

## China Book Review

by Matthew Griffiths

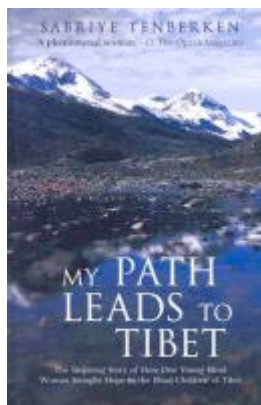
### **My Path Leads to Tibet, Sabriye Tenberken** (Arcade Publishing 2000, Ulverscroft Large Print 2000)

A young blind German woman goes to Tibet to start a school for blind children, and introduces a Tibetan version of Braille as well. Too far-fetched for a novel? Maybe, but this is not a novel, it's the true story of Sabriye Tenberken.

As a girl she suffered from poor eyesight which left her blind by the age of twelve. After struggling in school she went to a school for the blind and blossomed, completing school as well as learning to ride horses. After high school she enrolled in university to study Asian history and geography, along with Chinese and Tibetan languages.

No blind student had ever attempted these studies. To assist her own study she invented a system of Braille for the Tibetan language. During her studies she heard about the situation of blind children in Tibet. Due to the high altitude, bright sunlight and health problems, blindness is prevalent there\*\*. Adding to this, many Tibetans' attitude toward the blind were negative. Children were often kept at home and were not able to attend school or contribute to their families' activity.

With great determination and a refusal to accept anything less than success, she decided to travel to Tibet and investigate the conditions for blind people there with a view to starting a school for blind children to teach them skills which would make them useful to their communities and allow them to participate in society.



The book describes the challenges in making this dream a reality: first the scepticism of friends and professors in Germany, then the impenetrable mysteries of Chinese and Tibetan bureaucracy. Equally challenging and frustrating in turn was the lukewarm support from and difficulties of working with a German development organisation and government departments that sponsored and contributed funding for the work. In Tibet she faced the problem of who and who not to trust as she doggedly pursued her plan.

Sabriye's story also provides an insight into the experience of a blind person and the techniques they can use to move around and deal with the challenges of everyday life. The physical and emotional difficulties for a young woman in a demanding environment, pursuing a dream, make this a unique read. It's a fascinating and inspiring story.

*My Path Leads to Tibet* is available from the Hastings and Napier Public Libraries, also from Amazon.com.

**Editor's Note:** For a British Journal of Ophthalmology report "**Blindness and Eye Diseases in Tibet**", click [HERE](#)

---

Matthew Griffiths is a long time member of the NZ China Friendship Society. He loves Chinese food, has visited China many times, studied Mandarin, and attempted to learn Tai chi. He and his Chinese-born wife Deborah have two bilingual children. They lived in China from 2008 to 2010. Matthew travelled to Tibet in 2010 and now he can't stop learning more about it.

