Conclusions

Crafting Potency

This book has explored how potency is understood and crafted in Sowa Rigpa, shedding light on the largely unwritten artisanal epistemologies of amchi-pharmacists. We have shown that *menjor* involves far more than the assemblage of raw materials, that its theory and practice are mutually constitutive, and that potency is intricately crafted through a complex array of techniques. *Nüpa*, the Tibetan umbrella term for what we broadly approach as potency, emerges from our analysis as efficacy-in-becoming—a fluid capacity sculpted through craft, ritual, and environment rather than a fixed property of stable substances.

Our exploration of potency began with the seemingly simple substance limestone (Chapter 1), demonstrating how its properties can be transformed in various ways depending on how it is collected, processed, compounded, and ritually sculpted. Having traversed the more intricate layers of potency cultivation involved in the making and consecration of rejuvenating medicinal butter (Chapter 2), we then engaged with the foundational texts and theoretical concepts that provide the core framework for the *menjor* practices and processes encountered across the book (Chapter 3). Next, we explored the shifting taskscapes of contemporary Sowa Rigpa educational institutions in Kathmandu (Chapter 4), before reflecting upon the material and spiritual complexities of continuity compounds known as *papta* (Chapter 5). Along the way, we attended to the intertwining of text-based knowledge, lineage transmission, practical experience, acquired skill, and ritual activity. These all contribute to amchis' embodied expertise, enabling them to nurture and direct the properties of substances and, by doing so, craft efficacious medicines. Throughout, we have foregrounded emergent processes that fuse knowing practice with material qualities to generate specific forms of potency—processes that we argue can be best studied and described by working hands-on with substances alongside experienced practitioners.

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As one of the great Asian "scholarly medical traditions" (Bates 1995) Sowa Rigpa is characterized by a long history, a large corpus of classical and modern texts (mostly written in Tibetan and still untranslated), a tremendous diversity of materia medica across Himalayan and Inner Asian landscapes, and subtle configurations of family, lineage, and institutionally-based transmission. Duly acknowledging this vastness and heterogeneity, we make no claim to comprehensiveness, nor do we offer a step-by-step guide to crafting Sowa Rigpa medicines. We have instead sought to anchor the reader in local trajectories and experiences of *menjor* practice by ethnographically introducing Sowa Rigpa artisans working in contemporary India and Nepal or teaching in Europe, and using this as the basis for deeper reflection.

Our primary focus has been on a small number of everyday practices and ordinary raw materials. Exotic substances, complex procedures, and esoteric techniques are undoubtedly important and have considerable significance for the amchis with whom we worked, as shown in Chapter 5. However, seemingly mundane tasks such as grinding, sieving, boiling, and so forth constitute the bulk of *menjor* work, at least for the largely self-sufficient physician-pharmacists encountered in the book. This physically demanding, time-intensive, and often underpaid and undervalued labor firmly positions these practitioners in an artisanal lifeworld. At the same time, we observed that many of them live with a constant tension between their traditional artisanal ethos and the need to meet contemporary demands for increased scale, breadth, and rapidity in production.

Taken together, the specific examples that we have drawn upon highlight how Sowa Rigpa manifests itself locally and dynamically across diverse settings, responding to particular confluences of historical processes and institutional pressures, fluid meshworks of materials, and changing amchi taskscapes. They also encourage reflection on the dialectic between peripheries and centers of Sowa Rigpa. Regionally-inflected practices in Ladakh and Kathmandu continue to be shaped by interactions with centers of authority, such as major state-backed institutions in India—the National Institute of Sowa Rigpa in Leh, the Men-Tsee-Khang in Dharamsala, or the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Varanasi—as well as Tibetan medical institutions in Lhasa and Xining in the PRC. Processes of industrialization, standardization, and regulation have a different momentum in each place, creating unique challenges and opportunities for practitioners. While our findings should therefore not be taken as representative of the entire Himalayas let alone the Tibetan Plateau, there are a number of cross-cutting themes that are relevant to larger debates both within and beyond the study of Sowa Rigpa. In what follows, we discuss artisanal knowledge and literacy, writing and anthropology as forms of craft, as well as the histories and future trajectories of Sowa Rigpa, and *menjor* in particular.

Forms of literacy

Writing about craft is to take on a form of knowledge rooted in particular human capacities that is intractably difficult to articulate in words and texts.
Pamela Smith, From Lived Experience to the Written Word *(2022, 17)*

Throughout this book, we have distanced ourselves from the knowledge-practice dichotomy, instead considering the different forms of knowledge and learning—both textual and experiential—that are integral to *menjor* and, by extension, the crafting of potency. This leads us to consider how various forms of literacy and their entanglements connect the diverse practices presented across the chapters. Inspired by Pamela Smith (2004, 2022), we have focused primarily on artisanal literacy, which encompasses tacit, embodied knowledge and engagement with tools and materials when compounding medicines. Yet, we have also encountered textual and scientific literacies through which practitioners interact with both Tibetan works and biomedical sciences to articulate "traditional" knowing practice.

In Chapter 1, Amchi Tsultim Gyatso explained that his *chongzhi* purification procedure had been carried out by generations of expert amchis who gained experience through practice. When we asked about the textual sources underpinning this accumulated experience, he replied that "the text *is* experience." In many of our encounters with amchis, we similarly observed that while written indications are often upheld as the ideal—and in the case of the *Four Tantras*, revered as a sacred and unquestionable authority—amchis navigate them with discernment, frequently relying on their teacher's notes, oral instructions, and pragmatic adaptations to address the inevitable imperfections and daily-life limitations of their craft. This echoes Judith Farquhar's (1994) findings on the use of texts in Chinese medicine, which she approaches as "living documents" that are continuously and creatively recontextualized, living inherently in practice. It also reflects Tawni Tidwell's (2017, 216–77) insights into how memorizing and reciting the *Four Tantras* encodes and re-enacts embodied experience. Inspired by Tim Ingold as well as Smith, we tinkered with crafty descriptions to bridge the often-reified gaps between textual information and embodied practice, expressing the non-verbal literacies involved in the processing of substances and the making of medicines by hand.

Amchis' multiple literacies are reflected in their vernacular, understood here as a shared disciplinary language that binds practitioners to a common frame of understanding. The shared identity of Sowa Rigpa practitioners is rooted in a common knowledge base of textual literacy through the *Four Tantras*—which they study and memorize to different extents—facilitating access to a specific technical language and associated conceptual framework, as detailed in Chapter 3. While the amchi-pharmacists encountered in this book all share this language,

their personal vernaculars extend beyond textual transmission to include experiential vocabularies learned through lineage-based apprenticeships, and material languages that emerge through the making of medicines. The term "guild" might serve as a useful analogy for describing their shared yet restricted systems of expertise, although this historically loaded concept only partially maps on to contemporary Sowa Rigpa and must be used with caution.

Thinking through these multiple forms of literacy leads to the observation that *menjor* is grounded in theory, that theory is grounded in practice, and that each illuminates the other. Foundational compendia such as the *Four Tantras* and the *Four Collections* act as unifying threads across regional and institutional differences; indeed, memorization of these texts is what distinguishes amchis from other types of healers. Guild-like lineage structures allow for the transmission of central tenets *and* the lived theory of amchi artisans, which accommodates adaptations emerging from specific environments and bodies of experience and expertise. A parallel can be drawn here to Volker Scheid's (2007) concept of "currents of tradition," which defines tradition as an affinity to a core body of texts that provides continuity by serving as a touchstone of authority and legitimacy, while also allowing for flexibility, innovation, and multiplicity. We suggest that juxtaposing these notions of currents and guilds expands the anthropological vocabulary for studying *menjor* as craft, opening space to recognize tradition as dynamic and organized through communities of practice (Wenger 1998). It is these communities that sustain and transmit *menjor* knowledge within Sowa Rigpa. They are not passive repositories of static tradition; rather, they are social formations in flux, within which skilled practices are not only reproduced through situated apprenticeships and other shared activities, such as collective rituals, but are also refined and adapted to contemporary conditions. Artisanship involves more than technical skill; it is also relational and ethical work that involves attunement to materials, social dynamics, moral considerations, religious obligations, and cosmological forces. This is evident in the medicinal butter making and consecration workshop in Chapter 2, which transformed both the participants and the substances they were interacting with, and in Chapter 5 where annual *mendrup* rituals support artisanal *menjor* practices and co-create lineage continuity through *papta* substances.

Sowa Rigpa lineages can be thought of as pedagogical ecologies that cultivate shared ways of seeing, sensing, and crafting potency—an enskilment of the senses that Cristina Grasseni (2007) argues is forged only through prolonged, embodied apprenticeship. Shared vernaculars are thus important mediums of disciplinary cohesion that help amchis to maintain and pass on diverse skill sets and closely guarded experiential knowledge within localized communities of practice, while also being able to communicate with one another across regional and institutional heterogeneities.

Amchis from various backgrounds acknowledge that substances have innate capacities that can be purified, concentrated, strengthened, and modulated, while also consciously infusing their medicines with other sources of power. This multiplicity of potency implies a certain openness, a rich potential that allows for both continuity and creativity in practice. The three *nyepa*, five elements, six tastes, three post-digestive tastes, eight potencies, and seventeen qualities provide a clear conceptual framework for *menjor* activities (Chapter 3), but applying this framework in practice allows for considerable plasticity in the making of formulas, mediated by the cultivated palate of expert practitioners. Substances share properties, tastes, and qualities, but these are not perceived, interpreted, or employed identically by amchis. Proportions within a formula can vary significantly, processing techniques can differ, and while some ingredients are considered key to making the formula efficacious, others may be substituted or omitted entirely. While amchis try their best to follow written formulas precisely, sometimes the substances at hand are inferior in quality, too expensive, or simply unavailable, or production processes need to be adapted to new conditions. Across their works, Smith and Ingold remind us that craftwork is never self-explanatory or perfect; it is relational and contingent upon particular configurations of materials, environments, and skills. These observations resonate strongly with Sowa Rigpa *menjor* craft, as exemplified in the variously shaped *chongzhi* cakes made in different *menjor* settings (Chapter 1), adaptations of medicinal butter formulas (Chapter 2), great variabilities in the delivery of *menjor* education (Chapter 4), and some amchis' reliance on the spiritual potency of *papta* to fix incomplete formulas (Chapter 5).

In short, becoming a *menjor* artisan involves embodied knowledge and enskilment that is deeply reliant on hands-on practice. Texts provide the framework, but true expertise arises through touch, intuition, and direct engagement with materials across the full spectrum of potencies. The artisan's intimate relationship with substances and potencies both draws on and deepens tacit ways of knowing that, to borrow from Smith (2022, 17), are often "intractably difficult to articulate in words and texts."

Imperfect crafts

Producing this project monograph as a team made us realize that the writing process is, like *menjor*, a craft-like endeavor and therefore contingent, imperfect, and never truly "finished." Our medium is the English language, but our individual ways of speaking and writing differ beyond tonality and incorporate a range of disciplinary vernaculars. In our choice of vocabulary, we have approximated Tibetan technical terms and concepts in different ways, employing "literal" translations in

some parts of the book and more interpretive glosses in others, as well as drawing carefully on natural science lexicons to articulate the perspectives of the practitioners introduced in Chapter 3. We have also employed conceptual vocabularies from various academic disciplines as interpretive lenses. We have tried to remain attuned to the politics of language and translation, and to how Tibetan ideas and practices have been interpreted and represented beyond the Tibetophone world through word choices made largely by non-Tibetan scholars. Our monograph therefore consciously presents different translations and conceptual vocabularies based on engagements with different amchis in the field, clinic, classroom, and *menjor* sites, as well as our own disciplinary standpoints.

Like writing, anthropological research has long been presented as a craft that takes "practice, practice, and more practice" (Bernard 2018, 1; see also Epstein 1967). The craft of ethnography is, in many ways, a rather technical endeavor relying on a varied toolbox that only really comes into play in the field. As ethnographers of craft, we strove to learn something of the skilled practices of the artisan by consciously becoming researcher-apprentices, immersing ourselves in embodied learning processes as we engaged directly in key *menjor* tasks such as sorting, grinding, and boiling raw materials. While we do not suggest that apprenticeship can or should replace classical anthropological methods such as interviews, or even participant observation, we found that engaging directly in manual work alongside experts breaks down barriers between observer and observed, subject and object, resulting in a highly productive merging of perspectives. This approach of learning by doing is often messy, partial, inferred, and challenging to fully capture in writing, but also fosters immersive participation and empathy, cultivating correspondence while facilitating a shift from beliefs *about* something to relating *with* it (see Ingold 2006, 2013).

Adopting apprenticeship as a core anthropological method has clarified for each of us how *menjor* is, in essence, a generative process of crafting potency. In this process, the medicine maker acts as a potentiating agent, a weaver of potent threads, and a sculptor of material and immaterial potentialities. In addition to the production of potent medicines and the accumulation of expertise, the proficient maker is also said to simultaneously cultivate genuine compassion and wisdom, *bodhicitta*. Just as the amchi gains certain qualities through training and subsequent practice while traveling the path of the bodhisattva, the anthropologist-apprentice is equally changed on some level by their intimate engagement with processes of making, both material and ritual. Through correspondence, this way of experiencing *menjor* fundamentally shaped and transformed us as individuals, even though we were only participating for relatively short periods of time.

Our four-author, multi-sited, and apprentice-driven methodology exemplifies the book's mode of co-creation, enacting the claim that knowledge—like

potency—can be forged across linguistic, disciplinary, and sensory boundaries through embodied practice. At the same time, knowledge is inevitably partial, relational, and contingent, limited not only by the circumscribed body of ethnographic and textual materials that we work with, but also by our frames of reference and the analytical tools that we have chosen to use. In this book we have approached *menjor* as a craft, taking inspiration from the works of Smith and Ingold. While this enabled many valuable insights, in what follows we reflect on what can also be learned from the lacunae in this approach.

Methodological limitations

Adopting a certain analytical lens—or utilizing a particular tool—always comes with inherent limitations. While a hammer is ideal for many tasks, you cannot build an entire house with one. It is therefore not surprising that Ingold's ontology of dwelling (Knudsen 1998) does not work as a theory of everything. Indeed, any attempt to use it as such would miss the point and run counter to Ingold's intent. Nevertheless, his approach does provide a refreshingly monist alternative to Cartesian nature/culture and body/mind dualisms, particularly given that there is no Tibetan or Buddhist equivalent to "Western" conceptions of nature as a material backdrop for human civilization (see, e.g., Edelglass 2021, Fjeld and Lindskog 2017). More specifically, Ingold's notion of meshworks was useful for foregrounding emergent material entanglements, while the idea of taskscapes offered a way to capture the ensemble of activities considered essential for an amchi to be able to gather and weave together properties, substances, and other dynamic threads into potent medicines. While productive in these and other respects, we identified three main limitations in taking an Ingoldian approach to analyzing the crafting of potency in Sowa Rigpa, each of which is instructive in its own right.

First, a strong focus on emergent fields of practice tends to give less attention to texts. As emphasized by Are Knudsen (1998, 6): "Ingold's work can be read as a critique of the language-centered epistemology … which has dominated anthropology for half a century." Similarly, this book responds to the privileging of text as the source of knowledge in Tibetan and Himalayan studies (a point to which we return). In particular, we found that Ingold's notion of "guided rediscovery" offered a valuable vantage point on the interplay of texts and experience, knowledge and practice, especially in terms of "reading" recipes. However, much would be lost by ignoring philological and historical intricacies of interpretation and the many intertextualities in Tibetan scholastic commentarial traditions, even if they lie beyond the scope of this book.

Second, although Ingold has written about the re-animation of modern thought (Ingold 2006) and the role of imagination as an embodied way of knowing in both

scientific inquiry and religious sensibility (Ingold 2013c), his more Eurocentric reflections struggle to fully capture the incredibly rich, more-than-human life-worlds and ritual practices of Himalayan Vajrayāna Buddhists. Although Mridul Surbhi and Jan van der Valk (2025) suggest "ritualized meshworks" as a corrective, this richness is exemplified in much more detail through the *papta* compounds examined in Chapter 5. *Papta* are layered with the potencies of materials and rituals, and with spiritual intentionality, blessings, and the realization of living and deceased masters. They provide a medium for transformative interactions across lineages and ontological domains—as well as across space and time.

Third, Ingold's phenomenological approach to craft emphasizes processes of making as experiential, first-person interactions between makers, materials, and environments. While this approach has proved very useful for describing and understanding individual practices as they occur, it falls short when it comes to shared, collective, and institutional aspects of Sowa Rigpa. Its inability to account for the broader social, economic, and political dimensions of artisanal practice might be seen as a flaw in Ingold's work (see Kochan 2024), but at the same time it allows for a refreshing shift of focus away from essential yet endlessly rehearsed arguments concerning tradition and modernity, structure vs. agency, and knowledge/power. By bringing in the notion of communities of practice and considering the guild-like dynamics of amchi lineages, we have provided a partial corrective to the individualist bias and ahistoricity of Ingoldian approaches.

Smith's arguments emerge from her focus on early modern European contexts, where the spiritual dimensions of artisanal work were often intertwined with emerging notions of natural philosophy and "proto-science." In her work, artisans appear as forebearers of modern science, albeit with their own craft literacies. There are always significant risks in applying European models to vastly different cultural and historical settings. Early modern Europe is, of course, not readily comparable with the contemporary Himalayas; dynamic relationships between science, religion, technology, and medicine differ markedly across these two contexts. This does not preclude the application of some of Smith's conceptual tools to Sowa Rigpa, such as "artisanal epistemologies" and "artisanal literacies," but it does mean that we need to carefully consider how artisanship in Sowa Rigpa can help us to rethink and perhaps expand upon these concepts.

In *The Body of the Artisan* (2004), Smith calls for a history of vernacular science that prioritizes localized, practice-based ways of knowing, rooted in craft and nontextual, experiential labor. She highlights the persistent division in "Western" cultures between "those who work with their minds—scholars—and those who work with their hands—artisans" (7), arguing that we should not underestimate the frequently unwritten contribution of the latter to the scientific advances often attributed solely to the former. Her artisanal epistemological approach sharpened

our focus on the intricate interplay between artisans, their tools, and the materials they work with, as well as on their positioning in relation to scientific and religious paradigms. It also allowed us to recognize that formulas can be incomplete and substances unavailable, and to confirm that texts can be archaic, secretive, or missing altogether. This in turn brings to the fore the often-downplayed importance of experimentation as part of what it means to be a skilled amchi. However, our findings on amchis' artisanship and their multiple literacies call for a broader conception of vernacular science that leaves space for the blending of manual craft with both textual heritage and spiritual lineage.

Our examples show that primarily tacit craftwork often re-enters a textual orbit through teacher's notes, technical glosses, formularies, and so on. To fully appreciate such a specific text–practice dialectic demands a suitably focused ethnographic lens. Where Smith traces artisanal materials through early modern European circuits, Himalayan amchis are embedded in Vajrayāna Buddhist cosmology and soteriology. Their craftwork operates on different ontological planes, often simultaneously involving material, ritual, and spiritual commitment-related praxis. Smith's conceptualization of vernacular science falters when applied strictly to Sowa Rigpa because amchis move back and forth between memorized passages from the *Four Tantras*, sensory-focused apprenticeship, manual labor (e.g., harvesting, grinding, mixing) and ritual practice (e.g., mantras, prayers, meditative visualization). Tacit knowledge is central to amchi artisanship but continuously (re)connects to textual and oral lineages. Rather than rendering our application of Smith's framework invalid, these discordances invite us to expand her concept of "vernacular science" to encompass Sowa Rigpa's multimodal literacies, ritual intentionalities, and pharmaceutical terrains. There is a complex interplay of textual, experiential, lineage, and institutional registers at all status levels, rather than a sharp dividing line between vernacular and elite ways of knowing and acting, including when it comes to the crafting of potency through *menjor* practice.

Within a "Sowa Rigpa sensibility" (Adams, Schrempf, and Craig 2011), medicine, science, and religion hold distinct meanings while also remaining deeply intertwined. Sowa Rigpa has not undergone a historical period comparable to the "Age of Enlightenment" that swept across Europe from the late seventeenth century onward, though scholars such as Janet Gyatso (2015) have located distinct historical moments when empiricism gained ground on more strictly religious and scholastic orientations in medical thought, writing, and practice. Our fieldwork shows that ritual and religion continue to play key roles in *menjor* practice. This is particularly evident in lineage allegiances and their related blessed substances. At the same time, we observed very pragmatic, materialist approaches to substances and environmental conditions. In this sense, it would not be wrong to refer to

menjor experts as experiential naturalists or pragmatic pharmacists, with epistemological orientations akin to Gyatso's (2015) "scientific sensibilities."

Knowledge and substances on the move: Historical and textual considerations

It is widely known that the *Four Tantras* has syncretic origins and synthesized several currents of medical tradition: Tibetan, Indian, Buddhist, Chinese, Islamic, and others (Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle 2013, Yang Ga 2010). We also know that medical ideas, substances, knowledge, and therapeutic techniques such as moxibustion traveled throughout Eurasia and across the Himalayas over many centuries (McGrath 2021, Smith 2019, Yoeli-Tlalim 2013, 2021). In Chapter 3, we highlighted the ingenuity of polymath scholar-physicians such as Deumar Geshé Tendzin Püntsok, who in the early eighteenth century eloquently wrote about types of potency not previously elaborated. His works offer a glimpse into the historical richness of making, thinking, and writing about medicines. A lot remains to be done to uncover the dynamic histories of Sowa Rigpa pharmacology through textual sources.[124]

While the history of craft in Sowa Rigpa is equally beyond the scope of this book, we have presented ethnographic examples of how textual knowledge, raw materials, and artisanal know-how converge in contemporary Himalayan amchi practice. This has allowed us to demonstrate how amchis adapt their shared knowledge to local circumstances, for example, shifting the month of processing *chongzhi* in moonlight in regions affected by the monsoon and modifying the shape of the *chongzhi* cakes to adapt to the humidity (Chapter 1). We have also shown how consecrated substances move through religious communities and beyond in the form of *papta*, carrying blessings from past masters and ceremonies across centuries and converging repeatedly at annual rituals, before diffusing in the form of the numerous other medicines to which these potent more-than-substances have been added (Chapter 5).

The production of medicinal butter described in Chapter 2 also exemplifies how different modes of practice and material flows intersect. Some of its key ingredients—especially the three myrobalan fruits—have been traded extensively from India into Tibet, along the silk routes, and through seaports over many centuries. Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (2021, 63–84) describes how myrobalans were

124 For existing studies see, for example, Czaja 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, Gerke 2021, Simioli, 2013, 2016, 2025.

historically traded for all kinds of reasons: they were valued for dyeing, tanning, ink production, and even as a barter currency, as well as for medicinal purposes. While substances, formulas, and processing techniques often traveled widely and quickly, however, more complex theories explaining their use "traveled slowly or not at all" (3). The consequential lack of shared theoretical frameworks gave rise to localized, retrospective explanations, often merging different medical epistemologies. Yet, in our study of contemporary Sowa Rigpa institutional education in Kathmandu (Chapter 4), we noticed a remarkable partial inversion of Yoeli-Tlalim's findings. Textual knowledge about substances, formulas, and broad theoretical frameworks—especially of the three *nyepa*—nowadays circulate widely through institutional curricula and in globally accessible online teaching spaces. In contrast, the artisanal epistemologies and intricate craft knowledge needed to prepare and potentize medicines remains largely confined to experiential and lineage-based *menjor* training, which is now being marginalized through processes of institutionalization.

We saw some of this transcultural mélange in Dr. Arya Pasang Yonten's rejuvenating *menmar* workshop in Switzerland, which drew on the lineage of his Tibetan teachers as well as decades of institutional study and teaching in Dharamsala, Ladakh, and later across Europe and beyond. This workshop also brought together multiple historically and textually quite distinct ways of conceiving potency. As noted in Chapter 2, the *Four Tantras*' medicinal butter chapter (IV, 7) focuses on preparation techniques and ingredients and their effects on the three *nyepa*. It has strong textual similarities to the pre-thirteenth-century Tibetan works *Moon King* (*Zla ba'i rgyal po*) and the *Minor Tantra* (*Rgyud chung*) (Yang Ga 2010, 249). In contrast, the *chülen* material in the *Four Tantras* (III, 90), where we find *menmar* presented as a rejuvenating essence extraction, heavily depends on the Indian *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasaṃhitā* (Yang Ga 2010, 238).[125] Moreover, treating butter as a spiritually nourishing "nectar" introduces ideas of potency from Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions; these ideas and associated tantric practices became more prominent in *chülen* rejuvenation practices in central Tibet during the seventeenth century. In the contemporary art of making medicinal butter, all these different modes of potency—*nyepa*-pacifying, rejuvenating, and spiritually nourishing—come together.

While textual "origin" questions are perhaps of little consequence for contemporary practice (McGrath 2017a, b), they illustrate how ideas of potency are multivalent and evolve over time. *Menmar* clearly incorporates Indian ayurvedic

125 The *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasaṃhitā* was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan in the eleventh century and served as a key source for the *Four Tantras*.

and Buddhist rejuvenation ideas of potency with local Tibetan materia medica butter mixtures, as well as tantric Nyingma ideas about the potency of essences and nectars. Moreover, like the myrobalan fruits, many of the other *menmar* ingredients—nutmeg, long pepper, cardamom, pomegranate, Chinese angelica—attest to extensive histories of long-distance trade, still to be researched for Sowa Rigpa contexts. Our point here is to acknowledge multiplicity, indicating how understandings of *nüpa* developed from different traditions over a very long time, revealing entangled histories of potency, which could make for exciting future research.

Future trajectories

The tension between artisanal epistemologies and institutionalized Sowa Rigpa has been a key thread running through this book. We have seen how the curricular priorities and pedagogical approaches of modern educational institutions in India and Nepal tend to deemphasize *menjor* training, while simultaneously expanding opportunities for public health engagement and career development for young amchis (Chapter 4; see also Blaikie 2019, 2025, Blaikie and Craig 2022, Pordié and Blaikie 2014, Takkinen 2021). Rather than simplistically framing institutions as "bad" and small-scale lineage practices as "good," however, we recognize that institutions provide stability, resources, and legitimacy for practitioners, as well as platforms for advanced treatments in hospital settings. We further note that larger Sowa Rigpa institutions and factories have access to the resources and expertise required to engage in complicated pharmacological processes, such as those involved in preparing metal ashes and precious pills. This enables continued production of complex treatments that are impractical to make in smaller, artisanal settings with limited resources.

Contemporary Sowa Rigpa encompasses various ways of indexing status, hierarchy, and power, often still rooted in lineage and individual proficiency but increasingly shaped by processes of institutionalization and professionalization familiar across Asian medical traditions (Abraham 2020; Cameron 2019; Chudakova 2021). As seen in Chapter 2, Dr. Pasang gained prominence through a combination of institutional qualifications, teaching posts, and internationally-oriented initiatives. Faculty at the Tibetan and Tibetan-exile institutions discussed in Chapter 3 hold considerable authority and influence in their respective milieux, while Chapter 4 shows the greater bureaucratic and political weight granted to university certificates issued in Kathmandu than to the more traditional oral examinations that signify proficiency in less formalized settings. Sowa Rigpa's recent official recognition by the Indian government emphasizes institutional qualifications as

the main signifier of practitioner status, putting those without formal accreditation at a disadvantage even when they have extensive experience and popular acclaim. Nevertheless, deep connections to lineage-based knowledge and a commitment to artisanal forms of *menjor* practice remain evident across a broad range of institutional and non-institutional settings. Revered *menjor* experts pass on their knowledge in colleges and universities across the Tibetan cultural area and contribute to medicine making at larger scales. We saw this in Kathmandu, where the government-supported, university-affiliated Sowa Rigpa International College heavily relied on local amchis as teachers, and the "traditionalist" *menjor* specialist Amchi Urgian Kalzang used pill-making machines to fulfill bulk orders (Chapter 4). There is no sharp dividing line between "traditional" and "modern" modes of *menjor* training and practice, and this book shows that such binaries offer little to those seeking to understand recent and future trajectories.

Our findings do, however, raise concerns about the long-term sustainability of small-scale *menjor* practices in Nepal and India. As discussed in Chapter 1, amchi entrepreneurs often employ skilled laborers trained in *menjor* techniques who lack theoretical knowledge of Sowa Rigpa. This is partly to ensure they do not threaten the livelihood of the pharmacy owner by setting up independent businesses. Many young medical college graduates told us about their struggles to establish independent clinics with their own pharmacies due to limitations in institutional *menjor* training, the monopolies of larger pharmacies, and financial constraints. Institutions can also withhold particular *menjor* knowledge from students to prevent private entrepreneurial endeavors after graduation, while some formulas also depend on specific lineage transmissions. Building a patient base for a successful private (and typically urban) clinic requires significant time and effort, leaving little capacity for sourcing raw materials or producing medicines. Additionally, amchis in some educational settings face challenges accessing personal internships. The master-disciple model demands long-term commitment and effort, even self-sacrifice, which students used to modern classroom pedagogy are perhaps less inclined to endure.

In Nepal, Blaikie and Craig (2022) highlight the precarious yet adaptive nature of Sowa Rigpa producers amidst industrialization—a theme we explored through the lens of educational taskscapes in three Kathmandu Sowa Rigpa schools (Chapter 4). Sienna Craig (2007, 149) questions whether Nepal might witness a renaissance in high-quality Tibetan medical education, boosting the skills and confidence of newly graduating practitioners. However, it remains to be seen how the next generation will navigate the decline of apprenticeship-trained expert amchi-pharmacists. Despite challenges, including lack of government recognition, some amchis may continue to produce medicines in a less regulated environment, preserving spaces for artisanal *menjor* as in Ladakh (Blaikie 2022, 311). These

trajectories demand in-depth research if we are to understand the role of amchis in evolving healthcare systems and pharmaceutical industries across Asia.

In India, *menjor* education and practice are increasingly being steered toward an ayurvedic model of standardized curricula, reformulated medicinal products, centralized regulatory regimes, and market-oriented mass production. This is due to the Ministry of AYUSH's deep historical connection with the large network of ayurvedic institutions across India, and the relatively minor role that other medical traditions have been able to secure for themselves. Under new AYUSH rules, tremendous shifts are taking place in the kinds of abilities that amchis are expected to develop, with institutional training emphasizing academic credentials as part of master's and doctoral degrees. To ensure career promotion, students are required to write academic articles that have little to do with memorizing the *Four Tantras*, seeing patients, or making medicines. As this book goes to press, new research and writing skills modules are being introduced in India's Sowa Rigpa colleges (a development that occurred much earlier in the PRC).

It is not yet clear how amchis will integrate these new developments into their Sowa Rigpa practice over the next decades and how this will in turn shape their approaches to *menjor*.[126] However, since minority medical traditions in India and Nepal are increasingly encouraged to follow ayurvedic trajectories, Sowa Rigpa research is likely to shift toward the integrative medicine paradigm. Relying on biomedically-derived concepts of bodies, diseases, symptoms, and therapeutic effects, this paradigm privileges ethnopharmacological approaches to assessing the healing potential of medicinal plants (e.g., Kudlu 2022, Madhavan and Soman 2022), and use of the chemical active ingredient model to investigate and explain the effects of medicinal substances (and to a lesser extent formulas).[127] Critical questions persist: Will artisanship and manual, sensory expertise retain a role in this emerging research paradigm, and how will the multifaceted layers of potency explored in this book be accounted for?

AYUSH-influenced developments within Sowa Rigpa education and research may accelerate the standardization of practices, but our findings from Kathmandu suggest that some relatively new educational institutions still honor and draw upon lineage. Nurturing religious alliances as forms of legitimacy, they offer more space for *menjor* and the cultivation of ritually empowered practitioners, as well

126 In Tibetan regions in the PRC, *menjor* education has its own specialized tracks and often involves years of specialization and internships after graduation with a *kachupa* degree.

127 On synergy-by-design approaches to Sowa Rigpa pharmacology, see Tidwell and Nettles 2019; on network pharmacology approaches, see Zhao et al. 2018.

as what are deemed more potent medicines. In India, it is also possible that we will see the emergence of alternative models that blend lineage-based transmission with institutional pedagogy in surprising ways. For the time being, however, amchis studying in Indian college contexts must adapt to distinctly modern, AYUSH-influenced and biomedically-inflected modes of instruction, which markedly deemphasize *menjor* training. Such approaches to training may correspond well to the new, stable, and well-paid employment opportunities opening up for amchis in the public healthcare system (Blaikie 2019, 2025), but they leave limited space for students or graduates to learn or practice *menjor*.

A further set of challenges is also emergent in the tension between traditional artisanship and industrial standardization. The Sowa Rigpa pharmaceutical industry has grown so extensively that its impact extends even to those who do not actively engage with it or who deliberately seek to remain outside its scope (Kloos et al. 2020, 10). What does this mean for amchi-artisans? The flexibility and creativity integral to *menjor* artisanship defies the ideals of standardization and universality that are increasingly central to the industry. Where does the type of Sowa Rigpa artisanship discussed in this book fit into regulatory regimes such as Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP)?[128] While existing scholarship has started to explore the interface between traditional craft and industrial standardization (e.g., Craig 2011a, Cuomu 2022, Saxer 2013, Schwabl 2025, Van der Valk 2017), it remains an important area for further exploration. Regulatory regimes often ignore key ritual aspects of *menjor* and introduce material changes that affect medicine-making at a fundamental level. Machine grinding and manual grinding have different effects on the properties of substances, and powders, pills, and capsules embody distinct material and energetic qualities. This sensitivity to material processes, deeply embedded in *menjor* practice, is often sidelined in industrial approaches, eroding some of the contextual nuance that small-scale amchi-artisans have long relied upon to treat particular disease manifestations and individual patients-in-environments. This is not to suggest that using machines to make medicine requires no skill. To the contrary, in his work on the manufacture of Tibetan formulas in Switzerland, Van der Valk (2017, 126–58) shows that even on an industrial scale the pharmaceutical assembly line demands specific skillful interactions between workers, ingredients, and machinery.

Thus far, industrialization seems to have created ambivalent spaces in which small-scale artisanal and industrial modes of practice are coexisting and coevolving.

128 Contemporary regulatory regimes include, for example, good collection, manufacturing, and laboratory practices, intellectual property rights legislation, and national pharmacopeias and drug licensing laws (see Pordié and Gaudillière 2014).

This might offer opportunities for innovation within both. However, it also necessitates a heightened awareness of the material and ritual coherence of Sowa Rigpa, as well as how the growing use of machinery affects the status of amchis and the way they are perceived by one another and by the wider community. Experienced amchi-pharmacists producing medicines in large quantities, using machines and assistants, are often highly respected in Sowa Rigpa communities, as long as they maintain high standards of quality and ethical conduct (see Blaikie and Craig 2022). At the same time, amchis lacking access to machinery may attract praise for their commitment to artisanal methods and notions of "good medicine" and even be fetishized as upholders of authentically "pure" tradition, while simultaneously being dismissed as "backward."

Broader concerns regarding the sustainability of small-scale *menjor* are clearly manifested in the declining number of amchis making medicine in India and Nepal, and in our observation that many established pharmacists had no apprentices (e.g., Amchi Nawang Tsering, Amchi Tsultim Gyatso, Dr. Penpa Tsering). Even so, we do not predict "the end of artisanal Sowa Rigpa medicines," or the "dying out of ancient traditions" in these regions. Several of the institutions described in Chapter 4 continue to train students in artisanal *menjor* skills and small-scale production remains central to the way most amchis practice in contemporary Kathmandu (Blaikie and Craig 2022). Micro-scale producers also survive in the PRC despite the dominance of large factories (Hofer 2018; Kloos et al. 2020), and many Ladakhi amchis continue to produce medicines artisanally despite the regulatory implications of Sowa Rigpa's official recognition in India. Comparative examples from other Asian medical traditions also suggest a range of possible trajectories. For example, in his work on ayurvedic education and healing in Kerala, South India, historian Anthony Cerulli (2018, 2022) points to the persistence of the traditional *gurukulla* system, in which students live with and learn under the guidance of their teacher (*guru*) in a communal setting. Even after decades of streamlining and standardizing ayurvedic degrees and the widespread scaling-up of medicine production, this system has not vanished. To the contrary, Cerulli documents new models of *gurukulla* hands-on-training for post-graduates from ayurvedic institutes and shows that there are still many small, clinic-cum-pharmacy style setups and local producers in Kerala (see also Kudlu 2016), despite the long-term influence of AYUSH regulations and the presence of several large pharmacies dominating the landscape. While integration into state structures, industrialization, and new regulatory regimes might be pushing Sowa Rigpa further toward standardization and mass production in India and Nepal, there may still be room for a patchwork of modes that continues to create space (and demand) for artisanally-produced medicines and lineage-based skills and practices.

Making potency tangible

By moving beyond the profusion of texts and formularies, *Crafting Potency* has opened up new ways of engaging with the relationships between materials, knowledge, and artisanship in Sowa Rigpa. It appears with the same publisher as the interdisciplinary volume *Among Tibetan Materialities: Materials and Material Cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas* edited by Emma Martin, Trine Brox, and Diana Lange (2025). Both publications urge researchers to recognize the limits of the textual approach that continues to dominate Tibetan and Buddhist studies, and to recognize materials and the ways in which people engage with them as valid sources of knowledge. They also share an emphasis on the ordinary in terms of both materials and people, reflecting the recent push within Tibetan studies to look beyond extraordinary events, individuals, and "key" representatives of Buddhism (see, e.g., Gill and Hofer 2023). The open access platform that Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing has provided for both books facilitates the diffusion of materials, artisanship, and nontextual literacies within academia and beyond without the inequities created by high-priced publications and paywalls.

Menjor is a living tradition that thrives in communities of practice. Understanding any living tradition requires embodied ways of knowing, but this is especially the case for medicine, which is all about bodily processes, lived experience, and material therapeutics. Sowa Rigpa is usually presented as the *knowledge* of healing (*gso ba*). It is clearly a *science* (*rig pa*) in its own right, and for centuries its history has been written by eminent translators, scholar-physicians, monastic authorities, and polymaths. *Crafting Potency* is much more concerned with skilled practice than it is with book learning uncoupled from the experiential. We have consistently argued that small-scale medicine making is fundamentally concerned with the crafting of potency. Since medicines are Sowa Rigpa's main therapeutic arsenal, this craft is the amchi's true heart practice. The amchis who deeply embrace this craft are often exquisite artisans, even though they might not identify as such or come across as particularly scholarly or extraordinary in other respects. As soon as we started getting our hands dirty by working alongside amchis as apprentices, we were deeply humbled both by their intricate skills and their long hours of hard labor. This is partly why we chose to call attention to more peripheral people and places across the Himalayas, such as Amchi Nawang Tsering and his village of Nee close to the Changtang plateau (Chapters 1, 5). Even though Amchi Nawang has no official certificates (he passed the traditional amchi exam), nor access to electric machinery, his medicines are in high demand across Ladakh. His smooth, milky white *chongzhi*-coated Drupril pills (fig. 83) were recognized as supreme by the widely renowned senior Tibetan cottage industry producer Dr. Penpa Tsering when we showed him a sample in Dharamsala.

Figure 83
Amchi Nawang Tsering's *chongzhi*-coated Drupril pills. Nee, Ladakh, August 2022. Photo J. van der Valk (CC-BY-SA 4.0).

Menjor practice in Sowa Rigpa is endlessly creative in its specificity, and this creativity is mirrored in the multivalent potency of the resulting medicines. Potency in this sense is a total phenomenon, encompassing all dimensions of lived reality: body, speech, and mind, as well as the surrounding landscape and even spiritual and astrological influences. This resonates with the *Four Tantras*' assertion that "everything can be a medicine" (I, 3), which implies that all things possess inherent potency, if you know how to harness it. This idea is further reinforced by the encompassing vernacular term *choga*, which suggests that every act of medicine-making is technique, often imbued with spiritual practice, potentially ritualizing even the most mundane tasks.

The interconnected material meshworks, amchi taskscapes, epistemologies, and relationships that are interwoven in the crafting of potency are incredibly rich and almost mind-boggling in their scope. Yet, in practice, the acts of grinding, sieving, and shaping powders and pills remain deceptively simple, involving manual labor and everyday materials. There is an apparent contradiction here between the vastness of potency—encompassing sculpted layers of both material and immaterial qualities, self-cultivation, and ritual consecration—and the ordinariness of the processes involved. However, by grounding the living tradition of Sowa Rigpa in daily-life practices, we hope that this book has made *nüpa* both tangible and approachable, connecting the extraordinary with the ordinary. Potency, in the end, is simultaneously about knowing and doing what works. It is efficacy-in-becoming.