REVIEW: THE WAY OF KHAMS-PA BY CHIANGYONG TSERING

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The author, Chiangyong Tsering ('Jam dbyangs tshe ring, Jiangyangcairang), was born in Batang, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, PR China in 1970. A contemporary Tibetan novelist and poet, he studied in the Minority Class of the Lu Xun Literary Institute in Beijing and is currently the director of the Qinghai Writers' Association. His novels include The Book of Khams-pa, Yak’s Strolling, The Scattering of Ash, With a Stone in Arms, and The Way of Khams-pa. The Way of Khams-pa was published in the periodical Selected Novels in 2010 and was translated into English by Burton and Jiang (2015). Reflecting the life experiences of contemporary Tibetans, his works were awarded the 4th, 5th, and 6th Qinghai Literature and Art Government Award, the First Qinghai Lake

† These titles are from the English version.
In the novel's preface, Chiangyong Tsering writes:

When I was a child, I was the son of my father and mother. When I grew up, I found myself the son of the blue sky, the son of the river, and the son of the mountains. Many times, when I raise my head under the Plateau sky, I realize that the seeds of fate have sprouted in my body. As for the writing of The Way of Khams-pa, it should be regarded as the cause of this fate (Selected Novels, 2010:120).¹

The novel describes the life of an agro-pastoral Khams-pa village that is experiencing dramatic socioeconomic changes. The work is likely set after the Cultural Revolution, as indicated by the freedom of religious belief. Village changes echo economic developments following China's opening up beginning in the late 1970s. The work thus portrays a Khams-pa Tibetan village that goes through critical social changes, e.g., the development of infrastructure and the increasing availability of modern vehicles, which bring tremendous change to people's lives.

The novel begins with the following scene: Grandpa has lost his thockcha (thog lcags),² an amulet obtained from some mysterious period. Grandpa searches everywhere in the house, but the thockcha is nowhere to be found. In the end, he accepts the legend that thockcha might vanish into the ground. Consumed by great sorrow and regret, Grandpa draws his last breath at the age of seventy-three. That same night, a new life, Worma, is born.

Worma illustrates his family life in his village as he grows up. The second child of his family, Worma lives with his father, mother, and elder brother. His father and brother drive pack yaks loaded with goods to Baqing County Town to sell and exchange. They are also

¹ My translation.
² According to Bellezza, thockcha refers to "Tibetan talismans made of bronze and meteoric metals dating as far back as the Bronze Age" (https://bit.ly/2GkwX6i, accessed 11 July 2019).
messengers. The journey from the village to the county town takes a couple of days, and they often camp out in the open. Uncertainty and danger, such as bears attacking their yaks, are their companions.

The description of Grandpa, the loss of his thockcha, and his death signify a turning point. Although the thockcha, is not explicitly described, the writer indicates its special meaning to Grandpa: "This thockcha once opened its eyes and quivered on the bosom of Grandpa, who said that it had been a witness to his past seventy-three years and would remain as long as he lived" (Burton and Jiang, 2015:7). After the thockcha vanished, Grandpa never woke up. The family did not reveal the cause of Grandpa's death because the loss of the thockcha would be regarded negatively. As mentioned earlier, the novel opens with this scene. The writer does not return to the thockcha until the very end of the story.

The village and Baqing County Town are two different regions employed by the writer to show the connection and contrast between tradition and modernity. The village symbolizes the traditional while the county town denotes the modern. The village is home to mountains and mountain deities, barley fields that many generations have worked in and passed on farming skills, and elders who guard the area and recount legends of Khams-pa. On the contrary, the county town is an exciting place with new objects and information. Stronger connections between the two areas are created because of such developments as roads, electricity, and so on.

Grandma Namkha is an old widow who lives alone. She is a mysterious figure; nobody knows much about her past. She lives in the foothills of the sacred Khawa Mountain, which she guards. Spiritual peace emanates from the mountain deity, which villagers prostrate to from time to time to feel reassured.

Women without men or families find spiritual support and comfort from the mountain and the mountain deity. Noyong Kardo, another village widow, later joins Grandma Namkha to guard the mountain deity. Noyong Kardo had lived in the village until her only daughter left with a man. Grandma Namkha tells her that the place will

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1 I edited the English.
depend on her after she passes away. Noyong Kardo thus finds her ultimate purpose in guarding the sacred Khawa Mountain.

Worma looks up to his smart, capable brother, Nyima, who is the expected future village leader. This strong male figure displays traditional Khams-pa characteristics of masculinity, a sense of responsibility, a strong sense of determination, and courage. Nyima follows the older generations in many ways, but he is also curious about the outside world. He challenges himself by conquering dangers in nature. He goes out at night, looking for a leopard threatening the village's safety and is eventually able to shoot it. Nyima killed the leopard to eliminate danger, but also to earn the title "Khams-pa."

He approaches problems in different ways. For instance, when most people rely on religious figures and rituals during a severe drought, Nyima and some other young men attempt to bring water from a nearby snow mountain. Also, he enjoys bringing news and stories each time he returns from the county town. Furthermore, Nyima is the first villager to move out and live in the county town.

Director Drolma is an unusual character. It is often men who are better educated and more powerful. In this novel, however, it is Drolma, a woman who is the Director of the United Front Work Department of Baqing County, and who later becomes the governor of Baqing County. Director Drolma was originally married to a man in a higher position but eventually divorced him because he had an affair and cared little about her. Later, Director Drolma falls in love with Nyima, and they decide to marry.

The road construction is finally completed, and Director Drolma is promoted to be the governor of Baqing County. She comes to the village in a green jeep to meet Nyima's family, which leads some to refer to the road as "the Road of Love." After spending a night at Nyima's home, Drolma and Nyima leave for the county town. As he leaves, Nyima takes the leopard skin on the wall and the family's treasured heirloom knife under his pillow. These two objects have special meaning to Nyima as a Khams-pa. Although Nyima left the village, the place that most people thought he would take charge of, nothing much changes. Nyima becomes a father and works as the
wiring team chief at the power plant in Baqing. Worma realizes his brother did not change; only his lifestyle changed.

Worma grows up, and it is time for him to marry. Worma's wedding is important for the family, who decide to renovate their old house before proposing marriage. The old house is demolished with help from village friends and relatives. When rebuilding, Worma finds the thokcha in the dust by happenstance, which brings joy, excitement, and hope. The story ends with Worma’s mother saying:

'Son, it is your grandpa. He asked it to return to you!' Mother's voice sounded like a flag flapping in the wind. A long sigh escaped from her throat. I came close to her, and Mother placed the red string around my neck and covered her eyes with her hands. Nobody knew if she was in tears... Everybody saw the thokcha, the heavenly metal brought to earth by a flash of lightning, quivering on my chest, where it opened its eye that had long been covered by darkness (Burton and Jiang 2015, 268).\(^1\)

The thokcha’s reappearance signifies the continuation of traditional life. The novel depiction of the intersection of tradition and modernity suggests that despite modernity changing the traditional world in this Khams-pa village, key traditional values and elements remain.

The English version of the novel follows the original work.

The novel is successful in showing the traditional aspects of Tibetan life as well as changes to that life brought by modern developments. Nevertheless, the linear storyline avoids conflict and complex dynamics that modern alterations bring to local traditional worlds. Those interested in traditional Tibetan life and contemporary changes at the grassroots level will find the novel of value.

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\(^1\) I edited the English.
REFERENCES


CHINESE TERMS

Baqing 巴青
Batang 巴塘
Chiangyong Tsering, Jiangyang Cairang 江洋才让
Drolma, Zhuoma 卓玛
Khams-pa, Kangba 康巴
Khawa, Kawa 卡瓦
Lu Xun 鲁迅
Namkha, Nanka 南卡
Noyong Kardo, Nuoyong kanzhuo 诺雍堪卓
Nyima, Nima 尼玛
Qinghai 青海
thockcha, tajia 铜迦
Worma, Woma 干玛
Yushu 玉树

TIBETAN TERMS

'jam dbyangs tshe ring འཇམདབོངས་ཚེ་རིང་།
khams pa མཁམས་པ།
thog lcags གཞི་སྦྱང་།