Letter from Lhasa: on the Roof of the World

I t is late afternoon on a fine spring day in Lhasa, and I’ve gone to mail a letter at the post office, just up the road from the Potala Palace. The three-hour lunch break has just ended. Usually, at this time of day, most government offices are still deserted. But today the post office is bustling. The queue at the Express Mail counter stretches down the corridor; past the souvenir stamps and stuffed yaks.

Grandmothers and young, hip businessmen vie for space and balcony pens at the service desk, edging their way closer to the haggard women behind the counter. These customers push bulky envelopes toward the post office workers, whose tired eyes peer out from behind white surgical masks. The building itself smells of juniper, bitter herbs, and toxic chemical disinfectant.

I soon realize that all of these customers are not sending letters, but are transforming the China Post into a courier of protection and epidemic prevention from the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR)—one of the only places in China where the number of reported or suspected SARS cases is still zero—to those less fortunate cities and towns of inner China. The precious parcels contain Tibetan incense and protective amulets as well as Tibetan “precious pills,” bound for friends and relatives in other corners of the Motherland.

As I edge my way into the fray at the post office, I overhear stories about the inflated prices of Tibetan incense—a problem as Tibetans prepare for Saka Dawa, the most holy month of their lunar calendar, and a time for ritual and merit-making. A pair of Tibetan women—young mothers in their early thirties—chat about the traditional Chinese antiviral medicines that are being given to their kindergarteners each day after school lunch. Two old men, each wielding a prayer wheel, whisper the names of Tibetan Buddhist lamas and traditional doctors who are said to make the most potent protection amulets. A woman stirs out at the swiftly moving clouds of a gathering storm, and, here in the public domain, refers to the Dalai Lama: “He must be sending prayers to cleanse Tibet and keep us safe,” she says. Indeed, the weather on the Tibetan plateau has been erratic since March, when SARS became a global phenomenon and when the Chinese government began to recognize the extent of this new disease’s grip on its cities. Many Tibetans know attribute this oscillation between snow and hail, wind and sun as not merely “natural” but rather as divinely inspired purification.

One of the most interesting aspects of the SARS phenomenon in Tibet has been the proliferation of these hand-made protection amulets, or samsara beads, in Tibet. Even Communist Party officials are wearing them. Throughout Tibet, there has been a show of “superstitious” solidarity that, to me, marks a welcome alternative to the big business of ready-made Tibetan medicines, gives rise to an interesting counter-narrative to biomedical epidemic prevention, and lends a new meaning to the notion of “public health.”

In the past few weeks, I’ve begun to collect these hand-made bundles of herbs, blessed with prayers and beautifully wrapped in silk, that have been prepared by various Tibetan doctor friends. The amulets are meant to be fastened around one’s neck with silk blessing cords. However, people are advised to prevent the amulets from touching the skin, and to smell the potent nosegays each morning before eating or drinking. After it was discovered that one of the few regions of Guangdong that was not plagued by SARS was a township in which a Tibetan doctor lived and worked, a run on Tibetan incense began. He had recommended the use of incense as a protection against the spread of this disease.

The popular notion among lay people and doctors here in Tibet is that the SARS virus cannot live on the High Plateau, or has a very difficult time surviving, due to the Tibetan and the power of ultraviolet rays here at the roof of the world. The intense Tibetan landscape, with its sacred oxygen and potent herbs, conjures a possibility of protection from SARS that exists alongside all of the coronaviral and retroviral theories, the proliferation of surgical masks on the streets, the mandates to hand washing, the threats of contagion and quarantines, and the criminalization of anyone who does not report someone whom they think has SARS symptoms. The Chinese government has closed the border between Nepal and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, claiming that Nepal does have SARS, even though the Nepali government and the World Health Organization argue differently, and has stopped all foreigners as well as group Chinese tourists from entering the area, ostensibly to “save” Tibet from this new disease. However, daily plane loads of private Chinese citizens and “individual” Chinese tourists continue to arrive at the Lhasa airport from inner China, mostly via Chengdu. Roads between the TAR and other Chinese provinces remain open, though one must endure having one’s vehicle sprayed with chemicals and one’s temperature taken at a multitude of checkpoints.

It is rumored that those Chinese who are making their way to Tibet are coming in search of SARS salvage. Yet again, Tibet is conjured as an otherworldly place, somehow capable of transcending suffering and immune to epidemics—or at least holding the possibility of salvation from this new sickness. Indeed, here in Tibet, protection for the body and soul comes in many forms, but I am wondering and wandering with a greater awareness of what this quest for safety means for the people of Tibet as well as their Chinese compatriots here in Lhasa at the roof of the world.

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