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At the beginning of 1966, I was feeling quite comfortable and optimistic about my new life because things seemed to be working out more or less as I'd hoped, despite the physical difficulties. However, unbeknownst to me, a major conflict was erupting within the highest circles of the Chinese Communist Party that would reach out and touch my life far sooner and more directly than I could ever have imagined.

My classmates and I didn't become aware of the size and ferocity of the gathering storm until the summer of 1966, when we began to hear a great deal about a campaign called the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" in which students in Beijing were playing a major role. Mao Zedong felt that the Chinese communist revolution was in danger of stalling and stagnating because many government officials running it still harbored old prerevolutionary values and attitudes and were passing these on to the youth who would become China's future revolutionary leaders. Mao, therefore, launched what he called a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to smash those in authority and replace the old ideas and attitudes they held with a new proletarian culture. It became the duty of the proletarian class, particularly the young students who were not yet indoctrinated into the old values and culture, to smash all remnants of bourgeois thinking in the government and in intellectual and cultural spheres such as art, education, and literature.

Such class struggle was to be the engine that drove the revolution onward. Of course, we now know that Mao also was locked in a serious contest with other top leaders for control of the Communist Party and that the Cultural Revolution was part of his strategy to destroy his enemies, but at the time, my fellow students and I took it at face value. There were hidden "capitalist roaders" lurking in institutions and offices and hindering progress, and it was our task to uncover them and bring them down.

I never felt in danger myself. While it was true that I had been a clerk in the old regime and had lived and studied in India and America, I was not really a part of any old ruling elite, and I was certainly not someone in authority. The people who were being singled out were lifetime bureaucrats, senior officials, senior teachers, and administrators. I was a peasant from a mountain village in Tibet. Mao's call was not for action against people like me. Moreover, I was highly critical of the old feudal society and genuinely wanted revolutionary change. I became caught up in the enthusiasm of the hour as fully as any of my classmates.

We started to hear that students in Beijing were putting up huge posters that criticized the leaders of the university and demanding that hidden enemies of the revolution—colorfully called "ghosts" and "monsters"—be destroyed. And in August, Mao himself wrote that it was necessary to "Bombard the General Headquarters," and "Learn Revolution by Making Revolution." Soon the Beijing student disruptions and attacks on those in authority began to spread to other cities, and we heard about these events on the radio and in newspapers. Every day the school broadcast the Beijing news loudly over the public address system so the word quickly spread all over the campus. In my case, I also had a small shortwave radio that I had obtained in a trade for a Swiss watch I had brought from America, so I listened avidly to the reports of each new exploit.

Like other students, I found the reports from Beijing amazing and hard to imagine fully. The idea of students turning on their teachers and other authority figures seemed almost unthinkable, given my experience with the hierarchy and regimentation of life in Xianyang. But precisely because it was so unthinkable it was also exciting. Students like me were in the vanguard of continuing the revolution in China! I guess it appealed to my romantic sense of myself as a radical and revolutionary, even though I still couldn't see how these powerful political movements in the big cities could directly affect us here. There were no bourgeois counterrevolutionaries at Xianyang, no enemies of the state that I knew of. Everyone I knew seemed totally committed to the revolution.

All that changed dramatically one sweltering night in late June. I was sitting in my dorm with the windows and door wide open, carefully practicing my Chinese characters and trying to keep cool. At about nine or ten, I heard unusual shouting, and ran outside to see if I could find out what was going on. I was amazed to see students from all over the campus walking quickly toward our large soccer field where the lights were shining brightly. I joined them, curious to learn what was going on, and as I neared the field I could see that hundreds of students had already gathered there and more were streaming in every moment.

The sight at the sports field was astounding. A large brightly lighted stage had been set up, and on it were forty of our school's most important teachers and administrators, including Wang Jingzhi, the president of the institute. I pushed toward the front to get a better view and soon realized that this was not some standard political lecture. The leaders of our school were standing there hunched over, each adorned with a tall conical paper hat filled with large characters spouting derisive labels like "Capitalist Roader" or "Counterrevolutionary." Twenty or so student activists, almost all of whom were Tibetans, were controlling them. I later learned that these students had orchestrated the entire demonstration because they felt that it was time for our school to heed Chairman Mao's appeal to "make revolution."

It was unbelievable seeing the leaders of our school standing humbly with their heads bowed listening to what seemed like thousands of voices screaming slogans and mocking them. Sometimes the student activists would walk right up to one of these "hidden enemies," stand very close, and shout derisive slogans in his or her face. One student, for example, would jump up on the platform and scream, "Down with Mr. Wang who is leading us on the capitalist road." Another would say, "We are defending Mao's thoughts," or "We are the vanguard of Mao's proletarian line and the driving force in Mao's Great Cultural Revolution." The students leading the demonstration were utterly sure of themselves and strutted around the platform like victorious gladiators, completely confident about what they were doing. In a single moment our school's world had been turned upside down. The students now lorded over the teachers. They thought it was natural and right for them to be the ones to revolutionize their elders. All the students, myself included, collectively savored the emotion and power of this first act of "making revolution," although I still found it hard to believe that these leaders were all really capitalist roaders.

The struggle session—that's what it was called—broke up after an hour or so, at which time we students led the subjects in a degrading procession around the campus. One of the things that made the most vivid impression on me was that even Ma Ximei, our class's political ideology teacher, was made to beat a big drum in front of her and chant, "I am Ma Ximei, and I committed mistakes in my political teaching." At this time, none of the "authorities" was actually detained; they were all permitted to return to their homes. And yet it was clear to everyone that the Cultural Revolution was now here—not in Shanghai but in Xianyang, not at some vague future date, but now. For us at the institute, that amazing night was the beginning of a decade of chaos and destruction.

From the next day onward our school ceased to function as an institute of learning in any ordinary sense. We spent our time making revolution—writing slogans, planning more struggle sessions, and putting up huge posters all over campus. In my class of about fifty students, a few activists did all of the planning and the rest of us helped put the plans into practice.

During the next few months I attended many more struggle sessions, and all of us were engaged in what we called "digging in." To carry out class struggle, you needed both revolutionaries and "objects of revolution" against whom to battle. "Digging in" meant digging more deeply into the backgrounds of individuals suspected of being antirevolutionary. In our institute, the most obvious potential "objects of revolution" were the older individuals, the senior administrators and teachers who were raised in the old society. We poured over any information we could find about their backgrounds in their otherwise secret personnel files, trying to uncover evidence of their past involvements with the antirevolutionary Guomindang government of Chiang Kai-shek or any other form of exploitative activity. And students searched their memories for suspect comments and criticisms that teachers had made in the past. These were reported to the student activists and examined closely to see if they contained any evidence of counterrevolutionary sympathies.

I was not a member of the student leadership, but I participated. I am ashamed of that now, but, to be honest, at the time I identified totally with the students and Mao's cause. I felt that if Chairman Mao had called on us to be the vanguard of the revolution, then we should respond, and I did whatever I could to prevent the revolution stagnating as Mao had warned. Mostly my activities involved lugging around an iron bucket filled with paste and sticking up the revolutionary posters that seemed to shout slogans from every wall. I also volunteered for work in the kitchen. Others whose Chinese calligraphy was especially good wrote the striking red or black characters on the posters, and the activist leaders spent most of their time planning new strategies and demonstrations and opening lines of communication with other schools and work units engaged in similar revolutionary activities.

And we began to engage in what was called "revolutionary learning." This activity involved students traveling to other regions of the country to share experiences and learn from one another. Sometimes individual students and sometimes entire schools packed up and went on the road. The most popular location for such trips was Beijing, where Mao himself occasionally gave mass audiences. Individual students who wished to make such "revolutionary trips" could do so quite readily in the new climate of the Cultural Revolution. All they needed were ration coupons for the period they would be gone, which they could easily obtain from the school's Food Requisition Office. Nobody at our institute—or in similar situations elsewhere—dared to forbid travel or to try to tell the students what to do, because that could be taken as a sign of counterrevolutionary thinking. By now, the proletarian students were running the show and made their own decisions.

In early September it was our turn to board the trains and go to see Mao. In Beijing we stayed at the National Minorities Institute, living for a week in tents which we had brought with us from Xianyang. We created a gigantic tent city in the midst of their institute. Along with all the other students, I was extremely excited. I was not a fully accepted Red Guard in the sense that I was not permitted to wear the red armband, but I felt that I was a good revolutionary and as fully committed to Mao and the party line as any of my classmates. Therefore, it came as a shock when the two student activist leaders of my class—both of whom were Tibetan—told me on the day before our scheduled mass audience that I would not be permitted to accompany the rest of the students to Tiananmen Square to see Mao. They didn't accuse me of any counterrevolutionary activities; they simply said it wasn't appropriate for me to go. I was furious because I thought I had very obviously demonstrated that my sympathies were with the revolution and my loyalty was beyond question. Hadn't I given up an easy life in America to serve my people and country? I had worked hard since coming to the institute and did not deserve to be publicly singled out as not worthy enough to see Chairman Mao. It was unjust. It's hard to imagine now that I really felt that way, but at that time, being accepted by the mass of revolutionary students and joining the audience to see Mao were extremely important to me. And I did something about it.

I first tried to persuade the activists that I should be allowed to go, arguing that I had nothing to do with the exploitation of the old society and in fact was a victim of its exploitation. I reminded them that I was from a peasant family and had been compelled to go to Lhasa as a feudal tax. I also tried to convince them that I loved Chairman Mao and his socialist system and that I had every right to be allowed to see him when my classmates did. I used to refer to Mao as "Comrade Mao" rather than "Chairman Mao," because I really thought of him as a friend and comrade in a common struggle. But all my efforts were to no avail. The student leaders let me have my say, but in the end they just stared at me impassively, shook their heads, and told me once again that they had decided that it was not appropriate for me to go. That was all they would say.

I have always had a stubborn streak, and I was so angry at their stony refusal that I did something rather risky. All over China, new administrative offices called "Revolutionary Committees" had been created, and I knew that there was one for the Beijing National Minorities Institute where we were staying. I decided to go over the heads of the student leaders and plead my case there, and I told the activists I was leaving to do that. They were shocked and told me that was impossible, but I was really angry and stormed out saying that I was going whether they liked it or not. When they saw they couldn't stop me, one of them followed me all the way to the office.

The head of the Revolutionary Committee was very gracious and invited me to tell him my story. I did so with the student activist sitting in the same room listening in stony silence. I talked for some time, emphasizing my early days as a tax recruit to the Dalai Lama's dance troupe and the fact that although it was true that I had lived in America, I had rejected the views of the Tibetans in exile and returned to

China. I talked about how hard I had worked since I had come to China, how deep my commitment was, and how loyal I had always been. I was, I told him, a good and dedicated revolutionary who should be permitted to see Chairman Mao. The student activist scowled at me angrily the whole time, but he had nothing of any substance to add to the discussion as no one was charging me with any crime or concrete act of disloyalty. I really must have been quite emotional because I talked nonstop for about an hour. Finally the officer from the Revolutionary Committee raised his hand to stop further discussion. He looked directly at the student activist and said, "It is all right. Let him go. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter." I was exultant and felt totally vindicated.

Our audience with Chairman Mao was scheduled for the following morning, and I was so energized by my success that I had trouble sleeping. We were all excited, but I think I was even more so because of the difficulty I had to overcome. We got up before sunrise, between four and five, even before the birds were stirring. The air was cool when we lined up for our march to Tiananmen Square, which was about 15 miles from where we were staying. It took us between four and five hours to reach the square, but I don't think any of us was aware of the time or distance. We knew, of course, that we weren't actually having an audience with Mao alone and that there would be many other students from all over China (official figures later placed the total that day at 1.5 million). We would see Mao only at a distance. But to us he was the guiding force behind the revolution, and even a distant glimpse of the man himself was a great honor.

We didn't arrive at the square until between nine and ten o'clock. I still remember how struck I was by the immensity of it and the sight of so many tens of thousands of students in rank order waiting patiently like us. As one group finished another would begin to march past the high balcony on which Mao stood, and we all had a sense of being part of a vast, unified endeavor. When they told us it was our turn, we marched proudly beneath the chairman's gaze, holding and waving the little red book of his writings and shouting revolutionary slogans like "Long Live Chairman Mao." He had a distinctive silhouette and was relatively tall, so he stood out prominently on the reviewing stand. His steady gaze passed over wave after wave of chanting students, but I honestly had the feeling that he looked right at us—right at me—when we passed. And so it didn't matter that we could get no closer to him.

He had noticed us; we were part of his revolution. I remember being highly conscious of the drama of the moment, of the fact that I was in the heart of the new China, playing an important part in the creation of a new order. This was why I had returned to my homeland. I didn't ask, but I think all of us felt much the same way.

The next morning we returned to Xianyang, and for the rest of 1966 we continued to pursue the Cultural Revolution in our own school and surrounding areas. Then, near the end of the year, the decision was made that our school should go to Lhasa to share our revolutionary experiences with Tibetans there. We knew that the Cultural Revolution had already begun in Lhasa because individual students from our school had already made revolutionary visits and reported back to us. I was overjoyed both to be going home and to be going as a part of the revolutionary vanguard.

We had received permission from the military headquarters in Lhasa and made preparations for several thousand of us to depart. We traveled by train from Xianyang to Lanzhou and then to Golmud, the last train stop on the northern route to Lhasa. From there we drove south to Lhasa in military trucks, a journey that took about seven days.

It was December and the road from Golmud traversed Tibet's vast Northern Plateau, an area that averaged more than 16,000 feet in elevation, so it was freezing in the open trucks. We traveled all day, stopping each night at military truck stops, where we got food, fuel, and lodging. Then, as soon as it was light again, we rumbled on. On the seventh day we reached Lhasa in the late afternoon, the golden roof of the Potala Palace glittering over the valley as it had when I had departed a decade ago.

Because the size of our group was so large we divided into two sections, one group (mine) staying at the guesthouse at what had been the Ramoche Temple, the others in Kundeling, in what had been the monastery of a famous Tibetan lama. Not long after we arrived, General Zhang Guohua, the leading Chinese official, came to see us at the guesthouse. He welcomed us warmly, telling us that we were the pioneers of the Cultural Revolution. "You are," he said, "the best vanguard, the Red Guards who are defending Mao Zedong and his views." I was impressed by how seriously he was taking us and struck by how many different things can happen in one person's lifetime. I had first come to Lhasa nearly twenty-five years ago as a dancer for the Dalai Lama, and now here I was back in Tibet but this time part of a vast national movement committed to sweeping away all vestiges of the very society I had once served. If anyone had tried to tell me that such things were going to happen when I was a youth, I would have told him he was crazy! And yet, here I was.

We stayed in Lhasa for four or five months, from December 1966 till sometime in March 1967. A decade had passed since I left Lhasa for India, and a great deal had changed. As I initially looked around, I was struck by the many new houses, buildings, and roads. The size and scope of Lhasa had increased dramatically. I was particularly impressed with the many trees lining the highways, and thought this was a wonderful addition. However, I quickly learned that physical changes weren't the whole story.

I still had friends in Lhasa, and when I went to see them I got quite a different picture. One of the biggest changes in the city itself was the absence of the lively central market. There was nothing for sale on the streets any more. Gone were the cramped booths heaped full of wares, the voices of salesmen and customers laughing and haggling, and the many tea and beer shops I used to frequent. In their place were a few poorly stocked government stores.

It also soon became clear that the people weren't very well fed, either. Food was rationed, and there was almost no meat or butter or potatoes. I had lived in the old Lhasa for many years and was under no illusions about its shortcomings. However, there had always been a lot of food, and if you had any money to spend at all you had quite a bit of freedom and choice. Now the food was rationed at low levels. Each month people got 1.1 pounds of butter and 26.5 pounds of our staple tsamba—and not very good quality tsamba at that. In addition, they got only a small ration of flour. One could subsist on this, but not well.

Perhaps the most striking difference I saw was that people in general seemed dispirited and sullen. They appeared forlorn, as if they had just lost a close friend or relative. And on a more personal level, I was shocked by the fate of one of my closest friends from the old days. Söpela had been one of the early Tibetan "progressives." He was a clerk in the old government who, like me, did not like the old feudal system and had long dreamed of a modern Tibet without serfdom and class exploitation. He joined the new Tibetan Youth League and became an early activist, encouraging others to attend meetings and dances and to keep an open mind to reforming Tibet. I had gone along to some of the youth affairs with him and found them fun. At that time there were no such things as social dances and the like, so these activities were all new and exciting. Söpela soon thereafter went to study in Beijing and excelled in Chinese in addition to his Tibetan.

A few days after we arrived and settled in, I decided to visit Söpela. When I neared his house, I saw him outside on the street. Spontaneously, I ran over and threw my arms around him. But nothing happened. He didn't reciprocate. He sort of just stood there limply, his eyes cast down and a frightened look on his face. Even though I was hugging him he seemed to be pretending I wasn't there. For a minute I couldn't figure out what was going on and didn't know what to do. Then I looked around and realized we weren't alone. When I had first spied him, he was all I saw. Now I saw that he had a member of the Lhasa Red ~~Guards with him, and~~ this meant that he had become a "revolutionary object of struggle" and was under the "supervision of the masses." He said virtually nothing and seemed terribly ill at ease, and since I feared that just by my presence I was making things worse for him, I quickly concluded our meeting, saying something brief and noncommittal—"good to see you," "I have to go now"—and moved on.

As I walked away, keeping my own eyes on the ground directly in front of me, I was genuinely confused. How could someone who had been such an activist and advocate of change have become the object of the current revolution? I thought there had to be a mistake. I learned, however, that what had happened to Söpela had happened to some of my other friends who had also been activists during those early years. This news puzzled and bothered me deeply. But when I gradually calmed down and thought about it, I realized (or perhaps rationalized) that they had become mid-level officials and thus fit the model of targets for the Cultural Revolution in the sense that they were people in authority who grew up in the old society and were likely to be hidden capitalist roaders. But I never believed that Söpela was an enemy of the revolution; he was a true modern Tibetan, and it was sad to see him broken like that. (I should add, happily, that Söpela survived the Cultural Revolution and became an important official after the reform policies of Deng Xiaoping were implemented in 1978.)

I also met a woman who used to be a friend in the old days. Her name was Sangyela, and she would in fact later become my wife. She was also upset and unhappy with life in Lhasa. By all rights, Sangyela was in no danger of being struggled against because she was definitely from the proletarian class, but she was also extremely religious and hated the government for closing the monasteries and prohibiting all religion, even in your own home. If a neighbor or cadre found out you were still practicing religion and reported you, you would be brought before the masses and struggled against, for the goal of the Cultural Revolution was to eradicate all remnants of old values, customs, and beliefs. But we Tibetans are a stubborn people, and many Tibetans from all classes and backgrounds risked punishment and struggle sessions by secretly saying prayers in their homes or by circumambulating holy temples as if they were just on a stroll, all the while whispering silent prayers. Sangyela was one of these. In her case, she went so far as to continue to burn butter lamps as offerings to the gods. She would save small amounts of butter from her scanty monthly ration and use it to light a small butter lamp which she placed inside the cabinet that used to be her altar (behind its closed doors) rather than on top, as was normally done. When she told me this, all I could think about was the danger of setting the whole house on fire by leaving a burning lamp inside the old, dry wooden cabinet. She laughed when I implored her to stop and paid no attention to my warnings about safety. Her religion was everything to her. I was surprised to be so vividly reminded of how religious—and, to be honest, I really thought superstitious—my countrymen could be. But I said nothing further about it.

The more opportunities I had to talk to old friends in Lhasa, the more dissatisfaction I encountered. The general feeling was that the relatively liberal Chinese policies of the 1950s had been a sort of honeymoon that had ended abruptly with the 1959 Lhasa Uprising. One person sarcastically explained what happened with an analogy. The party's policies, he said, were like a wet leather hat: at first when wet, the hat feels comfortable, but as it dries, it contracts and becomes painful.

It was also deflating to have friends ask me incredulously why I had left America and come home. At this point most of them wanted to get out, and they kept asking me, "Why did you come?" "What is the matter with you?" These were hard questions coming as they did so unexpectedly and from such a surprising source, and I didn't feel I could tell them I came back to help Tibet in a way that would make sense to them, so I usually didn't answer such questions. I was genuinely taken aback by what I was seeing and hearing, and conflicting feelings pulled me in several directions at once. I hadn't expected to

see and hear anything like I was encountering. The fear and depression and the general poverty of conditions couldn't be denied. And in the current climate of opinion, there was no one among my comrades at the school to whom I could talk to about my doubts and concerns. The way things were now, if I dared to show any sympathy for my old friends or seemed to take their complaints to heart, I was in danger of being branded as an enemy of the revolution. I had to keep everything bottled up inside.

Unlike most of the students I knew, I didn't see things simply. To most of them—who were young, full of revolutionary zeal, and without much knowledge of life beyond their towns or villages—things were either black or white. Issues were clear-cut, the basis for their decisions unambiguous and seldom if ever examined. I was older, more educated, and had my own concept of change before I even decided to come back. When I said to myself that change had to occur, I didn't mean that everything that made up Tibetan culture had to be destroyed. I thought that improvements in hygiene, health care, and other services could and should be made as soon as possible. Tibet was a very backward country compared to more developed nations. I thought that the sooner we could improve the quality of life in these areas, the better. I felt strongly, too, that as a country Tibet should value education more—especially education for ordinary people. I didn't like the idea that all children would have to struggle as I had just to learn to read and write in their native language. I didn't see how we could move ahead into the modern world without a basically literate population. I also felt strongly that it was critical for the state to be separate from the church—at least in the political sense. In the old society about 15 percent of the total population were monks who were not engaged in producing anything. They relied on society to support them. I hoped there would come a time when monks would be self-sufficient and productive, and I totally favored a system in which there would be far fewer monks, but the quality and ability of each one would be higher.

But I also thought that there was such a thing as going too far. For instance, the example of Sangyela's strong and simple faith had touched me. I am not religious, and, as I have said, I supported fairly sweeping reforms of religion in Tibet. But I didn't think religion should be totally destroyed or forbidden. Abuse of the power of the monks is one thing, but the comfort and support people derive from their faith is another. I didn't see why it had to be either or. Similarly, I disapproved of the destruction of the ancient statues and religious texts. I didn't see what the revolution gained by destroying these things. They were already in existence, so why not just let them alone?

Perhaps more important, while I supported the idea that older people in power should be struggled against to cleanse the system of the old ways of thinking, I felt that the process was becoming much too indiscriminate. I couldn't get the example of my old friend Söpela out of my mind. I couldn't help thinking that the only reason he was singled out was that he was vulnerable—and perhaps because to keep its momentum the revolution had constantly to find new victims. Yes, Söpela had worked for the government in the old society. But they obviously didn't know him at all. He wasn't antirevolutionary. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Despite all these doubts and disagreements, however, I still identified with the students and was on the side of the new activism. I have discussed these events and my ambivalent reactions many times since with various foreign friends, and they always ask the same question: "Tashi, you are obviously a good nationalistic Tibetan who loves your culture and people. How could you be a Red Guard?" I have thought about that question many times and the answer is always the same. Like so many others, I felt that Mao's fundamental ideas would be good for Tibet. I believed that in order to create a truly modern society based on socialist, egalitarian principles we first had to root out those in authority who were secretly against the revolution. In retrospect, I think this line of thinking allowed me and many other Tibetan and Chinese students to rationalize the excesses and wrongs we saw as unfortunate side effects of a vitally important political movement. Although I was never fully accepted as a Red Guard, in my own mind I felt I had a pure revolutionary spirit and enthusiasm, and I worked to further the Red Guards' goals. Seeing the changes in Lhasa and the lives of her people had shocked me and sown deep doubts, and I spent endless hours in the quiet of the night thinking about these issues and trying to evaluate their significance. But in the end, I continued to be full of zeal for the revolution. And I was not alone. Tibet was full of Tibetan Red Guards and revolutionary activists, and, to be perfectly honest, I was proud to be a part of that movement. We were creating a new and more equitable proletarian culture in China and Tibet for the well-being of all Tibetans and Chinese. Or so we thought. How ironic considering what was about to happen.