



THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL DEATH: BUDDHISM, IMPERMANENCE, AND FAMILY IN TIBET

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Nothing is permanent. The idea of impermanence, or *mi rtag pa*, is a core idea in Tibetan Buddhism. Meditating on impermanence helps individuals comprehend the transitory nature of reality, and thus prepare for death.

Grappling with this philosophical idea is the responsibility of Buddhist monks and nuns, whose lives are devoted to the practice of religion. But, as with all religious concepts, impermanence also shapes the lives and ideas of lay people.

For ordinary Tibetans, what does it mean to live impermanence? Specifically, if meditations on impermanence prepare one for death, can they also be useful for something less predictable, for the possibility of social death?

In this talk I consider the social death of the powerful, but controversial Pangdatsang family. The story of their rise and fall, and of the familial and communal repercussions of social death, offers a window into the conceptual place of impermanence in Tibetan society and beyond.

Carole McGranahan is the author of Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War (Duke University Press, 2010), and co-editor with Ann Laura Stoler and Peter Perdue of Imperial Formations (SAR Press, 2007), and with John Collins of Ethnographies of U.S. Empire (Duke University Press, 2018). Her volume Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment is due out in May 2020.

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