

The History of Tibet

Review >
Tibet

This three-volume publication compiles articles on the political, religious, social and cultural history of Tibet.

By Vladimir Uspensky

Tibetan studies form an amalgam with Buddhist studies, and the Buddhist perspective on Tibetan history, originating from Tibetan written sources, is deep-seated in modern scholarship. As McKay writes, 'the dominance of Religious Studies/Budhology' results in a 'serious historical

imbalance' (Vol. 1, p. 24). The Western image of Tibet as a mythical country outside time and space – the 'Shangri-La image' – has penetrated not only popular culture but also scholarly research.



'Tibet was an island of stability in revolution- and war-torn East and Central Asia'



several entries are dedicated to the Bon religion, its origins and early history. Tibet as a Buddhist country, the mainstream concern of Tibetan studies, is the focus of the second volume: the beginning of the 'Second Propagation' of Buddhism, the establishment of monasticism, and the origins of the 'rule by incarnation' culminating in the supremacy of the Dalai Lama. The incor-

poration of Tibet into the Mongol Yuan Empire, contacts between Tibetan high lamas and the emperors of Ming China, and the rise to power of the Gelugpa School are well covered. The two local Chinchuan wars (1747-49 and 1771-76) receive an entry each. Other important events receive insufficient attention, including the Manchu Qing Empire's administration of Tibet. The 1750 Lhasa Revolt and Gurkha War (1788-1792) are scattered over several entries.

Modern dilemmas

The focus of the third volume is twentieth-century Tibet prior to the flight of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to India in 1959. This volume is largely concerned with the policies of foreign powers towards Tibet and the Tibetan government's attempts to establish contacts with the outside world. The Simla Convention, Indo-Tibetan border issues and British contacts with Tibet in the 1920s are treated in detail, though the 1904 Younghusband Mission does not receive a separate entry. Many newly discovered facts concerning the Tibetan policy of tsarist and communist Russia are also discussed. As McKay justly remarks, the de-facto independent state of Tibet was 'an island of stability' (Vol. 3, p. 2) in revolution- and war-torn East and Central Asia. There was, however, little unity within the ruling elite; their



The 'Great' Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682).

rivalry and egotism are vividly described.

The post-war events are well known: 'the Tibetan Government had suddenly awoken to the reality of the dangers which threatened it' (Vol. 3, p. 586) and attempted unsuccessfully to secure the country's sovereignty. These attempts are described in detail. The volume concludes with an overview of current and historical Western visions of Tibet and Buddhism. No specific entries discuss

these articles 'do not establish one "true" account of Tibet, or even provide a consensus of opinion on particular points' (Vol. 1, p. 15). He points out that 'Tibet has as many histories as it has historians' (Vol. 3, p. 30). The majority of Tibetanists would agree: as the Tibetan proverb says, 'each lama has his own teaching'.

Despite its heavy reliance on previously published works, this three-volume anthology is a new event in Tibetan

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developments in Tibet between 1951 and 1959, apart from a brief description of Tibetan resistance to Chinese rule.

Each of the three volumes is addressed to a different audience. The first volume contains in-depth studies by a small number of scholars on an obscure period of Tibetan history. The second volume may become a standard reference book for every Tibetanist. A major part of the third volume is of interest not only to specialized scholars but also to a general audience curious to learn more about Tibet. A short annotated bibliography of additional readings is also attached to the first volume.

The anthology contains 126 articles by a total of 75 mainly Western authors. There are a few entries by ex-patriot Tibetan scholars on the modern history of Tibet, though none by modern Chinese scholars as 'their historical scholarship fails to meet Western academic standards' (Vol. 1, p. 8). Inclusion of the modern Chinese perspective on Tibetan history, however, would have been appropriate. As the editor writes,

studies. The articles combine in unexpected ways and will stimulate further research. The outcome of McKay's efforts is impressive and deserves words of profound gratitude. <

- McKay, Alex, ed. (2003) *The History of Tibet* 1-3 vols. London, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, ISBN 0-700-71508-8
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