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Gossip From The Bazaar

By Mick Khoo
University of Colorado

The recent release of **Seven Years in Tibet** has provoked the customary media hoo-haa, and there have been the usual slew of stories floating about around the films launch, including discussions of Harrer's Nazi past, whether or not Brad Pitt can act (I thought that had been settled long ago), Disney hiring the Crown Prince of Modern Statecraft to once again work his dark magic with those dastardly types in the corridors of power in Beijing--preparing the way for Nixon was nothing compared with this--Richard Gere (how did he get in here oh, never mind), and so on. You know, all the really serious questions that everybody had hoped that the film would raise.

In all this fuss, the Argentinean angle was just about ignored, but it turns out that film was shot in Argentina, in the Andes; and although I haven't actually seen it yet, I did get a chance to take a look at some photos taken by a Tibetan friend who worked in the film, and the place does look remarkably authentic. There are certainly plenty of mountains, and white chortens dot the landscape in realistic fashion; even in close-up they look like the real thing. Somebody had definitely done their homework. Apparently, though, they were made from whatever passes for canvas and wood these days, probably some carbon fibre thing spun off from the space shuttle programme, and were light enough to be picked up at each corner and carried about until they were positioned in the landscape to the director's satisfaction; a kind of instant geomancy.

Attention to detail was carried right down to the smallest item; even the jewelry, examples of which my friend brought back from the shoot with him, looked pretty authentic to me, and were definitely good enough to grace the stalls of astute Tibetans and Kashmiris on the streets of Ladakh, Manali and Goa. Apparently authenticity was also to be found in some of the acting, with the actors playing Chinese soldiers in skirmishes with Tibetans often getting beaten up for real. It was to be found less in the Tibetan monks recruited from South India, to whom it had to be explained that when they keeled over in some of the fight scenes, they were to continue acting "dead" until the director shouted cut, as opposed to dying, then getting up on one elbow to discuss it all with another supposedly dead lama lying by their side.

Anyway, the photos that I saw of this generic Argentine-Tibeto landscape really did remind me of Ladakh; and this is not coincidence, as the film was originally slated for shooting in Ladakh, that is until the Chinese government brought up the issue with the Indian government, whose relationship with Tibetans has undergone some changes since the welcoming arms of Nehru in the 1960s. The Indians took a long, reasoned look at the issue, before agreeing with the Chinese. I don't suppose we will ever know what was said, although I suspect that we all have a pretty good guess, and as a result the film makers were refused permission to film in India. This came as something of a blow to the good folks of Leh, who had been awash in rumour, and not inconsiderable amounts of advance cash, since the decision to make the film was first announced. The accommodation scene had been well scoped out in advance by the film company, and all the most expensive hotels had been booked, apparently, for a period of four months; and not only hotels, but even superior guest houses (especially those whose owners

were connected to The Party), had been invited to render their services. For all these people, the math was pretty straight forward. Selling one hundred fifty days of accommodation and as much cheese toasties, Limca and Pepsi (TM) as possible to the representatives of la-la land started to look like a very good deal indeed, particularly for any of the recent builders of concrete hotels with attached bathrooms (principally consisting of dribbly showers, tepid hot water, and non-flushing flush toilets) who realised that they could get away with charging more or less what they wanted.

In the secondary sector (lower grade and unregistered guest houses) there was a certain amount of envy, but also a realisation that with all the main places booked, the discriminating tourist would not be averse to a spot of good ol' homestyle Ladakhi hospitality in a more humbler abode. Not only that, but there were taxis to hire out - it was rumoured that the film company would require more taxis every day than there were presently existing in Leh - as well as catering arrangements, firewood, guides, porters, interpreters, general schmoozers, and so on. Figuring out the angle, the niche, became something of a past time, and everybody had just about counted the money, banked it, and then spent it on that new satellite TV system, when the news came that the project had, thanks to the Chinese, been canceled.

Obviously, some people had invested a lot of money, but what goes around, comes around, and anyway Leh had been growing at a faster and faster pace over the last few years. The temporary surplus in accommodational and vehicular capacity would be soaked up in a short time. Indeed, before this summer Leh looked to be pretty much on an upward growth curve. I trace the beginning of this particular spurt to the installation of street lighting a couple of years ago, which besides ruining the night sky, enabled people to start hanging out on street corners at night, especially those sophisticated young things fresh back from Jammu and Delhi, thus prompting the growth of the late night restaurant sector. It also led to the strange spectacle of middle class Indian tourist families strolling down the main bazaar at night, holding hands in tight formation as they negotiated the piles of burning garbage, the bored paramilitary police, and the fornicating dogs. Street lighting coincided with the mass influx of tie-dye-trousered backpackers, roaring up, in a sort of hackneyed time honoured rebellious way, from Manali. The combination of artificial post-crepuscular illumination, and a gaily be-trousered and dreadlocked youth in search of action, produced for the first time, a kind of downtown Leh, consisting of innumerable shops (all called the German Bakery (TM), a name the originator is now trying to register as a copyright), selling small chewy cakes. Interspersed with these are various up market Tibetan eateries, fancy trouser shops, travel agents, and fax offices, all set up and all waiting for the tourists to arrive.

Which funny enough, this year, they didn't. One very good reason for this is that it was virtually impossible to get hold of a plane ticket. Usually because of the thin air and weather—the Leh sector is notoriously unreliable anyhow, especially once a few flights in a row have been canceled—but this year the unreliability became institutionalised, as the blocks of tickets were no sooner put on sale by Indian Airlines than they were immediately passed on to various travel agent friends of the employees of said airline. These agents then put them back on the market, the result being that if you went to Indian Airlines office in CP, Delhi, you were told that the waiting list was months long; however, if you really wanted to go, there were some travel agents who could fix it; for a premium, of course, this premium being somewhere between 500 and 1000 roops, which is pretty steep if you are under 30 and only paying about 2000 for the ticket anyway. Some travel agents have even moved into the back of the abandoned

office next to the Indian Airlines office in CP, the broken down looking place which used to be the Vayudoot office until they collapsed, and which is now the ticket office for EATS, the only reliable bus service to the Delhi Airport, reliable in this context meaning that the bus driver will not take you 20 kilometers out of his way to deposit you at his brother-in-laws expensive rat infested dump of a hotel. That way you wouldn't have far to walk to locate a travel agent; simply straight out of the door of Indian Airlines, turn right, and in through the next door on the right.

Anyway, this year there seemed to be a noticeable drop in the figures. Ladakhis noticed it, and I noticed it too. There is a point in every season where the locals tend to get outnumbered by video and camera touting louts on the Bazaar (where I spend a lot of my time), and it seemed not to happen this year. Unfortunately for the Ladakhis, the class of tourist who seems to be disappearing were the affluent middle-class Europeans - bourgeois French, Germans and Swiss (not English; they can't afford it) - who before had been the backbone of the tourist sector. Part of it probably was because they couldn't get a flight, or perhaps they decided to move onto the next undiscovered place. Leh is by no means Kathmandu, but at the same time moneyed seekers after peace, tranquillity and personal growth do demand certain standards, and it seemed that with the increasing likelihood of encounters in Leh involving either an Enfield, beer, pot, bizarre dress or (God forbid) a mixture of all of these, they (the moneyed seekers after peace, etc.) were unlikely to find them (certain standards) there (in Leh).

So the Ladakhis are left with catering to stingy riff raff on a budget, the sort of people who turn up with the 1991 edition of the Lonely Tony and stab a finger at the page, saying, "but it says HERE that a double is only 75." These people generally represent a culture which involves not shaving or brushing ones hair, which espouses wandering around monasteries wearing ludicrous shorts and no t-shirts and being sunburnt, and which clothes itself in the sort of garments which Gita Mehta once memorably described as ... and as such it is becoming etched in the minds of Ladakhis in various ways. Various merchants are only too pleased to relieve them of their carefully hoarded travelers cheques in exchange for anything tie-dyed; but the hotel owners are not so sure, and can actually do without these oafs, who sit around in large groups flicking cigarette butts into the tidy Ladakhi gardens, before sidling off to smoke pot in someone's room. Turning up at a guest house these days displaying even one or two of the characteristics outlined above is an open invitation for the sign in the landlords eyes to rotate from Vacancies to Full.

Its not like the good old days, people tell me, when Leh was smaller, and everyone used to know each other, and there was only one taxi stand, and no street lights, and tourists used to come back again and again. Tourists like world famous mountaineer Heinrich I-was-only-following-orders Harrer, for instance, who used to arrive in Leh with two suitcases, in which were a number of other holdalls, holdalls which were always mysteriously full of something or other by the time he left Leh. Just souvenirs, I expect; after all, he did like Ladakh so much. Do you know, they've just made a film about him? Whassisnames in it, the guy who can't act ...

Disclaimer: As this item claims to be gossip, any resemblance to any established fact, either living or dead, is not only totally coincidental, but probably a mistake. Probably.