



Female from Pelyul, Kham, East Tibet.

Photo by Primoz Peer.

Tibetan Terriers in Tibet Today

by Primoz Peer

In some parts of the world, the Tibetan plateau included, dogs are still bred for a purpose and to certain characteristics of the type.

You will see pariah dogs and mutts also in Tibet, and Tibetans just call them "Khyi" (in West and Central Tibet) or "Chee" (in East Tibet), which is a Tibetan word for dog. This term is usually used for a stray dog.

There are numerous packs of stray dogs roaming around. They are medium sized, short coated, mostly red coloured (I met an odd gold brindle dog) with more or less curled tails, and quite leggy.

In comparison with feral dogs of other countries (for example Egyptian pariah dogs), these dogs are a bit bigger, leggier, with thicker but still short coats, and a bit more Do-Khyi like in head expression.

They live in packs near main roads, crossroads, bigger settlements, or pilgrim routes.

Tibetans do not care for them but also they do not harm them in any way; they just let them live. The purpose of these dogs is cleaning. All digestible garbage is eaten by them.

In Eastern Tibet they also have a special word "Haba" for this small dog of various types, body and head proportions, and also coat types.

Tibetan society went through a drastic and brutal change following the Chinese occupation about 50 years ago, and that surely also affected their native dog population.

Most monasteries and towns and bigger villages were totally or partly destroyed, and so we can only speculate about the way of keeping dogs there 50 years ago.

Nowadays when some monasteries are being at least partly reconstructed, and the monks are returning to them, there is also an occasional dog living there, and it was especially interesting to meet a few "living Buddhas" and to see that most of them were keeping small pet dogs.

I tried to ask a high Lama, who was also keeping a small pet dog about dogs in monasteries and about breeding there, but he said that as far as he knew dogs

were never bred in monasteries, but given as gifts from the local people.

One can see that especially wealthy families are again keeping more small dogs as pets, something that was quite a usual thing in the old days.

From what we saw in Tibet, the small Tibetan "breeds" (or maybe it is better to say distinct types?) Tibetan Terriers, Lhasa Apsos, and Tibetan Spaniels are kept more or less as pets and their job around the house is to be a living alarm bell, while guarding is the job of the big working dogs, Do-Khyis and Khyi Apsos. There are very few (if any) small dogs in Western Tibet, mainly since there are very few villages or even towns in that part. Nomads there do not keep small dogs, since they cannot afford keeping them.

But in the East, the small dogs are abundant, and the small Haba, a dog of indeterminate type (from a miniature Golden Retriever to almost Dachshund type) is used by nomads as an alarm bell. Nomads do not care about the type of the small dog as long as it does the job. Usually a Haba is tied near the nomad tent with one or two Do-Khyis only few meters away.

However, Apsos are not mutts, and are bred for type and purpose mostly by financially affluent people, those who have a living Buddha in the household.

In Tibet you have the whole variety; from the short legged Apso (or Lhasa Apso as we know them in the West) - then the "in-between Apso" being just a bit short on legs (and you get them also in our Lhasa Apso and TT breeding here in the West) - and the square long legged Apso (or Tibetan Terrier for us in the West). This last type can be, on one side, a long legged Apso (known in the beginning of the breed in England as monastery type, the correct expression) or on the other side the stronger, bigger Tibetan Terriers (known in the beginning of the breed in England as herding type, again the correct expression). This in turn is close to the big shaggy herding dog, the type known in the West as Khyi-Apso.

Some Legends about Tibetan Dogs that appear to be false:

- No native dogs left in Tibet.

Indeed, the story that the Chinese destroyed all dogs is nothing but a fairytale. They have destroyed a lot of what Tibet was, but luckily the Tibetan people, their culture and their dogs are survivors, at least so far.

- TT type paws like snow shoes.

There's not a lot of snow in Tibet even during winter (except very high in the mountains) and it usually melts away in few days.

- One can only get a Tibetan dog as a present.

Quite a few Tibetans we talked to, knew well how much a dog or a puppy was worth, and Tibetans are known as one of the Asia's best merchants.

- Dogs as reincarnated monks.

Not only monks, all human beings can reincarnate as animals.

Tibetan Terrier - or maybe better a long legged Apso?

First one I met in Nepal. For me the first encounter with a Tibetan Terrier in Asia and a most magical experience was meeting a lovely gold Tibetan Terrier walking around the big Stupa of Bodhnath (in Kathmandu, Nepal) with his mistress, an old Tibetan lady, following her at the usual evening prayer.

The coat cut short revealed the very nice square body and typical head, just the right size, only the tail was set and carried a bit more open than we are used to.

The second sight or more accurately glimpse of a Tibetan Terrier was in Barabise (still in Nepal), a village on the way to the Himalaya and Tibetan border. A dark grey dog ran away from me before I managed to get more than a single photo of him.

Like with other small(er) breeds I hadn't met a single Tibetan Terrier type dog on my first trip to Western Tibet, but I was told by our Tibetan guide, and some other Tibetans, that dogs of this type are more numerous in Central and especially in Eastern Tibet.

Only weeks after coming back from the first Tibet trip I received a few photos from a friend who had just returned from far Eastern Tibet, the land known as Kham. There were some lovely Apsos in these photos, a few with short and even one with longer legs, a lovely sable TT.

That was it. From then on I was studying all I could find about Eastern Tibet, and the more I learned the more I was sure my next Tibet trip should be to Kham.

A Trip to Kham

Luckily enough this time two friends joined me, Margareta Sundqvist and Anna Lorenzon, both passionately involved with Tibetan dogs. Margareta is a legend in the breed, and Anna a vet and Tibetan Terrier breeder.

Arriving in Eastern Tibet we indeed met hundreds of Do-Khyis, lots of Khyi-Apsos, Lhasa Apsos and Tibetan Spaniels, but Tibetan Terriers were quite a rare "breed" also in Eastern Tibet.

Meeting these dogs was quite an experience in many ways.

Tibetan Spaniels and Apsos were the first Tibetan dogs we began to meet, even, on the way from Sichuan to Tibetan

areas, in those areas with a quite mixed population of Tibetan and Han people.

But we needed to arrive in the "real" Tibetan area before we met the first Tibetan Terriers.

Since it was autumn and mating time we saw quite a few dogs on streets that would otherwise rarely be seen outside the home yard. Most of them were males, reserved with strangers, but not shy or timid. They were survivor types, capable of finding food and mating in seconds.

Females on the other hand were mostly kept at home in the yards.

Quite a few males were so called (well, at least we called them by that name) "restaurant dogs", dogs that lived in front of the small restaurants open to the main street of the village or small town. Some of them were owned by the families that owned the restaurant, but mostly they were just trying to occupy a good place near the restaurant that might provide them with food. They were used to traffic, strangers, even tourists.

On the other hand some Tibetan Terriers were living in the homes of village people, and there especially females lived a quite different life. They lived in the yard surrounded by the high walls and these dogs were poorly socialized, since most of their lives confined to the small yard and only meeting their family and very few strangers. However, even these dogs, when met by us, did not appear to be aggressive, and were merely alarm bells. These village dogs were difficult to locate, but we went to small villages off the main road again and again and our guide asked local people about the dogs we were looking for, and showed them photos of dogs we took with us from home.

Farmers who had houses with a walled yard often had small dogs tied to the house on a short chain and usually with a bit of a shelter for the dog.

One often saw dogs following the master on "business trip" or the family on the move to a new grazing place and the dogs were never tied, although sometimes when the nomads or peasants came to town, they had their dogs on a short rope.

Once we even saw a dog in the bag on a motorbike, the most common transportation for nomads in this part of Tibet,



Tibetan Terrier male in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Photo by Primoz Peer.



Male in Tagong, Kham, East Tibet.

Photo by Primoz Peer.



Male from Xinduqiao, Kham, East Tibet.

Photo by Primoz Peer.



“Shue Shue”. Female from Kanze, Kham, East Tibet.

Photo by Primoz Peer.



Male in Danba, Kham, East Tibet.

Photo by Primoz Peer.



Female near Xinduqiao, Kham, East Tibet.

Photo by Primoz Peer.



Female near Xinduqiao, Kham, East Tibet.

Photo by Primoz Peer.

often the only way to traverse the parts of the roads washed away by high waters of a summer monsoon.

In Eastern Tibet where yak milk is plentiful, one of the important parts of dog food is milk. We saw a woman who gave her dog a good portion of milk (I would say more than one litre) from the morning milking. Still most dogs got leftovers, mostly tsampa and some meaty bones now and then.

We did not meet a single Tibetan Terrier type dog with Khampa nomads, since as already mentioned, their only need was for the small dog-alarm bell to work, no matter what type of ears or expression.

Description of the native TTs we saw

The size of Tibetan Terriers varied as much as we are used to in our western breedings, from bigger, stronger workman-like dogs to smaller, finer ones. Tibetan Terriers we met were (with the exception of a few that were in-between Tibetan Terrier and Lhasa Apso in type) all square, compact, moderately angulated, and very balanced dogs.

And it was the same with all other Tibetan “breeds” we met, most of which were almost square, compactly built dogs with moderate angulation and movement that was really amazing.

One seldom saw a gallop, and the usual movement was a light-footed trot and when circumstances required the dog just geared up, and moved to the next chance of food or mating, or away from strangers, with an even faster but very efficient and economical trot.

Also overall soundness was extremely high, with the exception of a few that were evidently recently wounded.

Heads were medium sized, not coarse, but far from small or “elegant”, matching the whole dog.

Muzzles were without exception of medium length, strong and with good underjaw, not a single long or pointed one. Whenever possible we tried to look at the bite, and although a few were undershot (and one too undershot) most of them had something like scissor or level bites.

Eyes were of medium size, with nice expression, none had small eyes.

Ears were similar in size and carriage to what we are used to, maybe a bit higher

set than the majority here. None had big heavy ears.

Feet – we were able to feel feet on only two Tibetan Terriers. Both had strong, big and rather flat feet. One could see that all Tibetan dogs tended to have slightly longer and bigger feet.

Coats did vary, from the white and even paler gold ones, with abundant and softer double coats to some blacks and whites and also blacks that carried a bit less undercoat, and had stronger, quite straight topcoat.

This is what we could see at times, since of course lots of Tibetan Terriers were partly or totally matted, and also their coats partly or completely cut short.

Colours of Tibetan Terriers we met in Kham were the rainbow we know also in our part of the world - whites, whites with gold, black or sable marks, sables, golds and creams, black and tans and a white with liver (chocolate) marks.

We were told by locals that white animals (not only dogs, also yaks etc.) were considered auspicious/special and even holy by Tibetan people. Although big, working dogs were bred for performance, so that the white colour was extremely rare among them, it might have been different among the small dogs serving only as alarm bells and pets.

Pigment on most dogs was complete. But one or two white and pale gold coloured Tibetan Terriers had pale noses, the detail we also often saw on some Lhasa Apsos and Tibetan Spaniels. Not a single light pigmented nose looked sunburnt.

We didn't see a single Tibetan Terrier with blue eye(s), although we met quite a few Do-Khyis and a Khyi-Apso with one or even both blue eyes.

Tails set and carriage: most Tibetan Terriers there had tails similar to those we are used to, quite high set and carried over the back, but one or two had so much old matted hair on the tail that they could not carry it over the back!

Temperaments of Tibetan Terriers we met were rather reserved with strangers but far from aggressive, the exceptions being the so-called restaurant dogs who were mostly friendly ones, used to all kinds of strangers.

The region we criss-crossed is approximately the size of 1400 x 1000 km, quite a big territory, and yet the differences

in type within the Tibetan Terrier population there were small. Of course we saw some that were definitely the “in-between” type, either slightly low on legs, or a bit sparsely coated. But the majority of dogs showed amazingly fixed type, especially compared to the breeding in our part of the world, where we all have a written standard (or standards) and where we have (or had) the stud books closed for decades.

Tibetan Goat

Especially the vast semi-arid high areas of northwest Tibet teem with goats. The Tibetan goat (or on the other side of Himalaya it is also called Kashmir goat) has a small body size and its weight averages around 21 to 23 kg. The top hair is much longer and finer than in other goat breeds, and is of different colours. The coat is double coated composed of two materials; but in this breed it is the under-coat or “pushm”, which is very soft and silky, and of high commercial value. The Tibetan name for goat is Ra. The type of coat and the name Apso (or Rapso meaning goat-like) shows that the coat of Apsos (both long and short legged) resembles that of the long and double coated Tibetan goats.

So we all need to remember that while Apsos were compared to Tibetan goats in coat type and texture, they should not be coated like European goats.

Collars

We didn't see a Tibetan Terrier wearing a collar, but a few small(er) dogs did, mostly thin ones made of yarn or textile with a few sleigh bells on them, and not the yak hair ones which were for big working Do-Khyis or Khyi-Apsos.

The Name

While showing the photos of Tibetan Terriers (we brought with us from Europe) we again and again asked Tibetans what they called this breed.

But while the reply in Western Tibet was always Apso, the names in the Eastern part (Kham) differed in every new valley we visited. Often people there appeared not to have any other common name than Haba – a small dog, meaning a dog smaller than big working dogs.

We also only managed to learn one call name for a certain dog, an (almost) white female called “Shue-Shue” (the snowflake).

Mating Season

We were in Kham in autumn, at what seems to be the height of the mating season, so there were more dogs around. More dogs that would otherwise not wander far from their home were trying to find mates.

When we asked Tibetans they would say that majority of litters were born in winter, and indeed we only saw three females with litters and very few youngsters among the huge dog population of Kham.

Kanze

We (Anna Lorenzon, Margareta Sundqvist, our guide Jack, our driver Mo and myself) found “Kanze”, the native Tibetan Terrier male in Kanze in the morning of Sept. 15, 2005 at 9:20 a.m..

After being on the road in this part of Tibet for quite some days and meeting lots of Tibetan dogs, especially Do-Khyi's and actively looking for Apsos, we succeeded in seeing quite a few nice Tibetan Terriers and for one reason or another we had even thought about taking one of these home with us. The best ones were tied inside the Tibetan homes, knowing very little about the world other than their family and the nearby houses and being very reserved with strangers. Such was the almost white female or the white and liver marked male.

A lovely and nicely socialized sable and white female, who belonged to a pharmacist in the small town of Pelyul, was regrettably too old and some other “restaurant” Tibetan Terriers were just not the wise choices.

Suddenly one morning good luck struck. When we first saw this dog, he was playing with another black male (shorter legs and short coat) along the “Liberation” street, a few hundred meters from the Golden Yak Hotel in the direction to Kanze monastery.

When I first whistled to him, he came at once with his tail wagging and ate a piece of cake Jack threw him. That was quite a surprise since most Tibetan dogs would just swiftly look at a stranger and continue running away.



Kanze in Kham, Tibet, September, 15, 2005.

Photos by Primoz Peer.

Kanze

Kanze is the local capital, more a big village than a town in Kham, Eastern Tibet, in China's administrative part of Sichuan province. Tibetans living in this part are called Khampas, still famous for their warlike spirit. Kanze - in Tibetan meaning a beautiful (monastery) on the white rock.



Visiting a monastery in Litang.

Photo by Primoz Peer.



Kanze's first bath at the grooming shop in Chengdu.

Photo by Primoz Peer.

We took some photos of him, and realizing how nice he was, I ran to the car and came back with a collar and flexi lead and I got him attached without a problem.

Looking around for the owner, we realized he was following his Khampa master, a wandering merchant, and from him we bought the dog a few minutes later, after a short negotiation of price!

His master told us that the dog was perhaps four years old (people there are not very reliable when it comes to the age of a dog or of themselves). Looking at his teeth we thought at least five, but then our dogs eat a very different diet.

His master knew nothing about his background, but looking at the type of dogs we met in the area, he was typical, stronger than some and by far the best built and best socialized of all we had seen (with the exception of the old sable and white female).

Just this detail - that he was around his master a lot, visiting different places and was not living all his life in the yard (as many, especially small ones - Apsos and TTs did) - "made" him highly socialized, used to other people, traffic, new things. We gave him an on the spot examination for external parasites and medication against internal parasites (although later on it appeared that he had none. Anna also gave him an initial vaccination against parvo etc.

Off we went in our 4WD, our new boy sitting in front with Anna, and not at all concerned or even amazed!

During the drive we decided he would be named after the small town where we found him. After more than an hour's drive, sometimes bumpy, we stopped at a meadow beside the road and we went for the first walk with him.

He was friendly, acting as if he had been with us for a long time, and as if used to collar and leash (although his coat around the neck showed he had not been on a lead for at least several months).

We took some photos. We even cut off the biggest mats around his tail and on his back. In the next few days we removed most big mats, and hundreds of seeds etc. even an elastic strap matted in.

On our next stops we met lots of Tibetans who were puzzled to see foreign tourists with a Tibetan dog on lead and that

same bewilderment we saw again and again for the remaining days of our trip. Kanze began more and more to show his very special character. In the next days we could not believe how fast he was adapting to everything.

I was quite nervous about what would happen when meeting strange dogs roaming loose and Kanze on lead. It was another surprise. Kanze handled some quite dangerous situations with a calm but proud and self-assured approach. One could see that an unnecessary fight was not an option for him. He was too wise.

When we stopped in Xinlong (Nyarong County) for the first night with Kanze, we bought him a Tibetan bell with strap and Margareta made him his special Tibetan collar.

The first night in the hotel was uneventful, I could see that the dog enjoyed the safety and comfort of the hotel room, but soon the typical canine in him tried to achieve a higher position, namely my bed! (That wasn't allowed).

At first he did not eat much, so we tried several things and boiled eggs were the first food he clearly enjoyed. Then he began to appreciate meat, especially fried duck.

He also got his own water and food bowls. They were Chinese metal bowls, but he soon let us know that his favourite way of eating was served with chop sticks! A Tibetan with good manners!

Days later we arrived at the 14+ million metropolis of Chengdu. Kanze's only problem was humid warm weather. Well, a lesser issue was his first visit to a grooming shop, where everything went quite well, until the big fan dryer was turned on, and Margareta showed her skill at calming the dog.

Clean and without a single mat, Kanze felt very much at home when strolling around Chengdu's busy streets and avenues shopping with us and he only missed the Chinese opera performance, staying in the hotel with Jack, our guide. Arriving at Chengdu, we rushed to visit the local vet, getting Kanze vaccinated against rabies, and Anna microchipped him at the same time with a chip she had carried (just in case) from Europe. Only minutes after that we also got the official Health Certificate from the State

Veterinary Office, which was situated nearby. Maybe everything was done so fast because they were only minutes away from the Chinese noon break.

We were never asked to show either of the two certificates, not even when we took Kanze to the airport for the flight to Guangzhou.

Amusingly enough, he soon even showed us his playful side, surprising us again and again with his adaptability. You should have seen him lying under the table in a posh Chengdu restaurant only days after we got him!

Only a week after we had met him on the high Tibetan plateau, we took him out of the crate after the short flight to Guangzhou, and he was pleased to see us again.

He stayed near Guangzhou with my friend Anita, an American lady who is also "into" dogs and has Tibetan Spaniels.

It took us six months to get him to Europe, with an antirabies titre test done in EU lab in Italy, and export permits required in China etc. etc.

And when he finally arrived he showed again his highly adaptable character. Within hours he was assessed by four judges in the middle of a busy Club meeting, with something like 50 other Tibetan dogs around. Very self-confident and relaxed, he did not growl even once and did not put his tail down either.

Kanze's new Life in Slovenia

He now lives with Sluga Valinger and family, together with their two Tibetan Terrier females here in Ljubljana.

He completely adopted his new family in only a few days.

When all are at home, Kanze is off duty, not caring much about the strangers coming to visit. But when on weekday mornings the family leaves for office and school, then he turns into a bit of a guard dog, not aggressive or furious, but strangers are not welcomed. However, he makes friends easily as soon as the newcomer is greeted by the family.

At first a fenced garden was the place to see how he adapted to being let loose.

On the temperament side, Kanze has been an astonishing experience.

I anticipated (and worried) how he would adapt to a new environment, to hectic town life, to traffic; would he bark a lot,

would he be aggressive at times, would he try to run away from home?

Not only has all that not happened, but just the contrary, and this native male is adapting swiftly, is very calm, playful and friendly and he really enjoys a life that offers him much more luxury than he was used to.

He is very self-confident and dominant around other dogs, with the exception of dogs bigger than he is, but he will not provoke a fight, not even when on lead.

We are learning totally new things about dogs by observing at his behaviour.

Today (October, 2006) Kanze appears to be a "normal" pet, and even more than many other dogs born and raised here, adapted to the big town life and enjoying it.

For quite some time now he has been let loose when on walks in the woods with his family, and he follows them without a single idea of running away.

He went to the mountains and to the seaside, although he was not very fond of swimming and shocked by the taste of salt water. He even endured the daily speed-boat trips.

The future will tell us if our hopes and dreams about Kanze as a breeding animal will come true, but already the experience of living with him and learning from him is well worth all the efforts to bring him from Tibet to Europe.

Using a native Dog in Breeding

After Kanze was assessed by three different specialist judges and after their favourable reports he was admitted to the FCI conditional stud book (also the two generations after him).

Kanze went through various health checks, and everything looked fine, even the hips are excellent, quite a surprise when considering his age and early life's wear.

Just now we are looking at Kanze's first born puppies and their overall type and viability gives us great hopes for the future.

We will need people with interest and knowledge and experience, and especially with patience and appreciation of the native Tibetan traits we will hopefully get back.

Kanze should be only the first native dog to join the population after far too many years.

Does anyone care to join us in trying to get some more native Tibetan Terriers from Tibet?



Kanze, March 2006.

PhotobyPrimozPeer