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*The Tibetan*  
**Assimilation**  
*of Buddhism*

*Conversion, Contestation, and Memory*

Matthew T. Kapstein

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THE TIBETAN ASSIMILATION OF BUDDHISM

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# The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism

*Conversion, Contestation,  
and Memory*

MATTHEW T. KAPSTEIN

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2000

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Oxford New York  
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Cape Town  
Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi  
Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
Paris São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw  
and associated companies in  
Berlin Ibadan

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First published in 2000 by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2002

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Kapstein, Matthew.

The Tibetan assimilation of buddhism : conversion,  
contestation, and memory / Matthew T. Kapstein.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-513122-3; 0-19-515227-1 (pbk.)

1. Buddhism—China—Tibet—History. I. Title.  
BQ7576.K37 2000  
294.3'923'09—dc21 99-33551

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

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*To the memory of Michael Aris  
March 27, 1946–March 27, 1999  
beloved friend to all friends of Tibet*

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## Preface

By what pathways and processes does a society appropriate unto itself what is alien, transforming the other even as it is transformed by it? The Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism offers compelling subject matter for reflection about this question, a question that is now especially pertinent to the study of society and culture. At a time when public discourse, in many domains, including popular interest in Tibet, seems to fix upon notions of hard and fast cultural or ethnic identities, it is well to remind ourselves that our identities have always been fluid constructions, whose vitality and ongoing creation demand internal change and responsiveness to external forces.

Much excellent work in the contemporary human sciences, throughout a broad spectrum of research, has been consecrated to explorations of cultural transmission and adaptation. It would be difficult to mention all that has in one way or another influenced my thinking in this area, not to speak of all that I probably should have read but still have not. To clarify the concerns informing the present book to some extent, however, two works come to mind that, though treating different historical problems from quite different perspectives, equally contribute to our thinking on the general question I have posed. I refer to Erik Zürcher's *The Buddhist Conquest of China* and Serge Gruzinski's recent *The Conquest of Mexico* (originally *La colonisation de l'imaginaire*). With the former, I share here an interest in the spread of Buddhism in early medieval Asia, and the crucial role played, not so much by foreign Buddhist missionaries, but by the formation of an indigenous Buddhist cultural elite who came to articulate their originally foreign faith in their own terms. And whereas Gruzinski examines the response of a colonized people to the culture of the colonizers, an issue that must be wholly distinguished from our present subject matter, the transformations of indigenous Mexican memory and imagination that were entailed by the processes he describes present a striking analogy to the transformation of the Tibetan *imaginaire* that was catalyzed by the promulgation of Buddhism.

Literary production in the thirteen centuries during which Tibetan has been written has been vast. At the present time, we have access to many thousands of printed volumes and manuscripts, containing many tens of thousands of individual works of different types: biographies and histories, medical treatises, books on astrology and divination, poems and works on poetics, grammars and dictionaries, ritual handbooks, and writings on all aspects of Tibetan religious life and thought are extensively represented, including those writings devoted strictly to Buddhist doctrine and scholastic philosophy. The study of this great legacy is only now emerging from its infancy, and though many particular problems remain unresolved, the general contours of

Tibetan literary and cultural history are in important respects becoming clear to those familiar at least in a general manner with the range of works now available in the Tibetan language. One of my aims in the present work is to convey to readers who are not Tibetanists some impression of the broad domain of Tibetan religious thought that has now begun to come into view.

Throughout this book, I therefore discuss aspects of the historical development of Buddhism in Tibet, but, unlike the two books I have mentioned, I do not propose to present here an historical account of my topic overall. My interest lies first in the varied textures of Tibetan Buddhist thought, and only secondarily in history per se. For this reason I have proceeded by way of a series of case studies, for the most part originally conceived as independent essays, that nevertheless reflect one another in their concerns. In a separate publication I shall explore in some detail the history of Tibetan Buddhist doctrinal thought in a more restricted sense. Here, however, in the first chapter I seek to introduce the history of Buddhist thought in Tibet as a question for critical reflection, and I suggest some of the ways in which historical change in the field of Tibetan thought may itself be conceived. In part 1, "Conversion and Narrative," I consider traditions concerning the eighth-century Tibetan adoption of Buddhism in relation to the late, legendary accounts of the conversion, as well as aspects of the earliest evidence that contributes to our understanding of eighth-century events. Part 2, "Sources of Contestation," offers studies of topics relating to doctrinal transmission, interpretation, and dispute, in order to illustrate aspects of Buddhist thought in Tibet as defining, not a body of static dogmatics, but a much contested field. In part 3, "Myth, Memory, Revelation," our concern will be with mythic and philosophical aspects of the Nyingmapa, or Ancient, school of Tibetan Buddhism, in whose revealed scriptures the formerly alien Indian religion is decisively transfigured to become a matter of Tibetan cultural, and even personal, memory.

The photograph that appears on the cover of this book provides a view of the great monastic complex of Samye. As Tibet's first Buddhist monastery, founded during the late eighth century, it is a unique symbol of Tibet's adoption of Buddhism. Not long after its foundation, it became the site of Tibet's first great doctrinal dispute, in which the Chan tradition of China confronted Indian Buddhist scholasticism. Finally, as a center of pilgrimage, even today it remains a focal point of Tibetan historical memory. In its three-storeyed structure, then, Samye embodies our key themes of conversion, contestation, and memory.

The chapters of this book draw on materials gathered throughout the entire course of my involvement in the study of Tibet, beginning almost three decades ago. To recall all that has been generously given to me that should be acknowledged here would require a thorough reconstruction of the magical net (*māyājāla*) of intellectual encounters woven throughout this time. In several chapters, for instance, I refer to an old chronicle called the *Testament of Ba* (*Sba-bzhed*). Though I only began to consider this important early text in depth five or six years ago, I was first introduced to it in 1972, when, as an undergraduate college student, I had the good fortune to attend James Bosson's courses on classical Tibetan at the University of California, Berkeley. While at Berkeley, too, I was able to study Buddhist texts with Lewis Lancaster, who also encouraged my studies in Nepal. I shall refrain, however, from lengthy autobiographical reflection just now, and, with apologies to teachers and

friends who remain unnamed herein, mention those whose counsel and encouragement most directly contributed to these pages.

Over the years I have been privileged to study and discuss Tibetan Buddhist history and thought with some of the leading representatives of traditional Tibetan learning. Though I write within the tradition of European scholarship, my reading of all things Tibetan is indelibly marked by the abundant instructions and comments of H. H. Dudjom Rinpoche Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje (1904–1987), H. H. Karmapa XVI Rangjung Rikpei Dorje (1927–1981), H. H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche Tashi Peljor (1910–1992), Ven. Kalu Rinpoche Rangjung Künkhyap (1905–1989), Ven. Dezhung Rinpoche Kunga Tenpei Nyima (1906–1987), Ven. Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche (1920–1996), and Rev. Serlo Lama Sangye Tenzin (1924–1990). I often imagine, when I become immersed in the works of the figures discussed in these pages—past masters like Sakya Paṇḍita, Karma Pakshi, Dölpopa, or Longchenpa—that one or more of these men is reading over my shoulder, challenging me to “turn not to the words, but to meaning.” I cannot pretend to comprehend the meaning of their tradition as they would, much less to communicate that understanding here, but at the least I hope to convey that Tibetan Buddhist writings do mean to challenge us in ways that require our contemporary reflections to unfold in sustained dialogue with tradition.

Ongoing conversations over many years with fellow Tibetanists have crucially influenced the reflections gathered in this book. I am particularly grateful in this regard for the friendship of Anne-Marie Blondeau, Ronald Davidson, Gyurme Dorje, David Germano, Steven Goodman, Janet Gyatso, Yoshiro Imaeda, David Jackson, Samten Karmay, Per Kværne, Alexander Macdonald, Fernand Meyer, Katsumi Mimaki, David Seyfort Ruegg, E. Gene Smith, Heather Stoddard, and Tashi Tsering. I similarly wish to mention colleagues whose insights into Buddhism in East Asia have often caused me to rethink perspectives on the history of Buddhism in Tibet, especially Ryuichi Abe, Carl Bielefeldt, Raoul Birnbaum, Robert Buswell, Bernard Faure, John McRae, and Stephen Teiser.

My mother, Dorothy Hammer, has always reminded me of the virtues of fine craftsmanship in the English language. If I nevertheless fall into the tar pit of academic prose, I have only myself to blame. Christine Mollier has graciously given me references to pertinent Chinese materials, suggestions regarding the book’s title, and inspiration to think things anew.

The three chapters of part 1, “Conversion and Narrative,” were first presented as the Numata Lectures at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in January 1997. Gratitude is due to the Numata Foundation, to Clark Gilpin, Dean of the Divinity School, and to the Divinity School’s Numata Committee: Steven Collins, Paul Griffiths, and Frank Reynolds. These scholars, together with Philip Gossett, Dean of the Division of the Humanities, and Sheldon Pollock, Chair of the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations when I returned to the University of Chicago in 1996, have made this a particularly propitious setting in which to complete this book. The presence in Chicago and the friendship of Margot Pritzker and Thomas J. Pritzker, whose deep connections with Tibet and neighboring lands are well known among those involved in Tibetan Studies, have further contributed to these fortunate circumstances.

Generous awards from a number of bodies have directly supported the research upon which this book is based. I acknowledge, in particular, the Committee for Scholarly Communication with China for its support of my research in Tibetan regions of

China in 1990 and 1992. In 1994–1995 I had the good fortune to be a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and I am especially grateful to Peter Schäfer, who invited me to join his seminar there, and to the physicist Piet Hut for freewheeling conversations throughout that year. A major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, supporting my translation work in 1994–1997, enabled me to complete a substantial volume of translation, from which many of the text selections included in the present book are drawn. All translations given here, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

Several chapters or chapter sections of this book were previously published as separate articles. I thank the editors and publishers of the journals and books in which they first appeared for permission to reproduce them here:

- “Religious Syncretism in 13th Century Tibet: *The Limitless Ocean Cycle*,” in B. N. Aziz and M. Kapstein, eds., *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, pp. 358–371. New Delhi: Manohar, 1985.
- “Remarks on the *Maṇi-bka’-’bum* and the Cult of Avalokiteśvara in Tibet,” in S. Goodman and R. Davidson, eds., *Tibetan Buddhism: Reason and Revelation*, pp. 79–93, 163–169. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992.
- “The Purificatory Gem and Its Cleansing: A Late Tibetan Polemical Discussion of Apocryphal Texts,” *History of Religions* 28/3 (February 1989): 217–244.
- “Samantabhadra and Rudra: Innate Enlightenment and Radical Evil in Tibetan Rnying-ma-pa Buddhism,” in Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy, eds., *Discourse and Practice*, pp. 51–82. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992.
- “The Amnesic Monarch and the Five Mnemic Men,” in Janet Gyatso, ed., *In the Mirror of Memory*, pp. 239–269. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992.
- “From Dol-po-pa to ‘Ba’-mda’ Dge-legs: Three Jo-nang-pa Masters on the Interpretation of *Prajñāpāramitā*,” in Helmut Krasser, Michael Torsten Much, Ernst Steinkellner, and Helmut Tauscher, eds., *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Seventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, vol. 1, pp. 457–475. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Science, 1997.

The first two have been incorporated into chapters 6 and 8, respectively. The next three appear here, with revisions, as chapters 7, 9, and 10. Some passages in chapter 6 are derived from the last mentioned.

To Cynthia Read, editor for philosophy and religion at the Oxford University Press, and to her associates at the Press, I am indebted for their care in bringing about the fruition of this work.

One of many fortunate encounters during the early 1970s, not long after I had embarked on the path of Tibetan Studies, was with Michael Aris, later of St. Anthony’s College, Oxford, to whom this book is dedicated, and whose tragic passing occurred while it was being prepared for the press. During my last conversation with Dr. Aris, in July 1998 at the meeting of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, an organization that he had founded, we discussed this book in manuscript, which, with characteristic generosity, he had recently read. He offered me both kind encouragement and thoughtful advice for its final revision. I have attempted as best I know how to achieve a standard that in some small measure reflects the excellence he exemplified for all those who knew him.

Chicago, Illinois  
April 1999

M. T. K.

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## A Note on Pronunciation

One of the greatest challenges for the non-Tibetanist who wishes to read scholarship on Tibet is to wrestle with names and terms that often seem to have been generated by the random sorting of the roman alphabet. Correspondingly, one of the greatest challenges for the Tibetanist is to find a way in which to represent words and names of the Tibetan language that can be read by nonspecialists without at the same time earning the scorn of peers, who prefer exact transcriptions. If the present book offers only the latest example of failed compromise, I may console myself nevertheless that failure along these lines enjoys some very good company indeed.

Tibetan, like English and French, is written with a roughly phonetic script that is not employed phonetically. Just as we write *thought* where *thawt* should suffice, so the Lhasan writes *thugs-bsam*, but pronounces, very roughly, *thusam*. This in itself would present not much difficulty, if there were a consensus among scholars as to a system of simplified Tibetan phonetic romanization, but regrettably this is not the case. On the one hand, Tibetan pronunciation varies considerably from one region to another, so that a phonetic script must be limited with respect to dialect. On the other, because the actual sounds of Tibetan do not correspond too closely with the sounds normally represented by the roman script as used for English, special conventions of usage must be stipulated, and Tibetanists have not so far agreed about these.

For the purposes of this book, I have based my transcription on an approximation of modern Central Tibetan pronunciation, retaining the exact transcription of the root-consonant (*ming-gzhi*) wherever this seems feasible. The following conventions should be noted:

The vowels *a*, *i*, *e*, *o*, *u* are pure vowels, never diphthongs, and their pronunciation is similar to that in Italian. The final *e* must always be pronounced, never silent. Thus *dorje* should be pronounced *dorjé*, never *dorj*. The vowels *ö* and *ü* are pronounced as in German.

The consonants *kh* and *ph* are similar to English *k* and *p*. The *h* in each case merely represents aspiration, and *kh* should never be pronounced like the guttural *ch* in

German *Nachlaß*, nor *ph* like the English *ph* in *phlox*. *Th* is used as it is in the English name *Thomas*, but never as in *thralldom* or *blather*. *Ts* and *dz* both resemble the sound in English *adze*, while *tsh* resembles that in *bets*. In the same way, *tr* and *dr* resemble the sound in *drill*, while *trh* is more like that in *trill*. *Ng* is as in English *sing*, though English speakers often find it difficult to pronounce in initial position, as in the common Tibetan name *Ngawang*.

*K* and *g* are closely similar to the English hard *g* in *gulf*, and those not actually seeking to master the Tibetan language may pronounce these two letters in just the same manner. (In Lhasa dialect they differ as to the tone of the syllable they begin, a distinction not made in English.) Similarly: *c* and *j* resemble English *j*, *p* and *b* resemble English *b*, *s* and *z* resemble English *s*, and *sh* and *zh* resemble English *sh*. *T* and *d* are closer to the French or Italian *d* than to the English.

*Ch*, *h*, *m*, *n*, *ny*, and *w* have approximately the same values they have in English.

The use of these conventions is limited to Tibetan proper nouns occurring in the main body of the text. Their precise Tibetan orthography is given in the general index. Book titles and terms used only parenthetically, and all Tibetan words used in the notes, are given in exact transcription following the system described in Wylie 1959.

Sanskrit words are transcribed here according to the standard system favored in scholarship concerning India. For those wishing to become familiar with the essentials of Sanskrit pronunciation, a convenient guide may be found in Olivelle 1996, pp. xiv–xv.

Chinese is given in the official Pinyin romanization, using tone accents only when citing words and phrases not used as titles or proper nouns. A Chinese glossary will be found at the end of the book.

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# A Brief Chronology of Tibetan Buddhism

The topics considered in this book for the most part belong to the history of Tibetan Buddhism prior to 1400. The timeline from 650 to 1400 provides a sketch of Tibetan Buddhist history during this period, and the closing paragraphs summarize developments after 1400 to which I also refer herein. Familiarity with this chronology will enable the reader to situate the particular topics discussed in the main body of the book within the Tibetan historical framework overall.

- 650 Tibetan traditions and legends trace, for more than thirty generations, the ancient origins of the dynasty that succeeded in unifying Tibet as an imperial power during the reign of Songtsen Gampo (c. 617–649/650). The Tibetan writing system is invented at this time, and, according to later legendary tradition, Buddhism is first introduced by the emperor's Chinese bride, the princess of Wencheng (d. 684).
- 700 During the time of the emperor Düsöng (d. 704), some temples are probably established. Under his son Trhi Detsuktsen (reigned 705–755/756) the princess of Jincheng (d. 739) promotes both Chinese culture and Buddhism.
- 750 The emperor Trhi Songdetsen (reigned 755/756–797) adopts Buddhism, probably in 762. In 763 his armies overrun the Chinese capital, Chang'an. He establishes Tibet's first Buddhist monastery, Samye (c. 779), and during the 780s conquers Dunhuang, a major center of Chinese Buddhism. The Chinese Chan master Moheyan is invited to central Tibet and becomes involved in a debate or discussion at Samye with the Indian Buddhist philosopher Kamalaśīla. The Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang leads to the preservation there of numerous Tibetan manuscripts, whose discovery in 1907 provides our richest source of Tibetan documentation for this period.
- 800 Under Trhi Songdetsen's greatest successors, Trhi Desongtsen (reigned 804–815) and Relpacen (reigned 815–838), Buddhism continues to flour-

ish with royal patronage. In the reign of Lang Darma (838–842), patronage of the monasteries is reduced or withdrawn, and later tradition recounts that there was a persecution of Buddhism culminating in Lang Darma's assassination in 842 by a Buddhist monk.

- 850 The collapse of the Central Tibetan royal dynasty follows, with the ensuing  
900 power vacuum persisting for a full four hundred years, until the Sakyapas, backed by China's Mongol rulers, emerge as Tibet's supreme rulers during the late thirteenth century.
- 950 The revival of monastic Buddhism in Central Tibet begins towards the middle of the tenth century. During the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, Tibetan Buddhism enters a new period of rapid development and change. Local lords vie for ascendancy, and religious authority is no less contested than temporal power. From the late tenth century onwards we find Tibetan translators and pilgrims journeying to India and Nepal in search of gurus, scriptures, and esoteric lore.
- 1000 These developments are particularly prominent in Western Tibet, where the great translator Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) is patronized by the monarchs of the Guge kingdom. The Indian scholar and adept Atiśa (982–1054) is invited to teach there beginning in 1042. The careers of these two notable Buddhist monks mark the beginning of what Tibetan historians call the "later spread of the teaching," or the age of the "new translations." In reaction to these new developments the older Tibetan religious traditions—the Bön religion and the Nyingmapa, or "ancient," school of Buddhism—reassert themselves.
- 1050 The new infusion of Indian Buddhist teaching gives rise to a number of new Tibetan Buddhist sects and schools. Among the most prominent are the Kadampa, stemming from Atiśa's successors, the Sakyapa, representing the tradition of the Khön family's monastery at Sakya (founded in 1073), and the Kagyüpa, maintaining the tantric teachings of the translator Marpa (1012–1097).
- 1100 The Kadampa monastery at Sangphu is founded in 1071 or 1073 and swiftly emerges as the leading center for the study of logic and other philosophical topics. Marpa's successors proliferate into a large number of Kagyüpa sublineages following Gampopa (1079–1153), the foremost disciple of the poet Milarepa (1040–1123). During the same period Khyungpo Neljor (d. c. 1135) independently establishes the Shangpa Kagyüpa tantric tradition.
- 1150 The reassertion of the Bön and Nyingmapa traditions is advanced by means of rediscovered "treasures" (*gter-ma*), texts and religious objects said to have been cached in earlier times and now recovered. Nyangrel Nyima Özer (1124–1196) in this way produces a tremendous body of historical and legendary literature that exerts a very considerable influence on the later development of both historiography and religious thought.

- 1200 In 1204, the Kashmiri scholar Śākyaśrī arrives in Tibet with a retinue of learned Indian followers, and their visit helps to catalyze a new enthusiasm for Indian scholarship. An heir to the Khön family of Sakya, who becomes famed as Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251), devotes himself to the advancement in Tibet of Indian intellectual traditions.
- 1250 In 1246, Sakya Paṇḍita is invited to visit the Mongol ruler, thus initiating the relationship between Sakya and Mongol power that dominates Tibetan politics for the next century. His nephew, Chögyel Phakpa (1235–1280), becomes state preceptor under Khubilai Khan. Members of non-Sakyapa sects also maintain relations with the Mongol lords; examples are the second Karmapa hierarch, Karma Pakshi (1204–1283), and his successor, Karmapa III Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339).
- 1300 During the period of the Mongol-Sakyapa hegemony, Tibetan Buddhist scholastic philosophy comes into flower. The many famous figures active during this period include the Kadampa scholiast Rikpe Reldri (early fourteenth century), the redactor of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, Butön (1290–1364), the founder of the controversial “extrinsic emptiness” teaching, Dölpopa (1292–1361), and the master of the Great Perfection system, Longchenpa (1308–1363).
- 1350 Under the leadership of Tai Situ Changchub Gyeltshen of the Phakmodrupa order, Tibet is freed from the Sakyapa-Mongol regime. The historical writings “rediscovered” by Orgyen Lingpa (b. 1323) contribute to the mythologizing of the 8th-century Tibetan empire. Scholastic philosophy continues to thrive, particularly in the monastic centers allied with the scholarly traditions of Sakya.
- 1400 Je Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) founds the Ganden monastery to the east of Lhasa (1409), which soon gives rise to a new Buddhist order, the Gelukpa, and emphasizes its continuities with the older Kadampa school. Though greatly revered for his vast learning and rigorous standard of practice, relations between his disciples and some representatives of the other orders grow increasingly contentious. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witness intensive doctrinal debate between the Gelukpas and their Sakyapa and Kagyüpa rivals.

The rise of the Gelukpa order coincides with a period of sustained civil war in Tibet. By the sixteenth century, important powers in the central Tibetan province of Ü are allied with the Gelukpas, while the kings of Tsang in the west support hierarchs of the Kagyüpa and other schools. One of the leading Gelukpa hierarchs, Sonam Gyamtsho, becomes a missionary to the Mongols and, on winning the allegiance of the chieftain Altan Khan (1578), receives the Mongolian title Dalai Lama (“oceanic guru”). Because the title is bestowed posthumously on his predecessors, he becomes the third in the line. The connection forged with the Mongols encourages the renewed interest of the Mongolian leadership in Tibetan affairs, and in 1642 Gushri Khan of the Khoshot tribe conquers all of Tibet, establishing the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) as ruler of the reunified realm.

In 1717, the Mongolian Dzungar tribe invades Tibet, bringing renewed civil war and intersectarian violence. The Manchu rulers of China's Qing dynasty (1644–1911) become directly involved in the events in Tibet and during the 1720s consolidate direct rule over large parts of the eastern Tibetan provinces of Amdo and Kham. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, these regions emerge as new centers of creative energy in the development of Tibetan Buddhist thought.

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THE TIBETAN ASSIMILATION OF BUDDHISM

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## Introduction

### *Death, Literacy, and Tibet's Buddhist Elite*

Before Buddhism made its presence felt in Tibet, as it did during the eighth and ninth centuries C.E., and even as the Buddha's teaching began to establish itself there, it was but one of several foreign ways of culture with which the Tibetans were becoming familiar. Besides Tibet's ancient indigenous traditions, that are still perceptible both in their persistent survivals and in elements of the earliest written records,<sup>1</sup> early medieval Tibet knew of Chinese historiography and Greek medicine, Nepalese sculpture and Sogdian textiles, Nestorian Christianity and Manichaeism.<sup>2</sup> The penetration by Buddhism of Tibetan culture, so that the two would become to all intents and purposes indivisibly associated, was not yet previsionsed, and to explain the success and thoroughness of Buddhism's Tibetan conquest remains a central problem for the historical study and interpretation of Tibetan civilization. The sketches of three key issues given here may serve as an introduction, delineating some important aspects of the rise of Buddhism in Tibet, and providing a point of departure for the studies that follow in later chapters.

Like some who have in recent years considered the relations among systematic and narrative modes of discourse,<sup>3</sup> I am concerned throughout this book with the study of a particular cultural sphere that is not our own, in this instance the realm of Tibetan Buddhism. Investigations such as these tend to underscore the apparent gulf separating descriptive and documentary scholarship from the domain of theory and interpretation, while at the same time they call into question any such deep divide. In the study of cultural history, this emerges wherever the question of contextualization imposes itself upon us, as it does whenever complex domains of discourse—worlds of thought in which myth and science, history and metaphysics, logic and poetry intersect, blend, and rebound—become subject matter for our reflections. We know that contextual background plays a crucial role in understanding, so we can't eliminate it. But we can't seem to come up with a decisive formulation of what that role is to be, so often we'd like to. I very much doubt that we shall ever be able to provide a purely methodological account of contextualization that would also serve as an acceptable guide to practice.<sup>4</sup> The scholar as contextualizer must in the end be a myth maker, spinning tales of reason, truth, and history, in virtue of which the actions,

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