



# Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews

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**Le Houérou, F. (2022). Tibet in European Eyes: How European Orientalists Shaped Representations of Tibet during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews*, 1(4), 167-171.**

ISSN 2827-9735

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1996.01.04.44

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

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Published by:  
The Asian Institute of Research

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# Tibet in European Eyes: How European Orientalists Shaped Representations of Tibet during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is historically recalling how Europeans portrayed Tibet during the middle of the 19th century. It introduces the problematic of a “pure” Tibet invented by Europeans travelers. The French orientalist will be studied as the main promoters of such caricatured narratives.

**Keywords:** Pure, Virgin, Orientalism, Colonial, Alexandra David Néel, Father Huc

## 1. The “virgin Tibet” paradigm

There are a plethora of narratives related to Tibet during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and after during the first decades of the twentieth. Each portrayed Tibet as an idealized untouched land “the roof of the world”, symbol of snow and purity. The widespread references can be classified as “orientalists” and “colonials”. Edward Said (1979) depicts the ways people from the West represented the East characterized by otherness that could be defined as relying on stereotypes as a lens of a dominant civilization and condescending representations to reinforce otherness.

In his introduction to *Orientalism*, Said defines his theory of a European invention of the Orient. He writes: “*The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences*” (Said, 1979, p. 1). The European idealization of Tibet, as a romanticized space, meets Said’s conception of an invented oriental world. A non-existing Tibet, a land depicted, by French writer Alexandra David Neel, who fashioned herself as the first woman in Lhasa. Her depictions offer the readers a paradigmatically orientalist view of the “roof of the world” by representing the space as exotic. Her books were sold as documents but were almost novels. She stressed the mystical side of an unknown land and invented a mysterious otherness that gave her a large following in France. She used to focus on her extraordinary experiences when travelling to Tibet, alone with a young monk that she adopted (but was used as a translator), disguised as a Tibetan beggar.



Figure1: Alexandra David Néel

To travel disguised as locals is paradigmatic to the orientalist approach. It emphasizes the exotic other and the position of the European observer as a cultural spy by hiding who she is for getting more information. On my view, this dissimulation is a paradigmatic status of a colonial view. The postcolonial approach is totally contrary to this disguised and hidden agenda. No academic, after the sixties, would ever take this position, but we must recall that she travelled in Tibet during the first decades of the twentieth century. She arrived in Lhasa in 1924. It is important to underline this historical dimension. It is obvious that she is situated in the logical continuity of the tales and stories given by the French Missionaries in 1846. Even the ways she disguised herself can be inspired by the stories of travels of Huc and Gabet. They also dressed up as Tibetan Lamas when travelling to China, Mongolia and Tibet. These authors recall in their book the urge to change clothes. There are continuities between Huc and Gabet (1) and Alexandra David Neel's *Voyage d'une Parisienne à Lhasa*, published in Paris, London and New York in 1927.

Let us recall the story of Evariste Huc (translated in English):

*The missionaries who reside in China, all, without exception, wear the secular dress of the people, and are in no way distinguishable from them; they bear no outward sign of their religious character. It is a great pity that they should be thus obliged to wear the secular costume, for it is an obstacle in the way of their preaching the gospel.*

*Among the Tartars, a black man—so they discriminate the laity, as wearing their hair, from the clergy, who have their heads close shaved—who should talk about religion would be laughed at, as impertinently meddling with things, the special province of the Lamas, and in no way concerning him. The reasons which appear to have introduced and maintained the custom of wearing the secular habit on the part of the missionaries in China, no longer applying to us, we resolved at length to appear in an ecclesiastical exterior becoming our sacred mission. The views of our vicar apostolic on the subject, as explained in his written instructions, being conformable with our wish, we did not hesitate. We resolved to adopt the secular dress of the Thibetian Lamas; that is to say, the dress which they wear when not actually performing their idolatrous ministry in the Pagodas. The costume of the Thibetian Lamas suggested itself to our preference as being in unison with that worn by our young neophyte, Samdadchiemba.*

*We announced to the Christians of the inn that we were resolved no longer to look like Chinese merchants; that we were about to cut off our long tails, and to shave our heads. This intimation created great agitation: some of our disciples even wept; all sought by their eloquence to divert us from a resolution which seemed to them fraught with danger; but their pathetic remonstrances were of no avail; one touch of a razor, in the hands of Samdadchiemba to sever the long tail of hair, which, to accommodate Chinese fashions, we had so carefully cultivated ever since our departure from*

France. We put on a long yellow robe, fastened at the right side with five gilt buttons, and round the waist by a long red sash; over this was a red jacket, with a collar of purple velvet; a yellow cap, surmounted by a red tuft, completed our new costume. Breakfast followed this decisive operation, but it was silent and sad. When the Comptroller of the Chest brought in some glasses and an urn, wherein smoked the hot wine drunk by the Chinese, we told him that having changed our habit of dress, we should change also our habit of living. "Take away," said we, "that wine and that chafing dish; henceforth we renounce drinking and smoking. You know," added we, laughing, "that good Lamas abstain from wine and tobacco." The Chinese Christians who surrounded us did not join in the laugh; they looked at us without speaking and with deep commiseration, fully persuaded that we should inevitably perish of privation and misery in the deserts of Tartary"<sup>i</sup>



LE R. P. HUC EN COSTUME CHINOIS

Extrait de la nouvelle édition des "Souvenirs du P. Huc",  
annotée et illustrée par J.-M. Planchet, missionnaire  
lazariste (Pékin, 1924.)

Figure II: Father Huc in Chinese costume.

Source. R.P Huc, *Souvenir d'un voyage au Thibet et en Chine*, Plon, 1926, Paris.

Alexandra David Néel, The well known woman feminist traveler, like the French missionaries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would adopt a similar approach in 1924, when she would don local clothes. In fact, she cites the missionaries in her edition at the beginning of her story, noting that Huc and Gabet were the only travelers who reached Lhasa in 1846 (Néel, 1927, p. 9).

*La question posée par cette femme me laissa très préoccupée. Ainsi, en dépit de la peine que j'avais prise de me poudrer avec du cacao mélange de braise pile, malgré mes jolies nattes en crin de yak, je ne ressemblais pas suffisamment à une Tibétaine. Que pouvais-je inventer de mieux?*

“The question asked by this woman left me very worried. Thus, in spite of the effort I had taken to put cocoa powder mixed with piled ash, despite my lovely mats in yak hair, I did not look sufficiently Tibetan. What else could I invent?” (Néel, 1927, p. 71)

She used cocoa powder as makeup to look Tibetan and furthermore, she explains that her *accoutrement* is rather useful to resemble a modest Tibetan in order to misguide humble Tibetans to represent her as “one of them” (Néel, 1927, p. 138). Néel is also very cautious to hide any golden item to dissimulate her wealth (Néel, 1927, p. 147)

It is obvious that Néel was inspired by the stories told by Huc a half of century before her travels. Huc describes that honorable Tibetan women coat their face with a sort of black jam in order to look hideous and repulsive to men when they get out of their houses (Huc, 1926, p. 141)

As the reader may see in the reference section, Néel produced a number of publications. Not only are these publications widespread, but also inspired many biographers and tales showing the fascination and impact she still has on the French public. The latest book published about her Tibetan epic in Tibet was released in 2018.

The romantic impact of her prose should not be underestimated in the way Tibet still appears in European imagination.

*J'ai vécu plusieurs années, au pied des neiges éternelles, comme dans les solitudes herbeuses de la région des grands lacs, la vie étrange et merveilleuse des anachorètes tibétains (.)*

I lived many years at the bottom of eternal snow, like in herbal solitudes from the great lakes region, the strange and wonderful life of Tibetan anchorite (Néel, 1927, p. 47).

In her publication “Voyage of a Parisian in Lhasa” (1927), Alexandra David Néel presents herself as having directly experienced the “eternal snow” of a “strange and wonderful life of a hermit”. These expressions are paradigmatic of orientalist self-fashioning. Everything is pictured as gorgeous, magic and mysterious. Her chocolate makeup trying to hide her white carnation did not protect her enough, and she was eventually unmasked by the governor of Lhasa and was forced to leave Tibet.

Her return to France on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1925 generated a lot of public interest that granted her fame and prestige. Magazines detailed exploits of her adventure. Her romanticized representation of Tibet meets the public expectations of a Far East and the fact that she is a female also played into public intrigue of her travels. I do not want here to minimize her courage (travelling alone in 1924 was not something common or easy) or her talent as a writer, but I think it is representative of the pervasiveness of orientalist representations in the early twentieth century. Her narratives are the fruit of a historical moment that show the typical ways the West is looking at the Orient. Today we look at it as stereotyped elements, but they were very originally perceived during that time. Few women were that intrepid, audacious, or daring. The French magazines were enthusiastic to relate her adventurous travels and she became an important icon of female freedom.

Copying her style from the French missionaries, she can be seen as an emblematic orientalist as a landmark of a specific style to portray a virgin Tibet still circulating in representations today in Europe, despite the fact that this Tibet has never existed.

I could directly measure the impact of this traditional orientalism at my university on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2014, when I participated to a Tibetan Film Festival at Aix-Marseille Université.(2) A documentary with ethnographic intention was projected at Aix-Marseille-University during a cultural festival organized by a professor of Tibetan

language. The documentary tells the story of a Tibetan refugee woman in exile living at the edge of the Tibetan colony in Delhi. The film was portraying a sick mother living at the margins with an African partner. The film is freely available on Dailymotion (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2g236p>).

It was shot in 2013, issued in 2014 and screened at Harvard University in May 2016. This documentary explored gender roles and the violence against women in exile through an original life-story of a Tibetan woman on the edge, in India, who was living with an African partner. The film was also questioning the reality of an accepted mix breeding and the limits of cultural amalgamation in our postcolonial world. The Tibetan colony condemned the Afro-Tibetan couple and few Tibetan refugees in the film expressed racism related to the color of the “half cast” baby, who was deemed too black by the Tibetan refugees in New Delhi.

Clearly the film explores the margins of the Tibetan colony in exile in India. The tensions in the film tell us much more about rejection, marginality, racial disregard, and community scornful judgment on the African partner of Angie, who was disparaged as a “violent beast”. Contemptuously seen as evil, the colony told me different horror stories about him.

The film was not advertising for a magical compassionate Tibet or a pure land and thus the audience was amazed and offended by the new migratory reality this documentary was presenting. They reacted very violently to the images and accused the author of filming “the worst of humanity” and to exhibit the most “horrible” side of the Tibetan community, ignoring the magnificent Tibetan culture. Their confrontational reaction was expressed in a campaign against the filmmaker. Other Tibetan filmmakers presented at the show tried to defend my point of view, arguing that I have filmed “the truth about today’s exile in India”. I realized that I was criticized for facing a contemporary Tibetan exile they refused to admit or perhaps, did not want to confront. This depiction contradicted the European imagination about a magical culture and an untouched land full of philosophical compassion. The audience was in majority studying Tibetan language at Aix-Marseille-University and despite the beginning of defense from the Tibetan artists (present that day), this reality remained unheard, unspoken. This refugee situation was opposed to their imagined representations of a past Tibet, and thus, had to be negated.

This narration illustrates the impact of French orientalism on the ways the public still portrays the “Orient” in Europe. This anecdotic account highlights how the Orient was an intellectual invention (Said, 1979, p. 1) and a current lively construction still very strong in the European imaginary. This representation of course influenced the way that Tibetan Muslims were invisible, unconsidered and were denied as object of scientific interest and research. Tibetans refused to protect an idealized Tibetan dream of purity, whereas Europeans clung to such representations

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<sup>1</sup>Evariste Regis Huc, *Travels in Tartary, Thibet, and China, 1844-5-6*.

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