

STORY: GOD–DOOR

Tshe dpag rnam rgyal (Duke University)

Traditional Moon Village lies near the sparkling Galaxy River, isolated from noisy bustling cities. Even the two ancient conifer trees standing by the river seem to have kept their youth, isolated from the damaging influences of the outside world. People respect the trees as a god, a sacred door for the village.

I was sent to the school beyond the river when I was eight, and had to pass the god–door every day on the narrow path that meandered between the old trees. My daily route provided countless opportunities to have contact with those mysterious trees that both amazed and frightened me with their outstanding height and remarkable denseness.

The trees stood atop the valley through which Galaxy River flows. The riverbed is deeply concave and the path on the slope of the valley is as steep as a mountain cliff. Despite its steepness, everyone leaving the village had to traverse this path – the only passage out of the village.

"Zhaba, don't ever harm the trees by the river – they are our village's God–door," eighty–year–old Grandfather said the first morning I went to school. "The birds and insects in those trees are guests both there and in our village. Be careful while playing with your slingshot."

"But you always say black crows are the most inauspicious birds, and that they bring bad luck to people," I said. "There are many in the trees every morning. They make terrible ghost–like sounds." I didn't know what sounds

ghosts made, and I hadn't seen one before; but I had heard Grandfather tell many stories about them.

"Don't argue with elders, Zhaba. If elders say something is wrong, it's wrong," he said with finality.

"Grandfather, they have no nests there. They fly there from the forest behind our village," I said, thinking that it would be OK to shoot birds not originally from God-door.

"Remember your age, baby. I'm eighty," he said, and turned to the family shrine to make his morning prostrations, his eyes brimming with concern and worry.

"OK, Grandfather," I replied, surrendering.

Shouldering my patched book-bag, I started off to school – the sole brick building anywhere near us. When I reached the river cliff, I looked at the trees again in a respectful way, recalling what Grandfather had said. The barley-birds sang welcoming songs to passersby, but the black crows made horrible croaks that angered me.

I took my catapult from my bag and looked for a proper sized pebble. Finding one, I loaded it and aimed at a crow, squawking atop the left tree. I pulled back the string with all my strength and let fly. The crow flew away the instant I released the string. I shot twice more at the other crows but they flew away in the same manner as the first, as though they sensed approaching danger. "They are smarter than people!" I thought, rushing down the river cliff as the school bell started ringing. As I was running, I tumbled, rolled down, and almost plunged into the river. Luckily I wasn't badly injured – I only scraped my knees. I got up and passed the log bridge over Galaxy River.

"Curse those inauspicious crows!" I muttered, and then to that I added all the terrible words I could think of, and hurried in to school, dust permeating my clothes.

That evening I told Grandfather what had happened. He frowned, then smiled broadly, and finally said, "Have you ever heard the saying, 'Listen to elders' words'? What happened to you resulted from you ignoring your elders. Let's see if you defy elders after this profound teaching."

"It's all because of those bad black crows," I said, comforting myself.

God-door provided much convenience to villagers and birds throughout the year. In the winter and early spring, noisy crows and magpies perched in the trees in the early mornings, energetically urging villagers to rise from their slumber and start a new day. In summer, people were sheltered both from heavy rain and scorching sunshine. Barley-birds and many other birds perched in and sang from the trees, making passersby happier, and filling them with energy.

I liked to join the elders in the late afternoons when they gathered around the Chanting Hall. They talked of everything that was happening and had happened, and how they understood the things around them. Sometimes, they even made insulting jokes with one another, but it always ended happily.

One day they talked about the village's God-door. An old lady called Big Mouth started, "When I was young, people worshipped God-door almost everyday by offering *sang*¹ and the God-door grew very densely. But now, see, people hardly care about the door, and thieves pour into the village." Her mouth quivered unusually when she spoke.

¹ *Sang* = *bsang*, 'smoke offerings' that primarily consist of conifer needles.

Then she began counting on her knuckles the number of thefts that had happened in the village recently.

"Do you still offer *sang* to God-door?" asked Mr. Picky. People laughed at the question, because the ritual had been abandoned during the Cultural Revolution, and was never renewed. Big Mouth looked at the ground sheepishly.

"I would, if it hadn't been for that time we all almost starved," she said, wiping spittle from around her quivering lips.

Seventy-year-old Small Head peeked out from the Chanting Hall, dropped the prayer wheel's pull rope, and joined the discussion, "I think God-door looks as dense as in the old days, but young people's impudent behavior sometimes angers God-door, so it is losing its original color." Some nodded in agreement while others shook their heads in disagreement. Still others stayed silent without expression.

"Some school kids were hunting the guests of the God-door, too," said Mr. Big Eye, staring in the direction where the school was located, even though it wasn't in view. "I don't know what is good about having such a school that opposes our religion. The kids only know hunting barley-birds and magpies. Maybe those teachers are teaching them how to kill animals." Mr. Big Eye punctuated his opining by squashing a fly that was disturbing him. Some people nodded while others remained silent.

"But at least they know how to read the scriptures," said Mr. Modern. "And because the kids are so young they can't do anything if they aren't in school. I would send all my grandchildren to school if I had enough money to support them. Nowadays, if people don't know how to read, they're blind." He stopped for a moment and looked around at his audience's reaction, who were listening while

counting their prayers beads. "My son and I've been having arguments over this for months, and still haven't reached a conclusion. Today's young people are so stubborn and disobedient."

Many people laughed at this. Others said quietly, "That's what makes him Modern."

"Believe it or not, God-door is sacred and holy not only because it blocks thieves and strangers from outside, but because of its special shape. People won't find that anywhere else except in our village – Moon Village," one newly arrived, very old person started. He placed both of his canes on each side of him after being helped to sit by two other elders. His very old face was covered with deep, heavy wrinkles. His hands shook like prayer flags on windy autumn days. His hair was as white as the spongy ice that lies along the river in early spring. The few teeth still in his mouth were yellowish black. He was highly respected by the villagers.

"Oh, Uncle Dopu, you came! How are you these days?" many asked while lifting themselves up off the ground to show respect.

"Sit, don't stand," Uncle Dopu said and people sat back, waiting to hear what Uncle Dopu had to say. He then passionately began, "You know what? Our village's God-door was the strongest God-door ever. It would take too long to describe the things God-door has helped us with. The conifer tree itself is a sacred component of *sang*; its smoke purifies all that is contaminated. Our conifer God-door blocks misfortune and expels bad luck. Both trees have specific shapes that match two of the Eight Auspicious Symbols. The left tree looks like a conch, which removes ignorance and helps villagers become more intelligent. The right tree is shaped like an umbrella, which helps release

our village from suffering and removes obstacles from our lives. People shouldn't curse them, harm them, or hunt near them, because such bad behavior brings bad luck to our village."

I stood beside Grandfather until the elders finished talking at dusk. I thought of the events that happened after my crow hunting and felt guilty. Every afternoon I joined the elders' discussion as soon as school was over, and learned much about our village and its God-door, but I never saw Uncle Dopu again.

Several years passed. I was coming home at noon for lunch from school, and saw some strangers by the river near the log bridge. They had left a dusty car at the school; my first time to see a car. Many villagers were astonished to see it. Some said it was a ghost. It looked like a giant frog to me, even though I had seen many pictures of cars like in the books I read in school.

Three or four people wearing Chinese clothes were at the river. One was carrying a triple-legged telescopic thing around the bridge. They were measuring something. The one wearing the nicest clothes seemed to be the leader. He pointed to the God-door and made a chopping gesture. The others nodded. When village kids crossed the narrow log bridge, the men looked curiously, as if hoping to see one of us fall into the river, which of course did not happen since we had been crossing it almost every day for years. We waited to see what they would do after we crossed the bridge. The leader pointed to the bridge and said something, which none of us understood but we heard the other people laugh sarcastically.

"They are scorning us," said an older student. We collected some stones and hurled them at the strangers when we got on top of the river cliff, and raced heroically home after all the small stones were gone. We had ambushed the forest police who had always stopped our parents from collecting firewood some years before and they had run away leaving behind most of their belongings. *They* had never returned.

The strangers at the river became big news in the village. The kids talked about it in school; youngsters chatted about it in the lanes, elders discussed it in and around the Chanting Hall during their usual gatherings. It was even the main topic in village homes after meals and before going to bed.

"I heard several Chinese came to our village from far away in a small ghost-like thing to mine gold in our village's back-mountain, but they were kept away by our God-door," said Big Mouth the next day in the Chanting Hall while turning the huge wheel prayer, smiling proudly.

"Who knows? Maybe they have other intentions," said Mr. Picky. "Remember what happened last year? Some Chinese came and said they were tax collectors, and drove a bunch of our yaks and flocks of sheep away. Maybe they are the same. Yak butchers! Disgusting!" He spat on the ground and continued, "Anyway we are most fortunate to have such a respectable God-door, which is a savior to both people and animals."

"Uncle Darje," the son of his younger brother said, who had overheard him as he was on the way to the forest to cut firewood, "You don't need to be afraid. They are not tax collectors or miners. They are interested in our God-door and in our bridge."

Mr. Picky felt a bit better and started to rotate the prayer wheel again, but signs of worry still came over his face intermittently. After a while, he turned to the road his nephew had gone down and shouted, "Gonlo, be careful! Maybe they have come to enforce forest laws. They might imprison you for no reason!" then he began chanting under his breath.

The shadow climbed up the shady side of the valley from the river on the valley floor. Mr. Big Eye temporarily gazed at God-door with a worried frown and saw his eight-year-old grandson coming back from school with several other kids. He gave a sigh of relief and dropped the prayer wheel's pull rope, "My boy is coming," he said and quickly left for home to take care of his grandson, Donzhub.

"Grandpa, our teacher said the nation would build a new bridge for our village," Donzhub said.

With a mixture of happiness and sadness Mr. Big Eye asked, "Where?"

"Over the old log bridge. The teachers say it will be a wide concrete bridge," he replied. Mr. Big Eye felt terrible fear and began gazing at the enormous mountain behind the village.

Next year in spring, several 'soil destroyers' came to the river. They had paw-like heads and clawed the earth from both sides of the river. This angered the villagers who were very worried about God-door. Villagers argued with the workers and leaders. There were many 'stone ambushes' each night. The machines gnawed away at the river cliff until there was only one pace between God-door and the cliff. Some parts of God-door's roots protruded from the cliff; some parts were even damaged by the 'soil destroyers'.

But for some lucky reason, God-door remained upright atop the cliff.

The barley-birds, magpies, crows, and other guests of God-door were nowhere to be seen while construction was in progress and most never returned.

I missed them in the early mornings when I passed withering God-door. Mother escorted me to school during those days of construction. The road still extended between God-door after the new big bridge was built, but the soundless mornings made me feel hollow.

The villagers had no interest in celebrating the newly built bridge as they normally celebrated a newly built house. But some watched the workers and township government officials celebrate. Firecrackers were set off, which attracted the children, though most stayed some distance away. Elders did not attend.

The newly built bridge was very convenient for us kids. We no longer slipped from the muddy path on the cliff and rolled into the river in summer; we didn't slip down the icy path in winters and injure our knees after crashing into the frozen river. The elders' worries, however, continued, and grew stronger.

"Those idiots injured our sacred God-door, and now it is becoming more withered each and every day," said Mr. Picky, sitting in his usual place in the Chanting Hall.

"Absolutely! The children refuse to wear their boots and youngsters are lazy about tying their sashes after God-door started withering. God-door no longer protects us from changing into demons. I heard the son of Worker Zhaxi is speaking Tibetan and Chinese mixed together. Who can understand such people!" said Mr. Dorji, shaking his head and spitting fiercely on the ground.

"It's not only workers' kids, even my own little granddaughter is speaking like that!" said Big Mouth. She was now so old that her eyelids had become as loose as her lips.

"Do you still remember the days when we were young men and women?" Mr. Modern asked, feeling strangely anxious about the God-door. "We walked in the rain in woven robes; our feet never left boots and our backs never left robes. But look at the clothes that today's mindless youngsters wear – disgusting!" He spat a wad of spit into the dirt, which kicked up a tiny puff of dust. He continued, "Neither god-like nor ghost-like people, wearing Tibetan upper clothes and Chinese lower clothes."

The elders never stopped complaining and, with the passing of time, they left this world one by one. Their worries went with them, since the new generations were oblivious to such concerns. While contemplating these worries that were brought up by the people in the past, I remembered a sage's saying:

*When the jewel is in your hand,
You don't understand it;
When others own the jewel,
You are bothered by endless regret.*