Fieldwork
A Photographer in Spiti

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Professorial Platform Lecture 2017

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Patrick Sutherland is a documentary photographer with a particular interest in the culturally Tibetan communities of the Spiti Valley in Northern India and in Western Tibet more generally. He has been photographing and researching in Spiti for twenty-five years, and has published two books: *Spiti* (Network 2000) with foreword by filmmaker Tenzing Sonam and dedication by Henri Cartier-Bresson, and *Disciples of a Crazy Saint* (Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford 2011), with an essay by co-author Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute. His photographic work from Spiti has been widely exhibited, nationally and internationally. Recent research for the British Library Endangered Archives Programme documented the texts, narrative paintings and other performance-related material belonging to the Buchen of Pin Valley, who are actors, storytellers and exorcists. The British Library also holds archives of Sutherland's reportage photographs and audio recordings. Patrick is Emeritus Professor of Documentary Photography at University of the Arts London.

Over the years his Spiti project has received funding from a number of different organisations including the BBC World Service, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the British Library World and Traditional Music section, the London College of Communication, the Arts Council, the Frederick Williamson Trust at Cambridge University and the British Library Endangered Archives Programme.

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Foreword

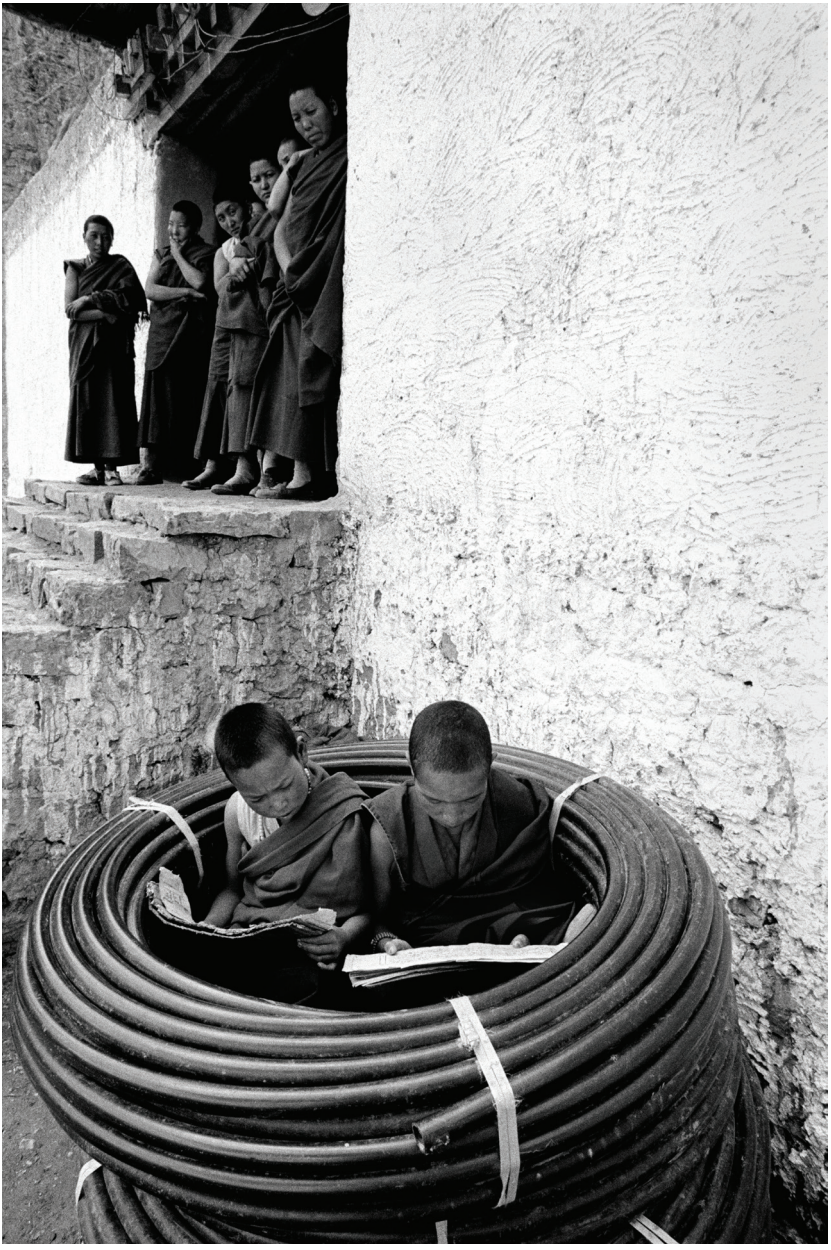
It gives me great pleasure to be able to have worked with Patrick. He is exactly what universities are about with his contribution to this community always focussed on students, research and teaching.

Patrick joined the University as a Course Leader for the Postgraduate Diploma in Photojournalism in 1993. He is responsible for developing and building LCC's reputation in this area. He was one of the first members of PARC and supported the development and culture for photography research at LCC and across the University over many years. He became a Professor, May 2014 and Emeritus Professor, July 2018.

Patrick's commitment to student experience has always been inspirational, continuing to support BA, MA and PhD students until he retired in December 2017. Over the last four years he has played a significant role as the LCC PhD lead tutor ensuring support for our students as well as staff involved in supervision and mentoring.

When LCC launched Graduate School in 2014 Patrick was one of our main advocates bringing together researchers and PhD students from across the college and UAL to foster a supportive and exciting environment. Patrick has been particularly successful in supporting PhD students' funding applications. He has played an active part in the life of the college and UAL. His legacy remains through our alumni and all of us who have been inspired by him.

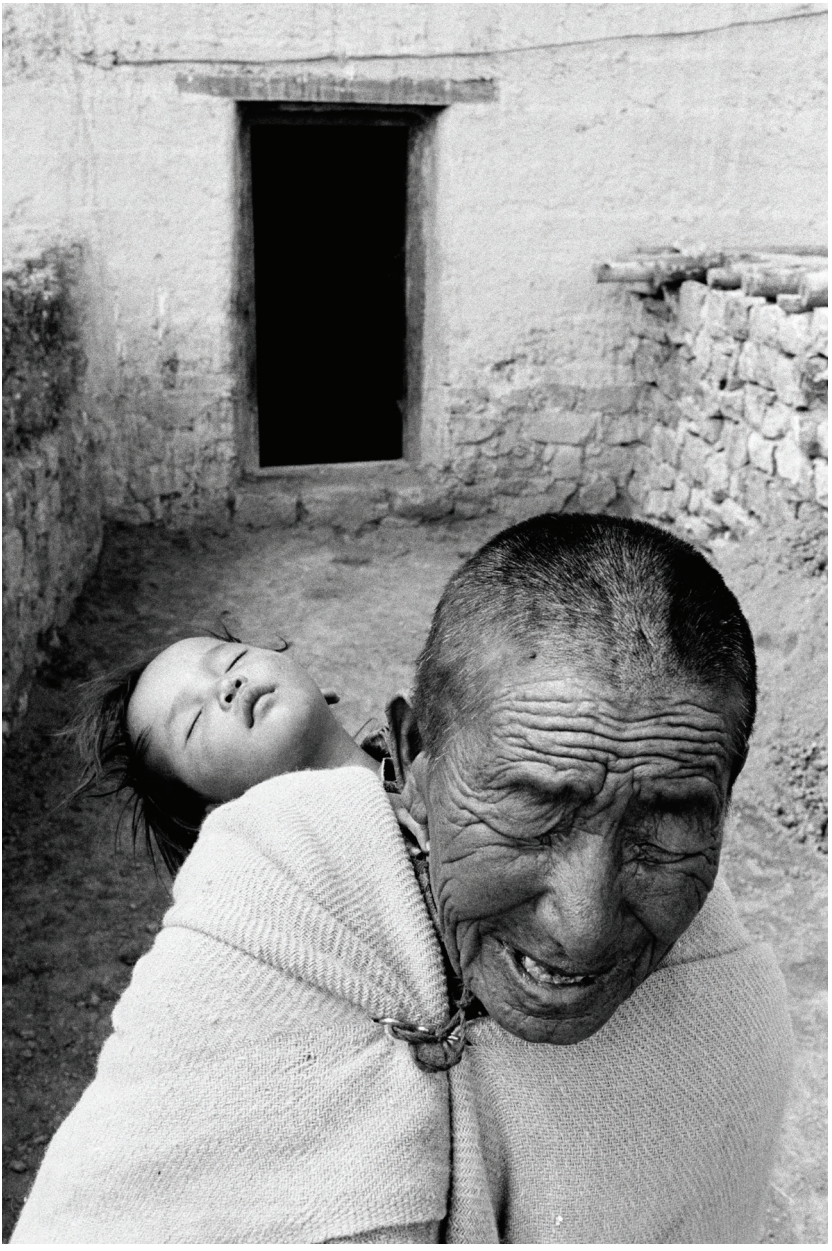
Natalie Brett
Pro Vice Chancellor & Head of College
London College of Communication,
University of the Arts London



The Spiti Valley in north India is a culturally-Tibetan region adjoining the border with occupied Tibet. It's a high-altitude desert dotted with small villages and monasteries, a landscape of rock and dust in which fields appear like oases, irrigated by glacial meltwater. I have been working in Spiti since 1993, returning every couple of years. I first travelled there with Graham, an old friend and Buddhist monk, and Tashi Namgyal, a monk from the valley. From the start I was welcomed into the community and stayed with local families. It was a position of great privilege. They fed me, looked after me on the many occasions when I was ill and put up with my incessant questioning.

I began documenting Spiti primarily in terms of its inhabitants and their communities: the relationships between people in a changing social and physical environment. A guiding aim was to avoid repeating and reinforcing the naïve vision of Tibetan peoples as perpetually smiling, blissed out on religion, spiritually elevated and, by extension, divorced from the real world of complexities, change and struggles. I wanted the work to feel much less comfortable than that, yet this ongoing project is undoubtedly an expression of deep affection for Spiti and its people.

Reportage photography is rarely a straightforward or rational process of descriptive recording. It is primarily intuitive: an essential looseness and messiness leading to the occasional resolution. Not knowing, perhaps not even understanding, is an essential part of this process and a major element in the pleasure of documentary practice. The camera can be a way of engaging with the world not just a technology for recording it.



Walking through Pangmo on my first fieldtrip, householders regularly stopped us, fascinated by my companion, a tall pale-skinned Englishman in Tibetan robes. They inevitably invited us inside for tea. I remember teetering on tiptoe to photograph Tsering Drolma (left), raising the camera to separate her from the doorway. Reportage photography, to misquote Cartier-Bresson, seems like a cross between being a tightrope walker and a pickpocket.

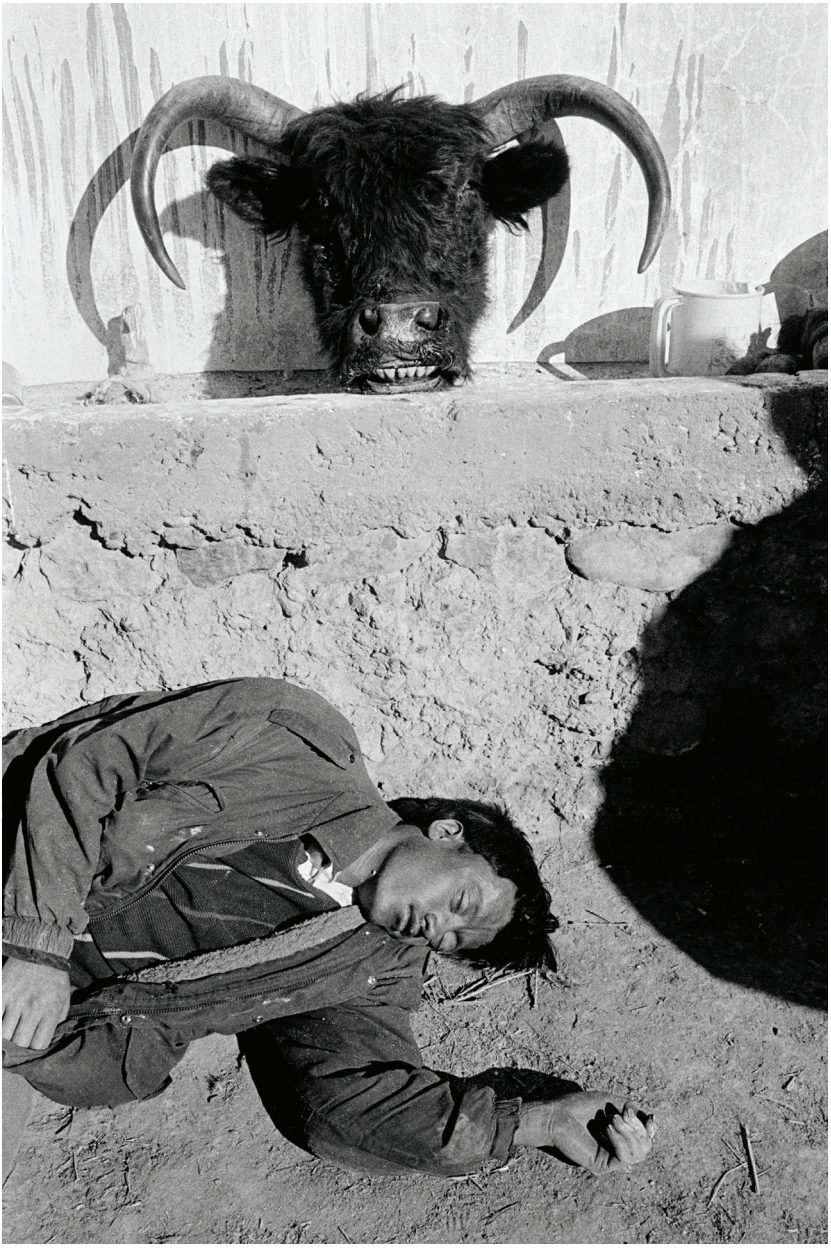
Many of my favourite images from Spiti are profoundly ambiguous. What is this photograph really about? Childhood and nurturing? Ageing and the effects of high-altitude ultraviolet light on human skin? Perhaps it can be read in terms of birth and death, mortality and reincarnation. But I am also aware that Tsering Drolma was a nun, so it could also be seen as reflecting the diminished status of nuns in Spiti, stuck at home undertaking domestic tasks rather than devoting their lives to religious practice.

In Gede, I noticed that all the animal pens were covered in protective wire mesh. On the outskirts of the hamlet, a man was washing the singed head of a *dzomo*, salvaged from a snow leopard kill (top left). Gede is on the edge of a vast uninhabited area, hundreds of square miles of perfect territory for these endangered felines. Villagers tell stories of these carnivores entering byres at night and slaughtering the animals. Of householders waking to commotion and carnage, coming downstairs to see red eyes in the darkness, a leopard gorged on blood.

Urgyen Dhargye, a tantric practitioner, blowing a mantra over a child who's been having fits (bottom left). Ritual pervades the Spitian landscape, from the simple daily recitation of prayers to grand monastic dance festivals. Twenty-five years later I can still recall the spluttering sound of Urgyen Dhargye's breath. But I am now much more aware of the raised position of the healer and the respectfully lower position of the mother. Respect and honour are fundamental concepts within Spiti. Status is manifested through positioning within social spaces, marked by distance from the door and height above the floor. It is also marked in special honorific and humilific language and highlighted through specific forms of music.

Spiti weddings are rich and complex events lasting several days. They include: the slaughter of yaks; the preparation of a feast for hundreds of guests; experts who perform song cycles and speeches from memory; the village oracle going into trance to consult the local deity; donations of money and hundreds of ceremonial silk scarves to the bride, groom and their families; purification rituals performed by monks; and music, drinking and dancing until the early hours.

Weddings take the form of ritualised kidnappings, and in the past women were actually captured for marriage. A party of men dressed in the finest of clothing, travels from the bridegroom's household to take away the bride. On arrival at the bride's house, they are stopped at the door where they have to sing and answer riddles. Once inside they are taken to meet the bride who spends most of her wedding weeping. As the party prepares to take the bride away from her home, the whole house is filled with the sound of crying: the bride, her consort, all the female relatives and many men. Weeping is an expected and respectful behaviour. In some weddings it's the groom who is expected to weep. After a night's celebration in the village hall, the visitors take the bride away on horseback. The sounds of weeping and wailing from the bride's party and cheering from the groom's party fill the air (previous page).

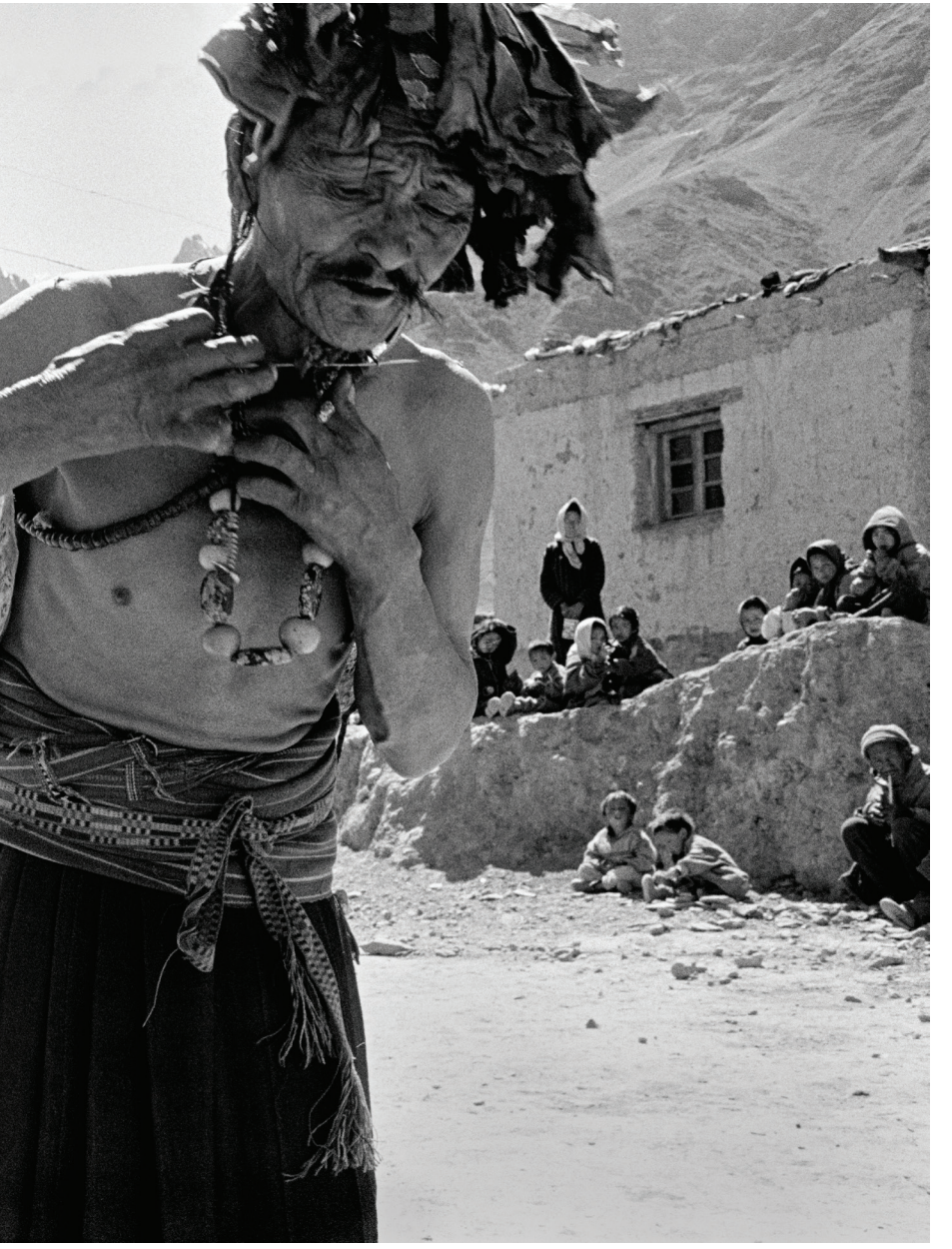


The morning after the party at a large Spiti wedding. Around the village, there were men who never made it home, lying in the sun, sleeping off the alcohol. The yak's head was part of the payment to the musicians. I had photographed Tandup Tsering suffocating this yak at the start of the wedding preparations. He shackled its legs, bound its jaws and stuffed its nostrils with dung. Afterwards, I watched children imitating the yak's death throes, the final gurgling sounds. Killing animals is really bad karma for Buddhists and is only undertaken by the lower caste or outsiders. After the animal had died, other villagers were willing to help, cutting up the carcass and distributing the meat. I was handed pieces of raw liver to eat, bloody and still warm.

Tandup Tsering was a butcher but also a musician who played the *surna*, a double-reeded wind instrument. Spiti musicians, called *Hirrip*, follow the bride throughout the wedding, playing honorific fanfares, singing songs to mark her journey from her family home to her husband's. During the long nights of Spiti wedding parties they provide the music for hours of dancing. At its best this sound is hypnotic, thundering and ecstatic. Performances develop into a competition between musicians and dancers, accelerating until one or other drops out. I recorded Tandup, drunk and exhausted, performing long instrumentals, drops of blood appearing on his blistered lips.

A few years later I heard that he had died. He was young but nobody seemed surprised. I visited his widow to give her money and offer condolences. She was previously married to his elder brother, a common Tibetan arrangement. He was also a musician, also a *surna* player, also an alcoholic. Both brothers drank themselves to an early death, casualties of the structural violence of caste.

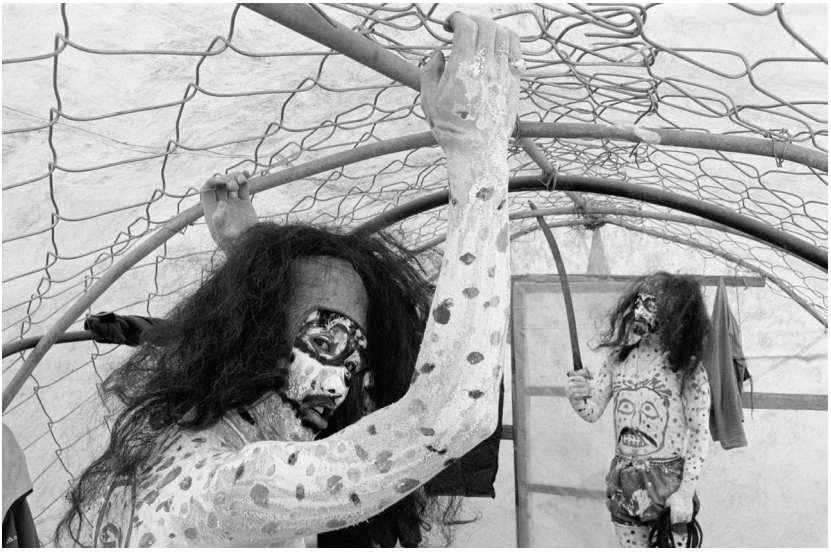
Getukma is a singer, one of Spiti's lower caste professional musicians. Her songs and music punctuate festivals and weddings, offering formal statements of honour and respect. *Hirrip* music is a rich element of Spiti's intangible culture. But caste is a contested territory in Spiti. Her son refuses to play his *surna*, the instrument that provides the melody for songs and dances. To perform as a musician is to publicly enact a diminished social status. He has left the village, found a government job and is trying to forge a life unencumbered by the limitations of his caste identity. It's widely understood that there is no concept of caste within Buddhism but it is embedded within many Buddhist communities.



The Buchen are exorcists, actors and storytellers, disciples of the fourteenth/fifteenth century Tibetan "crazy saint", Tangtong Gyalpo, and unique to the Pin Valley in Spiti. They are most widely known for performing an elaborate exorcism ritual that involves the invoking and casting out of demons. During the ritual, demons are summoned and entrapped in a block of stone. This is then laid on a man's belly and smashed. The Ceremony of Breaking the Stone is undertaken to banish disease or when new buildings are being constructed and is understood to benefit the local community in general.

In preparation for their role as religious practitioners, Head Buchen undergo periods of retreat in isolated caves. They memorise texts, undertake yogic practices and master complex tantric techniques. The perfection of these techniques gives them the power to deal with demonic forces.

In winter, Buchen also perform simple plays, well-loved and edifying Tibetan tales, the same repertoire of stories that form the basis of the Tibetan Opera. Delivering some key principles of Buddhism through entertainment is the basis of the Buchen role. On tour with their theatre, they recite prayers in houses, play music and party hard. As they dance with the villagers they sing sacred mantras together. The stage, an animal pen swept clean of ice and dung, also offers a space for comedy and slapstick, for uninhibited banter spiced with earthy humour. Buchen comment on the modern world. They joke about how mobile phones enable them to speak directly to deities. They joke about the strange four-legged humans who migrate to Spiti in summer, a mocking reference to westerners with trekking poles. They joke about foreigners kissing in public, which Spiti people find hilarious, and they joke especially about sex. But local audiences for these plays are diminishing. There is a conflict between the Buchen sense of themselves as religious practitioners and changing attitudes to their bawdiness. Their carnivalesque transgression is threatened by an increasingly educated, younger and more conservative community.



I photographed the Buchen performances and preparations: audiences sitting in animal pens in the freezing cold, actors keeping warm in greenhouses. The characterisations, as well as some costumes and props, are shared by different troupes and form part of their performance tradition. I loved the mix of absurd, sometimes obscene, humour, the prayer and deep emotion. Buchen are locally revered and treated as honoured guests within Pin Valley, where they are based, but sometimes complain that they are treated like beggars in other communities, trading the spiritual for the material, their religious performances for barley or cash.

On one trip I visited Sangye Gatuk, a member of a Buchen troupe I had toured with. He wanted to discuss the black and white prints I had been handing out. He explained that my photographs are so awful that when I leave, people tear them up and put them in the fire. This wonderful response triggered a new stage of the project. Buchen clearly found my unposed, reportage images problematic. Sangye explained that, from a Spitian perspective, good photographs are colour images of people, static and self-composed, facing the camera and dressed in their best clothing. Our attitudes towards photography seemed diametrically opposed. I wondered if we could negotiate a different strategy that would bridge this divide.

In preparation for my next fieldtrip I started researching historical imagery of the Buchen. In the British Library, John Falconer showed me an archive of photographs taken between 1910 and 1913 by John Coldstream. Coldstream was a British colonial administrator, a settlement officer, and the first person to map Spiti for the purposes of taxation. This is one of a series of images of the Ceremony of Breaking the Stone, the key Buchen exorcism ritual. He was probably the first person to photograph the ceremony.

His photograph of Lugsi, the shepherd (left), records a comic episode that forms an essential part of the stone breaking ritual. Lugsi is an argumentative and irrepressible joker. He continually interrupts and mocks the proceedings, adding obscenities and gibberish to an intense and dramatic tantric ritual. Coldstream's lugsi is barefoot, ragged and stroppy. He is blowing barley flour out of his mouth as if it was dragon's breath, confronting the camera with a grin and a clenched fist, seemingly undaunted by this encounter with alien technology, colonial authority and visual scrutiny. It's a gesture of humorous and good-natured resistance and his audience and fellow performers are clearly amused.

I returned to Spiti carrying digital prints of my own photographs of the Buchen and other historical material in order to stimulate discussion around our differing ideas of photography. We came up with the idea of shooting a series of simple colour portraits of the main characters from the Buchen plays. A series that might fit their concept of good photography, whilst also having documentary value to an outside audience. We listed the principal stories that the Buchen dramatise, the most important characters from these stories and then we chose a selection to photograph.

I encouraged the Buchen to decide how they want to present themselves to camera. They made the point that they didn't want me to photograph too much, that if my documentation was too thorough, no-one would want to come and see their performances.

They gathered costumes and props and we chose a village hall as a makeshift studio. Digital technology allowed us to review the work as it progressed. We shot, checked, discussed and reshot. Once in costume they often slipped into character and started performing. They seemed pleased with the results of the sessions. The project appeared to be moving forward and the Buchen seemed genuinely engaged.

At the end of the sessions we went through the files and I asked each of them to make a selection for themselves. They asked me to send them prints, specifying the size, but they requested portraits out of costume, not the portraits in role. It was clear that the Buchen wanted photographs, they wanted my photographs, they just didn't want to own and display the kind of documentary photographs I value.

I was intrigued by Pema Namgyal, and remember his manic energy and wacky stage presence. At one point during a Buchen performance he started ranting and teasing the audience about the negative effects of using chemical fertiliser, berating the villagers for no longer gathering dung. "If you don't have a basket then you can fill your pockets and when your pockets are full you can use your ears." At which point he stuffed goat turds in his ears to demonstrate. He seemed a natural and experienced performer, a self-confident, fast talking joker, happy to improvise in front of an audience.

I met him again recently. He's a farmer. Teetotal, serious, quiet and religiously minded. He admitted that I had documented his first experience of acting on stage. He thought I would be broadcasting his performance around the world and couldn't sleep for anxiety.

One of the characters from the story of Nangsa Obum is a monkey, which accompanies a Lama. The monkey is a tiny detail in the text of this harrowing tale, which describes the conflict between living in the material world and following a spiritual path. But it is often dramatised into an outrageous and obscene episode of Buchen performance. As the lama strums the *kogpo*, the monkey dances, wiggling his red buttocks and genitalia.

Buchen performances blend the religious and the comedic, the spiritual, social and sexual, presenting them as overlapping realms of human experience. Their carnivalesque and transgressive nature occasionally seems to subvert respect for religious authority, with portrayals of randy monks mumbling gibberish in place of prayer. But they also celebrate humanity and playfully attack dogma and unthinking convention.

When I mentioned that I was planning a small publication, the Buchen became excited by the possibilities. Books are sacred objects in Spiti. They were happy for my photographs to be published, the reportage images and the colour portraits mixed in with historical images, but insisted that everyone had to be named, each image accompanied by a description of the role of performers and name of the play they were appearing in. The book provided a resolution to the problem generated by my reportage photographs, but not a solution to the kind of images they would want to put on their walls.

I worried that Sangye Gatuk would be embarrassed to appear in print dressed as the priapic monkey (left). I questioned him several times to check. He assured me that he would treasure the book for his grandchildren.

The Buchen expressed profound disappointment with my reportage images, but I was equally bemused by *their* idea of photography, especially the computer-modified images that Spiti villagers display on their walls. This is a classic modern Spiti portrait, displayed in a house in Pin Valley. A full frontal, full length centralised figure dressed in the best of clothing and placed on an idealised background of mountains and flowers. These prints are heavily influenced by contemporary Indian studio photography: static and expressionless portraits floating upon generic internet-sourced landscapes that have been digitally montaged together. Many such photographs were commissioned outside the valley: by soldiers in the Indian army, student teachers and veterinary pharmacists away at college, pilgrims to religious sites, or farmers taking cash crops to market.

Reportage photographs locate people within a specific environment and fix them in time. Gestures or facial expressions express the fragmentary nature of the photographic moment. These Spitian photo-montages resist such depictions and replace them with an enduring temporality separated from actualities of place.

Contemporary Spiti photographs exist within established systems of visual representation. Depictions of important religious figures mirror the formal codes of Buddhist imagery: full frontal, centred, static, symmetrical. There are connections with the conventions of thangka painting: between the digitised flower beds often found in these composite portraits and the lotus throne supporting the Buddha in thangkas and wall paintings.

I was delighted to discover this photograph. It is an analogue montage employing pre-Photoshop methods. A small colour print mounted on card, which is now split, depicting the young Lochen Rinpoche, the spiritual head of Key monastery, with one of his gurus, the Serkhong Rinpoche, one of the most important lamas to travel in Spiti. Pasted on to the print is a creased and cracked, passport-sized, black and white photograph of the Panchen Lama embellished with colour. The Lochen Rinpoche and Panchen Lama lineages have long-established historical connections.

The Panchen Lama would be involved in identifying the reincarnation of the Lochen Rinpoche and vice versa. Historically, monks from Key monastery would go to Tashilunpo, the Panchen Lama's monastery in Shigatse in Tibet to continue their training. The image encapsulates their interconnection. If the Chinese had not invaded Tibet and sealed the border with Spiti, there would undoubtedly have been ordinary photographs of them meeting.

This painted photograph is positioned on a chair whenever the Lochen Rinpoche is away from the monastery. There is a long tradition of painted and hand coloured photographs. The first coloured daguerreotypes emerged very soon after the medium's invention and in India painted photographs flourished from the late 19th century.

Hand colouring and painting occupy a spectrum of possibilities. At one end are minor flourishes of colour, often gestures of respect, light touches on a black-and-white print. At the other end, the addition of new elements or the radical modification of existing elements within the frame. In this image, the clothing, seating and background have been fully coloured and a nimbus introduced to suggest enlightenment.

The original monochrome image has been re-photographed and enlarged prior to painting. In the process the feet have been thrown out of focus. Perhaps this is a simple technical mistake in the copying. But feet are locally viewed as unclean and polluting so this modification, intentional or not, is somehow extra respectful.

Photographs, of course, are not only images but also material objects. Photographs of high lamas are presented and positioned with great respect. Framed photographs of the high ranking lamas are frequently adorned with honorific scarves. In Key monastery, photographs of the Dalai Lama are hung high up, at the junction of the wall and ceiling. From a Western perspective it's an odd position but you are looking up at him and his image is looking down at you. The placement reflects ideas of honour, respect and deference.


1. Phagpa Yul Khorkyong
2. Lopon Kaminpa
3. Lopon Tropa Mepa
4. Drubthob Shinkawa
5. Lopon Dewabhama
6. Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo
18. Lobsang Thuten Rinchen Zangpo
7. Tsunpa Pelyang
17. Yongzin Lobsang Palden Rinchen Gyatso
8. Rongpa Galo
16. Jetsun Lobsang Tenpey Gyaltsen
9. Togden Ayurpa
19. Present Incarnation
Tanzin Kalsang Lochen Tulku Rinpoche
15. Lochen Tenzin Gyaltsen
14. Lobsang Tenzin Chophel
13. Khaydrub Geleg Samdrub
12. Jetsun Lobsang Paljor
11. Khenchen Ngawang Gyajin
10. Shangshung Chowang Drakpa

The 19th Lochen Rinpoche of Key monastery. Two pink lotus flowers have been montaged onto the central image, a digital form of lotus throne symbolising enlightenment. Eighteen named and numbered portraits form a frame depicting his previous incarnations. These thangka images are reproduced in black and white, amplifying the sense of the past and perhaps the authenticity of the lineage. The original thangkas are in colour but these thumbnails have been scanned in from Tashi Tsering and Roberto Vitali's *Short Guide to Key Gonpa*. Spiti's DIY photo culture has little concept of copyright.

Photographs of high lamas are commonly found in household prayer rooms, amongst statues, masks, thangkas, ritual implements, religious objects and offerings of water, flowers and fruit.

Highly honorific, these photographs are vehicles for meditation and accumulating merit, connected to beliefs in power and blessing. All Tibetan texts are believed to be sacred. Perhaps all images of high Lamas and deities too, though the particular form of reproduction seems very variable.

I am intrigued by the anomaly of commercial posters advertising apple traders or auto parts displayed within the sacred space of prayer rooms (overleaf). Each features the portrait of a highly respected Rinpoche. Spitians can happily burn my photographs but it is karmically complex to destroy visual material featuring the Dalai Lama. In prayer rooms I come across piles of identical printed cards of Buddha images brought back from pilgrimage, vinyl stickers of wrathful deities designed for attaching to car windscreens, wodges of photographs stuffed between statues and rolled up posters of visiting lamas. A kind of religious clutter is an increasing feature of Spiti households.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Spiti has quite an established culture of modifying individual static photographic images and of re-imagining the photographic frame. These images and image clusters challenge the limitations and cultural value of the straight photographic document. There is a strong sense that conventional photography is insufficient to the needs of Spitians. Unmodified photographs cannot express the subtleties of affiliation and association, status, values and beliefs that Spiti people desire from their photographic imagery. Like rituals, these photographs can be seen as having agency. They are, perhaps, attempts to influence or transform the world.

The unmodified image is what reportage photography holds dear: descriptions of actual people in real places at particular moments in time. This is precisely what these modified Spiti photographs resist. They present portraits in idealised forms, removed from the moment past and from the placement of the individual within the everyday world. Spiti photographs transcend the limitations of the straight document: they can bring together within a single frame, the living and the dead, people who are normally separated by politics and geography and they convey connections between ordinary human beings, politico-religious elites and deities. In doing so they express fundamental local and Buddhist ideas of lineage and authority, of enlightenment and reincarnation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lynne Finn for organising the Professorial Platform Lecture that marked my departure from LCC, Natalie Brett for funding this publication and for her generous encouragement, Ian Collison and Ernesto Ortiz Delgado for recording the lecture, and Russ Bestley for designing the publication, as ever a joy to work with. My numerous fieldtrips to Spiti over the last twenty-five years and my long absences from home have relied heavily on the generous and unwavering support of my wife Clare Jarrett and my children Catherine, Maddy and Jamie. This ongoing project would not have been possible without the participation, encouragement and advice of a very large number of people, far too numerous to list. I am particularly grateful to my many friends and collaborators in Spiti and within the Tibetan and Tibetan-supporting community, and to my friends and colleagues at LCC and UAL. The work would not have been possible without your support.

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One of our goals is to sustain and develop a world-class research culture that supports and informs the university's academic profile. As a leader in the arts and design sector, we aim to clearly articulate the practice-based nature of much of our research, and in doing so to demonstrate the importance of the creative arts to scholarly research. The Professorial Platforms series is an opportunity for University colleagues and associates, as well as invited members of the public to learn more about the research undertaken in the University. The Platforms enable Professors to highlight their field of interest and the University, in turn, to recognise and commemorate their successes to date.

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