

towns and villages in Congo where people voted that day, Bumba was the only one to erupt in violence. Overall, the election was hailed as a landmark success, a victory for peace after a decade of blood. But standing in the dark courtyard of the Mozuluwa, listening to another man plan another funeral, it sounded the same to me.

In the end, there were no boats to take us to Kisangani, so we hired a convoy of bicycles and continued east into the boiling sun. Our journey led us off the river and far into the jungle, beyond any guidebook or map. The war had ended, but peaceful revival had done little for the crowds of children who lined the forest track, their stomachs bloated from hunger, their mothers begging us to save them, begging us to do something. There was nothing I could do, nothing except pedal faster, leaving behind the naive ideas I'd clung to along the road.

PANKAJ MISHRA

The Train to Tibet

FROM *The New Yorker*

ON AN EVENING in late December, amid the chaos of Beijing West Railway Station, I stood in line for a train that looked little different from any of the other long-distance services shuffling into the vast Chinese hinterland. And yet the train I was about to board, the new Chinese service from Beijing to Lhasa, in Tibet, runs on the highest railroad in the world. Traversing a region known for earthquakes, low temperatures, and low atmospheric pressure, the railroad, which cost \$4.2 billion to build, is an extraordinary feat of modern engineering — perhaps even, as the former Chinese premier Zhu Rongji has claimed, “an unprecedented project in the history of mankind.” In two days, the train brings you to a region that thwarted some of the boldest travelers and explorers of the past.

The route's prospect encourages the laziest kind of armchair fantasy — of great expanses of the “roof of the world” rolling into view with silky black yaks grazing in the grasslands and prayer flags fluttering from gold-topped temples. The train is meant only partly for seekers of Tibet's romance, however. Beijing claims that the railroad between Golmud, in Qinghai Province, and Lhasa, which began operation on July 1 last year, will help speed up the modernization of the country's second-largest region, one of the remotest and least developed. Many critics, meanwhile, have denounced the railroad as a means for the Chinese authorities to strengthen their hold on Tibet, further settling the region with China's ethnic majority, the Han Chinese, and eroding indigenous Tibetan culture. Tibet, which is almost as big as Texas, California, and New York

State combined, also holds vast reserves of copper, iron, lead, zinc, and other minerals vital to China's economic growth.

In the long, disorderly line for the train, there were hardly any foreign tourists. I noticed several Chinese officials cutting ahead, dressed in Western suits and trailed by armed soldiers. Polite uniformed coach attendants stood rigidly at attention outside the pine green cars, but no one asked to see my expensively acquired permit for travel in Tibet.

Once aboard, I found my "soft sleeper" cabin, the ticket for which had cost about twelve hundred yuan, or some hundred and sixty dollars. Containing four bunk beds, it seemed very cramped. The introduction of luxury rolling stock is scheduled for the end of this year; the cars will feature private suites measuring a hundred square feet, and tickets will cost a thousand dollars a day. Meanwhile, it seemed that any impulse to luxury, or even basic comfort, had been squeezed out of my compartment. Flat-panel televisions, headphones, and a solitary white plastic rose in a narrow glass vase only highlighted its bleak functionalism. The ceiling was very low, and the space between the lower berths was barely wide enough for one person to stand up in, let alone four passengers struggling with severe altitude sickness.

To my relief, no one showed up to share my cabin. Indeed, despite subsidized fares and Chinese claims that 450,000 people took the train in its first two and a half months of operation, the train seemed far from full. I changed into my nightclothes, and hurried to the toilet at the end of the railcar; squat-style, it did not promise to stay clean for long. Back in the compartment, an attendant brought a thermos of hot water and then a rubber tube wrapped in a plastic packet. Wordlessly, he showed me how to attach it to the oxygen valve above my berth. The extra oxygen was a necessary precaution — the air in the mountains of Tibet contains 35–40 percent less oxygen than at sea level — but made the compartment look like a mobile clinic.

As the train slid away from Beijing, a P.A. system came to life. After a long speech in Chinese, a deep voice with a strange American accent unctuously intoned, "Dear passengers," and began to relay impressive statistics about the 700-mile railroad extension from Qinghai to Tibet: laid by a hundred thousand workers over five years, it traverses 340 miles of permafrost, often at altitudes be-

tween thirteen and sixteen thousand feet. Chinese pride in the railroad is intense, as I knew from a three-hour documentary that had been broadcast on the state-run CCTV channel in 2006. It had detailed the history of successive efforts by Chinese leaders to build the railway, and the struggles and sacrifices of construction workers, and had also asserted China's commitment to bringing "modern civilization" to Tibet, which it described as "a once remote and backward place." It claimed that Tibetans had been "yearning for decades" for the rail link to Lhasa, and showed Tibetans singing, in Mandarin, of their love for the Chinese motherland.

Such propaganda notwithstanding, the greatest rail construction ventures in history, in the American West and the Siberian East, do not come close to matching the technical achievement of the railroad to the Tibet Autonomous Region (as the land previously ruled by the Dalai Lama has been officially called since 1965). Laying rail tracks across Tibet's permafrost is especially risky, because the surface is prone to melt as temperatures rise. Chinese engineers faced this challenge with innovative cooling strategies. They elevated tracks; they put in a network of pipes to circulate liquid nitrogen and cold air beneath the rails in order to keep them frozen throughout the year; they installed metal sunshades in south-facing locations to deflect warmth from the sun. Although the carriages of the train looked old to me, they had UV-resistant coatings and an eco-friendly wastewater-storage system, and their underbellies were enclosed to protect wiring from snowstorms and sandstorms. A complex mechanism drew in outside air and released nitrogen and other gases while pumping oxygen-enriched air through the train.

I went to sleep early and woke up when it was still dark outside. For hours afterward, I lay in bed, waiting for light to nibble at the edges of the curtains. The light, when it came, was gray and dirty. Thick mist lay outside, through which the sun appeared as a sickly yellow blur. The view from the window, divided cleanly by the white plastic rose, did not improve as the day leaked away. Mist, smog, and dust stifled the passing scenery; the only color lay in sheets of blue plastic covering vegetable fields beside the tracks. Once, a station sign proclaimed a resonant place-name: XI'AN. We were in the antique heartland of China, watered by the Yellow River. Occasionally, the

advantage of the benefits and concessions offered by the Chinese government; it was also meant to take mineral resources out of the region.

Shortly before boarding the train, I had heard a fierce version of this argument from a Tibetan poet and essayist named Woesser. Many young Tibetan exiles in India and the West regard Woesser as a heroine, the first major secular voice within China to speak out against Chinese rule over Tibet. In the bleak grayness of December Beijing, at the hotel where I had arranged to meet her, she struck a defiantly ethnic note, wearing a gold-and-red Tibetan jacket with a side opening, suede boots, and orange-streaked silver earrings. I had expected to meet someone bearing the visible strain of state oppression, but Woesser seemed unbowed. Curiosity animated her broad oval face, making her look much younger than her forty years, and she smiled quickly between bursts of fervent speech.

"The train is a colonial imposition," she said, and she quoted Edward Said's description of imperialism as "geographical violence." She told me that Chinese rule over Tibet had grown much more repressive in the previous two years. She added, "Han Chinese already dominated Lhasa, and since the train arrived in July the city has changed even faster." Her vehement tone made me look around nervously for likely eavesdroppers.

In the struggle over Tibet, Woesser is an anomalous figure. Nothing in her background inclined her toward dissidence. Her half-Tibetan father had been a teenage soldier in China's People's Liberation Army (P.L.A.), which "peacefully liberated" Tibet in 1951, establishing Communist rule over a mostly Buddhist population and eventually forcing its leader, the Dalai Lama, to flee. (Soon after, China strengthened its hold on Tibet with a new road from Golmud to Lhasa, along much the same route as the one now taken by the railroad.) Born in 1966, Woesser was, as she writes in one of her poems, "raised under the bugle of the P.L.A." in Tibet. She was ten when Mao Zedong died, in 1976, and she burst into tears when she heard the news.

Woesser's first language is Chinese — she still doesn't read or write Tibetan — and as a young poet, she told me, she had no interest in politics until she read, in the late 1980s, a Chinese translation of a book about Tibetan refugees by John Avedon (son of

train, moving swiftly and smoothly, appeared to be in a gorge; we seemed to be traveling through Gansu, which has some of the roughest landscape in China.

In the dining room, as plain as an office canteen, the officials I had seen cutting in line on the platform were having a noisy meal, voices raised and chopsticks fluttering in the air. Their guards stood at a respectful distance while a pretty Chinese waitress hovered around them.

Fantasizing about this trip, I had often seen myself in the dining car, eating spicy tofu and drinking green tea, as the train to Lhasa ambled to its highest point, Tanggula Pass. But when the waitress finally delivered to me the tattered English version of the menu, it turned out to be resolutely unglamorous, with "vegetable stock" but no spicy tofu. I settled for fried eggplant and rice.

Back in my compartment after lunch, I called — on my British cell phone, which miraculously worked — a Tibetan exile in Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama's hometown in India. My friend had escaped recently, after living for some years near the railroad in Qinghai. He seemed both surprised and pleased to hear from someone traveling through his old haunts. He told me to compare the number of Tibetan passengers and workers on the train with the number of Chinese. He said, "No one will talk to you, but just go and count the number of Tibetans."

I had seen some Tibetans, recognizable by their full faces and burning-red cheeks, on the platform in Beijing the day before. They had seemed as anxious as everyone else to get on the train. In the morning, there had been four young Tibetans — in knockoff Nikes and identical raffish suede jackets — in the dining car. The pretty waitress, who had been ingratiating with the officials, was brusque with them, placing a single menu on their table without a glance in their direction, and then ignoring their attempts to get her attention.

I had been tempted to approach them. But I knew from an earlier visit to Tibet, in 2004, that Tibetans seen talking to foreigners, especially journalists, could invite unwelcome attention from the apparently numerous spies, informers, and plainclothes policemen. Were Tibetans on the train being monitored? I couldn't tell. But the Tibetan in Dharamsala was categorical about the train's purpose: it was meant to help Han Chinese move to Tibet to take

Richard Avedon). Through the '90s, she worked in a government job in Lhasa, as the editor of the magazine *Tibetan Literature*. It was not until 2000, when she met her partner, Wang Lixiong — an expert on Tibet, though he is Han Chinese — that she began to write critically about Chinese rule over Tibet. In 2003, the Chinese authorities moved against her. They banned her most popular book, *Notes on Tibet*, ostensibly for praising the Dalai Lama. She lost her job and was forbidden to leave the region. Ordered to receive "re-education" by visiting construction sites of the railroad in order to write articles praising the project, she managed to leave Tibet. She now lives with Wang Lixiong and his mother in a Beijing suburb.

A recently translated volume of Woese's and Wang Lixiong's writings, *Unlocking Tibet*, offers a forthright statement about the Chinese challenge to Tibetan culture and identity. Last year, Tibet's economy grew even faster than China's rate of 10.7 percent, helped by subsidies from Beijing — which, in recent years, have constituted more than half of local government revenue — and more than a million tourists each year. These days, Lhasa resembles a Chinese provincial city on the make. Crowds of people, mostly Han Chinese, swarm thoroughfares lined by shopping malls, new glass-and-steel office buildings, and massage parlors and hair salons, which are often fronts for brothels. In *Unlocking Tibet*, Woese naturally deplores these changes. She also criticizes the manner in which the Chinese government has restored many Buddhist monasteries and temples that had been destroyed during Mao's Cultural Revolution. The Tibetans who flock to these temples seem to enjoy considerable religious freedom, but Woese, in an essay on the Potala Palace, accuses the Chinese of turning the Dalai Lama's former residence in Lhasa into a mine of "unlimited commercial opportunities."

It was hard not to feel that Woese, awakening late to Tibet's plight, was trying to make amends, through her ardent denunciations of the Chinese regime, for the long years when she was a member of the Tibetan elite, unthinkingly loyal to its Chinese overlords. I was struck by the similarity of her situation to that of a young Tibetan monk she describes in one of her essays: taken by Chinese authorities to a human rights conference in Europe, the politically innocent man is thrown into confusion and sorrow by an angry crowd of Tibetan exiles accusing him of being a "Communist lama."

Woese's outspokenness about Tibet also disconcerted me because I had found it impossible to meet Tibetans in China willing to speak to me, even off the record. Recent reports by human rights organizations assert that Buddhist monks in Tibet are still forced to denounce the Dalai Lama, and Tibetans are prohibited from possessing pictures of him. Woese seems especially vulnerable. In 1999, Wang Lixiong was detained and interrogated by security officials in Muslim-dominated Xinjiang for more than a month. A policeman, Woese told me, permanently monitors their apartment.

I asked Woese if she wanted me to keep some of her remarks off the record. No longer smiling, she spoke rapidly to the interpreter, and then stared expectantly at me as I listened to the translation.

"I don't care," she said.

Woese's emphatic rejection of the railroad made me uneasy — in part because I have loved trains since childhood. My father worked for Indian Railways, and I grew up in sleepy provincial towns, close to railway yards, where the days resonated with the melancholy sighs of loitering steam engines and the contemptuous shudder of express trains speeding to the distant cities of Delhi, Madras, and Bombay. Every morning, slow mail trains delivered early editions of newspapers that had been printed the night before in their metropolitan bases. I often walked to the railway station to meet them. On the platform, where bundles of newspapers and magazines thrown by invisible hands landed with a dusty thud, I watched with awe as the soot-blackened engineers went off duty. There were rumors about their alcoholism and violent domestic habits, but on these mornings they always seemed to be returning home from heroic expeditions.

By the 1970s, steam was giving way to diesel and coaches were being designed in a modern functional style. But you could still find first-class railcars embodying colonial luxury. I traveled on them with my family on long journeys two or three times a year. As we sat in teak-paneled compartments with glass windows, inset mirrors, and embossed-leather seats, the sensation of movement infused eating, sleeping, and reading with a new sensuousness. The unrelentingly dark nights, the stationmaster holding an oil lantern on a deserted platform, acquired a fresh mystery; there was great drama in the figures of peasants working in the flat fields under vast skies,

and also in the small-town bazaars, whose garish shop signs managed to stoke longing as keenly as the familiar cries of hawkers that erupted at every stop.

Like much else in India, the railways seemed as though they had always been there. In fact, they were introduced in 1851, by the British, part of a worldwide surge in rail construction during the nineteenth century, which gave governments and businesses freer access to markets and resources in the remotest parts of Europe, America, Asia, and Africa. Indian nationalists accused the British of using railways to plunder their most valuable colonial possession. Mohandas Gandhi, whose political awakening began when he was expelled from a first-class rail compartment in South Africa because of his skin color, condemned railways as carriers of disease and disrupters of self-sufficient rural economies. But Gandhi's political heirs did not share his suspicion of Western-style modernization and development. Railways continued to expand in post-independence India, binding far-flung towns and villages into the fourth-biggest rail network in the world. In the film *Pather Panchali*, the first in Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy, the symbolically charged arrival of the train in the Bengal countryside heralds the displacement of a rural family.

In tradition-bound China, railways initially incited similar anxieties. Mandarins of China's last imperial dynasty purchased the few miles of rail track that had been laid by European traders near Shanghai and tore them up. But the nation-builders of Republican China quickly recognized the political uses of the railways. As early as the 1900s, when China had no real authority over Tibet, Sun Yat-sen, the founder of modern China, had outlined a plan to connect Lhasa to the Chinese rail system. However, civil war and the Japanese invasion insured that at the time of the Communist takeover, in 1949, China had only a few thousand miles of track, mostly in the north and northeast of the country.

Since then, the Chinese rail network has expanded dramatically and become one of the largest in the world. Reaching Golmud, in Qinghai, in 1984 and Kashgar, in Xinjiang, in 1999, it has economically integrated these remote provinces, making them available for large-scale resettlement by Han Chinese immigrants, and strengthening Beijing's political control.

The link from Golmud to Lhasa, across the almost impassable

Kunlun Mountains, which form a natural boundary at the north of the Tibetan plateau, has been the most ambitious of China's rail ventures. In 1889, visiting a country deeply humiliated by Western powers, Rudyard Kipling had wondered, "What will happen when China really wakes up, runs a line from Shanghai to Lhasa . . . and controls her own gun-factories and arsenals?" China has now woken up.

Later in the afternoon, when I walked through the train, the Tibetans seemed fewer and more subdued. Most were in the cheapest, "hard seats" carriage, tickets for which cost around fifty dollars. Built with scant regard for the human form, the hard seats encouraged a bolt-upright posture for forty-seven hours. The Tibetans had already slumped into a miasma of cigarette smoke and a faint smell of yak butter.

Many of the Chinese were grouped in the "hard sleeper" compartments, tickets for which cost around a hundred dollars. Empty instant-noodle cups lay on the floor, the P.A. system was turned up high, and people shouted into cell phones. It was hard to spot potential immigrants among them. Was it the young rake with quasi-punk hair and Lenovo laptop, or the middle-aged man with the *People's Daily* open on a battered leather briefcase? In one cabin, six teenage girls sprawled on narrow bunks, bored faces turned toward the door. There were more of them in the next cabin — two neat rows of equally listless expressions.

With the world outside obscured, a mood of lethargy and irresponsibility seemed to be spreading through the train. In the dining car, the guards, who had been stiffly solemn before their Chinese bosses, were flirting with the waitress. The coach attendants huddled in another corner of the car, smoking.

The commentary droned on: "Dear passengers, tea is a common drink among Tibetan people." I listened for a while, hoping for something like the story I had heard on the CCTV documentary of construction workers on the railroad stopping to let migrating antelope pass. But the P.A. system dealt mostly in bombast. Such-and-such a bridge or tunnel was a "masterpiece" in the history of rail construction; the railroad was to help develop Tibet in a "scientific, harmonious way."

Neither modern science nor harmony seemed to have played

much part in the development of the industrial city of Lanzhou, whose outskirts began to drift past the window in the afternoon — an assemblage of rusting machinery, slag heaps, and landfills; of chimneys and brick kilns belching thick smoke; of concrete tenements whose broken windowpanes were held together with cellophane and old newspapers. Western modes of mass production seemed to have re-created in China the squalor of nineteenth-century British coal and mill towns.

China's urbanization — arguably the most expansive and swiftest in history — has already exacted a steep environmental price from Tibet, whose rapidly melting glaciers feed the biggest rivers in Asia. The Marxist faith in the human ability to use technology to conquer nature means that there is no restraint in China on the Faustian fantasy of gigantic public projects, as demonstrated by the Three Gorges Dam, on the Yangtze River, which has already displaced 1.4 million people. When speaking of the railroad to Tibet, the Chinese sound like the true inheritors of the old European zeal for science and industry, as assured as colonial officials of another era were of their superiority over apparently benighted natives.

The railroad's frailty had become apparent in the weeks following its opening. Chinese engineers, however ingenious, had not fully reckoned with global warming, which was raising temperatures faster than expected, and the foundations of the rail line had already begun sinking into the permafrost by the end of July. Thawing could cause tracks to bend and slump, and bridges to crack. In late August, a dining car derailed 250 miles north of Lhasa, with no apparent effect on the train's oxygen-supply system. I tried not to think about the journey's likely perils as I drifted off to sleep for the second night on the train.

While I slept, Qinghai, a barren, inhospitable land settled by Chinese political prisoners in the 1950s and '60s, passed in the night. The train steadily gained altitude. When I awoke, just after we passed Goimud, the air felt thin, although oxygen was now pumping hard into the compartment. Groggily, I opened the curtains and then sat dazzled before a startlingly white landscape — its forbidding aspect tempered and endowed with heartening intimacy by the unearthly radiance of Tibetan light.

All through that morning, the train twisted and climbed through

the Kunlun Range, between mountains with needle-sharp peaks and sunny slopes. Occasionally, the mountains retreated, and then treeless valleys opened alongside the tracks, scored by streams of a glittering chalky white. The artificial rose in my compartment now appeared translucent.

The train clattered past empty railway stations and huts with corrugated-tin roofing; they looked like temporary dwellings for construction and maintenance workers. The highway to Lhasa ran alongside us, empty except for an occasional military convoy.

The P.A. system announced the Tanggula Pass, the highest point of our journey. At 16,640 feet, a thousand feet higher than Mont Blanc, the pass is higher than the altitude at which light aircraft fly. I had a mental image of the pass based on visits to other high passes in Tibet: the snowcapped mountains arrayed imperiously against the blue sky, supervising subsidiary ranges that stretched in rich layers below them. But I couldn't tell when we passed Tanggula. None of the cairns or prayer flags that frame views of Tibetan passes appeared. The railway seemed to have forgone some of the dramatic vistas offered by the road. It ascended gently to the Tibetan plateau, without any of the hairpin turns and loops of the kind that trains negotiate in the Himalayas.

The snow on the hills thinned, exposing wind-abraded rock. The ground showed through, brown and stony, and then we were in flat grassland with soft brown hills at the edge, their peaks sugared with snow and resembling the conical caps of Tibetan Buddhist sects.

Once, a herd of antelope skipped beside the tracks. Looking for more of them, I saw black nomad tents on a distant hillside. Yaks with white stripes on their backs appeared in the dank yellow grass. The train whizzed past empty stations; on the rare occasion that we stopped, there were hardly any Tibetans to be seen. This seemed the strangest aspect of a rail service designed to benefit local people: their meager presence outside as well as inside the train.

I read and napped for a while, and then took another walk through the train. I had a slight headache, and my swollen bag of dried apricots popped easily and spilled its contents on the floor. But the altitude was having a deeper effect on many people on the train. The guards I had seen carousing in the dining car looked drained, barely able to focus their eyes on the flat-screen television. In the chair car almost no one sat upright. The hard sleeper, too,

was a mess of slumped bodies. A faint smell of vomit lingered in the air. Remarkably clean so far, the toilet in my carriage had begun to overflow.

Outside, a few walled settlements in the Tibetan style began to appear — fortresslike houses with sloping walls; red, blue, and green prayer flags at the turret; and flat roofs, often topped inconspicuously with the red flag bearing Communist stars. A few miles out of Nagqu, the biggest Tibetan town north of Lhasa, the sun began to set. Long blue shadows crept down from the stony slopes of mountains even as the lingering light set their snow-flecked peaks ablaze.

On the highway, two leather-clad and goggled motorcyclists appeared, zooming through the jagged shadows on the tarmac, shrinking into the distance until they disappeared entirely. We passed a wide lake, the waves at its shore frozen into odd sculptural forms suggesting entrapment and desolation. As the train straightened after a long curving tunnel near Lhasa, a nomad emerged from his tent on a hillside. Fantastically dressed in fur hat, sheepskin coat, high boots, and silver buckles, he stopped and gazed at us — interlopers in his world — with what could have been either fear or disdain.

It was dark when the train, moving swiftly through Lhasa's outskirts, pulled into the great vault of the city's new railway station. The announcements on the P.A. system bounced off the building's high ceiling, wide platforms, and pedestrian tunnels, and dissolved into meaningless echoes. In the neon-lit concrete wilderness outside, the straggly crowd of tired passengers appeared diminished. The parking lot was several hundred meters away from the main building, and the P.L.A. soldiers with machine guns and the checkpoint on the road leading to the city were reminders of Chinese fears about security in Tibet.

On my first morning in Lhasa, I saw the Chinese-built quarter of the city — a grid of long roads lined by supermarkets, restaurants, bars, and night clubs — through Woese's eyes. The old quarter — centered on Jokhang, the holiest Tibetan temple — long reduced to an oasis in the hectically and garishly expanding city, seemed to have shrunk since my previous visit. But it hadn't lost the atmosphere of a medieval market-cum-pilgrim town: skullcapped and

thinly whiskered Muslims from Kazakhstan displayed mosaics of nuts and dried fruit; open-fronted shops sold dried yak meat and blocks of yak cheese; and antique stores sold prayer wheels, semi-precious stones, daggers, and saddles. Mingling with the merchants and the hawkers were the pilgrims, chanting and spinning prayer wheels as they circumambulated the gold-roofed Jokhang. A mysterious euphoria seemed to drive the dusty prostrators in their frayed gloves and knee pads, and the tiny aged matriarch in greasy robes tapping her forehead to the faded silk scarves hanging from the holiest chapel inside the Potala Palace.

In the encroaching Chinese city, new, hybrid identities for Tibet were on offer. The three white arches of the railway bridge over the Kyichu River were apparently designed to evoke *khatags*, the silk scarves that are a traditional Tibetan token of reverence. The railway station itself, a colossal structure with sloping walls of white and oxblood red, seemed to compete, in both size and detail, with the red and white of the Potala Palace, which looms above Lhasa on a large outcrop to the north of the city. Such selective borrowings reflect the fact that, in recent years, Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism have inspired a cultlike devotion among newly affluent Han Chinese. A stylish Chinese poet I met in Beijing last year blew perfect smoke rings as she lamented the immaturity of China's urban culture, and professed profound interest in Tibet. *Ketexizi* (*Mountain Patrol*), a popular Chinese film released in 2004, perfectly encapsulated this new Chinese romance, presenting the Tibetans as a proud, earthy, and honest frontier people. There are shops in almost every major Chinese city selling what a signboard in downtown Shanghai describes as BUDDHISM ACCESSORIES: Tibetan prayer wheels, bells, and incense.

In my hotel, the Brahmputra Grand, glass cases displayed antique guns, swords, armor, metal utensils, Tibetan masks, and statues, while the mostly Chinese staff, dressed in colorful Tibetan costume, greeted guests with an exaggerated bow and a heavily accented "*Tashi delek*." The hotel, which opened two days before the train to Lhasa's maiden journey, billed itself as Tibet's "first five-star hotel" and a "unique museum hotel." In the marble lobby, whose wall decorations, Buddhist statues, winding staircase, and gold-plated mandala created an overwhelming impression of gaudiness, a wide-screen television replayed endlessly an interview with the

hotel's owner, a soldier turned businessman from Sichuan. According to a glossy magazine placed in every room, the owner understood "the law of development of objective reality" and was someone who "spends all energy throughout his life in inheriting and flourishing Tibetan culture."

Despite the awkward translation, the words betrayed a kind of truth. From the beginning of market reforms in China, Communist Party bosses, government officials, and P.L.A. soldiers had grasped more keenly than most people the development of objective reality. Not surprisingly, they were, if not the true inheritors of Tibetan culture, certainly the people best placed to make money out of it.

On one occasion when I met Woesser, she was accompanied by her partner, Wang Lixiong. Wang had risked much, not only by finding fault with Chinese rule over Tibet — something no prominent Han Chinese writer or intellectual in China was known to have done — but also by meeting the Dalai Lama. Like Woesser, Wang had been born into China's privileged class. Then, in 1968, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, his Moscow-educated father, denounced as a "capitalist-roader and Soviet-revisionist spy" and imprisoned for months in a cowshed, had committed suicide; his mother, an editor at a film studio, had been sentenced to hard labor in the countryside. Naturally, the Cultural Revolution had given Wang a deep distrust of China's political system. It also brought him and Woesser together, he told me. Shortly after they started an e-mail correspondence, she sent him some photographs taken by her father in the late sixties of rampaging Red Guards in Tibet. He encouraged her to interview the people in the pictures, which showed mob fury and personal humiliation, and to write a commentary to go with the photographs.

Together, Woesser and Wang radiated a bemused happiness, as though they were still savoring the extraordinary luck of having found each other. They had corresponded by e-mail for a year before finally meeting, in 2000, when Wang visited Lhasa to research an article. Wang described it as a case of "love before first sight."

Wang told me that he thought the Communist system in China was in serious peril, that the Party's control over China was in danger of being broken. This did not make him hopeful about the fu-

ture of Tibet, however. He told me that he had taken the train to Lhasa last November. On the journey, he met a Tibetan woman who had left her Tibetan village to see the world and had ended up as a singer and dancer in a traveling show run by a Han Chinese. Realizing after some years that she was getting old, she had opened her own show, in the city of Yangzhou. She told Wang that she was returning to her native village to find more girls there who could be "ethnic exhibits."

Woesser thought that these privileged and ambitious Tibetans did not exceed 10 percent of the Tibetan population, but Wang seemed more pessimistic. He said, "The most important change the train will bring about is in Tibetan self-perceptions. Back during the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards smashed everything, but they left Tibetan hearts unchanged. But now Tibetan attitudes are being changed by the new cultural revolution of modernization and globalization. You can't resist this new materialism."

Woesser, in one of her essays, recounts a conversation with a young Tibetan entrepreneur seeking to develop Tibet's tourist industry, who grandly proclaims, "We are going to be the city eating up the villages." But it seemed that few young Tibetans were well placed to take advantage of the new economic environment. The infusion of Han Chinese, privileged by both ethnicity and language, had left the unemployed and the idle. One evening in a restaurant near the Jokhang temple, I met five young English-speaking Tibetans so overwhelmed by bitterness at their situation that they forgot, briefly, about the punitive consequences of talking to foreigners.

Dressed in jeans and big fluffy jackets, they appeared as if they might have been more at ease in the Chinese quarter's discos than in the Tibetan quarter. But an old-fashioned courteousness lay behind their coolly modern appearance; they belonged to a very different class from the Tibetans I had seen in the night clubs near the Potala Palace on my previous visit. Children of barley farmers in villages north of Lhasa, they lived crammed in small rented rooms in the city.

Looking for an unobtrusive place to talk, we went up to a restaurant's second floor. A young Chinese couple were already seated there, and a moment of unease followed. The couple were most

likely tourists; romantically self-absorbed, they barely glanced at us. The Tibetans, after a few appraising glances, became indifferent to them, probably confident that the Chinese wouldn't be able to follow a conversation in English. But I found myself nervously surveying the menu, remarking, pointlessly, on its variations on yak meat, and then abruptly talking of the Dalai Lama's embrace of vegetarianism during his exile in India. None of the Tibetans ordered meat, and they declined my offer of beer; they did not drink alcohol. I asked if they were religious, and they nodded. Did they go to temples? They nodded again. Conversation flowed only after the Chinese couple left.

The Tibetans had known one another since their early teens, when they left Tibet and made a dangerous journey together across high mountain passes to India. They spoke nostalgically of their time in India, especially of the school run by and for Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala. Their stay abroad had expanded their sense of possibility, but it had also brought a painful awareness of their place in the world. They had learned English in India, but this skill, valuable anywhere else in China, had proved to be of little use when official pressure on their families forced them to return to Tibet. Speaking passionately, and often all at the same time, they described how Chinese authorities worked hard to prevent Tibetans from escaping to India — some three thousand succeed annually — and how they periodically harassed Tibetans who had returned.

In any case, my companions couldn't have benefited from Tibet's market economy without fluency in Chinese. Even exams for the job of tour guide were conducted in Chinese and covered Chinese rather than Tibetan history. Higher education in China was far too expensive for this group, and they had none of the connections that Tibetans, however well educated, needed in order to obtain good government jobs, or to avoid being posted to the cold border regions. Their only option was to eke out a living off tourists in the summer season, as translators and guides, and then spend much of the winter on their families' farms.

They had, they told me, almost no contact with the local Chinese, and they saw Lhasa as a city divided, as much psychologically as physically, into the Chinese and Tibetan quarters. Mutual wariness, rather than outright hostility, had so far governed the relationship between the two communities. But the train, they felt,

could change that. They had little doubt that it was meant to benefit only the Chinese. Travel by road and air had been too arduous or expensive for likely Chinese migrants, who mostly tended to be poor. The train had already speeded up Han Chinese immigration to the city, where Tibetans were now in a minority. Every day, according to the Tibetan government in exile, more than five thousand visitors came to Lhasa, of whom some two thousand stayed. The effect on the local economy was already being felt. Rent for modest rooms of the kind they lived in had doubled.

Our voices resonated in the empty, dimly lit restaurant. It was New Year's Eve, but the lanes near the Jokhang had acquired a wintry desolation early in the evening. When we emerged into the night, there was a long wait for a taxi, but the Tibetans insisted on seeing me off. Quietly standing in the cold dark lane, they suddenly appeared adrift in their own city.

Returning to my hotel, I found P.L.A. cars and green-uniformed soldiers blocking the driveway. Alarmed, I went in to discover ballroom dancers crowding the lobby, which had been cleared of much of its Tibetan decorations: the hotel had decided to celebrate the Western New Year. Local Chinese officials in suits sat stiff-necked on sofas, watching women in long black gowns solemnly twirling around the marble floor as a synthesizer produced an approximation of the "Blue Danube" waltz. The uncertain and experimental nature of the event became more evident when the dance floor abruptly emptied and a heavily made-up Nepalese girl, not more than sixteen years old, in a white miniskirt began a kind of pole dance to the tune of a Bollywood film song. As if completing a scene from a colonial past, the Tibetan and Nepalese staff looked on blankly from the sidelines.

I left after the Nepalese girl threw off her jacket. In my hotel room, I switched on CCTV's New Year's show to find an overweight woman in an orange tracksuit singing a song about the railroad to Lhasa titled "The Road to Heaven." Woese later told me that "The Road to Heaven," an adapted folk song sung by a half-Tibetan pop star named Han Hong, had been played interminably on radio and television in Tibet for a whole year before the train arrived in Lhasa. In 2004, Han had also performed in Potata Square. In fact, she had planned to helicopter onto the roof of the Potata Palace for the performance, and had been dissuaded only after a cam-

paign on one of Woese's influential blogs, which has since been shut down. Judging by the English subtitles, "The Road to Heaven" consisted of a series of slightly ominous banalities: "people of all nationalities come together," for the train "was like a dragon crossing the mountains," "bringing warmth of the motherland to the frontier," whose arrival would make "barley and butter tea taste sweeter."

On my last day in Tibet, I visited a young farmer in his rural home, some sixty miles from Lhasa. The Tibetans I had met had sent him to accompany me to the Ganden Monastery, on one of the hills near Lhasa. On the way, I asked him if I could visit his village instead. Much to my surprise, he immediately agreed. It was a bright morning, cloudless, with only a few wisps of mist lingering around the hills in the remote distance. The farmer joked about Chinese attempts to get families in his village to fly the Communist flag and display pictures of China's president, Hu Jintao. Tibetans were apparently still required to take seriously the old-fashioned propaganda that much of inland China has outgrown.

It was with something like pride that he showed me around his old family house and introduced me to his parents and younger siblings. The courtyard where a huge Tibetan mastiff sat tethered, the hay-strewn shed where cows were being milked, the long living room with the coal stove and a fridge and a television set (both emblems of modernity covered decorously with embroidered cloth), the flat roof with an unrestricted view of the hills: this, he seemed to say, was the life that he and his family had created, without any help from the Chinese.

Nowhere was he more self-assured than in the prayer room, to which he took me last. Pausing in what was evidently the best-tended part of the house, he let me absorb its aura of sacredness. The Tibetan love of color and baroque decoration was on full display in the paneled chests painted with floral designs, the thick frescoed columns, the *thangkas* representing scenes from the life of the Buddha, the sashes hanging from the ceiling, the pile of Tibetan scriptures bound in bright yellow silk, and the row of silver lamps before an extravagantly gilded shrine.

On one relatively bare wall was a poster, the mandatory portrait of Hu Jintao. It was even bigger than the largest of the *thangkas*, but

in this portrait the Chinese president had been Tibetanized: he wore a *khatag*, and his figure was superimposed over images of the Potala Palace and ecstatic Tibetan dancers in traditional costumes. Smiling conspiratorially, the farmer pointed to one of the paneled chests. Inside, he said, was a picture of the Dalai Lama. It is illegal to possess one in Tibet, but the farmer, growing more cheerful by the second, told me that all his neighbors had one, too.

It was a defiant gesture, like that of the nomad who had watched from outside his tent as the train went past. And when I returned to Lhasa later that morning the city, overwhelmingly defined by the Chinese, appeared more clearly to be an exception. It seemed that there were many more Tibetans like the young farmer, asserting traditional ways of life against change imposed from Beijing — Tibetans whose loyalty to their faith and identity had been tested by successive political setbacks, and who would now struggle to survive the arrival of the railroad in Lhasa.