

REVIEW: *YESTERDAY'S TRIBE*

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Bstan pa yar rgyas བསྐྱལ་པ་ཡར་རྒྱལ།. 2014. *Kha sang gi tsho ba ཁ་སང་གི་ཚོ་བ།* [*Yesterday's Tribe*]. Zi ling ཟེ་ལིང་།: Mtsho ngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang མཚོ་ལྗོན་མི་རིགས་དབུ་སྐྱེན་ཁང་། [Mtsho ngon Nationalities Press]. 259pp. ISBN 978-7-5420-2375-9 (paperback 30RMB).

Bstan pa yar rgyas (b. 1962) was reared in a pastoral household in Byang thang (Changthang), Nag chu (Naqu) Prefecture, in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). A member of the China Writers Association and the Association of Ethnographic Photography, Bstan pa yar rgyas is currently employed by the Creation and Research Team of the TAR's Song and Dance Troupe. During his youth, he heard various folk narratives such as the Ge sar Epic from his uncle. He began school at the age of ten and became a teacher in Nag chu in 1981. In 1984, he enrolled in Tibet University where he started the student magazine, *Zla zer 'New Moon'*. In 1989, he returned to Nag chu as a teacher. In 1990, he shifted his work to the Nag chu Cultural Bureau where he conducted local ethnographic research and collected folklore and songs. In 1995, he became the chief editor of the local magazine *Byang thang*. In 2003, he moved to his current job.

A prolific writer in both Tibetan and Chinese, Bstan pa yar rgyas's first novel, *Khrag gi zags ma mkha' la 'phyo ba'i gangs ri dmar po'* 'A Red Snow Mountain Spraying Drops of Blood Towards the Sky', written in Tibetan, was serialized in *Tibet Culture and Art* from 1988 to 2000. In 2005, an offprint of this novel was republished as *Distant Nomad Tent*.<sup>1</sup>

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Kelsang Norbu. 2017. Review: *Yesterday's Tribe*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 45:9-15.

<sup>1</sup><https://goo.gl/oGsRR9>, accessed 27 August 2016.

Bstan pa yar rgyas's rich experiences and attachment to the local culture serve as his greatest inspirations for writing. Reviews of Bstan pa yar rgyas's earlier writings include Robin (2009-2010: 37-38):

*The Faraway Tent...* narrates the conflict among rival pastoral tribes in an unspecified past (possibly at the turn of the 20th century), through the turbulent destinies of Wangchen (Dbang chen), his second wife Omakyi ('O ma skyid), and his son Dradül (Dgra 'dul). Interspersed with well-rendered ethnological descriptions of nomadic folk culture with a focus on hunting and fighting, proverbs, and songs, it documents very satisfactorily the little-known life of Changthang (Byang thang) tribes before 1950. Its author, himself from a nomadic background in Nag chu, has a thorough inside knowledge of these communities and is a committed writer who regularly publishes realist fiction set in his native region, as well as ethnographic material that has become extremely precious as the nomadic way of life of the Changthang is doomed to undergo drastic changes within the next years.

Virtanen provides similar comments (2008: 244):

Most writings by Tenpa Yargyé deal with the life of the people of the Byang thang or Northern Plain, the high, cold region north of Lhasa where the vast majority of the population is engaged in nomadism. Foremost is the recently published novel *Thag ring gi sbra nag* (A distant nomad tent), also set in the Northern Plain and depicting the life of hunters. The main characters, Wangchen and his son Drandül, have left their home village and are wandering in the hostile and cold high plateau. They get their food by hunting. The culture of the hunters, their customs, beliefs, and songs, is described in naturalistic detail. The novel also contains hunting scenes and descriptions of taking revenge on enemies.

Neither of these summaries critically review the writer's work.

The author's most recent novel, *Yesterday's Tribe*, won the Junma Award.<sup>1</sup> Told in the third person and with striking similarities

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<sup>1</sup> "One of the four biggest national-level literary awards in China, Junma is

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to *A Distant Nomad Tent, Yesterday's Tribe* begins with a coming of age ritual for Rdo 'bum, a thirteen-year-old boy. Like his teenage peers who grow up on the Byang thang, Rdo 'bum is eager to be accepted as a man.

Chos dpal, the boy's father and head of a local tribe, fastens a red tassel to his son's braid, indicating that this young nomad's dream has now been realized, and tells him that he is no longer a youngster and must not shed tears. Instead, it is time he shouldered a real man's responsibilities and bravely faced all challenges: protecting the family's property - yaks and sheep, and the vast grassland upon which the family's wealth rests.

Bandits stealing livestock, fights between communities and tribes, and ferocious revenge attacks are common. Consequently, wealthy families must have the necessary manpower and arms to maintain their power and influence over others.

Rdo 'bum and his brother herd animals during a solar eclipse, after which the family realizes some of their yaks have been stolen. A "real man" should bring the stolen yaks back. This offers the opportunity for a man to prove himself, but there is also the possibility of danger. For a mother, wife, or sister, a man's pursuit of bandits is worrying.

No traces of the yaks are discovered and the pursuers return empty-handed, but not in total defeat. While chasing the bandits, they killed three, including the bandit leader, and captured six alive.

This violence to the bandits prepares the reader for the captives to be severely punished. Surprisingly, they are treated humanely. *Bla ma* are invited to conduct funerals for the deceased, a doctor treats the wounded, and food is generously offered to the others. When the tribe chiefs learn that these robbers are also "victims" - two new bandit gang members deceived them and disappeared with the stolen animals - the tribesmen's hatred towards these "victims" lessens. There is even sorrow and criticism in the tribe for what is seen as the unnecessary

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the premier award for literary works among ethnic minority groups" (<https://goo.gl/rzbdif>, accessed 24 August 2016).

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killing of the bandit head, who in death, has earned a certain respect for his bravery.

Through such conundrums, the writer seems to be maintaining a respect for human kindness and respect for human life. There is stealing, there is fighting, there is robbery and looting, and there is revenge killing. Yet, these Plateau nomads show respect for nature and life. For example, during the night attack on the bandits' tents, the chief of the pursuers repeatedly tells his men to avoid unnecessary killing. When wildlife such as antelope are hunted for subsistence, the hunters pray, expressing regret for taking lives. This duality derives from their need to survive as well as a strong faith in Buddhism.

In this reality-based fiction, the author provides rich narratives of life on the Byang thang, such as how a tribe is formed and maintained by a network of relatives and marriage, the generally harmonious relationship between master and servant, wedding and funeral rituals, summer horseraces, and polyandry, which is a well-accepted practice in the area. Detailed descriptions of what I have just listed provide a wealth of ethnographic materials.

One incident seems out of place, however, in this novel grounded in reality: a group of hunters chases and shoots at wildlife, which they plan to eat. This disturbs a meditating hermit, who warns one of the hunters and then flies away like a vulture!

The plot follows a simple storyline of chasing bandits and searching for stolen yaks by tribesmen. While it has certain details in the first half or so, the story becomes rushed towards the end with fewer details. The narrative ends without a climax.

The last chapter, "Conspiracy," is a particular disappointment: tribe leaders decide to purchase guns and ammunition from Muslim traders to better protect their grassland. The payment is generous. It includes thousands of lambskins, dozens of musk deer glands, dozens of deer antlers, hundreds of fox and lynx skins, thousands of silver coins, and numerous yak tails. The trading proceeds smoothly with the two sides exchanging gifts and expressing interest in future cooperation in business, despite the herders' discomfort with the way the alien visitors slaughter livestock for their food.

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After enjoying the herders' generous hospitality, the traders depart with the goods they have received and eventually pitch their tents when it comes time to rest. *Bang! Bang!* Gunshots ring out. The traders poke their heads out of their tents to figure out what is happening. They soon lose their lives in an attack by the nomads they have just traded with.

This is a real *conspiracy!* But then there comes a simple question: who are the schemers? Readers may be confused in trying to answer this.

From the storyline's simple logic, it was the Tibetan herders who betrayed the merchants, which contradicts the sense the novel has established up to this point and ruins the theme of the herders' morality - the humane characteristics in the hearts of these Plateau inhabitants.

Besides the unsatisfying conclusion, there are other details that the author treats without adequate attention. The lost yaks and the two bandits who deceived their fellow bandits are mentioned several times as the story unfolds, but simply no longer exist at the end.

Another incomplete side story is why the tribe purchases sophisticated arms from the Muslim traders. Supposedly it is to expel the well-equipped "bandits" and their large numbers of yaks and horses who trespass on their tribal grassland. These outsiders even steal the tribe's yaks. While readers expect a brutal revenge on the bandits with the newly-gained, advanced weapons, nothing happens. These shortcomings illustrate how the author might have given more careful thought to plot development.

In terms of character creation, the author gives only vague images using direct description or dialogue about the main characters' attributes. Details such as their age, likes and dislikes, let alone their internal world, remain ambiguous. This prevents the reader from having more than a superficial impression of the leading characters.

The time the novel is set in is also unclear. It is hard to guess the specific time of *yesterday* in which the tribe lives. There are a few clues, e.g., firelock rifles, the arrival of more advanced guns, a trader's pocket watch that greatly interests the herders, and the herders' first

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experience of choking on spicy chilies brought by Muslim traders. These clues point to the first half of the twentieth century.

This lack of clarity in time is something Virtanen (2008:244) notes:

While reading *A Distant Nomad Tent* I could not at first determine when the events were taking place. Only toward the end of the narrative is there a clue: as Wangchen's son Drandül joins the Tibetan troops on their way to oppose the intruders, there is a mention of the British armed mission to Tibet, which was commanded by Colonel Francis Younghusband in 1903-4. Thus the book is set in a period when man was very much part of nature, void of modern technology (except guns).

This story will not sit well with those most comfortable with "old Tibet" (pre-1950) depicted as a bleak, backward, and savage society of exploitation and oppression by the landed gentry - exploiters and enemies of the people. With a large dose of human compassion, *Yesterday's Tribe* depicts life with more nuance. This, and the rich description of highland culture, constitutes this novel's special value. Readers seeking to learn more about local customs in Nag chu and how it includes and excludes the exercise of human morality - depending on the context and the reader's interpretation - will find this novel rewarding.

#### REFERENCES

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- Virtanen, Riika J. 2008. *Development and Urban Space in Contemporary Tibetan Literature* in Lauran R Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (eds) *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 236-262.

## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

bla ma ལྷ་མ།

bstan pa yar rgyas, Tenpa Yargyé བསྐྱེན་པ་ཡར་རྒྱལ།

byang thang བྱང་ཐང་།

chos dpal ཚོས་དཔལ།

ge sar གེ་སར།

Gesang Nuobu 格桑诺布

Junma 骏马

kha sang gi tsho ba ཁ་སང་གི་ཚོ་བ།

khrag gi zegs ma mkha' la 'phyo ba'i gangs ri dmar po ཁྲག་གི་ཟེགས་མ་མཁའ་ལ་

འཕྲོ་བའི་གངས་རི་དམར་པོ།

nag chu ནག་ཚུ།

Naqu 那曲

rdo 'bum རྡོ་འབུམ།

skal bzang nor bu སྐལ་བཟང་ནོར་བུ།

thag ring gi sbra nag ཐག་རིང་གི་སྤྲ་ནག

zla zer ལྷ་ཟེར།