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# THE TIBETANS

MATTHEW T. KAPSTEIN

Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 384 pp, 25 illustrations.

REVIEWED BY PETER K. MORAN

The title of Matthew Kapstein's new book, *The Tibetans*, sounds like a good fit for a 1940s monograph, along the lines of *The Nuer*, or *The Sherpas*. How can one book—let only a mere 360 pages—possibly cover a subject marked out as “Tibetans”? Or more to the point, is there actually a unity of culture and history and language behind the people called Tibetan—or is this seeming unity a mere figment of outsiders? Kapstein is far too learned for reductionism, and far too smart to not address the question that the title begs. Leaving alone that this volume is one in a series (“The Peoples of Asia”) by Blackwell, with companion volumes entitled *The Manchus*, *The Persians*, *The Afghans*, and *The Chinese*, among others, Kapstein moves quickly in his preface to tell the reader that

“Tibet” is not now and never has been a monolithic entity, and the Tibetan people, far from being homogeneous, are diverse in terms of life-style, language, religion, and indeed most areas of culture....Given this, however, we can still speak sensibly, if tentatively, of a Tibetan civilizational sphere, focusing upon that which has at least the appearance of greatest universality within it.

Fair enough. The author informs us that he will primarily dwell upon Tibetan history, religion, language, and environment. On one hand, I wonder exactly what this leaves out; on the other hand, Kapstein is making it plain, again: of course the book can't even attempt to be all encompassing. Kapstein himself writes of the book's shortcomings when he notes that ideally *The Tibetans* would be “balanced” by other works that put the large, diverse Tibetan world in context by documenting its neighboring lands and peoples. But in fact, the author does a very fine job of noting the economic, linguistic, and religio-political linkages between Tibet and a variety of neighboring peoples, empires, and specific rulers over a course of fifteen hundred plus years. Building on much recent scholarship, for example, Kapstein is able to paint a dynamic picture of the relations between Mongols and Tibetans by emphasizing a few particulars. For these were primarily relationships forged by individual lamas with individual hegemonies according to the political, cultural and religious norms prevailing at the time. Mongol-Tibetan alliances were

messy and shifting affairs, being that various Mongol groups (the Zungkar, the Khalkha, etc.) were themselves working out internal power struggles that manifested in dealings with their Tibetan preceptors, and Kapstein makes it clear how these relationships—especially as they were idealized over centuries—continued to effect Tibetan political understandings right up through the 1950s.

*The Tibetans* is divided into nine chapters, beginning with sections on the environments of the larger plateau, basic economies, and language variations. It proceeds to early history—both legendary and recorded—and moves through the period of empire, the following devolution into regional hegemonies, and the rise of the Dalai Lamas. Chapters Six through Eight move away from this chronology, and treat larger thematic arenas: “Tibetan Society,” “Religious Life and Thought,” and “The Sites of Knowledge” (which includes epic oral literature, poetry, manufactured arts, and the sciences of astronomy, medicine, and divination). The final chapter is “Tibet in the Modern World.” To this reader, this ultimate chapter is profoundly important—both for the scale and type of changes that have occurred in Tibetan regions in the twentieth century, and for the ways in which the actors in Tibet's recent history interrupt our normal view of monks and Buddhism as constitutive of “Tibet.” I wish this chapter were longer, but, as with all the chapters here, Kapstein points the reader to more detailed sources in his Bibliography at book's end.

Working on a general overview book like this, which win no accolades among peers or in academe, has to be a largely thankless job. The book is clearly aimed at the smart lay reader—and it is certainly the best detailed introduction that currently exists, and probably could not be improved upon given Kapstein's command of Tibetan history, philosophy and cultural practices. Indeed, there are few scholars in the field of Tibetan studies who could write a volume as powerfully informed by decades of familiarity with the subject, and by a great deal of inspired scholarly output as well. There are some precedents, like Stein's *Tibetan Civilization* (1972 [1962]), Shakapba's *Tibet: A Political History* (1967), and Snellgrove and Richardson's *A Cultural History of Tibet* (1968). This book is meant as an answer to them in some ways, if only because—as Kapstein tells us—research in the field of Tibetan studies has exploded since those were written. *The Tibetans* improves and expands upon its predecessors, and we have Matthew Kapstein to thank for his efforts.

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