Matthew T. Kapstein’s book *The Tibetans* is part of a series that aims to present “a complete history, from the origins to the present, of the people under consideration” (ii). In contrast to the somewhat misleading title that makes one expect a purely ethnographic or anthropological survey that treats “the” Tibetans as a “monolithic entity” (xii), the book offers a well balanced presentation of the many dimensions of Tibet and its inhabitants. The book is addressed to readers with a general interest in Tibetan cultural history. But even advanced scholars may gain new insights. Kapstein, himself a leading tibetologist, addresses also topics of his own ongoing research. The book is very well written and makes extensive use of the latest research outcome. It will without doubt be very valuable for students of Asian history. Only readers with a special interest in the intellectual history of Tibetan religions, Buddhism in particular, may be better off with other introductory works, since merely a short chapter of the book comprises a discussion of religious ideas, rituals and institutions.

The survey sets out with an account of the Tibetan natural environment and the general cultural settings, living conditions and productive activities (1–26). The heading of this introductory chapter, “The vessel and its contents,” seems to allude to a traditional Buddhist classification (the “Word of the Vessel,” Tibetan *snod-kyi ’jig-rten*, and its animate contents, the living beings, called “juice,” *bcud*). This might be taken to illustrate the general fact that Kapstein (as most historians do) adopts the ‘emic’ historical periodization developed by Tibetan Buddhist scholars and historians for his own presentation of the history of Tibet. This approach is, of course, legitimate, yet, to a certain extent, also problematic, which will be discussed below. Unfolding the history of Tibet in four chapters, the first, “Prehistory and Early Legends”, starts with new scientific data of the earliest Tibetan settlements as well as indigenous Tibetan anthropogenic myths (27–50). A second chapter — and, accordingly, a historical period — comprises “The Tsenpo’s Imperial Dominion” (51–83); a third is characterized by “Fragmentation and Hegemonic Power” (84–126), whereas a fourth is devoted to “The Rule of the Dalai Lamas” (127–174). The concluding chapter, “Tibet in the Modern World” (269–300), rounds up the historical section of the book. In between the historical outline and the conclusion, three further chapters introduce the reader to issues of the “Tibetan Society” (175–204), “Religious Life and © Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2007 DOI: 10.1163/156852707X244333
Thought” (205–243), and to Tibetan art and science, “The Sites of Knowledge” (244–268). As the structure of the book shows Kapstein’s presentation follows the idea of a regional “Tibetan civilizational sphere” (xii); its single periods, however, are distinguished by the respective ruling powers. The book steers clear of earlier academic attempts to describe Buddhism, or, more general, religion as the leading force ruling Tibetan history. Instead it focuses on economic and political circumstances and interests. In Kapstein’s words: “It is one of the unfortunate illusions of Tibetan history that religious tension has too often been taken as the cause, rather than as a symptomatic ideological projection, of the underlying fissures that have often afflicted Tibetan society” (128). This guiding stance, an effect of the deconstruction of ‘Tibet-myth’ in the 1990’s, can be found in other recent publications as well (just to give one example: Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, Kleine Geschichte Tibets, Munich 2006). By using this approach the author is able to offer a convincing explanation of the impact an Inner-Asian economic crisis in 9th century had on the breakdown of the early Tibetan empire. The same perspective leads to a very intense and realistic, yet sad account of the factors that contributed to the internal Tibetan crisis after the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and the downfall of the regent Reting Rinpoche. It “brought to light the extreme fragility of the Tibetan state: its political leadership was corrupt and riven by faction, its military suited only for small-scale operations directed against fellow Tibetans, its great monasteries home to militant bands dedicated to refusing reform” (278–279). Those factors paved the way for the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese Army in 1950.

To return to the aforementioned difficulty with regard to the periodization of Tibetan history: Unfortunately some of the major events are only accessible through descriptions of Tibetan Buddhist historiographers. Obviously these texts often follow certain political or religious agendas. There is ample evidence that for central historical events like the narratives of the debate of Samye or the assassination of Langdarma (79–81), the only factum brutum is the intention behind the narration. What further complicates matters is that these narratives serve as turning points for the historiography of the traditional Tibetan authors. Nevertheless Kapstein proves to be quite optimistic (much more than the present reviewer) that the modern historian can get a grip on the historical events of Tibetan history by separating strongly biased or fictional accounts from supposedly underlying facts. Since in most of the disputed narratives Kapstein refers to the ongoing academic discussion, this is only meant to be a minor point of criticism. As the author admits (cf. xiii), two dimensions of “the Tibetans” did — unfortunately — not find entry into the book. First, there are only few remarks on the current situation of the