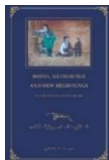


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REVIEW: *HOPES, GATHERINGS, AND NEW BEGINNINGS: AN A MDO TIBETAN NEW YEAR IN 2018* BY KLU THAR RGYAL ལྷ་ཐར་རྒྱལ།

Reviewed by Sami Honkasalo (University of Helsinki)\*



Klu thar rgyal ལྷ་ཐར་རྒྱལ།. 2021. *Hopes, Gatherings, and New Beginnings: An A Mdo Tibetan New Year in 2018* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), [bit.ly/3XHtcyj](https://bit.ly/3XHtcyj) 7 July 2023

At one level, Klu thar rgyal's *Hopes, Gatherings, and New Beginnings* is a meticulous description of celebrating Lo sar (Tibetan New Year) in the Tsha nag community of Qinghai on a single occasion in 2018. At another level, the ethnography is also an autobiographic narrative of the author's observation of change and continuity in the Amdo Tibetan culture of his region and reminiscences about his family and community. Klu thar rgyal is not an independent observer arriving to report from the outside but an active participant in most of the described events connecting his own direct personal experiences and memories with the recollections of earlier generations he has come to know during his life. Consequently, while the book's core narrative focuses on the present era and its practices, Klu thar rgyal offers the reader a glimpse of the historical aspects of what he observes, creating a web of narration intertwining the present and past. Lo sar appears not as a static celebration but a constantly evolving cultural practice reshaped by societal changes.

The book begins by describing the historical background of the Tsha nag community and its habitants based on oral family and community history. Klu thar rgyal narrates how the region became incorporated into the People's Republic of China and how life subsequently evolved, resulting in major changes quickly. Day-by-day narration follows as Lo sar celebrations progress.

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\* Sami Honkasalo. 2023. Review: *Hopes, Gatherings, and New beginnings: An A mdo Tibetan New Year in 2018* by Klu thar rgyal. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 63:469-471.

Conflict between tradition and modernity is a central theme in this narration. Focusing on how peoples of the Tibetosphere negotiate their place at the crossroads of the two has been the subject of research such as Norberg-Hodge's (1991) well-known work on Ladakh, and Burnett's (2014) research among the Gyalrongwa, to name two from the distant poles of the Tibetan cultural sphere. The Tsha nag community Lo sar has been permanently transformed by socioeconomic change. As Klu thar rgyal spells it out in his conclusion:

Electricity, TV, telephones, and cars were not part of my early childhood. Most locals walked while making Lo sar visits. Some elders rode horses. You could hear folk songs during Lo sar visits, and elders gave good wishes when you visited. Such songs and good wishes are now silent (210).

Two aspects of the book make it even more useful. First, the story is supplemented by photos that enrich the narration. This visual dimension further highlights the central theme of continuity and change. For instance, Figure 64 (146) portrays a local woman holding a *kha btags* 'ritual scarf', singing a traditional love song during a wedding while recorded by smartphones held by onlookers. Most photographs capture spontaneous events rather than being carefully planned with inevitable unnaturalness and artificiality, increasing their documentation value. Second, the book uses Wylie transliteration for Tibetan instead of an ad-hoc spelling of the copiously used Tibetan terms. While the book's abundance of Tibetan terms requires more effort from readers with limited or no familiarity with Tibetan culture and language, this encourages readers to search for more information concerning particular topics of interest.

Tibetan culture is often exoticized in the West and China, where it may serve as the "exotic other" for the Western and Han Chinese gaze. Jinba Tenzin (2014:56) illustrates this in the case of Suopo Tibetans in Danba, Sichuan, with Danba branded a "Valley of Beauties" and the Suopo area therein identified as one of the possible locations of an alleged "Eastern Queendom." Danba has thus emerged in recent decades as a tourist spot drawing

predominantly domestic visitors eager to experience the imaginary land of beautiful Tibetan ladies of high status and desire to engage in free love. Focusing on everyday tasks, Klu thar rgyal's account is a welcome antidote to the exoticization of Tibetan culture and its practices.

A vast body of research and literature connected to Tibetan cultures exists in English and other Western languages. However, cultural outsiders are still largely responsible for deciding how Tibet is discussed. The case of Tibet is not unique, given similar dynamics in many other non-Western cultures. Fortunately, however, recent years have seen more internationally oriented academic work in the Tibetosphere conducted by cultural insiders. Against this backdrop, Klu thar rgyal's work is particularly noteworthy since he speaks with an insider's voice and shows that Tibetans need not be merely subjects in work conducted by outsiders. They can also be authors with agency, telling their stories with their voices. In this respect, Klu thar rgyal's *Hopes, Gatherings, and New Beginnings* serves as a model for young Tibetans who wish to document the ongoing rapid transitions reshaping their cultural traditions in the tug-of-war between tradition and modernity and share their findings with global audiences.

In conclusion, Klu thar rgyal's *Hopes, Gatherings, and New Beginnings* is a welcome contribution to documenting the plurality of Lo sar practices in the Tibetosphere. May it inspire similar documentation by Tibetans of their transitioning cultural practices as Tibetans search for their place and shape in the modern world.

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