Introduction

Potency as Efficacy-in-Becoming

This book breaks new ground by exploring the intricate interweaving of knowledge, practice, and materials through which potency is crafted in Sowa Rigpa (*gso ba rig pa*). Based on fieldwork with practitioners known as *amchi* (*am chi*)[1] from the Himalayan regions of Ladakh and Dharamsala (India), as well as Kathmandu (Nepal), the four authors analyze how potency is understood and manipulated in the making of multi-ingredient medicines. Taking the Tibetan umbrella term *nüpa* (*nus pa*) as our starting point, we draw on insights gained by learning from and working side by side with amchis as apprentices and participant-observers, and from the lineages and accumulated experiences of our respective Sowa Rigpa teachers. We also bring in reflections on selected Tibetan medical works that shape amchis' artisanal practice, as well as contemporary theoretical perspectives from Dharamsala and eastern Tibet. From these vantage points, we explore how the therapeutic potential of Sowa Rigpa medicines or *men* (*sman*) is sculpted through both material processes and ritual means. Along the way, we also ask how amchis learn medicine-compounding or *menjor* (*sman sbyor*), and what changes when artisanship is passed on in institutional settings as compared to lineage-based training.

The practices, processes, and perspectives under investigation are plural and dynamic. Moreover, we four authors approach and interpret them in slightly different ways, since we work across social and biocultural anthropology and have different relations to Sowa Rigpa as a field of medical practice. This book is therefore a somewhat palimpsestic experimental mélange in the sense that it

1 Amchi is a Mongolian-derived word for a Sowa Rigpa medical practitioner used widely across the Himalayas and to a lesser extent in other regions. We use the title of "Dr." when referring to amchis who themselves use it; this is legal for registered amchis in countries where Sowa Rigpa is recognized. Amchis are also called *menpa* (*sman pa*).

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takes a metadisciplinary approach that has required translations across linguistic, epistemological, and ontological boundaries, leading us to trouble familiar categories in search of more suitable ways to approach potency. Our use of the term "potency" cannot therefore be identical to amchis' conceptions of *nüpa*; it rather serves as an analytical tool to help us talk about *nüpa*, as well as associated terms and techniques. While amchis craft *nüpa*, we craft a hermeneutics of potency by weaving together in the English vernacular ethnographic and textual materials derived from various Sowa Rigpa perspectives. Our analysis through much of the book is inspired by Tim Ingold's ecologically attuned phenomenology and Pamela Smith's material experimental methods for interpreting early modern science and technology, but we also pay attention to amchis' sensory-based approach as described textually and transmitted nowadays through the chosen scientific vernacular of those who teach and learn at two of the principal Tibetan medical colleges (Chapter 3).

Although often referred to in English as Tibetan medicine, Sowa Rigpa means knowledge or science (*rigpa*) of healing (*sowa*). Broadly, the English term "science" refers to systematic inquiry into the natural world through observation, experimentation, and evidence-based theory testing. While often associated with modern techno-scientific disciplines, such approaches are evident across diverse knowledge traditions, including Tibetan ones. As Janet Gyatso (2015, 5) notes in her study covering the mid-sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, terms like *rigpa* in Sowa Rigpa and *chepa* (*dpyad pa*) in *menché* (*sman dpyad*; often translated as "medical science") denote "critical and often empirically based ways of investigating and knowing about the world." While these terms are frequently associated with transcendental aims in Buddhist contexts,[2] Gyatso heuristically interprets the epistemic orientations of early modern Tibetan medicine as "reaching toward a scientific sensibility." Our understanding of science in this book is not confined to Eurocentric method-based empiricism; rather we see science as a situated, evolving practice for acquiring knowledge through embodied interaction, empirically evaluated experimentation, and nuanced rigor in craft—a mode of inquiry grounded in making, doing, and experiencing. As Smith (2022, 18) puts it, "the work of *making* is related to *knowing*, and … making is an epistemic activity and an active form of knowledge in its own right." Like both Ingold and Smith, we reject

2 Following Kapstein (2006, 205), our general use of the term "Buddhism" in the Tibetan and Himalayan context is inclusive of Bön in its "organized, clerical dimension." We use the designation Bön when referring to specific Bön institutions or practices, such as the Sorig Bumzhi School (Chapter 4) and Bönpo *mendrup* ritual (Chapter 5), or when we are highlighting differences from other Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

the long-held philosophical assumption that mind- and language-based cognition are the only sources of abstract or conceptual knowledge about the world, and instead foreground the preeminence of practice as the generator of knowledge (see Smith 2022, 232). By approaching scientific endeavors in this way, we strive for a better approximation of what in Sowa Rigpa is termed "knowledge" or *rigpa*.

Our aim is to unpack potency as a potential that is molded and actualized in practice. Along the way, we draw on and test the Ingoldian concepts of "skilled practice," "taskscapes," and "meshworks" (Ingold 2000, 2011b), as well as the idea of "artisanal epistemologies" (Smith 2004). In line with these perspectives, we approach practitioners as deeply immersed in their socio-ecological environments, allowing for embodied applications of Sowa Rigpa epistemologies. Thus, this book is more about craft as practice and process than it is about histories and theories. It is also about people and places at the peripheries of the larger contemporary Sowa Rigpa landscape (see Pordié and Kloos 2022), calling attention to amchis who engage in small-scale artisanal production and are embedded in lineage-based systems of expertise. These practitioners increasingly represent a minority compared to the larger group of amchis trained institutionally in India and Nepal. We highlight how they work with substances, sculpt potency, and pass on technical skills to the next generation of medicine-makers by means of a practice-centered approach toward artisanship and materiality. Like the amchis we work with, we acknowledge that substances have certain inherent (inter)active qualities. But our emphasis here is on how potency emerges as a capacity to have an effect rather than on static properties of supposedly stable ingredients. As laid out below, we analytically distinguish potency from efficacy by loosely defining the latter as the degree to which a substance might manifest its ascribed characteristics or benefit for a patient or consumer. Potency, we argue, is efficacy-in-becoming.

Potency in Sowa Rigpa is crafted through interlaced medical and ritual practices that facilitate the layering, melding, and integration of substances and properties. We heuristically define "ritual" as patterned, repetitive, and symbolic expressions of cultural and religious practice (largely but not exclusively Buddhist), and "medicine" as broadly empirically-based ways of healing. These cannot be regarded as two neatly separate domains, nor can they easily be confined to the temple, clinic, or pharmacy (*sman sbyor khang*; lit. medicine-compounding house). Medicine and ritual constitute interrelated areas of expertise in the Tibetan cultural sciences (*rig gnas*), where Buddhism (*nang don rig pa*) and medicine (Sowa Rigpa) form a nexus of entanglements between practitioners, lineages, materials, deities, and texts (Adams, Schrempf, and Craig 2011). "Ritual" is a common translation of the Tibetan term *choga* (*cho ga*), which is often used to refer to procedures, particularly of a medico-ritual type and often involving substances. But as William Sax (2010, 4) points out, what we label as "ritual" can be understood by those engaging in

it more simply as work: "what we see as ritual, they see as technique." In Sowa Rigpa, *choga* can refer to transforming substances into consecrated pills, but also to pharmacological processing in—often ritualized—medical settings. We do, however, make clear distinctions between technical terms and classifications as they appear in specialized texts, while exploring entanglements in practice through the relationships that experts have with the texts and materials they use.

In manifold ways, amchis rely on the foundational medical work the *Four Tantras* or *Gyüzhi* (*Rgyud bzhi*), or the Bön equivalent the *Four Collections* or *Bumzhi* (*'Bum bzhi*), and their later commentaries. Largely dating back to the twelfth century, the *Four Tantras* is partially memorized by most Sowa Rigpa students until this day (Tidwell 2017). The text draws on several sources, including the Tibetan translation of the Indian medical compendium *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasaṃhitā* by Vāgbhaṭa (Yang Ga 2010). Later, the Nyingma tantric cycle of the *Yutok Nyingtik* (*G.yu thog snying thig*) became one of the central spiritual sources for the medical tradition (Garrett 2009, Van Vleet 2016) and is still practiced by many Sowa Rigpa physicians (see Chapters 3, 4, and 5).[3] Nevertheless, contemporary Sowa Rigpa training and practice vary considerably between institutions (see Chapter 4 for Kathmandu), and across its vast homelands, from Tibetan regions in the PRC to India, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and the Russian republics of Kalmykia, Buryatia, and Tuva.

Sowa Rigpa theories surrounding potency, elemental properties, and conceptions of the body align with Buddhist cosmologies but are simultaneously articulated in modern scientific terms by institutionally trained amchis (Chapter 3). We note the emergence of Sowa Rigpa industries (Kloos et al. 2020) and various governments' attempts to standardize and regulate Sowa Rigpa education and practice. At the same time, forms of amchi artisanship deeply immersed in ritualized local environments persist in Himalayan valleys (Singh and Gerke, 2025; Surbhi and Van der Valk, 2025) and across the Tibetan Plateau (Tidwell 2021), offering insights into how *menjor* practices adapt across generations, changing environments, and socio-political contexts (Blaikie 2013, 2014, 2018, 2022, 2025). Meanwhile, new modes of engagement with this regional body of artisanship are also emerging beyond Tibetan and Himalayan worlds through figures such as Dr. Arya Pasang Yonten—born in Tibet and trained in Dharamsala—who now teaches aspects of medicine making in Switzerland to international students and anthropologist-apprentices (Chapter 2).

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3 The *Yutok Nyingtik* or *Yutok Heart Essence* is part of the collection known as the *Treasury of Rediscovered Teachings*, or *Rinchen Terdzö* (*Rin chen gter mdzod*). For centuries, amchis have practiced it to develop therapeutic skill and meditative sensibilities, as well as to consecrate their own medicines (Garrett 2009).

While the ethnographic and textual materials we draw upon only allow us to capture a glimpse of this diversity, they have enabled us to explore potency and its crafting from several different vantage points. Before turning to a more in-depth discussion of our methods and fieldsites, however, we first address the key question of why we have chosen to foreground potency as well as artisanal perspectives and practices.

Foregrounding potency

While writing our proposal for the project from which this book emerged, we built upon Van der Valk's (2017) combined Ingoldian and science studies approach to Sowa Rigpa medicine making. We were also inspired by Vivienne Lo and her collaborators' work on potent substances, which addresses key historical, ethnopharmacological, and regulatory transitions between foods and medicines across Eurasia—especially highlighting the role of spices as boundary objects. The latter provided us with many relevant insights, for instance on the global trade in cherished exotica, or the potency attributed to flavors and aromas and "the transformative potential of the culinary arts" (Lo et al. 2015, 3). Later, this inspiration found expression in the *HIMALAYA* special section edited by Gerke and Van der Valk (2019), which focused on materiality and artisanship in the crafting of potent compounds such as ayurvedic iron tonics (Wujastyk 2019), Burmese alchemical gold ash (Coderey 2019), and Tibetan pills containing semi-precious stones (Gerke 2019a) and highly poisonous plants (Van der Valk 2019). Other contributions explored the ritual deployment of Asian materia medica (Sehnalova 2019a) and built novel bridges between Sowa Rigpa concepts and modern pharmacology (Schwabl and Van der Valk 2019, Tidwell and Nettles 2019).

This book seeks to move beyond a palpable academic partiality (including our own) toward exotic substances in Sowa Rigpa, such as precious stones, metals, poisons, panaceas, and unusual animal parts.[4] We instead take the reader through the life-stories of ordinary and ubiquitous substances, such as limestone and medicinal butter containing extracts of common fruits and rhizomes. This allows us to explore seemingly mundane yet surprising complexities involved in the cultivation of potency. To explore more fully the many dimensions on which

4 On the use of insects in Tibetan materia medica see Czaja 2019a; on animal substances, especially musk, see Craig 2012; on precious stones and metals, see Gerke 2016, 2019a, 2021; on poisons, see Gerke 2023, Tidwell and Nettles 2019, Van der Valk 2019; and on bezoars and theriac, see Simioli 2016, 2025.

potency is understood to operate, however, one chapter focuses on a group of highly complex yet hitherto understudied consecrated compounds known as *papta* (*phabs rta*). While our selection of substances is by no means exhaustive or fully representative of Sowa Rigpa's rich pharmacopeia, it does illustrate the various constituent layers of potency.

There is an "ocean of Tibetan medical literature" (McGrath 2019) on which amchis and researchers rely to various extents, much of which concerns medicinal substances and formulations. However, each act of medicine making is, in a sense, unique. This is not just because ingredients have fluid identities and variable qualities or may be subject to substitution (*sman tshabs*).[5] Even "classical" formulas are dynamic, both as written recipes (Gerke 2018a) and due to divergent modes and conditions of production (e.g., Blaikie 2015). This book emphasizes how substances undergo various processes of transformation that revolve around the crafting of potency. In an effort to make their best medicines, amchis sculpt layer upon layer of potency through the confluence and manipulation of materials, mantras, meditative stabilization, interdependence, shape, moonlight, and lineage, to mention but a few elements introduced in this book.

Our aim is not to assess whether a Tibetan pill or ritualized action is efficacious according to specific criteria, but rather to show how amchis—and those who are medicine makers in particular—come to know, perceive, and craft potency. Potent substances can certainly evoke powerful effects on human body-minds. Once ingested they interact within a bodily context, manifesting their full potency as understood by amchis. Yet, before these effects can be experienced in the form of beneficial qualities (*phan yon*) or benefit (*phan thogs*), a fundamental series of theoretically informed yet highly pragmatic categorizations, skillful manipulations, and material transformations has already taken place. All this occurs *before* potency becomes measurable as effectiveness or efficacy in the biomedical paradigm when administered as a drug (see Pittler and White 1999). We analytically distinguish this creative manifestation of power prior to efficacy as potency.[6] This efficacy-in-becoming therefore has a much broader sense than

5 On substitution, see Czaja 2017, Glover 2021, Sabernig 2011, Schwabl and Van der Valk 2019.

6 The Tibetan term *nüpa* is often combined with the term *pentok* (*phan thogs*) to make *pennü* (*phan nus*), "beneficial potency." Although *pennü* is often glossed as "efficacy," it actually comprises a complex set of ideas that describe various effects of medicines and ritual compounds (Craig 2012, 6–8; Schrempf 2015, 288). In formularies, *pentok* and *pennü* typically link formulas to the treatment of specific diseases, but these indications do not fully explain the *nüpa* of the substances themselves.

the standard pharmacological meaning of potency, which denotes the intensity of dose-related drug activity.

Our conceptualization of potency here is derived from the Tibetan term *nüpa*. *Nüpa* is both an intransitive verb and a noun. As an intransitive verb that takes no direct object, *nüpa* denotes the capacity to do, enact, or confer something. In the medical and ritual contexts that we are concerned with in this book, it is the capacity to affect change upon a body of matter-energy: *nüpa* can roughen, lubricate, lighten, make heavier, heat, cool, dull, or sharpen (we explain how this works in Chapter 3). As a noun, it is a characteristic of a substance that emerges when it comes into contact with another entity. *Nüpa* also has broader semantic networks as applied both within and beyond Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist contexts, which connect it to the notions of benefit, strength, and power.[7] The rich and nuanced language surrounding the concept of *nüpa* hints at the myriad forms in which potency is cultivated, layered, and nurtured through both material processes and ritual means in artisanal practice.

Efficacy and efficacy-in-becoming

Potency in the sense of efficacy-in-becoming, and the ways in which practitioners-as-artisans modulate it by means of embodied medicine making, are the foci of this book. While this distinguishes our approach from research focused on questions related to efficacy (e.g., how medicines affect those who consume them and how this is understood and measured), it is important to acknowledge relevant developments in studies of efficacy across both anthropology and pharmacology.

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7 The semantic breadth of *nüpa* is reflected in Tibetan medical and standard dictionary entries. For example, the *New Orthographic Dictionary* (Sönam Tsering 1979, 434) describes *nüpa* as "a force that causes change to a substance, classified by type," offering a few illustrative examples: *nüpa* of a substance's materiality, *nüpa* of a medicine, and *nüpa* of saffron as a medicinal substance in alleviating hot illnesses. However, it also offers a secondary definition that defines *nüpa* in a much broader sense as "a term for power and qualities," using the example, "he has the power to alleviate hardship." The *Great Tibetan Dictionary* (Trang yi sün 1985) adds several synonyms to its entry on *nüpa*, which also point to its broader meanings: 1) *tsel* (*rtsal*), which connotes skill, dexterity, accomplishment, potential, potency, dynamic energy, strength, creative play/power, manifestation, capacity, expression, and effort; 2) *penwa* (*phan ba*), to benefit, to improve, to be useful; 3) *tup-pa* (*thub pa*), to be able to, to be capable, to withstand; and 4) *pöpa* (*phod pa*), to have the power to, to dare, to have capacity to endure.

Within the social sciences, researchers have long foregrounded the efficacy of symbols, the importance of meaning-making, and the way objects take on various significations as they move through different social contexts (Appadurai 1986, Moerman 2002). Elisabeth Hsu (2010, 23) noted that early on pharmaceutical anthropologists were "curiously uninterested in the materiality of drugs," having "left the discussion of the drugs and their physiological effects to biomedicine, accounted for sociocultural aspects, and thereby inadvertently reinforced the Cartesian dualism that has set the agenda for the medical anthropological project." Over recent decades, however, researchers of Asian medicines have made significant progress in dismantling nature-culture, body-mind, and biomedical-social efficacy dichotomies. The social lives of things approach has, for instance, been applied with nuance to the development of a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of the Tibetan "birth-helping pill" Zhijé 11 (Craig 2012, 215–52) and to investigating plural perceptions of mercurial medicines (Gerke 2013).

Over the past two decades our colleagues have critiqued the dominant approaches to how efficacy is determined and produced in the pharmaceutical industry. They have highlighted the appropriative application of RCTs to Sowa Rigpa as "randomized controlled crime" (Adams 2002), but also unveiled how identity politics are shaping the dynamics of global pharma in the case of Tibetan medicines (Craig and Adams 2008, Kloos 2017a). Similarly, they have addressed the "political efficacy" of Tibetan medicine in exile as a form of soft power (Kloos 2017a), as well as the paradoxical cultural survival of traditional medicine in today's market economy through the adoption of modern quality control methods in India, the PRC, and Switzerland (Craig 2011a; Cuomu 2022; Kloos 2015, 2017b; Saxer 2013; Van der Valk 2017, 159–201). Moreover, scholars studying efficacy through the lens of an integrative social ecologies framework have addressed the entanglement of ritual action and *menjor* practice (Craig 2011b, 2012), as well as the marginalizing effects of the shift of focus away from efficacy toward bureaucratic biomedical notions of safety in both regulatory frameworks and research (Gerke 2015, Kadetz 2015, Schrempf 2015), and the contingency of efficacy when amchis are caught up in overlapping regimes of legitimacy and ideologies of development (Blaikie and Craig 2022, Chudakova 2015, 2021).

Indeed, efficacy studies continue to be dominated by Cartesianism, relying on conventional pharmacological assessments of isolated material constituents and receptors in the drug development pipeline (Tidwell and Nettles 2019), with RCTs as the gold standard. RCTs still struggle with the placebo/nocebo response (Pardo-Cabello, Manzano-Gamero, and Puche-Cañas 2022). This is itself an artifact of a rigidly imposed body/mind dichotomy that can be fruitfully unpacked through lenses such as embodiment (Thompson, Ritenbaugh, and Nichter, 2009) and ritual theory (Kaptchuk 2011) that move beyond both cultural and biological reductionisms (Apud and Romaní 2019).

Sowa Rigpa medicines and therapies are only beginning to be "discovered" by scientists; compared to biomedical interventions, they are still in an exploratory research stage (Luo et al. 2015, Reuter, Weißhuhn, and Witt 2013). Major pharmaceutical companies with the resources for extensive clinical trials often show limited interest in multi-compound herbal formulations. This is largely due to the technical challenges and extreme costs involved in applying standard drug discovery and testing procedures to complex mixtures (Tidwell and Nettles 2019), but also because entire plants and traditionally documented recipes cannot be patented for exclusive sale by drug companies—that would be biopiracy as these are not laboratory inventions or innovations (Laird 2013). Nevertheless, other avenues toward the transformation of Sowa Rigpa formulas into "modern medicinal products" have been pursued, one example being the registration of Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products within the EU (Schwabl and Vennos 2015). Philip Reuter, Thorolf Weißhuhn, and Claudia Witt (2013) report around forty clinical studies of Sowa Rigpa treatment approaches published in Western languages (excluding Russian), and Luo et al. (2015) reviewed more than 200 randomized controlled trials performed in the PRC.[8]

In this book, we shift the analytical focus away from the efficacy of compounded medicines, to pre-efficacy and both the inherent and crafted potency of substances. While not necessarily articulated as such, potency in the sense of efficacy-in-becoming has received previous attention. In particular, scholars of Buddhist and Tibetan studies such as Cathy Cantwell (2015), James Gentry (2017, 2023a, 2023b), Olaf Czaja (2013, 2015), and Anna Sehnalova (2019a, 2019b) have paid close attention to powerful substances and objects, notably in tantric ritual, and have sometimes worked extensively with amchis to observe how they make and consecrate medicines. While we draw on these studies where relevant, especially in Chapter 5, we pivot in new directions by foregrounding artisanal perspectives and practices, mapping out a craft-based understanding of how amchis shape and enhance the perceived *nüpa* of substances.

Our outlook resonates with Anita Hardon and Emilia Sanabria's notion of "breaking open the pharmaceutical object" (2017, 118) and unsettling the rigid "Western" dichotomy of a thing and its representation. Like us, they are inspired by Ingold's (2011b, 2012) approach to materials-in-becoming, which they apply to the de- and re-articulation of "pharma-matter" in shifting environments, including leaky bodies metabolizing medicines. Recognizing that pharmaceutical materials

8 There are promising preliminary results using Sowa Rigpa for cancer treatment (Bauer-Wu et al. 2014), vascular dementia (Wu et al. 2016), ischemic stroke (Zhang et al. 2023), chronic gastritis (Dhondrup et al. 2023), and COVID-19 (Tidwell et al. 2024).

are always in flux and their actions are always-emergent, we concur with their view of "pharmaceuticals as never finished and as 'always on the way to becoming something else'" (Hardon and Sanabria 2017, 118, citing Ingold 2011b, 3). However, we anchor ourselves in the lifeworlds of amchis, who focus on processes that culminate in finished products and are motivated to perfect their *menjor* practice to benefit suffering beings. For us, efficacy-in-becoming includes all of these dimensions.

Artisanal epistemologies

Theoretically, we are inspired by historian of science Pamela Smith, who coined the term "artisanal epistemologies" to refer to knowledge attained through the manipulation of natural substances. Smith's research focuses on how artisans contributed to the scientific revolution in early modern Europe, specifically through their skilled crafts. In *The Body of the Artisan* (2004) and subsequent works (2010, 2013, 2014, 2022; Smith, Meyers, and Cook 2014), she explores the close relationship between the artisan and "nature," articulating the pivotal role of intimate engagement with materials and artisanship as a source of knowledge. Smith's work encourages us to learn the artisans' "material language" (2004, 8) and to recognize the many forms of expertise or literacy embodied in their unique methods, including the ways they work around and with textual imprecisions. Taken together, these aspects are key to what Smith terms "artisanal epistemology." While the lifeworlds of contemporary Himalayan amchis differ substantially from those of artisans in early modern European workshops, Smith's work resonates with our material because both explore the intersection of craft-based forms of making and empirical ways of knowing.

In her examination of late-medieval and early modern metalworking, Smith (2010) emphasizes that artisans perceived many substances as alive and transformable. She posits that their engagement with materials was inherently investigative and empirical, though not "scientific" in a modern sense. Artisanal practices were not routine, but intricately woven into a lived theory, often unspoken but nevertheless foundational to their practice (48). Smith encourages us to discover and decipher these underlying theories from the artisans' perspectives. Artisans were immersed in material exploration within vernacular worldviews, which incorporated religious and alchemical ideas, and opened onto the mysteries of their cosmologies. Her analysis of the red pigment vermilion exemplifies this, revealing a "vernacular science of matter" (41) that, in her later work, she terms "material imaginary" to emphasize the "deeper systematic understanding of materials" that informs artisanship (2022, 14, 45). Vermilion as a red powder, beyond

being a pigment, symbolized blood, embodying heat and life. Coral, also red, was employed to stop bleeding, and blood was applied to cut gemstones. Such potent qualities like redness and vitality were attributed to humans, animals, and minerals alike, reflecting a worldview in which such properties resonated across all forms of life and matter. Knowledge of these associations was inseparable from the act of making, infusing properties of substances across human and nonhuman realms with symbolic and spiritual meaning through a "web of correspondences" (Smith 2010, 47). The artisanal practices discussed in this book reveal their own webs of correspondences, for example, between the whiteness and cooling potentialities of *chongzhi* (*cong zhi*) (specific kinds of limestone), milk, and moonlight.

Sowa Rigpa theories pertaining to the five elements, called *jungwa nga* (*'byung ba lnga*), the three *nyepa* (*nyes pa gsum*), and the eight potencies or *nüpa gyé* (*nus pa brgyad*), engage with substances based on their properties and qualities (see Chapter 3).[9] *Menjor* techniques are applied to cultivate, manifest, and extract these qualities, transforming them into beneficial medicine. Amchis further enhance the *nüpa* of formulas through mantras, prayers, meditative visualization, and the addition of blessed substances. All these threads come to life as amchis manually grind, sublimate, incinerate, and infuse substances. These processes constitute integral parts of their epistemology and worldview, illustrating the interconnectedness of knowing and making across the realms of artisanal empiricism and Buddhist ritual.

Like Smith, we found a profound intimacy between amchi artisans and materials, forged through their sensory engagement with the substances at hand. Smith's (2016) Making and Knowing Project, based at Columbia University, engaged students in reconstructing sixteenth-century French recipes in a laboratory by experimenting with materials such as pigments through trial and error, leading to skill development and the refinement of practices. Notably, no text provided complete instructions; rather, mastery emerged from direct engagement with materials, involving errors, experimentation, and serendipity.[10] Her findings accord

9 The three *nyepa* in Sowa Rigpa are physiological pathways in the body that integrate the activities of the five elements. Though misleading, at times they are translated as "humors" to relate to similar historical correlates of the *doṣas* in Ayurveda. Their translation as "defaults" retains the literal meaning of *nyepa* as "default systems" that can incur fault in function when imbalanced. The eight *nüpa* are fundamental components of potency, closely linked with the six tastes and the three post-digestive tastes of substances. See Chapter 3 for the theoretical framework they provide for the crafting of potency in Sowa Rigpa.

10 Elisabeth Hsu and her colleagues drew similar conclusions from their ethno-archaeological experiments on the preparation of antimalarial juice from the plant *Artemisia annua* using ancient Chinese texts (Hsu 2015, Wright et al. 2010).

Figure 1 The main grinding stone of the Nee Amchi Association (Ogyan Sorig Tsogspa) pharmacy operated by Amchi Nawang Tsering. Nee, Ladakh, October 2018. Photo J. van der Valk (CC-BY-SA 4.0).

well with Gerke and Van der Valk's experiences described in Chapter 1 of making moonlight *chongzhi* with different amchis, and Van der Valk's description in Chapter 2 of hands-on apprenticeship in making medicinal butter.

In the *menjor* practices we observed in Ladakh, the grinding stone takes center stage as the most intimate tool connecting the practitioner with medicinal materials (figs. 1, 2) (see Singh and Gerke, 2025). The countless hours, months, and years dedicated by amchis to manually grinding herbs and minerals foster an enduring relationship between skilled bodies and tools (figs. 3, 4). Amchi Nawang Tsering, a lineage amchi and manual medicine maker in Nee (on the banks of the Indus River in Changthang) who features in several chapters, considers the grinding stone as a sacred space "where the gods live." Here, he recites auspicious prayers, mantras, and visualizes the Medicine Buddha (*Sangs rgyas sman bla*), infusing materials with blessings during the grinding process. In the interplay between materials, tools, and practices, a material language unfolds as a dynamic assemblage of *menjor* techniques, crafting a delicate balance that results in suitably potent medicine.

The distinct methodological approach that Smith takes, which involves meticulously following nontextual materials and processes, probes into the knowledge gained through "experience and labor," thereby showing due respect for what she

Figure 2 A smaller grinding stone with ground up limestone pieces at the Nee Amchi Association pharmacy operated by Amchi Nawang Tsering. Nee, September 2018. Photo courtesy of T. K. Shor (all rights reserved).

Figure 3 Amchi Nawang Tsering's hand holds the pestle; the two rabbit feet are used as brushes. Nee, August 2022. Photo J. van der Valk (CC-BY-SA 4.0).

Figure 4 Amchi Nawang Tsering grinding herbal raw materials. Nee, August 2022. Photo J. van der Valk (all rights reserved).

terms "artisanal literacy" (2004, 7–8). In this way, she seeks to overcome the widespread division between scholasticism and manual labor. This split is evident to varying degrees in Sowa Rigpa education in both institutional and lineage-based systems (see Chapter 4). Yet, Sowa Rigpa represents a living medical tradition that continues to draw on and internalize knowledge that was codified both in writing and embodied skill transmitted across centuries. Sowa Rigpa practitioners therefore navigate realms where literacy extends beyond the written word and where knowledge is deeply embedded both in and beyond texts. Proficient in Tibetan, amchis study medical texts, absorbing knowledge through the acts of reading, reciting, and memorizing, perpetuating a tradition that anchors their connection to the profound wisdom encapsulated in the *Four Tantras*. In other words, they "imbibe the text" and embody its knowledge (Tidwell 2017). At the same time, they are part of living amchi lineages and receive oral transmissions and practical training. Crucially, many formulary texts are short and incomplete. Drawing on Ingold (2001), we approach these formulary texts as scripts for guided rediscovery, which amchis "read" through observation and imitation of their teachers, and through careful improvisation based on years of experience (Chapter 1).

The amalgamation of oral and written traditions is crucial for the cultivation of artisanal expertise, just as the ways of transmitting knowledge, becoming an apprentice, and being part of a living lineage-based tradition are key to understandings of artisanal literacy in Sowa Rigpa (Chapters 1, 2, 4). Our aim is to show how the varied ways of being literate, although quite different modes of engaging with Sowa Rigpa praxis and materials, reveal a multiplicity of skills and knowledge forms that together materialize efficacy-in-becoming. They also allow for a comparative discussion across chapters, offering insights into how practitioners navigate ways of knowing, speaking, and writing about *menjor* in various settings. That said, we are aware of the complex histories of Tibetan medical texts themselves. No matter how strongly Tibetan ritual and medical experts emphasize their stable roots in past tradition, a historical perspective on textual production and reception reveals that these are anything but static (McGrath 2017a, 2017b, Yang Ga 2010). However, a philological analysis of the ways in which Tibetan authors wrote about *menjor* practices across time and different sources is not the focus of this book.[11] Clearly, in the daily *menjor* practices of the amchis we work with, pharmacological texts are granted a higher degree of authoritative stability and temporal intransigence than they are by philologists and Tibetologists.

11 See Gerke 2019a for a detailed example of intertextualities between three descriptions on the processing of precious stones.

Smith's contributions to the history of science also resonate with ongoing debates at the intersection of science and religion in Tibetan and Himalayan studies, as exemplified by the work of scholars like Janet Gyatso (2015). Gyatso explores the deployment of science and religion as analytical heuristics, focusing on seventeenth-century intellectual developments in Tibet. As previously noted by Gerke (2021, 134–35), Gyatso provides an areligious reading of empiricism in Sowa Rigpa, concluding that it emerged from challenges to tantric belief systems, thereby demonstrating a shift toward material realism in Tibetan medical thought. Gerke argues that this makes sense in certain contexts, but not necessarily in *menjor* practices that are deeply linked to Vajrayāna Buddhism, such as the taming of mercury or the ritual consecration of medicines. Gyatso's view of Tibetan medical empiricism remains thought-provoking and sensitizes us to more carefully analyze how Sowa Rigpa knowledge is expressed in situated practices. However, Smith (2013, 216) offers another way of rethinking *menjor* epistemologies when she argues that "all science begins with matter," encouraging us to look at the history of science "as the deep history of human engagement with natural materials." The bigger point here is that knowledge, materials, and skills flow together in historical processes emerging "from the work of craftspeople manipulating materials with certain properties to produce a substance with particular cultural resonance" (217).

As we synthesize the insights of Smith and Gyatso in the context of *menjor* artisanship, we are confronted with probing questions about the interplay of materials, techniques, and practitioners, about the empirical observations of amchis, and about their ways of theorizing the potency of substances. Are we surprised by forms of artisanship in which amchis recognize potencies as shaped by form and color, and by particular methods of drying, storing, grinding, or consecration? Understanding the epistemic logic of amchis within *menjor* practice requires nuanced exploration of the dynamic interplay between historical processes and contemporary practices, and between skilled practice and materials.

Skilled practice, taskscapes, and meshworks

> *Making, then, is a process of correspondence: not the imposition of preconceived form on raw material substance, but the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming.*
> *Tim Ingold,* Making *(2013b, 31)*

Alongside Smith's work on artisanal epistemologies, Ingold's applied phenomenology has served as an important source of inspiration for how we approach the

crafting of potency in this book. Ingold has repeatedly critiqued the concept of materiality as presented within material culture studies, challenging the notion that materiality can be studied separately from lived experience (Ingold 2011b, 2012, 2013b). Instead, he proposes an "ecology of materials" (Ingold 2012) in which things are not reduced to objects but recognized as tangles of materials enmeshed in dynamic lifeworlds. This reframing moves away from Aristotelian hylomorphism, in which objects are conceived as composites of a preconceived form imposed on matter. Rather than prioritizing ideas as ready-made cognitive blueprints, Ingold invites us to appreciate the gradual, processual emergence of material forms in-the-making. This counters the entrenched polarization of mind versus (and over) matter, as well as the related tendency to reify the nature/culture dichotomy. In Ingold's words: "Materials do not *exist*, in the manner of objects, as static entities with diagnostic attributes. … Rather, as substances-in-becoming they carry on or *perdure*" (2013b, 31).

Surbhi and Van der Valk (2025) experiment with applying an Ingoldian hermeneutical lens to their analysis of medicinal plant harvesting among Spitipa and Kinnauri amchis, finding it particularly pertinent for describing the often tacitly embodied and environmentally embedded aspects of Sowa Rigpa medicine making and—to a lesser extent—ritual consecration.[12] We thus propose along with Ingold that artisans' skillful working *with* the properties of materials through practical sensory engagement is an essential source of their potency: "The properties of materials, in short, are not attributes but histories" (Ingold 2011b, 32). In other words, our understanding of materials should not be limited to their supposedly stable properties but rather encompass the processes they continually undergo. Potent substances are always in a state of becoming. We therefore pay close attention to material meshworks, which Ingold (2007a, 80; 2011b) defines as dynamic entanglements of materials in movement, as well as to taskcapes, a term we borrow from Ingold to capture the patterns of activity that gather, weave, and patch together these dynamic threads into more or less durable things such as medicinal pills or powders.

Ingold (2000, 5) sees skills not just as bodily techniques, but as "capabilities of action and perception of the whole organic being (indissolubly mind and body) situated in a richly structured environment." He characterizes the practice of technical skill based on the following five dimensions (352–54), which we will explore in the course of the chapters: (1) processual emergence of intentionality and function, (2) relational immersion in environments, (3) qualities of judgment, dexterity and

12 See also Surbhi and Van der Valk 2025 for a discussion of Ingold's critique of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and the latter's impact on Gentry's (2017) inspiring work on "power objects" in Tibetan Buddhism.

care, (4) hands-on learning through guided repetition, and (5) form generated by movement rather than mechanical execution of a design. The form-generating aspect of Ingoldian skill, however, may not readily apply to making powders or amorphous butter pills (Chapter 2). Can you weave a medicine as one would a basket? The obvious answer is "no." What is crafted in *menjor* practice, we argue, is not form but potency. Potency can indeed be said to be woven or sculpted through engagement with/in a field of forces—following, enhancing, and perfecting the intrinsic qualities of medicinal materials—through patterned incremental behaviors which may include grinding and stirring, as well as visualizations and the recitation of mantras.[13] We nevertheless indicate where Ingold falls short. For example, his approach feels peripheral in Chapter 3 where descriptions drawing from modern technoscientific disciplines are preferred by amchis translating Sowa Rigpa theory into the English vernacular; it also has clear limits in Chapter 5 where it struggles to fully capture the multiple potencies of consecrated compounds.

We follow a "skilled practice" approach to artisanship. First developed by Cristina Grasseni (2007), this approach describes how people learn and refine specialized ways of perceiving and acting through apprenticeship and guided participation. Building on Ingold (2000), Grasseni emphasizes the social and situated nature of learning: novices become insiders to a particular craft or profession by gradually acquiring an "education of attention" within communities of practice (2007, 10). As part of this approach, we also use "taskscape" as a convenient lens that facilitates an integrated focus on the interlocking sets of activities that an amchi needs to master, from theoretical, diagnostic, and therapeutic skills to the sourcing of raw materials and the making of medicines (Blaikie 2014, Pordié and Blaikie 2014). While Ingold (2000, 190) developed the idea of taskscape to connote "a pattern of dwelling activities," we find this concept particularly useful in the context of *menjor* education. Surbhi and Van der Valk (2025) emphasize how medicine and ritual interlock in amchi taskscapes, and how the latter are enmeshed in animate landscapes. They coin the term "ritualized meshwork," extending Ingold's more secular vision of artisanship and dwelling to incorporate ritual practices, such as mantras, and sacred ecologies of land spirits and deities. Continuing along these lines, we pay attention to these phenomena in our exploration of the crafting of potency, but also highlight the divergent amchi taskscapes emerging through modern institutionalization, and how medicine-making is being pushed to the margins of Sowa Rigpa education (Chapter 4).

13 Chudakova (2017, 352) coined the term "pharmacopoeisis" to describe this laborious, highly contingent, more-than-human process of "making things medicinal" based on her engagement with Sowa Rigpa in Buryatia.

Collaborative methods and multi-sited fieldwork

A metadisciplinary approach

This book is a collaboration between a team of four authors. Each of us has been immersed in distinct geographies of Sowa Rigpa and studied with different amchis privately or in institutional settings. Our backgrounds involve different forms and degrees of engagement with Tibetan language, Sowa Rigpa, Buddhist studies, and anthropology, which make for productive and at times uncomfortable multiplicities. Methodologically, we consciously adopt a metadisciplinary stance (Salguero 2020) that stimulates cross-epistemological fertilization while also allowing the different perspectives of multiple intellectual traditions to exist simultaneously, without seeking to suppress or replace one another. Through this we aim to create a palimpsestic or layered perspective of different voices. That being said, the particularities of our training, research interests, and fieldwork experiences have resulted in the book exploring potency mainly from a medical and anthropological rather than a religious or philological perspective.

We conceived this book not as an edited volume but as a concise coauthored project monograph. Nevertheless, since we are shaped by our disciplinary backgrounds and personal perceptions of practice, we express ourselves in varied ways and draw on differing terminology and translations. The reader might find varying English translations for Tibetan medical terms across chapters and can refer to the glossary for succinct explanations. They will also find sections written from various perspectives, including fieldnotes in the first person (singular or plural) and third person narratives. Rather than smoothing over or editing out our differences, we decided to make them a strength of the book, having discussed and debated them as a team on many occasions.

When we came together as a team in the FWF-funded project Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Ritual, based at the University of Vienna (2018–2024), we were at various stages of our lives, with different levels of project employment, academic experience, and time commitment. From the outset, the fieldwork was multi-sited, spanning Dharamsala, Kathmandu, Leh, the Indus River valley of Ladakh, and a *menjor* workshop in Switzerland. Some places were familiar, some new. Fieldwork connected us as we relied on each other's previous movements across time and space. Chapter 5, for example, draws on Calum Blaikie's first fieldwork of 2007 in the amchi community of Nee, Ladakh (Blaikie 2014), Barbara Gerke's field visit to the same community with Jan van der Valk ten years later in 2018 (Gerke 2018b), and follow-up visits by Van der Valk and Blaikie in 2022, and Blaikie and Gerke in 2023 and 2024. Tawni Tidwell visited the same village in 2008, where she also observed the relationship between medicine

making and consecrated lineage substances. These experiences, as well as her studies and *menjor* apprenticeships with amchis in Dharamsala and eastern Tibet, inform her more theoretical considerations in Chapter 3.

As field researchers we relied on collegial contacts, personal letters of reference, and descriptions of previous visits. These shaped our relationships in the field and allowed for participation in "the same" medicine accomplishment or *mendrup* (*sman grub*) ritual event in Nee a decade apart. Our ethnographic experience was therefore molded by transferences between the field visits. We suggest that methodologically, such forms of continuity enable teams of researchers to conduct more fruitful work and better understand the dynamism of ritual and medical practices over time. Transmitting information, contacts, results, and insights to each other also brought us together as a team.

To contextualize our metadisciplinary approach to potency, in what follows we briefly introduce our respective encounters and engagements with various Sowa Rigpa experts and institutions. Our collaboration drew ethnographically from fieldsites and practitioners from the Himalayan regions, while also incorporating broader perspectives, since Tidwell trained in both Dharamsala and Qinghai with institutionally trained and private lineage practitioners, and Van der Valk has both researched and been trained in *menjor* in Europe as well as in the Himalayas. While we include Tibetan medical texts as sources, as a group of anthropologists and practitioners, we readily acknowledge our bias toward ethnographic rather than philological and historical research methods.

Encounters with Sowa Rigpa experts

Barbara Gerke studied Tibetan medicine with private teachers in Dharamsala from 1989 to 1992. During her year at Chagpori Tibetan Medical Institute (CTMI) in Darjeeling (1992–1993) she joined students making medicines by hand under lama-physician Sampel Norbu Trogawa Rinpoche (1932–2005), founding director of CTMI. Trogawa Rinpoche often visited Nee (Gerke 2018b), where he prepared *dütsi chömen* (*bdud rtsi chos sman*), processed mercury sulfide into an organo-metallic powder known as *tsotel* (*btso thal*), and bestowed the *Yutok Nyingtik* empowerment to the group of amchis we later met. In 2018, Gerke learned some of the steps of *chongzhi* processing with Amchi Nawang Tsering in Nee and participated in the *mendrup* ritual, documenting how lineage and empowerment merged with *menjor*, one of her research interests (Gerke 2016, 2018a, 2019b, 2021). She also spent time with Dr. Penpa Tsering, who trained at the Dharamsala Men-Tsee-Khang (MTK) and is one of the most senior and experienced private amchi entrepreneurs in the Dharamsala area. As well as interviewing him several

times on potency and the processing of precious substances (Gerke 2019a, 2021), she documented his processing of moonlight *chongzhi* in 2018 (see Chapter 1).

In 2011, together with Calum Blaikie, Sienna Craig, and Theresia Hofer, Gerke participated in an eight-day *menjor* workshop in Nepal with forty, largely non-institutional Sowa Rigpa practitioners (Blaikie et al. 2015). Participants sourced, cleaned, and prepared raw herbal materials into three formulas, which they also consecrated. Over the course of the workshop, they discussed potency, efficacy, and *menjor* techniques, while also receiving the *Yutok Nyingtik* empowerment from the late Tsikey Chokling Rinpoche (1953–2020). This direct engagement with medicine making, combined with her training in medical and social anthropology at Oxford, inform Gerke's mixed-methods approach, which combines textual analysis, history, and ethnography.

After obtaining degrees in biology and ethnobotany, Jan van der Valk decided in 2012 to merge his lifelong passion for plants with a newly found interest in Tibetan Buddhism by commencing a three-year course through the Tibetan Medicine Education Center (TME), learning directly from the founder-director Dr. Arya Pasang Yonten. He was so impressed by Dr. Pasang's teachings that he only wanted to do a PhD if it was about Sowa Rigpa. His doctoral research (2012–2017) in anthropology traced the transformations of plants into pills based on close collaboration with the pharmaceutical company PADMA AG in Switzerland and MTK in Dharamsala. Working with these larger institutions made him aware of the scientific, economic, technical, and regulatory forces that shape the mass-production of Tibetan medical and herbal products. In the meantime, he completed further courses and clinical internships with Dr. Pasang, received the full oral transmission of the *Four Tantras* along with related texts and formularies, and memorized the *Root Tantra* in Tibetan. In 2017, he set up the first Sowa Rigpa practice in Belgium with its own herbal dispensary, and since 2021 has been editing Dr. Pasang's educational materials in Tibetan and English for Bedurya Publications.

Van der Valk's personal trajectory is akin to lineage modes of transmission in Sowa Rigpa. It prepared the ground for two postdoc positions at the University of Vienna, which involved interviewing and making medicines with privately practicing amchis from Ladakh and Kathmandu. It proved meaningful to retrace steps of Dr. Pasang's life journey: to Kathmandu, where some of his family members had fled across the border from Kyirong, Tibet and still live; to Dharamsala, where he graduated and became MTK college principal; and to Ladakh, where he taught at the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies (CIBS). These connections opened many doors, for instance when meeting Dr. Pasang's senior students Drs. Padma Gurmet, Nawang Tangyas, and Karma Choden in Ladakh. He also received extensive *Yutok Nyingtik* teachings, transmissions, and guided practice

from Lama Justin von Bujdoss (2021–2023), especially those on Dzogchen (Great Completion). The layering of identities generated by this trajectory influenced Van der Valk's epistemological stance in nuanced ways. This comes to the fore in Chapter 2 but was also present in other encounters that inform his contributions to this book. In Nee, for instance, intensively engaging in *menjor* alongside Amchi Nawang Tsering also blurred the boundaries between participant observation and master–disciple apprenticeship. These experiences were not just data collection, but part of his journey toward becoming a better practitioner.

Tawni Tidwell began studying Tibetan medicine privately with Dr. Khenrab Gyamtso, Vice Principal of MTK in Dharamsala in 2008. With his encouragement, she spent three years preparing for the next medical entrance exam to MTK and, upon passing, entered with Batch 17 in 2011 for the *kachupa* (*dka' bcu pa*) degree program. Their class had annual medicinal plant expeditions and trained in medicine compounding practices under the head of the MTK pharmacy Jamyang Tashi, including the preparation of moonlight *chongzhi*. Having received a ten-day extensive *Yutok Nyingtik* empowerment from Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoche in 2005, Tidwell also received elaborate Medicine Buddha empowerment and commentarial transmissions alongside her classmates in 2013 from Dzogchen Ganor Rinpoche, culminating in a *mendrup* ritual. Venerable Nyima, attendant to Chatral Rinpoche for decades prior to serving at MTK, guided her class for monthly *Yutok Nyingtik* offering ceremonies.

In her third year, Tidwell transferred to Sorig Loling Tibetan Medical College at Qinghai University in Amdo, continuing her *kachupa* degree. Under Drs. Tashi Dhondup and Choying Rangdrol's expert guidance, she underwent focused *menjor* training, in addition to receiving teachings from Drs. Tsuntarjial, Tsiba, and Druktsé, among other *menjor* faculty. Her class went on annual medicinal plant expeditions to different regions and smaller nearby weekend trips. As a student, she interned with the Gastroenterology Department at Qinghai Provincial Tibetan Medical Hospital (QPTMH) from the end of her third through fifth years, joining morning rounds before class and grand rounds led by senior physicians. She also underwent the annual hospital medicinal plant expeditions and examinations. She extended her time in the Menjor Department to deepen her learning of *khenda* (*khaNDa*), medicinal butters, ashes, alcohols, and *chülen* (*bcud len*). Gyayé Aku Nyima invited her to apprentice in his outpatient clinic, and she received clinical oral instructions and commentarial transmissions of, for example, *Shelgong Sheltreng* (Deumar 2005) and *Zintik Yangtik* (Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé 2005). Dr. Tsering Namjial taught her unique medicinal bath *menjor* at Drangsrong Clinic in Rebkong. As a postdoctoral fellow at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 2018, she documented *menjor*-specific lineages across Amdo and Kham, receiving mentoring from Aku Jigmé Tsondue of Tsekhok, Aku Tingdzin of Darlag, Golok, Dr. Dukar

Tashi of Luchu (venesection), and Gansu Aku Nyima (veterinary medicine). In 2019, she attended the channel cleansing and special *menjor* workshop and transmission under Dr. Tensung Drakpa at Sangchu Hospital near Labrang Monastery. This immersive learning informed her theoretical contributions to this book.

Calum Blaikie first became interested in Sowa Rigpa in 2000 while conducting his master's research in eastern Ladakh. This interest led to a series of jobs (2001–2006) with the French NGO Nomad Recherche et Soutien International and its Indian partner organization, Ladakh Society for Traditional Medicine, both of which were supporting amchi communities in various ways through a period of considerable difficulty. Blaikie's early exposure to Sowa Rigpa thus came through his engagement in practical tasks such as supporting the training and subsequent practice of twenty young amchi students from rural areas, organizing seminars and workshops, developing an amchi-led medicinal plant conservation project, and hosting visiting researchers (see Pordié and Kloos 2022). Through this, he developed a fascination for small-scale medicine production processes and the medicinal plant trade, which became the main foci of his doctoral research (2006–2014) and have continued to influence his work ever since.

Blaikie has spent extended periods with amchis in both rural and urban settings, documenting their collection, trade, and exchange of raw materials, working alongside them to transform these materials into medicines, and tracing their subsequent dispersal patterns. He attended a *mendrup* ritual in Nee in 2007 and developed a strong connection with Amchi Nawang Tsering, which has endured over the years and expanded to include Gerke and Van der Valk. Blaikie's subsequent work has retained a major focus on *menjor* activities, including the abovementioned 2011 workshop in Kathmandu, the European Research Council-funded Reassembling Tibetan Medicine project on the emergence of a Sowa Rigpa industry (2014–2019), and the Potent Substances project at the University of Vienna (2018–2024) which inspired this book. He is currently Principal Investigator of the Austrian Science Fund project Integrating Traditional Medicine: Sowa Rigpa and the State in India, based at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (2021–2025), which explores the impact of the official state recognition of Sowa Rigpa in 2010 on the handling of its pharmacological knowledge, as well as on patterns and practices of medicine production, regulation, and distribution.

Fieldsites

The findings of this book rely primarily on long-term contacts in Ladakh (especially Leh, Choglamsar, and Nee), the Dharamsala area, and Kathmandu. We refrain from characterizing these locales here, as relevant details and the practitioners

are introduced in the respective chapters. Instead, we provide a brief overview of the main institutions that have increasingly shaped Sowa Rigpa education and pharmaceutical production across India and Nepal, and how we have each engaged with them during fieldwork. The following chapters then clarify the extent to which this larger context has influenced medicine making and different aspects of potency in specific settings.

Alongside various private clinics and pharmacies, seven educational Sowa Rigpa institutions recognized by the Ministry of AYUSH currently operate in India: in Leh, Choglamsar, Dharamsala, Sarnath, Darjeeling, Gangtok, and Bengaluru.[14] MTK in Dharamsala, founded in 1961, is the pioneering Sowa Rigpa institute in India dedicated to medical training, clinical work, and large-scale pharmaceutical production. Van der Valk (2017, 2019) conducted doctoral research in MTK's pharmaceutical department, while Gerke has collaborated closely with MTK and several private pharmacies in the area since 2008 (Gerke 2018a, 2019a, 2021). Tidwell spent the early years of her Tibetan medical education at MTK College (2008–2013).

In Ladakh, we visited three Sowa Rigpa institutes and several private amchis. The National Institute of Sowa Rigpa (NISR) in Leh operates as an autonomous institution under AYUSH, offering outpatient care and a college-level Menpa Kachupa degree (Bachelor of Sowa-Rigpa Medicine and Surgery, BSRMS). NISR procures medicines from surrounding pharmacies, especially that of the Ladakh Amchi Sabha, which was an important fieldsite for Blaikie during his doctoral fieldwork and which Van der Valk also visited in 2018 and 2022. We also contacted Buddhist nuns trained in Sowa Rigpa through the Ladakh Nuns Association (LNA) directed by Ven. Dr. Tsering Palmo. Some LNA nuns were partially trained at CTMI in Darjeeling; one now works at a pharmacy in Shey, near Leh. All four authors established long-term connections with the amchi community in Nee, which became the focus of an ethnographic study of ritually consecrated substances (Chapter 5). CIBS in Choglamsar, Ladakh, was founded in 1959 and has the status of a "deemed-to-be university." Its Sowa Rigpa faculty opened in 1989 with Dr. Pasang as its first teacher, and around seventy students have since graduated. Blaikie has conducted research at CIBS repeatedly since 2010, while Gerke and Van der Valk visited in 2018, observing students making medicines under the guidance of the Tibetan amchi Dr. Karma Choden, who also ran a private clinic

14 AYUSH is the Government of India ministry responsible for the education, research, and regulation of several traditional medicine systems, including Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa, and Homeopathy. Sowa Rigpa became the newest member of AYUSH following its governmental recognition in 2010 (see Blaikie 2016, Kloos 2016).

in Leh and was interviewed several times. Van der Valk followed up with visits in 2022, Blaikie in 2022 and 2024, and Gerke in 2024.

In Kathmandu, Van der Valk visited medical schools, clinics, and pharmacies in 2019 and 2022, focusing on shifts in *menjor* education instigated by institutionalization efforts. Although (at the time of writing) the government of Nepal has not formally recognized Sowa Rigpa as a medical system akin to Ayurveda, Chapter 4 discusses how Sowa Rigpa International College (SRIC), the Traditional Buddhist Sorig Institute (TBSI),[15] and the Sorig Bumzhi School (SBS) operate within different structures of government, international, and religious support. The Himalayan Amchi Association (HAA) founded in 1998, and more recently the Sowa Rigpa Association Nepal (SRAN) founded in 2017, have been advocating for professionalization, government recognition, and state-certified education. The HAA mainly consists of lineage practitioners from the Nepali Himalayas, whereas SRAN is registered under the Social Welfare Council (Government of Nepal) and is associated with SRIC, though it aims to represent all educational organizations. University-accredited programs now exist, and in 2019 a Medical Education Commission was set up to standardize degree entry requirements.

These institutional developments provide a significant context to situate the small-scale and cottage-industry *menjor* practices we observed across the Himalayas. They also raise broader questions about the future of *menjor* artisanship as described in this book, which we will address in the concluding chapter.

Chapter outline

Chapter 1 introduces *nüpa* in practice, focusing on amchis and their interactions with substances from sourcing, transforming, and potentizing, to prescribing medicines. We analyze how different processing techniques transform one substance—*chongzhi*—into a medicinal ingredient with either cooling or warming properties, or into a coating for pills. Two detailed ethnographic examples illustrate amchis' artisanal literacy, as well as Sowa Rigpa understandings of *nüpa* and how it can be directed. The first follows Amchi Tsultim Gyatso processing *chongzhi* under moonlight in Ladakh; the second documents similar techniques employed by Dr. Penpa Tsering near Dharamsala. Taking inspiration from Ingold and Hallam's (2014) discussion on making and growing and Smith's concept of artisanal epistemologies, we argue that the skillful art of the practitioner and the potency of the substance cannot be separated.

15 TBSI was renamed Samye Sowa Rigpa School of Traditional Tibetan Medicine in 2022.

Chapter 2 explores the interconnection of knowledge and practice in Sowa Rigpa through a more-than-ethnographic account of a workshop led by Dr. Arya Pasang Yonten, in which medicinal butter, or *menmar* (*sman mar*), was crafted and consecrated. Situating *menmar* within broader Sowa Rigpa and Vajrayāna rejuvenation currents of tradition, we show that learning from a skilled teacher involves more than assimilating textual or oral knowledge; it unfolds as a collaborative, practical, and improvisational process with dynamic materials, guided instructions, and ritual action in a responsive environment. Drawing on Ingold's (2018a) discussion on education and learning, this chapter pays particular attention to the correspondence of external and internal processes of transformation and the self-cultivation integral to learning, making, and becoming medicine.

Chapter 3 introduces textual understandings of potency that shape the artisanal practices explored in each of the more practice-based ethnographic chapters. It addresses questions that are at the heart of this book: What makes a substance potent? How is potency defined, attributed, and enhanced? Drawing on key Sowa Rigpa texts, the chapter outlines the theoretical framework informing amchis and *menjor* specialists as they cultivate potency through multiple steps and layers, from specimen identification, harvesting, drying, and storing, to processing, combining, compounding, and consecration. This includes discussion of the different ways in which various forms of potency are conceptualized, categorized, and elucidated, along with explanations of other core concepts that are foundational to how amchis develop formulas, compound medicines, and imbue substances with specific qualities through ritual means.

Chapter 4 explores contemporary *menjor* education and its changing dynamics in Kathmandu. Situating our discussion in the broader context of the marginalization of *menjor* in Sowa Rigpa education in India and Nepal, we examine how different learning models have been instituted by three relatively recently founded Sowa Rigpa colleges. Each is characterized by a different taskscape shaped by a complex interplay between professionalization, government recognition, international funding, and contestation over integration with biomedicine. A key point of difference is the relative emphasis placed on practical enskilment in medicine making and, by extension, lineage-based education and the interpenetration of medicine and religion. How does (not) learning how to make medicine shape potency in Sowa Rigpa? In what ways do these contemporary colleges constitute (im)potent modes of education?

Chapter 5 explores the intricate relationship between Sowa Rigpa formulas, spiritual empowerments, and Buddhist Vajrayāna lineages. Focusing on a group of complex consecrated compounds called *papta* as they come together in an amchi community in Ladakh, we discuss how these substances both embody and carry the potency of mantra, meditative practices, and medicinal ingredients across

both time and space. Situating *papta* within a broad array of powerful substances used in ritual and medical practices, we argue that they possess two distinct but interconnected sets of properties, relating to continuity and perpetuation on the one hand, and to transformation and catalyzation on the other. Approaching *papta* as emergent entities that combine numerous substances, potencies, blessings, empowerments, and ideals, allows us to better understand their material, spiritual, and relational dynamics.

In the concluding chapter, we draw together the threads of our explorations of potency and its crafting to reflect on some of the cross-cutting themes that have emerged about *menjor* and artisanship, about writing and anthropology as forms of imperfect craft, and about the histories and future trajectories of medicine making in Sowa Rigpa.