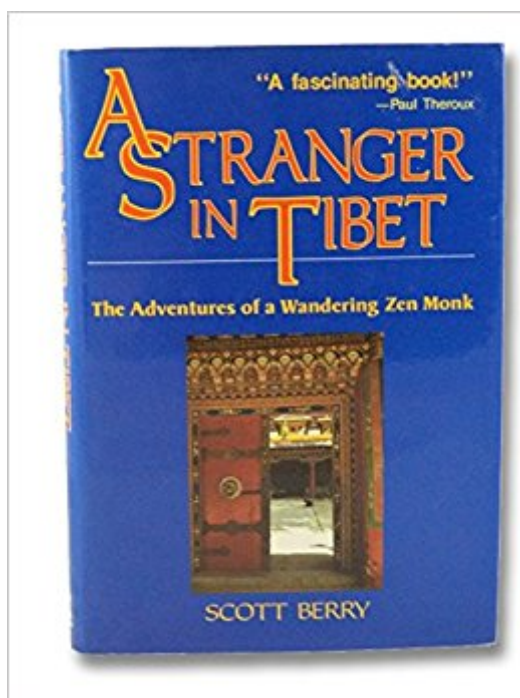


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A Stranger In Tibet: The Adventures Of A Wandering Zen Monk



Synopsis

A Stranger in Tibet: The Adventures of a Wandering Zen Monk To reach the "forbidden city" of Lhasa was the dream of generations of Western explorers. But until 1900 when Kawaguchi Ekai, a young Zen monk, donned a disguise and walked all the way there, few foreigners had ever done so. Clinging staunchly to his chastity; leaving a trail of broken hearts across the Himalayas; oppressed by the cultural impossibility of bathing, yet frequently almost drowned in river crossings; often lost and on the verge of starving or freezing to death; robbed by highwaymen, and taken for a spy; speaking fluently the language of a people he preferred not to understand. This brave, bigoted, and enterprising traveler was eventually to cross Tibet from west to east, study in one of the country's greatest monasteries, and keep his secret there for over a year. Keywords: BUDDHISM ZEN

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Customer Reviews

In July 1900, Kawaguchi Ekai, a Japanese Zen monk of rather unorthodox stripe, crossed from Nepal into Tibet, becoming the first Japanese to enter either country. He was in search of original Mahayana Buddhist manuscripts, but because Tibet was actively attempting to exclude any foreigners, he became involved in far more. Kawaguchi subsequently wrote an account of his travels, *Three Years in Tibet*, on which Berry based this biography. Rather than simply recounting Kawaguchi's travels, Berry discusses the geography, sociology, history, and especially topography of the area in a way that brings it alive. Since Kawaguchi lacked a sense of direction and was singularly accident-prone, there is no lack of excitement, but the book's strength is that it imparts a living character to Tibet, very important for contemporary readers today. (Illustrations, appendix, and

bibliography not seen.)-- Donald J. Pearce, Univ. of Minnesota Lib., Duluth Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I am just in the process of reading this book. It is definitely a good read. Anyone who enjoys travel and adventure should read this. The account of this Japanese Zen monk wandering through Tibet, encountering Tibetan Buddhists is fascinating. He exhibits tremendous survival skills. Can't say much more at the moment other than to highly recommend it.

After Colin Thubron's "To a Mountain in Tibet" reminded me of this account, I read it with pleasure. As an expat American living in Tokyo, Berry's well placed to navigate between cultures, and he retells with verve, erudition, and insight the saga at the dawn of the last century of Kawaguchi Ekai, the first Japanese to enter Nepal and Tibet, and the first non-Tibetan explorer since the middle of the 19th century to see Lhasa. Kawaguchi's priggish, hapless, and humanly unpredictable as he spends six years in the Himalayas, seeking to obtain a complete set of Buddhist scriptures to take home. As an on-off again, but dedicated if eccentric Zen monk, Kawaguchi resists temptation by Tibetan women, resents what he regards as falls from grace by fellow monastics he meets, and reacts with honesty and bluffing both when his cover is about to be revealed by suspicious natives. They're determined to resist any incursion by a foreigner whom some regard, in their isolation, as even an "Englishman" sent via India to spy on Tibet, in a time, then as now, of international intrigue. Berry smoothly integrates details such as the evolution of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, or the curiosities of the language, or the feel of village life, with aplomb. Of his first stage, entering Nepal: "there is no more glorious time of year than January on the north Indian plains: the crisp, cool nights and clear, sunny days are enough to lift the heart of even the most jaded traveler." (52) In disguise as a Chinese monk on his way back to Lhasa, Kawaguchi found himself in a place where "one can get away with virtually anything by making it seem pious." (84) This was when he stayed in shape, on his typical one vegetarian meal at noon, at twelve thousand feet, by carrying rocks as he ran up and down slopes. He tends to look down on Tibetan monks who were his hosts, who ate meat and sometimes lived with women: "Torn between his beliefs and the ragged reality of everyday life, Kawaguchi often had to give those who did not live up to his own strict standards the benefit of the doubt." (106) Later, the going gets rough. On the way across western Tibet's wilderness: "It was almost as if Kawaguchi himself were going over a checklist: robbery, exposure, starvation, snow blindness; now what else could possibly go wrong? Well, he had not yet been attacked by guard dogs." (140) The mastiffs rear up, on cue. The first third of the book shows his

early life, his preparations, which seem few, and his scholarly and geographical approaches before crossing into Tibet. The second part brings him into Lhasa. Berry shows us what Kawaguchi would have seen in 1901: the mix of peoples around the Potala on the Barkhor market route in the holy circuit around the Jokhang. Women with their hair in 108 plaits, menacing police-monks, crazed holy men, nomads in sheepskins, babies nursing, trinkets displayed, visitors and shoppers and pilgrims or all three, "smelling of butter and yak-dung smoke." (175) Berry reminds us that Kawaguchi "was the first sincere Buddhist traveling simply for the sake of his religion" (176) into Lhasa. Unlike Burton or Burkhardt sneaking into Mecca, Kawaguchi came as a real pilgrim, if necessarily in secret. There his linguistic ease, his mastery of the sacred texts, and especially his ad hoc medical skills bring him to the attention of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, for better and worse. The harshness meted out by the Tibetan lamas and their police to those who aided Kawaguchi in his deception and his escape (amidst lots of corrupt border guards and customs officials) darkens any expectation of this tale as a carefree retreat to a Shangri-La. After his return to Japan, Berry shows how Kawaguchi cannot fit in again: he's spent too much time among the "barbarians," and his own people seem to suspect his tales. After eight years studying Sanskrit in India, he goes back for three more years to Tibet, and finds the land already changed, from its new contacts with the British and after having expelled the Chinese. This period is rushed by comparison to the earlier stint, but Berry seems to hint that as a more tolerant repeat guest in Tibet, Kawaguchi's more placid demeanor makes for fewer moments of deceit, danger, or drama. In his retirement in Japan, before he died in 1945, his mellowness winningly contrasts with his censorious youth among his Buddhist peers, at home and abroad. Berry wraps it up with a postscript on his subject's first published account, "Three Years in Tibet," noting its many inconsistencies and sloppy preparation, while praising its vignettes of a land few had seen as explorers, but none other, at that time, had witnessed as a participant-observer, and as a pilgrim scholar. This is a moving, clear-headed, deromanticized, and skilled re-creation of the land and its longtime visitor, at a time when almost nobody else could have told what he could, as an Asian monk among his fabled confreres. Illustrated with drawings and period photos, a few endnotes, and an afterword, Berry blends scholarship and travel, history and biography, with ease. (Also titled "A Stranger in Nepal and Tibet," originally issued 1989.)

Scott Berry brought to light a most unusual book on Tibet based on the turn of the century manuscript of a Zen Monk's adventures in Tibet. Kawaguchi Ekai "Three Years In Tibet" was the contemporary of Alexandra David-Neel and Sir Francis Younghusband, the famous Tibetologist. The uniqueness of this book is that for the very first time, an account of Tibet was told from the

Asian point of view. Kawaguchi was born in the Meiji Restoration Era, but he was certainly not a conformist of that era, he was much too eccentric for his time. Although the Meiji Era symbolizes the modernization and opening of Japan as well as the adoption of a strong Japanese identity; Kawaguchi was the direct opposite, a throwback to a much earlier age of high adventure focusing on Buddhist spiritual development. During the Meiji Restoration, western culture and western scientific methods were making inroads into the Japanese system, downplaying China's symbolic role in Japan. All things Chinese especially Buddhism was despised, instead the state cult of Shintoism gained much favour of the Royal Court and the ruling clique. The Emperor though still a puppet emperor became the focus of the new cult of the emperor as the living embodiment of Amaretsu, the so called descendant of the Sun God. Kawaguchi had very strong affinity with Buddhism. In his early life although not yet a monk, he took the shojin vows of refraining from meat, alcohol and maintaining celibacy. Kawaguchi was first ordained in the Obaku sect (Obakusan or Mampukuji) a Buddhist sect imported to Japan during the Ming Dynasty retaining much of its Chinese influences like liturgy recitation and even the style of vegetarian cooking remained close to its Chinese identity. Although a member of this sect, Kawaguchi was disillusioned with the worldliness of the members of the Sangha, his quest was for the original teachings that remain the heart and soul of the Buddhist Tripitaka. No other place suits his quest except for Tibet, where Sanskrit Buddhist texts remain locked up in the various monasteries as a safeguard from the Muslim invasion of India. Scott Berry illustrated the zest of Kawaguchi, comparing him with Hsuan Tung, the illustrious pilgrim criss-crossing deserts, vast nations, various tribes etc in his quest for Buddhist holy texts. Kawaguchi was not unlike the modern incarnation of Hsuan Tung. His quest for Buddhist texts brought him to Darjeeling, India (Little Tibet) where he stayed for almost a year, accustoming to the Tibetan culture and language. Tibet at the turn of the century was a very feudal nation, the rule of the Dalai Lama was totalitarian and unquestionable. China's influence in Tibet remained very strong, the Chinese Ambans acted as agents of the Manchu Court influencing various policies of the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso. Tibet did not welcome visitors to her land, she was closed to foreigners except Buddhist pilgrims from Mongolia, Bhutan, Nepal and India. Many visitors gate-crashed into Tibet, including zealous Christian missionaries like Ippolito Desideri, and adventurers like Peter Hopkirk (*Trepasser On The Roof Of The World*). Still, forays into the Tibetan heartland remained few and far in between, remaining rather impossible for the curious westerners or in this scenario a lone Japanese monk. Kawaguchi's comments on Tibetan Buddhism was rather critical, he was not apprehensive to snide on the various practices of the Tibetans including the worship Guru Rinpoche or Guru Padmasambhava, in his views, he questioned the

equality that Tibetans placed upon Guru Rinpoche and Sakyamuni Buddha. For him, he evaluated Guru Rinpoche not as a true Buddha but a charlatan, murderer, fornicator and a drunkard as observed in his quotation. "Lobon (Guru Rinpoche) was in practice a devil in disguise of a priest and behaved if he has been born for the very purpose of corrupting and preventing the spread of holy doctrines of Buddhism". Scott Berry made known Kawaguchi cultural prejudices against Tibetans, he saw himself as culturally superior compared to backward and superstitious Tibetans. It is interesting to note that Kawaguchi took devotedly to the daily bath seriously, he was aghast of the Tibetans view of bathing that which at most was 3 times in a lifetime, at birth, marriage and death. In Darjeeling, Sagauli, Kathmandu and Thak Khola, Kawaguchi befriended many people including Chandra Das and Chiniya Lama. It was during this time, Kawaguchi replaced his Chinese Mahayana robes for the Tibetan maroon-coloured robes. Probably by then, Kawaguchi was in disguise not as a Japanese monk but a Chinese monk bending on making a sacred pilgrimage to the holy city of Lhasa. I am rather impressed by the author's account of life in Nepal as very few authors have touched on the palace intrigue of Nepal during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The author too wrote some very good narrative of daily practices of the Tibetans including a well-liked account of the hermit Gelong Rinpoche. Kawaguchi forays into Tibet was indeed very interesting, texts from his book "Three Years In Tibet" was well quoted and duly explained and detailed by Berry. Differences between the various religious factions of Tibetan Buddhism were highlighted, from the tulku line of the Karmapa-Dalai Lama to the degeneration of various Buddhist practices to tantrism. It is a pity, the climax of Berry's account was extremely short as compared to the overall account of Kawaguchi biography. The features of Kawaguchi in Lhasa (U Tsang) was indeed short (only two chapters) though I would say this should be given the most attention as it was the goal of Kawaguchi's prime destination. Kawaguchi indeed managed to realize his goals of collecting sacred text in Sanskrit, he was to become a student at the prime monastery of Sera, one of the three greatest monasteries in Tibet, i.e. Ganden, Drepung and Sera. Nevertheless, it is indeed very enlightening to read about Kawaguchi's encounters with the 7th Panchen Lama (although I would question the validity of Berry's numbering, as it seems strange to have a 7th Panchen Lama in the early 1900s and the 11th Panchen Lama enthroned in 1995), the 13th Dalai Lama and to the much admired Kyabje Tri Ganden Rinpoche. Kawaguchi never failed to mention his high admiration for Kyabje Tri Ganden Rinpoche, for him Kyabje was the ideal monk not corrupted by worldliness or politics. As a Doctor of Sera and at times personal physician to the 13th Dalai Lama, Kawaguchi wrote at long of health conditions and various medical practices among the Tibetans. Kawaguchi's description of Lhasa was indeed very fascinating. () END

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