

Litang: Life, Death, Festivals, and Politics (8/4/2007-8/6/2007)

I got a little taste of everything during my short two day visit to the Tibetan town of Litang in Northwestern Sichuan province. I arrived just in time to catch the last day of the horse festival featuring the most important race in which the winner received just shy of \$1,400 an amount that goes a long way in these parts. But the race was only part of the news as rumors of a protest for the Dali Lama and subsequent Chinese crackdown in the first few days of the festival circulated. Other tourist had said they had seen links to stories on the protests on the BBC and MSNBC websites but the China's new great wall against information detrimental to the current government kicked into action and prevented the stories from loading. While the rumors claimed as many as 200 were arrested and possibly two fatalities, I didn't find anyone who was there during the first days of the festivals who could actually substantiate this fist hand. While the scope may or may not have been exaggerated, as China opens up economically to the world, politically change has been much slower as protests and political prisoners are certainly not just a thing of the old communist era. On a walk in the hills above Litang with, a couple of others from the hostel where I was staying, we ran in to a family of nomads where the men's hair was uncharacteristically short for this area. They motioned that they had protested for the Dali Lama and were put in prison for a year by the Chinese where their hair was cut. Two things seem almost universal when I meet any Tibetans, their professed love for the Dali Lama, and their professed hate for the Chinese. It usually takes the form of a thumb's up for the Dali Lama and an extended pinky finger for the Chinese, which I have gathered is not a sign of endearment.

After a visit to the local monastery the afternoon of my arrival, the next morning I headed out to the grasslands on the out skirts of town with what seemed like everyone else in town to catch the finish of the big race. It was entertaining to just watch the dynamics of the



Monastery at Litang.



Wall surrounding the monastery at Litang.

crowd as they collectively tried repeatedly to get closer to where the horses would pass, only to be beaten back literally by the flag brandishing officials whose job was to counter the crowds desire to be as close to the race as possible. After a couple false alarms in which everyone rushed in thinking race was on only to be beaten back by the flagmen, the wining horse crossed the finish and was mobbed by the crowd. At this point the flagmen were overwhelmed and there previous efforts seemed futile in retrospect. Apparently there is only one place that matters since after the winning horse arrived the finish line was completely obscured by the mob as they draped the horse and rider in white silk scarves.

The following day I attended a sky burial with some others from the guesthouse where I was staying. I was somewhat surprised that tourists were allowed to observe, as I had heard that it was usually a very privet affair. For those unfamiliar with the traditional manner in which Tibetans dispose of a body, in a sky burial the body of the deceased is fed to vultures. In addition to symbolism of the cycle of life and wheel of dharma, it is that last

compassionate Karmic act by the deceased, offering their own body as food for other beings. The body is staked down to the ground with a red scarf around the neck and then the waiting vultures are allowed to feed. When we arrived the vultures were well into there feeding and the two bodies skeletal structure was clearly visible with the only skin remaining on the hands and feet. The vultures were large with wing spans in the 5-6 feet range, numbering as many as fifty they would occasionally fight each other over scraps of flesh. There were only a handful of the friends and family of the two deceased in attendance, all men. While women are allowed, they apparently usually don't attend. I can understand how it would be a hard thing to watch for someone close to the deceased. I was a bit surprised by the atmosphere which was not as solemn as I expected. The Tibetans in attendance talked amongst their selves and played with their cell phones. One of the bodies head kept rolling down the hill , and the white clad Sky master who presides over the burial would have to go down pick it up and bring it back



Crowd at the horse race in Litang.



Winner of the horse race in Litang.

to place it with the rest of the body. Once the bodies were picked clean the Sky master would then hack up the body starting from the feet and working his way up beating the bones into a pulp and mixing them with tsampa (a barely flour). Once he had ground up all the bones he walked away and the vultures descended the mixture devouring it in a feeding frenzy. Afterwards the family and friends graciously invited us western onlookers for food and tea.



Men standing on a motorcycle in attempt to get a better view of the horse race.



Sky burial site in Litang from a distance not pictures were allowed while we were watching the burial and I respected the wishes of our hosts and didn't try to sneak any. This shot is from a hill top far away the vultures are above and sky master in white is breaking down the bones of the second body.



Excited monk leaving the hall after chanting. Actually he was just hamming it up for the camera.



Elaborately painted house next to the monastery in Litang.



**Young monk at the
monastery in Litang.**



**Monks quarters at the
monastery in Litang.**



**Woman outside pile mani
near the monastery in
Litang.**



**Woman and baby
watching the horse race in
Litang.**



Winner of the horse race celebrating, Litang.



Horse festival in Litang.



Man examines glasses in Litang.



Horse riding demonstration on the festival in Litang.



Horse riding demonstration on the festival in Litang.



Women in Litang.



Tents at the festival in Litang.



Man examines rugs in Litang.



Men admiring a horse at the horse festival in Litang.



Woman at the festival in Litang.



Men in Litang.



Kampa man in Litang.



Kampa man in Litang.



Grasslands outside Litang.



Nomad man outside Litang (not one of the ones who when to prison).



**Nomad child outside
of Litang.**



**Nomad woman and child
outside of Litang.**