

## Compte-rendu

**Katia Buffetrille, *L'âge d'or du Tibet (XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles)*, Paris (Les Belles Lettres), 2019. 311 pp. ISBN 978-2-251-44974-6.**

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The political and social transformation of Tibet in the 17th and 18th centuries was far-reaching, resulting by the end of the 18th century in the consolidation of Manchu power over large parts of the Tibetan Plateau, including the territory of the Tibetan government having Lhasa as its capital and the Dalai Lama at its head. Numerous scholars have published studies of various aspects of these centuries, during which Tibet took shape in what might be called the 'pre-modern' period until the Chinese takeover in 1951. An important publication in this connection is Françoise Pommaret (ed.), *Lhasa, lieu du divin : la capitale des Dalai-Lamas au XVIIe siècle*, Genève (Olizan), 1997; English translation, *Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century*, Leiden (Brill), 2002. Katia Buffetrille's book brings all this research together in a compact, up-to-date volume, not restricting the perspective to Lhasa and Central Tibet or other territories governed by the Dalai Lamas.

*L'âge d'or du Tibet* is organized thematically into ten topics: History, Geography, Political and Administrative Organization, Society and Economy, Concepts of Time, Religion, Intellectual Life, The Arts, Leisure, and Private Life. At the end of the volume there are biographical sketches of 25 individuals who are frequently referred to, either because of their crucial involvement in the religious or political events in the period in question, or because they have left behind eyewitness accounts of those events, prominent among the latter being the Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733) who spent five years (1716-1721) in Lhasa and its vicinity, and the British representatives of the East Asia Company George Bogle (1746-1781) and Samuel Turner (1759-1802) who both visited Shigatse in the second part of the 18th century. By making extensive use of the accounts of Tibet which these European observers left behind, Buffetrille provides the reader with first-hand insights and observations which the Tibetan sources alone could not have supplied. However, the author also makes ample use of Tibetan and Chinese sources from the period in question. There is a rich bibliography, to a large extent divided into the topical sections listed above, but with the addition of a list of

sources relating to missionaries, traders, and travellers (including Muslims and Armenians), and, finally, useful indexes.

The greater part of the book's first section, that on "History," provides a particularly clear overview – concise, but not over-simplified – of a period in Tibetan history that was particularly complex. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Tibetan protagonists from the secular as well as the religious spheres vied for power, sometimes in alliance with and at other times in bitter opposition to Mongol princes and Manchu emperors of China. In only twenty pages, Buffetrille guides the reader through the convolutions of civil wars, religious rivalries, invasions and political intrigue with admirable succinctness, achieving, in the opinion of the present reviewer, a pedagogical *tour de force*.

Another interesting section, part of the chapter devoted to "Geography", deals with "Lhasa, a Cosmopolitan City", which presents, one by one, the non-Tibetan groups which at different times made Lhasa their home: Muslims (including Sufis), non-Muslim Indians, Newars from Nepal, Armenians, and Roman Catholic missionaries, including Jesuits who visited Lhasa as early as 1661. Buffetrille thereby refutes the widespread notion of Lhasa being "the forbidden city", inaccessible to foreigners. While this epithet may have been justified with reference to 19th century Lhasa, it would be entirely misleading in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The chapter on "Religion", while giving only a summary introduction to Buddhist doctrine (available in countless other publications), is all the more informative with regard to the social role of monasteries, rituals, pilgrimages, and 'popular religion', i. e. local religious practices only partly or superficially influenced by Buddhism. Likewise the Tibetan language, script, paper production, book-printing techniques, and literary genres are presented in a way that highlights the complexity and originality of Tibetan literary culture. Finally, the author is to be commended for the chapters on "Leisure" and "Private Life" which deal with topics that are seldom discussed in general expositions of Tibetan history and culture, including a section, "Sexuality", that does not shy away from discussing incest and homosexuality.

The illustrations are abundant and well chosen. Not surprisingly, relevant illustrations from contemporary sources are not easy to find, but they are supplemented by drawings (and only in a few cases photographs) from later sources. The decision to rely largely on prints and line drawings is a highly felicitous one, as the result is clarity and crispness which reproduction of photographs all too often fail to deliver. There is no methodological problem with using such illustrations dating from the 19th century, as Tibet's meeting with modernity only happened in the following century, and Lobsang Tenzin's admi-

rable line drawings (first published in R. A. Stein, *La civilisation tibétaine*, Paris, 1962) convey a timeless image of Tibet.

*L'âge d'or du Tibet* can be read as a monograph providing a rich and informative presentation of Tibet in the 17th and 18th centuries. However, it can also be used as a mini-encyclopaedia in which numerous topics, events and persons can be searched by anyone in need of specific and precise information. While the volume fits seamlessly into the prestigious series "Guide Belles Lettres des Civilisations" in which it is published, it is to be hoped that it will be translated and published in other languages as well, as there is a universal need for authoritative and nuanced books on Tibetan history.

