

READING CHINA:  
TIBETAN STORIES

· 阅读中国 ·  
藏族青年作家丛书

ཁམས་པའི་རྒྱུད་

KHAMS-PA:  
AN EPIC OF  
TIBETAN PEOPLE

康巴

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达真 著  
Ruth Graham 董锐 译

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

康巴: 英文 / 达真著; (美) Ruth Graham, 董锐译. —北京:  
中译出版社, 2015. 10

(藏族青年作家丛书)

ISBN 978-7-5001-4338-3

I. ①康… II. ①达… ②格… ③董… III. ①英语—语言读物  
②长篇小说—中国—当代 IV. ①H319.4:I

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2015) 第 253417 号

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出版发行 / 中译出版社

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总 策 划 / 张高里

策划编辑 / 范 伟 曹晓雅

责任编辑 / 丁 洁

封面设计 / 潘 峰

排 版 / 竹叶图文

印 刷 / 北京天来印务有限公司

经 销 / 新华书店

规 格 / 880mm×1230mm 1/32

印 张 / 19.375

字 数 / 482 千

版 次 / 2016 年 1 月第一版

印 次 / 2016 年 1 月第一次

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ISBN 978-7-5001-4338-3 定价: 60.00 元

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中 译 出 版 社

*Thazi* grew up in Kangting, a place combining Tibetan, Han and Hui cultures. His work is deeply influenced by his great-grandmother's legendary life. He has always insisted on the philosophy of 'reading thousands of books and travelling thousands of miles', visiting many Buddhist, Islamic and Christian communities. The bewildering secret history and disputes of the Tibetan Region made him retire from writing for quite a long time until he was suddenly enlightened ten years ago and started focusing on writing *Khams-pa*. His novel won the 10th 'Horse Award' for National Minority Literature.

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中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2015) 第 253417 号

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出版发行 / 中译出版社

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## *Chapter 1*

### The Valley

#### 1 *The Valley*

IT WAS LONG after daybreak when Yonten Keron jerked himself awake from the nightmare. In his dream, he saw streaks of blazing green light. It was painful, as though the lights were cutting him. At the same time, in the sutra hall upstairs, for the first time in his life, Lama Woesser saw the wicks of hundreds of butter lamps sputtering. It was an omen of calamity. Suddenly, the Lama felt as though numerous centipedes were wriggling on his body. Goose bumps spread over his skin. His breath quickened, and he shivered, as if seeing Yonten's bad dream in the lamplight.

Yonten opened his eyes, only to find that everything was as it had been, except that the amulet, that his lover—who had died 27 years ago—sent him, was vibrating violently on the stand. This was completely different from the broken scene he witnessed in his dream. His heart was now pounding with fear. Breathless, he felt his forehead with his palm. There were beads of cold sweat.

“The last time I was frightened awake was when I was a child,”

he murmured.

Grabbing the string of ivory Buddha beads on his wrist, Yonten pressed them to his forehead to defend against the evil spirit.

Outside the window the river was gurgling, making him feel desperately thirsty. Subconsciously, his tongue stirred in his mouth. Saliva suddenly welled out. He realized his right eyelid was twitching. This was an ill omen. He sent for the maid, Nadron.

"Nadron, go get a piece of red paper for me," he ordered, snapping his little finger against his thumb. The ivory Buddha beads fell from his forehead to his ear.

"Tell Lama Woesser to chant *Tara Sutras* this morning," he added, before Nadron could leave the room.

Then the complete image of Tara, mellow yet affirmative, broke into pieces in his mind.

"Yes, master," Nadron bowed and walked out backwards, still bowing. This was a tradition that all servants had maintained for thousands of years. It was as if an invisible weight made them stooped.

As the maid's footstep faded away, Yonten's mind was drawn back to the dream again: He walked alone by a white tower, and heard someone inside the tower calling his name in a sobbing tone. He made it out. It was Yang Kelsang, a mixed-race man, and his rival in love. He had killed him 27 years ago.

Yonten shouted to the tower, "Didn't I kill you a long time ago? I invited the best Lama to lead you to the Preta Realm, and the most powerful shaman to intone sutras for you for 49 days, to insure that you will never enter your next life; I have constructed a tower with copper and steel to put a spell on you. There is nothing you can do! Just stay in hell, enjoying the hunger and cold. Ha-ha . . ."

Right when Yonten was laughing at his rival in the tower, the tower collapsed with a boom. Debris flew all around. Suddenly, dark clouds rolled in the sky. A streak of green light twirled around his head and neck, saying, "When I was in the world of living, I never invited any Lama to intone sutras and place a spell on you as you did to me. My death was a mistake. I should not have to walk on the road to hell. I'll tell you what, when I was on my way to hell, several half-man and half-ghosts stopped me and said, 'Here is a message from hell. Go back to the world of the living and reincarnate into a rich family.' Afterwards, my spirit wandered here and there looking for an opportunity to reincarnate. Finally, 27 years later, I know your second daughter-in-law is going to give birth to a boy, and that boy will be my reincarnation. I will be your heir, chieftain. See you then, Grandpa."

As the green light disappeared, the tower restored itself.

"Humph. You son of a bitch. You want to be my heir? Don't even think about it!"

When he woke up again, the curse in the dream was still hovering in his mind. A moment later, he composed himself and the sound died down. Yet a sense of foreboding still remained in him, penetrating every vein. The dream made him feel ill more than he could tell.

"Was I wrong to kill that son of a bitch?"

This was the first time, in 27 years, that he thought about it.

The wind from Zheduo River whistled through the town, as if it was calling for the rehabilitation for Yang Kelsang. For hundreds of years, Zheduo River has conceived a mixed civilization of the Tibetan, Han and Hui people that has shaped a town of strategic importance in the Tea-Horse Road, Kangding.

From outside his room came light footsteps. Nadron lifted the curtain, and came in.

"Master, here is the red paper."

Yonten took the red paper, licked it and passed it to her. "Paste it to my right eyelid," he said with eyes closed.

After Nadron cautiously pasted the red paper she asked, "Master, are you going to get up?"

Yonten did not reply. Maid Zhima presented an exquisite tray on which there was a shining brass basin and a silver bowl with lightly salted water. Then he gargled with the salted water and spat the water out to the brass basin. Nadron took a warm wet towel and scrubbed the master's face.

"Watch out. Don't wash the paper off."

"Yes, master," she answered, continuing to scrub his face.

"Master, would you like to dine on the bed or at the table?" she asked in a low voice.

"On the bed. Get Karma Romyang and Zhongyi Shenggen for me later. Tell them I've got something to make arrangements for."

"Yes, master," Zhima said, offering up another a camphorwood tray engraved with patterns of Dharma-cakra and conch.

Yonten was now staring blankly at the tray that his grandfather had shown him many times. He smelt the faint fragrance the tray sent out, and his grandfather's proud words still rung in his ears.

"This tray was presented by the Chieftain. When the people were cutting wood to make this tray, an old man wailed and begged them not to. This old man untied the black kerchief around his head, knelt down, and said.

"Bodhisattva, this tree is more than one thousand years old. It's sacred. You can't cut it down."

But they didn't listen. Then on the same day, one of the woodcutters fell into the Dadu River and drowned."

When he heard the story from his grandfather, Yonten was still a little kid, too young to feel honored by the family's power as his grandfather did.

On the tray, there were blue-and-white porcelain plates with payman, Zanba, buckwheat cakes and honey, one bowl with cubilose congee, and one gold-rimmed bowl with buttered tea. Beside the gold-rimmed bowl was a silver tea can. Nadron Presented the buttered tea to Yonten gingerly.

"Master, enjoy your meal," Nadron said in a soft and feeble voice, and then she stepped backwards, and waited . . .

No sound could be heard except the sound of Yonten occasionally drinking his tea.

Acknowledging the summons, Karma Romyang and Zhongyi Shenggen, the two butlers, puffed upstairs. Yonten was now standing, scattering flower powder into the burner. The flower powder quickly turned into smoke. Ever since Yonten could remember, he learned from the people's daily practices when they went to the lamasery or went around the tower, or burned incense or recited sutras, he saw that the smoke acted as a messenger between men and gods. Today, he was going to tell the gods about the bad omen he had dreamt through wisps of the rising smoke.

"Ah, but it's not enough. I also have to ask the fortune teller in the family lamasery tomorrow," muttered Yonten, who always acted according to what was foretold. Now, he heard the voice of Lama Woesser softly intoning sutras in the sutras hall.

"Master, did you have a nice sleep?" The butlers greeted Yonten.

Yonten didn't respond, but continued putting flower powder

into the burner. So the butlers could only wait quietly, listening to the prayer flag fluttering in the wind from the Zheduo River.

The sun shone on Kangding, as the wind blew off the mist above the valley between the Guoda Mountain and Paoma Mountain. The Zheduo River and Yala River also converged in the valley.

He remembered burning incense and praying on the roof of the estate with his grandfather. It was forty-six years ago. Yet the prayer from his grandfather's thick lips still lingered around, as if it happened yesterday. He saw the smoke turn into his grandfather's face, smiling at him.

Still haunted by nightmare, he gazed out the valley in a daze. In his daze he was only aware of the occasional sound of an imam calling for a Fajr in the mosque and the bell ringing for mass in the Catholic Church across the river. Yet he remained motionless. Karma Romyang and Zhongyi Shenggen stood there like logs, waiting for him to give them his orders.

A flock of pigeons whistled overhead towards the Paoma Mountain. Yonten realized he had drifted away for a long time. He turned back, seeing the two butlers standing there quietly. He was then back to the status of the master.

"Karma, the autumn is coming. Choose a lucky day for departure. I'm going to let Rompa inspect the territory for me this year." After putting the last incense into the burner, he continued, "It is neither a good nor a bad year. Report to me the tributes after you inspect on the spot. Chieftain Chamwang and Chieftain Lhambo had a fight for their dispute on boundary and they've asked us to rule for them. Headman Mipah sent us an invitation for his son's wedding. You can prepare some wedding gifts. Zhongyi Shenggen, you draw up a letter. Send one to each chieftain and headman in the territory



so they can make preparations.”

“Yes.” The two answered in unison and left.

Just after few steps, Butler Karma turned back, and said, “By the way, master, Mr. Huang is back from Dege Parkhang\*. He is waiting downstairs.”

“Oh. The architect is back?”

Obviously, Mr. Huang’s visit gave him a little thrill, saving him from the nightmare.

“Nadron, go and tell Mr. Huang to wait a second in the sitting room. I’ll be there in a minute.” He stretched his arms above his head and took a deep breath as Zhima put on a beaver-skin waistcoat for him.

Every time before Yonten met his guests, he would dress up carefully. It was his habit for years. A few days ago, an America named Walker called at the house. After a long conversation with Yonten, he complimented Yonten as a highly-educated, graceful, smart man with a well-built body. Yonten, who was at first surprised to find that this complacent blue-eyed foreigner could speak Tibetan and Chinese so well, felt pleased by the complements. But he didn’t show it on his face. He had received waves of French, British and America visitors, who always flattered him. But satisfied as he might be, he was quietly disturbed by the praise.

“Why are these foreigners so obsessed with this land? What do they want?” He once asked himself confused.

“The letters from the court order me to take good care of them”.

The visitor was tiptoeing, appreciating a painting on the wall. It was a colorful realistic painting with hundreds birds. It had been

\* Parkhang, transliterated from Tibetan, literally means Sutras Printing Lamasery.