

## 2 Introduction

# Materials, materiality and material culture

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**Abstract** This introduction advocates for the expansion of Tibetan studies by embracing new sources, methodologies and frameworks to better understand the material culture of Tibet and the Himalayas. We start by reviewing the current state of the discipline's engagement with material culture. While recognizing the positive trend over the past decade of moving beyond the largely descriptive nature of earlier literature on Tibetan material culture, the chapter emphasizes the need for greater interaction with other academic fields to make our work relevant beyond Tibetan studies. We also address the limits and boundaries of how Tibet is understood as a political and geographical entity, stressing the importance of highlighting the localized experiences of regions like Sikkim, Ladakh, Bhutan and Nepal in scholarship. Additionally, we explore key terminology related to materiality, materials, labour and material culture, welcoming diverse perspectives in materially-led research rather than settling on a single approach. Along the way, we discuss how each chapter bridges other disciplines and is an example to follow. We conclude with a brief overview of the volume's structure, arguing that its chapters—both individually and taken together—promote the significance of knowledge produced when among Tibetan materialities.

**Keywords** material culture studies; methodologies; state of the field; sources; Tibetan studies

## Introduction

This volume is an effort to bridge Tibetan studies and material culture studies, offering fresh perspectives on how we understand materials and materiality in both historical and contemporary Tibetan and Himalayan contexts. We ask the discipline to reconsider what constitutes the Tibetan material world and to embrace new sites and lines of enquiry. In this introduction, we invite our Tibetan studies colleagues to share our interdisciplinary vision and expand their ambitions beyond the confines of Tibetan studies. By reaching out to other disciplines, we can contribute new theoretical discussions and ethnographic insights that hold broader relevance. We argue that the chapters that follow achieve precisely that; they speak directly to critical museology, waste studies, anthropology, religious studies, material culture studies, paper science, heroism studies and more, making our Tibetan and Himalayan topics relevant both for the insights they offer and for their role in shaping these diverse fields. Every chapter engages multiple disciplines while maintaining their solid Tibetan and Himalayan studies anchoring. Through this introduction, we encourage others to follow their example.

The connective thread that runs through this volume and connects each chapter is the material. In addition to its call to interdisciplinarity, *Among Tibetan Materialities* attempts to broaden the scope of Tibetan studies by highlighting the dynamic processes of becoming, making and knowing that shape material culture in Tibet and the Himalayas. As a benchmark publication at the intersection of Tibetan studies and material culture studies, it identifies keywords, concepts and ways of writing and thinking for an emerging area of research by bringing together a wide range of current scholarship on materials, materiality and material culture in Tibet and the Himalayas in both historical and contemporary contexts. Taken together, its contents disrupt accepted approaches to material culture in Tibetan studies by considering socially constructed materiality and the materials constituting things from their conception and production to their end of life and afterlife. Individual chapters offer theoretical, methodological and empirical insights of importance to various debates, from how we conceptualize and understand processes of becoming, making and knowing, to the different approaches that can be taken to investigate, conserve and communicate material culture. However, the conception of this volume and our collaboration with its other contributors are rooted in more

specific concerns and aspirations that we share as scholars working in the field of Tibetan studies. It is primarily to these issues that this introduction speaks.

Visual analysis and visual culture have been critical modes of analysis for Tibetan studies scholars, yet the use of material culture studies frameworks and theories of materialities and materials have received far less attention. In response, *Among Tibetan Materialities* aims to make an intervention into the discipline by challenging the limited and limiting ways it continues to understand itself. Our choice of title for this volume is not a coincidence. In reconfiguring the name of E. Gene Smith's (2001) celebrated work, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau*, we honour, address and begin to unpick the discipline's long-time commitments to textual scholarship and to classical texts as its core primary source material. We take this approach both to challenge current perceptions of the boundaries of the field and to open up debates on methodologies and analytical techniques that take Tibetan studies beyond its established practices.

We are not the first to ask questions of the discipline, not least regarding its relevance to the academy beyond Tibetan studies, to wider societal questions and—most importantly—to Tibetan and Himalayan societies. In October 2015, Janet Gyatso stated in her Inaugural Aris Lecture, 'Beyond Representation and Identity: Opening Ways for Tibetan Studies', that the field was at an important crossroads (Gyatso 2015). The discipline was witnessing a moment of change. Not only was it attempting to respond to broader transformations underway across the humanities and social sciences, but there were also increasing numbers of researchers from China joining the field and shifting the discourse.<sup>1</sup> Gyatso also noted a refocusing on what might be considered legitimate sources for Tibetological study as the discipline sought to make room for what she described as more 'prosaic' vernacular and

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1 To give just one example, at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) Seminar in 2022, during a discussion on a draft code of ethics for the association, inclusion of the word 'decolonial' was rejected on the grounds that researchers from China would not be able to agree to or adhere to this code. The discipline needs to recognize that such decisions are also based on researchers from outside China maintaining access to field sites in China. For democratic complicity with authoritarian states, see Greitens and Truex (2020); Pils (2021).

everyday materials, having previously predominantly focused upon the study of texts.

Beyond sources, Gyatso reflected on the aims and objectives of the discipline, commenting that ‘what we are doing in the field overall is primarily the history of Tibet: its religion, its culture, its language, its political institutions, its wars, and its knowledge systems’. Although subtle in her critique, she wondered how researchers could make other intentions more transparent and how we might ‘connect with our objects of study as fellow human beings, and ... subject Tibetan materials to forms of analysis common in other academic fields that are indeed well aware of the larger human interest of their topics of study’. For Gyatso this question was critical to the future of the field of Tibetan studies, which she felt was ‘in a crisis because it is barely equipped to do such things’. Nearly ten years on her lecture remains deeply relevant and serves as the starting point for our introduction to this volume. What has changed following Gyatso’s lecture, particularly in relation to materiality-related research? How has the discipline responded to this crisis? And where does this lead us?

The first part of this introduction addresses these questions, providing an overview of the state of the field followed by a discussion of its boundaries, and why and how these can be expanded. We then turn to a discussion of how we and the other contributors approach materials and materiality and objects and their stories, drawing out common threads and divergences across the chapters, before concluding with a brief overview of the volume’s organization.

## State of the field

Before 2015, interest in the visual and material were most obvious in two established strands of Tibetological research—art history and archaeology. The former was largely focused on a long-standing interest in pre-twentieth century Tibetan art history driven by questions associated with visual analysis, and with identifying and situating specific styles and religious iconography (e.g. Heller 1994, 1999, 2002; Henss 2020; Jackson 2005, 2009; Jackson and Jackson 1988; Klimburg-Salter 2000; Luczanits 2001, 2004; Singer and Denwood 1997; Tsering 2013).<sup>2</sup> This body of research sat alongside Tibetan studies’ long-standing

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2 For a critical reflection on this approach, see Lo Bue (2008).

connection to the material through archaeology and the excavation of sites in Tibet and across neighbouring Himalayan territories, the findings from which have been used to document, analyse and preserve cultural heritage (e.g. Aldenderfer 2003; Brantingham and Xing 2006; Devers 2019, 2021; Hazod 2015, 2010; Heller 2006). There is also a substantial body of literature that takes a descriptive approach to Tibetan material culture, providing detailed explanations and typologies of artefacts and their production technologies (*bod rum 'thag pa'i bzor tsal* 2013; Buckley 2005; Erhard and Wild 2022; Molacek et al. 2023; Ronge 1984, 1989; Ronge and Ronge 1980, 1981; 'Zang di shougong' 2007). These approaches have defined the kinds of research questions the visual and material have predominantly afforded the discipline.

During the last decade, however, several publications have offered reappraisals of core Tibetan studies subjects through materiality frameworks. Notably, there have been calls for greater attention to materiality in the writing of histories of Tibetan Buddhism and its institutions (Townsend 2021) and in analyses of Tibetan understandings of the roles of objects in Buddhist religious life (Gentry 2017). Dan Martin's (1994) work on relics, reliquaries and precious pills signalled the beginnings of this turn towards Tibetan Buddhist materiality, but the last decade or so has seen a growing focus on material religion (Bhutia 2022; Brox 2019, 2022a, 2022b, 2024; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014, 2022; Kerin 2013, 2021; Turek 2017). There has also been growing engagement with network perspectives on material culture common to many academic fields, resulting in increased attention to interactions between things—people, places, materials and texts—particularly in terms of ritual and medicinal practice (Blaikie, et al. 2015; Diemberger 2019; Gerke 2021; Hofer 2018). While recognition of Igor Kopytoff's (1995 [1986]) well-trodden analytical framework of the 'object biography' is not entirely new within the Tibetan studies community (O'Neill 1999), it too only appears to have gained some momentum more recently (e.g. Gerke 2013; Harris 2013; Shakya 2021; Xue 2021). Museum collections have also been reappraised and reconceptualized as not only a source for exhibitions and (art) historical research (e.g. Clarke 2004; LaRocca 2006; Pal 1969; Rhie and Thurman 1991), but also as teaching tools for understanding cross-cultural exchange (Debreczeny and Pakhoutova 2023).

These contributions reflect the discipline's late turn toward object-led pedagogies and its growing acknowledgment of long-standing bodies of research in critical museology, anthropology and material culture studies that place importance on critical inquiry through materiality.

These often-fleeting engagements with materiality are underpinned by long-standing enquiries into the visual and material centred around questions of (self)representation through museums, contemporary art and photography (Clark 2016; Harris 1999, 2012; Harris and Droma 2018; Harris and Shakya 2003; Keränen, Dodge and Conley 2015; Linrothe 2020; Martin 2017, 2024; Miller 2016; Singh 2013). Such enquiries often intersect with provenance research into the colonial histories of Tibetan collections in European museums and archives (Carrington 2003; Lange 2020; Linrothe 2015; Livne 2019; Martin 2015, 2019; Myatt 2012).

We have also seen growing momentum over the past decade or so in interdisciplinary investigations into economies, value, trade, commodification and consumerism (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2017; Caple 2020, 2022; Catanese 2019; Harris 2013; Lau 2012; Sulek 2019; Williams-Oerberg 2022; Zhang 2012), as well as groundbreaking interdisciplinary comparisons of print cultures (Diemberger, Ehrhard and Kornicki 2016) and scientific analyses of material components of objects (Helman-Ważny 2014; Helman-Ważny and Ramble 2021). We particularly want to highlight the relatively recent publication of two Tibetan language illustrated lexicons, which serve as extraordinary sources for the terminology given to objects (dkon mchog bstan 'dzin et al. 2010; tshul khrims blo gros 2017). Published in Beijing and Chengdu, these pictorial dictionaries map the Tibetan material world, classify and group objects relationally and act as catalogues of what counts as Tibetan material culture.

Beyond these works there is still little theorization of Tibetan materiality, its production technologies and the language and practices that support Tibetan ways of knowing and understanding the material world. This volume provides the first collection of materiality-focused research in Tibetan studies, covering a breadth of subjects (both historical and contemporary) and theoretical approaches. As such it captures many of the current methodological and analytical developments in this emerging field. While acknowledging the discipline's existing interests in the material and visual, our aim is to start to address the lag in its uptake of conceptually challenging frameworks. As Gyatso noted, this lag isolates Tibetan studies from participating in wider academic and societal debates. Tibetan studies should be relevant beyond Tibetan studies. We appreciate the knowledge produced and represented in scholarly works within our specialized field, but we also see how little impact they have had beyond it. This volume exemplifies in different ways how Tibetan studies can engage with broader scholarly

fields by bringing research on Tibetan and the Himalayas into dialogue with frameworks, concepts and methods developed elsewhere—or by offering new ones.

Our contributors use Pamela Smith's (2004) framework of 'artisanal epistemology' to analyse medicine making (Singh and Gerke) and bring Walter Benjamin's (2008 [1936]) notion of 'aura' into discussions about the making of butter ornaments (Stevenson). They draw on Bill Brown's (2001) 'thing theory' to analyse a film object (KS and Gupta) and take Michael O'Hanlon's (2000) notion of the 'scene of collecting' as a point of departure for discussing how Tibetan material knowledge can be recovered from the imperial archive (Martin). Some offer new concepts, such as the notions of 'ritualized meshwork' (Surbhi and Van der Valk) and 'heroic artefact' (Chophel). By engaging with these and other concepts—whether adopted or invented—the authors make Tibetan and Himalayan worlds relevant beyond their situated contexts in innovative and unexpected ways, contributing new perspectives to on-going methodological and epistemological debates in fields as diverse as museology (Thomas) and ritual studies (Wulff). They are examples of how this volume endeavours to position discussions on Tibetan material culture, materials and materialities in interdisciplinary fields and develop frameworks and concepts that can be productively applied beyond the scope of Tibetan studies.

## Borders and boundaries

A question central to our discussions has been around how we constitute space and place and what we mean when we say 'Tibetan' and 'Himalayan'. What comprises these material worlds? The precise borders and boundaries of Tibet and the nations situated within the Himalayan mountain range remain contested (McGranahan 2003; Yeh and Coggins 2014). Debates over what constitutes a recognizable and agreed site of study and what it should be called have produced new naming conventions and cartographies for the discipline (Shneiderman 2010; Tenzin 2017). As a group we have spent time thinking about these questions. A particular concern has been Tibet's erasure as a political and geographical entity, and its increasing absence in university departments, museum and library catalogues and exhibition halls, and as a site of inquiry in funding applications. In turn, we have questioned the wholesale labelling of something as Tibetan or Himalayan as shorthand for a kind of material culture that is expected to

look or function in a particular kind of way, a case in point being the widespread reference to ‘Tibetan Buddhist objects’. This denies specificity of place to researchers from and/or working in Sikkim, Spiti, Ladakh, Bhutan, Nepal and across India. In her contribution to this volume, Wulff has chosen to refer to Vajrayana Buddhism to avoid the conflation of Tibetan Buddhism with Buddhist practices in Bhutan. Several other chapters similarly recognize and address the politics and situatedness of place and the knowledge and practices produced in highly localized contexts.

This volume takes an expansive understanding of Tibetan and Himalayan material worlds. It includes material markers that embody a shared cultural identity and logic that can be just as easily present in Australia, Canada, the USA and Europe as it is in specific and bounded Tibetan and Himalayan geographical locations (see, e.g., KS and Gupta, this volume). We have few expectations that an object will openly display its Tibetan or Himalayan-ness. Our interest goes beyond obvious visual signals and looks to the mundane and to things that are seldom placed at the centre of inquiry, such as a stone used to grind medicines (Singh and Gerke, this volume), the harvesting of medicinal plants (Surbhi and Van der Valk, this volume), the worn-out washer of a prayer wheel (Brox, this volume) or a sword worn as a part of an official’s ceremonial attire (Chophel, this volume). Helman-Ważny (this volume) tackles the question of Tibetan-ness head on in her exploration of the process of understanding and granting Tibetan identity to paper, which is a surprisingly complex object. As these examples suggest, one of our aims is to contribute to and further encourage the burgeoning study of things in plain sight, from transport (Altner [Lange] 2009) and military equipment (LaRocca 2006; Venturi and Travers 2021) to everyday objects such as fishing supplies (Altner [Lange] 2009), mobile phones (Kukuczka 2016), backpacks (Martin 2024) and houses (Ptáčková 2020). Through our inclusion of a methodological chapter on the use of ethnographic illustrations as communicative media (Wulff), we also celebrate and foreground the potentialities of non-textual responses to the material, a notable example being Huatse Gyal’s documentary film, *Khata: Poison or Purity?* (2023).

It is a legacy of colonial scholarly practice that, as Tibetan studies scholars, we tend to be conditioned to follow predefined routes that privilege philology and philosophy based upon textual analysis over everyday experiences and practices, and that elevate religious authorities as sources of insight above lay practitioners who possess expertise in their own right. With this edited volume, we want to shine a light on



the stuff that constitutes Tibetan and Himalayan materials, materiality and material culture as experienced and understood by the people who make it, live and work with it, buy and offer it, cherish and discard it. The contributors to this book demonstrate the wealth of insights that can be gained through ethnographic fieldwork, archival studies, material-led enquiries and other methods that are under-acknowledged in the field of Tibetan studies. But for such enquiries to both enrich Tibetan studies *and* impact other fields of study it is essential to embrace interdisciplinary approaches that draw from diverse fields of study, collaborate with scholars from different backgrounds and engage in co-authorship to incorporate multiple perspectives.

A prime example of the productive potential of interdisciplinary collaboration is the chapter by Diana Lange and Oliver Hahn, who have worked together across the humanities and natural sciences divide in their analysis of a map of Mount Kailash. By combining their respective expertise in Tibetan cartography and scientific material analysis of colourants, they were able to uncover important information about the dating and production of the map that would otherwise have remained hidden. They show how the materials of which an object is made can be brought together with its historical context and cultural meaning to generate new knowledge. Similarly, Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (this volume) shows how the study of Tibetan paper and books as complex objects necessitates a research design inspired by both the humanities and the natural sciences. Instead of operating with a generalized theory of materiality, Helman-Ważny defines the materiality of books as constituted by both raw materials and production technologies. Her approach is truly interdisciplinary, drawing on heritage and conservation studies, fibre analysis and paper science.

Although material culture is critical to Tibetan society, it is seldom at the centre of scholarly inquiry; materials and materiality assume only secondary roles in studies and representations of Tibetan culture. This marginalization is also fuelled from a prominent position within the Tibetan community by the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA, previously the Tibetan Government-in-Exile), in part as a strategy of providing hope for the survival of Tibetan culture at a time marked by violent attacks on material culture within Tibet. The Dalai Lama has argued that authentic Tibetan culture does not lie in its material manifestations, which can be violently smashed under Chinese Communist party campaigns; rather, it is in the hearts and minds of Tibetans who embody an immaterial, Buddhist culture (Brox 2006). By highlighting the intimate connection between Tibetan

culture and Buddhism, the Dalai Lama has provided space and hope for the continuity of Tibetan culture despite its destruction in Tibet and irrespective of the geographical location of Tibetans. However, as a dominant discourse on Tibetan culture, the emphasis on immaterial, Buddhist culture has also legitimized a disregard for Tibetan material culture, materials and materiality in scholarship on and the representation of Tibet and the Himalayas. This was exemplified in the Dalai Lama's Tibetan Uprising Day speech to Tibetans on 10 March 1985. Telling Tibetans that it made no sense to simply arrange 'culture' in a book or set up 'culture' on an altar, he explained that culture does not involve physical exhibitions or ritualistic manifestations; it is not something one wears on the outside but has within (Dalai Lama XIV 1986: 424). In contrast, we embrace the concept of 'material culture', which contests this distinction as it acknowledges the fact that culture is not merely symbolic (Woodward 2020).

When Tibetan material culture does receive attention, it is commonly framed within the context of Buddhist material culture. The common approach here has been for scholars to seek to decipher the meaning of religious objects, which are viewed as conduits to something transcendent, as if there is always something more important lying beyond the material. From this perspective, material culture is only scrutinized for its symbolism or mediative potential. Yet, paying attention to the symbolism of Buddhist objects does not necessarily tell us much about how these objects become sacred (Brox, this volume), how they are understood and interacted with (Thomas, this volume), how their provenance is determined (Helman-Ważny; Lange and Hahn, both this volume) or even how they are appreciated (Martin, this volume). This is exemplified in Emma Martin's chapter, which examines how a Sikkimese connoisseur of Tibetan Buddhist Objects, Barmiok Jedrung Karma Palden Chögyal, evaluated a statue of Dorje Chang. Martin reveals how the material knowledge upon which his appraisal was based relied on a body of literature and a vocabulary focused on aesthetics rather than solely on religious efficacy. In other words, Martin forcefully delivers the imperative message that there is a Tibetan and Himalayan tradition for evaluating Buddhist objects that is determined by something other than dominant white Euro-American frames of reference. These objects are appreciated not only for their religious symbolic significance but also for their material properties, artisanship and execution.

As Katia Thomas highlights in her chapter, we often find the opposite problem within museology, namely that objects are evaluated—and

handled—in accordance with Euro-American aesthetic and scientific standards and priorities that often disregard the practices and beliefs of communities of origin. In her discussion of the restoration of a Manjushri statue on display at a museum in Gangtok, Thomas shows how Himalayan conservation practices are, in contrast, guided by religious values and protocols. This does not mean that the statue's aesthetics were disregarded, just differently valued. Restoring it to its original luminosity was seen as crucial to its intangible power and was prioritized over other considerations, such as the patina of ageing that would typically add historical or monetary value to an artefact in the setting of a European museum or art market. Thomas, like Martin and Helman-Ważny (this volume), lets us know that materials and their properties matter and are not somehow separate from or secondary to emic valuations of and engagements with Buddhist material objects.

## Materiality, materials and labour

The things that we study are part of the material cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas. This means that they must be studied as cultural and social phenomena, since they create the lives and worlds of people as much as people create things (Woodward 2020). Beyond this fundamental consensus, we do not privilege or propose a singular theory of Tibetan materials, materiality and material culture.<sup>3</sup> When we and the other contributors to this volume talk about materials and the materiality of things, we are all interested in relations, especially people-thing relations. But the way we talk about materiality differs according to the key dimension of person-thing relations or kind of knowledge that the concept of materiality serves to unlock or highlight. As a result, the volume does not present a unified, coherent understanding of or language about materiality. Instead, the author(s) of each chapter elucidate their framework and explain why their chosen approach matters to their particular study.

For some contributors, materiality means the physical aspects of a thing (Helman-Ważny; Martin, this volume). Others use the concept with reference to thinkers such as British anthropologist Tim Ingold, American art historian Michael Ann Holly or historian of science Lorraine Daston. For example, Mridul Surbhi and Jan M. A. van der

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3 For a history of theories of materiality, see Hicks (2010).

Valk (this volume) are inspired by Ingold (2000, 2011) in their analysis of the harvesting and processing of medicinal plants in Spiti and Kinnaur. Rather than merely focusing on the materiality of the final ‘thing’, they describe the sorting, grinding and sieving of medicinal herbs as ongoing activities embedded in what they conceptualize as ‘ritualized meshworks’. Similarly, Stuti Singh and Barbara Gerke (this volume) reference Ingold (2000, 2007), emphasizing his view of materiality as processual and relational. This perspective allows them to illustrate how medical practitioners, engaged in various medicine production processes, form an intimate connection with their tools, such as the grinding stone. Lange and Hahn (this volume) take a different approach. Inspired by Holly (Rosler et al. 2013), they approach materiality as the juncture between matter and imagination, highlighting how the two aspects must be studied together. This framework allows them to explore how crafting a map entails the selection of materials with specific properties that will aid its intended users in recalling (a story), comprehending (a teaching), or orienting themselves within their surroundings.

Likewise, there is no single theory informing how the authors differentiate between materials and materiality. Whereas some authors explicitly establish the differentiation, for others, it is inferred. Brox (this volume) uses the term materiality to describe how people interpret the potentials and lifecycles of materials worn and empowered through faith labour. A few authors avoid the term materiality altogether (Chophel, KS and Gupta, Wulff, this volume). Even so, they nonetheless speak to a distinction similar to that made by Ingold (2007) in his definition of materials as ‘the stuff that things are made of’ (1) and materiality as ‘what makes things “thingly”’ (9). ‘Thinglyness’ is not inherent in the thing, but is ascribed to it, for example through the fine materials (gold, silver, exotic skins) and interrelated affective discourses that make a sword into a ‘heroic artefact’ instrumentalized in nation-building (Chophel, this volume), or through the aesthetic choices of filmmakers who cast an amulet box in a ‘catalytic role’ in their movie (KS and Gupta, this volume).

Although we engage with these varied usages of the concept of materiality—ranging from its association with the physical composition of objects to the interplay between matter and imagination—we also want to privilege the materials involved. We address their availability, applicability, values and properties, as well as how these properties manifest and transform through manufacture, labour, practical application and usage. The materials and substances that the authors deal

with include (among others) bamboo, shells, pigments, dyes, cyanide, stone, gold, silver, goat brains, soot, animal skin, ammonia, cotton, barley and butter. They are materials ‘that have properties that are afforded (discovered through our interactions) and enacted (acting out their built-in potential)’ (Brox 2022a: 94). We have learnt about their different properties, such as their hardness, luminosity, reflectivity, solubility, abrasion resistance, density and biodegradability. Even the protective amulet box wrapped in a yellow cloth and featured in the film, *Dreaming Lhasa*, has material properties that influence how it is handled, its life trajectories and the meanings that are ascribed to it (KS and Gupta, this volume). Singh and Gerke (this volume) highlight how the material qualities of a grinding stone matter to both the physical production of medicine from herbs and to the medicine’s empowerment. Both the herbs and the grinding stone must have certain qualities in order to fulfil their potential, and it is only the skilled maker who knows how to bring this about. As this and other examples show, it is almost impossible to talk about materials and their properties and potentials without also discussing the human endeavour or labour that material culture demands, which includes physical and mental effort, expertise, tools, technologies, methods, collaboration, time and timing.

Several chapters highlight the labour invested in creating an object, including bringing forth the properties of its materials and realizing their potential. This includes the manual labour involved in tasks like grinding herbs or kneading butter. But it also encompasses the processes that Fabio Rambelli (2017) identifies in the production of Buddhist material objects, namely semiotic (signification of an object), ritual (e.g. bowing, circumambulating) and performance (e.g. entertainment, education). We see this in Katia Thomas’ (this volume) discussion of the restoration of a Buddhist statue, which involved a form of labour that she identifies as a Himalayan practice of ‘care’. Since this care was directed toward both the tangible and intangible aspects of the statue as a Buddhist material object, consecration rituals were considered as necessary as cleaning and replacing damaged parts of the statue in order to restore it to its original aesthetic splendour and religious power. Stevenson (this volume) similarly highlights the behind-the-scenes labour that goes into the ‘ritualized making’ of a ritual offering crafted from brightly coloured butter, a process that he conceptualizes as ‘pre-consecration’.

The chapters in this volume zoom in on these multi-layered productive processes and materials, including their temporal, collaborative and co-creative dimensions. The focused and repetitive labour of

the skilled medicine maker as he works with his grinding stone and herbs produces efficacious medicinal ingredients (Singh and Gerke, this volume). The team brought together to craft butter sculptures for a monastery prayer festival produce a ‘miraculous display’ through their synchronized movements and coordination (Stevenson, this volume). And the collection of medicinal plants in the Himalayas is a process embedded in ‘ritualized meshworks of potency’, within which medicinal practitioners, landscape, plants, weather, deities, ceremonial scarfs and mantras are intertwined (Surbhi and Van der Valk, this volume).

In short, rather than attempting to reach a consensus on how we talk about materiality, materials and labour, we have embraced an array of perspectives as this enriches our understanding of material culture in Tibet and the Himalayas. What binds these perspectives together is that they highlight how materiality manifests itself in interactions between people, things and natural, political, social and cultural environments.

## Objects and their stories

The range of interpretations of materiality to be found in this volume reflects the complexity of material culture and the different research interests and perspectives of the contributors. We also focus on a diverse range of objects. These things not only speak to us (Daston 2008; Lange and Hahn, this volume), but also appeal to us in ways that have prompted us to single them out, follow them, experience them and tell their stories. Helman-Ważny selected paper, KS and Gupta a film object, Lange and Hahn a map, and Brox a component of the prayer wheel. Why did the authors choose these specific objects? Because they are often overlooked, yet worthy of attention? Appreciated, even loved? Or are they things that we did not understand or knew were misunderstood? The things that surprised us?

Dendup Chophel (this volume) makes explicit the roots of his academic interest in the Bhutanese sword or *patag* (*dpa’ rtags*), which was fuelled by a long-standing personal fascination that culminated in his decision to acquire one for himself. Taking the patag as both a material object and an object of discourse, he explores how it became and has remained a potent symbol and material manifestation of heroic qualities, but also how it has become an object of potential contestation in Bhutan’s current socio-political context. Akin to other authors in this volume, Chophel’s chapter has served as a starting point rather than a conclusion to his inquiries, propelling him into further research aimed

at addressing gaps in Tibetological research on non-religious artefacts and exploring the potential that such scholarship has to promote societal change—one of his key personal aims as a scholar.

In her research, Mareike Wulff has been interested in how community members ‘read’ and made sense of the formal attire worn during their annual tantric Buddhist festival. In this volume, her primary focus is on the question of how to reproduce and communicate this visual layer of everyday knowledge in academic publications. She discusses her design and use of technical illustrations as a counterpart to written text, showing how this has enabled her to reveal, understand and visually communicate the multiple layers of information and meaning that a costume contains. By inviting the reader into her personal process of analysing and communicating through drawing, Wulff illuminates the potential for technical illustration as a method and communicative medium. Her chapter thus serves as a source of inspiration for the study of the material cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas—and beyond.

Martin also makes an inspiring methodological intervention through her decision *not* to focus on a thing. Although her chapter features a statue that is now part of a museum collection in Liverpool, she chooses to turn her attention from the object itself to its material-led appreciation by a Sikkimese connoisseur. Her motivation, visible throughout her scholarship, is to bring to light the individuals behind the material knowledge preserved in colonial archives. In this case, the individual in question is Barmiok Jedrung Karma Palden Chögyal. To a Western audience, he was previously an unknown Buddhist lama who served as an informant to a well-known colonial officer. By recognizing his contributions, Martin recovers his material knowledge and repositions him as a connoisseur and ‘a centre of power in his own right’.

These and the other contributors to this volume tend to use the terms ‘object’ and ‘thing’ interchangeably. We are, however, aware that some scholars have argued for an analytical distinction to be made between these concepts (Woodward 2020: 15). Gokul KS and Sonika Gupta (this volume) directly address the question of what makes an object a thing. Turning to literary studies and Bill Brown’s (2001) ‘thing theory’, they analyse a protective amulet box as a narrative device in the film *Dreaming Lhasa*. The authors highlight the significance and agency of the amulet box, showing how it affects the people who hold it and think about it, and how it plays an active role in shaping their identities, behaviour and relationships. Although the other contributors do not explicitly articulate any theoretical position when speaking

of objects and things, they nonetheless demonstrate how objects such as grinding stones and swords are agentic and significant—just like the amulet box in *Dreaming Lhasa*.

Several authors also point to what Stevenson (this volume) calls the ‘componentiality’ of objects; they are not one thing but many. This is exemplified in the Tibetan prayer wheel, which is an assemblage of several distinct components, including sacred texts and ordinary objects such as a bamboo tube and a washer made of shell (Brox, this volume), as well as in the costumes that Wulff (this volume) dissects through her illustrations. As Stevenson points out, in the case of objects that are collaboratively made, their creation necessitates the coming together of not only diverse materials (e.g., butter, flour, gold foil, dough, dyes and so forth) but also people, which requires coordination. He argues that these objects therefore comprise materials that extend beyond our usual understanding of the material to include elements such as time and timing. Similarly, Surbhi and Van der Valk (this volume) demonstrate the rich coming together of many things with different properties and potentials in the collection of medicinal plants and the making of medicines. They make a point of not reducing the landscape and pharmacies in which medical practitioners work to a context or backdrop for these processes. Instead, they relate how medicinal practitioners traverse landscapes in pursuit of medicinal plants in a ritualized meshwork of changing weather, rituals, tea breaks and so forth, and how preparing dried plants in a high-altitude pharmacy resonates with the surroundings and the tools that they use.

When we start disassembling these meshworks, assemblages and composite things, we get to experience objects in their different biographical phases—their coming about, usage, endurance, wear and decay—and also how people care for materials to prolong their existence and efficacy. We learn about processes of repair and renewal when, for example, a butter ornament is nibbled by rats (Stevenson, this volume), a statue is attacked by termites (Thomas, this volume) or a grinding stone is worn too smooth (Singh and Gerke, this volume). The dematerialization of an object can even be part of its productiveness. This is examined in the chapter by Brox, who shows how skilled practitioners produce sacred, apotropaic and auspicious objects through the wear of an apparently insignificant component of the prayer wheel, namely its washer. Tibetan elders explained to her how, when they diligently turn a prayer wheel, the washer absorbs blessings and becomes sacred. Worn out washers can thus be repurposed as amulets carried around the neck like beads on a thread, and given to beloved



grandchildren for protection, to women hoping for fertility or to the sick for recovery.

These studies of materials and their properties, as well as the values (cultural, social, economic, political) that things are ascribed, reveal stories about their making, endurance, affordances, travels, disposability and afterlives. These stories are typically not prescribed by Buddhist scriptures. Rather, they unfold through people's lives—through their work (Singh and Gerke; Surbhi and Van der Valk, both this volume), annual festivals (Stevenson; Wulff, both this volume), care practices (Thomas, this volume), filmmaking (KS and Gupta, this volume) and colonial encounters (Martin, this volume). Yet, Buddhism is nevertheless present in every chapter of this volume: even a weapon symbolizes Buddhist virtues (Chophel, this volume). In the study of Tibetan and Himalayan material culture, it seems that the everyday, past and present, is saturated with Buddhist values, things and atmospheres, underscoring the pervasiveness of Buddhism.

We are conscious of the absences in this volume, in particular its overreliance on Tibetan Buddhism as a site for understanding materiality in Tibet and the Himalayas and the lack of case studies that disrupt this. Nevertheless, we see this volume as the beginnings of a reappraisal of what Tibetan and Himalayan materiality is and hope that future studies will continue to challenge and expand on what we have begun here.

## Organization of the volume

Taken together, the chapters in this volume provide a broad view of Tibetan material culture, materials and materiality, underscoring the potential significance of a material focus within Tibetan studies. It is bookended by two reflective pieces: Tsering Yangzom's powerful meditation on Tibetan lives and objects, which forms the preface, and a final chapter that offers our reflections as editors on the story of this volume and the critical questions for Tibetan studies that this story raises. The remainder of the volume is organized into two parts, starting with the materials and other things that come together in material culture and then moving on to ways of knowing and interpreting material culture.

The five chapters in Part One, 'Matter and Material Epistemologies' explore the becoming, temporal dimensions and compositional complexities of materials and things. They are arranged to provide

a progressive narrowing of focus, from a broad exploration of the complex meshwork of relations that bring things into being, through detailed analyses of composite objects and individual components, to examination of the materials of which things are made. We start with the chapter by Surbhi and Van der Valk who examine the coming together of people, materials and environments in the gathering and making of medicines, a generative process they conceptualize as a 'ritualized meshwork'. Similarly, Stevenson highlights componentiality in his reflections on the collaborative making of a complex and composite 'flower offering' crafted from dough and coloured butter, and what this tells us about the importance of team, time and timing in processes of (pre-)consecration. The following chapter by Brox zooms in on one component of the prayer wheel, namely its washer, which dematerializes through a process of faith labour that is simultaneously generative of new efficacious objects, such as amulets, which can be made from worn down washers. The next two chapters hone in on materials. Helman-Ważny's discussion of the material composition of paper that can be considered 'Tibetan' is followed by Lange and Hahn's material analysis of the colourants used to produce a Tibetan map. Both chapters use interdisciplinary lenses, emphasizing material analysis as a means of bridging boundaries between the humanities and the sciences.

Part Two, 'Knowing and understanding matter', starts with three chapters that investigate the different kinds of literacy applied in assessments of Tibetan material culture among the people who live with, make and use it. This includes the Tibetan connoisseur's mastery of an 'aesthetics-based literature and lexicon', essential to evaluating the materials, material properties and form of a statue, as related by Martin. But it also includes the knowledge gained and expressed through a medical practitioner's use of a grinding stone as discussed by Singh and Gerke, as well as the visual literacy of community members who learn to 'read' material culture through socialization—a 'visual layer of knowledge' that Wulff seeks to communicate through her drawings of formal attire. The last three chapters provide object analyses that explore object politics and the role of cultural and political institutions in the production, maintenance and transformations of the narratives that they are cloaked in or produce. Thomas contributes to discussions on decolonial museum practices by showing what object preservation looks like within Himalayan museology. Chopel enquires into an object that is both materially and discursively central to the politics of heroism at the heart of Bhutanese nation-building. Finally, KS and

Gupta analyse what we can learn about refugeehood and the contested politics of the Tibetan struggle through a film object.

Together, the chapters presented in this volume offer new perspectives on Tibetan and Himalayan worlds as seen from materials and things, knowledge systems and cultural practices, inviting a reconsideration of Tibetan studies. They also promote the significance of knowledge produced when among Tibetan materialities. As related in the postscript by Barbara Gerke, *Among Tibetan Materialities: Materials and Material Cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas* offers a more inclusive approach to Tibetan studies and promises a transformative impact on future research agendas within the study of Tibetan and Himalayan material cultures and beyond.

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