

James Duncan Gentry. *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism: The Life, Writings, and Legacy of Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen*. Leiden: Brill, 2017. xvi + 514 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-33019-1

Reviewed by

Lewis Doney
(Universität Bonn)

In this monograph, Gentry offers Tibetan Studies a very welcome case study, applying recent theories on material culture to the practices of Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen (1552–1624). However, it could have been improved by building on his 2013 Harvard dissertation on the same theme, rather than largely reproducing it in print.

The subtitle of the dissertation, “[o]bjects of power in the life, writings and legacy of the Tibetan ritual master Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan,” is a more fitting description of this generally outstanding book. This master is famous within the Tibetan tradition as the man who built his public identity around the claim to be able to perform violent rites that would “turn back” or “repel” (*bzlog*) the “Mongols” (Sog) threatening large parts of Tibet during his life. These rituals made use of various objects, from those usually associated with Tibetan Buddhism such as human effigies, oblations and thread-crosses, to more creatively employed “objects” such as recited texts and newly built Buddhist structures (333). Sokdokpa also practiced and wrote many other things. Gentry includes an appendix (443–63), the only substantial element not found in his dissertation (apart from the index, 494–514), that comprises a very useful catalogue that Sokdokpa penned for his *Collected Works* and shows well the breadth of this master’s interests. Gentry’s focus in this monograph is the light that this literature (and other works on Sokdokpa) sheds on the importance, agency and aftereffect of power objects from the sixteenth century onward. More specifically, he seeks to question the idea that only humans give non-human objects power in Tibetan Buddhism. Gentry thus poses the question:

to what extent does transformation [e.g. of world, body or psyche] depend on individual karma, intention, meditative cultivation, gnosis, or some other personal quality; and to what extent does efficacious, transformative power reside in certain special materials, sensory objects, locations, gurus, or deities, such that they can impart it to other beings and impact them? (16)

Gentry makes the case that Sokdokpa's many and nuanced views on the power of objects should inspire Tibetanists to take them more seriously in their descriptions of Tibetan Buddhism and culture in general. Sokdokpa's views are found in his discussions of their efficacy, apologies for his use of them and criticism of other practitioners for treating them wrongly or unsubtly. He argues that Sokdokpa wrote in a sophisticated way about the objects he used in his rituals, which were so important to his successful career and legacy, and that his representations find resonance with today's theorists of material culture such as Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, Birgit Meyer and Daniel Miller. This approach offers a welcome corrective to the older tradition of Tibetan Studies that tended to ignore or disparage material aspects of Tibetan Buddhist religious rituals as degraded Buddhism and/or folk practice. Notable early exceptions among Tibetologists include Yael Bentor and Dan Martin, cited by Gentry (21, n. 38 and 179–80, nn. 18–19), and in Buddhist Studies Stanley Tambiah, whom he explicitly states was an inspiration for his study (21).

Gentry echoes Latour's sentiment when he states that his focus will be "object-power discourse" (27), neatly combining the latter's emphasis on three strands of analysis—the object or material, the power or social, and the discourse or representational. This balanced approach aims to avoid the replacement of a privileging of human agents with a blinkered focus on non-human agents. All three strands associate with each other, either harmoniously or in tension, and contribute together to build every complex and dynamic society.

Going further, Gentry represents Sokdokpa as adding his own perspective, such that we can "allow Sokdokpa's power-object discourse to present us with its world, not through the lens of these contemporary theorists, but as one conceivable alternative, which might contribute fresh possibilities regarding what it means to be human, and non-human" (17). He argues that Sokdokpa and proponents of the actor-network-theory (ANT), for instance, grant agency to non-humans in similar but different ways that should not be confused by applying etic frameworks onto the Tibetan context. Instead, he approvingly quotes Viveiros de Castro on "the art of determining the problems of each culture, not of finding solutions for the problems posed by our own" (25, n. 52). However, Gentry's

formulation of “object-power discourse” reveals a limitation in his approach, in that it privileges discourse as the noun qualified by the other two terms. This is perhaps due to a limitation of his sources, since we can only approach “Sokdokpa” through his writings, rather than perform an object biography on the materials he uses or conduct an anthropological survey of their social power. Yet it means that, in this reviewer’s opinion, Gentry’s fine book does not ultimately manage to break free of the previous weight of emphasis on literary discourse in Tibetan Studies.

In Part One, Gentry leads the reader through the turbulent sixteenth-century world preceding the birth of Sokdokpa. Of primary interest is Zhikpo Lingpa (1524–1583), whose influence on Sokdokpa was acknowledged in the latter’s biography of the former, and consisted of two main points (to quote Gentry):

1. the copious edible sacra and other power objects that Zhikpo Lingpa revealed, exchanged, and implemented during his lifetime; and
2. the ritual cycle *Twenty-five Ways to Repel Armies* and other violent army-repelling and natural disaster-repelling rites, which Zhikpo Lingpa discovered, implemented, and conferred upon Sokdokpa to enact after his death. (56)

Also of interest are two treasure-revealers (*gter ston*) from Mon, now Bhutan, Yongdzin Ngawang Drakpa (16th c.) and Tuksé Dawa Gyeltsen (1499–1587). The former may have been identified as a seven-times born Brahmin, thus imbuing his flesh with magical power and meaning that it could be used to gain liberation, ingested as pills (79). Gentry also looks at the process by which the latter of Sokdokpa’s mentors “cemented his identity as a seven-times born one whose physical flesh would be potent enough to both liberate beings and repel enemies” (83). Sokdokpa would go on to use and propound the benefits of these objects in his day, while also lauding his own power over them and ability to interpret prophecies regarding the time at which their deployment would be most effective (143–52).

Part Two delves in more detail into the tension in Sokdokpa’s depiction of the subjective power of Sokdokpa and the objective power of the pills, amulets, sounds and visions with which he was involved in various rites. Gentry offers a close reading of a number of his theoretical works and ritual texts, and argues that Sokdokpa’s discourses do not merely privilege the material. In fact, it seems at times that Sokdokpa’s works advocate for more discourse against those ritualists who had gone too far in the material direction. Gentry

quotes him as saying about initiation ceremonies “these days even great lamas just place the crystal, bell, and the rest on the head, and do not perform the introduction” or *ngo sprod* (365).

Finally, Part Three charts the influence of Sokdokpa on two state-formation projects. These effects were positive in Sikkim (415–27), but worked negatively in how the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lozang Gyatso (1617–1682) tried to destroy his legacy (384–408). This part also provides a number of interesting descriptions of ritual objects linked to Sokdokpa, their biographies and uses down to the present day. Of the three strands of Latourian analysis, object, power and discourse, this part most extends the discussion into the second, the social (though it also picks up some of the similar themes addressed in Part One). Yet even here, Gentry argues, the three cannot and should not be divorced. As he says of Lha Tshering’s attempt in this century to defend Sokdokpa and others against the attacks spearheaded by the Fifth Dalai Lama:

the indissoluble link between Zhikpo Lingpa, Sokdokpa, and their powerful object-oriented rites means that safeguarding their authority and authenticity in the eyes of potential detractors is tantamount to securing the efficacy of the objects and rites they produced, revealed, or implemented, objects and rites that are now central to the identity of Sikkim's Tibetan Buddhist Bhutia population. (429)

Gentry has evidently read widely within Sokdokpa’s oeuvre, and translates many apposite words of this master to support his case. He has also thankfully retained the Tibetan in transliteration, so that scholars can check that the translations do justice to the texts (which in the most part they do). Gentry appears also firmly grounded in the related Tibetan and non-Tibetan academic literature, with which he ably contextualises this master’s works in its time, as heir to numerous traditions inherited from the past, and affecting future Tibetans’ relations to power objects. He is to be commended for his judicious use of learned footnotes, which this reviewer was relieved to see do not misrepresent the earlier periods of Tibetan Buddhist history stretching right back to the imperial period.

To explain Sokdokpa’s perspective, Gentry analyses important passages of his works in multiple ways and from many angles. However, this can often make for dense and complex sentences that tend towards tortuous and repetitious prose at precisely those moments when the reader desires a clear and concise statement of the point being made. Gentry is thankfully much better at writing history, and so we are treated to fine narrative representations of Sokdokpa’s era lit with well-chosen vignettes from his life and times. At these points, in the same way that he describes Sokdokpa, Gentry

satisfyingly “weaves throughout these biographies episodes that attempt to demonstrate to readers through compelling narrative sequences the power of the material media that he theoretically defends in his apologetic writings” (138).

However, certain small details still detract from the overall effect. We are often asked to “recall” matters discussed sometimes fifty pages previously and not easily located using the index, when it would have been easy to have added a page reference to aid our recall. The book is pleasingly free of spelling and grammatical errors, but some have been transmitted from the dissertation to the book while others have appeared in the process (see especially 99–101). It is unclear why Gentry chooses to use Sanskrit, English or Tibetan terms at several points, since this is not explained at the beginning of the book. Nor are the very nice +, - and = *sigla* used in his transliterations, though they are largely self-evident.

More problematically, Gentry does not appear to have taken on board the insights of the “linguistic turn” in his zeal for the “material turn.” This reviewer found that Gentry privileges a “Sokdokpa” throughout the work, and does not enter into any preliminary philological criticism of the corpus or the words or deeds attributed to this person. Thus, he takes statements in colophons for granted as self-references (122) and generally refers to Sokdokpa’s utterances in the past tense of historical reality rather than the present tense of textual discourse. He claims, for instance, that Sokdokpa’s *History of How the Mongols Were Turned Back* “is told from the particular vantage point of its author ... [and] we must ask what effects in light of his broader context Sokdokpa may have hoped to achieve among his readers” (91). Gentry here strays into speculation over Sokdokpa’s authorial intent in a way that does not seem warranted. These statements should instead be problematized with reference to the traditional, genre and transmissional constraints placed upon what we may know of any author’s relationship to his work, including the specific constraints prevalent in Tibetan literary traditions such as historiography, and the physical, object-related constraints that limit the extent of his texts’ audiences. This reviewer is no advocate for the wholesale “death of the author,” yet would like to have seen Gentry take a more critical stance towards his protagonist—also finding much more satisfying analyses (such as at 166) where authorial intent is dropped from the discussion.

The above approach means that one prominent actor in the book goes largely unexamined: the text. Gentry provides one indication of a more complex relationship between the “author” and his text when he discusses the supply of paper as influencing Sokdokpa’s increased productivity (130), and later describes the paper required for creating

effigies of the Mongol hoards (and so repel them, 117) as “a scarce and expensive commodity which Sokdokpa could secure only through his diverse connections with a number of wealthy patrons” (143–44), which would occasionally run dry at inopportune moments during the fighting (127). This reviewer feels that Gentry could have explored such aspects of the agency of written works and the associations created by their material bases more fully, and so mitigated the privileging of the human agent “Sokdokpa” within the discourse of the monograph.

Also lacking is a serious consideration of whether this “Sokdokpa” arguing in the pages of these cited and quoted works could have been wrong, except for one footnote where he shows the master’s conception of “Mongols” to be flawed but nonetheless insists on using Sokdokpa’s usage throughout the book (29–30, n. 57). Gentry is right to criticise the unreflective use of the term “legitimation” in Tibetan Studies, which reduces a complex situation to a single socio-political strand of analysis, and instead describe two of the multiple levels of orientation of masters such as Sokdokpa—the quotidian and the sacralised (53–54, n.48). However, it seems that Gentry uses this perspective on Sokdokpa to avoid any responsibility to criticize the positions taken in works attributed to him—replacing a blanket disparagement with a general acceptance. He elsewhere states that, at times, “Sokdokpa attempts to create for himself a public image with just the right balance of moral integrity, selfless servitude, and dangerous power” (141), but this is merely accepted rather than challenged: “The dissonance between these two orientations can be read as an extension of the fundamental friction between subjective and objective sources of power that animates Sokdokpa’s power-object discourse throughout” (*ibid*). If Sokdokpa is to be taken seriously as a possible alternative to theorists of material culture, then more work would have to be done to demarcate the limits of his perspective and identify moments when his arguments are inferior to those of recent theorists. Nonetheless, these criticisms speak more to the difficulty of the task that Gentry undertook, and should not be read as a reason not to generally applaud his results.

Unlike many dissertations and monographs, Gentry refreshingly remains committed to the theory he discusses in the opening chapter, raises theoretical issues at many turns throughout the book and then returns to focus primarily on the material turn in his conclusion. He entertains the possibility that textual studies of objects such as his “run the risk of surreptitiously assimilating materiality to the subjective realm of human discourse” (435) but appeals to recent theories of material culture to try to escape from this trap. In fact, he suggests that Sokdokpa offers an improvement to these theories, a

“re-materialisation of textuality [through which] I envision this study to nudge the material turn into new directions. To be precise, ... a suggestion for how material culture studies of religion can incorporate or proceed based on the study of texts in a way that does not reduce cultural discourses to materiality or vice versa” (440–41). This reviewer is very sympathetic with his cause, but feels that such a dense and complex monograph may not have a great impact on the wider field of material studies outside of Tibetology.

Gentry’s dissertation, and thus this book, is a rather technical work of obviously fine scholarship that will be of great benefit to Tibetan Studies, most obviously as a detailed treatment of the key aspects of the life and works of Sokdokpa. It is also invaluable for anyone working on this period of Tibetan history and important for broaching the underappreciated topic of the material world for the benefit of Tibetology in general. Nonetheless, this reviewer regrets that the dissertation did not, and hopes that this work will, form the basis for a more ambitious and approachable work on power objects in Tibetan Buddhism—perhaps even a Tibetan history of material culture to match John Kieschnick’s 2003 work, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, or Fabio Rambelli’s 2007 monograph, *Buddhist Materiality: A cultural history of objects in Japanese Buddhism*, for lands further east. For such an undertaking by any other scholar, Gentry’s fine scholarly work would definitely be required reading.

