

The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, contestation and memory by Matthew Kapstein. Oxford University Press, 2000. 316 pp. ISBN 0-19-513122-3.

Reviewed by Martin Boord.

In this thought-provoking and penetrating study, Kapstein explores the shifting dynamics of the gradual absorption by Tibetans of alien cultural elements so as to create a new Tibetan self-identity, often referred to by learned Tibetans as ‘authentic Indian Buddhism’ despite the way in which the original material was often creatively adapted for use in the new homeland. Examining a range of eighth-century religious and historical sources, he charts the enormous reform of Tibet’s ancient system catalyzed during that period by the influx of Buddhism, and also shows how that ancient system remains still visible today beneath the deliberately adopted veil of a mainstream Buddhist identity.

In developing his narrative, the author examines a variety of original Tibetan sources including historical chronicles, imperial edicts, philosophical treatises, and writings on practical meditation and yoga. Far from simplistic in his approach, Kapstein discusses the influences on early medieval Tibet of Chinese historiography, Greek medicine, Nepalese sculpture, Sogdian textiles, Nestorian Christianity, and Manichaeism, as well as the several schools of Buddhism that had been developing away from India and which were now encountered by Tibetans in all directions around their homeland.

His careful reading of the *Testament of sBa*, an early chronicle of Tibetan history, reveals the manner in which details were wilfully altered in favour of a consciously created new identity and the genesis of Tibetan Buddhist historiography. For example, the *Testament of sBa* seems very much in favour of the Chinese influence upon the developing Tibetan culture, valuing their positive contribution to the Dharma in a manner which later historians do not.

Kapstein also explores the possibility of biblical sources for some of the tales told as ‘ancient Tibetan history’ so that the *Testament of sBa* stands revealed as an interpretation of history and not as an historical record. Indeed, it has been called ‘a specialised kind of religious meditation on parts of the story’ and marks the beginning of the Tibetans’ attempt to define themselves as operating within the Buddha’s prophetic intention so that the destiny of Tibet and the destiny of the Buddha’s teachings are inextricably intertwined. Tibetan historians since these early days have systematically developed a vision of their world as having been ordered and controlled by the agency of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Speaking to lamas today, they all agree that their religion is pure Indian Buddhism, while outsiders have called it 'lamaism' and refer to it as a debased and corrupt anomaly.

The old Tibetan royal annals served as instruments of bureaucratic practice and the art of government. Their development coincided with and reflected the organization of the empire during the period of expansion beginning in the mid-seventh century. With the fall of the empire during the ninth century, Tibetans were faced not only with a practical political and economic crisis, but with a crisis of understanding as well. The sophisticated cosmology and soteriology of Buddhism provided one possible way of making sense of the Tibetan world as a domain of meaningful agency and possible excellence, which began during and continued after its period of imperial greatness. The stunning achievement of Tibetan Buddhist historians was to create a compelling and enduring articulation of this vision, and it is to the author of the *Testament of sBa* that we owe what was perhaps its first full, and for Tibetans still vital, formulation.

Monastic clerical Buddhism, with its trained scholars and scribes, its language sciences and methods of translation, its libraries and catalogues, its systematization of reasoning and debate, provided medieval Tibet with an ideal model of organized knowledge at a time when the management of knowledge must have been felt as an ever more urgent concern. If we wish to make sense of the preferability of Buddhism to some in medieval Tibet, we need to understand how they thought it rationalized, more adequately than its competitors, the frailties of our concrete existence in the world. The adoption of the cosmology of *karma* and *saṃsāra* did not preclude, and in some respects no doubt encouraged, the performance of what we might hold to be magical ritual, but also it did appear to make intelligible why it was that among such rituals there were sometimes those that worked and at other times those that failed, and did so in a lawlike manner. Furthermore, the cosmology of *karma* and *saṃsāra* comported well with an imperial interest in legislation; that is to say, law and order may be reinforced by assenting to cosmic justice and order. The Buddhist canon, therefore, came to be regarded as an imperial treasure and the incorporation of this into the monarch's realm increased the royal charisma by signifying the king's possession of the well-ordered empire of enlightened reason.

The opening section of the *Testament of sBa* relates the events surrounding the birth and childhood of Khri Srong-lde'u-btsan, culminating in his personal adoption of Buddhism. This king placed great emphasis on funerary rites and the truth of the Buddhist teachings concerning *karma* and *saṃsāra*, whilst Kapstein's study of the development of such mortuary rites and their particular theories concerning the

after-death state clearly demonstrate the ongoing process of accommodation in which the alien and the indigenous came by stages to suffuse one another, especially due to the link binding Buddhism to language and literature. Kapstein also shows the well-known nine-vehicle analysis of religious practice to be a native innovation, the Buddhist schema deriving from the Bon.

The middle section of the *Testament* concerns itself with the invitation to Tibet of Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava, the foundation of Samye monastery (built as a representation of the cosmos containing a maṇḍala of Vairocana as its pure aspect), and the inception of a Tibetan Buddhist *saṃgha*.

In its final section, the *Testament* speaks of the schism between Hwa-shang Moheyan and his Chinese supporters of Chan, and Kamalaśīla and his Indian supporters of the gradual path. A royal resolution of the conflict determined in favour of the Indian faction and their view of the world as a well-ordered domain of rebirth governed by the lawlike operation of karma. The Chinese notion of sudden enlightenment was dismissed as dangerously disruptive of this natural order of moral causation.

From the 11th century onwards, the Tibetan vision of the old order became increasingly defined by the ongoing elaboration of two great cycles of myths of imperial Tibet: an Avalokiteśvara cycle focusing primarily on the reign of Srong-btsan sgam-po, and a Padmasambhava cycle focusing on the reign of Khri Srong-lde'u-btsan in which 'the precious guru' comes to dominate even the figure of the king. The role of the Chinese in the conversion of Tibet accentuated in the *Testament of sBa* is now mostly effaced, and the Chinese monks who had come to stay in Tibet later became ridiculed as buffoons in monastic dances.

Another interesting case study is the lately unacknowledged contribution made to Tibetan learning by the Buddhism of Korea during the Tang period (618-907) which is investigated fully by Kapstein in his section on 'Sources of Contestation'.

Despite all that has been said about wilful tampering with tradition, of course, it would make little sense to think of the transmission of Buddhist enlightenment as a process whereby identical learning could be reproduced invariantly in each generation, like a series of objects stamped out on a factory conveyor. Indeed, instead of rigid replication, such transmission must of necessity be a dynamic process involving a continuous recreation of tradition through both selective reappropriation of the past and innovation. Kapstein therefore shifts his focus from history to religion and offers an analysis of the very nature of 'scholasticism' in Tibet. Here the subject of study is the myriad number of opinions on topics that are, in

the final analysis, unknowable, for the truly significant foundation that is sought (the enlightenment of the buddhas) can only be realized intuitively, free from all worldly propositions about it. Tibetan masters call upon their disciples to question any and all doctrines, adhering to none until that final realization is gained and, to this end, Kapstein compares and contrasts the pedagogical styles of various lamas revered in the old and new schools of Tibetan Buddhism and considers the value of the 'revealed treasure' teachings by means of which the ancient tradition especially periodically revitalizes and renews itself.

This is a book of great value, to be read slowly more than once.