



■ The King of Cypress is the biggest tree in China. It is claimed to be the "Life Tree" of Shinrab Miba, establisher of Tibetan Buddhism.



■ The inhabitants of a small village, just at the most high elevated forest in China, have a very simple life style.



■ Nomad children in a yurt village on the Plateau (5135 m a.s.l.)



■ A typical view of the Tibetan Plateau or "the Roof of the World"

On the Lands of Giant Cypressses



LHASA, TIBET. My trip to the original sources of Tibetan culture "the Roof of the World" is finally true: I am sitting on a hill top and enjoying in this darkening evening the magic scenery of the snow-covered Himalayas in the distance. I have quietly completely down in order catch this special moment.

I feel suddenly amused in my moment of happiness, as I recall the lyric of a rock song called "Mešimökin tonttu" ("Gnome of a wilderness cabin"). The lyric, written in 1974, starts something like this: "I was once in Tibet, just a bit meditating, grandiose emotions are filling my mind with euphoria..."

I wonder whether my exceptional depth of thinking and related enlightenment of thoughts could be addressed to the famous Tibetan meditation?

I would like to answer: "Yes, buddhist staidness has already rubbed off on me. But I am also asking myself: is this all just some kind of hallucination experienced caused by oxygen deprivation at this high elevation?"

Background of my trip

I arrived here from Beijing, where I participated in a one-week scientific meeting called the 7th International Conference on Dendrochronology 11-18 June 2006. About 300 researchers from over 40 countries discussed widely there about the present state of today's tree-ring research.

The conference arrangers provided a possibility to join to one of the four post-excursions. I chose this Tibetan Excursion together with 42 other participants.

Lhasa

Oxygen deprivation at high elevation of Lhasa makes me ex-

haling even from the smallest straining. After some hours more and more of us suffer from symptoms typical to high altitude mountain sickness: increasing headache, irritability, paleness, difficulty to breath and indisposition. Luckily the doctor accompanying our group has pure oxygen as first aid relieving the symptoms.

I myself would like to drink some coffee, but it is very hard to get any here!

After a restless night we are having our breakfast. Symptoms of mountain disease hit many of us with full strength. Not even Professor Qi-Bin Zhang, our excursion leader, enjoys his most wonderful day, we can see it from his serious and white looking face! As still feeling pretty good, I try to concentrate on the sightseeing of Lhasa and its near surroundings.

After visiting several temples, we climb up to a hill top in the city centre. There it finally is, the famous temple palace of Potala! Watching this huge building complex is a glory that makes me gasping for air!

Tibet's 14th Dalai Lama escaped from here to India, Dharamsala in 1959. Potala serves nowadays as a museum.

Adventure at Yarlung Zangbo River

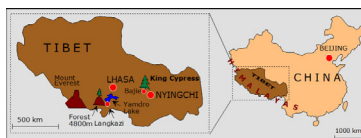
Lama disease symptoms seem to be abating. We are now on the way to the east, a city called Nyingchi, located 420 km from Lhasa. But just now we, our luggage in our hands, are standing by roadside and wait for new buses to arrive from Lhasa.

Almost four hour has already passed. The reason for our long stop was our bus drivers' dangerous driving and their refusing to slow down. Our excursion leaders had to stop the buses and serve them notice of termination. The bus drivers have a strange explanation for their fast drive — we can not slow down because we are fast drivers!

We thought first they are kidding. But listening to their serious talk, full of professional pride, we realized that they really mean what they are saying.

Our new bus drivers drive first peacefully along the beautiful

"Thoughts become enlightened on the roof of the world."



■ Tibetan girls at Yamdro lake

riverside road of Yarlung Zangbo. But gradually also their speed increases. High speed on a curvy and narrow paved road finally, as expected, leads close to Ngapo Zampa village to a crash with a scooter. Because the scooter driver uses no helmet, he hits dangerously his

head and is there after stunned. Traffic has stopped and curious local villagers gather at the accident place. The accident appears to be like a strange theatre play, started by the scooter man, our bus driver and the two policemen investigating the accident. The audience, a couple of hundred local villagers, and a fabulous looking river-mountain view as a background stage makes the scene perfect. None of the villagers speaks English. We just stir curiously each other.

The bus driver has to go to the local police station for one more hour. In the meantime we empty the local ice-cream kiosk. As we finally arrive in Nyingchi, also called the Switzerland of Tibet,

at 2 am, we are 7 hours behind our schedule.

King of Cypress

A small village called Bajie, close to the City of Nyingchi is famous for its forest of 900 giant cypress trees. The mean height of these trees is 44 meters and mean diameter 1.5 meters. Professor Zhang from the Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences, explains that this forest is a relict forest originating to a period about 4600 years ago, when nowadays almost treeless Southern Tibet Uplands was covered by a dense forest. Why did the forest disappear at that time? Was it natural climate change? No, human activity: grazing and forest cutting!

A crooked path leads to the roots of the most magnificent tree in China: King of Cypress. My first encounter with this six meters thick, 50 meters high tree and 2600 years old tree is gorgeous!

King of Cypress, once declared holy, is believed to be Shinrab Miba's life tree. Miba was establisher of Lama Buddhism. I honour this tree so much that I am even afraid to hug it! Well, hugging would be

difficult in any case, because its circumference, 18 m, exceeds over tenfold my fathom!

Juniperus communis, our home juniper species in Finland, belongs to the same family as King of Cypress. Finnish juniper, however, looks a dwarf in size compared to its Tibetan cousin. But talking in terms of range distribution (most widely spread conifer species in the world) and age (1100 years), there is no reason, why this Finnish cousin could not be included in this "royal" cypress family.

Forest on high elevation

We have returned back to Lhasa and are now heading to a region, where we shall see a forest stand that grows at the highest elevation of China. Only about half of our group were brave enough to take a risk to get new symptoms of mountain disease as climbing to an elevation of over five kilometres!

After a couple of hours driving we stop at Yamdro lake, located 4441 meters above sea level. Continuing to the Langkazi direction, we pass the Kangbala Pass at the elevation of 4990 meters. Sitting peacefully in place inside the bus does not feel bad. But walking outside is strenuous.

It is a fantastic experience to see praying rosaries cover the whole mountain hillside and also making a roof over the road in a small pass.

We arrive at a small village just on the base of a wooded hill. According to professor Zhang, this hillside forest, located about 4700-4800 meters above sea level, is populated by Sabina tibetica, a Tibetan conifer tree-species. It is one of the most highly elevated forests in China. The oldest trees here are over 400 years old.

Back to the village. We realize here, how simple life people lead here. Two singing women are sitting facing each other and washing clothes on a river bend. An old man is smiling widely: he greets us. Some women are grinding up corn at some distance. All the patios are very clean.

Root crop cultivations decorate the both sides of the village main road. A curious young

goat keeps quietly tight eye on us, until greets me beard wobbling: ba-a-a-aa". I suddenly recall my childhood home in my home village Kolari in Northern Finland in the 1960s. Our home goat called Manu was very playful and always liked to fight with me on our home yard.

Climate connection

The confiners of Southern Tibet and Finland react to roughly varying summer and winter temperatures and precipitation. Finnish timberline pine (Pinus sylvestris) is sensitive to NAO (North Atlantic Oscillation).

It is surprising that the NAO phenomenon can be detected in the confiners of the Tibetan Plateau about 6000 km from the Atlantic Ocean. It seems that the longitudinal mountain range from the Pyrenees to Himalaya, causes westerlies to bring warm and moist air of the Gulf Stream to these dry areas.

Another cause is the blocking effect of the high Himalayan mountains in the south.

The climatic connection between the confiners Finland and Tibet provides a good reason for developing Finnish-Chinese cooperation in Tree-Ring Science!

Some notes

Geology, nature, ethnic culture, local habits and long history (monks, monasteries, dalai lamas and many other special features) have made Tibet a "Holy Land" for tourists, mountain climbers and even scientists.

Chinese government funds the building of Tibetan infrastructure. The 2008 Beijing Olympics, well visible also in Lhasa's street life, have speeded up development there. The new railway from Beijing to Lhasa brings more tourists to the area, which means also prosperity to nomads.

Mantras are voice symbols that invoke our hidden internal mental power. The famous magic mantra of Lama Buddhists "om mani padme hum" refers to a Jewel in a Lotus flower. It means something like: a close touch to myself (Jewel) in human life (Lotus flower) is the most important thing. This mantra can be seen written on stones, cliffs and rosaries.

A short syllabus: My trip on the Roof of the World is now successfully over. After this experience I can say: "I was once in Tibet, just a bit meditating ... om mani padme hum!"

Margit Pudas-Timonen

Tiibet

Tibetan Plateau
■ The northern upland area of the Himalayas, also called "The Roof of the World".
■ The largest (1000 x 2500 km) ja highest (> 4500 m mpy.) flat country

Lhasa
■ "Place of Gods", Tibet's capital, about 200 000 inhabitants
■ One of the highest cities in the world (3650 m mpy.)

Potala
■ Administration palace of Dalai Lamas on Lhasa's Marpo Ri - hill
■ Extends 360 000 m2 (360 x 270 m)
■ 999 rooms and 1000 corridor halls

■ 1300 years long history. Since 1959 a museum
■ **Tibetan cypress** (*Cupressus gigantea*)
■ Also called Yarlung Zangbo cypress
■ **King of Cypress** is the noblest representative of the species: height: 50 m, diameter 5.8 m and age 2600 y. Grows in Bajie village, about 8 km from Nyingchi.
■ **Juniper** (*Juniperus communis*)
■ The same family of cypress plants (*Cupressaceae*) than Sequoia and Tibetan cypress
■ The highest juniper in Finland in Hiversalmi (141 m) and thickest in Villila (82 cm)
■ The oldest juniper in Finland (1100 y) was cut down in Lemmenjoki (Pelisseläki) in the 1950s.



■ Dalai Lama's Palace of Potala is the absolute eye-catcher of Lhasa.