

# THE HISTORICAL TIBETAN MASTIFF

## WESTERN STANDARDS WRONGLY PIGEONHOLE THIS MULTI-FACETED BREED



By Richard W. Eichorn

In the trinity of controversy in Tibetan Mastiffs – size, color and variations within type – let's focus on the latter.

As we tackle this most difficult subject, we must accept the fact that the Tibetan Mastiff is the perfect amalgamation of mastiff and mountain dog. It is fully mastiff and fully mountain dog at the same time, compromising neither, while at times embracing both extremes. It is a mastiff that functions like a mountain dog, or a mountain dog of mastiff size and type. It is a dog of impressive and immense mastiff size (history records 34 to 36 inches, and heavy bone) and type (heavy wrinkling, dewlap, haw, jowls, with a broad, deep, short, padded muzzle) that has evolved and adapted to survive in the most extreme climate and terrain known to mankind at the "Roof of the World." The result is the balanced, powerful, purposeful and efficient movement of mountain breeds on a dog of mastiff proportions with the longest lion-like coat known to Molosserdom.

We must also accept, understand and never discount the impact of the culture clash on a breed developed for consistent function and purpose in Far Eastern native lands that must strive for conformational consistency to accommodate the narrowly focused breed standards in the West. Truth be told, if we were staying true to Tibetan values and preserving the "true" breed, we would respect established Tibetan varieties and never try to consolidate them under one "Tibetan Mastiff" banner. Instead, we would espouse native breed distinctions and have separate stud books, breeding programs and designations for the separate breeds/varieties. At the very least, we would have separate Open classes for like-to-like judging. But such is not the case – yet – often resulting in confusing, inconsistent and often mediocre placements and breeding decisions.

If you are breeding or judging in China or Tibet, those native values and types are respected and are bred and judged separately according to type, color and coat varieties known as the Tiger/mastiff, Lion/mountain, Snow/white and even Bearded/Kyi Apso (think Bearded Collie) varieties. Not so in the West, where AKC and FCI standards

demand one ideal, requiring all the varieties of mastiff and mountain-dog sizes and types, smoother and rougher coats in the broadest spectrum of colors, to all compete for that one Best of Breed ribbon.

As breeders and judges, it is our responsibility to remain true to the legacy of the breed from the country of origin first, and keep the Tibetan perspective in mind regardless of where we are and which present-day version of a standard is in play. We all know that standards can and do change, subject to fleeting politics, agendas, winning trends and the reigns of popular dogs, and those standards can have varying degrees of authenticity and accuracy. Fortunately, there is a wealth of historic documentation available to guide us.



*Type on type on type! There is no mistaking the breed here. The deeply set eyes, the pronounced and hanging dewlap, and the fully matured coat, rich with pigment, as harsh as the Tibetan winters.*

Now, how to unscramble the egg, or to at least comprehend the recipe for the ultimate omelette? Not always easy, given the blending of lines, types and varieties that helped to rescue, resurrect and keep the breed from extinction during the 1950s Chinese invasion and subsequent occupation of Tibet. But no need to reinvent the wheel, either. Let's step beyond the controversy and varied opinions of present day, and look to the constant, to the blueprint, to our best teacher: history.

Well known in the Tibetan Mastiff world, the noted author and historian Robert B. Ekvall recorded his observations of the breed in his 1963 journal, the *Role of the Dog*

in *Tibetan Nomadic Society*. His keen insight gives us a rare window into a land and culture that was at the time shrouded in mystery. He is detailed and specific in his designation as to what constitutes a breed, variety or strain of a purebred dog, and what does not. He writes:

*There are two varieties or breeds; the true Tibetan mastiff - which is somewhat rare - and another equally ferocious and almost equally large mongrel. The latter undoubtedly has, among other strains, more or less mastiff blood. The mastiffs, known variously as Sang Khyi (Sang dog) or TSang Khyi (dogs of Tsang), constitute what Tibetans call a "bone line" and considerable efforts are made to keep the breed pure. Their possession is somewhat of a status symbol; it is very difficult to find one for sale; and if found the price is usually that of a good horse. They have the typical heavy muzzle, high domed head, hanging lips, the red of the eyelid showing and*



massive forequarters of the mastiff breed. The rather long tail is somewhat lightly feathered and carried in a loose curl. In color they are usually black, always so if considered pure bred - with tan trim on the face, neck and legs, usually some white on the throat and chest, and a tan spot over each eye; from which they get the name *Mig bZHi Can* (four eyed one[s]). As to size, the one I had weighed 160 pounds. Their most distinctive characteristic is an incredibly heavy baying bark - much more like the sound of a fog horn than the outcry of any animal.

The mongrel watchdogs, which are far the more numerous, are little, if any smaller than the mastiffs and quite as ferocious. But in their bark they do not have quite the foghorn quality or tone which distinguishes the true mastiff. In coloration they exhibit greater diversity; ranging from pure black to grey wolf color and even an occasional white one.

Their pelage is somewhat longer than that of the mastiffs, they have somewhat wide and flatter heads with more pointed muzzles, and the heavily feathered tail is carried in a tight curl over the back.

Their proper function in life, however, is as watchdogs, and as such they are savage and alert. Their mission in life, as defined by the Tibetans, is to "guard wealth against beasts of prey and thieves" and to the fulfillment of this mission they bring vigilance and ferocity."

From Ekvall's detailed account as a Tibetan Mastiff owner himself, "there are two varieties or breeds." The same holds true today. One prized, pure and rare, seldom for sale, highly priced, a status symbol known as the Sang Khyi/Tsang Khyi, with a heavy muzzle, domed head, hanging lips, red haw, massive chest, a long and lightly feathered loose tail, in black/tan with white on the chest and neck, of substance/160 pounds, with the breed-defining heavy, deep baying "copper gong" bark. This is consistent with breed expert and former Lhasa Mayor Luo Go's description in the Winter 2009/10 issue of *Modern Molosser* of the fabled

Tsang Khyi, still prized, preserved and protected in Tibet, today.

Ekvall's second variety or breed classification is described as a "mongrel" equal in size and temperament to the Tsang Khyi, more numerous/common with varying degrees of the mastiff/Tsang Khyi blood. These dogs

In this vintage photo, it is easy to see how this prime native specimen would inspire historians to record the "imposing size," "massive bone and forequarters," "broad backskull" and the "wide, padded muzzle," all consistent hallmarks of the true breed.



A fully mature bitch with the type, head and coat to be envied by most males in the breed. Note the broad mastiff skull and cheek fill, the wide-set eyes with a properly proportioned muzzle that works in harmony with the rest of the head.

don't have the characteristic deep, foghorn-like bark, and they come in a greater diversity of color, including black, blue/gray, even white with longer hair, wider/flatter heads, more refined/pointed muzzles, and with a higher-set curled tail. This is also in line with the mayor's detailing of other varieties, some of which are being produced in breeding programs today.

The writings of other noted historians record the same duality within the breed. Chinese annals of the Han Dynasty (142-87 B.C.) depict Tibetan dogs as being "as large as donkeys" (also noted by Marco Polo in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century), and found in the "red color." In 1842, naturalist Bryan Houghton Hodgson, when speaking about the breed noted, "There are several varieties," and documents the colors as "Black, black and tan or red with more or less of white. Some have a fifth toe behind [rear dewclaw]," which was worthy of mention in

*Animals and Plants Under Domestication* by Charles Darwin in 1868, and documented in the Hodgson illustration "Tibetan Mastiffs, 5-clawed and 4-clawed variety," published in *Dogs of the last hundred years at the British Museum* (Natural History). Hodgson goes on to document two varieties: "The variety from Lhasa is the most beautiful variety, and is almost always black with tan legs and a fifth or false toe front and rear," and "The Mustang variety is much smaller, bright red in color, with small eyes: this variety does not have the rear fifth toes."

In 1845, Mr. W.C. Martin, in *Knight's Weekly Volume, The History of the Dog*, wrote, "The Thibet Mastiff exceeds the English Mastiff in size, and has a still more lowering expression of countenance, from the skin of the eyebrows forming deep wrinkles, running to the sides



When considering the accuracy of breed historians, it is reassuring to note that dogs today still show "the heavy wrinkling and the deep pendulous lips" that fulfill those centuries-old descriptions.





*At a grand opening for a kennel in Wuhan, China in 2008, I was privileged to be among the first to see a group of Tibetan Mastiffs that had just arrived from the Qinghai Plateau. Some discussion ensued as to whether they were the tiger/mastiff or lion/mountain type. I remarked, "They are neither, they are the Tibet type." Breed authority Mayor Luo Go and his wife smiled, and nodded their heads.*



*An exquisite red-gold puppy already showing the classic type, alert expression, deep wrinkling, huge paws and massive bone desired in the breed.*

This breed is also a pure variety of the Molossus, whose unique characteristics are the result of selective adaptations to his geographical environment, and to climatic influences thereof.

"Even the largest specimens of the common European Mastiff varieties do not attain the size of the Tibet Mastiff," he writes. "... The head is larger, the back of the head is more pronounced ... the muzzle is broader and more blunt ... the lips are longer and therefore more deeply sagging. The skin of the cheek region is looser, the ears are longer and more rounded, and the eyes are somewhat smaller. Aristotle considered the Tibet Mastiff to be a bastard produced by crossbreeding a domesticated dog with a tiger."



Max Siber, author of *Der Tibethund* (1897), records the numerous findings of various authors, explorers and historians. "The color of the Tibet Mastiff ranges from black to a light golden brown or red, but the vast majority of them are black in color with rust-colored markings" (Count Bela Szechenyi in 1879); "Four feet in length from the tip of the nose to the onset of the tail, and had a height at the withers measuring two feet and ten inches [34 inches]," (Gill, 1880); "The lips are deeply sagging ... the mask has deep wrinkles ... deep-set bloodshot eyes ... pure black ... brown and dark wolf-gray individuals; the latter usually have black masks and black-tipped guard hair ... the giant, indeed the Goliath among the dog breeds, beside which even English Mastiffs, St. Bernards and Newfoundlands would appear small" (J. A. Petersen, 1895).

"But there is considerable variation with regard to coat color ... black ... black with rust-red ... rust-brown, light brown or golden red markings ... others brown with yellow markings [chocolate and tan]," wrote Siber himself. "... In addition, some are fawn-colored or deep red ... Others are dark-colored with a black saddle ... The Tibet Mastiff's head is disproportionate ... The lips of the Tibet Mastiff sag. The eyes are deeply set, with bloodshot conjunctivae ... [rear] Dewclaws ... all Tibet Mastiffs have them."

In 1900, the Rev. H.W. Bush shared his observations and conclusions about the Tsang Khyi/mastiff variety. He writes, "There are plenty of inferior specimens, but the huge big dog with the massive head, rounded skull, pendulous flews, small dark eyes showing much haw, plenty of wrinkle, almost invariably black with tan points, is only as a rule to be found in the larger monasteries, or outside the premises of the richer Tibetans."

This was not the slighter, more refined nomadic mountain



*A dog that could have served as inspiration for authors and artists in days gone by as well as for breeding programs today. A timeless, classic type, color and markings.*



*The promise of tomorrow, an outstanding pup full of all the potential any breeder would be proud to produce. It's easy to see what historians meant when they described dogs "of a sour countenance."*



*A top-winning red sable male in China.*

*This vintage engraving (Duncan, 1890) shows a dog of mastiff size and build, along with the lower-set and more loosely curled tail often referenced that was typical for the breed a century ago.*



dog promoted and by some as the ideal today, and which Rev. Bush referred to as "inferior specimens," but a prized dog of mastiff type and size kept exclusively in monasteries or by the wealthy.

This was likewise chronicled by canine illustrator and author Richard Strebel in 1905. "The Tibetans recognize two varieties – the rough and the smooth, though they value the rough most," he wrote. "The two strains, for they are not distinct breeds, resemble each other in every respect except coat. ... The two different types, the lighter animal and the much more massive one with heavier bone and wrinkled face....Only the lighter type of dog was able to keep up the chase with the horses. The heavy type would have been quite incapable of reaching the speed of the horse but was used to hunt lion and bear."

"The fact is that the lighter type of animal is the natural original type," he concluded, "and the larger, heavier type, the purposefully bred one."

In 1986, breed aficionado and parent-club co-founder Donald Messerschmidt told of his talk with a Tibetan family while he was stationed in Nepal, and then describes the differences between the Dokhyi/mountain flock guardian and the Tsang Khyi/mastiff temple guardian quite well:

*KHYI ("dog"), of Tibetan Mastiff (aka Bhotia as we know it), is the well-known livestock flock-protection dog kept by the Drog-pa nomadic herders of western Tibet and shepherds of the Himalayan regions. This dog is renowned as a fighter, controlling wolves and other predators. It makes its rounds of the yak or sheep herds during the night, and has a good, deep bark. It has a sharp scenting ability known as zi nobo in Tibetan, and is a good tracker. It is also accustomed to cold and windy weather. Its hair is not exceedingly long; it has a good solid head and body, with a bushy tail over the back. In short, all that we consider prime [flock guardian] Tibetan Mastiffs to be. The best colors, my friends say, are a black and tawny dog with two 'eye spots' or an all-black dog with a white star on its chest.*

Messerschmidt goes on to contrast the mastiff variety: *(T)SANG KHYI, ("best dog"), are sometimes referred to as Do-khyi ("tied dog"). Compared with the ordinary KHYI above (Tibetan Mastiff), the (T)SANG KHYI in its prime is a rare dog. The (T)SANG KHYI is primarily a guard dog, typically tied at the gate of monasteries and farm compounds. It has, according to a Tibetan saying, "Big head, big ears, big mouth (jowls) and big bark," but my friends were quick to point out that it is not a good running dog and has a generally narrow and poorly structured rear end. The (T)SANG KHYI is known for its ferocity as a barker, especially at night.*

The numerous historians referenced such as Siber, Petersen, Martin, Bush, Strebel and Ekvall, the contemporary Messerschmidt and others are all consistent in documenting and describing the Tsang Khyi/mastiff/Valley-Plateau variety/breed with terms such as "massive one ... heavier bone ... bone line," "huge big dog" size, "massive, BIG domed heads," "big ears," extreme mastiff wrinkled/jowled "big mouth/jowled" type, with details of structure for stationary, nocturnal sentinel-like guarding, "not built for movement ... not a good running dog," preferred coat varieties, and the fact that the special, mastiff-like variety was rare, "expensive and purposefully bred," unlike the other variety they called



*The type of puppy Western breeders are seeking to import from Tibet and China, provided they don't have to mortgage the farm to do so!*





*"inferior specimens, mongrels," and the "lighter... natural original type"* This is one colossal dog of extreme mastiff type.

How does this history apply or translate to the legacy of the "Tibetan Mastiff" today? It keeps the "breed" at the center of controversy, with diverse and even conflicting standards throughout the world, with polarized factions embracing and defending the various types/breeds. The Tsang Khyi/Valley/Plateau/mastiff fanciers of the *"purposefully bred"* variety/breed found in monasteries and owned by the wealthy are in sharp opposition to and even offended by the notion of sharing a stud book and ring time with the Do-khyi/Lion/mountain-flock dog fanciers and their nomadic *"natural original type."* Yet, the two varieties/breeds must exist under a single breed designation, for now.

A great example of the Tsang Khyi/mastiff variety makes for a poor example of the mountain variety/breed, and vice versa, and when forced to compete in the same ring, judges either show their allegiance to one type/variety or another, or uncourageously compromise with the best homogenized blend of the two. To give an example, imagine a judge having to award a single BOB ribbon to the best Saint Bernard competing against the best Alaskan Malamute, with a standard that was somehow inclusive of both breeds. Or the judge having to find the single BOB in a ring full of flock guardian Kuvasz, Great Pyrs, Tatra and Maremmas all shown under one standard. Perhaps trying to agree on what is middle ground for an athletic Cane Corso and stationary Neapolitan Mastiff, or the ongoing controversy with the American Akita still competing and breeding with the imported,



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Here the Tibetan Mastiff/Tsang Khyi is shown with a wild Indian dog/Dhole (Duncan, 1890). In this colorized version, the original full white collar has been changed to a tan color. The low-set flag tail that was common and correct for the breed then is faulted in present day standards.

refined smaller Japanese type. Welcome to wide, wonderful world of "Tibetan Mastiffs"!

One thing is certain, that the Tibetan people recognized and bred at least two separate breeds/varieties that should be preserved and respected, separately. And if there is one of those varieties that should set the precedent, history makes that very clear.

The bottom line is that no one will ever agree as to what constitutes the true breed *if* it must share its name, studbook and ring time with extreme Himalayan variations and sub-varieties with "more or less mastiff blood." For those of us who love and embrace purebred dogs and their many breeds distinctions, the careful, deliberate and *purposeful breeding* to preserve original type, soundness, temperament and health are what dog breeding is all about. It is our responsibility and duty as judges to find and award such specific, breed-defining merit, according to the standard, with a global perspective that honors the original breed according to *Tibetan* standards.

As for temperament, keep in mind that a proper Tibetan Mastiff would rather be at home guarding than ever allowing a stranger to walk up and examine it in a show ring. Be mindful of the balance needed between size, bone, mass and soundness; remember that a good dog comes in any color; be moved by the powerful and purposeful gait; and place a premium on mastiff type and the reserved, steadfast, regal demeanor of the dog who appears to be holding court, and you are merely an admiring subject.



The historic quotes, fulfilled in the flesh. The mastiff proportions, heavy flews and "blood red haws" repeatedly referenced as observed over centuries in native populations.



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