

A photograph of a Tibetan man sitting in front of a stone wall. He is wearing a maroon jacket with thick, brown, textured sleeves and a matching maroon skirt. He has a brown head covering and is smiling. He is holding a string of prayer beads in his right hand. In the background, there is a stone wall and some traditional Tibetan equipment, including a large white container and a wooden staff.

the
Tibetans

Matthew T. Kapstein

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The Tibetans

Matthew T. Kapstein



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Preface

In 1979, when the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) was created at Oxford, most of the world's scholars of Tibet could gather in a single, small lecture hall. Tibet was then an obscure field of study, far removed from the public view, and the little community of Tibetanists had the feel of a close-knit clan. All inhabited a common microcosm, in which it was more or less taken for granted that one should be familiar with all things Tibetan: topics as diverse as history, anthropology, art, medicine, literature, philosophy, and religion. Since that time, however, public interest in Tibet has increased dramatically, fueled in part by a flood of popular publications on Tibetan matters generally and above all on Tibetan religion. Simultaneously, the academic field of Tibetan studies has grown to a considerable extent, becoming more specialized in the process and divided into several distinct subdisciplines, sometimes with relatively little communication among them. Whereas the 1979 Oxford meeting produced a modest publication documenting its proceedings, the ninth seminar of the IATS held in Leiden in 2000 yielded ten specialized volumes of new research.

Despite this expansion, there are few works that suitably introduce current knowledge of Tibet to a general readership. Academic texts frequently address minutely defined topics and seldom have the non-specialist in mind. Popular writings tend either to dwell one-sidedly on religion, often supposing the reader to be a seeker of spiritual guidance, or else concern personal experiences in Tibet, whether from a Tibetan or foreign perspective. Though such accounts often have considerable value for the testimony and insights that they provide, they do not supply an orientation to the study of Tibet overall. *The Tibetans*, in

accord with the program set out for Blackwell's *The Peoples of Asia* series, offers an introduction to Tibet that is based upon the conclusions of recent scholarship, but at the same time presupposes no prior knowledge of Tibet.

Although an abundance of information about Tibet is now readily available, it has been necessary to keep this book within strict limits of length. One hopes that brevity will contribute to accessibility in this case, but it has required that hard choices be made about just what topics to cover and to what degree of detail. Inevitably I have adopted some restrictions that others would contest. Some of these must be mentioned at the very beginning.

"Tibet" is not now and never has been a monolithic entity, and the Tibetan people, far from being homogeneous, are diverse in terms of lifestyle, language, religion, and indeed most areas of culture. One of the ways in which Tibetan studies have positively matured in recent years has been precisely through their affirmation of this complexity, so that few scholars now entertain simple notions thought to pertain universally to the Tibetans or to Tibet as a whole. What is emphasized in current research tends to be the particular and the local, and some would suggest that it makes little sense to speak of such things as "Tibetan identity" any longer. We know of peoples who identify themselves (and in some cases are officially designated) as Tibetan, but whose language is not Tibetan. At the same time, we find others who speak languages that are clearly related to Tibetan, and whose history and culture are closely tied to Tibet, but who have nevertheless come to regard themselves as ethnically distinct from the Tibetans. There are even communities that neither speak Tibetan, nor are regarded by themselves or others as ethnic Tibetans, but whose culture is so thoroughly Tibetanized that they have for centuries been thought of as constituting an integral part of the Tibetan cultural world. To avoid conveying an

oversimplified account of the Tibetans, therefore, it would be necessary to detail these and many other ethnic, political, and linguistic particulars that are comprised within the Tibetan realm as a whole. Nevertheless, in the span of the present work, to do so is clearly impossible.

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. If I have chosen to stress in this context primarily the main lines of Tibetan history, language, and religion, as well as the Tibetan plateau itself and the special environmental conditions that obtain there, it is because these seem to me to be foremost among the factors that define the Tibetan world, despite very considerable variation in each of these areas. Ideally, in order to balance my account, the present volume would be supplemented by one or more works treating, for example, the Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples of the Himalaya, the Sino-Tibetan frontiers, and so on. Excellent volumes on *The Mongols* by David Morgan (Blackwell 1986) and *The Manchus* by Pamela Kyle Crossley (Blackwell 1997) may be recommended as introductions to two of the neighboring peoples with whom the Tibetans have long sustained political and cultural ties, and among whom Tibetan religion and learning have at times played significant roles.

A second restriction that I have imposed upon this work concerns the time-frame it covers. My primary interest throughout has been to introduce the traditional Tibetan world as it was before the mid-twentieth century, when revolutionary China asserted its control of Tibet. The tumultuous period that followed, during which time great political, economic, and cultural upheavals transformed many aspects of Tibetan life, has been treated primarily in the last chapter, and no claim is made that this offers anything more than the briefest glimpse of a complex and

much-contested history. It may appear therefore that I have skirted some of the compelling and difficult issues that most interest readers about Tibet: the tragic events surrounding Tibet's absorption into the People's Republic of China, the flight of the Dalai Lama and many of his compatriots to South Asia, and the very recent "globalization" of Tibetan culture. Because a number of readily available and excellent works (noted in the Bibliography) deal with these and other aspects of modern Tibet, I have not attempted to reproduce their contribution here: Melvyn C. Goldstein's fine essay, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon*, may be recommended in particular as providing an accessible, but nuanced, introduction to recent events. The final chapter, accordingly, is intended just to orient those who are new to Tibet to the most essential and pertinent information.

In its general outlines, this book primarily concerns Tibetan cultural history. I have used the historical chapters to introduce not just the conclusions of recent research, but also salient features of traditional accounts, which often are legendary in character. These are of value to us for their testimony regarding Tibetan conceptions of Tibet's past. As such they form a fundamental aspect of the Tibetan cultural background, with implications for Tibetan literature, law, politics, and religion. For similar reasons I have quoted liberally from Tibetan writings so as to convey something of the manner in which Tibetans have themselves spoken of their land, its history, and their civilization. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Tibetan works are my own. While I have always aimed to represent the texts chosen within reasonable bounds of accuracy, I have refrained from burdening them here with the technical apparatus required in more specialized contexts. A more comprehensive anthology of translated Tibetan text selections will be found in the forthcoming *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, which will complement the present work.

The Western-language sources from which this book has benefited may be found entered in the Bibliography. This follows the organization of the book overall and therefore indicates for each section the works that I have consulted and that I recommend to those who wish to explore in greater depth topics raised here. For those familiar with this literature, my many intellectual debts will be sufficiently obvious so that I may be excused, I trust, from the obligation to add extensive annotation throughout. Direct quotations, of course, are another matter and full citations are provided in the notes that accompany them. The references to Tibetan works given there will balance, to some extent, the emphasis on secondary literature in the Bibliography. To all those past masters and present colleagues whose writings have contributed to this work, I extend heartfelt thanks.

Matthew T. Kapstein
Paris, November 2005

Acknowledgements

My reflections on Tibetan history are indebted throughout to four of the great modern Tibetan historians with whom it was my privilege to have discussed many of the topics surveyed in these pages: Dudjom Rinpoche Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje (1904–87), Deshung Rinpoche Kunga Tenpei Nyima (1905–87), Dungkar Rinpoche Losang Tinley (1927–97), and Tsepon Shakabpa Wangchuk Deden (1908–89). Their counsel and their works, together with their erudition and humility, have long stood before me as models of the particular excellences of Tibetan learning.

In grappling with the problems inherent in the interpretation of traditional sources in the light of contemporary approaches to historical and cultural study, I am grateful for ongoing conversations over many years with fellow Tibetanists including the late Michael Aris, Anne-Marie Blondeau, Ronald Davidson, Georges Dreyfus, David Germano, Janet Gyatso, Yoshiro Imaeda, David Jackson, Samten Karmay, Leonard vander Kuijp, Per Kværne, Fernand Meyer, Elliot Sperling, Heather Stoddard, Tashi Tsering, and Roberto Vitali. Since the early 1970s E. Gene Smith has constantly encouraged, and through his bibliographical activities materially contributed to, all aspects of my research. More recently it has been a pleasure to see some of the discussions in the field taken up and advanced by a new generation of scholars of Tibet, among whom Bryan Cuevas, Kurtis Schaeffer, and Gray Tuttle have particularly contributed to my thinking on Tibetan cultural history.

For their specific advice and responses to queries in connection with this book I am indebted to Cynthia Beall, Lawrence Epstein, Melvyn Goldstein, and Daniel Miller. A number of organizations and individuals have assisted my research in Tibet and China over the years in ways that also

furthered its development. The Committee for Scholarly Communication with China sponsored travel and fieldwork in 1990, 1992, and 1998, on which occasions I enjoyed the cooperation of the Sichuan Academy of Social Science (SASS) in Chengdu and the Tibetan Academy of Social Science (TASS) in Lhasa. The Tibetan-Himalayan Digital Library (THDL) project based at the University of Virginia, aided by a grant from the US Department of Education, permitted documentation of central Tibetan historical sites in 2002 in collaboration with the TASS. In connection with these fruitful visits, I thank, in particular, the current president of the TASS, Tsewang Gyurme, and researchers including Pasang Wangdu, Buchung, Dongbu Lhagyal, Drongbu Tsering Dorje, and Tsering Gyalpo. Thanks, too, to the noted historian Chen Qingying, of the Center for Tibetan Studies in Beijing. For its support of my translation work, from which extracts are given here, I acknowledge the National Endowment of the Humanities, under translation grant number RL-22065.

The publishers and editors of the following among my previous work have graciously permitted me to use extracts from them here:

“The Royal Way of Supreme Compassion,” “The Guide to the Crystal Peak: A Pilgrim’s Handbook,” “The Journey to the Golden Mountain,” “The Sermon of an Itinerant Saint,” and “Turning Back Gossip: A Village Ritual of Exorcism,” in *Tibetan Religions in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity, ed. Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew T. Kapstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

“The Indian Literary Identity in Tibet,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Perspectives from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

“A Thorn in the Dragon’s Side: Tibetan Buddhist Culture in China,” in *Governing China’s Multi-ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

I am grateful, too, to Morris Rossabi for his invitation to make this addition to the Peoples of Asia series, and to Tessa Harvey, Angela Cohen, Gillian Kane, and Helen Lawton at Blackwell, for patiently but persistently urging me to get it done. David Williams and his colleagues at The Running Head efficiently effected its production, with the careful editorial contribution of John Gaunt. Christine Mollier has long urged me to address non-Tibetanists in my writing on Tibet; I hope that this at least in part responds to the charge. It goes without saying that I am solely responsible for the faults herein, in awareness of which, as Tibetan writers like to put it, I ask that the protectors be patient.

A Note on Transcription and Translation

Because the exact transcription of written Tibetan offers little guide to the actual pronunciation of the language, Tibetan is given in the main body of this book in simplified phonetic spellings. The scheme employed here is based on that used in my *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), modified so as to conform to the usage recently adopted by the Tibetan Himalayan Digital Library. For a detailed description of this, one may refer to the article by David Germano and Nicolas Tournadre, "THDL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan" (http://iris.lib.virginia.edu/tibet/xml/showEssay.php?xml=/collections/langling/THDL_phonetics.xml).

Most of the letters used may be pronounced according to their common English values. The exceptions to this rule are:

ö and ü, which are pronounced as in German
e and é, which are both pronounced like the French é, the accent being used here only at the end of words, to remind readers that a final e is not silent: e.g. *dorjé*
z and zh, which resemble s and sh; thus *Zhalu* sounds rather like *Shalu*

In a few cases, however, I have retained current conventional spellings for proper names, instead of phonetic transcriptions; for instance, Shigatsé instead of phonetic Zhigatsé (for literary Tibetan *gzhis-ka-rtse*), and Reting for Radreng (lit. *rwa-sgreng*). The Tibetan spelling glossary given at the end of the book provides the exact literary orthography for all Tibetan names and terms used herein. It includes also the Tibetan equivalents of certain Sanskrit,

Chinese, and Mongolian words used in the text, as well as of book titles for which I give only English translations.

Sanskrit words are given here without diacritical marks. I have followed the Sanskrit pronunciation, except in those instances in which a Sanskrit word is embedded in a Tibetan name, e.g. Padmasambhava (in accord with the Sanskrit), but Pema Jungné (where *pema* represents the Tibetan pronunciation of the Sanskrit word *padma*).

For Chinese, I use the standard Pinyin transcriptions throughout, though for a small number of proper names, such as Sun Yat-sen, I have retained the forms that will be recognized by most anglophone readers.

Map 1 Tibet's geography



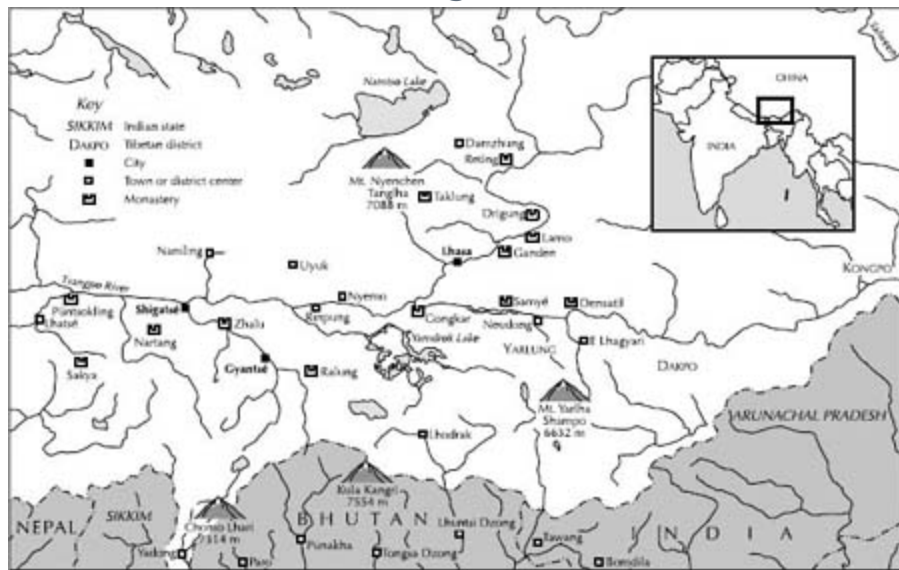
Map 2 The Tibetan Empire, late eighth-early ninth centuries (with modern borders for reference)



Map 3 Western Tibet



Map 4 Central Tibet and Tsang



Map 5 Far Eastern Tibet



Key

GANSU	Chinese province	■	Town
AMDO	Tibetan province or geographical region	■	Monastery
GOROK	Tibetan district	---	Provincial border
■	Provincial capital		

1

The Vessel and Its Contents

“Tibet” means many things. Geographically, it designates the vast uplift, popularly referred to as the “roof of the world,” that extends from the Himalaya to the great deserts of Inner Asia. Linguistically, it embraces those regions, from northern Pakistan to China’s Gansu Province, in which varieties of the Tibetan language are spoken. In its socioeconomic dimensions Tibet may be thought of in terms of its dominant modes of production: high-altitude pastoralism and a barley-based agriculture. Culturally Tibet is distinguished by the use of classical Tibetan as a literary medium, by shared artistic and craft traditions, and by the important role of the religious system of Tibetan Buddhism. Politically, according to one’s ideological standpoint or historical frame of reference, Tibet may be a particular administrative unit of the contemporary People’s Republic of China, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), or else the much vaster territory that, nominally at least, came under the rule of the Fifth Dalai Lama during the seventeenth century, which many Tibetans still see as defining their rightful political domain. Depending upon the story one wishes to tell, therefore, one must first choose among several distinct, but nevertheless overlapping, Tibets.

Though cultural and historical Tibet will be our main concern throughout this book, it is impossible to consider this apart from the distinctive geographical and ecological zone formed by the Tibetan plateau and its equally distinctive population of farmers and nomads, whose livelihoods are based respectively on the cultivation of

highland barley and the husbandry of sheep and yak, and who for the most part speak languages that are part of the tightly knit linguistic system of Tibetan. These people have not always considered themselves to be Tibetans, and do not always so consider themselves today, but in most cases they regard their culture and history as intimately tied to Tibet under one description or another. We will begin, therefore, with a general sketch of the Tibetan environment and its inhabitants - the "vessel and its contents" according to a traditional locution - and also of the language through which the Tibetan cultural sphere is in some measure defined.

High Peaks, Pure Earth

A popular legend provides a useful entry into the "land of snows." At some time in the distant past, Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, gazed upon our world with the intention of saving the creatures of Tibet. He looked and looked, but could find no hint that the Buddha had visited that land, or that his teaching had ever reached it. What Avalokiteshvara saw, as he continued his inspection, was a great area of darkness, which seemed to him to be without doubt the worst place on earth. Not long before, it had been a vast sea, but now that the waters had receded it appeared that the high regions of western Tibet were encircled by glacial mountains and fractured by ravines. Herds of hoofed animals roamed wild there. With its glaciers and lakes, feeding the rivers that flowed from the high plateau, this region resembled a reservoir. In the middle elevations of the plateau were grass-covered valleys interrupted by rocky massifs, where apes and ogresses made their lairs in caves and sheltered hollows. Broken up by the great river valleys, this part of Tibet seemed like the fractured terrain surrounding an irrigation canal. And following the plateau's

descent to the east, the bodhisattva saw forests and pasturelands, where birds of all kinds and even tropical creatures were to be found. This looked to him like land made fertile by irrigation. Still, with all the power of his divine sight, Avalokiteshvara could find no candidates for discipleship in Tibet, for no human beings were yet to be seen there.¹

The tale of the bodhisattva's first glimpse of Tibet serves to direct our vision to several key features of the Tibetan landscape. For much of Tibet was indeed formerly at or beneath sea level; in this the legend accords with geological fact. Roughly forty-five million years ago, as the Indian tectonic plate collided with and began to be drawn underneath Southern Tibet, then the south coast of continental Asia, the bed of the ancient Tethys Sea that had separated the continents began to rise. The ensuing uplift gave birth to the Himalaya and contributed to the formation of the other great mountain ranges of Inner Asia: Karakorum, Pamir, Tianshan, and Kunlun. During subsequent cycles of glaciation, many lakes, large and small, were also formed on the rising plateau. Following the last great Ice Age, these began to recede - in some places one finds ancient shorelines as much as 200 meters above present water levels - and, because they were frequently without outlet, they became rich in salts and other minerals, trade in which has played an essential role in the traditional economy. So not without reason do the old legends speak of a primordial ocean covering Tibet. The ongoing subduction of the Indian subcontinent, moreover, means that the Tibetan plateau (also called the Tibet-Qinghai plateau) is still in formation and is especially prone to earthquake. With a mean elevation of over 12,000 feet and an area of some 1.2 million square miles, it is by far the most extensive high-altitude region on earth. Roughly speaking, the Tibetan plateau embraces one-third of the territory of modern China

and is the size of the entire Republic of India, or nearly half the area of the lower forty-eight among the United States. To appreciate Tibet as a human habitat, therefore, its sheer immensity must first clearly be grasped.

Tibet is further depicted in our tale as a wilderness, a place that came to be peopled and tamed only at a relatively late date through the divine agency of the bodhisattva, a civilizing influence originating from beyond the frontiers of Tibet itself, perhaps a mythical reflection of the fact that much of Tibet was settled in comparatively recent times. Indeed, in some Himalayan districts, Tibetan settlement dates back only a few centuries. The origins of the Tibetan people will be considered in more detail in the following chapter, but here we should note that populations on the plateau were always comparatively thin. If the current ethnic Tibetan population of China, about 5.5 million, offers any indication, the population density of the Tibetan plateau could seldom have been much more than three or four persons per square mile, and for most of Tibet's history even less. Of course, the population is concentrated in habitable areas that comprise only a fraction of the Tibetan geographical region overall; it has been estimated, for instance, that only about 1 percent of the Tibetan plateau sustains regular agricultural activity. Still, the dispersal of the populace over a vast, inhospitable terrain was clearly a factor inhibiting early civilizational development.

When Avalokiteshvara gazed upon Tibet, he saw three main geographical zones. The tripartite division of the Tibetan plateau into its high and harsh western reaches, the agricultural valleys of its mid-elevations, and the rich pasturage and forested lowlands as one descends towards China schematically depicts the topography of the land as one moves from west to east. In comparing the land to an irrigation system, with its reservoir, channel, and fields, the

story underscores the central role of the control of water resources in the emergence of civilization in Tibet. Indeed, the Tibetan term for governmental authority (*chapsi*), literally “water-regime,” derives from the polite and honorific word for water, *chap*.

Figure 1 Irrigation works in the Indus River Valley, Ladakh, 1975.



In traditional Tibetan geographical terms, the three zones described by the bodhisattva correspond to the three great divisions of Tibet: (1) the “three circuits” of Ngari in the west, (2) the “four horns” of Ü (the “Center”) and Tsang, and (3) the “six ranges” or “three realms” constituting the eastern provinces of Amdo and Kham. The first embraces the territories of the ancient Zhangzhung and later Gugé kingdoms, centered in the areas around Mt. Kailash (alt. 6,714 meters) that now constitute the Ngari Prefecture (Ch. Alizhou) of the Tibet Autonomous Region. The “three circuits” (whose exact enumeration is treated variously in different sources) also include the regions of Ladakh and Zangskar, now in India’s Jammu and Kashmir State, and neighboring locations in Himachal Pradesh, as well as in