

# Westerners' Impressions of Lhasa before British Expeditionary Force Entering Lhasa

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**Abstract:** Lhasa is the focus of cultural discovery. Before the 20th century, Lhasa was only recorded in some travel notes by some missionaries and was ignored, closed to the western world. Until the British expeditionary force invaded Tibet in 1904, Lhasa was completely exposed to the invaders, making it fall down from the shrine and become a secular place instead of a “fairyland” holy city, thus being forced to accept the scrutiny and comments of the western world.

## 1. Introduction

Lhasa is not only a city, but also a symbol of Tibetan civilization with special significance. In the eyes of Tibetan Buddhists, it is a holy city, and every pilgrim pays respects to Lhasa for his long-cherished wish. In the eyes of westerners, Lhasa is the virgin land of spreading western civilization. Every missionary is proud of his successful mission in Lhasa. Before the 20th century, for the western world, Lhasa only existed in missionaries' travels, which were full of imagination. Until the British Expeditionary Forces entered Lhasa in August 1904, they uncovered the mystery of the Forbidden City.

## 2. “Cannibal Tubo” and Ignorance -- the Early Impression of Lhasa by Westerners

Early western impressions of Tibetan areas came from legends and imagination. According to the available data, the first person in the west who got to Tibetan areas and gained first-hand experience was Italian Jean-du PlanCarpin. He was dispatched by Pope Sinibaldo Fieschi to Mongolia in 1245. His *History of Mongolia* recorded the earliest information about Tubo residents. He entered the Bumtabeth area, “the residents are all pagans” and “the Tubo people have a magical, or rather abominable habit of devouring their parents. When someone died, they gathered all their relatives and had a good meal. The men would never have beards, and everyone was always holding a piece of iron to remove it. They were ugly and deformed. [1] “(9~10)In early 13<sup>th</sup> century, Friar Cuillaume de Rubruquis of France was ordered by the king to go to Mongolia and arrived in the newly established Mongo Khan Golden Account in 1253. Cuillaume de Rubruquis also mentioned the “Cannibal Tubo” and tried to find a religious motive for manners. At the same time, it also introduced Lamaism to westerners for the first time and reiterated that Tibet was rich in gold. “Their region is so rich in gold that people who want it can get it as they please as long as they let people dig. The left gold was buried back in the soil. They also stored the gold in boxes or small rooms which were their treasure houses. They believed that the gods took the remaining gold buried in the soil. “[1] (19) Later Marco Polo arrived in Tibetan areas and recorded the Tibetan people's clothing, marriage customs, funeral and interment, witchcraft, etc. He regarded them as savages. Johannes Gruber, an Austrian Jesuit missionary, together with Albert Dorville, a Belgian missionary, were the first Europeans to arrive in Lhasa. Their experiences in Tibet were recorded in *the illustration of China* by father Kireher of Jesuit<sup>1</sup>. They stayed in Lhasa for two months around 1670. Johannes Gruber was engaged in astronomical observation, measured the orientation of Lhasa city, and drew sketches of Potala Palace, portraits of Dalai Lama and men and women dressed in

<sup>1</sup> According to Michel Teló's book *Discovery of Tibet*, *Illustrated China* is the first book about China published in the West and published in Latin in 1667.

local costumes. He also introduced Lhasa to the western world for the first time, recording the living customs of Lhasa residents, their eating habits, like drinking a large amount of ghee tea, and recording the Tibetan custom of celestial burial. He wrote: "There are two princes ... one of whom maintains the justice of all affairs handled in the region ... the other lives idly in the palace, like living in the silence of the world, free from any affairs and not having to worry about anything. He was worshipped not only by the local people as a God, but also by the other flag princes who obeyed him in Tatar area, who were willing to pay homage to him and express their worship. It seemed like worshipping a real living god." [1](55~56) This is the first Western story about the Dalai Lama and the worship of the Dalai Lama by Tibetans. However, Johannes Gruber, a Jesuit believer, thought that this kind of worship was unnatural, and he also took a very negative attitude towards this kind of worship. He wrote: "the Dalai Lama has received such admiration and respect from all people that these people think they are honoured to get the excrement or other excrement of the Dalai Lama by sending him rich gifts and hang the rewards on their necks. Ah! What a disgusting act it is! They even mix it with meat, foolishly thinking it's a good medicine to prevent all kinds of diseases." The Tibetan women in his works "paint their faces with some kind of smelly oil. Besides the disgusting smell, it also distorts their faces and eyes. So people don't know whether they are women or ghosts of hell..... ". [1](58) Thus, in the eyes of westerners, Lhasa is a place of ignorance, people are uncivilized, and their customs run counter to western civilization. This may be one of the reasons why western missionaries made it a lifelong blessing to come to Lhasa to preach.

### **3. Loss and Closure: Westerners' Lhasa Impression in the 18th-19th Century**

The 18th century was a surging period when westerners began to study Tibet. In 1707, French Francois Marie de Tiurs and Giuseppe da Ascoli arrived in Lhasa. They worked hard to learn Tibetan, provided free medical care for Lhasa residents and made them accept themselves, and thus established a missionary area here. In 1716, three Jesuit priests, Em-manuel Freyre and Ippolito Desideri, as well as Crazio Ddlla Penna, arrived in Lhasa. Among them, Desideri, living in Lhasa for 6 years, was summoned by Tibet's Tibetan Khan and allowed to spread Christianity and learn Tibetan. Penna and others set up churches in Lhasa to provide free medical services, and also received Tibetan Khan's help to study in Sera Temple. The priests of the two churches were devoted to missionary work and held debates with Lamaism. In 1728, Dutch explorer Samuel DePutt traveled to Lhasa from Bangladesh, then arrived in Beijing from Lhasa and finally returned via Tibet. Missionary Pra Cassiano arrived in Lhasa around 1740. For the next half century, no westerners were able to enter Lhasa. Scottish George BoRle was commissioned by the East India Company to reach Shigatse in 1774, but he did not reach Lhasa. Poggel established friendly relations with the Zhashi Lama. He concerned himself with Tibetan society and the spiritual world of Tibetans. "I mention it here purely to show that people despised by Europeans can invent lifestyles beneficial to them without the help of the royal society." [1](87) Samuel Twine, cousin of Hastings, British Governor in Kolkata, led the mission to Tashilhunpo along the route of Poggel in 1783. He described the Himalayan region in romantic style, and recorded many daily lives of Zashlomb monks.

In the 19th century, Tibet's border was closed by the Qing government after the Ingolo people robbed the Tashilhunpo temple. Similarly, Tibetans took a skeptical attitude towards the British who were expanding their territory to the southern foothills of the Himalayas, because they heard that the British took part in the robbery of the Tashilhunpo temple, and they refused to help them to protect their religious tradition from the influence of other religious and theological forces. The closer travellers got to the holy city, the stricter the security measure was. Many people were blocked hundreds of kilometers away from the holy city. Therefore, throughout the 19th century, only few westerners entered Lhasa. The first was Thomas Manning, a British doctor who arrived in Lhasa in December 1811 with a general from the Chinese army. He lived here for four months. His stories about Lhasa were recorded in Clements R. Maxim's *Knocking on the Gate of Snow Capped Plateau: George Bogle's Experiences in Tibet and Thomas Manning's trip to Lhasa*. Although

Lhasa had pleasant exotic atmosphere in and around the city, Lhasa was more disappointing for Manning. Manning said: “The road was crowded with bustling monks, with beggars lying in the sun in the corner. Surprisingly, the palace was more lofty than I had imagined; but yet, I was disappointed at the city. There was no noticeable place in its appearance, let alone any pleasant place. The building was blackened by soot and grease. Hungry dogs roamed the streets, some of them barking incessantly and munching on scraps of skin scattered everywhere and giving off a smell of corpses. Other dogs were lame or wild. Others died of canker disease and hunger, and crows were pecking at them ... In a word, everything was desolate, filthy and had some kind of unreal image. Even the residents' joy and laughter seemed to me dreamy and imaginary. “[1](131) Obviously, for Manning, this holy city was most haunted by beggars and hungry dogs. It was a filthy city. It was a city that disappointed him. The westerners who subsequently entered Lhasa were the French emissary missionaries Rwsis Evariste Huc and father Joseph Gabet. They shaved their heads, dressed in the robes and wore hats of Gruba monks, called themselves “Western lamas” and entered Lhasa disguised in November 1844. Rwsis Evariste Huc recorded his experience into *Tartar Tibet and Travel History*, which contained details about Lhasa. In Rwsis Evariste Huc's travel notes, Lhasa was a small energetic town, with two-thirds of its residents being monks. Rwsis Evariste Huc gave a detailed introduction to the streets, the structure of houses, the residents in the city, commerce and the custom of burning mulberry. “There is something incredible in Rwsis Evariste Huc's description of the holy city, which makes people feel strange and familiar, exotic and mediocre.” [1](153) next came Sarat Chandra Das, an Indian employed by the British East India Company, entered Tibet from India to Lhasa in 1881. In his book *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, he recorded Lhasa's geography, folk customs, aristocratic families, monastic monk tours and major events. After them, there came Americans William Woodville Rockhill and Annie Taylor who went close to Lhasa, but both were held back by the authorities. However, Russian Derzhi successfully arrived in Lhasa in 1873. He entered Drepung monastery to study Buddhist scriptures. He obtained a Gesi degree in 1888. He was also recognized by the upper echelons of Tibet, holding the post of participating in Ni Kan cloth and studying Buddhist scriptures beside the 13th Dalai Lama. At the turn of the 19th-20th century, the Russian Tribikov, disguised as a pilgrim to the holy land of Lamaism, set out on November 25, 1899, and arrived in Lhasa in August 1900. Tribikov compiled the trip into a book, *Buddhist Pilgrims in the holy land of Tibet*, which was published in 1919. The book is divided into 17 chapters, most of which were about Lhasa. Most of his books recorded the main monasteries in Lhasa City, the life and pilgrimage of Buddhist Pilgrims in Lhasa, the ethnic composition of Lhasa residents, family furnishings, clothing, market trade, daily life and celebration of major festivals, as well as the management of local government in detail in the eyes of an observer. In September 1901, Tribikov left Lhasa with many of his photos and a large number of Tibetan religious and medical books. [2](154)

#### **4. Fairyland and Secular World: Lhasa's Impression of British Expeditionary Forces**

The British Expeditionary Force led by Macdonald John Alexander and Francis Younghusband (Younghusband) occupied Lhasa in August 1904 and signed the Lhasa Treaty in September. Younghusband wrote the book *History of British Aggression in Tibet*, which recorded the details of the entry into Tibet and the city of Lhasa he saw. The 19th chapter was “Impression of Lhasa”, which narrated the “release of prisoners”, “visiting monasteries”, “the character of Lama”, “the influence of Lamaism in Mongolia and Tibet”, “visiting Jueqian.”, “the inner spirit of Tibetans”, “the social character of Tibetans,” “Tibetan's perception of the British”, “Chinese authorities' attitude towards Tibetans”, etc. [3] (251-264) Younghusband and his subordinates had stationed here for nearly two months, giving them enough time to understand the “holy city”. Their impressions went through a subtle change from divine shock to disappointment. “What a vast and charming picture of Lhasa,” wrote Dr. Waddell in *The Unveiling of Lhasa*, and immersed in an unspeakable passion when he saw the panorama of Lhasa Kandler. He used the word “fairyland” for the picturesque scene. Langdon tried to grasp all the spots in his view. He wrote: “Lhasa City was located between the forest and the glade, and seemed like a long strip of narrow streets or a row of

flat rooms, with the dazzling light from the round roof and the golden ridge of the temple everywhere.” “Visitors will find a huge building in the beginning. That is Potala Palace, which could match with the towering pyramid. Compared with the huge size of the huge palace, the city was small and out of proportion. “[1](271-272) When they walking along the Lhasa street, it's another world. “Except the Potala Palace, there were not many important places here. At night, when the rain was pouring down, his Majesty's forces had to bypass the dirt and muddy roads. The streets were full of rubbish, and what's worse, large herds of pigs rolled back and forth in the dirt, and the conquerors had to drive them out of the road with bayonets. What is most unexpected (and even more unacceptable) was that the residents of Lhasa seemed to show complete indifference to the arrival of the British. There was no one else in the street except some beggars (alms or dervishes) who turned their donuts. People cast casual glances at the soldiers from shops and doorsteps, and it looked like their invasion was only a temporary trouble and made no sense. “[1] (275-276) The city was full of filthy and unromantic dilapidated houses, with disgusting locals. The aborigines were indifferent and even ignorant, and they showed no anger or hostility towards the group of invaders, which made the invaders feel that their presence in the holy city “is considered by Tibetans as an act of blasphemy.” [1](277) However, the Dalai Lama's escape greatly reduced the invaders' sense of holiness to the Potala Palace. “With the departure of the Living Buddha, Lhasa will no longer be a holy place in a sense, but only become the seat of a secular government plunged into chaos by the invasion of British troops.” [1](277-278) Obviously, in their eyes, Lhasa was called “holy city” and “Rome of Lamaism” because of its central position in Tibetan Buddhism, and the Dalai Lama was the king. But for the pope who abandoned the city and chose to flee, the city lost its original sacred position. Obviously, the dirty streets here were not commensurate with their reputation as “holy city”. Younghusband's *Impression of Lhasa*, besides describing the monasteries in Lhasa, mainly told westerners his views on Tibetan religion and Tibetan nationality. Although Younghusband admits that the people here have strong religious sentiments, are not a people without mercy and sociality, and are not free from restrictions on immoral travel, Tibetans often show a loving spirit and strong friendship, and their nature is kind. However, between the lines, Younghusband is full of disdain and contempt for Tibetan religions and monks. He thinks that “the main idea of Tibetans is to seek spiritual liberation from themselves. As long as they can seek self-liberation, they do not want to ask about other people.” [3](257) Its religion “has actually lost its magic.” [3](258) He introduced the practice and production of monks, and thought that monks of Lamaism were dirty and humble. The reason why they believed in Lamaism was not to seek religious truth, saved people and saved the world, but to escape the pain of real life, enjoy the life and the next life, and fight for fame and wealth. Most of the monks couldn't understand the real meanings of the Scriptures. They didn't abide by the rules and lived a dissolute life, and there was a hierarchy among the monks. According to Younghusband, the peace advocated by Lamaism “was nothing but self-extrication.” [3] (257). The Buddha statues in temples and rock walls were hypnosis and anesthesia for ordinary people, which made the nation degenerate. In the eyes of these expeditionary forces, this “fairyland” like city was nothing more than a secular place, which could not be equivalent to the name of “holy city”.

With the convenience of the early Lhasa Treaty, British Henry Hayden entered Tibet in 1922 as a consultant for the development of Tibet's mining industry and was warmly received by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in Lhasa. In his book *Hunting and Tourism on the Tibetan Plateau-Journal of Tibetan Geological Exploration*, which he co-authored with his entourage, Xize Coulson, he talked about his impression of Lhasa City, the most prominent of which was the stray dogs roaming around the city. Henry Hayden wrote: “Groups of at least 20 or 30 wild dogs can often be seen barking for a piece of rotten meat. These stray dogs actually acted as cleaners in Lhasa.” [4](96) American William McGovern arrived in Lhasa in 1923 and was received by the Dalai Lama. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was British officials who observed and studied Tibetan culture and Lhasa in depth, because other westerners could not enter Tibet without British consent. Among them were David Macdonald, the British business representative in Gyangzia East, and Chad Bell, a British official. Chad Bell was very concerned about Tibet's cultural tradition. He

was a friend of the 13th Dalai Lama and the only westerner invited to live in Lhasa. He recorded his dialogue with the Dalai Lama in his book *The Image of the Dalai Lama*. Alexandra David-Neel and his adoptive son Yongdeng, disguised as an old Tibetan woman who made a pilgrimage under the guise of collecting plant specimens, went begging and begging all the way through Yunnan to reach Gyangze via Chayu, Bomi and Nyingchi. After crossing the Yarlung Zangbo River, they successfully arrived in Lhasa on the eve of the Tibetan New Year in 1924 and lived there for two months. His book *My journey to Lhasa: The Personal Story Of The Only White Woman Who Succeeded In Entering The Forbidden City (My journey to Lhasa)* details the journey and the Potala Palace, residents' lives and The festival celebrated. The book has been translated and published in many languages. It is known as “a worldwide book” and has an important impact on Westerners' study of Tibet. David Nell is called “white skin and yellow soul” by Europe because of her passion and courage and persistence in studying Tibetan areas, and is hailed as “heroine” by French and even the whole western and Eastern academic circles.

## 5. The Focus of Observation and Narration of Lhasa for Westerners

Western people who entered Lhasa before the 20th century, judging from the documents retained, have already covered almost every aspect of Lhasa's politics, economy, culture, geography and residents' life. Rwsis Evariste Huc's description of Lhasa in *Tartar Tibet Travel History* focuses on belittling its religious characteristics and portraying it as a commercial trading center. West Renye Fang, which arrived in the holy city, seems to be addicted to these two aspects, which is their common ground. In the 19th century, westerners who thought they had a higher modern civilization were mostly impressed by the poor sanitation in Lhasa.

In terms of religion, westerners regard Lhasa as the center of Lamaism and the real “snow-covered Buddhist kingdom”, comparing it to “Vatican of Lamaism”. Westerners entering Lhasa have described in detail the religious and cultural landscapes seen in Lhasa's monasteries and other places. Most westerners scoff at Tibetan Buddhism except for a few scholars who study Buddhism religiously. As Kant believed, “from the gods of Chinese Buddhism described by Catholic missionaries, Buddhism is actually a pagan religion derived from Christian variants.” [5](164) “If there is a religion on earth that is absurd and inharmonious in nature, it is Tibetan religion.” [6](9) The westerners who first entered Lhasa were missionaries who wanted to preach in Lhasa. The Holy See also announced plans to establish a diocese here to begin the conquest of religious areas. Francois Marie de Tiurs, Giuseppe da Ascoli, Crazio dllapena and Jesuit priests (Ippolito Desideri) were all western missionaries who arrived in Tibetan areas and entered Lhasa in the early days. They dismissed Tibetan Buddhism as “a hodgepodge of superstition, witchcraft and idolatry (sometimes open to religion to some extent).” [1](142) Attempts to change Tibetans into Envelopes of God by exposing their shortcomings. Although some of them succeeded in establishing a parish in Lhasa and attracted the first group of followers, they all ended in failure under the counterattack of Lamaism. In his book *Discovery of Tibet*, Michel Teló commented: “The Christian Church was defeated by a rarely baptized nation in a dry inland region, rejected by a group of obscurantist Buddhist monks, and defeated by a group of fearsome gods. The church will only adopt its old strategy of mocking everything it cannot conquer. Tibet's allure was first inspired by the hope of finding a Christian enclave in Asia, but now it has only become one of the sources of inspiration for scholars with grotesque diseases.” [1](80)

In terms of economy, westerners all regard Lhasa as Tibet's trade center. In the descriptions of Trebicov, Charles Bill and others, the streets of Lhasa are full of small shops and temporary trading places that are open everywhere. Apart from tea, porcelain and silk, there are also many foreign commodities from the west, India, Nepal and other places. Some of them also paid attention to Lhasa's trade routes, transportation modes and the economic form of monasteries. “In the eyes of westerners, the Tibetan people's free contribution to the temple is the biggest economic burden of the Tibetan people and also the reason for the poverty of the Tibetan people. Therefore, Tibet is rich and poor, rich because there is a lot of gold and silver, and poor because there is a lack of daily necessities. Lamas obtain wealth through voluntary alms from believers, and then earn high

incomes through borrowing. In Tibet, lamas are the richest. “[8](40)

As for Lhasa residents, the westerners who entered Lhasa in the early days made some observations and descriptions on the physical features, lifestyle, housing construction, customs and national character of the Tibetan people in Lhasa. Rwsis Evariste Huc wrote in his travel notes: “Tibetans belong to the large ethnic group that the people are accustomed to call 'Mongolian subspecies'. They all have black hair, relatively thin beard, small zygomatic cheeks with Mongolian folds, short nose, large broad mouth and thin lips. Their skin is slightly brown. But among the upper class, we can find some people with white skin like Europeans. Tibetans are of medium height and as agile as Han people. They are close to Tartar's strength and drive. Their gymnastics performance, especially dance, seems to be the greatest pleasure, with rhythmic and light steps. When they go on the street, people will hear them chanting prayers or folk songs. “[5] (431-432) rwsis Evariste HUC and trebikov also think that, in contrast, Lhasa's men are not as industrious as women. Most of the men go to temples for monks, and women undertake more work. Women also show more talent in business and trade. Only in the eyes of Westerners, their images are more black and ugly. Lhasa people mainly eat tsamba, pasta, beef, mutton and dairy products. MacDonald John Alexander also describes the vegetables they eat: “Tibet basically can't grow several kinds of vegetables, even for the very common vegetables from India or other places, they don't know their names. The most cultivated vegetables in Tibet are turnips and turnips with strong taste. Occasionally, there are a few green vegetables [9] (123)

It is worth noting that westerners who entered Lhasa have two general impressions of Lhasa: one is that Lhasa is an idyllic paradise or Shangri-La. George BoRle, a Scot, lamented when he left Tibet: “Farewell to your loyal and simple people. I wish you a long time to enjoy the happiness that has been lost to the more civilized nations. When the civilized nations fall into the endless pursuit of greed and ambition, you will continue to live in peace and joy under the protection of barren hills. There is no need for anything but human nature. “[1](103) Samuel Twine said: “All people showed their devout worship and love for Buddha during their prayers, so I firmly believe that they are happy.” [1](112) Marshall Taylor believes that “something magical, joyful and simple and naive fills the travel notes of George BoRle and Samuel Twine with an unreal appearance. All this is too good to be believed. “[1](114) But another completely different view holds that Lhasa is a poor and dirty city and a place far away from modern civilization. When westerners entered the real world from the imaginary world, Lhasa's original abstract beauty ceased to exist, especially for 19th century travelers, they only saw dirt, poverty and desolation. Trebikov also said that Lhasa's “most streets are curved, narrow and dirty.” “Every decent house has a toilet. The whole house is one, usually on the upper floor. Its purpose is to make filth (excrement) flow to the square or the streets of nobody walks. In fact, no matter in any place or in the presence of the opposite sex, Tibetans never feel shy because of defecation. Therefore, when passing through the streets that residents like to walk, only cover your nose tightly and pay attention to your feet. “[10] (74) Marshall Taylor introduced in detail the travellers who entered Lhasa in the 19th century in the discovery of Tibet, saying that their travels “only mentioned an incredibly messy city full of monks, beggars and dogs.” [1] (123) just as in the early 20th century, from the perspective of the British times and other media, Tibet was regarded as “mysterious”, Tibetan people as “ignorant”, and Tibetan Buddhism as “backward”. “The British media's description of Tibetans, Tibetan society and Tibetan Buddhism in this period reflects the typical” binary opposition “thinking. In the text of British media, in the eyes of British and Indian colonial authorities and related academic works, Tibet is constructed as the image of “strange ignorance” and “ignorance and backwardness”. In the process of British media reproducing Tibet in China, there has always been a binary opposition centered on the myth between good and evil. Tibet is labelled with various negative labels: ignorance, backwardness, decadence and irrationality. “[11]

## 6. Conclusion

The westerners who entered Lhasa before the beginning of the 20th century, whether they were preaching, doing business or travelling, mostly took on the purpose of cultural invasion. They

sometimes “demonized” Tibetan areas and sometimes “beautified” them. But generally speaking, Lhasa is a huge attraction in the western world. It is not only a mysterious Forbidden City, but also an ignorant and backward place, waiting for the development of “Western civilization”.

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