

CHAPTER 36

At the Tibet Academy of Social Science

DURING MY TIME at the Academy of Social Science, it had not yet opened and was still in the preparatory stage. The few employees were engaged in copying rare texts on religious and dynastic history borrowed from the TAR archives for the academy's forthcoming journal, *Tibet Research* (*Bod ljongs zhib 'jug*), and copying the catalogues of the former printers of religious classics. A year went by in this way before the formal opening of the academy was announced, and social scientific research was allocated among six working groups. I was put in the archive group, which suited me best, because that was just the title they gave to the work of locating and seeking out required texts and copying them, and spared me the problem of actually having to write false interpretations of them.

Then in 1982, the academy sent me with one assistant to commission prints of the Buddhist canon from the printing house at Dégé in eastern Tibet. On the outward journey we flew down to Chengdu, where we met the chief of the Nationalities Affairs bureau there, Tashi Tséring, and sought permission to make prints from the Dégé blocks. He was a loyal Tibetan concerned for his culture, and wrote us the best letter of introduction he could. After spending a few days in Chengdu, we boarded a public bus and headed back toward Tibet, traveling via the Chinese town of Ya'an and crossing the Erlan Shan pass to reach Dartsé-do.

Since my companion had many relatives in that town, we spent a few days there. It would never have occurred to a newcomer in this place that it was in Tibet rather than China, as the old Tibetan town had entirely disappeared beneath newly built multistory Chinese buildings. Apart from the occasional sight of a few old locals in Tibetan dress, everyone, men and women alike, wore Chinese clothes, and everyone spoke Chinese, even to

the point of pronouncing their own names with Chinese intonation. To give one example: the name of the chairman of the Xikang (Kandzé) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture government in Dartsé-do was Lu-tung-da, which is not a recognizably Tibetan name, but he was in fact a Tibetan called Losang Dawa, a name the Chinese pronounce “Lu-tung-da,” which shows the level of self-confidence among the local Tibetan population. If Tibetan was not understood even in shops and eating houses, how much less could it be used in government offices, at the bank, post office, hospital, bus station, or other such places that local people had to frequent? The officials and staff working there were not all Chinese, many of them were Tibetan, but their behavior had become indistinguishable.

Going on up from there toward Dégé, through Mi-nyak, Tawu, Drang-go, and so on, all the trucks we passed coming the other way were carrying timber. In the Tawu and Drang-go valleys in particular, the forests had been cut mercilessly and so many logs dumped in the river that the water itself was scarcely visible. When I asked my fellow passengers why these logs had been put in the river, they told me that they were being floated downstream to Ya’an, where they would be retrieved, and that this was a wonderfully satisfactory means of transportation that saved on money and labor.

After passing through Kandzé, Darjé Gön, Béri, and so on, we reached Dégé Gön-chen and showed the official letter from the academy, together with the introduction from the Nationalities Affairs bureau in Chengdu, to the county leader and officials from the county cultural office. Since we were prepared to make the customary payment for the prints we commissioned, both offices were happy to accept it in principle, but said that the final decision could only be taken after consulting the senior and junior leaders of the printing house itself, and when they were contacted, the senior leader, Ngawang Tséring, and junior leader, Tashi Dorjé, flatly refused our commission. Since the popular, voluntary reconstruction of destroyed monasteries across northeastern Tibet had begun, large numbers of people were coming to Dégé to commission the printing of new scriptures, and as it had become established practice to bribe the two leaders, they would not entertain anyone coming empty-handed.

My companion then sent a letter back to our office explaining the situation and received a reply telling us to obtain the prints by any means possible, so we were obliged to find a way. One of the most influential figures locally at that time was Yang-ling Dorjé, a TAR secretary who had formerly served as leader of the Dégé county administration and was said to have protected the printing house during the Cultural Revolution. Many local

people told us that we could succeed with his support, so we wrote back to Lhasa for his instruction in writing, and after waiting there for six months in all, we finally got hold of prints of about two thirds of the wood blocks they had, including the Buddhist canon (*bKa' gyur*) and commentaries (*bsTan gyur*), the Nyingma Tantras (*rGyud 'bum*), the Sakya teachings on “path and result” (*Lam 'bras*), the “Seven Treasuries” of Long-chenpa (*mD-zod bdun*), and so on.

We left Dégé on October 2, 1982 for Chamdo, where we spent a few days. As in Dartsé-do, the former town of Chamdo could no longer be found amid the new Chinese buildings. Though it was within the so-called autonomous region, most of the buildings were multistory Chinese offices and residences, Chinese settlers made up the larger part of the population, and not only the officials but also most of the local people understood and used the Chinese language. Returning from there through Powo and Kongpo, I found the deforestation so advanced that the so-called “forested ravines of Kongpo” were beset with dust storms. There could be no doubt that within a few more decades the land would not only be robbed of its beauty but also be ravaged by a deluge of floods and other natural disasters.

After getting back to Lhasa on October 10 and handing over to the academy all the books we had managed to obtain, I made my application for permission to visit relatives living abroad, and it wasn't long before I received my foreign travel permit. I left Lhasa on March 8, 1983, heading for Nepal.