Like an Old Tent at Night: Nagtsang Boy’s Joys and Sorrows or a Personal History of the Years 1948-1959 in Tibet

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History was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. To understand history, we have to go inside and listen to what they’re saying.

Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things

Many scholars have reported on the difficulties of researching the past half century of Tibetan history. Studying it is psychologically exhausting, and poses ethical questions. Should one touch family histories, some painful, and bringing tears to the informants’ eyes? Will one put them at risk if their account of events conflicts with another, more official version of history?

History is a dangerous topic both for foreign scholars working in the People’s Republic of China and their Tibetan informants. It is even more so for those Tibetans who want to write their own accounts of the past. “About the history before 1958 one should write as clearly as possible. After 1958, as unclear as possible”, a Tibetan scholar in China told me. A Tibetan, not a scholar at all, explained why it is better not to open the ‘Pandora’s box’ of history: “It has been only fifty years, and both the victims and the oppressors are still alive.” Knowing the pains to which Tibetans go when telling their stories, and the risks they take, I was surprised to see that history as a topic of conversation comes up so easily, even if it requires trust and time. I was also surprised that Tibetans not only tell, but also write their histories, as the number of books published in the last decade shows. One of them is Nagtsang Boy’s Joys and Sorrows by Nagtsang Nulden Lobsang, published in China in 2007.

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When I conducted fieldwork in Tibet during the winter of 2007-2008, Nagsang Nulo’s book was everywhere. I noticed its green cover in the most unexpected places and moments, long before I knew what it was about. People owned or borrowed it, read it or just kept a copy at home. Both townspeople and those in rural areas had it, intellectuals as well as pastoralists. It seemed that Nulo’s book reached the remotest corners of the Tibetan reading world, places far from large cities with their well-supplied bookshops. It was sold in the tiniest of shops in rural county towns and villages, and even people unfamiliar with reading seemed to appreciate its value. But this book belongs to the shadowlands of the publishing world: it was published privately and was not among those circulated through official channels. Yet in the winter of 2007-2008 Tibetans had it at home, kept it on a table or in another visible place, and bookshop owners displayed it in their windows. The importance of Nulo’s book clearly exceeded its literary value. It was not only a book to read, but a book to have, and having it was a statement.

This essay is an attempt to analyse the success of Nagsang Boy’s Joys and Sorrows (which for the sake of simplicity will be called Joys and Sorrows here). It is based on observations made in 2007 and early 2008, before the wave of political protests swept through many parts of Tibet on the eve of the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. In this essay I argue that Nulo’s book and its success was a product of a certain atmosphere, and I try to reconstruct it. The observations quoted here have gained a historical value as the 2008 protests, their aftermath and a following wave of self-immolations changed the situation in significant ways. In addition to reconstructing this not-so-distant past, this essay addresses several questions. Where does the power of Nulo’s book come from? Why did Tibetan readers so widely identify with it? How was it possible for a book like this to be published and to circulate so widely? Why is it valuable for readers and scholars outside Tibet? Last but not least, this essay makes a call to abandon a state-centric view of Tibetan history and go beyond thinking in terms of bipolar political conflict. It argues that Nulo’s story can be analysed using the concept of Zomia, which makes it possible to see in it something more than an aspect of Sino-Tibetan conflict, and come to a closer understanding of the region which the author describes.

The plot

Nagsang Boy’s Joys and Sorrows is a literary autobiography of Nagsang Nulo. It is the first and so far the only work by this author. Nulo is neither a professional writer nor a historian, but a teacher and retired government official who held a number of significant positions in Chumarleb (Chu dmar leb) County, Yushu (Yul shul) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP), Qinghai Province. In Joys and Sorrows Nulo gives an account of his childhood years between his birth in 1948 and 1959 when he was eleven. He takes the readers to Chugama (Chu kha ma), his home area, and describes a number of other places that he visited, including Labrang (bLa brang), in Ganlho, Kan Iho TAP, Gansu), Lhasa and other locations in Central Tibet.

The book starts with a description of the author’s home area and family. Born during a thunderstorm, Nulo is a restless and tearful child, which is taken as an ominous sign of what he is going to witness in his life. His mother dies when he is small; both he and his brother stay with their relatives when the father goes on his many trade journeys. Nulo learns the family history, and his brother enters a monastery. Stories about life in a monastery village, fights with young monks and smaller and bigger adventures follow. One day, together with their father and other tribeswomen and -men, the two boys set off on a journey to Lhasa: many pages of the narrative are filled with descriptions of people they meet, and incidents that happen on the way, as well as descriptions of pilgrimage sites. Until this point the book is a mixture of adventure stories, descriptions of life and social relations on the grasslands, and lively dialogues between the protagonists. This is not a ‘paradise story’, and in the communities which Nulo describes there is place for the violence, injustice and all sorts of misery which befall any human society. Still, the situation changes dramatically when the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) enters the stage. The years 1958-1959 when Nulo’s homeland is incorporated into the People’s Republic of China (PRC) form a crucial part of his narrative. Descriptions of military clashes follow, and the book turns into a record of chaos, violence and human tragedy. Nulo’s family flees Chugama, heading for Central Tibet. After several weeks of desperate flight, surrounded by the PLA troops, Nulo’s father gets killed, and Nulo, together with his brother and other companions, is sent to prison, where he witnesses torture and death. Shortly afterwards, the brothers are placed in a Chinese school in Chumarleb. Together with scores of other children orphaned during this conflict, they struggle with famine and cold, and barely survive the drastic living conditions. It is December 1959. Here Nulo’s narrative ends.

The place

Chugama is located on the edge of the Tibetan plateau, in a large bend created by the Machu (rMa chu) or Yellow River. People say that the grasslands there are so fertile that a flock of sheep can easily hide in the grass without being seen by a herder. Home to pastoralists who depend for their subsistence on their herds of yaks, sheep and horses, Chugama is considered to be part of Amdo (A-md), one of three main provinces of so-called ‘ethnographic’ or ‘greater’ Tibet. On today’s administrative maps, Chugama is a township in Machu (rMa chu) County, in Ganlho TAP, Gansu Province.
Gansu Province covers the north-east edge of the Tibetan plateau and is one of five provincial-level administrative units in the PRC which are home to compact groups of Tibetan population. Unlike in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Tibetans do not form a majority in the other four provinces—Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan—but their percentage is large enough to warrant the existence of lower level prefectures and counties with ‘Tibetan Autonomous’ status inscribed in their names. While the Tibetan areas outside the TAR are part of Tibet as defined by the dominant population or linguistic markers, their past political status was often more ambiguous.

A close look at the political map of Asia before the 1950s reveals that there was no one Tibet, but many. The Dalai Lama’s state with its centre in Lhasa was, as Geoffrey Samuel aptly says, “only one, if in recent times the largest, of a variety of state formations within the Tibetan region” (1993: 39). What is today the TAR corresponds to the domain controlled by the government headed by the Dalai Lamas. This is the so-called ‘Lamaist state’, whose demise Melvyn Goldstein analyses in his series of historical volumes (1989, 2007, 2013). The areas beyond this state’s borders used to have a loose or sometimes scarcely existent connection to it. At the level of cultural affinities, a certain connectedness was felt but, politically speaking, these areas had their own identities and sometimes very different ambitions.

This vast stretch of land between the state of the Dalai Lamas and China resembled a political patchwork of principalities, kingdoms, monastic estates and nomadic confederacies. From the 18th century onwards, many of them were under Beijing’s jurisdiction. China gained control by absorbing their political elites into its official structures: once granted official rank, the local leaders became the state representatives responsible for taxes, censuses, mediating conflicts and interacting with other levels of administration. Some of them accepted these ranks with short-term gains in mind; some for security reasons in times of local conflict; some were forced; and others seemed unaware of what those ranks implied, as if they assumed they could brush them off whenever it was convenient. In any case, the Qing government’s interference in the lives of its Tibetan subjects remained limited, and people in the western flanks of Manchu China largely led a life of their own.

Life in this patchwork-like land was not always peaceful. It was repeatedly interrupted by both military aggression from the outside, and locally generated conflicts. Zhao Erfeng marched with his troops into Bathang (‘Ba’ thang) and Litang (Li thang) in 1903, and Mao Zedong’s Long March passed through parts of Ngawa (‘Nga ba) in the 1930s, to name but two examples. The internal conflicts that stirred up Tibetan societies can be illustrated with the case of Gonpo Namgyel (mGon po nam rgyal) from Nyarong (Nyag rong) and his expansionist policies of the 1860s. Written and oral accounts from the Tibetan plateau bear witness to the turbulent fates of its inhabitants, even if few of them reach the hands of Western readers. Joys and Sorrows is also an account of conflict and violence. This violence comes from two sources. First, during the period of the Republic of China, it is inflicted by the troops of the Ma warlords. Later on, after the founding of the PRC, it comes with the People’s Liberation Army.

Ma Bufang and other Mas

The end of the Qing dynasty started a wave of changes: a reshuffling of political allegiances and identities, and the emergence of new conflicts and new states. This was a moment for small political factions and peoples to push ahead with their own interests. (Outer) Mongolia declared independence in 1911, and (Central) Tibet in 1913; the country was slipping out of the new Republican government’s hands. In addition, large parts of China were controlled by semi- or fully independent local rulers. These warlords, who had often held official ranks in the Qing administration, fought against the new government and among themselves, contributing to chaos in the newly-born Republic. The government’s energy was consumed on other fronts, and integrating all the former Qing territories which now bred secessionist sentiments was beyond its power. Large parts of the north-eastern Tibetan plateau were also in the warlords’ hands. The difference was that the Ma warlords who controlled them, or aspired to do so, were recognized by the government as its legal representatives.

The Ma family of Hui warlords rose to prominence before the Republican era. Ma Qi, the founder of the dynasty, started his career in Qing China and was a leader of a local militia in Xining. When the regime changed, he recognized the new authority and sought its support for his own benefit. As a result of a shrewd political game, Ma Qi promoted himself to the position of governor of Qinghai. First his brother Ma Lin and then his sons Ma Buqing and Ma Bufang followed him in taking over the main positions in the province.

For Tibetans, the most ill-famed of the entire Ma family is Ma Bufang. Not everything that Tibetans attribute to him was really done by him, but it is his name that is associated with the darkest side of Muslim rule. Formally speaking, Ma Bufang acted as the long arm of the Republican government. When he pressed for tighter control over Tibetan territories, and strove to mop up the last pockets of local autonomy, he acted as if he was following the government’s orders. What he sought agreed with what the government wanted, but his politics were based on a more complicated calculation of interests. This, almost automatically, meant trouble for Tibetans: the more they seemed to threaten China’s unity, the more reason there was for the government to endorse the legitimacy of the Mas’ rule. As Uradyen Bulag (2002: 49) says in his analysis of the period, “it was to
their [the Mas’] advantage to play the Mongol and Tibetan card, thus sidelining the real issue of Qinghai—that is, the GMD [Kuomintang] drive for national integration against regional ‘feudalism’.

Ma Bufang launched a series of military and tax-collecting campaigns, and explorations of mineral deposits on the Tibetan plateau. While some communities were more at ease with his claims to suzerainty, others rejected them with full force, killing tax collectors and expelling mine labourers. This was especially the case in Golok [mGo log, a TAP in Qinghai], where memories of resistance to Ma Bufang, and stories of ambushes, betrayals, and killings committed by his troops are alive and told to this day. Some echo of these events reached even the ears of Western readers: Joseph Rock, an Austrian-American botanist and explorer, reported them in the National Geographic Magazine (1930). However, Western readers know Ma Bufang first of all as a sworn enemy of the Chinese communists. Leonard Clark, an American explorer who visited Tibet in 1949, described him in his adventure book *The Marching Wind* as a “bulwark against [the] Red invasion of India” and suggested that he undertake an expedition to Central Tibet to carry on the “anti-Communist campaign” (1957: 33). This explains why Ma Bufang enjoys an ambiguous reputation in the PRC: not only did his family support the Qing, but he himself was considered a ‘lackey’ of Chiang Kai-shek. It has not been forgotten how his troops clashed with the Red Army on the final leg of the Long March, and it was the communists who deprived him of power: he sought refuge in Taiwan and Saudi Arabia where he lived out the rest of his days.

**Liberation**

The end of the Mas’ rule brought liberation for many people, who until now continue to speak about the Mas as a nightmare of that time. There was, however, another kind of ‘liberation’ awaiting them, one that officially held this name in the country’s new discourse. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995: 115) observes:

Names set up a field of power. ‘Discovery’ [of America, replace with ‘liberation’ — E.S.] and analogous terms ensure that by just mentioning the event one enters a predetermined lexical field of clichés and predictable categories that foreclose a redefinition of the political and intellectual stakes.

Thus, while the first liberation—that from the Mas—was subjectively perceived as such by people whose territories the Mas’ troops raided, the new one was imposed from the outside as part of ‘objective’ reality. While the first brought freedom from violence, the latter was achieved by means of it. It was to bring another kind of experience—not least even more violence than that of the Mas. Soon after the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, its government sent two messages that were to determine the fate of Tibet. The first was that Tibet was an integral part of China, and the second that the authorities’ next step was to ‘liberate’ it. This ‘liberation’ meant expelling imperialist forces, abolishing the rule of the aristocratic and monastic establishment, introducing a new ownership and production system, and transferring power into the people’s hands. In Central Tibet, the state of the Dalai Lamas, it was possible to identify both an aristocracy and Buddhist monasteries owning large estates as well as foreigners from countries that the government dubbed ‘imperialist’. However, in the pastoral areas of the north-eastern Tibet, in places such as Chugama, exploiters of the poor and powerless were fewer, monasteries less powerful, and an aristocracy as such did not exist. The application of the ‘liberation principle’ to these areas still meets with disbelief: “What did we need to be liberated from?”

It makes sense to ask what ‘liberation’ meant for different areas of the Tibetan plateau, and how it was achieved. It is well known that the PLA marched into Central Tibet in 1950. A year later, the Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of [Central] Tibet was signed. However, in many pastoral regions the situation developed at a different pace. In some less accessible and thinly populated corners the PLA was not seen for another couple of years. In any case, the prelude to ‘liberation’ was surprisingly non-violent, and before fighting broke out, there was a time of peaceful co-existence. Elderly pastoralists often recall the Chinese troops’ initial respect for local institutions and elites. But when the new authorities pushed for changes in the status quo of these institutions as well as other forms of social and economic life, the situation changed and got out of control.

Before Tibetan communities inhabiting the north-eastern Tibetan plateau were restructured along the new lines, with ‘subalterns’ taking the rule into their hands, they went through a period of chaos. The so-called democratic reforms, which implied pooling of communally managed resources, abolishing private property, introducing class categories and reorganizing the population into people’s communes, were not accepted without resistance. Some Tibetans say that a true uprising took place, others speak of chaotic and disorganized moves: men running to the mountains, women staying behind, some people taking up arms and others succumbing to the new rule. Followers of the new ideology named their children Changdröl (bGings grol) or ‘Liberation’; such names are still found among people born in the 1960s. Both followers and adversaries of the new rule, and also those born long after these events, used—and still use—the ‘liberation’ as a point of
reference: 1958/1959 marks for them a passage from the ‘old’ to the ‘new’ society or world, as they are called in Tibetan. This point of reference is sometimes—rather unfortunately—used also by Western scholars, who refer to Tibet as ‘pre-modern’ before that turning point, and ‘modern’ afterwards, thus indirectly accepting the caesura imposed by the PRC. The transition from the past to the present through a period of chaos and violence is precisely what Joys and Sorrows is about.

**Why success?**

There are many keys to the success of Nulo's Joys and Sorrows. The first of them is that this book is an account of the violence that lies at the core of the 20th century Tibetan experience of history. Another is that it tells of things that one is not supposed to talk about. A third is that the readers recognize themselves in this narrative; and a fourth is that reading it can itself be considered an act of civil disobedience. In fact, these are all factors that enhance the impact of Nulo's book.

Joys and Sorrows tells about events and experiences that many readers recognize as their own or which they know from their families and communities. The Ma warlords' military campaigns constitute an important aspect of historical identity shared by people across the north-eastern Tibetan plateau. The 'liberation' is imprinted in their experience even more strongly, especially as it opened a historical chapter which is still running its course. It can be said that the Mas, their rule and the atrocities associated with it, belong to 'past history', which is painful but closed. The 'liberation', on the other hand, belongs to the 'present history', which is still in progress and continues to determine people's lives. The fact that it is acceptable to discuss and criticize the Mas, but not the 'liberation' years, illustrates this difference well.

The power of Nulo's narrative comes from the fact that it repeats experiences known to the readers and describes situations in which they recognize themselves. It evokes memories, or calls upon knowledge based on the memories of others who experienced the events described in the book. Joys and Sorrows is the author's autobiography, but also a 'biography of the nation' with which many readers identify. This identification was so strong during my fieldwork in 2007-2008 that endless numbers of informants sent me a bookshop to buy Nulo's book and urged me to read it. The book contained, as they said, the answers to many of my questions. "Read Nulo. It's all written there," they said. Though I worked in another region rather than Chugama, it seemed that local differences did not matter. "It was all the same here," as I often heard. In fact, Nulo and his father traversed a large area of the pastoral lands, and saw much more than his immediate homeland. He declares that he tells not only what happened to his closest family and relatives, but also to more distant tribeswomen and -men and other people whom he remembered.

The secret of Nulo's success lies not in the novelty of the events he describes, as his book does not contain anything that the majority of the readers would not know about. Rather, the uniqueness of the book lies in the fact that it publically says what is often spoken about, but not normally in public. It goes back to memories that are part of contested history, an alternative version of the past, which is silenced and does not have a place in the official discourse. As Trouillot (1995: 27) observes, "any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences". He explains that these silences enter the process of history production at four crucial points:

...the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance) (Trouillot 1995: 26).

Against these silences Nulo puts his word and implicitly invalidates the whole process of official sources, archives, narrative and history-making. He is the source (he experienced the events described); he collected the archive of other people's experiences; and he is a narrative maker. More sources are not needed to verify the history he makes. In any case, the readers possess them. Their experience validates Nulo's account, in the same way that their account validates their own experience or the experience of others they knew.

It needs to be stressed that Tibetan readers recognize that Nulo's book is about them, but it is not a book about everyone, and not only because most of the readers were born after the events it describes. Tibetan communities did not consist only of guerrilla fighters, and not everyone went through prisons and labour camps. Imagining Tibetan history since the onset of the PRC in terms of suffering and resistance is partly correct, but some parts of this picture need to be reserved for surrender and cooperation, not always forced. Yet, in Tibetan accounts of the past written outside the PRC, the narrative of resistance, pain and injustice prevails, and stories of those who cooperated with the PLA or became functionaries of the new state are silenced. Such responses to the circumstances of the time are deemed to be morally flawed, dictated by fear or opportunism, and not worth documenting. However, allowing them to disappear from this group portrait takes some depth away from the picture of how Tibetan societies functioned and thought during that period. Thus, Joys and Sorrows represents not only an individual but also, on an aggregate level, the families and communities.
in whose histories different attitudes and ideals mingled. For many readers it is also representative of the general situation of Tibet, as it reflects a sense of historical injustice, which, in their own feeling, is a key to their current political quandary.

The case of *Joys and Sorrows* shows how big a demand there was for a book that says out loud what people whisper. To borrow from Wang Lixiong. Nulo brings these “whispers within the nation” out into the public domain and gives them legitimacy (2010). This is important especially for younger readers who did not witness the 1950s, and for whom this book ‘creates’ reality. The power of the printed word validates the counter-narrative of the past which they knew only unofficially, as opposed to the one officially approved. But one can say that it is not only a hunger for written accounts of that period that stands behind Nulo’s success. It is also a hunger for acts of civil disobedience. Writing a book like this can be considered such an act, but reading it is one as well. Where the possibilities for open protest or expression are limited, and the political status quo and official version of the past are contested, a need to express dissent or discontent emerges—especially through avenues that are open to a large number of actors, and are not too risky but are nevertheless symbolically and subjectively potent. Reading Nulo’s book or having and displaying it at home was such an act, a signal that the owner shared the view of the past that the book expounds.12

One more source of *Joys and Sorrows*’ popularity can be added to this list: its language. Nulo wrote his book in Tibetan, but in the form spoken in the pastoral region where he comes from. This explains why—and this can be seen as rather unusual—the first translation of his narrative was made into standard literary Tibetan.13 The language of the original was said to be inaccessible to a wider group of Tibetan readers, and cited as one of the book’s shortcomings (LLN 2007/2008: 57). While this may be a shortcoming for readers accustomed to standard Tibetan, it is not so for people in Chugama and neighbouring regions. In Nulo’s down-to-earth prose and dialogues that could be taken from everyday life, they can see a reflection of their own speech, and feel that it is a book not only about them, but also for them. They no longer have to feel relegated to the hinterlands of the Tibetan literary world because Nulo’s book has made the language spoken in pastoral Tibet the centre of attention and given it its rightful place.

**How was it possible for a book like this to be published?**

Today, different parts of the Tibetan plateau are probably more consolidated than they have ever been before, yet there is still some sense in referring to them as ‘different Tibets’. At least one particular distinction should be made: between the TAR and the areas that are beyond its borders. This distinction helps us understand differences in social, economic and political situations observed in different points of Tibetan space. It also helps explain why a book like *Joys and Sorrows* could actually be published.

The Dalai Lama’s *Five-Point Peace Plan* announced in 1987, and his other proposals on how to solve the Tibet Question were prepared for the whole of Tibet, i.e. for Tibetan-inhabited areas in five provinces of western China. Beijing rebuffed the proposition to treat them as one, saying that developments in these five provinces were proceeding along different paths and at different speeds. Indeed, the regions on the north-eastern and eastern Tibetan plateau were exposed to Chinese reforms at an earlier point. Social reforms and collectivization had already started there in the 1950s, leading to resistance and revolts which spread to Central Tibet and culminated in the 1959 uprising in Lhasa and exodus of the Dalai Lama as well as thousands of other Tibetans. In Central Tibet, however, the problem of radical social reforms remained theoretical until 1966, i.e. the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. The Lhasa and Beijing governments agreed in 1951 that reforms in the Dalai Lama’s state should be gradual and adjusted to local conditions. Thus, while inhabitants of pastoral areas such as Chugama faced collectivization in the 1950s, in Central Tibet private property remained untouched for a longer time and only the land owned by aristocracy and monasteries was redistributed among the people in the initial stages.

This shows that at the onset of the PRC its government already ascribed different statuses to different parts of Tibet. The Dalai Lama’s state was diagnosed as lagging behind other regions in terms of social and economic development, which the state ideologists envisioned as a one-way linear evolution. In the beginning, this status benefited the population of the TAR, who received more moderate treatment than Tibetans elsewhere. This, however, has changed with time, and starting from the 1980s it was the non-TAR regions that were in many ways in a privileged position. Believed to be better integrated with the country, they enjoyed milder rule than the TAR, which was considered potentially troublesome and more prone to separatist sentiments.

During my fieldwork in 2007 and early 2008, Tibetans in many parts of Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu enjoyed freedom of expression incomparable with that in the TAR. The atmosphere was so relaxed that photos of the Dalai Lama were displayed not only in private houses, but in shops and restaurants, and people openly wore pendants with his image.14 Devotional jewellery bearing the Dalai Lama’s picture, and pirated recordings of his speeches were easily available in smaller towns and villages. A shopkeeper, not necessarily Tibetan, but Hui or Hui, would ask, not the least bit secretly, if one wanted ‘something extra’. This could be, for example, a DVD showing the ceremony of awarding the Dalai Lama the Congressional Gold Medal in the United States in October 2007. Not only in
private spaces did people watch recordings banned in official circulation, but also in restaurants outside busy hours the owners half-shut the blinds and played videos of the Dalai Lama’s teachings in India. When I travelled on a bus in Ngawa in early 2008, a driver played a music VCD interspersed with the Dalai Lama’s speeches subtitled in Chinese. He was undisturbed by the presence of Han passengers, while Tibetans debated whether the singer had left for India, was in hiding or lived his life as before publishing this album. Surprised by this relaxed atmosphere, I wrote in my field diary:

It seems that I have become invisible because previously the owners of the (…) restaurant used to switch off the speeches from India and played Tom and Jerry when I entered at the wrong moment. Now people not only ask me uncomfortable questions, but play in front of me DVDs which are banned in public. (…) This easily perceivable relaxation might have something to do with a rumour that the Olympic Games [in Beijing] will bring Tibetans something good. Some people even said that the Dalai Lama will come. It is hard not to think that this relaxation will be met with a crackdown. Maybe when police come back to town in a week or so, or when new orders arrive. If it does not happen now, then certainly after the Olympic Games (…), especially as the rumours create hopes which are not going to materialize. (18.02.2008)\footnote{15}

That was the context in which Nulo published *Joys and Sorrows*. The publication was conceived of as a private project. The initial print-run of 3,500 copies and a reprint were sponsored by the author himself. A series of unauthorized reprints then appeared in Ngawa and Chengdu. Both the original and pirated versions were sold in Tibetan bookshops in Xining in 2007, and in rural areas they remained on the shelves well into 2008, going into hidden drawers only when the March demonstrations started. As was the case with the singer whose VCD was played in Ngawa, people discussed Nulo’s whereabouts. “Is he in China?”, “Has he been arrested?” they asked. Nulo admitted that he expected problems and left for India to observe the situation from that safe haven. Not seeing any danger, he returned to Xining and has continued living there ever since.

It seems a paradox that a book as revolutionary as this one—comparable with Chinese ‘scar literature’ and raking up so many bitter memories that challenge the state-promoted vision of a society where all population groups live in harmony—fails to bring repercussions on the author, who is still able to continue his normal life. The book’s legal status, and the Nulo’s earlier government positions suggest a possible explanation.\footnote{16} Or perhaps it was his writing style which let him escape unscathed? After all, the book is written from the perspective of a child, which allows the author to deal with the topic in a safe manner: he lived through the events described, but did not take sides in the conflict. He is also cautious with the words he uses. As Robert Barnett says in his essay opening the English language translation of *Joys and Sorrows*, Nulo avoids politically tinted expressions and open accusations, and many words such as ‘Party’ or ‘Communism’ do not appear in the book at all (Barnett: in press). The reasons why Nulo avoided arrest or other repercussions lie probably in between. In any case, the atmosphere of the time when he wrote his book (the manuscript was completed in 2006) seems to have contributed to its production. It may not be a coincidence that Nulo and other authors such as Jamgo Rinzing and Tsering Dondrup published their accounts during the same period.

**Focus on the corner**

Chugama, Machu and neighbouring pastoral areas lie at the border of so-called ‘ethnographic Tibet’, but also at the border of knowledge of Tibetan history, cultures and lifestyles. Many pastoral areas of the Tibetan plateau fall prey to ‘heartlandism’ or a tendency to focus on agricultural, urban or otherwise more ‘developed’ regions and communities at the expense of those between these heartlands (van Schendel 2002: 653). In a large part of the literature about Tibet, pastoralists play an important, but only supporting role. They are often treated as an embodiment of ‘real Tibetan-ness’, but are at the same time just as a picturesque addition to the heartlands towards which they are believed to culturally and economically gravitate. The history books, be they *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* (Tsering Shakya 1999), *China’s Tibet Policy* (Dawa Norbu 2001) or *History of Tibet* (Smith 1996), all of them of great value, gloss over the political and historical status of many pastoral regions. The authors’ different focuses and the lack of first-hand sources serve as a partial explanation. Yet, the state-centrism haunting the literature about Tibet is clearly perceivable. It lures scholars and readers alike into a no-exit debate over whether Tibet was independent or dependent of China, a debate which, as Robert Barnett observes, has a political rather than scholarly value (1998: 180). Engrossed in it, it is easy to forget about places like Chugama, which do not fit into the black-and-white discourse over the Tibet Question.

The value of *Joys and Sorrows* lies in the fact that it is at the same time a voice from the inside (from Tibet within the PRC) and from Tibet’s periphery. It draws the readers’ attention to what is located on the edge of their mental map of Tibet: they need to rescue their perception and make a corner of this map its new centre. Those readers who envision Tibet as a homogenous entity will see in this book a confirmation of what human experience there was in the early years
of the PRC. But Nulo’s experience was at the same time common and specific, and those readers who see the intellectual value of Tibetan context in the multitude of Tibetans within one Tibet, in the patchwork of political entities, in the plurality of societies instead of one society, will see that Nulo writes about the ‘small homeland’ rather than the big one. The Land of Snow, like an umbrella under which smaller Tibetans shelter, is frequently evoked in the book, and there is no doubt that this is where Nulo’s allegiance lies. But the main narrative revolves around his immediate neighbourhood, his little ‘phayul’ (pha yul) or homeland, rooted in the author’s perception and a source of his early identification.

Chugama, Machu, and the broader pastoral highlands which form the background of Joys and Sorrows can be seen in the northern-western arm of ‘Zomia’. The term ‘Zomia’, coined by Willem van Schendel (2002: 647-648), denotes a vast stretch of land cutting through the south-east quarter of Asia. From the moment of its birth into the academy literature, Zomia’s borders and unifying features have been debated. However, it has neither fixed borders nor cultural homogeneity within them, and looking for them is, as Geoffrey Samuel says, a distortion of a concept which aimed to challenge a view of the world as built of discrete areas and borders (2010: 3). What is fixed in Zomia is its highland character, relative remoteness from the major states of the region, and a strong sense of autonomy. It is a ‘non-state space’ and can be envisioned as an escape zone (or zones) for those who want to escape the state (Samuel 2010: 8). As James Scott (2009: ix) says in his seminal study of Zomia, it is the last “region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states”.

To what degree pastoral regions of the Tibetan plateau have or have not been incorporated into the nation-state machinery is difficult to measure, but many of them, those in north-eastern Tibet, seemed to have stayed in the shadow of the states until the mid-20th century. On the one side, there was the Central Tibetan state, regardless of whether or not (or to what degree) it was sovereign, and on the other, Manchu and later Republican China, regardless of whether or not (or to what degree) it really ruled these territories. Today, these pastoral regions are incorporated into the PRC to a degree that permits no doubt as to their political status. But they are also incorporated into the exile Tibetan discourse. While the Central Tibetan government did not react when the PLA entered the Tibetan areas outside its immediate borders (thus showing that it did not treat them as its territories), today the Tibetan Government in Exile makes them unalterable parts of its official narrative about Tibet. In both of these cases, pastoral areas of the north-eastern Tibetan plateau fall prey to thinking in state- or nation-like categories. As Peter Hansen says in his article about the lack of subaltern studies in regard to Tibet, breaking out of the “intellectual prisons constructed by orientalist and nationalist interpretations of Tibet” is not easy and there is only a

limited space for research which does not want to take sides (2003: 10). Nulo’s account is a contribution to such research, and brings readers closer to understanding the self-image and status of these Tibetan Zomia-lands. In a sense, his book tells of the end of some part of Zomia, and of what happens when the state remembers its distant corners and how these corners fight to stay outside the state.

Mystery of survival

It is tempting to look for silences inscribed in any narrative of the past. As Michael Jackson (2002: 11) states in his study of storytelling, “For every story that sees the light of the day, untold stories remain in the shadows, censored or suppressed”.

They could be “arrested”, to use the term adopted by Carole McGranahan in the case of the Tibetan resistance army and exile Tibetan discourse: with some degree of cooperation and even acceptance from the side of those affected by this arrest, and even with an optimistic look into the future. Historical arrest means “the apprehension and detaining of particular pasts in anticipation of their eventual release”, but these pasts are not abandoned or erased, but postponed (McGranahan 2010: 24ff).

Some pasts in other political contexts can be more overtly delegitimized, and the apparatus of state repression employed to control people’s memories. When self-identification with the power centres imposing such a ban or attempting such erasure is limited or non-existent, conflicts are unavoidable. Yet, regardless of the circumstances in which these silences are produced, whether they come from the inside or from the outside, every society and narrative has them. Nulo’s book is not an exception.

Joys and Sorrows ends in 1959. It brings us to the edge of the ‘new’ time and leaves us there, without saying what happened later. To Tibetans in China, those who lived through that period, what happened later is well known. It may seem a relatively less important part of the past, since it is not such a subject of contention as the events of the earlier years. And yet, it is worth asking why the book ends at that point, and why no sequel is planned. Needless to say, the author has the right to choose whatever time-focus he wants. But for readers outside China, who know what happened in 1958, but less about what came later, this abrupt end can be disappointing.

As noted above, it can come as a surprise that Tibetans in the PRC do not shun conversations about the past or at least some parts of it. Moreover, they talk about it on their own initiative. But while they talk about 1958, they seldom do so about later years, or even openly reject suggestions that they could. At first glance it may surprise, but at the second it starts to seem logical. Stories of resistance, even if potentially dangerous to tell, are shared, especially those where a line between good and bad is clearly drawn. On the other hand, stories of
compliance or accommodation are not. Joys and Sorrows is also not about accommodation to the new system, finding ways to adapt to the new reality and learning how to survive. The author survived, quite successfully in fact, given the official positions he held, and his insights into the post-1958 realities could be more than valuable. But he chooses to end his narrative when he was still a child, and blankets with silence everything that came later.17

Nulo's book is undoubtedly a courageous one, and has considerable value to all interested in the modern history of Tibetan and other societies that underwent similar processes in the PRC. It is courageous because it touches upon topics that are seldom discussed in Tibetan writing in China and because his vision of events challenges the official one. However, for readers outside China, those brought up on Tibetan exile and Western accounts of the past, another book would be even more courageous: one that describes later years, when Nulo finished school and started his career. While it needs courage to describe the period when the PLA and Tibetans clashed, and our knowledge of it is still limited, there is also a need for another type of courage: to look into how Tibetan societies functioned in the new conditions. A sequel to Joys and Sorrows could bring us substantially closer to understanding it. Apart from outbursts of violence and organized destruction during the late 1950s and Cultural Revolution, there was something else: everyday life which was a field not only of resistance, but also of compliance and accommodation. Restoring meaning and value to this reality of everyday life, without passing moral judgments, is the path to uncovering the mystery of survival. But maybe such stories will also be released one day.

Conclusion

Nagtsang Nulo's Joys and Sorrows is fascinating for many reasons. Firstly it is a rare example of this kind of literature in China, discussing the dramatic birth of Tibet as part of the PRC. It made the impossible possible: it openly said what was not supposed to be said. Secondly, it made an impact which few modern books make among Tibetan readership in China. This impact appears even more exceptional when placed in the context of pastoral society which is often thought about in terms of illiteracy rather than book consumption. The case of Joys and Sorrows can be used for studying practices surrounding a book as a cultural artefact. It makes one reflect on what books people have, and why they have them, and rediscover the old truth that people have books not only to read them. The case of Joys and Sorrows shows how one book can electrify a society, and send currents through all social groups. Nulo's story brought together readers from many walks of life: pastoralists high in the mountains, and people who live and work in towns, those more obviously contra-PRC and those more moderate in their stands and life choices. Opinions which I collected showed that the readers shared similar enthusiasm for it. "This is the best book I've ever read!" a young intellectual in Qinghai exclaimed. "I cried all the time when I was reading it", a pastoralist who had learned to read admitted. "It deserves the Nobel Prize for Literature", said a government official, asking a while later, "Can a non-existent state propose a candidate for the Nobel Prize"?

To paraphrase Arundhati Roy's quotation at the head of this article, one could say that in pastoral Tibet "history is like an old tent at night. With all the lamps lit. And the ancestors whispering inside." Nulo transferred these whispers into writing and made them into a book that stormed bookshops, people's houses, thoughts, and conversations precisely because they wanted to go inside and hear what this history-tent is saying. In her essay Confronting Empire Roy gives a 'resistance recipe' to those who want to rise against an 'Empire' of any kind. She says, "Our strategy should be not only to confront [it], but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories." (Roy 2003: 112). Nulo's book fits more than well to this call, and shows that Tibetans retain their ability to tell their own stories.

Notes

1. These include The Red Wind Screem (rLung dmar 'ur 'ur) by Tsering Dondrup (Tshe ring don grub) (2006), My Homeland and Peaceful Liberation (Ngag i pha yul dang zhi ba'i bcings grol) and My Homeland and Listening Carefully (Ngag i pha yul dang gcab nyan) by Jamo Rinzing (Bya mdo rin bzang) (n.d.). They were discussed by Robin (2011), Erhard (2013) and Lamajabb (2009).

2. Tibetan title: Nags tshang zhi lu'i skyid 'dug. Following the author's own practice in the book, a shorter name—Nagtsang Nulo (Nags tshang nus blo)—or simply Nulo—will be used here, instead of Nagtsang Nulden Lobsang (Nags tshang nus Idan blo zang).

3. The book had the internal (Chin. neib) status of a product allowed for the use of a restricted audience. Thus, the book was published legally, but selling it on the open market was problematic, as Nulo himself explained in an Internet posting addressed to his readers (Nagtsang Nulo 2011).

4. In this article, Tibetan place names and terms are given in approximate phonetic form followed by the transliteration according to the system of Turrell V. Wylic (in brackets). The location of Tibetan place names on the administrative map of the PRC is also given. This is neither a political statement from the author nor a sign that names of Tibetan regions used prior to the PRC and those that became names of the current administrative divisions always designate exactly the same area.

6. Family ties between the Mas should not suggest that they held a unified front in politics, cf. Lipman (1984), Lin (2007) and (about Xinjiang) Forbes (1986).

7. The article by Bianca Horlemann (in press) brings more information about the conflicts between the Mas and the Goloks. The story of conflicts between the Mas many other communities of the Tibetan plateau still to be written.

8. Ma Bufang’s residence in Xining has been turned into a museum, but the Hui I spoke to expressed resentment about the way the state ‘hijacked’ their hero. Ma Bufang is recognized as a political figure in the country’s history, but any sentiments showing him as the political leader of the Huis, who represented his people, and was not ‘a China patriot’ were forbidden, according to them.

9. Jigten nyawna (’jig rten rnying pa), the ‘old’, and Jigten sarwa (’jig rten gser ba), the ‘new’ world. The categories of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ world are strongly imbued into people’s thinking about life before and after 1958. They commonly refer to aspects of life that have little to do with the reputed shortcomings of the earlier socio-economic system or its later improvements, as Charlene Makley shows (2007). Human interaction and gender roles were different, as her informants said, and even ‘old’ people were simply those born in the ‘old’, pre-1958 world (Makley 2007: 104).

10. In 2008 I asked Tibetan students in one high school in Qinghai to write an essay about their grandparents. Ma Bufang featured in these essays prominently, but the later period did not. Very few students mentioned famine during the Great Leap Forward, and none mentioned the armed conflicts of the late 1950s. The reason is not that they did not know what happened, but in their homework they reproduced only the part of their family experience that was officially allowed.


12. This comparison might not seem fitting here, but there was another extremely popular book in that period both among rural Tibetans and those with formal education, but admittedly only young people. It was a pocket edition of Treatise on the Arts of Love (’Dod pa’i bstan bcos) by Genlung Chophel (dGe ’dun chos ’phel) and Ju Mi pham (’Ju mi pham) (no year, publisher and place of publication given). The old truth that people declare themselves by the books they read applies in this context, too, but this is a topic for another article.

13. It was published by Khawa Karpo Tibet Culture Centre in India in 2009. The language of the original and the translation was analyzed by Xenia de Heering (2014). I thank her for sharing her manuscript with me.

14. The situation changes fast and the 2008 protests made the atmosphere tense even in formerly relaxed areas. My experience, however, shows that in 2009 things largely went back to the previous state of affairs. I observed, year after year, how the Dalai Lama’s photos disappeared and came back to their previous places. This should be taken as a warning not only not to generalize observations made in one specific place over others, but also not to generalize observations made at a particular point of time as pertaining to longer periods.

15. This was written during a period when non-Tibetans – businessmen, officials and uniformed personnel – had left home for Chinese New Year and winter holidays, hence the remark about the absence of police in town. A great source of information about gossip which both reflects and shapes social moods in Tibet are the essays of Tsering Woeser. After the Yushu earthquake in 2010, for example, a rumour was spread that the Dalai Lama was on his way to visit the survivors (Tsering Woeser 2013: 153).

16. François Robin reminds us that the other authors who published their books at around the same time lost their jobs, were arrested and accused of separatism, and suggests that it was Nulo’s government positions which helped him avoid such a fate (2011: 5). The fact remains, though, that the other authors were clearer in their political message and their books were ‘formally’ illegal (Erhardt 2013: 112).

17. One of few exceptions of literature which explores the secrets of the decades after Tibet has become incorporated into the PRC is, of course, a study by Melvyn Goldstein and his colleagues of the so-called Nyemo Incident during the Cultural Revolution (Goldstein et al. 2009).
Figures 1 and 2. Nagtsang Nulo (right) and his brother Jabe (‘Ja’ pe) in 1961 (a few years after the events that the book describes) and in 2012. Photographs courtesy of Nagtsang Nulo and Xenia de Heering.

References


