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## Book Review: *Fearless in Tibet: The Life of the Mystic Tertön Sogyal* by Matteo Pistono

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**Review of *Fearless in Tibet: The Life of the Mystic Tertön Sogyal*  
by Matteo Pistono**

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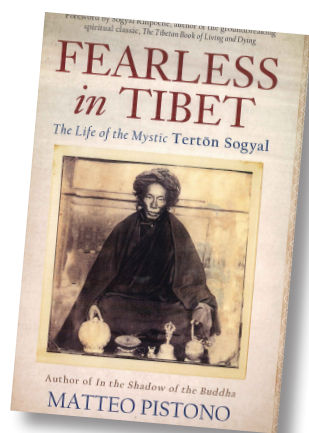
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***Fearless in Tibet: The Life of the Mystic Tertön Sogyal***

**Matteo Pistono.** Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2014. 351 pages. ISBN 9781401941468.

**Reviewed by Alyson Prude**

Tertön Sogyal (1856-1926), also known as Lerab Lingpa, was a prolific Treasure-revealer from eastern Tibet who acquired the patronage of none other than the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. Sogyal's influence on Tibetan religion and politics did not, however, end in the early

20th century. A life-force stone discovered by Sogyal was worn by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama on his escape from Tibet in 1959, and the Vajrakilaya rituals that Sogyal revealed are practiced in Dharamsala today by monks at the Dalai Lama's personal chapel. *Fearless in Tibet* retells the spiritual life-story of the Treasure-revealer, combining the oral histories that Pistono collected during his decade of travels in Tibet, Nepal, and India with a Tibetan-language hagiography written by one of Sogyal's disciples.

The book begins with a reconstructed account of Sogyal's childhood, including elements common to the biographies of Buddhist adepts: Sogyal's father wanted him to become a strong hunter; his mother secretly supported his desire to practice the Dharma. Unfortunately, the narrative is embellished with trite dialogue, such as when Sogyal's father states, "My son... is not gonna be a monk—he's ridin' sidekick with me" (p. 2). After this rocky start, the story picks up with descriptions of Sogyal's numerous and fantastical Treasure discoveries. One night, for example, Sogyal gets up just after midnight to begin climbing to a mountain cave. He arrives at dawn to meditate, and when the moment is right, withdraws his ritual dagger causing the rock wall of the cave to open and reveal a bronze Treasure casket. Sogyal takes the casket and

later unseals it to discover medicinal pills and a scroll (pp. 74-5). In another episode, Sogyal elicits a reaction from a painting of Tibet's protector deity, Palden Lhamo. When he threatens the painting with his dagger, Palden Lhamo's mule comes to life and kicks its leg into the air, at which point an angry black serpent appears with yet another Treasure casket (p. 101). The accounts of Sogyal's Treasure discoveries make for a lively narrative, and brief excerpts from Sogyal's prophecies and revelations introduce the reader to the basics of the Tibetan Treasure tradition.

Sogyal's life-story includes numerous interactions between the unrefined Nyingma yogi from Nyarong and Tibet's political leader and highest-ranking Gelugpa monk, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. Over the course of his life, Sogyal is repeatedly summoned to Lhasa to perform rituals for the long life of the Dalai Lama and to ward off the advancing British army. Perhaps without exaggeration, Pistono describes Sogyal as "Tibet's tantric defense minister" (p. 88). Unfortunately, *Fearless in Tibet* does not attempt to contextualize Sogyal or his practices within larger social or religious movements, and thus it passes without comment that Sogyal seems to have encountered little resistance or competition as he traveled, revealing and propagating his Treasures. Instead, the book

... is a lively and highly readable introduction to a powerful tantric yogi, a different sort of religious specialist from the scholar-monk who occupies much of the Western imagination.

**Alyson Prude on *Fearless in Tibet: The Life of the Mystic Tertön Sogyal***

claims that “the British were... unable to march on Lhasa because of the yogis’ protective shield and the Tibetans’ collective storehouse of positive merit” (p. 98) and that what made the country vulnerable to Chinese forces was the worship of Dorje Shugden (p. 172). Lost is an opportunity to probe the intersections of history, religion, and polemic in Tibetan hagiography.

Despite Pistono’s extensive field research, scholars will find *Fearless in Tibet* disappointing. Pistono credits the “spiritual biography” of Sogyal’s disciple Tsultrim Zangpo as his primary source yet states that he read through the 725-page text with the help of a Tibetan monk over the course of just six weeks spread out between Dharamsala and Washington, D.C. The extent to which Pistono himself reads Tibetan is unclear, but a reader gets the sense that the monk skimmed the text and offered Pistono an abbreviated summary. This in and of itself is not an insurmountable weakness; Tibetan hagiographies often contain little in the way of biography and lots in the way of Dharma. When read in conjunction with Pistono’s previous book which also sketches the broad outlines of Sogyal’s life, *In the Shadow of the Buddha* (New York: Dutton, 2011), however, a reader is left to wonder how Tsultrim Zangpo’s account compares to the oral histories that Pistono collected. For example, *In*

*the Shadow of the Buddha* reports an episode in which Sogyal and the Dalai Lama send a letter and diamond pendant “westward” by tying them around the neck of a raven. Three months later, the raven returns with a locket containing blonde hair and a letter, written in English, which enable Sogyal to decode a particularly important Treasure teaching (pp. 174-6). Surprisingly, this account is left out of *Fearless in Tibet* where we are told that Sogyal offered the Treasure teachings in question to the Dalai Lama as soon as he arrived in Lhasa (p. 162). Why was the story of the raven omitted from *Fearless in Tibet*?

Given the importance of the physical landscape to Treasure revelation, Pistono could have enhanced the narrative with vivid depictions of the many places mentioned in the text, thus adding an awareness of environment not found in Tibetan hagiographies. Photographs of the places mentioned in the text, such as Trom and Dzongsar, and descriptions of the monasteries Sogyal visited would have complemented the black-and-white photographs of paintings and statues that are interspersed throughout the text (and which would be more useful if their origin and approximate date of creation were provided). The addition of socio-cultural information that Pistono undoubtedly possesses would have further enhanced the reader’s appreciation for the

context in which Sogyal lived and conveyed useful information about the continued importance of blessings and relics within Tibetan Buddhism. Details of the many interviews Pistono conducted would have preserved information about Tibetan lamas, such as Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok and Khenpo Ajam, now passed, as well as the ways that narratives of religious masters’ lives are remembered, recorded, and celebrated. This would be especially valuable given the current state of affairs in which travel to the places Pistono visited is restricted and great monasteries like Larung and Yachen-gar are being destroyed.

*Fearless in Tibet* captures the flavor and excitement of Tibet’s tradition of Treasure revelation and lays a useful groundwork for further studies of an important religious figure whose collected revelations fill twenty volumes. For the Tibetan Studies scholar, the book lacks the requisite specificity and documentation of sources, and the absence of notations in the text to indicate corresponding endnotes is particularly frustrating. Put out by a non-academic, “self-help and transformational” publisher, the book’s intended readership seems, however, to be well-read Dharma practitioners with some background knowledge of Tibetan tantric Buddhism (<[www.hayhouse.com/about](http://www.hayhouse.com/about)>). For Dharma students and lay readers, *Fearless in Tibet* is a lively and highly readable

introduction to a powerful tantric yogi, a different sort of religious specialist from the scholar-monk who occupies much of the Western imagination.

*Alyson Prude is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia Southern University. Her research focuses on women's religious practices in Tibet and the Himalayas.*