

Book Review

***Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography*, by Alex McKay, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, vol. 38, Brill: Leiden, pp. xx + 530, 2015. \$170**

Kailas Histories shares an august lineage with other books of Brill's highly reputed Tibetan Studies Library series. This book is appropriately titled, as it examines a wide spectrum of historical and religious literature concerning Asia's holiest mountain, Kailas/Tise. It scrutinizes this famous landmark from both Hindu and Buddhist perspectives and details their evolving relationship with it over many centuries. In the Hindu context, McKay is most concerned with renunciants and their practices as a counterpoint to Brahminical and more orthodox understandings of Mount Kailas. In the Buddhist context, his is a religious history that separates layers of ideological accretion to uncover processes leading to the sacralization of Mount Tise. McKay's wide-ranging analysis of the development of Indian and Tibetan pilgrimage and sacred geographic traditions is an important contribution to this field of study. His demonstration that the globalization of Kailas is a modern phenomenon and not merely a fixture of textual lineages (Indic or Bodic), is one of *Kailas Histories'* greatest assets.

In this review, I highlight theoretical, methodological and factual inconsistencies in McKay's work. My critical focus is motivated by a desire to round out the author's broad discussions on historical and cultural questions pertaining to the Tibetan Tise. In Section 3 (*Tibetan Histories*), the author concludes that this mountain owes its significance and sacredness solely to Buddhism, an untenable position. Nonetheless, the historical problems raised by his stance do not detract from the value of the other three sections of the book (*Indic Histories, The Kailas Mountains of India, Modern Histories*) or its overall worth as a key reference work on Himalayan pilgrimage and sacred geography.

The first pages of the McKay's work are filled with maps helping orient readers to various mountains in the Indian Himalaya and in Tibet that carry the name: Kailas (Sanskrit: Kailāsa). It should be noted that Kaplas Kailas is incorrectly placed on Map 5. The Introduction presents a central finding of the

book: the cardinal place Kailas/Tise occupies in the imagination of modern Indians and Tibetans, as well as the construction of a pilgrimage center of international repute, can be traced to sociocultural and political developments of the last century. McKay's questions the supposed unique status of Tise by reminding us that it is the nexus of one of many sacred geographic networks interlacing the Tibetan Plateau. Nevertheless, one should not overly minimize the significance of Tise, at least in the vast nomadic belt stretching from eastern Ladakh to Mtsho-sngon in northeastern Tibet (A-mdo), as illustrated by a triad of holy mountains called Ti-thang-spom-gsum (Ti-se, Gnyan-chen thang-lha and A-myes rma-chen spom-ra). These three peaks weld Tibetan nomadic regions into a vast sacred geographic realm of considerable prominence. The Yungdrung Bon *mchod-bskang* (appeasement offerings) devoted to this trinity of mountains are attributed to the 8th century saint Dran-pa nam-mkha', but this is likely to be apocryphal. The 'rediscovery' of these texts by Rma lha-rgod thog-pa and by Dpon-gsas khyung-rgod rtsal, however, indicates that this sacred geographic tradition was known in the 12th or 13th century, giving it considerable historical depth.

In the Introduction, McKay articulates one of his prime assertions: "the mountain only become a sacred centre less than a millennium ago". As I shall show, while the Tibetan genre of relevant pilgrimage literature (*dkar-chag*, *gnas-bshad*, *gnas-yig*, etc.) is not more than 800 years old, it cannot be concluded that Tise did not have powerful religious associations before that time. The author also observes that the creation of the modern pilgrimage center of Tise was the work of hegemonic voices from outside the region: European and Brahmanical, as well as Buddhist and Bon coming from central and eastern Tibet. Although this view is largely valid, it negates the role of nomadic communities (Bon and Buddhist) in western Tibet in shaping the views of co-religionists from other regions of Tibet. McKay, while sensitive to the existence of indigenous belief systems, characterizes interactions between them and Buddhism and Bon as dominance of the latter over the former, disregarding more nuanced exchanges between local folk and more organized religious practitioners, as part of a broad field of belief and practice. Despite high status Buddhist clerics having subjugated local knowledge of sacred sites to formulations derived from Indic culture, accommodation and gradual reformulation of earlier ideas also served as driving forces behind the ideological construction of Tise.

Also in the Introduction, McKay overreaches by creating something he calls the Western Himalayan Cultural Complex (WHCC), a non-literary category in which he places ancient and subaltern regional customs, traditions and ideologies of peoples speaking more than 35 different languages. According

to McKay, the most relevant features of the WHCC are local territorial deities and water spirits (*nāga*). He ignores though the importance of local female divinities (protective and ancestral) in the Western Himalaya, ascribing them to the plains of India. The WHCC is depicted as a kind of counterweight to Buddhism and Hinduism, creating a trichotomy of interests and aims reminiscent of anthropological models used in the 1980s and 1990s to account for religious diversity in Nepal.

In ch. 1, McKay places Kailas in a broader framework of major holy mountains in Asian countries, illustrating through a fascinating array of examples that the Indo-Tibetan variant ritually and conceptually is one among several peers. He also reviews Vedic history (a heuristic category, as the author recognizes) and its allusions to the Western Himalaya as the source of great rivers.

In ch. 2, McKay pinpoints scant references to Kailas and the nearby sacred lake of Manasarovar (Mānasarovara) in Indic Epic literature (*Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*) to suggest that they may have been first recognized by gold miners, Himalayan tribes such as the Dards or by Indian renunciants. It should be noted that many portions of the upper stretches of the Sutlej and Indus rivers are not passable, forcing any such adventurers or migrants to negotiate a series of high passes in order to reach the Kailas region. McKay employs the term “Indo-European” in his Indian history review to describe peoples of the northern Subcontinent (presumably speakers of Indo-Aryan and Indo-Iranian languages), a non-standard usage, given that this term usually has much wider linguistic associations.

In ch. 3, McKay shows that in the *Purāna* (collection of Indic religious texts containing a diverse assortment of philosophical and mythological materials) Kailas and Manasarovar occupy competing religious contexts and do not necessarily have fixed geographic locations. In his discussion of the four of rivers that spring up near Kailas or around other world mountains, he states, “it appears that the first reference to the quartet of Indus-Brahmaputra-Sutlej-Karnali as the four rivers of Kailas may be in modern sources”. This however does not appear to be the case. An early Tibetan reference to these four rivers of southwestern Tibet (Chu-bo bzhi) is found in an Old Tibetan text (composed circa 850–1000), the *Sha ru shul ston*. Although the identity of the central mountain in this account is unclear, Tise is well situated between the headwaters of the four rivers, a geographic association that would not have escaped notice by early inhabitants of the region.

In ch. 4, McKay examines alchemical and other tantric traditions of renunciants, observing that their trade in high value, portable commodities across the Western Himalaya may have provided them with the wherewithal to regularly make pilgrimage to Kailas-Manasarovar, according these

places higher visibility among Indians more generally. In ch. 5, McKay reviews early Buddhist accounts of toponyms that pertain or may pertain to Kailas-Manasarovar, concluding that, like Hindu literature of the same period, actual geographic associations are obscured by the imaginal and mythological connotations of place names. Ch. 6 looks at Indian literature of the 18th to 20th centuries and the placement of Kailas-Manasarovar in a clear geographical context, facilitating the creation of a hill economy based on pilgrimage that was sanctioned by the British colonial government.

Chs. 7–10 deal with cis-Himalayan mountains identified as Kailas in north India. This second section of the book begins with a discussion on local beliefs and practices in contradistinction to Buddhism and Hinduism, which McKay terms the Western Himalayan Cultural Complex (WHCC). This concept of a third major religious grouping recurs in Section 2, as the author explores the spread of Buddhist and Hindu traditions and the political apparatus attached to them at the various Kailas mountains. Despite the reductionist nature of the author's WHCC, the degradation of localized ritual and belief systems surrounding cult deities he speaks of is undeniable. Furthermore, McKay's observation that Himalayan courts were instrumental in disseminating Sanskritic traditions while also propagating indigenous religious traditions is incisive. His description of five lesser peaks called Kailas (Kaplas, Manimahesh, Kinner, Adhi, and Sri), supplies precious historical information on the religious orientation and significance of these pilgrimage sites, adding much to the breadth of the book. In his treatment of Manimahesh Kailas, McKay considers the possibility that an invasion of the region in the late 8th century attributed to the Kiras, may have involved Tibetans. In this vein, he cites Sharma (2009) who equates the town name Chamba with the Tibetan Byams-pa (Brahma). It should also be noted that the god Kelang (Kyelang) noted in McKay's work has a non-Indo-Aryan origin, as do a number of other spirits in cis-Himalayan regions of Himachal Pradesh. The name Kyelang is derived from a pronominalized language of Lahoul (the original homeland of the deity) or possibly even from the extinct Zhang-zhung language of western Tibet. It should also be noted that Rajasthan, not Rajastan is the accepted usage; derived in part from the Sanskritic *sthāna*, not the Persian cognate *stan* (place, country). In ch. 10, McKay considers evidence suggesting that Sri Kailas, towering above the headwaters of the Ganges, is the Kailas of Indian Epic literature.

In Section 3 of his book, McKay presents the Tibetan perspective on Tise, the mountain that has emerged as the dominant Kailas in modern Indian reckonings. Unfortunately, this part of his book is riddled with historical and cultural misconceptions. These are partly explained by McKay's limited

selection of scholarly opinions on such matters. It does not appear that he was able to consult Tibetan texts himself, relying instead on secondary sources. Also, it appears that the author spent only a short time at Tise, precluding him from carrying out substantive fieldwork in the region. His contention aired in the beginning of ch. 11 that Tise probably became sacralized with the introduction of Buddhism is not sustained by the large body of archaeological, textual and ethnographic evidence available. Moreover, his claim that there are no traces of a historic territorial deity (*yul-lha*) connected to Tise, because the most likely contender is found on another peak and is devoid of a tribal identity, is inaccurate. Known as Gangs-ri lha-btsan, this territorial deity is actively worshipped by local herders and monastics; his relegation to a lesser peak appears to be a doctrinal contrivance to elevate the religious status of Tise. Buddhist texts (Rnying-ma and 'Brug-pa) exist for the propitiation of Gangs-ri lha-btsan, Gangs-ri (Snow Mountain) being an epithet for Tise. This god is an important family lineage protector and object of mediumship in western Tibet and the Changthang, indicating that the deification of Tise is a well entrenched tradition.

In the Bon tradition, Tise is identified as the theogonic nexus and abode of Ge-khod, who appears to have originated as a mountain god. Ge-khod and many figures in his retinue possess names with Zhang-zhung linguistic origins. This is also true of Tise, but McKay obscures this fact with incompatible etymological speculation. In the *Rgya bod kyi chos 'byung* (composed in the 13th century), Ge-god (*sic*) is listed as one of the main gods of Zhang-zhung. In what appears to be the earliest tier of lore about Ge-khod, which comes down to us in Yungdrung Bon texts written between the 12th and 15th centuries, this celestial warrior appeared at Ti-se in the guise of a wild yak. Just as the territorial deity of Tise was displaced by the Buddhist *gnas-ri* (the mountain as a tantric paradigm), so too was the primitive Ge-khod reconfigured into a tantric tutelary god. These changes occurred in the last millennium as Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon exerted their religious influence and political reach over pre-existing cultural traditions. This metamorphosis of earlier customs and beliefs transpired in an environment of sectarian competition involving various Tibetan Buddhist sects and Yungdrung Bon, a competition still being played out today. McKay believes that because Lake Ma-pham/Ma-pang has a resident serpent deity it may be most closely tied to his Western Himalayan Cultural Complex. However, this supposition overlooks the many lakes in Upper Tibet that also host female serpent spirits. They cannot be lumped together in one simple category defined by the presence of local deities in the Western Himalaya, for it excessively reduces the cultural sources involved in the formation of these chthonic entities.

McKay, subscribes to the opinion that most Tibetan materials from Dunhuang date to circa 950–1000 CE, acting as a mouthpiece for an unsubstantiated opinion on the matter. It will suffice to state that although the dating of Dunhuang manuscripts is not yet settled, there are sound grammatical, lexical and paleographic reasons to believe that certain non-Buddhist mytho-ritual texts in the collection belong to the 9th century and perhaps to the 8th century as well. McKay also reveals a bias when he characterizes early sources concerning the Zhang-zhung kingdom as “shadowy”, when in fact they provide the basis for a very important part of Tibetan imperial history. Moreover, he errs when he claims that Yungdrung Bon accounts of Zhang-zhung as instrumental to their history and identity only occur many centuries after the rise of the sect in the 10th–11th centuries. In fact, the central importance of personalities from Zhang-zhung is recognized from the 11th and 12th centuries onward, in lineages propagating ritual traditions like those associated with the gods Ge-khod and Me-ri and early funerary cycles like the Mu-cho’i khrom-’dur.

Another allegation made by McKay, again on the opinion of others, is that there is not a single text written in Old Tibetan related to the cult of mountains, thus this tradition could only have arisen in the last 1,000 years. However, Old Tibetan literature contains significant references to numinous mountains such as Tise, Sham-po, ’O-de gung-rgyal, and the group known as *lha-dgu*, often as witnesses to political events, as well as mention of Lake Ma-pang in a similar context. These early written materials indicate that a tradition of mountain worship was already established in Tibet in the Imperial period. As an afterthought, McKay adds that Iranian, Turkic, Indic and Chinese cultures subscribed to the sacredness of mountains and if this was not also true in mountainous Tibet, it would be a major anomaly. Indeed. The author goes on to brush aside Lha bla-ma ye-shes ’od (947–1024) rigorous engagement with non-Buddhist traditions called *bon*, as detailed in his edicts. McKay also claims that the great translator Rin-chen bzang-po’s (10th–11th century) biggest concern was non-Buddhist tantrics. However, in the royal edicts and earliest biography of Rin-chen bzang-po (both 11th century), *bon* is depicted as a highly influential and deeply rooted religious tradition (whatever its institutional composition may have been). For example, the ancestry of the great translator himself is *bon* and is described in detail in his biography. McKay seems oblivious to the import of this literature when he argues that local traditions at Tise prior to the 11th century probably owed their existence to his nebulous Western Himalayan Cultural Complex.

McKay is right to question the authenticity of the contest between the Buddhist saint Mi-la-ras-pa and a *bon* magician, nevertheless, the

Buddhist subjugation of Tise dovetails historically with the struggle for religious supremacy mentioned in numerous textual sources. What of the pre-10th century religious milieu then? In his search for the origins of the cultural significance of Tise-Mapham, McKay disregards the archaeological record, save for repeating an unfounded rumor that a Buddhist temple was established in near Tise, circa 137 BCE. Archaeological findings made around the flanks of Tise in the last two decades demolish his hypothesis that the mountain's sacredness and importance is a result of Buddhist inroads in the second millennium CE. In fact, the valleys and slopes around Tise hold no less than 12 major residential complexes, most of which supply ample architectonic evidence demonstrating that they are of archaic construction. I have described these all-stone corbelled edifices in detail in various publications. They are of an entirely different order of magnitude than the Buddhist monasteries that came up around Tise after 1000 CE. The archaic structures are also generally set at much higher elevation than the Buddhist facilities. Calibrated dates obtained from organic remains associated with all-stone corbelled structures indicate that they were being raised as early as the first millennium BCE. Those at Tise comprise the densest agglomeration of early structures anywhere in Upper Tibet. This large concentration of what were once strongholds, temples and hermitages illustrates the importance of Tise to the cultural and religious development of the region long before Buddhism emerged dominant in the 11th century CE.

In ch. 12, McKay examines the Buddhacization of Tise and the tantric doctrines and activities involved, avoiding some of the fundamental historical and cultural misconceptions that mar the previous chapter. However, he concludes that the various deities associated with Tise, including those belonging to the *btsan*, *ma-sangs* and *yi-dam* classes are all more recent attributions, precluding without sufficient consideration that in some cases they may represent vestigial forms of pre-Buddhist or early Tibetan Buddhist divinities.

Ch. 13 of McKay's work expounds upon the identity discourse of Yungdrung Bon. Here he mischaracterizes my archaeological work as championing the existence of a "Zhang-zhung empire", a point of view I have never had. In a single sentence and without one shred of evidence, he dismisses the many archaeological remains I have documented in the Tise region as probably postdating the late 10th century CE. In this chapter, McKay also contradicts his earlier position that Yungdrung Bon accounts of Zhang-zhung were written "many centuries" after the foundation of this religion by recognizing that they began to be compiled in the 11th and 12th centuries. Had he more carefully

considered his words, McKay could have avoided the religious biases that continually crop up in Section 3 of his book. Also, McKay's preoccupation with Zhang-zhung prevents him from appreciating that most accounts of Upper Tibet found in Dunhuang manuscripts, including those related to the archetypal personality Gshen-rab, occur under a different set of geographical labels; viz., various Smra appellations, yul-chab gyi ya-bgo, Kha-rag gtsang-stod, and Byang-kha snam-brgyad, etc. McKay was swayed by spurious claims that the earliest accounts of Gshen-rab, an archetypal priest in Old Tibetan sources and a Buddha in Classical Tibetan sources, are concerned solely with Central Tibet, when they are clearly aligned to western Tibet as well. McKay speculates that a conquest of the Tise region by a camp from Ru-thog may have led to the god Ge-khod being transferred to the former. However, at both locations there are extensive pre-Buddhist monumental remains that do not necessarily privilege one region over the other in terms of their early cultural value. The author's view that a story in the *Mnga'ris rgyal rabs* about the prosecution of *bon* in the 11th century is probably fictive runs counter to the edicts of King Lha bla-ma ye-she 'od, which stipulate various injunctions against these non-Buddhist religionists.

In Section 4, McKay expounds upon the modern cultural construction of Kailas-Manasarovar, detailing colonial political and economic processes as well as the romanticism that have led to the creation of the globalized image of the holy mountain and lake. With its many observations and insights, this part of the book is one of the strongest.

In the Conclusion, McKay alludes to the ostensible mission of his book to demolish myths and provide the facts, however disappointing they may be to those who have cherished beliefs surrounding Kailas/Tise. While some cherished beliefs like an ageless, singular holy mountain are patently false, more considered views of the early history of southwestern Tibet are not. Some of his misplaced myth-busting appears to stem from a poor command of primary sources. A fashionable ideological bias may also have colored his view of historical and cultural matters. The subjugation of female Mapham by male Tise as superseding the earliest tier of religious tradition, his Western Himalayan Cultural Complex, is the most conspicuous example. The deeply entrenched male-female dyadic constitution of mountains and lakes in Upper Tibet must be taken on its own merits, rather than trying to force this vast region into a cis-Himalayan cultural model.

McKay's tendency to equate an absence of textual references with a late genesis for religious phenomena surrounding Tise reinforces an underlying flaw in his work. He seems to hold that southwestern Tibet was virtually bereft of its own cultural and religious traditions before the civilizing influence of

Buddhism arrived. Too much effort is spent denying or erasing evidence that would situate this mountain in a firmer cultural and historical setting. Despite my critique of some of McKay's ideological and methodological approaches, his book is otherwise well rounded and judicious in scope and offers a rich assortment of materials. *Kailas Histories* also employs an innovative cross-cultural perspective that will be welcome by all who are interested in Mount Kailas/Tise. For these scholars, pilgrims and travelers alike the book is a worthy companion.

– **John Vincent Bellezza**