

## LIFE

Bla ma skyabs ལྷ་མ་སྐྱལ་བ།

I had a female yak when I was a young child and drank her milk, which helped me grow. She was like a mother.

One day I got very sick and was put in the hospital. My family did not have enough money for my medical care so Father sold the female yak to pay for my treatment.

That yak saved my life again.

While I was in the hospital, an old relative came to visit. Knowing that I liked stories, he told me this one:

Many years ago, all the villagers were talking about Zhao ma's baby. Elders wondered who the baby's father was. Others curiously gossiped about who Zhao ma's lover was. There were no clues.

Zhao ma had been orphaned at the age of ten when her mother died from cancer. After her mother died, she worked for a wealthy family herding calves and collecting fuel. She did not know who her father was and never asked. She lived in her small adobe house. This life made her mature quickly. She took care of herself and became increasingly independent.

She was slim and had long hair, bright eyes, thick eyebrows, and even tidy teeth that were as white as pure snow. Many boys lined up and called to her in front of her small house at night, but all failed to gain entry. She remained single. And then suddenly, she had had a child without people having noticed that she was pregnant. Her son, Zha de, had black curly hair that resembled lambskin and large eyes full of cruelty. His hands and feet didn't match his body. They were too big for a ten-year-old child. He was stronger than other children, whom he bullied. Parents hated him and called him Evil Son. He liked hunting and killed countless birds and insects without his mother knowing. Gradually he became a good hunter.

---

Bla ma skyabs. 2017. *Life. Asian Highlands Perspectives* 47:64-75.

---

The village consisted of thirty households. There was a dense forest in front of the village and a high range of mountains behind. People had heard that a bear lurked in the forest, but nobody had been injured. Unfortunately, a bear killed two women while they were collecting fuel in the forest. Villagers immediately stopped collecting fuel there. Soon, all the village men gathered to discuss how to kill the bear. Some said to Zha de, "If you are a great hunter, kill the bear."

He proudly answered, "I can kill the bear."

When everyone burst into loud laughter, he angrily declared, "I swear that I will kill it tonight, otherwise I won't come home."

That night he went alone into the forest. Worried that he would never return, his mother went to the local leader, who said, "Probably he's in the forest trying to kill that bear," and then called some men who looked for him everywhere, except in the forest. They found no trace of him. The only hope was to wait until dawn, and then search in the forest.

The sun slowly climbed up from behind a high mountain, gradually illuminating the brittle, frozen grass. Everyone assumed Zha bo had been eaten by the bear. A bit later a person emerged from the forest carrying something black on his back. Everyone was excited and agreed it must be Zha bo. His mother cried and then smiled as Zha bo came nearer with the still-bleeding bear, which was soaked in the bear's blood. Zha bo had slashed the bear's throat with a knife.

The villagers praised him and, from that time, he was no longer Evil Son. People realized he was no ordinary person. In the time of their forefathers, the local mountain god had had sex with a beautiful woman, who had given birth to a special child. This story led people to conclude Zha bo was also a mountain deity's son.

After killing that bear, Zha bo's reputation spread like the wind. He hunted and wandered from place to place, leaving behind valleys full of wildlife skeletons. Wild animals were terrified of Zha bo's scent.

One evening, when Zhao mo was driving twenty yaks back home from behind the mountains, she encountered five mounted bandits with rifles slung on their backs and holding unsheathed swords. Zhao mo had

---

never encountered such danger before. The bandits rounded up her yaks, grabbed her, and were eager to rape her.

Their leader said, "Stop! We have no time to enjoy this woman."

"My son is a deity's son and will kill you. Leave my yaks, please," Zhao mo said quietly.

The bandits glanced at each other, laughed, and said, "Such ridiculous boasts! Tell your son to find us," and then they left with the yaks.

After Zhao mo got home and told her son what had happened, he was so angry that his feet were trembling. He rushed outside without a word.

His mother followed and shouted, "Don't kill them!"

Zha bo soon reached a road he knew the brigands would take. When they arrived, he said, "Leave the yaks and I'll be merciful."

"You must be Deity Son," the leader laughingly exclaimed as his fellows burst into crazy laughter. Zha bo slowly moved toward them. They shot at him, but he dodged and suddenly vanished. Surprised and frightened, they searched for him until he suddenly jumped on the bandit leader, pulled him off his horse, grabbed his rifle, and smashed his head with his rifle butt, cracking his skull open like a watermelon. The other men were too scared to shoot and fled without a backward glance.

A female devil lived far from Zha bo's home. A village was in front of a cliff with high, hanging rocks. The female devil lived at the top of the cliff in a deep, dark cave and drank human blood and brains from young men she caught at night. She put a sharp metal point in her mouth, and stabbed it into the men's brains. Nobody had ever seen the devil's face because her hair was so long that it swept the ground like a broom when she walked.

Time passed and many women lost their husbands. Other wives worried about their husbands' fate, but could only beseech Buddha for help. Some strong men with rifles and swords attacked the devil, but nearly lost their lives in doing so.

When Zha bo heard this, he went to that place and rushed to the devil's cave without hesitation. The devil was combing her long hair as

Zha bo entered. She observed Zha bo from head to toe. Some of his black hair fell over his left eye. Only half of his long, high nose was visible. His strong body and long legs made him seem very confident. Feeling shy, she bent her head, hiding her little-girl face.

Zha bo came near her and said, "I have no place to sleep. I want to stay here. Can you share your bed with me?"

She nodded, a contented smile on her lovely face.

Then Zha bo gave her a large animal's stomach that he had pricked thousands of times with a needle and said, "We will cook. Please fetch some water."

The devil excitedly rushed to a small, clear stream at the bottom of the cliff and filled the stomach with water, which leaked out when she was only halfway back. She tried repeatedly, but failed each time.

Finally, she pulled out some of her own hair and tied each puncture in the stomach. After doing this, she was nearly bald. Zha bo put some yogurt in a black round pot, wrapped it in some clothes, put it on the bed, and arranged it so that it seemed he was sleeping there. He then destroyed everything he could find in the cave. When he finished, it seemed a battle had been fought.

After the devil tiredly entered the cave and saw the destruction in her home, she angrily tossed the water she was carrying away, put the metal tip in her mouth, stabbed the pot, then exclaimed, "This man's brains are sour!"

Zha bo swiftly shot her with his rifle from where he was hiding. She screamed and fled, leaving a bloody trail. Zha bo followed her, but finally lost her in the forest. Afterwards, village women no longer worried about their husbands. Everyone agreed that the local mountain god had sent Zha bo to vanquish the female devil.

This story made me feel better.

I got well, left the hospital, went home and then went to the yard to see my female yak.

She was gone and I understood what had happened.

I cried when I thought about that yak that had saved my life twice. Even today, I think about my female yak when I drink milk tea.

•••

Time passed and I was eight years old (1998).

My parents were sufficiently embarrassed about Brother's unmarried status at the age of twenty that they arranged his marriage. Neighbor boys his age were married and some of them already had children. Furthermore, bad rumors circulated in the village about my family being too poor to take a bride. My parents were under a lot of pressure to find a wife for Brother, who already seemed to be past the ideal age of marriage.

My village was divided by a dusty endless road that ran between Bla brang and Mtsho sngon. Passengers in passing vehicles could enjoy grassland that seemed to rival the size of a huge piece of sky that might have plummeted to earth in a place where people relied solely on livestock to survive. They continued to follow the example of their ancestors. When children were eighteen years old, they soon married.

Lives were, however, slowly changing and improving. Gradually people competed in accumulating jewelry and other personal adornments, especially for brides.

During the Tibetan New Year period, I was very excited to see Sister-in-law when she first visited my home. Sister-in-law is Father's sworn-brother's daughter so Father was not required to spend a huge amount on decorations. Nevertheless, Father sold one hundred sheep from our total sheep flock at that time, which numbered about 300. If it had been someone else, Father's sworn-brother would probably have demanded what would have required the selling of at least 200 sheep. At that time, one sheep was worth about 200 RMB. All the proceeds of this went to buy decorations for the bride - coral, silver, and gold.

Father did his best for his son.

Brother looked unhappy when his bride arrived. They didn't know each other very well. Father had done everything related to the

---

marriage. He had chosen the bride, decided how many sheep to sell, and so on.

Sister-in-law was slender, had two long braids, was a little taller than Brother, quiet, and very respectful of older people. Nevertheless, the new couple had little interest in each other, perhaps because they were strangers. At times, Brother spent the nights with other girls. Despite what may have been a complex association, nothing on the surface seemed wrong about their relationship.

Days passed. Months passed. Time passed as quickly as a flowing stream. My parents expected a grandson. When this did not happen, my parents invited four monks to come and chant in our home for a day. Mother also accompanied Sister-in-law to a sacred cave where women spend the night if they wish to become pregnant.

About a year later, Sister-in-law gave birth to a thin but healthy boy. Sister-in-law breastfed Nephew, but she didn't have enough milk to satisfy him so I occasionally held him and fed him milk from a bottle. I still treasure that experience of holding Nephew the first time.

When Nephew was three months old, Sister-in-law took him to her parents' home, where he became seriously ill. My parents were very anxious about their grandson, and consulted two high ranking *bla ma*, who recommended taking the baby to hospital. However, the doctors that were consulted could not identify Nephew's illness. He seemed incurable. He began taking less milk and constantly cried.

Mother suggested that Nephew had been possessed by evil from Sister-in-law's brother's wife whose five children had all died. Meanwhile, Sister-in-law's tears seemed never to stop falling.

At that time, my family's winter sheep enclosure was about a twenty-minute walk from our home. After supper, Father and Brother took turns watching the sheep all night to prevent wolf attack and protect against thieves.

Sometimes, Brother took me with him when it was time for him to keep watch and then left me alone so he could visit girls. I was terrified of being left alone in the very dark night. However, I agreed

---

because he lent me his battery-powered cassette-player. I loved listening to love songs and Sman bla skyabs' comedy sketches.

There was also another reason I agreed that Brother could leave me alone. He controlled our family's bicycle as the oldest son. Few families had a bicycle at that time. He promised that, the next day, I could ride the bike. He also showed me about thirty photos he had of his girlfriends. He kept the photos in a white envelope in his robe pouch. He also confided, in an uncaring way, that after Nephew died, he would divorce.

I quietly hated him when he said that. I loved Nephew very much and I didn't want to hear that he might soon die. Still, I didn't say anything because I was afraid he wouldn't allow me to use the bicycle.

The night Brother told me this, and after he left, I was both afraid and angry. I kept our flashlight the whole night. That made me feel better. I was excited to listen to my favorite tapes and gradually, I grew accustomed to sleeping alone.

The next day, after I had made my bargain with Brother, I rode the bicycle, sticking one foot through the middle opening in the frame. The bike was much too large for me to propel it any other way. Other children enviously followed me, pushing the bike from behind. I and the other children thought this was so exciting that we never felt hungry. I was extraordinarily happy and very proud of riding my bicycle in front of other children.

As Nephew got steadily worse, and it seemed death was near, my parents became increasingly frantic and Sister-in-law was terribly depressed. At this point, Father decided to invite a famous lay tantric specialist to our home. Though locals knew his name, they didn't know exactly where he was from. He had saved some children while some other children whom he had treated had died. Anyway, this seemed to be the only remaining possibility.

It was a winter day made warmer by a bright sun and a frozen creek that twinkled in the distance. Suddenly, our watchdog barked desperately as Father and the specialist approached. I hid behind

---

Mother and peeked out at the specialist, who had his hair in one long braid wrapped around his head and wore a robe like that of a monk. He was tall, strong, and had a dark face that was decorated with many whiskers. He looked dangerous.

He told Father to bring Nephew. Father did so and then the specialist watched him without saying anything. Next, he took some *rtsam pa*, mixed it with water, and then made an image the same size as Nephew, which he dressed in colored cloth. He put soot on Nephew's face.

He began chanting loudly while sometimes beating a drum and now and then sounding a trumpet made from a human thighbone. After about three hours of this, he told Father to throw the *rtsam pa* image out of our courtyard. He then ordered Father, Mother, Sister-in-law, and one of my sisters to each hold one of Nephew's limbs. He then took a pair of scissors and cut Nephew on each hand, halfway between the thumb and index finger. He took a big scoop and flung milk mixed with warm water on Nephew's body.

Nephew cried desperately until he was hoarse, but he never lost consciousness. This was already a marked improvement because, earlier when Nephew cried, he became unconscious.

Gradually, Nephew grew stronger until he had absolutely recovered. Now, he is sixteen and a middle school student.

Today, does Brother still have an ever-growing number of photos of beautiful young women, or is there only one person today in his heart - his wife? I'm unsure.

...

Four more years passed. I was twelve, the age when I became a real man. At that time my duty was to herd my family's yaks. In the morning after breakfast, I usually drove our yaks with my fellows behind the mountains. Herdsmen had gathered there as usual when I arrived that morning. They were talking about their sexual adventures and teasing boys, "Let me check your penis to see if you have become a real man."



---

I was wearing a short sheep-skin robe Mother had made. My slingshot was as long as I was tall. I had tied it around my waist to keep warmer. I slowly drove my yaks to the foot of the mountain and went over to the older men, who were discussing who had had the greatest number of sexual adventures. One man boasted that he had had sex with at least one hundred women. As he gestured with his hands and made sounds indicating what he had done, boys watched him and laughed so hard that they rolled on the ground.

Finally, an older man said to me, "Have you become a real man?"

I silently ran away, but I couldn't run very fast because my shoes were much bigger than my feet. The older man easily caught me and said, "That means you aren't a real man. Let me check your penis."

I cried, "No! No!" and struggled. He and two more men easily untied my red sash, pulled off my tattered blue pants with black cloth patches on each side of the legs, wiggled my penis, and laughed uproariously.

One older man said, "You should be punished for escaping," picked up some sheep dung, wetted it with saliva, put the sheep dung on a plant, and rubbed it on my bottom.

I cried and laughed, because it tickled me.

Afterwards, eager to become a real man, I wanted to have sex with a woman as soon as possible. One night after dinner, knowing that Brother had many girlfriends, I said to my parents, "I will sleep with Brother tonight."

"I want to have sex with one of your girlfriends. Please, take me with you tonight," I said as soon as we were alone.

He smiled and said, "Okay. Get ready."

I was very excited and washed at least nine layers of dirt from my filthy hands and sunburned face which I hadn't washed in about two months. I smeared fresh butter on my face and cleaned my nose, from which a small natural white stream usually ran. I achieved the best style ever in the few years of my life. We then walked through a

---

village where crazy dogs desperately barked to the accompaniment of clanging chains. I was terrified and looked back at the dogs several times. Finally, we reached a small adobe house. Brother knocked and called, "Lha mo! Lha mo!"

Someone unlocked the door from inside. We entered silently. A woman was on a big bed. Brother took off his shoes and got under the woman's thick quilt. "Come here," he said to me and opened the quilt between him and the woman. I rushed there without even taking off my shoes. I was too nervous to move. My whole body quivered like a vibrating machine.

"He's my younger brother. He wants to be a real man," Brother explained.

"He's still a child," the woman giggled.

"Please, let him do it," Brother said and rolled me on top of her.

I gripped Brother's hand and wanted to say, "No," but I couldn't say anything. He pulled my pants down to my shoes. I still couldn't move, because my heart was beating too fast. Lha mo touched my penis, giggled, and put it inside her vagina, which was as warm as hot spring water. Meanwhile she moved up and down under me.

"Brother, I have to pee!" I cried a short time later.

Brother rolled toward the window, laughing loudly. Suddenly, I splashed something inside her and felt released from nervousness and fear.

When I got home, the tip of my penis was aching and bleeding. I had given my virginity to an unknown woman and had no idea what her face looked like, but I was very proud to have become a real man.

Gradually, I fell in love with a woman who was already married and had one child. She was almost fifteen years older than me. I followed and teased her when she was herding. Sometimes she pushed me down and pinched my bottom repeatedly until it became as red as though countless mosquitoes had bitten it.

---

I struggled, but I couldn't escape. I begged her to let me free and promised not to tease her again.

One day she said, "I have something to do tomorrow. Can you take care of my yaks?"

"I will, if I can come to your place tonight," I replied.

"Not today. My husband is at home tonight. Maybe you should come tomorrow," she said with a suggestive smile.

I herded our yaks together the next day and fantasized about having sex with her. The sun slowly hid behind the mountains and I and the other herdsman took our livestock home.

After supper, I cleaned up and went to her house quietly. I knocked on the door and called out, "Older Sister!"

I heard someone coming to the door. Unfortunately, it was her husband who opened the door and yelled, "Bastard!"

I raced away without looking back. He threw a stick after me, which hit my right leg.

The next day I could hardly walk, but I still drove my yaks out to herd. She came to me and said, "Are you okay? I was teasing yesterday. Let me see your injury."

I silently hiked up my right pants leg.

She pointed to my leg and said, "It's swollen," and then she rubbed my leg lightly over and over. I saw her big breasts jiggling in her blouse, and recalled the first woman I had had sex with. I realized I had something as hard as a stake tent inside my pants.

She noticed and smiled.

"Older Sister, let me do it," I pleaded, bowing my head.

"You can, if you can push me down," she responded.

I jumped on her and she easily fell over.

After doing it, we jumped up. The other herders had already disappeared. It was rapidly becoming darker.

After a week, I heard that she and her husband had gone to Lha sa to do business.

I never saw her again.

---

 NON-ENGLISH TERMS

bla brang ལྷ་བྲང་།

bla ma skyabs ལྷ་མ་སྐྱབས།

lha mo ལྷ་མོ།

lha sa ལྷ་ས།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།

rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།

sman bla skyabs ལྷན་ལྷ་སྐྱབས།

zha bo ཇམ་བོ།