

PREAMBLE



From the peak of the Red Hill, the Potala Palace still looks down upon the city 300 feet below, and the Jokhang temple is still, for pilgrims, the destination of their journeys and the heart of the city, perhaps of their life aspirations. Drepung, Sera, and Ganden, the three great monasteries whose names mean the Grove of Wild Roses, the Heap of Rice, and the Place of Bliss, stand like sentinels in a giant circle on the mountain slopes around or beyond the city. On the western outskirts, white scarves have been left by devotees at the gates of the Norbulingka, as though the Dalai Lama is about to resume his residence at the Summer Palace. And the Barkor, the ring of alleyways along which the pilgrims walk in their endless circumambulations of the Jokhang, is crowded with prostrators, pilgrims, hawkers, and businessmen, much as it has been for 500 or perhaps 1,000 years.

But other things have changed since the Chinese arrived five decades ago. Lhasa today is a city of some 200,000 people, more than six times the number in 1950, and the city now sprawls across an area some 20 times greater than the one square mile it covered during the centuries before Mao's Peaceful Liberation. The highest building is no longer the Ramoche temple or the Jokhang, but the 13-story Public Security Building

on the road to Sera monastery; when the new hotel is completed on the former picnic site on Thieves' Island, even that edifice may be dwarfed. These buildings have been deposited by two great waves that during the past quarter century have swept over the city and transformed its history, perhaps faster than any other process since the fifteenth century. One of those waves is the Chinese state; the other is modernity.

If we wish to read the text that is formed by the streets and stones of this modern Lhasa, we must turn first to history, and then to other forms of story. In principle our task should not be too difficult: Lhasa is small for a city of such fame, its population one fiftieth that of London or Beijing. And it belongs to an older world, one that is generally seen by outsiders in the way we see many ancient things: as unitary, undivided, and homogeneous. Compared to other capitals of such repute, Lhasa is hardly even the size of a county town. It should therefore be relatively easy to describe.

