

Nagtsang Boy's *Joys and Sorrows*, or How China liberated the Tibetan grasslands



Nagtsang Nulo's *Joys and Sorrows* has enjoyed spectacular success among a Tibetan readership in China. Its influence reached the remotest corners of the reading world, places far from large cities with their well-supplied bookshops and titles emerging on the shelves soon after they leave the press. Nulo's book was sold in the tiniest dusty shops in prefecture and county towns and villages, places where books do not change often and are not often bought. This book, however, was bought and read both by city dwellers and by Tibetans in rural communities in agricultural valleys and high on the Tibetan plateau. If titles existing in the shadowlands of the publishing world could be awarded a bestseller status, Nulo's story deserved such. With this difference: his book was published with private money, as a private initiative, and sold, more often than not, from under the counter. It has never been part of the officially allowed and supported publishing world. Yet it was to be found in every other house: people read it, borrowed it or just kept it. Also those unfamiliar with books and reading, the illiterate if you will, appreciated its value.

Niko Andric

Machu and the rest of Tibet

Nagtsang Nulo himself is—according to today's maps—from Gansu. This province is one of five administrative units within China with compact groups of native Tibetans. The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) with its main urban center in Lhasa is the region most widely associated with "Tibet", but many more Tibetans live in provinces to the north and east: Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu. Tibetans do not form a majority in any of these four provinces, but locally their presence is large enough to warrant other, lower level "Tibetan Autonomous" units: prefectures and, under them, counties. From such a place—Machu County, Ganlho Prefecture, Gansu Province—comes the author of this book.

Machu lies in the large grassland loop created by the Yellow River which here suddenly changes its direction and flows towards the north-west. More fertile than the neighboring Golog or the more distant Yushu grasslands, with a slightly milder climate and at lower altitude, Machu is known for excellent conditions for rearing horses. Proud herders claim that in their homeland the grass can grow so tall that a flock of sheep can hide in it without being seen by the herder. Nulo's delightful homeland, part of Tibet if one defines it by dominant population or linguistic factors, has had a more ambiguous political status—which also explains why it is in Gansu province now.

A closer look at a political map of Asia as it was before the 1950s reveals that there was no *one* Tibet. There were *many*. As Geoffrey Samuel stresses, the Dalai Lama's regime at Lhasa was only one, albeit in "pre-modern" times the largest, of a range of more or less local power formations within Tibetan areas (Samuel: 39). Today's Tibet Autonomous Region

corresponds with what was a domain controlled by the government headed by the Dalai Lamas prior to the 1950s. Territories which found themselves beyond TAR borders (Nulo's homeland among them) used to have looser (and sometimes simply no) connection to that Central Tibetan state. On the level of cultural affinities, some connectedness was probably felt, but politically these Tibetan lands had their own ambitions and identities. Lhasa could certainly claim them as areas which either once belonged under Lhasa, or at least should do so. It could not, however, effectively put claims into action or was uninterested in doing so.

Chinese influences and Liberation

This vast stretch of land between the Dalai Lamas' state and China "proper" resembled a political patchwork of different shapes and sizes of principalities, kingdoms, monastic estates and nomadic confederacies and was inhabited by agriculturalist, pastoralist and urban communities. On a meta-level they had, since the 18th century, been placed under Chinese jurisdiction. Local Tibetan (or Mongol) leaders were absorbed into Chinese official structures: granted official ranks, they were to be the state's representatives responsible for collecting taxes, conducting censuses, mediating conflicts and occasionally interacting with other levels of the state. Some accepted these ranks with an eye on short-term gain, some for security reasons at a time of local conflict, some were forced, and some seemed perfectly unaware of what those ranks implied as if assuming that one could brush off the duties they entailed anytime it felt convenient. In any case, the state's interference into the lives of its Tibetan subjects remained limited and so these Western flanks of Manchu China have largely lived a life apart.

The emergence of the Republic and then the People's Republic of China on the political map of Asia was to change this "unsupervised" status of the areas adjoining China to the west. None of the interventions carried out by the semi-independent governors under Kuomintang rule to tighten their control over local Tibetan populations was as consequential as what is officially called Liberation. The government of the People's Republic of China, soon after it was proclaimed, sent out two messages important for Tibetans: that all Tibetan lands were an integral part of the country, and that the next step was to "liberate" them. Tibetans were to undergo a Communist revolution—just as other groups among China's population. In the case of the Dalai Lama's Tibet, liberation meant driving away imperialist forces, wiping out feudalism, aristocracy and monastic establishments, introducing new ownership and production systems and transferring power into the hands of the people. In Central Tibet it was perhaps possible to identify the aristocracy, land-owning monasteries and people "ascribed" to them, and foreigners from countries dubbed imperialist. But in the grasslands of the north-east, in Nulo's Machu for example, the ranks of exploiters of the poor and powerless were not so numerous, the monasteries less powerful, and an aristocracy as such did not exist. The application of liberation principles to the nomadic population of Machu echoes with disbelief until today: "From what did we need to be liberated?"

Before the Tibetan society was successfully re-structured along the new lines, with "subalterns" taking the reins, there were years of chaos as local communities did not accept change without resistance. Some see a true uprising in this, but others, those who lived through these years, speak of chaotic disorganized moves, men running into the mountains, women staying behind, some communities taking to arms,

Inset:
Nulo (on the right) and a childhood friend in June 1961, a few years after the events described in Nulo's book. Very few photos from Tibet during this period have survived, so this is a true rarity.

Background:
Gansu province.
Photo: Courtesy of Drea-Geneva, Flickr.

others succumbing to the new rules. This chaotic 1958/1959 marked a passage from the old to the new society. Fervent Tibetan followers of the new ideology even named their children Liberation. And all – fervent followers and open adversaries alike – used and continue to use this time as a point of reference: whether today is better or worse, whether it was worse or better before – the liberation ends the past and marks the start of the present. It works similar for many scholars of Tibetan Studies who call pre-1959 Tibet “pre-modern”. This transition from the old society through chaos into the new liberated one is what Nulo’s *Joys and Sorrows* are about.

Degrees of freedom

The Dalai Lama’s *Five Point Peace Plan* was prepared for “the whole of Tibet”, i.e. for all Tibetan-inhabited areas in the west of China. The suggestion to present this “Greater Tibet” with one-model autonomy was rebuffed when Beijing stated that developments in these five consecutive areas proceeded along different paths and at different speeds, so treating them the same would no be justified. Indeed, the non-TAR areas were not only liberated earlier but they also underwent the so-called democratic reforms sooner: pooling communally managed resources, abolishing private property, introducing class categories and restructuring society into people’s communes. In Central Tibet, the problem of radical social reforms remained theoretical until as late as 1966 or the Cultural Revolution years because it was agreed between the Beijing and Lhasa governments that reforms would be gradual and adjusted to the local conditions. Thus, while in Gansu and Qinghai collectivization started already in the 1950s, in TAR private property was generally accepted until the Cultural Revolution and only land owned by the aristocracy or monasteries was redistributed earlier.

According to the linear vision of development favoured by PRC ideologists, TAR lagged behind the more advanced non-TAR regions: the reforms there were delayed because people were believed to be less fit or ready to undergo them. Today, the non-TAR parts of Tibet, being better integrated with the rest of the country, enjoy milder rule than that exercised over Central Tibet which is considered potentially troublesome, more prone to separatist sentiments and less developed in terms of “social consciousness”.

When western nongovernmental organizations reported abuses of religious or political freedoms in TAR, the situation in rural Gansu and Qinghai was more relaxed. Photos of the Dalai Lama were visible not only in private but also in public spaces such as shops and restaurants. People openly wore pendants with the image of the Dalai Lama. Small devotional “jewelry” bearing his image and pirated recordings of his speeches were easily available in smaller towns and villages. A Han shopkeeper would simply, and not the least bit secretly, propose something “extra”: perhaps a DVD of the ceremony when the Dalai Lama was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal or childhood photos of the disappeared 11th Panchen Lama. Not only privately did people watch films unavailable for official circulation, but also in restaurants the owners would half-shut the blinds and play a video of religious teachings from India. On a bus from Ngawa a Tibetan driver played a pop music VCD mixed with the Dalai Lama’s speeches subtitled in Chinese: he seemed undisturbed by the presence of Han passengers, while Tibetans on board discussed whether the singer was already in India, in hiding or living his life as he used to do before publishing this album.

Publication

So it was in 2007, one year before a wide wave of social unrest swept through Tibet. Also in 2007, Nulo published his *Joys and Sorrows*.

Joys and Sorrows were published as the author’s private project. After the initial print run which Nulo financed himself, a series of unauthorized re-prints followed. Whichever its source, the book was openly sold in city bookshops in 2007 and early 2008. In rural areas it remained on the shelves well into 2008 before becoming a backlist item. As with the singer whose VCD was played on the Ngawa bus, a wave of rumors about Nulo’s whereabouts followed. “Is he still in China?” “Has he been arrested?” Nulo admitted that he expected trouble but did not meet any. It is a paradox to western logic how the author of such a revolutionary book – compared to Chinese “scar literature” and raking up so many bitter memories which run counter to the state-promoted vision of a society where all *ethnies* live in harmony and affection for each other – escaped repression and could continue his usual life, even meeting with foreigners and organizing the book’s foreign editions.

Focus on the edges

Machu lies not only on the borders of what is sometimes called ethnographic or cultural Tibet, but also at the borders of specialist knowledge about Tibetan history, cultures or lifestyles. It falls pray to “heartlandism” which focuses

scholarly attention on agricultural, urban or generally “developed” communities. The main history books on Tibet, be that *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* (Shakya: 1999), *China’s Tibet Policy* (Norbu: 2001) or *History of Tibet* (Smith: 1996) – all of indisputable value – gloss over the political or historical whereabouts of pastoralists’ lands. This state-centrism makes the authors engage in endless discussion on whether Tibet was dependent or independent of China. Engrossed in debates like that, which as Robert Barnett says have more political than scholarly value, they (consciously or not) pay no attention to the existence of places like Machu (1998: 180) – nomads’ lands that do not fit black-and-white arguments about the “Tibet Question”.

Joys and Sorrows is a call from beyond the heartland, from the heart of the pastoral lands. The value of Nulo’s book lies in the fact that it draws the readers’ attention to what is located on the edges of their mental map of Tibet. The reader needs to rescale perception and transform the far corner of the map into its new center. Those who envision Tibet as one homogenous entity will see in Nulo’s narrative confirmation of other stories of human experience in the early years of the People’s Republic of China. Those who see the academic value of a Tibetan context in the multitude of Tibets within one Tibet, in the patchwork of political entities, in the plural societies rather one society (to borrow from Samuel’s *Civilized Shamans* again) will see Nulo’s book as speaking of the “small homeland” rather than the big one. The Land of Snow, like a large umbrella under which all the little Tibets hide, is repeatedly called upon in the pages of *Joys and Sorrows* and there is no question that this is where Nulo’s concern and allegiance lie. The main narrative, however, revolves around the fate of his immediate neighborhood, his little *phayul* or homeland, which is rooted in the author’s perception and a source of his early identification.

In the absence of studies in Western languages, this piece of “history from below” must be appreciated. The more murky the political predicament of north-east Tibet, the more we should welcome Nulo’s *subjective* voice. Although subjective, his narrative reveals how the situation in Machu was perceived by its population. This perception continues to influence the actions of contemporary local actors up to this day.

The end of Zomia?

With Machu and other pastoral lands as the background, Nulo’s story is set in the north-west arm of Zomia. The name coined by Willem van Schendel in 2002. Zomia is a vast stretch of upland land cutting through the south-east quarter of Asia. It is, as James Scott argues, the last region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into the nation-states machinery (2009: ix). Whether they have or not is difficult to measure, especially today, but pastoral parts of the north-east Tibetan plateau undeniably lived in the shadow of states up to the 1950s. To one side was the Dalai Lama’s state – whether or not and to what degree it was sovereign – and to the other side Manchu and later Republican China – whether or not and to what degree it really “ruled” these territories. Seen from this point of view, Nulo’s book tells of what happens when the state remembers its distant areas and how Zomia fights to stay outside of its reach.

Today’s nomad-inhabited highlands of Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan are well incorporated into China’s administration system, leaving no doubt that they belong to it. They are also “taken over” by the exile Tibetan discourse. While the Lhasa government showed no reaction when the People’s Liberation Army entered Tibetan parts of Qinghai and Sichuan (thus giving a sign of not treating these areas as its immediate territory), today exile voices are firm that this is Tibet too (although by now “Tibet” has become more an imaginary entity than a map-based reality). But Tibetan pastoralists, even if rehabilitated into full citizens of Tibetan society, are still Zomia-nized. Evidence? The debate around the language in which Nulo composed his book.

It is perhaps unusual that *Joys and Sorrows*’ first translation was into Tibetan: the book was translated into literary Tibetan and published in India in 2008. The language of the original was criticized as being too inaccessible and was criticised as one of the shortcomings of the book (LLN 2007/2008: 57). This drawback – from a point of view of a reader accustomed to reading in a more standard version of Tibetan – is, however, the very key to the book’s success. Written in a “down-to-earth” language, with dialogue sounding as if taken straight from everyday life, and a style typical of the pastoral lands, *Joys and Sorrows* is not easy for those unfamiliar with vocabulary and expressions typical of the grasslands. At the same time, readers from there can see in Nulo’s verses a reflection of their own speech and highly valued oratorical style, and feel it is a book not only *about* them but also *for* them. *Joys and Sorrows* is comprehensible to those readers who, although literate, are not comfortable with reading works composed

in a more “sophisticated” literary style. This time, they need not feel relegated to the hinterlands of the Tibetan literary world. Whether the colloquial style of *Joys and Sorrows* is truly a drawback thus depends on your perspective.

Book untouched by a westerner

In her study on Tibetan (auto)biographies from the writing/publishing contact zone between Tibet and the West, Laurie McMillin shows how Western readers “coerce” narrators to produce a “particular kind of story” (2001: 212). Either by their participation in book production or merely by “being there” as the book’s potential readers whose tastes must be considered in a specific author-audience compromise, the Western agents are palpably there. In many cases the story gains its plot through an interaction between the Tibetan actor (who “owns” his life narrative) and his collaborators: the story is told to them, it is edited and published by them. This does not diminish the authenticity of the experiences the narrator wants to share, but their representation and interpretation is often achieved through the prism of a Western image of how Tibet should be viewed or presented to the public.

Nulo’s book is an exception. It has not been produced at the juncture of exile-Tibetan and Western world, or on terms dictated by the expectations of a Western publisher or audience. In private conversations, Nulo stated his interest in making his book accessible to as large a number of readers in as many countries as possible. The priority for him was, however, the readership in Tibet: those who shared his experiences and, even more, those born later, who were spared first-hand experience of what liberation meant. For Nulo, it was thus more a matter of preserving the memory and saving it from being erased than of winning the support of international community.

The book has now been translated into English,¹ and hence some intervention and intermediation has occurred, but the original manuscript is entirely Nulo’s work – nobody else could claim or conceal co-authorship. Many supposedly Tibetan-written accounts have been manipulated to some degree (perhaps in good faith) by non-Tibetan, western actors (sometimes almost imperceptibly as in the case of the Dalai Lama’s *My Land and My People*), and this knowledge makes one appreciate the original rhythm, the authorial selection of topics, and even the redundancies as evidence of *Joys and Sorrows*’ originality. If the book ever feels difficult to read, this should be taken as the best indicator that the story comes in a straight line from the author’s desk to the reader’s.

Tibetan readers in China received *Joys and Sorrows* enthusiastically. “This is the best Tibetan book I have ever read”, a young intellectual in Qinghai exclaimed. “I cried all the time when reading it”, admitted a nomad who had taught himself to read. “It deserves the Nobel Prize for Literature”, a government employee in Xining said – but then a doubt emerged: “Can a non-existing state submit candidates for the Nobel Prize?”

Niko Andric
Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany
nikoadric@hotmail.com

Notes

- 1 The English edition will be published later this year by the German publisher Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag in the series *Memories of Central Asia (Erinnerungen an Zentralasien)* edited by Prof. Ingeborg Baldauf of Humboldt University in Berlin.

References

- Barnett, Robert. 1998. [no title] In Steve Lehman (ed.), *The Tibetans. The Struggle to Survive*. New York: Umbrage Editions, pp. 178-196.
- LLN (*Latse Library Newsletter*). 2007/2008. “An Introduction to the Joys and Sorrows of a Tibetan Boy from Naktsang (Naktsang Shilu Kyiduk)”. *Latse Library Newsletter*, 5, pp. 54-59.
- McMillin, Laurie Hovell. 2001. *English in Tibet, Tibet in English, Self-Presentation in Tibet and the Diaspora*. New York: Palgrave.
- Norbu, Dawa. 2001. *China’s Tibet Policy*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Samuel, Geoffrey. 1993. *Civilized Shamans. Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Print.
- Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shakya, Tsering. 1999. *The Dragon in the Land of Snows. A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Van Schendel, Willem. 2002. “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia”, *Development and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20 (2002), pp. 647-668.
- Smith, Warren. 1996. *History of Tibet: Nationalism and Self-determination*. Boulder: Westview Press.