

14 Postscript

Weaving Materials into Tibetan and Himalayan Studies

Barbara Gerke 

I have been following the making of this volume since I and my colleague Jan van der Valk were invited as discussants to the Tibetan Materialities workshop at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, in May 2022. This event was preceded and followed by several online meetings to discuss and give feedback on the participants' writing progress. In the summer of the same year, we all met again in Prague for a materialities panel at the 16th International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) Seminar, where some of the papers were presented and I was again a discussant (together with Jan van der Valk).

From the outset, I was inspired by the collegial cooperation forged by this group, especially the innovative design of the Copenhagen workshop, which brought together junior and senior researchers on an equal platform. Each author had a full hour to discuss their writing project, followed up by supportive online feedback sessions. The collective methods this group developed were truly impressive and led to well-prepared, high-quality paper presentations at the IATS conference. The aim of all these endeavours was to create an international collaborative forum on Tibetan materialities that supported early career researchers (funded by the Asian Dynamics Initiative). *Among Tibetan Materialities* is the outcome of all these efforts and also includes several authors who joined the group at later stages. Being part of the book's making process, I am honoured to write its postscript, which offers some concluding and reflective thoughts in appreciation of the often invisible, skilled processes of (un)learning and thinking about materials over time. The threads of these processes

have been woven into this book to emerge as the text that you are now holding in your hands or reading on screen.

I want to begin by highlighting the value of temporality—the time that it takes to make things. Several chapters in this book show the importance of time and timing in the making of things, from the coordination of people, materials and environment in their production and the time taken to acquire materials and artisanal skills (Helman-Ważny; Lange and Hahn; Singh and Gerke; Stevenson; Surbhi and Van der Valk) to the significance and meaning that things can gain with time, even if they are worn out (Brox). Conference presentations of fifteen minutes are quite perishable in and of themselves, but they become a lot more enduring when we come together to create innovative models of building and sharing research over time, like this group has done. I want to use this metaphor of ‘making over time’ to invite readers to consider how the labour and skills involved in shaping collaborative academic writing can become more meaningful when including early career researchers in the process, even if it takes more time.

I have explored materials in the context of Tibetan medicine-making in my FWF-funded research project ‘Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Rituals’ at the University of Vienna. That project’s forthcoming book *Crafting Potency: Sowa Rigpa Artisanship across the Himalayas*, co-authored with Jan van der Valk, Tawni Tidwell and Calum Blaikie, will also be published by HASP in 2025. Through our overlapping interdisciplinary interests and HASP’s open access policy, *Crafting Potency* and *Among Tibetan Materialities* both share new research approaches of working with materials in Tibetan and Himalayan worlds that our colleagues across and beyond the Himalayas can easily access.

In preparation for the Copenhagen workshop, we all read Tim Ingold’s article, ‘Materials Against Materiality’, in which he rightfully asks: ‘What academic perversion leads us to speak not of *materials and their properties* but of *the materiality of objects*?’ (2007: 3, emphasis in original). Ingold’s critique here is that conceptions of materiality within material culture studies are overly abstract and detached from the practical and lived reality of working with materials. He reminds us that materials are not static or inert. Rather, they are part of ongoing, generative processes within natural and social worlds—worlds that materiality studies often dichotomize through the nature/culture divide.

During the workshop, we discussed how materials are tangible, dynamic substances that make up the world, constantly undergoing

transformation through interaction with human and non-human agents in different environments. Discussing and reflecting on our research examples, we thought through Ingoldian perspectives. This does not mean that the frameworks used across the book's chapters are Ingoldian. While Mridul Surbhi and Jan van der Valk develop an Ingoldian concept of 'ritualized meshworks' to think through plant collection and medicine making, other authors employ theories and methods from other areas of anthropology as well as history, cartography, museum restoration, film making, science and technology studies, the history of science and the natural sciences. Many of us continue to use the more abstract term 'materiality' in various ways when expressing how people think about materials. However, *Among Tibetan Materialities* does have a clear focus on materials and their properties, from paper, grinding stones, swords, amulets and butter sculptures to statues, maps and plants, to mention but a few. In his chapter on the *patag* (*dpa' rtags*; ceremonial sword), for example, Dendup Chophel emphasizes how its material qualities are integral to the power that it wields as a national symbol of heroism in Bhutan. Perhaps because the authors are dealing with materials, they are also naturally practice-oriented, hands-on and even activist in their approaches.

I note that the contributions do not cite Tibetan artisanal written texts. Is this because 'things' are less 'textual'? Or is it that Tibetan artisans did not write extensively about their crafts—or, if they did, that we rarely have access to these texts? I am reminded of Matthew Kapstein's (2012) statement that metallurgy and architecture were among the most secret domains in Tibet, guarded among families or small professional groups and documented mostly in private notebooks, many of which have been lost.¹ I assume that the difficulty in accessing Tibetan texts on artisanship contributes to the fact that research on materials and artisanship has not (yet) found a more prominent place in Tibetan studies, which, as the editors clearly point out, has a tendency to privilege texts over other materials as legitimate sources of knowledge. I whole-heartedly support their call for assigning equal value to sources beyond texts.

Tsering Yangzom's 'On Tibetan Lives and Objects' sets the tone for this book with its moving prose and recollection of museum visits where the author saw objects that did not display their underlying, untold stories. Her simple yet powerful statements, such as 'all text

1 I thank William McGrath for pointing me to this online lecture.

is potential', remind us of the responsibilities that come with writing. Tsering Yangzom's thoughts reverberate through this volume's introduction, in which the editors call for a fundamental rethinking of how material culture is approached within Tibetan studies, something they also return to in the last chapter. The historical domination of the field by textual analysis has sidelined the rich material aspects that permeate Tibetan and Himalayan societies. Contributors to this volume argue for a broader, more inclusive lens that accounts for both the physical and immaterial dimensions of Tibetan and Himalayan lives. Taken together, the chapters challenge scholars to move beyond traditional textual or object-centric analysis by showing the vibrancy of materials as entities that participate in the social, spiritual and political processes that define communities.

Moreover, the editors emphasize how our conceptualization of materials is inseparable from the power structures that shape how things are collected, interpreted and displayed. In this respect, materiality is not just a subject of study, but a political act. They also call for greater inclusivity and recognition of Tibetan and Himalayan voices within academic discourse. Materials, in this sense, can become a site for ethical engagement. However, this calls for an active rethinking across our disciplines so that materiality is not just conceived of as a subject of scholarly inquiry but also as a site for engaging with questions of colonialism, power and representation. Emma Martin explicitly pushes us to think about this in her chapter by showing how Tibetan material knowledge can be recovered from the colonial archive by focusing on the historical sites where artefacts were collected and the Tibetan and Himalayan individuals involved in these 'scenes of collecting'. Similarly, Katia Thomas' chapter leads us to reflect on what a Himalayan decolonial museum practice might look like through her study of the restoration of a statue at a museum in Gangtok by an all-local Sikkimese team.

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One of the central insights that emerges across the volume is the dynamic, embodied relationship between people and their material world. In several chapters, we see how things are brought to life through the practices and expertise of the people who interact with them, creating different types of non-textual 'literacy' that can be passed on through lineages and apprenticeship or socialization in particular social and environmental contexts. For instance, the chapter by Mareike Wulff

highlights how material culture, in this case Bhutanese festival attire, contains layers of visual knowledge that can be ‘read’ by those who have gained ‘visual literacy’ through socialization. Here, materiality is not only found in the material culture that we are studying, but also in its visual representation through layered illustrations that help others engage with and understand it. Similarly, in the chapter on Sowa Rigpa medicine-making that I co-authored with medical anthropologist Stuti Singh, we illustrate how forms of ‘artisanal literacy’ (Smith 2004) emerge from the intimacy between practitioners and their tools. In this context, grinding stones are not just passive instruments, but rather active participants in the creation of potent medicines. Imbued with ritual and care, these tools become extensions of the medical practitioners’ skills and knowledge—embodied forms of a living archive of medicine making knowledge that can be passed on to future generations.

The idea that materiality is a medium for knowledge transmission echoes throughout the volume. In Agnieszka Helman-Ważny’s exploration of Tibetan paper, we see how the materials used to make books—such as the plants from the Thymelaeaceae family—carry within them centuries of knowledge, tradition and local expertise. Raw materials, papermaking techniques and the final product are all deeply embedded in praxis. Paper is more than just a physical substrate for texts; it is a carrier of cultural memory. This theme of materials as a vessel for memory and continuity also appears in Brox’s study, where the wear and decay of prayer wheel washers does not diminish their value, but can instead give them new lives and forms of potency. I am left pondering how the lifeworlds of materials evolve over time, acquiring new meanings as they move through different stages of use and wear.

This collection of works therefore reveals that while attention to materials and their properties is crucial, materiality is not simply about things themselves. It is also about the ways in which they are entwined with processes of knowing, being in and interacting with the world. From religious rituals to political symbols, from everyday tools to sacred artefacts, materiality forms a solid foundation of cultural expression and identity in the diverse regions and cities covered in this volume: Amdo, Bhutan, Central Tibet, Chengdu, Dharamshala, Gandaki, Kathmandu, Kinnaur, Ladakh, Sikkim and Spiti—all clustered under the broad umbrella of ‘Tibet and the Himalayas’, which is itself a contested label that is difficult to define.

One of the volume’s most significant contributions is its critical engagement with the political dimensions of materials. Whether

examining the potency of the patag as a ‘heroic artefact’ in contemporary Bhutan or the politics of Tibetan identity revealed through a *gau* (*ga’u*; protective amulet box) in a film, the chapters demonstrate that things are often imbued with political meaning. Materials are never neutral; they reflect and shape the power structures within which they are embedded. Chophel shows how the patag is not just a sword; it is an assemblage of fine materials, techniques and symbolic and affective qualities that has been used in the ongoing construction of the Bhutanese nation. In Gokul KS and Sonika Gupta’s analysis of the film *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), the gau as a film object reveals contested histories and memories of Tibetan resistance and exile, driving the narrative and linking the characters’ personal stories to the larger political struggles of Tibet. Similarly, for those who are able to ‘read’ it, the Bhutanese festival attire discussed and illustrated by Wulff reinforces status and rank.

However, the materials presented are not only about power and politics; they are also about care and preservation. In Thomas’ chapter on Buddhist conservation practices at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim, we see how the care of sacred objects involves both material and immaterial aspects. The Institute’s restoration of a Manjushri statue required not just physical cleaning but also religious rituals to ensure the statue’s spiritual potency. We are led to think about how conservation in Himalayan Buddhist contexts demands a delicate balance between secular museological practices and religious beliefs—and how the materiality of statues cannot be disentangled from the rituals and practices that maintain their sacredness.

This intermingling of material and spiritual worlds is a recurring leitmotif throughout the volume. In Mark Stevenson’s study of the making of a Tibetan ‘butter sculpture’, we see how the temporal and collaborative nature of ritual art-making infuses it with layers of meaning. Created for the Losar festival at Rongwo Monastery in Rep-gong, this assemblage of figures and ornaments crafted from butter is not just an ephemeral creation; it is a material manifestation of ritual processes that involve a team of artisans and monks, each of whom has a specific role in the timely completion of the offering’s components and their assembly. Stevenson skilfully takes us through the five-day art-making process during which we witness how objects gain meaning not only through their physical form or through formal rituals of consecration, but also through the social interactions and the team’s synchronized making that bring them into being—in a process Stevenson calls pre-consecration. Reading his work prompted me to think

about how temporal elements become embedded in ritual sculptures through the process of their creation.

Several articles teach us how the materiality of things is also profoundly embedded in the environments and contexts in which they are created and circulated. Diana Lange and Oliver Hahn's material analysis of a Tibetan map of Mount Kailash exposes how the choice of materials—both traditional and synthetic—tells a story about the map's history and usage. This knowledge emerges from a close collaboration between the humanities and natural sciences, bringing together Lange's knowledge of Tibetan mapmaking and Hahn's expertise in scientific material analysis of colourants and writing and drawing materials. Here we are invited to think through how materiality is not just about what objects are made of, but how those materials interact with global flows of knowledge, technology and trade—themes addressed in Pamela Smith's (2019) edited volume *Entangled Itineraries*, in which the authors discuss how materials, techniques and knowledge circulate and change when they move through different 'relational fields', or contexts. Similarly, Martin's chapter on the 'scene of collecting' emphasizes the interpersonal and historical dynamics that shape the act of collecting. Both collecting and restoration are material process involving power relations, knowledge transfer and cultural negotiation.

What I learned from all these chapters is that materials are far from passive. Things, landscapes and tools in Tibetan and Himalayan contexts are agents of meaning that shape and are shaped by the people who use and interact with them. Whether through the embodied practices of medicine-making, the political instrumentalization of a sword or the collaborative creation of ritual art, materials form the connective tissue that links individuals to their environments, histories and communities.

The various theoretical approaches employed by the contributors are worth briefly reflecting on since they represent a diversity in thinking and disciplinary perspectives that could enrich future research on materials, and demonstrate how Tibetan studies can benefit from interdisciplinary engagement.

Surbhi and Van der Valk draw on Tim Ingold's (2000) concept of 'meshworks', which highlights the fluid and emergent properties of material interactions, offering a compelling way to understand the

interwoven relationships between people, plants and landscapes. But they also critically engage with Actor Network Theory (ANT), borrowed from science and technology studies, which offers yet another layer of theoretical complexity by conceptualizing objects, people and their interactions as part of dynamic networks—quite contradictory to Ingoldian meshworks. ANT shows how power and meaning are generated through these networks, helping to deconstruct the traditional dichotomies between subject and object, but falls short of what Surbhi and Van der Valk highlight in terms of alive entanglements between environments, deities, rituals and medicine making in Spiti. Lorraine Daston's (2008) notion of the 'talking' nature of things (Lange and Hahn) lets objects possess their own agency, while influencing and being influenced by human interaction. Bill Brown's (2001) 'thing theory' from literary studies, here applied to film analysis (KS and Gupta), offers an inspiring conceptual framework for analysing, for example, the transition of an amulet box from 'a religious power object to an emotional thing'.

Pamela Smith's (2004) work on 'artisanal epistemologies', applied in this volume to medicine making (Singh and Gerke), foregrounds artisanal knowledge—gained through embodied practices—as critical for our understanding of how potency and efficacy are crafted. Smith's framework brings to light the often-overlooked forms of knowledge that are transmitted through hands-on, skilled engagement with materials, which are infused with their own 'artisanal literacy'. Alfred Gell's (1992) theory of 'art and agency' extends this understanding by emphasizing how art objects, such as ritual sculptures (Stevenson), act as agents that mediate social relationships and religious practices, making a point about the active role of materials in shaping cultural and spiritual life. Similarly, the use of 'object biography' from archaeology and anthropology provides a method for tracing the life histories of things, charting their production, use, exchange, and eventual reinterpretation or what Schiffer (2013) conceptualizes as their afterlives, as explored by Brox.

Together, these diverse theoretical frameworks push the study of material culture beyond mere descriptions of things, inviting a more nuanced examination of the roles that materials play within social, political and spiritual contexts. While individual theorists might contradict one another, I found the variety of perspectives in this volume not only enriches the theoretical landscape of Tibetan and Himalayan studies but also opens up new ways of understanding the properties of things—whether sacred or mundane—and how they come to mediate

relationships, convey power and participate in the co-creation of meaning across different worlds.

At the heart of this volume is a call to rethink materials in Tibetan and Himalayan studies, not as a static collection of artefacts, but as living processes that are deeply embedded in the physical, spiritual, social and political dimensions of lives in these regions. As I reflect and write on the insights gained from this volume, I think that one of its lasting contributions is the invitation to explore new questions. How do things go beyond being objects and co-create each other? How do Tibetan and Himalayan societies sustain themselves, adapt and thrive in interaction with materials? What other material practices have yet to be explored in Tibetan and Himalayan (con)texts? How might our scholarly engagement with materials further shape the future not only of Tibetan studies, but also of the related disciplines presented in this volume (anthropology, history, museum studies, cartography and so on)? *Tibetan Materialities* certainly, and positively, sets the stage for future scholarship that is more inclusive, critical and engaged with the material realities of the vast Tibetan and Himalayan regions and their diverse peoples.

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ORCID®

Barbara Gerke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5271-8394>

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