

Taming the Poisonous: Mercury, Toxicity, and Safety in Tibetan Medical Practice

Barbara Gerke

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In *Taming the Poisonous: Mercury, Toxicity, and Safety in Tibetan Medical and Buddhist Ritual Practice* (2021), Barbara Gerke presents a deeply interdisciplinary investigation that reconfigures how we understand materiality, risk, and epistemology in Tibetan medicine and tantric traditions. This vital monograph is not only an ethnographic and historical contribution to Tibetan humanities but also a powerful critique of scientific hegemony and cultural translation, where the ‘poisonous’ becomes a site of philosophical, medical, and political transformation. Drawing from nearly two decades of research and multisite ethnographic fieldwork, Gerke traces the intricate life of mercury across ritual, textual, and pharmacological landscapes. Her work is valuable for scholars working at the intersections of medical anthropology, Buddhist studies, material culture, and transcultural theory.

Taming the Poisonous follows the story of the chemical element mercury through a discourse that centres on the concept of taming in Tibetan Medicine and Tantric Buddhist Studies. The author foregrounds taming, *dülwa* (*dul ba*), not only as a medical practice of detoxification but also as a deeply embedded philosophical and spiritual aspiration,

from the control of wild animals to the training of the mind in Buddhist soteriology and the legendary subjugation of demonic forces by Guru Padmasambhava in the 8th century. Gerke thus constructs a layered analytical nexus wherein the transformation of a dangerous substance into a potent medicine is also an artisanal, spiritual, and epistemic act.

The central focus of Gerke's anthropological engagement is her compelling demonstration of 'transculturality' and the complexity of navigating different epistemes. She interrogates how safety is conceived and enacted in Sowa-Rigpa (Tibetan Medicine), particularly as the practice travels across cultural boundaries—how it is translated, adopted, and resisted across contexts. The book offers a nuanced view of what it means for knowledge to be traditional yet globally mobile.

Through a close investigation of pharmacological techniques involved in the processing and taming of mercury, Gerke explores the intersection of embodied practices, mythical cosmologies, gendered transmission, and lineage-specific expertise in Tibetan medical traditions. She argues persuasively that Tibetan medicine reflects a spirit of scientific inquiry and innovation, even while it diverges from biomedical paradigms. Drawing on the critical scholarship of Talal Asad and others, Gerke criticizes the assumption that cultural translation is a neutral act. Instead, she highlights that translation is deeply embedded in power relations, especially around the definitions of toxicity, safety, and legitimacy.

Gerke untangles in great detail, and perhaps for the first time for a general readership, the complex transformative and manufacturing process that foregrounds traditional alchemy techniques found in Indian,

Chinese, and Tibetan traditions. While affirming that mercury taming is uniquely Tibetan in ritual and pharmacological synthesis, Gerke's comparative gestures leave room for further cross-cultural exploration. Importantly, she cautions against simplistic comparisons between medical systems and instead advocates for attention to modes of adaptation—an approach that gives anthropological investigations into transculturality a practice-informed and entangled texture.

Gerke's ethnographic fieldwork was conducted primarily at the Men-Tse-Khang and Delek Hospital in Dharamshala. These two institutions have played distinct roles in her research: Men-Tse-Khang has focused on the alchemical *taming* of mercury, while Delek Hospital has evaluated toxicity markers using biomedical protocols. These contrasting approaches underscore one of the book's major concerns—the tension between traditional Tibetan pharmacological knowledge and contemporary biomedical standards of safety. Beyond clinical settings, Gerke incorporates insights gathered from public events, such as conferences and seminars, as well as extensive interviews with Sowa-Rigpa and Ayurvedic practitioners. She also draws from her conversations and lectures delivered at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in Sarnath, India. Importantly, Gerke foregrounds her positionality as a researcher, acknowledging the influence of her own cultural perceptions of safety and embodied responses to toxicity. These reflections do not remain anecdotal; rather, they inform the theoretical framing developed later in the book.

A critical dimension of Gerke's ethnography lies in her engagement with secrecy and the gendered nature of esoteric knowledge transmission in Tantric Buddhist and Tibetan medical traditions. She

provides thoughtful accounts of why and how secrecy is maintained through lineage, ritualized practice, and oral transmission, particularly around the alchemical handling of mercury.

Chapters 2 and 3 of *Taming the Poisonous* position mercury not simply as a chemical element but as a living, mutable substance, a transformative agent whose taming is both a pharmacological and metaphysical act. Gerke traces the historical trajectories of mercury use in Tibet and its evolution during the exile period. She offers detailed documentation of how prominent Rinpoche(s) and physicians sustained medicinal lineages while filling therapeutic voids in exile communities. These chapters are further enriched by rare photographs, visual charts, and historical timelines including references to successive Dalai Lamas involved in mercury-related practices.

Critically, Gerke challenges the adequacy of dominant theoretical models such as the “social life of materials” and the “pharmaceutical nexus” for understanding Tibetan medical traditions. Rather than discarding them, she productively treats them as both conceptual tools and empirical questions, using them to reveal the embedded tensions between material agency, ritual knowledge, and modern regulatory regimes.

A particularly striking section addresses the 1977 taming of mercury in a Chinese labour camp. Drawing on the autobiographical writings of *Lamepa Chödrok* and *Khenpo Troru Tsenam*, Gerke treats biography not just as narrative but as a mode of scholarly documentation, illustrating the intertwining of political history, spiritual practice, and pharmacological resilience.

Chapter 4 of the book engages deeply with the interlinked ideas of ‘taming,’ ‘secrecy,’ and ‘knowledge transmission’ in Sowa-Rigpa. Gerke positions mercury taming as the most prestigious processing technique in Tibetan pharmacology and ritual practice, an alchemical act that reflects both technical mastery and spiritual lineage. Drawing from sociological theory, she references the concept of *Rigpa* as akin to Max Weber’s notion of “vocation,” proposing a culturally situated Tibetan model of scientific inquiry.

In Chapter 5 of her book, Gerke turns to gender and foregrounds the experiences of three women physicians: Lobsang Dolma Khangkar, Ani Ngawang, and Do Dase Wangmo. These trailblazing women are engaged in mercury processing despite longstanding prohibitions. Their accounts offer compelling portraits of resistance and resilience, revealing how these women negotiate taboos around the female body and claims to sacred knowledge. Though these women have privileged background and are a part of a long-standing teacher-student relationality, they all had to navigate both spiritual legitimacy and institutional scepticism. Gerke enriches this discussion with an evocative reading of Indic mythology, tracing the symbolic association of mercury with the union of Śiva and Pārvatī, thus grounding gendered restrictions in deeper cultural narratives. While critically addressing the justification or enforcement of these restrictions, she avoids gender essentialism, inviting the reader to consider the fluid negotiations of embodied authority in Tibetan medicine.

Chapter 6 of *Taming the Poisonous* is a shift toward the sensorial and experiential dimensions of mercury taming. Gerke

foregrounds the voices of contemporary practitioners, who describe their embodied engagement with mercury through the tantric concepts of heat, transformation, and purification. Using both historical records and ethnographic narratives, she reconstructs the process of hot and cold taming techniques and the typologies of disease that the processed mercury is believed to treat. Gerke also highlights the occupational hazards faced by tamers and the safety measures they develop, often blending ritual protocols with practical observation.

The analysis moves from local practice to global critique in Chapter 7. Here, Gerke confronts the tensions between traditional epistemes and global discourses on toxicity and regulation. She contextualizes these tensions through the Dalai Lama's statement, "we have to prove scientifically what Tibetans already know" (p. 238), using it to frame ongoing debates around scientific legitimacy, evidence, and policy. She argues that biomedical definitions of safety are largely shaped by Western regulatory frameworks, which tend to override or marginalize traditional systems like Sowa-Rigpa. However, she also brings to attention the hopeful current: Tibetan practitioners' increasing engagement with Western scientific expectations to ensure both survival and innovation within their medical system. Gerke's discussion underscores that this is not merely a biomedical debate but a political and ecological one; what counts as "safe" is never neutral.

For researchers and scholars of Sowa-Rigpa, such as myself, *Taming the Poisonous* illuminates a range of critical debates, particularly those related to pharmacy work, the compounding of medicines, and the artisanal expertise that traditional practitioners command. Gerke's ethnography raises essential questions: How are these skills acquired

and transmitted? What variables are shaping their transformation in contemporary contexts?

For readers in Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, the book contributes meaningfully to ongoing discussions about the concept of *poison* in Buddhist cosmology—its symbolic, cultural, and therapeutic meanings. For those engaged in historical, philological, and text-based inquiry, this monograph provides substantial new material, especially through its integration of textual history into the pharmaceutical nexus.

Importantly, the book also resonates with readers beyond the above-mentioned disciplinary categories. Gerke's attention to social patronage, gendered transmission, and embodied interpretations of safety makes her work relevant to anyone invested in understanding how knowledge systems emerge, travel, and adapt. Her central challenge to the presumed universality of scientific thought and her insistence on examining the politics of safety makes her book a compelling and timely read.

In times when the global circulation of traditional knowledge is both enabled and constrained by scientific, ecological, and political forces, *Taming the Poisonous* offers an essential case study in bridging epistemes. Gerke's work evokes a spirit of respectable pluralism, a concept as fluid and adaptive as mercury itself. Just as Tibetans across the world navigate pluralistic societies, the book reveals how such epistemic bridgework is not only possible but already embedded in the everyday practices of healing, translation, and transformation.