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THE NEW FLAMBOYANCE AND THE TIBETAN PALM TREE

With the new century, Lhasa changed.

For probably the first time in a hundred years, a new form of indigenous architecture emerged in the city: private houses built in a hybrid Tibetan style. In the early twentieth century the importation of steel girders from India, used to reinforce the framework of new buildings, had made redundant the use of pillars in Tibetan homes, so an indigenous variation of traditional Tibetan architecture had thus developed in Lhasa in the construction of houses on the outskirts of the city. The last of these was probably built in the early 1950s, when *Kalön* Ngapö, having sold the family mansion in the Barkor to the new government, had a new home built in one of the former parks on the banks of the Kyichu. No major stylistic innovations in Tibetan building had appeared since then, and neither had anyone been allowed to own private property or leaseholds. But a new set of circumstances coalesced in the late 1990s.

Just as pillarless rooms had arrived in Lhasa as a result of the British forcing Tibetans to trade with them, the changes a century later were an architectural consequence of policies imposed by the state, an opportunity turned to their advantage by those Tibetans in a position to do

so. At some point in the mid–1990s, as the drive for marketization was gathering momentum, it must have become clear to the local leadership that the benefits represented by the plethora of new shops, arcades, bars, and office blocks lining every street might be offset in the minds of Tibetan residents by the increase in merchants, investors, hawkers, and work-seekers from inland China who accompanied them, as well as by the demise of guaranteed social services. The Party therefore implemented one of its most effective policies in the region and increased the wages of all government employees.

The class made up of Tibetans employed by the government in Lhasa and their families probably includes about half of the city's indigenous population, as well as the vast majority of those with education and with foreign access and connections. This class had already been defined by prohibitions—it was the same group that had been forbidden from 1994 to have images or photographs of the Dalai Lama, and that had been ordered two years later not to practice religion in any form. The ban on images of the Dalai Lama was extended the following year to everyone, but only these government employees and their families, notwithstanding the promises in the Chinese constitution, were prohibited from religious practice. So it is not unlikely that some compensatory policy for the cadre class was felt to be expedient.

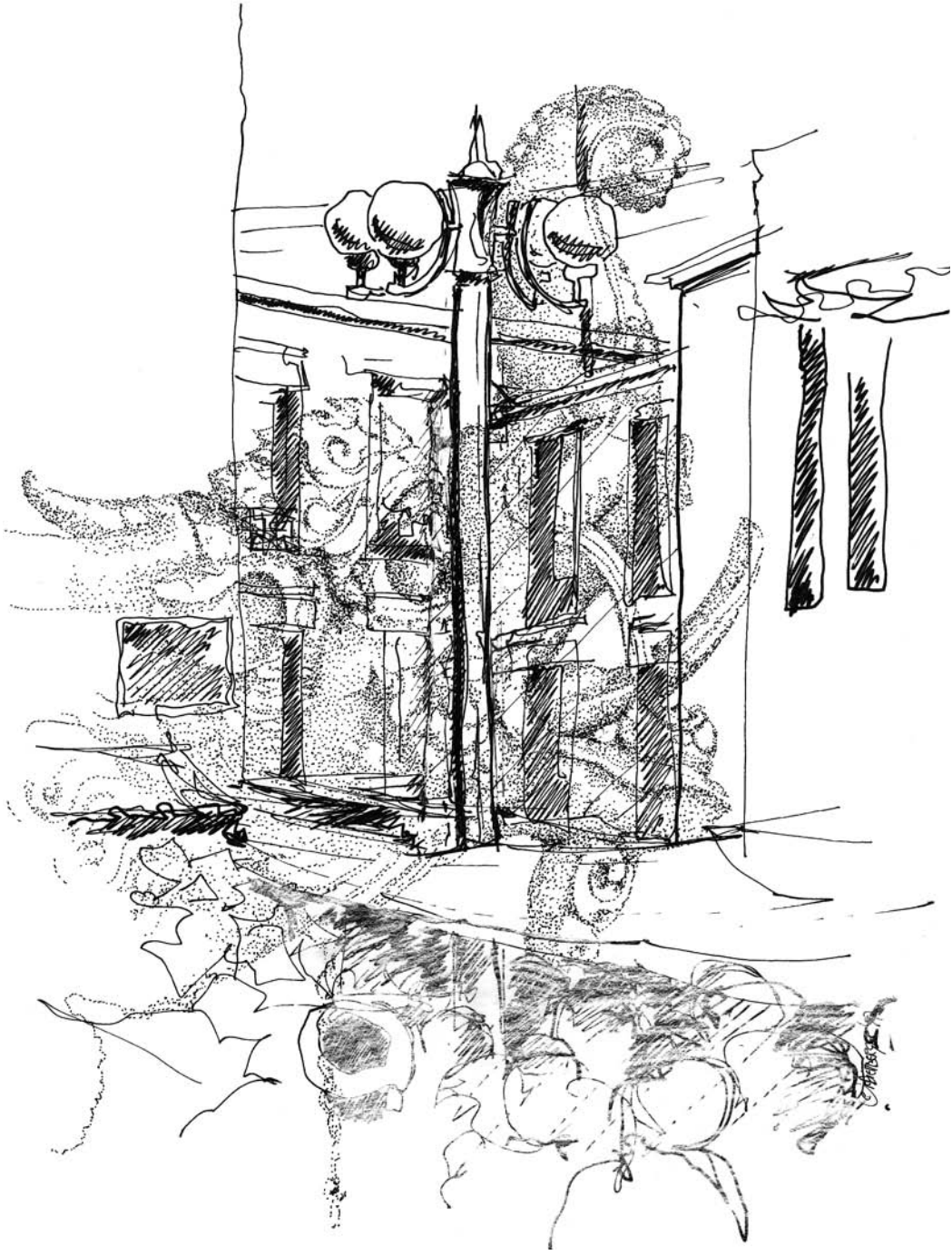
Many of these government staff thus saw their incomes rise dramatically. Others were allowed to take early retirement with full pay, sometimes when only in their forties. And at the same time Beijing, anxious to cut the costs of running a welfare state, had ruled that officials were allowed to move out of the accommodations provided by their work units and encouraged to take out low-interest loans in order to lease land on which to construct their own homes. For a few years in the late 1990s, as Beijing sought to initiate a private property market without allowing ownership, the right to private use of plots of land, valid for fifty years, was sold at bargain prices.

In Lhasa, several hundred Tibetan officials and their families rapidly moved out of the concrete-block work units where they had been housed since soon after the arrival of the People's Liberation Army. By the early years of the new century scores of new homes were being built on the outskirts of the city, to the east in Karma Gönsar, where 400 years before the Gelugpas had torched the single Karma Kagyu monastery then remaining in the city, and to the north in Tuanjie xincun, a

Chinese-created suburb whose name means "New Unity Village." The new houses were almost all in a hybrid Tibetan style that had recently begun to be developed by Tibetan officials building homes for retirement. It is sometimes called the New *Simsha* style, after the houses of aristocrats and high lamas that it recalls: Tibetan in appearance, but modern in amenities. These new buildings used wood only for window frames and lintels, and preformed concrete blocks in place of hewn stone, but their shape and dimensions were reminiscent of traditional forms. They had small walled and gardened courtyards, often with ornamental doors and patios for flowers, sometimes with glass roofs over the terraces, and they always faced south to catch the winter sun. Inside, many had Western-style chandeliers hanging from the ceilings, giant television sets, and other modern conveniences, but the walls were often painted with a traditional Tibetan frieze. The larger ones had outbuildings in the yard for the kitchen and the dining room. Other traditional accoutrements of wealth and property came with the architecture and the cash: mastiffs chained beside the giant gateways to guard the premises, and domestic servants from the countryside working for miniscule wages. A new style of Tibetan housing, living, and class division had finally emerged.

Another return to indigenous aesthetics had also taken place: the Tibetanization of parks. For decades Chinese city planners had been creating traditional Chinese-style gardens in Lhasa for public use that looked nothing like the paintings of landscape artists or photographs from Suzhou, because the grass wasted away through lack of water, the pagodas became dilapidated, and the ornamental lakes stagnated. Few people went to these places for picnics. But in the mid–1990s, on the road between Lhasa and Pabongka, where the giant rock lies that Princess Wencheng had recognized as a tortoise, the old water mill at Nyangdren that once ground *tsampa* or barley flour for the Dalai Lama was renovated and the land around it laid out as rambling hillside parkland with streams, trees, and terraces, a re-creation of a *lingka*. The buildings at the site are modern blocks without Tibetan character, but that matters little to the Tibetans who, on summer weekends, revive there the picnic practices of their ancestors, setting up tents and playing cards and mahjong.

A second Tibetan-style park appeared in 2003, this one with Tibetan-style buildings: the *Xianzudao*—the Island of the Footprint of the Gods. The park, which is also referred to as the New Norbulingka,



lies within a giant, walled enclosure by the river where a replica of the Podrang Sarpa, the palace of the current Dalai Lama's family, has been built. Although the structural work is in concrete, the reproduction of its externalities is exact, and within the park other replicas of old Lhasa houses dot the gardens. These are for use as hotels, but it is the space around them, and the Tibetan context they provide, that on the weekends entices Tibetans to hold yet more picnic parties. This was not a policy move by the local authorities or a shift in governmental aesthetics, but a private venture by a rich Tibetan, gambling that a knowledge of Tibetan tastes and inclinations can yield profits for a bright investor.

Casual visitors to Lhasa are unlikely to see these expressions of Tibetan recrudescence. They are more likely to be struck by the scale of modernization, with all the hallmarks of the global metropolis. Hypermarkets as large as anything in Beijing or Paris have appeared along the outer ring roads of the city, and giant housing developments offer private homes in walled compounds with private parks for the very rich, to the south of Sera monastery. These housing colonies have their benefits, because it is probably due to them that the cement factory whose dust-spewing smokestacks turned the land around Sera white has been moved to the edge of the city.

The old Tibetan houses beside the Snowland hotel, on what is now the western edge of the Tibetan quarter, were replaced by blocks with Tibetan-style façades, and the Barkor was repaved again with giant slabs. All decorative frontages were removed from the Barkor shops (except, it seems, from the giant antiques arcades, whose owners, usually not Tibetan, were permitted to put up carved Tibetan door frames), so the alleyways have acquired a flat, regular, expansive surface, and what once seemed a cluttered skein of passages is now a broad, well-regulated set of pedestrian thoroughfares. The rough, tin-covered market stalls have been replaced by units of identical design and size, and along the former alleyways, elaborate lampposts have been erected with art deco frills, each sprouting a cluster of twenty separate lamps on ornamental metal branches.

Elsewhere in the city, streets have been rebuilt; each bears the name of the inland province that sponsored it. In 2001 Beijing Lu, the last main street with a significant number of Tibetan stores, was repaved to mark the visit of a Chinese leader to preside over another parade in

the Potala Square commemorating Tibetan liberation. The development caused disruption at the time: most shops and hotels on Beijing Lu were unable to accept customers for some months because of the piles of mud and debris shifted to their front doors, where once there had been sidewalks. But by the time the new road was completed, the citizens were able to enjoy, at least on television, "a song and dance performance marking the 50th anniversary of the peaceful liberation of Tibet at the square in front of the Potala Palace and 'Holiday Night,' the fireworks show and performance [that] highlighted the great development in Tibet following the region's peaceful liberation."

The development style of the new century was crowned by architectural flourishes, odes to urban flamboyance. A 120-foot-high replica of a mountain, ultramodernist, angular, and concrete, was erected opposite the Potala Palace, across the new parade square, to mark the Everest-high achievement of half a century of Tibetan liberation. The first multistory block close to the traditional part of the city also went up that year, with the result that from the roof of the Jokhang temple you can no longer see the monastery of Sera on the slope north of the city. Thirteen stories high—ten floors higher than everything around it—with winglike flourishes on its roof, it stands some 300 yards from the Ramoche, the seventh-century temple built by Princess Wencheng on the site where the geomantic forces had made her cart get stuck just as she entered Lhasa. The tower block, a few feet outside the boundary of the official conservation zone within which buildings may not exceed four stories, is the new headquarters of the city's Public Security Bureau; the police, it was said, needed to be able to look down into surrounding courtyards and homes.

The site chosen by city planners as the centerpiece for architectural display was the main street popularly known as Yuthok Lam, the Street of the Turquoise Roof, after the blue roof tiles on the ornamental covered bridge that, some say, gave Dorje Yuthok's illustrious family its name. The bridge beside what had once been the gateway to the city had become just a building amid countless buildings, with nothing running beneath or over it, an ungrammatical memento of the watery forces that had bedeviled Srongtsen Gampo's city-building efforts a millennium earlier, and of the causeway cutting through the marshes along which the British troops and journalists had traveled as they crossed the empty land between the Potala and the city a hundred years before.

The street popularly known as Yuthok Lam had been renamed People's Road after liberation, since it connected the Jokhang temple at its eastern end with the new People's Government Headquarters at the western end, and in 1965 it had been the site of Lhasa's first official "market street." The bridge with the turquoise roof, now within the confines of the Lhasa customs office, had been scheduled for demolition at one time in the 1990s, but the planners decided to refurbish it as a monument. The other buildings on the street were reconstructed as modern stores selling fashionable clothes, flat-screen television sets, karaoke suites, and other goods. At its mid-point crossroads, video screens displaying advertising films were put up in the style of a miniature Times Square, and a stage has been set up outside the giant department store so that the salesgirls can demonstrate the virtues of fashionable commodities to passersby and persuade them through megaphones to enter the establishment.

At night along the length of the new Yuthok Lam, 20-foot-high decorative illuminated bollards flash different colors in sequence. Ornamental abstract Chinese sculptures in stainless steel, resembling curled-up dragons, mark the entrance to the thoroughfare. On the sidewalk, plastic mushrooms painted red with white spots, the size of a stone horse-mounting block or an upturned trash can, have been placed at regular intervals. When their wiring was still in working order, they played pop music every time a pedestrian walked by.

The most striking feature of the new flamboyance is horticultural: there are now palm trees on Yuthok Lam. These were imported from the inland areas, where they have become common sights at crossroads in major Chinese cities. One has appeared in front of the new leisure center at the university as well; two others have been placed beside the Golden Yaks. Their trunks are smooth and slender; each has between nine and twelve fronds at its peak, startling green, and at least five coconuts. At three or four points along Yuthok Lam they tower over the street in perpetual multicolored efflorescence.

The palm tree is not indigenous to Tibet, however, and these are made of plastic.

Western journalists and writers like myself found that our stories of five or ten years earlier had to be rewritten. Like our predecessors who had come with the British invasion a century before, we arrived prepared to

write about the iniquities of the system and departed somewhat in awe of its achievements. This time the achievements were economic rather than spiritual, the system was Chinese rather than Tibetan, and the change was effected by major alterations in local policies more than by the exigencies of foreign outlook or temperament. Those who had created narratives after 1987 that focused on dissent, protest, and their suppression by the state found themselves wandering down streets where there were fewer police visible and far less crime than in the cities from which they had come. Those streets were now lined with arcades, malls, and shops advertising the same cornucopia of endlessly available commodity goods we were accustomed from our own histories to see as the goal of social progress.

Visiting writers struggled with the difficulty of reconciling the sudden and visible surge of material prosperity with remembered concerns about political abuse, of which they could no longer see or hear evidence. One Western writer, after visiting Tibet, wrote a book-length apology for having been an active campaigner for Tibetan dissidents in the fifteen years before. Some social scientists produced studies aiming to discredit claims by Tibetan exiles; one set out to prove that conditions of rule in Tibet could not be termed colonial and that the exile leader's statements could not be trusted. Other writers seemed offended at the tone of popular Western rhetoric about Tibet, from which they wished to separate themselves, or embarrassed by what they now saw as their own naïveté. For some, what they encountered in their visits to twenty-first-century Tibet seemed more prominent and meaningful than the disturbing events about which they had read a decade earlier.

The modern mechanisms of discreet control still abounded—video cameras to monitor the crowds, plainclothes policemen, informants, professional eavesdroppers, electronic surveillance, and so forth—but more had changed than policing methods: in the capital open demonstrations against the government had ceased. Some 200 protests had been reported from Tibet in the years after the one I experienced on my first visit, but, although there was news of incidents in other, often rural, areas, few had been heard of in Lhasa after 1996. The calculus of dissent had changed. Anyone who expressed open disapproval of state policy faced long years in prison, and it must have seemed that the public statement of such sentiments was not worth the costs it would necessarily entail to one's life and family. In any case, most of the Tibetans bold enough to risk taking

to the streets either were in prison or had fled to India. I had by chance seen a sign of public dissent in the Tibetan capital when a miniature device of some sort exploded outside a courthouse in October 2000. Police rushed everywhere in a state of high anxiety to make sure no foreign tourist would realize what had occurred, but I was there long enough to observe that the only effect was a little streak of rubbish scattered across the pavement, not distinguishable from what was usually there before the sweeper ladies in their soiled blue work clothes arrived with their long brooms early every morning. Foreign writers were unlikely to see any such event, and, since they could speak to few people, they had to rely on what they saw more than on what they heard. The story that thus confronted them was not opposition but development.

This was not the only change in foreign writing about Tibet. At just the same time in the 1990s, Chinese writers and artists also found a new genre, one familiar in Western writing since at least the time when James Hilton wrote *Lost Horizon*: the eulogy for the beauty of Tibet's landscape, the grandeur of its traditional architecture, and the charm of its people and their "colorful" beliefs. Since 2003 a million tourists have visited Tibet each year, 20 times the number in 1987, and 90 percent of them have been Chinese citizens gazing with newly acquired interest, by no means always superficial, at the more exotic parts of their nation.

This gaze of the new Chinese middle classes toward the promise offered by their western hinterlands was linked to a movement that had been widespread in republican China in the decades before the Communists took over: the rediscovery of Tibet as a source of Buddhist teaching. Eighteen years before, I had seen Chinese tourists laughing publicly at the sight of Chinese Buddhist monks bravely trying to perform a simple ceremony in the temple atop the giant Buddha in Leshan, in the province of Sichuan. That same year, in the Gelugpa temple in Zorge in the eastern Tibetan borderlands, I had, unnoticed, watched a cadre in knee-high boots stride up and down a temple walkway screaming abuse at an assembly of several hundred monks who had been taking part in formal theological debate before an audience of nomads. In Lhasa in 1988, Chinese visitors, along with the Chinese troop patrols, had customarily walked the wrong way around the Jokhang in order to show a healthy distance from Tibetan notions of religious propriety.

But among the wave of Chinese visitors in the new millennium a substantial number, including cadres from the inland areas, were Buddhists who had come to see Tibet as the font of a recaptured spiritual tradition. Chinese visitors to the Jokhang would offer scarves and gifts to the statues of the Buddha, and sometimes bow before them. I met a Chinese businessmen who had traveled to Lhasa on his summer holiday from his office in Korea just to hear a Tibetan lama speak. I knew one Tibetan lama in Lhasa, a mid-ranking official whose colleagues did not know of his religious standing, in whose house at least three Chinese people had lived for several years, looking to outsiders like unobtrusive tenants but actually there as his disciples. Among my friends in the city were two Chinese students who had taken Tibetan names and learned the language. They had visited most of the major lamas remaining in Chinese territory, and were producing textbooks in Chinese for students of Buddhism. Not unlike Younghusband, though with far greater seriousness and learning, some of the Chinese whose parents had arrived in Tibet to liberate it from itself had become devotees of its culture and beliefs.

The increase in individual Chinese religiosity was particular to a certain sector and was not matched by greater tolerance of Tibetan Buddhism by the state. At the end of the 1990s an opposite trend had begun: stronger controls in monasteries, a general order forbidding officials and their families from engaging in any form of religious activity, and a ban on any schoolchildren or older students attending religious ceremonies.

With the century, I changed too. Instead of a reader of books about Tibet and an occasional visitor, I became for months at a time a foreign resident. Aspects of the city that had seemed before 2000 to be elements of fabled history or scars of modern encroachment became in time the normal drabness of my uninspiring, lived environment. As I became accustomed to the spread of urbanization, it lost the ability to shock and became simply normative.

I had a semiofficial position at the university, where each summer I would herd as best I could the students I brought with me from America and Europe, hounding them into the classrooms where they studied during the day and out of the nightclubs and bars that they frequented at night. They lived with me in a university building reserved for for-

eigners, into which we were locked each night at 11:30. There was little or no contact with other students on the campus, though we were not told of any explicit rule forbidding it. Those who visited us had to show their identity cards and sign their names, and few Tibetans came to see us. There were other foreign students and teachers in our dormitory who were vague about their aims in coming to Tibet to study one of the world's more difficult languages and who had a stream of local visitors, apparently unhindered by officialdom. These foreigners, it seemed, were Protestant missionaries, discreetly working to alter the history of Tibet in a more radical way than the Chinese Communists had managed. The Chinese ban on such endeavors was not enforced as long as their activities were private, and each Sunday our fellow students of unclear aim would go by bus to a local orphanage where no one spoke English and no one knew the meanings of the songs they taught the children. One day by chance I saw a student from Korea putting his hand on the heads of infants among the pilgrims in the Potala and whispering words that, when challenged, he declared to me were the real blessings these lost people yearn for. An American of similar persuasion counseled me more gently, explaining that Tibetan Buddhists are damned to hell. Later she returned to apologize for her omission in having failed to add that I am too.

We nonmissionaries mainly inferred the rules that limited us through a vague sense of recent history or from collective fears. These last were more effective than explicit prohibitions. We were not permitted more than a day's journey outside the city without a permit and an escort, but we were free to wander at will within the urban area, which was growing by the day. We were not told of many other regulations, although for some reason we were not allowed to travel by bus outside the city, even with an escort. Other limitations emerged osmotically, as when one afternoon after class a student brought a local friend, a nun, back to visit her in the dormitory, and I was summoned by an outraged official. I should already have known, she said, shocked at my ignorance, that such people had "old brains." That was the only way we discovered what no Westerner could have envisaged: without express permission, monks and nuns were forbidden to enter the university campus. I discovered later that this rule of separation applied to most official precincts in the city. Indigenous religiosity had come to be for the Chinese not unlike what personal hygiene had been for Younghusband and his crew.

My two narratives thus converged into one stream. There was no longer history on the one hand and experience on the other. There was no task more exacting than persuading teachers to assign homework for the classes, meeting local colleagues for lunch or dinner, having my students complete their coursework, or helping them avoid breaching known or unknown laws. For at least a portion of each year I became a part of the contents of buildings that I had until then viewed as an outsider. Their distinctiveness blurred, and the project of describing them became hard to maintain. As my life in Lhasa filled with the momentary excitements and quotidian despairs of work, relationships, food, and sleep, the streets I had studied became ways to get to a meeting or a meal, and buildings whose history I had once dreamed of understanding became permeable exteriors of which only the contents mattered: they became unnoticed extensions of the people I knew and the ways in which they lived, talked, and slept. Any clarity of vision that I had once thought I had upon arrival became obscured, and the lines that Italo Calvino had said were written in the corners of city streets and the gratings of windows became invisible. They could not be deciphered. They were no longer available as the distinct elements that the foreign writer wishes for, to control, describe, and play with according to his or her dreams.

But that was only true of the spaces in which I lived and moved—the university, the bookstores, the newly constructed Tibetan-style homes of my fellow teachers, the Muslim and Chinese restaurants I frequented, and the spaces in between. There was the photocopy shop run by a Chinese woman I had once briefly met in a train station in Qinghai, and the bicycle repair store, the last in Lhasa to be run by a Tibetan, where I bought endless nuts and bolts and inner tubes to encourage its survival. All of these places belonged to the new forms of architecture: white-tiled garage, Stalinist block, blue-fronted modernist, or *faux*-Tibetan concrete. But between these sites I had colonized with my familiarity were other buildings that remained unknown. Their visible, impenetrable exteriors resisted my gaze. They had contents and histories with which I had no acquaintance. Thus simplified, they remained lexical items with which I could weave stories. But, knowing both too little and too much, I could no longer claim the confidence to expound upon them.

I rarely dared to enter these unfamiliar places, not certain about the perimeters of safety for those living there. Especially I was nervous about

entering any of the old houses still standing in the Barkor, the yet unbroken links to the Tibetan past. These still spoke of stories too dangerous for me to dally with, too close to the perils I had known ten or twenty years before. I didn't want to be reminded of the errors I had made then, or to repeat them now. Maybe the memories were ghosts that should long since have been expelled. On several occasions, other foreigners told me that they had made such visits without incident. My anxiety was probably the exaggeration of an overactive mind.

One day a Western scholar came to speak to my students at the university. He was a distinguished figure in Tibetan studies and had spent considerable time in Lhasa. He argued that any diffidence about entering Tibetan houses and talking to the locals amounted to needless paranoia. For years, he said, he had spoken to every Tibetan he met and entered their houses without constraint, and that as long as one avoided saying anything political, no harm could ensue.

I accepted the next invitations that came to me by chance, to see if the professor was correct. There were three, all unsolicited, and all from people who knew nothing of my past and whom I had never met before and never saw again.

The first came the next day. I was teaching at the university that term and met with my students each week in a teahouse, in a group; that was the only time I saw my Tibetan students outside the classroom. The Chinese students came often to visit me, or took me to their homes. There was no reticence with them, and no concern about official sanctions; one even suggested marriage. But with the Tibetans none of that had happened till that day, when I met one with a friend in the street. The friend invited me alone to his home nearby. It was one of the last old buildings in the Barkor, and I wandered around its courtyard and its sagging rooftops, played with the children, and took a picture of an ancient saddlebag hanging in the shrine room that technically he was not supposed to have. Then he took me to a room in another part of the building where an elderly man, nearly blind, sat alone in the dark. I asked no questions; I knew my visit had gone beyond playing with the children. The old man had not met a Tibetan-speaking foreigner since his youth, and told me, unasked, of twenty years he had spent in prison. He said the best part of his life had been destroyed. In the 1950s he had been a radical, eager to rebuild his country and its society with the tools of modern knowledge. But he had thought to do that in a Tibetan way,

and had paid the price. Maybe he was one of those who had met earlier with Phuntsog Wanggyal in the Kyitöpa, or had dreamed of going to study in Kalimpong, as had the dancer Tashi Tsering. But reading about such a history was much easier than encountering a person who had lived one. I left the room as fast as decorum would allow in case he was discovered speaking to me. I did not see him or my host again. The following summer, when I returned to Lhasa, the house had been demolished.

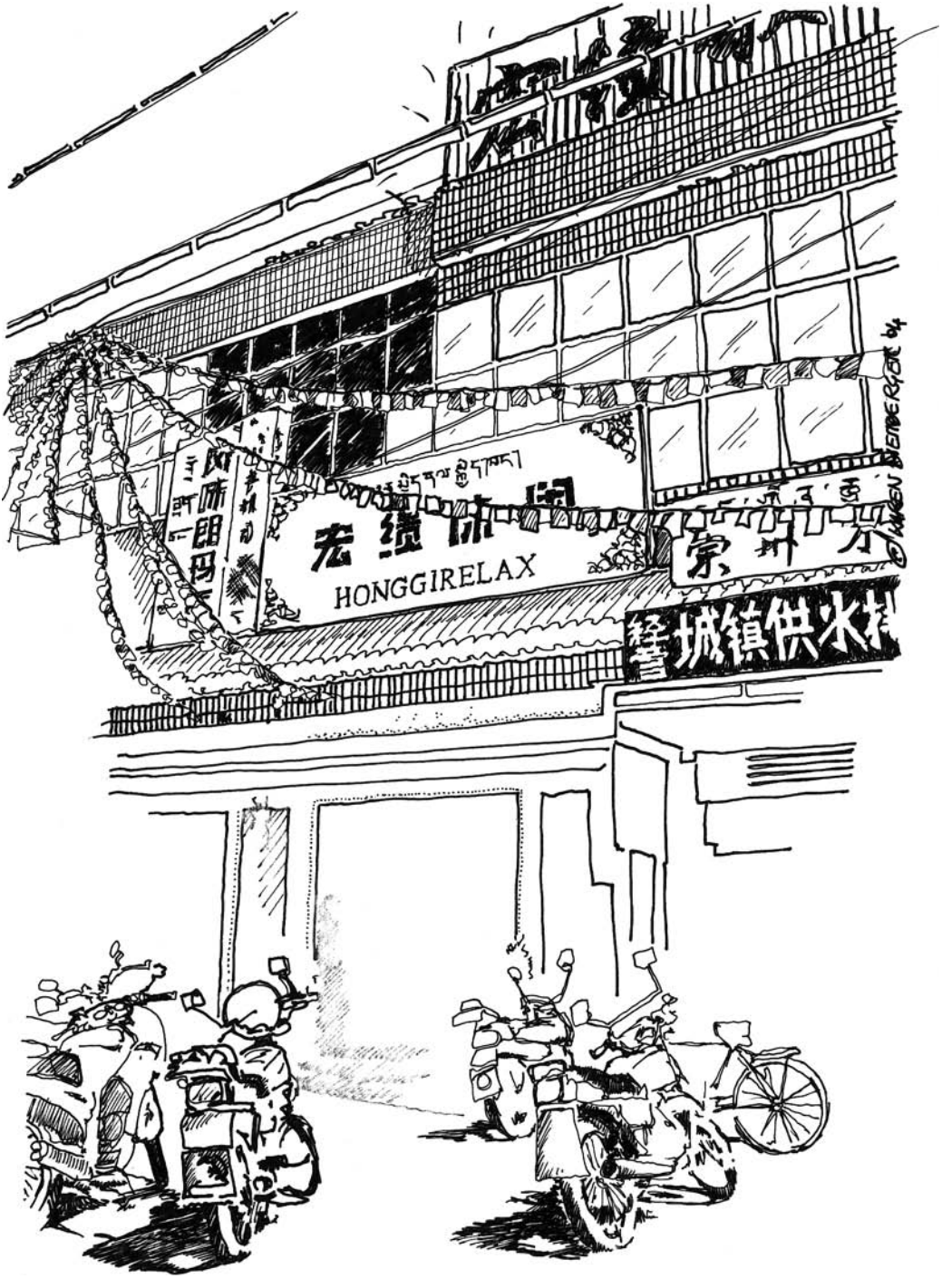
The second invitation came the next day, when I was buying something in my friend T.'s shop and a young Tibetan friend of hers came in. He was also from the countryside, but he could read and write, and he wanted to take me to his workplace next door to help him practice English and to entertain his colleagues. We wouldn't be alone, and he was unlikely to have any troubling memories such as I had heard about the day before. So I went with him into a new, utilitarian factory where Tibetans worked at machines and turned out assembly-line products. Lots of people thronged the hallway, and everyone could hear the patter of our anodyne remarks. Then I was taken around the factory offices to greet the staff, and by chance found myself alone for a few minutes in a small, sealed cubicle with a middle-aged woman from the stock ordering department. She told me that Tibet had been ruined by its new rulers, that the culture was being destroyed, and that she was waiting for the Dalai Lama to return. Again I left as rapidly as possible.

The last time, I was with the Western scholar. He took me to visit a Tibetan family he knew. After a while he left the room, and someone told me we were all leaving to go somewhere else. I was bundled, along with the family's children and the maid, into one of a fleet of taxis. I thought the professor was coming too, but when we arrived somewhere on the far side of the city, by now swathed in night, I realized that he had not been brought with us; he must have still been in the other house, drinking tea and not discussing politics.

Here, on the outskirts of the metropolis, I didn't get the chance to discuss anything: I was told. An important official described how his superiors had just shut down a major project he was involved in, related to Tibetan culture. He had spent several years checking the project documents with his colleagues and superiors to make sure there were no ambiguities, but it had been closed down anyway for some political transgression, and he was awaiting a decision on his

punishment. I couldn't follow all the details that had gotten him into trouble, except one that related to the provenance of some ancient Tibetan artifact that might or might not have had a Chinese origin, but I understood that his punishment would be either early retirement, being sacked without pension, or judicial sentencing. I think in the end it was the second, but I am not sure.

After that, I stopped accepting invitations.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