

Excerpts from Pema Bhum's *Jalam Tramo:* *The Rainbow Path of Many Hues*

Translated by Lauran R. Hartley

Excerpt 1

“Rainbow... rainbow... rainbow...” From the road a child’s voice sounded.

“Topden, look! A rainbow...!” It was Topden’s mother. “People are saying that the tail of the rainbow is touching our home.” Her voice started to recede. Perhaps she was going up to the roof to look for the rainbow. She continued, “Oh, actually, the rainbow is over there, beyond that mountain range!” The sound of her voice was getting more distant.

Topden walked out of his room to see the rainbow as well. The rain was still falling lightly. Only tufts of the rainbow were now visible, its vivid colors fading into the clouds that surrounded the far mountain peak. The edges of the clouds were beginning to brighten.

Topden returned to his bedroom and looked around. A photo of Lu Xun hung on the wall at the head of his bed. The writer’s face was stern, his eyes glancing to the right. The brim of a hat on a nearby nail covered one of Lu Xun’s eyes. The boy called it his “India hat.” Topden had bought it off of someone visiting from India with money that he had earned from making a handwritten copy of *The Eight Teachings* for an elderly *ngakpa* in their village. The lay tantric practitioners in his area knew how to recite texts, but those who could make handwritten copies were rare. After the Cultural Revolution, copying such ritual texts became a small business in places like his mountain village of Golwa. Topden had done quite a bit of such work. His penmanship was of course beautiful, but more importantly—according to the *ngakpas*—his handwriting was even.

Although his father had died many years ago, the gratitude people felt for him lived on. During the Cultural Revolution, his father had secretly borrowed traditional *pecha* from some unknown place and handcopied the texts. His father had also allowed Topden and his older brother to copy them. It was for this reason that Topden had become skilled at writing the squarish “Kham-script,” which omitted the “head” or upper horizontal line characteristic of the more common *uchen* or “headed” Tibetan font. When the Cultural Revolution ended, a great many people worked to restore the texts which had been dumped into rivers or burned in fires. Topden became fairly well-known in his village and in neighboring villages for his hand-copying of texts. The work also allowed him to cover some of his family’s expenses.

People often said that Topden's "India hat" was made to match his thick eyebrows. When he started wearing the hat to school, he could feel more eyes on him from among the girls at school in both the lower and the upper grades. "Tomorrow, however, is the last day I will wear my hat," he thought, letting out a long sigh.

Books were stacked on the desk in front of him. On top lay issues of the magazines *Light Rain* and *Tibetan Art and Literature*. The pile also contained a copy of the Gesar epic *The Battle of Hor and Ling* and some old notebooks in which he had written his homework for various classes. As he randomly picked up a notebook, the notes of a quiet melody being played on a flute reached his ears. He recognized the tune as the one played by young men in his village to signal to their girlfriends that they were coming to meet them. The melody, which was called "gyang bü (*rgyang 'bud*)" or "distant melody," was heard regularly at nightfall. Whenever the clear and solitary song pierced the dark, it left one with a certain loneliness.

Topden fingered the ring inside his pocket. He had bought it as a gift for Rinchen Drolma, but something he witnessed one day on the village path had stopped him from giving it to her. While stepping outside from the courtyard of his family's home, Topden had noticed his older brother standing slightly down the path. He was saying something to Rinchen Drolma. She was not facing him. Rather, her head was lowered, and with her two hands she was toying with the end of her braid, which just reached the top of her breast. After a few moments, she flicked the braid behind her back and walked away, her head still bowed. Topden's older brother stayed where he was, looking after her.

Love's jealousy paid no heed that it was his older brother. But then Topden's mind eased—after all, he thought, she hadn't been paying attention to him. Suddenly, the older brother turned and saw Topden. Something like guilt swept through the younger boy and he quickly stepped back into their courtyard. Topden stood waiting for his brother to return, slam the door loudly, and walk in with a heavy step. His brother did walk in and slam the door. Instead of a heavy step, however, Topden heard his brother happily humming the popular tune: "*Akhu Pema yé...*" Topden's guilty feeling vanished. The older brother walked into his own bedroom but then reappeared a few moments later. He was still humming. Topden watched him quietly from afar. His brother held a small mirror in one hand. In the other was a comb, which he began running through his hair. Topden felt his mind clench again. He reached into his jacket pocket and held the ring there tightly in his fist.

From the village outskirts the flute song sounded again. Topden was jarred from his recollections. He absentmindedly tried to remove the silver ring from his finger. At that moment, someone rapped on the window. "Go to sleep now, sweetie. Uncle Rabten will be here early tomorrow morning," his mother urged, her voice reaching him through the window.

Uncle Rabten was his mother's brother. He was also the monk-friend of the boy's now deceased father. Their uncle never missed an important family occasion, good or bad. Tomorrow morning

would be the family's last gathering before Topden's joining the monastery—his uncle would surely be coming for this.

Excerpt 2

Topden didn't know how he had arrived at the entrance of the haybarn. The barn door was still open. The maimed *dzomo* (hybrid female yak-cow) which belonged to Rinchen Drolma's family was eating the green grass that she had just now carried inside. Seeing the animal he felt a pang of regret. Several years ago, when he was one of the designated herders for the day, they had been driving the village animals down a narrow path on the side of a cliff. But they pushed the livestock too quickly and the crowded animals had to jostle for space on the tight passage. It was then that the *dzomo* had tumbled down the cliff and broken her leg. From that day on, she could no longer graze outside. The *dzomo* seemed aggravated by the very sight of Topden and swished her tail, bellowing loudly.

Rinchen Drolma was approaching the *dzomo* with a small wooden bucket in which she had collected rainwater. At the sight of Topden she lost her footing and stumbled to the ground. Topden quickly stepped forward, took the girl's hand and helped her up. While the skin on the back of her hand was rough and a bit stained, her palm was soft. Though standing now, she didn't withdraw her hand which still lay in Topden's grasp. They said nothing, nor did they move. The water which had spilled from the bucket was seeping into the earth beneath their feet. Water was also dripping from the edge of Rinchen Drolma's *chuba*. She then tugged on her hand but Topden held tight. With his other hand, he pulled the silver ring from his pocket and slid it onto her middle finger.

Once the ring was on her finger, he loosened his grip. But she allowed her hand to remain resting in his palm. Her finger with its various stains and the ring which shone in the sunlight seemed ill-suited for each other. Topden drew his gaze upward from her hand. Under her shirt with its worn-out collar and tattered cloth clasp, her chest rose and fell in accord with her breathing. His eyes slowly reached her face. Hers continued looking at the hand which still lay in his. It seemed impossible that her youthful face could ever dim from the endless housework. The pimples of adolescence dotted her forehead and the red cheeks of childhood had almost disappeared.

Topden found his lips nearing her face. She glanced towards the barn door, which still stood ajar. Her eyes then fell upon the large stack of dry hay to their right. Topden understood the meaning of her glance. He again quickened his grip on her hand, and led her towards the hay.

As they reached the edge of the haystack, he drew her close. Rinchen Drolma, stepping backwards, tried to find the middle of the pile, but their lips had already touched. She reached her free hand behind her back and tried to loosen the knot of the sash at her waist. But time did not allow for that either. The two were already entwined underneath the front fold of her *chuba*.

“Couldn’t you *not* be a monk?”

At her words, he no longer felt the wet edge of her robe on his inner thigh. He looked at her face. Light caught the tears along the bottom lid of her eye. She held tight to his neck and pressed her cheek against his. A thin trail of tears flowed to either side of where their two cheeks touched.

Hur. The crippled *dzomo* snorted. The barn grew quiet. The two were weeping, she crying as she looked up towards the sky and he staring down at the ground.

She swallowed and then whispered, “I need to give the *dzomo* some water.” He again felt the damp of her robe.

“Why couldn’t we have been born city people?” Topden wondered aloud, pulling out strands of straw from Rinchen Drolma’s hair.

Rinchen Drolma continued staring up towards the sky. Gulping down her tears once more, she asked, “What would that be like—to be city people?”

“In the city, people find their own husbands or wives, the parents don’t arrange it for them.” His lips held fast to the base of her ear. “Maybe they also don’t have to become monks just because their parents want that.” His voice was very quiet. Had he said these words aloud to her, or just to himself?

“I need to give the *dzomo* some water,” Rinchen Drolma repeated and unwrapped her two arms from Topden.

As Topden passed by the broken-legged *dzomo*, he noticed the animal was still chewing on some green grass. Spying Topden, the *dzomo* again swished her tail and swung her horn. While he wanted to take one last look at Rinchen Drolma, his neck wouldn’t turn back. Instead, he looked out from the safety of the haybarn door—but except for two dogs licking each other, he spotted nothing along the dirt path.

Excerpt 3

When the Cultural Revolution came to an end and religious practices were allowed again, it prompted a stream of lay people from villages nearby Ugya Monastery and a small assembly of monks. Sometimes a few security officers were also in view.

A few days after Lungrik entered the monastery, a Chinese man opened a hall nearby Ugya Monastery for showing videos on a big screen. The only films featured thus far were war and kungfu movies. Lungrik’s friend, who had the nickname “Flat-Nosed Prajna Boy,” hadn’t missed a single film since the place opened. Since he didn’t know Chinese, he was especially happy to go to the movies with Lungrik. During the film, Lungrik would translate any important dialogue for him, and after the show he would explain the plot as the two were walking back to their monks’ quarters. The friend otherwise only watched the fighting and understood nothing of the plot.

That night, when Lungrik and “Flat-Nosed” reached the door of the video hall, the movie was already playing. From a large speaker set up outside the door issued the loud sounds of kungfu fighting. Sometimes one heard the pounding of fists and feet. At other times, it was the *ting* and *zing* of clashing swords—or the shouts and groans of the kungfu fighters. Such sounds always held them at the door for a bit.

Through the door left ever so slightly ajar by the guard, people standing outside couldn’t see what was on the screen but they could see the faces of the audience. A blue light shone on each and every face, while everyone in the audience was turned toward and focused on the screen. Though the blue light flickered on their faces with an array of shades and colors, their eyes didn’t move, as if rendered by an artist’s pen. One young girl suddenly covered her mouth, while snot on the upper lip of another child was briefly illuminated in the light.

“Okay. Get out of here. I said, out!” The guard pushed against those standing outside. Several in the crowd, including Lungrik and Prajna-Boy, had no money for the entry fee—while others were waiting for the next show.

The guard shoved them back again, announcing loudly: “This new *kungfu* film...” But, before he could finish, something caught his eye. It was a Public Security officer who was watching the guard. Such officers made regular rounds of the video halls to be sure that the films being screened had no sexual content. The fines were heavy, it was said, if any such images were on the screen when the officers showed up. And if the officers were not happy, the video hall could even be closed down.

The video hall guard walked over to the Public Security officer and pulled a cigarette from his pocket, presenting it to the man. But, the officer did not reach for it and instead began to address the guard. With the unclaimed cigarette still wedged between his fingers, the guard drew his hand back as if to scratch his head. As Lungrik stood watching, he felt a tug on the edge of his shawl. He looked right and left and only then noticed that the area had cleared. Even his flat-nosed friend was nowhere to be seen. Everyone had entered the theatre.

On the screen, a beautiful woman was sitting on the floor of what looked like a storage room, her hands tied behind her back, tears streaming. A man was hugging her and crying while saying something to her. It looked like she had fallen into enemy hands, and the man had come to save her. Lungrik’s heart worried for the man and woman. He wondered: Couldn’t the man first release her from the bonds and the two escape—and *then* express his love, once they were free from danger?

When he saw the tears on the face of the beautiful woman, Lungrik thought of the face of Rinchen Drolma as she wept in the haybarn and asked him, “Couldn’t you *not* be a monk?” He felt as if he were seeing her face and hearing her voice.

Suddenly, two people whose faces were covered with black cloth and who were wielding swords charged the man who was trying to protect the woman. With his right leg, the man kicked one of

the enemies who had jumped him. The man was flung afar, hitting the wall, and fell to the ground. The other enemy was shifting back and forth, holding the sword, looking for a chance to strike.

The video hall fell absolutely silent. It was as if the people in the audience had stopped breathing. On the screen was the image of just the two men glaring at each other—one poised to attack, the other poised to defend. There was no accompanying music. For a moment, Lungrik did not even hear the usual cracking sound of sunflower-seed shells, nor did he feel the sting of cigarette smoke in his eyes.

Tok tok. Lungrik thought the sound was from the movie, but it wasn't. The video hall guard forced the door open and then slammed it shut, entering the theatre. Lungrik was closest to the door, and so it was his shawl that the guard first grabbed in an effort to kick the boy out. But then the guard quickly released his grip. Apparently, he too had become entranced by what was happening on the screen.

Excerpt 4

"We've arrived at the peak of Gampa Pass," the driver announced and stopped the truck.

Lungrik had never heard of Gampa Pass. He sat staring at the hillside where a marmot had just popped its head out of a burrow opening and was looking back and forth.

"Here. Offer up some *lungta!*" urged Trader Rinkho handing Lungrik a thick colored stack of small thin paper squares, each printed with an offering prayer. "You're educated. You studied in a monastery. Say some prayers for the protector's help. We will have to drive through many checkpoints now. I don't know how to do anything but shout out *ki* and the name of the local protector deity." He let out another *ki* but this time it didn't hurt Lungrik's ears like when they had been in the truck.

The banners and prayer flags flapping in the wind sounded as if the wind were demonstrating its strength. Lungrik picked up a sheaf of the prayer-flags and raised them into the air, but he scarcely had to release his fingers—the wind ripped the stack out of his hand and carried them away. His gaze followed the paper-stream of prayers and then he saw it: in the mountain valley expanse below, waters of a startling blue-green stretched long and wide, encircling an island-hill at its center. This was Yamdrok Yumtso. As he drew in the scene, his breath grew short and quickened and his head felt slightly dizzy.

"Aro, grab my hat!" Lungrik looked over to where the sound came from. The driver's hat was blowing in the wind towards Lungrik. Lungrik tried to catch hold of the narrow brim, but couldn't—and the hat flew on. Lungrik ran a few steps following after the hat, but then all went dark.

When he awoke from what seemed to be sleep, Lungrik was no longer on the peak of Gampa

Pass. Nor was he in the cab of the truck. He was in the rear bed of the truck, laid out on a sheepskin coat. This much he could tell. He never imagined that this truck so full of goods had room for him to sleep. The rank stench of vomit reached his nose.

“Oh. He’s come to!” Someone called out. Lungrik wondered who it might be and turned to look in the direction of the voice. It was a shaved-headed man wearing lay clothing. He was up towards the front. The man stood up and began knocking on the metal roof of the driver’s cab.

The truck stopped moving. Trader Rinkho appeared at the back of the truck and exclaimed, “Blessed Arkyap! You protect us like parents!”

The driver looked at Lungrik. “How are you feeling?” he asked. “I guess it’s okay if we don’t go to the hospital. Almighty Sky God!” He touched Lungrik’s shoulder with his hand.

“What happened to me?” Lungrik asked.

At this, the driver replied, “My god. My god! You’re okay! Some color is returning to your lips. Until now your lips were blue from altitude sickness. They were the color of iron!”

He pulled out a clove of garlic from his bag and gave it to Lungrik. “Take this. Garlic helps heal altitude sickness. You don’t have to go to the hospital now.” He turned to the two other people in the truck and said, “You two should eat the garlic as well. Here, take it. If any one of you needs to go to the hospital—it would not be good.”

Translation Commentary

Lauran R. Hartley

Pema Bhum (b. 1956), an influential scholar and writer, employs the verisimilitude of fiction in his debut novel *The Rainbow Path of Many Hues* (*'ja' lam khra mo*) to recover vivid details and the textures of late 1980s Tibet, which strict historical accounts are inclined to omit.

The novel opens in the author's (and main character's) birthplace, Rebkong. Thereon follows a complex string of embroilments via which the protagonist Lungrik (né Topden) finds himself caught up in the political turbulence of Lhasa, more than two thousand kilometers (1287 miles) from his Amdo Tibetan village home, and finally in India.

While the author's earlier works, *Six Stars with a Crooked Neck* (2001) and *Remembering Dorje Tsering* (2006), serve as memoirs narrating a collective albeit regional memory, this novel reveals the capacity of autofiction as well to mediate between individual and collective forms of memory. Hywel Dix and others have discussed the practice of diaspora, or post-diaspora writers in particular, who have "imbued fictional characters with aspects of their own experiences."¹ There *is* that—but this project, above all, springs from the creative imaginary and is readerly at heart. Video halls blasting kungfu, egg-blue lorries topped with khaki canvas, roadside pit-stops on a dusty bus ride, the empty husks of sunflower seeds, and paper currency featuring a Tibetan fox hat may all trigger a sort of nostalgia among early tourists and locals alike. Such details also bring a good story to life.

Pema Bhum has often stated that what Tibetan literacy needs to stay alive is literature that is accessible and grips the reader. His novel does that. Reader encomiums have focused on the unpredictable plot twists within a carefully woven narrative. While Pema Bhum's writing is widely recognized for its clear syntax and ironic humor, these 468 pages especially impress as the fruit of long and disciplined labor (about three years but eight years from conception to completion), marking another sort of path or journey in his career. Pema Bhum's previously published works of fiction have all been short stories, available in English thanks to the expert translations of writer Tenzin Dickie. (See, for example, her edited volume *Old Demons, New Deities*).

As Françoise Robin has quipped, the Tibetan novel is "still a novelty."² Pema Bhum's oeuvre

1. Dix 2022, 188.

2. Robin 2010.

joins a growing but still modest pool of some fifty Tibetan-language novels published to date, a count orally relayed by the prolific author Tsering Dondrup. While this generous estimate may overstate, it nevertheless highlights what has been no less than a revival of Tibetan literary writing over the past four decades. In 1979, when Pema Bhum started his studies in the Department of Minority Languages and Literatures at the Northwest Nationalities College in Lanzhou, just seven among the thirty-four students in his entering class had any fluency in written Tibetan. By contrast, the first run of 500 copies of *The Rainbow Path* sold out within ten days of publication—and that among the exile population. The novel has not been published in China.

We have selected just four excerpts from the novel, which was published by the non-profit organization The Latse Project, in April 2023. The translation process was admittedly a family affair. Pema Bhum, the author and my husband, selected a few scenes that he favored and read through these with me and our daughter. The three of us met weekly on Sundays as we were able last summer to read two to three pages at a time. When Yumtso left for her college semester abroad, she packed her copy of the novel and asked if we could continue our sessions via Zoom—testimony perhaps to the promise of good literature for sustaining a Tibetan readership. This mostly regular and happy process lent routine to my then reworking and fine-tuning the English for each passage as we proceeded. May these brief translations serve as an entrée and invitation to read and enjoy the Tibetan original.

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