

# Mastiff or MOUNTAIN DOG?

◀ *Defining Tibetan Mastiff Breed Type*

By Richard W. Eichhorn, Drakyi Tibetan Mastiffs

In this two-part series, we will unravel the nuances of Tibetan Mastiff breed type. This is a subject that has been the source of decades of internal conflict and controversy in international Tibetan Mastiff communities. It is also the reason why this most ancient of breeds did not enter the AKC until 2007.

While each breed of dog has variations, the differences in the Tibetan Mastiff world could be described almost as breed differences, not

just varieties within a breed. At the very least, we are talking about two, perhaps three or more distinct varieties in the breed, defined by size, type, color and coat differences, which could (or should?) compete for separate breed ribbons. This presents a confusing and frustrating situation for judges, who are forced to either put up a homogenized and safe Working dog that somewhat incorporates the best of the varieties present, or to select the best of his or her preferred type.

When mentoring, the number-one question I am asked is: *Why is there such a great variation in size and breed type in this breed?*

Simply stated, it is a collision between the Eastern/native need for function versus the Western need for a single, identifiable breed type. Native breeders and owners prized and bred for function and a flock guardian character, with less regard for consistency in size, type, color and coat. And with the extreme isolation of breeding populations of dogs in Tibet due to the harsh climate and treacherous terrain, remote villages would often each have their own version of a Tibetan Mastiff.

Historically there are documented separate varieties/sub-varieties of Tibetan/Himalayan dogs (Tsang Khyi, Do-khyi, Lion, Tiger, Snow, Himalayan Sheepdog, Bhotia, Bangara Mastiff, etc.) that have come to be identified as those used to resurrect this breed and save it from extinction after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in the 1950s. All those influences appear in contemporary Tibetan Mastiff studbooks and are now all classified under one “Tibetan Mastiff” umbrella. In its native land, the Tibetan Mastiff – now known throughout FCI countries as the “Do-Khyi,” in China and Tibet as the “Zang-Ao” (Tibet Dog), and in Taiwan as the “Ao-Chen” (Dog of Tibet) – was not found to be that standardized in appearance/phenotype as we have come to expect in Western dogdom.

The reason for this is simple: Traditional Tibetan dog breeding was the result of geographic patterns and subject to climate extremes, rather than the intentional, thoughtful breeding process we associate with dog breeding today. The nomadic life of herdsman was not conducive to developing a breeding program, and breed type (appearance) was not the main concern of the nomads. Function, based on physical soundness, and a strong guardian disposition were the two most highly sought after and prized traits in the dogs. Genetics were neither completely understood nor readily employed by the early Tibetans in their production of dogs; therefore, they failed to arrest the tendency of





By the famed British animal painter Arthur Wardle, showing the ideal outline and proportions for the breed. Today, with more length of neck and the profuse mane and feathering that come with maturity, this dog would regularly be seen in the winner's circle.

type variation that can be controlled by selective breeding programs now practiced in the West. Thus, dissimilar types and varieties developed in different regions.

Those differences (mastiff vs. shepherd/mountain dog) are still plainly seen in different breeding programs and regional populations today. To better explain this discrepancy, in 1901, Mr. L. Jacob spoke of his most recent trek into Tibet:

*"A group of twenty Thibetan (Mastiff) dogs might be taken at random, and if arranged in line, the most mastiff-like animal at one flank and the most sheepdog-like at the other, the rest being sorted in between by gradation, it would be absolutely impossible to say where the one variety ended and the other began."*

Yet, in his words, the difference between the most "mastiff-like" and most "sheepdog-like" types of Tibetan Mastiffs he describes are no doubt great, to say the least, with tremendous differences in type and size, and even color and temperament. The same holds true today, more than 100 years later! The two most often seen and historically documented varieties of Tibetan Mastiffs that Mr. Jacob spoke

of are known today as the Tsang-Khyi and the Do-Khyi, the former considered to be the finest, largest and most prized dogs, the latter the more commonly found smaller working variety. The best description of the mastiff Tsang-Khyi variety was given by Mr. W. Gill in his narrative of a journey through China and Eastern Tibet to Burma in 1880:

*"The chief had a huge dog, kept in a cage on the top of the wall at the entrance. It was a very heavily built black-and-tan, the tan of a very good colour; his coat was rather long, but smooth; he had a bushy tail, smooth tan legs, and an enormous head that seemed out of proportion to the body, very much like that of a bloodhound in shape with overhanging lips. His bloodshot eyes were very deep-set, and his ears were flat and drooping. He had tan spots over the eyes, and a tan spot on the breast. He measured four feet from the point of the nose to the root of the tail, and two feet ten inches in height at the shoulder [34"!]. He was three years old, and was of the true Tibetan [Mastiff] breed."*

This presents a very clear, descriptive picture for us today in reference to

type and specific cross-referencing pertaining to giant size and extremes associated with mastiff type. The largest Tsang Khyi type of dogs were often found in the monasteries serving as stationary guardians, gifts to the monks so that the owner might find favor in God's eyes. Others were sold to the wealthy as courtyard guardians, as few people could afford to feed such a large animal, while the smaller, more common shepherd-like Do-Khyi remained in the villages, in the pastures, with the caravans and on the trail with the nomads functioning in more of a livestock/flock guardian capacity. The first imports that reached U.S. shores some 40 years ago were from this wide, overly diverse gene base, varying in type, quality, authenticity and even *purity* depending upon their area of origin and the influence of other environmental factors. While these early U.S. imports represented the myriad of varieties referenced by Mr. L. Jacob in his narrative, the majority of present day Tibetan Mastiffs can now begin to be classified in the two distinct types of dogs historically known as the Tibetan Mastiff: the mastiff-like Tsang-Khyi and the mountain/shepherd-like Do-Khyi. Although the gap between the two types was often blurred and is bridged through the blending of



As I readied to award BIS, I asked for the rosette or trophy. I was then informed, "It is the red car outside the ring!" Pictured: The "father of the Tibetan Mastiff in China," Wang Zhankui (far left); the Mayor (left of car); the breeder/owner of the BIS (center); fellow judge Carolyn Alexander; Mrs. Luo Go,; me, and FCI breed specialist from Taiwan, Tibetan Mastiff breeder Wu Shinn-Shyong (far right).



Rick Eichhorn, Mrs. Lou Go, Carolyn Alexander and Mr. Luo Go.

contemporary bloodlines, a wide range of differences can still be seen in size, breed type, coat, color and at times, temperament.

It was during my 2007 trip to judge a Tibetan Mastiff Specialty in Anyang, China (my Best of Breed/BIS was actually awarded a car!) that I had the great pleasure to meet the former Mayor of Lhasa, Tibet, Luo Go. At some 70 years of age, he had been born in Tibet, lived there all his life, and had owned and bred Tibetan Mastiffs before, during and after Chinese involvement there, even to this very day. And while my 30-plus years of breeding, owning, handling and importing every major bloodline in the world today gave me a broader and more global base and perspective on the breed, this was the Holy Grail for me, a man who had actually lived his life in the presence of the “true” breed in the heart of its native land.

No more opinions or mere conjecture, these were the facts. I just needed my stone tablets to record his words of wisdom. I gladly became the student as we spent that week together as honored VIPs, and then another week in 2008 as invited guests to the opening of a new, multimillion-dollar kennel, exclusively featuring dogs from Tibet proper or from populations bred by Tibetan nationals on the Qinghai Plateau in China. My views on the breed and what I had known were challenged, redefined and affirmed all at the same time.

Here, in a world premiere exclusive to *Modern Molosser*, is the article he entrusted to me to share with the Western world, along with supporting photos that represent the dogs he describes.

I sincerely hope the Mayor's article begins to give you understanding as to what constitutes a true Tibetan Mastiff, but also that it helps you to know how to prioritize what you might be seeing in your ring. In part two of this series, I will go into more depth about the Tsang Khyi Valley, the Tsang Khyi Plateau and the Do-khyi Lion types. And as you read, please note your questions pursuant to type and send them to me at [drakytms@aol.com](mailto:drakytms@aol.com) so that I can address them in the next installment. In the meantime, happy judging!

# Straight from the Source

## Tibetan Mastiff Type and Conformation in Tibet

By Mr. Luo Go

Translation by Wu Chengmin, Tibetan Mastiff Research Center, Gon Yi, China



The Tibetan Mastiff is an original breed with substance and bone, four strong and sturdy limbs with powerful muscles and substance, with no excess of body mass under the skin. All these traits are geared to the extreme high and frigid climates. They have strong reproductive capacity and immune systems, and are late to mature. They grow a profuse coat of weather-resistant hair, with heavy undercoat for insulation.

For thousands of years, the Tibetan Mastiff has thrived in the harsh natural environment of Tibet with minimal resources. People have not interfered with their breeding systematically, so there are not obvious outside influences, nor extreme variations. Therefore, this kind of dog has been preserved as an ancient and original breed.

In spite of this, they can vary in type. To some degree, the difference of physical structure and type are a result of environment because of the terrain, ecology and management in rearing puppies, influenced by available resources and the social economy. The following explains the different types of Tibetan Mastiffs in Tsingzang Plateau, according to their type, structure and function.

# VALLEY

## Tibetan Mastiff



### The Valley Tibetan Mastiff in Tibet (abbr. "Tsang Khyi")

In Tibet, the Valley Tibetan Mastiff, or *Tsang Khyi*, is mainly found and produced in mountainous regions of the south, in Tibet's Autonomous Districts of Cuomai, Jiazha Sanru, Cuona and Longzi, all counties with high mountainous valley pastures.

In the mid-19th Century, in Charles Darwin's book "The Variations of Animals and Plants Under Domestication," Darwin praises the "enormous black mastiff" living in southern Himalayan mountain regions of Tibet. Here he no doubt refers to the large Tibetan Mastiffs known to be found in that same region.

Commonly, our Tibetan people call it the *Tsang Khyi*, referring to the very large size and particularly fine and preferred type of the variety. This kind of Tibetan Mastiff is prized for guarding and overseeing property, and for its beautiful, preferred type. Frequently, we tie them to the gate or both sides of the tent to serve as a sentry, or "do-khyi," when intruders approach.

The size of the most outstanding adult male is more than 75 cm (29.5 inches), with adult females averaging 70 cm (27.5 inches). They have a very big head and the pronounced occiput, thick and longer drooping ears, deeply set triangular eyes that show red haw when angry, with the upper lip hanging and pendulous, open flew at the back corners of the mouth, the obvious full mane to the withers and a broad straight back, gently rising to a tapering and narrowing rump, with a slight tuck up in the abdomen. The colors for this variety are black and tan ("Jiama") and solid black ("Dongma"), allowing some white markings. The gold, parti-color and dilute gray, as

well as others, are colors that indicate blending with other types of Tibetan Mastiffs, or cross-breeding with other Himalayan dogs.

The prevalent features of the Valley or Tsang Khyi Tibetan Mastiff are:

#### 1. Special ability for property protection

Because of the Valley Tibetan Mastiff's larger and sturdy physique and longer time of domestication, Tsang Khyi's head and upper lip becomes more and more pronounced and pendulous with age, making it increasingly less able and suited to confront predators. Therefore, the Valley Tsang Khyi should not go with the flock and shepherd. For thousands of years, the Valley Tsang Khyi Tibetan Mastiffs have not belonged to the flock-guardian variety. Their value is in domestic watchfulness, and to be enjoyed by the family. This type of Tibetan Mastiff is faithful to his master and the master's domesticated animals. They not only recognize and accept people, but will accept strangers interacting with their master's family. However, they will not tolerate any unknown animals near their master's animal or home, particularly at night. They stay alert and watchful throughout the night, patrolling their home property.

Once they encounter an intruder or new situation, the master can identify if the newcomer is a beast or a stranger according to the sound of the bark, and can also detect the direction and distance so as to be prepared to take the most effective measures. Once the territory is breached, all of a sudden the Tsang Khyi will rush toward the stranger and sniff to identify. At that moment, if the stranger keeps still, he will be safe. Otherwise the Tsang Khyi will bite down and hold onto the stranger, with as much discretionary force as needed until the master comes.

#### 2. A high value for enjoying the visual appearance and behavior

The peculiar voice of the Tsang Khyi type is sonorous, rugged and very deep. At any time, the Tsang Khyi uses different sounds to alert the master



## ▶ PLATEAU Tibetan Mastiff

to the exact information and different distances between the Tibetan Mastiff and the stranger. The Tibetan experts hold the view that the Tsang Khyi's bark has a strong rumble that other mastiff types don't have. The inheritance of special sound is very consistent and dominant in the Tsang Khyi. Although there can be degradation of the bark with the crossing of types of Tibetan Mastiff, the offspring of the pure Tsang Khyi will be evident to the ear with their sonorous, deep and pleasing sound. Indeed, it is very important and most valuable to preserve this distinct type and sound.

It's vital for us to value and preserve the pure Tsang Khyi Valley type of Tibetan Mastiff and to respect and protect their age-old traditions. Also, careful selection and using genetic data must be employed to make the best breedings come to fruition by constantly searching for the right combination of this type. With the changing world the Tibetan Mastiff must live in, and its changing role with mankind, this topic is a sparking point for necessary discussion.

An important reminder again, unique and crucial to the type, the sounds the Tsang Khyi makes change when the distance between the dog and stranger changes from far to near. The sounds of the Tsang Khyi change and progress with intensity while seated and when standing, then while walking and while running. When a stranger passes by the Tsang Khyi, a tethered Tsang Khyi will lunge and strain at the end of the chain, the neck compressed and choking, the eyes showing blood red, the gnashing of teeth, and in the moment we only hear the ragged, hoarse voice and panting breath. All of this an indication of the ferocity. While the whole process is heart-pounding, ultimately the result is that we can enjoy feeling secure, relaxed and carefree. It is exhilarating to watch.

**The Plateau Tibetan Mastiff, or Dro-khyi, in Tibet** (commonly misspoken as "do-khyi," which is a common term for any tied guard dog of any breed or street dog in Himalayan regions).

The Plateau Tibetan Mastiff, or, as some people say, the Pastoral *Dro-khyi* Tibetan Mastiff, can be found in the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous State, Tsinghai Province and Cichuan Zang district. The Tibetan Mastiffs of Hequ are some of the most typical representatives of the outstanding variety known as Plateau Dro-khyi Tibetan Mastiffs. According to the study of Mr. Cui and Mr. Yang from the Agricultural College of Gansu, this kind of Tibetan Mastiff is found primarily in the Hequ area. The Tibetan people call them Dro-khyi, meaning "*Tibetan Mastiff living on the prairie or grassland.*" The main features are the following:

1. Large size, sturdy strong body and bone with coordinated and balanced moment. An excellent adult male is a minimum of 73 cm (28.75 inches), and should be much taller. The adult female is well over 65 cm (25.5 inches). It has a large head and a prominent peak to the skull. Its ears are smaller than that of Valley Tsang Khyi. The upper lip is hanging, pendulous, dragging. In the neck and face a minimum of two prominent wrinkles. The back is broad and level, rising to an evident point of the shoulders. A moderate tuck up. The tail is spiral and up over the back.

2. The colors are mainly black and tan, black and golden. Other colors such as gray or white are found, but more in cross-bred dogs.

3. The coat should be of high volume and length in places, strong quality, cold-weather resistant.

4. On the prairie, the character of Tibetan Mastiff is formidable and always alert. He is very loyal to his master and does his work. He will display very strong protectiveness and can be violent against intruders, daring to fight against wild animals. He has a keen ability to watch the flock. He can be on duty the entire night, walking around the house and property, protecting and maintaining the security of humans and livestock.



# LION

## Tibetan Mastiff



5. The Dro-khyi, or Plateau Tibetan Mastiff, is has a thinner and higher-pitched bark than the Valley, or Tsang Khyi, Tibetan Mastiff. While penetrating, it is not as resounding or pleasing to the ear. It is a sturdy dog, with thicker wrinkles on the neck and face than those found on the Valley or Tsang Khyi Tibetan Mastiff. This indicates that there exist complementary traits to be blended between the two types in a breeding program, a strategy for the selection of future generations of breeding.

There is no great functional difference between the Plateau/Prairie/Drokhyi Tibetan Mastiff and the Valley/Tsang Khyi Tibetan Mastiff except the sound of the Dro-khyi's voice, which is not as sonorous. The types are both best suited for guarding and watching, to be enjoyed and bred, and preferred over other types of local shepherd dogs.

Zhongyuan Tibetan Mastiff Research Center has made great contributions to the restoration and preservation of the Tibetan Mastiff. Many ideal Plateau/Prairie/Dro-khyi Tibetan Mastiffs appear in this center. However, it is still urgent to establish and develop a high-profile genetic base of the finest Tibetan Mastiff bloodlines.

Above all, the Tibetan Mastiff, as primarily known to Westerners, refers to the general description of both the Tsang Khyi Valley Tibetan Mastiff and the Dro-khyi Plateau Tibetan Mastiff. Both are large and fine breeds of mastiff with hanging, pendulous lips.

### The Lion Tibetan Mastiff

It's difficult and scarce in Tibet to find the lesser known and pure, long-coated **Lion Tibetan Mastiff**, although it has wide distribution in some places. It mainly originates from

Shangnan, A'li, Changdu, Tibet and is found with Diqing Shepherds in Yunan, China. (It is also more common in some Western kennels.)

This type is very alert, can be aggressive and is conscious of guarding for shepherds, and is usually a tied guard/do-khyi at the gate or at both sides of the nomad tent. The outstanding adult male Lion Tibetan Mastiff has a maximum to 70 cm (27.5 inches) at the withers, females a maximum to 65 cm (25.5 inches). They have a rounder head, a big and short muzzle with tighter lips, a broad back and longer body. The point of the withers is not evident due to the excessive long hair (like the Chow Chow). The hair covers the entire body. The color is mainly gray, gray and tan, black and tan, and black. Lions in white and yellow colors are usually crossbred Lion dogs with Dro-khyi or other Himalayan dogs.

### About the Author

*Mr. Luo Go, lifetime resident and former Mayor of Lhasa, Tibet, is the most longstanding Tibetan Mastiff authority in the world today. At more than 70 years of age, he has lived his entire life with Tibetan Mastiffs in his home. His unique perspective, the result of many decades of experience as an owner and breeder, are of the breed in its native land – before, during and after the Chinese occupation of Tibet that began in the 1950s.*