CALLLING FROM KASHGAR

A JOURNEY THROUGH TIBET

Rod Richard

When Rod Richard arrived in Lhasa in 1986, there were fewer restrictions to travel than ever before, or since. Tibet had long been a forbidden kingdom, separate from the world below, yet tangled in the politics of surrounding empires.

His story begins in China and leads to the journey across West Tibet to Kashgar. Rattling over the high desert on the backs of old trucks, he meets PLA army convoys, solitary tribal groups and pilgrims of all sorts on their way to Mount Kailas. This is the father of all mountains, the sacred peak at the centre of the universe and a means to enlightenment. Powerful feelings emerge as the author walks the pilgrims' parikarama at 18,000 ft.

Rod Richard's climbing skills and his previous studies in Chinese and Political Science were well adapted for these travels. We benefit from an informed viewpoint, not only sharing the adventure and humour, but learning something of Tibet. He writes of earlier quests, including the infamous British expedition which slaughtered the Tibetan army. Such history introduces the all-abiding question of Tibetan nationalism today, seen from Peking as the troubles of a distant minority. With care and great understanding he describes the real situation and his thoughts for the future encourage sympathy and hope for Tibet. This is a book which draws the reader's heart forever North of the Himalayas.

Cover photographs by the author.

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Travel in China has long held a fascination for many from the very different culture of Western Europe dating back to the remarkable travels of Marco Polo in the 13th century.

After this brief flurry of contact, however, China again retired behind its bamboo curtain for several centuries.

The rise of European trade and naval power altered this first with the Portuguese at Macao in the 16th century. By 1840 the Opium War between Britain and China had destroyed China's attempts to keep her borders inviolate and opened the way for a series of unequal treaties which the Europeans, and later the Americans and Japanese, exploited to China's disadvantage.

This exploitation was not simply in terms of trade, but also in exposing a largely unwilling population to competing missionary influences. That is not to suggest that much of the missionary work was not of a high standard and bought many tangible benefits to the people, including Western medicine, hygiene and moves against widespread corruption.

Many of the written accounts of China in the 19th and 20th centuries come from these missionary sources, and not a few of them undertook remarkable journeys and penetrated to remote and inaccessible parts of the Empire. It provided for them a *raison d'être* for their travels which is now rarely the case, so other less readily defined justifications have to be sought – if indeed justification for travel is necessary at all.

China travel has also traditionally been hampered by governments in disarray, competing factions of warlords, disputes over regional autonomy, religious or ethnic minorities, and political dogmas. With the 1911 Revolution the Chinese Empire fell apart and was to remain in turmoil until the Communist victory of 1949. Since then periods of consolidation have been set back by a series of mass movements, which have spread confusion and disruption in their wake. The Cultural Revolution of 1966–76 saw this process reach its apogee in what is now largely accepted by Chinese and others alike to have been an unprecedented national disaster from which it will take decades for the self

inflicted wounds and the shattered economy to recover.

China has, however, a great cultural heritage. Its natural resources are impressive, though these are constantly under pressure from its vast and growing population. The many positive achievements of the Communist Revolution also cannot be dismissed lightly. With the reopening of relations with the West after the period of introspection that followed 1949, China has become a fascinating melting pot of ideas old and new where the pace of change is ever accelerating.

One facet of this has been easier access for foreigners, a developing tourist industry and a lessening of official paranoia about external influences. It has also been seen as a very good way of obtaining foreign exchange recognised in the issue of Foreign Exchange Certificates (FEC) in 1979. It was from this year that first a trickle, but before long a flood of foreigners started to visit, reaching even some of the remoter areas that had been entirely cut off from scrutiny for three decades.

Initially only a very limited number of major cities and tourist attractions were open to foreign travellers, and Aliens Travel Permits were required for all but these open areas. Rapidly this changed and by 1986 travel permits had generally become redundant. China is a very large country and there are still areas that remain closed. These may be for military/security reasons as on the frontier with Vietnam, or for nuclear installations in the Lop Nor Basin. They may also be because of internal disorder, for instance, some Muslim areas in Xinjiang or Minority groups in South-West China.

China is understandably a little reticent about its Minorities' policies after serious cultural and religious repression. This is particularly true of Tibet and was one of the major reasons for wanting to keep foreigners out, and so the world largely in a state of ignorance as to the true state of affairs. Some of the first visitors to Lhasa in 1979 appear to have been chosen because of the sympathetic picture they would paint in thanks for being allowed the privilege of a visit.

Unfortunately for the Chinese authorities this new openness has not all been entirely to their liking, with the

Tibetans tasting at last a little more freedom and demanding very much more. This contributed to riots in Lhasa in 1987 with a resulting clamp down. Perhaps Paul Theroux's most telling comment on his travels from 'Riding the Iron Rooster', is, 'in order to understand the Chinese you have to visit Tibet' – a sad reflection, though, on China's uneasy relationship with her neighbour, in particular since 1959. The history of relations between China and Tibet is a complex one. China claims sovereignty. Tibet has at worst conceded Chinese suzerainty. In the short term this may simply be academic as the one point on which the Chinese are quite clear, is that sovereignty is now non-negotiable and they hold all the cards. In the long term Tibetan nationalistic aspirations cannot be ignored, but it may well be that the joint effects of colonisation and tourism may undermine Tibetan culture in a fashion that straightforward military invasion, domination and suppression could never do. China now reluctantly refers to 'errors' and 'excesses' in the handling of the Tibetan question, as if, by so doing they have gone far enough to atone for the attempted cultural and national genocide of a claimed part of their own empire. Tiananmen Square may have caused some to pause and consider when they do unto their own that which they have done unto others. However, we should not condemn a nation, or specifically a race within that nation, albeit that they constitute 90% of the whole, for atrocities carried out. Do we really get the government we deserve? Have the Han Chinese deserved theirs? Sadly one cannot escape from greater Han chauvinism, their tendency to treat others as less than full citizens, and therefore somehow deserving of harsh treatment.

I came to Tibet largely by accident having travelled through China and acquired, I thought, some understanding of their language and culture. I had found much I had enjoyed and admired. I had made some friends. I had been greatly entertained, amused and mentally stimulated.

Tibet forced me to reconsider, both in philosophical and political terms, where I stood. It became apparent to me I could not sit endlessly on the fence. For the Chinese to mend their fences in Tibet requires more than a few half-hearted

apologies followed by the reimposition of martial law.

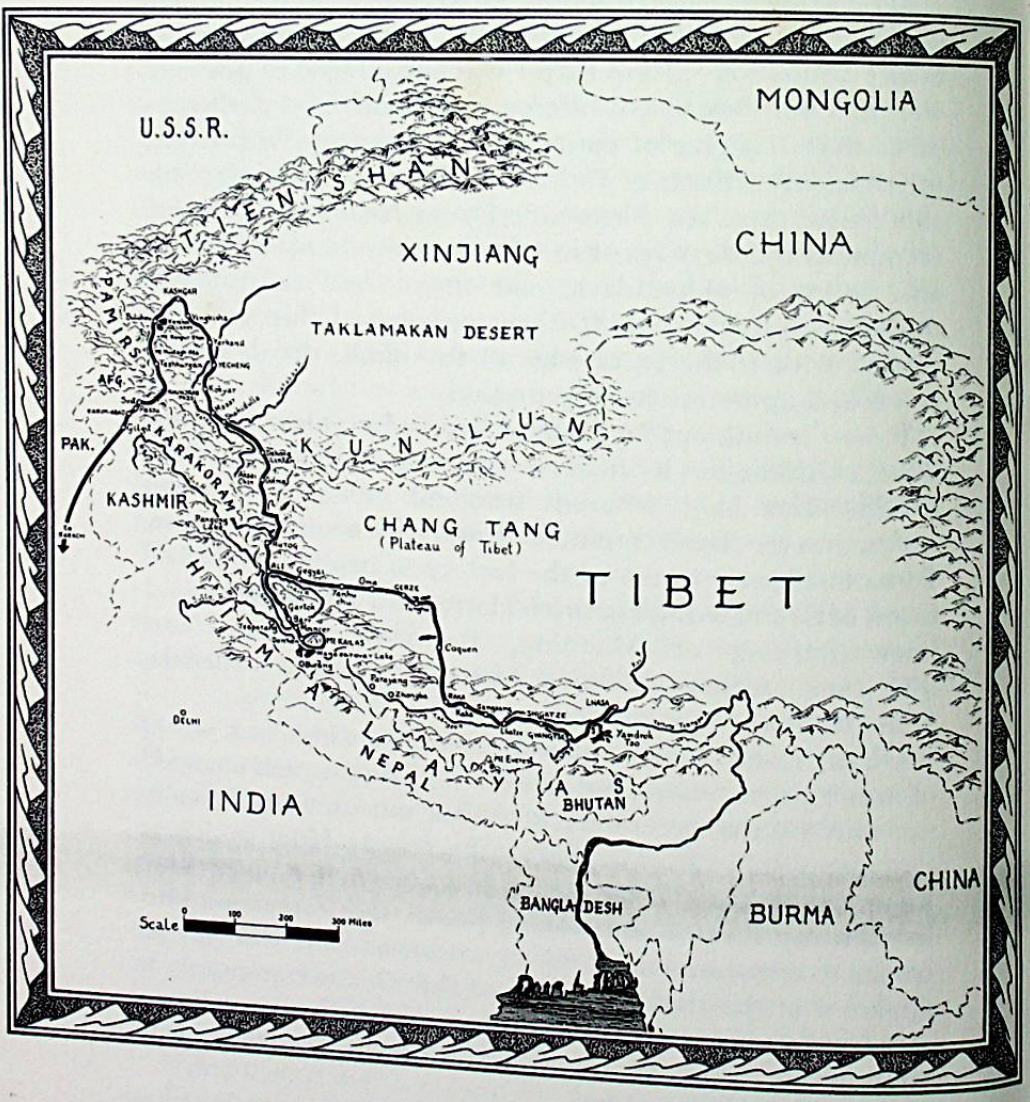
The journey I undertook through West Tibet, which at no time in history has been officially open to foreign travel, is again not likely to be achieved easily over the next few years.

My travels in eastern China in retrospect were excellent training for Tibet, and having found that Lhasa was now firmly on the tour group map I was encouraged to push out west precisely because it offered uncertainty and challenges other than a degree of patience in the face of bureaucratic intransigence. Much of China travel is slow uncomfortable and frustrating. As Alexandra David-Neal recalls, 'a full account of the days spent in argument would sound like an epic poem of olden days, half comic, half sad.' Travel through West Tibet to Kashgar epitomised this, and also carried with it the extra edge of the illicit, the danger of arrest and ignominioius deportation.

Before setting out for China I had had no idea of visiting Tibet. Although it held a mystical fascination since childhood, a land different from all others, it had not occured to me that it might be visited with comparitive ease. I was but barely aware of the history of exploration. I had heard of Sven Hedin, Heinrich Harrer and Younghusband. I knew nothing of Manning, Bouvalot, Prince Henri d'Orleans, Dutreuil de Rhins, Annie Taylor, Mrs Littledale, Susie Rijnhart, to name but a few.

On my return home I have discovered a whole new world of armchair travelling, but most of all I find myself changed not only by the experience of travel, but quite specifically but inexplicably by Mt Kailas, the remote Holy Buddhist mountain in West Tibet, which has since held a vivid place in both my dreams and waking hours, that forces me into constant reassessment of its significance. This was not so apparent at the time, but I know that this is not simply a romanticisation after the event, a self-fulfilling prophecy, although my journey there was by accident rather than design.

Rod Richard. Nairn, February 1990.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KASHMIR
CHANG TANG
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