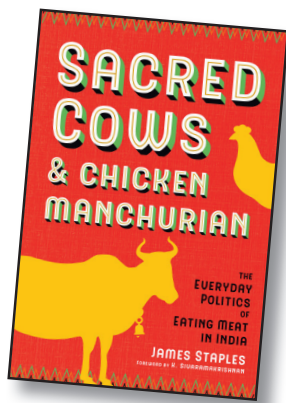


transformation than what is reflected in this framing. I truly believe the book deserves the widest possible readership and hope that its narrow framing will not distract from its wider resonances beyond Nubri and migration studies. I can easily see the book being a virtual gold mine of inspiration for students of agrarian change and rural transformation elsewhere in and beyond the Himalaya.

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Sacred Cows & Chicken Manchurian: The Everyday Politics of Eating Meat in India.

James Staples. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. 248 pages. ISBN 9780295747873.

Reviewed by Jonathan Dickstein

Sacred Cows & Chicken Manchurian adds to the extant literature on the anthropology of food in India with a focus on beef-eating and meat-eating more broadly. James Staples problematizes the facile binaries of beef-eating/non-beef-eating, vegetarian/non-vegetarian, and pro-cow protection/anti-cow protection

to illustrate the complexity and fluidity of the real-world socio-gastronomic terrain. Staples ushers us beyond binaries and into the lives of everyday eaters whose thoughts and politics rarely fall neatly into any standardized categories.

The book draws primarily from years of ethnographic research in rural Andhra Pradesh and urban Hyderabad (Telangana), as well as Delhi, Mumbai, and elsewhere. Preferring the discursive space between violent Hindu cow vigilantism on the one hand and staunch pro-beef Dalit activism on the other, Staples engages the “large and amorphous group” (p. 19) unaffiliated with either pole, and whose members toggle between myriad—at times seemingly contradictory—perspectives and practices. Staples’ informants are everyday Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, and both caste people and Dalits.

Following D.N. Jha (2002), Staples emphasizes that contrary to popular assumptions about the antiquity of vegetarianism in ancient India, both meat- and even beef-eating were common in the Vedic period and through the first millennium CE. Yet despite the reality of beef-eating, in the Vedic period the “mother cow” was granted *some* privileged status owing to the indispensable usage of her secretions for ritual performance and everyday sustenance. The colonial period saw the Arya Samaj deploy the symbol of the cow to rally Hindu Indians against both “mother”-killing, beef-eating British colonizers, and the minority Muslim population. Post-independence India carries this legacy, marked by an ebb and flow of Hindu nationalism at the highest levels of governance, resulting in controversial insistences on legislating cow-killing and beef-eating, as well as violent clashes

between (allegedly) beef-eating and (allegedly) non-beef-eating citizens.

The terrain is certainly muddy, for while at least sixty percent of all Indians are not vegetarian, their rice-centered diets remain *predominantly* vegetarian (p. 53). Moreover, many Hindu “vegetarians” (usually men) confess to periodic surreptitious meat-eating. Staples also notes that on the production or “beef chain” side of the equation, many vegetarian Hindus profit from, or are otherwise complicit in, the selling and killing of bovines for flesh. There is rampant “willful ignorance” (p. 95) in the Indian beef chain, whether in the context of a Hindu or non-Hindu’s responsibility for bovine death when they sell and/or eat cows, or in the pervading—and oftentimes preferred—ambiguity about whether the beef one sells or buys is *āvu mānsam* (cow meat) or *eddu mānsam* (buffalo meat).

Yet why, with the greater availability, affordability, and personal safety of eating alternative animal meats, would one continue to consume beef? (p. 102) While some eaters attest to the “purity” and health benefits of beef compared to other meats (p. 67), Staples stresses how beef-consumption is still perceived as integral to one’s Muslim, Christian, or Dalit identity. In fact, “[n]ot to eat beef . . . could be interpreted as a snub, a tacit acceptance of the dominant Hindu thinking that normalized the oppression of those from Dalit castes” (p. 111). However, the gastronomic landscape in contemporary India is rapidly changing, largely due to the industrialization of chicken production. Chicken is also, rather uniquely, a taboo-less meat, a fact that neutralizes its consumption relative to beef or pork (p. 129). Hence with persisting stigmas around beef- (and pork-) eating, shrinking pastures limiting goat production,

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Dickstein on *Sacred Cows & Chicken Manchurian: The Everyday Politics of Eating Meat in India*

and the Green Revolution of the 1960s initiating intensive “broiler” production that continues to this day, chicken has emerged as the “go-to” meat in India and around the world.

Globalism and cosmopolitanism have also re-emboldened the argument for class over caste (or Dirks over Dumont, p. 144–45). The increase in education and affluence among Dalit and otherwise marginalized populations troubles previous caste-heavy analyses, not to mention domestic and diasporic elites now conceiving prohibitions on meat-eating as backwards, religiously dogmatic, and unsophisticated. Staples recognizes how a class-centered analysis loses some force in its journey from city to village, yet the latter’s resemblant concerns for “ordinary people,” “big people,” and “poor people” (p. 149) reveal many of the same sensibilities and dynamics.

“I hope at least to have shown that the ubiquitous oppositions of vegetarianism and nonvegetarianism, beef and non-beef—essential though they are to the maintenance of high-caste hegemony – are woefully inadequate for describing the much more complicated eating habits of actual people in the course of their everyday lives.” (p.172)

To this desired end of demonstrating complexity and exceptionality, Staples has surely succeeded, combing theory, political analysis, and ethnography to demonstrate

how little ideology and consistency dictate individuals’ quotidian food habits. As such, *Sacred Cows & Chicken Manchurian* sits well alongside the nuanced works of Radhika Govindrajan (2017) and Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi (2012), albeit with a focus on food rather than human-animal relations or religiously-motivated violence, respectively.

While the author succeeds in describing the intricacies of food practices and politics, remarkably little space is devoted to *living* animals themselves. Cows and other animals are reflexively categorized as “food” from the outset, appearing as objects much more than subjects (with the exception of the first few pages). This starting point obscures a diversity of cow-protection, vegetarian, and animal activist positions, as well as those of individuals who forge deep personal relationships with the animals they may in fact eventually sell, kill, or even consume. In the Introduction Staples highlights the importance of “humans’ entanglements with the actual bodies of cows” (p. 25), but what about the reverse? What about bovines’ (usually lethal) entanglements with the actual bodies of humans? And what about the actual *minds* of cows? Claire Jean Kim’s *Dangerous Crossings* (2015) is instructive here, for whether in the context of live animal markets in San Francisco, indigenous whaling practices off the coast of British Columbia, or the racial dimensions of dog-fighting, Kim repeatedly

foregrounds animals themselves as subjects seriously impacted by conflicts conventionally framed as humans-only affairs.

Furthermore, engagement with Yamini Narayanan’s (2018) concept of “casteised speciesism” would have significantly enriched Staples’ analysis. Not only does Narayanan, akin to Kim, emphasize the phenomenon of species-based discrimination, but also the relationship of the category of “the animal” to ideologies and mechanisms of human oppression, specifically caste-based oppression. According to the theory and dynamic of casteised speciesism, not only are human “others” animalized with specific species of animals in mind, but so too are animals “casteised” with specific races and castes of humans in mind.

Sacred Cows & Chicken Manchurian is a welcome addition to the literature on food and perspectives on food in contemporary India, containing a wealth of ethnographic information on sourcing, preparation, and consumption that will be completely novel for readers unfamiliar with the region. Staples takes us beyond the familiar cow protectionism-as-Hindu nationalism critique to indicate how globalization, cosmopolitanism, class mobility, and the industrialization of food systems have affected this controversial issue. The book is well-suited for undergraduate and graduate students in Anthropology, Food Studies, and South Asian Studies, and anyone else interested in

the various factors determining what everyday Indians do and do not put on their plates.

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L'Âge d'or du Tibet (XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles)

Katia Buffetrille. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2019. 320 pages. ISBN 9782251449746.

By Patrick Kaplanian

The golden age of Tibet is often considered to be the 17th and 18th centuries. Why the 17th and 18th centuries? Because it was at this time that the system of government was established, which was maintained until the 1950s. The strength of this book lies in its description of this mechanism of governance. After the Mongolian leader Gushri Khan gave power to the 5th Dalai Lama (1642, p. 31), the government of the Dalai Lama, the Ganden Phodrang was established (1642, see p. 32). The Potala was built between 1645 and 1648, at least the part called the White Palace (p. 66, see also p. 237). And the system of government known as Ganden Phodrang is described on p. 97.

The independent states that revolved around this center, such as Tsang, with the Panchen Lama (pp. 30 and 100), the “principality” of Sakya (p. 100), the Lhagyari domain (p. 100), the neighboring kingdoms (Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh, Guge, pp. 46–50), the various kingdoms that share Kham (pp. 88–91) and the nomadic populations of Amdo (pp. 91–94) are also described.

If the work covers a relatively limited historical period, it manages to encompass almost all aspects of Tibetan civilization. You can just read the table of contents—it is impressive. The book strives for completeness, and while it is not obvious how to accomplish such an overview in 320 pages, the author is to be congratulated. The bet is successful, however, as she depicts Tibetan civilization in the round, including private life and art, society as well as rituals, architecture and intellectual life, etc. Some points are particularly well developed such as the sections on pilgrimages (pp. 188–194, one of the author’s specialties), festivals (pp. 246–256), and religions (pp. 163–200). The author has managed to give us an overall portrait without falling into excessive simplifications or indigestible scholarship.

Because this book is so wide-ranging, it is impossible to summarize. I can describe a section to show its richness. For example, pages 214 to 228 are devoted to literature. Of course, the author recalls the existence of classics such as *Kagyur* and *Tengyur* (simplified spellings used by the author, p. 215, Wylie is *bka' gyur* and *bstan gyur*), *terma* (*gter ma*, p. 217), royal chronicles (*gyelrab*; *rgyal rabs*, p. 220) like *The Blue Annals*, works of medicine such as the *Quadruple Treaty* (*gyüizhi*; *rguyd bzhi*, p. 223), songs (*lu*; *glu*), mystical songs (p. 225), aphorisms (p. 226), tales,

theater, and finally epics like the famous epic of Gesar de Ling (p. 228).

She also mentions less well-known types of literature, such as the compilation of ancient tantras (*nyingma gyübum*; *rnying ma rgyud 'bum*), a collection of Tantric texts that the various compilers had dismissed on the grounds of their lack of authenticity and that the Nyingma school took to themselves (p. 216).

Since the focus is Tibet from the 17th and 18th centuries, the author emphasizes the literary forms which experienced a great expansion at that time, for example, autobiographies and biographies (*rangnam*; *rang rnam* and *namthar*; *rnam thar*). Thus biographies appear of colossal length containing more than 1,000 folios, the record being held by the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama with 2,500 folios grouped in three volumes. The complete works (*sungbum*; *gsung bum*, p. 219) produced by compiling the works of certain masters and adding to them the transcription of their oral teachings made by their disciples also appeared at this time—once again the Fifth Dalai Lama comes out on top with 25 volumes. Particularly important in Tibet of the 17th and 18th centuries are the texts detailing the history of the development of the doctrine (*chöjung*; *chos 'jung*, p. 221). These texts are distinct from the royal chronicles since they present history in short, albeit under the pretext of religious history. As early as 1608, the great master Taranata composed a *History of Indian Buddhism* and, in 1748, Sumpa Khempo Yeshe Peljor wrote *The Wishful Tree*, a history of Buddhism in India, China, Tibet and Mongolia. Then came the *Crystal Mirror illuminating the Philosophical Positions of Thukwen Lobsang Chökyi Nyima*, enlarging the content of *The Wishful Tree* with a presentation of the doctrines of the different schools.