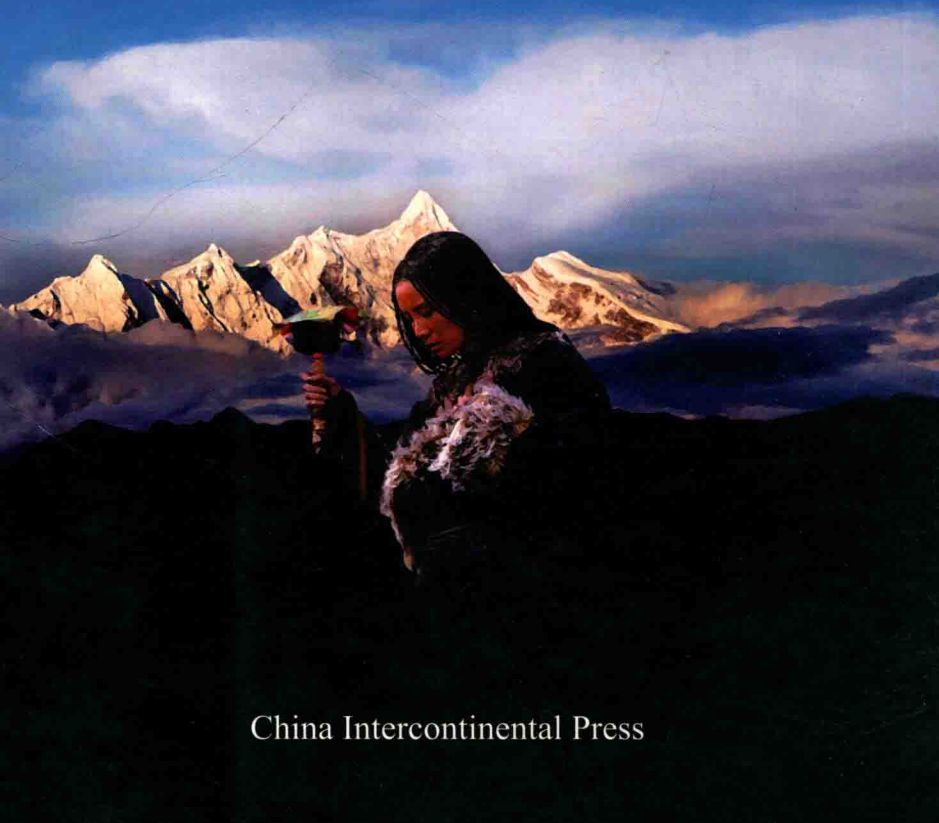


Jin Zhiguo

Eternal Mountain

Selected Tibetan Stories of Jin Zhiguo



China Intercontinental Press

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Eternal Mountain

The fire in the stove went out slowly. The round face of the shepherd, lying next to the stove glowed with the light of the fire, his body submerged in the elusive darkness. The perfume of milk pervaded the air in the tent. Because of the absolute silence, the sweet scent seemed even more powerful.

"Did you hear that? That sound...." Qionda asked for the third time since he had laid down to sleep. Huddling beneath the Tibetan tapestry side by side with Qionda, he made no reply and kept silent for a while as if he had fallen asleep. Suddenly, he responded slowly in a wide-awake tone:

"I didn't hear anything. Don't be so weird."

"I... I just wondered who you were."

Silence fell again.

The wind was rising. It made the trees breathe heavily. Outside the tent was a group of pilgrims who lay down on the ground around the bonfire, still chanting all the while.

"It's very cold outside. I'm afraid they will be frozen with the cold." He moved even closer to Qionda.

"They don't care about this... you're not that bad!"

"Shall we climb the mountain with them tomorrow morning?"

"Of course. It will be good for us. Try to sleep.... What are you

looking at?"

He stared at the top of the tent. There was a hole in it, through which, a shining star could just about be seen.

They got up late the next morning. Only a piece of worn-out sheepskin was left in the place where the shepherd had slept last night. It seemed to be still cooling. Outside the tent was a pile of ashes left behind by the pilgrims in the bright sunlight. There were mountains everywhere, just like a sea of mountains which looked as if they were about to swallow the people up. The mountaintops illuminated by the sun looked like the crests of great waves.

After drinking the buttered tea which had been set to warm on the stove by the shepherd, they packed up to leave.

When Qionda was putting on his suede hunting jacket, his eye was caught by a small emerald corduroy bag hanging by a red silk thread in front of Qionda.

"What's in that?" he asked Qionda.

"My love's blessings for me."

"How long is it now since you saw each other?"

"About five years, no, six years."

"You stayed in the college just four years."

"That's right. I spent another two years in the middle school in Lhasa."

"That's just puppy love!"

"She was also quite young then, but she could still sing great love songs."

"Did she sing and dance at the same time?"

"She dared not, for fear of others laughing at her."

"So she sang to you secretly?"

"You know, she had to carry water every day. The river runs right

in front of my home.”

“Hmm that sounds interesting. Well, why did she send you such a small bag instead of...?”

“Stop talking like that. I’m getting angry now. When I studied in Shanghai, I was often troubled by such questions.”

“Some things are inherently strange.”

“That’s because you don’t understand.... I think you are also very strange. Let’s go, weirdo.”

After a few steps forward, Qionda seemed to suddenly remember something. He paused, and then pulled out some clothes from the backpack on his back, pushed the tent flap aside and put the clothes inside.

“I just want to show our thanks to the shepherd for his hospitality.” Qionda explained when he saw the puzzled look on his face.

The faintly discernible mountain path was covered with dry twigs. The cracks of twigs under their feet could be heard from time to time. On one side of the mountain path was a large stretch of forest extending downward; and on the other side was a trickle of water quietly flowing down the rocky slope. Just as they were all getting sweaty from walking, they caught sight of the pilgrims staggering on ahead.

“They are walking so slowly. Can you see how many of them there are?” Qionda stopped to straighten the backpack on his back and he counted.

“Five... six... eight.” He counted, squinting his eyes and rested one arm on his hip.

“There are nine including five women. The one walking in front is a woman.”

“Your eyesight is really good, Qionda. But there’s no need to be

so careful.”

“Shut up! Let’s go.”

“I have to have a rest. I can’t go any further.”

“You cannot walk on?” Qionda looked at him in surprise. His face flushed, the sweaty skin was becoming wrinkled under the scorching sun.

“I’m Ok. Give me your bag.”

“No. Thanks. It’s so quiet here - it seems like a time many centuries ago.”

“Didn’t you hear that? That sound?”

He noticed a strange light glowing in the eyes of Qionda at this juncture.

“No. I want to listen to music.”

“Speaking of music, I remember when I was in Shanghai, my classmates and I went to a concert. We heard Debussy’s symphonic sketches....”

“Debussy, I like his music so very much.”

“Why?”

“The color and transparency of music are as fickle as the sea. It seduces with the image and the shape of the sea.”

“How did you design such a thing?”

“That is like a sea of blood. The wind is just like an elegy for a conqueror....”

“So terrible! I didn’t think so at that time. I was just tickled.”

“What?”

“When the performance was happening, I suddenly got a tickle in my throat and I really wanted to cough. However I dared not, so I had to try to fight it. When the piece closed and the audience were clapping, I had a fit of coughing.”

“So humorous, you are so silly....”

"Mind your words. Buckle your shoes. Look, they have moved on farther."

The trees were no longer so dense. There were several short pine trees scattered here and there. On the mountain path was just some weathered gravel. It was quite hard to find some human traces apart from the exposed dark wet bottom of the gravel disturbed by the pilgrims as they passed by. Actually, there were no real roads in this part of the world. They were just a path left by previous passersby. Except for the sun hanging in the sky, all that could be seen were just the majestic but desolate mountains. Some of the pilgrims kept turning around to take a look at the two figures following after them.

"Qionda, I remember that you once told me that you would go home after climbing the mountain."

"Yes. My mother still lives there."

"And your sweetheart."

"She's a grown up girl now. She will just watch me from afar - she won't approach me."

"I understand. What about them?"

"Who?"

"Those walking ahead. Who is waiting for them?"

"Heaven."

"You're joking?"

"Joking? You don't understand," mused Qionda, "Who waits for you?"

"...the mountain."

Qionda looked at him in confusion.

"We'd better catch up with them. I can see them clearly. The one walking in front is a woman."

“That’s not so easy even though they are not so far ahead of us.”

They thought they had been walking much faster. Actually, they were still moving just as slowly as before. Because of being worried, they felt that they were moving even slower. It seemed the pilgrims read their minds - they stopped to sit at the roadside. Several women went to pick up some firewood. A man set up a stove with some stones and put a badly potholed pot on top.

Breathing heavily, the two approached the pilgrims. They looked at each other silently.

The man making tea grinned and said a few words to them.

Qionda went over, took the bag off his back and sat next to the man. He took out several pieces of solid food from his bag and put them in front of the man. And then he delved his hand into the man’s *tsampa* bag, and said:

“He was wondering whether we were Han people.”

“What does that mean?”

“He said that now the Han people always came here by car. No Han people have been seen on this road since 1959.”

“Oh.”

Qionda began to chat with the man.

He sat on a rock which had been almost roasted in the burning sun and cast his eyes on the light blue smoke rising from the simple stove, as he waited for the water in the pot to boil. A girl, about 10, her bright eyes seemingly overshadowed by something, came over to him and extended her hands.

He gave Qionda a questioning look.

“She is asking you to take out your food.”

“I don’t want to eat anything.”

“You should take it out even if you are not hungry.” Qionda’s voice sounded too calm for him.

It seemed as if the man who was making tea neither saw nor heard anything. He was just focused on putting some tea in the boiling water. The others were also concentrated on doing their own things. A woman was breastfeeding her child while craning her neck to look at the path ahead, as if looking for something. Of the other women, some helped each other fix their hair and the more senior ones silently moved their lips and chanted sutras with their eyes closed.

Glancing at Qionda and then the little girl, his mind flashed on something but he was still at a loss. Obviously, the girl was not begging for food. She looked completely natural as if she was urging someone to do the right thing. He was struck by a kind of uneasiness. The grayish blue sky, indifferent sun, and endless mountains, combined with the look in the eyes of Qionda, the facial expression of the little girl and the silent pilgrims... all combined to contribute to the discomfort that was oppressing him. He felt as if he was so far away from everything that was right under his nose. He was not sure whether he was alone or not. So depressed, he emptied his bag on the ground in confusion.

An innocent smile spread on the face of the little girl. She ran back to the women.

The tea was ready.

The little girl picked up the cup in front of him, filled it with dark brown tea water and returned it to him.

The man making tea passed him a piece of dry meat.

The woman in the fur-lined gown who was breastfeeding her child also came over and gave him two pieces of milk curd.

Qionda was drinking tea with a smile, smacking his lips with satisfaction from time to time. He could see a trace of sarcasm shining in the eyes of Qionda.

No one said it was time to go and even no one made any gesture, but all the pilgrims began to pack their things silently. They said nothing to him and Qionda as though the two were not there at all.

"Shall we go now?" he asked Qionda idly.

"Ok. Let's go... the longer we rest, the more tired we will be."

Qionda poured the remaining tea water in his cup on the embers in the stove, creating a hissing puff of smoke.

The mountain sloped gently. People could now walk easily, no longer bound by the confines of the so-called road. However, no road also meant no guidance. The undulating hills came one after another. Just as you climbed over one, there would be another coming into view. Such a magic scene made people relax and simultaneously tighten both mentally and physically again and again. They told themselves many times that this must be the last hill. However, when they finally got to what they thought was the top, they would dejectedly find another hill waiting ahead. Despite this, no one revealed their depression. They just gritted their teeth or swore under their breaths, and then remobilized themselves both mentally and physically to start again. Their steps became much heavier. Sometimes they would even stagger.

"Damn it! What a long journey..." when they arrived at the top of another barren hill once again to find another identical one standing in front, Qionda couldn't help swearing aloud. The bag on his back tilted. His clothes were unbuttoned, and his collar hung from the shoulder.

"It seems that... you've... never been... down... this road...." he was out of breath, and the lips were turning a bit blue.

"No." Qionda panted for a while, "When I was young, the adults used to travel along this route. I wanted to climb the mountain with them, but mother always refused."

"How did you leave here?"

"Took the boat. You know, there is a river that runs right through our village."

"How high is the mountain?"

"Who knows? This is the way of pilgrims. In our village, you can see the snow-capped peak. People have been there to pick the snow lotus."

"But we cannot see the snow mountain from here - why is that?"

"You will. Look at the woman walking in the front, the one who seems as if she knows the way."

"It seems that they are not as tired as us."

"Certainly. Maybe Pamdo's success in conquering the Qomolangma resulted from the help of fairies."

"I'm afraid, even if there were fairies in the world, they would not lend us a hand."

"That's for sure, just because of your company...."

"Well, I'd like to see...."

"That's Ok. I heard that there is an American who conquered six of the highest mountains across the world. What a hero!"

"That was a Norwegian. He has conquered five. He plans to climb the sixth next year."

"Why do you always contradict me?!"

"It's said that when people get to somewhere above 3,000 meters above sea level, people will lose the ability to reason properly and it just gets worse the higher you go."

"You mean you think my brain is in a fog?"

"I don't mean that. I'm just talking about science."

"You should roll down the mountain if you fancy a rest!"

The two started grappling at each other with their arms. The

gravel under their feet began to clatter down along the slope.

At this moment, a pair of workmen's hands clutched at their heads and separated them easily.

The man making tea stood in front of them, his disheveled hair wet with sweat, his weathered face wearing an expression of pity.

"What are you doing?" The two aggressors panted desperately, glaring at him.

The pity in his eyes disappeared. Looking at them indifferently, he mumbled something and turned away.

"What did he say?" He turned to ask Qionda.

"He said 'the mountain god doesn't appreciate dead bodies'."

The blue sky was fading into gray. Under it the brownish mountains stood shoulder by shoulder. Sometimes, some loose streaks of cloud floated by the protruding parts, seemingly connecting them together. They silently looked at each other with desolate but consecrated eyes. Soon their indomitable self-confidence returned - they were a puzzling and interesting pair in that respect.

They began to slowly walk down after a quite long rest on the slope.

"Hey... I still don't know your name. Why did you come to climb this mountain?"

"You said an American had conquered six of the great peaks in the world, didn't you?"

"You're laughing at me?"

"No, I'm not."

"Is there any connection between you and him?"

"Yes. Mountain-climbing."

"You're not a good mountaineer."

"Why do you say that?"

"I can see that."

"You are right. This is my first time to climb a mountain."

"You're not here for the snow lotus, are you? Be careful, you might stay here forever."

"That's enough! This isn't an interesting topic."

"Please don't say 'not interesting'. Speaking of which, I'm getting cold feet."

"Oh, no. We must catch up with them, or we'll be lost."

"Don't worry. The woman in front is still visible."

They picked up the pace. The sun cast their shadows upon the pale weathered stones before them.

"My feet feel as if they are being dragged by something." Qionda began to slow down.

"We're climbing another hill."

"Why can't I see that?"

"Some things can just be felt."

"I sincerely hope this is the last hill. I don't have much strength left now. I hope I can reserve some energy for the main peak."

"So do I."

"I'll lie on my bed for three days when I get home."

"That'll be too boring."

"No, it won't. My mother will talk on and on. Moreover..."

"Your little sweetheart will sing to you."

"I've told you that she has grown up and won't sing to me any more. She just stands there, watching me. Do you understand?"

"I don't understand."

"You're so silly!"

"We are more similar than you know.... It's getting cold now!"

"You're right. Where is the sweat gone to?"

"You'd better button your coat."

"The little girl looks as if she is too tired to walk on."

"That man carries her on his back... Will he be mad at us?"

"Why would you think so? He is a true man. I know them."

"You should be proud of them. Do you like them?"

"Well... I admire them, but I can't say I completely like them."

"Why?"

"I don't know. For one thing, it's hard to draw a conclusion."

"Do you know what a master is?"

"It's not necessary for the master to know everything. Just as the saying goes: 'No matter how bright the light, it cannot light up every corner of the world.'"

"I think you need to stay in the university for another few years."

"Don't lecture me. You are no better than me."

"That's true. Look, they've stopped. Are they going to make tea again?"

"No. I'm afraid they are waiting for us."

The pilgrims silently stood in the depression where traces of ice and snow could be seen, gazing ahead. None of them paid any attention to the two wobbling towards them from behind.

"Ah! The mountain pass! I'm almost home!"

The cheers of Qionda disappeared into the heavens before radar-ing back to them as a strong echo. All eyes turned to the mountain pass where a huge Mani Stone Mound stood covered with numerous sutra streamers. These colorful cloth strips were shivering in the chilly wind.

There was a towering mountain peak covered with snow quietly standing on one side of the mountain pass.

He felt as if he was dead on his feet. Although they were still moving forward, it was just a kind of mechanical action. Qionda,