TASHIDAWA A SOUL INBONDAGE

and Other Selected Writings





A SOUL



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Preface

Literature may reflect the ethos of a country or a nation, while at the same time it can transcend the limits of time and space to most widely resonate a truly universal humanity. Literary works of art that move hearts may even inspire the compassion of strangers toward a people or country...

This "Panda Series" of books, expertly translated into English, compiles the works of well-known modern and contemporary Chinese authors around themes such as the city and the countryside, love and marriage, minority folk stories and historical legends. These works reflect the true spirit and everyday lives of the Chinese people, while widely resonating with their changing spiritual and social horizons.

Published from the 1980s, through more than 100 titles in English, this series continues to open wider the window for readers worldwide to better understand China through its new literature. Many familiar and fond readers await the latest in this "Panda Series." This publication of the "Panda Series" consolidates and looks back at earlier released literary works to draw new readers, while stirring the fond memories of old friends, to let more people share the experiences and views of the Chinese people in recent decades. We express our sincere appreciation to all authors, translators and editors who have engaged in their dedicated and meticulous work over the years to bring out these works. It is their passion and endeavor that have enabled this series to appear now in luminous distinction.

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Forward

Dondrup Wangbum

IN August 1991, I went to Lhasa to attend the Second International Symposium on Gesar Culture, and was met there by Tashi Dawa and Ma Lihua, poet and author of Glimpses of Northem Tibet. It was the second time I had met Tashi Dawa, the first time being exactly ten years before at a seminar on Tibetan literature. He was a very young man then and had just embarked on his literary career.

It was on the afternoon of August 14 in Ma Lihua's room that we had a rambling chat about almost everything under the sun. In the evening, I brought our conversation round to Tashi Dawa's literary works because I wanted to finish compiling An Introduction to Contemporary Tibetan Literature which I had started ten years before. Unfortunately, around ten o'clock, the electricity was cut off. Tashi Dawa went downstairs and brought back with him a lamp and we continued in its soft bright glow.

Tashi Dawa was born in Batang County in the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Zhou of Sichuan Province in 1959. His father was a government official. With the founding of the People's Republic of China, a large number of Tibetan people were sent to work in Tibet,

and his father was one of them. Tashi Dawa spent most of his childhood in Chongqing, his mother's home. Like other children of government workers in Tibet, he frequently travelled from Chongqing Nyingchi, or to Shigatse or Lhasa as his father was transferred from one place to another. After graduating from junior middle school in 1974, he studied painting at the exhibition centre of the Tibet Autonomous Region, and in the same year, became a stage designer at the local theatre. In 1978, he entered the Chinese Operatic Institute to follow a one-year advanced course in drama. His life in Chongqing and around the familiar Jialing River formed a solid basis for him to learn Chinese, which broadened his horizons and gave him greater scope to learn about other cultures around the world. It was with an open mind, therefore, that he "entered" Tibet, which, to him, was fresh and mysterious, and it is these qualities that are one of the main features of his works — the first of which was "Reticence" published in Tibetan Literature in 1979. It was this story that brought him to the attention of the Chinese literary world.

As a boy Tashi Dawa was imaginative and dreamy. He wanted to hear the wonderful music of the heavens resounding in the oppressive classroom. He hunched over his desk writing science-fiction, detective stories about his own heroism, putting all the weird ideas a junior middle school student could possibly have into his work. Sometimes, he would read with his friends or discuss international events. Reading is Tashi Dawa's favourite pastime. His early reading matter included mainly modern and contemporary Han Chinese literature and translated versions of Russian literature. In 1980

he developed an interest in American and Latin-American literature, including the works of J. L. Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, J. J. Rulfo, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. His early works, cence", "Pilgrims" and "Over the River", for example, are simple and realistic. His work "White Poplar, Garland and Dream" describes the workings of the subconscious. "A Soul in Bondage" and "Tibet, the Mysterious Years" are written in a style best described as "magical realism". The publication of "A Soul in Bondage" has generated great interest in many circles. Those who study Latin-American literature will immediately recognize the Latin-American influence. His so-called trilogy of illusions. "The Glory of the Wind and Horse", "Invitation of a Century" and "The Light on the Cliff" is written in a more sustained, detailed way and delves into the heart of Tibetan society. The tragic overtones are immensely moving. Opinions about the trilogy differ, some critics acclaiming it and others denouncing it as unintelligible. Whatever one's opinion, however, it is undoubtedly a courageous work, and is of historical value not only to Chinese literature but even more so to Tibetan literature. I once told a Tibetan writer. "Read Tashi Dawa's works. It's true that he is deficient in some aspects, but his artistic methods and the questions he raises are valuable. No artist will succeed without incorporating others' strong points." He read some and told me he was inspired.

In China, quite possibly in other countries as well, the reason for being a writer is to express thoughts and emotions which reflect one's own rugged life. Tashi Dawa has gone through periods of depression, when he felt lost and hopeless, but he did not despair. On the contrary he thought hard, explored actively and found a way out for himself. He chose writing as his career — a hard but glorious one.

Tashi Dawa's works cover a wide range of subjects. His early works deal mostly with Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. He describes its people, its local events, its famous and prosperous Bajiao Street located in the city's centre, Jokhang Temple, the sweet-tea houses and the wine stalls. His later works explore a wider range of subjects and characters, such as the modern young man, Luozhu, in the story "Plateau Serenade", who wears sunglasses made in Italy, genuine jeans and long hair. This was the story that brought him fame. Still later he introduces two more characters. One is the veteran Agebu in "The Night Without Stars", and the other is the serf Langqin in "The Old Manor". The variety of his subjects truly reflects present-day Tibetan society from all perspectives.

History and reality, the new and the old — Tashi Dawa persistently sets himself between these and presents his readers with a changing, kaleidoscopic world. Although his descriptive methods vary, his themes are similar, even the same, as in "Balsang and His Sisters", "Invitation of a Century", and "The Old Manor".

In "Invitation of a Century", Tashi Dawa describes, through the use of illusion, an absurd yet thought-provoking story about two friends, Sangyi and Gyayang. The latter eventually becomes a young aristocrat of the past and shrinks from an adult to a foetus.

[&]quot;When Sangyi caught sight of the girl with the

black mole on her chin, he could not believe his eyes. She was still as young as ever, the only young girl in the whole village now.

She stood silently, then went to the stables, while the others gaped. She bent down to look at the tiny creature, then lifted her skirt and a leg courageously, squatted, and sucked the foetus inside her."

The river of time flows backwards and the life of Gyayang returns to its original form. Because he is Gyayang's friend, Sangyi becomes his scapegoat and is thrown into prison. All these events show that the old ways in Tibet still exert a powerful influence.

"The Old Manor" is clearer in meaning than "Invitation of a Century". The male and female protagonists, like the battered and dilapidated manor, do not rebuild themselves to meet the needs of new circumstances, but retain in their minds outmoded thoughts until, years later, they eventually leave the new world.

The beautiful and cruel Lhamo Quzhen, owner of the manor, in the past tortured the young and handsome Langqin, then her slave. Times change. After Liberation Langgin is transformed from being a serf to being the leader of the cooperative team, director of the poor peasants' association and chairman of the people's commune while Lhamo Quzhen lives in poverty in a low hut, and becomes a plaything in the palm of Langqin's hand. The "cultural revolution" sets them both on the same level. At the end of the story he dies a lonely death, she is on the point of death and the manor has collapsed.

From his stories, firstly it may be clearly observed

that Tashi Dawa has put his finger on the pulse of Tibetan society, where religion and science, the new and the old, and the advanced and the backward coexist. Like shelves displaying goods, his novels exhibit the old and the new together. Beneath the superficial peaceful atmosphere people undergo drastic psychological conflicts. The withdrawal of old ideas from the historical stage is evidently reluctant, and the new lack glamour and strength. What is clearly expressed here is the fact that the world is changing.

Secondly, traditional theories and the concept of typicalization are hardly appropriate tools for an evaluation of Tashi Dawa's works. As he says, "I'm a writer of feeling." "Feeling" is the pertinent word here for it reveals the origins of the themes and his descriptive methods. Feelings are changeable and always fresh. A single feeling may be trivial, but the combination of many feelings creates a colourful, imaginative world. It is the specific realistic environment of the Tibet in which Tashi Dawa lives that has aroused these various feelings and which are also the reason why he has neither conformed to conventional patterns nor repeated himself.

An important feature of Tashi Dawa's works is that he emphasizes Tibetan life in the '80s, and deals mostly with Tibetan youth. He articulates their thoughts and the conflicts raised by the tension between the demands of modernization and traditional culture, new and old values. This is commendably adventurous, and is not something often touched on by other Tibetan writers. His success is perhaps also due to the following:

First, he sharply contrasts modern civilization — the

outside world — with the reality of life in Tibet, a technique which leaves a deep impression on readers who do not know this part of the world.

Secondly. Tashi Dawa does not stop at describing local customs, but consciously or unconsciously, observes people's lives with the objective perspective of an outsider. Most Tibetan writers are too close, too familiar with the Tibetan life-style to be inspired by it.

Thirdly, Tibet is often called "mysterious Tibet". The interest of many readers, both at home and abroad, anxious to hear some weird, mysterious or fantastic story, is aroused as soon as Tibet is mentioned. Actually, the "mystery" of Tibet is the "mystery" of Tibetan culture, and this mystery stems from ignorance. Once it is understood, it is no longer mysterious. A Tibetan never thinks of himself or his life as a mystery; Tashi Dawa's "magical realism" satisfies people's desire to know Tibet, and the strange descriptions arouse empathy.

Tashi Dawa is a full-time writer, vice-chairman of the Writers' Association of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, an editor of Tibetan Literature, and a member of the Chinese Writers' Association. He has published two collections of short stories, A Soul in Bondage and Invitation of a Century. He is still young and has a bright future ahead of him. He has confidence in his literary talents and is at present working on a novel.

A Soul in Bondage

THERE is a Peruvian folk-song called El Condor Pasa that I have not heard for a long time. But its simple, yet solemn melody lingers in the mind. Whenever I hear it, it conjures up a vision of high plateaux and deep valleys; of bits of farm land carved out of hillsides; of straggly crops; mill houses beside streams, and low stone cottages; of mountain folk struggling under heavy loads, the sound of cow bells, and the lonely dust-devils whirling in the wind, under a dazzling sun.

My visions are not of Peru and the foothills of the high Andes. They are visions of the Pabunaigang Mountains in the south of Tibet. I am not sure whether I have actually been there, or merely dreamt of those mountains. I cannot be sure, for I have been to too many places to keep reality and fantasy separate. I realize now that, until I finally went there, the Pabunaigang Mountains in my mind were only the reflection of a 19th century landscape by Constable.

Although it was still a quiet mountain area, the lives of the people had quietly slipped into the modern era. There was a small airport, from which a helicopter made the trip into the city five times a week.

Nearby was a electric generator powered by solar energy. In a small restaurant next to the petrol station at Zhelu Village, I sat with a man with a beard. He was