Toilet

by Tsadeu

Translated by Lucia Galli

One

Starting from that year, the riverbed barely held a hint of moisture, let alone a flow of clear water.

She tucked the leather-stringed black trousers into the crook of her knees and lightly pulled the end of her headscarf up on the bridge of her nose as she pushed apart the scattered grass with the tip of her feet. While peeing on the side of the bank, she mused about the dry riverbank. The sun had set; it must have been past 10 p.m. The hot stream hit the ground—like pure white sprays of moonlight or thrown flowers of humidity—and steam curled upward. A woman who had spent forty-seven years amid a thousand household chores, she had finally put a full stop at the end of her daily tasks. What a sweet little freedom it was, this resting while taking a peaceful piss! On that September night, stirred alternately by a cold breeze and an icy gust, she shifted to the right and crouched again, at times bowing her head and softly humming bits of songs through her nose. She squatted for a long time, occasionally lifting her head to stare at the high embarkments of the dry river in front of her. That was her natural habit: whenever she relaxed a little, she let her mind empty, and when she did that, she had to fix her gaze on one place for a long time.

"Damn it!"

Talking to herself, she pulled up the end of her robe that had dragged through the urine when her peaceful trance was disrupted by light coming from the main road ahead. She fastened the string of her trousers and closed the bottom of her robe as she stood up. Stomping down with her foot over the spot where the urine had seeped into the cracked earth, she darted across the main road. She sprinted across the narrow street like a startled lamb, leaping up and down as a spring wind flicks its ear. The lights of a car shone like the evening star, and under them everything became visible: the patterns of the white hairy wool lining the rim of her robe, the blades of grass clinging to the golden threads of the pale woolen hem, and the wind-blown plastic sheets on the sides of the road. She took long strides, breathing heavily by the time she reached her door. She rushed inside, the door banging shut as she entered. How calm and peaceful this little village was—suddenly emptied of the clamor of daytime life!

Her name was Semkyi Drölma, a nomad woman of Yulung New Village. The Dzö Lung basin

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was where she had settled, after having wrapped up all her current property, fate, happiness and sadness. Earlier—long ago—many small streams, bursting forth from hundreds of springs at the head of Dzö Lung, passed through this place and flowed into the Machu River. Because of that, the valley at their point of descent was known as Chudzö Lungpa—"Reservoir Valley"—or simply Dzö Lung. But these days, when the summer rains fall, if there is no flooding, then across the upper, middle, and lower Dzö Lung there is not even the faintest trace of dampness. Is it just that, or something else? In 2009, after large numbers of nomadic households from Sheutang were permanently resettled in this place, village leaders and respected elders gathered for discussions and gave the village that formed within the present Dzö Lung basin the name Yulung New Village. From that day on, Yulung New Village also became one of the seven newly established villages in this area, and Semkyi Drölma's family joined its forty-nine households.

"Mom. Mom..."

The boy felt the need to pee. Standing upright in bed in the quiet darkness of the night, he called a few times. Semkyi Drölma's drowsy thoughts were once again disrupted. Awakened, she blindly reached for the light switch. After rubbing her eyes and shaking off her sleep, she slipped her feet into her boots, lifted the robe that had been laid over the blanket on the bed, and draped it over her shoulders. Without a word, she led the boy outside.

The valley was biting cold at that hour of night, and that year, the winter chill felt sharper than the previous one. Wrapping her robe tightly, overlapping it to form a pocket for her hands, she sat down, but the late-autumn cold felt like a formless creature crawling over her.

Slowly, a chill crept through her—from the tips of her feet to the back of her knees, then upward to her thighs, mid-back, and the nape of her neck, until it reached the crown of her head. Leaning against the brick wall of the courtyard, Semkyi Drölma watched the boy's shadowy figure urinating off to the side.

"Tsebo, you done? Hurry up, Mama's boy! Mama's freezing!"

"I'm done."

"Ach! Couldn't you have worn something warmer?"

"I'm not cold."

"What a mess! One day you'll get frostbite and not even notice. Run ahead—Mama will lock the door."

Mother and child returned inside. The door was locked. The light went off. Only the wind, rustling the scarves tied at the eaves, could be heard. The small village grew quiet once more.

Some of life's tragedies not only cannot be fathomed or explained, but they crowd together, looming over the head of certain people on this round earth without ever moving on. So it was no surprise that the birthday of Tsebo, Semkyi Drölma's son, coincided with the death anniversary of her husband, Kelsang—that the boy might live his entire life without ever seeing his father's face or knowing the kind of grand birthday celebrations other children enjoyed year after year. Tsebo

might never experience any of that in this life, but such circumstances were far from unexpected. Each time Semkyi Drölma thought about it, sorrow surged from the depths of her chest. And amid the innocent child's snores, her eyes would well with tears, and sleep would elude her for a long time.

Two

It was daybreak. The first rays of the morning sun lit up Dzö Lung as smoke slowly drifted over the rooftops of some of Yulung New Village houses. As waves of heat rose through the thousands of slanted sunbeams and over the countless red-brick dwellings clustered at the mountain's base, it was hard not to think of the red lake of Tau Mitsho Marpo, which was said to be like grass set on fire.[1]

"Mom. Mom…"

Semkyi Drölma was still asleep. A soft thread of light slipped in through a gap in the window curtain, striking the wall near her pillow at an angle. That slanted beam of sunlight split the cloth folder holding the poverty registration documents hanging on the wall—half of it bathed in light, the other half in shadow. The boy stared for a while at the photographs of the committee leaders that were on the wall. As usual, he began playing with them from within his bed. When viewed from the right, the leaders' eyes seemed to look right; from the left, they looked left. It was something he never tired of, always finding it oddly fascinating. But soon, the constant pangs of hunger pulled his attention back to his mother.

"Mom. Mom…"

"Ach, are you awake?"

"The sun rose a long time ago."

When he saw Semkyi Drölma getting up from her bed, an inexplicable happiness stirred in the boy. He slipped back under his blanket and sat there, eyes wide open, watching his mother's every move. Semkyi Drölma was a woman who worked fast: within moments, she had rekindled the fire, cooked some food, boiled the morning tea, and made the outdoor incense offering. She set down a bowl of hot soup left over from the previous night and a fresh cup of black tea near the boy's pillow. Then, pouring herself a bowl of *tulma*[2] in a plastic cup, she sat by the iron stove and began eating her breakfast.

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1. Tau Mitsho Marpo (rta'u mi mtsho dmar po) is an ethnonym and place name referring to Tau (rta'u), dependent of Ling (gling). Rolf A. Stein identifies Mitsho Marpo as equivalent to Takrong (stag rong) and as another name for Tau in Kham (ancient Taofu, today Dawu County) (1959, 188); alternatively, it may denote the territory of a Golok (mgo log) tribe of the same name located southeast of Amnye Machen (rma chen spom ra), Chayet 2003, 26.
2. *Tulma* (*gtul ma*) is a type of porridge eaten for breakfast, prepared from butter tea mixed with tsampa and powdered

"When you're done eating, feed the cow. Mama must go the market to buy an iron shovel. Otherwise, we won't be able to catch up with the others."

"Yes. If it weren't for the broken shovel, our toilet would've been finished yesterday," the boy replied, stretching.

"Well, work harder and we'll get it done today."

The sun had climbed higher, and the heat made even lifting one's head impossible. Semkyi Drölma wore a new fur-lined robe, the two ends of her green belt pulled up at her hips. Wrapping a scarf around her head, she stepped out into the streets of Yulung New Village. A few stray dogs, who had taken shelter along the wall, stirred at the creaking sound of her shoes. Still half-asleep, they rose to their feet, tails dragging behind them along with their drowsiness. But realizing she paid them no mind, they curled up once again, wrapping tails and dreams around themselves, and drifted back to sleep.

"Semkyi, are you heading to the market?" called out Pobo Wangden as he spotted her walking briskly. The old man was busy burning plastic wall coverings and worn-out boots.

"Hey, burning house garbage?"

"Eh, the whole yard—inside and out—is buried in trash," Pobo Wangden said, wiping the sweat dripping from his neck with his right hand. Then he turned to her again. "Semkyi, child, if there's any milk at the market, could you get me some? I'm not used to drinking plain black tea, morning and evening."

"Ah, it's not easy for someone your age to go without even watery milk," Semkyi Drölma said, covering her nose with a sleeve. "Didn't Nyima buy a cow after selling the sheep?"

"Nah, he said the sale didn't go through. He went off to some meeting in town about the village toilets and hasn't come back yet," Pobo Wangden replied.

"Well then, if I see any milk at the market, I'll bring you a few bottles."

Semkyi Drölma continued down the narrow lanes of Yulung New Village toward town. Pobo Wangden remained seated on a stone platform by the street, staring after her as a thick smoke of burnt plastic spread through the alleys of Yulung New Village.

Three

After midday, a lazy stillness settled over the streets and market of Yulung New Village, steeped in the sweltering black heat.[3] A few children loitered, throwing stones at empty houses, and aside

dried cheese.

3. Black heat (*tsad nag*) refers to a weather condition characterized by a sky covered with dark, dense clouds and an atmosphere that feels unusually heavy, oppressive, and electrically charged.

from the sharp clatter of shattered windowpanes, there was little movement in that village at the foot of the mountains.

"Pssshhh…"

The loud splashing of the spotted dairy cow's urine striking the stone pavement of the inner yard woke Tsebo, who had fallen asleep with his head resting on the ground.

"Father and Mother! That's disgusting!" Tsebo lifted his head and cursed as he kicked up some dust; the cow marched into the stable, twitching her tail as if she'd just heard something.

Stepping out into the alley, Semkyi Drölma was just closing the gate behind her when she saw her boy picking up a stone and charging toward the stable. "Hi, what happened?" she called out.

"That old cow just pissed inside the yard! Father and Mother!" the boy shouted, then turned back and grumbled as he saw his mother come in.

"Silly boy! Would it be called an 'animal' if it knew clean from dirty? Did you give the cow any water?"

"I just filled two metal troughs. Mom, did you get a shovel for both of us?"

"Well, with the two of us working, things will go much faster."

"Yeah."

Mother and son entered the house one after the other. A few flies buzzed around the edges of the cow's feed scattered across the inner yard's stone pavement. Even the old, faded prayer flags hanging from the house's eaves flapped sluggishly in the heat. In that place, one could find no relief from the heat and no warmth against the cold. Sometimes thunder rumbled under the blazing sun, but no rain fell. Other times, the north wind blew while the unreliable sun flickered weakly above.

No villager could say when the black-and-white clouds drifting from the north or south would fully sweep away even those rays of sun in a sky simmering with lingering heat.

"Tsebo. The mud's dried out. Pour some water in and knead it."

"Okay."

Mother and son resumed their work on the outer toilet, picking up where they had left off the day before.

"Work hard, eh?" Semkyi Drölma watched her son as he kneaded the mud, sweat trickling down his forehead. He stepped into the water in his small boots, gripped the iron shovel by the base of its handle and got to work. Semkyi Drölma broke into a smile.

"Oh, Mom! Will the toilet be finished once we put on the top cover?" The boy leaned on the iron shovel, frowning as he watched his mother plastering the roof of the toilet.

"Yes! Once I finish plastering the top, it'll be done!"

"Hehe."

Evening shadows spread like cooking oil poured over grass, quickly creeping up the walls of the houses on the outskirts of Yulung New Village. They climbed steadily—from the base of the walls

to the egg-shaped lumps of cattle dung smeared on the tops, to the prayer flags hanging from the eaves, and finally to the chimneys poking from the rooftops. The shadows rose until they reached the middle slopes of Mount Amye Gomar, which loomed high above Dzö Lung, while a veil of dusty haze blanketed the northern end of the valley. Just before darkness swallowed the whole land, Semkyi Drölma and her son went back inside—this time with the toilet fully completed. That night, following their usual habit, they drank a little water and turned off the light, falling asleep almost instantly.

The day's labor had worn them out so completely that even when a fierce north wind swept through the valley in the middle of the night, pushing dust through the cracks in the window, neither of them stirred. It made one think: perhaps there is truth in the old saying that there's hardly any difference between physical exhaustion and mental fatigue—except in whether or not you can sleep through the night.

Four

Welcoming another day after seeing one off was a rhythm of life well known to all the households in that place. But that morning, before the sun had yet risen over the upper slopes of Dzö Lung, Nyima—the headman of Yulung New Village—arrived with a loud knock at the door of Semkyi Drölma and her child.

"Hello there, Semkyi Drölma! Hello!"

"Mom, Mom! There's a man knocking at the front door!" the boy called out as he woke.

"Stay here, I'll go." Semkyi Drölma quickly got up, tightening the belt of her robe as she went to the door.

"Headman Nyima, is that you? Come in!"

"I don't have time. Semkyi, your family's toilet isn't up to standard. You need to take it down and rebuild it today. I'll come by tomorrow to inspect it."

His words came out in a rush, without head nor tail, leaving Semkyi Drölma momentarily stunned.

"What a mess…What do you mean it's not right?" she asked at once.

"There was a meeting yesterday," he said. "It was decided that toilets can't be built outside the yard. They must, without exception, be constructed within the house compound. This isn't just a town-level decision—the directives regarding the toilet renovations have come from the top. If toilets are built outside, the village streets can easily become polluted. That's completely out of line with the rural development process." Headman Nyima spoke seriously, but some of his words went over Semkyi Drölma's head.

"What a mess…So, if I take it down, can I skip building another one?"

"No, absolutely not. Anyone who urinates or defecates near the village will be severely punished. Otherwise, people here would behave no better than livestock!" At Headman Nyima's words—whether meant personally or not—Semkyi Drölma felt a twinge of unease.

"Oh. If it had to be inside the yard, the only place it could go is next to the smoke-offering altar. What should I do?" She cut him off, pointing toward the far corner of the yard where the altar stood.

Headman Nyima glanced around her yard and then said firmly, "You'll have to build it there, even if it's beside the smoke-offering altar."

"Oh, I'm really not used to having a toilet inside the house grounds! What a mess…"

"You must get used to it. In time, you will," Headman Nyima said, interrupting her, then continued, "Find someone to help you and get it done today. Most families must take theirs down too." As he spoke, he pulled a cigarette from the pouch at his side and lit it. The swirling wind tousled the hair on his head and scattered the smoke from his mouth in all directions.

"Oh! Wait a minute!" Semkyi Drölma suddenly dashed back into the house and returned carrying three plastic bottles of milk.

"Please, give them to your father," she said, handing them to Headman Nyima.

"What's this?"

"Pobo Wangden said he isn't used to drinking plain black tea morning and evening, and the other day he asked me to buy him a few bottles of milk at the market."

"Oh, he'll get used to it in time. Yes…" Headman Nyima took the bottles of milk and stepped out, his words a whisper in the wind. Semkyi Drölma shut the door behind him and stepped back into her house, murmuring under her breath.

The headman's sudden announcement had left her stunned, both physically and mentally. The wind howled through the power poles and electric wires outside. Though it was already past nine o'clock in the morning, the sun was barely visible behind a sky choked with dark dust blowing across the horizon of Yulung New Village. Semkyi Drölma had now to think about finding some help as soon as possible.

She immediately opened her voice messenger app and called a few people who took part in mutual assistance work.

She then poured a spoonful of incense-scented water from the thermos, grabbed a bag of *sangtsi*,[4] and stepped out.

But lighting incense in the wind is no easy task. She struck the sulphur head of a match, but the wind snuffed out the small flame. Again she struck it—again, snuffed out. Again and again, strike and snuff, strike and snuff.

"Damn it…"

4. *Sangtsi* (*gsang rtsi*) is a ritual mixture of incense, tsampa, butter, grains, dried fruits, and herbs, traditionally burned as an offering.

Five

It was past one o'clock in the afternoon. The dust-laden northern wind had somewhat eased its hold over the surroundings of Yulung New Village. With the weather now back to normal, the villagers who had neither fields nor cattle to tend had gone indoors and lit their hearths. But in the courtyard of Semkyi Drölma's house, a group of women remained hard at work on a task that was far from leisurely.

"That's better. Yes…Or else…Or else, you take down the smoke-offering altar and rebuild it near the stable," Aché Döndrup Kyi suggested cautiously, rubbing the mud off the hem of her robe.

"Yeah, if we ever finish this blasted thing, the smoke-offering altar must be completely moved as well, before the severe cold sets in," replied Semkyi Drölma, as she arranged the bricks and kneaded the mud. The mud was too wet, and it splashed in long and short drips from the walls down to the ground.

"Of course, we'll finish it! We did most of the toilet in the morning. This afternoon we'll work on the smoke-offering altar," said Sangyé Tso. She and Semkyi Drölma had been friends since childhood, and she could sense Semkyi Drölma's mood from even the slightest change in her face.

"What a thing! I'm not used to peeing in the yard!" Semkyi Drölma muttered again, adding more water to the mud.

"You'll get used to it now. Back then, everyone screamed and yelled about not having livestock, but they got used to it. Same with burning coal—they all said they couldn't get used to that either, but they did," Sangyé Tso replied absentmindedly.

"Animals pee in the yard—they can't tell clean from dirty," Tsebo said suddenly, with a touch of sarcasm. He was squatting in the shade along the base of the wall.

"Instead, the headman said that it's those who pee outside the yard who are like animals…"

"Right. That's how it is now." Sangyé Tso's careless joke aimed at Tsebo made Semkyi Drölma uneasy again, and she quickly interrupted her.

"…"

When the sky is overcast, even time seems to shrink. In an instant, all Yulung New Village was swallowed by darkness. Aside from a few villagers pacing through the streets, it seemed even the stray dogs without owners had gone back to where they came from. Meanwhile, a soft stream of incense smoke curled up from Semkyi Drölma's yard, and as the wind picked up, it mingled with chimney smoke from the neighboring houses, swirling upward until it vanished into the dust-clouded sky.

When darkness fell, the tiny village tucked in the lower end of Dzö Lung fell silent again. Semkyi Drölma slowly shut the kitchen door, tied the ends of her headscarf tightly under her chin, and stepped outside. In the calm of early night, her sleep scattered like a flock of sheep at dawn,

drifting far into the distance. She crossed the road and made her way to the far side, following the banks of the Dzö Lung river.

How clear the sound of her footsteps was, crushing the grass in the night.

"Ach! It's getting colder," she murmured, tilting her head back to watch the heavy clouds shifting across the northern sky. In that still, cold night, the words of Headman Nyima echoed in her ears: "You'll get used to it. In time, you will."

The darkness thickened. Neither the colors of her robe nor the patterns of its white hairy wool could be seen, nor her figure, slowly losing the shine of youth, nor the half-sorrowful, half-joyful look on her face. Something—perhaps a bird—circled above the river embankment. The unidentified cry almost made her mind leave her body, and she stared in that direction for a long while.

Translator's Note

Tsewang Gyel (tshe dbang rgyal), writing under the pen name Tsadeu (tshwa rde'u), was born in 1993 in Chötsé (chos tshe), a small nomadic settlement in Guinan County (mang ra rdzong), Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. After graduating in 2017 from Qinghai Nationalities University with a degree in Tibetan Language and Literature, he joined the Qinghai Broadcasting Corporation, where he currently works as a writer and reporter for the legal affairs desk at Amdo TV. His literary production exemplifies key tendencies associated with a new generation of Tibetan writers and is characterized by an eclectic approach that extends beyond conventional print genres to encompass short stories, poems, television scripts, and song lyrics. His work has appeared in leading Tibetan-language magazines and newspapers—including *Light Rain* (*sbrang char*), *Tibetan Literature and Art* (*bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal*), *Snow Flower* (*gangs rgyan me tog*), *Qinghai Tibetan Newspaper* (*mtsho sngon bod yig gsar 'gyur*), and *Qinghai Tibetan Law Newspaper* (*mtsho sngon bod yug khrims lugs par*)—and has received recognition through several literary prizes.

One of his most notable works, awarded second prize at the 2020 National Tibetan Short Story Competition, is "Toilet" (*spyod khang*), which focuses on a seemingly mundane yet socially charged subject: the construction of indoor latrines in a rural compound. In Tsadeu's spare, almost utilitarian prose, this project becomes a vehicle for exposing the uncomfortable realities underpinning ecological resettlement initiatives and rural sanitation campaigns in the nomadic regions of western China. Semkyi Drölma's family, in their attempt to install such a facility, embody the bureaucratic absurdities and cultural contradictions confronting hundreds of thousands of nomadic herders and pastoral farmers, whose lives and communities have been upended by decades of government reforms.

To understand the broader background against which this seemingly minor domestic project takes place, it is necessary to consider the policy environment shaping contemporary Tibetan pastoral regions. Although development campaigns in Tibetan areas have been a priority for the Chinese government since the early 1950s, many contemporary relocation and rehousing policies trace their institutional origins to the 1994 Third Work Conference on Tibet. Since then, major state initiatives across the region have followed a broadly consistent blueprint: rapid economic growth paired with tightened political control, implemented through centrally designed regional Five-Year Plans.[5] Tensions intensified with the launch of the "West Development Strategy" (Ch. *xibu dakaifa*) in 1999, which promoted relocation as a key instrument for environmental

5. Human Rights Watch 2013, 38.

protection, livelihood improvement, and urbanization in some of western China's poorest and most ecologically fragile areas.[6]

Sedentarization accelerated in the early 2000s through a series of settlement schemes implemented across Tibetan areas of Qinghai Province. Framed as measures to address grassland degradation and promote urban prosperity, programs implemented under the "West Development Strategy" have been regarded by many outside observers less as environmental interventions than as state-led initiatives of permanent resettlement affecting ethnic minority communities, with questionable logic, benefits, and costs.[7]

Between 2004 and 2010, 1.13 million herders in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (TAP) were incorporated into sedentarization programs, including the "Ecological Migration in the Three-River Source Region" initiative in Qinghai (2004–2010) and the "Pastoralist Sedentarization Program" in Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan (2009–ongoing).[8] Government-led settlement efforts continued in subsequent decades under large-scale campaigns such as the "New Socialist Countryside," the "Comfortable Housing Campaign" (2005–present), and the "Leapfrog Development Strategy" (2010).[9]

Ecological resettlement formed a central component of the "Three-River Source Region General Plan," a large-scale environmental initiative that called for the relocation of almost 60,000 people (about 10,000 herding households), the reduction of livestock numbers, and the introduction of grazing bans across extensive grassland areas. By the time the Sanjiangyuan National Park—the world's second-largest nature reserve encompassing the headwaters of the Yangtze, Yellow, and Mekong rivers—was formally established, tens of thousands of Tibetan herders had already been resettled in newly constructed villages located near towns, highways, and emerging market centers.[10]

Against this backdrop of resettlement policies, Tsadeu's story situates its characters in a specific local setting, framing "Toilet" as a tale of ecological migration. The narrative frequently adopts impersonal constructions reminiscent of bureaucratic discourse, subtly conveying the sense that nomads—both fictitious and real—are moved about by forces beyond their control. Set in a newly built settlement somewhere in the Yellow River basin, the story follows Semkyi Drölma, a forty-seven-year-old nomad from Zheuthang (Xiewu Township) in Chindu County (Yushu TAP), as she struggles to adapt to sedentary life after her clan's relocation to Chudzö Lungpa (lit.

6. See Hao 2009. At first loosely defined, the "west" was clearly delineated in October 2000 to comprise the provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai; Chongqing Municipality; and the five autonomous regions of Tibet, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Guangxi, which collectively account for about three-quarters of China's ethnic minority population, See Yeh 2005.
7. See Yeh 2005, 2010; M. J. Foggin 2011; Du 2012; and Ptáčková 2011, 2012, 2020.
8. Human Rights Watch 2024, 14–15.
9. Human Rights Watch 2013, 40–44.
10. See Z. Wang et al. 2010; Du 2012.

"Reservoir Valley"), a lower-elevation ground situated southeast of the Bayan Har Mountains and at the point of descent of the Yellow River's tributaries, in the neighboring Madoi County (Golok TAP).

The environmental setting further complicates this process of relocation. Providing more than half of the Yellow River's multi-year average annual discharge to the Pacific Ocean, the headwater region plays a crucial role in the basin-wide flow regime.[11] At the same time, however, the area has also experienced significant environmental instability in recent decades. In the early 2000s, shifting streamflow patterns and changes in groundwater dynamics combined with permafrost degradation and broader ecological deterioration—processes largely linked to global warming—to produce major fluctuations in the river's flow in the Three-River Source region.[12]

While climate change contributed to hydrological instability, the impoundment of water behind regional dams appears to have further exacerbated these conditions by reducing downstream flow and intensifying drought. Periods of drought were sometimes followed by flooding when increased seasonal precipitation caused water to accumulate in reservoirs and then be released downstream.[13] By the time the events of the story appear to take place (early to mid-2010s), the Yellow River basin had already experienced two seasons of extreme drought (2006 and 2011), part of a broader two-decade period (1990–2010) characterized by below-average streamflow.

Against this backdrop of environmental precarity in the headwaters region, the protagonist's reflection on the lack of water—"Is it just that, or something else?" (*des byas sam ci cha*)—acquires sharper resonance. Tsadeu's detached, "show-don't-tell" narrative approach leaves room for a subtle, tongue-in-cheek critique of state-led "eco-progress." Faced with the visible absence of water in the riverbed, the implied answer to Semkyi Drölma's question can be read as gesturing toward a man-made, rather than purely natural, cause. This ambiguity reflects a broader debate surrounding the environmental rationale of such resettlement policies.[14] Despite official claims that settling nomads benefits grassland conservation, the evidence supporting this position remains inconclusive.[15] Meanwhile, research on resettled households frequently reports declines in both material and non-material assets—including livestock holdings, savings, labor opportunities, and community networks—alongside rising debt. Income lost from land and livestock is typically not offset by state-provided ecological compensation or by off-farm earnings from wage labor or self-employment.[16]

Launched in 2009, Qinghai's "Pastoralist Sedentarization Program"—modelled partly on the

11. Ma et al. 2019, 226.
12. Ma et al. 2021; Chai et al. 2019.
13. Ma et al. 2019, 232.
14. See J. M. Foggin 2008, 2011; P. Wang et al. 2015.
15. See Harris 2009; Du 2012; T. Li et al. 2022; Zhou et al. 2023.
16. See Ptáčková 2011, 2012; Du 2012; Bauer 2015; Huang et al. 2018, 190–191.

"Comfortable Housing Campaign" implemented in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) since 2005—envisaged, in its first year, the construction of nearly 26,000 new houses across 31 counties in six prefectures (Haibei, Hainan, Huangnan, Yushu, Guoluo, and Haixi). Under the program's various implementation models, nomadic households either contributed a fixed share toward government-led construction or received a set subsidy and assumed responsibility for building their homes themselves.[17]

Further policy momentum came with poverty alleviation initiatives. Relocation of nomadic communities in western provinces and autonomous regions of China accelerated in 2014 with the introduction of the nation-wide "Targeted Poverty Alleviation" (TPA) campaign, which paired individual households with local officials responsible for overseeing their transition out of poverty.[18] As a result, local cadres became familiar presences in the daily lives of resettled families—sometimes to the point that their portraits and documents circulated in domestic spaces, becoming objects of curiosity for children, as in the case of Semkyi Drölma's son Tsebo.

One of the measures adopted under poverty-reduction campaigns involved relocating households into standardized housing units in newly built villages, particularly in environmentally fragile or economically marginal regions.[19] Although these houses were promoted as safer and more comfortable than traditional dwellings, many suffered from serious structural flaws. Low-quality materials, inadequate planning, and poor sanitation infrastructure were widely reported. Facilities for the collection and treatment of waste were often incomplete or badly maintained, and open defecation frequently persisted.

Within this broader framework of rural development campaigns, sanitation reform also emerged as a key policy concern. In 2015, the Chinese government launched what soon became known as the "Toilet Revolution" (Ch. *cesuo geming*). The campaign set ambitious targets for upgrading rural sanitation facilities and achieving near-universal toilet coverage across the country.[20] Within this framework, toilets were not merely public health infrastructure but instruments for reshaping rural environments and promoting what policy documents described as improved "village appearance" (Ch. *cunrong cunmao*). As Xi Lan and colleagues argue, toilets in rural China have increasingly become spaces where state visions of environmental governance intersect with everyday practices of rural life.[21]

Framed under the rubric of eco-sustainability, the "Toilet Revolution" was linked in official discourse to broader concerns such as pollution and waste treatment. Toilet retrofitting was no longer presented merely as a public health measure but as an environmental initiative integral

17. See Ptáčková 2011.
18. Yang and Liu 2021, 246; Guo et al. 2022, 433; Davie et al. 2021.
19. See Yang and Liu 2021, 245.
20. Cheng et al. 2018, 348.
21. Xi Lan 2024, 221.

to rural development. Yet in practice, such policies often produce contradictions. The tensions "between the visual order from above and the living order from below"[22] frequently translate into uneven or purely cosmetic implementation of government directives, whereby toilet refurbishment and waste management are carried out only at the most basic level. In many cases, the absence of a complete sewerage system or an effective garbage collection service makes long-term sustainability impossible. Local officials and contractors have frequently been found responsible for poor-quality projects, as their primary interest lies in securing subsidies rather than ensuring effective results.[23]

In Tsadeu's story, these contradictions appear through the figure of the village headman Nyima, whose insistence that Semkyi Drölma install an indoor toilet to improve village sanitation contrasts sharply with the everyday practices of villagers—including his own father—whose habits reflect older forms of waste disposal.

As Xi Lan and colleagues note, toilets in rural China have become an "alienated space," insofar as the physical, lived practices they host are rendered invisible in the service of the development vision.[24] The aesthetic regime's indifference toward the actual toileting experience—and the cultural elements connected to it—often provokes resistance from locals, who resent the government's encroachment into individual lives. In many Tibetan pastoral households, bodily waste is expected to remain physically separate from the domestic sphere, which is associated with ritual purity and household deities. Placing a toilet inside the home can therefore evoke strong discomfort. In the story, Semkyi Drölma's small gestures of resistance—casual remarks, continued open urination, or nostalgic references to earlier customs—can thus be understood as subtle assertions of personal autonomy within a system of administrative oversight.

At the level of style, the story's language is rooted in the Amdo dialect (*a mdo skad*), which suits Tsadeu's grounded narrative style. As literary critic and editor Tsegyel (tshe rgyal) observes in his remarks as a competition judge, Tsadeu's "thoroughly down-to-earth subject" is matched by "an equally plain mode of expression." Drawing on the rhythms of everyday speech, the narrative unfolds at a measured pace—"neither overly brief nor excessively drawn out"—and presents its tensions "in an unforced and uncontrived manner," allowing the social and domestic dimensions of the project to emerge organically.[25]

In translating the story, I have attempted to preserve the understated humor and rhythmic quality of Tsadeu's prose while maintaining the clarity and directness of the original narrative voice.

22. Lan et al. 2024, 233.
23. See Z. Li 2018.
24. Xi Lan 2024, 238.
25. Tsadeu, "Toilet" (*spyod khang*), *Qinghai Tibetan Newspaper*, December 7, 2020, including the judge's remarks by Tse-gyel, https://www.tibetcm.com/contemporary/novel/2020-12-07/8948.html.

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