

SHEEP STUCK IN THE MUD

In 1994 I was seven years old. Local herders drove their livestock to the Yellow River once every two days because of the hot weather, rather than the usual once-in-three-days. Uncle Bsod nams was back home from school on summer vacation and my grandparents could relax more at home. They did not need to think much about the sheep, because Uncle herded them so well that Grandfather often praised him as being the best shepherd in the local community.

One very hot sunny morning our goats and sheep were parched. It had rained on the grassland the day before, so we had not watered the sheep because the sheep quenched their thirst by eating wet, dewy grass.

"Nangchukja, go with your uncle to the Yellow River to water our flock. You're now old enough to go," Grandfather said. I had never been to the banks of the Yellow River before. My grandparents thought I was too young and worried that I might fall in the river and drown.

"Sure, Grandfather," I replied excitedly, happily running around the house.

As Grandmother was readying breakfast, Uncle Bsod nams came into the house from the pasture and sat next to Grandfather. He had driven our flock to the pastureland early in the morning. "Bsod nams, take care of him on the way," Grandmother warned gravely, her face lined with worry.

"I'm going to the Yellow River, Uncle! What fun!" I yelled cheerfully and bounced around the house again.

"Don't let him step too close to the river, Bsod nams," Grandfather intoned.

Grandmother took four dragon-decorated bowls from the cupboard and put *rtsam pa* in them. This signaled that she had already boiled a kettle of milk tea, and breakfast was nearly ready. Grandmother took a small red bag from beside the bags made of sheepskin next to the cupboard. "I'll prepare enough for the two of you to eat. Nangchukja will be famished. He's never been to the riverbank before,

Grandmother said kindheartedly. Whenever we went to herd, we could not have lunch at home, so we took food with us.

Grandmother put two loaves of bread and a teapot-sized canteen of milk tea in the bag. I took the bag and my slingshot, and then we started down the trail leading to the pastureland. Grandmother accompanied Uncle and me to the top of the first hill. "Bsod nams, listen! Don't let Nangchukja get too near the Yellow River. You both be careful with the flock when they are having water from the banks. It's summer, and there is deep mud at the riverbank. Don't let the sheep get stuck. Also, the weather can change quickly, and you could be caught in a rainstorm or flood. If that happens, take the flock and move to a safe place," she said seriously.

"Yes, we will Mother," Uncle said in his usual sedate way.

Uncle and I went straight to the pastureland and drove the sheep toward the riverbank. I shot pebbles in my sling after the flock as Uncle did, to push the flock on toward the Yellow River.

"Now, we are nearing the river bank," Uncle said, after we passed through valleys and hills with the flock. He sang Tibetan folksongs on the way casually, without stopping. Uncle sang songs with various melodies whenever he was with the flock. I had heard them so many times that I could remember them all. When we reached the top of some hills and could then see the Yellow River the flock ran fast. They were extremely thirsty.

There were many other flocks watering from the banks. Ka tho's flock was next to ours. He was our neighbor. When our flock finished watering, Uncle and I herded them along the riverbank.

Ka tho approached and Uncle began chatting with him. Ka tho took a package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and offered Uncle one. They soon were emitting considerable clouds of smoke while chatting nonstop. Uncle Bsod nams told an attention-grabbing story that engrossed us for a long time.

"Why do you look so tired today?" Ka tho asked, inhaling smoke.

"Because I jumped over someone last night," Uncle said, watching as Ka tho puffed smoke out from his mouth and nose simultaneously.

"Oh! No wonder. Whom are you visiting these days?" Ka tho asked eagerly.

"Actually, that's a big secret. Don't tell anyone. Also you, Nangchukja," Uncle warned.

"Yes," I said shyly, bending my head down.

"Of course not, Bsod nams. Have I ever told anyone what you said?" Ka tho said.

"OK. I went to Blo bzung's wife last night. It was my first time," Uncle started.

"Oh! No, Yul lha!"¹⁸ Ka tho exclaimed. I was even more bowled over.

Uncle laughed and then stopped.

"Go on," Ka tho said.

"Actually I went there for her daughter, but I couldn't find her anywhere in any of the rooms. Then I thought she was in the room where her parents sleep, so I decided to check," Uncle paused to smoke.

"I see. Continue," Ka tho said. I laughed loudly and rolled on the ground. I was very interested in such talk.

"When I reached the bed, only one person was there. I was sure it was her and that her mother had gone to a neighbor's home. I took off my shoes and jumped in bed. Just then, I realized that it was her mother! I said 'Oh! Yul lha!' inaudibly.

"She turned to me and said, 'Who are you?' She scolded me, but gently.

"I bravely stayed and put my left arm around her. 'It's me, don't worry,' I replied nervously. I knew her husband had left to dig caterpillar fungi. And she's not that old!" Uncle said.

Ka tho shook his head in disbelief.

Uncle Bsod nams continued,

"When she discovered it was me, she was surprised, elbowed me, and told me to leave. But I could see that she

¹⁸ Yul lha = a mountain deity.

needed a man and I stayed. Before long, I could take her trousers off."

Uncle burst into laughter and so did Ka tho and I.

"Today's wives! Unbelievable!" Ka tho said, thinking of his own wife.

I stood, looked at the flock, and discovered Ka tho's and our flocks had mixed and were scattered all along the riverbank. "Our flocks are mixed and scattered, Uncle," I said anxiously.

"Oh! Yul lha! Some sheep might be stuck in the mud," Ka tho said and stood up worriedly.

We ran to the riverbank. Five sheep from our flock were stuck in mud. "Let's quickly pull them out!" Uncle said.

We took off our clothes and jumped in the mud. About half of the sheep's bodies were stuck in mud. We pulled on the sheep's horns and tails to get them out. We had pulled out four, but one was still stuck. We were exhausted. Uncle and Ka tho tried their utmost to pull out the last sheep. It was almost fully stuck in the mud. After they gripped the lower part of the sheep and horns with their last strength to pull it out of the swamp, Uncle reddened and coughed several times. This sheep died, and we had no way to revive it.

"I will drive our flocks together on the hillsides on the back way. You two come after me when you get the skin from this," Ka tho said and ran toward the other scattered sheep.

Eventually, Uncle took his belt knife from his silver, coral-decorated sheath. He skillfully removed its skin. We then returned home, driving the flock.

We ran along the flocks' tracks while carrying the sheepskin. Ka tho kindly drove our combined flocks. While we were driving the flocks, we tried to separate them, but this was difficult. Uncle and I worried about the dead sheep.

As we neared home, Ka tho's flock naturally separated from our sheep and went their own way. Uncle and I drove our flock on home.

"Don't tell that we didn't see the sheep while talking to Ka tho. Otherwise, my parents will scold us," Uncle said worriedly, not wanting me to reveal the truth.

"Uncle. What should we say?" I asked.

"We should say that the sheep jumped into the mud and then got stuck," Uncle counseled.



Sheep provide mutton and wool for locals.



Sacks made of sheep and yak skins used to store flour and *rtsam pa*.