

FROM INSIDE CHINA

· 中国报告系列 ·

Tales from Tibet

阿里 阿里

杜文娟 著 Sophie Murten 译

中国出版集团
中译出版社

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Ngari! Ngari!

*Nowhere else in the world could one get closer to the sun;
Nowhere else in the world could snowcapped mountains be more
desolate;
Nowhere else in the world could flowers be more amazing and fasci-
nating;
Nowhere else in the world could one see people smile more brilliantly.
Here is Ngari, the ancestor of countless mountains and rivers;
Here is Ngari, the eternal, boundless, and sacred Holy Land;
Here is Ngari, the place which everyone yearns for and where legends
abound;
Here is Ngari . . .*

Prologue

NGARI IS THE NAME of a faraway place and also the name of an area.

Ngari is a small town in the Gobi Desert. It is a place ordinary people look up to and bow down to, but you will never truly understand the difficulty of living here with the constant looming of death, nor will you know the true meaning of laughing out loud and enjoying happiness until you personally experience in Ngari the midday sun, the midnight chill, the snow in July, the distant desert and the threat of death with all your heart and soul.

When in Ngari, I always have delusions, unable to tell reality from scenes that appeared in my dreams. Once, in broad daylight, I thought for a long time but still couldn't think of where I was. I did not know where I came from and where I was going, and I even forgot the date.

While I climbed to the top of the high hills of Rutog County, I admired the rock paintings and the totems of yak, bharal and brown bears created by the ancient Ngari people; I panted for breath after going through the time-tunnel and bathed in the sun that had once shone upon the ancient Guge Kingdom; I boated

on the rippling water of Bangong Lake and found that where bar-headed geese flew past, there were outposts of neighboring countries. All the astonishment and fabulousness that I experienced here provoked my constant pondering over the history and fate of Ngari. What challenges and opportunities are waiting for it? Will this amazing land become better tomorrow, just like the songs predicted?

One has to trudge over numerous snowcapped mountains, Dabans*, glaciers and uninhabited areas on the way to Ngari from Lhasa. The first time I went from Lhasa to Ngari in 2009, it took me six days in an ordinary cross-country vehicle, traveling from sunrise to sunset, to arrive at Shiquanhe Town (“Lion Spring River Town”, the main town of Ngari Prefecture commonly known as Ngari Town). Even though the asphalt highway connecting Ngari with Lhasa has been completed and was opened to traffic in 2011, it still takes two days driving both day and night, even in a high-end cross-country vehicle, to finish the trip.

The name “Ngari” is associated with wars and a history of wretched circumstances unfolding on a magnificent scale. Nowadays, we can only get a glimpse of it through fragmentary records and folk legends.

On August 1, 1950, a cavalry troop from the independent regiment of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of the Xinjiang Military Area, led by Li Disan, started from Pulu Village in Yutian County in the south of Tarim Basin, climbed over the Karakorum and Kunlun Mountains and headed for Ngari, thus officially opening the prelude to the liberation of Ngari. The people

* Daban means high mountains and hilly mountain roads in Uighur and Mongol.

of this army also became the first Han people to reach Ngari Plateau. On August 23, 1951, the PLA was stationed in Gartok* and succeeded in liberating all of the Ngari territory.

Among the four sets of troops marching for Tibet from Xinjiang Province, Qinghai Province, Xikang Province (now non-existent) and Yunnan Province, the one led by Li Disan was the earliest to reach Tibet, however Ngari was the last to receive peaceful liberation. Li's advance force to Tibet was composed of 136 soldiers, of which 63 died on Ngari Plateau. They sacrificed their life for Ngari's liberation.

It is said that the three most known people in Ngari are Li Disan, Bi Shumin and Kong Fansen in the fields of military history, culture and leadership respectively. In fact, during the long history of civilization on Ngari Plateau, others such as Tonpa Shenrab Miowoche, founder of the Bon Religion tradition of Tibet; Milarepa, a Buddhist publicist; Yeshe-Ö, a prince of the ancient Guge Kingdom; Atiśa, a Buddhist master and Rinchen Zangpo, a great translator of sutras, all occupy an eminent place in the pantheon of sages and doyens here.

Yesterday is the history of today, while today is the history of tomorrow. The life of the Ngari people is like that of a river, which goes on and on with no end. They live a life which is colorful and full of vitality on the vast and lofty Ngari Mountains, just like the

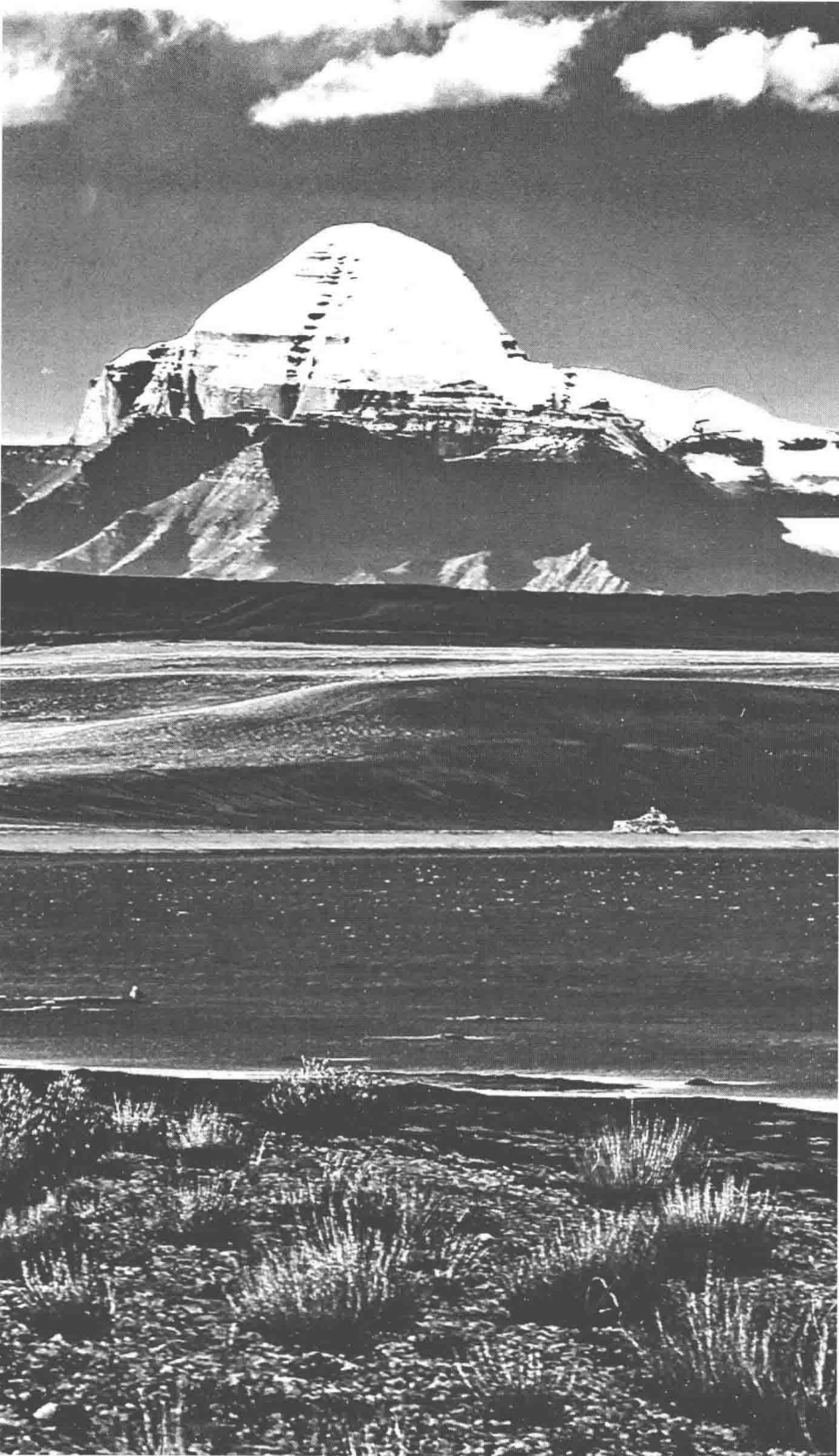
* Gartok, now called Garyarsa, was formerly the main town and summer capital of western Tibet. It is a trade-market of Tibet, situated on the bank of the Indus at an elevation of 14,630ft.

prayer flags.*

My love for the people and things of Ngari grow with my deepening understanding of it. I make new discoveries and have surprises every time I go there, which in turn adds to my feeling that it is important to safeguard this territory of our motherland. Gradually, I've come to understand how more than 90,000 tenacious people survive in this desolate wild land between West and South Asia and how native Ngari people and outsiders fight against external intrusion and the harsh natural environment here, how they fight against mental and physical loneliness to live a simple and happy life.

Please accept my benediction, Ngari.

* A prayer flag is also called Lung ta or "Wind Horse" flag in Tibetan, which is used to bless the surrounding countryside and also for other purposes. It is a piece of square or horizontal cloth, commonly hung in high places such as the top of temples, monasteries, stupas, and mountain passes.



Chapter 1
Two Hundred Thousand
Kowtows* to Reach the Dreamland

THIS DREAM REPEATED itself two or three times long before he became a *zhaba*†. In the same dream, he was stricken by the same tall and majestic snowcapped mountains and a vast expanse of lake, but he had no idea where they were. His master told him that only in Tibet could he find a place like this.

The Hard Life of the Child Gong Bao

I should start Gong Bao's story from the tenth year of his life.

Ten-year-old Gong Bao was riding on a bony horse, with his mother and a man walking by his side. The man, a Khampa (native of Kham, a historical region), was not his father. Back in their

* Kowtow here specifically refers to the Tibetan kowtow, in which pilgrims put their palms together and prostrate themselves on the ground with their head, two arms and two legs touching the earth, and move forward slowly, following every step with a kowtow. It is an extreme gesture of respect.

† *zhaba* means underage monks in the temples.

hometown of Huangyuan in Qinghai Province, his father was still kept in the dark when his mother took him and eloped with this man.

When they had eaten up all the fried *qingke* (namely barley flour, a kind of cereal), *zanba* (made of roasted *qingke*), dried meat and butter tea, mother and the Khampa's footsteps were even more faltering. The bony horse was the first to die from hunger, but following a Tibetan rule, they would not eat it. Gong Bao, hiding under his mother's Tibetan robe, stared at the dead horse in the snow with helpless and horrified eyes.

The three of them allayed their hunger with wild herbs. The placenta of the Tibetan antelopes could have served as their food, but vultures and the other bigger birds always got the upper hand. In desperate hunger, they finally climbed over the snowy Tanggula Mountains, welcomed by a scene of luxuriant grass and blooming wild flowers. Gong Bao, having picked a bunch of vibrant yellow and purple flowers, ran to his mother to hand them to her. His mother, however, looked at him blankly and reached out to Gong Bao's small tough hands instead of the flowers and led him into a tent.

The world inside the tent was just like that outside, with all the grass and flowers. Mother whispered a few words to the man in the tent, who nodded and handed her a small bag of highland barley. With that bag made of sheepskin in hand, Mother walked out of the tent to the Khampa and to the vast grassland.

At the end of the grassland was an endless extension of snowcapped mountains.

Gong Bao followed them, running, until he was too tired to run any more. He stopped by two stones and looked at them. The stones