



Himalayan Hermitess: The Life of a Tibetan Buddhist Nun

Kurtis R. Schaeffer

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Himalayan Hermitess is a vivid account of the life and times of a Buddhist nun living on the borderlands of Tibetan culture. Orgyan Chokyi (1675-1729) spent her life in Dolpo, the highest inhabited region of the Nepal Himalayas. Illiterate and expressly forbidden by her master to write her own life story, Orgyan Chokyi received divine inspiration, defied tradition, and composed one of the most engaging autobiographies of the Tibetan literary tradition.

The *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* is the oldest known autobiography authored by a Tibetan woman, and thus holds a critical place in both Tibetan and Buddhist literature. In it she tells of the sufferings of her youth, the struggle to escape menial labor and become a hermitess, her dreams and visionary experiences, her relationships with other nuns, the painstaking work of contemplative practice, and her hard-won social autonomy and high-mountain solitude. In process it develops a compelling vision of the relation between gender, the body, and suffering from a female Buddhist practitioner's perspective.

Part One of *Himalayan Hermitess* presents a religious history of Orgyan Chokyi's Himalayan world, the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi* as a work of literature, its portrayal of sorrow and joy, its perspectives on suffering and gender, as well as the diverse religious practices found throughout the work. Part Two offers a full translation of the *Life of Orgyan Chokyi*. Based almost entirely upon Tibetan documents never before translated, *Himalayan Hermitess* is an accessible introduction to Buddhism in the premodern Himalayas.

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