

REVIEW: *MY TWO FATHERS*

Reviewed by Sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱས་བཀྲ་ཤིས། (Duke University)



Tshe ring don 'grub. 2014. ཚེ་རིང་དོན་འགྲུབ། Nga yi a pha gnyis ང་ཡི་ཨ་ཕ་བཞིམ། [*My Two Fathers*]. Zi ling ཟི་ལིང་། Mthso sngon mi rigs dpe skrin khang མཚོ་སྐོན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱུན་ཁང། [Mthso sngon Nationalities Press]. 267 pp. ISBN 978-7-5420-2359-9 (paperback 31RMB)

Tshe ring don 'grub, officially classified as a Mongolian, was born 13 October 1961 in Sog (Henan) Mongolian Autonomous County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. He herded livestock until he was thirteen and then attended school where he studied Tibetan and Chinese for about eight years. Afterwards, he became a middle school teacher. Since early retirement in 2013, he has specialized in literary creation. Several of his short stories, novellas, and novels, written originally in Tibetan, have been translated into Mongolian, English, French, German, Japanese, Swedish, and Hungarian. Some have been used as textbooks in Tibetan and Mongolian areas.¹

Btsun po don 'grub (2014:231-236) comments that Tshe ring don 'grub uses his personal experiences to represent ordinary people's lives in Tibetan herding areas in A mdo. While summarizing publications about Tshe ring don 'grub's literary works, Btsun po don 'grub also describes Tshe ring don 'grub's family, education, and work experiences; the uniqueness of his writings and how he has been influenced by other writers. Btsun po don 'grub (2014:6) notes that the first analytical paper written in Tibetan about Tshe ring don 'grub's stories was *Bde zhing yangs pa'i lam chen zhig* 'A Big Wide Happy Road' by Skal bzang don grub, which was published by *Sbrang char* 'Light Rain' in 1985. Btsun po don 'grub lists thirty-nine Tibetan, three

Sangs rgyas bkra shis. 2017. Review: *My Two Fathers*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 45:16-38.

¹ The author provided this information to me through WeChat in April 2016.

Chinese, and two English articles about Tshe ring don 'grub's stories, collectively indicative of his stature in the world of modern Tibetan literature.

Tshe ring don 'grub's works have also been noticed outside of China. For example, Lama Jabb (2015:225) reports that in 2012, Tshe ring don 'grub expressed admiration for writers such as Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, George Orwell, and Salman Rushdie whose works he had read in Chinese translation. Robin (2009-2010:39-40) describes Tshe ring don 'grub as an experienced, radical, and productive Tibetan author with a decided irreverence for religion and tradition. Earlier, Hartley and Pema Bhum (2001:59) described his writing as "biting satire of social corruption and pettiness" and wielding "literary talents to cut through the muck of samsara and expose the hypocrisy of individuals as well as the wounds of social ills."

Interestingly, Tshe ring don 'grub's works have lacked appeal to a Mongolian readership. Yangdon Dhondup (2002:234) explains this rejection:

His [Tshe ring don 'grub's] explanation for this rejection was that his works revolve entirely around a Tibetan lifestyle and was therefore too remote for the Mongolian-speaking readership. ... Tsering Dondup summed up the situation of the people from Sogpo when he said: 'My bones are Mongolian, but I've spent my whole life speaking Tibetan, and all I've ever known has been Tibetan culture.'

The narrator of *My Two Fathers* is Bla ma skyabs, whose name appears only at the novel's end. The story is divided into three parts, each having twenty-five chapters, and is told in a series of flashbacks. In this review, I have rearranged events to make the novel easier for the reader to understand. Although the relationship between the narrator's (Bla ma skyabs) two fathers is clarified only at the end of the story, I want to make this clear now: the narrator's biological father is Ting 'dzin, who did not know he had a son for many years. Bsam 'phel, the narrator's second father, married the narrator's mother and cared

for the narrator throughout his life. I will explain this unusual relationship in more detail later.

The story begins with vivid description of the two fathers' different physical features and personalities. Bsam 'phel has very small eyes, is reticent, and exudes quiet honesty that often attracts women. In contrast, handsome Ting 'dzin has large eyes and is talkative. Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin were neighbors, grew up together, ate together, were so attached to each other that they slept under one sheepskin quilt, and herded jointly.

However, their respective families had very different backgrounds in terms of politics and finances. Ting 'dzin's father, Byams pa, was the only local government employee, the only local with a wristwatch and a radio, and was very devoted to the Communist Party. Byams pa believed that the most glorious act was to love Communism and venerate Chairman Mao. These beliefs paved his way to obtaining a government job, good horses, and rifles which he used to hunt antelope, blue sheep, and spotted deer.

Byams pa agrees that his son should attend school in order to eventually become a government employee. However, when Ting 'dzin finishes junior middle school, Byams pa advises:

Now you don't need to go to school. Look at me - I can barely read the Tibetan alphabet, but I am a leader of government employees. The most important thing to do is to be sincere and faithful to the Party. Don't you want to soon have excellent guns and great horses quickly? (7)

Nevertheless, Ting 'dzin continues to attend school.

In contrast, Bsam 'phel is from an ordinary family that suffered a great deal during the Cultural Revolution. Bsam 'phel's father had clandestinely gone to Lha ris Mountain one dark night to get medicinal water for his ill son. Heavy rain and fog meant that he was unable to return home until the next morning. Before he reached his home, government employees noticed he had a container of water and surmised he had been to fetch medicinal water. He was then charged

with engaging in superstitious activity, blacklisted, and punished for the crime of stealing government property - the medicinal water.

When Bsam 'phel hears that Ting 'dzin is attending school, he runs to his father and implores him to allow him to attend with his friend. His father refuses, leaving Bsam 'phel sad and lonely.

Bsam 'phel is fascinated by Ting 'dzin's engrossing stories about school, his blue school uniform, Young Pioneer¹ Red Scarf, and black shoes with plastic soles. Bsam 'phel has never seen or heard of such things and his desire to go to school intensifies. He and his mother repeatedly entreat his father to allow him to go to school. Finally exhausted by their entreaties, the father agrees, though he still can see no value in attending.

Ting 'dzin is delighted when he learns that Bsam 'phel will attend school, partly because older students bully him. Each time a new student enrolls in the school, some older students come out, one after another, from their dormitory rooms and glare at the new students, intimidating them, and even cruelly beating them. For example, on Bsam 'phel's first day at school, Thick Mouth Bsam 'grub, who often bullies Ting 'dzin, comes and gives each new student a nickname, such as Black-as-a-Pot and Cunt Mouth, and a hard slap.

Thick Mouth Bsam 'grub approaches Bsam 'phel, who is sitting on his bed, and exclaims in surprise, "A tsi! Are there really such small eyes like yours in the world? No! Those are not eyes but assholes" (26). Just as he is about to deliver a slap, Bsam 'phel kicks Thick Mouth Bsam 'grub's scrotum with his leather shoes, sending his tormentor tumbling to the floor, writhing in agony, biting his lower lip, and squeezing his eyes closed. A few minutes later when he is able to move, he grabs at Bsam 'phel's scrotum, whereupon Ting 'dzin hits Bsam 'grub's head twice with a stick. Bsam 'grub then falls unconscious.

¹ "Pioneers" in this context refers to the Chinese Communist Party's organization for children aged seven to twelve - Little Red Pioneers (Woronov 2007:647). Beginning in the 1950s, June the First in China has been observed as International Children's Day. A day of games, songs, and presentations, it has also been a time, since the early 1980s, for ceremonies inducting the nation's first grade students into the Little Red Pioneers (Woronov 2007:648).

Ting 'dzin and Bsam phel are taken to school on the back of yaks or horses. When ready to return home, they wait by the road, asking passing drivers for a lift. Sometimes they must walk home.

Bsam 'phel loves Children's Day because everybody wears new clothes and new shoes, receives candy and various food that they generally have only during Lo sar 'Tibetan New Year', participate in related singing and dancing events, and watch movies at night. Importantly, Young Pioneer members have red scarves tied around their necks and together sing "We are the heirs of Communism."

Once on Children's Day, when the students are singing, "We are the heirs of Communism," Stobs ldan, the knowledgeable, kind, and humorous school vice-headmaster laughs, and comments that it is surprising that the heirs of Communism have arrived while Communism has not. Soon after, Stobs ldan is jailed for this remark and two years later he becomes the school's swine caretaker.

In the winter, all the students receive winter clothes, except for Bsam 'phel and three other students whose families are also blacklisted. Reflecting on this situation, Bsam 'phel can find no reason for his family's political classification, other than the incident of his father fetching medicinal water from Lha ris Mountain and an uncle who opposed putting his family's property in a communal warehouse. The uncle had been subsequently incarcerated and, in 1958, he died in prison. Bsam 'phel hates this uncle and wishes there was a way he could erase this relationship so that he can better fit in and find a government job when he graduates.

The blacklisting means that no matter how excellent his school marks, Bsam 'phel will never receive a red scarf nor a school uniform. Discouraged and marginalized, Bsam 'phel concludes that he can never become a government employee no matter how hard he studies. At the same time, his father encourages him to return home and scolds that he should never have attended school in the first place.

Meanwhile, Ting 'dzin obtains a Young Pioneer scarf and joins the Young Pioneers.

When Stobs ldan hears that Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin have been promoted based on their good study results, he asks them to visit

his room. He lends them books that he has hidden in the ceiling and teaches them privately, warning them to keep the books a secret.

Stobs ldan explains that the purpose of attending school is neither to receive new clothes nor a red scarf, but to learn new and useful knowledge. Though Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin are unable to precisely identify what that is, they find something admirable and respectful about Stobs ldan. They study the Ge sar Epic, Tibetan history, Tibetan grammar, and various Chinese books under Stobs ldan's tutelage.

After Ting 'dzin and Bsam 'phel finish junior middle school, they are at a loss. Ting 'dzin wants to continue his schooling, while Bsam 'phel comments that attending school when teachers will not come to class regularly is a waste of time. Instead, he expresses a desire to be a primary school teacher if his family can solve the political classification problem.

They consult Stobs ldan, who urges them to continue to go to school. He promises to introduce them to some of his friends at senior middle school who can help them.

Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin attend the prefecture nationalities school where the food is terrible and where their nice clothes are stolen

After the Cultural Revolution, Stobs ldan is invited to teach students whose families had political classification problems so that they can receive their diplomas. Everything is changing.

Stobs ldan writes to a responsible teacher, 'Phags pa thar, and asks him to take care of Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin. 'Phags pa thar then often brings bread to Ting 'dzin and Bsam 'phel. When the lights are turned off in the classroom, the two boys go to 'Phags pa thar's room and study. They are the hardest working students in the class. Their head teacher orders them to help the lower level students with their study.

Bsam 'phel helps Kun bzang lha mo, who one day suddenly puts her arms around Bsam 'phel, sobs quietly, and confides that her family sent her to her groom's home a month earlier. Meanwhile, her husband visits his girlfriend every night and viciously scolds Kun bzang lha mo, who soon stops attending school.

Many students cheat on the examinations and consequently, Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin do not earn scores that are higher than others, which discourages them from caring about exam marks. They do, however, read whatever materials they can find. After reading a great deal, Bsam 'phel hones an ability to analyze ideas carefully.

Bsam 'phel's lack of interest in math and school activities angers his head teacher. When Bsam 'phel tells the teacher how wrong the school education system is, the head teacher suggests to the school that Bsam 'phel should be expelled for his arrogance.

Ting 'dzin is the leader of the student union and is often busy giving talks. Bsam 'phel suggests that if he really cares about the students, Ting 'dzin should write a letter to the school leaders about improving school food and hygiene. Subsequently, all the students are asked to put a fingerprint on the letter Ting 'dzin writes to the school leaders. This angers the school leaders, who scold Ting 'dzin. However, when they try to replace him as the leader of the student union, the students unite in declaring that if this happens they will leave the school. Consequently, Ting 'dzin retains his position.

Teacher 'Phags pa thar takes Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin to his home and shows them his family shrine that features 1,000-year-old copper images, *thang ka*, many volumes of scriptures, and offering bowls filled with pure water. Until now they had only heard of such objects from elders. 'Phags pa thar explains that those sacred objects are from his ancestors and that his family buried them during the Cultural Revolution. Ting 'dzin and Bsam 'phel are keenly interested in these mysterious objects, an interest that leads them to a monastery near the school where many students go to prostrate and circumambulate when final exams are approaching.

Though parts of the monastery buildings were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, most of the sacred objects inside survived intact. An old monk introduces images of various deities that the two boys had heard elders pray to. Later, the boys often visit the monastery and study with a monk who is an expert on *thang ka* painting, which Bsam 'phel asks the monk to teach him. The monk agrees, but when Bsam 'phel brings an oil painting of a Greek Venus

and says that he wants to combine oil painting and *thang ka* production to create a distinctive Sarasvati,¹ the monk is shocked. He angrily says, "I thought you were a clever young nomad, but you are a lunatic. Don't ever come to me again" (112).

Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin both value college life, but believe a college education is something unattainable, especially when they see few students pass the college entrance examinations, despite intense preparations. However, to their surprise they both pass. When Stobs ldan inquires what major they will choose, Bsam 'phel replies that he wants to study education or literature.

"That's a good choice and Ting 'dzin could be good at education and other issues, including politics. This is a difference between you two," Stobs ldan observes (140).

The college is very large with plenty of places to sit and study, including a free library. It is also a place where money can buy anything. The two young men also meet students from agricultural areas who have better Chinese but poor written Tibetan, and students from herding areas who are unable to either read or pronounce Chinese Pinyin correctly.

Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin spend most of their time studying, except on weekends when they both write poetry, earning money from publishers that helps to support their lives in school. Bsam 'phel is obsessed with reading and writing poetry and ignores most school activities.

Ting 'dzin, as the leader of the student union, tells Bsam 'phel to join more activities. Bsam 'phel replies that they are not in primary school and college students should have the freedom to do what they want. He then criticizes the school system and urges Ting 'dzin to write about the school's terrible education system.

Ting 'dzin ignores this.

¹ The goddess, Sarasvati, the Goddess of Learning and the consort of Brahma, is the source of all knowledge. Many students and scholars worship her. She is often depicted sitting on a lotus, symbolizing her foundation in the experience of the Absolute Truth (<http://goo.gl/DWkHSj>, accessed 7 July 2016).

Time passes and they are about to graduate. Bsam 'phel loves his college life. About this time, he recalls that Stobs ldan had told him that many sutras written in silver and gold were in the library, but during the Cultural Revolution, they were burned. Thinking there might be some such books in the library, Bsam 'phel goes to check.

Pa sangs sgrol ma, a librarian, shows Bsam 'phel a basement storehouse. After searching but finding nothing very old nor interesting, Bsam 'phel is disappointed and prepares to leave. Pa sangs sgrol ma then shows him a version of *Jinpingmei 'The Plum in the Golden Vase'*, which is at least a hundred years old and features illustrations of various erotic passages. Pa sangs sgrol ma and Bsam 'phel are so stimulated that they embrace, kiss, and have sex.

Pa sangs sgrol ma tells Bsam 'phel that he can take the book with him but he declines, saddened that he could not locate any Tibetan books. Pa sangs sgrol ma insists that since *Jinpingmei* is not on any booklist, he can take it and Bsam 'phel finally agrees. This becomes his most precious possession.

Eventually both Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin graduate from college. Ting 'dzin finds a job as a member of a government organization in the county town while Bsam 'phel opts to be a teacher in a nationalities middle school and teaches Tibetan. Ting 'dzin angrily accuses Bsam 'phel of being a fool for wanting to simply be an ordinary teacher, never even dreaming of owning a car.

After some years, Ting 'dzin sees the place where he lives and works as a cemetery and, desperately wanting to live in the city, decides to do a graduate degree.

Meanwhile, Bsam 'phel is often busy with his students at the local nationalities middle school. Painfully aware of how ineffective the education system is, he talks to the headmaster, who replies, "Bad students are always bad no matter how good our education management"(185).

During the same conversation, the headmaster hands Bsam 'phel some application forms for nominating the best teachers in the county. The headmaster wants Bsam 'phel to nominate him in a recommendation letter exaggerating how effective the country

education system is. Bsam 'phel refuses. As punishment, the headmaster orders him to teach more classes, which Bsam 'phel enjoys.

Nevertheless, the heavy workload takes its toll and he collapses in class. His students take him to the hospital where he meets a beautiful nurse, Lha kho, who is so shy that at first she is unable to look at him directly. Bsam 'phel comments that she seems very familiar and Ting 'dzin reminds him that she is their former classmate who often wore a tattered sheepskin robe because her family's political classification meant she was not given a school uniform.

Time passes and Bsam 'phel and Lha kho become so intimate that when she helps him pack the day before he is to be discharged from the hospital, Bsam 'phel asks her where she stays. He adds that he would like to visit her that night. Lowering her head, she gives him her room's address.

Bsam 'phel demonstrates how he will knock on her door at eleven in the evening, and later tells Ting 'dzin about his appointment with the nurse, where she lives, and how he intends to rap on the door.

About twenty minutes before the appointed time, Ting 'dzin is returning home. He suddenly recalls what Bsam 'phel told him. To have some fun, he goes to the nurse's room and raps on the door exactly as Bsam 'phel demonstrated. Lha kho opens the door and races back to her bed without looking. Unable to control his sexual desire, Ting 'dzin has sex with her.

About twenty minutes later, there is another knock on the door. It is Bsam 'phel. Only then does Lha kho realize the man in her bed is Ting 'dzin.

While studying for a graduate degree, Ting 'dzin meets the beautiful daughter of an important government official. She is known as the "School Flower." With her assistance, Ting 'dzin publishes a collection of his poetry for which he receives a payment. He easily composes an MA thesis, which is largely a copy of Ge sar-related materials and some disorganized comments. Given the cultural value assigned the Ge sar epic, no one is willing to say that what he wrote is unacceptable.

Bsam 'phel visits Ting 'dzin's home and chats with Ting 'dzin's father but, as he is an ordinary teacher, everybody considers him a failure and gives him little attention. His friend, Mgon po,¹ advises him to try to become a leading official in the county town, given his connections, but Bsam 'phel refuses.

Bsam 'phel is so concerned about his students that he even looks for them on the weekends in internet-bars and brings them back to school. He is tired of the school headmaster and has little communication with his family, who decides he is possessed by an evil spirit and invites a religious practitioner to perform an exorcism.

One day, Lha kho visits Bsam phel, asks about Ting 'dzin's whereabouts, and confides that she is pregnant. Bsam 'phel, feeling sorry for Lha kho and also responsible, believing that he should not have told Ting 'dzin about their appointment, offers to marry her. She agrees. The child is Bla ma skyabs, the narrator of this novel, whose biological father is Ting 'dzin, whom Bsam 'phel does not inform in fear of disturbing his study.

Ting 'dzin is predictably awarded his graduate degree and then arranges for a university position through his connections. He is so frequently invited to meetings that he does little work. When the meeting is about Tibetan traditional culture, he says how important it is and how everyone should learn from it. If the meeting is about Tibetan poetry, he lectures about how Tibetan poetry is the best poetry in the world and how everybody should learn from it.

Later, he marries A mtsho mo, an important surgeon in a large provincial hospital. One day, she complains about a poor patient who

¹ Mgon po was Ting 'dzin and Bsam 'phel's former classmate who was known for bedwetting. He was known simply as "Bedwetter" and slept on a bunk above Bsam 'phel. "A *ha wo!* 'Father's flesh!' Bedwetter peed on me again!" Bsam 'phel shouts while Mgon po pretends to sleep. "Bedwetter! Get up! Bedwetter needs my fists again," Bsam 'phel bellows at midnight (36). Feeling frustrated and angry, Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin tie Mgon po's penis with a wire and Bsam 'phel warns him that he will cut off his penis at the root if he unties it before sunrise. That night, though not one drop of pee falls on Bsam 'phel, Mgon po screams horribly before dawn with a penis so painfully swollen that the wire is no longer visible.

gives presents of lower-than-expected value to the doctors, who then remove only half of the patient's tumor. A mtsho mo also tells Ting 'dzin that they let a patient die because they did not have enough funds to pay for the medical expenses.

Ting 'dzin is shocked and scolds his wife for being heartless. In return, she curses him, and points out that he gives high marks and easy diplomas to students who give him a lot of money. Afterwards, the two are at total odds.

Bsam 'phel reads various books to learn more about the Tibetan education situation, but realizes later that this information is incorrect because money allows people to publish anything. And, without money, even if you write something meaningful and important, nobody cares. Bsam 'phel then visits various areas to research Tibetan education and reaches conclusions that are very different from what he has read.

Bsam 'phel wants to publish his own book but he cannot pay for it, so he asks Ting 'dzin for help. Ting 'dzin suggests that if he lacks influence with the publishers or money he could put a famous writer's name on the book. He adds that nobody cares about a middle school teacher's book and nobody would buy it if it were published. Bsam 'phel suggests that the book be published under both their names and hands his handwritten manuscript to Ting 'dzin, who promises to consider it.

Bsam 'phel also gives his precious *Jinpingmei* to Ting 'dzin, who complains that he cannot be promoted because he needs to bribe his leaders with a lot of money or a valuable relic.

Bsam 'phel returns to his school and soon after starts to feel sick. He becomes progressively thinner. His son goes with him for a health check and the results show that he has only a short time to live. Bsam 'phel dies some days later.

After reading the manuscript, Ting 'dzin admires Bsam 'phel's knowledge and research. When he hears that his friend has died, he recalls Bsam 'phel's suggestion that they be co-authors. But Ting 'dzin thinks:

Dear Friend Bsam 'phel, now this book can't help you and it can help me a lot. If this is published under your name, it will cost a lot, but if it is published under my name, it will cost less. To realize your dream, I will publish it and publicize it throughout society (247).

Feeling sad that his father died before the book was published, the narrator resolves to realize Bsam 'phel's dream. Then, to his astonishment, he hears a TV announcement that *Tibetan Cultural Education Path* has been published under Ting 'dzin's name. Many scholars take note of the book and some readers wonder about the identity of the real author.

The narrator calls Ting 'dzin and asks if he published his father's book.

Ting 'dzin hangs up. Later he wants to confess, but his wife forbids him to do so.

Bla ma skyabs takes Ting 'dzin to court and produces many records demonstrating that the book was written by his father, Bsam 'phel. Ting 'dzin subsequently loses his job after which nobody wants to help him. Ting 'dzin's wife then forces him to divorce. Later, Ting 'dzin learns that his wife is now dating the leader of the hospital where his wife works.

Ting 'dzin fills out the divorce forms and asks A mtsho mo who should care for their daughter. His wife suggests that they leave that decision to their daughter, who informs them that she wants neither of them to care for her, but she does need the family savings, home, and car.

A mtsho mo angrily reproaches, "You are going too far - we took care of you from the time you were an infant to now, paid for your schooling, and made connections to provide you a job. Are you forgetting all of this?" (254)

"I did not ask for any of this - I just borrowed your uterus. It's all what you should do," (254) the daughter replies. A mtsho mo and her daughter quarrel so loudly it seems the house will explode. Ting 'dzin wants to disappear from that place as quickly as possible.

It is the first day of the first lunar month and everybody is celebrating Lo sar 'Tibetan New Year'. Ting 'dzin is the only guest in a big hotel. He recalls the days when he was barefoot on the grassland with Bsam 'phel and the only thing that covered them from their navel to their thigh was sheepskin.

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This tangled, emotive story reflects the reality of Tibetan youth in Amdo herding areas in the 1980s, a reality that in 2016 has changed little. I would like to comment on the two main characters in terms of the different directions their lives took and their relationship with each other, the local state-sponsored education, Tibetan traditional values and marriage restrictions, violence in schools, sexual encounters, and language.

Ting 'dzin and Bsam 'phel grow up as neighbors and attend school through university together, but later their lives take very different trajectories. Bsam 'phel is honest, direct, and loyal. His life experiences help him comprehend the daunting reality of a society characterized by an ineffective, brutal state education system; personal relationships informed by self-interest; the critical importance of having an official government position that brings power and benefits; and social institutions driven by the profit motive rather than public service.

Bsam 'phel's experiences and observations convince him that a leadership position brings power to manipulate others, but generally not positively. Bsam 'phel is not alone in his understanding of the deficiencies of the education system, which are widely understood, but considered so much a part of an intractable system that they cannot be solved. Inspired by the possibility of developing a quality education system, however elusive, and motivated by a sense of compassion and the prospect of making positive differences, he researches education in Tibetan areas and eventually writes a book on the topic. He has little interest in accumulating money and is oblivious to others' expectations.

Despite having had a number of years of education Bsam 'phel does not live in a city, own a car, nor have an official position with power means. This means that he is generally considered a failure. It

is a telling comment on the reasons locals want their children to attend school - which are to obtain the very things Bsam 'phel rejects.

In contrast, Ting 'dzin is at the center of social activities and, with this as his passion, thinks about little else. He makes a great deal of money, attains a position of leadership with all its benefits and social prestige, and lives in a city, thus earning the admiration of those living in his local community who consider him a model of success, especially since he is one of the very few locals with such achievements. Nevertheless, he loses everything in the end, painfully learning that modern society operates based on who and how you manipulate others for your own benefit.

Despite the stark differences in these two characters, the relationship between Ting 'dzin and Bsam 'phel remains steadfast, based on a shared past in a traditional world where personality creates sincere love, sharing different life moments, a long time of being together, and a willingness and ability to overlook differences.

In terms of the education system, the author vividly describes the negatives. The violence in the schools depicted in this novel is also within my experience. Other references also illustrate this sad situation well, e.g., a particularly striking description by Karma Dondrub (2013:80-83):

Miss Li was my Chinese teacher. She was twenty-five, very arrogant, and regularly denigrated students from poor families and students whose parents did not work in government offices. I was from a simple nomad family, and immediately became a target of her mistreatment. I am not sure if she was really a bad person, but she always got angry at me whenever I did anything wrong. Every time she entered the classroom, I visualized her angry-looking face without looking at her. Before she beat me, she always praised certain students whose parents worked for the government, although there was really nothing to praise. Then she mercilessly beat my bottom with her stick. That made me homesick more than anything else.

Numerous other authors including Kondro Tsering (2007), Pad ma rin

chen (2013), Pema kyī (2015), G. yu 'brug and Stuart (2012), Rin chen rdo rje (2011), Tshes bcu lha mo (2013), Tsering Bum (2013), and Sonom Doomtso (2012) similarly give accounts of children bullying other students, and children being beaten by teachers in primary schools.

I have heard it argued that Tibetans fighting with other tribes or communities to protect their livestock and land has a long historical precedent. One must have the ability to protect property otherwise others will come and take it. The cultural meaning of masculinity, to fight and win and protect one's own family, tribe, and property; and the cultural imperative to overpower others (before they overpower you) are embedded in children and then manifest in bullying at school.

However, in this novel the primary explanation for children-on-children violence is the education system and within that, the school's poor management system. Rural schools in Amdo, especially in herding areas, were considered dumping grounds for teachers who broke rules, were disobedient to leaders, and were generally considered incompetent. They were sent here as punishment. Consequently, these teachers were generally unhappy with life, poorly supervised, and brutal to students.

Based on my experience as a student at Shes rig nor bu'i gling (Ra rgya School) from 2005 to 2011, I am convinced that a better education system is possible. Students from across all Tibetan areas in China attended this school and I cannot recall a single incident of student bullying. Most teachers were volunteers and very responsible. Their teachings of Buddhist ideas such as compassion to others influenced the students to be kind, care for younger students, and respect senior students. Corporal punishment was used, but lightly and generally only after a student had been warned three times.

Tshe ring don 'grub also reflects on the traditional marriage norms that restrict access to education. For example, Kun bzang lha mo is a brilliant student, but her family sends her to the groom's home after she finishes junior middle school. This resonates with my own experiences and observations. My parents (father, b. 1963; mother, b. 1963) married when they were fifteen. My mother did not know she

was engaged until fifteen days before her wedding ceremony. In another example, one of my former classmates was married while he was in senior middle school. Unbeknown to him, his family had prepared the wedding ceremony and were waiting for him when he returned home during the winter vacation.

Many parents also were not keen on their children attending school. Many students, unable to finish school, did not want to herd when they returned home. Older boys, for example, were given to wandering away from home, drinking, and playing billiards. Parents did not want their children to attempt to wrest money from them, and learn to be disobedient and disrespectful at school.

Parents also worried that their children would be hungry or poorly fed at school, that they would be ill and no one would properly care for them, and that teachers would beat them.

The author also suggests that children who manage to obtain an education in the state education system are mostly like Ting 'dzin - self-centered and adept at manipulating others through, for example, the skillful use of bribes. This is an outcome of the rule-centered, inflexible, and authoritarian modern education system.

The writer describes important national activities in a child's early education such as the Young Pioneers. Students loved this special day because they received special food treats, a Young Pioneer Red Scarf, a new school uniform, and they could participate in performances. However, this event was also used to stigmatize and essentially punish certain students' families who were blacklisted and consequently, whose children received nothing. Such students felt guilty and hated their family.

Woronov (2007) describes Chinese Children's Day as an institutional movement that produces national subjects:

The Little Red Pioneers, the Chinese Communist Party's organization for children aged 7-12, seem anachronistic in China today. This article argues that the Pioneer organization, rather than being an outdated relic of the nation's Maoist past, provides insight into contemporary Chinese nationalism, particularly the theoretical question of how children are

produced as national subjects. Based in Butler's concept of performativity, this article argues that children's nationalism in China is performed through daily activities and practices structured by the Little Red Pioneers (647).

Chinese Children's Day influences students' concept of self-identity and their life goals. For minorities, it is a strategy to inculcate a sense of national identity at the expense of ethnic identity.

I personally enjoyed Children's Day for the reasons mentioned above. I did not understand what the Young Pioneer Red Scarf represented, but I was proud because the teachers said that I was part of the nation after I wore the Red Scarf. I believed whatever my teachers told me, because all the parents in my community repeatedly told children to listen to the teachers. All the teachers and students were Tibetan and, at that time, I did not know there was a difference between Han and Tibetan except that they spoke different languages.

Students at my school were punished if they did not wear the Red Scarf for the once-a-week assembly in front of the national flag. During this school courtyard congregation, we sang China's national anthem. One of my classmates whose Red Scarf had been stolen, hated to line up because the teachers often dragged him by the ears in front of everybody and criticized him for breaking school rules, which meant that he was a bad person. My classmate could not afford to purchase a new Red Scarf so together we made one for him from a red cloth we found on the schoolyard.

The questions silently lurking behind this include: Should Tibetan parents send their children to schools? What difference does it make, and with what consequences? What are their choices?

Sexual encounters in the story are muted, but still claim the readers' attention. One account needs mentioning because it is unusual in a Tibetan-language novel. Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin meet their former middle school headmaster, Hei (Han Chinese), and share an evening of eating, drinking, and recalling their time in school together. By the end of the evening, Hei is a bit drunk and says that

rather than going to a hotel, he wants to stay with Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin.

Later that night, Ting 'dzin dreams that his girlfriend removes all her clothes, pulls down his underwear, and performs fellatio. Unable to breathe, Ting 'dzin awakens and is shocked when he sees Hei fondling and kissing his penis. He then kicks the embarrassed Hei off the bed.

Hei covers his face with his hands, and says, "I'm sorry, I have this problem of being only interested in men and I can't control myself. I'm sorry" (187).

This is one of the few examples of contemporary Tibetan writers describing a homosexual encounter and interestingly it is Hei, the Chinese man, who is the homosexual, and not a Tibetan. In respect of this, Lama Jabb notes:

On the rare occasions when homosexuality and autoeroticism surface in modern Tibetan poetry they almost exclusively concern lesbian sex or female masturbation, thereby denying through omission that such practices affect Tibetan men (2015:Kindle Locations 5054-5056).

About fifteen percent of the novel is dialogue. Humorous, colloquial language makes the novel more appealing, as does an occasional mix of Chinese with Tibetan language, e.g., *liangzhan* 'grain supply center', *liangpiao* 'food coupon', and *honglingjin* 'red scarf' (18). In terms of the colloquial, Bsam 'grub describes a student's eyes using *cha khug* (26) 'asshole' (LT: *bshang lam*; 'og sgo); Bsam 'phel's father says, *Ya zhi lu* (2) 'Hey! Boy!' (LT: *bu*), which Amdo people often use; and when Bsam 'phel and Ting 'dzin are chatting, the former says, "*Rogs pa lo lo*" (92) 'dear friend' (LT: *snying nye ba'i krog po*), an expression I often hear friends from Sog County use.

Everybody had a nickname when I was in school. Using nicknames was a way of making fun and teasing, and created more interesting and vivid verbal interchanges. Nicknames also appear in this novel. For example, Bsam 'phel's nickname is Mig rko 'Trench Eyes' because his eyes are small and deep-set while Ting 'dzin's

nickname is Mig 'jur 'Big Eyes' owing to his large eyes. Ting 'dzin and Bsam 'phel each uses the other's nicknames when they are together. In contrast, when they meet after many years, Ting 'dzin addresses Bsam 'phel more formally using his "real" name, which upsets Bsam 'phel because he now understands that their relationship is not what it had been. There is now a distance between them.

This novel is entirely credible as many events resonated with my own life experiences. It is also an entertaining read replete with details of the education system, life as a student, love and sex, complex relationships between friends and work colleagues, economic conditions, social expectations, and recollections of recent history and attempts to make sense of it.

But *My Two Fathers* is more than this in its critical presentation of A mdo life in the 1980s. As such, it is a valuable introduction to a version of modern A mdo social history that is unavailable in officially approved history books.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'og sgo འོག་སྒོ།

'phags pa thar འཕགས་པ་ཐར།

a mdo ཨ་མདོ།

a mtsho mo ཨ་མཚོ་མོ།

a tsi ཨ་ཙི།

bla ma skyabs ལྷ་མ་སྐྱབས།

bde zhing yangs pa'i lam chen zhig བདེ་ཞིང་ཡངས་པའི་ལམ་ཚེན་ཞིག།

brag dkar བྲག་དཀར།

bsam 'phel བསམ་འཕེལ།

bshang lam བཤང་ལམ།

btsun po don 'grub བཙུན་པོ་དོན་འགྲུབ།

bu བུ།

byams pa བྱམས་པ།

cha khug ཇ་ཁུག།

dpal kha དཔལ་ཁ།

ge sar གེ་སར།

Heka 河卡

Henan 河南

honglingjin 红领巾

Huangnan 黄南

Jinpingmei 金瓶梅

kun bzang lha mo ཀུན་བཟང་ལྷ་མོ།

lha kho ལྷ་ཁོ།

lha ris ལྷ་རིས།

Li Bai 李白

liangpiao 粮票

liangzhan 粮站

mes po མེས་པོ།

mgon po མགོན་པོ།

mig 'jur མིག་འཇུག།

mig rko མིག་རྒྱ།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།

mthso sngon mi rigs dpe skrin khang མཚོ་སྔོན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱུང་ཁང།

nga yi a pha gnyis ང་ཡི་ཨ་ཕ་གཉིས།
 pa sangs sgrol ma པ་སངས་སྐྱོལ་མ།
 Pinyin 拼音
 Qinghai 青海
 ra rgya ར་རྒྱ།
 rma lho མ་ལྷོ།
 rogs pa lo lo རོགས་པ་ལོ་ལོ།
 sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱས་བརྒྱ་ཤིས།
 sbrang char སྤང་ཅར།
 shes rig nor bu'i gling ཤེས་རིག་ནོར་བུའི་གླིང་།
 skal bzang don grub སྐལ་བཟང་དོན་གུབ།
 snying nye ba'i grogs po སྟིང་ལྷོ་བའི་གྲོགས་པོ།
 sog སོག།
 stobs ldan སྟོབས་ལྷན།
 thang ka ཐང་ཀ།
 ting 'dzin ཐིང་འཛིན།
 tshe ring don 'grub ཚེ་རིང་དོན་འགྲུབ།
 Xinghai 兴海
 ya zhi lu ཡ་ཞི་ལུ།
 zi ling ཟི་ལིང།