

***100th Anniversary Celebrations of the Men-Tsee-Khang  
& the Second Annual Conference of the Tibetan Medicine  
Committee of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine  
Societies, Lhasa, Tibet***

**20-22 August 2016**

**Katharina Sabernig**

One hundred years ago (1916) the Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang (Sman rtsis khang) was established as a patient-oriented institution in order to complement the traditional education at the Medical College on top of the Iron Hill (Lcags po ri). The celebration conference was organized in Lhasa by the Specialty Committee of Tibetan Medicine, which is part of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS), and the Health Bureau of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). It was generously sponsored by the Men-Tsee-Khang and the Tibetan Medical Research Institute of the TAR.

An excursion to both the old and new institution of the Men-Tsee-Khang, the latter one consists of a hospital and a museum made up the framework program for foreign participants. The overall appearance revealed that today Tibetan medicine is aimed to be studied historically, clinically, and pharmacognostically in a complementary dialog with modern science as one part of the public health service. The Tibetan hospital shows a vivid combination of traditional and biomedical applications: moxibustion, bloodletting, cupping, and pharmaceutical applications on the traditional side and “Western” diagnostic tools such as blood samples, CT and X-ray

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Aside from the generous institutional support approbated medical doctors, bureaucratic authorities, and students helped with official and spontaneous translations to facilitate international exchange. Rinchen Dondrup (Rin-chen-don-grub; Qinghai University, Xining and Vice President of WFCMS) worked tirelessly to organize travel documents and individual requirements of the international guests. He was generously assisted by Sienna Craig and Vincanne Adams.

examinations as well as endoscopic and minor surgical interventions on the other. The Medical College also took the opportunity to invite the foreign guests present, Janet Gyatso, Fernand Meyer and Katharina Sabernig (the author of this report), to give guest lectures, which were attended by local scholars of Tibetan medicine and hundreds of students.



International participants and Men-Tsee-Khang staff in front of the institution's old building, 20 August 2016 (Katharina Sabernig 2016)

The high-ranking opening ceremony was commenced by the Vice Chairman of the TAR and other representatives of the TAR Government, the WFCMS, the TAR Health & Family planning committee and the director of the Men-Tsee-Khang. About 400 Tibetan medical practitioners and researchers participated, mostly dressed in traditional clothes. Twelve foreign academic researchers – eight from the USA and individuals from Canada, France, Norway and Austria – were invited to strengthen international academic exchange. These scholars represented different fields of Tibetan or complementary medical studies with the aim to develop Tibetan clinical practice in accordance with the unique Tibetan culture, language, and its historically grown theoretical concepts. Additionally, Professor Fernand Meyer was honorably acknowledged for his lifetime achievement. Chinese news media reported on the conference with many photos of the foreign guests.

The keynote speakers, presenting in Tibetan, Chinese, or English, presented on a broad range of historical and clinical topics that covered different traditional medical systems in China and among its minority populations.

The English keynote speeches were fully translated into Tibetan while Tibetan and Chinese presentations were briefly summarized in English. Ten keynote speeches were held on the first day starting with Yixiyangzong (Yeshe-g.yang-vdzoms), executive president of the Lhasa Men-Tsee-Khang, who outlined major former developments over the past hundred years and future perspectives of the institution. This included a clear commitment to a complementary combination of traditional and biomedical service as an important and integrated factor of the TAR public health service. Janet Gyatso (Harvard University) discussed different forms of medical knowledge and social behavior in Tibetan medical paintings within their Buddhist context and their differences to classical Tibetan Buddhist paintings. Jianping Liu (Ligcanphin; Centre of Evidence Based Chinese Medicine at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine) introduced the approach of evidence-based medicine in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), favoring the necessity of randomized clinical trials (RCT) to change from an experienced-based to an evidence-based medical approach. His statement included a discussion of the general conflict between the standardization and individualization of medical practice. Jigemeide (Vjigs-med; International Hospital of Mongolian Medicine in the Mongolian Autonomous Region [MAR]), spoke about the history of Mongolian medicine, including the early non-Tibetan aspects as well as the important period between the 16th and 20th century. He also noted the major influences of Tibetan texts, notably the pharmacological achievements of Jampel Dorjé (Vjam-dpal-rdo-rje) and his beautifully Illustrated Tibeto-Mongolian Materia Medica of Ayurveda. Gongjuewangdui (Go-vjo-dbangvdu; Traditional Medical College in Lhasa) who compiled the first modern dictionary of Tibetan medicine in the 1980s, explored the history of monastic medical schools and lineages in Tibet. His talk, which was also circulated in the form of a printed booklet, included the early history and formation period of the major commentaries. He also outlined the establishment of the Iron Hill Medical College and later medical institutions in the major monasteries of Labrang and Kumbum.

In the afternoon, the president of the WFCMS, Jiumei Phuntsok (Vjigs-med-phun-tshogs), spoke about the patenting of traditional medicines and the respective pharmaceutical industry. Vincanne Adams (University of California) reviewed the history of science in Tibet and Tibet in science. She began with statements of Gendun Choepel (Dge-vdun-chos-vphel) and of other Tibetan scholars living in the early twentieth century on the relation between



scientific versus traditional knowledge and finished with biomedical studies exploring the effect of meditation with the help of modern imaging techniques. Dujiang (To-cing; Guiyang University of TCM and president of Hmong (Miao) medicine for the China Minorities Medicine Association) presented on the current research status and prospects of Hmong medicine. His key point was that the industrial development of Miao pharmaceutical prescriptions in Guizhou province incorporated systematical and pharmacognostical research. Gaerko (Skal-kho; Aba Tibetan Hospital and Chengdu University of TCM) underlined the complexity of different forms of pharmacological potency of Tibetan medicine as described in classical Tibetan texts. The final keynote talk was given by Qianraoosai (Mkhyen-rab-vod-gsal), President of Limai (Ris-med) Tibetan Hospital. He discussed the experiences of his project team in the treatment of AIDS with Tibetan medicine, including an analysis of the disease based on an interpretation of the human immunodeficiency virus from the Tibetan perspective. As the international delegation traveled back to their hotel at the end of the day, a beautiful rainbow appeared spanning from Potala Palace to Iron Hill, which was generally considered as an auspicious sign.

The following day was organized in four parallel-running panels, each with eight speakers of different languages; short summaries in English or Tibetan accompanied each talk. Sienna Craig (Dartmouth College) and Tawni Tidwell (Emory University) spoke in Tibetan, to the great joy of all participants. Each panel included international as well as Tibetan or Chinese speakers so as to enable academic exchange across language barriers. Each panel engaged a broad mixture of historical, philological, anthropological, and clinical or scientific studies. The final group discussions within individual panels demonstrated the importance of the Tibetan principle of seniority as well as status, and left time for deeper analysis of historical and future necessities. The closing meeting emphasized the successful organization of 100th Anniversary Celebrations of the Men-Tsee-Khang and it was clearly appreciated that the international and national research on Tibetan medicine is the sound basis for its future development.

## *Book Review*

**Mar pa's life seen through the prism of his many biographies:  
a review of Cécile Ducher's**

*Building a Tradition*  
*The Lives of Mar-pa the Translator*

**Biblioteca Collectanea 5**  
**Indus Verlag, Hamburg 2017**  
and

<https://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/view/subjects/12221.html>

Cécile Ducher's book—a study of the life of a most famous bKa' brgyud pa master—is conceived as an insider examination of the century-old literature dedicated to him. The fact that the basics of Mar pa's life are not beyond variance has led Ducher to involve herself in this biographical material.

Her work on the biographies of Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros is outstanding. She has dealt with the corpus of Mar pa's biographies comparing each text word by word with all others. Her treatment of these *rnam thar*-s is literary-oriented in order to find paternity and filiation. Every page is a quest for the purpose and the outcome is a piece of literary exegesis.

Ducher treats the biographies of Mar pa as a wade through the ways biographers across the centuries wrote about him. It is how they tackled his personality, highlighting or downplaying episodes of his life or aspects of his character and practice. It is Mar pa the human and Mar pa the legend, so closely connected that the two sides are hard to disentangle.

She defines her style of work diachronic, for she stresses that it aims at analysing the evolution of the biographers' narrations of his life, to detect similarities or departing points. She traces the indebtedness of biographies from others. Ducher rather more focuses on the narratives of Mar pa's life than his existence itself.

In the end, there is no marked evolution of Mar pa's personality. It is his biographers who like to see him from different angles. Eventually, Ducher ends up outlining the personality of Mar pa's biographers, too.

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