

Thub bstan (Tudeng)

I graduated from Qinghai Normal University's English Training Program (ETP) in 2006. In 2009, I earned an MA in Sociology from Silliman University in the Philippines. Since that time, I have worked in a non-government organization on the Plateau. I enjoy working in rural communities to identify problems and their solutions.

This is a true story that happened in March 2012, in Ku'u sgang Village, which is situated in a forested, mountainous area about five kilometers off a national road, along the Shis chu River that runs through Brag 'go Valley. The relative remoteness and lack of a proper road have left forest and lush grazing land largely intact for villagers and their handful of livestock. Plenty of wild mushrooms and flowers grow near the village, and it is also an ideal place for cultivating barley, peas, and potatoes. Monkeys scamper about in the forest, which is also home to brown bears, wild boars, and white-lipped deer. This is a place that many would liken to paradise.

During my childhood in the 1990s, Ku'u sgang Village had only ten households. Later, two village families moved near the roadside for convenience's sake. Meanwhile, three new households were established. Today, this beautiful village is home to eleven households and has a total population of sixty-two people.

The village includes two families with Chinese surnames (Huang and Zhou) and two other families with Chinese sons-in-law (surnamed Zhang and Wang). People of the relatively nearby roadside villages refer to Ku'u sgang as Rgya ri zhing or 'mountain fields reclaimed by Chinese'. My generation is the fourth of the Huang Family. As descendants of the root family of Huang, my older brother, younger sister, and I have Chinese names. We are called the dragon character generation, which signifies that the first character of all our given names is *long* 'dragon'. However, in my generation, we rarely use our Chinese names and the names on our official identification cards are Tibetan, unlike the older generations. I have

seventeen cousins who do not have Chinese names. In the Chinese tradition, sons and daughters inherit the surnames of their fathers; however, my uncles married and moved into Tibetan homes, or else established their own independent homes, and thus feel little obligation to pass on a Chinese surname to their offspring.

My paternal grandfather's father was a drifter from somewhere near Chengdu City. He married our great-grandmother after he was kicked out of his first wife's home. Great-grandmother was from Nyag rong County, where she lived as a nomad. Her brother murdered someone in a rangeland conflict and, subsequently, she and her family fled to Brag 'go County to escape reprisal. Great-grandfather somehow met Great-grandmother and they moved to Ku'u sgang. Their descendants had both Chinese and Tibetan names.

These great-grandparents had five sons. My paternal grandparents had nine children. My third uncle, an articulate man locally famous for his stubbornness, established his own family in the village a year after my birth. He has three daughters. The oldest is finishing her fifth year in medical college, the youngest is a middle school student, and the middle one, Sgrol ma, dropped out of middle school several years ago to stay at home and help her parents.

Sgrol ma was born in 1990. She is tall and her eyes startle people because they seem so large, as though they were the eyes of a yak. She wears traditional robes like other village women. Sgrol ma was regarded as the most beautiful girl in our village.

For five years, her father worked very hard as a laborer at construction sites and as a carpenter for dozens of local families who were building new homes. He did this to pay his daughters' school expenses and otherwise support the family. Once, he fell off a tractor and broke two ribs while transporting logs to sell. The pain and worry from this accident seemed to make him age significantly overnight, as if life had become suddenly burdensome. Nevertheless, he has never given up.

Uncle is practical, and planned to do whatever was necessary to send his oldest daughter to college, hoping that she would get a government job and then have be able to support the youngest daughter to attend college. Meanwhile, he wanted Sgrol ma to marry

and bring her husband into their home after the eldest daughter graduated. Uncle realized that Sgrol ma's future husband would be resentful if he moved into the home and saw the income that he helped earn paying for Sgrol ma's sisters' schooling. Knowing this might cause problems, he decided to wait a bit before arranging Sgrol ma's marriage. This was the plan until a messenger came from the other side of the river and announced that Sgrol ma had eloped.

Two marriage forms are practiced locally – marriages arranged by family members and *sa 'bud* 'fleeing'. Arranged marriages ignore the feelings of the youths most directly involved. Parents ask their most trusted relatives to look for potential spouses from reputable families or, at least, who seem well behaved and whose families lack a history of such diseases as leprosy and tuberculosis. Parents consult a wide range of contacts about the qualities of potential spouses. Once both sides reach a preliminary agreement, negotiations ensue. One of the first things mentioned is how well the new in-law will be treated in the home they will move into.

The second topic of discussion is 'marriage price', which is *mo rin* 'brideprice' when a girl moves into her husband's home, and *pho rin* 'price of the groom' when a boy will marry and move into his wife's home. *Nu rin* 'milk price' or 'nursing price' refers to compensation paid to the mother who nursed the bride or groom who is leaving to their spouse's home. *Nu rin* is very small compared to *pho rin* and *mo rin*.

In most cases the sentiments embedded in the phrase *shug pa ri la bead nas ri la mchod* 'juniper cut from the mountain is burned to venerate the mountain' is followed – the spouse marrying-in brings with them property or cash that exceeds what has been paid as *pho rin* or *mo rin*.

Sa 'bud can refer to two very different situations – fleeing revenge, like my great-grandfather, and elopement. The practice of elopement leaves the parents of both sides in a passive situation, since the young couple has an agreement before they flee to the house of a friend or relative, who then becomes the messenger to inform the parents to prepare for negotiation. The news of Cousin's elopement

was a bolt from the blue. Uncle had been asking around about a son-in-law for about a year. Local villagers had gotten accustomed to this and imagined she would agree to whatever marriage her father arranged for her. Her disappearance raised many questions: What was the couple's plan? With whom had Sgrol ma eloped? Who were his parents?

The man Cousin had escaped with was thirty-eight year old Tshe ring. According to rumor, he was an ugly novice carpenter, had long hair, was a childless divorcee, had left his wife's home without so much as a needle, and had lived with a nomad girl for a year after his divorce.

Meanwhile, Tshe ring's brother and parents had forced their first daughter-in-law out of their home after she was unable to give birth again after her first son. Tshe ring's brother then found a woman from the next county and married her. Time passed and she drove her parents-in-law out of the home. Tshe ring then lived with his parents in an abandoned primary school building while constructing a new home nearby.

This information about Tshe ring and his family's colorful background further weakened Uncle's already tired, worn-out body. He called my father for a discussion. Father then took me and my brother to Uncle's home. Uncle was old enough to remember the earthquake that shook our county in 1973. Local wooden houses became famous for their resilience in the face of the earthquakes. Uncle's house is unique in the village because, unlike others, there is no ground floor for livestock. Uncle reasons that two-story wood houses are weaker than one-story houses during earthquakes.

When we reached Uncle's home, Aunt came out to greet us and open the courtyard gate. She had more white hair than the last time I had seen her, and her moist cheeks told us that she'd been weeping. When we entered the kitchen, I noticed felt rugs scattered on the floor. Uncle looked much darker and older than the last time I had seen him. He sat in a corner with a jug of home-made barley liquor and a big chunk of raw yak meat on a plate in front of him. It was obvious he had been drinking. Raw yak meat is a delicacy served at festivals to honored guests. Barley liquor is generally served with

raw yak meat. Today, however, festivity and joy seemed to be sadly absent.

He told Aunt to bring tea. I then looked more carefully at Aunt. Her upper body seemed to bend forward in a way that formed a right angle, as though she were being inexorably pulled to the center of the earth by the force of gravity. I then realized how terrible the process of aging is and what tragic consequences it has.

Uncle said, "A messenger came today and told us that Sgrol ma wishes to live in the man's home and serve his parents."

We could hardly believe our ears! Sgrol ma had been designated as the one to stay in her own parents' home and care for them. This was catastrophic news for Uncle and Aunt.

Uncle continued in a shaky voice, "I would like to hear my daughter confirm this. She fully understood that she was supposed to stay at home with us." Uncle felt terribly betrayed by his own daughter.

The timing of Sgrol ma's elopement was particularly difficult because Uncle's father – my grandfather – had passed away only five months earlier. His closest relatives now were to observe certain cultural taboos. For a year they should hold no celebrations – no weddings, and no New Year festivities. Any sort of celebration was strictly forbidden. The family could not even observe the ritual of mountain deity worship during that year, since the whole village celebrates after such rituals. Furthermore, those who touch a corpse should not enter the family shrine. Locals think that they have *lag btsog pa* 'polluted hands'. The deceased's close relatives also do not wash their hair and face during the forty-nine days after death, nor do they cut their hair or shave for a year.

The more we learned about Tshe ring, the surer we became that Sgrol ma she had been deceived rather than fallen in love. As this conviction grew stronger, we held some hope that she might return to her parents alone, or with Tshe ring.

Tradition dictated that a few of Tshe ring's closest relatives would come the next day to negotiate. After discussion, we agreed to send some of our relatives to visit Tshe ring's parents early the next morning to assume an aggressive role, rather than passively wait.

The next morning, Father and Uncle's older brother – who I will call Second Uncle – rode motorcycles along a zigzagging mountain road and crossed the river to visit Tshe ring's parents on the other side of the valley. When they arrived it was so early that the old parents had not yet gotten up. They quickly scrambled up and put on their clothes.

Father then put a bottle of liquor wrapped in a *kha dar*¹ on the table and said, "You two must have heard about the children's elopement. We have come to say that Sgrol ma's parents are very proud to have your son as a son-in law. We heard that you have your first son caring for you. Sgrol ma has been designated by her parents to serve them. We have come to take your son and Sgrol ma to her parents' home."

His parents silently stared at each other for a few seconds and then began to relate how they had been kicked out of their home by their son's wife and other pathetic stories we had heard before. After giving a detailed account of these miseries, they cunningly concluded, "This young couple has decided to live here and we feel we must honor their decision."

Three of Tshe ring's relatives had been chosen to visit Uncle and Aunt, but we had come first so their visit was no longer appropriate. After about an hour, Tshe ring's father received a phone call from one of those representatives and told him to come to his home. These three representatives then soon arrived with a bottle of liquor and a *kha dar*, which they tried to give Father and Second Uncle to take to Uncle. However, these two gifts were politely refused. Father and Second Uncle then left for the messenger's village where Sgrol ma and Tshe ring were staying to hear Sgrol ma's side of the story.

That village was located in a valley only twenty minutes on motorcycle from the old primary school. Cousin called the representative and told him to inform Sgrol ma to come meet them at the shrine the villagers had built at a spot just outside the village.

¹ Strip of ceremonial silk, i.e., *kha btags*. A bottle of liquor wrapped in a *kha dar*, when accepted, signifies acceptance of the proposal.

When Sgrol ma appeared, Second Uncle scolded, "How heartless of you to leave your parents like this! Your father worked so hard to raise you and the other two girls, and now this is how you repay him!" Sgrol ma lowered her head and said nothing. "Did you know that Tshe ring is second-hand goods?" he continued.

Sgrol ma raised her head in shock and asked, "Who told you that? He never said anything about that."

Realizing that Tshe ring had lied from the very beginning, she put her head between her knees and began weeping. At this point, we felt there was some hope she would return to her parents. We also pitied Sgrol ma, who had so obviously been deceived, and understood that we had to handle this matter very carefully. If Sgrol ma left for her parents' home without a word, then Tshe ring's relatives would probably come and ask for compensation, because she had broken the tacit agreement she had made by eloping with him.

Finally, there was agreement that Sgrol ma would talk to Tshe ring about what he had so conveniently omitted from his life story. Meanwhile, our side would continue negotiating with Tshe ring's relatives. Since Tshe ring had never told her about his first marriage, it seemed that there had not been a real elopement but a conspiracy. Representing the relationship in this way meant we would have a better chance to prevail in negotiations and then be compensated.

We returned and reported the whole story to the elders who were preparing for negotiations. They were upset to hear what had happened but still had hope. We thought it would be good for Sgrol ma to leave Tshe ring, who had been deceitful from the beginning. However, a call from Sgrol ma's older sister vanquished this hope. She said that Sgrol ma had called her and said that if she returned home, she would be considered used goods and would never be able to find a husband and, furthermore, villagers would denigrate her behind her back. Given these realities, Sgrol ma had opted to honor the elopement. This decision dishonored all her relatives, causing even more frustration.

The next day, Tshe ring's representatives came to Uncle's home. Since Sgrol ma had said she supported the agreement, our side could do little. Uncle was not in the mood for negotiation. He just

wanted to know clearly from the visitors if there was a matchmaker among them. Uncle said, "Tshe ring never told Sgrol ma that he had been married before. This convinces us that this is a conspiracy rather than an elopement. We think there must be a matchmaker who bragged about how nice Tshe ring is and how nice his family is for my girl. The oldest person from your family needs to swear that there was no matchmaker of any kind. Only then can we start negotiations."

Followed by a discussion on their side, they called Tshe ring because someone from this group needed to make an oath. After a break, they reassembled for further negotiation that centered on the issue of the matchmaker. An old man with a wrinkled face stroked his white beard and said, "We asked Tshe ring. He said that there was no matchmaker. As the oldest representative, I will swear an oath."

Locally, it is believed that there are terrible consequences to falsely swear an oath. Whoever swears such an oath will be born in Hell after their death and their tongue will be pulled until it is as long as a field and then plowed repeatedly. Given the seriousness of taking an oath, it occupies a central role in negotiations. Oaths can be made by holding a *bla ma's* picture over the head, holding a door handle of a monastery both parties respect, and so on. The negotiation at Uncle's home took place in the living room, which featured several images of *bla ma* and deities on the walls. The old man representing Tshe ring swore facing a picture of a *bla ma* hanging on the wall. As soon as the oath was finished, our side raised such questions as: "Was there a matchmaker of any sort, such as someone giving out Sgrol ma's or her family's phone number? This is also considered matchmaking."

The old man's face turned deathly pale at once and then he said, "I'm very sorry. Tshe ring told us that there was a man who gave him a phone number."

Uncle immediately asked the name of the man who had given the number, but they begged for forgiveness and refused to tell his name. Giving out phone numbers is common among young people, but this action also connotes matchmaking. Their side was afraid that revealing this man's name would lead to more conflict.

Uncle then phoned his oldest daughter and told her to call Sgrol ma for a clear answer, but the response was similar. It was clear that Sgrol ma, for whatever reasons, didn't want to specify the man's name. Though she might have been deceived, she understood that the wrong answer could set off a blood feud – there were plenty of local examples. Now she had to accept her fate by honoring the elopement agreement, and also suffer from the knowledge that her family had been terribly humiliated.

Sgrol ma called as negotiations continued. Uncle stood and went outside to talk to her. After several minutes, he returned and said, "My girl called. She told me she will honor the agreement no matter what." The negotiators from our side were suddenly deflated.

Unwilling to respond immediately, Uncle told the representatives from Tshe ring's side to come again the next day for another round of negotiation.

The next day's meeting was brief. Uncle asked for 20,000 RMB for *mo rin*, and 3,000 RMB for *nu rin*. Tshe ring's relatives agreed at once, though this exceeded the local record for such payments. The old man who had sworn the oath searched his pocket and pulled out 500 RMB and a *kha dar* as a gesture to ask for forgiveness for the false oath he had sworn the day before. Marriage negotiations usually have a happy ending. Everything seemed headed in this direction until Uncle abruptly announced, "Please inform my daughter not to cross the threshold of this home for three years. After three years, I will see what mood I'm in to arrange a dowry," who then concluded by swearing an oath.

Everyone was shocked.

He added, "Tell her to be happy with her choice, live wherever she chooses, and not to do anything that would lead me to break my oath."

Tshe ring's relatives then departed victoriously, but somewhat bitterly.

Everything returned to normal. The village was soon as quiet as ever. Our tempers cooled after accepting that Cousin had made her own decision. It was her life to decide, not her father's and, of course, not ours either.

Several days later, I heard a rumor making the rounds in the village. Sgrol ma had, it was said, told a friend, "Father and my uncles were looking for a husband for me all over the place for a year. It seemed nobody wanted to marry me. The rumors I heard about me made me so ashamed that I no longer wanted to stay in the village."

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

bla ma ལྷ་མ།

Brag 'go བྲག་འགོ།

bskyur zas བསྐྱུར་བསམ།

Chengdu 成都

go log ma གོ་ལོག་མ།

Huang 黄

kha btags ཁ་བཏགས།

kha dar ཁ་དར།

Ku'u sgang ཀུ་ལུ་སྐང།

lag btsog pa ལག་བཅོག་པ།

Lo sar ལོ་སར།

mna' bshags མནའ་བཤགས།

mna' མནའ།

mo rin མོ་རིན།

nu rin ལུ་རིན།

Nyag rong ཉག་རོང།

pho rin ཕོ་རིན།

Qinghai Normal University 青海师范大学

Rgya ri zhing རྒྱ་རི་ཞིང།

RMB 人民币

sa 'bud ས་འབུད།

Sgrol ma སྐྱོལ་མ།

Shis chu ཤེས་ཅུ།

shug pa ri la bcad nas ri la mchod ལུག་པ་རི་ལ་བཅད་ནས་རི་ལ་མཚོད།

Sichuan 四川

thang ga ཐང་ག།

Thub bstan ཐུབ་བསྟན།

Tshe ring ཚེ་རིང་།

Tudeng 土登

Wang 王

yuan 元

Zhang 张

zhe dgu ཞེ་དགུ།

Zhou 周