



## News From Tartary

*Peter Fleming*

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## News From Tartary Peter Fleming

In 1935 Peter Fleming, an editor for the London Times and, interestingly, Ian Fleming's older brother, set out from Peking for Kashmir. It was a 3500 mile journey across the roof of the world. He chose as his traveling companion Ella Maillart, a beautiful Swiss journalist.

Fleming is one to underemphasize difficulties. He describes events and places in brilliant color and detail, also with great wit and humor. His story of the journey, a seven month odyssey through desert and upland, virtually uncharted, has become a classic of travel literature since its publication in 1936.

"No writer has given a keener picture of unchanging Tartary than has Fleming, and his description of Sinkiang reveals the last home of international intrigue, politics, violence and melodrama, where all foreigners are suspects and none welcome."

## News From Tartary Details

Date : Published 2001 by Birlinn Limited (first published 1936)

ISBN : 9781843410034

Author : Peter Fleming

Format : Paperback 394 pages

Genre : Travel, Nonfiction, Cultural, China, History, Adventure, Asia

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# From Reader Review News From Tartary for online ebook

## Bookguide says

This was an interesting account of a journey from Peking by train, then by foot, camel and horse, from Sining in the East, across the high plains, mountains, deserts and marshes of southern Mongolia, the north-east corner of Tibet, into the Sinkiang region of China, and over the mountain passes into what is now Pakistan and Srinagar in India, following the little-travelled southern Silk Route. The author, Peter Fleming, was the brother of Ian Fleming (the author of the original James Bond novels), and married to Celia Johnson, the actress in *Brief Encounter*. His travelling companion was a practical and long-suffering Swiss journalist, Kini Maillart, as well as a succession of local guides, whose characters were as varied as those of the horses and camels. The year was 1935, and tensions ran high in the region, with friction between the various tribal groupings, the Turkis and Tungans, the Russians and the Chinese, with interference from the Japanese who had annexed Manchuria.

I found the tale of the journey absorbing, and yet Fleming manages to tell us very little about the day-to-day lives of the people who lived in the region. In that respect I would have preferred a more anthropological study of the way of life. A more modern book on the same trip would undoubtedly have included a better map and many beautiful photos. Unfortunately Fleming lost a good deal of his film, and naturally all the photos are in black and white and often unclear. I attempted to follow the journey in an atlas, but was flummoxed for a long time, as the place-names are now given in more Chinese spellings, and many of the places which figure strongly in the story are tiny villages or a couple of dwellings which are not marked on maps; I found the modern versions of the places by googling them individually. I will add them to this JE when I come across the piece of paper I wrote them on, which I don't have to hand at the moment. I also found that it is now possible to travel in this region with relative ease, with the completion of the Karakorum Highway, and other road and rail connections, as well as airports in Kashgar, for instance.

Fleming wrote in a sardonic style with a strong current of understated humour. Despite the fact that Fleming viewed the local people from the colonial point of view, and tended to be condescending, he shared their discomfort whilst travelling and tried to respect their customs. "When people know no customs but their own, and when their own customs are few because of the extreme simplicity of their life, it is only courteous to respect those customs when you can."

Finally, I was amused to note that Fleming and Kini engaged in a primitive form of Bookcrossing, although the fate of the books was not what one might hope. They had "a substantial paper-backed supply of the works of MM. Maurice Leblanc and Georges Simenon... We fought each other for these books and dreaded the day when they would be finished. As each was jettisoned the influence of French detective fiction spread gradually throughout the caravan, and it was no uncommon thing to see a Mongol stalking along with the lively cover of 'La Demoiselle Aux Yeux Verts' stuck in between his forehead and his fur hat to form an eye-shade, while the dramatic pages of 'Le Fou de Bergerac' stuffed up the holes in several pairs of boots. The only other form of literature the Mongols can ever have seen was prayer-books in their own lamaseries; if they thought that our books were prayer-books too we must have struck them as very sacrilegious people."

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## Caro says

A must-read for anyone interested in Central Asia or the Silk Road, and a classic of British travel writing.

Peter Fleming (Ian's brother) decided at age 27 to travel from Peking to Srinagar in order to learn more about the closed region of Sinkiang (now known as the Western Uighur Autonomous Region of China). The political bits are confusing and not that interesting, but luckily most of this is about the journey. Along with Swiss traveler and adventurer Ella Maillart (and there's someone to learn more about), Fleming traveled by train, on foot, on horse, by camel and donkey through several deserts, an endless marsh, and mountains including the Himalayas. On the way they met with suspicious bureaucrats (their passports were never quite right, it's amazing they completed the journey), locals who were often kind but sometimes brutal, and some memorable animals, a few of which they had to leave behind when the animals became too weak to continue.

How does this journey differ from any of mine (besides everything, especially his incredible endurance, of course? Whereas I wear my special liner socks plus my socks to take a three-mile hike, Fleming wore out his last pair of socks and did the last several hundred miles in his bare boots!)? It's all in the preparation. As he writes,

"Our ignorance, our chronic lack of advance information, must be unexampled in the annals of modern travel. We had neither of us, before starting, read one in twenty of the books that we ought to have read, and our preconceptions of what a place was going to be like were never based, as they usefully could have been, on the regions... This state of affairs reflected discreditably on us but was not without its compensations. It was pleasant, in a way, to be journeying always into the blue, with no Baedeker to eliminate surprise and marshal our first impressions in advance..."

In one favorite episode, they arrive in Kashgar, where they expect, after months of traveling in the remote hills, to dress for dinner. But they find that Fleming's tropical suit, neatly folded in the bottom of his suitcase for all these months, is not only dripping wet and oozing mud, occasioned by the handler dropping the suitcase into the river, but has turned bright green because of a scarf packed right next to it. "It seemed to me that, if there is one thing worse than wearing bright green clothes, it is wearing bright green clothes which are also soaking wet; I therefore sadly resumed the shorts and shirt of every day and prepared to let down the British Raj." Luckily, the cheerful young man from the Consul-General's staff is unfazed, greeting him with "I don't know whether you drink beer.." It made me thirsty just reading about it.

His perspective on the locals inevitably reflects the time and place, though his descriptions are usually shrewd. I'll be interested to read Maillart's account of the same trip, "Forbidden Journey - From Peking to Cashmir" and see what she thought of Fleming and the locals. Highly recommend.

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## **Wendy says**

A vivid account of a spectacularly tedious journey, pace landscape. I think Peter Fleming was a better writer than his brother, and it is easy to see how he might have served as a partial model for James Bond.

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## **Ethan Cramer-Flood says**

In 1935, while his brother Ian was comfortably back in England (James Bond just a twinkle in his eye), Peter Fleming was making a career of adventure-writing and travel journalism. In those final hours of the Great Game era in Asia, one could still become a celebrity explorer in the service of the crown, and even plausibly walk in the footsteps -- or be perceived as walking in the footsteps -- of a certain Sir Lawrence. Peter

Fleming's life, at the time, was thought by his contemporary readers and fans to be something akin to our idea of an Indiana Jones; however, by modern sensibilities the greatest strength of his writing lies in his disarming British taste for understatement, his wit and nonchalance in the face of outrageous discomfort and danger, and his general sense of being unimpressed with his own exploits.

The tale itself is amazing. He spent seven months crossing from Peking to India in 1935 -- just as China was in a state of pre-WWII, pre-Civil War collapse. He could hardly have picked a more dangerous time in history to make the trek. The book primarily chronicles the second half of the trip: his passage through modern-day Xinjiang (which very roughly corresponds to the original notion of "Tartary"), a journey made almost entirely on foot. At the time the region was a black hole to Westerners, with none having set foot in or come out of central Tartary in several years -- and in fact, most Chinese and Russians had little idea what was happening there at the time either. Hence, the title: *News From Tartary*. The quest was essentially an intelligence gathering mission in the guise of a journalistic endeavor. Or, was it the reverse? Regardless, the results remain a delight, even today. The quality of the writing is what makes it worth reading, but the historical value makes it nearly priceless.

Highly recommended for those seeking perspective on that vast land of Western China causing so much trouble to the dictators in Beijing even today.

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### **Ryan Murdock says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this brilliant travel classic. Fleming and Swiss writer Ella Maillart set out to travel overland between Peking, China to Kashmir, India in the 1930's - an unstable time when China's Communist insurgency was on the rise, and the far west province of Xinjiang was well beyond the control of the capital. Fleming's account of their journey by horse and camel is sharply observed, brilliantly funny, and the dangers and hardships are always understated.

I traveled some of that same territory in 2002, and I really enjoyed reading about Xining, Qinghai, Kumbum monastery, the southern branch of the Silk Road on the far side of the Taklamakan Desert, Khotan and Kashgar, and more. Those regions felt like the most distant frontier even ten years ago, when China was rapidly bulldozing and resettling anything that makes them unique. It was nice to see from Fleming's account that, despite their political fortunes, the essential character of these people and places remains the same.

An outstanding work of travel literature.

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### **Philip says**

First read circa 1982, this remains one of my absolute all-time favorites -- I reread it every few years, and always keep a dictionary handy. No one writes with the elegance and bone dry humor of the late 19th/early 20th century British explorers. My very first nominee for the title "Best. Book. Ever."

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### **Max Nemtsov says**

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Neither of them wanted to join forces, but the alternative for both would have been to abandon the trip. Together, they could produce enough languages, life skills, money, and passports/visa to at least leave Beijing - and try and by-pass the official control posts. Maillart also wrote an account of this trip in her book *Forbidden Journey*, but unlike Fleming her outlook on the trip and the content of her observations are quite

different.

When reading *News from Tartary*, I probably learned more about Fleming than about the people he meets and the countries he passes through. It is also good to remember that when Fleming set out on his trip, he worked as a political correspondent for *The Times*, and much of Fleming's interests in the book focus on the political and military situation in China. For example, Fleming goes into quite some detail about the political leaders he meets, and troop movements he observes. As it turns out, however, his enthusiasm for political analysis may not have made up for a lack of expertise or indeed a lack of understanding of Chinese culture and society.

And this is really the crux of my hesitation to rate this book any higher: Fleming tried hard to transcend the stifled English attitude and open up to experience this different world that he threw himself into, but he never really manages to fully do this. As a result, the book reads like a boy's own adventure story - which it is, of course - but which could have been so much more in that his preoccupation with the British perspective seems to have blinded him to the marvels and wonders of the people and landscape he took so much trouble to encounter.

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## Kay says

### Travelling Asia at Asia's pace

Peter Fleming's account of his 3500-mile trek from Peking to Kashmir in 1935, a tale of adventure and portrait of a now-lost China, is enriched by his self-deprecating sense of humor and his expressive prose. A travel classic, *News from Tartary* is #64 on National Geographic's "100 Best Adventure Books" list.

Fleming calls himself "the amateur" and repeatedly draws the reader's attention to his lack of preparation:

*"Our ignorance, our chronic lack of advance information, must be unexampled in the annals of modern travel..... This state of affairs reflected discredibly on us, but was not without its compensations. It was pleasant, in a way, to be journeying always into the blue, with no Baedeker to eliminate surprise and marshal our first impressions in advance.*

Yet it is clear that there's a method to his madness and that this "amateur" prefers to live by his wits and take life as it comes:

*"There are, I know, many people to whom our existence would not have appealed; but actually it was a very good existence. We were down to brass tacks."*

Down to brass tacks. That really sums up nicely what Fleming and his companion Kini seemed to relish along the journey, which was fraught by heat, cold, thirst, hunger, and a thousand and one delays and frustrations.

But there are rewards along the way, moments of clarity and tranquility, such as when he looks down from a hillside onto the caravan he's traveling with:

*"There it wound, stately, methodical, through the bleak and empty land, 250 camels pacing in single file."*

Fleming excels at description. In a few quick strokes he portrays a superannuated "guard" assigned to them:

*"The escort was a spindle-shanked and defenceless dotard, a scarecrow in uniform with a face of wrinkled parchment. His fragility was alarming and we hoped sincerely that no strong wind would arise, for then we must surely lose him. He had with him a white and equally venerable pony, and on its back, wrapped in a tattered greatcoat, he rode, hunched in a coma, protecting us."*

The journey was conducted first by train, then by lorry, then by camel, horse, donkey, and, ultimately, on foot. Progress, was slow, but, to Fleming, this seemed appropriate:

*"We took, besides, a certain pride in the very slowness and primitive manner of our progress. We were traveling Asia at Asia's pace."*

Fleming's vivid accounts of the guides, bureaucrats, hangers-on, and ruffians met along the way are highly entertaining. His evocations of the stark landscape, impoverished settlements, and frequently brutal weather are equally striking. Fleming is most emotional, however, when he describes the suffering of the pack animals that he comes to know almost as well as his human companions. It would take a cold-hearted reader not to be moved when he and Kini are forced to abandon Kini's horse, Slalom, which is on its last legs:

*"We called to the Turkis to halt and unsaddled him [Slalom] for the last time. He stood as still as a stone, the ugly shadow of a horse, alone in the sunlight under the encircling hills; he had served us faithfully ever since Tangar. The camels moved off and I followed them; Kini stayed a little while with Slalom. I found that I was crying, for the first time in years."*

In contrast, Fleming describes his own sufferings and deprivations with restraint, regarding the bad food (or no food), verminous lodging-houses, scum-filled drinking holes, and other perils and discomforts of the road with dispassion.

*"You can hardly expect to cross Central Asia without occasionally experiencing inconveniences of this kind,"* he dryly notes.

There is, for the alert reader, the joy of lighting upon what I have come to think of as "Fleming-isms," those wonderfully apt turns of phrases that light up the imagination, often provoking laughter:

*"the beanstalk of procrastination"....*

*"the back wheels of the lorry fell through a small erection which was masquerading as a bridge"...*

*"in the matter of fuel we were back on the dung standard"....*

And countless others. There are, perhaps, fewer *bon mots* than in Fleming's *Brazilian Adventure*, but there's more continuity in this account, and the reader gains a better understanding of what mattered to Fleming.

What mattered it seemed, was to clear his mind of the fog of civilization and to be as self-reliant as possible. When Fleming and Kini, after some seven months on the road, suddenly find themselves at journey's end back in the bosom of the British Raj, they are discomfited. Abashed, they enter a magnificent hotel:

*Everyone was in evening dress. Anglo-India, starched and glossy, stared at us with horror and disgust. A stage clergyman with an Oxford voice started as though he had seen the devil. A hush, through which on all sides could be heard the fell epithet 'jungly,' descended on the assembled guests. We were back in Civilization."*



One senses, of course, that they would rather not be.

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*A note on this edition:*

If ever a book was in need of a preface, it is this one. I had been forewarned by a reviewer on Amazon that some editions lacked a map and the photos that had been in the original version of the book. Happily, the J.P. Tarcher edition I bought had both, but the map was small and quite difficult to follow and the photos were very cryptically subtitled and I was never sure what portions of the text they referred to.

However, the thing I longed for most was some background information on the political situation of China during this time. Finding myself somewhat at sea, I boned up a bit on 20th-century Chinese history and was able to follow a bit better. I later read that a limited edition has recently been published with a forward by Fleming's daughter. Perhaps this would be the best version to read, if one can lay hands on it.

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## **Rex Fuller says**

China, 1935. Communists wage civil war. The Soviet Union supports them and hunts down White Russian refugees. A dusty patina of poverty and disease settles everywhere. Of course, the very thing for a British newspaper reporter and his photographer friend to do would be a personal jaunt 3,500 miles west from Peking to Kashmir. Sort of informs the phrase “mad dogs and Englishmen.” The author was an experienced traveler having just been to the Caucasus, Ukraine, Samarkand, the Amur frontier, Vladivostok, Mongolia, Japan, and the Yangtse. Even so, this trip nearly smothered him, body and spirit.

Why are three old beggars wearing gauze boxes of lice on their calves? Answer: culturing anti-typhus serum. Thirty lice per dose. “Petty martyrdom” for twelve Chinese dollars a month. What passports and other permits are necessary? It is never certain and getting them is unknowably long. Inscrutable bureaucracy competes with lorry driver greed. The best strategy was never to reveal the ultimate destination, just the next one.

After an initial few days among piles of people in railcars, they traveled by foot, or mounted on camel, donkey, pony, or yak and were never comfortable. You’d be right to assume their caravan across China’s mountains and deserts was painfully cold. “For the first two or three hours it was always cold, and we would walk to restore the circulation in our feet. Sooner or later, every day the wind got up. It came tearing out of the west and scourged us without mercy. It was enough to drive you mad. You could not smoke, you could not speak (for nobody heard you), and after a time you could not think consecutively...The wind...played the same part on the Tibetan plateau as insects do in the tropical jungle.”

It took six full months in China – having three baths in that time frame – all the while cheated by Chinese, Mongol, or Turkic (Turkistani, that he called “Turki”) guides. Then, after one more month, Bandipur, Kashmir, in British India. The trip cost “roughly £150 each,” unimaginably cheap by today’s standards. Throughout, Fleming speaks in facile King’s English, such as his description of the entry at their destination hotel, “A hush, through which on all sides could be heard the fell epithet ‘jungly,’ descended on the assembled guests.” This is a remarkable and pleasurable read.

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## **Terri says**

I unwittingly did this book a great disservice. And so it is not really a reflection on the book that I nearly gave it 3 stars. I therefore gave it 4.

The problem was, I read an incredible 5 star book (Arabian Sands by Wilfred Thesiger) before News From Tartary and in light of that, News from Tartary paled in comparison.

I never felt a personal connection with this book, the people profiled within it, including the author, or the environment they travelled through. It was all just a bit intangible. It was also old fashioned, which Arabian Sands had not been, and that also shed News From Tartary in poor light. Robert Fleming is a man who calls American Indians 'Red Indians' and hunts for pleasure, an antiquated activity that led to many a Westerner taking photos of themselves standing over dead lions and elephants, or having them stuffed for their drawing rooms. This is the kind of old fashioned writer and book that I don't like.

I don't appreciate former generations who took such little interest in vanishing species and environment and cultures. People who lusted for adventure travel and rode out into the vast interiors of the continents with a dozen guides and servants, a pipe in their mouth and a general disregard for the lands they travelled through. So, this is why I nearly gave it 3 stars, but ended with 4.

Wilfred Thesiger showed me in his book, Arabian Sands, that being of this era doesn't have to mean hunting for pleasure and that you can do things for yourself and that you can incorporate other cultures into your routine and life while you travel - as opposed to simply observing them from the saddle of your horse or the door of your tent.

Robert Fleming showed me nothing that even came close to this in News From Tartary.

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## **Julian Schwarzenbach says**

Rereading of a favourite travel book.

I first read this in a lovely 1930's hardback edition some 30 years ago and found the writing spellbinding and very evocative. Having not looked at it for a number of years, I have just re-read it (after having re-read Brazilian Adventure and One's Company).

The writing is still well paced and very evocative of a long and sometimes tedious and arduous journey. The description of the people and places are fascinating, particularly as the world described almost certainly no longer exists in this form. Make sure that you get an edition that has all the photographs - although the quality of some is not brilliant, they help add an extra dimension to the book and the people and places described.

Whilst there are some dated phrases and terms, they can be easily ignored or skipped over.

Overall, a classic piece of travel writing.

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## **Sigrid Ellis says**

My goodness, I liked this book.

Peter Fleming was brother to the James-Bond-famous Ian Fleming. Peter was a journalist, a world traveler,

and an occasional spy. In 1935 he traveled from Peking to Srinagar. He traveled with a Swiss journalist, Kini, by truck, donkey, horse, camel, and foot through Siankiang, now known as the Western Uighur Autonomous Region of China. In 1935 it was under contested rule by China, an independence movement, and the Soviet Union. When Fleming and Kini set out, no one had heard anything from the interior of the province in six months. There was a likely chance that they would be arrested or killed as spies.

Yet Fleming's book is a light, wry, acerbic, self-deprecating narrative of the trip. Fleming highlights his own errors and failings, while praising the competence and humor of his traveling companion Kini. While the book does deal in ethnic stereotyping -- particularly of the Turkis, an ethnic group whose possible relation to the Turks I never actually understood -- Fleming manages to see most of the people encountered as individuals, not types.

Do be warned that the ethnocentrism and racism of the British in the 1930s is the lens through which the story is told. If that is a deal-breaker for you, avoid this book. But if you can read a book with that tone, and you like travelogues, history, and wry British humor, this book is for you.

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## Daren says

For those who aren't aware, *Forbidden Journey*, by Ella Maillart and *News From Tartary* by Peter Fleming both describe the same journey, at the same time, taken together. They were somewhat reluctant companions, who both expressed their misgivings about undertaking the journey together.

*"The jokes were flying. Somebody observed that Peter's last book was called One's Company, and the English edition of my last book, was Turkestan Solo. Now here we were, contrary to all our principles, going off together!"*

In both *Forbidden Journey* and *News From the Tartary* the authors distance themselves from the greatness of their work. Fleming goes so far in his Foreword to say *"Anyone familiar, even vicariously, with the regions which he traversed will recognise the inadequacy of my descriptions of them... we were no specialists. The world's stock of knowledge – geographical, ethnological, meteorological, what you will – gained nothing from our journey. Nor did we mean that it should. Much as we should have liked to justify our existence by bringing back material which would have set the hive of learned men buzzing... we were not qualified to do so. We measured no skulls, we took no readings; we would not have known how. We travelled for two reasons only... We wanted to find out what was happening in Sinkiang... the second... was because we believed, in the light of previous experience, that we should enjoy it. It turned out we were right. We enjoyed it very much."*

Both these books were written in a fairly humble, self-deprecating way, something I hadn't expected from Fleming in particular. I had found his *One's Company: A Journey to China* in 1933 written quite pretentiously, and I hadn't enjoyed it much at all. *News from the Tartary* however is not written this way at all.

Both books come across as accurately written, where one omits detail the other picks detail up, but they don't contradict each other. It may be that one author takes more from one encounter, or one location than the other, or one author is more involved in the conversation with a certain person, and therefore finds more to describe. At times an even that might take a chapter to explain in one book is bypassed with a sentence in the other book. I don't think anything would be lost from reading only one or other of these books, but I

enjoyed the novelty of reading them together .

It is fair to say that the journey was not unique – it was not the first time this route had been followed, but it was the first time for a number of years, and it would be a number more before it was repeated. To say that the journey of Maillart and Fleming was an inspiration for dozens of other intrepid travellers is no exaggeration.

Great books. I have opted to review them together... mainly due to the fact I read them together and can't really separate them.

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### **Melissa McShane says**

I enjoyed Fleming's book *To Peking: A Forgotten Journey from Moscow to Manchuria* very much, and a commenter on that review suggested I read this one. I'm so glad I did. It was a delightful account of two people's travels to a place they absolutely weren't supposed to go--and did anyway. Fleming has a witty, dry voice that draws you in and makes even his accounts of the political situation in Asia in the 1930s interesting. The deserts of central Asia come alive--if you can call it that when so much of the journey takes place in lands bare of any form of life.

Fleming and his companion, Ella "Kini" Maillart, endure any number of privations with a nonchalance that left me stunned. I'm trying not to imagine something called *tsamba*, which is a sort of meal mixed with tea into a lump of I don't even know what to compare it to. Sometimes the tea is mixed with a lump of rancid yak's butter, which frankly I thought Terry Pratchett made up. Fleming's enthusiasm for hunting combines both his love of the hunt and his need for food that isn't sawdust-meal and yak butter. Reading this book made my appetite disappear. Also amusing are Fleming's infrequent comments on what it was like traveling with a woman he wasn't romantically interested in; at one point he says that if this were a romance novel, he and Kini would have fallen madly in love by then, but unfortunately for the reputation of romances, they remained platonically friendly.

Though Fleming's attitudes are those of an Englishman of his time, with casually racist assumptions about the Asians he encounters, the fact that he makes equally broad and probably unjustified generalizations about *every* non-European he meets tempers those assumptions. He's also quick to ascribe positive characteristics to anyone, regardless of race, and my overall impression is of a man who valued his own civilization but saw good things in that of others. I'm definitely interested in reading more of his journeys.

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