THE IRON DRAGON HAS COME

BY WOESER

Behind the gala celebrations in Lhasa over the inauguration of the new Qinghai-Tibet Railway lies a deeper sadness and frustration.

The "iron horse" and "iron bird" that appeared in Tibetan prophecy over a thousand years ago manifested themselves in the twentieth century as the automobile and the airplane. The prophecy is optimistic, describing the iron creatures as the means by which Tibetan people are scattered around the world like ants, spreading the message of Buddhism to the "land of the red people." But how about the train? What does it resemble more than a writhing dragon? And what does that portend?

An exiled Tibetan scholar entitled his work on contemporary Tibetan history *The Dragon in the Land of Snows.*[1] It is well known that the dragon is the symbol of China and the Land of Snows is the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. A "dragon" of flesh and blood is nothing unusual, but if the "dragon" is transformed into iron and steel, the consequences are profound.

The Tibetan language has two words for "train." One is *rili,* which the Tibetans borrow from Urdu, and the other is *meiguoer,* a loose translation of the Chinese word for train, which is far less popular. Both of these coinages are fairly recent, within the past few decades, and they were seldom heard until five years ago, when they began to resound like thunder. At last, just a few days before the train made its formal entrance into Lhasa, the Tibetan Language Committee of Tibet Autonomous Region made the decision that the train from then on would be called *meiguoer,* not *rili*. (Does this mean news of the Iron Dragon of China cannot be disseminated in Tibet through an Indian dialect?)

A poem written in 1995

I feel I must write something. There were already so many "people outside the Land of Snows" (from the song "Yearning for the Magic Eagle") feeling excited and agitated by nationalism. Some Tibetan-looking officials, experts and representatives of the people abased themselves in tearful welcome of the iron dragon that would run 1,956 kilometers along a "magic sky road" (from the song "Sky Road") into the Lhasa terminal. Meanwhile, the hearts of the majority of Tibetan people were smothered by the Chinese red star flags, streamers and colorful balloons that shrouded the city of Lhasa. Of course, their voices had been stifled early on.

What a gala scene! Inland China sees few of these red tide displays nowadays, and journalists from Central China Television and Hong Kong's Phoenix Television were moved to exclaim, "How patriotic Tibetan people are!" Ah, yes; watching the live broadcasting in Beijing, I wanted to say just one sentence: "Anyone who doesn't look patriotic will be fined, don't you get it?" In all of China, perhaps only the Tibet Autonomous Region has enacted such a policy.

A person from inland China was puzzled at this, and said, "We don't understand. Can you explain?" A Tibetan from Lhasa patiently answered this question on my behalf: "Every family is required to fly the red star flag during the Spring Festival—the biggest Chinese festival—and it's the same at all the other major holidays, including the Tibetan New Year, Labor Day on May 1 and National Day on October 1. It's like that in Pakuo Street in downtown Lhasa; all the residential committees require it. If it were voluntary, that would be fine. But you're forced to do it, and those who refuse to comply are fined or, worse yet, labeled 'separatists.' It's hard to describe the mood under this kind of coercion . . . ."

I feel I must write something. I recall a poem I wrote many years ago, in the winter of 1995. At that time, I was working as an editor in the Writers' Association of the Tibet Autonomous Region. One afternoon our office received a file from the Chinese Communist Party Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region announcing that the atheist Party had appointed a boy as the 11th Panchen Lama, the reincarnated soul of the 10th Panchen Lama. The boy approved by the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, as the 11th Panchen Lama had been disdainfully rejected by the Party. Sitting within that system, I felt frozen both physically and mentally. Overwhelmed with indignation at the lies I had heard and read, I wrote:

Listen, the grand lie wraps the sky;
Only two birds remain in the woods,
Saying, "Tibet, Tibet, you are fortunate". . . .

Not a single day passes where we are not reminded of our good fortune. It is said that since 1950, or to be more accurate, since 1959,[2] the Tibetan people have led a happy existence. But

Photo: Getty Images

Changing environment: a nomad resettlement area in Huangnan (Chinese: Malho) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. Photo: International Campaign for Tibet

this "happiness" does not come from heaven or earth, nor was it bestowed by the "three exploiting groups" of Old Tibet, but rather has been given, and can only be given, by the Party. So even during the Cultural Revolution, when 6,000-odd Tibetan temples were smashed to smithereens, there were two singers in Tibetan attire with the Chinese last names of Zhang and Geng, who sang loudly through Tibetan lips: "Thank him (Chairman Mao) for bringing us happiness!" And so today people are punished for failing to hang a red star flag outside their homes, and red streamers garnish the streets of Lhasa, proclaiming, "The Qinghai-Tibet Railway is the road to happiness for all the nationalities in Tibet!" The leaders of Tibet have become so adroit and meticulous in their cosmetic efforts that even restroom attendants were issued with short-term salary cards for the railway's grand opening, so visiting reporters wouldn't see that people are normally charged for using the restroom.

The frog and the Nyenchhen Tanglha Mountain

What do the silenced Tibetan people say about the uninvited iron dragon, another "happiness" imposed upon them?

In 2004, construction of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway passed the Nyenchen Tanglha Mountain and the northern Tibetan prairie and moved toward Lhasa. A new folk tale spread quietly through Lhasa, which had the strong flavor of Tibetan folk literature, and passed from lip to ear, it acquired a magical aura. According to the story, at Damxung,[3] a place very near Lhasa, railway workers dug up a frog from the earth. The badly injured frog was huge, and it became even larger with each telling. In the earliest version, it was hauled off on a wooden cart; later it was said to require a truck. In the tea houses and households of Lhasa, people related the frog tale in a low voice, accompanied by anxious sighs.

Why should digging up a frog make people so worried? People outside Tibet have difficulty discerning the deeper meaning. In the ancient tradition of Tibet's Bön religion,[4] the metaphor of the frog is profound. Like many other animals that live in the water, the earth, the rocks and the woods, like the snake and the fish, the frog is regarded as a spirit that brings both good fortune and bad. These creatures are collectively known in the Tibetan language as *lu*, which coincidentally is loosely translated into Chinese as "dragon." Because the *lu* are imbued with extraordinary magic, the Bön tradition includes many classics and rituals exclusively devoted to them. Eventually, after Buddhism was introduced into Tibet, and especially after Padmasambhava,[5] the master of Esoteric Buddhism known for vanquishing monsters, entered Tibet, all kinds of *lu* were finally vanquished and converted to Buddhism, and became guardian spirits. Since then, the lu have held a very important position in the Tibetan pantheon.

As an embodiment of the *lu*, the frog has a function in Tibetan culture that transcends its animal nature. For that reason, when the train came and the *lu* that originally lived in the soil was battered black and blue and transported to an unknown place, the implication was that when the iron dragon arrived, Tibet's own "dragon" was unable to defend itself and was severely injured. This contemporary Tibetan folk tale, whose author will never be known, is amazingly subtle in its expression of the frustrated and defeated mood of the Tibetan people.

The time moves forward to 2006. The iron dragon had in fact already arrived in the form of crude freight trains with none of the fanfare later stirred up by the grand opening. But an accident happened during the Spring Festival: a freight train suddenly derailed on the bridge built high over the Damxung prairie. It was said that people were injured, but the jittery authorities blocked off the site and imposed a news blackout. Another new folk tale spread quietly through Lhasa, again bearing a strong flavor of Tibetan folk literature, and taking on a magical aura as it passed from lip to ear.

In the recounting of an old man in Lhasa, the reason that the normally smooth-running train got into an accident was that it passed Nyenchhen Tanglha Mountain. How could a mountain cause an accident? This is also associated with the traditional culture of Tibet. According to Tibetan folk religion, the Nyenchhen Tanglha Mountain is one of many mountain gods, called Zanri in Tibetan, that guard Tibet's northern Qiangtang Grassland. The mountains have magical powers to summon wind, rain, snow and hail, and to determine the increase and decline of living creatures and the fortunes of human beings. The mountain gods are regarded as more easily angered than the other gods, so everyone must pass the mountain with the appropriate respect and awe, and should especially avoid raising a disturbance, which could bring disaster. The old man whispered mysteriously to me, "The mountain god was angered, so the normally smooth-running *rili* was overturned."

In this way, the Tibetan people used their own wounded culture to console their frustrated hearts.

An American's omitted words

The grand triumph of the Qinghai-Tibet railway apparently required more than the high praises of Chinese themselves, and a quote from an American, discovered with much effort, became an authoritative testimony republished throughout the Chinese media. It was said that Paul Theroux, some fellow who loves to travel around by train, wrote these words while riding a train through China: "The Kunlun Range is a guarantee that the railway will never get to Lhasa."[6]

A poster on an Internet blog pointed out that almost all the reports about the completion and the opening to traffic of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway quoted Theroux's sentence, but that the next sentence in the quote was omitted by most of the media: "That is probably a good thing. I thought I liked railways until I saw Tibet, and then I realized that I like wilderness much more."[7] It's obvious that what Theroux means is that it "might be a good thing" if Tibet were never accessible by train.

Now everyone talks about going to Tibet. Stirred up by media hype, ordinary Chinese people have suddenly developed a keen interest in Tibet. In the past, the long distance and the expense of the trip discouraged many prospective visitors. Now people can barely contain their excitement at the mere 48 hours and 300 to 1,200 *yuan* required for the journey between Beijing and Lhasa. A Han Chinese friend who once filmed a documentary in Tibet said that even Beijing's unlicensed taxi drivers were clamoring for a chance to go to Tibet.

The celebrations of inlanders and the tears of an old Tibetan woman

After the Qinghai-Tibet railway had been operating for half a month, the broadcast media announced that 50,000 people had arrived in Lhasa. In Beijing, such a number would be undetectable, but the population of Lhasa, according to the fifth national census held in 2000, was 474,500, only about 3.6 percent that of Beijing. In other words, 50,000 people arriving in Lhasa in half a month was the equivalent of 1.4 million people arriving in Beijing. Of course, it's possible that 1.4 million people is not that many for Beijing; in one year during the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong inspected a million Red Guards at Tiananmen Square, and that doesn't seem to have resulted in the city's destruction. But the situation of Lhasa is different. The population of 470,000 includes the surrounding seven counties, with only 140,000 people living in the city itself. Surely 50,000 people descending on a city of 140,000 is bound to cause a tremendous disturbance, and even the official media admitted that Lhasa was "overwhelmed."

The grandmother of a Tibetan friend, an elderly and pious lady, always made a point of going to the Jokhang Temple[8] to worship on each Buddhist festival, in spite of her age and infirmity. According to custom, the faithful worshipped at the Jokhang Temple in the morning and at dusk, and tourists could visit during the afternoon. But once the passenger railway began operating, the temple had to give access to a constant stream of tourists from morning till night, forcing tourists and pilgrims to crowd together. In addition, many tourists refused to wait their turn, and failed to maintain a respectful silence, greatly disturbing those who came to seek spiritual consolation. The old Tibetan lady, stumbling with every step, could only hold up her flickering oil lamp and tearfully cry out in Tibetan, "I cannot escape the Chinese throng!" After returning home and contemplating more such experiences, the old woman wept at the realization that she might never again be able to worship Buddha at Jokhang Temple.

The 50,000 Chinese visitors were referred to by Lhasa residents as *zizi*, the Tibetan word for mice. Lhasa will continue to see many such *zizi*. The tourist industry predicted this year that 2.5 million people will flock to Tibet. A deputy mayor of Lhasa with the Chinese surname of Xu said that the increase in the tourists would not harm Tibet's environment or culture, at the same time that he mentioned that the Potala Palace had cut down its visiting hours while accommodating double the number of visitors.[9] He seemed to suggest that once visiting hours were reduced by two hours, it would not be a problem for 2,300 people to walk up and down the palace stairs every day. Such words defy logic! After suffering bombardments by the People's Liberation Army in 1959 and the digging of air-raid shelters at the base of the hill during the "Digging Shelters and Storing Grain" campaign of the Cultural Revolution, the historic Potala Palace suffered serious structural damage that has been only partially corrected through subsequent repairs. With so many tourists climbing the stairs each day, there is a real danger of collapse. Already, in the summer of 2001, the authorities were forced to acknowledge that the flow of visitors was unsustainable when one of the palace's walls collapsed.[10]

Many effects of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, such as the marginalization of Tibetans and the plundering of resources, are not yet apparent. Even so, the constant flow of tourists is already a heavy burden in the daily life of Lhasa residents, who refer to the influx as the "yellow peril." Someone sighed on the Internet, "For 311 *yuan*, the Sky Road brings you to tour Lhasa. Only 311 *yuan* is required to speed our destruction; that is too cheap. May the gods and spirits bless this holy land!" But today our gods and spirits are seriously injured; how can they bless our homeland?

Not long ago, a big charity benefit was held in Tibet. A group of people representing the media, corporations and sponsors went to the periphery of Mount Everest to clean up garbage and donate educational materials and daily necessities to nearby schools and villages. On the surface it looked like a noble activity to "assist Tibet," but it was eventually revealed to be a "commercial show" using Tibet to make money. One particularly heartbreaking detail was reported in the media: "The host gave a piece of chocolate to each child in a primary school, then had the pupils wave their candy in the air for five minutes while they were photographed. The show was really overdone; how must the children have felt?"[11]

Reading this detail, I remembered a Chinese movie called *The Devils are Here,* which was shown several years ago. It includes a scene in which a group of Japanese soldiers ride on large horses past a village, accompanied by the music of a military band, and a group of naïve Chinese children sit on a dirt wall at the entrance to the village, watching the scene with smiles

on their faces. The commander of the Japanese soldiers bends down and kindly hands a piece of candy to each child, and the children cheer and scamper with joy, holding the candy in their hands. A piece of candy satisfies the generosity of the donor and the material cravings of the receiver.

Of course, I don't mean to suggest anything in particular by referring to this movie—the use of candy in both cases is merely coincidental. But I wonder how many such coincidental offerings of candy Tibet will experience in the future.

Enjoying full benefits requires autonomy

In his comments on Kipling's novels, Edward Said holds that Kipling describes the people of India as creatures clearly needing the tutelage of the British. He says this tutelage is achieved by surrounding and then assimilating India in a narrative in which India, without Britain, would falter and perish through its own corruption.[12] This utilitarian view prevails in the attitude of Chinese toward Tibet. It seems that Tibetan people are also creatures requiring tutelage, wretchedly waiting to be liberated and fed. More lamentably, Tibetan people have been transformed into abnormal life forms, like the vegetables and flowers seen in vinyl hothouses all over Tibet these days. Once they leave the sanctuary of the hothouse, they will die, unaccustomed as they are to the outside world. Now, while still living in their own land, Tibetan people are smothering in the atmosphere created by outsiders, and are failing to acclimate to their own land. Since their land has become that of others, there's nothing they can do about it.

And so the big, inappropriate squares are built one after another, and skyscrapers of ceramic tile and blue glass rise one after another, and streets named for Chinese cities like Guangzhou and Suzhou appear one after another. Clusters of bordellos and flocks of prostitutes lure customers from the street in broad daylight. Even traditional food taboos are ignored at restaurants serving live fish and shrimp and donkey meat. In his *Culture and Imperialism,* Edward Said describes imperialism as a mode of "geographic violence" that manifests itself in immediately changing local living spaces, lifestyles and political systems wherever it goes.

Officials, and the official media that are their mouthpieces, take on the tones of saviors and spokespeople of the Tibetan people when they say, "We hope the Tibetan people can also enjoy the right to modernization; tradition and modernization are equally indispensable." This sounds quite reasonable, but let's not forget that rights require power. How can tradition exist without power? And what is considered modernization? Do the Tibetan people need to enjoy the kind of modernization described above? Isn't it essentially a sugar-coated violence? Scholars in the hire of the dictatorship constantly describe claims that the railway will harm the natural environment and traditional culture as a false proposition. But reality has shown that the so-called modernization in Tibet is an equally false modernization. Regrettably, violence of various degrees—hard, soft and in-between—prevails in the vast land of Tibet, and all of it bears the standard of development, and in the name of modernization works its impact on the senses and hearts of the people. Is this the happiness bestowed on the Tibetan people?

The train has come. The iron dragon has come. Rili-Meiguoer has come. But the real problem for Tibet is not the railway. If Tibet enjoyed real autonomy, it would be fine for the railway—or any number of railways—to run to each and every village. But without real autonomy, we can only let other people decide our fortune as they see fit, and allow an increasing chaos that inevitably results in our yielding to those in power. At the same time, the conscience of many people also yields to those in power, with an ultimately unfortunate result. As Said wrote, imperialism presents its victims with the choice to surrender or perish. Yes, there is no other choice. For the people of Tibet, who do not have autonomy, whether they choose to surrender or to perish, the road they travel will not be the "magic sky road" or what Lhasa residents jokingly refer to as "the road to lunacy," but a one-way road to destruction.

Translated by Wei Liu

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NOTES

1. Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows—A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947,* Pimlico, 1999.
2. China took military control of Tibet in 1959, and the Dalai Lama was forced into exile in India.
3. Also known in Chinese as Dangxiong.
4. For more on the Bön religion, see "The Bonpo's Tradition" on the Web site of the Government of Tibet in Exile, http://www.tibet.com/Buddhism/bon.html.
5. Chinese *pinyin:* Lian Huasheng.
6. Paul Theroux, *Riding the Iron Rooster,* Putnam, 1988.
7. The blog posting can be accessed at http://bowenqiangji.wordpress.com/. For a Chinese media report using only the first part of the quote, see People's Daily Online, "First train enters 'insurmountable' Kunlun Mountains," July 2, 2006, http://english.people.com.cn/200607/02/eng20060702_279259.html.
8. Known in Mandarin as the Dazhou Temple, one of the most sacred shrines in Tibet.
9. Xu Chengcang, quoted in "Lasa fusizhang: youke zengjia bu hui pohuai Sizang shengtai wenhua [Lhasa vice-mayor: the increase in tourists will not damage Tibet's environment or culture]," Chinareviewnews.com, July 2, 2006, http://cn.chinareviewnews.com/crn-webapp/doc/docDetailCreate.jsp?coluid=6&kindid=27&docid=100166592.
10. See Oliver August, "Tibet Palace Damaged in Quest for Tourists," *The Times,* August 18, 2001, posted on the Web site of Tibet Environmental Watch, http://www.tew.org/development/potala.damage.html.
11. Quoted from Xinhua Net, "Baozi biancheng daohuosuo: Sizang yici gongyi huodong beihou de 'shangye xiu'" [Bread becomes ammunition: The 'commercial show' behind the Tibet charity benefit]," June 19, 2006, http://news.xinhuanet.com/focus/2006-06/19/content_4701642.htm. The news article includes a photo of the children holding up their candy.
12. Probably from *Culture and Imperialism,* but Said also wrote the introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of Kipling's India-based novel *Kim.*