

FROM INSIDE CHINA

· 中国报告系列 ·

THE ORIENTAL EXPRESS

Building the Railway to the Roof of the World

东方哈达 —— 中国青藏铁路全景实录

徐剑 著 Callum Smith 译



中国出版集团
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Author's Note

IN THE EIGHTH century CE, a sage of the Tibetan Tubo Dynasty offered advice to the Tibetan Emperor Trisong Detsen that there were four ways that the future development of the Tibetan people could head: along the road of Buddhism in the East, the road of forestry in the south, the road of highland barley in the west, or along the road of steel in the north.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a thousand-year dream was forged into something of a poetic legend, transcending the Tibetan King Gesar of the Kingdom of Ling.

Xu Jian

The First Ticket
Entering Tibet

PERHAPS I WAS destined in this life to become enthralled in the vast bliss that is Tibet.

Those wildernesses which captivated me dance gracefully with the arc of time.

With only 150 minutes remaining on the 1st of October 2004, a moment that could have disappeared into the darkness of night for eternity, history was made. Perhaps there was no great event of national importance to attract global attention, so naturally, we cannot infer a collective memory.

The sky had not yet fallen dark, it remained slightly illuminated. The evening light ignited Kunlun's snowy peaks, as if to place an elegant sheet atop a bed. One by one, they fell, and they were met by the dusk that rose gradually from the walls of Gel mud City, and they became muddled together as a pink swathe of sky. The scattered clouds dispersed, and heroically, casts their last spell in a spectacular showdown before going into hibernation. It waits, waiting for a thousand years of blessing, or perhaps, a thousand years of inexorable doom.

I sat in the small drawing room of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway head conductor of the China Railway 20 Bureau Corporation. The Kunlun Mountains wrapped me in the desolate sheet of night, enveloping me in an eagerness and impatience. Sitting face to face with Kuang Chengming, I was at a loss for words. Since the words *heroes*, *miracles*, and *fervor* had already been deconstructed in our lives, and gradually erased from their mainstream context, I felt like I'd already become numb, or hard like ice, unable to again be swept away by a turbulence of emotion, unable to be moved ever again. However, the moment I set out upon the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, my emotional world, which had been still like stagnant water, suddenly entered a tempest from which emerged song and scenes of heaven and earth, as if to blow away the dirt, brush away the hardships of life, as waves and purity of a pool of emotion reappeared.

On many ordinary days like this, there was an oxygen tube inserted in my nostril, as I quietly listened to the ordinary female workers who had labored to build the railway tearfully describe the depths of their emotions. I couldn't help but choke on my tears — they were mothers, daughters, sisters; they were kind, delicate, loving. In their presence, a man need not wear a mask of pretense.

There were many nights such as this, where I drank a little light alcohol, where I gazed at the male laborers on the line who were the same age or still younger than me, and their words touched an emotional tender spot. Underneath armor was man-after-man, awash with emotion. Suddenly, the soft side of a man arose, sad and teary-eyed, I let it all out, accidentally wiping tear stains, trying my best to hold onto my manly pride, but in the end, my masculine guise was smashed to pieces by a wave of roaring and uncontrol-

lable emotion.

In my gaze was the head conductor Kuang Chengming, quietly narrating, and the Fenghuoshan Pass which rose over 5,000 meters above sea level, seemed to rise like a city wall in my line of sight. Limitless wild fields, and the prayer flags seemed alive, simultaneously leading to heaven and hell. This had almost become his Waterloo, he narrowly escaped, but an army burning with righteous indignation is bound to win, and he fought to win or die, for himself, for the respect of his men, and for the heroic souls of the 10th Division of People's Liberation Army (PLA) railway engineering corps who had perished. He spoke of when the 20 Bureau nearly lost their segment to others, and he spoke about his wife and son in faraway Xianyang City, and how he couldn't be there to accompany them. When he talked about the world's highest tunnel at Fenghuoshan Mountain finally becoming the Qinghai-Tibet rail's finest piece of engineering, he suddenly choked, unable to speak, and became teary.

But Kuang Chenming was a proud man, he didn't allow himself to cry. But tears welled in the corners of my eyes. Overwhelmed by uncontrollable emotion, my eyes were moistened by a wave of feeling from the people of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway.

At that moment, the atmosphere in the room became solemn, almost suffocating in awkward silence. It was difficult to continue the interview. The tissue I had been using had gradually disintegrated, and I wished to relieve the stifling and awkward atmosphere in the room. I even hoped that at that point, another person might appear to save the day.

The sound of a ringing mobile phone pierced the silence, and I took a great sigh of relief. The caller ID displayed the name of China

Central Television's director of logistics department, Yin Jianbai. Before I left Beijing, I had bid farewell to the long-standing senior official, eighty-two-year-old first secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region Party Committee, Yin Fatang. I heard that he had attended commemorative activities for the centennial of resistance against the English in Gyangze in Tibet with his wife and daughters, Jianbai and Yanong, and I hadn't expected him to return this quickly.

"Hi Jianbai, it's me. Where is your father these days?" I asked excitedly.

"He's already in Golmud City. Dad was on the train from Xining all day today. He just saw the construction headquarters of the Qinghai-Tibet rail, the logistics department, and the Golmud office of Tibet before returning. He's going to climb the mountain at 6am tomorrow morning."

"Climb the mountain? Tomorrow?" I was stunned, he was elderly and had only arrived at Golmud yesterday. Without a step-by-step acclimatization, people were sure to be concerned.

"Indeed! So I wanted dad to sleep a little earlier, but he said he wanted to see you." Jianbai seemed a little anxious.

"Oh!" I raised my wrist to check, it was already 9.30pm. "Which hotel are you staying at?"

"Jinlun Hotel, at room number 601 on the sixth floor."

"What a coincidence. I'm also staying at the Jinlun Hotel." I was almost surprised on the telephone, "at precisely room number 608, only a few doors away."

By now, Kuang Chengming had already regained his composure. I stood up and explained, "Mr. Yin is already eighty-two years old, but he took his whole family and went through the Kunlun Mountains, crossed the Tanggula Mountains, all to realize his dream

of completing a circuit of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway. He's been wanting to do this for decades."

"This in itself is a miracle, it's possible that he's the oldest senior official to travel the Qinghai-Tibet Railway." Kuang Chengming also stood up, saying, "let's go, I'll drive you back."

"It's more than a miracle." I gasped for breath as we walked downstairs, "my affinity, my knowledge and dreams of Tibet all began with a fortunate encounter with Mr. Yin. Fourteen years ago, when I had only just turned thirty, I first went with him along the Qinghai-Tibet Railway. When I was in Golmud City the night before I climbed the mountain, do you know what I felt?"

"What did you feel?" Kuang Chengming was a tad astonished.

"Like I was entering an execution ground!"

"Please, you're exaggerating!" The puzzled Kuang Chengming, who had spent three years at Fenghuoshan Mountain said, "you're not just being creative?"

"No!" I shook my head, and said very sincerely, "I was very afraid of altitude sickness back then, and I was worried that I'd leave my bones on the Qinghai-Tibet Railway. When we reached Shigatse, I was quite unwell and I didn't eat or drink anything for three days and nights, dreaming of a heavenly fantasy, and I nearly died."

"Really?"

"Without a doubt!" I nodded in reply.

The Nissan jeep drove out of the city gates, and the poplars pierced the night sky like sharp swords, the silhouettes of trees inlaid in long, thin scars on the sky, and above the treetops, hung the Kunlun moon, its light like an explosion, making the wide Kunlun road drip into the pure waves of the Milky Way, neon shone on both sides of the great thoroughfare, the rough projections of distant snowy

peaks were like a palace in the heavens. I sat in the jeep's passenger seat, and like a nimble speedboat passing through a space-time tunnel. The Kunlun moon lit the skies with its eternal presence, the legends of this heavenly road by no means came from snowy dust and smoke, but were gradually illuminated by the lunar halo.

I felt grateful, for when filled with mysterious longing for the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau at a young age, I was fortunate enough to be in the staff subordinate to Yin Fatang, whose experiences of the mysteries of Tibet had an imperceptible influence on me. My perceptual field, my life, creativity and even my emotional world were deeply imprinted with the traces of Tibet.

This fortunate encounter had begun in the 1980s.

On the eve of Chinese New Year in 1985, Yin Fatang, came to Beijing from Lhasa, becoming the deputy political commissar of the Second Artillery Corps.

Fortunately, in that year I was only twenty-six, and served as the secretary of the Party committee of the Second Artillery Corps, so I gradually became closer to Yin Fatang. Tibet blew toward me like a hazy blizzard.

The general had not yet reported for duty, but one letter after another had arrived from Tibet. Like layers of gentle wings, they had fallen on my desk, and we picked it up to look at, and couldn't help but laugh involuntarily: it was addressed to Great Master Yin Fatang. The Provincial Regional Party Committee First Secretary of the, surprisingly, had the elegant Buddhist name of Fatang ("Dharma Void"). Why would a Buddhist master enlist in the army? How could a Buddhist master climb the ranks to become provincial (regional) first secretary? Was he a revolutionary "Tsanpo", or a Buddhist in-between? The name "Yin Fatang" was sufficient in