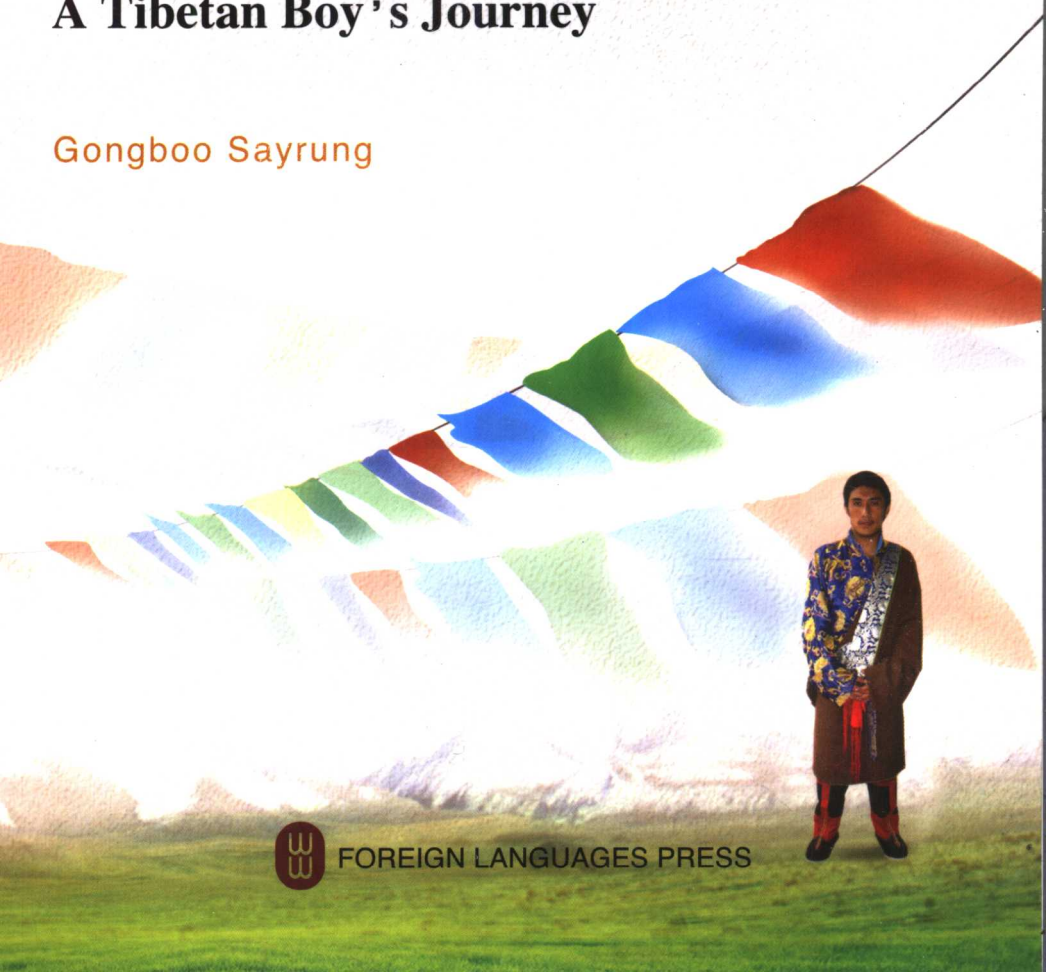




# From Grasslands to College

A Tibetan Boy's Journey

Gongboo Sayrung



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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Foreign Languages Press Beijing

## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

从草原到大学：一个藏族少年的故事：英文 / 贡布·泽仁 著. —北京：外文出版社，2007年

ISBN 978-7-119-05112-3

I.从… II.贡… III.贡布·泽仁—自传—英文 IV.K828.4

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2007)第 145864 号

策划编辑：许 荣

责任编辑：周晓刚

英文审定：郁 苓

封面设计：华子图文

印刷监制：张国祥

## 从草原到大学：一个藏族少年的故事

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© 外文出版社

外文出版社出版

(中国北京百万庄大街 24 号)

邮政编码 100037

北京外文印刷厂印刷

外文出版社网址：<http://www.flp.com.cn>

外文出版社电子信箱：[info@flp.com.cn](mailto:info@flp.com.cn)

[sales@flp.com.cn](mailto:sales@flp.com.cn)

中国国际图书贸易总公司发行

(中国北京车公庄西路 35 号)

北京邮政信箱第 399 号 邮政编码 100044

2007 年(大 32 开)第 1 版

2007 年第 1 版第 1 次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-05112-3

05800 (平)

10-E-3850P

First Edition 2007

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ISBN 978-7-119-05112-3

© Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China, 2007

Published by Foreign Languages Press

24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation

35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China

P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

*Printed in the People's Republic of China*

Reviews of  
*From Grasslands to College*  
— *A Tibetan Boy's Journey*

“A rare glimpse into the world of a young Tibetan. The storytelling is moving and poetic in its simplicity and honesty. An extraordinary read.” — *Katherine Morton, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University*

“Observant and reflective of many of his Tibetan contemporaries. A spectacularly successful and unique autobiography.” — *Huadan Zhaxi, Humboldt University, Berlin*

“A remarkable account of a Tibetan boy's journey towards adulthood in the late 20th century. Set against a cultural background that is sensitively recreated and interpreted, it is at the same time immediately accessible to English-speaking readers.” — *David Bertelson, Professor (retired), American Studies, University of Hawaii-Manoa*

“A marvelous, truthful story of a Khampa boy grown up to be a man.” — *Krisadawan Hongladarom, Chulalongkorn University*

“A plain tapestry woven with threads that are natural and yet mystical, recognizable and yet exotic, Gongboo Sayrung's *From Grasslands to College: A Tibetan Boy's Journey* promises to return memorable and unusual images of your own

childhood.” — *Yuwei Shi, The Monterey Institute of International Studies*

“Authentic voices of talented young Tibetan writers are beginning to be heard after a long and painful silence. Gongbo Sayrung’s is one such voice—lucid, sensitive, and penetrating. The story of his Tibetan childhood rings both poignant and true.”  
— *Richard Baum, Director, UCLA Center for Chinese Studies*

“These stories give access into another world, a childhood among Tibetan villagers and nomads. At the same time, the events are touchingly familiar, as much a mirror as a window. Behind the author’s voice is a smile, and a heart.” — *Rob Linrothe, Associate Professor, Skidmore College, New York*

“An absolutely transfixing and unique autobiographical account of a contemporary childhood that educates us about the realities of ordinary Tibetan life in China by a genuine local voice.” — *Kevin Stuart, Qinghai Normal University*

“An amazing story about one person’s desire to keep his language and culture alive. Would that there were more like him!”  
— *David Bradley, La Trobe University*

“Come to a remote Tibetan world and be surprised, smile, giggle, and cry. You will soon find yourself in the villages and townships where this childhood was spent and, at the same time, you will recall long forgotten memories from your own

childhood. Taste the Tibetan way of life with Gongboo as your tour guide.” — *Hiro Justin Ota, University of Hawaii-Manoa*

“An enrapturing and lively story about nomad and village life written with the eyes of a young, slowly maturing Tibetan. With imaginative skill for details, he brings to life conversations and relations among family members, how he learns Tibetan customs and traditions, about the importance of honor and courage among friends and neighbors, childhood games and school incidents and conflicts among same-aged mates, neighbors, and between nomads and villagers. An entertaining and fascinating read!” — *Mona Schrempf, Humbolt University, Berlin*

“A very touching and richly told autobiography of a young Tibetan man’s quest to repay his mother’s love. He and his mother are forced to leave his father’s family when he is only three months old. Never knowing his father, he grows up guided by his mother and an uncle, and as they move between farming villages, nomad encampments and remote townships the boy’s life is shaped by the struggle to find a balance between humility and personal pride. There is no other novel that takes us so sensitively into the details of Tibetan life in China today.” — *Mark Stevenson, Victoria University, Australia. Author of Many Paths: Searching for Old Tibet in New China*

# Introduction

I was born in 1984 in my father's home in Chewree Village, very near the present Zhanggo (Luhuo) County Town, Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. I am currently a student in the English Program in Qinghai Nationalities Teacher's College, Qinghai University. I began to learn English in 2002. This is my first book.

In the summer vacation of 2004, Dr. Kevin Stuart encouraged me to write about my life. I then wrote about all the important events that I could remember in my life.

Gongboo Sayrung  
June 2005

## *One*

**M**y parents were divorced when I was three months old, so my great uncle came to live with Mom and me. Once a week, Mother had to attend a meeting of the Women's Federation in the county town.

It was a winter night. The weather was very chilly. Mom was away at a meeting in the county town. I was wearing my old sheepskin robe. "My dear son, let's cook soup for supper. It will warm your little tummy," said Uncle.

"But potatoes also can warm my tummy, Uncle," I said because I liked potatoes. Every time Mother brought potatoes from the county town, I called them "my potatoes."

"That's true. A proverb says that all foods warm you," Uncle said.

"What is a proverb? Is that more delicious than my potatoes?" I asked.

Uncle did not answer. It seemed I was not old enough to learn this word, but this didn't bother me much. There were only the two of us. We finished our supper early and didn't keep our usual custom of a long chat after supper.

"My dear little son, it is time to go to bed. I'm also tired from softening those hides," said Uncle. He had been a monk but during the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1977), he became

a layman. Since then, he had lived with us. He had no formal job. Every day he softened yak-hides to earn income.

He cleaned up the dishes, stretched with a big yawn and then slowly went to his bedroom. I rushed after him and inquired, "Dear Uncle, can I sleep with you tonight? I'm afraid to sleep alone."

"Do you know what my father used to tell me? A real man is never afraid of darkness," said Uncle, staring at me.

"What is a real man? Is he a hero?" I asked.

"None of your old tricks! I know you want to play my famous games, so you can sleep with me for just tonight," said Uncle. Our home was big and we three—Uncle, Mom and me—had our own separate bedrooms. I had a small Tibetan style bed with a big raised bed-back painted with two dragons. The bed was lower than Uncle's and it also had two raised sides. I felt safe when I slept in it.

Once I got his permission, I rushed to his bed. For a minute I did not even take off my shoes.

"So what games do you want to play?" asked Uncle.

"First I want to arm wrestle," I said confidently. After I had heard a story from one of Mom's colleagues about a hero who killed nine suns, I dreamed day and night of being a tough guy.

"Good, my boy, you are almost like me," said Uncle with a warm smile.

I sat on the edge of the bed while Uncle faced me from the inner side of the bed. "Be careful, otherwise you will fall

off,” said Uncle with a rather sarcastic smile that contained a premature victory. Somehow I felt insulted. My desire to win was increasing, though the opponent was my dearest uncle.

I grabbed Uncle’s hand with all my energy, but I couldn’t move it a bit. It was like a louse trying to climb a wall. I had to look up to see how he felt. His expression remained very calm. Suddenly, a twinge of anger surged through my body. I could not control myself from crying out.

“My son, are you a man?” Uncle asked.

“Of course I am,” I said in a shaking voice.

“If so, then act like one,” he said. I was encouraged and wiped away my tears and moved back a little. Suddenly, I felt cold on my soles and a second later, I fell to the floor. At the same time, Uncle fell on top of me, because he was grabbing my hand and not paying much attention to himself, I remember being in Uncle’s embrace and an instant later, everything was dark.

I woke up next morning and looked around the room. All was unfamiliar. My bed was bigger and more comfortable. I could not understand where I was. I tried to turn on my left side to see more of this mysterious place, but I couldn’t move my left arm because of great pain in my shoulder, which was tightly wrapped in white cloth.

I heard a man saying to Uncle, “Your nephew’s collarbone is broken, but we tied it well, so you don’t need to worry. It’s better if he stays here a couple of days before going home.” Uncle said, “Of course we will stay. Thanks doctor.”

## Two

Sunshine warmly beamed through my bedroom window. Birds in nearby willow trees sang melodiously. I half stood in the bed and leaned backwards against the wall with my pillow behind me. I liked to open the windows at night in summer so that in the morning, I could smell the fragrance of the flowers wafting into my room. I sniffed the room as before and this wonderful smell provoked great pleasure.

“Zhashe, breakfast is ready. Do you want to get up?” Mother called from the kitchen in her usual gentle tones.

“I’ll get up soon Mom,” I said. Mother liked to call me Zhashe, because that was my nickname. In my home place, nicknames show love and kindness so only people on intimate terms use them.

Usually I dressed myself, but I was always confused in distinguishing between my right and left shoes. I carried my shoes to the kitchen to look for help.

“Come here my son, I’ll help you put on those shoes,” said Uncle. He was sitting on the right side of the stove, because that is where men sit. I went over and squatted between Uncle’s legs.

“A man cannot put on his shoes. What a shame,” said Mother and handed me a bowl filled with tsamba.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Roasted barley flour mixed with hot tea, butter, dried cheese and sugar.

I reached out my left hand to get the bowl, but still felt great pain in my collarbone. The bowl fell from my hand.

“Are you OK?” asked Mom. I noticed her pained expression. This hurt Uncle as well. Since my collarbone had been broken, Mother said he did not take good care of me.

“I’m fine. It is a little painful, but not serious,” I replied. Five months had passed since I had broken my collarbone and my answer made them feel better. We started breakfast. Mom handed me another bowl.

“We planned that Uncle would take you to visit the small deer park today. But it is far from here, and you are not recovered. I don’t think you should go,” said Mother.

“No, Mother, I can make it,” I said. I stood up and jumped around the kitchen and said, “See!” Then I went over and embraced Mother’s neck and kissed her forehead. “Mom, can I go with Uncle? I have never seen deer before,” I said.

“He should go. I want my son to see the most beautiful animal in the world,” Uncle said with a wide smile covering his wrinkled face.

“I won’t say no, but be careful on the way,” said Mother.

“My son, change your shoes! You can’t walk a long way in those boots,” said Uncle.

“Can you give me a few minutes? I have to wash my face,” I said. My family’s basins and soap were placed in order by the kitchen window. Mother helped me fill my small wooden basin with warm water and put my towel in it. She helped me change

my shoes, and rolled my robe sleeves up to my elbows and wetted the towel for me. I soon finished washing.

I looked through the kitchen window and saw Uncle standing outside, waiting for me. He wore a faded yellowish hat and a robe with patches around the collar and on the right sleeve. He was very proud of this robe, because he had bought it during the “Cultural Revolution” when such robes were considered high quality. He also wore a traditional vest which dirt had made its white color gray. I guessed he had not washed it since Mother bought it for him. A silk amulet hung around his neck. He held a string of endlessly circling prayer beads.

“Zhashe, the sun is up. Be quick, otherwise we won’t get back home tonight,” Uncle called from outside.

“I’m coming,” I said and rushed toward him without putting butter on my face. We used butter as lotion, because we rarely could buy commercial lotion.

The deer zoo was atop a mountain that faced my home from across the Uhya River. A dilapidated wooden bridge spanned the river. People dared not renovate this bridge, because it had been built by a lama and was sacred.

We were at the foot of the mountain after ten minutes or so. I turned and looked over my shoulder and saw no one crossing the bridge. I looked further to the other side of the river and saw my home in the second row of single storied buildings. It was the third one from the right. On the left side, three big logs leaned against the wall. Beside them, right un-

der the windows, was a big pile of dry yak dung that fed our metal store. The outer wall of my family's house was painted white with a little gray on the lower side of the walls. The roof was triangular. Countless rows of red tiles were lined up, side by side, covering the roof. Above all that, nine or ten chimneys stood in a line, dressed in black coats.

"Hey, what are you looking at?" Uncle called. "If you're tired, then let's go back, because we still have a long way to go. We aren't going to make it at this rate."

I turned toward Uncle. He was already up on the second turn of the path. I followed with my eyes moving all the way up to the mountaintop. I saw this zigzag path was awfully long and steep. I couldn't visualize what was on top of the mountain. Somewhere deep in my heart, I had already abandoned the desire to climb up this narrow path, but my eagerness to see the deer encouraged me. I said, "Don't worry, Uncle, I'm going to make it."

"Good! You're a real man!" said Uncle with a smile and stretched out his hand. "Come on! Give me your hand and let's move."

"OK, Uncle," I said. I ran to him and held his middle finger.

We didn't talk for a time while walking and then I asked, "Why is the deer park high up on the mountain top?"

"Son, when we climb mountains, we shouldn't talk, because we will lose our energy," said Uncle in an experienced tone. I did not follow the connections between talking and

losing energy, but I kept quiet. After that, he seemed very serious about what he had told me, so I didn't talk until we reached the top.

Getting there did not take as long as I thought. Uncle gave a sigh of satisfaction and handed me a bundle of small papers printed with horses and sacred words. "Do you see the little room with sacred flags on its top?" asked Uncle. He stopped and looked at me to see if I really saw it.

I nodded and said, "Yes."

"When we get there, we'll scatter these wind horses," said Uncle. I did not say anything. I just took the bundle of papers.

Soon Uncle was busy chanting and scattering the papers while circumambulating the small room. Sometimes he yelled out, "Lhasew, or "Happiness to the tutelary deities!" People scatter these papers when they reach high places, which means that they offer horses to tutelary deities so that they will bring luck on the journey. I stood holding the wind horses, feeling exuberant to be at this high place. I could envisage all that existed below, which seemed tiny. Somehow I felt I was a giant.

"Come here! What are you looking at?" called Uncle in an exhausted voice.

"OK," I said, running over to him. Uncle looked at my hands and saw that I was still holding the papers.

He shook his head with a frustrated expression, and said, "You know, kid, you will grow up one day. You have to learn this cultural system. Only a man who knows tradition de-

serves respect.”

I didn't fully concentrate on Uncle's words, because the scene was so fascinating. But a part of me did listen, because he was really experienced and knowledgeable, although sometimes what he said was beyond my understanding.

After a while I said, “Yes, Uncle, I will learn and become a great man one day.”

“My good boy, now follow me,” he said as he began to circle the small room again. I followed him and scattered the wind horses, though I did not understand what Uncle was chanting. He did not teach me, so I did not ask. We circumambulated the small room three times and then followed the narrow path through a small plain.

“Uncle, when can we see the deer park?” I asked.

“Be patient, we'll be there in a few minutes,” he said. Again we fell silent. When we crossed the plain, I saw a roof emerging as we moved nearer. Finally, I saw a whole building with a big courtyard surrounded by high walls. I could see a few juniper tree heads swaying. The house was one storied and designed in a traditional Tibetan style. The roof was covered with packed earth. The house was mainly built of wood, except for a foundation made of local stones.

A man was softening some hides. He looked at us as we approached.

“Darjie! I haven't seen you in ages. What happened to you?” exclaimed the man as he approached us with an amiable