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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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Fed and graced by melting snows tumbling  
Through seasonal rivers' rippling sheen,  
The prairie once again dons her raiment green.

Where the antelopes and marmots roam,  
Where eagle-pipes and horn-viols sing,  
Where sunshine cascades evermore,  
The wilderness glows with my love and blessing.

A cooling breeze sweeping o'er thy bosom,  
And skirted yaks galloping across,  
Their bushy tails like sails unfurling;  
Even a lone wolf craning its neck,  
A sight fine and stately to behold;  
A cup-shaped violet to herself murmuring low,  
Timid and romantic, lovely and arresting;  
Not a solitary tree within vision,  
Nor a cluster of sagebrushes in sight,  
Nothing save a white sandalwood fluttering afar,  
Hardly visible, certainly unreachable.

Ah, ye prairie, a vast ocean, a starry sky,  
Ah, ye prairie, a pastoral, a lover,  
The light of my eye till the end of time,  
My love for thee unfathomable, without confine.  
Long I dream of leaving this world with passion,  
Of passing into a guardian angel of thine,  
Of treading by thy side with the winds and snows,  
But why is my dream still a dream, oh, why?

Dreams in the Prairie,  
Summers and Winters  
April, 1988



DURING the several hundred years since the great age of exploration in the 16th century ushered in by Columbus' discovery of the New World, man has set foot in an ever widening area of our planet earth. Yet the veil of mystery which hung over its largest and highest landmass, the Qinghai Tibet Plateau, was not lifted until early this century.

That Tibet should be one of the last regions to be explored is due not only to its natural isolation — it is encircled by the world's highest mountain ranges: the Himalayas on the south, the Karakorum on the west, the Kunluns on the north, and a series of steeper traverse ranges on the east — it is also the result of the Tibetan people's decision to physically and psychologically exclude the outside world.

Up to the late 1940s, the Tibetan authorities often took pride in being able to keep their door perpetually closed to travellers. Consequently, this unexplored plateau became all the more shrouded in mystery, and thus all the more enticing to Westerners. In *Trespassers on the Roof of the World* written by an Englishman<sup>1</sup>, the author tells of the disastrous experiences of individuals of nine different nationalities who had managed to make their way up to this plateau. Driven by curiosity, ambition, belief, or a sense of mission, these explorers, scientists and missionaries, after overcoming countless hazards and hardships brought about by the alpine climate and rarefied air, cold and hunger, piercing winds and blinding sands, blizzards and hailstorms as well as by brigands, managed to move closer and closer to their goal, only to be frustratingly turned away. The scattered few who succeeded chose by coincidence to approach Lhasa from the North Tibet Plateau.

At an altitude of 5,000 metres above sea level, the natural conditions of this northern highland are extremely harsh and the chances of surviving the journey through it are one in ten — indeed, many crosses have been erected over graves of unfortunate Christians. Yet people have found nature at its worst is less forbidding than man-made barriers.

The first Westerner to reach the North Tibet Plateau was the Swedish explorer and surveyor Sven Hedin, who arrived in the first decade of this century. In his book *Travels in Asia's Heartland*<sup>2</sup>, he gave detailed accounts of how he struggled across the "snowy expanse . . . in the company of Death," and how, after several months, he at long last arrived at Shigatze with only two horses and one mule surviving from the 130 pack-animals he had at the start. Nevertheless, he felt amply rewarded. "Every step I took," he proclaimed, "was a step forward in our knowledge of the planet earth; the naming of every place I set foot in, a new conquest. Prior to January, 1907, we were as ignorant of this part of our planet as of the back side of the moon."

Eighty years have gone by since Sven Hedin's expedition, but outsiders' knowledge of Tibet has not been enhanced to any appreciable extent. During the few decades since the breakdown of the Tibetan theocracy, several state-sponsored surveys have been made to these northern wilds, but research done so far has been limited in depth and scope, and work in many branches of the natural sciences has hardly begun. And although anthropologists have formulated various hypotheses asserting that this highest and youngest landmass is the original home of mankind, they have not found evidence supporting their theses. To this day, the North

Tibet Plateau, a vast expanse of 600,000 square kilometres, still lies deep in its eon-long slumber. Those who have been here have caught glimpses of its physical and cultural features, but few, if any, have gained an insight into what lies beneath the surface.

The nature and culture of the earliest times are perhaps best preserved in the North Tibet Plateau. The world has undergone cataclysmic changes in recent decades, but in the North Tibet Plateau visitors can easily sense the lasting influence of man's primordial spirit.

Eager to learn about the origin and development of human culture and the evolution of the planet itself, people coincidentally turn their eyes to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. As the upland is the direct product of the earth's most powerful crustal movement, and as it was carved by rivers to depths of a thousand metres or so, the geological formations dating from the Early Precambrian Era to the Quaternary Period of the Cenozoic are vertically exposed to the eye. For this reason geologists claim that the key to understanding the kinetics of the earth's crustal upheavals lies in this plateau. Also, just as parts of the world suitable for certain anthropological studies have dwindled, scientists have suddenly discovered Tibet, a wide, virgin field for research. Many are convinced Tibet is the place to come to trace the history and culture of mankind and to reconstruct the many cultures of the remote past. The twenty-first century, anthropologists predict, will be the age of Tibetology.

I felt the only contribution I could offer in this respect was to make North Tibet known to the world through a film or a TV documentary.

'Good! Let's call it *Ten Thousand Li Across North*

Tibet," agreed local policy-makers and gave, then and there, the prospective film a title. Then, feeling that they hadn't done full justice to the area, one of them said, "Ten thousand *li*? Why, our Nagchu Prefecture alone covers 400,000 square kilometres!"

The responsibility for planning and writing the script naturally was left to me and my friends. I took a leave of absence from my job in Lhasa and made, in little over a year seven trips to North Tibet, visiting nearly all the major sites in the immense Nagchu Prefecture. In my travels I not only found subjects and ideas for filming, but gained new perspectives and insights as well. The resulting full-length feature, *Ten Thousand Li Across North Tibet*, is scheduled to be released in two years.

As time flows on, North Tibet still retains its old character. At the turn of the century, after "the first traveller in Tibet", Sven Hedin, returned euphoric to his homeland, many more travellers hastened to make the same trek. But unlike other famous explorers in history, they came and they saw, but they scarcely conquered.

More than half a century after Sven Hedin's footprints were covered by the snows, I came, I saw — but it was I who was conquered.

Who of the visitors to North Tibet has not found the place different from his preconceptions, has not experienced things at variance with his own views?

Confronted by Tibet, the cup of modern man's intellect runs over; his senses are nearly saturated. What new attitudes must he assume to assimilate and appreciate things so remote in time and space?

Years ago, it was a common view, even among emi-

ment artists who had lived in Lhasa many years, that North Tibet was a cultural void. I soon dismissed that subjective view after my trips to the area. And since then some of the artists have returned by various means to appreciate Tibetan culture and to be appreciated by it.

To me, North Tibet is no longer just a geographical region, it is also an emotional experience, even a state of mind.

## CHAPTER I WHERE THE WEST BEGINS

*Sacred Mountain and Holy Lake — Decoding the Six-Syllable Mantra — Portals Open to All — Sighs of the Golden Goat — The Kingdom of Demons and Its Subjects — The Vanishing Pack-animal Trails*

The Tibetan term for the North Tibet Plateau is Changtang, or northern plains.

As the principal region of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, a plateau on a plateau, North Tibet's most outstanding physical features, relative to adjacent areas, are its high altitude, frigid climate and flat terrain. With an average elevation of over 5,000 metres above sea level and an area of more than 600,000 square kilometres, North Tibet embraces all of Nagchu Prefecture, part of Ali Prefecture, and that part of Qinghai Province populated by Tibetans. Its size is equivalent to the aggregate area of several Chinese provinces or of many small countries. Nagchu Prefecture covers some 400,000 square kilometres, of which a hundred thousand and more is uninhabited land.

When people talk about North Tibet, they often quote from an ancient Changtang song:

The lonely bleakness may bring sadness  
When the Changtang first you roam,  
But once within her embrace,  
The grassland soon becomes your home.

To the local herdsmen, the North Tibet highland is

more than a place where they live and multiply; it is also a place to which they are spiritually and emotionally bound. They have nowhere else to call home. Had they been able to leave, they would have done so long ago. An outsider might, upon hearing this ancient song, sense the highlands' remoteness and vast expanse, and picture it as a bleak wasteland and cultural desert.

It is 340 kilometres from Lhasa to the town of Nagchu, the administrative centre of the prefecture. To get to the town from Lhasa, one follows the Qinghai-Tibet Highway northwestwards for roughly 90 kilometres to Yangbajan, then heads directly north from there.

Yangbajan is well-known for its geothermal fields. Despite its high elevation (over 4,000 metres), one can see year-round a mist of vapours rising amidst snow-clad mountains. The landscape along the 90-kilometre stretch from Lhasa is spectacular. The mountains are as varied in shape as they are grotesque in appearance, having been warped and fractured as a result of the earth's upheavals. Outside modern Lhasa, the drive through the mountains gives one the feeling of retracing the earth's history in a land of myth and fantasy.

After passing through Yangbajan, one views the snow-crested Nianqing Tanggula Range. *Nianqing* is the Tibetan word for 'god almighty'. This majestic mountain, one of Tibet's four famous sacred mountains, and the foremost of the hundred or so guardian peaks in the northern upland, is the southern gateway to the North Tibet Plateau. Nearby is the celestial Namtso, Tibet's largest lake, which is generally regarded as the wife of Mount Nianqing Tanggula. Anywhere in North Tibet

one can hear ancient legends as well as more recent stories about this couple.

Rising high on the Damxung grassland, the massive snow-clad Nianqing Tanggula Range is said to consist of about a hundred peaks, all of which are in view of those travelling to Lhasa on the Qinghai-Tibet Highway. The summit is Damlha, 7,117 metres above sea level, the highest and steepest of the snowy peaks in these parts. Pilgrims going south to Lhasa from Qinghai and southern Gansu would hasten to alight from their vehicles at the sight of the mountain and begin prostrating themselves as a gesture of devotion at every step the rest of the way to the sacred city.

According to legend and historical records, the guardian deity Nianqing Tanggula, also known as Tanglayaxiu and as Yaxiunian, reigns over the range that runs a hundred kilometres across North Tibet, and is also the guardian deity of the entire Buddhist world. Formerly only a local spirit, it was ordained Guardian Buddha by the Venerable Padma-Sambhava. At the same time, it is one of the Eighteen Gods of Wind and Hail and the Guardian God of Wealth and Treasure. As another legend has it, this peak is the bodyguard of King Trisang Detsan of the ancient Tubo Dynasty and concurrently the guardian of the Red Hill, the site of the Potala Palace, as well as the patron god of the area of Weizang Siru<sup>3</sup>. In a word, Mount Nianqing Tanggula is an omnipotent holy spirit known to all the Tibetan people.

This sacred peak of many titles appears as a gallant knight clad in white and mounted on a white horse. Lest any harm should befall *Dharmaskaya* (the embodiment of Truth and Law), he is constantly on inspec-



tion tours, accompanied by a retinue of 360 lesser gods, the 360 peaks of the range. The mount has other guises, too, one of which is a ferocious-looking god. In this incarnation, he appears stern, yet holy, wearing a black bear-skin cape over a suit of armour inlaid with jade, armed with an iron sword as well as a bow and arrow.

Namtso, or, "Celestial Lake", at 4,718 metres above sea level, is the highest large body of water in the world. It lives up to the name "Celestial Lake" by its immense size and sky-clear water. Yet it surpasses the blue skies in colour, being sometimes azure, sometimes green, sometimes aquamarine, and sometimes dull grey. It has another name, a Mongolian one — Tenggeli Sea, for it is said to be an inland sea that rises and falls with the waxing and waning of the moon. A living lake with a soul, it is believed to have been born in the year of the sheep. Once every twelve years a great festival is held on its shores, and pilgrims in their tens of thousands gather here. They circle it, burning incense and prostrating themselves in worship of Her Holiness. It is said that one trip around on foot takes two weeks or so, and over a month if yaks laden with luggage are used. At Bamgo County I learned from a herdsman who once lived by the holy lake that it had taken his 60-year-old mother three full months to circle the lake, prostrating herself each bodily length along the way.

Besides being a handsome, dignified pair, the sacred Mount Nianqing Tanggula and the holy Lake Namucuo are said to be endowed with immense wealth and power; they are the aristocracy of the gods. The prairies nearby used to be their pastures, and the surrounding mountains their servants in charge of grazing