

Seven Things You Didn't Know about Tibet
by Donald S. Lopez Jr.

1. "Shangri-La" is a fictional name for Tibet. James Hilton invented the name in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, which was made into a film by Frank Capra in 1937. "Shangri" has no meaning in Tibetan; "La" means "mountain pass." The name is apparently a garbling of Shambhala, a mythical Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas. "Shangri-La" quickly came into common usage as a place where all that is good and true is preserved. After US planes bombed Japan in the famous 1942 Doolittle Raid—immortalized in the film *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*—news reporters asked President Roosevelt where the planes had taken off from. He replied, "Shangri-La." Roosevelt later authorized the presidential retreat in Maryland, now known as Camp David; its original name was Shangri-La. Today, Shangri-La is the name of a chain of resort hotels and so is associated with beaches and free drinks.
2. The most widely read book about Tibet was written by an Englishman who claimed to be a Tibetan lama, despite the fact that he had never been to Tibet and did not speak a word of Tibetan. *The Third Eye* by T. Lobsang Rampa was the publishing event of 1956. It purported to be the autobiography of a Tibetan lama who, at the age of eight, underwent the operation of the third eye, in which a hole was drilled in his forehead to allow him to see auras. Such a procedure was not known in Tibet. A private detective eventually tracked down the author of the book, Cyril Hoskin, the unemployed son of an English plumber. *The Third Eye* was a bestseller in Europe and America. One enthusiastic reader even attempted to perform the operation on himself using a dentist's drill. Mr. Hoskin went on to write eighteen more books as T. Lobsang Rampa, with sales of over four million copies. (The "T." is for "Tuesday.")
3. Tibetans have never heard of their famous religious text *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. What is known in the West by that title is a short Tibetan work, the *Bardo Thodol*, meaning "Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State." It is a mortuary text, read over a dead or dying person to help him or her escape from rebirth or, if that's not possible, to have a good rebirth in the next life. It is an example of a genre of similar texts used in one of the four sects of Tibetan Buddhism. It became the most famous Tibetan text in the West after Walter Wentz, a wealthy American Theosophist, traveled to India in the 1920s, and commissioned a translation. Wentz then added his own commentary, transforming the Tibetan mortuary text into a Theosophical treatise. The text has lived on through several reincarnations, including one by Timothy Leary that uses the Tibetan text as a "flight plan" for an acid trip. Leary's book (*The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*) is best remembered for the line "Whenever in doubt, turn off your mind, relax, float downstream," which was lifted by John Lennon for the song "Tomorrow Never Knows" on the Beatles' 1966 album, *Revolver*.
4. Here is something for the initiated: The most famous of all Buddhist mantras, *om mani padme hum*, does not mean "the jewel in the lotus." It means instead, "O Jewel-Lotus." Nineteenth-century European scholars of Sanskrit misread a vocative ending as a locative ending, thus thinking that the jewel (mani) was in the lotus (padme). The mistranslated mantra took on a life of its own, probably because of its sexual symbolism; for instance it has been the title of scores of books, many of which have nothing whatsoever to do with Tibet or Buddhism. The mantra is actually a prayer, calling upon the bodhisattva of compassion—of whom the Dalai Lama is the human incarnation—who is depicted holding a jewel and a lotus in two of his one thousand hands. One of his epithets is thus (Mr.) Jewel-Lotus, so the mantra could be roughly translated, "O, Mr. Jewel-Lotus. Please give us a hand."

5. The most common Western name for Tibetan Buddhism, "Lamaism," is considered a disparaging term by Tibetans. At the end of the nineteenth century, both England and Russia wanted to add Tibet to their empires. Europeans typically justified colonialism by portraying the colony as a culturally deficient land that needed to be saved from itself. So Tibet was depicted as an irrational place with superstitious people living under the yoke of corrupt and evil priests. The religion of these priests, Westerners claimed, was not an authentic form of Buddhism and so did not deserve the name, instead they called it "Lamaism." Western scholars depicted true Buddhism as a religion of reason and restraint, filled with deep philosophy and free from the confines of ritual. In fact, such a pure form of Buddhism never existed in Asia, and was to be found only in the libraries and lecture halls of Europe and America.

6. Because Tibet never became a European colony, it remained—and for many, continues to remain—a land of mystery for the West. In the nineteenth century, it was fashionable to account for the whereabouts of anyone who could not be located by saying that he was in Tibet. Some claimed, for example, that Jesus had spent his lost years there. Madame Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, said that the "Mahatmas," masters who preserved the ancient wisdom of Atlantis, lived in Tibet. And in "The Adventure of the Empty House," Sherlock Holmes accounts for his whereabouts during the years following his apparent death after plunging, with Professor Moriarty, over the Reichenbach Fall, by telling Watson, "I traveled for two years in Tibet, therefore, and amused myself by visiting Lhassa, and spending some days with the head lama. You may have read of the remarkable explorations of a Norwegian named Sigerson, but I am sure that it never occurred to you that you were receiving news of your friend."

7. Tibet was not a non-violent society, even after the Dalai Lamas assumed secular control in 1642. The fifth Dalai Lama assumed secular power over Tibet only through the military intervention of his Qoshot Mongol patron, the Gushri Khan, whose troops defeated the Dalai Lama's rival, the king of Tsang. Tibetan armies fought wars against Ladakh in 1681 and against the Dzungar Mongols in 1720, and made numerous armed incursions into Bhutan in the eighteenth century. Tibetan troops fought against invading Nepali forces in 1788-1792 and 1854, against Dogra forces invading Ladakh from Kashmir in 1842, and against the British in 1904. The ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth Dalai Lamas all died young, with some or all rumored to have been poisoned, and the thirteenth Dalai Lama survived an assassination attempt by his own regent. Many Tibetan monks fought bravely against the Chinese invaders in the 1950s.

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