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**Yangzom Brauen**  
 Model, actress and now author, Brauen has written a memoir of her family's journey from post-occupation Tibet to their new life in the west

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## Looking beyond the mountains

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While global beauty Yangzom Brauen came of age in Bern, Switzerland, she has matured into her Tibetan legacy and global consciousness as an author, actress and activist

by **Elyse Glickman**

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ADAM SHERIDAN-TAYLOR

RATHER THAN INTRODUCE American friends and colleagues to her book in a sterile environment such as a book store or trendy café, Yangzom Brauen goes the creative extra mile by serving preview copies for the US edition of her book, *Across Many Mountains*, with a side of tsampa, a staple grain food (roasted barley) that sustained her mother and grandmother physically and spiritually throughout their entire lives—including their years of exile from Tibet half a century ago.

Brauen, who exhibits a very Swiss sensibility in her hospitality, stages her party at an artist friend's gallery loft apartment in Los Angeles' eclectic Silver Lake neighbourhood. She is attired in traditional Tibetan formal wear, looking uncannily regal even as she finishes steaming vegetarian and meat-filled momos (dumplings) and putting out salad and hot sauce to complete her perfect table. The delicate but distinctive aromas waft across the room.

'I found that when I interviewed my grandmother (Mola) and mother (Sonam, or Amala—mother), for both of them the sense of smell was so important because they triggered a lot of memories, especially with my mother,' recalls Brauen. 'Even years later, something like the smell of grass would unexpectedly take my Mom back to her childhood in old Tibet.'

The occupation of Tibet by the People's Republic

'My grandmother always told interesting stories about her childhood and youth in Old Tibet,' says Brauen. 'However, when she hit 89, I realized how important it was to get them on paper, especially as the old ways are fading, even back in Tibet, with monks and nuns now outfitted with laptops and cellphones'

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of China disrupted the simple pleasures and daily routines of life for Yangzom's mother and grandmother. Starting around 1959, mother and daughter would, literally, travel across many mountains—including the Himalayas—into India and an uncertain future. Yangzom and her younger brother would live this vicariously during their youth in Bern, Switzerland through profound storytelling from their Mola, as well as Sonam's generational take on the experience.

In the later years of that exile, a forbidden-turned-profound love between Yangzom's mother and Martin Brauen (a young, Swiss anthropologist), in the '60s and '70s, blossomed into the necessity to cross another set of mountains—the Alps, and technologies of the new world. This resulted in a multicultural childhood for their children. For Yangzom's brother, this unique upbringing begat a career successful artist in Zürich. The same setting inspired Yangzom to pursue acting, starting her career in Germany and ultimately landing in Hollywood films such as *Aeon Flux* with Charlize Theron and the soon-to-be-released *Escape from Tibet*, which boasts an international cast.

'My Mom was understandably hesitant at first about getting deeper into the relationship with a white man, especially as mixed marriages were almost unheard of in their Tibetan community,' Brauen continues. 'Formalities dictated the suitor had to go to the mother for permission, and my grandmother went to her guru to ask for permission and guidance. The guru initially felt it was not a good time for the match, and ordered Martin to return in a year. After dozens of letters, Martin returned to my grandmother's guru, who then gave the union his blessing, but with the caveat that he wasn't just going to marry my mother but also my grandmother and by extension, the community, aware that he would eventually move them out of India and into the new world.'

Brauen expresses feeling privileged that that she was raised in Bern in a multicultural home, celebrating Christmas, New Year and birthdays like every other Swiss family, but thanks to the rich presence of her grandmother, also Tibetan New Year and the Dalai Lama's birthday. From there came a sense of responsibility to preserve the living legacy of Tibet she was fed every day by her Amala and Mola. With the editing help of her father, she penned the original version of *Across Many Mountains*, which became a commercial and critical success in Germany, Switzerland and eventually, throughout Europe.

'My grandmother always told interesting stories about her childhood and youth in Old Tibet,' says Brauen. 'However, when she hit 89, I realized how important it was to get them on paper, especially as the old ways are fading, even back in Tibet, with monks and nuns now outfitted with laptops and cellphones. Adding to the sense of urgency was the March 2008 uprising in Tibet. The whole world looked to Tibet, which by then had been occupied for more than 50 years. It was imperative to preserve traditions and stories that could get lost in the ages.'

*Across Many Mountains* is effectively a journey composed of many personal stories. Brauen in the process learned authoring the book was quite the journey to create, as recalling events and memories sometimes proved painful for mother and grandmother. However, these efforts were richly rewarded with a personal story that opens out to an almost a 100-year Tibetan history from the old world



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11.06.11

Princess Catherine is on her way to becoming the most photographed woman in the world, as she was spotted Thursday at a charity event wearing a Swarovski crystal-studded Jenny Packham dress, matched with a pair of £175 L. K. Bennett shoes. ..

**Bulova Accutron creatives, with Sir Richard Branson, shown**

11.06.10

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11.06.09

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**Kim Kardashian and X Factor dominate Glamour awards' red-carpet chatter**

11.06.08

Reality star Kim Kardashian proved to be the talked-about celebrity at the Glamour awards in

to the new—revealing just how much the world can change over three generations.

‘As I wrote down these stories, it was increasingly important to me that people in the west know and understand more about Tibet,’ affirms Brauen. ‘I think the original German version connected with so many people because there are not many books out on Tibet, and most of these focus on the Dalai Lama or Rinpoche. Many of those stories are male dominated, and this book presents Tibetan culture and history through a rare woman’s perspective. One thing I found interesting was my grandmother’s views on gender roles and how being reborn a man would be better than to be reborn a woman. It has been fascinating to see how values change with each generation of our family, and how each perspective makes the whole story more compelling.’

Being committed to the Tibetan cause, meanwhile, is a lifelong passion for Brauen that came both before and after the authoring of the book. Putting her acting career in Germany for her beliefs, she developed an international reputation as a “rebel queen”.

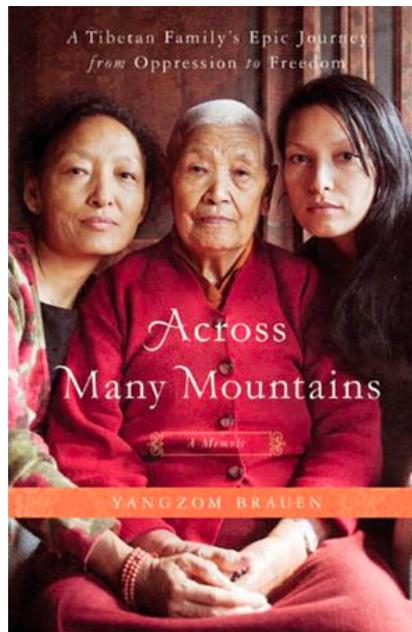
‘People ask me if I have made sacrifices in my acting career on behalf of my political involvements,’ she explains. ‘My answer to that is that I have not sacrificed anything. After finishing my studies a few years ago, I felt I needed to do something for Tibet. In that two-year period, I put acting on hold to become the president of the Tibetan youth association in Europe, encouraging young Tibetans and non-Tibetans to be involved in demonstrations, cultural events and benefit concerts. This was very much influenced by my growing up in a Tibetan–Swiss environment. As somebody half-Tibetan, and also thanks to my anthropologist Swiss father’s ongoing academic pursuits, I could never ignore Tibet is also my home country.’

While Brauen looks forward to the American, New Zealand, French, Italian and Finnish releases of her internationally heralded book, she enjoys observing the way people in Switzerland and Germany are reacting to the intertwined and meaningful stories of her family—especially as political discussions about Tibet on German talk shows led to the publishing deal.

‘So many people in Switzerland have read the book that when people see my grandmother on the street, they recognize her and call her “Mola”, or “grandmother”, and she’s fine with it,’ Brauen muses. ‘Although the women of my family endured so much pain and loss, the one thing all of us will never lose is our ability to believe and have faith. It doesn’t matter what you believe in, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or something else. What ultimately matters is that faith gives you strength and lets you survive any tragedy. However, I also hope younger generations of readers will be prompted to dig a little deeper into their own family histories, because everybody has a family story worth telling and sharing.’



Above Yangzom Brauen. Below The new edition of her book, *Across Many Mountains*, to be released in the US in September.



Elyse Gluckman is US west coast editor of Lucire.

London, with a figure-hugging strapless, floor-length black dress. The newly engaged Kardashian, wearing her \$2 million 20..

## Lady Gaga shocks with massive platform heels at CFDA awards

11.06.07

David X. Prutting/Billy Farrell Agency Lady Gaga loves to shock, and she did so again at the CFDA awards at the Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center in New York on Monday night. Donning a turquoise wig and enormous platform heels—which made it ..

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*photographed by Tanya Sooksombatisatian*



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