## ন্ন্ন্নি জে'ব'ন্ন'জ'বনি ম্না (My Father's Skills) শু'ট্না Mutik

(Translated from Tibetan by Nicole Willock)

Abstract: Written and translated for the second Tibetan Women's Writing Symposium at the University of Virginia in April 2022, Mutik's memoir draws upon everyday objects to poignantly reflect on her childhood. Feelings of regret mingle with questions of Tibetan identity as she recalls her childhood wish to wear new store-bought clothes when her father, a tailor of incredible expertise, had made her traditional Tibetan clothing. Built on mutual trust and intimacy in shared reading practices, the approach to the translation of this piece was dialogical whereby authorial and translation choices were discussed throughout the process.

**Keywords:** translation theory, childhood memories, Tibetan identity, father-daughter relationships, Tibetan traditional clothing

### **Translator's Introduction**

My reflections on this translation of "My Father's Skills" (মহ্মা ম্বিমার কিন্তা), an autobiographical memoir by Nyima Tso/Mutik, draw on insights from translation theorists that view acts in the translation process as involving ethical decision-making. The

translation process was dialogical between the author and me, the translator. This entailed surrendering both to the text and to the other as our friendship grew in moments of intimacy that the shared act of reading requires. We also formed a trust in each other and in our shared ethical values and commitments, in particular to the promotion of Tibetan literature in the world today despite our very different subject positions.

Nyima Tso left her home near Labrang Tashikyil Monastery in Gansu Province in 1999, when she was only fifteen. She then earned a bachelor's and a master's degree from the Norbulingka Institute in Himachal Pradesh, India, where she currently works as a production manager. She published a book of poems with Jamphel Drolma, First Journey of this Life (के के दिन्दिन प्राप्त कर्ति कर्ति (क्षे के प्राप्त कर्ति कर्ति कर्ति विकास कर्ति क्षिति कर्ति क्रिक्ट कर्ति क्रिक्ट क्रिक

Within the framework of the Tibetan Women's Writing Symposium, I first met Nyima Tso over Zoom in the summer of 2020 when we mutually developed a dialogical approach to reading and translating her award-winning poem, "Life in Samtha/the Borderlands" (ས་མབའོ་བ།). This culminated in several public bi-lingual readings and its publication in A Living Treasure: Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in Honor of Janet Gyatso. Nyima Tso wrote "My Father's Skills" for the second Tibetan Women's Writing Symposium which took place in person at the University of Virginia in April 2022. She chose her subject matter—childhood memories of her native Amdo—because she knew Tibetan writers from China were attending the symposium. The Tibetan-language memoir was also posted on Facebook. The inspiration

for this piece came from the organizers celebrating Tibetan women's writing, and in this way, the inspiration was also inherently dialogical.

The translation process involved surrendering to the text and to each other in reading together both Tibetan and English texts. Lawrence Venuti (The Translation Studies Reader; The Translator's Invisibility, among others) brings attention to the ethical dimensions of inscribing and domesticating foreign language literature. The process of domestication—turning a foreign text into an English one usually begins with the translator's choice to translate a particular text. In this case, I, as translator, stepped back from making this choice and surrendered to the author's choice to decide which text of her corpus should be translated. In her seminal essay, "The Politics of Translation,"8 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak brings attention to a feminist approach of surrendering to the linguistic rhetoricity of the text in the intimate act of reading while also considering the status of language in the world. After reading through the Tibetan of "My Father's Skills" a couple of times on my own, Nyima Tso and I met on Zoom to read and discuss the text together in the same process that we had used for translating "Life in Samtha/the Borderlands" (মামর্থীবের্ট্রানা). I attentively listened to the cadence and affective inflections of Nyima Tso's voice during her recitation in Amdo dialect, a form of spoken Tibetan that I had learned during my dissertation fieldwork. Then after each of our sessions, I drafted an English translation, which I shared with her and which we discussed further.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Venuti 2002, 369–387.

After finishing the first good complete draft of the translation, I let it rest for some months before returning to it for final edits. I noticed upon re-reading that the opening paragraph of "My Father's Skills" might need a few additional words for an Anglophone readership without which readers could not understand how this memoir relates to Nyima Tso's other occupation as a translator from English into Tibetan and as an entrepreneur. Nyima Tso has translated over fortyfour children's books into Tibetan from English (in the World Explorer Series of Manoj Publications, Delhi). Noticing the paucity of interesting Tibetan-language children's books, she began translating them on her own with the goal to awaken children's curiosity. Readers of these series follow the main character Benny on adventures through various landscapes to cope with extreme cold or to find water in the wild (For more information on this series, contact: Mutik Books mutikbooks@gmail.com). So, Nyima Tso bought the mini-portable sewing machine mentioned in the first paragraph of "My Father's Skills" for the purpose of wrapping parcels of children's book to ship them from her home in Himachal Pradesh to other parts of India and abroad. For readers of the original Tibetan this context is understood. However, for English readers, I contextualized this by adding "Tibetanlanguage" before "children's books" and interpolated "from India."

In that intimate act of reading, "My Father's Skills" also evokes affective dimensions of the complicated father-daughter relationship. Two scenes were particularly salient for me as they evoked my own memories of joy, shame, and regret. The joyous laughter of youth playing on a "horse" sewing stool brought me back to the endless hours of playing pretend as a kid. The pangs of regret and shame of the young Nyima Tso standing in the courtyard listening to the school principal

rekindled those feelings in the adult me of realizing how unappreciative I was as a child of my father's hard work and good advice. In this way, "My Father's Skills" encompasses the universal themes of childhood and coming of age.

However, these universal themes exploring the father-daughter relationship from childhood to adulthood take place in the specific context of Gansu Province, Eastern Tibet, of the People's Republic of China in the 1990s. When translating specific Tibetan terms, the reader surrenders to my choice of retaining the foreign word in the English-language text. In this case, in leaving chuba untranslated, it is incumbent upon readers to either familiarize themselves with this traditional Himalayan clothing, or not. The first time I use the term, however, I provided an English translation differentiating chuba made from lambskin (tsharu) or from sheepskin (logpa). We also discussed technical terms related to sewing machines, which I studied online. Later Nyima Tso showed me photos of her father's tailor supplies and materials and the "horse" sewing stool that he made (see figures).

Nyima Tso's writings, including "My Father's Skills" and "Life in Samtha/the Borderlands," show her versatility as an author. She writes, whether in prose or poetry, with a sensibility that evokes complex and conflicting emotions. Since we began working with each other in the pandemic, I have come to admire Nyima Tso's tireless efforts to promote Tibetan language among Tibetan women and children in exile. I think we share a similar value and understanding that if Tibetan language is to survive into the 22nd century and grow as a world language in the 21st century, it is through her interventions of teaching the youth and encouraging women to write in Tibetan.

However, there are many challenges. When we last met in November 2023, I learned that despite her position as executive secretary of the Tibetan Writers Abroad PEN Centre (PEN TIBET) and as editor of Mayum (আপুরা), the latest issue of Mayum, a literary magazine showcasing female Tibetan writers in exile, had to be postponed because there were not enough contributions. Nyima Tso attributed this to several factors including the precarious political position of Tibetan refugees and how Tibetan women often become overburdened with family or work life to continue writing.



Father's sewing machine at her family home © Gom Mei, 2022



The "horse" stool © Gom Mei, 2022

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## My Father's Skills

I bought a handheld mini-sewing machine online, mainly for making fabric covers needed to ship parcels of Tibetan-language children's books from India. The day that I got it, I tried it out; it seemed to work well at first, but then it jammed. A couple of months passed, and I didn't touch it.

Today as I looked in the direction of that mini-sewing machine perched on the corner of a table, it caught my eye, and my father's large sewing machine came to mind. My father is a tailor, but he's not an ordinary tailor just for local households; he's a travelling tailor for an entire district. With that said, I am not only referring to my father being a tailor. My father is kind-hearted, so if someone asked him to do some work, he agreed without hesitation, and then set off to their house. Every now and then, one family after another placed orders; then, father left us, and a few months passed. On the day that father returned home, he told endless stories about having wandered from one village to the next, and about making a chuba from tsharu (lambskin) or from logpa (sheepskin), and how such-and-such a family's tsharu had added sable fur on its edges, or how a groom's coat had a leopard skin collar. When my father was at home, he was always holding sewing materials—threads, needles for Tibetan shoes, or pieces of fake fur, tsharu, or logpa. Neighbors and acquaintances would stop by to order a particular item or to order clothes for a new bride or new groom in the village.

Considering my father's kind-hearted nature, one might think that wearing fine Tibetan clothing every day would not have been a problem for my family—my brothers, sisters, and myself. But when I was attending elementary school and my father made me Tibetan style tops and trousers, I definitely had negative karmic tendencies and a stupid way of thinking. Since all the children were wearing fashionable

store-bought clothes, and I was the only one to wear homemade Tibetan clothes, I was embarrassed. These days I think about that time and feel immense regret. I now think that in school, I was the luckiest girl and there wasn't anyone like me. At that time, I didn't know the value of things, but who's to blame for ignorance and what's its use? At the beginning of winter, my father made my mother, sisters, and I beautiful Tibetan shoes, but I nearly went crazy thinking of how boring and strange they were. I thought such things as, "Again this winter, like the last one, I am not lucky enough to wear new shoes," and I agonized over this. Every night I hugged my mom's neck, and I begged, "Please, please, please, buy me a new pair of shoes." I remember this clearly now.

As a child, I was conscious that my father and mother were talented in handicrafts and that my father had a sewing machine. Because my father was skilled in carpentry too, he built a foldable extension table that was joined to the sewing machine. When that table was extended to its full length, he laid out a large chuba on the sewing machine. My father also made a wooden stool for this, which my family called "the sewing machine stool." When my father wasn't at home, three or four of us kids would ride it. We played games continuously, like pretending a horse was galloping into town, or that during a horse race, we picked up a white scarf-khatag from the ground. Sometimes the stool became unbalanced, tipped over, and we hit our heads. We fell over and over again like this, countless times. It was as if my father's stool was made of cement because not even the slightest piece of wood split. When I think of this now, I doubt that a modern chair used in the way that we had used the-sewing-machinestool would last even a day. The stool my father made, a piece of our family's furniture, was used for decades and decades.

My father still has an iron. It is made out of bronze and looks just like a small cooking pan with a handle. It looks like you could pick it up easily with only one hand, but it's so heavy that I can barely pick it up, holding it with both hands. My father used to fill it with coals of dried yak dung and place it on the stove to keep it hot. Occasionally when he was making Tibetan clothing, he sprayed a sip of water over the cloth and slowly dragged the iron over it to press the seams together. I recollect that from time to time, my father called us children to stand near him; each of us held up a section of the Tibetan cloth and stretched it out with full strength, then he put it back down and sprayed a mouthful of water and ironed it some more.

I remember that in the twelfth month of the Tibetan calendar, each family took turns to host a prayer ceremony and a meal; at those times, everybody gathered together. On one such occasion, the head of a household looked at me and said, "You're the daughter of a very skilled tailor. You are not like other children. You are dressed so well!" I was so sad and couldn't bear what he had said and went to my mother's side and cried it all out. This was because I was the only child who wore Tibetan dress and every morning my father tied a Tibetan belt around my waist. It was so tight that I couldn't untie it myself without the help of an adult. In those days, I got caught up in desiring the store-bought clothes worn by the other kids. Once I even thought about setting all my Tibetan clothes on fire and scowled at my father.

Later, I attended a Tibetan middle school, and the school's policy was special. If a student was Tibetan, then either they had to

wear Tibetan clothes, or if they didn't have Tibetan clothes, they had to wear a uniform, or else they weren't permitted to attend school. At that time, I myself felt older and being that I was almost free from my father's orders, I thought I could wear whatever I wanted, whatever clothes that I liked. For a while, I had thoughts of throwing all my Tibetan clothes away as I pondered deeply that not even the slightest shadow of clothes that my father had made would fall anywhere on my body. Then the school principal stood in the front of an assembly and announced, "Students whose parents are Tibetan should wear Tibetan clothes. If you don't wear Tibetan clothes, since you are Tibetan by flesh and blood, how can you wash that away? So, since you are confident at the thought of being a Tibetan, you should wear Tibetan clothing! If we don't wear our own ethnic clothing, then who will?" At that, I felt such unbearable regret, that when I went home on the weekend, I asked my father to please make a Tibetan chuba for me. My father wore white-rimmed glasses and said that it was getting difficult to thread a needle. In the end, by working day and night, he completed a simple chuba for me. It wasn't my father's idea of a chuba. He made it according to my wishes—with shorter and tighter-fitting sleeves. As I was about to return to school my father observed, "That teacher is Tibetan to the bones. I don't need to say much because that teacher convinced you that your father wasn't wrong earlier. Even if I lose my eyesight, you'll wear Tibetan clothing."

Today this useless mini-sewing machine stirred up memories of my father's sewing machine. His sewing machine worked for years and years without even the slightest problem. I think I can say without exaggeration that his sewing machine made thousands upon thousands of chuba. Today, I think how wonderful it would

be if a tailor like my father or an instrument like my father's sewing machine were near to me. I grew up with such a valuable person. In my youth, I didn't appreciate that, and I feel full of regret. This useless mini-sewing-machine sparked memories of my father, and in turn, it reminded me of his skills at everything. Now I can say that my father was the best tailor and carpenter of my homeland. I can say that he was an expert tailor of Tibetan clothing who accepted not having a salaried job. My father is living proof that my homeland remains a truly incredible place where helping others is valued more than focusing on oneself. Such good fortune can't last indefinitely; if you think about it, this is certain.

### Dear Dad,

Thank you. My childhood was not unlucky in the way that I had thought when I was a child. I had a precious childhood in comparison to many other children; I am so grateful for that.

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