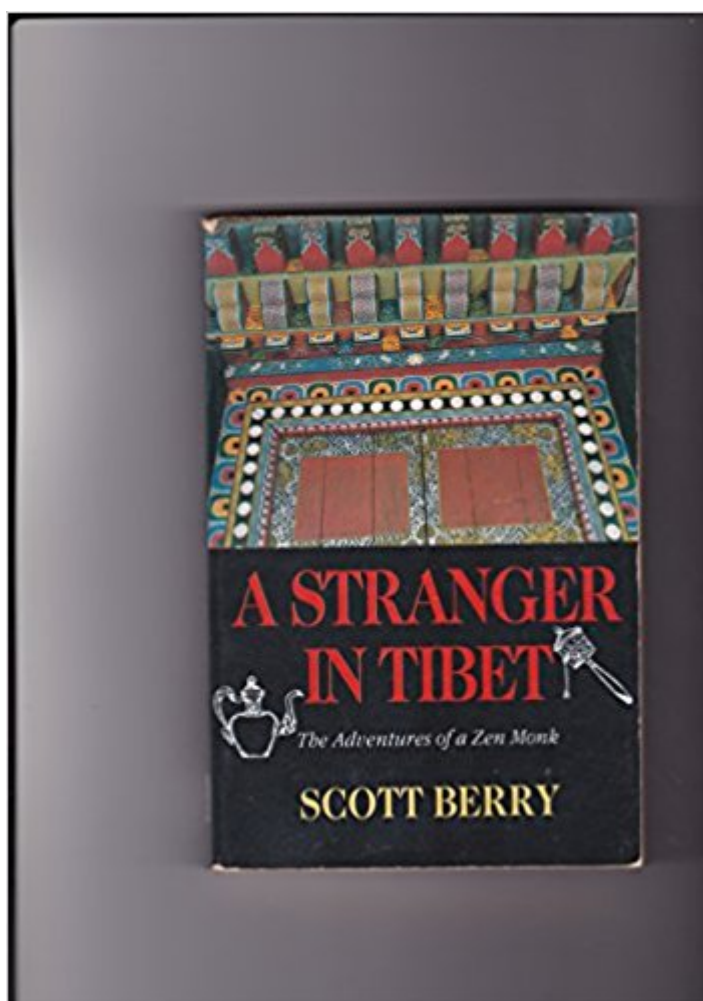


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A Stranger In Tibet: Adventures Of A Zen Monk - Life Of Kawaguchi Ekai (Flamingo)



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Customer Reviews

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 at, 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 were rather critical, he was not apprehensive to snide on the various practices of the Tibetans including the worship of 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's 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. He mentioned the dop-dop (warrior monks) of Sera having no money to pay for course of study at the college and not gifted in scholarly turn of mind, but instead earned their living by gathering yak dung, carrying firewood and most importantly as bodyguards of high reincarnations and the aristocratic families. However, Kawaguchi's time in Lhasa was short-lived, his identity was accidentally reviewed and his escape from Lhasa was to be planned. In his escape, he was duly worried for his friends he met in Tibet. What actions would befall them? Would they be punished for their liaison with a foreigner? His foray to Tibet was not the last one as he made another visit back to Tibet in 1909. In his later years, Kawaguchi sojourned his ripe old age by teaching and propagating the Buddhist faith as well as his writings on encounters in Tibet. In conclusion, I would say that Scott Berry's "A Stranger In Tibet: The Adventures Of A Zen Monk" is must-read book for the alternative view of Tibet. No other author had tried to present Old Tibet from the view of an Asian especially a Japanese.

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