

KALEIDOSCOPE: ETHNIC CHINESE WRITERS

· 阅读中国 · 五彩丛书 ·

# Little Novice

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丹增 著

DANIELLE LU 译

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**Tenzin**, born in Tibet, studied journalism at Fudan University, Shanghai. He previously held posts as Deputy Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region and deputy Secretary of Yunnan Province. He is currently President of the Chinese PEN centre. In 2005 and 2006, he was recognized by a series of awards for his work in the cultural industries, and in 2007 he won the Award for Outstanding Contribution in China's Creative Industry.

KALEIDOSCOPE: ETHNIC CHINESE WRITERS

——• 阅读中国 • 五彩丛书 •——

An Eternal Lamb

Monk Dance

Song Rod

Thus Speaks the Narrator

Writing Before Sleep

The Last Chieftain

Little Novice

Fox Grin

No Water Cleaner than Tears

Identity

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# Jiang Gong

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## 1

It was early autumn and the lands in the north of Tibet were already covered with a thin layer of snow. In the rolling hills that rose and fell below the snow-capped mountains, the colour of the landscape gradually faded towards the distance as the snow became denser. The effect was like a great, loose brushstroke. The distant, continuous line of mountain peaks looked like gods attired in pure white clothes gazing down upon the world of humans with majesty and coldness. People believed that the mountains of Tibet, like its rivers, were spiritual places: that the lofty, pure, holy mountains are the world in which the spirits reside and that the deep azure lakes are places treasured by the spirits. The birds in the sky, the animals in the mountains are all messengers of the gods; the livestock on the grasslands, the crops in the farmland are all gifts from Buddha and the bodhisattvas.

However, the greater part of this gift was bestowed upon the tribal headmen and the ordinary people always received very, very little. But people rarely complained because the

lamas kept telling them: if a person has a large number of livestock, then this is due to the merit they had accumulated in a past life, and if you suffer in poverty, it is due to your sins in your past life. As long as you guard against evil and do good deeds, then you will receive reward in the next life.

The next life was a beautiful hope, distant and dimly discernable, but it followed Tibetans like a shadow.

At that time, the Tibetans who lived here used the stars in the heavens to measure their amount of livestock, used the abundance of the plants to determine the livestock migration, used the cycle of the seasons to determine when to harvest the crops, used the jewellery they wore to show the prosperity of their household, used the offerings to the temple to store up karma for their next reincarnation, used the sun, the moon, the stars, and the names of protective deities to name their children and used the spells of the Buddhist masters and lamas to ward against the interference of evil spirits. They judged a man's honour by his sword and horse and a woman's demeanour by her singing and dancing. Of course, they also used the shadow of the sun cast by a pole on the sand table to measure the passing of the seasons, the agricultural roster and the astronomical calendar; they also lit a stick of incense to calculate the time, determine when it was midday and decide what hours should be used to worship the Buddha and the bodhisattvas and the spirits of the mountains, what hours should be used to work for the headman, weave *pulu*\* wool and sew clothes for the nobility and what hours should be used to escape the sinister spells of evil spirits and the oppressive whip of

\* A traditional Tibetan woolen fabric made from felt.



the headman. Ordinary Tibetans were a grindstone, the turning of which was beyond their control.

On the slope of this vast grassland proudly stood a Red Sect temple of a 500-year history with the Three Jewels of Buddhism, the Buddha, the *dharma*\* and the *sangha*†. It was a place of spiritual sustenance for Tibetans in a several hundred *li*‡ radius.

That morning, the first drums calling the lamas to read the morning scriptures had only just sounded when shepherd Acuo was prepared to drive the headman's sheep out of the pen. The starlight in the heavens had not yet completely faded, the dewdrops on the grass were still glittering and crystal-clear, and smoke had not yet risen from the houses. The village was still sleeping. Acuo followed closely behind the light of dawn, catching up with the steps of the sun as it rose, and began a very long journey in which he would take the flock towards mountain pastures.

Not long ago, a snow leopard had killed Acuo's brother Axi, and had also dragged away two sheep. After Headman Wangzhu heard of this, he faced Acuo's dazed father, Jiayang, shook his head and heaved a sigh full of regret for the loss of the two fat sheep. "Oh! I wanted to slaughter those sheep after autumn, but they've died first in the jaws of some wild beast." Immediately after, he added, "So, after this, your family will have to send another shepherd!" Jiayang was an honest and loyal man and his family had

\* *Dharma* refers to the teachings of the Buddha which leads to enlightenment.

† *Sangha* refers to the community of those who have attained enlightenment, and is more broadly used to refer to a community of practicing Buddhists.

‡ A *Li* is a Chinese unit of measurement with a standardized length of 500 m.

been sending shepherds to Headman Wangzhu's family for three generations. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Now the evil spirits came knocking on the door and hiding from them was useless. It was like a stone rolling down a mountain that could not return to its original place. Jiayang had no choice but let his son Acuo, who was only seven years old, replace his older brother as the shepherd.

A piercingly cold wind blew down from the snowy mountains, like a group of malicious spirits rushing down and roaring across the ground. The sheep were scattered on the slope, strenuously searching for herbivorous material beneath the thin layer of snow. The whole world had become cold and desolate; there were no strong, rich colours of the summer pastures and none of the romance of the sweet love songs that were sung in summer. Acuo was too small and was not yet a trained shepherd. His thin body could not bear the fierce, snowy wind that blew through this wilderness. Although it was almost noon and the sun was shining so fiercely it stung at his eyes, he still felt cold and had to pick up a big, fluffy sheep and hold it in his arms to keep warm.

Just then, a herd of black yaks flooded over the hill, their hooves pounding the earth with the sound of hundreds of large drums being beaten.

"Older Sister Yangzong!" Acuo turned towards the yaks and shouted. Even though he had not yet seen the person tending the herd, he knew for sure that behind the herd of yaks was Yangzong, who doted on him and often helped him on the pastures. Ever since his older brother had been killed by the leopard, there was only Yangzong left. She was

two years older than him and often looked after him on the pastures.

Yangzong's family was also poor shepherds and their family's financial situation was far worse than Acuo's. Several years ago her father had left to drive horses for a caravan which encountered bandits. They had not heard any news since, and now Yangzong and her mother depended on each other for survival.

Yangzong's whole body was wrapped up so tightly so that only her eyes were visible. She handed Acuo a still-warm roast potato. It appeared that she had been keeping it warm in her bosom.

"Here, Acuo." Every time they were on the pasture, Yangzong always gave Acuo a little something, a piece of curd cheese, a lump of *tsampa*\* or a handful of wild fruit. Acuo didn't know where Yangzong got this food, only that he only needed to see Yangzong's yak herd and his stomach could not help but rumble. "Yangzong, you should eat." Yangzong licked her dry lips, "I've eaten, Acuo."

Yangzong watched as Acuo finished eating the roast potato and then said, "I'm going over to the mountainside. Acuo, you need to be more careful."

"Yangzong, why don't you stay here?"

"The grass here isn't enough. You have your sheep eat it. Acuo, when I leave, I'll come over and call you."

Acuo looked on helplessly as Yangzong led her herd away. If Yangzong wasn't here, then he would feel like he was the only human in this vast plain. He would be scared, cold, hungry, sleepy...

\* Flour made from parched ground barley or wheat.

There were a few eagles soaring between the mountains and the pastures and they seemed to be the only living animals between heaven and earth as they glided proudly in the heights. The wings of an eagle were powerful and strong, and the opened feathers were both soft and solid. It appeared that they wanted to rise to the heavens and block out the sun. Their talons tucked up against their stomach were like sharp steel hooks, ready at any moment to take something into their claws. In this desolate pastureland, what would they seize as food?

The eagles had finally found their prey for today. Moreover, they did not see any shepherds or dogs around the flock. This meant that they were able to mount an attack on the unguarded flock at will.

The eagles swooped down one by one, using their sturdy and powerful talons to grab at the helpless lambs before whistling away. As light as a dragonfly skimming the surface of water, like a horse galloping over flowers, in an instant they finished the slaughter. The lambs were startled and fled in all four directions, but their opponents were in the sky. The eagles swept up to the top of the mountain and dropped the lambs they held, dashing them against the rocks. They then flew back to continue the slaughter.

There were some eagles that actually became tired, so that after they grabbed the lamb they did not fly high again, but engaged in a furious, lopsided battle. This was perhaps both the most difficult and the happiest flight of the eagle's life.

One by one the lambs were borne up into the sky and still the shepherd boy was at that moment in a sheltered mountain cave, clutching a sheep and sleeping sweetly. By

the time poor Acuo was startled awake by the pitiful cries of the lambs, seven or eight had already been taken from the pastures. He saw the final lamb in the eagle's talons, its four hooves frantically pedalling and kicking, as if it were about to step on the white cloud which hung so near to it.

"Buddha..." Acuo's mouth hung open with shock. He looked up to the sky, at the black dots growing ever smaller and asked helplessly, "Are you really sent by the spirits in the mountains?"

Just then, Yangzong came rushing over from the mountain slopes, "Acuo, what are you doing?"

Acuo gazed at her blankly, "I...was sleeping." Tears flowed down his dry, cracked cheeks.

Yangzong removed her worn headscarf and helped him wipe away the tearstains on his face. "Let's go back, and ask the master to show mercy. I'll come with you."

It was still long before sundown. Acuo herded the sheep back into Headman Wangzhu's pen. He already knew what would be waiting for him, but Yangzong was beside him and so he did not feel too scared.

Headman Wangzhu was still playing Tibetan cards with a few guests and he was a little surprised to see Acuo standing in the door. "The sun is still so high, so why are you standing there looking as thick as a block of wood?"

"Master, a few lambs...flew into the sky," Acuo replied.

"Were they blown away by the wind?" Headman Wangzhu asked.

"No."

"Ah, so the lambs grew wings?" The headman shouted this question.

"They were eaten by eagles," said Acuo, timidly.

Headman Wangzhu stood up, fixed his gaze on Acuo for a few seconds and then threw his cards on the table in a savage movement and shouted, "My whip!"

Yangzong then flashed out from behind Acuo, and all of a sudden knelt in front of Headman Wangzhu, "Master, I beg you, show some mercy. If eagles wish to eat the lambs, then there is nothing to be done. Master, I beg you to spare him."

"Where did you come from, miserable wretch? Go away!" Wangzhu kicked at her, his foot missing her by inches.

A servant handed the headman a cattle whip, and then helped him pull Acuo into the compound, saying, "Get down on the ground, Acuo. Eagles fed on Master's lambs, so Master's whip will feed on your flesh."

Acuo lay on the ground and his trousers were slipped down, exposing his dark, thin behind. The cattle whip was brandished in the air, and then with a sharp whistling sound hit Acuo's buttocks. It was like the fangs of a wolf, bite after bite scraping over the top of Acuo's heart. But Acuo did not cry out nor did he weep. The strange thing is that it appeared that the whip wasn't striking his body, but was hitting a smooth stone; there was only the sound of its whistling and no splash of flesh or blood. This made Wangzhu even angrier and his blows became increasingly fierce.

As Headman Wangzhu reached over 20 blows with the whip, a figure fell onto their knees with a "splatter" in front of him and said, "Master, Master, I beg you do not hit him. The child is still young, I beg you. Master, if you want to hit somebody, strike me!"

It turned out to be Acuo's father, Jiayang. He had run

all the way and so his hair tie had fallen out and his hair hung wildly and chaotically in front of his face, as if he were some unkempt madman. Headman Wangzhu stopped his whipping. He spat a mouthful of phlegm onto Jiayang's head and then thrashed him a few times with the whip. Finally he became bored and said in a bitter voice, "Bah, have I met with some evil spirit? If it's not the leopards dragging away my sheep, then it's the eagles taking them in their beaks. If I don't give you wretches a little lesson, then one day you'll bring the devils themselves over to me."

The headman huffed as he turned around and went inside. Jiayang and his son climbed up from the ground and knelt uprightly facing the headman's great door. The headman had not told them to leave and both father and son did not dare to get up. In the evening, delicate snowflakes floated in the air and soon the shoulders of both father and son were covered in a layer of white. The child's snot constantly trickled down and gradually turned into ice which stuck to his lips and looked like a strange, thick, white beard.

They knelt under the star-filled sky as the moon rose in the east. They knelt until the drunken headman came out from the compound to urinate and asked the housekeeper why there were two dogs kneeling there. The housekeeper told them that they weren't dogs, that they were the guilty Jiayang and Acuo. The headman finally remembered the events of the afternoon and let the half-frozen pair leave.

The next day, although his whole body was ridden with welts, Acuo still needed to go and tend the flock. This time he did not dare to sleep and did not even dare to blink anymore. His sorrowful, aggrieved tears froze into icicles on

his face but he did not have the time to break them off as he was scared of those ever-present eagles suddenly flying over his head like lightning and grabbing a lamb. If the same thing as yesterday happened today, he would be beaten to death by the chieftain. However, at least, he could relax a little, as Yangzong was in the distant hills and was ready to help him keep watch for eagles. They had agreed that if an eagle came flying, she would give him a whistle.

Then, a figure wearing a robe emerged from the ground and stood abruptly in front of Acuo. Acuo's eyes widened in surprise. He rubbed at his eyes. Heavens! This was the Great Tulku\* Dapu from the Qiari Temple! Was this a dream? On such a cold day, what was he doing on the pastures?

The Tulku had a benevolent and kindly countenance and he held prayer beads in his hand as he walked towards Acuo. He discovered an air of compassion about the boy's broad forehead, thick eyebrows and large eyes. That such a small child could have this kind of temperament, made the Ninth Tulku Dapu, who had read countless people and was also well-versed in the scriptures, feel gladness in his heart. He broke a piece of ice off the child's face and said to him, "Child, here I have some butter rice. You sit down to eat and I'll help watch over the sheep."

Even though Acuo was young, he knew that a bowl of butter rice was not to be eaten over the New Year celebrations. He also knew that this amiable elder was a Great Tulku and that everybody within 100 *li* radius had to kowtow to him when they met him. Even Headman Wangzhu had to hasten

\* A tulku is a Tibetan Buddhist term referring to a high-ranking lama who can choose their own manner of rebirth.



to dismount his horse and kneel down in a kowtow whenever they crossed paths. The child knelt down and said, "Tulku, how could I dare to let you tend my sheep?"

Tulku Dapu laughed, "Who says that I cannot tend the sheep? Before I was known as the Tulku, I was just a poor child like you. Eat up quick, child."

He took Acuo's shepherd whip and began driving the sheep.

It turned out that earlier that day, Acuo's father had paid a visit to the temple to light butter lamps, offer incense and pray to the Buddha to forgive their sins. This was because both of his sons had attracted leopards and eagles to the headman's sheep. Poor Jiayang did not know what kind of retribution he was suffering, or which deity his family had angered so that he should encounter such grave misfortune. In front of the incomparable wrath of the figure of the Vajrapani Bodhisattva, he prayed and cried out. Apart from the Bodhisattva's compassion, what else could help helpless and lowly shepherds like them?

Of course, compassion was shown. Tulku Dapu of the Qiari Temple heard Jiayang's prayers and then told his attendants to prepare some butter rice and pack it into a wooden box. He then strode out of the temple. The Abbot, Khenpo Pinsong\* asked, "Where are you going, Tulku?"

He smiled and replied, "I'm going to herd some sheep."

As the common saying goes, the stick a beggar uses to beat a dog has better uses. The Tulku going to tend sheep was an unthinkable thing at the time, like using precious sandalwood

\* The term Khenpo is used in Tibetan Buddhism to refer to a senior monk of the temple, often the abbot of a monastery.