



SAMPLE CHAPTER

Prologue

MOST cultural capitals in Asia came out of the twentieth century in a far worse state than when they entered it. Warfare, ideological upheavals, and ethnic conflict devastated the traditional societies of Peking and Mandalay, Lahore and Delhi, Hué and Phnom Penh, to cite just a few examples. The impact of the modern age on Lhasa is among the most severe tragedies of this kind, but the loss needs to be understood against the backdrop of the undefeatable resilience of Tibetans.

The motivation to document the remnants of traditional culture in certain Asian cities and to bring back to living memory the dramas played out on their streets inspired me to write what has now become a trilogy. *Old Lhasa: A Biography* came about because of my previous books on Peking and Ulaanbaatar. Writing about Peking's culture and its historical cosmopolitanism highlighted Mongolia's contribution to that city's heritage. Naturally the next step was to delve into the story of Ulaanbaatar, where I had lived for six years. A unique Central Asian city, Ulaanbaatar appeared to me to have been an "alternative reality" for Lhasa — if only Tibet had the same destiny as Mongolia and avoided absorption into the modern Chinese state. In Ulaanbaatar, the wind-horse flags flapping from the windowsills of Soviet-era apartment buildings, the juniper incense wafting from the temples, and the drawings of the endless knot on wooden doors enclosing

khasas (Mongolian courtyards) were echoes of distant Tibet. So the impetus to write about Lhasa was irresistible.

As this book slowly emerged, it grew into both a portrait of the history and culture of that city as well as a serviceable guidebook for readers who are able to go to Tibet when political and regulatory circumstances permit.

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In the 1920s, when Tibet enjoyed its greatest freedom from outside interference in the modern era, Lhasa had a population of only around twenty-five thousand. It was divided into two districts: one that is now the Old Town, with the seventh-century Jokhang Temple (or, more simply, the “Jokhang,” meaning the “House of the Lord”) at its center; and the other being Shol Village, which is at the foot of Marpo Ri (Red Mountain). These administrative districts were divided by a north–south boundary that ran through the Turquoise Bridge, another structure dating to the seventh century. The Old Town was not much larger than two or three square kilometers, while Shol was even tinier. Simple dirt roads passed through the settlements to nearby green meadows, swampy fields, and farms at the foothills of mountain ranges. The waters of the Lhasa River, one of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra, flowed past the city to the south on their way to the Indian Ocean.

The residents of Lhasa at that time took immense pride in the religious heritage of their city. Nearly every luminary in Tibetan history had come to Lhasa because of the importance of the Jokhang as the focal point from which Tibetan civilization evolved and expanded. No other city could rival it.

Lhasa grew organically outward in concentric circles. Around

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1160, a monk built the Nangkhor, a pilgrim's circuit (*korlam*) directly adjacent to the inner sanctum of the Jokhang, so that devotees could practice the religious ritual of circumambulation. It is from this kernel that the boundaries of Old Lhasa came into existence. By the fourteenth century, Lhasa was enclosed within the Barkhor, a kilometer-long *korlam* circling the temple and a monastery among other buildings. By the 1650s, Lhasa's outer limits had been expanded to the Lingkhor, a ten-kilometer pilgrimage route. And so the boundaries of the city remained until recently.

Lhasa's significance also drew heavily upon the nearby presence of government buildings and monastic seats of learning. On Marpo Ri, the Potala Palace is a massive and dazzlingly beautiful fortress-like monastery that had been the residence of the Dalai Lama and the seat of the Tibetan government since 1648. It is the most superb representation of Tibetan architecture ever built. Its magnificent appearance and sacred significance drew countless pilgrims, who streamed to Marpo Ri in constant clockwise motion with "almost uninterrupted silence, religious meditations occupying all [people's] minds."

Three monasteries outside the city were centers of the so-called Yellow Hat or Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, preserving a venerable tradition of scholasticism and monastic training that had been imported to Tibet from the universities at Nalanda, Odantapuri, and Vikramashila in northern India. With a resident clergy sometimes numbering up to ten thousand, each monastery was a separate and self-sustaining settlement that functioned for nearly all purposes as an independent municipality.

Daily life in early twentieth-century Lhasa was mostly grounded in religion for both the laity as well as the clergy. Founded in 1696, the Iron Mountain Medical College trained

monk-physicians in a form of healthcare based on Buddhist principles, herbal pharmaceuticals, and ancient Asian cosmology. Two printing presses used carved woodblocks to impress sutras and treatises by hand onto pages that were assembled into books. These invaluable works, which resembled the palm-leaf manuscripts of India and Southeast Asia, could be purchased by order at the bookstores operated by the presses, a mandatory stop for all bibliophilic pilgrims. A law court on the Barkhor settled disputes by reference to local customs, codified laws, and an utmost regard for the future spiritual impact of a judgment on the litigants. Itinerant Tibetan opera troupes presented music and dance performances in costumes that brought back to life distant events in Tibetan and Indian history, exhorting their audience to be compassionate and mindful of karmic consequence. The Lhasa calendar year revolved around a sequence of religious festivals that tracked the flow of one month into another in a never-ending cycle of faith and devotion as predictable as the celestial bodies rolling by overhead.

Although religion predominated the affairs of the city, Lhasa was the home of laypeople who pursued livelihoods that gave an additional layer of sophistication and complexity to the cityscape. Today at the southern foothills beneath the Potala Palace runs the multi-laned asphalt motorway called Beijing Road. The relentless traffic, winking street lights, and zebra crossings hide that this road was once a major caravan trading route rising up from India, passing through Lhasa, and then proceeding on to Peking, Yunnan, Mongolia, Mukden, and even Siberia. As a part of daily life, trade was engrained in the Tibetan character because it was a dependable profession and a time-honored predilection. Margins and returns on investment were predictable and steady. By the early twentieth century, the

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ordinary people of Lhasa had numerous opportunities to put their savings into the caravan trade and earn a living income without becoming prisoners of the clock. Of course, one had to be on guard against charlatans who might adulterate bundles of packed wool with sand or try their hand at other dodges, but the rules of the game were not secret.

To meet the needs of traveling merchants and caravans, the people of Lhasa operated restaurants, taverns, and brothels. Traders stayed at the points of presence of merchant trading networks; inns were residences for those transients with few business connections or family ties in the city. Itinerant traders bringing crops to market or selling religious relics wandered in to set up lean-tos in the streets or simply placed their wares on a blanket on the dirt surface of a marketplace. The awnings, tents, and stalls on the Barkhor were as numerous as the sails of ships in a busy commercial port. Beggars were commonplace. The people of Lhasa earned merit through routine acts of charity and performed them without condescension lest the beggars quickly turn to taunt the pompous and the stingy.

Nobles and high clerics lived in quadrangle three-story stone buildings, the so-called Lhasa town houses that were commonly referred to by the names of their owners. For those navigating the city, the names of the owners of houses often served in place of street names and numbers. "Commoners" who were successful at business or government service built smaller houses with courtyards or directly adjacent to the street.

Religion permeated society, but Lhasa was not an "other-worldly" place. Lhasans were a lively, cheeky, devotedly religious, occasionally violent, unpredictable, and compassionate people who savored the fruits of an advanced civilization that had existed at least for thirteen centuries. The teachings of the

dharma bred an instinctive impulse toward compassion and forgiveness among the laity. A foreign visitor recalled a case in which a monk and a nun abandoned their illegitimate newborn in the wild to avoid the public embarrassment of having violated their monastic vows. The magistrate had decreed a punishment of one hundred strokes of a rod, nearly the death penalty; but ordinary people beseeched the official in tears, pleading with him and offering silver and jewels to reduce the penalty and forgive the two lovers who had made a horrible and fearful error in judgment.

In 1951, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) marched into Lhasa behind portraits of Chairman Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Liu Shaoqi, the days of the city with its self-administered culture were numbered. During the 1959 Tibetan Uprising, the Chinese Communist Party reacted to the civil unrest as if Tibet was a recalcitrant nail needing to be hammered in flush to the wood. The Party continues to do so despite brief intermittent periods of slightly relaxed policies.

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Judging by contemporary guidebooks, it would seem today's travelers are invariably disappointed by Lhasa, decrying it as an entirely Chinese city that essentially differs not one jot from the Central Business District in Peking.

Disappointment in Lhasa is nothing new. Europeans were sharply critical of Lhasa after their arrival in the early twentieth century. In 1904 correspondents for British newspapers reported that Lhasa was a filthy town with unpaved roads, uncollected garbage heaps, and poisonous pools of sewage and waste.

Forty years later, five American airmen were brought to

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Lhasa after their cargo plane crashed into the mountains near Tsethang. One of the airmen was a Long Islander from Rockville Centre, a town that was “close enough to New York City for him to catch a train into Manhattan to watch a show at Radio City, shop at Macy’s, or dance to Glenn Miller’s ‘In the Mood.’” He could not believe that he who had so often strolled down Broadway was now riding a Tibetan mule en route to Lhasa.

But disappointment soon replaced wonder. Lhasa “confirmed his already-firm belief that Tibet had nothing to offer that he couldn’t find ‘twice as good’ in Rockville Centre.”

Chinese were not far behind their ocean-borne rivals in being disappointed by Tibet. The Qing emperors complained that only the worst administrators were willing to take up government service in Lhasa. In 1912 a senior Chinese official called on Basil Gould, the British trade agent, upon his arrival in Gyantse in Tsang Province.

Sir Basil recorded his conversation with the dejected official in seeming exile:

“And to what,” my visitor inquired, “do we owe the pleasure of being privileged to welcome Your Excellency to Gyantse?” I replied that I had wanted to visit a very interesting country and to make the acquaintance of very eminent people like him. On his putting much the same question again, I replied much on the same lines as before. This however did not content him and he continued, “Sir, please be frank. You say that you have come here direct from Simla, the headquarters of your employers, the Government of India. Permit me to enquire in what manner you offended them. Why did they send you away to such a distant

and undesirable place?” On being asked on how it came about that he was also in Tibet, he replied, “That is a long and painful story that I will recount to you at some other time.” It appeared that service in Tibet was not well liked by Chinese officials.

Today Chinese accept three-year postings in Lhasa as a step for professional advancement in their home provinces. They count the days until they are able to return (and assuredly Tibetans also count the days for their departure too).

Contemporary English-language guidebooks do not dwell on Lhasa, anticipating the traveler’s disappointment by prepping the reader for the letdown that is New Lhasa, a recently built city with the same sterile appearance as New Hangzhou on the Qiantang River or the Water Cube in Peking. Indeed, you do not travel all this way to see Chinese modernity; but, alas, Chinese modernity has been imported wholesale into Lhasa.

This is, of course, a misperception. The Old Town is the Tibetan Quarter. By comparison, this “authentic” part of the city makes up no more than one-twentieth of New Lhasa; but Old Lhasa is there, embedded within the center of New Lhasa. It is to be found in stunning temples and monasteries as well as overlooked and voiceless sites sanctified as the repository of spiritual energy from centuries of worship by pilgrims and residents.

More importantly, Old Lhasa is there in its people, who maintain their centuries-old faith and customs. These are not a scheduled culture-night at a resort or an anthropological zoo but a living culture. You just need to know where and how to look.

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The allure of Old Lhasa is what gratifies the curious traveler today. Its draw is the chance to glimpse the unique blend of ancient culture and customs that so captivated Fosco Maraini, an Italian explorer and travel writer, in 1948.

[Tibet] has a mediaeval faith; a mediaeval vision of the universe as a tremendous drama in which terrestrial alternate with celestial events, a mediaeval hierarchy culminating in one man and then passing into the invisible and the metaphysical, like an enormous tree with its roots among the stones and its leaves lost in the blue of heaven; mediaeval feasts and ceremonies, mediaeval filth and jewels, mediaeval professional story-tellers and tortures, tourneys and cavalcades, princesses and pilgrims, brigands and hermits, nobles and lepers; medieval renunciations, divine frenzies, minstrels and prophets.

The echoes of this still ring true. As a foreign scholar observes, “Tibetan Buddhism has at times been assigned the label ‘medieval’ as has Tibetan culture. Recently it has, on the contrary, experienced being fashionable, being the latest thing.” Fashionably medieval — a phrase that hints at what is lacking in modernity.

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There is the risk that the rich kaleidoscope of Old Lhasa induces a rapid conceptual overload in the traveler. The splendor of the artwork, the impressive sense of sanctity, and the intense devotion of monks and the laity soon produce a jumble of mesmerizing images that exhaust mindful appreciation. Only one-tenth of

the Potala Palace is open to visitors, but that small section packs an incredible punch of impressions that staggers cognition in minutes. And that is just for starters.

In this book I set out stories from Tibetan history and link them to particular sites so that the visitor will both see and comprehend these places and hopefully carry away their significance as an enduring memory. For this reason, the covered topics are selective, not comprehensive. We see tips of icebergs of historical and religious meaning that hopefully allude to the extraordinary depth and complexity of Tibetan civilization. This approach is *pointilliste*; but there is no manageable way in a book of this type, in my opinion, to attempt to paint the portrait of a complex city other than through carefully selected and positioned colorful dots that together conjure up a broader mosaic.

In the progression of this book, I often rely upon the legendary history of Lhasa before moving on to historical anecdotes that are supported by those usual props of the professional historian: solid documentary materials, which can be rather one-dimensional, incomplete, and, well, boring. To the extent possible for an outsider, I have sought to weave the story of ancient Lhasa as a Lhasan might believe things to have been in order to present the past in vivid hues of belief rather than merely the gray tones of skepticism and doubt.

I also select certain legends in preference to others that give a different explanation about the same event or site. Inconsistencies (which infuriate scholars) are important dilemmas for academic writing but detract from the impression made by the sights of the city. Why else would anyone go to the trouble and expense of visiting Lhasa other than to touch, albeit briefly, the cheerful, mystical, and contradictory Tibetan way of seeing

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things? As Tibetans sagaciously note with equanimity about the multiplicity of explanations:

*Lunpa-pa re re, ke-lu re,
Lama re re, cho-lu re.*

Every village has its own dialect,
Every lama his own doctrine.

* * *

Aside from the city's sights, Tibetans are unquestionably the most compelling reason for a trip to Lhasa. The most memorable aspect of travel is the people whom you meet along the way. This is why I have added personal anecdotes throughout the manuscript. A good way to encounter Lhasans is to ramble out on your own at an unusual hour. If you do so, then you will connect with the endearingly and heartbreakingly invincible.

To illustrate this, I once left my hotel around five thirty to take an early-morning stroll through the Tibetan Quarter. I zigged and zagged my way through the streets until I came to the Barkhor at the southeast prayer flag pole. In pre-dawn twilight, the Barkhor presented a timeless spectacle. Hundreds of pilgrims were completing the circuit as large bottle-shaped censers emitted massive clouds of burning juniper incense, which scented the air with its perfume. The stars and the moon shone brightly overhead while the eastern sky began to change from bible black to purplish blue with smears of apple-blossom pink. Scores of people prostrated themselves along the Barkhor; and there was a constant, buzzing hum of *om mani padme hum*. I joined the petitioners and circled the Jokhang to its northern

end, continually being welcomed and met with warmth. Pilgrims lifted up their right hand in a gesture of approval. One wizened woman, cackling merrily, came up to me, rubbed my shoulder in affection, and then stuck out her tongue — an arcane gesture to show respect. I replied in kind, hopefully making the old lady's day and giving her something to tell the family about over dinner that night.

I passed a fifteenth-century courthouse where an incense burner released columns of scented smoke and the mani-wheels were working at full speed and then turned right into an alley to Meru Nyingba Monastery. People were streaming into the courtyard following a complicated korlam to the sites of worship. It was a mixed temple-residential courtyard thronged with worshippers. This type of site is extremely rare in today's Lhasa as it combines the sacred and secular worlds in a single Tibetan complex where the lives of all the residents, lay and clerical, take place in a courtyard amid a jostling, merry, communal atmosphere.

I stumbled up the stairs to the main temple. A monk sounding a drum by the right side of the entrance greeted me with a huge smile and a wave beckoning me in. As before, none of the Tibetans batted an eyelid about someone so visibly non-Tibetan joining their devotions. I clambered up a perilously steep and slippery steel staircase, nearly tripping. Numerous hands reached out to steady me. On the second floor, there was an ornate chapel for the monastery's guardian protectors and a throng of worshippers who swept me up with them in circling the altars. I made my way out to the Barkhor to complete my circumambulation and then went back to the hotel. An experience such as this is why people ought to come to Lhasa.

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I confess this is not a “serious book” about Lhasa as the term is understood within the narrow confines of modern academia, since its objective is only to share what I have learned about Lhasa with *simpáticos*. My audience is the general reader or armchair traveler with a basic understanding of the tenets of Buddhism and the broad outlines of Asian history. I do not propose to go into great depth on religious theory, as that deserves separate treatment — and there are many expert resources in English. I hope my views might also be of interest to Tibetans who have come of age in the diaspora and are curious about what a non-Tibetan thinks of this fabled city.

I attempt to avoid the excessive solemnity and despair that attends much writing about Tibet. It is not that I am ignorant of ongoing atrocities and the appallingly cruel policies of the Party, but I have no doubt Tibet will have a renaissance of its civilization. Tibetans will overcome the current dark cycle just as they have overcome other bleak phases in their history. Like an offering of yak butter, it is for the light of this lamp that I have dared to write this book.

M.A. Aldrich
Year of the Water Tiger, First Moon
Three Harbor Village, Formosa

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