

# The Seven Days in Tibet

An introduction to Tibet and a personal travelogue from 2017

By Dennis Voss

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### A few words about me

My roots are from Germany; however, I lived in Spain, on a cruise ship, Switzerland, Ireland, China and now in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. My father explained to me at an early age that there are always two sides of the same coin and I should first get an idea myself of something and then forge a personal opinion. I accepted this advice and live accordingly. For example, when I was 18, I travelled to Israel and Palestine; I visited the Protestant and Catholic Ireland, and I was in South Korea and even in North Korea. Professionally, I have made an apprenticeship as a fully trained hotel industry expert and completed after some working time a finished my Bachelor Professional of Business (CCI). After working in Customer Relations in Ireland, I moved to China, where my wife and I worked and lived in Shanghai for 3.5 years. My personal desire for a master's degree fulfilled in the summer of 2018 when I completed a Master of Business Administration in International Strategic Management at the Open University of Hong Kong.

(I have changed the names of my wife, our friends and the guide because this travelogue is my personal memory. Unfortunately, I have to do it this way because the Tibetan issue in the press and especially in China too often polarize very much.)

# The Seven Days in Tibet - A Travelogue

## I never had the plan to go to Tibet

Actually, we never wanted to go to Tibet; however, in November 2017, we were expecting German friends in Shanghai and she really wanted to go to Tibet and she asked us if we could travel to Tibet together. Tibet in November, that's not too cold, so my first thought. But after a brief research, November turned out to be a pretty good season for travelling, as this is the Tibetan dry season and offseason. The temperatures should be around 16 degrees during the day, and it may freeze at night. But that was not a problem for us because we can dress up against cold weather. I told my wife about it and the more we informed ourselves about a possible trip, the more we got the feeling: "Yeah, let's go to Tibet!" We agreed to the plan and started with more detailed preparation. We needed to figure out different questions like: How does it work with the special travel permit to Tibet, which travels agency to choose, what about the altitude sickness and, and, and...

## Preparations

Entry into Tibet is only possible with a travel agency authorized by Chinese officials and it is only allowed to travel with a group tour. I wrote to several agencies and told them about our plan. After a detailed analysis of the offers, we chose a Tibetan provider, which was priced in the upper midfield, but it offered the most interesting tour and they delivered the best service. We figured out that this trip would not be cheap. Per person, the price for our private group of four people was about 1350 euros including train + plane tickets, hotels, tickets for attractions, drivers and guide. Of course, we had the possibility to book a cheaper tour in a larger group, but we didn't want that for two reasons. Firstly, in the case of fatigue or even signs of altitude sickness, we would be able to change the tour individually and, secondly, we will have more of our private guide, instead of a guide for a random group. As we always have a lot of questions for our guides, we like to pay a bit more for such an interesting destination and have the possibility to satisfy all our curiosity and needs.

Our plan was as follows:

- **1<sup>st</sup> day**  
Departure from Shanghai to Xining in Qinghai, a Chinese province bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region
- **2<sup>nd</sup> day**  
22-hour train ride from Xining (2000m altitude) to Lhasa (3658m altitude)
- **3<sup>rd</sup> day**  
Arrive in Lhasa and relax and acclimatize
- **4<sup>th</sup> day**  
Exploring Lhasa and surrounding country
- **5<sup>th</sup> day**  
Exploring Lhasa with a visit to the Potala Palace

- **6<sup>th</sup> day**  
Drive to the countryside and a short hike at 4000m altitude
- **7<sup>th</sup> day**  
Return flight from Lhasa via Xian to Shanghai

### The Seven Years in Tibet

Of course, we had to watch the film "The Seven Years in Tibet" as a preparation. Brad Pitt plays the Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer, who in 1939 attempted a German expedition to climb the Himalayas. The film is based on true events, even though not everything is displayed correctly. The expedition members came into British captivity during the war in British India. Many of the prisoners tried to flee and muddle themselves through to the Japanese troops in Burma. Some succeeded, others did not. In 1944, Harrer managed to escape and get to Tibet. His companion was Peter Aufschnaiter, another Austrian. During the entire journey, the two overcame at least 50 passes - none under 5000 meters - and walked about 2100 kilometres. On January 15, 1946, they reached the city of Lhasa, which was at that time forbidden and not accessible to foreigners. However, they gained access and later on prestige. Aufschnaiter became a consultant to the Tibetan government on agricultural and urban development issues. Harrer was first a translator and photographer for the Tibetan government, later a teacher (for English, geography and mathematics) and most recently a friend and teacher of the young 14th Dalai Lama, for whom he also designed a private cinema. A cordial friendship connected both until Harrer's death. Because of the Tibet-China conflict of 1950/51, Harrer fled to India in 1951. From there, Harrer returned to Europe the following year. About his experiences, he already began in India to write the book "The Seven Years in Tibet", which became a bestseller. The director of the film, Jean-Jacques Annaud, as well as the actors Brad Pitt, David Thewlis and Jamyang Jamtsho Wangchuk, received after the release of the film a lifelong entry ban to China - which Brad Pitt was repealed in 2014, so he could accompany his wife Angelina Jolie on a trip to Shanghai to look after their children. There was no public appearance of him.

### The altitude sickness

The movie draws our interested in Tibet but our concerns about altitude sickness also increased. Mountain sickness is caused by the lower oxygen concentration in the mountain air, resulting in less oxygen in the blood. For the unadjusted body, this is a burden that the body must acclimate slowly to avoid exhaustion, headache, nausea, and in the worst case (when ignoring the first warning signals), pulmonary edema. My wife talked to her pulmonologist in Germany because she was worried about her asthma, but he dispelled her concerns. Although physical fitness and good health are beneficial against altitude sickness, it is not possible to tell in advance who will be affected, but her asthma is not a risk factor. From 2000m altitude, someone can get this disease and the risk grows exponentially with increasing altitude. Our first countermeasure was to take the train from Xining at 2000m altitude to Lhasa. The 22-hour train ride reduces some risks enormously because the body can slowly get used to the rising altitude. There are also safety measures on the train, such as a supply of concentrated oxygen when needed, but more on that later.

### Visa application and special travel permit

Our friends needed a normal visa for China and we all needed afterwards a special entry permit for the Tibet region. We invited both of our friends with our private letter of invitation and now comes the paradox: it was not allowed to mention that we wanted to go together to Tibet, because then the visa offices abroad like to deny the visa. For our friends, all these secretiveness were a bit strange, but that's the way China works very often. Our friend, who works in Switzerland, then got the visa without any problems, but her friend in Germany had some bad luck and it took him forever to get the Visa with a Visa agency. Well, in the end, everything went well, and we learned that the easiest thing to do is to drive directly to the visa center and submit the visa. Also, the special entry permit for Tibet was not a problem in China, but my wife and I had to submit certificates from our employers that testified our proper employment in China.

### Politics and history - Why was Tibet conquered in 1950?

Then, suddenly a little shock. At the end of October, the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (which is actually a week away) was held in Beijing, and we figured out that the entry of foreigners into Tibet will be prohibited before and after the Congress. Was all the trouble for nothing? Fortunately, not, because shortly before our planned travel period Tibet was "released" again.

Tibet is a sensitive issue in China and exchange of different point of views with Chinese is most of the time impossible. For the vast majority, only the perception of the Communist Party of China is correct. Tibet had to be liberated from foreign agents and the bloodthirsty Dalai Lama, "the oppressor and slave-owner", as it happened mercifully in 1950 under Mao Zedong.

But what was Mao's real intention? A territorial gain for China of a region that was defended weakly, so China had the possibility to extend by 25% easily. Another intention was to have another buffer against India and to counteract the increasing influence of India in independent Tibet. The uranium deposits in Tibet for the Chinese nuclear bomb as well as the control of numerous river heads in China and Asia. In order to justify the annexation historically, it is told in China that Tibet has always belonged to China. Is that a fact?

### A small excursion into the government history of Tibet

Let's put it this way, there was sometimes more and less Chinese influence with, on and in Tibet. Between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, various Tibetan kingdoms formed a united Tibetan kingdom. In 1268, the Mongols completely conquered the area of today's Tibet. China itself then conquered the entire Mongolian controlled area and founded the now rather hated the Yuan Dynasty, because many Chinese believe that the Yuan Dynasty was a rule of barbarians over the Han Chinese. With the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty in 1368, the direct Mongolian and thus indirect Chinese influence on Tibet ends. This was followed by more than 250 years of the so-called high bloom of the Tibetan monastic culture. The aged Mongolian

Altan Khan recaptured the old ties to the Lamas around 1576/78, promoted Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia, and extended Mongolia's influence back to Tibet again. Since then, the title "Dalai Lama" (often translated as "ocean-like teacher") has been awarded for the first time. In 1617, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, now known as the "Great Fifth" in Tibetan Buddhism, was born and reunited the politically divided Tibet around 1630. He fundamentally reformed the institution of the Dalai Lama, instituted a hierocratic religious state and built the mighty Potala Palace in Lhasa, the new capital of Tibet. Lhasang Khan, the ruler of the Mongols, conquered Lhasa again in 1705. He deposed the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Tshangyang Gyatsho and installed Yeshe Gyatsho as the rightful sixth Dalai Lama.

In 1709, the Manchu (Chinese ethnic group, which later introduced the Qing Dynasty) sent their first imperial representative to Lhasa. In 1720, after military intervention by Manchu and China, the 7<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, with the support of the Tibetans, was enthroned in the Potala Palace and a provisional military government under Chinese leadership was established in Lhasa. A year later, the government power in Tibet was taken over by a Council of Ministers. 1723 the Chinese garrison withdrew from Lhasa again. From 1751 to 1910, the emperors of the Manchu-Chinese Qing dynasty exercised sometimes more and more often less protection and influence over Tibet. Until 1959, the Dalai Lamas should remain both, the spiritual and political, leaders of Tibet.

### International interest from 1890 until independence

In 1890, the British empire signed the Sikkim-Tibet Treaty with representatives of Manchu China (which claimed governance over Tibet), which determined the borders between Tibet and Sikkim (India). However, the Tibetans did not like it and they opposed it by tearing out the newly set boundary stones. In 1894, the governor of the Chinese emperor in Tibet was expelled by the Dalai Lama. Manchu China described this action as an illegal secession of Tibet from China. Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama was supported in this action by Great Britain and the Manchu government could not oppose the expulsion of the governor. Three years later, the Dalai Lama was so confident in his political power that he no longer felt it necessary to consult the representatives of the Manchu emperor on the appointment of Tibetan officials.

In 1902, the Indian Viceroy Curzon saw the interests of Great Britain threatened as he suspected Russian troops and weapons in Tibet. Colonel Francis Younghusband; therefore, marched into Tibet but could never find anything like that. At that time, "The Great Game" was one of its highlights. This was the historical conflict between Great Britain and Russia over supremacy in Central Asia. Tibet tried to be neutral and isolated themselves; however, the British forced Tibet in 1904 to talks, because 3,000 British troops were entering Tibet. On the way to Lhasa, the force encountered a poorly equipped Tibetan army, which had only 1,500 men. The battle turned quickly into a massacre and most of the Tibetan soldiers were killed by the new Maxim machine guns of the British. On August 2, the British arrived in Lhasa, which was previously abandoned by the Dalai Lama, who fled to Mongolia. In the Treaty of Lhasa, which was made binding for China in 1907 by an additional agreement as well, Britain set the Tibetan borders newly and claimed trading privileges. In the same year, under pressure from France, Russia buried its disputes with Great Britain and promised to leave the borders of British India untouched. The reason for the Russian

concessions was because they were enfeebled by the lost Russo-Japanese War of 1905. Unlike Tibet, Mongolia has been able to secede from China throughout history through the protection and help of Russia.

In March 1905, the first Tibetan uprising occurred, killing many Manchu officials and two Catholic priests. In response, 2,000 Manchu soldiers marched into the area, executed Tibetan officials and setting fire to a monastery.

In September 1908, the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has visited Beijing and afterwards he was denied the return to Tibet. He had to wait until 1909, but at the same time, Chinese General Zhao Erfeng invaded Tibet with an additional 2,000 troops. He established tyranny throughout much of Tibet and laying the foundations for the military occupation of Tibet in 1910. As a result, the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama had to flee to India. A year later, following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in China, Chinese garrisons stationed in Tibet were moved back to China.

### Independence of Tibet

In February 1912, the Chinese Republic was proclaimed. Although Tibet was declared a province of China, the Dalai Lama proclaimed independence in June and returned to Lhasa in 1913.

The British-Tibetan-Chinese Agreement, which wanted to clarify China's sovereignty over parts of Tibet and the autonomy of "Outer Tibet", was completed in 1914. However, China did not ratify this agreement and claimed its sovereignty over the whole Tibet again. Therefore, Britain and Tibet negotiated without China regarding the border between India and Tibet. Britain received Tibetan territory and annexed it to India.

The continued civil war in China after the capitulation of Japan in 1945 caused great concerns in Tibet. In response, all Chinese officials in the Tibet were expelled and their own army upgraded. An appeal to the governments of Britain, India and the US in 1949 was unsuccessful so that Tibet was politically isolated.

### End of independence

The Communists won the civil war in China and proclaimed 1949 the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Chinese People's Liberation Army directly occupied large parts of the Tibetan province of Amdo. Amdo is a northeastern Tibetan region that is divided today by the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan.

On 7 March 1950, a Tibetan government delegation arrived in India to open a dialogue with the newly declared People's Republic of China and to ensure that the PRC will respect Tibet's territorial integrity. The dialogue was delayed by a debate between the Delegation of Tibet, India, the United Kingdom and the PRC on the location of the talks. On September 16, 1950, the Tibetan delegation finally met with the General Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Delhi. The ambassador announced a three-point proposal that Tibet should be considered as a part of China's responsibility for defending Tibet, as well as for Tibet's trade and foreign relations. There were two options: the assumption would lead to a "peaceful liberation" of Tibet and the rejection would lead to a war.

The Tibetans pledged to maintain and deepen the relationship between China and Tibet, to consider China as a teacher and patron. On the other side, Tibet stressed that there is no need for Chinese troops in Tibet because there is nothing to fear about. Nevertheless, Mao had long had his own plans and instructed his generals and the high command in a telegram from Moscow to occupy Tibet. In October 1950, 40,000 soldiers of the People's Liberation Army invaded eastern Tibet and liquidated 5,000 Tibetan soldiers. This lost battle resulted in the entire Tibetan army surrendering. On October 21, Lhasa instructed a delegation to go to Beijing immediately to consult with the Communist government and accept the three-point plan if the status of the Dalai Lama could be guaranteed. As a result, the Seventeen-Point agreement was signed under duress with the newly formed government of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. This agreement affirmed the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China over Tibet but granted autonomy and freedom of worship. The Dalai Lama himself later stated that he had only agreed to the agreement in order to protect his people and the country from total destruction. In September 1954, he was elected a deputy and then deputy chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Who would have thought that?

Increasingly, Chinese civilian authorities and military authorities have been deployed in Tibet, and from 1958 there have been growing tensions between Mao and the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama has had and has a strong following among Tibetans, as many people regard him as their only leader, not only from a political point of view but also from a spiritual point of view. Although the Chinese government guaranteed cultural and religious sovereignty in an agreement; reprisals, oppression and prohibitions increased in Tibet. At the beginning of March 1959 rumours spread that the arrest of the still very young 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was imminent. For this reason, on March 10, 1959, around 30,000 Tibetans surrounded the Norbulingka Palace, which served as the Summer Palace, to form a human shield for the foremost spiritual leader. On March 15, 3,000 bodyguards of the Dalai Lama left the palace and took up a position on a prepared escape route. At 4:00 pm on March 17, the Chinese People's Liberation Army fired two mortar shells at Norbulingka. This made clear that the Chinese government really wanted to turn off the Dalai Lama. At 10 pm on the same evening, the Dalai Lama, disguised as a simple farm labourer, left Norbulingka Palace and Tibet. Until now he had no chance to return. On March 21, the occupiers fired 800 shells at Norbulingka. Thousands of men, women and children who were still around the palace walls were killed; Tens of thousands fled to India. In the end, the palace was in ruins. After the Dalai Lama's government fled to Dharamsala, India in 1959, during the Tibetan rebellion, they established an exile government. According to Chinese sources, the People's Liberation Army killed 86,000 Tibetans in this uprising. After that, the Central People's Government in Beijing renounced the agreements of the 17-point agreement.

### Tibet under Chinese rule

During Mao's "Great Leap Forward" campaign (1958-1961), between 200,000 and 1 million Tibetans died, and about 6,000 monasteries were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), destroying the vast majority of historic Tibetan architecture. More and more monks and opponents of the regime were persecuted, tortured and executed. Estimates assume another 100,000 to 200,000 deaths. The people's communes established during and after the Cultural Revolution of 1966, in which many Tibetans had to live compulsorily, were dissolved after Mao's death and the inhabitants were able to return home. Under

Chinese supervision, a revival of Tibetan Buddhist traditions has since been tolerated. Monasteries were rebuilt.

In 1980, Secretary-General and Reformer Hu Yaobang visited Tibet and initiated a phase of social, political and economic liberalization. However, at the end of the decade, against the background of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the monks in Drepung and Sera Monasteries began to protest for independence, and the government stopped reforming and launched an anti-separatist campaign. Human rights organizations have repeatedly criticized the attitude of Chinese governments in Beijing and Lhasa regarding human rights in the region as they spoke out on the violent crackdown on protests in monasteries and Tibetan cities, most recently in the Tibet unrest in 2008.

**Well, after this little digression, does Tibet belong to China or not?**

#### *The view of the Tibetan government in exile*

The Tibetan government in exile believes that at the time of the invasion by the People's Liberation Army, Tibet was an independent and fully functioning state and that the military invasion and ongoing occupation is violating international law and the right to self-determination. It should also be emphasized that Tibet has not been an integral part of China for 700 years, as the People's Republic of China likes to say. Tibet has only been under the influence of the Mongols or Manchu for a short time, but never under the influence of the Han Chinese. Moreover, Tibet has been in diplomatic relations with other nations, like Nepal since 1856, Russia since 1898 and Britain since 1903.

The 17-point agreement, also known as the "Tibet Peaceful Liberation Agreement", is invalid in the Tibetan view because it was only signed by Tibetan delegates as a result of China's military pressure. Furthermore, China is accused of disregarding the domestic autonomy and religious freedom guaranteed by the agreement.

On September 22, 1987, Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatsho made a proposal for rapprochement with China in the form of a five-point peace plan.

1. Transformation of the whole of Tibet into a zone of peace;
2. Abandonment of China's population transfer policy which threatens the very existence of the Tibetans as a people;
3. Respect for the Tibetan people's fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms;
4. Restoration and protection of Tibet's natural environment and the abandonment of China's use of Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and dumping of nuclear waste;
5. Commencement of earnest negotiations on the future status of Tibet and of relations between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples.

The Chinese government rejected the plan.

### *The view of the Chinese government*

From the point of view of the mainland government, Tibet has been an integral part of China for 700 years. According to pro-government historians, Songtsen Gampo's wedding with the Chinese Princess Wen Cheng in the 7<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of China's cultural hegemony over Tibet. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Tibet had become an administratively indivisible part of China, although, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century a Mongolian, so no Chinese foreign domination over Tibet began. Later on, the colonial power Britain had a military presence in China and supported the secession of Tibet politically, forcing the Chinese government to hold still. The Declaration of Independence of 1913, according to the Chinese government, has never been effective under international law because it has never been recognized by either China or any other state. By repressing Tibet's foreign influence (1950) and the conclusion of the 17-point agreement (1951), the traditional unity between China and Tibet had been restored.

The Dalai Lama's 5-point plan was rejected by the Chinese government because it would be widening the gap between China and Tibet. China also accuses the Dalai Lama of being a political exile who wants to see China shattered and divided. A dialogue with the Dalai Lama is only possible for the Chinese government when he renounces the pursuit of the so-called independence of Tibet. In order to do so, he must publicly and clearly declare Tibet and Taiwan as inseparable parts of the Chinese territory and that the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate government! In addition, he should commit to cease all activities to divide the Chinese motherland.

After these digressions you can get an idea of the two sides of the same coin and after some more research or even trips to China and Tibet, you can forge your own opinion regarding this topic. I have forged my opinion and speaking about it with a Chinese person is difficult. *"The unfortunate thing is that the Chinese are through and through, totally emotional about Tibet"*, says Paul Harris, an expert at Hong Kong Lingnan University. Behind them are diffuse fears and concrete fears: *"They do not want to set a precedent"*, says Harris. Because if Tibet can assert itself even with the slightest demand, other provinces also threaten to draw courage: the predominantly Muslim province of Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia, for example.

## Our journey

On a Wednesday evening in November 2017, we flew from Shanghai to Xining, in the Qinghai province (until 1928 the Amdo region which was a northeastern Tibetan region). For the almost 2000km we flew under 4 hours and landed at 23.20 o'clock. On the way, we already saw many snow-covered landscapes and when landing approached Xining looked like a "mini Las Vegas", the center bright and colourfully lit, located in the middle of nowhere. A driver picked us up and drove us to the hotel in the city center. With 2.5 million inhabitants, Xining is the fourth smallest provincial capital in China. Xining is already located at 2275m and we all had the feeling that we felt the thinner air. When we were moving and walking around, we were directly a bit breathe short. Furthermore, we only had -4 degrees, but the rooms of the simple hotel were warm.

## Xining

After a simple Chinese breakfast in the unheated hotel restaurant, the driver and our guide picked us up at 8 o'clock. The train to Lhasa was planned for leave at 2 pm, so we still had enough time to visit a Tibetan temple complex. We drove to the Kumbum Monastery, the "100,000 enlightening bodies of the Buddha", which dates back to the Ming Dynasty (1560) and is one of the six major monasteries of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. They are the ones who wear yellow hats, as well as the Damai Lama. The monastery is located about 40 kilometres southwest of Xining.

### *Visit the Kumbum Monastery*

Under blue skies and wonderful sunshine, we drove towards the temple complex. The air was still cold, but the sun was already warming. The architecture of the huge complex captivates with its Tibetan style elements - many individual buildings with whitewashed walls, reddish-brown roof friezes and gilded roofs. Many visitors were not there. First, we saw eight white pagodas symbolizing the eight merits of the Buddha. The colours of white and yellow are omnipresent, they represent that the Buddha's teaching last forever - like the sun and the moon. The central building is the "Golden Tiled Temple", which according to legend, is said to be located exactly where Tsongkhapa was born. He was a great reformer, from whose teaching later the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism emerged. It is the newest of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug).

The cultural and artistic treasures are immense at this Monastery. A curiosity are the butter sculptures, which are formed and carved by the monks under cold water. See that Tibet offers little opportunity to grow fruits or flowers in order to sacrifice them for Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, people started to sacrificed Yak butter which is sculpted artfully. Another peculiarity of the Tibetan orientation of Buddhism is that most Tibetan Buddhists are not vegetarians. They eat yak meat and sometimes fish (only in a few regions). There's a reason for that is the barren landscape of Tibet that does not provide enough vegetarian food.

### *The Yak*

The yak can tolerate extreme climatic conditions and with the reduced food supply of the Tibetan Plateau in Inner Asia these animals get along well. Temperatures down to -40 degrees are no problem for the animals; however, they can not handle temperatures of over 20 degrees as this is too warm for them. In large areas of Tibet rural lifestyles are mostly only possible because of the yaks. Accordingly, the yak has great importance in nutrition. It provides milk, meat, leather, hair and wool. Its dung is used as fuel, as there is often no wood in the plateau. As before, the yak is still used as a pack and riding the animal.

Yak meat is similar to beef but has a slightly lower energy content. The meat is coarse-grained and has a low content of intracellular stored fat. It is deep red, as it has a high myoglobin content. It is also rich in iron and zinc. The fat contains on average 19mg carotene per kilogram. This is significantly higher compared with beef fat, which contains only 7 mg carotene. This is why yak fat is much yellower. A female yak, which is actually called Bri, gives about 400 litres of milk a year. This is a small amount compared to domestic cattle or water buffalos. However, the fat content of the milk is high; it fluctuates between 5 and 8.6 percent over the course of a lactation period. Raw cow's milk, on the other hand, has a fat content of about five percent. Yak milk; therefore, has an energy content of approx. 871 kcal, whereas the comparable value for cow's milk is approx. 640 kcal.

### *Pilgrims and prayers*

Then we suddenly saw the first pilgrims, who took a step and then threw themselves down, moved their arms in a semicircle, got up again, took another step and threw themselves down again. This happens for countless miles. Most of them have a big leather apron, arm covers and wooden blocks in their hands. Without this assistive equipment, the pilgrims and their clothes would suffer to fast. It has already become clear to us how deeply religious most Tibetans are and that the everyday life of most Tibetans is determined by their religion. Of central importance is the Bodhi tree - Buddhists call the popular fig "tree of the spiritual awakening " because according to deliverances Buddha has meditated under such a tree and found enlightenment. Here grew such a tree and one day on all 100,000 leaves the image of Buddha appeared. According to this, people must repeat a prayer 100,000 times to Buddha so he will fulfill a wish. That means prostrating and praying 100,000 times.

### *Prayer wheels*

There were believers everywhere in the temple, staying at a particular place and threw themselves on the ground and repeated their prayers as well. The prayer wheels were also becoming a more common sight. They could be found everywhere in the temple in different shapes and forms. The smaller ones were the hand prayer wheels, which were tirelessly turned by Tibetans in their hand. These wheels contain printed prayers and mantras - a sacred syllable, a sacred word or a holy verse. In Tibetan Buddhism, prayer wheels are used to connect physical activity and spiritual-spiritual content. It is intended to give illiterates the opportunity to acquire positive karma because of spinning the prayer wheels and this will have much the same meritorious effect as orally reciting the prayers. A further motivation of this practice is also to

visualize in the rotation of the prayer wheel, that all the mantras contained in it radiate to all sentient beings, thereby eliminating their suffering and dissolving their evil karma.

### The first propaganda against Tibetans

Sadly, in the temple, we quickly noticed how derogatory the Chinese Guide was talking about the Tibetan culture, the faithful people and especially the monks. It turned to be a Chinese party propaganda tour through the temple and we just nodded it off and thought our part. *"The monks are all rich people,"* it was said, *"who are only in the temple to exclude people and thereby always buy the latest iPhone."* Moreover, he explained to us *"that The Dalai Lama is a slave owner and a criminal."* So, it went on during the whole tour in Xining. When we were drinking milk tea, the guide even claimed with a derogatory undertone, they would not drink sweet milk tea in Qinghai. Only Tibetans drink it sweet because England made them addicted to sugar. (As far as we can tell after our investigations, in the rest of mainland China, every Chinese loves to drink sweet milk tea ...) As you can see, somehow the guide found something to complain about everything that had something to do with Tibet. Why is someone like this a guide? We were looking forward that a new guide was waiting for us in Lhasa!

After the temple visit, we went through the attached village, my wife bought a large loaf of bread from a local for the train ride. The old lady was very grateful that we as foreigners bought some bread from her. After that, we entered a small cafe and ordered the aforementioned milk tea, which was not sweet but salty. Approximately 2 litres were served for 7 CAD. Already in the preparations, I read that one should not approach this "tea" as a normal tea but consider this more like a broth. The same applies to the legendary butter tea in Tibet itself, which is made from yak butter. In Tibet, it is as important as for many Europeans the coffee. For butter tea, the tea leaves are cooked for up to half a day, then the hot tea is poured into a churn whisk with salted yak butter, creating a greasy emulsion. So, not thinking of fruit tea, but rather of a "soup" and that was a great idea to get used to it! It reminded me of an asparagus cream soup (vaguely) and my wife and I fell in love with this drink directly. Our friend Max thought it was ok, but his girlfriend was not that convinced about it.

Drinking butter tea is an integral part of Tibetan life. Before working, a Tibetan usually enjoys several bowls of this tea. Since butter is the main ingredient, butter tea provides plenty of calorie-rich energy and is particularly suitable for high altitudes. It is even said that it helps against altitude sickness. The butter can also help to prevent brittle lips that can occur here quickly. Drinking 10 cups of it is not uncommon in Tibet. Since we could not drink the 2 litres, we took a part of it in the thermos bottle of my wife.

## The train journey

Back in Xining, we went to a large supermarket, where we stocked up on provisions for the 22-hour train ride. We were advised by the guide not to buy instant noodles, as we would be in a short time at an altitude where the water is already boiling, but not as hot as in the lowlands, so that the noodles will not boil properly.

Upon entering the train station our special travel permit was checked and when we were entering the train, they checked it again and we were allowed to board. 1956km of rails were laying ahead of us. The track has several world records: With a peak of 5072 meters, it is the highest railway on Earth (255m higher than the Peruvian Central Railway) and the new Guanjiao Tunnel is with 32.6km the longest railway tunnel of the Chinese rail network. It is also home to the highest railway station in the world (Tanggula, at 5068 meters) and the highest tunnel in the world (at 4905 meters). There are 675 bridges and about 550 km of track is laid on permafrost.

Before departure, we had to fill out a document that we are aware of the level and risk of lung disease and that we are physically and mentally healthy and that we will not hold the Chinese Railways liable in the case of an emergency. Medical staff should always be present on these trains, but we never saw someone. The trains each accommodate up to 930 travellers. However, we were in the offseason here, so that only a small part of the cabins was occupied. The train usually carries a first-class sleeping car (so-called "soft sleeper" car), a dining car and a wagon cargo. Half of the carriage consists of a 2nd class sleeping wagon and seating wagon. An electronic display in the carriage shows the current altitude and the speed of the train. There are central sinks and a squat toilet per carriage. Also, hot water dispenser can be found everywhere.

- Soft Sleeper: Four-bed compartment (two bunk beds) with oxygen connection at one end of the bed, a small screen at the other end, a reading light, a central table and a compartment door. (We were staying in one of these).
- Hard Sleeper: Six-bed compartment (two three-bunk beds) with narrower beds and outlets only in the hallway and no compartment doors.
- Seat: Seating in a 2 + 3 arrangement.

On an altitude of about 3000 meters, the oxygen connections are switched on, which in addition inflate oxygen into the corridor and the compartments, which reduces the risk of altitude sickness. In addition, we got small oxygen masks, which we could plug in at the bed so that everyone can breathe more oxygen if necessary.

The country quickly became very flat, but the train rose slowly but steadily. After 781km we reached Golmund at 9 pm. The Golmud-Lhasa section of 1,142km was built last. It was the section with the greatest technical challenges. After five years of construction, the Lhasa Railway started operation on July 1, 2006. Technically, especially the upper section of the railway between Golmud and Lhasa is a peculiarity, as a quarter of the route was built on permafrost soil. This soil thaws superficially in summer, without being

stabilized by vegetation. Moreover, the water can not seep into the deeper soil, which remains frozen in depth. Consequently, a layer of mud forms on the surface, into which the superstructure sinks. For this reason, various techniques have been developed to prevent thawing. At critical sections, sealed steel tubes were lowered into the ground, filled with a certain amount of ammonia, which cools the surrounding soil. Too warm soil brings the liquid ammonia - stored in the tube below - to evaporate, light ammonia gas rises in the tube and condenses at higher points of the tube, which are cooled by colder air. From there, liquefied refrigerant trickles down again. Since the heavier liquid ammonia can only run down, heat from this heat pipe can only be transported upwards, so the bottom will cool down. 10,000 of such ammonia-based heat exchangers were installed. Another way to stabilize the track is a special form of a superstructure. The three-meter-high railway embankment was built of roughly hewn, head-sized pieces of stone that were stacked without mortar. The steady wind of the plateau blows through the cracks, dissipates the radiated heat of the sun and thus keeps the ground cold.

Shortly after 5 o'clock in the morning, according to the conductress, the train should reach the highest train station in the world, Tanggula at 5068m. Of course, we did not want to miss that and set our alarm to 4.40am. The night was different for each of us. My wife was able to sleep very well, I was always awake and had to go to the bathroom constantly because I have read that drink a lot lowers the risk of altitude sickness. The reason for this is that people lose more water at high altitudes due to the very dry air. At night, I often looked out the window and at some point, I saw beautiful snowy landscapes. In between, I felt a bit tired and plugged in the oxygen mask and then I could sleep well again. Then the alarm clock woke us up and we all prepared for the quick stop. The outside temperature was several degrees under zero - anyway, we just wanted to get out for a short time and take a picture at Tanggula. Along stopover is not scheduled there anyway, because although it is a "rain station", there are no possibilities for passengers to get in or out... Does it then deserve the name of a train station? Well, we'll see it, we thought. But when it was 5.15am and no stop in sight, I got up and went to the intermediate compartment. There I saw that we were already descending because we were only at 4800m. Well, apparently the station was not approached, and we got up in vain. So, everyone is back in bed and around 7 o'clock I got up again. After the morning toilet, the sun slowly rises behind the high mountains. Outside, a breathtaking high plateau opened up. We drove through a sprawling high valley (over 4500m) and right and left certainly 5000-7000m high mountains ranges out so that the sun took some time to appear.

In Nagqu, we made our last stop before Lhasa - at 4526m. The average temperature in July is 5.7 °C, in January it is -17.3 °C. In addition, it hardly rains. Now it becomes clear that the small black dots we could see everywhere to the right and to the left of the tracks are yak herds because trees or fields are not possible up here. At the last two train stations, a lot of Tibetans have boarded the train. They look completely different than the Han Chinese, I said. The dark and leathery skin of the alpine sun, the traditional clothing and facial features are more reminiscent of First Nations from South America than Asians. More and more curious eyes strayed into our compartment. The people looked very friendly, smiled a lot and one or the other also asked for a picture with us. Our first meeting with Tibetans was a wonderful experience.

## Arriving Lhasa

At 11.10 am we arrived at over 3600m in the legendary Lhasa. The sun was shining and when we wanted to leave the station, we realized that only the Chinese could leave the station directly. We foreigners, but also the Tibetans, had to go through a separate exit and from there directly to a control barrack where our travel documents were checked in greater detail. We got our passports back and were a bit lost because no one told us what to do or where to go. Should we go now or not? The officer was suddenly gone, so we stood a bit helpless in this barrack. We did not want to do anything wrong, because the Chinese security forces and officials are said to be much stricter here in Tibet. In the end, we were able to leave the station area. At the exit, our Tibetan guide Tobgyel and new driver were already waiting for us. We were greeted with white scarves, the so-called khata, which were then put on our shoulders. It is a symbol of the pure heart of the donor and expresses the desire for happiness and goodwill as well as compassion for the recipient.

Our hotel was right in the center of Lhasa and on the way, we saw the mighty and impressive Potala Palace for the first time. The meaning of the name Lhasa is today usually translated with "place of the gods". After 1950, the population and urban area of Lhasa grew by leaps and bounds. By 1950, only 20,000 to 25,000 people lived in the city in front of the Potala Palace and around 15,000 to 20,000 monks in the surrounding monasteries. Today there are nearly 475,000 people living in the wider area. Of these, about 70% are Tibetans and already 30% Chinese.

On the way to the hotel, Tobgyel instructed us how to deal with the altitude. In the hotel, we should lie down first, sleep a bit and relax. We should wait until the afternoon to take a shower and then not too hot and not too long, as this could possibly cause circulatory collapse. Also, we should go slower, take it easy tonight and drink no alcohol. For safety, we got oxygen bottles in our hotel room and Tobgyel handed us some more for extra safety. We learned that we were allowed to move freely in the inner-city, but we can't enter temples without the presence of a guide. Furthermore, he discussed with us the other days and suggested some changes to the itinerary, so that we could experience this or that better. Of course, we agreed, since he is the expert here.

The hotel received us with a blackout, which was fixed in the afternoon. At the reception, I noticed three pictures of Tibetan monks. Each picture had a white scarf around the frame. Then, on the other side, I noticed a picture of the leaders of the Communist Party. These are depicting Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. These posters are set to replace those of the Dalai Lama in Tibetan homes. Also around this picture hung a white scarf.

We got great and spacious rooms facing south, with a great view of up to 5500m high mountains. We followed the instructions and my wife, and I was fine. Our heads were a bit throbbing and we had both a very dry nose, but otherwise, quite fit. Our friends felt the impact stronger. Nevertheless, we met on the roof terrace of the hotel and enjoyed the great view of the city. Then we moved relaxed into the historic center, which was only 10 minutes walk from the hotel. We noticed for the first time that the police and military presence in Lhasa is enormous. On almost every street corner we saw heavily armed security forces, sometimes even armoured vehicles. Each temple has a military post at the entrance. The city center is paved with police stations and security cameras. As a foreigner, you should never take photographs of

equipment, vehicles or persons connected with military or police. This can lead to the immediate collection of the camera and one even has to face deportation! When entering the city center, a public building or temple, people need to go through checkpoints to pass security checks. In addition, one should avoid addressing locals on political issues or speaking about the Dalai Lama.

Our destination was the Barkhor street, an approximately 800-meter prayer path that leads around Jokhang Monastery in Lhasa's center. Most of the Tibetans consider this temple as the most sacred and important temple in Tibet, to which one should pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime. The prayer path, paved with hand-polished slabs, is lined with well-preserved old buildings. In the shops on both sides of the Barkhor street, offer Tibetan arts and crafts products, but also a lot of tacks. The inner pilgrim route (Nangkhor) is located inside the Jokhang Monastery around the main hall, Barkhor street is the middle prayer path, and the outer Lingkhor circumnavigation path leads around the city of Lhasa. The first Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo built the Jokhang Temple in 647. Because of its splendour, it quickly attracted thousands of Buddhist pilgrims, thus creating a path that laid the foundation stone of Barkhor street. Out of it, this area developed itself more and more to the commercial center of the city. During the 1959 uprising, the People's Liberation Army had the order not to damage the temple, but during the Cultural Revolution, the Jokhang was looted and eventually used as Red Guards' headquarters and guesthouse and movie theatre.

Today many pilgrims walk clockwise in the Barkhor street, around and in the temple. Small and crowded streets lead to this central point in Lhasa, but access is blocked on all sides by Chinese checkpoints. Only by scanning the ID card and another security check people get access. I felt mentally moved back to Jerusalem. As we waited in line to get checked, I noticed one Chinese security guard making fun of the Tibetans over and over again. He made grimaces when he was checking the Tibetan IDs. I could see that he felt very sublime and superior.

There was an exciting and interesting crowd on Barkhor street. The mood of the Tibetans was much calmer as before the checkpoint. Hundreds of Tibetans trotted relaxed along the street in a clockwise direction. Again, and again pilgrims, who prostrated themselves in a monotonous rhythm and got up again. The temple in the center, with its sun-gleaming roofs and the historic buildings around it, we immediately felt transported to a bygone era. We had not seen many foreigners so far, so we were already a little bit special for many locals. As soon as one of us smiled at a Tibetan, one got the deepest heartfelt smile back. Rarely seen such powerful joy in people. Apparently, I had a special connection to the Tibetans, because I was regularly asked for pictures. We went around the temple and open ourselves to the atmosphere here. But I also quickly noticed that security forces were positioned on the roofs on all street corners. They over watched everything very suspiciously and even filmed with handheld cameras deliberately. We arrived at the Makye Ame Lhasa Restaurant, which is one of the more popular restaurants in Lhasa. It has a very rustic-style and the attentive service staff did a good job. The rest of the guests were mostly Chinese tourists. So, we used as a Lingua Franca Chinese, because here more people understood it compared to English - even if we felt weird to use Chinese here. The food was not bad, but not very cheap and the portions were also quite small. We ordered yak bratwurst, momos (these are Tibetan dumplings, which are similar to Italian ravioli, Chinese jiaozi or Russian pelmeni). After an evening walk through the old town,

we went back to the hotel. On our way, our friend Max pointed out that he felt we were being watched or even persecuted. I can not prove that, but I do not think it's impossible because Tibet turned into a surveillance state - much worse than the rest of China. Chinese Communist Party official Chen Quanguo first developed it in Tibet and is now being used in Xinjiang against the ethnic Uyghurs and Kazakhs.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> day in Lhasa

At 4.30am my night was over, and I could not sleep anymore. I had a slight headache. It felt like having a handover without drinking alcohol. At some point, I got up and started watching the slow sunrise. The sun was also here relatively late rising, because of the high mountains. Another reason was our location. Lhasa is at a similar level as Bangladesh, but we still had Beijing Time (China Standard Time). The countries on the same longitude are already -2 hours. Well, if it's here at 8 o'clock, it's only 6 o'clock in Bangladesh.

The night for our friends, in contrast, was a disaster. Nausea, strong headache and vomiting. The altitude sickness had pretty much hurt both of them.

The hotel breakfast was a mix of Tibetan/Western and especially Chinese food. There were toast, butter and a sort of cheese, fried eggs, chilli beans, seaweed salad, bok choy, crispy chicken strips and Tsampa. It is the simplest Tibetan meal, which is not just a travel snack but also eaten for breakfast most of the time. It is made from roasted barley flour and hot butter tea and then formed into dough balls or eaten as a porridge. Tibetan monks at the next table had only Tsampa.

Tobgyel picked us up. Today was the plan to visit two major monasteries around Lhasa. First, we drove to the Drepung monastery, which is 10km west of Lhasa. It is the largest monastery in Tibet and belongs to the Gelug School. Before the Potala Palace was completed, it was the seat of the Dalai Lama. An imposing structure that stretches from a valley up a mountain. Before 1959, Drepung had more than 10,000 monks and owned 186 manors, with about 20,000 serfs, 300 pasture areas and 16,000 shepherds. Wait, did I write serfs?!

The historic Tibetan state conserved a social system reminiscent of the European Middle Ages, headed by the Dalai Lama as the supreme temporal and spiritual authority. The political, cultural and social life was determined by the Buddhist religion and the clergy, which essentially represented the political and social power factors. The country's economy was purely agricultural, and the rural population was in a feudal relationship with the state, monasteries and landowners. Modern infrastructure and foreign affairs relationships were minimal, although the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatsho, who ruled until his death in 1933, was trying to cautiously modernize the country. Bhutan showed similar structures, occurrences and developments in its history and transformed in the last decades into a modern state without an invasion.

Today, 300 monks are allowed to live here at the Drepung monastery. The number of monks per monastery is controlled by the Chinese state. In addition, it requires Chinese approval who may become a monk.

West of the monastery there were everywhere rock paintings of Tibetan monks, but we also noticed everywhere painted "ladders", which were partially crossed with white paint. We learned that these ladders were painted by followers of the Bon religion, who claim by these actions sacred places for themselves. Consequently, one religion overpaints the other in those places at regular intervals. The Bon (in English: truth, reality, true doctrine) was the dominant religion in Tibet before the establishment of Buddhism as a state religion in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Bon and Buddhism influenced each other strongly. The Bon includes many ritual and shamanistic elements as well as own Bon deities. In 1977, the Dalai Lama

recognized Bon as the fifth spiritual school in Tibet. Since then, two representatives of the Bon have been members of the Tibetan exile parliament, as well as one representative for each of the other four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

While exploring the complex we had to overcome the first elevation gains and we noticed the thin air very quickly, so we started everything a lot more slowly and breathed consciously.

## Buddhism

The basis of Buddhist practice and theory are the Four Noble Truths: The First Noble Truth is that life is usually marked by suffering over birth, old age, illness and death; the Second Noble Truth, is that this suffering is caused by the three mind-poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion; The Third Noble Truth, is that future suffering cannot arise through the avoidance of these causes, or that happiness results from this avoidance, and the Fourth Noble Truth, is the means for the avoidance of suffering, and thus for the creation of happiness by following the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to liberation in the form of nirvana. Noble Eightfold Path consists in the right cognition, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right exercise, right mindfulness and right meditation. According to Buddhist teachings, all unenlightened beings are subject to an endless, painful cycle of birth and rebirth. The aim of the Buddhist practice is to emerge from this cycle of everlasting state of suffering. This can be achieved through the avoidance of suffering, that is, ethical behaviour, the cultivation of virtues, the practice of "contemplation/meditation" and the development of compassion for all beings and all-embracing wisdom. In this way, suffering and imperfection are overcome, and through enlightenment/awakening, the state of nirvana, the lack of happiness or the state of happiness is realized.

Under the glorious, bright sun we went to the main square of the complex and were able to watch Tibetan monks debating. The debate is an important part of Tibetan Buddhism and for the monks. In this way, knowledge is learned and consolidated, but also the monks prepare for exams, which are then also held in such a debate. The goal is to become a Geshe. A Geshe has studied the knowledge of Buddhism and is a specialist in logic, texts, rituals and correct procedures; therefore, they are considered the guardians of Buddhist knowledge. The Geshe degree ends with one of four Geshe grades (Dorampa, Lingtse, Tsorampa, and Lharampa), the highest of them is the Geshe Lharampa title. The education for this highest degree lasts about 20 years and is awarded after a series of annual exams, where the candidates must show their ability to dialectical debate on all areas of Buddhist theology and philosophy.

For this traditionally six departments of the study are passed through:

- The teachings of transcendent wisdom (Prajnaparamita)
- The teachings of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka)
- The Buddhist Logic (Pramana)
- The teachings of discipline (Vinaya)
- The teachings of higher knowledge (Abhidharma)

The monks sat opposite to each other in two separate blocks. In the middle of these two blocks sat two candidates, and six monks stood in front of them and asked questions to them. Debating in our sense is different from the Buddhist debating because the process is as follows. The interviewee/examinee sits on the floor. The questioner asks a question and claps in the direction of the interviewee who has to answer the question immediately after the clapping. We really enjoyed this interesting happening. Moreover, we were stunned by the wonderful great view from this terraced place down to the valley of Lhasa. After the end of the "debate", we visited more parts of the monastery, among others the monastery kitchen. There, in a corner, we saw a monk taking money from visitors and then writing something down in a huge book. In Buddhism, one can receive better karma through offerings and also by donating money. Either people sacrifice it in the temple at statues or in the kitchen of the monastery. Here the donors can add a purpose for their donation. Either for the preservation of the monastery or just for the purchase of food.

Most of the time we were not allowed to take pictures inside the buildings. The strong smell of yak butter was a constant companion in the buildings. It was sacrificed on a large scale by the visitors. In Thermos jugs they brought warm liquified yak butter with them and poured it on a grand scale in dedicated huge yak butter chandeliers which were burning. We entered the large assembly hall where the 300 monks could easily sit down. The older ones attuned to an impressive laryngeal song and waited for their butter tea, nimbly brought by the novices in large jugs.

Everywhere we saw sacred pictures and statues as well as a lot of "sob-stuff" which is beloved by many people in Buddhism. Of course, the mountains of sacrificed money could be found everywhere. Usually, very small bank notes (1 yuan = 20 cents or 5 Mao = 10 cents) were sacrificed. I also saw poor people who evidently had little or no money who took "already" sacrificed money and sacrificed it again. This way even the poor people could receive better karma. Karma means "action, work or deed" and refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect to the phenomena of the world (greed, hatred, ego-addiction). Karma refers to all doing and acting as well as all levels of thinking and feeling. All of this produces either good or bad karma or can be karmically neutral. Good as well as bad karma produces the consequence of the rebirths. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to escape this cycle, this is called the entrance to Nirvana. Since this goal in the history of Buddhism is often considered to be unattainable in life, it is, especially among the laity, more about accumulating good karma than about achieving nirvana in this life. Coupled with this is the belief that good karma (through good deeds, temporary or full entry into a monastery, donations to monks, copying sutras and much more) can also be given ritually to others, even to the dead or whole nations. Nevertheless, it was very strange to see Chinese money everywhere in this place. Especially, because Mao's head was everywhere on the money. Mao certainly had not imagined that.

The once private premises of the Dalai Lama were cozy through the wood panelling, but also very simple and the dimensions were modestly small. Due to the very steep and narrow wooden stairs inside the building, monks either have to be fit enough until old age or one day they simply will not go downstairs anymore and always stay up there or never go up again.

Outside, we explored the monastery a little bit more, which also housed many dogs that lay perfectly relaxed in the wonderful sun. On our tour, I noticed two high-ranking officers (a colonel and a brigadier

general) of the Chinese army, who received a private tour from a Chinese guide. "Know Your Enemy" is a saying derived from Sun Tzu's The Art of War. Has that been the case here, too?

For lunch, we went to a Nepalese restaurant. The prices on the menu were unbelievably cheap, but as it turned out, we had to pay extra for everything. So, if you ordered a curry, then only the curry and no rice or bread came with it. That explained the prices. We thought that the waitress could have pointed out this fact while picking up the order because we had ordered only the main courses. When we ordered the side dishes later, they took ages, so that the food was already cold when we got it; however, it was still very tasty.

After lunch, we drove to Sera Monastery, north of Lhasa. Sera means " Wild Roses Monastery". At the entrance, many children came to us with black stripes on their faces. Tobgyel told us that today children and young people are consecrated by monks with ashes here in the monastery. The place was busy, and a long line led away from the happening. In a small room, which was also used as a storage room, Tobgyel showed us two mandalas made of coloured sand. Mandala embodies the entire universe with heaven, earth and underworld. It serves as a visual aid in order to be able to internalize complex religious contexts by depicting gods, landscapes or signs. Of crucial importance for Mandalas made of sand is the subsequent wiping off of the works, which have been produced in hours, sometimes weeks, of work. The transience of life and the idea of deliverance from the material world should be carried out symbolically. Actually, these mandalas were only accessible to select monks, but during the Cultural Revolution they were removed from the temple and ended here in this room - accessible to everyone.

During the uprising of 1959 in Lhasa, the Sera monastery suffered severe damage. Many buildings were destroyed, and hundreds of monks killed. After the Dalai Lama was granted asylum in India, many Sera monks who survived the attack moved to India as well. After initial difficulties, they founded, with the support of the Indian government, a parallel Sera monastery in India. In 2008, about 500 monks lived here again. Three years later, according to local sources, only 300 monks were allowed anymore. The reason for this decline is due to the Tibetan turmoil of 2008 and the associated restrictions imposed by the Chinese officials.

Even today, the monastery is known for its debating monks. In a garden, we were fortunate to be able to attend this event here as well. Before entering the garden, a sign in Tibetan, Chinese and English language and pictures visually explained the rules of manners for the visitors. One should not enter the gravel bed of the garden, which was marked with a yellow line, in order not to disturb the monks. In theory so simple and in practice for many people, especially from China, an insurmountable task. Constantly people walked on the gravel bed and tried to get closer to the monks. These circumstances were well-known to the monastery and two securities were essential to maintain order. All too often, I ask myself what this kind of people think and how they can behave like a bull in a china shop. Not being aware of different customs and conventions and trying to show respect.

Back in the hotel, we relaxed and later in the evening my wife and I went to the old town again, because the altitude not only depletes us faster, it also makes us hungrier, because the body has so much more to do at this altitude that the basal metabolic rate of calories is increased. Not far from the hotel we ended

up at the Amdo Norzen Tibetan Restaurant and it turned out to be a real lucky find. We entered the small family restaurant, where a part of the family was having dinner, but as soon as we were inside, everyone jumped up and all the attention was ours. The 12-year old (probably) son of the family took over the position of the waiter who "persuaded" us to the specialty of the house, dumplings, yak in gravy and yak cheesecake. And, because we felt good, we also ordered a Lhasa beer from the highest brewery in the world. In the kitchen, lively activity began and the female family members began to sing while preparing the food. Actually, we had ordered too much when we got our orders. When the specialty of the house came, the 12-year-old, now with a chef's hat, finished it at the table. It was a boiling pot, which apparently came directly from an oven. The top layer in the pot was a freshly baked loaf of bread, hiding yak meat, potatoes, carrots, tomatoes and a spicy sauce. The boy cut everything and then served us properly from the pot. He was so happy about our praise that he was 10 centimetres taller when he was walking back into the kitchen. After this delicious meal, I was still looking for a little walk through the old town. Everything was almost deserted, but the flashing blue light of countless Chinese police stations became even more apparent in this darkness. Every 50 to 100 m was one of them. The anti-riot gear was always placed in the window or at the entrance, a statement without question.

## Potala Palace

Today, one of the main attractions was the visit to the Potala Palace. After a short drive, we had to pass through a first security check. The sun was glorious; however, it was still very cold. In front of the main gate, there was a dense crowd and many people did not understand the principle of "queuing up". Very annoying. I saw Chinese guides giving money and cigarettes to the Chinese security forces, so they could cut in line. In addition, I noticed many Tibetans who ruthlessly "pushed forward". However, our guide told us that Tibetans have a privilege to visit the palace. My first thought was: "Why not making two separate entrances so that the Tibetans do not have to squeeze through the line." How should this be here when it is the high season? There was another security check behind the main gate and finally, we were inside the walls. The palace radiated wonderfully in the sun. What a beautiful sight.

The palace is, in the east-west direction, about 350 meters long and in a north-south direction 300 meters wide. The palace was built on the 117m high Marpo Ri, the "Red Hill", in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Now, this mighty palace overlooks 300m above the flat valley of Lhasa the whole city. The complex has over 13 floors with 999 rooms, 10,000 shrines and about 200,000 statues. The palace is divided into colours:

The Red Palace (Potrang Marpo) is devoted entirely to religious study and prayer. It has some private rooms on the top floors for the Dalai Lama. Most of it consists of ceremonial and meditation halls, many smaller chapels, and libraries of important Buddhist scriptures. There are also eight tombs of some reincarnations of the Dalai Lama. The oldest one is the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, whose tomb is the most magnificent. Its stupa is 17.4 meters high and extends over three floors. About 3700 kilograms of gold were processed in this grave.

The White Palace or Potrang Karmo is the part of the Potala Palace that forms the living quarters of the Dalai Lama. Furthermore, this part contains living spaces, offices, seminar rooms, kitchens, storage rooms

and printing works. A central yellow-painted courtyard, known as Deyangshar, separates the living quarters of the Lama (secular) from those of the monks of the Red Palace. In this courtyard hang huge banners, which are embroidered with sacred symbols. These are hung during the New Year celebrations on the south side of the Potala.

We had to defeat 169 steps until we arrived at the palace itself. After a few small breaks, we finally reached the palace entrance. Tobgyel told us that during high season it is here as cattle herding because after 60 minutes the visitors have to be at the exit on the other side of the palace. Today we could spend some more time here. In the secular part of the palace we were allowed to take pictures, but in the Red Palace, it was forbidden. In the throne room, where the chair of the Dalai Lama is standing, there was clothing on the chair, which symbolizes the non-presence of the Dalai Lama. Apparently, for the Chinese regulators, this symbolism was not known, because many Tibetans prayed especially in this room more and profound. An old, already blinded Tibetan was struggling to make his way up to the last floors of the palace. Supported by the whole family, who then positioned him right in front of the religious relics, so that he could worship them. The palace is considered as one of the most important pilgrimage sites of Tibet.

We came out in the south part of the palace and we were impressed by this complex. But we were also overwhelmed by the show-off, gold and money which accumulated at the graves and deities. From a distance, the Tibetan temples and palaces seem so pure and accurate, just because of the white colour, but when you come closer to the buildings, you notice how "sloppy" the buildings were painted. Everywhere were splashes of paint. At one point I said that a German master painter is turning in one's grave. But Tobgyel told us that this white lime paint is reapplied every year to shine so beautifully in the sun. Now I understood! If I had to repaint my house every year, then I would probably do it sloppier.

The Potala Palace had withstood the turmoil of the times well, even the Cultural Revolution because the palace had to serve as accommodation for the Chinese occupation army.

As we descended, two young novices approached us and they ask if they could take pictures of us, which we affirmed. One of them was an avid amateur photographer and both were happy about the contact with us.

In the city center, we got an included lunch, which was not very good, but our guide said that the travel agency had a contract with them. The advertised "famous Tibetan restaurant" was actually just a tourist trap. In addition, Tobgyel told us that the "Tibetan travel agency" we had booked the trip with belongs to a Chinese woman who only pretends to be a Tibetan travel agency. They engage Tobgyel as a freelancer who is an independent tour guide. We were lucky that we got him because he did a very good job!

Near the restaurant was the Jokhang Temple, our next destination. Inside, many statues, shrines and again the heavy scent of yak butter candles. A famous statue of Songtsen Gampo is here. He was the King of Tibet from about 617 to 649. Under him, the Tibetans began to play a significant role in the history of Inner Asia for the first time. Under Songtsen Gampo, Buddhism also began to gain a foothold in Tibet. The visit of his statue should automatically and directly bring the pilgrims a better reincarnation. He and his wives have laid the foundation stone for this temple. He was married to a Chinese princess, which is what Chinese historians like to refer to and draw strange conclusions of it. Because these biased historians also love to

sweep under the table, that he was also married to an Indian/Nepali and a Tibetan princess. Significant until today is the position and relationship of Songtsen Gampo to the Chinese emperor because today's Chinese government would like to see if Tibet had already been a vassal state of China since then. But the bilingual inscriptions of two columns in Lhasa - one from 821 and the other one from 1794 - speak of the independence and autonomy of both countries. On the younger pillar, China's ambassador Ho Lin even confirmed that Tibet was not China's vassal state during the Tang and Song periods. Well, unfortunately, bad luck, dear China.

After visiting the temple, we turned another round on the Barkhor street. At the same time, Tobgyel told me that the shops here in the center may first be let to Chinese, who then re-lease the stores to Tibetans, of course at a higher price. Among the pilgrims, we also discovered children who did it in order to beg indirectly. My wife gave some money to a girl. An elderly Tibetan woman, who evidently had nothing to do with it, had noticed that, came up to us and thanked us for it and then went her own way.

Our friends went back to the hotel and rested, while my wife and I strolled through the city. We visited a modern supermarket and the art market hall, which was a little bit remote. My wife wanted to give Anne a prayer banner as they were blowing in the courtyard of the hotel. It is said that the wind carries the mantras on the flags and distributes them this way into the country and world. A nice idea.

For dinner, my wife and I chose the Tashi 1 restaurant at the corner of the many street "Beijing East road" and Danjielin road. We were greeted warmly and guided to the small dining room. At the next table sat a French couple and a table next to us a Tibetan family who enjoyed their butter tea. My wife ordered vegetables, vegetarian dumplings and naan bread. I ordered yak strips in cream and mushroom sauce and a yak soup. The yak meat was so delicious, I could really eat it for the rest of my life. It always reminded me of a mixture of beef and game. Delicious!

### Hiking around the Ganden Monastery

The last whole day in Tibet and we went out into the countryside. Unfortunately, our friends could not join us because they still had problems with the altitude and today it should even go up to 4,400m. Therefore, both decided to spend the day in Lhasa. The driver was already waiting for us and Tobgyel came a bit late with some bags in his hands. It was planned not only to go to the Ganden Monastery (translated: the "happy monastery") but also to visit his home village. For that, he had done some errands. His young and pretty wife came by quickly and brought even more things for his family. We had the feeling that he did not have too many opportunities to go home. Another reason why we were looking forward to today's tour.

We drove about 90 minutes to the east and stopped at a meat market in a small village. Tobgyel told us that he wanted to buy some meat for his family and that it was the freshest here. My wife and I decided to join him, and we needed to use the toilet in the bus station as well. Well, everything looked very fresh and "wild", because the heads and innards of the slaughtered animals were also lying on bloodied blankets of the salesmen. Flies cavorted everything and where everywhere. I am sure, this is nothing for many

Westerners with a faint of heart. However, this way the customer can get a better idea the freshness of the meat and estimate when the yak really was slaughtered.

We drove another 45 minutes and climbed the mountain with countless serpentines. The Ganden Monastery cuddled against the rocks and it looked breathtaking. Many visitors were not here, and the parking lot was peopled primarily with cows and strays. We decided to take the short hike first and visit the monastery afterwards. Above us, the sun was shining, and the blue sky had a fascinating dark colour. We could feel that we were here much closer to the universe than in Shanghai or Toronto. We went to the ridge and passed by a beggar, to whom our guide gave some money and they talked this, that and the other.

Right next to the monastery, almost on the ridge, is a Chinese police station. This multi-story building, which radiates so much mainland China and the Communist Party, is only there to oversee the monastery. Just in case, I guess.

We reached the ridge and a magnificent view over a huge valley, which was around 1000m below us, waiting for us. Some yaks grazed nearby, and eagles circled above us. We followed a trail that was also a pilgrim route. There was also a woman praying and tirelessly throwing herself into the dust. After a little bend, we heard vocals and met a Tibetan family, who obviously enjoyed squeezing through rock holes and cracks. According to a Tibetan folk belief, only people with a pure heart can squeeze through these natural openings. All the others would get stuck. We were invited by the family to crawl through one of these boulders as well, but we declined with thanks because it seemed sometimes very tight and even these dainty people had to press through it properly. Tobgyel dismissed that as a breeze and stupid folk belief, since size and form say nothing about the purity of a heart, and that's what Buddha is interested in. Later we overtook another group of pilgrims who also laughed and waved at us. Later, we saw them too, squeezing through crevices. What unbelievably happy people that are here despite all the oppression and distress here! Admirable! Admirable!

A little further on, ptarmigans crossed our path, and above us, more eagles and even vultures circled. A wonderful experience. Then Tobgyel showed us a stone with a portrait of Buddha carved in it and it was not made by "human hands". Full of conviction, he told us that this was a miracle because the image was created by mother nature. Well, we nodded that off. Because of these natural Buddha images, the mountain is considered sacred, he said. However, the Bon religion claimed this mountain for itself as well; therefore, natural Buddha images and partially crossed out white ladders alternated along our path. Again and again, small Buddhist altars stood on the wayside, in which stones were piled up. In some altars, birds threw out the stones in search of sparkling objects and food. We saw that Tobgyel always restored these stone pillars that had been destroyed under the birds' claws. So, we recreated them as well.

We passed a brushwood seller. Tobgyel talked to him in a kind of self-taught sign language and my wife's interest was aroused. We learned that the man was deaf and hard-of-hearing and had only rudimentary language skills. His brother and his wife had died and now he backs his nephews and nieces. To do so he sells small twigs and gets paid for small tasks in the monastery. Next to this man was a sacrificial altar in which a fire was burning. Tobgyel bought a clump of brushwood and barley flour and threw it in the fire

as scarification. We copied him and bought some of the stuff because we wanted to support this man a little bit. On the way back to the monastery, my wife asked Tobgyel about the hearing aid care/supply in Tibet and she learned that it does not exist. Those who can afford to travel to China can get them there. However, only a few Tibetans are getting these permits and for most of them leaving Tibet is too expensive. To get a passport as a Tibetan to travel abroad is nearly impossible and from time to time even the few with a passport are not allowed to leave China. At the moment China deprived again Tibetans to leave China. This is one of the most painful reprisals Tibetans suffer, Tobgyel told us. It was the first time for my wife that she was in a country where there is no system for the supply of hearing aids, not even aid projects. Even in Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in the world, where we were in 2015, is at least a small network of clinics that provide hearing aid for poor people since 2003. My wife was sure that the brushwood seller would be able to hear and speak if he had hearing aids. A search in Google for hearing aid care projects in Tibet led my wife to an American woman who organizes hearing aids to Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal. The rest of the way my wife immersed in deep silence because she needs hearing aids herself. Realizing how lucky she was to be born with her disability in a country that, despite its disadvantage, offered all the support (hearing aids, speech therapy, and other assistance) to go to school and university, this news hit her like a hammer. How many Tibetans were and will be in Tibet without enough support to tap the full potential of them because people have not such possibilities.

We went on and Tobgyel pointed to a lower hill in front of us. This is the place of the region where the sky burial is performed, which is the most common form of burial in Tibet. This kind of burial is normally unusual for Buddhism; however, it is done because of the lack of firewood and the frozen ground in winter make it difficult to dig a grave. Thus, necessarily, sky burial was included in Tibet's regional Buddhism. The corpse is laying out in the house for a few days and the family is continually offering food to the dead body. During this time (up to five days), a lama reads from the Tibetan Book of the Dead to the dead to lead the soul of the dead to leave the body. On the day of the funeral, the corpse is brought to the burial place before sunrise, after one last summons of the lama. There, the bodies are cut up by the corpse tigers and left behind to feed the vultures. The vultures, according to Tibetan belief, then carry the deceased into the "Bardo", which is a state between death and rebirth.

We passed a small yellow hut, which pressed against the mountainside. We learned that this was a space for meditation. There can not be a better place for that because it was so remote, and in fact, some people were sitting on the floor inside and were immersed in prayer. As always, we were invited to go inside, but we refused because we did not want to disturb the people. Although everyone here was always so nice and cheerful, a bit of privacy is certainly not wrong.

A little bit later, again facing the monastery, Tobgyel stopped and started to talk. He told us more about himself. His uncle was a monk in the monastery and he too had been a monk for 9 years until the Chinese authorities threw him out of the monastery. As an 8-year-old he followed his uncle and his family wanted him to devote his life to Tibetan Buddhism as well. But everything changed suddenly. When he was 17 years old, the authorities issued the rule that people should not enter a convent until they were 18 years old; consequently, he had to leave the monastery. However, the Chinese authorities said that he could return to the monastery at the age of 18. He returned to his native village, which lies in a relatively close

valley. After his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he made his way back to the monastery and wanted to "officially re-enter", but then the Chinese denied his request. The reasoning of them: "There are already enough monks, piss off!" The new regulation stated that someone only can join once in a monastery and since he was already once in a monastery, his resumption request was rejected a year later. Well then? He had to go to Lhasa and found a job as a waiter in a western restaurant. There he learned some English and came up with the idea to become a travel guide. He got the opportunity to visit the tourism school in Lhasa and was able to achieve his new goal. A short time ago, he started his own travel agency on a small scale. So, he not only needs to guide groups of other providers, but now he also can offer and organize tours by himself. Today Tobgyel lives with his wife and their child in Lhasa and only visits this monastery a few times a year with tourist groups.

He became very open-hearted here, in his homeland and near his old monastery. He seemed to trust us and he suddenly spoke of the Dalai Lama and that he is greatly missed by the Tibetan people. He also said that the current worst punishment of the central government in Beijing for the Tibetans is that they hardly get any travel permits. Virtually no Tibetans can officially leave Tibet at the moment. Anyone who wants this desperately has to flee to Nepal or India. And even in Nepal Tibetan refugees are not save anymore since 2016. They are forced to live isolated from society and in an uncertain legal situation. Moreover, they are now facing a de facto ban on political protests, sharp restrictions on public activities promoting Tibetan culture and religion, and routine abuses by Nepali security forces. It is a result of Chinas increasing influence over Tibetan refugees in Nepal and the new pro-Beijing government in Nepal is; unfortunately, an abetter.

Touched we entered the Ganden Monastery, which was founded in 1409. This is considered as the traditional headquarters of the Gelug School and is the office by its Abbots (The one with the yellow huts, as the Dalai Lama, is one). According to legend, the founding of Ganden was prophesied by Buddha himself. Tsongkhapa (The man with the Monastery in Xining) has received in one of his previous life a conch from Buddha, which Maudgalyayana (one of the two main disciples of the Buddha), it is said, later was buried at an unknown place in Tibet. In 1409, Tsongkhapa founded the "Monlam Prayer Festival" in the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. His disciples proposed to build a new monastery and he went in search and chose this mountain here as a chosen place. The legend says that the main temple and over seventy more buildings have been completed in the same year. In the following year, Tsongkhapa found the conch again on a hill behind the monastery. This fulfilled the prophecy about Ganden. In 1416, Tsongkhapa gave the conch to his disciple Jamyang Chöje Trashi Pelden, who founded the Drepung Monastery (the monastery west of Lhasa) the following year. Since then, the conch is kept in Drepung. Tsongkhapa often stayed in Ganden and he even died here. His body was embalmed and was one of the most important relics of the monastery. In 1959, about 7,500 monks were living in Ganden. During the destruction of the monastery during the Cultural Revolution, it was impossible to destroy the body because it simply did not want to catch fire. At a fortunate moment, some monks were able to get the corpse out of the ruined monastery and hide it somewhere. To this day, the body kept in a secret place. However, the countless cultural monuments in the monastery have been lost forever by the Chinese destructive frenzy. Since the 1980s, much of it has been rebuilt and monks began to pray and live here again. In early 1996, after a ban had been imposed on pictures of the Dalai Lama, 400 monks rebelled here, who were then shelled by Chinese troops. Two monks

died and many were injured. One hundred monks were arrested, and the aforementioned police station was built next to the monastery.

We roam through the complex and really everyone had a short chat with Tobgyel. We entered one of the main halls and our guide gave some money to one of the monks and began to pray. Outside, my wife got pretty bloody nosebleeds, so she had to use one handkerchief after another. We even started to pour cold water on her neck and; fortunately, it stopped! I never saw such a strong nosebleed. I am sure it was related to the altitude and the extremely dry air. However, we were able again to go to the dining room of the monastery. In doing so, Tobgyel was very careful that the blood-soaked handkerchiefs left a certain part of the monastery and were disposed properly.

He invited us to a Tibetan noodle soup, and we made ourselves comfortable in the public part of the dining area. All the guests looked pleased about us and kept an eye on us. They always smiled when our eyes met. It was all a bit scruffy and sticky at this place; however, the noodle soup with yak meat was delicious, heartier and tasty. First, the driver wanted to sit down at another table, but we insisted that he should sit with us and he did. Of course, we got tons of milk tea. Tobgyel asked us after dinner whether he could leave us alone for a moment because he wanted to say "hello" to some more people. Of course, we agreed to his request and met him later in the car.

As we drove down the winding road, we suddenly stopped and Tobgyelg jumped out of the car with a bundle of food. He handed it to this very old monk we had just passed by. We learned that the old man was his uncle. Interestingly, he stored the bundle of meat and vegetables on the roadside and continued his walk down the valley. He would take it later, on the way home, Tobgyel told us. Theft does not seem to be a problem here. The elderly man did not want to go down with us, he preferred to walk.

The drive to the home village took less than 30 minutes by car. In the past, the hike from the village to the monastery took over 4 hours. Actually, it is an only 4.5km linear distance from the monastery to the village, but you have to walk around 20 km detour through these huge mountains. From time to time he even does this hiking tour with tourists, but unfortunately, we did not have enough time for that.

In the countryside, I quickly noticed the Chinese flags that hung on every house. At first glance, one might think that these are all Chinese patriots. I asked Tobgyel right away about them and he replied that all Tibetans are obliged to fix the flag on the house, otherwise the authorities would come and impose fines or even send someone to prison. It's always nice when so-called "liberators" take such measures, right?

We reached the small village where his father and two of his sisters were waiting for us. The small courtyard was walled and there were two buildings and a stable inside. In the middle of the yard, the leashed dog was on guard duty and I asked directly what his name was. My question seemed to irritate. "The dog has no name, he is simply called Dog." I understood that here the people do not seem to have such a close relationship with animals, as in Europe. Pictures of our small, white dogs made a source of amusement. Three calves lay in the stable and some chickens were running around. We were greeted with a lot of butter tea and it tasted much more intense and stronger than in the city – much better! The milk came from their own yaks and the butter was made by themselves. What a great taste! We drank a lot of tea and the family told us that they had never had foreign visitors who loved to drink so much butter tea.

Also, our driver seemed visibly pleased with the good butter tea and happily sipped one cup at a time. Suddenly, in the yard outside, there was a cow that had lost its way and actually belonged to the neighbour. For some reason; however, she kept running into the yard of Tobgyel's family, and her sister was constantly busy pushing the cow out again. I asked where the yaks are, and the sister told me that they are still on the surrounding pastures with the other yaks of the village. At the right time, the yaks would come home alone, his sister told me as well.

The outdoor earth closet was located next to the stall and offered a great view of the mountains. Hands were washed under a manual water dispenser. In retrospect, the Tibetans and the Mongolian nomads do a lot in a similar manner, except that the Tibetans live in solid houses with electricity. We were allowed to take photos of the house, as many as we wanted, only the family did not want to be photographed, because some Tibetans still believe that every photo shortens life. Not all Tibetans believe that we recognized that from the picture frame in the reception room. It showed us other family members, siblings, nephews and nieces, some of whom studied or worked in Lhasa or outside. Later, we should also see this type of picture frames among the Mongolian nomads, another of the many similarities between these two peoples. For dinner, cooked over an open fire, we got a soup consisting of rice, potatoes, meat and a little vegetable. It tasted very good and we got plenty of it. We talked a bit with the family with Tobgyel's help and we told them from our lives in Germany and Shanghai. The income of the family was generated primarily from the livestock. However, the family was also supported by the family members who had moved away. In fact, Tobgyel had the whole car full of groceries and other necessary things for them. Before we left, we presented the father with a white scarf we had previously bought in Lhasa and gave some money as a thank you for the hospitality.

The drive back to the city limits was very scenic, but then came a huge checkpoint where all Tibetans had to get off the car and walk through a building like a border check. The drivers were checked in the car and then we were allowed to pass this kind of "border control", where we waited for Tobgyel. Borders only affecting the locals - what kind of freedom and autonomy is that!?

In the evening we went to dinner with our friends to a new department store. We discovered a small roof terrace, which gave a great view of the illuminated Potala Palace.

### Homeward journey

The next morning, we bought some souvenirs in the market hall and at lunchtime, we were picked up by Tobgyel and they drove us to the airport. It is located near the county seat of Gonggar and thus about 45 kilometres southwest of Lhasa. The former very mountainous road to the airport was more than 100 kilometres long. It was built in the last years for around 175 million US\$. This has reduced the travel time from one and a half hours to less than 30 minutes. The airport is one of the highest airports in the world, so pilots who want to land at Lhasa Gonggar Airport must undergo special training and get an extra license. They learn how to handle airports higher than 3,700 meters because the engines and the aircraft react differently with the higher altitude and have less thrust - just as we humans do.

At the airport, our friends were craving for some western food, so we wanted to eat at Burger King. Somehow the Chinese cashier infuriates me because of his stupid reaction and his wilful unwilling to

understand my Chinese, as I have been there before too often in Shanghai. My wife took me aside and told me to pull myself together, but I had a wave of deep anger in me. At dinner, our friend then asked how we found the trip and I busted with anger: "The damn Chinese government has no business here and it is a shame how they deal ill with the Tibetan people!"

The return flight to Xian went smoothly. As we were landing, I suddenly heard a Tibetan prayer voice singing in my head, and I was very confused. The monotone sonority was there, sure, but that cannot be happening?! It was not stopping, so I turned around and two rows behind me was really a Tibetan monk who was praying! I did not go bananas. In the Xian airport, we were then received by Chinese state television, where a loop ran about the heroic Chinese army and the glorious President Xi Jinping. North Korea sends its regards, I thought. The flight to Shanghai was then just a piece of cake and by landing there, we reached the end of our little adventure to the roof of the world.

## Epilogue

Since that trip, Tibet began to play a new part in my life and the fate of the Tibetans has come to my heart. Actually, I never wanted to go to Tibet, but after my 7 days in Tibet, a lot had changed in myself and my point of views. My view of China had changed drastically and my desire to stop living in this country grew stronger. Consequently, so we left China earlier than planned in September 2018 and moved to Canada. It's nice to live now in a country where life and the internet are not censored. We no longer wanted to live in a country where freedom of expression is a crime and; moreover, genocides are happening against Tibetans, Uighurs, other minorities and freethinkers. In our 3.5 years in Shanghai, we noticed how the Chinese government and Xi Jinping, who can now life-long rule since 2018, are tightening surveillance in China and demand more and more the craziest things. Their claims and demands, especially in the South China Sea, are unworldly and the threatening gestures towards Taiwan also increase lately. In addition, via my two-year study in Hong Kong, I've learned that the Beijing government has been accelerating the assimilation and incorporation of Hong Kong lately as well. No analyst in the 1990s could have imagined how fast mainland China is increasing its influence and authority in Hong Kong. In 2018, Hong Kong unveiled a proposed law to punish anyone who disrespects the Chinese national anthem with up to three years in jail. Moreover, the textbooks are already being "lined up", and events like the Tiananmen Square Massacre have been removed from them. I feel sorry for many of my fellow students from Hong Kong.

Consequently, it feels good to live in Canada and that's why I decided to get involved with the Tibetans in Canada. Unfortunately, many people, statesmen and governments are afraid to articulate against Chinas policies because of the fear of economic reprisals from China, but at what costs?? The trade war between the US and China shows us that China is in a much weaker position than many think. Otherwise, the Middle Kingdom would not have been so ready to compromise in so many points. The recent measures by the Chinese Communist Party are also signals that they are already experiencing or anticipating an economic downturn. Therefore, they introduce the social credit system, increase the controls and surveillance, and start to arrest more people (Chinese and foreigners). The reason behind it is because the party is particularly afraid of its own people when they realize that an economically downhill is happening after a long climb.

Firms that rely so much on business in and with China should consider what kind of authoritarian regime there are doing businesses with and whether it is not time to change strategy and to focus on other countries. Large multinational and small and medium-sized enterprises must ask themselves if their corporate social responsibility and code of conduct can be honest when they operate in China. Or does Chinas actions and regresses mean nothing to them - according to the motto: "Business as usual!?" Should a company still do business with a country that actively oppresses and even kills people in Tibet, Xinjiang and other parts of China without feeling guilty? The customers outside of China are already starting to ask questions. Moreover, the glamour and Chinese propaganda about the economic success of China's last 30 years are fading, and China shows more and more his's true colours behind the fancy skyscraper facades in Shanghai. Becoming again a China of oppression, manipulation and threats. The Communist Party and Xi Jinping are not philanthropists. They are only interested in their own power and power expansion. The hopes that the free market will change China have not occurred politically. No, under Xi Jinping, they are moving back to the Mao era and he is transforming into a Mao 2.0. Consequently, it is so important to

address injustice clearly and directly as a person, politician or government. Even if someone believes that a lot of things go wrong in China but hold still and say nothing - they automatically make themselves a silent assistant for China. What China fears most are people who have a common sense, a mind of one's own, can think for themselves, do not need an ideology, and express their own opinion! The silence and too polite manners must come to an end. Now is the time for clear messages!

I want to give the Tibetans to take along that nothing is hopeless and that freedom from China is possible. Maybe not in the next years or decades. It took for Ireland 279 years and Scotland needed 624 years for their political freedoms; however, they managed it. It is important that Tibetans living abroad do not forget Tibet and preserve their language and culture despite all kinds of difficulties abroad! Hope is the last thing to die!