



# TIBET

## *Through the Red Box*

By Peter Sís

Adapted by David Henry Hwang



### **Synopsis**

Tibet is a land of mystery and spirituality, a land of majestic peaks and hidden valleys, a land of peace. For most of us Tibet will always be a world away, but for Peter Sís, Tibet became something very real right in his own bedroom.

When Peter was a boy, the Russians invaded the Sís' homeland of Czechoslovakia. This new regime ordered Peter's father to leave home and make a film for the Chinese government—a film showing them building a highway into Tibet. He was only supposed to be gone for three months.

With nothing but his father's letters sent home, Peter tries to piece together what has happened to his father that has kept him away for three years. These stories transport Peter into a mystical world of monks, yeti, and lamas.

As Peter falls from a roof his father is caught in an avalanche. Somehow Mr. Sís survives unharmed—but now he is trapped in the wilds of Tibet completely alone, or is he? Soon he crosses paths with the Jingle Bell Boy, who somehow carries a letter from Peter to his father. All this time, Peter convalesces with a gift from his mother—a paint set. As Mr. Sís' story unfolds, Peter illustrates these wondrous tales. These images transport him, and us, to the land of magic. We travel to the lake of human-faced fish; the Buddhist palace, Potala, in Lhasa; and through a test of will, patience, forgiveness, and love. We all come out the other side, back into reality, back home.

### **Resource List**

#### ***For Children***

**Far Beyond the Garden Gate: Alexandra David-Neel's Journey to Lhasa**

Don Brown

**I Have an Olive Tree**

Eve Bunting

**Our Journey from Tibet: Based on a True Story**

Laurie Dolphin

**Trapped by the Ice!: Shackleton's Amazing Antarctic Adventure**

Michael McCurdy

**The Little Lama of Tibet**

Lois Raimondo

**Grandfather's Journey**

Allen Say

**A Small Tall Tale from the Far Far North**

Peter Sís

**Grass Sandals: The Travels of Basho**

Dawnine Spivak

#### **★ Spotlight**

**Explor-a-maze**

Robert Snedden

Maps, mazes, and narrative introduce the journeys of ten explorers in a unique history of discovery.

#### ***For Parents and Educators***

#### **★ Spotlight**

**The Dalai Lama: A Biography of the Tibetan Spiritual and Political Leader**  
Demi

In simple language and glorious art, Demi introduces the fourteenth Dalai Lama, his life as a spiritual leader, and the culture he represents.

# Tibet: A Land of Peace and Turmoil

In *Tibet Through the Red Box*, Peter's father is forced to travel to the east to film the People's Republic of China constructing a highway through Tibet. The history between China and Tibet is a long and complicated one, with treaty and border disputes remaining unresolved.

In 1950, China invaded Tibet, marking the beginning of the modern conflict that continues to this day. Tibetan culture incorporates concepts of peace and nonviolence, and yet the land has witnessed intense strife and discord for more than 50 years. As with any conflict, there are two sides to the issue: the Chinese argue that Tibet has been a part of China since the 13<sup>th</sup> century; Tibet maintains that it was an independent nation until the modern Chinese invasion. This hostile takeover has resulted in the loss of many lives and the near obliteration of a unique way of life.



Seeing a man in a town square holding a prayer wheel is not an uncommon sight in Tibet as religion is an integral part of everyday life for the Tibetan people. Photo by Eric Bolz.

Tibetan society is characterized more by religion than any other factor, primarily Buddhism. Most Tibetans believe in reincarnation (being reborn in another body after death) and nirvana (the place of enlightenment similar to the Christian idea of heaven), and stress the importance of living a compassionate life. Meditation (time devoted to stillness and personal reflection) is practiced regularly. The three “delusions” considered the causes of all suffering are: greed (symbolized by the hen), hatred (symbolized by the snake), and ignorance (symbolized by the wild boar). These ideas and practices helped create Tibet’s reputation as a land of peace and tranquility.

Before the Chinese invasion, one out of every five Tibetans was a Buddhist monk or nun. A particularly special monk may be designated a lama – someone believed to be the reincarnation of another lama from a past life. Religion and government are so intertwined that the Dalai Lama (a name first given in the 1300s by the Mongol ruler Altan Khan), the highest-ranking lama, is both the spiritual and political leader of Tibet. The current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. He currently lives in exile from Tibet in Dharamsala, India.

Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution of the 1960s decimated Tibetan society. The Chinese destroyed over 6,000 monasteries, leaving only about 40. Some of those were rebuilt, but with the intention of creating tourist attractions rather than restoring active religious practice to the area. Artists, intellectuals, and religious practitioners were forced to renounce their professions, flee the country, or be persecuted. The Chinese government seized land, and diverted an already limited food supply in order to feed its soldiers, leaving many Tibetan people to starve. China’s government also encouraged Chinese people to relocate in Tibet, offering incentives and land to those who accepted. This had the effect of diminishing the Tibetan population even further, as Tibetans were being pushed to the outside of their own society.

The rest of the world seemed to turn a blind eye to the situation in Tibet. Not wanting to anger China and endanger lucrative trading partnerships, many nations timidly and briefly questioned whether China had just cause for the takeover, but few, if any, took action in support of Tibet. As a result, the tiny and peaceful country experienced horrific upheaval and destruction alone. Today, a Tibetan community thrives in Dharamsala, populated mainly by refugees. Society and tradition are being actively preserved, and the Dalai Lama still holds hope that an agreement with China can be reached, and he will be able to return to his homeland in this lifetime.

## ACTIVITY:

Imagine your class is being sent into exile. It is up to you all to preserve your cultural heritage. You won’t have to worry about food, water, clothing, or shelter but everything else you bring with you must fit into one large backpack. Ask each student to make a list of the things he/she thinks have the biggest cultural significance. Would they want to bring books? Music? Religious tokens? Games? Now, as a class, compare your lists and decide what to put in your backpack. You have only twenty minutes to choose what to bring with you into exile to keep your heritage alive.



The 14th Dalai Lama.

# Buddhas, Thangkas, and Mandalas: Tibetan Art

It is almost impossible to separate Tibetan life and culture from Tibetan art, and certainly the division between Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan art is almost imperceptible, if a division exists at all. According to [www.himalayanart.org](http://www.himalayanart.org), it is "important to note that not only the visual arts but even the written language was developed for the purposes of the establishment, practice, and propagation of Buddhism. Buddhism had become the basis and means of the life, culture, and literacy of the Tibetan people."

There are many forms of artistic expression that Tibetans employ in their religious lives, and each form has its strict rules and patterns that are infused with specific religious significance. There are a few icons that people from around the world identify with Tibetan Buddhism: Buddha sculptures, mandalas, and thangkas.

When we think of Buddhism and its religious iconography, most likely the first image that springs to mind is a statue of



a Buddha. Statues or sculptures of Buddhas are some of the oldest and most important religious artifacts in Tibetan culture. "Exquisite Buddha images were cast using alloys whose production is an alchemical mystery," according to [www.himalayanart.org](http://www.himalayanart.org). These statues are as varied as the number of deities found in Buddhism, and each has its own significance and structure. Often

sculptures would be gilded and made hollow, with precious gems placed inside before a ceremony to mark the closing of the statue took place, which is why so many of these art works are the subject of vandalism and theft.

Another common and important art form in Tibetan Buddhism is the mandala. These are "two dimensional representations of the multidimensional universes Buddhas inhabit...mandalas are akin to architectural blueprints or aerial views of celestial palaces constructed of enlightened concepts" ([www.himalayanart.org](http://www.himalayanart.org)). Mandalas can be made as paintings and were often frescoes, paintings that are created directly on walls. A form of mandala creation that may be more familiar to us is the sand mandala, which

[www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com) tells us is "a painstaking, meticulous practice ending in the destruction of the work to demonstrate the law of impermanence."



Another keystone to Tibetan art is the thangka. Thangkas are scroll paintings that were first introduced to Tibet by Buddhist monks from India. These nomadic monks would travel the land making camp along the way, always outfitted for a full religious ceremony. Thangkas are used in ritual meditation and visualization practices. The art of thangka-making is generally passed down from father to son with the son apprenticing for his father. These scrolls are made using linen or occasionally silk.

The fabric is stretched on a frame and a base of chalk is applied to prepare the surface. The master thangka artist draws a charcoal outline of the design, which he then goes over with black ink, delineating which colors are to go where. The apprentice then fills in the colors for the master to go over in more detail, highlighting and shadowing and adding depth to the work. When the painting is finished it is mounted on a cloth, brocade borders are added, sticks are attached to the bottom for rolling the scroll, and then the whole thing is covered with silk veils for protection.

Tibetan art, in whatever form, is a continuation of and an aid to the people's religious life. For Tibetan Buddhists art doesn't imitate life, it is life.



## ACTIVITY:

### Make your own Mandala

Idea from [www.teachervision.com](http://www.teachervision.com)

Have your students each create a mandala that is the map of their life and consciousness. In the center of the mandala put the unifying theme of "self." Surrounding that center area make four quadrants. You can brainstorm labels for these sections or use the labels: heroes/heroines, goals/principals, compassion, and hopes for the future. Each student should fill in each section with symbols that represent that category to them and in their lives. For

example, in the "hopes for the future" section they may draw a pair of interlocked hands to represent harmony among all people. Because the outer categories are what make up the inner section, or the self, this area should be filled in last. You can have your students present and explain their mandalas to the class or post them without names so that the students can try to interpret each mandala on their own and guess who made which one.

## Author as Illustrator and Illustrator as Author

Beatrix Potter held a rather strong opinion about creating books for children – she felt that all writers should also be illustrators: “Kenneth Grahame ought to have been an artist,” she said about the author of *Wind in the Willows*, “at least all writers for children ought to have sufficient recognition of what things look like – did he not describe Toad as combing his *hair*? A mistake to fly in the face of nature – a frog may wear galoshes, but I don’t hold with toads having beards or wigs.”

Perhaps more of a realist than many writers for young people, Potter felt that stories should stay firmly rooted in the realm of the physical world, rather than venture *too* far into the imagination. Her feeling may be extreme, but her belief does support the widely acknowledged importance of an intricate relationship between text and illustration. Illustrator Ralph Caldecott, namesake of the prestigious Caldecott Medal for outstanding children’s picture books, felt that “the illustrations fill in what the words leave out, and the words fill in what the pictures leave out – both closely interwoven, each enhanced by the other.”

Good illustrations don’t prescribe the only way a story should look, but rather spark the reader’s imagination even further by adding a visual component. The pictures take the text in new directions, allowing a story to expand beyond the page.

In *Tibet Through the Red Box*, Peter Sis created his own mandala (traditional Tibetan representational painting) for the cover image. This illustration adds a visual experience of Tibetan aesthetics, helping take the reader deeper into the world of the story.

When there are two different people writing the text and creating the illustrations for a story, conflict may arise and artistic visions may differ. Sis drew the artwork for Sid Fleischman’s *Prince Brat and the Whipping Boy*, and found the creative process somewhat challenging, as so many images had already been fully described by the text. He says, “I find it much easier to work for myself. If other people write, ‘The forest has spruces all around,’ it can be hard to draw. I can write what I like to draw, like one tree.”

Styles of work vary among author/illustrators. While *Tibet Through the Red Box* relies heavily on detail, both in intricate artwork and word-heavy text, someone like P.D. Eastman chooses simplicity and sparseness in his work: *Go, Dog. Go!* and *Are You My Mother?* use bold colors and a small number of well-chosen words to craft their worlds.

Dr. Seuss is whimsical in both picture and language. All of these artists hold in common great skill at relating the visual and the verbal, which lends itself to creating books that are complete works of art.



Here we see one of the illustrations from *Tibet Through the Red Box*.

### ACTIVITY:

Invite your students to use someone else’s non-illustrated story to create a series of drawings or paintings that illustrate the story. Ask them to try and blend what the author describes with something original, and concentrate on what the story makes them think of that might not be described literally with words. Then let them choose a picture book without text and add their own words to tell the story. Ask them to try to think about what is happening just outside the picture that they might not see. Now, ask them which was easier? Why?

## Teacher Activities

### Focus: *Tibet Through the Red Box*

Book by Peter Sis; Adapted by David Henry Hwang

**Goals:** To introduce drama activities that will expand on the *Educator Resource Guide* and deepen comprehension on themes from the play; to provide activities that can be adapted to support other curriculum goals.

#### **CROSS THE LINE**

Students stand in two lines facing each other, with an imaginary line running down the middle. A list of statements is made, getting more personal as the game progresses, and students must cross the line if the statement is true for them. No verbal communication is allowed, and this is a good time to discuss verbal versus non-verbal communication.

Some suggested statements related to this play include:

*Cross the room if...*

*your favorite color is yellow, orange, or purple*

*you write in a journal*

*you let someone read your journal*

*you've traveled outside of Washington*

*you've traveled outside of the US*

*you've traveled to somewhere the people speak another language besides your first language*

*someone in your family has ever left for more than a week*

*you've ever been away from your family for more than a week*

*you have a talent*

*you like to draw*

**Activity Goals:** to build empathy with the characters and situations in the play; to assess what the group already knows about a specific topic; to encourage independent non-verbal thought and action.

#### **DRAWING DIRECTIONS**

In pairs, students take turns being the artist and the director. The director is secretly given a picture of an animal to describe to the artist. The artist then draws what the director described. Students compare the pictures and comment on why there are differences, if any.

**VARIATION:** Read a description from the book, and have students draw what they envision.

Compare the drawings. What influences our interpretations?

**Activity Goals:** to interpret verbal words into art, modeling Peter's interpretations of his father's letters; to use more specific details in descriptions.

## **GO, STOP, DROP, MELT**

In this activity, each command has a specific meaning:

**Go:** Move around the room at random

**Stop:** Freeze

**Drop:** Fall to the floor as quickly as possible while staying safe.

**Melt:** Melt to the floor in slow motion.

These commands can be given in almost any order, except that after “Drop” the teacher must say “Go”. Giving the command “stop” in the middle of a “melt” is especially interesting and valuable, because it allows the students to explore different body positions and learn balance and control of the body.

- VARIATIONS:**
1. Add commands, to indicate a more specific type of movement than “go.” (Popcorn, twizzle, jitterbug, and character transformations like dinosaur).
  2. Have the students “Rewind” (retrace steps until a new word is said) or combine words, e.g. “dancing dinosaur.”
  3. You can add a vocal component by adding sounds for “Go” (they make a consistent sound for “go”) and the same for “stop” and “melt”.
  4. Add “focus” (focusing eyes and attention on a person) and emotions (“focus on teacher with love”).
  5. Add music and environments.

Some suggested commands related to this play include:

*“Go” as though you are walking through the highest mountains.*

Sidecoach: *the air is thin, there are people dangling over the edge on ropes, and the sides are crumbling...”Stop!”*

*“Go” as though you are exploring a forest you’ve never seen before...*

Sidecoach: *What do you notice around you? What’s above your head? What’s beneath your feet? You get lost in the forest...”Stop!”*

Discussion: *What’s the difference between exploring and being lost?*

**Activity Goals:** to actively explore environments and obstacles in the play; to discover the different feelings associated with exploring and being lost; to encourage visualization, imagination, and control of one’s body.

## **STATUES AND TABLEAUX**

This activity can be built into “Go, Stop, Drop, Melt” or exist on its own.

Each student has 3-5 seconds to form an independent statue with his/her body based on the leader’s command.

Some suggested character statues related to this play include:

On the count of three, I want to see a frozen statue of...

*A soldier*

*A photographer*

*A dancer/musician*

*A spiritual leader*

*A jingle-bell boy*

*An explorer*

*Someone opening a letter*

Other suggested statues related to this play include:

On the count of three, I want to see a frozen statue of...

*Something that is red/blue/green/black*

*An emotion/feeling that you would connect to the color red/blue/green/black*

Leader can spotlight certain dynamic statues at any time, pointing out what s/he notices about them.

Now the leader pairs up students to form statues together.

Some suggested character and environment tableaux/pictures related to this play include:

On the count of three, I want to see a frozen tableaux/picture of...

*A mountain*

*Fish with human heads*

*Abominable snowmen*

Some suggested relationship tableaux/pictures related to this play include:

On the count of three, I want to see a frozen tableaux/picture of...

*A parent and sick child*

*A traveler and guide*

*A soldier and child*

The leader can also call for the students to create small group or even entire class tableaux.

Some suggested scene tableaux related to this play include:

On the count of three, I want to see a frozen tableaux/picture of...

*Workers creating a road on a mountain*

*Kids running from a Russian soldier*

*A traveler entering a palace*

*Yetis helping a foreign person*

*A pond with many human faced fish*

**Activity Goals:** to encourage creative collaboration among students; to spark thoughts about the relationships found in the play; to connect colors to emotions; to demonstrate possible staging choices.

### **INNER MONOLOGUE OR THOUGHT TRACKING**

These techniques can be added to any tableau or scene. While holding a tableau, the leader circulates, touching each student in turn to speak his or her thoughts out loud. Or, if the group is examining a tableau, ask the group to voice, in first person, what a specific character is thinking in the frozen picture. Inner Monologues: Leader (teacher) calls out "Freeze!" and as all are frozen, one by one the students as their character are allowed to speak their thoughts.

**Activity Goals:** to build empathy by portraying other characters; to practice thinking on one's feet; to delve deeper into the tableaux and make verbal choices based on a physical shape.

### **GROUP FORMATION**

*I don't know if it's even possible, or how you're going to do it, but by the time I count to five, you will be standing next to someone who...has the same color eyes/shirt etc. Keep calling different commonalities until you're satisfied with the pair choices.*

*On the count of three, I want to see groups of two/three/etc. Keep calling "Switch!" until you're satisfied with the group choices.*

### **TOWN MEETING**

Debate the merits and the drawbacks of building a road in Tibet. After watching the show, divide the class into people from Tibet, people from China, and people from Prague. Discover how viewpoints may or may not have changed.

**Activity Goals:** to embody other points of view besides the contemporary western world; to build persuasive skills.

### **Final Statue**

Make a statue of something you would like to do if you were away from your family for more than a week.