

The learned tree of Tibet



The inscriptions on the leaves of Kumbum are in Senzar, the sacred language of the Adepts, and comprise the whole Dharma of Buddhism and the history of the world.

The type-foundries of Didot contain nothing to excel them.

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Thirty-seven years ago, two daring Lazarist Missionaries who were attached to the Roman Catholic Mission establishment at Peking, undertook the desperate feat of penetrating as far as Lhasa, to preach Christianity among the benighted Buddhists. Their names were Huc¹ and Gabet;² the narrative of their journeys shows them to have been courageous and enthusiastic to a fault. This most interesting volume of travel appeared at Paris more than thirty years ago, and has since been translated twice into English and, we believe, other languages as well. As to its general merits we are not now concerned, but will confine ourselves to that portion³ where the author, Mr. Huc, describes the wonderful “Tree of Ten Thousand Images,” which they saw at the Lamasery, or Monastery, of Kumbum, or Kounboum, as they spell it. Mr. Huc tells us that the Tibetan legend affirms that when the mother of Tsong-Kha-pa,⁴ the renowned Buddhist reformer, devoted him to the religious life, and, according to custom, she “cut off his hair and threw it away, a tree sprang up from it, which bore on every one of its leaves a Tibetan character.” In Hazlitt’s translation (London, 1852) is a more literal (though, still, not exact) rendering of the original, and from it⁵ we quote the following interesting particulars: [348]

¹ [Évariste Régis Huc, C.M., 1813–1860, also known as Abbé Huc, French Catholic priest, Lazarite missionary, and traveller. Lazarite is one of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission, a religious institute founded by Vincent de Paul in 1624.]

² [Joseph Gabet, 1808–1853, French Catholic Lazarite missionary, active in Northern China and Mongolia before traveling to Tibet with Évariste Huc.]

³ Vol. II, p. 84, of the American edition of 1852.

⁴ [Cf. The author of *Lam-rim-chin-po*, or “Great Road to Perfection,” is the famous reformer of Lamaism “Tsong-Kha-pa, from whose hair sprang up the famous Kumbum letter tree — a tree whose leaves all bear sacred Tibetan inscriptions, according to the tradition. This tree was seen by Abbé Huc some forty years ago, and was seen last year by the Hungarian traveller Count Széchenyi; who, however, begging his pardon, could not, under its physical surroundings, have carried away a branch of it, as he pretends to have done.” (*Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (LAMAS AND DRUSES) III, p. 186 fn.)

⁵ pp. 324-26

. . . There were upon each of the leaves well-formed Thibetian characters, all of a green colour, some darker, some lighter than the leaf itself. Our first impression was a suspicion of fraud on the part of the Lamas; but, after a minute examination of every detail, we could not discover the least deception. The characters all appeared to us portions of the leaf itself, equally with its veins and nerves; the position was not the same in all; in one leaf they would be at the top of the leaf; in another, in the middle; in a third, at the base, or at the side; the younger leaves represented the characters only in a partial state of formation. The bark of the tree and its branches, which resemble that of the plane tree, are also covered with these characters. When you remove a piece of bark, the young bark under it exhibits the indistinct outlines of characters in a germinating state, and what is very singular, these new characters are not infrequently different from those which they replace. . . .

The Tree of the Ten Thousand Images seemed to us of great age. Its trunk, which three men could scarcely embrace with outstretched arms, is not more than eight feet high; the branches, instead of shooting up, spread out in the shape of a plume of feathers and are extremely bushy; few of them are dead. The leaves are always green, and the wood, which is of a reddish tint, has an exquisite odour, something like that of cinnamon. The Lamas informed us that in summer, towards the eighth moon, the tree produces large red flowers of an extremely beautiful character. . . .

The Abbé Huc himself puts the evidence with much more ardour. He says:

These letters are of their kind, of *such a perfection that the type-foundries of Didot*¹ *contain nothing to excel them.*

Let the reader mark this, as we shall have occasion to recur to it. And he saw on — or rather in — the leaves, not merely letters but “religious sentences,” self-printed by nature in the chlorophyll, starchy cells, and woody fibre! Leaves, twigs, branches, trunk — all bore the wonderful writings on their surfaces, outer and inner, layer upon layer, and no two superposed characters identical.

For do not fancy that these superposed layers repeat the same printing. No, quite the contrary; for each lamina you lift presents to view its distinct type. How, then, can you suspect jugglery? *I have done my best in that direction to discover the slightest trace of human trick, and my baffled mind could not retain the slightest suspicion.*

Who says this? A devoted Christian missionary, who went to Tibet expressly to prove Buddhism false and his own creed true, and who would have eagerly seized upon the smallest bit [349] of evidence that he could have paraded before the natives in support of his case. He saw and describes other wonders in Tibet — which are carefully suppressed in the American edition, but which by some of his rabidly orthodox critics are ascribed to the devil. Readers of *Isis Unveiled*, will find some of these wonders

¹ [Didot is the name of a family of French printers, punch-cutters and publishers. Through its achievements and advancements in printing, publishing and typography, the family has lent its name to typographic measurements developed by François-Ambroise Didot and the Didot typeface developed by Firmin Didot.]

described and discussed, especially in the first volume; where we have tried to show their reconciliation with natural law.

The subject of the Kumbum tree has been brought back to our recollection by a review,¹ by Mr. A.H. Keane,² of Herr Kreitner's³ just-published "Report of the Expedition to Tibet" under Count Széchenyi, a Hungarian nobleman,⁴ in 1877–80. The party made an excursion from Sining-fu to the monastery of Kumbum "for the purpose of testing Huc's extraordinary account of the famous tree of Buddha." They found:

. . . neither image (of Buddha) on the leaves, nor letters, but a waggish smile playing about the corner of the mouth of the elderly priest escorting us. In answer to our inquiries he informed us that *a long time ago*, the tree really produced leaves with Buddha's image, but that at present the miracle *was of rare occurrence*. A few God-favoured men alone were privileged to discover such leaves.

That is quite good enough for this witness: a Buddhist priest, whose religion teaches that there are no persons favoured by any God, that there is no such being as a God who dispenses favours, and that every man reaps what he has sown, nothing less and nothing more — made to say such nonsense: this shows what this explorer's testimony is worth to his adored sceptical science! But it seems that even the waggishly-smiling priest did tell them that good men can and do see the marvellous leaf-letters, and so, in spite of himself, Herr Kreitner rather strengthens than weakens the Abbé Huc's narrative. Had we never personally been able to verify the truth of the story, we should have to admit that the probabilities favour its acceptance, since the leaves of the Kumbum tree have been carried by pilgrims to every corner of the Chinese Empire (even Herr Kreitner admits this), and if the thing were a cheat, it would have been exposed without mercy by the Chinese opponents of [350] Buddhism, whose name is Legion. Besides, nature offers many corroborative analogies. Certain shells of the waters of the Red Sea (?) are said to have imprinted upon them the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; upon certain locusts are to be seen certain of the English alphabet; and in *The Theosophist*,⁵ an English correspondent translates from *Licht Mehr Licht*⁶ an account by [Oberlieutenant] Scheffer, of the strangely distinct marking of some German butterflies (*Vanessa Atalanta*) with the numerals of the year 1881. Then again, the cabinets of our modern entomologists teem with specimens which show that nature is continually producing among animals examples of the strangest mimicry of vegetable growths — as, for instance, caterpillars which look like tree-bark, mosses and dead twigs, insects that cannot be distinguished from green leaves, *etc.* Even the stripes of the tiger are mimics of the stalks of the jungle grasses in which he makes his lair. All these separate instances go to form a case of

¹ *Nature*, Vol. XXVII, p. 171

² [Augustus Henry Keane]

³ [Lieutenant Gustave Kreitner]

⁴ [Count István Széchenyi de Sárvár-Felsővidék, 1791–1860, Hungarian politician, political theorist, and writer; widely considered one of the greatest statesmen in his nation's history, he is still known to many as "the Greatest Hungarian."]

⁵ Vol. II, January 1881, p. 91; [tr. Mrs. E.K.]

⁶ [Cf. *Light, more light!* — The last words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.]

probable fact as to the Huc story of the Kumbum tree, since they show that it is quite possible for nature herself without miracle to produce vegetable growths in the form of legible characters. This is also the view of another correspondent of *Nature*, a Mr. W.T. Thiselton Dyer, who, in the number of that solid periodical for January 4th, after summing up the evidence, comes to the conclusion that:

. . . there really was in Huc's time a tree with markings on the leaves, which the imagination of the pious assimilated to Tibetan characters.

Pious what? He should remember that we have the testimony, not from some pious and credulous Tibetan Buddhist, but from an avowed enemy of that faith, Mr. Huc, who went to Kumbum to show up the humbug, who did "his best in that direction to discover the slightest trace of human trick" but whose baffled mind could not retain the slightest suspicion. So until Herr Kreitner and Mr. Dyer can show the candid Abbé's motive to lie to the disadvantage of his own religion, we must dismiss him from the stand as an unimpeached and weighty witness. Yes, the letter-tree of Tibet is a fact; and moreover, the inscriptions in its leaf-cells and fibres are in the SENZAR, or sacred language used by the Adepts, and in [351] their totality comprise the whole Dharma of Buddhism and the history of the world. As for any fanciful resemblance to actual alphabetical characters, the confession of Huc that they are so beautifully perfect, "that the type-foundries of Didot [a famous typographic establishment of Paris] contain nothing to excel them," settles that question most completely. And as for Kreitner's assertion that the tree is of the lilac species, Huc's description of the colour and cinnamon-like fragrance of its wood, and shape of its leaves, show it to be without probability. Perhaps that waggish old monk knew common mesmerism and "biologized" Count Széchenyi's party into seeing and not seeing whatever he pleased, as the late Professor Bushell made his Indian subjects imagine whatever he wished them to see. Now and again one meets with such "wags."

