

Eastern Tibet, or Kham, is a place of rugged ranges and torrential rivers, home to the fierce Khampa rebels who tried for a decade to defeat China's army and win independence for Tibet. Pamela Logan is an inveterate traveler who fell in love with Kham and was deeply affected by the poverty she saw there. With the help of many friends, she started a nonprofit to do the impossible: bring development and humanitarian assistance to Tibetans under Chinese rule.

This book chronicles Logan's fourteen years of work in Kham: helping children stay in school, saving the lives of babies and mothers, providing job training to nomadic herders, improving health care, assisting communities hit by earthquakes, and repairing centuries-old architecture.

Compassion Mandala records Logan's first-hand observations of rural Tibetan society and China's relentless efforts to modernize it. Outlining each gate of the development mandala – areas such as education, health care, jobs, and the environment – she explains how Tibet has changed over the past century, giving historical context to contemporary challenges. She details obstacles faced by Tibetans as ethnic minorities in China, and she describes how they are adapting to China's rapid development and the tidal wave of Chinese migrants arriving in their homeland. She portrays many individuals she knew: incarnate lamas, ordinary farmers, educated professionals, corrupt officials, devoted Buddhists, and a brilliant young woman determined to overcome her humble origins and realize her dreams.

PUBLISHED BY

 Hibiscus
Books



Compassion Mandala

*The Odyssey of an American
Charity in Contemporary Tibet*

Logan

 Hibiscus
Books

Compassion Mandala

*The Odyssey of an American Charity
in Contemporary Tibet*



Pamela Logan

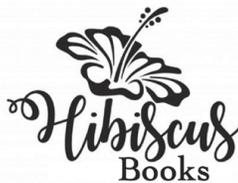


Compassion Mandala

*The Odyssey of an American Charity
in Contemporary Tibet*

Pamela Logan

Published by



Prologue

I WAS WALKING WITH FIVE others, ascending into high, scrubby terrain with no sign of human life. The climb was harder than expected, and our progress was slow. I had planned for us to reach the little hamlet of Chakgé in a single day, but by mid-afternoon, it was clear that we would fall short of this goal. We debated turning around, but the local man who was our guide said that we would find houses a little way further.

The afternoon grew late, and the clouds darkened, but we kept climbing. Icy flecks of snow began drifting down. Scanning the desolate, rock-strewn landscape as I walked, I was heartened to see that the trail was gradually flattening, heralding that the pass was close.

As the last glimmers of daylight trickled away, snowflakes fell more thickly, covering the footpath and its surroundings with the same feathery white blanket. We pulled out flashlights and kept going. The trail was fading away, and I began to worry we would be lost. Bivouacking would be rough: between the six of us, we had only two small tents and three sleeping bags. But fortune smiled, for at long last, we spotted a lone black herder's tent crouched beneath the silver curtains of falling snow.

The Tibetans in our party nominated me to make the first approach. “They’ll know we’re not bandits,” said one, “if they see you first.”

Scattered around the tent entrance, a dozen hoar-frosted yaks stood mute and motionless as lawn furniture. As I drew near, a dog barked explosively, and I heard a chain’s taut jangle. I stopped in my tracks and called out “*Arro! Arro!*” in my best hailing Tibetan. A moment later, a woman in a dark *chuba* (Tibetan robe) emerged to see who was there.

The woman stared at me but registered no surprise. I gestured toward my five friends standing back at a safe distance, veiled by falling snow. Her eyes quickly took in our predicament. Gripping the dog’s chain with both hands to keep the dog from lunging, she beckoned me forward. I carefully skirted the snarling canine and stooped to enter the tent vestibule, where three baby yaks were tethered. Stepping over them one by one, I made my way inside.

Income Generation

*A horse is judged by its saddle;
a man is judged by his work.*

— Tibetan proverb

One gate of the development mandala has the power to open all others: jobs. Income is the holy grail of development, for it empowers people to meet their own needs. Yet, ever since the founding of the People's Republic, the word "job" in Tibet has nearly always meant working for the government. There were few other employers and none that could match the stability, benefits, and opportunity for advancement that the government offered.

Tibetans did operate small businesses, but Han migrants from outside operated many more. Capital was not the biggest problem: although Tibetans had poor access to credit, they could still raise cash from gathering caterpillar fungus or by borrowing from family members who did so. The biggest problem was knowledge: they had little exposure to the new types of businesses that were popping up in towns and cities across China: internet cafes, print shops, salons, karaoke bars, mobile phone stores, automotive shops, photography studios, pharmacies, clothing boutiques, and more.

In Kham, Tibetan entrepreneurs mainly ran restaurants and drove taxis, but even in these industries, they struggled to compete with Chinese migrants, who were quick to spot opportunities and toiled ceaselessly to capture market share. Migrants outcompeted indigenous Tibetans even in many

traditional Tibetan trades such as tailoring, silversmithing, and home construction. Competition from migrants was a big reason why the microcredit model, so successful in South Asia, faced stiff headwinds in Tibet. Tibetans also lacked role models and networks to help them source the manufactured goods needed in the new economy.

Tourism was the only sector where the playing field tilted toward Tibetans, but tourism in Kham was still tiny and seasonal. Were there any other business models they could use? That was the riddle I yearned to solve.

Modernizing Agriculture

Early in the year of the male Water-Horse (2002), my own mother solved the jobs problem by proposing that KhamAid should help Tibetans grow vegetables. The traditional Tibetan diet—tsampa, yak-butter, and tea—fell light-years short of her nutritional standards. She wanted me to fix it.

Apart from a few hardy varieties of cabbage, potatoes, and turnips, most vegetables will not grow in the Tibetan climate unless they are protected from the weather. My mother agreed to donate five thousand US dollars if KhamAid would start a program to construct greenhouses. Families would grow vegetables for home consumption and for sale. As development ideas go, this one was pretty groovy: it would solve two problems—poverty and malnutrition—at once.

My staff and I explained the concept to the Women's Federation, our partner on other successful programs, and they steered us to Nyarong County. The county Agriculture Bureau was keen to see a

model greenhouse project, and the county Women's Federation knew some farmers who wanted to grow produce instead of barley. Nyarong County was isolated and poor and needed to boost its economy. No vegetables were grown locally; instead, they were being trucked from the Sichuan basin and were fiendishly expensive.

I put Linda Griffin in charge of the program. She was a new recruit, a British traveler and spiritual seeker who lived in China and spoke fluent Mandarin. Petite, soft-spoken, young, and pretty, she inspired trust and worked well with Chinese officials. She worked for us part-time, filling the rest of her time with freelance writing.

The Agriculture Bureau sharpened their pencils and designed a program that would build five greenhouses and train five families how to grow, but the cost was nearly \$4,000 per family. I couldn't countenance spending that much money on one family, not when other forms of assistance, such as scholarships, were so much cheaper. Linda Griffin and I dissected their plan, looking for expenses to shave.

The county seat was at a relatively balmy 3,080 meters (10,160 feet) above sea level. As in many other developing countries, subsistence agriculture in Kham was very effective in keeping people on their land and soaking up excess labor, but it provided an inadequate diet and put farmers at grave risk if their crops failed. Yet cash crops were not readily accepted by people who cherished their fields of barley as insurance against hunger.⁵¹

It was therefore remarkable that some farmer women in Nyarong had shown unusual initiative: they had hired workers from eastern Sichuan to grow lotus root, asparagus, spinach, and other vegetables

51 Chinese law kept families on their land by making it difficult to transfer the right to use a given plot except to descendants.

on their land, without a greenhouse. The experiment wasn't going well: the tomatoes were hardly out of the ground before frost killed them, and other crops were barely hanging on. Still, the women had entrepreneurial spirit and the courage to take risks.

One of the women slated to benefit from the program was Ajeh, forty-six years old. She had been to primary school but was functionally illiterate. When I went to her home to meet her, she had just come in from the fields, and her chuba was dusted with soil. Decades of outdoor toil had darkened and lined her face. In addition to their cropland, the family owned a tractor that her husband drove. His earnings of twenty yuan per day (less than US\$3) was enough to make them middle-income by local standards.

While walking around the hamlet, I met a girl who was just skin and bones and looked far younger than her stated age of ten. Food was evidently a problem for some Nyarong families.

At that time, *Tuigeng Huanlin* ("Grain for Green") was transforming the Nyarong countryside. The program's objective was to restore ecological balance, halt soil erosion, and reduce siltation of rivers. It gave technical assistance and financial incentives to farmers so that they would take slopes exceeding 25% out of production, shifting the burden of agriculture to less fragile areas elsewhere in China. Former agricultural lands were to be treated in two ways: those deemed as "economic areas" would be planted with trees to produce timber, fruits, or nuts. Those deemed to be "ecological areas" would be left alone to regenerate natural grasses and trees. Nyarong was an "economic area" where the owners of the freed-up land would get cash to buy seedlings. They would also receive subsidies in the form of grain, which would continue for five years or until the new orchards were mature enough to produce an income. In some areas, participa-

tion was voluntary; in other areas, farmers were obliged to take part, whether they wanted to or not.⁵²

The land under our future greenhouses was not sloped; it was flat, fertile, and easily irrigated: really, too good for barley. It would inevitably be converted to other uses. We hoped to make the owners agents and beneficiaries—not victims—of that process.

Working with the Agriculture Bureau and the Women's Federation, Linda Griffin and I redesigned the program. Ten women would participate. The greenhouses would be simple in design and easy to maintain and repair. There would be one hired hand: a trainer to teach the women how to grow. The Agriculture Bureau would manage the construction and provide tools and seeds, all as an interest-free loan, which the women would repay over five years. Repaid funds would be rolled back into the program, allowing more greenhouses to be built and additional families to take part.

I soon found a second sponsor: Trace Foundation, a medium-sized NGO in New York City that ran several assistance programs in Tibet. Together with my mother's donation, we now had enough money to fund the program. We had a product with high margins and proven demand, firm support from the local government, and motivated participants. Everything looked set for success.

52 The program was halted in 2007 except for forestation of barren land. Liu Can and Wu Bin, "Grain for Green Programme' in China: Policy Making and Implementation?" China Policy Institute, University of Nottingham, April 2010, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cpi/documents/briefings/briefing-60-reforestation.pdf>, accessed 11/11/14.

Tourism Takes Off

Meanwhile, in the outback of Degé County, the guest house that I had jump-started at Palpung Monastery was gaining momentum. Thanks to KhamAid's website and the *New York Times* article, a steady trickle of backpackers was finding their way there. A writer for Lonely Planet guidebooks—a publication carried by virtually all backpackers—made the trek and loved it, so updated editions included instructions on how to reach Palpung. Traffic began to grow.

Outfitters caught on, and before long, half a dozen agencies had slotted Palpung into their itineraries. As China developed, increasing numbers of urban Chinese developed a desire to be in the wilderness or wanted to learn about their country's ethnic minorities. Organized groups, both foreign and domestic, began showing up at Palpung.

The year 2002 brought a communication revolution thanks to new fiber optic cables striping western Sichuan. No more reliance on flimsy wires strung from poles; the new cable was safely underground. No more dialing and dialing and dialing to connect to far-flung towns; now anyone in China or overseas could connect on the first try. You could also walk up to a public phone in, say, the Ta'u County seat, and direct-dial California. Later, the government would shut down international direct-dialing, but in the early years, the services were gloriously unfettered.

Even better: the system's bandwidth was sufficient to carry thousands of simultaneous internet users, spurring internet cafes to open in every town. I bought a gadget that plugged into my laptop and allowed me to dial up a local internet service provider anywhere there was a mobile phone signal—a rapidly expanding list of places. The "Great Firewall" (as it later came to be known) was still embryonic, so you could surf almost anywhere you wanted.

The improved communications were a boon to residents, busi-

ness people, and travelers. No longer did traveling in Kham mean being incommunicado for weeks. The Chinese government blocked websites for international Tibet advocacy groups, but they didn't block khamaid.org. Backpackers could gather information, make a spur-of-the-moment decision to go to Palpung or other places, and later share their experiences with friends—all from internet cafés, without leaving the high plateau.

Rural areas would have poor access to the internet for a long time to come, but in towns and cities, the internet was making Tibet's isolation a thing of the past.

Clinic Aid Delivered

In midsummer, following Dr. Beattie's recommendations, Mr. Wu and Linda Griffin placed a large order with a medical supply house, and then accompanied the delivery truck to the five clinics we had selected the previous year for assistance. They received a warm welcome. "It's a great encouragement to us doctors," one medic told them, "when you bring support from such a faraway place."

Encouragement mattered because the doctors were miserable. Primitive conditions and loneliness were two big reasons for dissatisfaction. Linda Griffin observed that the doctors at Manigango, a remote, high-altitude outpost, seemed entirely dependent on each other for a social life. Although nearly all were ethnic Tibetans, they had difficulty communicating with local herders whose dialect they didn't understand and who had a very different outlook on life.

The doctors had few advanced diagnostic tools, so they relied on stethoscopes, otoscopes, thermometers, and blood pressure cuffs. This equipment, however, was old and worn, with several doctors sharing a single set. KhamAid gave each clinic multiple new sets.

The doctors frequently gave injections, but Dr. Beattie had observed that the clinics lacked adequate supplies of disposable needles, and their sterilization equipment was not up to modern standards. KhamAid gave ten thousand disposable needles and syringes to each clinic and electric autoclaves to four of the five. To keep vaccines from losing effectiveness, KhamAid gave each clinic a refrigerator and cold boxes to use for transportation.

The clinics often received accident victims and people needing emergency surgery. The director at Manigango had learned surgical techniques in a year-long training program but could not use his skills because the clinic's operating theater was not sterile enough to perform operations safely; in addition, the patients could not afford the fees. We couldn't fix these problems, but we did give the clinics equipment to stabilize trauma patients for transportation to a hospital: stretchers, suture kits, bowls for dressings, and a range of scissors. To help the doctors deliver babies safely, we provided delivery bundles with all the necessary equipment, as well as baby scales and charts to monitor the growth of infants in the critical early months.

Wu and Griffin also gave them books: a comprehensive doctor's manual and a rural health care guide. So intense was the doctors' thirst for information that many of them immediately grabbed the books and started reading. In Manigango, where KhamAid staff stayed the night, Griffin rose the next morning to find one doctor with his nose still buried.

Griffin and Wu also noted that the ward beds in Manigango were so decrepit that one patient declined to use them, preferring to pitch a tent in the yard. Later, they arranged for delivery of a dozen mattresses, quilts, covers, and sheets to that place.

Everywhere they went, Griffin and Wu heard that many patients could not afford to pay for treatment. A doctor told them that, in cases of genuine poverty, the government was supposed to subsidize care, but for reasons that weren't clear to Griffin and Wu, this rarely happened in practice.

To meet the need for affordable health care, several tulkus had opened charity clinics at various locations around Kham. Gyalten Rinpoche was building one near his school that would be staffed by graduates of TAR Tibetan Medical College. I learned that many if not most doctors of traditional Tibetan medicine who had graduated from government medical schools also learned the basics of Western medicine. This gave me more confidence in the care provided by the Tibetan medicine doctors at charity clinics.⁵³ The next year, we would raise nearly three times as much money and spend it at Gyalten Rinpoche's clinic as well as ones operated by Shangye Rinpoche, Palgya Rinpoche, and Shechen Monastery.

Another effort that supported health came from Gyalten Rinpoche's school. We had raised a sum of \$14,600 for them, allocated to teacher wages, a tractor for general transportation, and last but not least, a toilet, the school's first.

That's right. Throughout the school's eight-year existence, it had had no lavatory whatsoever, nor were there any trees or bushes in the vicinity. Children and staff took long walks outside the walls to relieve themselves in the open. I had done it a few times, and you bet I stepped carefully to find a fallow patch of ground. KhamAid's toilet grant would provide a handsome concrete outhouse painted white. It would have no running water, but compared to what they had before,

53 Shangye Rinpoche's hospital staff was led by a highly regarded Han physician from the city of Xi'an.

the new latrine with four solid walls, separate sides for boys and girls, and a roof overhead, would be a palace.

Meanwhile, back in Dartsendo, we had just completed the training of our third class of ten midwives. Each of the women had returned to their rural homes carrying with them delivery bundles that included stethoscopes, blood pressure cuffs, baby balances, tweezers, scissors, needles, and autoclaves that could be used on a wood stove to sterilize tools. Each got a package of medicines, and the Women's Federation set up a circulating fund so that they could replenish the drugs as needed. It was too early to tell whether our midwives would be effective, but our hopes were high.

Scholarship Challenges

KhamAid's scholarship program was growing rapidly, and we were now operating in six counties. Program director Dana Isherwood embraced it with passion, spending personal funds to fly between California and Kham. In 2002 alone, she found sponsors for 33 more students. Yet the program was not without problems. One mistake was an early attempt to include primary school pupils. Things went well at first: the cost per student was much lower than for older kids, attracting new donors. But keeping track of so many children and sponsors was exhausting. Then we discovered that one school was accepting tuition money from us and another NGO for the very same students. We pulled out of the double-dipping school and began to phase out the primary school program altogether.

We kept going with older children and, in the fall of 2002, we had 86 girls (our one boy had graduated). The kids were universally grateful and happy to be in school, but many had difficulty meeting a key program requirement: to write an annual letter to their sponsor.

They could write well enough in Chinese (usually less well in Tibetan); they just didn't know what to say. After one girl had fashioned a decent letter, her classmates would want to copy her, producing a stack of very similar documents. We had to look over their shoulders and make them personalize the letters. Otherwise, many would have employed identical turns of phrase.

On one occasion, we faced an existential crisis when we found out that a student in our program, a girl who looked, dressed, and spoke Tibetan, officially belonged to another ethnic group, the Naxi. Her village was an anomaly: a pocket of Naxi people surrounded by Tibetans. What *was* she, really? Had we misled her sponsor? Should we cancel her scholarship?

That begged even harder questions such as: what does it mean to be “Tibetan”?

And was KhamAid, by design, a racist organization?

In the end, we took the easy way out: we kept the girl on our rolls and said nothing to her sponsor.

A smaller but persistent headache was children's names. Most Tibetans do not use surnames; instead, each individual is given two names by their parents or by a lama.⁵⁴ The two are chosen from roughly a hundred common names, but some, like *Tsering*, which means “long life,” and *Lhamo*, which means “goddess,” are especially popular. At one time, we had six Tsering Lhamos on our roster.

Although we liked to use Tibetan names, school records were in Chinese. We struggled daily with name bewilderment and lived in constant terror of sending a child's letter to the wrong sponsor.

Yet despite the huge distance and infrequency of contact, I was

54 Surnames exist but are not common among Tibetans in China.

touched—and sometimes astounded—by how much sponsors cared about their students. Sponsors sent us cash to give them, sometimes more than was appropriate, so that we eventually had to impose a limit. Sponsors mailed gifts to our California office; I packed them in my bags for the long trip to Kham, handing them off to staff who carried them on marathon bus journeys, through all sorts of weather, to the faraway towns where our students lived.

One unwitting sponsor put a “Free Tibet” sticker on a letter he sent to us for his student. Another person kept inviting his student to travel with him and didn’t seem to understand why this was a terrible idea. We began to worry that our program might attract pedophiles looking for vulnerable children to exploit. We ousted the inappropriate sponsor, found the child a new one, and enacted policies to better protect students.

Out in Derong County, the girl Metok Tso was studying in junior middle school. As she grew older, her confidence and vivacious personality bloomed. When the English teacher asked questions of the class, other girls would hang their heads and mumble, but Metok Tso was eager to speak up, to test herself.

Metok Tso’s best friend was a girl named Rinchen Dolma, whose sponsor happened to be Dana Isherwood herself. When Dana visited their school, she wanted to spend time alone with her girl, but Metok Tso was already a force to be reckoned with and couldn’t be easily dismissed. “Metok Tso was so annoying,” Dana recalled, “because when I would ask for information from Rinchen, Metok Tso would volunteer it before Rinchen could open her mouth. Metok Tso loved the lime-light. She was always cheerful. She had energy, and that’s what made her attractive to so many people.”

But I was starting to realize that putting children in school was

not enough, for some of the schools were awful, especially in the remote countryside. One reason was brain drain. In the past, under China's centrally controlled economy, teachers were obliged to accept any job assigned to them. Now China was liberalizing its job market, and the best teachers were quitting in droves. To fill vacant posts, schools hired anyone they could find, qualified or not, with the result that only 15.6% of teachers in rural West China had a college diploma or university degree.⁵⁵ An exceptional child like Metok Tso could succeed in that environment, but many more children were left behind because teachers failed to engage them.

One action we took was to find US\$7,927 of support to help eight untrained individuals who were teaching in Nyarong County attend a two-year training program so they could improve their skills and get certified. Yet that was no help for the brain drain problem, which stemmed in part from horrendous living conditions at rural schools, an issue that afflicted clinics, too. To address this, I decided to launch a whole new effort that would harness the yearning of people in rich countries to travel to Tibet and help Tibetans.

I called the new program, "Better Homes." Not only would it improve teachers' lives, but it would allow the volunteers who worked on it to briefly become a part of rural communities. From that close vantage point, we would witness the struggles of ordinary Tibetans to better their lives.

That first year, I would also learn something else that is fundamental to life on the high plateau: how hard it is to get a decent meal.

55 Shiling McQuaide, "Making Education Equitable in Rural China through Distance Learning," *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10:1 (2009), p. 3.

School Renovation

During the previous winter, Mr. Wu had approached the Nyarong Education Bureau with my proposal to renovate schools using foreign volunteers. To my astonishment, they agreed, and so did the Foreign Affairs Office. A call issued by email got me a team of five volunteers; Linda Griffin would also go. We purchased a truckload of tools, paint, and construction materials according to the sketchy specifications provided by the Nyarong Education Bureau. By late September, we were ready to try out the program.

Our target was a Lharima Township, in the remote countryside of Nyarong County. Heavy rains had closed the main highway, so we changed to a high-clearance truck and set out on a secondary road across the hinterland. Our way was clogged with livestock, for many herders were migrating to lower pastures where they would spend the winter. Eight hours of stop-and-start driving through rain and mud brought us to the school gate.

Thanks to Mr. Wu's advance work, Lharima was expecting us, and we were greeted by a welcoming group of officials, teachers, and a hundred and forty very excited children. I think I must have shaken every one of their hands.

The next morning, we got to work. The teachers lived in twenty-year-old barracks built of logs, squared around a concrete yard. Thanks to poverty and (probably) corruption, the log buildings were rustic and in poor condition. The rooms were dark and depressing, in part because the walls had been papered over with ancient yellowed newsprint to stop the wind from knifing in through the cracks. Ceilings were black from the smoke of wood-burning stoves used for heat and cooking. The wiring, where it existed at all, was a fright.

Even worse, the place stank of indifference. The headmaster was

out of town at a basketball tourney. The teachers lolled around smoking and gossiping in the yard while pupils read their lessons unattended. Few teachers had bothered to improve their living quarters. Their salaries were too low, and anyway, most did not intend to stay in Lharima very long.

Our first task was to haul furniture and belongings out of the teachers' rooms and prep them for paint. I totted up the work in front of us: seven two-room apartments. Added to that were eight more rooms at the township clinic, which I had, perhaps unwisely, decided we would also renovate. These twenty-two rooms were to be cleaned of newspaper and painted.

We got to work wetting glued-on paper and scraping it off, but the adhesive was stubborn, and we had to moisten it repeatedly before it was soft enough to remove. The work quickly got bogged down. The volunteers kept at it, but they looked glum. We were planning to stay for only six days. It was plain that I had severely underestimated the job.

As we worked, schoolchildren came wandering over one by one to see what the foreigners were doing. Half an hour later, a few had started scraping newspaper from walls. "Some of them were turning up first with chopsticks," one volunteer said later when I asked her to talk in front of my video camera. "Then, a little later, a piece of glass, not too sharp, and they were scraping with that."

By midmorning, we had children with cleavers, children with hoes, and children with bare fingers. They piled up furniture and fearlessly scaled the wobbly towers to scrape the highest places. They folded themselves into compact bundles to scrape near the floor. A few hours later, the room was down to bare wood.

I went to the next apartment to size up the job there and saw that it was nearly clean, too. Children were everywhere, and now teachers

as well, and they were all working. The place had been sleepy and defeated when we arrived, but now there was a whirlwind of industry, a transformation. It was breathtaking.

The townlet of Lharima lay at a lofty 3,750 meters (12,400 feet) above sea level, a puddle of humanity in a shallow valley rimmed by forested slopes that quickly gave way to pasture. Most townspeople were former tent-dwelling herdsman who had moved here by choice (the county did not yet have a nomad resettlement program). Besides the school, the town had several dozen Tibetan-style houses, a government compound, some badly beat-up 1980s-era longhouses where officials lived, and a small, tidy monastery. Dogs barked all night, and footpaths were strewn with animal feces. Fights, both human and canine, were frequent.

Hard work made for hungry volunteers. Lharima had no shops or restaurants, apart from one fellow who sold liquor and cigarettes out of his home. We had brought along food supplies, but we needed a cook. The teachers could not do it because we had turned them out of their apartments, so they arranged for us to lunch at the home of a retired colleague who lived in the town. We offered to bring our supplies, but they insisted there was no need.

When we arrived, a friendly, middle-aged woman invited us in. Later, I asked her the amount of her pension, and she said 700 yuan (\$80) a month. That was a decent sum in Lharima, but there was little to buy, even in autumn when livestock is slaughtered and harvests are in.⁵⁶ The closest market town was 43 kilometers (27 miles) away, and there was no bus.

We soon learned that all she had for our lunch was noodles, lard,

⁵⁶ Autumn is the preferred season for slaughter because livestock are fattest and meat keeps all winter long.

and a few spices. After watching the greasy noodles slither into my bowl, it was all I could do to swallow them. Later, I took some food from our larder to give to the family, but it was plain that cooking for our group would be too much of a burden. Besides, their cuisine didn't suit Western palates. I appointed myself expedition cook; it was that or starve.

The teachers' office became my kitchen, and their one-burner electric stove was the focus. I hired a local girl to assist. The first meal would be a simple soup of noodles, meat, and vegetables. We had brought along a pressure-cooker, an essential tool for cooking at high altitude, but I had no experience using it. After forty-five minutes on the stove, at last, the pressure relief valve began rocking and hissing as it was supposed to.

A few minutes later, I took the pot off the stove and opened it. My helper plunged in a spoon and brought up a sample. It was mush. She looked at me balefully. "*Nimen neng chi zheige ma?*" You can eat this?

It was too late to start over. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" I said as my hungry team came in for dinner.

At first, I was a calamity in the kitchen, but slowly I got the hang of it. The stove, an electric coil set into a low table, gave only a feeble heat, especially in the hours before dinner, when the town overstrained its tiny hydroelectric generator. While waiting for the rice-pot to come to a boil, my assistant and I bent over chopping blocks whacking vegetables with heavy cleavers.

Water had to be fetched from a well in the yard in twin buckets slung from the ends of a pole balanced on one's shoulders. This was a trick any twelve-year-old Lharima girl could perform, but I knew my limits. I asked my assistant to fetch the water lest I become the town's laughingstock.

As affluent, fussy foreigners, we had brought fresh produce with us, but it took careful planning to use it before it rotted. Tofu, which came in unsealed plastic bags, was especially perishable. I had planned to buy meat in Lharima, but that proved difficult as people were reluctant to slaughter animals. One afternoon, the township officials procured a sheep that they transformed into a fiery death stew seething with chili peppers and swimming with small bones. It was tough going for palates unused to Sichuan fare; nevertheless, we ate it gratefully. For breakfast, at least, we had local yogurt and tsampa, both very tasty, and plenty of fresh butter.

Hygiene was a constant battle with high stakes for us foreigners unused to local bugs. Enemy Number One: lack of refrigeration, not just at the school but anywhere in town. Residents simply put their leftovers on a shelf, covered with cloth to keep out flies.

Enemy Number Two: the water. Like virtually all tap water in China, Lharima's water couldn't be trusted, and you had to boil it before you could drink it. When I made salads, I had to wash the vegetables in just-boiled water, a commodity known as *kaishui*. Like any Chinese housewife, I had an armada of thermos bottles for storing freshly boiled kaishui until needed. I needed it constantly: kaishui sterilized the cutting board and utensils, removed grease from dishes, made tea, coffee, hot chocolate, and soup, and was diluted to make warm water for personal washing and laundry. Getting enough kaishui was, just by itself, almost a full-time job.

But the greatest enemy was the school loo. It was a putrid shack sitting on stilts that stood by itself in one corner of the yard. To use it, you walked a plank to the boy's or girl's room, which hung over an open cesspool seething with waste and maggots. One's business was done squatting over a hole in the floorboards. More than a decade

later, volunteers still had vivid recollections. “[I was always] hoping the morning air would be cold so it would take the bite out of the odor,” wrote one, “and being especially mindful to avoid the occasional trail of excrement left near and around the holes by some of the less accurate children.”

We installed lights in the lavatory, but that’s all we could do for it. So, I always started meal preparations with a good scrub with warm kaishui and soap. Twice each day for seven people, I served up rice or noodles, three stir-fry dishes, one appetizer, and soup. Cooking at Lharima made me understand why Tibetans eat so simply and why diarrheal diseases are commonplace in Tibet.

By the third day, we had settled into our roles. A carpenter from California led the structural repairs. A computer programmer from Pittsburgh installed wires, switches, and lights. Linda Griffin and three other women were masters of scrape, caulk, and paint. I did a little of everything, but my main occupation was keeping the foreigners fed.

After we had cleaned the rooms of newspaper, we moved into the next phase: sealing the gaps between logs to keep out the wind. We had tubes of silicone caulk, but it was nowhere near enough. What to do? The answer was in the gobs of gooey paper coming off the walls. We mixed a test batch in a bucket. It was a sticky, repellant mess—perfect for children. Soon our elfin army was using its tiny fingers to push paper mâché into the walls.

Next was paint. That was a big job, so we brought on twelve local hires to help. Oh my, how they had fun! They sang while they painted; they joked and laughed, gesturing with paint-loaded brushes and sending ribbons of color flying in all directions. Paint dripped, daubed, leaked, spilled, and splattered. It was a good thing we had bought cheap lab coats to use as smocks. Otherwise, a lot of chubas

would have been ruined. As it was, we all got polka-dotted on our exposed skin and hair.

The work was hard and dirty, yet our spirits were high. Working side by side with locals, squirting caulk and dripping paint and poking goo, we laughed all day long. Wild characters would occasionally appear in the doorways to watch us work. At night, we sat up late quaffing Snow Flower beer and trading stories about the little incidents of the day and the people we were coming to know.

One person I got to know was a young woman named Yang Ming, one of three Han teachers at the school. She had bobbed hair and was barely five feet tall in heels; at nineteen, she was one of the youngest of the faculty. By day, she was a perky sparkplug with a big smile who got on well with everyone, but once, when she was alone with me, she let down her guard. “Since I came here, I’ve cried so many times,” she said. “I’m so terribly homesick.”

Her home was Suining, an impoverished place in eastern Sichuan, the source of legions of migrant workers who did the lowest-paid, most wretched work in China and were treated by many people as disposable. Nyarong County was supposed to be a land of opportunity for Yang Ming. Some years earlier, her father had gotten a job with the county forestry bureau and brought her along with him, transferring her registration to make her a legal resident. They did this because, by attending school in a disadvantaged area, Yang Ming could more easily qualify for vocational training after grade 9. The strategy worked, and she was admitted to Dartsendo Normal College for training as a teacher.

In due course, Yang Ming graduated and was offered a teaching position. She had won the coveted “iron rice bowl,” the lifetime of economic security that only a government job conferred, but it was a Pyrrhic victory because her father had meanwhile retired and gone home

to Suining. She was sent to Lharima, many days' travel from her home and family. Her job was teaching the Chinese language to first-graders who could not understand even a word and were not much interested in learning. The work was hard and thankless, and she drew little satisfaction from it. She was far too poor to pay the ten thousand-yuan bribe that would buy her a transfer to the county seat. Her prospects for finding a compatible husband in Lharima were dismal. Yet if she quit, she would lose her iron rice bowl. "My mother worries so much about me," she lamented, "alone in this place so very far away." She was not yet 20 years old, and already she had been here for two years.

The painting was moving along nicely. Roof work that KhamAid had paid for was holding up. With the help of teachers and children, we rewired all of the living quarters and the clinic and replaced more than sixty broken window panes. We hired a second carpenter from the county seat who worked for four days fixing broken floors, ceilings, and walls.

By the time we were ready to leave Lharima, we had touched off an epidemic of do-it-yourself fever. People who had been living in steadily deteriorating housing, some of them for years, finally took it upon themselves to paint furniture, hang curtains, and make other upgrades. We left them supplies so that they could continue after we were gone.

The impact of the Better Homes program was not easy to measure, but I still considered it a success. In future years, we would bring it to seven other schools in Kham.

Education Obstacles and Transitions

At the start of the Water-Ewe year (2003), KhamAid was poised to move forward, but we soon hit a speed bump—a nationwide panic over a flulike disease called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS. It started in Guangdong province and, because of China's initial

coverup, quickly spread, with more than 8,000 reported cases around the world, mostly in China and Hong Kong. By April, normal life had ceased. Counties and municipalities established checkpoints at their borders where officials took travelers' temperatures and sprayed vehicles with disinfectant. Face masks were ubiquitous, and people went to extraordinary lengths to avoid crowds.

While no infections were reported on the Tibetan plateau, the tourism industry suffered.

The SARS epidemic slowed KhamAid's work but didn't stop it. Dana Isherwood went out to visit scholarship students. The Books for Schools team moved ahead with their next translation project. By now, the books program had been going for several years, but we had not, as yet, assessed its effectiveness in promoting school engagement and Tibetan language literacy. I sent Linda Griffin to visit schools to check on the program's impact.

Visiting nine schools in four counties, Griffin found that kids loved our *Children's Fun Science* series thanks to the cute pictures on every page, but the rest of the news was not good. Our second series, titled *Window to Science*, was being read at only two schools. At all the others, the books appeared untouched.⁵⁷ When Linda asked why the books weren't useful, teachers seemed embarrassed and insisted that they were using them, even though the books appeared pristine.

Griffin learned that the science books were gathering dust because primary school pupils could not read Tibetan well enough to make heads or tails of them. Professor Palden Nyima, whose brainchild this program was, checked several other schools and found the same thing. He was stunned. Enconced in his ivory tower in Chengdu, he

57 Two Tibetan middle schools that routinely assigned extra reading used the *Window to Science* books.

had not realized how Tibetan language literacy had deteriorated in the countryside.

Teachers explained that the bottom line was jobs. How many jobs used the Tibetan language? Very few. “Education is a big investment for families,” Linda wrote. “Both kids and their parents know that Tibetan [language] won’t get you a good salary in the future.”

Our newest project was a seven-volume set of biographies called *Famous People in China and the World*, plus an eighth volume about women’s health. After I read Griffin’s report, I asked the professor to pull them from production, but it was too late: 130 sets had already shipped; another 2,700 freshly printed sets were sitting in Chengdu. So, we tore up the list of primary schools that were supposed to receive these books and made up a new list of high schools, colleges, and universities where people could read at a more advanced level. Despite the political sensitivity, we included several monasteries and nunneries. Then we shipped the books out.

In all, our Books for Schools program had purchased or printed close to 60,000 Tibetan language books and distributed them to more than a hundred schools with a combined enrollment of at least fifty thousand students. But other aid organizations were jumping on the book-printing bandwagon, and some schools now had more than they could use. It was time to move on.

Out at the Derong Middle School, Metok Tso and the other girls in her cohort were graduating from grade 9. In China, for students who plan to continue studying, graduation is a time of acute stress. After classes are over, students face grueling exams, then several weeks of tortured waiting. Girls like Metok Tso who lived in far-flung villages could not even find out their exam scores without a long trek to town.

We wanted to know whether our graduating girls intended to

continue their education, and if so, which schools they had qualified to attend. Anyone who knew Metok Tso would not have been surprised that she passed her exams. However, we at KhamAid didn't know her very well yet. We received no news and had no idea what her plans were. Each August, families scattered across Kham were simultaneously making decisions about their newly graduated children. We asked girls to phone us with the news, but they seldom did. Parents were even less help: they had no phones of their own and were too poor or intimidated to use the public phones in the county seats.

We did not find out that Metok Tso was admitted to Kang Nan Senior Middle School until she and her mother showed up at the school, baggage in hand, naively assuming that KhamAid would continue to pay Metok Tso's fees. As it happened, her sponsor had already committed to two other girls and couldn't continue to sponsor Metok Tso. Oops.

We faced this situation at the start of every school year, and it gave us much heartburn because we hated like anything for children to drop out. We scrambled to find her a new sponsor, which is when Richard Harlan entered her life.

Richard Harlan was a tall, gray-haired, mustachioed gentleman, a retired aerospace engineer, an unlikely explorer for he was not young, nor did he speak any Tibetan or Chinese. Nevertheless, starting in 2003, the year of his 70th birthday, he had begun spending his summers roaming far and wide across Kandze Prefecture. Improvising transportation as he went, he traveled solo or with Tibetans he encountered. Harlan had no political or religious agenda; like me, he was simply in love with the place.

Along the way, Richard Harlan discovered KhamAid and began sponsoring Metok Tso and several other students through our scholarship program. Metok Tso was all of fifteen or sixteen years old and

hardly started on her life's journey. Now, with Richard's help, she could take on the world.

Information

*Knowing just one word of wisdom is
like knowing a hundred ordinary words.*

— Tibetan proverb

What food is best for health? Why did my concrete crack? Will it rain tomorrow? Where can I sell my meat and yogurt? What does “democracy” mean?

A healthy mind asks a hundred questions a day, and the answers matter. In remote rural areas, lack of information matters, too. If travel to the outside world is a useful thing, then its vital complement, a conduit that brings the outer world in, is also absolutely important. Yet throughout history, Tibet's communication with the outside world has been tenuous, especially for people living off the major trade routes. Now, the roads were lessening isolation, but news and information were still slow to filter in. Electronic communication was key, but KhamAid could do little to open this gate, for it lay beyond our means.

A year after the work in Lharima, I brought another volunteer team to a different township in Nyarong County. Bangmé was a farming community deep within the Nyak Chu gorge. The Education Bureau had arranged for us to lodge with a local family. From this family, I would learn much about the contours of rural poverty and the human hunger to connect.

To learn more about this book,
visit pamela-logan.com