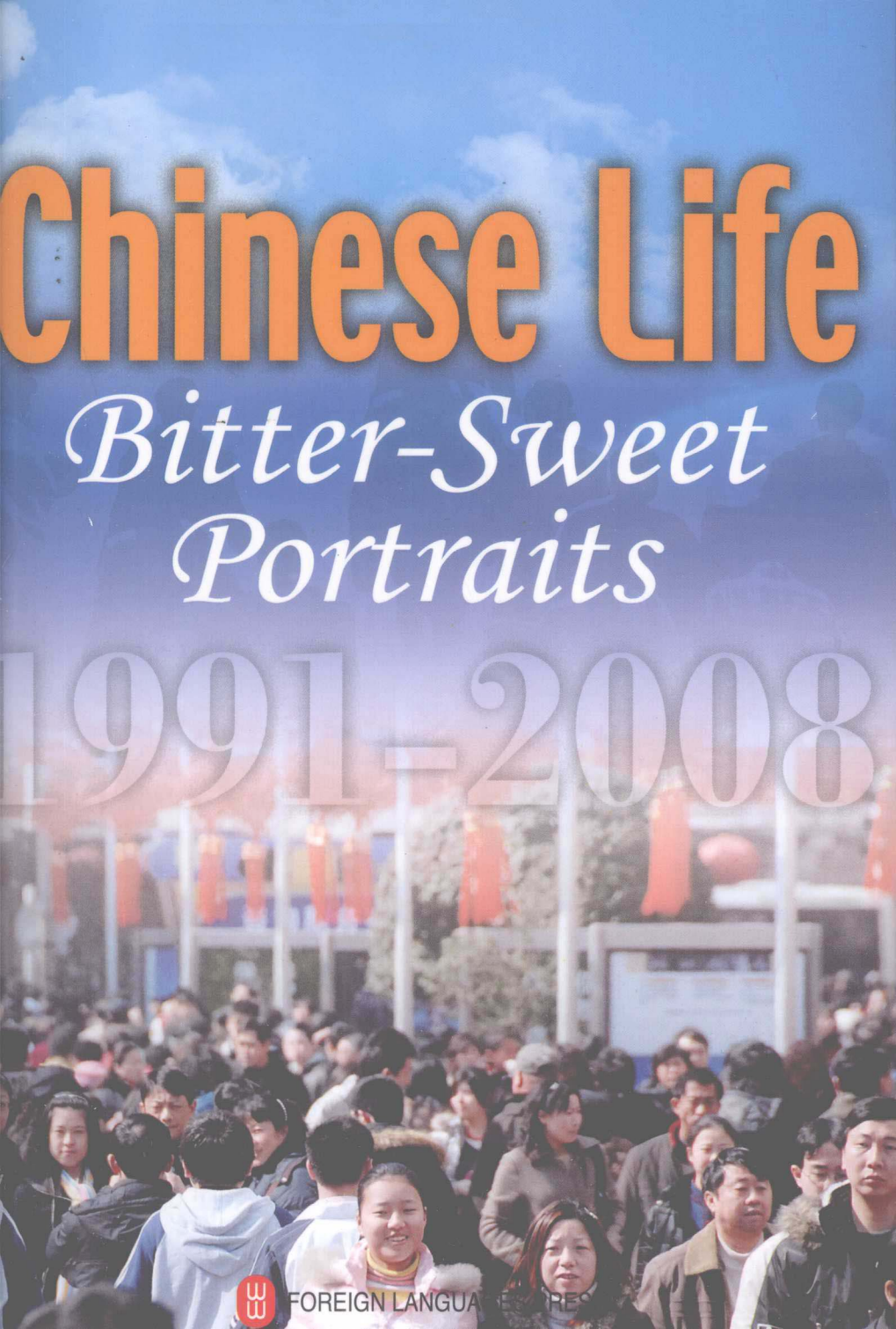
Chinese Life

Bitter-Sweet Portraits

1991-2008



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Publisher's Foreword

If we wanted a phrase associated with our better lives today, many people would mention "reform and opening up," a policy initiated in China in 1978. It was this policy that helped the Chinese people to get rid of poverty and start to become more well-off. And it was this policy that helped China open its long-closed door to the outside world and get even closer to it.

Over the past 30 years, China has undergone world-shaking changes while advancing its reform and opening up deeply and extensively. Now, newly built high-rises, bridges, highways and railways are to be seen everywhere; at the same time, overseas advanced equipment, technology and management modes have been introduced into China. During the 30 years of reform and opening up, what has happened to our lives and thinking? In 2008, the 30th anniversary of China's reform and opening up, we traced this period of history by publishing the two-volume *Chinese Life: Bitter-Sweet Portraits* series. By means of interviews, the two books portray the lives of a diversity of Chinese people who experienced these epoch-making changes.

Chinese Life: Bitter-Sweet Portraits (1991-2008) contains 87 interviews reflecting a wide range of personal experiences between 1991 and 2008, based on 150 interviews conducted from the 1990s to 2008. The interviewees come from different occupations and different places. They include a jazz player in Heilongjiang Province, a rock-and-roll drummer in Tibet, an elderly fruit farmer in Shanxi Province, a Beijing boss just 14 years old, a retired 68-year-old man who ventured alone in Africa, a college student who has adopted a younger sister despite poverty and hardship, and a woman entrepreneur who ranked No. 1 on Hurun China Rich List. We have also included in this book, medical workers, teachers, artists, athletes,

and migrant workers. We chose these people because we felt that they were representatives of Chinese society.

Their stories present the real lives of the Chinese people since the 1990s. In the course of the great social transformation brought about by reform and opening up, in their pursuit of well-off lives the Chinese people have striven to maintain their traditional virtues of a simple lifestyle and unselfishness. They have clung to their traditional culture while absorbing new and foreign cultural nourishment. All the interviewees related their experiences, joys, sorrows, challenges, grievances and hopes in a candid manner.

We are convinced that the best way to get to know a country is to let the people of that country speak for themselves, and the best approach to understanding a period is to record the lives of a wide variety of people who lived during that period.

For the sake of clarity, this book is categorized according to the interviewees' occupations. At the same time, the articles in each category are arranged in chronological order, as can be seen from the date at the end of each.

Finally, our acknowledgement is due to the following: our writers, most of whom are from the China Features section of Xinhua News Agency; Yu Yuanjiang, executive manager of China Features, who helped select and edit these interviews; as well as Foster Stockwell, K. Sri Bhaggiyadatta and May Yee, who helped edit this book. Our heartfelt thanks go to them for helping give readers such an intimate look at the Chinese people who lived during a certain very important period in the history of our country.

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CIVIL SERVICE

Wang Dongmei

Tibetan Spokeswoman

"My parents fell in love after their marriage."

Life with the wrong man began some 60 years ago for Caiji Lamo, a Khamba Tibetan woman in the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, now part of Qinghai Province. A man just rode up and literally out of the blue drew his dagger, pointed it at her, and told her to marry him or die. A petrified Caiji, still alive to tell her story at 87, chose the former. In the Khamba Tibetan areas in the 1930s, such a thing was not at all unusual.

The Khambas are a people whose males are regarded as quite manly and even fierce. Violent marriage proposals such as this were not unusual in the old days within the Khamba Tibetan communities, says Wang Dongmei, Caiji's granddaughter. "While girls were asleep with their mothers in tents, men on horseback might burst in, grab a girl and gallop off." In her grandma's case, Dongmei says, the man who stole her "was from a family of bandits."

Despite his evil past and rebellious future that also got him into trouble, the man with the stolen bride had five children whom Caiji loved and mothered as best she could. Her bandit husband eventually met a bitter end, perishing in prison during the late 1950s.

Now 31, Wang Dongmei works in the prefecture government and, able to tell a good story, could well be dubbed the family's "spokeswoman." She says she likes to tell her family story in the hope that her listeners can learn more about her people.

My Grandmother, Caiji, was left with the five children, the youngest being only two years old when she was widowed in 1959. She is now 87 years old, the respected head of a large family spanning four generations and including some 20 grandchildren plus their spouses, five great grandchildren, and

her own five children.

For Caiji, life really began after her "husband" died. Determined not to remarry, she became a lay Buddhist nun living at home and following local customs. Zhaxi Choma, her second daughter who is my mother, also began a new life with the death of my grandfather.

Her elder sister had always been in poor health and had become a Buddhist nun long before. So my mother, then only 13 years old, shouldered the responsibility of raising her younger sister and two brothers. She not only did all kinds of chores but tried by every means possible to earn food for the family. She toiled in the fields, cut and sold wood, and wove cloth at night. And on the darkest days she even went begging.

She did, however, manage to send her youngest brother, Wende Cering, to school, even though she herself was illiterate. My mother is most proud of this action. She firmly believes that education is the only way to improve the lives of folks like us. Thus my youngest uncle became the first educated member of our family. Since then, all the members of the younger generations of my family have been to school, achieving at least secondary school diplomas.

Wende Cering studied finance. Now he is manager of the Yushu Branch of the Agricultural Development Bank of China, and he says he's extremely grateful to his sister for the sacrifices she made in earning enough to send him to school.

I have worked for the prefectural government since my graduation in 1989 with a BA degree from the Qinghai Institute of Ethnic Studies in Xining, the provincial capital. My sister and brother-in-law, brother, and cousins have all been educated and now work in the banking and legal professions. Our grandpa's past hasn't cast any dark shadow on us.

We now live close to each other at Jiegu, the town at the center of Yushu Prefecture, in several Tibetan-style buildings with separate spacious courtyards. We also enjoy standards of living

that grandmother Caiji and even her offspring never could have dreamt of.

All of us are aware of what my mother has done for the family. She sacrificed a lot, even her personal romance. My mother used to be recognized as a local beauty, and many men courted her. When she reached 20, however, she chose my father, a Han Chinese 13 years her elder, not for love, but for the prospect of bettering the family's life.

My mother's dutiful marriage with Wang Fudi, my father, was quite different from the years of marriage that my grandmother experienced. Yet her helplessness was somewhat similar. Father was a road maintenance worker with a monthly wage of 140 yuan, which was regarded as a good source of income for the whole family.

My father, now 66 and retired, married into my mother's family as a live-in son-in-law. He was one of many workers who built the Xining-Yushu road in 1954, and he stayed with our family once the road was completed. By the time of his marriage he had been in the remote prefecture for 12 years, without paying one visit to his native home in Huangzhong, a county 800 kilometers away from Yushu.

He says he was too busy and tired with the road building to go back to Huangzhong. Besides this, he was an orphan and had no one to miss at home.

Fortunately for my mother, Wang never minded supporting such a big family. He says it was a family in need, so he gave all his money to support them. But he was not that easy-going. He refused to learn to speak Tibetan. At first we communicated with him by gestures. Then my mother learned to speak Mandarin. She had a far greater linguistic talent than he did.

My mother never imagined that the marriage might last for so long. Before she got married in 1966, she admits that she planned to leave him soon afterward. But then she realized that she just could not leave him. The longer they lived together, the less she wanted

to leave. Now her three children have all grown up and don't enjoy being apart.

My parents actually fell in love after their marriage. While I identify myself as Tibetan, despite my very Han-Chinese name, I call people of mixed blood like myself as being "from a family of ethnic unity." One of my favorite songs is "Tibetans and Hans are Daughters of the Same Mother—China."

Indeed. People have great difficulty telling if my father is of Han or Tibetan origin. Having lived in our Tibetan family on "the roof of the world" for so many years, he has long become accustomed to the local way of life. He has a weather-beaten complexion, typical of Tibetans on the plateau, and he wears a string of beads around his wrist, just like many Tibetan Buddhists.

But despite having felt quite at home high on the plateau, he has recently found that age and altitude are an incongruous combination. His failing health does not permit him to remain at such a high altitude. Jiegu is 3,700 meters above sea level. So he has bought an apartment in Xining where my mother joins him in winter.

My father really admires my mother, Choma. She is really tough, and was able to carry 100 kilograms of wood when she was a girl. She is also a gifted businesswoman. My father is also proud of his two daughters, but complains that his son, a prosecutor in Yushu County, drinks too much. He says that if the young man could give up that bad habit, he'd have nothing to complain about.

When my mother compares her life with my grandmother's, she says she thinks that she is "smarter" than the old woman, but only because grandmother's world was so isolated. Neither of them had much to say in their marriages, although her husband turned out to be far better. By contrast, mother observes that her daughters "are smarter than me" and they have "much greater freedom" in their choices of marriage partners. My sister, Donghua, got married out of her own choice and is now

mother of a lovely six-year-old girl, while I have so far remained single.

With each passing generation, our family has enjoyed a better life than the previous one. Women are now far more equal to men than before. But one thing hasn't changed—our men still do nothing at home.

(1999)

Qiampa Getsang

Custodian of the Potala Palace

"I'm fully responsible for everything in the palace."

When he left his uncle on the evening of March 10, 1959, at Norbu Linka, the Dalai Lama's summer palace at Lhasa, Qiampa Getsang never expected that one day he would be doing the same job as his late uncle, that is, managing the royal palace of the Dalai Lama. But that is indeed what he is now doing. While his uncle was a Buddhist monk and senior official of the Gaxag, the old Tibetan government, 60-year-old Getsang is taking care of the palace for the people as the director of the administrative office of the Potala Palace.

His uncle, Angwang Chaba, took part in the March 1959 revolt and was jailed after the revolt was quenched. The uncle died in prison. Thus Getsang, who had been raised by his uncle after he was orphaned at the age of two, began to live on his own. He was 17 years of age at the time, and he worked with a neighborhood committee in Lhasa for a few months before he was assigned, in 1960, to show films at Laze, a county in Xigaze of western Tibet.

Carrying the mark of being from a "politically incorrect" family, Getsang remained as a film projector for the next two decades, which was first interrupted by a border war with India in 1962 and then by the "cultural revolution" (1966-1976). During the border war, he was summoned to head a group of civilian workers to help with the transportation of military supplies for the Chinese army, and for a few years during the "cultural revolution" he was forced to do physical labor.

Against many odds, Getsang made Laze a national pacesetter in film distribution. He became a county official in charge of cultural affairs in the early 1980s, when China had begun implementing reform and opening up policies. His family background no longer cast a shadow over his career. He was elected deputy to the county people's congress, the local legislature, and was promoted to head a department of the Regional Film Distribution Company of Tibet in Lhasa in 1984.

Getsang admits that he was "quite reluctant" to take the post when he was appointed chief administrator of the 1,300-year-old palace, now listed as a World

Cultural Heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Yet no matter how reluctant he was, his appointment was irreversible. Getsang moved to the Potala Palace, and he has left his mark there.

I have more power than my uncle used to have. After all, I'm the legal person of the entity and since I took the current position in 1991, the cultural relics and Buddhist scriptures collected in the palace have far outnumbered the collection that was here up to 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled Tibet.

Our well-preserved collection has established such a good reputation for us that many people wish to donate their treasures to us. For instance, in 1995, a living Buddha of Qinghai's Kumbum Monastery, one of the six largest Lamaist temples in China, donated 232 relics, including statues and ritual utensils, to the Potala Palace before his death.

Among them are 24 pieces recognized as Grade One and Grade Two national treasures. The living Buddha believed that we could take good care of them. Now the 232 relics are on display in a special case.

When I was appointed to this post, all my family—my wife and two children—were against me coming here, even though by that time I had already been working with the renovation project of the palace for two years.

I liked to project films and I preferred my work of film distribution to administering the Potala Palace, especially at a time when film distribution was such a profitable business that people courted us for money. In contrast, the palace was so ill managed that it had only 7,782 yuan (barely US$ 1,000) in the bank, plus an overdue electricity bill of more than 9,000 yuan (about US$ 1,120). You felt like a pauper working with the palace, as you had to ask for money all the time.

I also dreaded the formidable responsibility. Nobody could tell how many cultural relics were stored in the huge palace and my children warned I would be suspected if our family got rich in the future, as people might assume I had taken something from the

palace.

At the same time, I didn't think I was educated enough to administer the palace. Although I had been a Buddhist from age 10 to 17 and I had learned to speak Mandarin Chinese later, I never actually had any Chinese schooling. On top of these misgivings I considered myself politically vulnerable because of my uncle.

The new government was about to send me to study in China's inland, but then they changed their minds at the last minute, without explaining why. I thought it might be due to my family background.

The first thing I did was to establish an archive for the relics in the palace and register them piece by piece. We have now booked more than 70,000 sets of relics. One set, like the stupa-tomb of the 13th Dalai Lama (1875-1933), contains a total of 943.5 kilograms of gold, with thousands of pearls, gems and jewels inlaid.

I also set up a staff to sort out the Buddhist scriptures scattered in the 2,000 rooms of the Potala. The scripture compilation has continued to this day and I can't say when the work will be completed as there are far too many scriptures stored here.

The work is quite time-consuming because many scriptures, especially those of sects other than the Gelu, or the yellow-hat sect, have been left unnoticed in storerooms ever since they were first sent to the palace. Compilers had to sort them out leaf by leaf, and put the same scriptures together and wrap them up with yellow silk. Hundreds of bookcases have been constructed recently to shelve them.

I'm very annoyed to hear some Westerners say that the scriptures in the Potala Palace have disappeared. I told them this was not true during my visit to Europe, and they wouldn't believe me, assuming I had been "brain washed." I became tired of making further explanations. I just wish they would come to Lhasa and see for themselves.

To date, we have produced four books based on the compilation, including *A Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures of the Nyingma Sect Stored in the Potala Palace*, and *A Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures of the Gelu*