



Gray Tuttle, Kurtis R. Schaeffer, eds. *The Tibetan History Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. xxiii + 720 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14468-1; \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-14469-8; ISBN 978-0-231-51354-8.

Reviewed by Alex McKay (University of Leiden (Emeritus))

Published on H-Buddhism (February, 2014)

Commissioned by A. Charles Muller

## Tibet History Reader by Kurtis Schaeffer

Volumes bringing together previously published academic articles on a particular theme are a genre that tends to be underrated by specialists, and their compilation is something of a thankless task. But as publishers recognize, they are of considerable value for students and libraries seeking reliable sources on a subject beyond the realm of the purely introductory. This collection of thirty-eight articles on the history of Tibet will therefore find a ready market.

This reviewer must confess to approaching *The Tibetan History Reader* with some sympathy. Having edited an even larger collection myself a decade ago, I can vouch for the amount of work necessary to produce such a volume, and the hidden difficulties that are involved in terms of such matters as copyright restrictions, outlandish reproduction fees, and translation issues. The selection of articles to be included is not, therefore, a simple matter. In addition, a series of editorial decisions in regard to language, style, layout, and content is required throughout the process.

The editors pass over these difficulties in their preface, which explains the decisions they have made in regard to standardization of transliteration and the imposition throughout of endnotes rather than footnotes. Both decisions are justifiable on several grounds, while the addition of both a complete bibliography and an index at the end of the volume adds considerably to its utility. The brevity of the preface is notable, however, and the volume would have benefited from some comment on matters such as the working definition of “Tibet,” the criteria used in the selection of articles, and the place of significant topics (such as Tibetan modernization or legal status), that are not seriously examined here. Also absent is any consideration of the wider context of Tibetan studies as a postcolonial field of encounter. Aside from more general theoretical considerations, few scholars in the field would claim total neutrality in the wider

China-Tibet issue, and the implications of this require some comment in such a volume. But the editors restrict themselves to their stated remit, to provide ready access to a selection of important studies of Tibetan history.

Their choice is perhaps a little conservative; material on, for example, western Tibet or the nomads is scanty, and the collection curiously lacks material concerning the political and diplomatic history of Tibet in the critical 1890-1950 period. The latter is a particularly regrettable omission given that students are liable to initially be drawn to just that period. But not least for reasons noted above, it would be unfair to criticize this work for articles or subjects that are not included; what is important is what is included, and in sum this is a valuable collection, well laid out and well printed.

The most recent contribution is from 2006, however, and many are from the 1970s and 1980s. A further caveat is that a number of these articles have been reprinted at least once before. But collectively they do represent a sound tradition of scholarship on Tibet, with Luciano Petech inevitably a major contributor with four articles. The editors have inserted a short—one or two paragraphs—preface to each article, locating its rationale and methodology and signaling its main conclusions. These are of considerable value, not least to students, as is the provision of a section listing key dates in Tibetan history.

Among the less well-known articles of particular note are Peter Schweiger’s “History as Myth: On the Appropriation of the Past in Tibetan Culture” (translated from the German for this publication), which concerns the Tibetan tradition of history writing and its role in the legitimization of elite institutions; Fang Kuei Li and W. South Coblin’s “The Linguistic and Historical Setting of the Old Tibetan Inscriptions,” a brief but fresh look at the transformation from aristocratic to Buddhist authority at court; Katō Naoto’s “Lobjang Danjin’s Rebellion of

1723,” which sheds further light on Sino-Mongol contestation for authority in Qinghai; Lauren Hartley’s study of “The Kingdom of Dergé,” extracted and revised from her MA thesis; and Grey Tuttle’s “Uniting Religion and Politics in a Bid for Autonomy,” which focuses on Tibetan Buddhist proselytization in Republican China and the

United States. Also welcome is Heather Stoddard’s “Progressives and Exiles,” an extract from her groundbreaking 1985 French-language monograph on Gedün Chöpal, again translated especially for this publication.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:  
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Alex McKay. Review of Tuttle, Gray; Schaeffer, Kurtis R., eds., *The Tibetan History Reader*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40395>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.