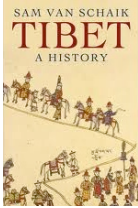


REVIEW: *TIBET – A HISTORY*

Reviewed by Ivette Vargas-O'Bryan (Austin College)



Sam van Schaik. 2011. *Tibet: A History*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 324pp, 24 b/w illustrations. ISBN: 10: 0300154046; 13: 9780300154047 (hardcover 30.77USD; paper 20.48USD; mobi 17.71USD).

Sam van Schaik, a lecturer at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, the British Library's expert on early Tibet, and author of an informative site on early Tibet,¹ has written a unique, extensive history of Tibet, encompassing the pre-imperial period to the present day. Given that works by Tsering Shakya (2000), Goldstein (1991, 2009), and Kapstein (2006) exist, why is another on the subject necessary? In the present work, the author calls into question many preconceptions the general reader and scholars may have about Tibet in terms of its religion, society, and politics. Anyone who has encountered Tibet is aware that its history is messy. What is most significant about this work is the narrative style, reminiscent of how Tibetans themselves often tell their own stories, colorfully intertwined with intrigue and diversions. This innovative tale of several cultures, cities, and persons reveals insight into the region. At times, this book resembles an intimate novella, rather than a dry catalogue of lists and dates, thus providing an authentic sense of the past.

In ten dense chapters, the glory days of the Tibetan empire in the seventh century, the times of persecutions, the balance of power, the switching of positions of conquest in dealings with China, the Arabs, and other groups, and the practices and uses of religion,

¹ <http://earlytibet.com>, accessed 21 November 2013.

particularly Tibetan Buddhism, are all illustrated. The selection of stories and events reveal the critique that, "the greatest representation of Tibet is that it was unchanging" (xviii).

Rather than succumbing to Orientalist or romantic notions of Tibet, or accentuating the predominance of the Dge lugs pa school, this work captures other stories – the lives of princesses, warlords, various Buddhist schools and religions, and cultures. At a time when Tibetan history has become a political tool in debates about Tibet's status within China, and as Chinese historians have looked for evidence of Tibetan dependence on China, van Schaik strikes a balance in perspectives by drawing from several historical and narrative sources.

Two critical aspects of Tibetan history in van Schaik's work are the varieties of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet's constant interactions with outside powers. These two aspects work together throughout the development of plural Tibetan histories, capturing the representation of views from Tibetan and Chinese sources of the struggles to maintain power at all costs. This book emphasizes that Tibet has never been isolated, at least not for a very long while, given its key role in changes that occurred in Central Asia and China. As early as the eighth century, there were complex relationships and conflicts between Tibetans and the Chinese, the Uighur, and the Arabs.

In the nineteenth century, Tibet was drawn into the Great Game between Russia and the British Empire. Twentieth century events include the British-Tibetan War of 1904, the need for Russian and British intervention, the escape of the Dalai Lama, the takeover by Mao, to the struggles in contemporary Tibet and in exile. The accounts provide reports of divergent Tibetan Buddhist sects deeply involved in political intrigue, e.g., the Dalai Lama blessing rifles or monastics involved in fighting, alongside accounts of devout leaders of Buddhism seeking teachings from India and Central Asia.

Ironic moments include Tibetans attacking Khotan, a major Buddhist area, and later supporting Buddhism over their own native traditions. Assimilation is often key in the adoption and adaptation of

religion. Tibet was no exception. Religion also played a key role for the devout and for the powerful, creating allies as well as enemies.

Though few passages in the book make original academic points, information is presented in an intimate, accessible, and entertaining manner. It has much to offer the general reader and undergraduate and first-year graduate students. Throughout, readers may find their ideas about Tibet being challenged and gaps in knowledge filled by narrative-historical detail.

In requiring my own undergraduate students read this history for a digital humanities course on Tibetan cultures, alongside works by other scholars, we found that it filled some gaps in knowledge in accessible ways. To the uninitiated reader, the extensive list of historical figures van Schaik draws from may, at times, seem daunting, perhaps selecting events from the less famous figures of history and from life stories of other Tibetan figures would have had more appeal. Overall, however, it is a well-written history of what shaped Tibet in its many twists and turns of fate. What struck me most about this work is that I could not put it down. I wanted to show a film that captured all the vignettes that the book was capturing. It was like a Tibetan Borgias series. I often asked myself, "How did he know all this detail? Was he there?"

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