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Report on My Fall 2013 Sabbatical Leave

Haiwang Yuan

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January 26, 2014

I. Background

In September, 2012, I applied to the Western Kentucky University (WKU) Research Office for the 2012-2013 Research & Creative Activities Program (RCAP) award. I also applied to WKU Academic Affairs via the Head of Department of Library Public Services (DLPS) and the Dean of University Libraries for the fall 2013 sabbatical leave. Both the award and the sabbatical were to be used for the purpose of writing a book on Tibetan folktales and getting it published. In fact, I was negotiating a book contract at the time with a U.S. publisher ABC-CLIO. It was subsequently signed on December 15, 2012.

According to the contract, the book titled *Tibetan Folktales* will be published by March, 2014. As a prerequisite, I need to co-author the book with a native Tibetan. A friend made during my 2011 trip to Beijing with the Confucius Institute at WKU introduced me to a veteran Tibetan lama Awang Kunga, a disciple of the 10th Panchen Lama's nephew Gaerwa Awang Songpo Rinpoche, Abbot of the Wendu Temple, Qinghai, China. Together with Southern Gansu, Qinghai forms the Amdo part of the "Cultural Tibet," the other two parts being U-Tsang (most of Tibet Autonomous Region or TAR) and Kham (eastern part of TAR and western part of Sichuan). Since the friend Li Bo by name will do more than just a liaison's work between me and Awang Kunga, the publisher has agreed to include her in the co-authorship with me as the primary author.

The book will be written in English for an English-speaking readership in North America as well as in the world. To introduce the readers to a selected collection of Tibetan folktales along with their cultural background, I need the RCAP funding to do a field work in Tibet and Tibetan habitats elsewhere in China, namely the Amdo and/or Kham parts of the "Cultural Tibet."

On December 06, 2012, I was selected to receive the RCAP award in the amount of \$7000. The Dean of University Libraries graciously added \$1,000 to support my research project. As the research dealt with human subjects, I took and passed two related online tests arranged by the WKU Office of Compliance. Then I passed another online test required as an eligible holder of a university's pro-card. WKU Purchasing and Accounts Payable Office helped me make necessary arrangements to anticipate possible difficulties in using the card in some cases in Tibet and China.

Then I surmounted the last obstacle. As a U.S. citizen who holds a U.S. passport, I needed a permit from the authorities of Tibet Autonomous Region to enter it as all non-Chinese citizens have to do. Then I learned that policies with regard to entry of Tibet had

been changed: Foreigners were not supposed to travel in Tibet individually. So I scrambled to contact a travel agency in China to help me get the permit and form a contingent tour group of four that included me, an American and an Indian couple. I made my trip to Tibet with the tour group and to South Gansu myself from May 9th through May 19th, 2013.

II. My Itinerary

April 30 – Left Bowling Green, KY, U.S.A. to Beijing, China.

May 1 – Arrived in Beijing.

May 2-8 – Recovered from the jetlag in Tianjin, my hometown that's 70 miles or 29-minute bullet train ride away from Beijing. I made several trips to Beijing to meet my co-authors in the meantime.

May 9 – Took the 44-hour train from Beijing to Lhasa, Tibet.

May 11 – Arrived in Lhasa, Tibet and adjusted to its high altitude to avoid mountain sickness: no shower, no alcohol, nor nervousness or excitement.

May 12 – Visited the Yerpa Monastery built by Songtsän Gampo (604–650 CE), the 33rd monarch of the Yarlung dynasty and the 1st king of a united Tibet. There the ruins of the original temples caught my attention. The tour guide told me that they were the result of a destruction inflicted by Mao's Red Guards during the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution. The monastery is one of the three most important centers of meditation and retreat in Central Tibet. I also learned that more and more Tibetan residents of Lhasa came all the way from Lhasa to worship at this monastery though it's located on a precipitous mountain. The reason for them to circumvent the Potala Palace close at hand, I learned, was that they resented the fact that the palace became increasingly commercialized as a tourist attraction. Tibetans hate to see their sacred place being used for money. I would have never known this without coming here myself. In the monastery, I collected a tale related to a bead-like trail on the floor leading to the alcove where Songtsän Gampo had meditated. Incidentally, the winding mountain road leading from Lhasa to the Yerpa Monastery was so treacherous that made me think that writing a book could be a life-risking business. That day I also visited another temple on the outskirts of Lhasa that housed samples of sand mandalas depicting the conceptual heaven of the Tibetans. I took pictures of them to illustrate my book with.

May 13 – Visited two of the cultural icons of Tibetan Buddhism: the Potala Palace and the Jokhang Monastery. Before entering the palace, I saw a large crowd on a square in front of it, mostly Tibetan residents of Lhasa, dancing the traditional Tibetan *gorchom* dance. I videoed and photographed the dancing spectacle. At least a photo of dancing Tibetans would make my book more appealing. The multi-storied Potala Palace has two colors: red on the top stories and white beneath them. The top structure of red color used

to be the political seat of Dalai Lamas. The white section that forms the much larger base of the palace was for religious purposes. Therefore the Potala Palace is an epitome of the diarchal religious-political system of old Tibet. Apart from shrine after shrine of various Buddhist gods, there are also thrones and tombs of former Dalai Lamas. When I visited the Jokhang Monastery, I learned about its legendary history. I was told that it was built by Songtsän Gampo for his Nepalese royal consort Bhrikuti with the help of his Tang Chinese consort Wencheng and herds of magic sheep. I have included this beautiful folktale in my book. At the monastery, I had the luck of witnessing the monks debating Buddhist scriptures. It was a tradition peculiar to Tibetan Buddhists.

May 14 – Visited one of Tibetans' sacred lakes Namtso 240 km (149 mi) from Lhasa. Close to the lake, our van left the highway running parallel to the newly-built railroad leading from Beijing and veered onto a road as treacherous as the one I had taken to visit the Yerpa Monastery two days before. To reach the lake, we had to go through the La Gen La mountain pass 5,190 m (17,028 ft) above sea level. It more than triples the height of the "mile-high" Denver. The lake was beautiful, and so was the legendary Namtso goddess. She had a baby son with a demigod hunter. Against her premonition, the hunter brought his bow and arrows when he went to the lake to meet the goddess and their baby. When he saw a female yak cuddling a calf by the lake, his hunting urge seized him. He shot and killed the calf who turned out to be his son. The bereaved goddess plunged herself into the lake never to appear. I have included the beautifully tragic folktale in my book.

May 15 – Left Lhasa airport and arrived in Lanzhou, Gansu Province at midnight.

May 16 – Took a long-distance bus from Lanzhou to South Gansu, which is part of Amdo, one of the regions included in the "Cultural Tibet." As it's located outside Tibet Autonomous Region, there was no travel limit for foreigners like me so that I could do my field work on my own. My first stop was the city of Hezuo, capital of the Gannan (South Gansu) Prefecture, a predominantly Tibetan habitat. I meant to enjoy the moving sight outside the bus window and took pictures, but I was frustrated. It rained all along. I arrived in Hezuo only to know that it was not much to see. The famous Labrang Monastery, one of the six great monasteries of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, was in Xiahe, more than 70 miles in the west. Apparently, for all the homework I had done in Bowling Green, KY, the 7,000-mile distance caused me to miss the target a little bit.

May 17 – The next morning I set off to Xiahe, a county neighboring Qinghai. On the bus, I became acquainted with a Tibetan named Tenzin, who was very outspoken and appeared to be a populist leader. From him, I learned a lot about how Tibetans viewed the Chinese government and their spiritual leader the Dalai Lama. I told him I was an American citizen and would never share what he was going to tell me with anyone in China, but he said he didn't care. From him, I learned why the Chinese government had been investing so much in Tibet but won so little of the Tibetans' heart. Some of his remarks were revealing: "We Tibetans may be economically poor, but we are spiritually rich. The Chinese only care about money." And he worried about their natural

environment being overdeveloped by Chinese “capitalists.” When it came to politics, he had no squirm of speaking out his mind, “What’s the use of building railways, bridges, and houses for us if the Chinese government won’t let us follow our father (his euphemism for the 14th Dalai Lama)? The pseudo government (in exile) is one thing, while the ‘father’ is another. He’s been demonized. He never says Tibet should leave China and become independent. We Tibetans know that’s not we are striving for. We would desert him if he meant it. We have only 6 million people. If we are one third of China’s 1.3 billion and have our own army, things could be different. We know that.” Through him and his remarks, I could see the smoldering anger, the helpless resignation, and the inexorable hope of the Tibetans. Now I saw the benefit of having the freedom of traveling by myself without “being taken care of” by a travel agent. After arriving at Xiahe, I visited the famed Labrang Monastery, where a lama guided us to each of the major chambers of worship. When asked, the lama guide told us: Of the 200,000 copies of Buddhist scriptures, only 60,000 survived the detrimental Cultural Revolution. Then I took a taxi to the Sangke Prairie Agritainment Ranch a dozen miles away. It was run by a Tibetan named Dorje. A tourist agent in Lanzhou had introduced me to him, who turned out to be very friendly and helpful.

May 18 – On the prairie, I had the closest contact with Tibetans as I possibly could. I slept in a Tibetan-styled room, ate their food, listened to their stories, enjoyed their singing, watched and participated in their dancing, and at my request, was treated to their demonstration of Tibetan wrestling and some other sports and games. During my conversation with Dorje, owner of the agritainment ranch, he talked about the necessity to maintain the Tibetan culture, which had so far been kept intact through history. He expressed Tibetans’ keen consciousness of the environment and his concern for the encroachment of Chinese commercial development. His sentiment echoed exactly that of Tenzin, the guy I had met on the bus from Hezuo to Xiahe.

May 19 – I missed the long-distance bus to Lanzhou as it ran only once a day. So I had to return to Lanzhou the hard way: taking a taxi. To reduce the cost, I rode with someone else. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise; for during the long ride, I easily got acquainted with the two young Tibetan drivers who alternated their driving. From what they told me, it followed that the younger generation of Tibetans were trying to adjust to the Chinese economic craze. Unlike their fathers’ generation who were more concerned about spiritual growth and environmental conservation, they seemed to care more about improving their living standards. This was also echoed by the young tour guides who had showed me around in and outside Lhasa. They were apparently caught between getting economically ahead like their Chinese peers while trying to reconcile their economic aspiration with their waning spiritual pursuit. Riding with me was the teenage nephew and employee of Dorje from the prairie agritainment ranch. He tagged along because he wanted to have his malfunctioned smartphone fixed in Lanzhou. He served as a footnote to the changes taking place among young Tibetans.

May 20 – Flew back to Tianjin from Lanzhou.

May 21-31 – Stayed in Tianjin ruminating upon what I had learned about Tibet and the Tibetan habitat in South Gansu. At the same time, I visited libraries and went to meet my co-authors in Beijing several times to work on the book project.

June 1 – I left Beijing, China and returned to Bowling Green, KY.

III. The Book Project and More

As of this report is being written on January 26, 2014, I had finished the draft manuscript of the contracted book titled *Tibetan Folktales* (The draft manuscript is available upon request). The writing was primarily executed between June 2013 and the first half of January 2014. Without this sabbatical leave, the completion of a 200-page book of academic value would be impossible. Its academic value is twofold: library patrons will find the introductory articles useful as reference materials while folklorists can use the motif index for comparative studies of world folktales.

I wish to thank everyone who has helped with my research. I am particularly indebted to Provost Gordon Emslie, Dean Connie Foster, and Department Head Brian Coutts for giving me the time. I am also thankful to my colleagues who did my share of the library work during my absence. Among them, I'm specifically grateful to Jan Renusch, University Libraries Dean's Office Coordinator, for handling my RCAP funds and Eric Fisher, Senior Technology Consultant leading the Library System Office, for coordinating the coverage of my web management work.

Apart from the book, I have also processed the photos I took and the journal I kept on my trip to get ready for at least two library-sponsored lectures that I have been scheduled to give: One is the "We've Been Everywhere" program and the other, the "Far Away Places" international talk series in partnership with Barnes & Noble's Booksellers at Bowling Green.

While writing my book, I helped solve some web problems referred to me by some of the library faculty and staff members.

Following is the book's table of content. The manuscript of the book needs more proofreading. The index won't be done until the galley proof is available.

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