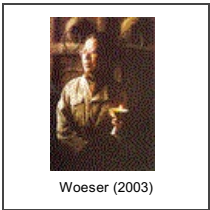


Diagnosing the Current Situation in Tibet. Interview with the Tibetan author Woesser

The following is an interview with Tibetan writer Woesser (also Woser, Oeser, Oser; Ch: Weise). It was conducted in 2006 by Namlo Yak, another contemporary Tibetan writer, and who has been living in exile since 1999. The original interview was published on a Chinese website in Chinese language. The present version is an abridged English translation of that interview⁽¹⁾. Woesser issued a press statement on 27 April 2008 explaining that her blog, woesser.middle-way.net, has been subjected to cyber attacks since 26 April, preventing her from logging on since then. Existing entries seem to have remained intact, however about 20 new entries have been posted on the comments page. Woesser therefore advised visitors to her website to *"be careful with any of the postings after 1:30 am Beijing time, 27 April"*. Woesser's website has recently been a key source for news about Tibet. Many recent reports disseminated by a diverse range of Tibet support groups source from this website. Meanwhile, Woesser continues to post current news about Tibet in Chinese language on another website, boxun.com.

Q: **What is your current situation?** [Note: The interview was conducted in 2006]



Woesser: *A few years ago, in one of my books I wrote: "My writing has become clearer, unequivocal. I will be a witness. I will be looking for, discovering, revealing and spreading a secret, which will be astonishing". This is the expectation I have.*

"Speaking the truth" is a basic requisite for being an author but today, in my situation, I have to pay for it. For example, after I published my essay collection "Tibet Notes", I was punished in many ways, which directly affected my right to survive, so I had to leave Lhasa to become an independent author outside of that political structure. On the one hand I feel relatively free now not to have to obey any official will, on the other hand, as I have had to leave Lhasa, I feel I have somehow become a refugee; it has made me very sad.

Q: **Nowadays, you are a freelance writer; could you publish your articles with official publishers? If you cannot, what are the excuses or reasons given for refusing to publish your articles?**

Woesser: *I am a Tibetan author writing in the Chinese language so relatively speaking, I have more space to publish my work in China than in Tibet. There are only a few publishers in the TAR (Tibet Autonomous Region), and they are firmly controlled by government ideology. Even though there is a very strict system of checking any published work in Mainland China, the country is vast and there are innumerable publications, so it is always possible to find a space for expressing the truth.*

Incidentally, as Tibet and its culture have become very popular in China, there are an increasing number of Chinese people who have shown great interest in learning about Tibet's people, geography and its spiritual world. Therefore authors such as myself can find a space to publish relevant articles.

Today, the situation in China has become much more severe; it has been said that a book, if its theme relates to Tibet, has to be submitted for examination by the central government. But sometimes it happens that the strict controls of the authorities still have some loopholes. So in 2004, my book - "The Crimson Map" - was published by the Chinese Tour Publishing Company. After a short while, the Propaganda Department of the TAR exerted huge pressure, which led to a prohibition on the sale of my book.

There is another book of mine, which has been circulating among different publishers for a long time, and I recently received correspondence from an editor stating: "...the topic of the book you submitted for publication, bodes ill rather than well as it involves some important subjects, like the nationality issue and the Cultural Revolution". So, it is incredibly hard to publish a book or an article today, I really feel unhappy and frustrated. But it is possible to publish some poems.

It needs to be clarified that Mainland China is not the only place to publish a book in Chinese. If there are problems getting one published, we can still publish it outside the country. I have published three books in Taiwan this year [Note: The interview was conducted in 2006], two of which are about the Chinese Cultural Revolution in Tibet. But I really hope that I can publish my books in Mainland China, as most Chinese readers are here, and it will be really helpful to provide more information about Tibet to Chinese people - to generate a great awareness about Tibet through my books.

Q: **I have heard that in order to get access to the internet in Tibet, Tibetan people have to use their identity cards to register for special permission. Do you think this 'special permission' prevents people from expressing their opinions freely?**

Woesser: *Half a year ago, I returned to Lhasa for a few months. Mostly I used the internet from my home, and there were a few times when I went to an internet cafe, but I didn't encounter any problems over 'special permission'. I don't know whether they have to request special permission in internet cafes. It is true that there is a lot of pressure from authorities concerning the use of the internet wherever it is, in the office, homes or internet cafes, so it has made people terribly afraid to visit some politically sensitive websites. No one even wants to 'have their say' on the BBC. People always feel that someone is spying on them, and the authorities will discover who has visited these forbidden websites. So it is not only affecting the ability of people to freely express their opinions; actually, there is no way to do so. In fact, people are not only facing difficulties using the internet, but in their daily lives they are afraid that something might happen to them. It's like walking on very thin ice because this long-held fear has changed the atmosphere, and has lodged deeply into each individual's mind. So today, it's like people live double lives, or split lives, in Tibet.*

Q: **It is said that there are double standards within Tibet's cultural circles. For example, there are strict controls for Tibetans who write in Tibetan, as opposed to looser controls among Tibetans who write in Chinese; or tight control over Tibetans who are famous, as opposed to a relaxed attitude to those Tibetans who are not. Have you been affected by these double standards?**

Woesser: *The double standards that you have mention actually exist. In Tibet, there is an unwritten law in the political system that goes: "If people*

have a very high standard in Tibetan literature; normally these people have stronger religious faith and reactionary ideology". This situation has led to the spread of Tibetan literature studies being intentionally or inadvertently neglected and has speeded up the assimilation of Tibet by Chinese. It also means Tibetan intellectuals have to passively accept the current situation in Tibet in order to survive. If there is someone who wants the authorities to pay more attention to Tibetan literature and to respect Tibetan culture, he or she will be regarded as a narrow nationalist at best, or a national separatist if the authorities are inclined to treat them more seriously.

It is obvious that in Tibet, Tibetan authors who write in Chinese have felt relatively less pressure from the authorities than authors writing in Tibetan. One could say there are differences between authors depending whether they work within the official structure or not. Authors who are part of this system are controlled and limited in equal measures by the government, and if someone becomes famous, then he or she will be treated very well and lots of benefits will be offered, such as power and profits. Then they can't normally give up these benefits once they become famous. Somehow it has turned to an invisible tightness.

Outside the official structures, it is certainly true that famous authors have more space to survive in than lesser well-known authors. Consider me as an example; after I was expelled from office, I still kept writing, but I cannot imagine what would happen to an ordinary author who produced the same work as me.

Q: Where have you been to in Tibet? Could you give a brief overview of the situation in these places?

Woeser: In recent years, I have been to most Tibetan areas for both travel and pilgrimage, as, deep in my heart, I regard the whole of Tibet as a huge monastery. This of course was my initial impression of Tibet, when I was there. After I spent a long time at the grass roots level in Tibet, my initial impression, which was more like a literary emotion, was changed to a feeling for history and a sense of purpose, like being on a mission. I can say that I used to look at my motherland with an aesthetic conception, but today I have started to see it and its people from a more historical and realistic perspective.

Now, I am going to talk about several basic situations in Tibet from different perspectives:

Environmental issues: Tibet is known as a paradise on Earth, but today its environmental situation has become a great concern; examples are: grass degeneration, deforestation, desertification and river exhaustion... Indeed, Tibet has a very fragile environment, and its harsh natural conditions make it much harder for vegetation to grow. Fortunately, there is a respect and compassion for living creatures in traditional Tibetan culture that advocates the protection of our ecological balance. So today we can still see beautiful natural scenery in Tibet. But currently our traditional culture is being destroyed, and instead the commercial trend, which only focuses on making money, has been popularised. So, as a result, the environment has been damaged.

Social issues: Since 1980, the authorities began managing many different kinds of festivals and celebrations. During these events, the most important feature is the traditional Tibetan fashion shows that have been promoted by the government-run media as a sign of wealth in Tibet. Very expensive and precious jewels and animal skins, such as tiger, leopard and otter, are used to decorate each article of clothing. This deviates from the concepts of traditional Tibetan clothing as well as from the essential Buddhist precept to cherish all kinds of life. It also departs from international awareness about protecting our environment. At the same time, this trend has also created unhealthy competition between local people, and has led to pressure to irrationally purchase these goods.

Another issue is that many Chinese-backed aid projects have renamed Tibetan streets, town squares and buildings with the names of the Chinese provinces and cities where support for the projects originated. This kind of phenomena has made Tibet lose its culture and character. In its place it has created a colonial legacy. Recently, it's even been reported that the biggest statue of Chairman Mao will be transported to Tibet as a 'support project'.

Another very significant development, especially in Tibetan towns and cities, is the change of language to Chinese. Tibetans in Sichuan province speak Chinese with the Sichuan accent; Tibetans in Yunnan province speak Chinese with the Yunnan accent; and Tibetans in Qinghai province speak Chinese with the Qinghai or sometimes Gansu accents, but Tibetans in the TAR and Lhasa speak Chinese with the standard Chinese pronunciation. When you are crossing the border between two different provinces, you will hear the differences between these accents.

It is said that there was a meeting held in Chengdu to discuss the creation of a standard Tibetan pronunciation, and the participants came from five Tibetan provinces. During the presentation, there were a few lecturers who spoke Tibetan, but most of them spoke Chinese with a number of different regional accents. Following that, people jokingly spoke about "using the Chinese language to create a new standard Tibetan pronunciation".

Q: What do you think about the new Chinese migrant issue in Tibet, as you have continuously travelled to Tibet, and what sort of people are involved in this huge migration?

Woeser: For this question, I am going to quote some information from one of my conversations with a senior TAR official in Lhasa two years ago. During the conversation, I asked him: "The Ministry of Public Security has been implementing a reform of the Household Registration Policy in mainland China. Do you think this reform will be carried out in Tibet?"

He answered: "It has already been executed in Tibet. Its objective is to encourage Chinese people in Mainland China to migrate to Tibet. Have you seen that these Chinese construction workers have already become local people in Lhasa? There are so many of them coming from Sichuan, Henan, Shanxi and Gansu provinces, and they have rented all the fields on the suburbs of Lhasa, so today there are no fields left there. Many of these new Chinese migrants have been making their own businesses in Tibet, like restaurants, vehicle repair centres, construction companies and many more. At the beginning, only a few of them came to Tibet, carrying on their backs just a woven bag and a sleeping sheet, but after a while their relatives and friends followed them. It's just like a small snowball rolling from the peak of the mountain down to the valley becoming bigger and bigger.

Have you ever tried 'Jade Baozi'? [Dumplings similar to Tibetan steamed momos] The owner of this restaurant is a lady from Sichuan province, she started her business on a very small scale, but today she has opened a chain of restaurants all over Tibet."

I replied: "I don't think she is one of the Chinese migrants, she just belongs to the 'Chinese floating population in Tibet'. A few days ago, didn't the Chairman of the TAR describe the migrants in this way to foreign journalists?"

"Hahaaaa! How could he say anything else? He wouldn't want to lose his position", he said smiling. "What is the floating population? These Chinese construction workers have already settled in Tibet. Near my home, there is a school filled with the children of these construction workers, so now they've even started to establish schools in Tibet", he said. "Some people are saying: 'Don't Tibetans need development? This is why we need to encourage educated people to go to Tibet'. Yes, it's not wrong, we need development and we need to attract educated people, but do you see what kind of people have come to Tibet? In America, there are also a lot of Chinese, but they are the high achievers, so this is the real meaning of exporting human resources. However, the Chinese people in Tibet are only the construction workers with a very low level of education", he said.

"By the way, there are several different ways that this enormous Chinese migration into Tibet will continue. For instance: the new Chinese migrant students. Many Chinese officials and workers bring their children from Mainland China to Tibet, before these kids are about to take their final examinations to enter university. They normally apply for a permanent resident certificate in Tibet for these kids, which will enable them to gain an advantage during their final university entrance examinations, as they are then considered minority students. As a result, it has become much harder for Tibetan students to enter a university in both Tibet and China, as Tibetan students have to compete with these new Chinese migrant students.

There's also the highly educated new Chinese migrants: as it is no longer the duty of the Chinese government to provide jobs to those who have just graduated from university, it's become very hard for young Chinese graduates to find work. Therefore the government has made promises to attract recent graduates to come to work in Tibet. Normally these young Chinese are willing to follow the government's suggestions, especially those who come from very poor areas in China. You see that there are quite a lot of them already arrived in Tibet", he said.

"Will the new Chinese migrants affect the employment situation of local Tibetans?" I asked.

"Yes, it's absolutely obvious." he answered. "But what can we do about it? For example, in this year alone, the Chinese government has already dispatched a few hundred Chinese tour guides to Tibet. As a result, there are many Tibetan guides who have lost their jobs. Ironically, the government has implemented a special new policy for these Chinese guides; they can refuse to go somewhere very high and poor such as Ali [Tib: Ngari]. Even in the quiet season, the travel companies have to provide 3,000 Yuan as a salary for each Chinese guide. Even though these companies are very frustrated about this new policy, they can actually do nothing except approve," he added.

"More Chinese migrants will definitely make the situation much more difficult for Tibetans to find a job", I said.

He replied: "Yes. Chinese people do anything to make money. There is a joke in Lhasa that goes: A Chinese man (after he'd heard that the person who performs sky burials can make a lot of money) came to the office of the National Religious Committee and asked to be a worker on sky burials, as he insisted that he had better professional skills than anyone in Tibet! There is another joke that except for the domdan [the worker responsible for sky burials] and the geshe [a monk/scholar], there is nothing the Chinese people can't do in the world!"

I said: "Regarding the current situation, I have written: 'Today, Tibet has changed from what she used to be, and many tourists have been disappointed during their visit to Tibet. Someone even said that Lhasa has become a clone of Chengdu'."

He replied: "One time, I made a test on my own to try to find out a rough figure for the structure of the population in Lhasa. That is, I started walking from my home, to the streets at the beginning of New Shol village, which is right behind the Potala Palace and just a few hundred metres away from my home. On the way, I met 37 Chinese and only five Tibetans, so it proves that the new Chinese migrants make up a significant part of the change in Tibet. Can Tibetans actually control this fierce migration? The answer unsurprisingly makes us very unhappy. We live on our land, but we are not the owner of this land. I have to add one more thing, autonomy today is not worth its name, so if we want to keep Tibet's real identity, not just the name, we have to achieve real autonomy", he finally added.

Q: What do you think about the Tibetan youth and what do they think about pursuing Tibetan culture in general?

Woeser: Tibetan traditional culture is the soul of Tibet, and Tibet's existence has to be based on pursuing and advocating Tibetan traditional culture. In one of my articles, which I wrote on 10 March 2005, I appealed: "Let us insist on keeping our own culture, not completely accepting all kinds of pressure and not following the trend of modern materialism under totalitarian control, as the combination of the two will definitely destroy Tibet's soul".

Keeping Tibetan culture does not mean being totally blind and conservative, it means a cultural choice. Our Tibetan intellectuals, professors and monks should take responsibility for their nation and teach ordinary Tibetans that it is not right to unconditionally follow an arrangement set by a totalitarian regime, and chasing after materialism doesn't necessarily result in happiness. We should be determined to keep our tradition and that includes every single thing in our daily life and each aspect of our spiritual world.

Since I became a freelance writer and published many of my articles on websites, I find it really interesting that I have met a lot of young Tibetans, especially in the Kham and U-Tsang regions, that I rarely had contact with before. This inspired me and gave me great confidence; I don't feel lonely anymore. Today, there are a lot of Tibetans, under 40 years old or even younger, who have very important positions in Tibet. Their rational faculties, sharp minds and awareness have made me admire them very much. These Tibetans' national consciousness could not be brainwashed by the education system. It has become much stronger today, as they have been able to find more ways to express their national consciousness, especially through different languages such as Chinese and English.

One time, a young Tibetan wrote me a letter saying: "We are using many different ways to release our individual voice from deep in our hearts to the world outside, but our objective is the same". Currently, there is a very famous saying by H.H the Dalai Lama going around many Tibetan intellectuals and scholars that says: "Insist on the Buddhist faith of compassion, wisdom, sincerity and kindness; Insist on treating an enemy as a relative, with tolerance and patience; Insist on peace to create trust and understanding". H.H the Dalai Lama's saying represents his expectation of the Middle Way. We ought to follow this way. There is a picture being passed around young Tibetans that depicts H.H the Dalai Lama pulling a cart through the mire, and a few Tibetans are sitting on the cart chanting to his back.

H.H the Dalai Lama, who has just passed 70 years old, is the spiritual father of Tibetans. In being his children, we should ease the burden from his shoulders, as it is so hard. We should also make an effort in many different ways to achieve union [between Tibetans in Tibet and exiles] some day in the future.

Q: After the Cultural Revolution, did the local authorities review the past?

Woeser: So far, the local authorities have not questioned any officials who gained power during the Cultural Revolution. Looking at those who are powerful in the region's government can show this.

Ragdi: The head of the 'Great United Central' [a Red Guard organisation during the Cultural Revolution] in the Nagchu area during the Cultural Revolution. From 1975 to 2003 he was the Vice-Secretary of TAR, and now he is a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress(NPC).

Legqoq: (Tib: Legchog) The head of the 'Great United Central' in the Shigatse area. He is now the Chairman of the NPC in the TAR.

Pasang: The head of the 'Little Red Guard' and the head of the 'Great United Central' in the Shannan (Tib: Lhoka) area. From 1971 to 2003 she was the Vice-Secretary of TAR, and now she is the Vice Chairman of the All-China Women's Federation.

Lobsang Dhunzhup: (Tib: Lobsang Dondrub) The Chief of Staff of the 'Serf War' [another Red Guard organisation during the Cultural Revolution] in the Tibet Nationality University in China. Now he is the Vice-Chairman of NPC in TAR.

Laba Phuntso: (Tib: Lhagba Phuntsog) The Chief Editor of the 'Tempest War' newspaper, which belonged to the 'Great United Central'. He is now the Chief Secretary in charge of Chinese Tibetan Studies Central.

Xiangpa Phuntso: (Tib: Jampa Phuntsog) The Chief of Staff of the 'Serf War'. Now he is the Vice-Secretary of the TAR.

Jangtso: The head of the 'Great United Central' in Tamu Mechanical Factory. Now he is the Vice-Chairman of the TAR.

Degyi Tsomo: (Tib: Dekyi Tsomo) The head of the "Serf War" in the Tibet Nationality University in China. Now she is a Standing Member of the Communist Party of the TAR.)

Buchong: (Tib: Buchung) The head of the 'Great United Central' of Jonche (Tib: Chonggye) county in the Shannan (Tib: Lhoka) area. Now he is the Vice-Secretary of the TAR and the Secretary of the Regional Commission for Discipline Inspection of the TAR.

Basang Dhunzhup: (Tib: Pasang Dondrub) From November 1969 to December 1970, he served in the 409 unit of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a translator in Tibet. Now he is a Standing Member of the Communist Party of the TAR, the Vice-Chairman of the Political Consultative Conference of the TAR and the Minister of the United Front Work Department of the TAR.

Yixi Tenzin: (Tib: Yeshe Tenzin) Originally, he was associated with the 'Rebel Central', [another Red Guard organisation during the Cultural Revolution] but later he joined the 'Great United Central'. He is now the Vice-Chairman of the Political Consultative Conference of the TAR.

Why doesn't the government want to scrutinise them? There are a lot of local Tibetans who have gained great benefits for themselves during events in Tibet's recent history. Now they have become one of the sticking points or stumbling blocks in resolving the Tibetan issue, as their achievements are purely of a political nature, as opposed to benefitting the people, and their policies have just been about pursuing stability, i.e. repressing dissent, in Tibet. Basically, there are two reasons for this: Firstly, it is related to Mao's concept of 'Class Struggle'. Secondly, it is related to the qualities of an individual; these people are uneducated. The only thing they can do is to overstate their enemy's position. If there is no enemy, they always try to concoct stories that give them reasons to draft local policies to keep up the pressure on ordinary people. This is the only way for both senior Tibetan officials and Chinese representatives in Tibet; it's purely for these individuals' benefit. Therefore, you can see why today these Chinese-Tibetan officials are constantly campaigning about "exposing and denouncing the Dalai Lama" in Tibet, and they are also trying to inspire [Chinese] nationalism in Tibet.

Currently, a very strange political atmosphere has been generated around the Tibetan issue. When the Chinese government tries to speak with H.H the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan regional government always creates some disturbance that interferes with the negotiations. This situation has made the Chinese government very frustrated, and sometimes caused their refusal to negotiate, as the government has to trust and depend on these senior Chinese-Tibetan officials in the TAR. So far, this strange political situation has caused a few negative results. It has made the Chinese government very reluctant to change its point of view of the Tibetan issue on the world stage. And then there is serious corruption.

It's said that Tibet is politically the last 'pure' area in China; [i.e. the region has upheld a socialist tradition] there is no one who is corrupt amongst these officials in Tibet. The reality is just the opposite. At one point, the former Secretary Huyao Bang said: "You [Chinese-Tibetan officials] have thrown all the money, which the central government has given to Tibet, into the Yarlung Tsangpo River". Actually they put this money into their own stomachs, but the central government just ignores what they are doing in Tibet. As a result, Tibetans will always stand in opposition to the Chinese authorities, whatever they bring to Tibet.

In fact, we can say that these Chinese-Tibetan officials, who came into power during the Chinese Cultural Revolution in Tibet, have created a private fiefdom that allows them all to speak with the same voice. Therefore, if the Chinese government does not remove the stumbling block that they created there will be no hope to resolve the Tibet issue in the future. Amongst these difficulties, which have made the Tibet issue very hard to solve, H.H the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government are not the problem anymore. These Chinese-Tibetan officials, who are supposed to work on behalf of Tibetans and lead the Chinese government to a resolution of the Tibet issue, always approach finding a proper solution from a negative standpoint.

Once, someone asked on a Chinese website: "For many years, we have not heard of any senior officials in Tibet being interrogated under the 'two stipulations' by the central government. [The 'two stipulations' or 'double regulation' (Chin: shuanggui) is a Chinese political term meaning that if an official is suspected of corruption, then the authorities will stipulate a specific time and place to question him or her for a certain period of time] How can they stay away from corruption under the same blue sky and political system?"

The answer is very obvious. It doesn't mean that there are no dishonest officials in Tibet, it's because these corrupt officials are using the 'Dalai Lama Separatist Group' as a shield to gain benefits from the central government without any problems. Therefore, the people who don't want to see the Dalai Lama return home are these corrupt and dishonest Chinese-Tibetan officials in Tibet.

Q: The Chinese government is a signatory to several different international laws, and the Chinese constitution has clearly stipulated

that every one has the right to make suggestions, and criticise the government. As you have experienced so many things in Tibet, how do you think Tibetan intellectuals should understand and use their rights (from these laws and the constitution) to protect themselves?

Woeser: *Everyone knows that freely expressing one's opinion and faith (if these divert from the authorities' ideology) will definitely lead to serious punishment even though these are rights clearly anchored in the Chinese constitution. How this happens depends greatly on each individual's specific situation. Tibetan intellectuals generally, except monks, are affiliated to the official structures. The authorities have the absolute and ultimate power to control the living space of each Tibetan, and their culture and their freedom of speech is strictly consigned within this outlined space. Someone trying to release their own voice, or cross this minefield, will be regarded as violating a ban, and consequently the authorities' big stick will land on their head. Somehow, this is also a kind of warning for others not to do the same, so you have to follow the authorities' wishes. If you wave the flag to exalt the authorities, then they will be very happy with you and reward you with a lot of benefits.*

It's very common for people to feel very scared living under such constraints. But, being afraid, will we do nothing about it? Being scared, will we have to be silent? No! Reality has taught us that we have to enhance our bravery and confidence, as we have to fight for our rights. If we give up our rights, especially the intellectuals who are responsible for recounting the truth and protecting the conscience [of our nation], this response will definitely intensify the suppression of the authorities.

Could we get rid of the political system's grip and gain the right to free expression? Among Tibetan intellectual circles there are two different groups: those who write and research in Tibetan, and those who do so in Chinese. As the first group's share of the cultural market is very narrow, i.e. only within Tibetan communities, it is extremely hard for them to survive outside of this official system. For the second group, since Chinese intellectuals have already formed a giant Chinese cultural market, it is much easier to survive outside of the official system. Therefore they have a relatively free space to express their opinions. It is exactly what I'm doing today. Even though my income is less compared to those dependent on the official system, my spirit is experiencing a great freedom. This is essential.

Q: You once wrote: "Tibet! Familiar is your geography, it is also an ancient geography and, somehow a religious geography too. Today, you have been printed in a warm light. When I call your name "Tibet", I'm always filled with gentle and sentimental emotion, as you have taken a lover in this unstable world!" And also: "An artist is on duty in a mission to testify and record the reality!" Could you explain to me whether there is any contradiction between your conviction and reality? If yes, how can you harmonise and reconcile the contradiction? What is the mystery?

Woeser: *I acknowledge that there is a tension in my relationship with reality, being an artist and a Buddhist. But it doesn't mean that I intentionally create contradictions with reality, it's just the opposite; reality always encroach on my heart. So, I have written that: "...but to be one of the Tibetans, Tibet's image of greatness and misery has put on my back enormous weights. 'Glory' and 'apathy' - I have to choose one or the other!" The glory that I have mentioned above is simply the glory of writing. This glory is essential, even if it's very small, but it should stand for the professional morality of writers.*

My experiences, which I gained during my visits in the vastness of Tibet, have changed me. Gradually, I really wished that my writings were not only for expressing my faith, but it also could be to show gratitude to this place where I grew up. This gratitude cannot be made-up, decorated, beautified, or even concocted by my words; it has to be faithfully recorded. Milan Kundera wrote: "The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was." [The Book Of Laughter and Forgetting]

Tibetans are very familiar today with this kind of situation. To be a writer, I write to preserve the memory, history and even our nation as a whole. This is exactly what of our writers are aiming at. Apart from this, what can we do? I'm just a writer, writing for memory, writing for conscience, writing for our prayers, nothing more.

Q: Do you have any requests to make to the international community or any important statement? For instance, about your freedom of travel.

Woeser: *I have been severely punished by the authorities, for simply trying to practice my rights of free expression. I not only lost my job, I lost my home and various insurance policies I held were cancelled, pension was cancelled. Moreover, the authorities always make some excuses not to issue me a passport, even though I have applied for one many times over the last three years. As of now, it seems there is no hope for me to travel.*

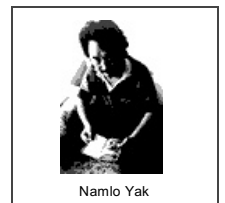
I'm actually not the only person to be denied a passport, as generally Tibetans in Tibet are encountering the same problem as me today. Even though it has become easier to apply for a passport in Mainland China today, Tibetans have to spend a lot of money and time to deal with the very complex paperwork involved. As the rights of travel and migration are fundamental human rights for each person, they should be respected. But under totalitarian control, Tibetans are facing a very hard situation in Tibet, as Tibetans' rights have been stripped in many different ways. So, I really hope that Tibet gets more attention and help from the international community in the near future.

About Namlo Yak

In Tibet, Namlo Yak was an official in the Department of Education besides being a poet. He wrote in Chinese and Tibetan and some of his poems were published in Tibetan language magazines. He took his main inspiration from Dhondup Gyal, who is regarded by many as the father of modern Tibetan literature.

Namlo Yak was imprisoned on 10 May 1993 after being caught with documents deemed sensitive by the Chinese authorities including a petition to the Dalai Lama. He was accused of organizing 'counter revolutionary' activities and was denied access to legal assistance during his trial. After a year in prison, Namlo Yak managed to get hold of writing materials smuggled in by the families of his fellow prisoners. Writing with just the inner ink tubes of ballpoint pens on cigarette papers, he composed a large collection of poetry. During his time in four different prisons, Namlo Yak also helped about 500 cellmates, many of them could not read or write, to prepare their court appeals. He was released on 14 November 1997.

He works as a researcher for the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) in Washington D.C. and in his spare time continued to write poetry; some of his works are being translated into English, French and Spanish.



Namlo Yak

Namlo Yak's political positions are moderate. He is committed to the Dalai Lama's Middle Way approach. Speaking about development, he says, *"no one can say that the Chinese only harmed the Tibetans. There are some ways in which we Tibetans needed that kind of help. But only very few Tibetans benefit; the vast majority do not benefit at all. Of course there are ways in which they have helped Tibet but the problem is their overall involvement: is it right or wrong? Compared with the wrong, is it enough? Chinese rule has brought more harm than good"*.

While in prison, Namlo Yak befriended his Chinese cellmates. *"We were dependent on each other, just like China and Tibet. It's a natural phenomenon"*. The Middle Way, he says, *"could show the world how to solve conflicts peacefully (...). If you are serious about non-violence, you can only show that conviction through some sacrifice on your own side"*.

Notes:

1: TibetInfoNet thanks Mr. Denis Burke for his precious collaboration in the preparation of this Update.

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