

Tashi in front of Mao Zedong's memorial hall in 1978 during his flight to Beijing to petition the State Council to redress his case.



Tashi with his wife Sangyela in 1981 in Xi'an City.

The voyage seemed endless. After leaving Cuba the ship crossed the Caribbean and the South Atlantic, plodded across the Mediterranean, negotiated the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, and slowly worked its way through the South China Sea to Canton. There were only ten other passengers besides myself, and all of them were old and seemed to be going back to Canton to die. We were fifty-seven days at sea, and I was alone most of the time.

I spent part of my time writing. While I was in Havana waiting for the ministry in Beijing to approve my passage, the secretary from the Chinese Embassy who found a hotel room for me had brought me between twenty and thirty books to keep me busy. They were all in English and on a variety of subjects: China, the history of the Chinese Communist Party, ideological tracts, and foreign policy. Alone in a strange country, I had plenty of time on my hands, and so I did quite a bit of reading just to pass the time. Now that I was trapped on shipboard, I needed to keep myself occupied and organize my thoughts. So I decided to write something, because as I discovered when I set down my impressions of America, writing is one of the best ways to discover what you think. And so as our ship rose and fell with the monotonous swells of the open sea I wrote an article about Tibet and China's foreign policy. The physical act itself helped keep my spirits up, although not entirely.

As you may imagine, I still had plenty of second thoughts about my decision to go back. It was too late to change my mind now, but I couldn't help occasionally second-guessing myself. The ship's captain was Swiss, and he and his Austrian engineer were no help. They were both very negative about China, and when they learned where I was going they told me flatly that I was making a big mistake. "Tashi," the captain said, "if you go to Communist China you will lose your freedom." They just couldn't understand my point of view. I knew that many of my American friends and supporters couldn't understand me either, and I worried that they would think I did not appreciate the efforts they had made to get me to the United States. I feared they would think I wasn't grateful.

To strengthen my resolve, I kept returning to the arguments I had framed when I had written to Gyalola after our emotional conversation in San Francisco. The main points still seemed valid. I thought that my generation of Tibetans—and perhaps my class—had a special responsibility. We had not created the Tibet of the past. Historically, the responsibility for the old society lay with the ruling classes—the aristocrats, the monks, and the heads of the monasteries. From exile, these former rulers were now seeking Tibetan independence, and it would have been easy enough for me to have joined them if I had wished. As I tried so hard to explain to Gyalola, however, I did not think their efforts were what would help our country most. I was afraid that independence now, even if possible, would only mean going back to the old ways. I felt strongly that before we sought independence we needed to catch up with the twentieth century and that to do so we needed to accept and even embrace the opportunities the Chinese communists offered. Making sacrifices, taking chances, were, I thought, the responsibilities of my generation, our mission, if you will. The question of Tibetan independence was best left to the next generation. In fact I thought it should be their decision: if tomorrow's young people were comfortable continuing under communist rule, then that was fine. If they thought they were being oppressed and wanted to rise up in revolt, then so be it. That could be their mission. My own mission was here and now—in China and Tibet.

These were brave words, and I believed them absolutely. But they didn't keep me from feeling both isolated and a bit fearful. One of the things that bothered me the most was my sense that there ought to have been more alternatives than I seemed to have. My only choices seemed

to be to join the government-in-exile and appear to endorse everything it stood for or to return to Communist China and appear to approve of Chinese policies. I hadn't been able to find any middle ground. The closer we got to our destination, the more apprehensive and full of self-doubt I became.

To be honest, I had felt more than a little vulnerable from the time I boarded the ship. I had to surrender my passport to the secretary from the Chinese Embassy in Havana. The embassy kept the passport and replaced it with a letter, which an embassy official gave to the captain of the ship. There was nothing necessarily amiss in all this. Where was I going or what borders was I likely to be crossing while on board ship? But it made me nervous all the same.

There was one moment in particular that made the implications of my decision to return especially real to me. Just before we docked at Canton, our ship hoisted a Chinese flag. I had seen the new communist standard in Lhasa in the 1950s, but when I saw the real thing again and actually heard it snap in a crisp breeze it made me realize that I was really there—in the People's Republic of China—for better or for worse. And then I got my first real jolt. I was not allowed to disembark! Nobody told me why. Nobody told me anything. The captain gave my letter (the one that had replaced my passport) to the frontier police, and I was put on a smaller ship and simply told to wait.

I was not allowed to leave for several days and felt puzzled—too much like a prisoner to feel comfortable. To be truthful, I was a bit frightened and spent a lot of time wondering why the Chinese were restricting me. Then on the third day I got a surprise visit from four people. Two were from the Canton Branch Office of the Political Consultative Conference. They had come to receive me on behalf of the local government and had brought me a bundle that contained a cotton padded quilt for sleeping and a set of denim clothing to wear. The other two were an older Chinese gentleman and a younger man who also looked Chinese to me. The young man, however, was actually a Tibetan from eastern Tibet who had come to interpret. He stunned me, therefore, when he suddenly said (in accented but perfectly understandable Lhasa Tibetan), "Mr. Zhao [the Chinese gentleman] and I were sent to greet you by the Tibetan Minority Institute of the city of Xianyang in Shaanxi Province [in northwestern China]." I was astonished not just by his Tibetan but by what he said. "Who are you again?" I asked. "Where are you from? The city of what?"

This was an early lesson in how the Chinese worked. Apparently plans had begun to be made for me as long ago as the time when I was waiting in Havana and had first asked for permission to come home. I remembered now that the embassy secretary had asked me a lot of questions about why I wanted to return, what my plans were, and so on. I had told him that I wanted to return to Tibet to help my people, but that first I hoped I would be allowed to continue my studies at a Chinese university, I hoped at Beijing University. It was clear to me now that though nobody had said a thing to me, decisions had long since been made about where I would go and what I would do. I was not to be sent to Beijing as I had asked, but rather to one of the new minority institutes designed to train Tibetan cadres and teachers—the new leaders of Tibet. Because of the time I had spent in America and my experience in American schools, I was to be trained as a teacher.

Now that Mr. Zhao had arrived, I learned I would soon be allowed to leave the ship, and within a day or two Mr. Zhao, the Tibetan interpreter, and I moved to a hot, stuffy hotel near the docks. The heat was oppressive and the only amenity was the mosquito net over each of the beds.

I had brought a few possessions: a calculator, a Minolta camera, two watches, and two boxes of clothing. But I had no Chinese money and there was no easy way to get any, so Mr. Zhao took care of all my expenses. We stayed at the hotel for a couple of days while he made arrangements. In the evenings he tried talking with me a bit through the interpreter. He told me he knew that I had been out of Tibet since 1957, and suggested that perhaps I wasn't aware of what had been going on either there or in China. He proudly listed what he called ten great construction projects that the Chinese had undertaken in the last few years. I listened politely, but I remember thinking that it wasn't "great" construction projects that a country needed—at least not a country like Tibet. I had done a lot of thinking since the days when I marveled at the roads the Chinese built so quickly in and around Lhasa. My courses at Williams College and the University of Washington had enlarged my perspective, and I felt now that Tibet needed to establish a basic and competitive agricultural and industrial base and a modern infrastructure. Above all, the population—especially the ordinary people—had to become literate in the Western sense. Then Tibet could worry about luxuries like great construction projects. I didn't say any of this openly, but I hadn't come all this way and taken the risks I had taken without knowing what I thought. So I listened politely and said little.

On the following day, we boarded a train that would take us 800 miles northwest across the very heart of China to the city of Xi'an. The journey took days as the train wound slowly through the Chinese heartland: through Hunan and Hubei provinces, across the Yangtze, and ever north and west into Shaanxi Province, the western wilderness Mao Zedong had made his headquarters in the early days of the Chinese Communist Party. Finally we arrived at Xi'an, one of the oldest cities in China, and slightly beyond it was Xianyang, which was to be my home for the immediate future.

I'll never forget my first impressions when we arrived. The railway station in Xianyang was just a short walk from the college, and the available student housing consisted of a few rows of simple brick buildings. I was given a single, small room in one of them. In it were one broken chair, a battered desk, and a wooden bed. There was a dim light, and the only window was cracked badly. Coming as I was from the comparatively plush dormitories of the University of Washington and the relative opulence of America, the contrast was stark. I had thought long and carefully about the political and moral aspects of my decision to return. In those respects I knew exactly what I was doing and why. But I now realized that I hadn't given much thought to what it was going to be like living in Communist China day in and day out. Sitting in this barren room in the middle of what at the time seemed like nowhere, I couldn't help wondering for the thousandth time if my choice had been wise. I had always seen myself as going to Tibet, even though my plans included study in China. When I pictured myself it was always in Lhasa, being welcomed, doing good work. Now I saw that when or if I was able to get home was not entirely in my control. I would get to Tibet when and if the Chinese wanted me to and not before. I tried to take comfort in the thought that since they were sending me to the minority institute for Tibetan cadres and teachers, they obviously were thinking about eventually letting me return to Tibet when my training was over. And I liked the idea of being trained as a teacher, so I could use my education and also help others do the same. But I saw now that my situation at Xianyang was little different from what it had been aboard ship. Now that I had fully committed to the journey, I couldn't get off until I reached my final destination, wherever that turned out to be.

The name of the school I had been sent to was the Tibetan Minority Institute, which I learned had been established in 1957. There were

about twenty-five hundred students at the university, almost all Tibetans. My unit, the Department of Education, numbered about five hundred, most of whom were the children of poor peasant families. We did many things together, but of course when we studied we were divided into smaller classes. Mine met on the third floor of the building where the Department of Education was housed. It contained forty Tibetan students in all, about half of them from the Chamdo area, near the border with China in eastern Tibet. They were more literate in Chinese than the rest of us. The other half were mostly from the Tsang area, much closer to my own village, and we were more literate in Tibetan. Everyone in my group was, I found, fairly well prepared compared to many of the other students, some of whom were nearly or completely illiterate. Whatever our background or state of preparation, however, our mission was clear enough. We were there to be trained as teachers and then sent back to Tibet to teach others.

Our days followed a strict routine. The school's sense of discipline and order was like the army's, and in fact I learned that many of the teachers had come from the military before being assigned to the school. On a typical day, we woke up early, washed in a common washroom, and then participated in group exercises. We had three meals a day at the school canteen. Breakfast followed the exercise period, and going to classes followed that. We didn't go from room to room as in America. Once we were assigned to a class, the students belonging to that class stayed in one room—a kind of homeroom—and different teachers came to lecture us at various times. There were teachers who taught Tibetan for those students who needed help learning to read and write their own language. Then we also had to learn Chinese. (It was so important that we learn Chinese quickly that some students—I was one of them—were given private tutors to help speed up the learning process.) There were four classes in the morning from eight to twelve and then we broke for lunch. In the summer we were allowed to rest after lunch until one-thirty, after which we went back to the classroom again, usually for political lessons. This went on until it was near time for dinner.

Adjusting to life in the Tibetan Minority Institute was difficult for me. Coming straight from America, I found the regimentation overpowering and the food and the hygiene poor. The food we ate was coarse and plain—blandly cooked vegetables, rice or steamed buns, and noodles. And we normally drank boiled water rather than tea. The

state of the bathrooms also disturbed me. They were foul smelling and never clean. It puzzled me why it didn't seem to bother the others as much as it bothered me. Sometimes I even tried to clean the bathroom up a bit myself, but it was no use. In the end the hardest things to swallow were the political lessons, which were interminable. I realized gradually that the Chinese had a political approach that made studying very different from studying at American universities. Here political ideology was more important than subject matter. There was no such thing as critical thinking and questioning. There was the party line, and it was correct! We were there to learn it, not weigh its utility vis-à-vis other ideologies. Hatred for the old feudal society was continually conveyed, and we were constantly exhorted to value collectivism over individualism and the needs of the group over the needs of the individual. Although this message was repetitive and boring, I accepted that it was necessary to ensure that all the future leaders in Tibet understood the goals and ideas of socialism.

In their way, given the standard of living in China, the Chinese took good care of their potential new crop of teacher-leaders. Counseling services were designed to help these new recruits, many in their late teens and just out of farms and villages. If students were homesick, had to deal with news of difficulty or tragedy at home, or simply began to fail in their courses and become despondent, there were both teachers and student monitors to provide assistance and support.

Each group, in fact, had a special "political monitor." Ours was a Chinese woman named Ma Ximei, who met with us every afternoon. It was her job to control and train our minds ideologically, to make sure our political development went smoothly and correctly. She talked to us about Mao's thoughts. She gave lectures on Communist Party history. Sometimes she would tell us stories about communist martyrs and heroes—people who had fought in the revolution or who had died in battle or serving the cause. As I said, there was never any class discussion or debate as in American schools. Ma Ximei just lectured for what seemed like hours and hours. In some ways this ceaseless political dialogue with endless terminological jargon was simply numbing. But at times it could be surprisingly moving. Sometimes Ma Ximei got so involved in the telling of one of her stories that she began to cry. At these times the students would often begin to cry as well, as if they had picked up her mood by contact. And though I was much older than most of the other students and had traveled the world, I wasn't im-

mune. Sometimes I think I just got caught up psychologically in the group's emotions. But sometimes I found the stories of individuals making great sacrifices on behalf of the people moving, and tears came to my eyes also.

I also had a problem controlling what I said. For example, I remember clearly that once at dinner during my first weeks in Xianyang I said—completely without thinking—that boiled water was harder to get here than milk in America. I really didn't mean it as an insult to socialism; it was just an observation that popped into my head, but the other students responded coldly and incredulously in a way that told me I had made a mistake. Saying good things about America, the great imperialist enemy of the People's Republic of China, was not acceptable, true or not. After a couple of similar mishaps, I realized that open expression of deviant ideas, let alone criticism, was not acceptable in China, and I had to learn to be very careful.

I also found that I had to be careful using some of the material items I had brought with me from America. For example, once when I took my American toilet kit to the common washroom and laid out several American jars of skin cream and hair oil, a student said, "Hey look. Capitalist goods." At first I responded honestly that these were very simple, and nothing compared with what the Americans had. But they immediately rebutted this saying, "Oh, you are siding with America." It was said partly in jest, but it was obvious that it had a serious side. Similarly, although almost all my classmates knew that I had come from America, they seldom if ever asked me about it or my experiences there. It was as if there was an invisible rule disallowing such talk. I guessed that they were afraid that showing too much interest in America might make others suspect their motives.

One of the biggest social adjustments I had to make was how to handle my private life, or more accurately, the lack of privacy and freedom to decide what to do. There always seemed to be people watching what one did and said, and everybody knew everything. Given that I had just come from America, I realized that I was being watched particularly closely. It bothered me a lot at first.

Generally speaking, our social interactions were as highly regimented as any of the other activities. Even though there were both boys and girls at the school, there was no such thing as dating in the Western sense—at least in theory. Of course people are people, and the men and women sometimes got together. But the school had its own

ideas about what they should be doing with their evenings, and that was studying political ideology. Sometimes Ma Ximei would have evening meetings at her house during the week to which students of both sexes were encouraged to come for political discussion. Couples were also allowed to pair off for intimate consultation and discussion, but the idea was that they would be exchanging political opinions and solving hypothetical problems in the approved way. There were weekly lectures given at the Department of Education, and there were movies every Saturday evening that you had to attend, too. But they were always in Chinese and always full of politics. You never got away from it.

There was another regular activity that by comparison made the routine of the dormitory and the classroom seem pleasant and easy. It was called "labor transformation." What it meant was that periodically we all had to go and work in the fields on nearby farms. It was party policy that even—perhaps especially—groups like teachers and intellectuals should engage in good, hard manual labor. The idea was that this "labor" helped "transform" such people by increasing their understanding and sympathy for the proletariat and decreasing their sense of social distance from them. It was also supposed to humiliate the more intellectual types by reminding them who and what were really important! It all made sense in theory, although it turned out to be very hard for me in practice. Several times a year we were sent to villages for a work stint of a few weeks, usually in June for the early weeding and irrigation and then once again toward the end of September for harvest. And we were sometimes sent back to support the farm laborers in the winter. The school made all the arrangements and then told us when and where we were going. Most times the whole five hundred of us in the Education Department went.

We had plenty of work to do because though the soil in the region was rich, there was never enough water. Irrigation was a constant problem, and the wells were extremely deep. Often you had to lower a bucket 50 feet before you could fill it and bring it back. I never really felt comfortable. During the first summer I remember I tried wearing some of the clothes I had brought from Cuba, and the other students got a good laugh at the way I looked. And those of us who weren't from farms provided quite a sight as we learned to use common tools. I remember that the peasants of the region used a particular kind of sickle to harvest the wheat. It was a clean, powerful instrument if you

knew what you were doing, but it was by no means easy to master. I had a lot of trouble getting the hang of it, and I'm not sure I ever did. In the winter we were sometimes sent out to help with projects, but we didn't stay at the site. We would leave early in the morning and return to the school the same evening. I remember these excursions mainly because the weather was often freezing cold and we had to hack at the frozen ground with shovels and pickaxes. Not only was the work hard but the living conditions were harsh as well. When we worked at the farms we all slept together in large barns or in what they called "community houses." The food the peasants ate was scarcer, coarser, and more primitive than anything we had to eat at the institute. It made me realize that, relatively speaking, we were eating well in school.

All in all, during my first year the "labor transformation" stints were the hardest things I had to deal with. They exhausted me, but I never got discouraged. I felt that this period was simply a passing stage I had to go through to achieve my goal of going back to Tibet. I considered being a student at the Minority Institute a wonderful opportunity to learn the skills that would help me become a part of the great revolutionary wave that was going to transform Tibet as well as China. So despite the physical and psychological hardships, I was thrilled to be studying at an elite institute that was preparing the future leaders of Tibet. The plan was that our class would graduate in 1967, so I worked as hard as I could to succeed in my studies and graduate with it.

At one point during this time my confidence in things in general was temporarily shaken by some startling news from home. I had had no communication with my family since the Lhasa Uprising in 1959 and so was surprised to get a letter from them here at the school. When I read the contents, I was stunned. My parents had been denounced as reactionaries. Their property had been confiscated, and they had been sent to Mani, a small nunnery not far from our village, with just a few basic utensils and clothes. They were in permanent exile now, with just enough land to exist on.

Their troubles had begun because of a foolish act of my second brother. From my father's letter I learned that when I sent my second brother back from India in 1958, he kept the handgun I had asked him to return to Wangdula and hid it in our village. At some point, the Chinese found the gun and accused him of being a reactionary counter-revolutionary. That was all the opportunity my old enemy Dorje Tsedon needed. He was still smarting under the embarrassment of the

beating I had given him years ago and the court's decision that hadn't gone in his favor. He had lost a good deal of face in the local area because the affair was so notorious. (I still meet elderly people from the area who remember the trial and the events that led up to it!) Now it was his chance to get revenge, and he took it. At a political meeting in our village called a "struggle session," Dorje arranged for others to denounce—struggle against—my parents and family for crimes against the revolution. Dorje himself dragged my mother around by the hair, pulling her by her braids, as a result of which she suffered from back trouble until her death in 1992. Dorje also abused my father. I was shocked to learn of these events. The thought of what my parents must have endured made me sad and furious, especially because I was so far away and powerless to do anything.

At the time, however, I saw my parents' sufferings as an isolated incident, more a personal problem than a portent of things to come. Even though my heart ached whenever I thought of them being beaten and humiliated, and I was frustrated by my inability to go to them or help them directly, I didn't connect what happened to them with anything that might happen to me. My second brother had been foolish to keep the gun, and my parents had to pay for it. At the moment, there was nothing I could do. Later, when I returned to Tibet, I swore I would try to right the wrong. So I went back to my studies and tried to put these events out of my mind. Little did I realize that a year later there would be struggle sessions in my own school.