

My_____



Path Leads
_____ to the
Plateau

Shan Shi
Michael L. Cavey
John James Chapman



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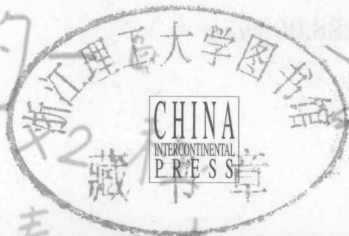
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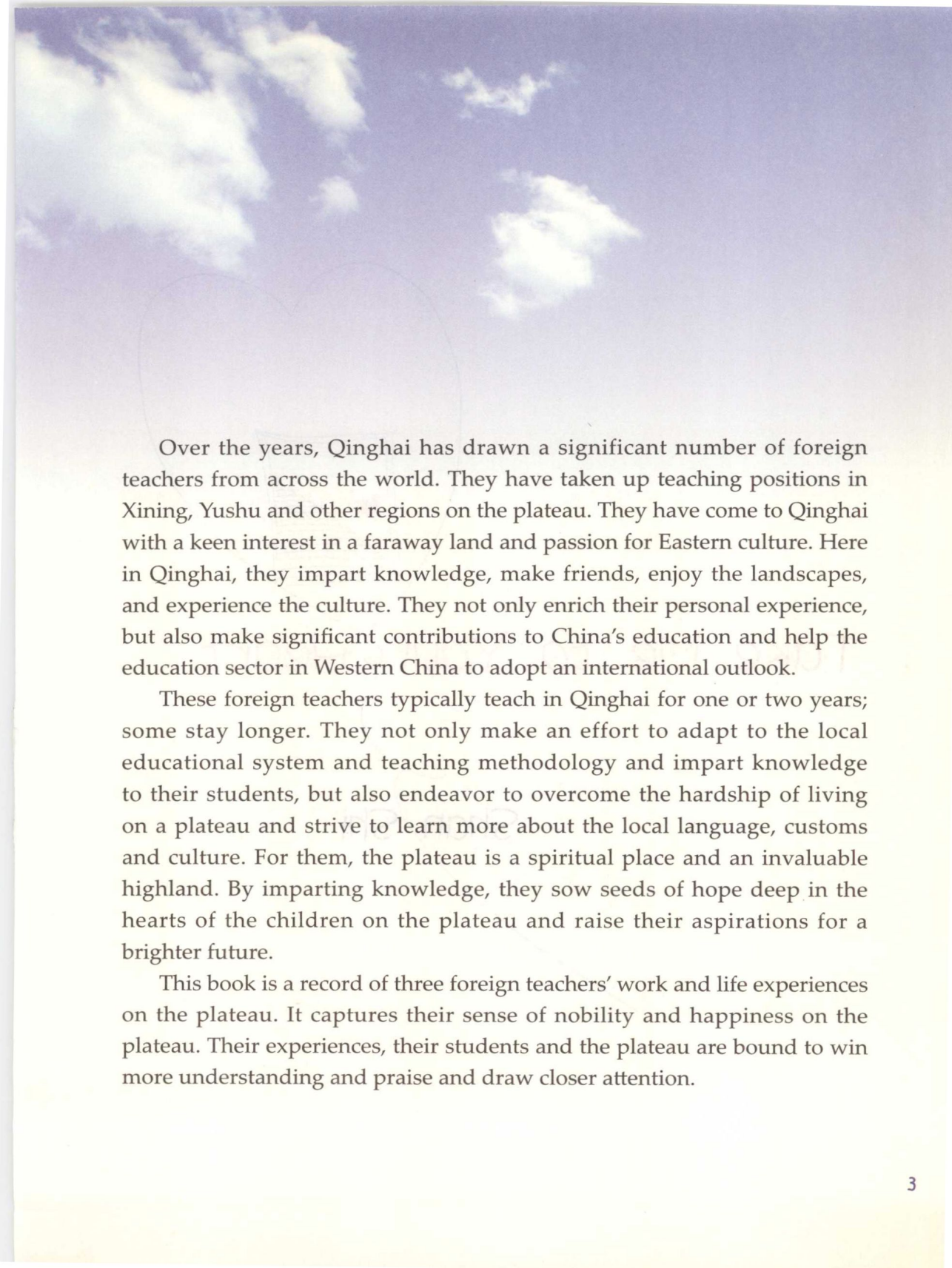
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Foreword

Qinghai Province lies in the northeastern part of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau in Western China, bordering Xinjiang, Gansu, Sichuan and Tibet. With a landmass of 720,000 square kilometers, Qinghai is China's fourth largest province. On average, Qinghai is approximately 3,000 meters above sea level, with 54 percent of the province's land rising 4,000 to 5,000 meters above sea level. The lowest point in Qinghai is 1,650 meters above sea level, while the highest point soars 6,860 meters above sea level.

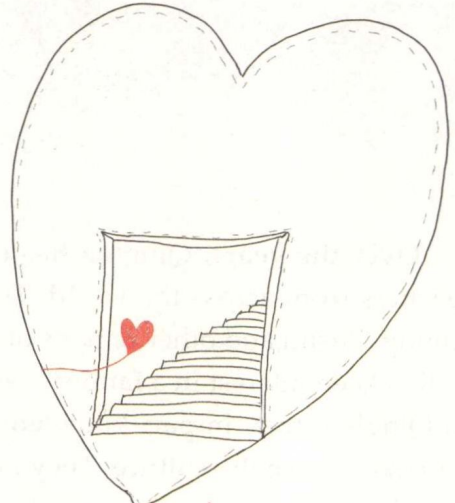
The provincial capital city, Xining, is located where the Loess Plateau meets the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, the agricultural region meets the pastoral region, and Han Chinese culture meets Tibetan culture. Xining is the only city on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau which has a population of more than 1 million. The city's residents are of 34 ethnicities, including Han Chinese, Hui, Tibetan, Tu, Mongolian, and Salar, and five major religions—Buddhism, Islamism, Taoism, Christianity and Catholicism—coexist in the city, with Tibetan Buddhism and Islamism being the most influential. Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture is Qinghai's first and China's second autonomous prefecture for an ethnic minority. It's located at the headwaters of the Yangtze River, Yellow River and Lancang River which flow across the heartland of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. It has an average altitude of more than 4,000 meters, a highest point of 6,621 meters, and a frigid climate.



Over the years, Qinghai has drawn a significant number of foreign teachers from across the world. They have taken up teaching positions in Xining, Yushu and other regions on the plateau. They have come to Qinghai with a keen interest in a faraway land and passion for Eastern culture. Here in Qinghai, they impart knowledge, make friends, enjoy the landscapes, and experience the culture. They not only enrich their personal experience, but also make significant contributions to China's education and help the education sector in Western China to adopt an international outlook.

These foreign teachers typically teach in Qinghai for one or two years; some stay longer. They not only make an effort to adapt to the local educational system and teaching methodology and impart knowledge to their students, but also endeavor to overcome the hardship of living on a plateau and strive to learn more about the local language, customs and culture. For them, the plateau is a spiritual place and an invaluable highland. By imparting knowledge, they sow seeds of hope deep in the hearts of the children on the plateau and raise their aspirations for a brighter future.

This book is a record of three foreign teachers' work and life experiences on the plateau. It captures their sense of nobility and happiness on the plateau. Their experiences, their students and the plateau are bound to win more understanding and praise and draw closer attention.



Take Me to Your Heart

Shan Shi

Shan Shi



Shan Shi graduated from the University of Southern California in 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre. She speaks fluent Mandarin and Turkmen, and she excels in multi-lingual education.

During college, she studied abroad in Athens, Greece and Edinburgh, Scotland. This ignited her passion for work abroad. After graduation, Shan served as a US Peace Corps Volunteer in Turkmenistan and worked in community development and health. She has also led trips as a Course Instructor for *Where There Be Dragons*, an organization that offers educational adventure programs for youth to travel to developing countries. From 2008 to 2009, she taught in Yushu's intensive English Tibetan Program, a local NGO's initiative to provide educational opportunities to gifted students from across Yushu Prefecture.



The Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Ethnic Integrated School (formerly the Yushu Prefecture Ethnic Normal School), where Shan Shi was teaching.

An Explosion of Yushu

At no prior time in my life did I think I would become a teacher. At no prior time did I think I would work and live in China. My name is Shan, and I am an English teacher in China, living in Yushu Prefecture. I teach 28 Tibetan students in an intensive English training program at a Tibetan public high school. How did this happen?

If you had asked me five years ago what my occupation would be, you would have gotten something along the lines of Hollywood director, famed off-Broadway avant-garde playwright, tragic actress. Five years earlier and it would have been Mathematician. Only when you go back much further, maybe to my life

circumstances around 5 years old, would you have come up with an answer akin to my present life situation. This, of course, makes our story all the more ironic.

Do you know the term Twinkie? Yellow on the outside and white inside? I don't like this term, like all reductive terms that take complex tapestries and iron them flat. But if the visual helps, one could think of me as analogous to the aforementioned junk food. I was born in Tianjin, relatively unknown to foreigners considering it is the third largest city in China. Only two hours from Beijing by minibus, it is bereft of the cultural venues and artistic fluency burgeoning in its bigger brother. Instead, the vacuum is filled by a unique Tianjin culture, a mix of rough-and-tumble dialects and attitudes, the same rapid economic expansion consuming an ever consumerist country, and a unique history of trade and relations with westerners. It is here that the Last Emperor resided after his banishment from the Forbidden Palace, and on Five Avenues, you can still see the houses of foreign embassy officials built in eclectic European architectural styles. But ask anyone in China about Tianjin, including Tianjin residents, and they will most likely talk about steamed buns. *Gou Bu Li* is hands down the most historic and well-known steamed bun chain in



Shan Shi's class.

China, and its home is Tianjin. Most residents will tell you it isn't good anymore, but like many hyped-up commodities here, that doesn't seem to have diminished its fame or popularity. That and 18th Street *Ma Hua*, fried, twisted dough-knots that come in an ever-increasing variety of flavors, are Tianjin's claim to fame.

I moved when I was six. Most of my relatives, however, still reside there. If you had predicted my future life at this time, you may very well have thought I would end up as a teacher. I was a good student, in a strict Chinese sense, wore glasses, and came from a middle-class family with a few connections. It seems very likely I would have ended up as a teacher in a public high school, teaching Chinese characters instead of my current predicament of trying to learn them.

Of course when I say "I" moved, what I mean is my parents moved. My father decided to attend law school in Washington, DC, and my mother and I followed him a year later in 1989. I was enrolled in a bilingual elementary education program in English and Spanish, which greatly helped to confuse the living daylights out of me. It was also around this time that my probabilities of becoming a Chinese teacher fell to the background and Mathematician rose to the foreground.

It was easy enough to spend my secondary years as a walking Chinese stereotype with thick glasses and mismatched clothing, but when it came time to apply to universities, I chose the very parentally reassuring major of theatre. Hence the Hollywood directing.

But how did I end up in Yushu? Isn't that what this book is about? College graduation, a dawning of the instability of theatre, two years of Peace Corps in Turkmenistan teaching, a summer trip to Yushu, and here we are. I was leading a group of western high school students along the ancient Silk Road for their summer holidays, and one of my co-instructors had been a former English teacher

in Yushu. We brought the group here to have homestays with some of the Tibetan students in the English program, and I just fell in love. Never mind my fascination with Buddhist philosophy or my soft spot for fluent non-native English speakers—Yushu blew my mind. The yaks, the monks, the picnics, the chanting. A stream of maroon robes and prayer bowls rushing past on foot, on motorcycles, stopping to ask me where I was from in a manner that actually brought me pleasure, the smiles from strangers, the invitation by the shop keeper to sit and watch TV with her—was this China? Certainly not the one I knew, and it begged exploring. The monastery filled to capacity and still streaming outwards on a day a special lama was there, Tibetan women in robes spinning prayer wheels on the door stoop in a hall so packed they cannot hear the lecture, but still looking like they will sit all day. The smoke, the juniper in the air, the incense burners being filled and refilled, butter lamps lit and relit, holding my hand over my nose and mouth as to avoid extinguishing a lamp, extinguishing a life. This was my first Yushu.

Ghee lamps in a Buddhist temple.



Winter in Yushu

The state of Virginia where I grew up is known for mild, distinct seasons. I always knew exactly where I was in the year. When the leaves turn, the school buses are once again prowling the streets, and I'm shopping for new pens. Light snow on the ground, the malls decorated with Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Valentine's. The birds chirping, a week off from school. Then the humid, sluggish days of berry-picking and couch vegetation

Thin-skinned and Asian, I was never one for the cold. But this consistent, sensible Virginian rhythm lulled me into reasonable comfort for my secondary days. For college, I jumped at the chance of Southern California but was still heard mumbling on the grassy quad with other out-of-staters about the "cool temperatures."

Plateau views.



But I was beckoned to Yushu in the summer, a land of happy yaks roaming happy grasses with the happiest, tiniest, most piercing blue and violet flowers you've ever seen. The running streams alongside running children, and the luxurious white, creamy yogurt "as thick as ice cream" to break your fall. This was late July, but when I returned a month later, the season was already changing. Unlike mild Virginia, Yushu has two seasons: summer and winter. The former lasts approximately 2 months, while the latter consumes the rest of the year. This would explain why Tibetans love to picnic so much in July.

Preparations for my winter in Yushu began at the end of August. I felt like an army ant, hording supplies and reinforcing my bunker. Thirty bags of dried yak dung were promptly ordered and stored in an upstairs room. Would have made for a nice guest room, but who could worry about entertaining guests at a time like this? A soft rattle at the metal door, held shut only by a padlock and optimism. I open upon a full-blown supply truck, dung in over laden woolen cloth bags. Instantly I am transported to age 5 in Tianjin, when the city residents' heating was still supplied by curiously fashioned coal in round cinders with holes in the middle to allow for air-flow. But here, coal in this quantity would far exceed my budget, and in its place are the 30 bags of dung and 10 smiling Tibetan children from across the street. They are small. And as they take turns



A Tibetan family.

hauling gigantic dung bag after bag from truck to upstairs room, I feel more and more prissy, standing at the door in a black Shanghai overcoat I do not want to dirty. Finally, I reach up for a bag of my own, promptly staggering under the weight, and is relieved by a kind twelve-year old nearby. A quotable promo I read before joining the Peace Corps flashes across my mind—"Know your own limitations."

"Alright, thank you very much. I'll just let you handle this one," I acquiesce.

After the dung settles, I set about my work covering the doors and windows with blankets and sheets, banishing the cold, creeping night wind. A green carpet is laid down for the bedroom, another attempt at insulation. The house is uniquely designed, with each room completely separated from the others and independent upon itself. I install a heating device in each room, and three for my bedroom. In the coldest of times, this is barely enough.

Then, my forays with the yak dung stove in the kitchen, the final destination of those 30 bags. When I go and visit a student's or colleague's family, there is always a gigantic, beautiful yak stove right in the middle of everything, the crowning centerpiece, and the household lights it with ease and grace. Sometimes I swear the madam of the house is looking at me with a wry smile, as if to say, "Look how easy!" Little mind is kept to the fire's upkeep, and an astronomical amount of heat is produced, enough to warm through me and my five layers. My stove is different. To begin with, the body is much smaller and therefore can hold much less dung. Also, there is strong suspicion the welding job is not top-notch, and the seams let air through where they shouldn't, making the compartment more difficult to heat up. There is an abundance of other theories, including insufficient air-circulation and pigeons roosting up and around the chimney, but one thing is for certain. The thing does not light. The most common advice I received, and it seemed like

everyone had some, was to use paper to help start the dung on fire. Although dried yak dung burns quite well, it has to be coaxed up to a certain temperature before it will combust, hence the paper. When this failed, the advice was more paper. After burning up half my homework supply in a smoke-filled but still freezing cold kitchen, I began to wonder about the efficacy of other people's advice.

Around this time, a friend of a friend was coming to Yushu to volunteer and tracked me down through an elaborate network of cell phone towers. I offered her a place to stay, and she offered to make me fires. It took her about a week of fits and starts, but finally she mastered the process and could get the stove pumping with a single match. Her original month-long stay extended into two and then a third, and it seemed my blood circulation was saved. But in late November, she flew to Thailand. I was left with an empty house and a stove full of ashes. It was all I could do to stop shivering. After recollecting my senses, I looked at my old nemesis once more, straight into its belly. I set my mind, as I had done so many times before in my determination to get a certain choice theatrical part, a certain university, or to force myself to stomach and actually like root beer. This was now do or die, and when the power went out in four hours as I knew it would, the stove would be my only friend. I set to work, trying different configurations of dung/paper, paper/dung, dung/paper/dung, paper/dung/paper. It was this last configuration that garnered the most promise, as it creates a ball of fire that envelopes and bewitches the dung into joining the cosmic dance. Whoosh! It's lit! A thundering sense of achievement fills me, along with a natural warmth that permeates the room. Feeling as big as King Gesar, I confidently add more yak dung to the flames and nearly extinguish the fire. But the epic hero of the longest epic poem ever written is with me now, and I am able to rekindle the blaze once more. What satisfaction! If