

hero and sati stone inscriptions. On the basis of Kṣatrapa, Sātavāhana, Vākāṭaka and Gupta epigraphs, she argues that from the early centuries CE onwards, “war became connected with the ceremonial aspect of royal grants” (p. 334). In Chapter 5, “Wilderness”, the last chapter, the author examines the same sources, focusing on tribal or “non-state” cultures, but also on aspects of forests, as for instance their relevance for concepts of renunciation as well as for hunting and protection of animals. The epilogue finally summarises the attestations for the circulation of influential political ideas, including the impact of Indian notions and practices on Southeast Asian traditions. The final remarks indirectly reveal the desiderata for future research: a similar study of political violence in early medieval India, i.e. the period from the 6th to the 13th centuries.

There are some inaccuracies in the book: for example, with reference to a famous cave inscription from Nasik in western India, Upinder Singh claims that “Rishabhadatta” was the “son-in law of the Kshatrapa king Ushavadatta” (p. 334). In fact, this inscription records activities of Uṣavadāta, the son-in-law of the Western Kṣatrapa king Nahapāna. And “Rṣabhadatta” is merely the Sanskritised form of the Prakrit name “Uṣavadāta”. But considering the large range of source material analysed by Singh, such shortcomings do not diminish the value of her book.

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AXEL MICHAELS, *Kultur und Geschichte Nepals*. Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag, 2018. 512 pages, €27.90. ISBN 978-3-520-21201-6

In his *Kultur und Geschichte Nepals*, Axel Michaels offers a general history of Nepal, spanning from the earliest extant material evidence dating to before the Common Era up to modern times. As professor emeritus of Classical Indology and Religious Studies at Heidelberg University and head of various research institutions and groups in both Germany and Nepal, Michaels has been one of the driving forces of the study of Nepal in Europe. The present volume constitutes an important contribution to the field by providing a high-level synthesis of up-to-date scholarship on Nepal’s history and its culture, both past and present, and reflects Michaels’s broad range of research expertise: grounded in a combination of text-based philological methods and ethnography, he has conducted numerous research projects related to Nepal on topics as wide-ranging as ritual studies, temple histories, chronicles, legal literature and documents.

A particular strength of the volume is the large number of new insights on cultural and historical developments for the period between the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by the Śāha Dynasty in 1768/69 up to the end of the Rānā Dynasty in 1951, a result of ongoing research activities on documents of this period being newly edited and studied in the context of Michaels's current long-term project on "Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Pre-modern Nepal", based at the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and being conducted in collaboration with the National Archives of Nepal. Further new insights into this period found throughout the book have arisen from the extensive research he conducted on the *muluki ain*, Nepal's National Code, which was instated in 1854 – a key reference point, since this was when existing socio-religious structures and customs, partly originating in pre-modern Nepal, were systematised into a formal legal code for the first time.

In his preface, Michaels opens the book with the question, "How does one write a history of Nepal?" He comments on the country's immense ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as on the methodological challenge that available sources for reconstructing Nepalese history are often disparate, sporadic and difficult to date. As reflected in the structure of the book, his answer is to move away from a single linear historical narrative dominated by political chronology. He focuses instead on the many entangled histories of Nepal's regions, religions, cultures, arts and economics as they coincided with the reigns of known dynasties and governments, while nonetheless following their independent trajectories and pace. Michaels also addresses the methodological question of how to evaluate Nepalese – and also South Asian at large – historical writings (e.g. *vaṃśāvalīs* and *māhātmyas*), which tend to intertwine historical facts with mythological episodes coloured by religious persuasions and thus to operate on cosmic time scales different than fact-based chronologies. This is a circumstance that has often led to such sources being deemed ahistorical and outright dismissed for historical reconstructions. Counteracting this view, throughout his book Michaels convincingly recovers the historical value of such sources – particularly for the 18th and 19th centuries – by assessing them in combination with the study of official documents, legal literature and inscriptions, nonetheless remaining sensitive to the interpretative context of the genre-specific blend of political and religious agendas pursued by their authors. He thereby points out how histories of politics and powers in Nepal are often conveyed and negotiated through religious narratives and ritual structures that follow their own logic and framing, therefore requiring different forms of analysis but being no less historically meaningful. Michaels's comprehensive approach particularly comes into play in some of the essays on specific cultural features – such as holy cows, *satī* practices, slavery and blood sacrifices – each demonstrating how the trajectories of these

micro-histories are important elements in forming an understanding of Nepal's history as a whole.

The volume is divided into ten chapters, each focusing on the different areas that have shaped the development and history of Nepal. The first chapter outlines the source materials at our disposal, including inscriptions, archaeological reports, coins, manuscripts and chronicles. Besides the provenance of these sources, the chapter also includes a survey of the collections, archives and galleries where they are kept, an invaluable orientation for students and researchers of Nepalese studies. The next two chapters set out Nepal's geographical and social makeup. Chapter two outlines Nepal's physical and geographical aspects. It surveys how the country's location, with some of the country lying in the plains towards India in the south and other large parts lying in nearly inaccessible areas of the Himalayan mountain range bordering China/Tibet in the north, has shaped the infrastructure. A section is also dedicated to the country's frequent earthquakes due to its position in a tectonically active area, and discusses the responses to the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake as well as text sources on how earthquakes were dealt with and culturally received in the past. All of these aspects have shaped much of Nepal's history in terms of governing structures, administration, trade, foreign relations and economic development. Chapter three provides an overview of Nepal's current broad spectrum of ethnic and cultural groups, with the Bahun-Chhetri being the largest politically unified group and the Newars probably the culturally most influential. It also includes a survey of the country's complex and diverse system of social hierarchies and family structures, and refers to the impact of the systematisation of Nepal's ethnic groups into a caste system in the National Code, or *muluki ain*, of 1854. Michaels also explores the position of women in Nepal's different cultural and religious contexts – ranging from disadvantaged dependents and victims of social oppression to respected active agents within family structures with important ritual functions. He also points to their gradual emancipation in the last decades through increasing access to education, the media and the job market.

Next follow outlines of the histories of regions and ethnic groups across the country: the fourth chapter is dedicated in its entirety to the history of the Kathmandu Valley, which has largely been at the centre of scholarship on Nepal's political and cultural history, to the extent that any discussion of the Valley is often seen as synonymous with talking about Nepal's history. In order to offset this position, in the fifth chapter Michaels then provides an overview of other regions and peoples: the history of the early Khasa-Malla kingdom of western Nepal, the development of the lowland Terai region and the Mustang region, as well as the histories of the ethnic groups of the Kiranti (Rai-Limbu) in the east and the Sherpas.

The next three chapters, six through nine, are dedicated to key themes that have collectively shaped the country's socio-religious and cultural history: the development of the state, economy and society; the development of religion; and the development of arts and culture. Chapter six is thus dedicated to diachronic analyses of the land tenure system, the work force and migration, trade, administration, the juridical system, the educational system, media and the health system. Chapter seven outlines Nepal's complex religious history, not only providing an overview of historical sources of both major traditions – Buddhism and Hinduism, with their many sub-groups – but also examining the country's rich ritual and processional tradition as well as religious sites such as the Guhyeśvarī temple. A key point made about religious life in Nepalese society is that although Hinduism remains the more dominant religious force, the self-understanding of religious affiliation is an open one, to the extent that some Nepalis would call themselves both Hindu and Buddhist and simultaneously worship gods from various religious branches during festivals or at religious sites. This does not amount to a religious syncretism in the sense of each religion losing its identity or its own religious officiants and structures as they converge into one, but means rather that individuals participate in religious events of various denominations without considering this to be in conflict with their individual religious affiliation.

Chapter eight is dedicated to culture and the arts. Its first section outlines Nepal's languages and literatures, as well as the diverse usage and degree of literary production in each. The second section is dedicated to the local art and craftsmanship scene, which has a strong and long-standing tradition that can, for instance, be traced to woodcarvings dating to the 6th/7th centuries. The chapter also includes a special focus essay on Nepalese modern art by Christiane Brosius, giving insights into the country's ever-growing art scene, including its increasing presence internationally, as well as its role in dealing with political unrest and national traumas such as the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake. The ninth chapter outlines the architectural history of the Kathmandu Valley, surveying the architectural remains starting with the Licchavi period up to modern times. In this chapter Michaels draws greatly on the research on the history of Newari architecture by Niels Gutschow, with whom he has frequently conducted joint research projects. Included in this chapter is also a discussion about recent developments and challenges relating to cultural heritage preservation in the light of modern urban developments and rebuilding activities after the earthquake.

The final chapter – bearing the title “Nepal in the World” and acting as a kind of concluding summary and outlook for the future – examines the repercussions of Nepal's special position as a country that largely closed itself off to outside influence until the 19th century, styled itself as the last Hindu kingdom, was never colonised, and only initiated a process of democratisation in

the middle of the 20th century. Michaels points out that these factors led to an unusual amount of ethnic and cultural diversity in the country, as well as ancient traditions being preserved. While this fact has been celebrated, at the same time it has also led to problematic political, economic and societal developments resulting from the challenges of uniting this very diversity of ethnicities, cultures and religions into a nation state and, at the same time, of gradually participating in the processes of globalisation and modernisation long at work outside the country. Yet, notwithstanding these difficulties, Michaels ends on an optimistic note, opposing the image sometimes held of Nepal as a developing country in danger of becoming a “failed state”, overwhelmed by the political, economical and environmental challenges resulting from explosive population growth, work emigration, political unrest and over-tourism. He emphasises that the country has also developed increasingly institutionalised forms of co-existence between religious and ethnic groups that preserve their many unique cultural features, and argues that it is precisely this diversity of ethnicities, cultures and religions characterising Nepal’s history that could be the country’s resource in moving forward. It may also result in an exemplary model of how to achieve “unity in diversity” (p. 423). The volume concludes with an appendix containing a timeline with important historical events, starting with the birth of the Buddha, and also including a list of kings and prime ministers; a useful list of references organised according to the topics treated in the chapters; a general bibliography; a glossary of important and frequently used terms; and finally, two indices, one for persons, and the other for places and things.

Given that the scope of the book is of extensive temporal and contextual reach, it is unsurprising that not all topics can be treated with the same depth and that choices of focus had to be made. Michaels himself points this out in his preface. Thus, in some areas of more marginal attention of the author, a few minor errors have slipped in, errors that, however, can be easily corrected for a second edition and certainly do not influence the overall narrative and impact of the book (e.g., p. 7: the earliest extant inscription in the Valley reads Jayavarman rather than Jayadeva; p. 67: the last record of the “Licchavi period” in 877 CE was not an inscription but a manuscript colophon; p. 273: the expression used in early inscriptions is Paramamāheśvara [“entirely devoted to Śiva”] rather than Paramamaheśvara [“great God”] and refers to the intensity of the king’s devotion to Śiva rather than to the greatness of the deity Śiva; p. 276: the *Śivadharmaśāstra* and *Śivadharmottara* do not teach “intensive tantric modes of worship”, but rather forms of lay worship, partly preceding the tantric forms; the sculpture in the Chāṅgu Nārāyaṇa temple area showing Viṣṇu riding Garuḍa [Fig. 15] is dated to the ninth century on p. 293 but to the fourth on p. 333). Some economic and social processes described for the Licchavi period are perhaps depicted with more certainty than

can be afforded from the source material and current state of knowledge, a circumstance, which, however, reflects the state of scholarship on the subject, where broad historical narratives are often presented. And finally, footnotes for more detailed or specific information would have been extremely useful and welcome, but due to the format and perhaps the intended readership of the book, these are regrettably not included. In such cases, the reader has best to refer to the bibliographical references arranged according to the treated topics.

To conclude, Michaels's volume is an important and very welcome contribution to the field of Nepal studies, providing a long-awaited updated history of Nepal, following earlier works with a similar aim from the last century, such as the general histories by Sylvain Lévi and Dilli Raman Regmi, and Mary Slusser's cultural history of the Kathmandu Valley. Despite the dense and complex interrelationships that are depicted, the work is clearly written and enjoyable to read, with vibrant descriptions of social, cultural and religious contexts and accounts of historical events. The volume also contains numerous translated text passages from original sources, which give insights into specific cultural and political events and satisfyingly pull the reader from the grand narrative to the specific source material, also for those who do not read the original languages. The volume also refers to often neglected and, for many, less accessible yet important scholarship of Nepalese scholars (see, e.g., pp. 244–249). While the volume has been written for a broader audience and will be extremely valuable for students or scholars of interrelated subjects such as art history or religious studies as well as for general historians, it is also of great interest to experts engaged directly in Nepal studies, as it provides new insights into cultural and historical developments (particularly of the 18th–20th centuries), brings together the main issues and latest directions in the field, and is accompanied by an extensive and up-to-date bibliography. For now, the volume has been published only in German; it is hoped that an English translation will soon follow to make this work more widely available.

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FENG YANGGANG, *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. 247 pages, 154 maps, €229.00. ISBN 978-90-04-35885-0 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-36990-0 (e-book)

This book is a major accomplishment by a prominent student of religious life in the contemporary People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC), assisted by his graduate students, post-doctoral researchers and further specialists in