

CHAPTER 26

The Xichao Dachang Timber Yard

THE CHINESE WORDS *Xichao Dachang* mean Western Station. It was the chief depot for military trucks plying the Qinghai–Tibet highway and was administered by the Qinghai provincial military headquarters. There was an enormous army base at that depot, which included a nearby timber yard, a vegetable garden, an orchard, and a food processing plant under its management, as well as a large dairy farm in the Chang Yangpachen area. Since the nonstaple food items produced were regularly available for sale to its staff, many people were eager to get themselves employed there in order to be able to buy otherwise scarce Chinese consumer products like cigarettes and sugar on a monthly basis.

One of my friends was working in that timber yard, and through him I managed to get a job there. Most of the work involved splitting huge tree trunks on electric sawing machines, so except for those cleaning up or sweeping up sawdust, the workers really had to be strong. It was said that the sawing machines in that workshop had been used by the Japanese during their occupation of China's northeast. Most had labels showing that they were made in America and a few were Japanese-made, and I had never seen timber being produced on such a large scale before. An average of 300 military trucks passed through the Xichao Dachang every day. Those truck teams were responsible for carrying military supplies in time of war, but usually they just carried timber, and normally they delivered loads of whole tree trunks from Kongpo to the timber yard two or three times a week. The quantity was so great that the trunks had to be stacked by crane so that they didn't completely cover the vast yard, until they formed a pile so tall it could almost be seen from Lhasa. Within two or three days they were sawn on those machines according to the Chinese system of measurement

into 8"-wide planks, which were then transported elsewhere by another team of trucks. Three hundred truckloads of raw tree trunks from Kongpo made approximately 100 truckloads of sawn planks, and the by-products of processing, such as tree bark and sawdust, were sold to army camps and government departments in the area for use as firewood, fencing material, and so on, and I reckon the income from that alone must have covered the factory's running costs, including the workers' and officials' wages.

At first, I assumed that the processed timber was being transported to construction units at army bases in other parts of Tibet, but the officials working there told us quite openly and unambiguously that no more than 20 percent was used for building material at other truck stops along the Qinghai-Tibet highway, while fully 80 percent of it went to the Chinese provinces of Gansu and Qinghai. At meetings the factory boss (*Khrang krang*) always used to tell us, "Ours is a glorious workshop because in addition to assisting the construction of the New Tibet, it serves our brother provinces as well," shamelessly presenting this villainy as a virtue.

I didn't discover the fact that the valuable bulk of the timber was being shipped off to China through any special investigation but simply stumbled over it while trying to earn my living. If you had actually gone looking for such information throughout the country, who knows what you might have found? While at least 40 percent of the Tibetan forest decimated so far was undoubtedly being transported to China, the remainder that was being used within Tibet benefited no one but the Chinese themselves while the Tibetans, the rightful owners of the land, were not entitled to so much as a twig. As I mentioned already, when the neighborhood committees in Lhasa needed building materials for the communal dining halls ordered by the municipal government, they forced the "class enemies" under their control to go and dismantle the former monastic buildings at Drépung. Not only was timber not available to Tibetans for building houses, they could not even buy scraps for firewood but had to burn animal dung and turf and, in the poorest households, trash like old plastic and bones. By contrast, neither Chinese offices nor workplaces ever burned dung or turf for fuel, and to find an individual Chinese household [in Tibet] doing so was as rare as seeing a star in daylight. Those Tibetans on intimate terms with the Chinese, however, bought timber and firewood from them discreetly.

In much the same way, although there was a lot of new development and construction, like the housing blocks in Lhasa and other cities, factories, highways, and bridges, it was exclusively related to Chinese interests, while in out-of-the-way rural areas inhabited only by Tibetans the old

donkey tracks were not replaced by any motor roads or modern bridges, as will be seen. In any case, the destruction of Tibet's forests is an irreparable loss, and in my view, if reversing it is not made a concern of the utmost priority, when the time comes for Tibet to be returned to Tibetan hands, it will be like inheriting an empty, derelict house.

Anyway, I was employed by the outfit that transported the timber to China, which did not fall under the economic regulations stipulated by the TAR and TMD authorities, so all the employees regardless of their class categorization received an extra sixteen pounds per month of either rice or wheat flour in addition to the grain ration, and were entitled to buy a monthly allowance of very scarce consumer goods imported from China, like cigarettes, sugar, soap, etc., as well as butter, meat, and fruit. In addition, if we had the money, we could buy more food products and military clothing on the quiet from individual soldiers, so from my own immediate point of view it was a comfortable position, given the prevailing conditions.

Later in 1970, after I had been working there for two or three months, they started to mine coal from a deposit at the head of the Yab valley in Tölung, west of Lhasa, and recruited workers to build an access road. When that group of workers required reinforcement, the neighborhood committee summoned me and I had to go and help. By the time I got there, most of the hard work had already been done and the road-building team had moved down to the mouth of the Yab valley to work on the last segment, which was completed in about a month. But after that, the workers were not sent home because their labor was needed to start on a large project in the same area, the construction of a total of six hydropower stations between Tong-ga in upper Tölung and Dongkar [below Drépung monastery]. And so, in the early spring of 1971, I had to go and work at the power station construction site in Tölung.