

Himalayan medical encounters: the establishment of Western biomedicine in Tibet

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During the 19th century, the first point of contact with Western medical systems for many Tibetans came via encounters with European travellers (who were generally either accompanied by a medical officer, or had acquired some practical medical knowledge themselves), or during their own excursions to British India. In the 20th century, the Younghusband mission (1903-04), marked the formal introduction of Western biomedicine into Tibet. Medical officers with the mission offered free services to Tibetans, including wounded 'enemy' combatants, and at the completion of the mission officers of the Indian Medical Service were stationed in Tibet to continue this free provision of biomedicine to the Tibetans. Despite initial cultural resistance, biomedicine proved popular there, and its development was further stimulated within the limited modernisation project initiated by the 13th Dalai Lama in the period 1913–23. By the 1940s, biomedicine appeared to be replacing the Tibetan medical system(s), not only in regard to its adoption by Tibetan elites, but across the broader community.

This paper is concerned to briefly examine the general nature and consequences of the informal encounters of the 19th century, before focussing on the explicit political aims of the British introduction of biomedicine, the medical aspects of the modernisation project, and its consequences for Tibetan medical systems. In conclusion, these elements will be considered in regard to the subsequent (post-1950s) renaissance of Tibetan medicine in the West, in order to bring out the two-way nature of the political aspects of this medical encounter.