

TIBET: BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

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Forbidden things awaken interest. A “Forbidden Land” all the more so. Many myths, secretive speculations, and open political questions have evolved around Tibet, a country 25 times the size of Austria (about 2 million square kilometers). An evaluation from the summer of 1993.

Merely the mention of the magic word “Tibet” starts an inner film for interested Western listeners: meditation in mystical monasteries, the forbidden city of Lhasa, the roof of the world, the Dalai Lama as the last living God, etc.

Therefore, a word of warning in advance to all the world-weary Europeans who are now once again searching for the meaning of their lives; you’ll find it neither in a Tibetan monastery, nor in the Himalayas, but only in yourself!

The fascination with Tibet is not “love at first sight”. The same is true of Lhasa, which looks more like the hundreds of faceless Chinese provincial cities than the place described in the secretive writings of Heinrich Harrer. Only the Potala, enthroned high over the city, for hundreds of years the residence of the Dalai Lama, gives the city a unique atmosphere. The biggest palace in the world, with over a thousand rooms, it was built in the 17th century by countless workers using no technical assistance.

You can’t consume Tibet, or absorb it into yourself, and you absolutely cannot copy it in snapshots. The thin air in altitudes between 3600 meters (Lhasa) and over 5000 meters (the Rongbuk monastery by Mount Everest) quickly convinces the experience-hungry tourists who want to maximize their sightseeing, of the merits of slowness. Here the beauty is in the truest sense of the word, is breathtaking.

Buddha is “in” in the West, and Tibetan monasteries the dream destination of all New-Agers. When confronted with the reality “on the ground”, the enthusiasm of many would soon wear off. The hygienic conditions, as well as the nourishment of the monks, the butter-tea prepared with rancid yak butter, surely takes some getting used to. But more sobering still is the real experience of Tibetan Buddhism. Although the historical Buddha considered the effectiveness of rites and ceremonies to be one of the ten “bindings”, the worship of relics and idols thrives in Tibet.

It absolutely seems as if today’s experience of Buddhism is as far from the precepts of its founder Siddhartha Gautama, as today’s Christianity is from the original teachings of Jesus Christ.

An especially macabre example of the various dimensions of Tibetan beliefs can be experienced before the displayed mummy of the recently deceased Pantshen Lama: in a chamber that radiates spirituality, pilgrims pray, while singing monks keep the death watch. The visitor might believe he is hallucinating when he suddenly discovers a Rolex, ostentatious and unmistakable, on the wrist of the dead Pantshen Lama.

Traditionally, the Dalai Lama plays the central role in spiritual and worldly belief. Many Tibetans can have no greater joy, than to receive a picture of the “Ocean of Wisdom”.

Especially older Tibetans shudder with awe when looking at his picture, and hold it above their heads as a gesture of submissiveness. One senses what it means for these people to see their God. Rarely can one otherwise experience the projection of all the hopes and longings of a people onto one man.

The efforts of the Chinese central government to bring this embodiment of his people once again under its control are understandable. Therefore, photos of the Dalai Lama are “officially” forbidden. In any case the Peking Ideology displays a clever double standard by selling photos of the Dalai Lama in the market at Lhasa. One has the impression that the Chinese will be satisfied when the Tibetan opposition is limited to a trade in “illegal” photos.

Of more consequence are the Chinese methods of control of the monasteries. The number of monks per monastery is fixed, and every abbot has an administrative official who has a say in decisions. In many monasteries, exorbitant entrance and photo fees are required. It is obvious to the monks, that these are rules from the Chinese authorities. Supposedly, these fees will be used for the re-building of the monasteries that were totally destroyed during the so-called “Cultural Revolution”.

Tibet has been open again to tourism for only a few years, but the effects are already clearly noticeable. Hordes of extremely aggressive beggars, and demanding children, make one forget that greed is one of the sins of Buddhism.

The younger generation’s fascination with all things material is understandable, but shocking nonetheless. Topping the list of coveted items are ballpoint pens and sweets, even before Dalai Lama photos. All the more shocking because the cause of this development is clearly identifiable.

A drastic and comic example of world culture alienation is a foreign woman whose most important contribution to third world aid policy is evidently to distribute paper handkerchiefs to the dirty-nosed Tibetan children, and, with delight, to blow many of their noses for them.

And a Tibetan woman with two children on her arm has already realized that it is far more profitable to beg for the leftovers of lunch packets from the tour busses, than to tend cattle at 4000 meters. One is confronted with the shocking scenario of a generation of beggars whose way of life is on the one hand rooted in tradition, and on the other is not capable of keeping up with the demands of the achievement-oriented 21st century.

Apart from that, one gets to know the enormous simplicity and heart-felt openness of the Tibetan soul, especially off the main tourist routes. These economically impoverished people are spontaneously ready, without exception, to give what little they have, some bread or butter tea, as well as a bed, to strangers, motivated by a deeply felt responsibility - not just for a moment of happiness - but for all living things.

Where does the secret of Tibet lie for toady’s visitor? It is in the scenic fascination of the land, almost impossible to put into words or to capture in photographs. World-travelers agree that almost nowhere else can one see the “100 most beautiful places in the world”, in just a few weeks. As one example, an unbelievable 360 degree panorama over a mountain lake that every moment changes from dark blue to turquoise before the background of the snow-covered “Schisapangma chain” with its majestic seven and eight thousand meter peaks.

Like all great beauties, Tibet is very demanding. She will be conquered only with the greatest effort. The long journey, the thin air, the strenuous travel by foot or jeep, as well as the unbalanced diet, are just a few of the obstacles that a traveler to Tibet must overcome. Beyond that openness, objectivity and cultural tolerance appear to be necessary prerequisites.

In the course of our journey, we cannot help but feel a deep sympathy for all those of the roof of the world. National opposition is currently creating tension. Fundamentally, an understanding between the Chinese, whose cultural heritage includes Confucius, the Tao and the principle of Yin/Yang, and the Tibetans, whose God-kings stood for the values of universal love, compassion and justice, should not be impossible. "The Gods Shall Triumph" is a book by Heinrich Harrer. "Divine Rationality Has Triumphed" still remains to be written, co-authored by the Tibetans and the Chinese.