

Ma Lihua

Souls Are Like the Wind

Translated from the Chinese
by Markus S. Conley and Song Meihua

Reihe Phönixfeder 37

OSTASIEN Verlag

We thank the author for the photographs she sent us
and the permission to use them for the English edition.

Licensed edition with permission from Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe
中国藏学出版社 (China Tibetology Publishing House)

Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen
Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über
<http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

ISSN: 1868-4866

ISBN: 978-3-946114-37-6

© 2017. OSTASIEN Verlag, Gossenberg (www.ostasien-verlag.de)

1. Auflage. Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Redaktion, Satz und Umschlaggestaltung:

Martin Hanke und Dorothee Schaab-Hanke

Druck und Bindung: Rosch-Buch Druckerei GmbH, Scheßlitz

Printed in Germany

Inhalt

Prologue	1
Chapter 1:	
Thragu's Sacrificial Practices throughout the Seasons	5
<i>Starting from the Ancient Spring Plowing Ceremony in the Fields</i>	5
<i>The Farm Woman Tsöndrü Wangmo and Her Family</i>	10
<i>Farming Ballads and the Ongkor Festival</i>	13
<i>Young City Riders Leaving Home Ballads Behind</i>	19
<i>Looking for the Goddess of the Earth: A Myth That Has Vanished</i>	25
<i>Entering into Everyday Life in Thragu</i>	31
<i>A Young Guy Who No Longer Returned to Thragu</i>	37
Chapter 2:	
The Spectacular Zhörong Mountain Valley	41
<i>Legends on the Banks of the Zhörong River</i>	41
<i>Drigung Thil Monastery's Past Brilliance and Adaptation</i>	41
<i>An Ascetic Monk Who Spent Eleven Years in Confinement</i>	43
<i>The Most Renowned Sky Burial Ground in Tibet</i>	48
<i>Tendzin Chödzin: A Dakini's Incarnation</i>	58
<i>Treu Lo Kagyü: A Grand Ritual Conducted for the Soul</i>	63
<i>Souls Are Like the Wind</i>	73
Chapter 3:	
Scenes from the Margin: Trülku Khedrup's Dramatic Life	81
<i>Khedrup's Literary Talent</i>	81
<i>Khedrup's Vicissitudes of Life</i>	84
<i>An Ancient Custom from Khedrup's Hometown: Hail Prevention at the Ongkor Festival in the Year of the Monkey</i>	91
<i>Another Ancient Custom from Khedrup's Hometown: A Male Spirit Medium Who Summons Deities to Descend into His Body and Yangguk – the Invitation of Blessings</i>	96
<i>Khedrup's Sacred Moment</i>	99
<i>Khedrup's Secular Worries</i>	102
<i>A Soul Afloat in the Never-ending Passage of Time</i>	106

Chapter 4:	
A Countryside Covered with Deities	109
<i>Legends in the Secret Mountain Valleys</i>	109
<i>Local Deities, Where Do You Come From, and What Have You Come to Do?</i>	112
<i>The Tsen Deities and the King of the Myriad Tsen</i>	116
<i>Investigation of the Deities and a Record of Their Genealogy</i>	121
<i>The Deities Have Descended: Three People I Know Who Summon Deities to Descend into Their Bodies</i>	127
<i>A Relic of High Antiquity: The Deities of the Three Realms and Their Mysterious Qualities</i>	138
<i>The Perfect Fire Offering in Tsenhang Village, in Which the Deities Are Honored and the Ghosts Are Given Alms</i>	144
Chapter 5:	
Where the Yarlung Tsangpo Flows	159
<i>Traveling to the Source of Tibetan Civilization: the Southern Tibetan Valley</i>	159
<i>The Monks and Nuns of Chimphu Hermitage</i>	162
<i>The Territory of the Lhagyari, Kings of the Hundred Deities</i>	175
<i>Several Thousands of Years from the Living Dead Who Keep the Tombs to Threnggo Valley</i>	183
<i>The Potters of Tsenyül</i>	189
<i>A Collection of Folktales from the Apes that Turned into Humans to Gokza Lhamo</i>	194
<i>The Guardian Deity of Lhoka's Cultural Relics</i>	200
Chapter 6:	
The Soul of a Pilgrim	207
<i>The People Who Kowtow in a World of Ice and Snow</i>	207
<i>Singing Songs of the Soul in the Camp of the Pilgrimage Tribe</i>	214
<i>Why We Go on Pilgrimages</i>	221
<i>Experiences and Legends in Norbu Zangpo's Family History</i>	223
<i>What We Know and What We Do Not Know</i>	231
<i>A Daily Chronicle of the Journey</i>	234
<i>Fulfilling Vows at Jokhang Monastery</i>	238

Chapter 7:	
Since I Heard the Expression “Souls Are Like the Wind”	243
<i>The World in Conceptions:</i>	
<i>From Word of Mouth and Written Sources</i>	243
<i>A Traditional Life: A Narration from Mr. Pento</i>	248
<i>A Closer Look at the Ups and Downs in the Life of the Narrator</i> <i>of the Previous Story</i>	255
<i>The Year 2000: Spending Tibetan New Year in Thragu Village</i>	260
<i>2015: “Ongkor Festival” in My Old Haunt Thragu Village</i>	267
<i>One Man’s Wanderings and Settling Down</i>	275
Notes	283
Postface by Peter Schwieger	291
Acknowledgements	295
Author and Translators	297

Prologue

The mountains are high, and the rivers wide. The desolate and cold Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is composed of such massive mountains and rivers. One is left wondering: where else in the world could one see such forbidding and lofty mountain ranges even more vast than these? Even the flat part of the plateau is several thousand meters above sea level, making it the roof of the world. I enjoy the moments when all my eyes meet is mountains. I enjoy appreciating them from all possible angles: gazing at them across their horizontal expanse or from a bird-eye's view, looking up at them from nearby or viewing them from a distance; I relish looking at them in all different sorts of lighting: in the rays of dawn in the morning, in the dimming lights of dusk, or in broad daylight; I enjoy going everywhere in the mountains, crossing them or trudging through them, whether in vehicles, on horseback, or simply on foot. During my seventeen or eighteen years in Tibet, these mountains have been my constant companions.

– It is *jiaogan* – bone-dry...

I tend to unconsciously think aloud in my native northern Chinese, and using “*jiaogan*” in my dialect fits perfectly in this situation. Indeed, it is bone-dry, bone-dry and boundless.

The vast and endless sunshine and monsoon winds above the mountain wilderness weather away the years like wisps of silk thread, desiccating life itself. By the term “life” I do not mean a certain individual's life or the lives of a certain group of people, but life in a general sense...all life.

A wiser person would favor water. Fortunately, there are coursing streams of water that never cease to flow. They run through the canyons and plains between the mountains, tumultuously or gently, continuing day and night, and never turning back. Whoever concentrates on flowing water will eventually become wise. The currents continue day and night never turning back, coursing off into the distance, into the bosom of the ocean. Along the way, they collect the water from the melted snow, rain, and springs, which ceaselessly surges downward from both banks. Since ancient times, the erosion caused by the water from the melting snow, the rain, and the springs has deepened and broadened the valleys that crisscross the land. Deep and shallow with many twists and turns, this natural environment is a

perfect creation of heaven and earth. Human beings have quietly emerged in the creases of the mountains and put down roots there. That vitality and current of life, which made me sigh endlessly with deep emotion for many years, silently flowed forth from the floor of the valley. Such primordial essence of life and living! All the villages I have visited are situated without exception in a place where water flows by. I always went from one valley into the next and crossed one river heading toward the next one.

In the last two years I have been rushing back and forth between the mountains and rivers of Lhasa in central Tibet and the Yarlung Tsangpo in Lhoka, visiting these villages and their people who have thus become increasingly familiar to me.¹ These patches of mountain wilderness are no longer something to be passed over briskly with an indiscriminate eye or mere objects treated with indifference; something we have in common and mutually share maintains and connects my empathy and my observations. No doubt, exploring and documenting the culture in these areas was important for me. Otherwise, why would I have approached these villages and homes with a zealous yearning and with such enthusiasm? It was without a doubt a great privilege to be the first to come to appreciate the existence of little known lifestyles in places folklorists and anthropologists had not previously had the chance to cast their eyes on. However:

This is not the sum total of its significance, at least not its ultimate and quintessential significance. For me, the process one must go through is much more appealing and pleasurable than the achievement of the objective: Why am I deeply interested in and inspired by a certain phenomenon or behavior? Where can I find clues about it? What methods can I use to trace it back to its origins? Whom can I learn about it from? What further questions may it raise, and what further forks in the road will it lead me to...?

Needless to say that these mysterious things were represented and expressed through cognitive and verbal means I long felt novel – almost all of my knowledge of Tibetan folk culture has been acquired through the Tibetan language. Full of expressive force, the Tibetan language is extraordinarily unusual and pleasing to the ear, with a modulation like craggy cliffs, and Tibetan speakers are, without exception, talkative, like streams of water gurgling without pause. Particularly when I conducted interviews, my thoughts would take flight,

and some single words I managed to catch would deviate from their original trajectory leading my thoughts to wander off in unrestrained imagination like a heavenly horse riding across the sky. A simple translation tip would make my mind comprehend it, extend the associations I had with it, and allow me to draw further inferences. In moments like that, I thought I had deliberately refused to gain mastery of this language.

Moreover, during this process I was granted the opportunity to meet people who had grown from the soil and, starting from an idea, came to take part in their daily lives for a time. There, the most mysterious things are the most clear, the most complicated things are the most simple, the most profane things are the most sacred, and the most unintentional things are those that are the most unforgettable. And in the end I entered into the most miraculous and mysterious transcendental world.

For a time I joined the Tibetan people, dancing and singing with them together in the same rhythms.

But penetration is not without its limits. Striding toward a big forest, we could only penetrate it halfway; for the other half of the way, we were too exhausted and “walked out”.

Chapter 1: Thragu's Sacrificial Practices throughout the Seasons

Starting from the Ancient Spring Plowing Ceremony in the Fields

Some villages near Lhasa City caught our eye in the autumn of 1992 when we traveled about the central agricultural areas of Tibet, trying really hard to look for villages where land worship rites are well preserved in farming practices for the television documentary series *Tibetan Culture*.² Thragu³ was one of them and our final choice. We stayed there for the better half of a year, filming them from the spring plowing to the autumn harvest and winter irrigation, only to find our preconceived intentions merely partly realized. In fact, the footage taken portrays a strikingly different story, such that we jokingly could be said to have harvested willow trees after intentionally planting flowers. Real life there is as solid as a rock; one can only authentically represent it rather than direct it according to one's wishful thinking. This leads to the empiric conclusion that rural life in Tibet is so varied that any single village is rich with profound significance, such that any random choice or casual drop-in would bring a wealth of discoveries. Of course, the precondition is one must stay there for a long time, ready to bear hardships and get integrated among the locals.

Our decision to film Thragu was not sparked by its uniqueness, but if anything, by its commonness. Lying on the outskirts of Lhasa City, the village is a couple of kilometers to the south of the Lhasa River, with the ridges at its back remaining visible only when seen from the edge of the city. After traveling across the river in a yak-hide boat, we had to turn into the col to the southeast to reach the village. Viewed from its northwest, the huge white monastic town, located in the western outskirts, looms up ahead – the world renowned Drepung Monastery, whose glow of enlightenment hangs over the village's spiritual life. The commonness of the village lies in its common conditions: as a tiny village with 48 households and a population of 300, its production capacity and standard of living rank second among the three villages in Neu Township, which is itself nothing but a medium-level township in Tölung Dechen County. In general, it is

its commonness that makes it representative of the countryside. The only special consideration was that it used to be the manor, or *zhika*, of Kündeling Monastery in Lhasa, which made its sacrificial activities more centralized and standard. In particular the spring plowing rites, which are seldom seen, have been able to be resumed here in recent years. Also, it is the hometown of Mr. Chöphel, one of my old friends.

Ever located within the depths of its valley, Thragu has been whiling away its days. Please listen as I take the time to talk about its people and affairs, its past and present.



The Spring Plowing Ceremony at Thragu Village



Villagers of Thragu carrying dippers of the five grains

It was decided that March 15 of 1992, the 11th of the first Tibetan lunar month in the Year of the Water Monkey,⁴ was the auspicious day to commence spring plowing in the village. The villagers also selected the auspicious route to the field and the site for rituals, as well as a pair consisting of a boy and a girl with the same zodiac sign.

It was a spring day, chilly yet sunny. Our film crew got to the village in the very early morning, filming how people were donning their festival best, and how they were dressing up their draft cattle, which had been idle throughout the winter, with red ribbons around their necks and a big, strikingly red flower on their foreheads. Then they bound two head of cattle together with a yoke attached to each other's collar, characteristic of Tibetan agricultural areas and known as a "yoke with two head of cattle for tilling". Quite a while passed before the elaborate procedure was done.

Then, as the sun rose, people went out to join each other, raising multicolored flags and arrows, carrying dippers of the five grains, and shouting orders to their animals. The smoke from the chimneys, having not yet completely dissipated, blended into the morning fog, which in this moment added to the joyous and lively atmosphere. All of the villagers, young and old, left their houses in a continuous procession toward the field near the *mani lhakhang*⁵ at the center of the village. *Balu*,⁶ an aromatic plant, was burnt for the ritual smoke. The animals, being yoked for the first time, were obviously not used to it and kept jumping and biting, so people immediately stuffed their mouths with *tsampa*⁷ and rubbed yak butter on their foreheads and horns, trying every means to calm them. The draft animal used in the agricultural areas of Tibet is called a "dzo", a cross between an ox and a yak. They look like something between their parents: taking after a yak but with shorter and thinner hair, especially on their hind legs and tails. For the sake of getting a shot with a special touch, we asked whether they would arrange for a large yak to lead the procession, but they immediately waved their hands and exclaimed "Oh, no! People in the neighboring villages would surely laugh at our poverty if they saw us using a yak as the leading farm animal, 'cause a dzo is twice as expensive, one dzo being worth two yaks."

Later Mr. Chöphel told us that a dzo was much dearer owing to its singular tameness and strength, just like what a mule is to its parents – the horse and the donkey.

People began to perform a ritual with a white stone named Ama Serdo (Mother Golden Rock) at the field's center. Some village women, walking around her in circles, kept adding wood and throwing *tsampa* into the ritual fire. Monks were chanting sutras by her side. Lined up respectively on either side of her were a row of men wearing gold embroidered hats and traditional, black Tibetan dress, holding daggers in their hands, and women dressed in brightly-colored blouses and skirts, standing hand in hand. Then, a mixture of unaccompanied male and female voices singing different tunes and lyrics with different rhythms and cadences was heard. This was the climax of the spring plowing ceremony, and it lasted for quite a while before reaching its conclusion.

The men sang a song of ancient warriors – *pé*, whose main verses are:

In the mountain, is there something or not? There is a snowy peak.
If there were no snowy peak, from where would water run down the slope;
If water had not collected in the lake, what would we use to water our crops?
...

Strapping men standing to the right, beautiful ladies standing to the left,
whether or not you can sing a *pé*, try and sing it as you may;
if you can sing, then sing along; if not, recite the six-syllable mantra.⁸

The women sang a *zhechen*, or dance song; the main lyrics are:

Where does the sun rise? In the east, the sun rises;
The world's waters and lands, the warm sunshine grants.
Where does the moon rise? From the mountaintop, the moon rises;
With sun and moon not there, there'd be light nowhere.
From where does the great roc fly? The great roc flies from on high;
Where hearts assemble of character high, the great roc is swooping by.

After some symbolic plowing and sowing during the ceremony, each household could begin planning their own farming activities the next day. I happened to pick up some verses of the song *Plowing Ballad*, one of which was:

Stop singing sad songs, dzo,
The *dzomo*'s⁹ borrowing grass from the plains for you.

And the other was:

Never thought Zangzang Lhamo would be a cheat,
Never tell the truth to that wife of three kids.

After the spring plowing and sowing fertilizer used to be transported in a boisterous and highly ritualized manner. This transportation of fertilizer continues but is no longer as boisterous. The main reason for this is that the villagers used to keep many donkeys for transportation because they had no horse-drawn carts, and they all labored for the owner of the manor. The donkeys were divided into groups of five and decorated with red ribbons, which was a site to behold. On the way, if the group behind overtook the one ahead people would start a good-humored dispute exchanging rounds of humorous arguments with sarcasm and ridicule, delighting in teasing each other. *Tsampa* and butter would be granted to the overtakers as a reward. Today with the land distributed among the households, they keep fewer donkeys and have even begun to use tractors to deliver the fertilizer. So the ritual is simplified by putting the white stone on top of the pile of fertilizer, which serves as a sacrificial offering, for the purpose of pleasing the earth goddess it represents.

Two folk religious rituals, Minor Deity Worship and Major Deity Worship, are still strictly practiced in Thragu, with the basic intention of praying for the autumn harvest. The deities worshiped may be the same or of the same category. The village's *yülha*, or deity of the local land, has the very long name Poche Yülha Karpo Tshalung Tenma Chunyi, containing the meanings "big" and "white". The Twelve Tenmas (Tenma Chunyi; Earth Mothers), are local guardian goddesses universally worshiped in Tibet. Moreover, the local *tsen* deities Barwa Pündün (seven outraged brothers) are also universally worshiped across Tibet. All villagers are assembled when the two rituals are held at Lhaten to the southeast, deep within valley, when all the spirits and deities are said to get together there. People linger at nine different sites, practicing *lhasang*,¹⁰ dancing, and chanting. These sites are said to be small areas separately controlled by local earth deities. Minor Deity Worship, which falls on the eighth day of the fourth Tibetan lunar month, shortly after the spring sowing, is meant to entrust the future harvest to the deities for safekeeping: "Dear deities, please do us the favor of guarding our crops and preventing disasters." Major Deity Worship is held shortly before the harvest on the eighth day of the seventh Tibetan lunar month to give thanks: "Dear Deities, we are going to withdraw the bumper harvest deposited here. We are so grateful to you for taking care of our crops!" They

also ask for permission to harvest; until then it is strictly forbidden to pick up the sickle and start reaping.

Apart from these, other rituals in Thragu include the Chökhör Festival and the Ongkor Festival. I found each festival to be characterized by the grand music and dance performances of *pé* and *zhechen* mentioned above, not knowing whether it had been like this since antiquity. I also found, in the music and dance procession, that the seniors performed very diligently while the youngsters either kept their heads in the clouds or simply could not sing. When asked why, the seniors would say, “Well, today’s youngsters...”

They hesitated to tell a long story.

The Farm Woman Tsöndrö Wangmo and Her Family

At the spring plowing ceremony, the lead singer in the female chorus, a white-haired old lady, soon attracted our attention. We invited her to come alone, and she entertained us with one song after another. We decided to interview and film her family. Thereupon, we came to her house and joined the family, sharing both their joys and worries. When the late autumn came and it was time for us to depart from Thragu, she said sentimentally, “We will remain good friends for as long as we live.”

Her name is Tsöndrö Wangmo, and she is a 78-year-old native of the village. Her eldest son, Tshering Chöphel, is married and lives at his father-in-law Po Wangdü’s place at the western end of the village. She and her second son lived at the eastern end of the village. When the second daughter-in-law moved in with them, they did not get along, so she got upset and moved to her elder in-law’s house.

“I suffer from arthritis and poor eyesight. I was a herdsman when I was young and something went wrong with my joints. Blood splashed into my eyes while I was slaughtering cattle, damaging them,” mumbled Po Wangdü, the father of her elder daughter-in-law, who is in his nineties, looks very old, and can hardly walk. He sits in the courtyard in the daytime, watching and doing some trivial chores like twisting yarn into ropes or flattening dung into pies. He is capable of knotting ropes into fine patterns. His room was full of hanging black and white thread reels and varied rope yokes. He is very concentrated when knotting ropes, as if that were the only thing in the world. Our interpreter Dedzin, asked him, “Grandpa, you’ve lived such a long life

and experienced many different eras; would you like to share some of your stories with us?”

The old man looked at us with his clouded eyes and proceeded to mumble:

“My family has been around for a very long time, urh...I have indeed experienced many different eras. At the age of 13, I went to Kham Prefecture (in Sichuan) with my master. At that time, no Tibetan money was accepted, only silver. I went to a pub with a cattle attendant. We drank from morning till night, urh...and it only cost us one piece of silver. We cut it with scissors. The cattle attendant was blind drunk and had to be carried back by four men. The next day he vomited blood and died. His liver was said to be damaged or something... At that time I was a herdsman of Kündeling, and I continued herding cattle after I came back. I was beaten, and jailed...thinking of life back then, few families could afford to eat *tsampa*, you know, and many were burdened with *ula* (corvée). Very often we had to beg for food or buy some *tormas*¹¹ (that had been offered to deities or Buddhas) so we had something to eat..., the place we used to live in was no better than a cattle shed, anyway, now we all live in new houses, and everyone leads a much happier life...”

Po Wangdü’s imposing power as a robust herdsman was only revealed when he got angry. We saw him get angry only once – with his grandson-in-law, Penpa.

Dekyi Drölkar, his only daughter and Tsöndrü Wangmo’s elder daughter-in-law, is a person of distinct character. She is a woman with a shrewd mind and is in charge of the family’s business and social interactions with the outside world. She goes to Lhasa in a yak-hide boat to sell peaches, apples, and other produce from her garden, visiting her eldest daughter Pasang Dekyi, who has married a bus driver in a village near the Norbu Lingka. She has often negotiated with our film crew for work delay subsidies. She is a person who is able to laugh off anything, strikingly different from her mother-in-law Tsöndrü Wangmo and her husband Tshering Chöphel.

She has two more children: her 15-year-old son Trashi, who dropped out of school because he is deaf and now herds sheep at home, and her 19-year-old second daughter, Dekyi Chödzhong, who is married woman and mother. We never saw this young mother smile; she kept frowning with irritation all the time. Later we found out that her irritation was a mask of her unease and distress.



Men carrying yak-hide boats on the shore of the Yarlung Tsangpo River



Yak-hide boats on the Yarlung Tsangpo River

Tshering Chöphel is the real head of the family despite having moved into his father-in-law Po Wangdü's house. "I'm the pillar of the fami-

ly,” he said with a smile. He showed us around his 2.8-acres of farmland. The main crop is winter wheat, with an annual production of 4200 kilograms. Following the township’s regulation, about 425 kilograms are sold to our country at market price; the rest they use themselves. He and his daughter take care of most of the farm work, asking their relatives and friends for help in the busy season. He does not expect anything of his son-in-law, Penpa, who was born into a herdsman’s family in Dechen, served in the army for several years, and knows little about farming. Tshering Chöphel also showed us around his water mill. There are a total of seven in the village, all of which were distributed among the families when farm output quotas were fixed for individual households. People usually come in autumn with a donkey to grind *tsampa*. Tshering Chöphel has to tend to this as well, and this earns the family an annual income of 300 to 400 RMB. Six years ago the government of Tölung Dechen County provided peach saplings to the farmers for free, so he fenced off a portion of his yard as an orchard, planting it with 40 saplings. Only a few years went by before the trees began to bear extremely tasty peaches as big as a fist. The family made more than 500 RMB with the peaches last year. There are also over ten apple trees, which produce sweet apples every year. In addition, they have 50 sheep, four cows, a dzo, a yak, and an ox. All this provides the family of seven with comfortable living conditions despite the heavy farm work.

46-year-old Tshering Chöphel is simple and honest, quiet, and good-humored. We have worked with him for a long time, and he has never given us a hard time. He is the very image of a good, traditional farmer. When asked whether anything else was on his mind, he answered, “I worry about nothing except that our parents are getting old. I am afraid that they will leave us....” When asked who would take over for him as head of the family, he replied after thinking for a moment, “I originally wanted to turn over the family affairs to my son-in-law Penpa, but now it seems that I have to turn them over to my son Trashi”.

Farming Ballads and the Ongkor Festival

On the 15th day of the fifth Tibetan lunar month, the day of the Chökhör Festival, we made another visit to Thragu but could not find Tsöndrü Wangmo in the *zhechen* procession. She had gone to

her daughter Pasang's place in the county seat. Her daughter is a primary school teacher and her son-in-law is the Director of Academic Affairs in the same school. The procession was grand. All of the people in the village came and assembled on a large yard at the center of the village, facing the white stone Ama Serdo. The people in the procession sang *pé* and *zbechen*. The lyrics were the same but not the clothes. Most of them wore casual clothes, plain Han-style or so-called western-style suit jackets. The men had their Tibetan coats wrapped around their waists.

A senior told us the stone, so white and bright, would bring them a bumper harvest if put in the field and keep evil and sickness at bay when hung on the door.

Some thirty monks at Drepung Monastery used to be invited by the manor for the Chökhör Festival. They would chant sutras and perform ceremonies, like reading aloud in unison a section from the *Kanjur* of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon and *Drolma Bum*, 100,000 recitations for Tārā. Now this was omitted, and only one lean monk from Drepung Monastery named Ngawang Khedrup, who had returned to the laity, was invited, and he sat mumbling by the *sangsöl* fire.

Despite his mother's absence, Tshering Chöphel participated in the parade, which proceeded clockwise around the village, assisting in carrying a heavy bundle of scriptures on his back. We stood on the heights and kept watch for a long time. The procession, led by resounding conch horns, carrying scriptures wrapped in yellow silk on their backs, and holding multicolored *dadar*¹² arrows in their hands, performed rituals at the altar of each earth deity, shouting praises to them with a rustling sound as the smoke from the incense wound in coils. Then the conch horns resounded again, and the procession slowly marched on. It takes great patience to take part in such festivals. I often linger on for days at such occasions as horse racing and have gotten used to it; however, impatience kept overwhelming me.

Po Wangdü said the implication of the festival is to call the "yang", a substance of good fortune, back from the highland barley fields.

We revisited the village the next day and spotted coils of white smoke rising above the valley. We quickly asked the reason why, and the villagers replied it was the 16th day of the fifth Tibetan lunar

month, a day when they light fires at a hundred locations throughout the entire village making *sangsöl* offerings to the deities.

Only then did I realize that they grew winter wheat instead of the traditional highland barley.¹³ I once again asked the reason why, and they said since Thragu Village was high up the hillside the village suffered from a shortage of water, which had resulted in some of the land going to waste. Going from the township hall to Thragu Village, one passes through a huge, sterile sandy moraine. Due to its drought tolerance and high yield, winter wheat has been their major crop for many years.

The Chökhör Festival usually falls during the flowering and filling period of barley and wheat. A few miles out, the lower-altitude region around Neu, where the township hall is located, is already bathed in an ocean of luxuriant green, whereas the wheat here is still short and delicate. Thus one may deduce that this mountain village is not located on fertile land.

Tsöndrü Wangmo was already back and herding cattle when we returned to the village to stay for a couple of days. Dedzin and I crossed the dried river beds, climbed halfway up the mountain, and looked around but only found Trashi feeding sheep with some youths. We shouted, asking him where his grandma was. The young shepherd pointed up to the herd of cattle at the top of the mountain. Not long after, a figure walked briskly down from above.

We sat down on a big boulder and began to chat. By convention, our interview would start with inquiries about the local legends. Take the Mountain of the Six Symbols of Longevity in front of the village, for example. When covered with snow, it presents the image of the six long-lived animals. We asked, “What animals are they? Could you precisely tell us the names and stories of the local guardian deities?” To our surprise, Tsöndrü Wangmo replied with a grin that she would neither listen to nor tell such mystical myths or legends. “Then how about telling us something factual?”

“Alright. I was born here. My grandfather lived to be 100. Once he was taken to Lhasa by Trashi Rinpoché from Kündeling for a Buddhist ritual. People in Lhasa said Kündeling’s assets amounted nearly to those of the Tibetan government, how could there be such a wealthy-looking old man there, whose beard was so white and long! We villagers were originally *threlpas* (tenant farmers) of Kün-

deling, and each household used to send four members of the family to the manor every day, three to do *ula* and one to bring food for the other three. Even when there was no *tsampa* to eat, we had to take care of the problem ourselves; the manor would not provide even a single drop of water. Back then my family collected dung across the mountainside to sell it in Lhasa for some *tsampa* or *tor-mas*.”

Tsöndrū Wangmo opened a small plastic pitcher, poured tea into the lid and invited us to drink, which we did not oblige. She then casually answered our informal questions as she was having tea and *tsampa*. She told us many stories of affairs past and present, domestic affairs, and affairs regarding the younger generation, in a carelessly detached manner. There are only a few people from her generation in the village. The young seldom talk to the old. The roles on the stage of life have switched in Thragu, such that the long-lived have come to be outsiders.

Suddenly it began to rain. We barely found shelter under a cliff. Being used to the changeable weather, Tsöndrū Wangmo never brought any rain gear with her.

The cheerful Tsöndrū Wangmo must have experienced many things when she was young. Mr. Liao Dongfan got to know her about three decades ago. She was very active in the village, enjoyed telling up-to-date stories like those of Norman Bethune, and was quite willing to accept new ideas. Now she was getting old and lived quietly in her own world. She would prostrate herself and chant sutras in her small shrine room in the early morning and spin prayer wheels at the village's *mani lhakhang* in her spare time. The day before the Ongkor Festival, we met her in the field in front of the *mani lhakhang* and got to record some of her work ballads.

Reaping ballad I:

Show me the roots of the wheat, please...

Reaping ballad II:

At the autumn harvest time,
let me be a herdswoman;

After the harvest time,
let me be a farmwoman again

Reaping ballad III (One sings the lead; the rest join in the chorus):

The toil matters nothing,
if you take the good with the bad;
Something worse fortune could tell,
if you ponder it carefully in your head.

A threshing ballad –

Winds from the ocean depths please blow,
to separate the chaff from the wheat we throw

She proceeded, “We used to have much better drinking songs than we do now. If liquor’s available, I could sing quite a few. Let me sing one for you.” –

The *panggyen metok*¹⁴ bloom on a summer day;
people gather together – cheerful and gay,
enjoying the fresh beer’s fragrance this day.
Ah, in *panggyen metok* we dance and sing ...

We played her the recorded ballads, and the elderly lady was delighted. Her eyebrows perked up, the wrinkles covering her face deepened, and she said with great contentment, “As an old saying goes, “A lifetime of happiness is happiness, but a moment of happiness is happiness too.” We should cherish the joy in our lives to the full, even if that joy should last just one hour; it is a gift from the deities and Bud-dhas, and it makes us who we are.”

Tsöndrü Wangmo always twined her long and thin gray braid round her black head cloth. One day she sat leaning against an embankment between the fields, somewhat inebriated, and pleaded with us like a little girl, saying, “Can you please take me to Lhasa? I can make tea for you. I don’t need money, just something to eat and something to wear. My children are all grown up. I have nothing left to worry about.... You probably don’t want to take me with you, do you?”

The Ongkor Festival is the second biggest festival after Tibetan New Year in the agricultural areas of Tibet. This was particularly true in Thrangu in the past, since it used to belong to a manor. At that time under the organization of the manor, a young boy and girl, aged 15-18, with the same zodiac sign, would be selected and dressed in ancient costumes as hero and heroine. Two men were selected to be dressed in white gowns, carry long knives, and raise banners, and there was an honor guard with eight valiant horses. All the villagers got together and pitched tents in the upper *lingka*, racing horses, shooting arrows, and celebrating through the night

with singing and dancing. Along with the retrieval of the bumper harvest and giving thanks to the deities at Major Deity Worship, the festivities lasted a total of seven days. In Thragu the canonical ritual was broken off for years. Recently, the elders have recommended resuming it, but the township government does not seem to approve, stating that the whole township and not just a single village should celebrate together. They also said that making new props like the elaborate costumes would be very expensive. In addition, not all the villagers are in favor of this, especially the young, who remain indifferent to traditions.

Therefore, the spirit of this year's Ongkor Festival in Thragu was somewhat dampened. On the date determined by the three villages in Neu Township for the collective celebration of the festival, the riders would first circle the fields at their own villages on horseback, and then in the afternoon, they would assemble at the seat of the township for horse racing and archery. However, there was not a single horse left in Thragu. There used to be horses in Thragu during the "People's Commune" period, and these were distributed among individual families when farm output quotas were fixed for individual households. With mechanization, however, the families no longer had any use for the horses, and they were all sold off, so now the villagers had to rent three horses for 70 RMB from the distant village of Namsé. In the early morning someone from Namsé brought the horses over in a truck. It took the Thragu villagers a good two hours to dress up the three horses. Adult villagers including Tshering Chöphel helped dress up first the horses and then the riders at the home of Thupten Tshering, an elementary school teacher and one of the three riders that were respectively elected by the three villages. They were dressed up as ancient riders in gleaming yellow and purple satin gowns and warrior's hats with bright red tassels. Many hands were seen working on the three brownish red and grayish white horses. The horses' manes were combed to the right into many thin braids, which were tied at the end with silk ribbons of all colors. Their tails were first tightly wrapped with red silk and then covered with a long strip-shaped decoration sewed from five-colored cloth. The saddle pads were made of brand-new brightly colored woolens. Both horses and people were most elaborately and gorgeously decorated.

The three riders sprang onto their horses and vanished from sight before Sun Liang, our cameraman, was ready to film. The banners they held up only became visible in a far off wheat field after quite some time. We asked whether they could perform again so we could get a better shot of them. They said they were afraid it might exhaust the horses, so Sun Liang had to bring his work to a rough denouement, and the Ongkor Festival in Thragu drew to a close.

We drove to the seat of the township in the afternoon and took Tsöndrü Wangmo with us. All her other family members went there except Po Wangdü, who stayed to look after the house. Common folks are always fond of such festivals, fond of horse racing and archery, while visitors from the city find it very hard to endure the rather slow pace of the games and the long exposure to the burning sun.

Thragu villagers, freshly dressed, emptied their village for the games. The 5 or 6-year-old twin boys, whose father Pasang Tshering ran a small business at Lhasa, put on a grand air in their fashionable denim overalls. Their little faces, which were dirty and looked like ink and wash paintings the other day when I met them, were amazingly spotless. Their grandma had explained: “The kids had syrup smeared across their faces, which the kitten came and licked. That’s how they got like that.” Seeing we were amused, she added, “You know, kids often sleep together with dogs.”

On the day of the Ongkor Festival, many people came back to Thragu from Lhasa to spend the day with their families. Only Penpa, Tshering Chöphel’s son-in-law, was an exception, more than an exception, because he had not sent a message back for about three months. They said they had not seen him in Lhasa – they may in fact have known, but would not tell us.

Young City Riders Leaving Home Ballads Behind

No business was ever run in Thragu until the early eighties when some youngsters started becoming involved in business, which is said to have been triggered by the following circumstance: At that time many Han Chinese cadres were transferred back to the Chinese interior and suddenly had a large quantity of used furniture and stuff to get rid of, so they set up a second-hand market, which attracted a bunch of farmers, who were then employed at that market. Thanks to its location, Neu Township jumped to action first, purchasing and reselling such

goods, and this was said to have later developed into a formal organization and network. Of course, their business involves other things, like auto parts and groceries. They would deal in whatever made money. In the entire township there are more than eighty people engaged in this occupation, some with a license and some without.

Dozens of young people engaged in business would leave home early and return late every day. When the sun had barely risen above the eastern mountains, a flock of them would pour out of the village on bicycles riding to the Lhasa River and getting on board the yak-hide boat, whose capacity was ten to twenty people. The round trip fair was 0.60 RMB per person and a mere 1 RMB for a person with a bicycle. After crossing the river, they rode bicycles to Barkhor Street. Neu Township's sphere of influence has already been established there and encompasses an alley in the area around Tshemönlung on Beijing East Road (north of Barkhor Street). There are more than twenty people from Thragu Village among them. We once followed them and filmed there, getting some shots of tire dealers, but failed to find out the details on the source of their goods and their earnings. All we could learn was what they would reveal to us; we knew better than to intrude on their business secrets. In general, a man's income was recorded at 10 RMB per day and a woman's at 5 RMB when annual income statistics for the entire township were compiled at the end of a year. Obviously, these were conservative figures. Anyhow, they amounted to a respectable income in contrast to the annual per capita income of 500 RMB for the township as a whole.

One day at lunchtime, we filmed them eating Chinese fast food in a restaurant on Barkhor Street. Then we followed them to an entertainment center and watched Lhakpa Tshering, another of the Ongkor Festival horse riders, play a smart game of billiards. They dressed like city people, and they seemed to feel that they were city people.

Most Tibetans, except the Khampa from eastern Tibet and western Sichuan, where business is prevalent, are still biased against business. Decent and kind peasants like Tshering Chöphel who pride themselves on earning money through hard labor believe that business people other than those engaged in state-run businesses are opportunistic, always trying to get the better of one another. He is not alone in this judgment; the villagers of Thragu do not welcome most

of those Khampa peddlers who occasionally come to purchase used porcelain and *khadens*.¹⁵ However, some people, in particular the younger generation, have left the countryside to do business, expanding their horizons, accumulating wealth, building new houses, and clothing their families respectably. What is more, it does not go against the national policies. Such is the case that the older generation in the village has hesitatingly begun to change its attitude toward doing business and at least does not consider business to be evil. Thus Tshering Chöphel approved of his son-in-law following the flow of migrants seeking fortune in Lhasa.

But what do these newly arising phenomena mean for the old traditions of Thragu?

Our shoot at the Ongkor Festival proved discouraging. We came to realize that their seasonal sacrificial practices not only began with a tiger's head and ended up with a snake's tail – starting of with a bang and ending with a whimper – but that they could barely be carried on. After Major Deity Worship, we proceeded to film Tshering Chöphel's family reaping grain. But it was a shame that his wife, daughter, and the girls who had come to help out were either too shy or unable to sing. Sensing our frustration, he sang a reaping song to console us:

We reap from here straight to Nyangtö Zhung.

Oh magistrates of Nyangtö, it is high time for reaping.

Gone are all the traditional ceremonies involved in reaping, transportation, and threshing, which were so touching, and full of human sentiment and a touch of the dramatic. At present, only a rough account related by Mr. Chöphel, the great intellectual who was born in Thragu, can tell us a thing or two about the former real-life drama performed in the fields each year, in which lay many simple aspirations. Mr. Liao Dongfan, a folklorist, learned of all this many years before I did and published the account in his *Record of the Customs of Tibet, the Land of Snows*,¹⁶ so I might as well borrow some of the folk songs and chants given in the work and provide them here:

On the day of the ceremony for the start of the harvest, people go to the fields in their festival best, taking special care to wear new shoes and shirts. They begin with a sacrifice to the white stone Ama Serdo at the center of the field, which has guarded the crops from spring to summer. They sprinkle highland barley beer¹⁷ and *tsampa* powder next to the sacred stone and light a fire for *sangsöl*. Then a revered

elderly farmer who is articulate is selected from among the villagers to chant to the stone:

“Ama Serdo, please help yourself to this food; oh Mother Golden Rock, please help yourself! We will start harvesting today. Please tell the spirits and creatures in the soil of the highland barley fields to hide their heads if they have heads, and retract their feet if they have feet, for we are coming with iron tools in our right hands and the five fingers of our left hands outstretched; if their heads hit our blades or their feet are chopped off and they end up with wounds as big as yaks, it will not be our concern.”

Then he turned to the field chanting, “Oh field, we can hardly wait even though you surely can. In spring and summer we fed you well and gave you plenty to drink; we will give you even more to eat and drink in the future, bringing you water and fertilizer as diligently as one attends to an elderly gentleman bringing him tea and highland barley beer! Today we will reap the barley as thoroughly as a drinkers drinks alcohol, as fiercely as hounds hunt their prey, as greedily as those who love drinking white beverages drink yoghurt, and as desperately as those who love drinking red beverages drink the blood of cattle! Like blue sheep springing over a cliff-top; like black cats jumping across a gully; like white horses galloping over the shoals...”

Having finished chanting, the elderly farmer took out the sickle which hung at his waist and reaped a bundle of barley from three directions, gleaned the grains from the stalks with his fingers and scattering them toward the sky, the earth, and the rivers, thus making sacrifices to the deities of the three realms and proclaiming to them that the harvest had begun.

Harvest season is of course the toughest time of the year for farmers, which is why the lyrics of the reaping songs the villagers of Thragu sing express the desire to be a leisurely shepherdess and even mention worse states of affairs as a means of consolation.

This is the humor born of helplessness. It is after all harvest season; a sentiment of joy and gratitude permeates the fields, which far exceeds the farmers’ physical exhaustion. One leads the singing, and the rest join in chorus –

We’ve made it. We’ve made it.
From the wide-mouthed sky, we got the harvest
From narrow-mouthed folks, we got the harvest
From underneath the cold frost, we got the harvest

From underneath the hail stones, we got the harvest...

The days the fields are gleaned are also a set time for people to practice the circle-dance *gorzhé*, which the old have passed down and taught the young. A game is played while the grain is being reaped and fields gleaned: whoever happens to find a cow horn has the privilege of being allowed to hit anybody else on the head with it. So the whole field would suddenly burst into raucous laughter. This actually relates to an allusion: Tibetans tend to call those who are stingy and irascible “cow horns”.

The joy of the harvest is really intoxicating, and people simply pretend to be dead drunk. The ceremony of transporting the grain to the threshing floor is even more of an exhibition. People bind the barley straw into the figure of a person – this straw person symbolizes the same deity as the white stone, which has transformed from the Earth Mother into the Goddess of the Harvest. Pretending to be dead drunk, the men squat down wanting to lift her on their backs but pretend they cannot lift her due to her weight.

Thereupon, someone next to them would take the role of the goddess and lecture them:

In summer I sleep in the rain-soaked earth,
In winter I sleep in the snow-covered ground,
How else would your grain provide such a yield,
Or have you ignored all my work in the field?

Of course, this is met with a resounding reply from the fields of

“Thanks, many thanks!” and “Sorry, very sorry!”

Only then does the straw mother reluctantly agree to be hoisted on their backs and carried to the threshing floor. She is wrapped in colorful silk and respectfully removed to the granary for further worship when the threshing is done.

Neglect of traditions is not the sole reason for today’s inactivity at the threshing ground. What also played a part in this is the disappearance of another tradition – the trading of grain for salt between farmers and herdsmen. In the past herdsmen used to come in droves from northern Tibet at harvest time accompanied by large herds of yaks carrying the salt they got from the no man’s land in the north. By convention, the herdsmen drove their herd of yaks on to the threshing ground, which was covered with ears of grain, trampling it. When the straw had been turned over twice, the host family would

take out their auspicious dipper of the five grains, coating the yaks' horns with butter, feeding the yaks with barley, and offering them alcohol. The herdsman would proceed to make the yaks respectively circle the ground clockwise and counterclockwise three times each. Then the yaks had fulfilled their duty, and they were led out.

The strongest yak was the last one to be led out, and it had to be allowed to deposit a blob of dung on the threshing ground. The dung was called "yangjor" and was an auspicious object containing a concentration of the lucky substance *yang*.

The traditional trading of grain for salt has become scarce in these past years, and while it is possible that traces of the custom remain in some remote areas, it is no longer seen in this agricultural region. Engaging in the two-way choice of the past, in which both parties satisfied their needs, is now no longer necessary. We can still see the refreshing spectacle of yaks threshing grain by trampling it, but without the grand, fervent ceremony and its related connotations.

Winnowing songs are equally anthropomorphized and touching, and nearly all of them are related to the wind. For instance, "Winds from the ocean depths please blow, to separate the chaff from the wheat we throw", or "Dear wind, where are you from? Did you receive boundless and generous hospitality along the way?", or "wind from the left, wind from the right, wind from all directions..." Here is another one:

If prayer flags don't blow in the wind, don't go
because that wind cannot help us winnow
The wind that can separate chaff from grain
is the breeze that shakes branches on the plain.

The beautiful songs have gone away, fading in the mountain thickets along the southern bank of the Lhasa River. They have only been passed down to Tsöndrü Wangmo's generation. What a shame! Together with the elders of Thragu Village, I lament the disappearance of this tradition. Hopefully, our written records can be preserved for future generations, like the myths and legends of high antiquity, like the *Daya*, *Xiaoya*,¹⁸ and *Yuefu*.¹⁹

Looking for the Goddess of the Earth: A Myth That Has Vanished

One day in late autumn, we were hiking up hill along Thragu valley on the way to some herdsmen's households to interview them, when I discovered a stone flake tool made of plain black gravel with a noticeable flat surface and distinct grooves radiating outward. Later, some experts for stone tools identified it as being a relatively typical stone scraper, saying news could be released that a Stone Age site had been discovered in Thragu Village on the southern bank of the Lhasa River.

A Neolithic site, the Chökung site, had been discovered on the northern bank of the river. Scientific investigation confirmed that the Lhasa River Valley was in the Agricultural Age at least 4000 years ago and was already entering the Bronze Age. Are they all that remains of that age, I wonder, the dry riverbed above Thragu Village, the barren basin, and this stone implement?

Then what about the worship of Mother Golden Rock, who is known as Ama Serdo or Lumo Karmo? What about those sacrificial rituals in the fields that never grow old, which follow the farming activities and the life cycle of the barley throughout the four seasons? What about the scenarios, atmosphere, and charm, which are just like those which embellish Qu Yuan's *Jiuge*?²⁰ Did they once grow along with the ancient artifacts that have been unearthed?

Almost all the sacrificial rituals in the fields revolve around the white stone. Its common name is Mother Golden Rock, while its formal name is Lumo Karmo – aged female dragon. This is a female earth deity who governs water and earth, and it seems she must have had her origins in the era of primitive religion. Anyhow, her deeds are too indistinct to research, and her image has been abstracted into a stone. She is a guardian deity of crops, but if the sacrifices offered to her are not satisfactory she causes crop failure. This is a common characteristic of all rural deities in Tibet. Thus rural deities are always feared more than they are respected. However, it seems to me Lumo Karmo enjoys affection as well.

We learned from Mr. Chöphel that these aged goddesses belong to the system of underground deities governed by the Dragon Lady Meldro Zichen. Deities known as *lu* in Tibetan are usually transcribed in Chinese with the word *long*, meaning “dragon”, as these

are similar in sound and meaning. As underground or water deities, they are commonly represented with the image of a snake or frog. In addition, with the Sea Dragon King,²¹ which was introduced from Buddhism, the distinction between “dragon” and “snake” later became unclear. Therefore, despite the Tibetan deity Meldro Zichen being a snake lady, she is also called Dragon Lady, or Dragon Queen.

I have wondered for a long time who the Earth Mother, the deities of agriculture, fertility, and the harvest were during the childhood of humankind in the age-old agricultural civilization in the Lhasa River Valley. Is Lumo Karmo/Meldro Zichen a trace left from that family of deities? Could ancient Tibetan mythology, mythical creatures, or the origins of myths be found by tracing this faint lead back in time? Could we, from age-washed and weathered relics, reconstruct the image of a mythical figure with a human head and a snake’s body, say, like the ancient Greek goddess Gaia or the Mexican Goddess of Grain?

The cosmological concept of a tripartite world is deeply rooted in the primitive beliefs of the Tibetan lands and the ancient Bön religion continuing all the way down to modern folk beliefs. The rulers of the three realms are as follows: those above are *nyen*, those in the middle are *tsen*, and those below are dragons. The “meldro” in Meldro Zichen is the name of a place while “zichen” means great and resplendent, suggesting that her radiance illuminates the world. According to an ancient sacred book, Meldro Zichen is the master of Tibetan treasures and ranks first among the eight classes of supernatural beings²² that live north of the world.

Meldro Zichen’s homeland is said to be located in the gorge deep in the mountains of Meldro Gungkar east of Lhasa, and Zichen Langtsho, which is surrounded by that group of mountains, is her sacred lake. Many folktales are still heard about her there, as well as people’s claims to have encountered her. However, generally speaking, an encounter with her is not a good omen for a man. Such a man would develop a skin disease known as “dragon skin” as an answer for his improper erotic thoughts. On the contrary, a woman would become beautiful after such an encounter. So when Tibetans praise a girl as being pretty, they will say she looks just like the Dragon Lady.

Another version of her tale tells the opposite, saying the goddess prefers men, and therefore a woman who encounters her will get a skin disease or pink eye.

Departing from Thrugu, we proceeded eastward in search of the Dragon Lady Meldro Zichen. A long journey across mountains and valleys finally brought us to her home of Zichen Langtsho (also called Meldro Tshochen; *tshochen* means “big lake”). It was drizzling lightly that summer day when we stood at a woody peak with an altitude exceeding 4500 meters, overlooking the lake veiled in misty rain and fog, looking forward to a miracle, but in vain. Our two guides, the mayor of Ruthok Township, Dawa Tshering, and a local senior, Portok, chattered, explaining some things unrelated to our purport. It is said that on every 15th of the fourth Tibetan month, monks sent by the old Tibetan government held a majestic ceremony here to make a sacrifice to the lake. They would perform *lhasang*, chant sutras, and throw a vase filled with treasures into the lake, praying for favorable weather throughout the year. Later, upon each reincarnation and enthronement of a Dalai Lama, he would come and honor the lake, and the remains of the Dalai Lama’s throne may be seen by the lake to this day. The guides also cited an important encounter in history of Meldro Zichen, namely that of her conflict and friendship with the eminent monk Padmasambhava and the Tibetan King Thrisong Detsen, saying that their friendship not only ensured world peace but also enabled her to spit gold and decorate the stupas and the statues of Samyé Monastery. They also told us a surreal story we had not heard of before – Meldro Zichen’s daughter Miss Zichen happened to be the mother of the Tibetan hero King Gesar! The guides also said last winter they saw a huge block of ice flowing out of the lake at Trashigang and into the Lhasa River. This was interpreted as being the yak butter Meldro Zichen presented to Śākyamuni at Jokhang Monastery in Lhasa.

When it came to Meldro Zichen’s original appearance and deeds, the two fellow natives of Meldro Zichen’s hometown replied they had no idea but said, “There’s a statue of her at Ruthok Monastery. Go and take a look at it. It’s beautiful.”

After we had traveled another long distance climbing high mountains and braving the heavy rain, we managed to reach the Hall of the Dragon King at Ruthok Monastery. In this “lukhang” of

rather modest proportions, a statue of a man stands at the center with one of a woman by its side. They are both colored statues, with seven snakes twisting from their necks to their heads. The monastery's manager, old Mr. Yangga, told us that the male one is the authentic (Buddhist) Dragon King. Here Meldro Zichen has been pushed back to a subordinate position and is called "Lumo", or Dragon Lady. This exotic deity, the Dragon King, was created by the Buddha through the illusory transformation of the power of his vows and resides in the central sea of the world. The manager repeatedly emphasized that they were different in that the former is a "lha" – a deity while the latter is a "lu" – a kind of spirit.

This system of underground deities flourished in the form of the "Dragon" clan in ancient times. According to recorded Tibetan history, the *tsempo*²³ of Tubo took a woman from the dragon clan as his wife up until the generation of Songtsen Gampo's grandfather. As indigenous deities of Tibet the "Dragon" clan went into decline with the introduction of Buddhism and its growing influence, and no historical record may be found of a marriage between the royal family and the dragon clan since then. Only in a folktale edited by modern scholars is there a depiction of a drippingly sentimental love story between the Dragon Lady Meldro Zichen and the Tibetan king Thrisong Detsen, similar in plot to *Legend of the White Snake*²⁴ – due to her snake identity, their love affair was prevented by ministers of the court. That is the only romance we were able to find involving Meldro Zichen. Common folks say that *lu* are long-lived and that all of them are *lumo karmo* – aged female dragons.

The further down the timeline the search for this deity progresses, the less poetic its descriptions become, till it eventually fades away in the boundless ocean of Tibetan Buddhism.

At the back of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, there is Dragon King Pond, in which lies the Dragon King Chamber, whose Tibetan name is "Lukhang". Legend has it that when the Potala Palace was being built, the Dragon King, who was in charge of the soil there, did not allow it to be removed until the 5th Dalai Lama promised to build him a hall as compensation. Another version of the story says the chamber was built by the 6th Dalai Lama to welcome a group of eight dragons headed by Meldro Zichen. However, this

hall is still primarily dedicated to the male Dragon King; Meldro Zichen is relegated to the second position.

After repeatedly hearing that there was a standard portrait of Meldro Zichen painted on the wall in Katshel Monastery in Meldro Gungkar County, we rushed our way to the monastery and asked a young monk to show it to us. When we first saw this wall painting we were utterly shocked! To our astonishment, Meldro Zichen was portrayed as a male warrior with a golden halberd, a horse covered in iron, banners, and armor, accompanied by two lithe and graceful noblewomen dressed in fluttering gowns who stood behind him. We were distinctly told by the young monk that this was indeed Meldro Zichen and that the two women were his wives. Since when had the goddess changed genders? The young monk was unable to dispel our doubts.

After many days of investigating the matter in numerous ways, the *trülku*²⁵ of Katshel Monastery did give us a clear answer. That was Meldro Zichen's martial incarnation, which rides a horse; the deity's civil incarnation is female and rides an elephant.

Versions of Meldro Zichen's tale are told everywhere in central Tibet from Meldro Gungkar to Lhasa, but have yet to be found in written documents and oral literature in areas beyond this region, such as the east, south, and west of Tibet, much less in the northern Tibetan pasturelands where agricultural water deities are not worshiped. In Gungkar there is a tale of Meldro Zichen that is close to the archetype. Once she changed into a big fish and swam down river but carelessly went the wrong way and swam straight to Lhalung Ravine, where she got stuck under the water mill of a family by the name of Kyinak Chökhör. When the father of the family Kyinak caught the giant fish, it said, "If you spare my life, I can offer you whatever you want." "I want nothing but a continuous supply of highland barley beer," replied the father. Instantly, the fish conjured up a big sealed ceramic jar, telling him, "Highland barley beer will flow on its own if you release its spout, but in no case should you break its seal open." The father promised to do so and released the fish back to river. Sure enough the supply of highland barley beer was never interrupted. There is a saying: As Kyinak Chökhör grows old but does not die, so is a jar of beer drunk but never drained.

The highland barley beer kept flowing without interruption, which made the missus curious, and so she stealthily uncovered the jar. “Oh, my, a jar full of fish, frogs and tadpoles!” she cried.

...

In Drigung Thil Monastery a story spread by the monks, in which Meldro Zichen is the benefactor of the Drigung Kagyü, is more popular. It is said that when Thil Monastery was starting to be built no water source could be found on the mountain, but after Meldro Zichen learned of this, she made 108 springs come forth on the mountain. Monks say with pride, “Water is plentiful wherever Drigung Kagyü monasteries are located.” Similar to that of the Dragon King, the portrait of the Great Master Lodrö,²⁶ one of the patriarchs of the Kagyü school, includes seven snakes extending along his neck, depicting the time when the patriarch was giving a Buddhist sermon in the summer in the Land of the Dragons, and the Dragon King used snakes to form a parasol to provide him shade.

As an indigenous goddess, Meldro Zichen’s fate was the same as that of her native brothers and sisters: After losing the advantage in the competition with Buddhism, she was subdued by the Great Master Padmasambhava, completely transformed by Buddhism within and without, and lost her original countenance and pure spirit. Anyway, forever gone is her ancient form. The surpassing latecomer Buddhism has flooded the land like an overwhelming deluge for ages. How could the indigenous creatures of old not absorb its water and nutrients and thus become so foreignized that their countenance was completely transformed? As all rivers lead to the sea, all forms of ancient Tibetan culture end up striding into the sea of Tibetan Buddhism. All we can do is gaze at the ocean and sigh.

Thus in the end the intriguing search for an ancient tale and a beautiful image we learned of at Thragu Village turned into a not quite so splendid revelation of the layers of accumulated culture and an exploration following the path spirituality took in the Tibetan lands as revealed by the origin and evolution of this image. I even came up with a graphic representation of this evolution, which is presented below:

Meldro Zichen, with the head of a human and the body of a snake, (possibly) the Earth Mother presiding over favorable weather and a bumper harvest, fertility and growth	
In folk belief: still in charge of the land and wealth as the Goddess of Agriculture and the Harvest. Image: a white stone	In religious circles: has become the benefactor and Dharmapāla ²⁷ of a religious sect; appearing in two forms being either martial or civil, wrathful or peaceful. Image: a male or female

Of course, this outcome has long since deviated from my initial intention and gone beyond the scope of what concerns me. What still fascinates me is the initial purity. It would be better for us to appreciate those poised and beautiful spirits with a human head and a snake's body in the early religious frescos and listen to the song sung while circling the white rock Ama Serdo in the fields:

Dear Madame Dragon on the land,
Our treasure and fortune guardian,
Don't lie here all alone,
Join us on the threshing ground!

Entering into Everyday Life in Thragu

The seasonal sacrifices at Thragu Village can hardly be continued; the original form of the deity Meldro Zichen has faded away, and the subsequent shift in traditional customs, which may be seen and heard everywhere, made me, a passionate advocate for the restoration of classical culture, repeatedly get frustrated in spite of myself. As time went on, the area we had visited grew vast, and we had penetrated the matter more deeply; we had no choice but to keep revising our filming intentions, adjusting our train of thought and seeking new clues. Take Thragu, for example. Our ultimate desire became accurately depicting "the day to day life of its ordinary people". At the same time, we became fully aware of the fact that we should stop deliberately searching for something that is universal and representative, and that Thragu is just Thragu, its ordinary people are just the ordinary people of Thragu, and their day to day lives are just the day to day lives of the ordinary people of Thragu.

We thus entered in among the minutiae of everyday life in Thragu, amidst the crowing of this small mountain village's roosters and the barking of its dogs, experiencing and observing life and living there.

Our accommodation there was Thragu's former schoolhouse, which was left empty after the new one was built. The new school is located at the center of the village, a large decent courtyard. It was built by collecting funds: 8,000 RMB were given by the Neu Township task force of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) Education Committee, and 2,000 RMB came from the Bureau of Culture and Education of Tölung Dechen County. The village provided no money but did provide human and material resources – 10 stones per person, and logs and labor as well. There is only a row of flat-roofed houses and a spacious playground. The school has 30 pupils in three grades and only one teacher, named Thupten Tshering, who was one of the three riders at the Ongkor Festival. He is a quiet 21-year-old man, who graduated from Tölung Dechen County Middle School and was one of Mr. Chöphel's former pupils. He writes words in Tibetan script with chalk on a large blackboard, and the pupils follow along on small blackboards with bamboo pens. The young teacher will go to his pupils from time to time, holding their dirty little hands and patiently showing them how to make the strokes. After he has finished giving lessons and assignments to one class, he will go to another of his classes in the next room. Mr. Chöphel was the first teacher of this school. One of his students, Tsöndrü Wangmo's daughter Pasang, succeeded him. Now Mr. Chöphel has become the principal of the county seat's middle school, and Pasang is a teacher in the county elementary school, so it may be said that former pupils of this village school can be found everywhere.

All the 30 pupils rushed out of their classroom crowding noisily around us while we were interviewing Thupten Tshering. The teacher had to quiet them down with exaggerated strictness. Behind the crowd of children stood two teenage girls, neatly dressed, wearing bows in their hair. It turned out they were students of the county middle school, who had graduated from here and come back home for the weekend. I came to think that this manner of being neat and at ease was a function of culture and that the ravine had assumed a new image different from that of the older generation.

Not until recently did electric lighting become available in Thragu. Previously, a reservoir had been set up on the high slope above the village and a power station built with funds provided from the township, but later the station broke down. People were saying, "We're so

close to Lhasa, and yet we're still living in darkness." This view was related to the county authorities, and so they negotiated with the village authorities, and both parties agreed to pay half, so the station could be rebuilt. The sum amounted to 25 RMB per capita, in addition to which 70,000 RMB were loaned from the National Bank. Now everything is fine; every household has electric lighting. If people want to get up a little earlier or go to bed a little later, or listen to the radio whenever they want, they can. But the township government said, worried about the villagers, "Things may be fine now, but how and when are they going to be able to pay off the large loan?"

Four households in the village bought TV sets all at once, but they apparently rejoiced too soon: they could not get any reception. Lhasa is so close by, but who on earth made the ravine bend in a curve? Consequently we were pressed again and again as to how to make the TV sets get reception. Not very far down into the valley, another village, where the Neu Township Hall is located, has access to China Central Television (CCTV) and the Tibetan language channel Tibetan TV. Youngsters may frequently be seen traveling in the evening between Thragu and Neu when series, say, *Journey to the West*, are broadcast on Tibetan TV.

There seem to have been some households of herdsmen throughout the history of Thragu Village, whose livelihood depended on relatively stable trade with the farming households. These herdsmen's settlement is located on a hillside above the farmland of Thragu Village, where crops do not grow. Their summer pasture is somewhere far beyond the mountains. Due to their different mode of production and way of life, they wander outside the community of the farming village and seem to us not to be villagers of Thragu.

One day after the autumn harvest, accompanied by Mr. Chöphel and his brother, Tsheten Dorjé, a local farmer, we went to interview the herdsmen who had just come back for the winter. During the Chökhör Festival, we took a distant look at their houses and yards: they were empty with not a single person in sight, only a fierce herding dog on a leash, a Tibetan mastiff, guarding its home, and when it heard human voices it started barking and would not stop. The herdsman we intended to interview was named Döndrup Tshering. It was in the small *lingka* behind his house that I found the stone scraper.

The black mastiff at the gate to the yard began barking around, jumping and running to the end of its chain. Chöphel motioned for us to stop walking until its master came out and held the dog securely in his arms, a saying rolling off his tongue, “A dog that lives in a ravine is fierce; a person who lives in a mass of people is fierce.” What a wonderful remark! At my encouragement, he continued, “Dogs can only live for nine years and yet they still offend people,” and we all burst out laughing.

Döndrup Tshering and his family were all in. Their neighbor Pema Namgyel also came and joined us. As for their property, Döndrup had 130 yaks and several sheep while Pema owned 60 yaks and no sheep. They do not engage in large-scale trade with the farmers in the village. Farmers can trade 14 kilograms of highland barley or winter wheat for a kilogram of yak butter; the strongest male yak can be priced up to 1000 RMB. If it is traded for grain, based on its build-up, a yak can be traded for anywhere from 350 to 850 kilograms of barley or wheat. It is common for some farmers to trade on credit and pay the credit off at harvest time. This year Döndrup traded 30-35 kilograms of butter on account. Winter butchering season, late in the tenth Tibetan lunar month, was coming, and the village farmers had already ordered nine head of cattle from him. In addition to the exchange of agricultural and animal products, they also cooperate with each other and exchange manpower to a certain extent. For example, Döndrup is a skilled mason and is often hired by people in the village to help build houses; meanwhile, he frequently hires people from the village to weave wool, and at the end of the seventh Tibetan lunar month he hires someone to cut the grass. Few activities in the village involve both the farmers and the herdsmen. They do not participate in any of the festivals revolving around farming activities. However, recently the township raised funds to build a health services center, calling on each person in the township to contribute 20 mud bricks. A notice was issued in Thragu Village asking both farmers and herdsmen to carry out the task together.

Pema Namgyel was younger and not content to just sit and wait for farmers to come to his doorstep to trade, so he rode his bicycle to Lhasa to sell his produce there during the seventh Tibetan lunar month, the richest season for yak butter and cheese. He said, with confidence and pride, that his yak butter and cheese are top quality

goods, especially the sour cheese with its fine curds, which is in turn a healing food able to cure illnesses such as headaches or carsickness. It was cheap at 12-14 RMB per kilogram.

In Tibet agriculture and animal husbandry are two vastly different lines of work, and farmers and herdsmen each have their own sense of pride in their occupation. Generally, farmers think herdsmen are less civilized and tend to talk gruffly, while herdsmen think farmers have no freedom, work too hard, and eat less meat. We asked Mr. Chöphel's younger brother, Tsheten Dorjé "Which do you think is better, being a farmer or a herdsman?" He measured his words replying, "They are equally good. You should choose your path in life based on the family you're born into." Chöphel, on the other hand, analyzed the situation, saying, "Herdsmen can make a fortune faster and earn far more income than farmers, but their occupation is riskier. They might suffer great losses or even total annihilation if struck by a disaster like a plague or a snow storm, and once the tragedy has passed it frequently takes them 7 or 8 years to recover. There is a Tibetan saying: 'A farmer may fall ill but will not die.'"

Well, how else do farmers and herdsmen differ? Chöphel cited another Tibetan saying: "Herdsmen produce wool, but farmers wear the best *pulu*;²⁸ farmers grow the barley, but herdsmen eat the best *tsampa*."

Mr. Chöphel, a village-born intellectual, became a child monk at Drepung Monastery when he was small but later returned to the laity, becoming a teacher and the principal of Tölung Dechen Middle School. He taught himself Chinese and can translate books with the help of dictionaries. His knowledge of folk customs and religion is profound; there is almost nothing he does not know, and when he speaks his witty remarks are like pearls of wisdom. For example, we once asked why he never married, and he responded with the single sentence: "Taking a wife is like being saddled, and having a child is like adding the whip." Whoever heard this nodded in approval. Although he is unwilling to subject himself to the constraints of a family, he leads a very disciplined life; he does not want to be troubled with worldly things, but he is nevertheless unable to shed himself of his obligations. Not long ago he was transferred to the Tibetan Theater Company of the TAR to work as a playwright and moved into an old manor on Barkhor Street in Lhasa. Two boys who grew up in Thragu, one from

his younger brother's family and the other from his younger sister's, also followed him there to live with him, and since then he has carried out the double occupation of being mother and father in one person and being a teacher, so he seems to be saddled and whipped without being married. Fortunately he is very capable, not only being a talented cook but also a tailor, carpenter, and painter, sewing his own Tibetan clothing and making his own furniture. He is a typical Tibetan, temperate and at peace with himself, and we have never seen him get anxious. He enjoys very high prestige in both the county seat and the village, because people in the village tend to adore people of culture.

A total of ten people from Thragu, including one college graduate, work outside the village as government officials or employees like Chöphel. This provides the villagers of Thragu with friends and relatives in this stratum of society, as well as bridges connecting them to the outside world. What is more, Lhasa is a dreamland for young girls from Thragu whose biggest dream is to marry a man from Lhasa and move there. Once we came across two girls who were pulling weeds in a field: 17-year-old Lhakpa Drölma and 15-year-old Phurjung. Dedzin asked, "Why aren't you in school?" "Our parents won't let us go." Then Dedzin asked them, "Have you ever been to Lhasa City? Do you like it there?" They said that they had been there and that they had gone there to sell *balu*. Lhakpa Drölma said, "I like Lhasa, and so does everybody else in the village. Many girls have married men and moved there." We then teased them, asking whether they had the same dream. The girls smiled instead of replying but the meaning was obvious. Lhakpa Drölma continued, saying that her two older sisters were married in Lhasa and had become housewives. Then Dedzin asked, "Are you fond of farm work?" "No, I'm not!" she answered with a ringing voice.

My interpreter Dedzin looked around and said expressively, "Your village is so beautiful that I want to stay here." Unexpectedly Lhakpa Drölma added with a smirk, "You'll never do farm work anyhow."

The tendency for the youth of Thragu Village to move away from tradition with their eager eyes gazing across the distance at Lhasa is common. Life is no longer simple, and they have a lot on their minds. Thus the old tend to complain, "Instead of watching Tibetan opera they want to watch movies or TV programs; instead of folk dances

they want to do something in the city...social dancing to disco.” Tsöndrü Wangmo once shook her head, saying, “No matter how harsh and hard life has been, the singing hasn’t stopped. Well, with today’s youngsters, who knows?”

With their minds full of concerns, the young people head for Lhasa, departing early in the morning and returning late at night traveling between the city and the countryside on the opposite shores of the Lhasa River, imbibing the urban atmosphere day by day, which without a doubt makes some sensitive souls feel unbalanced and pained. Gradually, one of the silhouettes could no longer be seen in the group of bicycle riders returning to the village – Penpa’s.

A Young Guy Who No Longer Returned to Thragu

At dusk one evening in early summer, we were driving down the dirt road connecting Thragu Village to Lhasa and ran into those entrepreneurs from Thragu who had just gotten off the yak-hide boat from Lhasa. Penpa followed the noise to our car, beaming from ear to ear. It was the first time we met him, a tall 28-year-old young man with curly hair, who looked more like a fashionable youth from Lhasa than a farmer, smart and handsome. We told him we had decided that we would like to film his family and asked him if he would come back earlier the next day. He readily agreed. But from the next day up until the point when our filming was coming to a close we saw neither hide nor hair of him.

We had questions as to Penpa’s whereabouts, but to avoid embarrassment, Tsöndrü Wangmo and her family did not want to answer our questions straight up, but simply faltered saying he had gone far away from home to do business. His fellow entrepreneurs said they did not know his whereabouts either. However, we clearly felt the family was shrouded in an atmosphere of displeasure. It was not until the day of the harvest when his 19-year-old wife Dekyi Chödzung began to weep after we had pressed her for information that we learned that Penpa, who had not returned for several months, had remained in Lhasa the entire time and had been hired as a taxi driver.

With the only hint we got from Tshering Chöphel, we headed straight to Barkhor Street and managed to find Penpa’s elder sister at a small stand. She took us to a nearby bus station where we waited for a short while till Penpa showed up driving an old, dilapidated car.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly. Without much persuasion, Penpa agreed to return home with us in his used car whose brand was unknown but which looked like a Toyota jeep. On the mountain path along the southern bank of the Lhasa River, its engine flamed up so many times that when we finally got back to the village it was already getting dark. We noticed he did not even bother to stop the car when he drove by his grandfather Po Wangdü, but proceeded swiftly to the peach tree at the gate to the yard. In that very moment, his wife Dekyi Chödzhong returned from the farmland. She noisily shut the gate to the yard behind her, turning a blind eye to her husband's arrival.

The situation that ensued was somewhat embarrassing – we got caught up in a family quarrel. Both his wife Dekyi Chödzhong and her mother Dekyi Drölkar, who had nursed grievances for quite some time, tried to get it all off their chests, saying he had done this and that in Lhasa and asking why he had bothered to come back. Po Wangdü shouted at him, telling him to get out for good or else he would break his legs. Penpa sat there in silence with his head hanging down, rubbing his daughter's tiny toy in his hand, which made it jingle. From our crew both Jampa Yönten and Dedzin were busy mediating, saying whatever an outsider could in such a situation but to no effect. This continued until Tshering Chöphel came home, greeted his son-in-law with a gentle tone, saying, "You back?" and passed his little granddaughter to Penpa, saying, "Say dada!" Then the atmosphere finally became a bit more relaxed.

We had Penpa stay for the night in Thragu – that was probably the last night he spent in the village.

Tsöndrü Wangmo did not show up afterwards; her leg was broken. One day before the harvest, Tshering Chöphel tried to trim the horns of a calf. Po Wangdü helped pin it down while Tsöndrü Wangmo tried to wrap its head with ropes, worried that the calf might poke his son's eyes out. Suddenly, the animal tried to break free. As the 90-some-year-old Po Wangdü struggled to wrestle the calf to the ground, Tsöndrü Wangmo was knocked down as well – her leg was injured. She had been confined to bed for days when we saw her again, and her right leg was swollen. She said all her life she had never gotten sick or suffered pain like this. She also worried that nobody would tend the yaks, considering the fact that only two people, her

son and granddaughter, would harvest the land that belonged to the eight family members, and that she was now unable to move when the family was this strapped for manpower. She asked us, kidding, whether we had magical medicine that could make her recover instantly.

Later, we did manage to get her some medicine and healing foods. At the request of her daughter Pasang, who is a teacher at the county elementary school, we brought the old lady to her place for better medical treatment during our last visit to Thragu. A foreign show was playing on the TV at Pasang's house, and her grandson, an elementary school student, delighted in saying that he would be taking part in the Municipal Football Match in Lhasa the next day. Tsöndrü Wangmo just sat idly by without saying a word.

The three generations of people from Thragu Village sitting there together really showed how the world had changed. I often think of that old lady, who was fond of tradition but not old-fashioned, of the motto she repeated over and over: "A lifetime of happiness is happiness, but a moment of happiness is happiness too" and of the many sincere and simple desires that she mentioned to us, and I cannot help sighing at what a decisive influence the external environment and era in which one lives exert on one's life. Had Tsöndrü Wangmo been born during her daughter's and grandson's age, her life would have been another story entirely. Even still, her life was not bad with her longevity and piece of mind, her ability to sing so many songs, and considering the fact that she brought up a son and a daughter as kindhearted and promising as Tshering Chöphel and Pasang.

Whether or not outsiders pay heed to it, life in Thragu still flows as gently as the Lhasa River. The farmers in the fields plow in spring and harvest in autumn. The young entrepreneurs who go to the city leave in the early morning and return late at night, except that Penpa is said not to return to the village any longer, but that does not matter for Tshering Chöphel's family has calmly accepted that fact and stopped worrying about him. Facts always come to be accepted, sooner or later.²⁹

When we first set foot in Thragu to film its spring plowing ceremony, the trees had not yet turned green. When we were finished filming, it was already late autumn. The leaves of the tall white poplars were a glowing yellow, a warm color rather than an intermediate hue.

Some of the willow trees, which were comparatively short, remained green, while others were a mix of green and yellow, giving the entire rural landscape the appearance of being composed of a multitude of different layers.

Chapter 2: The Spectacular Zhörung Mountain Valley

Legends on the Banks of the Zhörung River

The Lhasa River, which runs from east to west, has two sources: the snow-capped mountain Milha in the east and the Northern Tibetan Plateau in the northeast. Zhörung is the name of its tributary which runs through northern Tibet's Meldro Gungkar in its upper reaches. The river has flowed for ages, carving its bed over ten meters deep. Along its high riverbanks, animal husbandry and agriculture have developed according to the elevation of the terrain. We entered the valley on foot following the river upstream no less than five or six times over the course of two winters and springs. Each time we stayed there for several days, and we were always rewarded with an unexpected surprise, such that we came to think of the valley as being nearly beyond exhaustive exploration.

Meldro Gungkar County is 80 kilometers east of Lhasa, and Drigung Thil Monastery, which is nestled in the Zhörung Valley, is approximately 60 kilometers from the county seat, located to the northeast. Traveling not far to the east from the county seat and taking a sharp turn left into the mouth of the valley, an epic begins to emerge, about local culture, the origins of religion, folk literature, and secrets not known from canonical literature. Perhaps the prelude to this long epic's scroll is the cluster of ancient tombs excavated by the Tibetan archeologists a few years ago, which were said to contain ceramic funerary figurines rarely found in Tibet, along with the ancient ruins of Katshel Monastery. When studying the feng shui of the location, Princess Wencheng found the Tibetan Land of Snows looked like a sorceress lying on her back, so a group of monasteries was designed and built to respectively still her heart and four extremities. An antique brocade thangka tells the story, depicting a naked, plump lady lying on her back, temples painted over her body, with Lhasa's Jokhang Monastery on her heart and Katshel Monastery on her right shoulder.

Delving deeper, the path to Drigung Thil Monastery is said to have once been lined with 108 stupas. Most of them can still be traced on the way, but have either fallen into disrepair or been reconstructed. Our close observation and inquiry revealed that they differ in shape, name, and function. The stupa next to Tsenthang Village once

caught our eye; so one summer's day in the blaze of the setting sun, we parked the car by the side of the dirt road and filmed the people circumambulating this sutra pagoda, as well as the image of the monster visible in the mountainside behind the village. This is actually a bald spot: on the grassy slope facing the sun, which is overgrown with shrubs and weeds, the natural formation, a completely exposed area where not an inch of grass grows, presents a huge picture – a striding camel with a human corpse hanging upside down in its mouth that fills the whole of the huge mountainside. The locals said that is what it is, and we thought that was exactly what it looked like as well. The image of the monster was taken to be inauspicious, and therefore this stupa was built to subdue it.

When we were done filming, we suddenly noticed the right rear tire of our Land Cruiser had gone flat. We looked at each other in astonishment: it must have been the monster!

Afterwards, we lingered on for a short while in Tsenthang Village and learned the origin of its local deities, the story of the people who summoned the deities to descend into their bodies, and a newer version of that story. We got to know a legendary figure, Nupa Trülku, and also participated in a fire offering ceremony he was in charge of, in which the deities are honored and the ghosts are given alms.

As we emerged ourselves further in this valley, the following impression grew deeper. The entire region of Meldro Gungkar is rich in history and culture. Not only is it the birthplace of Songtsen Gampo, a place where Princess Wencheng passed through, and where virtuous eminent monks such as Tsongkhapa left a multitude of traces. It also possesses cultural significance. The 30 villages in this region have names whose initials correspond to each of the 30 letters of the Tibetan alphabet. Of course, Drigung Thil Monastery alone would make it abundantly well-known; the Zhörong valley has been host to multitudes of legends since time immemorial. In addition, some modern people, including Tibetans, Han Chinese, and Hui, who have worked or are working in Meldro Gungkar are coincidentally interested in folktales of this kind and frequently collect them to be printed in periodicals. Therefore, Meldro Gungkar is highly renowned, and stories of these legendary events are also widespread.

For instance, Yan Zhenzhong (he is of *Hui* ethnicity), who worked in Meldro Gungkar County for many years, told me about

two of this valley's legendary figures. One was the late tantric master and hail prevention lama Chöphel, who had such skills as body duplication, arm extension, and *tumo* fire meditation. His *tumo* fire meditation was such that no matter how icy the weather was, with heavy snowfall turning the land completely white, the snow on his rooftop melted. At the time of his passing, he was dressed in an extraordinarily dignified and neat manner. Ringing a brass bell with his hand, multi-colored clouds appeared in the sky, and five-colored rain fell. The other legendary figure was Pangda Kukpa of Pangda Village. "Kukpa" means mute. He was mute from birth and never wore clothes. He swam all the way across the Lhasa River with ease when its waters swelled in the summer; homeless and jobless, he went begging all over and was popular wherever he went. By all accounts, his visit to a place would bring a good harvest, unless he had been invited there. Thus people would prepare food, respectfully awaiting his arrival when they spotted his figure far in the distance. Each time after finishing the meal, he would coat his copper-colored naked body with yak butter and trot away. In the late 1950s during the democratic reform, clothes were distributed to him and he was made to put them on, but he seemed unusually nervous and uneasy, and he tore them all off. The village cadre fastened clothes around his body with ropes made of yak hair only to see them torn to pieces by him again. Some said Pangda Kukpa was an incarnation of Jikten Gönpö, the founder of Drigung Thil Monastery, and others said he was an incarnation of the patriarch Milarepa because the two tantric masters were good at *tumo* fire meditation, giving off heat internally. The two legendary figures passed away a few years ago.

In recent years, frequent sightings have been reported of a "fire boy", who has gone naked his entire life, from relevant parts of the country; probably Pangda Kukpa falls into the same category.

Drigung Thil Monastery's Past Brilliance and Adaptation

The country road that leads up the Zhörong River forks right after it passes through Tsenthang Village. Ahead on the left are the well-known Terdrom hot springs, an attraction for many who wish for health and longevity in this lifetime owing to its special remedial effect for stomach trouble and arthritis and its status of being a sacred place. Ahead on the right are Drigung Thil Monastery and its sky

burial ground, which are even more famous. For people who believe or ardently hope that the next life will be better than the current one, it used to be considered the perfect final destination. Thus, though the road forks, it assumes all of the promises for this life and the next, and naturally attracts generations of people in an endless procession from Lhasa and beyond.

Drigung Thil Monastery, our last destination in the valley, is located high up, scattered across half of the mountainside. On a snowy autumn day, a young monk guided us up a precipitous mountain path to visit Tendzin Nyima Trülku for his permission to interview the ascetic monks. The mountain on which Thil Monastery is located is steep, and the greatest part of the sutra hall, along with the monks' accommodations, is built half into a cave along the mountain. Drum music and the chanting of sutras carried from just such a small and narrow hall. The white-haired baby-faced Tendzin Nyima Trülku was sitting on the throne presiding over a Buddhist ceremony. The table and floor in front of the Buddha niche were covered with sealed ceramic jars. Thus, we inadvertently learned of a ceremony we had not yet heard of previously, namely "Sachok Bumpa",³⁰ gathering soil fertility for the earth.

This ritual was performed in response to a request by the local common people, for due to the dry weather and crop failure this year, they needed to bring offerings to the relevant deities, the ancient deities of the three realms – the heavens above, the human realm, and the earth below. 25 precious items were placed inside the earthenware jars, namely five kinds of treasures, five types of grains, five different spices, five kinds of silk, and five kinds of Tibetan medicine. By chanting sutras for five days, these precious items were bestowed with special Dharma power. At a selected time and location, when the direction of the wind and sunlight were favorable, these jars full of precious things were buried high up on the mountainside as an offering to the deities of the heavens, a ritual called "Nordrup Bumpa", meaning "bringing in wealth and riches". If the jars are buried in the fields, it is an offering to the earth deity of the human realm, and is called "Sachok Bumpa", which means "gathering soil fertility", and whose purpose is to make the soil become fertile. If the jars are buried upriver, it is called "Lubum", an offering to the water deities underground meant to ensure favorable weather and prevent the outbreak of diseases.



The Sachok Bumpa Ceremony at Drigung Thil Monastery



Drigung Thil Monastery

This ritual really appeals to me because the age-old notion of the deities of the three realms is so ancient that it can be traced back to the age of Bön religion before the introduction of Buddhism, or even further back to the era of primitive religion, in which nature deities

were worshiped. Perhaps one should not find it odd that this notion has been passed down to the present day, but what astonishes me to a certain extent is that these sacrifices are even practiced in a Buddhist monastery contrary to the fact that orthodox Buddhist monasteries are frequently reluctant to formally acknowledge the indigenous Tibetan folk deities. Therefore, I think that this accounts for at least two facts: one is how ancient and profound the traditions of this stretch of land are; the other is the influence of folk belief at Drigung Thil Monastery.

The four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism are commonly known as Red (Nyingma), White (Kagyü), Flowery (Sakya), and Yellow (Gelukpa), based on their vestments and somewhat more important characteristics. Each school has its historical inheritance, *yidam* and guru,³¹ doctrine, and legends. Drigung Thil Monastery belongs to a branch of Kagyü, being the main monastery of Drigung Kagyü.

The Kagyü school had a brilliant past. It once included a large proliferation of divisions: two branches, four major and eight minor lineages, two sects, and three *pa*. One of its founders was the famous ascetic monk of ancient Tibet, Milarepa. The school's ascetic practices and Tibetan tantric qigong made it world famous. Drigung Kagyü was established around the second half of the 12th century, and was invested during the Yuan Dynasty as the Drigung *Wanbu*,³² one of the 13 Tibetan *Wanbus*, whose religious sphere of influence extended at one time over the whole of Tibet, especially western Tibet, which centered around Ngari and covered present-day Kashmir and the northern part of Nepal. In its heyday, the monks of Thil Monastery numbered as many as 100,000. When the mist of history dispersed, the modern Kagyü school was merely limited to the Karma Kagyü, Drukpa Kagyü, Taklung Kagyü, and Drigung Kagyü, and could hardly be reconciled with its past in terms of size, position, and reputation. Drigung Kagyü suffered repeated defeats in history: It contended with the Sakya Dynasty in the 13th century but was beaten hollow, and its main monastery Drigung Thil was tragically ransacked. In the 14th century it fought with the Phakmo Drupa Dynasty, which followed the Sakya, and was defeated again. As the talented newcomer the Geluk school rose to its zenith after the 15th century, and many monasteries belonging to each of the ancient schools converted one

after the other, joining it and turning their backs on their former schools. Year after year of this suffering caused the Drigung Kagyü school's power to wane and made the memory of it unbearable. "Thil" in Drigung Thil Monastery initially meant "below", but how come is it now located on the mountaintop? Thil Monastery is said to have originally been located on the widest plain in Zhörong valley with row upon row of grand halls and monks' quarters. What a magnificent scale it had! Unfortunately, it was burned to the ground during the battles with other religious sects.

Its final destruction occurred of course during the Cultural Revolution. Its most recent restoration took place a little over a decade ago. Presently, with 116 monks on roster, Drigung Thil Monastery has kept its fame, but that fame is no longer rooted in its magnificent scale or huge number of disciples. Its Dharma power and function are reflected to a much greater extent in its sky burial ground, the most famous in Tibet, which is the most optimal way to redeem the souls of the dead. It is also the only place where a large-scale group activity for a living person's soul is held, which is peculiar to this school – "phowa", a soul transmigration ritual performed in every Tibetan Year of the Monkey.

The monastery's highlights also include mortification and qigong, among which *tumo* fire meditation is world-renowned. The tales of this practice of Tibetan tantric qigong are quite fantastic. Milarepa is said to have worn only a single white monk's gown all year round in summer and winter precisely because he had mastered this skill. Attaining this level of mastery is extremely difficult, and even after years of hard practice it might still remain unattainable. After a thorough survey at Thil Monastery, nobody was found to be good at it. There may only be people cultivating this method, which means that at some date they may be tested by some *trülku* in the following manner: having him sit in the ice and snow stark naked, wrapping his body in *pulu* that has been immersed in ice water, and seeing if he can heat it up in a short period of time till it is dry. Still, no audience was allowed to be present at such tests, let alone photographers, so there could hardly be any witnesses.

However, we eventually located a young monk named Trashī Raptēn, who had been in confinement and practiced mortification for eleven years. On that day the sky was dark, and it was snowy.

An Ascetic Monk Who Spent Eleven Years in Confinement

Trashi Rapten's zodiac sign is Rooster, and his nominal age is 36. Born into a family of herdsmen in northern Tibet, he became a practitioner of confinement at the age of 25 under the guidance of the famous *trülku* Bachung and practiced for 11 years. During this time Trülku Bachung passed away, and the white-haired baby-faced *trülku*, Tendzin Nyima, became his *ācārya*.³³ At this time Trashi Rapten had not yet finished his practice of mortification, he merely stopped practicing for the time being, bidding his new *ācārya* to check his performance and give him further instruction. A few days later, he shut himself again in the small cell and resumed his confinement. It took three years, one month, and fifteen days more before his long practice of mortification was finally done. At the sight of him, we were shocked, first by his pale and blushless face, then his freshly-shaven head which was shinning blue and white, and then his stupefied expression and timid look despite his regular and somewhat handsome facial features. Finally, we were shocked by his speech – isolated from the outside world for eleven years, how could his language ability be spared from deterioration! We gazed at him with mixed feelings, asking him extremely simple questions about his mortification.

Q (Question): Why did you choose this method of practice?

A (Answer): To save all living beings from sufferings.

Q: What level have you reached in your practice?

A: I don't know, but the *trülku* does.

Q: Do you feel lonely?

A: No.

Q: Have you ever wavered in your conviction?

A: Never.

Q: Many years have passed, and many great changes have taken place in the outside world. Wouldn't you like to get to know them?

A: No.

We learned from other monks that Trashi Rapten practiced with great determination. He sealed himself in completely, even stuffing the tiny window shut through which food was offered as alms, and left only a trough open to receive the weekly water supply from the outside. He ate so little that 25 kilograms of *tsampa* could keep him fed for one year. His daily practice was dominated not by meditation but by the reading and comprehension of scripture. At night, he was

supposed to sit cross-legged in meditation rather than lie down and sleep. He was prohibited from seeing any animal or human during his period of self-cultivation. Since the window was sealed shut, he could not see the sunlight.

The room where Trashī Rapten had meditated in confinement for eleven years was also built leaning against the mountain. The walls were plastered with coarse reddish brown clay, and along them lay piles of firewood, dried yak dung, and bags of *tsampa*. Inside the room there were only the basics such as a stove, a pot, a pan, and a spoon. There were not even any religious implements, not even a statue of the Buddha. Practitioners focus mainly on visualization and no longer need to fix their gaze on a concrete image. However, during the practice of mortification there is one concrete thing that must be done every day. After reciting the *Torma Gyatsa*,³⁴ *tsampa* is made into *tormas*, and these are offered to the “Four Guests”, namely the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), the many Dharmapālas, the six types of living beings including humans, and the many ghosts. Generally speaking, the Four Guests include all of the kinds of beings from heaven, the human realm, and hell. *Torma* offerings are sacrificed to those above and given as alms to those below.

Only at night was Trashī Rapten allowed to climb the sole ladder in the room up to the terrace on the rooftop to dispose of the water used to make the *tormas* in the morning. Each time he presumably could have gazed up at the night sky, looking at the stars twinkle and the moon wax and wane, listening to the breath of the night in perfect stillness, and dissolving into nature.

However, another possibility remained, namely that this person was already no longer in the mood to look and listen.

Trashī Rapten showed little interest in conversation. Staring at each other, we probably both had the feeling that a wide gap separated us and that we did not belong to the same dimension. We were better off with the 73-year-old monk Döndrup Norbu who enjoyed talking. The elderly monk invited us to his room and told us about his six full years of self-cultivation in confinement here from age 27 to 32.

Before the practice began, he had to recite four pieces of scripture mainly about previous existences, the next life, karmic retribution, etc. When he was shut in, the threshold had to be elevated and a conical wood peg placed in the middle of it as an indication that the practice was in progress and that the occupant should not be disturbed.

“Here was the trough, into which a person specially charged with the task poured a jug-full of water from outside every seven days. There was no specific person in charge of bringing the *tsampa*. Occasionally some people who had come to offer incense would bring food as alms, knocking on the small door of the window outside and putting the food inside. I was prohibited from answering the knock or seeing the almsgiver’s face. I could not open the small door of the window on the inside to take the food until the person left. I got up very early in those days, first reciting scripture and then practicing meditation. I meditated on the rarity of being born as a human, on karmic retribution, the mistakes I made in life, and maṇḍalas made as offerings. I only drank three small cups of tea, and ate three or four spoonfuls of *tsampa* for lunch. ...During meditation, some people experienced hell, while some saw an image of the Buddha. Still others practiced for one or two years, and having achieved no result whatsoever, ended the practice of their own accord.... At that time, I sat here day and night, never once lying down to rest and never undressing in those six years.”

I could not help prying: “You didn’t bathe or wash your hair for six years. You must have had a lot of lice, didn’t you?”

“No! Never! The practitioner’s power keeps such bugs at bay”, replied the elderly monk.

We interviewed the abbot of Thil Monastery on the subject of self-cultivation, and he told us about the origin of their religious sect and the monastery’s tradition of self-cultivation – it started with Dorjé Chang³⁵ and continued in succession with many Buddhists like Delek Nāropa, Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa, and Phakmo Drupa all the way to Kyopa Jigten Gönpo, the founder of the monastery. It has had a history of over 800 years since then. Every monk in the entire monastery wanted to practice self-cultivation and at best for their entire lives, but the monastery thought this over and came to the conclusion that there always needed to be someone to take care of the day-to-day activities in the monastery. Someone has to prepare the meals and do various chores. So they set the length of time for each period of self-cultivation, limiting it to three years, three months, and fifteen days. At present sixty monks have practiced or are practicing self-cultivation, and sooner or later the others will get their turn. At the same time, there are different steps along the path of self-cultivation. There are corresponding levels based on the individual’s specific condition, the individual advances step by step, and so forth.

In those days living on the plain in Zhörong valley, I often gazed up at those monks' residences half built into caves, half visible and half hidden amid the mist and thorny thickets. It was a world of darkness, forging a different landscape of life. Then I thought of many such places in Tibet. There are many such caves and houses as these and many people who have spent many years like this in confinement. I thought about how this has come to be a way of life for some people in Tibet, in the past and present. As a way of life, would this ascetic lifestyle not only be chosen by those people who are extraordinarily tough and pious, and full of hopes or fears regarding the next life?

The Most Renowned Sky Burial Ground in Tibet

While we were living on the plain in Zhörong Valley, we had to generate our own electricity for illumination in the evening. Once, our music consultant Mr. Pento visited us. His Tibetan was brilliant, so we asked him to translate an article on Thil Monastery's sky burial ground off the top of his head. The article was written by Mr. Könchok Phelgyé, a local cultural celebrity and secularized monk from Thil Monastery. The translation of the abstract was as follows:

This sky burial ground is unusual. Instead of being called *durtbrö* like usual, its name is "Tenchak". The mountain in which it is nestled is the same as Eagle Mountain in India, and Tenchak is located on the eagle's right wing. Śākyamuni once said there would be a Tenchak in Drigung; Padmasambhava once said there would be a sky burial ground to the north of India with one hundred *dākinīs* surrounding it; Chökyi Drakpa also said one of his thirteen incarnations would be born here.

The eastern mountain is Chenrezik (Avalokiteśvara), the western Changma Dorjé (Vajradhāra), the southern Nampar Nangdzé (Vairocana), and the northern Jampel Yang (Mañjuśrī). Tenchak is surrounded by eight other sky burial grounds.

This sky burial ground is continuously connected with the sky burial ground Silwé Tshel³⁶ in India by a ray of light. Carnivorous *dākinīs*, the Sky Burial Master (who has the form of a skeleton), *rolang* ghosts, and wheel-colored divine birds travel to and fro between these two sky burial grounds along this ray of light.

The huge stone in the middle of Tenchak was transported there through a web *dākinīs* wove with rainbows. Surrounding it are another

four stones respectively representing peace, intensity, severity, and anger, a steady progression from mildness to vehemence. Their function is the following: leading souls unobstructed across the path to hell.

The souls of all of the deceased brought to Tenchak will not be detained in that cruel place called hell and suffer hardship there, because deities and spirits here will rescue them, such that they will avoid suffering in hell and be able to be reborn as humans. (“What an effective hype!” said Pento, cutting in.) Apart from those mentioned above, other deities and spirits here also include Thragé Relpachen (the one whose hair is matted by blood); *rakṣasas* or *sinpo* in Tibetan (flesh-eating demons); *yidak* (hungry ghosts); *drimo* (a female ghost); and *janggung* (a ghost that badgers souls), as well as the local dragon deity, mountain deity, cloud deity, wood deity, eagle deity....

Four red stones stand around Tenchak, representing four *dākinīs*, who would stop any infectious disease of the deceased from spreading.

Walking around Tenchak to the right, there is a *zhiwa kyilkhor* (peace maṇḍala), a place where hair and bones of the deceased were burned; some white stupas stand further up, where famous *trülkus’* mortal bodies are kept; right above Tenchak is the *dākinīs’* dance floor; there is also a sandhill, of which it is said that whoever can climb to the top in one spurt, can avoid going to hell after death....

Regarding where the name Tenchak came from, at the end of the essay it mentions that the hillside was a gorgeous meadow, where Master Kyopa Rinpoché and his disciples used to take walks. One day, the master asked each of his disciples to display their supernatural powers. Some flew through the air, and some sat in the clouds. Suddenly, a disciple named Rinchen Drak fell to the ground and died. They wanted to dissect his corpse but could not get the knife to go in. Only after Kyopa Trülku chanted a piece of scripture, did the blade of the knife finally cut his abdomen open. A type of treasure called *rinsel*, which resembles pills, spilled all over the ground, and so everyone swept the *rinsels* together. Sweeping is “chak”, and the piece of scripture chanted was called “ten”: chanting scripture-dissecting-sweeping – the name “Tenchak” came about as a way of commemorating the entire process.

...

This sky burial ground is located on the mountainside to the right of Thil Monastery, and it is a quarter of an hour walk on the moun-

tain trail that leads there, which is lined with dense thickets. The ecosystem has received the utmost protection on this holy mountain. In summer the mountainside is luxuriantly green, while after the frost in autumn it is completely awash in purplish red. In between the vegetation it affords a bird's eye view of the broad Zhörong River valley – the wriggling stream divides the great plain in half. On the other side of the river valley, there are mountains as well, which are imposingly magnificent, snow-capped even in summer, and which boundlessly reach to the heavens. As the final destination at the end of one's life, this place is quite suitable.

The sky burial ground lay amidst thorn bushes clothed in beautiful reds and purples, and its sun- and weather-bleached prayer flags crisscrossed forming a net. Patches of pure white snow remained. Only the large area in the center, lined with cobblestones, where sky burial was conducted seemed soaked through with blood and fat, and a strong and intolerable odor of flesh wafted up with each breeze.



The sky burial master Thrinlé Chözang

The sky burial master Thrinlé Chözang's introduction of the sky burial ground was roughly similar to that in the article by Könchok Phelgyé. The main difference was just that many of the explanations

he gave were more strongly influenced by folk belief: “The mountain has the shape of Dorjé Phakmo lying on her back. This sky burial ground is at her navel. A small sky burial ground below, which is specially used for deceased children under the age of eight, is located where her genitalia are, and further down at the base of the mountain, at her feet, is a sky burial ground specially used for those who have died a violent death.”

Out of respect for ethnic customs and sentiments, the People’s Government of the TAR issued a notice many years ago prohibiting photography at sky burials. Despite that, a steady stream of novelty seekers, foreign and domestic, still continues to steal shots of the procedure. This is largely because sky burial masters and relatives of the deceased think it alright for the process to be photographed and made known to the outside world. We also needed to shoot related material that however belonged to the periphery, for instance, the surroundings, vultures, atmosphere, and the like, to clarify questions we had regarding the representation of Tibetan funerary practices and the Tibetan conception of the soul. With the permission of the sky burial master, the Monastery Management Committee, and the county leaders, we began by shooting them chanting the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* for the deceased the day before the sky burial.

The prayer ceremony for the deceased was held in the front yard of Thil Monastery’s great sutra hall in the afternoon on the day before the sky burial was conducted, and senior monks with great Dharma power took charge of it in turns. When the gong sounded from the roof of the monastery, monks in red robes came down in succession from all corners of the mountain. Judging from their mourning clothes, one of the two deceased brought here today was from a farming village in this county’s rural area and the other from the pasturelands of northern Tibet. The corpses were tightly wrapped with cloth in fetal position according to the standard procedure, suggesting the very blessing that they would be reborn as humans. The monks chanted the “phowa” sutra, led by a young monk in his thirties who must have possessed considerable Dharma power, because the ceremony is aimed at separating the soul of the deceased from the flesh, especially making the soul depart via the most suitable pathway – the fontanel at the top of the head – to then be reborn in a good realm. Before the chanting came to an end, they would bring all their Dhar-

ma power into play, visualize the *yidam*, concentrate their thoughts, roll their eyes upward, and exhale seven breaths with a poof, then the soul of the deceased could leave the body via the top of the crown of the head. This is the point of the entire ritual.

The funeral business is one of the essential businesses of Drigung Thil Monastery and also a major source of revenue. A *trülku* once stated that even if gold filled the valley, it would not be worth as much as the sky burial ground – an indication of its enduring economic benefits. Family members of the deceased would give the monks alms in the form of cash while they were chanting sutras. The monks at Thil Monastery told us in conversation more than once that it did not matter whether the people were rich or poor, or whether they provided a lot or a little money; they treated them all alike.

When asked how many souls of the dead this sky burial ground had already welcomed and sent off, nobody could say for sure. The sky burial master Thrinlé Chözang said, for astronomical reasons, sky burial was suspended on the eighth, eighteenth, twenty-eighth of every month. Over the course of five years, this sky burial ground had resumed its capacity of at least one and sometimes as many as ten people a day, most of whom came from this region, from Lhasa, from the region of Kongpo in the east, and from the pasturelands in northern Tibet and were transported here by vehicle or pack animal. By convention, the sky burial master would ask for a set of clothes for each person, all of which Thrinlé Chözang handed over to the monastery. The monastery distributed 370 articles of clothing to the monks every six months. That makes for a total of three to four thousand people who have been brought for sky burial in the past five years.

The 55-year-old sky burial master Thrinlé Chözang was a native of Terdrom, and during the period of democratic reform he was a disciple of a sky burial master in Drakyap. When he lived in the village below Thil Monastery during the “Cultural Revolution”, he secretly performed sky burials for the common people. He explained, saying, “The greatest feature of this sky burial ground is that corpses can be disposed of cleanly and thoroughly here. Look how many vultures there are here, from just over one hundred up to two or three hundred. If two or three corpses are brought in simultaneously it’s no problem, but if four are brought in it causes some trouble because the

vultures won't be able to eat them all up. Then a sutra needs to be chanted and a *lhasang* ceremony performed, bidding the vultures to continue eating, otherwise the monastery's prestige would be diminished. At other sky burial grounds, the leftovers are often burnt with petrol, but we find this absolutely impermissible, because the strong bad odor would harm the deities and ghosts in the heavens above and the area surrounding the sky burial ground. We dispose of the remains of the corpses by burning them with a mixture of yak butter and various ingredients like the leaves of the dwarf rhododendrons *sulu*³⁷ and *balu*, barberry root, *rampa* grass, black and white ores, and millet, while chanting sutras and praying. Corpses of children under eight are taken care of at a small sky burial ground downhill, while those who were mortally wounded by lethal weapons like guns or knives are taken care of at the sky burial ground at the foot of the mountain. Those who have been poisoned to death are brought to a place by the Zhörong River and burnt after Mönlam prayers have been chanted and a *phowa* ceremony performed for them, to avoid involving the vultures."

A friend of mine once told me two stories of events that occurred at the sky burial ground in Golok in Qinghai, where he worked. One story was about a young lady who died from drinking a large amount of virulent pesticide. A dozen vultures were poisoned to death at her sky burial. The other story was about a man who drank himself to death, such that at his sky burial drunkards fell to the ground covering a vast area – drunken vultures!

Now it seems not to be so rigid anymore. Of the two people brought for sky burial that morning, one had died an unnatural death – having presumably received a fatal blow on the head in a civil dispute – and should have been sent to the sky burial ground at the foot of the mountain. A car came from the county police department, and the medical examiner dressed in a white lab coat worked on the scene. Just beyond, a large flock of cinereous vultures that were waiting impatiently launched one attack after another, so the policemen and the people who had brought the corpse to the sky burial ground worked together, straightening a long rope and swaying it heavily, to prevent the vultures from jumping the gun. However, off and on, one or two vultures would break through the line of defense, grab a piece of flesh with its beak, and then dash away.

Thus, that early morning with the unwrapping of the corpse, the culture of sky burial unfolded before us in excruciating detail through its concrete methods. Its every procedure and detail vividly unfolded in the sounds of cutting and pounding, and the cackling and flapping of the impatient vultures. At that time the sky was azure and the clouds pure white. The light of the newly risen sun was refreshing and dazzling, the air was slightly moist, and between heaven and earth there was almost not the slightest wisp of wind.



Scene after a sky burial is finished



A sky burial ground

I was standing on the snow-covered ground, not far from the scene, quietly paying attention to the procedure, watching the sky burial master and his assistants work with skill and effort. An idea lingered in my mind: the body, which is customarily cherished and protected many times over, had thus vanished under these circumstances, and nothing was left.

Mr. Pento, along with our interpreter Dedzin, had already walked away, and stood far off on the other side of the hill waiting for the conclusion of the ceremony. Later Mr. Pento reacted sharply saying that he had already written in his will that he should be cremated and by no means given a sky burial.

What are called funerary methods are nothing but ways of dealing with the remains of the deceased, a problem which troubles the living. That day I thought of that for the first time in my life, thought of my final destination in the future. Pondering this subject, I found myself unsatisfied with any of humanity's existing methods, whether inhumation, sky burial, cremation, or water burial...

The best method would be vanishing without a trace in the very instant life comes to an end.

The soul would subsequently turn into a breeze in the clouds, returning to nothingness.

Tendzin Chödzin: A Dākinī's Incarnation

Terdrom Nunnery is not at all far from Thil Monastery; turning into the ravine at the turnoff for Rimdogang Village, it is a 6-7 kilometer walk. I was drawn there many times over a period of two consecutive years, both by the nature and the people.

Terdrom Ravine features a spectacular gorge with perpendicular precipices rising up on either side with green mountains and clear water, a strikingly different landscape from that of Zhörong Valley. The scene presented at its mouth already reveals its uniqueness from the start. Giant, perfectly round gray boulders are stacked on top of each other, straining upward to the azure vault of the heavens. Between the rocky cliffs are cluster upon cluster of pines and shrubs moistened below by gurgling streams. Not long ago I had come across a geologist who had just conducted an on-site investigation there and learned why its geology and topography were unique: Terdrom Ravine is a big deep fracture zone, where some sub-plates of the Eurasian

plate join. As for its big size, it stretches hundreds of kilometers rising from the Hengduan Mountains in the east and connecting with Gang Tisé³⁸ in the west; as for its depth, it plunges beneath the earth's surface through the crust to the magma layer. The geologist pointed out that wherever there are fracture zones, there are hot springs that flow forth above them, and as many as a dozen hot springs may be found throughout this ravine. The geologist also said that fracture zones are earthquake-prone. Not long after, as we slept on the floor in Thrugu Village, we woke up with a start shaken by a massive earthquake one early morning. The epicenter was in Yangrigang Township near Terdrom. Some houses were destroyed, seven yaks were dead, and several people injured, as reported by Lhasa TV.



Terdrom Ravine

Terdrom's mysterious mountain and unusual water are one of the factors that make it a sacred location. An old legend says that there are seven sacred locations on the southern continent Jambudvīpa, and Terdrom Ravine is one of them, with a hundred million goddesses residing on its holy mountain, which was perhaps one of the bases for the foundation of a nunnery here.

Its holiness is attributed to Tantric master Padmasambhava, as the most notable legend goes, who, invited by King Thrisong Detsen, subdued and assigned the infernal powers to build Samyé Monastery before flying to the north on an enchanted green horse enveloped by

the white clouds. When flying above the hot springs, he found that although it was a precious site, an evil dragon lurked there and a poisonous vapor arose from its hot springs, such that a bird flying by in the sky would drop dead falling straight down from the sky into the water. Padmasambhava subdued it by thrusting his vajra at the evil dragon, rendering it a guardian deity, and simultaneously transformed the poisonous water into medicine. Subsequently, he and his consort Khandro Yeshé Tshogyel practiced self-cultivation there together for seven years, seven months, and seven days, before he turned the sacred location Terdrom over to her for safe keeping and went to the Land of the Yakṣas.

“Terdrom” means “treasured deposits”, for Padmasambhava had buried numerous treasured deposits, such as deposits of *garra* earth (said to be edible), water deposits in the form of hot springs, deposits of gems (a square gate that naturally arose deep in the mountains of Terdrom is said to be the unopened entrance to the gem mine), and human deposits. The “human deposits” refers to Khandro, the deposit of *ḍākinīs*. Every so many years, an extraordinary lady would be identified as an incarnation of Yeshé Tshogyel. The previous Khandro was Chöden Zangmo, and the present one is Tendzin Chödzin, whom we have already met.

Khandro Tendzin Chödzin is a real person, and went from being a herds woman to being acknowledged by society and enjoying the station of an incarnation of a *ḍākinī* based on her own doing. Thus, she has the status of divinity, or is identified as being somewhere between the human and the divine. We felt we had become more familiar with her after many conversations about her life, the difficulties of restoring the nunnery, and the daily trifles there, but that was it; we could delve no deeper than that. Actually, we had finally given up our attempts to know her better, experiencing for the first time the confines of communication. There is a wall between the mundane and the religious, which is too difficult to surmount.

I would like to give a brief account from which the outside world might gain a rough impression. Whether an outsider can come to understand some things from this colorless account or perhaps gain nothing at all from it will have to be left to chance.

Khandro’s appearance is unlike that of most nuns; she is a practitioner who has hair, disheveled hair. “Khandro” is Tibetan for

“*ḍākinī*”, which in a sense means *apsaras*, but the real *ḍākinīs* are said to be ugly and naked and are a sort of self-cultivation companion in tantric Buddhism. At 57 despite the fact that Khandro seemed capable and experienced, her cheeks were rosy. When we took the liberty of asking her whether she was pretty in her youth, she pretended not to hear us. We intimately called her “Khandro La” as we began to get to know each other better.

She told us some of her experiences, but also skirted around some others: “In my childhood while I was living with my parents, I witnessed the death of my neighbors, the village children, and the youths, and thought about how I could not avoid death either, yet I was unwilling to die without having entered into the Buddhist world. Only the Buddha’s teachings can take away one’s anguish, while wealth and relatives cannot. Death is a law of nature for humankind. The only way to transcend the anguish of life and death is conversion to Buddhism. So from then on I devoted myself toward carrying on the Buddha’s teachings.”

Born an ordinary herdsman in Lhari County in northern Tibet, she left home for Terdrom Nunnery at age 18, but later was forcibly brought back home by her family. Two years later, she returned to Terdrom, practicing mortification alone for 12 years deep in the mountains at Drongur, where Padmasambhava once had. She said, “Life should be lived meaningfully. I must study the sutras for the next life. I’m indebted to my parents, but after death they will no longer know me, and I will no longer know them either.”

Even so, she was still supported by her family while she was practicing self-cultivation. Her younger sister brought her *tsampa* several times a year from her hometown. During the period of democratic reform, the township government persuaded her to return to Terdrom and share a room and land, spending her days there, but she had already gone insane – it is said that when the incarnation of Khandro has manifested itself but has not yet been acknowledged as such, the person is bound to be insane. This was also one of the pieces of evidence that Khandro La truly was the incarnation of the *ḍākinī*. During the “Cultural Revolution” the nunnery was destroyed, and Khandro La was forced to be a farmer and herdsman for more than a decade. Not until 1980 did she return to Terdrom Nunnery.

In the old days both monks and nuns practiced at Terdrom; only in the mid-80s when the monks were transferred uphill to Drongur Monastery did it become a nunnery. During the restoration of the nunnery, Khandro La said she was jumping about like a frog, submitting the application to the county government for funds, going to the pasturelands in the north to ask for yak butter, going to the farmlands in the south to ask for barley, going to the forests in the east to ask for timber, organizing nuns and their friends and relatives to transport stones and other materials for the construction of the nunnery. Eventually, the sutra hall which originally measured 4 pillars³⁹ was extended, becoming two-story building measuring 28 pillars. She also contributed her personal income to the construction of a sutra hall at Padmasambhava's retreat cave on the mountaintop and a *manilhakhang* in Rimdogang Village at the foot of the mountain. She did her utmost to run the nunnery for over a decade, and it has now grown substantially in size and fame, with 85 nuns registered and up to 150-160 including those unregistered.

She was said to have gotten married and had a baby, but that that child unfortunately died at an early age. We were unable to confirm whether these events happened when she was taken home by her family at age 18 or during the "Cultural Revolution", but we saw with our own eyes that she now lived together with the watchman who guarded the sutra hall at the mountaintop. He looked much younger than her. Regarding these points, we dared not inquire.

The idea that human life is suffering (*duhkha*) was deeply rooted in her mind. To shed light on this matter, Khandro La sang us a song of realization, in which Milarepa admonishes Nangsa:⁴⁰

My dear girl Nangsa, your life is like a rainbow above a grassy hillside.
Despite the rainbow's beauty being beyond compare, in a flash it will be gone,
inevitably returning to nothingness.

We accompanied Khandro La along the mountain path to her home. She was running a fever and occasionally had to lie down for a rest along the way. Common folks on the trail greeted her one after the other with respect by bowing and sticking out their tongues and then asked her to touch the crown of their heads. Each time Khandro La complained to us that being quite an ordinary person herself, she was not worthy of such veneration. She considered those women who asked her to touch the crowns of their heads to be foolish – they

should prostrate themselves before the real eminent monks who are *trülkus*, touching their heads to the *trülkus*' feet. She sighed, "I really wish I could change into a beggar's clothes and go somewhere where there is no one around, to meditate, but there is nowhere left to go."

Therefore, when there were many pilgrims, she would always shun the crowd, still walking the remote wilderness where there are no roads.

On that cloudy afternoon, I gazed for a long time at her far in the distance, a tiny silhouette walking alone along the ridge of a mountain, until it vanished into the smoky canopy of the sky.

Treu Lo Kagyü: A Grand Ritual Conducted for the Soul

The moment has arrived to get down to the main subject of this chapter and even of this entire book, the subject of the soul.

This subject first drew my attention because talking about it suddenly no longer felt like discussing abstract principles. It suddenly became something substantial that actually existed, a subject we, and thousands of others, put on the agenda and anxiously looked forward to.

The Drigung Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism, which Drigung Thil Monastery represents, has three peculiar characteristics, the first being its sky burial ground, the second Tibetan tantric qigong, and the third, that which mobilizes the most people, the ritual that blazes the trail for the souls of the living – the Treu Lo Kagyü *phowa*.

The literal translation of Treu Lo Kagyü is "Monkey-year Kagyü". According to the Drigung Kagyü school the tenth day of the sixth lunar month⁴¹ in each Tibetan Monkey year is the holiest day of them all. Their patron Buddha Padmasambhava was born in a lotus flower on the tenth day of the sixth lunar month in a certain Monkey year. The ninth abbot of Drigung Thil Monastery, Dorjé Gyelpo, is said to have also formally opened the sacred site of Terdrom on the tenth day of the sixth lunar month in a certain Monkey year, and the seventeenth abbot of Drigung Thil Monastery, Rinchen Phüntshok Trülku, established Terdrom Nunnery and initiated the *phowa* ritual on the tenth day of the sixth lunar month in a certain Monkey year as well, the last of which commenced during the 16th century. Since the 16th century, in the sixth Tibetan lunar month of each Year of the Monkey, an eight-day ritual is held because of and for the soul on the

plain of Drongur deep within Terdrom Valley where Rinchen Phüntshok once practiced self-cultivation in those years.

Phowa, whose Chinese transcription reads *paowa*,⁴² refers to guidance and transferal of the soul and is related to Tibetan tantric qigong. When chanted by eminent monks who are *trülku*s possessed with exceptional Dharma power, it can open up the joints' apertures for the living, whereas for the dead it provides guidance and salvation from suffering in the next life. It used to be transcribed in Chinese as *powa* with characters meaning "smashed tiles",⁴³ which was truly improper due to its association with smashed skulls and urns. After much deliberation the transcription that reads *paowa* was used, as it was thought improbable to arouse such suggestions.

The folklorist Liao Dongfan told us about the ritual's procedure. The top of the head of the person receiving *phowa* is covered with paper; after the *trülku* in charge has chanted the sutra, he exhales three breaths with a "pah", and in a *kṣāna*⁴⁴ the paper is hit and flutters away – the place in the middle of the crown of the skull where several bones join, which is called "*xin men*" in Chinese, "*tshanggo*" in Tibetan, and whose academic term is "sagittal suture" and Daoist term "*baibui*", opens up in a *kṣāna*. From then on, the direction the soul will head to in the future is secure – the Western Paradise.⁴⁵

The Terdrom nun Künzang's elder brother Phüntshok Norbu, a local herdsman, told us as he was sewing new clothes for his sister that some exceptionally sensitive people fainted during the ritual, while others got nosebleeds. When those who have received *phowa* are dying, the chanting of the sutra to save the soul from suffering in the next life is optional. On the day of the ritual, all those who were within the distance a horse could cover in 18 days could benefit from it.

An old monk from Drigung Thil Monastery said that it was rather all those who were within the distance a vulture could cover in 18 days who could benefit from it. What is more, if reverence and belief have taken shape in your mind, wherever you are and whatever religious sect you belong to, you will benefit from the ritual in your present and your next life just as you would have if you had experienced it in person. At the appointed time the sutra recitation, which continues for eight days, would emit the "sound of hundreds of millions", which is deeply moving. The biggest event of this kind in history involved one hundred thousand participants.

Then, what is all this based on?

A secularized monk named Könchok Phelgyé said, “All religious sects have the same conception of the soul. Without the soul, it would be impossible to speak of *phowa* with its rebirth of the soul in a new body in the next life. Milarepa, patriarch of the Kagyü school, holds that our conception of the mind is that of consciousness, and thus the mind is the soul. Regarding its location he said that the heart is like a crystal palace, and the soul is in this location, where the mind is. If there were no soul, there would be nothing called the next life.”

Phowa means sending the soul of the dead to the Pure Land.⁴⁶

The Kagyü *phowa* ritual involves three elements: the central vein, which is the route; the soul which is reborn, and the Pure Land in the Buddha realm. In Buddhism, the human body has three veins,⁴⁷ namely, the central, the left, and the right. The vein for rebirth into the Pure Land is the central vein. Following the central vein the soul arrives in the Buddha-land, which is precisely the World of Utmost Joy,⁴⁸ which everyone looks forward to.

The Nyingma Lama of the Marchok lineage Tendzin Gyatsho said:

Through the circulation of breaths, the top aperture opens wide like the mouth of a Tibetan horn, making the qi rise upward and emanate from the fontanel. By visualizing Amitāyus Buddha as a *yidam* and following the basic method of tantric Buddhist self-cultivation, which one has received, the person will be reborn into a new body in the next life. The soul is brought in from the central and side veins, forming a whirling pathway of air at the navel. All thoughts are focused on the representation of the patron Buddha of one’s practice, and then the soul of the deceased is brought across to Amitāyus Buddha’s Pure Land in the very instant it takes to produce the syllable “*shri*” during the recitation of a magic spell.

Könchok Samten, a Kagyü *gelong*, said:

Tantric methods of self-cultivation may not be transmitted to a broad public but can only be transmitted secretly. “Only if one has received the method secretly can one attain enlightenment.”

Now *phowa* is a ritual to save the soul from suffering in the next life within a method of self-cultivation, which has been received secretly. Nāropa, a *trülku* of the Kagyü school, said,

When the gates are closed a single ray of light remains shooting a hole open, shooting an arrow of breath into the heart;

The path to enlightenment is like a thread passing through the eye of a needle; the soul opens the aperture and enters the Pure Land.

.....

“So...” I proceeded, “how could I confirm that my soul has opened the aperture and how could I find out where in my body my soul is going afterwards?”

Könchok Samten, a *gelong* at Thil Monastery, told me it could be verified. If one had received *phowa*, a small crack could be seen on the top of one’s skull after death, which is wide enough to insert the stem of a flower or a piece of grass – in Tibetan this phenomenon is called *phowa jakzukma* – *jakma* is a thin and long type of grass that may be used for making besoms.

In principle, the Treu Lo Kagyü *phowa* ritual is held every twelve years, only this time it was held after a hiatus of thirty-six years since the last ritual, which was held in 1956. The devotees had been eagerly looking forward to it for quite some time, and we had waited for the day to arrive as well. One day in early August, we entered Terdrom Ravine, making our way to the sacred site Drongur.

As was previously described, the scene presented at the mouth of Terdrom Ravine already reveals that it is quite out of the ordinary. Giant, perfectly round gray boulders are stacked on top of each other, straining upward to the azure vault of the heavens. Between the rocky cliffs are cluster upon cluster of pines and shrubs moistened below by gurgling streams. A motorway was completed last year to meet the needs of people drawn to the Terdrom hot springs to bathe because they are widely renowned for their effectiveness at healing stomach problems, arthritis, and the like. The place called Tayak, which is near Terdrom Nunnery, functioned as a transit to Drongur for monks and laity alike. All of the grain, firewood, wood for pitching tents, and so on that was transported by motor vehicles was transferred to yak backs there. The motorway ends at the hot springs, leaving the rest of the trail to be covered on foot.

Tayak means “horse and yak”. There used to be natural rock formations shaped like a horse and a yak on opposite sides of the mountain. An ancient prophecy stated: the day the stone horse and yak collide the religion will be destroyed. Sure enough, they were bombed during the “Cultural Revolution”, and their fragments were thrown together. Commenting on the situation locals tried to explain it away,

saying that although they did collide in this manner, the religion still had not been destroyed. At the original site, someone took stone and made copies of the formations, but the copies look neither like a horse nor a yak and are neither fish nor flesh.

Terdrom hot springs is probably at an elevation of at least over 4200 meters. Due to the microclimate, which is warm and moist, a tiny snake rare in the Tibetan lands is common here and lurks about. In particular, in the two separate outdoor men's and women's bathing pools encircled with stones, at any given time there are smooth and slippery snakes gliding in the cracks between the rocks or floating on the surface of the water. These snakes are said to have never harmed people, and the bathers have grown as accustomed to them as they have to the water. Nevertheless, last year when I came here, despite people's every attempt to persuade me I still did not dare to go in the water. Having been afraid of snakes my entire life, I was concerned about the one-in-a-million chance that something might happen. This time not even one of my companions dared to go in the water: the tens and hundreds of thousands of people who pass through here, spinning prayer wheels and going on pilgrimages, or receiving *phowa*, bathe here to their hearts' content, so there is a constant flow of people who stay the night, muddying the waters.

My film crew rushed to the scene at dusk on the second day of the ritual, the ninth of the sixth Tibetan lunar month. We rented two horses to carry our baggage, hiking uphill along the gurgling waters of the Terdrom River. The mountain path, which ordinary people, monks, and nuns from the surrounding areas had rushed to repair during the past few days, had inevitably become narrower, and because those who had pitched their tents at Terdrom, Tayak, and the neighboring villages, those farmers and herdsmen who had finished circumambulating the holy mountain, listening to the sutra recitations, and had had their heads touched by *trülkus*, and who were now contently returning in triumph with their horses, surged toward us head on, we were met by one disarming smile after another. Both sides exchanged greetings with each other like old friends, mutually experiencing the kindness and amiability shared between fellow believers of the same religion. Along the way we heard that around thirty or so thousand people had already gathered at Drongur, coming from Nakchu in northern Tibet, Chamdo in eastern Tibet,

Nyingthri in southern Tibet, and Ngari in western Tibet, as well as the region of Lhasa, which was represented by both farmers and urban residents. It seemed that all Tibetans had gathered here. I witnessed a filial son carrying his aged father from a distant location arrive in Drongur on foot, and a person at the brink of death who was carried here on a stretcher, whom I saw die the next day at *phowa*. He had the honor of receiving an excessively splendid funeral when he was nearing the end, which was rather luxurious in light of his single, insignificant little life.

The further we walked the higher the terrain became and the lower the shrubs were, whereas the mountains on either side grew taller and steeper, such that when glancing up at them one could not see their full extent. The slate-gray, metallic-looking mountains bore yellowish brown scars of the passage of time, as if they were mottled with rust, and were increasingly rigid and straight. The rays of the setting sun shone down on the tips of the mountains with a gentle and sumptuous glow. This long and narrow ravine has certainly been a sacred location for quite some time. Akyi Chödzin, known as the local *sungma* or guardian goddess, was surely a Bön goddess in the era before the arrival of Buddhism since she was later subdued by Padmasambhava. During the thousand year long era of Buddhism, the ravine was also used as a site for self-cultivation by monks of the Nyingma and Kagyü schools. Not only may these retreat caves still be found there. Padmasambhava's retreat cave high atop a lofty cliff has become an essential destination for pilgrims. Moreover, there are currently still monks and nuns who enter confinement and practice tantric methods of self-cultivation in places that are off the beaten path. How many souls this sacred ravine has sheltered since ancient times that wallow in loneliness!

Drongur, meaning “bellows of wild yaks” in Tibetan, perfectly describes the valley's deep and desolate nature. A sacred site always has sacred relics; the surrounding four mountains are all involved in legends. For example, the mountain on the left side is called “Kagyü Phodrang”, meaning “Palace of the Kagyü”. The one in the middle is named Dorjé Phakmo – sow-headed Vajrayoginī. Ever has she sat here with her right leg bent and her left leg extended. Her plump, long left leg stretches from the bottom half of the mountain across the site of the *phowa* gathering to one side extending all the way to the

stream at the end of the grassy plain. Drongur Monastery was built in her bosom. The three nylon tents of our campground, in glaring red, yellow and purple, were pitched on her left knee.

What inspired the eminent monk and *trülku* of Drigung Thil Monastery, Rinchen Phüntshok, taken by a flight of fancy while practicing self-cultivation in a tiny cave here a little over three centuries ago, to open up an aperture for the soul of living human beings? Of the multitude of schools in Tibetan Buddhism, why did only the Kagyü school take to this practice? I asked the *gelong* Könchok Samten whether he might provide an explanation.

He said, “Different sects hold different conceptions of the soul, and we Drigung Kagyü maintain the conception which we have arrived at ourselves. As a model of the soul we have always taken that of one of our great masters Lodrö and as a model of behavior that of Khenchen Budé Sadö. For you uninitiated laypeople, we had better maintain silence regarding our specific conception of the soul.”

Drongur’s grassy plain, at an elevation of about 4,500 meters, was already seething with excitement. Smoke from campfires used to cook evening meals diffused through the air from the transient town formed by tents in all sorts of colors that had been pitched there. The tent city spread from the valley below with its upper tentacles extending toward the two upper sources of Terdrom River in the gorges to either side of the enormous body Dorjé Phakmo Mountain. The Lapland rosebays⁴⁹ along the mountain path had been recently cut or even uprooted for firewood, and the entire area had been used as a toilet; to fetch water people had to worm their way through the entire tent city to a clean spot above it. This sacred place, which in former years had been so isolated it seemed to be in a world apart, had suddenly become unbearably noisy and profane. An event of this kind is a disaster for the local ecosystem. Fortunately, it is not held annually, and after twelve years the new branches that emerge will already be luxuriantly green.

We stayed there for a total of three days and three nights. Every day in the wee hours of the morning, a couple of young monks blew Tibetan horns on the small ridge where our tents were crammed together. Their sound was intermittently high and low, pausing and continuing, with the occasional noisy striking of a gong. At this time the believers all got up. The grassy area in front of the large tent in the

middle of the plain was instantly covered with things like cushions, which they laid out to reserve a seat. After they had reserved a seat, the people, one after another, set about walking one full round clockwise along the trail that leads around the holy mountain to the right, a task they had to absolve daily. This takes them about four or five hours, but they are fleet of foot; if it were me, I would not even be able to make it all the way around in one whole day. Shortly after 10 a.m., people returned in succession and took their seats. Monks from 17 or 18 monasteries in the entire county of Meldro Gungkar and northern Tibet and seven or eight *trülkus* arrived on the premises and preached from the sutras in turn, forming a square phalanx of scarlet *kāśāyas*.⁵⁰ The content of each *trülku*'s sermon differed each day. We managed to get a daily schedule and a list of the subjects of the sutras preached, but they were frustratingly difficult to translate. In summary, they had to do with urging people to do good and the path to longevity. For example, *Guru Zhiwa* preached by Genpo Trülku (which might be roughly translated as *Peaceful Padmasambhava*) talks about the path to longevity. The sutra text is very long, but the gist of it says that whether people live to be 60 or 80, or die young, is determined through the chain of cause and effect by the karma from a previous existence. If one has murdered someone in a former life, it will certainly shorten the length of this life. If one wants to gain longevity in this life and happiness in the next, one must do two things: the first is to do many good deeds like saving creatures and setting them free and the second is focusing the whole of one's mind on the Buddha, especially believing in Tshepamé (Amitāyus Buddha) and Padmasambhava, because although these Buddhas are two in body, they are one in nature.

In summer in Tibet the sun is scorching hot. This year there was a drought, and the rainy season was taking its sweet time. On the grassy plain there was not a single tree to provide refuge from the blazing sun, which made us dizzy and made our heads throb, and there was nowhere to hide. Unable to sustain the heat, we had no choice but to abandon our cameraman in the middle of the site leaving him exposed to the sun as we retreated to our camp, opening a five-colored umbrella and watching from afar. Nevertheless, the dry summer air still rose from all around us and blew in our faces. Throughout the daylight hours of the long summer day the people stayed put, from the time the sun rose in the east to when the evening sun sank in the

west. What particularly delighted the easily satisfied people beyond their expectations was the fact that whereas in previous years sutras had to be chanted for seven days before the *phowa* ceremony was conducted on the eighth day of the event, the 15th of the sixth Tibetan lunar month, in this year due to a special arrangement the *phowa* transferal of souls would already take place on the eighth and tenth days of the month. It would be led by each of the *trülkus* from the different monasteries in turn.

Tibetans believe a man has a total of nine apertures spread over the upper and lower parts of the body (a woman has 12). When a person dies, if the soul escapes from an aperture in the upper part of the body, it is born in the next life into one of the three good *gatis* among the six paths⁵¹ of saṃsāra,⁵² namely heaven, the human realm, and the realm of the asuras, whereas if it escapes from an aperture in the lower part of the body, it falls into one of the three evil *gatis* among the six paths of saṃsāra, namely hell, life as a hungry ghost, and life as an animal. The process of sutra recitation is also that of closing the apertures of the entire body one by one in preparation for the opening of the fontanel at the crown of the head.

On the Buddha Padmasambhava's birthday, the 10th of the current Tibetan lunar month, we waited for hours filled with excitement and curiosity colored by mixed feelings of a sense of urgency, keenly watching what was going on at the spot where the sutras were being preached from under the giant five-colored umbrella. At its center a large patch of monks and nuns in scarlet had already finished their several rounds of chanting sutras in chorus, the Tibetan horns and femur horns had already finished being played, and the *trülkus* leading the ceremony had finished preaching. My watch said it was three p.m. Suddenly a tumult arose in the crowd, and our cameraman Sun Liang picked up his video camera and came toward us, utterly exhausted. Only then did we learn that unbeknownst to us the apertures had already been opened. We were eager to know whether he had captured that key scene on film, and how that key action had been carried out. Sun Liang said, "With attentive cues from the county cadre, I stood my ground for quite some time and finally managed to capture the moment on film. If I hadn't paid attention, I would have missed it. The three puffs of breath blown by the *trülku* didn't involve

much movement, and their sound was quite soft. It's no wonder you didn't notice it. As close as I stood...I didn't either."

Later on, we watched the *trülku's* facial expressions over and over on the screen: eyes slightly closed, he made three "poofs" using only his lips and ended with a long "wooooo". After this scene we concluded the episode we entitled "Where Souls Go"⁵³ with a shot of the thick white clouds pierced by the blue of the sky and the following closing remarks:

Thus the path has been opened for the soul to be reborn in the Pure Land of the West, settling once and for all its ultimate destination. Although it still needs to go through the cycle of *saṃsāra* in the temporal world and be reincarnated, hope is already gleaming on the opposite shore of time and space.

After the event we asked whether anybody fainted on the scene, and the people replied with satisfaction, "Yes, of course."

The head-touching ritual started at three p.m. on this day and lasted till seven in the evening. The ritual is observed differently by the Drigung Kagyü. Instead of sitting in their thrones and having the believers form a line and pass by one after another as they touched the crown of their heads with their hands or a treasured ritual implement, the two *trülkus*, accompanied by their entourage and the *gekö*,⁵⁴ let the believers remain seated and, holding longevity vases⁵⁵ and multi-colored *dadar* arrows in their hands, only took care of the front row each time. Those who had thus been bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha then arrived in the grand tent in the center, where they received the "tsok"⁵⁶ food offering. The vase and multicolored arrows not only had to be touched to tens of thousands of heads; at the same time they also had to be touched to the auspicious cords, or *sungdüs*,⁵⁷ made of threads of all colors braided around a strip of red cloth, which almost every single person held up in each hand. Through their contact with the *trülkus'* sacred objects these cords were bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha, and especially if they had been empowered eight times in this manner, these strips of embroidery floss had been entered into the divine input and were thus precious beyond compare. When tied around the neck, they possess special powers of protection, and they are the highest gift one can give a fellow villager, friend, or relative.

Conducting the head-touching ritual every day is hard work for the *trülkus*: it lasts from three in the afternoon till seven at dusk.

Just as all of humanity universally experienced the Stone Age in the prehistory of material culture as a group, regardless of race, in the prehistory of spiritual culture all human beings experienced the age of animism, pantheism, and sorcery. A single ocean of spirituality spread wantonly across the globe on such a grand scale and for quite a long period of time, permeating the vast and endless time and space with storms of sorcery, the many deities, and a multitude of souls. Now its tide has receded to the margins of the world, leaving only the vague sound of waves that occasionally skims past the ears of modern people like a faint sigh.

The founder of modern anthropology E. B. Tylor once pointed out that one of the great religious principles of humankind is the firm belief that the soul continues to survive and lives on after the physical death of the individual and that this belief in a next life can be divided into two main parts, the first being a theory of the transmigration of the soul and the second the continuing existence of the soul after death.

Offshoots have survived in Tibet. Pantheism and the concept of the transmigration of souls developed further going through a number of changes and became assimilated among the snow-capped mountains and grassy wilderness. The people here adhere to the belief that the mountains, rivers, and plants all have a soul, and having passed through countless cycles of birth, aging, sickness, and death, the soul, which each of us innately possesses, remains that unbearably old intangible entity from the dawn of high antiquity.

Here, the conceptions and arrangements regarding the soul have not only become a way of thinking but also constitute a way of life, a kind of group behavior.

Souls Are Like the Wind

“Soul” really is a mysterious and singularly beautiful term. Previously I always used to look at it poetically, rather than treating it as an actual entity, but now I indeed had to give it a thought or two. So I made inquiries at anytime and anywhere I chose, such as “What is the soul actually like? Where did it come from, and where is it going?”

- Those asked, including monks, nuns, and seniors, all smiled amiably.
- A monk named Rinchen Nyingnga said, “The four elements earth, fire, water, and wind formed the world and the human body, and with them the soul was born; when all things are ex-

tinct, the soul will perish of its own accord; when the world is reborn, the soul will be reborn as well.”

- The soul has neither form nor substance, and can be neither seen nor touched. As our saying goes, “Souls are like the wind.”
- In Buddhism, mind, cognition, and consciousness⁵⁸ (the soul) are just three different terms that refer to exactly the same concept. Mind is cognition, and cognition is consciousness. Does the soul exist or doesn’t it? It is said to exist because the perception through the five sensory organs exists; it is said not to exist because its root cannot be found. The key is that one must first understand the related concept of the mind thoroughly before one can understand that of cognition and consciousness and thereby properly realize emptiness.⁵⁹ The four schools of Tibetan Buddhism have the same understanding of the soul, only some methods of cultivation and some terms differ.
- A soul that has received *phowa* will, in the future, directly enter the Western Paradise, or Dewachen, where it will be guided by Öpamé, the Buddha of Infinite Light (Amitābha).

.....

As such, this must be the world of the Pure Land school of Buddhism. Having thought of this through my own understanding without a Buddhist master, I found myself perplexed by an uncertainty that had existed for a long time, since the Sui and Tang dynasties: What about karmic retribution? If those gangsters who have done all kinds of evil come here and get *phowa*-ed, would they not be able to cast off their old lives and be reborn in the Western Paradise as well?

Buddhist scriptures say, “Westward, past ten trillion Buddha-lands, lies a world called Utmost Joy.”⁶⁰ The Pure Land school, also called Amitābha school, involves a path of self-cultivation which can be practiced by all, including the holy above and the mundane below, a method that may be used by all whether wise or foolish. It is easy to begin but is highly successful, a fast track that achieves quick results with little effort. Scriptures also say, “If the name Amitābha is recited once with a sincere intention, it will eliminate all the serious offences committed during eight billion kalpas of lives.”

It is also said that Dewachen (the Western Paradise) in Tibetan Buddhism is the lowest in the hierarchy of the five paradises in the heavenly kingdom of the realm of the Buddhas. Entry into the West-

ern Paradise does not mean attainment to Buddhahood but merely that, being held in the arms of the Buddha, one is able to immerse oneself completely in the practice of self-cultivation without the slightest disturbance. One still has to return to the human realm in the future, spreading the Buddhist doctrine and saving all living things. The ultimate and sole way to be freed from *samsāra* is to become a Buddha.

At *phowa*, an old nun from a nunnery in northern Tibet in dirty clothes but with a dignified and noble manner slowly answered my questions as she was stirring *tsampa* mush in a glass jar with her fingers: “Karmic retribution is a definite. Going through *phowa* doesn’t settle all one’s troubles once and for all. It merely points the soul toward a path that leads upward. Whether it can reach the Western Paradise depends primarily on what one has done in this life.”

I continued to bother people with this question, and even a certain learned monk was at a loss for words, muttering irresolutely to himself for quite some time before saying, “*Phowa* is also a way of practice, illuminating the route for the soul. Karmic retribution does exist, but one can still be reborn in the Western Paradise despite numerous bad deeds one has committed by simply praising the Buddha and reciting the sutras.”

Still, the *ḍākinī* Khandro La maintained that receiving *phowa* can cleanse oneself of sin and purify one’s soul. She said, “That’s the reason why so many people travel long distances bearing their share of hardships to receive *phowa*.”

More people believe that the souls of those who have undergone *phowa* can avoid descending to hell after death or that although the souls will go to hell, they will pass through hell as quickly as possible, such that punishment there will be reduced and it will not come to long-term suffering. Some people believe, on the other hand, that the function of *phowa* is that of a commendation of the soul, which grants it slightly better treatment than it would receive according to karmic retribution.

Still others believe that this is all a bunch of hype.

Alas, since time immemorial nobody has managed to return from the Western Paradise and explain it for themselves.

I always find the soul with its relation to the inexhaustible sequence of this life and the next refreshing and it often sends thoughts flashing

across my mind. Like Sister Xianglin,⁶¹ I never tire of asking whomever I can, hoping they will clarify this philosophy. A young monk retorted, “When you Han Chinese bury the dead in the ground, you bury valuables and items for daily use with them. What does *that* mean?”

I said, “Han Chinese also acknowledge the existence of a soul, and due to Buddhist influence we also acknowledge the existence of a next life. The problem is I find it inconceivable: all explanations surrounding this question are fragmentary, as yet unsystematic, have trouble providing a consistent explanation, and are all unverifiable.”

The *gelong* Könchok Samten was the most patient, and tried to seriously discuss this question with me, expounding on the conception of *samsāra* in a simplified and gradual manner:

“We have to admit that we generally can’t remember past events that occurred before the age of eight. This means people tend to forget, doesn’t it? But just because we forgot them doesn’t mean those past events didn’t exist. People do have past lives. We just don’t remember them. As for the next life, just as it’s difficult for us to know what we’ll be doing tomorrow or next year, when it comes to the next life we know absolutely nothing about it. I don’t know whether you consider my answer to your question to be adequate or not. If you disagree, you are free to refute it. Generally, we can discuss it further.”

After the *gelong* had finished, he quietly waited for my response. Faced with his expectant gaze, my mind, unable to overcome its astonishment, suddenly went blank, and I was tongue-tied. We play by a different set of rules, and our trains of thought differ vastly. Worse still, no matter how I meditated on the subject, I failed to come up with a reply. My thoughts froze, rendering me unable to engage in the discussion.

Indeed, the *gelong* Könchok Samten did not have to seriously discuss the subject with me. *Samsāra*, an exotic concept in both Tibetan and Han lands, had already taken shape as early as the Vedic period of ancient India, and it is the basis on which Śākyamuni founded Buddhism. This great enlightened Buddha accepted the deeply ingrained conceptions of “inherent suffering” and “boundless transmigration” that were connected to the society in which he lived. The highest ideal of Buddhism lies precisely in halting this endless cycling to thus reach the quiescence of *nirvāṇa*. Extraordinarily eager people have

whimsically created such easy Buddhist paths as tantric and Pure Land Buddhism.

Yet what would it be like having become a Buddha anyhow?

During his life, Śākyamuni never gave a detailed answer to this question; thus the nature of the paradises in the realm of the Buddhas and of life there remains hazy. At the same time, the path that leads there has numerous branches and the creeds of each of the many schools are diverse and confused, which leaves one not knowing which to follow.

In the couple of months following the Treu Lo Kagyü, I visited places all over central Tibet to film them. Obsessed with questions about the soul, I would press any wise or eminent person I met for their views on it, but was unable to find the original form of the indigenous Tibetan conception of it, for their descriptions all bore a strong similarity to that which came from Buddhism. However, there was one principle that I came to understand through the explanations of the various sects: via different paths one may come to the same end. Among these conversations that with Könchok Phelgyé, a secularized monk living in the village downhill from Drigung Thil Monastery, was the most secular and vivid:

Q (Question): When did it begin? Where did it come from? What is it like? What part of the body does it reside in?

A (Answer): The soul was born the moment the living souls emerged. The living souls were not created by a deity, but were born with the deities. The existence of living souls indicates that of the soul. Neither flesh nor bone can move on its own; only when they have a soul, can they move. The father's essence and the mother's blood form the fetal qi; only when it is infused with a soul, does it develop into a human. The soul is like qi or the wind, truly extant yet intangible. The mind is the soul, and the soul is the mind. The soul resides where the heart is located, and the six forms of consciousness (perceived through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) are like six gateways, between which lies the soul. Modern science holds that the brain governs action, whereas the Buddhist doctrine says the soul governs brain, and then the brain governs action. That you come from Lhasa and you can immediately picture it is an example of the soul governing the mind.

Q: Why does the soul conceal its previous existences?

A: Since our religious attainments are insufficient, we do not know of our previous existences. That we are humans in this life only indicates that we accumulated some merit in our previous existence. All Buddhas have full knowledge of their previous existences; once one has become a Buddha, one is omniscient.

Q: Does the soul have a gender? Are mental faculties or occupational interests inherited with it?

A: The scriptures provide no record of the soul having a gender. How one views the previous life in this one is how one will view this life in the next. Whether one is reborn as a man or woman is a result of karmic retribution. Generally, being reborn in a male body is better. In any case, whether as a man or as a woman, being reborn as a human being is always a good thing, and it's something of your making. Rebirth doesn't involve the inheritance of an occupation. In this life you're engaged in writing, but in the next life you might not necessarily have anything to do with literature.

Q: What happens to one's soul after becoming a Buddha? What's a Buddha's life like?

A: At that time, the soul will have ceased being reincarnated, and no longer be reborn in this world or any other. Becoming a Buddha is our highest aspiration. Still, I haven't become a Buddha yet, so I have no idea what Buddhas get up to in their daily life. My guess is they don't descend to earth to work! (Laughter...)

This bothersome question must have troubled the entire world, which is why the religions of the entire world from modern primitive tribes to the societies of Western civilizations have had to come up with explanations and arrangements for it. The only difference is that the soul as it is understood in Christianity or Islam is possessed by an individual. It is present from birth, and when the physical body perishes, it remains in heaven or hell until the end of the world facing God's final judgment.

Since there is only one life, they understandably have the feeling that it may be described with the words "only" and "no more".

On the other hand, in the Buddhist world each soul is mutually possessed by countless life forms of the past and future. It already has had and will continue to have countless human and non-human lives. Thus, Buddhists are merely rich when it comes to time.

Do those who have the opportunity to choose their own religion simultaneously choose the properties and final destination of their souls? Long kalpas and saṃsāra, human life is but a great dream. If I were to look at myself from a Buddhist perspective, the first question I would pose would be: “Who am I?”

My soul and I...no, the soul temporarily dwelling in my body and I...no, that isn't right either. Perhaps I should say, “Soul and flesh, whichever is actually me, the person called Ma Lihua, who am I?”

This soul, must have not only passed through lots and lots of human bodies (some male, some female; good people and evil people; people from all walks of life and with all sorts of faces; repeatedly being someone's father or mother, or someone's son or daughter; who loved or hated thousands upon thousands of other souls), but also oxen, horses, wild beasts, worms, and tiny insects like flies and mosquitoes. It must have been deities, who are free from suffering, and irritable asuras, and have suffered the tortures of hell. Perhaps it has old grudges to settle, or a predestined fate that has yet to be fulfilled – who knows! I am just a vision of this soul in its limitless stream of lives and will be gone in the twinkling of an eye. I am only one phase in the course of its countless existences, only a tiny link in its inexhaustible and unending chain of lives –

How long this chain is!

Let me speak of the Buddhist conception of time. Supposing the soul was born together with the world, let us calculate how old the soul that is temporarily dwelling in my body, or put differently, the soul that I am using right now really is.

The world is also in a cycle of birth and death. Each full cycle is a *mahākalpa*, a great kalpa comprising four medium-sized kalpas, namely, the kalpas of formation, abiding, destruction, and annihilation.⁶² Each medium-sized kalpa is made up of twenty small kalpas. Within the time span of each small kalpa, the human lifespan, which is at its longest at 84,000 years of age when the world comes into being, decreases incrementally at a rate of 1 year every 100 years until the shortest human lifespan, 10 years, has been reached, and then increases once more at the same rate from 10 years of age to 84,000. ...

This is an astronomical figure that is difficult to recall.⁶³ Despite my efforts, I could not calculate my soul's venerable age and was unable to learn of the changing stream of lives it passed through, what

relationships exist between those lives and myself, their effect and influence on me and the distant next life yet to come, what debts were left from a previous existence, or which blessings I am enjoying are not the redemption of actions in this life. Who can give me an answer to all this? How can I find out the answer? I long so much for some adept person to point me in the right direction: toward my previous existence, the existence before that, my next life, and the life after that....

Nevertheless, maybe the most dreadful thing is someone with clear insight telling you what your hundred next lives will be like.

I could not help but worry, thinking, "After such a long period of time and so many rebirths, does the soul remain intact? Has it been polished as round as a pearl, as smooth as a piece of jade, and as shiny as a mirror, or has it been scarred countless times, covered with marks of usage?"

In particular, one's discontent with this life is surely caused by this soul. It seems difficult to change it even if one wants to – it has long since been determined.

Souls are like the wind.
Souls are like songs.
Souls are utterly exhausted
and have nowhere to escape to.

Chapter 3: Scenes from the Margin: Trülku Khedrup's Dramatic Life

Khedrup's Literary Talent

Let me quote his lyrics to start this chapter –

My childhood sweetheart always appears in my dream,
I want to open my longing heart but fear she would vanish into mist.
The Big Dipper shines so bright but is far beyond my reach;
I wanted to pitch a ladder to heaven, but there is no way.
Newly-formed friendships are like *panggyen* flowers,
blooming brightly but subject in a moment to decay.

The song is called “Momentary Rainbow” and was performed by the Lhoka Prefecture Art Troupe and recorded on audio tape. Obviously, its title and lyrics are saturated with Buddhist spirit, and are far from indigenous Tibetan optimism and folk tradition, reflecting the clash between Khedrup's emotions and reason deep in his mind. As a writer, he treasures kinship, love, and friendship, but the genes he inherited from his soul reject all of this, and so he is full of the ultimate negation of life.

I have known Khedrup for many years but have had little contact with him. As a member of the Lhoka Prefecture Art Troupe, he is a composer of song and dance routines, and folk comedies. Besides, by sorting out folksongs and folk literature from his homeland, he draws inspiration from rural materials and Buddhist stories, writing poems and novels whose style and content are both classical and modern, both religious and secular, just like him.

Common people are said not to be called by this name, seeing as the original meaning of *kbepa drup* is “sage” or *siddha*. Khedrup used to be a hereditary *trülku* of a monastery in his hometown, but being tossed about in the currents of time and destiny has rendered him to be everything without exactly being anything.

My conversation with him was really not easy. I wanted to inquire as much as possible, and he wanted to tell me as much as possible, but due to the language barrier, we had to find an interpreter, thus our conversation was limited. His self-taught Chinese only allowed him to express general ideas, while my Tibetan was even worse. Several times when I tried to express myself in Tibetan, Khedrup said, not without sympathy but with an air of superiority, “You'd better speak Chinese.”

Nevertheless, I managed to learn of some circumstances of life from him that are usually difficult to find out. He composed his literature in Tibetan. Instead of turning down my request of his works, he kept asking me: “What do you think of them? They are like novels, aren’t they?” He cooperated quite gladly when we repeatedly bothered him for a TV documentary, “Khedrup, between Buddhist and Secular”, and as if that were not enough, he even begged me many times to devote a chapter to him in my book so that the Chinese-speaking world would get to know him a little as well.

Despite our limited conversation, when talking to Khedrup I felt the genuine charm of the Tibetan language. As a learned man, the structure of his knowledge is different from that of my other friends. The wise phrases he used including proverbs, aphorisms, and allusions of both folk and religious origin made me feel refreshed, and I often wanted to jot them down – as a matter of fact, they could not slip my mind anyhow. For instance, to illustrate his disapproval of the common worship of local deities across Tibet, he quoted the proverb: “A good father plants a tree. A bad father makes a deity.” In an account of the hardships he experienced in his youth, he cited an allusion whose conclusion is “Even a sheep will grow canines if it is pushed too hard.” When he and his wife quarreled, his father-in-law mediated with the words, “Even dogs wouldn’t tear apart each other’s fur when they fight”. At his home village of Gyeling, Khedrup displayed his formerly well-known talents as a stonemason through the construction of a new home, singing a house-building song along with his fellow villagers: “We fellows who are glad to help are like brothers in a yak-hide boat; united in friendship in this life, we will be even closer in the next life.”

Thirty-five-year-old Khedrup has already endured the vicissitudes of life. The Buddhist view of life as suffering has seeped into his bone marrow. No less than a dozen times, I heard him sighing, “Life is a boundless sea of bitterness.” However, I was seized from time to time by a fit of laughter when I heard him start to talk of his past experiences, because the stories were unrestrained and interesting. I found that his joy and vexation stemmed from his present life and were the emotions felt by a person leading a secular life. Therefore, when a Gelukpa monk dissented that Nyingma *trülkus* are allowed to start a family, the eloquent Khedrup said, “Your Majesty, who is Buddha of all sects?” “Śākyamuni, of course!” “Well, did Śākyamuni Buddha marry and have a son?” His conversation partner fell speechless.

Even so, his mind is not at ease. In a verse of his autobiographical poem, he refers to his marriage as “water running downhill”. Such fine water running downhill! Would anyone else feign disadvantage when scoring a win? Is it not a beautiful mistake? We teased Khedrup, “Water is bound to run aggressively downhill, making vast oceans.”

He has a graceful and beautiful wife and two extremely bright children.

His son is 11 and his daughter 7. His son’s name is Khedzin, meaning “Khedrup’s successor”, and his daughter’s is Yangdzin, meaning “another successor”.

Dranang may be considered the oldest home of the Nyingma school, the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism. Dra, one of the four native Tibetan clans, resided here for generations, long before Tubo flourished. Dranang means “home of the Dra”. Later, Samyé, which lies north of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, became its political center during its golden age, and the first monastery was built in Tibet, marking the beginning of the Early Diffusion of Buddhism. In the following thousand or so years, history witnessed dramatic changes – each of the schools, including Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyü, and Geluk, took its turn on the stage, alternating and intermingling with each other, and in the course of history thirteen sages and four wise men emerged. In brief, Dranang is the place with the greatest accumulation of religious culture in Tibet.

Khedrup’s hometown of Gyeling Village in Dranang County lies on the southern bank of the Yarlung Zangpo River facing Samyé Monastery on the other side of the river. The monastery Khedrup served in is called Gyeling Tshokpa and was built in 1224 by Changchup Bé, a disciple of the renowned Indian monk and last abbot of Nālandā Monastery Śākyaśrībhadrā, who is known in Tibetan as Khaché Panchen. Later a small monastery was built in the upper valley with the name Gatshel Phuk, which roughly means “grove of love and beauty”. It is not a formal monastery but provides scholarly advanced monks from Gyeling Tshokpa with a tranquil and pretty site where they can study scripture. In the early years, the lush green forest there lined the hillside extending several hundred meters all the way down to the village. Unfortunately, it met its doom in the late 1950’s and was transformed into a sandy wasteland. At present, permission has not yet been given to restore the main monastery Gyeling

Tshokpa, whose main hall was used as a public barn during the Cultural Revolution and luckily survived. It remains a barn while the lovely little Gatshel Phuk has been reconstructed.

In my account of his life experience, I choose to provide an outline rather than to narrate it in detail. For one thing, it saves space, and for another, sooner or later he will compose a brilliant autobiography himself, in which stories of the prefecture, religion in this era, folk customs, and the destinies of all sorts of people will be elaborately and credibly depicted in the first person. Unlike me who always evades certain sensitive topics regarding Tibetan customs, the Tibetans themselves do not, but rather pride in them.

Khedrup's Vicissitudes of Life

Gatshel Phuk was the traditional seat of Khedrup's father, the *triülku* Könchok Chimé Gyatsho. At the age of forty, he fell in love with a young nun, and they had two sons Jikmé Palden and Khedrup. He died in 1959, leaving the young nun and their little sons alone in the world. According to the lineage tradition of the Nyingma school, he penned a will to recognize both of his sons as young *triülkus*. By nature, the first son Jikmé Palden was gentle and was said to be a civil reincarnation, while the second son Khedrup was vivacious and said to be a martial reincarnation.⁶⁴

Then Khedrup's bumpy life began. The mother and her two sons were forced to move to Gyeling Village as Gatshel Phuk was made a primary school. In order to survive, their mother remarried a disciple of their father, but she died of heart attack a few years later. Their stepfather looked after the pair of orphans and taught them Tibetan. Another couple of years later, they had a very young stepmother, who was just seven or eight years older than Jikmé Palden. By the local custom, the stepfather and son could marry the same woman. Actually, she married their stepfather for the fine-looking elder son. However, the young man refused her, and when the stepfather found out, he took his anger out on the youths and drove the two brothers out. Their 25-year-old disappointed stepmother ran off with another man shortly thereafter. In time the two brothers were reconciled with their remorseful stepfather, and remembering how he had graciously brought them up, they often helped him carry water and chop firewood, taking care of each other, all of which transpired over the

course of a couple of years. Another couple of years later, the two brothers grew to adulthood in the middle of the “Cultural Revolution” when they were “specially” treated due to their “special” origin. Then their stepfather collapsed while doing hard labor building a water channel. He was too self-conscious to go home even when he was dying, but Khedrup carted him home. That night, the old man uttered many words of gratitude to them, finally mumbling repeatedly, “Life is a boundless ocean of anguish, indeed, a boundless ocean of anguish...” before he died.

The production team showed up and took care of his funeral, and his meager estate went to the production team as well. A sky burial master had been arranged to come, but a jar of undiluted highland barley beer came sooner. The team leader got drunk, and hitting his chest he said, “I am a communist party member. I will carry him on my back to the sky burial ground!” Somebody tried to dissuade him, saying, “No, you can’t. You’re drunk.” He replied, “A living man can’t carry a dead one? That’s absurd!” So he carried him on his back but fell down into the ravine. Having dealt with the corpse in a bustle dazed by their inebriation, the crowd returned to the village and realized the team leader was missing. So they went back and looked for him all over, finally finding him late at night at the bottom of the ravine, plastered and still unconscious with a broken leg. They had to carry him back. Everyone said, “Tonight we carried a dead body away and a living one back”.

The story did not end there. Soon after, news of the incident reached the prefectural government. The prefectural officials severely questioned him as to what relations he actually had with the (“politically unclean”) deceased that he would go so far as to personally carry him on his back to the sky burial ground, and then he was removed from office and expelled from the Party. The poor former team leader was confined to bed for one good year.

That was only a single episode of Khedrup’s past. In those years they were poverty-stricken, and Khedrup dropped out after only three years of elementary school. After that, he and his brother educated themselves on their own, using scripture as their textbooks, which resulted in their good command of classical Tibetan. The production team stipulated that those who were under 18 were not allowed to work as part of the team and earn a salary, so as a young

man, Khedrup carried the stones and earth to build his own house. He used the allusion, “Even a sheep will grow canines if it is pushed too hard,” to illustrate his experiences back then. The story goes like this: Rechungpa, Milarepa’s great disciple, took a ferry across the river. The ferryman pressed him hard for the fare, but Rechungpa was penniless. Taking out a dog’s head, he said, “This is a sheep’s head.” The ferryman questioned, “Since when do sheep have canines? That’s clearly the head of a dog.” But he replied, “Even a sheep will grow canines if it is pushed too hard.”

The tiny house Khedrup built was called *tsitsi tsikhang*, the mouse house, by the villagers due to its size. The old house remains to this day, located on the low land behind the Gyeling Tshokpa, which is used as a barn. It looks so cute and well-proportioned that it seems remarkable. This masterpiece earned him a good reputation as *dozo chenmo* – a master stonemason. Thereafter, whoever built a house in the village would invite him, and he was sure to come.

At that time, Khedrup began to write poetry in Tibetan following the classical Tibetan writing tradition, and to this day he still writes ballads, novels, and essays in verse. When he had just come of age, Khedrup took part in the mass campaign “Learning from Dazhai”: a long water channel was built for the dry region of Dranang, which involved a huge labor force and expenditure and turned out to be futile. He wasted three years on that. In the daytime he would take part in the hard physical labor at the construction site, and in the evening he would practice writing. Desperate for rest, he came up with a dotty idea, inciting a fellow to deliberately wheel his cart into the Yarlung Tsangpo River. Then he “bravely” jumped into the river to fish it out, which earned him praise and a half-day leave.

Khedrup’s wish seemed fulfilled. However, how could a half day’s rest make up for years of fatigue? Due to his chronic back pain, he had to ask his brother to come to the construction site and substitute for him while he returned home to recuperate. It was harvest time, and Khedrup arrived at their family plot to harvest the potatoes. The “mouse house” had been burglarized: 50 kilograms of *tsampa*, all they had, were gone. He immediately reported the incident and asked for the county police to come, but in the end the case remained unsolved. He was so distraught he vented his anger through poetry, composing a Tibetan poem in a classical form containing thirty lines which suc-

cessively start with the 30 letters of the Tibetan alphabet, called a *kashé* in Tibetan. The gist of it is: the treasures accumulated through all the toil throughout one's life were swallowed up in an instant by a scoundrel; like a fox that has broken free from the hunter's trap, once this thief escaped he was gone without a trace.

The literati tend to overstate their feelings. His poem might seem fussy today, reflecting how Khedrup's poverty at that time constrained him. After all, times have changed.

In that decade all the villagers were in extremely dire straits. Destiny led Khedrup to leave his original path in life and be remolded. His fellow villagers say he is no ordinary *trülku*: not only is he proficient in the scriptures; he has mastered almost all of the skills required to lead a productive life. Recounting his writing career, he inevitably mentioned that the life he was most familiar with was that of his home village of Dranang. He knew the various farming activities that occurred throughout the year like the back of his hand, and the growth of the crops made him gaze amidst the fields in eager expectation. Therefore, in his long poem *Farm Life in the Four Seasons*, the land is animated and the crops are anthropomorphized. Another of his long poems, *The Three Advantages of Pulu*, not only enumerates the three special qualities of beauty, durability, and warmth that characterize the *pulu* produced in Dranang, which is known as the land of *pulu*, but also enumerates the entire process of its production from the raw materials to the finished product, from shepherding and shearing to carding, spinning, and weaving, which makes it seem like an advertisement. Struggling for survival in the rough, dry conditions, the people of Dranang developed a talent for weaving and were good at doing business. A couple of years ago, hearing that in Lhasa things were worth more money the older they were and that someone was buying old *khaden* at a high price, a shrewd man from Dranang tied a new *khaden* that had just been woven to the back of his walking tractor and dragged it along the road to wear it out and make it look old, until someone on the road came running up from behind and yelled, "You lost something!" The considerate Khedrup wrote these details in his novels.

Khedrup has benefited from the classical culture of his people, having read the masterpieces of classical Tibetan literature since childhood. On more than one occasion, he bragged to us about his brilliant

memory by saying he was able to recite the whole novel *Tale of the Incomparable Youth*⁶⁵ after having merely read it a couple of times. Still, he views this part of his people's cultural heritage objectively. Since the classic authors were all pious Buddhists, their works are filled with stories of karmic retribution, and all of them have happy endings, in clear contradiction to the reality of life. In terms of writing style, they follow a fixed format, which includes four parts: opening, development, climax, and conclusion. Take *Tale of the Incomparable Youth*. It likewise covers these four parts with the story's opening, the development of the plot, the characters' expression of emotion, and finally a conclusion, in which Zhönu Damé and his beloved retreat into the mountains, leading the simplest of lives, drinking water free of living things, and bringing salvation to the ordinary people, so they would no longer suffer the pain of reincarnation.

Khedrup does not think much of this traditional writing style, saying his writing differs from classical literature in that his features three things: a usually tragic ending, portrayal of the lower-class world, and innovations in style and the metaphors used.

Nor does he approve of certain contemporary writers who depict the mentality of Tibetan youths from farming villages regarding love and marriage with dripping sentimentality. He says that it is not that complicated. Young men and women in farming villages would fall in love without courting. It was always quite transparent. They would come right out with it, settling the matter at once. If they loved each other, then they would be together; otherwise they say, "Bye-bye." That is how the farmers really behave.

We were at his sister-in-law's in Dranang farming village when he talked about this. We then asked, "Didn't you and your wife Phüntshok Drölkar date back in the day?" His wife cut in, "The first thing Khedrup did was give me two candies...." Then her elder sister cut in, "Back then, before my little sister got fat, she was quite pretty. It was the *trülku* who seduced her and gave her a son at the age of 19." Khedrup was forced to admit that it was he who took the initiative and courted Phüntshok Drölkar but attributed it to the circumstances where people were grouped together to build the channel and they both happened to live at the same work site where love was bound to grow. Generally speaking, this construction site created the ideal conditions for men and women to make contact.

As a master stonemason, Khedrup was often invited to celebrations such as beam raising ceremonies, inaugurations of new buildings, and housewarming parties, for which singing and dancing are indispensable. Dranang's *gorzhé* circle dance is famous throughout Tibet, and Dranang takes first prize whenever it competes. As such, Dranang was banned from taking part in this year's *gorzhé* competition at the Yarlung Culture Festival being held in the town of Tsethang in Lhoka Prefecture, because other counties jointly threatened to withdraw from the competition otherwise. Anyway, Khedrup enthusiastically collected lyrics and thus developed an attachment to folk literature. In those years when he was doing farm work in his home village, we folklorists of the Tibetan Literature Association recognized his talent and almost had him transferred to our work unit. This is how he started his literary career.

On all such occasions he would end up dead drunk. It was precisely at this time that Khedrup began to love highland barley beer. After he went to Lhoka to work there, this changed into a love of Western-style beer. He euphemistically said that alcohol triggers inspiration, which foreshadowed his future family quarrels.

Khedrup's home is now in Tsethang, the capital of Lhoka Prefecture, on the second floor of the dormitory of the prefecture's art troupe. His wife is unemployed, his son a third grader, and his daughter has not started school yet, so the family's finances are tight. His elder brother Jikmé Palden, who married the daughter of a Nyingma *trülku*, teaches the senior classes Tibetan at the prefecture's middle school. One day we followed the two brothers to the District CPPCC (the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) to visit its acting vice president, the Marchok Trülku Tendzin Gyatsho. His seat is at a monastery in the southern county Tshomé, where lineages are hereditary. We asked him what distinguished the Nyingma school from other sects. If Professor Pento would have heard his reply, he would have said that it too sounded like an advertisement.

This time, it was the Nyingma School that was advertising. The Marchok Trülku Tendzin Gyatsho said:

Tibetan Buddhism consists of four major schools: Nyingma, Kagyü, Sakya, and Geluk. Nyingma believes that as the source of the rivers lies in the snow-capped mountains, so too does the source of Buddhism lie in the Buddha. The origin of all schools of Buddhism

can still be traced back to Śākyamuni Buddha. They only differ in their ways to Buddhahood. It's like eating a bar of brown sugar; no matter where one bites it tastes just as sweet.

The Nyingma method of self-cultivation is called the path of accumulation. This is a question of how fast it takes to complete the path and attain enlightenment; of course the path of accumulation is a time-saving shortcut. For example, it takes only two hours to reach Tsethang by airplane from the Chinese interior, while it takes longer by bus. Likewise, the time it takes to complete the path and attain enlightenment differs for each school.

The Nyingma school is a sect that has carried on the fundamentals of Buddhism. Through its tantric methods of self-cultivation, the practitioner reaches the inner realization of the nonexistence of all things and their inherent emptiness in a short period of time. Despite its relatively long history of treatises on the practice and regulations of the Mahāyāna ten grounds and five paths toward becoming a Bodhisattva, its main objective is studying the Buddhist scriptures in order to enter the tranquil state of tantric meditation. Our tantric teachings are similar to those of the Kagyu school in that one reaches the highest level in a split second. This is a major feature of our Nyingma school.

As for the hereditary nature of the Nyingma *trülku* lineage, the old man proceeded:

Inheritance within families is a special feature of the Nyingma school. The Sakya Trichen, who is the Sakya *trülku* from the Khön clan of Tsang; the abbot of Mindroling Monastery, a Nyingma Monastery of the Southern Terma Lineage in Lhoka Prefecture; Terdag Lingpa, the fifth Dalai Lama's tutor; and present abbot of this monastery all inherited there status as *trülkus*. I myself am the regal hereditary *trülku* of the Nyen clan. This tradition has been practiced from generation to generation, and remains unbroken.

According to the historical records of our clan, when the eminent Indian monk Paṇḍita Śākyaśribhadra arrived in Tibet, the abbot of our monastery also asked him to transmit the commandments to him and initiate him with anointment, as he desired to shave his head and take the vows. The *paṇḍita* did not agree, believing our hereditary system could spread the Buddha's teachings and thus benefit the world, especially since it is transmission from a Bodhisattva, in which good roots are perpetually continued.

Some masters before me have also expressed the desire shave their heads and take the vows but did not get permission either. Thus the hereditary system continued.

With the Marchok *trülku*, Khedrup, and his brother, the room where we met was packed with *trülkus*.

An Ancient Custom from Khedrup's Hometown: Hail Prevention at the Ongkor Festival in the Year of the Monkey

The agricultural area along the middle reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River sways profoundly and broadly in the ancient breeze of Tibetan culture. Through Khedrup I have heard of a great many miraculous things that I had not heard of before, such as fascinating farming rites; the secretive activities to summon *yang*, or the qi of good fortune, for the earth; and the Laws of Summer established conventionally through folk custom, which were prevalent in the old days and still exist today. Khedrup patiently explained the so-called Laws of Summer to me, which were instituted on the fifth day of the fifth Tibetan lunar month lasting around three months, and whose implementation was supervised by the prestigious protector of the fields: No horned cattle are allowed to enter the fields; no corpses shall be carried through the fields; while walking in the fields, no (red ochre) ceramic jars shall be carried, women shall not uncover their hair, no firewood shall be cut and no living things killed, and therefore water burial must take the place of sky burial.... Among these taboos are things that evoke associations of or symbolize acts which are taboo: All things associated with redness, weapons, blood, and murder are on the banned list.

The entire function of the Laws of Summer lies in preventing the possible occurrence of hailstorms. Due to the extraordinary importance of hail prevention, the religious occupation of weather *ngakpa* (hail prevention lama or master) emerges at the appropriate occasion and occupies an important position in the countryside. Khedrup introduced this occupation according to the usual account without adding his own judgement of it. Weather *ngakpas* generally possess a certain gift, have some supernatural powers, and later acquire some knowledge of astrology and meteorological phenomena, as well as Tibetan tantric qigong. Although they are equipped with similar prerequisites, the strength of their powers differs from person

to person. In Dranang there are really quite a few legends about weather *ngakpas*, and almost every ravine has this kind of shaman and a hail prevention master who was historically famous. Hail prevention masters were always contracted with their own ravine or field in a certain village. Each summer is their golden opportunity to cast spells. When hail clouds are closing in, hail prevention masters to the east will drive them to the west, and those in the west will drive them to the east, with the result that the less powerful master fails, and the storm hits the piece of land he is in charge of. If their powers are about equal, the hail will happen to fall on the ridge, water channel, or lane that forms the border between the two big fields. There are always many hailstorms in Tibet, and severe ones can sometimes destroy the year's harvest of an entire village. Thus the hail prevention master becomes a central figure in the countryside in summer. On some day in some year in the past when a powerful hail prevention master was about to pass, all of the people in the village came and, crying, urged him to stay. The hail prevention master consoled them saying, "Do not be sad. Cut off my arm after I die. It can protect your crops from hailstorms." The villagers did as he said, specifically cutting off his right arm when they performed his sky burial and placing it on a roof in the village. Thereafter, whenever hail was approaching, the withered hand would rustle down from the rooftop, and the hail prevention master's successor would pick it up and point it at the dark clouds, leading them into the depths of the valley where they gradually dispersed.

"Is it really efficacious?" We inquired.

Khedrup just laughed.

We accompanied Khedrup, or rather he accompanied us, from Tsethang to his hometown in Dranang to enjoy the cultural landscape there. The two places are not far apart, a little over an hour by bus.

We arrived at Gyeling Village on a summer day when the villager Phurjung's family just happened to be building a new house. All of the villagers, men and women, from each of the households came to lend a hand. The men were standing in a row passing along stone slabs while the women were lined up carrying the dirt on their backs. The men were singing a working song with the following touching lyrics to suit the occasion:

We fellows who are glad to help
are like brothers in a yak-hide boat;
In this life we are together,
and in the next we shall never part.

“Our village is like one big family. When one family builds a house, the entire village helps out,” said Khedrup quite proudly.

When I heard this, I broke out in laughter, for I had heard the same story in every village I went to during my travels in Tibet, and had even carefully noted it and published it. In fact, this is a feature common to the farming villages in Tibet.

The villagers were exhilarated when they saw that Khedrup was there and immediately offered him beer to toast his arrival. Khedrup climbed a ladder to the roof and began to hammer, his face glowing in the setting sun. Several women climbed to the roof after him, carrying jugs and bowls of highland barley beer. They urged each other to drink one bowl after another and were unrelenting, such that everyone in the village got drunk, filling the work atmosphere with warmth and harmony. Phurjung said more than one hundred neighbors came to help and his family had prepared beer brewed from nearly one thousand kilograms of highland barley for the occasion.

On another summer day, we joined Khedrup and his family to spend the Ongkor Festival in his hometown in Dranang.

The festival was held at his father’s birth village of Agar instead of his village Gyeling. It is said that one year after the festival had been celebrated in Gyeling, the village was hit by a series of diseases and natural disasters, which was considered inauspicious, and since then the festival there has been canceled, and the villagers have become spectators and participants at the festivities in the neighboring village of Agar. Unlike other farming villages in Tibet where the festival is held annually, at Agar the Ongkor Festival is held every twelve years in the Tibetan Monkey year when the crop has ripened, which many Tibetans find odd. Even stranger is that the “Sayang Festival” does not occur at any specific time. They just choose to hold the ceremony some springs when the harvest has been bad or when they deem it necessary. It is an extremely solemn event meant to re-collect the *yang* that is in the fields so that it does not flow away.

Having been suspended for so many years, the Ongkor Festival held in the Year of the Monkey at Agar Village was said to have been rehearsed the previous year for its assured success this year, reflecting the local people's attitude and sentiment toward it.

This year's Ongkor Festival in the Tibetan Year of the Water Monkey had us rushing to Agar. The degree of solemnity of Agar's Ongkor Festival was probably the highest in all of Tibet, and throughout my travels in Tibet no village would top it. The opulently clothed procession that paraded around the village and circumambulated the field was massive. The men were dressed in the ancient armor of warriors, the women in brightly colored garments, and the children were decked out as well. They held up flags, blew horns, beat drums, and carried scriptures, niches, and stupas on their backs. The reason they circle the vast field of barley and wheat is also for the sake of *yang*. All of Gyeling Village and the adjacent countryside turned out to watch the song and dance performances, the horse races, and archery competitions. The festive atmosphere reached its climax that afternoon when thousands of people gathered at the vast threshing ground exchanging *khatas* and good wishes. For a moment the *khatas* danced in the air and prayers were heard all around as each of the participants' necks was piled high with *khatas*. It was an extremely moving moment full of human emotion. People watching by the sidelines inevitably sighed to themselves thinking that the friendships formed in this life could not even come close to what these people had.

These ceremonial and convivial scenes made for only part of my concern and were not even the main one. At this Ongkor Festival I got much more than I expected, which repeatedly brought the word "overjoyed" to mind.

This was the first time I witnessed the live performance of a hail prevention lama. Summer is the rainy season in Tibet and it rains almost every day. However, it was exceptionally sunny on the day of the Ongkor Festival. The people in the village proudly told us that yesterday the village head had asked the hail prevention master Ngawang Drakpa to ensure that no rain would fall today. We rushed to look for Ngawang Drakpa, and found him watching the horse race. He verified what the villagers had told us: "It was the village head who had me ensure that no rain would fall today. I already did the spell." The hail prevention master, who was nearing 70, wore a broad smile,

pleased with his move. As we were talking, a large mass of dark clouds could suddenly be seen rolling in from the southern mountain pass accompanied by the sound of thunder and flashes of lightning. Not missing the opportunity, I asked, "Will it rain, or hail? Could you please cast a spell? Above all, would you mind being filmed?" Ngawang Drakpa calmly smiled, saying, "I've already recited the incantations and done the magic. That patch of clouds doesn't matter. I've already directed them on a route past us, so they won't pass over our heads." However, our camera was already pointed at him, and faced with our insistent pleas he kindly agreed to perform for us. He blew a femur horn, which had been empowered with a magic formula, three times with a "woo - woo - woo", then he grabbed a handful of powder from inside a small pouch and cast it up in the air and blowing it away with a "puff - puff - puff", and finally after making several tossing gestures with his hand he signaled for the the dark clouds to go to the edge of the mountains to the southwest with his prayer beads.

The whole process took a little over ten minutes.

The dark clouds kept hovering at their original position for a long time, wanting to enter the valley but not entering it, and dispersed when we were not paying attention.

The Lhoka Prefecture Art Troupe came at our invitation to give a performance the next day. Unfortunately, it was raining the whole time, and it did not stop until three p.m. We had begged the village head to send for the hail prevention master and to ask him to draw the clouds away, but he declined saying Ngawang Drakpa asserted yesterday that today's weather was no longer his business.

Ngawang Drakpa is a monk at Nyedo Monastery, which is located deep within Dranang Valley. In autumn we wanted to visit with him again and advanced along the most difficult path some seven miles into the valley. That waterless channel was lined with sharp stones, as if the rocky mountain had crumbled all along the way. In spite of Dranang Valley's long history of agriculture, or perhaps precisely because of its excessive exploitation over a long period of time, ecological imbalance, resource shortages, and severe natural disasters resulted, especially droughts and frequent hailstorms in summer. Nyedo emerged out of this demand, its main function being the prevention of the occurrence of disastrous hailstorms. It is a Nyingma monastery, but the main object of devotion in its Buddha

hall is neither an image of the Buddha nor a *yidam* as usual but rather a short sandalwood pillar from eastern Tibet known as the Divine Pillar. The Divine Pillar is said to possess Dharma power effective at combating drought and preventing hail. According to the description, it must stem from the primitive era of phallus worship, but this main object of devotion is usually hard to catch a glimpse of, as it is only open to the public on one specific day each year for sacrifices. We did not meet Ngawang Drakpa that day, for he was out in the countryside in Gonggar County begging for alms. After all, the time following the autumn harvest provides monks with a golden opportunity to go begging for alms.

Nyedo Monastery has a strong folk-religious flair, which not only encompasses the prevention of hail but also includes the presence of a spirit medium who acts as a spokesperson of local deities and gods.

*Another Ancient Custom from Khedrup's Hometown:
A Male Spirit Medium Who Summons Deities to Descend
into His Body and Yangguk – the Invitation of Blessings*

On the day of the Ongkor Festival, when the hail prevention lama Ngawang Drakpa demonstrated how he drives off hail, I also saw a male spirit medium summon a deity to descend into his body for the first time in that building which is called “yangkhang”.

Ngawang Drakpa, the spirit medium Thupten Gyatsho, and some senior farmers were sitting idly about, leaning against the wall. We barely entered the door when Ngawang Drakpa came up to us with a quick mysterious whisper, “This guy’s going to summon a deity to descend into his body. Do you want to shoot?”

We could not have asked for more; how could we not want to shoot. The senior discussed it once more with the middle-aged man by the wall, who conspicuously hesitated. At that time, the Tibetan Rural Socialist Education Movement was underway, promoting science and combating superstition, so those who practiced ritual possession did not dare show it openly. We quickly explained that we would film the descent of the deity as a phenomenon of rural culture and only show it to foreigners to illustrate the restoration of traditional Tibetan culture. He was still ill at ease, requesting me to make a written pledge in Chinese that bore my signature, explaining the whole thing.

In the very moment when he was carefully stuffing the strip of paper in his lapel, a woman burst in, her face in a scowl, and faced the spirit medium Thupten Gyatsho chattering bitterly.

The hail prevention lama winked at everybody, who sat there awkwardly. Nobody cut in, not even the spirit medium, who sat perfectly still without moving a muscle. Seeing no sense in the matter, the woman left in anger. As soon as she set one foot out the door, the old monk Ngawang Drakpa began to chant the sutra under his breath to call the divine spirit to take possession of the medium's body. My interpreter Dedzin seized the opportunity to interpret what the angry woman chattered about. The gist of it had to do with them being dependent on hard work for a living instead of him counting on spirit possession and thus and such, and then she pressed him to go home. She was the spirit medium's wife.

Thupten Gyatsho's eyes began to look vacant and it seemed as if he were getting drunk. People hurried to help him get up, and before he reached the altar, they bustled about dressing him in the divine vestments, consisting of a robe with broad sleeves, and setting the overstated divine crown on his head. Two seniors bent over and stuck their tongues out, respectfully seeking counsel from the deity: "This isn't a promising year. The harvest is bad and the people and animals in the village are getting sick. What shall we do?" In his stupor the spirit medium gave no verbal reply but slowly took the *khata* from the altar, grabbed the barley, and after he had blown a puff of air on it, handed it to the two seniors. Ngawang Drakpa, who was standing to one side, explained what the deity meant, the gist of which was that sacrifices should be made as they were in the past. The spirit medium took another *khata*, tying a knot in it, and tossed it over our camera with a flick of the wrist as a friendly blessing. Turning around, he ladled highland barley beer from a big ceramic urn, gesturing for us to come over to him, pouring it in turn into our cupped hands, and inviting us to drink.

The spirit medium uttered not a single word throughout, which is his manner of summoning the deity.

Ngawang Drakpa's chanting stopped the instant everybody had highland barley beer. One of the seniors who sought counsel with the deity said with relief, "It's done."

With his palms together, the spirit medium signaled the end. Shortly thereafter he was half-awake while the people bustled about removing his vestments and sitting him down against the wall. A short while later he returned to normal.

As he was coming to, Thupten Gyatsho began to discuss his experience in front of our camera. He said he really had no desire to be a spirit medium, but his body had other plans. Born into a family of spirit mediums, he started summoning deities accompanied by monks from Nyedo Monastery ever since he exhibited an abnormal state eight years ago. He becomes delirious as soon as he hears the words of the sutra to summon the deity, not realizing anything that happens after that. When the deity has left, he feels extraordinarily fatigued.

That day was also the first time I witnessed *yangguk*, the ceremony to invite blessings. People had gathered on a vast plain in front of the village and were singing and dancing for joy when a senior villager suddenly came into view with a big hat atop his head wrapped in wool, one hand clasped around a *chemar bo* container filled with barley grains with spikes of highland barley stuck in it and the other waving *dadar* arrows with multicolored silk streamers, and with an air dried leg of lamb half-hidden on his chest. Those are all auspicious things that invite blessings. With no one tailing along behind him, he staggered towards the village singing a little ditty – he was already quite drunk. Goaded by curiosity, we followed him to see where he might go and what he might do. He went all the way through the village lanes to the *yangkhang*, the house which contains all the qi of good fortune in the village. Climbing the steps and walking through the door, he put down the auspicious things he was carrying in his hands and began to dance with joy.

Someone in the house had prepared tea and highland barley beer and served them to him after he had finished dancing. Dimly aware of the camera facing him after a squiffy glance, he entertained us with a performance. Dipping his thumb and ring finger into a little tea, he snapped his fingers three times, venerating the deities of the heavens above, the human realm, and the earth below, before saying the following words of blessing: May the leaders of the TAR enjoy a long life!

We quickly corrected him, asking him to say another, more traditional blessing: May you have good fortune, and may all things go as you wish! May you prosper! May you enjoy good health! May you enjoy eternal happiness!

Khedrup declined to answer our repeated questions about the local gods of this region, the summoning of deities, and so on. Only concerned about the next life, the orthodox Buddhist doctrine is unwilling to acknowledge the deities that merely play a role in this life. When pressed too much, such that it was impossible for him to pander to us any longer, Khedrup would say, “From my point of view, the ancient Tibetan religion featuring ritual sacrifices to and worship of local deities has become conventionalized. We do afford it respect, but with regard to Buddhist doctrine, this sort of superstition is of little significance. As the saying goes, ‘A good father plants a tree. A bad father makes a deity.’ This means planting a tree benefits one’s descendants, while making a deity brings disaster. What can those local deities do? When they were knocked to the ground during the “Cultural Revolution” they could do nothing to stop it. Yet when their temples were rebuilt and they were devoutly worshiped, people said this person was kicked by a deity or that one was put under a spell. You see, I’ve never believed in them, so they won’t do anything to me.”

It seems Khedrup’s point of view is still relatively orthodox: He takes an affirmative stance toward his religion regardless of the faction. For the most part he has a positive attitude regarding the hail prevention lama as well, thinking this falls in the category of Tibetan tantric qigong and requires scientific knowledge in the field of meteorology and practical experience. Nevertheless, he fundamentally rejects the local guardian deities, taking them to be nothing but bizarre fantasies of the supernatural.

Even so, on the whole he finds these cultural phenomena in his hometown rather endearing.

Khedrup’s Sacred Moment

The third day of the festival witnessed another climax, as Khedrup and Jikmé Palden performed a ritual for the local people at Gatshel Phuk Monastery which essentially consisted of having their heads touched by the *trülkus* for blessings of peace, luck, health, and longevity. On that day even people from the county seat ten miles away rushed to the scene, and all at once the usually quiet and secluded little monastery began to bustle with activity. Destroyed during the “Cultural Revolution”, Gatshel Phuk Monastery was rebuilt a couple years ago through voluntary fund-raising among the local people and

now houses twenty monks. Khedrup's elder brother Jikmé Palden was generally in charge of the affairs within the monastery. In that year, Khedrup followed the township propaganda team to the seat of the prefecture and performed there. The prefecture discovered his creative talent and wanted to employ him in the prefecture art troupe. He only made one stipulation, that his brother be employed along with him. Considering Jikmé Palden's knowledge of written Tibetan was also quite good, they employed both of the brothers, who have always relied on each other, the older brother Jikmé Palden being assigned to the prefecture middle school as a Tibetan language teacher. Since the restoration of the monastery, monks and common folks have longed for the two brothers or even just one of them to come back and manage the monastery, but regrettably their wish has remained unfulfilled.

On this day before performing the ritual, the elder brother Jikmé Palden shaved his younger brother Khedrup's long poet's hair while an old nun knelt on the floor collecting it. This hair is also said to be a relic of the *trülku* and will be put in some sacred place like inside a sutra pagoda or the belly of a Buddha statue.

Accompanied by Tibetan horns and an honor guard, monks helped Khedrup change into the *trülku's* *kāṣāya*, and in this sacred atmosphere his transformation was completed from human to super-human.

The brothers sat face to face in the sutra hall chanting sutras, the elder brother Jikmé Palden's cushion being slightly higher. They endured hardship for almost half a life before regaining the right to do this.

Finally the two brothers, one holding a vase and the other holding multicolored arrows, touched the heads of the common folks who packed the yard in front of the monastery, blessing them.

We interviewed the crowd of pilgrims on the spot, asking the local seniors, "You've witnessed Khedrup growing up. He is now a state cadre and writer. What do you think sets him apart from others?"

They all rushed to reply, "Oh, there's a world of difference. Both of the brothers are highly talented, being profoundly learned despite little schooling, and their faith has remained unshaken despite so much suffering. We raise money for the restoration of the monastery precisely because of them. Now we already have a religious site. All it's lacking is a Buddha who'll serve as its abbot. Both of them are state

cadres because they are highly learned. We all wish that one day they will be able to come back to the monastery. If that day comes, we'll be extremely happy and feel completely satisfied."

We stopped a group of smartly dressed young guys from the county seat and asked them, "Khedrup is a *trülku*, but he has a wife and kids. What do you young people think about that?"

They answered eagerly, "That's not weird. As Buddhists we came here on pilgrimage. However, we also frequently go to places of entertainment such as dance halls. He's a *trülku*, but in the end he's still a human. We admire him because he's learned and contributes to society. In our modern society as long as someone has a righteous mind, we would not say he has violated the religious teachings."

We continued, "Do you envy Khedrup?" and the young guys answered, "We've seen the programs he's developed and read the books he's written. We envy his talent."

Then we asked Khedrup's son Khedzin, "Is Khedrup your dad or the *trülku* today?" and he said, "The *trülku*." We followed up, asking, "Well, will you ever come back here to be a *trülku* in the future?" and he said he would study in the Chinese interior and decide after he was done.

We then turned to Phüntshok Drölkar, saying, "You came here to have your head touched too?" "Of course!" she said. She seems to have made a glorious return to her hometown and be in high spirits in the presence of her sisters. At present, *trülkus* enjoy a very high social position in rural areas, and women from the countryside who manage to become the wife of a *trülku* are naturally treated like queens as well. According to the strict rules of ordination in the Geluk school, marriage is not allowed; however, common folks are very tolerant indeed. The radiant Phüntshok Drölkar wore a long Tibetan-style dress and was cloaked in a cream-colored wool coat. With the graceful poise of a noblewoman, she sauntered among the bustling pilgrims, who cast well-intentioned looks of envy upon her.

Although she was born a farmer and is now a housewife, Phüntshok Drölkar has not lost her noble air and reasonable nature. However, one day when our camera team arrived at Khedrup's home in the town of Tsethang in Lhoka Prefecture, Phüntshok Drölkar stormed out in anger, again because her husband had been drinking; she went back to her family in Dranang by herself. Embarrassed and confused,

Khedrup took over the heavy responsibility of running the household, going grocery shopping, returning home to cook meals, and looking after his son and daughter and so on, yet never failed to drink beer. In addition, he had to accompany us while we were filming.

We went to the tombs of the Tibetan kings in Chonggyé County together. Standing atop the tall pyramid-like burial mound, Khedrup pointed to the landscape and talked about its history, proud of the brilliant past Lhoka and his people possessed. He told us he was getting ready to write a collection of biographies of the famous figures of Lhoka in ancient times, including eminent monks and folk beauties. There were many things he thought and spoke differently about. For instance, regarding the history of Tibetan funeral practices, he said:

“Sky burial started earlier than ground burial, dating as early as two thousand years ago when the first Tibetan king is said to have returned to the heavens above via a ladder to heaven. When the eighth king was murdered the princes snatched back their father’s corpse in a hurry, and had no choice but bury it in the ground, and that is how the practice of ground burial was established. The reason lies in the Tibetan habit of imitation. Everyone competed at imitating whatever some monarch did, following him blindly. It’s just like what the Sakya aphorism points out, ‘When one dog bites, the whole pack joins in’; why the first dog bit, however, no one knows.

Later cremation appeared, which was reserved for those with great attainments and practiced in order to secure their precious relics, or *śarīra*, for making *tshatsha* (votive objects). After that water burial appeared because when someone who had been stabbed was given a sky burial, it started to hail, which was considered a bad omen. All in all, sky burial has existed since ancient times and never been interrupted.”

Khedrup’s Secular Worries

Being faced with reality, Khedrup’s passion for history vanished on the way back home from Chonggyé.

He shook his head and sighed, “Well, nowadays this man’s qi of good fortune has run out!” With deep sympathy, the gentlemen in my film crew kept comforting him by saying, “Crows are just as black all over the world. The wife in any family is like that.” Later, the word “crow” became a specific term among our film crew referring exclu-

sively to one of the gentlemen's wives: "How's your crow?" "Well, my crow's..." My interpreter Dedzin, who was considered to be gentle and wise, was called a white crow, while I was given the affectionate nickname "Queen Crow".

In fact, we too dissuaded Khedrup from drinking excessively, first of all because it is an irresponsible way to treat one's body, second, because it costs money, and furthermore because it affects his image. However, Khedrup is a missionary of alcohol, preaching about the role it plays in triggering inspiration, and he wondered how I could write any compositions or even be a writer without ever having gotten drunk! He urged me try it out and see how it felt to be drunk. One afternoon, the head office of Lhoka Prefecture entertained us, and since the people of Lhoka are strong drinkers, no one in my crew could compare, and everyone got a little drunk, which created a warm and intimate atmosphere we would later remember with incomparable nostalgia.

Seeing no indication of his wife's return, someone in our camera crew proposed we accompany Khedrup there to ask her to come back. Khedrup went to the prefecture elementary school to excuse his son's absence and took his son and daughter with him. Our two Toyota vans drove straight to Dranang, which for country folks seemed a decent enough way to invite somebody back.

It was the busy autumn harvest season, and Phüntshok Drölkar had gone to the fields with her entire family to reap the grain. Only when she saw our cars park by the gate, did she amble on over. Phüntshok Drölkar's entire face was darkened with anger while Khedrup gave a wry smile. It happened to be the day of the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, so we began to enthusiastically preach about the significance of the family reunion that takes place on that day for the family's harmony and unity. Phüntshok Drölkar churned us some yak butter tea, her face stiffened. This continued until her father came back, who exchanged kind greetings with his son-in-law before turning to his daughter and advising her, "Even dogs wouldn't tear apart each other's fur when they fight." Only then did Phüntshok Drölkar begin to list her husband's shortcomings in a sheer unending stream, emboldened by a sense of righteousness:

"It was more than just tearing fur that brought us where we are now. Dad, you live far away, how can you know? You wouldn't have

said that if you lived with us.” (Her father said: “Whatever the *trülku* wants, you’d better please him.”) “Is that so? Some people can go steal, cheat people, engage in illegal trade, or have a bastard. Since people admire the *trülku* anyway, it’s alright when *trülkus* go and do all those things!” (We cut in: “He merely drinks a bit, which is good for writing.”) “Of course Khedrup can keep drinking, and keep writing, writing like the flowing waters of a stream, not saying what needs to be said and saying nonsense that shouldn’t be said.” (Khedrup responded: “Stop fussing. It still isn’t that big of a deal.”) “Not that big a deal? I can’t convince you anyhow. Neither can your relatives. Not even the secretary of the prefectural Party committee Phurjung can convince you. In the daytime you’re one person, and in the evening another. When you drink alcohol you say, ‘This is *my* house.’ Why don’t you go back to *your* house tomorrow?” (We cut in again: “Khedrup doesn’t beat you when he’s drunk, does he?”) “Beat me? I’d knock him down before he tried.” (Everybody laughed, and we asked her younger sister to persuade her.) “I’m fed up with him. Little Sis’, why don’t you marry him? If you did you’d know. I bet you’d stay three months at most before you ran back home. I want to live here with my kids. They love me.” (Her daughter echos: “Mummy, I want my mummy. I came out of mummy’s tummy.”) “From today on, you don’t have a daddy anymore, nor do you have any money....”

Khedrup faltered upon her impassioned monologue. After the fact, Khedrup made excuses for himself, saying that with a silver tongue, he just chose not to engage her, otherwise how could Phüntshok Drölkar have been a match for him?

These ordinary family matters provided an excellent plot for our TV special. However, whoever takes them seriously is a fool. The next day when the whole family returned home, there was harmony between the husband and his wife: the couple started singing in chorus in the car as we were driving along.

Ordinary family matters are but external manifestations of life in Khedrup’s world. Khedrup was anxious to have me get to know and understand his thoughts, soul, and mind, and present them as best I could in Chinese. The three terms, despite slight difference, are taken as one in Tibetan, which Khedrup related patiently again and again using the Buddhist doctrines and classic illustrations in order to explain himself. The Buddhist view of time and space constructs the

world of his thoughts and determines his method of understanding. “It would be impossible for me to accept the teachings of another religion, such as Christianity, or Daoism in particular. Daoism proposes that everything follows its natural course the way the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and that when people die, it’s like when a light goes out. How could that be? Everything in the world exists in a karmic relationship of cause and effect; one’s behavior in a previous life affects this life, and one’s behavior in this life affects the next life. All creatures in the universe are interconnected by thousands of threads, such that a finger could flip the water of the entire ocean and a breath might stir the air of the entire world...”

However, Buddhism has always advocated reason and sublated emotions; so being a writer and a poet, Khedrup’s emotional inner world was bound to clash with it. The people around him admire him in each of his roles, whether as a *trülku*, state cadre, or writer. He, however, said something that sounded just like a proverb: “Passers-by believe *chulo*⁶⁶ plants are so comfortable and warm in the sunshine, whereas the plants themselves feel they get their fill of suffering being blown by the wind and battered by the rain.” Living amidst the desires of the temporal world, standing between the monastic and the secular, the profane and the sacred, the city and country, and right and wrong temptations and calls present themselves to him from all sides. Outsiders only see him bathing in the sunlight; the tempest of trials he is experiencing on the inside is clear to him alone. Therefore, he often laments that life is really a boundless sea of suffering and cites the *Five Desires of the Senses*, a warning to the world from the Buddhist sutras, as a means of finding excuses to console himself. These five desires of the senses are:

- As the sense of sight lusts after beautiful images,
a moth darts toward a flame, only to burn in the fire.
- As the sense of hearing yearns for sweet sounds,
an antelope charges toward the sound of flute, only to be captured by a hunter.
- As the sense of taste favors delicious foods,
only when someone puts out bait is an animal’s life taken.
- As the sense of smell fancies fragrant aromas,
an insect lingers on the pistil of a flower, only to walk right into a web.
- As the sense of touch likes soft objects,
an elephant steps into a marsh, only to forfeit its life.

In such an unprecedented era, Khedrup inevitably had to search for a fulcrum on which to balance his inner world. He mocked himself with the following words:

My purpose as a *trülku* is to purify people's minds and save all living things; my purpose as a writer is to develop the field of Tibetan literature and educate the masses. Both occupations essentially serve the same end.

A Soul Afloat in the Never-ending Passage of Time

Khedrup was having trouble with his son's household registration last year when I last saw him.

He still had many things on his mind. He wanted to make achievements in the religious sphere, achieve brilliance in the literary sphere, and rear his son and daughter to become promising young people. What he could not figure out was why he had been unable to compose an amazing work and remained completely unknown in spite of his profound accumulation of traditional culture and practical experience, and in addition why many authors that write about Tibet such as myself have been able to achieve glaring prominence merely through word of mouth.

In that regard I indeed felt that Khedrup had come up short, so I advised him to do two things. One was to experience the outside world by traveling outside Lhoka Prefecture and Tibet. The other was to learn a new language that is much easier than classical Tibetan, say Chinese or English, and to use this new tool for absorption and participation.

I added, "...provided you don't want to be merely a local celebrity, to repeat what your forefathers have done, or to abandon yourself to fate."

Khedrup has recently completed an autobiographical poem, a long poem full of self-glorification, conceit, self-abasement, contrition, and self-irony, voicing that nameless sentiment deep in his heart. The poem is titled *Sershong*, meaning "golden basin", an abbreviation for golden skills and fortune that is deficient like an empty basin, with which Khedrup metaphorically makes reference to himself. After recounting his good relationships, wisdom, and diligence in the poem, as well as the golden talent, character, mind, memory, ideals, skills, and inspiration he possesses, and the golden praise he has received, he

laments that his fortuneless fate is empty like a basin. Life is full of disappointments, and good friends you can talk to are few and far between.

The last three stanzas of the poem read:

People say Sershong has no fortune in this life;
your time slips past like water, and your sun is starting to set.
As time carves lines on your forehead,
you'd better prepare provisions and oars.

Sershong, don't be distressed, my son;
though this life is an ocean of endless despair,
This world is vivid, neither black nor white.
Joy and pain always come in a pair.

True, empty words writers may provide;
but only if it's said do people know.
Marx and Śākyamuni walk side by side,
Bitter sea and vivid life are just as true.

“...prepare provisions and oars” is an advisement for him to ferry across to Samyé on the opposite shore, where there is an *ukhang*, or qi chamber, for collecting a dying person's last breath.

Khedrup, who claimed to have a silver tongue, was in the end unable to say exactly what he expected me to write about him. I would not decline his request, but I already told him, “Well I'll just scribble something. Don't go suing me for violating your human rights or...well...*trülku* rights.”

What is known as a *trülku* is in fact a *nirmāṇakāya*, one who has attained great spiritual accomplishments through generation after generation of self-cultivation and realization, who has already attained enlightenment and could live eternally in the realm of the Buddhas, but instead has chosen to be reborn in the human realm life after life for the salvation of all living things and the education and conversion of the masses until all living souls are free from the ocean of suffering. This is hard labor that continues indefinitely.

Khedrup, you are so unusual, whoever prescribed your fortune, good and bad. You wander on the margins of life, being everything but not exactly anything. At times I felt I had captured your true state of mind, but it escaped once more. Whether or not my unwillingness to think hard about these questions was a result of our differences in time and space, we were unable to share a common world of thoughts. However, I will still express my heartfelt sympathy to you with the

thoughts of a common person: In the eternal stream of years to come that never rests and the eternal cycle of rebirths that is never exhausted, your soul has been predestined to have no means of breaking free. If there really is a next life, and if the soul really can be reborn, you might live for generation upon generation in the gap between emotions and reason, between the secular and the religious unable to attain inner peace. Do you know the profound mystery that lies therein?

To my mind, that is probably, or rather, must be something that was determined based on the innate character of that very same soul that was once used by your ancestors.

Chapter 4: A Countryside Covered with Deities

Legends in the Secret Mountain Valleys

At the beginning of this chapter, I would like to invite readers to make their way to two mountain valleys with vast horizons and landscapes. Both of these valleys lie along the banks of the Lhasa River. More precisely, the latter of the two valleys is located at the confluence of the Lhasa and Yarlung Tsangpo Rivers. Based on our common knowledge and our own experience, settlement along rivers is an instinctual habit unconsciously shared by early humans, so it follows that that region should definitely have a rich cultural heritage.

Let us wander together on plains brimming with ancient customs. These are wide river valleys suitable for agriculture. Valleys often take the shape of fan-shaped slopes which are sometimes known as alluvial and proluvial fans in scientific terms. The traces left across the mountains by summer downpours run dry sometimes consist of flaky gravel. In the valley there are fields and gardens, and villages. The villages are quietly situated in a specific fixed location with identical white walls and flat roofs and are exceptionally peaceful. The borders of the field surrounding a village consist of poplar and willow trees planted by hand, and on either slope of the valley there are clumps of wild shrubs, some of which are dense and some sparse. Under a clear and windless sky, the sun shines with its gleaming white rays. In the valley it is perfectly still, so still that you could hear a butterfly flapping its wings.

In this manner the mountain valley unfolds in form and countenance before us through its natural and manmade characteristics. As a first choice, we will head for Sangphu valley. That is a place I have been to many times. It is another valley, which runs parallel to the one where Thragu Village is located. Between the two valleys, the very mountain from an illustration of the six symbols of longevity appears on a snowy day. The distance separating Sangphu Valley and Lhasa is not great. To get there from the airport, just enter downtown Lhasa and cross the Neu Bridge over the Lhasa River. The road to Thragu is on one side. Walk westward along the river, passing the Neu Township Hall. Heading south from there would take you to Thragu Village. Head west, skirting around the ridge to enter the valley and hike down to its base.

This valley and its village were named after the Sangphu Monastery built there, and the monastery's name aptly means "secret valley". In approximately the 11th or 12th century CE, the Later Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet commenced. The disciples of the eminent Indian monk Atiśa, the two brothers⁶⁷ Lekpé Sherap and Loden Sherap, searched everywhere for a place to build a monastery. Suddenly, a kite flew off with Lekpé Sherap's bronze Tingsha cymbals in its beak. He asked anxiously where the bird was headed. The answer was "I am keeping it a secret for the time being", and that is how the valley got the name Sangphu – secret valley. Sangphu Monastery has thereby become the earliest and most famous Kadampa monastery. The Kadampa school no longer exists in the present day. It was the predecessor of the current Tibetan Buddhist Gelukpa school, and has already served its purpose in history. Before the 1960's the thousands of monks of the three big monasteries of Lhasa, Drepung, Ganden, and Sera, would converge en masse upon Sangphu Monastery every year at the summer religious festival⁶⁸ during the fourth Tibetan lunar month, and hold a grand Buddhist ceremony.

Sangphu Monastery is now in ruins. Only a small part of the monastery consisting of the sutra hall and the Dharmapāla hall has been restored. The administrator of the monastery is Ngawang Ganden, a man possessed by the guardian deity of the temple and region, Sethrap. When I first interviewed him in 1991, he was 68. It was he who explained to us the history of this temple and the local guardian deity. He also recounted for us the year in which he was first chosen by the deity, as well as what he experienced and felt while communicating the deity's commands.

In the year when two eminent monks traveled all the way to Tibet to spread the teachings of Buddhism, the Buddhist disciple Atsara used an elephant to carry the canonical works of the *Kanjur* and bring them there. Loden Sherap bid him to stay and serve as the monastery's guardian deity, but Atsara did not want to. Loden Sherap thought of a trick to get him to stay. He pretended to accidentally let his prayer beads slip through his hands and drop down the toilet. Tibetan toilets are tall and their bottom part is as big as a small room. Atsara, not realizing it was a trick, dove down to the bottom of the toilet to pick up the prayer beads. Then, Loden Sherap seized the opportunity and covered the opening. That is how Atsara was forced

to become the Dharmapāla Sethrap. If we look at his temple hall, we find that it is a converted toilet.

The four walls of the narrow, tall Dharmapāla hall are painted with black, shiny lacquer, just like a typical Tantra hall. On top of that, a vast area is covered with terrifying images outlined in gold. The clay sculpture of Sethrap, cloaked in darkness, has menacing features, a black (or perhaps red) face and fangs. His head bears a deity's crown. It is said that that crown is supposed to weigh over 30 pounds. Ngawang Ganden would wear it too when he summoned the deity to descend into his body. Now, Ngawang Ganden no longer summons the deity to descend into his body. He just chants the Dharmapāla Sutra. When he chants the words of the sutra, his voice is extraordinarily loud and booming, and quite deep. His pride and confidence are quite incongruous with his very thin and small build.

Sethrap's power is said to be great. In a certain year he once transformed himself into a divine wasp and caused havoc in the Potala Palace. Later he was bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha⁶⁹ by the fifth Dalai Lama. He is not only the guardian deity of the Sangphu region, but also that of the far-away region of Drakyap in eastern Tibet. Both of these monasteries were founded by the same person. Later on, when I was interviewing people in Drakyap County, I heard the locals say that when people from Drakyap go out, their cars do not overturn. If an outsider rides in a Drakyap car, the car will not overturn either due to the effect of Sethrap's protection. However, the locals also said that not that long ago, the Drakyap Monastery's car had also overturned and that this meant that in spite of the fact that Sethrap's power was great, the passengers' problem was that their belief in the deity and the sincerity of that belief still wavered.

Aside from Sethrap, Sangphu Valley has whole host of other guardian deities. Accordingly, the deities Ngawang Ganden was possessed by also included, in order of priority, the earth deity Neu Lutsen, who is a deity from the netherworld; and two lesser deities, Tsangtong Gyelpo and Dara, who are also called the incarnations of Sethrap's wisdom and voice. There was also a war deity, Dra Tsen.

Minor local deities of this type are not deities in the strict sense of the word. Strictly speaking, they should be considered as belonging to the category of entities such as ghosts and spirits. For example, Tsang-

tong Gyelpo and Dara were once *tsedrung*, monastic secular officials of the seventh rank in the Tibetan government. They were once ordered to come here to issue some proclamation, and were given instructions to read the proclamation in a low tone of voice, in order to avoid disturbing the deities, but they were too cocky and began reading the proclamation, contrary to their instructions, in a loud tone of voice. As a result, when they were getting ready to mount their horses and head back, a large flock of crows swooped in, unseating them both from their horses and causing them to fall to their deaths. These two souls were disobedient and roamed about the region refusing to leave. Later, they were subdued by Sethrap and made guardian deities.

Valleys are a mountain range's wrinkles. Along the Lhasa River, along the Yarlung Tsangpo River, along every well-known and less well-known water flow in Tibet, the mountain ranges continuously undulate. There are countless valleys like Sangphu. In each one in which there is human activity, there is surely a complete system of guardian deities. In this landscape, in which we may raise our eyes to gaze at natural and manmade things, a time and space still exist, which can neither be seen nor heard.

Local Deities, Where Do You Come From, and What Have You Come to Do?

Regarding this point, let us follow the current downstream, going straight to the place where the Lhasa and Yarlung Tsangpo Rivers meet – Chushur. Chushur's Sephu Valley is a little further away from the two famous rivers. The local deities of Sephu are even a bit more numerous than those of Sangphu. Furthermore, regarding Tibet's mysteriousness and symbolism, this valley is also better endowed, so it can probably provide more help in explaining those questions this author is trying to shed light on.

Sephu Valley is a relatively deep and long ravine, accommodating seven natural settlements and at least three monasteries. Along the road there are stupa-shaped objects. I dimly remember hearing that they are for sacrificing to some Buddha, deity, or *ḍākinī*. Ladders are drawn with lime on the mountain side along the side of the road from the bottom to the top, whose concrete image is composed of two vertical lines and a number of horizontal ones. The abstract image, on

the other hand, is one of droplets, drip, drip, dripping from the foot of the mountain to its summit. This is a special pastime of the people of Chushur. Perhaps only the people of Chushur have kept some ancient custom alive, while that custom has already disappeared in other places.

Tobgyé was born in the Year of the Monkey in Thongkhonang Village, and it just so happens that this year is the same zodiac year as the 36-year-old's year of birth. In front of the cliff opposite his home, he is pointing to a ladder to heaven drawn with chalk dust, and says he drew this ladder himself. He drew it, this "lungta",⁷⁰ because his fortune was failing him; his fortune could ascend, climbing up the rungs of the ladder. For the same purpose, he invited monks to come that day and recite sutras in his home, and stick a big white flag with a blue border on the stone wall of his house, a *lungta*, or wind horse⁷¹ flag. It was also meant as a prayer for his fortunes to rise.

The locals have several different explanations for the custom of drawing white ladders. The version having to do with fortune is one of them. If someone in the family dies, one is drawn as well, in order to save the souls of the dead so that they might ascend to heaven. Another explanation is the animal zodiac year corresponding to that of one's year of birth. Whether Han Chinese or Tibetan, all consider a year with the same zodiac sign as one's year of birth to be a bump in the road which is difficult to get past. Drawing a white ladder by the side of the road is meant to draw the attention of people who are on the road, so that they cannot help but utter a few lines from the sutras, thus dispelling disaster. This serves the exact same function as when Han Chinese post notes saying, "The heavens are yellow and the earth is green, if your young son cries at night, a superior person will read these words, letting him sleep till the sun comes up".

Besides drawing ladders to heaven, other measures for guarding against disasters related to the zodiac year of one's birth which I have come across while collecting information include: one, dressing in the newest or oldest clothing to attract people's attention and make them talk about you, which dispells disaster; two, wearing a yellow silk tunic with a swastika sewn on the back, using the motif for protection; three, sewing nine scales of armor (taken from the armor of ancient warriors) on the right shoulder for men and on the left shoulder for women, so that deities and demons will not bother you; four, hanging a special flag symbolizing the person's horoscope under the five-

colored banner, for example, a person whose fate is governed by the element earth hangs up a yellow flag, a person whose fate is governed by the element metal hangs up a white flag, and so on.

In short, the people of Chushur just love drawing ladders to heaven.

The naming of every village in Sephu Valley is said to be connected to an incident involving the disappearance of and search for a horse. Legend has it that once upon a time long, long ago Tibet's soil was barren. The Emperor of China observed the situation clearly and gathered the essence of soil fertility in a vase. The vase flew with peacock feathers to the land of Tibet, with the intention that the fertility would be scattered about the entire plateau of the Land of Snows in a year's time, but two or three years passed, and the vase still had not flown back. Anxious, the Emperor selected and dispatched a white man who rode a white horse to go on ahead in search of it. As he neared Sephu Valley he questioned the locals as to whether or not they had seen the vase. The answer he received was: "Samé", we have not seen it. Subsequently, that place was called Samé. After he had entered the valley, the white horse ran off. The place where the horse ran off is called "Talammoshü", the horse ran [away]. When the white man was looking for the white horse, someone told him "Yor", which means "It is certain", and so that village was called Yor Village. Someone else told him, "The horse passed by the front of my house," and so that place is called "Talamzhika", the house where the horse was seen. After he had gone to almost all of the villages in the valley, he called the last village "Sé" with the meaning "end" or "finish". Then, when he reached Thongkhonang Village, someone pointed to the top of the mountain far in the distance and said "The white horse is there," and as it so happens, the name "Thongkhonang" means to have seen something at the same time as one has heard it.

In Thongkhonang Village, the 60-year-old Wangden and the 70-year-old blind, elderly man Ngawang Chöphel told us this very famous tale of the white man and the white horse. The white man's name was Jowo Chingkar, "the Śākya who wears a white felt robe", who was probably some corporeal manifestation⁷² of Śākyamuni. When the white man in Thongkhonang did see the horse far in the distance on the mountain opposite him, he suddenly felt a splinter

stick in the sole of his foot. The moment he bent over to pull out the splinter, he turned to stone, frozen in that very position. At the same time, the white horse on the mountain opposite him also turned into a statue. Before that, the horse had given birth to four foals. Today, we can spot a group of horses consisting of one adult and four foals far off in the distance. On the face of the mountain we can also see a white stone man who is bowing down to pull out a splinter.

This is precisely how they became the guardian deities, or “*yülha*”, of Sephu Valley. The *yül* in *yülha* means “place” and *lha* means “deity”. They are not just the guardian deities of the seven villages in the valley. The white man and the white horse serve as the leaders of the procession for all of Takar Township, within the ravine and outside it, when they celebrate the Ongkor Festival. On the other hand, in the area around Jang Village beyond the mountains, the white man Jowo Chingkar has become the deity who presides over hail.

The vase mentioned in the tale also has its place. When the vase was flying along, a rabbit pinned it down under its belly on Ribong Mountain (Rabbit Mountain) and would not let it go. In order to keep the rich and fertile soil in its possession over a long period of time, the rabbit called on all of the local earth deities and guardian deities to rush to it and pin its body down. It is said that that mountain is still shaped like a rabbit pinning down a vase. Later, a monastery, Ribong Monastery, or Rabbit Monastery, was built on top of it. The people of the Sephu ravine say that the reason why crop yield in the region around Ribong Monastery is high despite the scarcity of water and why the harvest in Sephu Valley is bad despite its abundant water supply, is because the fertile soil [from the vase] could not make its way to Sephu Valley to be scattered there. The reason why the white man and the white horse have remained here in this manner was to provide a modicum of compensation by preserving the safety of the people and their livestock and ensuring a bumper harvest.

The blind, elderly man, Ngawang Chöphel, who related these circumstances, saw his mother in childbirth at the age of three, which made him go blind. The Tibetans say that a child who sees a woman give birth is apt to develop the physical disabilities of a pug nose and blindness. That is exactly how Ngawang Chöphel explained it.

The Tsen Deities and the King of the Myriad Tsen

Leaving Thongkhonang Village, we once again went to gather information on the origins of Wang Modro, the deity who presides over hail. The elderly 60-year-old woman, Peldrön might serve as a witness in a certain sense of the word. In a particular year during her great-grandfather's lifetime, a monk named Wang Modro who was on a pilgrimage came from Sikkim. He crossed the Himalayas and walked such a long distance, because he had vowed that he would make pilgrimage to Tsedrup, Dechen, and Ribong Monasteries. When he lodged at Peldrön's great-grandfather's house, he had already visited the former two monasteries. Along the way a splinter had stuck into his foot, and at that time the wound was already infected and festering, and he may have had blood poisoning as well. However he would not be dissuaded and was insistent on going to Ribong Monastery. So it was that he died of illness while crossing Papo La Mountain. Wang Modro died on this meadow with a river in front of him and a cliff behind him. Due to the fervency of his vow and his inability to fulfill it, after he died his soul did not want to leave and be reborn, and instead became a violent, ferocious ghost. When he gets angry and flies into a rage the entire valley is engulfed in a hailstorm. He is particularly apt to get angry during summer, the season of his death. That is why he became the famous Wang Modro *tsen*, the local *serdak*, or Lord of Hail. A small shrine, or "tenkhang", was erected on the site where he died. People are not allowed to sing and dance there, or to make a lot of noise, nor are they allowed to cut wood to make charcoal there. The old house where he lodged for the night all those years ago has been maintained by Peldrön's family. It was there over tea that we heard the story of his deeds. Interestingly enough, this *tsen* Wang Modro is only willing to do favors for members of Peldrön's family; if someone else comes to the *tenkhang* to offer smoke to him in a *lhasang* ceremony, he makes it hail, whereas if Peldrön or a member of her family comes, he does not. Thus even after the distribution of farmland to individual households, whenever Peldrön's family goes to the top of the mountain to offer smoke to him, a work-point is recorded for her in the village. Peldrön is the head of this household. In her early years she took a husband who was adopted into the family. Later she took in another somewhat younger wife for her husband. As is usually the case with this type of family, it seems to me that this

one husband and two wives get along perfectly well together. Actually, the children from this husband and the other wife no longer have any blood ties with Peldrön's family. When they go to offer incense is the offering still effective? "It is also effective", said the people in the village. Apparently, deities and ferocious ghosts are of the same mind as the Tibetan people, in that they only pay attention to the name of the house and not to bloodlines.

Tsen is what a monk becomes after he dies. Its outward appearance and *tenkhang* are red. *Gyelpo* is what a local king becomes after he dies. Its outward appearance and *tenkhang* are white. *Kyelha* are birth deities. They only influence people, either positively or negatively, who are born within the scope of a small area under their jurisdiction. Lesser deities do have background stories as well, but people have mostly forgotten them already.

In this valley there are also a couple of minor deities that fall under the categories of *gyelpo* and *kyelha*, one called Chökyi Gyelpo and the other called Künga. It is said that Künga is an incarnation of the *gyelpo* Pehar, the deity of worldly life. The *gyelpo* Chökyi, on the other hand, is the same entity as the *gyelpo* Nyangri of Lhasa. The *gyelpo* Nyangri also belongs to the category "lu", subterranean water deities. The locals, who know that it is the way it is but not why it is so, explained, "We just offer sacrifices to the all of the deities at New Year and on auspicious days anyhow, it does not matter what their background stories are."

The story the people of Chushur do delight in telling is that of "Dampa Tshering of Chushur", which is famous throughout the Tibetan lands. This story was first collected to be transmitted to the Chinese-speaking world by the scholar Liao Dongfan. The version I encountered in the countryside is pretty much the same as that which he narrated.

Around the time of the Qing dynasty, there was a butcher (some say a blacksmith, others a rich man) in Chushur named Dampa Tshering. Throughout his entire life, he primarily brought offerings to a *thangka* (brocade painting) of Tsenmar. Every time he got sick, he offered the blood of oxen and sheep as a sacrifice in front of the *thangka*, ensuring his recovery. However, during a final bout of severe illness, his offerings had lost their effectiveness. Dampa Tshering, on the brink of death, stood in the middle of his house dressed in full

armor and drew his bow shooting an arrow at Tsenmar which hit him straight in the forehead, saying, "I, Dampa Tshering of Chushur, will not die lying down!" When he had finished saying those words he died on his feet. Following him, the six men and six horses in his retinue accompanied their master in death.

Subsequently, the people in the region around Samyé Monastery saw a troop of seven men on horseback come charging like wild (some people have seen this also from time to time since then) heading straight for the *ukhang* of Samyé Monastery driving out the *ukhang's* main deity Tsenmar, thus unseating the King of the Myriad *Tsen* from his throne. For a very long time thereafter, Tsenmar took flight and his divinity was discredited. Even when the monastery held a Dharma assembly for the purpose of summoning the deity Tsenmar to descend into someone's body, the deity could not descend. The deity who took possession of the body was always Dampa Tshering and he used the possession of the body meant for Tsenmar to hurl abuse at him. It is said that later an eminent monk (according to one version, the fifth patriarch of the Sakya school) recognized him for who he was and admonished him, asking him why he should persist in this manner, making trouble for everyone. He said "Whatever you want, we can talk it over!"

Dampa Tshering did indeed make a request: to drink the same tea and eat the same porridge as the monks. Following what he said, Samyé Monastery built a *tenkhang* temple for this purpose next to the monastery, regularly offering him sacrifices of tea and porridge. In this way Dampa Tshering was pacified, and Tsenmar returned once more to his throne.

.....Later on while I was at Samyé Monastery verifying this legend, I discovered a story about the same figure, but since the setting of the story is different and the sentiment as well, the story's conclusion and the impression it gives us are different. Among the people of Samyé, Dampa Tshering was a real troublemaker. Tsenmar withdrew because he disdained fighting with him only to temporarily gain the upper hand. In addition, when the monks offered tea and porridge to Dampa Tshering they were actually being quite disrespectful. The tea and porridge were leftovers.

This legend of the people of Samyé tells that Dampa Tshering of Chushur was once very powerful. When he was murdered, he swore

he would turn into a ferocious ghost and avenge himself. He ran to Samyé monastery and chased Tsenmar to the sacred mountain Yarlha Shampo, and began managing the *ukhang* (qi chamber) himself. When the deity was summoned to descend, the fifth patriarch of the Sakya school Künga Rinchen just happened to be there and discovered that the deity who had taken possession of the body was not Tsenmar at all, so he leaned on his walking stick with his hand and braced his chin with it forming the mudra of the Vajra Buddha,⁷³ which made Dampa Tshering unable to descend and take possession of the body. Someone beside him noticed what the master was doing, and Künga Rinchen explained, “That is a fake Tsenmar.” At that, the multitude of people encircled and pursued Dampa Tshering in order to obstruct and intercept him. Hastily, he transformed himself into a little snake and hid in a monk’s shoe which was lying in front of the assembly hall, where he was then captured by Künga Rinchen, who said, “From now on we can only give you our leftover food and tea.” So a *tenkhang* was built in front of the *ukhang*, and the people dumped all their leftover tea and food there. The narration of the story given by people of Samyé is enough to cancel out every bit of the haughtiness of the people of Chushur. The buildings belonging to the temple complex, which were destroyed during the “Cultural Revolution”, are being rebuilt one after the other. Tsenmar’s *ukhang* has been enlarged several times over and has been built in a sumptuous and stately style, but apparently the reconstruction of Dampa Tshering’s *tenkhang* is not in the works. Outside his hometown he has obviously been sidelined.

Even so, the people of Lhasa still frequently say to this day that the people of Chushur are tough customers. The characterization of the people of Chushur as people who are not to be messed with derives from the figure of Dampa Tshering of Chushur.

Seeing that we have already come to discuss the *tsen*, which are unique to Tibet, and Tsenmar, the King of the Myriad *Tsen*, we might as well follow up by giving an account of Tsenmar’s mundane past. The story given below was narrated by the abbot of Samyé Monastery, Ngawang Gyelpo. The Samyé version of the story of Dampa Tshering of Chushur given above was narrated by him as well.

At one point in his lifetime, Tsenmar was a prince of Liyül (the region of Hotan in modern-day Xinjiang), but his every thought was

directed toward the Buddha and had no pretensions to the throne (according to another version he left his home to become a *bbikṣu*⁷⁴), and his good deeds were vast in scope. Once, a princess of a neighboring country was bitten by a poisonous snake while passing through his country. The prince sucked the venom out of her, saving the princess. Some treacherous court officials learned of this incident and used it to further their own interests, slandering him to the king saying that the prince did not devote any efforts whatsoever toward his proper duties, indulged madly in women's charms, etc. The prince and princess refuted the accusations over and over but to no avail. In the end, the king of Liyül killed his son, and the princess took her own life by throwing herself in the river. The prince, who found it difficult to curb his sorrow and anger, vowed he would turn into a demon after his death, to discipline those who had slandered him and those who could not distinguish between right and wrong.

His ghost fulfilled its wishes by killing those who had set him up and turned into the fiercest and most violent ferocious ghost in Jambudvīpa, namely the "Barwa Pündün", or the seven wrathful brothers, the most famous among the *tsen* deities. These seven men were all transformations of the spirit of the prince of Liyül, each incarnation representing a different ability he gained. No one could oppose them. This group roamed the world without fear of retaliation. Riding on a great wind, he arrived in ancient India where he finally met the tantric master Padmasambhava and was able to give vent to the anger which swelled within his breast. He transformed himself into seven wolves which faced the master and let out seven long howls. Seeing this, Padmasambhava knew that this was happening for a reason and used the Vajra method to make them transform into seven virtuous men on horseback. He granted them consolation and persuaded them with kind words, saying, "Your days of wandering about and doing evil end here. Let me tame you and bestow upon you the beneficent power and support of the Buddha!" Fittingly, at this time Thrisong Detsen happened to be founding Samyé Monastery, so Padmasambhava brought him along with him to Tibet and designated him leader of the hundred thousand *tsen* deities of Tibet, or Tsenmar, who presides over the *ukhang* (*qi* chamber) of Samyé Monastery and has dominion over the breath of life of the commoners on the plateau of the Land of Snows.

Besides this story, I have also investigated the history of the origins of numerous *tsen* deities in various different regions of Tibet and induced the following general rules governing this type of miraculous conception. The first of these rules is that they are the product of a transformation of souls of the dead. In Tibetan they are called “mishi tsenchak”, or “people who have died and become *tsen*”. The second rule is that they are not everyday people, but rather people who possess a certain capability, such as monks (who turn into *tsen*) and kings (who turn into *gyelpo*). The third rule is that their causes of death and their thoughts in the moment before death are the most crucial factors. Those who have suffered an injustice or humiliation, or who were unable to avenge a great wrong done to them, have evil thoughts before death. The minds of those who obsess about a certain subject, or have not fulfilled their lofty aspirations, are filled with regret at the moment of death. Those who entertain all sorts of worldly thoughts, for example, the various mental states revolving around attachment, worry, missing, longing, or regret with respect to affection, property, life, and every kind of unresolved matter in this life, cannot in general enter the gate of death with peaceful minds and balanced life energy, having completely eliminated all thoughts. The souls of such people have difficulty entering the six paths of *saṃsāra* and turn into wandering souls and wild demons without homes. In such cases, the usual method is to perform a ceremony relying on the power of the Buddha’s teachings to release the souls from their suffering and help them cease their wandering, in order to bring the souls of the deceased who have lost their way to find their way home and to go where they are supposed to go. Not all such wandering souls can turn into *tsen*. Therefore the fourth, most important point is that the soul must be bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha by an eminent monk and *trülku*, who thereby turns it into a *tsen*.

Investigation of the Deities and a Record of Their Genealogy

There was a time when both Gyatsho and I were wild about conducting investigations into the genealogy of the deities in various different parts of Tibet. Wherever we came to, after we had asked about the village’s population and number of livestock, we would immediately dive into an investigation of the deities, asking questions, such as

“Who is the supreme deity in your region? List the deities in hierarchical order, along with their background stories and functions. In what manner do the deities display their presence and show their influence? Who speaks on their behalf? What impact do they have? Do you believe in them? What are the differences in the intensity of belief between the different age-groups and social classes?” and all that. It was like asking them how many people there were in their families, what the eldest child was doing, and where the second eldest had gone. The majority of the people were absolutely delighted to answer these questions; others were entirely indifferent to them, while a few questioned where our intentions lay. Some just laughed, saying, “So many task forces have come to our village, but you are the first to ask about that!” In general, those who wanted to talk about the subject but could not explain it clearly were in the majority. The general impression was that the world of deities in the Tibetan countryside, this beacon of a bygone era, had already begun to dim in the middle of the 20th century when it began entering the modern age. Although there has been a renaissance following the opening toward religion that has taken place within the past few years, it is but a final glimmer of radiance.

The system of deities in the prefectures of Lhasa and Lhoka is given in hierarchical order below from highest to lowest, based on the impressions I got while conducting interviews there.

The high-ranking guardian deities are the mightiest two Dharma-pālas in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Palden Lhamo and Gönpo. It is said that because they swore an oath to protect the Dharma when Śākyamuni was alive, they have three eyes. What sets them apart from the multitude of protectors of the Dharma such as Hayagrīva and Vajrabhairava is that while the latter solely belong to the realm of religion, they on the other hand have more of a folkloric quality about them. However, the greatest difference that sets them apart from the deities of the countryside is that they are transcendental deities, who not only influence people in this life but also in the next. In the folk belief of some agricultural areas, they also function as local earth deities.

A little further down in the hierarchy are the “Tenma Chunyi”, or twelve female deities of the family Tenma, who are also Tibetan protectors of the Dharma. Some say they are corporeal manifestations of Palden Lhamo. The guardian deity of Seshing Village, a suburb of

Lhasa, is one of the twelve Tenmas. Her tiny *tenkhang* shrine sits in the fork of an old tree. Since she herself is a deity who came from out of town, guests are especially welcome in this village. Thus, in more than half of the households, the man of the house was taken in to the home from another family.

If we were to enumerate the worldly deities who really belong to this region, we would probably start with the local *yülba* deities. Of course, such a position may also be concurrently held by the high-ranking deities mentioned above, but I think that once they have been identified as *yülba*, they have been naturalized within the region. Aside from the white man with his white horse in the Sephu ravine, who is a local deity with a distinct outward appearance, and who has a pedigree, the image of most of the *yülba* I know of is blurred and their origins unclear. Only their empty names remain.

Tsen are the most intimate kind of deities. Picky people frequently correct this statement, saying, “*Tsen* are not deities. The word for deity is *lha*, and *tsen* are not *lha*. *Tsen* are *tsen*.” Maybe we should define them more appropriately as half human half ghost, half deity half ghost, or as a spirit that is something in between a person (soul), a ghost, a deity, and a demon. They belong among the chaotic deities as in the famous quotation regarding Confucius, “The Master does not speak of strange powers and chaotic deities,”⁷⁵ and are akin to the ferocious ghosts of the Han Chinese regions. A Tibetan friend of mine once explained the *tsen* to me by saying, “They are wandering souls and wild demons, who devote no efforts toward a proper occupation and specialize in mischief-making.” Actually, people are more afraid of *tsen* than that they respect them, and this so-called respect is in turn nothing more than that mentioned by Confucius in the statement “Respect ghosts and deities, but keep them at a distance.”⁷⁶ People who make offerings to *tsen* do not go so far as to pray for well-being, but rather that the *tsen* not bring disaster upon them. An example of such a prayer is: “Oh, don’t do me harm! Oh, don’t make it hail!” So I always wondered why people would want to construct their own cage and subjugate themselves to an alien force of their own making. This really echoes the sentiment of the saying “A bad father makes a deity.”⁷⁷ In particular, what is thoroughly preposterous and endearing is that apparently the disposition of the *tsen* of a certain village near the county seat of Meldro Gungkar is such that he only

meets local villagers with opposition, while treating outsiders in a friendly manner – a classic case of biting the hand that feeds you.

Gyelpo technically belong on the same level in the hierarchy as *tseu*, but they seem to have a much milder disposition. Since they have a mild disposition, they are neglected and do not possess any great amount of power, and so they are gradually being forgotten. Some people in a farming village in Dranang bring offerings to a *gyelpo* deity on their rooftops. I asked them about it over and over, but I could not get a straight answer from them. The people offering the sacrifices did not know why they should make the offerings and simply said that it might benefit them.

Kyelha are Birth Deities. There can be a number of Birth Deities in any one village, which divide their jurisdiction over that village. Those who are born within the scope of a certain *kyelha*'s jurisdiction have to return there to sacrifice to that *kyelha* at the customary time no matter where they go in the future, or else someone must make the sacrifice in their stead. However, devotion to the *kyelha* seems to be confined to certain locations in Lhoka Prefecture. The custom is rarely seen in the region of Lhasa. With the development of society, even farm people find it hard to maintain the ties to their native lands, which means the neglect of sacrifices can only become more and more severe. It seems birth deities are also on the list of endangered species.

Household deities have an even smaller scope of power, being restricted to a specific clan. In the middle of a grainfield near the county seat of Tölung Dechen, there is a very fine *tenkhang*. When we asked the people working in the field whom the sacrifices were offered to, they said to the household deity of family so and so. Since that family built a new house and moved away, they built this shrine at their old address so offerings could be made to them at fixed times to thank the household deity for his protection in the past. It seems household deities have former places of residence too.

The household deity, in turn, often takes the form of the stove deity. This probably reflects the fact that for people with a traditional conception of life food was the highest priority. At the same time, among the deities of the three realms the stove deity also belongs to the class of deities of the subterranean realm. For this reason, its image as an object of veneration often takes the form of a scorpion. On the wall above the stovetop in every house, a scorpion is drawn with chalk

dust. Both concrete images of scorpions and abstract ones are drawn. The taboos associated with the stove deity have remained intact when compared with those associated with the deities mentioned above, and this is quite understandable.

The stove deity is particularly fond of cleanliness. It is not permitted to burn anything in the stove's fire that is unclean, including things such as hair and bones. In addition, it is not permitted to let soup boil over. Otherwise the members of the family will get ringworm, develop wheals, or other such skin diseases which are cumulatively referred to as "dragon diseases" in Tibetan medicine. In Gyala Township in Tölung Dechen County, every year when the harvest had been reaped, white stones symbolizing the Earth Mother and the Goddess of the Harvest are invited into the home and placed on the top of the stove. Every year the first thing that must be done with the newly threshed grain is to place a handful on the top of the stove. In the spring of the following year the white stones will be invited to return to the fields, and the grain on the top of the stove is the first to be cast in the fields. If something accidentally boils over during cooking, the female head of the household will promptly blurt out, "It wasn't me. It was the neighbor's tea that boiled over!" If a new kitchen has been built, you have to say to the stove deity, "We have built you a new palace. Please move there!" Last year I spent Tibetan New Year in the town of Chedezhö in Gongkar County. At the crack of dawn on Tibetan New Year's Day, I followed the female head of the household through the streets and alleyways to her family's old house where she made an offering to the stove deity. She brought kindling and lit a fire with it, poured spirits in the fire as an offering, strewed *tsampa*, and arranged all sorts of offerings on the top of the stove as well. While she was doing all this, her mouth kept rattling off conventional phrases expressing gratitude for the benevolence bestowed upon her family in the past uninterruptedly.

Deities with an even smaller scope of power, so small that they only belong to oneself, are destiny deities, masters of each person's life. Destiny deities are attached to the right shoulder of men and to the left shoulder of women. They have the outward appearance of lanterns, lanterns which cannot be seen with the physical eye. That is why Tibetans have never directly used their shoulders when they work. The rope with which they harness their water baskets to their

backs is only ever fastened across the body below the shoulder area. They are afraid of patting someone on the shoulder, especially of a girl patting a boy on his right shoulder. In eastern Tibet where people believe in Bön, a famous Bön painter told me that the deities in a person's body do not reside in a fixed location, but move around just as a clock moves. There are also people who believe that the destiny deity is the soul. These are all some relatively widespread deities. In Jang Village in Chushur County, I have also heard of a kind of deity called "Nyengö", which has the outward appearance of an ox and is said to come from the ocean. People have not built a *tenkhang* for it. It resides instead in the corner of the threshing floor. When it hides among the herd of cattle, having the same color coat as the cattle, the cattle's milk production will be high and they will also fatten up quite nicely. However, sometimes the deity hurts people, so the people prepare fodder to coax it into leaving. Nyengö might be a livestock deity. When the female medium of said village has the deity Nyengö descend into her body, she has to eat grass.

The deity, or sprite, which is smallest in size is, according to the scholar Liao Dongfan, the size of a thumb and is called a Tshoporang. They carry five-colored lucky arrows on their backs, and a man and woman who are hit by one of their arrows are subsequently destined to marry each other, quite like Cupid, the god of love, from the frescoes. However, according to another version when small children throw a tantrum the grown-ups say, "Tshoporang is here!" to scare the child.

These are all deities belonging to Tibetan farming villages. As for the pasturelands, they have another system of deities, for example, mountain deities, tent deities, and road deities, which the author has already sketched in *Traveling Through Northern Tibet*.⁷⁸

Tibetan Buddhism has, looking down on these folk deities from its lofty position, given tacit consent to their existence, which is manifested by its acceptance of and coexistence with the native culture, stemming from the tolerance inherent in Buddhism.

Researchers specializing in the history of religion take this kind of phenomenon as an example of the fusion of Buddhism and Bön. Researchers specializing in cultural history focus their attentions on the developments and changes in the traditional Tibetan way of thinking reflected in it. People like us, on the other hand, who are

engaged in the field of culture and the arts, appreciate the imagination, creativity, artistic thought, and inspiration necessary for weaving the tapestry of these anthropomorphized deities and monsters and carrying on this tradition.

Atheists will look upon this disapprovingly, saying that all of this is pure fabrication.

Modern qigong theorists, sometimes known as life scientists, would retort, saying that this is in fact the true fabrication. In accordance with the psychological necessities of early humankind, humankind nurtured deities in its collective subconscious, causing them to gradually mature and become a self-contained entity, and in addition manifest their capabilities to affect the realm of humans.

The portraits of a couple of male and female spirit mediums I know, which are given below, may provide modern qigong theorists with further research materials. However I have not attempted to subject them to careful examination of the sort that would separate fact from fiction. The naïve simplicity and playful mentality of childhood which are vaguely transmitted by this cultural phenomenon indigenous to Tibet and its healing effect arrived at through psychological suggestion are nevertheless interesting.

The Deities Have Descended: Three People I Know Who Summon Deities to Descend into Their Bodies

Ngawang Ganden of Sangphu was the first male spirit medium who I interviewed. He is a friend of a friend of mine. This person has a thin, small frame and small eyes, and to top it off he always smiles so broadly that his eyes narrow to a squint. He is not originally from Sangphu Valley; instead his hometown is a village near Drepung Monastery. That is why he became a child monk at Drepung Monastery at a very early age. From time to time people who summon deities to descend into their bodies have arisen in his family line. In his 18th year of age, Ngawang Ganden suddenly went manic. Sethrap had taken possession of his body. Word got out and he was invited to Sangphu monastery to become a fulltime spirit-medium. Every year during the 11 years prior to the 1960s, he would officially take part in three ceremonies, one in summer on the 15th day of the fifth lunar month (in the Tibetan calendar), one in fall on the 15th day of the tenth lunar month, and a third at the beginning of spring according to the Tibet-

an calendar, in which the deity Sethrap would take possession of his body and answer all kinds questions posed to him by the common people of Sangphu, Thragu, and Deyang Villages and predict whether their affairs would take a positive or negative turn. On an ordinary day, he would occasionally be invited to Lhasa to summon the deity to descend into his body and conduct Buddhist services for large families and merchants from Drakyap in eastern Tibet. As has been explained before, Sethrap is at the same time the guardian deity of Drakyap Monastery and the region of Drakyap.

Ngawang Ganden's memories of how he felt when he summoned the deity to descend into his body in those years gone past were very vivid; one might say that it left a deep impression on his mind. While he was relating them to me, he betrayed a complicated mix of emotions, giving an impression of his sense of superiority over common people, as well as a sense of lingering fear that quickened his heart:

At the beginning of the ceremony for the summoning of the deity, eight monks must first recite sutras and play Tibetan horns,⁷⁹ which sound like Indian elephants trumpeting. While the deity was in the process of taking possession of me, my whole body ached, and sometimes I would spit blood. Two femur horns,⁸⁰ which sounded like Indian wolf dogs, were blown beside my ears, while someone lifted this crown weighing over 30 pounds and placed it on my head, tying it tightly at the nape of my neck. A fit of dizziness came over me and before my very eyes the petitioners suddenly grew big and tall. I, on the other hand, grew so light that I felt like I could float away on a breeze. It was like I was rising up into the sky. Then my eyes went black and I do not know what happened after that.

Afterwards I heard from others that the questions the people asked covered a broad range of subjects, for example, questions such as whether there would be a natural disaster or human catastrophe during that year, whether the crops should be sown late or early, how a sick family member might be cured and whether or not they could recuperate, and whether relatives would have a long or short lifespan. Sethrap used my mouth to provide responses to the questions, while a monk stood by jotting them down.

At that time Sethrap was not the only deity whom I summoned to descend into my body. The deities I had to summon were, in order of descending rank following Sethrap: the earth deity Neu Lutsen, the

local minor deities Tsangtong Gyelpo and Dara (being the two monastic secular officials in the Tibetan government who transformed into deities after their deaths), as well as the king of the war deities Dra Tsen. Only in the case of the war deity Dra Tsen did the ceremony of summoning the deity to descend into my body take a different course. He not only offered advice, but also had to administer medicine. If someone asked when a sick family member would fully recover, I would pass him a certain number of grains of barley signifying the number of days it would take for the recovery. If the family member had an external injury I would give him some roasted barley grains and butter for external application.

If some petitioner needed to keep something (their private affairs) a secret, they could write a few options on a piece of paper and pass it to me. I would then mark whichever option was possible or feasible, and it would not pass by the person jotting down the answers again.

In this manner, each time a deity was summoned to descend into my body the whole ceremony took about three hours. If, in addition, I blessed people by laying my hand on their heads, the whole ceremony lasted even longer. So when the deity left, the crown had to be removed immediately, otherwise my life was in danger. After I had been carried back to my room I still remained unconscious for quite a while. When I started coming to, I had visions of arriving at the blue sky, then white clouds, then staggering cliffs, and finally lush trees swaying in the breeze. I could feel every bone in my body breaking apart and being scattered all over the place. When I felt my scattered bones slowly coming back together again, I gradually began regaining consciousness, and I had come back to life as Ngawang Ganden.

Ngawang Ganden said the reason why he later stopped summoning the deity to descend into his body was first of all that he was already at an advanced age and could not bear all of that hassle any more. Aside from that, another more important reason was that the deities might not take possession of his body any more, or if they possessed him, the possession may prove to no longer be effective. Previously, people who summoned the deity to descend into their bodies were subject to many taboos: they were not allowed to eat pork, nor beef and lamb meat from animals that had died without being slaughtered; they had to keep their bodies clean; they had to go into

seclusion and meditate for a month before summoning the deity; etc. That is why it did not work out any more.

In traditional Tibetan society spirit mediums like Ngawang Ganden formed a special occupational stratum. This kind of divine practitioner is collectively called “kukhor”, meaning “possessed body”, with no distinction being made between male and female practitioners. The practice of summoning the deity to descend into one’s body is called *lhaphep*, meaning “the deity has come”. Thus, a *kukhor* is also called a *lhaphep-nyen*, meaning “one in whom the deity descends”. In the past, when different deities were summoned, the practitioner would wear different garments and use a different voice and different implements. Now, all of this has been simplified. Barley is usually used for counting. After it has been bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha, it can either be eaten or used. At this point, the barley has its own unique divine name “chakné”. If illnesses are being cured, a *khata*⁸¹ is frequently the most important implement, and it is used to draw out the disease. There are also others who merely take on the outward appearance of the deity who has been summoned and cure the illness through the application of Tibetan medicine and medications. In sum, each of the people I have experienced in the various regions of Tibet who summon the deity to descend into their bodies had their own special routine. Each of them demonstrated supernatural powers, and no two were alike. However, their function did not go beyond that of transmitting divine instructions, predicting fortune and misfortune, curing illnesses, and providing psychological counseling.

The first time I experienced the summoning of a deity first hand was in the *yangkhang* in Agar Village, Dranang. From start to finish during the entire procedure the spirit medium Thupten Gyatsho uttered not a single word. He just had the appearance of one who was inebriated and moved exceedingly slowly. This is another of the many colorful forms a deity summoning may exhibit.

Some time later, we went to Thupten Gyatsho once again, paying him a visit in his home. He was on the rooftop terrace spinning wool threads with a spinning wheel. At this time he had become a normal farmer once more. He was not good at conversation, and he seemed somewhat cautious in his behavior. His daughter, who had a strong build and was beautiful, was on one side working a loom with her

hands and feet, weaving *pulu*, and humming a tune. His wife seemed not to welcome our visit all that much. She at least begrudged the fact that such a man as her husband was receiving a visit, but in deference to Trülku Khedrup, who accompanied us, she poured us some tea anyway. This was a relatively wealthy farm family, yet some posters of gaudy, scantily clad modern girls had nevertheless been stuck to the walls which were decorated with auspicious pictures in the local Tibetan style. Printed on the posters in Chinese characters were the saying *gongxi facai* (May you enjoy prosperity in the New Year)⁸² and the following from *The Duke of Zhou's Book of Dream Interpretation*:⁸³ "Those who dream of digging a well will receive a letter from afar. Those who dream of a well bubbling over will accumulate a great amount of wealth. Those who dream of a blazing fire will come into a fortune. Those who dream of a fire burning the wilderness on a mountainside will have an awe-inspiring reputation...." No one in the entire family could read Chinese characters. It is unlikely that they knew the contents of these sayings. In this state which is neither fish nor fowl, it was still possible to conceive of a certain semblance of harmony between these mixed-up contexts.

The resident of Chushur who summons deities to descend into her body, Nyima Chödzin, does so in a manner which is the complete opposite of that of Thupten Gyatsho. After we had done our job convincing people at every level from the county to the township to the village down to the level of the household, we finally managed to approach her. Nyima Chödzin is a 20-year-old village girl with thin eyebrows, narrow eyes, and a thin soft voice. She is quite well known in her hometown and in the region around Lhasa. Every day an endless train of people request her medical consultation. On the day when we shot the on-site footage, she had summoned the Grand Minister Lhünpo of the major deity Nyenchen Thanglha. Nyenchen Thanglha had his origin as a great mountain range at the southern edge of the Northern Tibetan Plateau.⁸⁴ After his deification, he became the king of the 360 deities of that mountain chain. At the same time he is the leader of the 18 deities of the Land of Snows who preside over hail. However, in the story of the hero King Gesar he is also a doctor whose medical skills are exceptionally effective. His grand minister's medical skills are second rate, and he usually only takes on the task of assisting him, setting up medical appointments, or providing basic medical care.

Nyima Chödzin is also possessed by the local *yülha* deity and the deity of livestock, Nyengö, on specially appointed days. When she is possessed by Nyengö, she shows it by eating grass. In terms of language, when she has summoned Nyenchen Thanglha to descend into her body, she speaks the dialect of northern Tibet; when she summons Lhünpo, she speaks a dialect approaching that of Lhasa; and when she summons the local deity she uses the local dialect.



Altar for summoning deities



Nyima Chödzin in her role as a spirit medium

Someone called "It's begun!" in a low tone of voice. We rushed to turn on the battery-powered spotlight and the video camera before rushing into a side room of her house. The spectacle that met our eyes frightened us. The woman had already been enveloped by the deity's vestments which were both thick and bulky. A thick black fringe hung down from the front edge of the deity's headdress, only permitting a glimpse of a sharply pointed chin. What particularly made our hearts jump and our skin crawl was her voice, a steady, deliberate lingering, and resonant voice that simply did not seem to be emitted by a woman's vocal cords, but rather from a resonance chamber. She was already no longer Nyima Chödzin, but had become a body possessed by Lhünpo.

Spirit Medium (laughing cold): Hahahahah! What are you up to! When you gain benefits, you're ungrateful, and when you are unable to, you complain! Oh, humans! How can you be such slaves to your own whims!

Nyima Chödzin's Father (the interpreter of the divine oracle) with his head bowed in a low tone of voice: I've already informed you. They've come today to shoot a TV spot, to provide for cultural exchange with foreign countries. They don't have bad intentions. They've assured me they won't put our family in jeopardy in the future. Sorry, forgive me.

Spirit Medium (reluctantly): Alright, so be it. (directed toward the crowd) Do you have problems? If not I'll leave.

A Sick Woman (kneeling on the floor): My illness just won't get better. My heart keeps thumping like crazy. I've been to lots of hospitals but they still haven't managed to cure it.

Spirit Medium: Stand up and give me your hand. (checks her pulse for a long time) Have you seen a doctor of Western medicine? (She had.) Your illness won't resolve itself if you only seek the help of a doctor. In the southeast where the sun rises, you have something in your possession that is very dear which belongs to a friend or family member of yours. Because you can't bring yourself to return it, you have gotten this illness. Your heart disease is relatively serious. Your qi and blood are deficient, and you also have a stomach illness. Neither Western nor Tibetan doctors have a means of curing it. You had better return to your hometown. You will first see results once you have brought offerings to your birth deity. If you don't do so, you might develop a neurosis. Because you have been covetous and stingy,

you have offended the Dharmapāla. You should go to the monastery and conduct a Tārā Ceremony, offer sacrifices to the Heavenly Mother⁸⁵ and to the local deities as well. If you have accomplished all this by the 15th day of the 10th lunar month, I'll draw the illness out of you and cure your stomach illness. What you did wrong was to offend the Dharmapāla, so you must make offerings and pray. Regarding the precious object in your possession, you should return it to its original owner. If you can't find its owner you must think of its owner and atone for your transgression in your mind. You will meet Thrinlé Gyelpo, and this *gyelpo* deity will help you. When you come again on the 8th or 15th of the 10th lunar month, once you have made offerings to the local deities and gone to see a Western doctor, your illness will be cured, because you have brought the illness upon yourself.

(She blew a puff of air on a handful of barley grains and handed them to the sick woman.) Don't eat too many of them, just three a day. Don't be afraid. O.K. That will be all.

(The sick woman withdrew, and the spirit medium turned her attention once more to us.) Is the cadre a Tibetan?

(Dedzin stepped forward to apologize and explain things.)

Spirit Medium (clearly happy and extraordinarily kind): No problem! If there's no serious interference, then it's no problem! We are Dharmapālas. Where we go is unclear. If you don't do the family harm, there's no problem. You're doing work for the government, aren't you! By working together with the Han Chinese, we'll improve solidarity. O.K., next!

A Khampa⁸⁶ man asks for a prediction: A man in Phenpo borrowed 1000 Yuan from me. He always says he'll return the money, but never does. Please tell me, should I go to him and demand the money back or wait for him to send it back to me?

Spirit Medium: Has it been a long time since you lent him the money?

The man asking for a prediction: It's been four or five years.

Spirit Medium (stirring the barley grains in her left palm with her right index finger for a good while): You have to go to him, to demand the money back; otherwise you won't get it back. In the best case scenario, you'll get it back. If you can't get it back, you should still make yourself clear to him. (She paused, continuing to stir the barley grains, again for a good while.) As for the man who borrowed money from you, his life is in danger, which makes the situation even more

problematic. This friend of yours always cheated you with a smile on his face. You had better hurry up and go to him to demand your money back.

An old man representing someone seeking medical help: The sick person is in Nyemo and was unable to come. I've come to ask for the deity's help on his behalf.

Spirit Medium (laughing coldly): If he believes fully, then he will naturally have a completely believable outcome. If he half-believes and half-doubts, then he will only be able to reach half an outcome. If you use good wood to build a bridge, it will naturally be sturdy. If you pitch one up carelessly, it won't stand fast. If we forget a mountain after having crossed it and tear down a bridge after having crossed the river, can we be happy? If that's the case, we're past caring. That time we cured his gallbladder, and even drew out the stones, you also had a messenger trouble us with the matter, but we didn't mind. Now we haven't even met face to face and he's entrusted the matter with someone at random. Is that appropriate?

The old man (with reverence and awe): The sick man wanted to come in person, but he's had a fever for over ten days, and he couldn't find a car either. He couldn't come on his own. He had to entrust me with the matter.

Spirit Medium (impatiently): It can't last more than ten days. Have him come on his own. His life is in danger. He has to make a proper offering to his household deity, pray with reverence to the deity, and be pious. He must harbor benevolence in his mind and do good to others. Alright, that's what you should tell him.

Spirit Medium (noticing our guide): Come. The old one, come here. Have the white haired man come here.

(giving a *khata* to our guide): You're advanced in age, and your hair has grown white. You should do a good job working for the government. You have to keep yourself together. Normal people don't know what mishaps may occur later on, but we Dharmapālas do. So you have to keep yourself together.

(She poured *chang* in the hands of people in the crowd. She herself, on the other hand, drank the highland barley beer with a motion seen only among men.) Pleased, she said: I have to go now. Today was great. Today is the 15th. A great many flags have been hung from the upper floors of the buildings. Is there anybody else? If no one's left I'll go.

That Khampa creditor-guy hesitated for a moment, before coming forward once more: I have a yak that's been lost for about two or three months, and I can't find it. It's a black yak.

Spirit Medium (repeatedly nodding her head): Yes, uh-huh, it's a black yak.

(once again counting with barley grains for quite a long time): You can't find it in the places you've been. You have to go to the northeast, where the sun rises. Near a big tent there are several pools of water, clumps of grass, and a very steep mountain as well. It is with a herd of yaks. From the location where you live, it's to the southwest. From our perspective it's in the northeast. First you have to cross the mountain and then go looking. Cast these (barley grains) in the direction you go looking in. That will be all for today.

After that she chanted sutras and packed up for the day. A wide range of actions are involved in packing up. With her whole body convulsing in the chair, she jumped three times. Then she was so tired that she could not bear to stand up, and she slowly removed the deity's crown and took off the deity's vestments. She shook her braid loose and changed into everyday garments. The deity was gone; Nyima Chödzin was back.

Nyima Chödzin churned butter tea with ease and handed us tea one after the other. She accepted our TV interview. All we wanted to understand was simply when she started her career as someone who summons the deity to descend into her body, what origin her career had, how it happened in the beginning, her own feelings when she summoned the deity, what form the effects of the deity's healing take, what the usual taboos are, etc.

Like Ngawang Ganden and Thupten Gyatsho, Nyima Chödzin was born into a lineage, passed down along the female bloodline, of people who summon the deity to descend into their bodies. The Sekhor clan, to which her mother belonged, had the tradition of summoning the deity, but the deities who were summoned were all *yülha* deities from their hometown. She first showed signs of possession eight years ago. Nyima Chödzin's father explained that in the beginning, it was as if his daughter had gotten a serious illness, which made him fret. When he took her to the doctor to get help, the moment they arrived at the hospital she was better, but when they left the hospital she got sick again. When she heard the noise of drums

beating it got even worse. Later they went to Mr. Tendzin for help. He said that it was possession by a Dharmapāla, and that since the girl's body was pure, if they would have her summon the deity Nyenchen Thanglha to descend into her body it would be good for both herself and others. The deity summoned would be effective in healing those who had found no relief when visiting medical doctors, and doing so would also cause her to accumulate merit. Thereafter she summoned the deity Thanglha to descend into her body.

Nyima Chödzin added, "In the beginning, I didn't know that the *yülha* had already taken possession of my body. I felt terrible. I would involuntarily burst out in laughter, or say something that was on my mind that would provoke someone that I really didn't want to say, as if I had gone mad. When I felt happy I wanted to work, but when I didn't feel happy I didn't want to move. I felt like crying and sleeping, and no matter how much I ate, I wanted more."

As for the taboos, they are relatively strict. Maintaining the purity of one's body and the foods and beverages one consumes has the utmost priority. If one is the slightest bit lax in this regard, once the deity has been summoned one will vomit or pass blood. In the same way in which the people who are possessed usually experience an elevated sense of tension during the summoning of a deity, when the deity is descending she feels the meridians in her entire body swell and her whole body aches. In the beginning it feels like she is floating in midair; in the end she completely loses consciousness. She first notices a feeling of weakness once the deity has left her body. However, according to her, during the possession she is not aware of any of her words or actions.

This ancient vocation lets those who summon the deity stand for their entire lives on the threshold between humans and deities, making them humanlike but not human and godlike but not gods. Their souls belong to another world. Nyima Chödzin is ambivalent regarding this station. She says, "When the crowd comes together, I feel like I don't belong. I feel lonely, but I think I'm destined to feel that way. This is the only way I can do something to accumulate merit for others. For example, in this place, some people's illnesses can't be cured, and so they feel sad. Some are cured, and so they feel happy. Some people feel like they want to die straight away, but after they've

consulted the deity, they experience a turn for the better. Every time that happens I feel particularly happy.”

It seems there is no other choice left for her, but supposing she were able to choose, would she still want to lead a life as a normal person?

On that day, we stayed at Nyima Chödzin’s place for a long time. They sincerely hoped we would help them get reception on their television set, but the television crew fiddled around forever and still could not solve the problem. The reception of satellite signals coming in from certain directions is futile there due to the twists and turns of the mountains.

At this point, I would like to close the subject of the deities of the countryside and those who summon deities to descend into their bodies. I originally searched so passionately for materials related to this subject and so sincerely wanted to catch a glimpse of the spectacle of a deity descending into a person, yet in the process of conducting this investigation, especially when I myself thought I had learned everything there was to know about this phenomenon, having proceeded from reason to perception, I could not help but think that it would at least be inappropriate for me to write what I really think about the subject in this book. Nyima Chödzin, or rather the deity who possessed her body and made use of her mouth, once warned us “When you gain benefits, you’re ungrateful, and when you are unable to, you complain...,” which really gets at something. I will follow my conscience.

There is one point whose mention may be permitted, namely according to our study, the world of deities which has its origins in high antiquity in the Tibetan regions is being lost in the present day and age.

A Relic of High Antiquity: The Deities of the Three Realms and Their Mysterious Qualities

The cosmological conception of a world with three layers and the deities of the three realms had its origins in the extremely ancient primitive religious beliefs of the ancestors of the Tibetan people. It predates not only Buddhism but also the Tibetan religion Bön. Once in Drigung Thil Monastery, we were astonished to find ancient ceremonies being carried out in which offerings were made to the deities of the three realms and for the gathering of soil fertility. This shows us

at least two things, first that the conception of deities belonging to three realms has a long history, and second that this conception has already been accepted by Tibetan Buddhism and has become an integral part of its religious rituals.

On the plateau of the Land of Snows where the worship of deities abounds, every place in the heavens above, the human realm, and the earth below is full of deities. A ceremony for sacrificing to the deities of the three realms is held in each of the four seasons. The awnings that hang above the doorways and windows of residences combine the three colors white, red, and blue representing the protection of the deities of the three realms. Everywhere from the cities and towns to the townships and villages, from the mountain wilderness to the rivers and streams, one can see prayer flags fluttering come rain or come shine. This is a long-term offering to the deities of the three realms. White symbolizes the *lha* deities of the heavens above; red symbolizes the *tsen* deities of the human realm; and green symbolizes the *lu* deities of the earth below.

There is a section in the grand routine of song and dance of the ode, or *zhechen*, that forms a large part of the Tibetan sacrifice festival, in which the *zhepön*, which translates to “song leader” or “king of songs”, describes how he proceeds through the three realms – upper, middle, and lower – searching for the keys to the storehouses of songs:

I, the king of songs have come to the heavens above,
to visit Lhawang Gyelchen, the king of the deities of heaven.
I bid the king of heaven to bestow me with the key to the songs,
and let me open the door to the storehouse of songs of the heavens above.

I, the king of songs have come to the human realm,
to visit Yuma Gyelchen, the king of the *tsen* deities.
I bid the king of the *tsen* to bestow me with the key to the songs,
and let me open the door to the storehouse of songs of the human realm.

I, the king of songs have come to the earth below,
to visit Tsukna Rinchen, the king of the *lu* deities.
I bid the Dragon King to bestow me with the key to the songs,
and let me open the door to the storehouse of songs of the earth below.

Once the king of songs has obtained the keys to the storehouses of songs from the heavens above, the human realm, and the earth below, the god-kings of the three realms each send their five daughters to dance with king of songs, which takes the form of the grand routine of song and dance that is the *zhechen*.

The conception of the deities of the three realms definitely filled the ideological space on the plateau of the Land of Snows for a relatively long period of time. However with the evolution of society and the involvement of Buddhism, the structure of the system of deities underwent a multitude of adaptations, in particular being affected by the choices made by people, generation for generation, in their search for profit. The first of the deities of the three realms to become blurred was the deity of heaven. Legend has it that the first seven kings prior to the Tubo period were all deities of heaven who descended to the common people. After their deaths they followed ladders to heaven returning to their heavenly palace, dissolving into the cerulean blue void. After that, the successive dynasties of kings no longer ascended to heaven but were buried in the earth. The realm of heaven seems no longer to have captured people's attention, and so the deities of the upper realm were replaced by mountain deities, which were somewhat closer to the people.

Mountain deities are also called *nyen*, and they came in to being at least during the period of primitive religion in Tibet. The *nyen* deities reside on the peaks of high mountains which are closest to the sky connecting the realm of the heavens and the human realm. They preside over rain, snow, frost, and hail, and they have a much more intimate relationship with human beings. According to tradition, the snow-capped mountain Öde Gunggyel on the southern bank of the Yarlung Tsangpo River is the father of Tibet's eight great *nyen*. The snow-capped mountain Yarlung Shampo of the Yarlung River Valley is the father of the hundred thousand war deities of the plateau of the Land of Snows, who protected the monarchs of Tubo and their tribe generation for generation. The snow-covered mountain with its icy peak at the southernmost point of the Northern Tibetan Plateau is the great deity Nyenchen Thanglha's castle of ice crystals (namely the main deity, who Nyima Chödzin is possessed by). Beginning in the early period of the era of the Bön religion, he has been an important guardian deity of the Northern Tibetan Plateau and even all of Tibet.

The circumambulation of Gang Tisé Mountain in the Year of the Horse and Namtsho Lake in the year of the sheep are ways in which people make offerings to divine mountains and sacred rivers at appointed times.

It is said that the deities of the human realm are the *tsen*.

Water deities and the deities of the earth below are called *lu*, which sounds like what it means. It is translated as *long* in Chinese, meaning “dragon”.

However, in today’s Tibet there are planes that fly by in the heavens, people climbing on the snow-capped mountains, and cars racing by on the earth. People who come from all corners of the earth bring with them all sorts of modern information which influences Tibet. There are no longer any hidden corners or uncharted territories. With everything exposed in broad daylight, where could there be anything that is unrealistic.

In this way the deities have rapidly lost their prowess, and their radiance has dimmed. They have lost the battle against a disproportionately strong adversary and have fallen back to the desolate townships of the hinterlands in the lofty mountains, prolonging their decay.

Some mystical attributes which emerged and spread hand in hand with this world of deities, for example, types of metaphysical existence possessing neither an image nor an outer form such as *yang*, *phé*, and *lungta* have in the same manner experienced their rise and fall. The Tibetan countryside is permeated by their afterglow.

In the area surrounding Lhasa, Lhoka, and Zhikatsé, which has always been an area in which Tibetans have practiced agriculture, the whole gamut of ceremonies in which sacrifices are made to the deities of agriculture which are carried out from the spring plowing to the fall harvest has existed since ancient times. Bringing in a bumper harvest which would make the people self-sufficient was the original ideal of agricultural societies, and whether or not they would bring in a bumper harvest was controlled by and decided upon by the heavens. Ancient farmers could only bid for help from the Earth Mother and longed to receive protection in the faithful bosom of the great mother of the earth. Offerings and sacrifices are, as it were, a means of establishing a channel of communication with the deities.

While making these offerings and sacrifices to ingratiate themselves with the earth, they also aimed to please something that grew in the earth – highland barley – at the same time.

Highland barley is the staple of the Tibetan diet and is crucial for their survival, both materially and psychologically. Surrounding the history of the origin of highland barley and its life cycle people created

a set of ceremonies and taboos. One of the most ancient myths documents the ancestral lineage of highland barley.⁸⁷ The myth says that seven-grain highland barley descended from six-grain highland barley. Highland barley's ancestral father once soared over the grasslands like a male vulture. Highland barley's mother was named Chagima, and she was fittingly beautiful. The myth warns people that the six-grain highland barley is divine and that people should remain loyal to the divine highland barley.

When people sow highland barley and when they harvest it, they are also sowing and harvesting the highland barley's *yang*. Therefore, communication can and may occur between the person and the highland barley. The growth and bumper harvest of highland barley is both a result of the ingratiation of the earth goddess and the embodiment of the intimate relationship between humans and highland barley.

During the growing period of highland barley, especially in the three months after the stages of flowering and heading but before the ears have ripened and are harvested, the plants need to be protected meticulously. For this specific purpose, the people have established a summer procedure common in Tibetan agricultural areas of the past and present. On the first day of the fifth Tibetan lunar month, the sound of Tibetan horns rings out over Drigung Thil Monastery. The male spirit-medium Shawa Karpo arrives at Tsenthang Village which is located below Drigung Thil Monastery and announces the beginning of the prohibition which aims to prevent hailstorms from occurring and remains in effect for the three months of summer. This prohibition includes a ban on the use of knives and axes, a ban on cutting firewood, a ban on killing living beings, a ban on sky burial, and a ban on carrying a corpse across a field. In the fields, men are not allowed to bare their upper bodies and women must wear a scarf around their heads. It is even prohibited to argue, to use new red clay jars....

On the day of the Chökhör Festival,⁸⁸ people circumambulate the fields of grain carrying sutras on their backs, with the intent of securely establishing the location of the barley's *yang* in the fields of their village. During this time, villagers are strictly forbidden to talk. Especially if they meet people from a neighboring village, they must not talk to them, in order to prevent the barley's *yang* from escaping.

Yang, this mysterious attribute peculiar to the Tibetan lands, probably came into existence at a time when the human beings of the

plateau first began learning about the world. It was, at one time, everywhere, in people, livestock, mountains, water, trees, stones, in a house, and in a place. It is similar to a soul but it is not a soul. It is a psychological attribute which corresponds to material existence and is also translated according to its meaning with the expression “object essence”. No one knows at what point its reference shifted to specifically denote *qi* which brings good fortune. According to Khedrup’s explanation, *yang* is a combination of both *sönam*, or lucky *qi*, and *lungta*, circulating *qi* of good fortune.

Yang and the behaviors associated with *yang* are ubiquitous in folk life. In people’s homes there is a *yanggam*, a box of good fortune, which contains all sorts of auspicious items. It may not be opened on any ordinary day, but only on a specific day for *yangguk*, inviting good fortune to come into the home, when the auspicious items are exchanged. People also secretly grab a handful of soil from the cattle pens and fields of rich families in the village and place it in the box of good fortune.

If someone in the family sells a cow, the cow’s *yang* must not leave with the animal, so they have to take some hair from the crown of the cow’s head, the base of its horns, or its neck and store this precious item in the *yanggam* box of good fortune.

The taboo day for *yang* is Saturday. On that day one must be extraordinarily careful. Requests from outside of the family to borrow money or things from the family are refused, in order to prevent the family’s own *yang* from slipping away. On the other days beside Saturday, one must not loan property to people outside the family after the sun has sunk behind the mountains. Details related to *yang* permeate all of the festivals on the fields from the spring sowing to the fall harvest and every important segment of people’s lives from birth to death.

On the first day a newborn child goes outside of the house, a *lhasang* ceremony must be held, and good fortune is invited into the home with five-colored arrows and *khatas*.

When a funeral procession is held after relatives have passed away, one must also *yangguk* – invite good fortune into the home.

The main implements used during the marriage ceremony as well as most of the words recited are related to *yang* and *yangguk*.

For countless years, a groom's parents have stood on the flat rooftop of their house waving around a leg of lamb to say goodbye to the group of people from the bride's family who accompanied her to their home, saying, "Take your good qualities with you, but leave us our family's *yang*..."

Among the mysterious attributes, there is another thing without form called "phé", which has certain similarities with *yang* but is closer to the prime essence of a substance. For example, it exists in the first round of highland barley beer, in the first bucket of water drawn from a well or river on Tibetan New Year, in the first Tibetan opera performed on Zhotön Festival (the Yoghurt Banquet Festival)...

There are also numerous symbolic motifs, such as the eight auspicious treasures, the sun and moon shining together, five-colored prayer flags..., which do not need to be decoded one to one with regard to this world of symbols. Without exception, each of the footnotes which these mysterious things represent makes people's lives more and more beautiful.

The Perfect Fire Offering in Tsenthang Village, in Which the Deities Are Honored and the Ghosts Are Given Alms

Allow me to tell the entire story of one such village, Tsenthang, taking the knowledge and experiences I gathered there to represent the words of the people of Tsenthang Village and explain their surrealistic aspects, as well as telling about how they moved me and made me sigh with emotion.

The village is situated in Zhörong Mountain Valley, with which we have already made ourselves acquainted, on the road to Terdrom Nunnery and Drigung Thil Monastery before the road splits off.

The first few times I passed that way, I carelessly glanced past it, passing by it like any other stretch of road.

Later, when we heard a hitchhiker, who lived there and who was a tailor dressed in monks' robes, mention the village's name and that the sutra pagoda in front of the village was a pagoda built for the purpose of pacifying demons, it drew our interest enough to want to pay the village a visit.

In the blaze of the setting sun on that summer's day, we lingered beside the village for the first time, taking pictures of people circumambulating the sutra pagoda and of the image of a monster on the

hillside behind the village, a camel with a striding gait that held a human corpse in its mouth. As we proceeded with our interviews we learned that the sutra pagoda in front of the village was not meant to pacify this demon, but was built to frighten off a man wielding a knife, who could be seen in the natural formations on the mountain opposite the village and probably had nothing to do with the camel monster. The story of the camel goes like this. When this unlucky creature was heading toward Drigung Thil Monastery, King Gesar's concubine Drumo was washing her hair. When it caught her eye, she immediately splashed it with the water meant for her hair to drive it away. At that, the monster was frozen in the form it has to this day. A *lhakhang* shrine at the foot of the mountain is the treasure that serves to pacify the beast.

On another day, in fall, when snowflakes suddenly began floating through the air, we paid a special visit to this mountain village. Oral traditions made this piece of land characterized by classic simplicity immediately awoken with new life. In the twinkling of an eye, the still mountain wilderness was set ablaze with brilliant colors. Topden, a monk who returned to secular life, and his fellow villagers reminded each other and competed with each other to tell the tale, and thus a wave of oddly colorful scenes with well-known people, deities, divine beings, and demons of lives ancient and fresh began rolling in.

Tsenthang is backed against a mountain by the name of "Tsen". The flat embankment at the base of Tsen Mountain is called Tsenthang. There are two great Dharmapālas in Tsenthang and the region of Drigung, in which Tsenthang is located. One of them is Achi Chökyi Drölma, one of Palden Lhamo's corporeal manifestations, who rides a mule. She is also known as Aböchi, Achi Drölma, etc. The other one is the great, three-eyed deity Gönpo. The regional protector deities, or *yülhas*, of Tsenthang are the three sisters of Tsen Mountain who were Buddhist nuns. The details regarding the background history of the three sisters and their accomplishments are already unknown to the villagers. They only know that they lived on Tsen Mountain. The lake on the mountaintop is the milk lake of the three sisters who were nuns. The people say that the three sisters have "a lake of milk that cannot be drunk up and a lump of butter that cannot be eaten up." At the foot of Tsen

Mountain there is also a white deity of tea transport, The details regarding his background history and accomplishments are also unknown to the villagers. They only know that he transported tea from Kangding⁸⁹ in the east and silk from Ngari in the west. They never saw him walking about, but they could hear the bell on his mule go ding dong. Judging by my experience, no one knows why this outsider died in that place. I suppose he is a *tšen* deity. The village deity of Tsenthang is a *gyelpo*, but the people of Tsenthang say that he is not the kind of *gyelpo* that is transformed from a soul that does not want to enter the cycle of rebirth after death. According to the villagers' conception of deities, there are five *gyelpo* deities corresponding to the five directions North, South, East, West, and Center, and the *gyelpo* of Tsenthang is the *gyelpo* of the center, who has descended to the common realm. His *tenkhang* shrine was originally located on the site of the current township mayor's new residence, where the door to the kitchen is (When these words were being spoken, I happened to be sitting in the township mayor's home, and the villagers pointed to it, saying it was there.). Once when the people in the village took ill, a Himalayan marmot appeared in the middle of the village swaggering about. The villagers associated these phenomena with each other and so they bid Nupa Trülku to clear up the matter. By means of divination he determined that it was the village's homeless *gyelpo* who required housing. The villagers hurriedly built a new *tenkhang* on the mountain behind the village, in order to make him settle down and returned the magnificent antlers which had previously been offered to him to their rightful place once more. Thereupon, the marmot vanished from the village, and the sick people got better as well.

If there is a local deity, there is surely someone who summons that deity in order to transmit prophecies. This system of spirit-mediums has a long history in Tsenthang. The one who the villagers vividly remember and delight in talking about to this day is the female spirit-medium who died in the year 1957. She was the glory of the village. The villagers have always had mixed feelings regarding this profession. It is common for someone to claim himself to be the body which is possessed by a certain deity. Targeting this phenomenon, the previous regional governments have often used a number of different methods to determine their authenticity. One year the

government of the region of Gungkar summoned all of the spirit-mediums within the borders of the entire county, after having previously wrapped pieces of paper on which the word “deity” or “demon” had been written in a ball of *tsampa*, and let the spirit-mediums grab one after they had all entered their state. The one the female spirit-medium from Tsenthang grabbed was one with the word “deity” in it. Thus she was officially approved by the regional government. She triumphantly returned home and accepted a field granted her by the government.

The Ongkor Festival, which occurs once a year when the crops have turned golden and are ripe, was the day on which the female spirit-medium of Tsenthang summoned the deities to descend upon her. She was not only the spokesperson for the three sisters who had been Buddhist nuns, but also the body possessed by the white deity of tea transport, as well as the *lu* and *tsen* deities who accompany him. When the white deity of tea transport descended upon her body, the following image was presented: She straddled a white mule which she rode, and was clothed in pure white garments, holding a white whip in her right hand and a white banner in her left hand. When the *lu* and *tsen* deities descended upon her body, the female spirit-medium described what was happening to her in the following manner:

The lower part of my body is a dragon's body and on top of it is a human body.
I hold a red flag in my hands and a triangular banner is fastened to my neck.
I am riding a wolf using a snake as the.

Following her death, there was one man and one woman who both claimed to be her heir. Then, Nupa Trülku bid them to come forward, so that the authenticity of their claims might be determined. He bound the fingers of each of the two people together with a magical Dharma rope which had been imbued with the power of the Buddha and gave them each a hundred lashes on their backs. The result of the test showed that the man was the true heir while the woman was an imposter, because the man did not feel the pain, whereas the woman could not stop crying out in pain. That spirit-medium died of illness in the 1960s, from which point on a full-time spirit-medium has been absent.

In recent years, however, there was a son of the female spirit-medium mentioned above, who was mad. In the very moment when the deity wanted to descend into his body but had not yet done so, Nupa Trülku closed the deity's portal of entry just in time. The villagers explained this, saying that people who summon the deity to descend into their bodies must possess certain qualities. They have to be bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha by a *trülku* and they have to respect certain taboos. Otherwise they will put themselves and others in danger. As to what Nupa Trülku's considerations were in the matter, the villagers no longer know. That said, the female spirit-medium's son is no different from anyone else now.

There is no one left who conveys information from the deities. It seems life in Tsenthang Village follows the same routine as before. On New Year and auspicious days, when they experience happy occasions and disasters, the villagers still go to the places where the deities of their hometown are located and burn a little incense, make some smoke offerings, and talk a bit. The fact that an intermediary who communicates with the deities is absent is admittedly inconvenient, but through the smoke curling upward they can always express those desires which the myriad deities know without having asked.

In this manner, the people of Tsenthang Village have lived together in the same place symbiotically with deities, spirits, and monsters generation for generation. With their minds at ease, they are poised between their protection and oppression, between their radiance and shadows. Thus, finding a legendary figure who interacts between the monastic and the secular, the human and the divine, the real and surreal in such a subtle manner as Nupa Trülku on this stretch of native soil should seem the most natural thing in the world.

The first time we met Nupa Trülku was at the Kagyü ceremony held in the Year of the Monkey to guide the souls on the right path. We noticed that the ceremony's schedule included the preaching of sutras and opening of the portal of souls, which Nupa Trülku presided over. The purpose of our visit was in turn restricted to asking him to inform us on questions related to the origin of "phowa". He was sitting in a spacious tent tying knots in one piece after another of thick red acrylic cords. He mentioned his ears and his hearing aid. Regarding the questions we asked him, he laughed and didn't answer. An old monk at his side answered the questions instead. From

time to time faithful disciples would worm their way into the tent bent over with their tongues sticking out, and would touch Nupa Trülku's garments, legs, and feet with their foreheads, while some of them would throw themselves to the ground near him remaining prostrate. In spite of his lofty position, Nupa Trülku still had not lost his modesty, and fittingly put down his handwork now and again to pour a little holy water in which saffron has been steeped into the palms of the faithful disciples who had come to pay homage to him, after which he gave them a vajra knot which he has tied with his own hands, and then bestowed this *sungdü* tied with a red cord with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha by blowing a puff of air on it from his own mouth. There was also a lay person, an elderly lady, in the tent sitting on a *khaben*, who smiled the entire time. Back then we had no idea of her connection to Nupa Trülku. While we were saying our goodbyes, each of us received a red cord which had been tied into a vajra knot as a protective talisman.

At that time, we knew next to nothing about Nupa Trülku, especially concerning the scope of his Dharma powers. Having lived in that region for a long time, we heard many legends surrounding his personage. Put simply, Nupa Trülku is the successor to the lineage of the Great Masters of the Western Hall⁹⁰ of Drigung Thil Monastery. When the now sixty-one-year-old Nupa Trülku was five years old, he was invited from Zhikatsé in Tsang to join Thil Monastery. Before he reached the age of 20, he received relatively rigorous training, immersing himself in the study and recitation of the sutras. When he came of age in his twentieth year of age he took the important position which is known as "Gala" in Thil Monastery. He was universally praised for his religious attainments, but before long he left the path set before him, and changed the direction his life (or we might say his life as a *trülku*) took. He fell in love with a girl from Tsenthang Village. This behavior is not allowed according to the religious prescriptions, but his Dharma power and reputation were so great that the monastery hesitated to sanction this considerable violation. In the end, he maintained his present intermediate condition between monasticism and laity, having an itinerant relationship to the monastery. At major events involving all of the monasteries, they definitely ask him to step up and take charge. Usually he spends most of his time in Tsenthang Village, or he is invited by benefactors from all parts to conduct Bud-

dhist ceremonies. It is Tsenthang that rejoices, for this is considered to bring a lucky turn and good fortune to the villagers.

Nupa Trülku's special Dharma power is manifested in his resolution of tough problems related to abnormal souls. Drigung Thil Monastery's ability to *phowa*, or guide souls, is renowned in Tibet, and this ability of Nupa Trülku's is the most renowned in Drigung Thil Monastery. It is said that those whom *phowa* is conducted on through the application of his Dharma power show visible signs: a small hole opens directly in the middle of the crown of a dead person's head, which exudes a fluid, whereas the middle of the crown of living person's head becomes hot and swollen, and is said to have a crack into which a blade of grass may be inserted.

Regarding these souls that linger on after death and do not depart due to obstacles such as unfulfilled desires, unresolved rancor, emotional attachment, or attachment to material possessions, who enchant and confuse those in the human realm, Nupa Trülku always has a way to redeem them so they may go where they are supposed to, or to subdue them and bestow them with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha so that they become local protector deities known as *tseu*. Recently, there was an event which illustrates this ability. At the foot of the mountain on which Thil Monastery is located, the soul of Trazang, a housewife, wandered around everywhere, and many people from her village had run-ins with her. Consequently, they invited Nupa Trülku to come and conduct a Buddhist ceremony. Nupa Trülku used nine pieces of wood, writing Trazang's name and the names of the ghosts of each location on them separately. After he had recited the sutra, he identified the name of the ghost who was haunting them, and then he performed a "Jinsek" ceremony. When he was burning the ghost's name, an unusual sound emitted from the fire, which served to show that his judgment was accurate. The piece of wood which Trazang's name had been written on was not burned. Nupa Trülku conducted a Buddhist ceremony especially for her, to appease her and redeemed her so that she would be reborn again in another place.

When it comes to Nupa Trülku's ability to determine the authenticity of people who summon the deity to descend into their bodies, on the other hand, he is the ultimate authority in Drigung Thil Monastery and the region which falls within its scope of influence.

In the same vein, Nupa Trülku is very good at leading the Jinsek ceremony, which is intended to ward off natural disasters and eliminate hardships, by paying homage to the deities and giving alms to the demons. One day in early winter with snowflakes occasionally floating by, we rushed there from Lhasa specifically to shoot this event. We had not yet even managed to meet him when we visited Tsenthang Village in the fall. At the time he had gone by request to the region of Kongpo in the east, where a ghost was making mischief. Although we had not yet been able to meet him that time around, we found out that he would be in charge of the Jinsek ceremony for Tsenthang Village on the 19th day of the ninth lunar month in the Tibetan Calendar, which would fall on the 14th of November.

The next time we met Nupa Trülku, it was as if we no longer recognized him. He had changed from a fair-skinned fat man to a dark-skinned fat man. He seemed not to recognize us either, because his gentle, smiling face was no longer to be seen. This change made us learn from more than mere theoretical conjecture that the deities and Buddhas have two sorts of outward appearances, one beneficent and one fierce, one peaceful and one wrathful.

When we were drove hurriedly to Tsenthang, the lengthy prelude to this ceremony had already been underway for four days. In the private house in which Topden lived, they had recited sutras for several days, ringing a bell in one hand and beating a drum with the other. Besides Nupa Trülku and Topden, two monks, one young and one old, had been invited from Thil Monastery. When we told him at an untimely moment that we wanted to interview him, he shook a pile of sutra strips out of his hand with an irritated expression on his face, hinting at the fact that we had interrupted his work, which intimidated us so much we withdrew in embarrassment. We fawningly presented him an instant photograph, which we took of him, with both hands, and he still did not smile.

There has never been a set length of time or location in which Tsenthang's Jinsek ceremony takes place. Each ceremony may last anywhere from three to five to seven days. Only when natural disasters have devastated the year's harvest or when people or livestock are stricken by illness are the arrangements negotiated on by the villagers. The last time that occurred was in 1985. This year (1992) the agricultural areas across the whole of Tibet have experienced crop failure due

to widespread drought, and on top of that, some of the livestock in this village have contracted a strange illness, which makes them dizzy, such that they aimlessly turn around in circles, so the villagers have pooled funds and organized this event.

In the afternoon on the second day following our arrival in Tsen-thang Village, Jinsek officially began. The venue chosen was the biggest courtyard in the whole village, that of a person who drives his own car as a means of transportation. People had already chopped firewood here some time ago, which consisted of the gnarled roots of fire-resistant, perennial shrubs dug deeply from the mountain. Within the courtyard an altar had also been built in advance by laying two layers of bricks covering an area of one square meter, applying cement to them, and painting it black. The villagers went back and forth bringing in the implements and offerings necessary for the ceremony one by one. The aforementioned ceremony requires one person from each family of the 42 households in the whole village to attend. The more attend the greater the benefit. On this afternoon, under a sky with fading sunlight and gray clouds rolling in, the men and women of the village, young and old, came trickling in one after the other in a disorderly fashion.

Nupa Trülku appeared at the official event still clothed in his usual garb, a crimson monks robe and a yellow sweater covered by a nearly brown colored casual uniform. He was unkempt and tightly wound, like a commanding officer readying himself for combat. With sutra in hand he had the tables of offerings arranged strictly according to the guidelines laid out in the sutra, pointing to the people to move the plate of offerings from this table to another one. Then, he directed the assistants to puff out a complex geometrical image with bags of chalk dust, placing a butter lamp in the center of it. This was situated in a strictly determined position, and it is said that this conscientious attitude is meant as an attempt to please the myriad deities.

Five tables of offerings were arranged according to the five directions: North, South, East, West, and Center. Since the altar is at the center, two tables stand side by side to the north. The colors follow the pattern: blue for North, yellow for South, white for East, red for West, and black for Center. Each table is spread with the same color tablecloth, the same color *tormas* (a cone-shaped offering made of *tsampa*), the same color victory banner,⁹¹ and prayer flags. Each table

is furnished with five bowls of pure water, one butter lamp, and one stick of Tibetan incense. The offerings differ. On the white table to the east, black sesame, pills of Tibetan medicine, and wheat are offered. On the yellow table to the south, yogurt, barley, and rice, as well as a bundle of *rampa* grass roots are offered. On the red table to the west, peas, barley, and a type of Indian plant are offered. To the north, fruit, silverweed roots,⁹² cheese, and brick tea are offered on the blue table, and rapeseeds, peas, and highland barley beer are offered on the black table.

The main guests invited to today's Jinsek ceremony are the five *khandros*, female immortals, goddesses, and *ḍākinīs*, of the five directions, North, South, East, West, and Center. Each of the five *khandros* of the five direction and five respective colors is in charge of her own duty, but what the scope of each goddess's duty is, cannot be put into words by ordinary people. They are said to be recorded in the *Tenjur* of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. Regarding the food items which are presented as offerings, the explanation we received is the following: just like Tibetans love to eat *tsampa*, Han Chinese love to eat rice, and herdsmen love to eat meat, in terms of eating and drinking habits, each of the deities has her own preference.

At four in the afternoon with bells and drums sounding in unison, Nupa Trülku was the fourth person to walk around the altar, which was piled full of firewood, four times, changing his position and chanting the sutra. The sutra which was recited was the *Phünsum Tshok Mechö*, the Perfect Fire Offering, composed by a certain Karmapa Trülku. The gist of the text is:

Oh goddesses of the five directions, North, South, East, West, and Center, we respectfully invite you to grace us with your presence. We have prepared you a luxurious and opulent feast and wait for you to partake of it as you please. Those with a desire for meat are invited to eat the meat; those with a desire for blood are invited to drink the blood; and those with a desire for skin are invited to take the skin. We bear not the slightest apprehension with regard to all of this. Should the village meet with calamity and desolation, we request that you lend us a helping hand.

Topden sounded a Tibetan horn and someone placed a triangular bronze platter in front of Nupa Trülku. The platter held a demon called "lingka" fashioned from *tsampa* and glazed with red yak butter.

Nupa Trülku clasped the vajrakila, which was shaped like a triple diamond, between the palms of his hands and directed the blade toward the demon's heart, slowly stabbing at it. When he was finished stabbing it to death, he continued to use a small Tibetan knife to hack the *tsampa* demon to bits, which were to be burned. *Lingka* refers to malevolent beings in general, and it symbolizes all earthly catastrophes.

A row of four people surrounded the altar once again and chanted the sutra. At that moment, someone used a stick wrapped in cloth that had been soaked in yak butter to catch a spark and the altar was ignited by Nupa Trülku himself. The prayer flags of each color were taken from each of the tables of offerings in succession and thrown into the fire, and then rapeseed oil was scooped up with a ritual bronze ladle that had a long handle and was poured into the fire. While he was waiting for the blaze to flare up, Nupa Trülku threw one bit after the other of the *lingka* demon he had just minced into the fire, burning them up.

Two assistants piled wood on the fire and added oil to it without stopping even for a moment. Starting with the table to the east, all of the offerings were thrown in succession one by one into the fire. Not just those things that were on the tables were thrown into the fire; there were also sacks of grains such as barley, wheat, peas, and rapeseed in all sizes. Because this was what the 42 families of the entire village had brought together, it congealed the aspirations of each household and each person, their bids for tranquility and the avoidance of disasters, for recovery from illnesses and longevity, for luck and prosperity, etc. transmitted through a veil of smoke. As the myriad deities of the realm of heaven received the food, they must surely have become acquainted with these aspirations.

As the conflagration burned ever more vigorously, the ceremony reached its climax. A person who was the oldest in the village holding the last *torma* in both hands, which had a black victory banner stuck in it, reverently stood before the altar, and the villagers lined up behind him, each holding a white *khata* with both hands. Nupa Trülku tossed his *khata* into the fire, and the villagers, one after the other, tossed their *khatas* into the fire as well. At that moment, a specially fashioned gigantic wooden rod was ignited. This big wooden rod had been made the day before by binding numerous small sticks that were cut to the right length to the main stem and wrapping white cloth

drenched in yak butter around it layer for layer, and it was endowed with Dharma power after sutras had been recited, bestowing it with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha. Nupa Trülku gave the signal for the people to gather around the fire. His hand grasped some tsampa and hurled it at the torch, causing sparks to rain down on the crowd. The sparks are said to serve the function of warding off illness.



Scenes from the Fire Offering Ceremony



The oldest man in the village holding a plate with a torma, and the villagers behind him holding white khatas with both hands

In that moment, under the grey, hazy canopy of the heavens amidst the vast grey and hazy crowd, I saw pair after pair of eyes waiting in eager anticipation. Two bursts of flame flared up there – that was a disclosure from one soul after the other which had been through countless years pining ceaselessly, in an absent yet natural manner.

Slowly, a thought arose in my mind – although I am not a deity, I already know their past, present, and future.

If I were a deity, I would make their wishes come true.

As the ceremony drew to a close, someone scattered the *tsok* made from *tsampa* flour. Having undergone five days of sutra recitation during which it was bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha, it could ward off sickness when eaten.

We interviewed Nupa Trülku on the scene, asking him to talk with us about Jinsek. He said the Perfect Fire Offering is a religious ritual, which can dispel illness and eliminate disasters, prevent plagues from spreading in the village, and can heal the illness which makes livestock turn around in circles. When conducting this fire offering it is imperative that the strict guidelines of the tantra be followed, so that the four actions – pacification, enrichment, adoration, and execution – may be completed.

When we had taken pictures of the entire Jinsek ritual, we thought about whether or not the sacrificial ceremonies were like this during the era in which nature deities were worshipped. All in all, the

harsh natural environment and the relatively low production level created delusions of and dependency on divine power. The conception of the deities of the three realms, which is even more ancient and native compared to Buddhism, has penetrated the soil of the Land of Snows even more deeply, the reason for which lies in the fact that folk deities of this kind have a much more intimate connection with people's current lives, and with their work and livelihood. Besides, if the connotations are simple to explain, there is no need for profound theories, and it is feasible that rituals for sacrificing to deities should be relatively simple.



Scenes from the Fire Offering Ceremony (Jinsek)

When the people left the courtyard, the *sangsöl* smoke from the censer still pervaded, wafting into the void, transmitting to the doddering old deities of the three realms the wishes of generation after generation of people from the countryside, despite the fact that, for quite some time now, the deities are so familiar with these aspirations that they know them off pat.

Chapter 5: Where the Yarlung Tsangpo Flows

Traveling to the Source of Tibetan Civilization: the Southern Tibetan Valley

In the ten odd years I spent scanning the pages of the great book made manifest in physical and cultural geography that is Tibet, I came to understand that the mission I had been entrusted with was that of transmitting that book to the world in written form. This thought suddenly came to me at a time when I just happened to be ready to begin portraying in writing an area of significance, which is located in the middle reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River. This sudden idea provided me with an unending source of excitement. What I would complete would be the continuation of what I had previously worked hard on: speaking from a diachronic perspective across time, it would be an extension of the historical and cultural line of thought presented in *Going West to Ngari*;⁹³ speaking from a synchronic perspective across space, it would be the corresponding reference to the culture of animal husbandry reflected upon in *Traveling Through Northern Tibet*. Some individual, hidden from sight, was guiding my steps. Many years ago this author had been chosen, and the framework of these books had already been designed.

The mode of representation was fixed as well: Tibet's appearance is out of the ordinary, so its representation should also be out of the ordinary; this angle of representation and means of expression were stipulated and are implemented along a specific margin; although the representation is a little abstruse for a literary work, it is not rigorous enough for an academic work. However, this is just as well. Making use of a cultural and academic background prevents me from becoming too shallow, whereas making use of a literary form allows me to follow my heart's desire. In addition, only literature is allowed to entertain flights of fancy and spout nonsense. At the same time, it also allows me to stand on a sort of high ground, overlooking the myriad creatures in the space between the vault of heaven and the expanse of the earth that, with their comings and goings, resemble passing clouds or flowing water.

Having conducted on-site research on the natural, cultural, local, and theological history of this high-altitude region, which comprises

numerous sections, and written up this research, we now drove past Chushur Bridge, which spans the Yarlung Tsangpo River. Following the river eastward, we would enter the southern Tibetan river valley in terms of natural geography and in terms of administrative geography we were about to be in Lhoka Prefecture. The counties that border the river are, in order of succession, Gongkar, Dranang, Nedong, Zangri, and Chuksun. These place names, which shine with a dazzling light in Tibetan history, all signify places where something or other happened in the past. Following the river eastward gives one a different feeling than when one roams the Northern Tibetan Plateau in fields and villages. It is like you are about to dive into Tibet's written history: it also seems like the history of Tibetan civilization, the Tibetan people, Tibetan dynastic history, and the history of Tibetan religion is going to do something or other.

However, this clearly already goes beyond the reach of my field of interest and my abilities. I just am passionate about the feeling a location imparts and do not intend to conduct in-depth research on that location. Where my interests lie regarding history may be illustrated by the following example: on the permafrost surface of the no man's land on the Northern Tibetan Plateau, I picked up a beige lanceolate microlith, which was roughly flat, with my own hands; in a forsaken sand dune on the mudflats in southern Tibet, I dug up a Neolithic stone disc and an ancient potsherd ... that and nothing more.

Lhoka has always been called the cradle of Tibetan culture. Everybody says it like that, such that this seems to be the final verdict on the matter. According to accepted history, the Yarlung River Valley in this prefecture was the area where the predecessor of the Tubo royal dynasty, the Yarlung tribe, settled, which can be traced back at least to some period of time before the Common Era. The events surrounding the origin of the Tibetan people as recorded in the official history of Tibet, *The Clear Mirror of Royal Genealogies*,⁹⁴ also took place in this region. This origin story, which has been expressed repeatedly in ancient texts, literature, and art, is as follows: in the era of creation, a divine monkey, which was a corporeal manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, copulated with a rākṣasī demoness and brought forth the people of the Land of Snows, the black haired red faced people. The story places these events on Gönpori Mountain near the town of Tsethang, which is situated within the prefecture. The mountain cave where the

divine monkey and demoness lived has become a place of pilgrimage and a tourist destination. The people of Lhoka also proudly proclaim that this place possesses the four firsts of the Tibetan region; later someone came up with ten firsts: the first farm, the first palace, the first king, the first sutra, the first monastery, the first village, the first manor...and the rest probably include the first marketplace and the first workshop, or thus and such.

According to the definition established by convention in academic circles, culture is behavior in which humankind exceeds the material and mental aspects of behavior associated with animal nature, whereas a civilization is a relatively developed society that has shed itself of its primitive state. The first civilization is roughly embodied by sedentary settlement, agriculture and animal husbandry, the division of labor in society and exchange of commodities, the rise of a privileged stratum of society as well as the use of metal, etc. In this sense, we may well expect a definition in which academic circles designate southern Tibet as the birthplace of Tibetan civilization.

The first rays of culture to emerge on the Tibetan Plateau seem to have been unable to fall here. As far as I know, in southwestern Tibet and the Northern Tibetan Plateau paleoliths and microliths have been discovered one after the other, but at least on the southern shore of the river, no microliths have been discovered to date, only a small number of neoliths. Neolithic sites have only been discovered north of the river. It seems the region in the middle reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo should probably be considered the talented newcomer within the early period of the history of Tibetan culture.

In the past few years, I have followed this river upstream to its source or downstream following its current; I have gone from the region south of the stream to that north of the stream and then from the region north of the stream to that south of the stream. It is as if this were the progression of history and life, madly dashing left and right, tossed about over and over, till one day one goes, never to return again. Our current approach to this wellspring of Tibetan civilization is not meant as an investigation, but as an opportunity to peruse and enjoy the existing cultural heritage, which has been preserved for thousands of years up to the present day in material form. If we follow the hints presented in the lines of religious and cultural development, we should first arrive at the newly revived sacred retreat site Chimphu,

which is patronized by every school of Tibetan Buddhism, go to the Lhagyari, the descendents of the royal lineage of Tubo, who blended Buddhism and Bön, and then go to the burial grounds of the Tibetan kings in Chonggyé, to the mountain valley Threnggo on the northern shore of the river and get a taste of that Neolithic village that has laid silent for several thousands of years before its official excavation, and finally we should arrive at the fabled birthplace of the Tibetans, Gönpori Mountain.

Let us undertake a magnificent historical journey. Of course, we will undertake the journey by going where the spirit moves us, following a chronological sequence, going from the contemporary to the distant past.

The Monks and Nuns of Chimphu Hermitage

Chimphu hermitage sits on the big mountain on the northern shore of the Yarlung Tsangpo River to the back of Samyé Monastery. I have gone there twice. This time we took our Toyota all-terrain jeep for a stretch and rode the rumbling steamship across the river, which had the feeling of modernity. On the northern shore of the river, we still had to drive along the edge of the mountain and then cross the coastal plain along the riverbank which is marked by severe desertification and where disastrous sandstorms occur from time to time. After a little over an hour, we took the turn into Chimphu mountain valley. We followed the road till we got half way up the mountain, and then the road ended. In recent years the locals had been able to repair the road through volunteer work so that it was open to traffic up to this point, which was a very difficult task in and of itself. So we unloaded the vehicle and set up camp there.

The *chim* in Chimphu is the clan name of a former minister of Tubo, and *phu* means mountain valley. Before the advent of Buddhism, it was presumably the land that belonged to the Chim clan. In the neighboring mountain valleys that follow along the northern shore of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, the pale grey boulders lie exposed. Only in Chimphu do shrubs flourish. The thorny thickets that cover every inch of the mountain are a verdant green in summer and are flushed with red by the frost and snow in the fall. Both of the times I came to Chimphu were in the fall. The last time it was clothed in beautiful reds and purples; this time the colors had grown somewhat

withered and faint, because it was already very late in the fall. All monasteries and sacred retreat sites choose locations with lovely landscapes, and in turn, because they have become sacred sites, their ecosystems are conserved quite well, thus constituting a positive feedback loop. The monks and nuns of Chimphu hermitage consciously abide by this place's unwritten rules of the mountain: do not pollute the water source, do not harm the animals, and do not cut firewood nearby. In particular, cutting green branches is strictly forbidden. The lay people at the foot of the mountain in the region surrounding Samyé also consciously abide by this particular rule of the mountain, such that Chimphu will perpetually be clothed in emerald or crimson in accordance with the seasons.



View of Chimphu Hermitage

As the sun leaned toward the west, we unloaded the car, and Jampa Tshering from the Lhoka Prefecture Cultural Relics Administration Committee led us up the mountain. In order to afford us the opportunity to look down across the landscape of Chimphu at sunset, he made the romantic suggestion to lead us on a narrow path on the eastern side of the valley used only by people who cut firewood, which was concealed in one moment yet appeared in the next.

This really was one overgrown pathway. Not only was the path steep and dangerous, as well as being blocked by a tangle of branches, but to top it off, each of the branches was thorny. Our hair and sweaters became covered with tons of thorns and leaves. Walking along a mountain path like that at an elevation of 4000 meters is tiring too, but finding myself in the midst of those circumstances in that season, at that time of day, filled my heart with nothing but pure joy. At the time, I thought I had become a human plant and that even if a black bear should appear, I would not be afraid, because the stupid bear would surely mistake me for a plant. At that time, the evening sun was sinking beneath the horizon, warm and vibrant, gracefully illuminating the blood-red shrubs. Stopping here made the mountainside seem exactly as if Jampa Tshering had designed it for all of us, and we were able to take in the whole panorama of Chimphu. From the summit to the floor of the valley, the forest was so dense that not a trace of human activity could be seen, just the curling smoke from randomly scattered clusters of campfires used to cook evening meals. This stemmed from the practitioners' preparation of cooked food characteristic of beings in the human realm. From this mountaintop to the next crisscrossed lines of prayer flags fluttered in the wind. A couple of monasteries and sutra recitation halls and a couple of white stupas stood perfectly still, embraced by the mountains. I thought of those people who had gambled with their lives to come here and practice self-cultivation. What was their reason for coming? Was it not simply to attain enlightenment and achieve transcendence? Yet each time they commit themselves body and soul, wholly absorbed with single-hearted devotion, contemplating to exhaustion and living what they believe in, so no matter whether they are in majestic natural surroundings or not, each time they feel an upsurge of emotion or their state of mind is harmonious; it is a peak experience, and they experience momentary transcendence, so that they already feel satisfied. What does the word

buddha mean? It means one who is perfectly enlightened. A Buddha is not a deity, so the definition modern-day Buddhists induce is: a Buddha is a personage who has at once attained the highest degree of perfection in the areas of reason, emotion, and capability.

By this standard, would those people who have only experienced poverty and hardship and have been unsuccessful all of their lives, who in terms of their mental capacity have no way of achieving the the required standard, not find it difficult to fulfill their great aspiration of becoming a Buddha?

It would certainly also be difficult for me to become a Buddha in this lifetime, since my personality is such that I am filled with a passion for life, filled with love and emotional sentiment, and I crave prestige. Thus my worldly thoughts burn with fervor. At the most I can content myself with a transient realization of a Buddha-land during a moment of transcendence, only this and nothing more, nothing more. And after that moment I will return to the temporal world to remain there for a very long time.

Cloaked in the night we climbed to the peak of the mountain where the Chimphu cave monastery is located. In the dim light of yak butter lamps, the supervisor of the Chimphu cave monastery, Sanggyé Tendzin, explained to us in an unceasing torrent of words the history of Chimphu hermitage throughout the ages. That evening, cameraman Sun Liang was seriously ill, such that he nearly would not have made it back down the mountain. We were all famished and unbearably thirsty, and cold too. Only Sanggyé was chattering away.

The next day, Sanggyé Tendzin also spouted an unceasing torrent of words in front of our camera lens. He stood on the rooftop terrace of the monastery holding up the long horizontal strip of a sutra in one hand and quoting from the text, while he pointed to the landscape with the other hand when he was not using to turn the pages of the sutra:

...Padmasambhava subdued a demon on Mt. Hepori in Samyé, pursuing the demoness from the realm of the Nāgas to this place with the intent to kill it. Padmasambhava left his footprint behind that white stupa, extending his finger while reciting the magic word “Om”. The rocks that tumbled down came to rest on top of each other and the demoness was trapped under the white stupa.

On the eastern side of the peak is Padmasambhava's retreat cave.
In the sutra it says:

The mountain peak is just like a giant tent,
the Great Master practiced self-cultivation
in an especially outstanding landscape.
Nobles, ministers, and sages were around him.
The air circulated blessing the fields
and the mountain water was pure.
This is where the wild animals frolic and play.

This says that around Padmasambhava's retreat cave there were retreat caves of 25 nobles and ministers who attained enlightenment, and that in summer pure mountain water accumulated, and on the bright green mountainside wild animals played. The 25 people who attained enlightenment were great masters of Tibetan tantric qigong. After their techniques were perfected, some of them could bound into the heavens and soar around, some of them could run swiftly across the surface of water, some of them pinched off rocks and ate them as *tsampa*, and some were able to reverse the aging process....

Sanggyé Tendzin led us to the mountain cave inside the monastery, where Padmasambhava practiced self-cultivation. Inside the cave, the gigantic boulders were stained with soot and rubbed so much by the faithful that they had turned pitch black. Offerings are brought there to the statues of Padmasambhava and his two principle consorts. Sanggyé Tendzin said, "This is the red cliff cave. Just by gazing upon it, you will develop a pious mind. Once you have paid homage to it, you will wash yourself clean of a lifetime's worth of sins. A maṇḍala of the eight great practitioners has formed in the rock, as well as Buddha images of ḍākinīs and the 21 Tārās. By being physically present in this cave, any aspiration one may have may be realized. If you like you can recite your aspirations silently to yourselves. I assure you all your wishes will come true."

Each of us closed their eyes and pressed their palms together. Everyone had their own personal wishes.

At the front of the red cliff cave there is a sacred print, which we learned about in the following story, which was recorded in a sutra.

The eight-year-old daughter of the Tibetan king Thrisong Detsen, Lhacham Pema,⁹⁵ contracted a parasite and fell ill. It hurt so badly that she fell in and out of consciousness. She was brought to this place from Samyé to seek Padmasambhava's help in healing her illness.

Padmasambhava used holy water to bring her back to life, but in the end she returned to the dead once more. One of Padmasambhava's principle consorts Khandro Yeshé Tshogyel posed a question, "If this girl's fortune was good, why did she leave the realm of humans at the age of eight? If she did not have good fortune, why was she born a princess and how could she have come to sit in the arms of the great master Padmasambhava?"

Padmasambhava answered, "This has nothing to do with good fortune, but rather it is rooted in karma. King of Tibet, in your former life you accumulated an unparalleled amount of merit through self-cultivation. Because you vowed to become a king in this life you became the King of Tibet. There once was a fly that flew past your ear, which you inadvertently squeezed it to death between your thumb and forefinger. You were extraordinarily remorseful and vowed, 'I wish you to be reborn at my side in your next life.' Consequently, it was reborn into the royal family and became your daughter. However, the sins of her previous life were very grave, so that is why she lived to the age of eight and then died. This is karmic retribution."

The people listening to his explanation suddenly saw the light. The King of Tibet, who was still grieving, asked what his daughter's next life would be like. Padmasambhava did not have the heart to continue, for fear of deepening the King's grief. However, unable to resist Thrisong Detsen's repeated pleas, Padmasambhava finally said, "Because of her former sins, in her next life she will be reborn in the woods in Samyé as a dog that drags its hindquarters behind it. After having lived through six rebirths as this kind of crippled dog, she will live through four further rebirths as a crippled woman in Yarlung Prefecture. Then she will be reincarnated as the royal consort of the King of Chari. After she has experienced countless lives, her ultimate fate is to be reborn into the heavenly kingdom in the arms of the Buddha."

The sacred print found here is the print left by the little princess's knees when she knelt in front of Padmasambhava back then. After it had been bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha by the great master, the print became raised. After her death she was buried right here. Now, boards have been built to form the shape of the hash sign to provide people with a place to pay homage to her. Those who come to pay homage to her have smeared the boards of the enclosure with yak butter such that they have turned black and

become shiny. Coin after coin and bill after bill of small currency, countless Renminbi in total, have been thrown into the middle of it.

Thrisong Detsen, who was the King of Tibet 1200 some years ago, had Samyé monastery built, Tibet's first monastery complex, and invited Padmasambhava, the great tantric master from the state of Oḍḍiyāna, letting Buddhism be propagated throughout the Tibetan lands. The King of Tibet also presented Padmasambhava with his own beloved consort, Yeshé Tshogyel, so that she should become his consort – one of his companions in self-cultivation. Legend has it that after Padmasambhava had established the sacred site of Chimphu, Thrisong Detsen also practiced self-cultivation here in Sangchen Metok⁹⁶ Cave.



Samyé Monastery: A typical synthesis of Tibetan, Han, and Indian architecture

Now this retreat cave of Thrisong Detsen's serves as a sacred site where visitors bearing incense pay homage to him. There are two young monks from eastern Tibet who practice self-cultivation here. Both of them came last year. They say Samyé Monastery is very famous the world over, and that if one recites the six-syllable mantra once while practicing self-cultivation here, that is better than reciting a hundred mantras elsewhere, and that the merit acquired by practicing self-cultivation elsewhere is less than that acquired here within a single day.

It is precisely because such luminaries as the great master Padmasambhava and the Tibetan king Thrisong Detsen have practiced self-cultivation here that Chimphu has as a matter of course become an extraordinary sacred location. At the moment over one hundred monks and nuns in total practice self-cultivation here, more than two-thirds of whom are nuns. We made the request to pay them a visit, which Sanggyé Tendzin accepted with pleasure. He escorted us to a retreat cave behind the monastery. The monk who practiced self-cultivation there was the fifty-six-year-old Lodrö Dargyé. He was a local from Dranang County.

Interviewer: How many years have you practiced self-cultivation here?

Lodrö Dargyé: Nine.

Interviewer: For how long do you plan to practice self-cultivation here?

Lodrö Dargyé: I'm already quite old. I plan on spending my last years here.

Interviewer: Do you usually provide for yourself?

Lodrö Dargyé: Yes. I gather firewood and go get water.

Interviewer: Would you please tell us how a day in your life is organized?

Lodrö Dargyé: I don't get up that early every day. However, when I'm practicing self-cultivation for one or two months in seclusion, I get up early and go to sleep late practicing diligently.

Interviewer: What does your self-cultivation entail? What level of self-cultivation do you practice?

Lodrö Dargyé: Before I meditate, I study the classic text *Kunzang Lamai Zhelung*.⁹⁷ When it comes to the level of my self-cultivation, I have no way of knowing that. The main thing is to practice the contents of the classic text, so that I come to comprehend them to the point that I have cut off the ten evils and collected the ten virtues (Cutting off the ten evils means the following: Don't kill living beings, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't lie, don't incite quarrels between people, don't use coarse language, don't use imprecise and overly florid speech, don't be covetous, don't get angry, don't harbor misconceptions).

Interviewer: When you practice self-cultivation in seclusion, don't you feel lonely all by yourself?

Lodrö Dargyé: That's not possible. Secular life is full of multifarious and chaotic tasks, full of resentment and unbearably troublesome. When one sits in meditation practicing self-cultivation, there are no worries and the mind is at ease.

The retreat house in which Lodrö Dargyé lives may well be the best one in all of Chimphu with its stone pathway and wicker gate, birds chirping in the mountain solitude, a canopy of trees covering the courtyard, vines climbing up the stone walls, with red and yellow fallen leaves covering the ground and rustling in the autumn breeze. It has a tinge of immortality about it. Nevertheless, it is difficult to thoroughly transcend the mundane and free oneself of all vestiges of everyday human life. The material needs of secular life remain. Lodrö Dargyé returns home at least twice a year and brings back provisions. The alms the practitioners of Chimphu are able to receive are few indeed, and in general they receive material support from their families and friends or, after the fall harvest, they lock their cells and go begging.

According to Sanggyé Tendzin, all those who come to Chimphu have seen through the dust of secular life and are searching for the path to liberation. They need not be endowed with any aptitude for self-cultivation, and they do not need anyone to examine them and confirm their qualifications. Rather, they are free to come and go as they please. The monastery's management only extends to helping newcomers with their living arrangements and taking care of funeral arrangements for the deceased – there are several sky burial grounds situated all over the mountainside.

The self-cultivation practiced here emphasizes the importance of cultivating the mind and not the body, and Tibetan tantric qigong is not practiced here either. Those who are literate primarily read the sutras. Those who are illiterate can recite the six-syllable mantra thousands of times over or bow down over and over again without stopping. In sum, the methods of practice differ, and they depend on the person involved, but the merit accrued from them is the same.

The thirty-three-year-old nun Chimé Lhamo from Gojo County in eastern Tibet has lived in Chimphu for seven years. Her method of self-cultivation is bowing down in front of a Buddhist shrine in her room. In seven years she has prostrated the full length of her body 300,000 times.

Chimé Lhamo's neighbor, an old nun of 66 years, who she takes care of, has prostrated herself 400,000 times.

A relatively large number of the monks and nuns who practice self-cultivation here are from Gojo County in eastern Tibet. In the early 1980's when self-cultivation in Chimphu was just beginning to be revived, a famous *trülku* from that county came here. Since then natives of Gojo County have come here to seek refuge one after the other. Last year, the *trülku* attained parinirvāṇa,⁹⁸ and his followers built a white stupa for him at the tip of the mountain and raised a line of prayer flags like a mountain ridge extending from about halfway up the mountain to its tip. Now that the venerated master is no longer there, Chimé Lhamo is debating whether or not to stay here. She has always been dependent on the support of her distant relatives in Lhasa. She appears to be utterly destitute as well.



Lines of prayer flags fluttering in the wind at Chimphu Hermitage

In a crude mountain cave, which is said to have been the retreat cave of Namkhai Nyingpo, one of the 25 disciples of Padmasambhava who attained enlightenment, lives the middle-aged nun Damchö Drölma, who is haggard and pained. She kept saying over and over that she had not a single relative in her hometown, and that she was completely on her own here, such that it would be best for her to live out the rest of her days practicing self-cultivation here. The way she kept saying that inspired pity for her helpless state.

In another group of living quarters put together from a conglomeration of a couple of neighboring caves, some young nuns lived keeping each other company. They were all healthy and well-behaved young ladies with bubbly personalities, who laughed loudly. They helped us carry the camera equipment down the mountain and proved to be fleet of foot.

Chimphu hermitage is very famous now. The Department of Tourism has listed it as a tourist attraction. It is said that during the self-cultivation craze a few years ago, several self-employed businessmen came here to practice self-cultivation after they had made money. Some foreigners came too but were later urged by the local authorities to leave. That said, if self-cultivation in Chimphu is treated as a fad, it seems to be an open-ended one. In the past few years this place has ceased being isolated. Pilgrims and tourists come here every day. The practitioners delight in making their acquaintance and are eager to answer their questions. The practitioners associate with one another in a friendly manner as well, like neighbors in a village. They help each other and live just as if they were in their own homes. Sanggyé Tendzin said, there once was a young nun who had braided hair and who wore makeup and dressed up. There was also a couple consisting of a monk and a nun who moved in together. This conduct goes against the mountain's rules, and so they were expelled.

Jampa Tshering really beat around the bush before he finally asked a question about the contact between the man and woman mentioned above, hemming and hawing. I would never have thought that Sanggyé Tendzin would answer the question as frankly as he did. After we left Chimphu we heard a romantic story involving a man who used to be a village cadre of some village in eastern Tibet. He eloped with his lover, wandering far and wide until they were tired of drifting about. Then both of them retired to the mountain forest to live in seclusion and came to Chimphu to practice self-cultivation. As it happens, the man became the supervisor of Chimphu hermitage. We do not know for certain whether or not this man was Sanggyé Tendzin. We also heard that when people from that man's village came on pilgrimage later on, they found him, laughed heartily and said the disciplinary measure sanctioned by the party is still waiting for him. It is also said that that man was quite good at playing the flute, and that when he raised the flute to his lips and played from time to time in Chimphu as well, the monks and nuns practicing self-

cultivation would sit around him and listen. A Han Chinese man, who new all of this, lamented deeply, saying that that man, who experienced all of that and has now achieved a state of tranquility, really has led an easy life.

I am not sure if such a man who once delved deeply into the dust of secular life before he made his way out of it can achieve proper success through self-cultivation.

On both shores of the Yarlung Tsangpo River hermitages of this type are distributed all over the place. Now numerous sacred sites have been abandoned, but there is hope that some will be revived.

Dingpoche Monastery in southern Tibet is a monastery of the Drukpa Kagyü school, which is famous for the spectacle presented by the practice of Tibetan tantric qigong. Small tents for self-cultivation of a kind that is unique in all of the Tibetan lands are lined up outdoors around a wide open space atop a mountain. A hole in the earth about 30 cm deep and covering an area of one square meter supports each of the very small white tents with pointy roofs. What practitioners have trained in here in the severe cold of winters past is the famous “*tumo* fire meditation” – navel fire yoga.

Jikmé Gyatsho, abbot of Dingpoche Monastery, gave us a brief introduction of this tradition. Its details are esoteric and profound, such that my friend Wangdü Tshering had a very difficult time translating them and when he had translated them, they were just as difficult to understand:

The Kagyü school of our monastery primarily practices Mahāmudrā and Nāropa’s Method of the Six Accomplishments.⁹⁹ Old monks usually practice the method of Mahāmudrā, while young monks usually practice the method of Mahāmudrā till they can practice *samatha*,¹⁰⁰ and then gradually begin practicing the Method of the Six Accomplishments. They start by practicing navel fire yoga, and move on to illusory body yoga, dream yoga, pure light yoga, the yoga of the next life, and *phowa* yoga. This happens to be the site where our monastery practices navel fire yoga.

The practice of navel fire yoga comprises two details. One of them is that *tumo* fire meditation must be practiced outdoors and completely naked. The other is that only those who have completed the transfer of merit through their training may practice this method of cultivation. During the era when Rinchen Pelzang was abbot, all of

this could be accomplished. Now the monks just study the sutras here for two hours each day.

I once trained in *tumo* fire meditation for six or seven years. When training in the practice of *tumo* fire meditation, one must start off at the level of the path of accumulation and arrive at the level of universal completion, progressing step by step through the distinct levels of the hierarchy. In the ultimate path, the entire structure of the physical body in its transformation and manifestation is completely absorbed in the realm of *dharmatā*,¹⁰¹ where there is no rebirth. Thus one visualizes an image and causes it to become reality, finally achieving spiritual attainment.

At that time, when the evening sun was about to set, a couple dozen young monks wormed their way one by one into the tiny tents and vied with one another as to who could chant sutras the loudest. We asked whether or not someone would, in the future, train in the practice of *tumo* fire meditation, following the strict guidelines of that practice.

Mr. Jikmé Gyatsho said that was the plan. Just like when building a house the foundation must be laid first, these young people are studying in preparation to enter the fourth level of cultivation prior to the practice. While waiting for the disciples' innate abilities to mature, they can first practice methods such as the visualizations of Mahāmudrā yoga, vajra breath counting, and vase breathing. Then, they can practice the calming of the mind and *tumo* fire yoga, etc., which is part of the Method of Six Accomplishments.

Two years later, there would be someone meditating in the little tents who truly practiced the method. We agreed we would come again for an interview at that future date.

The practitioners' ultimate objective is to achieve proper success through self-cultivation, to free themselves once and for all from the world of dust. Therefore, they intend to devote the whole of their present lives to self-cultivation, in order to reach an inexhaustible future life. They have already made their standard of living sink to the lowest level, and besides that, they are in need of next to nothing.

However, after two years had passed, we were still unable to go there as we had planned, and so we do not know who among the practitioners are in the little tents.

The Territory of the Lhagyari, Kings of the Hundred Deities

Starting in Dranang and crossing Nedong County and the town of Tsethang, following the current of the Yarlung Tsangpo downstream, one arrives in the county of Chuksum in the eastern part of Lhoka Prefecture. East of Chuksum is Gyatsha County. Nang County, east of Gyatsha, always belonged to Lhoka and has just been placed under the newly established administrative office of Nyingthri in recent years. Actually, based on historical geography and cultural tradition assigning Nang County to Lhoka makes a little more sense. The Tubo earth burial tombs, the Lhé Hill tombs, which are superlative regarding the area they cover and the line-up of people buried in them, are located there.

Compared with the rest of the prefectures in Tibet, Lhoka has a relatively low elevation, a mild climate, a relatively ample supply of electricity, and in addition the distances between its county seats are the smallest. You can run through several counties in one day. This shows that the population of Lhoka is concentrated and transportation there is easy. It is the most fully developed prefecture in Tibet. Chuksum is not the least bit remote, yet it is still relatively unfamiliar to me. When I went there in 1992 it was my first time there, and my only time as well. I undertook the trip there at the behest of Li Yongxian, a specialist in Tibetan archeology from Sichuan University. He had previously investigated the historic Lhagyari Palace and the Tubo Period grottoes there in Lok Village. Following his investigation a number of tentative plans for related reconstruction projects and for the development of the site as a tourist attraction have been placed on the agenda.

In the region adjacent to the Chuksum County seat, we stumbled upon natural topographical formations resembling a miniature version of the Gugé Clay Forest in Ngari and could not help but applaud and smile broadly at the sight of it. You know, why would these descendants of the Tubo royal family follow the same aesthetic eye and sense of feng shui of human habitats and have the descendants of Lang Darma live in these separate places which are the only two in Tibet with clay forest land formations!

The following presents a historical anecdote drawing on this point, which happens to tie into and expand on what I related at the

beginning of *Going West to Ngari* regarding the succession, following the collapse of the Tubo Dynasty, of the line of descendants of Lang Darma who died a violent death. Allow me to start with the opening section of *Going West to Ngari*:

In the second half of the ninth century, the sun was already setting on the Tubo Empire, which for a time had held Chang'an in awe and held sway over all of Central Asia, controlling the Silk Road for more than one hundred years, and it was nearing the end of the road. Tsenpo Lang Darma stamped out Buddhist teachings sounding the death's knell for this fated dynasty. The resulting infighting among the members of the royal family and the succession of military campaigns year after year was the same as beating the empire when it was down and amounted to it digging its own grave, and the great uprising of slaves and commoners that occurred as if "one bird had soared into the sky and a hundred followed" and swept across all of Tibet rocked, in turn, the foundation of the society this dynasty depended on for its very existence. At the end of that century, the capture and execution of Pelkhor Tsen, son of the last Tsenpo, Ösung, by soldiers of the slave uprising in the prefecture of Nyangro Shambö in Tsang (Gyantsé in modern-day Tibet) marked the end of the Tubo Empire.

That sorrowful morning, on a bleak autumn day in Jema Yungdrung, several hundred miles west of Nyangro Shambö, Pelkhor Tsen's son Kyidé Nyima Gön, who had escaped to the wilds, bid the old ministers accompanying him farewell and went westward, providing the prologue for the seven hundred year Gugé Dynasty.

At the same time, Kyidé Nyima Gön's younger brother, Pelkhor Tsen's second son Trashi Tsekpa Pel wandered off to the region around Drongpa in southwestern Zhikatsé, and his children and grandchildren lived and multiplied there, becoming the local *gyelpos* for many generations. Around the 12th century, one of his descendants was invited back to southern Tibet by the original nobles of Tubo and founded a small dynasty by the name of "Yarlung Jowo". Later they moved to Chuksum again, marking the foundation of the Kingdom of Lhagyari.

Originally, Kyidé Nyima Gön had left his homeland under duress and was forced to establish a new world, while the lineage of Lhagyari returned to the old world, just as fallen leaves settle on the roots of a tree, seeking the protection of the souls of their ancestors.

Lhagyari – kings of the hundred deities. The Lhagyari royal lineage continued even a bit longer than that of Gugé. It extended continuously till the middle of the 20th century. According to a survey conducted by a team of investigators led by the scholar Professor Li Youyi, in 1956, as well as the statistics dating to a couple of years after the democratic reform, the areas ruled by the Lhagyari king included the land of the four *dzongs* (counties) Lhagyari, Zangri, Gyatsha, and Lhüntsé, covering an area of approximately 3000 km². 13 monasteries; 20 some manors; nine pastures; farmland encompassing a broad area; approximately 50,000 heads of livestock including horses, cattle, and sheep; a little over 2000 serf households; close to 10,000 additional subjects; more than ten workshops that provided their services directly to the royal court; three or four hundred house slaves, etc. were under his administration. The royal family of Lhagyari enjoyed the privilege to make laws, produce instruments of punishment, establish prisons, and pass judgment in law cases.¹⁰²

In the modern age the Lhagyari clearly fell into decline. For seven or eight hundred years, as the legitimate heirs to the royal house of Tubo, the Lhagyari successively experienced frequent dynastic changes, yet maintained a comparatively independent status. Legend has it that when the Lhagyari king went to Lhasa to pay homage to the court, the Tibetan government would send a minister of the fourth rank to the Lhasa River ford to welcome him and bow to him, and when he met with the Dalai Lama, the Lhagyari king's seat was a *khaden* that was only one level lower than that of this highest ruler in the Tibetan lands.

This concept of legitimacy reflects native ideas on ancestors, clan lineages, family names, and male heirs, which existed before the advent of Buddhism and were no different from those of the Han at that time. Its transmission is vividly manifested by the old house “Gyelsé Thrunghang”, the house in which princes are born.

Lok Village is very far away from the Chuksun County seat. Embarking from the county seat, one can drive on a dirt road between loess cliffs to Seu Township. The people of Seu Township say, “Here in our township is where the Lhagyari Dharma kings rose to power. Only later did the royal court relocate to Chuksun.” Seu means “someone who has a lot of gold” – “gold king” or the place of the gold king, and the river that runs through the territory of the Lhagyari is

Ser Chu River – the gold river. Legend has it that the gold nuggets in the river are the size of boulders. Seu Township, discarded here by history, is bleak and bears the desolation of late autumn. Its elevation is somewhat high and it seems the people here mainly herd livestock for a living. In front of the township hall was a wide expanse of tall grassland. I wonder if it was like that eight hundred years ago.



Riding on horseback to Lok Village



Women of Lok Village washing their clothes

It is impossible to drive to Lok Village by car, so we rented horses and rode there. Early in the morning on the day after, we drove the horses

forward along the mountain valley at the end of the grassland with heads held high. There were some historical remains along the path, toppled stupas or platforms for signal fires. We took a lot of pictures while riding the horses. This time, besides Li Yongxian, Gyatsho, Trashi Dawa, and Ngalong came along as well.

The side of the cliff near Lok Village is dotted with caves, and it has a bit of the feeling of the region of Dzada and Puhreng in western Ngari, but of course with much fewer caves. This is where the early Buddhist grotto “Cow Nose” is located, which archeologist Li Yongxian and his colleagues discovered.

Cow Nose is a descriptive name relating to the shape of the grotto. This type of vertical shaft is only encountered in the early Dunhuang grottoes. We climbed up along the precipitous mountain and wriggled our way into the cave, which was not exactly small. The inside of the grotto was already being used by common folks as a storehouse for firewood. Someone helped us tidy things up a bit so we could shoot photos of the patterns on the ceiling, the reliefs on the walls, and the auras carved behind Buddha statues, but the Buddha statues themselves were long gone.

According to their research, archeologists say that the art in the grottoes in this area was added early during the Later Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet, roughly between the tenth and eleventh centuries. The shape in which they were carved out is close to that of those in Dunhuang, while the style of the art in them is close to that of the grottoes in Ngari, and quite different from the Ü-Tsang style of central Tibet. In total there are a hundred some grottoes such as this around Lok Village.

The locals do not pay any attention at all to these artistic phenomena. They said the caves are called “gepa dangpo”, which means “where the early people dwelled”. This means that back before there were houses here, the people excavated these caves as shelters. Only later were offerings made to the Buddha, which is called “cow nose” in the vernacular. Lok Village, which is situated at the end of the valley, is not exactly a small village. The houses are crowded together and cover a large portion of the mountainside. More than halfway up the mountain, there is a monastery called Lo Chöden, which was the ancestral temple of the Lhagyari. The tall and large, exceedingly dilapidated old house standing in the area above the monastery is the

Gyelsé Thrunghang, the house in which princes are born, which was, for successive generations, the designated location for the consorts of the Lhagyari kings to bear children.



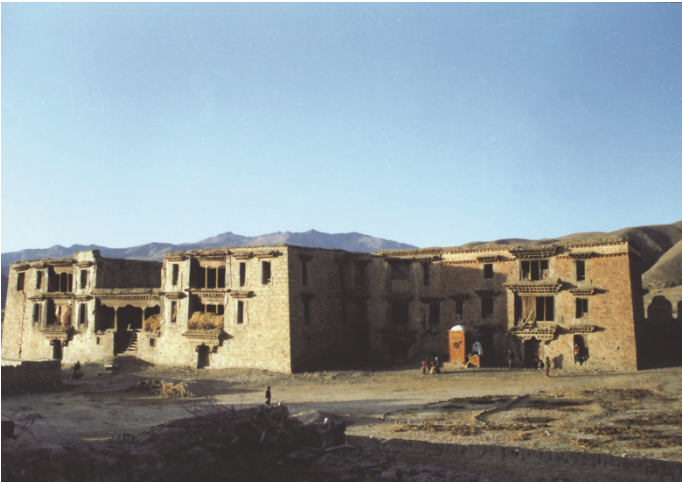
Gepa dangpo: Grottoes around Lok Village



A view of Lok Village

Sönam Wangchuk, mayor of Seu Village, sat on a stone pedestal in the portico of the monastery telling the history of the village, but he could not tell it clearly. An eighty-year-old man from the village could not explain it clearly either. However, with regard to the old house, Sönam

Wangchuk said that the grandson of the first Lhagyari king was born there, since this is the location of the Lhagyaris' guardian deity and the royal family's birth deity. The earliest kings were unable to bear children elsewhere. Only Lok Village had the proper feng shui and the deities to protect them with their blessing. Thereafter, all of the queens had to come to Lok Village, to the old house, to give birth. This custom continued uninterrupted till 1959, when the old house was divided up and allocated to commoners to serve as their living quarters.



Ruins of Lhagyari Palace



Detail of Lhagyari Palace

Sönam Wangchuk still remembered seeing the royal consort's honor guard in his childhood. The monastery organized a welcoming ceremony with standards flying. The monks blew conch horns on the mountaintop opposite the temple, and the common people conducted *sangsöl* ceremonies on the surrounding mountaintops. The royal consort's horse caravan consisted of a total of twenty some horses surrounded by attendants, and they came in an imposing and grand procession along the mountain path...

The Lhagyari king came to Lok Village every year in summer during the sixth lunar month in the Tibetan calendar and before the beginning of winter during the eleventh lunar month. Each time he stayed two or three days, worshipping the deities, offering sacrifices to his ancestors, and receiving commoners.

...

After returning to Lhasa, I visited a descendant of the Lhagyari kings in an ordinary house on Barkhor Street. This middle-aged man said that up to his grandmother's generation, the women in his family still gave birth in the Gyelsé Thrunghang. Starting with his mother, the women gave birth wherever they pleased. I handed him pictures of the historic Lhagyari Palace to look at and said he could pick one to keep as memento. He glanced at them briefly and gave them back to me with a smile saying he did not want one. That is Tibetan nonchalance.

...

Trashi Dawa seemed to be constantly deliberating about something during the entire investigation. I noticed he expressed interest in the old house, and guessed he might be planning something – perhaps he was thinking of a good subject that could turn into a big story, a world renowned work like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *The Autumn of the Patriarch* or such.¹⁰³

While Gugé is famous throughout the land for its special geographic environment, its religious art with its own unique style, and the mystery of its downfall, Lhagyari is unable to attract the necessary attention despite its thought-provoking significance for the indigenous culture and is always treated with cold indifference.

On the plain in the river valley below the Lhagyari Palace lies the Lhagyari summer palace. I do not know when they started doing so, but the Lhagyari imitated the architectural style of the Dalai Lama

and erected a small version of the Potala Palace, a small version of Lukhang Lake, the location of the Mönlam Prayer Festival, etc. – just like a small version of Lhasa. The small version of the Norbu Lingka located here was built by the last Lhagyari king based on the ancient Han-style architecture of the Chinese interior, which he saw during his visit to the Chinese interior at the beginning of the 1950's. Now it has remained idle, standing in the courtyard of the county government building, for quite some time. The original walls that surrounded the palace and other structures such as the palace bathhouse, however, no longer exist. The *lingka* too has been destroyed by new construction.

We lifted our gaze to the Lhagyari Palace in the light of the setting sun atop the high hill with its ancient walls. Only ancient walls tower so high that you cannot look over them and are built that wide and thick, demonstrating a monarchical will, and an attempt to establish something that is indestructible.

Looking back at that distant year, we see the Lhagyari king, that king of the hundred deities, clothed in Songtsen Gampo's regalia, his wavy hair draped over both shoulders holding the white yak's tail fly whisk of the preeminent master in his hand with his feet firmly planted on a red carpet, passing through the midst of his magnificent honor guard with his head held high, striding from the palace to the forty-columned *Kanjur* sutra recitation hall.

Several Thousands of Years from the Living Dead Who Keep the Tombs to Threnggo Valley

Beginning with the Lhagyari, I felt we were touching upon the essence of the source of native Tibetan culture ever more closely.

We have been to the tombs of the Tibetan kings in southern Tibet a great many times. The tombs of the Tibetan kings are in Chonggyé County, in the foothills of Muré Mountain at the mouth of Dungkar Valley. Covering an area that measures two thousand some meters in length from east to west and one thousand four hundred some meters in breadth from north to south, the river valley is adorned with one trapezoidal mound next to the other. I am not going to do a general introduction on them based on common knowledge, such as the following, which is based on historical sources: The interior of the tombs is generally divided into several rooms, and

the deceased are buried with various valuables. *The White Annals*¹⁰⁴ say, when the Tubo “rulers died, all things such as the *tsempo*’s horse, armor, and precious objects were buried with him.” *The Account of the Kings*¹⁰⁵ says, “The interior of the small tombs comprises nine cells. The *tsempo*’s corpse is placed in the center, painted with gold. The tomb is filled with treasures,” and the like.

The information derived from archeological excavations makes it clear that from as far back as the Neolithic Era, which was four or five thousand years ago, and throughout the whole of the Tubo Period, earth burial was the main burial method in the Tibetan region. The practice of burying the living with the dead existed as well, as has been discovered in some of the early tombs. At that time the people of this area were just like the people in the Han areas, in that serving the dead was like serving the living. This reflects the conception that when the flesh perishes the soul lives eternally in another world. What the people were concerned about was life after death.

I do not want to provide a general introduction here. The peculiar subject I would like to glean from this matter is the uniquely Tibetan institution of tomb keepers, which replaced the practice of burying the living with the dead.

Although I had heard of this matter quite early on, this time Jampa Tshering from the prefecture’s Cultural Relics Administration Committee explained it in exhaustive detail, and we looked at the site even though it is only a local relic. He led us by the side of Songtsen Gampo’s tomb, where there was a small house that once housed a tomb keeper and said:

In former times a tomb keeper lived in this location. This is the ruin. The institution of tomb keepers is an extension of the Bön practice of burying the living with the dead. The slaying of a human as a sacrifice was transformed into a human who was not slain but kept the tomb while remaining alive.

The position of tomb keeper was generally filled by one of the Tibetan king’s personal servants or a minister from his inner circle. For the family clan of whoever managed to be chosen, it was a stroke of luck. This family would receive material support from the royal court for generations to come, and enjoy grants such as land and slaves. But for the person providing the service, it was a very unlucky turn of events. He indeed was one of the living dead. To his dying day, he was

not allowed to make contact with the living in the outside world. If someone came to make sacrifice, he had to evade them. He could only eat sacrificial offerings. It was just as if he had been sacrificed.

Of course, sacrificial offerings alone are not enough. The tomb keeper had his own supplementary food source. When the cattle and sheep of the common people that surrounded the burial site carelessly wandered on to the burial grounds, the tomb keeper had the right to appropriate this livestock that had been delivered to his doorstep as his own. The procedure was to heat the animals' horns and bend them into a curve. This meant the animal had passed into the tomb keeper's possession. Then it was released to return back to its previous owners, who would continue raising it. When there were not enough sacrificial offerings, the tomb keeper could slaughter the animal to allay his hunger.

The period in which the practice of burying the living with the dead, which was prevalent in the early period, was abolished as a barbaric institution was some time before the seventh century during Songtsen Gampo's grandfather's generation. After that, the institution of the tomb keeper was implemented, which most probably held throughout the Tubo Period, and thus existed for approximately two hundred years. Later, following the demise of Tubo and the emergence of sky burial, there was neither a Tibetan king, nor a tomb to be kept. However, the practice whereby the tomb keeper would mark the livestock by heating its horns carried on. Bandits imitated the tomb keepers, heating the horns of common people's livestock to change their shape, and when they needed them they would retrieve them, bolstered by the conviction that the law was on their side.

Not long ago when a group of young archeologists was fixing their gaze on an agricultural village in the Threnggo Valley north of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, one of them uttered the sentence: "Why were ancient humans unable to inhabit this area when the fluvial terrace was so well developed?" Based on this preconceived judgment, they searched for the whole of one week – only a single week and no more. The illumination of the resplendent light of the sunset drew them toward a sand dune shimmering with a golden glow. The ground was covered with stone tools, potsherds, fire pits, and the like, and thus a Neolithic site impatiently revealed itself before their very eyes.

The flights to Lhasa from everywhere including Chengdu, Beijing, and Kathmandu all landed at the airport in Gongkar. The airport is located on the southern shore of the Yarlung Tsangpo River. On the northern shore of the river not very far from the airport, there is a valley that lies in a north-south direction and that is Threnggo. Threnggo means “the open gate”, which in turn has the connotation “rugged and strategically important” as well as “narrow”. One can ride a wooden motorboat to cross the broad surface of the river, but cars cannot board the boat. On the northern shore of the river a forest of poplar trees stretches continuously in a long, dense swath from the sand beaches of the river’s shore to the foot of the mountain. On the mountainside facing the river is Dorjé Drak Monastery. Dorjé Drak Monastery is one of the three great Nyingma monasteries in Lhoka Prefecture, which are Chonggyé’s Pelri Monastery in the south, Dranang’s Mindröling Monastery in the east, and Gongkar’s Dorjé Drak Monastery in the north.

The mountain that Dorjé Drak leans on resembles a dragon, and the monastery is located prominently in the area of the dragon’s heart. It is said that during the Republic Period, a Han geologist from the Chinese interior came to look at it and said that since the monastery’s foundation rested in the dragon’s palm, this monastery would surely thrive. However, to this day Dorjé Drak has not experienced much prosperity at all. First, its predecessor is said to have been built in a place called Zangzang Lhadrag between Ngari and Northern Tibet in ancient times when the Later Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet had just begun. Later, in the period of turmoil caused by the war with Lhapzang Khan, it was destroyed and relocated here. It is also said that the monastery’s name, which means “vajra cliff”, was bestowed by the Emperor of China, and that at its zenith the monks there numbered over three hundred. Said monastery escaped the vagaries of the “Cultural Revolution” by the skin of its teeth and was preserved intact up to the middle of the 1970s, functioning as the township’s granary. Then in 1975 all of the grain was used to alleviate poverty, and the monastery stood empty until 1978. At that time wood was needed to build the county’s Institute of Agricultural Sciences, and the decision was made to demolish the monastery and transport the wood by river. However, not long after they had just finished demolishing the monastery, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh

Central Committee was convened, and the policy on religion was put into effect, so that everywhere monasteries were rebuilt one after the other, and Dorjé Drak busied itself with the task of renovation as well – yet another example of something that people would not have done in the first place, if they had known then that they would regret it later.

Now, there are only 20 or 30 monks at Dorjé Drak Monastery. They have done a good job at diversifying and have purchased an oil press, a noodle machine, and a ferryboat, in order to serve the masses. Even if there is only one person there to cross the river, they still want to ferry him across. Every year they also ship chemical fertilizer for the local lay people, and as a result Dorjé Drak Monastery has been voted an advanced collective of the Autonomous Region.

Dorjé Drak Monastery sits on the eastern side of the mouth of Threnggo Valley together with the mountain opposite it to the east, just like two leaves of a massive gate standing wide open. In each of the two mountain faces two fully armored heavenly kings are carved as guards. When these Four Heavenly Kings were carved or who they were carved by is unknown. The carvings we saw were recently re-carved by someone on top of the originals. Directly in the middle of the mouth of the valley, between the two mountains, there is a small rocky hill. The locals say it is the bolt across the gate of Threnggo.

This gate which opens to the world may be considered profoundly meaningful.

Jampa Tshering was one of the archeologists in the group that discovered this site, and before the site was officially excavated, he brought us here again. On the day we came here, we also arrived at precisely that time when the sun was leaning toward the west. In this broad stretch of empty land severely affected by desertification, we filled all our pockets full up like greedy mob bosses with those chopping tools, scrapers, and chunks of stone showing clear traces of flaking in every size, which were meticulously worked by early humans. With boundless joy, we gazed about wide-eyed and impatiently dug pits in the sand with our hands, selecting those shards of sand-tempered pottery which were cord marked. Jampa Tshering saw what we were doing and remarked sarcastically, “Why is it you don’t know to use stone tools?” Then it suddenly dawned on us, and we picked up

the stone tools the early humans had used ourselves to excavate that era.

The discovery of Threnggo Valley is of enormous significance. Not only does it at least contain this single Neolithic site that lay exposed on the earth's surface, which the experts' preliminary analysis has determined to have a roughly three or four thousand year history. At another location in the valley a smelting site has been discovered with scorched earth that was fired at high temperatures and bits of congealed glass. In addition, on the stone wall that lines the river a new discovery was made of cliff paintings of animals. Their style is roughly the same as that of the cliff paintings made in northern Tibet and those made by the pastoral nomads throughout Tibet. On the same section of the stone wall there are also cliff inscriptions and the six-syllable mantra stemming from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In addition, ancient tombs have been discovered on the floor of the valley, and the mouth of that very valley is where the famous Nyingma monastery Dorjé Drak is located.

Several thousand years of Tibetan history are condensed in Threnggo Valley, and the common folks of Threnggo Township have a passion for ancient traditions as well. Every New Year to this day, the men still perform a type of waist drum dance, in which they throw their braided hair around. This dance is said to have been passed down since the time of the grand opening ceremony of Samyé Monastery over 1200 years ago. It comprises eight different dances, each of which is divided into eighteen acts and differs in what is acted out. For example, in one of them animals are acted out, such as elephants roaming about, crows hopping around, and gaurs pacing back and forth. They perform every year on the fifth, sixth, and seventh days of the Tibetan New Year, and also perform alongside other groups during the cultural festival held by the prefecture. The men maintain their long braided hair, especially for the purpose of performing this kind of waist drum dance.

Apart from this tradition, the township has also maintained the tradition of song competitions. They compete with the neighboring township singing for seven days and seven nights on end without repeating a single song. The record for the highest number of songs sung is a total of 540. When the song leader, sixty-year-old Grandpa

Tshering starts to dance, he is like a child, something we later witnessed for ourselves at a performance in Tsethang.

We enjoyed ourselves so much in this valley of culture that we almost forgot we had to leave. With twilight nearing we rushed to catch a walking tractor to ride to the crossing. The bed of gravel that lined the shore nearly would have caused our guts to fall out. Once we had reached the crossing it was already the dead of night. The warm-hearted and compassionate people of Threnggo were still waiting at the side of the boat. Soon after, the sound of the engine rose up from the still surface of the river. Cast in the light of the moon, the surface of the river looked like a dreamscape. The clear, bright moon once shined on those people who made the stone tools and ceramics, on the people who made the cliff paintings, and on those people who rest in peace in the ancient tombs. Those people have passed away; we are still alive.

The Potters of Tsenyül

The artifacts from that era have been discovered, and the techniques of craftsmanship from that era still survive among the people. We discovered this fact through our study of a pottery village. In some article I had seen people called this craft a living fossil from primitive times. If this is not taken to be a derogatory term, I think that is exactly what it is.

On the southern shore of the middle reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River lies the famous Dranang Mountain Valley. In Dranang Valley there has always been a tradition of handwork. Workshops for every type of handcraft including weaving, metalwork, sculpture, and lacquer painting are spread throughout the cities, towns, townships, and villages, and there is also a pottery village called Tsenyül, which is renowned near and far.

Tsenyül sits on a broad proluvial fan within the valley, and consists of a hillside of Tibetan style stone buildings with flat roofs. The color of the surrounding mountain is a deep orange and there is gravel everywhere, making the ground unsuitable for agriculture. The natural environment determined the method of production. This small village relies on the mountain, eating it, manufacturing pottery for its livelihood. Out of a total of 64 households in the entire village, 56 specialize in the production of pottery. The remaining seven house-

holds are all single-person families, and it is difficult for them to individually manage the multistep production of pottery, so they are forced to engage in agriculture or take up odd jobs. Occasionally, they hire someone to come into their homes to make some pottery. The rest of this village's assets are closely tied to this main theme: there are only 66 acres of farmland and 1200 heads of livestock consisting of donkeys for transporting the pottery, milk yaks to provide yak butter, and sheep which serve as the source of meat, leather, and wool.

The tradition of pottery production in Tsenyül originated at least at the end of Neolithic era, and it seems to have continued uninterrupted since then.

According to the *Record of Cultural Relics of Dranang County*,¹⁰⁶ this site, as measured by archeologists, covers an area of approximately 250,000 m². The villagers do not know when it dates to; they only have a vague recollection of an ancient legend. A sainted old man named Bodanna transmitted this handcraft. The villagers pride themselves on the fact that the people of Tsenyül have a patent on it. Outsiders have been unable to learn the handcraft and spread it elsewhere. During the period of collectivization, a commune once organized four production brigades of commune members to learn to make pottery. They invited a master from Tsenyül, who brought a complete set of tools with him. The processing worked and the pieces were formed as well, but the firing failed. Everyone said it was a problem with the feng shui. It seems Tsenyül pottery manufacturing will remain exclusive for a long time to come.

We witnessed and shot footage of the whole manufacturing process at Pema Wanggyel's home, which verified the conclusion made in the *Record of Cultural Relics* that the technique of manufacturing pottery used in Tsenyül is a living fossil, which has been preserved from primitive times to the present. All of the raw materials and tools are obtained locally. The clay is procured on the mountaintop, which is a day's trip from the village. The clay is sifted once through a coarse sieve at the site where it is obtained and then transported back home on the backs of donkeys. Having been passed again through a fine sieve, the fine particles are set aside for making fine details such as the rim of the vessels. The coarse clay is mixed with a small amount of water and kneaded, forming a lump of prepared clay. This is piled onto a solid, hard clay form and is then formed by working it on a

wheel. Both hands and feet are used in the process. The big toe of the right foot provides the motion to turn the wheel, while both hands form the clay with simple wooden tools following the contours of the vessel. After the ceramic vessel that has been shaped is air dried in the sun, it is colored with *yala* red clay and cured with smoke. Then it is placed in the kiln, where it is finally fired.

The fuel consists of root mats¹⁰⁷ and yak dung which have been prepared in advance. On a set date in summer, everyone in the village sets out and goes to a grassy hillside behind the village to dig root mats and deposit them on the spot. When they are required, each family goes there with a donkey to haul them, leaving in the morning and returning at noon. Within the village, the area in which root mats may be dug is restricted to a 130–150 acre patch of grassy hillside behind the mountain. The grassy hillside in front of the village is the village's pastureland, and it is forbidden to dig there. Root mats possess the ability to regenerate. Those dug in this year may recover within twelve years.

The kilns in which the pottery is fired are crude. A shallow rectangular pit is dug and surrounded by a scant ring of stones. The half finished goods in all sizes are inserted into the empty space and piled in three layers. The gaps between them are filled with yak dung that has been broken apart with the hands. Then, they are covered with a large root mat. The fire is lit at dusk, not in such away that open flames may be seen, but such that it slowly cures the pottery with smoke while baking it. In the night after about three hours, the fire is dampened with a layer of root mat. Early in the morning the day after, the fire has gone out and the smoke has died down, such that the finished product, which has been completely fired to maturity and is brick-red in color, may be carefully picked out of the ashes. The people of Tsenyül have distilled their firing technique to perfection over a long period of time. That morning the boss, Pema Wanggyel, told us full of joy, "One hundred percent of the pottery has been successfully fired!"

Over the course of the entire production process, the original method of production was followed one hundred percent of the time as well, and not the slightest bit of modern tools or modern flair was to be seen. It was as if the people were props demonstrating the people's way of life in ancient times at a large-scale exhibit on folk cus-

toms. The production method used by the people of Tsenyül today is a diagram that explains the process by which pottery was made in the Neolithic era. Those pairs upon pairs of eyes keeping watch by the kiln in the dark that glimmer in the light from the flickering fire of the kiln are none other than the eyes of the descendants through many generations since the time of that sainted old man Bodanna.

The final procedure is packing the various ceramic pots, bowls, vats, and jars. Before the sun comes up they are fastened to the backs of donkeys, clinking the whole way along as they are taken to every location to be sold. The people from Tsenyül who sell the pottery have an encampment in an area situated in the suburbs of Tsethang. After they have unloaded the donkeys they pile the ceramics in a wall encircling the camp. Within the enclosure they boil tea and eat simple meals. With a couple of ceramic jars on their backs they walk some ten or twenty miles from village to village peddling their wares. As with their production, the channels of distribution and exchange of the products depend on individual action as well.

Earthenware has long played a very important role in Tibetan traditions, and it encompasses almost all utensils needed in basic daily life: cooking appliances from the stove to pots, spoons, bowls, vats, and jars, as well as vats for the fermentation of alcoholic beverages, teapots for butter tea, and braziers for keeping the tea warm. Vessels made of metal steadily entered the homes of ordinary people in the middle of the 20th century, although the ceramic vessels from Tsenyül with their thinness and durability – they say you can trample an earthenware jar from Tsenyül with your feet and it will not break – are famous throughout Tibet, the era of earthenware vessels is becoming a thing of the past. In this clan, the role of numerous members of this family of vessels has been replaced by modern products that are beautiful, durable, and fashionable. Among them, aluminum pots, water buckets made of sheet iron, and thermoses with inner vacuum flasks in particular are the most popular – although the people in the countryside nostalgically say that rice cooked in clay pots is more fragrant and tea steeped in a clay teapot is still better. Looking to the future, the potters cannot help but be a bit concerned. Even so they still manufacture ten some different types of pottery now, and sales are good.

Befitting the primitive method of production, the lifestyle of the people of Tsenyül has a classic simplicity. In the family of six we visited, the old couple had two sons aged 24 and 21 and two daughters aged 29 and 16. The eldest son already had a wife and child who lived separately in the same village. People who are in the know say that in order not to split up the family business, in the future when they invite the bride into their home both brothers will share this wife. The family's eldest daughter still has not been given away. The villagers think this is because the girl has never been outside of the village, and thus has not had the opportunity to make contact with outsiders. Her mother thinks the girl has no intension of marrying. If she did, would her mom not know about it? Her mother also said, "We are not comfortable with being photographed or talked about, because our occupation is not a good one."

In Tibet, potters traditionally have a rather low status in society, only slightly better than that of ironmongers and butchers, who are seen as the basest people, and they are called by the pejorative name "clay folk". Their status causes them to be shunned by others. When they are out selling their pottery, no one will put them up for the night. The girls from a potter's family cannot marry into outsiders' families and are forced to look for a groom within their own village. However, the young men in the village have many opportunities to leave the village when they sell their pottery, and quite a few of them are able to bring back a daughter-in-law, which is why there is an excess of young women in the village, many of whom are spinsters. One village-woman told us proudly that her daughter, who is the same age as the girl mentioned above, went to Lhasa to visit relatives, and that she was luckily married off to a farmer in the suburbs.

Compared to farmers, potters have a high income. A conservative estimate would put the average annual per capita income of the entire village at over 800 RMB, while that of the average farmer does not exceed 500 or 600 RMB. That is satisfactory considering their plain and simple lifestyle. When asked about his opinion on the occupation, Pema Wangyel said, "Farmers have a peak season and a slack season, while potters are busy from the beginning to the end of the year. Although it's a hard life, the income is high." They also said that when one is born into a family of potters, one is destined to be a potter and none of them would ever plan on changing jobs.

Due to their traditional status and mindset, in the past no one from the village of Tsenyül left home to become a monk, since only people who are learned or have a thirst for learning would enter the Buddhist clergy, and as of now, from what we have learned from the mayor of the village none of the young people in the village have gone to school. When we specifically asked him about this problem, the mayor of the village added that they were already planning to pool funds and open an elementary school.

I once associated the handworkers' workshops that are distributed throughout the whole of Tibet with the harmonious routines of a traditional lifestyle, something I admired in my heart of hearts. But the pottery village Tsenyül has taken this a bit too far, which has made me reconsider and come to associate it with the bright and dark sides of a traditional lifestyle, such that I cannot help but be disillusioned.

The meaning of Tsenyül, the village's name, is very ancient as well and possesses a strong local character. *Yül* means location, and *tsen* signifies the wrathful guardian deities by that name, which are unique to Tibet. Tsenyül is namely the *tsen* deities' hometown. The specific guardian deities of the village are the Barwa Pündün, the great *tsen* deities who are famous throughout Tibet – the seven wrathful brothers. Above the village there is a shrine, or “tenkhang”, devoted to them. Below the village there are two further shrines, or *tenkhangs*, one red and one white, which are devoted to a lesser *tsen* and a *gyelpo* (king) respectively. Whenever someone in the family leaves the village to sell pottery, the remaining family members make smoke offerings to them, praying that the travelers will have a safe journey.

A Collection of Folktales from the Apes that Turned into Humans to Gokza Lhamo

Traditionally, Gönpori Mountain is considered to be one of the four most famous mountains in Tibet (the other three being Hepori, Chakpori, and Chakzam Chuwori). Its guardian deity is a beneficent incarnation of the goddess Palden Lhamo. The four corners of Mt. Gönpori rest on the backs of divine beasts: a peacock at the northern corner, a scorpion at the southern corner, a great elephant at the western corner, and a noble steed at the eastern corner. The top of the mountain does not touch the heavens and its base does not touch the ground. It floats in midair separated from both heav-

en and earth by a distance of one cubit. On Mt. Gönpori there are 108 sky burial grounds, 108 retreat caves, and 108 springs – when people tell this legend, they never add an explanation as to why this mountain has yet to float in midair, seeing as it is rooted in the ground and far from the sky as well, or for that matter why the sky burial grounds and springs have disappeared and where they have gone. Similarly, when they enthusiastically relate the story of how the ancestors of their people emerged from this place, they decline to comment on its possibility as well.

The myth of the origin of the Tibetan people that is recorded in *The Clear Mirror of Royal Genealogies* goes like this:

After a divine monkey had taken the Buddhist vows with the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, he practiced self-cultivation in a cave on Mt. Gönpori, when a rākṣasī demoness who dwelled in the rocks came and tried to seduce him. The monkey said, “I cannot break my vows.” The demoness started to threaten to commit suicide, but noticed that the divine monkey was not the least bit moved, and so she again impressed upon him the advantages and disadvantages involved according to her way of thinking, “If you and I do not become husband and wife, I will be forced to take a demon as my companion. We will hurt tens of thousands of souls by day and devour thousands of living beings by night, and we will bear countless little demons together as well, making the Land of Snows the Land of the Rākṣasas. Please think twice before you act!”

Taking the lesser of the two evils, the divine monkey bid the divine bodhisattva for the permission to marry. Subsequently they bore six monkeys, each of which was reborn from one the six modes of existence of sentient beings. After a short period of three years, the six monkeys had multiplied and become five hundred monkeys. At this time, the fruits in the forest ran out and they were stricken with a hunger that was difficult to endure. The monkeys’ father begged the bodhisattva once more for assistance and received the five grains that grow on their own without needing to be sown. After the young monkeys had made the grains their source of food, their fur became short, their tails shrank, and they developed the ability to use language. They had become human.

Thereafter the Tibetans inherited the respective character traits of their ancestral father and mother. As you can see, all kind-

heartedness, compassion, diligence, and amiability derived from the father's traits, while all greed, envy, hatred, and caprice derived from the mother's traits, as with all other such traits.

This story is commonly seen in history books and wall paintings, such that the Tibetans are so familiar with it that they can recall every detail. However, if you use your brain and think it over for a moment, you will realize that this version is no longer correct. The Buddhist tinge was obviously added later. So, what was the original story like? A determined Jampa Tshering had a hard time trying to locate the source of the story in the town of Tsethang. An old man seemed to have preserved the original version of said legend:

During the savage age, war broke out among a troop of monkeys (apes) in the eastern mountain forests. Two monkeys, one female and one male fled separately to Mt. Gönpori. In the beginning, both of them misjudged each other, each mistaking the other for an enemy, and so they did not have relations with one another. However, a wild grapevine grew at the entrance to the mountain cave where the female monkey lived, and it was heavy with fruit which enticed the male monkey. While the male monkey was in the process of secretly picking grapes, each of the monkeys discovered the other happened to be the opposite sex of the same type of monkey, and they were inwardly overjoyed. The male monkey courted the female, and the female monkey's response was splendid: "What took you so long!" At that, he moved into the mountain cave which was overgrown with grapevines to live with her. That mountain cave still exists to this day. Later the wild grapevine was hit by fire and burned, but seeds that remained from the original plant germinated and branched out. Enlightened by this experience, the two of them extrapolated upon it and buried seeds from many different types of grains, and invented agriculture. Over a long period of time, because their children and grandchildren frequently squatted on the ground to work, their tails were rubbed clean off, and hence they had turned into humans.

That is how the old man said the Tibetan people originated. Not long after he told this story, he passed away.

Ancient Lhoka was most certainly full of ancient stories, but in the long river of time these droplets have been lost in the current one after the other. Some have been lost in modern times. Numerous

people have heard of a fertility dance that existed somewhere in Lhoka a couple of decades ago, but having traveled all over Lhoka to every county, I still could not get any information about it. Maybe those who have learned of it will not talk about it.

Then again, there are very few who have learned of something and will not talk about it. On the contrary, country folk delight in talking about primitive local customs. Jampa Tshering passed a story on to us, which was he was told immediately after the origin myth of the monkeys that turned into humans had been related to him.

At that time, he posed the question, "Why do we Tibetans not eat donkey meat?" That old man told a story, and it is the only story of its kind that I have heard in the Tibetan region. There was no other of its kind. To this day I am still perplexed as to how this sort of thing could occur, and if this sort of thing did occur, why it would make it worthwhile to worship a deity and the signs of its divinity and to transmit this to the present day. Treating this legend as the basis for the taboo against eating donkey meat is indeed doubtful as well. In the border region between the two counties Gongkar and Dranang next to a village on the banks of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, there exists a shrine which is dedicated to Gokza Lhamo. Gokza Lhamo was once one of the women in this village. However she came up with such an idea, she copulated with a donkey at this location. In the process, the donkey spooked and dashed off, dragging her to death. The locals built her a stupa and started making offerings to her as a deity. Jampa Tshering drew the conclusion that this was primitive fertility worship.

This time when we returned on the road from Tsethang, we searched for this stupa the whole way, and when we came across people by the side of the highway we stopped to ask them about it. Those we asked seemed to know what we were talking about but said nothing and had secretive expressions on their faces. One of them even laughed loudly. We finally heard something from a group of people threshing grain. They said, "You've driven past it."

We were disappointed and did not go back to look for it again. Arriving in Gongkar County immediately thereafter, only when we were confronted with the circumstance that women were made to keep their distance, did we receive a detailed explanation from the

secretary of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission, Tendar. When Gyatsho related the information to us, he was evasive and wanted to say something but kept hesitating, such that in the end, the origin of the matter remained sketchy.

The year after at the beginning of spring, we went to that region to take pictures of the common folks celebrating Tibetan New Year. This time we found the place where offerings were made to Gokza Lhamo along the highway. It was not a white stupa, just a miniature shrine, or *tenkhang* in Tibetan, which was about as tall as a person and composed of a number of stones piled on top of one another in several layers – a sacrificial altar. It was afternoon on the third day of the Tibetan New Year, and that dry wind was blowing that carries particles of sand and silt, which is typical by the banks of the river in the springtime. We climbed to the top of the earthen cliff walking around this shrine back and forth several times, and saw only something that was makeshift in nature with nothing special about it. Since a ceremony had just been conducted there, the five-colored banners had been replaced by brand-new ones and the *sangsöl* pile was emitting smoke. A lattice had been drawn on the ground with lime; I do not know what purpose it was meant to serve.

At that time, every man and woman in Gokza Village stood by the side of the highway dressed in their fineries and intercepted every car that passed by, courteously urging all of the strangers that came by to drink beer. Those doing the urging had already drunk so much that they could no longer stand straight. We were extremely pleased that they stopped us, and after we had drunk their beer, we asked who the village cadre was, and whether or not we could go to their village and sit down with him for a bit. Having heard this, the villagers were overjoyed by this unexpected turn of events, and a group of them hastened to lead us to the home of the village's branch party secretary. The village's branch party secretary's name was Tshering, and he had drunk just about as much as the others. With his hazy, bloodshot eyes he told us, "Today the whole village of 48 households has gone in its entirety to the sacrificial altar of Gokza Lhamo. This is the only day on which everyone, every man and woman, may go. On the 17th day of the 12th lunar month in the Tibetan calendar the fathers of each family may go. Women and girls above the age of five may not go. Gokza Lhamo does not wel-

come them. If they do go, they immediately get pinkeye. That means Gokza Lhamo is jealous of them.”

In Gokza Village and the three neighboring natural villages there are no other guardian deities. *Yülha*, *tsen*, *kyelha*, *gyelpo*, etc. do not exist, only the single guardian deity Gokza Lhamo. We did not spend a festival such as the Ongkor Festival in this place. The 16th day of the 12th lunar month in the Tibetan calendar is when the festival is celebrated here. In the past during the reign of the estates, emissaries were dispatched to take care of the arrangements for the festival. Now, the three natural settlements each take turns making the arrangements.

On the first day a statue of Gokza Lhamo is made of yak butter and *tsampa*. On the second day she is carried to the sacrificial altar by four men. The men bring meat and knives with them and sit down in alignment within the square frame drawn in lime. One of them is responsible for making sure whether the meat and knives have been brought. They sit there for at least an hour.

When the ceremony has been completed, the upper body of her statue is handed to the hail prevention lama. In the summer when hail is warded off, it possesses the Dharma power to do so. The lower half of the body is divided into three parts and distributed amongst the three natural settlements as sacred objects which are to be shared and eaten. When the men return the women must welcome them at the entrance to the village.

The village's branch party secretary suggested we go into the ravine to pay the small monastery dedicated to Gokza Lhamo a visit. He also said, “Only today on the third day of New Year, is it possible to allow a female comrade such as yourself to visit it.”

Walking alongside Gokza Lhamo's sacrificial altar into the ravine, we arrived at a village at the base of a small mountain. The name of this village was special, Nama Village – the matrilineal village. The small mountain's name is Surkhangseng, which means “there is a house next to it”.

All of the people in Nama Village were drunk, and the odor of highland barley beer emanated from every corner. Someone stumbled about, leading us up the small mountain and opened a small sutra recitation hall, and there was Gokza Lhamo, a newly modeled clay sculpture roughly painted in bright colors, an image of a female

Dharmapāla that can be seen anywhere. He also pointed out that the figure next to her was her husband, the great deity Gönpo.

All over the Tibetan countryside traces of the assimilation of native religion with Buddhism may be seen, and Gokza Lhamo certainly has an interesting history of development.

We asked, “Has this goddess manifested herself? Have any signs of her divinity been discovered?”

When the goddess gets angry, fires break out in many different places throughout the village. When one is put out here, another breaks out there, but they are all small fires, which may be stamped out. This happens because there is fire which forms naturally inside the goddess’s belly. When it catches fire, you can smell *tsampa* and yak butter burning. Also, numerous people who were drunk with beer have met a woman at night who was wearing a *badro* (head-dress) on her head and who walked past them carrying a basket on her back. Some people have also dreamt of a beautiful woman in the nighttime, and all those who experienced this had back pain the next day.

I will leave it to scholars interested in such matters to study how many questions the appearance of Gokza Lhamo explains in the end and whatever cultural connotations may be revealed by this phenomenon.

The Guardian Deity of Lhoka’s Cultural Relics

The majority of the time we spent in Lhoka, we were accompanied by Jampa Tshering, who in addition acted as our guide. We have learned of much background information and many leads from him. Jampa Tshering, who is thirty some years of age, was born in the Chonggyé County seat opposite the tombs of the Tibetan kings. His mother is Tibetan and his father is a Han Chinese man from Anhui. That is why Jampa Tshering has a Han Chinese name, Cheng Wanxi. In the mid-1980s he graduated from the Tibet Minzu College in Xianyang, Shaanxi, and was assigned to the Lhoka Prefecture Cultural Relics Administration Committee. The day after he reported for duty, he went into the countryside to Dranang County to do a general survey of cultural relics. Now, he might be regarded as an expert on the cultural relics in Lhoka Prefecture.

The authority on Lhoka Prefecture's cultural relics is the standing chair of the prefecture's Cultural Relics Administration Committee, Thupten Namkha. He started to take charge of this job as early as 1980, and one might call him the guardian deity of the cultural relics in Lhoka Prefecture. From 1983 to 1992 when general surveys of the cultural relics were conducted in all the prefectures of Tibet, Lhoka stood by them for the full nine years, constituting a special task force within the general survey of cultural relics in Tibet.

Previously, Lhoka Prefecture had a total of 210 monasteries and it was extremely rich in religious cultural relics. During the ten years of domestic turmoil, a portion of the monasteries were demolished. Even after the end of the Cultural Revolution at the end of the 1970s, the three famous monasteries including Gongkar's Dorjé Drak were still demolished, which was really absurd. However, a considerable portion of the monasteries were luckily spared this fate because they came to serve as the communities' granaries. Thereafter, "The monasteries kept the grain safe, and the grain saved the monasteries" became a popular saying. However, during these years in which this refined culture was swept away and all of the deities were swept away as well, the loss of cultural relics was relatively severe, the most famous example being the pearl *thangka* depicting Avalokiteśvara that dated to the Phakmo Drupa Dynasty (during the Ming Dynasty), which was also destroyed during the later period of the Cultural Revolution. The pearls were sold to the Foreign Trade Department, and someone took the fabric, using it to make a pillowcase – later it was reconstructed under the auspices of Thupten Namkha. In a showroom in Lhüntsé County a statue of Śākyamuni made of metal alloy was turned upside-down to serve as the docent's stool. Thupten Namkha took it and asked someone to do an appraisal of it. It had a 900 year history and its style was Indian. Instances such as these abound. In 1987, when Rithang Monastery was about to be torn down and rebuilt, Thupten Namkha hurried there to halt the demolition. He explained that it was a Tubo Era structure and what it was worth. In Lhüntsé he once found an ancient palm-leaf manuscript¹⁰⁸ encased in sheepskin, and quickly collected it for safe keeping. Later it was appraised by experts and it turned out to be a history of Bhutan. Gyiru Lakhang, which is located on the northern shore of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, would have been lost forever if he had arrived there

three days later than he did. At the time, a project was confirmed at a meeting of lower level cadres convened in Nedong County, whereby the decision was made to pull down Gyiru Lakhang and build a guesthouse in Kyerpa Township. When Thupten Namkha heard of this, he instantaneously reported it to the prefecture, and the administrative office of the prefecture instructed him to proceed to the site immediately and conduct an investigation. That is when the historic site from the era of Gyimsheng Kongjo was first discovered. Now it has become an important cultural relic protection site. According to research conducted by nationally famous Tibetologists, Gyiru Lakhang's Tubo Era manuscripts exceed the Dunhuang manuscripts in number. Even Bön scriptures have survived among them.

During the general survey of cultural relics, which took a little over ten years, Thupten Namkha and Jampa Tshering had already completed the investigation of all of Lhoka's twelve counties, and the records of the cultural relics of each county were being published one after the other. I once recorded a short piece on a failure they experienced in a documentary report:

... The special participants in this cultural project from the Lhoka Prefecture Cultural Relics Administration Committee experienced many hardships. That year they went to Targo, the most remote village in Zangri County, in a group of seven that included a guide. They rode on horseback for two days and then hiked for an additional day. On a precipice overlooking the turbulent waters of the Yarlung Tsangpo River they moved along grasping at crevices in the rock. One false move and they would surely become food for the fishes. (This village is located at a section of the Yarlung River where there is a big whirlpool, and the completely white skeletons of those who have found a watery grave upstream are piled up by the shore.) It is said that there had previously been a county cadre who lacked experience in hiking along steep cliffs, and he took a wrong step on the rock face causing him to get stuck there until a brave herdsman found him and carried him under her arm, escorting him to a safe spot. It takes six days to get to Targo Village, and they had brought very little food with them, such that they had to ration the instant noodles amongst them. Suddenly one day all of the food disappeared. Upon investigation, they discovered that the culprit was a marmot, who had dug a hole underground and upon its completion carried the food away. The seven of them had

only brought one tent, and at night there was just enough space for everyone to put the upper halves of their bodies in the tent. One might say, their heads were hidden but their tails were exposed. The nightly rain and snow made the blanket soaking wet, and at the break of day when they wringed it out a gurgling stream of water flowed from it. The whole way, they hung it over one of the horses' backs to let it air-dry. Then the hardships were over. Absolutely no one counts on a trip to the Tibetan countryside as being an occasion to enjoy the comforts of life, but it is never as extreme as this trip to Targo in which each step forward on the six day trek there and back was wrought with difficulty, and they found not even the faintest shadow of a cultural relic there. In Targo, these unlucky guys from Lhoka truly ended up empty-handed.

...

A developmental history of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, which was the product of an expedition conducted on location by a comprehensive scientific investigation team from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, has already roughly established a timeline of the location's natural history. Roaming around Lhoka Prefecture, I became deeply immersed in the local history and culture, which inevitably triggered an intense yearning toward this mission of establishing a timeline of Tibetan culture. The conduction of the general survey of cultural relics, whose scope encompassed all of Tibet, which the Autonomous Region's Cultural Relics Administration Committee concentrated on over a period of nine years, was definitely not the effort of any one person, but rather that of a group of people, including the Lhoka Cultural Relics Administration Committee. This task attracted numerous specialists in related fields from the Chinese interior and brought forth a fair amount of achievements. During the painstaking process of shooting the series *Tibetan Culture*, I did the interviews little by little, entering into this field bit by bit.

The bounds of the seemingly endless history of survival of the people of the plateau are unclear, and the growth-rings of the region's cultural history are blurred, hidden in the dense fog of human prehistory. To date, the archeological timelines for every location on earth are distinct and closely interlinked with one another, such that they may be corrected or even torn apart and reconstructed. Only with Tibet do you have to recover the missing links one by one under layers of dust and permafrost in order to join them together again,

link by link. Then, in an archeological wasteland covering 1.2 million square kilometers, experts began reading the region's prehistory with the archeoliths and microliths, lifting page for page of the Neolithic Era, the megalithic sites, the primitive cliff paintings, and ancient tombs down to Buddhist artwork and all sorts of the remains of material and spiritual culture, thus inaugurating an age of discovery.

Nine years later, faced with the large amount of archeological evidence, the Tibetan archeologist responsible for this job, Sönam Wangdü, had no choice but to rethink the conclusions reached in former times. He told me that to this day only two Neolithic Era sites have been formally excavated in the Tibetan prefectures, Kharup in Chamdo and Chökung in Lhasa, but both clearly represent different cultural systems. The newly discovered Threnngo Valley site in Lhoka made a question that was complicated to begin with even more complicated. Looking at culture as a phenomenon of human activity and civilization as a yardstick for the development of society, when and where did each, taken separately, originate? Sönam Wangdü hesitatingly says that at least at the moment, he tends to think that the Tibetan civilization originated in southern Tibet, but is that supposed to mean that the Tibetan culture, which appeared long before the Tibetan civilization, originated in Tsang and to its west?

That is precisely so. This calls in to question and challenges the conclusions previously drawn in relation to Tibetan culture. A new theoretical framework has yet to be established, and a large amount of new archeological evidence urgently waits to clear up a number of questions, but it seems it too does not possess the ability to clear up this confusion. It will certainly raise more questions than it has already answered, because each time a question is raised, it is like a tiny cog in a much bigger machine that cannot be removed without setting the whole machine in motion, such that a series of new questions intricately entangled with one another like knotted roots will inevitably arise and thus cast doubt on previous answers to other questions.

That is precisely so. We can only wait...wait for someone to construct and describe

a history of material cultural,
a history of spiritual civilization,
and a history of the soul
of the Tibetan Plateau.



Mural in Drathang Monastery in Dranang County



Mural of the Buddha in Drathang Monastery

Chapter 6: The Soul of a Pilgrim

The People Who Kowtow in a World of Ice and Snow

To this day I occasionally recollect about the Zhörong mountain valley, and every time I remember that its depth is immeasurable. In the past few years I have gone there three times, yet in the end I still have not come to know it fully. The origin and development of religion, human affairs in history, myths and legends, as well as the folk life there are just like a perennial bush with deep roots and plentiful branches, which cycles through phases in which it alternately withers and thrives, yet lives on endlessly. Even the clouds that occasionally stop there or the winds that sweep past the mountain valley are molded in a way that enriches them with culture.

How much more is this true of the monks there, and even the travelers passing through.

The next trip I took to the Zhörong mountain valley, in mid-October, was the one where I was accompanied by the most people. Together with the composer Cai Meihai and the music consultant Pento who came along with their crew to collect folksongs we ended up filling two cars with a total of nine people. We arrived at dusk. Leisurely following the Zhörong River upstream, the last of the fall colors on the mountainsides at the banks of the river showered a dazzling gold shimmer in the splendor of the sunset. Small patches of broadleaf forest charmingly swaggered at the brink of their highest possible altitude. However they quickly disappeared behind us in the dust. The golden fall colors gradually disappeared as well. Going higher, clumps of bushes flushed with a deep red replaced the poplars and willows that permeated the steep mountainside from the depths of the valley with their luxuriant growth.

The climate was also clearly not the same as it was where the poplars and willows grew. The weather in October occasionally includes snowfall. Looking up early in the morning at the mountain on which Drigung Thil Monastery is located, the upper half of the mountain is covered in white snow. Thil Monastery is just like a massive ship moored on a sea of snow. The sky above the river valley changes constantly, with grey clouds suddenly rolling into a perfectly clear sky that start snowing with a swish. Usually only tiny particles of snow, name-

ly sleet, fall upon the head and face cooling them. When that happens you want to squint and retract your head, yet you also feel refreshed.

From time to time we hurried around in this sort of snowscape, climbing mountains, conducting interviews, and standing at the top of some mountain looking out into the distance at our Zhörong River valley, which is broad and vast. There was nothing like it before and there will be nothing like it after.

We did not see the tents of Norbu Zangpo and his group on the valley floor. At the time they had already been there a little over ten days.

On that day it did not sleet. Instead snowflakes began floating around constituting medium snowfall. We had to wait for the right time to shoot the footage we had planned. He Wei and Sun Liang drove off to shoot footage of the snow-covered landscape – scenery shots. I, on the other hand, went to Tsenthang Village accompanied by two experts. We said we were collecting folksongs, but we were really gathering information on folk customs and folk beliefs of all sorts. The lines “The lower part of my body is a dragon’s body and on top of it is a human body. I hold a red flag in my hands and a triangular banner is fastened to my neck. I am riding a wolf using a snake as the reins,” which the female spirit medium of Tsenthang chants when she summons the deity to descend into her body, were among the information gathered on this visit. Although we wanted to interview Nupa Trülku during the visit and did not manage to meet him yet, we learned he would conduct the Jinsek ceremony there a month later on the 19th day of the 9th Tibetan lunar month.

At noon when we withdrew back to camp along a road covered to the brim with white, new fallen snow, we suddenly noticed that our people and car in the front had gotten jumbled together with another group of people and there was quite a commotion. They stopped the car nearby and they all came rushing out. A guy who headed up the group spoke in Chinese asking the distinct question, “Are you Ma Lihua?”

That is how I got to know him, Norbu Zangpo, that young monk who still maintained his comeliness and vigor and his elegant mien despite the hardships and travel fatigue incurred on the pilgrimage route. I got to know his parents and his companions. Encountering them certainly did not just mean that our footage would be supplemented by some unplanned shots. Following our completion of the

television special *Pilgrimage Tribe*¹⁰⁹ their importance to me had yet to be completely revealed, and after a song his father Samchok Dorjé had sung was processed by Meihai on the computer and he added echoes and a virtual harmony to it with a digital synthesizer, making it the title song of our twelve episode series *Tibetan Culture*, it demonstrated the indissoluble bond between us at another level. That moment would be separated from the day we first met by the space of almost one year and we would be physically located in a different place over a thousand miles away, yet we would still be able to sense that hidden connection.

Norbu Zangpo wrote in that day's journal entry, "Didn't find the horses. Bumped into a television."

Since our trip to Tsenthang Village proved very fruitful, we flaunted it to our travel companions.

Regardless, He Wei proudly proclaimed, "Nevertheless, it still cannot compare to how fruitful our trip was."

They drove aimlessly, wandering about in the snowy wilderness, shooting footage of whatever caught their eye. A herd of yaks resting on the snow-covered ground were exactly like a perfectly still group of statues. A layer of snow that would not melt had fallen in the gaps between their fur, gradually growing thicker and heavier. They still stood out in stark contrast, yet they moved not even a whisker. When all of that was vividly reflected in the photos and on screen, the extraordinary texture of the images made them resemble oil paintings. Those were the pack animals of Norbu Zangpo and his group. As the lens panned from the yaks to the four small tents, some more people came out of them, and they could not help but come over to the cameraman to satisfy their curiosity, inquiring as to where he came from, where he was going, how he got there, how long it had taken, etc. It all started from there.

That evening I managed to watch how they kowtow on the snow-covered ground on the nine-inch monitor.

In the same valley we were in, leaden clouds were willed to fall and the entire wilderness was covered in white. A row of a little over ten people wriggled on the barren, snow-covered ground, their pairs of hands being raised and lowered, their bodies alternately rising and falling, the sound of the wooden blocks on their hands scraping against the frozen ground arising from the still mountain valley and mingling with the continuous sound of sutras being chanted. Norbu Zangpo's

father Samchok Dorjé resembled a Native American in his appearance, and each of the lines that crisscrossed his face was an engraving of his piety. His handsome son Norbu Zangpo always had a distant look in his eyes, always penetrating beyond the real world and concentrating on a future place and time that were out of reach. The young monks Karma Losar, Rinchen Norbu, Jamyang Özer, and Karma Zhidrup and the nuns Yingsel and Jamyang Drölma, who followed close behind, all had the same solemn expression, paying no attention to the cameraman as he rushed back and forth shooting footage.



Pilgrims toiling their way through a mountain valley

This situation which appeared on the screen via the camera lens, had momentarily acquired an eternal character. At first it was only gazed upon by a couple of pairs of eyes. Not long after, it would appear in ever increasing numbers of places in Tibet, China, the opposite shore of the ocean, and the globe, in the heart of Europe, for example, at Mipcom in Cannes.

Because of them, the whole world would come to know that in Tibet, this method of expressing one's beliefs still exists.

In which era did the pilgrimages of Tibet, the Land of Snows, begin? Who initiated them? Why would the ascetic practice of throwing the entire body to the ground, which is masochistic in character, be chosen? To this day I have never found a similar method with another ethnicity, religion, or location. The Tibetans think that they cannot express their most pious and deepest feelings and desires in any other way. In a Tibetan folksong there is even a first-person description of kowtowing on pilgrimage, but it presents the matter rather too lightly, just like a romantic ballad. The lyrics are long. The gist of them is:

The black ground I measure with my body;
the white clouds I count with my fingers;
the precipitous cliffs I climb as if I were climbing a ladder;
the flat grasslands I glide across as if I were reading the sutras....

This is a group of people who have been together on pilgrimage for a little over a year prostrating the full length of their bodies from their hometown in Nangchen County to Lhasa.

In terms of administrative geography, Nangchen belongs to the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province; in terms of natural geography it belongs to the Hengduan Mountain Range; in terms of cultural geography it belongs to Kham of the Khampa; and in terms of historical geography it was the heartland of the ancient Eastern Matriarchate. To this day the ruins of the ancient country's capital remain. This is a county I have never been to. I vaguely remember hearing that the two most outstanding characteristics of the place are: (1) that is the most heavily impoverished county in Qinghai Province and (2) that the people of that county are extremely religious. I do not know whether these two factors are in a cause and effect relationship with one another. Generally speaking, there is a statistic which may clarify this question: in a tiny county with a population under 100,000, there are as many as 60–70 monasteries.

In this sort of a religious atmosphere pilgrimaging to Lhasa is both traditional and trendy. Ordinary folks travel on foot following the highways or by car by hitching a ride. The type of pilgrimage to Lhasa in which the pilgrims prostrate their whole bodies every three steps they take has been equally rare in ancient and modern times. In Kyichu Township where Norbu Zangpo is from, a few elders from the previous generation prostrated their way to Lhasa, and it bestowed them with a lifetime of honor. Their names also achieved

wide and deep renown throughout his hometown. This is an ideal that people admire and pursue in this life.

Precisely due to this encouragement through extraordinary religious fervor, Norbu Zangpo and his father have long entertained the idea of doing this. This is coupled with the fact that the family's finances have been less than optimal in recent years, and when someone was asked to cast lots regarding the matter, the lots said that a pilgrimage to Lhasa would be auspicious. When friends and relatives heard of this, one after the other demanded to come along, such that a pilgrimage group of 18 people young and old was formed, the oldest being the 77-year-old Rikdzin Chödzin and the second oldest being Rikdzin Chödzin's husband Samchok Dorjé, who is ten years her junior. The youngest was Könchok Chöphel, who was not quite six months old. His father Rinchen Norbu was a kowtower, whereas his mother Ngawang Chödzin drove the pack yaks that made up the supply line while carrying her child on her back. The soul of the group was of course Samchok Dorjé and Rikdzin Chödzin's son, the 29-year-old monk Norbu Zangpo. With his fellow villagers presenting him with *khatas* and enthusiastically wishing him well, Norbu Zangpo's group bent down and made their first full-length prostrations on the ground in their mountain village in the fall of 1991, on November 10, the 4th day of the 10th Tibetan lunar month. From there they progressed in that manner through the barren mountains and the wilderness, through blizzards and under the blazing sun for the length of one year.

On December 13, 1992, when they finally fulfilled their desire to kowtow all the way to the foot of the golden statue of Śākyamuni in Jokhang Monastery in Lhasa, there were still 18 people in the group, but the members of the group had changed. Over the course of the journey, whose length reached one year, one month, and three days, some of the original travel companions left, and others joined the group later, while some came and went. The oldest among them was still Rikdzin Chödzin, who had turned 78, and the youngest was still Könchok Chöphel, who was already a little over one and a half years old and had learned to walk along the pilgrimage route. Over the course of a year each of the kowtowers had worn through no less than eight rawhide aprons, and the number of wooden mitts they wore through could not be counted. Of the fifteen yaks they had at the start of the trip, none remained.



The golden statue of Śākyamuni at Jokhang Monastery

We had, indeed, already met up with each other in the summer, but we just saw each other and did not get to know each other. In August we took part in the *phowa* ceremony together, the ceremony in which souls are transferred, on the holy ground of Terdrom Ravine. In the midst of the vast sea of people they still did not particularly attract our attention in the least, but our film crew's three brightly colored nylon tents did make a relatively deep impression on them. At that time they had already finished kowtowing along more than half of the route, having reached the Lhari County pasture in northern Tibet. There they had heard the date this religious event would occur on and made great haste, traveling for eight days on foot straight to Terdrom. When the eight-day event had drawn to a close, they walked eight days back to where they came from. The progress made when kowtowing is very slow, the record lying at best at 6 km per day and at worst at 1 km per day. When members of the group or livestock fell ill, however, they would inch their way along with difficulty. That is why when we returned to the ravine that October, we were, much to our surprise, able to meet up with each other again.

Singing Songs of the Soul in the Camp of the Pilgrimage Tribe

Zhörung River is the upper source of the Lhasa River that lies to the north of it. We had already followed it from a place near the mouth of the Lhasa River gorge a little over 60 km upstream. The highway ends there, and we could not continue following the river upstream, so we have no way of knowing what lies in the depths of the mountain valley and on the sides of the mountains there. Norbu Zangpo and his group came kowtowing from the depths of the mountain valley. This is said to have been an ancient courier route. In ancient times all country folks going to Lhasa walked along this mountain path. Since the advent of modern times, a road has been built below Drigung Thil Monastery by which one may connect to the Sichuan-Tibet Highway. People driving pack animals to Lhasa on foot usually set up camp there to rest and reorganize, and in addition if they manage to scrounge a handcart with rubber wheels from Lhasa, they leave their pack yaks with nearby friends and family in their old hometowns to drive them onward once they have returned. This is of course a new tradition from the past few years, since nothing with wheels was ever used as a means of transportation in the history of the Tibetan lands. According to research conducted by attentive people, in the past the only wheel-shaped motive devices in Tibet were objects with religious symbolism such as the Wheel of Dharma and prayer wheels. Among the people there was the water wheel, but there were no wagon wheels.

Norbu Zangpo and his group had already stayed there for more than ten days. The large troop of people and animals waited there for the four handcarts that had been laid out for them to be brought from Norbu Zangpo's second older sister's family in Lhasa by a small group of people who had gone there ahead of them. Right when they were ready to depart, in the night on the day before yesterday, a couple of their horses strayed. For two days thereafter they went down into the river valley following the river in search of the horses and subsequently turned right cutting into Terdrom Valley. Another two days passed before they found the horses in the upper part of the valley. As it turned out, a horse that had recently been brought from there in exchange for another one returned to its former masters, coercing part of the group to leave with it. Norbu Zangpo's journal entry for that day began with a description of these events.



Visiting Norbu Zangpo and filming his daily life

During those couple of days we often dropped by to see them, casually shooting scenes from their daily lives, such as them boiling tea, eating, twisting ropes from yak hairs, and repairing the implements used for kowtowing. The young and amble monks were interested in the handcarts, lifting them with one hand. Jamyang Özer, Karma Losar, and Karma Zhidrup all had luck on the first go round. Only Rinchen Norbu had no such luck and tried to lift the cart again and again to no avail. Quite crestfallen he yielded to another member of the group. Rinchen Norbu's son Könchok Chöphel ran about in the snow here and there, looking this way and that. His mom got him all cleaned up afterward.

The only one we could talk with was Norbu Zangpo, who not only could speak Chinese, but also the Lhasa dialect of Tibetan. The Kham dialect his friends and relatives spoke was unintelligible for Dedzin. The music consultant Master Pento was able to understand a little. He primarily worked with Meihai in recording the songs Samchok Dorjé sang, Buddhist spiritual songs only usually sung by monks and nuns. One song consisting of the six-syllable mantra, the musicians made them sing over and over again, once with only the men, once with only the women, and once with the men and women together. The lyrics consisted of only those six famous syllables, while the melody rose and fell with a boundless and distant endlessness: Om...ma...ni...pe...me...hung...

The most moving of the songs was the one that was later made the title song. Samchok Dorjé sang it with a rough and hoarse voice. It was an ever-changing song that slowly came forth. He sang of the mountain streams flowing and of the earth and the heavens in a tone that rose abruptly and was full of variations. The highest point in the melody is an overtone that stirs one's soul. This sung sutra, when slightly edited with modern technology, attained a high level of refinement. Everyone who heard it said that no singer could top him.

How could anyone sing better than him! What sets Samchok Dorjé fundamentally apart from all other singers is:

He sings with his soul.

We named this troop the pilgrimage tribe and gradually became acquainted with each of the members of the tribe that traveled together on the route.

Of the eighteen people who finally arrived in Lhasa, eight were monks, six were nuns, and four were laypeople. The laypeople included Norbu Zangpo's mother, Könchok Chöphel and his mother, and the youth Shira Bumgyü from Chamdo.

A few of the elderly people and children who embarked on the route with them in the beginning hitched rides from passing cars and left in the middle of the journey. Three months into the pilgrimage the group met up with seven pilgrims who had come from Nangchen. Three of the seven pilgrims kowtowed, while four boiled tea and served them. Confronted with their entreaties, Norbu Zangpo agreed to let them travel with his group. However, not long thereafter trouble arose: The dried rations and jerky they had brought with them when they started the journey were already used up, and they had to rely on begging to get by, but no matter whether a household had many members or few, the head of each household provided them with the same amount of food and fuel, such that after traveling together for one month, they had no choice but to tell the seven to be on their way.

Half a year later, the four brothers and sisters from Chamdo caught up with the group from behind. They consisted of the 28-year-old nun and elder sister Kayang Lhamo, the 27 year-old layperson and elder brother Shira Bumgyü, the 24-year-old nun and younger sister Jamyang Drölma, and the 20-year-old *gelong* and younger brother Karma Zhidrup. Their hometown lay in Thopa Ravine in Chamdo County. They belonged to a big family of herdsmen consisting of ten

siblings. Apart from two elder sisters who had already married, at the time four remaining siblings were in charge of the family business. In the fall of the previous year, at approximately the same time as Norbu Zangpo's departure, these four siblings began kowtowing along the path. From Chamdo they kowtowed westward to Riwoche. In a place called Ritsha at the foot of the snow-covered mountain Sertshapö La on the border between Qinghai and Tibet they unexpectedly heard that Norbu Zangpo had passed through the area. Having long looked up to Norbu Zangpo, the four brothers and sisters picked up their pace and made great haste, kowtowing every day till it was very late before they stopped to rest, only to get on the road very early the next day, tracking him down till early summer in the month of June. They finally met in the region around Gyashö Pelkar in Driru County in northern Tibet. Thereafter they did not want to part with him, no matter what happened, and followed him all the way to Lhasa.

From that moment on, the pilgrimage tribe consisted of four white cloth tents. The tent in the center, which was somewhat large and was covered by a sunshade, housed Norbu Zangpo's family and relatives: his father and mother, his older cousin the nun Tshedzin Chödzin, and the short little monk Topden – his 14-year-old nephew who had joined the monastery as a child monk. During the final two months of the pilgrimage, his younger male cousin Latö rushed to them from Lhasa to volunteer as a member of the support crew.

In a small tent to one side of the main tent lived three nuns: the mother-daughter pair Tshering and Yingsel, and Karma Losar's younger cousin, the fat nun Terdrom Gyünmé. What set the old nun Tshering apart from the masses was that she wore a heavy sheepskin robe that was worn to a fine patina.

That robe had lost its original color due to the accumulation of greasy filth over the years, and its many shallow and deep wrinkles constituted a black and shiny bas-relief that gave it a highly three-dimensional appearance. Her 26-year-old daughter Yingsel had no light left in her eyes due to the long-term illness she suffered. The fat nun Terdrom Gyünmé provided a stark contrast to her, in that her face was always beaming. She was a member of the support crew brought there by her elder cousin Karma Losar, and she also served as a cook for the tribe, assuming the responsibility of attending to Norbu Zangpo part-time. As soon as the master appeared, she immediately

dressed him in his cotton-padded jacket and poured yak butter tea, handing it to him, and when Norbu Zangpo sat cross-legged partaking of his meal, she knelt before him, refilling the master's tea cup from time to time.



The old nun Tshering wearing her sheepskin robe



Old nun holding a prayer wheel in her hands

The two small tents on the other side of the main tent respectively housed the four siblings from Chamdo and the rest of the people in the group. One day when we arrived at the campground bright and early, the old nun Tshering was boiling tea, Kayang Lhamo was reciting a sutra, and Rinchen Norbu was wrapped in a blanket with his upper body exposed, drinking the yak butter tea his wife Ngawang Chödzin handed to him. Rinchen Norbu had not recovered from his long bout of illness. His stomach had been upset since they started the pilgrimage, and he had had the runs for a year. Now he was as thin as a stick figure and had lost all color in his face. Living in the same tent as this family of three were the following young monks: the long-faced Karma Losar and the tall Jamyang Özer.

It looked as if this tribe was composed of at least five small units. On the surface they seemed to act as a collective, but in reality each unit was more or less independent of the others, each being made up of kowtowers and attendants. There were a total of eleven people who kowtowed. To put it in their words, in spite of the differences in actions according to the division of labor, the merit accumulated was just the same. The general manager Topden was in charge of logistics, organizing the setting up and clearing away of the camp, choosing the campsite, begging for alms, and distributing the provisions, tea, and firewood received as alms. A society made up of eighteen people also has differences in rank. Norbu Zangpo was just like a headman. Everyone was content with their position in the hierarchy, and there was not a hint of dissent.

Kayang Lhamo, who was born in the Year of the Dragon, cast lots in the Dragon year 1988. The fortune said that in order for her to get through the year of her horoscope safe and sound, she needed to make an auspicious trip northward to Tshemapo Monastery to study the sutras. Thus, Kayang Lhamo went from Chamdo to Nangchen and studied for a year and three months under the tutelage of Norbu Zangpo's older brother. Norbu Zangpo's connection to her was not only based on the fact that they had studied together but even more so due to the fact that she idolized him. Kayang Lhamo's three younger siblings were all kowtowers. She patiently boiled tea for them, serving them some, and patiently washed and braided the hair of her younger brother who is a layperson. Every time they arrived at a village, she went from house to house with Topden, Tshering, and the rest of

them begging for alms. Every time Norbu Zangpo was mentioned her big and beautiful eyes lit up in a flash of unusual radiance, and she said with a sense of yearning, "Of all the people I have ever met, Norbu Zangpo is the most diligent, most kind-hearted, and most talented. The loving kindness with which he treats us is as difficult to repay as the loving kindness received from our parents. Whatever he tells me to do, I do it gladly. Wherever he goes, we want to follow." Further she said, "Staying with him day and night fills me with trepidation. How can I sit at the same table with a noble man such as him? But I do want to be together with Norbu Zangpo at the same monastery. That's the best thing that could happen to me in my whole life."

The two elderly people sat peacefully by their beloved in the tiny tent in the wilderness, which overflowed with tenderness and harmony. This handsome son maintained his gentle authority, making this tribe radiate with the brilliant glow of benevolence. When the subject of their internal affairs was broached, Norbu Zangpo said, "We travel together to achieve a common objective; this is our lot in life, and the reason why we choose this arduous method to pilgrimage to Lhasa is to purify ourselves, in order to set an example of self-sacrifice for the people of the world. Thus, internal unity is important." Once, the little guy, Topden, and the big guy, Jamyang Özer, got into a heated debate as to whether the kowtowers or their attendants earn more merit. Norbu Zangpo used these words to straighten the two of them out, so they both bought meat and tea to entertain everyone and swore in front of the entire troop that they had reconciled with each other. From that time on, they were as close to each other as brothers.

In a blizzard, we witnessed them begging. The men were all standing in a row shaking a drum in one hand and holding a bell in the other, their shoulder-length hair, monk's robes, and the tassels of their bells and drums fluttering about in the wind, as the snowflakes flew about, falling in masses from the sky coming down at a slant. The gloomy and bleak voices of the men accompanied the sound of the bells and drums, carrying off into the barren wilderness. The sutra they chanted is called "Jo". The gist of it is:

So that all beings in the cosmos may free themselves from the ocean of suffering so they may be happy and at peace, we act as messengers disseminating the doctrine. I make my behavior an example

for others, transcending worldly thoughts and focusing the whole of my mind on the Buddha. May the task not yet completed by the great masters such as Śākyamuni be brought to completion by my will. For those who do not understand the doctrine, may it be made clear to them through my power. For those who believe in the religion, may they attain perfection through my power.

Why We Go on Pilgrimages

The first thought we had when we met up with them, was to aim to get at the heart of their motivation for undertaking the trip. We turned the video camera on and asked them to speak freely.

Norbu Zangpo's objective was clear; pilgrimaging to the holy site of Lhasa as a person who makes a Tibetan religious sacrifice of his own body was reason enough. He also chose this ascetic method in order to more effectively clean away the sins incurred in this life and the previous one, so that he might come infinitely close to his highest ideal.

Jamyang Özer: All of the living souls in the six paths of existence are like our parents, in that there is no way to repay their loving kindness. I wish they would all enter into the arms of the Buddha. If I can't fulfill my wish in this lifetime, I still wish to enter Sukhāvātī in the coming life. That is my dream.

Rinchen Norbu: It takes courage to go out on a pilgrimage bringing your wife and child along with you. My parents have been sick for nine months now, and I've been sick the entire time as well. My wife and child have had a hard time of it following along with me, but it's important. My parents in this life are always praying for me too. All of the people in the world may have once been my parents, but my parents in this lifetime have been extraordinarily kind to me and suffered their fair share of hardship because of me. Having been able to be born in the human realm in this life, I have to cherish this human body. Whether I'll be able to be reborn in this world, I can't say with any clarity, and even if I'll be born in this world it is hard to say whether I'll be reborn as a human or as something else. Relying on the Venerated Master's benevolence, I made the vow to make pilgrimage for the Buddha in the hope of ascending to the Buddha-land of joy. The fact that I'm unable to fulfill my desire in this life is something I have no influence over, so I will continue my efforts. The Buddha experienced many more lives with much more bitter hardships than I

have before he finally became the Buddha. In the world there is birth, aging, sickness, and death, along with every sort of human suffering; I wish to benefit the myriad creatures of the Land of Snows just like the three holy monks and to make the Buddha's teachings last for all eternity. I wish to bear all of the hardships of the human realm alone, and I wish to share all of my own happiness with the people of the world.

I hope my son will be able to devoutly believe in the Buddha as well, and that he'll make it. Along the entire journey he's experienced hardships just as I have and it has made him persevere. He began practicing asceticism as a child with a heart full of pious devotion.

Karma Losar: Prostrating the entire length of one's body really is tough, but when I think of the fact that I'm worshipping the Buddhas, praying that the Buddha's teachings will last for all eternity so that the Wheel of Dharma will turn forever, none of that matters.

Kayang Lhamo: Before coming here I practiced self-cultivation in a cave. When I came up with the idea to go on a pilgrimage to Lhasa, I asked the venerated master Phurchok Dorjé for guidance. He cast lots, and the lots said that it didn't matter whether I practiced self-cultivation or went on a pilgrimage for the Buddha, since both would be auspicious.

The nun Tshering: My daughter kowtows with them. Before leaving home we entrusted the family's livestock to our relatives to care for, and both of us, mother and daughter, joined the pilgrimage group. The reason we kowtow in worship of Śākyamuni is so that the myriad creatures of the world may attain the blessing of the Buddhas and enjoy peace and happiness together.

Samchok Dorjé: I just turned 68, and I can't say that I am without sin. In order to let the myriad creatures free themselves from the ocean of suffering and focus the whole of their minds on the Buddha, I want to do good toward others, and I regard the people of this world the same as I do my parents, because you could have been my parents in a former life and I could have been one of your parents in a former life. Humanity is fraught with many evil aspects, such as stealing, killing, lying, etc. As a member of the older generation, I frequently instruct the younger generation to abstain from these kinds of evil behavior.

When I get up early in the morning, I go to the top of the mountain to collect yak dung. I stop when I have enough to burn for one day. The rest of my time is devoted to kowtowing and chanting the

name of the Buddha. Since this life is such that although we have things that we eat, wear, and use, we can't take them with us when we die, only by asking the bodhisattvas for their blessing, can we ascend to the realm of Sukhāvātī.

People are very selfish, saying this is mine; that is his. This is the reason conflicts occur between one country and another, one person and another, and one family and another that cause unrest in the world. If you want to make war no longer occur in the human realm, you have to pray to the Buddha.

People's lives are short and full of suffering. They may end up dying tomorrow. I can't say whether I'll make pilgrimage for the Buddha again a couple of years down the road. If someone only lives for one day, they should not waste the opportunity to make pilgrimage for the Buddha for one day.

At the same time, I also pray that Chairman Mao's ideology may last for all eternity, and I wish that all the people who work for Chairman Mao may ascend to the realm of Sukhāvātī. I'm elderly and lack knowledge of culture. All I have is a devout heart; all I have is my strict adherence to the religious proscriptions and accompanying the rest of the troop on the entire route of the pilgrimage.

Experiences and Legends in Norbu Zangpo's Family History

The direct translation of the name Norbu Zangpo means "good treasure". Having learned a little about his life experiences, one could not say that the meaning of "treasured" contained within this name is self-explanatory. In Nangchen, that plot of land that is older than old, the reign of the local Gyelpos lasted all the way into the 1950s. In Nangchen, that plot of land that is older than old, that corner of the earth where the heavens are high and the Emperor was far away, everything formed a world unto itself. That district and that era never formed a complete picture in my mind, and so I have never portrayed them in my writing. However, there is one thing about the area that I have perceived and heard of, namely that the people there have a free spirit and are unrestrained, which is especially exemplified by the fact that the system of heirs to the famous houses of the ministers of the king have a sturdy trunk and profuse branches. Norbu Zangpo hap-

pens to be the fruit of one such side branch, and his existence aptly illustrates the universal nature of chance.

Norbu Zangpo's family history would seem in the eyes of ordinary people to be legendary and romantic. Norbu Zangpo's attitude toward this family history would seem in the eyes of ordinary people to be quite interesting as well: His aloof tone of voice conveyed his pride. Norbu Zangpo's paternal line of descent connects to the great house of the Master of Sutras¹¹⁰ of the king of Nangchen. "However," said Norbu Zangpo, "Papa Samchok Dorjé was not conceived by the Sutra Master's proper wife, but by Grandpa and another woman." Norbu Zangpo's maternal line of descent connects to the Company Commander of the subjects of the king of Nangchen. "However," said Norbu Zangpo, "Mama Rikdzin Chödzin was not conceived by the Company Commander's proper wife either, but by my other grandpa and another woman."

At that, Norbu Zangpo immediately burst out in laughter: "Of course, they were both brought into the world secretly."

His elderly 78-year-old mother sat down beside him, perpetually spinning a prayer wheel in her hand. Then I asked him, "Was your mother pretty in her youth?"

"Maybe," said Norbu Zangpo with a warm and friendly smile, "If she had not been pretty, would the *trülku* have married her?"

In her heavily wrinkled countenance one could no longer see the slightest trace of the loveliness it once possessed, but she had perfect poise and a certain air of maturity that comes from having seen the world. She was neither a kowtower nor a member of the supply line; rather she followed everyone on foot for countless miles. In her youth, she first married a *trülku* from Nangchen and bore him two sons and two daughters. At the end of the 1950s, when her husband the *trülku* passed away, Rikdzin Chödzin, who was already over 40, went south dragging her sons and daughters along with her, seeking shelter with Samchok Dorjé, who at the time worked in a highway maintenance group on Nyingthri Highway. Norbu Zangpo is their only child. Doing the arithmetic in my head, in that year when she bore the child, she was already quite advanced in age. She must have already been 48 or 49.

Tibetans have a habit of adding the names of their family members after the terms describing their relationship to them within the

family, for example, Papa So-and-so or Uncle So-and-so. This sounds different from the way Han Chinese feel about these relations, and I guess the feeling they associate with their relatives differs from that of the Han Chinese as well.

If you believe that a soul may be reborn from time to time in a new body, and if you think that all souls could have, and have at one time in the past, swapped roles as father and son, mother and daughter, husband and wife, or older and younger brother, the feeling you associate with your family relations would be different too.

At present, Norbu Zangpo's married, 49-year-old eldest older brother is the *trülku* in a nunnery in Nangchen. His second eldest older brother is a county cadre. His eldest older sister once served in public office as well, but she went into retirement at the age of 45, and now she does whatever she pleases. His second eldest older sister has lived on the outskirts of Lhasa for quite some time. Her husband works as a painter in a lumber mill.

Thus the side branches of his family have separated off again and again in lush profusion. Norbu Zangpo himself was born, grew up, and reached adulthood on the roadside of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway. When he was small, he went to school for a couple of years and learned to speak Chinese alongside Han Chinese children. At a tender age he was already determined he would do something great, in order to repay his kind father and mother. In the beginning the profession he set his sights on was chauffeuring. For the Tibetan region, this is a vibrant profession, and chauffeurs still enjoy a high standing to this day. Since he wanted to be a chauffeur, he begged chauffeurs who were older than him to teach him to drive, and one accepted under the condition that Norbu Zangpo wash one article of his clothing for every two utility poles they drove past. These are the sort of events of yesteryear that make you burst out laughing when you recall them.

Whether he liked it or not, this is how Norbu Zangpo's life played out: First he became a part-time worker in a highway maintenance group working on the section of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway between Nyingthri and Thangmé, which is famous for its frequent occurrences of subsidence. In his 18th year, his older brother regained his position as *trülku*, and took their parents back home with him. Norbu Zangpo followed his parents as well, returning to the moun-

tain village in Nangchen that was their hometown. In the two years that followed, he had nothing to do and was capable of doing anything. The multitalented Norbu Zangpo can write and paint, is good at singing and dancing, and can play the harmonica and the electronic keyboard, as well as wind and percussion instruments. He can work as a carpenter, blacksmith, or an engraver. He can repair timepieces and household appliances, and he can even function as half a doctor: On the pilgrimage he carried injection equipment with him, giving shots to sick travel companions. On account of his good character and talent, the people in his hometown respected him and called him “the prodigy”. When faced with the final choice of his permanent career, maybe he had no other alternative and did not stop to think it over before embarking on his religious career, seeing as this was originally considered the greatest option by the people of his hometown. At the same time, it manifests the decisive influence a closed social environment has on one’s fate. In the region of his hometown, you seldom hear of any young men and women with a healthy body and a healthy mind that have not become monks or nuns, or at the very least monks or nuns who live at home.

At 20, Norbu Zangpo became a monk, not just an ordinary monk but a “*gelong*”, or *bhikṣu*, who takes severe vows. The Buddhist school he belongs to is the Drukpa Kagyü branch of the Tibetan Buddhist Kagyü school, which emphasizes oral transmission and self-cultivation instead of the sutras. “*Gelong*” is not a title, but rather a category signifying strict self-discipline, which attaches extraordinary importance to the devotion of one’s mind. Those who are completely illiterate can be *gelongs* too; they just have to pledge to strictly abide by 253 vows for the whole of their lives. The monastery affirms their status based on their desire in combination with examination of their daily statements and actions. Of the 253 vows, the following five are the most important: do not kill living things, do not drink alcohol, do not lie, do not steal, and do not commit unfit sexual practices. If a *gelong* transgresses, not only are all his previous efforts wasted; he may no longer be a *gelong* in this lifetime, and the retribution for his evil-doing is double that of an ordinary monk who has broken his vows.

Doubtless ascetic practices can temper one’s will, but ascetic practices did not make Śākyamuni become the Buddha. That is why Śākyamuni did not advocate ascetic practices. Nevertheless, a host of

monks that came after him still went to extremes. To mention one famous story, an ascetic monk with a pair of gorgeous eyes went begging for alms and captured the eye of a beautiful woman, who lingered by him. When the beautiful woman praised his eyes, he gouged one out without hesitation, saying, "You can take this ball of flesh if you like. Do you still think it looks lovely now?"

In the countryside, the Nyingma, Kagyü, and Sakya schools do not strictly forbid marriage among monks like the Geluk school does. Among the pilgrims, the young monks Karma Losar and Rinchen Norbu have already married and had children. As a *gelong*, Norbu Zangpo has sworn never to marry in his entire lifetime. Tibetan Buddhism has adapted rules to suit local conditions, allowing monks to eat meat. However, Norbu Zangpo has never been tainted by either fish or meat. His father Samchok Dorjé said that they noticed this peculiarity of their son's when he had just learned to crawl. The very sight of meat and bones made him uneasy, and occasionally, when he ate some by mistake, his tongue and his whole body had an allergic reaction, and he broke out in hives all over. Who knows what he did in a former life to deserve that.

The nine years of life as a monk reshaped Norbu Zangpo into the form he has today, a tall and slender figure wrapped in crimson monk's robes with a lean face and long hair that falls on his shoulders, just like a gallant swordsman in ancient times but a little more refined and gentle in appearance. His forehead which should have been smooth was abraded by the earth to a hard callous. His eyes were distant and in a daze, incapable of twinkling just like those of a philosopher lost in contemplation, or like a Buddha's eyes of wisdom that have turned gloomy because they are full of sympathy. As he headed for an immeasurably remote future space and time, there was a hint of something that seemed like melancholy in him. His established beliefs were tainted by a slight, hidden wavering, that is to say, from time to time I detected a transient uncertainty in his dazed eyes.

The original nature he maintained lent his behavior a distinct individual character, which made it clear that he was the one who successfully organized this pilgrimage troop. We noticed what set this group apart from the masses: During the arduous journey, whenever the conditions permitted it even slightly, they bathed and changed clothes, washed their beddings, and relaxed for a short period of time

as much as they could. Each of the eighteen people in the group had a specific job, which promoted group solidarity and helped them live together in harmony. What was particularly astounding was that over the course of the journey which lasted over a year, Norbu Zangpo kept making short notes in his Tibetan almanac and writing daily journal entries in his notebook. All in all, their noble elegance, first and foremost that of Norbu Zangpo's father, which could not be concealed under their outer appearance that was battered by the wind and frost, left us with such a distinct impression that when we ran into another troop of pilgrims again thereafter and they took the initiative mentioning that they would gladly cooperate with us in our filming, our cameraman Sun Liang immediately shook his head expressing his general disinterest. You cannot turn back the clock.

While wandering all over the Tibetan countryside visiting the monasteries there, I often wringed my hands and sighed at how the outstanding young people of the countryside would join monasteries. When I brought this up when I was talking with Norbu Zangpo, he said, as if it were nothing, "This is the tradition of our people. The bright and intelligent people become monks and nuns and study the sutras. The stupid and ignorant people bear children and serve the others." When we had gotten to know each other a little better, I probed him about his emotional experiences saying, "Doesn't such an intelligent and handsome young man as you have a legion of female admirers?" Norbu Zangpo suddenly became stiff and vaguely indicated that he could not and dared not say anything on the matter. Then, when I asked him about his desires, he answered by saying he had two, the first being to become enrolled in the Buddhist Academy and the second to find a teacher to study archaic Tibetan grammar with. He had no other aspirations.

Norbu Zangpo's ideals in life were firmly grounded in the religious atmosphere of his hometown and strengthened by the fact that people looked up to him for guidance, flocking to be near him, though his relations had undoubtedly urged him on as well. His older sisters said that it would have been alright if he had not become a monk, but now that he has taken this step and gone so far in this direction, he might as well keep it up.

"Seeing as the choices of your destiny were dictated by your surroundings, could a change in your surroundings cause you to change

your original aspiration in life?" "Maybe," answered Norbu Zangpo hesitatingly, "but what would I change it to?"

"What if you had the opportunity to be a driver again?"

He shook his head, "It's too late for that now. If I did, I'd be a laughing stock."

"And what if a director cast you as an actor, in a positive role of course, as a hero of some sort or other?"

This suggestion seemed to speak to him. He answered without wasting a moment's thought, saying that he could not act out just any part, but only one that would benefit his religion and help to convert the masses.

Then I asked him, "Can I take you out to a ballroom once you've gotten to Lhasa?" He said, "It wouldn't be appropriate for me to go dressed as a monk." "Well, could you if you changed into street clothes?" He said yes.

Later, I failed to fulfill those promises. As a layperson, I am always busy with everyday errands that never get finished. I did not know what Norbu Zangpo would think of that. Norbu Zangpo, who had made the transmission of dogma his occupation could receive my praise and admiration, but he was incapable of making me become a person like him, and it may have even been less sensible of me to try to change him out of pity – if he were to change into a modern youth on a street corner in Lhasa, would he still have that power to touch people's hearts?

I only kept one of my promises to him, the promise I made to write him. He said I should write whatever I wanted.

In the two month since we met them in the snow, we had followed them from time to time, becoming involved in their affairs, fretting and rejoicing together, and sharing in their enthusiasm when they reached their destination. After about a year had passed, when I wanted to record a strictly factual account of their experiences, voices, and facial expressions, I still felt my heart tremble and ache.

Not just in relation to them but in relation to all of the pious believers I had come into contact with in the process of one year of shooting, those monks and nuns who had abandoned everything and gambled with their own lives, the most pernicious question I asked in my heart of hearts was, what if there is no next life?

If there is no next life, have they not just wasted this life?

I had long since landed in the quagmire of specious relativism, and lost the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Not to mention the fact that right and wrong are relative terms. I could not maintain the objectivity, fairness, and understanding toward them, which I strived to uphold, let alone identify with them. In the past, my praise for them had been excessive, which made me feel uneasy. Now pity outweighs praise, and many a time I feel a sadness that cannot be put into words. Regarding Norbu Zangpo and his group, I find their pure spirit and pious asceticism on the one hand deeply moving. On the other hand, I take exception to these practices of theirs and fundamentally reject them. For a long time now I have borne the torment of these contradicting points of view. This is only one such example.

And is Norbu Zangpo's determination firm and his mind at ease? He faces two worlds. One is the traditional world of the older generation, wreathed in the smoke of incense. That ancient path, which the sun is setting on, leads straight to that place beyond the horizon, which is called the next life. The other leads to the modern world with the heavy traffic of a new century, which is full of even more alluring things than ever before, things more alluring than the next life. If you have left your homeland, can the shrine with its masonry laid using the water and earth of that homeland still stand its ground?

Only in the elderly couple Samchok Dorjé and Rikdzin Chödzin did I see that kind of super-stable state of mind, which comprises the tranquility and joy that only those people possess whose selves have completely dissolved in the supreme, among that which is boundless and eternal, and which stems from a sense of security and belonging which they possess and on which they rely completely. Just as they only need their souls to sing, they even face their current lives which are rough and full of hardships with a temperament characterized by uncontainable joy. I even believe that the contradictions in their minds have vanished, the world having been harmonized and simplified by being restructured in their conceptions of it. This life has been simplified. It has all become one.

Is what I have seen the conclusion of the story?

This is why I have put my head together with Sun Liang's, wanting to come up with a reason in these next few years to take a trip to that remote ravine which is Norbu Zangpo's homeland, taking the video camera along, of course, in order to take a look at what Norbu Zangpo and his young companions' beliefs and lives are like. That

would be interesting, whether they have changed or become even more steadfast in their convictions.

What We Know and What We Do Not Know

One should not let one's emotions obstruct the flow of narration. Let us return once more to the main topic of following the group's progress on the pilgrimage road.

No matter how many prayers one has spoken in a single lifetime, this act only counts once. Precisely for the sake of having a future life that is better than this life, an elderly couple who suffered the vicissitudes of life left their ten some yaks and fifty some goats and sheep in the care of their relatives, asked a nun to look after their home, and thus went forth through the wind and frost toward what to their minds is holy ground. Every day, Samchok Dorjé prayed for the souls of the myriad living beings of the cosmos, and every day he wished the head of state and the religious leaders boundless longevity. He always completed each set of kowtows scrupulously. His forehead, hard and calloused, was scraped open every day drawing forth fresh blood. Due to his daily emphasis and reminders, the young monks and nuns strictly observed the rules, and in spite of there being no one there to supervise him, when he kowtowed, he never cheated his way around.

This method of kowtowing is called "three steps, one body", which indicates that three steps are taken each time before the length of the body is prostrated. In the past, some other authors and I have explained the concrete method of kowtowing, how the palms are pressed together in front of the chest, how they are raised to the tip of the nose and forehead, throwing the body forward, making the five extremities hit the ground, etc., but no one has, as yet, explained the rules for kowtowing on a pilgrimage. This was the first time I came to understand and see with my own eyes the particulars of kowtowing.

Every day from the beginning of the journey the pilgrims were only allowed to recite sutras, and not to talk. If they happened upon a situation in which they had to talk, they had to recite a sutra text asking for forgiveness first. If they came upon a river along the way, they had to eyeball the distance, and after they made it across the water they had to make up for it by kowtowing that distance. When they went down a mountain, due to inertia, they were not allowed to stand comfortably either, and after they had made it down the moun-

tain they had to make up for the equivalent distance in kowtows. In the knee-deep snow of the snow-covered mountain Sertshapö La they were really unable to kowtow, and so they took a rope and measured the distance they traveled, each of them making up for it with 4800 kowtows once they arrived in Lhasa. Their strict observation of the rules caused them to be admired on the whole of their journey, which made them feel proud. When they ran into another group of pilgrims in the region of Shel La Mountain and saw that those pilgrims lifted their legs and walked more than ten paces each time they kowtowed, they felt those pilgrims' minds were insincere. They talked about this several times, and each time the subject came up they felt very unhappy, because it related to the problem of the fame associated with the practice of going on kowtow pilgrimages as a whole.

Each day's worth of kowtowing follows a fixed routine. After breakfast the pilgrims walk to the place where they left a mark the previous evening, form a horizontal row, press their palms together, and chant a prayer sutra in unison. Towards evening when they conclude their daily kowtowing they must kowtow in all four directions, East, South, West, and North, which is meant as a way of honoring all of the local deities, saying, "This evening we will temporarily dwell in this place. Please protect us." They kowtow three times in the direction they will travel in next, expressing their appreciation toward all deities and the myriad creatures along the path, saying, "The life I have been provided with requires water and fire." Then they kowtow three more times in the direction they are facing, warning the local deities who they shall disturb the following day. Finally, they bow three times in the direction they are facing, signifying their endless gratitude and well-wishing. That said, the ceremony involving kowtows in all four directions at the conclusion of a day's worth of kowtowing is something I have only seen Samchok Dorjé keep doing over the entire course of the pilgrimage from beginning to end.

As we became more familiar with one another, we came to know more and more interesting things about this group of young people. For example, the short little monk Topden was a meat eater. He could not take a single step without having eaten meat. Once, he met with a happy turn of events: a hunter had shot a buck and only taken its antlers. Topden carried the dead deer, which was frozen solid, back to camp, and it provided him with several splendid meals. However, one

time, he almost ended up becoming a splendid meal for a black bear himself. In a ravine, he suddenly bumped into a black bear. He turned tail and ran, but the bear followed close behind and would not let up. Topden, inspired to ingenuity by this sticky situation, hid himself in a crevice in the rocks, and surprisingly the dimwitted bear was unable to find him. We also found out that the fat nun's inelegant nickname was "Zhu Bajie", after the character in *Journey to the West* who is half pig and half human, and we learned that the Chamdoer Shira Bumgyü had contracted a strange eye disease, such that every time he looked in a body of water to make sure there was a rock in it for him to step on, once he put his foot down he would inevitably land in the water anyway. Then there was Norbu Zangpo's nephew, who had grown up in his hometown since he was small and who no longer recognized his own mom when he arrived in Lhasa. He would always follow his uncle Norbu Zangpo's lead calling his mom "older sister".

Of course, there are even more stories we do not know.

...

Our filming schedule was already full, and having added the extra material from the pilgrimage tribe project, we were extraordinarily tired from all that running around, which was compounded by the frequent trips between both shores across the Lhasa and Yarlung Tsangpo rivers. No matter how much leeway we gave the group, planning according to an estimated advance of one to two kilometers per day, they always dragged their way along anyhow. Jamyang Özer went into the mountains to visit his relatives and invited Karma Zhidrup to come along, and so everybody had to wait for them to come back, in the end waiting for four or five days. Rinchen Norbu's illness became critical, and so a group of pilgrims took him to Lhasa for emergency medical care, while the rest of them waited where they were yet again. In short, every time we returned to the campsite we inevitably complained and nagged them, saying, "You're so totally slow. Your discipline is really slack! No, you simply don't have any discipline whatsoever. Look! We've already been to Lhoka and taken some more footage there, and we've done some stuff in Lhasa too. Winter is around the corner. Your pilgrimage and our shooting should be brought to an end. Sheesh! Why aren't you anxious?"

Norbu Zangpo really was not anxious. None of them were. My Tibetan friends are incapable of getting anxious. The couple Gyatsho

and Dedzin, who are my dear friends, is always in good spirits. This is a people that do not get anxious. Someone once reminded me, saying, “Have you ever seen a Tibetan hit his child because he’s anxious?”

If you believe in a *mahākālpa* that lasts 1.3 billion years, and that a soul returns to this world endlessly and needs to go through an inexhaustible number of such *mahākālpas*, provided that you have an inexhaustible amount of time, why would you be anxious to go anywhere?

When I started becoming anxious, Norbu Zangpo explained with a chuckle, “Whenever many people are involved, there are many tasks and many illnesses.”

Thinking back on it now, I cannot help finding it funny. We were just like characters in a famous story.

Samchok Dorjé said that early in the morning when he got up he would go to the top of the mountain to collect yak dung, stopping when he had enough to burn for one day. That self-actualizer in the story received an answer in the same vane from the foreign fisherman who was basking in the sun on the beach: “Since I caught an extra fish yesterday, I can stop now because I have enough to eat today.” The self-actualizer strongly disapproved of this indolent apathy and said, “If I had the time you have, I wouldn’t waste one minute of it and would catch as many fish as I could, accumulate wealth and property, establish a joint venture company, a multinational corporation, conduct maritime trade, issue stocks, and become one of the wealthiest people in the world in a few decades.”

“And then what?”

“Then,” said the self-actualizer, “once I’ve achieved success and fame I’d enter the Buddhist clergy or go to the beach and bask in the sun.”

Samchok Dorjé and the foreign fisherman smiled with wisdom.

I, however, plan to reflect on the differences between these two disparate paths that seem to lead to the same goal.

A Daily Chronicle of the Journey

One year, one month, and three days make a full 399 days and nights when added together, and Norbu Zangpo summarized what the group did each day in a sentence, recording the sentences on the strips of the Tibetan calendar. Norbu Zangpo leafed through them with a

peaceful state of mind, leisurely explaining what happened. There were no earth-shaking events. He just recorded trivial affairs such as where they went on that day, whom they saw, what happened to them, that someone got sick, some animal died, or was sold. This lets us appreciate the length of the journey, the wind and frost, the rain, snow, and sunshine they went through, and the very long trail of footprints that crossed through time and the wilderness, imprints on their bodies and their minds.

Excerpts from this chronicle are presented below.

November 10, 1991, the fourth day of the tenth Tibetan lunar month: We set off.

Two days later we arrived at the ruins of the ancient state of Nangchen, a place full of *mani* stones dedicated to the Princess Wencheng.

December 4: Karma Losar became critically ill. All of the nuns wept. I recited a sutra for him and gave him a shot. Karma Losar had acute pain under the right side of his chest. Then all of the kowtowers had acute pain on both sides of their chests. I suppose it was either because our muscles were severely strained or our inner organs displaced.

January 1, 1992: We crossed the snow-covered mountain Sertshapö La that forms the border between Qinghai and Tibet. The snow was so deep we couldn't kowtow. We had to wade across through the snow. It was already the dead of night when we made it across the mountain. When we found local folks we asked them for yak dung and accommodations. One of them said, "Some of the pilgrims that come through here are good people and some of them are bad people. The bad people steal and rob. I don't know whether you're good or bad!" He ridiculed us with his words, but he still gave us some yak dung. Only after we had slowly warmed our hands over the yak dung fire were we able to take off the wooden mitts, which were frozen solid.

January 21: First round of begging for alms.

January 24: Second round of begging for alms. On this day there was also an incident: Our beloved little black horse fell into a frozen stream. Luckily it didn't get injured.

Later they traded this horse for a red horse; the red horse's master took a liking to this well bred horse from the countryside, and pre-

ferred putting 450 RMB on top in a desperate attempt to close the deal. The entries written subsequent to that event contain many such descriptions of horses being traded and yaks being sold. Sometimes they made money and sometimes they lost money.

January 28: We arrived in a farming village in Tengchen County and stayed at my father's uncle's son's house. On the following day we recited sutras for our host's family. Since they rather eagerly urged us to remain with them, we stayed on for twelve days straight.

February 9: We set out on the path. On the road we met up with seven pilgrims from Nangchen. Thereafter we traveled together for a month and then parted company.

February 20: On the road we met up with eight people from Sichuan who kowtowed. Instead of taking three steps per prostration they took more than ten.

March 1: We kowtowed to the summit of the big snow-covered mountain Shel La within the borders of Tengchen County.

March 3: The nuns Tshering and Yingsel's yak lost its footing and fell into a cave in the snow on Shel La Mountain. Due to the yak's massive proportions, they were unable to drag it out. The situation persisted till the fifth day of the third Tibetan lunar month, when the eight pilgrims from Sichuan arrived and we begged that group of men to help us. By half lifting and half pulling we dragged the yak, whose legs and hooves were already frostbitten, down the mountain. A man from Sichuan said, "Ten days' worth of kowtowing isn't as tiring as that was!" His intent was to talk us into giving him some food, but we didn't have any. In the couple of days that followed, we were constantly on the move looking for a suitable place to take the crippled yak to. When we arrived in a nearby village we begged for fodder and looked for a vehicle in which to transport the yak to the highway maintenance squad so we could leave the leader of the highway maintenance squad in charge of taking care of the crippled yak. Before we went on our way, we piled the 15 burlap sacks full of fodder we had managed to get by begging by the side of the yak, which lay paralyzed, leaving it to its fate. Therefore, the mother and daughter Tshering and Yingsel were irrevocably heartbroken, thinking that this yak that was doomed to die would die because of them.

Another yak died in an even more gruesome manner, and the whole thing seemed to be predestined. That evening Cousin Tshed-

zin Yüdrön's yak left the herd on its own. Everyone searched for it all over the place, finally finding it on the third day next to a ditch, gasping its last breath. We all noticed it seemed to be crying and discovered there was a gaping wound under its tail, pitch black like a mountain cave, with the inside torn asunder. As it happened, a despicable, cruel jackal had bored into it from its anus and swallowed its intestines so that there was nothing left. Analyzing the trail of blood, it became apparent that after this yak left the troop of people and the yak herd on its own, it had lost its source of protection. When its pain had become too difficult to bear, it was already too late. It roamed all over the mountain running like wild, yet it still could not shake that abominable demon that stuck on its tail like a suction cup until it leapt into the ditch. Maybe the jackal left of its own accord after it had eaten its fill. That enormous beast suffered all kinds of hardships for three days before it gasped its last breath. My cousin was so hurt that she didn't want to go on living. The entire assembly of monks and nuns held a ceremony to save the deceased yak's soul.

June 6: Four brothers and sisters arrived from Chamdo.

June 9: Seven of the nine yaks took ill. It took them 16 days to recover.

July 30 –August 25: We returned on foot from Lhari to Meldro Gungkar to take part in the “Treu Lo Kagyü” ceremony. Afterwards we left the only five yaks that remained with the common folk in Lhari.

September 10: Lost five horses within the borders of Lhari. Topden searched for the horses and ran into a black bear, which chased him.

October 15: Went on pilgrimage to Drigung Thil Monastery. Lost six horses.

October 16: Didn't find the horses. Bumped into a television [film crew].

In the subsequent entries in the chronicle the word “television” appears quite frequently. The entries also frequently mention Rinchen Norbu's falling ill, that his illness became serious and he was rushed to Lhasa Hospital for emergency treatment. The last few dozen kilometers on the way to Lhasa were an eventful leg of the journey full of interruptions that took the course of one month. Ever stooping Rinchen Norbu grew thinner with each passing day and was

on the verge of passing. He had long suffered from gastroenteritis which was compounded by the poor nutrition and excessive physical strain of the journey. Our film crew traveled the distance between the hospital and the camp by car several times and paid a special visit to the Bureau of Chamdo Prefecture in Lhasa, so they would issue a certificate allowing the hospital to provide free healthcare. After the pilgrimage to Jokhang Monastery, Rinchen Norbu accepted our request to interview him, saying he once thought how wonderful it would be to die like that and be able to take away with him all the suffering of the human world!

According to one interpretation, for whoever dies on the pilgrimage route, it is not a stroke of misfortune but rather of good fortune. People would say that he was someone who died on the pilgrimage route!

Yingsel thought the same way. The 26-year-old nun Yingsel's light fever had not abated for several months, she was always unable to catch up with her kowtowing companions, and so she had no choice but to depart early and return late. Her solitary shadow crept across the surface of the black asphalt road. It often took her quite a while to crawl to her feet. She had already reached her limit.

Fortunately, Lhasa could be seen in the distance.

Within the borders of Daktsé County, a few dozen miles east of Lhasa, one could vaguely make out the Potala Palace in the distance, seated atop the Red Hill in the center of the city of Lhasa. Tibetans say that when people come from afar and spot the golden tip of the Potala in the distance for the first time, if that golden tip is shining in brilliant splendor they will have good luck. I wonder if the deities have expressed such generosity even once.

In the end, Norbu Zangpo recorded this last line pertaining to the journey:

December 13, 1992, 15th day of the tenth Tibetan lunar month:
Pilgrimage to Jokhang Monastery.

Fulfilling Vows at Jokhang Monastery

The 15th day of the tenth month in the Tibetan calendar is a solemn religious festival. In expectation of this festival the group cleaned themselves up for several days at Norbu Zangpo's second eldest sister's home in the eastern suburbs of Lhasa and made up for the 4800

full prostrations they had failed to complete while crossing the snow-covered mountain Sertshapö La almost one year prior, conducting in turn a Buddhist ceremony for good fortune.

On the day of the festival, the smoke of the incense curled through the air at the doors to Jokhang Monastery, and the place was bustling with pilgrims and businessmen. As the sound of wooden mitts scraping the ground carried over to them, a long and narrow path immediately emerged amidst the mass of people. On hearing that sound the seven or eight former natives of Nangchen County who worked or did business in Lhasa and had hastened to come there burnt incense for the pilgrims, clearing the path donned in colorful satin robes, their heads wrapped tightly in black silk, each holding a pure white *khata* in their hands. From time to time a pilgrim came forth from among the spectators presenting each of the kowtowers in turn with alms — 1 RMB or a couple of *mao*. The ruddy complexion of their weather beaten and suntanned faces, their tousled hair caked with dust, the imprints on their foreheads, and their ragged attire were enough to win them general acclaim and heroes' crowns of laurels, as they approached their holy ground's arch of triumph step by step with extraordinarily solemn expressions.

Since we had made arrangements by making contact in advance, the closed crimson doors of Jokhang Monastery opened inviting them in. Crawling they passed through the courtyard and kowtowed directly into the holiest hall of the sacred monastery, up to the statue representing Śākyamuni at the age of twelve. According to the regulations, they had to kowtow straight to the foot of the Buddha image before their works of merit, this journey, would be considered complete. In the lamp-lit darkness of the sutra hall, facing the resplendent Buddha image, this group of devout believers who had come from afar stood together perfectly still chanting aloud an ode to Śākyamuni, which mentioned all kinds of sacrifices, prayers, and blessings, for quite some time. The sound of the mixed chorus of men and women chanting in unison resonated solemnly, pouring into every corner of the sutra hall, and for that moment these people who had endured hardship enjoyed its bittersweet flavor.

I noticed the excitement and enthrallment in one after the other of those familiar faces. This holy ground was at the threshold of the gateway between the sacred and secular worlds, and to stand on it

meant to merge into its eternal power. They had risen to a higher level, having transcended the mundane and cast off the profanities of life and arrived directly at the best and most beautiful sacred hall. Situated in the middle of the group was Samchok Dorjé, whose whole face was dripping with sweat and whose eyes glistened with tears. Topden's tears on the other hand streamed all over his face, and he could not compose himself. Kayang Lhamo's eyes were tightly closed, her mouth mumbling. The glazed expression in Rinchen Norbu and Yingsel's eyes revealed their usual bitterness and sense of helplessness. Norbu Zangpo, the person leading the chant, had a detached expression on his face that bore a hint of the relief one feels after a heavy burden has been lifted off one's shoulders. This time and place were precisely that dreamlike realm this group of people had diligently sought after for many years, where their dull and base lives radiated in a brilliant splendor for this instant. At this time and place, this group of people who had already transcended the mundane and cast off the profanities of life, who had done away with their selves and possessed next to nothing, were devoting their efforts to an extraordinarily moving course of action: filled to the brim with happiness and beneficence, they wished all of humanity and all living beings well:

We wish all living souls in the world well. May they have luck all the time, may they have luck everywhere, may they have luck in the daytime, may they have luck at night, may they have luck every day, and may they have luck every year; may each of their births bring them luck. *Trashiüüü sho! Trashiüüü sho!* With this chant we wish them luck that shall not abate nor be exhausted.

When the tediously long sutra had been recited, the most brilliant and sacred concluding movement was to follow: with another three full prostrations of the body made here, their foreheads could lightly graze the feet of the Buddha statue.

But unfortunately this movement could not be completed. When Samchok Dorjé and his son raised their hands and bent over to prostrate themselves in homage to the statue, a monk waiting to one side, who had already lost his patience, unceremoniously grabbed them by their collars, pushing and shoving them, to make them circle around and away from the Buddha statue as quickly as possible – in this manner the matter was hastily put to an end.

“Only three kowtows were left!” This left Samchok Dorjé, who was in tears, with a sense of regret that would last for the rest of his life.

The radiance of the sacred faded away and the people we had come to know well resumed their normal state, the state of relaxation one has after having completed a task with great success.

Once again there was a dazed look in Norbu Zangpo’s eyes, one that had passed beyond the secular world and was directed toward a distant place that cannot as yet be reached within normal people’s lines of vision.

Following this pilgrimage to Jokhang, I heard that they would also travel to various places in southern and western Tibet, but this time they would hitch rides there instead of kowtowing. They would visit famous monasteries such as Samyé and Sakya. If possible, they would also like to go to Gang Rinpoché Mountain¹¹¹ in Ngari. Only Rinchen Norbu had to return to a place 60 some kilometers east of Lhasa to make up for that distance in kowtows.

So, Norbu Zangpo, you handsome man from Kham, you young *gelong* who has vowed to sever the bonds of the world of dust, with that soul of yours tired by the tribulations it has experienced, or rather, guided by your immortal soul, what places will you end up going to?

Chapter 7: Since I Heard the Expression “Souls Are Like the Wind”

Since I heard the expositions of people from the countryside related to the poetic expression “souls are like the wind” in the mountain wilderness of Meldro Gungkar, and wrote this book around that theme, more than 20 years have passed. In this period of time, one edition of the work has been printed after the other by a number of different publishing houses, and separate editions for Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as an edition in English to appear shortly, have been added, which means that someone is always reading the work. Yet the entire contents of this book, whose main topic is the cultural phenomena of the southern Tibetan agricultural area and their changes, end in the year 1993 when the first draft of the work was completed; what has happened since then? Since I have made it my personal mission to write a work in the genre of a documentary, why should I not expand on some of the topics, relating once again the landscapes I have seen in passing, like a sequel of a television show? This sequel does not relate all of the developments that have occurred since then but just three or so fragments that have been selected from them. Even so, the legends of old will become reality and some things that were enthralling are no more. As they say, if you are patient enough in time you will witness everything, including things you could imagine and those you could not, things you can put into words and those you cannot.

The World in Conceptions: From Word of Mouth and Written Sources

As for the origin of the soul and its evolutionary path, one of the things that has always enthralled me was at what time and in what way eternal life in the “land of the dead” transformed into transmigration in this world. If one starts to trace its origins by searching in origin myths and the oral tradition, the result is that it is difficult to find any trace of it, for example the passage I quoted in the past says:

In the beginning of high antiquity there was such emptiness that not one entity existed; in this supreme void there was only an empty darkness. The radiance of light acted as the father and the rays of light as the mother bearing the two colors grey and black separately. In their midst a slight breeze like a puff of breath gradually took shape. Frost appeared within this slight breeze, congealing it into dew, and the dew changed into a pool of water that resembled a bright mirror. On that pool of water a thin film gradually developed and joined to form an egg. When the egg hatched, two eagles, one black and one white, emerged. The two eagles joined with one another and laid three eggs: one white, one black, and one multicolored. The white egg split open, and the sacred mountains and deities took shape. The black egg split open, and the people with black heads and red faces took shape. The multicolored egg split open, and all of the living souls in the world took shape....

This ancient ballad on the creation of the world was recorded in a classic of the ancient religion of Tibet, Land of Snows – the Bön religion. I do not know who first came up with this story, but it was subsequently passed along and quoted in all sorts of works. At first I mistakenly thought it to be the original version of the origins of the world and humankind from the ancestors of the Tibetans; only later did I learn that this version had undergone changes in the process of the Tibetans' conversion to Buddhism. In the same period of time, this author also heard another version from a Bön painter in Chamdo: The god of heaven Zhitö looked down from heaven upon the plateau of the Land of Snows and it struck his fancy, so he descended there into the realm of the mundane. Feeling lonely he proceeded to invite the goddess Sherap to come and be his companion. The two deities joined with each other bearing a son named Shewa. They knew neither to gather food nor to cultivate the land and only knew to pick up the ripe fruit that had fallen to the ground to stave their hunger. When they accidentally shook the branches of a tree and experienced how the wild fruits fell to the ground, they had an epiphany. This is how humankind began gathering food....

That visit took place at a location where a mural was being created. The painter, who was of advanced age, was vividly reproducing his view of the cosmos in a riotous profusion of color. The account he gave on this graphic representation of the geography of the world was quite similar to what I had read in a book on Tibetan Buddhism. It only made such a strong impression on me because the elderly gen-

tleman's explanation of it was lively. He said that four worlds exist in the cosmos: in the eastern world, the sky is white, and the ground is crescent shaped; in the western world, the sky is green, and the ground is square shaped; in the northern world, the sky is red and the ground is circular; in our, southern world, the sky is blue, and the ground is triangular (or the shape of an inverted cone). The Bön painter explained the scene illustrated in his painting in detail, adding the remarks: "The people in the eastern world are excessively tall which makes action inconvenient; the western world subsists solely on milk, and their lives are monotonous; in the northern world, one tree grows out of the ground when each person is born, and thereafter that person only uses the fruit of that tree for food, and only the leaves of that tree as clothing. Of the four worlds our, southern world is the best; food is plentiful and one can entertain religious beliefs. The only flaw is that there are many wars. As for the four warriors in martial attire, those are the four great heavenly kings." That obviously stems from Buddhist influence.

During my deliberate search I failed to grasp the essentials, and conversely I ended up grasping them when I was not paying attention. Many years later when I was gathering materials for the composition of the work *A Classic of Weathered Stories: 15 Tibetan Historical Tales*,¹¹² a legend stemming from a Tibetan manuscript from Dunhuang provided me with a lead. Judging from customary regional spelling variants in the classical Tibetan text, the opinion in academic circles is that the story circulated in the Golok region in present-day Qinghai during the early Tubo period. The gist of the story is: The domestic horse was once a wild horse, and the wild horse was once a divine horse in heaven. The youngest horse of three brothers, Khukrön Mangdar, turned to the human Mabu Damshé for help to work together to destroy the wild yak Gawa, in order to avenge his oldest brother's death. From then on, he allied himself with the human and swore a serious oath: "In life I shall carry you over long distances on my back for one hundred years, and when you die you shall still be my master." Later, when that brave rider Mabu Damshé, who helped his friend destroy his enemy, died, "smashed to pieces like a beautiful piece of turquoise" as the legend says, he rode Khukrön Mangdar, who thereby fulfilled his promise and served as his master's "pet horse" being buried with him. In order to let "the deceased keep

on living after death”, Bön priests got involved, launching an intervention at the right time and in the right manner, which is where the ceremony to save the souls of the dead originated. Along with the “pet horse”, who is a servant for the deceased, another indispensable funerary item is a sheep, which acts as the deceased’s guide to the land of the dead. The Bön priest mutters the following incantation to it: “Oh ceremonial sheep, you are the father of the fatherless and the mother of the motherless...may this person live again because of you...may this person be redeemed because of you.”

Thus the sheep is in front leading the way and the pony Khukrön Mangdar carries his deceased master to the homeland of the deceased. The pony needs to exhibit courage while crossing the mountain passes and magnanimity when facing river crossings. After they have crossed the intersection between heaven and earth, passing beyond approximately nine mountains and nine rivers, the other dimension is in sight: “There the grass and trees are always green in winter as in summer and there is spring water even sweeter and mellower than fine wine. Master and servant will attain eternal life in this land.”

Since this story was written on a Tibetan scroll in a very early decade, it is usually interpreted as a rare embodiment of the origin of the domestic horse, the practice of burying living beings with the dead, and associated ancient burial rituals. Others think that this explains, at the same time, why Tibetans have not eaten horse meat, along with the meat of other equines such as donkeys and mules, since ancient times, all because a life and death pact existed between humans and horses. How long this myth circulated is unknown, but it was obviously recorded in the “old teachings” and already stood alone in that era, since the author sings, over and over, the words: “None of this belongs to the ‘new teachings’ but to the ancient customs from the past.” What is also repeatedly sung is: “The barren desert is vast, and the road is long and winding; what falls from above is rain, and what rises from below is wind; the paths of the living and the dead are not identical; people who are alive and people who are dead have different characteristics; people who did good before, still do good now; things that were beneficial in the past are still useful now....”

This story was recorded in the era when the new was replacing the old. This clear transition is displayed in the transition from earth burial to sky burial. The homeland of the deceased no longer existed,

and the soul, which “lives on after death”, swam with the tide, alternately coming and going along the paths to the six modes of existence within the world, incessantly for all time. Among what are called the six paths of transmigration — heaven, human existence, existence as an asura, hell, existence as a hungry ghost, and existence as an animal — although the first three are called the three good *gatis*, nothing is better than being born as a human, since humans alone have the greatest possibility of approaching the completion of the path to Buddhahood. All of the elderly people constantly pray in the hope of being born again in the next life as humans, being reincarnated again in the southern world, and eating *tsampa*, drinking butter tea, and devoutly believing in Buddhism as they did before.

There are individual variants from the norm. Long ago I heard that in the mountain forests of southeastern Tibet, the Lhopa have long maintained a different view of the soul: After a person has died, it is both bad if his soul ascends to heaven or remains in the world. The single best possibility is descending into the underworld. I finally had the opportunity in 2006 to visit the village Khyunglin in the Lhoba township Naiyü in Menling County and paid a visit to the elderly woman Yarbong, the last female spirit medium of the Bokar tribe, asking her to teach me their different story of the origin of the spirit, their myth of the creation of the world, and the comings and goings of souls – in a certain habitat, this type of holy person frequently fills the role of the bearer of local history and culture.

In a wooden shack in the mountain village, the elderly woman was half lying down on a yak-skin cushion next to the firepit holding a very long stemmed pipe in one hand, whose flame alternately flared up and died down. She spoke in a leisurely manner, only using the past tense, and she frequently consulted her son, who was to one side, saying, “What do they say about that nowadays?” which showed how unusual her opinion was on one and the same question.

“In the beginning not a single thing existed in the world, until heaven and earth entered into matrimony.” The grand setting this opening passage of the legend establishes is surprisingly romantic!

Heaven and earth got married and bore three brothers: a human, a tiger, and a monkey. Due to their differences in nature, whatever they did, they headed toward different futures, but the soul, that immortal entity that was born with them, had only one course: it

ascended to heaven, entered the earth, or was caught between heaven and earth. In contrast to the conceptual world of other peoples, those who have provided a blood sacrifice by being killed by someone else, whether in combat or not, reside in heaven. From then on they enjoy the wonderful flesh of the inexhaustible fruit of immortality, but they can all too easily turn into bloodthirsty ghosts that exact their revenge in the human realm. Those caught between heaven and earth are the souls of people who have committed suicide, and that is considered the most dreadful fate: Those who have hanged themselves will inhabit the mountain forests like owls. Those who have drowned themselves, on the other hand, will be covered in scales on their entire bodies and will swim about in the water. While they might be able to observe the human realm, the humans do not see a single one of them. Is that not a terrifying version of eternal life? The most ideal place to end up in is the netherworld. Those who have died of natural causes, whether of sickness or old age, can be reunited there with their relatives who have passed away. Whatever chickens, pigs, and yaks one once had will continue to follow their master as they did in life.

Yarbong had gradually grown old, such that she could already no longer demonstrate the ritual methods to bid spirits to dispel demons, which entail a wide range of movements. She just uses a small bowl of clear water and a handful of rice, with which she does guests the courtesy of casting a fortune. While mumbling some words under her breath, she observed the shapes the grains of rice formed in the water, and the elderly woman said, delighted, "My guest, you will always have good fortune. In the past, present, and the future I can see, your fortune is always good." She said with a friendly smile, "You should carry that good fortune with you when you go to far-off places."

That is how it has been. It is precisely because of so much well-wishing and so many blessings from the earth and the people that my heart is filled with gratitude, and I have gone to so many places, traveling, observing, and writing.

A Traditional Life: A Narration from Mr. Pento

When I thought I had achieved a certain degree of understanding of Tibetan farming villages, I thought about whether it might be possible to attempt a description of Tibetan life, that is to say, life in the traditional sense of the word, since in this day and age, in a great many

places in Tibet, that kind of life is mixing with or even dissolving into the fabric of modern society. In those years Master Pento was my consultant on music and folk customs. In summarizing the collective paths of peoples' lives, he used the past tense and a nostalgic perspective without leaving out the impressions left by his individual experience.

Birth, in Buddhism, is considered to be the first of the eight kinds of suffering in life. It is said that after the embryo has had its fill of suffering for nine months in the cramped darkness, it must in turn endure the passage through the narrow birth canal, which is as painful as when a yak is whipped after having been skinned alive. That is why the tiny creature always comes into the human world loudly crying – correct, every one of us heralds his arrival in the human world by crying loudly. At this moment, the elders of the family will daub a bit of yak butter on the infant's forehead symbolizing good luck and well-wishing. Three days later the friends and relatives who come bearing gifts to offer their congratulations also daub yak butter on his forehead, one after the other. From that point on, the smell of yak butter will accompany him to his dying day.

Generally speaking, the concept that male children are worth more than female children is least prevalent in the Tibetan regions, and it is basically irrelevant whether one has a boy or a girl, although according to the karmic relationship of cause and effect, being born into a male body is said to be a little better.

Among the common people, a woman who has given birth usually leaves her bed within two or three days after childbirth to start working again. Healthy, hardworking women receive general praise. Women from upper-class families and those who are weak can rest a few more days.

Seven days after birth, the child goes outside for the first time, held in the arms of its parents. They make a pilgrimage to a monastery to “yangguk”, pray for good fortune, praying to the deities and praising the Buddha for a lifetime of blessings.

Birthdays, however, were neglected. Tibetans were not in the habit of celebrating birthdays – if this life is not the only one, and there await innumerable lives yet to come, the particular day one is reborn on in this process of circulation is no longer all that important. Tibetans were not necessarily able to say exactly how old they were, but their zodiac sign was important. When someone would inquire as to

their age, they might not answer directly, but simply say that they were born in the Year of the Monkey, or perhaps, the Rooster, because one's zodiac sign played a part in everyday life. It was needed whether one was casting lots after an unpleasant turn of events or getting engaged to be married, and in ceremonies conducted in villages, people were often chosen based on their zodiac sign to act out important roles as well. Besides that, the year of one's zodiac sign was also considered to be a sensitive year. In this year there were many taboos that need to be respected, for example (at this point Master Pento provided an interesting example): In the past there was a rule in Lhasa that one was not allowed to eat fish in one's zodiac year. If someone did anyway, his lips were hooked shut with a fish hook and he had to walk one round on Barkhor Street as punishment, but people who were going through the year of their zodiac sign still wanted to eat this forbidden fruit, so the people who wandered the streets and alleyways selling fish pandered to this mentality by only crying, "Water radishes for sale!"

In the past Tibetans are said to have had surnames, but following the spread and deep penetration of Buddhism into the Tibetan lands, except for the upper-class nobility and a few pasturelands with house names (which are different than family names), people generally did not have surnames. Children of common folks were named very freely. Most of them were named after the weekday on which they were born, for example: Nyima, Dawa, Mikmar, Lhakpa, Phurbu, Pasang, and Penba...which are the names of the seven heavenly bodies and also those of the days of the week from Sunday and Monday to Saturday. To this day far too many people have these names, such that when one of these names is called in a classroom, it is met with a resounding reply. Thus, something is frequently added before the names to distinguish more than one individual from the same village or the same work unit who has the same one of these names. For example, people are called Big Dawa, Middle Dawa, and Little Dawa, Male Dawa and Female Dawa, and the like.

Another kind of name that is common is lucky names, for example, Tshering, meaning "longevity" or Döndrup, meaning "as one wishes", etc. Those who placed some importance on the matter would ask a monk to choose a name with a religious flair: Dröлма, meaning "female spirit", Dröлка, meaning "Tārā", or Dorjé, meaning "vajra". So

that the baby will grow up well, some Tibetans choose names like the Han Chinese Gousheng (what the dog left behind), naming their child Khyikhyak, meaning “dog poop”, and children born while their mothers died in childbirth are named Sherap.

Tibetan nursery rhymes have been collected and organized by others, but I have never seen a report on children’s games, and besides, the youth of today do not play them anymore anyhow. In the past, children five or six years of age would imitate the lives and labor of grownups, playing a kind of game called “chase away the wolf”. One of the children would play the part of a yak and one would play the part of a wolf, and the children would sing: “Little yak come inside; mean old wolf rush outside.” There was also a kind of game having to do with bargaining for fire, which had a profound meaning, expressing how, in the era when the tools for making fire were unknown, the people in the village would visit the person responsible for tending the seed fire every day to bargain for fire. Somewhat older children, on the other hand, would make masks and conscientiously imitate the older generation’s dances for the deities and performances of Tibetan opera.

When children reached the age of seven or eight, they would start down their own separate paths in life, and their destinies divided them from then on. Some became farmers, some herdsmen, and some went to the monastery to become child monks; only children of financially well situated families could get an education. For a child from a poor family, being able to serve the children of a rich family while accompanying them in their studies was a fortunate turn of events – as it were, in his childhood Pento had the good fortune to accompany the son of a nobleman during his several years of education in a private school, where he learned the necessary fundamentals of written Tibetan.

In their teenage years, children grew up and became adults, working, living, dancing and singing, and taking part in all sorts of ceremonial activities in the village. In the night of a festive celebration, they would drink and party wildly all night long. They would also go outside due to demands placed on them by their lives or their religion. As for marriage, generally speaking, engagements among the poor were carried out freely, as not much importance was placed on them. Noble families, on the other hand, considered it important that marriages occur between people from families of the same standing, and that

the couple's fates be calculated and the lots consulted about the match. However, whether rich or poor it was all the same if a man married into a woman's family or vice versa; in terms of status and substance both men and women enjoyed equal rights.

The marriage ceremony in the Tibetan region was always a solemn occasion. In the past, as a rule the ability to conduct such a ceremony was limited to those with status. Now common people usually value this sort of pomp and are pleased to take part in it. The marriage ceremony is full of trivial details, so much so that it would be difficult to explain them in their entirety in just a few words. It is something that one could write an entire book about, as some already have. The marriage ballad, which has a rare form consisting of a large collection of several songs, is not only extremely lengthy, its contents are so varied and numerous that they sufficiently cover the entirety of everyday life. Concentrated within it are the rituals, feeling, and flair of the ancient Bön religion. The five-colored arrows, lucky symbols, and methods of attracting good fortune are all traces left from ancient ideals and life in ancient times. Precisely because it is ancient, it has distilled within it the glorious aspirations of many generations, and therefore people believe this ceremony can bring good fortune and satisfaction to their families' lives.

As different paths in life reflect different destinies, for each different life there are different things that cause a person to be happy, angry, grieved, or full of joy. The little fellows who played the games "chase away the wolf" and "bargaining for fire" together in their childhood years each received their station in this existence according to their "karma" from their previous existence, and the causes rooted in what they would do and become in this existence would directly affect whether they would be honored, disgraced, have luck, or be unlucky in their future existences.

Throughout one's entire life, one has to abide by all sorts of taboos. Buddhism teaches people to cultivate goodness and suppress evil and to have compassion for living souls; not killing living things is especially important in this regard. However, because one is constantly forced to kill or injure living things, perhaps unintentionally, in the process of living and working, for example, while plowing the fields, one injures the tiny bugs and worms, etc., and although this was unintentional, one is still guilty, one must frequently burn incense in praise

of the Buddha and take part in all sorts of religious activities. Methods of atonement also include holding the name of some Buddha or bodhisattva in one's mind, which can lessen the guilt. In this context there is a *Golden Book of Atonement*, whose text is not long, which, like the file used to conquer hell, if recited once each day, is said to enable one to atone for all his sins and pass through the vagaries of hell with ease.

Nevertheless, hell is still the inevitable path to transformation at the completion of one's life. Mr. Pento recounted a folksong, which I knew, straight away the first time I heard it, must have circulated in the lower levels of society:

The realm of ultimate happiness above is not that comfortable;
look how the *trülkus* turn back to gaze at the human realm
even as they ascend to heaven.

The realm of hell below is not that painful;
look how the old noblemen are also competing with each other to get there.

The process of dying and sky burial is surrounded by a whole complex of strict, rigid, and trivial sacrificial rites, which convey the ideal of a soul that does not perish, the concept of the cycling of births and deaths, and the pure spirit of the autochthonous religion. This ritual commences even before the person who is dying has drawn his last breath.

As for the important things that must be done by a person nearing death, he must be made to cut off all mundane thoughts. To this end he must be given a specially made pill, which has been bestowed with the beneficent power and support of the Buddha by a *trülku*, and the name of the *trülku* or *yidam* who he usually venerated must be called loudly within his earshot to make him tread the path toward life with a calm state of mind. Feelings of love he continues to maintain toward the world or unfulfilled desires he harbors in his mind are thought to constitute a dangerous state that will directly influence the realm he is reborn in. Putting it briefly, these are extremely disadvantageous to the deceased.

Before the person who has passed away is brought to the site for sky burial there are still many things to be done. A monk or spirit medium must be asked to recite related classics and to divine the auspicious day for the burial. A painter must be asked to paint a *thangka* with a Buddhist theme, which is to be given as an offering in

a monastery or at the Buddhist altar in the family's home. The objective of these actions lies in redeeming the soul of the deceased. What is particularly important is urging the soul of the deceased to exit the body through the aperture of the fontanel at the crown of the head, so that it will be reborn in one of the three good *gatis*.

Attention is given to replace all of the clothing and bedding the deceased used that are made of leather or fur, because a single hair is like a mountain and because of it the deceased would be unable to cross over into the next life. Having been stripped of all his clothes, the deceased's head is lowered to his knees in the position of a fetus in the womb, and he is wrapped in white cloth. Food must be arranged beside the remains, which is called "feeding the soul", and a lantern must be lit, incense burnt, and *lhasang* conducted as offerings. It is strictly forbidden to allow dogs and cats to approach the remains; otherwise the corpse may become a "zombie" and harm the living.

On the appointed auspicious day, people take him to the site for sky burial, and he has finished his last journey in this life.

However, the soul does not know in the first few days that its corporeal form has already perished, and as it did in the past, it comes in the midst of familiar people to chitchat with them, but it soon discovers that people neither make eye contact with it nor hear what it says. On the fifth day it finally understands it can do nothing else but leave its familiar surroundings and roam all over the place, stilling its hunger with the *sangsöl* smoke people have provided as an offering. After the sutra for redeeming souls has been read over the course of 49 days, the soul departs from this place altogether and proceeds to hell to receive judgment.

Although there are promises of the kind asserted at Drigung Monastery's sky burial ground that one can avoid the descent into hell after death, generally people still think that hell is the inevitable path of transition at the completion of each and every lifetime, the place the soul should go after death. Even if a person has been good, no exception is made – on the contrary, the thought that a soul should not go to hell is frightening. In hell the soul will receive fair judgment. The king of hell will use a special scale to weigh good and evil: good deeds the person has done are represented by white stones and bad deeds by black stones. If there are many white stones and few black ones, after not a very long stay in hell the soul can be on its way.

Otherwise, there are eight hot and eight cold hells which will present their purpose to it.

Precisely because death is the passage from this life to that life, it is not at all something to be afraid of. Therefore, feelings related to a relative's passing are relatively sober. In order to prevent the deceased from worrying, people are particularly not supposed to cry in their presence while they are dying. During the seven times seven days of the mourning period thereafter, all sorts of morning ceremonies must be conducted, but on the one year anniversary of the deceased's death, a grand celebration must be held to congratulate that soul for once again receiving a new life. Thereafter, the relatives should completely dismiss the deceased from their memory: they must not keep photographs of him or things he left behind and are not permitted to mention his name....

According to the people's desires, after the one year anniversary of the deceased's death, that soul will be reborn once more in the human realm and start another cycle.

A Closer Look at the Ups and Downs in the Life of the Narrator of the Previous Story

Caught in an age of severe transformations, in which it seemed that changes in fate from communities to individuals were imperative once the order that had not changed for hundreds of thousands of years had been disrupted, Mr. Pento's life has enough of a legendary quality that it makes a very good case study. The story of the events he either personally experienced or heard about that transpired around him from his childhood to his teenage years, which he told me in conversation in the present day, seemed like it had occurred in a separate world.

Pento was born in the town of Zhikatsé in Tsang in 1932. Several of the counties surrounding Zhikatsé were possessions of Trashī Lhünpo Monastery, and the common people on those possessions were all subjects of Panchen Rinpoché. His father's side of the family lived in the countryside, working generation after generation as farmers. His mother's family lived in town doing odd jobs. Pento followed his mother and grew up in town. When he had completed his eighteenth year, he became a Tibetan soldier in order to pay his family's poll tax, but even though he brought his own dry rations to the army

camp, he still belonged to the lowest level of society, and that kind of life can hardly be considered life at all, so he deserted. In fact when he still had not gotten that far, he was caught and brought back. Then he was flogged, put in confinement, and received his fair share of disciplinary punishment. This youth who had just begun to make a life for himself did not know where to turn to. In those days there were few opportunities to choose from, so he was perfectly satisfied with hiding among a mule caravan and becoming a servant. They went east to Gyantsé and down south to Phakri making their way through the Himalayas. Though life was hard, his intrinsic love of music made him attentive to local song and dance wherever he went. He recorded the lyrics and the melodies and had pleasure doing it. While he was in the small plateau town of Phakri, he met his partner for this lifetime, and they were married. He himself thought his fate to be fixed in this way: camping in the wilds and eating meager rations on the mule trail and being able to temporarily escape the wind and cold at his home in town, but the ways of the world changed. While he was in Phakri, he met a unit of the People's Liberation Army for the first time, which held the red flag high, and that became a turning point in his fate.

At that time Tibet had already been peacefully liberated. The young Pento became a national cadre, and his first job was to fill a position as a teacher of written Tibetan in the Tibetan Cadre School in Zhikatsé. That was in 1956. A few years later he was transferred to Lhasa's art troupe as a talented musician and to receive key training was sent to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music for advanced studies. For five years beginning in 1960, in great Shanghai in this hallowed hall of music, he became acquainted with music theory, studied composition, and also took on the task of studying literary Chinese during this period. Upon completion of his studies, he returned home and took a position in the Tibetan Theater Company of the TAR, taking part in rewriting traditional Tibetan plays performed on public squares into contemporary stage productions and in writing new compositions for modern Tibetan operas. Aside from Tibetan opera, in the beginning Pento already had success as an up-and-coming composer with original compositions including songs, instrumentals, and song and dance performances, etc., all of which bear the rich essence of the plateau unique to his people. Later he emerged as a folk music theorist. He had already traveled all over Tibet collecting folk-

songs in an extensive and artful manner, unearthing them in every version of classical Tibetan documents, organizing them into categories, and studying them, covering every genre of Tibetan dance music including instrumental pieces from the secular to the religious, from the “grassroots” to the imperial court, and from the prehistoric to the modern, along with their origin and development, treating each as its own system. He speaks and writes of them with the distinctness that comes with familiarity. His treatises *The History of Tibetan Music*¹¹³ and *The History of Mönpa Music*¹¹⁴ were published in succession, establishing him as a music historian.

Along with theoretical research he also uncovered artifacts, such as the “lithophone”, for example. The lithophone may be called the most ancient instrument in the Tibetan region. It was originally constructed by spirit mediums during the age of the Bön religion using local materials and was played at ritual sacrifices. Pento had seen this when he was small, and through careful investigation he discovered that there were also people in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries who practiced playing this relic. Enlightened by Pento’s treatise on the lithophone, the creator of the Tibetan Song and Dance Ensemble sprung to action selecting a bunch of stones from the riverbank with special musical qualities that could emit different scales, which he brought to the stage in the 1980s in a performance consisting primarily of Buddhist music. The classic sound they emitted when they were struck made me unable to resist sighing, “Stones can sing too.”

In this manner the respected and beloved Master Pento frequently refreshed us with new sights and sounds and allowed us a glimpse of the diversity of ethnic culture and its innovativeness in concrete images devoid of conceptualization. Two cases in point are particularly impressive. The first is research regarding religious music. In a research paper analyzing the *cham* dance (a religious dance of the deities), he provides relatively specialized knowledge beyond that of the common observer, for example, the *dungchen*¹¹⁵ and its mysterious method of musical notation. The *dungchen* is a wind instrument that evolved from the ancient ceramic great horn of the Tibetan lands. Now it is usually made of copper and silver, which enables it to emit an imposing and majestic sound when played, embellishing the fierce images of the Dharmapālas of the tantric world. Through the practical experience they gained in the art of playing the instrument over a

long period of time, monks created the unusual flower clef notation for the *dungchen*, which is divided into flower, petal, and stem: the flower functions as the contrabass or C-clef, the petal functions as the G-clef, and the flower stem functions as the high-D-clef, etc. This kind of clef notation looks like the illustrations of a heavenly book, so this time what I sighed was “A music score can burst into bloom too.”

The second impressive case regards the music involved in the art of presenting the Gesar Epic in a mixture of speech and song. If there had not been someone like Mr. Pento, who devoted a full half of a century toward collecting and compiling this music for publication, how else could we have come to understand how plentiful and boundless the musical elements in this epic are! The documentation of and research on the recorded version of this world’s longest heroic epic were highly respected by the nation, led to the foundation of a special organization, and were listed for a long period of time as one of the projects in the “intangible heritage” program, which provided it with monetary support. From Beijing to Tibet and the Tibetan regions in the four provinces Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, and Qinghai, there was a multitude of collectors and researchers, but they all focused mainly on the literary contents of the epic, extrapolating from them to treat their many specific topics. Research on the epic only received a complete treatment with the advent of Mr. Pento’s accomplishments in the field, making his contribution a milestone in the field. The name of this work is *The Wondrous Sounds of the Country of Ling*.¹¹⁶ The country of Ling is that of King Gesar, and the word “wondrous” in “wondrous sounds” is not only reflected in its function as the vehicle of a grand narrative, which provides a reproduction of sacrificial ceremonies, totem worship, program music, musical structure, etc. from throughout the course of Tibetan history through a concentration of lyrics and melodies. The most wondrous part is that each of the staggeringly numerous characters in the epic has its own musical theme and multiple arias, which is what is meant by “thousands of characters and tens of thousands of arias”. The monograph presents 108 carefully selected arias unique to 38 main characters from the country of Ling as examples, along with their scores and matching lyrics in Tibetan and Chinese. These include King Gesar’s “The Giant Roc is Circling”, his concubine Drumo’s “Six Calls of the Cuckoo Bird”, as well the general’s “Proud of Himself Like a White

Lion” and the fool’s “Sloppy and Befuddled”, among others. This time I have already run out of words to sigh, so I might as well describe this achievement with the term “breathtaking”.

Life is the soil in which art, as well as the artist himself, grows. Master Pento seems to live for art, and this life he has lived has really been worthwhile. In Tibetan Buddhism there is a deity who presides over the arts called the Goddess of Wondrous Music¹¹⁷ in Chinese and Yangchenma in Tibetan, and sometimes I think Master Pento must be this era’s avatar of the deity of the arts! When I consulted him about traditional Tibetan life, he was already past sixty and was still the acting editor in chief of the periodical *Tibetan Art Studies*, which is sponsored by the Tibetan Department of Culture. He retired 20 years ago, but he has clearly still not tired of working, leaning over his desk and writing with single-minded devotion. I had the honor of editing and publishing the two import works *Historical Anecdotes on Tibetan Music*¹¹⁸ and *The Wondrous Sounds of the Country of Ling: Introduction to the musical tradition of the heroic epic of King Gesar*¹¹⁹ for him while I was working at China Tibetology Publishing House, and now I have taken over a third manuscript, *Superlatives in the Song and Dance of Sacred Places*,¹²⁰ which mainly describes the urban dance music “nangma” from Lhasa Prefecture and the “Lhasa tap dance”, which evolved from the “tözhé” from Lhatsé in Tsang, and whose scores use a five-line staff, not simple numeric notation. In addition, the work *The Complete Book of Tibetan Folk Music*¹²¹ has already been outlined, and three more books covering Tibetan opera music, religious music, and the marriage ballad, which are all works whose topics were proposed by the “intangible heritage” project, are currently in planning.

I was told all of this information during my most recent visit with Mr. Pento this summer. “Intangible heritage” is an abbreviation of intangible cultural heritage. The organization is located in the TAR Department of Culture. Although Master Pento is a member of the committee of specialists who evaluate people who pass down “intangible heritage”, when he was compiling the music of the epic he was still acting on his own. Only during the process of its publication did he receive official recognition, and when he did, the Department of Culture was overjoyed and not only rushed to provide funding for the work’s publication, so that the symbol could be imprinted on the cover with the caption “Tibetan Intangible Cultural Heritage Series”;

at the same time they took full advantage of this book as a source of funding, using the funds provided by the “intangible heritage” project to invite the famous ballad singer, the 80-some-year-old Mr. Thupten, to come out of retirement to lead the performance of the 108 songs included in *The Wondrous Sounds of the Country of Ling*, which were recorded on audio and video and made into an optical disk, so they could be preserved for posterity.

This level of esteem illustrates how valuable he is. When the senior speaks it makes him happy, and when we listen it makes us happy as well. Only it is hard on the elderly gentleman, now that he has accepted the assignment of writing five more books. If the time required for each new book is estimated at three or four years, completing them all could mean he has to write till he is 100 years old! Master Pento said that that is why he must walk ten thousand paces every day for exercise and that writing with a computer would be much more efficient than writing by hand.

Words cannot express the guidance and influence Master Pento has had on me in my understanding and accumulation of knowledge on Tibetan culture. Seeing as I have already mentioned Yangchenma, I might as well recount an interlude from the past. A couple of years ago, after the composer He Xuntian had just completed the world renowned album *Sister Drum*, he went to Tibet to collect folk music with the intent of creating another, comparable collection of works, originally giving the collection the title *Yangchen Lhamo*. Remembering that Master Pento once said that Yangchen Lhamo was also known as Yangchenma, I subsequently suggested he change the title to *Yangchenma*, a suggestion Mr. He gladly accepted with an expression of gratitude. I answered, “If you want to thank someone, thank Master Pento.”

The Year 2000: Spending Tibetan New Year in Thragu Village

Thragu Village is not that far from the city of Lhasa. The linear distance between the two is not more than six or seven kilometers, but they are separated by the Lhasa River. If you take a detour from Lhasa Bridge in the southeast of the city, I am afraid the journey would be no less than 20 km. In the year when we first visited Thragu, the extremely lively spring plowing ceremony drew us there, and over the

greater part of a year thereafter we traveled back and forth along this mountain path to the mountain village many times, shooting footage of the ancient ceremonies held in the fields throughout the four seasons. The television documentary was called *Days in Thragu Village*. At the same time I also wrote about the village in the first chapter of this book, entitled “Thragu’s Sacrificial Practices Throughout the Seasons”. Although we had already seen with our own eyes how a whole host of traditional ceremonies related to worshiping the earth had changed and become hidden in contemporary society, we were nevertheless very deeply moved by the simple and comforting life of the countryside. Eight years later I finally took another trip to that tiny mountain village, staying at Master Chöphel’s younger brother Tsheten Dorjé’s home to experience folk customs. I went to celebrate the most magnificent holiday observed in the Tibetan countryside together with my old and new friends from the village, namely the first Tibetan New Year’s celebration in the new millennium, heralding in the Year of the Iron Dragon.

The ceremony “Expelling the Demons”, held in the evening of the 29th day of the 12th Tibetan lunar month, pulls back the opening curtain on the Tibetan New Year’s festivities. On the plateau of the Land of Snows, the beliefs and taboos associated with deities of the three realms of heaven, earth, and water, as well as the demon realm, have their origins in the distant past and long predate the history of Tibetan Buddhism, being almost as old as the spiritual life of humanity itself, and their transmission has remained unbroken to the present day, although they have a largely symbolic character nowadays. Thus the ceremony “Expelling the Demons” is not the least bit frightening. On the contrary, it is imbued with a playful mentality and a cheerful atmosphere. Before dinner, in each household barley straw is bound together in the shape of a cross, which is placed in a container, such as a bowl, basket, or cardboard box, containing charred yak dung probably meant to symbolize the “demon”. Each member of Tsheten Dorjé’s family took a ball of *tsampa* in his hand and touched it or rubbed it lightly against his forehead and all over the front of his clothing before throwing it into the container, thus symbolizing the removal of inauspiciousness and impurity from the old year, such as bad luck and illnesses. The host Tsheten Dorjé went into the yak pen and rubbed the yak’s bodies in the same manner. Doing so is said to keep the livestock free of illness in the new year.

The host's elder sister Nyinyi poured a ladleful of the noodle soup called "guthuk" that had just been prepared on top, saying that this was done to feed the "demon" well, in order to make him apt to hit the road. Then the container was escorted to the street intersection by the entire family, and the straw cross was set on fire. Three families who lived nearby also joined in the procession to send the demon off.

As the fires lit up, firecrackers went off. Everyone leapt over the fire one after the other, which is also a sort of ritual to cleanse the body of impurities.

When the fire died, the ceremony of sending off the demon had reached its conclusion. Someone warned me, "Don't look back on the way back to the house, in order to avoid attracting the demon that has just been sent off. Otherwise he'll follow you back to the house again."

At that time the curtain of the night had already descended. Everyone sat down in a circle in the kitchen and ate "guthuk", which was truly a joyous event. The hostess Gyalo held the ladle in hand, serving everyone a bowlful of "guthuk". "Guthuk" is a dough drop soup to which nine ingredients such as pieces of meat, cheese, and radish are added. Interestingly, wrapped inside the somewhat larger dough balls there are objects including clumps of yak butter, wool, sticks, chili peppers, and rocks, which show whether the person who ends up eating them has a good or bad character. If the piece of wool yarn is wound toward the inside, it means that the person has accumulated wealth, and the opposite means that the person has squandered the family's fortune. Thus ridiculing laughter often breaks out at the dining table. But it may not be that accurate after all. In my dough ball there were a few grains of barley that had been used to make beer, and so they all said in unison that I was an alcoholic, which was an unfair accusation.

People from Thragu who work outside of the village also hurry home to celebrate New Year, and so all at once there were quite a few more people in the household, namely the host Tsheten Dorjé's younger brother Thupten, who is vice mayor of Neu Township; Tsheten Dorjé's 18-year-old son Tendzin Namsé, who works in Lhasa; the host's elder sister Nyinyi's second son Tsheten Könchok, who works in Tölung Dechen; and then there was the host's 13-year-old niece Dechö, herself a student at Lhasa Elementary School, who was bored and came to the countryside to spend New Year.

The 30th day of the last month of a great lunar year is the last day of preparations for New Year, on which every family rushes to make the *chemar bo*, known as the dipper of the five grains in Chinese. They have to make yak butter flowers and the offerings to the deities and Buddhas known as *tormas*, they have to arrange a sheep's head and barley seedlings, and they have to paint the walls of the kitchen full of auspicious images of the eight treasures. All of these things are meant as prayers and wishes for a bumper harvest of grain and that the domestic animals should thrive in the new year, which is quite a pure wish.

In the evening on the 30th day of the last month of a great lunar year, the entire family sits in a circle in the living room watching television. This is indeed a new phenomenon in Thragu Village. Although the village is close to Lhasa, due to obstruction by a mountain chain, the people of Thragu Village were never able to watch television. The youths in the village had to content themselves with walking several kilometers every evening to the Neu Township Hall along the Lhasa River to watch the dubbed Tibetan version of *Journey to the West*. Only half of a year ago, did the municipal government build a relay station in the village, but even so they can only receive the Tibetan language channel Tibetan Television. Recently it has broadcast the dubbed Tibetan version of *Investiture of the Gods*, and thus the people in the village have become familiar with the legendary figure from the Han Chinese lands, Jiang Ziya.

The schedule on Tibetan New Year's Day is quite full. First, at 4 AM a kind of porridge made by slowly simmering highland barley beer and cheese is eaten, which is called *kunden*. After that, when the first light shines out from above the mountaintop to the east, the people in the entire village go outside to fetch water. It is said that the water in the first pail someone manages to snatch is full of the energy "yang", which symbolizes an auspicious fortune. When the ground is bathed in sunlight, another kind of porridge is eaten, which consists of barley flakes and yak jerky and is called *drothuk*. The first thing in the morning, the hostess brought us the dipper of the five grains and had us make toasts with the *chemar*.¹²²

In the morning on Tibetan New Year's Day, everyone dons their festive attire. When Nyinyi's eldest son Sönam, who usually wears short length casual clothing, had just changed into his new Tibetan

robe, his own dog surprisingly did not recognize its master and rushed at him and would not stop barking. The concerned party did not know whether to laugh or cry, while the onlookers around him split their sides with laughter.

In addition, a touching scene played out in Nyinyi's family: A pigeon that had left the family for more than 20 days unexpectedly flew back home at the crack of dawn at the very beginning of the new year. The family had originally kept two pigeons, but on one night so stormy that the moon was hidden in darkness, an owl attacked and ate one of them. Having lost its companion, the other pigeon subsequently flew away from the place where its heart had been broken. Now it finally returned to its nest and looked to have cheered up again. It is just all by its lonesome, which makes its masters feel sorry for it.

After breakfast, the festival reached a mini-climax with a frenzy of New Year's well-wishing between neighboring friends and family. As the township's vice mayor, Thupten, in Tibetan dress with a gold embroidered cap on his head, led the young people from his elder brother Tsheten Dorjé and his elder sister Nyinyi's families with the *chemar bo* cupped in his hands and a pitcher of beer dangling from his wrist and went from house to house to wish the families a happy new year. At each house, he first made a toast with *chemar*, wishing the residents good fortune in a loud voice with the words "trashhi delek". Then he accepted the highland barley beer handed to him by the head of the household and drank three mouthfuls from each cup as proscribed. Everyone sat down together in a circle drinking beer, sipping tea, and wishing each other good fortune. Then the head of that household picked up his *chemar bo* and pitcher of beer, joining the troop of New Year's well-wishers as they went to another family. Thus the troop of New Year's well-wishers became bigger and bigger as it went from house to house like a snowball rolling down a hill. In the end everyone celebrated together at the home of elderly Tshering Phüntshok, singing, dancing, drinking beer, and chatting. It was there that they got a couple of guests from outside of the village sloshed.

Tshering Phüntshok recalled that we had come here eight years ago and shot footage of the singing and dancing at their spring plowing ceremony, saying with a deeply emotional sigh that many of our old friends from back then were no longer with us, including Tsöndrü Wangmo and Po Wangdü. When I thought of Tsöndrü

Wangmo, the song leader in group dances, I thought of her motto “A lifetime of happiness is happiness, but a moment of happiness is happiness too,” and asked elderly Tshering Phüntshok, “So can the song and dance at the spring plowing ceremony still continue to take place?” He answered that he had already taught his son Lhakpa Tshering, and that a group of a young people could inherit this tradition.

On the second day of the Tibetan New Year, the festival reached another climax with the flurry of action surrounding the annual ceremony of the changing of the prayer flags. Under the resplendent light of the sun, every household lights the *sangsöl* censor on the rooftop of its house, and surrounded by the *sangsöl* smoke curling upward, they carry the prayer flags, which have been prepared in advance, up to the rooftop, exchanging them with the old prayer flags, which have faded. The five-colored prayer flags with their dazzling brilliance that catches the eye waved about under the blue sky and white clouds, completing the last act of the New Year’s celebration following the motto “out with the old and in with the new”, bidding the old year farewell and welcoming in the new year. The entire family lined up in a row and wished the myriad creatures of nature good fortune. The symbolism of the five colors of the prayer flags is as follows, listed from what is above to what is below: blue is the sky, white the clouds, red fire, green water, and yellow earth, which are the basic elements of humankind’s natural habitat and have constituted the most familiar scenery in rural life since ancient times. Under nature’s protection, in celebrations of festivals year after year, and in the dialogue with nature, the days in the countryside seem like a long stream with a distant source and the lives of the common folks are steady and serene.

On Tsheten Dorjé’s rooftop the television antenna and the five-colored prayer flags stand together, side by side, embodying both tradition and modernity.

Looking down upon the entire village, I discovered that in a period of only a few years every family had built a new house. Tsheten Dorjé’s house had been expanded, and Nyinyi’s family had simply moved to a new residence. Thragu Village had clearly become prosperous. When I inquired as to what caused this, everyone said it was because of the convenient location near the outskirts of the city, which brought a diversified economy to life. For example, aside from planting three and a half acres of barley and wheat, Tsheten Dorjé’s

family also planted 200 willows and poplars, from which they have already profited; 60 peach trees, which brought in 3000 RMB last year; potatoes, which may be sold for a total of 2000 RMB annually; and they use a small four-wheel tractor for transportation, which can bring in 5000 RMB annually. They have especially made progress in the area of animal husbandry, keeping three pigs and 18 chickens, as well as 29 sheep and 60 goats, and apart from cattle and dzo, the family keeps 25 yaks. Whereas they previously relied on buying the yak butter and meat products they needed with cash or bartering for them with agricultural products, now they have enough of their own to spare. On top of that, they once sold seven yaks at an average of 1200 RMB per head, which had already brought in more than 10,000 RMB total. Everyone says the development of animal husbandry in agricultural areas is a path to riches.

Eight years ago I described how the youth of Thrangu gravitated toward the city, a phenomenon that still exists today because there are more options there, but on the other hand there are still young people who love and have their minds set on agriculture and animal husbandry. Tsheten Dorjé's eldest son Tendzin Namsé went to work in Lhasa after he graduated from middle school, but although his second eldest son Tendzin Lozang, who is 14, is still in school, he has expressed an innate love of farm work and livestock, and there seems to be no doubt he will be Tsheten Dorjé's heir. Nyinyi's third son Tenchong did not pass the test to get into a Tibetan middle school in the interior of China after he had graduated from elementary school, so he simply gave up his education and took charge of herding both of the families' cattle. Ordinarily Tenchong is uncommunicative, but both of those eyes of his are engaged in exclusive dialogues with the yaks. On the last day of the old year, he had crossed over three mountains entering Daktsé County in search of a yak that had strayed from him a little over four months ago. From the locals he heard that the yak had become a "guerrilla": by day it hid in the depths of the mountains, and by night it came down from the mountains sneaking around and eating the wheat seedlings. Tenchong returned empty-handed. In the afternoon on the second day of New Year, he got in our car accompanied by his uncle Tsheten Dorjé and went back to Daktsé once more to look for the yak. Two days later we received word in Lhasa that the yak

had been found and led back home. This was also something of a brief interlude in the Tibetan New Year's celebrations in Thragu.

In the past, I had already heard of the tedious procedures and symbolism associated with Tibetan New Year so often I could describe them in detail, but only this time did I take part in them as a member of a village, spending someone else's life for a few days. Of course it is the most leisurely and happiest day of the year, which is why I crossed the grand stage of the festival, as a member of the audience and as an actor, as an admirer and as an observer.

2015:

"Ongkor Festival" in My Old Haunt Thragu Village

Thinking back to when I first made a connection with Thragu Village, I did have a utilitarian goal, namely to make it the object of a documentary film on rural life in the Lhasa River Valley. Although I had no longer had the extravagant hope of thereby illustrating my original preconceptions of its typicality and representativity, and such, later on, regarding its ordinariness it had, on the contrary, acquired more personal warmth and sentimental value, such that I became attached to the place from that time on. When I visited the village again after an eight-year hiatus, without a work assignment and completely of my own accord, I really did go in order to take part in the lively Tibetan New Year's festivities there. It seems that the visit was in fact not entirely devoid of utilitarian considerations; accompanying me on the trip was the cameraman Master Zhang Ying, who later published the album with complementary text, entitled *Tibetan New Year in Thragu*,¹²³ in cooperation with myself, which did a good job of shedding light on the questions we had. Apart from that, subconsciously it may quite possibly have made the village an archetype of cultural change, such that with the passage of time, one may see how old things that remain and new things that arise are interwoven in the course of development; how an ordinary day, which seems as calm as the waters of the Lhasa River quietly changes its appearance; and that however beliefs may change, some part of them remains unchanged: they remain there till the end of time.

However, not only would what transpired have never occurred to me at the spring plowing ceremony 20 years ago, 15 years ago

when the prayer flags were planted on the rooftop there was not the slightest portent of it either. The huge and severe transformation occurred so unexpectedly that even calling it a “rift” would not be an exaggeration, because the archetype possessing general and wide-ranging significance had suddenly split off and become a unique, isolated example – Thragu Village had ceased to exist.

At the beginning of the new century, work finally began on the Qinghai-Tibet railway, which had been in discussion for half a century. At first Neu Township was said to have been chosen for the location of the terminus. Then it was said that even Thragu Village would have to be resettled. From then on the rumors increased, up until the villagers were collectively relocated into new housing and completely “deagriculturalized”, thus completing the transformation of their identity from villagers who practice agriculture to urban residents. Their new homestead is not far from their original location, in the vicinity of the Lhasa train station. I heard this information mostly through telephone conversations with Master Pento. At that time I was already in Beijing, and it was hard for me not to be touched by each of the pieces of information I heard – I was touched, but that is all. If I were to say that I was overwhelmed with emotion, it would be a gross exaggeration. When facing the loss of some traditional things, I would not be that pretentious, since I always recall a sentence the young lady Lhakpa Drölma from Thragu once said, “You’ll never do farm work anyhow.” Correct, having long since left the fields of the countryside, we only make occasional visits there; the feelings of those who currently live there are what is important. Nevertheless, I still have my concerns: Have the young people who long yearned to go to live in the city seen their desires finally be fulfilled, and do they lead good lives nowadays?

The connection to Thragu Village originated with Master Chöphel, and my most recent visit there was also because of him. In the summer of 2015 at Mr. Pento’s house in Lhasa I found Master Chöpel’s cell phone number and called a couple of times before someone finally picked up. From that end of the connection there was background noise. “What’s going on?” He said he was at the Ongkor Festival. “Is that the horse race?” I heard Master Chöphel burst into laughter saying, “Where do they still have horses!”



Prayer flags and television antenna stand together on top of Tsheten Dorje's roof.



Celebrating with villagers holding dippers of the five grains

We rushed on to the scene on the third day of the Ongkor Festival. There were four of us traveling together: Mr. Pento's second eldest son Dawa drove, and riding in the car with him were Mr. Pento, his eldest son Peljor's daughter Geyang, and I. When we crossed Neu Bridge and drove down Thragu Avenue, we saw a great big new village complex made up of uniform two-story Tibetan-style buildings with uniform courtyards all lined up in a row. With all of the houses

looking roughly the same, Pento's family, who had been here several times before but had forgotten the house number, stopped the car to ask for directions quite a few times, such that when we finally found the place, Master Chöphel was waiting to welcome us outside the gate to the courtyard wearing his perpetually cheerful expression.

Neu New Village is not only home to the former residents of Thragu Village, the households relocated from the original seat of the township government and several neighboring villages all live here concentrated in the same community complex. The uniform houses were designed based on a traditional model with their backs to the north and their fronts facing south. Under the eaves of the corridor leading to the main building lie tea tables and cushions, combining the functionality of a living room with a place where the residents can do handwork. In this moment butter tea, sweetened tea, and yoghurt had already been prepared, and everyone took a seat. After a flurry of conventional greetings, we started asking about this and that. First we politely asked the host to talk about the move and about the changes in their lives.

Master Chöphel, who was a child monk when he was small, later served as a teacher at Thragu Elementary School and then a principal at Tölung Dechen County Middle School, and who retired from a position as a playwright at the Tibetan Theater Company of the TAR, is a typical scholar not interested in chatting about family life, and he stopped after explaining to us what had happened in a couple of words:

Our old house, which stood on the old site of the seat of the township government, was estimated at 200,000 RMB and the 1.8 acres of land at 330,000 RMB. Government built housing meant we did not pay a thing. We paid the costs of furnishing the house out of pocket, spending a total of a little over 100,000 RMB. Now everyone leads lives the same as city dwellers and has all the must-have electronic home appliances: electric lighting, telephones, televisions, refrigerators, and washing machines, but we all had these things already in our old homes. What is new is that we no longer burn firewood and yak dung. A natural gas pipeline leads directly to the kitchen. As for my fellow villagers' means of making a living, the people from the relocated households enjoy a number of types of preferential treatment; they have first priority when the Lhasa train station recruits workers. The neighboring economic development zone has experienced a major construction boom in the past few years, and the transportation of all

goods and materials required by the construction sites is provided entirely by a logistics team made up of people from the new village – the new village, whose population is less than 2000, has acquired a whopping 400 new freight trucks. Almost every family has one, and some families have as many as three or four, making them an important source of income for each family.

Strictly speaking, Master Chöphel, who is the patriarch of the family, is, however, not the owner of the house. He is a “public official” who receives a pension. Having never married in his entire life, when he retired he moved in with his elder sister. His sister’s daughter, who is already middle aged, is a sanitation worker in the new village. Her other children and grandchildren also work outside the home, and their family is one of the few that does not have a truck. Master Chöphel has another older sister, who has been a nun all of her life, and who also lived in an apartment in the same house, one separated from his by a wall with a door connecting the two. Now both of his older sisters have passed away, making Master Chöphel the oldest member of the family, the typical “maternal uncle who manages the household”. Since the families of his two relatives in Thrugu Village, Nyinyi and Tsheten Dorjé, lived above the village, the demolition of their homes and their relocation were not urgent, and they have not yet moved to the new village. Tenchong, who loves livestock, is still herding yaks. Nevertheless, the new village is still expanding, and there is a new house for them there. The only people who will definitely not be relocated are the few families of herdsmen. 20 some years ago Master Chöphel accompanied us on our way up the mountain to visit them. That was when I heard him say the phrases “A dog that lives in a ravine is fierce; a person who lives in a mass of people is fierce,” and “Dogs can only live for nine years and yet they still offend people.”

Instead of chatting about family life, Master Chöphel chatted about work. I knew he would not give himself up to leisure after retirement, but I would have hardly thought he would end up dedicating himself to the “intangible heritage” project just like Master Pento. The task Master Chöphel took on was that of organizing the original scripts of the eight great traditional Tibetan operas. The plots of the eight great Tibetan operas, except for those of *The Princess Wenchang* and *Nangsa Öbum*, are primarily derived from the Jātakas, the stories of the Buddha’s past lives. Since Thangtong Gyelpo established this art form to raise funds to build a chain bridge over a river,

over the several hundred years in which it was passed down, every element that makes up this genre of theater was perfected, and it enjoys wide popularity in the cities and the countryside. These public square performances are characteristically rather laid back; they do not have a prepared script, and the lines can be adlibbed on the spot. Each piece is performed over several days, and actors and audience can switch roles. During the performance it is common to see members of the audience go up to the actors and serve them tea or offer them *khatas*. To adapt them for a modern audience as a modern stage production, numerous specialists have taken part in rewriting them for half a century, and the multiple revisions invariably bear traces of the limitations of the eras they were written in and the specialists' individual biases. Thus, due to the importance of a written version of the traditional Tibetan operas as part of, or even the quintessence of, the intangible cultural heritage of the region, this task was automatically added to the projects of the "intangible heritage" organization, and asking Master Chöphel to return the operas to their original state was the most suitable thing to do.

Master Chöphel does not use a computer. What he submits are handwritten manuscripts in Tibetan, the printed draft of which he subsequently proofreads and revises. He took out the manuscript of *Drowa Zangmo* to show us an example, asking Master Pento to point some things out. In the absence of old prepared scripts, the piece was collated based on the main gist of the story in the Buddhist sutra and actual performances by Tibetan theater troupes in the countryside – to this day four professional Tibetan theater troupes remain in the farming townships and villages of Lhasa and Lhoka; *Drowa Zangmo* was based on the performances of the very famous Kyormolung Tibetan opera troupe. This collated edition also included a new innovation; a brief introduction of the characters and a synopsis of the plot were added.

The two older gentlemen, one 84 and the other 71, who have been good friends for most of their lives, thus started a lively discussion. Those of us listening on the sidelines were joined by a middle-aged man Ngödrup from the TAR Tibetan Theater Company, who regularly drops by to visit the two older gentlemen whenever he is seeking guidance. This time he caught an excellent opportunity to learn. Comparatively speaking, although Master Pento's second eldest son Dawa also works at the Tibetan Theater Company, his heart is

regrettably not in it, and he himself claims that he is not “cut out” to carry on his father’s work. Hope may lie with Geyang, who is studying at Dalian Nationalities University. Might she be able to be her grandfather’s assistant in the future?

When the sun is shining brightly it would be satisfying to sit in the corridor whether in winter or in summer, but at the moment the sky was dark and covered by a dense layer of clouds. On two of the three days of the Ongkor Festival gathering it rained, such that we ridiculed them, saying, “You can sure pick a time to celebrate a festival! Since there’s no field to circumambulate and there are no horses to race, this Ongkor Festival that’s been stripped of its core characteristics is not worthy of its name!”



Chöphel’s new residence:
Master Pento is seated to the right and Master Chöphel to the left.

The only thing that remains of the heritage maintained by the village, which may be considered to have already been lost, is the joyous get-together in a hall, where songs and dances are performed. The committee of Neu New Village was in charge of making the arrangements for the performances. On the first day they invited the Tibetan opera troupe Kyormolung, whose fame has echoed far and wide, not to perform Tibetan opera but a song and dance routine. On the second day the migrant workers gave a special performance on the construction site of the neighboring economic development zone. The per-

formers were an amateur song and dance troupe made up of migrant workers from the neighboring eight townships. On the third day, which was today, people from Neu New Village performed song and dance routines themselves. Ongkor Festival still occurs once a year, and as in the past, those who study, work, or do business outside the village, now including those who leave the village to do logistics work, all return home for the festival.

The location of the gathering was not far from the new village, but we drove there anyway. The dirt road was muddy, and all types of transportation, from walking tractors to sedans and vans, were parked on the curb. Seeing license plate numbers from other provinces, we presumed them to belong to car tourists who had also heard the news and hurried to get here. Thus the people attending the gathering were not all residents of the new village. There were also urbanites from Lhasa, who had come to see the performances. Seated on the ground in such a vast location, there were at least a couple thousand people packed one next to the other.

During the performance, we were led to the side of the audience's mats where a row of chairs had been reserved for us. After the male vocalist's solo came the *gorzhé* group dance prevalent in farming villages, followed by the female vocalist's solo, and then the group dance *tözhé* – the Lhasa tap dance. People frequently went up onto the stage to offer the performers *khatas*, but even more people held up their cell phones and cameras to take pictures. Each performance received cheers and a vigorous round of applause. Master Chöphel said it was even livelier than on the previous two days, because the fellow villagers knew each other well, and all the performers were their neighbors' sons and daughters! When the iconic *nangma* music rose from the stage, the women flung their water sleeves about, dancing and singing in an embodiment of the elegance of the city and a magnum opus of traditional song and dance. At this time, Master Chöphel got so excited that he teased, "That's your Thragu Village!" All of these women were originally born in Thragu Village. They had grown to be so neat and beautiful, that I did not recognize a single one of them. Master Chöphel laughed again, saying, "They weren't born yet the year you were here!"

The drizzle pitter-pattered, and although the vast location was covered by a tent, large water droplets still collected and came pouring down. Braving the rain to enjoy the spectacle, no one left their seats,

which served to show how enthusiastic the audience was. After the show, Master Pento concluded, "Except for the use of technologies, such as the sound system and the MIDI accompaniments, all of the performances had a traditional form and used old lyrics. Surprisingly, even the soloists didn't sing current popular songs!" That part deeply moved me. When I think back to that young generation of a bygone era that yearned to go to the city and was fond of singing popular songs and disco dancing, in light of the really big changes that have taken place in the past 20 some years, I cannot help but think that this distant landscape or landscape fading into the distance is perhaps more worth seeking and yearning for. Whatever nostalgia I have for that place may be nothing more than states of mind separated in space and time, which only offer something to reminisce about.

The vast location was developed on previously fallow land. The residents of the new village planted trees around it, and since then there has been a place to cross a *lingka*, embodying the aspirations and efforts that went into the construction of their new home. Lifting one's gaze to look in all directions, one sees a modern building complex rising from the ground on this side and the distant mountains half hidden in the rain and fog on that side. It is already impossible to make out the original township hall and the sites of the villages Shangdrong and Thragu, among other things that are also hard to make out, like where it all begins and where it ends.

One Man's Wanderings and Settling Down

In the summer of 2015 when I visited Tibet again, starting with Nyingthri, I took a flight from Chengdu, and on that same day the first direct flight from Beijing took off. I heard that direct flights would be added from some big cities in the interior of China one after the other not long after. Nyingthri in southeastern Tibet is five or six hundred meters lower in altitude than Lhasa, so the reaction to the high altitude is much less when one lands there, and coupled with the concentration of natural and cultural tourist resources of the highest quality, it will presumably become the first choice for tourists seeking a gateway to Tibet in the future! Subsequently I also traveled from Pomé to Metok, entering the heart of the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, where I had long yearned to go, and thus fulfilled one of this lifetime's deepest desires. The reason why this inconceivable feat could be accomplished with ease is that the Galung La Tunnel has

been opened, and what in former years was a hike through the mountain that took three days is now a car trip that takes all of three hours. These things I have mentioned are only one part of the huge change that has taken place. Nyingthri Prefecture is just now being rebuilt into a city, a freeway connecting it to Lhasa will soon be finished, and the construction of a railway will begin shortly thereafter. Staying the night in downtown Nyingthri, I dialed Norbu Zangpo's cellphone. At the other end of the phone he immediately expressed the desire to come and see me, and I answered, "I am very sorry, but I haven't taken care of the thing you wanted me to take care of yet. I'll see you sometime after that!"

Correct, the very same monk from Nangchen named Norbu Zangpo had concluded that phase of his life in which he traveled all over on pilgrimage and in the end had returned to his roots, his birthplace of Nyingthri, like a fallen leaf returning to the roots of a tree, having settled in Drukchörten Village in Buchu Township, which is 30 kilometers from downtown Nyingthri. He settled there in order to accomplish a great task. Just what task was that? Listen and I will tell you the story bit by bit.

In 1992 the shooting of the pilgrimage was complete, and so we parted ways. In the first ten some years thereafter our contact would break off for a while and then continue, because my contact partner would go into seclusion for a while and then resurface. All in all, contact has been steady in the past ten years, and our telephone contact had become more frequent. During that entire period of time, we met again a total of three times, in Lhasa, Beijing, and Nyingthri respectively.

The first reunion in Lhasa took place only one year after we had parted. Within that year, I had spent more than half the time in the computer room finishing the post production on the twelve-part documentary series *Tibetan Culture*, after which I finished writing *Souls Are Like the Wind*, and in the series and the book, I included one episode and one chapter, respectively, which portrayed this group of pilgrims. In this same year, Norbu Zangpo and his companions were constantly on the road, and he similarly completed his mission: He left his parents and his nephew at his older sister's in Lhasa, while he proceeded to southern and western Tibet, accompanied by people such as the youthful and strong Jamyang Özer, making pilgrimage to each of the famous monasteries there, as well as the sacred mountain

Gang Rinpoché. Then he proceeded to the sacred mountains in the southeast and circumambulated them as part of the pilgrimage. In short, he traveled to every single place in Tibet that he considered sacred. Although he did not kowtow his way along this route but either hitched rides or hiked on foot, scaling mountains and fording streams, one could see from the traces of hardships left on his face that the path was still arduous.

As for the whereabouts of the rest of the pilgrimage troop, Norbu Zangpo also made an introduction: In the previous year when they arrived in Lhasa, the team disintegrated of its own accord after they had fulfilled their vows in Jokhang Monastery, and they each went their own way. The householder Torden went back the way he came, leading the horses and yaks he had left along the way at his old home in the care of his family, and walking back to Nangchen. Rinchen Norbu's whole family, the mother and daughter Tshering and Yingsel, and the fat nun, hitched a ride and returned home on the Qinghai-Tibet Highway. The four brothers and sisters from Chamdo, including Kayang Lhamo, continued their pilgrimage, traveling southwestward, and they were said to have been stopped at the border between China and Nepal. Where they went after that is unknown. What we do know with certainty is that in the moment the old nun Tshering got home, she died of sickness – after completing a great, lifelong vow, she concluded this incarnation, for which the locals would call her fortunate.

We received them for a showing of the broadcast “Pilgrimage Tribe”.¹²⁴ Gazing at themselves on the screen, they could not hide their feelings of joy and often let out emotional sighs, made comments in a low tone of voice, and laughed at themselves. Norbu Zangpo said, “You even wrote in the commentary about how I wanted to be a driver!”

“This was the episode we put the most effort into writing,” I said “and having already shown it at two film festivals we participated in at home and abroad, as well as having let old Samchok Dorjé's singing of the six-syllable mantra resonate beyond the country's borders, all those who had seen the piece did not fail to be amazed, which was very moving. Remembering the phrase ‘The black ground I measure with my body...,’ some people wanted to know where you went after visiting Lhasa on pilgrimage and what you would be doing, in short, what became of you.”

At the time he had no concrete plans for the near future and seemed to be thinking aloud when he said: “Well what else can I do?”

For a couple of years after that I heard nothing from him. On one occasion at the edge of Lukhang Lake in back of the Potala Palace, I ran into a group of pilgrims. I inquired as to where they were from, and after learning they were from Nangchen, I asked about Norbu Zangpo. They said, “Although we don’t know him personally, we all know his name.” This seemed to confirm the aforementioned adage “All pilgrims who kowtow to Lhasa will achieve local renown.”

In Beijing in the spring of 2006, I met him again in a different setting. Norbu Zangpo accompanied his elderly, octogenarian father to Beijing to see a doctor. A businessman of high standing had provided monetary assistance for the trip, as well as helping them by making contact with the director of a hospital in Beijing. This illustrates Norbu Zangpo’s social networking ability and the advantage of such connections, the relations and power essential to someone planning great events. This get-together was precisely when I learned that their family had already changed their registration and moved back to Nyingthri ten years prior, establishing residence in Nyingthri’s old quarter, where Norbu Zangpo’s father Samchok Dorjé had worked before retirement and where Norbu Zangpo himself had grown to adulthood. However, when the family chose to settle in Drukchörten Village in Buchu Township, it was because that was where Norbu Zangpo wanted to accomplish his goal – his plans for the near future not only entailed concrete objectives but also what may be considered an ambitiously large sum of money, namely the renovation or even the reconstruction of a monastery!

The first time I heard this, it sounded hard to believe, but he really did accomplish his goal. Drukchörten Monastery was once a famous Drukpa Kagyü Monastery; at least in Kongpo Prefecture (Nyingthri Prefecture’s former name) it was at the top of the list. Built in the mid-15th century, it is said to have housed more than one thousand monks during its golden age, and a large number of eminent monks came from there throughout the ages. The *triülku* lineage was passed down for 14 generations, among which the ninth Gyelwang *triülku* once went to Beijing on the invitation of the Qing emperor for a holy audience and was bestowed with a golden cap and Buddhist ritual implements. In the beginning of the 20th century, the last *triülku* in the lineage was born in the Ngaphö clan’s manor in Kongpo. Howev-

er the structures of said monastery were completely destroyed in the extremely strong 8.5-magnitude Metok-Dzayül earthquake of 1950. After that, at the expressed request of monks and laity, Mr. Ngaphö Ngawang Jikmé, who was a high official in the local government of the Tibetan region at the time, made a personal decision to rebuild a sutra hall and monks' quarters above the original site but on a much smaller scale. Since the *trülku* of said monastery was born into the Ngaphö clan, Mr. Ngaphö also took charge of the reconstruction and provided the building materials, such that the locals came to call the monastery "Ngaphö Monastery" or the "Ngaphö Family Temple". Yet during the "Cultural Revolution", it was once again struck by misfortune. The assembly of monks was disbanded, its cultural relics were scattered and lost, the sutra hall was used as a granary, and the monks' quarters were converted into residential housing. When the religious policies of the era of reform and opening were put into effect, the majority of monasteries throughout Tibet were restored, and in no time in the neighboring areas surrounding the monasteries, incense was being burnt again, however there was still no word on the reconstruction of Drukchörten Monastery.

The gory details of the process are not known, but the short of it is that the application for reconstruction received approval in the end, in the summer of 2006. I was in Nyingthri Prefecture gathering folksongs. We made contact by telephone, and Norbu Zangpo drove by to pick me up and take me to his place. At that time his mother had already passed away, but his father Samchok Dorjé was still alive and well. His elder brother, the *trülku* in Qinghai, happened to be there as well. The whole family kept watch over the ruins of the original site – speaking of "the whole family", I hesitated quite a bit before writing this. Might there be other important members of the family I should mention in writing? Having written these words, I am allowing the reader to follow along and observe with me the "monk who established a family and the nun who became a mother", alright? If I had not written this and let the reader continue on in ignorance instead, would that not, on the contrary, have been incorrect or inappropriate? This is indeed a problem. After hesitating several times, I decided to seek the opinion of the party in question. I never thought that party would say, without a second's thought, "You should write it, you should. Truth is sought from facts; just tell it like it is!" – Those really were his exact words.

In spring when he was in Beijing, Norbu Zangpo had said that he had a secret, which he could not reveal for the time being, and that he could only tell me when I came to his place. I thought it odd at the time, and it filled me with concern. This continued up until we pulled up to the gate of his family compound, and a youth heard the sound and came running. When the youth pulled open the two iron doors of the gate, Norbu Zangpo said with a sly smile, "Who do you think he looks like?"

Was there any need to guess? One look at him and I knew: "He's your son; you have a son!"

There really was one surprise after the other, for shortly thereafter I saw the woman, cradling an infant in her arms, and her face was also familiar. Was that not the beautiful nun Yingsel from the pilgrimage tribe? "Hey, it seems you have been a family for quite some time!"

The whole family thus kept watch over the ruins, those of the original site from before the earthquake, but at that time reconstruction had been approved for the site above the old one, which had been built after the earthquake. Out of consideration of a multitude of different aspects as well as emotional factors, Norbu Zangpo and the people of the village still thought highly of the old site from before the quake and struggled for the approval of its reconstruction for several years before they finally saw their desires fulfilled. Therefore, construction began mainly during the past few years. The government established an agency and provided a portion of the funding. Norbu Zangpo became the person in charge of Drukchörten Monastery as well as the monastery's abbot, and was given the new Buddhist name "Karma Künzang". For the past few years he went all over begging for alms, and collecting funds, timber building material, etc., for the reconstruction of the monastery. Having received national endorsement, corresponding treatment followed consecutively. Not only was continuing support provided in the form of financial resources, since Nyingthri's partner provinces for providing assistance are the rich and populous Guangdong and Fujian, there are many opportunities for exchange, and frequently, people from all sectors of society go on visitation tours. Norbu Zangpo has been able to join such groups and take several trips outside Tibet, primarily to a bunch of places in the south, and has not only been to several dozen Buddhist monasteries, attentively gathering administration experience. Studying the achievements of modern architecture in person was also one part of the visits, to in short broad-

en their horizons. Although work on the reconstruction of the monastery is grueling, the results are striking. The main structure is beginning to take shape. The floor of the main hall, or sutra hall, stretches across a vast 600 m², and the interior decoration in the form of wall paintings is about to be completed. The precious cultural artifacts that were lost without a trace during the decade of turmoil have returned again, including each of the most prized treasures of the monastery such as the golden cap and Buddhist ritual implements bestowed by the Emperor. They are all in perfect condition without any damages, and they were all kept by the people of the surrounding village in their own collections for many years....

I heard similar details on the progress of the project by telephone. When I asked how the family was doing, he said that all were well, except that his father had passed away, and he had held a fire offering ceremony for him. His eldest son had already come of age and had inherited his father's profession and become a monk. He was at the Kagyü monastery in Jomda County in Chamdo Prefecture, furthering his studies of the Buddha's teachings. His second son was in elementary school, and the family had grown further with the addition of a baby girl, who had just turned six. Last year he called me saying that he wanted to establish a library in the monastery and had hoped I could help him. That really was a creative idea, so I complied and told my colleagues at the publishing company, and they all felt positively about it. Both religious and secular works in Tibetan, Chinese, and English could be provided – when I previously mentioned the thing he wanted me to take care of, this was what I was referring to.

Thinking back on the many years I spent in Tibet, there were so many other people's lives that I could not fully observe, such that even at this point in time I cannot consider that period of my life to be completed. Although I have managed to see one member of the previous generation after another grow old and pass away and the new generation grow up, our generation is still ambling along amidst the vicissitudes of life – what I am calling the vicissitudes of life relates to individuals and even more so to the society as a whole. There is no need to wait till the next incarnation. In this life and this existence, unimaginable changes, visible changes with maximum contrast, still surpass those in any number of past lives, existences, or generations. Compared to the plot of a meticulously planned drama series, it is no less splendid – what can be presented by drama writers is, after all,

Notes

- 1 In 1991 and 1992, the author made many field surveys in preparation of the TV documentary series *Tibetan Culture*.
- 2 *Xizang wenhua xilie* 西藏文化系列.
- 3 The transliterations of the Tibetan words and names found in this book are primarily based on their pronunciation in the Lhasa dialect. THL simplified phonetic transcription was taken as the basis of these transliterations, but an attempt was made to preserve the important distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants. Aspiration is shown through the addition of an “h” following consonants, as in Wylie transcription. Thus “ph”, “th”, and “kh” are the aspirated counterparts of “p”, “t”, and “k”, the latter of which have pronunciations similar to those in the Romance languages, and should be read as “p”, “t”, and “k” are in English. “sh” and “ch” roughly represent their counterparts in English. An “r” following a consonant indicates that it is retroflex, spoken with the tip of the tongue pointing toward the back of the mouth. “hr” is pronounced as a retroflex “sh” sound much as in Mandarin Chinese. “b”, “d”, “g”, “j”, “dz”, “z”, and “zh” generally represent the same consonant sounds in Lhasa Tibetan as “ph”, “th”, “kh”, “ch”, “tsh”, “s”, and “sh” respectively, but the former have a low or rising tone, while the latter have a high or falling tone. The vowels that carry a diaeresis should be pronounced as in German.
- 4 The Tibetan calendar is a lunisolar calendar, that is, the Tibetan year comprises either 12 or 13 lunar months, each beginning and ending with a new moon. A thirteenth month is added every two or three years, so that an average Tibetan year is equal to the solar year. The 60-year cycle is observed: each year is associated with an animal and an element, similar to the Chinese zodiac. The twelve zodiac animals are: rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog, pig, rat, ox, and tiger. The five elements are: fire, earth, metal, water, and wood.
- 5 *Mani lhakhang*: a simple rural Buddhist chapel, in which stand many large prayer wheels encased in sheets of copper. (Author’s note)
- 6 *Rhododendron anthopogon*.
- 7 Ground roasted barley, the staple food of the Tibetans.
- 8 *Om mani padme hūm* (Tibetan pronunciation: Om mani pemé hung).
- 9 A female dzo.

- 10 *Sang* is the most widespread purification ritual among Tibetans. It mainly involves the burning of aromatic plants, such as juniper branches, leaves of rhododendrons, etc., which produce white aromatic smoke rather than dark smoke.
- 11 *torma*: a conical offering cake made of *tsampa*. (Author's note)
- 12 Ceremonial arrows with colorful streamers attached to them.
- 13 Highland barley is the traditional staple crop of the Tibetan Plateau. It is distinct from varieties of barley known in the West and is represented by the unique word *qingke* 青稞 in Chinese. However, due to stylistic considerations the adjective "highland" has only been retained in this work in situations where this extra piece of information was thought crucial or was thought not to hamper the flow of the text.
- 14 The name of Tibetan meadow flowers, as well as that of a dance song.
- 15 *khaden*: a Tibetan rug for sitting or sleeping.
- 16 *Xueyu Xizang fengqing lu* 雪域西藏风情录.
- 17 Known as *chang* in Tibetan (Chinese transliteration: *qiang* 羌), highland barley beer is a traditional alcoholic beverage of the Tibetan people having an alcohol content of 5% or less. The term is sometimes mistranslated as "wine", which in English generally refers to a beverage with a much higher alcohol content, especially in relation to barley. Since Western-style beer is also brewed from barley and since the Chinese term specifically mentions the distinct variety of barley, namely "highland barley", it has been translated as "highland barley beer".
- 18 The *Shijing*, the earliest extant collection of Chinese poems, is divided into three parts according to their genre, namely *feng*, *ya* and *song*, with the genre *ya* being divided further into *da* (major) *ya* and *xiao* (minor) *ya*.
- 19 *Yuefu* were Chinese poems composed in the style of a folksong. The term literally means "music department", a reference to the government organization originally charged with collecting or writing the lyrics, especially during the Han Dynasty.
- 20 Qu Yuan's *Jiuge* are a group of poems with novel style and aesthetic traits among the *Chu Ci* whose contents are a major primary source for historical information about the culture and religious beliefs in

the territory of the former Kingdom of Chu. The beliefs reflected in these poems have retained indications of shamanistic practices.

- 21 Skt: Sāgara Nāgarāja.
- 22 Of Buddhist origin. The eight classes are: deva, nāga, yakṣa, gandarva, asura, garuḍa, kinnara, and mahoraga.
- 23 Tibetan title of the ruler of the dynasty.
- 24 *Baishhe zhuan* 白蛇传.
- 25 In this work the Tibetan word *trülku* has been used to translate the Chinese term *huofo* 活佛, which is frequently directly translated in English as “living Buddha”, since the direct translation of the term is often considered to be misleading. The author herself defines this term in her work on p. 107 as being equivalent to *huashen* 化身, the corporeal manifestation of a Buddha, which is known as *nirmāṇa-kāya* in Sanskrit and whose Tibetan translation is *trülku*.
- 26 Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (1012–1097).
- 27 Protector of Buddhist teachings, or “Dharma”.
- 28 *Pulu* is a kind of handmade wool cloth used for clothing and blankets, which is also presented as a gift during rituals.
- 29 Eight years later, in 2000, I spent the first Tibetan New Year of the new millennium at the home of Tsheten Dorjé, Mr. Qunpei’s younger brother, and heard that Penpa and Dekyi Chödzung were already divorced and that Po Wangdü and Tsöndrö Wangmo had successively passed away. (Author’s note)
- 30 *Bumpa* means “vase” or “vessel” in Tibetan.
- 31 *Guru* is a Sanskrit term that denotes someone who is a teacher, guide, or master of certain knowledge. In pan-Indian traditions, a guru is more than a teacher and is traditionally treated with reverence by the student. The guru serves as a counselor who helps mold values, sharing experiential knowledge, as much as literal knowledge, and provides an example in life and a source of inspiration, helping the student evolve spiritually. The term also refers to someone who is primarily one’s spiritual guide and helps one to discover the same potentialities that the guru has already realized.
- 32 Chinese term. The Tibetan term is: *thrikor*.
- 33 Sanskrit word denoting a teacher or preceptor.
- 34 Eng: hundred *torma* offering practice.
- 35 Tibetan name for Vajradhāra, primordial Buddha of the Kagyü.

- 36 Tibetan for Śītavana.
- 37 *Rhododendron setosum*.
- 38 The Tibetan name for Mt. Kailash.
- 39 Tib: *kawa*. Tibetan buildings are measured in “pillars”, which range from 8 to 10 square meters per unit based on building specifications. (Author’s note)
- 40 *Nangsa Öbum*, one of the eight great traditional Tibetan operas, tells of a common girl from Tsang who was forced to marry into a wealthy family and suffered her fair share before being saved through the Buddha’s teachings. (Author’s note)
- 41 The Monkey month.
- 42 抛哇.
- 43 破瓦.
- 44 Sanskrit word for “an instant”.
- 45 Skt: Sukhāvātī.
- 46 See note 45.
- 47 Skt: *nāḍī*.
- 48 This is the literal meaning of Sukhāvātī.
- 49 *Rhododendron lapponicum*.
- 50 Sanskrit for monks’ robes.
- 51 The paths to the six modes of existence in Tibetan Buddhism, that of demons, hungry ghosts, animals, human beings, jealous deities, and deities.
- 52 The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, which according to Buddhist teachings may only be escaped by achieving enlightenment.
- 53 *Linghun hewang* 灵魂何往.
- 54 Disciplinary supervisor of a monastery.
- 55 Tib: *tshelum*.
- 56 A sacrificial feast of consecrated food offerings.
- 57 *Sungdū*: Tibetan for “protection knot”.
- 58 In Sanskrit *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna* respectively.
- 59 Skt: *śūnyatā*.
- 60 “Utmost Joy” is a decomposition of the literal meaning of Sukhāvātī.
- 61 Sister Xianglin is a character from *The New Year’s Sacrifice*, a short story written by Lun Xun (1881–1936) in 1924. Her tragic life caused her to chatter away with whomever she met and repeatedly vent her grievances.

- 62 In Sanskrit their names are *vivarta*, *vivartasiddha*, *saṃvarta*, and *saṃvartasiddha* respectively.
- 63 To quote a paragraph from *Various Forms and Manifestations of Legend* by Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), an Argentine short-story writer, essayist, and poet, “Buddhism’s view of time is visionary. The sense of reality is weakened rather than strengthened by huge numbers: 12,000 monks and 32,000 bodhisattvas make even less sense than one monk and one bodhisattva. Complicated formats and figures are nothing but bubbles and ‘much ado about nothing’, so are the entire universe and rebirths of creatures.” – from *Borges Fiction Anthology*, published in 1996 by Hainan International Press. (Author’s note)
- 64 The Reincarnation of *trülkus* is a system of identifying a religious leader and a method of facilitating his succession that is unique to Tibetan Buddhism, in which the enlightened Buddha takes a human form on earth to experience illness and death, preach the doctrine, and save all living things. The methods of succession I know of include selecting a child as the incarnation; inheritance through a *rüpa*, or bone, lineage; and succession through social recognition; and most recently I have heard of a small sect where the position is personally passed down from the former master. (Author’s note)
- 65 *Zhönu Damé Kyi Tam Gyü* by Tshering Wanggyel.
- 66 A type of rhubarb.
- 67 Ngok Loden Sherap was Ngok Lekpé Sherap’s nephew.
- 68 This is Saga Dawa, the Tibetan version of the Buddhist festival of Vesak, commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha.
- 69 Skt: *adhiṣṭhāna*.
- 70 Tibetan prayer flag.
- 71 This is the literal translation of the Tibetan word *lungta* meaning “prayer flag”.
- 72 Skt: *nirmānakāya*.
- 73 Vairocana Buddha.
- 74 A Buddhist monk.
- 75 This is a quotation from *Analects* 7. 21.
- 76 This quotation may be found in *Analects* 6.22.

- 77 This is the second half of the Tibetan saying “A good father plants a tree. A bad father makes a deity.” See chapter 3.
- 78 *Zangbei youli* 藏北游历.
- 79 Tib: *dungchen*.
- 80 Tib: *kangling*. A Tibetan horn made from a human femur.
- 81 A Tibetan scarf.
- 82 A typical Chinese New Year’s greeting.
- 83 *Zhougong jie meng* 周公解梦.
- 84 Also known by the Tibetan name Changthang.
- 85 Palden Lhamo, a Dharmapāla.
- 86 A person from the region of Kham.
- 87 For this myth, see *Folktales of Northeastern Tibet* by Wang Qingshan. It may be seen as an early attempt to explain the origin of species and as a reflection of the concept that all things have a soul, which is entailed in the worship of grain deities. (Author’s note)
- 88 Chökhör falls on the 4th day of the 6th lunar month in the Tibetan calendar and commemorates the first time the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths.
- 89 Dartsedo in Tibetan. The city is now located in Sichuan Province, but was formerly a border town between the areas populated by the Tibetans and the Han Chinese.
- 90 Nupa Lhadrang in Tibetan.
- 91 Skt: *dhvaja* (Tib: *gyeltsben*).
- 92 *Potentilla anserina* (Tib: *droma*).
- 93 *Xixing Ali* 西行阿里.
- 94 *Gyelrap Selbai Melong*.
- 95 Princess; her full name is Pema Sel.
- 96 Lit. “flower of Tantrayāna”.
- 97 *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrül Rinpoche.
- 98 E. g. he passed away.
- 99 The Six Yogas of Nāropa.
- 100 The complete calming of the mind.
- 101 True nature.
- 102 *Survey of the Society and History of the Tibetan People*, vol. 2 of *Survey of the Society and History of China’s National Minorities (Zangzu shehui lishi diaocha 藏族社会历史调查)* Tibetan People’s Press: 1987 was consulted for information pertaining to Lhagyari. Other

data, which do not agree completely with those given, were found as well. Those provided here should only serve as a point of reference. (Author's note)

- 103 On this trip to Chuksun in 1991, my travel companions included the author Trashi Dawa, whose novels stand apart among those of the new era; the archeologist Li Yongxian, who is a professor at Sichuan University and formerly took part in an archeological investigation of Tibet for a number of years; and Gyatsho, who is the current editor in chief of the periodical *Tibet Geographic* (*Xizang renwen dili* 西藏人文地理). (Author's note)
- 104 *Depther Karpo* written by Gedün Chöphel.
- 105 *Gyelpo Kathang*.
- 106 *Zha'nang Xian wenwu zhi* 扎囊县文物志.
- 107 Root mats are one of Tibet's traditional types of fuel. The matted roots of the perennial grass are tightly interwoven making them incombustible, so they are at the same time also commonly used to build walls. Since the mats do not recover easily after being dug up, their usage has a harmful effect on the natural ecosystem. (Author's note)
- 108 Lit. Talipot palm leaf manuscript.
- 109 *Chaosheng buluo* 朝圣部落.
- 110 Skt: Sūtrācārya.
- 111 Mount Kailash.
- 112 *Fenghua chengdian: Xizang wenshi gushi shiwu jiang* 风化成典—西藏文史故事十五讲. An English version of this book entitled *A Classic of Weathered Stories: 15 Tibetan Historical Tales* is in preparation.
- 113 *Zangzu yinyue shi* 藏族音乐史.
- 114 *Menbazu yinyue shi* 门巴族音乐史.
- 115 The Tibetan word for the Tibetan horn.
- 116 *Lingguo miaoyin* 岭国妙音.
- 117 Skt: Sarasvatī.
- 118 *Xizang yinyue shihua* 西藏音乐史话.
- 119 *Lingguo miaoyin: changpian yingxiong shishi Gesa'er wang zhuan yinyue gailun* 岭国妙音—长篇英雄史诗格萨尔王传音乐概论.
- 120 *Shengdi gewu zhi zui* 圣地歌舞之最.
- 121 *Xizang minzu minjian yinyue zhonglei daquan* 西藏民族民间音乐种类大全.

- 122 A ritual in which a pinch of *chemar*, consisting of yak butter, *tsampa*, and sugar, is thrown in the air to wish others good fortune.
- 123 *Zai Chagu Cun Zang linian* 在查古过藏历年.
- 124 *Chaosheng buluo* 朝圣部落.

Postface by Peter Schwieger

Beyond doubt Ma Lihua is one of the most highly profiled authors in the People's Republic of China writing today on modern Tibet. Her writings express a familiarity with Tibet that could only grow through long stays in Tibet and an intensive interaction with its people. She first entered Tibet in 1976, when the Cultural Revolution came to an end. At that time she was a young college graduate working as a volunteer in the countryside in central Tibet. Tibet with its nature and its people presented a completely new world to her. And this world started to fascinate her to an extent that she finally was unable to detach herself from Tibet anymore. Over the years she has written and published numerous books on Tibet. They oscillate between nonfiction and literature, often preferring an essay-like style. Expressing a genuine interest in the land and great sympathy for its people, they contributed significantly to the spread of a lyrical image of Tibet in China, which is not unlike the image of Tibet dominant in the West. Tibet appears as a kind of counter world: a place of open space that allows one's own thoughts to transgress their inbred boundaries and to question common matters of course as well as one place whose population is characterized by freshness and nativeness. This is also the background color pervading Ma Lihua's book *Souls Are Like the Wind*. The book was written more than 20 years ago. It originally emerged as a byproduct of Ma Lihua's involvement in the production of a twelve-part TV documentary series on Tibetan culture. Since then the publication of various new editions has proven its unbroken attraction and positive reception in China. Though in parts the book presents itself like an anthropological study based on an academic background and profound knowledge of the Tibetan culture, it does not claim the thoroughness and accuracy of a scientific analysis. From time to time the participatory observations give reason to a free flow of the author's thoughts often challenging her own views on human life and social relationships.

The book covers folk customs and folk beliefs in a rural central Tibetan area not far from Lhasa. It depicts the life in the countryside which is dictated by the change of the seasons. The calm and unagitated style of the narration resembles a painting, describing structures and basic concepts more than it searches for spectacular events and

extraordinary moments in Tibetan life. The people's deep and unquestioned confidence in the given course of life as shown in Ma Lihua's book is strong evidence for the unbroken influence of Tibetan Buddhism on the beliefs and daily life of the Tibetan people. These beliefs are blended with an animist world view, according to which the country is covered with a great variety of local deities and spirits who influence the lives and fate of the people living within their respective domains.

In her narration Ma Lihua gives the Tibetan people a say. Basing her descriptions on a relativistic conviction, she is neither arrogant nor judgemental. By taking people's statements seriously, her observations express a deep respect for the Tibetans and their culture, an attitude which sharply contrasts with the smart-alec approach characteristic of the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution. She does not provide an abstract analysis of Tibetan society but introduces real people to us: a *trülku*, an ascetic, a monk, etc. Pilgrims touch us with their straightforward statements about their motivations for accepting the burden of a long pilgrimage full of hardship. In their unbroken piety they even include Chairman Mao and his ideology in their prayers. Ma Lihua's face-to-face encounters are never fleeting or superficial. She took time to get to know the people better, thus establishing real and close social relationships. However, in spite of having spent so many years together with the people, she is aware that ultimately an irreconcilable distance will always remain and that she will never fully understand what she observes. In addition, when she has doubts concerning the people's view of life and their willingness to accept all kinds of hardships without complaints only to ensure a better rebirth, her praise for the people's pure spirit and pious asceticism turns into pity and sadness. Thus, her attitude is never that of an indifferent observer.

The central theme of Ma Lihua's book is a question regarding the nature of the "soul" and its fate after death. She addresses this question again and again in her interviews. Due in particular to its Christian connotation, the use of the term "soul", whose Chinese equivalent is *linghun* 灵魂 ("soul, spirit"), is problematic in a Tibetan context. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism neglects the idea of a "soul" migrating from one existence to another, refuting in turn the Hindu concept of *ātman*, an indestructible individual self. When reading the

statements and reflections about the “soul” in Ma Lihua’s narration, one becomes aware that it combines two different Tibetan concepts. First, it refers to the Buddhist concept of *namsbé*, “consciousness”. After death it is this consciousness, in Sanskrit *vijñāna*, which leaves the body in search of a new existence. However, in Buddhist philosophy this consciousness is not regarded as an entity, but as a stream continuing even after death. The consciousness is the object of the Tibetan Buddhist *phowa* (*’pho ba*) ritual, a term meaning “transference” and referring in this context to the transference of the consciousness of a deceased being into another body or to a desirable destination. There is, however, another term in Tibetan which is often translated as “soul” – *la* (*bla*). This term is frequently encountered in ritual prescripts of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet’s Bön religion, and it is already documented in Tibetan texts from Dunhuang. This term seems to have originated in a non-Buddhist, animistic world view. When the *la* is lost and it roams around, one becomes ill. Therefore, the Nyingmapas and Bönpos offer rituals to call the *la* back into the body.

Though not written on the basis of written Tibetan sources, Ma Lihua’s book not only conveys the notion of Tibet as a land rich in culture but also as a place full of history. Thus, she even goes back to the Neolithic period in her brief discussion of the few excavations done so far. Moreover, she mentions the most popular Tibetan origin myth as recorded in *The Clear Mirror of Royal Genealogies* from the 14th century. However, history is not her main topic, and a critical analysis of Tibet’s recent past can hardly be expected.

The great merit of Ma Lihua’s book lies in the sympathy it has promoted among Chinese readers for Tibet and its people, the insight into a fascinating living culture so different from that of the Han Chinese, the encounters with people who are still firmly rooted in their traditional belief system, and the contribution the book makes to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Tibet and its unique traditions. Through this English translation of her book, the Western reader will in turn receive a fascinating impression of how thought-provoking a long-time encounter with Tibetan people can be, regardless of one’s own cultural background.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following individuals who – apart from the translators themselves – have played an important part in the realization of this book: Dr. Wu Xiujie in Berlin, who first turned our attention to this book and then recommended us to the China Tibetology Publishing House for the coordination of the project in all stages of its development; the author herself, Ma Lihua, for having entrusted us with publishing the English version of her book; Mrs. Feng Liang and her colleagues from the China Tibetology Publishing House for providing us with important materials; and Prof. Dr. Schwieger, University of Bonn, Department of Mongolian and Tibetan Studies, for writing the postface to this book and sharing his expertise with us.

Song Meihua was responsible for the translation of the prologue and chapters 1 to 3 of this book. Markus S. Conley was responsible for the translation of chapters 4 to 7 and for editing the prologue and the preceding chapters.

All comments in the endnotes, except for those which are indicated as the author's comments, were made by the translators.

Author and Translators



MA Lihua 马丽华,

Han Chinese, was born in Ji'nan, Shandong Province, PR China. In 1976, after graduating in Chinese Studies from Linyi Normal University, she went to Tibet and stayed there for 27 years. In 1990 she earned an MA in Literature at the Peking University. She was an editor of the Chinese journal *Tibetan Literature* and served as the vice-chair of both the Writers' Association of Tibet and the Tibet Federation of Literary and Art Circles.

During her years in Tibet she became addicted to the beauty of the Land of Snows and the kindness of its people. She started to conduct fieldwork in order to become better acquainted with the Tibetan people, their daily life, rites, and religion. She has authored a total of twenty works on subjects related to Tibet, primarily in the genre of documentary literature, and a variety of her works has been published in Hong Kong and Taiwan. English and French editions of *Traveling Through Northern Tibet* have been published by Chinese Literature Publishing House.

In the beginning of the 90s, Ma Lihua produced the television series *Tibetan Culture* as a byproduct of her on-the-spot fieldwork. During her time in Tibet, she already began publishing poetry and prose about her life there, which soon attracted the attention of a wide readership. Li Jingze 李敬泽, a famous Chinese literary critic, once called her a 20th Century “discoverer of Tibet”.

Although she has enjoyed a successful career as a literary author, she has developed an increasing interest in academic investigations of the culture and history of Tibet. In 2003 she took over the position as editor in chief of the China Tibetology Publishing House in Beijing, a position she maintained until 2011. Recently, she has concentrated her efforts on the history of scientific investigations conducted in Tibet.

Ma Lihua has been honored with numerous prizes, among them the Qomolangma Prize (1992) for Tibetan studies. For her nonfiction series *Travels in Tibet* (including *Traveling Through Northern Tibet*, *Going West to Ngari*, and *Souls Are Like the Wind*, as well as *The Red Mountains of Eastern Tibet*, she won the Outstanding Best-sellers prize. In 2009, *A Classic of Weathered Stories: 15 Tibetan Historical Tales* received the National Library of China’s 5th Wenjin Book Award.

SONG Meihua 宋美华,

is an associate professor of English at the Southwest Jiaotong University, PR China. Her research interests are translation studies, intercultural studies, and foreign language teaching. Her publications include books and academic articles in *Index to Social Sciences and Humanities Proceedings (ISSHP)*, *ProQuest*, and *China Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI)* source journals. She has presided over research projects at the provincial and ministerial level, and participated as a leading researcher in research projects at the national level. For her teaching and coaching accomplishments she has been awarded several prizes. She is currently an academic visitor at the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester, UK.

Markus S. CONLEY,

born in Elkins, West Virginia, USA, earned a BA in biology at West Virginia University and an MA in Sinology and German linguistics at the Humboldt University of Berlin. A freelance translator of Chinese and proofreader specializing in American English, he is presently working as a language editor for the academic *Journal of Asian History*. His research interests include the philosophies and religions of China and India, language sciences, botany, biogeography, anthropology, and archeology. He currently resides in Berlin.

