


SELECTED SHORT STORIES
BY TIBETAN WRITERS

NEIGHBOR OF THE PARADISE

WRITERS ASSOCIATION OF TIBET AUTONOMOUS REGION



China Intercontinental Press

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Selected Short Stories by Tibetan Writers

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Tibet – A Soul Tied on a Leather Knot

Zhaxi Dawa

Nowadays, the Peruvian folk song “Eagle” with its slow melody and simple style is seldom heard. I have this song on tape. Every time I hear the song, I can see the plateau valleys, the flocks of sheep rushing out from rocky crevices, fields splitting into small pieces at the foot of the snow-capped mountain, sparse crops, water mills beside the streams, low stone farmhouses, mountain villagers carrying things, copper bells tied around the cattle necks, lonely little whirlwinds, and of course dazzling sunlight.

These scenes are not in the central highlands at the foot of Andes, Peru, but rather in the Palbonegang Mountain area in southern Tibet. Have I dreamed it or actually seen it in reality? I cannot remember clearly because I have been to so many places.

It was only later when I actually went to the Palbonegang Mountain area that I realized that the Palbonegang in my memory was just the beautiful pastoral landscapes of the 19th century as painted by John Constable.

Although it is still a tranquil mountain area, the people here quietly enjoy modern life. A small civil aviation station here provides a regular helicopter service with five flights to the town area every week. There is a solar power station nearby. In a small restaurant beside the automatic gas station at the entrance to the Zelhu Village, a bearded loquacious man shared a table with me.

He is the chairman of the well-known Himalaya Transportation Co., which was the first company in Tibet to own a large container fleet imported from Germany. When visiting a local carpet factory, their designers came up with design patterns using computers. The ground satellite receiving station provides 38 hours of television programs for five channels to audiences each day.

Although modern material civilization has liberated people from traditional concepts, people in the Palbonegang Mountain area still retain many of their ancient ways: When chatting with me, the village head who had a doctorate in agriculture breathed the cold air from time to time. When one asks for the help of others, he/she will beg repeatedly while shaking his/her thumb. To express one's sincere respect to city people, some elderly people still will take off their hats and hold it in their hands, and then stand aside. Although measurements were standardized by the state many years ago, people here still use traditional ways to measure length: straighten one arm, and put the other hand (with the fingers raised vertically) on various positions of the arm – the wrist, forearm, elbow and shoulder.

Living Buddha Sangyi Darpu, the 23rd incarnated Living Buddha of the Tatu Monastery, is dying. He is 98 years old. After his death, the reincarnation system will not be used any longer. I want to write a special report about it. Sangyi Darpu and I have already made contact. I think that Tibetan Lamaism (including all the various sects), one of the world's most profound and mysterious religions in the world, perhaps will come to an end with the disappearance of the reincarnation system and of religious leaders of all ranks. To a certain extent, forms also dominate consciousness.

Living Buddha Tatu Sangyi Darpu shook his head, as he disagreed with me. His pupils dilated slowly.

“Shambhala,” he said as he moved his lips gently, “the battle has already begun.”

As recorded in ancient scriptures, there exists a legendary Buddhist utopia, a “Pure Land” in the north. It is named Shambhala. It is said that the yogic esotericism originated from Shambhala. The first king Sochadenapo was recognized by Sakyamuni here, and the king would later help spread Esoteric Buddhism to Kalachakra. As recorded in the scriptures, a great war would happen in the snow-capped country Shambhala one day. Shambhala’s Oath praised the last king. “You galloped forward bravely, without looking back. You threw the spear against the chest of Halotameng, the head of demons opposing the Shambhala. Then, all the devils were killed.” Tatu Sangyi Darpu told me about that war. He said: “After the elimination of demons after hundreds of years of hard fighting, the tombs of eminent monks in the Ganden Monastery will open automatically, and the religious doctrines of Sakyamuni will spread again for a thousand years. After the storms and fires, floods will submerge the whole world. When the end of the world is coming, some survivors will be saved from the heavenly palace by gods. Therefore, when the world forms once again, religion will also rise again.”

While lying in bed, Tatu Sangyi Darpu entered a state of hallucination, as if he were speaking to an invisible person in front of him: “After you climb over the Kacham Snow Mountain and stand in the middle of the palms of Padma Sambhava, do not pursue or look for it. You should comprehend things through prayer, and gain the phantom through comprehension. In the criss-cross palm veins, there is only one way to the pure land.”

I saw when Padma Sambhava passed away, a chariot flew down from the sky. Accompanied by two fairy maidens, he got on the

chariot, and flew towards the south.

“Two young people from Khampa were looking for the road to Shambhala,” said the Living Buddha.

I looked at him wearily.

I asked: “In 1984, a man and a woman came here from Kamba. Are you referring to them?”

He nodded.

I asked: “The man was wounded here?”

The Living Buddha said: “You also heard that?”

As he closed his eyes, Living Buddha Tatu Sangyi Darpu intermittently recalled that time when those two young people came to the Palbonegang Mountain area. He told me what happened on their journey to Palbonegang. I thought the Living Buddha was reciting an unpublished novel that I had written. I did not make the novel public after I wrote it. Instead I locked it away in a box. He was almost reciting my novel sentence by sentence. The destination of the couple was a village named “A” in Palbonegang. The time was 1984, and the leading characters were a man and a woman. I did not show the novel to others because I did not know their exact destination. I understood the explanation of the Living Buddha. The sole difference lay in the fact that the leading characters in my novel were guided by an old man in a wine shop. But I did not make clear the direction given by the old man because I did not know it at that time. The Living Buddha said that he gave them directions in his house. But the coincidence is that the old man and the Living Buddha both mentioned the palm print of Padma Sambhava.

① Tsongkhapa – the founder of the Shamanism, and the master of the first Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. Gandan Monastery is the main temple of Shamanism. It was founded by Tsongkhapa personally, and is located beyond the eastern suburbs of Lhasa.

Finally, other people came into the house and surrounded him. The Living Buddha half-closed his eyes, and gradually entered a state of losing consciousness and thought.

I had studied the deathbed phenomena. According to scriptures, the luster on his face and the diffusion degree of pupils, he was beginning to enter the third stage between death and regeneration. The process from death to regeneration is divided into seven stages, and each stage is subdivided into seven stages. It is said that 49 days of prayer and sacrifice are needed for regeneration.

Some people began to prepare for the funeral. The Living Buddha would be cremated. I knew that some people wanted to gather up the remains of the Living Buddha as relics for collection and commemoration.

After bidding farewell to the Living Buddha, I began to think about the motives of literary creation on the way home: "Like a daydream, an article is the continuation of the game played in childhood, and also its alternative." (Sigmund Freud) "Literary creation is a pure spiritual and unintentional activity... a free ideological activity without any rational control or any aesthetic or moral prejudice." (André Breton) "Literary creation is the need for a certain feeling. We are essential in the relationship between man and the world." (Jean-Paul Sartre) There is a rare fact, i.e., the images of objective things, through the power of ideas, become bio-sensing information and are transferred to the authors' brains. It is like a revelation. I recorded a situation where two Khampapeople came to Palbonegang at the same time. I was unclear about what would happen later because there must be some disorder in such information.

After going home, I opened a box labelled "lovely outcast". Neatly 100 kraft bags are arranged in order in the box. I put all the

writings which were not published or that I did not want to publish in the box. I took out a No.840720 paper bag. It was an unnamed short story. This is the story:

Chim stood on the hillside herding two dozen sheep. She saw a little black spot like an ant moving slowly along the wide, winding and dry riverbed. There was a lot of gravel at the foot of the hill. She identified it as a man, who was moving towards her home. Chim whipped the sheep and hurried down the hill.

By her rough estimation, she thought the man would arrive at her home at dusk. Only several low huts made of stone could be seen on the ridgy hillock of the surrounding wilderness. Behind the huts lived two households: Chim and her father; a dumb woman who was more than 50 years old. Her father was an artist who could talk and sing the King Gesar. Other villages a dozen kilometers away often invited him to perform. Sometimes, he would go to the more distant towns and villages. Each time, he left home for between several days and several months. The stranger rode a horse, and led another horse. That man invited her father wearing a long-handled stringed instrument on his back to mount the horse. Subsequently, the clapping of the hooves and the ringing of copper bells rhythmically broke the silence of the wilderness for a long time. Standing on the hillock and touching the big black dog sitting beside her skirt, Chim stared at the two horses until they disappeared round the first bend.

The rhythmic and monotonous clapping and ringing was like the musical accompaniment to her childhood. Every time she herded sheep while she sat on the stones or meditated lonely on the slopes of the hill, that sound would echo up to her from the distant valley. The song contains the essence of eternal life in the wilderness and the somewhat desolate desire that exists in an environment of loneliness.

The dumb woman wove woolen carpets all day. Each morning, she cast a handful of tsampa peas towards the sky, while standing on a hillock and calling Avalokitesvara. Then, she would pray to the east while shaking an oily prayer wheel in her hand. Occasionally at midnight, her father went to the room of the dumb woman. At dawn, he came back covering his head with a long robe. After getting up in the morning, Chim would squeeze milk, make tea, and then drink roasted tsampa. Then after loading her lambskin pockets with food for the day and carrying a little black pot on her back, she would open the sheep pen fence behind the house. Then after whipping the beasts gently, she would drive the sheep towards the hill and herd them there. Her daily life was like that.

After preparing food and hot tea, Chim lay on the blanket, waiting for the visitor. When the dog barked outside, she rushed out, and saw the moon was just rising. After grasping the dog chain, she looked around but did not see any person. After a while, she saw a man was coming up the slope in front of her.

“Come here. Take it easy. I’ve got the dog,” said Chim.

The stranger was an imposing-looking man.

“Sir, have a rest,” said Chim. She led the man into the room. One red silk tassel hung over his forehead under his hat. Her father was not at home – he had gone out to talk and sing the King Gesar. The rat-tat given out when the dumb woman tamped the carpet with a wooden hammer was heard from next door. After having dinner and thanking her, the weary man went to the bed of Chim’s father.

Chim stood outside for a moment, looking at the starry sky. It was so quiet that no sound could be heard.

The valley in front of her appeared blue white under the moonlight. The big black dog tied with an iron chain whirled around impatiently. Chim squatted down and hugged with the dog,

her arms around its neck. Thinking of her childhood spent on the lonely hillock, the silent people who came to pick up her father, and the sleeping man who came from a distant place and would leave tomorrow, she started to cry. She knelt on the ground, holding her face in her hands, and prayed for her father's forgiveness silently. Then after drying her tears with the black dog's fur, she stood up and went back to the room.

In darkness, she trembled as if she had malaria, and climbed quietly into the woolen blanket of the stranger.

When Phosphorus rose, Chim rolled up her thin blanket under the swaying light of the lamp. She loaded her cloth bag with some dried meat, the leather pouch used to rub the tsampa, the coarse salt and a piece of butter, and carried the small black pot to cook tea on the hill while she did her herding. Finally she looked at the dim little house.

She said: "Okay."

After finishing snuffing and clapping his hands to remove the tobacco powder, he stood up, and touched her forehead, while putting one hand around her shoulder. They came out of the little house lowering their heads. They walked towards the darkness of the west. Chim was carrying a heavy load, and the things on her back Chim led all the way. She did not want to know where the man was taking her to. She only knew that she would leave this lifeless land forever. That man with a string of sandalwood prayer beads in his hands, strode proudly ahead, as if he was so very confident about the long journey ahead.

Tagbei asked: "Why do you hang a leather rope around your waist? You look like an unloved puppy."

"I use it to count the number of days. Don't you notice that I have tied five knots," said Chim. "I left home five days ago."

“Only five days? That’s nothing for me. I was born to have no home.”

She followed Tagbei along the way. At night, they slept in different places such as in rural wheat fields, sheep pens, corners of temple ruins and caves. If they had good luck, they could sleep in the outhouses of farmers, or in the tents of shepherds.

On entering a temple, they would kneel down in front of each Bodhisattva statue, to pay respects and pray. As long as they saw any Mani pile outside the temple, beside the road, at the riverside and at the mountain pass, they would pick up several white stones and put them on top. Along the way, they saw some Buddhists who kowtowed every step. They wore thick canvas aprons, and the clothes covering the chest and knee positions was worn through. They were patched over layer by layer. Some ash was dotted on their faces. One egg-sized sarcoma was left on the forehead of each Buddhist, and the blood and soil were mixed together. The wood sheathing used to nail the iron sheet left two deep scratches on both sides of the place where each Buddhist lay prostrate. Tagbei and Chim passed them out because they were walking and not kowtowing.

The Tibetan Plateau is full of numerous and winding hills. It was sparsely populated along the journey. For several days, they did not see any person or village. The cold breeze was blowing through the valley. While looking up at the blue sky for a moment, they felt their bodies were floating up. The sun was burning, making the ground so hot. The plateau in daytime was eternally and infinitely tranquil. Tagbei was robust and agile. He tiptoed on slippery stones to climb towards the peak quickly. After climbing onto a round stone, he stopped and turned around. He sat down to wait for Chim because she was far behind. They always kept silent on the

journey. Sometimes, Chim suddenly burst into song because of the unbearable silence, like an animal screaming at the sky. Tagbei continued to walk instead of looking back at her. After a moment, it became deathly silent because Chim stopped singing. Chim followed him her head lowered. They began to talk only when they sat down to have a rest.

“No blood now?”

“I do not feel in pain anymore.”

“Let me have a look.”

“Catch some spiders for me. I will crumb them and apply them to my wound. In that way, I will heal soon.”

“There are no spiders here.”

“Try to find them in the stone crevices. After lifting the rocks, you can find spiders.”

Chim pushed aside the stones which were half-covered in the soil, looking for spiders carefully. After a while, she caught five or six spiders. She grasped them in her hands. She stood in front of Tagbei, she pulled open his hand and put them on his palm. After crumbing the spiders, they applied the paste to the wound.

“That dog is so fierce. I ran for a long time. I almost became dizzy.”

“I should have killed it with my knife.”

“That woman gave us...” she said imitating the most obscene gesture. “It’s really scary.”

Tagbei picked up a handful of soil and sprinkled it on his wound, to help dry the wound under the sun.

“Where did she hide the money?”

“A pile of money was put in the cabinet of a hotel room,” he said making a gesture with his hands. “I only took a dozen banknotes.”

“What do you want to buy with the money?”

“What? The Cigu Monastery is at the foot of the mountain in front of us. I will send some money to the Bodhisattva. But I will keep some money.”

“Well, do you feel better now? Do you still feel in pain?”

“I do not feel in pain now. I’m too thirsty now.”

“Don’t you notice that I have set up the pot? Now I’ll look for some dry branches.”

Tagbei lazily lay on the stones, and covered his eyes with the wide-brimmed hat to shelter from the sunlight, chewing hay. After groveling in front of an oven made up of three white stones, Chim blew the fire hard to cook the tea. Her cheeks bulged. Flames came out. She jumped up, and began to rub her eyes irritated by the smoke. After pulling down the hair on her forehead, she found that her hair was a little burnt.

There were two figures on the peak of a distant mountain. Perhaps they were shepherds, one tall and one short. Like black hawks on the rocks at the peak of a mountain, they were motionless.

Chim also saw them and greeted them waving her right hand. They responded greeting her waving their hands. Because of the long distance, they could not hear each other even though they shouted loudly.

“I thought that we were the only people here,” said Chim to Tagbei.

“I’m waiting for your tea,” he said closing his eyes.

Chim suddenly remembered something. She took out a book from her arms, and showed it to Tagbei very proudly. She said that she had stolen it from a young fellow who flattered her and was impolite to her one night when they stayed in one village. Tagbei did not know the text or mechanical drawings in the book. The picture of a tractor is on the book cover.

“It’s useless,” he said giving it back to Chim.

Chim was so frustrated that she tore the book to light the fire the next night.

At dusk, they arrived at a bend, and Chim saw a distant village surrounded by green trees. She cheered up again. She began to sing the song again, she danced in the pile of Indian Kalimeris herbs beside the field with her stick in her hand. She picked up the stick again, and carefully poked the armpits and waist of Tagbei, to tickle him. Tagbei impatiently grasped the stick and pushed her aside, which made her fall down. She felt simultaneously amused and annoyed, and she was confused for some time.

After entering the village, Tagbei left to drink wine alone or do something else. They agreed to sleep in an empty house beside the primary school in the village, which had just been built but was not yet equipped with doors and windows. A film was showing on the village square. The projection screen was erected on wooden poles. When collecting firewood in the forest, Chim was surrounded by a group of children. The children threw stones at her on the wall. Her shoulder was hit by a stone. She did not look back, until a young man wearing a yellow hat drove away the children.

“One of the eight stones hit you, right,” said the Yellow Hat smiling. He held an electronic calculator in his hand. He showed it to Chim, and she saw the Arabic numeral “8”. “Where are you from?”

Chim looked at him.

“Do you remember how many days it is since you left home?”

“I cannot remember now,” said Chim lifting the leather rope. “Let me count it now. Please help me.”

“Does one knot mean a day,” he asked kneeling in front of her. “Interesting... 92 days.”