Chapter 36

A Brief Introduction to the Culture of Our National Minorities
Why Are There So Few Trees in Tibet?

Margaret's worst fears were confirmed the next morning, when she went to report to the Principal of the middle school.

The school was a collection of brick buildings a hundred yards away from the single women's dormitory. Inside the entrance was a counter, with a small office behind it for mail reception and other petty tasks. A young Chinese woman was leaning on the counter, in conversation with a middle-aged woman of indeterminate race inside the office. Margaret addressed herself to this second woman.

"Excuse me, comrade, can you tell me where the Principal's office is?" The first woman was staring at her as she spoke.

"Go to the end here and turn left. It's the second on the left." The woman spoke Chinese with a northwestern accent.

Margaret thanked her and set off along the corridor. The two women at the counter were silent until she reached the turn, then there was an explosion of whispering. Just as she turned into the corridor leading to the Principal's office, Margaret clearly caught the word *foreigner*. Her insides went cold. Everybody knew! Even here, two thousand miles away! So the one thing she had hoped for from her exile—that her disgrace, and the absurd rumors surrounding it, might not be known—was vain. Numb, she knocked on the Principal's door. There was no response. She knocked twice more, louder each time, but still without result. As she stood

wondering how to proceed, a door further along the corridor opened and a man's head peered out.

"Are you Han Yuezhu?" asked the man, in Chinese with a Sichuan accent.

"Yes. I've come to report to the Principal."

The man laughed. "Waste of time. He's never there. Come in here. You can report to me."

Margaret walked along to his office. He had left the door open and gone to sit at his desk. She closed the door and went to the desk. The man watched her with a good-humored half-smile.

"Oh, sit down, sit down. Don't be so polite! Want some tea?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink tea much."

The man was about fifty, short and rough-featured. He wore a rumpled blue tunic and cap. His teeth were brown.

"I'm Zhang Dalin. Branch Secretary for the middle school. Welcome to our unit! I heard you got in rather late last night."

"Yes. It's my fault. I didn't make proper arrangements to get here. I had to wait on the road for a truck. Oh! I had to wait several hours."

"That's not good. Not good. We should have been told. And it was bad luck you had to wait so long. Usually there are four or five trucks every day. But two of them broke down yesterday." Branch Secretary Zhang shook his head. "Anyway, you got here. That's the main thing." He paused to light a cigarette. His fingers were stained nearly black from cigarette smoke, and the ashtray on his desk was overflowing with stubs.

While Branch Secretary Zhang's eyes were focused on the match, Margaret looked around the office. Behind Branch Secretary Zhang was a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf of the same ancient, dark wood as his desk and chairs. It was piled with battered cardboard folders, sheaves of loose papers tied with thread, and yellowing old newspapers. On the desk itself was the ashtray, a cracked tea-mug, and a newspaper, which Branch Secretary Zhang seemed to have been reading when she entered. Behind her, against the interior wall, was a bed, with a low locker set beside it. In the center of that wall was a crudely colorized picture of Chairman Mao, in a frame.

"So you've come from Beijing, hm?"

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"Yes. From the Conservatory of Music."

"Yes. You're an opera singer. Foreign style of opera." Clearly Branch Secretary Zhang had read her file. "Can you sing Chinese opera, too? Sichuan style?"

"No. Not at all. I was only trained in the foreign style."

"Ah. Pity. We might have had you give a performance. Some of the older comrades like our Sichuan opera. But foreign style . . ." he shrugged. ". . .Nobody could appreciate it." He laughed.

"I'm from Sichuan myself, actually," said Margaret. "Before I went to Beijing."

Branch Secretary Zhang nodded. "Yes, I caught the accent. Though I must say, your Chinese is very standard now. That's good, that's what we need here. Someone who can teach good Chinese. And English, of course. A new thing for us . . ." He started to say something else, but went into a coughing fit instead.

"Are you from Chongqing?" asked Margaret politely when the coughing had subsided, naming the biggest city in Sichuan Province.

Branch Secretary Zhang nodded. "Yes. But I've been here almost thirty years now." He took a pull on his cigarette and regarded her in silence for a moment through a veil of smoke. "Conditions are different here, you know."

"Yes. I mean, I expected they would be. But I don't mind any kind of hardship. So long as I can make a contribution."

Branch Secretary Zhang looked at her levelly. "That's right. Make a contribution. We must all try to make a contribution." He nodded, sending smoke out through his nose. "You know this is a minority area?"

"Well, they didn't tell me. But I've seen that a lot of the people are minority."

"Right. It's not an autonomous district, nor even an autonomous county, but as a matter of fact the population here is mostly minority. Tibetan, that is." Branch Secretary Zhang turned aside, scraping his chair on the concrete floor, to spit into a cuspidor.

"But they can speak Chinese, can't they? The truck driver who brought me here, he can speak Chinese quite well."

Branch Secretary Zhang laughed, not altogether humorously. "Can.

'Can' is one thing. 'Willing' is another. I know that driver. Old Bolmo. He's all right. He's what we call a silly Tibetan."

"Silly?"

"Yes. There are two kinds of Tibetans: silly Tibetans and hard Tibetans. Silly Tibetans are easy to deal with. They learn a bit of Chinese—though never very much, because they're too stupid—do some kind of useful work, and don't make trouble. Old Bolmo's one of those. Then there are hard Tibetans. Your hard Tibetan won't speak Chinese unless he has to, and sometimes won't even then, because he's refused to learn it. If you give him a job to do he'll just go through the motions. And if you don't keep your eye on him, he'll make trouble."

"Trouble?" This word made Margaret feel nervous, on her own account. To hear of other people making trouble reminded her that she herself had made trouble, and was known for it even here, in this far place.

"Trouble. I'll tell you frankly, little Han, we have a lot of splittists here. You know what I mean by a splittist?"

"Of course. People who want to split the Motherland."

Margaret was relieved that the conversation seemed to be staying on general lines. She knew about splittists. There had been a big movement against splittists in her last year at middle school. For weeks the Political Study classes had been given over to denunciations of splittists. Nobody knew why. Margaret had never grasped the finer points of the campaign—by late middle school, nobody paid much attention to Political Study—but knew it was connected somehow with the minorities. Some of the minorities wanted to split their territories off from the motherland, to form their own countries. That was the essence of it, she thought.

"That's right. I'll explain the situation. After Liberation, our country re-asserted control over Tibet, which of course had been Chinese for centuries. In a spirit of reconciliation, and because we had more pressing matters to attend to, our government allowed the old feudal Tibetan society to continue. The landlords still had their land, the priests still had their monasteries. That was a wrong policy. The landlords and priests took advantage of it to stir up the people against the Communist Party. At last there was an insurrection. We had to use the army to restore order. When they saw their insurrection was going to fail, the landlord classes

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and the priests all fled to India. Well, the Indian government is not altogether friendly to our country. They set up the Tibetans with a little state of their own, a little Tibet in India. They gave them a lot of money. Of course, the Imperialists also gave them money. So now there they are in India, making propaganda for the Imperialists against our Party, and sending their spies into our country to make trouble amongst the minorities. That's the source of the problems. That's why we have strict rules here. For example, you should never go out of the compound alone. We don't allow that. Your experience yesterday was very bad, very bad. You should never go out alone in this district."

All this was quite new to Margaret. Other than the fact of their being grateful to their Elder Brother Chinese for liberating them from feudalism, the only thing she had ever heard about the Tibetans was that they were filthy. Tibetan indifference to personal hygiene was legendary in China. Father himself had been with the army in Tibet at the time of the landlords' rebellion. As a child, she had heard him tell stories about it, all centering on the filthy personal habits of the Tibetans.

"All the Tibetans, whether men or women, wear a kind of long, loose robe," Father had said. "And when they want to shit, they just spin themselves round like this . . ." he stood up and tried to spin on his toes . . . "to make the robe come out. Then they haul it up, and squat down, and do their business right there, wherever they happen to be. In the street, in a shop, in the living-room of your house! They just shit anywhere!"

This little tale had left Margaret helpless with laughter, rolling on the floor clutching her sides, partly at the outrageousness of the Tibetans' behavior, partly at the spectacle of Father—not a man equipped with much physical grace—twirling on tip-toe with his arms held out like a huge, clumsy ballet dancer.

Now, in this place, she was to be among Tibetans herself, and had to grasp something about these matters of policy. Bewildered, she asked Branch Secretary Zhang: "What about the common people? Aren't they grateful to the Communist Party for liberating them from the feudal landlords?"

Branch Secretary Zhang scowled and shook his head. "You would think so, wouldn't you? I tell you, many brave young soldiers suffered

and died, so that these people could enjoy a modern life, with education and hospitals and socialism. Yes, they should be grateful for that. They should love the Motherland. But the problem is, Tibetans are very stupid. *Very* stupid. Stupidity is in their bones. You can't get it out. My own theory is, it's the thin air up here. They don't get enough oxygen in their brains. Generation after generation, it makes them stupid. To tell you the truth, little Han, Tibetans are no better than cattle."

"Oh, dear. Then I'm afraid it's going to be very difficult to teach them."

"Teach them? Ha! Teach them to use the toilet, that's all you'll be able to teach them. If you can teach them that, you'll have done a service to the Motherland!" Branch Secretary Zhang turned away to spit again.

Margaret felt herself blushing a little. But curiosity mastered embarrassment. "Is it true then, what people say? That Tibetans have no regard for hygiene?"

"Oh, it's true, all right. You'll see. One thing you must pay attention to in your classes is that pupils use the toilets. You must be very strict about it. They won't do their business in the classroom—they get severely punished for that—but when they excuse themselves to go out, they often don't bother to go all the way to the toilet. They just do it in the corridor, outside the classroom door. They think that as soon as they're out of sight, you won't be able to figure out what they're doing. Always check outside after class, if anybody excused himself. And if there's anything there, report the one who was excused. Now . . ." Branch Secretary Zhang scraped back his chair and stood up. Hastily, Margaret stood too. ". . . I'll show you around the place. Come on." He held the door open for her.

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"Used to be a People's Commune," said Branch Secretary Zhang. "That was the original idea."

They were crossing the open space between the school and the women's dormitory, the way Margaret had come.

"There were some fields here before. So the authorities reasoned that

it would be a good place for a commune. But it wasn't successful. Too many mistakes were made."

They had reached the women's dormitory, but were walking past it to the main administration building where Margaret had arrived the previous night.

"The authorities wanted to grow all wheat. But the soil's wrong here, and the peasants didn't know how to grow it. And they wouldn't eat it anyway. That's another thing about Tibetans, they're very conservative. They won't change their customs. They went hungry, rather than eat wheat. Anyway, then the policy changed. They tried to break up the commune, but that wouldn't work either. At last the army set up this research station."

"Oh. Is the army here, then?" asked Margaret.

"Not now, no. There's a garrison down the road, between here and Nakri. But we don't see much of them. They lend us a truck once in a while, that's all. But at that time this whole area was under military jurisdiction. Because of the troubles I told you about. In here."

They had reached the administration building, where Margaret had arrived the night before. It was quite imposing. The front part was two-story, the only two-story structure in the Station, and of a peculiar architecture, with wide square windows and doors at each side of the main door. It seemed to be old. Newer buildings had been added at the back. Just inside the entrance was a large lobby. Two cadres were standing there in conversation. Branch Secretary Zhang walked right up to them.

"Old Ma! Here's the new teacher! The English teacher!" Then, to Margaret: "This is Secretary Ma. Secretary for the whole Station! Big responsibility!"

Secretary Ma was short, no more than five three, with an oddly child-like face, the features all seeming too small and too far from each other. The impression was unpleasant somehow, conveying not the innocence of childhood, but its ignorance and cruelty. He was wearing a dingy dark-blue cadre jacket. He stared at Margaret for a few beats, then made a thin little smile and said: "How do you do."

"Secretary Ma was fifteen years in the army. Little Han comes from Beijing." (Thus ended Branch Secretary Zhang's introductions.)

Again, Secretary Ma said nothing for a space of time that was just too

long. Then: "You have cold winters in the capital." He had a strong south-eastern accent—Zhejiang Province, Margaret thought.

"Yes," said Margaret.

Secretary Ma nodded. "It's cold here, too. Summer is pleasant enough, but winter is very cold. Better put more clothes on."

"Yes. Thank you." There was something in the way he looked at her that made Margaret feel very uncomfortable. The content of that look—or one part of the content, at any rate—was unmistakable: *I know all about you.*

"And this is Branch Secretary Lian. From the factory." Branch Secretary Lian made a tired smile. "I'm just showing little Han around the Station."

Secretary Ma nodded. "Good, good. Be sure to show her the factory."

Branch Secretary Zhang led her outside again. "Old Ma came here five years ago. He's very capable. Can arrange everything. Last year the poultry unit wanted to try a new kind of chicken feed they'd read about. Couldn't find it anywhere. He found it. Got the army to fly it in for us. They have an airstrip at the base. Oh, he really knows how to arrange things. It was he who got the factory set up for us. It made a big difference. To our income, I mean."

"What does the factory make?" asked Margaret.

"Stampings. Metal stampings. For bottle caps, electrical fittings, and so on. You'll see. Over here." He cut off across another open stretch of ground where two trucks were parked. In the distance were some concrete buildings. As they approached, Margaret could hear a sort of rhythmic thumping sound.

They entered one of the concrete buildings and walked down a corridor. The sound was much louder now. After some turns they came to a thick, grimy curtain over a doorway. Branch Secretary Zhang pushed it up and the sound of the factory flooded out, deafeningly loud. Margaret stepped inside. It was a long, low shed. Along the walls at each side, and in two rows down the length of the place, were benches. Sitting on stools, hunched over the benches, were women. Each woman had a machine which she operated by swinging a large handle about a vertical axis. At the opposite end of the handle was a counterweight, a ball of black metal. Swinging the handle caused some part of the machine to come down with

a thump, and the handle then swung itself back for the process to be repeated. Between the women were crates into which pieces of metal were continually falling. At the far end of the shed were two freestanding larger machines which seemed to be under their own power, and which were creating most of the noise. There was a smell of steam and oil.

Branch Secretary Zhang led her between the benches to the machines at the far end. Faces looked up at her as she passed. The women seemed to be all Chinese. "They can earn two dollars a day when we have full production," shouted Branch Secretary Zhang above the noise. "It's been a big boost for the local economy."

"It seems that everybody is Chinese," Margaret shouted over the noise.

"This kind of work isn't suitable for Tibetans. You see, Tibetans are fundamentally nomads. They can't stay long in one place. If you try to get them to work in a factory, well, they turn up for one or two days, then they disappear. It's not suitable work for them."

The freestanding machines were worked by men. Both men were Chinese. They gaped at her. Branch Secretary Zhang tried to explain the stamping process to her, but she didn't get much of it. The noise was too loud, and anyway she had no interest in machinery. At last they nodded good-bye to the workers, and Branch Secretary Zhang led the way out through a door at the back. Margaret felt the eyes of the men on her as she stepped away. The reduction in sound as Branch Secretary Zhang closed the door was blissful.

"Of course," Branch Secretary Zhang was saying, "it depends on our supply of sheet metal. With two trucks out of action, we'll probably run out for a while."

"What happens then?"

"Oh, we have to close the factory for a few days. Same when we run out of coal, or if one of the belts breaks, or the power generators fail. It's a struggle to keep it going. You can really say we're pioneers in this region. As I told you, conditions are difficult here. But we're making progress. Now . . ." he indicated some brick buildings to their front, " . . . I'll show you the arboriculture unit. You'll like that."

"Arboriculture? I don't think I've seen a tree for days."

Branch Secretary Zhang shrugged. "To tell the truth, it's not a big success. It was another one of Old Ma's ideas. He thought if the trees could get a start in a controlled indoor environment, then they would be able to survive outside. But they don't. The soil's too poor, and conditions too harsh. They have a small plantation going down by the river, where the ground is exceptionally good. But it has to be guarded all the time, otherwise the peasants just steal the trees. Here." He opened a door. Inside the air was warm and humid. "Ah, feel that. This is the right job to have when the winter sets in. Let's find somebody to show us around."

They wandered by some empty offices, then through another of the heavy cloth curtains into a sort of large greenhouse. The walls were brick, but the ceiling was made of glass. A narrow path ran down the center, and on each side were trays filled with rich dark soil. Growing in the trays was a wide assortment of plants: ferns, small bushes, shoots of various kinds. Kneeling at one of the trays, working in the soil with his hands, was a young man. He looked up when they came in, but at once went back to what he was doing.

"Norbu! Hey, Norbu! This is our new teacher."

The young man looked up again. His expression was not altogether pleasant. There was something contemptuous in it. For a moment he seemed undecided whether or not he should pay any further attention to them. Then he came to his feet in a single slow, smooth movement—he might almost have been a dancer, Margaret could not help thinking—and stood regarding them, brushing the soil from his hands.

Standing, he made a striking figure. He was tall—well over six feet—and powerfully built. His skin was dark, but not as dark as most Tibetans', and he might have been Chinese; but something about the composition of his features was wrong for a Chinese. He wore an unbuttoned green army jacket, with protective over-sleeves, and nothing but a T-shirt underneath. The T-shirt was tight across the muscles of his chest. He watched them with that same expression Margaret had first seen—wary, insolent. She thought him no more than twenty-five.

"Norbu's in charge of these plants," said Branch Secretary Zhang redundantly. "He's been here—how long now, Norbu?"

"This is my second year." His Chinese was good standard Mandarin,

the book-Mandarin of people who have learned the language at school or in the military.

"This is Han Yuezhu. She's going to teach English and Chinese in the middle school. You know, we've been trying to get an English teacher for a long time. Little Han is a college graduate. Her English is first-rate. We were really lucky to get her."

Branch Secretary Zhang said nothing about her being a singer, for which Margaret was profoundly grateful—though probably (she reflected) he just hadn't thought it relevant.

Norbu had fixed his eyes on her while Branch Secretary Zhang spoke. It was a deliberate kind of look, a stare—as if he wanted to make her feel uncomfortable. Margaret thought it rude, and stared right back.

"It's good," he said after a short pause, still looking at her. "Good to teach English."

Suddenly, unexpectedly, he lifted up his head, put his hands on his hips, and laughed so loud that Margaret involuntarily stepped back. "Very good." He looked at her again, smiling easily now. "Perhaps I'll come to your classes. Perhaps I'll learn English." This idea seemed to come to him as a huge joke. He threw his head up again and rocked backward and forward, his laughter rolling around the greenhouse. His teeth were very white.

Branch Secretary Zhang seemed to have taken offense at something. "If you want to go to classes, you'll have to get release from your unit," he said rather curtly. "All right, little Han, we'd better get back. Come on." And he hustled her out. The outside air seemed cold on her skin after the greenhouses.

"As well as being stupid, I should tell you that a lot of Tibetans are just not right in the head. Mental problems. As I said, it comes down to lack of oxygen in their home region. You never know what they'll do."

"He seemed like a very odd character," agreed Margaret.