

Searching for Shangri La: Tibet in Comics

by Geoffrey Clarfield (April 2012)

Hero, Villain, Yeti: Tibet in Comics is the latest free exhibit on display at the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art in the Chelsea district of Manhattan. Curator Martin Brauen has presented more than fifty comics from the early 1940s to the present for our contemplation and enlightenment. The exhibit presents Western comics like *Tin Tin in Tibet* beside more recently produced comics made by Tibetans, that encourage living according to Buddhist principles. The comics are attached to an extended two-sided reading lectern where you can read many of them from cover to cover, if you have the time.

It is a delightful, exciting and paradoxical exhibit (but wonderfully evocative) for it only mentions in passing that many of the spectacular powers and phenomena described in these comics have a basis in Tibetan culture and a strange, yet recurring but unexplained connection to New York City itself.

So that we may better understand how Westerners have transmitted, distorted and transformed Tibetan culture through comics and popular culture let us list a few traditional Tibetan beliefs and see how they fare in the comic book world and the related world of films, novels, and popular American religion, for the exhibit opens this wider door by also highlighting the work of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (founder of Theosophy), the reincarnated Tibetan monk, Lobsang Rampa and James Hilton (author of the novel *Lost Horizon*).