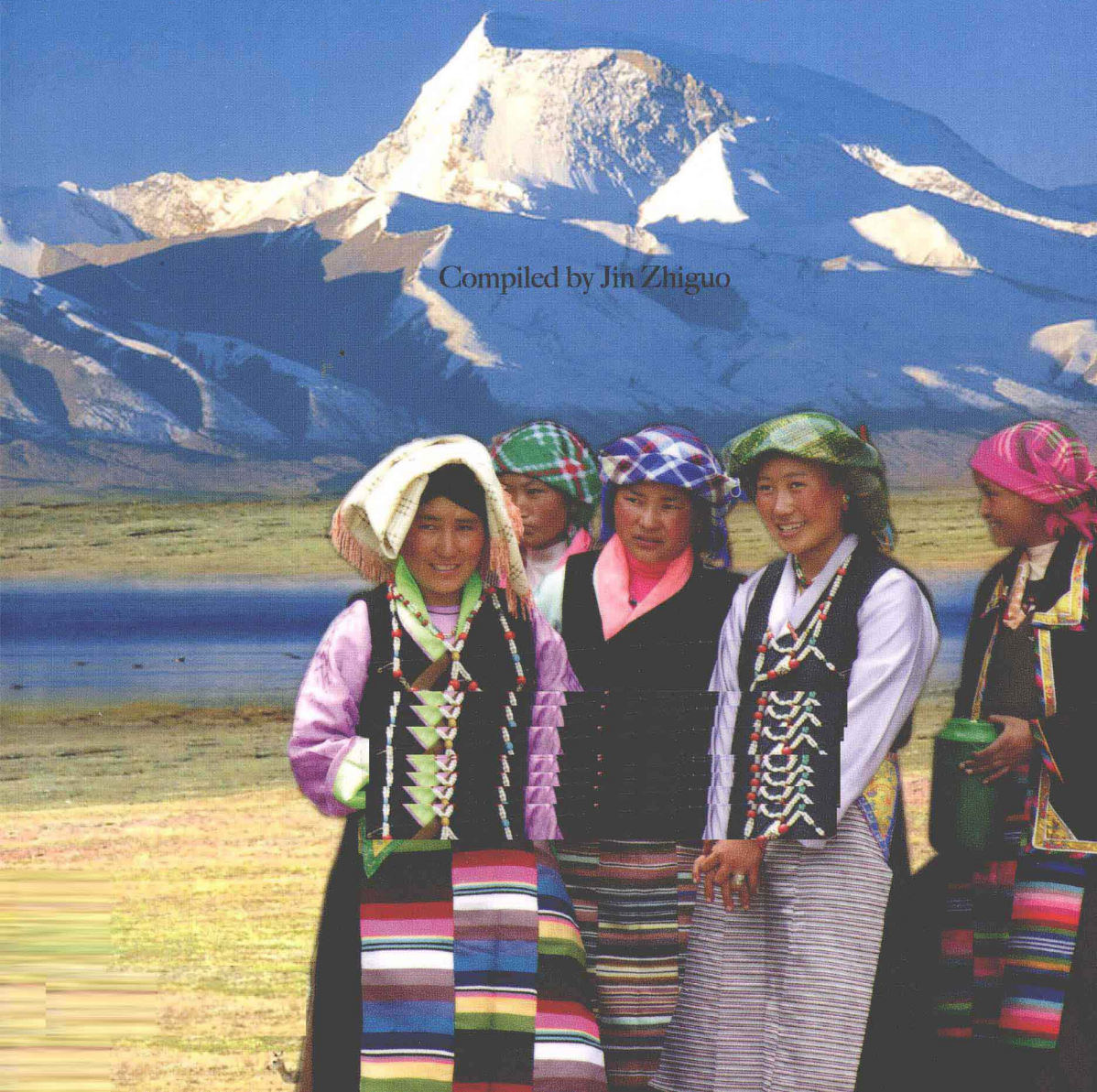



# Living on the Roof of the World

Compiled by Jin Zhiguo





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NEW WORLD PRESS



## 图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

生活在世界屋脊上: 英文 / 金志国主编. -- 北京:

新世界出版社, 2010.11

ISBN 978-7-5104-1414-5

I. ①生… II. ①金… III. ①纪实文学—中国—当代—英文 IV. ①I25

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2010) 第222593号

## 生活在世界屋脊上 (英)

主 编: 金志国

策 划: 张海鸥 李淑娟

责任编辑: 李淑娟

翻 译: 传神联合 (北京) 信息技术有限公司

英文改稿: Stephanie Buzzarte Tansey, David A. Peck

英文审定: 姜竹青

图片提供: 《中国西藏》杂志 格勒 羽芊 金勇 中国日报社

装帧设计: 青青虫工作室

责任印制: 李一鸣 黄厚清

出版发行: 新世界出版社

社 址: 北京市西城区百万庄大街24号 (100037)

总编室电话: +86 10 6899 5424 68326679 (传真)

发行部电话: +86 10 6899 5968 68998705 (传真)

本社中文网址: <http://www.nwp.cn>

本社英文网址: <http://www.newworld-press.com>

版权部电子信箱: [frank@nwp.com.cn](mailto:frank@nwp.com.cn)

版权部电话: +86 10 6899 6306

印刷: 北京外文印刷厂

经销: 新华书店

开本: 787 × 1092 1/16

字数: 200千字 印张: 15.25

版次: 2011年1月第1版 2011年1月北京第1次印刷

书号: ISBN 978-7-5104-1414-5

定价: 78.00元

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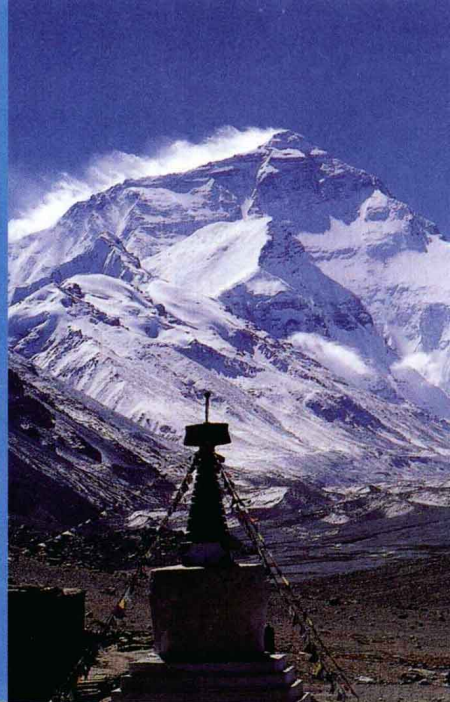
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# No. 1 Rock Band of the Tibetan Plateau

By Deqing Baizhen



All of a sudden, rock music can be heard from street to street in Lhasa, adding a special and fresh flavor to the city. Five years ago Tenzin Dawa established the Unplugged, Tibet's first folk-rock music club, and ever since a new sound, Tibetan folk with rock 'n' roll, has been tantalizing audiences, passers-by and the neighborhood. Now his band, Celestial Baton, has released their first CD and it is everywhere in Lhasa, changing the way Tibetans think about their music.

Tashi Phuntsok, who plays bass, is the leader of Celestial Baton. Tenzin Dawa is the drummer, and the heart and soul of the band. Sonam Tenzin plays lead guitar and Sonam Nima, rhythm guitar. Sonam Nianza is the lead singer. The band began to play together a few years ago. They decided to burn a CD when they saw that their music had begun to stir up a deepening response from their audiences.

A celestial baton, according to Tibetan Buddhism, is a powerful rod that can repel evil and so symbolizes the value of Tibetan culture. It means, "to be a thunderbolt," explains Tenzin Dawa. "The name also captures our high-





pitched, soul-penetrating music. Our Tibetan music creates a dialogue with the more universal expression of life which is at the heart of rock 'n' roll. We want to reflect the truth and beauty in our society and, together with rock, reveal the goodness of human nature.”

## Their Music

Though their music is very strikingly new, they are very attentive, deliberate and thoughtful when they write the music and lyrics to their songs. Songs such as *Desire*, *Rinzin Wangmo*, and *Labudabu* are based on original folk songs. The purpose of these folk songs was always to teach the values of goodness and beauty, and the band is careful to capture this in their new and distinctive renditions as well.

Labudabu, for example, is a well-known imaginary figure, who in fables takes his father's place in the army. However, the band changed this. For them Labudabu is an unambitious man who leads a meaningless and unexciting life. He gets lost in daydreams of success and fortune. The song is scathingly sarcastic, because Labudabu has clearly lost his sense of good and beauty. With a hip-hop beat, the band turns the song into a funny teasing reminder of what is important in life. Sonam Nima explains: “I feel that the hip-hop beat here is extremely mind-blowing. The old version of the song makes it difficult for people today to learn how to really deal with their lives. If we use the old ideas, the slow rhythm, then the song doesn't get where we need it to go. This way it works just right.”

In terms of style, *Labudabu* starts out rhythmically like a Tibetan nursery rhyme. The popular hip-hop beat is in the refrain. It gives a totally new impression to people when they hear it, and at the same time, they are caught in an inexplicable sense of *déjà vu*.”

*Amaqiangmala* (meaning Song of the Highland Barley Wine) is a very

old folk song. The band borrowed from this famous Tibetan toast song and turned it into rap music. It is the first time that songs in Tibetan have been rapped. Sonam Nima says that this folk song has been sung for centuries with the same old tune. They wanted to put in something new and so added a touch of Western forms and rhythms. "Now it sounds really good and the song has come alive," he says.

They wrote the first song in Tibetan to help preserve the Tibetan antelopes from poaching. Again, Tashi Phuntsok: "We have a Tibetan hero, Suonandajie, who died trying to save them. We are singers, so we cannot catch those poachers as much as we would like to do so. Writing a song for our antelopes is our way of helping them. We humbly offer this as our gift to them."

The band has added traditional instruments not usually played together and it is marvelous. The traditional *dramyin*, for example, is a lute instrument with six strings and usually played as an accompaniment for Buddhist songs. In their CD it has a special role throughout the whole album, interweaving the evoking sounds of the ancient plateau into the music. "Many ethnic instruments can also play modern music. It is only the shackles on the minds of people that stop us. If you break free from the idea that traditional musical instruments can only be for traditional music, you will see something much more fascinating and brilliant," Tashi Phuntsok comments.

Bian Luo, a noted Tibetan songwriter and lyricist, spoke highly of the album: "Celestial Baton has made a great contribution to Tibetan music. First, they have added their own interpretation of history in the form of rock 'n' roll. As to the music itself, the introduction of such new language in Tibetan music is bold and successful. The biggest breakthrough, however, is the strong empathy shown in their songs and their straightforward lyrics."





## Tradition and Finding a Way Forward Together

Of course, criticism has also arisen. Some say that they are defiling folk songs with their new interpretations. The band, however, faces these concerns with equanimity and emphasizes that their music is but the expression of their artistic feelings: “Others may feel our music a mockery of folk songs, but this is only their particular understanding and views. The song, *Amaqiangmala*, for example, was once popular but was mostly unknown to most young people until we reintroduced it with our adaptation. Now the song can be heard in many places. It’s our contribution. From our viewpoint, we think we are carrying our ethnic music forward,” explains Tashi Phuntsok,

Music should connect with people and help them face social problems squarely. This way they can realize what they need to do. Facing the doubts from the musicians who play traditional music, he insists: “Despite variations, a folk song will always be itself in nature. Just like people, you may wear whatever you desire, but the belief and soul in you will never change so easily with what is fashionable.”

## Growing in the Soil of Traditional Music

Their musical creativity has not stopped. The band is now looking for inspirations in other areas of the rich Tibetan musical landscape, namely pastoral songs that resound on the grasslands and also work songs.

They consider every inch of the inspiring land of Tibet to be an unfailing source of creativity. “We have an inexhaustible supply for our music. You may hear a different tone passing by one mountain for example to the next. The lead chanter in a Buddhist temple often has a deep, rich and resonant bass voice, which we’d also like to capture as well. At the same time our music can

be brought to life by looking from a different perspective. We listened very carefully to the normal ‘Da-a-ga Song,’ an antiphonal song with varied rhythms between a man and a woman and we found we could make it even better with our instrumental accompaniment and rhythms. Rap can be added to Tibetan operas as well,” observes Sonam Nianza.

In early 1990s, musicians in Tibet tried rock ‘n’ roll but they didn’t know much about the culture and traditions of Western music and Tibet was not ready to hear it then. Now, for this new generation, Celestial Baton is able to combine traditional folk music with this outside influence. Listening to both since their childhood the members of the band are able to integrate them. Giving full range to the ethnic elements as well as broadening the rock with forms of hip-hop, rap, R&B and blues, they’ve created their own brand of music.

All of the members of the band have daytime jobs. Tashi Phuntsok gave up his well-paid job in telecommunications and switched to a five-year study of music in Tibet University. He is presently a teacher of music in a secondary school. Tenzin Dawa runs the Unplugged. The lead singer Sonam Tenzin is a dancer with the Singing and Dancing Troupe of Tibet Autonomous Region. Sonam Nianza, the lead guitarist, is a German-speaking tour guide. Sonam Nima, the rhythm guitarist, is an auditor.

Other such groups who have spearheaded such ideas are Cui Jian, the first rocker in China, who used *suona* (double-reed wind instrument with a flaring metal bell) and zither (*guzheng*, a 16-26 stringed zither with movable bridges) in rock music in the 1980s, and Askar, the rock band in Xinjiang, who successfully brings tamboura into their music.

Songwriter Bian thinks that untrained individuals bring fresh perspectives to music. “Professionals may see only the simple orchestration and melody in this music, but it is just these unsophisticated techniques that are the highlights.”

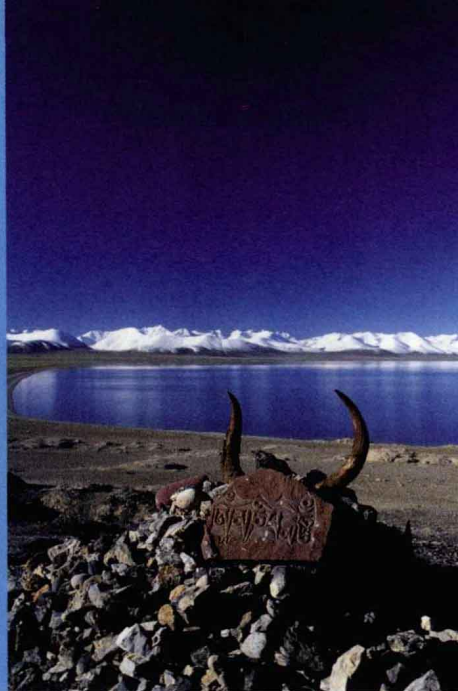


Celestial Baton permits innovative dialogue to occur to Tibetans and their music. The band brings new vigor to Tibetan music and its culture as well. Tibetan rock music can now take its place in the international history of music and enrich world culture. At the same time, the music of Tibet will now continue to evolve into the future.



# Lobsang Tenzin and the Legendary Tibetan Medical Family of Qiemo

By Jin Zhiguo

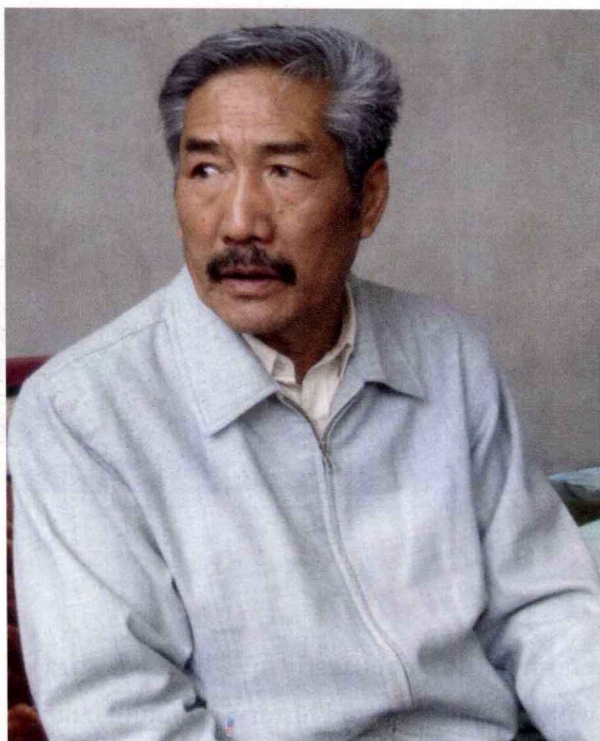


Just like all cultural phenomena in Tibet traditions have an aura of mysticism. Tibetan medicine, with its 2,000-year-old history, profound cultural presence, myriad of stories and legends, unique medical ideas and means of treatment, has intrigued people around the world.

If you want to know about Tibetan medicine and pharmacology, you need to know about Lobsang Tenzin, a Tibetan doctor who is regarded as one of the best doctors today.

He comes from a family which has produced several great physicians during the past centuries. And, like his ancestors, he uses new ideas as well as the family's colossal medical library when curing his patients. His method combines Tibetan medicine, traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine and has resolved lots of complicated cases.

His reputation has gradually spread from Tibetan-inhabited areas to central China and then into the world. Tibetan medication is attracting more and more patients. If they are not able to visit Tibet, they ask friends and relatives to bring back medicine that he has prescribed.



Today the humanity and ideas behind Tibetan medical concepts of diagnosis has aroused keen interest and research has begun into this unique medicine and pharmacology. The concept of the human being is different from that of Western medicine, or traditional Chinese medicinal sciences. Its distinctive analysis of the human body includes the bonds between the patient,

family and the doctor. Finally there are ethical principles the patients must follow that are prescribed by Tibetan medicine.

Finally, the reverence for the doctor is also a feature of Tibetan medicine and pharmacology. There are also complicated processes of preparing drugs. There are sacred blessings and prayers for every procedure. Even meticulous procedures to make pills which are wrapped in red silk or yellow satin, look somehow holy and sacred.

## **The Family from Aga**

Lobsang Tenzin's ancestral home is in Aga, Gonjo County, Chamdo Prefecture in eastern Tibet. It is a beautiful town surrounded by high mountains and deep valleys. Virgin forests cover the land so it is spectacular in

winter and colorful in summer.

The busy turning of seasons doesn't ripple the tranquility of his family. It is free of disturbances from the outside world. As a result, life here is simple and slow, making people's live a long life. Most of the families, from generation to generation, live the way of their ancestors.

Only a few people walk out of the mountains, bathing in the sunshine and breathing the air of the outside world. There is always someone from Lobsang Tenzin's family among these people. Their reputation comes from cultivating superb medical skills, a lineage of living Buddhas and magistrates, as well as a spirit of adventure and seeking personal cultivation.

Lobsang Tenzin's great-grandfather learned medical skills from his father when he was young. Then, when he was 30, he traveled to India, Nepal and Sikkim as a roving doctor. He spent many years and all his youth in exotic places. He visited famous doctors, collecting rare herbs adding to the precious medical fortune of the Qiemo family.

When he returned home, he was a 60-year-old man. He brought with him numerous medical books, medicines and apparatus for which he needed more than 30 horses to carry home.

Lobsang Tenzin's grandfather was a baby when his father left. He only really met his father as an adult. Before that, he relied on the medical skills of the family for his training and practising.

When his father returned, he told his son many anecdotes about the outside world. He especially explained the medical concepts that were different from traditional Tibetan medicine, such as bloodletting therapy, smoke therapy, pointing therapy, massage and rubbing therapy.

Like father, like son. All these stories inspired the 30-year-old son, who wished to be like his father and go out into the world. His father approved and made a rough itinerary for him. Carrying just simple medical equipment, he started on his journey.





He not only went to Sikkim, India, Nepal and other places his father had been to, but also to Medog to check the medicinal materials there, to Nayu of Mainling (this was said to be the source of medicine of the founder of Tibetan medicine, Yotok Yonten Kongpo), and to Wutai Mountain in Shanxi Province. He spent 26 years traveling, almost as long as his father's journey. Like his father, he brought back numerous books on medicine.

From then on, the family introduced traditional Chinese medicine into their medical skills. We can assume that during the 26 years of travel of Lobsang Tenzin's grandfather, he spent much of the time and energy on natural medicine. The journey for medical practice, study and research did not only enrich the medical wealth of the Qiemo family, but also brought in many unknown plants. While he led the family, they enjoyed an unprecedentedly high reputation in the medical field. Their fame spread from Chamdo to Lhasa.

Lobsang Tenzin's grandfather lived 103 years. In his last years, the society was under tremendous change. For safety, the old man put many medical books and materials in caves or donated them to monasteries. He wrote prescriptions for various diseases and handed 360 secret prescriptions down to his third son, who is Lobsang Tenzin's father.

Working as a roving doctor became a tradition. Lobsang Tenzin's father left home at the age of 18. The next year, a young lady from a rich family, his childhood playmate, found him in Mainling, and married him. The lady became Lobsang Tenzin's mother. The young couple went south to Medog.

Lobsang Tenzin explained why so many doctors in the family went to Medog. Tibetan medicine and pharmacology has three schools, one relies on plants for medicine, another on minerals, and the other on the bones and flesh of animals. The Qiemo family is from the first school. The proportion of medicine the Qiemo family prepares is 10 percent minerals, 20 percent bones and flesh of animals and 70 percent plants. Most of the medicinal plants only

grow in Medog.

Perhaps it was a coincidence that in the perpetual spring of Medog, which is also called “Pema Gang” (Lotus Mountain), a new successor of the family was conceived. Like the births of other living Buddhas and legendary men, the birth and childhood of Lobsang Tenzin had its own legendary omens.

After his mother became pregnant in Medog, the couple began the nine-month journey home. On their way they stopped in Ninga Village of Mainling County. On the morning of September 15, 1944, the sun did not rise and the village was quiet. A storm of hailstones suddenly rained down. A few minutes later, the hailstones stopped. Villagers were afraid that their crops were ruined and rushed out to check them.

To their astonishment, the hailstones were not white but full of different colors. Even more peculiar, the hailstones didn’t fall on the fields, just on the ground around the houses. While the villagers were still in confusion, a strong beam of sunlight burst out from the dark sky and clouds turned to golden red. A rainbow spanned the sky, connecting the faraway mountains to a house of the village. At that the same moment, a clear and loud crying of a baby was heard from the rainbow, breaking the silence of the morning.

With the strange phenomenon surrounding his birth and the background of his family, the ninth successor of the family, Lobsang Tenzin attracted attention of Thomjong Lama, a great living Buddha of Nyingma School. After a long and complicated religious ritual, the three-year-old boy was nominated by Thomjong Living Buddha as a reincarnated living Buddha of a monastery of Nyingma School in Nayu. He named the boy “Pema Norbu” (born of the lotus). And the monastery was named Nyizin (unsetting sun).

There was a legend about the naming of the monastery. When the monastery was about to be built, Master Padmasambhava asked the first abbot



of the monastery to finish the construction in 38 days. The abbot racked his brains but couldn't figure out any way to complete the construction in such a limited period.

He said as much to Padmasambhava that unless the sun did not set, it was impossible to fulfill his request. Master Padmasambhava agreed: That's no problem. So he cast a magic spell and held the sun on the top of the mountain. As soon as the monastery was finished, the sun set.

The little living Buddha Pema Norbu started to learn Tibetan and to recite some simple scriptures at the monastery. Pema Norbu began reading Padmasambhava's work *The Virtue of Human Wisdom*, which has over 380 pages. In addition to daily study, the little living Buddha was asked to attend various religious activities and give blessings to believers on festivals. Three years later, Pema Norbu was six and had acquired the solemn facial expressions of a religious leader.

One day, the living Buddha Thomjong visited Nyizin Monastery with Pema Norbu's father. His father said that the political situations were not stable. Though Pema Norbu was a living Buddha, he was still very young, and his father was concerned for his safety. He planned to move to Lhasa and wanted his son to come with them. Pema Norbu was very happy to do so as he missed his parents.

In 1952, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Tibet's capital Lhasa, in accordance with the Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet (or 17-Article Agreement) signed in 1951. It marked a new chapter in the history of Tibet. The plateau that had slept for thousands of years now awakened to new reality.

"New China", "the Communist Party of China", "the PLA soldier", "liberation", "the red Hans" and other new words passed from mouth to mouth. Rumors of all sorts spread across the mountains and waters like gusts of wind.