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# The Tibetan Novel as Social History: Reflections on Trashi Palden's *Phal pa'i khyim tshang gi skyid sdug*

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## *Introduction*

The Tibetan novel that forms the subject of this article is Trashi Palden's *Phal pa'i khyim tshang gi skyid sdug* (henceforth *Phal pa*), "The Life of an Ordinary Household",[1] first published in 1995 and again in 2002. The novel has featured in short English-language studies by at least two scholars: Tsering Shakya and Riika Virtanen.[2] In the case of the three works in question—one by Shakya and two by Virtanen—the authors situate *Phal pa* in broader discussions of modern Tibetan literature that provide important insights into the field in general and this novel in particular. Unfortunately, there is insufficient space here to give these two authors the attention they deserve, but I will refer to them periodically in the following pages. Unlike their exemplary studies, the present article will make little reference to the contemporary literary context but will focus more narrowly on the question of how this one novel might be regarded as a contribution to Tibetan social history.

The action of *Phal pa* is set in the village of Lingshong, a community of thirty households, in the Tsang province of west-central Tibet, and departs only occasionally, and never very far, from this location. The story covers just over two decades, beginning in the early years of the period of Democratic Reforms—implemented after the crushing of the 1959 uprising and the departure of the Dalai

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1 The *skyid sdug* of the title is not a straightforward term to translate. Literally "joy [and] suffering," the term belongs to the category of abstract nouns that are formed by the juxtaposition of two opposites, as in *ring thung* (lit. long-short) for "length," *che chung* (lit. big-small) for "size" and so forth. Since there is no corresponding abstract noun in English, "life" is probably a reasonable approximation in the present context.

2 Shakya 2004: 151–174; Virtanen 2018; Virtanen n.d. I am indebted to both colleagues for kindly permitting me to consult and to refer to their respective unpublished studies.

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Lama to India—through the Cultural Revolution and the era of economic and social liberalism in the 1980s. The final part of this article offers an extended synopsis of the plot. However, at the risk of covering some of the same ground, we may begin with a much more succinct outline that will be an adequate, if minimal, basis for the discussion that follows.

One of the central figures in the story is Döndrub, an "Everyman" Tibetan villager for whom the "nameless religion"—tradition—holds a more important place than the intricacies of Buddhist doctrine, and who treats both political ideology and improbable religious explanations with equal scepticism. He has two daughters, Tsheten Lhamo and Drolma, by different wives: the first by Yangdzom, who has already died before the novel begins—though we encounter her in several flashbacks—and Chime Wangmo. The four of them share a house with Döndrub's mother, Dedrön. Tsheten Lhamo's childhood sweetheart is Phuntshok, a youth of good character—as she herself is—who has two younger sisters. The last character who must be named in the much-reduced outline is Lhakdor. As a member of the Blacksmith (*mgar ba*) caste he belongs to a social rank that was traditionally regarded as being inferior to that of the majority of the community. His seething resentment at his inherited social status is one of the engines that drives the dynamics in the relationships between the main characters.

The genealogical diagram of the main characters provided here may be a useful point of reference for readers who wish to be reminded of who is who.

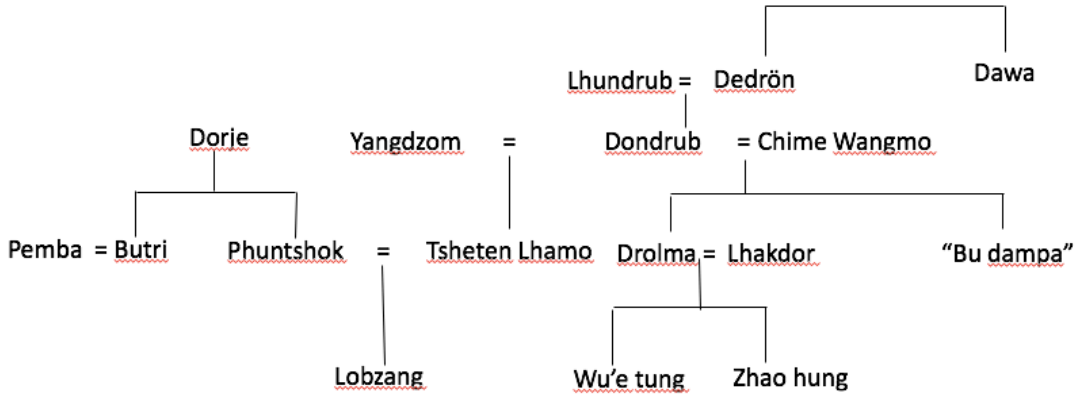



*Fig. 1 — Genealogical diagram of the main characters in* Phal pa

As far as their position in the drama of this constellation is concerned, it might also be helpful for readers to map these figures onto characters from well-known English novels—for example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In such an exercise, Döndrub would correspond (*mutatis mutandis*) to Mr. Bennett; Chime Wangmo to Mrs. Bennett; Tsheten Lhamo to Elizabeth Bennett, the heroine of the story; Phuntshok to Mr. Darcy (at least in terms of uprightness of character and adherence to principle, since he has no fortune to speak of); Drolma to the flighty Lydia, and Lhakdor to the dreadful George Wickham, who seduces an all-too-willing Lydia into an ill-advised marriage much as Lhakdor seduces Drolma.

Chime Wangmo's marriage to Döndrub as his second wife begins happily enough, but after the birth of her daughter Drolma, she becomes a storybook wicked stepmother to Tsheten Lhamo. So incensed is Dedrön by her shabby treatment of her stepdaughter, that Döndrub is eventually obliged to divide the household, with Chime Wangmo and her daughter Drolma living in one part and the rest of the family in the other.

Tsheten Lhamo, in the meantime, is betrothed to Phuntshok, in an arrangement whereby he will move into her house as an in-marrying son-in-law (*mag pa*), even though he is an only son. In the event, later in the story, Phuntshok's sister also marries a *mag pa*, thereby ensuring that there is a man in her house to maintain the succession. However, to everyone's consternation, Tsheten Lhamo's marriage must be postponed because Phuntshok is selected for training as a party cadre, which will require him to go to Lhasa for two years. He is chosen both for his personal qualities as well as his social background, insofar as his family are relatively poor. Döndrub's household, by contrast, is ranked as "middle-rich", and is accordingly disfavoured in the new regime. Collectivisation is under way, and Döndrub loses much of his land and livestock to the commune. As the reforms are intensified and eventually degenerate into the Cultural Revolution, he suffers even more privation, and is eventually reduced to being the herder for the commune's goats.

The main beneficiary of these reforms is Lhakdor the Blacksmith, whose lowly status during the old regime qualifies him for a position of considerable authority in the community. However, the prominence he has been accorded does not translate into social acceptance; people remain reluctant to "share the cup" with them and use the ironic deference with which they now treat him as a distancing mechanism. Nor does his personal comportment do much to win the acceptance he so craves. He is infatuated with Tsheten Lhamo, and when she rejects his advances he resorts—unsuccessfully—to force and to blackmail. Eventually, finding her

sister more amenable to his attentions (though she, too, has to ward off an attempt on his part to rape her), he leaves his long-suffering wife and children and moves in with Drolma and her mother Chime Wangmo.

After he has returned from Lhasa and has duly moved into Tsheten Lhamo's house, Phuntshok enjoys a position of prominence and respect in the commune. But this is not to last. He is aware of corruption among the officials—Lhakdor among them—that is causing hardship for the ordinary villagers. However, his investigations incur the anger of his superiors at the district headquarters, and after some heavy-handed treatment he is demoted. Not long afterwards he is attacked in the dark while on his way home and suffers a broken leg. Tsheten Lhamo, too, is weakened by privation and loses a child she is carrying.

With Mao's death in 1976 the tide begins to turn. Manufactured goods start to arrive in the village, people are no longer hungry, and there is a new style of leadership that is both more relaxed and more favourable to the observance of Tibetan traditions. Lhakdor is bewildered and distressed to find his authority ebbing away, and to see that people no longer pay him even the token respect they had previous extended to him. He is killed in an accident, but his ghost continues to linger in the community as a malign presence, until that, too, fades away. Phuntshok is disillusioned with the old Party policies that he had upheld so loyally, and teams up with his brothers-in-law to following the now officially-endorsed capitalist road. With the growth of economic prosperity, relaxation of political constraints and the restoration of religious and cultural activities, the novel ends in the glow of optimism that was so palpable in Tibet in the mid-1980s.

### *Commoners and Blacksmiths: a question of status*

Phuntshok and Lhakdor are pitched against each other in the novel as hero and villain. Phuntshok is everything one might hope for in a son, husband, son-in-law, and public servant. He is too principled for his own good and maintains scrupulous standards of honesty out of loyalty to the Party and for the well-being of his fellow-villagers. If he is eventually disenchanted with the collective model this is not because he has at last parted company with prescribed attitudes, but because he has moved in pace with Party policy, which is now encouraging the accumulation of private wealth. He is, in a sense, the purest form of what the state may have to offer at any point in the unpredictable mutations of its policies over the twenty-odd years covered by the novel.

Lhakdor, by contrast, is anything but two-dimensional, and he is—as both Shakya and Virtanen rightly argue—the most interesting character in the story. Before discussing his role, however, a few words should be said about social stratification in Tibet.[3]

Agrarian communities in all parts of "ethnographic" Tibet—including those in the Himalayan borderlands of countries adjacent to China—were (and for the most part still are) stratified. Generally speaking, these strata—which we may think of as castes—consisted of four or more hierarchically organised groups, which included aristocrats, priests, commoners, and artisans. Some of these castes might exhibit further subdivision: thus, the topmost caste might be refracted into royalty and other nobility, while priests and commoners might also have further internal layers. The terms for these castes, and indeed for "caste" itself, varies from place to place. There may be a certain amount of porosity between castes: in some circumstances there may be intermarriage between aristocrats and priests, or priests and commoners, and even between certain commoners and aristocrats. Generally, however, aristocrats were and are usually endogamous, and artisans almost invariably so.

Caste distinctions are manifested in a variety of ways. Where inter-caste marriage does take place, the distinction may be objectified in the symbolic amount of bridewealth that is paid. The two most important public manifestations of social inclusion are the allocation of a place in a seating row and, if such a place is accorded, the right to "share the cup" with the members of that row. These criteria for inclusion are sometimes formulated simply as *gral* ("row") and *kha* ("mouth"). One might say of a person, for example, that he has "row" but no "mouth", meaning that he is entitled to occupy a place in a seating row ranked in terms of the members' ages, but he may not share the cup with them.

The term "artisan" as I have used it here is not entirely accurate, insofar as it denotes just one section of a larger category of people who occupy the lowest rank of rural communities. Others within this category are fishermen, butchers, professional body-cutters, and certain others. The generic term for this category also varies from place to place and includes names such as *yawa* (*ya ba*), *mendrig* (*dman rigs*?), and *ringgen* (*rigs ngan*), which all, in spite of their different etymologies, correspond to the English rubric of "outcaste". Caste

[3] There are considerable local differences with regard to social stratification in Tibetan societies, and this outline is intended as a broad characterisation of general features that will take particular examples from only certain regions. For discussions of the subject, see, among other works, Aziz (1978); Fjeld (2005, 2008); Ramble (1984, 2014). Note that Ramble (1984) and Fjeld (2005) use the term "rank" rather than "caste".

status is acquired by inheritance from one's parents. In the case of the children of mixed-caste parentage, status may depend on a number of other factors, among which residence may be a key element.

The commoner caste, too, is designated by different names according to the region concerned. In Himalayan areas such as Mustang and Dolpo, as well as adjacent parts of Tibet, the term used is *phalwa* (*phal pa*). I have not been able to determine whether the term was used for this social category in the vicinity of Shigatse. Barbara Aziz, whose classic study *Tibetan Frontier Families* was based on interviews with refugees from Dingri, gives the usual term as *miser* (*mi ser*), which was also current in Central Tibet proper. However, there is one possibly significant passage in *Phal pa* where Drolma rejects Lhakdor's advances and is accused by him of being an aristocrat. The author points out that it goes without saying that she is not of course an aristocrat but the daughter of a *phal ba* household.[4] Our understanding of the title of the novel may need to be revised, so that Döndrub's family would not be an "ordinary" but a "commoner" household.

Commoners do not accord artisans a place in their seating rows, and they do not share the cup with them. Sharing a cup with an artisan would result in being afflicted by *drib* (*grib*). Although *grib* is perhaps best understood as what anthropological terminology would classify as "ritual pollution," it is also considered as having a physical manifestation, insofar as it may produce pathological symptoms of varying severity.[5] Far more serious than the *grib* transmitted by sharing the cup is that which results from sexual contact. In South Mustang, a man of commoner caste or above who had sexual relations with an artisan woman would have to undergo a protracted process of ritual purification that including bathing in sacred springs, drinking water containing gold filings, and consuming grain husks left over from brewing; husks are used for scrubbing kitchen utensils and are considered to scour the digestive tract of a polluted person. A higher caste woman who had sexual relations with an artisan man had no recourse to social reintegration through ritual purification.[6]

It is broadly accepted in the more recent social anthropological literature on South Asia that the caste status of individuals is not defined by the designated occupations of the castes in question. Most brahman men are not priests, but follow different professions as doctors, lawyers, airline pilots, and professional cricketers, among

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4 *tshe brtan lha mo ni sku drag gi bu mo ma yin la rigs rus mtho po gang min tshad red ces shod rgyud med par mo ni khyi tshang phal pa'i bu mo zhig yin* (*Phal pa*: 207).

5 Aziz (1979: 58–66); Fjeld (2005: 48–50). For a discussion of the social significance of *grib*, see Schicklgruber (1995).

6 Ramble (2014: 207).

others. The same is true of the so-called occupational castes, although the limited economic and educational opportunities mean that they account for a relatively small percentage of the professions listed above. Caste is defined above all by endogamy, and the general tendency to avoid inter-caste marriage ensures the perpetuation of caste identity, irrespective of the professional activities of the members of the group. According to a common convention, where a caste designation is a profession, the name is written with a capital initial. Thus, a tailor is someone who earns a living by making clothes, whereas a Tailor is a member of a Tailor caste and may be a university professor or factory worker who has never held a needle in his or her life. A significant feature of Trashi Palden's characterisation of Lhakdor is that it makes no distinction between blacksmiths and Blacksmiths. Whether by literary design or through alignment with the world view that would have been part of his formative social environment, he conflates Lhakdor's heredity, profession, and personality into a single disagreeable composite. While this equation may sit uncomfortably with a modern Western sensibility, it is surely representative of the view held by a great majority of rural Tibetans of the commoner caste and above. Authors who translate Tibetan works into English may struggle to render terms such as *rigs ngan*, one of several terms for "outcaste," without reproducing its literal meaning as "bad kind," or to decide from the context whether *ma rabs* should be "lower class" or "ill-mannered", but the distinction is an alien imposition by a right-thinking Western elite. (By the same token, the dissolution of caste distinctions advocated in the discourses of the Buddha or exemplified in the antinomianism of the *mahāsiddha*s is the stuff of pious tales, not respectable Tibetan village life).

*Phal pa* is not a didactic essay that has tasked itself to subvert the social order by endowing a blacksmith with the qualities of a hero (as would have been the case in a work of Party propaganda) or of a decent human being, like the Dalit Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Lhakdor corresponds to the type of character for whom authors of a bygone era are castigated by the critics of our enlightened age: he is Shakespeare's Caliban or Mozart's (and his librettist Schickeneder's) Monostatos, creatures whose moral debasement is consubstantial with their heredity; like them he is black—not in complexion, but in appellation: to other villagers he is *mgar ba nag po*, the "black artisan", and he is said to have "black bones", a metonymic reference to his inferior patriline. Like these characters, he lusts hopelessly after the daughter of the patriarch—Prospero's daughter Miranda in the first case and Sorastro's Pamina in the second—but is brutally reminded that such loveliness is not for

the likes of him.

But just as much as Trashi Palden does not reproduce in Lhakdor the stereotype of the hero of the revolution or the self-evident humanity of a Dalit, he does not let his readers off lightly by creating a two-dimensional monster that we can easily execrate; he allows us into Lhakdor's inner thoughts, beyond the meanness and brutality, to his terrible sadness. Like Caliban in *The Tempest*, he is given some of the most poignant lines in the story. At one point, after suffering yet another thinly disguised (though well-deserved) snub by Döndrub and Tsheten Lhamo,

> Lhakdor let out a long sigh. "So there it is," he said. "Since I have black bones I can't be white-boned. And yet, whenever one of us has died, I've never yet heard a body-cutter speaking of anyone having black bones".[7]

In another passage, sensitively translated by Riika Virtanen, Lhakdor "wanted to clear away his own lot of inequality, and pondered on how all people on earth might become equal, free and harmonious." He cannot understand, when enlightened Party policy has created equality, and the leaders are members of the working class who hold power,

> the reason why people still had to look down on him. But this was a remnant of an old custom that could not be changed overnight. In the face of this reality he felt despondent, and with a tired expression on his face there was nothing he could do but sigh.[8]

The author's—and, we may suppose, his fellow-villagers'—understanding of the relationship between occupation and heredity is articulated in an encounter that occurs near the end of the book. Earlier in the story, at the onset of the Cultural Revolution, a friend of Döndrub's named Wangyal is dismissed from the position he holds as a secretary (*hru'u ci*) ostensibly because of his numerous dalliances, which are considered to be inappropriate behaviour. When he reappears more than a decade later, he meets Phuntshok and his brother-in-law Pemba, and the three of them have a drink together. For all these years Wangyal has been a metalworker in a factory.

> It's been a very long time since we last met," said Wangyal with a smile, and he offered his beer cup. "Oh no, not for me—who's going

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7 *Phal pa*: 205.

8 *Phal pa*: 252–253; Virtanen n.d. Virtanen's translation has been slightly modified here.

> to share a drink from a metalworker's cup?' said Phuntshok, and they all burst out laughing. Then Phuntshok took the cup from Wangyal, and after passing it to Pemba he had a drink himself. "Well," said Wangyal with a frown, "there were others who didn't let me drink from their cup on the grounds that I was a smith."[9]

He goes on to describe his experiences in the factory, where a number of the officials under whom he worked were from artisan families. After listening to his story Pemba remarks,

> "I see. So that's how this works. In this generation no one cares in the least that Grandfather Wangyal was a metalworker. But after a couple of generations you can be sure that people would say, 'He's from a blacksmith lineage'."[10]

There is, in short, an almost Lamarckian conception of caste status in terms of the inheritance of acquired characteristics: by working with metal over generations, blacksmiths eventually become Blacksmiths.[11]

Throughout the novel the reader wishes that Lhakdor might perform some selfless and generous act that will persuade the community that artisans are just as capable of noble thoughts and deeds as anyone else; that he will succeed in doing what Party policy has signally failed to do in elevating him to a position of authority. Perhaps the expectations of Western readers have been conditioned by novels and films in which such demonstrations are commonplace. An outstanding non-Western example of the genre is Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, in which the seventh member of the team is the boorish peasant Kikuchiyo, masquerading as a samurai. Rather like Lhakdor, he despises the higher stratum of society and yet desperately wants to be a part of it; his grotesque bearing and undisguised concupiscence mark him as an impostor; but—in addition to endearing himself to his companions and to viewers as the film unfolds—he achieves redemption at the end when he avenges a samurai comrade's death by killing the chief of the bandits, an exploit that costs him his life. There is no such redemption for Lhakdor. Embittered at the realisation that the social advancement he had expected with the policies of the Democratic Reforms was a hollow promise, he tries to gain the respect of his fellow-villages by performing an act of reckless bravado, when he is a member of a

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9 *Phal pa*: 566.

10 *ibid.*: 569

11 "For some Tibetans, particularly in Lhasa, it is the fire that constitutes the polluting aspect of a smith's work. In the iron factories in Lhasa, Tibetans of all backgrounds are employed, but only those of the blacksmith *rigs* handle the fire" (Fjeld 2008: 133, caption to fig. 12).

work team that sets out to mend a wooden bridge on a torrential waterway. Not only does he fail to save the construction, but he is killed in the process. Far from being hailed as a hero, he returns to haunt the village as a parasitic ghost.

We may envisage different reader responses to Trashi Palden's treatment of Lhakdor. Among these might be a sense that the author had missed an opportunity to eschew the perpetuation of a social stereotype by offering a more optimistic vision of the possibility of a more equal society. Alternatively, we might conclude that the novel is not meant to be prescriptive but resolutely descriptive, and that even if Lhakdor's character is not necessarily a true likeness of a blacksmith it is an accurate depiction of the way in which artisans are perceived by the rural majority. It is precisely this ability to observe and record village life through the eyes of farmers and herders, without the prism of a social or political project, that makes *Phal pa* such an important contribution to Tibetan social history. The following section will examine more closely the nature of this contribution.

## Phal pa *and social history*

Until the mid-1980s, anthropological accounts of Tibetan communities in European languages were based on interviews with members of the exile community who left Tibet in 1959, or else on field studies conducted in Himalayan regions adjacent to the TAR. In the latter category, the first such study to be conducted by a professional anthropologist was Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's ethnography of the Sherpas, published in 1964. Tibet at this time was on the brink of the Cultural Revolution, and it would be another two decades before any ethnographic research could be carried out in the region. Accounts about rural life in Central Tibet in the period between the dissolution of the Ganden Phodrang government and the end of the Cultural Revolution are nevertheless not completely lacking. There are at least three bodies of information that are particularly worth our attention in this regard. The first is the *Tibetan Oral History Archive*, an ongoing project comprising transcripts, with English translations, of interviews with clerics, officials, and ordinary villagers amounting to several tens of thousands of pages. The project, conducted by Case Western Reserve University's Centre for Research on Tibet under the direction of Melvyn Goldstein in collaboration with Lhasa's Tibet Academy of Social Science, covers three periods: pre-1959; 1959-1966, the years spanning the implementation of Democratic Reforms up to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution; and 1966 onwards, the Cultural Revolution

itself and its aftermath. The most important study of the period to depend substantially on this resource is *On the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: The Nyemo Incident of 1969,* by Goldstein, Ben Jiao and Tanzen Lhundrup (2009).

The second corpus to be noted is the Chinese-language series entitled *Social and Historical Investigations of the Tibetan Nationality* (Su 2019).[12] This collection is part of the results of a well-known project that was initiated in 1953 by the PRC's Ethnic Committee of the National People's Congress and the Central Committee on Ethnic Affairs with a view to documenting—and indeed defining—China's minority populations. The project was suspended at the onset of the Cultural Revolution with the dissolution of the Central Committee on Ethnic Affairs but resumed in 1978 under the newly-constituted National Committee on Ethnic Affairs. The project culminated in the publication of 402 volumes in five series. The section concerning Tibet belongs to the fifth series, and after revision was republished in six volumes in 2009 as *Social and Historical Investigations of the Tibetan Nationality*, under the direction of Su Faxiang. The six volumes are organised according to the areas of the TAR that are covered. Insofar as it focuses on Shigatse Prefecture, the sixth volume in this collection would be the most relevant for any comparative study of the general area in which *Phal pa* is set. The study consists of socio-economic surveys carried out in a number of monastic, noble, and government estates, and provides a great deal of information about land tenure, taxation, peasant rights, and living conditions as well as social institutions such as marriage practices.

In view of the dearth of Tibetan documentary material from the two decades following the implementation of Democratic Reforms, these two bodies of information are clearly of immense value. We should nevertheless be aware of the inherent limitations that might make them a less than perfect record of the period they cover. In the case of the *Tibetan Oral History Archive* we are dealing with individuals' recollections of events four or five decades after they occurred; *Social and Historical Investigations* contains a great deal of quantitative data, but it should not be forgotten that both this material as well as the neutrality of interviewees' recollections may be compromised by the circumstances under which this information was gathered. The point of this caveat is that the ostensibly factual character of these two bodies of material is not in itself an assurance of their reliability. Paradoxically, although it is presented as a work of fiction, *Phal pa*—the third source for the social history of this

[12] The following brief overview is based on an extensive English-language summary of the work that was kindly made for me by Wang Yuewei.

period—may be a more dependable witness of events because its author was not constrained by any political agenda, and because he is describing events a very short time after they happened.

But to what extent can we consider a novel such as *Phal pa* to be a valid document for our understanding of the time and place it purports to describe? The question of course relates to the more general discussion of the relationship between fiction and history. The invention of the English language historical novel is generally credited to Sir Walter Scott, with the publication, in 1814, of *Waverley*, and the series of works that followed it. The genre proved to be so successful that the narrative style was adopted by professional historians as a way of making their researches more accessible to a general readership—authors such as Greene, Carlyle, and Macaulay. But there was a reciprocal effect on the public perception of the novel: "This blurring of the line between history and fiction appears to have given more authority to pure fiction as historical source".[13] The willingness to accept fiction as a medium for the delivery of fact provided a valuable platform for the work of novelists such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and—most important for the present article—Thomas Hardy.[14]

For Hayden White, the distinction between a historical account and a historical novel would seem to be one of degree. In his well-known comparison of three historical forms—the annals, the chronicle, and the "history proper"—the main distinction is the extent to which the narrative element is developed in each. Narrative is the connective tissue that brings events into a meaningful pattern; it is not inherent in the events themselves, but is something imposed by the author, and its presence has been accepted in historiography to the degree where "the very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which 'the true' is identified with 'the real' only in so far as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity".[15]

If the 19th century saw the mutually assisted rise of both historical fiction and narrativised history, an important precedent for conflating the two modes had been set even earlier, with the publication of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722. The book is presented as an eyewitness account of the progress of the bubonic plague that struck London in 1665, by an anonymous saddler in Whitechapel. Defoe was not in fact present for much of it

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13 Rogers (2001: 217).
14 *ibid*.: 218.
15 White (1980: 10).

but derived his information from accounts that were published soon after the event and embellished these. Assessments of his achievement have ranged from "authentic history" at one extreme to "absolute fiction" at the other, although the truth is perhaps best formulated in Sir Walter Scott's own conclusion that the *Journal* is "one of that peculiar class of writing which hovers between history and romance".[16]

But if we are to look for a well-known writer of historical fiction with whose work *Phal pa* might profitably be compared, then it is surely Thomas Hardy. From the very time in which he was writing, the value of Hardy's work for its documentation of rural life at that particular time and place was noted, and this appreciation has continued to grow steadily ever since, as 19th-century "Wessex"—Dorsetshire and the adjacent counties of southern England in which the novels are set—recedes into an ever more distant past.

Hardy's Wessex was exotic for most of his readers: the peculiarities of the Dorset dialect, the archaic technologies of agriculture and animal husbandry, and, perhaps above all, the remnants of pagan festivals that feature so prominently in many of the stories, would have been quite unfamiliar to them. The daily life of Lingshong village, by contrast, is broadly similar to that of any mixed economy agrarian/livestock-rearing (*sa ma 'brog*) community in West-Central Tibet. The author of *Phal pa* does not attempt to reproduce the features of the Tsang dialect in the characters' dialogues; and given the likelihood that even his city-dwelling readers—the rural-urban divide being far less marked in 1990s Tibet than in the England of a century earlier—would have had some familiarity with the economic and festive rhythms of village life, he would not have been describing activities that were unknown to them. Trashi Palden does indeed devote a great deal of time and meticulous description to the routines of the domestic economy, a feature that Riika Virtanen attributes (quite rightly, in my opinion) to the author's wish to convey a sense of the reality of village life.

In assessing the relevance of *Phal pa* for Tibetan social history, it is important to note that the work itself is not historical; it is ethnographic. There is nothing in there in terms of either time or space that the author himself could not have witnessed. As far as geographical range is concerned, the action rarely leaves the territory of the village. If the district headquarters, the *chus*, where one or two scenes are set, feels a long distance away, the county seat, the *rdzong*, is positively remote. As a dramatic device, this unity of place, so to speak, is a highly effective means of conveying what must surely

[16] Quoted in Bastian (1965: 173).

have been the sense of a locally bounded universe for Tibetan villages at this time. When pictures of Mao first appear in the community buildings, some people are astonished to learn that he is a human being; the major upheavals of these two decades—the Great Leap forward, the Cultural Revolution, the campaign against the Gang of Four, and other events—are presented without the stark violence and drama that are so familiar to us from accounts set in cities of inland China or even Tibetan flashpoints such as Nyemo during the notorious uprising of 1969. The epicentres of these movements are a long way away, and their tremors reach the village in the form of low-level corruption, economic deprivation, abuse of power by local officials, and a miasma of general cheerlessness. Villagers have very little idea of what it is they are periodically incited to demonstrate about. In one grimly farcical episode, cited by Tsering Shakya, everyone is instructed to shout slogans in condemnation of the Gang of Four. Unaware of the significance of the names Wang, Zhang, Jiang and Yao that he is denouncing, Döndrub supposes vaguely that there is a Tibetan named Wangyal Jamyang who has fallen out of favour.[17] On another occasion Dorje uses the expressive analogy of beer production to characterise the relationship between the Central Government and the rural periphery: he has recently heard, he says, that Party policies are like the best-quality beer when it is first drawn off (*chang dang po*); the policies in the TAR are like the beer that is drawn when water has been added to the fermented must for a second time (*chang gnyis pa*); "but then these policies become progressively diluted," he adds, "until what we in the villages get is the thinnest beer (*sing khu*)."[18]

Simultaneously obscuring the past and the rest of the world beyond the confines of the village casts a spotlight onto the community and isolates it in time and space. The villagers are actors without agency, amid policies and events that have been determined far away and handed down to them, and practically the only arena that affords freedom of action is that of domestic life and interpersonal relationships. The meticulous and extensive details of people's livelihoods, household rituals—clandestine as some of these may be—and community celebrations, both traditional and modern, are the work of a conscientious ethnographer for whom no detail is too insignificant to document. One even has a sense of the political and cultural myopia of which neophyte fieldworkers are often accused, in their failure to locate the communities they study in a

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17 *Phal pa*: 486; Shakya (2004: 168).

18 *nye char nga'i go thos ltar na krung dbyang gi srid jus ni chang dang po yin pa dang / rang skyon ljongs kyi srid jus ni chang gnyis pa yin pa / de nas rim bzhin sla ru sla ru song nas nga tshor sing khu las rag gi yod tshod mi 'dug / Phal pa*: 500.

broader national and international context, and in treating them as "people without history". In Trashi Palden's case this myopia is surely not a failure but rather a technique calculated to underscore the remoteness of Lingshong from the national centres of decision-making, and it serves to circumscribe the theatre of his interest.

To repeat a point that was made above: Trashi Palden is not writing social history through the medium of a novel, but fictionalised ethnography. As Shannon Rogers observes, one of the achievements of authors such as Dickens, Hardy and George Eliot is "the creation—usually unconscious—of historical documents through the medium of fictionalised social commentary".[19] Like the English authors cited here, Trashi Palden is creating historical documents based on his first-hand experiences and, perhaps, on interviews with people about contemporary or very recent events. In this respect we may contrast him with authors such as Hardy, and even more so Scott, who added a greater temporal depth (much greater in Scott's case) to their novels by recourse to published historical accounts and, at least with Hardy, by combining personal observation with the testimonies of elderly witnesses. Yvonne Verdier argues that "Hardy's Wessex is very precisely situated in time. Hardy emphasises this himself, and to this extent he is not writing historical novels in the sense that Walter Scott does".[20] Perhaps so, but while Hardy is certainly less "historical" than Scott, episodes like the description of George III's review of artillery in *The Trumpet-Major* were based on what Hardy had heard in his childhood from "old people who were present," while his reconstruction of battles on the European continent relied heavily on well-known accounts of the Napoleonic Wars.[21] Trashi Palden, like Hardy, bears comparison with Ranke—one of the founding figures of European social history—in his quest to present the past "as it actually (or essentially) was" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). While the question of the proper interpretation of *eigentlich* in this manifesto has proved to be a fertile source of debate among historians, in Trashi Palden's case at least the dominant actuality is the enaction of activities and events, rather than any hypothetical essence that might underlie them. Ironically, the descriptions of both daily and seasonal activities, whether domestic or communal, as well as one-off events such as the implementation of particular national policies, are accorded a prominence that would be hard to find in many modern

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19 Rogers (2001: 218).

20 "Le Wessex de Hardy est très précisément situé dans le temps. Hardy le souligne lui-même et en cela il ne fera jamais de roman historique au sens de Walter Scott" (Verdier 1995: 64).

21 Rogers (1985: 221–222); for a list of Hardy's probable sources, see *ibid.*: 230, fn. 10.

anthropological studies. The following list of examples of economic and political activities will serve as an example of the novel's engagement with such descriptions: an explanation of seed-to-yield grain ratios;[22] an excursus on brewing and sewing;[23] the establishment of the commune, including the procedures for the reallocation of land and property;[24] the distribution of Mao's *Little Red Book* and the policy of slogan-shouting;[25] an account of daily domestic chores;[26] the process of clearing a landslide;[27] an excursus on tea making;[28] an exposition of the pyramidal structure of political authority;[29] the rise and fall of political slogan-writing;[30] the dissolution of the commune and the process of redistribution of land and livestock to families.[31]

These are just a few examples of instances where the author departs from the main narrative to follow a tangential, sometimes almost pedagogical, byway along which he feels his readers should be led. Outside the economic and productive side of village activities there are similar set pieces in which he educates us about the non-material aspects of social life, including the domain of popular religion—which, incidentally, demonstrates remarkable resilience even during the bleakest years of the Cultural Revolution. These include a lecture by Dedrön on the technique for calculating whether a couple may marry or if their consanguineal proximity precludes them from doing so;[32] an account of an "operatic" Ache Lhamo performance, with a compelling portrait of an impoverished and elderly jester;[33] an oracular seance in which a spirit medium is invited to treat Döndrub and Chime Wangmo's infant son;[34] the pervasive presence of proverbs in everyday conversation, but especially on more formal occasions such as the lengthy mediation process that precedes Döndrub and Chime Wangmo's separation;[35] a description of children's games;[36] divination with the use of a rosary;[37] the

22 *Phal* pa: 118.
23 *ibid.*: 135.
24 *ibid.*: 149–154.
25 *ibid.*: 167.
26 *ibid*: 174–175.
27 *ibid.*: 188.
28 *ibid.*: 210.
29 *ibid.* 363 ff.
30 *ibid.*: 372.
31 *ibid.*: 489 ff.
32 *ibid.*: 35.
33 *ibid.*: 45.
34 *ibid.* 94 ff.
35 *ibid.* 113 ff.
36 *ibid.*: 129.
37 *ibid.*: 201.

blessing of a newly-established household with butter and beer;[38] beliefs concerning twins and triplets;[39] the traditional procedure for making formal requests, with the accompaniment of beer and gifts;[40] an example of an elaborate (and, apparently, lethal) curse;[41] a technique for repelling hailstorms.[42]

While the descriptions of some of these situations are relatively cursory, certain events are singled out for more sustained attention. This is the case with two weddings: that of Tsheten Lhamo and Phuntshok[43] and, later on, of Butri (Phuntshok's sister) and Pemba,[44] when all the components of these complex events are painstakingly catalogued.

Marriage is, of course, a rite of passage, not a calendrical ritual, and for all the importance the author attributes to the former it is the seasonal ceremonies that have a special structuring role in the novel. The crucial significance of such rites for Hardy has been noted by Yvonne Verdier—herself an anthropologist—in a study of his novels that was left unfinished at the time of her death. Hardy, she says,

> absolutely needs custom; he needs *a* custom, and above all a calendrical custom to enable him to develop his stories and to shape his characters' destinies [...] [Rural society] is not defined by universal rites of passage but more assuredly by the cycle of seasons, calendrical events, and works and days [...] Hardy invites us to consider the ethnography of calendrical rites through the dramatic use he makes of them.[45]

While constraints of space prohibit a more systematic comparison of the role that customs—and particularly calendrical festivals—play in *Phal pa* and in Hardy's novels, we may at least note the significance, in the former, of two seasonal ceremonies: New Year and the midsummer festival. Arguably these are the two most important

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38 *ibid.*: 262.
39 *ibid.*: 305.
40 *ibid.*: 351, 406.
41 *ibid.*: 410.
42 *ibid.*: 358.
43 *ibid.*: 290 ff.
44 *ibid.*: 532 ff.
45 "Hardy a absolument besoin de la coutume, d'une coutume, et en tout premier lieu d'une coutume calendaire pour monter ses histoires, nouer le destin de ses personnages. [...] Ce ne sont pas les rites de passage, universels, qui...caractérisent [la société paysanne], mais plus certainement la ronde des saisons, les figures du calendrier, les travaux et les jours. [...] Aussi est-ce déjà l'ethnographie des rites calendaires que, à travers l'utilisation dramatique qu'il en fait, Hardy nous invite à considerer" (Verdier 1995: 85).

occasions in the annual cycle of any Tibetan village, marking, as they do, the opposite ends of the diameter that bisects it. The vicissitudes of these two ceremonies over the course of the quarter-century covered by the novel are emblematic of the condition of the community as a whole. The summer festival is marked by the *'ong skor*, the ritual circumambulation of the community's fields, and it is no doubt significant that we find an *'ong skor* soon after the beginning and again shortly before the end of the novel. Whether or not the author intended this to signify that a long—and in this case nightmarish—cycle had been described and completed, the second event is a clear statement that life has at last returned to normal: in the nadir of the intervening decades we have seen the *'ong skor* being abolished in favour of a soulless and much-resented invented tradition: *ba yi*—literally "Eight One"—in commemoration of the founding of the People's Liberation Army on 1 August 1927.[46] Losar—the New Year—had also fallen into abeyance, with only a short holiday for the agrarian New Year (*so nam lo gsar*) being permitted. These and other cultural events, as stated above, would by no means have been so outlandish to Trashi Palden's readers as Hardy's descriptions of, say, Club Walking, the Skimmington Ride and the Mummers Play would have been to his; Trashi Palden, like any villager in Tibet between 1959 and 1979, had no reason to think that the abolition of the festivals might one day be reversed, and we might imagine that he perceived the prohibition that he had witnessed as a warning that, if they were not meticulously recorded, these and other cherished customs could easily one day vanish without trace. If, as Yvonne Verdier suggests, Hardy uses calendrical rites to structure his plots,[47] a similar case may be made for *Phal pa.* Perhaps in order to emphasise the point that the major festivals are not merely a decorative froth but are inextricably entangled with the real lives of real people, Trashi Palden makes them the setting for pivotal events in the story. Thus the horse race at the opening *'ong skor* defines the characters of Phuntshok and Lhakdor and the subsequent rivalry between them, and is evoked later in the novel as point of reference; the dance that follows it is the setting for the tryst where Tsheten Lhamo and Phuntshok determine to spend their lives together; the first Losar is the scene of the bitter row that leads to the separation of Döndrub and Chime Wangmo and the partition of their household.[48]

It is generally agreed that the most disconcerting aspect of

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46 *Phal pa*: 418–419.
47 Verdier (1995: 81).
48 *Phal pa*: 99ff.

Hardy's novels for many of his urban-dwelling readership was the endowment of his rustic characters with intelligence. To his critics, this attribution was a fantasy that fatally undermined the pretensions of his novels to realism. As far as I am aware, such preconceptions about the rural population of Tibet are not current among its city dwellers, presumably because the boundary between the two categories is porous enough to forestall the emergence of such fictions.[49] Depictions of Tibetans as naive and undiscriminating are nevertheless to be found in the work of a number of contemporary Han writers. A well-known purveyor of this notion is Wang Lixiong who, in an article entitled "Reflections on Tibet," defended the widely-held belief that Tibetans have been lobotomised by the "terrifying sense of isolation and helplessness" induced by the unforgiving environment they inhabit. [50] This intellectual submissiveness, the argument goes, explains the Tibetans' unquestioning faith in the Dalai Lama and their acceptance of the feudal system, as well as the seamless transfer of this acceptance to the Maoist regimes and the dictates of the Red Guards. Wang's argument was robustly challenged in a riposte by Tsering Shakya (2002), but the myth remains deeply entrenched in the perspectives of certain writers.

I would suggest that Trashi Palden's depiction of Tibetan rustics would be just as discomfiting to exponents of this view as Hardy's "thinking Hodge" was to Londoners, though the subversive character of the novel is by no means obvious. As Tsering Shakya observes,

> Tashi Palden's narrative is very much a production of the time and reflects the acceptable form of characterisation [...] [T]he text, while being nativist on the one hand, on the other hand conforms to the Party's line of reasoning.[51]

The novel was published at a period when Deng's reforms were well established, and the palpable resentment of the Lingshong villagers to the policies of the time are, as Tsering Shakya points out, entirely consonant with the official position of the 1990s. But perhaps the really significant point about the villagers' attitudes is not so much that they are in line with the Party policy of the time when the book

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[49] This being said, there does appear to be an unflattering topos of the "dim-witted nomad" (*'brog pa 'thom 'thom*) among sedentary farmers, as pointed out to me with some amusement by two friends, the late Guge Tsering Gyalpo and Porong Dawa Dargye—both accomplished individuals from nomad families.

[50] Wang (2002).

[51] Shakya (2005: 173).

was published, as that villagers are capable of critical thinking at *any* given time. Contrary to what we would expect of the typical Tibetan imagined by Wang Lixiong, Döndrub is rather sceptical of the spirit medium who has been invited to treat his son,[52] just as he is sceptical about the benefits of collectivisation, slogan-shouting and other Party initiatives; and while he works in the harshest conditions as the commune's goatherd, the only moment of anxiety he ever experiences outdoors is when he climbs on to his roof one New Year's morning and thinks for a moment that the village may be on fire when he sees red flags flying above every house.[53]

*Extended Synopsis*

The backbone of the novel is provided by the character of Döndrub, the head of the eponymous "ordinary household." He is described as being tall and lean, and "still in his prime". He has two daughters, Tsheten Lhamo and Drolma, and we find him near the beginning of the novel preoccupied with the question of which of the two should marry out and which should remain at home to inherit the household and take an in-marrying groom, a *mag pa*. The other members of the household are his wife, Chönyi Angmo, and his mother, Dedrön. He and his mother would like to keep Tsheten Lhamo at home, but Chönyi Angmo would prefer to retain Drolma.

During a discussion about prospective suitors for the girls the question of incest-avoidance arises, and Dedrön explains the principle whereby marriageability can be calculated by using the parts of one's arm to represent ascending generations. Candidates for marriage are represented by the extremities of the fingers, and ascending generations correspond to the finger joints, the wrists, the elbow and the shoulder. If the prospective couple have no common ancestor at any of these points—six generations—they are considered to be marriageable.[54]

It is summer, and the villagers are preparing for the *'ong skor*, the ceremonial circumambulation of the barley fields to ensure their protection. Religious activity and traditional festivals are still permitted at this stage, and the procession is even led by a monk on a white horse whose role it is to keep down the obstructive demons

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52 *Phal pa*: 94ff.

53 *ibid.*: 278.

54 Variants of this method of computation are to be found in other Tibetan communities. In parts of Mustang, for example, a couple may not have a common matrilineal ancestor between the fingertips and the wrist—four generations; having a common patrilineal ancestor in any ascending generation would disqualify the couple from marriage.

known as *sri*. As is usual with such agrarian summer festivals, this one features a much-anticipated horse race. The likeable young man name Phuntshok, for whom Tsheten Lhamo has a special affection, comes second. The race is also the first real opportunity for us to see something of the character of Lhakdor, who is from a blacksmith family. There has recently been an official declaration to the effect that the distinctions between social ranks that were traditionally observed in Tibet are to be dissolved: everyone is now "the same"—at least, in terms of ranking categories based on heredity, because stratification based on other criteria are soon to be enforced. Lhakdor suffers deeply from the social stigma of being a blacksmith. He is naturally delighted at the abolition of the social distinctions that disfavoured him but craves respect and recognition. Part of tragedy throughout the novel is that, in spite of official Party policy, all his efforts to earn respect go awry, and serve only to confirm people in their low opinion of him. His behaviour at the horse race is just the first of many instances of these failures. We are told that he looks after his horse well; but the night before the race he feeds the animals on meat and tea, which makes it uncontrollable the following day. When it refuses to respond to his commands and causes him to miss the race, badly, he is enraged at being let down and flogs it viciously. People watch this spectacle with contempt, and one remarks, "He really is a blacksmith (*mgar ba rang red*)." The race is followed by a performance of the Ache Lhamo, the so-called "Tibetan Opera".

After a description of gendered division of domestic labour, the action returns to the festivities, where a village dance is now in progress. The occasion affords Phuntshok and Tsheten Lhamo, who have been close friends since childhood, to exchange intimacies and discuss the possibility of a future life together. Tsheten Lhamo's family are wealthier than Phuntshok's, and he is convinced that her parents will never agree to her marrying him. The reason is not so much the difference in wealth as the rules—or rather, conventions—of residence in marriage. In much of Central Tibet, residence is virilocal; that is to say, the bride takes up residence in her husband's house. In a house with no sons the eldest daughter inherits and takes an in-marrying husband—the *mag pa* of the household. The difficulty for the young couple in the story is that Phuntshok is an only son, and, according to convention, should remain at home to inherit the household. He is aware that her father Döndrub wants to keep her at home as the heiress of the house. Döndrub is indeed determined to keep Tsheten Lhamo at home and resents his wife and younger daughter's scheme to "turn my [elder] daughter out like a dog".[55] On

[55] *Phal pa*: 55.

the last page of the chapter his thoughts travel back several years to introduce a flashback that opens chapter two.[56]

It is eight years earlier, and there is an atmosphere of acute tension in the household. Chime Wangmo is patently favouring the younger daughter Drolma over her elder sister Yeshe Lhamo, and physically abusing the latter. Döndrub's mother Dedrön tells her son that she will starve herself if he does not intervene in the matter; she is particularly incensed because Chime Wangmo has hit the girl over the head for no reason. Unable to endure the conflict and the pressure Döndrub flies into a rage. He smashes a cup and declares that he will not take sides in family disputes. His maternal uncle, Dawa, is a calm voice of reason and good counsel, and has the family's best interests at heart. Döndrub is considering splitting the household into two units, but Dawa advises him against such a drastic move, and reassures him that it is perfectly normal for a family to quarrel.

In spite of Chime Wangmo's continuing abuse, Tshering Lhamo remains a model daughter. She spends a good deal of time with her favourite playmate, Phuntshok, but takes good care of her younger sister Drolma. When she carries Drolma in a blanket on her back, neighbours remark affectionately that she is "like a flea carrying a louse."

The authorities announce a plan to create a school, and boys and girls between the ages of thirteen and sixteen are expected to attend. Neither Tsheten Lhamo nor Drolma is keen to go to school. The school is to serve six villages in the *shang*, and since no building materials are provided the villagers proceed to tear down the Buddhist temple, and the wooden covers of the books are used as writing tablets by the pupils. After some discussion, Drolma is the one who is chosen to go to school; Tsheten Lhamo must stay at home and work. She and her paternal grandfather, Jowo Lhundrub, take care of the animals together, and he even cites a proverb to the effect that the task of tending livestock falls to people twice in their lives: first when they are children, and again when they are elderly.[57] In the course of the conversations while they are together, Powo Lhundrub accidentally lets Tsheten Lhamo into a family secret: she is not Chime Wangmo's daugther; she is actually the daughter of Döndrub's first, and now deceased, wife.

Tsheten Lhamo learns about her origins in the third part of the chapter, in a flashback that is introduced by her grandmother Dedrön, who decides to tell her the full story. Tsheten Lhamo's real

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[56] *ibid.*: 56.
[57] *ibid.*: 68.

mother is named Yangdzom. She has fallen seriously ill, but there is no doctor to take care of her. Her illness is interpreted as being the result of karma from a past life. Yangdzom has been the perfect wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, and the household has lived in complete harmony. But this idyll is too good to last, and Yangdzom dies at dawn. Three days after her death a sky burial is performed. Döndrub becomes increasingly withdrawn and morose.

The fourth part of the chapter takes us to the autumn following the death of Yangdzom. Tsheten Lhamo is just thirteen months old, and her father and grandmother have diametrically opposite attitudes to her: for Dedrön, she is an unbearable reminder of her beloved daughter-in-law Yangdzom; to Döndrub she is the only source of happiness in his life.

Now we learn more about the economic status of Döndrub's household in the village. His landholding amounts to one quarter of a full tax unit (*rkang*), which is "by no means small" (*chung chung ma yin*).[58] As far as livestock is concerned, he owns 30 sheep or goats (*ra lug*). Although he is a capable farmer and herder, his uncle Dawa is able to shear two sheep in the time that it takes him to shear one. Dawa advises Döndrub to remarry. The family's landholding, as he points out, is too large for one man to manage all by himself. He knows of a young woman from Dzongkar who would be an ideal match: she is from "a pure family line" and speaks both Tibetan and Chinese. When he speaks of Yangdzom he never mentions her by name, but as *'das po*—"the deceased one." Döndrub reluctantly agrees: Tsheten Lhamo, he reflects, will still be young enough to think that the new wife is her real mother, but he refuses to consider the prospect of remarrying until the *lo mchod* ceremony, which marks the passage of a full year after the death of a person, has been completed. The *lo mchod* will be held in the eleventh month, and his marriage to his new bride will take place in the new year. On the appointed day, Chime Wangmo arrives amid ceremony, and immediately endears herself to Döndrub and his mother by taking care of Tsheten Lhamo. After eighteen months Drolma is born; and Chime Wangmo's character takes an unexpected turn.

In the fifth part of the chapter we return to the present time, where Tsheten Lhamo has just heard all the above from her grandmother. A month after starting school, the pupils are given a test; Drolma comes last and is publicly humiliated. Her grandmother comforts her, reassuring her that girls are not meant to go to school anyway; in fact, it is only monks and the sons of aristocrats who should receive an education. She goes on to console her for her humiliation by

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58 *ibid.*: 83.

cataloguing the dreadful punishments that were meted out to schoolchildren in the past but adds that things are no longer thus in the modern era. Drolma avoids classes for three days, keeping the company of the cows and her grandfather, but eventually returns to school. By this time, she and Tsheten Lhamo have a baby brother, Buchung.

In the spring of that year there is an outbreak of dysentery in the community. The villagers consult an oracle, who declares that the epidemic is the result of hunting by the Chinese army, which has angered the local territorial god (*yul lha*), and he has retaliated by unleashing this affliction. Dedrön, Chime Wangmo, and Buchung are stricken and although Döndrub wants to take them to the army doctor his grandmother demurs, preferring the ministrations of the spirit medium. Speaking through his oracle, the divinity blames the family for the illness, but although he holds his peace Döndrub is bewildered about why they should be punished for transgressions committed by the army. The oracle further declares that Buchung is a special child, and when word of this gets around villagers come to the house to receive a blessing from him. The various rituals that are performed for the sick child are ineffective, and in the face of strenuous opposition from both his mother and his wife, Döndrub takes Buchung to the hospital at the district headquarters (*chus*). Here a doctor berates him for leaving matters so late and tells him to go to the country (*rdzong*) hospital, which has better resources to deal with such a desperate case. But by now the boy's condition has deteriorated so badly that nothing can save him, and he dies in his father's arms. The oracle announces that there was no remedy anyway since this was a case of "left-over life" (*tshe lhag*), in which an individual lives out the remainder of a previous incarnation that was cut short.

Although the family slowly come to terms with their loss, Buchung's absence is still felt during the New Year festivities. As in the case of other village festivals, the occasion gives the author an opportunity to describe a quintessentially Tibetan celebration in close ethnographic detail. One of the events of the ceremony is a ritual of propitiation for the territorial god known as *chu dar*, in which a young girl from a well-to-do house is chosen to play a prominent role, and Tsheten Lhamo is selected for this honour. Dedrön gives the girl her jewelry to wear for the occasion, something that enrages Chime Wangmo, who feels slighted at the thought that she has been bypassed in the transmission of property that should customarily pass through the line of senior women of a household. Döndrub tries as usual to mollify his wife by reassuring her that Dedrön's gesture is merely a loan for the occasion, but she remains implacable, and the

sight of her step-daughter wearing this finery on the occasion of the ceremony only intensifies her fury. Döndrub diverts his frustration to his mother, saying that she should have consulted him first, but she too snaps at him angrily. There is a hostile confrontation between Dedrön and Chime Wangmo, and even though Uncle Dawa, ever the peacemaker, tries to calm his sister by citing the proverb that "even a nun can be a king for the sake of peace in Tibet", it is clear that the rift in the family is now irreparable.

Chapter three opens onto the scene of a tense and unhappy family. Chime Wangmo has taken to making *chang* clandestinely for her own consumption, and blatantly favours Drolma over her step-daughter by giving her pieces of meat. Although she protests to her mother-in-law that the *chang* was intended for the elderly, Dedrön forbids her entry to the pantry by locking the door. Chime Wangmo retaliates by locking Dedrön out of the house altogether on the grounds that a thief might enter while the other family members are away. Following a further confrontation in which Dedrön accuses Chime Wangmo to her face of drinking and stealing, Döndrub intervenes and declares that he has no choice but to divide the household. Word of the rift gets around the community and it becomes a talking point: "If the bride is a thief," people mutter, "how can a household survive?" But opinions in the village are divided, with some people blaming the older members of the family and some the younger generation. Prominent members of the community—including Ngawang, one of the village's representatives at the level of the *shang*—and Döndrub's uncle, Dawa, are invited to mediate in the process of diving the household and its property. The author devotes a substantial part of the chapter to this occasion, the like of which he must surely have often witnessed in his own village. One striking feature of the description is the extent to which all the speakers make use of proverbs during their interventions. After a great deal of discussion of the pros and cons of splitting the family, Döndrub decides in favour of a division, and invites one of the local leaders (*u yon*) to oversee the allocation of domestic property to each of the two hearths. According to the new arrangement, Drolma lives with her mother, Chime Wangmo, while Döndrub, his mother and his elder daughter Tsheten Lhamo form the other unit. For these three, the solution is a happy one. Tsheten Lhamo works hard and is a delight to her father and grandmother. Drolma, too, works hard at carding and weaving, but her mother is less indulgent with her than in the past, and beats her without reason.

These domestic developments are taking place against the background of more momentous changes in the country, and the ripples of these far-off upheavals begin to reach the village. There is

an intensification of political propaganda, and the better-off families begin to feel themselves threatened by the anticipated measures. Poorer families are especially welcomed at the now-daily meetings, and Chime Wangmo sees this new trend as a something potentially advantageous for her situation. In spite of the general ambience of domestic harmony in his home, Döndrub is troubled—not yet by the political wind that is blowing, but because of his anxiety about Tsheten Lhamo's future. As the eldest daughter of a sonless household she should remain at home and take an in-marrying *mag pa* as her husband. The problem for Döndrub is that, as far as he is concerned, the only candidate (and there are many suitors) worth considering is his daughter's childhood sweetheart, Phuntshok; but as an only son, Phuntshok will no doubt be required to remain at home to inherit his own household. Indeed, his father Dorje has visited Döndrub on more than one occasion to request Tsheten Lhamo's hand in marriage to his son. Without much hope of success, Döndrub nevertheless summons up his courage and pays a visit to Dorje. The family are poor, and while their relative indigence is what has convinced Phuntshok that Tsheten Lhamo's family would never accept him as a son-in-law, it also makes him a promising candidate for training as a future party cadre. Döndrub puts the question to Dorje who, to his surprise, graciously agrees to the match: it transpires that the benevolent and discreet Uncle Dawa has previously approached Dorje to prepare him for Döndrub's visit, and to persuade him of the advantages of the arrangement that he will propose. The wedding is duly set for the following February, at the beginning of the new year. The general atmosphere of relief and euphoria that ensures offers an appropriate point of departure for the author to insert an interlude about the games that the village children play, and between a passage about the preliminary political education that Phuntshok receives and a scene of chaste romanticism between him and Tsheten Lhamo, the author offers an ethnographic description of domestic activities, notably sewing and *chang*-brewing.

But this idyll, too, is threatened when Phuntshok learns that he will have to go to Lhasa for two years of training. On learning about this, Tsheten Lhamo bemoans her wretched *karma* while angrily attacking Phuntshok for having failed to consult her on the matter. One of the more perspicacious, if rather grim, proverbs that are cited in the midst of these exchanges runs: "With the law of the nation above and community tradition below, forget about any freedom to do as you please."[59]

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[59] *mtho rgyal khab la khrims dang 'og sde pa la'ang srol yod pas de ltar rang snang gang dran byed rgyu ga la yong.*

Tsheten Lhamo's desolation in the face of Phuntshok's imminent departure for Lhasa is not alleviated by the visits of neighbours who come by ostensibly to console her but cannot resist warning of the dangers of the big city: Lhasa is a place of thieves and cars, and who know what other potential threats to Phuntshok's safety and fidelity. In the course of a brief moonlit meeting Tsheten Lhamo tells him of her fear that he will leave her for a sophisticated city girl, but he protests that this will never happen, and the two swear an oath of loyalty to each other. Following a simple wedding at home Phuntshok sets off for the city.

Most of the fifth part of the chapter is devoted to the political and economic reorganisation of the village with the establishment of a commune (*kung hre*). There is widespread anxiety about the prospect of collectivisation, and the sense of loss felt by many people at the appropriation of their fields. Moreover, livestock owners no longer have any say in the matter of whether their animals are to be slaughtered or not. An incidental concern is the abolition of the office of the village weather-maker, whose task it was to perform rituals to protect the fields from hail. There is indeed a storm, and Döndrub and Dorje are about to set out to check the fields but Dedrön stops them: there is no point in going, she says; the fields are now part of the collective, and they do not need to feel any responsibility for them. The dismissal of the weather-maker is part of a more general erosion of agrarian rituals; for the first time this year the *'ong skor*, the annual ceremony of protecting the fields by circumambulating them, will no longer be performed.

The redistribution of property takes place at a public meeting at which political speeches are made and the PLA is present. People are sternly warned that any foot-dragging may lead to offenders being marked as counter-revolutionaries. Döndrub loses his best field but asks to be allowed to keep his ageing donkey, even though this leads to accusations that he is private-property-minded. It very soon becomes apparent that collectivisation is going to bring with it a raft of unexpected hardships.

The reader's vantage point on these developments, as it is throughout most the novel, is the "middle" range of the socio-economic hierarchy represented by Döndrub's family, most of whom are displeased and disturbed by the changes that are taking place. However, the lower echelons are the winners here, and no one in the novel is more enthusiastic about the situation than Lhakdor the Blacksmith. His now-elevated status has made him bolder, and he visits Tsheten Lhamo with increasing frequency. While he hopes that his new social standing will induce her to treat him with the respect he was always denied, she deftly uses the transformation as a

distancing mechanism, addressing him formally by his title rather than his personal name. Irritated by her aloofness he asks her if she misses Phuntshok, and then adds that she might as well forget him since he is unlikely to be back for many years. The general stress of the situation causes Dedrön to fall ill, leading Döndrub to view the collective system with even greater loathing, since the strict work roster prevents him from staying at home to take care of his mother. Tsheten Lhamo, in the meantime, does her best to avoid Lhakdor, who is consumed with envy and longing; but always scheming.

The political situation continues to intensify at the beginning of chapter four. Years are not given, but we know that it must be 1967 or 1968 because there is a new term in the air: Cultural Revolution. Posters of Chairman Mao—already a familiar name, of course—begin to appear in public places. When people learn the identity of the man who features on the poster, they are astonished to discover that he is just a human. The *Little Red Book*, too, makes its appearance, and the villagers must now brandish it and shout slogans from it during official events. Dedrön has passed away in the spring, and Döndrub—who is now the donkey driver for the commune—and Chime Wangmo begin to grow closer again. Uncle Dawa, wise as ever in village matters, counsels Döndrub not to let this rapprochement happen too soon or too obviously, or else it will reflect badly on Döndrub's late mother—his sister—who will then be blamed for having driven a wedge through the family.

Tsheten Lhamo, in the meantime, is alarmed by another rumour, to the effect that her sister Drolma and Lhakdor the Blacksmith are becoming overly (as she sees it) friendly. Drolma defends Lhakdor with the remark that "now that he's an official he doesn't beat iron any more",[60] to which her elder sister replies with a lecture on the nature of blacksmiths: that they are social marginals not because they beat iron but because of their hereditary character. She warns Drolma that if she associates too closely with Lhakdor she will no longer be able to share utensils—to "mix mouths"—with the rest of her family; she will be like the proverbial white crow that is conspicuously set apart from its fellows.

At a meeting that is held a few days later it is announced that one of the officials, Wangyal, is to be sacked from his privileged position, and reduced to being a metal-worker. The implied distinction between a blacksmith and a metal-worker is significant, because the matter is raised again at the end of the novel when the more drastic reforms of the Cultural Revolution are consigned to history, and Wangyal's rehabilitation illustrates the point that the mere fact of

60 *ibid.*: 172.

working with iron does not make one a blacksmith. The reason cited for Wangyal's fall from grace is his past record of dalliances with women, which is taken as evidence of "bad behaviour". Döndrub, who likes Wangyal, cannot see why his private life should have any relevance for his aptitude for political service.

Tsheten Lhamo misses Phuntshok more and more, and the fact that he has stopped writing convinces her that he has found another woman in Lhasa. Pachung, the postman with a fine white horse, teases her about her ill-concealed anxious anticipation. Conditions on the commune, meanwhile, are becoming harsher, and Döndrub, whose landholding was "by no means small," is subjected to criticism and opprobrium for his former prosperity. Now we meet a friend of his, Yeshe Palzang, who is described as a *grong chog pa*, a "village ritualist." When Döndrub grumbles to him about the difficulty of belonging to the commune, Yeshe Palzang replies to him, *sotto voce*, that even though he is not a commune member he is by no means free (*rang dbang*): he is not allowed to plant or to irrigate his fields, and others shun him. As a diviner (*mo pa*) he had a collection of scriptures but was required to burn them all. However, even though he has lost his books and other ritual items such as his divination dice (*mo sho*), he can still exercise his craft clandestinely with his rosary. And indeed, he has been invited to Döndrub's house precisely in order to determine whether or not Phuntshok will be returning to the village. The prognosis is favourable, but just as Tsheten Lhamo exclaims happily that she will not have to wait much longer for Phuntshok's return, Lhakdor walks into the house and catches Yeshe Palzang with his rosary in his hands, and fixes on him "like a dog that has spotted meat." Realising that the situation is an extremely dangerous one for Yeshe Palzang, Tsheten Lhamo insists that the diviner is present at their insistence, and that he should not be held responsible. But Lhakdor is not going to let such an excellent opportunity go to waste. He reminds the trio about the severity of the consequences for them if he reports the matter. However, he will consider dropping the matter ... if Tsheten Lhama agrees to marry him. Döndrub is consumed with rage, inwardly excoriating Lhakdor as a "vile artisan" (*mgar nag*) but manages to control himself. Addressing Lhakdor calmly and respectfully as "honourable representative of the state" (*chab srid lags*), he suggests that just as clay and bronze images should not be kept in the same shrine, so it would be inappropriate for him to consider living under the same roof as someone who is so much his social inferior.

After this encounter, the author allows us one of the few, precious insights we are given into Lhakdor's innermost thoughts. The spurious argument offered by Döndrub about the incompatibility

between his daughter and Lhakdor notwithstanding, he is under no illusions: the real reason for Döndrub's demurral is the inferior status that has dogged Lhakdor into an era where such distinctions are supposed to have been abolished. He and others of his class are said to be "black-boned," but he has never yet heard a body-cutter speak of dismembering a corpse and finding it to have black bones.

Having suffered a series of rejections by Tsheten Lhamo, Lhakdor turns his attentions to Drolma, who is altogether more accommodating in spite of her family's warnings. She nevertheless rejects his all-too unsubtle advances, and when he accuses her of being an aristocrat the author reminds us that she is not in fact a member of the nobility but a mere commoner.[61] Lhakdor is still in two minds: he has strong feelings for Tsheten Lhamo, but he knows from Drolma's indiscretions that she and her father have said abominable things about him, and furthermore, they are in transgression of the law through having invited a class enemy, a diviner, to perform a forbidden ritual for them. From then on, he becomes a frequent visitor to Drolma's house. Drolma's mother, Chime Wangmo, is under no illusion that her daughter is his second choice and mutters a proverb to the effect that the best meat goes to the wolf, whereas the fox has to make do with what is left.

The social consequences of associating too obviously with Lhakdor begin to show soon afterwards. Döndrub has invited Chime Wangmo and his uncle Dawa to his house for a drink, but in the course of the evening Tsheten Lhamo declines to share Drolma's cup and puts her refusal down to having a cold that she does not want to pass on to her sister. Although Döndrub strongly disapproves of Drolma's dalliance with Lhakdor, he nevertheless berates Tsheten Lhamo for her unsisterly behaviour, causing her to break down in tears. A few days later Drolma hears an angry altercation outside the house. A crowd has gathered around Lhakdor and Tsheten Lhamo, who are hurling insults—thickly larded with proverbs—at each other. Lhakdor, Tsheten Lhamo claims, has tried to assault her. Drolma, preferring her own reading of the situation, returns home content in the knowledge that her sister has not succeeded in seducing Lhakdor.

Chapter five opens with Tsheten Lhamo returning home, desolate and lonely, after Lhakdor's assault, but the novel's attention soon shifts from her private misery to the public ennui of the daily political meetings to which everyone is subjected. In a flashback to a meeting of the previous night, an official reads a government document that the assembled villagers are required to discuss. The

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61 *ibid.*: 207.

grinding tedium of the event, in which most of those present are falling asleep, is lightened for a moment when someone breaks wind, but the depiction of the scene leaves us in no doubt about the consensus, evidently shared by the author, that such meetings are nothing but a futile waste of everyone's time.

After the meeting (we are still in the flashback) Tsheten Lhamo accompanies her friend Butri—Phuntshok's sister—back to her house, and on the way home she is attacked by Lhakdor. He begs her to sleep with him just once, assuring her that he will never bother her again afterwards. As he tries to grab her, she resists vigorously, yelling so loudly that villagers come running to see what the matter is. "See what sort of leader this is!" she shouts to the gathering witnesses, denouncing her aggressor for hypocrisy as someone who pontificates against impropriety but himself engages in such depravity. The onlookers marvel at "how such a sheep is transformed into a tigress," while Lhakdor feels her words "like machine-gun bullets in his heart." He slinks home, humiliated and wretched, telling himself that succeeding in winning her favour "would be like reaching the stars".[62]

But his humiliation is mixed with rage, first at himself—for not having approached Tsheten Lhamo more delicately—and secondly at the world, that such a pernicious system of discrimination based on heredity should exist at all. He is enraged at the upper classes in general and at Tsheten Lhamo in particular.

Unexpectedly, in the second part of the chapter, Phuntshok returns to the village. He had left in 1966 and it is now 1968. The much-anticipated reunion between him and Tsheten Lhamo is deferred while each wonders anxiously if the other has found a new partner during the separation. The fact that Phuntshok has come with a female companion only serves to exacerbate Tsheten Lhamo's uncertainty. However, it transpires that the companion is nothing more than a colleague (although we are told she would have wanted things to be otherwise), and after her departure, just as Tsheten Lhamo is about to set off to pay him a visit, he arrives at the door. Phuntshok has changed: he is stronger, sports a moustache and can no longer sit cross-legged.[63] However, he reassures his hosts of his enduring Tibetanness, and when Döndrub expresses his regret that he was unable to welcome him home with a flask of *chang*—because such traditional activities are no longer permitted—he says that

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62 *ibid.*: 225.

63 During a visit to Tibet in 1985 I was informed by someone who had spent more than a decade in gaol that prisoners were forbidden to sit cross-legged, as this was considered to be a distinctively Tibetan posture; only squatting was acceptable.

*tsampa* will do perfectly well.

As if to highlight the sterling qualities of the principled and disciplined young man who has just returned to the village, the next part (4) of the chapter opens with an almost caricatural picture of Lhakdor. The consensus in the community is that he acted like an animal in accosting Tsheten Lhamo because he is a blacksmith. We also learn that he periodically beats his wife—which whom he has not had conjugal relations for some time—and that every time he beats her, she threatens to leave him. Drolma is kind to him, but even here the author denies him the redemption of gentle feelings, since his foremost interest, as she slowly matures, is about "defiling her body." There is, we are told, no difference between a blacksmith and a butcher.[64]

Tsheten Lhamo is only the first to refuse to "share the cup" with her sister Drolma, but others, too, follow suit. Döndrub, her father, continues to share the cup with her, only to find that he too is subjected to the same exclusion.

Lhakdor now has the office of field-guard (*'ong srung*), whose duty it is to ensure that livestock do not enter the fields. At one point he accosts Drolma, who happens to be passing by, and attempts to drag her into his field, but she is saved when some cattle enter the crops nearby and Lhakdor is duty-bound to release her in order to evict the animals—to the derision of the owner of the cattle. But his aggression has not deterred Drolma, who continues to treat him with affection, and when they next meet, and he is drinking *chang*, he asks her, with a combination of pathos and bitterness, whether she minds that her bowl, from which he is drinking, is now polluted. It is no surprise that Lhakdor is an enthusiastic supporter of the Cultural Revolution. He is the first man in the village to cut his hair short, and he becomes a member of the Red Guards. And yet he wonders why, when this new social order has been created, people continue to look down on him. His relationship with Drolma intensifies, and when his wife eventually leaves him, he takes a large grain allocation and moves in with Drolma and her mother. The latter resents his presence, but soon comes to appreciate the material advantages of sharing a house with a member of the politically privileged class.

The division of Döndrub's household leads indirectly to another culture clash. Döndrub and Tsheten Lhamo pay a visit to Chime Wangmo, and Döndrub sets about putting daubs of butter on the stove, the pillars and the door lintels to effect the auspices. While this gesture elicits approval from some of those present, Lhakdor makes a show of indifference, and remarks that this is "unnecessary

64 *Phal pa*: 248.

superstition". But Lhakdor's mother, Pedrön, again praises Döndrub, with compliments about his illustrious ancestry and the remark that this observance of tradition "makes us ashamed of ourselves". Lhakdor is wounded by the implicit put-down. But the disadvantages of having even a "middle-rich" heritage soon become apparent again. The work of rebuilding the houses has depleted the commune's grain stocks, and members of Döndrub's socio-economic category receive little or no surplus grain.

Chapter six begins with an imposition by the party that is resented particularly deeply. Phuntshok, who is the secretary (*drung yig*) of the collective and sits at the head of the row, receives an order that the forthcoming Losar—New Year—festivities must be organised on a much more limited scale than was the case in the past: there will be only five days of holiday at the Agrarian New Year (*so nam lo gsar*); there will be no *chang*, and the Royal New year, Gyalpo Losar (*rgyal po lo gsar*), which falls a month later, will not be celebrated at all. And so Losar in the year 1969 is a crashing anticlimax; normally the air would be full of juniper smoke and a Gutor (*dgu gtor*) ritual for the purification of the community would be performed, but this year there is none of that. Flag-raising, however, is permissible, and this provides the opportunity for a barely-noticeable gesture of resistance on the part of one of the villagers. Döndrub raises a flag amid the ruins of the broken shrines in the village; Lhakdor erects a red flag; but one of Döndrub's neighbours raises a flag with a vulture feather attached to the top. Döndrub asks him in bewilderment about the significance of this feather. The man replies that he does not know, but that attaching a vulture feather to a prayer flag must surely be a gesture of "superstitious faith" (*rmongs dad*)—and, by implication, a discrete act of subversion.[65] But this is just a shard of levity in a drab world; Döndrub looks out and sees the fiery red roofscape of the community; there are no rituals, no dances, no games. It is a scene of cheerless misery.

Even the muted pre-nuptial ceremonies for Phuntshok and Tsheten Lhamo's wedding are a cause of tension. The seating order is established, grain swastikas are set at the head of each row, gifts are given. Lhakdor, who never had much affection for Phuntshok in the first place, is infuriated by the spectacle of someone who is, after all, a member of the Party, indulging in the "Four Olds".[66]

Drolma is pregnant by Lhakdor, but there are complications with the labour and fears grow for the mother's life. Word spreads that the affliction has been caused by a witch, and Döndrub is convinced that

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65 *ibid.*: 277.

66 *ibid.*: 295.

Pedrön, Lhakdor's mother, is the offender. The family engage the services of a traditional doctor (*sman pa*). Drolma believes she is dying, and when Pedrön visits her, her behaviour is such that even the doctor is convinced that she is to blame for the problem. When she leaves the house, Chime Wangmo follows her to the door and throws a handful of ash after her—as one would do for a "ransom" effigy (*glud*) that was being removed from a house at the conclusion of an exorcism ritual. Realising that he lacks the wherewithal to help Drolma, the healer advises the family to bring a doctor from the county headquarters (*rdzong*). Lhakdor is unable to go to the *rdzong* because he is fully occupied with commune responsibilities, and Döndrub duly sets off on his horse under the moonlight.

In the *rdzong*, the county seat, he meets a doctor of his acquaintance who hastens to the village by truck, while Döndrub returns slowly on his tired horse. On returning home he finds that Drolma has given birth to twin boys, and he falls to his knees in exhaustion and relief, thanking the doctor and the others who have helped. Lhakdor has not been able to do anything to help in the crisis, but Döndrub, realising that the circumstances were beyond his control, does not blame him for this—especially since he sees Lhakdor's genuine frustration at his own powerlessness.

This is 1969, and tensions are mounting over the border between China and India. Recruitment for the army begins, and Lhakdor is among the first to sign up—much to the annoyance of his mother and his wife, who point out how unreasonable this is in the light of his having two small children. They argue that he should at least have discussed the matter with them before making his decision. He counters that as a party official concerned with security issues, it was incumbent on him to enlist, and besides, there are certain material advantages to be had.

As the secretary of the commune, Phuntshok is not in the first wave of recruits, but Döndrub is, and although Phuntshok offers to go in his place he is not allowed to. In the end, the whole recruitment process is a fiasco. The morning after the women have said goodbye to their departing menfolk, they see them returning to the village following their rejection on grounds of physical unsuitability or inadequate provisioning from their homes.

Chapter seven begins in the same year. We are squarely in the Cultural Revolution, and political campaigns are being conducted to root out and crush recidivists. Lhakdor has been promoted, while Döndrub has been condemned as "one who combines the private and the governmental" (*sger gzhung mnyam 'brel*) on account of his privately-owned donkey. He is made to work as the commune's goatherd. Phuntshok, too, has suffered a fall from grace. He is aware

of discrepancies between what is allocated to the commune by the higher authorities and what actually reaches the grass-roots level. There is collusion among several corrupt officials—one of whom is, of course, Lhakdor—who ensure that Phuntshok is in no position to denounce their activities. By July 1970 there is no tea in the village any more, and people use the bark of wild bushes to make substitute infusions; everyone is hungry. A girl called Pasang comes to Döndrub's house to beg for a little *tsampa*, but Tsheten Lhamo—who, in the meantime, has had a son named Lobzang—has to tell her that they have none to spare, though she does relent and invites her in for tea. Pasang's family have had debts to pay, and things are especially hard for them.

Phuntshok, a true idealist, is furious at the injustices that are being perpetrated. He is upset at not being able to perform his duties properly and goes so far as to investigate the situation in other communes. His enquiries lead him to oppose publicly the official party line which claims that each year's harvest is better than the last.[67] Well-wishers warn him that what he is doing is against Party policy, and that he is treading a dangerous path. In spite of the pressure on him to desist, he is determined to speak truth to power. People are not starving; they are clandestinely eating the unripe grain as it grows in the fields and taking a little home for their families. Eventually he submits a report on his findings to the county headquarters—a report that is "like dropping a stone in the water". He has been looking closely into Lhakdor's activities, in spite of Döndrub begging him to desist. At a personal level, too, relations between the two families are strained. Lhakdor's twins have been bullying little Lobzang, which in turn further sours the already strained relationship between their respective mothers, Drolma and Tsheten Lhamo.

Phuntshok is summoned to the district (*chus*) office, where the officials have learned about the report he has submitted. He is questioned by an official named Liu—one of only two Han Chinese (the other being a water engineer) to appear in the entire novel. Phuntshok explains his actions, but this only provokes Liu to greater anger. In the face of Phuntshok's refusal to back down, Liu orders him to stay in the *chus* overnight and to make a public confession. He

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67 While the widespread practice of inflating figures for the harvest enabled corrupt officials to purloin part of the produce, it resulted in particular hardship for farmers because of the obligation to pay a portion of their yield as a "donation" (actually a lease fee) and also to sell a part of their surplus to the state. If the harvest records were exaggerated, in reality there was no surplus, and farmers were in fact parting with resources they needed for their survival. For a discussion of this problem, see Goldstein *et al.* (2009: 61–64).

is confronted by a group of officials, some of whom accuse him of being a member of the execrated Gyenlok (*gyen log*) faction of the Red Guards, while others beat him, but still he refuses to recant.

The following day, Döndrub brings bedding for him, but is not allowed to see him. Although Döndrub tells Tsheten Lhamo nothing she guesses that something is amiss, and wonders if Phuntshok will go to prison. She visits Lhakdor in the hope of obtaining more information, but he claims ignorance. In spite of his hope that things will turn out badly for Phuntshok, he is nervous and uncertain; he goes to visit one of his coparceners who reassures him that he has no cause for concern. And so indeed it turns out. A committee under the presidency of a firebrand junior official named Dekyi Saldrön censures Phuntshok for his activities, and although he is sent home with a reprimand, the corruption that he was trying to uncover remains buried—to Lhakdor's great relief.

Weakened by stress and general hardship, Tsheten Lhamo loses the child she is carrying. She has aged, and her father Döndrub finds it increasingly hard to be out in all weathers with the commune's sheep. But it is Phuntshok who is the next to fall seriously ill. He is, as the author observes, like the proverbial cow that is sick in spring and will die in the autumn. Tsheten Lhamo begs Ngawang, a commune official, to excuse him from work, but Ngawang responds that the situation is beyond his control. In desperation, she puts on her finest clothes and goes to Lhakdor's house with a flask of beer—the obligatory accompaniment to any formal request in a Tibetan village—and an apron she herself has woven.

Her sister, Drolma, and her stepmother Chime Wangmo give her a cool reception, making inconsequential conversation, while Lhakdor ignores her and smokes a cigarette. She cannot help noticing that they not only have tea, but even oil to put in it. She pours a cup of *chang* for Lhakdor with the entreaty that he intercede in having Phuntshok excused from work. Lhakdor drinks the *chang* but tells Tsheten Lhamo that she should have asked him earlier, and that she should now try talking to the commune leadership. Drolma keeps the apron her sister has brought, and Tsheten Lhamo returns empty-handed. She visits Lhakdor again when he is at home alone, and he implies, none too subtly, that he will help her in return for the favours she has denied him so far—adding, with characteristic inelegance, that it will not be such a big matter for her now that she is a mother. He lunges at her and she tries to fight him off, but at that moment Drolma walks into the room, yells at her sister that she is a whore and spits in Lhakdor's face, declaring her intention to leave him: "Now we'll keep the knife and the meat apart", she says. But Lhakdor, paradox that he is, presents Phuntshok's case to the

commune, and he is excused from work. Although Lhakdor no longer lives with Drolma, he is required to support the children, and becomes embittered towards both Drolma and her mother Chime Wangmo.

Although Phuntshok has been demoted he continues to challenge the system and announces his plan to write a letter to an even higher authority than the county. Döndrub again wisely counsels him against this course of action.

Shortly after this comes one of a few episodes in the novel when a praeternatural element enters the story. Tsheten Lhamo and Lobzang are at home together when the young boy suddenly says, "Dad is bleeding from the head".[68] She goes out to investigate, and finds Phuntshok unconscious in a puddle, with a gash in his head and a broken leg, having been ambushed on the way home by unidentified assailants.

The leg is badly broken and needs to be set, but the officially recognised *chus* district doctor demurs, on the grounds that he is unqualified to carry out such a complicated procedure. Döndrub, in his frustration, curses him as a parasitic *za 'dre* demon. Döndrub and the other senior figures know that there is an excellent bone-setter nearby, but he has been publicly denounced and humiliated by being made to wear the notorious dunce's hat and refuses to come. The official version of Phuntshok's accident is that he fell down a set of stairs. Dorje, Phuntshok's father, clandestinely visits the bone-setter who reluctantly agrees to come, but only under cover of darkness. After examining the leg, he announces that the bones have knit, and will have to be rebroken. Although he doubts that Phuntshok will be able to stand the pain, the latter insists, and the bone-setter duly proceeds, accompanied by the recitation of mantras. Phuntshok's leg is repaired, but he walks with a limp for ever after.

Phuntshok has been a staunch supporter of the Revolution and of the Party's position, and his crusade has been directed against corrupt individuals who have been parasitic on the system, not against the system itself. Now for the first time, we begin to see cracks in his unquestioning dedication. Following a brief excursus on the rise and decline of the campaign of slogan-writing, we learn that Phuntshok has come to the conclusion that slogans are actually nothing more than "empty words". Cynicism and disillusion are general. There is a new leader in the commune whose mission is to create new irrigation canals. All the canals are dignified with "Red" names, but with the humour characteristic of citizens in totalitarian societies they are given irreverent nicknames, like "Waterless

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68 *Phal pa*: 365.

Irrigation Canal" (*chu med chu yur*), while the official himself has the sobriquet "Canal Secretary" (*yur bu'i hru'u ci*).[69]

Phuntshok is engaged in a propaganda exercise against Lin Biao (who plotted against Mao and died in a plane crash in September 1971) and the Gang of Four, and all the men of the village are away from their homes. Tsheten Lhamo is alone at home when she goes into labour, but fortunately Lobzang returns home in time to bring her the wool and the scissors she needs. He then goes to inform Drolma, who makes a pot of tea and hurries to visit her sister. She lights a fire and blocks the draughts in the house, and remarks to her that she could have died without anyone knowing about it.[70] Döndrub returns home from the pastures and is shocked to find out what has happened.

Chapter eight opens with a watershed moment in the novel. A message has gone out to everyone that there will be an unscheduled meeting, but that no one should beat drums or laugh or wear good clothing. The commune officials are being closely watched by outside mentors. Various theories are put forward about the reason for the meeting; someone suggests that they are going to be told that they will have to eat wheat (as opposed to the preferred barley) *tsampa* again this year.[71] Four armed guards are present at the meeting. Flags are flying at half-mast, and there is a white flower on Mao's portrait.

Phuntshok realises what is behind the meeting shortly before Mao Zedong's death is announced. All the officials on the podium burst into tears and fall to the ground in a display of grief. Butri, Phuntshok's sister, asks Tsheten Lhamo what they are meant to do. Realising that they are supposed to take their cue from the leaders on stage she spits into her hands and rubs her eyes until they are red and wet. Others follow suit, but in spite of their outward show of bereavement all are trying to conceal their hilarity at the absurdity of the situation.

Back at home, the question is raised about the significance of Mao's passing: "Does this mean the old regime will come back?" To which Döndrub remarks, with resignation, that whether foreigners invade or the old regime returns, it will make no difference to the lives of ordinary people. Tsheten Lhamo tells him to lower his voice, because little Lobzang might repeat the conversation; but Lobzang, child though he is, assures them that he will not say a word. The young women continue to joke about the histrionics of the officials earlier in the day—"What an actor Lhakdor is!" It transpires that the

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69 *Phal* pa: 375; Shakya (2004: 169).
70 *Phal pa*: 385.
71 *ibid.*: 389.

officials, too, had rubbed spit into their eyes before appearing on the podium.

In the course of a meeting it is announced that Mao has a successor. Lhakdor is profoundly relieved, since the rumour that the old regime might return has been taken seriously by many. People are told that they may again dance and sing. Changes are soon felt: the work regime is reorganised, and agricultural machinery is brought to the village. A programme of literacy is launched, but there are few promising youngsters.

We are soon in the 1980s, and the responsibility system is introduced. The new leader of the commune, noticing how capable Phuntshok is and how respected he is by others, elevates his status. Sonor, formerly a vocal detractor of Phuntshok, now comes to his house with a flask of *chang* to ingratiate himself. During the visit he reveals that it was he who had attacked him and broken his leg, because Lhakdor had persuaded him that Phuntshok was having an affair with his wife. It was also Sonor who had made up the story of Phuntshok's having fallen down a flight of stairs.

After Sonor's departure, Tsheten Lhamo, Drolma and Butri are incensed by Phuntshok's forgiving and conciliatory attitude. Phuntshok responds with a saying, that "there's no point in soaking a corpse in water"—Sonor had been using weapons that had been made by someone else; and besides, one should operate within the framework of the law; to which Döndrub retorts that the law is useless. Butri, Phuntshok's sister, leaves peremptorily and goes to Lhakdor house. Standing outside it, she yells out a dire curse that ends with the wish that Lhakdor should die an unusual and lonely death. Lhadgor himself, sitting at home with his mother, shrugs off the curse as the ravings of a madwoman.

But he is aware that times have changed, and that his power is on the wane. He finds himself increasingly marginalised, and, as before, people are unwilling to share the cup with him. Moreover, Pemba is now back from military service and has no patience for Lhakdor's attitude. In the course of an argument he seizes him, threatening to give him a thrashing, but Phuntshok and others break up the impending fight. In the rest of the community, there is a general resurgence of optimism: there are tug-of-war contests, people play cards and other games, and sing songs.

Lhakdor's eventual demise occurs shortly after this. A work party, which includes Lhakdor, Pema and Phuntshok, sets out to repair a wooden bridge that has been damaged. Lhakdor is in the current, holding a beam, when the force of the water suddenly increases. He is trapped in the torrent, clinging on to the beam. Pemba makes a move to help him but is held back by the others for his own safety.

Eventually, the strength of the current is too great, and Lhakdor is swept downstream by the water. A search part sets out to find him, and they go as far as the confluence of the river with the Tsangpo, but there is no sign of the body, and no point in searching any further. The fact that he has died in his prime due to an accident, and that the absence body makes it impossible to have a proper funeral, mean that this is a highly inauspicious death. Sightings of Lhakdor's ghost are reported, and he is feared and execrated in death even more than he was in life. An elderly blacksmith, distressed by this affront to the memory and reputation of his deceased relative, complains to the commune about the resurgence of "superstitious beliefs" (*rmongs dad*) in the community; but the Cultural Revolution is now long past, the monasteries are opening again, and such complaints no longer carry any weight. It is rumoured that Lhakdor's ghost is haunting them because they had destroyed monasteries and temples, but although people are afraid, they are reassured that 49 days after his death his consciousness will be carried away "like a feather in the wind."

One day, his widow Drolma goes to the storeroom of the house and sees him sitting on the sacks of grain, staring at her. Items have been disturbed in the room. When a severely shaken Drolma tells the family what she has seen, Döndrub explains that the ghost has been extracting the nutrition from the grain. They discuss the possibility of commissioning an exorcism by means of a "burnt offering" (*sbyin sreg*) fire ritual, but Döndrub is sceptical: "It would be hard to burn someone who was so wicked".[72] Drolma wonders why, when Lhakdor was apart from her most of the time when he was alive, he should cling to her now that he is dead.

The social changes that have already begun gather pace in chapter nine. Material conditions are improving, and traditions are being revived. Most people are now wearing factory-made shoes (though Döndrub still wears home-made rope-soled felt boots). When Pemba and Butri (Phuntshok's sister) are married, the prayer flags that Pemba raises are "modern-traditional" (*gsar rnying*), and Pemba even gets drunk. Chime Wangmo remarks to her daughter Drolma that "caste-consciousness is returning" and expresses her concern for the social position of her grandsons, Lhakdor's children.

Phuntshok is in charge of the redistribution of land and, as we might expect, he does his best to achieve an equitable allocation. Drolma, by contrast, has fallen low. A widow with three children and no income, and stagmatised by association with her late husband Lhakdor, she has no income, and is despised by the neighbours she

[72] *ibid.*: 437.

visits as a pariah.

By the beginning of chapter ten we are in 1981. The communes have been dissolved and preparations are being made for the implementation of the so-called "responsibility system." A delegation of new officials visits the former commune building in Lingshong and are amused by the old-style—that is to say, pre-1979—welcome extended to them by Ngawang. The locals, for their part, are astonished by the attitude of their visitors, who eat with them and even play dice. The team makes house-to-house visits to canvass opinions on the ongoing changes. They enter Dondrub's house and catch him with his rosary in hand. He makes to conceal it, but they stop him, saying that what he is doing is perfectly proper. After some hesitation, he expresses the view that things are better now than they were either during the old regime of the Ganden Phodrang or during the Cultural Revolution.

There is another Losar ceremony, but on this occasion the event is celebrated with all the traditional rituals, including the expulsion of a ransom effigy at the end of the old year. The expulsion is accompanied by fireworks, in the midst of which Ngawang loses his hand in an accident.

The marriage of Pemba and Butri, Phuntshok's sister, is described in close detail. The rebuilding of Buddhist temples has begun.

Later in the year the village fields are threatened by a strange cloud that has formed as consequence of the death of a half-mad priest, but Dondrub knows enough to perform a hail-repulsion (*ser zlog*) ritual, and the cloud bypasses the village.

Chime Wangmo's health has been failing, and it becomes clear that she will not live long. On her deathbed she expresses her dying wish that Dondrub should take care of his younger daughter Drolma and her three fatherless children.

Phuntshok, in the meantime, has lost interest in being a public servant, but, ever the obedient follower of the current Party line, suggests to his brother-in-law Pemba that they should go into business together: he proposes that they take a loan from the bank and buy a lorry. Wangyal, the friend of Dondrub who had been dismissed from his position of political responsibility on a spurious charge of immoral conduct, reappears and joins the two young men for a drink of *chang*. The discussion about the status of blacksmiths that follows is discussed above in the main part of the article.

The novel ends on the eve of the *'ong skor*, the summer festival. Tsheten Lhamo and her sister Drolma are reconciled, Lhakdor's son by his first marriage is now working with his grandfather as an apprentice blacksmith, and Phuntshok and Pemba, having concluded their financial affairs in the district headquarters in preparation for

acquiring their lorry, are seen in the distance returning home just in time to take part in the horse race.

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