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THE MULTILAYERED STREETS

The architectural styles to be seen along the city streets are words in a text through which one can infer the simultaneous existence of the many Lhasas that today crowd one another for space and dominance within the evolving city. There is the traditional mud-packed, stone-and-timber house in a winding alley, perhaps occupied by a practicing Buddhist who wishes to be near the Jokhang; there are the false-fronted houses of the New Tibetan style, inhabited by Tibetan tenants and by settlers from the Chinese plains, in the city's heart. There are the featureless rectangular blocks laid out along the grids imposed across the city, which are the most prolific type of building to be found in the capital, housing state offices and their Chinese and Tibetan employees. Garage-like teahouses owned by semi-indigent Tibetans mingle with the small-time bars of petty Chinese migrants from Sichuan. The great square and the smaller efforts at grand, colonial statuary are pointed out by leaders as signs of progress. The modernist nightclubs and multistory blocks mark the new, expanding commercial city and the opportunities for citizens with the urge or the wherewithal to spend their wealth. To them can be added the *Simsha* style of Tibetan retro buildings and picnic parks that hint at recollections of the past, and the official flamboyance of the new

street decorations, with their plastic palm trees and their singing mushrooms planted along the showcase thoroughfares of Lhasa.

Of these eight styles, and the worldviews they represent, six were created by the new administrators of the region as expressions of one or another form of power or benevolence. These styles articulated the administration's role and purpose in Tibet, a constant oscillation between implanting civilization and the suppression of dissent. In this way China has not been dissimilar from other rulers in annexed lands. Where new China's contribution to Tibet stood out was in its early aesthetic choices. Unlike Western colonial architects, who sought to exhibit elegance as well as power, for some decades Chinese socialists demonstrated the determination and capability to build great cities, the hallmark of self-conscious civilizations, without including the display of refinement in their creations. Perhaps it was because China was then impoverished, or because within it lingered an ideological imperative, learned from the Soviets, to discard self-conscious artistry.

Or perhaps their idea of the city at that time involved an instinctual extirpation of energies that, like alleyways, tapered house frames, and decorated windows, seemed irrational and unnecessary. One can imagine that if the new administrators of Tibet had found a demoness stretched across the countryside, they would not have merely pinned her down as Princess Wencheng did, but would have tried to extinguish every trace of her existence in order to obliterate the untamed forces of female and premetropolitan nature. The Tibetans too had some regard, especially from the time Tsongkhapa established his three monasteries around Lhasa, for the taming of unruly passion, in that many men and women chose monastic professions and thus wore unvaried and nongendered dress. But the Tibetans had not sought to eliminate the existence of aesthetic sensibility, least of all in the vivacity of their architecture. The construction in Lhasa between 1959 and the 1990s thus spoke of a governmental instinct to suppress natural energies not only in the realm of ethics and social engineering but also in architecture and design.

Of the six styles that constitute the Chinese contribution to the architecture of new Tibet, two—the dormitory block and the garagelike shop—are statements of this antiaesthetic functionalism. The first still dominates the city: indistinguishable rectangular buildings made out of concrete, with few distinctive features and little use of color, arranged

along straight roads dissecting the city, the older ones contained within a walled courtyard, giving one point of access and control and imparting a sense of fortification, as if the world outside might be a threat to the building and its inhabitants. They are a monument to a time that some wish to forget, before the 1980 turning point was inserted into Tibetan and Chinese history. The most recent styles—the New Tibetan, the monumental, the modernist, and the new flamboyance—also come from the East, the land of divination, but in a later form. They evince an urge to decorate as well as to construct. If they convey a message written by the state, it is of national success and aspiration, and is increasingly a call for the individual desire repressed earlier to triumph over ideology and memories of the past.

The indigenous styles, the traditional townhouse and the New *Simsha*, like the picnic grounds, are part of a conversation with the Tibetan past and a dream about the future that speak of the benefits that come with modernity, and of the memory of something important in the culture that the Chinese experiment in Tibet has sometimes sought to extirpate and at other times sought to reeducate. Within the walled and unwalled compounds of the city formed by these streets and buildings live people the archaeology of whose lives can scarcely be read from their exteriors, and whose present surroundings may speak nothing of their histories and desires. Those who were once aristocrats in pillared mansions with south-facing balconies may now reside in a corner of a crowded tenement. In the rain-stained offices of the government, a former yak herder works as a clerk. The general manager of the grand hotel, who is about to die, wonders if he would have been spared cancer had he remained a monk. The land on which his office stands was once a park where foreign visitors watched antlike monks thronging gold-roofed temples. The famous lama's new townhouse has been constructed in Tibetan style, financed by the sale of statues stolen from the Ramoche. A couple whispering words of love at night in a deserted parking lot forget they are standing on the roof beams of the hall of slumbering *nāga*s. In a concrete dormitory lives a woman from Gyantse; she never heard the Maxim guns as they mowed down her great-uncle. The pockmarked youth from the northern plateau selling CDs behind the blue-glass frontage of the department store belongs to the fifteenth generation of the offspring of King Gesar and has dreams of fighting men at night. The pop star singing Chinese songs under the spinning disco lights

of what used to be the People's Cultural Palace thinks wistfully of her mother, who spoke a language she has forgotten now. The hawker from Sichuan selling turnips is unaware they are already growing at mGar's descendants' plot of land, where the straight new road cuts through the suburbs and becomes a track again on the sandy outskirts of the city.

These people and these streets contain within their memories one another's histories and futures, so that to the outsider—the foreigner, the visitor, and the conqueror—the square, the circle, the demoness, and the multilayered become confused and indistinguishable, as if in a story written, recited, and perhaps understood only by those who are in it.

The restaurant where I met him was not cheap, but it was near the office. Anyway, it was Chinese, so he would probably feel at home. The style was ultramodern and minimal, with square white pillars and metal chairs. Giant uncurtained windows stretched the full length of the building, so we could watch the London commuters struggling home against the rain. It didn't offer intimacy or comfort, but at least it looked expensive. And that is always an advantage.

He made a valiant effort to keep the conversation going. It wasn't like the banquets he described in Lhasa, when everyone drank till they were sick and then drank more. And there was no way I was going to sing or shout or dance, as I knew he would have done back home. But he made an effort to act as if he was enjoying himself.

We talked about work and how much there was to do, and about Christmas and how commercialized it was, and about his health and how it was getting better since he had arrived, since those early days when we had hidden him in attic rooms until asylum papers had been secured. He ordered another bottle of Kingfisher and we talked about how he couldn't sleep unless he drank a lot. I didn't ask, because I find tears so embarrassing, but obviously he was missing home. And then he told a joke.

It was an exceptional joke, because I had never understood any other joke he had told me, and he was always telling jokes that seemed more like proverbs, which I didn't understand and which didn't make me laugh. But this one seemed to be extraordinarily English. At least, it had an Englishman in it. Strange, because it was apparently quite true.

This Englishman had been bald and very tall. He must have been one of the diplomats stationed in Gyantse, in southern Tibet, before the war. I had

been to Gyantse once, ten years before. I had seen the fort. So I could relate to this.

The Englishman had been invited to a dinner by Phala, the local lord of Gyantse. For the first course each guest was presented with a large pancake, steaming hot. Everyone waited for the Englishman to begin. But since there was no silverware, he was unsure what to do. So he waited to see what Phala would do with his pancake. Phala put it on his head. So the Englishman did too.

The joke was funny because Phala had lots of hair, braided and pinned up on his head, in the style of all Tibetan aristocrats, and the British man was bald, so the pancake must have burned his pate, a pain he no doubt had to hide. I could understand that. And my friend explained that it was Phala's lesson to the British, because the Tibetans who went to India had always been laughed at for not knowing what cutlery to use. So I thought I got it. It was all about the English being pompous and assuming they knew more than the Tibetans. I thought I got it.

So then he told another joke.

There were two men, one from Tsang in the south of Tibet and one from Lhasa. They met by chance one day at the top of the Gampa-la, the pass on the road south from the capital that leads toward Gyantse.

"Tell me," said the man from Tsang, "what is Lhasa like?"

"Do you mean," said the man from Lhasa, "that you have never been there?"

"No, I have never been there," said the man from Tsang.

"Then I could tell you anything I wanted," replied the man from Lhasa.

My friend the old Tibetan went red in the face with contentment and roared with laughter at his joke. I beamed approval conscientiously and muttered how hilarious it was.

The restaurant suddenly seemed rather cramped. I was acutely embarrassed. Why was it funny that the man from Tsang would believe anything he was told about Lhasa? I really didn't get it. I couldn't understand at all. The old Tibetan was still laughing. I couldn't understand at all.