



# HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

---

Volume 24  
Number 1 *Himalaya; The Journal of the  
Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*  
No. 1 & 2

Article 17

---

2004

## Tibetan Nomad Childhood

Karma Dondrub

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

---

### Recommended Citation

Dondrub, Karma. 2004. Tibetan Nomad Childhood. *HIMALAYA* 24(1).  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol24/iss1/17>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).





# Tibetan Nomad Childhood

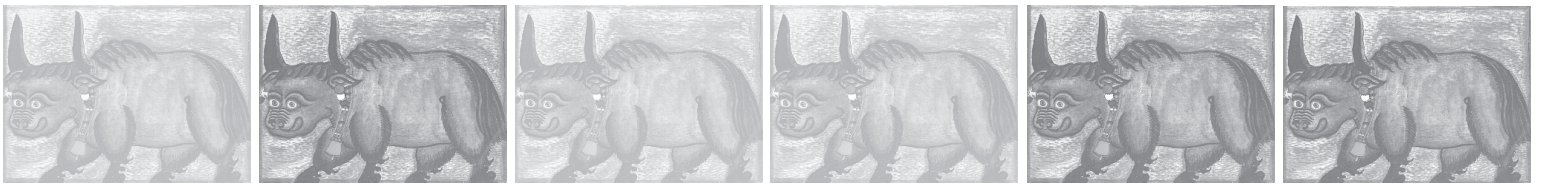
by Karma-Dondrub



Tents and herders, Eastern Tibetan Plateau

PHOTO: HAN JIANLIN

EDITORS' NOTE: See the end of the excerpt to learn about the author, the program in which he wrote his novel, and to find out how to download the entire work.



## Author's Introduction

**M**y name is Karma-Dondrub. I was born under Mother's robe in a black yak-hair tent. I can't tell anybody my precise birth date because Mother doesn't remember. No one in our community can tell his or her exact birth date. And deep down in my thoughts, I tell myself that if I knew my birthday's exact date, it wouldn't make any difference. What I can be sure about is that I was born in 1983 in a nomad family on a grassland so vast that a galloping horse can't reach the end before tiring out.

My birthplace is in Chendou County, which is part of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, located in the southwest of Qinghai Province about 800 kilometers south of the province capital—Xining City. We are Kham speakers while most other Tibetans in Qinghai are Amdo speakers.

### 1. Setting

Our summer pasture is located in the northeast of our county—Chendou. I can't tell you how many kilometers are between the summer pasture and the county township, because, traditionally, we count journeys by the day, not by the kilometer. If we start a journey from the summer pasture to the county town, it requires two entire days on horseback.

Much of my grassland family life took place in our black yak hair tent. A square floor is enclosed within the yak hair tent. In the middle of the tent is a stove that divides the tent into two parts—right and left. Traditionally, men sit on the right side of the tent and women sit on the left. But nowadays, women and men sit wherever they like. The stove always is exactly between the two supporting poles. Overpowering smoke continually soaks the roof pole. There are eight main stays: two for the back and front, two

#### About the Author

*Karma-Dondrub was born in 1983 in a nomad family, in Karwung Brigade, Chendou County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. He herded livestock beginning when he could walk until he went to school at the age of eight in the county seat. He began learning English in 2001 at Qinghai Normal University in Xining City. This is his first book.*

for each side and four for each corner. The poles hold up all these stays. Dried yak dung is kept in the lower left part of the tent to conveniently make a fire and keep it dry. Food and clothes are kept in the upper left of the tent. One or two beds are on the right side of the tent.

Before a family goes to bed, the family members chant scriptures together. Normally, the content is Padmasambhava's teachings. Also there might be scriptures praising Tara. Usually, the father begins chanting and other members follow. Chanting evening scriptures helps to have a better life in the next incarnation.

Our summer pasture is a boundless emerald land through which a pure stream flows. There are countless legends about the stream. Here are two my mother told me:

### The Incarnate Lama Mines Water

Several centuries ago, many streams bubbled through boundless verdant grassland. There were also little lakes around. When an auspicious day came, certain lucky people saw buffalos coming out of the lakes and grazing with the yaks. People said this was King Gesar's<sup>1</sup> birthplace. Each year, the number of yaks increased and some yaks gave birth to buffalos.

I was very interested in buffalos, because I had never seen any. So I leaned against Mother's robe to hear better.

At that time, people could move anywhere they wanted. About fifty years later, thousands of families moved with their livestock to this place. During the later springtime there was no grass for the animals, because there were too many animals, and the grass was eaten up in the early spring. Conflicts arose between settled families and newly arrived families. The two groups began fighting each other with knives and dog beaters and as a consequence, some died. They all were struggling for their lives, which was very understandable.

One morning, a venerable lama on pilgrimage crossed this land. He understood that much killing was going on and he wanted to stop it. He prayed to Buddha that there would be no water in this land. Several days later, his wish was promptly fulfilled. All the lakes and streams dried up day after day. The fighting stopped because all the people hopelessly moved away. This place was then empty.

In about 1990, when the government divided the land, that place belonged to us. Before we moved there some villagers worried about water. Certain villagers said, "In summer we can drink rain from the sky, in winter we can



melt snow for water.”

Some said, “We shouldn’t obey this order. If we go there our livestock will die and perhaps that old danger will reappear.”

Then an old man had a good idea. He said, “We should ask our local lama to help us have water.” Everyone agreed. This is what most Tibetans do when they have difficulties. It is an important part of our traditional culture that has been passed down from generation to generation.

Early the next morning, on the zigzag narrow path leading in the direction of a remote monastery, two men rode well-fed horses. On either side of one horse swung saddlebags loaded with butter and meat—presents for the lama. They vanished far into the distance without a trace. Since it was a great matter for the locals, elders stood outside their tents wondering if the horsemen would return with good news. Even if it was awful news, they were dying to hear it. This was the focus of the camp’s discussion. All the possibilities and benefits were discussed and rediscussed. Youngsters climbed the mountain in front of their tents and gazed far into the distance at the path leading to the monastery.

Later that afternoon, two speedy horsemen came riding the well-fed horses at high speed toward the camp. They told us that the lama said it was possible to mine water and that he would begin on an auspicious day. When that day came the villagers should hold a very big ritual that would help them feel happy. Then he would be successful in mining water. That evening, the villagers once again praised the lama.”

In my home place a lama sees everything, not just in the present, but in the future as well. When villagers have difficulties, they consult him for suggestions.

On a very auspicious day, all the camp men went to the designated place and participated in the ritual activity. The lama divined exactly where the ritual should be held and concluded that the ritual should be held at a particular place where there had once been a spring. He chanted scriptures while burning incense and offering ritual needs into the sky and burned some of them. Three days later, there was a stream. People say it is one of the streams from centuries ago.”

### **The Filial Daughter’s Tears**

Long ago, there lived an old couple. The old couple had a single beautiful and virtuous daughter whose beauty was

widely recognized. Her only duty was to carry water on her back for her family to drink. It was a long distance between her home and the place where she fetched water. It was impossible for old people to fetch water because of the long distance. But everyday, she fetched water twice—once in the early morning and again in late afternoon. So her family had no worry about having plenty of water to make tea. Her parents liked to drink tea more than anything else.

One day, a handsome young man was watering his horse when she got there. The man looked at her closely for awhile and said, “I’m the son of the chieftain of the East. One day, I’ll come to you and ask you to marry me,” and then he rode away. She filled her bucket with water and carried it on her back to her home. She told her parents what had happened at the riverbank. Her parents said that it was her good fortune to be the wife of a chieftain’s son and that she should wait for his return.

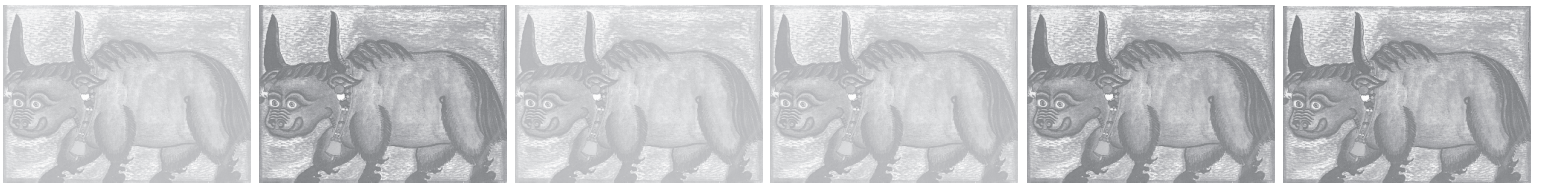
She replied that she dared not leave her parents and she would continue to provide water for them for the rest of their lives. Her parents persisted in persuading her by saying that it was local custom that a girl should marry out when the time came. And also that it was their dream to see her wedding party. Finally, she agreed.

A year later, the chieftain’s son still hadn’t shown up. Day by day, her parents were getting older and older, and they anxiously waited for him to come to take their daughter. But the daughter had no interest in seeing him.

One day, they saw a rider on a speedy horse trotting toward their tent. They all thought it was the chieftain’s son, but it turned out that he was the chieftain’s son’s messenger. He said, “Tomorrow will be the auspicious day for the chieftain’s son’s marriage. Before sunrise, the chieftain will send his people to get you. Please be ready.” The messenger left, leaving the three of them in silence.

The mother helped her daughter dress her hair while the father took out her best clothes. The daughter felt tense about leaving her parents. She thought, “After I leave them, how will they be able to get water? How many years are they going to live? Will I meet them again?” As she was pondering these questions, warm tears streamed down her face. “I don’t want to leave you. How can you get water if I leave you?” she said.

“Silly child, what are you saying? I fetched water for this family until you grew up. Now I’m still strong enough to carry water,” her mother said.



Young Woman

PHOTO: HERMANN KEUTZMANN

“Go child, go your own way. I never expected that you would help us but you helped us a lot. Father will pray for you,” her father said.

Her parents prepared her dowry and put it beside her bed before they went to sleep. She tried to get some sleep but couldn't. She thought, “Will I see my dear parents again? How will they get water?” These thoughts brought tears to her eyes again. She cried like a child and then thought that this would only make her parents sad. So she walked outside, sat near the tent and cried silently. She thought, “Beginning tomorrow night, I will become someone else. I will no longer be my dear parents' child.” Her tears, resembling prayer beads trickling off a broken string, delicately plopped into the soft grass. She wept there the whole night.

The chieftain's people arrived when dawn came. She left with them. When the sun rose, a spring formed where her tears had dropped the night before. Then the old couple had water near their tent.

## The Lion and Wild Yak's Battle

A wild yak once lived on this boundless verdant grassland. The wild yak didn't leave this place for many years with good reason: there was plenty of grass to eat when he felt hungry and a stream to drink from when he felt thirsty. And for all those years, there were no other beasts that dared attack him. Everyday, he proudly grazed among domestic yaks, as if he were the king of the verdant grassland.

One day, he saw a hungry lion drinking water from the stream when he went there. The presence of the lion kindled fires of hatred in his heart. The lion was not welcome in this luxuriant grassland where he wanted to spend his time. He rubbed his head against the earth and got ready to fight.

At the same time, the lion caught sight of the wild yak. He was very hungry and wanted to devour the wild yak in an instant. With a roar, the lion charged the wild yak. They began fighting. When they got tired, they drank water from the stream and then continued fighting. A day passed. Neither gave up. On the third day, the stream dried up. There was no water to give them energy to continue so they were too exhausted to continue fighting. Then they separated and went in different directions.

Three days later, the stream came back but the wild yak and lion never returned.

## 2. Dangers

Summer is short but beautiful. The meadows are dotted with wild flowers and the grass takes on an altogether new and richer shade of green in summer. The air is scented with the fresh and surprising odors of various flowers. We camped near the stream, lived in tents and kept the animals in the circle that we made with the camp to protect our livestock from thieves and wild beasts. Wild beasts are huge threats to both humans and livestock in my home area, especially bears.

### A Black Bear Kills a Woman (i)

Once, when a woman untied her yaks and drove them out of the open yak enclosure, she saw a black thing as big as a yak lying nearby. Although she couldn't see clearly in the dimness of dawn, she thought it was a yak that she



had left behind, and went to it. She beat its back with her slingshot. That infuriated it. It stood on its hind legs that supported its large awkward body. It was a black bear—a savage animal in my home area.

The woman who had upset the bear was scared to death, and unable to move. She screamed. That infuriated the black bear still more. It roared, rushed at the woman and slapped her with a paw. She fell to the ground, face up. The bear then peeled off her facial skin and killed her.

I was very terrified when I heard this story so either Mother or Brother had to accompany me at night when I was outside the tent.

### **A Black Bear Kills a Woman (ii)**

Some years ago, there lived a childless young couple. Everyday the husband herded and the wife did the housework. That area was full of such wild beasts as wolves and black bears. Every afternoon, the husband called his wife from his herding area to see if she was OK. Every time the wife responded to him. In this way, they understood they both were fine.

One afternoon there was no answer when the husband called to his wife. Feeling anxious and worried, he called several more times but still there was no response. He thought, “Something must have happened.” In the afternoon, when he headed to his home, all his yaks sniffed in the direction of his tent. He realized something was unusual. He quietly approached the tent. From the back of the tent, he peeked inside and saw a bear sleeping in one corner of the tent while holding his wife’s head. He caught a riding yak in his herd and rode to summon his neighbors that lived some miles away. All the young men soon gathered. Each man stood near a tent stay, and then they cut the tent stays at the same time, so the tent collapsed on the bear. Then they stabbed the bear to death with their knives.

### **A Bear Steals Sheep**

About a century ago, a poor old couple lived in our camp. They had no property but they did own some sacred sheep given by villagers. They were not allowed to kill the sacred sheep but they could butcher their offspring. Everyday, the old man drove his sheep to a better grassy place to graze. As a result, in the evening, the sheep provided more milk for the old couple.

Summer arrived and the camp moved to its summer

pasture. The old couple found no reason to follow the camp because they had few livestock, so they remained in their winter camp. From the night that the camp moved to its summer pasture, the old couple found a sheep gone from their sheep enclosure every morning.

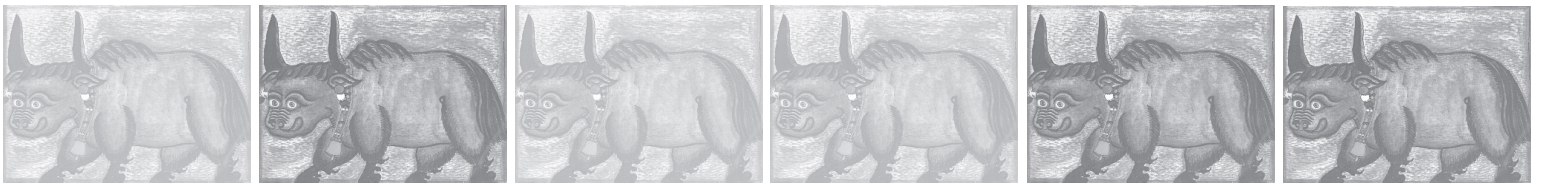
On the third day, the old man decided to stay awake all night to see what would happen to his sheep, but he slept before midnight. Because of the intense cold, he woke up around midnight and vaguely saw a huge thing moving in his sheep enclosure. All his sheep were gathered in one corner of the enclosure. He slowly approached the thing and patted it with his hand while holding a stone. With a roar, the thing ran away while shitting. The old man realized that it was a bear. Later, the bear didn’t return to trouble the sheep.

## **3. Kicked by a Calf**

My herding adventures began one summer. My family owned two hundred sheep, eighty yaks, and three horses. I was the main herder of twenty yak calves my family owned. Nomad children are inevitably tied to the great hardship of herding their family’s livestock. During summer we herd the calves and other yaks separately, because we need to milk mother yaks in the afternoon. If the calves are with their mothers, there is little milk later. Calves are the most disobedient animals. When they see yaks in the distance, they run to them with their tails straight up in the air. When this happened, I had to chase after them. Of course, they were much faster than me. When I got where they had paused, I could hardly catch my breath and tiny beads of sweat dotted my nose. I panted heavily, like a horse at the end of a long journey, and there was a bloody taste in my mouth.

Sometimes I couldn’t even stop them from scattering when there were no other yaks around. That made me burst into tears. At the time, I was extremely angry and I began to beat them with stones. I particularly aimed at their thin and short legs, hoping that I could break them but that never happened, because my immature body had limited strength. Herding calves was the most difficult thing I experienced during my childhood.

When Mother milked our yaks, she needed someone to help her untie the calves and pull them back as soon as they got a little milk in their mouths. I was not involved



in this particular task, but I was very curious about things that I couldn't do or had never tried. One afternoon, I asked Mother if I could help her untie the calves and pull them back. She agreed. I eagerly approached the biggest calf. As soon as I held the rope around his neck the calf jerked with all his strength, and I tumbled to the ground. I got up as if nothing had happened, otherwise Mother wouldn't let me to do this work again. Finally I managed to untie the rope, but when I pulled him back he kicked my right shin. The pain was sharp and I burst into tears. That worried Mother. She thought my right leg might be broken and ordered my older brother to call Tashi—an older man who had been our neighbor for years. He called himself a healing specialist. He was a doctor who cured people using religious methods. He had a very good reputation for healing people. He had never charged anything from his patients in the village, although he did charge outsiders a little. Sometimes villagers from neighboring areas came to ask him to come and treat their ill relatives.

I lay in our tent screaming loudly. He came inside and stood before me. He was very tall and looked ancient, yet there was high self-esteem in his gestures. He had a dark red face. He held a few small bags in his right hand and prayer beads in his left hand. He asked Mother what was wrong with me, while placing his small bags on a clean place. Mother said a calf kicked me. He laughed loudly. There was connotation in his laughter, but he didn't say a single word. My pain was gone as soon as I heard his laughter. I stopped crying. I saw his half-closed eyes as he approached me. My mind took twists and turns and I realized there was no point that I should be helped since the pain was gone. I said, "Mother, I'm OK."

To my surprise, Tashi didn't turn away. Instead he said, "Just in case," and took some herbs from his small bags and burned them, soaking me in the ensuing pungent smoke. After that, he held my leg and pressed lightly with his thumb. Next he gave me some Tibetan medicine to take. I said I was perfectly fine but he insisted I accept it, and I did. Mother asked him to sit and offered him a bowl of milk-tea. He sat cross-legged on a carpet near the fireplace.

"How've you been these days?" Mother asked.

"I've been busy all this year," Tashi answered.

"You should rest," Mother advised.

"No, I can't rest. Some patients are beyond hope without my help," he said. Actually, he was not a skillful doctor,

but villagers had no one else to call on.

"Thanks for coming today, otherwise I don't know what would have happened," Mother said.

"No, no, no, your husband is a very good person who has helped me before. I owe much to him. If you need help afterwards, just call me," he said.

Suddenly Mother looked at me and said, "Did you take the medicine?"

"No, I am perfectly fine," I said.

"No, do what Tashi tells you to do. He knows a lot," she said.

I insisted that I didn't need to take the medicine. But finally, I was forced to. The taste was very bitter and lingered for a long time. When I looked at the "specialist," there was a triumphant smile on his dark red face. I didn't know what relationships were going on between older people and I worried life would be complicated once I grew up. I decided not to look at this dark red man again, buried my head in my little hands and fell asleep.

## 4. Moving Camp

A dog barking woke me the next morning. I went outside. It turned out that the dog was our black watchdog. Father valued this dog more than a galloping horse. Then I heard horse hooves pounding the ground. I jumped and cried, "Father is back!" Father and my oldest brother had been away on a trip to our county town for almost a month to buy grain and other necessities.

From my local community to the county town requires almost two days on horseback. Father, my brother and several pack yaks and two horses were trotting toward our tent. Mother was collecting yak dung in the open yak enclosure. When she heard my shout, she put down the wooden basket and ran into the tent to warm the tea. When they got home, we unpacked the yaks. Father and Brother had bought needed supplies.

I was so excited with Father and Brother's arrival that I wasn't able to describe the adventure that had happened the day before, even though the words were in my mouth. I just swallowed them. Mother didn't mention it either. Father said that it was the right time to go the county town, because we would soon move to our autumn pasture and then the distance was very far. Father also brought news that the township clerks would come to count the number



of animals several days later for tax purposes. Father said that everyone in the camp should hear the news of the imminent taxation visit and told my brother to tell the news to every family head. The news spread very fast. An hour later, everyone in the camp knew about it. The old people decided we should immediately move to the autumn pasture to avoid the tax. Their decision was reasonable, since we had already paid taxes that year. The government had decreed taxes should be collected once every three years, but there was much corruption and policies often changed.

We moved at least twice a year. We moved from summer camp to winter camp and sometimes we had a spring camp and an autumn camp. We usually moved three times. Moves depended on the weather. If there was a winter snowstorm, we had to move to the spring camp, because in some parts of our winter camp, the snow did not melt until summer. If there was a summer drought, the grass withered and became fragile. Passing herds of animals broke the grass into small bits. Even the slightest breeze blew it away, leaving only the yellow soil. In order to prevent this, we moved to the autumn camp.

I was thrilled at the prospect of travel and I looked forward to the journey with a tremendous feeling of optimism. I liked to sleep out of the tent on summer nights, but it was impossible while Mother was at home. She thought that our dogs would attack me. During night we set the watch-dogs free, to protect our livestock from wolf attack and us from thieves and bandits.

The night before we moved camp we took down the tent to reduce the workload the next day. That night was the only sure opportunity for me to sleep outside in the whole year. I loved sleeping outside, especially under a cloudless star-sparkled sky. My older brother and I slept together whenever that time came. I remember those times clearly, because they are one of the happiest memories I had with Brother during his brief lifetime.

There is a star for each person. That night, I pointed to a very bright star in the boundless sky and said, "That is my star." I fell asleep counting the stars. Mother said if you can't fall asleep you should chant scriptures and you shouldn't think because thinking keeps you from sleeping. I have found that this is true.

Early the next morning, we drove the yaks and sheep to the new camp with our pack yaks and horses. Packing the tent was difficult. It required two very strong men and

a yak. Thankfully, in our village we had the custom of helping each other whenever a family needed help or found itself in difficulty. Our neighbors came to help our family pack our tent, since my oldest brother was still young. I needed to go after the sheep with my older brother. That day I asked Father to let me take Blacky—a guard dog—with me. Father refused because the sheep would be frightened if a dog followed them. Finally I agreed, since to argue with Father was wrong.

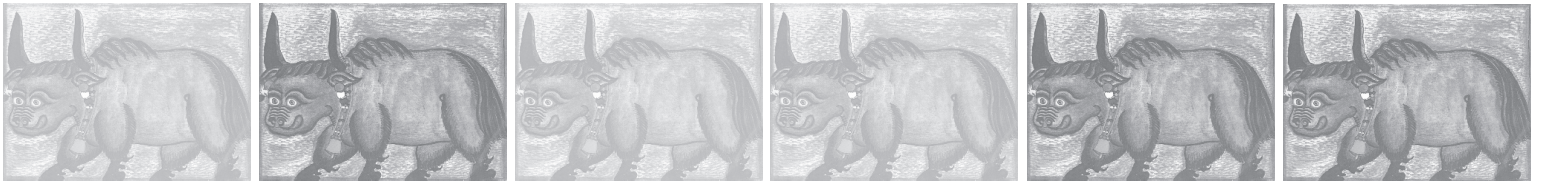


Boy in blue

PHOTO: TED SAVAGE

Mother told me that before I could walk steadily, Brother and I were put in wooden baskets and then loaded on a tame riding yak when we moved camp. I don't remember that very clearly, but since I was a child I have never been afraid of riding yaks and horses. That day, I saw my neighbors putting their children who were too young to walk for long distances, in baskets and loading them on gentle riding yaks. The baskets that we put children in are usually used for collecting yak dung. To do this, we first put a saddle on a tame riding yak, and then put a child in the basket. We tie the child's belt to the basket so the child





will not fall out of the basket. We load the basket on one side of the saddle and load something that weighs the same on the other side. If a family has many children, they may load two children on each side of the saddle. Some parents tell their children to hold the saddle while the riding yak carries them.

The scenery on the way was spectacular. There were strips of lush green pasture on which hundreds of sheep and yaks grazed sporadically as we herded them. The views were more beautiful and wonderful than anything I have ever seen. Occasionally, Brother and I caught sight of herds of deer and gazelle. I loved to see them stand nervously watching us approach, and then spring away on their lithe sinuous legs.

Looking far off down the river valley, we could see an open area surrounded by small hills. That was our autumn camp. We reached our destination just as the sunset's brilliant hues had almost vanished. The tents were quickly pitched and everything was readied. Traditionally, we use a turtle to make a circle around the place where the tent will be pitched so that the local mountain deity and the nagas in the new place will not cause problems. It doesn't matter if the turtle is dead or alive.

We drove the animals into their new open enclosures. Father counted them to ensure we hadn't left any behind. The counting was very necessary when we reached a new camp. When we lost animals, it was possible they would return at night. But it was quite different when we were in a new camp, since the animals didn't know where to go. When we entered the tent it was already dark. We sat around the cooking fire eating our supper by the light of flickering butter lamps and listening to the wind whisper outside. After supper we all chanted our evening scripture together and then went to bed.

## 5. Skinning a Wolf

Thankfully, the clerks didn't pursue us to collect taxes. Still, people lived with much worry because wolves bloodily troubled the herds, killing a yak or sheep nearly every day. This was uncommon. At that time, nobody in our group owned a gun. Elders had the idea to catch wolves with traps, but nobody did that until...

Dark clouds drifted over and obliterated the sun. A wind blew noisily across the valley as flocks of homeward-bound

birds flapped their wings like rags trying to free themselves from a line in a strong wind. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled as I herded sheep on a small mountain. I have always been very afraid of thunder. I yelled at the sheep and they gathered. They always huddle together automatically at such moments. I tried to drive them to my home, but suddenly a bolt of lightning sliced through the sky. I closed my eyes, held my hands over my ears and lay on the ground for some moments. I saw and heard nothing that made me feel safe. Once Mother said, "If there is lightning and thunder, don't scream because that will make more lightning and thunder." I didn't cry out and then torrential rain fell as the thunder died away. I wasn't afraid of the rain.

When I managed to pry open my eyes, I didn't see any sheep. Instead, I saw a dark rain-filled sky. I heard shouts from our group. I had no idea what to do. Should I go home or look for the flock? I really wanted to lie down again and have a big cry, but worry for the missing flock made me walk on. I went over a hill to see if my herd was there, but failed to spot any sheep. I only saw hills rising higher and higher. I was as wet as if I had just been plucked out of water. Suddenly, I heard someone calling my name in the far distance. It was my eldest brother. I responded with a mix of great excitement and shame.

Some moments later Brother came up. "I lost my sheep!" I cried out.

"Yes. The wolves chased them into a valley while you were away," he said.

I wanted to say that I was with the sheep, but instead I asked, "How many were killed?"

"Five," he answered. My Buddha! That was a big number. I thought Father would surely give me at least five heavy lashes that night.

"Does Father know?" I asked.

"Yes, he said tonight he would set traps up where the sheep were killed," Brother replied.

Father had been a hunter when he was young. He owned two Tibetan iron traps but he never let me touch them.

I was happy to hear what Brother said. I thought, "Afterwards, there will be no trouble from these wolves."

I asked Brother, "How do you know this?"

"Mother watched you and the herd constantly, so she saw everything. In fact, she sent me here," he replied.

I got home and found Father drinking milk tea from his small black pot. He didn't offer any comment. After he



finished drinking his tea he set out with his two iron traps. We believed that a wolf will come at night to the place where he kills during the day. Father didn't come back when it was time to go to bed. The tent was soaking wet and the ground in the tent was wet, too. We had to sleep on the wet ground.

Later, the lambs' bleating awakened me. It reminded me of my coming punishment, and the fact that the lambs' mothers were gone. I began to chant scriptures and soon fell asleep.

The next day, I didn't know when Father got up to check his traps, but I realized he had failed to catch the wolves. Father didn't say anything, yet I knew that he was angry with me.

This day the wolves killed a yak that belonged to the camp leader. He came to my home to borrow the traps and promised that he would kill the wolves. Father agreed. That night he also set the traps. People's shouting woke me up the next morning. I went out immediately. A wolf was trapped. The village leader was standing atop the hill, and calling people for help. All the camp men went to help him. I went along, too. I saw a big wolf caught in one trap. Gnashing his teeth, jerking his body, pulling his leg—the wolf was really in a difficult situation. From time to time, he trotted toward the people while leaping up and down. To my surprise a wolf didn't bark like a dog, instead it gnashed its teeth constantly. Then a man hit the wolf's snout with a hammer, and the wolf fell unconscious.

They tied the wolf's snout with a tight rope. It immediately regained consciousness. They began skinning it while it was alive. No matter how the wolf jerked and struggled there was no help for him. When they finished skinning, they set the wolf free from the trap, but didn't remove the rope from his snout. The poor beast limped away. I realized they hadn't even left his tail on his body. This was the camp leader's idea. I hated him more than I can say.

The same afternoon I leaned against the pole in front of our tent, looking at the deepening autumn colors. The camp leader headed our way with the traps in his hands. This kindled fires of hatred in my heart. My eyes ached. A pain grew in my heart. My body began trembling. I realized that I didn't want to see him again. I entered the tent and then asked my elder brother to take the traps from him. Until that moment, I hadn't known what real hatred was.

Father got back his traps. He had always refused to

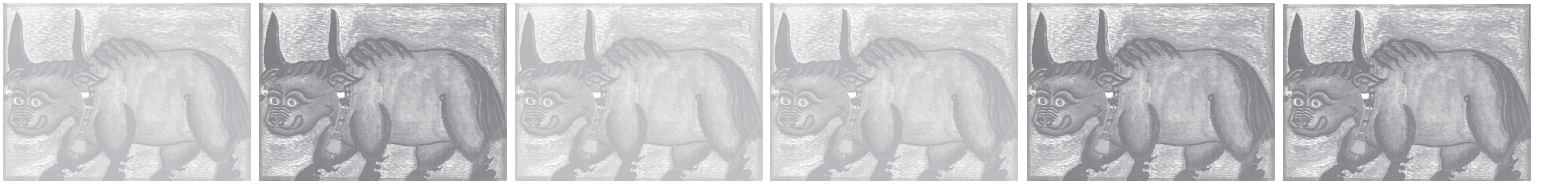
sell them when people wanted to buy them. Later that afternoon, he broke them with his own hands and threw them away. I saw great sadness on his face that day.

The next day, two yaks died in the camp leader's open enclosure without any sign of sickness. Believing that the activity the day before had offended the local deity, the camp leader came to invite the specialist in the healing arts—Tashi, who took out his prayer beads and a small book from his robe. The book was very dark, as though soaked by countless years of smoke. He closed his eyes and chanted something under his breath, while holding the prayer beads in both hands. Maybe he was paying undivided attention to this or the beauty of the scenery intoxicated him. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and divided the beads with his fingers. Then he opened the book and read something. He was performing a divination. Tashi performed two divinations and both showed something had offended the local deity. As soon as the camp leader learnt this, his face turned as red as the liver of a freshly butchered yak. He was afraid something would happen to his family members. He asked Tashi what he should do to appease the deity. Tashi performed another divination and concluded that a ritual should be held.

Led by Tashi, the old men dressed in their best Tibetan robes and held such ritual vessels as knives, bows, arrows, axes and swords. I was involved in the ritual, but only as a spectator, since the ritual required a number of spectators. As soon as the rays of the rising sun were just touching the mountain peaks, Tashi made up his face with yogurt and ash. He donned a four-colored hat (white, yellow, red and green) and played flutes and drums to the spirit of the local deity. He waved a white ritual flag into the sky. The other participants raised their knives and swords high in the air and walked around Tashi while shouting and yelling anything they liked. The place was alive with sounds. We spectators helped them by adding dried yak dung to the fire that they had made and watching them.

Tashi was quite exhausted at the end. He said he had invited the local deity at the beginning of the ritual and had just sent him back, while wiping sweat from his forehead. I hadn't seen the local deity dancing with Tashi, nor had I heard him summoned. That day, Tashi had shown that he was knowledgeable and powerful. Later it turned out that he once was a monk, had broken his religious vows and become a layman.

As a child, I couldn't comprehend all those things.



Instead, I felt Tashi was cheating us. But I was involved in the ritual, since I was a camp member, and a devotee of the local deity. When I returned to our tent, I took Mother's prayer beads, held them in both hands and then divided the beads with my fingers to see what would happen the next day, but I failed to see anything. I told Mother that there was nothing to see in divinations and that Tashi was cheating us.

Mother angrily said that people like me were unqualified to perform such religious rituals. She added that because of the little merit that I had accumulated in my previous life, I would never become a performer of rituals. I was very sad when I heard that, because I had believed I could do anything if I tried hard enough. I still wanted to invite the local deity to my home and have him change my dirty china bowl into a silver bowl. Some moments later, Mother went out to milk the female yaks. Taking this opportunity, I put yogurt and ash on my face, and dressed in Mother's robe. Putting her winter hat on my head, I began to play my brother's flute as Tashi had done that morning. From time to time, I closed my eyes and yelled out like Tashi had done. An hour later, I was too exhausted to continue, so I opened my eyes and found that nothing had changed—my dirty china bowl was still a dirty china bowl. Disappointed by that futile performance, I went out to help Mother.

## 6. A Bandit in Disguise

I don't know whether it was because of Tashi's power or some natural change, but the wolves' killing stopped. Nevertheless, a nomadic life inevitably has dangers that are like ripples on a pond; when one disappears another emerges.

It was still mid-autumn, the busiest time. Men need to go out to trade butter and cheese. Women did the normal housework while young people herded. It was also the time that animals are valued more than at any other time of year. In autumn, if you sell the animals they bring a good price. If you kill them, they supply nice meat. Female yaks also produce much milk. At least one person must be with a herd, otherwise thieves or bandits will drive the herd away. Thieves and bandits are huge threats to us in autumn. They always watch the herds. If they notice there are no herders, they will surely drive the herd away. Sometimes they even use violence to get yaks and horses.

On one occasion, a man from Shichu came to our community. It was in the early spring. It seemed that he had no family. Namjom brought him to his home and provided him food and clothes. After a short while they became good friends. The man helped Namjom to herd his yaks. He was a very good herder and always drove Namjom's yaks to the place where the most grass was.

Gradually, the man became a member of Namjom's family. That autumn, Namjom needed to go to the



Markham Valley Shepherd

PHOTO: BIRGET KEIL

township town to buy barley for the family. The Shichu man said that he wanted to leave and asked for a horse to ride on the way. Namjom asked why he was leaving so hurriedly. The man said that he missed his home place. Namjom thought it was reasonable to loan a horse to the man, since he had helped his family for months. The man rode the horse away. The next day Namjom also left. Only his two children and wife were at home. At that time his



oldest child was fifteen years old.

On the third day Namjom was gone, four men rushed to Namjom's family with guns in their hands at midnight. They threatened his wife and children by saying they would shoot whoever made a single sound. Two men stayed in their tent with guns in their hands, while the other two went out to cut the ropes that tied the yaks. Namjom's wife said their family watchdog didn't bark at all. After a while one man came into the tent and said that they were ready. Then the other two followed him. Namjom's wife said that she peeked through the tent door and saw the four men driving away fifteen of their yaks. One man was lying with the watchdog. After the four men were some distance away, the man lying with the watchdog mounted his horse and rode after them.

When she went out to see how many yaks had been stolen, she found that they had cut four ropes and drove away twenty yaks. All the people in our camp suspected that the man who was lying with the watchdog was Namjom's old friend. We could do nothing but take this as a lifelong lesson.

## 7. Mother's Favorite Proverbs

In late Autumn, even the calves were old enough to graze and they would walk a long distance, although their short thin legs were submerged in the grass near the tent. I wanted them to be near the tent so I could watch them from the door of the tent while having a bowl of milk tea.

Almost everyday I had to run after the calves up the mountains and down the rivers. Mother and my oldest sister were buried in work—collecting yak dung, milking, making butter, spinning yak hair and twining ropes. My older brothers had gone with the herds. Father was weaving yak-hair cloth. Everyone was busy, except my younger brother. Still, I could easily find someone to talk to if I wished, but in autumn I had no time to do so.

Normally, I'd get up early. After breakfast, I'd walk out in the sunlight to see where the calves had gone. Since the sunlight was extremely bright in the unpolluted atmosphere, I pulled my hat down or put my right hand to my forehead to block the bright sunlight. A long time passed before I glanced at the sky. It is a very strange thing for nomads to not look at the sky because we predict the following day's weather this way.

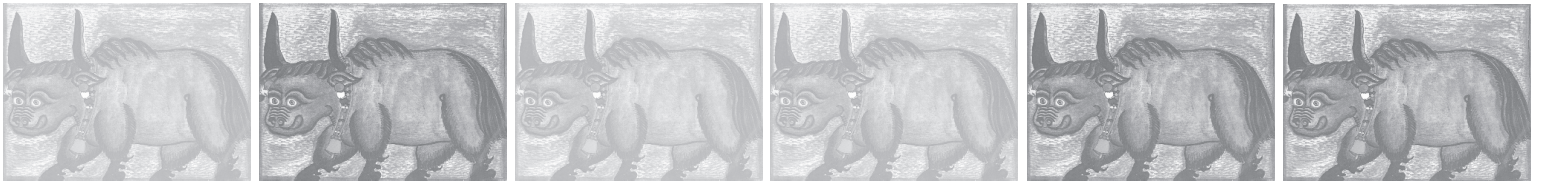
I lay on the tender grass one day while grazing the calves. Since my attention had been caught by the sound of gushing water in the stream just beside the calves I was herding, I blankly looked up at the sky, where cottony white clouds were scooting south. While trying to ignore what was happening in the sky, I remembered a saying, "In the summer, when black and round clouds go south, they portend rain. In winter, when long thin clouds go north, they portend snow." It was clever and very scientific, deserving of being written down as a real truth. I wondered, "How many such intelligent sayings have disappeared in this nomad area, like dust scattered in the wind?" I couldn't answer that question.

Everyone in my camp said that I was a tough boy. Honestly, I don't care what others say about me. I just want to tell people what kind of person I really am and I want to express what I am thinking. Leaving behind unanswered questions pains my heart.

Not willing to leave the question unanswered, I decided to ask Mother. Ever since I can remember, I'd ask Mother whenever I had a question I couldn't answer. She always had the answers. Keeping that thought in my mind, I once again looked up at the sky. The white clouds had disappeared, and had been replaced by dark brooding clouds. Hordes of insects that had just been busily crawling around me had also vanished. Flocks of birds were winging their way swiftly through the sky. I looked at the stream and saw splashes.

Suddenly, a wind blew noisily across the grassland, laden with the fragrance of grass and meadow flowers. The wind raised surging waves deep in the sea of grass around me. I was intoxicated by the natural perfume for some moments, as the calves enjoyed the cool grass. Mother told me that when there was cool grass to eat in summer, the animals should be allowed to graze because they enjoy that moment more than anything that we can describe. It was the same for warm grass in winter. While pondering these things, I felt something plop on my head and shoulders. I realized it was raining gently. I stood up and took a long breath under the rain-filled sky, then drove the calves home.

When I got back, Mother offered me a bowl of warm milk tea. While having that, I could hear raindrops splattering the tent. Then I remembered the unanswered question. I badly wanted to ask Mother but instead, I asked her where insightful nomad proverbs and sayings she had



learnt. Mother told me that she had learnt them from her grandparents and parents. She also said that there were many she had never learned. Here are some proverbs I learned from Mother:

If the road is long, set out with a good galloping horse,  
If you wish to live a long time, take a wife of noble birth,  
If the spring day is long, eat a lot.

If you have a boy, send him to a distant place to study,  
If you have a dog, do not let it roam freely.

Wet wood can still burn,  
Dry stones will never burn.

If you take a good wife, you will have a happy time all your life,  
If you take a bad wife, you will be in sorrow all your life.

Don't waste your daytime, kill lice at night.  
Don't go out looking for missing yaks at night,  
Since you can't even see a huge mountain.

You can't take back the words you've already spoken,  
But you can take back the stone that you dropped.

If you are wealthy, everyone will respect you,  
If you are poor, even your real brother will ignore you.

A good watchdog has yellow hair in its eyebrows;

A man who wants to marry ought to be capable.

The camel has a long neck but it never touches the stars in the sky,  
The hare has short legs but he can't be called an insect.

Each area has its own customs,  
Each chieftain has his own roles.

Barley will never grow on farming land unless you sow it,  
A child will never be obedient unless you beat him.

Beat the goat to scare the sheep.

A mole always leaves black soil behind him,

A bad person carries bad news with him.

If a furious snow-lion stands on a snow mountain,  
He is the snow mountain's decoration.  
If a furious dog runs down the street,  
He is the target of thrown stones.

I never heard my grandparents' voices, nor did I see them for they had died tragically in the years before my birth in the time of great social turbulence. Mother had learnt something from them and she said she still missed them a lot.

When it was time to go to bed, the rain continued. I directly went to bed after chanting evening scripture. I can tell you how heavily it rained while I was asleep. It rained the whole night. Everything was wet in the tent, including the tent itself, but nobody complained. Nomads believe that a gentle rain is good for not only growing plants, but also for the livestock.

## 8. Anthrax

The next morning, I put on the same clothes I had worn the day before, which were soaking wet. After breakfast, I walked out and discovered that it was misty. I couldn't see very far. This didn't matter as long as I could see the calves. After awhile I saw my calves circling a big yak near Tashi's open yak enclosure. The yak was standing motionlessly. Usually when I got up I couldn't see a single yak around our camp so I guessed something was wrong with the yak. But since the yak didn't belong to my family, I didn't pay much attention and reentered our tent.

When the sun broke through the clouds and began beating down on the wet ground, I walked out of the tent holding a cup of milk tea. It was about noon. Old nomads say that the best time to view mountains and grasslands is when the sky has cleared after a rain because things are then dressed in their brightest colors and are bathed in the most delightful light. Standing in front of the tent, I enjoyed looking at the deep autumn colors in those precious fleeting moments. Villagers were emerging from their tents to dry out their wet things. They put some on patches of short grass and some were hung on tent stays. Behind me, Mother was doing the same thing. My feet were sodden, since I hadn't changed my wet boots that morning,



so I sat down to dry my wet boots on a patch of grass.

In the early afternoon, Mother told me it was time to drive the calves home, because their mothers would come soon. The calves were scattered near Tashi's tent and the open yak enclosure. When I got near his tent, I heard an unfamiliar sound. Maybe he was reading something. Because of his dog, I dared not approach his tent. Then I walked around and tried to see what was happening inside, but the tent door was closed. In daytime, nomads don't close the door unless it is windy or rainy. The big yak was still standing in the same place, as motionless as a rock.

When it was time to milk, my brother got home. He had been herding all day. He brought news about missing yaks from Tsering's herd. Tsering was Tashi's oldest son. He had left his parents' tent and moved into his bride's parents' home several years earlier. My brother added that maybe bandits had stolen the yaks. Tsering was now looking for them in valleys near his herding area. I didn't pay much attention to the report of missing yaks, since this is very common in nomad areas. I looked around and saw Father sitting on the grass, having a bowl of milk tea and looking into the far distance. Taking a cup, I joined him. Since I was a child, I liked to have tea from Father's black clay pot. But Mother prevented me, by saying that I would be deaf when I got old if I had tea as thick as Father's. As soon as I sat beside him, he poured me a cup of tea.

While sipping the tea, I caught sight of Tashi heading our way. He stood some distance away and waved his long sleeves in the air that meant, "Come here." Father got to his feet and walked to where Tashi was standing. If it hadn't of been Tashi, I would have run before Father to meet him. I don't know if it was by the way he walked or some prejudice, but I didn't even feel like looking at him. Like or not liking someone is more emotional than reasonable.

After a long talk, Father came back. Mother had finished milking and we all waited for him in the tent. Father wore a dumfounded look when he entered. Mother asked him what Tashi had said. Father said that Tashi had asked him for medicine because a yak was sick. He added that, according to Tashi's description, the yak probably had anthrax. I had no idea what anthrax was. I wanted to ask him, but Father hurried out with a bag tucked under his armpit. Father was our camp vet. I tried to run after Father, but Mother stopped me at the tent door. So I quietly waited for Father to return.

Later, Father returned and had the same expression as before. He told Mother that he was quite sure that anthrax was here. "Now everyone in the camp should be aware of this, since it is contagious for both people and animals," said Father. "All our camp people should meet and discuss this." Then, my brother was dispatched to call the villagers. When I walked out with Father, I saw all the villagers were gathered near our open yak enclosure, waiting for Father and looking desperately at him, as a nursing child waits for its mother. Father began by saying that anthrax was here. Elders were flabbergasted. Youngsters blankly looked at Father's face. I would first have told a joke and then gotten to the real point if I had been Father. But he didn't do that. I understood, since he was the camp vet and a household head. Father pointed to the sick unmoving yak and emphasized it all once again. All the villagers knew the yak was from Tashi's family.

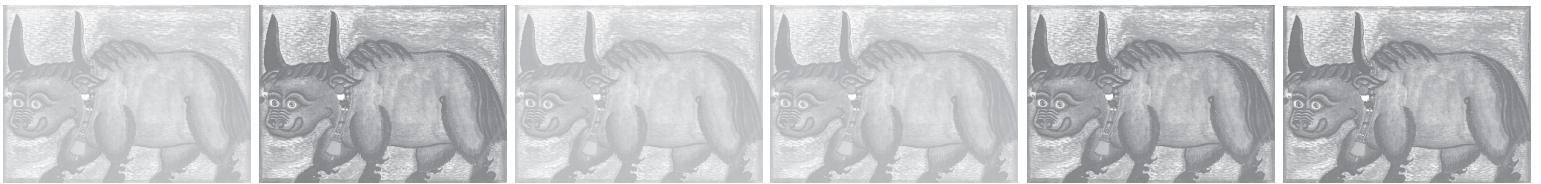
"When did the yak get sick?" asked a villager.

"I noticed it this morning," Tashi replied.

"Why didn't you tell us this morning? We could think of something, otherwise..." another person offered in a low voice and then swallowed the remaining half of the sentence. I was sure that the unsaid half of the sentence hurt him terribly, like an arrow piercing down his throat and then pausing at his heart before exiting through his chest. His face was as pale as though a brown bear were standing before him.

"I was chanting and praying to the gods to not spread the disease on this earth after my boy told me a yak was sick," Tashi said. Everyone looked at each other silently. I remembered the unusual sound from his tent. It was actually the sound of chanting. I laughed out loud. To be honest, I had imagined all sorts of things about the sounds. Everyone looked at me at the same time. It was too embarrassing to stare bask at their faces, so I buried my head in my hands and stared at the ground.

A woman stepped out of the crowd and began scolding Tashi, pointing her index finger at his face. "Tashi, we've experienced anthrax before. We know how serious it is. Do you remember how many livestock were killed the last time? We nearly had to take beggars' sticks and begin begging, right?" Then large teardrops fell from her eyes and splattered quietly on the soft grass. She wiped away the tears with her sleeve and raised her voice once again. "My dear mother sacrificed her life in order to save you. You shameless old dog, do you remember that? You never



knew how much we suffered from losing our mother. Now the disease is here again, and you keep it a secret. Why didn't you prevent the disease spreading last time, if your chanting has so much power? If you had told us, at least we could have protected ourselves. You only care about your fame." She spat on the ground, which meant she was cursing him. Her husband rushed towards her, grabbed her arm and pulled her away. The curse created an explosion as though gasoline had been tossed on fire. Tashi was infuriated and rushed at the woman. He looked exactly like a ferocious beast that had been hungry for days and then had just seen a piece of delicious flesh. Villagers stopped him and said that a good man never used fists to solve problems. They also added that using violence would not only create problems, but also exacerbate the current problem.

Some people blamed Tashi by saying how stupid he was. Some kept quiet. It seemed that they were in deep thought. I had learnt this was not the first time that anthrax had struck our area but in my life, this was the first time.

Silence reigned supreme until the camp leader blurted, "Elders, listen, for now anthrax is here in our area. We should think of how to avoid spreading it. Otherwise, it will not only destroy our livestock, but also infect people." The elders discussed what to do. On such matters I had no chance to share my thoughts, but I did have a good opportunity to listen.

I heard Father's say, "We should give the protection of injections to the animals that are not yet infected. But I don't have enough injections for all animals in the camp, not even for my own livestock. Early tomorrow morning people from our camp should go to the township government and inform them of the situation, and then they will give us injections. Now it is better for both people and animals to keep away from that sick yak."

Everyone agreed. Then arose another difficulty—who should go to the township. The camp leader volunteered and said that he wanted to take two people with him. One was Father, since he was the camp vet, and knew something about medicine. The other was Yeshe, who would be a helper. This was then settled. They decided to set out before the sun rose the next day.

A person asked what should be done with the medicine in Father's hand. Everyone looked at each other silently. It seemed it was too embarrassing to say, "I want some."

"We should divide the medicine according to the

number of people in a family," some people said. As soon as that sentence was blurted out, Father took a small bag out from his robe pouch. He swore that it was all he had and the villagers could do whatever they wanted with it. Everyone hushed when they heard that.

"How many yaks can be injected with the medicine?" someone asked.

Father said, "Around thirty."

There were twenty-five households in our camp at the time. If we divided the medicine then only a single yak could get the injection of protection per family. For a family, a single yak wouldn't make any difference in terms of being rich or poor.

The camp leader cleared his throat and said, "We have never paid him anything as salary even though he has been camp vet for more than ten years. Whenever there is any danger in terms of animal disease, he is the first person to be on call. Now, I declare that the medicine he has in his hand belongs to him." Our camp leader decided that. No one disagreed, even though a nomad had nothing to lose in opposing his camp leader.

Villagers scattered when the meeting concluded. Father put the bag back into his robe pouch and told my brother and me to drive our yaks home. I wondered why, since it was too early for the yaks to be home. I looked up at the sky to see if anything had changed that explained Father's abnormal command. The sky was as blue as ever. I turned my head and saw the stream flowing through the widening valley, sending spray into the distance. Father added that he was going to inject the yaks. That made me even more perplexed. I was eight years old. I had never had an injection, nor had I seen anyone injecting any creature. When we got sick, we would be patient until the sickness left by itself. Sometimes we eat byin-rten. A holy person, for example, an incarnate lama or a very respected monk may give a ball of tsamba, one of their hair or a piece of their clothing. These may be ingested in the every early morning to prevent illness and taken when illness strikes to become well.

If the sickness were beyond our patience, we were taken on horseback or a riding yak to the county town, where doctors treated us.

Before gathering the yaks, I looked around to see if any yaks were standing like the sick one in our herd. I saw none. I had been told to leave sick ones behind. Then I ran to gather some of our yaks, while my brother was doing the



same thing in another direction.

When we drove all the yaks home, Father said there were not enough injections for all. First he injected all the female yaks and then the male ones. Certain yaks jumped as soon as the needle touched their buttocks, as if we had set their buttocks on fire. Other yaks didn't even move, as if the pain of the injection was less than being bitten by an insect. I wanted Father to give injections to my calves, but he didn't. I wasn't happy about that. For the whole summer and the half of the autumn, I had been herding the calves and I felt great affection for them.

Father explained the symptoms of anthrax, "The infected yak shakes and mucus runs from its nose constantly. Usually after a yak dies, blood comes out of every orifice, but that does not apply to yaks with anthrax. Some don't bleed when they die. Every yak that dies of anthrax points its head north. That is where the evil spirit wants it to be." We believe that a disease has its owner—an

evil-spirit. "People will not get anthrax if they don't touch creatures infected with anthrax. Because the evil spirit lives within the yak, it is possible that the person who touches the corpse first will get anthrax, when the sick one is living."

Father told my brother that if he saw any yak in our herd with symptoms to leave it behind. He pointed to my younger brother and me and said that we must never touch any yak. I didn't agree because common sense told me that I couldn't get anthrax. But I consented with a nod.

After Father's talk, I had some idea about anthrax, but I didn't consider it to be very serious. If it were very serious, I had no idea how I could escape since we were living so close to yaks.

## 9. Bandits Steal Yaks

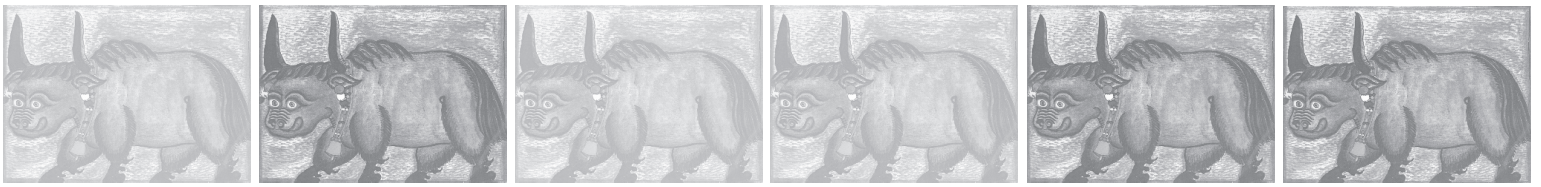
Supper was served. We sat around the fire eating by the



Tibetan tea shop

PHOTO: ZHENG LI GANG





light of flickering butter lamps and listening to the wind's whisper outside. The dog chained to the end of the open yak enclosure barked like mad. We all walked out to see what was happening. Someone was standing some distance away, yelling Father's name. We all could visualize the person without seeing him—Tsering. Father responded. Tsering yelled for him to come there. If it weren't Tsering, we would have thought the person had come to ask for injections. Mother tried to stop me when I ran after Father, but Father said it was fine for me to come with him.

I saw an inquisitive look on Tsering's face that told me what he was thinking when we reached him. He was staring at us, as if a detective were deciding if the person in front of him were a thief.

"What can I do for you?" Father asked, breaking the ice.

"My yaks were driven away by bandits during the morning mists. I want to go after them tomorrow morning I've come to borrow a horse from you, since my own horse will soon give birth," he said. I could see plenty of hatred in his eyes. Maybe that was the reason his voice was so hoarse.

"How many yaks?" Father asked.

"Ten," Tsering replied. For a newly established family, that was a considerable number.

"How do you know they've been stolen? Maybe your yaks are near the herding area that you recently left," Father consoled.

"Since this noon, I have searched every valley in our herding area. Now, I'm pretty sure they were driven away," he said determinedly.

"Who is going with you?" Father asked.

"I asked Dondrub and he agreed. I promised if we found the yaks I would give him two. If we don't, I'll give him one," Tsering answered.

"Did Dondrub request payment for going with you?" Father asked. We nomads never ask anything from a person who asks for help.

"No, that's only what I want to give him, since his life will be at risk," Tsering replied.

"In which direction are you heading?" Father asked.

"This morning I met some herders from our neighbor village. They said they had seen Shichu bandits several days ago. I think I should go southeast where most bandits are from," Tsering answered. People from my camp believe that Shichu is the motherland of all yak and horse bandits.

Father agreed to loan a horse to Tsering, since my

family had three horses. Tsering promised if anything happened to the horse he would compensate, even though Father said nothing about that. Both Father and I wished him good luck. When we returned home, it was time to sleep.

Dogs' incessant barking woke me the next morning. After dressing and washing, I walked out just in time to see two mounted horses trotting southeast. I saw some people gathered near Tsering's tent door. I ran there and found Mother. I asked her who the riders were. She said they were Tsering and Dondrub. The villagers had seen them off.

They set out with a pair of good swords. I thought at least they would turn to look back at us one more time, but they didn't. I stood staring at their backs until they disappeared. They were gone like a beautiful rainbow that vanishes into the edge of the sky, with no indication of when it will reappear.

"Will they come back?" automatically slipped from my lips, even though I didn't want to say that.

"I don't know," someone said. Mother gave me a very fierce glance. Tsering's wife stared at me. I saw large teardrops welling in the corners of her eyes. On the way home, Mother told me that I shouldn't ask such questions.

When we got back, we found Father had gone to the township for the injections. That didn't matter because he would surely return. I also discovered that I had gotten up earlier than usual. Normally when I got up, I walked outside to find brilliant sunlight filling the sky, but today the sun hadn't risen yet. Crystal white autumn frost covered everything. Mother told me frost was the morning clothing autumn borrowed from the sun and as soon as the sun emerged, he took back his clothing from autumn.

Mother was collecting yak dung in our open yak enclosure. I stayed there and looked around the area where unexpected things were occurring. It was a lovely place. Singing and laughing usually never ended. But today I didn't hear either of them. I caught sight of the sick yak near Tashi's open yak enclosure. It hadn't collapsed yet.

I entered the tent where Mother was waiting for me to have breakfast. After breakfast, I walked out once more. The sky was full of sunlight. Some old people were enjoying it. As soon as I got there, I fell into a conversation with an old herdsman.

"Will they come back?" I began.

"Do you mean Tsering and Dondrub?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.



“They will surely come back empty-handed,” he said.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“From past experience. People from our land have never succeeded when they pursue bandits,” he said. I then learned that this was not the first time bandits had driven away yaks from our land.

“You mean our people are not brave enough to fight against bandits?” I said.

“No, the bandits are poor enough to lose their lives over yaks,” he said.

“If they’re poor, why don’t they become beggars rather than bandits? I think it’s fine to be beggar if you’re really poor. But how terrible to be a bandit, taking animals from others and making them suffer,” I said.

“The customs of their lands require a poor man to be a bandit. If he begs from home to home, the local people treat him like a dog. If he is a bandit and takes animals from other areas, local people praise him and treat him as a real man,” he said.

“Will Tsering be a bandit? I think if he comes back empty-handed, he will be very poor,” I said.

“No, our custom doesn’t require that,” he said.

“Are they black-haired Tibetans?” I asked.

“Yes, they are real Tibetans,” he said. That was the first time I realized that it is wrong to think that all Tibetans have the same customs.

## 10. Anthrax Kills

“Bang,” a booming sound came from some distance away. My ears tingled. First, I thought it was gunfire and someone had been shot in a distant place. I turned and looked in the direction of the sound just in time to see the gigantic sick yak collapsing on the ground.

Tashi slowly walked to the body with a shovel and a pickax. I couldn’t predict what he was going to do. Normally, when an animal dies, we all take knives and skin the animal. I ran after him to see what he would do. Since Mother wasn’t with me, nobody could stop me. Tashi tiredly began to dig a hole near the body. When I got where he was, I could hardly catch my breath. Tiny beads of sweat dotted my nose. I panted heavily, like a horse after at the end of a long journey.

“Can I help you?” I asked him.

“No, you shouldn’t touch anything here,” he replied.

“Why not, since you can?” I said. I tried to argue with him, since he had given me a very catastrophic first impression.

“To make a long story short, you should listen to me and learn something from me. I have more experience than you,” he said very normally. I agreed and didn’t argue with him. I found something was missing.

“Usually, you speak with great pride. Why not today?” I asked.

“These days, misfortune is falling on me. I even have no feeling to look up at the sky,” he said with a pitiful smile.

He was digging, digging into the ground.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

“To bury the body,” he said without glancing at me.

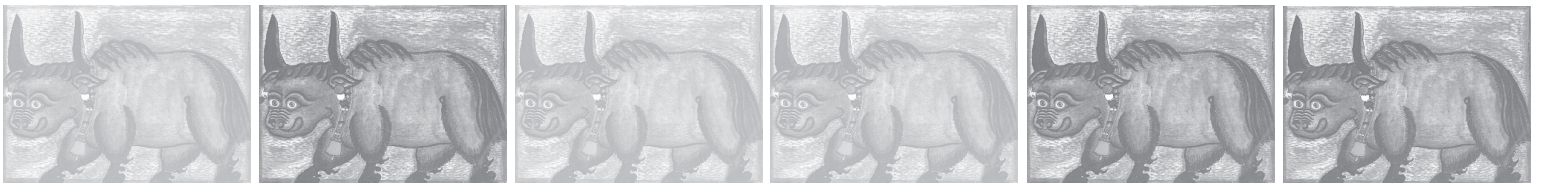
“Don’t you eat meat? I think meat tastes good taste in autumn. If you don’t want it, I’ll will take some to my home,” I said as I walked to the body to see how the yak had died, but he stopped me half-way. Actually, Father had explained why I shouldn’t get near the body. But I was very curious to see the body.

“No!” he yelled. At the moment I turned to see at his face. Just then I caught sight of Mother and some villagers coming towards us. Mother scolded me for getting near the body. When she got close enough, she tried to slap my face. I circled the people to escape her punishment as Mother chased me. Tashi jumped between Mother and me and stopped Mother by saying that I hadn’t touched anything. Mother stopped, but she still was in a great anguish, which showed how much she loved me.

With Mother present, I dared not touch anything. I observed what they were doing. They dug the ground as deep as Tashi’s height. I looked into the hole and felt that I wouldn’t be able to get out if I fell inside. After digging the hole, Tashi took ropes out from his robe pouch. He told some people that they needed to drag the body into the hole, and the rest should use their pickaxes to push. Using ropes and pickaxes, villagers pushed and dragged the body into the hole. “Bang,” came from the hole, but dust didn’t rise into the air. It wasn’t a booming sound. They put back the soil. A series of sounds emitted as soon as each shovel of soil fell on the body: Bi-Bang! Bi-Bang! Bi-Bang!

Father had gone for medicine with two men, and Tsering and Dondrub were chasing the bandits.

I began to count the days they had been gone. Every afternoon I climbed atop a hill, awaiting their return. To the south, line upon line of mountain ranges stretched



as far as my eyes could reach. Yaks, sheep and horses speckled immense grassland to the north. But I saw no mounted people coming to our camp.

Three days passed. What about Tsering and Dondrub? Were they killed or driving the missing yaks homeward? Facing north, I stood in the wind and let the wind beat my face. After some moments, I found myself lost in thought, staring at the edges of the sky.

On the fourth day, more yaks were sick and died. Villagers buried them all where they collapsed. Here and there the number of small hills increased as more yaks died. All the villagers waited for Father's group to return, but time passes very slowly when you urgently need someone to return. I had no time to look at the sky. I found myself staring into the distance. People said that I was beginning to understand things and was grieving over losing yaks, not understanding that I hoped to be the first to see Father's group return. I wanted to see them riding their horses, trotting towards our camp, bringing us hope.

On the sixth day from some distance away, we recognized Father riding toward us, but not the two others. Villagers said the two others were surely Yeshe and the camp leader. But somehow I hesitated because of the way they rode. We all ran to greet them. When we got near enough to see the riders, it turned out that the other two were Han Chinese. At first, villagers thought the township government had sent two good vets to secure the life of both the nomads and their livestock. But Father told us that these two were Han businessmen, and he hadn't got the medicine, since the township government didn't have any. Yeshe and the camp leader were still in the township center waiting for the medicine. A concerned look appeared on everyone's face after hearing this news—except for the two Han Chinese.

I wanted to tell Father that two yaks had died of anthrax in our herd, and we had buried them. But I decided that since he didn't get the medicine, two yaks didn't mean much, so I kept quiet.

Father said he had promised that he would sell some yaks to the two Han. This was the first time that I had seen Han people in my life, so I closely studied them. The old one's gaunt face sported a pathetically scraggly yellowish beard. The young one had a pale face, as though he had never had even a bit of rich food in his life. He was tall and thin and his legs resembled chopsticks. Both of them didn't look like businessmen, or at least what we imagined

businessmen should look like. Both could speak a bit of Tibetan, since they had been living in Tibetan areas for a long time. We could make simple conversation in Tibetan.

After my brother returned from herding, Father told me to drive the yaks home that my brother had left some distance away, since it was still early. I reluctantly walked to the herd because selling meant killing. Father recommended ten yaks to the Han businessmen. I realized these ten had not been injected. The two Han businessmen used their own language to discuss the price. We didn't understand a single word. To my ear, a noise made by the wind was more melodious than the sounds they were generating.

At that time, one of our best yaks would bring three hundred yuan, if it was sold in the township. When businessmen came to our camp to buy yaks, the best one would bring two hundred fifty yuan. I didn't know how much our yaks brought this time. To tell the truth, I had no idea about money at that time. But in 2005, the best yak sells for 2,500 yuan.

The two businessmen bargained a lot, since they knew that anthrax was here, and finally we reached an agreement. They put some colored papers in Father's hand and drove the yaks out of their open enclosure. Some yaks tried to run back, but they failed. I wanted to save their lives because they were about to die. I ran after them, but Father stopped me. I jerked in his hands with all my might. Then he got angry and gave me a heavy slap that sent me tumbling to the ground facedown. Clutching a clump of grass and pulling it out, I felt sad to miss the opportunity to save their lives. My eyes moistened, and then teardrops fell from my young eyes; fretful tears resembling prayer beads trickling from a broken string.

I ran back to the end of the open yak enclosure where Father's horse was tied to a peg. Jumping into the saddle with the wind in my face, I galloped off for a quite a distance before stopping atop a hill, where the immense grassland rose up majestically below me. The blue sky was high and empty. I could see for miles and miles. Suddenly, I felt that Yeshe and the camp leader wouldn't return until the first snow turned the land white. And when they did come, the medicine would mean nothing. The two Han businessmen had been gone for a long time. I had missed the opportunity to save lives once more, but this time I didn't feel sad because I thought everything would be the same in the end. As the wind caressed boundless green



grass below, I felt that my heart could tolerate anything. The fragrance of grass carried by the wind intoxicated me.

I spurred the horse through the camp. The restless camp members gathered after milking. I overheard them talking about my family. They said that it was Father's good fortune to be the vet of our camp, since some yaks got the protection of injection. And that he had used his intelligence to sell some that were not protected. They also added that perhaps this wasn't a good thing and maybe, sooner or later, something would happen to our family, since all others were tightly wrapped in great misfortune.

If Tashi had been around at that moment, I would have asked him for a divination, since people believe that imminent events can be foreseen in a divination. I once again looked around for Tashi, but I failed to see him. So I said, "Fine, let it happen." At the moment, I badly desired a new thing to happen to replace the old thing. I thought and hoped that time would accelerate if more things happened.

When I got back home, my family was eating supper, sitting around the fire. I told them what other villagers had been saying about our family. Dark clouds gathered on Father's face, but he didn't utter a single word. My brother said that people envied our luck. Afterwards, we ignored what people said, as if it were blown away by the autumn wind, leaving not even a shadow in our hearts.

Everyday, more yaks got sick and more died. People buried all the dead ones.

Father didn't return to the township. He said he had already reported the amount of medicine that we needed to the township government and that as soon as Yeshi and the camp leader got the medicine, they would come home.

Villagers were engrossed in what they were doing and it seemed that they had forgotten Tsering and Dondrub. I looked around and saw Tsering's wife gazing into the distance. Clearly, she longed for her husband. But no one else was looking into the distance, which meant that nobody else was missing Dondrub. I felt my heart suddenly gripped by a warm longing for Dondrub, something that I had never felt before. I looked far into the horizon. The deepening autumn colors were losing their vibrancy. I stared at the edges of the sky and saw a wind pushing masses of clouds across the heavens. The fierce wind also made me shed tears. I realized that winter would be here soon and we needed our butcher, Dondrub, to kill animals for meat during the winter.

## 11. Anthrax Abates, Tsering Returns Empty-Handed

Tsering and Dondrub showed up about a half-month later. The old man whom I had talked to was right. They had come back empty-handed with shameful smiles. But they had brought a bunch of stories:

"Three days after we left, we saw the bandits driving our yaks down a very narrow valley. We shouted at them to stop but they didn't. So we shot at them while riding our horses and a horse fell to the ground with its rider. Then two men dismounted and shot back at us while the rest of them continued driving the yaks. The two men blocked us until night came. The next day, we didn't know which direction that they had taken. We went along the valley but found no trace, so we gave up."

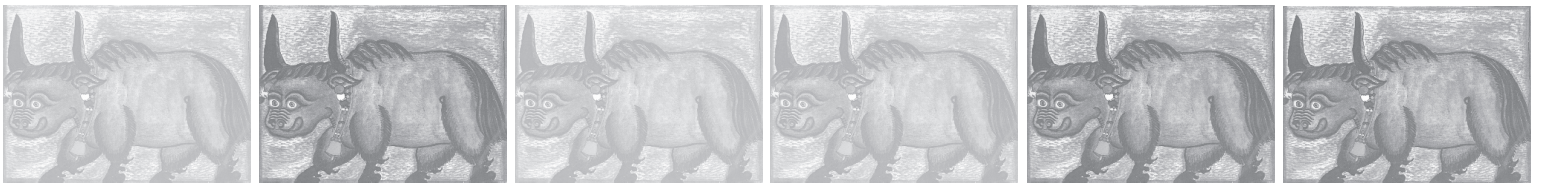
To make a long story short, they hadn't fought the bandits but had gotten lost in unfamiliar valleys. Tsering's wife shed some tears before saying it was all right that they had missed the bandits for they were now home safely. Villagers said it was right too, as long as she thought so.

Several days later, Yeshi and the camp leader returned. They said if they had waited for the medicine it would require another month and they were very anxious to see what was happening in our camp.

Now, we didn't need anyone else from our camp to return.

Each day fewer and fewer yaks got sick as the wind grew in its harshness, blowing away the agents of anthrax. I still couldn't help staring at the edges of the sky, even though this brought tears to my eyes. Standing alone against a harsh wind, tears automatically flowed. People said something was wrong with my head. They didn't know that I hoped to be the first to see winter arrive. Then the first snow turned the area white.

Even though the number of animals' deaths rapidly decreased, villagers still urged Yeshi and the camp leader to go to the township center to get inoculations. A heavy snow fell on the day they were to depart. It was a big snow. Thick flakes rushed toward earth like flocks of birds. I stood under the snowing sky and shouted, "It's over!" Normally, my shouts were carried by the wind, but today there wasn't even a whisper of wind. If I had pulled out a hair from my head and tossed it into the air, it would have fallen straight to the ground without wavering. Everyone in the camp might have heard my shout and have thought that a child was shouting in the snow like a dog. By noontime,



the snow still fell, so Yeshe and the camp leader cancelled their journey to the township center.

People said that anthrax would disappear after the snow. It did.

I don't know the total number of yaks killed by anthrax. Two of my family's yaks died. Fortunately, none of our camp residents contracted anthrax.

## 12. The Camp Butcher

Winter arrived. We needed animals butchered to have meat to eat during winter. I heard my parents discussing which ones to kill. I interrupted and said, "There are several naughty calves. I'm sure they are fat. They can run very fast. I think this year we should kill them to eat during wintertime." They both laughed and so did I, without really knowing why. I saw an inquisitive look on Father's face that told me he was thinking.

He opened his mouth and said, "Go out and see your calves." I went out and saw the calves happily grazing near the tent. Not wanting to enter the tent, I looked up at the sky. Brilliant sunlight shone from above. I could see far into the distance and I enjoyed it. Then I noticed several camp children playing in the open livestock enclosure so I joined them. I had a very good time with them and slept nicely that night.

When I woke up and went outside, three huge yaks were tied in the open yak enclosure. Five sheep were in the sheep pen. I also saw Dondrob walking to the pen. In our village, killing was taboo except for the man from the poorest family, who found it a way to earn money. Dondrob was our camp butcher. He was in his twenties and a very nice looking young man. You would never have guessed that he was someone whose specialty was taking animals' lives. Unfortunately, he was born in the poorest family in our camp. Mother told me his father was the former camp butcher and automatically, he had followed his father's path.

While he was skinning a sheep, he constantly chanted something under his breath. I saw great sadness on his handsome face, and realized that the world desperately pulled him into things that he didn't want, but over which he had no control. I felt pity for him. I walked over to help in order to scatter his sadness. Not knowing how to begin a conversation I asked, "Do you like to kill animals?"

Before answering, he smiled. It wasn't an ordinary smile. It was not happy or sad. His expression told me

it was a smile of desperation. He asked me the same question, "Do you like to kill animals?"

I wanted to say "No," but I suddenly realized nobody had ever asked me a question like that. I spent some time thinking about it. I found I couldn't say, "No," because I had killed some small birds with stones for fun. I couldn't say, "Yes," because I felt very bad after killing and my parents forbade me to kill. I thought hard about how to answer. My brain was gurgling like boiling water. Not knowing how to answer my question and his, I said, "We could be good friends." He burst into laughter and so did I.

People kept a certain distance from the butcher while trying to establish a close relationship with hunters. I spent some time figuring out why there was such a big difference. Later, I learnt people could get things like bear gall bladders from hunters, while gaining nothing from a butcher. For me, this didn't make any moral sense. Later, I developed a very good relationship with Dondrob. He is still one of my best friends.

## 13. Three Favorite Stories

We lived in tents throughout the year. I remember every tiny detail of everything that happened that winter. I constantly felt cold in winter. It was really cold. Steam from people's breaths froze into ice on their hats and shoulders. Mostly, I stayed near the fire and listened to Mother's stories. Mother is a natural storyteller, and I am her most devoted listener. Winter provided an excellent time for people to gather. In my home area, telling folktales was an inevitable activity after dark. King Gesar stories were the most popular. People from my home area believe that without King Gesar, we would all be ruined by demons. No matter if you were young or old in our camp, your mind was struck with the surety of King Gesar's existence. Even a stone beside a road contained a good story of King Gesar, and that provided enough evidence to believe that King Gesar was not a legend. Men in our camp admired King Gesar's bravery and his deeds, and women had high regard for his consort's beauty.

Here are three of my favorite folktales that Mother told when I was a child:

Tashi and His Father

Long ago a poor villager lived with his son, Tashi, who was very smart. Their only property was their special horse



that everybody admired and coveted.

One day the richest villager thought, "Tonight I will take my white yak and tie it in the poor man's yard. Nobody will know. Tomorrow I will tell everybody that someone stole my white yak. Everyone will then believe that the poor man and Tashi stole the yak. After that I will threaten to punish them. They will say, "Please take our horse instead."

At midnight Tashi woke up and saw what the rich man was doing. "Father wake up," said the boy. "The rich man tied his white yak in our yard. He wants to treat us unjustly and we must oppose him."

"What should we do?" asked his father.

"We will rub ash in the white yak's hair to make it black. Then the rich man will not recognize it," answered Tashi. Then they rubbed ash on the yak and took the yak near the gate and beat it. The black yak was then very afraid to go near the gate. Afterwards, Tashi and his father went back inside their house and slept.

The next morning the rich man came to the poor man's home and said, "You stole my white yak last night. Now you have two choices—I want you to pay me double the cost of my white yak or I will punish you and take your horse."

"Dear fellow," said Tashi, "my father and I did not steal your white yak. We have our own black yak so we needn't steal yours." The rich man hesitated. "If you don't believe I will show you," said Tashi. The rich man walked into the yard and saw only a black yak in the poor man's yard. He tried to drive it out but the black yak was afraid to go near the gate. The rich man sadly left the yard and the black yak then belonged to Tashi and his father.

They slaughtered the yak and enjoyed good yak meat for several days. The rich man thought, "The poor man's boy is very clever and if he were my assistant, I'd greatly benefit."

After many days the rich man invited the poor man and his son to his home. They eagerly accepted. Tashi said, "If they ask questions, I will answer. You don't need to say anything."

When they reached the rich man's home, the boy entered first and sat. The rich man thought, "It is very impolite for a boy to go before his father." He asked, "Who is your father?"

"He is my father," answered the boy.

"A father is much better than his son so let your father sit

first," said the rich man.

"That's right," said the boy.

"I will lend you one hundred mules to do businesses. After one month please come to me with the income and I will reward you," said the rich man. The boy accepted.

After a month Tashi returned one hundred donkeys instead of one hundred mules. He pretended to be very proud of himself. "I did a very good job, my boss. It was just like turning ordinary metal into gold. I exchanged the mules for donkeys because you said, 'A father is much better than a son.' Well, a mule's father is a donkey. The income I can't count," said Tashi.

The boss was speechless. Afterwards, the poor father and Tashi became extremely rich because of the profit from this business.

### Washalamo

Once a mother had a daughter named Washalamo. There was a savage demon in their village who wanted to take the most village beautiful girl to be his wife. Washalamo was very beautiful. The mother announced that whoever guessed her daughter's real name could have her.

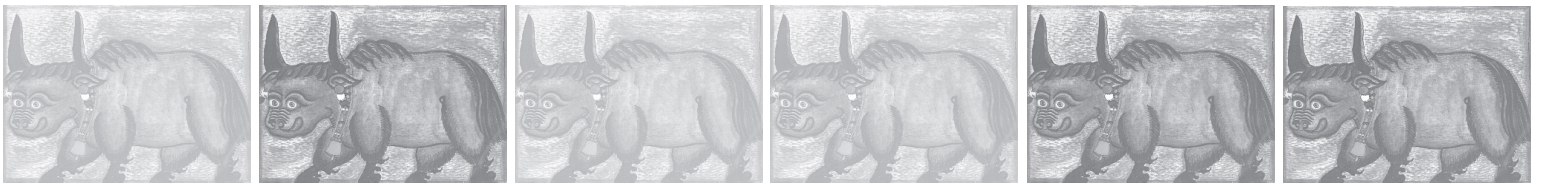
One day the demon disguised himself as a beggar, came to their village and begged from the mother and her daughter. When Washalamo smiled, there was a very auspicious sign on one of her front teeth. The beggar noticed this and fell in love with her, but he didn't know her name.

A fox always slept on their roof. The mother called her daughter's name twice a day. The demon asked the fox to learn the daughter's name and promised the fox that if he did what he said, then he would give him a large amount of meat. The fox agreed. When night came, the fox went to the roof to sleep.

After a short time, the mother called her daughter's name and said it was time to go to bed. The fox heard and memorized the name. In the morning, the fox left and had to cross a very big river before he reached his daytime destination. When he got near the river he was so afraid of crossing that he forgot the name. The demon was waiting for him on the other side of river.

"What's the daughter's name?" the demon demanded.

"I was so afraid of crossing the river that I forgot her name," the fox replied. The demon then slapped the fox very hard.



“OK, tomorrow I will wait for you before you reach this river and help you cross. You should be able to tell me her name then,” the demon said. The fox agreed.

That night the fox returned to the roof to sleep. When morning came and said that it was time to get up. The fox heard the name and memorized it. When he nearly reached the river, the demon was waiting for him.

“What’s her name?” the demon asked.

“Her name is Washalamo,” the fox replied. The demon helped the fox cross the river, and rewarded him with a large piece of meat. Then he came to see the mother and asked her to give him her daughter. The mother asked if he knew her daughter’s name. He said, “Your daughter’s name is Washalamo,” and the mother gave her daughter to him.

Before the daughter left, her mother gave her seven seeds and told her to use them when she was in trouble. Then the demon took the daughter and left.

When they reached the demon’s home, he gave her three keys. One was a golden key, another was a silver key and the other one was an iron key. They lived together for a long time.

One day the demon went out. Washalamo took that opportunity to open every door to see what he owned. She used the golden key to open a door and discovered a room full of corpses. Among the corpses was an old lady who was half-dead who asked, “Are you the housewife of the family?”

“Yes,” Washalamo answered.

“When you are young, it is very pleasant to be the mistress of this family. But it isn’t pleasant when you get old. Once I was the mistress of this family. It is better if you run away rather than stay here,” the old lady advised.

Washalamo was afraid, and asked, “What should I do now?”

“It is no use to be afraid. You should tear off the skin from a corpse’s face and put it on your face. There is a room with an iron door that is full of jewels. Use the iron key to open that door and take the jewels you want. You should also take a white stone that is there. Maybe you will meet him on the way and perhaps he will stop you. At that time, use the white stone to beat him and then he will flee. Demons are deathly afraid of white stones,” the old lady instructed. Washalamo then did exactly what the old lady instructed.

Washalamo did meet her demon husband and used

the white stone to beat him, which made him flee. She continued on and finally reached a village. She asked the village king whether she could be employed as a servant. The king agreed and hired her as a yak-herder.

She took off her old-lady clothes and put on her jewels when she reached the mountains. One day the king’s son went to sightsee in the mountains and saw a very beautiful lady walking after his family’s herd of yaks. When he came home that night, he told his father, “I saw a very beautiful young lady walking after our yak herd. Maybe that is our new servant.”

His father said that it was impossible.

One day, the prince once again saw a beautiful lady herding his family’s yaks. He then returned the next day and secretly waited for her. Washalamo had no time to change her clothes and was caught by the prince, who asked her how she had become such a beauty. She told him everything that she had experienced. The prince was attracted by her beauty and asked her to marry him. She refused several times but finally, she agreed. Then she married the prince and had a very happy life.

Father’s Advice

There were two families. One family had only a father and a son. The other family had a father and two sons. These two families had been great friends from the time of their ancestors.

One day the father who had one son told his son that he was about to die.

“Before I die, I have two things that you should keep in your heart. First, don’t fully trust your friends. The second is not to trust your wife either. Please remember these two things throughout your life.”

Several days later, the father passed away and the boy was now alone. His father had saved a little bag of gold during his lifetime and it now belonged to his son, who decided to do business. It was not very convenient to take the gold with him. Wondering if his father’s advice was true, he entrusted the gold to his father’s best friend. Later he did business for many years.

One day he needed the gold. “Now, I need to use my gold. Please give it to me,” he said to his father’s friend.

But much earlier, his father’s best friend had taken the gold out of the bag and replaced it with sand. The man gave the bag of sand to him.

The son opened the bag, saw that the bag was full of sand and said, “Things are really impermanent. Gold has



become sand!"

"That's a pity. If you need any help afterward, please call me," his father's friend said.

"OK, it doesn't matter if the gold became sand. In the next few days I'm going to build a house, so I need your boys to help me," he said. The friend agreed and his boys followed him to his home.

He led the boys to a basement, provided all that they needed and locked them inside. He also bought two monkeys. One was called Dongrub and the other was Tashi—the same names as his father's best friend's sons. Several days passed and then he went to see the boys' father. "You're sons are really helpful, and I have finished building my house. But things are really impermanent. We never know what will occur. Several days ago gold became sand, and now people have become monkeys," he said.

When the father went to see his sons he saw two monkeys. When he called "Dondrub" one of the monkeys came and greeted him. When he called "Tashi" the other monkey came. The father was very sad and exclaimed, "It is not a big problem if gold becomes sand, but it is a big problem if people become monkeys."

The father went to see a hermit for suggestions. "People have become monkeys. What can we do to change the monkeys to people?" he asked the hermit.

"If you pay back what you took, then the monkeys will become people," the hermit answered. Then the father took the gold that had been stolen and returned it to the real owner.

"Oh, you have changed sand into gold so maybe several days later I can change monkeys into people," the man said. Several days later he took the boys out of the basement and took them to their home.

Years tumbled past like the turbulent flow of a swollen river and he married a young village woman.

One day, he remembered his father's second piece of advice—don't completely trust your wife. Quietly, he went to the king's palace and stole the king's peacock. Secretly, he put the peacock in a hole and fed it without his wife's knowledge. At the same time he bought another peacock and took it to his wife.

"Now, we are going to eat the king's peacock so that we can have eternal life. If the king discovers this, I will be killed, so don't tell anybody," he told his wife. Then they killed the peacock and ate it together.

Several days later, the king discovered that his peacock had been stolen. The king said he would give a big reward

to whoever found his peacock. If that person were a woman she would be made a queen, and if he were a man, he would be given a high position.

His wife went to the palace and told the king that her husband had stolen his peacock. The king ordered the thief arrested and brought before him.

"Why did you steal my peacock and eat it?" the king asked.

"Dear King, I didn't eat your peacock. I took it because I wanted to test whether my father's advice was true," he said. Then he returned the king's peacock and told the entire story to the king. The king admired his cleverness and gave him a minister's position.

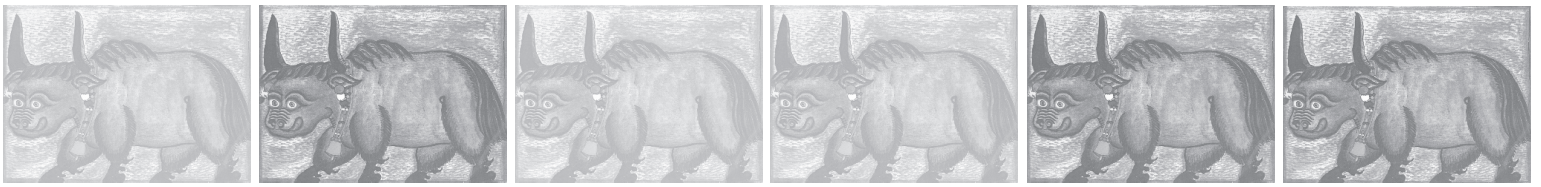
After supper, all the camp children came to my home to listen to Mother's folktales. Most of the time, I owned the best seat—in front of Mother's robe. Sometimes this was a big challenge. One evening, while helping Father feed the horses, a boy occupied my usual seat. When I came inside, I wasn't happy about that, so I grabbed his sheepskin coat and pulled him to the ground. He stood up immediately and pushed me away. My foot caught on the edge of the stove and I fell to the ground. Then I took a stone and hurled it with all my might at his forehead. The stone hit dead on and he cried out in a flood of tears as blood poured from a terribly deep gash on his forehead. Mother wiped away his tears with her sleeve, hugged him and gave my seat to him. She didn't let me listen to her stories that night.

I walked out feeling sad. I looked up at the sky, hoping to see my very bright star but it wasn't in its usual position. The wind blew noisily, so I stood there motionlessly while the wind buffeted my face. When I entered the tent, all the children were gone. Mother was waiting for me. I undressed and said, "Mother, blow out the lamp and tell me the story that you told them tonight." I listened very carefully at the beginning, but later lost interest and fell asleep.

## 14. Herding Sheep in Winter

Brother was sick the next day. Mother told me to herd the sheep as she prepared the food for me. It was so cold that I felt as if my blood had stopped circulating. My heart trembled. My bones quivered. While opening my sheep pen, I saw Dondrub driving his sheep away from our camp. He had about twenty sheep—the fewest number of





sheep that a family owned in our camp. I told Mother that I would like to go with him that day. Mother agreed, so I drove my sheep in the same direction as he was headed.

The turquoise sky was crystal clear. As soon as I got near enough to hear Dondrub's voice, he said, "It's a very cold day, maybe the coldest day this winter."

I agreed, but I was too cold to utter what I had in my mouth so I just nodded. Thinking back now, I realize that I have lost many important opportunities in my life for not expressing myself.

"What's wrong with your elder brother?" he asked.

"He's sick," I replied with the only mouth of warm breath I had at that moment.

"I know you are cold. You go home and I'll herd your sheep today for you," he said.

I wanted to agree, but automatically my head shook "No." I continued walking with him, while cursing myself for not being able to say what I thought. He told me to collect yak dung to make a fire while he cut plants we use to burn first to kindle the yak dung. I was so cold that my hands and feet didn't seem to exist any more. I couldn't even bend over to collect yak dung. Realizing that I was literally freezing, Dondrub told me not to do anything.

As I stamped my feet on the frozen winter ground, the ground returned a painful echo that scattered into my bones. I regretted at not going home when there was a chance. Dondrub collected yak dung, cut some kindling plants, made a fire and brewed a pot of tea. I stepped near the fire to get warm as the wind carried a thick plume of smoke to a distant mountain. My eyes followed the smoke as it vanished into the distance. The tea was boiling. I got warmer. Dondrub told me it was time to eat. I looked up at the sky and it told me it was about midday. Of course we herdsmen need no excuse when we feel like eating. I unfastened the bag Mother had tied on my back when I left home that morning. It contained a small bag of tsamba and some pieces of meat. At that time, the main foods in my home were tsamba and meat. I told Dondrub that he could have the tsamba in my bag. Suddenly he asked, "What do you think about the weather?"

"It's just cold," I replied.

"You children will get used to it when you grow up. What's your plan about your future?" he said.

"I don't know yet, but I won't herd if herding is this hard," I said.

He was a little sad when he heard that. "Yes, it is better

to have ambitions. But it is impossible that a wolf's cub can become a lion's cub. A wolf's pup will be a wolf all his life," he said.

I knew that he was telling the truth, but I didn't like it somehow. I drank tea from his black pot silently. Our conversation stopped there, just like a poem with a mysterious ending. I was almost bored to death.

Then he began telling me tales and singing songs to relieve my boredom. I liked listening to his stories, but not as much as Mother's tales. I liked all his songs and learnt some of them that I still remember.

(1)

In that distant grassland,  
A white tent is pitched.  
I think it is my beloved girl,  
When the wind raised the tent flap.

(2)

Tell me what you want, my beloved girl.  
If you want a star in the sky,  
I'll make a rainbow ladder to take it for you.  
If you want treasures from the ocean,  
I'll make an iron-chained lasso to catch them for you.

(3)

It doesn't matter if the summer river swells,  
And the winter river subsides,  
My brown horse and I'll come around the source of the river.

Like any adult, most of his songs were love songs. Soon it was late afternoon and time for us to head home. He looked in the direction of the grazing sheep and yelled several times. Slowly, the sheep gathered and started homeward.

## 15. Brother Dies

I saw Mother in the open enclosure feeding some scrawny calves. As soon as I got near her, she asked how the day had gone. I told her that it was very cold; otherwise it was wonderful. I wasn't sure why Mother's usual smile was absent. Before entering the tent, she told me Tashi was in the tent, because my elder brother was getting worse. Maybe my bewildered expressions asked that question.



I caught sight of Father first when I entered the tent. Heavy wrinkles lined his face as he drank black tea from his clay pot. Father usually preferred milk tea, but that day he was drinking black tea. He asked me no questions. Brother lay on his bed with his eyes closed. Tashi was sitting on a carpet near the stove. It was deadly silent. It was the uneasiest moment in our tent that I had ever experienced. I untied the bag from my back and put it in a tent corner. I poured a cup of tea for myself and sat near the stove silently as darkness slowly descended. I walked out of the tent into the darkness and stayed awhile. When I returned to the tent, Brother was sleeping. I wanted to tell him good night, but I didn't want to bother him.

I didn't know he had quietly departed until morning came. Everyone wept. I saw him wrapped in white cloth. I felt very saddened by Brother's departure from this impermanent world where everyone was so eager to live. My memories flood back as I write this. Brother had been by far my most enthusiastic playmate. Nevertheless, I spent a great deal of time squabbling and arguing with him, and we often came to blows. When Mother learned this, she always found the same thing—Brother in tears and me with a big smile on my face. Despite the fact that he was older, I was always the winner. He was a very good-natured boy and very strong but he couldn't bring himself to use all his strength against me. Although he was my best friend and beloved brother, we were incapable of getting on well together. One of us would make a remark that led to an argument and finally to blows. Throughout my childhood, he was my devoted friend and a constant source of fun. He never for a moment lost his great sense of humor. Somehow, without him my life is missing something. I can't tell people what it is exactly, but I can feel it.

Back near the tent on that awful day I looked up at the sky, my eyes brimming with tears, hoping to see Brother's soul. The sky was high and vacant. Nothing was in sight. The ground was a vast carpet of gray as far as the eye could see. Wind sailed across it. Standing alone in the wind, I knew I had no hope of ever seeing Brother again.

Father came from the local monastery that afternoon with monks and the lama to help raise Brother's soul. Our local monastery isn't far from our winter camp. The journey between them takes two hours on foot. We put Brother's corpse in the middle of a circle made by the monks and they chanted scriptures together. Brother was

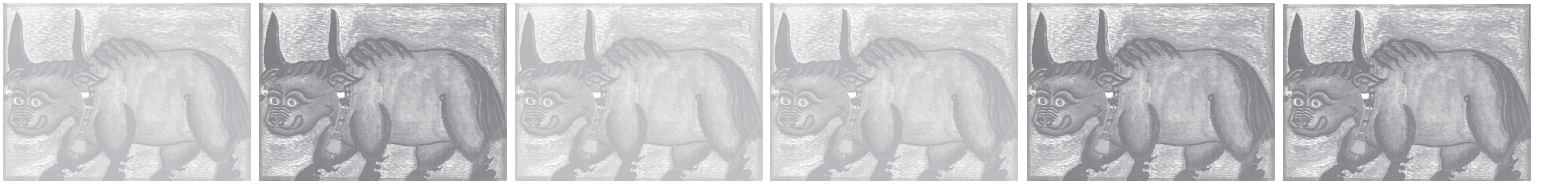
lucky to have the lama present. He was usually away when people died. I appreciated him being there.

An empty feeling stayed in my heart that night as I lay in bed listening to the wind blow across the sky. I tried to recall everything that Brother and I had done together in as much detail as possible. The memories of our shared past brought tears. I finally got up quietly, walked out and let the wind pummel my face.

Brother was carried to the place of final departure three days later. I didn't personally participate, since Father took care of all the funeral arrangements. I knew there wasn't much use in grieving, but I couldn't help feeling sad whenever I recalled the past. I also realized that Brother's death, in a way, symbolized the end of my childhood. I was sad, but I realized that I wasn't as sad as my parents. They aged quickly. Their hair became as gray as winter grass. I didn't often see Mother's merry smile again. She cried frequently, and we knew why. One morning, not long after Brother's death, Father chose twenty-seven good sheep and a yak and drove them in the direction of the local monastery. Until that moment, I hadn't known Father would give a sheep to each monk and the yak to the lama for helping raise my brother's soul to Heaven. I then learned how many monks there were at the local monastery.

Throughout the winter, I sank deeper and deeper into sorrow about losing Brother. As I faced the wind, I remembered the imminent thing that people had talked about in autumn. At that time, I had said, "Let it happen." Now, I regretted saying that. If I could have retracted what I had said, I would have done so in a second, but according to local custom a man can't take back his words once he blurts them out. Tears streamed down my face, as I thought about this. From the day of his departure, I had no desire to gaze at the sky. My head was weighed down with depression and sadness.

One day as I was lying in bed, Brother's familiar face floated before my eyes. He asked me why I looked so sad. I told him it was because he was dead. He said he wasn't dead and that his soul would endure until the end of the world. I asked him if we could talk and meet afterward. But all he said was not to grieve for him and not let our parents be disappointed. I promised him that I would try my best to fulfill both of his wishes. When I opened my eyes, he wasn't there. I felt my heart ache.



## 16. Dondrub Brings a Fawn Home

I was looking forward to seeing spring. Finally, it arrived. Everything became fresh and gay with spears of new green grass emerging. It is true that nothing lasts forever for the grief in my heart was almost gone. Thoughts of Brother no longer saddened me the way they had before.

One afternoon of a clear day as light clouds bounced in the sky, I lay on the spring ground, sunshine caressing me, green grass tenderly poking my immature body. Suddenly, I heard someone calling my name. I could visualize the person without looking at him. I jumped up and looked in the direction of Dondrub's voice. He was standing some distance away, holding something in his robe pouch. He waved his long sleeve in the air signifying "Come here." I walked to where he was standing. He was on the way home from herding. He took a fawn from his robe pouch and smiled triumphantly. I like animals, especially baby animals. The fawn had dark round eyes and a pair of sharp ears stood alert in the air. Their tips were black. It had light brown fur. It struggled to get out of my hands. I asked him what he would do with it. He told me that he would feed it with his sheep. He went home to give milk to the fawn.

I ran back to my home and told Mother that Dondrub had caught a fawn. Mother said, "Oh Buddha! Its Mother will come fetch him as soon as she notices her baby is absent."

"How will the doe find her son?" I asked.

"She can smell where he is and then she will come get

him," Mother said.

Dondrub's fawn became the centerpiece of our evening discussion.

At midnight, fierce barking woke me. The doe had come to fetch her son. Mother was right. As soon as the mother deer approached our camp, the dogs chased her away. She constantly made a strange sound. Dondrub wisely decided not to release the fawn that night. If he had, the dogs would have ripped it to pieces.

I couldn't sleep, so I lay in bed listening to the echo of the deer's feet on the spring ground when the dogs chased her away. I saw the crescent moon rising higher and higher until it reached my very bright star. Then the moon captured the bright star, just like a mother putting her child into a robe pouch. I relaxed and closed my eyes, but I couldn't sleep. . . .

*Tibetan Nomad Childhood* will soon be available on [www.lulu.com/plateaupubs](http://www.lulu.com/plateaupubs)



Karma-Dondrub tells us in *Tibetan Nomad Childhood* that he "was born under Mother's robe in a black yak-hair tent in a family of nomadic yak herders" in Chendou County, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Karma "can't tell anybody my precise birth date because Mother doesn't remember" but "I can be sure ... I was born in 1983 in a nomad family on a grassland so vast that a galloping horse can't reach the end before tiring out." Karma began herding livestock when he could walk until he went to school at the age of eight in the county seat and, at the same time, was shocked to see a tree for the first time. He began learning English in 2001 at Qinghai Normal University in Xining City



## English Training Program

### Qinghai Nationalities Teacher's College, Qinghai Normal University

Some are only twenty, born in 1986--in rural Tibetan environments in China that are increasingly, for better or worse, difficult to find; an era of tents, near complete dependence on yaks and/or subsistence agriculture, few vehicles, no electricity, little-to-no formal State schooling, and a large measure of isolation (no motorcycles, no cars, no buses, no trucks) and lack of contact with a non-Tibetan world.

Who are they? Students in a special English Training Program (ETP) in the Qinghai (Mtsho sngon, Koknor) Nationalities Teacher's College, Qinghai Normal University located in Xining City, Qinghai Province, PR China. Begun in 1997, the program had grown into seven classes of Tibetan students from the provinces of Yunnan, Gansu, Sichuan, and Qinghai and the Tibetan Autonomous Region in early 2006. Made possible by grants from The Bridge Fund, the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, Misereor, Good Works, and Trace Foundation, the program seeks to provide students with a high level of English proficiency while, at the same time, emphasizing a command of the Tibetan and Chinese languages. One of the most remarkable aspects of this program is that nearly all students are from rural Tibetan areas.



Karma-Dondrub



Puhua Donzhi

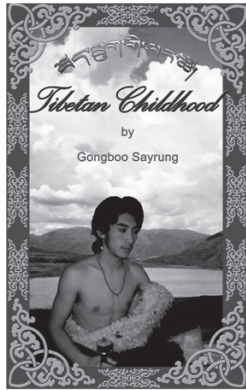
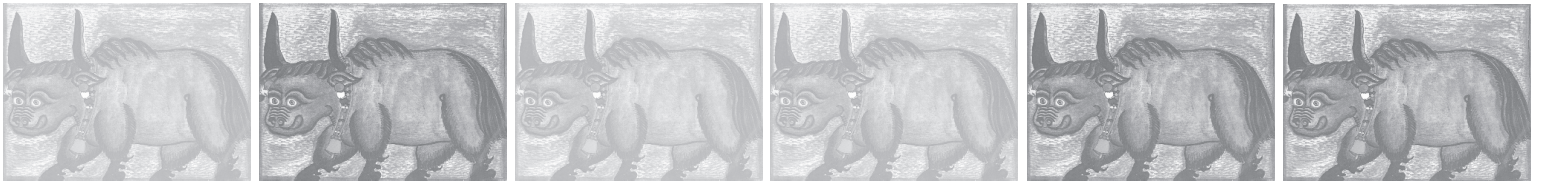
In March 2006, the program had nine foreign teachers and approximately 221 students, all of whom speak, read, and write Tibetan.

I came to China in 1984 and have lived since in Inner Mongolia (3 years) and Qinghai, except for the better part of a year in Ulaanbaatar and Erdenet. Reflection after years of publishing articles emphasizing technical description of ritual and language suggested to me the importance of sharing the lived and recollected experiences of these young Tibetans: What was recalled about childhood? What was early education? Who were important people in these students' early lives? What were happy and sad moments? Why didn't I do this sooner? An outgrowth of my suggestions, as a teacher in the English Training Program, and my editorial assistance, has been the works of four recent ETP graduates in the form of two autobiographies, one short novel, and two documentary films that are now available, thanks to POD (Print on Demand) publishing, on lulu.com.



Guhrub

**Kevin Stuart**



**Gongboo Sayrung**, born in 1984, is a native of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province. *Tibetan Childhood* traces his relationship with his great-uncle and his mother (his father left the family when he was an infant) from very young childhood, describes his life in township towns, the eventual death of his great-uncle, a visit to his maternal grandmother on the grassland, and other events, including his study of English at Qinghai Normal University in Xining City, which explains his fluency in English. Gongboo's account is, finally an absolutely transfixing and unique autobiographical account of a contemporary childhood that educates us about the realities of ordinary Tibetan life in China by a genuine local voice. [Gongboo Sayrung (author); Losang Sodnum and Tsepakgyap (illustrations). 2005. *Tibetan Childhood*. <http://www.lulu.com/content/188312>. 144 pages, 6.0" x 9.0", perfect binding, black and white interior ink, numerous illustrations; download: 1 documents (PDF), 889 KB. Printed: 8.99; download 1.58.]

**Guhruh** was born in 1983 in Rangnan Village, Qiuji Township, Zongay County, Nahwah Qiang and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. He went to school periodically before dropping out to drive a truck with an older brother to and from Lhasa, then returned to school. He was later selected to attend the English Training Program at Qinghai Normal University in Xining City, which explains his ability in English. This novel, Guhruh's first, is a must-read despite its unflinchingly honesty, which is at times painful and tells us more than we may want to know about the realities of conflict between early 20th Century Tibetan tribes. The most important person in Guhruh's childhood was his grandfather (Jahzong), who this book is dedicated to. The book is Guhruh's retelling of his grandfather's accounts. [Guhruh (author), Tsepakgyap (illustrations). 2005. *Jahzong: Tibetan Tribal Hero*. <http://www.lulu.com/content/186844> (in hardcopy and electronic form). 148 pages, 6.0" x 9.0, perfect binding, black and white interior ink, numerous illustrations; download: 1 documents (PDF), 1765 KB, Printed: 8.99; download 1.50.]

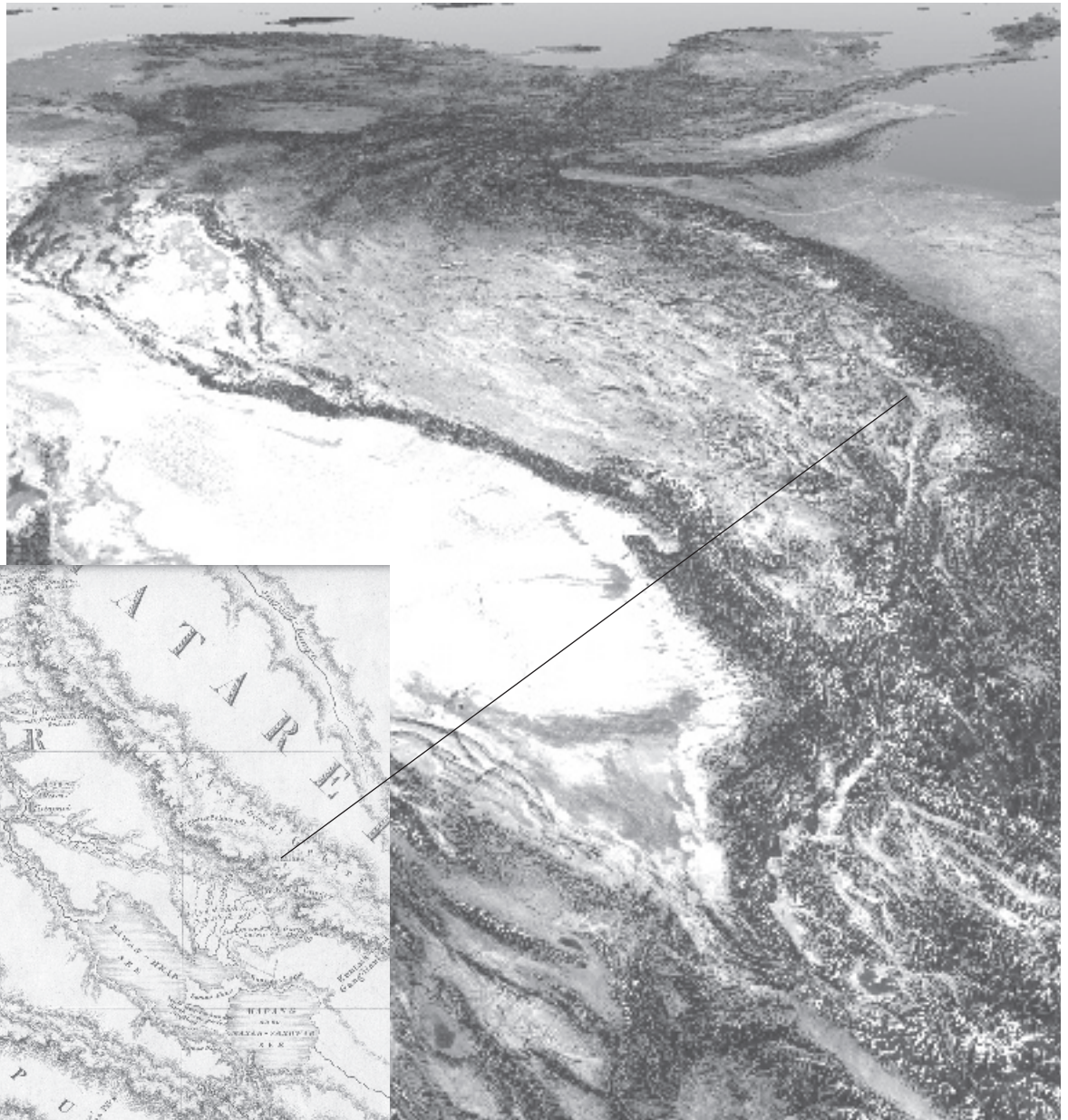
**Puhua Dongzhi** was born in 1982, the youngest of nine children, in a rural area of east central Qinghai. His keen interest in computers and film and fluency in Tibetan, Chinese and English have resulted in the two documentaries below that give unusual insight into contemporary Tibetan life: a religious ritual at an important Tibetan monastery in China and an "ordinary" Tibetan village wedding. In 2006, Puhua was invited to attend the Berlinale Talent Campus at the 56th Berlin International Film Festival.

Puhua Dongzhi. 2005. *Tibetan Village Wedding*. <http://www.lulu.com/content/208262>. DVD. 22-year old Lha dpa' tshe ring married 19-year old Tshe ring mtsho in rural 'ber gtsang mo Tibetan Village, located in east central Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, northwest China. Both have some primary school education. Both are farmers, cultivating wheat, barley, beans, potatoes and edible oil crops. The documentary includes activities the night prior to the formal wedding party; the groom and his companion's arrival at the bride's home; women from the bride's village attacking the groom and his companion and pulling their ears; the companion singing to thwart the women's attack; the bride and her companions' arrival at the groom's home; the bride prostrating three times to the groom's home's door protective deity, family god, and the fire deity; gifts; wedding food; orations; singing; the bride's entourage's departure; evening celebration. (Rare insight into village Tibetan life. Tibetan soundtrack; English subtitles. 35 minutes. Color.) 14\$.

Puhua Dongzhi. 2005. *The Perfection of Wisdom*. <http://www.lulu.com/content/208262>. DVD. "The Perfection of Wisdom" (Phar phyin) is the one of the five treatises of Buddhist philosophy. Ngag dbang 'jam dbyangs, a monk at Bla brang Monastery in Gansu Province, China, earned this degree in 2004. This documentary, filmed and edited by his younger brother, documents the graduation ritual for the thirty monks who achieved this degree. The documentary features Ngag dbang 'jam dbyangs making 1,000 packages of sugar and raisins, given away at the ritual's end; debating Buddha's deeds in La kha Lama's quarters the night before the formal ritual; and visiting the monastery halls early the next morning; the formal examination with an assembly of all monastic leaders and monks in the great hall; and congratulations from friends, family members, and teachers. (A rare look into a contemporary large Tibetan Buddhist monastery. Tibetan soundtrack; English subtitles. 27 minutes. Color.) 14\$.



HIGH ASIA: The Tibetan Plateau and surrounding territory, viewed ESE from space (courtesy of William Bowen: <http://geogdata.csun.edu>)



Mount Kailas ("Caylasa P.") extracted from the map by Carl Ritter: *Entwurf zu einer Karte vom ganzen Gebirgssysteme des Himálaja nach den Quellenangaben. Nebst einer Specialkarte des hohen Himálaja in Gurwhal, Kemaon, Almora; mit den Quellen des Ganges, Indus, Sutludsch.* Berlin: Druckerei der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1832