

REVIEW: *PHYUR BA*

Reviewed by 'Brug mo skyid འབྲུག་མོ་སྐལ། (Zhoumaoji 周毛吉,  
Qinghai Normal University 青海师范大学)



Mkha' mo rgyal མཁའ་མོ་རྒྱལ། 2015. *Phyur ba ཕུར་བ། [Dried Cheese]*. Khriin tu'u མི་ཁྲོན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱུང་ཁང། [Sichuan Nationalities Press]. 269 pp. ISBN 978-7-5409-5455-0 (paperback 35RMB)

Mkha' mo rgyal was born in Dgon gong ma Village, 'Ba' (Tongde) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. While attending the Tibetan Studies College of Mtsho sngon Nationalities University she began writing. In addition to editing and translating teaching materials for primary and secondary schools, she has also published short stories and poetry (Mkha' mo rgyal, 2015).

*Phyur ba* is the first Tibetan women's novel (Robin 2016:86) and was recognized as an Outstanding Work by the Qinghai Writers Guild in 2014 (Duojiecairang and Limaoyou 2014).<sup>1</sup> The name, which translates as 'dried cheese' is a food eaten daily by many Tibetans. Made from fermented milk without cream, it is dried in the sun by women in pastoral areas. Both sweet and sour, *phyur ba* brings to mind the happiness and sadness, ups and downs, laughter and tears that life brings. It also has symbolic connotations, representing the diligence of women. The novel's title, therefore, can be understood as reflecting the emotions of the protagonist, Mdzes se. This is emphasized at the end of the novel:

As Mdzes se loosened the thread tying the bag woven from yak hair in her lap, lumps of white *phyur ba* made by Sgron dkar appeared. She put a lump into her mouth and chewed audibly. The sweet and sour that she

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://goo.gl/IeTCog>, accessed 13 September 2016.

had been so familiar with in childhood sank deep into her heart. A tear trickled from her cheek to her neck (269).

*Phyur ba* is set in early autumn in Brag dkar thang, a remote pastoral community. Mdzes se returns from Paris and visits Brag dkar thang and the small temple there. This is important to her because the temple appears in a picture that she had received many years earlier from Pad ma rdo rje, her former boyfriend, when she was leaving for Shanghai to undertake further studies in painting.

Mdzes se and Pad ma rdo rje fell in love when they were in college. He taught her some basics in painting and urged her to take painting classes. He also helped her get the opportunity to further her study of painting in Shanghai. The influence from Pad ma rdo rje to Mdzes se proves profound. His encouragement and support in college largely explains her interest in painting and the international fame she has gained as an artist. Their love took root in their college days and has never withered, despite Pad ma rdo rje marrying Sgron dkar, the wife of a neighbor serving a life term in prison, and Mdzes se moving to Paris with her mother to develop her career as a painter.

Mdzes se stays with Pad ma rdo rje's family while in the local community. From Uncle Thar lo, Pad ma rdo rje's father, Mdzes se learns just how much Pad ma rdo rje loves her. The small temple in the picture was dedicated to an outstanding *bla ma* who greatly influenced Pad ma rdo rje's disposition and his enthusiasm for painting. This temple is passionately valued and appreciated by the family. Pad ma rdo rje gave her the picture, indicating her irreplaceable place in his heart.

Mdzes se also comes to understand that Pad ma rdo rje took Sgron dkar as his wife due to Uncle Thar lo's arrangement and to protect his family's reputation from Sgron dkar's brothers, who accused Pad ma rdo rje of flirting with Sgron dkar. Mdzes se interacts with Sgron dkar during her stay in the home, and is touched by her gentle, caring, and diligent character.

Throughout the entire story, Pad ma rdo rje is invisible. He is in Australia studying livestock management. We learn about Pad ma

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through Mdzes se's flashbacks, his father's narrations, and Pad ma's phone calls. In a sense, Mdzes se's journey to meet Pad ma rdo rje is unsuccessful. Yet, it is not without reward as she goes on pilgrimage with his family to Lha sa, completing a sacred mission that every Tibetan nomad hopes to realize in their lifetime. While there, she prays for Pad ma rdo rje and his family in front of the Jo bo, a large image in the Jo khang Temple in the center of Lha sa. This reflects the core theme of the story - love that endures in the hearts of many Tibetan women.

This deep love is evident in the lives of several female characters in the novel who have chosen to keep this powerful emotion in their hearts and memories rather than allowing it to harm their current lives and disrupt the lives of others. Tshe ring lha mo and Lha skyid, for example, have their own secret loves. Mdzes se chooses to remain unmarried, whereas Tshe ring lha mo brings up her child from a failed marriage as a single mother, and Lha skyid endures coldness from her husband, Tshe ring dbang rgyal. This behavior of hiding a secret love deep in their hearts is two-sided, concealing their true feelings and thoughts and allowing them to tolerate others. This is a major message that Mkha' mo rgyal aims to send through this story. The fictional female characters in this story typify a great number of Tibetan women in Mkha' mo rgyal's experience:

Many Tibetan women share a common value that it is improper to show and publicize their love. Instead, they keep it hidden in their hearts all their life. I have realized this since childhood through observing my sister. I want to show this kind of love from an artist's perspective to honor this great love Tibetan women have and to let the world know about it.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, such love is not exclusive to women nor is it only between men and women. Men can also feel such love, which can embrace the love of parents for children, children for parents, and the love of the Tibetan people for nature and for their traditional culture.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://goo.gl/aW1Fbg>, accessed 13 September 2016.

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This story also reflects the realities of many pastoral communities in Mtsho lho Prefecture. Numerous similarities can be seen in the story's depiction of shifts in the cultural values of the people, as well as social changes in the structures of production and reproduction in the community. Such changes in the structure of production are obvious in the resettlement of nomads in farming areas, the assignment of fields for agricultural cultivation, and the opening of small-scale businesses such as grocery stores or tailor shops. These changes are in tandem with a shift from extended to nuclear families in many communities both in herding and farming areas. Thus Mkha' mo rgyal commented in her interview:

No doubt that this novel is fiction as that is what novels are, but it is set in a particular place amid contemporary social situations at a particular time. It could be any ordinary Tibetan place with similar social circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

The resettlement of herders into towns brings unexpected changes. For example, Aunt Bde skyid's daughter, a resident of 'Brog gsar 'New Nomad Village', commits suicide after having little to do at home and becoming involved in a problematic courtship.

Another noticeable issue in the story is the county- and town-level boarding schools for nine-year compulsory education. Uncle Thar lo's grandson must leave his family and is allowed to see his parents only once a week. This sets his parents at odds with one another as the mother tries to keep the crying boy at home while his father is preparing to take him to school. His mother worries that her son will not be well cared for at school.

The establishment of the joint-stock cooperative system in agricultural and pastoral areas is also a major issue in Brag dkar thang. The community leader, Tshe grub, encourages the villagers to participate. This puzzles Uncle Thar lo and others, who recall the poverty and starvation that resulted from the cooperative systems in the 1960s to the early 1980s.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://goo.gl/aW1Fbg>, accessed 13 September 2016.

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Tshe ring lha mo sends her son to a school in Zi ling (Xining) where everything is taught in the Chinese language in the hope that he will receive a better education. Uncle Thar lo then worries the boy will forget traditional Tibetan customs, language, and values. Other challenges dealt with in the novel include the destructive practice of collecting caterpillar fungus which causes desertification and the grassland fencing that alters the breeding of yaks and sheep. Fences reduce opportunities for the females to find stronger males to mate with, thus adversely affecting livestock quality.

Another challenge addressed is the use of Chinese language in public sectors involving the police and in court, creating communication barriers for Tibetan nomads and farmers. These issues appear throughout the story and surely resonate with readers living in similar areas. They also highlight issues for readers who might be unfamiliar with contemporary social and cultural challenges faced by many rural Tibetans.

The novel's colloquial A mdo Tibetan dialect includes vivid descriptions and the use of proverbs in poetic form. Reflecting genuine life problems and an artistic imagination, this narrative reveals challenges faced by rural Tibetan from the point of view of a young Tibetan woman who has experienced both Tibetan and Western cultures. The tension felt by many Tibetans between trusting and retaining tradition in the face of rapid social change results in hesitation and psychological, spiritual, and practical confusion. The author suggests treasuring traditional values that see compassion as an important value, and highlights the benefits of maintaining a balanced ecosystem in a society that emphasizes economic growth.

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## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'ba' འབའ།  
 'brog gsar འབྲོག་གསར།  
 bde skyid བདེ་སྦྱིང།  
 brag dkar thang བྲག་དྲཀར་ཐང་།  
 dgon gong ma དགོན་གོང་མ།  
 Hainan 海南  
 jo bo ཇོ་བོ།  
 jo khang ཇོ་ཁང་།  
 khrin tu'u ཁིན་ཏུ་འུ།  
 lha sa ལྷ་ས།  
 lha skyid ལྷ་སྦྱིང།  
 mdzes se མངོས་ས།  
 mkha' mo rgyal མཁའ་མོ་རྒྱལ།  
 mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།  
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྟོན།  
 pad ma rdo rje པད་མ་རོ་རྗེ།  
 phyur ba ཕུར་བ།  
 Qinghai 青海  
 sgron dkar སྟོན་དྲཀར།  
 Shanghai 上海  
 Tongde 同德  
 tshe grub ཚེ་གུབ།  
 tshe ring lha mo ཚེ་རིང་ལྷ་མོ།  
 tshe ring dbang rgyal ཚེ་རིང་དབང་རྒྱལ།  
 Xining 西宁  
 zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།