

爱是一双出发的箭 (Love Is a Pair of Unloosed Arrows)

白玛娜珍 བན་ལྷ་མཛེས། Baimanazhen

(Translated from Chinese by Jue Liang and Andrew S. Taylor)

Abstract: Baimanazhen is one of the most celebrated and prolific Sinophone Tibetan women writers. This essay provides a brief biography as well as a discussion of the major themes and techniques of her works. Translated from Chinese into English for the first time, the essay “Love Is a Pair of Unloosed Arrows” tells the story of Yangchen and Dundrup, a pair of former extramarital lovers turned spiritual companions.

Keywords: Baimanazhen, Sinophone Tibetan literature, essay, creative nonfiction, women in Tibet

Translators’ Introduction

Baimanazhen (Tib. བན་ལྷ་མཛེས།, Chn. 白玛娜珍, b. 1967) is a prolific writer who works across many genres. She was born in Lhasa into a family established in the local literary circle: Her father worked at the Lhasa branch of Xinhua News Agency, an official state news agency and publisher, and her mother was also a writer. She writes in Chinese about her experiences as a Tibetan woman in a variety of vocations: professional dancer, radio host, and television producer, among many others. Her first career as a dancer took her all over Tibet,

from Kham to Ngari, and she writes about the cross-cultural tensions that she witnessed contemporary Tibetans facing during her travels, as in the essay translated below. Other topics include her friendships with conservative nuns and Lhasa socialites, her pilgrimages to sacred sites, and her reflections on the materialist influences of city life. Her writings include the novel *Lhasa, World of Dust* (Chn. 拉萨红尘), translated into English as *Love in Lhasa* by James Yongue and Wan Jiahui.²¹ Set in 1980s Lhasa, the novel follows the trajectories of two young Tibetan women, Nangsa and Yama, as their lives unfold in two divergent directions. It received an honorable mention in the fiction category at the Second Women's Literature in China Awards

Baimanazhen's essay "Love Is a Pair of Unloosed Arrows," translated below, has been selected from her collection *Lhasa Rain* (Chn. 拉萨的雨). "Arrows" is a brief but penetrating essay that caused the translators some angst in capturing its subtleties. As such, they are grateful for the opportunity to direct the reader's attention to some of its more profound passages and perhaps hedge their own shortcomings.

One of the most eye-raising aspects of the essay for readers not familiar with Tibetan monastic culture is the relationship between Dundrup and Yangchen, neighbors turned lovers turned quasi-monastic partners. Is their relationship scandalous? An instance of redeemed forbidden love? Not exactly. Although certainly not normative, it is not surprising that relationships between men and women, including monks and nuns, have always been complex in a society where as much as

²¹ Nordrun 2015. The translators of the novel made a mistake in rendering Baimanazhen's name, hence the discrepancy.

fifteen to twenty percent of the population might enroll as monastics at some point in life.²² Although some monastics take tonsure as adolescents and maintain their monastic vows their entire lives, others might enroll only during their adolescence, after a longtime spouse has passed, or even for a predetermined period of time in adulthood. In Tsering Yangzom Lama's novel *We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies*, a novel that explores similar social complexities, a Tibetan woman is told of a potential love interest, "Don't pity him. He's a monk now." Only for her to rejoin, "Maybe he won't always stay a monk." The remark is met with laughs and a perfunctory swat.²³ Yangchen and Dundrup's relationship, although unorthodox and no doubt a subject of gossip in their original community, is not unique or unintelligible. It also sets in motion a complicated emotional dynamic that gives an element of dramatic tension to what might otherwise seem like a character study. One Chinese friend to whom the translators gave the essay exclaimed halfway through, "Is Yangchen going to be the author's mother?"

Another especially interesting dimension of Baimanazhen's essay is its centering of the silent Yangchen. Her physical presence and silence are deftly juxtaposed in the story's central paradox. The first time the author visits Yangchen, she has taken a vow of silence, and so sits by silently as Dundrup tells their—her—story, emoting, but not contributing verbally. The second time the author visits the hermitage, she has physically departed—only upstairs, for a brief retreat, but

²² Ryavec and Bowman 2021.

²³ Lama 2022, 172.

renders herself inaccessible to the author and the world outside her small hut. Has she surpassed Dundrup spiritually and transcended the mundane “world of dust,” or is her silence socially expected?

Nevertheless, there are two significant moments when the author either intuitively Yangchen’s thoughts despite her lack of communication or perhaps projects her own emotions onto the silent practitioner. The first time is in one of the most interesting and only explicitly philosophical passages in the essay:

Yangchen’s face was covered in tears. She thought, the river that runs through the village has flowed so far only to arrive here. In the same way, all of her and Dundrup’s karma across many lifetimes had led to their coming together. Just as a river cannot flow backward, their relationship was fated and could not be reversed.

How does the author know this? Does she know what Yangchen is thinking or does she merely think that she knows what Yangchen is thinking? Is she recording something Yangchen told her later, after her day of silence? The reader is not told but is left to wonder if there is some sort of shared experience or bond that unites them across the silence.

The second time comes in a more explicitly gendered passage, when the author asks Yangchen if she misses the children she has abandoned to go practice with Dundrup—a question that she does not ask Dundrup, who also left his children:

Yangchen was taking a vow of silence that day. My question

about her children startled her. She looked dazed and stopped fingering her prayer beads. But she shook her head in silence. The resolution in her expression made my tears begin to flow. I could almost feel the agony that her maternal heart must have experienced.

Yangchen shows only silent resolution, but the author interprets her headshake as intense maternal sadness, despite no indication that this is the case. Is the author making a mistake in her projection? Is she showing us the inaccurate conception of a shared women's essence commonly imposed by readers, or is she sincerely asserting the existence of a maternal sadness as a gendered universal?

In addition to centering Yangchen as a subject, we also see the author's concern for women's experiences in the discussion of the domestic objects that thread the essay together. The trope of the ignorant city-dweller hiking up to the mountains to receive a teaching is established in the initial description of the hermitage's proximity to Samye, its remoteness, and its sacred pedigree. And yet when the author arrives, she instead provides a catalogue of domestic objects, focusing on kitchenware instead of meditative practices—dark red clay teapots, a stove for butter tea, the happiness of the nuns going about their morning chores, descriptions of the small huts that had been built brick by brick and plank by plank. Similarly, when the author returns to the nunnery after a nine-year absence, she shows how the hermitage has changed by talking about the new objects that have appeared in the kitchen, for instance an olive-green blender operated by a new nun. Even in a place built for transcendence, gendered mundanity is never elided.

The translators were equally baffled by what might seem like minor technical difficulties, which we found nevertheless were hubs for the larger socio-political issues at work in the piece. These difficulties began with the title, which might be translated as “Love Is a Pair of chufa Arrows.” But what to do with this chufa? The word can be used as a noun or verb and is most commonly translated as “departure” or “start” in Chinese—for instance, a plane or ship leaving port can chufa, as can a person or army leaving a city. But arrows do not commonly chufa—would it be best to capture that awkwardness in English, for instance as “Love Is a Pair of Departing Arrows”? It’s a tricky tradeoff—an English reader might well blame the translators or, more significantly, the author, and not read the piece instead of assuming that the awkwardness is intentional. Our sense is that the title describes the arrows immediately after they have been shot from a bow, soaring but not aimed toward any particular target, except perhaps beyond.

A final point worth communicating in this work of creative nonfiction is that the author writes herself as a character. For anyone who has met Baimanazhen, it is difficult to imagine such a kind and considerate woman barging into houses and interjecting herself between a monastic couple—is she perhaps the beetle crawling through the open windowpane? This perpetual discomfort in her own space and body, as well as her surprise when the monk speaks fluent Chinese, among other scenes, depict a sense of dislocation that is perhaps felt by much of the Sinophone Tibetan community more generally.

Ensuring that Tibetan remains a viable language in arts, politics, and the home is one of the great challenges facing the contemporary Tibetan community, one that all Tibetan studies academics should

work to support. We hope this Yeshe volume reflects that concern by providing bilingual editions, which will allow native Tibetan readers to read along while also allowing students of Tibetan or second-generation Tibetans access to the original works. But the same colonial and neoliberal forces that have threatened the Tibetan language with functional extinction have also alienated many Tibetans from their mother tongue—Tibetans who, through no fault of their own, have grown up in Sinophone, Anglophone, or other linguistic spheres, and we risk erasing their experiences if they too are not recognized as part of the Tibetan literary community. Baimanazhen shows the possibility of using Chinese to communicate the experiences of many contemporary Sinophone Tibetans in Tibet, ranging from their liminal status to their reverence for Buddhism, with all its lived ambivalences and complexities.

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九年前的一个夏天，我和朋友第一次去青朴。

青朴位于西藏山南地区扎囊县，在县城桑耶寺东北约15公里的纳瑞山腰，海拔4300米，纳瑞山被称为青朴。传说是从前山上有一户青氏家族。藏传佛教宁玛派创始人莲花生、西藏第一位女密宗大师益西措加、寂护大师、藏王赤松德赞、密宗大师白若扎纳等都曾在青朴山上修法。青朴是西藏最著名的隐修圣地。从桑耶寺坐船横渡雅鲁藏布江，对岸，就是青朴了。

青朴大山像伸开手臂在等候我们。胸膛盛开着野蔷薇花和缤纷的山花。

山半腰，有一所小“文则寺”。天已晚，寺院住持顿珠拉（化名）安排我们在寺里一间空房里住下。

顿珠拉高高的个子，微微有些驼背，戴着眼镜，和蔼可亲。那晚，他的身后，跟来一位看上去30多岁的尼姑央金拉（化名），顿珠拉说，央金是和自己一起从安多地区来的。

这晚，在青朴文则寺的小院里，漫天星光中，央金拉守在顿珠拉身旁一言不发。顿珠拉用流利的汉语和我朋友交谈着。我有些惊诧，我没想到这样偏远的地方，一位藏地出家人竟能把汉语说得那么好。

第二天一早，我们被邀请到寺院厨房喝茶。厨房的黑壁墙上，涂满了民间白色的吉祥图，暗红的土陶茶壶在火炉上飘散出酥油茶浓香。五六位尼姑红扑扑的脸蛋像苹果，她们在为早间开法会的尼姑们煮糌粑粥。一面说笑着，传来叮叮咚咚的山泉水。

我好奇地向她们问起住持顿珠拉哪里学的汉语，尼姑央金拉为什么不说话……

从厨房出来，我闯进一排排尼姑宿舍中间——顿珠和央金的家。和文则寺其他尼姑宿舍一样，顿珠和央金的家也是土坯和木头盖的简易小屋。

我敲开门，拿着笔记本，莽撞地坐在僧人顿珠和尼姑央金中间。

房子狭长、窄小。除了两张藏式单人木床，没有任何家具。地上满是山里的尘土。锅碗瓢盆和一个烧煤油的小炉子、糌粑口袋等

凌乱地扔在靠窗的一角。从一扇破窗子里，钻进来的甲壳虫，在地上爬来爬去。

“您现在还爱央金拉吗？”一开口，我唐突地问。

盘坐在我对面卡垫上的顿珠拉，并不回避。他微笑着看看我，又望一眼沉默的央金。

窗外，野蔷薇树在摇曳，山雨就要来了，雅鲁藏布江闪着白光，像要把尘世和青朴分成两半。

顿珠拉拨着念珠，缓缓地说：“现在，我随时准备好了往生。只是央金，她跟我来青朴，我放心不下她.....”

原来，在安多藏区的某个小村庄，顿珠和央金是邻居。四十出头的顿珠是村里的党支部分书记，他儿女成双，妻子贤惠。央金一家住在顿珠家隔壁，她沉默寡言，是三个孩子的母亲、村委会的会计。丈夫是村里的农民。

顿珠和央金两家，和睦为邻。两家的孩子也很要好。

顿珠懂藏、汉文，常教央金的孩子认字读书；央金做了好吃的面疙瘩汤，也要送半锅给顿珠一家。但一天，夜半月圆，顿珠和央金，从相互敬慕到暗恋，爱情在这个晚上像冲破了堤岸，终于越过了两家人相隔的墙。

央金泪流满面，她想，村里的小河，历经多少，才来到这个村庄，她和顿珠，也经历了生生世世缘分才走到一起，河水不会倒

流，他们的宿缘没有退路。

他们抛下孩子、家庭和婚姻，抛下一切，出走了——

但黑夜茫茫，该去往哪里？

他们风餐露宿，去了印度、尼泊尔，朝拜了西藏所有的神山圣湖。一天，路仿佛到了尽头，他们到了青朴。

阳光像白银，微风像密语，山上，莲花生和益西措加密修的岩洞，像青朴的心窝。传说中，108个修行洞、108尊刻在岩壁石上的佛塔、108个天葬台、108个泉眼如梦……

顿珠和央金，再也没有离开过108颗念珠。

顿珠和央金在青朴岩洞，一住就是8年。

直到一位活佛重建文则寺，活佛请顿珠和央金管理小寺。文则寺，是尼姑院。

从此，顿珠腰上挂起一大串文则寺的钥匙。除了管理寺院，他要给尼姑们讲解佛经、教授藏文、主持寺里的法事……

那天，听着顿珠拉的讲述，我突然问：“尼姑央金拉，这些年，您想念孩子吗？”

央金在禁语，不说话。听到我问她的孩子们，她怔住了。她停下手里拨动的念珠，一脸恍惚。但她沉默着，对我摇头。望着她坚毅的神色，我的泪水哗哗流淌，我仿佛感觉到她做母亲的心，曾

怎样痛过。

多年后，我再来到青朴，协助基金会送酥油、茶叶和日常药品。

那一路，黑夜像蜜一般醇厚，天蒙蒙亮时，我们到了。

路，这时已经修到青朴半山的文则寺。山上下来一位年轻的僧人清点我们捐赠的物资。中午一点，桑耶寺也会送来一批粮食，这位僧人对我们说，那时山上会下来十几位僧人，把物品扛上山，再通知每个山洞里的隐修者来领取。

我们却是租车来的。遥望青朴，司机当天要回。我想去看望顿珠和央金。

顺着文则寺旁的小路，我先去了寺里的厨房。厨房也扩建了，洒满了阳光。正用果绿色的搅拌机搅拌着酥油茶的女姑，是新来的。她给我斟满茶，告诉我顿珠拉和央金拉还在青朴，在文则寺。

寺外的野蔷薇树长得更茂密了。有一栋两层小楼，红色的小门锁着，透过门缝，我看到院子里盛开着花，我猜那该是央金种的。门旁边的墙上，有一块小木板挡住窗口，我敲了敲，顿珠拉在！他拉开小木板，露出笑容。

“顿珠拉，你们好吗？”他的身后，我看到房子里摆放着彩色藏柜，床上铺着羊毛卡垫。液化炉旁，几个擦得锃亮的暖瓶闪着光。

“很好，谢谢。”

顿珠拉看起来胖了，气色也很好。

“您还记得我吗？”我问。

顿珠拉微笑着，好像忘了。

又聊了几句，我告辞了。刚走到一处看上去新装的自来水池旁，我的心头突然一阵痛。

9年了。

远眺青朴山下，我的生活空无痕迹，身后，顿珠拉和央金拉在一起，9年来没有分离一天。

我擦干眼泪决定再返回去。

我敲开顿珠拉的小木窗。

“你是——”

顿珠拉怔怔地望着我，他叫出了我的名字。

“这些年……你还好吗？”顿珠拉眼里透出沧桑。

我摇摇头。

但我丰衣足食，我还缺什么吗？

我没见到央金拉。顿珠拉说，央金在楼上闭关，不能出来见面。

回去的路上，我回想着青朴，想顿珠拉和央金拉，——像青朴山上，一双突破红尘的箭。

Love Is a Pair of Unloosed Arrows

I first visited Chimpu with a friend one summer day nine years ago.

Chimpu is the name given to a Tibetan area about fifteen kilometers northeast of Samye Monastery, in the Lhokha region of Dranang County. When you reach the waist of Mount Yari at 4,300 meters elevation, that is Chimpu.

Legend has it that the Chim clan once lived on the mountain. The Lotus-Born, who founded the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, Tibet's first female tantric master Yeshe Tsogyel, the master Shantarakshita, the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen, and the tantric master Vairocana have all practiced at Chimpu: It is the most famous solitary retreat site in Tibet. If you take a boat from Samye onto the Yarlung Tsangpo River, the far shore is Chimpu.

The mountain awaited us with open arms, its bosom filled with blossoming Rambler roses and other colorful mountain flowers.

Halfway up the mountain was a small hermitage called Wendza. It was already late, and the abbot, Dundrup (pseudonym), arranged for us to stay in one of its empty rooms.

Dundrup is a tall man, though slightly hunchbacked. He looks kind and approachable in his glasses. That night a nun who looked like she was in her 30s named Yangchen (pseudonym) was following him around. Dundrup told us that he and Yangchen had come together from Amdo.

That night, starlight filled the whole sky above the small courtyard of the hermitage. Dundrup was chatting with my friend in fluent Chinese, while Yangchen stood near him, silently watching. I was a bit surprised; I hadn't expected that a Tibetan monk from so remote a place could speak fluent Chinese.

Early the next morning, we were invited to have tea in the kitchen. The black walls of the kitchen were plastered with auspicious white folk symbols. The dark red clay teapots on the stove filled the room with the rich fragrance of butter tea. The five or six nuns who were preparing the tsampa porridge for the nuns' morning teachings all had faces as plump and red as apples. They laughed and chatted as they carried water from the babbling mountain spring.

I was curious, so I asked them where Abbot Dundrup had learned Chinese and why the nun Yangchen didn't speak at all...

I left the kitchen and barged into Dundrup and Yangchen's

home, one of many among the rows and rows of residences for the nuns. Their humble hut was made of mud bricks and wood, just like the homes of the other nuns.

I knocked and opened the door. Notebook in hand, I sat obtrusively between Dundrup and Yangchen.

It was a narrow, small room with no other furniture than two Tibetan-style single beds made of wood. The floor was dusty. Pots, pans, utensils, a small stove, and bags of tsampa were piled in the corner by the window. A beetle crawled in through a broken pane.

“Do you still love Yangchen-la?” I asked abruptly.

Dundrup-la sat cross-legged on a cushion in front of me and did not avoid the question. Smiling at me, he looked at the silent Yangchen.

Outside the window, the ramblers and trees swayed gently. There would soon be rain on the mountain. The white waves of the Yarlung Tsangpo River glistened as though separating Chimpu from the world of dust.

Dundrup-la spoke slowly as he counted his rosary beads.

“At this point, I’m ready for the next life. It’s just Yangchen that I worry about; she followed me to Chimpu...”

It turned out that Dundrup and Yangchen had been neighbors in a small village in Amdo. The forty-something Dundrup had been

deputy party secretary in the village. He had a son, a daughter, and a virtuous wife. Yangchen's family lived next door. She was reticent, a mother of three, and the accountant for the village party committee. Her husband was a farmer in the village.

Dundrup and Yangchen's families were friendly—their children were especially close.

Dundrup spoke both Tibetan and Chinese and would often teach Yangchen's kids to read and write. Whenever Yangchen made her delicious noodle soup, she would send half to Dundrup's family.

But one night under a full moon Dundrup and Yangchen crossed from mutual adoration to a secret tryst, their love overflowing the wall separating their houses like water over a bank.

Yangchen's face was covered in tears. She thought, the river that runs through the village has flowed so far only to arrive here. In the same way, all of her and Dundrup's karma across many lifetimes had led to their coming together. Just as a river cannot flow backward, their relationship was fated and could not be reversed.

They left behind their children, families, and marriages. They let go of everything and left.

But the dark night is long—where could they go?

They roughed it, pilgrimaging to India, Nepal, and all the sacred lakes and mountains of Tibet. One day they arrived at Chimpu and

somehow knew their road had come to an end.

The sun shone like silver and the breeze whispered its own secret language. On the mountain, the secret retreat cave of the Lotus-Born and Yeshe Tsogyal was the heart of Chimpu. Legend says it contains 108 meditation caves, 108 stupas carved into the cliffs, 108 sky-burial platforms, and 108 dreamlike springs...

Since they arrived, Dundrup and Yangchen have never parted from their rosaries, strung with 108 prayer beads.

They had lived in the Chimpu cave for eight years when a Living Buddha, called a tulku in Tibetan, started rebuilding the Wendza hermitage, and asked Dundrup and Yangchen to manage it. The hermitage had gradually become a nunnery.

Hanging from Dundrup's waist was a long stream of keys for the nunnery. In addition to managing the temple, Dundrup also taught the nuns Buddhist scripture, Tibetan language, and how to perform temple rituals.

That day, as Dundrup was telling their story, I suddenly asked, "Ani Yangchen-la, do you miss your children after all these years?"

Yangchen was taking a vow of silence that day. My question about her children startled her. She looked dazed and stopped fingering her prayer beads. But she shook her head in silence. The resolution in her expression made my tears begin to flow. I could almost feel the agony that her maternal heart must have experienced.

Many years later, I returned to Chimpu to help a charity deliver butter, tea, and medicine.

The darkness of the road was as thick as honey. We didn't arrive until dawn.

The road had been expanded and now reached all the way up the mountain to the hermitage. A young monk came down from the mountain and took inventory of the donations. At 1pm there would also be a food delivery from Samye, and the young monk told us that a dozen or so monks would come down to carry everything up the hill, and that they would notify everyone in the retreat caves to come and collect their share.

We just rented a car. I knew the driver needed to return that same day but looking at Chimpu, I wanted to check-in on Dundrup and Yangchen.

Following the small path through the hermitage, I stopped first at the kitchen. The kitchen too had been expanded and was filled with sunshine. I didn't recognize the nun making butter tea in an olive-green blender; she must have been new. She said that Dundrup-la and Yangchen-la were still at the hermitage as she filled my teacup.

The rambler bushes in the fields outside the temple had grown even more lush. There was a modest two-story building with a little red door locked. Through the keyhole I could see flowers blossoming in the courtyard, probably Yangchen's work. I knocked on a small wooden

board covering the window. Dundrup-la appeared in the window! He pulled the plank aside and smiled.

“Dundrup-la, how are you?” I saw that behind him were colorful Tibetan-style cabinets. Wool blankets covered the bed, and a few polished thermoses stood next to the gas stove, glistening in the sunlight.

“Well, thank you.”

Dundrup-la seemed to have put on some weight; he looked good.

“Do you still remember me?” I asked.

Dundrup-la smiled; it looked like he had forgotten.

We chatted for a little while, and I said goodbye. As I walked beside a newly dug reservoir, my heart abruptly started to ache.

It had been nine years.

Looking down Chimpu hill, I realized my empty life left no traces. Behind me, Dundrup-la and Yangchen-la had been together for nine years without separating for even a single day.

I wiped away my tears and decided to return.

I knocked again on Dundrup-la’s board.

“You are —”

Dundrup-la looked at me and recalled my name with a start.

“After all these years...are you still well?” I could see all the vicissitudes of life in Dundrup’s eyes.

I shook my head. But I had enough to eat and clothes to wear, what else did I need?

I didn’t get to see Yangchen-la. Dundrup-la told me that she was in solitary practice upstairs and couldn’t come down to see me.

I thought of Chimpu on the way back. Dundrup-la and Yangchen-la were like a pair of arrows unloosed from the mountain that had pierced this mundane world of dust.

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