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Michael L. Walter, *Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet*  
*Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet* by Michael L. Walter

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purpose of this book” (xiv). Of course, from a theistic point of view, the project begs the question of whether naturalism is defensible, and Taves does not address the current philosophical challenges to naturalism or question the foundational commitment of that view.

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*Buddhism and Empire: The Political and Religious Culture of Early Tibet.* By MICHAEL L. WALTER. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009. Pp. xxviii+316. \$182.00 (cloth).

This work admirably yet not wholly satisfactorily tackles the vexed topic of the earliest documented religious practices in Tibet, those of its imperial period (ca. 600–850 CE). Contemporary evidence on imperial religion is scarce and largely confined to witnesses emanating from the court itself (7). Therefore, previous scholars studying this period have been tempted to bolster the earliest evidence with recourse to the wealth of sources dating from the *phyi dar* period (the “later propagation” of Buddhism; 77 and 134, endnote 4). These later texts rewrite history to speak to their contemporaries about the “golden age” of empire, making them partial, unreliable witnesses to Tibet’s imperial religious practices. Michael Walter thus expresses a wish to “establish a provisional hierarchy of the accuracy of Tibetan sources for reconstructing religion during the Imperium” (xxii), as a prelude to basing his description of imperial religion on the most reliable witnesses.

Walter begins chapter 1 cautiously, warning against following even the earliest sources’ representations of the imperial period, since “nearly all genuine Old Tibetan documents are official or quasi-official products of the Tibetan government” (1). On the basis of both the content and dissemination of these imperial Tibetan documents, he draws attention to the interrelated nexus existing between the imperial court, the nobility, and the Buddhist *sangha* (4). In this system, especially toward the end of the empire, many government ministers were both powerful clan leaders and also Buddhist monks (17). Walter argues that the documents’ descriptions of the *btsan po* (emperor) at the head of the government, through the use of honorific terminology (92–96) and a mythology of rule (18–23), set his royal line apart as inherently superior to the traditional, clan-based, structure of society. Clan leaders were bound to the *btsan po* through oathing rites (11) as a *comitatus*: a band of warrior-companions sworn to protect their lord at all costs, in return for lavish gifts and a share in the wealth of the empire (27–29). Walter argues that such bonds were so strong that even though some clan leaders may have disagreed with the imperial sanction of Buddhist rituals at court, they would have felt disloyal to turn against him (36). However, at the collapse of the empire, the wealth dried up and the *btsan po/comitatus* system was abandoned as “an intrusive presence in clan-oriented society” (36). This is an interesting and fresh perspective, which eschews the *phyi dar* narrative on imperial court life in favor of viewing the Tibetan empire within the wider perspective of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex (37 and 63 n. 63) in which it was situated.

As Walter admits, “this amounts to argument from analogy, generally considered to be a weak method for analysis and reconstruction” (37). Therefore, chapters 2–4 delve deeper into the more “specific and emic” (76) evidence of imperial-period Old Tibetan terminology as a key to unlocking court hierarchies and religious practices. Walter sets out numerous important themes in these chapters, which for reasons of space cannot be covered in turn here. Generally, Walter criticizes the use of *phyi dar* sources and relatively modern dictionaries in explaining ancient political and religious terminology (see, e.g., 245–46). Yet Tibetan imperial texts almost never explain such basic and central terms, and so perhaps these terms will always remain obscure despite Walter’s efforts here.

Walter especially shines in these chapters when he follows a critical *via negativa*, bringing to light, problematizing, and finally laying to rest the hoary debates over such notions as a “pre-Buddhist” religion of either Bon or complex mountain cults that overly occupied previous scholars and influence the misleading depictions of ancient Tibetan history contained in general works on Tibet today. Walter offers a robust critique of Sino-Tibetan linguistic theory (75–86), arguing that any evidence so far amassed in favor of linking Tibetan language with Chinese languages can be explained by the proximity of their cultures over time, rather than by any underlying structural affinity indicative of deep dependence of one language group on the other. He further argues that the theory has so far explained none of Tibet’s ancient religious practices (83–84). Walter rightly questions the evidence used to suggest that Bon, Tibet’s “other” religion in Tibet, constituted the pre-Buddhist religion of the early imperial period (191–95 and app. 2). He also performs the same useful critical analysis with regard to the mountain cults that arose after the imperial period and were then written into imperial history (230–40). Writing here, Walter is both balanced and self-assured in his arguments, which consist “not of a description of rites, but [of] a critique of descriptions of them” (191). Such criticisms of previous scholarship on imperial religious terminology make up by far the most beneficial sections for a nonspecialist or non-Tibetanist scholar approaching the subject with certain Western myths about Tibet in mind. However, a comparative historian or anthropologist wishing to search for important religious terms, say, in the contents page or index, would be hard-pressed to find them since they are given without even a guide translation. The same is true of many of the long citations from Old and classical Tibetan texts (see, e.g., 170–71), which obstruct clear dialogue with readers not trained in Tibetan.

At a deeper level, Walter’s espoused aim to rely on genuinely ancient Old Tibetan sources wavers in later chapters. This is to the detriment of his description of imperial religious practices and may prove especially misleading to students and nonspecialists who are unaware of the disputed nature of the texts that he cites. For instance, in his “provisional hierarchy” of accurate Tibetan sources (xxii–xxv), Walter places very low the *sBa bzhed*, a *phyi dar* history on the (re)introduction of Buddhism to Tibet during the reign of Khri Srong lde brtsan (755–ca.800 CE). However, in later chapters (170ff.) he comes to rely increasingly on the *sBa bzhed* in proposing rituals that Khri Srong lde brtsan carried out for his own legitimization. The *sBa bzhed*’s narrative focuses on Khri Srong lde brtsan’s construction of a Buddhist monastery called bSam yas, a central theme that the text surrounds with ritual and miracle. Walter suggests that one such ritual, in which “Khri Srong Lde Brtsan used a golden axe or simi-

lar object to outline Bsam-yas" (21), actually took place (186–89). This argument is based solely on what he admits is purely “anecdotal” evidence (187) backed by the similarity of its narrative to such Eurasian myths as Romulus and Remus founding Rome (188). Further chapters remove the note of hesitancy from this argument without offering further evidence, and even build further speculation as to the political function of bSam yas monastery on top of this event, which is treated as a fact (243 and 280 n. 47). Thus, after laudably highlighting earlier Tibetans’ and Tibetologists’ myths of imperial Tibet, Walter creates his own myth of the rite of bSam yas. However, Walter’s concluding sections are far more cautious. Over the course of this rich and detailed book he offers us many different interesting speculations, but his final conclusion admits that in describing the importance of imperial religion, “all we are left with is the asserted superiority of the btsan-pos” (257).

Scholars writing on ancient Tibet will benefit from Walter’s fresh approach and critiques of previous scholarship, and from the freedom to study new topics rather than cover the same ground implied by older assumptions about imperial religious practices. They will also need to seriously consider his new view of ancient Tibetan society, based as it is on the fruits of wider Central Eurasian Culture Complex research. Yet Walter sets out to only rely on genuinely old and so relatively more reliable sources (an aim that he repeats in his final section, “Methodological Observations”; 257–59). His use of *phyi dar* sources, such as the *sBa bzhed* or the Fifth Dalai Lama’s seventeenth-century history (185) means that he has not wholly succeeded in excluding later representations of the imperial period from his treatment of the imperial use of Buddhist rituals. Such a failure may not only disappoint the specialist in ancient Tibetan culture but also may hamper this book’s ability to speak to nonspecialists or scholars of countries other than Tibet, who would otherwise have learned an enormous amount about Tibetan court rituals in comparison with wider trends in Central Asia or the world.

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*Sinister Yogis*. By DAVID GORDON WHITE. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Pp. 352+xxii.

*Sinister Yogis* completes the “triptych” of David Gordon White’s powerful and groundbreaking work on the history of yoga and Tantra in South Asia. Whereas his previous two volumes had examined the development of alchemy in the Siddha tradition and sexual practices in Tantra, *Sinister Yogis* examines a wide range of narratives drawn from numerous languages and a vast span of history to reveal a very different portrait of the yogi than the one found in either South Asian philosophical texts or in Western popular and New Age literature. While there are a few notable gaps in White’s history, this book is another invaluable contribution to South Asian studies and religious studies.

As he explains in the introduction, White hopes to offer a corrective to most contemporary popular images of the yogi, who is usually imagined as either a transcen-