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# *MESTIZO:* TWO NARRATIVES CONVERGE

In a teahouse opposite the university, I was talking with a student from Australia about her academic progress. We were in one of the countless rows along the new city streets of featureless, two-story, garage-type cavities constructed out of concrete since the 1990s. Four identical stores alongside it served the Tibetan population of the campus. The room was barely larger than a shack, with two low tables on either side, each with a pair of benches roughly hewn out of wood. A crude partition had been set up to ward off the fumes from the gas stove in the back, where the sister of my main Tibetan student worked daily until midnight preparing all the dishes on the menu. As in every Tibetan teahouse, these were sweet tea or butter tea, or, for those who wanted to eat, a meat broth, called *thupa,* or rice and potatoes with flecks of beef, called *sha 'mdre*.

Like her fellow teahouse workers, the sister was from the countryside and could not read or write. But her brother had married a city woman who, having obtained a clerical position in the office that manages Lhasa's monasteries, had been able to afford a business license. It was hanging on the wall, carefully framed. Near it was a picture of a yak's skull. It was draped with a white *khata* and so must have become

a sacred emblem of Tibet, probably of recent origin. There were posters of football players and Chinese pop stars. Above the door hung a faded photograph of a leafless tree, an image whose significance, if it had any, I did not know.

The table was stained with the marks of countless cups and bowls, and among them a student of the English language had carved the words *I lvoe*. The imperfect spelling did not detract from the care with which each serif of each letter was engraved. I imagined the girl who inspired such graffiti giggling at its cosmopolitan daring.

The usual customers were male youths who in the evenings were most often, if they had the cash, the worse for wear from alcohol. But it was still afternoon and an older woman, rotund and extroverted, was sitting at the next table. Her son was studying at the university across the road; she herself had not had such an education. She was explaining to her friends why a certain lama deserved respect above all others in the city. There were few lamas left in Lhasa whom she knew of, and it sounded like she had never met one face to face; I realized I'd never heard a normal Tibetan in Lhasa talk openly about a spiritual master. Probably it was because, except for the great *Geshe* Lamrim, whom I had tried unsuccessfully to visit at Drepung on my first trip to Tibet, ten years before he died in 1997, none had received permission to give teachings to the public.

The lama she respected was one she had heard about but whose name she did not know. So she described his achievements to her friends, which were that he had restored two or three dilapidated Tibetan mansions in the Lhasa Barkor to their original condition. He knew the design and layout of all the old Tibetan buildings that had stood in the capital in the old days, she said, and could draw their plans from memory and recite the histories of their occupants.

I realized that she was referring to Minyak Chökyi Gyaltsen, whom Western scholars think of as a kind of scholar-architect, an autodidact, perhaps the only such Tibetan to have shared that kind of knowledge. He was brought out of decades of seclusion after 1990 partly through the efforts of a young German enthusiast, who for a short while had been allowed to bring in foreign funds for restoration work until he was expelled. But for the lady in the teahouse, Minyak Chökyi Gyaltsen was a *rinpoche*, a revered spiritual master, and his work on Lhasa's physical fabric a mark of exceptional learning and religiosity.

It was the first time I had heard an ordinary Tibetan lament the loss of Tibetan-style buildings. "I would never live in one of those buildings built by Chinese," she said. "I only feel comfortable in a Tibetan one." I recalled those Westerners who five years earlier had scoffed at the years of fund raising the German did to support renovation work by Tibetan craftsman, largely unemployed until he had arrived. Only bourgeois foreigners cared about old buildings, his critics had said, insisting that modern Tibetans preferred creature comforts and were indifferent to matters of aesthetics and tradition. If that had ever been so, it seemed that it was no longer the case.

My closest Chinese friend in Lhasa at that time owned an Internet shop opposite the side gate of the university. He had come to Tibet not by choice but because his wife taught piano in the music school, and it was easy for him to make good money on the side by hiring out computers by the hour. In his arcades young boys of all nationalities played war games all night, and girls sent messages to friends in inland China. The war games were voiced in American English. The computers wrote in English or Chinese.

He was a man of endless charm and sophistication and spoke perfect, unaccented English with a strong smattering of American slang, even though he had never been beyond his country's borders. We drove in a cab past the rows of flashing neon signs that illuminate the frontage of the new development on Thieves' Island, the former picnic site now turned into a maze of lush restaurants, stores, and brothels. He had just treated me to a meal of Sichuan hot-pot in a luxurious eatery on the western edge of town, where uniformed flunkies had helped us into our cab and where at least 200 Chinese and Tibetan customers were paying a month's official wages for a taste of inland cuisine and opulent milieu.

As we passed the beckoning signs of nightlife on Thieves' Island, I had asked my friend what he thought of the city. He was the only person I knew in Lhasa who would have been unafraid to criticize the government, had he wished to, and not only when its officers raided his arcades, ostensibly for some technical abuse of Internet regulations, in order to extract a bribe. "I do not like what we have done to this city," he said. I thrilled to find confirmation of my own unstated sentiments.

"We have not treated these Tibetans as well as they deserve," he continued. "The buildings are too low. What this place needs is tower blocks like we have in Chengdu."

I mumbled something, confused.

*"Is that the religion women cannot practice?"*

*It was the third time we had met in the two rooms that made up her family's apartment. Since she was studying English, it was okay for me to visit her. Past the Potala, right at the fork, across the roundabout, and into the Chinese part of Lhasa. Left at the second alleyway after the Golden Yaks.*

*"Is that the what?" I said. It wasn't very good English, and I was only there on the pretext that I spoke English well. Once a week, Thursday nights. It had taken me a while to find my way. No one seemed to be watching and I always waited until nightfall, but tourists rarely visited this part of town, west of the Golden Yaks, so it made no difference: I was conspicuous anyway.*

*There was a door in the wall on the far side of the courtyard, across a sward of splinters left by the glass-cutters who worked there during the day. Probably Chinese, I thought viciously, who knew all about hard work and private enterprise but hadn't discovered the broom.*

*Beyond the door in the wall was a second, tiny courtyard leading to the two rooms cut out of a former outhouse. The first was lined with gilt knickknacks and kitschy calendars. What I could see of the second was lined with books.*

*"*Youtai *religion," she explained. The Chinese term for Jews and Judaism. "Women cannot practice."*

*There was only one place I knew where that statement had been formulated. She couldn't have seen it; they don't show that sort of film in Tibet. They show Hong Kong martial arts films and Hindi movies and dubbed action films featuring Sylvester Stallone. Nothing too troubling for the mind: mostly about violence, mostly about men, very little about love or sex, nothing about religion. And twenty-five-part television marathons about Tibetans' liberation from feudal overlords by fresh-faced youths dressed in the plain, faded green of the PLA uniform, which was now so popular that on Thieves' Island on the south side of the city you could rent a private room in a restaurant and be served by girls wearing the same 1950s uniforms, only newly creased and unfaded, and revolutionarily bright red lipstick.*

*And anyway all the cinemas in town except for two were closed, because some smart planner in the Party had worked out that wealthy people don't take part in demonstrations and tripled all the salaries. So everyone with a*

*job had bought a VCR, even the Tibetans. But she still didn't have one, so she couldn't have seen it. And she clearly didn't know that the ban on Jewish women studying had passed from most of our communities fifty years ago. This was a one-source piece of knowledge, and that source could only be ...*

*"*Yen-tel,*" she said. "*Yen-tel.*"*

*She came back from the other room with* A Collection of the World's 1,000 Best Films. *At least I think it was called that, but I can't read Chinese. But there, under 1982 or 1983, it was: "Directed by Barbra Streisand, Produced by Barbra Streisand, Starring Barbra Streisand,* Yentl, *the story of the Jewish girl who won't accept that the study of religion is not allowed for her." The girl of whom Bashevis Singer had written in his wicked, impenetrable, and subversive way; the girl who had disguised herself as a boy in order to study and who, in her desperation to maintain the illusion, had ended up in a wholly fabricated marriage. And who after many years had been turned into the heroine of a sepia-toned Hollywood epic for which they hadn't given Babs even a copper yak, let alone an Oscar.*

*My Thursday evening pupil was not far from Barbra's age. Once, I had heard my pupil sing, a spiritual she had learned in its entirety from a Japanese film in which a "*Negro,*" as she put it, had died after falling from a cliff for some reason I couldn't grasp, singing. She had sung divinely, evoking his suffering and that of his people, and I had sat there on her sofa among the nylon cushions and the plastic flowers and discreetly cried. But she didn't have a film star's looks. The horn-rimmed spectacles, the scraped-back hair, the asexual garb, the absence of adornment, severity of appearance. At first, three weeks before, in the Snowlands restaurant where she had asked if I would teach her, she had seemed more like an Asian Rosa Klebb. She embodied the Chinese puritan, the type who were already too committed to abandon woolen stockings for skin-tight polyester suits and nylons when the market had arrived, or, rather, had been pushed in. Or the ones who gambled that the state bureaucracy was a safer bet than the main street stores and nightclubs that they maybe had realized, even then, were sure as the spring tide to come.*

*She didn't only look like a stern-faced Chinese cadre: she* was *a Chinese cadre. A very high-up Chinese cadre. At the last lesson I finally dared to ask, "What do you do?"*

*"You would not understand," she said. "I have seen films. I know what Americans in offices do. Especially New York. They work, all the time. It's a different system here. We do nothing. We play mahjong and we do nothing. It's different here."*

*Her gamble had been right, of course: she did nothing all day and still got paid. Handsomely by local standards, 2,000* kuai *a month, I'd bet. Of course she'd been right: the Party wouldn't yet break the iron rice bowl in Tibet, the lifelong social safety net. Tibet is one place where it doesn't mind paying for compliance, at least among officials. Anyway, she had hedged her bets both ways: she had long since told her husband to leave, and had bought part-ownership of a high-class nightclub, in which Sichuanese migrant girls in scanty outfits—Tibetan girls, she said, just don't know how to do it—served liquor to Chinese soldiers and office staff who were drinking up their altitude allowances and remoteness bonuses but still had plenty left to squander in brothels on their way back to their bare and lonely one-lightbulb rooms in China's western outpost.*

*That's a smart cadre. Play it both ways.*

*She served more tea. Chinese leaf tea, almost colorless, bitter but refreshing in the intense cold since the sun had gone down. I was still trying to exonerate my religion. It was just a custom in some communities, I stammered hopefully, the ban on female learning has no written basis. "They were the ones who killed* Yishu*," she declared. The Chinese word for Jesus. So now I knew where she had learned her English: it must have been from the officially sanctioned foreign English teachers, the same covert Protestant evangelists who had told me that all Tibetans were damned to hell. My forebears had killed Jesus, so I understood why I should go there; what the Tibetans had done, I wasn't sure. But the missionaries weren't there to explain these things to foreigners. They had more pressing work to do.*

*She looked through the book and wrote some notes on films she found.* Bullit. Star Wars. Vertigo. *Her pen was lavishly inlaid with fake lapis lazuli, an excess of plastic opulence. "Presented to Tibet's Cadres by the Central Authorities' Representative Delegation on the 30th Anniversary of Peaceful Liberation,"was faintly etched on it in Tibetan. It ran out of ink again. I lent her mine.*

*"I was in it," I said. "The tailor. The apprentice tailor."*

*She took no notice; she was writing in her notebook. A long description of her father's life lay across its pages, written in a grotesque cursive that knew no horizontals, and she was copying my corrections to her homework from the week before. He had been a landless laborer in the Yunnanese southwest fifty years before, and had fled to join Maoist guerrillas in the hills after beating his landlord's donkey to death by mistake. But it wasn't his oppressed credentials that had brought him to high office under the new regime: it was the*

*happenstance that he had learned Tibetan in his youth while driving animals to market across the mountains in northwest Yunnan. First he was a translator for the arriving army as it followed the passes he had so often crossed, then he had some years of education in the cadre school, and finally he became a county leader, or as she put it, a district magistrate. This woman ate foreign-language dictionaries for breakfast.*

*"She reads everything," the Tibetan girl from the Snowlands told me later. "All she does is read. None of us knows as much as her. She's read all of* The Water Margin. *And not just the* Dream of the Red Chamber, *either. Other things too," she said. "She hardly goes out, she just reads."*

*I remembered the Dostoevsky I had recognized among the rows of Chinese novels next to the photo of her taken as a student twenty years earlier at college, with the red neck scarf that marked her Party future. It was printed on the lightly plasticated paper used for posters at that time; too large for any private photograph, it had some caption printed underneath. She must have been a propaganda model whose image was distributed across the country. My God, she had been beautiful then. Joyous, gleaming, flush with the promise of revolution. Now rows and rows of bookshelves towered around the dusty memorabilia of a thrilling youth. There were cheap encyclopedias leaning against the empty fish tank, and picture books of other countries stacked beside the songbird's cage. And all across the glass-topped table were ornate cups and boxes filled with plastic flower stems and fountain pens whose reservoirs no longer would accept ink.*

*She passed me the next installment of her homework. This time it was not about her father. It was about her mother, who had been even poorer than her husband, and had become a much higher cadre than either him or their ever-so-accomplished daughter. Something really high, but this was not for telling, not even in the quest to acquire more vocabulary. All I knew was that the mother had been born of poor farmers in the hills just west of the Drichu, and had traveled to Lhasa behind the army for which her husband was then translating. Swept up in that great movement, she had ended up by the 1970s as a leader in Tibet.*

*That was when I realized. West of the Drichu lay the heartlands of Tibet. My pupil couldn't write Tibetan, she couldn't read it, she could only speak it with effort; she surely wore no* chupa, *and she didn't eat parched barley flour. But her mother was Tibetan. And on weekends and late at night, perhaps, or sometimes in her dreams, maybe, the daughter was Tibetan too.*

*The Tibetan language likes to play with unequal pairings and conflicting negatives:* ra ma lug, lha ma yin*—neither beast nor bird, neither goat nor sheep, neither god nor human. Tibetans do not describe such people as "half this, half that," but as "*gya ma bod*": neither Chinese nor Tibetan. I watched her add more new words to her vocabulary list and wondered if I was looking into the mixed, the hybrid, the nondual, the undivided, the commingled, the neither-being-nor-not-being described in the Higher Sutras. Then I remembered I was looking at the Cadre Who Played It Both Ways, who was weaned on Marx and who had graduated on Bashevis Singer. The Tibetan* mestizo.

*I wonder what my pupil is doing now. Whether she had to answer questions about the unofficial evening classes. Whether she kept her resolve to sell the nightclub holding. Whether she is still writing in her notebook, hoping for some Western teacher to come one day to check the endless pages of cursive confessional. Whether she dreams she is Tibetan. Whether she still thinks Jews are all misogynists. Why she never asked me who the assistant tailor was.*

*Bashevis Singer and Hollywood gave Yentl a glorious ending, by having her escape the misery of her homeland and the fiction of her marriage by taking a boat to America. Being great writers of fiction and crafters of dreams, they never told us if she was happy when she got there. Or if she retained the knowledge of her religion and her language after the first few years had passed. Or if the culture left behind survived. They didn't describe the Land of Individual Freedom where Barbra had been unhappy as a child, and where in Manhattan, men still survive by roaming the streets at night and pulling Coke cans out of garbage bins to turn in for maybe $15 a day. They just described the soaring ecstasy of a flight to somewhere else.*

*The half-goat, half-sheep grazes both the pastureland and the mountainsides; she doesn't run away to sea. The pure-breed lives only in the imagination, and finally migrates in pursuit of dreams; the hybrid buys shares in nightclubs, reads books in foreign languages, and adapts. The one enchants, the other discards outward charms. With her the future lies.*