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Climbing in the Killing Fields

Shekar, a few clicks west of the dirt 'superhighway' to Lhasa, has been a classic jumping-off place for Everest expeditions since the days of George Mallory. Here, climbers can begin acclimatising to the Tibetan plateau before heading into Base Camp at 17,000ft. Trucks deposit inbound expeditions at a Chinese hotel or the more rustic 'guest-house', and there you sit for up to a week, listening to dogs barking and the wind blowing.

A favourite diversion is a day hike through the rubble of the old *dzong*, or fortress, that snakes up the hillside overlooking town. The ruins look long dead, ancient enough to match Mesa Verde or Chichén Itzá. But until just 35 years ago, Shekar Dzong housed thousands of Tibetan monks and served as a regional capital.

In 1959 the People's Liberation Army 'liberated' Tibet from itself. Since then, 1.2 million Tibetans – one in every six – have died under Chinese occupation. That compares almost exactly with what the Khmer Rouge left behind in Cambodia. But until the spring of 1993, when I made a detour through what has been dubbed 'The Killing Fields', the connection had never occurred to me. At first glance, the two countries seem worlds apart; the one tropical, populous, and internecine, the other chilly and pacifist. You detect epic tragedy in what remains: ghost villages laced with bones and land mines, monasteries like Shekar's reduced to rubble. But there's more to it than that. Both Tibet and Cambodia are Buddhist. Each had a population of 6 million ethnically homogenous people. And each lost a million or more people to regimes bearing radical Maoism and weaponry made in China. On the eve of elections, I toured Cambodia with a United Nations worker, and witnessed firsthand the grand, \$3 billion attempt by the world community to lift a nation out of its own history. In Tibet I found the exact reverse – a nation abandoned to its circumstances. The principles of international law have been trumpeted in Cambodia, forgotten in Tibet. The Forbidden Kingdom may as well be invisible.

Anonymity comes naturally to Tibet. Scattered through Asia, Europe, and the United States, its 120,000 refugees have become a virtual cliché of exile. The Tibetans' code of non-violence has muted their rage, and the fact that China's invasion of Tibet occurred 40 years ago – in the wee hours of the Cold War – makes the Tibetans' loss appear almost obsolete. Progressive Chinese like to blame the murder and destruction in Tibet on the excesses of the Cultural Revolution a generation ago. But that sidesteps the issue of ongoing genocide. The massive resettlement into Tibet of racially pure Han Chinese – gulag prisoners, People's Liberation Army soldiers, registered workers, and 'floaters' – is rapidly finishing off what is left of the country.

This population transfer is the Middle Kingdom's version of old-fashioned Manifest Destiny. In Manchuria, where China's resettlement campaign began in the 19th century, there are now 75 million Chinese and fewer than 3 million Manchurians. Inner Mongolia, invaded in the 1950s, now numbers 8.5 million Chinese and 2.5 million Mongolians. And the Chinese are doing the same thing in Burma today. Population transfer steals jobs, food, and natural resources from the locals. In the name of progress and development, the tactic also turns the native people into an 'ethnic minority' in their own country.

Thanks to high-altitude cash subsidies, guaranteed jobs, and other incentives, more Han Chinese populate Tibet today than Tibetans. Chinese commonly refer to Tibetans as barbarians and dogs. Tibetans are pushed off their land to make way for development projects. Their culture and religion are being replaced by Chinese karaoke bars, concrete apartment complexes, and satellite dishes. Tibetan forests and mineral deposits are being stripped and shipped eastwards at a furious pace to build China's 'economic miracle'. Wildlife has been machine-gunned; the people have been communalised, tortured, executed, and marginalised.

At times it has seemed that climbers alone were detailing events within this remote nation. From Heinrich Harrer to John Ackerly (director of International Campaign for Tibet) to Galen Rowell, Annie Whitehouse, Doug Scott, and David Breashears, climbers have provided the outside world with some of the clearest accounts existing of Tibet's slow death. At the same time, however, mountaineers and trekkers need to acknowledge that our journeys into Tibet are helping to underwrite its death. Except for spontaneous donations to yak herders, pilgrims or monks we meet along the way, every penny of our money goes to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and helps pay for its illegal occupation of Tibet. Renting Everest and other peaks to climbers is one of the few ways that China can obtain valuable foreign currency in Tibet. The revenues can range in the hundreds of thousands, even millions of dollars per year, particularly when huge Japanese and Western groups come rolling through. That money directly subsidises Chinese settlers and the Chinese soldiers who imprison, torture, and kill dissenting Tibetans.

Here and there along the touristised stretches, mostly around Lhasa, the PRC has permitted a dozen or so monasteries, like the one at Shekar Dzong, to begin rebuilding. These are mere shells staffed by monks who are underpaid, overworked custodians designed to showcase China's so-called freedom of religion. In effect, China is cobbling together a quaint Disneyland for Western *dharna* bums, adventure travellers and mountaineers. Along with their foreign currency, travellers provide an audience for Chinese propaganda. As visitors to Tibet, where the genocide and artifice are safely tucked behind China's great wall of 'internal affairs', we tend to act as if Tibet were none of our business. The Chinese get our money *and* our compliance. That has to change.

The debate over our presence in Tibet – whether it does more harm than good – is long running. Some purists believe we have no business visiting

Tibet at all while the Chinese remain in control. Certainly there is power in the argument that we ought not to conduct business in Tibet (and that includes renting the Himalaya and contracting services) with the very people butchering it. On the other side of the coin are those who argue that politics, even genocide, have nothing to do with travel. They argue that world travellers – climbers, particularly – obey no borders. Their spirit is their passport. For these modern-day Ulysses, nothing transcends the freedom of the hills.

Maybe, once upon a time, ascent allowed climbers a fantasy land beyond ordinary responsibilities. If so, those times are gone. Himalayan mountaineers are no longer separate from what has become a global tourism industry. Worlds we climbers visit may be more extreme than the beaten path, but our actions still carry moral force. Whether we champion human rights or trade upon them or do nothing at all, we are making a choice. Even in the deepest Himalaya, our choices are our signature.

The exiled Dalai Lama has declared that tourists should visit his former homeland, the more the better. He requests just one thing in exchange: our voices. He asks us – climbers, trekkers, and Holiday Inn'ers alike – to bear witness, to speak honestly about what we see.

The burden, then, is on each of us to *see*. It means being informed and aware and not pretending that our mega-expeditions, our misinformation, and our cosiness with the Chinese Mountaineering Association have no real consequence.

At the top of Shekar Dzong, you emerge into a magical forest of hundreds of prayer flags. In the far distance, Everest blows its plume and several thousand feet below lies the town of Shekar, the Tibetan third of it whitewashed, the Chinese section cement gray. Remarkably, it's possible to feel a spirit of hope here. Even in this killed place, you can see that Tibet is not yet dead. If only a boycott of the Himalayan range could halt China's rape of Tibet. We could make our sacrifice, gain our merit, be done with it. It's not that easy. At present it seems more likely that our presence – informed and vocal – may contribute to some measure of independence upon the high plateau.

There are no easy rules to guide our conduct in these other killing fields. There are no free answers. But it is time that climbers take their presence in Tibet seriously. Whether we like it or not, one way or another, our mountain holidays are helping to shape that country's future.

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