



Tibet: A History

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Situated north of the Himalayas, Tibet is famous for its unique culture and its controversial assimilation into modern China. Yet Tibet in the twenty-first century can only be properly understood in the context of its extraordinary history.

Sam van Schaik brings the history of Tibet to life by telling the stories of the people involved, from the glory days of the Tibetan empire in the seventh century through to the present day. He explores the emergence of Tibetan Buddhism and the rise of the Dalai Lamas, Tibet's entanglement in the "Great Game" in the early twentieth century, its submission to Chinese Communist rule in the 1950s, and the troubled times of recent decades.

Tibet sheds light on the country's complex relationship with China and explains often-misunderstood aspects of its culture, such as reborn lamas, monasteries and hermits, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and the role of the Dalai Lama. Van Schaik works through the layers of history and myth to create a compelling narrative, one that offers readers a greater understanding of this important and controversial corner of the world.

Tibet: A History Details

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From Reader Review Tibet: A History for online ebook

Marsha Altman says

Recommended. The most straightforward and concise history of Tibet available in American and British markets. If you're familiar with Tibetan history, it's probably a little controversial on the subjects of Tibet's early history, which itself makes it interesting.

Pat Rolston says

Sam Van Schaik writes in a manner allowing for leisurely reading yet highly informative Tibetan history from 700 AD to present in only 269 pages. Don't be deterred by the seemingly impossible task of writing decent 1,300 year history in this length as it is brevity at it's best. The author captures the Chinese-Tibetan dynamic wonderfully with vignettes that result in a thorough understanding and very enjoyable reading experience. Perfect for anyone seeking a basic understanding of an amazing people and culture we so often overlook yet has so much to offer the world.

Jessica Zu says

a pretty good story about tibetan history, for general public, and maybe some undergraduate teaching

Annie says

Dr. van Schaik writes clearly, concisely, in a way that is scholarly and grounded but absolutely page-turning. He uses dynamic storytelling without sensationalizing the material. Going back to the 7th century, van Schaik uses the order of elements to break certain assumptions about Tibet (for example, he begins the first chapter with the invasion of Chang'an in 763 and then backtracks to question how the conditions for this invasion came about). Throughout the book he deftly weaves material together in a way that does not privilege more recent academic texts over traditional sources.

Afterwards I could imagine expanding out each chapter for a longer series of books - the writing style did leave me curious for more details - and it is not comprehensive in the sense that it needs to shine a light on different people and places along the way. At the same time it does not rest so heavily on one school of thought or region; rather it paints a more varied image of the histories. The chapter on the 20th century does not touch on as many of the concerns of diaspora politics as I would like to see in this type of history, but it does build a strong arc that would make more detailed histories of this era, like Dr. Tsering Shakya's book on this topic, easier to grasp in the context of a longer timeline.

The book ended with these lines: "What is Tibet? Surely the most important answers will be those put forward not by foreign historians or political theorists, but by Tibetans themselves."

David says

A good primer that would have been better with less Buddhism and more politics, economics, and social structures.

Bruno Lucas says

A very readable and balanced biography of Tibet. This book delivered exactly what I was hoping: a basic knowledge of Tibet's story, and some understanding of the controversy around its history.

As the author points out in his introduction, the debate over Tibet's identity has turned into a war, and "in a war like this, history plays perhaps the most important role". One side of the debate points out that Tibet has always been strongly linked to China, having lived under its influence since the XIIIth century, and as a region of China since the Manchu dynasty in the XVIIIth century. The other side argues that Tibet has its own culture, history, and has been independent throughout its history, its relation with China being one of priest and patron. On the center of that debate, China's annexation of Tibet in 1949 and the subsequent establishment of the Tibetan government in exile.

The first interesting point in that controversy is how fluid the conception of nation-state was. The notion of sovereign nations we have today in the West is not a good way to gauge what happened in Central Asia in the period covered by the book. Empires would have circles of influence over other countries, of different intensities. Under Mongol rule, the Tibetans would be ruled by local rulers and pay tribute. The Manchus' intervention in a local strife and subsequent decision to influence over the choosing of the tulips, point to a strong influence, but as pointed out this did not equate to direct rule and Tibet was free to self-govern as long as order was maintained.

As for the cultural differences, what remains clear here is that the cultural histories are intertwined. After all, Buddhism in Tibet started in the VIIth century with the marriage of emperor Songtsen Gampo to a Buddhist Chinese princess. From the revival of Buddhism in Tibet until the end of the Manchu dynasty, Tibet would yield considerable religious influence over China, with lamas and other religious dignitaries being frequently summoned to the Chinese capital. It is striking that, before the advent of "modern China" in the early XXth century, cultural differences created more animosity and violence within Tibet, with the rivalry between different schools, than between Tibet and its neighbors.

At the end, what seems to have destroyed the Tibetan desire for independence is the advent of modern technology. Ever since the end of the Tibetan Empire, Tibet was never able to build a significant army. Therefore, a patron was always in order, to provide for order at home and protection from beyond. In exchange, Tibet provided a mix of tribute, religious influence and prestige. When it took months to undertake a perilous journey from Lhasa to Beijing or Mongolia, this worked well, since the suzerainty did not have the intention of taking over direct administration over the country. But as travel and communications evolved rapidly in the XIXth century, that incentive to keep hands off faded. The stipulation in the Simla Accord of Tibet as a "suzerain" of China simply had no place in the XXth century. In the same way as Tibetans were caught off-guard by the superior warfare technology of the British in 1903, they were surprised by the disappearance of the possibility of special influence relations between nation states. This is not just an abstraction: the difficulty faced by the 13th Dalai Lama to build an army and modernize Tibet are a demonstration of the difficulty faced by Tibet to transform itself and build an effective defense against China, both military and diplomatic: "lack of haste may have been a dearly held principle of Tibetan life, but there was no stopping the speed of change as the XXth century unfolded". When the communists emerged victorious from the civil war, with no incentive to remaining in a special relation with Tibet and no deterrence, annexation was a matter of time. It is indicative of the disconnect between the Tibetan way of life

and the way the game was played in the XXth century that, when Chinese troops started to mobilize, radio messages from the border east to warn Lhasa fell on deaf ears because the ruling Kashag was hosting its annual multi-day picnic.

So where to now? The Tibetan government in exile has done an incredible job in creating sympathy abroad for Tibetan culture and its cause for independence. However, with China's economic rise and the increasing integration of Tibet (you can now go by train from Lhasa to Beijing in a few hours), chances of further autonomy seem slim. As the Chinese and the Tibetans become richer, and the leaders of Tibet's government in exile become older, it appears the fate of the autonomous region will become tied with that of China itself: if the country goes in the way of further representation and openness, then there might be a way for Tibet to achieve further autonomy. However, if the status quo remains, then there is simply no incentive for Beijing to grant increasing autonomy to the Tibetans, and demonstrations and protests like the 200 ones will only be met with more repression. The idea of Tibet is now, more than ever, linked to how China itself will evolve.

Andrew says

Spatially and religiously, a well balanced history of Tibet. I thought the strongest points were the author's commitment to giving us a rich understanding of divisions within Tibet over 1500 years of history. We explains the genesis of all the major, and many of the minor, schools of Tibetan Buddhism and their political roles in U, Tsang, Kham, and Amdo. While the book tends to be more of a history of Central Tibet, van Schaik still tends to the history of its larger, more powerful neighbors without ever reducing Tibet and Tibetan politics to an epiphenomenon of say, China.

These sorts of histories are no doubt hard to write, but they can also be hard to read. Characters come onto the scene for half a chapter and then disappear completely as the next generation takes the scene. This is why the book was easy to put down for a long period of time; there wasn't much of an arch besides the angel of history to keep me going. Still, this book is a great resource for the very long and convoluted history of what we call Tibet.

Nor'dzin Pamo says

Tibet: A History was published in 2011, but I wish I had been able to read it 20 years ago. It is written in an informative and approachable style, that is not too academic. This history explodes any illusions of Tibet as having been a paradise of serene Buddhist practitioners.

Before it became part of communist China in 1959, Tibet's history was violent, and full of political intrigue and manoeuvring. Tibet was often at the centre of a web of power struggles from all directions - China, Mongolia, India, Nepal, and Russia, to name a few. Sometimes Tibet was the conquering and advancing force, and sometimes it was under siege from all sides struggling to maintain territory. Tibet as a nation did not exactly exist for most of its history, and when its political leaders did eventually seek to identify Tibet in this way, and declare its independence at the beginning of the 20th century, it was too little too late in the political arena. China had too much influence and too much power.

The history of Buddhism in Tibet is fascinating, and at times shocking. The importance of this religion is central to Tibet spiritually, but Buddhism also been used continually as a means of controlling the population and for political expediency. Political power was deeply woven into religious power and wealth. The Gélug was the most recent of the four schools of Buddhism in Tibet, arising in the 15th century, and it eventually came to be the most powerful. Before the Chinese took over in the 20th century, about half of the farmland

was owned by the monasteries, of which there were thousands, and about a quarter of the population were monastics. Only about a fifth of those monastics however, the reader is told, were seriously studying the Buddhist teachings, and even fewer dedicated their lives to meditation practice. The most dedicated practitioners were also the poorest. Monks might be as likely to be involved in violent feuds over land and wealth, as the secular leaders of the clans.

It is easy to see from this historical work how communist China could regard the general population of Tibet as deprived, uneducated, and lacking freedom. The belief that communism would free the Tibetan people and improve their lot in life was not just empty rhetoric. The Chinese solution however, the Cultural Revolution, was shockingly violent and unsympathetic to the culture and religion of Tibet. It was distressing to read of the suffering of the Tibetan people since 1959 and to the virtual eradication of Tibetan culture. For anyone interested in Tibetan Buddhism this is an important book to read. It puts into perspective many aspects of Tibetan culture that manifest within the presentation of religious practice. For me it has also explained some prejudices and sectarian stances I have encountered in the presentation and practice of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

Kencho Wangdi says

self reading

Blaine says

It's hard to know what to think of a Tibet scholar whose Tibet history begins with an attempt to obfuscate the actual geographic location of his subject. Van Schaik's book on the history of Tibet begins in the preface with "Where is Tibet?" and proceeds to call into question not only where Tibet is located but also how Tibet is defined as a culture, its identity, and its claim to being an legitimate independent culture.

While the rest of the book presents a relatively non-biased look at Tibetan history, other reviewers who claim Van Schaik is "neutral" or "has no political axe to grind" must not have read this preface where he immediately plunges us into the China-Tibet controversy, into "a war of wildly differing visions" (p.xvi). "To even talk about 'Tibet' is to simplify and distort" he continues, pointing out that there are sub-divisions and sub-identities within Tibetan culture as if this is another fact that disqualifies its claim to being a legitimate culture. "How can one write a history of Tibet when we can hardly say where 'Tibet' begins or ends...?", suggesting again that Tibet is somehow different in this way from every other major world civilization (such as China itself whose borders have changed for thousands of years).

Van Schaik's purpose may be to de-romanticize and set straight Western misconceptions about Tibet (of which there are many) but in doing so he also comes across as supporting the Chinese Communist agenda of delegitimizing Tibet as a unique and independent culture that has also been independently governed over much of its history. Most of his points are true of just about any civilization that's been around for several millennia - territorial boundary changes, overlapping with current neighboring country border, linguistic and regional subdivisions within the culture, differing sects, schools of thought, political groups, etc. What major ancient civilization has not gone through such changes over the course of its history?

One also wonders why Van Schaik's history makes no mention of the thousands of years of Tibetan people's history prior to his arbitrary starting point, the 7th Century. Does a culture exist or have a history only when

it "arrives on the world stage"? Others such as Bellezza's *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World* have shown that Tibetans have occupied this region of the world for thousands of years prior to when Van Schaik starts his history.

Like others, I learned a ton from Van Schiak's book and I appreciate his scholarship, his engaging narrative, and his awareness that it is *his* narrative. If you want a history of Tibet written from an objective perspective that will deflate your romantic view of it as a Buddhist *Shangri-La*, this is a good place to start.

My view is that it's high time that the Tibetans themselves write their own history from their own perspective and take control of the narrative of who they are as a people, a culture, a civilization. To my knowledge no such history exists except in the form of a Buddhist history of Tibet.

Tim C says

This book is an excellent introduction to the complex and often contentious history of Tibet. It manages to convey an admirably balanced overview (especially of the recent past). As a concise narrative history it is informed by a very clear, scholarly interpretation of its source material, yet at the same time it remains a highly engaging read. The chapters are set out in a clear and logical chronology with a deft lightness of touch in terms of occasional references linking either forwards or backwards in time to help the reader remain orientated without getting bogged down at all. Each chapter is then broken up into short sections which make reading such a vast topic surprisingly digestible. Van Schaik's commendably clear writing style also makes this book progressively absorbing.

The book explains well how, until the intervention of Europeans and the subsequent global shift towards set ideas and ideals of rigid 'nationalisms', the political landscape of Central Asia was very much defined by shifting, fluid boundaries - based on fragile alliances and fealties, or outright conquest and subjugation - rather than fixed territorial demarcations as different polities rose and receded from prominence over time. Arguably these historical fluctuations have since been both the basis and the cause of various contentious attempts to settle and fix these polities in the modern era. In this sense Tibet has always found itself at the centre of a politically charged and highly contested chessboard of empires and nations.

Historians will no doubt wish that the notes and references section had been given more depth and space, yet given the vast scope of this history the author has realised a truly commendable achievement in writing such an accessible yet simultaneously thorough text. Such a book has been long overdue, and, as such, this history will now undoubtedly serve lay-readers and students alike as *the* primary introduction for both those readers either interested in a general overview, or those wishing to embark upon a more in-depth study of Tibet's fascinating story. I highly recommend it!

Hadrian says

This book accomplishes the difficult task of summarizing a thousand years of history of a place into 300 pages. It is an easy and entertaining read, and covers unknown topics with depth.

I enjoyed the chapters on the earliest history of Tibet, including the Tibetan seizure of Chang'an in 763, their relations with the Song court, and the introduction of Buddhism. In these earliest chapters, Van Schaik

manages to find the history within the legends, and his use of early Tibetan and Chinese sources is excellent.

Though some of his stories tend to lean to the more extreme and are not always cited as well as I'd like, this is still an accessible history. Though I'd still prefer more detail on Tibet's role in the Great Game and the 13th Dalai Lama, and more information on the current crises.

Some minor errors too - e.g. ?(wang2) is translated as prince instead of king and 'tendings' is used incorrectly on page 55. But if it's only things like that I can find, then what's left is still a fine book.

Vishu says

A fantastic overview of the layered and complex history of Tibet.

Peter Hutt Sierra says

A good introduction the the region. I've always found Tibet to be very interesting subject, but then again that's true of most places I know little about. The discussions on various schools of Buddhism can be a little overwhelming at times, but that just makes me want to read more.

John Eliade says

The most comprehensive, readable, and best summary of Tibetan history out there.
