

## TWO BEAUTIFUL BOOKS LOOK AT TRADITIONAL TIBETAN HOUSES

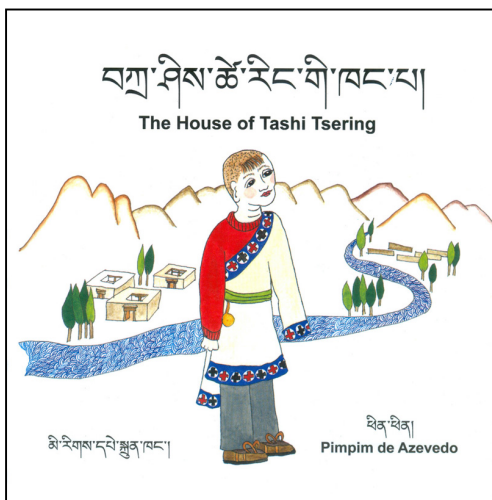
The Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) is an intrepid group of Asian and European activists, scholars, artisans, and Tibet-lovers who have been working in Tibet, Mongolia and India for the past 20 years to restore traditional houses, neighborhoods and monasteries. They use the restoration process to revive the traditional building crafts and cultural practices that go into these beautiful buildings, which continue to be under serious threat. Although their work has focused on restoring historic structures, the group has always searched for ways that the mostly poor families who live in these old buildings and neighborhoods can stay and be part of their revival, rather than pushed out to make way for tourist boutiques or tower blocks. In this way, the THF has used the historic building angle as a conscious anti-eviction strategy, in situations where surviving Tibetan neighborhoods - and the ancient social cultures they contain - are in serious danger of vanishing under government development plans and the more general creeping-in of international sameness.



Making or repairing a real Tibetan house, however, was not so easy. Many crafts go into the building - or rebuilding - of these houses: intricate stone masonry, timber joinery of windows and superstructures, carving of wooden columns, roof-making, painting of colorful ornamental friezes and window trim. The "Arga women", for example, use clay, mud and stones to fashion the traditional flat Tibetan roofs, and part of this ancient and highly-skilled process involves dancing and singing special roofing songs in unison, as they make their way, back and forth, across the new roof, gently compacting the stones with long mallets. One of the THF's most difficult tasks has been finding artisans to carry out the restoration work, train younger craftspeople and keep these crafts alive. For this, they ranged all over Tibet, searching for the few surviving master carpenters, stone masons, wood carvers, painters and roof-makers (many in their sixties and seventies!). And when they began working with these people, who knew so much and were themselves cultural treasures, they formulated what has become one of their core working principles: *when in doubt, trust the craftsman*.



Over the years, the THF team has also acquired a considerable understanding of Tibetan buildings, and this understanding has been lovingly preserved in reports, maps, films, archives of measured drawings and books.



Before he died in January 2012, Andre Alexander, one of the THF co-founders, had published a beautiful book on Lhasa's temples, and almost finished a companion volume on Lhasa's houses. Pimpim de Azevedo and Yutaka Hirako, who help coordinate THF's work, are now working with the prestigious Serindia publishing house in Chicago to complete Andre's book - a big, coffee-table book filled with drawings and photos of many of the houses THF restored (sadly, many of which have been demolished now). Pimpim has also written and illustrated another book about Tibetan houses - this one pitched to a younger audience. "*The House of Tashi Tsering*" tells the story of a young boy who dreams of building a house for his family, and gathers ideas as he journeys around Tibet and learns first-hand the whys and hows of Tibetan house design and construction. By some miracle of gentle diplomacy, Pimpim has persuaded the Chinese Government to publish this book (in a bilingual Tibetan and English edition), which is her own love-letter to the Tibetan people,

culture and houses she has come to understand so well.

For more information about these books, please contact Pimpim at: [pemamarpo@yahoo.com.hk](mailto:pemamarpo@yahoo.com.hk)

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