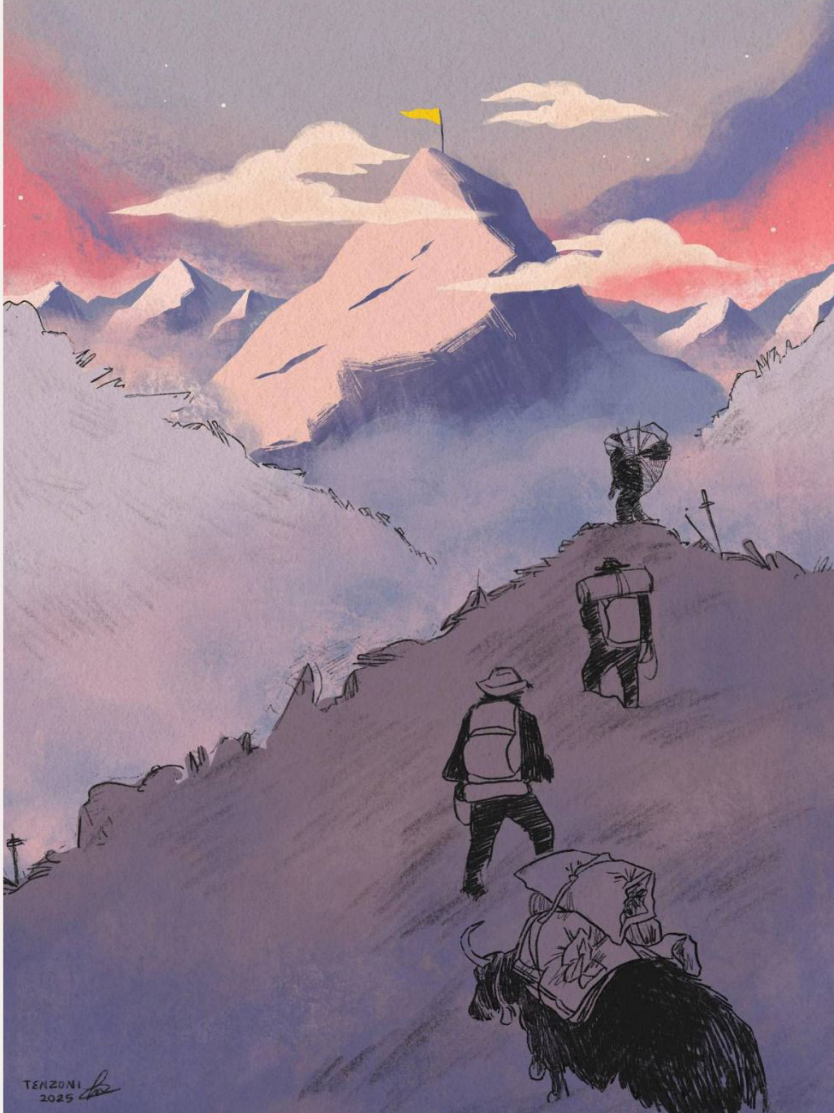


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REGULAR ISSUE



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Cover Image:

TENZONI, *The Journey Up* (2025)

Digital Art

Courtesy of the artist

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## Editorial

Five years ago, we founded *Yeshe* as a journal of Tibetan literature, arts, and humanities to fill the existing gap between writing and the publication of creative and scholarly works in the field. Five years later, we have published eight issues, including three special and five regular issues, which demonstrates the field's potential and the need of journals like *Yeshe*. What's conspicuous about the content throughout these eight issues is how much of it is translated from the Tibetan language. Kati Fitzgerald, *Yeshe*'s nonfiction editor, testifies vis-à-vis our first nonfiction contest:

Because of a myriad of factors, I thought that we might receive a majority of submissions in non-Tibetan languages. Much to my delight, all the submissions were written in Tibetan. Despite all the obstacles that the Tibetan language faces and the constant anxieties about the future of Tibetan oral and written communication, this fact demonstrates the vitality and strength of Tibetan writing.

Fitzgerald, the judge of the contest, applauds the winning authors for their “use of Tibetan flexibly and creatively to reflect their messy, agonizing, and capricious truths.” We congratulate the winning authors and cite here the judge's comments on their respective works:

Kelsang Lhamo's first-place essay, འཆོ་བའི་ཉམས་སྒྲུབ་དུས་སྟེན།



“A Fragment of Life Experience,” is a fascinating account of a landlord-tenant dispute that will infuriate and bewilder you with its twists and turns. Not only is the essay linguistically interesting, as Kelsang Lhamo engages proverbs, humor, and witty metaphors in her narrative, but it also describes a part of the Tibetan experience that we rarely see portrayed on the page. Her experience of ludicrous American tenancy laws and a boldfaced squatter is certainly not unique to this one case, but Kelsang Lhamo brings her own philosophical interpretations that highlight some of the possibilities and pitfalls of engaged compassion in our contemporary world.

Tamdin Tso’s second-place essay, དྲན་བ་དམར་རྗེན་མ། སེམས་  
རྒྱུ་གི་བ་ལོ་རྗེས་སུ་དྲན་བ། “Raw Remembrances:  
Memories of My Father on the Banks of My Mind,” is  
short note to her late father. She remembers mundane  
details about his hobbies and character that create a  
patchwork of memories of a beloved and imperfect man.  
The result is honest and self-effacing, highlighting the  
unreliability of memory and various aspects, selfish and  
inspirational alike, of grief. She also points to a weight  
felt by so many in the diaspora – to succeed in life to  
honor those who sacrificed so much in the past.

The weight of memory that Tibetan exiles harbor is also felt in  
Tenzin Ju’s historically attentive and articulate essay featured in the

nonfiction section. Tenzin Ju reflects on the cultural afterlife of Tibet, otherwise “melting from public consciousness much like the glaciers of the Himalayas,” in the Tibetan objects displayed in museums, and the ritual of visiting these museums, despite several misrepresentations, as “a way to feel home from afar.”

The mnemonic task of Tibetan objects in Tenzin Ju’s nonfiction is done by a polaroid in Losang Gyatso’s ghost story “Virginia Is for Lovers.” A polaroid camera brings fragmented memories of a forgotten night of a couple’s accidental entry into a long-destroyed dance hall inhabited by spirits. The cinematic visuals, such as “her shoulder blades down to her waist,” evoke an eerie atmosphere, and little details, like the stale smell of air in a normal shop, deepen the uncanniness. The liminal atmosphere of Losang Gyatso’s story lingers in Kyabchen Dedrol’s elegiac story “Pale Songs” about a group of Tibetan sexworkers, labourers, and runaways, systematically marginalized by society, as they drift like ghosts through a blizzard-stricken landscape. Translated from Tibetan by Gödod Norbu Amchok, the story, however, insists on beauty amidst despair and achieves it through poetic prose in phrases like “many straight beams of light like pillars stretched out one after another from between the white clouds.” Tsering Döndrup “Masks,” a story about the strangeness of recognition and the fragility of human connection during times of pandemic, resonates with other stories in the fiction section. The ambiguity of guesswork and intuition does the emotional work in “Masks” and leaves one with a mysterious longing for what remains seen and unseen behind the mask.

The poetry section centers around the theme of identity anchored in the experience of migration and memory intertwined with landscapes.

In Tashi Bhutia's "Epicenter," identity moves between dramatic shifts of terrain "from the hills of God / to the pit of misery," suspended along fault lines of place and the passage of time, "every passing moment reminding / what could be." Forged in the stigmatized geography of the suburban margins of Montreal, the self in Dorji Dhatsenpa's "*Pure Romantics (Hinterland)*" is stubborn - "i've driven all over the south shore, but i refuse to go into longueuil" - despite identifying as "a Longueuil boy, born and bred." In Sonam Chhomo's "Plants," "Faint memories of sunflowers... my excursion to the riverside... chewing on unknown but edible stem of a mentok" becomes the blueprint for self, recreated in her another poem "Mixtape" in a corner of a room, "dedicated to the gods, books, and guests," seamlessly merging in "aromas, forming a hybrid." The poems champion the continuity of memory and survival despite trauma and rupture.

The themes of self, survival, and landscape emerge once again in the performance section. In the Bhutanese folklore "*Oral Tradition: The Life of Domley Sonam Wangyal*," documented and translated from Dzongkha by Tenzin Dorji, the land converges with the spirit and fate of the child herder Wangyal. Little Wangyal's tragic story, from his fragile efforts to assert his place as a competent herder to being overwhelmed by forces of nature and supernatural beyond him, suggests the necessity to attune to the spiritual ecology of our world for survival. In Rinchen's screenplay *The Wilderness Wrangler*, translated by Tsemdo, the orphaned seventh-grader Lobsang endures the literal wilderness of blizzards and predators and the emotional pain of abandonment and loss of sister and home. Lobsang's inward migration towards moral becoming in the Tibetan grassland gets juxtaposed in the performance section to young Kunsel and Passang's outward migration towards community integration

and moral recalibration in the urban landscape of Toronto in an excerpt from Kunsang Kyirong's *100 Sunset*. The Q and A, following the excerpt, with Kunsang Kyirong reveals her ethics of resisting judgment in portrayal of her film's characters who are "contradictory, flawed, and sometimes both hurting and causing hurt at the same time."

Kelsang Lhamo's interview in this issue of *Yeshe* works as the theoretical framework for understanding the creative works in the nonfiction, fiction, poetry and performance sections as she speaks among other things about her early childhood immersed in sacred geography, the hardship of eleven-month journey by foot to India, endurance and discipline during her nine years of retreat in Dharamkot, and her intellectually enriching work of cataloguing Tibetan texts under Gene Smith's guidance. Her interview justifies why Tibetan stories matter and should be told to a global audience.

The review section of *Yeshe* gives us a critical insight into what has been evolving in Tibetan humanities recently. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's *The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile* is reviewed by Jigme Yeshe Lama for its commitment to restoring the dignity of Tsokhag Chusum, the Thirteen leaders from Amdo and Kham, who, despite having played a crucial role in building exile settlements, were mislabelled as regionalists and castigated from mainstream exile politics. Rae Dachille reviews Jed Forman's *Out of Sight Into Mind: The History and Philosophy of Yogic Perception* as a groundbreaking study of yogic perception in Indian and Tibetan philosophy that engages with thinkers such as Dharmakīrti, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Tsongkhapa, Sakya Paṇḍita, and Gorampa, and introduces the concept of "omniphenomenology" to theorize the transcendental

potential of enlightened perception beyond dualistic, first-person phenomenology. *Living Treasure: Buddhist and Tibetan Studies in Honor of Janet Gyatso* is reviewed by Priyanka Chakraborty as an extensive interdisciplinary tribute that maps Janet Gyatso's intellectual legacy, providing a methodological model for studying Tibetan Buddhist texts not just as doctrinal sources but as embodied, lived, and even contested philosophical works. Mridul Surbhi reviews *Taming the Poisonous: Mercury, Toxicity, and Safety in Tibetan Medical Practice*, a landmark interdisciplinary study of Tibetan medicine and tantra, by Barbara Gerke, as a powerful critique of universalist science and neutral translation. In favor of epistemic pluralism, Gerke praises Sowa-Rigpa and Tibetan medical practitioners' comprehensive understanding of material substances as mutable and relational. And finally, Tenzin Nyima Bhutia's review of *Longing to Awaken: Buddhist Devotion in Tibetan Poetry and Song*, edited by Holly Gayley and Dominique Townsend, highlights this anthology's redefinition of devotion as a discerning, critical practice instead of blind faith, and repositioning of poetry from the periphery to the core of Tibetan Buddhist religious life in its capacity of transmission, dialogue, and awakening. These five reviews across interdisciplinary subjects of ethnographic history, poetry, buddhist philosophy, and Tibetan medicine demonstrate the growing scholarship in Tibetan Studies that is methodologically grounded and ethically attuned to dynamic Tibetan subjectivities on a global stage.

Tibetan subjectivities once again take the center stage in the article section. Geshe Tri Yungdrung's article "The Culture of Tulma, Tsampa, and Tea in Tibet," written originally in Tibetan, adheres to Tibetan and not the western scholarly tradition vis-à-vis the "norms regarding dating, citations, and etymologies, among other conventions" as noted

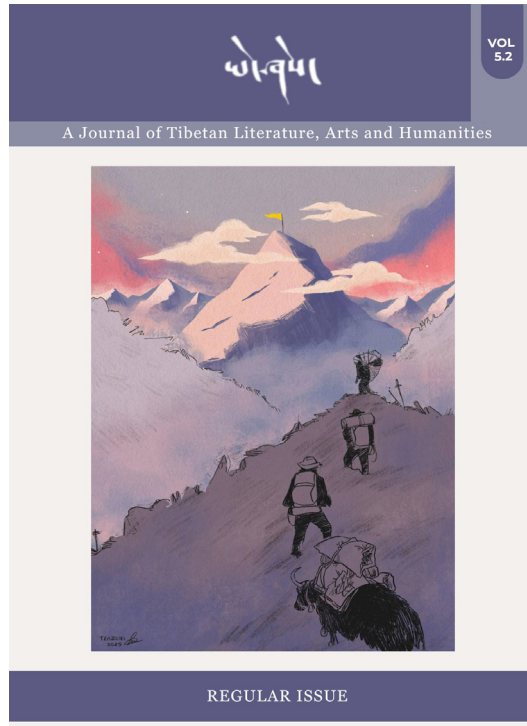
by the article editor Andrew Taylor. Geshe Tri Yungdrung draws on Tibetan religious, historical, and medicinal texts and everyday nomadic practices in his article to affirm his argument that Tibetan food culture is an internally coherent indigenous epistemology and “not borrowed or influenced by neighboring Han or other cultures.” Likewise, resisting external references, Eva Leick demonstrates in “Dzamling Gar Song and Dance: A Khaita Manifesto” how Khaita safeguards Tibetan culture and language while integrating Dzogchen teachings on cultivating presence, awareness, harmony, and joy. Both articles prioritize Tibetan sources and modes of knowing as benchmark for research on Tibet.

With this fifth annual issue of *Yeshe*, we hope that not only scholars and Tibetan writers will continue to trust us with their works but some insitution will come forward to support our labour of love so that it can be sustained in the future.

Patricia Vedani-Schiaffini and Shelly Bhoil  
Founding editors

## On Transition: Cover Art Statement

Nawang Tsomo Kinkar



TENZONI, *The Journey Up* (2025)

Digital Art

Courtesy of the artist

“The summit is less about conquest and more about transition,”<sup>1</sup> explained the Toronto-based art director and illustrator Tenzin Tsering, who is more endearingly known by the artist moniker Tenzoni.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes in the statement are from written correspondence between Tenzoni (Tenzin Tsering) and Nawang Tsomo Kinkar in August 2025.

In early August, I invited Tenzoni to submit an artwork for the cover of the 2025's annual issue of *Yeshe*. The young artist and I met for the first time, online, as we were both preparing for a period of uncertainty in our respective lives. Prompted by Tibetan and Buddhist worldviews on the inevitability of change and impermanence, the artist produced a digital illustration titled *The Journey Up* (2025). Upon first look, the visual focal point of Tenzoni's blue and purple-filled world of *The Journey Up* is a yellow flag. Marking the central peak of a mountain range, the flag's assumed visual significance wanes as the viewer's eyes move away from the high ranges and downward to the foreground of the scene where several individuals, as well as a yak, carrying loads of varying sizes trek up a mountain trail. When I asked the artist about this work over email, she answered, "I grew up learning about how the Sherpa people migrated from Tibet into the Khumbu region of Nepal, and so our languages, traditions, and spiritual practices are closely tied."

Like many Tibetans part of the global exiled diaspora, Tenzoni's connection to the homeland is strengthened through stories and fragmented memories shared amongst her family members and elders. She continues, "I've always felt a sense of kinship and pride learning about how Sherpas also carry forward Tibetan values of resilience, humility, and community in such a visible way. Through this work, I wanted to acknowledge our shared lineage and pay respect to their role as both mountaineers and cultural keepers of the Himalayas."

These intergenerational exchanges allow for present and future Tibetans to consider what it means to be in relation to our lands when physical access remains controlled. Therefore, *The Journey Up* also explores the notion of impermanence and transition within the context



of a rapidly altering Himalayan ecosystem. As climate disasters and mass tourism continue to shape the trajectory of many local mountain communities, Tenzoni's work reveals the region's foreboding current reality and "speaks to the fragility...of environmental stability." By doing so, the artist gestures toward the possibility of a future in which environmental stewardship of the Himalayas are governed by its Indigenous communities.

The moment of movement that is depicted in *The Journey Up* is not simply reflected by the physical journey taking place within the artwork or its association to histories of displacement. Rather the movement that hinges on transformation is charted by and through the inheritance of a story, enduring and persisting via Tenzoni's use of colour, shape, and form. It seems fitting then when the artist expressed to me: "It feels like arriving at a threshold: I've survived the climb, but the view from the top is what transforms me, offering perspective and a reminder that I'm still moving forward, even through difficulty."

## ARTICLES

# **Dzamling Gar Song and Dance: A Khaita Manifesto**

Eva Leick

**Abstract:** *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* holds a distinctive place within Khaita – Joyful Dances (Khaita), a translocal and transcultural practice of singing and dancing initiated by the Dzogchen master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu (1938 – 2018) in 2011. Developed within his International Dzogchen Community, Khaita serves dual purposes: promoting and preserving Tibetan culture and fostering presence, awareness, and harmony. Unlike the 400 Tibetan songs in the Khaita archive, *Dzamling Gar Song* is unique in being personally written and composed by Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, reflecting his profound experience as a Dzogchen teacher.

In this article, I introduce the Khaita project and explore the concept of joy as a meaningful and productive framework for understanding it. I then examine the role of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* within the collection, connecting it to Khaita's two main objectives: the preservation of Tibetan culture and language and the promotion of overall harmony through singing and dancing. By closely analyzing the song's lyrics and the dance's movements, I demonstrate how they represent these principles. I thereby draw on both literary and dance analysis, as well as my own experience as a Khaita practitioner. I further provide insights into the approach to the Tibetan language in Khaita and examine how the song's three sections relate to the themes of presence, awareness, and harmony that align with Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's Dzogchen teachings. By focusing on *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*, I aim to offer

an understanding of Khaita as both a cultural expression and a spiritual teaching.

**Keywords:** Khaita, Tibetan dance, Namkhai Norbu, Dzogchen, Dzamling Gar Song

## **Introduction**

*Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* can be regarded as the ‘manifesto’ of the Khaita – Joyful Dance project. Its lyrics and choreography incorporate essential principles that are illustrative of all songs and dances in the Khaita collection. *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* holds a unique position, being composed, written and choreographed by the Dzogchen master Namkhai Norbu, representing an extraordinary Dzogchen teaching.

In this article, I explore the role of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* within the Khaita collection of songs and dances, which was developed by Namkhai Norbu between 2011 and 2018, with *Dzamling Gar Song* being added in 2013. I ask how this particular song and dance is representative of the overall Khaita project with its two main purposes, namely the preservation of Tibetan culture and the promotion of presence and awareness. I thereby investigate which aspects of the song’s lyrics and movements, as well as general attitudes within the Khaita practice, can serve as evidence to support this claim.

I begin by introducing the practice of Khaita, highlighting its origins, the extent of its collection of songs and dances, its connection to Namkhai Norbu’s Dzogchen teachings, and its emphasis on joy. I then

conduct a close reading of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*, analyzing how its lyrics and movements<sup>1</sup> align with the designated purposes of Khaita. In addition to literary analysis, I also apply dance analysis, focusing on movement sequences and their interpretations.

This research builds on my previous work, conducted using ethnographic methodology, in which I explored in detail how Khaita serves the two main purposes outlined by Namkhai Norbu. I take these purposes as foundational assumptions for this article: (1) the preservation of Tibetan culture and (2) the promotion of presence, awareness and harmony (Leick). In my earlier work, I critically examined the concept of ‘Tibetanness’<sup>2</sup>, presenting it as a fluid, context-dependent construct. While aware of its constructed meaning and acknowledging that there is no fixed or essential definition of what it means to be Tibetan, I use the term analytically to explore associations with Tibetan identity such as geography, language, religion, shared history, artifacts, and traditional clothing, and similar elements. I further investigated the notions of presence and awareness, framing them as outcomes of mindfulness practices supported by qualitative research data.

As a Khaita teacher and dedicated dancer myself, my insights are informed by my close involvement in the Khaita community. I have studied the dances and songs in depth, performed them publicly on numerous occasions, and engaged in exchanges with fellow dancers about the shared experiences and interpretations that emerge from the practice.

---

1 I follow a structuralist perspective in which ‘text’ is understood as an entity of meaning that extends beyond the written word and may include other media such as dance (Blanariu).

2 Throughout this article, I use single quotation marks when referring to ‘Tibetanness’ to emphasize it as a constructed concept.

*Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*, as a unique example within the Khaita collection, has not yet been discussed in academic discourse. In this article, I aim to demonstrate how it can be read as a ‘microcosm’ of the entire Khaita project, encapsulating its key elements in words and movement, foregrounding Namkhai Norbu’s intention behind it.

## **Khaita - Joyful Dances**

Khaita – Joyful Dances (short: Khaita, mkha’i rta), translated from Tibetan as Harmony in Space, is a project initiated in 2011 by the Tibetan Buddhist scholar and Dzogchen<sup>3</sup> (rdzogs chen) master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu (1938 – 2018). It is a translocal and transcultural singing and dancing practice mainly performed at locations of the International Dzogchen Community around the world. Khaita represents the last large project that Namkhai Norbu developed in the years towards the end of his life. It defines itself with two primary purposes, namely the contribution and preservation of Tibetan culture and the promotion of presence, awareness and harmony that aligns with the teachings of Dzogchen. As such, Khaita subsumes both Namkhai Norbu’s commitment to the safeguarding of the Tibetan culture and his lifelong endeavour as a spiritual teacher of Dzogchen, providing his students with methods to help them be more present and aware, observe themselves, overcome

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<sup>3</sup> Adriano Clemente explains: “Dzogchen, a Tibetan word that means ‘total perfection’ or ‘absolute completeness’ is the name of a spiritual teaching found in both the Bön and the Ancient Buddhist traditions of Tibet, where it is considered the highest path of realization, due to its direct and clear presentation of the nature of mind as the source of all phenomena of existence and to its special methods for accomplishing its potentiality. The meaning of Dzogchen refers to this real, self-perfected nature of each individual, [...] and the scope of this teaching is to reveal directly and experientially the state of ‘Dzogchen’ so that this knowledge becomes wholly integrated into one’s life and behavior.” (Visionary Encounters, 1)

limitations, and ultimately become free from suffering.<sup>4</sup>

The essence of the Dzogchen teachings is the state of *Ati Dzopa Chenpo*, meaning a profound knowledge of one's nature. According to the Dzogchen view, it is present in all beings and can be discovered and experienced by the introduction to one's natural state through a knowledgeable Dzogchen master. Once discovered, familiarity with this state can be developed by practice until one is no longer conditioned by any form of dualism. Adriano Clemente describes it in the following way:

The knowledge transmitted by the master of the Dzogchen (*rdzog chen*) teachings is neither of an intellectual nature nor conditioned by the principles of a religious or philosophical ideology. It concerns the reality of human experience in its immediacy. 'Dzgochen' means 'total' (*chen*) 'perfection' or 'completeness' (*rdzogs*): the primordial state of each individual, an absolute potentiality [...]. (in Norbu, *The Mirror* 7)

Namkhai Norbu further elaborates and highlights the aspect of relaxation:

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4 From an early age, Namkhai Norbu was recognized as the reincarnation of several important spiritual teachers, including Adzom Drukpa. He received extensive religious training in Tibet, mastering Buddhist sciences such as astrology and medicine. In the 1960s, Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci invited him to Italy, where Namkhai Norbu became a scholar of Tibetan language and literature at the University of Naples L'Orientale, a position he held from 1962 to 1992. Beyond his spiritual leadership, Namkhai Norbu is widely respected for his contributions to the study of Tibet's ancient history, particularly the Bön tradition. His notable publications include *Necklace of Zi: A Cultural History of Tibet* (1981), the three-volume *Light of Kailash* (published in English between 2009 and 2015), and *Drung, Deu, and Bön: Narrations, Symbolic Language, and the Bön* (1995). His most influential works on Dzogchen include *The Crystal and the Way of Light: Sutra, Tantra, and Dzogchen* (1989) and *The Mirror: Advice on Presence and Awareness* (1977) (Clemente, Namkhai Norbu).

If we want to explain the Dzogchen teachings in a simple way, we could say, ‘The Dzogchen teachings are about learning how to relax.’ This is because we don’t know how to relax; we are always busy following after our thoughts and judgments. [...] So even if we are able to relax our body a little, our mind and energy are generally still charged up. It is not so easy at all to be totally relaxed. Without help, we just do not know how to do it, and this is why we need the teachings: to help us reacquaint with the state of relaxation. (*A Guide to the Practice of Guru Arya Tara and Her Twenty-One Praises* 46)

Khaita is primarily danced by students of Namkhai Norbu in centers of the International Dzogchen Community. The application of the Dzogchen teachings in the singing and dance practice thereby seems to be the ultimate purpose of the practice. Yet, at the same time, Khaita is open to everyone and is not exclusive to students of Namkhai Norbu or other Buddhist practitioners. In fact, it is increasingly practiced as a method to raise intercultural awareness, collaboration, mindfulness, physical coordination and wellbeing in institutions without Buddhist contexts (“Khaita Joyful Dances”). For this reason, Khaita as a Dzogchen method can be considered an inner approach.

The Khaita collection with its songs and dances was established between 2011 and 2018. The collection consists of around 400 Tibetan modern pop songs, some rooted in folk traditions and others more contemporary, all selected by Namkhai Norbu based on their meanings, melodies, and the artists who performed them. He favoured musicians who express in their songs what it means to be Tibetan in contemporary times, including ways of maintaining cultural identity, language and



knowledges. At the same time, the songs' lyrics refer to more universal values such as caring for the environment, respecting one's ancestors, the wish for peace in the world or the joy of being surrounded by loved ones (Norbu, *Message from Tibet through Songs and Dances 10*).

There are around 240 Khaita dances to these selected songs. Some are based on Tibetan folk dances; some have been choreographed by international students of Namkhai Norbu. Until Namkhai Norbu's death in 2018, all Khaita dances underwent a process requiring his feedback and approval. Certain guidelines for Khaita dances resulted from this, including, for example, suggestions for mudras to translate the song's meaning into movements, as well as ideas to make choreographies balanced by including, for example, turns in two directions rather than only one (Leick, *Creating Khaita – Joyful Dances*).

All Khaita songs and dances are categorized and archived in a digital archive available online via [khaita.com](http://khaita.com). Dance demonstration videos by the Khaita community are therein placed next to the original YouTube videos by the Tibetan artists. Besides the artists' names, the song text in Tibetan, a phonetic transliteration, English translation and dance tutorials, the archive further exhibits commentaries to specific songs by Namkhai Norbu that are rich in linguistic, historic, religious and cultural insights.

Khaita cannot be claimed exclusively as 'Tibetan dance' due to its unique creation history and global application by diverse dancers. Unlike traditional Tibetan dance forms, Khaita did not emerge from the Tibetan regions but was developed under the guidance of Namkhai Norbu in a translocal community. This distinct origin and its close association

with his teachings set Khaita apart from other existing Tibetan dance traditions, positioning it as a contemporary, cross-cultural phenomenon rather than a traditional dance form. For this reason, it does not belong to the tradition of the sacred / Tantric *Cham* dances ('*cham*'), nor to the folk opera *Ache lhamo* (*A-che IHamo*), nor to the broad spectrum of Tibetan folk dances. While some Khaita choreographies re-enact well-known dances,<sup>5</sup> many other Khaita choreographies were created by students of Namkhai Norbu between 2011 and 2018. This represent a clear and intentional break from existing dance traditions, with the dances following their own guidelines and choreographic principles that have been established in the feedback processes by Namkhai Norbu (*ibid.*). As such, it cannot be said that Khaita corresponds to any other Tibetan dance tradition<sup>6</sup> but rather follows its own lineage; it has 'grown' and developed with Namkhai Norbu's students over the last fourteen years.

## The Aspect of Joy

Joy is a central aspect of the Khaita practice, as reflected in its full name, Khaita – Joyful Dances. Namkhai Norbu introduced this epithet

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<sup>5</sup> See list of circle dances on khaita.com (<https://khaita.com>).

<sup>6</sup> The Tibetan performing art practice that probably shares most similarities with Khaita in its framing is the movement surrounding Lingdro Dechen Rolmo (Lingdro). It is music and dance practice performed by laypeople and devised by Khenpo Jigmed Puntsok (1933-2004) (Terrone). It is described as a meditational and devotional practice that traces its origins to Miphan Jamyang Namgyal Gyatso (1846-1914) and connects back to the life of King Gesar. In an early article from 1983, Lin Lerner emphasizes that Lingdro's "sublime poetry contains the teaching of Dzogchen, Atiyoga" (Lerner 55), rather than focusing solely on the epic stories of King Gesar. This connection to Dzogchen makes it an appealing practice for comparison with Khaita. Following Khenpo Jigmed Puntsok's death, Lingdro has undergone significant changes, with efforts to preserve it outside the Tibetan regions and opening it up to new audiences. This evolution makes Lingdro an interesting parallel to Khaita, particularly in how both practices adapt translocally and spread beyond traditional contexts. To the best of my knowledge, there is no literature documenting these developments. While a detailed comparison of these two practices is worth pursuing, it is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on *Dzamling Gar Song* and Dance in detail.

in the early 2010s, when developing and refining Khaita (Dal Borgo 2). He emphasized the focus on joy as a guiding principle for the practice's purpose: "[W]hen we enjoy and we are moving, we concentrate [on the] positive. That [creates a] kind of [...] melody, [...] harmony. That is the meaning, 'Khaita'" ("Khaita Joyful Dances" 0:22).

In my previous quantitative and qualitative research with Khaita practitioners (Leick, *Khaita – Joyful Dances*), I found that 'joy' was frequently referenced as a major effect of the practice. While the name itself may suggest a priming effect, the consistent mention of joy by various dancers indicates that it genuinely resonates with Khaita practitioners. For example, in a quantitative study I conducted, 100% of participants agreed with the statement "[Khaita] makes me joyful." Additionally, in open-response questions, participants frequently described their experience using the word 'joy,' with comments such as, "Khaita is definitely a joyful experience!"; "[it] awakens the joy inside me"; and "[Khaita has] an uplifting effect on mood [that] fully correspond[s] to the name 'Joyful Dances.'" In qualitative interviews, several Khaita practitioners further elaborated on the joyful effects they experience as a result of their practice. Many provided detailed insights into how the joy of Khaita differs from other emotional states, such as temporary happiness or entertainment (*ibid.*).

Joy can be understood in several ways. It might be a synonym for happiness, pleasure, gaiety or bliss to be experienced in various contexts, for example, after having achieved something, feeling physical pleasure or rejoicing in someone else's success.<sup>7</sup> From a spiritual perspective

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<sup>7</sup> Amongst others, see Paul Ekman et al. for more insights into the psychological perspective of joy.

– a view also embraced by Namkhai Norbu – joy is often defined more narrowly and distinguished from happiness and pleasure; while happiness and pleasure are temporary enjoyable emotions that often depend on outer circumstances, joy goes deeper and refers to an inner approach to life. For example, in the *Book of Joy*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the 14th Dalai Lama discuss the quality and nature of joy. Tutu defines joy as “much bigger than happiness”: “While happiness is often seen as being dependent on external circumstances, joy is not” (3). As such, Tutu claims that joy does not mean the absence of suffering but rather the ability to find joy and peace within oneself regardless of the circumstances. It may be cultivated through daily thoughts, feelings and actions and can be regarded as a permanent, inner state that outlasts temporary enjoyable emotions. In addition to this, the Dalai Lama highlights that joy cannot be found from the outside and hence refers to the quality of joy as self-generating: “The ultimate source of happiness is within us” (ibid.).

From these results the perception that joy, once experienced, can be cultivated and purposefully trained. This suggests that Khaita may function as a method to connect to and cultivate joy in oneself and spread it to the group. In this way, the name of Khaita – Joyful Dances can be understood as reminder of the experience of joy. In addition, several Khaita songs speak about joy and lasting happiness – for example, the *Dzamling Gar Song*: “happiness is present, self-perfected all is manifesting” and “happiness is present, joy is developing” (“International Atiyoga Foundation”, *Dzamling Gar*). This encourages practitioners to connect to the source of joyfulness that comes from within and stay present with this sensation.

## Dzamling Gar Song and Dance

Within the structure of the Khaita collection, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* (འཛམ་གླིང་སྒར་གླུ་བློ་ 'dzam gling sgar glu bro) holds a unique position. Created in 2013, it is the only song within the Khaita corpus that was composed and written by Namkhai Norbu himself.<sup>8</sup> The original music consists of him singing and playing harmonica; later versions include other musicians and various instruments. The dance was suggested mostly by Namkhai Norbu, making him its choreographer. Due to circumstances connected to his health, he was supported by two students<sup>9</sup> in finalizing and presenting the dance.

The song / dance is structured in three parts, with a repeated musical interlude. Each section corresponds to a specific principle of meaning. Within the Dzogchen Community, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* is usually practiced at the end of each Khaita session that typically lasts one hour, representing a moment of connection to the spiritual master and contemplation of its meaning.

Dzamling Gar Song and Dance Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB1vICJ0I1k&t=215s>

*Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* aligns with other songs in the Khaita collection through its expression of 'Tibetanness'. Namkhai Norbu, as a Tibetan, composed the song with lyrics in the Tibetan

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<sup>8</sup> In *Dzamling Gar Song*, it is specified that "the words and melody spontaneously and joyfully arose in His [Namkhai Norbu's] mind." (Norbu, *Dzamling Gar Song* 5)

<sup>9</sup> The two collaborators in the dance's choreography were Phuntsog Wangmo and Adriana Dal Borgo.

language. This is consistent with the rest of the Khaita collection, which exclusively features Tibetan artists singing in Tibetan, mostly about life in and the land of Tibet (Norbu, *Message from Tibet through Songs and Dances* 10). However, the structure and melody of *Dzamling Gar Song*'s music do not conform to traditional Tibetan folk music. The themes conveyed in *Dzamling Gar Song*'s lyrics reflect the Dzogchen teachings, which are considered to have Tibetan origins,<sup>10</sup> further reinforcing its connection to 'Tibetanness'. At the same time, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* transcends its cultural framework through its interpretation as a spiritual teaching, extending beyond cultural boundaries ("Khaita Joyful Dances").

Due to being created by a Dzogchen master, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* is viewed as a spiritual teaching. For example, in the introduction to the booklet *Dzamling Gar Song*, Adriana Dal Borgo writes: "May this Song, which is not an ordinary song but a complete teaching, bring joy and benefit to all sentient beings" (in Norbu, *Dzamling Gar Song* 5). Namkhai Norbu himself refers to the profundity of the lyrics: "[I]f I were to write a commentary on this *Dzamling Gar Song* I would be able to write a very fine description, even three volumes. I have a precise

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10 Clemente expands on the origins of Dzogchen: "In the Buddhist tradition, the origin of Dzogchen is attributed to Garab Dorje, a master from Oddiyana who lived some centuries after the pari-nirvana of Buddha Shakyamuni. His transmission passed on to various siddhas from Oddiyana and India, until it reached Tibet in the eight century thanks to the masters Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava, and to the Tibetan translator Vairochana. The teachings of these masters then converged into the Nyingma or Ancient tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, whose transmission has been kept alive up to the present day by many realized teachers." (Clemente, *Visionary Encounters* 1) In reality, however, the Dzogchen teachings are said older than humans and cannot rightfully claimed to be Tibetan. Namkhai Norbu states: "[...] we can't even truly say that the Dzogchen teaching belongs to this planet Earth, much less to any particular national culture. Although it is true that the tradition of Dzogchen [...] has been transmitted through the culture of Tibet that has harbored it ever since the beginning of recorded history in Tibet, we nevertheless cannot finally say that Dzogchen is Tibetan, because the primordial state itself has no nationality and is omnipresent." (Crystal and the Way of Light 33)

idea of everything” (ibid. 24). On multiple occasions, he encouraged his students to study the song and dance and try to understand its meaning.<sup>11</sup>

A variety of approaches to understanding *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* can be taken, the most straightforward being perhaps the approximation from a spiritual viewpoint. It might serve as a gateway to Namkhai Norbu’s extensive Dzogchen teachings. From this perspective, *Dzamling Gar Song*’s three parts can be viewed as representative of base, path and fruit – key concepts in the presentation of the Dzogchen teachings (Norbu, *Crystal and the Way of Light*; Dalai Lama). The point of this article is not to explain the meaning of Namkhai Norbu’s teaching on *Dzamling Gar Song* in depth – something that I feel neither qualified to do as I am not a Dzogchen teacher, nor seems necessary given the availability of original sources<sup>12</sup> – but to connect it to the overall goals of the Khaita project. I aim to demonstrate how the *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* connects to the two main goals of Khaita, namely the promotion of Tibetan culture and the fostering of states of awareness and presence and overall harmony. I do this not only through a close reading of the lyrics and movements of the *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*, but also by illustrating how Namkhai Norbu introduced it to his students as a method to achieve these objectives.

## (1) The Preservation of Tibetan Culture and Language

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11 The documentary “The Sun of Samantabhadra” (2024) gives a detailed insight into the various teaching contexts in which Namkhai Norbu explained the meaning of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Zc1hiuR2UA&t=2s>)

12 Consider the booklet *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*, the *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* entry in the public Khaita archive (<https://khaita.com/songs/dzamling-gar>), the dedicated webpage on the Khaita site (<https://khaita.org/song-and-dances/dzamling-gar-song/>), and the documentary “The Sun of Samantabhadra” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Zc1hiuR2UA&t=2s>).

There are two main reasons behind the Khaita project, namely the preservation and dissemination of Tibetan culture and the promotion of presence, awareness and harmony that is connected to the Dzogchen teachings. The first reason, the support of the Tibetan culture, was a strong motivation for Namkhai Norbu, grounded in his own ethnicity and extensive studies of Tibetan and Buddhist knowledges:

I was born and grew up in Tibet where my opportunity to study Tibetan culture was good, although my life has been spent in Western countries because of previous karma. Since knowledge of Tibetan culture is firmly rooted in me, [...] I feel the need to take special care of that culture, both worldly and spiritual, a need that has been continuously present in my life. [...] Thus I came to understand that Tibetan songs and the dances connected to them are indispensable factors in the long-lasting preservation and diffusion of Tibetan culture (*Message from Tibet through Songs and Dances* 9–10).

Yet Khaita's focus on Tibetan culture is not so much connected to Namkhai Norbu's ethnicity and personal feelings for his homeland, but to the relationship between Tibetan culture, language and Buddhist knowledge considered to be inseparably interwoven. The Buddhist knowledges of overcoming suffering, taking the main paths of Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen, have been transmitted by knowledge holders, spiritual masters and teachers for centuries within the Tibetan regions (Namkhai, *Dzogchen*; Patrul Rinpoche). They are said to be core values of Buddhist teachings as they explain the conditions of existence that cause suffering (*samsara*) and show the possibilities of overcoming them.



Spiritual Buddhist texts have been codified mostly in the Tibetan language.<sup>13</sup> The ongoing threat of language extinction<sup>14</sup> would lead to a loss of access to these texts. Namkhai Norbu explains:

Tibet is a unique population who [sic] saved this precious teaching that we have and that we can follow today. If there were no Tibetans, no Tibetan culture and no Tibetan today, there would not exist the Dzogchen teaching in this world, and even the Vajrayana teaching would not exist. (*Evolution and Our Responsibility Towards All Sentient Being*)

Sociolinguists have long agreed that language is a fundamental component of a people's identity. Its endangerment and eventual loss can have profound cultural, personal and ecological consequences, potentially leading to the extinction of vital cultural knowledge (Low et al.; Schieffelin et al.; Kroskrity). The prevention of the loss of the Tibetan language and a resulting disappearance of Tibetan / Buddhist knowledge was one of the main activities to which Namkhai Norbu's dedicated his life. For example, besides being an eminent scholar in the fields of Tibetan Language and Literature, he also founded the umbrella organization *The International Atiyoga Foundation* that, amongst others,

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13 Nicolas Tournarde suggests that 'Tibetic' is a more accurate way of speaking of 'Tibetan' due to its multiple dialects. No single Tibetan language exists, but rather various languages that are not mutually intelligible: "With the recent descriptions of many new 'dialects' or 'languages', scholars of Tibetan linguistics have come to realize the incredible diversity of this linguistic area. The representation of a single language is no longer viable and we have to speak of a language family. In fact, the Tibetic linguistic family is comparable in size and diversity to the Romance or Germanic families. The term 'Tibetic' is thus very convenient to denote a well-defined family of languages derived from Old Tibetan." (106-107)

14 The majority of Tibetic languages have under 10.000 speakers, yet the precise number of fluent speakers cannot be identified. ("Endangered Language Alliance")

includes the departments of *The School of Tibetan Language and Translation* and *The Shang Shung Institute* (“International Atiyoga Foundation”, *International Atiyoga Foundation*). Khaita, with its selected songs in Tibetan language by Tibetan artists, is a continuation of this life endeavour as a method to expose practitioners to Tibetan language and culture.

It is worth highlighting in this regard is that Namkhai Norbu encouraged his students, Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike, to engage with Tibetan language / culture as a gateway to Buddhist knowledge. In the introduction to *Message from Tibet*, he writes:

Regardless of whether one is Tibetan or not, if all of those who have a love for Tibetan culture can take an interest in these new Tibetan songs, this attitude will certainly be of help to the Tibetan culture; therefore I earnestly request all such people to keep this in mind. (10)

To him, Khaita represented a joyful and easily accessible way to learn about, disseminate and preserve Tibetan culture and language, regardless of national or ethnic belonging, through songs and dances.

*Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* exemplifies how Namkhai Norbu used Khaita as a method to preserve Tibetan language and expose Khaita enthusiasts to it. He transcribed the original song texts in Tibetan language and *Drajyor* and then, with help from experts, translated them into to English. *Drajyor* (སྐ་སྐྱེར་, sgra sbyor) is a phonetic transcription system that represents Tibetan sounds with Latin letters. It was devised

by Namkhai Norbu and perfected for use in spiritual practice texts.<sup>15</sup> Singing along to the artist's voice, following the *Drajyor* transcription, enables non-Tibetan speakers to become familiar with Tibetan lexis and syntax.

In addition to that, *Dzamlung Gar Song* includes an extensive linguistic and explanatory commentary. This is representative of other Khaita songs; Namkhai Norbu gave numerous oral explanations on such songs. *Dzamlung Gar Song*'s commentary is thereby special in its extent and precision, which led to its publication in the booklet *Dzamlung Gar Song* in 2018. Besides its deeper meaning as a Dzogchen text, the commentary is valuable as a linguistic resource, explaining lexical nuances and grammatical specificities. The booklet further includes a musical notation of the song that might facilitate the singing process. Namkhai Norbu also commented on other songs from the Khaita collection, and many of these commentaries are published in *Collected Commentaries on the Songs in Message from Tibet through Songs and Dances*. They are, however, significantly shorter than the one on *Dzamlung Gar Song* and do not include musical notations.

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15 In *Drajyor: Tibetan Phonetics for the Dzogchen Community* it says: "The Drajyor phonetic transcription system was created by Chögyal Namkhai Norbu to facilitate the correct pronunciation of Tibetan without knowledge of the Tibetan alphabet and as a support to learn to properly pronounce Tibetan. This booklet introduces all of the possible letter and sound combinations occurring in Tibetan texts along with their Drajyor equivalents. Drajyor distinguishes subtle differences in pronunciation using technical devices such as accentuation in addition to a conventional (nonstandard) use of the letters of the Latin alphabet and hence can represent a wider range of sounds and tones than more common phonetic systems. Drajyor is particularly useful for practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism and Dzogchen and is commonly used in the Dzogchen Community." (Shang Shung Publications, 2021) The difference between the Wylie system and Drajyor is that Wylie represents a standardized way to represent Tibetan syllables and orthography whereas Drajyor exclusively focusses on the sound and pronunciation of Tibetan. For more information on the Wylie transcription system see (Wylie).

From my year-long field research within the centers of the International Dzogchen Community, I can confirm that many Khaita practitioners – most of whom come from Western language backgrounds – report increased exposure to Tibetan language and knowledge through the songs in the Khaita collection. For example, several practitioners shared that the repeated singing and engagement with the meaning of the songs motivated them to study Tibetan or improve their language skills. However, only a few practitioners have expressed a sufficient level of proficiency in Tibetan to fully understand songs from the Khaita collection without English translation. Additionally, the pronunciation of Tibetan sounds remains unfamiliar to most, and many still find the written characters difficult to read, even after years of training (Leick, *Khaita – Joyful Dances*).

Video: “The Sun of Samantabhadra” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Zc1hiuR2UA&t=2s>

## **(2) Presence, Awareness and Harmony**

Besides supporting Tibetan culture and language, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* is also representative of Khaita’s second main designated purpose, namely the promotion of presence, awareness and harmony. This connects to Khaita’s translation from Tibetan to Harmony in Space, which is often used as a descriptive epithet in English. This epithet is intertwined with Namkhai Norbu’s Dzogchen teachings and his continuous efforts to make his students aware of their circumstances and provide them with tools to enable them to become more present.

Like many Khaita dances, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* is

danced in a circle. Dancing it in a harmonious way means that one's attention is not only on one's own movements, focusing on physical coordination and bodily presence, but also on the correspondence to the general choreography, on the group, on the music, on the spacing and, ideally, on remembering the lyrics and their meaning.

In the following, I analyse the three parts of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*'s song text in a close reading and highlight general principles that correlate with the Khaita project per se. I do this by first focusing on the lyrics of each section. Using techniques of dance analysis, I then follow an embodied approach and concentrate on the choreography of the dance.

## First Part: Dzamling Gar

*Dzamling Gar Song* begins with the following words:<sup>16</sup>

འཛམ་གླིང་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཐོག་མཆོག་  
འདུག་ཟེེ།  
འཛམ་གླིང་ཁྱོད་ལ་མི་མཆོག་  
གང་འདྲ་མཆོག་གེ།  
  
བདེ་ལྡན་དུ་ལེགས་ཤིག་  
དགའ་བྱེད་འཛམ་གླིང་འགས་འདྲ།  
ལྷན་ལྷན་ཐོག་ཀྱི་འགས་  
དགའ་བྱེད་རྩལ་ལ་ལེགས་ཤིག་དང་།  
བདེ་ལྡན་མཉམ་དུ་རྩལ་ཤིག་  
བསམ་ལ་ཤིས་པར་ཤིག་  
བསམ་པར་ཤིག་འཇུག་པར་ཤིག་  
བཤམ་ཤིག་ལྷན་ལྷན་ལྷན་ལྷན་  
ཐོག་ཀྱི་འགས་པར་ཤིག་ལྷན་ཤིག་

zám ~ lín kyon-gyĩ~, zóg qen- dús dé~,  
zám~ lín~ gár~ la~ ji~ gyòg~ gǎñ~ ãñ-gyòg  
  
dê~ lhod~du peb ~ xog~.  
gá ~ gyid zòm~ jyũñ~ lag ~ a~.  
pun~ sum~ cog~jyũñ lag,  
gá ~ gyid~ rol~ la~ peb~ ã-dǎñ,  
dé ~ gyid ñám~ du~ rol~ lo.  
dra ~la~ xis~bar xog,  
sám ~ dôn drüb~ bar xog,  
dra ~ xis lhun~ gyis~ drüb~ ùnas,  
qyog ~gun~las nám~ bar~ gyál~ lo.

Dzogchen Communities of the whole world,  
To Dzamling Gar, as soon as possible,  
  
In a relaxed manner, please come!  
Happiness is present,  
All is perfected, nothing is missing.  
Please come to enjoy happiness,  
Let's enjoy happiness together!  
May all manifest auspiciously!  
May our desires be fulfilled!  
With self-perfected fortune arising,  
May victory manifest in all directions!

(International Atiyoga Foundation, Dzamling Gar)

The lyrics represent an invitation to the “Dzogchen Communities

16 For efficiency, repetitions of lines have been removed. Besides Tibetan script and English translation, the table includes Drajyor translation as published.

of the whole world” to come to Dzamling Gar “in a relaxed manner”, where “happiness is present” and “nothing is missing” (ibid.). These

words can be understood in two senses. Firstly, “Dzogchen Community of the whole world” refers to all those interested in the Dzogchen teachings, regardless of their nationality, cultural background, gender, social class, age or physical abilities.

Until his death in 2018, Namkhai Norbu travelled all around the world to teach and spread his knowledge of Dzogchen. As part of his global activities, he founded several centers of the International Dzogchen Community. ‘Merigar’, located in Tuscany, Italy and inaugurated in 1980, was the first. The creation of other ‘Gars’, meaning major centers, and ‘Lings’, minor centers, followed all around the world. The International Dzogchen Community now consists of thousands of members in over forty countries (“International Dzogchen Community”).



Figure 1: Map of the International Dzogchen Community with its centers.  
©Fulvio Ferrari

Dzamling Gar, established in 2013, which coincided with the

creation of *Dzamling Gar Song*, is located on the Canarian Island of Tenerife. It serves as the ‘global Gar’, representative of all other centers. Dzamling Gar has been crucial for the development of Khaita; practice sessions happen every day and performances take place regularly.

The first part of *Dzamling Gar Song* is an invitation to the “Dzogchen Communities of the whole world” to come to the physical site of Dzamling Gar, “in a relaxed way”, and enjoy dancing and being together (International Atiyoga Foundation, *Dzamling Gar*). This shows Khaita’s transculturality and -locality, its openness to all people and the diversity of its practitioners.

Secondly, the lyrics can be interpreted beyond the understanding of Dzamling Gar as a physical site. Instead, ‘Dzamling Gar’ refers to the state of *Ati Dzogpa Chenpo* that may arise in each individual in a self-perfected way. As such, the song’s lyrics are an invitation to one’s true nature from where everything manifests perfectly. In the commentary to the song, Namkhai Norbu explains:

Everything goes well because we are not doing something in a dualistic way, not fighting or struggling to obtain something. We are dealing with how our real nature is, our nature as it manifests, we are working with that. Of course, everything that manifests is then positive. (*Dzamling Gar Song* 21)

The state of *Ati Dzogpa Chenpo* is associated with presence and awareness of experiencing one’s condition and circumstances, one’s real nature. A ‘supreme harmony’, where there is nothing to do, force or worry about, is the result. This is expressed through “as soon as possible,

in a relaxed way” (International Atiyoga Foundation, *Dzamling Gar*):

*Ji gyòg gǎṅ gyòg* means as soon as possible, not slowly, or maybe next year. But when we say to come as soon possible, it does not mean that you should get nervous and stressfully force yourself to come soon. That is not the point. The point is to come as soon as possible in a relaxed way. (Norbu, *Dzamling Gar Song* 20)

In this sense, the words can be understood as an invitation to relax in one’s own natural state (*Ati Dzogpa Chenpo*) that is to be discovered without making special effort or having to change anything. Residing in this state is compared to a “victory” from which everything manifests in positive ways (International Atiyoga Foundation, *Dzamling Gar*).

It is worth highlighting that this invitation is conveyed in the format of a song and is danced to. This is decisive for all Khaita dances; instead of limiting the physical senses, a common method in other Buddhist traditions, the contemplation takes place while moving and singing. This is a key characteristic of Namkhai Norbu’s Dzogchen teachings. He explains:

If you train in sitting meditation, without moving, without even shifting your eyes, it is easier to discover a calm state, free of thoughts [and be present]. But this is only half the path, because movement is part of our real nature as well. If we develop only the calm state, we can definitely feel relaxed and not confused while we meditate, but sooner or later we will have to move. And what will happen then to our meditation? It is as if you go to a nice hotel to relax and spend some quiet time away from your



worries. As nice as it is, it does not last. You stay one day, two days, one week, then you have to go. And all your stress and worries are waiting for you outside. For this reason, in the Dzogchen teachings the emphasis is on knowing how to integrate with movement. (*Starting the Evolution* 87)

Therefore, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* and all Khaita dances are a method of practicing to relax, being present and, if possible, residing in the state of Dzogchen, while moving (harmoniously) in space.

### **Movements: First Part**

The movements of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* begin with a musical part without singing that is repeated several times. It consists of a simple sequence of basic steps<sup>17</sup>, each in counts of four, with both arms expanding slowly. The right arm rises slightly higher to the center of the circle while the left arm stretches to the outside, approximately at shoulder height.

With the words, the movements change and a combination of rhythmical steps, which repeats three times, follows. The body orientation thereby alternates from facing the inside of the circle to following the direction of the circle. The movements do not have a designated meaning and follow the style of Tibetan folk dances.

With *gá gyid zòm jyŭŋ lag* and so forth, the movements turn into

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17 The basic step is a combination of weight shift from right to left leg, with the right leg performing a slight kick away from the ground on the fourth count of the movement.

the chorus of the dance, which gets repeated three and a half times in total before the end of the dance. Two movements are particularly striking: the raising of the arms, with turning hand movements on four levels, and the turning in two different directions. The first combination is accompanied by the words *gá gyid zòm jyŷŷ lag*, “happiness is present” (International Atiyoga Foundation, *Dzamling Gar*). The raising of the arms thereby exemplifies something manifesting, and the turning hands can be viewed as playful ornaments, representing happiness. The turning in two directions is connected with the principle of balancing choreography and enhancing dancers’ presence and awareness. As a result of Namkhai Norbu’s feedback process, the change of turns in opposite directions can often be found in Khaita dances.



Picture 1: Raising of the arms (start)<sup>18</sup>



Picture 2: Raising of the arms (final)

To sum up, the first part of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* is an invitation to come to Dzamling Gar, both in the literal sense of visiting its geographic site as the global center of the Dzogchen Community, where Khaita is practiced daily, and in the understanding of Dzamling Gar as one’s real nature. Residing in the state of *Ati Dzogpa Chenpo* of full presence relates to happiness and positive manifestations everywhere.

## **Second Part: Collaboration**

<sup>18</sup> The pictures from 1-6 are screenshots from International Atiyoga Foundation’s Dzamling Gar Dance demonstration video. (2024). Dzamling Gar. <https://khaita.com/songs/dzamling-gar>

The second part of *Dzamling Gar Song* contains the following words:

དང་ཅག་གི་རྩོམ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་ལྷ་ལྟ་བུ་གྱི་	ned ~ jag-gĩ dob~ xug~, lhan ~jig-du dril~ dāñ~. zóg~ qen~ dùs~ dé~ yon~ gyi dob~ ò ~xug lhan~ jig-du dril ~xog~. gá~ gyid zòm~jyũñ~ lag~ a~. dob~ ò~xug lhan~jig~du dril ~xog. gá ~ gyid zòm~jyũñ lag, lhun~ gyĩs~ grub~jyũñ lag, a~ tii da~ góñ~ gyon~ añ~dāñ, zám ~lĩñ~la~ dé~ gyid~ hõñ~ño. dra ~la~ xis~bar xog sám ~ dón drùb~par xog, rañ ~ gyúd~gyi nál~ lug~ gyás~ as~nas , zám~ lĩñ~gun xĩ~ dé~la rol~ lo.	Let's unite our strength and capacity, Dzogchen Communities, all your strength and capacity Let's unite! Happiness is present, Let's unite your strength and capacity! Happiness is present, All is manifesting self-perfected. Live in the knowledge of the primordial state, And happiness will arise in the world. May all manifest auspiciously! May our desires be fulfilled! Developing the knowledge of our authentic condition The entire world peace will enjoy.
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(ibid.)

The second part of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* is dedicated to the aspect of harmonious collaboration. “Let’s unite our strength and capacity” can be understood both in the literal sense of working together harmoniously as well as a deeper meaning of being together in the state of Dzogchen in an undistracted way (ibid.):

So *ned jag gĩ dob xug* means our energy, our effort, everything. *Lhan jig du dril dāñ* means we are bringing it all together. [...] Being together is just like when we do Guruyoga.<sup>19</sup> [I]n that moment, thinking this or that does not distract us. We try to be in a state, the primordial state. That is our real nature. [...] In a relative sense *ned jag gĩ dob xug lhan jig du dril dāñ* means to

<sup>19</sup> Guruyoga is one of the main meditation methods in several Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

unite, to work together. In an absolute sense, it means to integrate and really find ourselves in our state. (*Dzamling Gar Song* 23)

Khaita is a practice that builds on collaboration between different people. This is best illustrated through the example of a circle, the formation in which most Khaita dances are performed. Three aspects are thereby essential: First, a circle cannot physically be formed alone and requires more than one person. Second, provided there is adequate space, it is open to an infinite number of people. Third, there is no hierarchy in a circle. As soon as one enters the circle of dancers, one is part of the group. The ‘successes’ of the Khaita choreographies are therefore not so much dependent on individual dancers’ capacities as on the overall harmony of the group. Collaboration with the other dancers, presence and awareness with the movements, and harmony with the music as well as the space become more important.

In addition to this, collaboration is a common theme of the Khaita songs. Many songs, for example, emphasize the unity of the Tibetan people. Several songs highlight the importance of unity among the three Tibetan regions of Amdo, Kham and Ü-Tsang, and within the diaspora by remembering their common points of interest such as a shared history, language and religion and cultural identity. Similarly, the main point of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*’s second part is the reminder of everyone’s potentiality to be in the state of Dzogchen, which is a shared quality: “Everyone, the group and the individuals within it, has the primordial potentialities” (Norbu, *Dzamling Gar Song* 23). In other words, it recalls the essence of human nature that can be shared joyfully and in a relaxed way.

After the invitation in the first part, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*’s second part encourages people to work together in a harmonious way and to connect in the essence of the teachings.

## Movements: Second Part

The movements of the second part start after the musical interlude, as described above. With the starting of the words, dancers move forward in the direction of the circle for four counts before coming back with the same movement in the same timing. The legs perform a ‘limping step’, with the right leg giving the accent and the left slightly dragging behind. The arms move along the body and rise to the center of the circle on the fourth count of the movement, together with the right leg executing a slight kick. The importance of this combination lies in moving in space, forward and backward.

After this, with the words of *zóg qen dūs dé yon gyi dob xug*, dancers change their body orientation from facing the direction of the circle to the center of the circle. With four simple steps they walk inside the circle and come back to their original position again. They perform a  $\frac{3}{4}$  turn on the spot before repeating the whole sequence starting from the opposite leg, including the turn, to the outside of the circle. The arms rise during the turn and stay at the level of the navel with the walking steps. Again, the turns are performed in different directions. The same is true for the steps: While the steps inside the circle start with the left leg, the steps to the outside direction begin with the right. This corresponds to the previously mentioned principle of choreographic balance. After this, the chorus as described in the first part repeats.



Picture 3: Going inside the circle



Picture 4: Going outside the circle

The characteristic of the second part's movements is the use of space in all directions; forward, backward, inside, outside and all around as proposed by the turns. This relates to movement in life that is never still and, on a larger scale, also refers to the movement of the earth in the solar system. On a choreographic level, the dancers' collaboration is crucial as they need to be aware of how they move in space with respect to the people in front of and behind them. Keeping a unified circle can be challenging, particularly when moving to the outside of the circle and not seeing the group. In brief, *Dzamling Gar Song's* second part is dedicated to the principle of harmonious collaboration.

### Third Part: Application and Peace

Dzamling Gar Song's third and last part has the following words:

མ་ ~ ཉི་འི་དགོངས་པ་ རྟོན་། རང་ ~ རྒྱུད་ལ་ རྩལ་ དང་ །	a ~ tii gón~ dón~, ran~ gyúd~la dril~ dān~, ran~ gyúd~ nál~ lug~ dog~ jyod-gyis zām~ ām-līn	Integrate the principle of Ati in your state! Through the knowledge and application of one's authentic condition, the world
རང་ རྒྱུད་ རྩལ་ འཕགས་ རྟོན་ རྒྱུད་ རྩམ་ འཛམ་ འམ་ རྒྱུད་	xī~ dé~la kòd ~ yon~.	Will be established in peace!
ཞི་ བདེ་ལ་ འཛིན་ ~ ཡོང་ །	ran~ gyúd nál~ lug~ dog~ jyod-gyis zām~ ām-līn	Through the knowledge and application of one's authentic condition, the world
རང་ ~ རྒྱུད་ རྩལ་ འཕགས་ རྟོན་ རྒྱུད་ རྩམ་ འཛམ་ འམ་ རྒྱུད་	xī~ dé~la kòd ~ yon~o~.	Will be established in peace!
ཞི་ བདེ་ལ་ འཛིན་ ~ ཡོང་ ~ འོ་ །	gá~gyid zòm~jyūn lag~ a~.	Happiness is present,
དགའ་ འོ་ རྒྱུད་ འཛམ་ རྒྱུད་ འཕགས་ ~ འོ་ །	zām~ am-līn xī~ dé~la kòd ~ yon.	The world will be established in peace.
འཛམ་ འམ་ རྒྱུད་ ཞི་ བདེ་ལ་ འཛིན་ ~ ཡོང་ །	gá~gyid zòm~jyūn lag,	Happiness is present,
དགའ་ རྒྱུད་ འཛམ་ རྒྱུད་ འཕགས་།	dé~ gá~ gyás~jyūn lag,	Joy is developing,
དགའ་ དགའ་ རྒྱུད་ རྒྱུད་ འཕགས་།	ran~ gyúd nál~ lug~la~ jyór~ ò~dān,	Integrate the authentic condition in your state,
རང་ ~ རྒྱུད་ རྩལ་ འཕགས་ལ་ རྒྱུད་ འོ་ དང་ །	gun~sán~gī ŋi~ ma~ xar~ro~.	And the sun of Samantabhadra will arise.
ཀུན་ ~འབངས་ འགྱུ་ ཉི་ མ་ ཤར་ རོ་ །	dra~la~ xis~bar xog	May all manifest auspiciously!
བགྲ་ ~ ལ་ ཤེས་པར་ ཤོག	sām~ dōn drüb~par xog,	May our desires be fulfilled!
བསམ་ ~ རོན་ འཕྱུག་པར་ ཤོག	drò~gun dé~ xīn~ gyid~ ī~nas,	May all beings have joy!
འོ་ ~ ཀུན་ བདེ་ ཞི་ རྒྱུད་ ~ རི་ རྒྱས་	dan~dé~yi bal~la~ rol~lo.	And enjoy the splendor of ultimate happiness.
གཏན་ འབདེ་མི་ དཔལ་ ལ་ རྩལ་ རྟོ		

(International Atiyoga Foundation, Dzamling Gar)

The third part is dedicated to the integration of knowledge, of “the principle of Ati”, which means “the primordial state” as “the state of Dzogchen

knowledge” (Norbu, *Dzamling Gar Song* 26), and its consequences for the whole world. Namkhai Norbu therein stresses that the understanding of the knowledge of Dzogchen is not an intellectual matter:

*Raj gyúd nál lug* means our knowledge, our understanding, being in our real nature. First is *dog*. *Dog* means you understand, not in an intellectual way but concretely. You discover how your real nature is. *Jyod* means that you not only know it, but then you remain in this knowledge. (ibid. 27)

As such, the last part of the song highlights the aspect of the concrete application in daily life of knowledge experienced. The consequences of applying one’s authentic state might then lead to peace: “Through the knowledge and application of one’s authentic condition, the world will be established in peace!” (International Atiyoga Foundation, *Dzamling Gar*).

Peace is a key principle of the Khaita practice (Leick, *Khaita – Joyful Dances*). It is not solely understood as the absence of war or violence but rather refers to a relaxed, clear and peaceful state of mind. This concept, focusing on inner transformation, is called ‘evolution’ in Namkhai Norbu’s teachings: “If we need peace, we need evolution and evolution must develop in the condition of the individual, not revolution. We always have the idea that we want to change someone. This is called revolution, but it doesn’t work and it has no benefit” (*Evolution and Our Responsibility Towards All Sentient Beings* 2). It follows that the starting point for peace is the individual and not the external.<sup>20</sup>

Just as in counting to a million one must begin counting at the

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20 This is a common belief in Buddhism. The Dalai Lama, for example, states: “Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way. [...] Peace must first be developed within an individual. And I believe that love, compassion, and altruism are the fundamental basis for peace. Once these qualities are developed within an individual, he or she is then able to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony. This atmosphere can be expanded and extended from the individual to his family, from the family to the community and eventually to the whole world.” (in Hanh)



number one, so to benefit society, one must begin by working on oneself. Each individual must truly take responsibility for him or herself, and this can only be done by working to increase one's awareness, to become more fully conscious, more the master of oneself. Change on a small scale can bring about change on a wider scale. (Norbu, *Crystal and the Way of Light* 164–165)

In this sense, Khaita can be viewed as a peace project: It enjoins practitioners to observe themselves, to be present and aware of their movement, the music, the space, the group and the connection to the meaning of the songs' lyrics. Ideally, as encouraged by *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*, practitioners manage to reside in their relaxed, peaceful, natural state of Dzogchen. Consequently, the knowledge of Dzogchen may spread to other individuals and, on a larger scale, to the whole world and help create world peace.

### **Movements: Third Part**

The characteristics of the third parts' movements are the opening of the arms in various ways. With *Ati*, they open from the heart above the head in a rather fast movement followed by two limping steps to the words of *gón dñn*. With *rañ gyúd la drīl dññ*, both arms again raise above the head and open to the sides. Directly after this, the left arm opens above the head, followed almost immediately by the right arm. The combination symbolizes the integration of one's state in the space.

With the next line, the dancer moves slightly in the direction of the circle with *rañ gyúd nál lug* and then returns to remain on the spot. With *dog jyod gyis*, both arms are raised again above the head. In this



moment, the heels lift off the floor: With the words *zàm ģm-lĩŋ xĩ dé*, the dancer moves backwards, in the opposite direction to the circle. First, the right leg and right arm open to the back before the left leg and arm do the same movement to the opposite side. The arms thereby open in a round way, as if showing the planet earth (*zàm ģm-lĩŋ*) and offering it peace (*xĩ dé*). This is a moment that requires musical and lyrical awareness, as the movement needs to be precisely timed with the lyrics. The line finishes with the dancer bringing the arms down to the slightly bent knees and opening them from there above the head in a slow-paced way with *kòd yon o*. The line is then repeated in the exact same way. After this, the chorus is performed one more time, with a fast additional repetition starting from the line *dra la xis bar xog* and the musical interlude.

The many openings of the arms of the third part are related to spreading in space, establishing oneself in it, while incorporating one's surroundings. The physical sensation of stretching in all directions aligns with the lyrics of the third part that encourage applied knowledge of one's state in the world / in the space.



Picture 5: Raising of the right arm



Picture 6: Raising of both arms

To sum up, *Dzamlıng Gar Song and Dance's* third part is

associated with the application of one's knowledge and experience and the spreading of peacefulness around the world. As such, it aligns with the purpose of Khaita to promote harmony within oneself and the extended group.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have shown how *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* exemplifies the underlying principles of Khaita – Joyful Dances. Khaita's connection to Tibetan culture has become clear by exploring the way Namkhai Norbu uses songs in Tibetan language, their transcriptions and translations, and their meaning connected to Tibetan life and knowledges as a method to promote his students' engagement with Tibetan culture. As such, Khaita contributes to the safeguarding of Tibetan language and culture.

In addition, the analysis of *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*'s three sections have illustrated several principles of the Khaita practice, namely the connection to the Dzogchen teachings with their focus on residing in the state of *Ati Dzogpa Chenpo*, the aspect of collaboration amongst all dancers despite their diverse backgrounds and the application of one's experience in peaceful ways. I have clarified thereby how *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance* promotes presence, awareness and harmony for its practitioners, and is representative of all Khaita songs and dances.

Being written and choreographed by the Dzogchen Master Namkhai Norbu, *Dzamling Gar Song and Dance*'s meaning is manifold and aligns with several points in his profound Dzogchen teachings. It is exemplary of the extensive Khaita project that represents Namkhai

Norbu's last major teaching and can thus be viewed as a Khaita manifesto.

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# **The Culture of Tibetan Tulma, Tsampa, and Tea**

Geshe Tri Yungdrung

(Translated from the Tibetan by Kelsang Lhamo)

**Editor’s note:** This article represents an exemplary discussion of Tibetan foodways by a scholar writing in the Tibetan scholarly tradition. Readers are advised that some of the norms regarding dating, citations, and etymologies, among other conventions, differ between the Tibetan and Western scholarly traditions. We at *Yeshe* are committed to supporting research in the Tibetan scholarly tradition with minimalistic editorial interference.

**Abstract:** In the traditional culture of Tibetan nomads, there is a substance called “tulma (གཏུལ་མ་),” which is also known by many other names, including “jasue (ར་སྤུལ་),” “jadur (ར་འདུར་),” “kyoma (རྒྱལ་མ་),” and “garla (གར་ལྷེ).” The article discusses the processes required to ground and churn barley into tulma, and how it is mixed with tsampa. After one cooks the barley grain, one must also mix it with wheat, lentils, or corn. Moreover, one also needs tea.

The article offers quotes from many different ancient texts showing the origins and benefits of tulma, tsampa, and tea culture in Tibet.

**Keywords:** tulma, tsampa, tea, Tibetan foodways, tea culture

## Tibetan Tulma (གཏུལ་མ་) Culture

In the nomadic regions of Amdo, on the northeastern border of Tibet, my homeland, there is a substance called “tulma (གཏུལ་མ་),” which in some areas is also customarily referred to as “jasue (རྩ་སྤྱུས).” Tulma and jasue are synonymous, two names that convey the same meaning. I have heard that in western Tibet regions they also called it “jadur (རྩ་འདུར),” “kyoma (རྩྱུ་མ་),” “garla (གར་སྤྱུ),” and even by other names. It is a small amount of tsampa (or a similar substance) scattered or sprinkled onto another material. For example, the *Great Tibetan Dictionary* (ཆེན་མཇོན་ཆེན་མོ) describes it as follows: “Sprinkle powdered medicine onto a remedy. Sprinkle roasted barley flour into tea.” According to the dictionary definitions, the term “tulma” refers to either roasted barley flour, dried cheese (སྤྱར་ར།), and butter being sprinkled on top of tea, or to these three ingredients being mixed together in a bowl, over which tea is then poured and stirred. Both methods are known as “tulma.” Tulma is a unique and essential staple in my homeland, the nomadic region of Amdo. It is an indispensable part of morning tea. As a local Amdo saying goes: “Morning tea must have good tulma, just as a spiritual mentor must have a good lama.” Tulma is often referred to in local sayings, as seen in this folk proverb. However, people usually say “tulma dhak” to describe chewing tulma.

In our tradition, morning tulma is considered a supreme nourishing remedy, almost like a medicinal elixir for the body. If there is an elderly or frail person in the household, it is customary to prepare them tulma early in the morning, even before they rise from bed, so it is

ready and warming by their bedside when they wake. According to ancient tradition, Tibetans living on the high plateau followed a daily dietary rhythm: “In the morning, prepare tulma. In the afternoon, eat tsampa. In the evening, drink tsamku (tsampa soup).”<sup>1</sup> This ancient wisdom reflects a balanced way of life shaped by the high-altitude environment. It also sheds light on why Tibetans were historically known as “Black-Headed Barley-Eaters”.

In summary, the ancient dietary customs of our snow land, which centered around consuming tsampa and drinking butter tea, were not borrowed or influenced by neighboring Han or other cultures. Rather, these traditions represent an indigenous Tibetan way of life that has thrived naturally on the Plateau for thousands of years. Moreover, since tsampa and tea are indispensable when having tulma, I would also like to briefly discuss tsampa and tea as well.

## **The Culture of Tibetan Tsampa (ཕྱམ་པ་)**

### *The Nature and Classification of Tsampa*

Tsampa is the staple food of the Tibetans who created the ancient sustenance of the entire snowy land of Tibet. It is a unique part of Tibet’s culinary heritage, passed down since ancient times, even dating back to the era of ancestral oral traditions. Tsampa is made from roasted barley flour, one of the “Five Grains.” Also called “barley tsampa,” it is made by roasting barley, one of the five sacred grains, in a pan or copper pot, then grinding it into flour using a stone hand mill, water mill, self-grinder, or any type of grinder. However, depending on regional customs

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<sup>1</sup> This is according to the Amdo farmer Rabten Gyal. Gyal, Rabten. Interview by Geshe Tri Yungdrung, 2022.

and local conditions, tsampa is not limited to barley flour alone. Various grains are roasted and ground to produce distinct types of tsampa, each with its own name and specific use, such as those made from roasted peas, wheat, buckwheat, or rice. *The Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary* describes tsampa as: “Flour made by adding water to grains such as barley and others, then grinding and sifting them. [Types include] pea flour, ordinary flour, fine flour, medium flour, and offering flour. Tsampa is made from white powder (བྲུལ་ཏོག). It is the same as being carried by the wind (ལྷགས་བས་བྱེར་ན་བྱེར་མཉམ་ཡིན།).” Similarly, the ancient Tibetan text *Do Zermik* (མདོ་གཟེར་མིག) defines tsampa as barley flour. Therefore, it seems that the popular term “tsampa” strongly implies barley tsampa itself. According to the *Dungkar Dictionary*: “Tsampa is a staple food of the Tibetan people,” and because it is extremely delicious, it is also known as “white honey tsampa (ལྷང་དཀར་ཅམ་ས་).” Tsampa is not only a food but also one of Tibet’s traditional excellent medicines that can nourish the body’s essence and cure various diseases, as is clearly stated in ancient Tibetan medical texts. This is evident from the fact that “tsampa” appears many times in the ancient *Four Medical Treatises* (འབྲུམ་བཞི་), where it is described as an excellent medicine, and its benefits and effects are enumerated and compiled below.

### *Mentions of Tsampa in Ancient Scriptures*

From the *Four Medical Treatises*: “Barley tsampa, though cooling in nature, strengthens vitality and calms excessive digestive heat. A soup prepared from green, unripe ears of grain and barley flour helps alleviate persistent imbalances. It is easy to digest, gentle on the stomach, and promotes warm, masculine energy (149).” The same source

says, “*ya baksha ra* (ཡ་བཀྲ་ར་) generates heat, cures tumors, and purifies disease. White powder (བུལ་ཉོག་) removes decay and softens tsampa. Yellow sulfur dispels harmful influences and dries pus and blood (149).” Thus, it is said that tsampa enhances physical strength, yellow sulfur eliminates illness, and together they help dry excess bodily fluids such as pus and blood, promoting overall health. Likewise, according to the *Black Hundred Cures*: “When the head spins and both body and mind feel heavy, there is excessive mucus, low internal heat, poor appetite, and physical weakness. Pain arises in the kidneys and lower back, and the body becomes swollen. Vomiting and diarrhea occur, accompanied by tsampa and phlegm. The blood drawn during bloodletting appears reddish-white and sticky (Thar, *Four Medical Treatises*, 202).” From the same text: “Use myrobalan (arura), nutmeg (jati), or duralabha (ཁྲི་ཆེར་). Keep the body warm and induce sweating, then remove half the wool covering. Barley porridge and a broth made from tsam pa help dispel excess wind energy. For conditions involving fever, bile heat, sweating, and residual body hair, it is better to avoid bloodletting; the most effective treatment is to induce perspiration (271).”

The same text continues: “Indigestion leads to a sallow complexion and abdominal bloating. A mixture of five pomegranates, rock salt, and white rock-sugar is recommended. If vomiting occurs, apply a warm, oily poultice to the stomach. If the vomit is watery, administer a decoction made from radish. Giving only a small amount of tsampa makes it easier to digest (398).” Later, it reads, “Fourth, a discussion of whether food and behavior are beneficial or harmful for general wounds: During the early stages of a wound, bleeding and swelling occur. Therefore, broth and tsampa should be consumed (398).”

The term “tsampa” appears frequently in the *Four Medical Treatises* and other classical texts. However, it is necessary to examine whether the term “tsampa” in these contexts refers specifically to tsampa as ground grain flour, or whether it has other meanings. As the saying goes, one must “distinguish similar sounds with different meanings.”

### *The Origin of Tsampa*

The ancient people of Tibet are credited with compiling the *Four Medical Treatises*, which document numerous medicinal ingredients derived from native Tibetan plants and minerals. These ingredients played an essential role in the daily life and healthcare practices of ancient Tibetans.

According to tradition, this foundational medical text was composed by Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, the founder of the Bon religion in Tibet, around 16017 B.CE. It is widely accepted among traditional historians that he was born near Mount Kailash, the sacred mountain revered in both Tibet and the ancient kingdom of Zhangzhung. The frequent appearance of the term “tsampa” in Tibet’s ancient texts suggests that it is one of the oldest indigenous Tibetan terms. While some argue that tsampa evolved from the Zhangzhung word *bong nge* (བོང་ངེ), classical texts occasionally interpret *bong nge* as referring to ritual offerings (གཞོན་མ), communal gatherings, or even sacred visions (Yasuhiko and Karmay, *A Lexicon of Zhangzhung and Bonpo Terms*, 162). This makes it difficult to definitively establish a direct linguistic connection.

It is certain that tsampa is undeniably an archaic Tibetan term originating from the country's own historical records, not a food that spread later from India or China.

### *The Benefits of Tsampa*

*The Four Medical Tantras* describe how tsampa treats various diseases and its beneficial effects. “According to modern scientific research, barley contains substances that can destroy cancer cells and other harmful cells (as in the case of “low-calorie sweeteners”) and as such are highly beneficial in preventing diseases like leprosy. Additionally, there is a dietary substance called “dietary fiber” (བཟང་བཅད་ཆེ་སྒྲ་), which neutralizes pathogenic factors causing male genital and urinary tract diseases. Not only does it also prevent stomach and intestinal cancer, but it also reduces bile fluid that is contained in the blood, thereby helping prevent heart disease. Its health benefits are described as extremely significant.

Thus, the great medical master Yuthok Yonten Gonpo (གཡུ་ཐོག་ཡོན་ཏེན་གཏོན་པོ་, 1126-1201) stated that, “the supreme food is tsampa,” and further affirmed that “aged barley tsampa” is classified among the medicinal grains, offering significant benefits for the urogenital system, including conditions such as diabetes (Dondrup, *100-Word Essay*, 118-120). Similarly, in the Tibetan folk tradition, there is a saying: “When you have the flu, chew tulma.” It is believed that consuming tsampa helps alleviate symptoms of colds and flu. For example, when elderly individuals experience wind disease, tsampa is not only often eaten

mixed with butter but also used in warm compresses or massages on the upper back. This is considered essential for restoring balance and aiding recovery. Another method involves finely mincing meat, boiling it with tsampa to make tsampa broth, and drinking it to relieve wind disorder. These practices demonstrate how tsampa has long been relied upon in Tibetan culture to treat various ailments, reflecting a profound traditional wisdom rooted in empirical knowledge and passed down through generations. Indeed, such methods embody a sophisticated medical heritage worthy of deep respect.

## **Tibetan Tea Culture**

### *The First Conversation Regarding Tea (ཇ)*

When discussing the tea mixed with tsampa or barley flour mentioned above, it is essential to focus on the tea as well as the tsampa. As it is said, “Tea and *chang* are the thirst-quenching drinks.” Tea culture has existed in Tibet for thousands of years. It was first encountered by Master Thonmi who discovered it on his way to Zhangzhung after he could not find it in India and other places. The autobiography of Shenrab Miwo recounts:

Tea is perfect in every way.

Peaceful and gentle, the essence of excellence.

As long as beings are guided by compassion,

I prostrate to the Lord Shenlha. (Nyingpo, *Drime Ziji*, 247)

Upon examining the etymology of the word, it is evident that it existed at least as early as the 7th century. When discussing its benefits, this tea is not only a beverage for quenching thirst but also a medicinal extract capable of combating various diseases. Clear tea is required for



medicinal decoctions. The origins of the tea, benefits, and advantages of this traditional practice are well-documented in ancient Tibetan medical texts such as the *Four Medical Tantras* and *Ziji* among others. Below is a detailed explanation based on these authoritative sources.

### *Tea Terminology in Ancient Writings*

Firstly, from the *Four Medical Treatises*: “Combine the three heating ingredients in a medicinal mixture to be taken as tea, morning and evening (Thar, *Four Medical Treatises*, 56).” Later, the same text states: “For chronic heat disorders, [use] fresh cooling meats, non-greasy broths, cooled tea, and water or milk, along with foods like yogurt, provided they are balanced at the appropriate temperature (72).” And again, from the same source: “For [illnesses of] the ears and throat, use beef or *dri* (female yak) milk, beans, tea and boiled cold water, especially when catarrh and fever are severe. If *chang* (barley beer) is unsuitable, drink boiled chang diluted with water, using a straw to make it drinkable. If the tea is unsuitable, add a pinch of salt in urine and drink it. If the yogurt is unsuitable, drink buttermilk instead (211).”

The *Four Medical Treatises* continues: “Because drinks such as yogurt, butter, and tea are not consumed, the clear fluids lose their pathways, and the body’s elements become unwilling to circulate (Thar, 233).” In this case, “Cold foods and drinks like dandelion, yogurt, buttermilk, boiled cold water, and tea, and so forth, should be consumed (380),” along with “beef, antelope, blue sheep, and fresh deer meat. *Bötuk* (a type of *thukpa* with ginger and peppercorn), tea, and cold water can also be served (522).” Thus, it is clear from ancient medical texts that the culture of tea drinking has existed in Tibet since ancient times, and it

also has benefits such as destroying diseases.

Similarly, from the autobiography of Shenrab Miwoche called the *Drime Ziji*: “Make offerings of flour and the flax plant in a secret feast. Adorn them with pure *torma* of various grains. Nourish them with tea, beer, milk, and libations (Vol. 8, 38).” Again, from the same source: “[Eat] white sweets, grains, nutrients, and nourishing foods, and for thirst take tea, alcohol, and other drinks (Vol. 5, 258).” Again, from the same source: “Offer the three whites and the three sweets, essential herbs, moisture, various divine cakes and drinks, cooked, roasted, raw, and so on. Offer tea, beer and the finest offering water (Vol. 6, 78).” The *Drime Ziji* continues:

Drinks include tea, and chang (*yu ti*).

The faults of beer are as stated above.

Tea comes from the substance of a growing tree.

Generally, when cutting a living tree  
or using cut flowers and dried leaves,  
use materials that are lifeless and inanimate.

Moreover, when it comes to plants and crops,  
if the green part dries up at the root, it causes harm.

Similarly, historical flowers and ripening fruits  
gradually diminish.

When the season ends and no further growth occurs,  
the leaves, flowers, and fruits fall off naturally.

Know that there is no fault in this.

When a tree bears a hundred fruits,  
cutting off even one branch is a serious offense.

Therefore, cutting the trunk at the root  
renders it lifeless and without breath.

Earth lords, nagas, and spirits of the soil:  
Their dwelling place and source of life  
arises from the body of a golden tortoise.  
Upon it, living beings and sentient creatures thrive.  
The tree's goddess claims it as her own.  
Therefore, for forests and flowers...  
avoid cutting down trees.  
In particular, as for the tea called "Yongmar tea":  
"Yong" comes from the "Yongdu tree."  
Butter is more precious than refined gold.  
Tea quenches thirst, hence "tea."  
Therefore, it is called "Yongmar tea." (Vol. 11, 207)

The text also discusses the origins of the term "tea," as well as its meaning and benefits.

### *The Story of the Origin of Tea*

The origin of tea is also mentioned in the eleventh volume of the detailed biography of Tonpa Shenrab, the *Ziji*:

The Origin Story:  
On triple-tiered Mount Meru's peak,  
dwells the perpetually intoxicated Kumara.  
Amrita's essence fell on grains, fruits and herbs,  
creating threefold bliss—intoxication, ecstasy and joy.  
From this ambrosial brew they drank without restraint,  
quenching thirst, yet bringing drunkenness and haze,  
till even the gods of Triple Heaven's realm,  
provoked by nectar's power, began to fight.

Though the gods' children knew no natural birth,  
Now they coupled, conceiving demon spawn -  
the *māra* parasites that live as one,  
one soul enduring while the other kills.  
The pure gods, outraged by this disgrace,  
saw heaven's purity defiled with filth.  
Then the elder *māra*, Long-Armed Demon Lord,  
before the triple world's great assembly hall,  
with humble plea to Lady Namchi Gonggyal,  
offered submission at the cosmic tree's abode.  
"You are the mother of all sentient beings in existence,  
great in kindness to all living creatures.  
We, the twins, harmful spirit deities,  
dwell on the third terrace of Mount Meru.  
The perpetually intoxicated Kumara dwells there,  
having blessed the fruit of the nine grains' essence  
with amrita nectar,  
and consuming milk and chang beer.  
Through drunkenness, intoxication, and coarseness,  
conflict arose among the twins.  
Wherever fermentation occurred,  
the gods lost their shame and modesty,  
and the pure divine races became disturbed in mind.  
The shadow of the divine realm being polluted and defiled  
falls upon human beings.  
Gods and humans have fallen to lower status,  
demons and rakshasas have risen in rank.  
Regarding this, may the Lady consider in her wisdom:  
That the defilement of the divine realm be purified,

that the human realm flourish and prosper,  
that the intoxication of the body be cleared,  
that conflicts with the *asuras* not arise.  
We request a method for peace and equality.”  
Then Jomo said: “Listen, God of the *yaksha* king!  
I will fulfill all your wishes as I desire.  
You are also a tree that supports living beings.  
On the trunk of the all-gathering tree,  
with the magic of demons and ogres,  
where the poisonous worms do not arise,  
hold the precious stick,  
guard from the peak of existence.  
But if the venomous worms should appear,  
The king wielding the stick must deliver their punishment.”  
Having spoken thus, she gave her command.  
Then Lady Namchi Gonggyal,  
at the top of the all-encompassing tree where the three realms  
converge,  
with hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes mixed,  
and saliva from the tongue,  
she made aspirations for nectar and medicine.  
From that, a nectar tree grew.  
From the tree, five branches split.  
The trunk pierced the divine tree.  
The branches split into five directions:  
east, south, west, north, and center.  
In the east arose white conch leaves and Sur Bu.  
In the south, turquoise leaves and blue juniper.  
In the west, copper leaves and red neem.

In the north, golden leaves and yellow birch.  
In the center, a green Mule Drum tree.  
From that, nine types of incense plants arose.  
From the plants, eighteen incense trees came into being.  
There, nectar and incense leaves were cut...  
Using a mixture of roast barley flour and butter,  
on the peaks of the seven golden mountains,  
with the swift presence of eighteen men and horses,  
thirteen Sipa Bonpos  
and thirteen Bon Bird messengers  
cleanse the defilements with a blue changeless.  
“By offering the mixture of roast barley flour and butter,  
cleanse the defilements of the celestial realm,  
so that all beings may have happiness and well-being!  
From the nectar, the incense trees,  
and the fruits scattered across the four continents of the human  
realm,  
may trees bearing nectar come into being!  
The method of pure intoxication, Kumaradza,  
and the fruits of the Mule Drum tree—  
may they grow on the first of the seven golden mountains  
and upon the third terrace!”  
It exists in a Mule Drum tree grove.  
The grove is the source of the Drum tree’s essence.  
Various desirable things come from the tree.  
The leaves provide coolness and shade.  
The flowers are wonderful to behold.  
The fruits provide nourishment and food.  
The heartwood becomes precious ornaments.

The bark becomes silk and covering.  
The sap becomes essence and nectar.  
The trunk becomes a place to live.  
By the blessings of the Lady Namchi Gonggyal,  
by the perfection of generosity,  
the *druma* tree is the enjoyment of humans.  
The fortunate ones use it as a place of enjoyment,  
while the unfortunate ones are nowhere to be found.  
The poor cannot see what to do.  
On the third terrace, a garden was created,  
From Yongmar, tea plants emerged.  
Their colors are divided into six types:  
white, green, red, blue, dark, and yellow.  
Leaves, flowers, fruits,  
fragrance, and the six excellent tastes are present.  
The cause is from the divine tree,  
and it belongs to the *druma* tree family.  
By the blessings of the Lady Namchi Gonggyal,  
the nectar of the healing tree,  
the method of pure intoxication, Kumaradza,  
the twin monsters are cruel and calm.  
At that time, Lady Namchi Gonggyal,  
with its leaves, flowers, and fruits  
scattered across the four continents of the human realm,  
made the aspiration of nectar and nourishment.  
This is the origin of tea.  
It is the best of all drinks,  
coming from a tree, it bears few faults.  
It should be taken in moderation.

Drinking immoderately enhances youth  
and becomes the cause of increasing splendor.  
Because it is the essence of the nectar tree,  
a strong body and attachment arise from it.  
Craving becomes the cause of the loss of *bindu*.  
Therefore, moderate thirst relief is sufficient.  
The severity of the offense  
beyond that is like cutting the roots of a tree that grows from a  
sprout.  
It is generated from the element's cause,  
purified by the ritual of the Wheel of Time.  
Otherwise, flourishing, expanding,  
and declining are progressively lesser offenses.  
It is taught as a cause for drinking.  
Moreover, except for the six times,  
it becomes a transgression at inappropriate times.  
Therefore, one should not be attached to untimely food and the  
warmth of the evening. (Vol. 11, 207-209)

This statement is said to be the earliest historical document of the origin of tea. Thus, based on these words spoken by the ancestor Shenrab Tonpa regarding the culture of tea and its origin and history, it can be proven that the origin of tea has a history of at least four-thousand years.

According to other major Tibetan and Chinese historical records, around the 7th century (approximately 680 CE), when the Tibetan emperor Dusong Mangpoje (or Lungnam Trulgyi Gyalpo) had a serious illness, a beautiful bird brought a wooden leaf in its mouth, which was offered to the king to quench his thirst, and it was then that the tradition of drinking



wooden leaf tea first became popular in Tibet (Zangpo, *The Tibetan and Chinese Historical Records of Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo*, 172-176).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is said that during the reign of Emperor Songtsen Gampo, the great minister Tonmi Sambhota discovered the letters *ca*, *cha*, and *ja* in the upper regions, thus giving rise to the term *ja* (tea). However, upon closer examination, these accounts appear to be fabricated, more like forced insertions into the historical narrative. On this point, the scholar Zamtsa Tsering Dondrup has also written an article titled “The History of the Spread of Tea,” in which he refutes these claims (47-48).

### *How to Make Tea and Its Benefits*

There are various methods according to the customs of different regions. In my hometown of Amdo, Qinghai, the most common tea is called “black tea” or popularly known as “wild black tea.” It seems almost identical to what is called black tea in central regions. The method of brewing it is: Put a small amount of black tea or mixed tea in water, boil it in a pan, copper pot, or pot, and drink it when the tea turns reddish-brown. It is said that black tea is warm in nature, so drinking it is good for the stomach and helps with indigestion. In particular, it is said to be very effective in warming the body. Stirred tea is commonly made in central Tibet and Kham. It is also called “butter tea” or “churned tea” because black tea extract, butter, and salt water are poured into a churn or a cylindrical container and repeatedly stirred or churned.

There are traditionally said to be nine benefits of butter tea or

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Tibetan and Chinese historical records of Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo, tea appeared in Tibet during the time of Dus-srong Mang-rje. Likewise, many people have quoted that saying when talking about the history of tea. If that is taken as the initial origin of tea, then it seems that the history of tea in Tibet is very short. See Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo, *The Tibetan and Chinese Historical Records of Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo*, 240-244.

churned tea. It is said that modern scientists have proven through research that it helps in: 1. Replenishing energy, 2. Brain health, 3. Improving digestion, 4. Burning fat, 5. Preventing altitude sickness, 6. Benefiting skin diseases, 7. Benefiting heart health, 8. Preventing diabetes, and 9. Boosting immunity. In addition to black tea, there is also white tea, milk tea, sweet tea, bone tea, and tsampa tea.

### *Various Synonyms for Tea*

From the history of how tea appeared in Tibet, it is mentioned that there are sixteen types of tea (Zangpo, *The Tibetan and Chinese Historical Records*, 240):

1. Phuma (ཏུ་མ་)
2. Dhama (ཐད་ཨ་མ་)
3. Charma (ཆར་མ།)
4. Chuma (ཚུ་མ་)
5. Shingsar (ཞིང་གསར་)
6. Shingrnying (ཞིང་རྟིང་)
7. Shangma (བཤང་མ་)
8. Jima (ཇི་མ་)
9. Luchan (ལུང་ཅན་)
10. Luhme (ལུང་མེད།)
11. Tseja (ཅེ་ཇ་)
12. Barja (བར་ཇ།)
13. Tshadul (ཚ་འདུལ།)
14. Drangdul (བྲང་འདུལ།)

15. Minpa (མིན་པ།)

16. Maminpa (མ་མིན་པ་)

Each of these has differences in the thickness of their stems, the color of their leaves, their taste and aroma, as well as their benefits for specific physical ailments. These details are extensively explained in “The Ocean of Nectar: A Treatise on Examining the Quality of Chinese Tea,” a section within *The Great Chinese-Tibetan Encyclopedia* composed by Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo. This text elaborates on the varieties of tea, their distinct characteristics, and their benefits (240-244).

According to *The Stainless Crystal Mirror*, the Tibetan etymology of the word for tea (ja) is said to be derived from a partial pronunciation of the Chinese character 茶 (*chá*). However, the *Great Chinese Dictionary* published by the Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House states that the Chinese character 茶 emerged as a term during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty. Before that, the character 檟 (*jiǎ*) was used instead of 茶. Chinese scholars suggest that the pronunciation and usage of 檟 originated from the language of the people in the Sichuan-Yaknga region. Therefore, the reason why the pronunciation of “tea” used in the Sichuan Yaksha area is close to the pronunciation of the Tibetan word for “tea” is because the people in those areas are Tibetan. In the history of Gyalrong, Yaknga is said to be one of the eighteen Gyalrong kingdoms, and in short, the Chinese word “*cha*” is also a derivative of the Tibetan word “*ja*”, as is established in the oral tradition of tea culture (Zimar, *On Tibetan Tea Culture*, 241-245).

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## **REVIEWS**

## ***The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile***

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa  
Columbia University Press  
331 pages, 2025, Euro 22.00

Reviewed by Jigme Yeshe Lama

In *The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile*, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa highlights the story of the Tsokhag Chusum, or Group of Thirteen in the 1960s. This group consisted of Tibetan leaders primarily from Kham and Amdo regions, which are less represented in the mainstream discourse of exile due to their contested history. She emphasizes that the story of Tsokhag Chusum is crucial for understanding the challenges of Tibetan nation-building in exile. Their goal of strengthening ties with their regional communities and protecting their unique cultural and political identities was often viewed—especially by centralized groups like the Tibetan United Association (Chigdril Tsogpa)—as a threat to overall Tibetan unity. Using both primary and secondary sources, along with personal connections (including her late mother’s close ties with the Thirteen), Dhompa’s account combines scholarly research with personal stories, allowing for an in-depth look at exile politics.

Dhompa’s book is a first of its kind, at least in the English language, which narrates the stories of the Thirteen. She writes about numerous individuals who have never received due credit for charting

their own paths and building successful settlements or monasteries. In fact, as she writes, their stories and their lives have been consigned to the footnotes of exile history. These individuals and the group have been vilified, castigated, and swept under the carpet.

Dhomba identifies two competing visions of the Tibetan nation: the dominant, unified, and state-centered approach promoted by the exile government through the United Party, and a sidelined vision promoted by the Thirteen, which focused on regional identity and autonomy but was often seen as narrow or backward, misunderstood, and accused of regionalism (p. 16). Instead of taking sides, Dhomba provides a fair critique of both views. She highlights the ongoing tension between unity and diversity that continues to influence Tibetan political discussions in exile. This book sheds light on the marginalized narratives of the Tibetan struggle for belonging and democratic self-governance in exile. Highlighting this period of exile history, which is traumatic for many and also deemed unnecessary by others, is crucial for the development of a healthy democracy. Her book has been published at the right time, as tensions between unity and democracy still affect the exiled Tibetan community. Regionalism is still considered a disruption to unity among Tibetans. The Thirteen were among the first to be blamed by the ruling exile elites for fueling regionalism and weakening unity. Therefore, sharing their side of the story is an important way of acknowledging their struggles and sacrifices. The book offers a platform for alternative perspectives within the exile community, which is essential for the growth of a mature democratic system. Tsering Wangmo Dhomba's book is significant as it reinforces principles of equality, justice, rights, and plurality—values essential for a mature democracy. Her book, with its alternative, dissenting narratives of exiled Tibetans, is a must-

read for everyone, especially Tibetans, many of whom have a skewed understanding of the Thirteen. She explores the process of nation-building of the Tibetan state in exile and the resistance it faces from the group of thirteen through three key events: the oath of unity (1960), the student protests at Ockenden, and the assassination of Gungthang Tsultrim, as well as the meetings between the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and the Thirteen.

A complex tale of Tibetan nationalism, *The Politics of Sorrow* draws attention to the marginal narratives amidst mechanisms adopted by the Tibetans to bring unity and secure the nation. The preface and introduction provide a brief overview of the theme of unity and regionalism in the Tibetan exile world, beginning with the assassination of Gungthang Tsultrim, contextualised within the politics of exile, which in turn shapes the ‘politics of sorrow.’ The Thirteen perceived unity as suppressing intracultural and religious differences and lesser-told histories, which the United Party interpreted as a sign of their resistance to modernity and change. The master narrative of a nation mobilises a community by privileging a particular practice as its constitutive principle, which shapes who belongs and who doesn’t (p.28). Thus, the aspirations of the Thirteen were termed as regionalism, an act of disunity, which did not have a place in the new polity and the new form of citizenship.

Chapter 1 discusses democracy in exile and its interaction with the pre-1959 socio-political value system of the Khampas and Amdowas, which was termed as challenging the reforms introduced by the CTA. Dhompma writes about the great oath of unity made by Tibetans in Bodh Gaya in 1960, when a lack of unity was blamed for the loss of their country (p.47). The great oath was the first step in building a united nation



in exile and this unity was difficult to embrace. Chapter 2 discusses the dominance of the CTA representatives in work units and settlements and the discrimination against Eastern Tibetan Refugees. The latter was accused of being anti-government and un-Tibetan when demanding that separate settlements be looked upon as separate sources of traditional authority. Dhompa writes about the United Party's association with Gyalo Thondup, elder brother of the Dalai Lama, and their domination upon the exile society through imposing a singular Tibetan identity by privileging Gelug teachings over other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The United Party created a split in the Chushi Gangdruk whose nationalism recognized regions and nations as complementary and not competing projects (p.40). Many of the founding members of the Thirteen were also members of the Chushi Gangdruk.

Chapter 3 discusses the genesis of The Thirteen to counter the United Party, preventing the destruction of the other Tibetan Schools. The Thirteen attempted to make Tibetan society more inclusive, especially for minorities like the Bonpos (p.108). The chapter discusses the role of Gungthang Tsultrim and others who formed their own settlements, providing a decentralized understanding of the construction of the exile society. Chapter 4 documents the responses of the United Party through the Seven Resolutions and Supporting Documents. This was “a manual on the duties of belonging to the new Tibetan polity” (p.126). Dhompa dissects each resolution, examining it through the ideas of unity and democracy.

In Chapter 5, Dhompa writes about the revolt by thirty Tibetan students at the Ockenden School in South India, where they accused the teachers of teaching them wrong history and attempting to turn them into

Bonpos (p. 145). The exile state wanted to mold history to serve the larger cause of unity, and this incident showcased the complex biography of a nation navigating through contestation, cooption and marginalization of alternate histories and visions. The incident highlighted nation-making as a social, cultural, and political process (p. 165), and those who did not adhere to the official narrative were branded as traitors.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the several meetings that led to the formation of the Thirteen Settlements. This group of Thirteen opposed the United Party by securing their individual religious institutions and settlements, registered themselves as a cooperative society with the Indian government, and chose the Sixteenth Karmapa as their patron with assurance from the Dalai Lama.

Chapter 7 discusses the direct conflict between the Thirteen and the United Party, which emerged after the Thirteen tried to gain Indian citizenship. They mentioned that they sought citizenship to protect themselves from the United Party. This move received criticism from exile officials and parliamentarians, while Indian newspapers portrayed it as the presence of discord in the exile community. Another allegation was the Thirteen's connection to Taiwan. Dhompas writes there was peaceful coexistence between the Thirteen and the United Party shattered by the assassination of Gunghang Tsultrim. After this incident, a pamphlet was published which appealed to the Indian government for protection. It mentioned that the Khampas and Amdowas were politically free, and that the Dalai Lama was curtailed by certain administrators, making him an ornamental head (p.222).

Chapter 8 highlights the meetings that took place between the

Thirteen and the CTA in 1978 after the assassination of Gungthang Tsultrim. The Thirteen discussed their complaints, questioned the authority of the United Party, and attempted to mend relations with the CTA, which meant recognition from the Dalai Lama himself. The author highlights the questions of belonging, recognition, and identity. The initial reconciliation turned to dissatisfaction when the Dalai Lama, displeased with the pamphlet, saw it as a challenge to the government. These meetings offer a glimpse into the discussions regarding the rights and duties of Tibetans as refugee citizens. Dhompa concludes with questions of nationalism and belonging, wherein the nation's values, if broken by its members, lead to their ostracism. The Thirteen received several denunciatory letters sent by different exile organizations, so many of them returned to Tibet (p. 255). The remaining members of the Thirteen published a booklet, justifying their priority as preserving Tibet's ancient culture and religion. They blamed the disrepute upon the handiwork of a few people influenced by Gyalo Thondup.

*The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile* contains a factual error in naming the settlement in Chandragiri, Odhisa as Chattisgarh (p.73). The book is also short on the discussion about the internal dynamism of the Thirteen, for there is in all probability the presence of hierarchy among the group members. Nonetheless, this book is a pioneering work on Tibetan exile nationalism, especially in its examination of dissent and contestations within the Tibetan exile community. While Dhompa writes about the traditional elites from Eastern Tibet, her work can also be placed under the larger rubric of 'subaltern studies', as these individuals and their communities were transformed into the subaltern in the Tibetan exile world. Finally, she writes that national homogeneity, even when it serves a purpose as

important as the Tibetan national struggle, still deserves scrutiny. The book conveys that the Tibet we build in exile must be more than the sum of our fears, which makes *The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile* a must-read for every Tibetan.

## ***Out of Sight Into Mind: The History and Philosophy of Yogic Perception***

Forman, Jed

296 pages, 2025, USD 35.00 (Paperback)

Columbia University Press

Reviewed by Rae Dachille

In 1965, Joseph Kosuth staged a conceptual art piece entitled “One and Three Chairs,” in which a plain wooden chair is flanked by a photo of itself and a copy of the dictionary definition of “chair.” The piece prompts reflections on which of these three chairs is real. Is it the image of the chair, the concept of the chair grounded in language, or the actual chair? Is ‘that’ chair more real because I can sit in it and therefore it fulfills a function? (Well, actually, I can’t sit in ‘that’ chair because it is an art museum, and that sort of thing tends not to be permitted). The first time I encountered one of Kosuth’s chair pieces, I was in Paris, coming down off a week-long Tibetan studies conference during which I had listened to many philosophically inclined Tibetologists pose questions about chairs and tables. These quintessential examples are commonly used to explore the tensions expressed by Buddhist thinkers between how we perceive things, how we conceive of them, and how we can penetrate the façade to have a more accurate view of our realities. These pressing concerns in Buddhist philosophy are often articulated in terms of the connection between the universal and the particular. In Kosuth’s piece, the dictionary definition reflects the linguistically substantiated concept of chair (the universal), and the wooden object embodies the

particular chair, but the photograph of the chair introduces a third dimension to the problem, the image or representation of the chair. How do Kosuth's three chairs relate to one another? I found myself returning to this question repeatedly as I read Jed Forman's new book on yogic perception (*yogi-pratyakṣa*). For example, in describing the pragmatism of Indian Buddhism philosopher Dharmakīrti's perspective, Forman writes: "Conceptual thinking simply seems to work. Although universals are mental concoctions that do not inhere in the world, thinking with them is effective. The idea of a chair is good enough to help me to find something to sit in" (79). Cognition is useful in Dharmakīrti's view because it has the capacity to be both informative (*avi/saṃvāda*) and effective at achieving desired ends (*arthakriyā*) (49).

From a Buddhist perspective, which chair(/s), if any, does the liberated yogin see? Are these accomplished meditators able to see both every instance of a chair in any time and place as well as the chair's tenuous metaphysical status? Is it possible to even describe this way of looking at the world? These are the types of questions that concern Forman in his ambitious study of yogic perception across over a thousand years of philosophical inquiry between India and Tibet. He coins the term "omniphemenology" to describe the possibilities presented by Buddhist thinkers for a more enlightened view of things. As to whether such a yogin would see all the chairs that have ever been or none at all, Forman reveals a rich and diverse range of views expressed by Indian and Tibetan thinkers from about the fifth to the sixteenth centuries.

The book is divided into three parts comprising two chapters each: "Hindu Traditions and Epistemology," "Indian Buddhism and Phenomenology," and "Tibetan Buddhism and Language." In Chapter

One, “Extramission, Remote Seeing, and Intuitions,” Forman argues that understandings of yogic perception evolved from a visual paradigm to a kind of mental introspection. He introduces the early Indian notion of *prāpyakārin* (“acting having reached [the object]”) according to which the senses reach out to their objects, citing relevant instances from key texts such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the *Śiva Purāṇa*, and the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali. He highlights Vyāsa’s 5th/6th century commentary on verses 3.25 of Patañjali’s text, which reads: “It is said that this mental activity is luminous (*jyotis*). The mind’s light belongs to this activity; when it is cast toward a subtle (*sūkṣma*), occluded (*vyavahita*), or distant (*viprakṛṣṭa*) object, the yogi discovers that object” (18 & fn20). The verse serves as a touchstone for exploring the nature of omniscience, and as Forman shows, it is cited in the work of Buddhist authors. Prajñākara-gupta (ca.750-810), a commentator on Dharmakīrti’s work, for example, cites the verse to laud “those ‘great’ (*mahat*) remote seers—not content just with clairvoyant acrobatics” who “first develop insight into reality, practical omniscience, before developing literal knowledge of all things”(28). Forman builds upon these themes of the extent of yogic perception and the ranking of its contents in the next chapter.

Chapter Two, “The Epistemology of Authority and Testimony,” explores arguments against yogic perception, such as those posed by the Mīmāṃsā together with responses from Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya, Jain, and, of course, Buddhist thinkers. Here, Forman interrogates the connection between ‘testimony’ and ‘perception’ through the writings of thinkers such as Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, Jñānaśrīmitra, Veṅkaṭanātha, and Candrakīrti. Śāntarakṣita, for example, asserts that “scriptural meaning is underdetermined” and therefore yogins are necessary to make sense of it (56). Further clarifying Śāntarakṣita’s position, Forman writes:

“Insofar as we have effective religious practices—mudras, mandalas, and mantras—there must have been someone with supersensible abilities who first had insight into their efficacy” (57). Veṅkaṭanātha, a defender of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, introduces the possibility that text doesn’t just document yogic perception but also produces it (59-60). The relationship between text, exegesis, and yogic experience is central to these discussions, but the word ‘experience’ seems to appear very little in the first part of Forman’s book. I suspect that this absence is intended to support the author’s concerns with parsing experience to address the “epistemic *disconnect* between perception and conception” he regards as common to Buddhist traditions (76). He pursues this ‘disconnect’ in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Three, “Pragmatism and Coherentism,” initiates the second part of the book. Forman begins the chapter by laying out Dignāga and Dharmakīrti’s approaches to the aforementioned “epistemic *disconnect*” and proceeds to explore how appearances relate to “direct insight” in the works of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga. Grasping these two different strains of Indian Buddhist philosophy will be vital for the reader in making sense of Forman’s arguments on the Tibetan tradition in the book’s final sections. Both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti hold that whereas we ‘perceive’ particulars, we ‘conceive’ universals (re-enter the chairs and tables). What does the yogin perceive? What do they see? In the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu asserts that progress on the Path of Seeing (*darśana-mārga*) involves directly realizing the Four Noble Truths (83). Forman also describes Asaṅga’s three stages of coming to see objects as mind, challenging the very notion of ‘mind,’ and overcoming the dichotomy between subject and object (84). Apparently, the third stage involves eliminating appearances altogether. In this vein, Asaṅga



explains: “*In nonconceptual wisdom, none of those objects appear at all. So, take to heart that there are no objects. And since there are no objects, there is no consciousness*” (85 & fn 35). As Forman points out, the question of whether appearances actually disappear is a subject of much controversy; it certainly percolates beneath the Tibetan scholastic landscape.

Forman defines omniscience as “a nonperspectival way of being in the world” (111-12) and proposes that yogic perception of this kind has the potential to solve phenomenology’s undue fixation on the first-person perspective and dualistic thinking. Forman’s “Omniphenomenology” is the title and topic of Chapter Four, in which the language of ‘experience’ begins to manifest. For example, Forman remarks that “Buddhists insist that unlike normal sense perception—which, indeed, does not reach the level of awareness—yogic perception is an experiential state” (133). Moreover, he suggests that “within yogic perception, which perceives reality at its most fundamental, experience and the world are coextensive”(132). In this understanding, Buddhists see the distinction of self and world and subject and object as “conceptual,” obscuring our “fundamental nondual experience” (131-2). I concur with Forman’s proposal that understanding yogic perception better has the potential to subvert entrenched biases within phenomenology. I appreciate his exploration of the anti-racist implications of this work through his dialogue with Calvin Warren’s *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* at the end of the chapter.

The final third of the book turns to Tibet to focus specifically upon how Buddhist authors from the Gelug and Sakya traditions built upon and modified the work of their Indian predecessors. We may find

some answers to the problems of Kosuth's third chair in this account of competing Tibetan views on 'appearances.' Overall, Forman frames the discussion in terms of two connections: how Gelug scholars responded to Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti in what he calls "quasirepresentationalist realism," and how Sakyapas incorporated Asaṅga's position in a form of "antirepresentationism." Forman describes the attitude toward appearances in the first view as a blindfold in need of removal as opposed to the second view, in which they are more like an inaccurate prescription for glasses that can be corrected (142-3). In both cases, the relationship to the views of Chapa Chökyi Senge (1109-1169), the abbot of the vibrant scholastic community of Sangpu Neutok, is significant.

In Chapter Five, "Gelug Representationalism," Forman shows how Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (1357-1419), the founder of the Gelug tradition, made sense of appearances in ways that both agree with and differ from Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti's legacies. Forman plants the seeds for this conversation on appearances between Tsongkhapa and Candrakīrti in Chapter Two, where he highlights Candrakīrti's stipulation that all cognitions correspond to external objects using three examples to illustrate this point: meditation on the environment as a world filled with bones, the phenomenon of floaters experienced by the person suffering from an eye disease, and the hell being's vision of water as pus a blood. In Chapter Five, Forman returns to these examples to illustrate how Tsongkhapa prioritized making distinctions between appearances that are "authentic representations" and those that are not (151). He summarizes Tsongkhapa's view as follows: "although both yogic appearances and the appearance of falling hairs are alike in their being clear, they are distinct on the question of representation" (153). In other words, it is not enough for a yogic appearance to be conducive toward enlightenment; it

must also correspond to an object in the world, one that can be supported by inference. Forman shows how Tsongkhapa's views accord in this way with those of Chapa, who parsed "distortions" from appearances with "epistemic value" and gave reason an essential role in awakening (143-7). Forman argues that Tsongkhapa's concern with evaluating the authenticity of representations surpasses his pragmatism and that this theory holds true for Tsongkhapa's interpretations of tantric practice as well.

In the final chapter, "Sakya Antirepresentationalism," Forman represents a range of Sakyapa views on appearances, including the voices of Sönam Tsemo (1142-1182), Sakya Paṇḍita (1182-1251), Gorampa (1429-1489), and Śākya Chokden (1428-1507), emphasizing their contrast with the Gelugpas. Overall, he highlights the "complicated relationship between inference and direct realization" as well as the idea that yogi perception moves beyond appearances (173). Sönam Tsemo, one of Chapa's own students, appears to be in conflict with his teacher in eliminating epistemic objects from yogic perception. They also construe what it means to be "free from elaborations" in different ways. Forman asserts a parallel between the view of Sönam Tsemo (as well as of some of his successors) and that of Asaṅga, a connection some Sakyapas (both past and present) might take issue with. As for the great polymath Sakya Paṇḍita, Forman nuances his yogic perception to include one with appearances (and capable of seeing other worlds) and one without appearances (176). This intriguing distinction, one Forman shows to be not common to the Gelugpas, merits further research, together with the compelling remarks on "clear appearances." For example, Forman observes that while Dharmakīrti admits such appearances into his view of yogic perception, Sakya Paṇḍita "denies that yogic perception represents the real via an appearance" (178). Forman contrasts the

instrumental value of appearances for the Gelugpa with the Sakyapa view, which he summarizes as follows: “The ultimate truth realized in yogic perception does not appear at all, not even in yogic perceptions, which grasps it (somehow) without appearances—not even qua the absence of appearances” (193). My own evolving understanding of the Sakyapa position has been trained on a gap between appearances, a space between thoughts, in which powerful transformations might occur. I would be curious to know the author’s response to that possibility. Forman successfully identifies several key issues in the Sakya view of appearances. A groundbreaking study, Forman’s *Out of Sight Into Mind* also attests to the fact that more work remains to be done.

Tsongkhapa’s student, Kedrub Gelek Pelzang (1385-1438) serves as a foil for working through the differences in Sakya and Gelug approaches, particularly in thinking through how inference and yogic perception relate. Forman accentuates the power of inference in both Tsongkhapa and Kedrub’s thinking, a power to deduce aspects of the true state of things complemented by yogic perception’s more direct access to them (187). The author remarks upon how Tsongkhapa strives “to maintain representational realism but also preserve the Buddhist soteriological project, which problematizes representations” (166). I have found such tensions to be especially potent in tantric polemical encounters of the Gelug and Sakya traditions. For example, in a debate with a Sakyapa tantric master on the topic of body mandala, Tsongkhapa’s student Kedrub challenged tantric visualizations as mere mental constructions and therefore lacking in efficacy unless they had some basis in reality. In the context of that argument, Kedrub elevates practice with an actual versus an imagined tantric consort on the reasoning that without actual bodily sites to be transformed, the transformation of

body into mandala will not be efficacious. Similarly, at another point in that same debate, Kedrub asserts that when imagining deities arrayed on different parts of the body, it is only necessary to position them on actual body parts, i.e. the two actual eyes rather than the six imagined ones of a many-faced deity.<sup>1</sup> Such arguments might be fruitfully incorporated into Forman's calculation of what counts as an 'authentic representation' in a soteriological context in which representations (and of course, bodies) hold such a charged status.

As a work of comparative philosophy, Forman's book contributes meaningfully to the larger project of taking Buddhist philosophy seriously *as* philosophy. Forman produces conversation between the Buddhist authors at the center of his study and a wide range of Western philosophers, including Hegel, Heidegger, Russell, and Wittgenstein, to name just a few. There are moments, however, in which I would have appreciated a bit less engagement with Heidegger, for example, and a little more with a broader range of Tibetan interlocutors. In particular, creating a parallel between Asaṅga's view on appearances and that of the Sakyapas calls for reflection upon who else in the trajectory of Tibetan scholasticism may have issued a similar claim. Historically, how has proposing such a parallel been an act fueled by concerns that exceed the purely philosophical, concerns with distinguishing traditions, securing patronage, and so forth? My engagement with Sakya experts suggests, for example, that while they acknowledge some correlation with the Cittamātrin view, for the latter, consciousness is real, whereas for the Sakyapa, it is instead natureless, interdependent, and free from expression. In fifteenth-century tantric polemics, for example, Sakyapas

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<sup>1</sup> See Dachille, Rae Erin. 2022. *Searching for the Body: A Contemporary Perspective on Tibetan Buddhist Tantra*. Columbia University Press, 59-60

often pushed back against any conflation of their perspective with that of the Yogācārin, Vijñaptimātrin, or Cittamātrin.<sup>2</sup> Forman's treatment of Gorampa and Śākya Chokden might be enriched through further conversation with some of these polemical exchanges.

As a whole, Forman's *Out of Sight Into Mind* invites readers to probe the limits of perception and imagination in India and Tibet. The author makes bold connections and provides valuable philosophical context for exploring these limits both within and beyond the Buddhist world.

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<sup>2</sup> For one example, see Dachille, Rae. "“Empty Like the Sky”: Polysemy and the Problem of ‘Mere Clear Awareness’ at the Intersection of Sūtra and Tantra in Fifteenth-century Tibet.” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, 58 (April 2021): 208-236.

***Living Treasure: Buddhist and Tibetan Studies in Honor of Janet Gyatso***

Holly Gayley and Andrew Quintman

536 pages, 2023, Rs 3619 (Hardcover)

Wisdom Publications

Reviewed by Priyanka Chakraborty

Mapping a Scholarly Cosmos: Living Treasure and the Intellectual  
Legacy of Janet Gyatso

*Living Treasure: Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in Honor of Janet Gyatso*, published in 2023, honors the decades-long corpus of Professor Janet Gyatso's scholarship. The Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard Divinity School, Gyatso has more than thirty years of experience and expertise in the academic discourse. In the contemporary study of Tibetan and Buddhist literature, few scholars have shaped the field as definitively as Professor Gyatso. Through a comprehensive body of work that engages autobiography, revelation literature, gender, medicine, and epistemology Gyatso has successfully constructed a robust intellectual architecture that both critiques and reconstitutes the treatment of Tibetan texts. Her scholarship is established upon meticulous philology and deep literary sensibility that is simultaneously marked by a critical commitment to interrogating categories of authorship, personhood, and knowledge. This festschrift, edited by Holly Gayley and Andrew Quintman, former students of Gyatso, brings renowned scholars associated with Tibetan and Buddhist studies together to critique and carry forward Gyatso's academic legacy.

The book has twenty-nine chapters of interdisciplinary approach, divided into five thematic sections: Women, Gender, and Sexuality; Biography and Autobiography; The Nyingma Imaginaire; Literature, Art, and Poetry; and Early Modernity: Human and Nonhuman Worlds. Since Gyatso has played a crucial role in expanding the discourse of Buddhist Studies by integrating Gender Studies, medical humanities, and Tibetan Studies into mainstream Buddhist Studies, this book appears to be a fitting response towards her contribution. She is also one of the primary scholars who emphasized gender dynamics in Tibetan and Buddhist contexts by challenging the androcentric narratives of Buddhist historiography. The essays in this book further expand upon the critical conversations Gyatso has initiated throughout her career; by either critically enhancing upon her insights or by responding to her scholarly inquiries. The contributors include leading scholars such as Donald Lopez, José Cabezón, Matthew Kapstein, and Samten Karmay, among others.

The volume opens with discussions focusing on Gyatso's pioneering works on gender in Tibetan Buddhism, where she has been instrumental in shifting the scholarly paradigms from descriptive recovery to critical interrogation. The very first essay is "The Revenge of the Demoness," by José Cabezón, where he examines the intersection of material culture with gendered religious experience. Another notable contribution in this section is Padma 'tsho's article on writings by Tibetan nuns on education and equality. The title of Cabezón's essay alludes to Gyatso's seminal essay "Down with the Demoness: Reflections on a Feminine Ground in Tibet," published in 1989. In her essay, Gyatso had interrogated the narrative subjugation of female demons in Tibetan Buddhist texts as allegories for the containment of unruly feminine



power. She revealed how Buddhist ethical hegemony is enacted through gendered structures of purification, discipline, and narrative reform. Gyatso's inquiries into the position/status of women in Tibet continued through her sustained interrogation of gendered hierarchies in Tibetan Buddhist traditions as well. Another of Gyatso's essays, "Female Ordination in Buddhism: Looking into a Crystal Ball, Making a Future" (1992), reframed the absence of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in Tibetan monasticism as a site of ethical and philosophical contestation rather than a historical omission. This foundational intervention laid the groundwork for the co-edited volume *Women in Tibet* (2005), with Hanna Havnevik, which assembled critical essays challenging the masculinist logic of Buddhist historiography. Across these works, Gyatso articulates how Buddhist institutions construct idealized models of womanhood while marginalizing female religious agency. Padma 'tsho's essay and other essays of this section of *Living Treasure* expand on these lines of inquiry by engaging with Tibetan nuns' literature, female monastic aspirations, and the performative dimensions of gender in Buddhist contexts, thereby extending Gyatso's legacy as a pioneer of feminist critique in Tibetan studies.

The volume's second section is based on life writings. This section illustrates how Gyatso's works has been instrumental in redefining Tibetan life writing as a site of performative selfhood and lineage construction. The essays range from biographical works of monks to hagiographies of masters like Padmasambhava and *namthar* from terma literature (i.e., biographies which are part of treasure revelation). In her book *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary* (1998), Janet Gyatso offers a transformative reading of the autobiographical writings of the 18th-century Nyingma master

Jigme Lingpa. She channelises the literary strategies through which visionary experiences are framed, e.g., humility, revelation, and doctrinal authority, and through them destabilizes the long-standing orientalist assumptions that Tibetan literature is merely mimetic or ahistorical. She reconceptualizes autobiography not as a transparent self-narration but as a discursive field where authorial subjectivity is strategically constructed in dialogue with lineage, soteriology, and poetic convention. Subsequently, this helps her in positioning Tibetan life writing as a genre of literary innovation and spiritual legitimation, thereby urging a reshaping of scholarly understanding of Buddhist selfhood and textual performance.

Gyatso, in her doctoral research from University of Berkeley, did work on the polymath Thang-stong rGyal-po, in which she explored the intersections of performance, architecture, and tantric vision. Her thesis underscored the capacity of Nyingma tradition to integrate engineering, aesthetics, and soteriology into a coherent cultural logic. This early work foreshadows her later emphasis on the multidimensionality of Tibetan intellectual life. The third section of the book is dedicated to Gyatso's research on these subjects and delves into the esoteric and visionary traditions of the Nyingma school. The five essays in this section are philosophical dialogues that investigate various philosophical quotients of Nyingma traditions. Two of these articles are about the thoughts of Jigme Lingpa. The first one, by Benjamin Bogin, is on the portrait of Jigme Lingpa and the performative nature of feast songs. The second article, by Willa B. Baker, deals with the idea of absence. The other three essays discuss the theory of mind and matter, the divinity of creation, and the human mind. Thus they continue the discussion of how Gyatso's works have contributed immensely to our understanding of the literary

and philosophical worlds of the Nyingma tradition, particularly through her engagement with *terma* (hidden treasure texts), tantric epistemologies, and the mythopoeic imagination.

Another distinct contribution of Gyatso's scholarship is her deep attention to the literary and artistic dimensions of Tibetan culture. She consistently challenges the reductive reading of Buddhist texts as doctrinal manuals, insisting instead on their status as aesthetic, affective, and imaginative works. In various essays, Gyatso writes about the literary architecture of Tibetan genres, from visionary hymns to medical treatises, thus attending to metaphor, allusion, intertextuality, and rhetorical form. The fourth and the largest section comprises eight chapters focusing on Gyatso's contribution in literary aspects. It has a diverse collection of articles ranging from love poems to the idea of language, from dictionaries to portraits. Sonam Kachru explores eros and epistemology while tracing affective and ethical resonances within Indian Buddhist philosophy. Dominique Townsend's essay revisits the writings of Pöpa Chenpo, and celebrates rhetorical courage and stylistic boldness. The articles of Pema Bhum and Nancy G. Lin talk in terms of the evolution of the Tibetan language. Pema Bhum delineates the details of the first Tibetan dictionary, while Lin's article has a more contemporary take on Tibetan studies and attempts to decolonize Tibetan poetry. Lama Jabb and Andrew Quintman, through literary and elegiac analyses of Tibetan love poetry and Jonang monastic lamentation respectively, explore how emotion, history, and poetics intersect. The final essays by Amy Heller and Leonard van der Kuijp turn to material and visual culture, examining portraiture of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The diversity of this final section is proof of Gyatso's varied contributions in the study of Tibetan literature, and insists on a capacious and interdisciplinary canon, where poetry,

historiography, painting, and medicine are approached with equal critical depth.

The final section of *Living Treasure* witnesses the coming together of the human and non-human worlds. In one of her most expansive works, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (2016), Gyatso offers a groundbreaking account of Tibetan early modernity. She focuses on the 17th–18th centuries to trace the evolution of Tibetan medical scholars who developed an empirical, observational methodology that retained fidelity to Buddhist ethical frameworks. Rather than framing this period as one of decline or stagnation, Gyatso reveals a dynamic intellectual culture engaging with issues of bodily integrity, scientific procedure, and human suffering. Interestingly, in this text Gyatso expands the category of the “human” to include microbial, elemental, and karmic agents, thus foregrounding a proto-posthumanist Buddhist vision of interdependence and ethical entanglement. The six essays in this section, of *Living Treasure*, explore Tibetan intellectual culture through the lens of interdependence, epistemology, aesthetics, and nonhuman agency. For example, Sarah H. Jacoby’s writing on *tendrel* (interdependence) broadens the concept to include spiritual and ecological entanglements, aligning with Gyatso’s posthumanist ethics. Again, Charles Ramble’s narrative explores nonhuman sentience in Bönpo literature, echoing Gyatso’s interest in narrative subjectivity. And Heather Stoddard offers a lyrical tribute to Gyatso’s intellectual and personal journey through Tibetan cultural landscapes.

The volume employs a rich array of methodologies. Depending on the necessity of the essays they range from historical and ethnographic

case studies to textual analysis, thereby reflecting the interdisciplinary ethos central to Gyatso's own scholarship. This methodological pluralism enables a nuanced engagement with the complexities of Tibetan and Buddhist studies. Despite the thematic diversity, the essays are coherently organized and consistently dialogue with Gyatso's intellectual legacy, ensuring the volume's structural and conceptual integrity. However, the volume's major limitation comes in the form of underrepresentation of certain domains like ritual studies and material culture. Since Gyatso offered a long-standing engagement with gender and ethics in Buddhist traditions and had deeply studied rituals and performances in Buddhist traditions, a more robust engagement with these aspects would have further enriched the volume. Janet Gyatso's contribution to the field can be best described as a thoughtful disruption, one that questions normative assumptions while constructing new pathways of inquiry. Her writings have expanded the archive of Tibetan literary culture, insisting that we attend not only to sacred texts but also to autobiography, medicine, art, and gendered embodiment. Her works introduced and established Tibetan intellectual life as richly textured, contested, and alive to the complexities of human experience. In this way, Gyatso has redefined what it means to study Buddhism as a lived tradition and literature as a site of philosophical experimentation. Her legacy is both foundational and forward-looking; an invitation to engage critically, compassionately, and creatively with the worlds Tibetan texts inhabit. Thus, *Living Treasure* is not only a celebration of Janet Gyatso's legacy but a vital resource for scholars and students interested in Tibetan and Buddhist studies. The contributors' reflections on tradition, modernity, gender, identity, and critical scholarship resonate with Gyatso's own academic journey, making this volume a fitting tribute to her enduring impact on the field.

## ***Taming the Poisonous: Mercury, Toxicity, and Safety in Tibetan Medical Practice***

Barbara Gerke

379 pages, 2021, open access

Heidelberg University Publishing

Reviewed by Mridul Surbhi

In *Taming the Poisonous: Mercury, Toxicity, and Safety in Tibetan Medical and Buddhist Ritual Practice* (2021), Barbara Gerke presents a deeply interdisciplinary investigation that reconfigures how we understand materiality, risk, and epistemology in Tibetan medicine and tantric traditions. This vital monograph is not only an ethnographic and historical contribution to Tibetan humanities but also a powerful critique of scientific hegemony and cultural translation, where the ‘poisonous’ becomes a site of philosophical, medical, and political transformation. Drawing from nearly two decades of research and multisite ethnographic fieldwork, Gerke traces the intricate life of mercury across ritual, textual, and pharmacological landscapes. Her work is valuable for scholars working at the intersections of medical anthropology, Buddhist studies, material culture, and transcultural theory.

*Taming the Poisonous* follows the story of the chemical element mercury through a discourse that centres on the concept of taming in Tibetan Medicine and Tantric Buddhist Studies. The author foregrounds taming, *dülwa* (*dul ba*), not only as a medical practice of detoxification but also as a deeply embedded philosophical and spiritual aspiration,

from the control of wild animals to the training of the mind in Buddhist soteriology and the legendary subjugation of demonic forces by Guru Padmasambhava in the 8th century. Gerke thus constructs a layered analytical nexus wherein the transformation of a dangerous substance into a potent medicine is also an artisanal, spiritual, and epistemic act.

The central focus of Gerke's anthropological engagement is her compelling demonstration of 'transculturality' and the complexity of navigating different epistemes. She interrogates how safety is conceived and enacted in Sowa-Rigpa (Tibetan Medicine), particularly as the practice travels across cultural boundaries—how it is translated, adopted, and resisted across contexts. The book offers a nuanced view of what it means for knowledge to be traditional yet globally mobile.

Through a close investigation of pharmacological techniques involved in the processing and taming of mercury, Gerke explores the intersection of embodied practices, mythical cosmologies, gendered transmission, and lineage-specific expertise in Tibetan medical traditions. She argues persuasively that Tibetan medicine reflects a spirit of scientific inquiry and innovation, even while it diverges from biomedical paradigms. Drawing on the critical scholarship of Talal Asad and others, Gerke criticizes the assumption that cultural translation is a neutral act. Instead, she highlights that translation is deeply embedded in power relations, especially around the definitions of toxicity, safety, and legitimacy.

Gerke untangles in great detail, and perhaps for the first time for a general readership, the complex transformative and manufacturing process that foregrounds traditional alchemy techniques found in Indian,

Chinese, and Tibetan traditions. While affirming that mercury taming is uniquely Tibetan in ritual and pharmacological synthesis, Gerke's comparative gestures leave room for further cross-cultural exploration. Importantly, she cautions against simplistic comparisons between medical systems and instead advocates for attention to modes of adaptation—an approach that gives anthropological investigations into transculturality a practice-informed and entangled texture.

Gerke's ethnographic fieldwork was conducted primarily at the Men-Tse-Khang and Delek Hospital in Dharamshala. These two institutions have played distinct roles in her research: Men-Tse-Khang has focused on the alchemical *taming* of mercury, while Delek Hospital has evaluated toxicity markers using biomedical protocols. These contrasting approaches underscore one of the book's major concerns—the tension between traditional Tibetan pharmacological knowledge and contemporary biomedical standards of safety. Beyond clinical settings, Gerke incorporates insights gathered from public events, such as conferences and seminars, as well as extensive interviews with Sowa-Rigpa and Ayurvedic practitioners. She also draws from her conversations and lectures delivered at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in Sarnath, India. Importantly, Gerke foregrounds her positionality as a researcher, acknowledging the influence of her own cultural perceptions of safety and embodied responses to toxicity. These reflections do not remain anecdotal; rather, they inform the theoretical framing developed later in the book.

A critical dimension of Gerke's ethnography lies in her engagement with secrecy and the gendered nature of esoteric knowledge transmission in Tantric Buddhist and Tibetan medical traditions. She



provides thoughtful accounts of why and how secrecy is maintained through lineage, ritualized practice, and oral transmission, particularly around the alchemical handling of mercury.

Chapters 2 and 3 of *Taming the Poisonous* position mercury not simply as a chemical element but as a living, mutable substance, a transformative agent whose taming is both a pharmacological and metaphysical act. Gerke traces the historical trajectories of mercury use in Tibet and its evolution during the exile period. She offers detailed documentation of how prominent Rinpoche(s) and physicians sustained medicinal lineages while filling therapeutic voids in exile communities. These chapters are further enriched by rare photographs, visual charts, and historical timelines including references to successive Dalai Lamas involved in mercury-related practices.

Critically, Gerke challenges the adequacy of dominant theoretical models such as the “social life of materials” and the “pharmaceutical nexus” for understanding Tibetan medical traditions. Rather than discarding them, she productively treats them as both conceptual tools and empirical questions, using them to reveal the embedded tensions between material agency, ritual knowledge, and modern regulatory regimes.

A particularly striking section addresses the 1977 taming of mercury in a Chinese labour camp. Drawing on the autobiographical writings of *Lamepa Chödrok* and *Khenpo Troru Tsenam*, Gerke treats biography not just as narrative but as a mode of scholarly documentation, illustrating the intertwining of political history, spiritual practice, and pharmacological resilience.

Chapter 4 of the book engages deeply with the interlinked ideas of ‘taming,’ ‘secrecy,’ and ‘knowledge transmission’ in Sowa-Rigpa. Gerke positions mercury taming as the most prestigious processing technique in Tibetan pharmacology and ritual practice, an alchemical act that reflects both technical mastery and spiritual lineage. Drawing from sociological theory, she references the concept of *Rigpa* as akin to Max Weber’s notion of “vocation,” proposing a culturally situated Tibetan model of scientific inquiry.

In Chapter 5 of her book, Gerke turns to gender and foregrounds the experiences of three women physicians: Lobsang Dolma Khangkar, Ani Ngawang, and Do Dase Wangmo. These trailblazing women are engaged in mercury processing despite longstanding prohibitions. Their accounts offer compelling portraits of resistance and resilience, revealing how these women negotiate taboos around the female body and claims to sacred knowledge. Though these women have privileged background and are a part of a long-standing teacher-student relationality, they all had to navigate both spiritual legitimacy and institutional scepticism. Gerke enriches this discussion with an evocative reading of Indic mythology, tracing the symbolic association of mercury with the union of Śiva and Pārvatī, thus grounding gendered restrictions in deeper cultural narratives. While critically addressing the justification or enforcement of these restrictions, she avoids gender essentialism, inviting the reader to consider the fluid negotiations of embodied authority in Tibetan medicine.

Chapter 6 of *Taming the Poisonous* is a shift toward the sensorial and experiential dimensions of mercury taming. Gerke

foregrounds the voices of contemporary practitioners, who describe their embodied engagement with mercury through the tantric concepts of heat, transformation, and purification. Using both historical records and ethnographic narratives, she reconstructs the process of hot and cold taming techniques and the typologies of disease that the processed mercury is believed to treat. Gerke also highlights the occupational hazards faced by tamers and the safety measures they develop, often blending ritual protocols with practical observation.

The analysis moves from local practice to global critique in Chapter 7. Here, Gerke confronts the tensions between traditional epistemes and global discourses on toxicity and regulation. She contextualizes these tensions through the Dalai Lama's statement, "we have to prove scientifically what Tibetans already know" (p. 238), using it to frame ongoing debates around scientific legitimacy, evidence, and policy. She argues that biomedical definitions of safety are largely shaped by Western regulatory frameworks, which tend to override or marginalize traditional systems like Sowa-Rigpa. However, she also brings to attention the hopeful current: Tibetan practitioners' increasing engagement with Western scientific expectations to ensure both survival and innovation within their medical system. Gerke's discussion underscores that this is not merely a biomedical debate but a political and ecological one; what counts as "safe" is never neutral.

For researchers and scholars of Sowa-Rigpa, such as myself, *Taming the Poisonous* illuminates a range of critical debates, particularly those related to pharmacy work, the compounding of medicines, and the artisanal expertise that traditional practitioners command. Gerke's ethnography raises essential questions: How are these skills acquired

and transmitted? What variables are shaping their transformation in contemporary contexts?

For readers in Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, the book contributes meaningfully to ongoing discussions about the concept of *poison* in Buddhist cosmology—its symbolic, cultural, and therapeutic meanings. For those engaged in historical, philological, and text-based inquiry, this monograph provides substantial new material, especially through its integration of textual history into the pharmaceutical nexus.

Importantly, the book also resonates with readers beyond the above-mentioned disciplinary categories. Gerke's attention to social patronage, gendered transmission, and embodied interpretations of safety makes her work relevant to anyone invested in understanding how knowledge systems emerge, travel, and adapt. Her central challenge to the presumed universality of scientific thought and her insistence on examining the politics of safety makes her book a compelling and timely read.

In times when the global circulation of traditional knowledge is both enabled and constrained by scientific, ecological, and political forces, *Taming the Poisonous* offers an essential case study in bridging epistemes. Gerke's work evokes a spirit of respectable pluralism, a concept as fluid and adaptive as mercury itself. Just as Tibetans across the world navigate pluralistic societies, the book reveals how such epistemic bridgework is not only possible but already embedded in the everyday practices of healing, translation, and transformation.

## **Longing to Awaken: Buddhist Devotion in Tibetan Poetry and Song**

Edited by Holly Gayley and Dominique Townsend

340 pages, 2024, Rs 3547/- (Paperback)

University of Virginia Press

Reviewed by Tenzin Nyima Bhutia

An Anthology of the Heart, Bridging Worlds: Exploring  
Devotion Through Tibetan Poetry and Song in *Longing to Awaken*

*Longing to Awaken: Buddhist Devotion in Tibetan Poetry and Song*, edited by Holly Gayley and Dominique Townsend, and published by the University of Virginia Press (2024), is a noteworthy collection of Tibetan poetry and song that delves into the multifaceted nature of devotion within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Going beyond a simple presentation of translated works, Gayley and Townsend provide a bridge for readers to access the heart of Tibetan Buddhist practice, presenting both original Tibetan texts and accessible English translations. In doing so, they invite a broader audience to engage with the profound spiritual longing, the nuanced philosophical underpinnings, and the vibrant cultural expressions embedded within these devotional pieces. The editors are to be lauded for their meticulous scholarship and commitment to presenting a diverse array of voices, spanning centuries and various schools of thought within Tibetan Buddhism. This collection is an excavation and illumination of the power of poetry as a lived experience and a conduit for spiritual practice, inspiration, and realization.

The “Editorial Introduction” deftly explores the complexities of Buddhist devotion, differentiating it from mere blind faith by highlighting the importance of discernment and critical inquiry. An interview with Jetsün Khandro Rinpoché is a standout feature, offering a practitioner’s perspective that skillfully grounds the academic discussion in lived experience. The section titled “An Act of Bardo: Translating Tibetan Poetry” is particularly valuable, as it directly addresses the inherent challenges in translating poetry across languages and cultures. This section offers a nuanced exploration of the complexities of translation. The anthology comprises twenty-five carefully selected poems and songs. A detailed List of Contributors and a comprehensive Index conclude the book, enhancing its usability for researchers. Each chapter meticulously presents the original Tibetan text alongside its English translation, facilitating a deeper engagement with the source material.

The translated pieces showcase a diverse spectrum of devotional sentiments and expressions, and the editors made a deliberate and commendable choice to include works from both well-known figures such as Milarepa, Longchenpa, and Jigmé Lingpa, and lesser-known or marginalized voices, including female Buddhist figures like Yeshé Tsogyal, Sera Khandro, and Mingyur Peldrön. This inclusion serves to expand the traditional canon and challenge conventional narratives within Tibetan Buddhist Studies, acknowledging the vital contributions of women often overlooked in historical accounts. The poems and songs delve into a range of themes central to Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice: the profound guru-disciple relationship, the ever-present awareness of impermanence, the ardent longing for enlightenment, the acceptance of death, and the transformative power of love and compassion. The anthology also incorporates less conventional pieces,

such as Khangsar Tenpé Wangchuk's "The Non-Song," which challenges readers to reconsider conventional notions of devotional expression.

One of the greatest strengths of *Longing to Awaken* lies in the meticulous care with which the editors have curated and presented the translated works. Each poem or song is accompanied by an insightful introduction that provides historical context, biographical information, and a discussion of key themes and literary devices, thus serving as invaluable guides for readers unfamiliar with Tibetan Buddhist literature. The inclusion of original poems and songs allows readers with knowledge of Tibetan to engage with the original language and appreciate the nuances of poetry. Furthermore, the book's successful balance between scholarly rigor and accessible language, alongside its clear organization, makes it a valuable resource for both academic scholars and general readers interested in exploring Tibetan Buddhist culture and spirituality.

*Longing to Awaken* resonates with the spirit of groundbreaking collections such as *Women Writing in India* (Volumes I and II), edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, which seeks to unearth and amplify marginalized voices within a specific cultural context. Gayley and Townsend mirror Tharu and Lalitha by demonstrating a commitment to expanding the literary canon and challenging traditional narratives. While *Women Writing in India* focuses specifically on women's voices across a span of 2400 years, *Longing to Awaken* adopts a broader thematic approach, exploring the multifaceted nature of devotion across various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. *Longing to Awaken* also builds upon the work of scholars such as Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik, who have examined the role of women in Tibetan Buddhism, and by including works by female poets and practitioners, Gayley and Townsend contribute

to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the tradition. *Longing to Awaken* could serve as a valuable supplementary text in courses on Tibetan Buddhism, religious studies, and comparative literature.

Acknowledging the inherent limitations of any curated collection is essential for a balanced critique. While *Longing to Awaken* offers a diverse selection of poems and songs, the very act of selection inevitably reflects the editors' own choices and perspectives. Readers deeply invested in specific lineages, such as the Sakya or Jonang schools, or time periods might find that their areas of interest are not as comprehensively represented as others. While the anthology includes works from the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism, other less prominent lineages receive comparatively less attention. The editors provide valuable historical background information for each piece, but a more sustained analysis of the dynamic interplay between devotional expression and broader social forces would have deepened the book's critical engagement with the material. Another potential avenue for expansion lies in the inclusion of more contemporary voices. While the collection does feature some works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the majority of the selections are drawn from earlier periods. Incorporating a greater number of contemporary poems and songs would provide readers with a more complete understanding of how devotion is expressed in Tibetan Buddhism today, reflecting the evolving nature of the tradition.

Beyond its role as a collection of translated works, *Longing to Awaken* also serves as a catalyst for critical reflection on the very essence of devotion. The editors' framing of devotion as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing both unwavering faith



and discerning wisdom, is a particularly insightful approach. By emphasizing the importance of critical inquiry, personal experience, and the role of doubt, the anthology moves beyond simplistic notions of devotion as blind adherence to dogma. The inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives further underscores the fluidity and adaptability of devotional expression within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The poems and songs in this collection reveal that devotion is not a static or monolithic concept, but rather a dynamic and evolving process shaped by individual experiences, cultural contexts, and historical circumstances. Further critical analysis could explore the power dynamics inherent in the guru-disciple relationship, a recurring theme in many of the poems. How do these poems negotiate the delicate balance between reverence and autonomy? How do they address the potential for abuse of power within these relationships? These are important questions to consider when engaging with this material. The anthology also raises thought-provoking questions about the relationship between language, translation, and religious experience. The act of translating poetry across languages and cultures inevitably involves a degree of interpretation, transformation, and even loss. The editors have well acknowledged these challenges and provided readers with the tools to critically assess the translations, prompting reflection on the nature of transmission and interpretation.

To conclude, *Longing to Awaken* holds the potential to exert a considerable influence on the field of Tibetan Buddhist Studies, and by making these previously inaccessible poems and songs available to a wider audience, the anthology will undoubtedly stimulate further research and discussion on the multifaceted topic of devotion. While no collection is without its limitations, the strengths of this book far outweigh

any perceived shortcomings, making it a must-read for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and the transformative power of devotion. This book could also serve as a valuable model for future anthologies that seek to explore the diverse expressions of religious experience across cultures and traditions, promoting cross-cultural understanding and fostering dialogue between different spiritual paths. *Longing to Awaken* is a book that will resonate long after the final page is turned, inviting readers to contemplate the nature of longing, the meaning of devotion, and the path to awakening.

(The reviewer acknowledges the use of QuillBot for editing this review)

## **INTERVIEW**

## Talking Retreat, Romance, and Writing with Kelsang Lhamo

Tenzin Dickie

*I interviewed writer and scholar Kelsang Lhamo at my home in Boston, in the fall of 2025. She had just written a long essay about a squatter in her New York apartment which won the Yeshe nonfiction contest, so it felt like a good time to speak with her. She had also recently published a biography of Gene Smith, the scholar and preservationist of Tibetan books who built the premier Tibetan Buddhist digital library. Working under Gene Smith, Kelsang developed into a formidable Buddhist scholar—she honed not only her scholarship, but also her commitment to cultural preservation and transmission. She first rose to fame with her debut book, a mix of prose and poetry, written while she was a nun on retreat in the hills of Dharamsala, which is now being translated into English. I spoke with Kelsang about her education in Tibet, journey to India, writing, and more.*

**What inspired you to start writing? Can you tell us how you first began writing?**

In middle school in Tibet, one of our textbooks had selections from Victor Hugo’s diary. Hugo wrote that if a people don’t have their literature, it’s as if they are in prison without a key. That was when I first became interested in writing. At the time, the weekly newspaper *Tibet Daily* published these short essays called “nyuk sar” and I started to read them.

I began to write and sent my writings to the *Tibetan Art and Literature journal*. They paid 1 or 2 yuan for a word at the time. I collected folk songs and sent them to newspapers. I started to write Ka-shey, which they published. Dechen Dolkar, the founding editor of *Tibetan Art and Literature*, was very supportive of my work.

Then *Lhokha Art and Literature* invited me to a literary workshop that Dungkar Lobsang Trinle was teaching. He had written a commentary on the *Mirror of Poetry*, *Tsigyen Rigpai Gochey*, and he taught us that. It was a 3-month workshop, and along with Dungkar Rinpoche, Chapel Tseten Phuntsok, Sholkhang Thupten Nyima, Gen Khedup, and Ugen Dorje also taught us.

There were sixty-five of us taking this workshop—I was one of two girls there. Most of the other participants were teachers, so I was the youngest at the workshop. When I met Dungkar Rinpoche, I prostrated in front of him. I was the only one to prostrate—it wasn't so restricted, but people didn't prostrate back then—and he took a lot of interest in me. He took me on a pilgrimage to the south of Central Tibet with him, to the Tibetan emperors' tombs and Yumbu Lhakhang and so on.

### **Tell us more about your education in Tibetan literature.**

After I came back home, my mother didn't want me to go to school anymore. We were semi-nomads, *samadrok*, and she wanted to keep me at home. I was doing very well at school, and I wanted to study, so I left home and went to Sheldrak Khen Rinpoche (1906-1992) to learn Tibetan medicine. Sheldrak Khen Rinpoche was a tertön who

lived at Tsayul hermitage, and he was the guru and the doctor in our area. When I asked him to take me on as a student, he agreed. I memorized the *Gyushi, The Four Medical Tantras* root text, and learned the diagnostic methods of pulse and urine checking. But more than medicine, I was learning Tibetan and Buddhist history and literature. I learned Tibetan *namthars* and Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* from Sheldrak Khen Rinpoche, and it changed my life.

Rinpoche had so many ancient texts with him, texts that had been hidden away to keep them safe. And because they had been hidden for so many years, they were all stuck together. Rinpoche's son and I had to take the pages apart, clean and dry them. I copied the *namthars* at night, and I gave them to publishing houses to print. I read Gyelse Thokme Sangpo's text all night and copied it—because the text is all about generosity, I started to feel a lot of renunciation. Rinpoche taught me the Ngondro texts, and *Words of my Perfect Teacher*, and many other texts. I realized that I needed to learn so much more.

My parents wanted me to get married, but I had bigger ambitions than that. I wanted to go to India for further Buddhist study, so Rinpoche helped prepare me for the journey. Rinpoche's cousin also wanted to go, so she and I left together as travel companions. Because of Rinpoche's influence, my family was not punished even though I had left for India; Rinpoche explained that I only went to study the Dharma, and our farmland was not seized. I was the first disciple that Rinpoche took on, after the fall of Tibet. All of Lhokha knew that I was Rinpoche's student, and people were kind to me because of it. I didn't tell my parents that I was going to India. I just left.

**Tell us about your journey to India. What were your first years in India like?**

I walked for eleven months and passed through Kailash and Mustang to get to India. It was May when we left Lhokha, going first to Lhasa and then Shigatse. We stayed at Kailash, Gang Rinpoche, for three months. The reincarnation of Shabkar was rebuilding a monastery—Lho Trugo Gon, where Yidrok Lhamo bathed in the Choegyal Norsang story—and we stayed and worked there for three months. We earned one yuan a day, in return for food and a place to stay. There were fifteen of us at that point. In September, we left—Shabkar arranged our way to Nepal, and the journey took maybe ten or fifteen days.

A guide took us to Bongpa, then we crossed a river and arrived in Mustang. We had to walk a whole day downhill, all day long. This was in 1987 or 88, and there was no security, no soldiers. In Mustang, we stayed at the palace. The Queen of Mustang found out there were two girls from Tibet, so she invited us to the palace, and we stayed there for a month. Then we walked down to Pokhara, and the whole way down the mountains were filled with Rhododendron flowers.

Once in India, we went straight to Bodh Gaya and Varanasi, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama was giving a Kalachakra initiation. There were so many monks, and they looked resplendent in their monks' robes. And I thought, if only we could wear such robes! Then one day we saw women wearing these robes too—nuns in their robes. Then we went to Dharamsala, and saw His Holiness, and he said we should go to Mentseekhang and study medicine. But we wanted to go on retreat, so we asked him to introduce us to a teacher. For nine years, my friend and

I lived in retreat at Rishi Bhavan in Dharamkot. Our teachers, who lived up at Triund, were Geshe Drubtob and Yeshe Topden.

But I was very interested in poetry, especially love poems, and then I started writing poetry. The writer Gonpo Tsering was interested in me, but I was still very committed to being a nun. It was very cold up in Dharamkot; so in the winter, I went to Varanasi. I began to learn Hindi, which was very easy for me, and I fell in love with Hindi poetry. And then I became a little interested in romance, I think!

### **How did you write your first book? How did it get published?**

During my three months at Kailash on my journey, I started keeping a diary. I was very expressive in my diary and loved writing in it. I wrote letters to Gonpo Tsering in my diary, although I never sent them. I wrote to Dhonyoe la too. Sometimes when people asked me what I was up to, I just showed them my diary. It was Tashi Tsering from Amnye Machen who told me that I should turn my diary into a book. He said he will publish it. So I looked through my diary entries and pulled together the entries on my life in retreat and made a book manuscript. In 2000, Amnye Machen published the book. It was launched at Indiana University with me, Tashi Tsering, Elliot Sperling, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The book was about me and my fellow nuns, although I changed the identifying details. There were four of us, all from Tibet. One of the nuns—she was involved in the demonstrations there—went back to Tibet. Another was the sister of Tsipon Shakabpa. The third nun was Seldon la, who was Kungo Tara's niece. I wrote about her and Khenpo



Choga, who preyed on her—I called him just Khenpo in the book, but everyone knew who it was. I think this was the first Tibetan #MeToo episode. Seldon la ended up having a child, a daughter, whom she never sent to school. Eventually, they went back to Tibet.

**Who are the poets and writers that you admire, and why?**

I love Langdun Paljor's novel *Tsugyu* and Wangdor Tailing's *The Secret of Tesur House*. And Tsangyon Heruka's *Life of Milarepa* is just wonderful. Without Heruka, Milarepa would not be so famous. No one else writes like Heruka. I also like Dokhar Tsering Wangyal's biography of Phola and *The Tale of the Incomparable Prince*, and Dza Patrul's song collection. I brought these six books with me from Tibet. On the road, I threw away my clothes and my Tsampa because they were too heavy, but I kept my books.

I also love the big Chinese classics—*The Water Margin*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, etc.—which were translated beautifully into Tibetan. *Water Margin* is about patriotism, and I think a lot of people learned to be nationalistic and patriotic because of this book. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a beautiful love story.

**You were a librarian at the Buddhist Digital Resource Center for a long time. What's something about Tibetan books that people should pay attention to?**

Every day there were all kinds of texts that we worked with, and it was such an education for me. I knew a little bit of Nyingma texts, and I knew some Geluk texts, but I didn't know other traditions. Gene Smith

wanted us to catalog a text only after we had read it in its entirety, so I learned a lot. We didn't just note the title, the lineage, the genre, and when it was written—we went beyond all that. For Tibetan literature, if you could only see one small corner before, now it was like seeing the whole park.

In the end, it's all the same source, there are just different branches. As a librarian, that's what you learn. In order to catalog, first read the whole text, don't rush. You can learn the essence of the book from the colophon. These days, a book's preface tells you all about the book, but before it was the colophon. Don't judge a book by its cover, or its title, you have to read the colophon. Reading the colophon is like reading the whole book. That's my advice. Even the lamas, when they talk, they give the essence of their talk at the end. It's the same with Tibetan books.

Looking ahead, I think the future will be very challenging for Tibetans, with Tibetan language and literature under great threat. The people I know tell me that in Tibet, the Tibetan language is disappearing. That's why it's up to my generation to save our language.

## **FICTION**

## Virginia Is for Lovers

Losang Gyatso



I found the Polaroid recently while vacuuming under the driver's seat. It showed Tencho and me dancing, her in a black dress I'd never seen, me in clothes that looked borrowed from a Texas thrift store. What made my skin prickle wasn't just that I didn't remember us ever taking the photo—it was seeing us as we are today, when we hadn't taken a Polaroid in over twenty-five years. I put the picture on the fridge door like how they stick pieces of evidence on a wall in TV crime dramas. And sure enough, after a few days of seeing it several times a day, things started coming back to us; a moment here, an image there, that eventually helped us piece together what happened that Saturday night over three months ago, though even now, some parts remain hazy.

Others, I would do almost anything to forget. I've always written things down to try and gain some perspective on difficult experiences, if not a full understanding, and so this is my attempt to put down Tencho's and my collective recollection of that night.

It started out innocently enough. The sky was turning pink, losing light, and a light drizzle made the vehicles on Interstate 95 look like shimmering strings of pearls and coral. We were heading to Richmond to visit our son Tashi, an easy hundred-mile drive south from where we are in northern Virginia. I-95 can be treacherous, especially in the winter months—it runs from the Canada-Maine border down to Florida, mixing laid-back local traffic with speeding long-haul drivers who only had Miami and warm beaches on their minds. Let's just say that it's not a highway that you merge onto casually while fiddling with the radio. But we knew this stretch well enough. Tencho called Tashi as we approached Richmond. There was laughter in the background, and then our son's girlfriend saying, "Oh no, Tashi!" He'd forgotten we were coming. They'd gone camping for the weekend and were 100 miles away somewhere. "Oh well, we'll see them next time," Tencho said, ever the optimist and by far the more even-keeled of the two of us. Her actual first and middle names are Tenzin Chodon, but it's common practice in parts of Tibet to conjoin the first two syllables to form a hybrid name, as in Tencho. It sounds less formal and more endearing than saying both names in full. We also often add "la" as an honorific after names, especially in and around Lhasa, so she's "Tencho la," to me usually, but I'll drop the formality for the sake of ease of reading, though I must say it feels a little awkward and rude.

I realized we'd driven well past Richmond while talking to Tashi.

The window lights in the distant hills were thinning out, and a passing sign said, “Next Exit 20 Miles.” Fuck! That’s forty miles just to get back to Richmond, then another hundred to home. “Let’s just enjoy the drive,” Tencho said, “We’ll get gas at that exit and head back. We have momos in the fridge for dinner.” I was already hungry but didn’t say anything. Instead, I nudged the cruise control higher until we started passing Canadian and New England plates. The darkness grew absolute, making the view on both sides of the road resemble black walls. The radio offered only country western, oldies, or ‘end-of-the-world ‘ preaching. I settled on Patsy Cline singing “Crazy.” It was a favorite of an old boss of mine at a New York ad agency, Don G., a native of Georgia who once, after a few Stolichnayas too many at an office drinks party, urinated full circle around the statue of a northern Civil War general. But enough with the monkey mind.

The exit appeared so suddenly I had to swerve to make the off-ramp. Instead of the expected cluster of gas stations and fast-food joints, we came to a T-junction in the middle of nowhere with a sign: Left to Pauwau, right to Fort Gregg Adams—a pretty Native American name or a fort which Don’s forebears may have manned. I took the left. Nine miles on a narrow winding road without passing a single car brought us to some scattered houses, a few with lights on, but most either boarded up or falling down. After the last house, we came to a deserted intersection with just a gas station on one corner, a flickering fluorescent tube above its solitary pump. The credit card reader took its time while crickets chirped and large moths flapped around the buzzing tube light. Tencho went to get snacks while I stayed there holding the broken pump handle. Through the grimy window, partially covered with fading lottery tickets and tobacco ad stickers, I watched her approach a woman with

a bleached blonde bouffant. The scene, lit by that pale light falling on weed-strewn concrete, reminded me of an Edward Hopper painting—but eerier, and more hermetically-sealed-looking.

Inside the shop, the air smelled stale and there was muffled music drifting in from somewhere distant. The woman behind the cash register, wearing a tangerine-colored print dress and a drawn face, rang up the snacks and cracked a brief smile, like a tired game show hostess. When Tencho asked about a bathroom, the woman pointed with an open palm to a narrow door beside the counter. “Right through there, honey.” We exchanged glances, both thinking we should probably forget the bathroom, but before we could retreat, the woman lifted the counter section and stepped out. I couldn’t help noticing her light blue ankle strap shoes and thinking, “She must be going out later.” She pushed open the door, and the music came closer. “It’s in the back,” she said, leading us down a corridor with worn damask wallpaper and framed pictures of rodeos and milk glass sconces. At the end hung a heavy velvet curtain. Tencho pulled the curtain back slightly, and we might as well have seen the Potala Palace or the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. Before us stretched a dance hall with a live band on stage, a long bar running down one side, and couples line dancing across the floor. And somehow, between the store and that curtain, we’d undergone a wardrobe transformation. I thought that I was looking at somebody else in the mirror—cowboy boots, western shirt, the whole nine yards. At least Tencho’s wearing something that she might have actually picked. She caught my eye in the mirror and mouthed, “This is crazy!” A waitress in cowgirl gear collecting empties passed by. “You guys look cute.” Just like that, the disorientation and sense of being off kilter went away, like a toothache ending abruptly.

We got beers at the bar—Budweisers, since the bartender looked at me funny and said “There ain’t no such thing as a Bud Light.” I let it go, paid, and we turned around to watch the dancing. After a few minutes I was about to suggest we leave when a boy, no more than twelve, wearing thick glasses and a tucked-in checkered shirt, scurried up with a Polaroid camera hanging from his neck. “Would you like a photo on the dance floor? It’s instant.” I started to decline, but then those opening piano tremolo notes of “Crazy” came on. I swear to the three Buddhas. Tencho was already on the floor, swaying to the music, with arms outstretched and fingers beckoning like in a Bollywood film. I gulped down my beer, always needing a little buzz to dance, and then joined Tencho on the dance floor. The kid circled us, one eye on the viewfinder and a finger on the red shutter button. Just as a young soldier dropped to one knee in the middle of the dance floor and held up an open ring box to a girl in an orange print dress, we heard the shutter click and the grinding whir of the photo emerging. The boy set his Casio digital watch to a grave ceremony. “Two minutes,” he announced, as if counting down a rocket launch. We watched our image slowly emerge through the chemical mist. “I hope it will help you remember us,” he said, which I thought at the time sounded both funny and sort of sad coming from someone his age.

The neon Marlboro clock showed midnight when we made our way through the dancing couples toward the velvet curtain and then back through the corridor. But at the door, the woman in the store blocked our path, hands high on the doorframe. “Now why are you people leaving so early? The party’s just getting started,” she cooed, raising one eyebrow. Her makeup was heavier now, her voice more intimate. Whereas earlier she had looked a little drawn and distant, she now appeared renewed



and her movements more physical. However, when we insisted that we had a long drive ahead and appeared undeterred, her playful smile turned desperate in front of our eyes. And in a voice that was more frail-sounding and more manic, she said, “Won’t you two stay with me a little longer... my... all of my friends have gone away.” The temperature seemed to drop. My skin went clammy. I couldn’t breathe. The woman’s face contorted and morphed between livid rage and grief as she held me with her eyes. I felt myself giving in to the cold and to the pressing pain in my chest. Next thing, I felt Tencho squeezing my fingers hard and shouting my name although she sounded very far away. Suddenly, my lungs exploded and I heaved and coughed before I could breathe again. Then Tencho did something I didn’t expect—she removed the green glass mala from her wrist. “Thank you for letting us see the beautiful dance hall and meet all your friends,” Tencho said. “Please take this rosary... it’s from a Green Tara initiation... we believe she manifests unconditional love for all beings.” I doubted that the love and light talk would go anywhere with the woman who a moment ago was taking away my breath. I’d actually started glancing around for something I could use as a weapon in case things turned worse. But the woman’s eyes calmed and fixed on the green beads, and then she reached out with both her hands to take it. And as she moved aside to let us pass, I could swear that I had heard her say, “Unconditional love,” as if she was trying to remember something.

We drove around the lot once before leaving, looking for... I don’t know. Probably anything that would help make a sliver of sense. Our headlights swept across the empty space—just weeds growing through broken concrete and a few charred beams. We didn’t know why, but an overwhelming sense of sorrow washed over us at that moment, and

we both started whispering, “Om Mani Padme Hum.” The next thing, Tencho is shouting something and I narrowly avoid hitting the gas pump before finally getting away from that place. Back on I-95, at a 7-Eleven past Richmond, the guy at the register asked where we were coming from. “Pauwau... is that how you say it?” Tencho answered, which is when I noticed that she’s back in her regular clothes. The guy’s face fell. “Not much there these days. Not since that terrible dance hall fire near forty years ago. Most folks left or died off after that.” We drove home in silence, lay awake until dawn before drifting into sleep. And when we woke up in the middle of the day, we had no memory of the night before—until the Polaroid surfaced two weeks ago.

And that was where the story ended until this morning when a package arrived from Dharamsala, India. Inside was a green glass mala, sent by Tencho’s friend to replace the one given away. As I handled the beads and watched the light moving on them, a memory rushed back like a flashback in a film: We had driven around the empty lot and were passing the store, when I looked into the window one last time and saw the woman. She was opening a cigarette carton and I could see that she was wearing the green mala on her wrist. She swung around to start stocking the shelf behind her, turning her back to us. That’s when I saw it—the absence of skin and fabric from her shoulder blades down to her waist. It was like looking at an amorphous hollow, with dry organs still quivering, and a desiccated spine and rib cage moving as she worked. I heard Tencho scream, “Gyatso la!” and yanked the steering wheel hard to avoid crashing into the gas pump and blowing us up in a ball of fire. Some things, once seen, can’t be unseen. Some things are just crazy.

## **Pale Songs**

Kyabchen Dedrol

(Translated from Tibetan by Gödod Norbu Amchok)

Blizzards.

Blizzards are a good subject for many stories. Due to the blizzards, the temperature in Serlung Village had plummeted to forty degrees below zero.

Many black tents that once had red flames as their hearts now lie empty, so we don't know for sure whether the highest-ranking people in this village, such as Village Chief Nakgon, bard Lhato, merchant Penchung, judge Karma, singer Miktshe, and Tulku Yeshe, or even the main character of this story, the girl Pema, are alive or dead.

Ten days ago, Village Chief Nakgon, with a trembling voice, had said, "Are we still waiting for ourselves to turn into glaciers like this? Those who want to live, follow me, and if all the land under the sky freezes like this, I will never boast." Since then, many paths had been created around the village, all buried under thick snow. Reporters, armed with scientific gadgets, found no news to report.

However, the courage to go beyond fact and insist on fiction can be regarded as a characteristic of storywriters or a sign of shamelessness, so I am writing in this way again with great courage.

1

Though the ragged clothes revealed her chapped skin, this girl, Pema, was still busy scattering melodious songs, like white snowflakes, into the lap of the vast earth. As she sang, warmth filled every vein from the soles of her feet to her brain, and many straight beams of light like pillars stretched out one after another from between the white clouds. Gradually, the snow stopped falling from the sky, and the snow on the ground began to melt.

A flock of small birds circled as usual, and some prayer flags flew freely.

At this moment, Pema paused her singing, but the melody and each word burned intensely in her heart, like scalding water.

While experiencing the endless beautiful scenery, she was also thinking about where she came from, where she would go tomorrow, and where she was today. She also knew very well that whatever she thought about, there would be tears, all shed for different reasons.

Really. In times of loneliness, who is a better protector than oneself? But she remembered someone other than herself, a man named Phunnor. To be clear, that man was the crafter of the lyrics and melodies of the songs she was singing, and his intelligent face and humorous words were unforgettable to anyone who knew him.

For days on end, he introduced her to many different kinds of

musical works while recounting the scattered histories of great, world-renowned musicians, and similarly told her a lot about art and poetry related to music. As a result, her eyes, throat, joys and sorrows, and all the components of her body, speech, and mind became as pure and immaculate as if they had been washed with a clear and cool consecrated-bath. It was also for the first time, she realised, that in order to live a happy life in this world, besides love, there is also a need for something called freedom.

“Anyway, sing a song. For me now, the thing I love most is your songs. Pema. Sing a song.”

His last words still echoed vividly in her ears. That day, she whispered a soft song in front of him, her voice trembling and sorrowful. The policeman, gripping Phunnor’s arm tightly, cast looks of lust and arrogance toward Pema. At last, with a sigh, she asked, “Why did you have to imprison him?” And the policeman said, “It was none of your business.”

She had only seen him in her dreams ever since.

## 2

She continued moving forward as before. From afar, the dark shape coming towards her was actually a muleteer. He was leading a mule whose four hooves moved in rhythm with the tinkling of the small bell on its neck.

“Well, girl. What is the snow depth on the other side of this

mountain?”

“I don’t know!”

“What a girl of misfortune! Showing arrogance even to a merchant like me. Look! My mules are loaded with turquoise and coral of immeasurable value. Don’t Tibetan girls sell their bodies for turquoise and coral?”

“You. You. Aren’t you the singer Miktshe? I’m Pema.”

“Oh, Pema, everyone says you are dead,” he said, with a strange look in his eyes. “Pema, let’s go back. Now that the snow has stopped, it’s time for us to live our lives as before.”

“No, Miktshe. Just sing a song.” Pema pleaded a little weakly, so he sang a song. But unlike before, most of the content of his lyrics was only praising turquoise and coral, and when he sang, he was not so careful, and he repeatedly glanced at the turquoise and coral loaded on the mule.

“Is this what you have achieved, even though the Three Precious Jewels saved you from the terror of the blizzard and gave you life again?”

Pema scolded him without scruple. At that moment, the sound of a cuckoo, which was heard from afar, was carried by the wind, but he led his mule away, saying, “the demon bird is just like you, demon girl.”

“He’s even calling the cuckoo a demon bird, now.” Pema was astonished. We don’t know exactly how many days and nights passed

after that, or what kind of song she sang, but one morning what appeared before her was not mountains and rivers, but a great temple with golden roofs embracing the sunlight and majestic stone walls. Arriving there, she felt immense joy, as if she had found her final resting place, and the exquisite craftsmanship on the outside of the temple also evoked the courage, wisdom, and high standards of this ancient nation. However, after entering the temple, she was shocked and stunned.

Inside the temple, instead of statues, religious texts, murals, butter lamps, and other things that should be in a temple, there were many people in uniform cutting wood, smelting iron, mixing various medicines, operating computers, and doing all kinds of other work. They were even slaughtering livestock.

Terrified, she tried to retreat, but a man approached her. “If you’re new here, you’ll have to wait a few days; there’s no work available yet,” he said.

“Are you accumulating evil deeds in this way and also going against the Buddha’s teachings?”

“The Buddha’s teachings are ingrained in our flesh and blood. Why would we go against that? However, we also have the task of transforming your rags into new clothes.”

“I’ve heard this before. Not a single word has changed. So who are you?” She asked, hoping he was Phunnor. He said, “My name is Ralo. I used to be the main character in a story.” Yellow snot ran out of his nostril. Then, after wiping the snot clean with a handkerchief, he

turned away and went back to work, saying, “You women are really pathetic.”

3

Snowed. Once again.

“Have you heard that Phunnor has been sentenced to death?”

“What crime did he commit?”

“He forgot to write ‘salute’ at the end of his letter requesting leave.”

The two old women were chatting, and there was no connection between them and Pema, and there was no connection between them and the Village Chief Nakgon, the bard Lhato, and so on.

Upon arriving, Pema collapsed involuntarily at the door of a ball-room. The modern, popular music and the mixed male and female clamour inside the dance hall seemed designed to overwhelm the poor. On the stage, a girl in a white dress was passionately singing a Chinese song called “Heart Too Soft.” She was Pema’s older sister, named Gekma<sup>1</sup>—a term more enviable than her surname.

Pema was surrounded by no one but Gekma when she woke up and restored her memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Gekma (ཐྱེག་མ་) meaning charming woman in Tibetan.



“Dear Sister, the weather in our hometown is frigid. Every winter, snow falls endlessly, and my father sent me off through the snow three times to get married. However, I fled home three times through the snow. Oh, I knew a man. His name is Phunnor.”

As Gekma started to speak, a woman called her name and said, “Hi, Gekma. Today the windhorse runs for you.<sup>2</sup> A prince is waiting for you with stacks of hundred-yuan bills.

“I have tears too.” As Pema heard Gekma’s words, Gekma went to the woman. After a while, Pema listened to the news coming from a nearby loudspeaker.

“On the 15th of this month, a Dongfeng truck fell off Darkhar, the highest mountain in this area. Unfortunately, the truck was not carrying goods from one place to another, but Tibetan girls who were going to dig caterpillar fungus because they were poor. The girls, whose average age was twenty-five, turned into thirty corpses in an instant, and even after three days, no one arrived to claim them. In the end, the road repair workers had no choice but to dump the bodies in the water. That’s the end of the news. See you tomorrow.”

“Hope not to see you tomorrow.” Pema closed her eyes and sang Phunnor’s song again. As she sang, all the blood vessels from the soles of her feet to her brain were warmed, and many rays of light, as straight as pillars, stretched out one after another from between the white clouds.

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<sup>2</sup> In Tibetan, it means that today is a day where good luck and favourable circumstances are on your side.

4

On the day Phunnor was led to the execution ground, many people crowded to watch as if at a spectacle. Taking advantage of the good opportunity, Miktshe sold turquoise and coral, and in less than half an hour, his pockets were filled with banknotes twice as much as his capital. Immediately, the words slipped from his mouth, “If I can’t go back to that place several times to transport turquoise, I’m not my mother’s son!”

That day, Pema was wandering the streets of a small town with some girls. While they introduced each other to the paths they had traveled and the people they had seen, they also proposed that they all go to Lhasa. But after Pema thought about it for a while, she said, “I am not going.”

“Why?”

“I need to find Phunnor. Talking with him is the most enjoyable thing I do in the world.

At one point some people came running busily towards them, and one of them said, “Yes. It’s Pema.” And the others said, “Indeed! It’s Pema.”

“Pema. Your mother is dead. Your father is dead. Your younger brother is dead. Your...” As an old man said this, Pema stared with wide, unblinking eyes, so the old man continued, “It seems to be true that she’s crazy. Hey, Pema, look. How many fingers are here?” He held out his middle and index fingers together, folding the others. “Two, Village

Chief Nakgon.” As Pema replied, another old man said, “Girl, let’s go back. Now the snow in our hometown is a little thinner than before, so we can find you a suitable husband and some property to live on.”

That afternoon, Pema returned with them, and a few days later, some young men dressed in finery came to bring a husband for her. The groom was Miktshe, and the first thing he did was fetch a turquoise and coral necklace from the pack on his horse, saying, “This is the first gift I give to my spouse to express my love.” Pema bowed her head and said not a word.

Later, Pema also heard from Miktshe about Phunnor being led to the execution ground.

There is no doubt that the landscape of Serlung Village is rich in beautiful and magnificent splendour, and it is a land that foreigners may adorn with many terms such as “mythical world” or “hidden paradise.”

Pema, a girl who born and raised in this place, started a new life once again. Now she only sings the songs composed by Phunnor after her husband had gone to sell turquoise and coral. Sometimes the husband heard her singing outside the window and gave her a terrible scolding, but she never answered him once. Anyway, the husband became her owner, and she his slave.

Several years later, her young elementary-school-aged child was forming sentences with the word “died.” He wrote bluntly, “My mother had died” without a second thought. Pema did actually die that day.

Later, people heard a faint voice singing songs from a mountain ridge fifty miles away from Serlung Village. Because the sound of that voice was like being wrapped in wind-blown snow or slowly moving mist, we called them “pale songs.”

The original Tibetan version is available on Butter-lamp at <https://www.tibetcm.com/specialist/deydrol/2014-12-11/6975.html>

## **Masks**

Tsering Döndrup

(Translated from Tibetan by Christopher Peacock)

She came towards me, two twinkling eyes smiling above a baby-blue mask. There was no one else around, so it had to be me she was smiling at. Who was she? I wondered, moving towards her. Still smiling, she extended her right hand. She had long, slender, and incredibly soft fingers—I had the strange sensation of never wanting to let them go. These were hands befitting a pianist or a surgeon, I thought. Who knows, maybe she was one.

“Hi.” She was the first to speak.

“Hi.”

“Forgot your mask?” she said, still smiling. As she spoke, she slid the green leather handbag under her arm round to the front, extracted a plastic-wrapped baby-blue mask identical to her own, and handed it to me. It seemed like the two of us had known each other for a long time. But who was she?

I belonged to a small minority of people, surrounded by a happily willing majority, who simply couldn’t bear to wear a mask. Better to just catch the virus than have to cover up your face, I thought. It was precisely because of this attitude that I found myself walking ten kilometers on a frosty late autumn morning instead of taking a taxi or a bus.

I stood there, holding the mask in my hand. “Written anything new recently?” she said, eyes still twinkling. As I was thinking of how to answer her, she spoke again. “Ah, the bus is here. See you later.” With great intimacy, she laid those long, slender, incredibly soft fingers on my left arm, then boarded the bus. So this meeting place of ours—it was a bus stop.

After we parted ways at the bus stop, I finally started thinking about who she was. Actually no; I had been thinking about it from the moment I saw those two twinkling eyes coming towards me. Who was she? Why didn’t I ask her? I should have added her on WeChat. Maybe we were already friends on WeChat? Maybe if she’d been maskless like me, I would have recognized her right away. Sadly, it’s all over when you have to say “if.”

I lingered there, feeling at a loss, replaying our fleeting encounter in my mind. She was about my height, 1.7 meters at least. Her dyed-blond hair was tied up in a bun and her fine eyebrows were neatly groomed. Those twinkling eyes lay beneath naturally long lashes. She wore a short white woolen top and a black skirt—of what material I’m unsure—that hung off sturdy hips and draped down to the ground, preventing me from getting a look at her shoes. But the little gold studs inlaid with turquoise stones were all it took to confirm that she was Tibetan, proof as solid as her ID card.

“Who is she? Ah—never mind who she is,” I thought to myself, about to set off to where I ought to set off. But I remained there, held back as if by some intangible force.

Bus numbers two and five stop here. The name of the stop is Springwater. I didn't see whether she got on the number two or the number five. I looked at the route map to see where these two buses went, and to see if there were any Tibetan residential areas or places where Tibetan speakers worked along the routes.

More people were gathering at the bus stop. All were looking at me with surprise and hostility. Clearly, it was because I wasn't wearing a mask. I was left with little choice but to leave the bus stop. Staring at the mask she had given me, I began to wonder again who she was. I caught myself at once—"never mind who she is, stop thinking about it." Yet her image refused to disappear from my mind, and furthermore, I found myself thinking about Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. A love story spanning some half a century, the novel tells of a couple unable to marry because of their youth, who undergo all the trials and tribulations of life and are reunited in their eighties, only to find themselves unable to marry because of their old age, all the while showing us the history of Colombia and the horrors that war and epidemics inflict on people's lives.

And with the horrors of COVID and the war in Ukraine, what are we in now if not a time of war and epidemics? Not to mention the headaches of propaganda, which makes it increasingly impossible to sort truth from lies, and that the pandemic has further isolated those with already limited social interactions, leaving them completely alienated, and has made it so we can no longer even see the faces of those who already hid their true feelings. How many tear-jerking love stories there must be in the world with war and pandemics as the backdrop! Yet, in

some times and some places, those stories can be turned into tools of the rulers' propaganda, creating more harm than good. Literary creation is one of the noblest pursuits imaginable, but when it becomes a tool of the ruler's propaganda, there is nothing filthier. What would a pure and simple love story even look like in *this* time of pandemic? What about a story with me and the woman from just now as protagonists? Haha! Could we call that love? Ridiculous. That woman might even be a relative of mine.

Then again, I'm quite certain that I have no family at all in town other than my sister. So why such tenderness towards me? It's also possible that she came up here from my hometown—but no, it was obvious from the assured, familiar way she boarded the bus that she was a long-time resident of the city. Perhaps she had mistaken me for someone else? No—she knew I was a writer, didn't she? Well, maybe she'd seen my picture somewhere? That can't be it either—there wasn't so much as a bio on the jacket of my solitary published book, let alone a photo. Except—except there was someone who had put the whole book online, a picture of me included. Even if she'd seen that, though, it wouldn't explain how affectionate she'd acted. Could she be the wife or girlfriend of a friend of mine? But then those twinkling eyes alone would have made her easily recognizable, even if I couldn't see her whole face. In any case, she must have read my work. Who knows, maybe she was a big fan...

She came towards me, two twinkling eyes smiling above a baby-blue mask. She extended her right hand. They were long, slender, and incredibly soft fingers—I had the strange sensation of never wanting to let them go. She held out a plastic-wrapped baby-blue mask. With my



left hand, I took the mask, and with my right, I took her hand in mine and led her to the woodland park on the riverbank. Countless poplars grew there, tips piercing the sky and trunks thick as buckets, but there was nowhere you could set foot without stepping in trash and excrement. It brought to mind that saying: “The poplar is mighty but sprouts from the dung, the azalea is tiny but springs on the mountain.” The few spots that were trash-free—or relatively trash-free—were already filled with masked people. All were looking at me with surprise and hostility. Clearly, it was because I wasn’t wearing a mask. She kept reminding me to put my mask on, but I wouldn’t. Hand in hand, we took a long stroll in the woods, stopping occasionally when we found a clean spot to sit and chat under the cool shade of a tree. This went on for three or four hours, but not once did she take off her mask, so I’d still had no chance to identify her.

Out of ideas, I pointed out that the kind of mask she wore was only effective for four hours, in the hope that she might take it off just once, but she said she’d just swapped it for a new one when she went to the bathroom a moment ago. There was a teahouse in the park, and I figured she’d have to remove her mask if she was drinking, so I suggested we stop by. But even at the teahouse, the mask didn’t come off. It seemed her refusal to remove the mask was as stubborn as my refusal to wear one. Perhaps she had a cleft palate? Or a huge mouth that gaped down to her neck? Or absurdly thick lips? Or maybe it was really bad breath? I recalled with some sadness the woman I briefly dated the year before, who I’d been forced to break up with for that very reason.

“If you’re not having tea, shall we go walk by the river?”

“Sure.”

We went down to the riverbank. Even here they were constructing those big stone embankments they were calling “river course management guards.” These days every river in the grasslands big and small was fenced off by these things, much to the indignation of the nomads, who complained relentlessly that they had no way to water their flocks.

做核酸啦，做核酸啦.....<sup>1</sup>

That hateful shriek snapped me out of my dream. Another one of those COVID testing companies that turns negatives to positives for the sake of profit, I imagine. A surge of anger rose inside me.

*Ah tsi.* A damn dream. Of course. Maybe it was all a dream. No. I met her yesterday. That wasn’t a dream. It was real. And the plastic-wrapped baby-blue mask by my pillow was proof. I rolled over in bed and picked up the mask. I found myself reading aloud the Chinese characters printed on it: 做医用外科口罩.<sup>2</sup> Who was she? What did she do? Was she a pianist, a surgeon? Or maybe she was someone like my sister, someone who couldn’t land a good civil service or teaching gig after college and wound up an admin assistant at some local government office making a paltry two thousand RMB a month. How sad that would be. Sometimes people like that really drive you mad. Take my sister, usually a sensible person, someone who listens to my and our parents’ advice. But not so after graduating college. After several unsuccessful

<sup>1</sup> In the original Tibetan text, this phrase is written in Chinese characters. Pronounced *zuo hesuan la* (“PCR tests, PCR tests!”), this phrase was heard throughout China during the pandemic at testing sites, or when white-suited medical workers came door-to-door to administer PCR tests for COVID-19.

<sup>2</sup> Surgical mask for medical use

job applications, I said to her, “Forget about it. Why don’t you go back and stay with Mum and Dad, look after the livestock, and just read in your spare time?” Replying in between sobs, she said she refused to return to the grasslands. I thought of that proverb: “A herder’s hardship is hardship indeed, and harder still when snows impede.” She must be afraid of the cold and the physical labor, I thought. Since she’d been off at school from a young age, not wanting to do a herder’s work was understandable. I said, “How about we hire someone to help Mum and Dad back home, and you can stay in the city and sell yoghurt and milk?” But still she refused. She said she had to work in an office no matter what, even if they didn’t pay her.

And that was how she ended up in a low-paid government admin job. That two thousand a month wasn’t even enough to cover her phone bill and the food she always had delivered. Besides the low salary, she had to live with the constant threat of being made redundant, the constant snide remarks and put-downs from senior coworkers, and the constant need to fawn on the bosses. Seen from the outside, she wore fancy clothes and carried a cute knock-off designer bag, but inside she was fragile to a pitiful degree. Any attempt to persuade her to ditch that wretched job was simply met with more resistance—like I said, it can drive you mad. Most people can’t even get one of these humble positions after graduation. They spend their days wandering aimlessly like lost souls in the bardo or killing time staring at their phones. It’s enough to bring tears to your eyes.

I put the mask back by the pillow and picked up my phone. Of the 1242 contacts I have on WeChat, the majority are people I’ve never laid eyes on; people who got in touch because of my writing, mainly. Many

of those had sent effusive friend requests, having got my contact from a friend of a friend; then after I accepted, they never messaged me again. Of course, there were also people I'd seen before, people I know, even relatives, friends, and old classmates, but there were also many whose identities remained a mystery since they hadn't put their real names. Anyway, could she be among them? What if I posted a message on my Moments in both Tibetan and Chinese: "Can the person who gave me a mask yesterday morning at the Springwater bus stop please DM me"? It was worth a try at least. So I posted the message, complete with a picture of the mask, but no one got in touch. My post did, however, garner plenty of piss-taking comments. "Got started a bit early on the booze yesterday, did you?" said one. There were a few along those lines.

If she was commuting to work, then she'd almost certainly be back at the Springwater stop at the same time tomorrow. So the next morning I got there nice and early to wait for her. The masked people were all looking at me with surprise and hostility. Clearly, it was because I wasn't wearing a mask. Although we were yet to have a single reported case in our little town on the grasslands, we'd been subjected to repeated and unpredictable lockdowns. The lockdowns, and the accompanying barrages of propaganda, had really put people on edge, making them wary as wounded animals. "What is it you're really afraid of? The pandemic, or something else?" These words were muttered to myself, and no one around me heard them. It was now an hour later than the time we met yesterday, but there was still no sign of her. She wasn't coming. Maybe she had got on the bus here by chance. If that was the case, it was possible she'd never come here again, and in that case, I'd never see her again, and if I never saw her again, I'd never find out who she was. Maybe she would come again tomorrow, and then the two of

us would form some special bond. Maybe we would meet again in fifty years. These notions brought *Love in the Time of Cholera* back into my thoughts, and vivid details of its fantastical love story filled my mind...

As I walked back home, I felt a pang of regret that I hadn't simply asked her where she was going, and I pondered whether or not I should come again tomorrow. I decided in the end that I would.

I went back to the Springwater stop at the exact same time for the next seven days in a row, waiting and hoping to catch sight of her. Though I became resigned to the fact that we wouldn't meet again, I kept going back, like clockwork. The only thing that changed was the steadily decreasing number of people looking at me with surprise and hostility.

After a month or so, my boss finally asked why I was never in the office in the mornings, and I finally had to admit to myself how foolish I was being. I was about to toss the plastic-wrapped baby-blue mask, but at the last minute, I changed my mind. Before I throw it away, I'll go to the Springwater stop one last time.

The next morning, when I was almost at Springwater, she came towards me, two twinkling eyes smiling above a baby-blue mask.

**NONFICTION**

## **A Fragment of Life Experience**

Kelsang Lhamo

(Translated from Tibetan by Kati Fitzgerald)

This country, one of the most powerful and prosperous on earth, a political force standing above all other nations, this so-called ‘Land of Opportunity,’ nevertheless has dishonest and crooked laws. I encountered one such law in a situation that made my heart shiver with cold and turned my breath jagged, causing me sleepless nights, tossing and turning with doubts. Unable to control my racing thoughts, I tried to fix this ailment in my heart by listening to Milarepa’s songs of realization, etc. Realizing that others may have had similar experiences, I decided to write this essay.

I moved to New York in 1999 and lived there for a long time. Then I was still young, so I woke up early, went to bed late, and worked with diligence. In 2005, I bought a one-bedroom apartment in Sunnyside. In America, buying a house is the sign that you have made it in life. Because of the nice environment, the convenience of the location, the quality of the apartment, and especially because my best girlfriends were all nearby, I felt at that time that this was really my home.

However, in 2012, I had to move to Boston for work. We stayed in our New York apartment occasionally when we traveled and when my husband needed medical treatments. When we first arrived in Boston, we met a few new Tibetan people, who gave us a warm and sincere welcome. Eventually, they asked us to lend them the apartment when

they needed to go to New York. “Kelsang la, please lend us your keys.” Slowly over time, I ended up lending out my keys to people I didn’t even know. Although the building rules stipulated that only two people could stay in the residence, I came to find out that there were sometimes up to fifteen people staying in the apartment. Not knowing how to say no to my friends, I decided that I would begin renting out the apartment as a way of being able to refuse them. For a few years, I rented out the apartment and was flush with cash. When the two-year lease expired, the renter moved out of state. I then entered into another two-year contract with a single tenant named Marianne. After a year and a half, Marianne told me, “I got a new boyfriend. He and I are planning to move in together in a new place.” Additionally, she requested that because she still had six months left on the lease, that I would allow her mother, who was suffering from breast cancer, to stay in the apartment. She gave a very persuasive soliloquy. Marianne and her mother owned a salon on 43rd Ave and 47th St. Because they were local people, I trusted them and agreed. However, later I came to discover that the woman who was staying in the apartment was in fact not Marianne’s mother but some other acquaintance of hers. I couldn’t have imagined that she would trick me like this. After six months, this other woman called me and said that she received government housing assistance and would be moving.

The plan was for me to personally collect the keys on March 5, 2023, but something came up and I was not able to go to New York. I told the tenant to leave the keys with the building super, Julianne, which she did. On the night of March 9th, I went to New York to show the apartment to a real estate agent, and when I took the keys and opened the door, I found it empty save for a few scattered items. The glass of one cabinet was broken, and the walls were scratched. The hall looked like



an ancient ruin. The bathroom and kitchen were filled with bad odors. The place was replete with cockroaches, and no corner was left clean.

In the early morning of the 10th, I went with a different real estate agent to show the apartment, but when I tried the door, I couldn't open it. My surrounding neighbors tried to help me, but to no avail. I thought it was strange that I could open the door last night but not this morning. All of a sudden, four or five young New York City cops appeared with the sound of heavy footsteps. With a loud voice, one asked me what I was doing there. I said, "I'm the landlord. I just opened the door yesterday, but today I'm unable to open the door. I want to put this house on the market, so I came to show the apartment to a real estate agent." As soon as the police officer arrived, the door popped open.

Unexpectedly, out of my apartment came a frightening man with a nasty face, more than 6 feet tall, with a shiny bald spot on the top of his head, some of the long hairs on the back of his head frizzy and loose on the nape of his neck. He looked to be around 40 or 50 years old, shaking his head and giving me a scowl, he said with a growl, "I live here. This woman is trying to break in." He wailed to the cops angrily and with agitation. I couldn't believe my eyes, and I became speechless. Not only did he have keys to the apartment, but he also had an envelope with the apartment's address on it. He repeated to the cops, "This is my apartment. I don't know this woman at all." The cops yelled at me, "Give us evidence of your ownership of this apartment." Luckily, I had the monthly mortgage statements on my phone, which I showed to them. The older cop grimaced and said, "This won't stand as proof of ownership. If you don't get out of here immediately, I'm going to throw you in jail." Even though I already knew that they would

not be any help in solving this issue, I still wanted to ask a question, so I asked, “Respected Police Officer, I have a question. If his being in possession of a set of keys and an envelope with this apartment’s address on it is adequate proof of his rights, then why are my set of keys and mortgage documents inadequate?” The older police officer was left completely speechless. There was one Chinese police officer, who went directly into the apartment with confidence and comforted the squatter, “You’re okay, right?” Turning to me, he said with arrogance, “You’re not allowed to cross this threshold.” Thinking that I was Chinese, he was pretending not to be Chinese, but anyone with eyes could see that he was Chinese. Anyway, I was amazed by the fact that not only could they evict but even throw the rightful owner of a property in jail. I was rendered speechless when I saw the terrifying laws of these New York police officers. A younger white officer off to the side said, “I’ll give you some legal advice. Because he’s obviously been living here for more than a month, he has already become a legal tenant. The best solution is for the landlord and tenant to go to court. Maybe you’ll be compensated for damages.” How strange! You can be charged with trespassing on your own property—this is the first time in my life I had ever heard or seen such a thing, so I was confused. I felt so sad. All sorts of thoughts appeared in my mind, and for a moment, I was as still as a painting.

Then I called the former tenant, and she said, “This is impossible!” She arrived with some people from her church. Finally, it turned out that that man was her ex-boyfriend, and when he had come recently to help her move, he must have made a copy of the keys. She acted like she couldn’t do anything about the situation. Although I called the cops again and spoke with them, there was nothing they could do. I had become helpless. Although saddened, I controlled my emotions and resolved to

take the matter to court. In this powerful country of America, it must be that there are honest and upright laws that can distinguish between the truth and lies. And even though those police officers were crooked, it is impossible that there is no other court of law in which to plead one's case. Having faith in an honest trial that distinguishes between truth and falsehoods under the rule of law, I thought I would certainly get my apartment back from the hands of this person, so I calmed down.

Then I hastily searched for an affordable lawyer who worked on landlord-tenant disputes. I was introduced to a lawyer by my real estate agent, who would take the case for \$3000. The lawyer was a woman named Silviya. On April 6, 2023, she began the procedures. First, a 90-day notice had to be sent. The lawyer told me confidently, "He'll definitely vacate by then." I initially felt relieved, but 90 days passed, and he still hadn't left. Now we needed to file a formal complaint in court. The lawyer's fees were \$450 per hour. When I asked her approximately how many hours would be needed, she said she wouldn't be able to estimate. In my opinion, this was too dangerous, like shooting an arrow in the dark. Thinking that no matter what, there was nothing to be done except to resolve this issue, I asked all around and searched on Google. Finally, a friend introduced me to another lawyer. Compared to my former lawyer, he was cheaper. He only charged \$300 per hour. He was a man named Nick, and he said that the previous lawyer was mistaken. He said that we didn't need to wait 90 days and that it was possible to send a 10-day notice. On August 10, 2023, we finally did so. That man had still not left the apartment. Just like that, four months passed.

Then began the real court proceedings. It took a few months for the court to schedule a hearing. We went to the courthouse at the appointed

time on September 8. Although there were many people crowded in the courthouse, it was hushed. We looked at the court schedule displayed by the door of the court, and there were approximately 60 people scheduled to appear that day. I was number 8. On the wall behind the judge's bench was a golden or brass display with the words, "In God we trust." Whatever God is up in the sky, I prayed, "Please bear witness to the truth." Listening to the troubles of the defendants that went before me, only then I realized that this kind of misfortune had not only befallen me. All the people filling this courthouse were also engaged in lawsuits between landlords and tenants. I finally understood the true difficulties of regular American people and therefore felt my own suffering decrease.

My lawyer Nick whispered, "If the squatter doesn't appear in court today, that would be great." But he appeared at the correct time. Because the guy requested additional time, the judge ruled that the case would commence after four months.

On January 16, 2024, without any remorse, he filed a request saying that he was having trouble finding an apartment. With respect and deep hope, I also filed a request that he would vacate the property as quickly as possible. On March 25, 2024, the court replied with a summons to appear again two months and 25 days later. I appeared at the appointed time. That man also appeared. He said that he needed additional time. By the way he carried on crying and gasping, you would think that I had stolen his apartment. These kinds of people who are experts in deceit and trickery infuriate me so much that I felt like I had a fire burning in my stomach but couldn't release the smoke through my mouth. The judge said, "Okay, we'll push back the eviction date three months." He continued moaning about his difficulties and then the judge said, "Then

you definitely need to move within six months.” He agreed. I couldn’t argue with the judge. From seeing how he promised, it seemed as if he really would move out. I submitted to the court that since he entered my home, because he was dirty and brought dogs and homeless people into the building, the building management committee had raised my monthly fees. He said in front of the court that he would take responsibility for those fees, but I never saw a cent. With a deep sigh, I resigned myself to waiting for him to vacate the property on September 25th.

In the meantime, he cost me so much money. One problem after another appeared—like water leaking from the bathroom. The building manager called me again and again, begging me to take responsibility for the apartment. It takes longer for the courts to come to a decision than the pace of a tortoise and my previous optimism slowly disappeared. Thinking that it would be necessary to find my own solution to this problem, one day I called the squatter and beseeched him, “I can give you some money to help with the apartment search, but please give me back my apartment. I am all alone and a mere librarian, so I don’t have a high salary. This apartment in New York is my only property.”

That man said casually, “Those other two women were con artists. I am a believer in Jesus. My grandmother advised me to be a good person. I will give you your apartment back. This weekend, come and we can resolve this.” On June 15, 2024, not able to contain my anticipation, I bought a plane ticket from Boston to New York. On Saturday, it rained all day. I waited by the door for a long time, but he never showed. I called him and asked him what happened. He said, “Today it’s raining, so I can’t move. Come by tomorrow.” Thinking that I would get my apartment back tomorrow, I slept well. The next morning, he called me

and said, “Lhamo, today won’t work. I can’t move.” He may as well have slapped me across the face. I felt so stupid for trusting this man who doesn’t accept the laws of karma or even have any decency. However, this guy is an evil, habitual conman. Forget about respecting me, this man would even break the law, so I realized that my attempts to get my house back were a waste of time and money.

For a single woman all alone in a foreign country, experiencing such physical, emotional and economic difficulties, it would be impossible not to feel badly. I tried to cultivate bodhicitta and perform tonglen<sup>1</sup> meditation as much as I could. When I asked around me, some people frightened me by saying that this would take another few years to be resolved. Others counseled, “No problem—you’ll recover your losses later.” Whatever the case, it was clear that until the karmic debt from my previous lives was paid off, I wouldn’t be able to get rid of him. So I didn’t want to talk about this with anyone.

I had an online friend who was living in India, with whom I usually shared my joys and tribulations. He pretended not to be annoyed even though his ears must have been burning. He gave me both gentle and tough advice telling me that it is necessary to have courage to face difficulties in order to live in the world. Sometimes he would sing meaningful Indian love songs to soothe my mind. From this I felt deeply that he was not just giving friendly soothing words, but that his words were truly from the heart. This friendship and companionship made me determined to continue to fight for justice. Also, my best childhood friend Dechen la, and her family always welcomed me to their home without annoyance and like I was a long-lost guest when I had to go to New York.

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<sup>1</sup> Meditation on taking on the sufferings of others and sharing one’s own merit and happiness

They always asked with care about my difficulties, sometimes scolding me with compassion and forcing me to take holidays with them to try to ease my mind. My childhood friend Dadron la also tried to soothe me and whenever Dechen la was not in New York, out of the goodness of her heart, Dadron la accompanied me in my difficulties. My old dharma friend in Boston, Drolkar la, always came to meet me no matter whether I was experiencing joys or tribulations. Likewise, my colleague Dekyi la also supported me out of the goodness of her heart. It's like the proverb, *You know the strength of a stallion when he falls in the mud, you know the value of a friend when you have difficulties*. Isn't that true? Whatever the case, in my life, my online friend and my girlfriends became essential for my happiness.

On September 25, 2024, after waiting six months as was ordered, the case was handed over to the New York City Marshals. The marshal sent a notification, and the date of eviction was set to October 8, 2024. I thought that no matter what, it would be okay because I would get my apartment back after eight months of waiting. I prepared to arrive in New York the following day. That afternoon, my lawyer called me and said, "Lhamo, unfortunately, the court requested the case be returned to them from the marshal. He was granted an additional one-month reprieve." When I told people from Boston about this development, they couldn't believe it and even people from New York said they had never heard of such a thing.

Once again, as was ordered, the case was sent back to the marshal's office and a deadline was set for November 18, 2024. For a second time, the same exact thing happened. This squatter was like a bum wandering around. As the proverb goes, *Beggars assess the character of a dog and*

*the good ones get smacked on the back with a stick.* It seemed as if this was how he spent his whole life.

I sent an email to my lawyer saying, “Because you are a lawyer, please stand up for the truth. The way you are working is a disgrace to your parents and a waste of your tuition.” I don’t know if he ever read it, but I felt better. Then the court pushed back the date 22 days. And this is how this went on for 23 months. Out of desperation, I sent a letter of complaint to the US president, the governor of New York state, and the mayor of New York City, but this had the same effect as throwing a stone in the ocean.

On January 6, 2025, we went back to court. I had gone through so much to get to this point. When it was time for my testimony, because it had been so difficult to get this opportunity, I deeply pleaded about the physical and mental difficulties I had experienced. Even though the guy pled guilty, he still requested, with shifty eyes, that the eviction date be moved to the end of the month. The judge didn’t grant his request this time. He immediately ordered that a date be set with the marshal. I was both joyous and nervous. Like the old proverb goes, *If a monkey has 18 places to jump, the fox will have 19.* Likewise, I was afraid of what tricks he might still have up his sleeve, and there remained a nagging worry in my heart.

If the Communist Party were to confiscate your land or home, it would be completely seized. With complete certainty, you would be severed from the property. There would be no legal recourse. If your property is invaded in the US, not only is your property trespassed, but all the expenses related to it are the responsibility of the homeowner. If



the eviction of the squatter is postponed, the innocent party will become homeless, discarded on the side of the road. Thinking about this, I became extremely depressed that in this great country there can exist such terrible laws.

When I think about New York police officers, I become angry. Every time I see a New York police officer, I feel a pain, as if I've been struck in the head with a hammer. I think that if they performed their duty honestly many people would avoid this kind of suffering.

So just like it is the nature of planted crops to grow to harvest and for resting wine to ferment, on January 6, 2025, a snowy winter's day, as was ordered by the Queens New York Supreme Court, the marshal gave an order allowing the immediate eviction of that criminal. However, there are so many people with similar issues like me in New York, so it took 15 days for them to set the deadline. Finally, I received a letter stating that he would be evicted on the 21st. Of course I was happy, but I was also wondering what new tricks that man might come up with, whether he would really leave that day, and the like. I spent the whole day with uncontrollable thoughts racing through my mind, making my chest ache. Like the proverb *Not only do they kill the wild yak, but they also make a flag out of his tail* goes, when that man created that much annoyance and pain for me, how could I trust him today? Now I had become unable to be naïve, like someone who has never had their foot pierced by a thorn. Controlling my own mind, I held onto the hope that the truth would prevail and tried to be broadminded.

The day of the eviction, it looked like that squatter's fortunes would turn and he would come to the end of his cunning, deceptive, and

evil tricks. I didn't hear any bad news from him, but I also didn't get the result that I desired. As it is said that people's wishes sometimes fall from the sky, nature took pity on him and the temperature in New York and the surrounding areas became extremely cold, falling to -8 and all legal actions within the city were withdrawn, so he gained a few days.

It snowed a ton, and the temperature continued to be extremely cold, so I'm positive that he was holding onto hope that he would be allowed to continue staying in the apartment. Because I had been smacked in the face so many times in the past, I waited until the last minute and didn't buy a ticket until the morning of the 24th to avoid wasting more money. Up to the last day, I hadn't heard any bad news. Then when it was time for me to go retrieve the keys, I couldn't find a ticket. Although there were some tickets available, they were twice as expensive as usual. Although I wasn't used to driving my own car on the highway for long distances, like the proverb says, *the auntie has to be able to cross the bridge she built*. I had no choice but to drive myself. Without wasting my breath or energy, I went to New York, picturing myself achieving my goal, and fortunately arrived without any issues.

From the vast sky, cloaked in a blanket of white, fell snowflakes like wool, fluttering bit by bit into the earth's embrace. The way that each snowflake dissolved before my eyes, I felt deeply that these were like flowers of consolation tossed by my late, beloved parents. When I saw the way the whole ground was covered as if by a single completely white khata, I felt so strongly as if I had arrived back one more time in my own country of Tibet. Within the freezing cold, I found warmth and happiness. I felt that it was a good sign. As commanded under the law, not only had I not received any rent for the past two years, I wasn't even

allowed to go near the front door of my own home, so I was thrilled to finally be in control of my own property. Whatever the case, I think that what is said by the great masters of the past must be true—if you own a horse, your suffering will be the size of a horse. If you own a sheep, your suffering will be the size of a sheep. The suffering that I experienced is the suffering of having something. I gained some understanding that wealth is the deceptive source of our downfall. When I thought about what benefits can be accumulated within samsara and the disadvantages that arise from within samsara, I thought again and again about fleeing to perform the holy dharma.

It took three and a half hours to get there. Unlike Boston, in New York there were only traces left of the snow. I arrived at Diversity Plaza, which we Tibetans call Ü-Rang Plaza, in Jackson Heights, at exactly noon. Ü-Rang Plaza is a gathering place in New York of many different ethnic groups—Tibetans, Bhutanese, Himalayans, Indians, Nepalis, Mexicans, and Middle Easterners. It's said that there are speakers of nearly 240 languages there. At first, when Tibetans were initially applying for their residency permits, this small, local market plaza was a place to discuss our mutual joys and pains, so it received the name Comfort Plaza.

Gradually, we were all released from the suffering of residency permits. Most people either became single or grew up into young adults and all fostered hopes to find a compatible partner to marry, so the plaza became a meeting place when we had free time, and it then received the name Hope Plaza. After a few years, most were freed from worries about basic necessities, like housing, food, clothing, etc. Only then did attention turn to Tibetan society. Some people supported the Middle Way or Ü policies and others the Rangzen policies, and so on. People often

gathered there to discuss political issues, so the place received the name Ü-Rang Plaza. After a while, everyone's knowledge of international affairs broadened, so the plaza became a place for discussing various affairs, and it received the name Busy-Body Plaza.

In the past, the smell of Indian spices wafted over the plaza, but on that day, it was filled with the smell of Tibetan dumplings, momos, and other Tibetan foods. There are around 20 Tibetan restaurants there. As usual, I went to Lhasa Restaurant near Busy-Body Plaza to get a bunch of Tibetan food. The taste so reminded me of my mother's handmade, nutritious food. My apartment was really close—only three subway stops away from Busy-Body Plaza. As I was about to arrive at my apartment, the marshal called and said he was running ahead of schedule. Half running and half walking, trotting along, I arrived at my apartment door before the marshal. When I entered the lobby of the building, I met the grim-faced squatter as he was leaving. Although he was vibrating with hatred, this time I had the weight of the law behind me. Like the saying goes, *if you know the depth of the water, you can catch a fish*, without any hesitation, I asked with confidence, “Hey you! Where are the keys?” With a frown, he tried to blow me off, saying, “According to my lawyer, I still have a few days to stay.” As it's often said, *if you try to talk reason to a scoundrel, he won't listen or understand. He will reply with nonsense and then you'll both lose the thread*, he continued to arrogantly try to postpone his eviction.

But when I looked carefully at his face, I could see that this time his countenance was different, and his voice was weaker. Right away, an energetic young man adorned in a military outfit and two powerful Black plainclothes officers arrived with a dignified air. The young male

marshal called out my name and asked, “Are you case number xxx?” “Yes sir. The squatter is this man here,” I said, pointing at the man. The marshal barely gave him a glance and paid him no attention. That thief, who used to seem as menacing as a huge yak, changed into an extremely weak little man. It appeared to me as if he lost a few inches before my eyes.

From that time forward, he had no right to cross the threshold of my home. Thinking I finally had the pleasure of getting payback, I was overjoyed. The marshal, with a glance at the guy, opened the door and changed the locks. Then he examined and inventoried the squatter’s belongings. Although there was nothing valuable, there were nearly 100 black garbage bags of junk. That jerk had turned my apartment into a dump. The young marshal said with amazement, “We’ve had to move out a lot of jerks, but I’ve never seen someone as filthy as this.” The two other officers also shook their heads in surprise, saying, “Wow, I guess people like this really do exist!”

Then the building super showed up and said, “You think this is bad? That guy filled up the entire dumpster with his garbage. Being able to get this guy to move out, I feel as happy as if I were the landlord awarded this eviction.” He continued, “He would often bring a bunch of people over and create huge problems.” After the marshal completed his detailed overview, he announced that the guy would have one hour sometime within the next 30 days to deal with his belongings. On the door, the marshal posted a large notice stating that on this day and month, the Supreme Court had ordered that man’s eviction.

Again, I had to wait 30 days, but this time I felt much more

relaxed than I had previously. I left with a copy of the notice, so if the squatter tried to take possession of the apartment again, I could show the police this notice and it would be clear that no one would have the right to steal my property again. I turned to the marshal and, wanting to give them a gesture of thanks, said, “You guys must be tired. Please let me get you a cup of coffee.” Finally, I saw them break into a smile for the first time saying, “We have three evictions to conduct today.” The way they said that they have between three and five of such evictions every day, I imagined that in their eyes this situation was totally normal.

On the next day, that thief arrived and grabbed a few valuable things and said to throw away the rest. From that day forward, he faded away like a rainbow. It took a long time to clean up and repaint the apartment. I received help from a few talented friends who volunteered to help me out of the pure goodness of their hearts—some painted, some repaired the kitchen, some repaired the bathroom, and so on. Although I could never properly express my gratitude to them, I can never forget their kindness, held like a bouquet of flowers in my heart.

This firsthand account of my experience is only valuable in that it might help others going through something similar. The main takeaway from this essay is this: *There will be laughter in times of happiness, tears in times of sorrow, glares in times of anger, and poetic words in times of love.* I propose that, in this world of happiness and sorrow, from the very beginning to the end, the only dangling bridge that tethers us human beings to life is facing suffering.

## **Raw Remembrances: Memories of My Father on the Banks of My Mind**

Tamdin Tso

(Translated from Tibetan by Kati Fitzgerald)

You. In the crevices of my memories, always the unvanishing ruler of the brown grasslands and black tents. From the banks of my memories, again and again arises the brown *gyabri*<sup>1</sup> that has never moved; in the depths of my memories, magnificent like Mount Meru, abiding with a dignity of mind. You. The only flower abiding with ease in the middle of the vast grasslands. You. The nomad's vestige. You. A nomadic family's life-giving tree. You. A household's hereditary pillar. I desire to be always unseparated from you, forever unsplit from you.

But this impermanent life is like dew on the grass – who knows when this knot of life, over which we are powerless, might come unwound?

One snowy winter's day, I arrived at the threshold of my school for the first time. My father had put me on the back of our family's old horse named Tselo and brought me to school that one time. That was the first time he brought me to school and also the last.

My late father, he really loved to steep Chinese tea in hot water. When he or we siblings would go to the market, we would buy many different kinds of tea and bring them home. Tea was his favorite pastime,

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<sup>1</sup> Principal mountain of a settlement

and I think that he was very talented at distinguishing the flavors and qualities of tea. He usually wanted to stay cozily at home, adding fuel to keep the hearth continuously burning. His home was always warm – a *mani* wheel in his right hand and mani beads in his left hand, there he would be reciting mantras. In general, my father was the kind of person who enjoyed learning new information and about changes to modern life, maybe because he often enjoyed watching the news. Additionally, his favorite of all was the famous Tibetan musician, Dubhe, also known as the Blue Cuckoo of the Snowlands. He collected so many of Dubhe's cassettes.

In general, although he was a trustworthy man who did not talk or gossip much, just like the proverb says, *there are no trees without knots in the entire forest, there is no man in the world without faults* - he had a short temper. Just like it is said that *a short temper will destroy a man and a short<sup>2</sup> mountain pass will destroy a horse*, his short temper, whether going or staying, caused him to perform whatever tasks and at whatever distance without laziness and in a rush. Was it due to his busy and hasty personality? Whatever the case, his nature was that he was always busily running around.

In general, no matter what stage of developmental change people are in, the reality is that everyone is searching for a method for improving one's livelihood and innovating one's necessities. Assessing the customs of the pastoral areas, my father was among the best at making handmade items such as prayer flag poles, stakes, tie ropes, various wooden pegs, saddles, bits, halters, leads, slingshots, ceremonial arrows, chests, and

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<sup>2</sup> aka steep



many other kinds of necessary items. Therefore, often, when it was time for the *latse* (mountaintop cairn) offerings, I witnessed many people requesting him to make ceremonial arrows and, in the summer, requesting him to make many of the items needed for the black tents. I also witnessed him making such items many times myself.

My father loved to joke around with the neighborhood kids. Sometimes his jokes were too rough for some children, and they would be unable to take it and would cry. I also cried a few times. My aunt, my mother's sister, was a little talkative, and once my father told me that I wasn't their child but actually the daughter of my aunt and that I was given to my father and mother when I was little. That time I cried. I'm not sure of the reason why. Maybe because out of all my aunts, she talked the most.

My father had one special skill – he was able to heal the illnesses and broken bones of animals such as horses, yaks and sheep. Although he was not a professional doctor, he became proficient from life experience and training. He was resourceful in many different skillful methods of inducing healing. Therefore, you wouldn't be wrong to call him a doctor. Likewise, he had no insignificant familiarity with human joints, etc. When there was an increase in the number of horse racing competition programs, father would have no free time, and it became obvious that he had become renowned. Many people came searching for him, and some even brought their horses right to our door. Others drove cars and came to pick him up. Sometimes he would need to leave for a few days at a time in order to provide continuous treatment. What's notable is that he didn't take payment for his medical treatments. When I was small, he provided free treatment, but later he made a condition that if he treated

an animal from the household, they would need to offer an appropriate number of animals as *tsethar* (vow never to kill the animal). He and many others found this arrangement to be very positive. I believe that he viewed this as the greatest accomplishment of his life.

Once in the household of my neighbor Uncle Tamdrin Kyab, their *yaru*<sup>3</sup> was struck with an abscess of the brain that causes irregular behavior, so they asked my father to look at the animal. At that time, the *yaru* was in the corral making circles around one point. My father had a few people hold down the *yaru*, and then he used a needle to extract some blood from the unafflicted eye socket and then inserted it into the other eye. After a few days, the *yaru*'s illness had completely resolved. This is really an amazing and special technique, and I think that this kind of important knowledge is both necessary and practical.

Because I was given the opportunity to embark on my primary and secondary education with the support of my siblings and the wisdom of my parents, my memories of time spent in the companionship of my father and mother are rare. During the summer and winter holidays, I would mostly be accompanied by my mother, so although we lived together in one home, I was less familiar with my father than with my mother. Although my memory doesn't appear with certainty, my parents told me that when I was small, I slept with my mother, and sometimes when my father would say, "Come here and sleep with me," I would not only not accept it but also run away, and when he forced me, I would cry in his arms. That's what they say, but what remains on the banks of my memory is that my father used to tell me *Sripa Gaypo* stories about a spoiled man and a cunning wife, etc.

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3 *Yaru* refers both bull and cow yaks in their second year of life.

When I was small, like other kids, my greatest dream was to have a bike. Not only that, but even though I think I never asked my parents for any little thing while growing up, for the sake of this dream, I asked my father a few times. “Please buy me a bike like the other kids have,” I requested. I sometimes asked with sincerity and sometimes jokingly, trying all sorts of ways to express my desire, but no matter what I did, that dream never came to reality. And now it has become impossible to be realized.

In general, many of the allocations doled out by fate are inevitable in nature - we are powerless like a prayer flag blown about by the wind. Today, while forcing myself to hold back hideous lamentations and my tears of suffering wash over me like waves, I collect all these blurry memories that include you. Although this is not really for you, but rather for my own purposes, you are still the ruler of my memories. My affectionate memories are filled with you. You were the forebearer of this conditioned body of mine and the benefactor of enormously powerful love. Therefore, don’t be sad. I stash away the innumerable tokens of love you have given to me, and, in this note, promise from the very depths of my heart never to throw away the gift of opportunity you have given me.

In this saṃsāric world,  
by the power of karma and merit,  
we gathered for this one lifetime,  
which was this girl’s fortunate karma.

## **Imagining Tibet: Representations in the National Museum of Scotland**

Tenzin Ju

These days, it feels like Tibet is vanishing. It has disappeared from the list of countries in geography textbooks, global maps, visa forms, and the roll calls of international sports like the Olympics and the World Cup. In the mainstream press, stories from or about Tibet are increasingly rare. The idea of Tibet is melting from public consciousness much like the glaciers of the Himalayas. Once featured in numerous Hollywood films and international best-selling books, Tibet now lingers mostly in museum exhibits. Even this fragile space is under threat, as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) transnational influence works to overwrite "Tibet" with "Xizang," an imposed name of central Tibet. For many of us in the diaspora, time in the West deepens our longing for home. As a result, stepping into a new city often means scanning for a museum, searching for a Tibetan corner, however small. It has become a ritual of mine, a way to feel home from afar.

When I first arrived in Edinburgh in August 2021 with a group of Tibetan friends, we stayed at Brae House on 31 Abbeyhill. It is just a few minutes' walk to the west from the Palace of Holyroodhouse and the Scottish Parliament. From our flat, we had a clear view of Arthur's Seat, and seeing it reminded me of a small hill called Mugri (མུག་རི།) near our village in Tibet. Mugri was like a molehill compared to the other mountains in the region. Next morning, climbing Arthur's Seat was the obvious thing to do. It was a short but refreshing hike. From

Arthur's Seat we walked to Himalaya Café at 20 Clerk Street, taking the route along Holyrood Park Road beside the Commonwealth Pool. I later learned that Himalaya Café is much more than just a place to grab a meal. As the only Tibetan café in Edinburgh, it doubles as an information centre, a community hub, a cultural embassy, and even an emotional support station for homesick Tibetan and Himalayan students like me. It is the kind of place where you can walk in for a cup of tea and walk out with housing advice, a job lead, and three new friends. I've never met a Tibetan who's visited Edinburgh and hasn't been there.

After a delicious free brunch, I asked Reka, the café's owner, how many Tibetans lived in Edinburgh. "Around thirty," she said—a number that didn't surprise me, considering there are only about a thousand Tibetans across the UK. As we chatted, I mentioned how the café's layout, colours, the shrine, thangkas (ཐང་ཀ་ Tibetan scroll paintings) of Buddhist deities and overall feel reminded me of something between a Tibetan home and a temple. That seemed to resonate with her, because she quickly suggested we visit the Tibetan section at the National Museum of Scotland.

We strolled down Newington Road from Clerk Street, casually scanning the storefronts, Chinese restaurants, Halal grocery shops, and rows of charity shops. Unlike chain-store colonised British high streets, each had its own clutter and charm. When we reached the Law School (also known as Old College), we wandered inside, took a few photos on the lawn in the centre courtyard, and then exited through the south-facing door at the back. A quick right turn, then a left, and we were standing in front of the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) on Chamber Street—curious and a little excited to see how Tibet had found its place within

those walls.

## **The Tibetan Section**

The museum's original entrance, once elevated and accessible only via a grand staircase, has been reconstructed to enhance accessibility. Now, side entrances at street level lead visitors into the vaulted Entrance Hall, which was formerly a basement storage area. Flanking the museum's entrance are statues of two figures: William Henry Playfair and William Chambers. Playfair was a distinguished 19th-century Scottish architect renowned for his neoclassical designs (Edinburgh World Heritage, 2025), while William Chambers was a prominent publisher and philanthropist (Evendo, 2025). These statues serve as symbolic guardians of the museum, embodying the importance of the rich history and cultural legacy that the institution preserves. The Entrance Hall, once a utilitarian space, now features vaulted ceilings and stone archways that create a unique atmosphere for visitors. Ascending from the Entrance Hall one reaches the Grand Gallery, a space characterised by its soaring glass roof and delicate cast-iron balconies. Captain Francis Fowke, who designed this space in 1866, was inspired by London's Crystal Palace (ArchDaily, 2011).

On the southern wall of the Grand Gallery, three doors lead into the main exhibition halls of the museum. If you walk to the left the Tibetan collection, part of the 'Living Lands' theme, is in the second hall. The first thing that caught my eye was a Tibetan prayer wheel (See figure 1).



Figure 1: Tibetan prayer wheels at the National Museum of Scotland

Prayer wheels are woven into the very fabric of Tibetan life. They come in brass and copper, in wood and stone, in forms as varied as the people who turn them. You'll find them in monasteries, built into the walls of public halls, in family kitchens, and carried by elders in various sizes and styles (see figure 2). The reason people turn these wheels is because they contain tightly wound scrolls of printed mantras, prayers, sacred scriptures. Spinning the wheel is thought to be just as powerful as chanting the words aloud. They all spin the same way, clockwise, except those of the ancient Bon (བོན) tradition,<sup>1</sup> which move in the other direction. To turn a wheel counterclockwise, in the Buddhist context, is to accumulate negative karmic imprints, which is the ticket that leads to rebirth in one of the three lower realms.<sup>2</sup> I often caught sight of curious tourists turning the prayer wheel the wrong way. Circling back to set

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1 Bon is said to be one of five major Tibetan Buddhist sects. Their wheels move counterclockwise, which they believe is the correct direction as the mantras and sacred texts contained within them are folded rightward. This practice aligns with the tradition of reading texts from left to right. It is also said they believe they will meet the Buddha halfway, as he moves clockwise.

2 The three lower realms are the realm of Hell, the realm of Hungry Ghosts, and the realm of Animals.

it right once they had moved on became a habit of mine. There was something instinctual in it, like brushing dust off a sacred book. Back home, only mischievous children dared spin them anticlockwise in defiance of a grandparent's watchful eye. Such rebellion was met with discipline, a stinging reminder across the backside, so I was never a rebel. What made this prayer wheel special was that it was not just a display. Unlike many other museum pieces, it was alive, moving, turning and chanting the mantras.



Figure 2: Tibetan prayer wheels of different types, designed by Loplao

A dead taxidermied dri (འབྲི།) (See Figure 3) stands two meters away from the prayer wheels along the southern wall. Its presence demands attention. Though labelled simply as “Yak” (གཡལ་ག), her slenderer frame, finer features, and moderate size distinguish her as a female, which is called a dri in Tibetan. Yak refers only to the male. Such inaccuracies are common in general public spaces, but high-profile national museums like this could easily avoid them if they employed Tibetan museologists. For a Tibetan, the difference between yak and dri is like the difference between a bull and a cow. The dri is equally essential to nomadic life



on the plateau, though less acknowledged in Western portrayals as the word yak invades its place. This dri's underside shows signs of wear, her belly hair thinning and frayed, a clue to the season of her death. In early spring, yaks and dris begin to shed their thick winter coats in preparation for the warmer months ahead. This transitional fur loss is mirrored here, suggesting the animal may have died or been culled in that season.



Figure 3: A taxidermized dri (འབྲི།) at the National Museum of Scotland

Behind this dri stretches a full-wall mural: sweeping Tibetan highlands dusted with snow, brown slopes rolling toward the sky, barren and vast. Interspersed are photographs of nomads and their animals like dris and yaks burdened with household loads, trudging over uneven ground. The imagery conveys not only landscape but livelihood. A museum caption reads:

Tibetan nomads herd Yak. These large animals are remarkably agile on the high mountain passes, helping nomadic people make

difficult journeys across rocky landscapes. Yaks are very strong and are used to move camps to new sites. Their hair, which is warm and waterproof, is often used to make tents.

While the yaks and dris of the Tibetan plateau are agile, strong, and biologically adapted to harsh high-altitude environments, they are herbivores typically found grazing in expansive grasslands. Presenting this taxidermied dri on a setting of polished blue slate stones contrasts with the traditional portrayal of these animals in Tibetan art and photography, where they are usually depicted in natural, grassy landscapes (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Exhibit of Tibetan Yaks at Lhasa Yak Museum in Tibet

After the initial nostalgia of encountering the dri and the prayer wheels wore off, spending more than ten minutes in the Tibetan section revealed a wealth of smaller, more intimate collections. These included items related to pilgrimage, clothing and crafts, spiritual utensils, and belongings of the Tibetan aristocracy from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Among these, one object deeply intertwined with my childhood stood

out: a man's *gau* (གཱུ) (see Figure 5), an amulet case.



Figure 5: A man's *gau* (གཱུ), an amulet case, at the National Museum of Scotland

In my village every child wore a gau. Either around the neck or slung over the shoulder for spiritual protection. Inside each gau were sacred contents: images of deities, written mantras and prayers, pieces of cloth blessed by revered lamas, and other holy relics. I remember my own gau, filled by my parents with great care. Among the many sacred items, it held a small image of the Dalai Lama, hidden behind a picture of another lama whose image wasn't censored in Tibet. The cord that held the gau was itself blessed, and as children visited monasteries or received blessings from different lamas, they were given protection knots, *sung du* (སྒྲུང་ཐུག་པུ་ཏུ་). These were tied onto the cord, accumulating over time. In some cases, the number of *sung du* would become so great that they completely obscured the gau itself.

While the gau and the *sung du* served as spiritual armour, they

also became home to less welcome residents, lice and their freshly laid eggs. Worn for years without ever being washed, the gau and its attachments offered the perfect refuge for these tiny intruders. Hygiene standards were different back then, especially in rural Tibet. Bathing and hair-washing were rare, particularly for children. I still recall how the backs of my hands resembled what we called “crow’s hands,” darkened with layers of dust from wiping my nose while playing in the dusty village playgrounds.

To the left of the smaller collections, a large map of Tibet was printed on the wall (Figure 6). I was pleased to see the Museum had titled the map ‘Tibet’, in defiance of China’s directives. While the map accurately depicted the overall size of Tibet, its internal regional divisions were misrepresented. Specifically, it named only two of Tibet’s three traditional provinces.



Figure 6: Map of Tibet at the National Museum of Scotland, where Kham is merged into Amdo and U-Tsang.

Tibetans divide their country into three main regions: U-Tsang,

Kham, and Amdo, which are collectively known as the *cholka-sum* (ཆོལ་སྐུ་སྟུང་།), meaning “three regions.” However, this map merged Kham into the neighbouring regions of U-Tsang (referred to as the Tibet Autonomous Region) and Amdo (as Qinghai Province), thereby erasing Kham as a distinct region. This was a significant distortion of Tibet’s traditional geography (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Map of Tibet depicting its three traditional regions, produced by Free Tibet

The absence of Tibet as a country on global maps, the misrepresentation of its internal geography, and the Sinicization of Tibetan place names have impacted how people perceive and understand the Tibetan landscape. For instance, when trying to locate a Tibetan place on Google Maps, using its traditional Tibetan name is often pointless. Most of the time, one must resort to the Chinese version. A clear example is the Yellow River. Even though it originates in Tibet, searching for its Tibetan name *Rma Chu* (རྩ་ཆུ།) often provides no results. Only the English name “Yellow River” or the Chinese name *Huáng Hé* (黄河) will bring it up. This erroneously hints, to people who do not

know Tibet, that Tibetan places are Chinese. Particularly, the erasure of Tibetan terms from popular maps and digital spaces echoes Philipson's (2018) concept of *linguistic imperialism*, wherein a dominant language actively hinders the survival and growth of minority languages. The replacement of "Tibet" with "Xizang" by Western museums such as the Musée Guimet and the Musée du quai Branly, under the influence of CCP directive (Lawson-Tancred, 2025), shows that Chinese linguistic imperialism extends well beyond digital maps.

## **The History**

My past four years of lectures, tutorials, and heated debates about decolonization and imperialism at the University of Edinburgh have shaped the way I think about museums. I can no longer avoid questioning how the museum objects were collected and the historical contexts behind their acquisition. When I searched for the history of the Tibetan collection at the NMS, I found the literature to be scarce. Inbal Livne appears to be the only scholar who has worked on this collection, having written her PhD thesis on the subject. From Livne's work, it becomes clear that the Tibetan collection at NMS was largely formed through the efforts of amateur collectors operating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She identifies three primary categories of these individuals: missionaries, military personnel, and colonial collectors (Livne, 2010). Each group's motivations and the circumstances surrounding their acquisition of Tibetan objects were shaped by the historical context of the time.

Missionary collectors such as Annie Royle Taylor, J.W. Innes Wright, and H.F. Ridley were primarily motivated by evangelical aims.

Their collecting activities predated the 1904 Younghusband Expedition. Many of the objects they gathered were brought back to Scotland to create educational displays intended to generate support for future missionary efforts. At the same time, these collectors sought to better understand Tibetan culture and Buddhism. Annie Taylor's collection, for example, includes everyday items. Museum records note that some of these belonged to her Tibetan companions, Puntso and Sigu (Livne, 2013). Innes Wright, while working as a missionary, also sold parts of his collection to institutions such as the National Museum of Scotland and the Liverpool Museum, suggesting financial motives alongside his religious pursuits (Livne, 2013).

Military collectors entered the scene more forcefully during the British military incursions into Tibet with the 1904 Younghusband Expedition. Scottish officers such as Colonel Frederick "Eric" Marshman Bailey, Major W.J. Ottley and Captain J.F.C. Dalmahoy acquired Tibetan objects under circumstances often tied directly to acts of war. In some cases, these objects were looted from monasteries or other sacred spaces during violent conflict. For example, Ottley's collection was regarded as a "trophy" of war, and as Livne notes, his donation to the museum appears to be as much about immortalising his personal legacy as it was about cultural preservation (Livne, 2013). The Younghusband Expedition was the first Western military invasion of Tibet, and it looted a lot of Tibetan Buddhist art, bringing its beauty to the attention of the West.

Livne terms the third category as "colonial collectors." This includes figures who were neither missionaries nor military personnel, but who were nonetheless deeply entangled in the networks of empire. This group includes individuals like Lilian Le Mesurier, Lord and Lady

Carmichael, and Agnes Symington Christison (Livne, 2010). Their reasons for collecting varied, ranging from personal curiosity to familial ties or academic interests. These reasons all demonstrate the deep appeal of Tibetan art beyond its cultural boundaries. According to Livne, Le Mesurier's collection offers insight into a more personal engagement with Tibetan material culture, while Christison's collections from Darjeeling and beyond reflect the layered and hybrid nature of colonial life in Tibet and Himalayan regions (Livne, 2010; 2013).

While the Tibetan collections at NMS reflect imperial motives and colonial imbalances, their current preservation is thoughtful and respectful despite some minor inaccuracies. The museum also serves as an important platform for showcasing Tibetan cultural heritage. Had these objects not been taken by their "collectors," many might have been lost or destroyed during the Cultural Revolution in Tibet (1966–1976), when an estimated 90% of monasteries were demolished (Cimmino, 2018). As Livne (2010; 2013) notes, provenance plays a crucial role in revealing the "biographies of objects and people" (p. 291), and through these objects one can trace personal ambition, institutional priorities, and imperial ideologies. Many of these items are also valuable historical materials from an independent Tibet.

On a personal level, even if tourists spin the prayer wheel the wrong way, the museum mistakes a dri for a yak, and the museum map overlooks the region I come from, this Tibetan display still holds deep meaning for me. It's where I go when I miss home, and the first place I take visiting friends—just like you'd invite someone into your own home. Its ambiance and the quiet presence of familiar objects often transport me back to the world I grew up in. Nevertheless, as a



Tibetologist, I am aware of the precarious position Tibet and Tibetans occupy on international platforms, in museums, and within academic institutions shaped by complex political, cultural, and demographic dynamics. As Kelsang (2025) observes, despite the prominent display of Tibetan collections in Western museums, the presence of Tibetans as curators, interpreters, and collaborators remains scarce. This absence allows Tibetan collections to be framed through the perspectives of Chinese and Western curators, often at the expense of Tibetan voices and agency.

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## **POETRY**

## **Epicenter**

Tashi Bhutia

From the hills of God  
to the pit of misery

flashing,  
changing everything

Hope crumbling, thoughts lamenting

fighting to hold ground  
in this desert of apathy. Clinging

to strains of life

Every passing moment reminding  
what could be.

In his prime, the quake struck—  
a crater, hard to cover up,

from the hills  
of God  
to the pit of misery

\*This poem was during after the poet's experience in prison and the  
COVID lockdowns.

## Pure Romantics (Hinterland)

Dorji Dhatsenpa

*“i’ve driven all over the south shore, but i refuse to go into longueuil”*

because i want racailles who pop percs and rap to Hamza while we’re cruising down Chemin de Chambly. i want white trash dyslexic broke boys who live in crummy fucking apartments who teach me how to roll up a fatass joint. i want Eastern European incels who teach me how to moderate Discord servers and clue me in on 4chan lingo (google search, what is a negative canthal tilt? what is sounding? what is mpreg?) i want to run from my past. i want schools that get bomb threats every year, i want to know plugs and get my eleven-year-old brother shitfaced on tequila. i want that summer camp where the management stole kids from us. i want that greek waitress at La Belle Province to interrupt me speaking to my brother and fill me in on the amount of scumbag good for nothing bad men she has in her life again. i want that pedophile teacher at my old high school to rot in prison, i want to dance on his mother’s grave with my friends again. i want to tote drugs and sell guns and get my dick sucked and sing “O Canada” as i flee the stranglehold of death. because because because because because because because i don’t want to be pure. i don’t want to be classy. i don’t want to dress down and preach humility. i don’t want to blow daddy’s money on vodka in Jeanne-Mance. i want Sean Baker to film me begging for dick at Terminus Longueuil like a detty detty little boy. i was never destined to be like the Thomsons and the Rothschildren of the world. i’m a loser and an empath and a good time. i’m a Longueuil boy, born and bred.

## Two Poems

Sonam Chhomo

### Plants

Caring for plants is like caring for  
old parents: tethered yet branched. My name,  
like people's names, must be cut like a stem  
They know the common  
ones like spider, jade, tulsi, lily. The rest described by colors,  
and features: elongated,  
edged, smooth, polished, rough, spiky. No one messes  
with another plant's origin. Even their expiries are fixed:  
a certain time, a certain month, a certain season. Such  
wisdom brightens their moods: burial grounds, priest,

loose clothes, no strings. Memory syncs with the  
chronology of plants we touch: first those  
yellow-colored flowers blanketing the neighbor's wooden  
house, refusing to leave the rot years after the owners left.  
s's kitchen garden ransacked by monkeys,  
a's attempt at coloring my balcony with flower pots, now

only pots and soil remain. Ama's climbing spree on plum  
trees like a child thief, visits to amchi's house with bananas  
in exchange for medicines he scoured from the earth, plants he  
ground and stored. feeble attempts at gardening, twice in

cities with excessive heat, and staring bodies as if plants gossiped on our authenticity. y's garden colors her life like novels do for my mother: a neverland of sorts. n's dream of studying plants in the forests of Lahaul, but she chose to stay indoors, painting plants on canvases. Her kids carry her dreams now.

Faint memories of sunflowers. My excursion to the riverside with achi and acho, chewing on unknown but edible stem of a mentok, collecting chharma, and discussing the khangs that are visible to the naked eye. I become a tourist here as no leans on my ear and whispers: "Stay alert, an angry cow might chase you." My knowledge did not equal his experience. My intimacy with plants, with junipers here, are as distanced as my hold on sTod Bhoti. Holding a photograph of ama in cholu, walking on a road in Gemur while caring for two jades in my room: leftover green tea leaves, drips of water pouring carefully. Keep it alive. As long as it withstands the heat. As long as it's green.

## Mixtape

There's a corner in my room dedicated to the gods, books, and guests. Ama tells us to pray to whichever god we believe in the most; we choose depending on location, time and deed. Quiet at the other end of the house, Aba sits in a yogic pose, breathing in and breathing out, replicating the buddha pose he says he just knows. The odor of the agarbattis as Ama prays signal the kitchen rituals. The doorbell rings twice. One for the maid, the other for the garbage collector. All for service or nothing survives. Drops of phenol mixed with water: swept clean. We forget the prayers that were incensed a minute ago. Out comes the aroma of oil, chopped garlic, cumin and turmeric: the usual ingredients for today. The aromas sit, persist and move around like the maid, who swiftly catches a breath of fresh air before leaving for the house next door. I can already smell the spice in the air as she opens the door. The corners are merged in aromas, forming a hybrid, unable to choose either side of the house. The next day and the coming days, the same ritual follows.



## **PERFORMANCE**

# **The Wilderness Wrangler**

Rinchen

(Translated into English by Tsemdo)

This screenplay is adapted from Sonam Tsering's novella *The Little Horse Herder*

**Abstract:** Lobsang, an orphaned seventh-grader raised by his older sister Yangbe, disheartened by bullying and disillusioned with school dreams of returning to a life of herding after middle school. When a rescued vulture he had cared for is prematurely released by an animal rescue center, he learns that Yangbe is getting married. Lobsang runs away into the wilderness with his beloved mare and her foal. He finds temporary shelter with Mongolian herders and learns essential survival skills from a solitary nomad named Kunsang. But soon, Lobsang is left to face blizzards, wolves, and starvation on his own. Surviving only by sharing his mare's milk with the foal, he endures the brutal conditions of the highlands. A hermit eventually helps him reunite with Yangbe and Kunsang, who is revealed to be her fiancé. Now a newly formed family, the three embark on a pilgrimage to sacred Mount Dongri. There, they spot the once-released vulture soaring above, a symbol of survival and freedom. Together, they begin their journey home.

**Keywords:** Wilderness; Tibetan nomads; horses; grassland; Tibetan Plateau

## **1 INT. SEVENTH-GRADE CLASSROOM - DAY**

Chinese teacher MR.HAN stands at the blackboard, writing “The World’s Tallest Mountain” with an arrow.

MR.HAN: Who knows the name of the world’s tallest mountain?

Several students raise their hands. MR.HAN notices Lobsang in the second-to-last row staring out the window, distracted. Everyone follows MR.HAN’s gaze to Lobsang, and Lobsang laughs. Only his deskmate Yangchen nudges his arm, snapping him back to reality.

MR.HAN: Lobsang, what are you thinking about? Daydreaming?

Lobsang stands up awkwardly, silent and head bowed.

MR.HAN: Tell us, what is the world’s tallest mountain?

Lobsang remains silent, head down.

MR. HAN: Yangchen, tell him what the world’s tallest mountain is.

YANGBE: Mount Everest.

MR.HAN: Now you know, Lobsang.

Lobsang glances at MR.HAN and murmurs.

LOBSANG: Yeah, I know.

Child bully Sonam, sitting behind Lobsang, signals to his lackey Dondrub. Dondrub pulls a bottle of red ink from his desk and secretly pours it on Lobsang's chair.

MR.HAN: Sit down.

Lobsang sits. After a moment, he feels dampness under him. He touches it, and his hand is covered in red. Startled, he cautiously sniffs his hand and realizes it's red ink. He looks back at Sonam and Dondrub, but they pretend to be engrossed in the lesson. Lobsang turns back and forces himself to listen.

## **2 EXT. OUTSIDE CLASSROOM - DAY**

Students play freely on the school grounds. Lobsang walks alone from the building, his jacket tied around his waist to cover his stained pants. He hurries toward the dormitory.

## **3 INT. DORMITORY - DAY**

Lobsang enters the dorm, pulls clean pants from his metal locker, and changes quickly. He hides the dirty pants under his bedding just as the bell rings. He rushes out, running toward the classroom building.

## **4 EXT. SCHOOL GATE - DAYS LATER - DAY**

A beautiful woman, around 25, Yangbe (Lobsang's sister), peers into

the schoolyard near the gate. She glances at her motorcycle parked by the wall.

Lobsang appears in her line of sight. Her face lights up as he approaches. He waits at the security booth by the gate. She picks up her backpack, enters after signing the visitor log, and they walk toward the dorms.

## **5 INT. DORMITORY - DAY**

Yangbe places beef jerky, red dates, raisins, bread, and a new woolen blanket into Lobsang's locker. Lobsang nibbles on biscuits she brought. YANGBE: Share some raisins with your roommates tonight. Don't be selfish.

LOBSANG: Ok.

Yangbe locks the locker and feels his quilt.

YANGBE: This needs airing. I'll hang it out. Remember to bring it in this afternoon.

LOBSANG: Don't bother. We have scheduled sunning days. You should go; I have class.

YANGBE: Then air it yourself, okay?

LOBSANG: Ok.

They exit the dorm. Lobsang walks ahead quickly.

YANGBE: Wear more layers when it gets cold. Use the new blanket at night. Listen to your teachers and study hard.

LOBSANG: I know. Aren't you going to Aunt's? Hurry, or it'll be dark.

YANGBE: It's fine. I'll be back before dark.

Lobsang seems impatient. He walks her to the gate, where she mounts her motorcycle.

LOBSANG: I'm heading back.

YANGBE: Okay, go ahead.

Lobsang takes a few steps, then suddenly turns and runs back.

LOBSANG: Sis, did the Animal Rescue Station call? Is the baby vulture's injury healed?

YANGBE: Not yet. They'll notify us when they release it into the mountains.

LOBSANG: What if they forget to call?

YANGBE: They won't. We agreed they'd invite us to the release.

LOBSANG: Alright. Bye.

YANGBE: Go on. Class is starting.

Lobsang hurries toward the classroom building. Yangbe watches him disappear, then rides away.

## **6 INT. DORMITORY - DAY (NOON)**

Lobsang returns to the dorm. Bully Sonam and his two lackeys are waiting. Habitually, Lobsang takes his key, opens his locker, and lays all the food his sister brought on his bed. Sonam samples everything while the lackeys watch. Lobsang stands aside.

SONAM: Is this all? You didn't hide anything, did you?

LOBSANG: No. This is everything.

Sonam leaves a small portion of dried fruit and half the bread for Lobsang. He and his lackeys take the rest. At the door, Sonam turns back.

SONAM: Got any money?

LOBSANG: No. Sis didn't give me any this time.

Sonam eyes him. Lobsang fidgets. Lackey Dondrub pats Lobsang's pockets.

DONDRUB: There is nothing.

SONAM: Bring cigarettes after the next break.

Without waiting for a reply, Sonam leaves with his lackeys. Dejected,

Lobsang breaks off a piece of bread, places it on his pillow, returns the remaining food to his locker, and sits on the bed to eat.

## **7 EXT. WILDERNESS HIGHWAY - DUSK**

Yangbe rides her motorcycle on a wide highway. A large truck passes, heading in the opposite direction.

## **8 INT. DORMITORY - NIGHT**

All students are asleep. Lobsang takes a piece of bread from under his pillow. Tashi hears him eating and turns.

TASHI: Give me some? I skipped dinner.

Lobsang breaks off a piece for Tashi. They eat quietly in their beds.

LOBSANG: Do you know where the Animal Rescue Station is?

TASHI: No. What's that?

LOBSANG: They treat injured animals and release them back to the mountains when they're healed.

TASHI: How do you know?

LOBSANG: I rescued an injured baby vulture while herding. The rescue people took it for treatment.



TASHI: Weren't you scared? Vultures can eat a whole yak!

LOBSANG: No. It was hurt—couldn't peck anyone.

TASHI: Do they have tigers or lions in the Station?

LOBSANG: Not sure. Probably. Ever seen a snow leopard?

TASHI: On TV.

LOBSANG: The Rescue Station has one.

TASHI: How do you know?

LOBSANG: The rescue staff told me when they came to my home.

TASHI: Oh.

## **9 EXT. GRASSLAND ROADSIDE - DAY**

Yangbe waits by the road, her horse "Leopard" tied to a concrete pole. Cars and trucks occasionally pass. Soon, a bus stops nearby. Lobsang disembarks. Yangbe takes his backpack.

LOBSANG: Where's the motorcycle?

YANGBE: The chain broke. So I brought "Leopard" instead.

LOBSANG: "Leopard" looks thinner.

YANGBE: We lost some yaks recently. Just found them two days ago.  
“Leopard” hasn’t rested enough from the trip.

LOBSANG: If he’s too tired and can’t rest, he’ll die.

YANGBE: He won’t. Who told you that? Don’t say unlucky things.

LOBSANG: Should we walk home?

YANGBE: No, too much work at home. Get on.

Lobsang mounts the saddle. Yangbe sits behind him.

YANGBE: Take the reins. “Leopard” isn’t as tired as you think.

LOBSANG: He is. I can tell.

Lobsang takes the reins and guides “Leopard” slowly forward.

## **10 EXT. GRASSLAND - DAY**

Yangbe and Lobsang ride “Leopard” across the grassland near home.

LOBSANG: Is “Flower Deer” about to foal?

YANGBE: Not yet.

LOBSANG: Why not?

YANGBE: It is not time yet.

LOBSANG: I bet she'll foal before I go back to school.

YANGBE: Maybe.

LOBSANG: What will it be?

YANGBE: Probably a filly.

LOBSANG: I want a colt.

YANGBE: Might be a colt.

LOBSANG: What color?

YANGBE: Maybe white.

LOBSANG: I bet it'll be black.

YANGBE: You like black?

LOBSANG: Mm.

They chat and laugh as they ride.

## **11 EXT. HOMESTEAD - DUSK**

At dusk, smoke curls from the chimneys of distant herders' homes.

Yangbe steps out with a milk pail, heading toward a tethered cow. Lobsang herds sheep toward home in the distance.

A white sedan pulls up nearby. Lobsang quickly corrals the sheep. Yangbe pauses milking, looks back, and sees a man her age in sunglasses stepping out. She sets the pail aside and approaches cautiously. The man removes his sunglasses, and it is Tsering, her childhood friend and former fiancé. They smile awkwardly.

YANGBE: Where are you going?

TSERING: I am visiting my hometown, and thought I'd stop by.

Lobsang approaches, eyeing the white Santana.

LOBSANG: "Big Brother" Tsering, what are you doing here?

TSERING: I was looking for good horses in the area.

LOBSANG: Oh.

YANGBE: Lobsang, go inside and have some food first and put the sheep in the pen later.

LOBSANG: Mm.

Lobsang glances at them and enters the house. Yangbe and Tsering stand silently.

TSERING: You don't want to invite me in for tea?

YANGBE: The sun's setting.

TSERING: Alright... Did you hear about me?

YANGBE: Hear what?

TSERING: I got divorced.

Tsering watches Yangbe. She looks down silently.

## **12 INT. INSIDE HOUSE - DUSK**

Lobsang stands by the window, eating sliced mutton from a rib bone. He watches Yangbe and Tsering outside, overhearing their conversation. After a long silence, Yangbe returns to milking. Tsering gets in his car and drives away.

## **13 EXT. GRASSLAND - NIGHT**

The grassland is silent, dotted only by faint lights from distant homes. Occasional dog barks echo.

## **14 INT. HOME - NIGHT**

Lobsang finishes a bowl of noodles and hands it to Yangbe.

LOBSANG: That was great! Another bowl!

YANGBE: There's yogurt later. Will you have room?

LOBSANG: I'll move around a bit.

He grins. Yangbe refills his bowl.

YANGBE: How's the school food? Do you have enough to eat?

She hands him the bowl. He eats as they talk.

LOBSANG: It is enough, but it's always the same dishes. I am getting tired of them.

YANGBE: Should I talk to your headteacher or principal when I take you back?

LOBSANG: Better not. "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down."

YANGBE: True... Did a teacher teach you that proverb?

LOBSANG: Yup, MR.HAN.

YANGBE: How did he explain it?

LOBSANG: I don't remember exactly. But do you know how "rubbing sticks to make fire" was discovered?

YANGBE: From burning wood?

LOBSANG: No! Monkeys invented it—rubbing sticks together makes smoke and fire.

YANGBE: Monkeys?

LOBSANG: I think so.

YANGBE: I don't remember that lesson. I think it was cavemen.

LOBSANG: Let's check the textbook.

Lobsang fetches his textbook and flips to the “rubbing sticks for fire” chapter.

YANGBE: What does it say?

LOBSANG: It shows two foreigners making fire. No monkeys.

He shows Yangbe the book. She points at the text.

YANGBE: See? It says cavemen invented it. Not monkeys.

Lobsang checks, sets the book aside, and keeps eating.

LOBSANG: Guess I misheard. I thought it was monkeys. They look similar anyway.

YANGBE: It seems you don't listen carefully in class.

LOBSANG: I do listen.

YANGBE: Well, matches and lighters make fire easy now.

LOBSANG: Yeah.

YANGBE: You haven't skipped class lately, have you?

LOBSANG: No. Ask the teacher if you don't believe me.

YANGBE: Good.

Lobsang finishes his noodles. They keep talking.

LOBSANG: Can I herd tomorrow?

YANGBE: Sure. With you out, I can do the housework.

LOBSANG: Is Uncle Pema home? I want to show him my bridle.

YANGBE: He asked when you'd be back. He'll be happy to see you.

LOBSANG: Will Uncle Pema move to the city?

YANGBE: Probably. His son's in Xining. He might retire there soon.

LOBSANG: Can we buy his livestock then?

YANGBE: Don't dream. We can't afford it, and I can't manage alone.



LOBSANG: I'll help you!

YANGBE: You should focus on school. Maybe attend university, become a civil servant.

LOBSANG: I'm not cut out for that. Finishing middle school would be an achievement.

YANGBE: If you can't even finish middle school, people will laugh at us.

Silence hangs between them.

LOBSANG: Can I have 100 yuan this time?

YANGBE: What for?

LOBSANG: For the school uniform and a book.

YANGBE: How much are they?

LOBSANG: About 80-something.

YANGBE: Okay.

Pause.

YANGBE: You're not getting into trouble at school, are you?

LOBSANG: No.

YANGBE: Good.

**15 EXT. OUTSIDE LOBSANG’S HOME – DAWN**

The horizon glows pale. Silhouettes of mountains and houses are faintly visible. The light turns on in Yangbe’s home.

**16 EXT. OUTSIDE HOME - DAWN**

After washing up, Yangbe yawns, carrying a milk pail into the yak pen.

**17 INT. INSIDE HOME - DAWN**

Lobsang sleeps deeply.

**18 EXT. OUTSIDE HOME - MORNING**

Yangbe helps Lobsang herd livestock out of the pen. Lobsang rides “Spotted Leopard,” carrying his bridle as he follows the herd uphill.

LOBSANG: I’ll have lunch at Uncle Pema’s.

**19 EXT. GRASSLAND - DAY**

Lobsang lies on the grass, using his bridle as a pillow, watching clouds drift. “Spotted Leopard” grazes peacefully nearby.

## **20 EXT. OUTSIDE UNCLE PEMA'S HOME - DAY**

Uncle Pema drinks tea on the grassland with two Hui men (one old and one young). Roast lamb sits on the table. Bones suggest they've eaten well. A tin box sits near Pema. About 20 sheep bleat loudly in a pen despite the noon hour. Pema counts the last stack of money before him.

OLD HUI: The milk is good.

YOUNG HUI: Pure milk is the best.

Pema finishes counting and sets the money down.

OLD HUI: Are they all there?

PEMA: Yes.

OLD HUI: What about the caterpillar fungus? Not selling?

Pema sighs.

PEMA: I'll hold onto it. The price isn't right.

The old Hui opens the tin to inspect the fungus. Pema watches.

OLD HUI: Fine. We're old friends. I'll take the sheep. Can't  
profit much on these anyway. Just covering costs.

He stands. Pema hands him the tin. The young Hui pulls money

from his bag, counts it, and gives it to Pema, who places it on the table.

OLD HUI: Aren't you counting it?

PEMA: No need.

OLD HUI: We'll head off then.

They shake hands. The three walk toward the sheep pen. Pema opens the gate. The young Hui drives the sheep out onto the road. Pema and the old Hui stand watch.

OLD HUI: We're leaving.

The young Hui waves goodbye.

PEMA: Safe travels.

Pema watches them go. The young Hui herds the sheep erratically. The old Hui follows. Suddenly, the old Hui turns back.

OLD HUI: Friend, if you lease your pasture next year, contact me first.

PEMA: Will do.

Pema watches them disappear. He spots a boy on horseback approaching from a distant hillside.

## **21 EXT. HILLSIDE - DAY**

Lobsang rides toward Pema's home. He sees the two Hui men driving the small flock away.

## **22 EXT. NEAR UNCLE PEMA'S HOME - DAY**

Lobsang sees someone moving in and out of Pema's house. Riding closer, he finds Pema adjusting a satellite dish. Pema smiles warmly at his approach.

LOBSANG: Sold some sheep?

PEMA: Yeah. Pasture's stretched thin. Are you on break?

Lobsang dismounts.

LOBSANG: Yes. Since yesterday.

PEMA: Do you know where Australia and New Zealand are?

LOBSANG: I heard of them in geography class.

PEMA: Close to China?

LOBSANG: Far. One's in the north, and the other's in the south of the globe. Why?

PEMA: Ever since lamb from Australia and New Zealand flooded in, our

prices have kept dropping. I wonder why it's so cheap.

LOBSANG: The internet says Australia's summer is all year round. Grass grows everywhere. Sheep are ready at two years old. Only 300 yuan each.

PEMA: That cheap? And a place with eternal summer? That's strange.

LOBSANG: That's what they say online.

Pema ponders, then drops the subject.

LOBSANG: Is the satellite dish broken?

PEMA: It stopped working last night, but was fine yesterday.

LOBSANG: Maybe the wind knocked it crooked.

PEMA: Could be. Go check the TV. Call me if it shows a signal.

LOBSANG: Okay.

Lobsang enters and watches the "searching for signal" screen.  
Pema slowly adjusts the dish outside.

PEMA: Anything?

LOBSANG: Not yet.

Lobsang keeps watching.

### **23 EXT. OUTSIDE PEMA'S HOME - DAY**

Pema continues adjusting the dish. Lobsang directs from inside.

LOBSANG: Hold there... Turn back slowly... Oh! Lost it again!

PEMA: How about now?

LOBSANG: It flashed just now. Turn back gently.

Pema makes micro-adjustments. Lobsang guides.

LOBSANG: Stop! Perfect! Hold it!

Pema freezes, carefully releases the dish, and secures it with bricks before entering.

### **24 INT. INSIDE PEMA'S HOME - DAY**

Pema brings meat to the table and pours tea for Lobsang.

PEMA: Please have some. It's fresh. A sheep was mauled by wolves days ago. Had to put it down.

Pema changes TV channels, settling on a Sino-Japanese war drama.

LOBSANG: If we had guns, wolves wouldn't dare.

PEMA: True. But guns are banned now. Even if we had one, couldn't kill wolves—just scare them. They're protected.

LOBSANG: If wolves are protected, why aren't sheep? Who pays when wolves kill sheep?

PEMA: Bad luck. Even pheasants are protected now. If you kill one, go to jail. Maybe there's sense in it.

LOBSANG: Hard life.

PEMA: It is.

Pema examines the bridle Lobsang left by the door. Lobsang eats meat with tea.

PEMA: You made this?

LOBSANG: Yeah. I'm stuck on the next part. I need your advice.  
Pema studies the half-finished bridle.

PEMA: Not bad. Impressive for your age. Leave it. I'll fix it up. Pick it up during next break.

LOBSANG: Okay.

PEMA: When do you go back?

LOBSANG: Day after tomorrow.



PEMA: Do you like the school?

LOBSANG: Not really. I prefer herding at home. But I'd never tell my Sis.

PEMA: Your parents are gone. Listen to your sister.

Lobsang stays silent.

PEMA: You need to get an education. Times have changed. Even to be a good herder, you need education now.

Lobsang ponders while eating meat and watching TV. Pema fiddles with the bridle, also watching.

## **25 EXT. HOMEWARD PATH - DAY**

Lobsang rides "Leopard," carrying a newborn lamb.

## **26 INT. INSIDE HOME - NIGHT**

Yangbe cleans after dinner. Lobsang bottle-feeds the lamb.

LOBSANG: Could it be Uncle Pema's lamb?

YANGBE: Maybe. But his herd doesn't graze there. Could be Darlo's. I'll ask neighbors tomorrow.

LOBSANG: Why would a ewe abandon her lamb?

YANGBE: They usually don't.

LOBSANG: Maybe it got lost? Can we keep it?

YANGBE: Can't keep someone else's lamb.

## **27 EXT. GRASSLAND PATH - DAY**

Yangbe and Lobsang ride a horse across the grassland.

## **28 EXT. ROADSIDE - DAY**

They dismount at the highway. Yangbe ties the horse to graze. They wait for the bus. Yangbe pulls 120 yuan from her pocket.

YANGBE: Spend it wisely. Only buy food if you're really hungry.

LOBSANG: Okay.

LOBSANG: Sis, show me the vulture photo again.

Yangbe shows a photo of her, Lobsang, and the baby vulture on the phone. Lobsang zooms in.

LOBSANG: Let's visit the Rescue Station next time.

YANGBE: Do you even know where it is?

LOBSANG: We can ask.

YANGBE: The motorcycle's still broken. Better wait for their call.

Lobsang sulks, staring ahead. Yangbe watches him, knowing he's upset.

A breeze stirs her hair and the grass. A bus can be seen in the far distance.

YANGBE: The bus is coming.

She grabs his backpack, helps him put it on, and flags down the bus.  
Lobsang boards quickly.

YANGBE: Study hard!

Lobsang doesn't reply. He finds a window seat. The bus pulls away. He doesn't wave goodbye. Yangbe watches it leave.

## **29 EXT. SCHOOL STORE - DAY**

Lobsang shops for cigarettes to give to Sonam. An old man runs the store. Lobsang eyes different brands.

LOBSANG: (Pointing to a red pack) How much for that one?

STOREKEEPER: Don't sell cigarettes to kids.

LOBSANG: The teacher sent me.

STOREKEEPER: Which teacher?

LOBSANG: Mr. Han.

STOREKEEPER: Twelve yuan.

LOBSANG: What's the cheapest?

The storekeeper points to a white pack.

STOREKEEPER: Ten yuan. Cheapest.

LOBSANG: That one. And a cola, and a one-yuan spicy strip.

The storekeeper gives him change, cigarettes, cola, and a snack. Lobsang leaves. Outside, he checks if anyone's watching, crouches, lifts his pant leg, and stuffs his remaining five yuan into his sock. He eats the snack and drinks cola as he walks to school.

### **30 EXT. SCHOOL GATE - DAY**

Lobsang spots Sonam and his lackeys leaving school. He hides, chugging his cola to finish before they arrive. Unable to finish, he has an idea. He walks to a corner, urinates into the bottle, wipes it with his pant leg, shakes it, and walks casually toward school. They meet near the gate. He hands Sonam the cigarettes.

SONAM: The serial class-skipper bought the cheapest.

LOBSANG: I didn't have enough money.

Sonam notices the cola and snacks. He takes a strip of the snack and tastes it.

SONAM: Bring the food from home tonight.

Lobsang stays silent, head down.

SONAM: Got a problem?

LOBSANG: No.

SONAM: Good. Go on.

As Lobsang turns to leave, Sonam stops him.

SONAM: Wait.

Sonam takes the cola bottle from Lobsang's pocket and drinks. He smacks his lips, tasting the "special" cola.

SONAM: Tastes different. How much?

LOBSANG: Three yuan. Different factories, different taste.

Sonam checks the label and drinks again.

SONAM: Go back.

Lobsang hurries off. The lackeys eye the cola thirstily. Lobsang looks back to see Sonam pass the bottle to them. A victorious smile crosses his face.

### **31 EXT. OUTSIDE CLASSROOM - DAY**

During the break, students play outside. Lobsang and Tashi chat quietly in a corner.

LOBSANG: Wanna go to the Animal Rescue Station?

TASHI: When?

LOBSANG: During the break on Sunday afternoon.

TASHI: Do you know where it is? Far?

LOBSANG: Behind Amnye Dongso Mountain. We'll take a taxi.

TASHI: I'm scared of the teachers.

LOBSANG: If we're back before evening study, it's fine.

Tashi hesitates.

TASHI: Still scared.

LOBSANG: I'll buy you a burger if you come.

Tashi thinks.

TASHI: I want iced cola.

LOBSANG: Deal.

TASHI: Promise you're not lying?

LOBSANG: I've got over eighty yuan left from Sis. We'll eat burgers and take a taxi.

TASHI: Okay.

LOBSANG: Deal. No backing out.

TASHI: Deal.

### **32 INT. BURGER SHOP - DAY**

Lobsang and Tashi exit with burgers and iced colas. They eat while waiting for a taxi on the street.

### **33 INT. TAXI - DAY**

The taxi heads into the mountains. They sip cola.

LOBSANG: How long does it take, driver?

DRIVER: About an hour.

LOBSANG: Okay.

Silence.

DRIVER: Why are you going to the Rescue Station?

LOBSANG: To see a baby vulture I rescued.

DRIVER: You rescued a vulture? Impressive!

Lobsang and Tashi exchange smiles, then watch the scenery. The taxi winds up a mountain road.

### **34 EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - DAY**

The taxi makes its way through loop after loop of winding mountain roads. Tall mountains flank the road, dotted with forests, shrubs, and grassland.

### **35 EXT. ANIMAL RESCUE STATION - DAY**

The taxi climbs a slope and stops at the Rescue Station gate.

### **36 EXT. RESCUE STATION GATE - DAY**

Lobsang and Tashi get out. The small side gate is locked. They look back at the driver.

DRIVER: Do you need a ride back?

Lobsang and Tashi look at each other.

LOBSANG: You go ahead first.



They stand at the gate, peering in. No one in sight.

### **37 EXT. OUTSIDE RESCUE STATION WALL - DAY**

They try to peek over the wall at the animals, especially the vulture, but the wall is too high.

### **38 EXT. RESCUE STATION GATE - DAY**

Defeated, they wait under the scorching sun, sweating. Finally, a pickup truck arrives and honks. A young man sleepily emerges from a building and opens the gate. Lobsang and Tashi approach.

YOUNG MAN: What do you want?

LOBSANG: We're here to see the baby vulture. I rescued one brought here two months ago.

The young man looks at a woman getting out of the truck.

YOUNG MAN: Lhamo! These are for you!

Lhamo recognizes Lobsang.

LHAMO: Hey! What are you doing here?

LOBSANG: I am here to see the baby vulture.

LHAMO: Oh... it was released already.

Lobsang's face falls.

LHAMO: We tried calling your sister when we released it near Dongri Sacred Mountain, but her phone was off. So we went alone.

Tashi watches Lobsang's dismay.

TASHI: Should we go back?

LHAMO: Since you're here, tour the other animals! Come on!

She takes Lobsang's hand and walks toward the enclosures. First is a Chinese mountain cat sheltering in its hut.

LHAMO: This is a mountain cat. Bigger than house cats. See the tufts on its ears? Thicker tail, too.

They watch through the glass. Lhamo leads them on.

LHAMO: This is our snow leopard. There's a famous film called Snow Leopard. Have you seen it? This one broke its right leg while hunting on cliffs. Now it's in the post-surgery period, almost healed. We'll release it when it's fully recovered.

TASHI: (To Lobsang) Have you seen that movie?

LOBSANG: Yeah. That leopard was whiter, cleaner, prettier.

They whisper. Lhamo shows them red deer, antelope, Pallas's cats, etc.

Fascinated, they interact closely with deer and antelope along a wooden walkway. Finally, they reach a large aviary holding an old vulture with a broken wing.

LHAMO: (Pointing) Himalayan vulture aviary. Your baby vulture stayed here after surgery until it could hunt again. We released it 4 kilos heavier thanks to our care!

Lobsang stares at the aviary and the old vulture.

LOBSANG: Can vultures fly over Mount Everest?

Lhamo is stumped.

LHAMO: Huh? Um... I'll ask the director.

She calls.

LHAMO: Director, two students asked if vultures can fly over Everest. I didn't know.

DIRECTOR (V.O.): Stumped you, eh? Yes, vultures can fly over Everest. They're among the few birds that can.

LHAMO: Thanks, Director! (Smiling at Lobsang and Tashi)

The director says yes, vultures are among the few birds that can fly directly over Everest!

They tour more animals. Time flies. Before leaving, Lhamo gives them booklets and snacks from her office and walks them out.

LHAMO: Hurry back. Follow the road. Don't get caught in the dark.

LOBSANG: Okay.

TASHI: Thanks.

LOBSANG: When you released it... did you see its mother?

Lhamo pauses, then improvises.

LHAMO: Oh! Yes! Its mother was waiting on the mountain. We released it near her. It flew straight to her. They circled together and flew off.  
Lobsang looks relieved.

LOBSANG: Okay. Bye.

They wave goodbye. Lhamo watches them walk away.

### **39 EXT. MOUNTAINSIDE - DUSK**

At dusk, Lobsang and Tashi reach the mountainside. Sunset bathes the valley town and the red cliffs of Tsenmo Mountain in golden light.

They both look toward the school. Students dot the playground.

TASHI: There are people in the field.

LOBSANG: Evening study hasn't started. We can still make it.

TASHI: Let's hurry.

LOBSANG: Yeah.

Relieved, they rest briefly, then rush downhill. By the time they reach town, streetlights are on. They dash across streets toward the school.

#### **40 EXT. STREET NEAR SCHOOL - NIGHT**

Lobsang jogs down the sparsely populated street near school.

LOBSANG: Evening study must've started.

TASHI: What do we do?

LOBSANG: Sneak over the wall.

TASHI: Okay.

#### **41 EXT. SCHOOL WALL - NIGHT**

Lobsang helps Tashi climb the wall into the campus.

## **42 EXT. SCHOOL GROUNDS - NIGHT**

As they sneak toward the classroom building, a patrolling teacher spots them.

TEACHER: Hey! You two! Come here!

They walk over reluctantly. The teacher questions them in the distance.

## **43 EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY**

The whole school assembles before the podium. Homeroom teachers stand behind their classes. Lobsang and Tashi hang their heads onstage. The principal announces their punishment for sneaking out, skipping class and “stealing oil bread” from the cafeteria.

PRINCIPAL: For leaving campus without permission and tardiness, seventh-grade students Lobsang and Tashi receive a warning and one week of classroom cleaning duty!

Students murmur. Lobsang glances down. Sonam smirks and gives him a thumbs-up.

## **44 EXT. OUTSIDE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE - DAY**

Lobsang waits outside. Sonam, his two lackeys, their homeroom teacher, and two police officers enter the office. The bullies look dejected. Soon, Yangbe exits. Lobsang gives her an awkward smile. She shakes her head.

YANGBE: You are hopeless. Let's go.

LOBSANG: What about them? Are the police arresting them?

YANGBE: Worry about yourself! Move!

LOBSANG: It's your fault! You wouldn't take me to see the vulture!  
They released it already!

YANGBE: I didn't have time!

LOBSANG: They called you! Your phone was off!

YANGBE: I probably had no signal while herding.

LOBSANG: They released it near the Dongri Sacred Mountain.

YANGBE: Good. At least it can fly now. Better than being caged forever.

Lobsang looks thoughtful as he follows Yangbe downstairs.

#### **45 EXT. SCHOOL GATE - DAY**

End of the month, the school was on break. Yangbe starts her motorcycle.  
Lobsang mounts the back, wearing his backpack. They ride off.

#### **46 EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - AFTERNOON**

They ride along winding mountain roads.

**47 EXT. GRASSLAND PATH - AFTERNOON**

They turn off the highway onto a dirt path. Livestock graze on both sides.

**48 INT. INSIDE HOME - NIGHT**

Lobsang bottle-feeds the lamb. Yangbe serves mutton from a pot.

YANGBE: Done feeding?

LOBSANG: Almost. Do you think its mother was eaten by wolves?

YANGBE: I don't know. I asked all the neighbors. No one's missing a lamb. Strange.

Lobsang finishes, puts the lamb in its makeshift pen, and sits to eat. He devours his food.

LOBSANG: Maybe thieves slaughtered its mother. Now it's an orphan.

Yangbe stays silent. They eat quietly.

YANGBE: You'll start herding tomorrow. Since school's hopeless for you.

LOBSANG: Never liked it anyway. I'm dumb.

YANGBE: You are hopeless. Who throws away their future like this?



LOBSANG: Sis, ask the principal if I can quit? I'll help you herd. I learn nothing at school.

YANGBE: Impossible. The law says you have to finish middle school. School won't expel you. I wanted you to go to university... Look at you now.

Pause.

YANGBE: Fine. You can come back after middle school.

LOBSANG: That's years away! Too long!

YANGBE: There is no other choice. Eat and sleep. Get up early tomorrow.

#### **49 EXT. OUTSIDE HOME - DAWN**

Snow covers the ground. A bitter wind blows. Lobsang stumbles out to urinate. An unusual sound comes from the stable. Peering through the window, he sees "Flower Deer" has returned and seems to be struggling. He runs inside.

LOBSANG: (Repeatedly) Sis!

YANGBE: (V.O.) What?

LOBSANG: "Flower Deer" is back! I think she's having trouble!

A light flicks on. Yangbe and Lobsang rush to the stable.

## **50 INT. INSIDE HOME - DAWN**

Yangbe carries a feed plate from the storeroom, adding flour to it. Lobsang boils water by the stove. Steam rises. The lamb bleats softly in its pen.

LOBSANG: It's a black foal, right? I have a name.

YANGBE: Thought of one already?

LOBSANG: "Jade Deer." I picked it long ago. Like it?

YANGBE: Nice. Water's almost boiling. Go back to sleep.

She adds water to the feed plate. Lobsang heads back to bed.

## **51 EXT. GRASSLAND - DAY**

Morning. Lobsang rides "Leopard" behind the herd into the mountains. The vast landscape holds only scattered yaks. Occasionally, he shouts like an experienced herder. For stragglers, he uses his slingshot.

## **52 EXT. MOUNTAINTOP - DAY**

Livestock graze leisurely. Lobsang rides to the summit and surveys the land. Soon, the lead sheep nears a bend beyond the mountain. Lobsang gallops ahead to block them. The herd turns back to graze.

He dismounts, letting "Leopard" graze. From his backpack,

he pulls out dried meat, tea, and bread for lunch. Following herders' tradition, he scatters breadcrumbs for birds and insects.

After eating, he plays with his slingshot and shoots at a plastic bottle. Later, he lies on the grass, studying insects and plants, then gazes at the clouds, lost in thought.

### **53 EXT. HOMESTEAD - DAY**

At dusk, livestock return home. "Flower Deer," unseen for days, is tethered outside. A black foal plays nearby. Lobsang rides "Leopard" home. Yangbe watches from a window.

He dismounts and rushes to "Flower Deer," stroking her face and neck, then interacts with the foal. Yangbe brings a bucket of beans to the feeding trough.

**YANGBE:** Hungry? Come eat.

**LOBSANG:** Not yet. "Jade Deer" is taller now.

**YANGBE:** Really? In just a few days?

**LOBSANG:** I can tell. Taller and stronger.

**YANGBE:** Maybe.

Lobsang fetches the bridle Uncle Pema helped finish. He tries to put it on the foal, but it dodges playfully. Exhausted, Lobsang grabs its

flank. The foal startles, kicking slightly before hiding behind its mother.

LOBSANG: So stubborn! Won't let me touch it or put on the bridle!

YANGBE: It's just a newborn! Not used to strangers. Give it some time.  
Eat first. We need to count the livestock later.

She heads inside. Lobsang gives up, washes his face, and enters.  
Yangbe serves potato stir-fry kept warm on the stove and pours Lobsang  
some tea. Lobsang eats while watching TV.

LOBSANG: Let's name the foal.

YANGBE: What name is good? You choose.

LOBSANG: "Jade Deer."

YANGBE: Nice. "Jade Deer" it is.

LOBSANG: Mother "Flower Deer," daughter "Jade Deer." Perfect!  
He eats proudly. Yangbe watches him, hesitant.

YANGBE: Um... Auntie came today...

LOBSANG: Yeah?

YANGBE: Said... she found a match for me.

Lobsang looks confused.

LOBSANG: What match?

YANGBE: (Speaking softly) Said he's a good man... willing to be a live-in son-in-law.

Lobsang understands. He stays silent.

YANGBE: I have to marry someday, Lobsang. I am not leaving you.

LOBSANG: Who is he?

YANGBE: Dargye. From Santala. You might've heard of him? He won second place in the horse race a few years back.

LOBSANG: Never heard of that bastard.

YANGBE: Don't swear! He's a good man.

LOBSANG: How would I know? I have never met him.

YANGBE: You wanted riding lessons, right? He can teach you.

LOBSANG: Hmph! I don't need him! I'll beat him easily someday!  
Silence.

YANGBE: I...

Lobsang storms out before she finishes. Yangbe watches through the window as he unties "Leopard," mounts, and gallops away.

**54 EXT. HILLSIDE OPPOSITE HOME - DUSK**

Lobsang whips “Leopard” fiercely up the hill. Exhausted, the horse trembles and refuses to move higher. Finally realizing his cruelty, Lobsang dismounts, hugs “Leopard’s” neck, sobs and apologies.

LOBSANG: I’m sorry! Sorry! Didn’t mean to hurt you... I...

Choked with tears, he clings to the horse. Boy and horse stand silhouetted against the dying light, a picture of desolation.

**55 INT. INSIDE HOME - NIGHT**

Yangbe, in her bed, stares at the ceiling. Lobsang lies facing away, pretending to sleep. The lamb bleats softly.

YANGBE: Lobsang?

There is no response from Lobsang. He holds his breath, eyes shut tight.

YANGBE: Asleep?

Silence. Yangbe gives up. Tears well in Lobsang’s eyes.

**56 INT. INSIDE HOME - DAWN**

Yangbe is already up and busy. Lobsang feigns sleep.

YANGBE: Butter tea’s ready. I’m going to go for herding. Get up and eat later.

Lobsang stays silent. Once she's gone, he jumps up. He feeds "Flower Deer" and the foal, eats breakfast while bottle-feeding the lamb, then puts the lamb in the pen.

He rummages through the house, packing tack, clothes, camping gear (blankets and firecrackers), and food into saddlebags. Thoughts of Yangbe make him pause; he unpacks items several times, but hardens his resolve and repacks.

Worried riding "Flower Deer" so soon after foaling might harm her, he walks, leading her. The foal "Jade Deer" follows.

They head west across the grassland.

After an hour, crossing a pass, he stops and looks back toward home. Seeing nothing, he continues.

## **57 EXT. GRASSLAND - DAY**

Journeying for a long time, Lobsang deliberately chooses open terrain. During the journey, "Jade Deer" attempts to suckle several times, but to save time and exit familiar territory, Lobsang forcibly leads "Flower Deer" onward, giving no opportunity to nurse.

## **58 EXT. GRASSY MEADOW - DAY**

It is already afternoon. Lobsang rests and eats lunch in a lush grassy meadow, allowing "Flower Deer" and "Jade Deer" to rest and fill their bellies.

## 59 EXT. GRASSY HILLSIDE - DAY

Lobsang leads “Flower Deer” and “Jade Deer” onward, walking along a mountainside. By the time he reaches the hilltop, dusk is falling. Dark clouds gather over the distant peaks, swallowing the sun’s last rays. Far off, a storm is brewing. Fortunately, scattered households are visible nearby. Lobsang quickens his pace towards the nearest one, but finds only a cute little girl, about six years old.

LOBSANG: Where are your parents?

Lobsang asks her in both Tibetan and Chinese, but the girl just stares silently. Lobsang has to leave. Before going, he takes a small snack from his pocket and gives it to her. As he leaves, the girl smiles and waves. Lobsang walks on, sometimes breaking into a run, heading towards a more distant house. Dozens of minutes later, he finally reaches the door of the far house.

LOBSANG: Anyone home?

Almost as he calls out, a young woman emerges. She looks only slightly older than his sister Yangbe. Seeing Lobsang, she seems surprised, then turns and says something into the house in Mongolian, which Lobsang can’t fully understand. The woman turns back to Lobsang.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Hello.

LOBSANG: Hello, may I take shelter from the rain at your place?



He speaks to her in the Tibetan-accented Mandarin he learned at school.

MONGOLIAN WOMAN: Ah, yes, come in quickly.

She takes the reins from Lobsang and glances at the saddlebags on the horse.

MONGOLIAN WOMAN: Bring your saddlebags inside.

Simultaneously, a young Mongolian man with curly hair comes out and smiles at Lobsang.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Where are you headed, young brother?

LOBSANG: Hello, brother. I'm looking for horses. I came from the Nihaning area.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Come on in.

The Mongolian man takes the saddlebags from Lobsang.

## **60 INT. MONGOLIAN HOME - DAY**

The Mongolian man leads Lobsang inside. Lobsang looks around; the room is tidy. The man places the saddlebags in a corner and gestures for him to sit.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Sit, brother.

The woman comes in from outside, pours Lobsang a bowl of milk tea, and refills the man's tea.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Drink some milk tea, young brother. Warm yourself up.

MONGOLIAN WOMAN: Please have some tea.

The woman sits down beside her husband. Lobsang takes a sip of tea, hesitates, then speaks.

LOBSANG: If it's convenient, I'd like to ask to stay the night.

MONGOLIAN MAN: No need to go anywhere. It's no trouble at all. Stay tonight.

LOBSANG: Mm, thank you.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Hey, young brother, relax, no need to be so formal.

LOBSANG: Mm, okay.

MONGOLIAN MAN: When I was your age, I wouldn't dare travel alone like this.

LOBSANG: My father said it's to train me.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Mm, that's how a grassland man should be.

The man gives Lobsang a thumbs-up and signals for his wife to bring food.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Hurry up and bring him something to eat.

LOBSANG: No need, I'm not hungry yet.

The woman still brings out a plate of meat and places it before him.

MONGOLIAN WOMAN: Fill your stomach a little first. Dinner will be ready soon.

LOBSANG: I'm really not hungry. I'll eat later with everyone.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Alright then. We'll eat once we gather the sheep flock.

The woman gets up to prepare dinner.

MONGOLIAN MAN: How many days have you been searching?

LOBSANG: Two days.

MONGOLIAN MAN: What kind of horses?

LOBSANG: Three horses. One is a pale-bellied horse.

MONGOLIAN MAN: That's easily recognizable, but I haven't seen any around here.

LOBSANG: Maybe they followed other herds far away or got lost.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Probably.

A pause.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Sit for a while. I'll go gather the sheep flock.

LOBSANG: I'll come too.

MONGOLIAN MAN: Mm, fine.

The Mongolian man and Lobsang stand up almost simultaneously and go out.

## **61 EXT. HILLSIDE OUTSIDE MONGOLIAN HOME - DUSK**

The Mongolian man and Lobsang drive the sheep and cattle herd back from a nearby hillside. Under the overcast sky, raindrops begin to fall.

## **62 INT. MONGOLIAN HOME - NIGHT**

The Mongolian man and Lobsang warm themselves by the stove while the Mongolian woman makes hand-pulled noodles nearby.

MONGOLIAN MAN: By the way, young brother, what's your name?  
I forgot to ask earlier.

LOBSANG: I'm Lobsang. What's your name, brother?

MONGOLIAN MAN: I'm Mönkh. Your sister-in-law is Bayintana. Her name is beautiful, right?

He looks at his wife, then winks at Lobsang.

LOBSANG: Beautiful.

MONGOLIAN MAN (MÖNKH): And she's not bad-looking either.

Lobsang smiled sheepishly.

LOBSANG: Mm, very pretty.

BAYINTANA: Mönkh, don't talk nonsense in front of our young brother.

Bayintana has finished cooking the noodles. She serves Lobsang a bowl first.

BAYINTANA: Eat quickly. You must be starving.

LOBSANG: Mm, okay.

MÖNKH: Don't be polite. Make yourself at home.

Bayintana serves Mönkh a bowl and finally sits on a small stool beside him to eat.

**63 EXT. OUTSIDE MÖNKH'S HOME - NIGHT**

“Flower Deer” grazes leisurely on the grassy patch outside Mönhk’s home. “Jade Deer” frolics around its mother.

**64 INT. INSIDE MÖNKH'S HOME - NIGHT**

Bayintana cleans the dishes and pots. Mönhk and Lobsang remain seated. Mönhk fiddles with his phone. Bayintana glances back at him.

BAYINTANA: Let’s play cards later. Our TV is broken, haven’t gotten it fixed.

LOBSANG: Okay.

MÖNKH: You know how to play cards, right, Lobsang?

Lobsang: Mm, a little. I played occasionally at school.

MÖNKH: You’re still in school?

LOBSANG: Yes, but I graduated from middle school this year.

BAYINTANA: Where did you go? Near Wajok?

LOBSANG: No, near Yulong.

MÖNKH: That’s a bit far.

LOBSANG: It's okay.

MÖNKH: I met your sister-in-law near Wajok. I was a grade above her. Back then, she was still a snot-nosed little girl.

Bayintana, searching for cards nearby, hears Mönkh badmouthing her. She glares at him, brings the cards over, kicks him lightly, sits down, and begins shuffling.

BAYINTANA: Shut up! When did I ever have snot? You were the one with snot! Listen, Lobsang, Mönkh was no good. Always getting into trouble at school.

MÖNKH: Heh, bad boys get the pretty girls, right? I was shameless; I pestered her every day. That's why she married me in the end.

BAYINTANA: Exactly! His skin is thicker than cowhide. No shame at all.

Lobsang watches Mönkh and Bayintana tease each other with a smile. Mönkh took the cards from Bayintana and starts dealing for the three of them.

MÖNKH: Young brother Lobsang, do you plan to go to university?

LOBSANG: No. My grades aren't good enough.

BAYINTANA: If studying really isn't for you, it's fine. I think you'd make a fine herder. So young and already traveling the grasslands alone

like this.

MÖNKH: Being a free herder is good too.

LOBSANG: Mm, that's what I think too.

Lobsang, Bayintana, and Mönkh pick up their dealt cards and arrange them.

## **65 INT. INSIDE MÖNKH'S HOME - DAWN**

At dawn, Bayintana gets up, washes, and starts working. She gently shakes Mönkh awake. Lobsang also wakes up and gets up.

BAYINTANA: It's still early. Sleep a bit more. I'll wake you up when breakfast is ready. Or maybe rest here today?

LOBSANG: No. If the horses have gone far, it'll be troublesome.

BAYINTANA: Maybe they've already gone back by themselves?

LOBSANG: They won't have, sister-in-law. One horse was just bought recently. It must have led them away. I need to find them quickly.

## **66 EXT. OUTSIDE MÖNKH'S HOME - DAY**

Lobsang leads "Flower Deer" and the fawn. Mönkh helps him saddle "Flower Deer." Bayintana brings a bottle of water, a jar of yogurt, and a lump of fried barley flower from inside, placing them in the



saddlebags. Lobsang prepares to leave with the deer.

MÖNKH: Brother Lobsang, you should ride.

BAYINTANA: Yes, you're light. As long as you don't let her run, it should be fine.

Lobsang thinks they made sense and mounts "Flower Deer" to leave.

LOBSANG: I'm off then, brother, sister-in-law.

BAYINTANA: Don't forget to visit when you have time.

LOBSANG: Okay. I will definitely come back to visit.

Lobsang rides "Flower Deer," "Jade Deer" following behind. Bayintana leans against Mönkh as they watch Lobsang ride away.

## **67 EXT. BASE OF A BARREN SLOPE - DAY**

Lobsang rides "Flower Deer" along the shaded base of a barren slope. The vegetation on the sunny side isn't lush, but the shaded side is even sparser, sand and soil almost exposed. Lobsang dismounts and begins leading "Flower Deer" and "Jade Deer" up the slope.

## **68 EXT. BARREN SLOPE - DAY**

Under the scorching sun, Lobsang leads "Flower Deer" and "Jade Deer" up the barren slope. He stops occasionally, wiping sweat from his

forehead before continuing.

## **69 EXT. BEND IN A WASTELAND - DAY**

Lobsang rides “Flower Deer” towards a bend in the wasteland, “Jade Deer” following closely. He looks up at the sun; it is past noon. The sparse grass and plants are yellowing. Looking around, all he sees is wasteland. Feeding “The Deer” here is impossible. He decides to eat first, slowly pulling the reins to stop the horse at the bend. He dismounts, takes things from the saddlebags, and prepares lunch.

Lobsang eats the fried barley flour and half a jar of yogurt given by Mönkh and Bayintana. After drinking some water from the plastic bottle, he feels drowsy. Just as he is about to lie down, a man on horseback, around 40, suddenly appears less than ten meters ahead to the right. The middle-aged rider looks dusty and unshaven, wearing a dirty black Tibetan robe, trousers, and boots. He doesn’t look ordinary, especially with the dagger at his waist and the rifle-shaped object wrapped in canvas. Lobsang also sees dried blood seeping from the rider’s bulging saddlebag, covered by army-green cloth. The rider adjusts the cloth to cover it.

MIDDLE-AGED RIDER: Hello, brother.

LOBSANG: Hello.

MIDDLE-AGED RIDER: Seen any ranger patrols, or two or three people together, on the road?

LOBSANG: I haven't met anyone on the road.

MIDDLE-AGED RIDER: Got water?

Lobsang shows his water bottle. The rider gestures for him to throw it to him. Lobsang stands and throws it. The rider drinks half and throws the bottle back.

Just then, the rider sees another horseman approaching in the distance. He grips the canvas-wrapped rifle defensively. Lobsang also spots the rider approaching from the left.

MIDDLE-AGED RIDER: Brother, don't say things you shouldn't say to others. You know what trouble that brings, right?

Lobsang glances at the young rider approaching from the left, then back at the middle-aged man.

LOBSANG: Mm.

MIDDLE-AGED RIDER: Good.

The young rider draws closer. He rides a silver-maned horse, wears sunglasses, a sun hat, a brown leather jacket, blue jeans, and martin boots. He looks about 27, dashing. He stops about ten meters away. The two riders stare at each other. Seeing the dagger on the middle-aged man's waist, the young man deliberately reveals his own. They stand facing each other in silence. Lobsang stands near the middle-aged man. After a moment, the middle-aged man nods at the young man, who nods

back.

MIDDLE-AGED RIDER: Thank you, friend.

The middle-aged man thanks Lobsang, then spurs his horse, detouring around the young man and disappearing over a hill. The young man watches him leave, then rides straight to Lobsang, scrutinizing him.

YOUNG RIDER: Young brother, who was that?

LOBSANG: Don't know.

He asked for water and left.

YOUNG RIDER: What did he say?

LOBSANG: Didn't say anything.

YOUNG RIDER: Okay. I thought you were together.

LOBSANG: No.

YOUNG RIDER: Where are you headed?

LOBSANG: I am looking for horses.

YOUNG RIDER: What a coincidence. Me too. How many horses?

LOBSANG: Three of my family's. Yours?

YOUNG RIDER: About a dozen, probably. Three blue roans. One's a big bright bay, and very noticeable.

LOBSANG: Haven't seen them.

YOUNG RIDER: Your three probably aren't alone. Might have joined a bigger herd.

LOBSANG: Possibly.

YOUNG RIDER: Where are you from?

LOBSANG: From Niha.

YOUNG RIDER: Sunny Side of Niha or Shady Side of Naha?

LOBSANG: Shady Side.

YOUNG RIDER: Okay. I know people near Sunny Side, but not Shady Side, I think.

LOBSANG: And you?

YOUNG RIDER: Me? Far from here. Over there.

He points in the direction he came from.

YOUNG RIDER: I've been out for days. Haven't even seen horse dung on the road.

LOBSANG: Horse dung?

YOUNG RIDER: If it's dung from my horses, I can tell at a glance.

Lobsang gives him a faint smile.

YOUNG RIDER: What? Don't believe me?

LOBSANG: No one is going to believe it. Go ahead and fool a ghost with it.

The young man finally dismounts and sits beside him.

YOUNG RIDER: Since that's how it is, let's make a bet. I'll show you if I'm bragging or not.

LOBSANG: How?

YOUNG RIDER: It's simple. You're looking for horses too, right? Maybe they got mixed together. Let's look together. I'll show you how I find them.

LOBSANG: But you wouldn't recognize my horse's dung. Wouldn't I just be helping you find your horses?

YOUNG RIDER: You don't get it. If the dung isn't too old, I can tell when they passed. If it's not from my horses, it must be from yours, right?

LOBSANG: I don't know. You go look yourself. We'll each search alone.

Lobsang mounts "Flower Deer" and leaves with "Jade Deer." Soon, the young rider follows.

YOUNG RIDER: Brother, no offence, but pushing a mare that just gave birth a few days ago like this...Make sure she doesn't get sick.

Lobsang ignores him and keeps walking.

YOUNG RIDER: I suggest you go slow. This horse shouldn't get chilled right now.

LOBSANG: You mean if she doesn't get cold, she'll be fine?

YOUNG RIDER: Anyway, my horse went through something similar. She was fine later.

Lobsang pulls the reins and dismounts, leading "Flower Deer" forward, "Jade Deer" following. The young rider still follows.

YOUNG RIDER: Come on up. Ride behind me. Walking like this, you won't get far.

LOBSANG: No. I'll go alone.

YOUNG RIDER: Searching together is better. We'll have company. How about that?

Lobsang ignores him. His attention is fixed on “Jade Deer.” He constantly checks the horses’ condition, touching “Flower Deer’s” chest and neck to see if she is sweating, and watching if Jade Deer can keep up. The young rider follows silently, smiling as he watches Lobsang worry.

YOUNG RIDER: Do you know my horse’s name?

LOBSANG: No.

YOUNG RIDER: Silvermane.

LOBSANG: Oh.

YOUNG RIDER: He’s a good horse. Ran in horse races.

LOBSANG: When?

YOUNG RIDER: Years ago, when he was young. He’s a bit older now.

LOBSANG: What do you think of my horse?

YOUNG RIDER: What’s her name?

LOBSANG: “Jade Deer”.

YOUNG RIDER: Special name. Seems like she has potential. Depends on how she’s trained later.

Lobsang is silent. They walk on.



YOUNG RIDER: Do you know how to train horses?

LOBSANG: Not yet.

YOUNG RIDER: Find someone experienced to teach you. Otherwise, you'll waste a good horse.

They reach the edge of a small valley. It looks like a dead end, but Lobsang turns into it, walking calmly. The young rider rides ahead of him and turns his horse around.

YOUNG RIDER: Brother, what are you doing?

LOBSANG: I want to go into that valley. If you're in a hurry, leave. No need to follow me.

YOUNG RIDER: That valley's a dead end. There's no way through.

Lobsang ignores him.

YOUNG RIDER: Meeting is fate. Besides, we're both looking for horses. It is safer together, right?

LOBSANG: We'll each search alone. Why do you insist on following me?

Lobsang walks on without stopping. The young rider stands still, watching him leave.

**70 EXT. WASTELAND LEFT OF VALLEY - DAY**

Gradually, Lobsang becomes a small dot moving towards the valley on the left. The young rider heads across the flatter wasteland on the right.

**71 EXT. INSIDE VALLEY - DAY**

Lobsang leads “Flower Deer” and the foal long the valley floor, filled with oddly shaped boulders. He occasionally looks back towards where the young rider has gone.

**72 EXT. VALLEY EXIT (RIGHT) - DUSK**

Lobsang leads “Flower Deer” out of a valley exit. He checks the horse, then looks at the setting sun. He looks tired.

YOUNG RIDER: Brother, you’re too slow. I’ve been waiting forever.

Lobsang looks up. The young rider is resting on a hillside to the right of the pass. Lobsang still doesn’t want to engage and keeps walking. The rider watches him, then mounts and follows.

YOUNG RIDER: Look, the sun’s almost down. We need to find a place to camp and make a fire, or we’ll freeze tonight.

Lobsang glances at the setting sun and keeps walking, head down.

YOUNG RIDER: Let’s walk ahead, see if there’s a good spot. Might get

rain or snow tonight.

No reply.

YOUNG RIDER: I'm Kunsang. What's your name?

Silence.

YOUNG RIDER (KUNSANG): Hmm?

LOBSANG: I'm Lobsang.

YOUNG RIDER (KUNSANG): Mm. We need to find a place with dry dung, preferably near water. No fire, no hot water, no warmth. Big trouble.

Lobsang listen to Kunsang's reasonable analysis. He begins to feel this guy might be reliable, but doesn't respond immediately, pretending he knows it all. He walks alongside Kunsang, leading the Deer.

YOUNG RIDER (KUNSANG): Get on. You must be tired after walking all day.

Kunsang holds out his right hand, offering to pull Lobsang up behind him on Silvermane.

### **73 EXT. WASTELAND - DUSK**

They ride double on Silvermane across the vast wasteland. Scattered animal bones lie on the ground nearby.

KUNSANG: See those bones? It means wolves are around. It is dangerous. We need to keep going and find water if we can.

They ride for a long time. Kunsang spots a dilapidated prefab building nestled against a sunny slope.

KUNSANG: Look! A prefab hut! Might be water nearby too.

Lobsang looks over Kunsang's shoulder. There was indeed an old prefab building.

LOBSANG: If people lived here, there should be water.

KUNSANG: Smart! But it might be dried up by now.

### **74 EXT. DILAPIDATED PREFAB BUILDING - EVENING**

Kunsang and Lobsang reach the building. It has no roof. The door is smashed off. Window glass lies shattered everywhere. Probably left by a grassland rodent control team years ago. Lobsang dismounts first and peers inside. Animal and livestock dung is scattered inside. Kunsang dismounts and also checks.

LOBSANG: Livestock and other animals have been in here.

KUNSANG: We'll camp here tonight. Shame there are no pheasants around. Pheasant tastes way better than rabbit.

Kunsang takes his saddlebags off the horse, places them on the ground, and hobbles Silvermane. Lobsang unsaddles "Flower Deer" and brings his gear inside.

LOBSANG: Can you catch rabbits?

KUNSANG: I'll set a snare with this wire. We'll have rabbit meat soon. You gather dry dung. See if there's water nearby.

LOBSANG: Okay.

Lobsang takes off his outer robe, ties the sleeves to make a bag, and goes to gather dung. Kunsang starts to make a snare with wire, glances around, and heads in the opposite direction.

It's almost dark. Lobsang has gathered a large pile of dung. He returns with another load. Kunsang already has a fire going.

LOBSANG: There's water by the marsh over there.

KUNSANG: Oh, great! Get some more. We need it, or we'll freeze. I'll fetch water and check the snare.

LOBSANG: Okay.

Lobsang leaves with his robe-bag. Kunsang grabs his small blackened

teapot and also heads out.

## **75 EXT/INT. DILAPIDATED PREFAB BUILDING - NIGHT**

Night falls. A fire blazes in a hearth made of three stones. Steam rises from the teapot. Kunsang cuts the rabbit meat into chunks, tells Lobsang to put them in the teapot to boil, and skewers the two hind legs on a wire for roasting.

KUNSANG: Here, hold this. Soon we'll have rabbit soup, then grilled meat. Warm food, then a good sleep. Perfect.

Kunsang hands the skewers to Lobsang. He takes a small bottle from his saddlebag.

LOBSANG: You brought seasoning?

KUNSANG: Yep. Essential for the wild. Salt and spices make it delicious.

LOBSANG: Do you travel around all the time?

KUNSANG: Have to. I'm a wandering herder. Drifting, but feels free. It's okay. Here, give it back.

He takes the skewers back.

KUNSANG: But I might get married by year's end. After that, responsibilities. Can't wander anymore.

Kunsang glances at Lobsang, turning the rabbit legs over the fire. Rabbit fat drips, sizzling on the coals. A rich aroma fills the air. Lobsang swallowed.

LOBSANG: Why aren't you married yet at your age?

KUNSANG: Reasons. Besides, I'm not that old. Only 27.

The meat in the teapot begins to bubble, but isn't fully cooked yet. Lobsang stares hungrily at the roasting meat. He feels a hunger like never before.

LOBSANG: Ready yet? Can I eat?

KUNSANG: Almost.

Kunsang hands Lobsang a roasted leg.

KUNSANG: Eat. Have some soup later. Guaranteed sleep till dawn.

They eat the legs and finish all the boiled meat and soup in the teapot.

KUNSANG: Well? Full?

LOBSANG: Almost.

KUNSANG: Your stomach's full, but your mind isn't satisfied.

LOBSANG: Then let's catch another one tomorrow.

KUNSANG: Tomorrow I need to go towards the Sunny Side of Niha. I'll be back the day after for sure.

LOBSANG: What's in the Sunny Side of Niha? Giving up on the horses?

KUNSANG: Important business. Maybe my friend already found the herd.

LOBSANG: What important business?

Kunsang hesitates slightly, then continues.

KUNSANG: Tell you the truth. I'm not looking for horses. I've been guiding the State Grid construction crew these days. Job's almost done, so I left early. Going to see someone important.

LOBSANG: You left early? What if they get lost in the mountains?

KUNSANG: It's fine. There's a cook, a local guy. He can lead them back.

LOBSANG: Oh, right.

KUNSANG: Do you have someone you like?

Lobsang smiles faintly and stays silent.

KUNSANG: You're young. But you will someday.



Hearing Kunsang is going to see someone important, Lobsang thinks of his sister preparing for marriage. His mood suddenly drops. Just then, Kunsang takes out his phone, turns it on. Still no signal.

LOBSANG: You have a phone?

KUNSANG: No signal at all. Don't you carry one?

LOBSANG: No signal in the mountains. Didn't bring it.

KUNSANG: Mm, makes sense.

Full and satisfied, they use their robes as blankets and lie down. When the dung fire is almost out, Kunsang gets up and adds more yak dung. Lobsang also turns to watch the fire.

KUNSANG: You're not asleep?

LOBSANG: Mm, can't sleep.

He looks up at the night sky.

KUNSANG: You're not scared, are you?

LOBSANG: No.

KUNSANG: With me here, don't be afraid. I'm the king of the wilderness.

Lobsang stays silent.

KUNSANG: Cold?

Lobsang: No.

A period of silence.

Lobsang gazes at the stars, lost in thought. After a long while, he asks.

LOBSANG: Do you know how far the stars are?

Kunsang is stumped. He turns to Lobsang.

KUNSANG: No idea. Really far, I guess.

LOBSANG: You must see them very clearly from the Himalayas.

KUNSANG: Himalayas?

LOBSANG: Yeah, the world's highest mountains.

KUNSANG: Isn't Mount Everest the highest peak?

LOBSANG: Everest is the highest point of the Himalayas.

KUNSANG: You know a lot. You're a student, right?

LOBSANG: Went to school before. Stopped later.

KUNSANG: Why?

LOBSANG: Didn't want to. Hey, have you heard of Dongri Sacred Mountain?

KUNSANG: I think I have. Dongri Sacred Mountain is a famous holy mountain around here. Especially for men, you have to go there before you turn 18. Looks like you haven't been.

LOBSANG: I'm far from that. Where is it? Far?

KUNSANG: On horseback, a day west of here. Walking, maybe two days. You'll go someday.

LOBSANG: Oh, okay.

A pause.

LOBSANG: Have you seen vultures at Dongri Sacred Mountain?

KUNSANG: No, but...there should be. Vultures go where there's carrion. If there were carrion here, they'd fly here.

LOBSANG: Mm. Where do they usually live?

KUNSANG: Probably in caves on the mountain somewhere.

LOBSANG: Oh.

## **76 EXT. DILAPIDATED PREFAB BUILDING - NIGHT**

Early morning. Lobsang returns with water. Kunsang is still asleep. Lobsang breaks dry dung into small pieces and places them on the dying embers. He blows gently, but blows too hard the first time, covering himself in ash. The second time, he controls his breath, and the fire catches. As the tea water boils, Kunsang wakes up. He gets up, relieves himself, then comes back for a simple breakfast of flatbread and tea.

KUNSANG: Today, you search west. If you don't see fresh dung within a day, it means they didn't go that way. Come back here and wait for me.

LOBSANG: Okay. What if you don't come?

KUNSANG: I'll be back. If I really can't make it, just head home. The horses you're looking for aren't in this area.

LOBSANG: Can't go back.

KUNSANG: Why? Must find them? Will you get scolded if you go back?

LOBSANG: Not really. It's just...

KUNSANG: What?

Lobsang ignores.

KUNSANG: Okay, since you don't want to say, forget it. Just listen to

me, you won't go wrong.

After breakfast, they set off in their respective directions. Before leaving, Kunsang gives Lobsang the knife he used to cut the meat last night.

KUNSANG: Take this knife. Walking alone in the wild without a knife? You'd starve to death.

LOBSANG: Mm.

KUNSANG: I'm off then. Be careful. Goodbye.

LOBSANG: Goodbye. Hey, can I ask you a favor?

KUNSANG: What?

LOBSANG: Can you take a message to my family?

KUNSANG: Absolutely. Word for word.

LOBSANG: I lied last night. I'm not from the Shady Side of Naha. I'm from the Sunny Side of Niha, by the Tsechu River. There are three households downstream. The furthest one is mine. If no one's home, tell any of them.

KUNSANG: No problem. We're brothers now. I'll deliver your message faithfully.

LOBSANG: But promise me one thing.

KUNSANG: Say it.

LOBSANG: Keep my whereabouts secret. Don't tell anyone. Not even roughly where I am. Okay?

KUNSANG: Why?

LOBSANG: I'm not looking for horses. I ran away from home.

KUNSANG: I knew it. Someone searching for horses wouldn't forget binoculars and wouldn't keep walking into empty places.

Lobsang looks embarrassed.

Silence.

KUNSANG: But I still admire your courage. How old are you?

LOBSANG: Twelve.

KUNSANG: I'd never gone out alone at twelve. That much, you're braver than me.

LOBSANG: So you promise?

KUNSANG: Are you really determined to run away? Not going back?

LOBSANG: Not forever. I'll go back. But I need to be out for a few days, toughen myself up. Maybe go to Dongri Sacred Mountain.

KUNSANG: Then what should I tell your family?

LOBSANG: Tell them I went to see Dongri Sacred Mountain and will be back soon.

KUNSANG: Deal.

LOBSANG: Mm.

KUNSANG: Then go see Dongri Sacred Mountain and turn back. If you get there first, wait for me. We'll meet back here.

Kunsang thinks for a moment.

KUNSANG: Oh, the State Grid crew might come back north of Dongri Sacred Mountain. If you meet them, say you're my nephew. The cook is Phurba. You can follow them back. If you don't meet them, come back the same way. We'll meet here. Got it?

LOBSANG: Okay.

Kunsang gives Lobsang some firecrackers, matches, and the knife from his saddlebag.

KUNSANG: Take these too. If you see or hear wolves, light a fire and set off firecrackers. They won't dare come close.

LOBSANG: Thank you, brother Kunsang.

KUNSANG: No need. Be careful on the road.

Oh, and starting today, you can ride. Just don't go too fast.

LOBSANG: Okay.

Lobsang waves goodbye, watching Kunsang ride away until he disappears into the golden light. After Kunsang leaves, Lobsang packs up, carefully placing Kunsang's teapot, rabbit snare wire, knife, and firecrackers into his saddlebags. He stamps out the last embers and sets off.

## **77 EXT. WASTELAND - DAY**

Lobsang rides "Flower Deer," "Jade Deer" trotting behind. Today, his mood is exceptionally good. The guilt of secretly running away vanished. He heads towards Dongri Sacred Mountain as Kunsang describes. Gradually, as the terrain rises, the vegetation grows denser. The warm sun and cool breeze refresh him. He looks around from horseback, gazes into the distance, enjoying the wildness and freedom, occasionally bursting into song.

## **78 EXT. STREAMSIDE - NOON**

By a stream, he lets "Flower Deer" drink. Judging by the sun, it is well past noon. He takes leftover flatbread from home from his saddlebags, dips it in water for lunch. Just then, an airplane flies overhead. Lobsang watches it happily, shouting until it disappears.



“Jade Deer” isn’t ready to drink yet. Curious, it touches its muzzle to the water. The cold startles it, making it jump back. Lobsang laughs heartily at its reaction.

After resting, he fills the jar Bayintana gives him with water, puts it back in the saddlebags, and mounts “Flower Deer.” Worried she might sweat and get sick, he rides slowly.

## **79 EXT. CAMPSITE - AFTERNOON**

After about thirty kilometers, the sun hangs low over the western mountains. Lobsang needs to find shelter for the night. Rounding a bend, he sees over a dozen yaks on a sunny slope to the right of a grassy area. Thinking it is a herder, he is delighted. Closer, he sees they are wild yaks. He knows their temper; a slight mistake could provoke an attack, so he doesn’t dare get too close. But as a herder’s son, even with wild yaks nearby, he feels somewhat reassured. He finds a spot that looks like a previous campsite. The grass here is much richer than the barren land he’d crossed. He unsaddles “Flower Deer,” hobbles her, and lets them graze. Then, taking Kunsang’s snare wire, he goes to set a trap, placing it near a path after finding fresh rabbit droppings.

While he is gone, “Flower Deer” wanders to his saddlebags and eats most of his flatbread. Returning to find only a small piece left, he is dismayed. But exhaustion outweighs sorrow. He eats the remaining bread, then lies down leaning against the saddle.

Leaning back, exhaustion hits him instantly, and he falls asleep.

When he wakes, a gentle breeze blows. It is afternoon. His head feels foggy, and sweat beads on his forehead, nose, and neck. Hunger and discomfort make him reluctant to move, but he forces himself up to check the snare. He hasn't caught a rabbit, only a marmot.

Mimicking Kunsang, he skins and guts the marmot, nearly vomits from the smell and his discomfort, but holds it in. After cleaning it, he uses his lighter to start a fire and begins roasting it. The marmot meat smells odd. Impatient, he wolfs it down before it is fully cooked, barely tasting it.

After eating, his discomfort gradually fades. This was his first night alone in the wild, hunting and cooking his meal. His spirits lifts. Gradually, a dull ache comes from his feet. He takes off his shoes and socks. His feet are covered in blisters, some burst. He squeezes out the fluid, dries his shoes and socks by the fire, cuts his scarf in half, and wraps his feet. Then he goes to gather dung for the night.

That night, the rising moon is obscured by clouds. The surroundings are hazy. Occasional unknown sounds come from the darkness.

The firelight would protect him from wolves. This requires lots of dung and branches. Gathering courage, he makes several trips to collect enough, plus some dry weeds. Lobsang lights the dung ring around him, spreads his blanket, and lies down. He surrounds himself with a ring of burning dung, and arranges himself in the center.

Gathering courage, Lobsang makes several trips to collect dung and some dry weeds. He makes a ring with these and lights it. The firelight should protect him from wolves. He spreads his blanket in the center and lies down.

Late at night, nature calls. He gets up, walks a few steps behind the camp, and begins relieving himself. A huge shape suddenly rises and runs off! Lobsang freezes, trembling, urine splashing his pants. It takes him a while to calm down. It's just a wild yak.

Returning, he can't sleep. He keeps getting up to add dung. Gazing at the bright star in the western sky, he finds the solitude thrilling. Hearing "Flower Deer" grazing nearby calms him slightly. Eventually, exhaustion wins. He adds a large pile of dung and falls asleep.

Lobsang wakes and sleeps fitfully until dawn breaks. Relieved, he sleeps soundly, well into the afternoon.

## **80 EXT. DANXIA LANDFORM HILLS - AFTERNOON**

Lobsang crosses valleys and meadows to reach a barren area dotted with Danxia landform hills. Low, colorful hills flank the sides. Deep in the wasteland is a small lake, about 80 square meters. He sees no sign of the towering, snow-capped, eagle-wing-shaped Dongri Sacred Mountain Kunsang described. He begins to doubt his direction.

## **81 EXT. SMALL LAKESIDE - DUSK**

Lobsang dismounts by the lake. He lets “Flower Deer” drink, then plays skimming stones on the water, finding rare joy, forgetting his troubles for a moment.

Leaving, he eats the last small piece of flatbread from his saddlebags for a late lunch. Dark clouds gather on the horizon. Worried about rain, he mounts “Flower Deer” and rides on. Crossing a narrow wild grass patch, the land opens up. He scans constantly but sees no sign of human life or animals, only a few black dots far away. As he gets closer, he sees it’s a cairn of large stones, as if deliberately placed.

## **82 EXT. CAIRN OF STONES - EXT DUSK**

The distance to the cairn seems short, but “Flower Deer” keeps stopping to graze. He pulls the reins, lets her eat, then pulls again. It takes over an hour. The sun had vanished. The gloomy sky brings a sharp temperature drop. Snow seems likely.

## **83 EXT. CAIRN OF STONES - DUSK**

The cairn is larger than expected. While it wouldn’t block rain, it offers a windbreak. Lobsang decides to camp there. He quickly unsaddles “Flower Deer” and hobbles her and the fawn on nearby grass, letting them graze before snow covers everything. He hurries to set rabbit snares in nearby thickets, then gathers enough dry branches and dung for a fire while waiting for prey.

He should have been near Dongri Sacred Mountain by now, but

looking around, he sees no towering, eagle-winged snow mountain, not even a decent, small snow-capped peak.

Snow begins to fall, heavier and heavier. Soon, everything is blanketed white. He goes to check the snares but finds nothing. Disappointed, he returns to the cairn, boils snow water, and drinks weak tea to stave off hunger.

Near dark, he checks the snares again. Still nothing. Exhausted, he lies down and falls asleep instantly. In the middle of the night, cold wakes him. The fire is out. He quickly relit it and adds dung. He checks on the deer, but can't see them. Though scared, he gathers the courage to look. All is silent. The horses are lying in a nearby depression, sheltering from the snow. He leads them back to the fire, trying to get them to lie down and warm up, but they stubbornly stand. Helpless, he rearranges his bedding and lies down. Despite the time, sleep doesn't come. His hunger vanishes, replaced by chills. His earlier cold symptoms have worsened. Enduring the discomfort, he adds fuel to the fire, wraps himself tightly in his robe, and lies there shivering, drifting in and out of consciousness all night.

## **84 EXT. CAIRN OF STONES - DAY**

In the pre-dawn hours, distant howls echo – wolves, Lobsang thinks, but sounding very far off, which reassures him slightly. The snow also eases. Lobsang feels a bit better. He gets up, takes the knife from his saddlebag and tucks it in his belt, puts some firecrackers and matches in his pocket, relieves himself outside, and checks the snares again. Still empty.

Returning, he picks a small bundle of wild onions he'd spotted the day before. He remembers his sister saying wild onion tea could cure a cold. Starving, he eats half raw and boils the other half in snow water. Despite the foul taste, he forces himself to drink the whole pot once it has cooled.

Half an hour later, lying on his side, intense nausea hits him. Greenish onion water gushes from his mouth, followed by chewed bits of onion. He vomits violently before collapsing back down.

Time passed. Lobsang feels his stomach burning hot. He is ravenous yet feverish and sweating. Hallucinations begin: Kunsang and his sister Yangbe are beside him. Yangbe is by the fire making his favorite lamb noodle soup; Kunsang is roasting a pheasant nearby. Lobsang tries to get up but can't move or speak. He reaches out to them, but they remain indifferent, slowly fading from view. He realizes it was just a hallucination.

Clearing his head, Lobsang thinks of another way to eat. He stands up, stumbles to "Flower Deer," and starts milking her directly into the teapot. But he is too hungry. Halfway through, instead of boiling it, he drinks the warm milk right there. It soothes his stomach. He pushes "Jade Deer" under her mother to nurse. Feeling slightly better, he returns to rest.

Regaining some strength, he packs his things, deciding to head back. He doubts if Kunsang comes or not. He feels he can't search for Dongri Mountain now. All he wants is to get home safely to his sister.

## **85 EXT. WASTELAND - DAY**

In the heavy snow, Lobsang turns back, leading “Flower Deer” and the fawn. The snow is half a foot deep; every step is a struggle, burying his ankles. Soon, snow starts falling again. His feet, shoes, ears, hands, and face are freezing. He has to constantly rub his hands to prevent frostbite.

## **86 EXT. THICKET AND FOREST – DAY**

The snowstorm and gloom limit visibility to barely ten meters. He loses all landmarks. He walks blindly, guided only by instinct, feeling lost in a vast white void. He walks for a long time. Suddenly, a large thicket appears. He hadn’t seen this on his way in. He fears he is lost. He stops, looking around helplessly.

Snow keeps falling. After a moment’s thought, he decides to enter the thicket. At least he could make a fire there. “The Deer” could eat twigs. He could drink milk again. Better than starving on the open plain.

Lobsang quickly leads the deer into the thicket. Inside, he spots a path, like a herding trail, leading into a forest. Following it, he might find a ranger station. Even if empty, he could shelter there safely for the night.

He walks on, but soon loses the path. The thicket is just the forest’s edge. The forest is deep, seemingly endless. Dusk approaches. He walks for nearly an hour with no sign of a station. Exhausted and hungry, the

deer move slowly. Surveying the area, he decides to camp under a large poplar tree ahead. He ties the deer to the tree trunk, then clears snow from the ground with his hands and feet. He gathers firewood and dry grass from the nearby forest to start a fire and warm up.

Once warmer, he goes for more wood to last the night. On his way back with a large bundle, he sees bird tracks in the snow. Occasionally, mournful bird cries echo in the forest. At first scared, he gradually grows used to the sounds and calms down.

After bringing back a large bundle of wood, he makes two more trips. On the third return trip, he sees a flock of pheasants foraging nearby. Armed with a stick, he hides behind a large tree, waiting. As they approach, he springs out and hurls the stick. It seems to hit one. The bird shrieks pitifully, and the flock scatters. The injured bird flies erratically for a moment, then crashes down somewhere. Lobsang rushes to find it but searches in vain, finding only a dropped feather. Giving up, he gathers more wood and returns to camp. Looking at his pile, he feels it isn't enough. He makes several more trips, clearing all usable brush within meters of the poplar.

## **87 EXT. THICKET AND FOREST - NIGHT**

Night falls silently. Lobsang arranges his sleeping spot at the base of the poplar. He builds three fires around the tree in a triangle, forming a protective barrier for himself and the deer. This requires far more wood than he can gather. Exhausted, he sits leaning against the tree after finally gathering what he hopes is enough.



Lobsang half-reclines against the tree. The fire warms him. But another problem has arisen: he hadn't eaten all day except for the morning's milk. Hunger gnaws at him. He has to ask "Flower Deer" again. Too weak to milk her and boil it, he crawls over and kneels beneath her, suckling directly. "Flower Deer" stands patiently for a while, but Lobsang soon stops, remembering "Jade Deer" needs milk too. The warm milk in his stomach brings some comfort and energy.

He adds wood to the fires, rearranges his blanket, leans back against the saddle, and sighs deeply. Looking up at the grey sky, he sees that the snow has nearly stopped. His tense nerves relax slightly. Only then does he feel his feet are freezing, soaked through. He takes off his shoes and socks, places the insoles on sticks near the fire to dry, and moves the blanket and saddle closer, barefoot. He picks up a thicker log to rest his feet on while warming them, but his right foot lands squarely on a sharp splinter! He screams in pain and falls. Gritting his teeth, he pulls out the splinter. Blood stains his entire foot sole. Pain and fear bring cold sweat to his forehead.

Lobsang crawls to his saddlebags, takes out the torn scarf he'd used earlier, and bandages his foot tightly. He tries to stand to add wood to the fires but wobbles dangerously. Finding a sturdy branch to use as a crutch, he limps painfully to each fire, adding fuel.

As he turns back from the last fire, he hears movement behind him. In the darkness beyond the firelight, he senses a hidden danger approaching. Tension snaps him to full alert. He can even hear the scrape of his back against the poplar bark as he stands up, trembling. Slowly, he draws the knife from his belt, ready. "Flower Deer" also senses danger,

straining against her tether. “Jade Deer” becomes restless, too. Lobsang calls their names softly, trying to calm them.

Moments later, soft “hrrr, hrrr” sounds grow closer. Suddenly, a group of dark shapes rush past through the darkness just beyond the firelight — a low, continuous rumble of many feet, like machinery. Lobsang can’t see clearly, but the sound suggests wild boars. He knows they are dangerous, too. Overwhelmed by fear, Lobsang grabs a half-burnt brand from the nearest fire and throws it towards the sound. The boars are already gone, crashing away. Only the crackle of the brand landing in the snowy brush breaks the silence. He grabs another burning log, then five or six more, throwing them wildly in different directions. Bushes ignite, casting a fiery red glow over the camp, offering Lobsang and the deer fleeting comfort. The fires burn down to the roots, meet the snow, and gradually die out.

Lobsang knows he needs a defensive barrier fast. Limping, he stands and connects the remaining piles of wood to the three fires, building a kind of nest-like shelter. It feels safer, but he still has to constantly add fuel. His only hope is to survive until dawn.

He starts counting: 1, 2, 3... up to 1500. Only half an hour passes. Time has never felt so slow. He deeply regrets running away, endangering himself and the deer. Yet another part of him feels this is a necessary trial for a grassland boy to become a man. He remembers the saying: “Survive great peril, find great fortune.” He prays silently and resolves to face this danger bravely.

This time, he counts to 3000. The fire is dwindling. Summoning

courage, he limps around adding wood. He returns to his spot by the tree, leaning back but not lying flat – afraid he’d fall asleep and be vulnerable.

After a long while, an idea strikes him. He sits up quickly, selects a long, sturdy branch from his woodpile, and uses his knife to sharpen one end into a crude spear. Gripping it tightly, he feels slightly more secure. He then moves closer to the fire to warm his damp pants and body.

## **88 EXT. FOREST EDGE - DAY**

As he waits, the eastern horizon slowly pales. His anxiety eases slightly. He gathers some tender twigs for the deer to nibble, then milks “Flower Deer” into the teapot and boils milk tea, waiting for full light. To his dismay, the overcast sky thickens instead of brightening. Lobsang quickly packs up, stamps out the fires thoroughly, and hurriedly leads the deer onward. Walking through the snow, he finds a winter pheasant, its head bitten off by some animal. He puts it in his saddlebags and continues. After a long walk, he realizes he is back near last night’s campsite. Panic surges. He doesn’t know which way leads out of the forest. He stands still, scanning helplessly. Suddenly, he has an idea. He mounts “Flower Deer” and lets her choose the path – horses have a better sense of direction. Riding like this for about an hour, they finally reach the forest edge.

## **89 EXT. SNOWFIELD - DAY**

Beyond the forest lies a vast snowfield. Lobsang rides “Flower Deer,” “Jade Deer” struggling behind, as they trudge forward with great

difficulty.

## **90 EXT. SNOWFIELD - MOUNTAIN SPUR - DAY**

Lobsang and the deer press on. Ahead is a long mountain spur. Crossing its curve leads to another open area flanked by east-west valleys. As they round the spur, Lobsang spots five or six riders about three or four kilometers away in the eastern valley. He can just make out their yellow hard hats – the State Grid crew! Seeing a lifeline, Lobsang urges “Flower Deer” faster, shouting desperately. But the crew disappears into the snowy expanse. Lobsang spurs the horse, screams hoarsely, but they are too far to hear. Overwhelmed by despair, Lobsang weeps. Tears and mucus freeze on his face as he rides on, the horse slowing to a steady pace, his sobs fading into exhausted silence.

Suddenly, “Flower Deer” slows, shakes her head, and refuses to go forward. Lobsang scolds and spurs her, but she resists. Puzzled, he looks around. Something moves in his peripheral vision. Focusing to the right, he sees it: on a snowy slope ahead, a thin wolf lies watching them. Scanning carefully, he sees only one. Strangely, seeing the wolf calms him. Fatigue and fear recede; his mind sharpens.

He quickly dismounts, calms “Flower Deer.” Gripping his makeshift spear, he leads the Deer forward, glancing back constantly to the wolf. Once past the wolf’s position, he remounts. This time, “Flower Deer” moves forward briskly at his urging.

Being watched by a wolf, even a thin one, makes crossing this open snowfield dangerous. If other wolves are nearby, it is deadly. He

needs shelter immediately, then to wait for luck, or to hope Kunsang will find him on his way back.

Lobsang rides on, searching the landscape. About a kilometer east of the wolf's position, near a valley mouth, he spots a cliff face. Looking closer, he sees an overhang – a perfect shelter. He decides to head there fast.

He keeps glancing warily towards the wolf. Thankfully, it remains lying down, staring intently as they move away. Lobsang flicks the reins, urging “Flower Deer” to trot.

## **91 EXT. HERMITAGE - AFTERNOON**

High on the cliff face opposite, a small hermitage clings to the rock. Inside, a hermit with long, unkempt hair and beard is visible.

## **92 INT. HERMITAGE - AFTERNOON**

The emaciated hermit opens the hermitage's small window. He breaks part of his food into thumb-sized pieces and places them on the sill as an offering. As he finishes and is about to close the window, he sees Lobsang and the Deer on the snowfield below. At first, he thinks it a trick of the eye. He looks again. Then he spots the wolf on the slope. A ripple disturbs his calm mind. After a moment's thought, he closes the window, sits down cross-legged, and resumes his meditation.

### **93 EXT. CLIFF FACE - AFTERNOON**

After about thirty minutes, they reach the cliff face. Bushes grow along one side - firewood! Relieved, Lobsang unsaddles “Flower Deer.” He takes his torn shirt from the saddlebags and quickly rubs the sweat from her back to prevent sickness.

He surveys the terrain. Deep in the valley recess, to the left, is a crevice like a shallow cave. It seems made for him. He hobbles thenear a large boulder and begins the now-familiar routine: gathering wood and building a fire.

But the matches are damp from the snow. He strikes several, but no spark. Only two left. He strikes both together – a weak flame sparks but dies instantly in the cold wind. Desperate, he tries the ancient fire drill method. He rubs two dry sticks together furiously until his palms bleed. Still no fire. He tries another way: carves a small hole in one stick with his knife, sharpens the end of another, inserts it, and twists rapidly. Sweat pours down his face; his hands are raw and bleeding. Finally, smoke rises, then a tiny ember! He coaxes it gently onto tinder, blows softly, and a flame leaps up! He feeds it carefully with dry grass and twigs, then adds larger branches. Once the fire is strong, he leaves the cave again to find forage for the “deer.” He uses more branches and brush to partially block the cave entrance.

### **94 EXT/INT. INSIDE CLIFF CAVE - AFTERNOON**

“Jade Deer” is hungry, kneels to nurse. Lobsang uses his knife to sharpen over a dozen long sticks into crude spears, jamming them point-

outward into the brush barrier to form a defensive wall. He makes six longer spears to fight the wolf if it attacks.

Perhaps from exhaustion, tension, or hunger, sweat beads his forehead. He wipes his bleeding hands. Watching outside, he thinks about roasting the frozen pheasant. But it is rock-hard; he can't even skewer it. He gives up. To save time, he crawls under "Flower Deer" to drink the milk "Jade Deer" left behind. As he drinks, he freezes. In his peripheral vision, beyond the barrier, a large shape with a dragging tail moves. He looks carefully. It's the wolf.

Lobsang stops to drink. Trembling, he crawls back, grabs one of the long spears, and waits. Waiting is agony. Time crawls. He doesn't know if it is afternoon or dusk – likely afternoon. He stares intently, waiting for the attack or praying the wolf will leave. Suddenly, he sees it. It stands just outside the brush wall, even closer than before, staring cunningly at him. He stares back, gripping the spear, using his right foot to drag another spear within reach. In that tense moment, he can hear his own pounding heart. Fear and pressure make it hard to breathe.

## **95 EXT. OUTSIDE CLIFF CAVE - AFTERNOON**

Looking closely, the wolf is a filthy old animal, its hind leg visibly injured. Lobsang feels a flicker of hope, but the wolf's low and rumbling growl forces him back to alertness. Should he attack first or wait? Finally, he gathers his courage and roars at the wolf, jumping up and down once! The wolf flinches, almost fleeing, then snarls in fury. It charges! But stops short as its head hits the spear-tipped barrier. Lobsang instinctively steps back. The wolf charges again, trying to push through

the barrier. Lobsang roars again, bracing himself, and thrusts his spear at its head! The wolf jerks back just in time. The spear tip grazes air. Another thrust misses.

A long standoff follows. The exertion aggravates Lobsang's foot wound. Blood seeps into his shoe. Every slight pressure sends sharp pain shooting through him. Lobsang retreats, grabs the frozen pheasant, and throws it towards the wolf. Keeping his spear ready, he adds wood to the fire. Suddenly, he snatches a half-burnt brand from the flames and hurls it at the wolf! The wolf yelps and jumps back, then snarls, baring its teeth, still watching. The violent movement has caused its injured leg to bleed anew. An idea flashes in Lobsang's mind: burn the brush barrier to drive the wolf away. He hesitates – it is risky. The wolf watches intently from outside.

## **96 EXT. CLIFF CAVE ENTRANCE - DUSK**

Suddenly, Lobsang acts. He throws the burning brand directly into the base of the brush wall! Then grabs another burning stick and jams it in elsewhere. Enraged, the wolf lunges! Lobsang thrusts his spear instinctively! Once! Twice! The third thrust pierces! The wolf shrieks! Lobsang feels a violent tug – he lets go. The spear pierces near the wolf's shoulder blade. It bleeds. The wolf retreats with a low, pained whine, limping away to lick its wound a short distance off. Lobsang gasps for breath. They are locked in a stalemate, waiting for the other to break. Just then, a loud, guttural shout (a noise to drive animals away) echoes from the cliff top above! The sound startles the wolf. It backs up, head swivelling, trying to locate the source. That shout fills Lobsang with hope of rescue! Seizing the wolf's distraction, Lobsang scrambles back,



reaches into his saddlebags, grabs all the firecrackers Kunsang gave him, and hurls them into the burning brush wall! Instantly, the shout from above is drowned by an earsplitting BANG! BANG! BANG! as the firecrackers exploded explode amidst the flames!

Smoke billows from the burning barrier. The shouting voice grows closer. The heat and noise agitate “Flower Deer” and “Jade Deer.” Lobsang slowly backs deeper into the cave, spear still raised, eyes wide, staring through the smoke and flames. He can’t see the wolf. Did he flee? Is it a trick of the smoke? He blinks, straining to see. The wolf is truly gone.

Lobsang scans the entrance area carefully. No sign of the wolf. The shouting continues, drawing nearer. Lobsang feels a wave of relief but stays cautious. Even as he leans back against the cliff wall, he keeps the spear tight in his grip. Gradually, exhaustion overwhelms him. As the shouting grows loud, a figure holding a long staff appears at the cave entrance – the hermit. Half-asleep, half-awake, Lobsang watches him approach. The hermit gestures for him to rest, then places his own robe over Lobsang and moves the fire closer to him.

## **97 INT. INSIDE THE CLIFF CAVE - DUSK**

Suddenly, he wakes up, drenched in sweat. He thought he heard shouts — a man and a woman. He tries to stand and move forward, but he can’t rise.

LOBSANG: It’s my sister. She’s calling me.

The hermit thought thinks Lobsang is hallucinating. He listens intently into the distance but hears nothing.

HERMIT: You must have misheard. Rest now. When the weather clears tomorrow, I'll take you back.

Lobsang is utterly exhausted.

LOBSANG: Okay.

Lobsang closes his eyes and falls asleep. The hermit adds branches to the fire. Soon, faint shouts echo, growing louder and closer. Lobsang lacks the strength to stand. Leaning against the stone wall, he tries to call back, but his voice is too weak. The hermit helps Lobsang stumble out of the cave. The wolves have vanished. As the shouts draw nearer, Lobsang recognizes his sister Yangbe and Dargye's voices. Then, he and the hermit spot two riders — dark silhouettes on the snowy plain to their left. Lobsang tries to shout to them, but his throat fails him. The hermit calls out for him.

HERMIT: Hey! The child you're looking for is here!

He waves toward the riders. They shout back and ride closer. Seeing them approach, Lobsang sways with excitement, breaks free from the hermit's support, and collapses. The hermit holds Lobsang and presses his philtrum, trying to revive him. By the time Lobsang awakes, Kunsang and Yangbe are beside him. He finally sees them. Yangbe holds him, tears streaming as she checks for injuries.

YANGBE: Don't scare me like that! Are you hurt?

HERMIT: He's fine — just overwhelmed and exhausted.

Kunsang also checks him from head to toe. Thankfully, no serious wounds.

LOBSANG: I'm okay.

Yangbe hugs him tightly and sobs.

KUNSANG: It's nothing serious. Thanks to the master for saving him.

YANGBE: If not for you, Master, I might have never seen my brother again.

She sets Lobsang down and prostrates to the hermit.

HERMIT: Rise, no need for that. The wolf was already gone when I arrived. Last year, when I came here, it was the alpha of its pack. But it aged, the pack chose a new leader, and it was cast out. It's been roaming nearby ever since.

KUNSANG: Master, you must stay safe too.

HERMIT: Mm, no worries. It can't reach my place.

Yangbe pulls Lobsang back into her arms, stroking his hair.

YANGBE: You scared me to death! If anything happened to you, how could I go on?

Seeing his sister's tears, Lobsang realizes how reckless he'd been. Guilt washes over him. He hugs her and weeps. Watching them, Kunsang's eyes grow moist. He comforts the siblings. Once everyone has calmed down, the hermit suggests returning to his retreat. Dargye and Yangbe offer him and Lobsang dried provisions and freshly brewed tea.

YANGBE: Master, please eat something.

KUNSANG: Yes, please. Sustaining a retreat deep in these mountains can't be easy.

HERMIT: I've already eaten lunch. I fast in the afternoon.

YANGBE: Oh, I see. Then take some to have another day.

KUNSANG: Yes, please.

Full and warmed, Lobsang falls asleep beside his sister.

HERMIT: Since the child is safe and you're reunited, I'll return now.

KUNSANG: Did rescuing him disrupt your retreat?

The hermit stands up.

HERMIT: What matters is his safety. Everything else can be restarted.

YANGBE: We're truly sorry for interrupting your practice.

As the hermit walks out, he glances at the sleeping Lobsang.

HERMIT: It's nothing. If one retreats merely for retreating's sake, that's attachment. I must go now.

YANGBE: Thank you, Master.

KUNSANG: We're deeply grateful.

The hermit doesn't reply. Kunsang and Yangbe watch him walk back through the shrubs, leaning on his staff.

## **98 EXT/INT. Cliff Cave - Night**

Night falls. Kunsang and Yangbe decide to camp there and leave at dawn. Kunsang prepares the campsite and lights a fire for dinner.

Much later, the smell of meat rouses Lobsang. Yangbe is bandaging her foot. Kunsang hands Lobsang a piece of meat, which he devours ravenously. Kunsang and Yangbe smile at him; he grins back. They exchange meaningful glances — Yangbe refusing Kunsang's silent urge to reveal something to Lobsang. Lobsang nearly notices.

LOBSANG: What is it?

YANGBE: Nothing.

LOBSANG:

Are you hiding something from me?

KUNSANG:

No, what would we hide?

YANGBE:

You should thank him. Without him, I might never have found you.

LOBSANG:

Thank you, Dargye.

KUNSANG:

No need, brother Lobsang. We're brothers now — no need for thanks between brothers.

After their ordeal, Lobsang had warmed to Kunsang. He secretly watches his sister and Kunsang, hoping Kunsang is Yangbe's fiancé — the "Dargye" she'd mentioned. For a moment, he suspects Kunsang is hiding his true name. Lost in thought, he drifts off.

## **99 EXT. The Return Journey(Snowfield; Wilderness; Grassland) - Day**

The next morning, under the dawn light on the snowfield, the trio sets

off on two horses: Kunsang rides his own, while Lobsang rides behind Yangbe, leading “Flower Deer” and her foal.

**100 EXT. Wilderness Beyond Dongri Sacred Mountain - Day**

They ride across the wilderness until the majestic Dongri Sacred Mountain comes into view.

LOBSANG: Look! That must be Dongri Sacred Mountain!

KUNSANG: See? Just as I described. Doesn’t it look like a garuda spreading its wings?

YANGBE: It’s especially beautiful today.

LOBSANG: It’s so high! Kunsang, have you climbed to its peak?

KUNSANG: Several times. Five, I think.

LOBSANG: Sister, what about you?

YANGBE: I’ve only come here — never summited.

**101 EXT. FOOT OF DONGRI SACRED MOUNTAIN - DAY**

The group halts at the mountain’s base. Kunsang and Yangbe remove their hats and scarves in reverence. Lobsang gazes up in awe.

LOBSANG: So tall!

KUNSANG: Lobsang, take off your hat to pay respect.

Lobsang hastily removes his hat.

LOBSANG: How long to climb to the top from here?

KUNSANG: Start at dawn, reach it by afternoon.

LOBSANG: So almost a full day?

KUNSANG: Mm.

YANGBE: Let's go. If it snows, we'll be in trouble.

Just then, Lobsang spots vultures circling the summit.

LOBSANG: Look — vultures! That little one might be there too!

KUNSANG: There is a smaller one!

YANGBE: Now Lobsang has no regrets, right?

LOBSANG: Mm.

They watch the vultures circle the sacred peak for a long while before finally riding away.



## **102 EXT. DISTANT WILDERNESS - DAY**

The three journey across the wilderness, far from the mountain.

YANGBE: Lobsang, when summer break comes next year, let's return and climb the mountain.

LOBSANG: Mm, okay.

KUNSANG: It's even more fun in summer!

## **103 EXT. GRASSLAND - DAY**

The trio ride across a broad, flat grassland.

KUNSANG: Brother Lobsang, feel like racing?

LOBSANG: Mm!

KUNSANG: Then mount "Leopard." Let's race!

LOBSANG: Okay!

Lobsang asks Yangbe to switch horses since "Flower Deer" isn't fit for galloping yet.

LOBSANG: Sis, I'll ride "Leopard."

YANGBE: Alright — don't ride too fast!

They dismount and swap.

KUNSANG: Ready, brother Lobsang?

LOBSANG: Yeah! Go!

They spur their horses forward.

YANGBE: Dargye! Race only to that pass — don't go farther!

KUNSANG: Got it!

Kunsang leads at first, but Lobsang gradually pulls ahead. Elated, Lobsang cheers as he races. It's clear Kunsang is letting him win.

#### **104 EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS - DAY**

Lobsang reaches the pass first and waits, eyeing Kunsang sternly as he arrives.

LOBSANG: You liar.

KUNSANG(DARGYE): What?

LOBSANG: Your name isn't Kunsang. You're Dargye — the one marrying my sister!

Kunsang (Dargye) smiles placatingly.

LOBSANG: You hid it well.

KUNSANG: That day, I guessed you might be Yangbe's brother.  
But I feared you'd reject me, so I didn't give my real name.

Both look toward Yangbe riding toward them.

LOBSANG: Fine. I approve.

KUNSANG: What?

Kunsang glances at Lobsang, who is watching Yangbe.

LOBSANG: But you have to take me to school.

Kunsang smiles faintly at Lobsang, then looks toward Yangbe.

### **105 EXT. GRASSBANK NEAR HOME - DUSK**

Kunsang, Yangbe, and Lobsang ride side by side across the twilight grassbank, laughing.

YANGBE: Lobsang, the school wants you back. Rest tomorrow and return to school.

Lobsang stays silent.

YANGBE: It's your choice. Stay home for a few days. Going late is fine

too.

LOBSANG: I'll go back on time. I...kind of miss school. Also, next break, I'm taking food to the master.

YANGBE: Mm, we'll deliver it together.

KUNSANG: Agreed.

Lobsang happily spurs his horse ahead, leaving Yangbe and Dargye riding side by side, chatting and laughing as they follow.

**The End**

# ***100 Sunset: An Excerpt and Q and A with Kunsang Kyirong***

Kunsang Kyirong

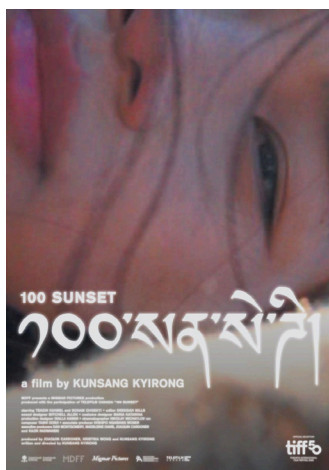
**Abstract:** Debuted at the 2025 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), *100 Sunset* directed and written by Kunsang Kyirong, was recently screened in international film festivals in São Paulo, Tokyo, and Dharamsala. This article carries an excerpt from the film's script, giving the readers a glimpse into the tender friendship between two immigrant Tibetan girls, besides a short Q and A with Kunsang Kyirong.

**Keywords:** friendship, migration, casting, production, visual language

## **Excerpt from *100 Sunset***

Kunsang Kyirong

(Translated from Tibetan by Tenzin Nyinje, Lobsang Tenzin, Soepa)



Poster credit Migmar Pictures Inc.

### 63 INT. ESL OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Through the doorway students work at their desks.

At the edge of the classroom a few students exit.

Kunsel and Passang stand near the photo copy machine, scanning pages from Kunsel's notebook.

PASSANG

Hold still.

PASSANG

Gulchok ma tong ah

PASSANG

འགྲུལ་གྱི་མ་གཏོང་ཅ།

Passang grabs the notebook and presses Kunsel's hands on the scanner. Keeping them from rising.

Kunsel looks at Passang and laughs, the light from the scanner illuminating her fingers.

Multiple sheets of paper print out of the scanner.

Passang goes through the printed sheets of paper. On one paper is a poster for an upcoming fashion show, the next is the scanned image of Kunsel's hands.

### 64 INT. BLOOR-YONGE STATION SUBWAY - DAY, LATER

The subway station is busy, packed with people. People listening to headphones, people holding briefcases, they move quickly, eager to reach their destination.

KUNSEL and Passang are in the midst of the crowd walking through.

PASSANG

(O/S)

Do you like it here?

PASSANG

Kheyraṅg dheyla kyi-po dhug  
wai.

PASSANG

ཁྱེད་རང་འདི་ལ་སྤྱིད་པོ་འདུག་པས།

Kunsel looks over at Passang, shaking her head.

The two girls can barely be seen, they walk down the stairs to the platform.

They enter the subway amongst the large crowd, cramming into the subway train.

PASSANG

(O/S)

Yeah, I know, it always takes a  
while, to get use to a new place.  
But, you'll adjust. You just have  
to give it time.

PASSANG

Ray ngay hago ghe yod. Sacha  
sarpa la gomya dutsoe tok-  
tsam gorkyi ray. Yinay  
kheyrang samtral majay ah,  
galar gom drokyi ray.

PASSANG

རེད། ངས་ཏུ་གོ་གི་ཡོད། ས་ཆ་  
གསར་བ་ལ་གོམས་ལ་དུས་ཚོད་ཉོག་  
ཅམ་འགོར་གི་རེད། ཡིན་ནས་  
ཁྱེད་རང་སེམས་ཁྲལ་མ་བྱེད་ཨ།  
ག་ལེར་གོམས་འགོ་གི་རེད།

INSERT DV IMAGE: SUBWAY/TRAIN

**65 INT. DV FOOTAGE, CASTLE FRANK-BROADVIEW  
SUBWAY/TTC - MOMENTS LATER**

PASSANG

(O/S)

Where did you get that camera?

PASSANG

Kheyrang the parchay dhe  
gawa nay raging.

PASSANG

ཁྱེད་རང་གི་དབར་ཆས་འདི་  
ག་བ་ནས་རགས་སོང་།

TONS of people are standing in the subway, silently riding,  
holding the metal rails above their heads to maintain balance.

From the window the train emerges from below to above ground.  
Outside buildings pass by quickly.

KUNSEL

(lying) (O/S)



I bought it.

KUNSEL

Ngay nyod yin

KUNSEL

ངས་ཉེས་ཡིན།

INSERT DV IMAGE OF PASSANG SITTING IN THE TRAIN NEXT TO KUNSEL.

PASSANG

(O/S)(CHEEKILY)

You sure you didn't steal it!

PASSANG

Ngonay kheyraṅ ghe kue may

wa

PASSANG

དངོས་གནས་ཁྱེད་རང་  
གི་རྒྱས་མེད་བ།

Through the window the scenery continues to flutter by.

**66 INT./EXT. CASTLE FRANK-BROADVIEW SUBWAY/TTC  
SUBWAY - MOMENTS LATER**

Outside the landscape passes by quickly; trees; buildings; parking lots. The train enters below ground as quick as it emerged.

PASSANG

(O/S)

I have no photographs from when I  
was younger. I don't even know

what I looked like when I was a kid.

PASSANG

Ngarang la chungdue kabkyi  
par may. Chungdue kab su  
nga-rang gha-dra yod mey ha  
gokey may.

PASSANG

ང་རང་ལ་ཚུང་དུས་སྐབས་ཀྱི་  
པར་མེད། ཚུང་དུས་སྐབས་སུ  
ང་རང་ག་འདྲ་ཡོད་མེད་ཏེ་  
གོ་གི་མེད།

PASSANG

(O/S)

It's no big deal. It's probably  
more trouble than what it's worth.

PASSANG

Naygak chenpo dhedra gal  
maray. Phalchar dheer tse-  
thong lay nyokthra chewazz  
yodkyi ray.

PASSANG

གནད་འགག་ཆེན་པོ་འདི་འདྲ་གང་  
མ་རེད། སལ་ཆེར་བཅི་  
མཐོང་ལས་སྟོན་པ་ཆེ་བ་  
ཡོད་ཀྱི་རེད།

PASSANG

(O/S)

Let's go eat something.

PASSANG

Dha chig zaka droko.

PASSANG

ང་ཆོ་ཅིག་ཟ་ག་འགྲོ།

People start to shuffle out of the train. Passang pulls Kunsel  
through, getting lost in the crowd.

**67 INT. DV FOOTAGE, KOREAN RESTAURANT - DAY,  
MOMENTS  
LATER**

Passang shoves food into her mouth.

She grabs the camera from Kunsel and turns it around.

Kunsel takes a bite of the long slippery noodles at the end of her fork.



Left to right: Lead actresses Tenzin Kunsel who plays 'Kunsel' and Sonam Choeyki who plays 'Passang'. Photo credit Migmar Pictures Inc.

## **Q and A with Kunsang Kyirong**

**Q Your debut film *100 Sunset* is outstanding for its humanizing tendency, for how the viewers are left feeling for both the victim and the victimizer, their roles flipping in between. How do you achieve that?**

**A** I don't look at any of the characters in *100 Sunset* strictly as a victim or a victimizer. What was most important to me during the writing stage was resisting judgment and, hopefully, finding something human in both the so-called "victim" and "victimizer." The shifting identification isn't a trick. It's, hopefully, a reflection of how people actually are: contradictory, flawed, and sometimes both hurting and causing hurt at the same time. I like Kunsel because of this complexity. She embodies both sides of these binaries, and that tension is what I think makes her interesting.

**Q Your film is also unusual for having Tibetan women in lead roles, and rather intriguing roles characterized by Kunsel's voyeuristic habits and Passang's betrayal of her husband. Tell us your motivation and the story behind women protagonism in *100 Sunset*.**

**A** I'm drawn to complicated women and the messy, often contradictory relationships they experience. I like their contradictions, the choices they make, the secrets they keep, and the ways they repress certain feelings, which then surface in their actions and decisions.



*100 Sunset* crew filming in Parkdale on a winter day.

Photo credit Jamyang Kunga Tenzin

**Q The film’s directional minimalism, with its observational storytelling, is striking. Could you talk about your approach to the film’s visual language, especially the use of banal as well as buddhist objects for nonverbal dialogues?**

A Cinematographer Nikolay Michaylov and I began shaping the film’s visual language early in the process. From the start, we knew we wanted to create a sense of observation, almost like the viewer is quietly looking in. To achieve this, we often framed shots through objects, over people’s shoulders, or from behind doorways, windows, and mirrors. This approach gave the film an observational and voyeuristic quality.

Regarding the Buddhist objects, all of the interiors were real homes belonging to Tibetan families in the West Lodge apartment

complex. Many of the Buddhist items you see on screen were already part of these homes, and we kept them in place as an essential part of the production design. Their presence naturally contributed to the film's sense of lived-in authenticity.

**Q Let's talk about casting and your preparation of the first-time actors for the film. Did you exercise restraint or allow improvisations to achieve such great intimacy between the characters and their performance?**

**A** The casting process was one of my favourite parts of pre-production. We held auditions at a local Tibetan cultural center with the support of my friends Chemi Lhamo and Associate Producer and Buddhist monk Khenpo Ngawang Woser. Through these auditions, we found our secondary cast. The film's two leads, Kunsel and Passang, were cast through a more serendipitous process. Kunsel is the daughter of a friend of Khenpo Ngawang Woser, and Passang was a server at a Parkdale Tibetan restaurant I visited often.

I worked with each girl separately for some time before introducing them to each other. For a full year, I spent one day every weekend with them. We watched movies together, explored the city, and rehearsed scenes as I slowly got to know them. The development of the characters drew on qualities they already possessed. Kunsel, for example, naturally brought a sense of restraint due to her shyness. During production we occasionally improvised dialogue when something felt stiff, but the film remained fully scripted.

**Q In one of your interviews, you mention the Tibetan community**

**money-lending circle, *dhukuti*, as the scaffolding of the film. What a strong scaffolding! How did you tap into this financial practice for your cinematic storytelling without making it look expository?**

A I wanted *dhukuti* to exist in the background, much like the building itself blends into the environment, allowing the relationship between the two young women to take center stage. It serves as the system they enter, but it was never meant to be the main focus of the film. By keeping it as a structural element rather than an exposition point, I think it supports the story without drawing too much attention away from the characters.



Left to right: Director Kunsang Kyirong with actor Tenzin Kunsel  
Photo credit Jamyang Kunga Tenzin

## **Oral Tradition: The Life of Domley Sonam Wangyal**

(Documented and translated from Dzongkha by Tenzin Dorji)

**Abstract:** Oral traditions play a vital role in the socio-cultural lives of the Bhutanese people. Among the various oral traditions prevalent across Bhutan—such as the lives of Gelong Sumdar Tashi and Pemai Tshewang Tashi—the life of Domley Sonam Wangyal stands out as unique to its kind. This oral tradition is said to be based on a true event, passed down from generation to generation as folklore in Taktse village in Trongsa District, Bhutan. However, the lack of written records and documentation has hindered its wider recognition and inclusion in oral history. Therefore, this study used a qualitative oral history approach, which involved interviews, recording oral accounts, and taking field notes. The analysis of the data reveals the social status of cowherds and their fear of local spirits. A written document of Wangyal's oral tale can preserve it for history and help disseminate the knowledge of this oral tradition, its significance and some details on the way of life of shepherds in the area.

**Keywords:** Folklore, oral tradition, cowherds, local spirits, historical record.

### **Summary of Domley Sonam Wangyal's Life**

According to Ap Koto from Eusa village, the first expert, the oral poetry presenting the life story of Sonam Wangyal was transmitted orally from generation to generation. Since there were no public events where the story was narrated or performed, those who were willing to learn



had to personally request guidance from the experts. After the experts' agreement, learning primarily took place during the day while grazing cattle in the fields, and sometimes in the evening after dinner.

Ap Norbu from Taktse village, the second expert, said that although no one advised him, he developed an interest on his own and learned orally from two experts, Ap Koto and Karchung, when he was quite young. Further discussion with him indicates that there were no written documents nor multiple variants of the tale; the story was conveyed only through oral narration, which was either narrated melodiously, like singing a song, or delivered with normal speech.

He is concerned that this inheritance might disappear sooner or later because present generations are not showing a willingness even to listen to the story. However, I was fortunate to meet both experts and am grateful for their generosity in sharing their knowledge. The life story goes as follows:

Many years ago, there was an eight-year-old boy named Sonam Wangyal in Taktse village, Trongsa Dzongkhag in Bhutan. After the summer cultivation was completed, his parents prepared provisions and sent him to graze their cattle with their neighbors at the pastureland of Tunley pass, which is a day's walk from Taktse village. Around the ninth month of the Bhutanese lunar calendar, when it was time for the harvest in the village, Sonam and his neighbors started to drive the cattle back toward the village.

When they reached Domley Pang, a grassy meadow about a four-hour walk from Taktse village, they noticed that one helper from each

household in the neighborhood was waiting there to receive them, except for Sonam's family. As a result, he was left behind, waiting for his father while the others drove their cattle toward the village. Unfortunately, that night, it was believed that he was forcibly taken away by a local spirit, leading to his permanent departure from his family at a young age. The first time I heard this story, it made me feel a mixture of sadness and fear. Curious, I asked the storytellers about their experiences, and they explained that narrating it always evokes sorrow and fear in the audience. Many are brought to tears, and some even weep at the end.

Sonam Wangyal, being the main character in this story who was lost at Domley Pang, is commonly referred to as 'Domley Sonam Wangyal'. This story reflects not only the situation and environment of that time, but also social tradition, the love and affection between parents and children, the importance of cattle ownership, the fear of local spirits, the practice of child marriage, and the pain of being separated from one's family at a young age.

### **The Details of Domley Sonam Wangyal's Life**

Many years ago, in Taktse village, Drakteng Gewog, Trongsa in Bhutan, there was a tradition of moving cattle to distant places after the summer cultivation to avoid damaging the crops.<sup>1</sup> That year,<sup>2</sup> as the neighbors were preparing to drive their cattle to graze at the Tungley pass,<sup>3</sup> which is a day's walk from Taktse village, a cow named Lekpai

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1 Nowadays, the tradition of shifting cattle residences has stopped. Some oxen and cows that are not milking are driven to distant forests after the summer cultivation.

2 According to the narrators, there is no confirmation of the year in which this event happened.

3 La means hill or pass, and Tungley is the name of the hill, which is a one-day walk from Taktse village in Trongsa District, Bhutan.

Yangley Zom<sup>4</sup> was also excited about traveling to new places. She couldn't be controlled, even when tied with a rope.

The father of Sonam Wangyal, seeing the situation, said to his wife<sup>5</sup>:

“In the three-month summer season,  
When the artemisia flowers bloom,  
And the scorching heat arrives,  
In the fertile land of wheat,<sup>6</sup>  
Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom signals  
That she wants to roam the snowy mountain  
And graze on fresh grass.  
She refuses to drink water from a pond,  
But a river that flows down from the snowy mountain.  
She cannot be controlled, even when tied with a rope.  
It is certain she won't stay here at any cost.  
You, my beloved wife,  
Prepare the provisions.  
We must send our son, Wangyal,<sup>7</sup> to drive the cattle into the  
mountains.”

When the father of Sonam Wangyal was occupied with other work at home and decided to send his son with the cattle, the wife said to her husband:

“You, as his father, have only one son,  
I, as his mother, have only one son,

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4 Ba means ‘cow’ in Dzongkha, she is a hybrid cow called ja tsham (ཇ་ཙམ་) in Dzongkha, which was highly valued among the other cows, also played a vital role in this oral story.

5 The names of Sonam Wangyal's father and mother are not revealed in the oral account.

6 This land refers to the Zelong located between the houses of Aum Dolma and Aum Langa mo in Taktse village.

7 Sonam Wangyal was referred to as Wangyal for short.

Our son is still too young,  
He is only eight years old.  
I will not send him, no matter what.  
We can prepare provisions  
And ask the neighbors for help in driving the cattle.”

The husband replied upon hearing this:  
“As the saying goes, wealth should be kept with oneself,  
While children should be kept with others.<sup>8</sup>  
Prepare the provisions,  
Wangyal must go, no matter what.”

The husband decided to send his son with the other cow herders and assured them that he would come to receive the cattle on the way when they returned. While she was making tea, warming the wine, packing the lunch, and preparing other provisions for her son, Wangyal witnessed some bad omens and said to himself:

“When my mother was making tea on the stove,  
It fell down.  
When warming the wine,  
It overflowed.  
While packing the lunch,  
It was overcooked and burnt.  
Does this mean that Yangley Zom may get into trouble,  
Or that I may fall ill?

Rather than Yangley facing trouble,

8 Dzongkha proverb: ལྷ་རྩལ་དང་ཆ། རྩ་རང་དང་ཆ། is translated as: Children should be kept with others, while wealth should be kept with oneself. The meaning is that since children can be spoiled by taking advantage of their parents’ deep love, it is better to keep them with others, such as relatives, whom they would not dare ask for anything they desire. Regarding wealth, it may not be returned if entrusted to others.

I would prefer to fall ill myself.

I have witnessed these bad omens.”

Thinking about these possibilities, Wangyal fell into an unconscious state.

After regaining consciousness, feeling sad, he looked at Peldon, to whom he had been married according to the tradition of child marriage, and said:

“Although my mother refused to send me,

My father won’t let me stay, no matter what.

Ba Lekpai Yangle Zom indicates

That she wants to roam the snowy mountain,

Graze on fresh grass,

And drink from the river that flows down from the snowy mountain.

At the bottom of Tungle mountain,

Accompanied by other cowherders,

I must go, no matter what.

This is my duty,

Regardless of pleasure or disappointment.

Peldon, whom I met at a young age,

Take care of my mother,

Serve her well.”

Talking to his mother, he said,

“Until I return from the mountain,

Stay healthy, my mother.”

After asking Peldon to take care of his mother, he carried a wool raincoat over his nape and a milk bucket in his right hand, hung the horn

trumpet over his shoulder, and grabbed the provisions. He then walked to the wheat field, Zelong, which was about a minute's walk from his home, and released the cattle.

As he was driving the cattle, he looked at Lekpai Yanglek Zom and said:

“Ba Lekpai Yanglek Zom,  
We are heading toward the mountain.  
Soon, we will graze on fresh grass  
And drink from the mountain river.  
Now, move—move in procession,  
Lead us without distraction.”

While Wangyal was walking behind the cattle, his heart was filled with sadness, which led him to think about the situation as follows:

“Ba Lekpai Yanglek Zom is moving in front,  
Khi (dog) Takar Tenzin is trailing behind,  
I, Sonam Wangyal, am walking in the middle.  
My upper body is wet from the rain,  
And my lower body is stuck in the mud.  
I am unable to carry the wool raincoat  
My mother gave me over my nape.  
The milk bucket is too heavy to carry in my hand,  
And the golden trumpet hangs over my shoulder.  
So, I am moving toward the mountain,  
But when I look at the situation, I see that:  
First, I have not yet grown strong enough,  
Second, the sadness of leaving my parents weighs heavily on me,  
Third, there were bad omens before I left.  
When I see all these difficulties together,

There is no way to avoid feeling disappointed.”

When he reached Tangchen Pang, a plain area behind Taktse Lakhang, he saw his mother looking at him as he turned to gaze at the village.

She stood there, watching him intently.

“As I reached Tangchen Pang,

My beloved mother, in pain from being separated from her son,

Leaving work and duties aside,

Came up to the door leading to the upper terrace of the house,

Placed her right palm on her forehead,

And kept looking at me cautiously.”

When he was moving from Tangchen Pang, he said:

“Now, move and move in procession,

Through the way of Tangchen Pang.

When I reached Sangley Koem, the short rest stop,

I endeavored to blow the golden trumpet.<sup>9</sup>

I saw that upon hearing the horn, my mother felt unconscious,

So I couldn't continue it.

Aren't there relatives and neighbours?

Aren't there parents and children?

If you, parents and children, are there,

If there are relatives and neighbors,

I ask you to apply *zati*<sup>10</sup> oil to her right hand and massage it,

And place her left hand over your shoulder.

Please wake my mother from her unconscious state,

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<sup>9</sup> It is called um (ཡུམ་) in local language. The narrator Ap Koto said that a trumpet is usually made from a buffalo's horn, so mentioning a golden trumpet is a poetic expression.

<sup>10</sup> Zati (ཇའི་) is an oil-based medicine in Sanskrit that cures mania when applied to the external parts of the body.

Assist her to walk in the house,  
Console her in her gloomy condition.  
I pray to reunite with her without any illness or depression.”  
When Wangyal witnessed his mother fall into an unconscious state, he  
couldn’t continue blowing the trumpet and asked his relatives to assist  
her. He then continued driving the cattle from there.

As he reached Le Pang, meadow, he said:  
“Rest and rest,  
Ba Lekpai Yanglely Zom,  
Now, take a rest  
And graze on fresh grass.  
Though I tried not to gaze at my mother,  
I couldn’t resist it.  
So I must turn my face once toward the village.”  
Wangyal took a short rest there and gazed at his mother in the village.

He then said this when he was moving through Jade Drak (rock):  
“Move and move in procession,  
Move through Jade Drak.  
Ba Lekpai Yanglely Zom,  
Lead us without distraction, moving in front,  
Khi Takar Tenzin is trailing behind,  
I, Sonam Wangyal, am walking in the middle.  
Again, my mother has fallen into an unconscious state.  
Although I thought of returning a hundred or a thousand times,  
I dared not go against my father’s command.  
Rather, I must move forward, even with a heavy heart of pain.”



Although Wangyal repeatedly thought of returning to the village, he continued his journey, adhering to his father's instructions, and said this when he arrived at Gumdo Pang, meadow:

“Rest and rest,

Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom,

At the center of the meadow, Sershok.

Now, take a rest,

And graze on fresh grass.

Sit down, khi Takar Tenzin.

When I was supposed to have lunch, which was sent by my mother,

I could not easily lose the knots of *tore*<sup>11</sup> in which the lunch was packed.

After loosening it, the first share of the lunch<sup>12</sup> is offered to the warrior deity,<sup>13</sup>

To whom our forefathers have taken refuge,

To the female deity,<sup>14</sup> to whom our foremothers seek protection,

To the soul deity,<sup>15</sup> who is protecting me,

And to the local guardian deities,<sup>16</sup> who are living at these sites.”

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11 *Tore* (ཐོར་རས་) is made from white cotton fabric and typically measures about 1 meter in length and width. It is used to hold meals such as rice and dough without soup and is also commonly used for packing lunch and dinner while traveling. Today, it is almost entirely replaced by plates and lunch packaging containers, except on some occasions.

12 Offering the first share of lunch is *to phue* (lto phud ཐོ་ཕུད་), tea is *japhue* (ja phud ཇ་ཕུད་), and alcohol is *chang phue* (chang phud ཇང་ཕུད་) in Dzongkha. The first share of these is offered to divine beings through chanting and visualizing their divine qualities, such as protecting oneself from obstacles and evil spirits, as well as bringing prosperity.

13 The warrior deity is *dralha* (དར་ལྷ་) in Dzongkha, which refers to Dorji Dragtsan (rdo rje brag btsan རྡོ་རྗེ་བླ་མ་བཙན་).

14 The female deity is *molha* (མོ་ལྷ་) in Dzongkha, which refers to Tashi Wangzom (bkra shis dbang ‘dzoms བཀྲ་ཤིས་དབང་འཛོམས་).

15 The soul deity is *sogtha* (srog lha སྟོག་ལྷ་) in Dzongkha.

16 The local guardian deities are *zhidag* (gzhi bdag གཞི་བདག་) in Dzongkha. These also refer to Dorji Dragtsan and Tashi Wangzom, who are venerated as birth deities by the villages of Taktse, Eusa, and Tashi Dingkha in Trongsa, Bhutan.

After the offering was done, when he was supposed to take the lunch, he was not in the mood due to the lingering pain of remembering his mother and said to the dog:

“When I was making dough from cooked rice for lunch,  
Due to the memory of my mother,  
A mountain of pain was heaped upon me,  
And the dough could not be eaten.  
You, khi Takar Tenzin,  
Take this dough for your lunch.”

Saying this, Wangyal gave the packed lunch to the dog. As he was leaving Gumdo Pang, he said:

“Move and move,  
Move through Langley trail,  
Ba Lekpai Yanglely Zom,  
Gulp the water thrice,  
That belongs to the aquatic deity<sup>17</sup> at Gumdo Pang.”

As he arrived at Pholha Dzong, the abode of the local Tutelary deity Dorji Dragtsan, he offered him the wine and sought protection with the following words:

“The wine, sent by my mother,  
Is the nectar that quenches thirst on the way.  
I wish to offer its first share  
To the warrior deity,  
To whom our forefathers have taken refuge,

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17 The aquatic deity is Tshomen mo (mtsho smen mo མཚོ་སྤྲན་མོ་) in Dzongkha, which refers to Samdup Wangmo (bsam grub dbang mo བསམ་གྲུབ་དབང་མོ་). She is located in the lake at the Phuntsho Choeling Goenpa area, which is about one and a half kilometers from Gumdo Pang. Her abode is situated just above the lake.

To the female deity, to whom our foremothers seek protection,  
To the soul deity, who is protecting me.  
I place my warrior deity at the center of my crown.  
You, the local warrior deity, guide me on my way.  
You, the local warrior deity, abide on my pillow.  
I am moving toward the mountain,  
So you know my situation and look after me.”

He then left Pholha Dzong and moved toward Tungle pass. When he arrived at the bottom of Tungle pass, he said this to Yangle Zom and the other cattle:

“In the three-month summer season,  
As we came toward the mountain,  
We arrived at the bottom of Tungle pass,  
Where incense trees like small rhododendrons, miniature  
rhododendron, and others are growing freshly,  
And trees like firs and others are growing densely.  
Different species of birds are seen,  
Nutritious green grass is abundant,  
And the pastoral areas are soft and wide for roaming.  
Now, since we have arrived at the place with grass and water,  
Ba Lekpai Yangle Zom and others,  
Graze on the fresh grass,  
Drink the cool water flowing from the mountain,  
And be happy and relaxed here.”  
There, Sonam Wangyal set up a residence with his neighbors and  
grazed the cattle for three months.

Finally, when harvest time arrived, he, along with the others,

drove the cattle to Domley Pang, where one helper from each house was waiting to receive them, except for Sonam Wangyal. Wangyal's father sent him a message saying that due to his busy schedule at home, he was unable to come today, but he would come to receive him the next morning as soon as the rooster crowed. Until then, Sonam was to wait there. As the neighbors packed their belongings, separated their cattle, and drove them towards Taktse village, Sonam was left behind alone. When the sun was about to set, he uttered the following lines unhappily.

With the passage of time and the changing seasons,  
As three months came to an end,  
Autumn arrived, the time to harvest the paddy.  
Once busy with moving the cattle to a new residence,  
Driving them in groups, we reached Domley Pang.  
Helpers from the neighboring houses were there to receive them,  
But I, Wangyal, was left with no one.  
As they separated and drove the cattle,  
I, Wangyal, was left behind, alone.  
Every time I miss my mother,  
I feel the same disappointment, again and again.  
My father had promised to come for me,  
Yet, even sun is about to sink behind the mountains,  
And darkness is creeping in.  
My father had not arrived.  
This, I realized, was my father's trick.  
He had said that wealth is meant to be kept with oneself,  
A son should be entrusted to others.  
Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom,  
Could not be controlled, even when tied with a rope.

So I wanted to release her into the mountain,  
And you should go and look after her.  
When my mother was making tea on the stove, it fell.  
When she warmed the wine,  
It overflowed.  
I analyzed these bad omens,  
And knew that I, Sonam, would soon fall ill.  
Though I appear as a human being,  
I will soon become invisible, a spirit.”

Assuming he might be hunted by a local spirit at night, Wangyal asked the cow and dog for their protection:

“All the cattle are tied, except for the calves,  
You, Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom,  
Circle around and keep watch over me,  
Do not stray away.  
You, khi Lekpai Takar Tenzin,  
Stay close to me,  
And bark towards the outside.  
For I, Wangyal, am alone and dare not stay here.”

The following day, Wangyal’s father woke up as soon as the rooster crowed and hastily walked towards Domley Pang. When he arrived, he saw the mattress and bed where Wangyal had laid, but he didn’t find him. Upon witnessing the hoofprints of the cow around the bed, the father uttered these words:

“The sleeping mattress is spread across the bed,

The warmth of my son's body is still there.<sup>18</sup>  
Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom has left repeated hoofprints  
Around the bed.  
It seems like a bad omen when I see this.  
Where are you now,  
My son, Sonam Wangyal?"

The father was concerned that something might have happened to his son and searched for him in nearby places. When he called his name in a loud tone, the sound of a flute was heard from the base of Domley Cliff. Since Wangyal used to play the flute, the father thought he was at the base of the cliff. However, when the father went to check, the sound of the flute came from the top of the cliff. As he climbed up, the sound was heard again from the base.

In the meantime, it was 9 o'clock in the morning, the time to drive the cattle.<sup>19</sup> The father said:

"Now, we have to move, we have to move,  
We must move out of this place.  
As per the sun's rotation,  
It is time to leave this place.  
I have several reasons

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18 According to the narrator Ap Norbu, it is said that the cow and the dog tried to save Wangyal from the local spirit throughout the night, but the spirit finally took him away at dawn, just before his father arrived. As a result, the warmth of his son's body was still present.

19 The 9:00 AM time is not a precise or ritualistic time for moving the cattle. Instead, it works as a practical deadline. We must remember the historical context: people did not have modern facilities like torches or headlamps. If they left much later than 9:00 AM, they would risk being unable to finish the journey and reach the village before dark. The other reason relates to the local work habit. Even today, villagers normally go to their fields before or at 9:00 AM. This timing applies when they are hired by others for labor work. Therefore, getting late past 9:00 AM often means they must cancel other labor work commitments.

Why I could not come yesterday for your reception.”

Even after this request, Wangyal didn't come, and the father said to himself:

“Although I searched for Wangyal here and there,  
I could not find him.”

The father thought that Wangyal was upset for not coming to receive him yesterday, so he was avoiding him. However, he believed Wangyal would come later once he had recovered his mood. For the time being, there was no room for negotiation, and they could talk about it more precisely when they reached home. The father then picked up a milk bucket and drove the cattle toward Taktse village, with the dog following behind.

Around 4 p.m., when they were approaching Shiphug, which is not far from Taktse village, Wangyal's mother was looking at them from the main door of their home. She saw no one except Wangyal's father, the cattle, and the dog. The mother began to worry that something might have happened to her son, or perhaps he was following the cattle. She waited until they reached Tangchen Pang, and then it was confirmed that her son was not there. Overcome with anxiety about her son, she fainted from the tension.

When she recovered from fainting, she looked at Peldon and said:

“When they were approaching Shiphug,  
Wangyal was out of my view,  
But I thought perhaps he was following the cattle.  
I waited until they reached Tangchen Pang,

And then it was confirmed that Wangyal wasn't there.  
A mountain of worry was heaped upon me.  
When I saw this situation,  
Drops of tears rolled down,  
And I fainted once.  
Peldon, who engaged with my son when he was too young,  
Today might be early,  
As the sun is about to sink behind the mountains,  
And darkness is creeping in.  
Tomorrow might be too late.  
You and I should wake up at dawn  
And go to search for Wangyal.”

The mother continued, “I’m wondering whether Wangyal hasn’t come home out of anger or if he has gotten lost somewhere. If there is fate, we will meet him again.” Peldon also hoped to find Wangyal and bring him home. With this hope, they got up early and walked to Domley Pang.

When they reached the base of the fir tree,<sup>20</sup> which grew against the cliff in Domley Pang, although Wangyal had a deep love for Peldon, he couldn’t appear before her, as he had already become a spirit. When Peldon went to the right side of the tree, Wangyal went to the left, and when Peldon moved to the left side, Wangyal moved to the right. Thus, they couldn’t meet face to face. Peldon felt disappointed and said to Wangyal:

“Wangyal, my spouse since our youth,

<sup>20</sup> The narrator Ap Yeshe said that the fir tree, believed to be Wangyal’s soul-tree, collapsed long ago.



With the hope of meeting you,  
I rose at dawn  
And came here seeking you.  
But you, a human being,  
has already become a spirit.”

To this, Wangyal replied:  
“Since it was my father’s trick,  
I have nothing to say to my mother.  
From today, there is no beloved son to my mother,  
Nor spouse to you, Peldon,  
And no family to me.  
The fate of being together  
Has come to an end now.  
Peldon, my spouse since our youth,  
The decision to leave you  
Has left me behind in the spirit realm.  
Even then, if you need something to remember me by,  
Then bring my ring from the right finger.”

When Peldon heard his statement, pretending to hug the fir tree, she extended both arms and caught the thumb ring from his right hand. She knew that she had no other option but to bring the ring as a token of remembrance. It is said that Wangyal then disappeared, saying, “Now, our fate has come to an end.” Peldon also returned to the village with her mother-in-law, bringing the thumb ring.

## CONTRIBUTORS BIONOTES

**Christopher Peacock** is an Assistant Professor of East Asian Studies at Dickinson College and the fiction editor at *Yeshe*. A scholar of Chinese and Tibetan literatures, his other translations include Tsering Yangkyi's *Flowers of Lhasa* (Balestier Press, 2022).

**Dorji Dhatsenpa** (he/him) is a second-year student at Dawson College majoring in Literature. His favorite poets are C A Conrad, Louise Glück, and Ada Limón. In his spare time, he enjoys reading about Tibetan Buddhist mythology, going thrifting, and spending quality time with friends. He aspires to be a professor one day.

**Eva Leick** is a researcher, dancer, and dance teacher based in Austria. She holds a PhD from the University of Salzburg, where her research focused on *Khaita – Joyful Dances*. She has worked on the project *Ružake gila* at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. As founding member and dancer with the contemporary dance company *subsTanz* based in Graz, Leick regularly performs on stage. In 2024, she earned her certification as a Khaita – Joyful Dances instructor.

**Geshe Tri Yungdrung** was born in the Blue Lake (མཚོ་ལྗང་པོ།) district of Amdo in 1985. He is currently a doctoral student at the Dalai Lama Institute for Higher Education in Bangalore. He serves as an Advisory Board Member of the International Seminar of Young Tibetologists (ISYT) and is a member of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS). In 2018, he took vows as a geshe in Yungdrung Bon Monastery.

He became director of the Yungdrung Bon Library and organized the International Conference on Zhangzhung and Tibetan Studies. He has published twelve books, including works on poetry, grammar, history, and biography, and presented papers at many international Tibetology conferences.

**Gödod Norbu Amchok** (དགོས་འདོད་ནོར་བུ།) was born into the nomadic community of Amchok in Amdo in the 1990s. He is also the Chinese translator of *The Barkor Bar* (八廓酒館) published by independent Chinese publisher in 2022, also has forthcoming collection of English translations of Kyabchen Dedrol's poems.

**Jigme Yeshe Lama** is an Assistant Professor in Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta.

**Kati Fitzgerald** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Otterbein University. Her research investigates the intersections between artistic production, religious practice, frameworks of healing, and bodily forms of liberation. She studied at Tibet University in Lhasa and went on to receive an MA and PhD from the Department of Comparative Studies at the Ohio State University in 2020. Her MA research focused on female characters in Tibetan opera and her dissertation focused on female religious practice in the Nangchen region of Eastern Tibet. She completed a one-year postdoc at Yale University's Institute of Sacred Music and has been teaching in Ohio ever since. She is interested in theoretical interventions and creative innovations made by everyday Buddhists and teaches courses on religion, medicine, ethics, gender and sexuality.

**Kelsang Lhamo** is a Tibetan scholar and translator born in the southern region of Lhasa. From a young age, she studied under prominent teachers both within and outside Tibet, focusing on the Five Minor Sciences of Tibetan tradition. In 1989, she traveled to India to further her studies, receiving novice vows from His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. She spent the next decade immersed in the Geluk tradition, while also studying Hindi and the Vedas in Varanasi. In 1998, Kelsang moved to the United States, where she collaborated with Ringu Tulku on the Tibetan translation of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche. She later joined the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (formerly the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center), working closely with its founder, the late E. Gene Smith, to preserve and study Tibetan literary heritage. In addition to her archival and translation work, Kelsang has taught Tibetan language and literature to students across the globe.

**Kunsang Kyirong** is a Tibetan Canadian film director and screenwriter. A graduate of Emily Carr University of Art and Design, she won the award for Best Student Animation at the Ottawa International Animation Festival for *Yarlung* in 2020 and an honorable mention in the National Short Film Competition at the 2022 Festival du nouveau cinéma for her short film *Dhulpa* in 2022. Her directorial debut in 2025 received an honorable mention for the Best Canadian Discovery award during its premier at Toronto International Film Festival.

**Kyabchen Dedrol** (ལྷནས་ཆེན་བདེ་གྲོལ།) is a leading contemporary Tibetan poet, essayist, translator, literary critic, playwright, and novelist. Born in Chukhama, Chyokho, a nomadic community in Amdo in the 1970s, Dedrol is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of [Butter-lamp](#) (མཚོན་མེ་བོད་གྱི་རྩོམ་རིག་བླ་བ།), one of the most influential independent Tibetan literary

websites. He is also the editor of Tibetan language journal, *World Literature*. Dedrol has translated the Japanese autobiographical memoir *Totto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window* and the ancient Indian drama, *Śakuntalā* into Tibetan.

**Losang Gyatso** was born in Lhasa but has lived in the UK and the US since 1963. He started making art in the early 1990s while working as an advertising art director in New York City. Initially a process of reconciling his own identity and aesthetics, his work evolved over time from explorations of Tibetan petroglyphs, mythology, and Buddhist ideas, toward a more universal, abstract, and playful way of seeing the world that is perhaps both sensual and spiritual. His current project titled, *Happiness*, is a series of paintings that look at the ideas of change and interconnectedness and can be followed on Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/losanggyatso.art/>. Other recent works of fiction by Gyatso include [“Farewell Pass”](#) and [“Monkey Mind.”](#)

**Mridul Surbhi** (Philosophy BA, Social Anthropology MA) is a doctoral scholar and Graduate Teaching Assistant at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. Her work centres on the lived experiences of non-institutionally trained *amchi* in the Indian Himalayas. She conducts long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Kinnaur, Spiti, and Kullu (Himachal Pradesh), focusing on Sowa Rigpa knowledge transmission, ethics, nonhuman agents, as well as the impact of conservation-development paradigms and state policies. She has previously worked in the capacity of researcher and program coordinator with the Dalai Lama and Tong-Len Trust in Dharamsala (2015–2018) and is currently part of a local *amchi* self-help group involved in the collection and preservation of medicinal plants in liaison with the Spiti

Amchi Sangh Board, the Department of AYUSH, and other government agencies.

**Nawang Tsomo Kinkar** is an independent art writer and curator interested in photography and contemporary art. She holds a MA in Photography Preservation and Collections Management from Toronto Metropolitan University where her thesis explored 20th century British colonial photographs of Tibet through a collections-based project at the Royal Ontario Museum. Nawang has worked on research projects at the Museum of Modern Art, The Image Centre, and the Canadian Centre for Architecture. In 2024, she was the inaugural recipient of the TD Curatorial Fellowship at Winnipeg Art Gallery-Qaumajuq. She was a 2025 Writer-in-Residence at Forge Project and is the 2025-26 TD Writing Fellow at Gallery TPW. Her writing can be found in *Inuit Art Quarterly*, *BlackFlash Magazine*, *10x10 Photobooks*, among others. She is the new Art Editor for *Yeshe Journal*.

**Priyanka Chakraborty** is an Assistant Professor of English Studies at Sister Nivedita University, Kolkata, India. She graduated from Banaras Hindu University in 2023 and studied contemporary Tibetan narratives for her doctoral thesis. She is a recipient of Fulbright Fellowship (Wesleyan University, 2022-23) and Asian Graduate Fellowship (National University of Singapore, 2020). Her latest publication is a chapter on Tibetan Exile Cinema in *South Asia in Alternative Cinema(s)* published by Routledge (2025). She recently attended AAS in Asia, 2025 at Kathmandu and the ICLA Congress 2025 at Seoul. She has also participated at the Annual Meeting of American Folklore Society, November 2025

**Rae Dachille** (Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies, University of California at Berkeley) is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies & East Asian Studies at the University of Arizona. Her research addresses theories of representation and embodiment across the domains of Himalayan art, ritual, philosophy and medicine. She is the author of *Searching for the Body: A Contemporary Perspective on Tibetan Buddhist Tantra* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

**Rinchen** graduated from the Tibetology Institute of Minzu University of China with a bachelor's degree in history and later earned an MFA in Film Arts from the Department of Literature at Beijing Film Academy. He has directed the short film *Free Market* (2018). His recent feature-length screenplays include *Warrior*, *A Thousand-Mile Farewell*, and *The Wilderness Wrangler*.

**Sonam Chhomo** is a PhD candidate in Humanities and Social Sciences at Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, India, working on the intersections of oral narratives and space in the Western Himalayas. She is the co-founder/co-editor of RewaSum, a digital platform for archiving and publishing photographs, artworks, travelogues and contemporary writings from the trans-Himalayas. She has published articles and interviews in Outlook Travel, a creative non-fiction "Everything Happens for a Reason" in Terralingua magazine's Indigenous Youth Story Circle, and two poems in The Pomelo: Exploring Himalayan Voices. Apart from creative writing, she likes painting in her spare time.

**Tamdin Tso**, originally from Ka Chu kha, Dzoge County, completed her early education in her hometown before coming to India in 2018. She published her first poetry book *The Alien Moon* in 2023 and received

the second prize in *Yeshe's* nonfiction contest for “Raw Remembrances: Memories of My Father on the Banks of My Mind.”

**Tashi Bhutia** was born a Tibetan refugee in Nepal and received his education in northeast India.

**Tenzin Dickie** is the editor of *Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty-One Short Stories from Tibet*, and *The Penguin Book of Modern Tibetan Essays*.

**Tenzin Dorji** is a faculty member at the College of Language and Culture Studies, Royal University of Bhutan, where he has been teaching since 2014. He holds an M.A. in Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy from the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Varanasi, India. Tenzin has published several books and articles on Buddhist studies, as well as on Tibetan, Bhutanese languages, and cultures. His research passion lies in the field of living ritual cultures, oral tradition, and the languages of Bhutan.

**Tenzoni (Tenzin Tsering)** is a Tibetan-Filipino illustrator and artist based in Toronto, Canada. Known for her vibrant use of color and dynamic storytelling, Tenzoni draws from her rich Himalayan and Southeast Asian cultural heritages to create immersive artworks through mural painting, editorial and book art commissions, comic illustrations, character design, and more. With a passion for blending traditional techniques and digital tools, Tenzoni enjoys painting with gouache and aims to bring a tactile and striking quality to her work. The bold hues and intricate details within her work reflect her deep appreciation for Tibetan artistry, inviting viewers into a vivid world where traditional design meets contemporary aesthetic. Tenzoni received her BFA from



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**Tenzin Ju**, born and raised in Tibet, left his homeland at a young age. He studied at Drepung Monastery and the College of Higher Tibetan Studies in India, followed by University of Edinburgh and the University of Oxford. Throughout his adulthood, he taught the Tibetan language in various institutions including Thosamling Nunnery in Dharamsala, and the University of London and Oxford in UK. He also published the *The Manual of Authentic Tibetan* in 2018. Tenzin is a co-founder of Tib Shelf and the founder and director of Loplao (easytibetan).

**Tsemdo** graduated from Qinghai Normal University, majoring in English, and from the Beijing Film Academy's Department of Cinematography with a focus on Film Production. He works as a film producer and photographer. His producing credits include several award-winning films such as *Snow Leopard*, *Jinpa*, and *Tharlo*.

**Tsering Döndrup** is one of modern Tibet's most celebrated writers. The author of several novels and collections of short fiction, his work has received literary awards at home and abroad and has been translated into numerous languages. English translations of his work include the book-length publications *The Handsome Monk and Other Stories* (Columbia University Press, 2019) and *The Red Wind Howls* (Columbia University Press, 2025).

