these authors, particularly those who examine the question of meat at length, divide their own works precisely as I have done” (p. 44). Would it not have been better to say: “I divided my work following these authors...”? Barstow points out that these three sets of vows, often taken simultaneously by religious Tibetans (p. 45), could contradict one another on the question of meat eating. As for the vows of individual liberation (pp. 44-69), there was a debate between those who considered that meat was allowed under certain conditions (like Kedrubjé, pp. 57, 80¹), and those who thought that vegetarianism was essential to fully ordained monks (Jigten Sumgön or Ngawang Lekpa, p. 51), but also on the exact meaning of the words of the Buddha (Gorampa Sönamp Sengé, p. 57), or the reasons which prevented one from being vegetarian (p. 60), etc.
- 7 The second set of vows, the vows of the bodhisattva, is the object of chapter 3. Centred on compassion, they are “the driving force behind vegetarianism in Tibet” (p. 70). Since they take precedence over those of individual liberation, “meat was forbidden to devout Buddhists, regardless of their ordination status” (pp. 85, 88).
- 8 Chapter 4, “The Tantric Perspectives”, addresses the problem of tantric commitments and the need to consume meat in certain rituals, and the different strategies advocated by the adepts of vegetarianism to answer this question. The Nyüngné fasting ritual (pp. 107-111) is discussed at some length.
- 9 Chapter 5, which starts the second section, deals with meat “As a necessary evil”. The author rightly recognizes that meat (which was expensive) was more a dietary supplement than a staple. As is well known, the majority of the lay and religious population ate meat when they could, and monasteries were not the last to participate in the feast. One of the best examples I am aware of is given by George Patterson, a Scottish missionary who was in Kham in the 1940s. One day, arriving in Lithang, he saw “the steaming carcasses of freshly slaughtered yaks [...], it was the monastery that had ordered the slaying of the animals to supply the monks with meat for food, and

also to stock against future profitable trade. Three hundred yaks were being slaughtered every day and the butchering had already gone on for several days²”.

- 10 An important point put forward by Barstow is that the idea that meat was necessary to be healthy and strong was not only very widespread but was also supported by Tibetan medical tradition (pp.123-125). Moreover, due to climatic conditions, growing vegetables was difficult. This explains why even the proponents of vegetarianism allowed meat in some cases like illness or old age, warning, however, against eating meat for its pleasant taste.
- 11 It happens also that meat might be conceived as “A Positive Good” (chapter 6, pp. 134-167). The author highlights two cultural patterns prevalent in Tibet in which meat is perceived as something very positive. The first concerns economic gain and the display of wealth in order to improve one’s social position; the second is the ideal of heroic masculinity.
- 12 Having identified three patterns concerning meat consumption – the first centered on ethical Buddhist norms, the second respecting these norms but admitting the idea that meat is necessary for good health, the third based on cultural models that highlight wealth and heroic masculinity – Barstow describes in the last chapter (“Seeking a Middle Way”) the various strategies developed by the pro-vegetarian lamas to solve the tensions that surround meat-eating, for example saying prayers before eating an animal.
- 13 The book ends with an epilogue on vegetarianism in contemporary Tibet, which is, according to the author, “almost mainstream” and “strikingly widespread”. The main figures at the source of this movement are presented: Jigme Phuntsok, Tsultrim Lodrö, and Rasé Könchok Gyatso. Barstow raises the issue of the controversial aspect of vegetarianism, quoting my article “A controversy on vegetarianism” in which I have included the translation of an article written by the feminist Amdowa writer Jamyang Kyi. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding made him write that: “In Buffetrille’s analysis, this vision of pure Buddhist ethics is opposed by a discourse, supported by the Chinese state and influential lay Tibetans like Jamyang Kyi, that emphasizes economic development and assimilation” (p. 207). This is a misinterpretation. In my article I do not say that Jamyang Kyi supported the Chinese state’s discourse on “economic development and assimilation” which, of course, she doesn’t. It is well known that she was arrested in 2008, in the context of the 2008 unrest and spent 21 days in jail, a detention of which she later gave a day by day account in her blog³.
- 14 In the epilogue again, another confusion is caused by an error on my part. Misled this time by my own mistake, Barstow writes: “In the end, Buffetrille notes, Tibetan themselves are choosing between these visions of Tibetan culture, with the popularity of vegetarianism suggesting that many tend towards the religious vision”. In fact, the sentence referred to by Barstow in my published article⁴ results from the conflation between two sentences that read initially “Of course, it is Tibetans, always eager to peacefully assert their collective identity and values, who are the agents of the cultural resistance to the state’s policy. Nevertheless, with their call for a generalized vegetarianism and a respect for the new set of Ten Virtues, clerics ask Tibetans to reform their way of life which explains the heated debate on the Web”. I am fully responsible for this error, and wish to correct it here since it is at odds with the central argument of the article.
- 15 The phenomenon of vegetarianism in contemporary Tibet is a new field of research. By focusing on the history of this phenomenon, by showing that it was debated among

members of the monastic elite, Barstow opens a new window on a little-known aspect of Tibetan culture. Thus, this book is an important contribution. Nevertheless, what is detrimental to the scope of this book is the author's tendency to generalize certain facts in order to accentuate the importance of vegetarianism and the debate around it among Tibetans. This is expressed through a lack of precision, as in the following examples:

- p. 23 "Few [scholars] were willing to accept the idea that concern over meat eating was widespread in Tibet". The author could have been more precise by simply adding "among the monastic elite and some ascetics".
 - p. 52: According to Barstow, between the 12th and the 20th centuries, "dozens of individuals who adopted vegetarianism at the same time they became monks" are recorded in the literature. However, this figure doesn't seem very high if we compare it with the percentage that represented the monastic community in Tibet: around 7.5% of the population. The author adds: "And these of course represent only those whose life stories were written down. There must have been hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of others who also adopted vegetarianism as part of their monastic vows". This is of course a possibility, but it disregards another possibility: that only a relatively restricted number of clerics decided to stop eating meat.
- 16 Speaking about Kedrubjé, Barstow highlights the fact that this well-known Geluk scholar accepted the meat that has "threefold purity" (p. 57, 60) and that he made a clear distinction between eating meat that has been purchased and killing the animal for its meat (p. 80). He adds that "in other places, Khedrubjé is strongly critical of meat" (p. 16), since he wrote that "it is not suitable to eat meat under power of desirous craving for its taste" (p. 61). From this, the reader understands that for Kedrubjé eating meat was acceptable under some conditions. This explains why it is problematic to find Kedrubjé's name in a list of "major figures in the history of Tibetan Buddhism" who all are strongly pro-vegetarian⁵ (p. 61).
- 17 Also, in a book dedicated to this subject, one would expect that the author should have some clear ideas on the diet of the Tibetans: cf. p. 23 where one reads, "There can be no doubt that meat in one form or another is one of the central staples of the Tibetan diet" versus pp. 118-119, where Barstow, based on authors from different periods (Tashi Khedrup, Bell, Naktsang Nulo), asserts that "meat, while present, was more of a supplement than a dietary staple". Again, a lack of precision leads to contradiction. While tsampa was the staple food of farmers, it is more than likely that meat was more than a supplement for prosperous nomads.
- 18 As for Tibet today, things appear to be more nuanced, and qualifying the present phenomenon of vegetarianism in Tibet as "almost mainstream" and "strikingly widespread", is an overstatement, giving the impression that the population of the whole Tibetan plateau shares the same craze for this movement. My own fieldwork in Amdo, carried out during multiple stays over many years, leaves me in no doubt that this movement is far from being popular in the region. One can hear fierce opposition to Tsultrim Lodrö's speeches from Tibetans of all backgrounds. Lastly, Barstow considers that vegetarianism in today's Tibet "should not be understood as a cultural import, whether from China, India or the West" but as "the flourishing of ethical norms and ideals that have long been present on the plateau but which have, for just as long, been overshadowed by other, competing concerns" (p. 209). However, while I think that the attitude of Chinese Buddhists towards vegetarianism has a great influence on the

current movement in Tibet, the heated debate around it among Tibetans is proof at least that the “flourishing” of such norms is still a very contested subject.

- 19 However, this confusion and lack of precision are outweighed by the work’s merits, making Barstow’s book a valuable contribution to this new field of research.

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NOTES

1. A forthcoming article by Nyangshem Gyal deals with Kedrubjé’s attitude relative to meat eating (2018, “Tibetan Vegetarianism”, *Journal of Tibetology (Bod rig pa'i dus deb)*, vol. 19).
2. Patterson 2005, pp. 15-16.
3. I have spoken with the author, and this mistake will be corrected in the paperback edition, which will be released in February 2019.
4. “Of course, it is Tibetans, always eager to peacefully assert their collective identity and values who are the agents of this process, with their incitement to a generalized vegetarianism and respect for the new set of Ten Virtues” (p. 207).
5. The forthcoming article by Nyangshem Gyal emphasizes the role of Kédubje in the debate around vegetarianism.