

# Exotic Oriental Magic Legend

## Account to Tibetan by Medieval Europe

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**Abstract**—The most distant oriental land can greatly inspire people's feelings of longing and desire to explore. In the process of "discovering" and "understanding" East, medieval Europe give oriental a variety of exotic atmosphere featured on emphasizing the heterogeneity of oriental culture, they are an extremely important driving force in mutual understanding, communication and exchange among civilizations. Among the many exotic descriptions with oriental features, Tibet has become a very exotic oriental enclave. Magical beauty and terrible absurdity the two distinct different descriptions are the first impression of Europeans on the orient. This first impression on the East has a lasting impact. Its impact on later creation of the Tibet image for centuries cannot be underestimated.

**Keywords**—medieval; Europe; Tibet; exotic atmosphere

### I. INTRODUCTION

The most distant oriental land can greatly inspire people's feelings of longing and desire to explore. "Most suitable candidates for playing the role of a foreign model are peoples and cultures that most distant from us, we know little about."<sup>1</sup> Distant strange oriental land is the source of mystery and the source to stimulate the imagination and the desire to explore. "Exotic atmosphere" is subject to the regulation of observers' perspective. It is not per se exclusive oriental features, but the feature west assigned to it in the "discover" and understanding to east. From this perspective, the Western "discovery" process is actually associated with the gradually exotic process of east, but also the process "oriental land" gradually step into the western literary imagination schemata. Exotic atmosphere that featured emphasizing the heterogeneous culture has become a very important driving force for mutual understanding, communication and exchange among different civilizations.

Explorers' longing for distant exotic land aroused European exploring desire. Then journey to the East is full of adventure and romance in the minds of Europeans. In a long historical period, missionaries, travelers, traders, conquerors adopted an active role of exotic gatherers and disseminators. From the initially blur performance of the exotic lands to consciously and purposefully rendering exotic atmosphere, they deliberately create distinct exotic image alien to their own cultures.

### II. MAGICAL AND ALLURING TIBET

Among the many exotic descriptions with oriental features, Tibet has become a very exotic oriental enclave. The presentation of Tibet strange customs greatly strengthened the allure of Tibet to westerners. Under the writing of these narrators, the allure of the Tibet to west is mainly from the following two aspects.

The first is the peculiar sexual customs of Tibet, in Marco Polo's description, the Tibetans will dedicate their beautiful maiden to outsiders:

*In this area, there is a kind of popular scandalous custom that people do not want to marry a virgin, on the contrary, but to marry the woman who had many heterosexual relations with men in the past. The reason why such a scandalous custom prevails can only be the result of blind worship to Buddhism. They think that this behavior is loved by God and believe that a woman of no lover is worthless.*

*Therefore, when the merchant caravans came here put up their tents for the night, mothers with daughters waiting for marriage at home would lead them to come to the tent and beg the strangers to accept their daughters. They felt honored if their daughters had long companionship during their stay. The most beautiful women would be naturally chosen by businessmen but the others cannot help but be disappointed. The women being selected continue to live together with passengers until they left. When breaking up, the businessmen would return these women to their mother, and never attempt to elope with them. However, these women's hope for businessmen was just some small gifts from them, namely ornaments, such as rings or other memorabilia to show off, so they can take the things back to their home.*

*All of these decorations were worn on the neck or other places. Woman with the most gifts was considered as the most notable and men-provoking person, and therefore respected by men to marry. On marriage day, she would display these gifts and her husband treated these gifts as his idol and evidence for her to pleasure men. However, after the marriage, she became a married woman and no one would dare to have sexual relation with her. This is a rule, and no one can overstep it.<sup>1</sup>*

In medieval secular life, sex is a very veiled and sensitive topic and the Church also condemns sexual relations outside marriage, while sexual openness of Tibet locating in the

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hinterland of East undoubtedly become an important message to catch the eye of people. The Venetian introduced the practice in detail and concluded that: "if I described to you such a marriage, it is because they are indeed worthy of presentation and narration, where our young people should go".<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, another factor of Tibet full of temptation to west is witchcraft. "Among Local people (Tibetan), you can find the best wizard. When they use witchcraft, they can control the forces of nature with the thunder and lightning ability. This witchcraft is ever-changing and can be turned into an incredible visions and miracles, but these miracles are unprecedented and unheard".<sup>2</sup> in order to avoid accusations of witchcraft, Marco · Polo added: "I will not tell you about all these in this book ". However, he could not help but talk about some paranormal ability of wizard in Kashmir and Tibet in another paragraph text: "If there never had bad weather, it was because Khan had some witchcraft and astrology experts, they knew a lot of magic and spiritualism divination techniques that any clouds or bad weather would not occur over such a vast area of land. They did everything by the devil 'careers', but they made others believe that they accomplished performance by holiness of the heart and God. There were more than ten million people did like this. No one told lies actually here because the wise men who knew spiritualism divination techniques would tell you: 'It is entirely possible'".<sup>3</sup>

When describing luxurious palaces and imperial etiquette in another paragraph of Travels, he also referred to these healers (or so-called astrologers). On August 28 in the lunar calendar every year, wizards would hold memorial ceremony and they would perform some strange witchcraft. For example, on cloudy days, when they saw the heavy rain was coming down, warlocks then boarded the roof of the palace residence, once they used witchcraft, the sky immediately begun to clear the air, the wind and rain. Around the palace, there was thunder and lightning under a storm but the location of the palace had no rain at all. There was one strange thing that even the narrator Mark · Polo felt unbelievable. "One thing, though I think it incredible, however, it should also be recorded. Once khan sat in imperial temple.... When he had the meal, the table in the middle rose to the height of eight cubits (a cubit equals about 45 --50 cm), not far from the table there was a cupboard, which stood all cutlery. Now imposed by their witchcraft, all of the jug, milk bottles or other beverage containers, would automatically pour the beverage into the cup without the help of guards, then the cup flew over a distance of ten steps in the air and reached the hands of khan. After drinking, cups automatically flew back to the original place. This witchcraft was performed in front of many visitors invited by Khan".<sup>4</sup> the witchcraft was very magical and unpredictable. The reasons why Khan didn't believe Christianity mentioned in Travel was that Christians didn't have witchcraft or miracles, while Buddhist can do whatever they want and they can control the forces of nature, at the same time, Buddhist idols can be responsive and very efficacious.<sup>5</sup>

In Mandeville's Travels, the ability of witches was further exaggerated. They are magical and almighty. At the banquet, "they fell from the sky, bringing a bright, like the sun, the moon, shining everyone. Then everywhere was dark, pitch

dark. Then it became the day and the sun shone pleasantly. They brought the most beautiful girl in the world to dance, while other girls held golden cups filled with milk of different animals, respectfully handed to lords and ladies to enjoy. Knights armed with rifles had matches on the horses. Firstly they ran all the way, then violently attacked each other, rudely interrupted others' spears, debris drifting all over the hall. Then they hung pig and stag and hounds also ran awfully with mouth open. There were many other wonderful things from their witchcraft, which were amazing. Such games were not stopped until meals were ready".<sup>1</sup>

Such descriptions on beautiful girls and magic wizards and full of oriental exotic feel were the first impression of Europeans on the orient. This first impression on the East has a lasting impact. Its impact on later creation of the Tibet image for centuries cannot be underestimated.

### III. TIBET WITH RIDICULOUS HORRIBLE COLOR

As the building skill, exotic atmosphere words were not always shown in the same appearance. Description to Tibet of medieval European was not only a simple idealized description. The image of Tibet sometimes was totally different. In such description, the most eye-catching thing of Tibet was ridiculous horrible custom, which was recorded as follows in the travels of Odoric of Pordenone:

*I arrived at a place called Tubo (TIBET), it bordered on India and under the control of Khan ... another custom of this place was like this. If the father died, the son said: "I want to mourn my father"; and he gathered the state's monks, musicians, as well as relatives and friends together. They transport the body to the suburb happily. They prepared a large table and the monk cut off his head on the table and then handed it to his son. Son and all the people sang carols for the dead. Then the monk cut the body into pieces, after doing so, they all got into the city, walking and praying for the dead. Thereafter, the falcons flew down from hills, depicting pieces of meat and flew away. At the moment, all the people shouted: "Look, this man is a saint because condors send him to heaven." Thus, the son felt very decent, because his father was taken to the heaven in such a happy way. So he spoiled his father's head and immediately ate it. He made a drinking cup of his father's cranium to memory his late father. He and his family often religiously used it to drink. They said they can express great respect for his father by doing this. They also had many other absurd and terrible customs.*<sup>2</sup>

This is probably the first record of Western to Tibetan Funeral, but motivated by prejudice and cultural misunderstanding, the Western naturally named the people of this place "cannibal tribe". Such narrative also showed up in the Jean de Plan Carpin in Mongolia: "Mongolian army came to Burithabet on the way return in triumph (now west of Qinghai Lake) and conquered people in this area by force. The latter were not only infidels, but also had an incredible, or more correctly, disgusting custom: If someone's father died, his son and all the relatives would divide the body and eat it. This was what locals attested to us".<sup>1</sup>

While Marco · Polo described magical wizards in the palace, he also mentioned a group of slovenly, odious, ragged

dirty and vulgarly rude people. In addition to their general living like animals and frightening behaviors, they ate human beings. After criminal were sentenced to death, they immediately carried away corpses, roasted with fire, and then ate human flesh. However, they did not eat the body of natural death.<sup>2</sup>

Although the narrator admitted that they didn't saw such appalling practices that eating human body but listened to others description then recorded, a fixed thinking mode also formed when such descriptions continued to appear in many works: In the distant Tibet, there was not only the mouthwatering wealth, lost Christians, but also dangerous obstacles everywhere. This narrative showed the kind of complex mental conflict of the western world for east. The existence of "barbarians" often aroused impulse of missionary to "save" their religion.

#### IV. NARRATIVE ABOUT TIBETAN RELIGION

As a businessman and traveler Marco · Polo observed the eastern things very carefully, he described religion in Tibet in detail in his travels and explained reincarnation very lively, "they believed that the soul cannot be destroyed. If someone was dead, he would reincarnate immediately. The future status of the person would get better or worse in accordance with his good and evil acts in lifetime. If he was poor but he behaved gracious and politely, his first reincarnation would be in a decent woman, after birth he became a decent person. The second time he reborn in a notable family and became a nobleman, he got higher on the birth level until became a deity. Conversely, if he was a decent child with bad behaviors, then his next life would become a clown, ultimately a dog, and would continue to fall, the more the lower down".<sup>3</sup>

Thereafter Lamaism was also talked about by Odoric of Pordenone. "I arrived at a place called Tubo (TIBET), it bordered on India and under the control of Khan. They had plenty of pasta and wine, as any region in the world. The state's people live in tents made of black felt. But there were walls of black and white in shoutown and the imperial City, in which streets were lined well. No one dared to kill any living creature in this city, whether human or beast because it was the worship to an idol piety of them. In the city lived Abbassi (it can be regarded as dervishes or monks), or the Pope in their words. He was the idol of all Christian princes, and his spent their holy supply in their way."<sup>4</sup>

Here emerged a series of words as the altar, scriptures, prayer beads, God, the Pope and the holy catholic supply matching terminology which was used to explain Lamaism and reflect their similarities. When footprints of looking for Elder John had not stopped, Tibet full of religious color and having many similarities with the Catholic religion would naturally be.

Medieval Europe was always in a constantly swinging between imagination and narrative to the distant east. Many seemingly contradictory things were presented to readers together, such as desolation and wealth, magical witchcraft and terrible cannibal customs, beautiful and open woman and woman with wild boar-like teeth..... all the information likes

twinkling stars, faintly sends some sporadic, intermittent message.

For the above travelers and missionaries, whether they really arrived over Tibet or not, most researchers held a negative attitude. Although they lack of evidence that they had entered Tibet personally, but by descriptions of others and many inquiries, they finally constructed an "exotic" image of Tibet. In fact, this kind of image of Tibet was the result of comparing between familiar Europe and other eastern nations by travelers. Tibetan culture appeared in the vision of the West with a significant difference and the west continued to experience and express Tibetan exotic atmosphere.

As a matter of fact, the germination of exotic atmosphere was almost simultaneous with the war and the historical exchanges between east and west. A series of historical events promoted cognition of the west to the east. While the Yuan army western expedition and the crusades are two far-reaching historical events. Mongolian Yuan army expedition brought in the effect of east to the west, the ancient Chinese civilization attracted a large number of businessmen and travelers went to China to open up their own businesses, at the same time, they greatly stimulated Vatican to send missionaries to China. From the end of the 11th century to the end of the 13th century, the Europeans launched nine Crusades under the leadership of the Vatican. Even though the Crusades did not fundamentally change the image of the east in the eyes of Europeans, but it greatly arouse Europeans desire to explore the east. "Expansionism (dynamism) spirit stimulated and the released by Crusades made preparation for a new round of exploring the east in the 13th century." 1 Crusades conquest which had colonial nature promoted the integration and conflict of eastern and western civilizations further. Reflected in the field of literature, writers were increasingly interested in oriental affairs, and their descriptions of the exotic East was gradually increasing. Although all types of text description of the eastern land in this period was half-truths without high literary value, but they started to show the shadowy outline of eastern world in front of the western people.

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