

LITTLE BOY WITH A WALKING STICK: WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱལ་བཀྲ་ཤིས། (Duke University)

It is our responsibility to share information about what is happening in our world and try to improve life for, particularly, illiterate rural residents. The narrative that follows is just one amid countless sad stories representing life in rural areas. This tragedy happened because of irresponsible teachers, poor school management, and poor medical care.

I know Tshe ring¹ well. He told me this story during the Tibetan New Year in 2016 when I visited his family in the county town where he and his wife took turns looking after their children who attended primary school.

Locals also often lack language skills that would enable them to communicate with non-Tibetan speaking doctors in the city and thus are reluctant to attempt visiting large hospitals even when they realize that they are very ill.

One of many recent "developments" in rural A mdo is the emergence of new, modern school classrooms, teachers' offices, canteens, living quarters, and so on that are generally constructed in township and county towns. A distance, both physical and emotional, is thus created between children who are required to attend school, and their parents and other care-giving relatives, who remain at home. Tshe ring don 'grub's tragic story is an example of what can happen in this "improved" system of basic education.

Countless safety rules in schools are enforced for the most part to ensure school security, stability and a "harmonious" society, and staff promotion. Such rules often have little to do with genuine concern for the health and safety of individual students. It is unusual to find a teacher who looks after each individual student closely in their class.

Sangs rgyas bkra shis. 2017. Little Boy With a Walking Stick: Who is Responsible? *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 44:352-366.

¹ All names have been changed.

There are several reasons for this. Class sizes are usually large and the teacher-student ratio is too high for teachers to come to understand each student's individual situation.

Often, as in the case of Tshe ring don 'grub's school, teachers (who are Tibetan), are "outsiders" who leave the school and return to their own homes whenever possible. The future they hope for is to be reassigned to another "better" school and leave the area. The quality of education would improve if responsible, qualified teachers who enjoy teaching in rural Tibetan areas were hired, instead of those who only do it to earn money and care little about the students' welfare. Consequently, tragedies like that of Tshe ring don 'grub are inevitable.

Poor medical care in rural Tibetan areas is a critical problem locals face in daily life. Locals have great faith in medical practitioners, but these "doctors" are often poorly trained and lack basic medical knowledge. Some have never studied medicine at all and simply give intravenous injections (IVs) to all those who come for treatment because it is a way of earning an income, as well as meeting the expectation of patients who equate "treatment" with receiving IVs.

Lack of basic health and hygiene knowledge is another pressing issue, especially in areas where religious and traditional medical treatment continue to play an important role. Limited household income, limited knowledge of the Chinese language, little understanding of how to register at a hospital or clinic, and a poor understanding of how to take modern medicine. Choices are limited given such conditions, which explains why religious and traditional treatments are often the only affordable and culturally accessible choices.

General illiteracy (in any language), lack of knowledge of the Chinese language and legal responsibilities related to the consequences of what a student experiences at school, and limited communication between local and non-local Tibetans leads to more delay and inaction as Tshe ring don 'grub's experience so vividly demonstrates.

Resolutions often begin to form when a situation starts to attract the attention of the legal system, police officers, and/or

important local officials. Unfortunately, when action does begin to take place, it often produces results that are delayed and thus the victim experiences grave consequences.

There are many young local dropouts who are chronically underemployed. If the brightest and most motivated of these young people were placed in a medical training program they might then choose to return to their home community and offer medical services. For example, a monk from a neighboring village attended a private Tibetan medical school for three years in a rural, herding area. He now has his own clinic in his local community. He told me that that his clinic is visited by a number of locals on a daily basis.

Finally, basic empowering approaches to overcome the issues mentioned above might include implementing basic legal and medical awareness training programs in local communities and building accessible platforms/networks that provide legal and medical consulting services. Though somewhat limited, the Internet increasingly plays a critical role in disseminating information on issues such as the case of Tshe ring don 'grub. An example of this is WeChat, a Chinese social networking cellphone application that enables users to post pictures, text (in the Tibetan language as well as other languages), videos, and audio messages. Such tools could then be deployed to raise awareness of the possibility for legal processes related to prosecution, medical treatment, hospital admittance, and so on.

...

It was the fifth day of the Eleventh Lunar Month in 2014. My family was busy preparing for my niece's wedding. Some relatives and friends were coming to help my family make fried bread, which is a major task for weddings because many guests attend. We need to prepare a lot of bread as a main food item. We can't fry bread without many people.

I got up earlier than usual because I had to go pick up my eight-year-old twins at the local primary school, which is four kilometers from my home. Then I pulled on my tattered Tibetan robe and went to check to see if any ewes had given birth.

The sun was beginning to appear across the valleys and, as the

wind blew, the dry bushes on the wall of the sheep shed whistled. Lha mo and my sister, Bde skyid, were putting chunks of frozen yak dung into *sle bo* 'baskets woven from shrubs'. The yaks were chewing their cud and liquid from their mouths had frozen and was hanging like dangling teats.

I moved over the sheep-shed door made of frozen yak dung and slowly walked among the sheep. Two little wet sticky lambs were wandering and crying among the sheep, but this brought no reaction from their mother. Another lamb was dead. Its mother was still busy licking its carcass. I brought the dead lamb into the house and put it in the sunshine in the glass-enclosed verandah so that it would dry and then be easier to skin.

My fifteen-year-old daughter, Tsho mo, who has never attended school, feels embarrassed that we have only a few sheep, while other families have hundreds. She complained that the lamb would not have died if I had checked the sheep at midnight as I do occasionally.

After a breakfast of bread, *rtsam pa*, and milk tea, I asked my wife and daughter to identify the mothers of those two wandering lambs, put them in the sheep-shed and keep them there until they let their lambs nurse. I reminded them not to forget to feed the sheep some dried grass, and gave instructions about what to do when the helpers came to fry bread.

"Such a year! Everybody is talking about the scarcity of forage and the low price of livestock. It wasn't like this before. What is happening to this world?" Bde skyid commented.

It was cold outside. I started my motorcycle and let it run for some minutes to warm up, told Lha mo that I would be back soon, and then headed to the school.

It took me thirty minutes to get there. That was longer than usual because the wind was strong. The racket of the wind would have made me deaf if I had not been wearing a helmet.

The winter holiday was beginning, and I was there to take my twin eight-year old sons - Tshe ring don 'grub and Bkra shis rgya - home with me. Usually I visited my twins once in two days, but this time it had been three days. Tshe ring don 'grub, the elder son, was crying when I found him. He said that his feet were very cold.

I thought this was just a normal reaction to a cold winter and didn't pay much attention.

All the parents were busy folding up their children's mats and quilts. I did the same with my twins' mats and quilts and tied them to my motorcycle.

The school was distributing boxes of milk and commercial bread to the students. I told Bkra shis rgyal to get the milk and bread allotment for himself and his brother, since Tshe ring don 'grub said he couldn't walk. Meanwhile, I took the blanket that I had on the back of my motorcycle and wrapped Tshe ring don 'grub's feet in it.

"I'm afraid to go there and get the milk and bread. Father! Please come with me!" Bkra shis rgyal pleaded.

"Who are you afraid of?" I asked.

"Teachers!" he exclaimed and clutched my hand.

I accompanied him, because I understand what it means to be afraid of teachers. I was also very afraid of my teachers when I attended school for about a year in the 1980s.

"I am Tshe ring don 'grub's father. May I have my sons' milk and bread please? Tshe ring don 'grub says his feet are very cold and painful and he can't come," I explained to the head teacher of my sons' class, who was a new teacher.

She agreed.

This sort of milk and bread has had chemicals added to it and I encourage my sons not eat to drink and eat it, but they often don't listen.

It was getting colder. It was probably around minus twenty degrees Celsius. I wrapped my twins in a thick fur-lined mat and headed home on my motorcycle.

We arrived and I was stressed and impatient because about twenty people had come to help fry bread for my niece's wedding ceremony and I needed to organize them and provide whatever they needed.

Tshe ring don 'grub said that his feet were still very cold. I told Bde skyid to take off his shoes and put him near the adobe stove in the main room.

"A ha wo! A ha wo! This boy is finished! This boy is finished!" my

wife and sister exclaimed together. Everybody dropped what they were doing and ran over to Tshe ring don 'grub. I then realized something terrible had happened from the frightened faces. My wife and sister were crying.

Tshe ring don 'grub's feet were dark from the ankles to the toes and swollen. I was terrified and at a loss.

When I asked Tshe ring don 'grub what had happened, he only sobbed.

"He peed in his pants the day before yesterday or yesterday during class," said Bkra shis rgyal.

Later, I learned that Tshe ring don 'grub had had diarrhea and had asked his teacher several times for permission to go to the toilet during class. Finally, when he needed to pee, the teacher angrily scolded, "What's wrong with you? You can't go to the toilet repeatedly during class time. Look at the others! They aren't asking to go to the toilet during class."

Tshe ring don 'grub was then afraid, peed in his pants, and didn't tell others because he was so embarrassed. Tshe ring don 'grub later said that it was too painful to remove his shoes, so he wore them at night while he was sleeping in his dorm room, which had no heating.

I took Tshe ring don 'grub back to school to look for his head teacher but, when we got there, nobody was there. This is what I had expected. All the teachers are from farming areas and they go home immediately after school is finished.

I didn't know the teacher's contact information and there was no one to ask so I then took Tshe ring don 'grub to the local clinic and consulted a local doctor.

He said that there was nothing he could do.

Tshe ring don 'grub was now screaming loudly from the severe pain and I didn't know what to do so I called the local *bla ma* on my cellphone, hoping to get some advice. He didn't answer. I decided to go back home and then on to the county town.

When I got home, the local helpers had nearly finished frying the bread. I thanked them and took my son to the county town, which was about two and half hours away by motorcycle.

When I arrived, I asked some doctors for advice. They told me

there was an experienced Tibetan doctor in her sixties who might have some ideas about what to do when feet were injured by cold. I then took my boy to her.

She has her own clinic and many patients. She didn't say the boy's feet were very seriously injured, but she did ask me who had allowed this to happen.

The people around us were all shocked and asked questions like: "Where did this happen?" "Who let this happen?"

I answered that it had happened in the school.

"What a parent! Where were the teachers? You didn't know his feet were frozen?" some strangers in the clinic said.

I replied that he boarded at the school and only came home during holidays.

Everybody was murmuring, but I concentrated on what the doctor was saying.

"The boy needs IVs," she said.

I then calmed down somewhat because the doctor seemed to know what to do. The boy received IVs for about five days and his feet did look better.

The doctor then suggested that I take him home and ensure he continued IV treatment at the local clinic, so I brought him back home. The wedding was approaching and there were a lot of things I had to do.

I was eventually able to talk to the local *bla ma* through the phone. He said that there were some chanting rituals that had to be done for the boy.

I took him to another local clinic where the monk doctor gave him an IV and purified the boy with sacred water while he chanted scriptures.

I also invited some monks from the local monastery to come to my home and hold the rituals the *bla ma* suggested.

About ten days later, I found the contact information for the school headmaster, school director, and the boy's class's head teacher. I explained my boy's situation. They suggested that we discuss it when I was next in the county town. I then took Tshe ring don 'grub to the county town and asked the school people to come and talk about the boy's situation, but they ignored me and didn't come.

The boy received IVs for about twenty days from the local clinic. Everyday I took him to the clinic and took him back home after the IV. The swelling almost disappeared except for his toes. The local doctor said that he was recovering and Tshe ring don 'grub said that he felt less pain, but I discovered that something was wrong - something was not normal about his feet. I felt that his feet looked like they were drying.

I decided to have him checked in a Chinese hospital in the county town. The Chinese doctors in the hospital were shocked when they saw his feet, said that all they could do was amputate his feet, and suggested that I take Tshe ring don 'grub to Zi ling (Xining) immediately.

I was disappointed and hopeless. I can't understand a single word of Chinese and I also didn't have the money to take him to Zi ling. I took Tshe ring don 'grub back home and asked some locals for loans.

Two days later, I had managed to collect some money and then asked 'Brug thar, one of my relatives who knows some Qinghai Chinese dialect, to go with my wife and me to Hospital Number Twenty-One in Zi ling City. The doctors there said that there was nothing they could do because they had no experience with such problems.

Then we took the boy to Hospital Number Twenty-Two - a military hospital. The doctors said that Tshe ring don 'grub's feet had been frozen and that it was too late. They added that they would have been able to help had we brought him in the first twenty-four hours, but now it was too late and the only solution was to amputate. The also said that he needed to receive IVs for about twenty days before the amputation. I didn't know why he needed IVs for that many days. I supposed it was related to reducing the swelling.

Twenty days passed and the doctors said the time had come for amputation and we needed to prepare the payment. We were told that his left foot was to be cut off from the ankle and the right foot from mid-foot.

My wife wept and I didn't agree, because I hoped for a better solution.

I had no savings and there was no way that I could sell my family's livestock in winter. I had no choice except to contact some of my relatives. The doctors would not do the amputation until I put enough money on my account. My close relatives collected some money and brought it to me,

along with mutton, bread, and *rtsam pa* from their homes.

I then called the headmaster again and explained that the boy needed surgery. After several days, the headmaster, the boy's class head teacher, and some other teachers visited and talked to the doctors to better learn the boy's situation.

It then seemed that they would help. They said they would find a better hospital. However, the next day, they said they couldn't find a better hospital.

I told them that I didn't have enough money to pay for the surgery and thus needed the school's financial support.

The headmaster replied that they had just come to visit the boy because he was a student in their school and that they didn't know if the school had responsibility for the boy, and then they left.

The doctors said, "We have had cases like your son's. Some parents refused to allow their children's feet to be amputated. We explained that the feet had to be amputated from the ankle, but they insisted that we amputate from the mid-foot. When we did so, the procedure was not successful and then we had to amputate from the knees. You should think carefully."

After several negotiations with doctors, the doctors decided to cut off two toes from the right foot, and all the toes from the left and remove black flesh from the middle part of the foot. After the surgery, the feet were wrapped with bandages and blood and yellow liquid were oozing from plastic tubes. The doctors said that we would know if he needed more surgery after fifteen days.

My wife and I did pretty much whatever the doctors said, because we really didn't know what our choices were.

The boy received IVs everyday. He was in severe pain, cried often, and slept when he was exhausted. My wife and I took turns caring for him at night. The hospital said that only two people could stay with him at night. 'Brug thar sometimes found a cheap hotel and then sometimes secretly came back to the hospital at midnight to sleep.

'Brug thar went out to buy food for us. My wife and I had never stayed in a big city like Zi ling and didn't even know how to get back to the room once we were some distance away from the hospital.

My two monk relatives in the local monastery gathered all the monks in the monastery and chanted for the boy.

Fifteen days later, the doctors said that the boy needed more surgery because his left foot bones from which they had removed flesh had turned black, but that the boy would have to wait for three more days.

Meanwhile, 'Brug thar had to return home, because his wife and three children were rebuilding their house and they needed his help. After he left, my wife and I could not communicate with the doctors and nurses, so I called a relative who was a college student and he came to help us for about a week.

When a nurse informed me that the money on my account was finished, I called the former leader of my community, Rta 'grin, who knows the teachers at my son's school. I asked him to talk to the teachers about my boy's situation, hoping that the school would provide financial support.

Rta 'grin called me back the next day and reported, "The school director was very angry this time. He said, 'The school has no money to support the boy and it is not the school's responsibility. It is the boy's parents' responsibility. I hate this kind of family. We will try to find someone who will, however, help the boy with finances. We will also talk to the insurance organization."¹

I felt hopeless and called my monk uncle. I asked him to loan me funds from the monastery.

The next day, he did loan some money from the monastery, put it on my account, and said that I needed to return it with interest when the boy came home.

I agreed.

We did not inform my son before the second surgery, because he often cried loudly and said that he wanted to go home. The doctors said that the boy's left foot had to be cut off from mid-foot and a slice of flesh had to be cut from his thigh to wrap the head of his left foot.

My wife and I asked the doctor if this could be taken from one of

¹ I asked Tshe ring what "insurance company" means and he said that he did not know what it meant or how the insurance scheme worked. He said the school contacted the insurance company and asked for money. Tshe ring had no direct contact with the insurance company.

our thighs because the boy was so thin that it seemed there was nothing to take from his thigh except bone.

The doctors said this was impossible.

We were very worried that the boy would not be able to deal with such serious surgery, because he was so thin and small.

The surgery was successful.

I was very disappointed by the school and didn't know what to do. I then went to the county town, met Rta 'grin, and asked him to tell the school leaders to give me a clear answer: Would the school take responsibility for my son?

Rta 'grin called the school director while I was with him. I could overhear the director scolding, saying that the school had no money and what had happened to the boy was not the school's responsibility.

Not knowing what else to do, I said to Rta 'grin, "I know I am incapable of forcing the school to do anything, but I will spread news of what has happened to my boy as widely as I can. Please let me know if the school has something new to say."

I returned to Zi ling with a hopeless heart.

Rta 'grin phoned the next morning and reported that the school had contacted him. They were asking me not to spread news of my boy's situation because they would reconsider.

That afternoon, Rta 'grin called and said that the school wanted me to come to the county town to have discussions.

I replied that I couldn't come, because I had to care for the boy in Zi ling.

Some days later, the school called and said that they would pay for the boy's medical expenses and provide an additional forty-five thousand *yuan*.

I said it was not enough, because I had spent more than that on living expenses while in Zi ling and also, that my livestock were dying at home from not being cared for properly. I added that I would have to pay even more if the boy required an artificial leg.

The next morning, my monk uncle told me that he had negotiated with the school, that they had agreed to add 10,000 *yuan*, and he had agreed. "This is the best we can do. Don't negotiate with the school further,

because I decided it," he concluded.

This monk uncle is the man my family respects the most. I couldn't question his decision, but I did say that they had to give me the money the day my boy was released from the hospital and I would at that time hand over all the medical expense receipts.

The school agreed.

After about a month had passed after the first surgery, the hospital said that the boy was ready to go home, though Tshe ring don 'grub could barely stand. We took the bus to the county town and I called the school people. They said that the school's director was not there and I should come back some days later.

Three days later, I called the school director. He told me that the school couldn't pay what they had promised because others who were also responsible for the decision had disagreed.

I was enraged and said that I would take the case to court to see if there was any justice.

Rta 'grin called me that evening and said, "The school asked that you not take this to court. They'll give you the money, but they need some time. They are asking for the funds from somebody else. Maybe you should wait. The school leaders have strong connections with higher officials. We won't win if we take this case to court."

I thought this was reasonable. I have no connections and no money, and I also didn't know how to take a case to court. I agreed to wait.

After about fifteen days, no one called me. I was worried, so I called local elders, including my monk uncle, who then went to meet the school people and asked them why they had not provided funds.

The next day, the director of the school called me and angrily said, "What a strange person you are! We told you to wait so why didn't you wait? Why did you ask those people to talk to us? We aren't your servants."

This made me so angry that I said, "You are the strange ones! You promised that the school would give me the money the day my boy returned home from the hospital. But two months have passed and I've still received no money from the school. I borrowed money for the medical care from others and promised I would return it when my family got back home from the hospital. I have to pay about thirty percent interest on

these loans. These interest fees are increasing day by day. Who will pay for that? If the school is going to pay the medical expenses, pay it today and if you will not, then tell me honestly. Don't lie to me anymore. I am sick of being abused and lied to."

I hung up.

He called me back, but I didn't answer.

The next morning Rta 'grin called and said, "The school has agreed to give you the money in five days. They have asked for funds from the insurance company and some other people. They were told to provide the victim's bank account information and were told the funds would only be sent to the victim's bank account to help the boy. If the insurance company or other people send any money to your account, you must give all the money to the school, because the school asked for the money."

I agreed, because I knew that I would get no money if I disagreed.

Five days later, I went to the county town with some other local people. We met four school representatives, who gave me 50,000 *yuan* for medical expenses and 67,000 *yuan* in addition to the medical expenses in cash. I then gave them the 10,000 *yuan* in cash that the insurance company had put on my bank account about two weeks earlier. After we calculated the medical expenses according to the hospital receipts, they still owed me 280 *yuan*. They said that they would give it to me later. I didn't believe that, but I told them I needed that 280 *yuan*.

Tshe ring don 'grub now walks with a stick. We are hoping that he can walk without that stick soon. I often recall Tshe ring don 'grub's active behavior before this unfortunate thing happened and I feel pain, regret, and guilt because I strongly encouraged him to go to school and even forced him sometimes.

Still, I know it is better for him to continue to attend school. If he gets an education, he will have an easier life.

I also worry about who will care for him after his parents are gone.

We want to provide Tshe ring don 'grub and his brother a better educational environment so I rented a small room in the county town and send my two sons to school here.

I get up at five AM, cook for the children, take them to school, come back, and chant for a bit. Sometimes I visit local people who are

also taking care of their children in the county town and we chat. Then I prepare lunch for my two sons and myself. At eleven-thirty AM, I walk to the school to pick up my sons, which takes about twenty minutes.

After lunch, I encourage them to write their homework, but it is not very effective, because I can only read some Tibetan, and don't know other subjects, so I don't know if the children tell me the truth about their homework.

I take them to school at one-thirty PM. In the afternoon, I wash the children's clothes when it is necessary, but most of the time I chant, because I have nothing to do. I want to find a part time job, but it is very difficult, because I can't read or write Chinese.

I prepare supper and go to pick up the boys at five-thirty PM and we have dinner together. After dinner, I take them out, let them play for a while, and then bring them back to finish their homework.

My wife and daughter, who have never been to school, herd our livestock. They send food to us regularly through local people coming to the county town. Sometimes my wife takes care of the children in the county town, but she doesn't like to stay here because it is boring and too crowded. I have the same feeling, but I must endure it.

My boys enjoy school here. They can come home to eat and also can stay at home at night.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'brug thar འབྲུག་ཐར།
 bde skyid བདེ་སྐྱིད།
 bkra shis rgya བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རྒྱལ།
 bla ma ལྷ་མ།
 lha mo ལྷ་མོ།
 rta 'grin རྩ་མགོན།
 rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།
 sle bo སྤེ་བོ།
 tshe ring ཚེ་རིང་།
 tshe ring don 'grub ཚེ་རིང་དོན་འགྲུབ།
 tsho mo མཚོ་མོ།
 Xining ཅི་འུ་འུ་
 yuan ལྷོ་
 zi ling ཟླ་ལིང་།