

POLICY BRIEF

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Dr. Monika Chansoria is a Tokyo-based Senior Fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs. Previously, she has held appointments at the Sandia National Laboratories (U.S.), Hokkaido University (Sapporo, Japan), and Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris). Dr. Chansoria has authored five books including her latest work, *China, Japan, and Senkaku Islands: Conflict in the East China Sea Amid an American Shadow* (Routledge © 2018).

North China, Boxer Rebellion, Japan, Nepal, and Foreign Explorers: Ekai Kawaguchi's Notes on 20th Century Tibet*

Dr. Monika Chansoria

Following his arrival and getting adjusted in Lhasa in March 1901, Japanese Buddhist explorer, Ekai Kawaguchi began familiarizing himself with the life and times of 20th century Tibet. Kawaguchi embarked upon his destination, Tibet, in June 1897 when he left Japan. Arriving in Lhasa nearly four years thereafter, in 1901, Kawaguchi was prepared for the challenges in store, though unaware of the scale of their manifestation. There was a sense of relief though, that he had been able to overcome perhaps the most arduous part of his journey, which was reaching this wearisome and forbidden land whilst being in disguise all through.

Being a stranger who got success in entering Tibet and reaching Lhasa, when it was exceedingly difficult for even a local Tibetan to come into the capital, the locals found it hard to believe Kawaguchi when he told them that he came via the Jangthang (literally meaning pastoral 'northern plain') route. The locals argued that there were soldiers placed on guard all along that road, to which Kawaguchi replied that he ventured through the pathless wilds.¹

North China and the Boxer Rebellion

Coincidentally, this was also the period when the *Boxer Uprising* was taking place in China. Also referred to as the *Boxer Rebellion* (拳亂), or the *Yihetuan Movement* (義和團運動), it was primarily an anti-imperialist and anti-foreign uprising which took place in China between 1899 and 1901, nearing the Qing dynasty's last

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* This is the third paper in a continuing series tracing the travels and journey of Japan's first successful explorer inside Tibet in 1900, Ekai Kawaguchi. The narrative, citations, and arguments of this paper are primarily excerpted and based on Kawaguchi's personal memoir published in 1909, titled *Three Years in Tibet*, [Theosophist Office, Vasanta Press, Adyar (Madras) British India.]

1 Chapter LII, *Japan in Lhasa*, p. 342.

period. Initiated by the Militia United in Righteousness (*Yihetuan*) who were known commonly as *Boxers*, for many of their members were practitioners of Chinese martial arts, the determinants of the rebellion were many, including, severe drought, deep inroads of foreign spheres of influence, and several months of mounting violence in Shandong and North China. Resultantly, the Boxer warriors converged on Peking (Beijing) in June 1900 raising the slogan ‘*support the Qing government and exterminate the foreigners.*’²

On April 7, 1901, Kawaguchi attended a special service of prayer for the safety of the Chinese Emperor in “connection with the Boxer war.” The service was held at every temple in Tibet including at the Sera monastery where Kawaguchi initially stayed. He narrates of a discreet meeting for seven days, during which, special priests offered secret prayers.³ Upon enquiry Kawaguchi was told that Peking was invaded by foreign troops and that the Chinese seemed to have been beaten. Although, Kawaguchi wanted to hear in greater detail, he was denied any further information beyond this within the monasteries.⁴ Subsequently, while moving around Lhasa, he got ‘more definite information about the Boxer trouble.’ Some merchants who had just returned from China, and few who came from Nepal and India, brought news about the developments, but Kawaguchi described all these as ‘laughable and unreliable.’⁵ According to few, rumors were that the Emperor of China had bequeathed his throne to the Crown Prince and absconded, while some others told Kawaguchi that the

Emperor was defeated and was in Sin-an. Another set of people alluded that a famine prevailed in China leaving people famished. Indeed, every sort of rumor was aboard in the Tibetan capital.⁶

Portrayal of the earlier relations between China and Tibet requires erudition and in-depth research and investigation to write with precise competence. And thus, Kawaguchi decided to confine himself only to the existing state of those relations as he witnessed himself. Calling Tibet nominally as a protectorate of China, bound to pay a tribute to the Suzerain State, the days gone by saw Tibet forwarding this tribute to China. But subsequently the payment was commuted against expenses which China had to allow Tibet, on account of the Grand Prayer which was performed every year at Lhasa for the prosperity of the Chinese Emperor.⁷

Kawaguchi notes that the loss of Chinese prestige in Tibet was truly extraordinary since the Sino-Japanese War. Prior to that, China used to treat Tibet in a high-handed way, while the latter, overawed by the display of force of the Suzerain, submitted to it tamely.⁸ Post the Sino-Japanese War, much of that changed, and instead of a subservient attitude, Tibet began viewing China with a deep sense of contempt and ridicule. To a certain extent, the Tibetans arrived at the conclusion that their masters were no longer able to protect and help them, and therefore did not deserve to be feared and respected anymore. This sudden and apparent downfall of its prestige inside Tibet left China completely mortified.⁹

2 For more details see, Klein Thoralf, “The Boxer War—The Boxer Uprising,” *Violence de masse et Résistance - Réseau de recherche*, SciencesPo, Paris, July 23, 2008.

3 Chapter XLVII, *Tibet and North China*, p. 297.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 299.

7 Chapter LXXIII, *China, Nepal and Tibet*, p. 519.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

During his stay at Lhasa, Kawaguchi got to know of a *yellow paper* that contained the Chinese Emperor's decree issued at the termination of the Boxer Rebellion. The *yellow paper* decree was hung up in the square of the city and was addressed to all the 18 provinces of China as well as its protectorates.¹⁰ In order to promote aims of mutual benefit, the Middle Kingdom had been opened up to allow foreigners with the freedom of travelling to any place they wished. The decree concluded that this policy of welcome and hospitality needed to be adopted in all provinces and protectorates. After seeing and hearing this, Kawaguchi thought that the decree may have been issued as a result of conclusion of peace between the Powers and China after the former entered Peking. What was interesting and significant to note was that the decree failed to produce any particular impression on Tibet, and the Tibetans.¹¹

Kawaguchi asked a highly placed Government official as to what would be Tibet's response towards the order set forth in the decree, and whether the Tibetan Government, in the face of that injunction, could refuse to allow Englishmen to enter their country. The official 'scornfully' replied that his Government was not obliged to obey an order which the Chinese Emperor issued at his own pleasure. And besides, he continued, it was highly doubtful whether the Emperor could have issued a decree of that nature, which he knew was utterly opposed to the interests and traditional policy of Tibet.¹² It was probably clandestinely issued by few 'wicked men' near the Emperor as "a result of bribes received from foreigners... It did not deserve to be trusted, much less to be obeyed,

declared my Tibetan friend."¹³ Whatever could have been the motive, the Tibetans were known to being utterly indifferent to most of the decrees coming in from China.

Japan in Lhasa

In the meanwhile, Kawaguchi became quite popular owing to his medical practice and treatment, and got acquainted with Cham-ba Choe-sang, the Ex-Minister of Finance in the Tibetan Government, who was a learned scholar and an experienced diplomat. He felt sorry that Kawaguchi was not receiving adequate time for studying Buddhism and scriptures having to attend to many patients daily. He warned Kawaguchi to be on the guard suspecting that he might be poisoned since he was envied for taking away the work of many local doctors. And, therefore, the Ex-Minister offered him a dwelling at his residence which was more private as compared to the monastery.¹⁴ Accordingly, Kawaguchi left his quarters at the Sera monastery and moved into the two-storied residence of the Ex-Minister where he found an excellent tutor. That was none other than the Ex-Minister's natural half-brother, Ti Rinpoche (then present ruler of Tibet) by title, whose father was a Chinaman. Ti Rinpoche was 67 years of age, and was named the highest priest in all of Tibet holding the title of Ti Rinpoche of Ganden.¹⁵

In the temple of Ganden, there is a priestly seat on which the Grand Lama had the right to be seated by birth, while Ti Rinpoche had to receive training of 30 years after receiving the degree of Doctorate in Buddhism, before he was given the above privilege.¹⁶ Following

10 Ibid., p. 520.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 521.

14 Chapter LI, *My Tibetan Friends and Benefactors*, p. 333.

15 Chapter LII, *Japan in Lhasa*, p. 336.

16 Ibid.

this prolonged and rigorous training of three decades, he was declared a perfectly learned and virtuous priest and was elected as the highest priest in Tibet and given the privilege to sit on the priestly seat. Any person or priest who attained moral and intellectual perfection after a study and training of some 50-60 years could be seated on this seat, except for the sons of butchers, blacksmiths, hunters, and men belonging to the lowest castes.¹⁷ In Tibet, the distinction of castes was given much importance.¹⁸

The 'Middle path for the circumambulation of the holy temple of the Buddha' or the Parkor, was the name of one of the principal and busiest street in Lhasa. It was also infamous for it was the place where criminals were exposed to public disgrace. Walking along the Parkor, Kawaguchi witnessed many shops that lined up sides of the street and were not very different from those in most other countries. Many portable shops or stalls could be seen in the street, in which daily essentials like articles of food, clothing and furniture were sold. Most of these things were made in Tibet, though some were imported from Calcutta and Bombay in British India, while few others from China.¹⁹ Kawaguchi also noticed some Japanese bamboo blinds with pictures of women, and imitation corals made in Japan being sold at the Parkor. Besides, he discovered *kutani* porcelain in the higher elite circles, but rarely spotted them in local stores or shops in Lhasa. Japanese scroll pictures too were found, often hanging in the houses of rich and influential families.²⁰ Another noticeable item sold cheaply in the districts was musk, costing about one-tenth of

the price in Japan.²¹ Though the musk deer was found almost everywhere in Tibet, its principal habitation was in remote districts such as Kongbo, Tsari, and Lo. Tibetan musk was sent in far larger quantities to China as compared to India, despite the fact that transportation to India was easier. Almost all goods from Tibet to China travelled through Ta-chien-lu, and were more or less sent to Yunnan. Japan used to obtain the prized 'Yunnan-musk' from China. It was Kawaguchi who discovered that the 'Yunnan-musk' came originally from Tibet.²²

Nepal and the Gurkhas

The Tibetan Government appeared desirous of maintaining friendly relations with Nepal. On an occasion, the Ruler of Nepal dispatched his messenger to Tibet to procure a set of Tibetan sutras. Upon hearing this, the Dalai Lama ordered a set to be sent to Nepal as a present from himself – which was subsequently kept in the Royal Library of Nepal.²³ Tibetan Buddhists staying in Nepal enjoyed protection from the Government, and Nepal's ruler often made monetary grants or timber donations to build Buddhist temples in his dominion. These gestures drew a favorable image for Nepal in the Tibetan people.²⁴

Although the Tibetans did not harbor any sense of malice towards its neighbors beyond the mountains, they remained apprehensive of the *Gurkhas* on account of their valor, skill and discipline. Kawaguchi writes in detail about the Nepalese troops serving in the army of British Indian Government. The famous *Gurkhas* (Nepalese soldiers and troops) were

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 337.

19 Ibid., p. 339.

20 Ibid.

21 Chapter LXIV, *Tibetan Trade and Industry*, p. 449.

22 Ibid., p. 450.

23 Chapter LXXIII, *China, Nepal and Tibet*, p. 524.

24 Ibid., pp. 524-525.

vigorous enough to even rival regular British troops in discipline and effectiveness. The *Gurkhas* since that time, and till date, remain unmatched in mountain warfare, be it their capacity to enduring hardships and in running up and down hill while bearing heavy knapsacks – rendering them far superior to the British soldiers. Describing them being ‘ideal soldiers’, Kawaguchi noticed that the *Gurkhas* resembled Japanese soldiers immensely in stature and general appearance, as also in temperament.²⁵

Kawaguchi specifically recalled the population bulge stating that he had never seen so many children anywhere as he did while he was in the Himalayan dominion, Nepal. He also listed a few beneficial effects of the steady advance of population that were visible, namely, 1) almost every nook and corner of available land was brought under tillage 2) woods were tended with extreme care, and 3) remote forests added to the stock of lumber, a major portion of which was annually exported to lower India.²⁶ Additionally, Nepal was pursuing trade and opening up wild lands in Sikkim and Darjeeling. Further, perhaps it saw Tibet – a territory about twelve-fold that of Nepal, far more thinly populated, as a region to expand.²⁷

The attempts by Russia to infiltrate into Tibet had alarmed Nepal especially after inputs reached that Tibet had concluded a secret treaty with Russia and that large quantities of arms and ammunition had reached Lhasa from S. Petersburg. The scenario of Russia establishing a base in Tibet exposed Nepal to the danger of absorption.²⁸ Kawaguchi described the then

ruler of Nepal as ‘too intelligent a statesman’ who perceived that it would be England that would stand to gain with a lion’s share of victory in case of any future trouble between Tibet and Nepal.²⁹ The ruler of Nepal seemingly confined himself to making arrangements with Tibet by means of which the Nepalese could enter and settle in Tibet to carry on profitable economic and trade-related undertakings and establish their influence. This would also result in countering any potential advances of Russian influence in Tibet.³⁰ Nepal’s own internal political mess kept it deeply absorbed and it could not spare either energy or money for pursuing any consistent policy towards Tibet.³¹ Although the military service of Nepal was sufficiently creditable, its diplomacy left much to be desired.³²

Traditional Policy of Prohibiting Foreigners inside Tibet

Kawaguchi acknowledged that the number of unsuccessful explorers to Tibet was quite large and that he had heard of around 25 such expeditions. His own estimate, however, stood at around 40-50 such missions taking all explorers into account. Recalling many articles and write-ups about Tibet in Japanese magazines and newspapers, Kawaguchi termed them as ‘highly misleading and often fictitious’ – based on incorrect information and inaccuracy found in most works on Tibet.³³ Kawaguchi highlighted this facet by citing the most conspicuous instance of this kind, and furnished the case of a Hungarian explorer, A. Csoma de Koros, who compiled a Tibetan-English dictionary,

25 Ibid., p. 522.

26 Ibid., p. 521.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., pp. 522-523.

29 Ibid., p. 523.

30 Ibid., p. 524.

31 Ibid., p. 525.

32 Ibid.

33 Chapter LVIII, *Foreign Explorers and the Policy of Seclusion*, p. 403.

having learned the language from a Lama in Ladakh. This was a district on the south-western boundary of Tibet, next to British India, where Csoma is said to have resided for more than three years.³⁴ The author wanted to study the Tibetan language on its native soil and for that reason attempted to enter Tibet. He found it impossible to carry out his plan from Ladakh, as the Tibetan frontier guards there forbade the entry of a stranger into their country. It then occurred to Csoma that he might succeed in his project if he started from Darjeeling. Unfortunately, he caught jungle-fever while travelling in the neighborhood of Darjeeling and died there, never having set his foot on Tibetan soil. His tomb till date stands at a place near Darjeeling, probably at the point where he fell ill. Despite the above being the factual narrative, according to Kawaguchi, "... writers on Tibet, both Japanese and Western, mostly represent Csoma as someone having spent many years in Lhasa," which was not the case at all.³⁵

One evening in November 1901, during a casual conversation with the Ex-Minister, the subject of a British missionary attempting to visit Lhasa came up. "I wonder why British people are so desirous to come to our country... I cannot at all understand their motive" observed the Ex-Minister. The incident was that of a British woman arriving around eight years ago at a place called Nakchukha on the boundary between Tibet and China. It was none other than Annie R. Taylor, a missionary, who attempted to travel from northern China to Darjeeling via Lhasa.³⁶ Kawaguchi had already heard of this story during his stay at Darjeeling prior to arriving in Tibet, where he accidentally met with one of the guides who had

accompanied her. The Ex-Minister went on to tell how the lady was stopped by the natives of the place from proceeding further. It was very fortunate that the chieftain of the local tribe was a merciful man, or else, she could have been murdered.³⁷ A report on the matter was soon forwarded to Lhasa by the magistrate of the district, and the Ex-Minister was ordered by his Government to hasten to the spot, and deal with the foreigner in a suitable manner. In other words, his commission was to cause the lady at once to quit Tibetan soil.³⁸

Arriving at Nakchukha, he found that although the lady spoke Tibetan, it was in a dialect differing from that at Lhasa. She claimed to come to Tibet in order to acquaint herself with the sacred teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. With that objective, she wanted to make a pilgrimage to Lhasa and then to return home by way of Darjeeling. She then showed a passport obtained from the Emperor of China. The Ex-Minister told her he was under strict orders from the Grand Lama's Government to forbid the entrance of any foreigner within his dominions. The Grand Lama's Government could not extend its protection to a foreigner attempting a journey through the wild districts of Tibet.³⁹ Taylor demanded an explanation as to why a person, possessing a passport obtained from the Emperor of China, could not travel through Tibet, which was a protectorate under the Emperor. The Minister admitted to the suzerainty of the Chinese Emperor, but said that, at the same time, they were not obliged to obey the Emperor's will on every matter – especially on issues of seclusion for which they were determined to oppose even the Emperor, should he try by force to set aside this

34 Ibid., p. 404.

35 Ibid., pp. 403-404.

36 Ibid., p. 397.

37 Ibid., p. 398.

38 Ibid., pp. 397-398.

39 Ibid.

traditional Tibetan policy.⁴⁰

Besides, the first valid story of a foreigner arriving in Tibet can be dated back to the 14th century when in the year 1328 a priest of Pordenone, named Friar Odoric, entered Tibet as a propagandist of the Roman Catholic Church. Instead of imparting anything novel to the natives of Tibet, it was Odoric who profited by what he saw in Tibet and made notes of many unique rituals practiced by Tibetan priests. Upon arriving back in his homeland, it is learnt that he burnt most of those notes fearing that their publication might compromise the interests of his own religion. Despite that, a fragment of his travel accounts were preserved.⁴¹ Many centuries later, in the 17th century, two brothers (probably French) named Grueber and D'Orville, entered Tibet in 1661. It remained doubtful if they proceeded as far as Lhasa, though Kawaguchi attributes that they went from Peking to Lhasa, and from there on, through Nepal to India.

During the period when Warren Hastings was the Viceroy of British India, he conceived the idea of establishing a regular trade connection between India and Tibet, and for the said purpose, dispatched a commissioner, named George Bogle, to Tibet in the year 1774. Bogle accompanied by his wife failed to reach Lhasa, and remained at Shigatze. Kawaguchi refers to Bogle's account of his journey as being extant in print. Few years later, in 1781, Hastings once again dispatched a commissioner, Captain Turner, who stayed in Tibet for two years, not necessarily in Lhasa. Kawaguchi notes that the only English explorer to have reached Lhasa in 1811 from India was Thomas Manning.⁴² Around this time, trade between British India and Tibet had actively grown, but with the termination of

Hasting's viceroyalty and subsequent return to England, trade began to register a steep decline, and ultimately ceased altogether. All channels of communications had since become almost closed between the two countries. Meanwhile, the movement and activities of Christian missionaries and other foreign propagandists put the Grand Lama's Government on its guard.⁴³

In the year 1871, a Russian Colonel named Prejevalsky entered Tibet across its eastern border through Kham, and reached a place about 500 miles from Lhasa from where he was forced to return by the Tibetan Government. Apparently, Prejevalsky at first, passed through the Chinese region of Tibet, but was stopped as soon as he set foot in the Dalai Lama's dominion. He next tried to enter Tibet from the north, and this time reached a place about 170 miles from Lhasa on the boundary line between the Chinese and Tibetan territories, only to be obliged to withdraw yet again. Later during that decade, in 1879, an Englishman named Captain Hill entered Tibet from the direction of Tachien-lu, but had to withdraw from Ba-lithang on the boundary between the Chinese and Tibetan dominions. Kawaguchi stated that this was the same place from where Japanese priests, Messrs. Nomi and Teramoto were driven back.⁴⁴ Another instance is that of Swedish geographer and illustrator Sven Anders Hedin, who tried to enter Tibet repeatedly from the north, whilst Kawaguchi was staying at Lhasa, but, finally gave it up. Hedin later succeeded in entering Tibet from Kashmir in 1906.

The last and perhaps most critical exploration that Kawaguchi mentioned was the one undertaken in 1881 and 1882 by Sarat Chandra Das, Kawaguchi's own mentor and teacher at

40 Ibid., p. 399.

41 Ibid., p. 400.

42 Ibid., p. 401.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., pp. 401-402.

Darjeeling. At first, Das proceeded as far as Shigatze in 1881 where he remained for two months and returned to India. The results of his exploration were reported to the British Government, following which he undertook a second trip to Tibet in the following year, having secured a Tibetan passport as earlier. This time Das first reached Shigatze and thereafter Lhasa. Kawaguchi narrates what he heard about Das from a Tibetan – that he conducted his mission with extreme caution, seldom venturing out in the daytime, and when obliged to do so, taking care to avoid attracting the attention of natives.⁴⁵ Das stayed in Lhasa for around three weeks and also travelled to other parts of Tibet and finally returned to Darjeeling in less than a year.⁴⁶ When Sarat Chandra Das’ tasks and assignment became known to the Tibetan Government, it caused extraordinary disturbance, resulting in strengthening the Tibetan resolve to strictly enforce the policy of exclusion against all foreigners, more than ever.⁴⁷

Policy of Seclusion

Being fair to the Tibetans, they originally were people who were highly welcoming and warm to strangers. The suspicion of the Grand Lama’s Government got heightened as a result of an insidious piece of advice which, the Government of China gave to Tibet. It was to the effect that if Tibet allowed free entry of foreigners into its territory, they would destroy its Buddhism, and replace it with Christianity.⁴⁸ The simple-minded Tibetan became dreadfully alarmed at this warning, however even then, did not put the policy of exclusion into full force

immediately. To that extent, it was the discovery of Sarat Chandra Das’ mission which became a reference point for the strict enforcement of Tibet’s exclusion policy. Kawaguchi described this phase as one where, it appeared that Tibet had been converted into a nation full of detectives and constables.⁴⁹

Coinciding with these developments, were the supposed designs and interests of other big powers, namely England and Russia, in Tibet. The Tibetan natives attributed England’s desire to take possession of gold mines which were plentifully found in Tibet. Kawaguchi went beyond this ‘superficial explanation’ and argued that in his opinion, the interest of England towards Tibet arose from the desire to prevent Russia from bringing Tibet under its sway.⁵⁰ England wanted to prevent Russia from using this ‘highland’ as a base of operations in carrying out its ambitious projects on India.⁵¹ Any potential advance of Russian influence in Tibet, or that of Russia securing a base up there, would have made England very insecure about the safety of its colonial empire in India.⁵²

Recalling what the Tibetan Minister of Treasury once said to him, Kawaguchi described, “It would indeed be a great humiliation to Tibet, if it were, ever, reduced to being a tributary of another country... more disastrous and unbearable would be its national religion being superseded by a strange faith.”⁵³ The Minister was firm while stating further, that Tibet must oppose, at all costs, any plans made by foreigners against it. In this backdrop, it became absolutely necessary for Tibet to forbid

45 Ibid.
 46 Ibid., pp. 402-403.
 47 Ibid.
 48 Ibid., p. 405.
 49 Ibid.
 50 Ibid.
 51 Ibid., p. 406.
 52 Ibid.
 53 Ibid.

the entry of all foreigners and keep them guessing about the real condition and situation of the country.⁵⁴ Thus, the policy of seclusion, which primarily originated from religious motives, had since acquired greater form and shape owing to political and security considerations.

54 Ibid.