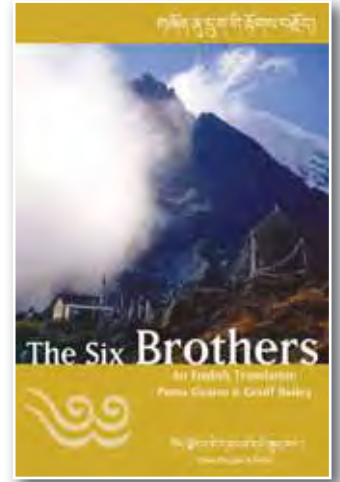


# Not lost in translation



The Six Brothers: An English Translation. 2007. Translated by Pema Gyatso and Geoff Bailey; Publishing Editor: Dobi Tsering Dorje; Tibet People's Press, Lhasa, Tibetan Autonomous Region

Based on the lives of six brothers, the story is an analogy of the six virtuous perfections of the Bodhisattvas. The story unfolds around the lives of the three older brothers, who are in the grip of worldly desires and attached to the fleeting pleasures of cyclical existence **BY MARK TURIN**

Translation is a notoriously thankless task: if accurate and fluid, the translator is essentially invisible and his hand is nowhere to be seen; if not, the translator is held accountable for the flaws. Frustrated with this absence and lack of recognition, the great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges once quipped that "the original is unfaithful to the translation." Since I do not read Tibetan, I am not in a position to comment on whether Pema Gyatso and Geoff Bailey's translation accurately reflects the original text. What I can say, however, is that "The Six Brothers" is an elegant rendering of complex literary Tibetan into captivating and very readable English.

Based on the lives of six brothers, the story is an analogy of the six virtuous perfections of the Bodhisattvas. The story unfolds around the lives of the three older brothers, who are in the grip of worldly desires and attached to the fleeting pleasures of cyclical existence. The three younger brothers, who are in fact Bodhisattvas, continually try to persuade their older siblings to give up their lives of meaningless folly and to opt for the path of true enlightenment. In the course of their various life journeys, the older brothers end up in various degrees of trouble, which require the younger brothers to rescue them—an allegorical play on the true nature of a Bodhisattva. Eventually, the older brothers recognize the error of their ways, repent and begin on the right path.

This 230-page book comprises an English translation of the text (about 150 pages) followed by the original in Tibetan. In their preface, the translators humbly admit that it is "with some trepidation that we present this English translation" (page 1), as this text is considered to be one of the most exquisitely

written in the Tibetan language. As such, the epic is often referred to as the "mother" of all Tibetan poetry. While the authorship of the epic is unknown, scholars estimate that it was written six to seven hundred years ago. An interesting debate exists around the origin of the tale, discussed in brief in the book's introduction. Some commentators agree with the statement in the text's colophon that the narrative originated in India, that perhaps it was even written by the Indian Pandita Umapati, while others believe the text to have been composed by an unknown Tibetan scholar who lived in India for many years. As with all such epic narratives, the provenance of "The Six Brothers" is destined to be unknown, and competing narratives of its origin will continue to strive for authenticity.

The Tibetan original is divided into seven chapters, including an introductory salutation, and contains over 130 different kinds of metaphors, similes and synonyms, making it metaphorically rich and analytically complex. The first chapter introduces each of the six brothers and describes their various characteristics, and the remaining six chapters are each devoted to one of the six perfections, presented in the correct order of importance: generosity, ethics, perseverance, diligence, concentration and wisdom.

The translators suggest that their primary aim in preparing this translation was to aid those who wish to study Tibetan texts in tandem with an English translation, but I would go further and suggest that the text itself is interesting enough to be read by anyone with an interest in philosophy, morality or spirituality, even without understanding the Tibetan. Let us turn now to a few snippets of the text

of "The Six Brothers" and reflect on their astuteness and parsimonious formulation:

The fire of sorrow, which is fuelled by the sighs of beggars

Who have been sent away having had their hopes dashed,

Burns the tree of one's honour.

Ignorant ones who act like this, though alive, they are really dead. (page 33)

So, before the thief of old age

Steals your youthfulness,

You should independently take care

Of your own affairs. (page 57)

The moon, whose eyes were closed with loving smiles and

Who was drunk with nectar.

Slipped down the smooth surface of the sky

Falling into the sea. (page 86)

The critic and translator Norman Shapiro wrote that translation is "the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections—scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. It should never call attention to itself." From my perspective, the translators of "The Six Brothers" have achieved transparency—the text reads beautifully in English. Congratulations are thus due to the two translators for making this powerful and timeless Tibetan text available to a lay readership and for doing the job so well.