

With the Tibetans in Kumbum during the Mohammedan Rebellion By Richard C. Frajola, September 2008

In examining postal artifacts, such as the cover shown below in Figure 1, one is often lead into a veritable garden of forking paths. A cover may be of interest for many reasons, such as the adhesive it bears, the contents of the enclosed letter, the importance of the letter-writer, the postal services used to transmit it to its destination, or the history of the location and era. All of these paths are of great interest in the study of this cover.



Figure 1. Cover that originated in Tibet and was posted from Shanghai on April 3, 1896.

The cover appears at first glance to be of only moderate interest. It is a rather typical use of a United States stamp from the United States Postal Agency at Shanghai, China in April 1896. The Agency had been established in 1867 in conjunction with steamship service mail between the United States and China that operated via Japan (for additional information, see *The United States Post Offices in China and Japan, 1867-1874* by Frajola, Perlman and Scamp). The cover is addressed to the United States and bears the usual five-cent stamp of 1894 in use at the time.

Dateline Kumbum, Tibet

The envelope enclosed two letters which have been preserved intact. The first, dated "Kumbum Tibet, January 22, 1896," was written by Dr. Susie C. Rijnhart and the second, dated "Kumbum, Jan 31 96," was written by her husband, Petrus (Peter) Rijnhart.

The monastery (lamasery) of Kumbum, located in the Amdo region, was founded in 1583 after a visit to a holy sandalwood tree in the area by the Third Dalai Lama. The name reportedly means "100,000 enlightening bodies of the Buddha," in homage to images on

found on the leaves of the holy tree which mark the birth-spot of the Tsongkhapa. In 1896, the lamasery was home to approximately 4,000 monks and was surrounded by a village of layman named Luser.

The Authors

Dr. Susie Rijnhart wrote the earlier of the two enclosed letters. She was born in Canada in 1868 and graduated from Trinity University twenty years later with a degree in medicine. She became very active in the Christian church and, while engaged in her medical practice in Chatham, Canada, she met and married Peter Rijnhart in September 1894. Much is known about Dr. Susie Rijnhart through her book published in 1901. Entitled *With The Tibetans In Tent And Temple, Narrative of Four Years' Residence On the Tibetan Border, and of a Journey Into the Far Interior*, the book has been a primary source for the information presented here.

Less is known about her husband Peter, the author of the second letter, beyond what is written in Dr. Rijnhart's book. Peter was of Dutch descent and had previously visited Tibet as a missionary. He was apparently the primary factor in their shared religious zeal that led both to accept the missionary assignment in Tibet in 1894. Peter was killed, along with their one year old son Charlie, while on an expedition to the interior of Tibet in 1898.

The Mohammedan Rebellion of 1895-1896

According to Dr. Rijnhart's book, the Mohammedans constituted about one-fourth of the population in Kansu province and numbered about one and one-half million, the balance being Tibetans, Chinese and Mongolians. She identified the Mohammedans as descendants of the great migrations from Turkestan, Kashmir and Samarkand five centuries previous and notes that in Sinkiang district they divided into *Lao-chiao* or "old religion" and *Sin-chiao* or "new religion. According to Dr. Rijnhart the *Lao-chiao* generally remained neutral or supported the Chinese. She further notes that the "cause of the dispute which culminated in one of the most sanguinary and disastrous wars that ever took place in Western China was the question as to whether or not a Mohammedan might wear a beard before the age of forty!" Whatever the actual cause, Chinese troops were sent on March 13, 1895 to Lancho and Hsuen-hua-ting, the seat of the troubles, to settle the disturbance.

Aided by Tibetans, including a contingent of soldiers from the lamasery at Kumbum, the major fighting against the portion of the Mohammedans in rebellion ended at the beginning of January 1896.

Two First-hand Accounts

The two enclosed letters provide first-hand accounts of the situation. Excerpts from the first letter, written by Dr. Susie Rijnhart:

Kumbum, Tibet
January 22nd 1896

Dear Mother Hill,

For ever so long I have been going to write to you, but the roads have been for six months closed by the Mohammedan rebellion, that we did not write because there was no way of sending off mail. And we have at last received letters, Jan'y 21st. Your sons' among the number. Glad indeed were we to at least get word from the outside world, six months is a long time to be cut off.

.... Just five miles from us the other day, the soldiers who brought up our letters, gained a decisive victory over the Mohammedans, burning their villages, killing a thousand men, women & children, while the others ran away. Much as we deplore seeing women & children killed, we hail the coming of the soldiers with delight, as our home had been in much danger. We live in a house in the village just three minutes walk from the house of the Lamas, but so concerned was the Grand Lama (Mina Fuyeh), the big man of the Lamasery, that he offered us rooms in his house until danger was over. If the Mohammedans come here, the people would run to the Lama's houses & leave us all alone. So, we accepted the kind offer & lived in his house for two months. We then came to our own home again leaving part of our stuff there, so that if we lose what there is here, we will still have something left if our lives are spared. It is an awful sensation. Only last night the alarm went thro the village that the rebels were burning a village five li – not two miles away from us.

The people are very kind, and consider and call us their own men. We have treated so many wounded men and soldiers, that we are considered quite indispensable here. When peace comes we will be able to go anyplace to doctor and preach, & be received with kindness. But from none do we get presents as often & as valuable as from the big man in the lamasery. Among them is a coral rosary, or "Mani" as they call it, a set of horn buttons for a gown, maple sugar from interior Tibet, pears from some days journey from here & he has promised, if we ever go home, to give us a prayer wheel to take with us. We often eat food with him.

(balance of the letter relates largely to their Christian and medical missionary work)

Excerpts from the second letter written by Peter Rijnhart:

Kumbum
31 Jan '96

My Dear Leslie and Mother Hill,

Your kind letter dated Aug. was recd a short time ago. The first we recd for 6 months but thanks be unto our Lord who again has heard our prayers and has caused the road to be opened so that now our mail can go down and come up as before.

We are surrounded by cruel rebels yet Since we came we have experienced not a little. We went on a trip to Kokonor lake in July and on the 2nd day in a very deserted place we were attacked by 16 robbers and only fear for our foreign gun and revolvers saved our lives.

Since then we have expected a daily visit of the rebels and every night we go to bed fearing that we shall hear the alarm during the night. ... Twice at night was the alarm sounded but the rebels did not come closer than a mile.

Their (the rebels) headquarters are now only 10 miles away (another 3-4 miles away was destroyed by the soldiers) but in that headquarters there are said to be 20,000 of them. ... The work is going on fairly. We have a host of friends among the priest now. So many have benefited by our drugs, - even the Grand Lama and the treasurer have been sick and at once sent for us. The medicines were prayerfully given, benefited them and now we count them among our best friends. Often do I visit them (because they can not leave the lamasery even to go across to the laymen village where we live – this is their law) and talk about our doctrine and theirs ... Ho Taren – the commander of the troops (2,000) was shot the other day in the leg. My dear wife was tired having been extremely busy the previous days. I went 10 li (3 miles) to see him ...

The full contents of both letters may be read at www.rfrajola.com/tibet/tibet.htm

The Route of the Cover

The content of Susie Rijnhart's letter suggests, because inbound mail was received through the courtesy of Chinese soldiers, that this outbound cover was likely carried from the conflicted area by the military before reaching safer mail channels. Although the exact route of carriage from Kumbum to Shanghai is unknown, the route taken by the Rijnharts on their trip to Kumbum, as shown in the map in Figure 2, may well have been the normal route for mail as well.

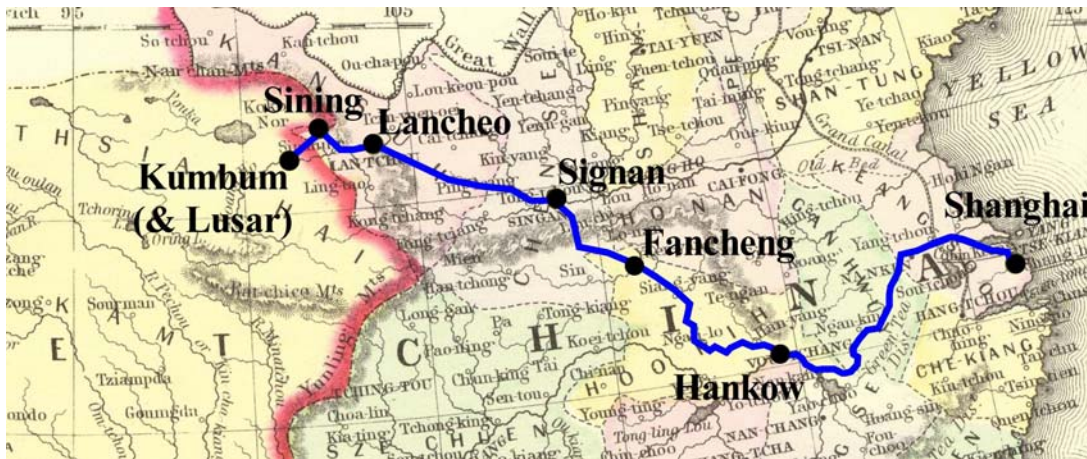


Figure 2. Map showing route of the Rijnharts from Shanghai to Kumbum.

Dr. Rijnhart described the route of her trip to Kumbum in her book: “From Shanghai up the Yangtze to Hankow we would go by steamer; thence by house-boat up the Han as far as Fancheng, situated about four hundred miles up the river. The remainder of the journey would be completed overland by cart and mule.”

After reaching Shanghai, the cover was placed in the mails at the United States Postal Agency with a United States single five-cent 1894 issue adhesive for a single-weight rate to the United States. As the letter weighed in excess of one-half ounce, it was marked in manuscript with a bold “T” (taxe) as insufficiently prepaid. The cover was postmarked on April 3, 1896 with the Agency postmark dated to correspond with the departure of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company steamer bound for Yokohama, Japan. At Yokohama, the mail bag containing the cover was transferred to another PMSS steamer for carriage to San Francisco, California.

Upon arrival at San Francisco, the cover received the San Francisco Foreign Division (abbreviated “F.D.”) backstamp of April 24, 1896 and the front was marked in pencil “2” indicating double rate, and “U.S. Charge To Collect 10 Cents” two line handstamp. When the cover arrived at its Fort Wayne, Indiana destination, the ten-cent postage due adhesive was applied and canceled when the recipient picked up the cover.

The author would welcome information about additional covers from Tibet that utilized the United States Postal Agency in Shanghai during this period. This cover is the only example known to the author at this time.