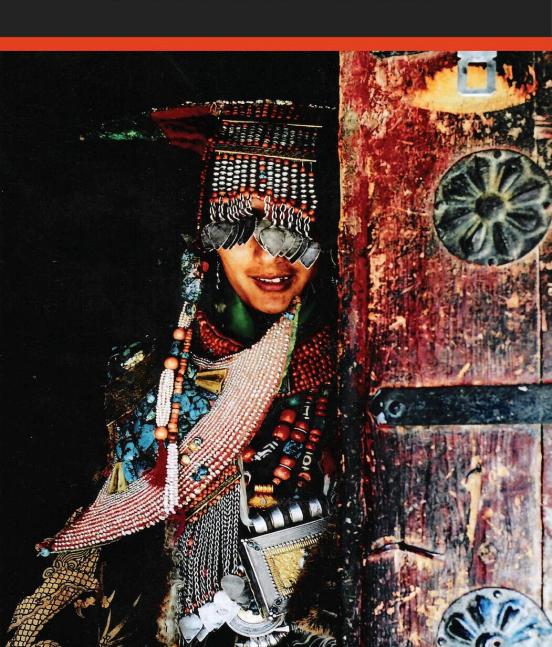
SEARCHING FOR SHANGRI-LA

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IN WESTERN CHINA



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Lauren<u>ce J. Brahm</u>

DISCOVERY PUBLISHER

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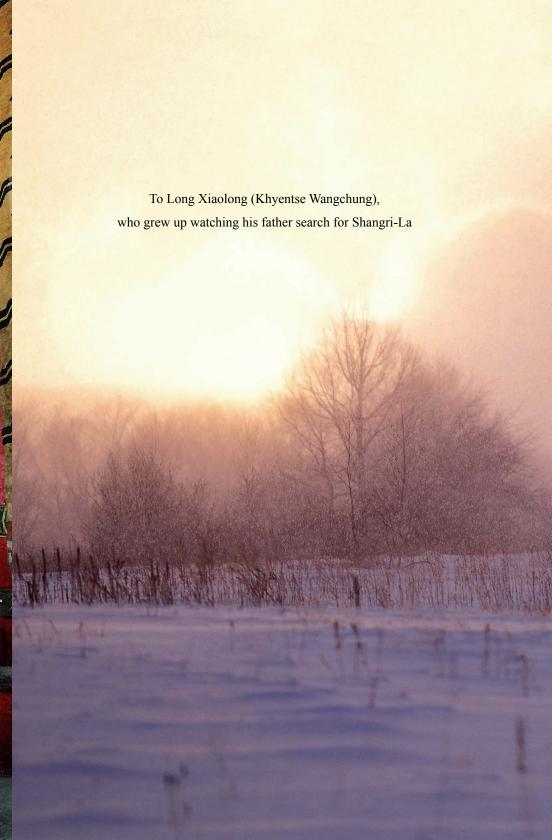
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Questions, No Answers

Everyone asked me why I came to China, as if there was some fault, or some strange reason. Till today, they keep asking me this question. The truth is, I do not have an answer. So I used to make up answers.

As a student, I worked as a tour guide taking American tourists around China. They always asked me why I came to China. I told them I did not have an answer, so they gave me an answer. They would whisper among themselves that I must have been the child of missionaries. I said no. They did not believe me. After a while, I just told everyone that I was a child of missionaries.

Then I became a lawyer, a business advisor, a writer, a consultant, a commentator, and then everyone wanted my comments on everything related to China. After all the comments, press interviews, board meetings, and meetings with all those CEOs visiting China every year, the question would always come up again — "Why did I come to China?"

Again, I had no answer, but they insisted that there must be an answer. Everything must have an answer, otherwise the market economy will collapse. We will not be able to sell books that provide instant answers, or products that are the answer to all questions. There are religious books and videos, and multimedia packaging of the answers you need, but they are answers that you just have to pay for, credit card and you can pay over the Internet, because it makes things so convenient. Do not tell me there is no answer. The answer must be in black and white, very clear, easily explained and capable of being packaged, franchised and distributed to all answer-seekers seeking answers to the same question.

I made up an answer for those who were curious, I told them that I came to China in 1981, inspired by Edgar Snow and Han Suyin, looking for Mao's China, and found Deng's China. When everyone in China was making too much money to talk about Mao anymore, I stayed. This answer was always acceptable, because in the minds of those hearing it, I must be staying in China to make money. This sounded acceptable and constituted a good answer. The truth is, I did not have an answer.

I still do not have an answer. Now I am tired of China as I have come to know it — everybody making money, thinking about money, talking about money and living for money in its pure cash accountable form. It seems like they all worship money now. Everyone is willing to sell everything in China for



money, then sell what they buy to make more money. This is not the China I came to 22 years ago. This was not why I came to China.

Beijing today is no longer Beijing. The tree-lined streets no longer have trees, only cement. The old courtyard houses are gone, replaced by cement. There seems to be nothing here but traffic and cement. The city government is very proud of its cement because it looks just like the cement in America. They keep putting more cement on top of the cement, to try to make the city look more like America.

Everybody calls me to ask for advice on how to make money in China. I guess the Western businessmen have discovered that they can sell cement to China. My phone is always ringing, ringing, ringing, ringing, ringing, ringing, and still ringing. Sometimes, these businessmen who are calling me are upset that I have not read my e-mails. They expect me to wait for an e-mail, as if my life was embodied in an electronic device. I would rather wait for nothing at all. I tell them to stop sending me e-mails because I will not sit in front of a computer waiting



for their e-mails, waiting to die looking and waiting and hoping to receive and send an e-mail. I cannot believe that life can be concentrated and reduced to one single digitized electronic message, which is not even spelled correctly.

They call me instead, and the ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring of a mobile phone goes ringing through the pulse of my mind, for as long as I can stand the stress factor induced by the excessive talking. To solve the problem, I gave everybody my mobile phone number, then switched off the phone and bought another phone. This, however, did not solve the problem.

I began to ask myself the question: "What am I doing here? Why did I come to China?"

Then I had a dream. It came back to me every night. I had dreams of wild Tibetan ponies, white ponies running in uncertain directions. They were running across a vast Tibetan plain. It was surrounded by snow-capped mountains, but they could not reach the mountains. I was not certain which direction they were running in, but I knew it was uncertain. So I decided to follow the Tibetan ponies.

Uncertain Directions

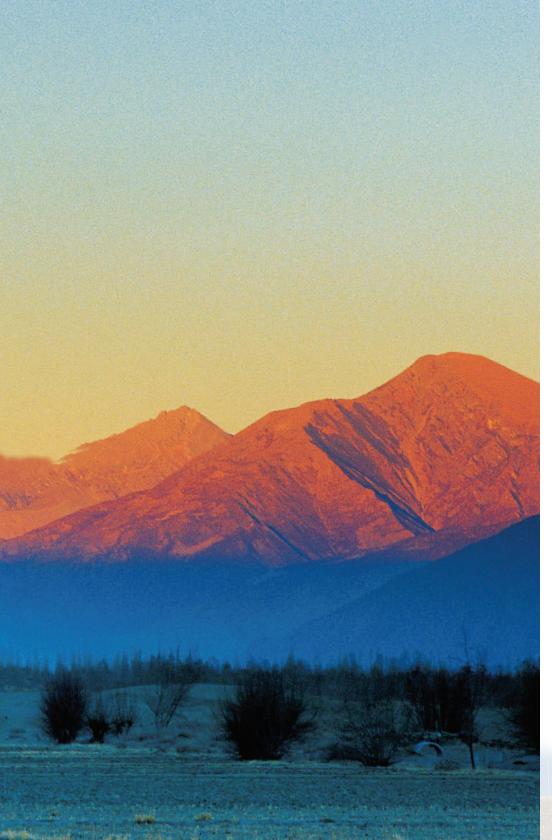
Where is Shangri-La? Is it Tibet? Some tourists say that Qinghai has more of that Tibetan feeling than Tibet itself, as if foreigners can determine better than Tibetans themselves what Tibet should feel like. Some call this packaging.

The town of Lijiang, once an ancient kingdom in Yunnan, discovered a stone tablet with the Chinese characters "Xiang-ge-li-la" (Shangri-La) carved on the stone. So Lijiang advertised that it was Shangri-La. Tourists poured in. But another county called Zhongdian said that they were Shangri-La. Tourists started going there too. Then some people in Sichuan said that Shangri-La must be there too. They joined the dispute.

In fact, none of the officials in any of the self-proclaimed Shangri-La were looking for Shangri-La. They were just looking for tourist dollars on the back of packaging, franchising and distributing Shangri-La.

One day, I was having coffee with the pop singer, Ai Jing, at a Beijing Starbucks. "A café is like a peach garden beyond the realm," she explained. "If you want to find a place that is more expansive, well, everyone has this in their minds, a place where they can feel freedom from urban hassles." I began to think about this as I stared into a cup of café latte, looking for a connection to this peach garden thing.

I told her about the Tibetan ponies and my decision to



follow them even if the direction was uncertain. I described the place where I kept seeing the ponies, a vast Tibetan plain surrounded by snow-capped mountains. She said it sounded like Shangri-La, a place she had heard of once, or maybe twice. It could be found in a cup of café latte if one looked carefully enough. I looked into my cup of café latte and did not understand. She said I was not looking carefully enough.

The question is: how to find a new direction without breaking course with the direction that you have been going for such a long time? If you go in one direction long enough, it is easy to believe that this is the only direction or the right direction until you eventually run out of time. The only way to find a different course is to change the direction you have been going in. This may be done through definitive action, or inaction. To do this, you must stop everything you are doing and place them all in front of you like a deck of cards. Just spread them out in front of you, then wait for the wind to blow them away.

I told Ai Jing that I was heading west, in search of an uncertain direction, in search of Shangri-La. "You ought to try," she said. "People talk of Shangri-La, but there are many controversies over where it really is. If you want to search for it, I think it must be in the west. Take a road and follow it, just go without following any direction." She said that if I were to do this, I should hitchhike. This was the best way to travel in China because the direction would be uncertain and I would end up wherever I was dropped off. In such a case, when

dropped off, I should just keep walking, all by myself, in a certain direction. If uncertain, I could always ask for directions.

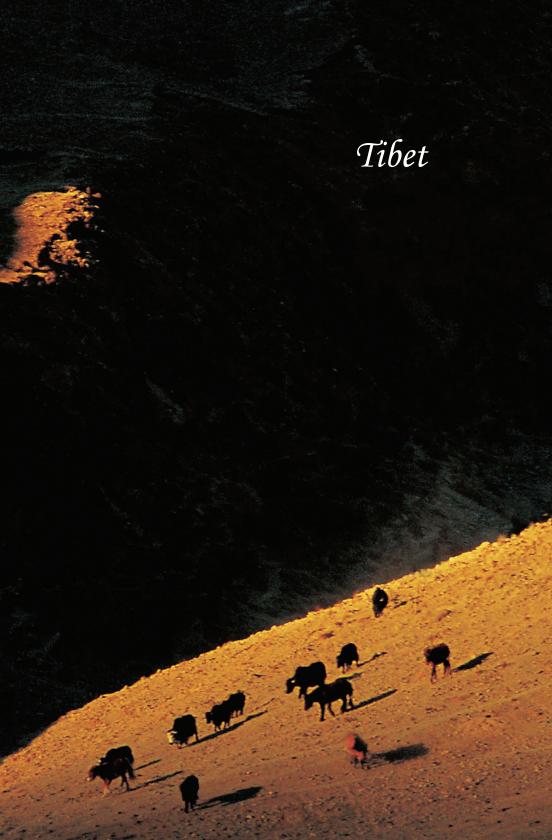


Conversation with a Yak Skull

I have watched you decompose. I have seen eagles pick at your sightless eyes and ants suck marrow from your bones.

I have wandered to lost eries where eagles die.
Only to find a talon and a few feathers rotting in the sun.

And there in eve-tide stillness
I watched my shadow linger,
stretch and dissolve into the night.
Where motionless upon a distant land
time ceased to be measured
and all but the sky
was soon forgotten.







Asking for Directions

I left the airport. I began down the road toward Lhasa. I thought the search for Shangri-La should begin in Lhasa, but was not completely sure. So I started asking for directions.

It is said, upon arriving in Tibet, one should stop at a temple before entering Lhasa, But it is not said which temple to stop at or where one can find the particular temple. It is only said to be alongside the road. So I followed the road. Then I came to a temple. I did not know whether it was the right temple but went in anyways after asking the monks whether this was a temple. They said that there were many temples on the road to Lhasa. They asked me which one I was looking for.

I asked a monk for directions. He offered me yak butter tea. I stopped asking him for directions and drank the tea. It smelled of yak butter. The feeling was warm in the early Tibetan morning when the sky is still cool and one feels that earth has not yet entirely awoken. The monk explained to me that to search for directions, I should begin with a cup of yak butter tea.

I tried to explain that I was searching for a place called Shangri-La but was not sure which direction to go in. Should I continue traveling to Lhasa, or should I go somewhere else? The monks looked at me as if they understood an uncertainty in such a question which should not be answered with too much haste. They poured me another cup of yak butter tea. I drank it.

Entering the inner chamber, I found myself staring at the penetrating composure of White Tara, the Tibetan Bodhisattva of mercy and knowledge, with eyes on her hands, feet and forehead. She is said to see all, to know all. I stared at her eyes. She stared back with composure and sympathy. The room was consumed by the silence of burning incense — scent decomposing in flame. The silence of the incense was dissipated by the ring of a temple bell —the sound of which was dissipated by the ring of my mobile phone. An old friend was calling. It was Douglas Gerber calling from Hong Kong. A high-flying corporate executive with an American multinational corporation, Douglas was a quiet practitioner of Tibetan Buddhist meditation. He told me that his teacher, the Living Buddha Beru Khyentse Rimpoche, would be returning to Lhasa any day. He would probably be in Lhasa when I was.

Great! I would meet Rimpoche again after so many years. I asked Douglas when Rimpoche would arrive, where he would stay and when I could see him. I asked these questions with exactness. But Douglas did not know when Rimpoche would arrive or depart. Such details were unimportant, if I wished to see Rimpoche, I should look for him. Douglas gave me a couple of mobile telephone numbers of people who might know where Rimpoche would be. "Try calling the numbers," Douglas suggested. If I could not find the Living Buddha, I should not worry at all. The Buddha would find me.

I left the temple and hitchhiked down the road. The road passed a rock. There was a large Buddha carved on the rock,

Searching for Shangri-La

painted bright yellow and blue with a touch of green and red. White *hada* scarves and colored *jingfan* prayer flags fluttered in the wind where they had been placed.

You could see the statue from the road, but could not touch it unless you crossed the river. A young boy offered to lead me across the river. Placing his forehead against the hand of the statue he suggested that I do the same — ask for blessing and make a wish. I did so and made a wish. I asked the stone Buddha to help me find Shangri-La. The young boy asked for money.

A Cup of Yak Butter Tea

For Tibetans, the greatest pilgrimage is to Jokhang Temple (Da Zhao Si in Chinese), the origin of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. The process of arrival at Jokhang is a journey. Tibetans prostrate themselves every step of the way. Hands clasped in prayer are placed on forehead, chest, and waist, falling on both hands and knees, face down upon earth, fingertips stretching and reaching forward. This is an act of ultimate submission to Buddha, Teachers, Bodhisattvas, and Guardians — in this order. Each prostration brings them only one step further to where their fingertips stopped, only to begin prostrating again. This is how the pilgrimage to Jokhang Temple begins and ends.

To prostrate repeatedly across the distance traveled on the journey to Jokhang Temple is an act of faith Tibetans live for and is a journey to be completed at least once in a lifetime. For some, this may require months of walking and prostrating; for others, years. On the plaza before Jokhang Temple, along the concentric roads winding around Jokhang Temple, one can see many Tibetans prostrating. Some have traveled long distances, others entire lifetimes

So for me, the search for Shangri-La began at Jokhang Temple. This was the logical place to begin such a search. Here, more than 1,300 years ago, during the height of the Tang Dynasty, Emperor Tang Taizhong presented Princess Wen Cheng to the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo, as an act of unity

between two peoples. She brought with her a statue of Sakamuni, the first Buddha. The temple was built around this statue.

Around the temple, concentric rings of roads unwind, lined with enormous brass Tibetan prayer wheels. There are prayers written and tucked inside the wheels. If you turn them, it is likened to saying the prayers, in this manner, the temple is always surrounded by the whirling energy emitted from the concentric turning of wheels. Pilgrims coming to the temple must follow the cyclic path and turn all the wheels. You can turn them clockwise, but not counter-clockwise. Clocks cannot be turned backwards.

It is said that Princess Wen Cheng brought Buddhism to Tibet and that she smiled (but remembered not to laugh) like the Bodhisattva, Guan Yin. Jokhang became a center of learning; a center for the spread of Buddhist philosophy, from here, the philosophy of the ideal Shambhala, or "Shangri-La" extended to Nepal, Bhutan, Qinghai, Yunnan and eventually, throughout the world. So logically, the search for Shangri-La should begin at Jokhang Temple. I was to learn by coming to Jokhang Temple that to begin such a search, one must begin by disengaging from the logical.

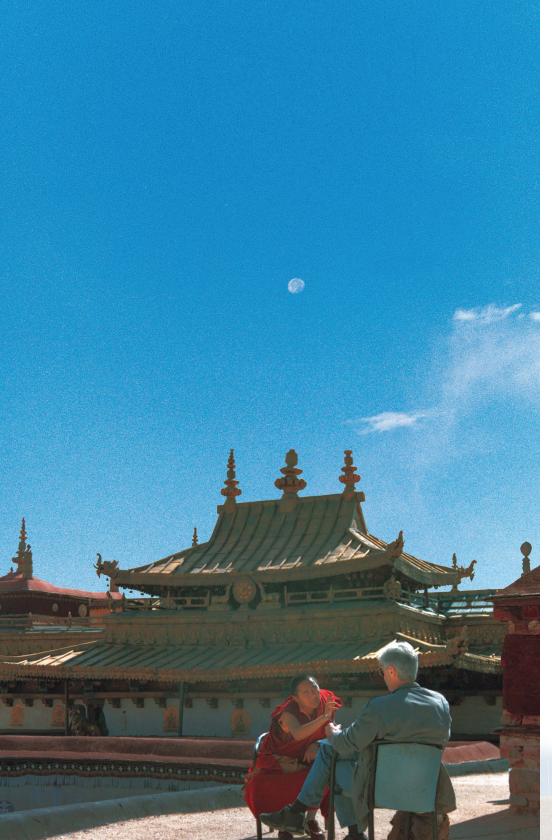
Such disengagement began when I entered the heavy red gate of Jokhang Temple, smothered in the smell of incense and yak butter oil. I entered the door and crawled up a narrow staircase to the rooftop looking for Nyima Tsering, one of the 99 monks who administer Jokhang Temple. I found him in a room and he

offered me yak butter tea. I began to look for Shangri-La in the cup of tea, and remembered to look carefully. I was not looking carefully enough.

Nyima Tsering complained about the tourists. There were too many of them. While on one hand, he was pleased that so many people wanted to come to Jokhang to gain knowledge in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. On the other hand, he was disturbed by the number of cigarette butts and Kodak film cartons being left behind. Due to the overwhelming international popularity of Tibetan philosophy and Shangri-La searching chic, the monks were now too busy sweeping up cigarette butts and used film cartons to have time for meditation, he complained. This was becoming a problem, interfering with the process of concentration. How could monks teach Buddhist philosophy to visitors seeking answers to their questions when the monks were so busy cleaning up the garbage they had left behind?

I stopped looking for Shangri-La to discuss this problem, hoping to provide him with an answer. Instead, Nyima Tsering brought me to the rooftop of Jokhang Temple to talk about Buddhist philosophy, while still complaining about the extensive littering. I left the yak butter tea, still hot, in his room. Eventually, the tea would evaporate. Yak butter, however, would remain.

"But now this is a problem," explained Nyima Tsering, waving his hands excitedly from under his saffron robe. "I feel both happy and sad. I am happy that so many people want to understand our culture through Jokhang Temple. On the other



hand, I worry that we have too many visitors. People come to Tibet with great hope of seeking Buddhist truths. However, upon arrival, they cannot obtain what they want. As Buddhist monks, we cannot introduce them properly to Buddhist Dharma, because there are many ideas, which we monks, including myself, do not have time to understand. One thing is, we need a quiet environment, a long time to meditate. This is a prerequisite. But there is also a requirement in Buddhism to save others' lives, which means we have to save all things with life. But before instructing others, we should instruct ourselves. It is not enough to only have a splendid temple filled with monks wearing these clothes," he pointed to his saffron robe. "The most important question is, there should be masters and teachers inside the temples too!" He was frustrated that most of the monks are spending their time administering crowds visiting the temple, instead of meditating or cultivating the principles they should teach.

"But people are coming here because this temple is said to be the root of Tibetan Buddhism," I asked. "So they're coming to the origin, right?"

"The origin of Buddhism is India," Nyima Tsering corrected me sharply. "However, it is a pity that Buddhism is now almost non-existent there because of past conditions, or maybe it's destiny. Maybe it did not establish very solid roots there. Or maybe there were too many battles. Today, we have to admit that the seeds of Shangri-La were only planted in the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau when Buddhism arrived. They sprouted,

bloomed, and fruited here. So I appreciate the vision of earlier generations, including King Songsten Gampo. They transformed Indian Buddhism into Tibetan Buddhism by combining its principles with our environment, culture, and customs. So we should feel thankful to our ancestors. But right now, we have a new sense of urgency, as we, their grandchildren inheriting it, should be responsible for protecting Shangri-La. This is a big, urgent problem. If lost, it will not only be a loss for the Tibetans, but also a loss for the whole world."

"Are many people coming to Jokhang Temple in search of Shangri-La?" I asked.

"Many, many. Last week, I received many people from abroad. They told me once they set foot on Lhasa, they felt completely calm and comforted, and found things that they had lost. However, once they return to their homes, they become busy as time constraints pollute their hearts and souls again. No matter how much more money they have, regardless of how big their factories are, they cannot achieve real happiness. I think this is the power of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. We may not have money, but we have the pride of knowing that our hearts are free and at ease. In the era of my grandparents, life was poor, but relationships between people were much better. Really, there are two aspects to being happy. One is your material well-being, the other is an open and free heart that is without restrictions. Without this, the happiness of a human being is no different from an animal. If we only have material things, or if you only have a beautiful home, a big factory, then it is like raising pigs. Pigs are





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OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IN WESTERN CHINA

J. Brahm travels through the western region of China in search of Shangri-la — only to find that it is not a place, but a state of mind. Shangri-la has now become a source of creative inspiration, drawing China's leading figures in pop culture and art circles to western China, all in search of Shangri-la. China's leading cultural figures such as composer San Bao, dancer Yang Liping, and pop singer Dadawa appear in the book, together with artists, lamas, and living Buddhas. Searching for Shangri-la is China's first alternative philosophy travelogue.

Can one, indeed, find Shangri-la?



