

*The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.* By Bryan J. Cuevas. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; pp. xi + 328. £32.00).

Tibetan religious scholarship has been a subject of fascination, intense speculation and debate among Western scholars over the past century. Since the sacred Tibetan Buddhist texts known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* were first translated into English in 1927, they have become some of the most widely read works of Tibetan literature in the West. Bryan J. Cuevas, Assistant Professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at Florida State University, makes a significant contribution to the historical debate over the origins of the different texts that formed the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* by undertaking an ambitious historical study of the production and dissemination of the *Bardo Thödol* in Tibet (translated as *Great Liberation Upon Hearing in the Bardo* or *Liberation Upon Hearing*). In this way, Cuevas' book stands apart from the translations and religious interpretations of the *Bardo* that have emerged over the past eighty years, which do not give adequate consideration to the historical context of the book.

Cuevas focuses on the history of the 'treasure revelations' of Karma Lingpa, an obscure fourteenth century mystic who discovered the sacred scriptural treasures that contained detailed instructions on religious practices to be performed at the moment of death, during a perilous and prolonged post-mortem phase called 'bardo', and during the confused journey into a new existence. Cuevas divides his book into four sections: the first section charts the Indian origins of the bardo concept and considers Tibetan perceptions of death and afterlife before and after the introduction of Buddhism; the second section discusses the prophecies and treasure revelations; the third section analyses the role of monastic institutions in preserving, standardizing, and diffusing the spiritual mortuary scriptures; and the last section focuses on Rikzin Nyima Drakpa, the controversial 'treasure revealer' who was responsible for establishing the standard textual arrangement of the *Liberation Upon Hearing*, known in modern times as *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

In general, the practice of Tibetan Buddhists was to read aloud the *Bardo Thödol* to the dying to help them attain liberation. The intention of this was to guide the dying to use the moment of death as a means to recognize the nature of the mind and attain liberation. The treasures, discovered by Karma Lingpa in the region of Southern Tibet called the Gampodar Mountains, consist of three texts, the *Karling Peaceful and Wrathful*, a literary cycle entitled *Self Liberated Wisdom of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*, and the most important, the set of funeral texts *Great Liberation Upon Hearing in the Bardo*.

These concealed treasures were Tibetan writings dating from the eleventh century, which introduced and popularized new and innovative interpretations of religious ideas and techniques that were previously known only to scholarly monks. Cuevas' main thesis is essentially that from the eleventh century, old and new reformulations of the bardo concept were woven together as various instructional traditions were developed and proliferated by yogis.

In support of this thesis, Cuevas traces the historical origins myths of ancient Tibetan funeral customs which dictated how death should be perceived and embodied beliefs about death and the dead. Cuevas argues that these myths show a continuity that existed between ritual beliefs of ancient Tibet and those preserved by later ritual traditions. A particular myth about the Tibetan King Drigum Tsempe is argued to represent a pivotal shift from an older cosmology to a new religious worldview. The concept of death became a transition process towards a new existence, rather than an end state. The novel underlying assumption was that the dead had a 'consciousness' that required guidance in order to reach the correct path towards rebirth. These new concepts were the foundations of the bardo rituals and prayers which purified the sins of the deceased, influenced and even altered the fate of the deceased during their journey from death to rebirth.

Cuevas' most important observations appear in the third section of the book where he discusses various theories and problems relating to the origins of the *Liberation Upon Hearing* texts, its subsequent multiple interpretations and translations and its complex dissemination through various sources. He juxtaposes the various linear traditions of the *Self Liberated Wisdom of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*, with the single lineage that transmitted the *Liberation Upon Hearing* texts. Cuevas argues that the *Bardo Thödol (Liberation Upon Hearing)*, was transmitted and interpreted by those closest to Karma Lingpa: his son Nyida Chöse and his grandfather, Nyida Sange. However, the credibility of this reconstruction of events is questionable. Although entertaining to read, the stories of Karma Lingpa's life and those around him are poorly recorded and Cuevas 'what he believes are the most credible. In addition, Cuevas acknowledges that analysis of existing religious texts cannot reveal anything definite about the actual content of the oldest books, or the 'core texts' of the Karling treasure tradition because the original manuscripts of Karma Lingpa and his immediate disciples are lost to us forever.

Despite meagre sources, Cuevas is still able to construct the life and role of Rikzin Nyima Drakpa, a powerful seventeenth century Tibetan religious figure. As the subject of the final section of the book, Cuevas treats in precise detail the transcriptions and sequences of the *Liberation Upon Hearing* scrolls made by Nyima Drakpa in 1678 that would become the core texts of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Cuevas concludes by suggesting

that different versions of the *Liberation Upon Hearing* have been subject to a ‘kleenex effect’, namely that it became a generic label for all similar texts related to the dying and the dead. Thus Cuevas’ key point is that the diverse history of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is hidden beneath the complex relationships that were involved in the production and transmissions of religious knowledge.

A few minor criticisms can be made regarding a book of this scope, but they do not undermine the general argument. The main weakness is that Cuevas at times lacks sufficient and convincing evidence and as a result, occasionally discusses speculative theories which do not demonstrate to the reader that he has clarified the web of lineages into a coherent history. The dates of assimilation of different strands of the *Liberation Upon Hearing* and of the *Self Liberated Wisdom of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities* texts are also unclear, casting doubt on the accuracy of Cuevas’ assessment of the origins and transmissions of these texts. Further, the relationships between the two other treasures that were discovered together with the *Liberation Upon Hearing* text are not elaborated on and remain a mystery.

Despite these problems, Cuevas’ manages to present a strong framework of analysis that gives the book a central coherence. His contextualized study of the origins and transmission of the spiritual mortuary texts in its own complex religious arenas demonstrates how the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* was constructed from social networks of treasure revealers, their disciples and important mystics who determined the transmission, production and distribution of ideas and literature about a post-mortem existence in which death is believed to be a beginning and a journey rather than an end. In addition, Cuevas’ infuses his rich narrative with a comprehensive survey of existing sources, ecclesiastical histories and biographies in Tibetan Buddhism, including some from neighbouring India and China.

Essentially, Cuevas’ findings about the complex and embedded history of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* are clearly intriguing, and informed readers will be rewarded with an insightful journey into the origins and proliferation of ideas about the cycle of human birth, life and death as part of a wider cosmological drama.

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