


**Akester, Matthew, *Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo's Guide to Central Tibet*, Chicago (Serindia Publications), 2016. 824 pp. ISBN 978-1-932476-60-6.**

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amyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820–1892) is widely recognized as one of the most important intellectual and spiritual masters in Tibet in the nineteenth century. It is therefore not without relevance to point to Matthew Akester's earlier book containing a carefully annotated translation of the biography of this great Tibetan scholar, composed by the latter's disciple, friend and colleague, the not less renowned scholar Jamgön Kongtrul (1813–99): *The Life of Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo by Jamgön Kongtrul*, New Delhi (Shechen Publications), 2012.

A native of Dergé, Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo was at the centre of the *ris med* 'eclectic' or 'non-partisan' movement which reached its apex in Eastern Tibet in the nineteenth century. Among the strongest motives for travelling extensively in Central Tibet was his interest in different religious traditions, and although such pious peregrinations were common then – as they remain today – writing a handbook for other pilgrims (as opposed to catalogues and inventories of specific monasteries) was new. His *Guide* (*dBus gtsang gnas rten rag rim gyi mtshan byang mdor bsdus dad pa'i sa bon*),<sup>1</sup> compiled on the basis of travels in Central Tibet in the 1840's, would therefore seem to be the first of its kind; it gained wide popularity and is still in print in Tibet.

Apart from a few earlier references (Ferrari 1958, p. xx), Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo's *Guide* first came to the notice of Western scholars in 1958 with the posthumous publication in the *Serie Orientale Roma* of Alfonsa Ferrari's annotated translation.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately Ferrari (1918–1954) did not live to see the publication of her work, which was completed and edited by Luciano Petech in collaboration with Hugh Richardson, the latter also supplying a considerable number of photos of the places dealt with in the *Guide*. At the time of its

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title found in the Dergé edition. Different editions have different titles, cf. p. 17 and note 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ferrari, Alfonsa, *mK'yen brtse's Guide to the Holy Places of Central Tibet*, Rome (IsMEO), 1958. Serie Orientale Roma XVI.

publication, Ferrari's work was a uniquely informative and richly annotated source of information concerning the monasteries and temples of Central Tibet, which has retained its usefulness until today.

Matthew Akester's work, which largely replaces the Italian study from 1958, is impressive. For once, the term "awesome", in current usage usually emptied of its meaning, is not out of place. It is, with respect to comprehensiveness combined with breadth and variety of its sources, among the most ambitious works this reviewer has seen in Tibetan studies for a great many years. Briefly stated, it contains a translation of Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo's *Guide*, a short and concise text, comprising only 18 fols. in the original rDzong-gsar edition (p. 15), reproduced in Akester's work (pp. 702-710). Following the *Guide*, Akester divides this text into sections, each section dealing with a district in Central Tibet. The individual monastery or temple mentioned in the relevant section is then presented in great detail – in fact, each entry, in all about 200, is a virtual storehouse of information. Akester makes use of multiple historical sources, primary as well as secondary, to outline the history of each location through the centuries: its foundation, expansion or decline, famous (and less famous) monks and lamas associated with it, and, not least, its fate during the disastrous period of the pre-1960's and the subsequent Cultural Revolution. He then describes the process of reconstruction, generally from the 1980's onwards, and the current state of the monastery or temple. Abundant notes contain a wealth of supplementary information concerning lamas and textual sources, including references to Jamyang Khyentsé's biography, and much else. There are indexes of place-names and personal names, with transliterated spellings.

A major source of information is the *Moon Crystal Necklace* (*Gangs ljong dbus gtsang gnas bskor lam yig nor bu zla shel gyi se mo do*) a "pilgrimage diary of ...Urgyen Chökyi Gyatso of Ka-tok (1880–1925), a far more ambitious work (280 folia)...compiled from notes made by the author during his 1918-20 tour of Ü-Tsang" (p. 17). This work, which has so far not been translated into English, is to a large extent a commentary to Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo's *Guide*.

The illustrations are exceptionally numerous and well chosen. They include photos of thangkas and statues of important lamas, as well as wall paintings and actual portrait photos, many of which have not been published before, at least in Western publications. The author systematically presents pre-1959 photos of the temples and monasteries wherever available, making the book the most comprehensive photographic documentation of its kind up to now. Some of the photos taken by the late Hugh Richardson have been

published previously in other publications, but many others will be new to almost all readers, not least the many photos taken by the Gyalyum Kunsang Dechen Tsono Namgyel (1906–1987) during her pilgrimage in Central Tibet in 1935-36. With more than 200 sites described, the book gives a unique and deeply disturbing insight into the scale of the destruction that took place in Tibet after 1960, both before and during the Cultural Revolution, simply by juxtaposing the "before" and "after". The extent of reconstruction, especially in the 1980's and 1990's, is also amazing, especially taking into account that most of the funding was provided by Tibetans locally, in the form of donations and voluntary labour.

A highly commendable feature of the present work is the fact that in the 1990's the author visited a great many of the sites mentioned in the *Guide*, resulting not only in numerous photos, but also in the collection of oral information which contributes to the unique usefulness of this book.

Reviewing a work of such complexity, it is not possible to provide a brief presentation of even a selection of the entries. The possible sources of pictorial material might of course be expanded, but wherever choice is possible, the author seems to have made a judicious choice. It might nevertheless be useful to point out to interested readers two works containing illustrations which supplement Akester's presentation of the holy sites of Lhasa:

- Vaniš, Josef, Vladimir Sis, Josef Kolmaš, Per Kvaerne, *Recalling Tibet*, Oslo/Prague (The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture/ Práh Press), 1997 (containing numerous photos not published in Sis and Vaniš, *On the road through Tibet*, London (Spring Books), 1957.
- Larsen, Knud and Amund Sinding-Larsen, *The Lhasa Atlas. Traditional Tibetan Architecture and Townscape*, London (Serindia Publications), 2001.

The book is provided with maps that "attempt to depict central Tibet as it was in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the time of Khyentsé Rinpoche's travels, using a traditional Tibetan format with which he would have been familiar (p. 9)". While the resulting maps contribute to recreating the mid-19th century atmosphere in Tibet, Akester's book would have benefited – and this is the only element which I feel is lacking in this volume – from a detailed conventional map, pinpointing the exact location of each site.

Akester's work is the result of decades of travelling and reading, dedication and careful scholarship. It is a unique and extraordinary

book, a virtually inexhaustible mine of information and a pleasure to read (the speed recommended by this reviewer is one entry a day). Whether one's primary interest is the religious, political or cultural history of Central Tibet, this work is fundamental, and due to the circumstances of its origin, is not likely to be superseded.

