

Tibet

**Matthew Kapstein. *The Tibetans***

Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. xviii + 360 pages. Maps, photographs, spellings of Tibetan names and terms, bibliography, index. Hardcover, US\$31.95; ISBN-13: 978-0-631-22574-4, ISBN-10: 0-631-22574-9.

A MAJORITY of scholars of Tibet are Buddhologists, or otherwise study the religions and religious literature of that mountainous and still remote realm. There are very good reasons for this, given the doctrinally, textually, and artistically elaborate religious systems of Tibet, and Matthew Kapstein, the author of this multifaceted primer of Tibet, is himself one of the world's leading scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and culture. The book under review, however, is a balanced summary of the geography, languages, prehistory, history, and polity of Tibet. It is a book that all scholars of Tibet and Central Asia, regardless of disciplinary focus, should read and control. The reason for this high praise is that no other book has this reach; Kapstein does an excellent job of covering all these areas (and more), and he does it without the biases that afflict considerable swaths of scholarship in the field. In addition to the above topics, Kapstein addresses political and dynastic history, the history of Tibet's social and cultural institutions, the role of women in Tibet, the unique role played by the primary religio-political leaders—namely the Dalai Lamas, and the history and development of Tibetan literature, art, and medicine. He concludes with a chapter on the breakdown of Tibetan society in the twentieth century, its brutal takeover by the Chinese, the aftermath of this forced regime change, and thoughts on the future. In his discussions of religion in Tibet, which, he notes, pervades most aspects of life there, Kapstein deals not just with Buddhism and Bön, but with Islam and Christianity as well, both of which have a history and presence in the area. He covers the expected areas well, including discussions of the different sects of Vajrayana Buddhism, monastic institutions, yoga, and Tantra, all of which are advanced by initiations and hierarchies that have impacted on the culture as a whole. Through all of this, the book is free from jargon and is accessible to the general reader.

The book is a volume in a series titled *The Peoples of Asia*. The other published books in the series are *The Manchus*, *The Persians*, *The Mughals of India*, *The Mongols*, and *The Afghans*. Others, titled *The Turks*, *The Phoenecians*, *The Japanese*, and *The Chinese*, are in preparation. Mindful of the dedicated content of the series, Kapstein begins with a description of the geography and topography of Tibet, and accounts of animals, peasants, nomads, and traders, linking nomadism with agricultural settlement. He describes the crops grown at the lower elevations, including barley and tea, that enable those high on the plateau to survive through trading, and recognizes that those who controlled the waterways and irrigation channels were central in the emergence of the early Tibetan state. Kapstein's training as a

Tibetologist is evident when he describes the Tibetan language, its dialects, and the development of the Tibetan script in the seventh century from North Indian and Central Asian models.

Of particular interest to this reviewer are Kapstein's perspicacious discussions of the basic terminology of early Tibetan religion and his judicious and succinct descriptions of spirit-mediumship (*lhabab*) and its relation with the state, particularly the monarch or *tsenpo*. This is a very old and revered practice in Tibet, emerging from a broad background of Central Asian shamanism, the definition(s) of which Kapstein wisely sidesteps. On the village level, practitioners become possessed by local ghosts and demons, while more high profile mediums are possessed by major protector divinities associated with the Tibetan state. Those who experience such oracular possession may be monks or laymen (in the case of monks it might be part of their occupation), men or women, and it could also be competitive. More formal and contemporary religious authorities see possession by protective deities to be "the true archaic form of mediumship, while communication with common ghosts and the like is taken to be evidence of later corruption" (49). Discussions such as this on details of religious practice, including that of Bön, and their relationship with cultural and political institutions of all periods in Tibet are particularly important given the balance of cultural forces there.

A great deal of the book is taken up in discussion of Tibetan polity from the seventh century to modern times. Tibet, we learn, was a great regional power in the second half of the first millennium CE. Although it collapsed in the ninth century, "its afterglow has been sufficiently forceful so as to have engendered an empire of the imagination" (52). Discussions of the rise and fall of various Tibetan imperial formations, dynastic interactions, and the political uses of Buddhism are important to the story.

The establishment of Buddhism was gradual after its introduction to Tibet from India in the fourth century. After a number of failed attempts to solidify its position, Buddhism was finally adopted by Tri Songdetsen, who ruled from 755-797. Thereafter it was so thoroughly incorporated that "[b]y the twelfth century the story of the Buddhist conquest of Tibet had developed to become an elaborate national epic, explaining the very emergence of Tibet and its inhabitants, and especially the appearance of the Tsenpos, as evidence of Avalokiteshvara's compassionate intercession in the world of ordinary beings" (66). In its moments of ascendancy, three figures dominated: "Together the king Tri Songdetsen, the monk Shantarakshita, and the adept Padmasambhava came to be popularly revered as the trinity of the Tibetan conversion and so represent three of the major constituents of the Tibetan religious world: patron, monk, and Tantric adept" (68). Considerable legend appears to have grown around these three, especially the latter, which underscores that "the religious view of the past cannot be readily reconciled with the demands of critical history" (68-69). Eventually, Buddhism came "to serve the dominant classes as a marker of status, a token of their excellence and worth" (102). It was not far from that point for Buddhism to become a powerful tool in the hands of lay and monastic elites in the construction of a feudal or semi-feudal society. Indeed, wealth and commerce within the context of Buddhist morality

became associated with the symbolic wealth of religious merit. It is no surprise, then, to learn of “the close relationship between the political and religious dimensions of Tibetan imperial authority” (76).

As for the necessity of Buddhism as a state religion, “we can imagine that the Buddhist monastic academy provided medieval Tibet with an ideal model of organized knowledge. In a sprawling empire in which the management of information must have been felt as an ever more pressing concern, part of the attraction of Buddhism stemmed from its particular mastery over the arts of the written word, its mastery of reason” (71). The state required “a framework of universal law, which Buddhism was able to supply” (71). Far from being an isolated theocracy, it held important geographical, cultural, and doctrinal positions in the burgeoning world of Buddhism, particularly Mahāyāna. Kapstein notes that, “In both quantitative and qualitative terms the achievement of the Tibetan translators must be ranked among the cultural monuments of the medieval world and the hundreds of texts translated into Tibetan by the imperial translation committees may be counted among the finest achievements of the art of translation in any place or time” (72).

The final chapter presents a balanced view of Chinese and Tibetan internal conflicts, misunderstandings, external pressures, deceit by the Americans after World War II, timorous disinterest on the part of Nehru’s India, internal bungling and ineffectual leadership on the part of the Tibetan government in the first half of the twentieth century (the exception being the XIV Dalai Lama himself, who appears to have consistently operated within the highest principles of Buddhism), and the betrayal and genocide by the Chinese. Tibet was a stridently theocratic society that vigorously favored religious and economic elites (like nearly all pre-modern societies). Because of this, and because of the nature of the Chinese Communist system in the 1950s, Kapstein writes, “Tibet had been dragged, kicking and screaming, into one version of modernity” (290). With respect to the future, he writes, “China has signaled that it intends to fulfill the infrastructural requirements for Tibet’s integration into the economic life of China as a whole. The challenge that it faces is to make the Tibetan people the true beneficiaries of ongoing development, or to risk proving the exiles correct by transforming the Tibetans into a people thoroughly disenfranchised in their own homes” (297). This is the proper attitude for the author of such a primer on Tibet to take. As a reviewer, however, it is fair to state that at this point the latter proclivity appears to have gained the upper hand as the Han Chinese, with their rapacious appetite for the fruits of modernization, have assumed thorough control over all aspects of the Tibetan economy that might contribute to Tibet’s integration with China. There can be no question that the forces of “liberation” have clearly become the forces of repression.

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