

# A Study of George Bogle's Transcript on Tibet in the Logic of Colonial Trade

Xiaomei Han<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Qinghai Minzu University, Xining, Qinghai 810007, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: glenysan@163.com

## ABSTRACT

The transcript left by George Bogle, an employee of the British East India Company, on his mission to Tibet is adopted as research text in the paper to explore Britain's preoccupation with China during the period of colonial expansion. In spite of the ban on maritime trade and the foreign policy of isolationism from the outside world launched by the Ming and Qing governments and the Qing government respectively, Britain still attempted to open a direct trade route with mainland China via Tibet. A review of previous documents reveals a detailed record of British commercial trade with Tibet, and the desires and prejudices of George Bogle, who wrote in the logic of colonial trade. This can highly boost the study on Sino-British relations in the eighteenth century.

**Keywords:** Colonial trade, George Bogle, Transcript on Tibet.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Colonial expansion in Britain, which began in the late sixteenth century, was usually carried out by privileged trading companies granted by the government. The development of British overseas colonization promoted the British East India Company from a commercial trading enterprise to the actual ruler of India. At that time, the ban on maritime trade and the foreign policy of isolationism from the outside world adopted by the Ming and Qing governments and the Qing government respectively greatly hampered the expansion of the East India Company in China. As a result, the company can only carry out a small number of commercial activities in Guangzhou. After dominating India, the East India Company turned its attention to Tibet, China, which borders the northern part of India, in an attempt to open up a direct trade route with the Chinese mainland. [1]

Warren Hastings, the first British viceroy of India, was one of the architects of this plan, sending George Bogle, a British clerk of the East India Company, on a diplomatic mission to Tibet in 1774. In 1875, Bogle's diaries and other written materials were published. As the first Englishman to make it to

the hinterland of Tibet, Bogle provided the British with a complete overview of the region by observing Tibet keenly and keeping detailed records as required. Thanks to this, the West was able to get first-hand information about the politics, economy, religion and culture of Tibet, while the Europeans were able to have a comprehensive understanding of a real Tibet, although there were some mistakes and prejudices in their understanding. [2]

## 2. THE BACKGROUND OF GEORGE BOGEL'S JOURNEY TO TIBET

Born in Scotland in November 1746, George Bogle studied logic and other educational subjects at the University of Edinburgh from October 1760 to April 1761 and became a clerk in the administration of the East India Company in 1769. Brilliant, industrious and calm, he won the appreciation of Warren Hastings. On Hastings' orders in May 1774, Bogle set out from Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal, India, and arrived at Shigatse in November 1774. He returned to India in April 1775.

In 1773, Bhutan, a vassal state of Tibet, China, attacked neighboring northern Bangladesh. Having gradually gained control of Bangladesh, the British East India Company considered the area attacked to be part of their rule. Warren Hastings, the British viceroy of India, decided to send Bengal troops to

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invade Bhutan, and the Maharaja of Bhutan was forced to send a letter to the 6th Panchen for help. In order to prevent Bhutan from being controlled by Bangladesh, and out of concern for the stability of the Tibetan border, Blo-bzang-ye-shes, the 6th Panchen, wrote a letter to Hastings, affirming Bhutan's relations with Tibet and offering to mediate between the two sides. The East India Company seized the opportunity to make peace with Bhutan while sending George Bogel to "return visit" the Panchen at Tashilhunpo Monastery. In order to let Bengal withdraw, the Panchen had to accept the British government's demand. Under the name of "trade", Bogel and others collected information on the political and economic aspects of Tibet, attempting to open the door of Tibet. However, British demands for trade and other political relations with Tibet were politely rejected by the latter. After nearly five months in Shigatse, Bogel returned without success.

The exact purpose of the visit can be found in the letter of appointment to Bogel.

- "You have been appointed as my representative to meet the Panchen of Tibet in Lhasa... The purpose of your mission is to open up trade on an equal footing between the people of Tibet and the inhabitants of British India... You must find out which goods sell well besides those on the attached list. You should also try your best to find out which of the manufactured goods, agricultural products and goods we trade with other countries can also be procured from Tibet, especially those of high value and easy to transport, such as gold, silver, gem, musk, rhubarb and madder... You must also find out the roads between the border of British India and Lhasa, the clans along the way, the intercourse between Lhasa and the neighbouring areas, their governments, taxes and customs." [3]p.150

In addition to the official letter of appointment, Hastings wrote Bogel a personal commission and a memorandum on Tibet. There were ten personal commissions, including a survey of the government and taxation in Tibet, the relationship between Lhasa and neighboring countries and regions, and the value of trade between Tibet and British India. There were also physical items to be brought back, including a pair of Tibetan antelopes, a pair of yaks, a whole walnut tree, seeds or plants from rhubarb or ginseng, and any rarities that suited the British palate, whether natural, industrial, painting or animal. In the memorandum, Hastings gave a relatively comprehensive and concise introduction to the location, origin, history, religion and hierarchy of

Tibet, which implies Hastings' own deep interest in and study of Tibet. The knowledge served as a useful reference for Bogel's journey to Tibet.

The 6th item of personal commissions is noteworthy: "Keep a diary of anything you observe along the way, including the people, the region, the climate or the roads, the Tibetan etiquette, customs, architecture, cooking methods, or anything interesting about trade. In order to write down everything that happens and every word that is said, you must carry your pencil case and notebook with you and use your spare time to put things and words together while they are still fresh in your memory." [1]<sup>p.153</sup> Hastings' specific but small requests led Poggie to produce a very comprehensive account of Tibet, which provided the British with a great deal of first-hand material and knowledge for the future expansion of the British Empire northward.

### **3. A PICTURE OF TRADE IN TIBET RECORDED BY GEORGE BOGEL**

Since the direct purpose of Bogel's visit to Tibet was trade, there are many content about trade in Tibet in his records. In a memo, Pogel noted that Tibet's foreign trade was considerable. With its barren land and sparsely populated population, Tibet has to rely on other countries to meet its huge domestic demand, and it also has precious metals for exchange. According to him, the monks, who are in large numbers, are hungry for luxury goods. In addition to gold, musk, Yak tail, cashmere and salt, Tibet also produces almost no industrial products other than coarse wool clothing and fine twill khaki.

Hastings also asked Bogel to investigate groups of businessmen who trade with the local government in Tibet, based on concerns about potential competitors. Bogel believes that Tibet's main trading partner at the time was mainland China. The goods that Tibet buys from mainland China include coarse tea, premium silks and satins, hada, velvet, fur, porcelain, cutlery, silver ingots and some tobacco, and is paid for in gold, pearls, coral, Indian conch shells and a small amount of Bengal clothing. The trade route passes through Xining. Bogel notes that the main people who trade between Tibet and Russia are Khalkha-Mongols, <sup>1</sup> who follow the Lamaist

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1. Kharkha: Originally the name of the Mobei Mongolian tribes in the Qing Dynasty. It was first seen in the late Ming Dynasty and got its name because it is most distributed in the Kalka River basin. The Khalkha-Mongols are the largest ethnic group in Mongolia, accounting for more than 80% of the inhabitants of Mongolia. There are also a few Khalkha-Mongols in China.

religion. Every year they made the pilgrimage to Lhasa, a sacred place in Tibet, in droves with their families, along with caravans loaded with furs and Siberian goods. This would serve both a pilgrimage and a business purpose. In addition to furs, they brought Russian black leather, camels, inferior pearls, silver, etc., and exchanged these for broad cloth, amber, spices, and gold. He also found that trade between Tibet and Kashmir was not very large. Tibet mainly imported sugar, raisins and other fruits from Kashmir, while it exported goat hair and gold. Another prominent group of traders in the Tibetan trade at that time were the Hindu monks. They gained a high status in Tibet, and many of them dressed as poor people but were actually quite rich. Their business focused on small items of high value, and they stealthily shipped goods through channels unknown to other merchants. As for those countries in the south, they exported spices, timber, silk and linen clothes to Tibet via Assam; Tibet imported rice, wrought-iron, coarse woolen cloth and dyes through Bhutan and traded them with mainland China for tea, rock salt, wool, sheepskin and fine wool cloth. They mainly imported pig iron and rice from Nepal, as well as coinage. [4]

Bogel stressed that although trade from Bhutan and Nepal was not very important, the two countries had long been the main routes for trade between Bangladesh and Tibet. Bogel also included in his summary report a list of goods imported into Tibet from Bangladesh, their prices and the cost of transporting them. He thought Tibetans loved everything that came from a foreign country, and even people at the lowest levels had curiosity. So cutlery, glassware and many other European industrial products would sell well.

On observation, Bogel hoped to use the Panchen's "authority and influence" to get British goods into Tibet: "Although the Panchen do not actually administer the Tibetan government, his authority and influence seem sufficient to achieve the goal of promoting trade. The passes he issues to merchants and travelers allow them to travel all over Tibet. He is revered by his own people and respected by his neighbors. His gentle, peaceful nature is particularly suited to promoting trade. I therefore find that the Panchen is willing to work with you to remove obstacles to free trade and to take appropriate measures to increase exchanges between Bangladesh and Tibet." [3] p.359

Bogel's final destination was Lhasa, the true religious, political and economic center of Tibet. But he only got as far as the Tashilhunpo Monastery in

the Shigatse region of Tibet, and his request to enter Lhasa was strongly opposed by King Regent Dimmu Living Buddha. According to Bogel, the Panchen explained to him, "The reason why the Living Buddha was worried about the British was not only for himself, but also for fear of offending the emperor. After all, Tibet was part of China and should only act after receiving instructions from Beijing." [3]p.310 "Tibet recognized the Chinese emperor as the supreme ruler. The most important official posts in Tibet were appointed by imperial decree, and the emperor's approval had to be sought before all important measures were carried out." Bogel wrote in his report. [3]p.357 A similar expression can be found in his diary: "I believe that Dimmu Living Buddha and the local government of Tibet will agree to such a reasonable proposal. The two Lhasa delegates replied that the Buddha would do all he could within his authority. But he was only a subject of the emperor of China, and all Tibet belonged to the emperor. So I the stumbling block is the emperor of China." [3]p.307 These accounts show that the British government at the time recognized Tibet as an inalienable part of China, and Bogel attributes his failure to reach his final destination, Lhasa, to the central government's obstruction.

As a matter of fact, the British government was well aware of the ban on maritime trade and the foreign policy of isolationism from the outside world launched by the Ming and Qing governments and the Qing government respectively. The local government of Tibet, which was part of China, also carried out these policies strictly. As a result, George Bogel, who had to stay at Shigatse, failed to enter Lhasa and establish relations with the local government of Tibet, let alone open a trade route from Bangladesh to Tibet. It can be said that the main objective of Bogel's mission into Tibet was not achieved. However, during this period, he collected a huge number of information about the economy, products, politics, religion, customs and other aspects of Tibet, which provided precious first-hand information for the British people to understand Tibet and make strategies against Tibet in the future.

#### **4. TIBETANS AND TIBETAN SOCIETY IN THE EYES OF GEORGE BOGEL**

Bogel was most impressed by the Panchen. It was the intersection between the sixth Panchen and the British viceroy of India over Bengal's invasion of Bhutan and the historical opportunity provided by the Panchen that Bogel had the opportunity to go to

Tibet. His transcript shows his personal respect for the Panchen: "The Panchen is about 40 years old. He is cheerful, amiable, inquisitive, intelligent, and completely in charge of his own affairs. He is open-minded and visionary, and, like all great men, wishes to extend his influence. His temperament, kindness, and humane thoughts implies an aversion to war and bloodshed. He tries to mediate all the quarrels so that the two sides could come to an accommodation. He is frank, and neither flatters nor receives flattery. He is generous and kind, and is loved and respected by Tibetans, Khalkha-Mongols and many mainlanders of China. I may be biased in my portrayal of him, but his followers, Kashmiris, and fakirs describe his character in a much more positive, unflattering light. I confess that I never met a man whose manners gave me so much pleasure, or whom I was so soon attracted to as he." [3]<sup>p.292</sup>

Bogel struck a similarly appreciative tone when describing the ordinary Tibetans he met. He argues that the Tibetan devotees' devotion to the Panchen and the satisfaction they show when they see him "are purer than the satisfaction of all the guns unrolled in the towers and all the hymns sung by the poet laureate. This expression pleases me more than anything else. Anyone who feels the same way can feel it, and I can't help feeling, to a certain extent, the same feelings for the Panchen that his followers feel for him." [3]<sup>p.251</sup> The women of the Tibetan families he stayed with on his journey were also admiring: "Tibetan women are slimmer and happier than their counterparts in neighbouring countries. At the same time, Tibetans, who don't have to work hard, have plenty of time to chat and have fun, which makes them happy and good-tempered." [3]<sup>p.251</sup> In addition, he was impressed by the forthright and humorous nature of the Tibetans, who love to laugh, dance and sing.

As the first Englishman to visit Tibet, Bogel gave a detailed description of every aspect of Tibetan society, life, trade and so on. Since he entered Tibet as official representative of the British East India Company, he was treated with a higher standard of courtesy and met more members of the Tibetan upper class. So, his view of life in Tibet is a far away from that of the missionaries who went through all sorts of hardships to get there. He therefore devotes a great deal of space to descriptions of gift-giving, religious ceremonies, the reception of the Panchen and Tibetan customs.

Courtesy calls and gifting are highly valued. He mentioned that when he and others arrived at Nanmulin Castle, where the Panchen lived, they were

treated with a pot of brewed tea, cooked rice, four or five bags of flour and rice, three or four dried mutton, and some wine. When he met the Panchen, he also received a gift from the governor, a letter and a pearl necklace. Zhaxizi's guard came to visit him with hada, two or three bags of gold dust and fruit. Pacha mdav-dpon, one of the four mdav-dpon of Tibet,<sup>2</sup> and even representatives from the Dalai Lama and the regent, Dimmu Living Buddha, came to visit him with gifts. Of course, Bogel also gave gifts to the Tibetans, such as coral beads to the Panchen Lama, and gifts for return visit. These accounts show that Bogel was treated very well when he entered Tibet, so the life he described was basically the life of the Tibetan upper class monks and nobles.

In addition, his close contact with the Panchen also deepened his understanding of religious rituals and reception ceremonies. One of the things that impressed him most was the way people paid homage to the Panchen Lama for blessings. As a witness, Bogel described the prayers held at the Panchen's palace at Nanmulin Castle and at the Tashilhunpo Monastery. "The Panchen Lama sits under a canopy in the hall, and the worshipers who ask for blessings are arranged in a circular pattern. The first pilgrims are the laymen, who present gifts based on their circumstances: a horse, a cow, dried meat, flour, cloth, or a hada if there was nothing to offer... At the ceremony I saw, about 3,000 people asked for blessings." [3]<sup>pp.240-241</sup> Bogel gives a very detailed description of the content and process of the Buddhist pilgrimage to the Panchen Lama. Watching the whole event, he reproduces the grand religious event objectively from the perspective of a bystander. This perspective is more comprehensive and objective than that of other followers.

It's interesting to note that Bogel, after attending many of these ceremonies, became very tired of this kind of life. "How can I stop participating in these boring ceremonies? How can I describe with pleasure the dull, unchanging life I led at Tashilhunpo Monastery? My life here is almost monastic. There is nothing here but monks. All I can hear from morning till night is the sound of chanting, cymbals and drums." [3]<sup>p.260</sup> Since Bogel was not a missionary and had a relatively poor understanding of Tibetan religion before entering Tibet, it can be inferred that

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2. Mdav-dpon: The title of the former Tibetan local government troops in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In the 57th year of the reign of Emperor Qianlong, the Qing government stipulated that the Tibetan army should be limited to three thousand soldiers, and six mdav-dpon, and 500 soldiers for each mdav-dpon. The post was usually occupied by an official of aristocratic origin.

he did not read the records of his predecessors (such as Aristotle, Dexidili, etc.) before entering Tibet. He had the best experience and benefits than any man before him.

When Bogel returned to India in April 1775, he did not establish free trade between British India and Tibet, nor could he enter Lhasa and establish relations with the Tibetan government, let alone establish a permanent presence in Lhasa. Based on the letter of appointment, his trip to Tibet was a failure. However, he collected a great deal of information on Tibet for the East India Company, and he himself established a good relationship with the Sixth Panchen. As a result, when he returned to India, he not only received reimbursement from the East India Company, but also got a bonus of 15,000 rupees.

In 1779, when the East India Company heard that the Sixth Panchen had gone to Beijing to celebrate the birthday of Emperor Qianlong, Hastings wanted to send Bogel to Beijing to meet the Sixth Panchen. However, in 1780, the Sixth Panchen died of smallpox in Beijing. Bogel died of cholera more than four months later. That marks the end of Bogel's trip to Tibet.

## **5. DESIRE AND PREJUDICE UNDER THE LOGIC OF COLONIAL EXPANSION**

In the 18th century, the British colonial merchant George Bogel's attempt to enter Tibet to seek trade was actually a regular approach adopted by the British in the period of colonial expansion.<sup>3</sup> From the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century, Britain gradually won the commercial competition with the European countries, and finally became the leading trading and colonial empire. The expansion of trade backed by colonial power drives British colonial expansion and elevates Britain into a powerful colonial empire, which profoundly affects the modern history of the world. [6]

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3. According to the historian Stavrianos, "All the Europeans who lived and traded in India during the seventeenth century were allowed to do so by the powerful Mughal emperors. The latter might easily have driven them into the sea, but for their humble pleas for the right to trade... The collapse of central power gave the British and French East India Companies an opportunity to transform themselves from commercial organizations into regional overlords and tributaries. They built fortresses, provided for soldiers, made coinage, and made treaties with the Indian rulers around them, because there was no central authority in India that could prevent them from spreading their influence. " [5] p. 357

In view of the fact that modern Britain was developed and expanded under the influence of mercantilism and gradually dominated the world, the colonial merchants in the colonial expansion period acted as the pioneer for colonial expansion and wealth accumulation. The first British who went to Tibet were colonial traders. As British influence spread throughout India, Tibet, on the northern foot of the Himalayas, became an area of great commercial potential for colonial traders. The colonial merchants' strong desire for wealth was evident. One can't talk about colonial traders with ties to Tibet without Warren Hastings, the British viceroy of India. As viceroy of India from 1773 to 1784, he extended the influence of the East India Company throughout the southern Indian peninsula. By the time he left office, the company had become one of South Asia's most powerful political entities. While strengthening rule over India, he sought to expand trade routes with the countries on India's northern frontier, the Himalayas, and with Tibet.

Hastings' memorandum and his letter of appointment to Bogel reveal his deep interest in Tibet, but these interests are limited to the important factors influencing trade and commerce: goods, roads, government, taxes, customs, animals, plants, etc. These information "must be found out by all means". As a result, the vast majority of Bogel's and Turner's records relate to the opening of trade routes and Tibetan trade, which have been discussed in detail above.

In order to persuade the board members of the East India Company to agree to the proposal of sending Bogel to Tibet, Hastings explained in a memorandum the advantages of sending a British man to Tibet, "I can also convince the board that the information available to me about the people, region and government of Tibet will greatly encourage me to pursue my plan of sending a mission. The Tibetan people are simple, friendly, numerous and industrious. They lived in a well-governed environment and had extensive contacts with other ethnic groups, especially the Han Chinese and the Tatars. Important commercial goods were distributed, and gold and silver were abundant." [3] p.148

Hastings' description shows that he thinks the Tibetans have many good qualities: simple, industrious and friendly, which is consistent with the facts. But it should not be emphasized that the statement was intended to persuade the board to allow Bogel to go to Tibet at the expense of the state Treasury. Similarly, his followers, Bogel, told a similar story, that the Tibetans were a gentle and

mercantile people. Such narrative is utilitarian when it becomes a vehicle for an end. [7]

Hastings contributed to the wealth accumulation during the period of colonial expansion. His, Bogel's, and Turner's view of the trade in Tibet is based on the perspective of the colonial merchants, who have a strong desire to colonize and expand.

What cannot be ignored is the colonialist color and condescending attitude often exuded in their narration, which are not fundamentally different from those of the missionaries before them. [8]

Bogel has described Tibetans as avid diviners who turn to astrologers when faced with choices or important moments in their lives. "Tibetans are big believers in fortune-telling. In fact, all mankind seems to believe in fortune-telling, except, of course, our European philosophers, who are too clever to believe in anything." [3]<sup>p.264</sup> The English thought that all societies outside the West were barbaric or semi-civilized, so there was an impassable gap between Europeans and the rest of the world. [9] They believe that Europe stands for "rightness", "elegance" and "smartness", while Tibetan culture can only be shown to be "wrong", "ridiculous" and "stupid".

Bogel also came across a machine in Tibet that cut grass and fed it to cattle. "I remember the hay cutter was considered a great invention in England. So I mention this Tibetan machine here only to show that the Europeans thought the inferior peoples could find useful skills in life without the aid of the Royal Society." [3] p.232 Although Bogel admits that the Tibetans were able to create such machines without European help, his account also shows that the Tibetans were a "inferior people" in European eyes. This kind of relation contrast which often appears in the Orientalist vision is presented: the west and the east, the superior nation and the inferior one, the conqueror and the conquered.

Bogel is also concerned about how Tibetans view Westerners. While Bogel was trying to persuade the Panchen Lama to agree to trade, he recognized that the Tibetans were generally suspicious of Westerners, and he himself noted that the British were described as a "deceitful, ambitious people", "Under the guise of trade, Westerners try to sneak into a country, spy on its geography and inhabitants, and then attempt to invade and colonize it." [3]<sup>p.299</sup> He retorted that it was all "gossip" and that "the English have no idea what duplicity, deceit and subterfuge are." [3]<sup>p.335</sup> "In any case, the whole world knows that Britain was forced to fight out of necessity and in self-defence."

[3]<sup>p.299</sup> These narratives strive to portray Britain as a moral country.

What, in fact, do the British want the rest of the world to think of them? The British popular culture of the nineteenth century had a good description of this. In a children's book called *The Hobbit of the Fairies* (1897), T.Mullet Ellis drew a map of tributes paid to Queen Victoria by various nations. "The kings from the far east, India, Selingabandan and Morocco, the Dalai Lama from Tibet and other places, all bare knees crawling in front of the queen's throne, with their back carrying big bags of jewelry special gifts for the queen. The Queen had all these priceless gifts, gold bars from California, ships full of gold from the rich land of Australia. The Queen's treasure-house is full of gold ingots and precious gems." [10]<sup>p.79</sup>

The English people described in this vivid passage are very different from the brave, stoic, and intelligent people Bogel depicts. This passage reveals that what the British really yearn for is wealth and racial privilege rather than equality, expecting the admiration of other peoples and the offering of treasures to them, which represent "elegance" and "intelligence". [11]

Bogel's farewell to Tibet on his return to Bengal was also special: "Farewell, honest and simple people! May you enjoy for a long time the happiness that the more developed nations do not enjoy! May you, under the protection of your barren mountains, continue to live in peace and contentment, and have all that nature has given you, while these so-called developed nations are busy in the never-ending pursuit of greed and ambition!" [3]<sup>p.337</sup> This shows his limited criticism of expansionist capitalism on the one hand, and his mixed feelings towards the Tibetans on the other. Tibet was also included in a "modernization" logic of dualistic opposition between modernity and backwardness, development and stagnation, east and west. [12]

## 6. CONCLUSION

In general, under the influence of mercantilism, the tentacles of British colonial expansion reached China's Tibet in the early eighteenth century. The British were encouraged to trade with Tibet because of its rich mineral and animal resources, its simple people, its large consumer market, and its location on the trade route to Beijing. Their grand goal of extending the British Empire's trade to all over China for more profits is scuppered due to various elements including the foreign policy of isolationism from the outside world launched by the Qing government.

Their accounts, however, give Westerners the opportunity to learn about Tibet in detail for the first time. Even though the narrative is full of desires and prejudices, their writings can be employed as a reference to critically elaborate some of the real conditions in Tibet and its surrounding areas at that time.

### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Xiaomei Han.

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