



2021

Book Review: Christopher I. Beckwith. *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*

Constance Wilkinson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilkinson, Constance (2021) "Book Review: Christopher I. Beckwith. *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 84 : No. 84 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol84/iss84/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

**Christopher I. Beckwith. *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987**

Reviewed by Constance Wilkinson

The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia was brought into being by polyglot polymath philologist MacArthur Fellowship recipient and stupefyingly wide-ranging medieval Central Asian civilizations-ist scholar Christopher I. Beckwith as the "first detailed narrative history of the Tibetan Empire in Central Asia written in any language" (vii). By 1993, Princeton University Press had released a 4th printing/1st paperback edition (with a new afterword by Beckwith), suggesting a widening readership for what some might regard as a rarified subject.

In this compact and densely fact-packed work, Beckwith corrects the record on Imperial Tibet, as emphasized in its inside title page, where it gains a dynamic sub-title: *A History of the Struggle for Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese During the Early Middle Ages*.

Who dominates this struggle during the seventh through ninth CE centuries? (Hint: It's not T'ang China.)

Turns out that the imperial subject of this fine book, far from being the weak, culturally derivative, politically inconsequential polity dismissed by historians historically (and to this day) as an insignificant feudal pseudo-state comprised of squabbling tribes of barbaric barbarians, the Tibetan Empire was, *au contraire*, strategic, acquisitive, belligerent, punitive, wealthy-Silk Road-international-trade-oriented from its imperialist imperial beginnings. Imperial Tibet was a force to be reckoned with, feared by its neighbors and feared by them with good reason.

Beckwith mines myriad crucial sources, reading most in their original languages: Tibetan, Chinese, Old Tibetan, Old Turkic, Arabic, Persian. With facts gleaned from disparate sources — official histories, personal accounts, diaries, letters, songs, government records, trade merchant accounts, treaties, pillar inscriptions — Beckwith finds fine threads and weaves them masterfully together into a rich narrative tapestry revealing the rise of Tibet into prominence, then dominance and endurance.

Chapter 1

"Entrance into Central Asia" begins with various Central Tibetan warlords fighting for supremacy. At that time, the Tibetan plateau was home to martial polities of varying sizes, held together by comitatus loyalty and personal commitment to a single warlord leader--unto death. (p. 15) One clan prevailed, now known as the Yarlung dynasty.

One of its scions, Songtsen Gampo (who will later be venerated for promoting the spread of Buddhist teachings), is credited with building his father's Central Tibetan kingdom into a Central Asian empire.

A contemporary Tibetan source says¹ that the assassination of Songtsen's father by a rival faction traumatized Songtsen as a young child, fueling a lifelong desire for revenge and power through conquest. Songtsen took the throne in 618 CE, as *tsempo* ("emperor") and "began a systematic reduction of all opposition to his rule on the Tibetan plateau." (p. 20)

Having put down "the rebellion that accompanied his father's death by poisoning," (p. 20) Songtsen went on to invade and subjugate his neighbor to the northeast, the Sum-pa, who were vassals of "the shadowy Zhang-Zhung confederation," (p. 14) an adversary nation more powerful than Songtsen, too powerful for him to invade and conquer. To deal with dangerous Zhang-Zhung, Songtsen abandoned invasion in favor of diplomacy through marital alliance: mollifying powerful neighboring countries by offering marriage to a royal princess — "the princess bribe."² Emperor Songtsen sent his own sister Sad³-Mar-Kar to marry the King of Zhang Zhung and off she dutifully went to her remote new kingdom.

The new queen takes Zhang Zhung as a personal insult. Her royal residence is the famous Khyung Lung Silver Palace. "Silver?" A pale pile of dusty rocks. "Palace"? A grubby citadel in ruins. The country? Precipitous cliffs, abyssal ravines. The food is nasty, she's forced to eat fish, her servants are stupid; she can't stand her spouse. That fate has forced her to dwell in such a horrid place is just a bad joke.⁴ Queen Sad-Mar-Kar thinks Zhang-Zhung is nothing to write home about — which doesn't stop her from doing just that. She writes songs⁵ whining about her life and sends them to brother Songtsen. Along with sending him her sad songs (plus a pile of trinkets), Sad-mar-kar sends word that the King of Zhang Zhung is coming to nearby Sum-pa. Somehow her trinkets reveal her husband's location and timing and her desire to be free. Songtsen sends his men to lie in ambush, wait for the King, and kill him. And they do.

¹ Personal communication, Khenpo Chodrak Tenphel, 2020

² A pun by the reviewer alluding to a popular American fantasy fairy tale. However, it is an arrangement that apparently was utilized frequently in Tibetan foreign relations.

³ Transliterated "Sad" is pronounced "say," not "sad."

⁴ Uray, G. (1972). *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 25, 5-38. Retrieved December 22, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23657137>

⁵ Hummel, Siegbert, "On Zhang-Zhung," Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharmasala, India, 2000, p. 111

Having presumably made less sad his sister Sad-mar-kar by bumping off her hubby, having moved seamlessly from normal marital diplomacy to treacherous family treachery, Emperor Songtsen Gampo invades the now-kingless Kingdom of Zhang-Zhung, usurps the throne and adds this powerful country (and its very powerful army) to his growing collection of vassal states. Says Beckwith, "[W]ith this victory, Srong btsan sgampo⁶ became master of the high Tibetan plateau." (p. 20)

Songtsen Gampo invades neighboring Nepal, subjugates it, requests a princess bribe and returns home with a nice Nepalese princess bride.

When equally acquisitive Emperor Taizong of T'ang China invades the A-zha region, a NE buffer state between Tibet and China, Emperor Songtsen asks his new next-door neighbor to give him an imperial princess.

Now, the *heqin*⁷ princess bribe system involves a *lesser* power offering a princess to a *greater* power, as a bribe, to ensure peace. On these grounds, perhaps, assuming that his empire is superior, the T'ang emperor refuses to cough up a princess.

In response, Beckwith reports, Tibetan Emperor Songtsen promptly "strengthened his army with Zhang-Zhung troops and attacked and easily defeated" (p. 22) the [T'ang China vassal kingdom of the] A-zha in 637 (an area near Ko-Ko-Nor situated near a crucial and profitable trade route controlled by T'ang). Beckwith explains that "[The Tibetan Emperor] followed up this success [in 637] by subjugating two powerful [nearby] tribes:" the Tanguts and the Po-lan. (pp. 22-23)

"Having established himself as an enemy to be feared, Srong btsan sgampo⁸ raided the Chinese border town of Sung *chou*⁹ on September 12, 638." (p. 23) Emperor Songtsen's army easily defeated the "Chinese force sent against him by the commander in Sung *chou*, and he [Songtsen] incited the local Ch'iang tribes to revolt against their Chinese masters." (p. 23) The Tibetan emperor let it be known that should he *not* receive a T'ang imperial princess, he, Emperor Songtsen, would lead his vastly superior Imperial Tibetan army deep into China and wreak havoc.

This threat, backed up by his recent demonstrations of martial art, does the trick, demonstrating who *is* and who is *not* the top dog emperor.

⁶ Beckwith's transliteration of Songtsen Gampo.

⁷ Heqin, also known as marriage alliance, refers to the historical practice of . . . marrying princesses—usually members of minor branches of the ruling family—to rulers of neighboring states.^[1] It was often adopted as an appeasement strategy with an enemy state too powerful to defeat on the battlefield. The policy was not always effective. It implied an equal diplomatic status between the emperor and the ruler of the other state. As a result, it was controversial and had many critics.

⁸ Songtsen Gampo.

⁹ Songzhou, in Sichuan.

T'ang emperor Taizong gives up, gives in, and gives away to Emperor Songtsen a nice new T'ang princess bride (p. 23) bribe so that the Tibetan Emperor Songtsen will take his big fat army back to wherever it came from. This princess agreement *does* work for the next decade, during which Tibet continues to invade and conquer other countries but keeps the peace with T'ang.

In 650, Songtsen Gampo died. Nevertheless, Tibetan expansionism continues to be the rule, whether the ruling ruler is an actual emperor or a bellicose Minister or Regent (who governs when a given emperor is too old or too young or too something.) For a supposedly buddhadharma-spreading country, Imperial Tibet seems to do nothing much except invade, invade, invade, and, mostly, conquer:

Year	Attacker	Attackee
656	Tibet	Lesser Bolu & Bailian (control NW silk road trade)
660	Tibet	A-zha/T'u-yu-hun (control NE silk road trade route)
662	Tibet & allies	T'ang army in NW says it's too tired to fight Tibet, so runs away
663	Tibet & allies	Gilgit/Wakhan/Balur (control NW silk road trade route)
663	Tibet	invade A-zha/T'u-yu-hun. (NE route)
667	Tibet	W. Turkic tribes become vassals of Tibet (NW)
668	Tibet	erects fortress in A-zha near T'ang border (NE)
670	Tibet & allies	take Tarim Basin/T'ang loses its Four Garrisons
670	Tibet	crushes T'ang army at Wu Hai/Koko Nor (NE)
670	Tibet	defeats T'ang army at Tafei Ch'uan/Koko Nor (NE)

"This military disaster marked the end of two decades of Chinese domination of the Tarim Basin...The first period of Tibetan domination over the Tarim states and neighboring regions had begun." (p. 36)

Chapter 2

"The Tibetan Empire in the Western Regions" begins with sad, shocked T'ang China trying to recover from the "great defeat of the Chinese imperial army which had been sent in 670 to the Koko Nor *to crush the Tibetans* [emphasis mine] and recover the Four Garrisons."(p. 38)

During T'ang's 670 attempt to recover their valuable Four Garrisons and crush the Tibetans, kicking them out of the Tarim Basin, the Chinese had faced a Tibetan army of 200,000 (at Wu Hai) and a 400,000-man Tibetan force (at Ta-fei Chu'an.)¹⁰

In 677, the Tibetan emperor dies, and another succeeds him and there's another minister-regent. But it doesn't matter much who's calling the shots — expansionist Tibet's gonna be expansionist Tibet. In the far west, the Tibetans now are invading Turkistan; in the east, Tibet starts raiding T'ang's fortified Chinese prefectural capitals: Shan *chou*, K'uo *chou*, and Ho *chou*, among others. (p. 43) In response to the outrage of constant raiding, T'ang China put together an expeditionary army *specifically to punish Imperial Tibet*. Interestingly, that T'ang army *never goes anywhere*. (p. 43)

"By the end of 677, Tibet had established control over the whole of the Tarim Basin and the neighboring mountainous lands to the southwest." (p. 43)

In the summer of 678, a yet another new T'ang expeditionary army is assembled to deal with those pesky Tibetans, and a new T'ang general is named, and he and his army *do* go somewhere, specifically to Shan *chou*, where T'ang prevailed in a small skirmish. However, later that year, on October 3, 678, there occurred not a skirmish, but a massive battle between Imperial Tibet and Imperial China around the Koko Nor area, which ended in yet another massively disastrous military defeat for T'ang.

Meanwhile, expansionist Tibet keeps on expanding when it can, and when it can't, still keeps on trying:

Year	Action
680	Tibet captures the Anrong Fortress in Sichuan
681	Tibet invades the Qinghai region
685	Another T'ang army is raised to attack Tibet. <i>It never leaves China.</i>
687	Tibet invades the Turkic country of Guzan (Kucha) in the West
687	A Chinese general chosen to lead an army against Tibet. <i>Attack is cancelled.</i>
687	Tibet re-takes control of the Western regions
689	T'ang attacks Tibet near Kongol and is defeated at Yin-chih-chia River
690	Tibet defeats T'ang army at Issyk-kul (now in Kyrgystan)
691	T'ang raises army to attack Tibetans at Wu-wei. <i>T'ang army is recalled.</i>

¹⁰ See the 2020 Conference on Social Sciences, Education, and Management, which one declines properly to cite lest it draw attention to a seemingly still-sensitive topic. Google, Ta-fei-chu'an/Da-fei Ch'uan and Tubo/Tibet (41). Oddly, the outcome of this battle sticks in China's current craw, inspiring scholarly papers that try to T'ang-splain away Tibet's victory and China's terrible defeat ("Not our fault! Bad place! Stinky! Too cold! Too high! Bad sickness, big miasma, holey socks!")

Internal political collapse in Tibet, however, leads to weakness that is noticed by T'ang. An expeditionary army is raised, and striking swiftly to dispatch a wounded enemy, T'ang attacks the Tarim Basin.

Chapter 3

“The Arabs and Western Turks” begins with the sudden and successful Chinese re-capture in 694 of what had once been T'ang's celebrated Four Garrisons, after 22 years of failed attempts. (p. 55) Despite serious internal strife, conflict between the young Tibetan emperor and his experienced Gar clan Minister, Tibet manages to pull itself together, and, in 696, the (Tibetan) empire strikes back. A bloody battle takes place between T'ang and Tibet in which the Tibetans are once again victorious. The battleground near T'ao *chou* acquires a new name due to the carnage — "Tag La Gya Dur" (Tib.) or "Tiger Pass Chinese Graveyard." After this, "Tibet was able — from a position of strength — to send an embassy to the T'ang court with a peace proposal — a political marriage." (p. 58) Once again, at T'ang's expense, Tibet's military superiority enables it to play the princess bribe card—and win.

However, the long-simmering antipathy between the Tibetan emperor and the long-powerful Gar clan had not dissipated. In 697, with war minister Gar far from Central Tibet, subduing T'ang's vassals in A-zha, the Tibetan emperor invited the leaders of the Gar clan to a hunting party. Over two thousand came. The emperor had all of them executed. (p. 60) Thus "[t]he house of Gar was crushed." (p. 61) What was someone saying about bringing the Buddhist teachings to Tibet? Never mind.

Despite the evil karma resulting from the emperor's decision to execute two thousand innocent Tibetans, somehow some Tibetans remain, undaunted, un-assassinated; the Tibetan emperor orders his military to launch a series of raids on the eastern border, targeting T'ang military prefectures and cities. In the far west, the Tibetans join with Arab forces to oust T'ang.

Year	Action
700	Tibet raids Ho <i>chou</i> , Liang <i>chou</i> , Ch'ang-sung <i>hsien</i> .
701	Tibet & E. Turk allies raid Liang <i>chou</i> . Again.
701	Tibet raids S'ung <i>chou</i> , T'ao <i>chou</i> .
702	Tibet raids S'ung <i>chou</i> , T'ao <i>chou</i> .
702	Tibet raids Mao <i>chou</i> .
703-4	Tibet subjugates the Mywa of Nanzhao on Tibet's SW border w/ T'ang
704	Tibet & W. Turks attack Tirmidh in Tukharistan - control N/S routes
710	Tibet demands gift of NE land from T'ang and receives land
710	Tibet builds a bridge over Yellow River on its new land gift
710	Tibet stations 2 armies on Tibet/China border on its new land gift
714	Tibet begins raiding Chinese border posts along river

Year	Action
714	Tibet offers peace but T'ang refuses so Tibet raids T'ang cities and border posts
715	Tibet allies with Arab forces to attack T'ang vassal Ferghana

"[T]he events of 715 clearly indicate that a milestone in Eurasian history had been reached. The Arabs from the west, the Chinese from the east, and the Tibetans from the south — the three greatest expansionistic states of early medieval Asia — had converged." (p. 83)

Chapter 4

“The Turgis Alliance”: Beckwith opens this chapter remarking that "it is a testament to the weakness of T'ang in comparison with their self-portrait in dynastic histories, that they could not seriously alter the course of events in Eurasia during the eighth century. In the end, the proud Chinese had to accept the fact of equality with their neighbors." (p. 84) Especially when their neighbors kept on attacking them, and especially Imperial Tibet.¹¹

In the northeast, the Tibetans continued their raids on vulnerable T'ang outposts; in the west, the Tibetans, Arabs, the Turgis Confederacy, Uighurs, Eastern Turks, and T'ang continued duking it out for control of the Tarim Basin, with losses on all sides, and frequent shifts of alliances. There's just no stopping these Tibetans.

Chapter 5

“T'ang China and the Arabs”¹²: In 737, T'ang China under emperor Hsuan-tsung broke a 7-year peace treaty with Tibet by invading northeastern Tibet and decisively defeating them. In the west, Tibetan-Turgis allies joined forces against intrusive Arabs. Many T'ang victories started to occur (probably because the Gar clan had been annihilated — they had been very famously skilled soldiers).

¹¹ 727 Tibet & allies attack Kucha
Tibet and allies attack Kucha, Gua zhou and Su zhou
¹² 730 Tibetan Army is in Turkharistan, the far west
734 T'ang and Tibet set a boundary at Chiling Mountain
737 Tibet conquers Lesser Bolu
741 Tibet attacks Qinghai, then sacks the Stone City
745 T'ang attacks Tibet and suffers defeat
749 T'ang attacks Tibet and suffers heavy casualties

Despite having to endure more and more military defeats, the Tibetan Empire continued to cause problems for T'ang. For example, Beckwith points out that "[d]uring the winter, when Chinese armies were largely immobilized, the Tibetans seem to have had complete control of the area...the Tibetans would wait until the grain grown by the Chinese was ripe; then they would raid and collect it. The T'ang authorities were so helpless to stop this (it happened every year) that the local Chinese nicknamed the area "Tibetan Grain Estates." (p. 129)

Chapter 6

"The Late Empire" begins with increasing losses for Imperial Tibet, that is, until the An-Lushan rebellion in 755, which required T'ang to withdraw its military from all its various faraway posts: in the west, the north, the northeast, opening the door for Imperial Tibet to sweep right back in. Which they do.¹³ By 763, the rebellion is still going strong, Tibet has re-gained its territories, and a strong and confident Tibetan Army sweeps into the T'ang capital city, Ch'ang-An, and takes it over, installs a Tibetan puppet as emperor, and then the Tibetans leave to begin re-taking their former territories. And they do.

I could go on, because there is more, and more, but I recommend you acquire this book so you may read it yourself and savor it. It's a great book. It has kept my mind bogged happily for months and as I write this, my wonderment continues to increase.

I've become undaunted by learning A-zha in Tibetan is also known as Togon in Tibetan and is also known as T'u-yu-hun in Chinese and also known as A-chai in Chinese. A-zha is Togon is T'u-yu-hun is A-chai. And so on.

-
- ¹³ 757 Tibet conquers Shanzhou
 763 Tibet conquers Kharasahr, invades T'ang with 100K army
 765 Tibet invades Tang 70K army and takes Liang zhou
 766 Tibet conquers Ganzhou and Suzhou
 776 Tibet conquers Gauzhou
 781 Tibet conquers Hami
 783 Tibet & China sign treaty of Qinshui
 784 China breaks treaty
 786 Tibet conquers Yanzhou and Xiazhou
 787 Tibet captures Dunhuang and Kucha
 789 Tibet attacks Lonshou, Jingzhou and Bingzhou
 790 Tibet conquers Tingzhou
 792 Tibet conquers Gaochang and Khotan etc.

Beckwith's book has made me wonder how, from Central Tibet, the Tibetan Empire could possibly keep track of battles on its eastern border with A-zha/T'ang China, as well as in the desert-y middle Tarim Basin/Four Garrisons, as well as the really faraway Pamir-Gilgit-Karakorum mountain passes, simultaneously. Not to mention Nanzhao, in the south. Turkestan. That's a lot of territory to take and keep or merely keep track of.

Beckwith's book made me wonder what happened to all those pacific meditative Buddhist teachings lovingly imported to Tibet by Tibetan emperors whilst engaging in almost perpetual warfare and the occasional outright massacre.

It made me amazed that the conventional historians' view of imperial Tibet as being a backward backwater still prevails. Curious civilizationists who acquire Christopher Beckwith's excellent book will enjoy the wrongly-written record of Imperial Tibet in Central Asia being corrected.