

*Geopolitical Exotica: Tibet in Western Imagination*

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This book studies the role played by imperial history in the constitution of Tibetanness and, thus, contributes to “Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism,”—an initiative first undertaken by Philip Darby and Alfred Paolini in 1994. Their abovementioned ground-breaking article was followed by the seminal works of L. H. M. Ling, Sankaran Krishna, Geeta Chowdhry and Himadeep Muppidi. These opuses explore the potential of bringing together IR and postcolonialism. Dibyesh Anand’s contribution to this recent counter-hegemonic tendency in IR studies the contentious Tibetan question from a postcolonial perspective and outlines the contours of an ethical approach to the non-Western Other in IR. This approach depends on scrutinizing representations, studying their constitutive and subversive roles, deparochializing IR and studying imperial history, identity and culture.

Given the transdisciplinarity of this book, its audience will certainly encompass more than the students of political science—the disciplinary affiliation with which the book-cover is branded. The book falls in three parts. The first and second chapters—the first part of the book—give the reader an account of status-quoist and parochial conventional IR. It, then, moves on to show the crucial role of representing the non-western Other in the West’s constitution of itself as superior, enlightened and progressive. Chapter two enumerates a considerable number of the discursive practices which enable this representation of the Other. In the second part of the book, Anand offers an analysis of the poetics (3<sup>rd</sup> chapter) and politics (4<sup>th</sup> chapter) of Exotica Tibet—“western exoticized representations of Tibet and Tibetans” (xii). The last part of the book (the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> chapters) interrogates the constitutive role of these representations in Tibetan identity discourses.

The violent domesticating translation of Tibet’s geopolitical identity from suzerainty-autonomy to sovereignty-autonomy in the aftermath of the Chinese invasion of Tibet (1951) foregrounds the importance of representation in the way IR deals with Tibet and the subversive appropriation of that very representation by Tibetan resistance movements. Before China’s invasion of Tibet and the withdrawal of British imperial forces from the Indian subcontinent, Britain used to formulate Tibet’s geopolitical identity in terms of Chinese suzerainty-Tibetan autonomy (74). Britain’s construction of this geopolitical identity rests on its use of Exotica Tibet. Anand gives an interesting account of the major cultural sites through which the

fabric of Tibet and Tibetanness were discursively weaved in chapter 3. Among these are novels (James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*), historical accounts by British military officers (Colonel Francis Younghusband's *India and Tibet* (1910) and movies (*Seven Years in Tibet* starring Brad Pitt). Anand's postcolonial study of the British imperial archive allows him to show the role colonial representational regimes play in the construction and mutation of Tibetan geopolitical identity. Indeed, before 1951, the imperial interests of Britain were discursively served by a construction of Tibetan identity based on the image of Tibet as "a forbidden kingdom," "the mysterious Tibet," and "closed Tibet" (75). These representations of Tibet are found everywhere in *Exotica Tibet*. Anand's postcolonial approach to the Tibet question, thus, stresses the importance of examining the interdependence of knowledge and power—an interdependence studied at length by Michel Foucault.

These imperial representations of Tibet do not just serve the interests of the British. More importantly, they have a productive and constitutive power over Tibetans. In fact, the powerful representational imperial regime has constructed Tibet and Tibetans and made the latter "prisoners of Shangri-la" (88). This utopian setting in Hilton's *Lost Horizon* has come to represent Tibet for Westerners as a repository of "mental peace, spiritual wisdom, 'high' culture and physical wealth" (41). This representation of Tibet as a peaceful refuge from the world and Tibetans as victims of Chinese-imposed modernization seem to deprive Tibetans from their agency and foreclose any resistance on their part. However, here the importance of Anand's study of the politics of *Exotica Tibet* comes to the fore. Tibetans in exile took up these representations and used them in such a way as to attract international support for their cause. For instance, they used the connection between Shangri-la and the victimization of Tibetans embraced by westerners in order to "mobilize many non-Tibetans for the 'Save Tibet' cause" (98). In this sense, Tibetans cleverly and subversively made use of the imperial regime of representation.

Anand also traces another discursive move undertaken by Tibetans in their struggle for self-determination, namely their innovative use of traditions. Tibetan conceptions of international relations and of their relationship with China, which do not have equivalents in the jargon of Western IR, got lost with the violent inclusion of Tibet in the westernized international political system. These untranslatable elements were not accounted for in the translation of Tibetans' geopolitical identity, after 1951. In response to this, Tibetans resurrect elements of their conception of IR such as the "framework of patron-client relationship" (103)—a framework which defined their former relationship to China before 1951—in order to gain international support for their struggle (103). "Working within the framework of a patron-client relationship, Tibetans have managed to construct and reinforce a national identity by drawing upon the patronage of transnational networks and connections" (103).

This mistranslation of the Tibetan Other is, thus, countered by an act of translation on the part of resistance movements. This counter-

hegemonic act of translation is attentive to the image the west already has of Tibet. It is worth noting that Anand's reference to the domesticating translation of Tibet and Tibetans is a very interesting one and could potentially be dealt with in a work of its own (76).

*Geopolitical Exotica* explores the potential of approaching the Tibetan question from a postcolonial perspective. The attention Anand pays to representation, cultural production and imperial history, as well as his use of theory, allow him to erode the boundaries of conventional IR. This transdisciplinarity is a *sine qua non* for an ethical approach to the non-western Other in IR.

#### Works Cited

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