



AHP 33 A TIBETAN COMMUNITY ON THE YELLOW RIVER

Rka phug Rdo rje don grub & CK Stuart



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AHP 33

མི་འགྲོ་སྐྱོད་འདུག་སྐྱོད་ཀྱི་རྩིས་ལྷན་འབྲེས་ལ་མཁོ་ལོ་གཞི་སྦྱོར་བཞུགས་པའི་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་

# Farmers, Fugitives, Ghosts, & Exploding Grasshoppers



Everyday Life in Horse Race Village,  
A Tibetan Community on the Yellow River



Rka phug Rdo rje don grub  
and CK Stuart

མ་གྲུང་དལ་འབབ་རིང་མོའི་འགྲམ་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་རྒྱ  
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# **FARMERS, FUGITIVES, GHOSTS, AND EXPLODING GRASSHOPPERS**

**EVERYDAY LIFE IN HORSE RACE VILLAGE, A TIBETAN  
COMMUNITY ON THE YELLOW RIVER**

by

རྣ་ཕུག་རྡོ་རྗེ་དོན་གྲུབ། Rka phug Rdo rje don grub

*and*

**CK Stuart**

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SUMMARY: Rta rgyugs (Dajiu tan) is a natural farming village that is part of Rka phug (Gabu) Administrative Village, northwest of Khams ra (Kanbula) Town, Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. Other aspects of the community are presented in terms of history, education, housing, eating, sleeping, archery, religion, livelihood, sources of cash income, stories, folktales, and photographs.

COVERS: Characters in 'Cham (Rdo rje don grub).

Rural village communities do not necessarily follow the normative, orthodox values espoused by literary scholars and the learned clergy. Although villagers' lives, thoughts, and social interactions are to some extent constrained by such outside factors, locals create and reinvent values in their own imagined space within these parameters to adapt to their own needs. We have emphasized what villagers do and believe, rather than attempt etymological investigations to discover 'true' meanings.

# RKA PHUG RDO RJE DON GRUB

Rka phug Rdo rje don grub (Duoji Dangzhi; Joshua) was born in 1985 in Rta rgyugs (Dajiu tan) Village, Rka phug (Gabu) Administrative Village, Khams ra (Kanbula) Town, Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China. He attended Rka phug Primary School, Gcan tsha Nationalities Middle School, the English Training Program (ETP) at Mtsho sngon Normal University, and Xi'an International Studies University. He currently teaches English at Rma lho (Henan) Nationalities Middle School in Rma lho Mongolian Autonomous County, Rma lho Prefecture. His important collections of local, endangered culture may be found online at:

ཀུལུག་རྗེ་རྗེ་དོན་གྲུབ་ནི་ ༡༩༨༥ ལོའི་ཟ࿃་ ༡༢ པར་གྲུང་གོའི་མཚོ་སྔོན་ཞིང་ཆེན་མ་ལྷོ་བོད་རིགས་རང་སྐྱོང་ཁུལ་གཙན་ཚུན་ཆོ་རྒྱལ་ལྟེང་གི་རྒྱ་རྒྱལ་མངའ་སྡེ་བར་སྐྱེས། འོད་གིས་སྤྲ་གཞུག་ཏུ་ཀུལུག་སློབ་ཚུང་དང་གཙན་ཚུན་ཆོ་རྒྱལ་སློབ་འབྲིང་། མཚོ་སྔོན་དགེ་ཐོན་སློབ་ཆེན་མི་རིགས་དགེ་ཐོན་སློབ་སློང་གི་བོད་དབྱིན་སྤྲེལ་གཞིའི་ཨམ་སྐད་རིགས་སློབ་ཆེན་སོགས་སུ་སློབ་གཉེན་བྱས། འོད་གིས་དུ་མ་ལྷོ་བོད་རིགས་རང་སྐྱོང་ཁུལ་མ་ལྷོ་སོག་རྫོང་མི་རིགས་སློབ་འབྲིང་དུ་དབྱིན་ཡིག་དགེ་རྒྱུ་གྱི་ལས་ཀ་ལུག་ལས་གནང་བཞེན་ཡོད། འོས་བསྐྱུ་ཉེར་བྱས་པའི་གཙན་ཚུན་ཀུལུག་ལུག་སྤྲེལ་གྱི་ཉམས་དམས་སུ་འགྲོ་བཞེན་པའི་རིག་གནས་མ་ལག་དག་གསལ་གྱི་དྲ་ཆིགས་སོགས་སུ་བཞོད་ཡོད།

多吉当知于 1985 年 12 月出生在中国青海省黄南藏族自治州尖扎县坎布拉镇尕布大九村。他先后就读于尕布村小学、尖扎县民族中学、青海师范大学民族师范学院藏英班以及西安外国语大学。他目前在黄南藏族自治州河南蒙古族自治县民族中学担任英语教师职务。他所搜集的当地重要濒危文化素材上传至下列网址上:

- <http://www.oralliterature.org/collections/rgrub001.html>
- <https://archive.org/details/RkaPhugTibetanVillageCulturalMaterials>
- <https://tibetanplateau.wikischolars.columbia.edu/Rdo+rje+don+%27grub%27s+%28b.+1985%29+Collection>
- <http://archive.org/details/cham-TibetanRitualDance>
- <http://archive.org/details/chamIn2011>



Rka phug Rdo rje don grub in Lha sa (photo by Dbang rgyal don grub, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All photographs were taken by Rka phug Rdo rje don grub unless otherwise noted. Dates indicating when photographs were taken appear in parentheses at the end of captions.



Rka phug Rdo rje don grub and family on the back steps of the Po ta la (photo by a Chinese tourist, 2009).

## KEY CONSULTANTS

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'Phags mo tshe ring (right, b. 1929) of Rta rgyugs Village is Rka phug Rdo rje don grub's maternal grandfather (2012). To the left is Phags mo tshe ring's daughter, G.yu sgron mtsho (b. 1969).



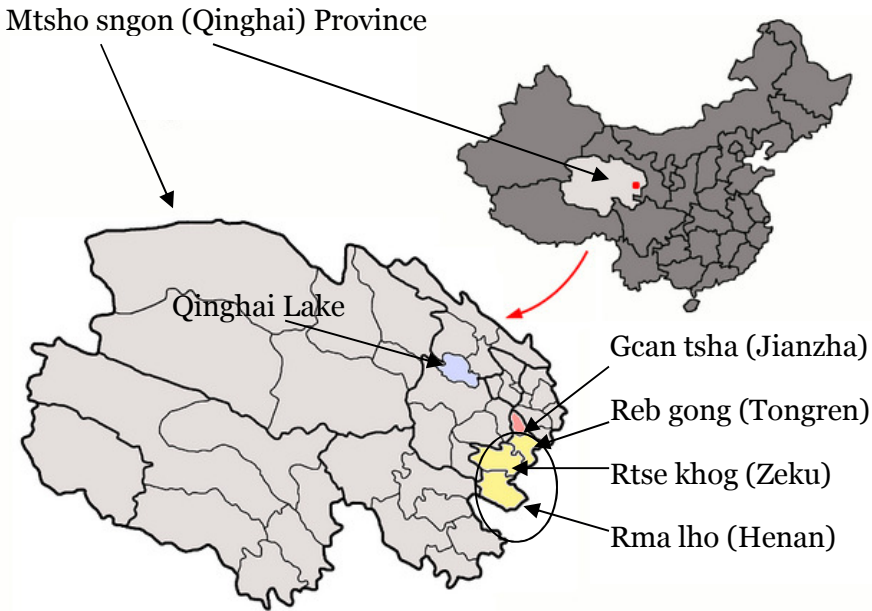


Rgyal mtshan (b. 1935) of Tsang tsa Village often visits relatives in Rta rgyugs Village. He is 'Phags mo tshe ring's younger brother. He and Gu ru (b. 1933), his wife, know many folktales and stories. Rgyal mtshan has lived a life of herding and cultivating barley and vegetables. He is illiterate (2010).



Bde skyid mtsho (b. 1966) of Rta rgyugs Village is Rka phug Rdo rje don grub's mother. She is illiterate (2007).

# MAP<sup>2</sup>



Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (in circle above) includes Gcan tsha (Jianzha), Reb gong (Tongren), and Rtse khog (Zeku) counties, and Rma lho (Henan) Mongolian Autonomous County.

<sup>2</sup> This is a modified version of Croquant (2007) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Location\\_of\\_Jainca\\_within\\_Qinghai\\_\(China\).png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Location_of_Jainca_within_Qinghai_(China).png), accessed 27 December 2011.

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# **PART ONE**

---

## **EVERYDAY LIFE IN HORSE RACE VILLAGE**

## INTRODUCTION

China's Mtsho sngon (Qinghai, Kokonor) Province, located in northwest China, is the nation's largest province<sup>3</sup> in terms of land area and also the province with the smallest population (5.6 million). Mtsho sngon's population by ethnic group is given in Table 1:

Table 1. Mtsho sngon's population by ethnic group.<sup>4</sup>

Ethnic Group	Population	Percentage
Han	2,983,516	53.02
Tibetan	1,375,062	24.44
Hui	834,298	14.83
Tu <sup>5</sup>	204,413	3.63
Salar	107,089	1.90
Mongol	99,815	1.77
Others	22,529	0.40

Mtsho sngon is administratively divided into four Tibetan autonomous prefectures, a Mongolian and Tibetan autonomous prefecture, Haidong Municipality, Ledu Region, and Zi ling (Xining) City, which is the provincial capital. The focus of this study is a natural village <sup>6</sup> in Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

In 2010, Rma lho had a population of 256,716, with four major ethnic groups, as illustrated in Table 2:

---

<sup>3</sup> Qinghai is a province and not one of China's ethnic minority autonomous regions, which include Tibet, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and Inner Mongolia.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.qhjsw.gov.cn/NewsView.asp?nid=774>, accessed 10 October 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Tu = Monguor, Mongghul, Mangghuer, Dor rdo.

<sup>6</sup> Natural village = *ziran cun*. An administrative village (*xingzheng cun*) is often comprised of several natural villages.

Table 2. Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture population by ethnic group.<sup>7</sup>

Ethnic Group	Population	Percentage
Tibetan	175,978	68.55
Mongol	35,894	13.98
Hui	16,741	6.52
Han	15,617	6.08
Tu	10,027	3.91
Salar	1,696	0.66
Others	763	0.30

Rta rgyugs (Dajiu tan), the community studied, is a natural farming village that is part of Rka phug (Gabu) Administrative Village, northwest of Khams ra (Kanbula) Town,<sup>8</sup> Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Major administrative divisions in Rma lho include Gcan tsha, Reb gong (Tongren), and Rtse khog (Zeku) counties, and Rma lho (Henan) Mongolian Autonomous County. In 2005, the total population of the prefecture was 220,655 (sixty-five percent Tibetan).<sup>9</sup>

There are six townships,<sup>10</sup> three towns,<sup>11</sup> and seventy-nine administrative villages in Gcan tsha County. The county had a population of approximately 50,000 in the year 2001, of who sixty-seven percent were Tibetan.<sup>12</sup> Villagers shop in Khams ra Town, ten to fifteen minutes away by motorcycle, and Gdong sna<sup>13</sup> (Kangyang) Town and 'Do ba (Duoba) Village, which are both twenty to thirty

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.tjcn.org/rkpcgb/rkpcgb/201112/22722.html>, accessed 10 October 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Town = *zhen*.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.huangnan.gov.cn>, accessed 10 October 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Township = *xiang*. Gcan tsha thang (Jianzha tan), Nang khog (Nengke), Skya rgya (Jiajia), Snang ra (Angla), Steng so (Dangshun), and Tsho drug (Cuozhou).

<sup>11</sup> Mar khu thang (Maketang), Gdong sna (Kangyang), and Khams ra (Kanbula).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.jianzha.gov.cn>, accessed 10 October 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Gdong sna, the fourth Rka phug incarnation, Rka phug pandita Blo bzang don grub, was born in Gdong sna in 1740 (Bsod nams tshe ring 2008:87).

minutes away by motorcycle. Villagers also traveled to these locations by bus or mini-bus for four RMB (one way) in 2012.

The county seat is the town of Mar khu thang (Maketang), which was usually reached by mini-bus costing eleven RMB per passenger one way in 2012. Travelers to Zi ling City went by private taxi (thirty-five RMB one way per passenger) that accommodated four passengers in 2012. The same trip cost twenty-one RMB by public bus and required two and half hours in 2012. Villagers went to Khams ra Town or Gdong sna Town to catch the private buses, mini-buses, and taxis, most of which were operated by local Muslims and a few Tibetans.

Rta rgyugs Village is about five kilometers from Khams ra Town, and is located on the south bank of the Rma chu 'Yellow River'. Rta rgyugs is one of Rka phug Administrative Village's four subdivisions. Cung smad, Dpon rgya, and Mo zi are the other three.

Khams ra Town must be transited when visiting Khams ra National Forest Park, famous for its varied, picturesque landscape, located some thirty-three kilometers north of the town. A small valley extends to Rta rgyugs Village lands in the east, and borders a Hui village<sup>14</sup> of about 350 residents also called Rta rgyugs in the south. The two Rta rgyugs villages share the same name because both communities were relocated to the general area around 1979.

East of the Tibetan Rta rgyugs Village, Tibetans cultivate about sixty *mu*<sup>15</sup> of land, which extends to Bod bya tshang (Baoxiazang), a Tibetan village on the south bank of the Rma chu. A road leading to Gdong sna (Kangyang), a Muslim town near the Rma chu, is the border between Rta rgyugs and Bod bya tshang villages. Tibetan Rta rgyugs villagers cultivate an additional one hundred *mu* of land north of the village.

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<sup>14</sup> Rta rgyugs Muslim Village is situated in Shang Lijia Administrative Village, Khams ra Town.

<sup>15</sup> One *mu* is 0.067 hectares.



Khams ra Town is famous for its geographic features. Since 2011, local government has been reconstructing stores, houses, and roads to boost tourism (2012).



Khams ra Town on the banks of the Yellow River (2012).



Sngo rgya Reservoir (Lijia xia), thirty kilometers from Khams ra Town (2012).

## NAMES

'Rta rgyugs' literally means 'horse race' owing to the area having been used for horse races and other festivals during the time of the Rka phug *tsho dpon* 'tribal leader' before 1949. The name 'horse race' remained, and became the name of the village.

*Rka phug* may be translated as 'to make irrigation ditches' and 'above the ditch'. Local elders said there were many difficulties in digging an irrigation ditch leading water from Rka phug gram pa,<sup>16</sup> a tributary of the Rma chu 'Yellow River', through a nameless rocky mountain. After several months of hard labor, however, they succeeded. Certain Rka phug elders said the irrigation ditches to Sngo sar and Yar mkhar villages were located below the irrigation ditch to

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<sup>16</sup> *Gram pa* = riverbed. This refers to a place (Gram pa) where a big river flows all year and the source from which villagers obtain irrigation and drinking water.



Rka phug and, as time passed, the location of the irrigation ditch to the village - 'above the irrigation ditch' (*rka phug*) - became the village name. Earlier community names are unknown.

The Tibetan village, Yar mkhar, now inhabited by Muslims, was controlled by the Rka phug Chieftain in the pre-1949 era, and its residents fought under the chieftain's command. Local villages and Yar mkhar Muslim Village also held joint archery competitions before 1949. The Muslim village population grew after 1949, and the village was divided into two sections: Shang 'Upper' Lijia and Xia 'Lower' Lijia, which are located about four kilometers from Rta rgyugs Village, near Khams ra Town. Rka phug Tibetans refer to the contemporary Muslim village as Mkhar gong ma 'Upper Mkhar Village' and Mkhar zhol ma 'Lower Mkhar Village'. 'Yar mkhar' is used to refer to Yar mkhar Village, encompassing both upper and lower sections.

When current Rta rgyugs villagers moved from the agro-pastoral communities of Tsang tsa, Se rgya, and Thang mtsher (in Khams ra Town, about twenty kilometers north of Rta rgyugs Village) in about 1979 to become a part of Rka phug Administrative Village, Rta rgyugs Village had no official name. Consequently, some villagers use the term 'Rta rgyugs', which was the local term for the area where the village is currently located. Some villagers also use the Chinese term, Sandui 'Number Three Production Brigade', because Rta rgyugs Village was once the third largest administrative unit in Rka phug Administrative Village and, at that time, had the name Sandui.

## LOCAL HISTORY

Thirteen households<sup>17</sup> moved from Tsang tsa (Zangzha), Se rgya (Saijia), and Thang mtsher (Tangcai) communities in 1979. Se rgya and Thang mtsher are subdivisions of Sngo sar Dadui 'Production Brigade' Village. When Sngo sar was a tribe under the local chieftain, it included Lha sde, Se rgya, Thang mtsher, Sngo rgya, and Se rtsa<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Tsang tsa households: Sha bo rdo rje, Gro tshe, Tshon tsi, 'Jigs pa skyabs, Byams pa skyid, Rdo sba bkra shis, and Bun khrang; Se rgya households: Tshe lo, Ban drug, 'Phag mo tshe ring, and Dbang skyid srol ma; and Thang mtsher households: Phag rgya, and Rab brtan.

<sup>18</sup> Se rtsa Natural Village is part of Sngo rgya Administrative Village.

villages. Later, Ru mtsher became a *dadui*, and then became an administrative village around 1987, which included and still includes Ru mtsher, Tsang tsa, Se rgya, and Thang mtsher villages. Despite placing these communities in various administrative categories, villages continue to hold religious rituals such as 'Cham and Mchod 'du<sup>19</sup> as when they were a single tribe.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), certain villagers, including the first author's paternal and maternal grandfathers, were designated *zhwa gon* 'hat wearers'. This term references people who were publically punished and humiliated for hunting, stealing public property, and generally violating local government rules.

Government authorities urged a few households that were considered rich to move and thus serve as examples for other households to also move. 'Phags mo tshe ring said Rka phug Administrative Village asked the local government to order the fourteen households to move to Rta rgyugs in the 1970s, because villagers were afraid of losing their land to Muslims who lived nearby. This Muslim village by 2010, had grown to eighty households.

After several years of leveling land into fields, digging irrigation ditches, and planting trees near the houses, uncultivated land became cropland. However, villagers could not harvest sufficient grain to support themselves because of the soil's infertility. Poverty and hunger forced the 'Jigs pa skyabs, Byams pa skyid, and Rdo bha bkra shis households to return to their original home area.

Rka phug was previously ruled by the Rka phug Chieftain. Nor bu dgra 'dul was a name used to refer to King Ge sar<sup>20</sup> that was given to the Rka phug Chieftain by the Dgu rong (Gulang; a location in Gcan tsha County) Bla ma. Nor bu dgra 'dul was the last chieftain of the Rka phug Tribe, which included Lha grong, Sman 'gang, Ru mtsher, Tsang tsa, Dpon rgya, Mo zi, and Cung smad villages. According to local elders, the Rka phug Chieftain was known for his bravery and marksmanship. The Rka phug Tribe was involved in serious conflicts with the Do rgya Tribe, Bod bya tshang Village, and the Sngo sar Tribe. According to elders, Chieftain Nor bu dgra 'dul

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<sup>19</sup> *Sngags pa* and villagers chant and have a feast during this ritual.

<sup>20</sup> Ge sar refers to the brave lord of the legendary Kingdom of Gling. Ge sar's exploits are related in the *Epic of King Gesar* in poetry, prose, and song.

was apprehended and imprisoned by the Red Army because he had given sanctuary to a Nationalist general who fled to Rka phug Village for refuge.

Three Han Chinese households and four Tsang tsa Tibetan households, including the author's grandparents, first moved to the contemporary Rta rgyugs Village. During the last years of rule by the Rka phug Chieftain, a female Han Chinese<sup>21</sup> was taken as an indentured servant to work in the local chieftain's home. She was set free in 1949, lived in Rta rgyugs Village, and married a Han Chinese man, who moved to Rta rgyugs Village from a nearby Chinese village. The other two Han Chinese families were originally from the current Minhe Hui and Tu (Mangghuer) Autonomous County and Ledu Region and migrated to the current village seeking a better life. In 2010, there were fifteen Han Chinese households and eighteen Tibetan households. The total population was 175 residents (thirty-three households).

All Han Chinese village residents are fluent in Tibetan and communicate in Tibetan with local Tibetan villagers, are culturally Tibetan, and make offerings to Yul lha and Erlang, whose images are in Erlang Khang (discussed later) in Cung smad Village.<sup>22</sup> They also participate in funerals, archery competitions, and the Lha rtsed rituals<sup>23</sup> held by villagers. These Han families speak the Mtsho sngon Chinese dialect in their homes.

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<sup>21</sup> The names of some individuals that appear in this text have been changed or otherwise obscured.

<sup>22</sup> 'Yul lha', in this context, refers to a specific deity enshrined in Erlang Khang.

<sup>23</sup> Rituals during which a spirit medium is possessed by a local deity and an Erlang image in a sedan is carried to village households to expel bad spirits and protect the family.



Rka phug Village. The Yellow River is in the background (2012).



Rka phug Village. The Yellow River is in the background (2012).



Concrete road in Rta rgyugs Village (2012).



Electricity poles in Rta rgyugs Village (2012).



Se rgya and Thang mtsher fields in winter (2012).



A 200 year old tree that is a symbol of Dpon rgya Village (2012).

## HOUSING

### INTRODUCTION

Every home in Rta rgyugs Village is inside a rectangular adobe-wall courtyard, which provides one wall for each room in the home - several rooms built adjoining the courtyard wall. The other walls of each room are made of red brick. All homes are one story. Each home typically has a guest room, shrine, grain storeroom, kitchen, a room or rooms for livestock, and a shelter for storing farm tools and the family tractor. Walls of the dining and guest rooms are paneled with wood. A family's wealth determines the extent of paneling.

Red bricks were first used in the village in the mid-1990s as flooring and then later in wall construction. In 2012, there was a kiln near Cung smad Village, about five kilometers from Rta rgyugs Village, where villagers paid 0.04 RMB per brick.



A kiln near Cung smad Village (2012).

About ninety percent of village homes feature flat roofs made with a flat wood frame, atop of which straw is put, followed by dirt. The dirt is then softly stepped on and more dirt is added until a layer about seven centimeters thick has formed. A few households put a large piece of plastic directly over the wood frame to reduce leaks,

and then place dirt on top. However, this leads to the flat wood frame rotting more quickly than without the plastic. A few homes were built with a pitched roof covered with tiles beginning in about 2005. This style of roof was thought to be more durable and waterproof.

Beginning in about 2000, families began putting decorative ceramic tiles on the outside walls of rooms. Such tiles were purchased in Gdong sna Town for about one RMB each in 2012. The images on the tiles were of little concern - villagers bought whatever tiles were available and hired locals with the required skill to attach the tiles to the walls.

The toilet is outside the courtyard.

#### PLANNING A NEW HOUSE

When a son leaves his parents' home to establish his own family, he visits the local *bla ma*, taking soil from several locations where the new home walls might be built. The *bla ma* then decides which location is best for building a new home and indicates the direction of the door. A *sngags pa* 'lay tantric practitioner' is invited to visit the new home location. A large *bsang*<sup>24</sup> offering is made at the center of the new home site and the *sngags pa* chants for a day. He encourages the family to build new walls around the place where he made *bsang* offerings and chanted. This is called making *gtor rgyag thig*.

Village elders said the chanting beseeches permission from *sa bdag* 'land spirits' to build there. If the *sa bdag* are displeased, disasters such as death, falling into serious debt, and livestock loss may occur. In the event of such calamities, the family should consult the *bla ma*, who may suggest that the family courtyard gate be put in a new location or that the family build a '*bum khang*, a stupa- or box-like room where many clay images of deities are stored to prevent diseases and livestock loss, and to beseech wealth.

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<sup>24</sup> *Bsang* refers to a mixture of roasted barley, roasted wheat flour, sugar, and conifer needles burned as a fumigation offering to, particularly, mountain deities.





Contemporary village house, family wind flag, and a 'bum khang (center) in a courtyard (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).

#### BUILDING A COURTYARD WALL

Rooms of the family home are built against the courtyard walls, i.e., one wall of each room is a section of the courtyard wall. Thick courtyard walls thus help retain heat in winter. Walls are about four meters tall, to thwart thieves from climbing over and entering the home compound, as well as for privacy. Able-bodied villagers come and help a family build courtyard walls.

A large amount of earth is required and is often taken from the place where the courtyard walls will be built. This site is soaked with water for five to six days before the walls are built. The site of the future courtyard walls often needs to be leveled and soil is often collected here for wall construction. Moist soil is used in wall construction. Sometimes, earth may be scarce and is then transported from a location where there is uncultivated land. If this is the case, a large pile of transported earth is watered, using irrigation ditches if possible. If no ditches can be diverted to the piled earth, villagers use mules, trucks, and tractors to haul water from a nearby river and

pour it on the soil several times a day for several days before the soil is suitable for making courtyard walls.

*Gyang gzhongs* 'wood frames' and ropes are used to build courtyard walls and are borrowed, when needed, from local households. Villagers come when the household has prepared tools and the earth is sufficiently damp. They also bring tools if they have them. These tools are also borrowed from neighboring villagers without paying rental fees.

A rock weighing ten to fifteen kilograms is used as a tamping tool to make a strong foundation for the walls. Men who tamp the soil raise the rock above their head and let it fall, to pack the soil. Men take turns using the rock-tamp inside the wood frame. Next, women replace men in the wood frame. They level the soil and pack it with their feet as men stand on both sides of the walls and toss earth into the *gyang gzhongs*. Tossing the soil is thought to require more manpower in comparison with tamping the earth in *gyang gzhongs*, especially when such labor continues for ten to fifteen days with little rest.

There is no payment for villagers who help build the walls. It is considered mutual aid.

After ten to fifteen days of construction, the walls are usually completed and then the family plans to build rooms inside the courtyard walls. With regular repair such walls last for thirty years.

The host family prepares and serves good food to helpers, e.g., various vegetables are cooked with pork, and steamed buns are made fresh every morning. A meal is served around four p.m. due to the longer days in spring.

After 2010, however, the process described above began changing. Villagers are now somewhat reluctant to help each other, due to increased competition between families in building new houses. Generally, only siblings come and help each other. Villagers who do come are paid. Families who were better off financially, invited villagers to work when building a courtyard wall and paid them seventy to one hundred RMB per day in 2012.

## HOUSEHOLD SHRINES AND COURTYARD ALTARS

Nearly every household has a shrine in their home<sup>25</sup> where images of Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava, White Tara, Blue Tara, the tenth PaN chen bla ma (1938-1989), and locally famous *bla ma* such as Rka phug pandita and Rdzong nang Zhabs drung Dge 'dun Bstan pa rgya mtsho (1904-1993; Bsod nams tshe ring 2008:92-94) are displayed. Seven or fourteen copper containers of water are set before these images every morning and emptied in the afternoon. Fresh, pure water is added every morning. Rapeseed oil lamps are offered on the first and fifteenth days of every lunar month.



Newly boiled tea is offered to the *tsha gsur* in the morning (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).

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<sup>25</sup> A few families have only a table or adobe platform where offerings are made. Some families also burn *bsang* on a metal tray or in a small pot.

Every Tibetan household has an altar in the family courtyard center where *bsang* is offered early every morning to beseech protection from mountain, territorial, and protector deities, and where *tsha gsur*<sup>26</sup> is burned to beings in the '*gro ba rigs drug* 'the six realms of sentient beings'.<sup>27</sup>



A village household entrance and a pig sty built with stone and earth (left). The family's dog is under a tree to the right (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).

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<sup>26</sup> Roasted barley is placed on firewood or straw ash in a clay container. A dipper of the first-brewed tea in the morning is scattered in a circle around the container as purification.

<sup>27</sup> '*Gro ba rigs drug* refers to *mi, lha, lha ma yin, dmyal ba, yi dwags,* and *dud gro* (humans, gods, demigods, hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals, respectively) - the Six Classes of Sentient Beings.



A village household storage area (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).



The interior of a modern village house (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).



A village household gate and orchard walls (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).



A modern stove in a new village house (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).

## SLEEPING

Grandparents sleep with their unmarried family members on the *he rdze*. Married couples sleep apart from their parents. Each of the older sons establishes a new house with the assistance of their parents and siblings, and live separately from their parents' family when their children are around three years old. Such couples sleep with their children until they are five to six years old. Same sex children sleep together under the same quilt, or they might sleep separately on the same *he rdze*.

In 2012, many households used metal stoves in rooms. Smoke from such stoves passed through the *he rdze* and heated the platform where people sat, rested, ate, chatted, and slept. Historically, the platform was made of flat, black rock that absorbed heat and retained it for a long period. More recently, bricks have been used because it is convenient to do so, and the black rocks are difficult to obtain. Today, a family might have *he rdze* in two or three rooms, though they are only heated when used. The *he rdze* is about one meter high. One side adjoins the courtyard wall near the chimney that emits smoke. The front side inside the room is decorated with wood. The *he rdze* is covered with fabric carpet. *Gdan dkar* 'white carpets' made from sheep's wool show respect to guests and are put on top of the fabric carpet. Rooms with such specially outfitted *he rdze* are used for guests and also during such festivals as the New Year and at weddings when there are many visitors.

When family members sleep on a *he rdze*, the head is placed to the north, which is near the hearth or stove. The front of a *he rdze* is near a window and is offered to the oldest family member. After sleeping, bedding is folded neatly and put at the back of the *he rdze*. It is considered disrespectful to step over another person, their clothes, or bedding.



Modern village houses typically feature glass-enclosed patios that keep out dust and retain warmth in winter (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).

## EATING

Local residents often eat while sitting on short-legged chairs or stools around a short-legged wood table at the hearth, which is usually attached to the *he rdze*. The family head generally sits at the front of the hearth, followed by sons and sons-in-law of the family according to their age. Mothers and daughters often sit near the hearth where firewood is piled, and keep the hearth fire burning. Food is served to the family head first, and then to sons and daughters. Mothers eat last and wash the dishes after the meal.<sup>28</sup>

Porridge, milk tea with butter, noodles, rice, dumplings, and soup are offered in bowls. Bowls should be held - eating from a bowl on the table is considered improper.

It is considered unhealthy to eat while standing. Leaving even a small amount of food in a bowl after eating is also considered

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<sup>28</sup> Daughters and daughters-in-law are expected to help the mother do all the family chores, including cooking, serving food, and cleaning up after meals. Sons help the mother if there are no daughters or daughters-in-law in the family.



inappropriate, because it may attract *the'u rang* (described in detail later) that might create problems for the family.

Belching after a meal is accepted in the home, but is considered impolite when guests are present.

To not offer food when a guest visits is considered extremely impolite. While it is not taboo to eat at other people's homes, eating very little is considered proper. The nature of the visit and the relationship between host and guest determines what food is served and how much a guest eats. For example, if a guest and host are intimate and the guest has been invited with the understanding that a good meal and liquor will be served, the guest is expected to eat and drink well. However, if the visit is a more casual one, e.g., a neighbor drops in to borrow a farming tool and will only stay a few minutes to chat, the guest might be offered only bread and tea, which the guest might refuse.

A typical breakfast is homemade baked bread, *rtsam pa*, and a cup of milk tea. A special breakfast might include freshly baked bread or steamed buns, butter, and several stir-fried dishes of meat and vegetables. Breakfast is at around eight a.m. except during winter, when ten a.m. is common.

An ordinary lunch is baked bread with stir-fried dishes of meat and vegetables. A special lunch is rice with several stir-fried dishes of meat and vegetables. Lunch is between two and three p.m. in winter and at around noon at other times of the year.

Noodles are usually served for supper. A special supper might feature noodles, stir-fried dishes of meat and vegetables, and boiled pork, mutton, and/ or beef. Supper at around seven to eight p.m. is common but, during winter, six p.m. is common.

In 2012, villagers bought containers of milk in town and also sometimes bought bread. Instant noodles, cooked chicken legs, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, and Sprite had also entered the local diet. Villagers also often went to town on motorcycle or in the family car to have lunch or supper.



*Gor mo zhi* - bread baked in ash (Rta rgyugs Village, 2011).



*Zangs gor* - baked bread (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).



Sog sog (top) and gor dmar (bottom) – deep fried bread (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).

## SOURCES OF CASH INCOME

Most Rta rgyugs households devote about one *mu* of land to the cultivation of beans, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, garlic, zucchini, carrots, eggplants, corn, and cabbage. In spring, women put green onions and Chinese cabbage in baskets and carry them on their backs to Khams ra Town, where they sell their produce quickly because of its freshness and because no insecticides are used.<sup>29</sup>

Villagers also cultivate apples, peaches, pears, and apricots. Households with large orchards take fruit by tractor-trailers to Rma lho Mongolian Autonomous County and Rtse khog County in Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; Bla brang (Xiahe) County in Kan lho (Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province; and Tsang tsa, Se rgya, and Thang mtsher - the communities from which

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<sup>29</sup> Chemical fertilizers are used.

most Rta rgyugs villagers originally came. Fruit is exchanged for butter, cheese, barley, meat, animal skins, and yogurt in Rtse khog and Rma lho counties. These items are then sold in farming areas in Bla brang and Gcan tsha counties, and Gdong sna Town. Fruit is also exchanged for potatoes and beans in farming areas, and also used to feed swine.

Collecting and selling caterpillar fungus is a key economic activity. Every year after plowing, villagers go to Mgo log (Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; Brag dkar (Xinghai) County in Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; and Yul shul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Collectors spend about fifty days from the time they leave the village until they return on caterpillar fungus collection trips. Each collector earned 5,000-7,000 RMB in 2010. Meanwhile, elders stay at home and care for children. Some households pay older villagers to irrigate their fields and tend their houses and orchards, if no elders are in their home. Crops are beginning to bear seeds when the caterpillar fungus collectors return home.

After harvest, Rta rgyugs men and women leave for construction work in Yul shul Prefecture; Brag dkar County; Rtse khog County in Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; Gcan tsha thang Township in Gcan tsha County, Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; Zi ling City; Rta thang (Datong) Hui and Tu Autonomous County in Zi ling City; and brick and cast-iron factories in Rka phug Administrative Village. Construction jobs paid fifty to seventy RMB per day in 2010. Villagers often worked until late in the ninth lunar month, and then returned home.

## **MONASTERY, MONKS, TANTRINS, AND MEDIUMS**

Rdzong nang refers to a Dge lugs monastery founded by Rka phug Sgom chung<sup>30</sup> in Rdzong gong ma near Mo zi Village. Later, the fourth Rka phug incarnation, Blo bzang don grub (1740-1827; Bsod nams tshe ring 2008:84), moved the monastery to its current location near Cung smad Village. According to locals, a monk

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<sup>30</sup> We were unable to identify birth and death dates for the founder, the first Rka phug incarnation.

ominously fell into a canyon at the monastery's original site and died, leading to the monastery's relocation. Local informants also said that the Rka phug incarnation described the shape of the current location as resembling a resting elephant, which is why he chose to build Rdzong nang Monastery there.

Rta rgyugs villagers follow the Rnying ma and Dge lugs teachings. Every household sends one or more representatives to visit Rdzong nang Monastery on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month to worship, offer *bsang*, circumambulate the monastery, turn prayer wheels, and beseech blessings and protection from *bla ma*, who are asked to name children, give medical advice, suggest locations to collect caterpillar fungus, and chant scriptures when middle school students will soon take the university entrance exam in the hope they will score well.

*Sngags pa*, known as *dpon* locally, are tantric specialists belonging to the Rnying ma Sect. They are believed to have the power to conquer ghosts and are invited to chant scriptures when family elders and women have bad dreams.



Rdzong nang Monastery, Rka phug Administrative Village (2010).

When a household encounters such difficulties as livestock loss, children's illness, tractor accidents, or constant discord between family members, they may invite a *lha pa* 'spirit medium' to the home to perform an exorcism. There was one *lha pa* (b. 1965) in Rka phug Administrative Village in 2010. In 2009 during the Lha rtsed ritual, Cung smad Village invited a *lha pa* from a Tibetan village in Hualong Hui Autonomous County, because their own village *lha pa* was unavailable.<sup>31</sup>

At funerals, Dge lugs monks from Rdzong nang Monastery are commonly invited to chant. *Sngags pa* are generally asked to chant to expel evil spirits, for example, when a family member has recurring nightmares and when people are ill and believe that an evil spirit has made them ill. Furthermore, only *sngags pa* perform during the 'Cham ritual, described below. In 2012, there were four *sngags pa* and no Dge lugs monks from Rka phug Administrative Village.

## ERLANG

Erlang is an important deity for Tibetan residents of Rka phug Administrative Village, who frequently visit the Erlang Temple located in Cung smad Village to ask for good health and prosperity. Tibetans and their descendants who once lived in Yar mkhar Village gather, invite *lha pa*, and carry an image of Erlang in a sedan to local households during Lha rtsed, a festival dedicated to Erlang in the hope he will enjoy himself after meditating and protecting local villagers for a year. Lha rtsed is held, as described below, from the twenty-first to twenty-fifth days of the sixth lunar month, and also involves villagers gathering near the temple and singing *dmangs glu* 'traditional folk songs' and *glu shags* 'antiphonal debate songs'.

Dpon rgya, Mo zi, and Rta rgyugs villagers venerate A myes Erlang and Yul lha. The latter may be translated as 'guardian deity of a locality'. Here, it refers to a class of territorial protector deities and the name of a specific deity. Villagers believe that Yul lha and A myes Erlang are deities who are able to help them with problems that they

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<sup>31</sup> For more on *lha pa*, see Snying bo rgyal and Rino (2008). We note that there is variation in *lha pa*, for example, in Rka phug may be possessed by Erlang and then speak in Chinese.

face in life. They do not consult them for help in the next life. Every first and tenth days of each lunar month, villagers visit Erlang Khang, a temple where A myes Erlang and Yul lha deities reside in Cung smad Village, one and a half kilometers from Rta rgyugs Village. When locals meet difficulties, they typically visit and worship in Erlang Khang. Local villagers believe that A myes Erlang and Yul lha can empower and assist them in overcoming worldly difficulties and offer *bsang* to beseech protection from these two deities, who may speak through the *lha pa* when a household invites him to their home.

Living roosters and goats were burned as offerings to A myes Erlang and Yul lha until about 2000. At this time village elders said that such offerings violated Buddhist precepts, and the practice ceased.

According to local elders, Erlang Khang was located in Yar mkhar Village before the Tibetan inhabitants left and its subsequent resettlement by Muslims. These local elders said that when they were children, they attended Lha rtsed in Yar mkhar Village, which later experienced internal strife unrelated to Lha rtsed and some villagers were killed. Villagers then divided into several groups and migrated to such neighbor villages as Brag khang sna kha, Ru mtsher, and Rka phug. Pious, former Yar mkhar Tibetan villagers then moved the A myes Erlang image near Rka phug Rdzong nang Monastery, where monks cared for it. Because the Erlang statue was very heavy, villagers divided it into pieces to facilitate its relocation. Rdzong nang Monastery monks hauled water from the nearby Rka phug River, which they mixed with soil to make packed earthen walls for a temple to house A myes Erlang. The temple was completed after several months of hard labor. Monks offered *bsang* in the temple in ten-day shifts in turn and continued caring for Erlang Temple until 1958, when many monasteries and temples were destroyed, including Erlang Khang, leaving only the walls.

When villagers began rebuilding monasteries in the late 1980s, they also planned to build a temple for A myes Erlang. However, Yar mkhar Tibetan Village had by then ceased to exist, as mentioned earlier, and there was disagreement over the site for a new Erlang temple. One or two years passed before it was finally agreed to build the temple in Cung smad Village, because the number of Tibetan households in Cung smad originally from Yar mkhar Village

outnumbered the largest group in Cung smad.

During the Lha rtse'd ritual, four males over the age of ten carry the Erlang sedan from Erlang Khang to a threshing ground near the temple and visit households originally from Yar mkhar Village. The sedan is placed on a table the host family has prepared inside the home compound, *bsang* is offered, and the contents of a bottle of liquor are scattered over the sedan by the oldest male in the household. A brick of tea, *kha btags*,<sup>32</sup> and money are also offered to Erlang when the sedan leaves. Household members may prostrate, kneel, kowtow, and/ or touch their foreheads to the sedan, beseeching protection and blessings from A myes Erlang.



Walls that once housed an Erlang image, near Rdzong nang Monastery. Erlang Deity is now cared for by former Yar mkhar Tibetan villagers who now reside in Cung smad Village (2012).

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<sup>32</sup> A strip of silk offered to honored guests, particularly *bla ma*, and close friends as a token of respect. *Kha btags* are also offered to deities at temples and monasteries.





The Six Sacred Syllables on a stone near Cung smad Village (2012).

## GHOSTS

### INTRODUCTION

People are endowed with *rnam shes* 'soul' at birth. They may become a '*dre* 'ghost' when the soul lingers in Bar do, the state of birth and death, for seven weeks after death, particularly when the soul is obsessed with their spouse, children, relatives, property, or the desire for revenge.

A wandering ghost may harm livestock and villagers, and may soon cause the death of mules, milk cows, horses, goats, sheep, and yaks. The ghost may also cause quarreling and killing in a community.

Dogs are thought to be able to see roaming ghosts in dark places, because of the yellow spots above their eyes. They howl like wolves if they see a ghost roaming in the village.

A person is protected by a *lus lha* 'body deity'. When the *lus lha* is weak, that person is susceptible to possession, loses

consciousness, and the ghost then speaks, revealing its name and harmful things it has done to family members and villagers. The possessed person may laugh when the home is quiet, run back and forth in the courtyard, and climb up the ladder to the house roof and back down again. The ghost leaves and returns; it does not stay constantly in the person's body. The person feels ill, lacks energy when the ghost leaves, and has no memory of what happened while possessed.

Before seeking help from a *bla ma* or a *sngags pa*, villagers try to deal with a ghost by using a stout string to bind the afflicted person's thumbs together, which compels the ghost to reply to questions. Villagers order the ghost to leave immediately. Villagers may also hold the possessed person and beat their head with a burning broom to expel the ghost. Another treatment involves pressing the possessed person's *ya mchu bar ma'i ngag lam* 'philtrum' to expel the ghost. When ghosts are too strong for such measures, local villagers invite well-known *sngags pa* to expel them.



Prayer wheels in Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang (Dpon rgya Village, 2012).

A family representative is sent to a trusted *bla ma* to seek advice when ghosts continue troubling a family. Villagers often invite three *sngags pa* from Dpal rgyal gong ba Monastery<sup>33</sup> in Khams ra, if the *bla ma* advises holding a ritual to vanquish ghosts. The *sngags pa* brings a drum with strings attached on opposite sides to hang from the ceiling just above the *he rdze*. A *sngags pa* holds and beats the drum with a mallet, while holding one end of the string. One *sngags pa* holds a *sbug chal* 'cymbal', which he beats with a beater when chanting starts. The third *sngags pa* holds a bell and vajra.

One of the *sngags pa* uses a religious implement made from a yak horn. The horn is emptied and items described as sand mixed with blood, a knife that took hundreds of lives, a thousand poisonous substances, and 10,000 blood substances are put inside the yak horn. The *sngags pa* shakes the yak horn when they chant together.

Names of the ghosts are written on *ming shing* 'name tokens' that are small triangular coin-size pieces of wood. *N+ri*, a tantric syllable, is engraved at the top of each *ming shing*. A pot is set up, rapeseed oil is added and heated, and two sharp swords are crossed and put over the pot. A *rkyal ba* 'goat-skin container' that is free of hair is also readied. The skin is sewn together, leaving only a small opening. The skin becomes round and resembles a balloon when the sewing is finished. Five to seven triangular pieces of wood with dead people's names are placed in the goat-skin bag. A string is used to bind the opening of the goat-skin bag shut after the names of the ghosts are placed inside. Handcuffs, shackles, a double-bladed sword, a bow, a pair of arrows, the front leg of a goat with attached meat, and a *zangs 'bud* 'bullet casing' must be prepared before the ritual begins.

*Sngags pa* chant '*dul*, a scripture for subduing ghosts. They conquer the ghosts by chanting such scriptures as '*Jigs byed*, *Rta mgrin*, or *Dam can stobs ldan dbyings 'gugs*. These are names of deities as well as the names of the scriptures.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Dpal rgyal gong ba snyags khang nges gsang rdo rje theg mchog gling. Such local lay Rnying ma monasteries are generally smaller than local Dge lugs monasteries and physical infrastructure also differs.

<sup>34</sup> Villagers use deity names to refer to specific scriptures devoted to

## MEALS FOR SNGAGS PA AND RELATIVES

Relatives come to the afflicted family to assist during the days the *sngags pa* chants. Male members go to the nearest town and purchase *rtsam pa*, butter, candy, yogurt, salt, and vegetables. Some men stay near the home where the *sngags pa* chants, wait to bring what the *sngags pa* requests, take *gtor ma* outside the house, and serve food at appropriate times. Female relatives make dough on a large cutting board, make dumplings (both meat and chive dumplings), replenish the cooking fire, and boil tea. Dumplings, butter, *rtsam pa*, yogurt, and milk tea are main foods for *sngags pa*. If the *sngags pa* are vegetarian, the family prepares appropriate dishes.

A large cooking fire is made in the courtyard and a large pot of *mchod* 'soup with radish and other vegetables' is prepared. Relatives eat whenever hungry. Deep-fried and steamed bread are also put on wood tables on the house porch for relatives.

## CALLING GHOSTS<sup>35</sup>

Three *sngags pa* sit on white felt spread on the *he rdze* when all is readied. Their *ral pa* 'long hair' is wrapped around and over their heads. Some *sngags pa* have genuine long hair. Most *sngags pa*, however, lack *ral pa*. They wear a strip of red cloth around their heads and also wear red robes.

Long, narrow scripture books with wood covers are set on a wood table in the center of the *he rdze*. *Lha bshos* 'dough effigies' made from *rtsam pa* are put in small copper containers and placed in several lines atop the table. *Sngags pa* sit around three sides of the table and chant scriptures devoted to *Rta mgrin*, '*Jigs byed*, or *Dam can stobs ldan dbyings 'gugs* for three to seven days, commanding the roaming souls to gather in a certain place and atone for the evil things that they have done. It is much harder to subdue the ghost of a layman who chanted scriptures when he was alive, because the ghost chants what the *sngags pa* chant. In such cases, the *sngags pa* may

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these deities.

<sup>35</sup> See Kondro Tsering (2012:101-102) for an account that has striking similarities with this description.

need to chant for a week to subdue them. The ghost is caught in three days if it is weaker than the *sngags pa*.

Rgyal mtshan and Gu ru jointly gave this account:

A middle-aged Ru mtsher villager died. He had been a monk before becoming a layman. He became a ghost. Several relatives saw him wandering in the corners of the grieving family's home. Other relatives reported seeing him in the stables feeding the calves with dried grass. Some female relatives saw him staring at them through the windows while they were doing chores. The family then invited a local *sngags pa*, but he was unable to subdue the ghost. Local people said that the ghost was not easily defeated because he had been a monk while alive.

Several days later, a young man who was a relative of the bereaved family suddenly became very ill. The family invited *sngags pa* and monks to chant. However, this was in vain and the young man died. Afterwards, the ghost spoke after possessing a villager and said he had killed the young man. This was followed by the death of several yaks, mules, and horses in the village. The whole village was so frightened that they dared not go out after dark. Villagers stayed at home and did not visit each other in the evenings as they usually did.

Another local villager was possessed by the ghost and said that the family had not offered him food and clothes after his death and that he had only received a fox hat from the funeral, which he had bought when he was alive. He said he was hungry, thirsty, and afraid to continue his journey, so he had returned. Hearing this, the family invited a powerful *bla ma* to subdue the ghost and sponsored a lavish week of mourning, offering meals to local villagers, and visiting such monasteries as Bla brang and Sku 'bum. After the *bla ma* came and chanted for several days, the village regained peace.

Three *sngags pa* chant from morning till dusk. A man comes into the room every thirty minutes or so to change water offerings, throw *gtor ma* in the direction *sngags pa* indicate, and ask the *sngags pa* at what time they wish to eat.

Seven to ten older male villagers begin to visit Tibetan households at around eleven-thirty p.m. They enter the guest room, family members' rooms, granary, stables, storerooms, orchards, empty rooms, and straw storage rooms, because such places are thought to harbor ghosts.

A man at the front holds a bow and two arrows, one brings the front goat leg, another holds handcuffs and shakes them, one blows the bullet casing to make a shrill whistling sound, one holds the goat-skin bag with the names inside and shakes it, and another man drags the shackles, which make scraping sounds. At the corner of a home or dark place in the village, they call the names of the ghosts, and say, "Come to us! Follow us! We will give you delicious food to eat. We will give you delicious drinks and comfortable rooms in which to rest. Come to us! Follow us!"

These men must be brave. It disrupts the ritual if one is cowardly. 'Phags mo tshe ring gave this account:

One balmy night, ten village elders visited every household with their weapons, making endless whistles with the bullet casing and clanking noises with the shackles and handcuffs. They called the names of the ghosts and said, "Follow us, come to us. You will have delicious food to eat; you will have comfortable rooms to rest in." The last person in the group dragged the shackles. Everybody was afraid and very uncomfortable. When they reached one particular household, stones were piled at the corner of the house door, but they didn't pay any attention to them. When they left the household, the shackles got caught among the stones. The man pulling the shackles was terrified, jerked them once or twice to no avail, and then raced home. Meanwhile the other men in the group stampeded back to the *sngags pa*, quickly reassembled, and identified who was missing. Seven village elders went to the missing man's home and found him wrapped in a quilt in bed, sweat dripping from his forehead. When villagers asked what had happened, he answered, "The shackles got stuck and I couldn't move them. I was terrified. I thought the ghost was pulling them, so I ran home."

#### PUNISHING AND EXPELLING GHOSTS

The elders visit several households, return, and give the *rkyal ba* to a *sngags pa*, who approaches the heated pot on the fire, removes the string on the *rkyal ba*, and scatters the *ming shing* into the heated pot. *Ming shing* moving up and down in the pot, indicates that the ghost with that name has been caught and is now under the *sngags pa's* control. The *sngags pa* then chant more vigorously, beating the drums loudly, and shaking the *dril bu* and *Da ru*.

Some *ming shing* give no indication the souls of those whose names they bear were caught in the *rkyal ba*. A *sngags pa* returns these to the elders, who then resume visiting additional households. They stop visiting when the *sngags pa* say all *ming shing* move up and down in the pot. Elders may visit neighboring villages if the *ming shing* show no signs of movement. If they cannot capture all the ghosts in one night, they continue the following evenings.

When all the ghosts are caught, *sngags pa* punish them by heating the pot with a big fire and putting *ming shing* in heated rapeseed oil. When the pot becomes very hot, the ghosts make pathetic sounds - some cry loudly and beg for help, which only *sngags pa* hear. At this moment, the *sngags pa* orders the ghosts to confess the harmful things they have done to local people. The ghosts often then submit and tell the *sngags pa* everything that they have done. At this time, the ghosts may describe how they were caught by the *sngags pa* when they fled, as illustrated by this account from Rgyal mtshan:

One beautiful spring, some ghosts lingered in the village, disturbing our usual tranquility. These ghosts started to take the lives of healthy horses, sheep, and goats, which made villagers fretful. As a result, a famous *bla ma* and more than twenty monks were invited by Tsang tsa Village to vanquish the roaming ghosts. Monks and local villagers pitched tents on the threshing ground and chanted scriptures for several days. The *bla ma* began vanquishing the ghosts and, after seven days of strenuous work, he finally caught one particularly recalcitrant ghost.

When the *bla ma* questioned the ghost that had resisted capture, it said, "I have been running from home to home, in the dark corners, holding to the wood of houses with both hands and feet. After several days, I was really afraid and roamed to the remotest place in the village - a big cave by the fields where strong tree roots hang down. That night, I clutched the tree roots with my hands and feet, trying to avoid the chanting. When it turned very dark, monks chanted and the *bla ma* said, "*Khub!*" When I heard this, I lost control of my feet. When the *bla ma* yelled, "*Khub!*" a second time, it seemed a big wind was howling, the roots broke, and I was thrown into a big goat-skin bag in an instant. I was then tossed into a hot pot and roasted. Then, they put me into heated rapeseed oil and my body was almost burned

up. I was expelled to a faraway place. I'm going very far away."<sup>36</sup>

The ghosts are not killed when *sngags pa* or a *bla ma* catch them, for it is a sin to do so. Instead, they are banished to distant places. Sometimes, *sngags pa* put the ghosts in bottles and bury them in remote places where they cannot bother anyone.

Local residents may also invite *lha pa* to conquer ghosts. The *lha pa* wears his hair in a queue and wears brightly colored clothes with wide sleeves. He wears two strips of silk that are crossed at the chest, go over his shoulders, under his arms, and are tied at this back. The *lha pa* chants scriptures on the *he rdze* until he is possessed by Yul lha or Erlang. He shakes when he is possessed. The *lha pa* usually tells family members in the local Tibetan dialect what needs to be brought but, sometimes he speaks in Chinese, which indicates that he is possessed by Erlang.

Windows and doors must be closed when a *lha pa* vanquishes ghosts. There should be no light in the room. The *lha pa* holds a *rlung ras* 'wind flag', a religious flag used to change the direction of the wind. A pot is set up, filled with rapeseed oil, and heated. The *lha pa* takes a mouthful of liquor and spits it into the bubbling rapeseed oil, creating a burst of flame. It seems that the *lha pa* is breathing fire. He then uses the *rlung ras* to spread the fire in every direction in the home. Ghosts fear fire and do not approach the family again.

#### AVOIDING PURSUIT BY GHOSTS

Ghosts often follow people to homes when darkness approaches. This is particularly true when a soul has become a wandering ghost and roams the village. Family members with weak *lus lha* are targets. They often dream of being chased by spiders, dogs, and hooting owls, and frequently feel sick. In the account below, Rdo rje don grub describes how his mother taught him to avoid pursuit by a ghost while he was a primary school pupil.

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<sup>36</sup> *Sngags pa* are believed to be able to communicate with the ghosts while they are in the heated oil. The ghosts do whatever the *sngags pa* say and confess what they have done. Only *sngags pa* are able to hear these confessions. Later, tells the *sngags pa* tells villagers what the ghosts said.



I was around twelve years old when I attended grade six in primary school. The school had extra evening review classes before the middle school entrance examination. There were only three grade six students from my village, including me. We went to evening classes together after supper.

When I reached the door of my home after evening class, I saw black ash from burning stalks piled in front of the closed door. Mother came and opened the door just after I knocked. She did not let me come inside until I stepped over the ash. I was confused. Once I got inside I asked, "What's that ash for, Mother?"

"There has been a terrible killing in our neighbor village. People say the dead woman has become a ghost. Villagers have heard her singing, endlessly laughing, and pathetically crying late every night. I'm afraid she might follow you, because you students are going in and out in the evenings. Don't hum when you return after class. The ghost may follow you if you do," Mother said.

"OK, what else should I avoid at night?" I asked.

"Don't look back frequently when you walk home," Mother said.

"Why? I often do that when I hear something behind me," I said.

"There are two eternally shining lamps on everybody's shoulders. If you look back constantly, then your chin may knock over the lamps. As a result, the ghost follows you," Mother said.

"Are ghosts afraid of lights?" I asked.

Mother nodded affirmatively.

I tried to do what Mother said. Sometimes, I looked back without paying much attention, but when I remembered the ghost would follow me, I felt uncomfortable and tried to heed Mother's advice.

## THE'U RANG<sup>37</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

*The'u rang* are cat-like spirits who bring assistance, wealth, and fortune to families that invite and venerate them. *The'u rang yar skyel* do good things for a family, and poor families may invite and venerate such *the'u rang*, hoping to become rich. *The'u rang mar skyel* cause misfortune and disaster to a family or relatives when they are offended. Such deities can be inherited and a family may try to expel such deities because few villagers approve of such worship making it difficult, for example, for a family to find suitable spouses for their children. Many villagers dislike families that worship *the'u rang* because they are thought to bring fortune to a family by stealing from other families.

### INVITING THE'U RANG

A small amount of water is boiled in a pot, several bowls of barley are added, and the mixture is stirred until the barley completely absorbs the water. When the barley grains are very hot and swollen, they are wrapped in a towel or cloth to retain the heat. The pot is reheated and a small amount of dried soil is put in the pot when it is very hot. The boiled barley is then put back into the pot. When heated soil and boiled barley make contact, the barley pops like popcorn. The popped barley is taken to a crossroad and scattered from the crossroad back to the family's courtyard, and then to a room where the remaining barley is put in a cloth bag, sewn up, and venerated. This bag is thought to be the residence of the *the'u rang*, which is venerated as a wealth spirit.

### EXPELLING THE'U RANG

Monkeys and *the'u rang* are considered enemies. For this reason, families hang pictures of monkeys holding a *the'u rang's* head or

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<sup>37</sup> This section on *the'u rang* is derived primarily from information provided by Rgyal mtshan and other information Rdo rje don grub heard from villagers.

mutilated body over their courtyard gate when they want to expel or prevent theft by *the'u rang*. Sometimes, especially at night, villagers put what they believe to be monkey eyebrows passed down from their ancestors<sup>38</sup> around an oil lamp or on a light bulb. According to village elders, when *the'u rang* are about to enter the house, they encounter the monkey images, which prevent them from entering. Villagers may also co-operate to expel *the'u rang*, as illustrated in the account below:

During winter, a family wanted to expel the *the'u rang* in their home and invited a *sngags pa*, who suggested that the family find a time when the *the'u rang* would be outside the home.

One night, when every family member was gathered around a table, the family head said, "I feel like having fresh grain these days, but fresh grain is hard to find because it is winter."

Everyone nodded in agreement, emphasizing their desire for fresh grain.

Their *the'u rang* heard this and immediately set out to a distant place to look for fresh grain. *The'u rang* can reach distant places in an instant. The *the'u rang* picked some fresh grain and happily returned home to find thousands of flames around the family courtyard walls, which were actually butter lamps set by the family under the *sngags pa*'s instructions. The deity was thus unable to enter the home ever again.

Bde skyid mtsho gave the following account:

Long ago, a family who made their own barley liquor had a new bride. Every time, after making fresh barley liquor, the mother-in-law filled a small cup of fresh liquor and placed it in a wood cabinet as an offering to the *the'u rang*. One day, the mother-in-law set a fresh cup of liquor in the wood cabinet and left. A bit later, the new bride noticed that the cup placed in the cabinet was empty. She was surprised. Not knowing what had happened,

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<sup>38</sup> Village elders said that 'monkey eyebrows' were bought from hunters before 1949, and have been kept from that time. A small bowl is turned upside down, oil is poured inside the bottom rim, and a cotton wick is placed in the oil and lit. The eyebrows are placed near the wick. The light is then thought to radiate through the eyebrows, frightening away *the'u rang*.

she filled the cup, and put it back in its former place. When she looked at it a bit later, the liquor had again vanished, so she filled it again. When she opened the wood cabinet the third time, she found a tiny cat-like animal collapsed in the cabinet. It seemed that this creature had drunk the liquor. Without knowing what the animal was, she tossed it into the hearth fire. The creature made agonizing sounds as it slowly died.

Afterwards, every member of that family fell seriously ill and died one by one.

Rgyal mtshan provided this related account of a family ridding itself of a *the'u rang yar skyel* and, as in the previous account, how all the family members eventually died.

Once a *the'u rang yar skyel* lived in a home. Since no one in the tribe would agree to give a bride to the family's only son, the family tried everything in their power to get rid of the *the'u rang*. One day they devised a plan to send the creature to a distant place. At the usual dinnertime, they put a cup of liquor in the cabinet where the *the'u rang* lived. Knowing that it was listening, the family head said, "Now it's time to build a new house. I heard of some very special wood in Rgya nag<sup>39</sup> that can be carved into whatever you want. It would be wonderful if we had such wood."

At midnight, all the family members got up and checked to see if the *the'u rang* had set out to get the special wood and, indeed, it was gone. The family then invited monks from a nearby village to perform a ritual to prevent the *the'u rang's* return. They put sacred mantras carved in red clay on the courtyard walls.

They heard loud moaning from outside at about three in the morning. When they went outside the next morning the only thing they saw was the special wood they had mentioned the previous night. The *the'u rang* was gone. They were happy that they could now surely get a bride for their son, however, after several years, they had all died.

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<sup>39</sup> Rgya nag refers to China and, currently, in the sense of inner China.

## A YEAR IN HORSE RACE VILLAGE

### LO SAR AND *LAB TSE*

The year begins with the festive Lo sar 'New Year' period, which lasts fifteen days. Villagers visit each other for the first three days and celebrate by wearing their best clothes, eating the best food available, drinking beer and liquor, and singing. For the remaining days of Lo sar, villagers visit local monasteries, and also hold weddings and archery competitions (described below).

On the third or sixth day of the first lunar month, male villagers visit the *lab tse* on nearby Khams ri Mountain, which is considered the highest mountain in the vicinity of the four natural villages that comprise Rka phug Administrative Village. Tsang tsa, Se rgya, and Thang mtsher villages are located at the bottom of Khams ri Mountain. The Khams ri *lab tse* is a round, brick structure that is about one meter tall with a hollow interior, and is about two meters in diameter. Stones are added to support large, long poles resembling arrows that are thrust inside and bushes from which *kha btags* and prayer flags are hung. Prayer flags are also tied to flag poles planted in the ground on the left and right sides of the *lab tse*. A *bsang khang*, a square altar made from concrete and red bricks, is several meters north of the *lab tse*. During the first lunar month, male villagers renew the *lab tse* by adding wood poles resembling arrows and inserting birch-tree branches decorated with sheep's wool.

The Khams ri *lab tse* is about twenty kilometers from Rta rgyugs Village. More than a hundred households offer *bsang* to A myes Khams ri and place *bsang rtsi* on this altar. *Rlung rta* 'wind horses' are thrown into the air. Local men visit the *lab tse* frequently throughout the year and offer *bsang* to A myes Khams ri, beseeching blessings, for example, when students take university entrance examinations or families face difficulties.



Khams ri Lab tse. Se rgya, Thang mtsher, Sngo rgya, Lha sde, and Se rtsa villages renew Khams ri Lab tse by adding poles resembling arrows and inserting bushes decorated with sheep's wool annually on the third day or the sixth day of the first lunar month (2012).



*Bsang* offered to Khams ri Deity (2012).



A myes Brag dmar Lab tse in winter. Dpon rgya villagers venerate Brag dmar Deity (2012).



Cung smad Village Lab tse was renewed in 2011 by inserting poles resembling arrows and wrapping new cloth around the poles (2012).



Khams ri Lab tse altar (2012).





*Rlung rta* offered while circumambulating Khams ri Lab tse (2012).



*Rlung rta* at Khams ri Lab tse (2012).



Wind flag printed with Tibetan scriptures atop a mountain by Srin po Lab tse (2012).

#### AGRICULTURAL WORK BEGINS

Agricultural work begins after the Lo sar period. After piling up *lud* 'manure'<sup>40</sup> (produced by goats, cows, donkeys, mules, and pigs) near the livestock enclosure for a year, villagers pulverize the resulting clods of manure with *lcags khem* 'shovels' and *o rdung* 'mallets'. Men and boys put pulverized manure in *sle bo* 'handmade wicker baskets' and load them on the backs of women and older girls. Such loads weigh twelve to twenty-five kilograms. The manure is dumped in the fields and made into small mounds. For distant fields, Rta rgyugs villagers put manure in sacks and bags, and load them on donkeys and mules. It often takes two or three days to complete transporting manure to the fields.

Villagers shovel the manure in piles at one-meter intervals. The piles are then covered with soil to prevent the manure from blowing away. Manure nurtures the crops and keeps the soil soft.

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<sup>40</sup> *Lud* is a term that has also come to include chemical fertilizers as they become more commonly used.

In 2012, however, almost every village family used a tractor to haul manure to the fields, put it in big piles, and then spread it over the fields on the day fields were sown or on the previous day. Furthermore, fewer families raised livestock in 2012, and thus the amount of manure was limited.

Rta rgyugs villagers purchase five to seven bags of fertilizer per household annually in Gdong sna. Every bag weighs about seventy kilograms. Two to three family heads go together to purchase fertilizers, driving a tractor pulling a trailer that can haul about 1,000 kilograms. They also purchase 'bu sman 'insecticide' and mix it with grain seeds on the morning of sowing day.

### 'CHAM

Once these preparations have been made, villagers participate in the annual 'Cham ritual - masked religious dances that take place in Dpal rgyal gong ba Monastery and Se rtsa, Rnying ma monasteries in Khams ra. 'Cham is thought by villagers to serve multiple functions, including appeasing and delighting deities through dance. Locals solicit such deities' protection to ensure good harvests and to expel evil spirits from their communities.



'Cham is held annually on the seventeenth day of the first lunar month at Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang (Dpon rgya Village, 2012).

The ritual is held on the sixteenth day of the first lunar month in Se rtsa and on the seventeenth day in Dpal rgyal gong ba Monastery. Local elders said the ritual originated from a Khams area where renowned *bla ma* were expert in such religious dance. *Sngags pa* from Rka phug and Se rtsa villages previously visited the Khams monasteries to receive instructions from 'Cham practitioners there. Such visits no longer occur and the history of local 'Cham is unclear.

'Cham preparations begin on the eleventh day of the first lunar month when *sngags pa* gather in Dpal rgyal gong ba Monastery and chant '*Khor ba dbyings sgrol* - a scripture believed capable of stopping storms and expelling evil spirits - until the seventeenth day of the first lunar month. Each *sngags pa* wears a strip of red cloth around his head, a *tsha ru* 'lambskin robe', and a red cloth robe over the *tsha ru*. *Sngags pa* from Lha grong, Sman 'gang, Ru mtsher, Tsang tsa, Dpon rgya, Mo zi, Cung smad, and Rta rgyugs villages must attend the ritual.

A large amount of *bsang* is offered in the dance courtyard center on the eleventh day and kept burning for seven days. Thousands of *gtor ma* 'dough effigies' are made by *sngags pa* and placed before deity images in the monastery during these days. 'Cham begins in the monastery on the twelfth day. There is no audience.



Incense offering in the courtyard center (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).

Mthun 'Cham 'Harmonious Dance' starts in the morning. *Khro bo* and *khro mo* 'wrathful deity' dancers wear masks and hold weapons. Dgra 'Cham 'Enemy Dance' commences in the late afternoon. At this time, a *nya bo*, a human-like dough effigy that embodies malevolent spirits, is brought to the courtyard center and *khro bo* and *khro mo* dancers use knives to chop the *nya bo* into nine pieces, thus destroying the embodied evil. This is repeated until the seventeenth day, when the dancers gather in the courtyard and an audience of several hundred congregates. There is no strict rule on how many *sngags pa* should attend, however, all the *sngags pa* who are physically able generally do attend. When the *sngags pa* appear in the courtyard at the beginning of 'Cham, a *sngags pa* holds incense in one hand and a *dril bu* 'bell' in the other and leads them. He is accompanied by two *tsi 'bud mkhan* 'trumpeters' and two *sngags pa* with *dung dkar* 'white conch shells'. Eleven *sngags pa* with *sbug chal* 'cymbals' follow. Five of these *sngags pa* with cymbals remain on the platform when 'Cham dances commence. Three *sngags pa* holding medium-sized *mga* 'goat-skin drums' come to and stay on the platform when the masked dance begins. One *sngags pa* with *nor bu* 'treasure' (a painted image of jewels), and a *bla ma* with a *bum pa* 'vase' and *gdugs* 'parasol' are followed by two *sngags pa* holding *rgyal mtshan* 'victory banners'. Two boys between the ages of seven and ten with *Da ru* 'small drum with two attached strikers' follow. Two *dung chen* 'large trumpets' are put on the roof near the monastery gate and are sounded by two *sngags pa* who appeared in the courtyard at the beginning of the ritual.

A *dbu mdzad* 'chant initiator' is chosen from among the *sngags pa*. He must have a high-pitched voice to initiate the chanting and must know the chanting rhythms and melodies. The *dbu mdzad* chants alone and slowly at the beginning with two cymbals, and at a certain rhythm as indicated by a book placed on the lead table. Other *sngags pa* follow the *dbu mdzad*. The 'Cham performers dance according to the *sngags pa*'s beats and chants. The chant initiator often sits in the middle among the *sngags pa*. Each of the other *sngags pa* holds a *Da ru* and chants. A goat was offered to the chant initiator about twenty years ago according to local elders, however, in 2007, the goat was replaced with about 200 RMB.

The *khri pa* or *dge skos*<sup>41</sup> holds a stick used to beat the dancers if they do not dance properly, and oversees matters that occur during the ritual, such as meals and rest periods. All performers respect and obey him. The *dge skos* is often the oldest *sngags pa* in the monastery. A new *dge skos* is chosen every three years and serves a three-year term of duty.

A *sngags pa* must serve as a dancer for thirty-six years or so because he must dance for three years wearing the same deity mask (*'ug pa*, *shwa*, and *keng rus* are not included in this equation). However, the time may be reduced if the *sngags pa* dances exceptionally well, in which case he may wear different masks without wearing each for three years. In such cases, ten to thirteen years are needed to wear all the masks and perform the roles each mask signifies. After retirement, the *sngags pa* is expected to attend the dance ritual until he is very old. Masked dancers might be paid to perform if a dancer is unable to participate. In the past, if a dancer could not participate, other 'Cham dancers replaced him, because there were many talented 'Cham dancers among the *sngags pa*. Nowadays, 'Cham performers have decreased in number. A paid performer was given 200 RMB in 2010.

The dancers are forbidden to leave the monastery during the 'Cham ritual, however, they may receive permission if there are pressing issues they must deal with. Dancers are expected to abstain from sexual intercourse during this period and are not allowed to smoke, drink liquor, or eat meat during the seven days of ritual. Some elder *sngags pa* have *mtshams khang* 'place for retreat' in the monastery yard and stay there. Most young *sngags pa* lack their own rooms, thus elder *sngags pa*'s rooms are crowded with *sngags pa* during the seven days.

Practice periods for 'Cham are on the twentieth day of the eleventh lunar month and the fifth day of the first lunar month. Practice continues for about a week each time with older 'Cham dancers teaching and supervising the new dancers' movements.

There are nineteen masks and each represents a particular deity. A mold is made. Glue is mixed with dry soil. Afterwards, layers of cloth are put on the clay mold between layers of the glue-soil

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<sup>41</sup> In the local context, this person is understood to be the 'head abbot'/'disciplinarian'.

mixture. The masks are put in bright sunshine to dry and might also be placed near the hearth in a monastery, where they are made. When the glue dries, the clay mold is removed. The resulting masks are then decorated and painted with their characteristic shapes and colors. The masks for the two villages are listed in Table 3.



The *dge skos* holds a stick on 'Cham day (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Mtshams khang* for *sngags pa* (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



Table 3. 'Cham masks in Se rtsa and Rka phug villages. X indicates that the village does not employ that mask in its 'Cham.

Mask	Mask	Se rtsa Village	Rka phug Village
<i>'ug pa</i>	owl	•	•
<i>bdud</i>	devil, demon	•	•
Brag dmar	the mountain deity of Dpon rgya Village	X	•
<i>btsan</i>	spirit, demon	•	•
Dam can mgar dmar	protector deity	X	•
Dam can rdo legs pa	protector deity	•	X
Dam can mgar nag	protector deity	X	•
Dmag zor rgyal mo	female deity	•	•
Gza'/ Drang srong <sup>42</sup>	nine-headed creature	•	•
<i>keng rus</i>	skeleton	•	•
Khams ri	mountain deity	•	X
<i>khro bo</i>	male wrathful deity	•	•
<i>khro mo</i>	female wrathful deity	•	•
<i>klu</i>	water spirit	•	•
Lha mo ri ma de	female deity	•	X
<i>pho rog</i>	raven	•	•
<i>shwa</i>	stag	•	•
Sngags srung	protector deity	•	•
Srin po	Tsang tsa Village's mountain deity <sup>43</sup>	•	•

<sup>42</sup> *Gza'* is the local name and is locally understood to be in the category of non-human spirits.

<sup>43</sup> Six to eight hours by horse is required to reach this mountain from Rta rgyugs Village.

This list shows that masks for both communities are very similar. The masks are placed in the courtyard on the seventeenth day of the first lunar month. Locals offer *kha btags*, small-sized *gos* 'silk', and larger-sized *nyal thul phyi ma* 'cloth for quilt covers' to the masks when worn during 'Cham and during offering occasions to local mountain deities and *gzhi bdag* 'local deities', beseeching blessings and protection. The cloth offerings are tied or bound to the sashes the dancers wear. The dancers now own these offerings.

Villages<sup>44</sup> are responsible in turn for providing food for the *sngags pa*. There are usually ten to fifteen cooks from the host village who prepare '*bras thug* 'boiled rice mixed with butter, sugar, raisins, and jujubes'<sup>45</sup> in a large pot on the thirteenth, fifteenth, and seventeenth days of the first lunar month. The cooks get up at around four a.m. to make tea and cook *mchod* soup on the eleventh day of the first lunar month. When the *sngags pa* finish chanting at dawn, the food must be ready. The cooks hurry to cook '*bras thug*, because it takes time and the *sngags pa* have lunch soon after breakfast.

*Sngags pa* choose a new ritual organizer once every three years on the auspicious thirteenth day. Residents from the eight villages come and offer *bsang* on the fifteenth day. On the seventeenth day, all 'Cham dancers gather in the courtyard and an audience gathers from the eight villages and other neighboring villages<sup>46</sup> at the monastery. '*Bras thug* is prepared during these three days. Mutton was put on trays on rows of wood tables before 2004. Afterwards, *sngags pa* stopped eating meat during all rituals. At present, noodles, *rtsam pa*, butter, and sugar are prepared during the seven days.

Each household prepares 200 *gor dmar* and a half kilogram of rapeseed oil and brings them to the monastery in Rka phug Administrative Village. Meals are offered to people from the eight villages on the seventeenth day. The cooks also invite their relatives and acquaintances to have tea and '*bras thug* at lunch.

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<sup>44</sup> Lha grong, Sman 'gang, Ru mtsher, Tsang tsa, Dpon rgya, Mo zi, Cung smad, and Rta rgyugs.

<sup>45</sup> Historically, villagers added *gro ma* when making '*bras thug*. However, in recent years, jujubes have been used because they are cheap and easily available.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Do rgya and Brag khang sna kha villages.

'Cham begins when *khro bo* and *khro mo* appear in the courtyard, accompanied by cymbals, *rnga*, and *dung chen* played by *sngags pa* sitting on platforms made of bricks about 1.5 meters high around the courtyard. *Khro bo* and *khro mo* are considered protectors against the evil spirits that might disturb the ritual and linger around the dance area. The next performers are *keng rus*, who are understood to be protectors of souls of the dead and appear in the courtyard twice. *Keng rus* resemble skeletons and have huge ears and wide mouths.

Twelve *zhwa nag* 'black hat' dancers, appear in the courtyard next.

The *keng rus* carry a *nya bo* on a triangular wooden litter between them when they appear the second time. The dough effigy symbolizes malevolent spirits that cause disasters for locals. It has tiny hands bound behind it, and a huge belly. Next, *pho rog* 'crow-' and '*ug pa* 'owl-' headed dancers enter the courtyard. Their movements are complex and fast as they squat and circle the courtyard. They move around the dough effigy, attempting to cut and eat the *nya bo*. They do not subdue the *nya bo* and their dance ends in failure.

The next dancer is *shwa* 'stag-' headed dancer, who cuts the *nya bo* into pieces, tosses them into the air, kneels on a *gdan dkar* 'white rug', uses his antlers to take the *kha btags* that is spread between two one meter high poles that stand just in front of him, and uses all his might to knock down the poles with his antlers. His movements become quick and complex as he circles the courtyard, the *kha btags* hanging from his antlers, suggesting an auspicious year for locals. The dance ends in victory.

*Gza'* comes next, holding a bow with a notched arrow in his left hand and another weapon resembling a spear in his right hand. As he exits the dancing hall,<sup>47</sup> he lingers at the door, and does not enter the courtyard. As *gza'* stops moving, eleven other dancers appear from the hall, and follow him to the courtyard. Among these

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<sup>47</sup> There are two separate main rooms in Rka phug Dpal rgyal gong ba Monastery. They are a dance hall for 'Cham performers to change their masks and rest during 'Cham performances, and a place to store the masks after the ritual. The second main room is known as Tshogs chen 'du khang where *bla ma* and *sngags pa* chant.

dancers, the mountain deities Srin po, Khams ri, and Brag dmar are offered *gos*, *kha btags*, and *nyal thul phyi ma*, which are tied to the sashes of their dance garments at the back.

After *gza'* circles the courtyard one or twice, *gtor rgyag* 'ritual of burning offerings to drive away evil spirits' begins. Several elder *sngags pa* bring *gtor ma* with a crow head and exit the monastery to burn it in a bonfire fueled by dried plant stalks. Two local villagers holding religious flags tied on a long pole, the twelve dancers, drummers, and chanters follow the *sngags pa*. Before tossing the *gtor ma* into the fire, the twelve dancers steadily gaze in the direction where the fire is set while the chanters and drummers perform. The ritual concludes by throwing the *gtor ma* into the fire.



Performing Nor bu dga' 'khyil, or making a large circle into a very small one, and then into a big circle. During the ritual, a *sngags pa* holds a stick with incense and leads other *sngags pa* around the courtyard (Dpal gyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Sngags pa* with *sbug chal* walk to the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Sngags pa* with *Da ru* walk to the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Sngags pa* with *sbug chal* and drums circle the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



'Ug pa and pho rog attempt to dismember the nya bo (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).





Zhwa nag performers dance in the courtyard (Se rtsa'i sngags khang, Se rtsa Village, 2013).



*Keng rus* in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



Shwa with *kha btags* (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Bdud* appears in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



Gza' appears in the courtyard (Se rtsa'i sngags khang, Se rtsa Village, 2013).



*Btsan* in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Klu* appears in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



Srin po dances in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).





Khams ri in the courtyard (Se rtsa'i sngags khang, Se rtsa Village (2013).



Brag dmar in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



Dmag zor rgyal mo at the *gtor rgyag* (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



Sngags srung dances in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



Dam can mgar nag in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



Dam can mgar dmar in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Khro bo* dances in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Khro mo* dances in the courtyard (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).





A *sngags pa* prepares to throw the *gtor ma* into a fire (Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang, Dpon rgya Village, 2013).



*Dung chen* inside Dpal rgyal gong ba'i sngags khang (Dpon rgya Village, 2013).

#### AGRICULTURAL WORK CONTINUES

After the 'Cham ritual, the next important activity is to fetch plow animals back from the village's pastoral areas. Historically, nearly every household owned a mule, whereas only a few owned *mdzo*<sup>48</sup> because they are expensive and require constant care and much grass. Households that owned cows, yaks, and *mdzo* often took them to grassland areas in agro-pastoral areas<sup>49</sup> where grass growing on forested mountains during late autumn was more plentiful as compared to farming areas. Plow animals were often left in forested mountains and checked once every two to four weeks.

When spring arrived and plowing time drew near, one or two family members brought their plow animals back from the agro-

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<sup>48</sup> *Mdzo* = cross between a female yak and a bull.

<sup>49</sup> These areas are Tsang tsa, Se rgya, and Thang mtsher villages in Khams ra Town. They have a small amount of land near their houses where barley, potatoes, and rapeseed are cultivated. These villages plow the land in late autumn to kill weeds and to bury straw. Because of different weather conditions, Rta rgyugs and these villages plow and sow at different times.

pastoral areas. Families who had no livestock borrowed plow animals from relatives in agro-pastoral areas in exchange for labor. When sowing time arrived in the agro-pastoral area, such Rta rgyugs families were obligated to assist their agro-pastoral relatives.

In 2012, as previously mentioned, nearly every household owned a tractor, and most people between the ages of twenty to fifty were working away from the village for much of the year. There were few livestock in the village in 2012.

Thong skar 'the auspicious day for beginning cultivation'/ 'plow date' was historically observed before sowing. An older village man visited a *sngags pa* or *rtsis pa* 'astrologer' offered bread, a tea brick, and money on behalf of the whole village, and asked him to select an auspicious day for sowing. The elder then reported the date and in what direction to make the first furrow. On the specified date, a large *bsang* offering was made in a field centrally located in the village, and three furrows were made circling the *bsang* clockwise with the plow animals in the hope of receiving an abundant autumn harvest. Villagers made furrows and scattered seeds in the furrow as a symbolic beginning, but started cultivation in earnest the next afternoon when the soil was mellow.

Thong skar was no longer practiced in 2012, although a religious specialist continued to be consulted for the plowing date.

On the sowing day, *khal ma* 'pack animals' are tied with several ropes and *sna gcu* 'nose rings' are put in the *mdzo*'s noses. *Gnya'* *shing* 'yokes' are fastened with a throat latch. The middle of the yoke features a 'V' shaped piece of wood to which the *thong gshol* 'plow' is attached. A check line is attached to the left and right sides of the *mdzo*'s nose ring. The rope end is fastened to the plow. The plowman determines the direction of the furrow by pulling the check lines.

Mules are bridled and *ske tho* 'collars' (thick cloth stuffed with cotton or cloth) are put around their necks. *La pan* 'hame'<sup>50</sup> with small ropes attached at the top and bottom are placed at the front of the collar. The ropes are run through the bottoms of the collars and fastened to the mule's neck. When a mule pulls a plow, the force of

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<sup>50</sup> A hame is one of the two curved wooden or metal pieces of a harness that fits around the neck of a draft animal and to which the traces are attached.

their pull is centered on their chest. Collars reduce discomfort from the hame.

The center of the hame features holes, through which small ropes pass and are attached to a *'phred shing* 'heel chains' near the mule's hooves, where it is hitched to the plow. A long rope is tied to both sides of the bridle.

An older, experienced plowman is chosen. Straight, parallel furrows portend an abundant harvest and no natural disasters. The plowman ensures the plow animals walk steadily while pulling the plow. He may hold a stick to whip or threaten the plow animals in case they do not walk evenly.

Two female villagers follow the plowman. One scatters wheat seeds as the other scatters fertilizer into the furrows. Each woman holds a basket in her left hand and scatters seeds or fertilizer with her right hand. It often takes three to five days for a family to finish sowing. Villagers stop sowing soon after sunset because soil in the fields freezes.

Some households sow differently. After plowing their land in late autumn, they do not irrigate their fields until spring, when seeds and fertilizer are scattered in the fields. Afterwards, a *shal* 'harrow' is used to cover the seeds and fertilizer. When crops are a few centimeters tall, the fields are irrigated, though most fields are watered earlier. This method of cultivation is called *skya 'debs*.

In 2012, only about two household families plowed using mules and *mdzo*. Other families used tractors. Villagers no longer scattered seeds and fertilizer into furrows. Instead they cast them in the fields before plowing. Once fields have been thus planted, the next step in the agricultural round is harrowing.

A harrow with a light person sitting on top is pulled over the fields by plow animals, smoothing the soil over the seeds. This prevents seeds from drying quickly under the sun. Harrowing is also done in late autumn when most fields have been irrigated once. Harrowing at this time is thought to prevent clods from forming and to keep the soil moist until spring.

Villagers often prepared two pairs of work animals, and when one pair finished a period of work they rested, while the others worked. In 2012, however, only one or two village families used a

harrow pulled by plow animals – other families used a tractor to pull the harrow.

After sowing, livestock must be closely watched or they will destroy the new crops. Villagers may keep the livestock in a grassy place with long ropes attached to pegs, especially at noon, when people rest. If livestock destroy crops, the owner of offending livestock must pay compensation based on the amount of crops destroyed.

Housewives take scythes and go to areas where grass grows in summer, which are often near crop fields, and cut grass for livestock. After every household has transported harvested crops to the threshing ground, the livestock are no longer restrained and fodder need no longer be gathered for them. Grass in the fields then provides forage for livestock.

Before this, much agricultural work remains to be done, however. One of the most significant tasks is irrigation. Stones roll from mountains into irrigation channels, sand accumulates from flooding, and ice remaining in the ditches may hinder the even flow of water. In such cases, ditches need to be repaired and cleaned.

Rta rgyugs villagers irrigate their fields from the river flowing through Ba ring Valley when snow on A myes Srin po melts. Villagers irrigate the fields in turn in the order of largest to smallest village according to population. When it is Rta rgyugs's turn to irrigate, the village leader meets with one representative from each household to discuss how to prevent Cung smad, Dpon rgya, and Mo zi villagers from stealing water. Several village households are chosen by lottery to guard key sections of the irrigation ditch, and then each household chooses an appropriate representative.

The first irrigation is *rdul chu*. Villages take turns irrigating their fields. Fields are connected, and when one family finishes watering their fields, they inform the next family.

In order to conserve the limited water and finish irrigation in a timely manner, village leaders gather one representative from each family for a meeting at the *ma Ni* hall prior to the irrigation day. Guards for every part of the ditch are chosen through lottery. The guards protect the ditch for about twenty-nine hours, because each village has a limited time to water their fields once. The ditch leading to Rta rgyugs Village must be guarded vigilantly because water passes

through three other villages and certain villagers attempt to divert the water for their orchards and greenhouses, though this is forbidden.

Village women first weed late in the third lunar month, after a week of irrigation. Housewives often assist each other to complete *yur ma* 'weeding the fields'. When one family finishes weeding, they begin weeding the fields of a family that has helped them. This work continues for about a week. If one family has much land, the housewives weed for ten or more days.

*Lan chu* or *sngo chu*, alternative terms for 'watering the second time', is done in the middle of the fourth lunar month when the crops are about twenty centimeters tall. Fields are usually irrigated five times before the crops are harvested, however, fields may be watered eight to nine times if there is little summer rainfall.

A second weeding is done around the twentieth day of the fourth lunar month, when the crops are as tall as a grown man's knees and the second irrigation is finished. *Yug po*, a plant that is very similar to wheat, is a frequent focus of weeding.

Villagers also observe *Lnga pa'i ba bzhi* on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. They put tree branches and wild flowers above and to the sides of the courtyard gate and the doors of rooms inside the courtyard.

Weeding in the late fifth lunar month when the crops begin bearing seeds is done to remove *yug po*. If its seeds ripen and fall, many will sprout the following spring. *Yug po* is fed to livestock or piled far from the fields and burned after drying. In 2012, about half of the village households used herbicides and did not weed.

The *Lha rtsed* Festival is then held from the twenty-first to twenty-fifth days of the sixth lunar month. It is also locally known as *Klu rol*. During the festival, a spirit medium is possessed by a local deity and an image of Erlang in a sedan is carried by young males from *Rka phug Administrative Village* and the former *Yar mkhar* villages to households in *Rka phug Administrative Village* to expel evil spirits and protect the families. Local males and females also gather at *Gram pa* and sing traditional songs during this period. This five-day festival is considered a time of entertainment for Erlang, who has been meditating in the temple for a year, protecting the village.

Harvesting begins around the twentieth day of the sixth lunar month when crop stalks yellow, and grain ears become golden and

droop. Both men and women harvest. Local villagers also hire people from such herding areas as Sman 'gang, Lha grong, and Ru mtsher villages for fifty to seventy RMB a day. The hired people stay one to three days in a village household and are provided three meals a day. Harvesters begin in the early afternoon after frost in the fields has evaporated. *Shog* 'bound sheaves' are leaned against each other in the fields with the ears up, so the grain will dry. After a week of sunning, the sheaves are fastened to the back of mules, donkeys, and horses with ropes and transported to the threshing ground. This work is done in the early morning or in the late afternoon to avoid bright sunshine, which makes the husks and grain stick together, and prevents grain husks from shattering. Villagers hurriedly transport the sheaves to the threshing ground because storms are frequent and sudden when ripe crops are in the fields. The sheaves are piled in big stacks on the threshing ground and covered with large pieces of plastic.

Villagers separate husks and grain by leading a mule or donkey pulling a *rdo li* 'threshing/ rolling stone' in circles over untied sheaves of wheat scattered on the threshing ground until the grain separates from the stalks. Meanwhile others use *tshob* 'pitchforks' to toss stalks into the air to further separate grain from stalks and from chaff.

Stalks mashed by rolling stones are preferred by livestock. Such stalks are also preferred by village women for use as fuel. Villagers pile the grain together after the rolling stone pulled by a mule or donkey circles the threshing ground many times. Straw is put in a family's straw-room, which is often located near the threshing ground. Households lacking a straw-room pile the straw to one side of the threshing ground. Straw is compressed by a person standing atop the pile as others toss straw on top of the growing pile.

*Khem* 'winnowing shovels' are used to separate *phub ma* 'wheat husks' by tossing *nas ma* 'fresh grain' into the air when wind blows. Villagers whistle or say:

རླུང་གཡུག་པ། རླུང་གཡུག་པ།

<sup>1</sup>Blow wind, blow wind

This is thought to call the wind. Grain is also winnowed on the

threshing ground, using tractors that power a fan.

In 2012, however, only about three village families used a threshing stone. Others used a tractor-powered threshing machine that finished threshing a family's grain in two to three hours, or their crop was harvested by a combine harvester that reaps, threshes, and winnows crops, leaving chopped stalks, leaves, and other non-grain materials on the fields. Two families in local villages own tractor-powered threshing machines and charged families about seventy RMB per hour to use it in 2012.

Once the grain is separated from the husks, it is dried in the sun for two or three days to limit spoilage. Piles of grain separated from husks are dried over the threshing ground using *'ded ma*, a wood farming tool resembling a rake. One person guards the grain against birds and thieves. The weather is unpredictable at this time and sudden rain is possible. Villagers watch carefully and start to pile the grain and cover it with sheets of plastic when the sky becomes cloudy.

After drying, grain is moved to the *'bru khang* 'granary'.<sup>51</sup> A large wood tamp is used to tamp grain stored in the granary as a way to detect if grain has been stolen. According to local elders, the tamp is carved with a deity in order to expel evil spirits that might steal grain. The tamp is kept in the storehouse when it is not in use. Other families put grain in bags and pile them in a room.

Livestock are now allowed to graze freely in the fields. Then, during the late eighth lunar month, some villagers begin *skya 'debs*, cultivation in which fields are watered after crops are a few centimeters tall. Fields are also harrowed and irrigated during the late eighth lunar month.

On the twenty-fifth day of the tenth lunar month, villagers chant with monks to commemorate the death of Tsong kha pa.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> It is a square, adobe structure about 1.2 meters tall, 1.7 meters long, and 1.2 meters wide. One side of the granary is usually built against the family wall in the home storeroom. In 2010, however, grain, after being cleaned, was stored in plastic bags and piled together in a room. Storage in the bags means there is much less work to do when families sell and mill grain.

<sup>52</sup> Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), a renowned teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, was the founder of the Dge lugs Sect.





Farming tools (left to right): *khem*, *lcags khem*, and *tsheb* (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).



*Tuoguji* used to separate straw from grain prior to the time of combine harvesters (Rta rgyugs Village, 2009).



Separating straw from grain (Rta rgyugs Village, 2009).



A combine harvester harvests village fields (Rta rgyugs Village, 2009).



Villagers move grain from the combine harvester to a trailer (Rta rgyugs Village, 2009).



Drying grain on the threshing ground using a 'Ded ma (Rta rgyugs Village, 2009).

## ARCHERY

Villagers hold archery competitions in the eleventh and twelfth lunar months. Elder males gather on the Rta rgyugs threshing ground, practice archery for two weeks, and challenge one to three neighboring villages.

Villagers choose a *mda' dpon* 'commander of the archers' who holds the bow and initiates the competition. They also choose a *mda' gzhug* 'final archer' who shoots the last two arrows during a competition.

In this context, *mda' dpon* refers to the villager who makes decisions, holds bows, and initiates archery contests. A *mda' dpon* is chosen among the village archers by lottery with arrows after making a huge *bsang* offering in the *ma Ni* hall in Rta rgyugs Village. The *mda' gzhug* is also chosen during this ritual.

A male elder offers *bsang* first and then gathers the arrows from the archers and chants, beseeching protection from the mountain deity. Next, he randomly chooses an arrow from all the

arrows. The owner of this arrow is the *mda' dpon*. The *mda' gzhug* is chosen in the same way.

The other archers are expected to obey rules set by the *mda' dpon* and *mda' gzhug*. When villagers choose the *mda' dpon* and *mda' gzhug*, they gather at the *ma Ni*<sup>53</sup> hall in the village where elders regularly gather to turn large *ma Ni* wheels, and offer a huge *bsang*. They beseech protection from their mountain deity, A myes Khams ri, and his assistance in obtaining victory. If the village that is being challenged agrees to compete, both sides gather thirty to fifty elder men and visit each other two to three times during the daytime dressed in ordinary clothes. There is no activity other than shooting arrows and the host village's women and visiting archers singing farewell songs before the latter depart. This entire activity is called *skya 'then*.

On *mda' ston* 'archery party' days, *skugs ya* 'opponent players' historically wore fox-skin hats, *tsha ru* 'lambskin robes', necklaces, swords, and Tibetan boots. Local villagers stopped wearing otter skins, fox-skin hats, and coral in 2006 after a teaching from a much-respected *bla ma* argued against this practice. As a result, archers now only wear *tsha ru*. Opponent archers reach the host village late in the afternoon. The guests and host village's women compete in singing traditional songs in the evening. Seven to thirteen host village's elders first sing *bstod glu* 'praise songs' to the *sha nye* 'archer guests',<sup>54</sup> praising them and offering liquor to initiate the archery festival. When the host village's males finish singing, an elder among the opponent archers sings to the host village's archers. The singing then alternates between the *sha nye* and *ma sru* 'the host village's women'. *Glu*,<sup>55</sup> *ston bshad*,<sup>56</sup> and *rtsed rigs*<sup>57</sup> are usually sung. Afterwards, village men return to their homes and rest for the next

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<sup>53</sup> *Ma Ni* is a short form of *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM*, a common six syllable mantra associated with Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

<sup>54</sup> This term literally means 'relative' but in this particular context refers to 'archer guests'.

<sup>55</sup> In this context, *glu* refers to Tibetan folk songs.

<sup>56</sup> *Ston bshad* refers to an activity in which an oration is given in praise of tea, *chang* 'liquor', bread, meat, and arrows.

<sup>57</sup> An activity in which people sing and dance simultaneously. Three or more people are needed for *rtsed rigs*.

day's competition, after inviting the opponent archers to the *ma Ni* hall around midnight. The singing competition between opponent archers and host village's women may last until dawn. Many villagers become friends through these archery competitions, some become sworn brothers, and some find wives or husbands.

Both competing villages make large offerings to their mountain deities during the competition. Sometimes they make live animal sacrifices in the hope this will bring victory and blessings. Villagers believe that the mountain deities are invited during the competition, and that the deities help them win if they are offered adequate sacrifices.

Men, women, elders, and children are the audience. They enjoy the competition, and visit archery festivals held in their own and other villages during the eleventh and twelfth lunar months. Local shopkeepers also come, set up stalls, and sell snacks, beer and other drinks, and cigarettes. Tibetan businessmen also bring bows and arrows to sell.

#### PUBLIC WORK: REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

While archery competitions are being held in Rta rgyugs and surrounding villages, the village leader or the village secretary holds a meeting, and collects the papers distributed to the villagers who participated in annual public work tasks. Every family must have a certain number of papers. Households that earned fewer papers than the required number are punished by collecting a sum of money or a certain amount of grain based on the village work they did and did not do. The village leader presents cash awards to households that earned the most papers. Such households are seen as very responsible for public work.

#### LO SAR PREPARATIONS

Late in the eleventh lunar month, villagers begin preparations for New Year. They are concerned primarily with cleaning and renewing their homes. First, they hang new flags printed with scriptures from

Rdzong nang Monastery<sup>58</sup> that are attached to a tall pole on the right side of the courtyard gate inside the courtyard. Next, they clean bowls, carpets, pots, and furniture on the eighteenth day of the twelfth lunar month. Dust from a thorough sweeping of the house is discarded in a certain direction on the nineteenth day of the twelfth lunar month according to a *sngags pa's* indication. Then, on the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth lunar month, villagers renew the interior of the hearth with fresh adobe, filling holes made by adding fuel over the course of the year. Finally, villagers prepare deep-fried bread, prepare three altars on the roof of their house, put *lha bshos* in the home shrine, and place butter lamps in front of deity images in the home shrine during the late twelfth lunar month in readiness for the New Year.

Every family member, except very old infirm people and very young children, goes to collect ice from the river a few days before the New Year. Axes are used to chop enough ice to fill five to ten fertilizer bags. In the past, villagers loaded the bags of ice on mules and horses, but nowadays the ice is transported from Gram pa to the village by tractor-trailers. Some households chop the ice into smaller pieces during the time they are collecting ice so that it is ready to put atop household walls. Other households transport large chunks to their homes out of concern smaller pieces will melt. This is particularly the case for households lacking a place to store ice. Pieces of ice are put on courtyard walls, orchard walls, roofs, and in the center of fields by every member of the family as water offerings to the deities on New Year's Eve. Ice is not collected if a family member has passed away during the year, a signal that they are in mourning.

The fifteen days of New Year celebrations follow, and villagers are then ready to repeat the annual cycle.

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<sup>58</sup> A local Dge lugs monastery.



Boiled yak meat for Lo sar (Rta rgyugs Village, 2012).



# **PART TWO**

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## **NARRATIVES FROM HORSE RACE VILLAGE**

# RDO RJE DON GRUB'S CHILDHOOD

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## TOYS

Spring flowers were budding one sunny day as though resolved to release their pollen on behalf of their relationship with wasps. Butterflies hovered above the buds in anticipation, as though searching for mates. Birds sought fallen seeds on the earth in order to build strong bodies to produce the next bird generation. The noisy birds perched on tall trees near my home at dawn and sang, announcing that it was time to get up.

Village fields had been plowed, clods had been pulverized, and the fields harrowed and sown. Men began to leave for construction work and other jobs outside the village to better their lives. Digging gold had become important work for villagers. Father also prepared to leave and then set out with other young village men.

Younger Brother and I were too young to attend school. We talked about how Father had promised to buy and bring us plastic guns when he returned. Brother was very fond of guns and often imitated policemen apprehending criminals. He played the role of the patriotic policeman while I was the cowardly criminal. Mother grumbled about our constant, silly game, but we never tired of it. Brother often asked Mother, "Is Father coming home tomorrow morning?"

Mother always nodded but said nothing. She constantly worried about Father's safety in the remote place where he had gone to search for gold. I did not fully understand her worry but it made me anxious, too.

Time marched ahead and long-expected summer finally arrived, with a bright, luminous sun shining in a turquoise sky, scattering sunrays in every corner, as though intending to roast every living thing on earth. Birds flicked their feathers in streams, dogs lolled their tongues while retreating to the shade of trees, and pigs sought marshy areas to wallow delightedly in their own excrement. Only sunflowers faced the sun, as though having a confidential

conversation.

Our burning expectations were finally fulfilled when Father returned with two plastic guns and presents for Mother. Brother and I were delighted with the guns. Father also gave us oddly shaped bullets that looked like sticks and had soft plastic cups that stuck to whatever they hit. We rushed to the threshing ground, where children congregated, jumping in the air like gamboling calves. The children stopped playing when they noticed our excited clamor, and stared at us without blinking, as though their souls had fled. I quickly took out the loaded gun from my robe pouch and ordered them to freeze. The children were intimidated at the sight of my brand-new plastic gun and stood steadily. But not Sangs rgyas, who stepped forward without hesitation and said, "Who do you think you are? Do you really think you can scare me with a plastic gun?"

At this moment, Brother envisaged Sangs rgyas as a ferocious criminal and pulled the trigger. The dart flew straight at him, hitting his forehead. He crumpled to the ground as though shot by a real gun. The other children curiously crowded around Sangs rgyas. While he lay prone, I tried my best to pull the dart from his forehead but failed. Brother embraced me from behind and we both pulled with all our might. When the dart came away, we escaped like frightened fawns, not wanting to be punished by Sangs rgyas's parents.

## **WILD HERBS**

Home is at about 2,000 meters above sea level and the cold brown season is much longer than the warm green season. The winter landscape is often wrapped in snow as though clad in a white coat. Mountain peaks are often shrouded in haze suggesting that the edges of the sky and the mountains are attached. Children mischievously played snowball games after it snowed. I enjoyed walking in the snow, listening to the crunch of my footsteps as they desecrated the gleaming, pristine surface.

Many village children played crazily one snowy day. They made and threw snowballs, and chased each other. After some time they collapsed on the ground, facing up, panting, and resting from their exhausting games. Meanwhile, 'Phags mo rdo rje arrived. He

was two years older than me. We played together whenever we had time. As time passed, he became just like my older brother. "There is a wonderful wild herb you've never tasted. It's unbelievably delicious, just like mother's milk," he said.

Everyone's spirits lifted with this mysterious, attractive declaration, as if we could almost smell the fragrance of this wild herb. We then marched toward the place where he reported many such wild herbs grew amid snowflakes that fell so thickly that we could hardly see. When I looked up, it seemed thousands of butterflies were fluttering down from the white-wool-carpet-like sky, as though celebrating our adventure.

Upon reaching the field, we couldn't find the wild herb. 'Phags mo rdo rje pointed out some leaves that the plant had already shed on the ground and its underlying tubers. Following his instructions, we soon located the rich smelling plant under our feet, uncovered the roots, and nibbled on them like wild hares. A few children didn't even brush away the dirt before they began chewing.

My friend, Tshe brtan, and I lagged behind because we were tired. Drops of sweat dotted our noses, despite the snow. We rested and then continued. Tshe brtan began digging at something. "This is the wild herb we're looking for. I'm sure it's delicious," Tshe brtan said confidently, handing me half a root, encouraging me to eat it. Convinced, I swallowed it after chewing a mouthful a few times.

Everyone was digging busily, thrusting sticks into the field, separating herb from soil. I joined in and soon collected a bunch of roots. We paused and wiped our foreheads with grimy sleeves after we were satisfied with our harvest. A bit later, we resumed chewing the wild roots while sitting on the freezing ground, our faces covered with smiles. Snow continued its feathery descent, seemingly praising our victory. We gazed at the white sky, the willow-leaf-like snowflakes caressing our faces. We were periodically spellbound by this exquisite experience and then resumed masticating the roots like cows chewing their cud.

"Freeze, you little pups! I'll beat your butts!" someone bellowed. Everyone turned and saw a middle-aged man rushing at us with big steps, holding a whip, intent on thrashing us. We darted homeward like a herd of fawns overwhelmed by a lion's roar. Some children fell to the ground, struggled, and scrambled onwards on all-

fours. Tshe brtan and I scurried among our friends sneering at our pursuer, who lagged behind.

Suddenly, my muscles became fluid, I couldn't feel my feet on the ground, and my stomach felt bloated as I rushed ahead. Air rushed up from my stomach and bubbles frothed in my mouth. I was poisoned and queasy. I didn't understand why. Tshe brtan was stooped over, staring at his shoes, breathing heavily. He looked at me, his eyes brimming with tears, bubbles dribbling from his mouth. He lacked energy to move. Our pursuer quickly grabbed us and bellowed, "You little bastards, faster than a horse, but I finally caught you! Ha... ha... ha... How pitiful!" while whipping our butts. "Pretend to be sick! You can't cheat me, boys!" he scolded while whipping our backs. He then forced us to swear never to disturb his fields again. We nodded, not hearing him clearly because we were so ill. We vomited after he left.

We finally reached my maternal grandmother's home. I approached the closed door and pushed, but felt too weak to try again. I repeatedly knocked on the door. Finally, Uncle 'Phags mo rdo rje came and opened it. When we stepped inside, several children peeked at us, suspecting we were the man chasing them. After 'Phags mo rdo rje closed the door, seven children approached us curiously and asked what had happened. I had been whipped and poisoned and was in no mood to talk.

"What happened, Rdo rje don grub? You look terrible. Are you sick?" Grandmother asked anxiously, touching my forehead with her wrinkled hand.

I murmured what had happened. Grandmother rushed to the storeroom, returned with a bottle of sour milk, and persuaded Tshe brtan and me to drink it immediately. I vomited, after finishing the milk, as did Tshe brtan.

After a nap, we felt much better. Grandmother said it was taboo to dig herbs from fields, because doing so disturbed the fields' rest and woke the field goddess, while she was resting. Furthermore, holes might damage the fields when there was a heavy rain.

Although I hesitated in accepting Grandmother's accounts, I was sufficiently scared and never dared dig that herb again.

## WASPS

Villagers enjoy a time of relative leisure after harvest. Yellow foliage falls earthwards, placing a tattered carpet on the ground. Leaves fall into brooks, disturbing the regular life of fish that scatter, waving their fins, desperately seeking a safe refuge, and then after the water calms, swim back to the leaves to investigate what had frightened them. Yellow leaves welcome autumn, creating a yellow world if you care to notice. At sunset, when the sun scatters its dying rays on earth, it is a world of thousands of suns and golden reflections from the leaves that pierce the heavens and incite envy in the hearts of enlightened beings. People ignore the beauty of the leaves, which they see as a disturbance. They are trampled, collected, and burned as fuel but I see them as gifts of the season. I enjoy sunset and twilight. I go out for a walk before dinner every day to observe clouds moving in the sky.

One sunny day, village children gathered around fields that were being plowed, raced across the fields looking for fun, their feet sinking into the fresh earth. Sometimes, their shoes got stuck in the soft soil and they burst into peals of laughter. 'Phags mo rdo rje finished running across terraced fields in a small valley reachable along a narrow path. He leaned against the wall of a terrace on the left side of the field, intending to rest. As he placed his hands against the wall, his hand was stung, which made him jump up and down like an untied calf eager to nurse its mother. He gripped his right wrist as his face quickly came to resemble a crimson balloon. He sputtered incomprehensibly, like a cartoon character. I approached him and realized he had been stung. I remembered Grandmother's remedy, turned my back to the other children, and peed on his hand. We investigated, eager to find out what had stung him, and discovered a hive as big as a dove's nest in a hole.

Tshe brtan found the nest of some wasps first. When he was about to announce this, a wasp flew from the nest as quickly as lightning and stung his newly shaven head. Everyone moved back, like a sea current pushed by a new wave. We reached the other side of the field in a flash, panted, and clasped our thighs. Diamond-like tears clustered in Tshe brtan's eyes and he sobbed, though no tears fell.

'Phags mo rdo rje headed up to look for other friends and noticed some wandering donkeys with bulging stomachs in the upper fields. They gazed at us, their ears erect and twitching, seemingly feeling sympathy for us. 'Phags mo rdo rje guessed they were laughing at us, returned, and said, "Those stupid donkeys are making fun of us. Let them taste some delicious stings," then he approached the hive slowly with a stick in his right hand, and a cloth wrapped around his head. He jammed the stick into the wasps' beautifully built home and charged towards us like a savage bear. The wasps were enraged and began stinging the stick like bullets. Meanwhile, we surrounded the donkeys and herded them down the path, which was now brimming with furious wasps.

The donkeys walked in front and then noticed the wasps. Elderly donkeys walked behind, not understanding the trick. It seemed they were too old to easily climb up this small twisting path. As they marched forward, they scattered dust on the hovering wasps, further enraging them. They attacked the donkeys. As they were stung, the donkeys kept their front legs stationary while their hind legs kicked into the air repeatedly, like school children doing morning exercises. They stretched out their necks biting at the wasps, but this tactic was in vain. More wasps stung their buttocks. The pain became unbearable and they then jumped up and down and kicked at each other violently. Some reared, kicking and braying simultaneously. The wasps attacked the donkeys relentlessly until they fled along the road with their tails high in the air.

I felt exhilarated and leapt into the air, clapping my hands at this marvelous display.

## **BURNING GRASSHOPPERS**

"I caught twenty grasshoppers. How many did you get?" 'Phags mo rdo rje asked.

"I...I just caught nine," I murmured, without looking at him.

"Oh, no! You clumsy little boy! Try harder this time," he reprimanded, wiggling his eyebrows for emphasis.

Resolved to do my best, I chased grasshoppers in all directions, determined to catch as many as 'Phags mo rdo rje. A bit

later, he lay exhausted on the ground, hair stuck to his forehead, dots of sweat on his nose. I sat by him. "How many did you catch?" he asked.

"Just twenty-five," I answered meekly.

"Not bad. You improved," he said. We got up a few minutes later and joined our friends, who were still busy pursuing grasshoppers. We put grasshoppers in our pockets, where some got squashed at once. Some were pulled apart and looked very funny.

"Are these grasshoppers made of grass?" the youngest boy, Tshe ring, asked.

"Probably," I replied.

"I think so. Grasshoppers don't have any blood, see," Tshe ring said, pulling a grasshopper from his pocket and breaking it into pieces.

"Oh, don't do that, Tshe ring. That's not the correct way to treat small animals we've caught from our hard work. Everyone, pay attention," 'Phags mo rdo rje proclaimed, climbing up a mound from where he could survey all the children. "We'll play a terrific game soon. Now, everybody collect dry grass."

Everyone began collecting grass enthusiastically. I was confused, not knowing what the dry grass was for. I walked away and looked for grass reluctantly, under 'Phags mo rdo rje's watchful eyes. In half an hour we had a respectable pile. Although he didn't explain the purpose of collecting the grass, the other children seemed to understand, running back and forth, adding more grass to the pile. After some time, 'Phags mo rdo rje neared the pile, chanting inaudibly and set the grass on fire with a match. Everyone hopped up and down, shouting and clapping. 'Phags mo rdo rje began throwing the grasshoppers into the fire and we followed suit, flinging our own grasshoppers into the blaze without mercy. As the grasshoppers hit the fire, they popped like firecrackers, making us burst into laughter.

When I recalled the grasshoppers struggling to escape the fire, I felt my heart ache. I wanted to share such feelings with my companions but dared not. I thought they would laugh and consider me a coward. As a result, I remained guiltily quiet, and walked away somewhat tearfully.

I couldn't sleep that night. The gruesome events earlier in the day constantly replayed in my mind. When I dozed off, grasshoppers



appeared with broken, dismembered bodies, suffering from the sizzling fire. The bigger ones flapped their wings, opened their eyes, and flew at me, ready to gouge out my eyes. My parents' tranquil sleep was interrupted by my noisy nightmare. I woke up, sweating profusely and panting. I told them what had happened and they explained that it was wrong to kill insects, and suggested I recite scriptures. The three of us then recited scriptures for an hour, after which I could not remember anything.

Afterwards, I refrained from killing insects.

## HERDING

A tremulous crimson sun emerged above from the eastern horizon, seemingly intimidated by yellowish-gold poplar foliage that paved the ground like treasure piled on earth. I threw on my clothes, left my warm bed, and approached the stove, where a wood fire crackled. A soot-covered, steaming pot was nestled in the fire, giving off an aroma of gently boiling milk that filled every corner of the room. When Mother lifted the kettle lid, steam flew out, like smoke pouring out from an old, steam-powered locomotive.

Once her snowball-like bread buns were sufficiently steamed, Mother handed me one and a cup of milk. The bun was so hot I juggled it between bites. As I was enjoying my food, I heard the increasingly loud sound of livestock running, chased by shouting boys and men. It was time to go herding. I gobbled down a piece of bread, finished the cup of milk, wiped my mouth with dirty sleeves, ran to the gate, and led our mule outside.

Each household owned at least one milk cow and a mule for plowing. Some households owned more and also had several sheep and goats. My family had a mule, a cow, and a mischievous calf. I left our cow in the orchard because she was pregnant and my parents were afraid I would neglect her when I herded. I sometimes got angry with the cows because of their clumsiness. In contrast, I enjoyed herding the mule because I could ride it back home. I reached the yard gate quickly as village livestock poured into the village lanes, released from household enclosures, their hooves trampling the dusty road, churning up bits of soil, like marching troops. Some boys raised

their whips in the air intending to sting the back legs of the livestock, which made them stampede ahead, wreathing this little world in dust.

I moved behind my mule, urging him on. He seemed to understand and trotted with the other livestock. I ignored the dust and followed my mule, holding a coiled rope attached to a metal peg. Some children held long thick ropes. Others dragged ropes on the ground because they were too heavy to carry. We carried a rope attached to a peg whenever we herded. We pounded the pegs in the ground once we discovered lush pasture, and tied the mules and cows to the pegs.

We reached a field with grass and stubble. I led my mule to the field, despite his stubborn resistance, as though tempted by grass elsewhere. I pulled him firmly to the field center, but he indicated disagreement, shaking his tail and swinging his head back and forth. Finally, I untangled the rope, thrust the peg into the ground, and then found my friends who were helping each other pound pegs into the ground. Girls gathered by the road and played happily. A few girls led cows between the space of fields, where nutritious grass grew thickly.

The sun gradually reached its luminous, flaming zenith. Some cows lay under trees in the shade, chewing their cud, their stomachs as taut as balloons as they swished their tails nonchalantly. They were so stout that their dewlaps dragged the ground when they walked.

Mules stood under trees by the fields disgruntled, concentrating on something as their ears wiggled back and forth frequently. They shook their tails angrily, and sometimes made trumpet-like sounds and kicked with their hind legs. We approached the mules to shoo away insects bothering their rest, but could not eliminate their vexation. We then left and began napping in grassy spots.

I was awakened by a noise, looked around, and noticed a group of boys wrestling, writhing back and forth on the ground. I joined with confidence. We competed but failed to conclude who was the champion after countless matches. We were so captivated by our competition that we forgot everything else. While lying on the ground, I noticed something gray hopping about. "Quick, everybody, here's a wild hare!" I yelled.

"Grab it! Grab it!" the boys shouted.

I extended my hands, like an eagle attempting to snatch a stray lamb. I tiptoed quietly toward the hare, which hopped and left me two meters away, and then vanished down a path without a trace. "Where did it go? Where is the hare?" asked a tall boy, panting. "Did you catch it?"

"I couldn't catch it," I replied.

"Was it cute?" another boy asked curiously.

"Of course! It had long erect ears, a very short tail, and long hind legs," I replied.

"Really? But I heard hares don't have tails," the shortest boy said.

"No, you're wrong. Hares have long tails, just like mules," the tallest boy answered.

"Why don't we decide after we catch it?" I suggested.

"Let's try!" everyone agreed and dispersed in all directions, searching for the hare. We looked everywhere, but the hare seemed to have vanished.

"That's impossible. The hare must be somewhere around here," I muttered.

"Maybe it was just an illusion," a boy said suspiciously.

We stopped searching for the hare as the sun began setting, sending forth its last glittering, gilded rays. Though I enjoyed watching the sunset, it could not cheer me because of the unsuccessful hunt. While I got my mule ready to go home, a boy asked, "How about a mule race?"

"How far will we ride?" I asked.

"To our orchard gate," the boy said.

"Agreed," I said. We all then mounted our mules and stood in a line on the road. The race began. I hit my mule with the metal peg and galloped toward the orchard gate. I reached the finish line victoriously, yelled, turned back, and saw that some boys had tumbled off their mules. A few boys had jumped from the mules because they ran too fast and they were afraid of falling off and being hurt. After a bit, all the boys arrived, acknowledged I had won, and praised my riding skills. My face was covered with a radiant smile and the intolerable feeling of losing the hare vanished like fog under a bright sun.

## LIZARD AND FOUR EYES

When the weather turned hot, my maternal grandfather's two *mdzo* needed to be taken to the river for water about three kilometers away. I eagerly volunteered for this task. The *mdzo* were brothers. The big one was named Lizard, because he pulled the plow straight, like a lizard running in a desert. The other was Four Eyes, because he had white spots just above his eyes, making it seem that he had four eyes. Grandfather was fond of livestock and villagers said the *mdzo* were as strong as wild yaks.

The sun began descending from the bright, blue sky to its home in the late afternoon, signaling the time to take livestock to the river. Nearby village residents did the same, thus hundreds of thirsty livestock trotted along the narrow path that led to the river. Villagers put wood containers on the backs of mules and donkeys heading to the river.

To avoid the crowded path, Uncle and I waited a bit. We often walked holding the *mdzo*'s tails while they moved sluggishly ahead. We never worried that they would kick us. Sometimes, they would firmly pull their tails, as if teasing us.

When we started back from the river, we crossed a huge threshing ground. Uncle would then say, "Hold their tails tightly, Rdo rje don grub, we're going to fly." My spirit soared as I anticipated Uncle's shout. When we lashed their hindquarters, they rushed forward like ferocious dogs, giving us the feeling of stepping on fluffy clouds while walking in a blue sky. Sometimes, Four Eyes' tail would slip from my fingers when he moved ahead too fast, leaving me straggling behind.

When we got back, the *mdzo* headed directly to a long, narrow trough where Grandfather had prepared husks and wheat flour mixed together, which they munched, shaking their tails in contentment. Grandfather happily watched while stroking their backs with his rough hands.

•••

"Rdo rje don grub, please lead your Four Eyes here," Uncle said, while I was playing with village boys.

"Why, Uncle? It's still early," I responded.

"Can't you see they are thirsty now?" Uncle replied, pointing to Four Eyes.

"OK, let's go," I agreed.

I approached Four Eyes and untied the rope from the peg. As I urged Four Eyes toward the riverbank, he swung his head up and down, acknowledging my signal and walked forward, jostling Lizard. Slowly, the distance increased between us and I could no longer see Four Eyes. As we reached a bend in the path, Four Eyes vanished from sight. A sudden twinge like an electric shock passed through my body.

Uncle and I sped up, but still couldn't see Four Eyes. Hundreds of light-yellow bulls and cows crowded the lane. I shouted Four Eye's name, but could not locate him. Suddenly, a hornless, blood-colored bull emerged from the livestock, rumbling forward, bellowing hoarsely, his hooves clattering against the earth. As he moved, other livestock began running, trampling each other. The arrogant bull headed to the front, as though he were the only bull in the universe. Four Eyes, who suddenly came into view, walked along the lane. The proud bull did not even deign to look at him. Four Eyes approached the bull, which furiously butted him with his large, thick head, tossing Four Eyes against a boulder as though he were as light as a newborn calf. Blood splattered everywhere and Four Eyes bellowed in pain. Lizard quickly moved ahead when he heard Four Eye's painful roar.

"What's going on, Uncle?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Uncle said.

As Lizard stampeded to the front, the other livestock scattered. Uncle and I followed. Lizard then charged the bull, attempting to gore his belly with his sharp horns. Seeing Lizard's charge, the bull also charged but was gored in the hindquarters, which made him hit the ground with a sound like booming thunder. Dust wafted around him as he scrambled up and disappeared into the distance like a beaten cur. Witnessing this, I appreciated Lizard helping Four Eyes and stroked his back. Seeing Four Eyes' wounded leg and pain made tears trickle down my face. Afterwards, when we continued down the lane, other livestock bolted when they saw Lizard, dispersing like clouds in a windy sky. I hoped to see that arrogant bull again, but it seemed he

had been swallowed by the earth. I was very proud of Lizard and his bravery.

## **PRIMARY SCHOOL**

### **BEGINNING SCHOOL**

Father is the second oldest son in his family. According to custom, the youngest son stays with his parents and cares for them. Consequently, when Father married Mother, the family established a new household for him on uncultivated land where only wild grass grew. We had a very large orchard around our house where apricot, pear, and apple trees grew, providing us delicious fruit in autumn. The village children would peek over the orchard walls when they walked along the road, plotting how to steal fruit.

Younger Brother is three years younger than me. We often played around the orchard yard happily. He asked repeatedly, "Brother, when will we go to school?"

"When we are old enough," I answered.

"But when is old enough to go to school?" he asked.

"When you're seven," I replied.

"Oh, then I need to grow up very quickly," he said.

It was winter when Father took me to school. The sun had already emerged from the east and shone brightly. Father loaded a metal container on our mule to fetch water from the river, which we needed to cross to reach the school. He lifted me up and put me on the mule. I was excited at the thought of having many new friends to play with, but I had also heard rumors about a teacher who was as cruel as a wolf when he was angry and bit students' ears when they did not answer questions. When I thought of such a teacher, my heart throbbed faster than usual, thinking he might bite me.

As the mule trotted toward school, scary images of this teacher lingered in my head. When we reached the school, a shabby wood gate presented itself. Old rusty handles were on its right side and it seemed the gate was now never fastened. A modern steel handle was attached much lower than the old ones. The door featured indistinct writing covered with dust. I dismounted, moved to the

school gate, and walked inside. Students were seated in several lines reading books in the schoolyard, facing the sun, absorbing its warmth. One teacher walked back and forth slowly, supervising them.

Suddenly, a terrible fear rose as I imagined that this teacher must be the ferocious ear-biter and I dared go no further. When I turned, Father was watching me. I ran back to him and begged him to take me home.

Father embraced me, patted my back, and said, "Boy, please go inside. This is the place where your dreams begin, so you can become like an eagle flying in a boundless sky." Though I could not comprehend what this meant, his words encouraged me. Father pondered for a moment, then held my hand and led me inside.

When I scrutinized the students, I noticed Uncle (who really was my uncle, despite our ages being very close) peeking at me from behind his book. He beckoned me to come to his side. Feeling a flood of relief, I scurried toward him. Seeing me sitting by Uncle, Father smiled, strode outside, and soon vanished.

Three weeks passed smoothly. I disliked school because I had to obey many rules and was constantly afraid of a beating from the teacher as though I were a guilty prisoner. When I sat by Uncle, I felt he was my protector, which gave encouragement.

I had started school late and thus had no books. There was nothing I could do about that.

After one or two hours in the classroom, students spread out over the schoolyard, where they stayed like motionless rocks, until they could memorize and write down what they had been taught in the class. Those three weeks were the most miserable time of my life. I could barely comprehend a single word of Chinese when the Chinese teacher taught. My mind was in our orchard when I sat in the classroom. Chinese, Tibetan, and arithmetic teachers' voices reverberated like I was standing atop a craggy mountain.

#### TEACHER NOR BU BITES A STUDENT'S EAR

The classroom had been swept and cleaned one Friday morning when I entered the room and put my schoolbag on my desk. Students sat cross-legged on the ground in the courtyard, holding their tattered, ragged books and reviewing what had been chanted in class. I went

inside and found a comfortable seat. I saw a bug-eyed student sitting on the other side of the classroom, murmuring constantly. I guessed he was fretful about class, and was reciting scriptures to beseech protection. My mind turned inward as morning class approached. Thoughts of Nor bu, the ear-biting Tibetan teacher, made my pulse race.

A whistle shrilled and students flooded into their bleak classrooms, waiting for teachers. Students quieted at the teachers' arrival, quivering like frightened chicks. Some students closed their books and recited something under their breath. Others swayed their upper bodies in circles. I prayed silently, hoping the teacher would not ask me questions.

'Thick Moustache' was the nickname for a teacher with a very thick, pitch-black moustache. He had a Tibetan name - Nor bu - but few students knew it. He wore a faded suit half-a-decade old. Two sharp, bulging eyes darted among students, ensuring no student lost concentration under his close supervision.

Something was going on in Teacher Nor bu's class. I looked at the other side of the classroom and heard the bug-eyed student murmuring. I turned and noticed he and his desk-mate were discussing something. Their murmur suffused around the classroom boisterously, while other students kept their voices down. Teacher Nor bu noticed but remained silent, controlling his temper. Time passed. The murmuring continued. Teacher Nor bu looked toward the noise. His eyes turned red and seemed to enlarge. Sweat dotted my forehead as I prayed for an early end to the class.

"You, bug-eyed student, stand up!" screeched Teacher Nor bu. "What are you blabbering about in my class?" The dumbfounded boys stood immediately, as though awakened by an earthquake. Their distraught faces turned pallid and their legs quivered. "You little chicks! What are you talking about while I'm teaching? You don't understand class rules?" Teacher Nor bu bellowed.

The classroom fell deadly quiet as we all stared at the standing students. Teacher Nor bu strode forward and grabbed the bug-eyed student by the hair like a soaring eagle shooting down from the sky to snatch a trembling hare. He pulled up his head ruthlessly, bit the little boy's ear, and then pushed him down. Blood flowed from the bitten ear as tears trickled down from the child's eyes. He



soundlessly sobbed. The class bell clanged, I snatched my school bag from the floor, and rushed home without turning my head. My heart beat so hard that I could almost hear it.

"You're so early today, Rdo rje. Did school finish?" Mother asked from where she was busy in the kitchen.

"Yes, Mother. Today is Friday. School finished early," I lied.

"Good! I'm cooking lunch now," Mother said, without looking at me. "Let's wait for your Father. He'll be back soon from the fields."

I was an honest child and never deceived anyone. This time I had no alternative, because Mother would have been shocked if she had discovered the truth. That afternoon, I felt dreadfully guilty for having lied. I trampled on leaves in the orchard and listened to the crunch as I walked. I tried not to think about anything else. Somehow, it worked. I relaxed and my legs stopped shaking. Dusk drew near, as signaled by the occasional chirpings of homeward-bound birds. This was my favorite time of day, but this evening I stared dully at the sunset without inspiration.

Night came. I gazed at the infinite sky and its glittering, dancing stars. I heard dogs barking in the distance as the darkness of night grew heavier. The teacher's attack came again to my mind and a twinge of fear pushed through my body. I quickly went inside where the air was laden with the odor of supper. I rushed to the stove and squatted, waited, and then gobbled down the steaming bowl of noodles Mother handed me.

Father stared at me but said nothing. Later, he asked something related to school, listened to my reply, and then seethed, "You must be lying to us."

I kept silent.

"You should have told the truth," Father said. "What happened? Tell us."

After revealing my little secret to them, I felt much relief. Mother gently stroked my hair and said that everything would be fine. Father remained silent, his head cocked to one side as he puffed steadily on a sheep-shank pipe. I could not remember how long I cried, but Mother's robe was drenched with my tears. I sobbed and sobbed, until she helped me sleep on the *he rdze*.

I woke up the next morning and went to the threshing ground to play. Children had already gathered. I exuberantly joined and

played with them cheerfully. A while later, some talkative students peeked over in my direction, as if looking for someone. They were my classmates. After a while, they said sarcastically, "Although Rdo rje don grub doesn't have books, he can catch up with us easily. He's such a smart boy."

"That's right, but I think he must have had a serious fever yesterday, he was sweating a lot," a curly-haired boy said.

"I don't agree. His trousers were drenched. He must have peed in his pants," another boy said, digging at something in his nose.

It seemed they understood my little secrets - my fear, weaknesses, and cowardice. Their words sank into my heart like bullets loading into a gun. They continued to criticize me. No longer able to bear it, I went home with a heavy heart and wailed in Mother's arms. I begged her not to send me to school again. Mother kept quiet, consoling me by wiping away my tears with her hands. I could not comprehend why my parents insisted that I attend school, though I knew they had reasons. I frittered away the whole year staying at home, playing with Brother and friends. Teacher Nor bu lingered in my memory. Sometimes, I dreamed about him sticking out his neck to bite my ear, and I would wake in a flood of sweat.

Teacher Nor bu was transferred to another school a year later. Thankfully, I never saw him again. My fear began to fade as I enrolled in grade one.

## TRUANT

In late spring, newly-grown willow branches hung down, resembling a young woman's sleek hair, swaying in the soft breeze. Fruit trees were in blossom, infusing surrounding areas with fragrance. Feeble butterflies flitted among the flowers, as though disoriented by the flowers' urgent fragrance. Chirping birds darted among the branches while mother birds returned with delicious food, some quickly dozing after settling on their eggs.

I got up early as usual and marched to school, leaving a trail of loudly repeated texts from my Tibetan book. I stopped periodically, motionlessly, enjoying nature's fragrance. Suddenly distracted by a sharp call, I glanced around and found I was near a grove of trees

floored with dense grass. Somebody shouted, "Hello, Rdo rje don grub! Come over here. I'll show you something!" It was my classmate.

"What? Tell me now!" I shouted back.

"You'll like it!" he said.

I knew I should go to school, but curiosity won. I took my schoolbag from my back, put my book inside, zipped it shut, and walked toward him. When I got near, I saw he was holding something in his left hand.

I impatiently told him to show me what was in his hand. "Here it is," he said, revealing a baby bird that looked like it had been plucked and was ready to cook.

I was enthralled and wanted to hold it, but dared not. "Would you help me find one?" I said.

Zla ba said nothing. I tried to persuade him, but it was all in vain. He told me he had caught it as he was studying, but I didn't believe him. I lost patience and hurried on to school.

The class started as soon as I reached the classroom. I was fine for the first three classes. During the last morning class, I was so dreamy that I couldn't concentrate. The teachers' lips moved and I saw gestures, but I comprehended nothing. It seemed I was deaf, as though the teacher was talking on one side of a river and I was on the other side. I stared at the blackboard and tried to listen, but my mind had left the classroom. I imagined catching a baby bird, taking good care of him like a mother, feeding him every day with crystal clear water, and keeping it in a beautifully designed cage with a nice, comfortable carpet on the bottom. I would teach him to speak human language, take him to the riverbank to play on the weekend, and...

While imagining such wondrous possibilities, the sound of knocking reverberated. My mind returned. I realized that the teacher was standing at my desk. He asked, "Where is your mind, Rdo rje don grub?"

I was disoriented and speechless. I started to say something, but I was embarrassed and retreated into silence as the classroom fell into a graveyard-like quiet. I stood up, my head down. The teacher remained in front of me for a while. My face resembled a red balloon and felt as hot as though I had a severe fever. The class bell rang and I felt much relief, like a caged bird must feel when it gains freedom.

Because of the long distance between my school and home, I brought lunch in my school bag. Mother had put bread and a bottle of milk in my bag. I had lunch and then searched for Zla ba. Not finding him at school, I continued searching and finally located him in that grove near the school where he and several other students had gathered. Zla ba was explaining how to find baby birds. I sat nearby. No one noticed me because Zla ba had all their attention. "If you want a baby bird, raise your hand!" Zla ba said.

Everyone shouted, "Yes!"

I intended to join, but somehow lagged behind the others. Zla ba noticed, glanced at me, and asked, "Are you really sure you'll come with us, now?"

I wavered between attending class and searching for birds. I was silent for a moment and then I decided to join them. Zla ba seemed twice my height, even though we were the same age. His long, thin arms could snatch things in an instant and he could climb trees like a monkey. He was the first volunteer whenever we needed to climb trees.

We silently searched for nests among trees in the grove, like hunters. Everyone expected something wonderful. Zla ba led us and we followed, as though he were our general and we were his soldiers. He touched certain robust trees, as though he could detect bird nests that way. Sometimes, he climbed up a tree, like a leopard, and then jumped down. Everyone admired his tree-climbing skills. We walked until coming to a gigantic tree on the edge of the grove.

"Look!" a boy shouted. "There must be a bird nest in that old tree. Grandfather told me birds build nests in old trees."

"Look, everyone! There's a hole just under the lowest branch of the tree. There must be a bird nest inside," another boy said.

"What if snakes are inside?" a buck-toothed boy asked.

"Impossible! My mother said snakes live among stones," a skinny boy said.

We boisterously discussed this issue. "OK, boys, come closer," Zla ba finally commanded and we obediently gathered and listened. He shared his idea confidently and we all agreed without hesitation. Four boys then knelt at the bottom of the gigantic tree, while one boy climbed up. After getting the baby birds, we exuberantly headed

home, never taking our eyes from the birds. We decided to meet and play with the birds the next day.

#### MOTHER'S PUNISHMENT

Seven of us repeatedly escaped from school and hunted baby birds. We agreed to bring lunch and then ate it outside school. When the weather was drizzly, we sought shelter in the grove and joyfully played games. When we were lucky, we found bird eggs in fields, boiled them in discarded metal tea cups on stoves made of stones, and ate them together like a family. We enjoyed being together. We forgot time and paid no attention to how many days we did not attend school. Our parents sent us off with lunch, and we skipped classes for two weeks. Our teachers finally reported our truancy to our parents and scolded them for not ensuring that we were in school.

I reached home during this period one early evening as shiny sunbeams lingered in the sky like shooting stars. I hummed, savoring the memory of eating boiled bird eggs with friends. When I reached the door, I saw Mother looking for me, her hand near her forehead, protecting her eyes from the sun. I felt warm inside when I saw Mother, and rushed to her, calling to her. Mother always responded, but this time she turned, not acknowledging me. As soon as I stepped inside the yard, Mother raised a leather whip into the air and beat my bottom furiously. She kept saying, "This is what you deserve," I was astounded by her rage and attempted to evade the whip, but I could not. My flesh turned red and I cried loudly.

"Why are you crying?" Mother asked, continuing to lash me.

"I can't bear the pain. Mother, please stop!" I begged.

"Who told you to escape school? Your parents work so hard to send you to school and then you escape. Who told you to do so?" she demanded. Mother stopped beating me when I grabbed her leg and begged her, tears pouring down my cheeks. Tears glittered in her eyes. She knelt, stroked my head several times, and forced me to swear I would never skip class. I did so and determined to attend all my classes. From that day on, I kept my promise and did join every class. My fame rose like a crescent moon and I was henceforth known as a good student and a good boy in the village.

## THE LHA RTSUED FESTIVAL

### THE TWENTY-FIRST DAY OF THE SIXTH LUNAR MONTH

"Rdo rje, please go to Gram pa and see what's going on there. Today's the twenty-first day of the sixth lunar month," Mother said, sharpening a scythe on a small millstone, preparing for harvest.

"May I wear the silk shirt and leather boots you bought me?" I asked.

"Yes," Mother replied with a smile.

I gladly put on my new Tibetan shirt and boots and rushed to Gram pa, which was about a kilometer away. I felt I was the most attractive child there. Willow trees grew along the path to the small grove and cloth tents were pitched under the trees. Stoves had been set up and cooking pots installed. Small shops were scattered along the road, selling drinks and food. Some tents were made of thick, light-green material and were waterproof. Children constantly peeked inside tents that showed movies.

A dozen richly adorned Tibetan women huddled together, murmuring indistinctly, as though too shy to walk along the road. Their attractive felt hats fitted them perfectly.

Suddenly, the clash of cymbals reverberated, and I noticed children rushing along a path over the slope to the *ma Ni* hall. I followed and caught up with them at the gate of the *ma Ni* hall courtyard. I looked inside and saw villagers of every age. I felt as though something unprecedented was imminent. The A myes Erlang sedan rested on a wood table. Several robust young men sat tiredly by the sedan, perspiration dotting their foreheads and flowing down their faces. They were too exhausted to wipe it away and breathed heavily, leaning against the walls. I slowly approached, trying to figure out what had happened. The crowd began to disperse a bit and I slowly walked outside from the *ma Ni* hall courtyard, feeling depressed that I had missed the temple performance. Thinking of the next day, however, my heart overflowed with happiness and I longed for it to come in an instant. I strolled behind the threshing ground and heard elders chatting under the willow shade. I approached quietly.

"When I was about ten, several boys from my village and I were curious about carrying the sedan. We dreamed of holding it. We decided to carry the sedan on the twenty-third day of the sixth lunar month. We agreed that if one of us didn't carry it, we would call him a coward from that day on," an old man said slowly. "We were very poor. We had no shoes, so we came to the *ma Ni* hall barefoot. When we carried the sedan to village homes, it turned, changing direction. Our feet trampled over prickly plants, but we felt no pain, which was really unbelievable."

More and more children gathered around these elders and sat cross-legged.

"Such things really happen! Many years ago, there was no bridge over the Yellow River and people crossed the river in small boats. During the festival, villagers living on the other side of the river said if the sedan could cross the river, they would sacrifice three goats immediately," a sixty year old man said. "Four young men were holding the sedan on their shoulders when, suddenly, the sedan floated over the river like a leaf. The upper bodies of those young men were visible. Everyone was dumbfounded and couldn't believe their eyes, but it happened."

Children and young men gathered around these elders, resting their chins on their colorful clothes. They longed to hear more stories from the old people, but time did not allow it. When I began to walk homeward, villagers rushed down the road, as though a performance would soon begin. I discovered a folksong competition was about to take place. I resisted joining and walked home to report to Mother what I had seen and heard.

#### THE TWENTY-SECOND DAY OF THE SIXTH LUNAR MONTH

I set out for the *ma Ni* hall the next morning, longing to help carry the sedan. The sound of scripture chanting echoed from the *ma Ni* hall amid the wafting, smoky fragrance of smoldering conifer branches, infusing the atmosphere with an aura of sacredness. I strode to the *ma Ni* hall courtyard and, once inside, saw hundreds of locals crowded together. The majestic A myes Erlang statue stood on a platform, showing a wrathful expression. Pad ma tshe brtan, the spirit medium, knelt on a tattered rug, reciting scriptures in a

tremulous voice. On the left side, a goat-skin drum hung from a long rope. Pad ma tshe brtan hit the drum and chanted simultaneously with a relatively fast rhythm.

The recitation soon ceased and two elders rushed into the room with *lha pa* garments, which they put on Pad ma tshe brtan. His hat was broad-brimmed with black ribbons around the brim, shielding his eyes from the audience. Figures of deities were also on the hat. As Pad ma tshe brtan knelt before A myes Erlang, he began shaking like electricity was passing through his body. He exhaled and inhaled deeply while beating his goat-skin drum, stepped out of the room clutching the drum in his left hand, and shook his head from side to side. Now possessed by A myes Erlang, his body trembled, as he circumambulated the altar while beating the drum. After dancing around the altar with the drum several times, he strode straight into the room, striking the drum more loudly, and then circled the room as though he had discovered something there. All of a sudden, he knelt on the rug, panting and shaking his head like something would soon emerge from his body. The *ma Ni* hall keeper and several villagers gripped him until he became normal.

"oM AHhUM, oM AHhUM! To the venerable homeland deity, A myes Erlang. You protected us from storms and terrible plagues this year. We've been grateful to you ever since you came here. Today is your day, your day of enjoyment. Please accept the food villagers have offered. We will make offerings to you whenever we think of you and ask you to forgive us when we make mistakes," the *ma Ni* hall keeper said, walking around the sedan, flinging grain upwards. He touched the sedan poles piously and prostrated. When he finished prostrating, he beckoned to four young men to take the sedan. Everyone removed their hats as a sign of devotion and respect. A bit later, the sedan raced through the village, pursued by a group of unruly children and middle-aged men. I saw Uncle 'Phags mo rdo rje approach the *ma Ni* hall keeper and ask if I could carry the sedan.

"Rdo rje, it's not heavy now. You can replace me right now," Uncle said, while the sedan went down a small path through the village.

"I'm still afraid. If it runs, I'll fall and it'll be very embarrassing!" I said hesitantly.



"Don't be afraid! I'll take your place when the sedan gets heavier or runs. Come on, try," Uncle said, as sweat pearly on his forehead.

"I can't!" I replied nervously.

"Don't think of your face. It's not about losing something. It's about accumulating merit. Come on!" he persuaded. Thus encouraged, I scurried up and touched the sedan poll. My legs shook, as if I was possessed by some spirits. I gritted my teeth, and then the sedan forged ahead, leaving me behind. I felt much relief, but regretted I had not accumulated merit.

"Boys, please help these young men and replace them. They have carried the sedan all the way. Let's leave. Nobody's at home in this household," an elder said.

The sedan rushed toward the household door even though a lock hung on the door. I was amazed, approached a middle-aged man, and asked, "Why does A myes Erlang stay at the door of that household when it is locked?"

"You haven't heard about this? This family has been disturbed by a ghost since last winter when a man committed suicide by drinking poison. The housewife is possessed by spirits. I heard her hair is disheveled at night and she gnashes her teeth," he said.

I had heard many ghost stories before, but this one seemed particularly petrifying. "Do you think the ghost is still around here?" I asked.

"Yes, otherwise A myes Erlang wouldn't insist on entering the home," the man answered.

The sedan moved back and forth at the door of that household, reluctant to leave. After a bit, a sallow middle-aged man with disheveled hair hanging down to his shoulders appeared on the roof. "Please forgive me, A myes Erlang! I can't invite you inside," he murmured, prostrating to the sedan. "I've been sick since last year. I can't come out now. Please take these offerings. Please be happy!" he said and then dropped two tea bricks, a bottle of liquor, and a *kha btags* to the people below.

A man in the group accepted the gifts and said loudly, "Yah, A myes Erlang! This family made you offerings. He is sick, and unable to come out and invite you in. You must forgive him, and bestow protection and blessings on this family."

After the speech, the sedan turned and the *ma Ni* hall keeper beat the cymbal with a stick. The sedan then took the road back to the temple in a calm, steady stride. I believed that A myes Erlang really did reside in the sedan. I then felt a strong desire to carry the sedan. After we escorted the sedan back to the *ma Ni* hall, I gladly walked to Gram pa. I searched for Mother and found her with other village women. I sat by her on a stone and enjoyed the song competition that was taking place.

"Mother, why is money in the hair of women singers?" I asked.

"Because everyone enjoys their songs. That's their reward," she whispered.

"If the money falls to the ground, may I pick it up?" I asked.

Mother smiled, and laughed. The spectators gazed at the singers, fully grasping the meanings of the songs, while I failed to understand them at all. Dusk approached. Everyone scattered, looking for their family members. I held Mother's hand tightly as I remembered the ghost story I had heard that day. I dared look only at the road leading home.

#### THE TWENTY-THIRD DAY OF THE SIXTH LUNAR MONTH

"Let other boys take the sedan!" the old man with the cymbal ordered.

"Here's your chance, Rdo rje," Uncle 'Phags mo rdo rje persuaded.

I wavered no more and replaced Uncle. The sedan did not lurch in all directions on our shoulders but instead went slowly along the road to the monastery.

When we reached the monastery yard, a *bla ma* hurriedly emerged from a two-story building. Several monks brought out a wood table and told us to place the sedan on the table. I felt much relief after the sedan was then placed on the table. I had worried about falling and, if that happened, everyone would denigrate me.

The *bla ma* approached the sedan. Everyone lowered their heads and prostrated three times. He walked clockwise around the sedan, splashing liquor from a large bottle, and chanting. Afterwards, the *bla ma* offered grain from a gold colored bowl. A wood chair was brought and he sat on it, in preparation for blessing those who had assembled. We stood in a line and moved toward the *bla ma* with our

heads down. He gently placed his wrinkled hand on our heads one by one. I felt strengthened and happier as he touched my head.

"Boys, lift the sedan. Let's set out!" the old man commanded, after the *bla ma* returned to his room, striking the cymbal loudly. The previous sedan bearers and I then picked up the sedan. "Yah! A myes Erlang, our *bla ma* offered you so many nice things, would you like to express your joy?" the old man shouted, and then struck his cymbal.

The sedan rushed to the gate, returned to the table, and turned around several times, as though showing appreciation for the *bla ma's* warm reception. As the sedan was turning, I felt I had no control over my body. Sometimes, the sedan became heavier and pushed down, hurting my shoulder. Occasionally, the pole was light as a feather. The sedan moved in every direction as if it was controlled by supernatural power. Next, the sedan rushed to the *ma Ni* hall, down the path where local villagers were crowded and goods were displayed. As soon as the cymbal sounded, local villagers moved to the side of the road and lowered their heads in respect. Then the sedan began reeling again, lurching to shop and restaurant doors, like a guest. Shop owners gladly offered the best they had without hesitation and touched their forehead to the sedan piously to beseech protection. Suddenly, the sedan rushed toward Gram pa at unbelievable speed, as if A myes Erlang had forgotten something there. The sedan increased in weight. Unable to hold it, I yelled, "Uncle! Here! I can't hold it!"

"OK, move aside slowly," he said. The sedan rushed to the river flowing across the path through an irrigation ditch and on to the river. The four men carrying the sedan had no time to roll up their trousers. The sedan went into the river and moved back and forth a long time as locals gathered and watched. They were happy seeing A myes Erlang truly enjoying himself. The men's new clothes were ruined in the muddy river, but they looked happy.

#### WATCHING MOVIES

That evening, Uncle and I strolled to Gram pa, where local villagers congregated in tent restaurants. We walked along the street, looking for entertainment. Uncle walked ahead, and suddenly said, "Rdo rje, would you like to watch a Hong Kong movie, tonight?"

"What?" I asked.

"I want to watch some action movies. Would you like to join me?" he said.

"Sure," I answered.

"Do you have any money? I spent all mine today," Uncle said.

"No, but I can get some from Mother," I replied.

"That's unnecessary. We can handle it ourselves," he said, walking to a tree on the other side of the street and then gestured for me to follow. I blindly did so, not knowing what was going on. We squatted under a long branched tree and gazed into the distance. Later, he broke the quiet with, "You see that tractor-trailer?"

"Yes. Why?" I said.

"Do you know what's inside it?" he asked.

"Watermelons. Oh! You're going to..." I said.

"Don't speak loudly or others will hear you," he shushed.

I shut up and waited for an opportune moment to steal some watermelons. We waited and waited. The watermelon keeper never left his seat. Without any other alternative, Uncle encouraged me to pretend to be a customer to distract the keeper's attention. Finally, we stole a watermelon, sold it, got money, and then entered the tent theater.

## THE BONFIRE

I woke up early the next morning and soon reached the *ma Ni* hall. The spirit medium performed as usual, jumping up and down, despite being in his sixties. After he entered the room, 'Phags mo rdo rje and I held the sedan poles, ready to carry the sedan.

The sedan pulled us in every direction as soon as we reached the *ma Ni* hall yard. I stumbled, and then concentrated on taking my next step, but then the sedan moved aside suddenly and it fell toward the ground. I then noticed Uncle lying beside me. Uncle and I jumped up and resumed our journey. We lifted the sedan on our shoulders with all our strength again, despite the dust in our hair. I could not calm down after carrying the sedan. I was suspicious about the accident. I tried to think of a reason, but could not. I reached the threshing ground near the *ma Ni* hall, and met Uncle there. He

looked depressed and agitated. "Why are you so unhappy, Uncle?" I asked.

"Nothing. I just don't feel good," he grumbled, bowing his head.

"About the accident this morning?" I asked.

Uncle nodded his head.

"Why did we fall this morning?" I asked.

"Probably because we stole that watermelon last night," he answered.

Regretting what we had done, we swore to never steal again. Dusk approached. Local villagers hurried toward the *ma Ni* hall. Uncle and I followed, eager to enjoy the last day of the festival. When we arrived, we found that a bonfire had been prepared. Locals patiently stood around the firewood. The chanting in the room would end soon after everyone gathered. Four robust men carried the sedan and circled the yard madly. Villagers raced away when the sedan rushed at them. A while later, the sedan calmed down. The bonfire was lit and then, as it grew larger, the four young sedan bearers yelled, "*Lha rgyal lo!* Victory to the deities!" and tossed the sedan up. Everyone followed and shouted the same thing in an increasingly boisterous atmosphere. Seeing the scene, my heart filled with a passion that I am unable to describe. I also unconsciously yelled, "*Lha rgyal lo, Lha rgyal lo!*" and prayed sincerely that A myes Erlang would be with us forever.

## GRANDMOTHER'S DEATH<sup>59</sup>

A sweltering early autumn day began cooling as the shimmering sun headed to its home, scattering blood-red rays over an empty sky. After harvesting in the fields for an entire day exhausted villagers returned home, scooped fresh, cool water from storage vats, poured it in bowls, and gulped it down making loud noises like thirsty bulls. After drinking several bowls of water, they reclined here and there on homemade felt carpets in courtyards, wiping away sweat. They constantly fanned themselves with their straw hats to cool their

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<sup>59</sup> Dbang mtsho (1938-2001) was Don grub's mother. Rdo rje don grub was sixteen when she passed away.

overheated bodies. Although exhausted, smiles never left their faces, as though they knew there would be a bounteous harvest.

"Brother, Brother! Mother's not well!" Dbang mo, Don grub's younger sister shouted, rushing into a courtyard.

Don grub was shocked and disoriented. His mind returned to his sister and he shouted, "Go! Go! Go!" and then rushed toward his mother's home as fast as he could, vanishing in a flash. Brother and I had no idea what was going on but followed anyway.

"Mother, please look at me. I'm your son, Don grub," Don grub pleaded.

Grandmother sat on a sofa, hardly moving, but still breathing.

"A ne, it's Lha mo. Please don't close your eyes," Mother tearfully entreated.

Their efforts could not bring Grandmother back to life. With a thin smile she gazed at those huddled around her and then shut her eyes a final time.

Father and Mother embraced Grandmother tightly, as though someone was trying to pull her away. The house immediately filled with wailing. Brother and I witnessed all this as deep grief attacked our bones. Endless tears made our faces shine, trickling to the floor like summer rain. Father's eyes were bloodshot. He saw us standing at the threshold and said, "Go home! Close the door and go to bed. You two don't belong here!"

I understood people were mortal, but I never thought Grandmother would leave us. Brother and I were sleepless that night, as though our souls had been captured by evil spirits. We stayed up until dawn when our parents returned home to get rapeseed oil and firewood. Their eyes were swollen and green discoloration framed their eye sockets. It seemed they had not closed their eyes all night. They stared at us silently. Mother tied up a bunch of firewood with rope, and carried it to Grandmother's home. Father followed with about five kilograms of rapeseed oil in a plastic container, and then stopping, he turned, and said, "Come, you have work to do."

We arrived before sunrise. Don grub's younger sister, Dbang mo, and his younger brother were busy preparing tables, food, and drinks. As soon as Mother unloaded the firewood, she began helping Dbang mo with various tasks.

Father entered the guest room, the source of loud chanting that could be heard from outside. Seven monks sat on the *he rdze* in the guest room, chanting scriptures in quick rhythm. As soon as I heard their chanting, comfort filled me as if Grandmother had not left. Local villagers soon gathered in the courtyard unloading firewood, rapeseed oil, bowls, and other articles a bereaved family requires when many visitors come.

Almost every village household sent at least one representative to help, including both men and women. More than forty villagers soon gathered in the yard. Everyone was serious. Hats and scarves were removed. All heads were bare. Women moved to the kitchen to assist other women boil tea, make steamed stuffed dumplings and steamed buns, wash bowls, put firewood in the hearth, chop vegetables, and so on. Male villagers carried chopped vegetables, meat, and other ingredients to a stove made of brick and adobe set up in a courtyard corner. A big fire crackled under pots holding *mchod* and '*bras thug*. Men also chopped firewood that had been brought by village households to the home. Other men stood outside the gate, greeting new arrivals.

Grandfather seemed older than before. He didn't look at anybody, but just moved between the *mchod khang* 'family shrine' located at the courtyard center and a newly made altar in front of the courtyard gate. His bald head was bare, his stooped body was wrapped in a tattered robe, and he murmured constantly with his head down, as if nobody was near.

Grandfather and Father called me outside the gate a bit later and said, "Your uncle must come and help make arrangements. Go to Ru mtsher Village and inform Uncle 'Phags ri (Grandmother's older brother)."

Grandfather silently listened as Father instructed me. Grandfather then added, "Be careful on the way."

Ru mtsher is an agro-pastoral area where residents cultivate barley, beans, potatoes, and vegetables. It is more than thirty kilometers from my village. Walking there generally requires at least three hours but I made it in less than two. I have a slight frame and could skillfully bound up and down mountains like a wild goat. It was still early when I reached Uncle's home. His expression told me he had a premonition that something dire had happened. His tense

expression hardened as I entered the room. He immediately invited me to sit near the hearth, where he sat cross-legged. Uncle's wife offered me a bowl of tea as soon as I sat down.

"Grandmother passed away. Grandfather sent me here. He wants you to come," I repeated as Father had instructed and then remained silent.

"*oM ma Ni pad+me hUM!* It's just like dung after the soul leaves. Need to throw away the soul container, like dung," Uncle said, as his prayer bead counting accelerated. Despite his face becoming paler, there was little change in his behavior. "Finish your tea, and then let's set out," he said.

Our journey to Grandfather's home was hampered by light rain. The autumn sun began breaking through thick clouds as we moved on. Fog shrouded mountain peaks and dewdrops drenched our shoes and the lower parts of our trousers. Despite Uncle being well into his sixties, he took the lead, as though he had regained his youth. He kept saying, "It's just like dung, need to throw it away," while chanting.

Grandfather greeted Uncle at the front gate when we arrived. They clasped hands tightly and entered the courtyard, murmuring to each other. Grandfather constantly nodded his head. After a brief talk, Uncle entered the guest room where the monks were chanting. He was a *sngags pa* and often participated in significant ceremonies in his and the neighboring villages.

Noon came. Father asked the helpers to serve lunch to the monks first. Helpers scooted to and fro between the kitchen and the guest room. The chanting ceased as the monks ate.

After preparing and offering the best food to the monks, villagers began their own lunch. More local villagers began gathering in the courtyard, including children and elders. Villagers believe it is good merit to offer food and money to whoever visits the bereaved family because this ensures the soul of the deceased will have a smooth journey to the next life. With few obstacles, they will be reborn within seven weeks. Elders offered the best food the bereaved family had prepared to everyone, regardless of age, ensuring all got something, and then they had their own lunch.

Afterwards, Uncle Tse dbang, Younger Brother, and I were told to recite a scripture dedicated to someone who has recently



passed away and was a close relative. Such scriptures chanted by close relatives are believed to have significant power to bring the deceased a better reincarnation. We chanted these scriptures for three days until we were told to help with *skar ma* 'disposal of the corpse'.

Monks headed back to the monastery after supper that night. Village elders came to chant passages of *mgur*, normally led by a village *sngags pa*. After finishing several *mgur* passages, villagers chanted *sgrol ma*, a scripture with which I was very familiar. Brother and I participated and chanted until around eleven p.m. On such occasions, males are often seated on the *he rdze*, while females sit around the hearth. Everyone holds prayer beads and keeps count of the number of times they chant the scripture. Tea is offered to everyone during the chanting. Afterwards, a big meal of noodles with plenty of meat and vegetables is offered to everyone who has come to chant. Villagers eat these noodles because it is the custom. Before leaving, they are also offered a bit of brick tea as thanks.

On the third day after completing the chanting of *mgur* and *sgrol ma*, all female villagers returned home, while bereaved relatives and several robust adult male villagers stayed behind. It was late night when we were told that the corpse would be placed in the river. The exact date and time are determined by a *bla ma* or a *sngags pa* when the family member visits them. It was announced that those with dragons and snakes as their zodiac signs could not participate in *skar ma*. Brother and Grandfather have such zodiac signs and thus could not go. Father urged me to join them, but I was afraid because it was my first time to participate in such a ritual.

In a rush, sturdy young men entered the room where the corpse was. They put the poles on their shoulders and carried the body outside the home compound where Father and Uncle shouldered the poles and silently started off. We soon reached a path leading to the Yellow River, which ran about ten kilometers from the village. Everyone scurried along as the poles creaked and our footsteps rustled. A man with a flashlight led the way. A strong passion welled within me as I fully understood their sincere sense of duty. I closely followed Father, hoping to help carry Grandmother. After some time, Father signaled to me and I replaced him. Drops of sweat dribbled from his forehead.

Though it was late night when we finally reached the banks of the Yellow River, we could make out the water flowing eastward, winding around several curves and giving off a flickering light that revealed its width. Without rolling up their trousers four young men waded into the river. When the water reached their chests, they gently pushed the corpse toward a small whirlpool where it disappeared.

We gazed at the center of the river once they were back on the bank. The corpse did not reappear. A man quickly offered *bsang* as part of the rite. He put water in a container and put it in front of the *sngags pa* and monk while they chanted, then scattered the sacred water into the air as he walked around the *bsang* three times. Afterwards, we all returned home along the path we had come on before and did not look back in fear the soul might follow.

Village elders say that as soon as a corpse is put in a river, thousands of fish come and devour it and that the corpse vanishes in an instant. Although I had not seen this with my own eyes, I believed that there were thousands of fish waiting under the water to eat the corpse.

# SHORT STORIES

## THE WATER DEITIES MADE ME SICK

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Pad ma mtsho was born in about 1960, is illiterate, and has lived most of her life in the village. This is her story.

It was winter. I was out fetching firewood to heat the *he rdze*. It was a mostly barren land. There was little firewood to collect. I searched the whole day but didn't find much. I then began cutting *dra ma*, a plant with small leaves that has tiny yellow flowers during spring. Most villagers never dare touch it because they think it grows where *klu* reside. I hesitated for a while, but thinking of sleeping on a warm, comfortable *he rdze*, I went ahead and cut it, and then started home with what I had gathered.

My husband lectured me about the importance of not angering water deities when I got home, but I tried to persuade him that everything would be fine - that my cutting the plant did not matter. However, things did not turn out as I expected.

I experienced some very scary dreams that night. Huge, black spiders crawled over the ceilings, marching toward me. As they approached, their eyes grew bigger and were full of rage. Their hairy legs became thicker and thicker. It seemed they were about to crush me. I was terrified and woke up drenched in sweat. It was a long time before I went back to sleep. When I got up in the morning, I was exhausted and felt queasy throughout the day. I kept my nightmare a secret because I thought everything would be fine.

I dreamed about dogs the following night. They chased me as I fled as fast as I could but then caught and bit me, leaving wounds all over my body. Sometimes, I broke free. I woke up during the very early morning with beads of sweat dotting my body. This time I shared my disturbing dreams with my husband because I was increasingly uncomfortable. He worriedly suggested I visit a locally famous *sngags pa*. During the visit, he asked me the date I had cut the *dra ma* and began to check in a book according to the date. He

immediately pointed out something about the plants I had cut and declared, "You offended the water deities' territory."

I recalled the plant that I had cut. He suggested that just after midnight, when people were in bed and everything was quiet, I should make a hundred small *bsang* and place them on the walls of our home, and also where the water deities resided.

Just after midnight, I prepared a basket of straw and plenty of *bsang rtsi*. I placed many small *bsang* on the house walls spaced about a half-meter apart, lit straw, and begged the water deities to forgive me. Afterwards, I slowly walked to the place where I had cut the plant and offered small *bsang* around it. I prayed sincerely and piously until I grew calmer.

Afterwards, I had dreams at night, but not nightmares. I hardly remembered what my dreams were and life returned to normal.

## A GOOD PERSON IS HARD TO FIND

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I heard this story from a villager (b. 1937). He and the main character lived at the same time. I created this story based on what the elder told me and what I imagined. *Rdo rje don grub*

Black clouds rambled in the sky, crowding each other, shifting shapes at unpredictable speed, as though a fearful giant might soon rise up amongst them. The wind, heavily laden with dust, howled viciously, seemingly intent on obliterating all creatures and objects on earth. It seemed almost impossible to take even one step in opposition to this powerful force. Nothing alleviated Rdo mtsho's anger and resentment toward her relatives as she began a hazardous journey along a trail meandering into the distance.

Rdo mtsho was eighty-five and dwelt within an ever-shrinking body that she fully realized would soon be a non-living entity. Her walking stick had been a constant companion for about fifteen years. She relied on it whenever she moved. Her disheveled hair resembled thinning winter grass. Her intimidating, gnarled face framed dissatisfied eyes that were nearly invisible amid thick wrinkles. She wore a tattered Tibetan robe that had been on her back for at least a decade. Its broken hem brushed the ground rhythmically as she trudged along the path. Sweat trickled down her sunburned cheeks, mingling with dust, becoming smears that she wiped away with stained sleeves. She wore a silver earring in her left ear; its mate had been torn years ago and could no longer hold an earring. Two front teeth protruded; others stood tidily at attention in straight lines. They seemed to be false, but were not, for she had never even been to the county town.

She moved forward as sluggishly as a turtle. The wind opposed her, but she confidently forged onward with the help of her trusty walking stick. Occasionally, when the wind blew in exceptionally powerful gusts that howled down the trail, she stood leaning into the wind to maintain her balance.

She walked for hours away from the home where she had stayed. She did not feel cold, though it was winter. Constant walking warmed her. Dusk had fallen by the time she reached the home of her brother, Skal bzang.

"What happened, Sister? How did you get here?" Skal bzang asked in amazement.

"I walked," Rdo mtsho said tears glistening.

"What's wrong?" Skal bzang asked.

Rdo mtsho was unable to do anything but whisper incoherently. She blinked rapidly as pearl-sized tears welled up in her wizened eyes, as though they were summer springs, again to be wiped with damp sleeves. Finally she managed, "Your brother, Rgyal mtshan, mistreated me. He didn't bring me breakfast for two days."

"How could this be? He promised to bring you every meal on time after he received two bags of flour and 1,000 RMB from the local government, plus ten head of livestock from you," Skal bzang said.

"Yes, he should have done what he promised. I'm over eighty," Rdo mtsho said furiously.

"That's right!" Skal bzang agreed.

"He promised!" Rdo mtsho said tearfully.

Skal bzang fell silent and seemed to be making a plan. He realized his chance had come. Father of two adult children and seventy years old, he worried his sister might go elsewhere. Skal bzang quickly prepared a bed for her, bringing out his family's best blankets and carpets, enthusiastically playing the role of a concerned, benevolent brother.

Skal bzang could not sleep that night. He turned from side to side wondering if his sister would stay, knowing he would benefit from what would come with her if she did. Rdo mtsho's host family received bags of wheat, cash, and livestock from Rdo mtsho's many relatives. He was happy she had come to him for her arrival meant new wealth for his family.

Skal bzang rose early the next morning with suppressed excitement and, without washing, strode to Rdo mtsho's bedroom, eager to assure himself that this new found 'treasure' was still in his hands. He knocked, opened the door, and panicked when he saw she was gone. He rushed out, searched for fresh footprints, and was reassured to see Rdo mtsho enjoying the warmth of the budding radiant sun. She glanced at the eastern horizon as smoke from village chimneys increasingly shrouded the area. A few villagers herded livestock into adjacent mountains to graze. Bleats from a flock of sheep driven by a girl caught her attention, reminding her of a past

when she had been a beautiful flower, herding sheep on boundless, verdant grassland.

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Local villagers hurriedly rounded up their livestock from the pastures one summer afternoon. Rdo mtsho stood atop a small mountain covered with lush vegetation, and then walked downslope, rotating her slingshot above her head, flinging an occasional pebble at an errant sheep, humming an ancient melody as she moved along. Her homespun Tibetan robe was tight enough to outline pert breasts. Her long black hair swayed in the breeze, resembling willow branches riding a spring breeze. When she smiled, people were reminded of a rose blossom. She was indeed a glittering translucent diamond and every young man in the village dreamed of bedding or marrying her.

She put a heavy wood bucket on her back every morning and went to a clean brook near her home to fetch water. Though she was a bit unkempt in the early morning, it could not detract from her beauty. She sang while hauling the heavy water bucket back home. Lustful men and boys gazed in the direction of this seemingly unattainable, melodiously-voiced beauty whose fame spread far and wide. None in the village dared propose for she seemed beyond reach.

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"Aunt Rdo mtsho, time for breakfast. Father's waiting for you inside," called Dbang rgyal, interrupting her recollections. Her smile faded. She wanted to permanently remain in that vanished past, but her stomach was grumbling and pushed her to get up and eagerly go inside for breakfast. "This food is really delicious. I've not had food like this in years. Your brother never gave me such tasty food while I was at his home," Rdo mtsho said unselfconsciously, which made Skal bzang and his family uncomfortable for it was the sort of food that they ate every day. Rdo mtsho continued to praise the food as though she had been starved for a long time.

Rdo mtsho stayed at Skal bzang's house for more than two weeks. The family respected and treated her as their mother. Rdo mtsho was satisfied and decided to live with her brother until her last day, but she did not know how to tell him this.

"You all are kind, nice people, while it seems my destiny to be

old and lonely," Rdo mtsho said emotionally to Skal bzang, who was sitting on a stool, encased in a sheepskin robe, silently and morosely gazing into the distance. "You're so lucky to have children around. You could never feel lonely. They respect and understand how to treat elders," Rdo mtsho said.

"Yes, especially when you're here," Skal bzang said.

"I feel much happier living with you here than with your younger brother. I'll stay longer if you don't mind," Rdo mtsho announced.

"You're more than welcome," Skal bzang replied.

"Really?" Rdo mtsho said.

"Yes, if you wish. When will you move in?" Skal bzang asked.

"I don't know. Soon, if it's OK," came the reply.

"Move whenever you like," Skal bzang offered seemingly generously.

"I never want to see that bastard's face again," Rdo mtsho blurted out angrily. "All my belongings must be brought here. Will you help me?"

Skal bzang nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

The following morning, Skal bzang saddled his brown mule and set out for the mountain where Rdo mtsho had lived. It was a long journey along a snaking path up to the village. He rode the mule and then occasionally dismounted and rested. Sometimes he walked, leading the mule, wondering if Rgyal mtshan would return Rdo mtsho's belongings, since she had stayed at his home for some years. While deep in thought, he was surprised to find himself suddenly at Rgyal mtshan's courtyard gate.

"My brother, how have you been?" asked his younger brother, Rgyal mtshan, who happened to be standing at the gate.

"Not bad," Skal bzang answered.

"Nice to have you here!" declared Rgyal mtshan.

"How about you? How is your hearing?" enquired Skal bzang.

"Worse than before," Rgyal mtshan responded.

"Time marches on," Skal bzang said with a slight, forced smile.

"Yes, we are old, useless, and powerless," answered Rgyal mtshan.

That night the two brothers made their bed in a private room, recalled their childhood, and sometimes laughed for so long it



seemed their intestines might rupture. Occasionally, the room turned deadly quiet, only for conversation to then resume.

Rgyal mtshan puffed on a pipe of smoldering, locally grown tobacco, smoke spiraling around the dim light from a rapeseed-oil lamp. Skal bzang lay by the window, staring at the ceiling. He wondered how he could broach the purpose of his visit. "I came for Sister's belongings. She wants to stay at my home," said Skal bzang finally.

Rgyal mtshan reluctantly agreed.

"What happened? I don't understand," asked Skal bzang.

"I forgot breakfast just one morning. I know she has spread the story that I didn't give her good breakfasts," Rgyal mtshan continued disappointedly.

"But I know she wouldn't exaggerate," replied Skal bzang.

"She does. She's always been like that. She behaved badly here every day," continued Rgyal mtshan. "You should be careful because I believe she'll do the same in your home."

"I'll be careful," assured Skal bzang.

Their conversation gradually petered out and the house became tranquil, until Rgyal mtshan began snoring at a volume and intensity that truly resembled the sounds of a slumbering hog. Skal bzang stared at the lamp for a while and then blew it out.

The next morning, Rgyal mtshan helped his older brother load Rdo mtsho's possessions, which amounted to only half of what Skal bzang expected. Rgyal mtshan's daughter-in-law had argued that she had cared for Rdo mtsho during her stay at Rgyal mtshan's home and thus deserved half of what Rdo mtsho owned.

Skal bzang got home around noon. Sweat drenched his shirt collar. Dbang rgyal, Skal bzang's son, was waiting at the gate and helped unload the horse. Rdo mtsho, noticing that he had returned, approached and inspected her belongings carefully. "You didn't bring everything. He refused to return them all, right?" Rdo mtsho inquired angrily.

Skal bzang nodded.

"He should have given everything back since Aunt is staying here," Dbang rgyal said.

"I know, but he'll visit soon. We'll talk about it when he comes," Skal bzang said. This response did not convince Dbang rgyal,

but he dared say no more.

Soon they had lunch and, though some dissatisfaction hung in the air, it was a pleasant meal. Rdo mtsho went out to sit in a homemade chair and enjoy the sunshine in the courtyard after lunch. The radiant sun carpeted the earth with golden beams gifting everything with welcomed warmth, easing the sorrow Rdo mtsho's fate had dealt her. She longed to return to the time when she was loved and pursued. She wondered how different her life might have been if her first marriage had been successful.

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It was another beautiful morning. Rdo mtsho went to fetch water as usual. As she hummed and walked back home with the brimming bucket on her back, she saw a cluster of children playing in her courtyard, near some well-decorated horses tied to a pole.

Rdo mtsho reached the threshold, saw unfamiliar faces, and guessed that they were matchmakers. With contradictory thoughts, she greeted them politely and resumed her chores. She was right - the meeting between the strangers and her parents was about her future marriage. Her parents were given porcelain bowls and strips of silk. After the guests left, Rdo mtsho's parents told her that she would marry and move to her husband's home in a neighboring village. Rdo mtsho wished that her parents had rejected the proposal, but she knew that as powerful forces were at work she could only accept.

A month later, villagers gathered at Rdo mtsho's home to escort her on horseback to the groom's home. Rdo mtsho was the center of attention. It seemed she was a princess.

The marriage began well. She and Rin chen enjoyed chatting and lived harmoniously but, as time passed, they quarreled and it became increasingly clear that Rdo mtsho no longer wanted to live with her new husband.

"You were the princess of your village. If you don't want to stay here, leave and find another man," Rin chen said.

"It's my fate to marry you but, if you don't want me, I'll leave," Rdo mtsho replied, salty tears rolling endlessly down her cheeks.

"Get out! I've had enough of your complaints!" Rin chen bellowed, grabbing a hot poker lying by the hearth and rushing at Rdo mtsho, who ran out of the house like a frightened hare chased by

a voracious wolf. Rdo mtsho tumbled into a ditch, the worst accident of her life. When she regained consciousness, she was lying in her parents' home, where she experienced unprecedented kindness from her parents. A few days later, she miscarried and stayed in bed for two weeks.

Time passed and matchmakers again came, bringing bolts of silk, valuable ancient tea bowls, tea bricks, and other gifts as though she were a powerful governor. Certain matchmakers represented well-off local people, including relatives of the local tribal leader, owners of hundreds of head of livestock, and wealthy businessmen. Pressured by her parents, Rdo mtsho married again.

Her subsequent marriages - seven in total - were unsuccessful. She stayed no more than two years in any one home. She got along with her husbands and in-laws but was unable to conceive, which led to dissatisfaction and then separation. When matchmakers stopped visiting, she realized that she was in her forties and her youth was gone.

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"Hello, Brother," Rgyal mtshan called out, appearing in Skal bzang's courtyard one cold windy morning with his thirty-year-old daughter-in-law.

"You really are an early bird. Come in, it's freezing out there," Skal bzang replied, inviting them into the house.

They all sat around the hearth. Rdo mtsho was still in bed, near the hearth. Detecting Rgyal mtshan's arrival, she turned silently to one side. Rgyal mtshan and Skal bzang found many topics to discuss but the focus finally and inevitably turned to Rdo mtsho. "She was at my home for several years. That's why I returned only half of her belongings," Rgyal mtshan started politely.

"You promised you would take good care of her, thus we agreed to give all her belongings to you," Skal bzang said.

Rgyal mtshan remained silent, as though agreeing. The conversation was at an impasse. Neither party knew what to say next.

Then Rgyal mtshan's daughter-in-law blurted, "My family deserves half of her belongings because we cared for her very well during that time."

"Foolish girl! Shut up! Don't interrupt while elders are

talking," Rgyal mtshan shouted.

"It's true. We won't return anything more!" Rgyal mtshan's daughter-in-law persisted.

"Show respect, girl. You should not talk like that," insisted Dbang rgyal.

"Like what? Do you think I'm wrong? OK, tell me what we should do," demanded the daughter-in-law.

"Watch your tongue or I'll hit you!" Dbang rgyal bellowed, standing up.

"I dare you! Go ahead! Be a real man!" Rgyal mtshan's daughter-in-law shrieked.

Dbang rgyal furiously rushed at her rolling up his robe sleeves, making the erstwhile cozy room full of relatives as noisy as a magpie's nest.

When their attention turned to Rdo mtsho, she had vanished and was now on another journey, this one to her niece's home. She felt an unprecedented energy surging inside her, as if she was in her twenties again and knew her final destination. She gradually disappeared into the distance, lost to view if anyone had been watching, her figure growing ever more indistinct in a snowy, frigid landscape of bleak, denuded mountains.

## THE FUGITIVE

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I created this story based on accounts I heard from different local people and my imagination. *Rdo rje don grub*

"Don't come near me. I've got a knife. I'll stab you in the heart if you take another step," Bkra shis murmured interminably. He could not wake up, as though possessed by wrathful spirits. Twisting from side to side on the *he rdze*, he kicked hard, disturbing his wife's sleep.

Mtsho mo looked at her husband anxiously and sighed. Finally, she patted his shoulder and gently said, "You're dreaming about that again."

Bkra shis woke up, soaked in sweat and disoriented. He wiped his forehead and sat up. He looked as though he had been working in a mine for several hours without resting and drinking. He glanced at Mtsho mo and said nothing. Reluctantly, his gaze fixed on the window, overcome by years of living in constant fear of being arrested.

...

The fifteen-day New Year period was coming. It was cold enough to make your bones ache. Every household was occupied with New Year preparations, purchasing food and other items for the coming festival. Bkra shis's family and some other villagers were so poor that they had no money to buy new things.

Bkra shis began visiting some of his relatives frequently. Nyi ma, their eight-year-old son, rarely saw him after dinner. He asked Mtsho mo once where his father was, but she remained quiet.

Several days passed. Sometimes Bkra shis only returned at the crack of dawn, and then slept during the day. Once he entered the house, he collapsed on his bed, too weary to remove his clothes. Seeing his strained face, Nyi ma wondered again what he had been doing all night. "Why do you come home so late? What do you do all night, Father?" Nyi ma asked.

He answered, "Child, don't interfere in adult affairs."

His answers so dismayed Nyi ma that he didn't know how to respond and walked away, his head bowed in heavy disappointment.

Though Nyi ma did not understand, he knew something was terribly wrong.

## THEFT

Early one morning Bkra shis returned home hurriedly with a sallow face and threw his arms around himself, as if he were freezing. He stretched his hands out to the fire and rubbed them together. After a while, he took his pipe unsteadily from his pocket, packed the bowl with potent local tobacco, lit it, and puffed several times, staring at the fire, lost in thought.

Mtsho mo was an early bird and was sweeping the floor when Bkra shis arrived. She quickly added dung to the fire. Bkra shis was agitated and did not know what to say. As Mtsho mo leaned forward adding wood to the cooking stove, she squatted and noticing Bkra shis' palsied fingers wrapped around his pipe asked, "What happened to your hands?"

"Uh... Nothing, actually," replied Bkra shis, trying unsuccessfully to stop his hands from shaking.

"You are uncomfortable. What happened?" Mtsho mo asked again.

Bkra shis didn't know where to start, hesitated, and then moved nearer Mtsho mo. He was about to say something when Nyi ma emerged from under a quilt on the bed, eager to hear. Bkra shis noticed and said, "Nyi ma, please go out for a bit, I have something to tell your mother."

Nyi ma obeyed, and then squatted on the threshold, eavesdropping.

"Listen, something terrible happened last night. Terrible!" Bkra shis began in a tremulous, worried tone.

"What?" Mtsho mo asked, urging him to continue.

Bkra shis took a deep breath and proceeded, "I told you what we've been doing these days. Last night, my friends and I took pieces of metal from the factory located near our fields. We should have been satisfied but, when we were about to return, we saw some other metal we hadn't noticed before. Nobody wanted to lose what seemed a good opportunity. We all agreed to grab some, but the problem was the guards."

Mtsho mo knotted her eyebrows, giving total attention to Bkra shis, who continued, "Ye shes and I were responsible for watching the guards. No lights were on when we scrambled up a hill for a broader view. Other friends jumped over the walls and reached the court piled with pieces of metal that are worth a lot. When they were about to haul the heaviest ones over the wall, there was an accident. One of our men slipped and fell into the courtyard. The metal fell with a thunderous clang and the guards rushed over like angry ants."

Bkra shis stood, pacing back and forth as he talked. Excitement gripped his face, as he further lost himself in describing what had transpired. "I whistled a signal to retreat, but we had to rescue our man who had fallen into the courtyard. My friends tried to pull him back up as the guards, armed with stones, approached and yelled. I ran down and told my companions to run quickly. As we were about to retreat, three guards appeared from their room holding weapons. Three of my friends pounced on them like furious wolves. The guards fell back as they were punched and beaten. One guard's head was smashed with a brick, and blood flowed from a wound. As soon as I told them to flee, they abandoned the guard. When I climbed up the wall and was about to jump down, I realized it was too dangerous. I then told the other men, who changed direction. While I turned, intent on following my friends, someone grabbed me from behind. We fell and his back hit the ground with me on top. Though he was hurt, he didn't let go. As I struggled to get free, I realized that he was clutching my sheep-skin coat. I squirmed out of it and fled. As soon as I got over the wall, furious guards shot at me. Ye shes was running toward me, dragging one leg. He had been struggling with a guard, whose gun had accidentally fired, the bullet passing through his right thigh. We raced home as quickly as we could."

Mtsho mo was speechless and stared into the fire for some moments, before saying, "It's not your fault. If we weren't so poor, you wouldn't need to steal." She added more wood to the fire, looked at Bkra shis, and knew something was missing. "Where's your sheepskin coat?" she asked.

Stunned, Bkra shis frantically began searching the house, but it was nowhere to be found. He was fretful and could not recall where he had left it.

"Think carefully. It's evidence if it's still at the place you just described. They'll find you," cautioned Mtsho mo.

"I can't remember," Bkra shis replied.

"I didn't see your coat when you arrived. You must have left it somewhere," urged Mtsho mo.

Bkra shis thought. He could not remember. Then after a few minutes, he recalled, "Yes! I left it there."

"Where?" asked Mtsho mo anxiously.

"Where we fought with the guards," Bkra shis answered.

"That's bad, bad. You said your plans were secret and well-rehearsed, but you left your coat there," Mtsho mo said furiously. "They'll use your coat to identify you and then police will arrest and imprison you."

Bkra shis fell silent, never imagining his coat would bring such trouble. Regretting all he had done, he bowed his head, running his hands through his thinning hair.

Mtsho mo heaved a deep sigh and cautioned, "We must be very careful. They'll arrive any time. Our village is very near the factory. We are all suspects now."

"Yes, we must be very careful. I'll inform the others, too," Bkra shis replied.

"What if they arrest you, or arrest us all? We'll all be punished," despaired Mtsho mo, tears glinting.

"They'll not arrest any of us. The Three Jewels<sup>60</sup> will protect us. Don't worry," reassured Bkra shis, though he had no idea what the next day would bring. He now stopped talking, stepped out to the threshold and, noticing Nyi ma, said, "Go wash your face, Son. We'll go buy candy for Lo sar. I'll be back soon," He then disappeared.

The sun began shining brightly, but generated little warmth. Several heavily-clothed policemen approached the village in the distance, tracking footprints left by Bkra shis and his fellows that led to a home adjacent to the factory. The policemen divided into two groups and entered the home by impudently shoving open the door.

Another policeman holding a hat stepped through another courtyard gate and found a housewife busy with chores in the courtyard. He politely asked her, "Do you recognize this hat? Who

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<sup>60</sup> Dkon mchog gsum 'the Three Jewels' refers to the Buddha, the Buddha's teachings, and the community of monks.



wears this hat in your village?"

As soon as Lhun grub, the household head, heard the policeman, he stepped outside and approached the group, feeling fretful and uneasy. Recognizing one policeman he felt better. He called him over and said, "I'm telling you this because we're relatives. You must swear that you won't share this information with the government or the other policemen. You must keep it secret."

"I promise," the policeman answered solemnly.

"I heard my maternal uncle and some other village men have been stealing metal from the factory. I think that's my uncle's hat," confided Lhun grub.

The policeman mingled with two other policemen and then they left without a word. The other group of policemen knocked violently at the door of another home until someone scurried to open it. "Do any of you recognize this sheep-skin coat? Tell us what you know, or you'll be in serious trouble," a middle-aged policeman threatened bossily.

"It belongs to Bkra shis," confessed the petrified householder.

The policemen then rushed in the direction of the village threshing ground, signaling to the policemen lagging there to catch up. Bkra shis returned from visiting his friend's home and had breakfast with his son and wife. Not a word was spoken, intensifying the strained atmosphere. After the quick breakfast, Mtsho mo and Nyi ma left, leaving Bkra shis alone inside the house. Mtsho mo locked the door to thwart the policemen, should they come.

Mtsho mo and Nyi ma approached the threshing ground where villagers were huddled. It seemed a meeting was in progress. Seeing two jeeps parked at the threshing ground center sent a shiver of fear through Mtsho mo. She clutched Nyi ma's hand and began retreating home.

"Where is Bkra shis's home?" a policeman questioned an old man in a village lane. The old man was Nyi ma's grandfather.

"He's my daughter's husband. If you have something important to tell him, you can discuss it with me," the old man said.

"We have business with him and prefer to talk to him in person," a policeman replied authoritatively, as though he were the captain.

As soon as they reached Bkra shis's home, they gripped their

weapons, and scurried around the home without making much noise. When they saw a lock on the door they retreated in disappointment. Bkra shis was terrified by the sounds outside, but kept quiet. Mtsho mo and Nyi ma returned after the policemen had walked back to the threshing ground.

"You must avoid the policemen in our village. They know the missing coat is yours. You're under suspicion," Mtsho mo said, panting anxiously.

"Who told the police the coat belongs to me? My friends? A villager?" Bkra shis wondered. Considering the implications, fear rose inside him. "I must be very careful," he thought to himself.

Bkra shis furtively left the village that afternoon and climbed a nearby tall mountain, in case the policemen entered his home, only returning at dusk.

## SURRENDER?

"I talked to the police captain at the threshing ground today. They'll punish you lightly if you surrender. He suggests the sooner the better or they'll imprison you all for many years," counseled Nyi ma's grandfather, disturbing the quiet in the house.

"They're cunning. There's no possibility they will reduce my punishment. They'll beat us to death after they get us," Dbang phyug said.

"You can't be stubborn. You are all heroes and I'm proud of each of you. The best way to solve this is to surrender. They'll relentlessly pursue you until all of you are imprisoned one by one. I don't want to see that," urged Nyi ma's grandfather.

"But we could flee and return when things are calmer. We can flee today, tonight, now," suggested Bkra shis spiritedly.

"Yes. I smashed one man's head with a brick. I heard he was sent to the hospital. I don't want to get my head smashed when he sees me," Rdo kho said.

"But they shot one of you. It's even now," declared Nyi ma's grandfather.

Though Nyi ma's grandfather believed surrendering and confessing would bring reduced punishment, the seven younger men never seriously considered relinquishing their freedom willingly.

"Don't panic. I'll have a confidential meeting with the policeman who is my relative. Let's see what's next after I meet him," suggested Bkra b+ha, who had remained silent while others were talking.

"Is he trustworthy? How close is he to you? People will do anything if they are bribed and offered a promotion. He's not a captain. There's a big possibility he'll betray us. You must be very careful putting us all at risk," cautioned Sha rdo.

"He's my close relative. You all must have faith in me," urged Bkra b+ha.

Midnight came. Bkra b+ha, the oldest among the suspects, was determined to visit his policeman relative.

Dpal ldan, an ambitious young policeman, clad in western-style clothes at his home, paced back and forth in his living room, smoking. He thought, "What should I tell my uncle?" Extinguishing his cigarette in an ashtray wisps of smoke gently wafted into the air. Revealing the truth to the police captain would mean his uncle would be imprisoned for at least several years. On the other hand, revealing what he discovered from a visit to another village home the previous day would give him position, wealth, and power - the life he had dreamed of since becoming a policeman. He had never encountered such tantalizing, complex, and ruthless choices. Suddenly, an unusually loud knock interrupted his ruminations.

"Uncle, whatever your group decides, you must let me know first. I'll try my best to find a solution," Dpal ldan coaxed, after inviting Bkra b+ha inside.

"Can you really find a solution? You're young. It's not that I don't trust you, but I'm afraid your captain won't do what he promises. I imagine they will capture us as soon as you reveal what you know," Bkra b+ha said.

Trying to reassure his uncle Dpal ldan suggested he'd discuss it with the captain the next morning and inform his uncle immediately if there was a further development.

Looking at Dpal ldan's impassive expression, Bkra b+ha left without another word.

Early the next morning, every villager was summoned for an urgent meeting on the threshing ground. When Mtsho mo and Nyi ma arrived, several police cars were already parked there. A dozen

policemen were surrounded by villagers. One then announced, "We've discovered the men who've committed the crimes in your village. It's not wise to deceive the government. We're not idiots. We've given you enough time to consider and confess what you've done. Don't blame us for taking action if you resist."

The frightened villagers then began murmuring. The police captain strode toward Bkra b+ha, who was wearing a brand new hat. Bkra b+ha stood still as a monument, showing no expression.

"So, you're Bkra b+ha. I've heard about you. May I see your new hat?" asked the captain sarcastically.

Bkra b+ha handed it to him, not taking his gaze from the captain's face. "Nice hat," the captain said, and then he turned and waved, signaling the other policemen to retreat. In an instant, the cars vanished into the distance down the dusty lane, in a trail of noise.

The murmuring continued as the villagers trudged home. Bkra b+ha and his friends lagged behind, impassive expressions on their face indicating helplessness.

That night Bkra shis and his friends gathered but few words were spoken. Everyone just waited, waited, and waited. After the nearly silent meeting, only "Be careful!" was said, before they returned to their homes.

## POLICE RAID

Mtsho mo prepared dumplings for supper. She skillfully wrapped the stuffing in the wrappers, while Bkra shis kneaded dough until it became increasingly pliant. While Nyi ma was imagining the tasty, cooked dumplings, Mtsho mo asked him to add firewood to the fire to boil water. The bird-like, uncooked dumplings were lined up on plates as though they were hatching. Nyi ma stared at the dumplings like a cat, anticipating their appearance fully cooked and steaming in his bowl. He was delighted as supper time drew nearer. He sat by the fire anxiously waiting for his bowl to be filled with dumplings, the air redolent with the fragrant smell of dumplings dancing in a steaming cauldron.

Nyi ma took a bowl of steaming dumplings from Mtsho mo a bit later, picked up one dumpling with a pair of chopsticks, and began eating it like a famished wolf. Bkra shis looked at Nyi ma, smiled, and

said, "Eat slowly. There're plenty more dumplings in the pot."

Nyi ma flushed and continued attacking the dumplings.

When Mtsho mo walked to the kitchen to get seasonings, she heard squealing brakes as some cars stopped nearby. She strode outside and soon met a barricade. Several policemen rushed to Mtsho mo's neighbor's courtyard gate while others were talking to villagers. Seeing this, Mtsho mo rushed back home panting. "Hide! They're here!" she stammered.

Bkra shis stopped eating and disappeared into one of the storerooms desperately seeking shelter, like a mouse attacked by a cat. Finally, he crawled into a half-emptied flour container.

When Mtsho mo again stepped outside the door, she saw seven men scurrying about in two groups. Armed with pistols and truncheons, they circled the house, and then rushed inside. They searched every room in pairs, shouting loudly. Failing to find Bkra shis, they gathered in the main room and noticed the bowls filled with dumplings. "Where's your husband?" a policeman asked in a hoarse voice, as though he had been smoking for years.

"I don't know," answered Mtsho mo defiantly.

"You're very loyal. You should also be loyal to your government," a tall man said knowingly. "Your husband committed a crime and you should tell us his whereabouts and then he'll be sentenced lightly. Otherwise, all of you are in trouble."

Mtsho mo maintained a sincere look of innocence and kept her mouth shut. After a while, a man squatted by Nyi ma, stroked his head gently, and asked, "Where did your father go, little friend?"

Though Nyi ma knew where he was, he detested these awful men and loved his father. After fruitless effort, the men helplessly left and Mtsho mo calmed down. She and Nyi ma rushed to the storeroom, opened the flour container, and Bkra shis emerged, flour coating his clothes as though he has been caught in a blizzard. Seeing Bkra shis's appearance, Nyi ma giggled. Mtsho mo stayed calm, signaled that the police had left, and said not a word as she packed butter, *rtsam pa*, and some meat in a bag.

Bkra shis sat quietly by the hearth, puffing his pipe. He considered surrendering, and then he considered his family and decided he could not. He thought, "This ordeal is destined for this lifetime. I must confront and overcome it."

Mtsho mo approached, sat by him, looked at him despondently, and said, "You are entangled in this and we must face it. This is destined. There's nothing we can do to change it. You must avoid arrest. I can't take responsibility for this family alone. I have often been ill after giving birth to Nyi ma and I am now pregnant again. Go somewhere. Elude them. It's the only way." Mtsho mo's tears flowed, as though her red eye sockets were springs.

"I've tried my best to improve our poor condition. Instead, I brought disaster. I am deeply regretful," confessed Bkra shis in a trembling voice.

"What you did was for our family," Mtsho mo said. "I have prepared food and the mule is saddled. Set out at midnight."

"Yes, that's best. Those rapacious policemen will probably come again at the crack of dawn," Bkra shis replied, looking at the sky, checking the time.

Time passed. They squatted by the hearth, staring at the starry sky through the window. Nyi ma wanted to say something to his father, but was at a loss for words.

#### ARREST

Bkra shis loaded the mule under the moonlight. He then walked away from Mtsho mo and Nyi ma, leading the mule under a starry sky to a place Nyi ma had never been. He marched forward, turning his head now and again to look at his wife and son. Mtsho mo's tears glittered like crystal diamonds. It was the first time Nyi ma had seen his mother so despondent.

The next morning when the sun's first rays glimmered, smoke gently glided into the air from numerous village chimneys, announcing families were up and busy with chores. This idyllic scene was soon disturbed by policemen swarming around Mtsho mo's home, searching every room again and behaving rudely. Their eyes glowed with irritation and hatred when they were unable to find Bkra shis. They crudely hustled Mtsho mo into a village lane. She felt disoriented but walked steadily. Devastated at Mtsho mo's departure, Nyi ma ran after her, and tightly grasped her hand, terrified she would be jailed. When he looked at Mtsho mo, he saw hatred in her eyes, and not a trace of fear. Such bravery helped him find courage.

Bkra b+ha guessed Dpal ldan had betrayed him. His anger was of such magnitude that he would have tortured the betrayer thousands of times, but what awaited Bkra b+ha was imprisonment.

When Mtsho mo and Nyi ma approached a relative's home, they saw Bkra b+ha, surrounded by several men holding guns. On his shoulder Bkra b+ha placidly carried pieces of metal that he had stolen. Bsod noms had also been apprehended. His wife and children stared at him, their faces wet with tears. Looking at their miserable faces, Nyi ma's heart felt broken. The policemen pushed Bsod noms forward, and thrust his head down.

Other policemen lagged behind, looking very patient. Suddenly, an impetuous young policeman rushed at Mtsho mo and beat her with a stick. Provoked by such outrageousness, Mtsho mo scolded, "Audacious dog! If you are truly brave enough, find my husband! I committed no crime. How dare you treat people like this?"

These words silenced the policemen. Afterwards, a man approached and threatened, "We can't arrest your husband because of you. You helped him escape. Tell us everything now, or you will be in serious trouble."

Mtsho mo fearlessly replied, "Be careful, I'm innocent. If you continue to mistreat me, I have the right to sue you all."

Mtsho mo's threat changed nothing but when the policemen noticed more villagers gathering, they silently backed away, talked among themselves, and then departed. Nyi ma felt great relief. Mtsho mo gazed at them and murmured under her breath. Nyi ma was dumbstruck by her reaction in front of her tormentors and silently prayed that nothing serious would happen to his relatives and Bkra shis's friends.

All the suspects except Bkra shis and Ye shes were hustled off to jail. The village became quieter after Bkra shis's friends were gone. The frequent visiting, laughing, and jovial atmosphere were gone.

Wrinkles accumulated on Mtsho mo's forehead and her hair grayed as time passed. Though misfortune plagued her, she never surrendered, bravely bearing the heavy burden of caring for her family, stoically confronting every difficulty.

Ye shes hid in the mountains and met Bkra shis. They wandered in the mountains and forests, avoiding people in fear they would divulge their whereabouts to earn a reward from the local

government. Sometimes, they visited relatives for a brief time and then their wives would come with meat and bread for them.

#### YE SHES'S ARREST

Four years passed. In this time, most of the convicted thieves had been released. Meanwhile, no longer able to bear the harsh weather, Bkra shis and Ye shes furtively moved to Ye shes's home in an agropastoral area where many of the local families were Ye shes's relatives and cultivated barley, potatoes, and beans. There they visited other local families openly as though they had regained their freedom. Everything was quiet for a couple of weeks.

Then, one night, Ye shes bravely said, "New Year is approaching. The local leader and his men also need to be at home at this time. Our friends have also been released from prison."

"Maybe, but sometimes the police make special investigations, especially before the New Year," cautioned Bkra shis.

"I think it will be fine. I'll go to town tomorrow morning and buy some things for the New Year," announced Ye shes.

Bkra shis stopped puffing on his pipe, wrapped it in his tobacco pouch, and exclaimed, "Are you serious?"

"Just this once. They won't recognize me if I'm in town driving a tractor," said Ye shes resolutely.

"It's dangerous. They've got our pictures. They'll recognize you," replied Bkra shis. "What if they arrest you? What if they are waiting for us there?"

Ye shes silently put his head on his pillow and pulled his quilt around him. Bkra shis blew out the rapeseed-oil lamp. The night seemed particularly tranquil.

A rooster crowed, announcing a new day. Bkra shis remained in bed. He had slept poorly, thinking of Ye shes's planned trip to town. He finally fell asleep and did not awaken until bright sunshine fell on his bed. Ye shes was gone. Bkra shis hurriedly wrapped up in his robe and strode into the kitchen wearing a severe expression. "Where is your husband, Sha bo?" Bkra shis asked, tightening his sash.

"He went to town this morning to buy things for New Year. He said he would be back soon. He asked me to tell you not to worry," Sha bo said.



But Bkra shis worried, thinking about Ye shes's safety. Finally, he stepped up on the *he rdze*, sat cross-legged, held a wood-cover Tibetan scripture volume, and commenced reciting scriptures while swaying his upper body.

The town was about twenty kilometers from Ye shes's home. Ye shes drove his tractor along the road toward town, imagining the tractor was an airplane. Everything seemed usual when he reached the small town. The single long street was packed with locals clad in sheep-skin robes. He pulled the tractor to the side of the street and entered a shop. He noticed the local leader's office in the distance and dared not approach it. After making purchases, he felt jubilant and worry-free, mounted his tractor, and sped homeward, joyfully humming, imagining spending days with his relatives and family. He was so enraptured by his sense of bravery and accomplishment in coming to the local town and eager anticipation for the coming festival days that he never thought to look back. Shortly after, a siren echoed piercingly, rushing toward him. Ye shes was startled and accelerated, but the tractor could run no faster. Thick rings of pitch-black smoke wreathed the air.

From behind the leader's men shouted for him to stop. With no alternative, Ye shes stopped the tractor and stuck his hands in the air. Immediately, two men rushed forward, threw him to the ground, and handcuffed his hands behind his back.

"Be co-operative!" demanded a policeman arrogantly, and shoved him into the jeep. Another policeman chugged off on the tractor toward Ye shes's village. Loquacious Ye shes had become quiet. He bowed his head full of regret at having ignored his friend's warning.

Bkra shis and Sha bo watched outside until darkness fell. Bkra shis had a premonition of impending disaster. They finally returned inside and sat around the hearth, staring at the burning firewood. They did not have dinner in the house that was now ominously quiet. Only a sizzling sound in the hearth could be heard. Bkra shis pulled out his pipe from his pouch, lit it, and began puffing.

"Sha bo, please saddle my mule," Bkra shis said politely. He emptied his pipe, tapping it against the sole of his shoe.

"Why? Are you leaving?" asked Sha bo.

"Yes, your home is no longer safe," Bkra shis said, packing a

leather bag.

"But my husband isn't back yet. Aren't you going to wait for him?" she asked.

"I must go," Bkra shis said.

Sha bo lowered her head and the house regained its silence.

"What's wrong?" Bkra shis asked.

"Nothing," she replied. Her eyes glittered with crystal tears. "You must have heard something about Ye shes. Tell me what you know," she said.

"I didn't hear anything. Don't think too much. Your husband will be fine," consoled Bkra shis. A few minutes later he took the reins of his mule and trudged into the darkness, thinking of his wife after having seen Sha bo's endless tears.

The next day, news of Ye shes's arrest spread like the wind. "What sins did he commit in his previous life?" an old man said. "*oM ma Ni pad+me hUM*. May the Three Jewels protect and bless him."

"What unfortunate karma! Why is life so unfair? Why must women always suffer for the misdeeds of their men?" wailed an old lady, and resumed chanting.

As villagers went to bed that night, the whole village regained its usual peace and tranquility. Then suddenly half a dozen men wearing ordinary clothes jumped over Ye shes's home compound walls, searching for Bkra shis. Luckily, Bkra shis had fled long before and they soon left, glaring hatefully at Sha bo.

Maybe it was Bkra shis's fate to escape, or his destiny to live in the clutches of hatred and fear. He was an ordinary person, who committed a crime to improve his family's life.

## FUTURE

Several months after Bkra shis had left home Mtsho mo gave birth to a lovely daughter, Klu mo, who brought great joy. However, Mtsho mo's burden was now heavier.

One night, Mtsho mo's relatives gathered and discussed her future. "As your father, I can't bear for you to die before I do. There is a saying, 'It's a disgrace for white-haired people to see off black-haired people.' Your husband can't come home and you have two children. Your son can now care for this family," Nyi ma's

grandfather, Pa sangs, said.

"You mean Nyi ma should stay at home and help me?" Mtsho mo asked.

"Yes. Women suffer most. You should listen to your father's suggestions," Bzang mo, Pa sangs's wife, added.

"He's doing very well at school. He's the top student in his class. Every teacher praises his progress. Dropping out will ruin his future prospects," Mtsho mo replied.

"That's fate. The same happened to me. I left school because I am the oldest son in my family. You are my sister. You know that," Nyi ma's uncle, Tshe b+ho, said.

Mtsho mo continued, "I know. Though our family lineage is considered impeccable none of us have a better life. We work in the fields until death comes. I don't want my children to suffer like us. I hope they change their life through education. That's my wish in this life."

"My dear daughter, you are correct. Long ago, a famous Tibetan saint said, 'Even if you know your life will end tomorrow, study today.' I understand the importance of knowledge, but think about it," Pa sangs advised.

Mtsho mo gently stroked Nyi ma's and his sister's heads. The visitors seemingly had acquiesced to Mtsho mo's decision and left without a word a bit later.

Nyi ma could not imagine how hard his life would be if he quit school. He knew how much he would miss the days with his schoolmates.

Lo sar drew closer. Villagers were busy shopping. An invigorating spirit suffused the village, but Mtsho mo and her relatives were deeply depressed. The cheery atmosphere of New Year had died out in their souls.

#### WITH GRANDPARENTS

Many months passed and then Bkra shis surreptitiously returned home one dawn. Nyi ma thought he had regained his freedom and no longer needed to hide. Nyi ma was ecstatic with his return, but was soon disillusioned when he saw his parents packing some bags. It seemed they planned to leave.

At that time, Lha sa was considered very far from Bkra shis's home. He had heard that some neighboring villagers had escaped to Lha sa after they had gone against the local government. Consequently, Lha sa had become an attractive refuge. However, he did not reveal where he was going to his children because he thought it would be risky if the police interrogated them and then learned the truth.

After a usual supper, Bkra shis spoke, "As you two understand, I can't be with you for a while. I need to go somewhere. Your mother will also come.

"Will you and Mother be back soon?" Nyi ma asked.

Klu mo stared at their parents, seemingly wanting to say something, but only mumbled because she was too young to speak clearly.

"Yes, soon. Please remember, your father is not a bad man. He loves you. I made mistakes, but everything will be all right. Don't worry. Understand?" explained Bkra shis.

"You'll stay with your grandparents while we're gone. Don't be naughty. Obey them. Study hard. Sometimes they'll scold you, but they love you, too. Never talk back. Do you understand?" added Mtsho mo.

"We're really sorry to leave you with your grandparents. We'll make it up to you when we return. Please take care of your sister, Nyi ma. I want to see you two go to school and graduate from universities," Bkra shis said.

These words were thus engraved on the two little children's hearts, never to be erased. The next day they had a new home - their grandparents' home. Despite their parents' promises, years passed before they saw each other again. Nevertheless, the children were optimistic about their future, because they kept their parents' words and promises in their hearts, empowering them to overcome whatever obstacles presented themselves.

## NEW LIFE IN LHA SA

Bkra shis contacted his social ties in and beyond Lha sa, seeking work. After living a hard life precariously in holy Lha sa for several years, he sold his one year-old tractor to get enough money to treat relevant

officers with expensive food in restaurants and offer them other inducements. Bkra shis finally managed to obtain an official driver's license and then worked as a cab driver for a taxi company, earning about 2,000 RMB monthly. Though he was far from his home village, in his dreams police regularly chased him. He slept fitfully, often waking drenched in sweat. When he was unable to cope with such dreams, he visited monasteries and prayed for mental tranquility. He and Mtsho mo offered *bsang* and circumambulated monasteries hoping to gain inner peace. As time went by, this mental anguish lessened, but he still wondered how they would maintain their life in what remained a strange city.

Lha sa is a popular tourist destination. Thousands pour into the city, especially in summer. Bkra shis's earnings multiplied. Three years later, his savings allowed him to open a small shop that Mtsho mo managed near the Jo khang. Mtsho mo's outgoing nature attracted many customers, and she began making more friends in the city, including locals and people originally from her home area. With their kind assistance, coupled with her diligence and perseverance, her small business did well and their life markedly improved.

However, when Mtsho mo thought of her two children entrusted to her parents, she felt terrible. Tears trickled down her face. Sometimes, she wept surreptitiously in fear Bkra shis would scold her, using her tears as evidence of feminine weakness. Mtsho mo eventually could no longer suppress her emotions and exploded one night, "Bkra shis, I can't bear missing my children! I must visit home this summer!"

Bkra shis remained silent, as if he had not heard. Mtsho mo waited patiently until Bkra shis broke the long silence. He gently turned from Mtsho mo, moved to the other side of the bed, turned on the light and lit a cigarette with a lighter decorated with the Tibetan alphabet. Puffs of smokes drifted sluggishly in the air. He stared, as if drugged by the smoke's taste and odor, which reminded him of the taste of tobacco he had grown in his small tobacco plot back at home.

"Absolutely! We often promised to visit. Surely, we've broken our vows. What a shame!" exclaimed Bkra shis.

"So, you approve of me visiting home?" Mtsho mo asked hopefully.

"It's more than just needing to visit, we should return. We

belong there, but it's still not the right time," Bkra shis said.

In the dim light Mtsho mo's crystal tears glistened. She was speechless and choked with emotion. "When is the right time?" she finally sniffed.

"I don't know, but I believe the Three Jewels will provide the answer," Bkra shis replied, feeling drawn to a Buddha image hung on the wall.

Suddenly, Mtsho mo smiled broadly as if all her sorrows were washed away. She wiped her teary eyes with her nightgown sleeve and said, "What about bringing them here for a summer holiday? They could visit monasteries to accumulate merit, broaden their mind, and they won't need to work during harvest time back home. It would be a very good chance for them to visit this holy land - a lifetime dream fulfilled for many."

"Excellent, but the universe has grown smaller since our youth. Lha sa is no longer the dreamland of years ago and will be much less so some years from now. We'll have more chances to bring them here. Let's wait another year. OK?" Bkra shis said.

Mtsho mo's enthusiasm evaporated as she wilted onto the bed without looking at her husband. Bkra shis took a last puff, flicked the remains of his cigarette into the ashtray, turned off the light, and lay down with a heavy feeling.

#### MTSHO MO'S VISIT HOME

Summer quietly approached, embracing the holy city in greenery. Birds chirped and flitted back and forth among tree branches, celebrating summer's arrival. Pilgrims dressed in Tibetan clothing rested in parks near the Po ta la under towering trees to avoid powerful sunshine that had illuminated ancient Tibetan historical events and culture from time immemorial. Shimmering lights glittered from the gold decorated tops of the Po ta la, suffusing every corner of the holy city, magically protecting the city from harm. Mtsho mo leaned against a gigantic tree in the front park of the Po ta la after circumambulating the Po ta la and Jo khang that morning. She wanted a long rest. A pleasant breeze caressed her cheeks and her willow-like hair fluttered. Pilgrims chatted in various dialects that she only partially comprehended. She paid little attention, however, as

she gazed at the towering Po ta la without blinking, eager to share a long-buried secret. She understood the Po ta la to be a receptacle of supreme religions mystery and value, and she hoped to have the good fortune to glimpse it when she took her last breath. After a long while, she put her hands to her wrinkled forehead piously, murmured, and shut her eyes.

A group of pilgrims speaking her home dialect passed by, murmuring the Po ta la's praises. Her attention was immediately attracted by the familiar dialect. She opened her eyes but could only see their backs. She noticed a couple followed by two children. She estimated them to be the same age as her own children left at home with her parents. This plunged her into mental anguish. Despite her fatigue, she stood, grabbed her *bsang* pouch, donned her white broad-brimmed hat, and hurried home, as though eager to inform Bkra shis of something.

"Our children will have their summer holiday soon. If you think we are not ready to bring them here this year, please allow me to visit this summer. It doesn't need to be a long visit," she pleaded, tears oozing from the corners of her eyes.

"You are desperate to see them. I'm committing a serious sin to disagree. I don't have much to say, if you've already made up your mind," Bkra shis said.

Mtsho mo smiled broadly, a smile Bkra shis had not seen for too long. It recalled aspects of her youthful beauty, for she had been much sought-after when she was in her early twenties. That beauty from the old days had evaporated like dew on a hot summer day, buried now somewhere in her bones rarely rising to the surface. Bkra shis gazed at her affectionately as if it was their first romantic rendezvous, realizing he had indeed made the right decision.

"I will entrust our shop to my good friend. There's no need for you to worry about it. She'll manage it well. Her Lha sa dialect is better than mine," reassured Mtsho mo the next day, putting her luggage atop a bus. "Be careful while driving. Many tourists are here, especially at this time. Drive slowly. We can't cope with an accident."

"I know, I know. I'm not a three year-old child! I know how I should behave," Bkra shis said impatiently.

She got on the bus, which soon chugged ahead, casting thick blasts of black smoke behind. Bkra shis stood still as Mtsho mo

embarked on her homeward journey. Mtsho mo had not shed tears this time, instead, she was resolute and ecstatic. Her soul had lifted. She waved to Bkra shis gracefully and, as the bus passed in front of the Po ta la, she gazed at it and prayed silently, as though saying farewell.

She drifted off to sleep an hour later as the bus moved down a well-paved road, surrounded by towering, various-shaped mountains that she understood to be manifestations of mountain deities in this holy realm. She closed her eyes in exhaustion, as though she had not slept for years.

Mtsho mo arrived home three nights and two days later. Meeting her parents and relatives brought pleasure. She felt vital and strong. Although Lha sa was considered a dreamland by most Tibetans, her birthplace gave her great joy. She visited village relatives in turn and chatted about her life in Lha sa. Everyone expressed great curiosity, admiration, and a desire to visit holy Lha sa in their lifetime. Mtsho mo explained challenges in dealing with loneliness and lacking friends and relatives there.

Years of absence from the village meant there were many changes. The once bumpy, narrow path leading to the village had been widened and paved. Tractor numbers had doubled, disturbing village tranquility. The village electrical system had been revamped and villagers yearned for larger, more modern televisions, and DVD players. Seeing such rapid development, Mtsho mo felt it important to return permanently and improve her home; she realized the gap between her family and other village families created by their absence, was rapidly widening.

Visiting their deserted home made Mtsho mo weep. Weeds as tall as middle-aged men waved from the packed adobe roof, which leaked because of the holes insects had dug. Unpruned flowering trees in the courtyard towered over the walls. Poplar leaves were heaped in courtyard corners. Thick, dried mud had collected along passageways, as if water had flowed inside when torrential rain had fallen. Weeds as thick as grass on the mountain pastures pierced the courtyard walls. Mtsho mo squatted and stared at all of this for a long while, as though her eyes were playing tricks.

She then worked for five days cleaning the house, never thinking cleaning and tidying were tasks she was obligated to do.



Rather, she found pleasure in it and completed her task with enthusiasm.

#### CAR ACCIDENT

Klu mo began school in her village and did well in her studies. Meanwhile, Nyi ma studied in junior middle school student. He often visited home on the weekends to see his sister, but sometimes, because of study pressure and teachers' mistreatment, a fear of teachers was in his mind. He begged his grandparents to allow him to stay at home for some days, but they refused because they believed that education assured a better future.

Hearing of Mtsho mo's home visit, Nyi ma was eager to reach home as quickly as possible and be reunited with his mother. Mtsho mo, however, was concerned with his study and promised to visit his school one weekend. It was an ordinary day when Mtsho mo and Klu mo set out for the county town in a battered mini-bus they boarded near the village. Striking summer scenery appeared like a goddess of beauty, clad in various colored garments, intoxicating passengers, who forgot the discomforts of the journey along a winding road. Curious Klu mo never ceased questioning Mtsho mo from the beginning of the journey until she felt queasy and drifted into sleep as the bus reached the halfway point.

In time, passengers leaned against the sides of the bus as though they were drunkards, and snores were audible. Large drops of jiggling, translucent sweat dotted the driver's forehead as the sun reached its zenith. He wiped his forehead with a moist towel when sweat periodically trickled into his eyes. "Don't violate rules, just follow the road," the driver whispered to himself, looking into the distance at a Santana, not having the heart to disturb his dreaming passengers. "Don't come down the center of the road," the driver whispered to himself as a Santana came ever nearer and then, just moments later he screamed, "No! No! No!"

A powerful force knocked the mini-bus to one side of the road. It turned over twice. Some parts of the bus were torn apart and hurtled into the distance. The Santana had smashed into the front of the mini-bus that now resembled a broken egg shrouded in dust, as it lay upside down, like an animal carcass after the flesh has been

ripped away, its tilted wheels spinning pathetically in ever slower circles of disaster.

A long silence dramatized the horror of the situation. Suddenly, a voice shouted, "Klu mo! Wake up! Open your eyes!" Klu mo was unconscious. Mtsho mo pulled her out of the bus and shook her. Blood flowed from a deep wound in Mtsho mo's own forehead. She dabbed at it with her sleeve, continuing to call to Klu mo.

"Please save my child! Save my child!" Mtsho mo shrieked, clutching the Santana driver, who lay on the ground in deep shock. Mtsho mo grabbed his tie, pulled him up, and ordered him to take her and her daughter to the hospital immediately.

Mtsho mo's shouts enlivened the driver, who picked Klu mo up, put her in his battered car, and started off to the county town. Meanwhile, several police cars with blaring sirens arrived to rescue passengers who were still trapped.

Mtsho mo urged the driver to go faster. The frightened driver obeyed, as though Mtsho mo were holding a gun to the back of his head. They reached the front of the hospital and the driver carried Klu mo into the hospital, loudly calling for doctors. Two doctors came immediately and took her to the emergency room.

When Mtsho mo finally paused to take a deep breath, she fainted from shock and loss of blood from her own wounds.

The driver shouted again and several nurses came to care for her.

Bde skyid, Mtsho mo's sister, reached the hospital a few hours after the accident, carefully examined Mtsho mo's stitches, and asked her if she was in pain.

Mtsho mo began crying when they turned their attention to Klu mo, who lay on the bed, wearing an oxygen mask, with an always-dribbling IV needle stuck in her arm.

Meanwhile, Nyi ma finished lunch and waited in his dorm room for his mother and sister to visit. He grew concerned about their delayed arrival, but he had strong faith that wherever Mtsho mo went, there would be no obstacles because he understood her to be a manifestation of Tara.

"Buzz! Buzz!" Nyi ma's cell phone vibrated in his left trouser pocket. He fumbled for his phone and punched the answer button, trembling with excitement. "Nyi ma! Where are you? Come to the

Tibetan Hospital immediately. Something's happened to Mtsho mo and Klu mo," urged Bde skyid.

When Nyi ma asked what had happened, the phone went dead. Incredulous, Nyi ma stood, grabbed his school jacket from a hanger, and rushed to the hospital with mixed feelings.

"Nyi ma, come here!" Bde skyid yelled from outside the hospital gate.

"What happened, Aunt?" Nyi ma asked worriedly, after crossing the street.

"They had an accident," Bde skyid said, tears glittering.

"The Three Jewels! Are they all right?" Nyi ma asked.

"Your mother's forehead was cut. It's not very serious. But your sister..." she said, choking.

"What happened to Klu mo? What happened?" Nyi ma demanded, clutching his aunt's shoulders.

"She's unconscious," she murmured, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Take me to her room, please!" Nyi ma urged, barely restraining his pent up emotions.

As he entered the room where Klu mo was in bed, clad in a patient's gown with her eyes closed, he was dumbstruck. Mtsho mo lay next to her, an IV plugged into her arm as well. She burst into tears when Nyi ma entered. Grabbing his hand tightly, she wept as if Klu mo would never awaken.

"Don't worry Mother, Sister will be fine. She'll be all right," Nyi ma consoled, giving her a long, rare hug.

After Nyi ma's comfort, Mtsho mo composed herself and dried her swollen, bloodshot eyes. Nyi ma sat by his sister and looked at her intently, tears flowing from his eyes. His expression was so tight it seemed blood might ooze out. Then suddenly he jumped up and disappeared outside.

Nyi ma was terribly upset, thinking that if his mother and sister had not come to visit him, such a horrible accident would never have happened. He felt guilty and began to condemn himself for selfishly causing such tragedy.

Bde skyid found him, patted his shoulder gently, and comforting him said, "The doctors say your sister will be fine, though she'll be unconscious for several days. Don't blame yourself. These

things happen. They're inevitable. Be kind to yourself."

Nyi ma nodded without turning. He felt much relief, re-entered the room, wanting to talk to his mother, whom he had not seen in a long while.

The next day, Nyi ma's paternal and maternal grandfathers visited the hospital with homemade bread, butter, and *rtsam pa*, planning to stay until Klu mo regained consciousness. They were less worried than Mtsho mo and comforted her during meal times. Nyi ma believed that with their grandfathers near his sister would awaken soon. They were like two majestically towering mountains, protecting her from all harm and radiating hope.

Nyi ma visited the hospital when he finished his classes and silently beseeched protection from the Three Jewels to speed his sister's recovery.

The grandfathers strolled to school early each morning. When they saw him studying with other classmates, they greeted him with broad smiles. Through their smiles, Nyi ma saw their support, pride, and a bit of jealousy, the latter a testimony to their never having had a chance to attend school.

Three days later, Klu mo regained consciousness, bringing smiles, hope, and joy. The doctors said she had been incredibly fortunate. Had her injury been a bit more serious she could have been permanently disabled. Though Klu mo was now conscious, she stumbled when she walked. The doctors said this would continue for several months. Mtsho mo would not leave Klu mo while she was recovering. She worried her grandparents would not be able to give her the care she needed. She decided to take her to Lha sa and keep her there until she recovered completely.

After they left, Nyi ma made frequent phone calls inquiring about Klu mo's health. He could not bear the idea of her being disabled, and unable to walk normally. Hearing good news about his sister's health, Nyi ma's worry began fading. His phone calls became less frequent and he refocused on his study.

Six months later, Klu mo was normal again, an outcome which her parents, her relatives and Nyi ma had earnestly prayed for. Each had made their own contribution to her recovery. Her parents took her to famous monasteries in Lha sa, while the grandfathers constantly offered large *bsang* offerings to local mountain and

territorial deities, beseeching protection and assistance for her health. Meanwhile, Nyi ma piously prayed daily to the Three Jewels for help.

Mtsho mo returned home with Klu mo so that she could continue her study in primary school. The children's earnest desire to gain knowledge for a better future affected her deeply and her attitude began to change about living in Lha sa. She decided to return home and lead a simple life, regardless of the cost.

## RETURN HOME

Years after Bkra shis had first become a fugitive, he returned home with Mtsho mo. All of the incarcerated metal thieves had been released from prison. Some seemed to have aged five to ten years more than their real age. Others had obviously changed and were no longer interested in chatting. It seemed that their youth had gone like a shooting star, a mere flicker across the sky of their life. They seldom gathered as before. Everyone seemed focused on work and improving their homes.

Bkra shis and Mtsho mo were optimistic when they heard the good news of their friends' release. They hoped that the case was closed and the police would no longer hunt for Bkra shis, who sometimes regretted fleeing the police, leading a life like a hunted animal in constant sorrow and worry. Sometimes, he envied his friends for gaining their freedom, but when he heard their miserable stories of life in prison, he felt he had been very lucky to not have been incarcerated, believing he could not have survived the miseries of prison. He often showed his gratitude to the Three Jewels by offering abundant *bsang* and chanting scriptures, especially early in the morning and late at night.

Although their return brought optimism and a promising future for the families of those released, and for the community as a whole, Bkra shis never felt free and could not erase the nightmare that had tormented him for years. It was as though an evil spirit had possessed him. Nevertheless, he did his best to hide his sorrow, not wanting to make others sad, too. He was convinced that he would overcome these obstacles in due time.

Walking into the house where three generations had lived brought back childhood memories, a tempting world for an adult. The

wood gate decorated with animal heads and thickly smeared colors suggested the laughter and warmth that had once suffused every corner of the home. Standing before the gate heavy with memories, Bkra shis recalled a childhood with his parents and the happy time of becoming a father himself. What he prized most was his parents' unconditional love and compassion, and raising him to be a healthy, strong Tibetan man. He felt deeply indebted to his parents, especially now that they were in a place not bothered by sorrow and worry. He felt they were near him when he sincerely missed them. They were always deep in his heart.

As Bkra shis slowly pushed open the creaking gate, a memory of village children and grandchildren rushing into the room to ask their grandparents to tell stories flooded his mind, filling the air with a warm familial atmosphere. At the time, he had loathed the creaking sound as children scrambled into the room, banging the courtyard gate wide open with all their might. Those children feared nothing. He now regretted not cherishing those times. He walked forward on stones paving the way from the gate to the room. The stones provided an opportunity to stamp mud and snow from shoes. Children, on the other hand, often saw these stones as a place to play - stepping on and jumping over them as they came inside. Their shimmering eyes often forgot the stones, however, once they noticed a fruit tree that had towered in the yard for two decades, offering plenty of fruit for the family. Though saliva gathered at the corners of their thirsty mouths, their ambitious desires, fueled by chronic vitamin and mineral deficiencies, were never fulfilled since a scrawny, vicious dog was tied to a pole under the tree.

Bkra shis's grandparents had enjoyed basking in the sun on the verandah when they had free time. Visitors had gathered as the grandparents sat on homemade carpets, counting their prayer beads; gossiping about village affairs; boasting about such subjects as their attractiveness, bravery, hunting wild animals, being a sought-after bride; prestigious family trees; telling intriguing folktales; and discussing complex local affairs. The visitors soon became an audience - children, middle-aged men, brides, visitors - that paid rapt attention, as though the elders were telling Ge sar stories.

Entering the room was problematic for Bkra shis as a child. His innate clumsiness, particularly at the crack of dawn when family

members were occupied with chores, provoked regular laughter in the home. The familiar smell of yak milk caressed his cheeks, pulling him across the threshold like a saddled beast of burden.

In those bygone days, Pa sangs - Bkra shis's father - often scooped embers from the hearth while murmuring scriptures, placed the embers on the altar at the courtyard center, and burned offerings to the local deities. It was an honorable, daily task. His mother came in the morning with a wood pail of milk, a smile on her face, as if she were utterly content with what the yak had offered. His elder sister kept the fire burning in the hearth, as the younger sister kneaded dough on the cutting board and steamed buns in a pot. Meanwhile, his elder brother lay in bed, snoring as loudly as a slumbering hog, oblivious to all around him.

Now, as a father of two children who were rapidly growing up, such memories had faded and seldom surfaced, though still deeply etched in his mind. Time had brought much change after returning from Lha sa. The fruit tree's leaves had already fallen, leaving denuded branches jutting into the air. The scruffy dog was long gone, released from the rain and cold it had endured for many years. Windows once covered by oiled, shimmering paper had turned dull with dust and long-time neglect. Gradually approaching the once boisterous *he rdze* with heavy steps, he leaned against the adjacent wood column and stretched out his left hand to where the carpets once lay, recalling the warmth that had lingered there when he was a child. He was then overcome by a memory of an event that had broken his heart.

#### COLLECTING CATERPILLAR FUNGUS

A year after returning from Lha sa, Bkra shis, Mtsho mo, and some other villagers set out for Mgo log to search for the vital income resource - caterpillar fungus, a traditional medicine. The diggers seldom considered who had started the collection of this sacred plant. Such thoughts were irrelevant to the tens of thousands of poor locals who streamed into high altitude Tibetan areas, eager to collect and sell this precious herb. The more religiously inclined questioned the wisdom of removing such rare plants from the land, thinking there were reasons for such herbs to grow there, and worried about

punishment from land deities. Nevertheless, the desire for a better material life always won out. As the years passed, the collection and sale of caterpillar fungus became an integral part of their annual income. They knew that digging the herb was destroying the land – the land that their ancestors had fought to protect with their lives and blood, and regretted this destruction. Though local government made regular announcements about the importance of protecting the land, they were ignored because living comes first and the income from collecting and selling the herb brought benefits nothing else could.

The bus to Mgo log set out from Zi ling, a journey that took about seven hours along muddy twisting routes. Due to reports of accidents on the way, passengers worried about the bus trip. Tibetans held prayer beads, chanting the Six Sacred Syllables constantly, beseeching protection and strength from the Three Jewels. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo behaved as did others. Bkra shis's constant companion was a book of religious recitations he always carried when he traveled to a distant destination. He often chanted at the crack of dawn to obtain confidence and protection. Though Mtsho mo had never been to school, her illiteracy did not stop her from reciting scriptures that every adult villager knew. She murmured without pause as the bus chugged along.

The weather in the third lunar month was unpleasant. Constant wind assaulted their already burned cheeks, piercing their flesh. Passengers bundled in layers of clothes got off the bus once it reached the first station in Mgo log where they rented share-taxis for fifty RMB per person, and then sped toward herders' tents. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo huddled together in the private car they had rented and reached a herder's tent after an hour's ride.

"Hello! Welcome! You two must have had a rough journey! Please sit near the hearth!" the tent's hosts chorused, welcoming them into their cozy tent.

Bkra shis and Mtsho mo thanked them in return, deeply appreciative of this warm reception, and offered the gifts they had brought. Strong, fragrant butter tea was immediately served. Burning wood and dung crackled and popped in the hearth. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo held their bowls of tea, warming their hands. As the hosts added more yak dung to the fire, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo removed some of their outer garments and soon were caught up in lively



conversation as if they had been reunited with loved ones whom they had not seen for decades. Wolves howled in the distance, as if summoning all the wolves in the world for a hunt. Lights in the tents began dimming and the stars became visible. When the tent where Bkra shis and Mtsho mo slept went dark, the unremitting wind and wolf howls reigned supreme.

Snowflakes began tumbling earthward at daybreak, as though welcoming Bkra shis and Mtsho mo, soon cloaking the earth in white. The couple got up and headed to the part of the grassland the herder owned and for which they had paid 2,000 RMB for the right to collect the fungus. The herders accompanied them, warned them not to go further than the boundaries of their land to avoid disputes between land owners, and then soon returned to their tent. Meanwhile, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo searched for the precious herb hidden among the snowy grass.

An unpleasant, frosty wind howled from dawn to dusk, swirling snowflakes into drifts. The sun, shrouded in thick clouds, hung in the far distance, as if imprisoned in a sky jail. A thick, home-made scarf was wrapped around Bkra shis's neck. Under a sheep-skin hat, old-fashioned, large-lens sunglasses were perched on his sharp nose, so that he resembled a mountain climber. Mtsho mo wore a thick scarf of the type her village women favored, exposing only her classically beautiful eyes. They continued searching for the herb despite the frigid ground and bothersome wind.

They collected ten herbs the first day. Some diggers returned to their tents empty-handed. The herbs were then sun-dried and stored in a dry place to prevent mold.

After repeated invitations, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo spent a second night in the herder's tent. They did not wish to impose, however, the lady of the tent valued friendship as much as money and she knew full well the harsh living conditions the diggers endured during the two-month collection period. She sincerely cared about Bkra shis and Mtsho mo, for which they were immensely appreciative.

The housewife began her chores early the next morning. After a quick breakfast, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo set out to pitch a tent that would be their refuge for the next two months. They carried on their backs what was required to set up the tent, trudging into the foggy distance. The housewife watched them until the tent door curtain fell

back in place.

Bkra shis and Mtsho mo rose every morning and set out searching for the herb. As spring progressed, fog was frequent, waking the hibernating soil, encouraging the herbs to grow. The sun often glittered in the sky, emanating soothing light, empowering soil, water, trees, and all that depended on sunshine. The couple left their tent early and, after locating patches of herbs, would smile broadly as their cloth herb containers bulged when they returned to their shabby tent in the evening. After drying, they carefully wrapped the herbs in dry, clean cloth, and hid them where others would not find them.

One special morning, the sun shimmered in an invigoratingly cloudless sky whose flawless clarity suggested a newly-wiped mirror. Snowflakes that had accumulated atop tents began melting. Water plopped on the ground, making small cavities in the snow. Fog rippled above the ground like ocean waves. Such soothing weather was as rare as turtle feathers. Bkra shis and Mtsho mo yearned to sit and enjoy this spectacular natural display, but they had to search for herbs.

#### GRANDMOTHER'S ILLNESS

As Bkra shis and Mtsho mo continued to search for herbs in challenging weather at high altitude in order to accumulate money to repair their run-down house and send their children to school, bad news came. The land owner, Dkon mchog, who was in his thirties, approached Bkra shis, who had been crawling on the ground in late morning, wrapped in a thick sheepskin robe, searching for the elusive herb. Dkon mchog told Bkra shis he had a long-distance call. Bkra shis noticed nothing dire from the land owner's impassive expression. He stood, patting dirt off his buttocks, relaxed his cramped muscles, and followed Dkon mchog who was already nearly beyond his field of vision.

"Mother isn't well. Her condition is rapidly deteriorating. Come home quickly if you want to see her, otherwise..." his sister, Dkar mo, said and then choked and began sobbing. Bkra shis was overwhelmed by this sudden, shocking news. He took some time to bring his absent mind back to the scene.

"Will she hold out until I get home?" Bkra shis asked in

concern.

"I don't know. I don't really know..." Dkar mo sobbed.

"Don't just weep, talk to me!" Bkra shis demanded, raising his voice a bit, impatient with her futile tears.

Then a familiar voice replaced that of his sister. "Hello! Son! The doctors say your mother has severe respiratory problems. According to my experience, she'll last until you arrive home, maybe longer," Pa sangs said, providing reassurance and comfort.

"If that's the case, I must return. I can't bear her leaving without seeing her," Bkra shis announced.

"Don't be impulsive. There's another issue you must confront," Pa sangs cautioned.

"What's that?" asked Bkra shis, detecting the grave concern in Pa sang's voice.

"After all these years, those government dogs still want to punish you," reminded Pa sangs.

"Are you saying they'll seize any chance they can, including Mother's illness," asked Bkra shis.

"Yes, they might see this as an unprecedented chance," Pa sangs said thoughtfully. "You'd better wait and see how things go."

"Yes, but I must see Mother before she leaves this world. I can strive for freedom even if I am imprisoned, but I cannot have a mother twice in this life. I'm also sure I don't deserve the death penalty for what I did if those laws written on white paper with black ink are ever applied fairly," Bkra shis said.

"I'm proud of what you said. I'll always support you," Pa sangs replied, moved by his son's powerful statement.

Bkra shis returned to his tent on a horse Dkon mchog had lent him. He waved and shouted to Mtsho mo, who was crawling along a slope searching for herbs, signaling her to return to their tent. As Bkra shis yelled the horse stood steady, wiggling its ears back and forth.

A sudden twinge ran up Mtsho mo's spine. Bkra shis's shouts suggested something ominous. She worried about her son and daughter. With her heart pounding fast and feeling as though all her blood was congregating in her mouth, she jogged toward the tent.

"What happened?" she asked worriedly, upon entering the tent.

Bkra shis had just finished gulping down a bowl of milk tea from the thermos of tea Mtsho mo had boiled that morning. He rubbed his mouth with his robe sleeve, turned to Mtsho mo, and said, "Mother's health is deteriorating. Father just called. I must return home now or I won't see her again in this life."

Shocked and dumbstruck, Mtsho mo stared at Bkra shis gravely. "You're right. We must return immediately. We can come again next year to collect herbs, but you only have one Mother."

"You should stay and continue collecting herbs. My going is enough," Bkra shis said.

"No, I've already decided. I'm sure I can be helpful," Mtsho mo insisted.

Gratitude flashed across Bkra shis's weather-beaten, handsome face. They began packing up their gear, which they asked Dkon mchog's family to care for until they returned the following year.

After a quick farewell and sincere thanks to the herder's family for their hospitality, Bkra shis and Mtsho mo hired a mini-bus for 120 RMB and headed home. They encouraged the driver to drive fast as they prayed and beseeched the deities for a safe journey. Once back in the capital city, they boarded an old bus and headed homeward.

#### GRANDFATHER'S VISIT

"If we were back in old society, your skin would already have been peeled off and your flesh fed to dogs for betraying your relatives. Your flesh would have disgusted even the dogs. What do you think?" Pa sangs, Dpal ldan's maternal uncle, said forcefully. Pa sangs continued, "However, the world has changed. We are all protected under so-called government laws and we can no longer punish you in those ways."

Dpal ldan's betrayal had resulted in Bkra shis's friends being imprisoned and receiving visits from their relatives only once a year. As Pa sangs thought of that painful period of imprisonment a decade ago, resentment that he had kept deep in his heart awakened. He considered dismembering this man with a sharp knife.

"Everything you said is completely true. I am a dog," admitted Dpal ldan guiltily.

"Even a good dog doesn't betray its master!" Pa sangs bellowed.

"I'm worse than a dog. Worse..." Dpal ldan stuttered.

"You've been promoted to chief of the township police department because of your excellent work," Pa sangs said. "Here is one last favor you must do for my son and other relatives who have suffered in prison as compensation. That's all I ask."

"I'm listening and I'll help if I can," Dpal ldan replied, as if threatened by a gunman.

"I've heard rumors that there will be a police operation to clean up some lingering cases, including arresting my son. Is this true?" Pa sangs said.

"Er... yes, it is," Dpal ldan confirmed slowly after a long hesitation.

"Swear you aren't fooling us this time? If you are, you will be in a serious trouble," threatened Pa sangs, pointing his index finger at Dpal ldan's forehead.

"I swear," Dpal ldan said.

"My wife is dying and I worry that she might not last until her favorite son returns from Mgo log. If she has the chance to see him, she might not leave us so soon. She needs her son's company when she leaves us forever."

"I fully understand," Dpal ldan replied.

"During his time with his mother, I hope there is no disturbance from you and your crew. I despise those who never respect life and find whatever means to attain their goals."

"It will be as you wish," conceded Dpal ldan.

"You'd better keep your promise," Pa sangs said critically.

After Pa sangs's departure, the officer leaned back tiredly into his cozy sofa, as if he had been mining coal all day. Pa sangs's strong words echoed and re-echoed in his mind. He imagined they might kidnap his only son or bomb his house if he did not comply. He stood and reached for his desk phone that sat under a bright lamp in the corner of the living room, and dialed a number he could not be more familiar with.

## BZANG MO'S CONFESSION

Bkra shis's return and presence brought hope and joy to Bzang mo, and consoled family members. However her plumpness rapidly faded, revealing sharp cheekbones. When a local *bla ma* suggested she be taken to the county town hospital, Mtsho mo accompanied her. Bkra shis stayed at home after his relatives convinced him that somebody might report his presence to the county town police to get the reward on his head. He constantly beseeched Buddha to help his mother rapidly recover.

The relatively advanced care at the county town hospital ensured Bzang mo would have a few more months of worldly life, though she felt she had experienced and seen enough. She wished she could leave the world sooner rather than suffering in bed, burdening her family members. However, after her treatments when the sun beamed brightly in the cloudless sky, she enjoyed going outside. The gentle breeze on her cheeks, fluttering poplar foliage, and Mtsho mo's companionship were all pleasant.

At times, Mtsho mo's care and assistance reminded her of the time when she had been a new bride, as beautiful as a flawless rose. She admired Mtsho mo's relative youth and beauty and, over the years, had felt a certain jealousy, fearing that if she praised Mtsho mo to friends and relatives, her own position in the family would be diminished. While in the hospital, however, she reflected on how Mtsho mo had served her, Pa sangs, and other family members over the years, and had never complained. Bzang mo became much more sympathetic and felt guilty for what she now understood to be years of mistreatment.

Bzang mo summoned her courage late one night and said, "As the saying goes, 'When death draws near, words become meaningful.' I never imagined I would understand this proverb when I was as young as you but now, with death near, I fully understand. Your father-in-law and I have never treated you as a full member of our family, often excluding you as someone who occupied our son's attention. I was immature and blind with jealousy, though I had given birth to several children by the time you joined our family. I worried you would take my position in the family, push me aside, and mistreat me. That's what seems to happen in every Tibetan family.

My husband once poured a cup of hot tea on you when you accidentally served me a cup of tea that had not yet boiled. You must resent us when you recall these unpleasant things," Bzang mo concluded.

Mtsho mo was speechless and felt all her resentment vanish like vapor. Gently, she pushed a strand of hair from the side of her face and said, "You think too much. I'm sure you must have been in the same sort of situation. You survived very hard, chaotic times. Although it's never been easy for me, I tried to be patient and endure those difficult days, believing such trials would end someday. Such treatment of daughters-in-law is ingrained in our culture. What a tragedy!"

Bzang mo continued, "When you two left the family, the division of property was unfair. I must confess this or I won't be able to close my eyes when I die. I sincerely hope you forgive my unfairness. I wish I could have another life to make up for all the wrongs I've done."

"I understand. You don't need to apologize. I'm content with being a daughter-in-law," Mtsho mo comforted tearfully.

"You have two lovely children you can be proud of. There's no doubt they will have bright futures. I wish to live until they are married and have beautiful children, laughing and playing around, but I'm sure that is impossible. I will be long gone by that time," reflected Bzang mo.

A smile illuminated Bzang mo's face, as though a long-buried knot of sorrow had finally come untangled. She stared at Mtsho mo in a way that signaled her full acceptance of her as a member of the family, which seemed now too late and no longer necessary.

Bzang mo dozed off. Mtsho mo pulled her bed cover up, covering her exposed hands, and prepared bedding on an old stained sofa next to Bzang mo's bed.

Bkra shis's anxiety increased as he waited for his mother's return. Understanding her bleak prospects, he paced in the yard, deep in thought. Sometimes he sat in a chair for hours, wrapping tobacco in slips of newspaper, and extinguishing them after a few puffs in an ashtray littered with numerous partially-smoked cigarettes. Whenever he could no longer suppress his anxiety, he went outside and walked back and forth on the threshing ground near his home. Before, he had not dared even so much as step outside of

his home, fearing some villagers might reveal his presence to the police. Now, he frequently ventured outside, not caring what others might see and do. In the face of his mother's ill health, all else seemed trivial.

As for the police, maybe they had heard of Bzang mo's poor health, maybe Pa sangs's visit to the police chief's home had worked, or maybe they were showing respect for Bkra shis. At any rate, they never appeared in uniform.

#### UNCLE'S MARRIAGE

Bzang mo returned home two months later. She was healthier, chatted with relatives and other villagers, her limbs moved as well as when she was in her twenties and thirties, and she walked without assistance. The sense of impending doom, which had hung in the air like black clouds before a destructive storm, had vanished.

Pa sangs believed Bzang mo's return to good health was because of the intervention by the Three Jewels, further showing their compassion for sentient beings mired in misfortune. Afterwards, Pa sangs rose before dawn and recited scriptures as though he was a religious figure. When there was fire ash in the stove, he immediately approached the stove, collected the ash, and burned offerings in the altar after cleaning his hands. Every movement indicated his sense of intense gratitude that his beloved was with him again.

Tshe dbang, Bkra shis's youngest brother, had dropped out of school because of his poor performance on an exam which, if he had passed, would have immediately brought him a job, ensuring him a comfortable, stable life. He was one of the top three students in his village primary school, as well as in the first year of junior middle school, and had received several awards. Pa sangs mentioned his excellent academic performance at mealtimes, setting him as an exemplary model. Yet, his later performance in school accurately proves a Tibetan proverb, 'A crow's son gets blacker, while a magpie's son gets brighter and more colorful.' Tshe dbang clearly was in the crow category. Even though his acute mind made him a star in his class, his keen intelligence was coupled with laziness, bad habits, and negative influences from friends, which culminated in him becoming one of the worst students in his last term of junior middle school.



Hundreds of beer bottles were his confidants in junior middle school. He spent much time in dirty, unkempt movie rooms in forlorn corners of the county town. At times, he slept for many hours, as though he had ventured through a vast desert and eventually found his way home. Such behavior foretold his poor performance on the examination. Tshe dbang seemed destined to be a man with a shovel, though his parents had hoped pen and paper would be more frequent companions.

His failure in education, Bzang mo's deteriorating health, his oldest brother's separation from his parents to establish his own household - all pushed his parents to find him a bride so the new couple would care for them and deal with family issues. It all seemed perfectly arranged for Tshe dbang. He was, after all, the youngest son and this was a youngest son's time-honored, cultural duty. Tshe dbang was seventeen and what he thought of such arrangements was irrelevant.

After Pa sangs's brief trip to an agro-pastoral village, a young woman named Phyug mo, who was around her future-husband's age, was invited into their home. Tshe dbang accepted all this and got along well with his wife. It was his mother's last great wish.

#### BKRA SHIS'S FREEDOM

Three months after the marriage, Bzang mo quietly passed away while sitting in an upholstered chair late one afternoon when the sun's weakening rays scattered in the sky, making thousands of lumps of crimson clouds, which seemed to be mourning her departure. Her death caused quite a stir. Rumors circulated that mothers-in-law were destined to have short lives after taking a new bride into their home, especially a bride for the youngest son.

During the mandatory seven weeks of mourning, a member from each village family came to the bereaved family bringing firewood, cooking oil, and fried bread to help feed visitors from different villages. Phyug mo's father, Tshe b+ha, visited Pa sangs's home one sunny day during the days of mourning. A *sngags pa*, he volunteered to chant for the roaming spirit in a separate room while monks recited in the main room.

After seeing off guests in the late evening, Pa sangs and Tshe

b+ha had a conversation that ultimately led to Bkra shis's freedom. "You are so lucky to have had such a warm-hearted, benevolent wife," Tshe b+ha said.

"Yes, she was the kindest person. I am privileged to have met a woman like her in this life. Sadly, I was never a very good husband. I was very immature when she married and moved into my home," Pa sangs said.

"Life is like that. You don't understand a person's value until they're gone. I understand your circumstance - as though half your soul has been taken away. Though my wife left a decade ago, I think of her every day, but my grief will never bring her back. I felt I could not live without her company the first few months after her departure. I then decided she would be glad if I lived a few more years. Afterwards, I dedicated most of my time to chanting and accumulating merit in the hope of having a better incarnation in my next life. A human life is so precious. My point is that you must accept the circle of life and death. Nobody lives forever. Chant more scriptures, circumambulate monasteries, be moderate, and don't think too much," Tshe b+ha said.

Pa sangs and Tshe b+ha smoked for a time and then Tshe b+ha continued, "Phyug mo mentioned Bkra shis's miserable condition when she last visited me. Have you thought of a solution?"

"I contacted those I know, but it all has ended in failure. Now, I think being a fugitive for life is Bkra shis's destiny," Pa sangs said.

"One of my relatives has a contact in a provincial-level office. He skillfully helped me with several issues that were much more serious than your son's. Without his help, some men in my community would have been imprisoned for at least five or six years," confided Tshe b+ha.

"Are you serious? If you could help regain my son's freedom, I'd be eternally grateful," exclaimed Pa sangs.

"We're relatives now that my daughter has married into your family. Helping each other is what relatives should do," Tshe b+ha concluded.

A saddle was already on Tshe b+ha's horse when he soon departed. He skillfully mounted and vanished into the distance toward his home. Pa sangs placed his clasped wrinkled hands to his forehead piously, hoping to gain his son's freedom.

A few months later, everyone was impatiently anticipating the advent of the Tibetan New Year. Pa sangs was intently removing bristles from a hog's head in front of the kitchen stove and did not notice the guest until he had reached the threshold of the room and yelled his name.

Tshe b+ha was immediately served milk tea and fresh bread when he sat near the hearth.

"Your son is now free," Tshe b+ha announced happily, very pleased with himself.

Pa sangs was motionless and bewildered. The tranquility of the moment was broken by Pa sangs's simple question, "Are you serious?"

"Yes, your son is now free," Tshe b+ha repeated, enunciating every word clearly.

"No need to stay in prison for even a few months like one of his friends?" Pa sangs asked disbelievingly.

"That's right," Tshe b+ha replied.

"Seek protection from the Three Jewels!" exclaimed Pa sangs repeating this familiar phrase several times in appreciation of what he was sure was their assistance.

At this moment, Bkra shis entered, approached Tshe b+ha, handed him something wrapped in thickly embroidered cloth, and said, "You must take this money as a token of my appreciation. Although we cannot fully compensate you for your help, this represents our gratitude. Please take it," Bkra shis insisted.

Bkra shis thus regained his freedom. His crime files had been erased at the related departments - gone forever like dinosaurs that had vanished from the earth. What's more, the related departments received an anonymous fax that read:

It is no longer needed nor allowed to pursue Bkra shis as a wanted criminal. Whoever violates this message must bear all the consequences. Such a person is looking for trouble for himself and all his relatives. Circulate this message to those involved.

## BKRA SHIS'S MEMORIES

Drops of tears gathered and glittered at the corners of Bkra shis's bloodshot eyes as he drew back from remembering. Thick dust fell from the shabby, disheveled roofs that had not been repaired since his parents' departure. He slowly retreated from the room where his parents, with joy and sorrow, had spent most of their lifetime with their children, grandsons, and granddaughters, and where they had taken their last breaths. Tears gently rolled down his cheeks when he reached the courtyard. Reluctantly raising his unkempt hand he wiped away the tears. He stared at the wetness on the back of his hand for a while and then smiled broadly. Letting the tears flow down gently from his hand to the ground, he waited as they sank into the soil and then bolted the wood gate from outside, exchanging the outdated, clunky lock for a stronger, modern one, and left for his own home.

•••

"Bkra shis, you might get cold if you don't use the quilt," Mtsho mo chastised a second time.

"OK," Bkra shis replied, returning from his memories of struggling for freedom and of his mother, whom he missed terribly. He had stayed in bed for hours.

"Sleep. You must go to town tomorrow to shop. The New Year draws near," Mtsho mo said drowsily.

Bkra shis felt stimulated thinking of New Year's approach. He no longer needed to worry about lack of money for purchasing New Year articles now that he had regained his freedom and could go anywhere to earn money. His miserable life of hiding for more than nine years had ended.

He gently pulled the quilt over his body, and relaxed on the bed where he had been awakened by nightmares for countless nights. He fell into a peaceful sleep the likes of which he had not experienced for a very long time.

# FOLKTALES

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My paternal grandfather, Phag rgya (1928-2003), and paternal grandmother, Dbang mtsho (1938-2001), were my favorite storytellers when I was a child. I shared a *he rdze* with them and asked them to tell stories before sleeping. Every night, they took turns telling me and my brother stories. When it was Grandfather's turn, I slept next to him and then slept near Grandmother when she told stories. At that time, especially after dinner during winter, there was no other entertainment. As soon as we finished dinner, we climbed on the *he rdze* and our nightly routine began. My grandparents seemingly knew thousands of folktales. Every night, they had new, fresh stories, which were our lullabies.

My generation is the last to hear grandparents' tales and stories as an integral part of childhood. Beginning in the late 1990s, radio, tape players, televisions, and VCD/DVD players entered my community and rapidly replaced storytelling. Returning home from school for the winter holiday when I was around thirteen, I noticed the huge change that TV had wrought. After dinner, everyone jostled to sit nearest the television, especially parents and children. In vain my grandparents hoped that family members would gather on the *he rdze* and listen to their tales as they had done for almost three decades.

By 2014, children rarely asked elders to tell stories because of the wide variety of available TV channels. In Rta rgyugs Village, primary school students gather in front of TV as soon as they get home, especially on weekends, to watch cartoons produced outside China.

In 2010, when I asked several villagers in their seventies to tell stories, they were eager to do so. However, because they had not told stories for years, they rarely could finish telling more than five complete folktales in one session. They had to stop and ponder, and ask other elders to help complete them.

My maternal grandfather, 'Phags mo tshe ring often told me about his adventures as a young Tibetan soldier during the time of Ma Bufang, a Muslim warlord who controlled a big swath of Eastern

Tibet prior to 'Liberation'. Grandfather said Ma had as many as 180,000 soldiers. He also said that when he was in his twenties, he often stood by one of Ma Bufang's generals and was a much beloved aide. Although he did not engage in major battles, he held a significant position as a jeep driver for important officials in Ma's government. In 1948, Grandfather returned home because of his mother's insistence, which, he said, is probably the reason he is still alive.

Because Grandfather was not in Ma's army in 1949 when the Red Army took control of Eastern Tibet, he was not detained. Rather, he was recruited into the PLA. He had permission to join whichever platoon he wanted without consulting the platoon commander and was one of six people chosen out of 6,000 soldiers to go to Korea as a transport pilot. However, Grandmother burned all his documents because she did not want him to go. She cried night and day because she was afraid that he would die in the war.

I detect frustration every time Grandfather tells this story. He understands that he might have died, but he is sorry he missed a pilot's career.

The folktales that follow are retellings of stories that I remember from my childhood and also from materials that I collected in the village, which may be found here:

- <http://www.archive.org/details/RkaPhugTibetanVillageCulturalMaterials>
- <http://www.oralliterature.org/collections/rgrub001.html>

## RABBIT AND WOLF

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Rabbit was making glue by a fire. A hungry wolf came by, wanted to eat Rabbit, and said, "What's your name?"

"My name is Glue-maker Rabbit," terrified Rabbit answered.

"What are you busy with?" Wolf asked.

"I'm making glue," Rabbit answered.

"Why are you making glue?" Wolf asked.

"I won't tell you. It's not a nice thing to know," Rabbit said.

"Please tell me. I really want to learn from you," Wolf said.

"OK. Put plenty of glue on your eyes and run through that flock of sheep without opening your eyes. Then the sheep will jump into your mouth one by one," Rabbit explained.

"Please put some glue on my eyes," begged Wolf.

"OK, but you must close your eyes when you get near the sheep," said Rabbit, and smeared glue on Wolf's eyes. Wolf then ran to the sheep flock with his eyes shut tight. As he ran among the sheep, the glue dried and he could not open his eyes. He continued running until he was caught by some herders, who nearly beat him to death.

Battered Wolf was furious and resolved to kill Glue-Maker Rabbit. Returning to where he had met Rabbit at the head of the valley, he saw Rabbit nibbling on some plants. Glue-Maker Rabbit, now disguised as Plant-Plucker Rabbit, had put dead plants in the ground, put candies atop these plants, and then pretended to use all his strength to pull the plants up one by one, even jumping theatrically into the air. Wolf approached and asked furiously, "What's your name?"

"My name is Plant-Plucker Rabbit," answered Rabbit.

"Have you seen Glue-Maker Rabbit?" Wolf asked angrily.

"No, I haven't," replied Rabbit innocently.

"Why are you pulling those plants out of the ground?" Wolf asked.

Rabbit then jumped into the air, pulled out a plant with a candy on it, and put the candy in Wolf's mouth. The candy melted in Wolf's mouth. "It's incredibly tasty. I want more. Tell me how to get more," Wolf said.

"You have to pull the plants with all your might, otherwise, it's

hard to get them," Rabbit said.

Wolf grabbed the plant with his front paws and, using all his strength, he pulled the plant, which came out of the ground all at once, sending Wolf rolling down into the deep valley. As he tumbled his head hit against rocks and halfway down, he struck a large tree branch just managing to hold onto the branch with his fangs.

Seeing Wolf hanging on the branch Rabbit shouted, "If you are the son of a good father, say 'Ha-ha!' but if you are the son of a bad father, say 'Hum hum'."

Thinking, "Of course I'm the son of a good father," Wolf shouted, "Ha-ha." Which meant he fell further into the valley where he smashed into a boulder and died.



## **STALK-LEGS, EGG-HEAD, AND HORSE-HAIR NECK**

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Long ago, a family had three people. One was called Stalk-Legs, because his legs were as thin as wheat stalks. If he jumped into the air just once, he would die immediately from breaking his calves. Egg-Head had a very large, egg-like head with a skull so thin that if you flicked it with one finger one time, he would die from a broken skull. Horse-Hair Neck had a very thin throat and would immediately choke to death from food caught in his throat if he tried to swallow something big.

One day the three wandered around looking for food. Luckily, they found a dead goat, which they happily carried home and boiled in a big pot. A while later, Horse-Hair Neck who could wait no longer said to the other two, "The meat must be boiled now. I'll check to make sure." Next, he cut off a big piece and ate it. The meat was so hot that when he tried to swallow, his throat constricted, and he died.

Egg-Head exulted, "You deserve it! You deserve it!" and then slapped his forehead in excitement, thereby breaking his head. He died, too.

After noticing the death of his two brothers, Stalk-Legs gleefully leapt into the air saying, "Now, all the meat is mine!" Landing on the ground, his tiny legs broke and he also died.

## A KHU STON PA FRIGHTENS THE THIEVES

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In the center of a forest one day, A khu ston pa stumbled upon thieves who were about to slaughter a *mdzo* they had stolen. A khu ston pa immediately turned away because he didn't want to get involved. However, the thieves saw him and grabbed him, assuming he was the *mdzo's* owner.

"Please don't hurt me, I'm not the *mdzo's* owner," A khu ston pa pleaded.

"If you aren't the owner, that's great! Let's butcher it and you'll get your part," the thieves said.

"Which part do you like best?" a thief asked.

"Oh, I like the stomach best. If you give me the stomach, I don't need anything else," A khu ston pa answered sincerely.

The thieves agreed and gave A khu ston pa the *mdzo's* stomach. They boiled all the meat in a big pot, and A khu ston pa enjoyed a big meal with them. Afterwards, the thieves were full and taking off their knives, heavy coats, and hats they prepared to have a long rest on the grass by the fireplace they had made to cook the meat. When the thieves had fallen asleep, A khu ston pa secretly went to the riverbank, cleaned the *mdzo's* stomach, blew air into the stomach until it was taut as a balloon, and then tied it to the branch of a tall tree. Holding a stick in his hand he beat the stomach yelling, "Please don't beat me! Please! I'm not the thief! I'm not!"

The thieves awoke and, hearing what seemed to be a man being beaten, thought, "The *mdzo's* owners have caught our friend." They were so frightened that they fled without looking back.

A while later, A khu ston pa met an old man and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for my *mdzo*," the old man answered.

"Oh, please don't worry. You'll find your *mdzo*," A khu ston pa said and led the old man to the place where the thieves had boiled the meat. There were still some pieces of meat in the pot and some on the ground. The thieves' clothes, hats, and knives were also scattered about.

"If you sell the clothes, hats, and knives, you can surely buy another *mdzo* like the one they butchered," A khu ston pa suggested.

"Thank you very much. If I hadn't met you, I wouldn't have found my *mdzo*," the old man said. He offered all the meat to A khuston pa, who happily took it and walked home.

## A KHU STON PA'S PREGNANCY

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Uncle A khu ston pa lived in Kong po and was so poor that he lacked livestock to plow his fields in autumn. Without any other alternative, he visited the local leader and asked for help. The leader then lent him a male yak. Before taking the yak away, the county leader said, "At this time next year, you must bring me two big containers of butter."

Though A khu ston pa had no idea how he would obtain two containers of butter, he promised to do so because he was in desperate need of a draft animal.

A khu ston pa used the male yak to cultivate his fields and haul firewood for a year. He was truly satisfied with the yak. Autumn came and the county sent some government men to collect butter and other taxes from households that the county leader had lent animals to. When they reached A khu ston pa's village, A khu ston pa told fellow villagers to tell them that he was pregnant. He also wrote a note and put it on his door that said 'A khu ston pa is pregnant'. He put this on his door and securely fastened it.

The officials soon came to his home, forced open the door, and found that A khu ston pa had nothing to offer the county leader. They scolded him in turn, bound his hands behind him, and took him to the county leader.

"Why are you here, A khu ston pa? Your neighbors say you are pregnant. I've never heard of a man being pregnant. You want to break your promise, right?" the county leader accused.

"Dear leader, I promised to give you two containers of butter this year, but you gave other villagers female yaks and gave me a male yak. How can a male yak produce butter?" A khu ston pa said.

The county leader could think of nothing to say. He madly paced back and forth in front of A khu ston pa, trying to think of a good answer. Finally, he ordered A khu ston pa to leave, but not before ordering him to never tell other villagers that he had paid the county leader nothing.

A khu ston pa agreed to keep the secret. When returning home, he met villagers bringing butter, cheese, and other payments to the county leader because he had loaned them yaks. A khu ston pa

ran to them announcing, "Today, I visited the county leader. We talked about taxes this year and he agreed not to collect taxes from us. You may all go home and have a nice New Year."

The villagers very gladly returned home. Thus, the county leader did not receive butter and other taxes from villagers that year.

## TWO BROTHERS

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Older Brother was married while Younger Brother was single. Younger Brother was stupid, spoke very directly, and often did dangerous things. Their family was so poor that they relied on hunting to live. One day, Older Brother's wife was very curious about hunting and asked Younger Brother, "You brothers often go hunting. How do you hunt animals?"

"Please get in the feed trough and stick out your head like an animal. I'll show you how I hunt," Younger Brother said.

His sister-in-law agreed.

Younger Brother loaded his gun and when his sister-in-law stuck her head out of the trough like an animal, he pulled the trigger, shot her dead, and said, "Get up Sister-in-law. That's how I kill animals." Not understanding that she was dead, he returned to his room.

Older Brother returned home a bit later and asked, "Did you see my wife? Where is she?"

"She's in the trough," Younger Brother answered.

"What's she doing there?" Older brother asked.

"She kept asking how we hunted, so I showed her," Younger Brother replied.

Older Brother felt very sad when he discovered his dead wife, but knew he could only invite some *bla ma* and monks from the monastery to come and chant for her. "Please go invite monks from the monastery. Your sister-in-law is dead and we must chant for her so she'll have a better next life," Older Brother said.

Rather than visiting monks, Younger Brother went straight inside the monastery and invited the Buddha images there. He pulled the hand of a Buddha image and said, "Please come with me. My sister-in-law is dead. You must chant for her next incarnation." The hand broke off. He then went to another Buddha image and pulled the image, taking it down from its throne. After many unsuccessful attempts to get 'monks' to follow him, he circled the monastery and noticed some small Buddha images, which he thought were small monks standing in a line. They were made of red clay and easy to carry. He happily picked up several and started home.

When a torrential rain fell, he ran into a hut by the road, leaving the red clay 'monks' outside. After the rain stopped, he came out of the hut and saw the 'monks' had dissolved and now looked exactly like human feces. Younger Brother then said, "These monks are really something! I tried my best to invite them, but they were very reluctant. Now they have defecated here and left without saying goodbye." So he returned home empty-handed.

"Did you invite monks to our home?" Older Brother asked.

"Monks are so fragile! When I pulled their hands, they broke. When I was trying to move them, they fell on the ground and their bodies shattered. Finally, I invited some monks, however, when there was a sudden rain, I ran into a hut but when the rain stopped, the monks had defecated and returned to their monastery," Younger Brother said.

Older Brother, realizing Younger Brother had done strange things again, kept quiet but thought, "I must do something. He killed my wife, broke monastery Buddha images, and left monk images in the rain. If I don't do something, more disasters will come."

The next day, Older Brother asked Younger Brother to go hunting. Before climbing up a mountain, Older Brother said, "If you see an animal on the mountain, please shout to let me know. If I see one, I'll do the same." Then they climbed up a tree-covered mountain from different directions. As soon as they began climbing, Older Brother clambered straight up the mountain, reached the top first, hurriedly collected firewood, and heated a big boulder on the winding path Younger Brother was climbing. The boulder quickly became very hot. When his younger brother was about to reach the mountaintop, he rolled the heated boulder at him and yelled, "Brother, an injured animal is running toward you! Catch it! Catch it!"

Younger Brother leapt on the heated boulder and clutched it with both hands. The hot boulder seared his skin. His hands stuck to the boulder and made a sizzling sound. He said to the boulder, "Though you make hundreds of sounds, I won't let you go before Brother comes." After rolling down the mountain with the heated boulder, he was burned and crushed to death.

## FLOWER U DUM WA RA<sup>61</sup>

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A rich king had two servants - a young man and the young man's old mother. One day, while herding the king's livestock on a grassy mountain, the young man saw a fox carrying a bright flower over a slope. The flower attracted his attention. He then chased the fox for a long distance, finally got the flower from the fox, happily returned home, and showed it to his mother. When light from the flower filled the whole room that night, the mother knew that indeed this was a rare flower. Feeling uncomfortable, she suggested, "We don't deserve such a treasure because we are so poor. We should offer it to our king and maybe he will treat us better."

The young man agreed and presented the flower to the king, who suspiciously thought, "This young man must have magic power to obtain a flower as precious as this. If he stays here, he may become a threat. I must find a way to kill him." So the king said, "I like this flower very much. Please bring another flower like this so this one won't feel lonely."

The young man felt very sorry, knowing how difficult it would be to find another such rare flower. His mother also deeply regretted giving the flower to the king. However the young man now embarked on a search for another precious flower. He walked for several days and came to a great body of water. Faint from hunger and thirst, he felt it was impossible to cross the sea so he rested. An old turtle then came and asked him why he was there and where he was going. After telling the old turtle about his difficulties and about the flower, the turtle told him that if he crossed the sea, he would reach another country where he could find many flowers like the one he was searching for. The old turtle then offered to carry the young man across the sea.

When the young man reached the other side of the sea, the turtle advised, "After you cross that mountain, you'll see a rock cave. Inside are a gold throne, a silver throne, and an iron throne. They are the thrones of that country's king and queen. Hide and don't let

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<sup>61</sup> Those we consulted were unable to explain the meaning of this name. Jest and Stein (1998) provide a story about the *utumwara* flower that has similarities to the story recorded here.



anyone see you there." The turtle then disappeared into the sea.

As he walked along a path toward the mountain the young man saw thousands of flowers like the one he had given the king. When he entered the cave, he saw the thrones the turtle had described and quietly hid underneath one.

When night came, a gold bird, a silver bird, and an iron bird flew into the cave. Each landed on their thrones. They untied a cloth bag and poured out human bones. One of the birds then pointed a sword at the bones. Magically, the human bones turned into a goddess-like being. They ordered her to cook for them. After eating plenty of food, they pointed the sword at the beautiful woman who turned back into bones. The birds then left.

After observing all this, the young man approached the sword and bag, and did exactly what he had just seen done with the sword. The beauty appeared and explained, "I was caught by three big birds and now I am unable to return home. Once you get the flower, you must run back home taking me with you after I turn into bones."

The young man listened carefully, picked up a flower, took the bag filled with human bones, and walked back to the sea. The waiting turtle agreed to take him back across the sea but, when he was halfway to the other side, the three birds discovered that the young man had fled with the bag of bones and attacked him where he sat on the turtle's back. The birds flogged him, almost throwing him into the sea. However, he hung on tightly and managed to reach the other side.

When he finally got home he offered another flower to the astonished king, who was now even more certain that the boy would someday take his power.

A few days later, the king summoned the young man to his palace and said, "My father died nine years ago. I can't find the key to my treasure house. He probably took it when he died. Please go to Heaven and bring the key back."

The young man was worried because he had no idea what to do. Suddenly, he remembered the bag he had brought and summoned the beauty. After explaining his situation, she suggested that he not leave his room for seven days.

After seven days, the beautiful woman said to the young man, "Visit the king today and tell him you've been to Heaven, met his father, and tell him that the key is under his throne."

The young man did exactly what the young woman said. The king looked for the key, and found it where the young man indicated. The king was very surprised that the young man had returned from Heaven and said that he also wanted to visit his father.

The young man pointed the blood-smeared sword at the king, who immediately turned into a skeleton. The young man discarded the king's bones, married the beautiful woman, and then they lived happily with his mother.

## HUNTING ELEPHANTS

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A group of villagers gathered and went to hunt elephants, motivated by a local king's promise of a rich reward if they brought elephant meat home. The villagers eventually killed a huge elephant with spears and arrows. Exhausted and hungry after an arduous period of hunting, they decided to cook the elephant meat after reaching a beautiful meadow. Realizing the spring in the meadow lacked enough water to boil the elephant meat, they divided into two groups. One group would guard and boil half of the meat while the other group fetched water from a river.

After one group left to fetch water, one member of the other group suggested, "If we put poison in the meat that we cook for them, they will eat it when they return because they will be famished. The rest of the meat will then belong to us." The other group members all agreed.

Meanwhile, a member of the group that had gone to fetch water suggested, "If we poison the water, they will drink it when we return and then all the meat will be ours." The other members also all agreed.

A bit later, the group returned with buckets of water, rushed to the pots, ate meat like ravenous wolves, and soon all died from the poison. The other group was delighted to have achieved their goal, drank the water, and then died from the poisoned water. Bows, arrows, and spears were scattered everywhere in the meadow and the meat belonged to no one.

Several hours later, a fox wandered by, noticed plenty of meat, and happily thought, "I should eat the bony, tough meat first and store the fat meat elsewhere. There's so much meat here, I won't need to search for food for one or two years." He began searching for tough, hard meat. He found a taut bowstring, but after he began chewing it, it broke, smashing his nose, killing him.

## BARLEY SEED SON

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A lonely woman longed to have a child and was upset because she unable to conceive. When a *bla ma* passed by some days later, she warmly welcomed him into her home and asked him to chant scriptures so that she might conceive. The *bla ma* was sincerely sympathetic and chanted piously. He also took barley seeds from a bowl and flung them into the air while circling the courtyard, chanting scriptures. By chance, a barley seed landed in the old woman's mouth.

She exclaimed, "A barley seed landed in my mouth! Is this a good sign?"

"You'll soon have a son. Please name him Barley Seed Son," the *bla ma* said, smiling warmly.

The *bla ma* left the next morning.

The *bla ma's* prediction came true some months later when the old woman gave birth to a son. She was delighted and gave him the name the *bla ma* had suggested.

Barley Seed Son quickly grew into a handsome young man, but then his mother became very sick and died, leaving him alone. He felt extremely sad and lonely, and yearned to have brothers. Finally, he put his metal arrows in his quiver, strung his metal bow on his back, and walked toward a forest. After several hours of walking in the forest, he saw smoke rising near a gigantic tree. Without hesitation, he strung an arrow, shot at the smoke with his all might, and shouted:

If you are heading upslope, please set out,  
If you are heading downslope, please move down.  
My name is Barley Seed Son,  
I've come to make sworn brothers.

The man who lived by the giant tree came out and said, "Today must be auspicious. My name is Tree Leaf Son. I also have no brothers and came here looking for some brothers." They then became sworn brothers, proceeded on together, and soon reached the foot of a towering rock, where smoke wafted into the air gently, as though someone was making tea.

Barley Seed Son shot a metal arrow at the rock and shouted:

If you are heading upslope, please set out,  
If you are heading downslope, please move down.  
My name is Barley Seed Son,  
I've come to make sworn brothers.

A young man appeared at the foot of the rock and said, "Today's a good day. My name is Rock Son. I live alone and I'm also looking for brothers."

The three thus became sworn brothers with Barley Seed Son being the oldest and Rock Son the youngest. They built a log house and lived a pleasant life by hunting in the forest when they were hungry and visiting nearby beautiful places together, leaving loneliness behind.

One day upon returning to their house with plenty of game, they were stunned to see food on their plates, boiled tea in the kettle, bread baked in a pan, and a just-swept floor. Strangely, there was no sign of anybody. They were curious and decided to learn who was responsible.

The following day, Barley Seed Son and Tree Leaf Son went out hunting, while Rock Son stayed home to discover who was preparing delicious food for them. However, Rock Son fell asleep and reported seeing nothing.

The next day, Tree Leaf Son stayed behind. When Barley Seed Son and Tree Leaf Son returned from hunting, he said he had not seen anyone, though delicious food was prepared as before.

The following day, Barley Seed Son stayed and hid patiently behind the door, holding his bow with an arrow notched. Three pigeons flew into the room a while later, removed their pigeon clothes, hung them on the wall, and began cooking. Barley Seed Son watched carefully. When they had nearly finished cooking and were about to leave, he grabbed the pigeon clothes and threw them into the hearth, where they burned to ash.

Barley Seed Son turned around and beheld three goddess-like beauties - Sun Daughter, Moon Daughter, and Star Daughter. Sun Daughter was the most beautiful. Barley Seed Son smeared mud on her face because he knew when his brothers came, that they would certainly choose her to be their wife. As he predicted, when they

returned, they chose Moon Daughter and Star Daughter to be their wives. Thus, they married and began an even happier life.

Time passed and they were happy together, but Barley Seed Son's wife, Sun Daughter, became progressively thinner and soon resembled a tree in a desert. After careful observation, the brothers learned she was frequently with an old woman, who was actually a witch. While pretending to search for lice on her head, the witch sucked Sun Daughter's blood from her neck with a copper mouth. When the three brothers tried to kill the old woman, she fled, taking Sun Daughter with her.

The brothers chased the old witch until she disappeared into a hole that seemed bottomless. Barley Seed Son insisted on pursuing the witch into the hole. The brothers agreed and lowered him into the hole with a rope. He entered another world once he reached the bottom.

When he asked a herdsman by a river about the witch, the herdsman said he had seen a young beautiful woman with an old woman. Barley Seed Son then gripped his metal bow and arrows and headed toward where the old woman resided. When he arrived, he found she had nine heads and was sucking blood with her proboscis from the neck of Sun Daughter, who was very pale and drowsy. Barley Seed Son pulled the string of his metal bow with all his might and shot at the old woman. His arrow pierced eight of her heads. She fled in terror, retracting her copper mouth as she ran. Barley Seed Son ran to his wife, embraced her, and took her to the hole where his brothers were waiting above.

Barley Seed Son asked his brothers to pull his wife up and they did so. However, when it was his turn to come up, his brothers left with Sun Daughter. After they had gone, Barley Seed Son pondered how to get out of the hole. He looked up and saw a garuda nest on a giant sandalwood tree where garuda nestlings were chirping. As a gigantic serpent slithered near, about to devour the baby birds, Barley Seed Son pulled his metal bow again and shot the serpent dead.

Suddenly, a strong wind howled, announcing the mother garuda's return from hunting. She was very grateful to Barley Seed Son for saving her babies and asked why and how he had reached the bottom of the hole. After he had explained his situation, the giant bird was very sympathetic and promised to fly him out of the hole if

he brought one hundred pigeons and one hundred other birds.

Barley Seed Son went hunting and returned with pigeons and other birds. Before he mounted the garuda, she said, "When I turn my head right and say '*hu*', please put a pigeon in my mouth. When I turn my head left and say '*shub*', please put another bird in my mouth."

He agreed, mounted the garuda, and then they began their flight from the bottom of the hole upwards. Barley Seed Son fed the garuda as she signaled. When they were just about to reach the top, he discovered only two pigeons remained so he put them both into the bird's mouth at one time. However, the bird soon could fly no further and asked for more birds. With no choice, he cut off a piece of flesh from his calf, put it into the bird's mouth, and then they reached the top. As the garuda was about to say farewell, she noticed the boy was trembling and asked, "Why are you shaking?"

"I didn't have enough pigeons, so I put the flesh of my calf into your mouth," the boy said.

The garuda then vomited out his flesh, and put it back on Barley Seed Son's leg, where it magically reattached.

When Barley Seed Son returned home, he found his wife had been forced to serve his brothers and their wives as though they were kings and queens, which broke his heart. He never imagined his sworn brothers would do such a thing. Tears dribbled from his cheeks as he notched an arrow and releasing the bow string, impaled and killed his two brothers with a single arrow. Barley Seed Son and Sun Daughter then lived happily after making his brothers' wives their servants.

## THE GHOST MOTHER

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An old woman, her daughter, and the daughter's several-month-old son lived together. The old woman stayed at home and cared for the baby. When the daughter was weeding the fields one summer day, a sudden feeling of worry gripped her. She thought, "I need to work hard every day, while my old mother stays at home caring for my son. But what if she isn't my real mother? What might happen to my little son?"

Her worry attracted a ghost mother in the distance who quietly approached, disguised as an old woman. The ghost said, "I have been looking for you everywhere and now I've found you. The old woman in your home isn't your real mother. I'm your real mother. Let's go to my place."

"We can't. I left my child at home and the old woman is tending him. Please come tomorrow. When I have my child, we'll go together to your place," the daughter answered.

The next morning, the daughter told the old woman she would take her child with her to the field. Though the old woman objected, the daughter insisted. Later that morning, while the daughter was weeding with her child on her back, the ghost mother came clad in a long black coat, leading a donkey. She asked the daughter to mount the donkey and let her hold the child. They then set out for the ghost mother's home.

"Please give the child to me. It's time for me to nurse him," the daughter said to the ghost mother when they had gone some distance.

"He's asleep. You can nurse him when he's awake," the ghost mother replied.

The child's mother agreed and kept quiet.

The ghost mother secretly strangled the child and devoured some of his flesh on the way to her home. When they reached her home, the ghost mother hurriedly ran to the kitchen and prepared soup for the child's mother, telling the daughter to rest. A bit later, the witch offered the baby's mother a bowl of soup. When the daughter was about to have some, she noticed fingers and toes in her bowl. Pretending nothing had happened, she poured the soup under the carpet when the ghost mother was not watching.



The ghost mother readied bedding when night came and said, "Don't go outside during the night. There's a fat woman tied to a pole who is a ghost. She is very dangerous and you must never approach her."

The daughter went to bed early that night and did not go near the tied-up old woman.

The next day, the daughter wept in the house because she discovered that the ghost mother had killed her little child. A while later, she felt very curious about the old woman tied in the yard, walked out to have a look, and approached the pole. The old woman said, "The ghost mother has killed your child. She feeds me every day and will eat me after I become very fat. You must flee, otherwise you'll be next."

The daughter was terrified after hearing this and asked, "How can I escape?"

"Take a strand of her hair, a comb, and a hairpin, and then run away. She'll chase you. When she's just about to catch you, drop a strand of her hair. She'll pick it up, return to her room to store it, and then resume chasing you. By the time you drop her hairpin, you'll probably be back at your home."

The daughter did as the old woman suggested and fled. The ghost mother soon discovered she was missing and gave chase. Just as she was about to catch her, the daughter dropped a strand of her hair. The ghost mother picked it up from the ground and returned to her house, stored it, and then resumed the chase.

The young woman then dropped the hairpin to the ground, which the ghost mother picked up and went home. When she returned, the young woman was finally inside her own home. The ghost cried, "Child's mother! Open the door. I'm here to return your baby." She repeated this again and again and the old mother and her daughter were unable to sleep.

The next morning, they got up very early and dug a deep hole in front of their gate. They put cloth, dung, and husks together, burned them in the hole, covered the hole with a layer of twigs and thin branches, and then put straw atop this. The ghost mother appeared that evening again crying out, "Child's mother! Please open the door. I'm here to return your baby!"

"It's very cold outside! Please jump up and down and warm up,

and then we'll open the door for you," the daughter called back. When the ghost mother jumped several times, the twigs and branches broke. She fell into the hole, landed on the smoldering fuel, and by the next morning had turned into shiny prayer beads. The mother and her daughter collected the prayer beads and looked for someone to sell them to.

A peddler came to the village some days later. The mother and her daughter exchanged the prayer beads for some articles they needed. The peddler was very glad to obtain such rare prayer beads so cheaply, thinking they must be very valuable. The peddler visited different villages with the prayer beads in a box. After walking for a long while, he finally reached the Yellow River.

"Peddler, release me. If you don't, I'll swallow you," the ghost mother said.

The peddler heard some whispers, looked around, saw nothing, and kept walking, but continued to hear someone whispering, "Release me or I'll swallow you."

The peddler finally detected the origin of the sound and opened the box. Immediately, the prayer beads turned into the ghost mother, whose nails began to elongate. The frightened peddler closed the box with all his might, hurled it into the Yellow River, and rushed home.

## A SELFISH MOTHER

---

Long ago, a couple had a son. The mother was frequently ill after giving birth. Her health continued to worsen, and she soon died. Her husband then remarried and the second wife gave birth to a son.

Some years later, the two sons had grown up and herded sheep on the grassland. The mother put wheat flour bread in her son's bag and put barley flour bread in the other son's bag when they herded. While she prepared wheat flour, sugar, and butter for her son, she only gave barley flour to her stepson and ordered him to herd the sheep that were hard to control. Meanwhile, she assigned the docile sheep to her own son. As time went on, her stepson became skinny and weak, while her own son was strong and healthy.

The mother made clothes one winter. When the two sons returned home from herding one day, their father was sitting by the hearth. The older son was so cold he was shaking, though he was wearing thick clothes. However, the younger son seemed to not feel the cold at all. Their father angrily hit his older son's back with a poker when he approached the hearth to warm up. The thick clothes that the older son was wearing tore and his father discovered they were filled with straw, while the younger son's clothes were padded with new cotton. When the father asked his older son what had happened, he learned all about his second wife. He became deeply concerned about his older son, fell seriously ill, and died.

In time, the mother wanted to force the older son out of the home. She gave her own son seven ewes and her stepson seven rams. She said, "Return home only when seven lambs follow your sheep. Otherwise, never return home."

The sons nodded and left.

Several months later, the younger son's sheep had seven lambs and he returned home. Meanwhile, the older son continued, wandering with his seven rams.

One day, coming upon a big grass pile, he lay on it, soon felt drowsy, and then noticed a wasp flying over his head. "Why are you so sad and not at home?" the wasp asked.

The older son explained how his parents had died and how his stepmother mistreated him.

The wasp sympathetically said, "Poor son! Circle the grass pile, worship it three times, and stomp on it. Then a deep hole will open. I'll be waiting for you at the bottom."

The son did as the wasp said, entered the hole, and walked down and down. After a long time, he came to another world - the naga world. When he was puzzled about which way to go, the wasp appeared and invited him to its home. Before they reached the wasp's home, it said, "There will be a large snake in front of the hearth. Don't be afraid. That's my father. Another large snake will be on the other side of the hearth. Don't be afraid. That's my mother. Many tiny snakes will be in my home. Don't be afraid - they're my family members."

The son agreed and followed the wasp. When he reached the home, he truly saw two enormous serpents slowly writhing near the hearth. Though he was terrified, he remained outwardly calm. He slowly approached the serpents and sat. When the serpents asked him why he was there, the son told his story, which was so sad that they were all moved to tears and welcomed him to stay with them.

Several days passed and the wasp said, "You cannot stay here forever. You must return someday. When you are leaving, my parents will offer you many gifts - gold and silver. Don't take them. When they ask what you want, tell them you need a gold pot, gold spoon, gold chopsticks, and a gold stove. They will refuse, but insist and they will give them to you. I'll then escort you back to your home."

The son visited the wasp's parents, said exactly what the wasp had told him, and finally received a gold pot, gold spoon, gold chopsticks, and gold stove. When the wasp escorted him up to the surface the son asked, "Why do I need these things?"

"When you get home, your stepmother will ask you to set up a stove and boil hot water. She will give you only a very small amount of firewood. Set up the gold stove, put the pot on it, put nine spoons of water in the pot, and put nine pieces of wood the size of gold chopsticks in the hearth. Dig a very deep hole by the stove. When the water boils, put nine gold spoons of hot water into the hole. Then call your stepmother. When she asks you where you got these things, tell her you got them from your father whom you visited in Heaven. Tell her that your father has been receiving gifts every day and you received these items when you visited him. Tell her you will go and

visit your father for more gifts the following day. When she hears this, she won't let you go. Instead, she'll order her son to visit. When she asks how to visit your father, tell her to jump into the hole you made that by this time will be full of hot water."

Feeling confident, the son returned home. Upon arriving, his stepmother told him to set up a stove and boil water, and gave him a very small amount of firewood. The son did as the wasp advised. After he finished his tasks, he called his stepmother to come check. She was surprised and asked him how he had managed to complete his task so quickly. He said what the wasp had told him to say and concluded by telling her that if she jumped into the hole, she could visit her husband.

"I'll visit my father again and get gifts for you and for my younger brother. You don't have to go there," the son said while the stepmother was in deep thought.

"Oh! You've already been there once. Let your younger brother go this time. He misses his father a lot," she replied.

The greedy stepmother quickly ran to another room, returned with her son, and forced him to jump into the deep hole. He was terrified and stretched out his arms for help. When she saw her son waving his arms, she thought he was calling her to come. Hoping to get more treasures from her husband, she jumped into the deep hole without hesitation.

The hot water boiled and killed them in a very short time. Everything then belonged to the older son who lived happily afterwards.

## THE GHOST QUEEN

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A chieftain had a beautiful wife who died tragically at an early age. After her death, disasters came one after another to the village. Some villagers got very sick and some died shortly after they fell ill. Healthy livestock died after a short illness. Worried villagers went to the local monastery and consulted a *bla ma*, who said, "The queen has become a fierce ghost and is causing many problems in the village. Invite a powerful *sngags pa* to vanquish her."

The villagers then invited a famous *sngags pa* from a neighboring village. Soon after arriving in the village, he chanted for about a week. Though very successful in conquering ghosts in past decades, he was incapable of subduing Ghost Queen and decided to leave the village after sunset. He thought, "I've been chanting for a week. If I leave now, the ghost won't see me," and left quietly to avoid being noticed by Ghost Queen.

The *sngags pa* soon reached the Yellow River, hurriedly put his belongings in a canoe, and prepared to leave. Suddenly, a strong whirlwind appeared in front of him. A woman wearing the Ghost Queen's clothes sat atop the whirlwind and shouted, "Wait for me *sngags pa*! I'll come with you."

The terrified *sngags pa* immediately pushed the canoe forward with a paddle. Ghost Queen followed, flying in the air and leaving a turbulent trail in the river. He knew she would not give up and paddled the canoe with all his might, returning to the place where he had boarded the canoe. Ghost Queen suddenly vanished.

Holding his prayer beads and knife, the *sngags pa* left the canoe, rushed to a village straw stack, and squirmed into the center. Ghost Queen soon arrived. In the dim moonlight, he saw that she had a huge copper mouth that shone in the moonlight as she searched for the *sngags pa* in the straw. Ghost Queen knew he was somewhere nearby and intended to scare him to death by thrusting her proboscis into the straw.

The frightened *sngags pa* thought, "She will surely kill me. I'd better beseech the Three Jewels. That's better than waiting to die." He then chanted and prayed to the Three Jewels piously. Ghost Queen circled the threshing ground. When wandering dogs ran at her,

she waved her sleeve, which made the dogs yelp like they had been shot by a powerful gun.

At dawn, the *sngags pa* felt better and safer, came out from the straw stack, and looked around. Ghost Queen was gone. He saw the dogs near the threshing ground looking upslope and knew she must be there. He then visited the chieftain's house and reported what had happened. The chieftain ordered a powerful *lha pa* in the village to subdue Ghost Queen.

Eventually, the *lha pa* ran outside the village *ma Ni* hall, found a piglet, indicated it was possessed by Ghost Queen, enticed her into an old vat, put the lid on, and threw it into the Yellow River. Ghost Queen was thus vanquished.

## THE SHEPHERD AND THE WOLF CUBS

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A shepherd noticed six wolf cubs waiting for their mother in a wolf den while he was herding his sheep back home. The herdsman happily thought, "I cannot buy a lambskin robe for myself because it's too expensive. These wolf cubs have nice pelts. When they grow bigger, I can surely make a nice robe of their skins." He wondered how he could keep the cubs in their den for a few months and finally concluded, "If these wolf cubs cannot see, they'll be in the same place when I return several months from now. I'll then kill and skin them, and make a nice, warm wolf skin robe." He then took a needle from his robe and pierced all the cubs' eyes.

The shepherd returned several months later and found the wolves still in the den, but now as large as mature wolves. He confidently approached, planning to kill and skin them. As soon as he got near, the wolves sniffed, realized it was the man who had blinded them, pounced, and killed him.



## A MISTREATED HOUSEHOLDER

---

Long ago in India, a rich, pious householder was one of Shakyamuni's sponsors. When he was young, he had given money to poor people and very responsibly cared for his family. But, when he reached his sixties, he was mistreated by his wife, son, daughter-in-law, nephew, and niece. None of his relatives cared about him. Without other choices, the old householder decided to visit the Buddha.

The old man walked a long way and finally reached the place where the Buddha resided. However, the Buddha had gone to another place, and had not yet returned. He then visited a much respected *bla ma* and said sincerely, "I am now in my sixties. My immediate family members, relatives, and fellow villagers dislike and mistreat me. I must have done something unforgivable in a previous life. Now, my only wish is to become a monk. Am I fated to become a monk?"

"You're over sixty. You can't become a monk. Please go home," the *bla ma* advised.

The old man hopelessly began his trip home. In time he came to a temple that housed many deity images. The temple was made of stone bricks and the steps were also made of stone. The old man began smashing his head against the stone steps saying, "When I was young, I was a pious Buddhist and one of your sponsors. Now, when I need your help, I can't find you. When I wished to become a monk, your student said I'm too old. There's nothing I can do except kill myself." Blood dribbled down from the old man's forehead and soon covered the temple's front steps.

As the old householder continued to beat his head on the stone steps, the Buddha appeared as a shimmering golden light over his head, and asked, "What are you doing? Why are you beating your head?"

The old man explained how he was mistreated by his family members, relatives, and neighbors, and he also described what the *bla ma* had said to him about becoming a monk.

The Buddha said, "Visit the *bla ma* again. Tell him to shave your head and allow you to become a monk."

The old man very gladly returned to the home of the *bla ma*, who did what the Buddha said. The old man thus became a monk

after shaving his head, adopting a religious name, and putting on a monk's robe. He now had to obey the monastery's rules and, though he was already an old man, take food to the other monks. When he was serving food, hot tea spilled on him. When he served noodles, some monks intentionally spilled soup on his clothes, making the old man tremble among the young, energetic monks.

The old householder thought, "When I was in the village, family members and relatives mistreated me. Now, my situation is no better here in the monastery. The monks pour tea and soup on me, burning my body. I can't bear it. I'll never be a real monk. It's better to end my life than continue to suffer like this."

He then climbed atop a steep mountain, removed his monk clothing so as to not disgrace the robes, and leapt from the mountaintop, intending to kill himself. The *bla ma* divined what the old man had done, flew from the sky disguised as an eagle, and rescued him. "What are you doing?" the *bla ma* asked.

"When I was at home, no one liked me. When I became a monk, the other monks also mistreated me. I am so sad that I want to die. I decided to leap from the steep mountaintop to end my suffering," the old man replied.

"Please don't. We'll visit some places," the *bla ma* said.

"Where will we go?" the old man asked.

"The other side of the ocean," the *bla ma* said. "Hold me tightly."

The *bla ma* waved his robe like eagle wings and they flew into the sky. In a very short time, they reached the other side of the ocean and rested. A while later, the *bla ma* told the old man a story:

There was an insatiable *bla ma* who collected offerings from poor people, but never recited scriptures for dead people. He had a very charming wife. One year, he hired a very strong, brave, skillful man as a bodyguard. They then set sail in a boat to collect gold and treasures. Unfortunately, the boat sank and they died because of the strong ocean wind.

After finishing the story, the *bla ma* and the old householder walked ahead and eventually came to well-preserved bones near the ocean. A snake crawled in and out of the mouth of a skull and sometimes writhed inside it. "What is that? Why is there a snake

there?" the old man asked.

"Those are the bones and skull of the *bla ma*'s wife. She felt she was very attractive when she was alive, and was very attached to her beauty. After her death, she became a snake, unable to leave her bones," the *bla ma* answered.

The old householder felt very sympathetic for the beautiful wife and his compassion began to grow. They continued walking and came to a giant tree. Thousands of insects covered the giant tree, which constantly moaned, as though the insects were eating it and sucking its sap. "Why are there so many insects on that tree?" the old man asked.

"The big tree is the insatiable *bla ma* who died when he was crossing the ocean. The insects are the incarnations of dead people who gave him many offerings and asked for a better next life, but the *bla ma* chanted no scriptures for them after they died. They have now become insects who eat his flesh and drink his blood. The moaning sound is made by the *bla ma* because he suffers from this torture."

The old householder thought that a *bla ma* truly should not treat people in such a way, and again felt compassion for those who had died and become insects because of one person - the *bla ma*. The old man thus took the first step to becoming enlightened.

They walked on and met a very strong, furious man holding a sharp sword. His angry eyes were very red, he chewed his lower lip, and he slashed himself with a sharp sword, cutting himself into thousands of pieces. A bit later, his body parts reconnected and he came back to life. He again gripped his sword, flew into a rage, and repeated the same process as before. "Why does that man kill himself again and again?" the old man asked.

"That's the brave man the *bla ma* brought when he was crossing the ocean. Because he sinned by killing many people, he suffers the consequences. He must kill himself to remove the sins he committed in his previous life," the *bla ma* said.

The old man felt sincere sympathy for those who had been killed by this man's sword and realized being a hero was not necessarily a great thing. These realizations brought him another step closer to enlightenment.

Afterwards, they climbed a very steep mountain. As they climbed, the old man noticed many bones. Some were as small as

needles, others were the size of doors, and some seemed to be giants' bones. When they reached the mountaintop, the old man realized they were atop an immense mountain of bones. Terrified, he asked the *bla ma*, "What kind of animals have such bones? Why are they piled there?"

"These are your bones," the *bla ma* answered.

"Why do you say that?" the old man asked in surprise.

"You were a king in a previous life and heavily taxed your people, regardless of their wealth. After your death, you were reborn as a giant sea creature. When you opened your mouth, animals went inside. When you closed your mouth, half the ocean became blood red from your killing thousands of creatures. You were reborn as you are now 500 years later. The reason your wife, children, relatives, and your neighbors mistreat you in this life is because they are the sea creatures you killed."

The old householder thoroughly regretted what he had done in his previous lives as a king and a sea creature. As soon as he felt this deep, sincere regret, he passed the third step of achieving enlightenment. His teacher knew he had passed these steps and got ready to fly back to their monastery over the sea. Before flying away, he said to the old householder, "I'm not helping you back home this time. Do so yourself." Then the old householder imitated his teacher, the *bla ma*, and found that he could fly.

The Buddha was waiting for them when they returned and said to the old man, "You are now enlightened. Never feel anger and take revenge because the monks treated you badly when you were here. If you do so, they will go to Hell in their next lives. You no longer need to stay among the monks. Please stay with other enlightened ones."

The old man gladly prostrated and thanked the Buddha.

## THE MAGIC MONK

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An ignorant monk disguised himself as a powerful *bla ma*, visited herding areas, and pretended to chant mysterious scriptures. Actually, he repeated one sentence over and over again in whatever household invited him to stay. The pious nomads invited him into their homes to expel evil and offered him *rtsam pa*, butter, cheese, and other gifts when he left.

One day, having loaded his belongings on his horse, the monk headed to another household to chant. Black dots appeared in the distance as he went along. The monk had no idea what they were, stopped, and stared. As the dots neared he realized they were seven bandits, who soon galloped up with their rifles drawn and shouted at him.

The alarmed monk turned his horse and fled for his life. After galloping a while the exhausted horse reached a cave, where the frightened monk hid inside. A large frog crawled slowly in front of him as though disturbed by his arrival. The monk quickly picked up the frog, put it in his *rtsam pa* bag, and shook the bag just as the seven bandits arrived and demanded his belongings.

The monk quickly took out the *rtsam pa*-covered frog, put it beside him, and sat cross-legged. The clumsy, barley-flour-covered frog was confused, opened its mouth widely, slowly stretched out its left front leg, and wiped barley flour from its left eye. A moment later, the frog did the same thing with its right front leg, cleaning barley flour from its right eye. The seven bandits stared, not daring to approach. While the frog performed, the monk began murmuring, gesturing at the bandits, and then loudly said to the frog, "Now you clearly see these men standing here. There are seven of them. These bad men rob poor people. Today, you must take their lives on behalf of all poor people."

The seven terrified bandits fled.

## PARENT EATER

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A father, mother, their son, and their daughter lived together in a large village. The daughter was actually a living ghost, but nobody realized it. Every night when she left home, a villager would disappear and later nobody knew what had happened to that person. The brother was suspicious of his sister's unusual nocturnal activities and decided to watch her. After supper one night, he climbed up a tall tree and waited. She soon arrived near the tree and looked around, as though waiting for someone. A bit later, four middle-aged '*dre mo*' 'female ghosts' appeared. One very beautiful one approached the young woman and asked, "Why didn't you bring your brother tonight?"

She answered, "Brother went out after supper. I couldn't find him."

The beautiful '*dre mo*' said nothing, seemed disappointed, waved, and hit the ground several times with her sleeves. A person magically appeared, whom they all attacked and devoured in an instant. After a short rest, the beautiful witch said, "Please bring your brother the day after tomorrow."

She said, "No, I'll bring him here tomorrow evening."

The delighted witches then left, going in different directions.

The very next day, when the daughter approached her brother and asked if he needed to go anywhere that night, he replied that he did not. The whole family spent the day together. After a quick supper, the brother left, climbed up the tall tree again, and thought, "Those witches intend to kill me. I must pray to the Three Jewels for help." He took out a rope and tied himself to the tree with nine knots. His sister soon walked under the tree and signaled her witch friends, who immediately appeared.

"Where is your brother?" they demanded.

"He went out just after supper. I'm sure he didn't go far," she answered.

"Excellent!" the beautiful witch exclaimed, flapped her arms, and struck the ground nine times with her sleeves. The nine knots the brother had made were untied by her power.

He was terrified and thought, "If she waves her sleeve one

more time, I'll fall to the foot of the tree and be killed in an instant." He piously prayed to the Three Jewels. Luckily, the witch did not wave her sleeves again. The disappointed witches then left after the sister promised to bring her brother the following day.

After they left, the brother untangled his hands, climbed down, returned home immediately, and told his parents about his sister, describing what had happened that night and the night before. He suggested they should move somewhere else. Sadly, his parents ignored what he said. Without other choices, the brother left home.

After wandering for several months, he came to a village and eventually married a woman there. He thought about his parents and home almost every day, and vowed to visit them at some point in the future. Meanwhile, he raised some puppies and fed them only meat.

Ten years later, the brother finally decided to visit his parents. He said to his wife before leaving, "Put a pan of blood and a pan of milk before the dogs. If they pull fiercely to drink the blood, release them. If they pull to drink the milk, don't release them."

When he reached a mountaintop where he could see his parents' village, he knew it was deserted. Weeds grew on household roofs, the fields were empty, and not a single chimney was smoking. The once energetic village had become somberly quiet. The brother then noticed smoke coming up out of his parents' home chimney. He walked down to the village, hoping to find his parents alive. He climbed up to the roof of his home and looked down through the smoke hole where he saw his sister sitting among piles of human bones, putting her parents' bones together. While she was busy with the bones, a tear dribbled from the brother's cheek through the smoke hole and fell to the floor.

His sister noticed and thought, "There isn't even a bit of cloud in the sky, so how could water fall?" She jumped up, reached the roof in an instant, and found her brother there.

He knew his sister would not harm him in broad daylight and, indeed, she warmly welcomed him. She boiled soup from their parents' bones and handed a bowl to her brother, who pretended to drink it, but actually poured the soup down his chest to the floor.

"Brother, you must be exhausted. Please rest while I prepare a delicious meal for you," she said.

The brother thought, "She'll kill me if I stay inside. I must stay

outside." He then said, "I'll wait outside."

"I'm afraid you'll leave if you go outside," his sister said.

"I won't leave. If you don't trust me, put a rope around my wrist," her brother said.

She then tied a rope around his wrist and secured one end of the rope to a pole by the cutting board. The brother sat outside, waited, and noticed a chicken wandering nearby. He untied the rope from his wrist and put it around the chicken's legs. The chicken pulled at the rope, trying to escape. The sister saw the rope moving and thought her brother was still there. Meanwhile, her brother again climbed up the tall tree for it was the only place he could hide.

His sister called and called but, when her brother did not come, she stepped outside and saw the chicken. Enraged, she grabbed the chicken, swallowed it one gulp, and then ran after her brother. She soon reached the tree. Seeing her brother in the tree top, she asked how she could climb up. He refused to say, because he knew she would kill him if he told her.

Realizing she could not climb up the tree made her so impatient and furious that she began gnawing at the tree trunk with her teeth. A third of the giant tree trunk was soon gone.

At this moment, the dogs raised in the brother's home fiercely pulled toward the pan of blood. Recalling what her husband had told her, the brother's wife released them. Once released, an unprecedented wind began howling and the dogs raced toward the tall tree. The sister noticed the fierce wind and asked, "Brother, what's that strange sound?"

"It's nothing. Concentrate on your task," ordered her brother.

The strong wind blew everything toward them and the sister thought of fleeing, however, her brother persuaded her to stay. Then the dogs came, attacked the sister, and devoured every bit of her in an instant. The brother climbed down from the tree, and returned home riding one dog, and leading the others.



## DONKEY AND TIGER

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Many years ago, a gray-haired mother and a ten year-old boy lived at the foot of a forested mountain. Their only property was a scraggy donkey that they depended on to haul firewood from the forest. When the boy got older, he began collecting wood from the mountain.

One morning after breakfast, his mother packed a bottle of yogurt and some chopped pieces of cooked sheep stomach in a bag which the boy put on Donkey and then he set out for the forest. After reaching the forest, he rested, leaning against a gigantic tree. A bit later, he tied Donkey to a tree branch and began collecting dry branches. Suddenly, a fierce tiger pounced on the boy and killed him in a flash. Tiger then sniffed the footprints, and followed the boy's scent back to where Donkey was tied.

Tiger felt surprised and afraid as he soberly looked at Donkey. He had never seen such a creature before. He walked back and forth in front of Donkey several times, baring his sharp fangs, intending to frighten the strangely-shaped creature before him.

Donkey pretended to take no interest and stared motionlessly at Tiger. A sudden fear rose in Tiger because Donkey was not frightened. "Who are you? What's your name?" Tiger demanded.

"What's your name?" Donkey asked, thinking the end of his life was at hand.

"My name is Big-mouth Forest Tiger," replied Tiger.

"My name is Big-ear Donkey-Tiger," Donkey said, swishing his tail.

Tiger was confused upon hearing such a name, but was interested in testing his ability. "What are you good at?" Tiger asked.

Before the boy went to fetch firewood, he had put the bottle of yogurt and pieces of sheep stomach under some leaves near Donkey, to prevent them from being stolen. Donkey stepped on these leaves, breaking the bottle of yogurt. Yogurt flowed from the bottle.

"What's that? What's that liquid?" Tiger asked.

"Naga brains. I just dug them out with my hoof," Donkey answered.

Tiger was dumbfounded. After further deliberation, Tiger asked, "What else can you do?"

Donkey pawed out a wad of sheep stomach from the piled leaves and boasted, "These are naga intestines. Have a taste!"

"Oh no! No! I don't like guts," declared Tiger, stepping back nervously, increasingly persuaded Donkey was a supernatural being. Eventually, they became sworn friends, promising to never betray each other under any circumstances, and vowing to help each other survive in the forest.

One day, Donkey and Tiger reached a verdant meadow as they were hunting. A silver stream flowed gently through the center of the meadow, surrounded by small mountains. A herd of deer gathered by the stream. Some deer nibbled tender grass, while others sipped and bathed in the stream. Donkey and Tiger were delighted by this lovely scene and agreed to attack the deer. They moved forward as planned and soon reached a path - the only entry and exit to the beautiful meadow. Finally, they decided that Tiger would lie in wait by the path while Donkey would chase the deer toward him.

Donkey approached some deer and brayed loudly, while racing back and forth. The petrified deer raced toward where Tiger lay in wait. Tiger attacked with his paws and bit their throats, killing many deer in a very short time. Tiger wanted his sworn brother to share this delicious meal and said, "Brother! Come and let's share this meal."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I never eat meat," Donkey replied.

"Really? I didn't know that. What do you eat?" Tiger asked.

"Grass. I eat grass," answered Donkey.

Tiger was stupefied and thought, "This strange creature must be a very venerable being. He is capable of hunting, but never eats meat. I must be careful."

Days passed and Big-mouth Forest Tiger had eaten up almost all the meat and began chewing the brittle bones. "Why are you eating those hard things?" Donkey asked.

"Because I'm hungry," Tiger replied.

"If you're hungry, let's hunt," Donkey said, and then the two walked along a shortcut to a forested mountain. They did not speak because the weather was hot. Tiger's mouth was wide open and his tongue hung out as Donkey thrashed his tail to chase away irritating mosquitoes and flies. "Since you are omnipotent, I'll chase the animals and you capture them," Tiger said.

Donkey was at a loss for words, thinking, "Tiger will not spare me once he learns I'm just an ordinary donkey." He thus had no alternative but to agree to wait for the animals.

Tiger chased a herd of deer in Donkey's direction. The deer leapt into the air, kicking back with their hind legs and quickly trampled Donkey, who could not kill even a single deer. He found he could not move his body because he was seriously injured. He lay on the ground, his head on his front legs, and waited for his friend.

A crow hovered in the sky, cawed several times, and then plunged down toward the motionless donkey, as if it were an arrow shot by a hunter. It landed, wiggled its tail feathers up and down, and then approached Donkey. Suddenly, Crow pecked something from Donkey's anus and swallowed before retreating cautiously. Crow looked around, saw nothing nearby, and approached Donkey again.

Donkey decided to catch Crow, so when Crow was about to pick something again from his anus, Donkey jerked his tail like a snake, pinning Crow under his bottom. Tiger returned at that instant and demanded, "Where are the animals you captured?"

"I didn't see any animals come this way," Donkey replied.

"Impossible! I chased many deer in your direction," Tiger said emphatically.

"I did catch a crow," declared Donkey.

Tiger circled Donkey and noticed a crow stuck under his bottom. Tiger admired Donkey for such hunting skills but then he became afraid.

Donkey said nothing as they headed home, crossing a huge snow-capped mountain. Tiger continually praised Donkey, who pretended to listen, though his limbs were on the verge of collapse. They marched along the path and finally reached the foot of a mountain. The trampled-path was covered with ice, which made it resemble a huge piece of silk. They had to cross it. Tiger stretched out his sharp paws and walked cautiously, failing to notice his friend, who lagged behind.

Donkey was intimidated by so much ice and dared not take even as much as one step forward. He trembled like a leaf in the wind, thrashing his long tail from side to side. After a long internal struggle, however, he determined to confront this challenge. Unfortunately, his hooves slipped and he smashed his head on the ice. As he crawled

over the ice, his open wounds left blood splattered everywhere. The ice soon looked as though scriptures were engraved on it.<sup>62</sup>

Tiger turned, saw Donkey on the ice, and said, "What are those bloody things smeared on the ice? Oh! You know how to write Tibetan scriptures!"

"Oh, yes. These are just a simple version," Donkey answered in a cheerful tone, disguising the pain he felt.

When Tiger heard this, he rushed away, thinking Donkey was indeed powerful and might be about to kill him. As he ran through a forested mountain lolling his tongue, he met Wolf who asked, "Why are you running so fast?"

"Oh, haven't you heard of Big-ear Donkey-Tiger?" exclaimed Tiger. "He is a strange creature that hunts animals but never eats meat, catches flying crows, and writes Tibetan scriptures on ice."

"Really? I've never heard of such a creature. Take me to him. I'm really eager to meet this supernatural being," Wolf said.

"It's very risky to take you there," cautioned Tiger.

"Don't panic, I'll stay near you," Wolf reassured.

Wolf and Tiger agreed to tie their tails together and walked into the forest to meet Donkey. Tiger felt fretful as he walked with his new friend and glanced here and there nervously, thinking Donkey might kill him at any moment. Wolf walked a bit to the front, pulling the intimidated Tiger.

"Oh, dear friend, you're here!" Donkey said when Wolf suddenly appeared. "You promised and then gave me a red cow last month. Is this a new gift you have brought today?"

Hearing this, Tiger was petrified, turned, and rushed into the distance with all his might, forgetting that Wolf was tied to his tail. After running for a while, he slowed, and looked back at Wolf, whose teeth were bared. Not understanding that Wolf had been dragged to death, he resumed running. When he eventually looked at Wolf a second time, it seemed Wolf was taking off his robe, for the skin on his left foot was torn away. With resumed terror, Tiger sped away, and dared not look back until he could no longer breathe.

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<sup>62</sup> A reference to writing scriptures on ice that is popular in, for example, Yul shul. See [http://eng1.tibet.cn/2010zj/twywd/201401/t20140121\\_1968812.html](http://eng1.tibet.cn/2010zj/twywd/201401/t20140121_1968812.html) for examples (accessed 1 March 2014).

## RABBIT AND BEAR

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Every day, Mother Rabbit and Mother Bear left their homes to dig wild herbs. Every sunset, Mother Rabbit brought a bulging sack of wild herbs home, while Mother Bear returned dragging a sack only half full. As time passed, Mother Bear deeply resented Mother Rabbit.

One beautiful morning, the two mothers set out to dig wild herbs as usual, carrying their tattered sacks on their backs. Mother Rabbit worked hard as she always did, slowly but surely filling her sack of herbs. Meanwhile, Mother Bear lay on the ground, watching Mother Rabbit dig. Annoyed by Mother Bear's laziness, Mother Rabbit approached saying, "Hey! Get up and dig, or you'll have nothing to take home," and patted her on the shoulder.

"OK," Mother Bear said, closing her eyes. Time passed and Mother Bear had done no work. She pretended to sleep, but actually was closely observing Mother Rabbit's every move. The thought of killing her grew. Meanwhile, Mother Rabbit concentrated on her work, never imagining her old neighbor would harm her.

Suddenly, a big figure approached and smashed Mother Rabbit's head with a stick. After killing her, Mother Bear returned home with Mother Rabbit's sack of wild herbs and her body. When she walked by Mother Rabbit's home, Little Rabbit was waiting, fretfully gazing into the distance. When he saw Mother Bear, he excitedly thought his mother would be home soon. "Mother Bear, is my mother coming home?" Little Rabbit asked.

"Yes, she's coming. She's just a little tired," Mother Bear responded.

Little Rabbit waited and waited. Darkness fell. Knowing something terrible had happened, he crawled up on top of Mother Bear's roof, peeked inside through the smoke hole, and heard, "Here are Mother Rabbit's head, feet, and her intestines. Little Rabbit will ask you to play the ewe and wolf game with him tomorrow. Don't do it, no matter what he says," Mother Bear said.

Tears streamed down Little Rabbit's cheeks, as he quietly returned to his home.

As the sun rose the next morning, Mother Bear left her home as usual. The two babies got up early and played, each in their own

home. When Little Rabbit was sure Mother Bear was gone, he called, "Hello! Little Bear! Come out and play hide-and-peek with me."

"Oh, I can't. Mother said I can't play hide-and-peek with you today," Little Bear said.

"Then, let's play the ewe and wolf game," suggested Little Rabbit.

"No. Mother said I also can't play any games with you," Little Bear answered.

"Let's play high jump," Little Rabbit said, trying again.

"Mother didn't mention that one," Little Bear said.

The objective of the game was to jump over a dry horizontal branch about a meter high. They played this game almost every day. Earlier, Little Rabbit had resolved to take revenge and had hidden a sharp double-bladed sword on the landing spot, and covered it with withered grass.

The branch seemed higher than usual and fat Little Bear could not succeed because he was slow and clumsy. To encourage him, Little Rabbit jumped across the branch. Little Bear then moved a long way back, rushed with all his strength at the branch, jumped, and died when the upright sword stabbed him through the heart.

When Little Rabbit realized Little Bear was dead, his long ears stood on end and he looked around for Mother Bear. His heart pounded. He knew he should leave so he hopped until he met a shepherd, and said:

Mother Bear killed my dear mother,  
I killed clumsy Little Bear,  
It's time for me to hide, time to elude,  
Mother Bear is behind me.

"Hide among the sheep," the shepherd said sympathetically.

Furious Mother Bear soon arrived and demanded, "Have you seen an animal with long ears and long hind legs? If you haven't, I'll gouge out your eyes and chew off your ears."

The petrified shepherd quickly gestured to Little Rabbit, who hopped away with ferocious Mother Bear in hot pursuit. Little Rabbit ran through vast verdant grassland and noticed a herd of grazing horses. He went up to the leader of the horses and said:

Mother Bear killed my dear mother,  
I killed clumsy Little Bear,  
It's time for me to hide, time to elude,  
Mother Bear is behind me.

The horse leader said, "Hide in my mane. She won't find you there."

Mother Bear soon arrived, panting heavily, and growled, "Have you seen an animal with long ears and long hind-legs? If you haven't, I'll gouge out your eyes and rip off your ears." The astonished horse gestured to Little Rabbit who writhed like an enraged snake and disappeared into a rocky mountain with Mother Bear right behind him. Little Rabbit hopped into a valley surrounded by a cliff. Countless butterflies hovered among thousands of blooming flowers. A babbling brook flowed like a silver thread through the valley into the distance.

Little Rabbit was fleeing for his life and dared not enjoy this magnificent scenery. Suddenly a boulder-sized wild yak, lying asleep in the middle of the path, appeared before him. Little Rabbit approached the wild yak very quietly, woke him up, and beseeched:

Mother Bear killed my dear mother,  
I killed clumsy Little Bear,  
It's time for me to hide, time to elude,  
Mother Bear is behind me.

The wild yak stood up, which made the ground tremble like an earthquake. He carefully examined Little Rabbit from head to toe, smiled, and said, "Hide in my ears, but you must never touch the three gems inside my ear. If you touch them, you will suffer."

"Yes, I'll obey you," Little Rabbit replied humbly.

Wild Yak lowered his head, and Little Rabbit climbed up and squirmed inside Wild Yak's ear, provoking an unbearable itch.

Mother Bear arrived with sweat dripping from her furry face, and angrily demanded, "Have you seen a creature with long ears and long hind-legs? If you haven't, I'll gouge out your eyes and rip off your ears."

Wild Yak was so enraged by this that he gored Mother Bear in the belly, instantly killing her. "Now come out. I killed Mother Bear.

There's nothing to be afraid of," Wild Yak announced proudly.

When Little Rabbit was about to step outside, he was attracted by the three gems and said, "Oh, I must tie my shoelace. I'll be out soon!"

Little Rabbit curiously touched the three jewels in the yak's ears. Wild Yak could not bear the itch and swung his head back and forth. Little Rabbit then fell to the ground and was caught by Wild Yak who bellowed, "I said you would suffer if you touched my three gems. I'll kill you!"

Little Rabbit was so frightened he quivered like a poisoned rat. His clouded mind could not concentrate. After a bit, he mumbled, "Uncle Yak, your beautifully-formed mouth resembles a mouth of gold, your invincible sharp nose is a gold nose, your glittering charming eyes are gold eyes, your huge, Mount Everest-like horns, are gold horns."

Wild Yak stepped back after hearing this flattery, blinked, and happily said, "Please continue, I'd like to hear more."

As soon as Little Rabbit realized he could escape, he rushed into a triangular-shaped rocky cave and cursed, "Your mouth is as filthy as shit, your misshapen nose stinks like shit, your eyes are dull and blind, and your rotten horns are useless."

Wild Yak furiously charged the cave but his horns were too wide to fit inside. The ensuing impact was so great that he died. Little Rabbit then proceeded, following a gently flowing river into a valley. The sun gradually reached its zenith and the weather turned hot. Little Rabbit looked into the distance and saw smoke coming from a chimney. When he reached the house, he walked inside and found a wrinkled old couple with a newborn infant. "Everybody is busy going over there to get free meat from a freshly-killed yak," Little Rabbit said, pointing into the distance. "You haven't heard about it?"

The old couple looked at Little Rabbit from head to paw and asked, "Are you sure the meat is free?"

"Yes, I just came from there," Little Rabbit replied. "Everyone is taking some. You two should hurry!"

"One of us must stay and look after our baby," the old woman said.

"I'll tend the baby, don't worry," offered Little Rabbit.

The old couple then set out to get free yak meat. Meanwhile,



Little Rabbit cut off the baby's head, put it in a blanket, cut the infant's body into parts and put them in a pot, and kindled a big fire. He put some pigeons under the baby's head to make it seem the child has breathing, and waited for the old couple to return.

The old couple soon arrived with plenty of yak meat in a sack. They felt grateful to Little Rabbit, who was at the hearth stoking the fire. As soon as they smelled cooking meat, they asked, "What's that smell? Did you boil something?"

"Oh, you older people are so slow. I went and brought back some yak meat, and boiled it for you," Little Rabbit replied.

"It seems the meat is ready," the old woman said, approaching the pot. She placed the meat on a big wood platter and she and her famished husband then began enjoying it. While they were eating, a crow perched on a tree near their house and cawed, "Baby eaters! Infant blood drinkers!"

The old man shouted and chased the crow away. Meanwhile, the old woman looked over at the bed, went near, and pulled the blanket back. Pigeons flew in every direction as the child's head rolled onto the floor. The old lady erupted like a volcano, rushed at Little Rabbit, and screaming, "I'll kill you!" grabbed a spike while the old man grabbed a poker.

"I'm going to die so please grant a last request," Little Rabbit said.

"Say it quickly!" yelled the old man.

"Before I die, fill my ears with ash. This is how you should kill me," Little Rabbit wailed pathetically. The old couple put plenty of ash in Rabbit's ears and waited, guarding Little Rabbit like policemen.

"I'll count to three," Rabbit said. "When I say three, beat me to death." Rabbit counted to three but, before the two sticks smashed him, he shook his head, scattering ash into the eyes of the old couple who then blindly clubbed each other to death.

Rabbit then left the house and lived happily.

# CONCLUSION

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In the early 1990s, local villagers produced only enough food from their fields to feed themselves. There was little change in villagers' living standard from year to year. People had more free time than they do now, and there were many *sngags pa*. *Sngags pa* from Rta rgyugs and neighboring villages visited famous *bla ma* in various monasteries and meditated in caves to avoid distraction from worldly concerns. Traditionally, after spending some years in the caves they returned to their village to engage with local communities in the role of mediators, peacemakers, magicians, healers, and so on. Consequently, powerful and renowned *sngags pa* lived in every village.

However, when the 'Opening Up the West' (Xibu da kai fa) policy was promulgated, local villagers became busier. In 2012, a major concern was earning money as villagers eagerly competed with each other to build new brick homes, or renovate their old homes; own large screen television sets, DVD players, electric and gas cookers, carpets, motorcycles, cars, and other items; and to decorate their homes. These expenditures brought new forms of comfort and entertainment to their lives, and also allowed for a display of wealth.

People increasingly ignore traditions. *Sngags pa* are no exception. Common rituals are neglected and the number of participants steadily decreases. Certain rituals such as Khyung<sup>63</sup> in the sixth lunar month and 'Cham in Rdzong nang Monastery have been discontinued due to an insufficient number of *sngags pa* and monks. Most famous *sngags pa* are busy working outside the village as migrant laborers. In 2011, local residents took ill people to

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<sup>63</sup> Khyung was held in the sixth lunar month every year in turn by Dpon rgya, Cung smad, Mo zi, Ru mtsher, Sman 'gang, and Lha grong villagers. *Sngags pa* chanted scriptures for two to three days. There was an image of a camel on the back wall of the chanting room representing an evil spirit. A man wearing *tsha ru* held a sword, a bow, and arrows and walked in different directions while *sngags pa* chanted. He shot the camel with his arrows as he walked toward it. After the ritual ended, villagers gathered in such places as *ma Ni* halls and threshing grounds to celebrate by singing and eating good food.

hospitals, because they could not find very powerful *sngags pa* to help them.

In terms of agriculture, village social interaction changed after combine harvesters were introduced in 2006. Their introduction to the village in 2006 and 2007, and the use of herbicides, tractors, fertilizers, and insecticides have dramatically altered the practice of agriculture. In 2006, two Tibetans from Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture brought a combine harvester to the village, measured the fields, and said that they would use the combine to harvest the fields for seventy RMB per *mu*. From observing combine harvesting in nearby villages, villagers understood that the machine would greatly reduce harvest time, eliminate worries about inclement weather damaging the crop, and reduce the number of people needed for harvest. Consequently, the combine harvester was used to harvest all the fields it could.<sup>64</sup> About ten percent of the fields were too narrow, not level enough, or were near the irrigation ditch, which the combine harvester could not cross. These fields were harvested by hand. In the harvest process, combine harvesters reduce crop stalks to very small pieces, which are seen as low-grade fuel and livestock feed. In 2012, about eighty percent of families burned such material in their fields.

After each family plows and seeds, young people generally leave to undertake migrant labor and return later in the year to harvest crops. Families with no one at home to tend the growing crops, generally have agreements with other villagers to weed, irrigate, and apply insecticide. In 2012, approximately 500 RMB was paid to a caretaker family for performing these duties.

With greater income, villagers increasingly use electricity to cook, and burn coal in winter for heat, devaluing dung and plant stalks as fuels. In 2011, for example, Rdo rje don grub's family spent one hundred RMB for electricity, 1,000 RMB for coal, and 200 RMB for bottled gas (for cooking).

Since an exchange of manpower is no longer needed, village households harvest individually. Villagers also have more income sources today and no longer rely on crops to sustain their lives.

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<sup>64</sup> After 2007, the number of combine harvesters owned and operated by Han Chinese increased. No Tibetans owning combine harvesters have come to the village to harvest crops since 2007.

Villagers also spend far less time in the village. This is especially noteworthy for women, many of whom, in 2012, had years of experience living outside the village where they had encountered people from a variety of walks of life speaking various languages. This has brought contact with a much wider world than was the case historically.

Education has had a similar impact in broadening locals' worldview. There is no primary school in Rta rgyugs Village, although there has been a primary school with grades one to five in Rka phug Administrative Village since 1991. Local households are required to send their children to school for nine years of compulsory education, although some students are taken from school after six years because their families have determined that they need their labor at home.

Rta rgyugs Village has two graduates of the Rma lho Nationalities Normal School who work as primary school teachers. Both obtained official jobs because the local government arranged jobs for graduates prior to 1998. The village has one college graduate from Mtsho lho Nationalities Junior Teacher's School in Chab cha who currently works at a police station in Gcan tsha County Town. In 2010, one student was seeking an MA degree in Tibetan at Mtsho sngon Normal University, one was pursuing a BA degree in the United States, one was studying for a BA degree at Mtsho sngon Normal University, one associate degree graduate was working at the county police station, one student was attending senior middle school at Gcan tsha Nationalities Number One Middle School, and four students were attending junior middle school at Gcan tsha Nationalities Number One Middle School.

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# GLOSSARY

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'**bras thug** འབྲས་ཐུག། boiled rice mixed with butter, sugar, raisins, and jujubes prepared for rituals with many participants

'**bru khang** འབྲུ་ཁང། granary

'**bu sman** འབྲུ་སྐྱོན། insecticide

'**bum khang** འབྲུ་ཁང། room in which many clay deity statues are stored to prevent diseases and livestock loss, and to beseech wealth

'**Cham** འཆམ། in the context of this book, this term refers to a ritual in which Rnying ma practitioners perform various masked dances to protect the village from evil spirits, beseech harmony, and ensure a good harvest

'**ded ma** འདེད་མ། wood farming tool resembling a rake

'**Do ba** འདོ་བ། (Duoba 多巴) Village

'**dre mo** འདྲེ་མོ། female ghost

'**dul** འདུལ། scripture chanted to subdue ghosts

'**gro ba rigs drug** འགྲོ་བ་རིགས་དྲུག། Six Classes of Sentient Beings

'**Jigs byed** འཇིགས་བྱེད། protector deity and the eponymous tantric text

'**Jigs pa skyabs** འཇིགས་པ་སྐྱབས། person's name

'**Khor ba dbyings sgrol** འཁོར་བ་དབྱིངས་སྐྱོལ། scripture title

'**Phags mo rdo rje** འཕགས་མོ་རྡོ་རྗེ། person's name

'**Phags mo tshe ring** འཕགས་མོ་ཚེ་རིང། person's name

'**Phags ri** འཕགས་རི། person's name

'**phred shing** འཕྲེད་ཤིང། wood whippetree used with mules and *mdzo*

**'ug pa** རླུ་པ། 'owl'; name of a 'Cham mask

**A**

**A khu ston pa** ཨ་ཁུ་སྟོན་པ། trickster's name

**A myes Khams ri** ཨ་མྱེས་ཁམས་རི། Mountain Deity

**A myes Srin po** ཨ་མྱེས་སྲིན་པོ། Mountain Deity

**a ne** ཨ་ནེ། aunt

**B**

**Ba ring** བ་རིང། place name

**Ban drug** བན་ལྷུག། person's name

**bar do** བར་དོ། the state between birth and death

**Bde skyid** བདེ་སྦྱིད། person's name

**Bde skyid mtsho** བདེ་སྦྱིད་མཚོ། person's name

**bdud** བདུད། name of a 'Cham mask

**Bkra b+ha** བཀ་བླ། person's name

**Bkra shis** བཀ་ཤེས། person's name

**Bkra shis don grub** བཀ་ཤེས་དོན་གྲུབ། person's name

**Bla brang** ལྷ་བང། (Xiahe 夏河) place name

**bla ma** ལྷ་མ། Tibetan teacher of the Dharma

**Blo bzang don grub** ལྷོ་བཟང་དོན་གྲུབ། person's name

**Bod bya tshang** བོད་བྱ་ཚང། (Baoxiazang 保下藏) Village

**Brag dkar** བྲག་དཀར། (Xinghai 兴海) County, Qinghai Province

**Brag dmar** བྲག་དམར། name of a 'Cham mask and the name of a local mountain deity

**Brag khang sna kha** བྲག་ཁང་སྐ་ཁ། name of a township and a village

**bsang** བསང། mixture of roasted barley, roasted wheat flour, sugar, and conifer needles burned as a fumigation offering to, particularly, mountain deities



**bsang khang** བསང་ཁང། altar

**bsang rtsi** བསང་རྩི། roasted barley mixed with butter, sugar, and whole apples as offerings

**Bsod nams** བསོད་ནམས། person's name

**bstod glu** བསོད་གླུ། praise songs

**btsan** བཙན། name of a 'Cham mask; character in 'Cham dance; spirit

**bum pa** བུམ་པ། vase, one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols

**Bun khrang** བུན་ཁྲང། person's name

**Byams pa skyid** བུམས་པ་སྦྱིད། person's name

**Bzang mo** བཟང་མོ། person's name

### C

**Chab cha** ཆབ་ཇ། Town

**cun** འུ། village

**Cung smad** ཅུང་སྐད། Village

### D

**Da ru** དཱ་རུ། small drum with two attached strikers

**dadui** དཱ་དུའི། production brigade

**Dam can mgar dmar** དམ་ཅན་མགར་དམར། name of a 'Cham mask and the deity it signifies

**Dam can mgar nag** དམ་ཅན་མགར་ནག། name of a 'Cham mask and the deity it signifies

**Dam can rdo legs pa** དམ་ཅན་རྩོ་ལེགས་པ། name of a 'Cham mask and the deity it signifies

**Dam can stobs ldan dbyings 'gugs** དམ་ཅན་སྟོབས་ལྷན་དབྱིངས་འགྲུགས།  
Tibetan religious book

**Dbang mo** དབང་མོ། person's name

**Dbang mtsho** དབང་མཚོ། person's name

- Dbang phyug** དབང་ཕྱུག། person's name
- Dbang rgyal** དབང་རྒྱལ། person's name
- Dbang rgyal don grub** དབང་རྒྱལ་དོན་གྲུབ། person's name
- Dbang skyid sgrol ma** དབང་སྦྱིད་སྦྱོལ་མ། person's name
- dbu mdzad** དབུ་མཛད། chant initiator
- Dge lugs** དགོ་ལུགས།, Dge lugs pa'i grub mtha' དགོ་ལུགས་པའི་གྲུབ་མཐའ། Sect of Tibetan Buddhism
- Dge lugs pa** དགོ་ལུགས་པ། follower of the Dge lugs Sect
- dge skos** དགོ་སྐོས། local term for *khri pa*
- Dgra 'Cham** དབྱ་འཆམ། literally 'enemy dance', this performance is part of the 'Cham ritual during the seven days of the ritual with no audience. It has an active dance tempo.
- Dgu rong** དགུ་རོང། (Gulang 古浪) place name
- Dkar mo** དཀར་མོ། person's name
- Dkon mchog** དཀོན་མཚོག། person's name
- Dmag zor rgyal mo** དམག་ཟོར་རྒྱལ་མོ། name of a 'Cham mask and the female deity it signifies
- dmangs glu** དམངས་སྐུ། traditional folk songs
- Dmyal ba** དམྱལ་བ། hell beings
- Do rgya** དོ་རྒྱ། Village
- Dol po** དོལ་པོ། an area in western Nepal that borders the Tibet Autonomous Region
- Don grub** དོན་གྲུབ། person's name
- Dor rdo** དོར་རྩོ། local name for Monguor (Tu)
- Dpal ldan** དཔལ་ལྷན། person's name

**Dpal rgyal gong ba** དཔལ་རྒྱལ་གོང་བ། Dpal rgyal gong ba sngags khang  
nges gsang rdo rje theg mchog gling དཔལ་རྒྱལ་གོང་བ་སྐྱེགས་ཁང་རེས་  
གསང་རྗེ་རྗེ་ཐེག་མཆོག་གླིང་། Dpal rgyal gong ba Monastery

**dpon** དཔོན། local term for *sngags pa*

**Dpon rgya** དཔོན་རྒྱ། Village

**dra ma** གྲམ། plant with yellow flowers that is sun-dried and burned  
to heat the *he rdze* in winter

**Drang srong** གྲང་སྲོང་། alternative name of a nine-headed 'Cham mask

**dril bu** གྲིལ་བུ། bell

**dud 'gro** འདུ་འགོ། animals

**dung chen** འདུ་ཆེན། large trumpets used in religious ritual

**dung dkar** འདུ་དཀར། white conch shell used in religious ritual

## E

**Erlang** 二郎 (Ri lang རི་ལང་།) local deity considered to be Chinese,  
worshipped by Rka phug Administrative Village residents

## G

**G.yu sgron mtsho** གཡུ་སྐྱོན་མཚོ། person's name

**Gcan tsha** གཅན་ཚ། (Jianzha 尖扎) County

**Gcan tsha thang** གཅན་ཚ་ཐང་། (Jianzha tan 尖扎滩) Township

**gdan dkar** གདན་དཀར། white carpet

**Gdong sna** གདོང་སྐ། (Kangyang 康扬) Town

**gdugs** གདུགས། parasol, one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols

**Ge sar** གེ་སར། (Gesar 格萨尔) legendary hero

**Gling** གླིང་། Ge sar's legendary kingdom

**glu shags** གླུ་ཤགས། antiphonal debate songs

**gnya' shing** གཉལ་ཤིང་། yoke for *mdzo*

**gor dmar** གོར་དམར། deep-fried bread

**gor mo zhi** གོར་མོ་ཞི། bread made by baking dough in a round metal container in ash

**gos** གོས། silk

**Gram pa** གར་པ། literally 'riverbed', however, in the context of this study, Gram pa refers to a location about four kilometers from Rta rgyugs Village, near Erlang Khang where locals collect drinking water and divert water to irrigate fields

**gro ma** གོ་མ། wild, baby yams

**Gro tshe** གོ་ཚེ། person's name

**gtor ma** གརྟར་མ། dough effigies made from barley flour mixed with water and decorated with butter. *Gtor ma* are often made by *sngags pa* or monks during community and individual family rituals

**gtor rgyag** གརྟར་རྒྱུག། ritual involving burning offerings to expel evil spirits

**gtor rgyag thig** གརྟར་རྒྱུག་ཐིག། ritual performed when a new home is about to be built

**Gu ru** གུ་རུ། person's name

**Guangxi Zhuang** 广西壮 Autonomous Region

**gyang gzhongs** གྱུང་གཞོངས། frame/ mold in which earth is pounded to construct a wall person's name

**gza'** གཟེལ། name of a nine-headed 'Cham mask and understood locally to be in the category of non-human beings

**gzhi bdag** གཞི་བདག། local deities

## H

**Haidong Municipality** 海东市 Qinghai Province

**he rdze** ཉེ་རྗེ།, *tsha thab* ཚ་བཟ། (*kang* 炕) large heatable, raised platform where people sleep, chat, eat, and entertain guests

**Hualong** 化隆 Hui Autonomous County

**Hui** 回 Muslim ethnic group in China

**Huzhu** 互助 Mongghul (Tu) Autonomous County

## J

**Jo khang** རྗེ་ཁང། the most important and sacred temple in Tibet

## K

**Kan Iho** ཀན་ལྗོ། (Gannan 甘南) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province

**keng rus** ཀེང་རུས། skeleton; characters in 'Cham dance

**kha btags** ཁ་བཏགས། strip of silk presented to religious personalities, guests, and friends to show respect

**khal ma** ཁལ་མ། pack animal

**Khams** ཁམས། place name

**Khams ra** ཁམས་ར། (Kanbula 坎布拉) Town

**Khams ri** ཁམས་རི། name of a 'Cham mask; name of the Rta rgyugs Village mountain deity

**khang** ཁང། hall or room

**khem** ཁེམ། winnowing shovel

**khri pa** ཁྲི་པ། abbot; locally understood as *dge skos* responsible for a wide array of activities during 'Cham

**khro bo** ཁྲོ་བ། name of a 'Cham mask; characters in 'Cham; wrathful male deities

**khro mo** ཁྲོ་མ། name of a 'Cham mask; characters in 'Cham; wrathful female deities

**khub** ཁུབ། vocable

**Khyung** ལྷུང། a ritual that is no longer practiced in the village, during which a camel is shot by a well-dressed man with a bow and arrows

**klu** ལྷུ། name of a 'Cham mask; naga; Tibetan folk songs

**Klu mo** ལྷུ་མོ། person's name

**Klu rol** ལྷུ་རོལ། an alternative name, locally, for the Lha rtse ritual

**Kong po** ཀོང་པོ། place name

## L

**lab tse** ལབ་ཙེ། mountain deity dwelling often constructed atop a mountain with tree branches, wood poles resembling arrows, and wind flags where villagers offer a large *bsang* annually

**lag phyi** ལག་ཕྱི། a piece of cloth village women wear on their heads

**lan chu, sngo chu** ལན་ཅུ། སྒོ་ཅུ། alternative names for the second irrigation of fields

**la pan** ལ་པན། hame (one of the two curved wooden or metal pieces of a harness that fits around the neck of a draft animal and to which the traces are attached)

**lcags khem** ལུགས་ཁེམ། shovel

**Ledu** ལེདུ། 乐都 County

**lha** ལྷ། deity

**lha bshos** ལྷ་བཤོས། dough effigy

**Lha grong** ལྷ་གྲོང། Village

**lha ma yin** ལྷ་མ་ཡིན། demigods

**Lha mo** ལྷ་མོ། person's name

**Lha mo re ma de** ལྷ་མོ་རེ་མ་དེ། name of a 'Cham mask; a character in 'Cham

**lha pa** ལྷ་པ། spirit medium

**lha rgyal lo** ལྷ་རྒྱལ་ལོ། 'victory to the gods' such phrases are recited when local villagers offer *bsang* atop mountains

**Lha rtsed** ལྷ་རྩེད། local festival held from the twenty-first to twenty-fifth days of the sixth lunar month, locally known as Klu rol.

**Lha sa** ལྷ་ས། City

**Lha sde** ལྷ་སྡེ། Village

**Lhun grub** ལྷུན་གུབ། person's name

**Lnga pa'i ba bzhi** ལྷ་པའི་བ་བཞི། / **Lnga pa'i tshes bzhi** ལྷ་པའི་ཚེས་བཞི། a festival marked by putting tree branches and wild flowers above and to the sides of the courtyard gate and the doors of rooms inside the courtyard on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month

**Lo sar** ལོ་སར། Tibetan New Year period

**lud** ལུད། manure

**lus lha** ལུས་ལྷ། body deity; residents of Rta rgyugs Village believe every person is protected by a body deity

## M

**Ma Bufang** མ་བུའཕུའཕ། person's name

**ma Ni** མ་ཉི། hall, room for villagers to chant scriptures and turn scripture wheels

**ma sru** མ་སྲུ། host village's women

**Mar khu thang** མར་ཁུ་ཐང། (Maketang མཀའཏུང་) Town

**mchod** མཚོད། a soup containing radish and meat. Potatoes, carrots, and cabbage might be added. *Mchod* is prepared for rituals involving many people such as funerals and 'Cham.

**Mchod 'du** མཚོད་འདུ། *sngags pa* and villagers chant and have abundant food during this ritual

**mchod khang** མཚོན་ཁང་། family shrine where deity images hang on the walls and purified water is offered every morning by the family head

**mda' dpon** མདའ་དཔོན། 'commander of the archers', who holds the bow and initiates the archery competition

**mda' gzbug** མདའ་གཞུག། 'the last archer', who shoots the final two arrows during an archery competition

**mda' ston** མདའ་སྟོན། archery party

**mdzo** མཚོ། cross between a female yak and a bull

**Mgo log** མགོ་ལོག། (Guoluo 果洛) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

**mgur** མགུར། religious songs collectively sung by villagers with a variety of rhythms in mourning after a death in a home

**mi** མི། person

**ming shing** མིང་ཤིང། pieces of wood on which the names of dead people are written during a ritual to expel ghosts

**Minhe** མི་དབོན། Hui and Mangghuer (Tu) Autonomous County

**Mkhar gong ma** མཁར་གོང་མ། Village

**Mkhar zhol ma** མཁར་ཞོལ་མ། Village

**Mo zi** མོ་ཟི། Village

**Mthun 'Cham** མཐུན་མཚམ། 'harmonious dance' is part of the 'Cham ritual done in practice prior to dancers performing in the central courtyard on the seventeenth day of the first lunar month.

**mtshams khang** མཚོ་མས་ཁང་། rooms for *sngags pa* in a monastery; retreat room

**Mtsho lho** མཚོ་ལྷོ། Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

**Mtsho mo** མཚོ་མོ། person's name



**Mtsho sngon** མཚོ་སྔོན། (Qinghai 青海) Province

**mu** 亩 land measure equal to 0.067 hectares

**N**

**N+ri** རྩི tantric syllable written on a piece of wood when expelling evil spirits

**Nang khog** རང་ཁོག། (Nengke 能科) Township

**nas ma** རས་མ། fresh grain

**Ningxia Hui** རིང་ཕྱི་མི། Autonomous Region

**Nor bu** རོར་བུ། person's name

**nor bu** རོར་བུ། treasure

**Nor bu dgra 'dul** རོར་བུ་དག་འདུལ། person's name

**Nor bu dga' 'khyil** རོར་བུ་དག་འབྱེལ། Buddhist symbol of union of opposing forces; 'Cham dance on this theme

**nya bo** རྣ་བོ། a dough effigy made from barley flour with a huge stomach and tiny head that is dyed red and resembles a devil.

It is chopped into pieces during 'Cham.

**nyal thul phyi ma** རྣ་ལུལ་ཕྱི་མ། cloth for quilt covers offered to 'Cham dancers during 'Cham rituals

**Nyi ma** རྣི་མ། person's name

**O**

**o rdung** ཨོ་རུང། mallets used to pulverize clods in fields

**oM AHhUM** ཨོ་ཨཱ་ཧཱུྃ། mantra

**oM ma Ni pad+me hUM** ཨོ་མ་ཐི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ། mantra

**P**

**Pa sangs** པ་སངས། person's name

**Pad ma mtsho** པད་མ་མཚོ། person's name

**Pad ma tshe brtan** པད་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན། person's name

**PaN chen** པན་ཆེན། Bla ma  
**Phag rgya** ཕག་རྒྱ། person's name  
**pho rog** ཕོ་རོག། crow, character in 'Cham dance  
**phub ma** ཕུབ་མ། wheat husks  
**Phyug mo** ཕུག་མོ། person's name  
**Po ta la** ཕོ་ཏ་ལ། Potala Palace

**R**

**Rab brtan** རབ་བརྟན། person's name  
**ral pa** རལ་པ། natural or false long hair worn by Rnying ma practitioners  
**Rdo bha bkra shis** རྡོ་བླ་བཀ་ཤེས། person's name  
**Rdo kho** རྡོ་ཁོ། person's name  
**rdo li** རྡོ་ལི། stone roller; a farming tool  
**Rdo mtsho** རྡོ་མཚོ། person's name  
**Rdo rje** རྡོ་རྗེ། person's name  
**rdo rje** རྡོ་རྗེ། vajra, religious implement  
**Rdo rje don grub** རྡོ་རྗེ་དོན་གུབ། person's name  
**rdul chu** རུལ་ཚུ། first irrigation of farm land  
**Rdzong nang** རྫོང་ནང། monastery name  
**Rdzong nang zhabs drung dge 'dun bstan pa rgya mtsho** རྫོང་ནང་ཞབས་རྒྱུ་འདུན་བཟུན་པ་རྒྱ་མཚོ། important religious person  
**Reb gong** རེབ་གོང། (Tongren 同仁), location in Mtsho sngon Province  
**Rgya nag** རྒྱ་ནག། China  
**Rgyal mtshan** རྒྱལ་མཚན། person's name  
**rgyal mtshan** རྒྱལ་མཚན། victory banner, one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols  
**Rin chen** རིན་ཆེན། person's name

**Rin chen rdo rje** རིན་ཆེན་རོ་རྗེ། person's name

**Rka phug** ཀ་ཕུག (Gabu 尕布) place name

**Rka phug gram pa** ཀ་ཕུག་གྲམ་པ། a tributary of the Rma chu 'Yellow River'

**Rka phug pandita (paN+Ti ta)** ཀ་ཕུག་པནྟི་ཏ། important religious person

**Rka phug sgom chung** ཀ་ཕུག་སློམ་ཚུང། person's name

**rkyal ba** རྒྱལ་བ། skin bag, goat-skin bag

**rlung ras** རླུང་རས། 'wind flag' used in rituals to change the direction of the wind

**rlung rta** རླུང་རྟ། 'wind horse'; small squares of paper printed with deities and thrown into the air to beseech good luck

**Rma chu** མ་ཚུ། Yellow River

**Rma lho** མ་ལྷོ། (Huangnan 黄南) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; (Henan 河南) Mongolian Autonomous County

**Rma lho Nationalities Normal School**, Rma lho mi rigs dge thon slob grwa མ་ལྷོ་མི་རིགས་དགེ་སློབ་སློབ་གླུ། (Huangnan minzu shifan xueyuan 黄南民族师范学院)

**RMB** Renminbi 人民币

**rnam shes** རྣམ་ཤེས། soul, consciousness

**rnga** རྟ། drums

**Rnying ma** རྟིང་མ། a Tibetan Buddhist sect

**Rta mgrin** རྟ་མགྲིན། person's name; name of a religious text

**Rta rgyugs** རྟ་རྒྱུགས། (Dajiu tan 达久/大九滩) Village

**Rta thang** རྟ་ཐང། (Datong 大同) Hui and Tu Autonomous County

**rtsam pa** རྩམ་པ། roasted barley flour; a mixture of roasted barley flour, butter, dried cheese, and sugar and other ingredients added as desired that is mixed with hot tea

**Rtse khog** རྩེ་ཁོག (Zeku 泽库) County

**rtсед rigs** རྩེད་རིགས། archery activity in which three or more people sing and dance simultaneously

**rtsis pa** རྩིས་པ། astrologer

**Ru mtsher** རུ་མཚེན། Village

## S

**sa bdag** ས་བདག། land spirit

**Salar** (Sala 撒拉) Muslim ethnic group in China

**Sandui** 三队 Number Three Production Brigade

**Sangs rgyas** སངས་རྒྱས། person's name

**sbug chal** སུག་ཇལ། cymbals used in rituals

**Se rgya** སེ་རྒྱ། (Saijia 赛加) Village

**Se rtsa** སེ་རྩ། Village

**Se rtsa'i sngags khang** སེ་རྩ་འི་སྐྱེས་ཁང། the monastery of Se rtsa Village

**Sgrol ma** སྐྱོལ་མ། person's name; Tara. The local laity consider it the eponymous prayer. The short name for this brief prayer text is *Praise of Tara*, which is recited during the week of mourning after a death.

**Sha bo** ཤ་བོ། person's name

**Sha bo rdo rje** ཤ་བོ་རྡོ་རྗེ། person's name

**sha nye** ཤ་ཉེ། archer guests

**Sha rdo** ཤ་རྡོ། person's name

**shal** ཤལ། harrow (farming tool)

**shal rgyag pa** ་ཤལ་རྒྱལ་པ། harrowing

**Shang Lijia** ཤ་ལ་ལི་ཇི་ཇི་ Administrative Village

**shog** ་ཤོག་ bound sheaves

**shub** ་ཤུབ་ vocable

**shwa** ་ཤྱ་ 'stag', name of a 'Cham mask and character

**Skal bzang** ་སྐལ་བཟང་། person's name

**skar ma** ་སྐར་མ། the date when a corpse is put in the river or offered to birds in a sky burial

**ske tho** ་སྐེ་ཐོ། plow collar stuffed with cotton or cloth

**skugs ya** ་སྐུག་སྐལ་ཡ། opponent archers

**skya 'debs** ་སྐུ་འདེབས། method of cultivation in which fields are watered after crops are a few centimeters tall

**skya 'then** ་སྐུ་འཐེན། archery contest focused on competition that features little in the way of singing, drinking, feasting, and other celebratory activities

**Skya rgya** ་སྐུ་རྒྱ། (Jiajia 贾加) Township

**sle bo** ་སྐླེ་བོ། handmade wood back basket

**Sman 'gang** ་སྐམ་ཀང་། Village

**sna gcu** ་སྐྱ་གཅུ། cow and *mdzo* nose ring

**Snang ra** ་སྐྱང་ར། (Angla 昂拉) Township

**sngags pa** ་སྐྱག་སྐལ་། tantric practitioner; Rnying ma practitioner well-known for the efficacy of their chanting

**sngags srung** ་སྐྱག་སྐྱུང་། name of a 'Cham mask

**Sngo rgya** ་སྐྱོ་རྒྱ། Village/ Reservoir (Lijia xia 李家峡)

**Sngo sar** ་སྐྱོ་སར། Village

**sog sog** ་སོག་སོག་ fried bread

**Srin po** སྲིན་པོ། name of a 'Cham mask and character, and the name of a local mountain deity

**Steng so** སྲེང་སོ། (Dangshun 当顺) Township

**ston bshad** སྲོན་བཤད། archery activity in which an oration is given praising tea, liquor, bread, meat, bows, and arrows

## T

**Thang mtsher** ཐང་མཚོ་རྒྱ། (Tangcai 唐才) Village

**the'u rang** ཐེ་འུ་རང། cat-like spirit

**the'u rang mar skyel** ཐེ་འུ་རང་མར་སྐྱེལ། cat-like spirit who brings misfortune and disaster

**the'u rang yar skyel** ཐེ་འུ་རང་ཡར་སྐྱེལ། cat-like spirit who brings fortune and luck to families who worship it

**thong gshol** ཐོང་གཤོ། a plow

**Three Jewels** Dkon mchog gsum དཀོན་མཆོག་གསུམ། the Buddha, the Buddha's teachings, and the community of Buddhist monks

**Thong skar** ཐོང་སྐར། auspicious day to begin field cultivation

**Tsang tsa** ཐང་ཙ། (Zangzha 藏扎) Village

**tsha gsur** ཐཤ་གསུར། small *rtsam pa* offering for lingering spirits that follows *bsang* offerings made in the courtyard

**tsha ru** ཐཤ་རུ། lambskin robe

**Tshe b+ha** ཐཤེ་བ། person's name

**Tshe b+ho** ཐཤེ་འོ། person's name

**Tshe brtan** ཐཤེ་བརྟན། person's name

**Tshe dbang** ཐཤེ་དབང། person's name

**Tshe lo** ཐཤེ་ལོ། person's name

**Tshe ring** ཐཤེ་རིང། person's name

**tsheb** ཚེབ། pitchfork made of wood with two, three, or four prongs  
that is used when separating grain from straw

**tsher sil** ཚེར་སིལ། a wild fruit

**Tsho drug** ཚོ་རྟུག། (Cuozhou 措周) Township

**tsho dpon** ཚོ་དཔོན། chieftain, tribal leader

**tshod ma** ཚོད་མ། steamed stuffed dumplings

**Tshogs chen 'du khang** ཚོགས་ཚེན་འདུ་ཁང། major assembly hall

**Tshon tsi** ཚོན་ཚི། person's name

**tsi 'bud mkhan** ཚི་འབྲུད་མཁན། trumpeter in religious ritual

**Tsong kha pa** ཚོང་ཁ་པ། founder of the Dge lugs Sect of Tibetan  
Buddhism

**Tu** ཏུ ethnic group in China living primarily in Qinghai and Gansu  
provinces

**tuoguji** ཏུ་གུ་ཇི། farming machine used to separate straw from grain

## U

**u dum wa rA** ཡུ་དུམ་ལ་ར། flower name

## X

**Xia Lijia** ས་ལེ་ཇི། Village

**xiang** སྲ། township

**Xibu da kai fa** སྤུ་དཀའ་ཕུ་ཁོ་ལོ། Opening Up the West policy

**Xinjiang** སོ་ཇོང་ཁུངས་རྒྱུ་རྩུག་རྫོང་། Uygur Autonomous Region

**xingzheng cun** སྲི་ཇེ་ཇེ་འཁྲུག་། administrative village

## Y

**ya mchu bar ma'i ngag lam** ཡ་མཚུ་བར་མའི་ངག་ལམ། philtum

**yar mkhar/ Yar mkhar** ཡར་མཁར། 'upper courtyard wall'/ 'upper  
fortress'; village name

**yi dwags** ཡི་དྲགས། hungry ghosts

**Ye shes** ཡེ་ཤེས། person's name

**yug po** ཡུག་པོ། weed resembling wheat

**Yul lha** ཡུལ་ལྷ། 'local deity'; a specific deity worshipped by Rka phug villagers

**Yul shul** ཡུལ་ཤུལ། (Yushu 玉树) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

**yur ma** ཡུར་མ། field weeding

## Z

**zangs 'bud** ཟངས་འབུད། bullet casing

**zangs gor** ཟངས་གོར། baked bread

**zhen** འབྲོག་ཚོ། town

**zhwa gon** ཞུ་གོང། local term for a person who violated the law or opposed the local government resulting in imprisonment, being wanted by the authorities, public humiliation and punishment, and so on

**zhwa nag** ཞུ་ནག། name of a 'Cham mask; a collective name for twelve 'Cham dancers; and the name of a particular performance involving twelve dancers who wear black hats that feature a fringe about seven centimeters long, covering the dancers' eyes. The dancers tie a towel around their heads to cover their nose and lower face.

**Zi ling** ཟི་ལིང། (Xining 西宁) City, capital of Mtsho sngon Province

**ziran cun** འོ་རྒྱུ་འབྲོག། natural village

**Zla ba** ཟླ་པ། person's name



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