

KORA

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- * Over 100,000 copies sold in Taiwan!
- * Nominated for the 2009 Taipei Book Fair Award
- * One of Kingstone Bookstore's Most Influential Books of the Year 2008
- * Second in Eslite Bookstore's Chinese Literature of the Year 2008

The first time Hsieh Wang-Ling went travelling was the summer after his third year of university. Having gone through a recent break up, he was in search of a place 'empty of memories,' and so started on a journey through China, from Urumqi to Tibet and back down the Yangtze River through Three Gorges. But instead of erasing the memories, he found that travelling was a means to forgetting oneself. This was the beginning of what would become his Kora, the ritual of circling sacred mountains made by Tibetans in order to renounce their desires and sins, a pilgrimage of prayer to others.

Upon graduation, Hsieh saw an announcement for a travel grant set up by writer and internationally renowned choreographer Lin Hwai-Min, founder of Cloud Gate Theater. He made a quick application for money to cycle from Yunnan to Lhasa, never imagining that he would be successful. Now he had only one month to train before he was to set out on a two month journey that would leave his nearest and dearest worried for his safety. In fact, the two-thousand kilometre route was notorious for its difficulties, and every expert he consulted advised him to abandon the plan. Dog attacks, altitude sickness, snow storms, he experienced them all, and even got lost along the way for a while. But with some of the most breathtaking, and challenging, roads anywhere in the world, this is one of the finest coming-of-age stories to have come out of Taiwan in recent years.

Adapted for the big screen in 2011 as *One Mile Above* by director Du Jiaji, it won Best Artistic Contribution at the Tokyo International Film Festival that year.

Hsieh Wang-Ling 謝旺霖

Hsieh Wang-Ling had taken his family's advice and enrolled in politics and law at university when he received a grant to allow him to ride through Yunnan and Tibet. Having faced such a



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Jennifer Wang (Yuan-Liou)

jenny@ylib.com

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perilous journey and survived, he decided upon his return to pursue his dream and become a writer, while studying for his PhD at the Institute of Taiwanese Literature at National Chengchi University.

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By Hsieh Wang-Ling. Translated by Nadia Chung.

Sky Burial at Drigung Thil

If you go upstream for about sixty kilometres northeast through the Shorongchu valley in Medro Gongkar county, you will see Drigung Thil Monastery nestled on a ridge steep in the hills. It is said that there is a sky burial charnel ground, or *durtro*, here that compares in fame to the Sitavana grounds in India.

When you ask locals from Menba village down in the foothills about ascending the mountain, curious people crowd around you and stick their heads out, but no one actually pays you any mind unless you hire someone to lead you there. You have no choice but to go and find your own way. There seems to be a hidden path behind the village.

You try climbing for a while, then look back nervously and spy a woman with a bamboo basket on her back who happens to be walking below. Noticing your hesitation, she raises her hand and points up with a finger. You nod in acknowledgement, and overcome your uncertainty.

The sunbeams are held tightly behind the thick cloud cover, with only a flash of faint light managing to escape dejectedly here and there. The surrounding mountains are blanketed with pure white snow; only the lone hill on which the Drigung Thil Monastery is situated is free of white specks.

Taking your steps with full concentration, you pull yourself up with your hands against bare rock, and are winded halfway up the hill. When you look up, Drigung Thil Monastery seems only a foot away, yet you just can't reach it, no matter how hard you try. It is as though this is a passage to the heavens, over which the *Mamsa Dakini* has set up myriad barriers allowing only people who have received the dharma to arrive at their destination.

Suddenly, someone clothed in maroon robes comes swiftly down the winding path, and before you know it a corpulent lama is standing on a huge rock above you, bending down to extend you a brawny arm. You let him pull you up and you end up standing next to him, pallid and out of breath. He holds your ice-cold hands quietly (gushing forth warmth), pats you on the back of your neck and flicks your forehead with his fingers. You don't pull back or feel any displeasure; instead, a strange delirium spreads across your brain. By the time you return to your senses and prepare to thank the portly lama, he is already one step ahead of you, near the bottom of the hill. Gusts of wind weave sharply in and out overhead. A river of sweat flows relentlessly down from your forehead toward your ears. You hear what might be the repeated swishing of the monk's wide sleeves, but you can't be sure from which direction it comes.

Finally stepping into the monastery, your nostrils are assaulted by the pungent odor of feces and urine, burying all the solemnity accrued in your imagination along the way deep in the latrine pits. The entrance is located directly opposite the steps that lead up to the monastery. The main temple of the monastery is just metres to the side of the stairs. You decide to take a break and sit down on the steps in front of the temple, then nibble on some hard biscuits you brought with you. A

few hunchbacked Tibetans spinning *mani* prayer wheels walk by, as do some red-robed lamas, and a stray dog paces back and forth in front of you a couple times, treating you as if you were air. All is so detached and desolate. An indifferent atmosphere prevails at Drigung Thil, but this is the place Tibetans long for as the final refuge of their soul.

When you register for your overnight stay, horns and conches begin to sound in the Tashi Gomang Hall, and the lamas outside don tall crescent-shaped fringed hats. I hear that they are preparing to hold the death recommendation ceremony, called *powwa*, in the chanting hall. This ceremony must be presided over by a senior monk who recites a prayer to help the deceased cross over to the other side. Then ha, ha, ha... Seven breaths are blown on the head of the deceased, to help the soul escape the body through the crown of the head and direct it to the states of heaven, humanity and *asura* (the three good or upward directions or states of existence). The body, having now attained the dharma through this ceremony, will be taken to the *durtro* the next morning.

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The temperature early in the morning is still ten degrees below zero Celsius, and the frigid, dry air cuts like a razorblade. Darkness and mist enshroud everything around you. Wearing a dim helmet lamp, you trail quite a distance behind a team of Tibetans who now turn onto an inconspicuous trail on the right hand side of Tashi Gomang Hall. The leader is holding incense, followed by someone carrying a heavy coiled bag. That, most likely, is what will be playing the lead role in the ceremony soon to take place.

As you walk, you suddenly feel as though your lips are being torn open, which shakes you from your drowsiness. You extend your neck and try to take in air in spite of the bloody stench it contains. There are triangular *mani* prayer stone piles along the way, as if to calm the passersby, or offer them spiritual guidance.

With the increase in torn pieces of cloth, hair and paper money scattered in the thorny shrubs, faint shadows of gods start to appear among the rocks on the steep hill—Sakyamuni, Padmasambhava, White Tara, Green Tara, Vairocana—but it seems as though none of them is able to protect you. You keep tripping over the scraggly thorns, many times falling behind the funeral procession which is about to vanish into the black veil of night. You are almost tempted to cry out, opening and closing your eyes over and over again, wishing that this were only a dream you had after awaking from another dream.

But it is all so vivid—the heartbeat, the breathing, and the teeth chattering uncontrollably in the cold. ‘Don’t disturb the deceased from his rest.’ You walk to the railing of the *durtro* and do not dare go any further, remembering the warnings of the locals: unless you have the explicit consent of the *rogyapa* or family of the deceased, you are best advised to stay away from the *durtro*. The family sometimes throw rocks at bystanders to chase them away.

As soon as the corpse bearer sets down the bag on his shoulder, he catches sight of you standing on the other side of a metal guardrail. Suddenly every person in the *durtro* shifts their gaze in your direction, staring at you blankly. You stand, stoically, not daring to look up for a long time, until they all finally begin to busy themselves with their duties in the ceremony.

Will flocks of vultures really descend upon the grounds of the sky burial site? Perhaps it’s a coincidence, or maybe it’s the product of some mysterious cosmic arrangement. You scan the hills around carefully for movement, and it doesn’t seem likely that vultures will appear. You only spy a few crows circling in the dark sky. You wonder whether the Tibetans have confused crows for

vultures.

You hear people chanting mantras. When the crossover prayers are finished, the head *rogyapa* immediately tosses three meat and three vegetarian dishes into the pile of juniper incense, mixes in some *tsampa*, or roasted barley flour, and lights the pile. A translucent lazy snake of white smoke billows up, then gradually dissipates and mixes into the air you are breathing. The ceremony unfolding before you feels like nothing more than a strongly-scented sleep.

All of earth and heaven still seem to be waiting for something to happen. Streamers in five colours flutter in the wind. Suddenly, there is a violent uproar above. Vultures with wingspans of six or seven feet emerge from every corner of the hills as though in ambush, soaring into the indigo sky and circling overhead, causing the once silent crows to shriek.

The vultures alight one after another, lining up behind the *rogyapa*, their brownish-gray feathers tilting down slowly like falling snow. Your eyelids quiver to the beat of the strong-bodied vultures' wing flapping. The Tibetans there only display subtle expressions of satisfaction.

The red-robed *rogyapa* holds a hook in his left hand and a silver blade in his right. Light suddenly flashes up from near his feet, causing the dew on the moist grass tips to reflect back an exuberant yellow. It is as though he and he alone stands on the boundary between life and death. He is God's chosen one.

Hundreds of vultures, separated from the site by only a thin string, flap their wings impatiently. Two assistants standing near the *rogyapa* advance and open the shroud. You can't even tell if the face is warm and friendly or a serious one. Then the body, curled up like a fetus, is suddenly plopped onto the stone *durtro*. According to Tibetan beliefs, this curled-up position, which resembles the baby in its mother's womb, symbolises a return to the beginning of life. The two fists are meekly clenched under the cheeks to express the will to be born again as a human in the next life.

When the corpse is properly positioned, with its back to the sky, the shrieking of the vultures begins to reverberate through the mountains, awakening the entire Shorongchu valley. The blade makes its first incision on the back of the neck, and the hook is stuck into the dry, withered flesh of the corpse. The blade then glides down the arm and slips along the midline of the thighs, slitting them open, one cut at a time. These incisions are in fact believed to bring the deceased back to life. The cut into the abdomen is especially deep; the viscera spilling helplessly onto the ground as the blade is pulled out. The entire burden of an intact human body is relinquished in an instant, regardless of gender, age, rank or worldly wealth, through the adept hands of the *rogyapa*.

The sky master steps back in a bent-over position. When the string falls from the grip of those holding it, the *rogyapa* calls out: 'Yi-ah, yi-ah!' Vultures stride across the boundary, then bite, tear, and devour every inch of the white corpse's opaque flesh. This ravaging of the corpse, beakful by beakful, is in fact believed to bring the deceased back to life. The birds clutch the hair attached to the body and skin, the pieces of bloody flesh, and the creaking skeleton, clawing at the body, pecking and gnawing. They flicker wildly against the dawning sky like black flames trying to set alight the corpse, a body that longs to fly but can't.

Waves of a bloody stench waft further afield by the flapping of the fervent vultures, and you try to endure the acid churning in your stomach. When you raise your head up again, the corpse has been transformed into a pile of blood-stained white bones.

The *rogyapa* walks to the centre of the *durtro* like a raging red fire, driving away the vultures that are not yet sated. His two assistants deftly lay the skeleton, still covered with a thin layer of flesh, onto the stone *durtro* and smash it to bits with a stone mallet, using all their might. 'Add some

roasted barley flour and stir it up.’ With a single blow the skull is crushed, with pieces flying in all directions. Eyeballs bounce out. The pounding and grinding of the mallet clanks over and over again. This pounding and grinding is in fact meant to bring the deceased back to life. After the bones are turned into powder, they are mixed with some roasted barley flour and swept into a heap together with the puddle of blood on the ground, in hopes that the vultures will finish it all off in one go.

This thorough elimination of the dead body not only represents the purity (purity in life, purity in death) of the body; the reputation of the sky burial *durtro* is also at stake—if the vultures, who serve as envoys for heaven and the human world consume all of the remains, the deceased will have nothing to hold him back, and nothing to stay attached to. But if these celestial vultures don’t finish off the corpse, the *rogyapa* must, in order to avoid the perception of a bad omen, burn more offerings and pray harder for the birds to continue their feast.

The vultures know that this is not their prey, nor a sacrifice, but an ancient promise of the Tibetans to return to God and to nature their due. Finally, only a small pool of blood and some hairs remain on the clearing. The gorged vultures drag their claws and sway from side to side in the centre of the grounds, while other vultures circle above with their wings spread, coveting more. The taste of blood permeates the air, infiltrates and lingers in your memory, seeping into every single one of your pores.

A life came into being and now returns to nothingness. The thought stings the flesh. Is this all real? Is it an illusion, or is it real pain that you feel after witnessing what happens here? But the dead certainly don’t feel any pain—it’s just your imagination. You still cling to your physical body and to life. But something inside is quietly melting, and you feel a gush of warmth, a gush that death has given you. They run on grasslands, serve yak butter tea in tents, kowtow in front of temples, then return here—to die.

The omnipresent Buddhists have a saying: ‘May the speech of the common man not hinder the flight of holy blessings. With full compassion for the keeping of the *dharma*, may the gaze of all readers receptive to the *dharma* maintain due solemnity. Your lips are warm. Do not let the sounds you blurt out disturb the silence of the transient *samsara*.’

Om mani padme hum, the transient *samsara*. Isn’t anyone supposed to feel sad when this ceremony concludes? How should we mourn the lingering soul? Perhaps to Tibetans, death does not mark the end of life, so much as the beginning of a new one, and that is why they can let go of the body after death with such detachment and reenter the cycle of nature, a thorough implementation of the spirit of giving up your body as alms.

Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. People who receive a sky burial return to the sky, where they may soar. Everything is interconnected—from visible to invisible, from life to death, from broken to whole.

You suddenly seem to comprehend it a bit better, that the passing on of the body is only a transformation leading to a new beginning in the human world, a divine metaphor that transcends the carnal. Each one of the vultures covering the mountains and filling the sky now carries a part of the devotee. He is omnipresent. The birds are family. An ending links to countless beginnings. The skyline drawn open by the vultures’ wings is the suturing of the wound. It is the regeneration of light, activated by the darkness.

Dawn suddenly breaks, and on the way back, you see another sky burial procession hastening to the burial site. When you make way for it to pass on a narrow mountain path, once again you see a coiled bundle. It gently brushes against your arm as it passes by, lightly, only this time you are sure

you will not see what is inside.

A man from the procession suddenly turns his head to ask you: 'Did you remember to take a short nap on the sky burial *durtro*?' Take a nap? You look at him, confused. He answers half seriously, half jokingly: 'You're only blessed if you take a short nap there! It ensures that you will die a peaceful death when your time comes.' Seeing his calm expression, you get the nagging feeling that, in the end, you haven't yet accepted our inevitable collective fate as they have, even though the end of life is widely acknowledged as a returning home and a blessing.

This is life bared down to its essentials, from existence to nothingness, then from nothingness to existence. You find yourself at a great divide, and you hesitate. Your flesh is still warm, your bones still hard, you think about *samsara*. *Samsara* left you in this world, to achieve complete understanding here. But the sky in front of you only dazzles to the point of vertigo.