



Scottish Geographical Magazine

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsgj19>

My experiences in Tibet

Annie E. Taylor

Published online: 27 Feb 2008.

To cite this article: Annie E. Taylor (1894) My experiences in Tibet, Scottish Geographical Magazine, 10:1, 1-8, DOI: [10.1080/00369229408732685](https://doi.org/10.1080/00369229408732685)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00369229408732685>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

THE SCOTTISH GEOGRAPHICAL MAGAZINE.

MY EXPERIENCES IN TIBET.

By ANNIE R. TAYLOR.

(Read at Meetings of the Society in Edinburgh and Glasgow, December 1893.)

IN addressing the members of a learned Society, as I have the honour and pleasure of doing this afternoon, I feel much regret that, owing to my lack of scientific knowledge and the want of instruments, I was unable, during my late journey through Tibet, to make any of those observations which I know are valued by such a body. Tibet is, however, so little known, and information so scarce regarding its accessibility by travellers, that I feel that a short relation of my experiences, and a statement of facts, the knowledge of which I reaped in my late journey in that country and during my residence at various times on its frontiers, will not be uninteresting. I will deal especially with Eastern Tibet, of which I have the most experience.

There are three highroads from the Chinese borders to the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. Two start at the south-east of Tibet, from Ta-chien-lu, the border-town in the Chinese province of Sze-chuen. Of these one is the official, or Ba-li-tang-Lam (*lam* is Tibetan for road), and is used by the Mandarins, and by official couriers; the other is the Tea Road or Ga-Lam, the route of the tea caravans. The third highroad starts from Si-ning (north-east of Tibet) in the Chinese province of Kan-su, and is called the Si-ning Lam. In the centre of the Nag-chu-ka district of Tibet proper, and but a few days' journey from Lhasa, the Si-ning Road converges into the Tea Road.

Of these three routes the official is the shortest. Another advantage it has consists in the rest-houses at intervals by the roadside, where travellers can stay, and fresh horses be hired. It is, however, the most mountainous of the roads, and consequently, the most expensive to

travel by. Nor is it freer from marauders and robbers than any other road.

The Tea Road traverses a country dotted over with numerous villages, and has rest-houses at intervals of long stages, as far as the town of Ke-gu, the centre of the tea trade, and the half-way halting-place between the Chinese frontier and the Tibetan capital. From Ke-gu onwards there are on either side of the Tea Road numerous black tent encampments, at which meat can be bought and tired-out horses exchanged for fresh ones. In the early part of the year mules can be hired for travelling by this route, but they are generally only taken as far as Ke-gu, at a hire of ten to twelve rupees each for the journey. Thence to Lhassa, the Tibetan ox, or yâk, the *Bos gruniens*, is employed, at the hire of four bricks of tea the animal. The conditions upon hiring yâk are: that if they die on the road, or are carried off by brigands other than the Golok tribes, the hirer bears the loss. With regard to the formidable Golok tribes just referred to, their attacks are so irresistible, that if they are the marauders, the hirer of the yâk need not make good the loss—the merchant loses his merchandise, the *drog-pa* his yâk. Should, however, the *drog-pa* (or cattle-owner) accompany the travellers, he has to be kept during the journey, but, on the other hand, no compensation is made for animals dying or lost on the road. The Tea Road is not difficult to travel along, comparatively speaking. Although the mountains are high, their ascent and descent are mostly gradual. The water supply is plentiful, but the grass is in some places very scarce, by reason of the large herds of cattle, belonging to the black tent settlements before referred to, which graze by the roadside.

The Si-ning Road, the direction of which, as you see, is south-west, passes for the most part through uninhabited country. The pasturage is good, but water at times is scarce. This is the least mountainous of all the roads.

From every town on the Chinese borders a road starts to Lhassa, but they all eventually merge into one of the three highroads above mentioned. I set out in my late journey from the town of Tao-chow, known to the Tibetans as Wa-tze, on the Chinese borders of the province of Kan-su, by a road which, after a few days' journey, joins the road running between the huge monastery La-ber-long (Tibetan name, Am-do Ta-shi gumpa)—to which are attached five thousand lamas—and the important town of Ke-gu.

Tao-chow lies some little distance from the river Tao, and the old city, at which I lived, is the centre of trade with Tibet and that part of Kan-su. This district is separated from Tibet by a range of hills, traversable by three passes, at which there are gates guarded by Chinese soldiers, where custom dues are levied.

Between the years 1887-1892 I had made sojourns of some length on the Tibetan borders, two on the Indian frontier, two on the Chinese. My last stay on the Indian side had been especially fruitful, for I had learnt the language as spoken at Lhassa. And it was on this border, when living in a hut among the Tibetans of Sikkim, that I came across my faithful little Tibetan man-servant, Puntso, now with me. A native

of Lhasa, he had run away from a cruel master to take refuge in India, where he arrived in a pitiable condition. He was sent by some Tibetan neighbours to me to doctor him, and, with the blessing of God, I brought him back to health and strength. Becoming attached to me on this account, he entered my service, to accompany me, in 1891, *vid.* Calcutta to Shanghai, and thence for many long miles through China, till we again reached the Tibetan frontier. Here I settled in the old city of Tao-chow (there is a modern Tao-chow a few miles off) to await an opportunity of penetrating into the interior of Tibet. This opportunity came at last.

Among my acquaintances in the old Chinese town I counted a Chinese Mohammedan, Noga by name, married to a Lhasa woman called Erminie. Noga had been to Lhasa several times, and on his last expedition had brought away Erminie, who was given him to wife by her mother for the term of three years. That time was now fully up, and Erminie was anxious to return home. They were accordingly thinking over ways and means of making the journey, and, knowing my desires, proposed that I should engage Noga as guide and head-servant, and accompany them on the expedition. My idea was to make some stay at the capital, and thence to travel on across the Himalayan passes to Darjiling, thus traversing the country and getting a general knowledge of the people, with a view to prepare the way for mission-work. Noga agreed to conduct me the whole way; and we finally concluded a bargain by which he was to make all necessary preparations, receiving money from me for the expenses.

It was on the 2nd of September 1892 that I set out on my long-wished-for journey. My party consisted of myself and five Asiatics: Noga, the Chinese Mohammedan guide and my head-servant; Erminie, the Tibetan woman, Noga's wife, who was to travel with us as far as Lhasa; Leucotze, a young Chinese Mohammedan servant; Puntso, my faithful Tibetan, who had become a Christian; and Nobgey, a fellow-traveller, a Tibetan borderman bound for Lhasa. Our cavalcade numbered sixteen horses; Nobgey and Erminie rode their own; the others were mine, and consisted of mounts for myself and three servants, and of six pack-horses laden with our two tents, bedding, cloths for barter, presents for chiefs, and food for two months. The brigands relieved me of a good part of this luggage, together with two of my horses, a few days after crossing the border; while poor Nobgey was bereft of nearly all his belongings, and took a sad leave of us, to retrace his steps to the Chinese border.

Our road lay at first through the district inhabited by the agricultural tribes on the frontier. Fertile fields, populous villages, temples surrounded by trees met our eyes, while the picturesque natives in their bright cotton jackets and sheepskin gowns bordered with cloths of various colours, with their smiling faces and animated looks, singing or chatting while working in the fields, struck me by the vivid contrast to the sober looks and apathetic appearance of the Chinese on the other side.

But the country inhabited by the Drog-pa, or black-tent people, is soon reached, and here the aspect of the country changes. At first shrubs are to be seen, but these gradually disappear, and the country

becomes a cheerless waste. These Drog-pa are divided into various tribes, and the tribes into numerous encampments. A head chief is acknowledged by the tribe, while a minor one rules over each encampment. The Mongol tribes who have settled in this district, namely, the Koko-Nor, between whom and their Tibetan neighbours there is continual strife, speak the Mongolian as well as the Tibetan languages. On account of their pillaging propensities, they are forbidden to cross the Chinese border, but Chinese merchants come to them. They prefer, however, to trade with the lamas of the monastery of La-ber-long. The Mongol women embroider artistically with gold thread and coloured silks. They also make eye-protectors of horse-hair, worn by the natives as a protection against snow-blindness, and manufacture large quantities of felt. This they use for tents, as also for rain-cloaks and other coverings. Their tents are different from those of the Tibetans. Their dress and mode of life are very similar. The women milk, churn, and tend the young cattle. The boys and old men watch the flocks and herds. The young men spend their time in practising the arts of warfare, in waylaying and attacking travellers, and in fighting other tribes in the surrounding country. The Upper Yellow River, or Ma-chu, forms the boundary of the district inhabited by this people. This river we crossed on a pontoon, made by four inflated bullock-skins, one at each corner of a hurdle-like raft of interwoven branches. This was pulled across the river by two horses swimming, guided by two men, who floated on the water with a foot on the hurdle.

The Golok people on the other side of the river are very different from the Mongols in appearance, but much the same in their love of plunder and pillage. Gold is to be found in this district, both in the mountains and in the sands of the rivers, but brigandage is the chief occupation. Nevertheless, I was hospitably entertained in their settlements, notably by a Golok chieftainess, who, upon my leaving their country, gave me an escort of two men to accompany me into a safer region.

We next came into the Sa-chu-ka country, which is rocky and stony. The tribes here also live by brigandage, though they are so far civilised as to pay taxes to China. Then we reached the monastery Sha-e-gumpa, and traversed a more smiling landscape, past monasteries, villages, and fertile crops of barley, peas, and turnips. The Tibetan monasteries that I saw did not consist, like the European, of one or more huge blocks of buildings, but, on the contrary, of many small gaily-painted houses of various shapes, grouped round the big square temple. Sha-e-gumpa, situated high on a hill, was a most fantastic conglomeration of odd shapes and many bright colours. The next day we crossed the Di-chu (the Yang-tse-Kiang of China) and came to the picturesque little town of Gala, built, like most Tibetan towns, into the side of the hill. In the summer time the Chinese find their way here to buy the gold washed by the Tibetans from the sand of the river. These latter exchange it for fifteen times its weight of not very pure silver, while the buyers get eighteen times its weight on Chinese soil. The rocks at Gala are of a peculiar green shade, indicating the presence of copper. In appearance the inhabitants of Gala bear a strong resemblance to portraits

of the time of Charles the First. They have long narrow faces, aquiline noses, pointed chins, and big lips; cut their hair in a fringe over the forehead, and wear it in long locks, men and women alike. Their gowns are of red, blue, or white cloth, woven at Lhasa. They drink freely of a spirit distilled from barley, love singing and dancing, and, like most Tibetans, are full of fun. Our Tibetan host, by name Pategn, with whose wife and little children I became very intimate, consented to join my little train, to replace Leucotze, my young Chinese Mohammedan servant, who had died from exposure as we were leaving the Golok country.

We next crossed the Rab-la, one of the most formidable passes of Tibet, and leaving behind us the large town, Ma-ni-tang, we came to the town Ke-gu, the half-way halting-place on the Tea Road, and the centre of the tea trade. This town is the residence of numerous tea-merchants, whose interests are guarded by a mandarin from Si-ning and another from Lan-chow. It is the Chinese who chiefly bring the tea here, to sell it to the Tibetan merchants, who forward it to Lhasa. The currency in this trade is the Indian rupee, which, however, is often dispensed with, and then the tea is bartered by the Chinese for wool, hides and furs, gold dust, mercury, and other Tibetan products, for importation into China. The tea, branches as well as leaves, is packed in compressed bricks about fourteen inches long, ten wide, and four thick. This tea is literally the sweepings of the plantations, and the dried leaves and branches of other plants are mixed with it. Eight of these bricks are sewed in a skin, and a yâk carries two skins. All Tibetans drink tea. They boil it, branches and all, in water with a little soda and salt, and before drinking add butter, barley flour (which is called *tsampa*), and dried native cheese. The solid part of this mixture, when merely moistened with a little liquid tea and made into hard balls, is called *ba*, and forms the staple food of Tibet. The chief meat consumed is mutton, upon which the black-tent people almost live. Sheep are cheap. In the interior of the country they cost from one rupee to two rupees. For winter consumption they are killed early in the cold season, and are frozen.

Turning our backs on Ke-gu, we followed the Tea Road through the midst of numerous nomad tribes. These do not follow the free-booting profession, but are adepts at the less honourable one of petty thieving (these are Tibetan sentiments!). Mercury is found in this district. It is called by the Tibetans white earth poison, and is one of the exports to China. Salt and mineral soda are also to be obtained, and find ready sale at Lhasa and other parts of Tibet, being important items in Tibetan tea-making.

We left the high or Tea Road at the Pan-gan monastery for a mountainous route which brought us to Tash-e-gumpa (*gumpa*=monastery) which is situated on the river Tsa-chu, and is the half-way halt between Ke-gu and Lhasa. We then continued our way along the valley of the river Tsa-chu. Here volcanic energy had evidently been at work. The variegated soil—red, pink, grey, brown, and white—was a novel sight. I especially admired the red earth, which cast a pretty pink glow on the

sheep and horses grazing by the roadside. We passed a mineral spring, which threw a jet a foot above the ground. Our horses, though very thirsty, the rivers being frozen over, would not touch the waters from this spring, for they were bitter.

Upon crossing the Dam-jan-er-la, one of the most dreaded passes (though its ascent is gradual), we reached a greater elevation than any we had yet surmounted. The cold here is generally so intense that travellers often freeze by the wayside. Stopping to attend frost-bitten men would only mean destruction to the rest of the party. Breathing was very difficult, and I awoke in the night gasping for breath. I also suffered much from palpitation of the heart. It is probably known to you that the average elevation of Great Tibet is some 15,000 feet (the greatest altitude in the world, Mount Everest, is 29,000 feet). I was unable to make any scientific observations beyond noticing that on this pass our water boiled at so low a point that it was little more than tepid. We had to drink our tea very quickly to prevent a crust of ice forming on the top. And we took good care to touch no steel or iron for the sake of our epidermis. We came unscathed through this redoubtable pass, and crossed the Long-er-tsa-ke-la. On our descent we found the valleys thickly populated with the black-tent tribes, rich in large herds of cattle and horses.

We still marched on with slow pace and sorry exterior along the Tea Road, which took us on over the So-ba-ner-la, and on the 28th of December across the Sok-chu, the river followed by Captain Bower on his late expedition, till we came at last within sight of the boundary of our promised land, the waters of the Bo-chu, which here separate the province of Amdo from the sacred province of Ü. We were prepared for this, for we had been meeting large caravans returning from the capital. On the last day of the old year (1892) we crossed the river, and found ourselves within the Lhasa district.

Had I been strong enough, it would have been wise to have left our horses here and continued the journey on foot, following up the course of the frozen river as it winds in and out among the mountains, until we had reached a point near Lhasa. The natives say that this is sometimes done. But the road is long, and the tribes dwelling on the banks of the river share the freebooting propensities of the eastern tribes; I therefore resolved to follow the usual route. After twice crossing the river, and passing a small lake called Ang-nga, our horses picked their way over a very stony course and down a steep descent till we came to the Da-chu, flowing through a deep gorge. Two days after crossing this river I was taken prisoner, to be conducted later on by military escort a very long day's journey nearer to Lhasa, within an hour or so of Nag-chu-kokang. I was then within three stages of Lhasa, and at the junction of the Si-ning and the Tea Roads.

After much palavering with the Lhasa chiefs who came to interview me, I finally had to give up Lhasa for this time, and, with my Tibetan servants, Puntso and Pategn, set out on my return journey to Ke-gu, varying the route by not always keeping to the highroad.

After a long stay at Ke-gu, where I mixed much with the natives, we

started for China in a south-easterly direction, with some mule-drivers returning to Oganze, which is on the Tea Road, half-way to Ta-chien-lu. We soon entered the province of Kham, which with Amdo are the two principal Tibetan provinces that pay tribute to China. The taxes and customs levied in Ü are paid to the royal lama at Lhasa. But it were a difficult task to detail the relation of the various parts of Tibet, either to the Tibetan or to the Chinese Government; still more to define exactly the nature of this relationship. We passed numerous small towns and villages, and the country, though mountainous, is—unlike the other mountainous districts we had traversed—well wooded and with occasional fertile districts. Hot sulphur springs abound as well as other springs of mineral waters, much valued by the Tibetans for their medicinal properties. I saw rocks of slate; and coal is found in abundance. It is used by the natives as fuel, but is not in great demand until the Chinese border is reached.

My Tibetan trip was now drawing to a close, and on the 12th of April 1893 I arrived at the town of Ta-chien-lu, in the Chinese province of Sze-chuen.

This journey, which lasted seven months and ten days from the date I left Tao-chow in Kan-su to my arrival in Ta-chien-lu, cost me about £100, including the value of everything—horses, luggage, and provisions—stolen on the way. The vicissitudes of my property, owing to the attack of the brigands, and the brigand-like propensities of my ostensible guide and guardian, the Chinaman Noga, are too many to be enumerated. Suffice it to say, my cavalcade and luggage diminished visibly and grew beautifully less day by day. Noga, after several attempts upon my life, abandoned me (to my great relief) at Tash-e-gumpa, taking with him his wife Erminie and the greater part of my belongings.

Hurrying after us by double stages, and passing us when out of sight behind some hills, he carried information to the Lhasa chiefs about the foreign lady-traveller, and it is to him I owe my failure in reaching Lhasa and carrying out my idea of journeying thence over the Himalayan passes to Darjiling. I was, when arrested in the Lhasa district, so destitute of money, and even of the necessities of life, that the Lhasa chiefs gave me the wherewithal to retrace my steps to the half-way town Ke-gu, where I had to leave my tents; and then for many a night I slept in the open air. My bed was either on the ground in the lee of a pile of luggage, or, if I chanced to find one, a hole, the sides of which protected me from the fierce icy blasts which blow over these great altitudes. A piece of felt to cover the ice at the bottom of the hole made my couch, and a warm sleeping bag into which I crept formed my sleeping clothes. Caves now and then proved a welcome luxury. I was in Tibetan dress, but this was only to avoid the gaze of too curious eyes. With regard to my servants, Noga, as you have heard, proved faithless; Leucotze, the other Chinaman, died; the two Tibetans—my faithful Puntso, and Pategn, who entered my service at Gala—alone stuck to me through thick and thin. The latter, Pategn, took leave of me upon our return to Ke-gu, and wended his way northwards to his home and wife and children at Gala. Puntso has never left me.

I have nothing but praise to give the Tibetans for their chivalry and

kindness. Setting aside their raiding proclivities (of which, after all, in earlier times, we have had lively examples on our own borders), they are hospitable, friendly, trustworthy, and by no means averse to intercourse with Europeans. In simplicity and naiveness, more especially, those people form a striking contrast to most Asiatic races. Although the lamas, for political reasons, do not wish to see us in their country, it is the Chinese who force Tibet, though this country is only partly tributary to them, to so jealously guard her frontiers; and this principally for their own trade interests; nor do they hesitate to do all they can to impede any intercourse between the Tibetans and Europeans and to raise bad blood.

Should I be asked my opinion as to what is of most importance to Tibetan travellers, I should emphasise the necessity of the Tibetan language being mastered by all intending explorers; one is so peculiarly liable to be misled and deceived by Eastern interpreters. As this tongue is much easier to acquire than most Oriental languages, as for instance, Arabic or Chinese, it is not too formidable a task.

I shall trespass on your time for a little longer in order to reply to a frequent question regarding what I saw of the fauna and flora of Tibet. The following animals actually came under my personal observation:—

The yâk (*Bos grunniens*), both tame and in herds of wild ones. This curious black-coated and maned animal, in some points like a buffalo, in others like a horse, but which, clumsy as it looks, climbs precipitous ascents with a truly astonishing ease and celerity, and which grunts like a pig, has often been described. Not so an animal of the horse tribe, herds of which I came across on the lofty mountain ranges. This animal strongly resembles the quagga of South Africa. It is shaped like a zebra, but with a stripeless fawn-coloured coat, of a paler shade on the belly, and is, so the natives told me, untameable. One whole day's journey through snow-drifts and over snow-covered holes my little party safely followed in the wake of a herd of these animals, so unerring was their instinct in finding a safe footpath. Herds of deer were countless. We also came across flocks of wild sheep and goats, wolves, foxes, hares, marmots, and rats devastating whole acres. Among birds, the black and white eagles and the beautiful golden eagle were conspicuous. Vultures were innumerable, and play an economic part in the consumption of dead bodies, which are cut up in small pieces for their repast, the Tibetans objecting, from a feeling of sentiment, to the bodies of their friends being torn to pieces by the birds. Huge, impertinent, thievish crows would attack our provisions on the very backs of our pack-horses. Teal, and a little bird called *Tit* in Tibetan, were common.

When speaking of the flora I must remind you that a snow-covered ground does not offer much temptation to botanise. Except in Kham and on the borders, trees were conspicuous by their absence. A few fir stumps, juniper bushes, briars overhung with snow, and a sweet edible root given me by some natives claimed my attention in the interior. Edelweiss and other Alpine flowers grew on the borders.