

Materiality, Agency and Power: Crafting Potency in Sowa Rigpa and Ritual Practice

A two-day interdisciplinary workshop

As part of the three-year FWF-funded project on “Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Rituals,” we have invited a group of dedicated scholars to discuss the productive interrelationships between materiality, agency, and power in Tibetan medical and ritual practice. How can we better understand how medicines become potent? What constitutes the agency of ritual objects and potent substances?



**July 12-13,
2022**

**Department of South Asian,
Tibetan and Buddhist Studies**

Seminar room 1,
Spitalgasse 2, Hof 2.7
1090 Vienna

<https://potentsubstances.univie.ac.at/>

All are welcome!

Please register until July 11:
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Program

Tuesday, July 12, 2022

9.15	arrive at ISTB
9.30 (s.t.) – 10.30	Project Forum: Working & Thinking with Potent Substances Introducing the Potent Substances Project: Interactive Discussion (Barbara Gerke, Jan van der Valk, Tawni Tidwell, Calum Blaikie)
10.30 – 11.00	Coffee break
11.00 – 12.30	Session 1: Crafting Potency <u>James Gentry</u> (Stanford University): “Potency in the Making: Tracing Networks of Efficacy in Ratna Lingpa’s Maṇi-Pill Tradition” <u>Jan van der Valk</u> (University of Vienna): “Beyond the Ethnographic Case Study: A Student-Practitioner-Anthropologist Learning (about) the Craft of Tibetan Medicinal Butter Preparation”
12.30 – 13.30	Lunch (catered for speakers in Seminar room 2)
13.30 – 15.00	Session 2: Potency as Potential <u>Katharina Sabernig</u> (University of Applied Arts Vienna): “Forms of <i>nüpa</i> in the <i>Crystal Globe & Crystal Rosary</i> and Related Tibetan Texts” <u>Tawni Tidwell</u> (University of Wisconsin-Madison): “Developing <i>nüpa</i> in Tibetan medicine-Compounding Classics and Related Ritual from Yutok Nyingtik”
15.00 – 15.30	Coffee break
15.30 – 16.15	Session 3: Potency as Network <u>Herbert Schwabl</u> (Padma AG, Switzerland): “Probing Flexibility and Stability - The Materiality of Tibetan Formulas Challenged by Biomedical Semiotics”
16.15 – 16.30	Guided Discussion (discussant: William McGrath)
18.30	Dinner (partially sponsored by PADMA AG)

Program

Wednesday, July 13, 2022

- 09.00 – 10.30 Session 4: **Protection & Purity**
William McGrath (New York University): “The Potency of Champions: Protecting Tibetan Bodies from Epidemic and Military Invasions”

Stacey Van Vleet (University of California, Berkeley): “Potency and Purity at Labrang Medical College (1769-1800)”
- 10.30 – 11.00 Coffee break
- 11.00 – 12.30 Session 5: **Landscape & Lineage**
Anna Sehnalova (University of Oxford) “Agency of Environment and Potency of Landscape in Buddhist and Tibetan Indigenous Cosmologies”

Barbara Gerke and Calum Blaikie (University of Vienna | Austrian Academy of Sciences): “Continuity of Potency: Ethnographies of Lineage Substances (*phab rta*)”
- 12.30 – 13.30 Lunch (catered for speakers in Seminar room 2)
- 13.30 – 15.00 Session 6: **Pharmacopolitics & Practice**

Tatiana Chudakova (Tufts University): “Artemisian Dreams: The Pharmacopolitics of Essence”
(VIA ZOOM)

Elisabeth Hsu (University of Oxford): “What is not in a Text? Potencies Solicitating Practice”
- 15.00 – 15.30 Coffee break
- 15.30 – 16.30 **Audiovisual session**

Donagh Coleman (University of California, Berkeley) “Extraordinary Tibetan Buddhist Death Displays and the Dynamic of Presence and Absence”
(including footage shot for his new film *Tukdam: Between Worlds*)
- 16.30 – 16.45 Guided Discussion (discussant: James Gentry)
- 16.45 – 17.15 Round Table (Barbara Gerke, Jan van der Valk, Tawni Tidwell, Calum Blaikie)

Abstracts

James Gentry (Stanford University):

“Potency in the Making: Tracing Networks of Efficacy in Ratna Lingpa’s Maṇi-Pill Tradition”

This paper considers how substances are attributed potency through examining the nexus of materiality, ritual action, expertise, and narrative at work in the *maṇi*-pill tradition developed by the fifteenth-century Treasure revealer Ratna Lingpa (Ratna gling pa, 1403–1479). Ratna Lingpa’s *maṇi*-pill tradition is a Buddhist medico-ritual tradition still practiced today whose roots lie in post-eighth-century Indian Buddhist Tantric literature. Operating at the interface between Tibetan medicine and Buddhist ritual, Ratna Lingpa’s *maṇi* pill comes embedded in Buddhist narrative traditions and incorporates as ingredients the flesh of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara’s emanations and other Buddhist special dead, along with other substances more commonly at use in Tibetan medicine. The pill also undergoes an elaborate communal ritual consecration process as part of its manufacture and public distribution. Analysis draws inspiration from actor-network theory and other theorists of human/non-human relationality to inquire into how material, discursive, sensory, and enacted features combine to imbue the *maṇi* pill with perceived potency. It also asks how this nexus of features might have contributed to the success of Ratna Lingpa’s tradition to the present.

Jan van der Valk (University of Vienna):

“Beyond the Ethnographic Case Study: A Student-Practitioner-Anthropologist Learning (about) the Craft of Tibetan Medicinal Butter Preparation”

In line with Tim Ingold’s distinction between ethnography as producing a retrospective account of lived experience and anthropology as an open-ended inquiry into living with people, this paper argues that participant observation is a way of learning that goes beyond the problematic objectification of people into “qualitative data” and “cases” for comparison and generalisation. As a student-practitioner-anthropologist, I describe how I started learning the craft of making and consecrating Tibetan medicinal butter pills as part of a one-week workshop in the Swiss Alps in the Spring of 2018, alongside my teacher Arya Pasang Yonten and a dozen of fellow students. I frame this way of studying not just as a transmission of authorised knowledge, but as an opening up of paths of growth and discovery by attending to things. Learning this skilled practice is joining with the properties and activities of materials - including materia medica such as myrobalans, molasses, honey and milk - in an ecology of correspondence that transforms both the ingredients and the artisan. Notably, the correspondence between making and maker was taught explicitly through the lenses of Sowa Rigpa and tantric Buddhist practice: the grinding, boiling, sieving, and filtering mirror the steps of bodily digestion, whereas the ritual consecration of the prepared medicinal butter works by “extracting the essence” (bcud len) of the elements into the pills through self-identification with meditational deities of healing and longevity. I aim to show that mutual processes of becoming are an integral part of undergoing an education, which applies to learning a craft as well as practicing participant observation.

Katharina Sabernig (University of Applied Arts Vienna):

“Forms of *nüpa* in the *Crystal Globe & Crystal Rosary* and Related Tibetan Texts”

The eighteenth-century pharmacopoeia *Shel gong* (Crystal Globe) lists the names of individual source materials, which are specified by an elaborate autocommentary called *Shel phreng* (Crystal Rosary). Both were devised by Deumar Geshé Tendzin Püntso (De'u dmar Dge bshes Bstan 'dzin phun tshogs, 1673-1743). Together they form one of the most important contributions to the genre of *trungpé* (*'khrungs dpe*) literature. While the *Shel gong* includes the principal indication of the individual substances, the more extensive *Shel phreng* provides further pharmacognostic details on pharmacodynamic concepts as well as subtypes, substitutes, synonyms, names in local dialects, and descriptions of their visual appearance. The pharmacopoeia expands on the twentieth chapter of the *Explanatory Tantra* entitled “Effect of medicines” (*sman gyi nus pa*). In the context of this chapter, the term *nus pa* is used as an umbrella term involving different pharmacodynamic concepts, including the specific concept of eight “potencies, as a homonym referring to the qualities that characterise an ingredient. A similar but more complex notion is the concept of seventeen “properties” (*yon tan*). However, the materials listed in the *Explanatory Tantra* are not classified according to the specific idea of *nüpa* (*nus pa*), but following the “nature” (*ngo bo*) of the respective material. It was Dar mo Menrampa Lozang Chödrak (Dar mo sman rams pa Blo bzang chos grags, 1638-1710?) who added the specific qualities to most of the individual names in his *Explanation of the effect of medicines in the twentieth chapter of the Explanatory Tantra* (*Bshad pa'i rgyud kyi le'u nyi shu pa sman gyi nus pa bstan pa'i tshig gi don gyi 'grel ba mes po'i dgongs rgyan*). His text can be considered as an important source and a precursor to Tendzin Phüntso's work. My presentation will analyse the relationship between these texts and their different manner of dealing with and connecting the pharmacodynamic concepts of *nus pa*, *yon tan* and *ngo bo*.

Tawni Tidwell (University of Wisconsin-Madison):

“Developing *nüpa* in Tibetan Medicine-Compounding Classics and Related Ritual from Yutok Nyingtik”

This presentation provides the textual foundations for characterizing potency in Tibetan medicine, focusing on the detailed presentation of *nüpa* (*nus pa*) in the *Four Medical Treatises* (*Rgyud bzhi*) and its most prominent relevant commentaries, including *Crystal Orb and Rosary* (*Shel gong shel phreng*) by Deumar Tendzin Püntso. Specifically, this presentation will address the technicalities of how the classic eight potencies (*nus pa brgyad*) are understood in the *Four Medical Treatises* as related to the elemental dynamics (*'byung ba lnga*), tastes (*ro drug*), post-digestive tastes (*zhu rjes gsum*) and qualities (*yon tan bcu bdun*). I will select a few illuminating examples of formulas to demonstrate the theory. The presentation will touch briefly on relevant ritual references important to imbued aspects of potency through consecration from a related spiritual practice to Tibetan medicine, the Revealed Treasure text cycle Heart Essence of Yutok (*G.yu thog snying thig*), known as Yutok Nyingtik, from the Rinchen Terdzö (*Rin chen gter mdzod*), with particular attention to the rituals related to the protectors in consecrating medicine. Understandings of *nüpa* and its multivalent and complex transformations through harvesting, processing, compounding and consecrating will be explored.

Herbert Schwabl (Padma AG, Switzerland):

“Probing Flexibility and Stability - The Materiality of Tibetan Formulas Challenged by Biomedical Semiotics”

Tibetan formulas are predominantly compounded with ingredients of herbal origin. Modern phytochemistry describes each plant as containing a variety of active molecules, grouped into essential oils, flavonoids, polyphenols, alkaloids, etc. From this point of view, a Tibetan formula can be understood as an extreme form of a multi-compound mixture. The more ingredients are present in a given volume, the less their concentration. It is thus not surprising that their activity lies at the lower end compared to usual pharmacological textbook knowledge. Tibetan formulas can therefore not be understood through the activity of single and specific molecules, but more as a pleiotropic, unspecific mode of action. Such formulas can be interpreted as acting on the systemic level of the whole organism, or as adaptogens (with non-specific, usually tonifying activity). On the other side stands modern pharmacology, which relies on the paradigm of specificity. Medical indications are standardized via ICD-terms (the WHO International Classification of Diseases). For each defined medical indication exist specific pharmaceuticals, each based on mono-substances with defined dosage. The pharmacopoeia demands exact and normative values for each drug. This spills over to phyto-pharmacy, the field of pharmacognosy. Herbal ingredients also have to be standardized and are assessed using “theoretical” values, such as content of essential oils or certain patterns of flavonoids. Such differences open up a discourse of bio-medical semiotics. How does a formula interact or “speak” to the organism? If the specificity of a formula is connected to its molecular materiality, where to anchor an unspecific, pleiotropic activity? Ideally, Tibetan concepts of compounding or potency should help to conceptualize relations within the pleiotropic network.

William McGrath (New York University):

“The Potency of Champions: Protecting Tibetan Bodies from Epidemic and Military Invasions”

Following the establishment of Mongol-Sakya hegemony (ca. 1250–1350) in Tibet, an epidemic disease called the Black Triad (Nag po sum sgril) spread throughout the plateau. In line with its name, physicians and ritual specialists alike understood the Black Triad to be a deadly combination of three symptoms: fever, wind disorder, and the invasion of *nyen*-spirits. The *Vase of Ambrosia* (*'Chi med bdud rtsi bum pa*), a treasure text about the Black Triad that emerged during this period, describes *nyen*-spirits as entering the orifices of a sick person, traveling along their inner channels, and occupying their viscera. As such, the *Vase of Ambrosia* prescribes “champions” (*gyad*) that protect vulnerable orifices and “scouts” (*zu gu pa*) that attack *nyen*-spirits from within the patient. In this paper, I will analyze the parallel invasions of Tibetan valleys by Mongol armies and Tibetan bodies by *nyen*-spirits. In doing so, I shall argue that champions and scouts are no mere symbols for military figures (Douglas 1996), but instead represents techniques for teaching Tibetan bodies (Asad 1997) and protecting them from the copresences of epidemic and military invaders (Beliso-De Jesús 2015).

Stacey Van Vleet (University of California, Berkeley):

“Potency and Purity at Labrang Medical College (1769-1800)”

In the year 1800, a scholar from Labrang Tashikhyil in Amdo compared his monastery’s recently-founded medical college to the model of Chakpori medical monastery in Lhasa (estb. 1696). In particular, the Second Welmang Pandita Könchok Gyeltsen (1764-1853) praised the precious pills (*rin chen ril bu*) produced at Chakpori as “enormously effective.” And yet – as documented in part by this same scholar – the Labrang medical college would deploy a new protocol for producing precious pills that deviated significantly from the Chakpori model. This paper will examine innovations in pill production at Labrang Tashikhyil monastery in the late 18th century, which subsequently began to rival the influence of Chakpori throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world. It will compare the ritual and material protocols for producing precious pills described by the physician Tsangmen Yeshé Zangpo (1707-1784) with a related set designed for “Ganden Pills” (*dge ldan ril bu*) by the Second Jamyang Zhepa Könchok Jikmé Wangpo (1728-1791). It will explore how reading these recipe and ritual texts together along with *bca’ yig*, *gdan rabs*, and *chos ’byung* can help to situate these sources in relation to each other, as well as within the wider curriculum of a monastery, in ways that are otherwise not made explicit. It will show how different ritual and doctrinal frameworks for pill production encapsulated distinctive logics of potency and diverging protocols for making substances and subjects potent. At the heart of the debates shared across these texts were questions about the relationship between potency and purity. Labrang Tashikhyil scholars held different views – from their earlier Lhasa counterparts and sometimes each other – as to what constituted “very pure methods,” ritually pure ingredients, and acceptable bases for engaging in potentially transgressive methods of purification or the transformation of ritually impure substances and subjects through skillful means.

Anna Sehnalova (University of Oxford):

“Agency of Environment and Potency of Landscape in Buddhist and Tibetan Indigenous Cosmologies”

This paper draws attention to the complex Tibetan cultural and religious backgrounds informing and co-producing various notions of potency – the entangled manifestations of Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon (g.Yung drung Bon), with their prominent tantric components, and indigenous notions of ritualised landscapes, mundane deities, and ancestral cults. Taking the example of natural environment and sacralised landscapes of the worshipped mountains of Nyenpo Yutse (gNyan po g.yu rtse) and Anye Machen (A myes rma chen) in East Tibet, I show the multiple and varied “layers of potency” accumulating in certain places and materials, or individuals coming from these places. I study them and the area historically via written documents, through recent ethnographic fieldwork, and current oral history. These layers derive from intricate cosmologies, which serve as unities of sense-making of the world. They do not only inform different cultural and religious notions, but also political power and social structure, economies, and identities. All are inherent in the land, and are tied to different qualities of auspiciousness (such as *bkra shis*, *rlung rta*), prosperity (such as *g.yang*, *sa bcud*), vitality (such as *bla*), and spiritual achievements (*byin rlabs*, *bsod nams*). I argue that it is by understanding the foundations of the interacting cosmological frameworks at play, that we can decipher what constitutes “potency” (*nus pa*) or “great potency” (*nus pa chen po*). Both the historical, mythological, and present conceptualisations and experienced materiality of the land determine its agency, i.e. its “creative capacities” (Jones & Cloke 2002:5), and potency in the light of people’s cosmological narratives.

Barbara Gerke and Calum Blaikie (University of Vienna, Austrian Academy of Sciences):

“Continuity of Potency: Ethnographies of Lineage Substances (*phab rta*)”

Sowa Rigpa formulas are often deeply enmeshed with ritual empowerment related to particular lineages of Buddhist and Bön masters. This presentation analyzes the way so-called “fermenting agents,” called *papta* (*phab rta*), enable certain forms of potency to continue both over generations and across batches of medicines in the same generation. *Papta* and the spiritual lineages through which medical knowledge and ‘blessings’ are transmitted affect the making of formulas, as well as their perception and circulation, in many areas where Sowa Rigpa is practiced today. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with small-scale cottage industry producers in Ladakh (India), we explore the use of *papta* in “accomplished medicines” (*sman grub*) and other special formulas, as well as in essential medicines for everyday use. We argue that *papta* substances can best be understood as operating both within and between pharmacological, spiritual, and social realms. They not only carry the potency of mantras and meditative practice into the medicines to which they are added, but also “perfect” the ordinary substances comprising those medicines, thus further enhancing their efficacy. *Papta* carry spiritual traditions and potencies across generations, often bridging long periods of the absence of a highly trained and realized master. Their use confirms the association of individual practitioners to authoritative lineages, while also maintaining connections within larger groups of practitioners and with the wider lay community. The inclusion of several *papta* of varied origin also suggests forms of material expression as part of a larger *communitas* of both lineages and potencies that converge in medicines.

Tatiana Chudakova (Tufts University):

“Artemisian Dreams: The Pharmacopolitics of Essence” (VIA ZOOM)

This work explores how a genus of plants—in this case, artemisia—becomes reconfigured in relation to a single defining chemical compound, in different places in times. Contrasting this plant’s deployment in Buryat Sowa Rigpa with the ways in which this genus has, at different moments, captured pharmacological and industrial ambitions in Europe and the United States, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the production of value and values around a plant like Artemisia has depended, in Western scientific and medical imaginaries, on defining plants in relation to a singular, “essential” phytochemical component—essential in multiple senses, both as technique for extracting and concentrating volatile oils, and as the locus for the production of social values and their authorization. Threading together the moral panics around *Artemisia absinthium* in 19th century France; the reclassification of *Artemisia astraonica* as a precursor to camphor in the production of celluloid during the Soviet 1920s and 30s; and the contemporary debates about the role of *Artemisia annua*’s potential for addressing malaria, and then COVID— this paper asks what preoccupations with essences might tell us about the politics of empires on the one hand, and about the politics of empiricism on the other—and how the two are entangled. I suggest that the disparate imaginaries of plant potencies often materialize infrastructural relationships and the political and social processes through which these relationships are enacted, as much as they reflect new discoveries about what constitutes a plant’s “active ingredients.”

Elisabeth Hsu (University of Oxford):

“What is not in a Text? Potencies Solicitating Practice”

This presentation begins with a reflection on an ethno-archaeological investigation into the use of *qinghao* (*Artemisia annua* L.) juices as antimalarial (see Wright et al. 2010), which highlights how important “common sense” is to making sense of practice-oriented textual instructions (Hsu 2015). With this mindset it investigates information concerned with a formula’s potency (a) on dosage, and what this may imply, (b) on interdictions, and (c) on different sorts of efficacies in over 150 *qinghao* formulae that were recorded in Chinese medical formulary books in dynastic China. The presentation ends with asking what else, apart from “common sense,” we have to consider in order to make sense of practice-oriented textual instructions. For doing so, it foregrounds Antonio Gramsci’s understandings of “common sense” and “practical knowledge.”

Donagh Coleman (University of California, Berkeley):

“Extraordinary Tibetan Buddhist Death Displays and the Dynamic of Presence and Absence”

(including footage shot for his new film *Tukdam: Between Worlds*)

Tracing out an anthropology of the extraordinary, especially attending to Tibetan Buddhist death displays, my presentation takes as its framework the dynamic of presence and absence. From its beginnings, much of anthropology has been embedded in a kind of absence discourse when it comes to what appears “extraordinary” to a modern Euroamerican regime of truth and its attendant naturalist ontology. Classic subjects like magic, witchcraft, or spirits have been explained according to different rationalities, discourses, performativity, etc., in terms that are usually quite different to how such phenomena are perceived in the cultures under examination. For the human sciences, such phenomena do not, by and large, “really exist” in their own terms. More recently, anthropological literature on spirits has combined Latour and Actor-Network-Theory with William James’ pragmatism, looking at invisible entities in terms of a “pragmatics of effects,” granting them agency and presence in terms of the effects such entities engender in (social) worlds. Such an approach brings us midway between absence and presence, the latter articulated for example in Edith Turner’s work on spirit experiences and Anthropology of Consciousness literature, or the work of religious studies scholar, comparativist Jeffrey Kripal (from whom I borrow the absence-presence analytic). While Buddhism is often associated with negation and hence absence, a “positive” Buddhism is also evident already in early textual sources, gaining full articulation in the doctrine of Buddha-nature. (Some scholars have noted that the rangtong-shentong distinction in Tibetan Buddhism is unique in delineating these two approaches of a negative and positive Buddhism.) The Buddha-nature is seen to be imbued with presence, power, and indeed, potency, manifesting for example in spectacular death displays in the Tibetan Buddhist world. Challenging prevailing absence discourses, death displays like *tukdam* (post-mortem meditation) and phenomena observed after cremation such as relic pills (*ringse*) or religious images engraved onto charred bones of cremated bodies offer striking examples of presencing. In this connexion, I consider phenomena which seem to emanate presence from their own side. Here potency or agency are not so obviously crafted or socially attributed, but rather seem to inhere in certain bodies, objects, environments, or encounters (some of which may nonetheless have been previously empowered through praxis or ritual). Illustrating themes of presence and absence – which can be construed as the very dynamic of life and death – my presentation will include ethnographic examples and related audiovisual material gathered in the course of my fieldwork and filming for the documentary *Tukdam: Between Worlds*.