

Adventures of a Neophyte in Tibet

Cheryl Reighter

After six months of on again, off again departure plans and mixed messages from government officials, we were hoping that we had found the "window of opportunity" for arriving in Lhasa; after Monlam festival, but before the 40th anniversary of "the people's peaceful liberation of Tibet." We were hoping that by sneaking in "low profile" between these two events, we might avoid the possibility of appearing to take one side or the other, (no joke!) and might also avoid "being there" (and thus implicated) during possible riots, which inevitably would result in marshal law being declared and foreign nationals being sent home with failed research plans.

As we journeyed from San Francisco to Hong Kong to Chengdu to Lhasa, I watched the gradual falling away of all things familiar to me. My two years of Mandarin were completely inadequate to manage even the simplest of street signs. I could ask a well-rehearsed question but couldn't comprehend the answer. The refined tones of classical Beijing dialect that I had tried to mime after my teacher, Ge Li Mei, were nowhere to be found in the clamor of the Chengdu vegetable markets.

The world inside the Jin Jiang, Chengdu's pricier tourist hotel, stood in stark contrast to the crowded, sooty world of the city beyond its polished doors. We sipped Coca-colas in the air conditioned bar, browsed through expensive gift shops, sent telexes and ate cream puffs from the in-house bakery. The Jin Jiang was described by guests as the last bastion of Western decadence in China.

Outside in the street, a wide and steady stream of bicycles competed with pedestrians, buses, walking tractors and speeding taxis for the narrower side streets. In the square, lighted timers ticked off the seconds left to cross the street before the next onslaught of frantic traffic. The city, like a last minute boom town, gave way abruptly to the open countryside. In the fields every inch cultivated with orderly plots bounded by a maze of canal works, oxen trudged out infinite knots in the rich and smelly soil. Women and children squatted along the rows planting, weeding, and harvesting in an endless and overlapping

cycle.

Now we were approaching "the frontier," where the adventurous go; where tame meets wild -- places from which unbelievable and scattered tales come back to civilization on the wind. What did I know about Tibet? Virtually nothing, which is what your average person knows. Tibet was an exotic, high and dry place somewhere west of China and north of India, untouched by the long hand of the West until the turn of the century when a British expedition, led by someone named Younghusband, forced itself on an unwilling host and left after signing trade agreements, saying that "Tibetans were filthy and ate little pills made from the Dalai Lama's shit."

"Jolmo Lungma" is the native name for the mountain named in the West after Sir George Everest, the surveyor general in India during the height of England's patriarchal colonialism in India. I suppose if you're going to survey and map a vast area with the aim of understanding just how much you own--how much there is in terms of potential resources--then you can't have those resources called *goddess mother of the earth*, or it makes carving up and allocating those resources rather an ugly metaphor.

I knew that Tibet was a spiritual place, that it was difficult place to get to and that was essentially why it had been left alone; too much effort for the potential return, given the difficulty of travel. What had been an hour and forty-five minute plane ride for me, took ten difficult days overland, and then only if passes were open.

I didn't read about demonstrations or violence until just a few months before I left. I had read *Son of the Revolution* in China studies and knew what the cultural revolution had meant for China. Ge Li Mei had finally talked about it after her whole family was over here and she no longer had to worry about "rats" in this country. She had been in the red guard as a teenager and had "kept her family in line." But I somehow never connected what the cultural revolution had meant for Tibet. To be honest, I, like many people, was still laboring under the delusion that Tibet was an

independent country or kingdom like Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and all those other exotic places in the East. The occupation of Tibet has been one of the best kept secrets of the twentieth century.

At a hundred dollars a day, the Lhasa Holiday Inn portrays itself as the Jin Jiang of Lhasa, but this is akin to trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. I fail to understand why anyone would pay six thousand dollars to come all the way to Tibet and then attempt to recreate the west here, but I saw people in the lobby everyday by the score. Busloads of retired Americans, Germans, Japanese and French arrive everyday, laden with cameras, sunscreen and bottled water; they arrive exhausted from their three day tour of the orient, half-starved for oxygen and "coming down with something" they picked up in Katmandu. They are irritable, pompous and rude; whining in the lobby about all the things their tour guide didn't tell them. They can't be blamed, really. By the time you get there its too late to turn back and refunds are out of the question. No one told them that nothing is as it appears and satisfaction is not guaranteed. You pay your money and you take your chances. That's why they call it an adventure.

The tourists don't understand this. They don't understand that the Holiday Inn is "done with mirrors" - approximating reality through illusions. Just because a plumbing fixture is there, doesn't mean it will work. "Hot" water is relative. The ice cream is really iced powdered milk and the cheeseburgers are really yak burgers. The cooking oil is really ceremonial ghee.

The Holiday Inn in Lhasa is the result of a joint venture with the Chinese Sports and Tourism Association, the state bureau controlling hotels in China. It existed for many years virtually without competition because the government controls where visitors may stay in Lhasa. It is a short walk from the Norbu Linkhor, which was once the summer home of the 5th, 7th, 13th and 14th Dalai Lamas. All tourists (in registered groups only) are deposited within the hotel gates. The "house staff" is Tibetan, complete with all the ethnic trimmings that can be fetishized for the delight of the tourists. Mid-management is Chinese, brought in by the sports association. Upper management is mostly European and comes from Holiday International.

The restaurant manager's name is Gallo, from the wine making family. He inadvertently entertained us

throughout the summer, in the "jiggeas who don't leave club" that we form with the Save the Children people from London, the women doctors from Belgium, the E.S.L. people who volunteer at the language school, and the occasional H.P.Ds., what we came to call the "high plains drifters;" the renegade tourists hiding out at the Yak hotel, or the rare lone cyclist intent on a "real Tibetan experience" away from the contrived and controlled tours.

The structure of the Holiday Inn presents itself as a miniature of life in Lhasa. Upper management consists of highly paid, well educated, and gregarious foreigners who sign an 18 month agreement after which they travel with free hotel accommodations. They live, work, eat, and party within the cloistered environment of the hotel grounds. Their salary is optimal, expenses minimal; they "serve their stint" and plan their vacations. Tibet is considered difficult duty and they are compensated; kind of like combat pay. Gallo clearly hates being here. He resents having to deal with "stupid Chinese" who don't understand simple English, don't follow his orders, and don't know how to treat guests. He resents Tibetan employees who "don't care about work and who are dirty."

All of his troubles result from the impossible circumstances within which he is doomed to work, and under which he can't possibly be expected to run a successful restaurant. He says his situation reminds him of the telephone game. He would tell his Chinese assistants what he wants in English (with a heavy Italian accent). They would translate to Chinese and pass his instructions along to the Tibetans, who ultimately carry them out. By the time his message is translated twice and filtered through tense, unequal relations, only some small portion may survive in tact. Thus, after giving careful instructions on the preparation of mayonnaise, it is left on the counter to turn blue and dangerous.

He tells us of the vacuum cleaner incident, in which twenty new vacuums disappeared, one by one. He found them much later accidentally, all stuffed in a locked closet. It seems that the Tibetan housekeepers thought the dirt was sucked out through the power cord, just as it is sucked into the vacuum. As the vacuums filled to capacity and choked, they were hidden, because the Tibetans thought they would be blamed for breaking them.

The Holiday Inn is also known locally as the "Mei-you Fandian;" the "we don't have hotel." "NO" is the most frequently heard utterance from hotel staff because the Chinese Sports and Tourism Association is a work unit just like any other social institution in China. Employees get paid the same whether or not customers are happy, whether the hotel is full or empty. There is no bonus for effort and only harder work for "success."

Tibetan staff are instructed not to speak to foreigners, not to enter the elevator if tourists are on it and to leave immediately if tourists join them. Mostly Tibetans at the Holiday Inn do a lot of cleaning, bowing and leaving. The whining tourists, distressed over their failed expectations of Shangri-La, unload their hostility on Gallo, who in turn, unloads on "his girls." They, in turn, look for anyone nearby who is lower in the pecking order; any Tibetan within earshot will do.

I call this the dog-kicking syndrome. It manifests itself in varying forms throughout Lhasa. Even inanimate objects will suffice. On several occasions I have watched Chinese tourists push the elevator button once, then pound it ferociously when the door doesn't open immediately. Pent-up tension spurts out like steam from a pressure cooker. After having every facet of their lives, from work, to residence, to fecundity controlled, *something* has to go the way they want it, when they want it, how they want it.

Those two weeks at the Holiday Inn leave me feeling a little schizophrenic. I spend my days interviewing peasant farmers, nomadic herdsmen and little old ladies with pet sheep on leashes, while I spend my evenings in the lobby of the Holiday Inn. I'm not sure who are the more interesting subjects; the Tibetan patients, or the foreign nationals, little emperors and petty tyrants of the Holiday Inn.

We finally decide that if the "high plains drifters" are getting away with staying at the Yak Hotel, we should make a break for it too. The Yak is a Tibetan rooming house, run by Tibetans, in the Tibetan quarter just off the Barkhor. The equivalent of nine dollars a night compared with 100 at the Holiday Inn and the service is better, the people friendlier, and most importantly it is in the center of the Tibetan population.

So we pack up our belongings and move to the Yak, using the Mentsekhang ambulance, which is really more like a milk truck. Once settled, Nawang (the translator)

and I go out to buy the requisite pressure cooker to go with our kerosene stove. We will buy, clean, and cook our own food, hopefully avoiding the recurring diarrhea that results from eating in the jiaozi stands along People's Road. Once out in the street, I rejoice at the change in atmosphere. People smile here and are concerned we get a good deal. I hadn't noticed what was missing until it appeared: everyone is glad we're here. I feel among friends.

As we wander past the vendors, browsing and talking about the old city, a palpable tension catches up with us from behind and races on ahead of us through the crowded street. I can hear distant shouts, like a football game, but worrisome. All of the vendors are hurriedly packing up their wares and calling to their neighbors in alarming tones. Before Nawang can translate what is going on, we are overcome by a crowd of people running and screaming. We begin running with them, not knowing what else to do and fearing we might be overrun otherwise. Nawang's face is drawn in worry; wide-eyed and fearful. We duck into a large store, just as the metal security gates slam shut behind us.

Once inside, we have time to piece together the rumors buzzing through the crowd of people locked inside with us. Apparently a security cop got into a fight with a Khampa, who hit him. The cop then clouted the Khampa with a Billy club, at which point the Khampa knifed him. Khampas are well known for their knife handling abilities, as well as for having cantankerous dispositions. At this point, a dozen security police issued forth from the station on the Barkhor and beat up the Khampa. The crowd that had gathered began throwing rocks at the security police and the P.L.A. was called in to "restore order." At this point anyone with half a brain ran away quick.

A woman began pounding on the gates, pathetically begging to be let in. Although she is frantic, the gatekeeper hesitates. I start feeling hemmed in; Craig doesn't know where we are and is probably pacing the floor by now. We might be locked in overnight, or even longer. As soon as the guard started to open the gate, I told Nawang to make a rush for it and we broke through the crowd and out into the street again, just in time to see the P.L.A. trucks pull up and several hundred soldiers with riot gear and automatic weapons spill into the Barkhor.

They instantly surround the square in front of the Jokhang Temple, forming a ring around the margins of the crowd. I tell Nawang to walk casually beside me, pretending to be in conversation. I tell him to just look straight ahead and walk toward the Yak Hotel. "If anyone calls to you, just pretend you don't understand them." He says that's easy because they are all Chinese.

So we cross the square, while two hundred soldiers and as many Tibetans watch us. Someone calls out to us, but we ignore it. My head starts pounding and I revert to humor in an attempt to calm myself. Is this not more adventure than I bargained for? Nawang keeps trying to put himself between me and the troops. I tell him this is a ridiculous gesture; that the Chinese would love an excuse to shoot him, but that they would never shoot a foreigner and probably wouldn't shoot him if a foreigner is present. He doesn't seem relieved.

Then I remember the story of the Dutch woman who got herself shot demonstrating with Tibetans in 1987. The official Chinese response was: "We didn't know she was a foreigner; she was wearing Tibetan dress" -- as if it is fair game to shoot anyone in Tibetan clothing. Remembering her story leaves me feeling a little queasy and the two block walk to the Yak seems to take an eternity.

We reach the gates of the Yak; huge, ornately carved and painted wooden doors that are at first closed. As we

approach, the doors swing open to reveal the hotel manager, who has been nervously awaiting our return. Craig comes out on the balcony, looking unusually white, and asks if we are all right. He says he heard automatic weapons fire and was beginning to really worry about us. I climb the stairs to my room and curl up on the bed to wait and see if this latest tension will nix our work- if we will be expelled for fear we might see too much. Welcome to Lhasa.

Notes

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