



AUTHORS' NOTES

From Francis

Two years ago my friends in Qinghai took me in their jeep on a long journey to visit lama temples and observe the living conditions of Tibetan villagers in the remote area of Kekexili. Along the way we often saw colorful flags printed with scriptures standing in strong, freezing winds which stung our faces and roared in our ears.

On the plateau, 4,500 meters above sea level, the weather is always severe. The Tibetan villagers in this area often keep herds and live scattered from each other. This has slowed down the area's educational development, and charity work has been difficult. Therefore, when I saw the happy children in an orphanage, I was particularly worried about their future education. Several orphans had been left by their nun-mothers, and their futures seemed bleaker than those of the others. I decided to financially support these "nuns' orphans", and I knew my wife would also be happy to do this kind of charity.

My friends who accompanied me on the trip were all devout Tibetan Buddhists. They told me that a high lama in Yushu, near the Tibetan Autonomous Region, had just finished his 15-year practice of austerities inside a cave, and they wanted to introduce me to him. As we were heading to Lhasa, we went to Yushu across the River Tortor. We stayed in the jeep for several days, driving around in the midst of wilderness. Growing up in the busy city of

Hong Kong, I could not help but be afraid of dealing with nature in this fashion. I felt amazingly warm and safe every time I saw a herdsman or any passing vehicle.

We suddenly heard a whizzing sound, as a van going too fast overtook our jeep and then disappeared from sight. Soon we heard the screeching sound of an accident in front of us. We stopped at the accident site and discovered that the van had careered off the road. The entire vehicle had fallen into a creek. We had no time to think, but ran out to rescue the injured before it was too late. We managed to get two injured men out of the van, which was covered by the water, but another person was unconscious inside the vehicle, trapped in the wreckage. I crossed to the other side of the creek to look into the van and discovered that the injured passenger was an old lady. Using all my strength I pulled her out of the tight grip of the metal, and then carried her on my back and attempted to cross the creek in order to put her down on the roadside. However, the water ran very fast, and I decided not to risk injuring the old lady further. Instead I carried her a long distance along the river bank until I found a safe place to cross.

On the 4500-meter plateau, people coming from the lowlands are warned not to engage in any strenuous activity, and I would usually become dizzy and nauseous if I ran fast for even two minutes. However, I totally forgot about my physical limitations when rescuing this old woman on the high plateau.

That night we stayed in a Tibetan village nearby. Perhaps I was suffering somewhat from high altitude sickness, or perhaps I was still excited about the rescue, but for the whole night I could not sleep. I looked at the stars, letting my thoughts wander. Strange thoughts came into my mind.

I thought about the orphans I'd just met. They seemed happy, as if they didn't know what tears were. But what lives would they have when they grew up? When I was small I loved to read translations of children's fantasies from Western novels. Unfortunately, all those lovely magic stories and legends left me when I became an adult. However, under that starry sky, those fantasies which had made me happy as a child were now all coming back. They took my heart along that stormy creek, flowing to a fantastic place where I could forget all rules and realities except happiness – a pure place where I had been for the moment while I tried to rescue the injured, without thinking of anything.

In the dark I suddenly saw a round shape, colored like a rainbow. It seemed to be a mirage. Then a little nun appeared in front of me. It seemed that she was rescuing people. Her strength was enormous – she could easily lift the van and pull out the injured. Then my thoughts about this little-but-powerful nun expanded. This naive girl came from a kind of paradise, and she was on her way to see the outside world – but what she saw was human suffering, and after she had tasted all the different kinds of tears, she finally understood the truth of the universe. At this point I realized that we adults sometimes also need to be enlightened and encouraged by children's fantasies.

The idea of creating *Pelma's Tears* came from the sky. I could not resist.

The railway from Qinghai to Tibet was opened as the structure and main characters of the story were being developed, and the whole world started to pay more attention to Tibet. Just before the railway's grand opening, my friend in Qinghai, who had participated in rescuing the injured, drove me into Tibet again.

We embarked on another journey because the Jokhang Monastery in the centre of Lhasa had especially gifted a sacred robe of its Buddha statue to my friend. At the same time, an old Rimpoche (a Tibetan Buddhist honorific title for incarnate lamas who are recognized by the authorities within a lineage as superior dharma masters) in Yushu accepted both my friend and I as his followers. We completed this spiritual journey earnestly and piously.

However, a strange thing happened. On the Lunar New Year's Day last year, this friend lost his life, together with his whole family, in a tragic car accident on the Qinghai-Tibet highway while he was driving his family around to visit friends.

In mourning my late friend, I have been driven to deep reflection: What exactly is life? What does it mean to live? On the road of life, the things we encounter are often so random and unexpected that we can sometimes hardly cope. But we must face unanticipated storms with self-confidence and devout belief. One must learn to give in order to take control of one's life. Life's unexpected events and unknown time-span are dependent on our accumulated merits and on our spiritual offerings. People may depart first when they have used up their accumulated merits. What we pray for is merely a serene mind that can help us go peacefully.

These reflections have sparked my creativity and have infused the work of *Pelma's Tears*. For me, Pelma represents an altruistic figure who gives herself unconditionally to world peace. She is not just a character in a novel, but a spiritual train which takes me toward the ultimate destiny of wisdom.

Francis Ng, 1st July 2008

From Yeeshan

Pelma was born in April 2006. At the time, I was struggling with my doctoral dissertation. Accompanied by emotional upheavals, my doctor prescribed me anti-depressant medication. Unfortunately I was too sensitive to this medicine and it drove me into further dejection, but I had to quit it slowly.

In the midst of this misery, a film producer called me and asked if I had time to write a courtroom drama for Ng Chun-yu (Francis Ng's Chinese name). Coincidentally my friend Aiko Fukuoka was in town. This Japanese sociologist and movie fanatic had seen more of Francis' movies than I had. She wanted to interview him, and I needed a creative job as an escape from the pressures of academic work.

At our first meeting, Francis told us the story outline through his marvelous acting performance. I used to pay to watch his talk shows, but now I enjoyed the show for free. This seemed a good way to cure my gloom. Two weeks later I handed Francis a scene breakdown draft. As this had all gone smoothly, he asked if I would be interested in working on another script about a fantasy in ancient Tibet. I said yes. This "yes" only reflected the habit of freelance writers who always nod their heads before checking schedules. I did not really have the time to write another script. "This movie's title is *Pelma's Tears*. I won't consider other titles," Francis told me. I liked this title too. I am particularly weak in naming movies, although this is an important part of marketing them. "As I don't have to worry about the title, it might be an easy job," I told myself.

"The main character is called Pelma," Francis continued. "This is a common Tibetan name for girls, meaning lotus. Pelma is a

teenage nun, growing up in a paradise located on an island in the middle of Qinghai Lake. One day, she is assigned a mission and sent to the outside world on a little fishing boat...”

I was surprised to hear about this leading character. There is a hidden rule in the film industry. In any large budget film, inspirational lines, heroic scenes and climactic endings are always written for the male movie star. Film companies use leading characters as CEOs who can lead the production team to success. Investors tend to be less confident of an actress unless she has millions of fans. This is similar to the situation in large enterprises, where there are fewer female CEOs. Regardless of his own career interest, Francis had generously appointed a little girl to be the CEO of *Pelma's Tears*. I felt embarrassed to insist on my own ideas. In fact I did not have any writing style in mind but my strength is in realism, strengthened by fieldwork research. I had never written any fantasy or magical realism.

With his performing talent, Francis acted out the design of a movie poster for me: “The scene must be tremendously heroic. The sky burial site might be the location of the last scene, where I want to highlight the new image of a saintly girl. In Tibetan custom, it is the loved one of the dead who carries the body to the sky burial mountain. Assuming that the fisherman sacrifices his life to rescue Pelma, it will be this little nun who carries the man’s body in her arms. In the poster, Pelma is walking this way... step by step, walking up to the mountain.” At the business centre, Francis soon entered Pelma’s world as he carried the imaginary heavy air, just as if that little girl was carrying a heavy body, struggling to walk forward. His expressions changed gradually along each step, from naivety to maturity, and from those of an ordinary nun to those of someone becoming a saint, with enormous power and

great wisdom. It was amazing to see the little nun's growing process manifested in Francis' masculine face. What a brilliant actor!

Unable to join Francis and his assistant Youngson on fieldwork, I created the third main character on the university campus after I had seen a giant male student talking to a petite female professor. Reflecting this unevenness, a little nun also led a giant slave on her journey. After their trip to Tibet, Francis and Youngson often came to my office to teach me Lamaist Buddhism, showing me materials of Tibetan culture, and sketching the maps of Pelma's journey. I tried four versions of the screenplay but failed. A Buddhist writer would do a better job, I thought, so I offered to quit.

"This movie is not a Buddhist movie! It's your academic mindset that has blocked your creativity," Francis responded. I agreed. But I was desperate to submit my dissertation. I could not write *Pelma* well but I was pleased that she had entered my life – thinking of her journey, somehow I could bolster myself to quit the anti-depressant medication. Francis did not know that I was completely controlled by the medicine's side effects. A part of *Pelma's Tears* was influenced by this. Once, after we had finished a boring meeting, Francis said to me in a hopeless tone: "You should write all your rigid and dogmatic bookworm qualities into the fisherman. I could play this character well, and you'll realize how deadwood and unimaginative you have been."

It was a good idea!

I wanted to remove all these bad adjectives. But it was hard to imagine that a young Tibetan man would behave like a rigid bookworm, and so we changed the fisherman to the offspring of the Great Tang Empire's ambassador. Francis then gave this lovely character a meaningful name – Tian Xia – which vividly depicts the

silly dream of integrating all differences into one single block.

Once, we spent a whole afternoon at a French restaurant in the IFC Mall, and created another two characters: a sexy she-wolf fairy and a handsome Tibetan antelope spirit with their own missions and misunderstandings. The story texture was thus shaped with strong humanistic emotions.

When Francis started to practice boxing for his participation in a martial arts movie, we met in his boxing coach's studio. I was annoyed by having discussions with a man who was constantly punching a sandbag, and so I often chatted with the men there about the tribes I had read about in classic anthropological books. I often use this masculine topic to relate to macho men. Overhearing something about an African tribe, Francis stopped punching and said, "Why don't we put some tribes into the story?"

As a result, a tribe selling water, a tribe selling slaves, and a tribe selling shamanic skills were born in the boxing studio, and were then further fitted out with colorful masks and tribal costumes similar to the images exhibited in museums. The dynamics of these three tribes added complexity to the storyline.

As we two authors were away from Hong Kong most of the time, we moved our meeting venue to international telephone lines. Surprisingly, a matriarchal tribe was formed here.

Through online discussions, we continued to search for an imaginative romance, although we could have simply used the cliché tragedies of life and death or humans versus other beings. Intent on finding a new angle to illustrate romantic love, we found the age issue to be a brilliant tool which enabled us to delve into deeper layers of complicated human feelings.

When the story was fully developed, we presented it at the 5th Hong Kong and Asia Film Forum. The first draft of the film script was finalized in May 2007, in both English and Chinese.

It was well received by friends who read it. A friend who lived in Tibet for many years said that Pelma brought him back to the Tibetan villages.

The fine film director Ann Hui was surprised that two authors from completely different backgrounds, who had hardly known each other, were able to clash and produce such inspired sparks. Indeed, this kind of co-authorship was not easy to form, especially when the two of us had worked with no promise of income. We believe that it is Pelma who chose us, who waited for the specific timing to enter our lives, and continuously made us work harder and harder. Rather than creating Pelma, our successful partnership was created by her.

Up to this point, we were aware that making *Pelma's Tears* into a movie would involve huge investment, suitable human resources, technology, management, and patience. However, we also came to realize that Pelma has grown up. She has her own life; her own charm and sense of humor; her own ideas and beliefs. As she chose two different writers to change in different ways, Pelma has the right to deal with all men, women and children in the world in her own manner. We cannot deny that this little nun is completely independent of us.

It is Pelma who made the decision to enter the world first in the form of a novel. She is eager to see the world. She is keen on participating in discussions about phenomena that concern modern people the most. She can explain conflicts and tragedies by relating them to ancient Tibetan society. Her worldview is farsighted,

beyond the boundaries of religion, nation, and culture. Therefore we decided to publish the first edition of the book in English.

I embarked on my fieldwork in June 2007, along Pelma's route across the Qinghai plateau. I learned a little Tibetan, visited a remote nunnery, and talked to Tibetans. I know that there are no corners of the world still untouched by modernity, but compared to those living in the Lhasa area, the Tibetans in Qinghai Province seem to have deviated less from their traditional lifestyles. My fieldwork focused on the Amdo region of Tibet, where I collected a lot of precious cultural information.

In July I went to Europe with fieldwork data and my co-author's notes to organize the first draft of the novel. My friend's parents invited me to visit their mansion in northwest France. I wrote the first part of the novel there while visiting the surrounding villages, tasting delicious French food, and jogging in the beautiful gardens. I felt that Pelma and French readers would have a stimulating discussion.

I wrote the next part of the novel on another friend's balcony with a fantastic lake view, in Lausanne, Switzerland. Seeing the waters of Lake Geneva, as blue as the salt lake in Qinghai, I believed that Pelma and Swiss readers would be able to share something. Later, in Milan, I heard the little nun whispering to me, "I also want to exchange thoughts with these charming Italians."

The novel's first page was written in New York, where I stayed with my dear friends Smokey and Sally; accidentally, the last page was also finished in their spacious apartment in Manhattan.

This seemingly romantic writing trip also included obstacles and problems. For instance, an editor bumped into us and wanted a job. Hiring an editor is a common practice in the publishing field;

nevertheless, Pelma here ran into a man who demanded higher fees above the agreed rates every other day. Despite failing to meet the professional standard, we made substantial payments to him. With insulting words, he blackmailed us for more money – otherwise he would publish the text on the internet, and claim himself as the author. Ironically, this kind of behavior resembled so much that of the Wangchuk Chieftain we had created by our own hands. Thanks to this blackmail, we had to struggle till the last minute to refine the text. Compared with the text held hostage, this final version is rich, gleaming, and powerful.

We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. John Thorne who edited the final version with deep understanding of Pelma.

This novel is thus written based on a film script. The language is full of visual imagery, and is very cinematographic. It reads like a fable, maximizing the very essence of magical realism and stimulating readers to express their own imaginations.

Yeeshan Yang, 1st July 2008