
L'Âge d'or du Tibet, by Katia Buffetrille

Françoise Robin



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/106>

DOI: 10.4000/ebhr.106

ISSN: 2823-6114

Publisher

CNRS - UPR 299 - Centre d'Etudes Himalayennes

Electronic reference

Françoise Robin, "*L'Âge d'or du Tibet*, by Katia Buffetrille", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* [Online], 56 | 2021, Online since 10 September 2021, connection on 22 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/106> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebhr.106>

This text was automatically generated on 22 July 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution 4.0 International - CC BY 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

L'Âge d'or du Tibet, by Katia Buffetrille

Françoise Robin

REFERENCES

L'Âge d'or du Tibet by Katia Buffetrille. Paris: Les Belles-Lettres. 2019, 320 pp, ISBN 9782251449746

- 1 *L'Âge d'or du Tibet* (ie The Golden Age of Tibet) is the latest (34th) volume in a prestigious French-language collection aimed at introducing the high points of world civilisations to an inquisitive, non-specialist readership. As far as Asia is concerned, previously published volumes cover Edo Japan, Chosŏn Korea, classical India, medieval Iran, Khmer Cambodia, 18th-century Manchu China (along with another volume dedicated to Manchu China), Siam, ancient Vietnam (10th–15th c) and Burma-Pagan. The preparation of most volumes have been entrusted to recognised and accomplished French academics.
- 2 This synopsis of 17th–18th century Tibet has been undertaken by Katia Buffetrille, a well-established anthropologist and Tibet specialist with a long career of publishing works mostly on pilgrimages and rituals. The task was daunting: she rightly mentions in her introduction that sources are ‘on certain topics, often non-existent, sometimes contradictory, when not altogether inconsistent’ (p7, my translation). Another challenge to the completion of such a concise volume is, as stated by the author herself, ‘the impossibility of making generalisations due to local variations’ (p267). We may add to this warning that most primary Tibetan language material and most Tibetan studies research deals with Tibetan Buddhism and, to a lesser extent, history, ultimately at the expense of research on more mundane matters (daily life, politics, economy, love and relationship, to name but a few).
- 3 This compact survey of Tibetan civilisation is based on several sources: *The Illusive Play*, the monumental autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama (1617–1682) which was translated

into English in 2014 by Samten Karmay, historical studies of the period and precious travel accounts by a handful of Western travellers and missionaries who were present in Tibet during the period in question. These references are complemented by an impressive amount of reliable secondary sources. There are few sources in Tibetan since the book aims at a non-specialist readership. The absence of footnotes is no doubt imposed by the publisher and is compensated for by the scrupulously listed sources provided for each chapter at the end of the volume.

- 4 In her introduction and throughout the book, Buffetrille justifies her choice for the period covered, by recalling that the mid-17th century saw a sizeable part of Tibetan territory reunited for the first time after four centuries, ushering in a period of 'great political stability' (p7), under the aegis of the then Dalai Lama, number five in his reincarnation lineage, Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso. The 'Great Fifth', as he is called by Tibetans due to his prestige, great vision and political acumen, 'established a specific type of government based on the union of spiritual authority and temporal power' (ibid). The system lasted until 1959 with the invasion of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that led to the exile in India of the current 14th Dalai (b 1935). Moreover, Buffetrille argues, under the Great Fifth and, to a certain extent, thereafter medicine, arts, belles-lettres, 'reached their peak' (ibid).
- 5 This volume taking the form of a synopsis, it is difficult to summarise and does not lend itself well to the exercise. Suffice to say that it is organised according to what appears to be a mandatory structure, shared by other titles in the collection: its ten chapters, all of which are introduced by a short and concise summary, cover Tibetan history (30 pages) and geography (a much needed 40-page clarification, given Tibet's lack of clearly delimited borders), its political organisation (20 pages), society and economy (30 pages), time, astrology and divination (15 pages), religions (45 pages), intellectual life (mainly literature, covering 30 pages), arts (religious for the most part, 15 pages), leisure (15 pages, mostly describing festivals) and private life (almost 30 pages, centred on daily life and the individual). The first two chapters (history and politics) focus more specifically on the 'Golden Age' period. The others, for lack of sources to provide relevant and precise data for the given time span, mostly present different aspects of what one could call 'traditional Tibetan civilisation', with the assumption that little changed between the 17th century and the late 19th–early 20th century, the latter period being the one for which we have a larger number of sources. The chapters all contain precise information, with frequent cross-references between one chapter and another, with little repetition, if any at all. The book is designed in such a way that the chapters can be read independently of one another. It ends with a double index (persons and general, with the transliteration of Tibetan words, for the benefit of specialists) and very concise biographic notes on historical personages mentioned throughout the 300-page book (the 6th Dalai Lama and the 1st Jamyang Zhepa, founder of Labrang Monastery, would have deserved to be mentioned). Its copious black and white illustrations are especially noteworthy and one can only commend Buffetrille for having included original and, for some, lesser-known or overlooked visual sources. For instance, drawings by Léa Lafugie, one of the rare Western women to have ventured to Tibet prior to the 1950s; the 1749 map of Greater Tibet ('Grand Thibet') by M. Bellin (p14); realistic drawings from the travel memoirs of Hamilton Bower, a now almost forgotten Scottish explorer who journeyed to Tibet in the 1890s; drawings made by

Ahmad Shah at the turn of the 20th century; and charming minute drawings of everyday life and activities, executed by a Tibetan called Lobsang Tenzin.

- 6 As mentioned earlier, the book's target readership is non-specialists. They may be students of Tibetan or of neighbouring civilisations (Mongolia, China, India, Nepal), as well as the general educated public who wishes to delight in Buffetrille's great capacity to summarise the material available. Nevertheless, *L'Âge d'or du Tibet* is not without interest for specialists: first, they can earmark the book as a valuable vade mecum for their students. In addition, it is a useful compendium that one should but does not always possess about Tibet in various fields, containing knowledge that is usually scattered among various publications and which Buffetrille has masterfully encapsulated in 300 pages. Specialists, no matter what their own field of expertise and consequently their own lacunae, will definitely acquire new knowledge. The present reviewer, for one, learnt among other things that Tibet made silk in the 18th century (p139), that musk was acquired by a French trader (J-B Tavernier) from Tibetan merchants he met in India in the 17th century (p136) and that Bathang in Kham was ruled by the Lhasa government between 1703 and 1719 (p90). The maps by R Chaix, a Tibet specialist and cartographer, are accurate and precise, a rarity when it comes to Tibet, and can be used by specialists too.
- 7 Of course, such a synopsis, covering a diversity of academic fields, is bound to contain some factual errors but they are remarkably rare and, above all, minor: for instance, the dates of birth and death of Thonmi Sambhota, the inventor of the Tibetan script who lived in the 7th c, have been mixed up with those of Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) (p203). Pakpa Lodrö Gyeltsen's 'lignage *khön*' (p291) is unclear: 'clan Khön' would have been more accurate. Describing the 6th Dalai Lama (1683–1705) who succeeded the 'Great Fifth', as a 'romantic poet' (p68) is questionable: romanticism never got as far as Tibet and the hierarch was more than a mere poet. Also, asserting that ministers and treasurers in the Kingdom of Derge (spelt bDe dge in the Index but should read sDe dge) were 'elected' ('élus', p90) is surprising and begs the question: who were the electors? Sönam Rabten is described anachronistically as the first 'depa' (see further on) of the unified Tibetan government in 1632 (p248), which is impossible since, as the author rightfully mentions on page 32, it was in 1642 that the Tibetan government was created. And finally, some terms call for an explanation: 'Tsangpa' (p102) and Monguor (p289), for instance.
- 8 Another minor concern is the transcription of Tibetan, which presents a few inconsistencies – it is in fact often the case in most publications about Tibet due to the lack of a standard system of transcription. Should a second edition of the volume be published, this issue needs to be addressed.
- 9 Although most of the translations are absolutely accurate, they can be questioned in a few limited cases: 'desi' or 'depa' has long been rendered as 'regent' in Western sources, and Buffetrille follows this convention. But, more than a regent proper (someone who rules during an interregnum, usually until a ruler comes of age), and for which Tibetan has a specific term (*sikyong* or *srid skyong*), this position shares similarities with that of prime minister or governor who handles civil matters under the Dalai Lama's authority. In fact, elsewhere in the book and in a different context (p90), the term 'depa' is translated as 'gouverneur'. Another translation for discussion is that of the term 'bar mi'. It is given as 'between men' (p105), though a more accurate translation would be 'a person in between', ie a 'go-between', as per its more common translation.

Also, 'Ganden Podrang', the name of the administrative quarters of the Tibetan government and, by metonymy, the Tibetan government administration, is sometimes translated as 'Palace of Felicity' (p96), although 'Ganden' is in fact, as Buffetrille rightly states elsewhere, a reference to the eponymous monastery (Ganden Monastery) and as such should not be translated. On that topic, one may also wonder about the absence of the widely used expression *Depa Shung* (sDe pa gzhung) to refer to the Tibetan government between 1642 and 1959.

- 10 The overview of the highly complex Tibetan geography ('L'espace tibétain', pp 55–94) is excellent and precise. But elsewhere in the book, the reader is occasionally faced with two different meanings of 'Tibet': the territory governed by the unified Tibetan government under the leadership of the Dalai Lama or the whole of ethnographic 'Tibet'. For instance, the statement 'Polhané... became the leader of Tibet' in 1729 is confusing: neither Polhané nor the Dalai Lamas ruled over territories beyond Central Tibet. A similar remark can be made about the use of the word 'Chinese', when 'Manchu' or 'Sino-Manchu' might have been preferable (p68 and p290). A last terminological inconsistency which could be easily remedied concerns the qualification of the political system that ruled over the whole of Tibet between the 6th and 9th centuries. The author uses alternately 'empire' and 'kingdom', and for its leaders, 'emperors' and 'kings' – it would have been preferable to use one term throughout the book.
- 11 These minor remarks aside, one can only commend this excellent book for providing a short, compact, reliable, detailed synopsis of classical and traditional Tibetan civilisation. Meant for the general public or as a starting point for students, and for academics who need to further their knowledge of Tibetan traditional civilisation on specific aspects, it offers sound, reliable knowledge about Tibetan society in the 17th and 18th centuries as far as politics and administration are concerned, and about 'traditional Tibet'. Among other things, it reveals a lesser-known side of the Tibetan world as open to its neighbours and to outside influences, fully active in Asian politics and economics, not entirely devoid of rivalry and internal strife, entertaining a complex relationship with its powerful Sino-Manchu neighbour, but definitely distinct from it, and it does justice to a full and rich Tibetan civilisation, without churning out the usual clichés.

AUTHORS

FRANÇOISE ROBIN

Françoise Robin is professor of Tibetan language and literature at INALCO (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, Paris) and member of IFRAE (French Institute for East Asia Research). She has recently co-edited, with Robert Barnett and Benno Weiner, *Conflicting Memories: Tibetan History under Mao Retold*, Brill, 2020.