Tibet, the Last Cry

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BLACKSMITH BOOKS

Tibet, the Last Cry
ISBN 978-988-16139-5-0

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Published by Blacksmith Books
5th Floor, 24 Hollywood Road, Central, Hong Kong
Tel: (+852) 2877 7899
www.blacksmithbooks.com

Also by Eric Meyer:
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Cent drôles d'oiseaux de la forêt chinoise, 2012
Tibet, dernier cri, French edition, l'Aube, 2013
Tibet, ultimo grito, Spanish edition, Icaria, 2013

This book is dedicated to the old Tibetan lady in gypsy dress whom we met at a humble bar in Lhasa – she never stopped sticking her tongue out at us that night, the local sign for "welcome" – as well as to her younger companions who serenaded us with drinking songs.

"In order for Tibet to be a part of our country and to experience prosperity and enlightenment, we have six tasks to complete: the first will be to scrupulously respect Tibet's ethnic autonomy…to let them be the masters of their own destiny."

Speech by Hu Yaobang, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, to 5,000 notables in Lhasa
29 May, 1980

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Prologue

In September, 2008, at the end of our voyage to the Land of Snow, there were two ideas we could not get out of our heads:

— In these mountain monasteries and cities, Tibet's consciousness is perpetuated across two antagonistic discourses, two voices that come from elsewhere: one from the Tibetans who have left their country and the other the voice of the Han Chinese who have moved there. Between these two, the struggle remains passionate.

— In spite of these differences, we believe we can see a way to bring them together. Between old and new, local and imported, the wooden plow and mechanized agriculture, carmine robes and mobile phones, the high plateau is living a material and moral synthesis, building radical new tools and a renaissance that is audacious and refined – much like the Norman kingdoms in the Holy Land during the Crusades.

This future prosperity is almost palpable, but it will not happen until there is reconciliation between Tibetans and Hans, not to mention with the other ethnicities in Tibet – Kirgiz, Kazakhs and Kas, these Muslim Lhasans who have been there for 600 years. The future is in the acceptance of the others. By putting their resources together, they can all create vehicles for their common future. They can integrate the genius of their different origins with the constraints of their shared environment. For example, they could develop cities with glass to filter out ultraviolet light. Or, under its 350 days per year of piercing sunlight, they could produce greenhouse fruits and vegetables with unique flavors, grown with their water that is the purest in the world; or welcome visitors from China and the rest of the world to this dreamscape land, for one-of-a-kind cultural and spiritual tourism.

It seems to us that it is all there, the secret of Tibet, at once exposed and hidden: its only possible future.

Alas, during the three years following our voyage, *Tibet, the Last Cry* was met with a skepticism that recalls that kind of antagonism which extends across the world from on high. The scenario was always the same. Publishers read our book and looked at the photos, first with sympathy and sometimes with enthusiasm. But over the succeeding months, all of them opted to not follow up.

At heart, the reason is historical. The Western world's opinion on Tibet is a *fait accompli*. Since his eviction in 1959, the Dalai Lama, a humble salesman of his faith, has disseminated all over the world his call for aid for his lost kingdom. And in its corner, a ham-fisted China, looking slightly autistic, has shown over and over again its incapacity to communicate and its apparent conviction of the uselessness to even try. From all this, Europe knew where to hang its hat.

And our publishers have to earn a living. A book about Tibet can usually only be pigeonholed in one of these two camps, and all the better if it lands on the side of the exiles. But heaven forbid if there is a book that looks at both points of view simultaneously, which is what we did. There is of course freedom of expression to defend, but in times of economic crisis, this line of argument falters badly, such that we had to gloss over a number of polite refusals: for these publishing houses, the commercial risk was simply greater than they were willing to wager.

However, far from being discouraged, this resistance, which we felt the whole time we were in Tibet with the local officials, only steeled the determination of our convictions. Even if the Roof of the World is currently living through some dark hours, we are absolutely convinced that this "hell" has an escape route and we can contribute to helping find it. The Land of Snow will not get to rewind the film footage of its invasion, nor see a great return of the Han people to their lowlands. Something else will have to happen and it is this "thing" that we are so anxious to reveal.

Finally after three straight years of rejection and feeling our way through the mist, in the autumn of 2011, Laurent got the idea to promote the book on the website Kickstarter (www.kickstarter.com), which facilitates the micro-financing of private projects: solidarity to build a future outside the limits of nations and established structures, via social networks.

The results surpassed our wildest dreams. Two hundred and twenty-two friends, known and unknown, web surfers on four continents, chose to give us the funds to publish our book simultaneously in French, English and Spanish. Their contributions allowed us to co-finance its publication with three courageous publishers: L'Aube (La Tour-d'Aigues) in French; Blacksmith (Hong Kong) in English and Icaria (Barcelona) in Spanish.

Tibet, the Last Cry: this book is thus an adventure in itself, apart from our travels to Tibet, and it binds us all together. To give our book an even greater voice, we have decided to donate half of our authors' rights to two NGOs that we met during our trek: Global Nomad (www.global-nomad-tibet.com) and Braille without Borders (www.braillewithoutborders.org). We initiated this sponsorship in 2009, during a conference in Beijing, where I (Eric) gave commentary on Laurent's Tibet photos. Half of the proceeds from the sale of his pictures were given to these two organizations.

Happy reading and enjoy the discoveries!

Eric Meyer and Laurent Zylberman

On Board the High Speed Train #T-27
Beijing-Lhasa

The Han people

"Hello, Hello!" we hear, as we run into two strangers while walking down the aisle. By the look of their clothes, one in a vest and the other in a leather jacket, they are two small-time Chinese market traders.

You would assume they are rich, except that they are sitting in the "hard seat" section of our train number T-27, from Beijing to Lhasa. Hard (wooden) seats are the cheapest tickets that are available on Chinese trains.

As we move by and smile at them, Zhang and Wang invite us to sit with them, ecstatic to spend five minutes talking with some foreigners. This is a rare occasion and quite an honor in Chinese culture.

They are both undoubtedly in their 40s and they are of the Han race. The Hans are the ethnic majority in China, representing 96% of all Chinese citizens. Athletic looking, Wang appears a little younger. He has energetic features and that kind of thick, stubborn hair which always looks good, even when unbrushed.

With his chiseled, somewhat pock-marked face, Zhang looks less confident and a little on the shifty side, sometimes giving us bizarre looks.

As can be seen by their appearance, they are what are known as "Getihu" in Mandarin, or street vendors. For the sake of survival in a life of exile, they work in tandem. Both are natives of Lanzhou City, about 1,500 km north of the Yellow River. The first thing they tell us is that they are returning to Lhasa, their new home since 2004.

Tibet, Wang told us spontaneously, is the land where they hope to live out all their dreams, dreams that will pull them out of the poverty they grew up with in Gansu province.

"In Lanzhou, where we were kids," Zhang tells us, "there is nothing to do, too much competition, not enough business and lots of corrupt cops and thieves everywhere. Lhasa is the new Eldorado. The place is rolling in money. It is full of immigrants, all of whom are potential customers, since they are restarting their lives there from zero. So, for us, all these newcomers are our customers."

But the train didn't start going to Lhasa until the summer of 2007. Why did you two go so early?

"Together with Wang," Zhang says, "I wanted to be sure to beat the crowd. Because you know in business, not everybody can be the seller."

However, it must be said, Tibet is really big...

"Yes, you can even say 'huge'. But the air is really thin and it freezes eight months out of the year. So, it is not like there are tons of people to make ends meet. It is obvious that one day the Chinese government is going to close the

doors on migration to Tibet. But we will already be there, well established. ”

“You know,” says Wang, “we live quite well in Lhasa. We have enough to feed our families. And we have lots of friends who have made their way up there like us.”

And do you have any Tibetan friends?

“Of course, and we have work for them to do. It really is a friendship between two peoples. We are all Chinese and live by the same laws.” And Zhang adds warmly, with a flourish, “It is one, big happy family!”

Zhang and Wang are coming back from Chengdu, in Sichuan, where they went to stock up on goods: clothing, stuffed animals, pots and pans, bowls and bottles; these are the odds and ends that are the foundation of their business. Their purchases are arriving in Lhasa by truck, two days behind them.

“In the beginning,” says the robust Wang, “it took us five days by bus to go the 3,300 km.”

“Now it only takes two days, and that has changed our lives,” adds Zhang, “and it has also gotten a lot cheaper. To go from Chengdu to Lhasa is now only ¥300 (US$45), and this is over halfway across China.”

I cannot help but find their optimism a little strained. As we speak, it is just a few months after some brief, but exceedingly violent, social disorder which cost the lives of over 200 people, mostly Hans in Lhasa and elsewhere on the Top of the World. For the last six months, their new home has been under very tight government control, cut off from the outside world, except for those, like them, who are authorized to come down off the plateau to replenish their wares.

Were their street stands among the 300 shops that were burned down by rioters during those dark days surrounding 14 March, 2008?

“No, no,” replied Zhang, nonchalantly, “nothing happened to us.”

So, they were lucky, if they are telling the truth. It all sounds a little too rosy and exactly what the government censors would want to hear. For foreigners, these two gentlemen represent the heart and soul of China’s mobilized, migrating Hans. It is no exaggeration to say that like American or Boer settlers, they are on a conquest of the land and against everyone in their path. This gold rush must be rationalized in the eyes of the outside world, because it really is a war for resources and riches. And their verbiage sounds like the kind of contrived slogans that hide the intensity of the battle at hand.

…And the Tibetans

While we are gabbing away like friends, I suddenly sense that people are peering at us. In fact, sitting across from us, with fixed gazes, are four young men and a woman, all about 20-25 years old.

They are obviously so different from our new neighbors, starting with their fiery eyes, and also their body language. One guy is holding his friend by the neck while the other responds by holding his buddy at the waist. This casual maneuver appears quite natural for them. Their look is so unlike the Han. The third young man has high, sun-

darkened cheeks and the last one has curly, raven-black hair. These five young adults are our first direct encounter with Tibetan people.

Without getting up, Laurent, my photographer friend and I turn to these people and, speaking Mandarin, introduce ourselves. With a well-polished manner, the woman answers back in Mandarin, introducing her friends and saying, "Welcome to Tibet!"

Their little group, she explains, is returning from a fun weekend in Xi'an. Two of them are students and three of them are working. The young woman, who has not told us her name, mentions that they are in fact childhood friends.

We are dying to learn more, but will not get the chance.

So far during this conversation, our Han businessmen have kept quiet, staring at their feet. But suddenly from behind our backs, Zhang interrupts us. The bitterness of his tirade is not lessened by the monotone cadence of his voice. It is one of a man filled with deep resentment: "The Communist Party treats the Tibetans well," he says. "The Party offers them rights. It is spending a fortune to improve their lot. Without us Chinese, the Tibetans would be living in misery.

"This is unlike the Dalai Lama who, aside from his royal airs, is doing nothing to enrich the region. On the contrary, he incites secessionists and foments revolt. He was the one who was behind the March riots, they have the proof. You know, the Tibetans should be a little more thankful for all that we are doing for them. And for me, these guys here just don't seem to have a sense of gratitude, deep down."

Laurent and I are stunned as we witness this brazen insult. So, we turn back to the young Tibetans, not sure what their reaction will be. But, in a flash, they have already disappeared, leaving their seats and moving four rows away.

Out of sorts, Laurent and I cut the conversation short and go back to our compartment, avoiding further contact with the Tibetans. We are embarrassed that we may have put them in a difficult situation, and we certainly do not want to be responsible for a fight on board.

But in any case, we understood enough. By fleeing this verbal attack, these Tibetan youngsters sent us a clear message: there is no way they could reply in kind without risking a rumble in a train car that was 90% full of Han, or being arrested by the dozen police officers on board, all of whom have little patience nor a sense of humor when it comes to ethnic conflict.

The frustration of Zhang, this shopkeeper, is also quite edifying. On the question of their having Tibetan friends, Wang had added to his answer quoted above, "In fact yes, lots of friends. We are friends with all our employees!" Yet, the outburst that his acerbic companion made must be considered his own answer to our question. Its bitterness spoke volumes about the frustrations and hand-wringing both these populations have for each other. It is safe to say there is not much cross-cultural amity in this thin, mountain air.

Laurent thinks that Zhang, the less good-looking of the pair, let loose this tirade to compensate for his feelings of inferiority, not to mention to enjoy the emotional rush of a good insult. We can also glean a form of crude, reactionary racism: maybe Zhang did not want to share this prized exchange with Westerners with these inferior beings.

Wang was better behaved. But that does not necessarily mean he has any more appreciation for Tibetans than Zhang. He was simply conforming to the first rule of Chinese culture: always put on your best appearances for China, when in front of foreigners. And rule number two: do not hang out your dirty laundry except in the privacy of your family.

And so it was thus, on our way to Tibet and without having even set foot on its soil, that we experienced our first cross-cultural exchange between these two peoples. It was a message of shared dislike and mistrust, even hate; a message that augurs ominously for the remainder of our journey, as well as for the future of the region.

Introduction

On 20 September, three French people and one Chinese person went to Tibet. We stayed there for two weeks.

It was a rare privilege. Since the riots of 14-16 March, 2008, we were among the first westerners authorized to enter this forbidden, traumatized region, which was under military guard and armed to the teeth.

The surprise was relative. Even before these bloody events, the administration of this "autonomous territory" has always been averse to giving out travel permits, except for rich tourists, sympathetic Euro-Chinese faithful and business people – and even then, not to all of them.

Tibet is a country still being brought to submission and Beijing is always leery of keeping it under control.

Since the insurrection, the Top of the World has battened down the hatches. Apparatchiks and soldiers, Tibetans and Han (or other minorities) and sheep herders from the steppes seem like a swarm of hornets, where a clumsy visitor has to stick out their head. Still, in such trying times, we got our special travel permit – a miracle which I will explain fully later.

So, our visit was going to take place in a tense environment. These two weeks gave me the feeling of watching the great wheel of time grind to a halt, a screeching melody of badly lubricated gears piercing my eardrums. The hands of the clock seemed to start moving backwards, plunging us again into the nightmare experience on Tiananmen Square, twenty years ago. This was a Petri dish of fear and mistrust, denunciations and propaganda. During these two weeks we were almost always under surveillance, limited in our movement and in our ability to talk to people and be heard.

A multitude of experiences on this trip not only made us laugh, but also bite our lower lips. Throughout this book and from our experiences, I wanted to make sense of this question: How has Tibet changed after 50 years of development under Chinese administration? Socialist China and exiled Tibet are engaged in a cold war, challenging who has the moral authority to run the high-altitude mountain range. For weapons, each side has its own history (both mutually incompatible), as well as its myths, its vision and its blood price. Take a deeper look and you will see that this cold war precedes the 1959 invasion by the (Chinese) People's Liberation Army. There is also a division among the Tibetans themselves, on what kind of relationship they desire with China and the social model for their future. And China struggles with this same kind of debate as well: How much freedom to give to its citizens? What limits should be placed on the powers of the state? How much of a role should its citizens have in the affairs of the country?

Today, it is quite clear that the Chinese are not about to leave the Top of the World. Their establishment here is final, unless an unimaginable upheaval of their entire society occurs – and it would take a lot more than the fall of Communism for that to happen.

Tibetans and Han are two ancient and venerable cultures that do not understand each other. Yet, both have equal legitimacy to bring ideas to the table. Under these conditions, the only thing left to do for these people who are destined to live together, is to work at making it less arduous.

And we, visitors, witnesses and readers, as outsiders can smooth the edges by helping to make the mirror in which they gaze less sectarian, and refusing to accept the two polar extremes: of Beijing and of the Dalai Lama's entourage.

Beijing, September 2008-December 2011

First & Second Day
Saturday & Sunday, 20-21 September, 2008
High Speed Train #T-27

After four months of effort and 21 years of waiting, we are finally going. Our group is composed of Laurent Zylberman, a globe-trotting photographer; Mr. Li Feng, a soft-spoken Francophile intellectual; Brigitte, my wife, who has shared my joys and trials in this country since 1988; and myself.

I am writing this chapter on board the high speed train Number 27, a daily line from Beijing to Lhasa that has only been open for the last 18 months.

This railroad connection is both monstrous and magnificent at the same time. It brings to life a dream that has captivated the imagination of everyone who has been in power in China for the last 150 years, from the last Qing emperors to Mao Zedong, as well as Chiang Kai-shek: The dream of anchoring this rebellious land of Tibet to the Motherland, using a two-railed steel umbilical cord. Some 4,500 kilometers separate the capital of the empire from that of Tibet, affectionately known as the "Top of

the World." And the T-27 chews up this distance in 46½ hours. This train line also serves an important role: to unfurl the lands of Tibet to the vibrant nation of China, a veritable ant colony seeking to expand its boundaries. Under the guise of an internal visa, this convoy, almost forbidden to foreigners, is "free" to any Chinese ready to put their back into this crusade of assimilation. So, many poor people, homeless, runaways, students who dropped out of school, unemployed white collar workers, all these failed people full of hope and ambition, the left-behinds in China, are welcome to get on board. "Go West, Young Man," as they used to say in previous centuries, like the English filling their sailboats with "Her Majesty's Passengers": pickpockets, hookers or debt prisoners en route to Australia, with a chance to turn a new page in life, seek one's fortune, start a clean slate.

When things heat up, as happened on March 14th 2008, it was by this train that regiments of soldiers made it up here, effortlessly climbing over the foothills of this plateau.

And coming from the other direction is lumber, along with the ores of iron, copper and zinc, in thousands of rail cars whose numbers are increasing by the day, as the wealth of the Himalayas and all its peaks gets drilled away.

Shaanxi – impoverished cities

So, here we are at sunrise on Sunday the 21st, inside our cozy train compartment with four "soft" sleeper beds. Just an hour ago, passing through a small station, we left Shaanxi Province behind us and started to penetrate towards the West. Through a number of dynasties, its boundaries fluctuating like an accordion, this is as far as Chinese empire ever got.

For a long time, starting yesterday evening, we have seen along the tracks a motif of the urban working class: a whole network of villages and suburbs, made of cracking, flea-bitten brick and concrete. Before us are public housing projects, windows covered in blue-tinted Visqueen, a cruel symbol of new riches to protect their inhabitants at the lowest cost possible from the heat of the sun.

These urban valleys regularly narrow down to almost nothing and suddenly get very dark, ensconced in shade. But the demographic pressures remain intense, as is attested to by the farmers' conquest of the eroded hill slopes, scaling steep faces and leveled by force of hoe and plow, eking out cultivated terraces, each barely bigger than a small bedroom. At these scaled heights, the labor of seeding and weeding is done without tractor. It is only by the back-breaking work of men (and women), who carry on their shoulders irrigation water, that it can succeed. Those who are a little better off are lucky enough to use donkeys.

Here is a sign of voluntary cooperation and the hunger of modern-day life: entire valleys are covered by long assemblies of bamboo in the form of stretched-out igloos and covered in translucent Visqueen, giving the impression of parks full of giant turtles. These low-cost greenhouses are warmed up in the winter by covering them with straw at night and exposing them to the sun during the day. This allows the villagers to steal an extra harvest each year.

Quite a few of these plastic covered pergolas are without plastic. You can see the exposed bamboo frames and new seedlings inside. The wheat has just been harvested and before the first freeze, a last crop of tomatoes, green peppers, cauliflower and broccoli is being planted to feed the city.

We pass Baoji ("Valuable Rooster"), a city of 3.6 million inhabitants living in hopeless suburbs built out of roughly poured concrete. They surround a stylish nucleus of villas for the nouveaux riche. The national highway is a strategic East-West thoroughfare that snakes into two lanes, on both our left and right. Like on the coastal highways twenty years ago, it is backed up with thousands of semi-tractor trailers, all stalled for tens of kilometers in either direction, as far as the eye can see, paralyzed by an accident or breakdown. There is no shoulder on the highway. This poor road has been pitifully overrun by its current needs. This is a nightmare traffic jam created by courageous and desperate people: they are a generation behind their brethren in the more developed coastal regions.

We are only in the first third of our trip, but already see a difference in the extremely arid climate and the manifest drop in wealth. It is not for nothing that geographers call this central region "Yellow China" compared to the "Blue China" of the maritime provinces. Here, "poverty" is worthy of the name. As far as the eye can see, the sky is murky and full of the dust kicked up from agricultural cultivation, burning trash, the greasy dust of burning coal spewed over garbage dumps, where, with the slightest breeze, it is all kicked up and collects on our train window panes. These windows have to be religiously cleaned every night, at one train station or another. Sometimes the dust is actually cement, blown from the hundreds of work sites which are crawling with the humanity of common laborers. Other times, the sky takes on the hues of ocher or violet. It is smoke from the thousands of calamitous factories that surround us. This pollution also carries the recognizable stench of sulfur, spat out by coal-fired stoves and hot water heaters. All around us we are seemingly followed by the breathless song of millions of souls who scratch the soil for their daily pittance. Baoji is not exactly a rooster as valuable as all that!

Gansu – already in the desert

After 18 hours of non-stop "shake, rattle and roll" in the train, we enter Gansu, one of China's poorest provinces. It is in stark contrast to the hustle and bustle that we left behind in Shaanxi.

Gansu: fewer mountains, fewer people, more drought. Yet, everywhere we look we see rows of fruit trees, tall corn plants and yellowing soybeans, and sorghum, as red as the robes of the Buddhists, and a profusion of vegetables. This 21st of September, the progress of the harvest is measured by the number of large mounds of straw (under the rain, not covered up) in the fields, and by the laced rows of eared corn, or by the braids of onions and garlic hanging from the balconies. Here and there among the yellow cliffs we can see the entrances of deserted cave dwellings, as well as abandoned mines. We get the impression that what is unwinding is an agricultural system in transition between

two epochs: the long-standing struggle for survival etched in the people's minds from famine, and the voluntary action of the Communist Party and the state to bring this rural society into the orbit of modern technology.

Half carried away by the flash rains, the huts made of earthen bricks are in stark contrast to the odd modern factory. Their flat roofs made out of bluish sheet metal are near towering wind turbines that cut and slice the sky along the hilltops along the horizon. These gigantic turbines are financed by Beijing in its quest to launch the world's most developed renewable energy industrial sector.

High altitude trains – a technical feat

How much did this flight-of-fancy train line, with its political overtones to boot, actually cost? Only ¥36 billion for the 1,300 kilometers that connect Golmud to Lhasa. Five years of work by tens of thousands of shovel-bearing laborers.

Keeping in mind the difficulties associated with record-setting altitudes, the droughts and the flash storms, it is truly a feat of technological bravado. The train cars had to be redesigned with better insulation and air conditioning, each one equipped with an air-to-oxygen separator, for the passengers suffering from hypoxia. The big national corporations could not come up with the concept. It took the Canadian train and airplane manufacturing company Bombardier, which adapted its current designs with its Chinese factory of Sifang, in Qingdao (Shandong), to pull it off.

Each sleeper cabin has its own private air conditioning and, with soft sleepers, individual televisions. Another luxury for the pampered traveler: the volume knob on the loudspeaker allows you to turn off the on-board radio and get a couple of hours of extra sleep after sunrise, sparing you the public announcements, the arias of Chinese opera and the obligatory military marching music played before every upcoming station stop.

In its other features, the high speed T-27 succeeds rather well in blending in with all the other socialist trains of China. Spinach green in décor, it offers the standard four classes from the comfy soft sleeper bed down to the rock-smooth "hard seats."

These seating classes were scrupulously mulled over in the fifties, when it was de rigueur to hew Communist principles to the realities of the rail system. The revolution already had to face up to a serious dilemma. It was all about class struggle versus unequal comfort when the privileged rode the train. So they had their four classes, but they massaged them with a slight verbal hypocrisy: just remove the word "class" from the trains, all the while piously preserving the feudal reality of tufted comfort for the apparatchiks' buttocks!

It was during that crazy period in Chinese life when they still fervently believed in the future of Communism. During the annual National People's Congress (legislature) the most ardent zealots even proposed switching the colors of traffic lights, so that "red" meant "go." If it meant marching towards the Revolution through radical audacity, then so be it. Never mind that comrade drivers

would have to pause and think about green being red and red being green, as they careened through humanity-packed intersections… Luckily, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping were alerted by their experts about how much this absurdity would plunge China into isolation, vis-à-vis the outside world. So, they interceded to block this visual form of proletarian poetry, this unintentional tribute to John Dalton.

Before even beginning construction on the Beijing-Lhasa rail line, the Chinese Academy of Sciences worked for years on various techniques to protect the permafrost, this frozen subsoil that has existed for millions of years. I can see the results during our trip. The train track is frequently elevated several meters above ground, anchored in a bed of rocks, frequently pierced by tunnels for the through passage of wild yaks (*Bos grunniens*) and Tibetan antelopes (*Pantholops hodgsonii*), the latter called "chiru" in Chinese and on the CITES endangered species list. In order to traverse the many wetlands and mountain brooks that crisscross the region, a biome that supports a flora of splendid bronze hues, the rail line travels over long sections of elevated viaduct on its way to Lhasa.

In order to take advantage of the countryside and to take in as many vistas as possible, I sit down to write at last in the panoramic dining car. Facing me is the young cashier, who keeps looking at me out of the corner of her eye. She is wearing a crisp and clean uniform with a red corsage, white-striped blouse and sporting a little hat like you would see on a waitress in a 1950s American diner. She is having nothing to do with the last customers on her shift, who keep hanging around, nor those who are trying to infiltrate her territory: "We're closed, we have nothing left to serve you, it's our rest time right now," all the while adding the standard rhetoric of courtesy, "OK, guys?"

Reluctantly, most of those seated get up and go. The failed infiltrators turn back and join the others, wearing sheepish faces. The last holdouts are playing poker. They are surely bigwigs in their own right and so they confidently turn a deaf ear. So, a sort of vague compromise establishes itself, according to the unwritten rules: the old-timers can still stay, on the condition that no more orders are taken. And me, at my corner table, I am protected by the double trump card of being a foreigner as well as a working stiff with my laptop computer.

Twenty years for a trip

Outside my immaculate panoramic window (many thanks to the highly efficient hands that cleaned it!), I see rows of hay bales and three languid yaks under intense sunlight which is reflecting off the pools of several brooks. This is a prairie full of running streams and organic life.

Why this fascination with Tibet in China, Europe, America, the whole world in fact? The famous comic book by Hergé, *Tintin in Tibet* (1960), would it have the same influence on today's generations of youngsters who now hold rein: journalists, business people, politicians? That image of its character Blessed Lightning, the Lama priest accustomed to séances of trance and levitation, would he still haunt our collective conscience like he did in the 1960s? Is it the attraction of Buddhism in Europe that

comes to the forefront for the Land of Snow? The blind search, among their confessions, by all the world's peoples for some sort of ecumenical harmony; is it a globalization of faith? Whether it is the sects with the yellow, red or black hats, tantric Buddhism in Europe and America is enjoying a surge of popularity and already has several million faithful.

Maybe it is also, deep down, the thrill of extremes and for setting records that beats in the hearts of all humanity, all children. It is possible that we are also captivated by the imagination of a country with its purity and its poverty, by the lightness of its atmosphere or its cuisine and what it needs. This is a country where water boils at 60°C and one is sustained by a fistful of barley flour mixed in a bowl with yak butter tea. Meager fare, but it nourishes the body and the soul at the same time through the smile of the host who offers it…

I see a yurt as we roll by, that ephemeral lodging of the herdsman, searching pasture for his goats, sheep and dozen or so yaks. This plateau with no end, with its migrant population is far from being homogeneous and is not exclusively Tibetan. Other shepherds might be Mongols (in this case), Uighurs, Kazakhs, Hui, Sala, Kirgiz – all distinguishable by their shirts or tunics, bonnets and felt hats. Right now the train is going by a chorten; in this case a huge pyramid of rocks piled up and coated with white lime. From it are flying dozens of multicolored, but rain- and sun-faded ribbons, ragged from the wind. Behind this monument is installed a small hermitage with high walls made of mortar-less stones. It is guarded by a Tibetan mastiff that is on a chain, undoubtedly ferocious. His full-throated, long barking howls at our train's passage are smothered by the double-paned glass I am gazing out of.

On 27 September, 1987, 15 days before my arrival in China, there was the first insurrection in Tibet. In Lhasa and Shigatse, monks revolted by the hundreds, pouring out of their sanctuaries, marching down streets and brandishing the national flag of Tibet – with its red and blue stripes behind the sun perched on a snow-covered mountain which is blazing with two emerald-maned, heraldic snow lions hoisting the Three Jewels of Dharma.

The reasons for this uprising, as well as for the one in March 2008, 21 years later, were the same: For several months previously, police control became suffocating in an attempt to crush the influence of the monks among the populace, as well as their ties to the Dalai Lama in exile. Suddenly, a thousand things became punishable and punished, like carrying a picture of the Dalai Lama or praying in public.

In China, an officially secular state, this kind of imposition of public law is respected. For thousands of years, the "Sons of Heaven" (the subjects of the empire) have followed orders from on high in the name of family survival. Patiently, they bend their backs and wait for better days which, through the prism of liberty, never happen. But this fealty has never worked in Tibet, a spiritual land that believes in other values, in other human relationships.

This crackdown of discipline in 1987 marked a turning point for the directives of Hu Yaobang, China's General Secretary, who had traveled to Lhasa in May, 1980. In a celebrated speech, he promised to offer the Tibetans the decades necessary to integrate themselves into Chinese society (see the epigraph at the beginning of this book). The freedom of religion should have no bounds. Chinese (Han) migration would be restricted. The Tibetan people must remain "masters of their own destiny." This path to wisdom, which was later applied and respected in Hong Kong, should have been enough to keep the peace.

We are now in a deserted valley lined with yellow scree that crisscrosses in torrents down the mountainsides. I see a village spread out in low, gray cement colors: these are the residences of settlers and soldiers. Lifeless, colorless and held together for the sake of survival, this is a grid-like hamlet of one-story concrete barracks, with its arteries of tic-tac-toe dirt streets in the style of a Roman camp: Running north to south and east to west. Behind the village, I can make out pale green fields of wheat and rye. Along the horizon, the mountain range is carved, with peaks covered in an eternity of snow. The skyline looks chiseled with hard angles and contrasting colors: intense royal blue and gray-white.

Where are the inhabitants? In the fields? Practising a few rounds at the shooting range? Exuding boredom, this place reminds you of neighboring Xinjiang's *bingquan*, those military farms full of soldier-farmers that were founded by Mao, starting in the 1950s on China's Muslim soil in order to maintain the country's peace on a day-to-day basis while fulfilling their own needs: on the one hand the plow and on the other a Kalashnikov.

It took one "Hu" to start it and another Hu to bring it to a halt, seven years later. In December 1987, the then newly promoted General Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Hu Jintao[1], was a young unknown, but brilliant in his government service. He was known for his reliability and impeccable loyalty to the Communist Party. Discovered by Deng Xiaoping, this young ladder-climber was put into this high level post with a certain amount of risk. But he confirmed his worth and Hu would be named the future supreme leader from the "Fifth Generation": he was called to take the reins of the People's Republic 15 years later. Being called the Patriarch is as good as becoming it.

However, in the vast machinations of China's nomenklatura, Hu was all alone. Among dozens of high level leaders in their forties and fifties who were eligible to become the supreme leader, his promotion in 1987 caused teeth to grind. Hu was nothing but a senior official and they dreamed of tripping him up. This looked all the more easy since Hu was now exiled from the confines of the empire and would be incapable of defending himself. His only protection would be his capacity to walk the straightest line, to amaze his sphere of contacts with an impeccable rectitude – at least from a Communist point of view.

Therefore, when the revolt erupted in Lhasa, Hu, being a political animal, did not hesitate to ditch the "altruistic" and "father-like" policy of Hu Yaobang, now an old cadre

who was perceived by all to be in decline and increasing isolation. So it was thus that this young Secretary ordered troops to open fire on sight at the monks marching in the center of Lhasa. As a result, he was able to quell the rebellion in a matter of days and acquired the reputation of a man with an iron fist, totally unfettered by Western-style humanitarian concerns. Through this sacrifice of several dozen lives, he assured his seat as President.

In December 1987 I could still go to Lhasa to be a witness to all this unrest. There still reigned in China the idea of an ideal administration, with black-and-white rules, but they were often not applied. Alas, just as I was planning on traveling to Tibet, it was closed shut like a vice. Thereafter, every time I requested a visa by telex to Lhasa, I invariably received the response "The weather is still too cold." This message was as terse as it was elliptical. But it did not even try to hide that my presence, as that of all journalists, was undesirable.

Visa kabuki games

In the spring of 2008, after Tibet's explosion of violence, this reflexive closure of the borders exacerbated itself: the last thing Lhasa wanted was to show the world's media its humiliated metropolis packed with soldiers, with its blackened shops and plumes of smoke from fires still not extinguished after all the looters' attacks.

But I was still looking for an opening. Trying to enter as a tourist, I went to see CITS, the national tourist agency. I played the straight game, declaring my status as a journalist, but promising not to do any writing or reporting. I just wanted to see, with family and friends, a land that had been shut off to me for over 20 years.

Maybe I was a little naïve. Such a deal was in fact intolerable to both sides. For myself, as a reporter, I was giving up everything by renouncing my profession to go to this place, one of the most isolated in the world. Of course, I never abandoned my dream to write an article or a book about such a voyage. But no matter what, I was prepared to keep my word, not interview anybody nor take any notes. I would have to write from memory, cataloguing each evening in my head what I had experienced each day. But the value of such a work risked being weak: how precise would be my recollections, what leads would not be followed up, what about those questions asked on-the-spot, from gut feelings of intuition? Which Tibetans could overcome their fear to talk to me, to give me their account of things, in the middle of a tour group? The more I thought about it, the more the whole idea seemed a pipe dream.

In any case, CITS had no margin to maneuver. Courteous to a fault, the Beijing employee first gave me some rays of hope. She proposed a limited itinerary selected by them and strictly limited to visiting temples, all with a price tag to make anybody take a step or two back! Even under these terms, she called me back the next day, eating her words and putting the kibosh on that minimalist proposal. It only took 24 hours for Lhasa to see my name on their list of banned media foreigners, forbidden by default. There was no point in trying this route again.

The fault line

The idea that worked finally surged into me from an atmosphere of total disarray. I called the information desk at the Wajiaobu, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To my contact man[2], I revealed my project, and my sense of disappointment. With all the sincerity of a desperate man, I stipulated (and even promised to myself) that I was going to Tibet to write a book.

To my big surprise, and in denial of the fact that Chinese government employees never get excited about anything, he replied tit-for-tat, "But you are wrong, Mr. Meyer, journalists are always welcome in Tibet. All you have to do is place the request in the right place, not at a tourist agency, but at the Waiban, the Bureau of Foreign Affairs of Tibet, in Lhasa."

In retrospect, I think I now understand that through the good offices of the local security bureau, the ministry got wind of my plans to try the tourist route as well as Lhasa's refusal to comply. So, his department had already studied my case and made its decision. It was just waiting for my call.

The aftermath went like a well-oiled machine. On June 30th I mailed my request, with all the forms properly filled out, to the proper address. The fact that this Waiban in Lhasa, with its 80 employees, only communicates via fax and not by email reveals a certain style of monastic rules and relative self-protection. Of course, in reality, Lhasa was linked with Beijing via the internet. But the fax gave Lhasa the opportunity to follow its most precious imperative: to take as long as possible. Because in a place so charged with political tension, to not communicate, to not commit oneself too quickly, is the best guarantee for long-term survival. Otherwise, unforeseen blowback is always possible.

On July 15th I got a call from Lhasa on my mobile phone. It was a friendly employee, asking me anxiously in Chinese if I still wanted to come to Tibet.

Everything was swinging into action. Several exchanges followed at regular intervals before I was bestowed with the lodging permit and notified by telephone on August 15th. Then on September 15th, five days before the departure date, I received the travel pass by fax, while at the same time Laurent, who had been hanging out for weeks in Paris, was invited by the Embassy of China there to come and pick up his visa.

It must be said at this point that the travel pass sent by fax had zero administrative value. The real thing would arrive to us by messenger, six hours before the train's departure; thus providing a brilliant example of the unrivaled capacity of this administration to educate foreigners in patience.

Even buying the train tickets was done in an atmosphere of suspense, since bookings only open two, at best three, days before the train's departure. So, two Chinese, including Li Feng, one of our group, went on a big hunt for tickets at two different ticket offices. The hope was that one of them would get in line and make it to the window before the tickets were all sold out. Officially, no government office would help us.

But the reality is surely something else altogether. Hiding in the shadows of power, like some fairy tale, good little invisible fairies were watching over our voyage, fighting valiantly against any evil witches. This Lhasa Waiban wanted us to make it there about as much as they wanted a hole in the head. But the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had our backs, and other entities, such as the bureaus of Public Security and China Railways, were keeping score. Even the Office for the Organization of the Olympic Games had a hand in the deal, as a friend of a tourist agency explained it to me. This being their all-powerful year of 2008, they had block-booked a huge number of seats on the trains and planes going to Lhasa. The aim was to satisfy the demands of foreign athletes and trainers, who were dying to visit Tibet after the games were finished.

All of this hidden, Byzantine palaver went right over the heads of our group: Brigitte (my wife), Laurent, Li Feng and myself. We had just won the chess match of the decade, something that no one else had been able to do for such a long time: Let's hit the road!

And so it was the previous day, on the evening of September 20th, that we piled into a taxi to go to the Beijing West Train Station. This is a bombastic example of architecture, adorned with a pretentious, fort-like façade. It is topped with a huge, curved roof and at the top of this great wall, as if an afterthought, it is crowned with a Sinified arc de triomphe. It was built in 1999 for the 50th anniversary of China's founding as a republic. However, it has not aged well. It only took eight months to build, which is ridiculously fast. But no sooner was it finished than all of its construction problems came to haunt them.

When it came time to pour the foundations, the above-ground architectural plans had not even been done yet. But the rush was on. So, the order for the materials resulted in endless slapdash work and mismanagement. There were, for example, the 10,000 water faucets that all dripped together, like a water concert, and had to be changed. But they did not get changed fast enough, so all the walls ended up flaming red with rust. The Hong Kong press had a field day reporting on the bay windows they forgot to seal into their frames. With the first gusts of wind, they went flying out of their holes, careening to the ground below and smashing into thousands of shards among the crowds. It was a miracle that no one was killed.

There were also the concrete railway ties, poured on the hardened clay ground, that crumbled under the weight of the trains. Thousands of problems piled up. Small things like realizing that they forgot about a metro station to serve this huge monstrosity or not installing a taxi ramp for arriving and departing passengers. The taxi ramp was added at the last moment and ended up being over a kilometer long. Wheezy motors frequently cut out during the last 200 meters of a very steep spiral climb. So, it is constantly plugged by immovable traffic jams, causing hordes of passengers to miss their trains.

We briefly found ourselves traversing a waiting hall crammed with thousands of passengers destined for every corner of the empire. We saw a Tibetan musical group that was returning home after their tour. They were sporting

their turbans, baggy pants and shimmering blouses and were encumbered with their stringed and wind instruments.

From a scratchy loudspeaker the signal was given. With hundreds of fellow passengers in our convoy, we ambled up to the control turnstiles and ran our bags through the scanners, along with many bundles, baskets of food and gifts. With our infamous travel pass in hand, we filed in behind the others. And not a single guard bothered to ask for it!

This gave us the opportunity, all things considered, to honor the efficiency of the police, who knew exactly who was who. So, there was no need to even look at our ID cards. It must be said that among the 1,000 passengers boarding the T-27, just six foreigners (including two German tourists and Li Feng traveling on a foreigner's permit) were constantly followed by dozens of security cameras, which are tied into a huge computer for facial recognition. No one will ever get lost on the face of this earth.

Third Day
Monday, 22 September, 2008
Train #T-27

Short of breath

The altitude is already playing tricks on us. This evening was even more difficult than the previous one. We are suffering from aches and pains, lost vision, diarrhea and other classic symptoms of altitude sickness. The embassy doctor warned me of some general pain, discomfort in the upper chest and light headaches for whomever ascends more than 500 meters per day. Beijing, our starting point, sits at only 45 meters above sea level. Last night, we slept at Xining, which is 2,200 meters up. Then this morning, eight hours later, the train broke the three kilometer barrier. It was here that the train opened up the oxygen system. Each passenger in their sleeper can individually turn on and control this precious stream of gas.

It has a simple, somewhat amateur design, so this unique type of distribution does not wander far from the laboratory from whence it came. We can see a system of trial and error, as doctors and engineers tinker with the circuits so they are capable of helping the masses to

confront the voyage's biological challenge. There are in fact two ways to get the stuff: one is the classic airline emergency mask and the other is like in a hospital, with two Neoprene tubes to insert in the nostrils.

These hardworking helpers reduce the shock, but we are impatient to overcome feelings of constantly being out of breath. This sensation of gasping for air never leaves us, like fish out of water, even till the last night we are at high altitude.

The Tibetan plateau

We wake up in the middle of a huge plateau. We see either a linear horizon with its vast emptiness or huge, broad valleys. Every 100 km or so, there is a rail service station with several side tracks, all invariably crowded with convoys of goods awaiting our passage on this mono-track carrying us to Lhasa.

Like a huge slab of tofu with continental dimensions, this high altitude desert is sundered by a raised bed of sand and rocks, over which we pass. Sunken alongside the track is a green, metal-grilled fence to discourage small wildlife from crossing. But it's not for the antelope, which are capable of jumping over obstacles up to 3.5 meters tall.

The ground we are traveling across is spongy and covered here and there by tufts of low-lying plants and faded moss. The permafrost lies a half a meter below what we can see. And circulating across this icy carpet is a cross-linking tapestry of little brooks, ponds and mazes of wetlands.

Since Qinghai, 1,000 km to the east of us now, our convoy has traded its electric power for the locomotives' diesel engines. High-power electric pylons have disappeared here. There are just not enough people and traffic to justify such an investment. In any case, they would be vulnerable to blizzards and freezing rains. The smallest tornado would bring down the lines, twisting and crumpling the pylons like folded paper, immobilizing the rail line for weeks.

A double-edged slogan

While leaving a city, we see a factory wall with this cryptic slogan:

The market determines our future
But the price determines the now

What a bizarre political advertisement compared to what one might expect on road sides in Europe, bragging about the latest model Fiat or Renault.

This expression especially seems to me to express the poignant poverty of this province and its determination to escape it, whatever the cost. Since Deng Xiaoping swore off Mao's egalitarianism, everyone can dream of becoming rich in industry or commerce. In this tortoise and hare race, the blue China, those rich alluvial plains along the coast, were better situated than the yellow plateaus. These disinherited regions, like Qinghai, which we are crossing, only recently shook off the most abject of poverty and still lag far behind. The great national plan for the future is to displace the coastal factories to the western plateaus (the "market" in the above slogan). But in order to do so, these regions now have to make products of equal quality for

less money, thanks to lower-cost labor and cheaper costs of production (hence "price" in the slogan). In reality, this slogan is simply retreading a tired old Stalinist formula: "Work hard, roll up your sleeves and the future is yours!"

Li Feng sees things about the same way. It reminds him of his childhood and schooldays growing up in Xi'an. "They made us memorize by heart the sayings of Marx, like, 'from everyone their capability and to everyone their needs'. They promised us we would overtake the West in industrial capacity in 20 years' time and in the meantime we had to break our backs at work."

But Laurent objects: "Might it rather be a protest against the constant rise of price tags? The 'price' shown that you are talking about could be for pork, rice or eggs, which are getting more and more expensive by the day and forcing the masses to cut back on their food purchases."

My take on all this, I conclude, is that the local Party leader is daring to complain, obliquely, about the government policy that still favors the big cities and rich coastal zones, while sacrificing the interior of the country. You see, as soon as they believe the outside world is not looking at them, China's regions are not as unified as all that, and the unifying umbrella of the Party can conceal lots of conflicts.

At times the plateau rises up to become mountains. They are flanked with the same brown or green vegetation, which can turn pink or violet depending on how the sunlight reflects off the rockfaces. Once in a while we see a farmhouse or a monastery pass by, with fairly high, solid walls to protect against robbers and wolves. Seeing the surroundings, you have to ask yourself how they can even survive.

Off in the distance we can see white, square or rectangular tents. This signals nomadic herders, with their itinerant herds of yaks, goats and sheep; they will hang out in this area for a few weeks until the pasture is eaten down and then move on. The ground already looks worn down and devoid of much grass…

Snow barrier contraptions

On board the T-27, China's pet project, we can see a very convincing effort to try to protect the environment. Yesterday, we saw how they are trying to protect the permafrost (with the train line running on raised viaducts). But right here in Qinghai, across great expanses of ground along the track, in strips of 20-40 meters wide and going for kilometers on end, we see a network of scree laid out by human hands. Thousands of railway workers patiently collected all of the rocks and stones from the neighboring prairies, and all are neatly worked together in squat walls about 15cm high, creating a lattice of diamond shapes about one meter long each.

After just two years exposed to the wind and temperature fluctuations, we can see in places that the latticework is already frayed and falling apart, as if to remind humanity of its futility in trying to subjugate nature. But in other places, this work of Myrmidons shows amazing signs of rebirth, a change of eras: on the inside of the diamonds we can see the desired tufts of plants that have taken root

and are protected from the vicissitudes of the harshest blizzards.

Elsewhere, there are concrete panels hanging suspended from heavy chains, not connected but parallel. They hang together like the sails on a corvette that has tacked its way towards the sky, far from the ground where the yaks are. In other places there are semi-round concrete tiles, connected together like wreaths hundreds of meters in size. They look like some kind of trap set for the snow packs of winter's blizzards. There are all kinds of open-air science experiments that have been invented and are being tested by the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS – the overseer of this rail project). They dot the landscape as we progress forward on this strategic line.

After several hours, I begin to understand what's going on. These projects are concentrated right along the border of the track and follow its contours, with its bare mid-slopes. They are there to play the role of copses, since trees here are non-existent due to the high altitude. Like copses, they are there to block and dissipate the snow-charged winds. They are also there to stop the formation of snowdrifts and keep the track passable, even when the blizzards are at their coldest and most bitter.

We can also see in sections that are completely exposed to the sun, where there is not a spot of shadow to be had, there are freakish looking devices: like a beveled tube system that runs along the embankment. It is a thermosiphon, whose reflecting mirrors send the sun's rays back into the sky. The hope is that they will help preserve the permafrost and they were also invented by the CAS. In the summer of 2009 however, a study in the magazine *Scientific American*[3] cast doubts on their capacity. They are supposed to stop the permafrost's temperature rising by 0.2°C in the ground and 2° in the air by 2050. However, it appears that these goals, benchmarked in 2003, have already been surpassed. UNEP (the United Nations Environmental Program) says the permafrost has already warmed up 0.3° since 1978 and +0.6° where human activity has taken hold. Zheng Guoguang, national director of China's meteorological center, adds that due to a magnifying glass effect of light and heat in altitude, the permafrost's warming effect will continue to increase by 0.32° every decade, compared to +0.2° elsewhere in the world. "In the worst case scenario," says Zheng, "the permafrost will melt and render the train line unusable in its current state." It is no accident that China just installed 16 automated heat trap stations along its route. We should know in a few years if China will be able to save its rail line to Lhasa.

In this fashion, which is symptomatic of a totalitarian state, the research bureaus have done an incredible work of precision and technical efficiency. But they forgot to communicate with the passengers and explain to them the goals of all this work and why they are important to them. This is different compared to Europe or America, where our public transportation and road systems are validated by the taxpaying public. But this is a symptomatic omission here. The opinion and collaboration of the public does not count for much. All that matters is the order from on high and its technocratic implementation.

Work on the rail line is going on even today. Along huge sections of the line, gloved trackmen, wearing chapkas (wooly hats with fur-lined flaps on all three sides) are digging a narrow trench and lining it with slabs of concrete, to act as a drainage ditch.

In the afternoon we are riding across the hundreds of kilometers of expanse that separates us from the Promised Land. Our fatigue lets up a little and we can admire this amazingly beautiful, high-altitude land: we pass over a half-dried-up lake and are surrounded on both our left and our right with crystal clear waters. It is like looking at a series of artworks as we are suspended in midair. The spongy landscape is covered in mysterious lichens. Off in the distance are high-peaked mountains, forever covered in snow. Here, the mountain chain, looking violently carved and chiseled, has peaks hitting 6,500 meters.

Tangula, the world's highest train station

Almost without even realizing it, we have crossed the Tangula mountain pass, which sits in the middle of the same named mountain chain, and which rivals the Himalayas. We were holding out hope for some relief from the tortuous and extreme incline we were climbing, like some phantom blizzard train with its switchbacks and valleys of fire. But there was nothing of the sort.

In fact, this mountain pass does not even live up to its namesake. It is more like a high-altitude landing in an uneven area with huge open areas interrupted in the distance by chains of peaks with their eternal snow caps.

We have stopped in wide open country next to a little deserted train station. On the new and clean platforms, signboards soberly announce in blue marine Chinese characters the name of the place, "Tangula Pass," and its elevation of 5,073m, more than five kilometers above sea level!

Nobody gets off the train. No traveler was waiting for us, no bundles nor suitcases were piled up. Stricken with sickness and less dashing than the day before, the passengers prefer to conserve their energy, laid out in their compartments, fighting for their biological adaptation to arrive. The temperature looks cool and not glacial, maybe 10°C, judging by the looks of the barely insulated vests and pants on the men hoisting picks and shovels outside.

Li Feng thinks this station was only built to flatter the egos of national glory. Here they can hoist into the trophy case the "highest train station in the world," even certified in the Guinness Book of World Records[4].

Mrs. Fan, a good Communist in the compartment next to ours, vehemently disagrees with Li's tendentious interpretation. "You are ill-informed. It was not built to break the world record, but to serve the hamlets, the nomadic vendors and herdsmen in the area. They know the train exists and arrives here and that it generates jobs. Restaurants, post office, souvenir sales, dormitories for the rail men shepherds, all this rides on and serves this train station. Later there will be a medical dispensary, a hotel, a mobile phone store, a greengrocer and a market. Within 2-3 years, for sure, you will see a city grow up..."

The thin air is really manifesting itself with our altitude sickness, but also the lack of vegetation. Trees and bushes have long ago disappeared. A few small shrubs and patchy tufts of grass here and there is all. The rest of the land is nothing but a wild expanse of rocks, a souvenir of life's origins on our planet, maybe a cousin of lunar landscapes and worthy of the rock gardens in Hangzhou, Suzhou and Kyoto. Is there any local fauna that can survive at this altitude? Or are there any animals from the middle altitudes that wander up here sometimes? It is impossible to know. Following the laws of instinct and evolution, owls, antelopes, foxes, vultures and hares all disappear at the first sound of the train.

Liu Weiqiang, a photographer, is paid to know. In February 2006, when the line was at the technical test stage, he hid out near one of the viaducts where there was an established trail for antelope, the celebrated chiru. He was hoping to take pictures of the antelopes alongside the passing train. But after eight days under the snow, freezing in his observation point with his biscuits and water thermos, he finally had to admit it: the wild animals fled the trains. Liu did not want to admit that the animals would be terrorized by the approach of the iron monster.

So, when he got back and worked on his pictures, he got some help from Photoshop. "Following his heart", he composed the picture of his dreams, marrying a photo of the antelope with a photo of the train. What he did not take into consideration, and way beyond his imagination, was how popular his new picture would end up being. The photo had weight and carried an ideological message: Communism could be reconciled with Mother Nature. Communism overcame the fear of death and was more powerful than capitalism, to be sure. Several months later his picture won the first prize in CCTV's national photography competition. This was quickly followed by the fall of Liu: losing his honor and gaining a reputation as a fraud. After being intensely covered by the media for several weeks, Liu was unmasked by a computer nerd who analyzed the photo and revealed the conflicting angle of light rays and the relaxed, fearless posture of the animals. To top it all, this computer guru even showed online the "glue line" between the two joined photos and how to do it with Photoshop! The scandal caused Liu's editor-in-chief to resign and he had to return the prize money.

Exploring Train #T-27

In order to shake the cobwebs from our legs and observe the quiet society of the travelers, Laurent and I take off to explore the train. It was here that we experienced what was presented in the introduction of this book, the incident between the Han street vendors and the young Tibetans.

Our "soft sleeper" car is full of rich Beijingers: retirees, well placed people, state travel agency employees, workers from international firms, small business owners or high-ranking government employees. When they opted for a means of transport from the lowlands to Lhasa, money played less of a role than the criteria of esthetics (the unforgettable scenery) and health (slower, hence better adaptation to altitude). Like us, they chose the slow way, out of nostalgia or for a vacation. It also gives everyone

the chance to adjust to the change in altitude and enjoy the magnificent countryside. Riding the train is a relaxing distraction, punctuated by the shock of the wheels on the steel rail connections.

Among the people of good standing, a friendly and wealthy class of society, we can see their money spread out before us: heavy gold necklaces and bracelets for the women, hanging over Italian or French made blouses. For the men, Rolex watches and real Lacoste shirts, fancy branded sweaters, fashion designer jackets with the obvious name brands, of course, and bedecked with the priciest cameras and most up-to-date movie cams.

Three cars back, the sleepers become "hard," with six to a room. In this area we see windbreakers, jackets and T-shirts of Chinese manufacturers with the thick, lower-quality sweaters of the semi-rich.

Even further back, we go down to another social class. These are the "soft seats." At this level, lying prostrate is a luxury already thrown out the window, not to mention any privacy of any kind.

Then come the "hard seats." They are full of people with nylon windbreakers, unpleated pants replete with spots and ill-fitted oversized shoes. We can see by themselves a few here, like Yang and Zhang, our street vendors, draped in the dignity of their social standing, with coats, ties and leather vests.

In this humble universe wafts hints of hard boiled eggs, dried fish and stale tobacco, since smoking is expressly forbidden since we passed Golmud and they opened up the oxygen breathing system. One can also detect the ripeness of humanity, which is inevitable after being cooped up in a train for thirty hours.

It must be said that the most outcast candidates seeking their new life in Tibet are not even on board. For half the cost and taking two-and-a-half times longer, they rumble up the plateau crammed into overpacked buses, dazed and confused in rolling tombs. In exchange for not being heated, they are well ventilated by all the broken windows and holes in the corrugated sheet metal, allowing the lucky passengers to quaff by the bucketload all the smog, rainfall and cigarette smoke.

On board the T-27, I estimate that the Tibetan passengers do not exceed 5% of the customers. Among them, I see three nuns and two monks, small and thin in build. They are sleeping in their seats, each arm in arm with the other, fraternally protecting their money belts. We stop and admire the touching scene. There is absolutely nothing fake about it, nor is it ridiculous, inappropriate or erotic.

At the Xining train station last night, we saw them get on board, preceding the horde of newcomers, because the station police had let them walk into the closed area in advance. Usually, low-level apparatchiks like these are renowned for blowing off people of the cloth, out of their respect for their proper secular roles and historic materialism. But here, our lamas, nuns and monks seem to be honored like some notables from the heavens, and offered priority seating for the best places left. Maybe it means that workers, when they think we are not looking,

can rein in their ideological principles and swap them for tradition, or maybe for a pinch of humanity!

Descent to Lhasa

Descending into Lhasa (1,500 meters lower than where we were five hours earlier), we go back through the cloud line and fog on our way. Life begins to come back to the way we know it. First we start to see trees, softwoods and then hardwoods. Then we begin to see enclosures and hamlets. We see more and more yaks and goats grazing, side roads and walled villages. First, we see plots of sparsely seeded rye and local wheat, which begin to multiply in number. Thereafter, we go by the neighborhoods along the Lhasa River, white and green, translucent, bubbling, roiling and magnificent.

We stop at Nagqu, a county seat three hours north of the capital. Still undergoing construction, the station has been super-sized, with a dozen platforms for three trains stopped there and the equipment for a weighbridge to accommodate 40-foot containers. There are several large projects shimmering below with the valiant effort of thousands of Han and Tibetan construction workers. They labor under the sway of foremens' whistles, who are blue in the face from the cold and all their straining. Churning in their tracks are frontloaders with tires that are two meters in diameter. They are trying to excavate veins of rock and silt and quickly dispose of it into dump trucks that are waiting in line. In three directions from our train we can see concrete trucks with their 20-meter-tall articulated sluice gates pumping and pouring away. They are building huge hangars that are still uncovered, so it looks like we are gazing into forests of exposed beams.

Nobody on the train seems to know what this unknown investment is destined for. A Shanghai tourist assures me that it is going to be a slaughterhouse for yaks and sheep, as we gaze out at ever greater numbers of flocks as we pass. Another, a Beijinger, wildly speculates that it is going to become a textile plant.

Several days later, the Dutch owner of a tavern unique in its style whispered in my ear, like some state secret, that Beijing was preparing "one of the most important logistical hubs in all of Asia, for raw materials." It will be designed to stock and roll out lumber, wool and the one hundred mineral ores found under Tibet's surface, to supply the lowlands, the "mother country." The goal is to compensate for at least some of the import needs currently being supplied by Australia, Africa and Latin America. It will be like a supermarket of global dimensions, formidably supported by government subsidies and discreetly managed by a Canadian multinational. This company was attracted by the chance to explore and set up mining facilities in Tibet, which has the largest proven reserves of lithium (a crucial input for electric car batteries), not to mention healthy quantities of oil, coal, copper and a hundred other riches. But since this exploitation of the Top of the World is frowned upon outside of China, Beijing maintains a heavy shroud of discretion over this strategic project.

In fact, from an economic standpoint, this connection in the form of an umbilical cord is already playing a crushing role. From now until August 2009, this rail line

will have transported, coming and going, 62.5 million tons of goods and 8.3 million passengers.

Around us, the ground is flooded by a rain that intermittently beats down on our cabin windows. Prevented from making it over the Tangula Pass, the clouds coming from the east build up and burst open on this side of the mountain. Heroically, the peasants try to harvest their crops with sickles, laying down their stalks of rye and wheat on the drenched ground. They try to stand them up, forming little round or oblong teepees. But we can see stands that were just put up in the last few days showing signs of rust and rot. Their winter hay crop appears lost, as well as the grain. Li Feng says it is the result of an autumn that was too warm, and with its rapidly melting glaciers, Tibet has front row seats at the spectacle of global climate change.

As we go down further towards Lhasa, the rain subsides. Each of us is occupied with reconstituting our bags, whose contents are spread out all over our sleeper room after two days of use. We can see suburbs, obsolete military barracks and above all, in every direction, a frenzy of investment. Everywhere we look we see cranes, construction sites, roads being built, residential additions and factories popping up like mushrooms. Looking in every direction, concrete is being used on a colossal scale. After we cross a suspension bridge dressed in white and hanging over the Brahmaputra River, we await our glorious arrival in a train station which is modestly sized, but of model design. Its décor is martial, in marble, glass and ceramics. Before finally stopping, we see the platform is full of armed police to welcome us. As soon as we alight, they courteously guide us the length of the platform, through the hall and all the way outside into the open air. Shadows of night are falling like a stage curtain. All the passengers are carrying their bags on their arms, along a 500-meter walkway bordered by white and cherry-red street lights. It is impossible to even consider leaving this flux of humanity to take a quick photo. A humorless young man in fatigues keeps us moving with one hand, while his other paw is poised on the huge truncheon hanging on his thick belt.

The atmosphere around the station is like a fantasy, some visual hymn to the glory of the regime and to post-modernism. All around us we see soaring bridges, huge, brand-new boulevards going to unoccupied neighborhoods, sprouting out of nothing. This is the Lhasa of tomorrow, today. We get to the barriers, where parents, friends and business contacts have come to pick up their arrivals. It is very clever the way they have set up the train station. If a traveler at this instant could somehow overcome the many security measures already put in place, and could set off a bomb worthy of the name, the destruction would only occur right in the immediate area. By putting the entire train out of sight in quarantine, no one there would know what happened. Well thought out. Here already, Big Brother is watching you.

First steps, first conflict

At the exit of the lighted walkway we wait for Sanmu, the agent from the Lhasa Bureau of Foreign Affairs. Twenty-five years old, hair done up in a bun, Sanmu is

a well-dressed young woman, gracious in manner, almost doll-like. She cultivates a smiling disposition, although a little on the sad side. "Welcome to Chinese Tibet," she says, extending her hand to shake. Her first words are already revealing about her hectoring style as a guide. In fact, even though she is a local girl, she has bought into the language of the new master, and throughout the trip she studiously avoids any expression that might suggest Tibet existing without China.

We board a Jinbei minibus, a Toyota clone. Sanmu takes us straight to the Shengjiang Hotel which is situated right on the edge of historic Lhasa. It is a serious-looking building, quiet and comfortable, neither more nor less. Shengjiang means "Sacred Flower," which is the Chinese translation for the Brahmaputra, into which the Lhasa River flows.

We put our bags in the hotel rooms and go out, with the lit Potala following us in the background. We make our way to a restaurant with some vague notions of being American. Under a shower of halogen lamps, we see a sign that says, "Lhasa Tibet Steak House."

Despite its tasteless outer appearance, the interior is decorated with taste and discretion. It is like a mini-museum of local art. On the walls hang "tangkas"[5] and on the ceiling are yak skins. The cabinets and sofas are covered in multicolored, dragon-skin Naugahyde. The feet of all the furniture are sculpted to look like the paws of snow leopards. Absolutely nothing is Chinese. There are batiks and colored fabric reminding us of India or the Himalayan kingdoms. All in all, it is a welcome diversion from the cloned Qing look that blankets the rest of the empire.

The menu is also more locally authentic. They offer "momo," which are round raviolis, with vertical edges and more firm than the Chinese "jiaozi." Momo are either filled with yak cheese or grilled ground lamb meat, seasoned with parsley. There are little meat buns, golden baked in the oven and of course, "tsampa." These are deluxe quality little balls of barley, kneaded with butter tea and seasoned with paprika. Except for the last one, all these dishes have a Chinese equivalent. Another one is little balls of fried yak yogurt that are sprayed with concentrated sugary milk. This one also probably came from the lowlands. But they all had their important nuances, suggesting a separate path of evolution. It is as if Tibet has lived from time to time closer to its Chinese neighbor, taking advantage of an alliance or an invasion. But it has never, even today, accepted being a part of the Mandarin melting-pot universe.

While we are dining, Sanmu gives us a presentation about our program. Eight days ago, when we finally received our journalists' residence permit, we were able to tell them what we wanted to see, who we wanted to meet and the subject of our reporting, which would replace the tourist schedule that was originally submitted.

Of our requests, only the most trivial were granted: quashed were our hopes to see what military barracks, prisons, factories and state farms looked like. All that was left were government buildings and monasteries, as many as we could desire. To make sure that we do not know too

much about what our program is and where we would be going, the Waiban tactfully did not offer us copies of our program.

None of this does anything to build our confidence. All my suspicions that I harbored before we left are being confirmed. If Beijing pushed for our trip to happen, then Lhasa has decided to fight us tooth and nail. So, in face of this cold resistance from our hosts, our dance has changed its stance to a stiff-armed waltz.

The battle begins over the minibus that they offer. The fact that it is brand new allows them to claim three times the price that we found online in Beijing. We put our feet down and stubbornly refuse to accept their proposal. So, Sanmu calls her director on her mobile. The phone call lasts no less than twenty minutes. We wait through long gabs and even longer silences (a scene that we will relive again and again in the coming days!) We are finally granted the right to choose our vehicle. In order to save face, we receive this warning: "as a result of your decision, we decline all responsibility if anything happens to you while traveling on the roads of the autonomous territory of Tibet."

Once the dust is settled and both parties are able to brush clean their clothes, so to speak, we are able to go back to the hotel and consign our tired bodies to our beds. Thanks to our respiratory oppression, we are subject to a litany of ailments: throbbing jabs of pain around the eyes and foreheads, aching joints and sore throats. But, on the threshold of our amazing voyage, these manifestations are almost a welcome sign. Heart and soul, we are captivated by a sense of enthusiasm and hope: enchanted to be here, fleeting participants in this world of gods and soldiers, of the material and the spiritual, across the millennia. The altitude sickness is intensified by the sensations of high mountain drunkenness. There is nothing in the world that we would trade to be here. We would have to be whipped like draft animals to drive us back to Beijing, 3,600 meters below.