GEORGE JOHNSTON’S TIBETAN INTERLUDE
Myth and Reality in Shangri-La

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Abstract

In 1945 Australian war correspondent and later novelist George Johnston undertook a journey on the Tibetan Plateau with fellow American correspondent James Burke. Johnston later wrote about this adventure in his memoir Journey Through Tomorrow (1947) as part of a wider account of his travels in Asia during the Second World War. This article considers the Tibetan section of his narrative with a focus on the influence of English novelist James Hilton’s Lost Horizon, with its depiction of a Tibetan utopia in the form of the lamasery of Shangri-La. In doing so the article considers Johnston’s text as an example of the challenge faced by travel writers in negotiating the territory between myth and reality in representing the ‘truth’ of their experience, and as a narrative that avoids the worst of the orientalizing traits of many other travelers’ accounts of Tibet.

Keywords: George Johnston, James Burke, Konka Gomba, myth, Shangri-La, Tibet, utopianism

Even before the initial firsthand accounts of Tibet appeared in the West, the region’s formidable topography and isolation had produced constant exaggeration and often inaccurate speculation about the land, the peoples who lived there, and the wonders it might reveal. When early written reports from travelers and missionaries emerged in the eighteenth century they established a myth around Tibetan spirituality that coupled observations of Tibetan Buddhism with the “mystical” appeal of the region’s extraordinary landscape (Kaschewsky 2001).
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As knowledge of the world’s geographic features progressed during the nineteenth century, speculation regarding the few remaining “unexplored” areas intensified, including the world’s highest landforms on the Tibetan Plateau. During this period the features of the Tibetan imaginary that were to remain almost unshakeable across the course of the twentieth century were further sharpened and consolidated. As Dodin and Räther (2001) have noted, those with an interest in spirituality and exoticism found it easy to co-opt existing (mis)understandings of Tibet in order to enhance the myth that the region embodied values distinct from the dominant modes of rationality and empiricism.

Theosophical writings sensationalized Tibet as the spiritual center of the world. Isolated from modernity on “the roof of the world,” Tibet was suddenly perceived as a repository of secret knowledge and sublime wisdom untarnished by the ages. (395–396)

The Tibetan myth was strengthened late in the nineteenth century as the country’s theocratic rulers, concerned by both British and Russian imperialism as well as the increasing number of Christian missionaries, chose to resist Western presence. The resulting perception of Tibet as a “forbidden kingdom” and the capital Lhasa as a “forbidden city” further heightened speculation about this mysterious land. As Peter Bishop argues in his study of the influence of travel narratives on the place of Tibet in the Western imagination, by the beginning of the twentieth century the region was powerfully present in Western consciousness.

Tibet was not just any place, not just one among many within the Western global imagination. For a few years at the turn of the century it became the place. It was for the fin de siècle what Tahiti and China had been for the eighteenth century, what the Arctic was for the early-to-mid nineteenth century and the source of the Nile for the late nineteenth century. (1989, 143)

Despite the supposedly closed borders, Western presence in Tibet was impossible to deter, as both European and Asian powers eyed the region for its strategic importance as a buffer between West and East. The number of visitors (mostly government agents but also intrepid travelers) continued to
grow in the early years of the twentieth century, with the increasing number of written reports reaching the West often reinforcing the myth of a region not only “sacred” and “spiritual” but also with powerful utopian associations. Even if some accounts pointed to the shortcomings of seclusion, poverty, and a stifling monastic culture, the West remained receptive to a myth that Tibet’s unique spirituality found a natural home in the vast, mysterious and numinous spaces of the Tibetan Plateau. As Bishop concluded, “Tibet came to glow with the aura of otherworldliness” (149).

The clinching representation of the utopian view of Tibet came with Englishman James Hilton’s 1933 novel Lost Horizon. Hilton’s invention of Shangri-La, a lamasery in a secluded valley at the foot of a mountain in an unspecified location in Tibet, relied upon and confirmed existing Western fantasies. Shangri-La lies in a beautiful and fertile place of immaculately clean air, with kindly people disinterested in worldly goods and who age slowly and are blessed with impeccable social graces. It also resolutely resists incursions from the “outside world” and has the capacity to heal Westerners damaged by modernity. As Bishop noted,

At a time when even Lhasa was on the telephone and modern dance-music could be heard from the numerous radios in wealthy Lhasan households, Shangri-La was even more remote, even more exemplary, than the Forbidden City itself. (217)

Although Lost Horizon was represented as nothing but fiction, the established appeal of the Tibetan myth ensured the dreamful West embraced it as akin to travel writing. There was intense speculation as to the location of the “real” Shangri-La, at the same time as the term and concept became dissociated from a singular, largely imagined landscape and applied to the broader region of the Tibetan Plateau. Such was the novel’s popularity that it was made into a film in 1937, and shortly thereafter became one of the world’s first mass-market paperbacks.

Not surprisingly, in more recent decades, as the theory and mechanics of orientalism have become better understood and recognized, the West’s engagement with both the “real” Tibet and its mythical manifestations has been problematized in books such as Donald Lopez’s Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West (1998) and Tom Neuhaus’s Tibet in the Western Imagination (2012). Lopez in particular has been influential in
arguing that the West has uncritically imbibed orientalist fantasies of Tibet that not only distort understanding of the complexity and reality of both historical and contemporary Tibet but also damage the prospect of recovering a truly Tibetan identity as it struggles to win independence from China. Elements of Lopez’s thesis and conclusion have been contested (Dreyfus 2005; Thurman 2001), but there has been widespread acceptance of the extent to which a Tibetan myth has become almost indelibly and detrimentally imprinted on the West. And as Lopez’s reference to Shangri-La in his book’s title indicates, Hilton’s fictional encapsulation of these myths has come to serve as shorthand for the West’s orientalizing response to Tibet.

At the time *Lost Horizon*’s vision of a Tibetan lost world was such a powerful and popularly consumed endorsement of existing myths that authors engaging in Tibetan travel writing during the period immediately after its publication inevitably wrote under the book’s influence. In this article we consider one such account, Australian George Johnston’s *Journey Through Tomorrow* (1947)—a book overlooked by Bishop, Lopez, and Neuhaus—in order to examine how a traveler’s account of this remarkable region inevitably navigated a rocky path between received myth and observed reality in the post-Hilton period. Separating myth from reality is a challenge many travel writers face, but it is particularly charged when the myth is as potent and systemic in Western cultures as that of an earthly utopia and when it has such deep historical and contemporary resonance, as was the case with midcentury Tibet.

**Prelude**

George Johnston (1912–1970) would eventually achieve his greatest fame in Australia in the 1960s when he wrote a critically acclaimed and popularly successful trilogy of autobiographical novels, commencing with *My Brother Jack* (1964). Before then, however, he had also attracted a national following as a widely read correspondent during the Second World War after being appointed as Australia’s first official war correspondent in early 1942.

In Johnston’s wartime role he enjoyed considerable autonomy in determining his program of travel and reportage. He spent long periods of 1942 in New Guinea and then worked for much of 1943 in the United States. In the early months of 1944 he traveled to India, Ceylon, and Burma for
his first extended foray into Asia before, in June, arriving in China, where he remained for five months based in the western cities of Kunming and Chungking, reporting on the progress of the Sino-Japanese War. In October of 1944 he undertook a three-month trip through the Middle East, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Italy before journeying extensively by rail through Burma and northern India in the early part of 1945. In mid-April he traveled briefly to Australia, then returned to China in May to recommence reporting on the Sino-Japanese War.

Johnston developed a professional interest in Chinese and Tibetan history, including a fascination with the overland trade routes and caravanserais that linked China and India through Tibet—the western neighbor with whom China shared an increasingly uneasy relationship. These trans-Tibetan trade routes, which terminated in Kunming and nearby Likiang, had carried goods during the summer months for over a thousand years. Johnston’s interest in Tibet was apparent when a lengthy article, “Strange Tales Come out of Tibet . . . Asia’s Enigma,” appeared under his byline in the Australian press in January 1945. Johnston noted the war’s impact on the world’s “Dark places,” adding that Tibet was the country “least touched by all the years of the war” (1945b, 12). The article provided a potted account of Tibet’s history, geography, and politics, but its real purpose was to establish the “forbidding plateau” as an exotic region unknown to the outside world.

The most modern intelligence maps of Tibet still show great gaps, and hazy, dotted outlines. Aerial mapping units who have the hazardous task of charting the rugged alps that divide China from India are constantly finding new and unsuspected geographical features in the almost completely unknown wilderness of Eastern Siking, where China and Tibet come together in a Disney phantasy of incredible mountains and untrodden gorges. (12)

And while Johnston flagged that the country’s isolation was inevitably coming to an end, he also raised the possibility that great discoveries might still be made “in some sealed valley or in the hills behind the forbidding ramparts” (13).

Repeatedly strange stories drift down to the civilised fringes of China, near Ch’eng-tu, of strange, hairless men with white skin and long tails
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who live in trees, of great giants and tiny dwarfs. It is easy to be sceptical of the stories—but nobody really knows. (13)

Equally telling was a second article published in June 1945 in which Johnston told the story of the Tibetan trade routes and the novel uses made of them during the war. Under the heading “Pack Train’s Journey through Tibet,” he reported on the arrival in Kunming of the US Army’s Sino-American Horse Purchasing Bureau’s “pack train” of Tibetan mountain ponies after a “21-day trek across 456 miles of the wildest mountain country in the world” (1945a, 16). These tough Tibetan horses were destined for use by the Chinese army in their war with the Japanese. Johnston again used this opportunity to emphasize the remoteness and danger of Tibet that was relieved only when travelers reached China.

The trail, which had never before been traveled by white men, took the pack train up and down tortuous 45deg mountain slopes of the Tibetan plateau, across the angry, swirling rapids of the Upper Yangtse, through the primitive Lolo tribal country, and finally into Yunnan’s terraced paddy fields. (16)

During his first period in China in 1944 Johnston met James Burke, who would be his companion the following year on an extraordinary trek through Tibet’s high valleys. Burke was a fellow journalist who, at the time, was attached to the US Office of War Information, operating a listening post intercepting communications behind Japanese lines in western China. Burke was qualified for this role because he was born in Shanghai, where his father, William B. Burke, had been engaged in missionary work since the late 1880s. As a result Burke was fluent in Mandarin and knew China well, and Johnston later reported that it was Burke who “first interested me in the old, historic trails” (1947, 245) of the trans-Tibetan trading routes.

When Johnston returned to China in 1945 he again met up with Burke, who was by this time working for Liberty, which competed against the Saturday Evening Post in the lucrative US weekly magazine market. In this role Burke had already witnessed the Tibetan operation of the Horse Purchasing Bureau in June 1945, and his report on this experience would appear in Liberty in December of that year. Although Burke did not accompany the pack train’s overland journey to Kunming, he had flown into Ying Kwan Chai,
which served as the base for the Horse Purchasing Bureau and, at 11,500 feet, he described as “probably the highest regularly maintained airfield in the world” (1947, 30–31), and he then spent some two weeks in the area.

What Johnston heard from Burke after the latter returned to Kunming very likely fired his own interest in exploring the operations of the Horse Purchasing Bureau—or at least using it as a pretext for entering Tibet. On July 9 Burke wrote to his wife, Josephine, telling her “I’ve decided to go back to Tibet.”

I didn’t really expect to go back so soon and I don’t know what I’ll find there this time, but I’m really very fond of the place. And I think I’ll enjoy another two weeks very much, because I’m going up with George Johnston, the Australian correspondent (who writes for American magazines) and he’s a pleasant person. He was making preparations today to go up on the next trip and I simply couldn’t resist the temptation to go with him, particularly after the colonel handling the thing said there’d be room on the plane for me and he’d be glad to have me along.

Burke informed his wife that his Liberty article had been dispatched and that a second journey would provide further color and detail for another piece he was planning to submit to the New Yorker. Johnston was likely keen for Burke to undertake this second trip, as the American could offer both his experience from the previous journey and his fluency in Mandarin.

**Tibetan Interlude**

George Johnston’s *Journey Through Tomorrow* records his experiences traveling through Asia in 1944 and 1945. The book’s focus, as described in the preface, is on the coming rise of Asia as a locus of global economic and geopolitical strength. Johnston’s thesis is that at a time when the West remains distracted by rebuilding Europe amid the turmoil of the Cold War, the world is on the brink of a cycle of history that will “push the centre of gravity of civilisation back to the Orient” (np).

*Journey Through Tomorrow* is divided into five “books” titled India, China, Tibetan Interlude, Burma, and Japan. Although the word “Interlude” used for the Tibetan section might suggest it is slighter than the others, the
opposite is true. It is the longest of the five sections and consumes over one-third of the text. In this case Johnston describes his Tibetan travels as an “Interlude” to indicate that there is something substantially different about the travel reported in this section, in which he steps away from India and China as the population-driven centers of industry and growth as well as from the unresolved issues regarding the economic stabilization and political modernization of postwar Japan to undertake a very different style of journey and encounter with a land and its people.

Accordingly, Johnston carefully constructs his Tibetan journey as a welcome respite from the war that has dominated his life and work for the past four years. It was, he recalls, a rare opportunity to “wander around a fantastic and wonderful country whose people had never heard of Hitler or the European war, many of whom did not even know that China, their next-door neighbor, had been at war with Japan for over eight years!” (219). As the Chinese section of Journey Through Tomorrow recounts, Johnston had witnessed firsthand the immense destruction resulting from the Sino-Japanese War, which saw a mixture of medieval and modern warfare, compounded by famine, devastate some of China’s finest cities and lay waste to areas of eastern and central China. He had been particularly disturbed in September 1944 when he witnessed the mass deaths from starvation and disease on the roads out of the city of Kweilin after the population fled following rumors of a Japanese advance.6 Johnston reported not only on the horror of what he witnessed but also on the incompetence and corruption of the Chinese generals and officials who abetted the calamity. It is therefore understandable that the war-weary Johnston identified with Hugh Conway, the hero of Lost Horizon, who is burnt out by his experience in the 1914–1918 war and arrives at the Tibetan sanctuary of Shangri-La in need of personal healing.7

As prescribed by its myth, Johnston depicts Tibet as a land of distinct temperament that stands apart from both the West and the East, one that merits a journey with a slower pace of travel. Whereas he writes elsewhere in Journey Through Tomorrow that “I flew across more than a dozen countries at a speed that convinced me of the horrible possibility that air travel would eventually eliminate travel altogether because it enabled one to see almost nothing at all” (110), he finds that journeying through Tibet on horseback is an experience vastly at odds with the crushing modernity of wartime continent hopping.
It is, however, on a plane, descending for a refueling stop on the way to Ying Kwan Chai, that Johnston commences his Tibetan interlude. Opening this section at 19,500 feet allows him to introduce, immediately and powerfully, an important element of his narrative—the extraordinary topography of the Tibetan Plateau.

The fantastic peaks stood between the two blankets of cloud, rising like jagged islands from the vapours below—great masses of rock and ice and snow, riven by black chasms, divided by huge glaciers looking like avalanches frozen into immobility, seared by perpendicular cliff faces broken and choked with snow. The peaks had no beginnings and no endings, for their bases were hidden almost four miles below and their summits were lost in the swirling, smoking clouds above. (217)

Among this “forbidding eastern barrier” (218) stands one peak towering over others, the “snow giant” that will cast its long shadow over Johnston’s unfolding journey and text: “‘There she is,’ said the pilot. ‘Minya Konka’” (217). At 24,900 feet, Minya Konka is the Plateau’s highest peak and, as home to the thunder god Doi Ji, among the most sacred for Tibetan Buddhists.

Johnston then pauses his narrative to provide further background by introducing Burke and describing the operations of the Horse Purchasing Bureau, including an invitation from the colonel overseeing the next trip to “come along.” Improbably, it was a trip with particular significance to an Australian, as the Bureau was trading “a plane load of Australian Army slouch hats” (218) for the ponies. The colonel further tempts Johnston with the suggestion that he may be the first Australian to enter Tibet.

Johnston also introduces two interrelated tropes essential to his narrative. First, he repeats and expands further on the strangeness and unknown qualities of Tibet, declaring that “I am not prepared to disbelieve that behind its mountain barriers are strange secrets about which the world of to-day knows nothing” (221). More importantly he also flags that by journey’s end he will “visit the real Shangri-la” (219) while also declaring that “I am not prepared to believe that hidden somewhere in the wilderness of the eastern Tibetan Plateau is Hilton’s Shangri-la” (220–221). Johnston is therefore declaring that he won’t use this opportunity to follow the overland trading routes that provided a pretext for traveling to Tibet but rather
that he is on a quest of a different sort—to reach the Lamasery at Konka Gomba, an ancient monastery on the flanks of Minya Konka and believed by Johnston to be Hilton’s model for Shangri-La. Since the publication of *Lost Horizon* numerous locations have been suggested as the “real” Shangri-La amid speculation as to whether Hilton had a particular monastery in mind or if the location was imaginatively created. For the purpose of Johnston’s narrative, however, it is important that he believes—or claims to believe—that Konka Gomba is the template for Shangri-La and, therefore, the goal of his journey.

The exact nature of what Johnston “believed” is difficult to discern conclusively from his text, although for a man of his inherent skepticism, it is very unlikely he believed that Hilton’s utopian vision of Shangri-La had any basis in reality. He may, however, have well believed that Konka Gomba served as the model for Hilton’s monastery, and as one of the remotest locations in the world’s remotest country—and therefore the last place to be reached by the war—it provides an ideal symbolic end point for his journey. Johnston’s journalistic acumen—and love of a good story—is such that he realizes that even traveling into “forbidden” territory demands to be represented as more than an aimless ramble across a remote space; he needs both to be going somewhere and to have a reason for going there. He is also astute enough to realize that for his readers there are quite profound possibilities evoked by both Tibet’s mythic resonance and its contemporary appeal in the form of Hilton’s tale, and he is prepared to exploit them to create an enthralling narrative based on the possibility of an earthly paradise at his journey’s end. Johnston was a constant ironist (a character from one of his novels claims that “The true salt of life, surely, was irony—not joy” [1959, 105]), but if his intention with the Shangri-La element of *Journey Through Tomorrow* is simply irony, then it is approached with a remarkably straight face. For while Johnston undertakes a trip and produces a narrative influenced by Tibetan myths, the real shape to his journey is provided by his newspaperman’s professional eye, his experience of previous travel throughout Asia, and his skepticism of the human condition born from his experience of a world at war. As a result he goes in search of reality rather than myth while also remaining open to encountering elements of that myth. There is scant evidence that he was strongly predisposed to a view about Tibet, its people, its society, or its religion, and although it is arguable that it would have been impossible for him to have not previously
imbibed some orientalist misconceptions, *Journey Through Tomorrow* also provides ample evidence of an open-minded search for the “truth.”

With his journey now fully backgrounded, Johnston takes the reader back on board the plane for the final leg of his flight to high Tibet, from Hsi-ch’ang to Ying Kwan Chai. He again invokes the spectacle of flying between massive peaks and “close to the edge of a glacier just as its lip crumbled away in a mammoth avalanche, showering huge boulders and powdered snow deep into a rock-choked valley” (222). With this hint of ever-present danger, the plane passes through the mountain portals, and Johnston announces he has arrived in “a world seen by very few white men and understood by almost none” (224).

Johnston uses his airport arrival to paint a vivid picture of the scene as a surging, noisy, colorful crowd composed of various strands of Tibetan society meets his plane. He describes villagers, all “incredibly filthy and smelling heavily of rancid yak butter” (224); the pageantry of overland traders with their bell-laden yaks traveling “the great caravan route between Lhasa and Tatsien-Lu” (224), with the men dressed in “glowing robes” and women “in new coats and boots of bright colours”; the many red-robed lamas “yammering excitedly” (224); and a Living Buddha clad in a wine-colored robe worn over a yellow silk gown and a “strange hat of glossy yellow lacquer shaped like a pagoda” (225). This is a new world, exotically unlike anything Johnston has encountered elsewhere in Asia and ripe with the promise of discovery. Johnston also turns his eye to an important source of Tibet’s mythic appeal by describing the immense landscape in which this colorful and pungent cavalcade of Tibetan society unfolds as “a valley of breathtaking colour and beauty, a valley musical with the song of roaring rivers and the softer, chuckling gurgle of cascades, a valley of a million flowers glittering in bright warm sunshine” (223).

In order to assist them in reaching Konka Gomba, Johnston and Burke acquire a guide, Feng Liu-lu. Feng is an expatriate Chinese and an important part of the journey because he is able to speak Tibetan. Many conversations reported in *Journey Through Tomorrow* use a convention whereby Johnston is directly conversing with Tibetans and Chinese, but as he speaks neither language, this is clearly not possible. As Johnston explains at one point, “Burke, who was born in Shanghai and speaks good Chinese, conducted negotiations, using Feng to translate his Chinese into Tibetan, while he retailed the salient points back to me in English” (231). For this reason Burke and Feng were
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essential not only to the journey but to the impressions that found their way into Johnston’s text, as it was often they who decided what Johnston “heard.”

Figure 1: George Johnston (L) and James Burke, Minya Konka in the background, 1945. Johnston wears a “slouch hat” of the type traded for Tibetan ponies (photo by James Burke).

Despite the elements of Tibetan myth reflected in Johnston’s account of the landscape and his initial encounter with its peoples, the travelers rapidly discover there are unpleasant realities associated with the human occupation of Ying Kwan Chai. It is recalled as a town of few charms, infested with rats, blowflies, monstrous spiders, and “prowling village mongrels” (228). Johnston finds that houses conform to a standard arrangement, consisting of a ground floor for animals that produced “an awful treacly mass of mud and manure, across which planks were stretched crazily between slimy stepping-stones” and above which was a floor of family living space where “[f]loors and walls were smoke-blackened and thick with grime and everything was seen hazily through mists of acrid, spicy smoke from the yak dung” (229).
This unpleasant domestic environment, mixed with frequent storms, high altitude, and the “overwhelming stench of rancid butter” (233) makes the men’s introduction to Tibet difficult. From the outset the travelers confront the dichotomous nature of a country that offers tantalizing glimpses of its mythic appeal as it also constantly confronts them with distasteful realities. Johnston’s narrative regularly points to the disparity between the wonderful sounds and smells of the mountain valleys and the constantly malodorous houses that have the Westerners gasping for fresh air, between people who are genial and friendly but also unattractive and dirty. But even as Johnston ends his first day by drifting off to sleep with “the icy rain of Tibet pouring down the walls and through the cracked roof and soaking our sleeping bags” (235), he nonetheless feels the lure of the place and the adventure ahead.

But outside, through the crash of the storm when the thunder was stilled for a moment, we could hear the tinkling of the bells and the chuckling laughter of the mountain streams. We could hear the music of Tibet . . . and even with the rats Tibet was more than bearable. (235)

Having pointed out the uncomfortable physical realities of Tibetan life, Johnston also describes other problems shaping the country. First, he notes that to those who live in Ying Kwan Chai the village is known only by its Tibetan name, Dzongo, and that the town’s province of Sikang was newly Chinese, having been created in 1939 to annex parts of Tibet. Presciently, Johnston concludes that the real threat to Tibet’s romantic isolation and mythical purity comes not from Western incursion but from Asian geopolitics.

[Ying Kwan Chai’s] language, religion, habits, way of life and geography are all Tibetan—except for the vaguely dotted lines on the maps and the varying hues of the printer’s ink. According to the atlas, Ying Kwan Chai is a Chinese town, but according to its manners and appearance it is as Tibetan as Lhasa. (236)

Second, it is apparent that not all threats are external, as Johnston also describes a society internally riven by the place of religion and the multitude of priests it supports. He sketches in the tension between different sects of lamas, but he finds the real divide is between the lamas and other Tibetans, concluding that there is “no land more priest-ridden” (264).
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Someone with Johnston’s disdain for organized religion was unlikely to take a benign view of such a heavily theocratic social structure, but from the outset he is unrelentingly scathing of the lamas. Many, he points out, enter religious life because of family custom rather than religious fervor, and “Released on to the roads and villages after years of monastic seclusion they become lazy parasites or avaricious rascals or childish fools” (267). Whereas Lamaism may be part of Tibet’s mythic appeal, Johnston represents the reality quite differently.

Johnston narrates the small troupe’s travel across the plateau as both difficult and exhilarating. The many problems include long days in the saddle, the need to cross fast-moving and ice-cold streams, freezing nights, constant squalls that leave them miserably cold and wet, and being threatened by “Tibetan mastiffs—the largest and most vicious breed of dog in the world” (279).

Figure 2: George Johnston rides through yak country (photo by James Burke).

The region’s human and social elements also continue to be portrayed as problematic. The small party encounters the nuisance of wandering lamas and the threat of banditry, and shelter is scarce and found in overcrowded, damp inns and yurts offering unfamiliar food amid the constant odor of rancid butter. Even when the travelers enter a seemingly idyllic valley it
manifests as a badlands of wealthy and protective farmers who, at house after house, “refused shelter or any assistance whatever” (302).

Some of the poorer Tibetans provided a sharp contrast, however, particularly the nomads who spend summers in the high valleys and whom Johnston describes as “The real cream of Tibetan society” (268). The most elaborately described example falls in the chapter “Nomads of the Black Tents,” in which Johnston writes about his experience of staying for several days “in the yurt of T’se Ch’i, in the flower-studded valley of S-le-t’o” (281). He introduces T’se Ch’i by evoking his physical appeal in terms familiar to his readers—“I looked up and saw a tall, slim man watching us, a picturesquely handsome man with the face and bearing and dignity of a Red Indian chieftain” (284)—who then enhances this comparison with his “quiet courtesy.” Impressed by the generosity of T’se Ch’i and his companions, Johnston is able to overcome his distaste of people who were “unspeakably dirty” and “smelled prodigiously” to come to admire men who “were big and strong and well-built and with a natural dignity” as well as their “handsome” women (289). Importantly, in this welcoming valley, where there is still much that is “strange and barbaric,” he also finds with these nomads a comforting reality where “so much . . . was as familiar as the everyday scenes on an Australian farm” (288).

Johnston resists, however, the temptation to overly romanticize any part of Tibetan society or to ascribe to the people elements of the mythical spirituality associated with the region. After surveying the various strata of Tibetan society he concludes it is their very normality that is most impressive:

[T]hey are very little different, except in costume, religion and personal habits, from their counterparts in the world we regard as mundane and dull and orthodox. They have much the same loves and hates, the same passions and the same kindness, the same worries and the same bewilderments, the same curiosities and the same mixtures of courage and cowardice, generosity and avarice, the same primal fear of what to them, and to us, is unknown. (271)

While Johnston and Burke are staying with T’se Ch’i they have a close encounter with the Living Buddha, Kama Cheuh-ji-sing kai, when they are invited to his tent. It is apparently a meeting for which they have planned, as Burke, aware that the Living Buddha’s proudest possession is a
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Figure 3: George Johnston with the daughter and wife of T’se Ch’i (photo by James Burke).

phonograph on which he has nothing to play apart from one Noël Coward recording, takes a gift of a “hot jazz” record, “It Must be Jelly ’Cause Jam Don’t Shake Like That.”

Once the record has been played and approved, the Living Buddha and his guests settle down to a conversation about some basics of Lamaism, reincarnation, diet, prayer, and differences between Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. According to Johnston’s biographer Garry Kinnane,

There could hardly have been an Australian precedent for such a lofty conference, nor hardly an Australian less qualified to participate. Johnston had no religious faith at all, and no professed respect for Christianity. (1986, 61–62)

Although not of a religious disposition, there is plentiful evidence in Journey Through Tomorrow that Johnston was inquisitive about Tibetan Buddhism and realized that in order to understand Tibet—including the lamasery of Konka Gomba—he needed to be familiar with the religion’s basics. Johnston’s account of the conversation with the Living Buddha again foregrounds the gulf between the myth and reality of Tibetan spiritual
life, but the discussion is abruptly curtailed when the Living Buddha discovers the travelers have a camera and demands to have his picture taken with Johnston. The Australian is left mulling the contradictions of a man who believed himself to be the “fifth reincarnation of an old seventeenth century lama saint” while eagerly embracing, for reasons of vanity, the technologies of modernity.

As we trudged away across the flowered field I heard his soft farewell, “Go gently,” above the strident noise of “It Must Be Jelly ’Cause Jam Don’t Shake Like That.” And I wondered whether that song and Noel Coward’s clipped accent could be regarded as distractions by a man groping his way back in time to find out how he lived twelve hundred years ago. (297)

This encounter with the Living Buddha of Konka Gomba is the final preparation for the travelers reaching the lamasery itself. Dispensing with further preliminaries, Johnston brings on a chapter titled “The Road to Shangri-La,” which he commences by reiterating the claim that Konka Gomba is the lamasery of Lost Horizon.

All the western missionaries at Tatsien-Lu . . . will tell you that the real setting of Hilton’s Shangri-la, in “Lost Horizon,” is the thousand-year-old lamasery of Konka Gomba, perched at the foot of the massive glacier which feeds the white flanks of Minya Konka. (307)

Johnston concedes there are other lamaseries that have been associated with Hilton’s book, but having established (to his satisfaction) Konka Gomba’s credentials, he announces they are three days rested and, “There was no earthly reason why we should not take the road to Shangri-la” (307). This final trek takes the troupe above seventeen thousand feet, where they encounter some final challenges—signs of mysterious mountain dwellers who are never seen, aggressive yaks and evidence of bears, ever steeper gradients and unexpectedly thick forests—as they approach their deferred setting for utopia. “It was,” Johnston writes, “dreary, dismal and eerie. It was cold, lonely, mysterious. It was, I suppose, exactly what one should have expected along the road to Shangri-la” (312). After a final twelve-hour day on horseback, their moment of revelation is at hand.
Suddenly Feng stiffened in his saddle, pointed ahead dramatically.
“There,” he shouted, exultantly.
“Konka Gomba!”
Ahead of us was the real Shangri-la. (315)

Although reaching Konka Gomba is the climax of their journey, Johnston’s immediate response is that the lamasery itself is an anticlimactic drab, brown stone building far removed from the “white and gleaming” Shangri-La of his imagining. But as he also notes, “What it lacked in beauty it made up for in the drama of its setting” (315), and he provides a powerful description of the building’s fragile perch beneath the glacier spilling from the sides of Minya Konka. “That night,” Johnston announces confidently, “we slept in Shangri-la” (316).

As Johnston’s final chance to glimpse something of the mythical spirituality of Tibet—even if not quite an earthly paradise—everything now rests on Konka Gomba. Over the following three chapters, however, Johnston provides an account of life at the lamasery that describes anything but Hilton’s utopia. His disappointment extends not only to the unappealing buildings and their disorganized and filthy interiors that “smelled with the rank odor of ten centuries of unwashed humanity” (324) but, more particularly, with the lamas’ spiritual indifference. While Johnston had been scathing of the lamas he encountered elsewhere, he had higher expectations of those residing in Konka Gomba and supposedly devoted to contemplation. What he and Burke find, however, is an unimpressive cast of priests undertaking habitual prayer and ritual with profound disinterest. Their praying only assumes urgency when a paying family arrives on pilgrimage, who are then fawned over and performed for

Figure 4: The lamasery of Konka Gomba, George Johnston in the foreground (photo by James Burke).
as “cash customers” whom the lamas need to carry away the message “that nobody in the world was more energetically holy or fanatically religious than the monks of Konka Gomba” (344). Johnston and Burke also find the lamas to be materialistic and avaricious, eager to trade religious ornaments for Western trinkets and to profit by on-selling at inflated prices, and, in the fashion of a classic dystopia, it is the senior lamas who are the greatest abusers. “After the novelty had worn off,” Johnston concedes, “our stay at Konka Gomba was not very pleasant” (341).

Once again, however, Johnston carefully stresses the disparity between the manmade and natural worlds, noting that insofar as he finds the mythical Tibet, it is in Konka Gomba’s physical surroundings rather than its spiritual life. As he writes, “The beauty of this remote Shangri-la was certainly not anything that man had made” (320), and he describes how it is the lamas who are supposedly taking inspiration from the “grandeur, beauty and an overwhelming magnificence” (320) who foul their extraordinary environment, including “relieving themselves” (333) immediately outside the monastery and under the watchful eye of Minya Konka.

**Figure 5:** George Johnston (foreground) with lamas at Konka Gomba lamasery (photo by James Burke).
At one point Johnston and Burke seek to better apprehend the magnitude of the landscape by trekking to the glacier that hangs over Konka Gomba and then climbing to the highest point visible from the lamasery. In the course of this seven-hour adventure the mountain’s scale and power confront them as “curious whirlings of water, groanings, creakings and thunderous crashes” engulf them (329). Amidst this “peak of incalculable destructive forces, never seen since the Ice Age,” (333) Johnston finally encounters some sense of the numinous that is missing within the all-too-human world of the lamasery.

Just when Johnston—and his readers—despair of finding evidence of the human element of Hilton’s utopia, he comes to the final chapter, describing his stay at the lamasery, “The Mystery Woman of Snow Mountain.” Johnston introduces the chapter by conceding that “There was, as the reader will have gathered, little enough in the character and atmosphere of Konka Gomba to strike any parallel with the Shangri-la of Hilton’s pen” before noting there are nonetheless “two aspects which afforded intriguing angles of thought” (346). He first notes that the lamasery enjoys a micro-climate, which protects it from the worst of the high-altitude weather and produces a “similarity with the Shangri-la of fiction” (346). The second, he announces, is “the existence of the mysterious woman of the Great Snow Mountain, whom we met only on the last day of our stay” (346).

The story is one which one hesitates to write—especially in this setting of the eerie lamassery [sic] of a real-life Shangri-la—because of the obvious fear that it will be construed as a newspaperman’s invention, but this is the way it really happened. (349)

During a farewell visit to the lamas’ cells the priest conducting Johnston and Burke hesitates and then throws open a closed door. They enter a “brightly-lighted, astonishingly clean room” that has within a solitary figure deep in meditation. In a fairy tale–like awakening, the figure slowly opens its eyes, removes a hat and spectacles, and “We saw, to our astonishment, that we were looking at a beautiful Chinese girl!” (349)

Burke bowed and introduced the two of us. She held out a tiny, fragile hand and announced herself as Miss Shen Shu-wen, from Peking, writing the characters of her name with a Chinese brush on a sheet of flimsy paper. That is how we met the mysterious woman of the Great Snow Mountain. (349)
Figure 6: The “flimsy sheet of paper” on which Shen Shu-wen, Resident Scholar of the Snow Mountain, wrote her name, translated by James Burke as “Delicate book” (photo by James Burke).
Johnston recounts at length the conversation with this woman, who also takes the name Hsueh Shan Chu Shih—“The Snow Mountain’s Resident Scholar.” She explains she had been a guerrilla fighter and was wounded in the war but could not return to Peking (Beijing), as it was occupied by the Japanese. Instead, inspired by an interest in Lamaism, she fled to Tibet and Konka Gomba, despite sharing Johnston’s poor opinion of the lamas. She has now been confined to her room for three years, fasting for long periods and dedicating herself to meditation under the influence of the “Snow Mountain.” She discusses with Johnston and Burke the results of her Buddhist learning, particularly her reincarnations, although she is also very keen to hear from her visitors about the progress of the Asian and European wars.

This meeting makes a deep impression upon Johnston, seemingly fusing something of the myth of Tibetan spirituality with the reality he and this seemingly fragile warrior-scholar share as war-distressed visitors to Konka Gomba. For Johnston her presence is troubling in that her story is evidence that the war has reached even this most remote of locations, while her dedication to prayer and contemplation suggests that there might yet be some substance to the myth of Tibetan spirituality. At the same time her very nature undercuts the spiritual claims made for Tibet and its religion: she is Chinese, not Tibetan; a woman, not a man; a warrior, not a lama; and in her meticulous cleanliness and dedication to prayer, totally unlike the lamas of Konka Gomba.

For Johnston, however, this strange, brave, and intelligent woman is the only indication that in this run-down lamasery it is possible to glimpse something of the “real”—that is, the human—Shangri-La. When she reveals, to Johnston’s surprise, that she is forty-three despite looking far younger, he notes that “Here again was the Shangri-la touch—the agelessness that had been the feature of Hilton’s book” (350). The Snow Mountain’s Resident Scholar is the catalyst for Johnston revising his hitherto disappointing experience of Konka Gomba with the belated realization that he has indeed found a remnant of Hilton’s lost world. As Johnston, Burke, and Feng leave the lamasery behind them, Johnston describes the monastery receding “as intangible and unreal as a dream,” and “the thickening vegetation obliterating behind us this fantastic Shangri-la” (354). No longer simply a disappointment, the lamasery has suddenly become for Johnston a far more complex representation of Tibetan society. “After Konka Gomba,” he declares, “everything was inclined to be anticlimactic” (355).
Accordingly Johnston concludes his Tibetan interlude by recalling a single night on the return journey while sleeping in a “New Konka Lamassery,” which possesses “the cleanliness and beauty that Old Konka lacked” but fails to “recapture the mysterious magic of Shangri-la” (360).

The curious thing is that the new lamassery would have been the perfect Hollywood setting for the traditional conception of Shangri-la; the old monastery would have been dismissed with scorn by any director worthy of his name. Hollywood, I am afraid, has made us emotional slaves to the colossal, the impressive, the stupendous. (359)

So whereas Konka Gomba predictably failed to meet any expectations Johnston or his readers may have had of an earthly utopia in accordance with either Hilton’s novel or its Hollywood shadow, his Tibetan Interlude nonetheless ends on a note of muted success. Johnston—for the purpose of his narrative at least—finds in the lamassery’s unsurpassed setting and his meeting with the Snow Mountain’s Resident Scholar a way of glimpsing the complex realities of life on the Tibetan Plateau.

Postlude

Within weeks of returning to China Johnston followed the Allied Forces to Japan for the final days of the war and was present for the Japanese surrender on board the USS Missouri on September 2. He visited both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and one can only imagine the wrenching disparity of visiting, a month apart, the uplands of Minya Konka and the wastelands of the Japanese holocaust. The concluding section of Journey Through Tomorrow, describing Johnston’s time in Japan, is imbued with mounting despair, and perhaps this was the experience that confirmed his assessment that discovering the reality of Konka Gomba was a different journey from finding the mythical Shangri-La.

When Johnston returned to Australia he recommenced his career in journalism while completing the manuscript of Journey Through Tomorrow. During this immediate postwar period he met and married Charmian Clift, and the couple began jointly writing fiction. Their first novel, High Valley (1949), was set in Tibet and relied heavily on Johnston’s knowledge
of the region’s landscape, people, and social and religious customs. It tells the story of a Chinese youth, Salom, who sets out in search of the Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix in high Tibet, which will supposedly serve as an ideal place from which to pursue happiness and fulfilment. While *High Valley* again extols the beauty of the Tibetan landscape, it is also described as combative, violent, and priest infested; it is a lama, Yanong, who is the novel’s chief antagonist and provokes its tragic climax. Salom eventually realizes that, as with other places in his experience, “there was a disease on this valley, too, and the disease was humanity” (142). With its dystopian representation of Tibetan mountain life, the novel has been described as “a kind of *Lost Horizon* in reverse” (Clancy 1992, 194).

In both *Journey Through Tomorrow* and *High Valley* Johnston assesses the gap between the myths of Tibet he had encountered in *Lost Horizon* (and elsewhere) and the reality of his own experience. He consistently describes an exotic society living amid great natural beauty of mythic proportions but undermined by the reality of lives burdened by poverty and seclusion. And Tibetan Buddhism, a central element of the region’s persistently romantic myths, is also found wanting as a religion troubled by an indifferent class of avaricious and exploitative priests.

Lopez has argued that once the mythical representation of Tibet was established, it had the effect of creating an “essence” that then “may split into two opposing elements” (10).

Thus, Lamaism may be portrayed in the West as the most authentic and the most degenerate form of Buddhism, Tibetan monks may be portrayed as saintly and rapacious, Tibetan artists may be portrayed as inspired mystics and mindless automatons, Tibetan peasants may be portrayed as pristine and filthy. (10)

It is a feature of Johnston’s narrative that, although his journey is shaped by mythical Tibet, he nonetheless avoids such essentializing binaries. Which isn’t to say that elements of orientalism can’t be found in Johnston’s assessments—his ready adoption of Hilton’s trope of an earthly paradise ensures the shadow of orientalizing conceptions remains ever present, as does his insistently negative perception of the lamas and even his response to such mundane matters as personal cleanliness. As the result, however, of his careful and empathetic perception of the lives of a range of Tibetan society, Johnston effectively avoids the more predictable and trite formulations
associated with orientalism. In recognizing the ordinariness of the Tibetan people—including the lamas—in terms of their motivations, desires, and needs, he produces a clear-eyed account of a singular society that marries its exoticism to the most commonplace elements of humanity. In doing so Johnston embraces the alluring reality of a place that has enabled a reincarnated high priest to embrace the jazz age, a wounded Chinese scholar to see the gods, and a war-weary and disillusioned Australian journalist to catch a glimpse of personal peace.

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Notes

1. John MacGregor’s major survey of Tibetan exploration, Tibet: A Chronicle of Exploration (1970), covers the thirteenth century through the early twentieth century and categorizes the region’s explorers as missionaries, merchants, and imperialists.
2. One of the most widely read of the theosophically influenced accounts was Franco-Belgian explorer, opera singer, scholar, linguist, and Buddhist Alexandra David-Néel’s Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet, published in 1929 (the first English edition, Magic and Mystery in Tibet, appeared in 1932). David-Néel spent many years living in Tibet, which gave her account considerable authority, and her writing notably influenced James Hilton. There is no evidence that Johnston read Magic and Mystery in Tibet or David-Néel’s other books dealing with the region.
3. A British force led by Colonel Francis Younghusband occupied parts of Tibet, including Lhasa, during 1903–1904. The campaign was undertaken to forestall similar action by Russia.
4. This process reached a slightly absurd administrative conclusion in 2002, when Zhongdian County in Southwest China was officially renamed Shangrila, beating bids by neighboring prefectures.
5. Burke also adopted the Shangri-La motif for his Liberty article, published with the title “Horse-Trading in Shangri-La,” suggesting journalistic cooperation between he and Johnston.
George Johnston’s Tibetan Interlude

6. This event formed the basis of Johnston’s novel *The Far Road* (1962).
7. There isn’t any evidence as to exactly when Johnston read *The Lost Horizon*, but it is likely in the period in which his interest in Tibet was growing (Johnston made a habit of reading intensely before traveling to new places). On several occasions, he also refers to the “Hollywood” version of the story, so it is highly likely he had seen the 1937 Frank Capra–directed movie.
8. The exact dates or duration of the trip are not established in *Journey Through Tomorrow*. Burke kept a notebook titled “2nd Minya Konka Trip July 15–30,” reflecting the fifteen-day rotation of planes supporting the Horse Purchasing Bureau. A starting date of July 15 is supported by Johnston’s realization several days into the journey “that it was my birthday” (287), which fell on July 20. However, Burke’s end date of July 30 seemingly indicates the intended end date rather than when the journey actually concluded. Kinnane reports that the trip lasted “about five weeks” (1984, 63). It is almost certain that Johnston and Burke missed the July 30 return flight due to weather delays and because Burke fell seriously ill with a kidney infection. Johnston supports this in his autobiographical novel *A Cartload of Clay* (1971), writing that “he and Jim had not made their rendezvous on the stipulated date” (99). Johnston also wrote in *A Cartload of Clay* that when he and Burke did leave by plane, they learned of the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 6 and 9) and that “the day was the fourteenth of August” (99). The evidence therefore suggests the journey was from July 15 through August 14.
9. Johnston uses both Tibetan and Chinese place names in *Journey Through Tomorrow*. Place names in the region have been increasingly Sina-cized, including Gongga Shan for Minya Konka. Johnston’s usages have been retained in this article.
10. There were several versions of the song available at the time. The one carried by Burke was likely a 1942 recording by Glenn Miller and his Orchestra. The only lyrics are “It must be jelly ’cause jam don’t shake like that / It must be jelly ’cause jam don’t shake like that / Oh mama, you’re so big and fat.”
11. By 1945 Minya Konka had been summited only once, by Americans Terris Moore and Richard Burdsall in 1932.
12. James Burke left his own account of this encounter in an unpublished story, “Snow Mountain Jane: Resident Scholar of the Snow Mountain.” Burke’s version of the discussion between the two men and Shen Shu-wen has many similarities with that provided by Johnston, but there are also elements unique to each. One difference is that according to Burke’s story, after the first meeting they received an invitation from Shen for a second meeting, but only Burke attended because as Johnston “spoke no Chinese there seemed little for him to miss.” Some of the conversation Burke reports from this second meeting is, however, included in Johnston’s account. It can be speculated that Burke shared with Johnston the details of the second meeting, which Johnston then included in his account of the meeting he attended.

References


