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FOREIGN VISITORS, OSCILLATIONS, AND EXTREMES

The writings of Western visitors to Lhasa have their own tradition. "This city of gigantic palace and golden roof," wrote Perceval Landon, the correspondent for *The Times* of London who accompanied the British expedition in the Tibetan capital in the 1903–04 invasion; it was he who noticed the *amban*'s choice of biscuits. His description of the city's glittering rooftops was typical of Westerners' accounts of Lhasa at this time. Such observations were to be found in the recollections of exiled aristocrats and other travelers as well: "glistening in the sun were the golden roofs," wrote the Khampa lady Jamyang Sakya of her first view of Lhasa in 1951; "the golden roofs of its temples glittering," recalled Kimura no less poetically of the moment he had first seen the city some six years earlier.

Views of this kind in the writings of Western and exiled Tibetan writers typically invoke a notion of splendor and of unity. In the case of Western visitors, however, this perception was organized within a dualistic frame, where the gleaming images of religious dedication and architectural magnificence served to contrast with some contradictory, more earthy, impression. Thus their descriptions oscillate between two

extremes, and their readings of Lhasa are suspended between two opposing nodes of moral value. It is as if Tibetans were to be permitted praise to offset the condemnation that it must accompany, or as if to indicate that wonders can be found even among the natural and the less civilized. Spencer Chapman, for example, the British diplomat who had listened to the news from London on his radio in Lhasa in 1936, saw the Potala Palace as representing "the very essence of the Tibetan people" in its mixture of splendor and ruggedness: "underneath this beauty [and] the exquisite workmanship of many of the smallest details," he wrote, "there is a lurking grimness."

For many of these Westerners, the two poles of their Tibetan experience were sanctity on the one hand and dirt on the other. The sanctity was perceived most often in the sight of the sun glinting on the gilded temple roofs or in the burgundy-colored robes of myriad monks, usually viewed from afar and often—perhaps to distance the writer from their beliefs—said to have looked like ants at work. The dirt was described most commonly in terms of smell. For those who entered Tibet by the shortest route from India, the odor was especially prominent in their minds, because in Phari, the first town after the border crossing, one could only walk on rooftops: all the roads and spaces between houses had for generations been filled several feet high with refuse and detritus. "Appallingly foul and dirty, possibly the dirtiest and foulest town on earth," announced Austine Waddell when he arrived there with the British troops in 1903 as Younghusband's medical officer: "a vast barrow in a muck-heap, with an all-pervading foul stench everywhere." He renamed the town "Phari-the-Foul." Not shy about honoring the Victorian tradition of branding a people according to the attributes of their landscape, he declared its inhabitants "to be in thorough keeping with the squalor and filth amongst which they live."

On reaching Lhasa itself, however, the more attentive of these visitors from the south sometimes noted that conditions were relatively clean, and it was with some surprise that Waddell recorded that 720 pounds of soap and 6,694 towels had been imported into Tibet from India in the first three months of 1899. He also observed that nearly every Tibetan soldier killed by the British troops in the massacre at Gyantse had been found—the British seem to have pillaged the corpses—to have had a bar of soap in his pack. Nevertheless, the initial impact of Phari or some

similar experience generally overrode subsequent evidence of any Tibetan familiarity with hygiene.

Even Fosco Maraini, the photographer who accompanied the Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci in 1948 and perhaps the most refined of all the Western writers on Tibet, could not but express revulsion at the dirtiness of the Tibetans. Indeed, he reveled in the excessiveness of the filth he found: "the dirt is ancient, stupendous and three-dimensional," he wrote. He even christened it with the pseudo-scientific name of *foetor tibeticus*. Maraini, a brilliant observer of the finer details of human behavior that he encountered on his travels, not least when they allowed him to scrutinize feminine beauty, had written a famous paean to the elegance with which the Maharajah of Sikkim ate his peas—"the last pea, defeated and impaled on the fork, was raised to the royal lips, which opened delicately to receive it, as if about to give, or to receive, a kiss." The peas were in large part a device, the reader might suspect, to lead the writer to a more important matter, namely the transcendent beauty of the Maharajah's daughter.

This lady was a princess of Tibetan extraction, like all of the Sikkimese royal family, by the name of Pemá Chöki, who painted her toenails red and who came to represent to Maraini—in her beauty and intelligence, her liveliness of thought, her familiarity with modernity, and her mischievous attachment to what he saw as superstition—his deeply conflictual response to the Tibetan condition. The art historian Bernard Berenson read Maraini's account of this contrast as a revelation of the universal conformity that can be found beneath the sensually offensive and exotic, and described the reading of the book as if it had constituted an actual meeting with Tibetans:

> Disgusted with smells, nauseated with food, [with] their gorgeous raiment, their dirt, their eyes, their bad smell, I encountered [in Maraini's descriptions of Tibet] fellow men singularly like ourselves…folk as good and true and intelligent as without questioning we assume that we are.

But Maraini, exalted by his long conversations with the princess who came to represent the core insight of his experience in Tibet, had sought to express a more nuanced sensitivity toward the aesthetic and moral discontinuities he believed he had encountered:

> The association of Pemá Chöki with a *gön-khang* [a temple dedicated to wrathful deities] struck me as a criminal offence. It was impossible to imagine anything lovelier than the princess at that moment, with her colour, her jewels, and her youth, and impossible to imagine anything more revolting than a gön-khang, a dark, dusty pocket of stale air, stinking of rancid butter, containing skinless, greasy carcasses, with terrifying gods painted on the walls, riding monsters, wearing diadems of skulls and necklaces of human heads, and holding blood-filled skulls in their hands as cups.
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> The princess once more raised the transparent glass to her lips, sipped, smiled and continued, "But you don't even know what a gön-khang is!" She then gave me a full description. She spoke of bones and dances, of *dri-dug*, the sacred knife, of *dorje*, the thunderbolt, of garlands of skulls, of sceptres of impaled men. In her was Tibet, the secret and untranslated Tibet; Tibet, the land of exaltation, beauty, and horror, the land of open sky and stony wastes and foetid gön-khangs, of lofty peaks sparkling in the sun and of places where dead bodies are hacked to pieces to provide meals for the vultures; land of simplicity and cruelty, of purity and orgy....
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> How reconcile the divine purity and serenity of these mountains, the infinite sweetness of sky and space, with the stinking, blood-thirsty horror of the lamaist phantasmagoria? Yet both were Tibet. How reconcile those monstrous tutelary deities with the grace of Pemá Chöki? Perhaps the mystery of Pemá Chöki was to some extent the mystery of Tibet, and perhaps she could give me the clue to its solution.

The Italian scholar-traveler was not alone among foreigners in finding a difficult dislocation in the art of Tibet and the statuary of its temples, much as visitors to Phari had found in the dirt of its streets and the stench of its inhabitants. For many, the paintings of wrathful deities in particular were a sign of evil, or evidence of what one called "the diseased and sinister Tibetan imagination which revels in bones, blood and death, [and] delights in the revolting." For others of a more moralistic bent, it was not the symbolism of their art but the Tibetan form of Buddhism itself—Landon described it as the "living type of big-

otry, cruelty and slavery"—that represented the negative pole of their experience of Tibet.

But these writers were pulled by deeply contradictory emotions. The lyricism of Landon's prose suggests that he was as much in love with that which he declared abhorrent as Maraini was with the daughter of the pea-eating prince. "Under the fierce sun of that day and the white gauze of the almost unclouded sky of Lhasa, it was not easy to find fault with the creed, however narrow and merciless, which built the Potala Palace and laid out the green spaces at its foot," enthused the man from *The Times*. "Lamaism has inspired the stones and gold of Lhasa, and nothing but Lamaism could have done this thing."

Landon was not the only European to see the religion as more than a curse or source of fear. The nineteenth-century German philosopher Hensoldt considered Tibetan Buddhism to be cultured and peaceful, and the great Swedish explorer Sven Hedin described Tibet as endowed with "the light of holiness." The moral polarity by which Western perceptions were structured allowed a vertiginous switching between the two extremes, as if lofty admiration propelled a guilt-ridden yearning for the previous object of condemnation. This metamorphosis of foreign invaders from a position of superior revulsion to one of intense flirtation found its apogee in the life of Colonel Younghusband himself.

The aristocrat, described by one biographer as the last great imperial adventurer, had driven 3,000 troops and twice as many retainers across the Himalayas in a needless exercise to project British imperial influence beyond India's northern perimeter. To obtain the support of his government, he had fomented a fear that Russian weapons were being imported into Tibet, presaging an attack on British India. There were, however, no Russians in Tibet, and only three Russian rifles and a few cartridges subsequently came to light; as in later wars of similar construction, the absence of weaponry required another *casus belli* to be produced. In this case it was the enforcement of the British right, as then perceived, to enter into correspondence with Lhasa over their claim to monopolize access to trans-Himalayan trade.

Since Younghusband had been instructed by London to take his troops only as far as was necessary to get the Tibetans to negotiate, he rejected each delegation sent to discuss terms with him on the grounds of their lack of seniority. This allowed him to push all the way to Lhasa, a project in which he deployed Maxim guns against Tibetans armed with

flintlocks, many of whom he famously gunned down as they walked away in retreat, or, in one case, after they had been persuaded or cajoled to give up their defensive positions under the pretext of negotiating. His motivation is said by some to have been a simple fascination with the fabled city of golden rooftops and a desire to acquire fame as the first Westerner in modern times openly to enter it. He thus became the first man since the Dzungar Mongols in 1717 to have successfully invaded Tibet and taken its capital by force, and the person most responsible for the chain of Chinese invasions that beset Tibet in the following half century.

This was not how Younghusband saw his role. In September 1904, six months after having overseen what he described privately to his father as "a pure massacre" of Tibetan troops at Chumik Shenko (he blamed it entirely on the Tibetans) and four weeks after having forced the Tibetans to sign the surrender agreement in Lhasa, Younghusband returned with his troops to India, having lost only 34 of them in battle. The mind with which he left was the opposite of that with which he had arrived, at least in terms of what he chose to recollect: the military adventurer reconstructed himself as a spiritual pioneer. He wrote later of his experience at the moment of his departure, as he looked down from a high mountain pass:

> I went off alone to the mountainside and gave myself up to all the emotions of this eventful time.... Bathed in the insinuating influences of the dreamy autumn evening, I was insensibly suffused with an almost intoxicating sense of elation and good-will. This exhilaration of the moment grew and grew till it thrilled through me with overpowering intensity. Never again could I think evil or again be at enmity with any man. All nature and all humanity were bathed in a rosy glowing radiancy; and life for the future seemed not but buoyancy and light.... That single hour on leaving Lhasa was worth all the rest of a lifetime.

His rebirth is not to be explained by guilt, of which there is no trace in his writings, or by doubt about the morality of his political excursions. Maybe the spiritual simply offered a new and, to his mind, uncharted territory to conquer; more likely, all great empires and their protagonists veer at moments of triumph between attraction to the truly vicious

and to the apparently sublime. It was an experience that profoundly changed his life. Whatever the reasons for Younghusband's apparent shift in what is aptly called orientation in his perceptions of the East, the history of many foreign travelers in Tibet, not excluding some Chinese, is in part a story of foreigners becoming engrossed and entranced by that which initially repelled them.

It was already dark by the time I returned to the alleyway where a Tibetan had asked me to bring medicine. The streets of the old city were silent and deserted: there was no sign of police. Maybe they were celebrating somewhere. Maybe they knew that it was only necessary for them to wait.

The great wooden doors of the compound he had pointed out were closed: when I had promised I would return, I had forgotten that the doors might be shut. I pounded on them till someone came. Everyone in the neighborhood must have heard it. After some time, someone inside realized that it was a foreigner knocking and unbolted the giant door.

She led me and my acquaintance Steve to the right, along the side of the courtyard and down a short flight of steps. In the room at the bottom, someone was weeping. It sounded like an older woman. Another person stood up as we came in, but it was too dark to see more. I was steered toward the wooden pallet that was the bed. The woman lifted up the cloth to show where the bullet had gone in. I could see the hole, just above the ankle. It hadn't come out the other side.

The bleeding had already stopped, so there wasn't much to do. I cleaned the entry wound and poured on the powder I had bought in Hong Kong. I had seen it on television, on a show about an aid worker saved from infection after an accident in the Philippines. It wasn't the first time I had used it: in Golmud the week before, I had used some to treat a truck driver, injured in one of the regular street fights between drunken Tibetans and off-duty Chinese troops. They slashed one another with their belts, and the buckles scored deep scars in their faces. I had talked him into driving me south to Lhasa on the strength of that powder, so it had to be quite good.

It was now ten hours or more since the shooting; everything depended on how much blood he had lost. If it was a lot, he had to be taken to the hospital straightaway; otherwise they had maybe two days before the powder would be used up and infection would set in. Then they would have to take him to a doctor anyway.

Someone there spoke a little English and translated.

At the other end of the bed I could see the man's face. It convulsed from time to time with unknown thoughts. Deep brown wrinkles moved slightly across the cheekbones and sometimes caught the gleam from the flashlight Steve was shining on his leg. The wrinkles glistened with sweat. He wasn't young—perhaps forty—but he looked fifty or more, slightly undernourished, aging early. Probably born just before the Chinese arrived. He might even have taken part in the uprising of 1959, the last time that Lhasa had been convulsed by revolt. He had survived all that and the Cultural Revolution to be shot one blue-skied morning in October 1987, at the height of China's opening up.

It was clear that he understood the choices. His face contorted silently with the pain, either of the wound or of making decisions: he would die if he didn't get treatment, and if he did seek treatment, he would be arrested. The foreigners had a flashlight, a camera, and a powder that might help for a few days. These would only delay the choices. Otherwise the foreigners were useless.

Steve took a photograph of the leg. The incandescence of the flash injected our civilization momentarily into the dark space of the room, and for a brief, Goya-esque moment, the faces around the bed were bathed in a cruel white light. The photo was a vain attempt to make a memorial out of this man's pain, to make it look like we had done something. But we knew from the disasters of that morning, when photographs taken by foreigners had been confiscated by the police, that we could not dare to record his face. And we knew that photos without faces do not get published in the West.

We were led out into the night and hurried back to the hotel along deserted alleyways, despondent. Medically we could do little except warn of the consequences of avoiding treatment. It was only later that we recognized what we had achieved: we had banged on the door of their compound and had certainly led people to that room. What we had done had been in the great tradition of all foreign intervention, however well intentioned: probably more harm than good.

Not all outsiders were or are attracted by the contrasts they find within their experience of Tibet: some have viewed the place with unadulterated disgust. These have tended to be people with monolithic views of the world; ironically, they have also often been the people most convinced of their own sophistication and of the benefit they bring to the Tibetan people. Within this category we can include Chinese ideologues convinced of the horrors of prerevolutionary life in Tibet, for some of

whom a more nuanced view has been, in some periods, professionally or morally inconvenient. We can also include modern Western missionaries, judging by a recruiting leaflet issued by one such organization in 1990:

> Is there no light that cuts through the demonic darkness in Tibet, a nation long steeped in demonism and Tibetan Buddhism called Lamaism?...Satan has enslaved the people to a lifetime pre-occupation with right words and works. "*Om mani padme hum*" and other phrases are chanted repeatedly to false gods.

Both Chinese propagandists and Christian fundamentalists have a unitary view of Tibet, one of undifferentiated awfulness. The Communists, in their sterner phases, have an endless fascination with what they believe to have been the cruelty of master-serf relations in traditional society, and the contemporary Protestant missionaries are convinced that the culture is satanic. Their views are the mirror image of the aristocratic myths of collective happiness. They constitute more than a mere attitude: the ideological stance they represent creates a web of concepts, some of which have potent consequences. It was a Chinese idea of this kind that led to the attempt to eliminate Tibetan ethnic identity during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as to similar efforts at purging traditional culture throughout China. Christian fundamentalists have damaged many of the cultures they have sought to enlighten, as has been shown in other cases. We might expect that in the process of transformation and discussion by which such views mutate into engines of persecution, the most crucial area of intellectual assertion is in the domains of racial superiority, religion, or social relations, matters on which their proponents claim unassailable authority. But in fact the driving force of these views is in large part the effort to reclaim history.

For absolutists have a perception of history that differs from that of other people. They see life as a historical process defined by a particular moment of redemption; before that moment everything is bad, and after it everything is good. If we might describe the writing of the imperial adventurers as vertical and organized around experience, that of the ideologues is lateral and temporal: they divide up the flat expanse of time into the incomplete and the fulfilled, rather than measure the heights and depths of sensual, coterminous, and contradictory experience. For

the Chinese Communists the democratic reforms of 1959 thus reversed the awfulness of traditional Tibet to its mirror opposite, an equally indivisible happiness. For the Christian fundamentalists in 1990, everything was much the same as it was when Landon and Waddell arrived in 1903, because the Tibetans were still not redeemed as true believers: in their view, the moment of historical transformation will come only when the Tibetans are converted. This scheme, once established, absorbs and reorders all experience. For the missionaries, even the aroma of local foodstuffs can be fitted into this chronology as a marker of the absence of redemption: "They use rancid-smelling yak butter for just about everything—as a skin protector, as a tea drink or as an offering to idols," the contemporary missionaries' recruiting leaflet says of the Tibetans. At least the most dogmatic Western visitors of the 1990s were complaining about Tibetans' cooking instead of their appearance.

Chinese propagandists have a more complex task than complaining about the cuisine: they have to change the Tibetan view of history, and they do not have the words of any God to help them, a disadvantage that contemporary Chinese intellectuals have sometimes specifically lamented. Every inch of inroad into the massive hinterlands of pre-Communist thought has to be constructed laboriously. Textbooks have to be rewritten, the shape of the calendar has to be altered, the measurement of time has to be reordered, words must be invented to describe the claims of the new state, the great buildings and thoroughfares have to be given new names, and new stories have to be disseminated in the effort to construct a uniform, consistent account of the integration of Tibet within the Chinese motherland.

The project was and is highly fraught, because the effort to create the appearance of unity is ongoing: almost everything that can be seen in Tibet that is not specifically Tibetan is effectively a signboard saying INTEGRATION WORK IN PROGRESS. If Tibet had been a part of China before the arrival of the People's Liberation Army at its inner borders in October 1950, there was little to show for it. The few Chinese and their camp followers who had lived in Lhasa had been expelled by the Tibetan government in 1912 and again in 1949, but despite the recourse they had offered to anti-British conservatives and the intellectual stimulus they had brought through the likes of Phuntsog Wanggyal to progressives and radicals, they seem not to have made any impact on the infrastructure or material conditions of the country. Given that China was an em-

pire until the time it was evicted from Tibet, and that empires do not act like nation-states in their endless effort to reproduce themselves in all particulars throughout the breadth of their domains, the lack of Chinese presence in the Tibetan landscape should not perhaps surprise us: there was nothing modern or statelike about the Tibet–China relationship before the twentieth century. There was, certainly, extensive influence on food, clothes, fashion, art, administrative terms, and the like, though strictly speaking, many of these were Mongol or Manchu rather than Chinese. But in any case, the absence of Chineseness is striking in one overriding particular: there was little translation of works from Chinese in all the spectacular vastness of Tibetan literature, even though that literature was founded on the translation of foreign writings. China, when it emerged as a nation-state a hundred years ago, slapped rudely out of inertia toward its western flank by Younghusband's quest for adventure, thus had centuries of deficit to make up for in its effort to render Tibet visibly an extension of the motherland.

From the late 1950s the work of integration, founded chiefly on military assertion and the administrative reordering of space, moved rapidly to include a rewriting of history. Part of that effort involved presenting incidents in which traditional Tibetan potentates appear to have acknowledged China's sovereignty over them—usually the acceptance of an honorific title or a seal of office from an emperor. Another, partly contradictory, effort involved presenting Tibet before the Chinese invasion as immersed in suffering and barbarity. New Tibetan printing presses produced works that showed earlier linkages between Tibet and China, most of which were administrative or titular rather than intellectual, while a separate literature, often dominated by grisly illustrations, was produced to record the depravities of preliberation Tibetan society, with maimed peasants, chained felons, and servants carrying aristocrats on their backs. The impact and logic of these presentations depended on an innovative and irrefutable division of time into a morally inflected past and present. A separate but more persuasive and significant literature appeared in the 1980s, presenting historical accounts that included substantial extracts from Tibetan and Chinese governmental correspondence, some of which indeed suggests a close and unequal administrative relationship in the era before the fall of the Qing in 1912.

The point in these surgical slicings of the past at which history was seen to pivot, the instant at which the traditional was transmuted into

the modern, was rigidly asserted, shaping a view of history and of meaning merely by its evocation. But that point was not the moment highlighted by the historical documents—the collapse of the Qing and the unilateral declaration of independence by the thirteenth Dalai Lama. Rather, it was the victory of the Chinese Communist forces on the central Tibetan borders in 1950. The point of transition changed slightly over time: later, for a while, it was the arrival of the People's Liberation Army in the Tibetan capital one year later; for nearly a decade in the 1950s and again in the early 1990s, it was the moment in May 1951 when the Tibetans signed the surrender agreement that acknowledged Chinese sovereignty. It was only after that agreement collapsed and the fourteenth Dalai Lama fled to India that the pivotal point became March 1959, when the Chinese implemented direct rule or, as they term it, *minzhu gaige*, democratic reform. Whichever of these dates is used, everything before it is seen as backward, and since then history has moved inexorably forward.

The amputation of chronology seems crude when viewed retrospectively as an act of polemical rewriting, but it is part of any effort at national construction and is not particular to China. When Deng Xiaoping replaced Mao as the paramount leader of the People's Republic after 1978, he had, like all new leaders, to distance the new regime from the failed policies of its predecessors. For some years, Chinese publications recalled the date in December 1978 ("the Third Plenary of the 11th Congress") as the moment dividing the good from the bad, when Deng had the Party pass a ruling that practice, rather than Mao's dictums, should be the "sole criterion of truth." But after the policy of "liberalization and opening up" yielded dramatic achievements in terms of boosting the rural economy (it had ended the commune system and allowed peasants to farm their own land), almost all official documents began to use an unspecified moment in 1980 as the instant of transition.

For Tibetans particularly, the effect was that the Cultural Revolution was supposed to be seen as the past, and everything after 1980 as the present. Most Chinese statistics and descriptions of Tibet now use that date to mark the beginning of Chinese modernization in Tibet, much as if modern China had not been in control for the previous thirty years. Tibetans, like everyone in China, were asked, in effect, to forget the past (although in Tibet, alone among China's provinces and regions, Tibetan leaders appointed during the Cultural Revolution remained in their positions until the turn of the next century). This

would be academic, except that it is this device that allows outsiders to see Chinese governance as a benefit: had the previous decades not been excised from the Chinese calculations, the overall achievement in Tibet, at least, might have seemed marginal. Periodization allows us usefully to measure a certain kind of progress and improvement, but the calculation of net benefit is best left to participants, whose memories are more likely to be ordered by experience than by historical convention.

The Western writers of the imperial tradition did not see their arrival in Tibet as an end to history, probably because they had no intention to remain and reconstruct the place as part of a modern state. The British wanted Tibet to reject Russian or Chinese dominance, but they had no interest in lifting Tibetans out of their perceived misery or imposing an outside conception of civilization upon them. There is, however, one attribute that the Communist and Christian missionaries shared with the more elegant foreign writers: both of their views imply, though the ideologues and missionaries are loath to state it, that in some way Tibetans themselves considered their own lifestyle as positive. Both views therefore suggest that explanations other than those offered by visitors must be sought in order to explain the apparent anomalies and contradictions in outsiders' perceptions of Tibet. And, in the case of the visitors who seem to have been attracted by this world even while deploring what they saw as its revolting character, something more complex must have occurred in their experience of Tibet than is acknowledged in their descriptions.