

# TIBET

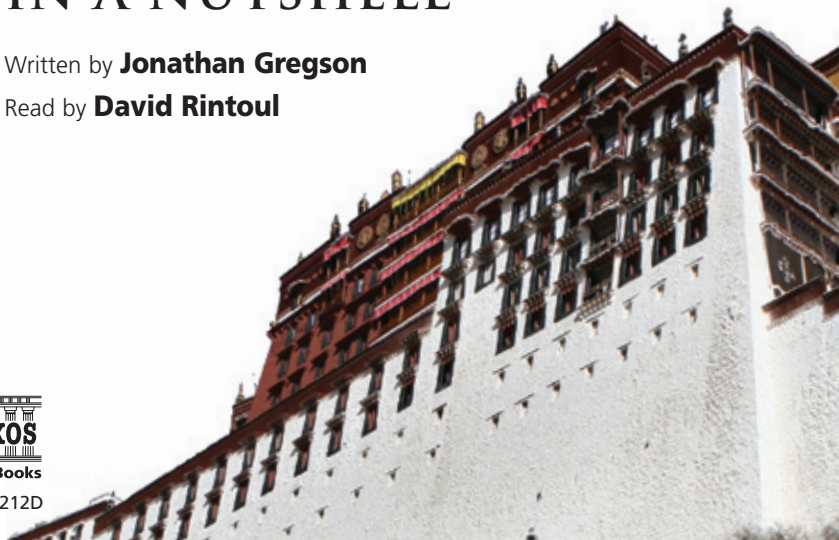
## IN A NUTSHELL

Written by **Jonathan Gregson**

Read by **David Rintoul**



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1	To the Western imagination...	5:07
2	At these altitudes the light, the wind...	5:54
3	Most Tibetans are meat eaters, even though...	6:01
4	The Tibetan language is likewise distinct...	4:41
5	It was Songsten Gampo who first established...	5:20
6	This transformation was almost entirely...	5:38
7	Tibet became a storehouse of Buddhist teachings...	5:08
8	Under Tsongkhapa's successor, Gedun Truppa...	4:55
9	The 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso...	5:27
10	The Dalai Lama also sought recognition...	6:07
11	Neither he nor the Tibetan government...	4:58
12	Meanwhile, beyond the Himalayas, China...	4:19
13	Dharamsala's strategy then was to shift...	4:18
14	Nearly four decades after abandoning...	5:25
15	The current status of Tibet...	3:29

**Total time: 1:17:00**

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## IN A NUTSHELL

Written by **Jonathan Gregson**

Tibet is a land like no other. For more than a thousand years Tibetan civilisation developed in a manner quite distinct from that of its largest neighbours, India and China, or any other society on Earth. Ruled over by a god-king, and with nearly a quarter of its people dedicated to the religious life as Buddhist monks or nuns, Tibet was a rare example of an entire society in which spirituality took precedence over more worldly matters. Encircled by the world's highest mountains, and universally known as 'The Land of Snows', it remained physically isolated and deliberately aloof from the onward march of more materialistic civilisations. The few outsiders who managed to enter Tibet described it as 'medieval' and 'otherworldly'.

That state of affairs continued until 1950 when the Chinese Communists

invaded and set about uprooting the country's feudal society and superstitious values, in place of which they tried to impose state socialism, atheism, and their doctrine that Tibet had always been an integral part of China or – as they put it – 'The Great Motherland'. This amounted to a complete inversion of the deeply held beliefs of the majority of Tibetans. Some co-operated with their new political masters in the hope of advancement, but most stuck to their traditional ways.

When persuasion failed, the Chinese turned to harsher methods. Thousands of monasteries were emptied, their prayer halls, libraries and works of art destroyed. Monks and nuns were forced to marry each other. Those who refused to accept the new Communist values were subjected to public humiliation in 'struggle sessions'.

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Thousands were imprisoned or executed. Unsurprisingly, Tibetans rose in revolt – first in the eastern province of Kham and then, during the spring of 1959, in what has become known as the Lhasa Uprising.

The Dalai Lama, along with many members of his government and the most venerated of reincarnate lamas, fled the Land of Snows and sought refuge in India. There they were joined by resistance fighters and thousands of ordinary Tibetans who refused to collaborate with the Communist regime. For the last half century, close to 100,000 Tibetans have been living in exile – mainly in India, but also with smaller communities in North America, Western Europe and Australasia – where they have been free to practise their religion, establish monasteries or spiritual centres, and retain their loyalty to the Dalai Lama.

Within Tibet, conditions went from bad to worse. Forced collectivisation of land, and the authorities' insistence on growing crops ill-suited to Tibet's harsh climate, resulted in man-made famines. Hundreds of monasteries were ransacked or dynamited during the Cultural Revolution. Although subsequently some monasteries have been

restored – either with state aid or through the private donations of pious Tibetans – any manifestations of loyalty to the Dalai Lama or demands for civil freedoms have been met with clampdowns by the authorities. Thousands of monks, nuns, and ordinary Tibetans who dared to protest have been imprisoned and tortured. And while China has invested heavily in Tibet, modernising its physical infrastructure and bringing about material progress, most of the benefits have gone, not to native Tibetans but to the waves of Han Chinese immigrants who now form the majority of the population in cities such as Lhasa and Shigatse and effectively control the economy. With a new railway linking central Tibet with China, many fear that Chinese settlers will swamp the indigenous population and that Tibetan culture, already marginalised or treated by the authorities as a museum-piece to attract foreign tourists, will wither and die.

For several decades now, many Tibetan families have sent their children on a perilous journey over the Himalayan passes to be educated in the Tibetan language and learn about their Buddhist traditions among the exiled community in India. Many monks

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and high lamas – most famously the teenage Karmapa, recognised by both Beijing and the Dalai Lama – have likewise fled in secret so that they could practise their religion freely and receive spiritual teachings from gurus and scholars living in exile.

Given the scale of destruction of monastic libraries within Tibet, and the disappearance or corruption of orally-transmitted teachings that had been specific to a particular monastery or lineage of reincarnate lamas, the core values of Tibetan civilisation are now probably better preserved among the exiled community than within the Land of Snows itself. The great monasteries of Ganden, Sera and Drepung have been re-founded in the South Indian state of Karnataka, where thousands of Tibetan exiles have settled in kibbutz-style communities. And the success of Tibetan Buddhism in transforming itself from a localised and esoteric cult into a truly world religion, with monasteries and spiritual centres spread across all five continents, should ensure that the spiritual genius of Tibetan civilisation will survive, no matter what happens within the country itself.

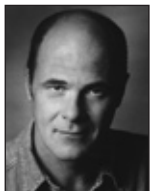
Naturally there are concerns that some aspects of exiled Tibetan culture will become diluted or contaminated by that of the host nation. Even scholar monks holding disputations in India are occasionally known to substitute words in Hindi for the correct term in Tibetan. Likewise, artists decorating temples or painting devotional scrolls, known as tangkas, are increasingly introducing Indian or Nepalese motifs and techniques. In monasteries or meditation centres set up in the West, some of the more specifically Tibetan or esoteric aspects of spiritual practice have been watered down, thereby rendering the core teachings more palatable to American or European acolytes.

Nonetheless, the genius of Tibetan civilisation lives on under an alien sun. Whether it will ever be resurrected in the Land of Snows depends as much on political developments within China as it does on the determination of ordinary Tibetans, in exile or at home, to maintain their unique culture.

**Notes by Jonathan Gregson**



**Jonathan Gregson** was born and raised in India and has been visiting the Himalayan region for nearly 50 years. He has travelled overland across Tibet and visited adjacent regions repeatedly, such as Bhutan, Sikkim, Mustang and Mongolia, that have been deeply influenced by Tibetan civilization. His books include *Kingdoms Beyond the Clouds: Journeys in Search of the Himalayan Kings* and *Massacre at the Palace: The Doomed Royal Dynasty of Nepal*. He is married and lives in East London.



After Edinburgh University, **David Rintoul** went on a scholarship to RADA. His theatre work includes *Sergeant Ola and His Followers* and *Etta Jenks* at the Royal Court Theatre, *The Beaux Stratagem*, *Infidelities* and *The White Devil* at the Lyric, and *Richard II* and *Richard III* opposite Derek Jacobi at the Phoenix. His Television appearances include *Taggart*, *Poirot* and many others. He has previously read *Rights of Man* for Naxos AudioBooks.

## The music on this recording was taken from the NAXOS catalogue

**TIBET SHERAB LING MONKS SACRED TIBETAN CHANT** NAXOS WORLD 76044-2  
Sherab Ling Monastery Monks (Tracks 2 and 3)

**Music programming by Sarah Butcher**

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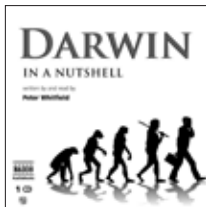
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To the Western imagination, Tibet has always been a mysterious place. For centuries its capital, Lhasa, was known as a Forbidden City: it was ruled by a priest-king, and its medieval society was not welcoming to foreigners. But the exile of the Dalai Lama and his followers half a century ago, the destruction of the monasteries, and the plight of the Tibetan people who remained, evoked continuing sympathy. Jonathan Gregson places the religious and political situation against an historical perspective in this sympathetic portrait.



**David Rintoul's** theatre work includes *The White Devil* at the Lyric, and *Richard II* and *Richard III* opposite Derek Jacobi at the Phoenix. His television appearances include *Poirot* and *Taggart*. He has also read *Rights of Man* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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