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

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, Ganhó 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 Golgo or the more distant Yushu grasslands, with a slightly milder climate and at lower altitude, Machu is known for its sheep, which can hide in it without being seen by the herder. Proud herdsmen 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 unawares 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 ranks 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 Kuomingtang 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 “ascrbed” 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,
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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 stories are richer than the statistics of Machu provided by its population. This perspective continues to influence the actions of contemporary local actors up to this day.

The end of Zonia?

With Machu and other pastoral lands as the background, Joys and Sorrows extends the geographic frame of Zonia. The name coined by Willem van Schendel in 2002 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 underlie 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 the People's Liberation Army. These two entities did not meet any. It is a paradox to western logic how the 11th Panchen Lama disappeared 2008. In rural areas it remained on the shelves well into 2008. It should be noted that in rural Gansu and Qinghai was more relaxed. Photos of Nulo's speeches were easily available in smaller towns and villages. People openly and adjusted to the local conditions. Thus, while in Gusui and Gansu collectivization started already in the 1950s, in the Tibetan area private property was generally accepted until the Cultural Revolution, leaving no doubt that they belong to it. They are treated as an imaginary entity than a map-based reality. But Tibetan readers in China received it 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-existent state submit candidates for the Nobel Prize?”

The book has now been translated into English, and hence some intervention and intermediation has occurred, but the original manuscript is entirely Nulo’s work whereby 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 authors (sometimes almost imperfectly as in the case of the Dalai Lama's My Land and My People), and this knowledge makes one appreciate the authenticity of the storyteller’s voice, his truthfulness, and the experience behind the book. 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, the book is a matter of preserving the memory and saving it from being erased than of winning the support of international community.

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 (Ermengen an Zentralasien) edited by Prof. Ingeborg Baldauf of Humboldt University in Berlin.

References

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Joys and Sorrows were published as the author’s private project. After the showprint of the manuscript, a huge amount of unauthorized re-printed copies were published, which, unsolicited, its open sale in bookshops and restaurants...