

EPILOGUE

Lhasa, 2016

I am sitting in a teahouse behind the Potala palace with a friend. It's been eight years since my last visit to Lhasa, so we have a lot to talk about. The city has expanded massively to the east and the west – high-rise buildings, sometimes empty, loom on the outskirts of the city. Bright colourful lights, alternating between purple, red, green, blue, and yellow, are shining on the shopping malls, and traffic seems endless. The Barkhor, the old town, looks as it did before, but the buildings are new, the cameras are everywhere, and I need to pass through checkpoints with metal detectors to enter these circular paths of commerce and pilgrimage, and now tourism. More than 30 million, mostly Chinese, tourists walked these streets in 2020, according to China Daily,¹ with the numbers having increased year by year over the last decade. Considering that the population of TAR is some 3.2 million, these numbers are astonishing. Tibet has become a destination for national travellers – a place of clean air and scenic landscapes; it is reminiscent of a romantic past.

But the sky is as bright blue as before, and the park behind the palace is still filled with families. As we sit drinking sweet tea and talking, a man at the table beside us asks me where I am from. Norway, I answer. Where are you from, I ask back. Shigatse, he says. Ah, I've been to Shigatse, but it was a long time ago, I say. Where in Shigatse are you from? Panam, he says. He is from the village next to Sharlung. I explain my relation to his village, a place I have visited many times. He remembers that he heard about a foreigner with a child who had stayed with Tashi-la, and we laugh about the coincidence of our meeting. He had not been home for some months; he lives in Lhasa with his family, but he keeps in touch. Tashi-la is healthy and active again after having had some health problems the year before, he explains, adding that 'he is such a good man', and I could not agree more. After some time, his phone rings – it's his mother calling from the village. I hear him explain about our encounter, they laugh. He asks about Tashi-la, is he still in good health? Yes. Can I ask some questions to your mother, I ask? Sure. These are



Figure 8.1. Resting after a long day in the field. © Heidi Fjeld

the answers I got: Most of the houses have been rebuilt in their village and also in Sharlung, and most people took loans from the bank and received some support from the Comfortable Houses Project (CHP). The houses are now more beautiful than before – they look the same, but they have larger windows. Most households have a tractor, some have a truck or a minibus that they rent out to businesses in Shigatse or elsewhere. They bought these vehicles also with the help of the bank. What else has happened? The nuns have completed the residence areas (*shak*), and they now live in the nunnery. The conversation pauses, they talk about other things. I try to politely interrupt. How about marriage, I ask? For example, the marriages arranged in the previous year; were any of them polyandrous (*zasum*)? He explains – without the sense of shyness so common when people talk about polyandry in Lhasa – that his brothers, who live with his mother, are married together and that one brother works in the field, and one is a herder, ‘he herds more than 80 goats and sheep’, he says, smiling. I know that polyandry is common there, I confirm, and repeat my question to his mother. Of the marriages she remembers from last year, in Sharlung and the villages around, where some of them *zasum*? He answers, ‘all, she says, all were *zasum*’.

Note

1. ‘Tibet Makes Strong Tourism Recovery’, 24 December 2020. Retrieved February 2021 from <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202012/23/WS5fe32193a31024ad0ba9de08.html>.