

SAM VAN SCHAİK

TIBET
A HISTORY

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations and Maps</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Note On Pronouncing Tibetan Words</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xv</i>
1 Tibet Appears, 600–700	1
2 The Holy Buddhist Empire, 700–797	21
3 Keepers of the Flame, 797–1054	41
4 Patrons and Priests, 1054–1315	61
5 Golden Age, 1315–1543	85
6 The Rise and Fall of the Dalai Lamas, 1543–1757	114
7 The Balancing Act, 1757–1904	146
8 Independence, 1904–1950	180
9 Under the Red Flag, 1950–1959	207
10 Two Tibets, 1959 to the Present	238
<i>Notes</i>	<i>270</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>292</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>304</i>

Preface

Where is Tibet? It can be difficult to locate, even in a bookshop. Uncertain or nervous booksellers rarely seem to know what to do with books on Tibet. Some stick them straight onto the 'China' shelf. Some, aware that this is an unpopular strategy among many outside China, find a corner somewhere in 'Asia, General'. Others transcend the whole geographical issue by putting their books on Tibet on the 'Buddhism' shelves, allowing Tibet to float entirely free of complicated questions of politics and place. And there's a certain university library in London where it has become customary to deface the sign on the shelves containing books on Tibet: 'China' is scratched out and 'Tibet' written under it; then somebody else comes and scratches out 'Tibet' and writes 'China' again. And so on. The plight of these books is indicative of the confusion surrounding the status of Tibet itself.

Look at a map for another example. Where, on the map, is Tibet? Some modern writers make a distinction between 'political Tibet', which is the area within the borders of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and 'ethnographic Tibet', a wider territory sharing a language and culture that are still recognisably Tibetan. This wider concept of Tibet overlaps with four other Chinese provinces – Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan – and the Himalayan kingdoms of Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim and Ladakh. The Tibetans have their own version of this distinction, which goes back many centuries. They speak of the central region of the country, roughly corresponding to the modern Autonomous Region, as 'Tibet' (*Bod*, pronounced *bö*), and the wider realm of Tibetan culture as 'Greater Tibet' (*Bod chen po*).

PREFACE

As if this were not confusing enough, we also have political ideologies distorting any attempt to define Tibet. The clash of ideologies was particularly obvious in March 2009, a troubled anniversary for Tibet. Half a century early protests against the Chinese presence in Lhasa resulted in the flight of the Dalai Lama to India, the violent suppression of the protestors and the swift dismantling of traditional Tibet. As the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan government in exile prepared to mark the anniversary with speeches calling for an end to the Communist Party's repressive regime in Tibet, the Chinese government announced that the same anniversary was to be celebrated as 'serf liberation day'.

It has become clear that the debate over Tibet's identity has turned into a war of wildly differing visions. In a war like this, history plays perhaps the most important role. Arguments supporting the current state of Tibet as a region of China reach back to the Manchu dynasty in the eighteenth century, and further still, to the great Mongol empire in the thirteenth century and the Tibetan empire in the seventh. Such arguments are countered by Tibetan claims that their empire was once the equal of the Chinese, and that later relationships with the Mongols and Manchus (who were not, in any case, Chinese) were on the model of the relationship between religious patrons and their priests.

Then there are the arguments about what life was like in Tibet before the Communist reforms of the 1960s. Was it, as some claim, a spiritual paradise, a prelapsarian world in which everyone was happy with their lot, motivated by compassion and striving only for the highest Buddhist goal of freeing all living beings from suffering? Or was it a place of medieval suffering, in which peasants were bound to their lord's manor for life, their lack of freedom compounded by their ignorance in a system that privileged the monks and the aristocracy? The Chinese have characterised traditional Tibet as a 'hell on earth'. Countering them, the Dalai Lama has spoken of life in modern Tibet using the very same words. Thus the year 1959 has become a line dividing good from evil, like the symbol of yin and yang, but with the black and white constantly switching from one side to another depending on who is speaking.

There is, of course, more to Tibet than is allowed for by these polemics, and there is more to Tibet's history than its relationship with China. Indeed, there is much more than any of the clichés allow. For over a thousand years most Tibetans were Buddhists, and Tibetan history features some of the most inspiring saints of any religious tradition. But that did not prevent Tibet being a dangerous and often violent place where travellers carried swords, and later

PREFACE

guns, at all times. In Eastern Tibet violence might be prolonged for generations by blood feuds in vicious cycles of revenge. Everywhere life was highly stratified by the distinctions between the aristocratic minority and the mass of ordinary peasants and nomads.

This is only to say that the same factors found in every other pre-modern society were active in Tibet. And why should they not have been? Romantic visions of Tibet tend to make Tibetans unrecognisable as ordinary people. But their adherence to Buddhism did not lessen their enjoyment of drinking, dancing and music. Nor did it lessen their anxieties about ordinary things such as birth, marriage and livelihood. Rather than trusting such things entirely to the impersonal force of karma, they often turned to ritualists who specialised in placating the gods, demons and spirits that populated the sky, land and rivers.

It has been said that Tibet is special because it has been so isolated throughout its history, cut off from the world by its high mountains. But it is equally valid to see Tibet as being deeply involved with other cultures throughout its history. In the early days of the Tibetan empire, Tibetans were influenced by cultures as far afield as Persia, Nepal and Korea. Lhasa has always been thronged with merchants and pilgrims travelling from distant countries, and for many centuries had its own Muslim community. Indeed, Tibet's history simply cannot be understood without acknowledging its intimate connections to other peoples and powers. These connections, and not a mythical isolation, are what have made Tibet what it is today.

Even to talk about 'Tibet' is to simplify and distort; the distinction between 'political' and 'ethnographic' Tibet is itself an oversimplification. People from the eastern regions of Kham and Amdo have always identified themselves as Khampas and Amdowas rather than Tibetans, and have sometimes been more closely connected to their Chinese neighbours than to Central Tibet. Until the twentieth century these local ties tended to be stronger than any notion of a Greater Tibet, and they still threaten modern attempts to forge an overarching Tibetan identity. Likewise, a shared adherence to Buddhism did not curtail individual allegiances to particular religious schools or monasteries; nor did it prevent struggles, sometimes violent, from breaking out between monasteries.

Perhaps the greatest misrepresentation of Tibet is that it was unchanging. The tensions, divergences and connections to the outside world that defined it have led to centuries of dynamic movement, with the political and religious landscape of Tibet constantly subject to change. These changes have sometimes been

PREFACE

gradual and almost imperceptible; at other times they have been cataclysmic. Though it came late to modernity, Tibet's many violent political upheavals, religious ferments, and artistic and literary developments match those of other countries before the Industrial Revolution.

How can one write a history of Tibet when we can hardly say where 'Tibet' begins or ends, when it exists in so many places at once? The writer of such a history can only hope to capture something of this diverse, ever-changing realm and the complex people who have inhabited it. There is an idea in Buddhism, *tendrel*, which is often translated into English as 'interdependent origination'. What it means is that every event is suspended in a fragile network of causes and conditions without which it could not be. The Buddha said that only the omniscient could know the full complexity of causes behind even a single event. It is an apt lesson for anyone who would write history. We can glimpse a cause here, a condition there, but the complete view will probably only ever reveal itself to the omniscient.

This history, this book, is a narrative, and any narrative is limited to the point of view of particular people and events. It is necessarily partial and incomplete. Yet the plot-driven framework of narrative may not be the worst way to approach Tibet, placing it in the flow of time which is the driving force of any story. The Tibetans have their own marvellous tradition of historical writing, and the corpus of modern scholarship on Tibet grows every day. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to grasp the whole; but we can choose a path.

In this book, that path begins with the first appearance of Tibet on the world stage in the seventh century, and ends with the exploration of what it means to be Tibetan in the twenty-first. It follows those individuals who have been most influential in the making of Tibet, or have at least made the biggest impact on Tibet's own historians and storytellers. And though it is sometimes difficult to say whether a famous event really happened as it has been told and retold, that is no reason to dismiss it or consign it to a footnote. These are the stories that, layer upon layer, have contributed to the cultural identities of Tibetans today, to the sense of what it is to be Tibetan. So we begin at the point where something called Tibet, with its own culture and history, first came together: in the glory days of the Tibetan empire.