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BOOK REVIEW

The Temples of Lhasa: Tibetan Buddhist Architecture from the 7th to the 21st Centuries. By André Alexander. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2005. 285 pages. \$65.00.

This handsome volume, published on glossy paper with numerous images, maps and architectural drawings, is the most complete study ever done of the architecture of Tibetan temples in the city of Lhasa, before 1959 the capital of Tibet, and today the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China. The book documents the work of the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF, originally called the “Lhasa Archive Project”), a non-profit organization that worked in Lhasa from 1991 until 2000. The THF, founded by André Alexander, had as its original mission to preserve important historic buildings in Lhasa, and the present book is the first volume of what is envisioned as a multi-volume series of “conservation inventories,” much of which served as preparatory research for actual preservation projects undertaken by the THF. Having been denied permission to continue its work in Lhasa, the THF today works in architectural preservation in other parts of China.

The Temples of Lhasa provides us, in its introduction and conclusion, with interesting judgments concerning the origins of early Tibetan religious architectural style, which the author traces to the so-called “vihara” Indian/Gandharan type temples found at sites like Ajanta, Nalanda, and Jaulian. The author calls this “monastic architecture,” but in Tibet at least there is little evidence that the earliest temples of Lhasa were built for monks, or that monks had anything to do with the design or building of such structures. Be that as it may, both the historical comparisons to Indian Buddhist temple construction and the typology of Tibetan temples found at the end of the book are welcome contributions to the field of Tibetan religious architecture, about which little has been written to date in Western languages.

The comparative-historical and structuralist-typological contributions just mentioned are just a small part of this project, however. The book’s main task is to provide the reader with descriptions of nineteen of Lhasa’s most

important temples. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction and description of the site, followed by a concise history. The bulk of the chapter is then taken up by sections called “site survey” and “site evaluation,” which focus principally on the architecture (and often the murals) of a given temple and its evolution up to the present. Beautiful color images and exquisite architectural plans and drawings grace almost every page. The largest section of the work (one-fifth of the entire book) is on the Tsuglag khang, sometimes called Lhasa’s “central cathedral,” the earliest and most important temple in Lhasa, housing the famous Jowo Rinpoché, Tibet’s holiest Buddha image. Other chapters deal with the temple complexes at the two tantric colleges, the five Tsen-spirit temples, the three seats of the Dalai Lama’s regents, the Tsamkhung nunnery, and various other smaller temples found principally in the heart of the old city. The Potala, the Dalai Lama’s principal residence, a site that is itself home to many temples, is not dealt with in this book, which is understandable, given that an entire volume could be written on this complex site. The historian of Tibetan religions will read this book and yearn for more in-depth historical treatments of each of the sites, but by the book’s own self-description, it is chiefly a work on Tibetan religious *architecture*, and, seen as such, it more than meets its stated goals.

Mention must also be made of the Appendix, where we find translations of classical and contemporary Tibetan texts related to the temples and images discussed in the book. Some of these are portions of texts belonging to the classical Tibetan genre of “inventory” (*karchag*). The more modern pieces, chiefly written by Rimbur Rinpoché (1923–2006), detail the destruction, recovery, and restoration of the important Buddha (Jowo) images at the Tsuglag khang and Ramoché temples. These fine translations, the work of Matthew Akester, are an important contribution to the history of the religious art of Lhasa from the seventeenth century to the modern period.

Alexander is even-handed in dealing with the developments that have taken place in Lhasa in recent decades. On the one hand, he acknowledges the preservation work undertaken by some Chinese (TAR) government offices, and the help he received from ethnic Tibetan government officials in different preservation projects. However, this book can also be read as the story of oft thwarted attempts to preserve Tibet’s architectural patrimony, as a chronicle of the continuing destruction of Lhasa’s historic buildings in the name of modernization, and as a narrative of the triumph of market forces over attempts at cultural conservation. Of course, this chronicling of the destruction of Old Lhasa is only a minor part of the book’s agenda, but for scholars interested in the transformation of traditional societies in the face of rampant capitalism, it is bound to be one of the most important.

Through the lens of architecture, *The Temples of Lhasa* provides us not only with a picture of what Lhasa once was, but also with a snapshot of what it has become at the end of the twentieth century. It is a chronicle of things past, but also a wake-up call to the threat that Tibetan culture faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Chinese government calls important

historical sites “cultural relics” (*wen wu*). One can only hope that it will learn from its Buddhist citizens something of the treatment of relics.

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