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## Road Tripping the Roof of the World

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## Road Tripping the Roof of the World

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2019 China-Tibet Field Study

# ROAD TRIPPING THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

miyako namba & fellow travelers (materials coordinated by sigrid arenas)

Last summer a dozen Humboldt State students, along with me and GESA faculty and respected China-Tibet expert Tony Rossi, took quite possibly the longest road trip of my life...if you could call what we experienced a “road trip.” Our group was comprised of Geography majors and minors, a Biology major, Anthropology majors and minors, sophomores to seniors to alum, an English major, and an aspiring Linguistics major.

We were a medley of students if you have ever seen one, a veritable motley crew that was especially lucky as the summer 2019 China-Tibet journey would cap a program started by Rossi nearly two decades ago.

Starting in Beijing, China, on May 28, we ventured into the heart of eastern China. Mostly busing, sometimes walking and occasionally taking a train, we wound our way through what I like to all China’s backcountry. We ate new foods, met new people, danced new dances, traveled new roads, and encountered more cultural variety than a person could ever grasp from a textbook or a story. We slept in a monk’s house in a small village, threw instant noodle parties in monastery hotel rooms, snapped copious photos, and some of us even played basketball with Tibetan Buddhist young monks.

After six weeks filled with memories to savor for years to come, we found ourselves in the famed Secret Garden in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, toasting to the



*The summer 2019 China-Tibet student cohort, with Rossi (front row, center), at the Yak Hotel in Lhasa, Tibet.*

end of our extraordinary trip, which concluded the following day on July 6. Many of us were breaking up into smaller groups to continue our travels around the Eurasian continent, so the occasion took the form of a see-you-soon dinner party.

The trip itself was full of new experiences, lessons, connections, and stories that will last lifetimes. There is no way I could tell even a portion of those stories by myself. Thankfully, several of my fellow “class”-mates—or, rather, “field”-mates—are here to help me tell some of the tales from last summer.



## Almost Missing the Monk Debates

joan esquivel

My most memorable moment took place at a temple in the outskirts of Lhasa. It almost didn't happen. That morning the group separated when some of us were subject to the dress code at the Jokhang temple. Able to enter with the first wave, I did not receive the information that we had a set time to regroup and then depart for the monk debates. The monk debates, my most anticipated activity. We had a few opportunities to see them, but I always missed them due to the same reason: miscommunication of information. We took our time experiencing the Jokhang during the last day of Saga Dawa, the most important month of the Tibetan lunar calendar. Finally working our way back to the hotel, we met with the disappointed face of our teacher. Lucky for us he waited for us. As a full group, we took a taxi to the temple.



Walking into the courtyard, we saw what looked to be one hundred monks standing in groups, moving in forms, clapping, and swinging their prayer beads. We sat there in awe watching their faces as they poked fun at each

other's arguments. We remained until their closing prayer. When studying something on paper for so long, it is amazing finally to interact with it firsthand. The cooling tarp, the crack of the gravel. I was finally here!



## Treading Sacred Stones

samuel king

Standing on the outskirts of Sjykendo, a huge pile of carved stones piqued my curiosity. In their multitude, the stones formed elaborate walls and hills with a striking amount of them. I got

lost in a maze of Tibetan script intricately chiseled on tablets, varying delightfully in size and shape. I looked closely, seeing that each stone revealed its own vibrancy of color and the artistry.

*“I got lost in a maze of Tibetan script intricately chiseled on tablets.”*

The maze led me in deeper. I climbed up and reached a vantage point in which I was able to visualize the entire assembly of rock and stone. I stood in a moment of silence and tried to take it all in. Sounds of prayer wheels rang in the distance. The shuffling of monks and laypeople circumambulating the stones. The rush of a river. The valley encircling this holy site. I could not help but feel some guilt in treading these sacred tablets, but my spirit of adventure overrides my sensibility in most cases.

# A Snapshot of Amity and Earrings

blenna kiros

As I was hiking down the hill of a monastery in Garze, a Tibetan woman approached me. She insisted on gifting me her turquoise stud earrings in exchange for the dangly blue ones hanging from my ears. The woman never introduced herself. Nor did she take time to assess my appearance and only then decide she wanted to own the jewelry that were already on my lobes. Her disposition said, without actual words, “Where have you been? This exchange was supposed to happen an hour ago.” I felt as though I was attending a scheduled appointment of which only she was aware. I felt as though I had no real choice in the matter. I was happy to give her



*Above left: Tibetan woman with her new earrings. Above right: The turquoise studs given to the author. Right: Author with her new friend (photos courtesy author).*



the earrings because the whole situation was so lighthearted. What was memorable about our interaction was her brash desire to wear the earrings. She seemed very pleased as she confidently flaunted the newly acquired jewelry to all of us.



## Venturing into the Unknown

noah ruschmeyer

After a long day of traveling, our group arrived in a small village near the sacred Mt. Genyan. We were tired, hungry, and a little bit anxious. Our intention was to find accommodations for the night, but we came across no restaurants or guesthouses. Fortunately, we met a compassionate family who fed us lunch and dinner, then put us up for the night. There is nothing quite as humanizing as breaking bread with people who might seem very different from

ourselves. In this photo I stand with one of the grandmothers of the family and her grandson. This moment reinforced what traveling is all about: diving into new cultures and not being afraid to venture into the unknown. In unfamiliar places, it is easy to seek comfort in what we know, but only by breaking free of what we think we know, can we experience the vibrant bouquet of peculiar new feelings, thoughts, and emotions that make us human.



## Catching My Breath, Having It Taken Away

garrett gazzo

This photo was taken at the top of the trip's first major pass, Zhi duo la or "Deer Guts Pass," cataloged around 4,400 meters in elevation. After climbing what felt like 20 stories the top of the pass's vantage point, I caught my breath. And then it was taken away by the sight of thousands of prayer flags blowing in the wind, this mountain strip, and on the opposite end, a sea of rolling hills. Self-

accomplishment saturated that moment because my pursuit of participating in this program started in 2017, and here I was two years later in the midst of accomplishing that goal. That is also when Rylie, another student in our group, made it to the peak and hugged me while saying, "We made it, buddy!" We both broke out into laughter, absorbing all we could from our surroundings.



## Mingling with Tibetan Plant Life

molly cribari

*Ajuga reptans* (*Lamaiceae*) grows on the hillsides of the glacial valley in which the Dzogchen Monastery is nestled. Exploring the moraine was one of the most botanically rewarding moments I had on that six-week trip, finally encountering the plants I had read about while preparing for Tibet. The grounds of the Dzogchen Monastery were flush with flowers, occasional piles of yak dung, and a small herd of horses grazing in the distance. The ridge across from where I climbed was a sky burial site, a place for taking the dead. As I mingled with the diverse plant life, the sound of the monks chanting the morning prayers drifted up from below at the monastery. The landscape was Tibetan, botanically and culturally, with scattered purple shrub *Rhododendrons*, pink miniature *Adrosaces*, and moving maroon lines of monks walking in the valley below.

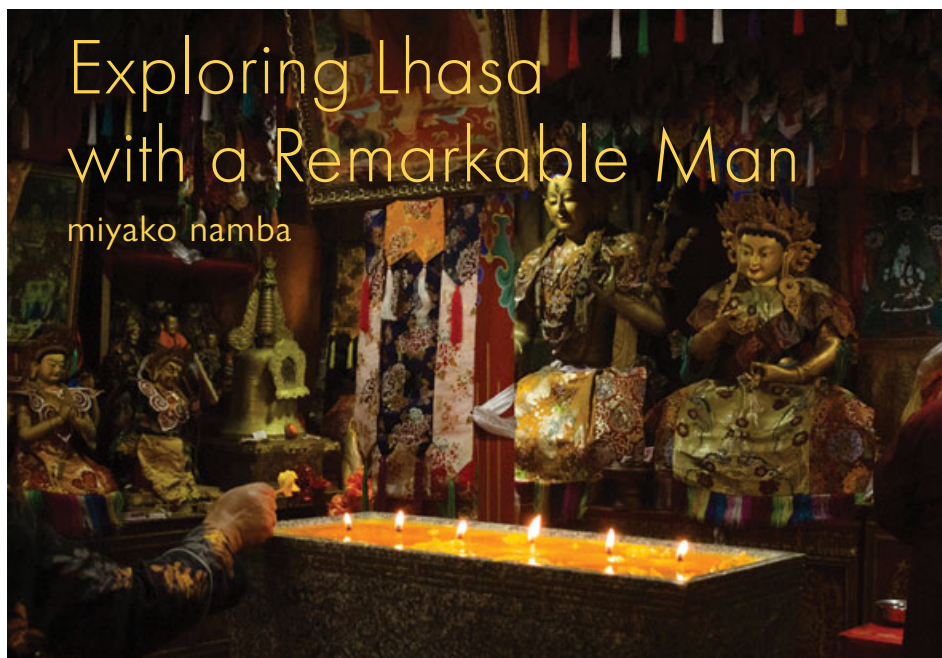


## Elevating My View

monica wingett

**D**uring the second week, we trekked to an area of the Sichuan Province to visit Mt. Genyen, one of Tibet's sacred mountains. My research topic was sacred mountains, so I was excited. We parked our tour bus on the side of a dirt road. From there we grabbed our packs and started hiking. We reached the top of a hill, and what lay before me took my breath away (although it was probably the elevation!). The

view—the valley, rivers, trees, bright sky, and towering mountains—was the most picturesque I could imagine. A place so seemingly untouched by society, one that was hard to believe existed in the world today. All I could hear was the sound of the rushing river over rocks. The only part touched by people was the monastery at the bottom of the mountain and the colorful prayer flags floating in the wind.



## Exploring Lhasa with a Remarkable Man

miyako namba



Tashii has lived in Lhasa his whole life. Our stroll around town confirmed his deep and intimate acquaintance with the Tibetan capital. He was an art professor at Lhasa University, teaching foreigners how to paint *thangkas* (Tibetan Buddhist paintings on cotton, silk appliqué, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala), which accounted for his good English. Tashii wanted to show me a few places, places “the government doesn’t want you to see”. Weary but curious, I told him the truth: I had until 1 p.m. The next three hours were full of lessons, history, and stories.

Tashii led me through five separate temples. As it was Saga Dawa, many Tibetans were out making offerings. Yet all the temples we visited remained quiet and tranquil, despite the bustling Barkhor Bazaar outside. As we wound through alleyways and temples, Tashii explained more about his life. He has lived in Lhasa for 63 years and has been painting *thangkas* for most of that time. He has restored statues and *thongkas* found in these very temples.

As a history buff, I found the fourth temple by far the most intriguing. Tashii took me to a remote temple in the heart of the Barkhor, down two or three different alleyways, which opened up into a massive courtyard with two women selling barley wine and butter for offerings. We made our way up the steps to a small room on the top floor. Tashii pointed out the *thongkas* he had made, allowing time to soak in all the colors and artistry of the room while he went to talk to the monk.

In every room honoring a deity or idea, one almost usually encounters a monk accepting offerings in the form of currency while reciting sutras. When I returned to Tashii, he mentioned off-handedly that this was the room where the Dalai Lama hid out while the Potala and the Jokhung were being searched during the Cultural Revolution. The Dalai Lama spent his last night in Tibet in this very room.

I was still processing all I had just learned when Tashii took me to yet another temple, this time outside the Barkhor. It appeared far bigger than all the other temples. After the tour of temples, Tashii guided me to a traditional teahouse, which he said was one of only twelve remaining original buildings in Lhasa. All the workers and patrons were Tibetan. The lighting was mostly natural light. It was dark but cozy. I sipped sweet tea and listened to more of Tashii’s stories. He talked of his family and many of the adventures he has had around China.

During these three hours, I caught myself doing reality checks more times than I’d like to admit. Tashii’s stories were unbelievable at times, his body of experience something I could have never imagined. Tashii never asked for money or asked me to buy his paintings. In fact, he offered to make me a *thongka*, send it across the Pacific Ocean to my home. I’m not holding my breath awaiting for a package from Lhasa, but I can say that meeting Tashii was possibly the most fascinating thing about Tibet. Not only is he semi-famous in Lhasa, but he is very well off and, he reported, helped write most of the section on Lhasa in *Lonely Planet Tibet*.