

THE CITY, THE CIRCLE



Even before its construction was completed at the end of the seventeenth century, the Potala Palace dominated the experience of travelers to Lhasa. Situated on the summit of Marpori, the Red Hill, it is the natural focus of the Lhasa valley; as the seat of the ruler and a military stronghold, as well as the former residence of the imperial ancestors, it might have been expected to be the center of the new capital. But throughout history, the Potala has been regarded by Tibetans as outside the city. It is the Jokhang temple, low and physically unprepossessing, on the flat land near the river, that is the heart of Lhasa.

The Tibetan capital is a densely packed warren of streets built between two concentric circles that have the Jokhang at their center: the *Barkor*, the “middle circuit,” which runs around the walls of the Jokhang temple complex, and the *Lingkor*, or outer circuit. Like all such pilgrimage routes in Tibet, the Lingkor was defined by mystical, not human, geography: it had to encompass the major sites of spiritual rather than architectural significance in the locality, including intervening areas of countryside or wilderness. So the Lhasa Lingkor travels for more than a mile beyond the edge of the traditional conurbation,

beside the river Kyichu, so that it can include in the western curve of its ellipse the two hills of Chagpori and Marpori. That the Potala lies within the Lhasa Lingkor thus does not mean it was within the traditional city. It did not stand alone—below it was a village known as Shöl, whose residents the present Dalai Lama describes observing from his window as a child; it had been of considerable importance since the seventeenth century as the site of government offices and the official dungeons, as well as brothels. But Shöl was regarded as a separate village outside the city. The Potala thus was like the sun in the Ptolemaic view: the life of the city basked in its light but revolved around the temple of the Jokhang.

Four other buildings define the spiritual geography of Lhasa. About a mile west of the Potala lies the Summer Palace of the Dalai Lama, the Norbulingka, also a site of pilgrimage, though not of geomantic significance. Beyond these two palaces is a third circle. It is formed by the *densasum*, the three monastic seats that Tsongkhapa and his disciples founded in the early fifteenth century: the monastery of Drepung to the west, on the southern flank of the mountain of Gamphel Ri that Wencheng recognized as one wing of the eagle pressing down; Sera monastery to the north, where the flat land meets the slopes of Gyaltzen Ri, probably one leg of the crawling tortoise; and, some 20 miles to the east, near the birthplace of Srongtsen Gampo, the monastery of Ganden, remote but crucial to Lhasans' later perception of their city.

We found N. near his room; luckily this time we did not have to enter. There were still a few tourists around, so it didn't look too bad. We told him quickly what question we needed to ask his superior before we left the country, and, whatever he thought about it, he agreed to take us to meet him.

He led us to the foot of a steep flight of steps cut into the mountainside, and signaled that we should wait there a while. He climbed up and disappeared through a small door at the top of the stairs. We waited and tried to look innocuous, but we were already higher up the mountain than any tourists ever go.

N. reemerged and beckoned us up the stairway. Beyond the door was a small anteroom, and then a curtained doorway. We kicked our shoes off, even though it took more time. After all, this was the deputy director, so we had to show respect.

He was sitting with his back to the window on a hard bed covered with a patterned yellow cloth. The afternoon sun behind him made it hard to see his face, but he was old, very old, very wrinkled.

He wasn't prepossessing and showed no sign of confidence, let alone charisma. He was a thin, anxious, aged man burdened by a high position. The school had been shut down for nearly two decades, and when they had reopened it in 1981, there had been almost no survivors left who remembered the teachings and who had not been forced to take up other professions in the interim. So probably he had been obliged by circumstance to take the job.

He offered us each a boiled sweet from a wicker basket that sat on a low table in front of him. I asked my question: Did he give permission for us to tell people in the outside world the names of his staff members who had been imprisoned? "Yes," he said. It wouldn't bring them any worse suffering than they had already undergone.

And then he talked. We hadn't asked him to. And he didn't talk about what we should do; he talked about the college. There had been an election for the post of director, he said, and for the deputies as well, and it had been fixed. The Chinese had decided who should be nominated, and there was no one else to vote for.

I had got it wrong: it wasn't because he was the last one left that he was the deputy director; it was because the Chinese had told him to be the deputy director. That meant they considered him an ally. I guessed that was why he looked so worn and sorrowful.

The staff had all wanted their most learned teacher to have the post, he continued, but the Chinese had said no. The election had been a fabrication.

And then he cried. Real tears came out of his eyes. The deputy director was weeping. I didn't understand. The tears looked as though they would fall into the wicker basket full of boiled sweets. There was something much more grievous about the staged nomination of the director than I could understand, more serious even than the imprisonment of the staff. Whatever it was, it meant a lot to this old man.

There was not much time—we had to return to the city before we were noticed—and I didn't know what to say. So I asked my other question, my big question. It was meant to sound like an act of generosity, to show that I cared about what he thought and to suggest that I had real influence. "What," I asked, "should we tell our government when we get back?" Was there any message he wished to have passed on?

"Which government is that?" he asked.

"The British," I explained.

He wasn't crying anymore, and he seemed composed. He thought a little and then, almost imperceptibly, he shook his head. And then he said, "The British betrayed us in the past and will betray us in the future."

There was no message to deliver.

The city thus revolves around a temple in the shadow of three hills. From one of them a sacred palace looks down, while a second, more recent palace marks the western entrance to the valley just beyond the cluster of the hills. These are in turn encircled by a ring of great monasteries on the slopes of surrounding mountains, of which sometimes four and sometimes eight constituted, in a much earlier perception, the outermost in a series of propitious rings around the capital.

Just as the four-sided view of the Tibetan world had once located its moral center in Buddhist India while depending on earlier Chinese divination skills to facilitate the importation of those resources, the circular view of Lhasa was also defined initially by magical and later by religious considerations. But the fact that its heart was the Jokhang and its focus and justification became the centrality of Buddhism, or that after the fourteenth century it redefined itself in terms of monasteries, did not mean that the city or its people were necessarily kind or good or moral. That is quite another issue.

The Western idea of sanctity, for example, suggests that places centered on religion should be calm, serene, and tranquil; this is a fundamental aspect of our concept of the sacred. There is a sense of a special space where noise, appearance, even air and light, are more refined in quality; this is exemplified by the architecture, and especially the height, of our temples and our churches. This idea of sanctity as tranquility is associated with religious specialists in Tibet as well—the term *gōnpa* or monastery in Tibetan originally meant "deserted place"—and can be found in the writings of some of the exiled aristocrats, where it probably reflects the instinct felt by any nobleman who wants to escape the turmoil of interaction with the lower classes and so looks to religious buildings to offer such a haven. But, just as religious buildings in Tibet did not usually aspire to height, lay religious practice did not always entail quietude or calm.

"Tranquility" was probably not a term that often characterized the city of Lhasa. The great monastic institutions of Sera, Drepung, and

Ganden, each at their prime having between 5,000 and 10,000 monks, could not have been oases of serenity with such numbers crowded into dormitories with few comforts and fewer distractions. There were *dob-dobs*, or police monks, in each monastery to maintain order, and other police in the city, but on some occasions fighting broke out on a scale that threatened the stability of the state, as in the revolt of the monks of Sera Je in 1947. The physical power and threat of such large groups of men must have been quite daunting to individuals as well as to the government. Tashi Tsering, for example, who as a child in 1942 was enrolled by force in the Dalai Lama's dance troupe, describes in his autobiography the constant risk of being kidnapped by senior monks in search of attractive young men to keep as sexual partners. However holy its conceptual orientation, the city of Lhasa was not in every way an otherworldly place.

The Barkor likewise may have been a site of pilgrimage, but it was also a marketplace, since the best place to sell goods to devotees was where they gathered daily to perform their primary ritual, the circumambulation of the Jokhang; there was no sense of contradiction between commerce and religion. If we look more carefully at the accounts of Tibetans and even foreign visitors, the excitement of Lhasa was as much about shopping as about prayer, or their combination: "there is nothing one cannot buy, or at least order," wrote Heinrich Harrer of his time there in the 1940s. "One even finds the Elizabeth Arden specialties, and there is a keen demand for them. American overshoes, dating from the last war, are displayed between joints of yak's meat and chunks of butter. You can order, too, sewing-machines, radio sets and gramophones and hit up Bing Crosby's latest records for your next party," he added.

Kimura gave an even longer list of what could be obtained in the Barkor, including American, British, and Japanese guns, ammunition, and hand grenades. Tibetan and Western visitors alike rejoiced at the prospect of shopping in preinvasion Lhasa. But the pleasures of consumerism came to an abrupt end when the Chinese arrived and closed the border with India. "One of the biggest changes in the city itself was the absence of the lively central market," wrote the former dancer Tashi Tsering of his return to Lhasa in 1966, after ten years abroad:

There was nothing for sale on the streets anymore. Gone were the cramped booths heaped full of wares, the voices of salesmen

and customers laughing and haggling, and the many tea and beer shops I used to frequent. In their place were a few poorly stocked government stores. It soon became clear that the people weren't very well fed, either. Food was rationed, and there was almost no meat or butter or potatoes. I had lived in the old Lhasa for many years and was under no illusions about its shortcomings. However, there had always been a lot of food, and if you had any money to spend at all you had quite a bit of freedom and choice. Now the food was rationed at low levels.

It is one of the great tragicomic ironies of the Chinese presence that since the new transition point of 1980, Beijing's main claim to legitimacy in Tibet has been the fact that it has brought consumer commodities to Tibet: until the Chinese arrived, the shops of Lhasa had been full of them.

It was not only the shopping that struck Western visitors to preinvasion Lhasa, once they had recovered from the splendor of the Potala. Although their writings dwell on the exotic and mystical aspects of Tibetan culture, what appears to have imparted an aura of beauty and excellence to the city had nothing to do with religion: it was its parks and gardens. Landon is one of the few foreigners to give full credit to their impact:

This city of gigantic palace and golden roof, these wild stretches of woodland, these acres of close-cropped grazing land and marshy grass, ringed and delimited by high trees or lazy streamlets of brown transparent water over which the branches almost meet.... Between the palace on our left and the town a mile away in front of us there is this arcadian luxuriance interposing a mile-wide belt of green...with trees numerous [enough] in themselves to give Lhasa a reputation as a garden city. In this stretch of green unspoiled by house or temple, and roadless save for one diverging highway, Lhasa has a feature which no other town on earth can rival. Between and over the glades and woodlands of the city of Lhasa itself peeps an adobe stretch of narrow streets and flat-topped houses crowned here and there with a blaze of golden roofs or gilded cupolas.

Zasak Taring's map of 1959 shows a circle of twenty-two *lingkas* or parks, each with its own name, surrounding the city, especially along

the north bank of the Kyichu River and beyond Chagpori, most of them half a mile or more in breadth. They were in general not carefully manicured exercises in horticulture, as are public parks in Europe or China, but open areas largely left to nature. Written history may tell us that the culture of Lhasa revolved around religious festivals, but oral tradition suggests that, as with the week-long parties described by Dorje Yuthok, the Lhasa year focused just as much on the days when everyone went to picnic in the *lingkas*. Today, except for the Dalai Lama's Summer Palace, a small part of the Shugtri Lingka (now renamed the People's Park), and the Lukhang, those parks have disappeared. They lie beneath the offices, dormitory blocks, and barracks that make up the modern city.

And although Lhasans see their home as a city of temples surrounded by monasteries, its detailed layout was not shaped by its religious edifices. Unlike the Potala and the three great monastic seats that, by virtue of their siting on hilltops or on mountain slopes, dominate the city, the temples within Lhasa proper had no architectural dominance, as far as we can tell: they have no spire, as on Christian edifices, to mark them; no pagoda, as with temples in China; no dome, as on the mosques of Mughal India; and no grand squares, *durbars*, or gardens to emphasize their importance. Even the Ramoche, built by Wencheng at the same time as the Jokhang, has little physical presence compared to the great monasteries draped on mountainsides across Tibet. Although the *lhakhang*—the temples or houses of the gods—are of great significance to practitioners in Lhasa, it had not been felt necessary to amplify the prominence of these buildings by their design or location. The focus of the city is its role as a place of pilgrimage, but if we study the layout of the alleyways and houses of traditional Lhasa, beyond the purview of the Jokhang, we see that it is the market squares and the mansions of the aristocrats that have shaped the street plan of the city. With this in mind, we turn to the picture today.

“He is an important monk,” someone had once told me. But this was never said publicly. To those outside that tiny cell of underground activists, he was a young man who went to discos and got drunk and lived with his father (only he wasn’t his father) in a tiny set of rooms on the west side of Lhasa. I was shown his letter, but it said nothing about religion, and no one had ever seen this monk near a temple. Still, he had never written in his own hand before, and his friends insisted that whatever he said was important.

Seven years had passed since I had been in Tibet. I had cried when we had finally reached Nepal, after long days walking through snowdrifts and over the remains of houses tossed aside by avalanches. And my tears had not been so much in sorrow as in relief. Still, as I looked back at the mountains looming over the town of Dram-mo and the Friendship Bridge, Tibet had seemed magnificent and statuesque, and the town perched on the distant slopes had looked so much sturdier and more modern than the shacks and hovels of Nepal.

After the letter arrived, I came to think of him privately as the Maybe Monk, but he, like the mountains, dominated the little world around him. I had heard that it was from him that people in Lhasa found out who was in prison, which of them were in solitary confinement, who had been beaten, and who had staged a protest against conditions there; for those were the days when even in the prisons, Tibetans staged demonstrations. And for years there was a story that the Maybe Monk had smuggled food into the prison, so that the captives would have a better chance to keep their bodies strong. He had a friend or a cousin in the military, it was said, and that was how he could do so much.

The letter said he needed money, a small amount, to buy clothing to send to the prisoners. There was even a kind of budget, with so many prisoners requiring so many pairs of running shoes. I had seen these sorts of things before.

Later I heard that one of his relatives had also received a letter; they had sent the money. It had also been for running shoes, but a lot of running shoes. He had wanted to set up a shop, he had said, and use the profits to pay back the loan and fund the purchase of shoes for the prisoners. But the shop never opened and the loan was not repaid.

The final letter, I heard, came in 1993. One thing had changed by then: the Chinese had announced a plan to make Lhasa into a special economic zone. That meant lower taxes, higher profits, and lots of incentives to set up businesses. And there were special rewards for anyone who could bring in foreign money. Suddenly Tibetans had the chance to get rich, especially if they were good at talking.

I knew that another of the monk's friends abroad had received a message saying watches were needed, a particular brand. The correspondents were distantly related and questions were not asked. Anyway, the monk was a pa-wo, a hero of the underground. Three expensive watches were bought and sent to him by hand. He must have needed them as bribes to win over officials in the prisons or on the police force, his friends reasoned.

In the final letter, the Maybe Monk had described a new and better way to help raise money to clothe the prisoners: he had been offered the chance to invest in a new company that would make carpets with modern designs. After all, the carpets from Tibet are among the best in the world, that's what the magazines in China say. He wanted \$30,000.

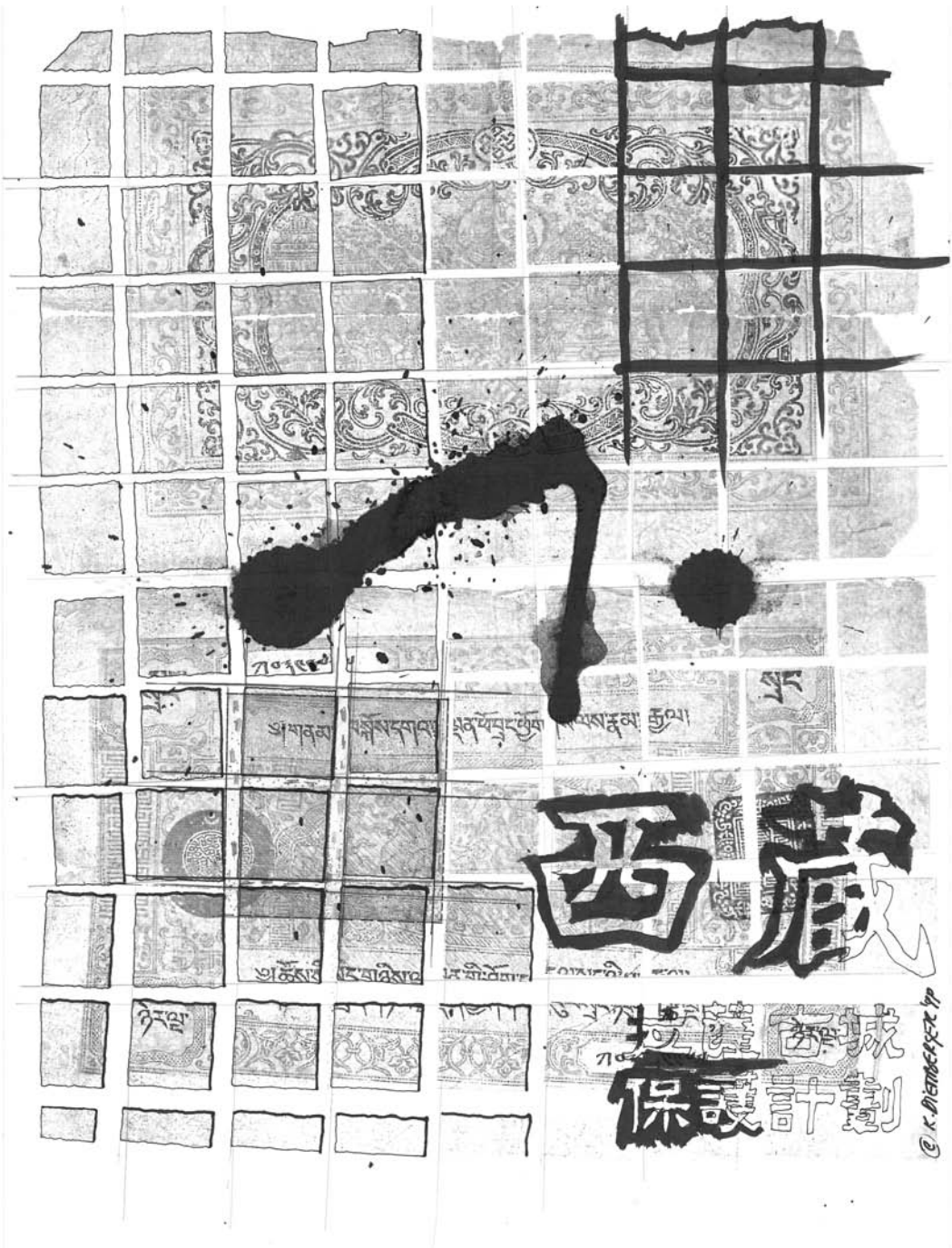
Not even his relatives answered that request.

The opening up of private enterprise hadn't been the only change in 1993: the Chinese had also crushed the underground. In April a man from Trom-sikhang had been detained. People said he had given names; that meant he had been tortured. Other members of his cell had talked, and at least one of them had connections with another cell. By the end of the summer half a dozen groups, all with names like the Young Tiger Cubs or the Youth of the Three Regions or the Lion Youth for Freedom, were gone.

In one raid the police had found a typewriter in the room of a man whom they knew to be illiterate. So they had found a neighbor who had books, and among the books a letter, and within the letter a note about conditions in the prisons. The letter writer was known to be a quiet sort of person, but of an evening he had the habit of visiting the small set of rooms in the west of Lhasa where the Maybe Monk lived with the man who was not in fact his father. That was how they got the Maybe Monk. Unless, that is, they knew him already.

Nobody now speaks about the Maybe Monk. Even the relative abroad was vague about a call from Beijing a year later suggesting an urgent meeting there to discuss his latest proposition. No one ever says that anything has changed, but they don't talk about his spiritual lineage much these days, or about how, since 1993, he makes his living. Or about his daily meetings with his policeman friend.

So I don't know how he gets by now. Maybe one of his investments paid off, or maybe someone else believed the talk about the running shoes. I really couldn't say. But when I last heard, eight years ago, the payment for information was 400 yuan a story, two months' income at the time. At least, that's what I heard. I suspect he doesn't do too badly nowadays.



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