TSERING DORJE

PHOTO ESSAY

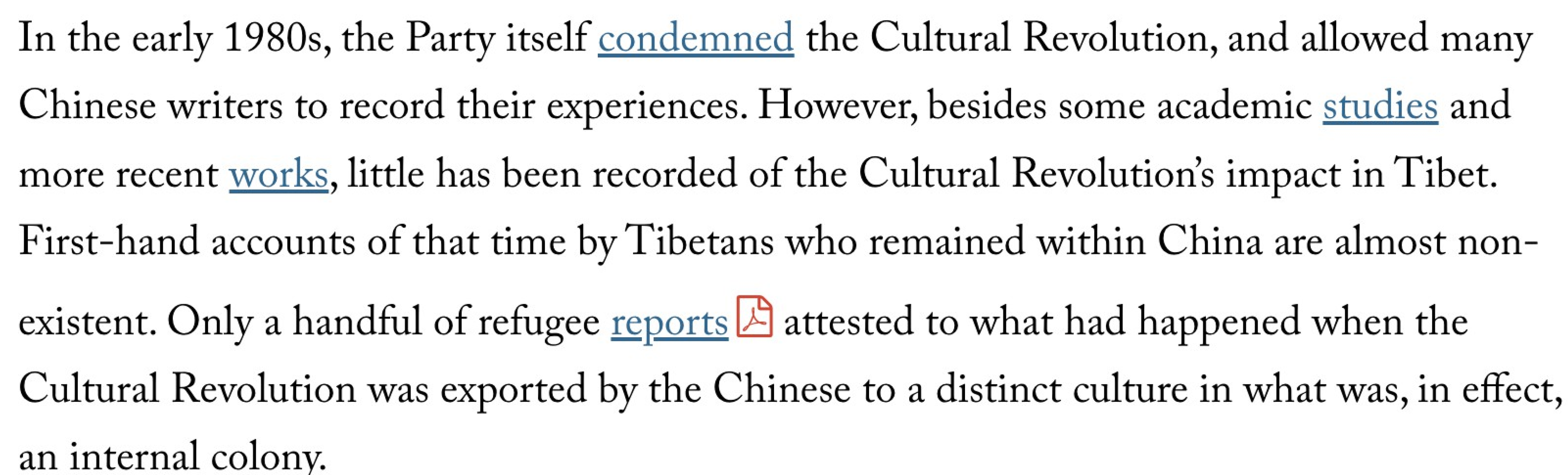
Tibet's Cultural Revolution

The brutality of Maoist Red Guards is well documented, but lesser known in relation to Tibet, where its spiritual damage ran deep. Few records remained — until a Tibetan writer found a trove of photos taken by her father, an officer in the Chinese army.

TSERING WOESER — APRIL 25, 2024

HISTORY TIBET

When Tibet was taken over by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950, the Chinese officials sent to run Tibet initially made few changes to its society, culture or administration. But, as with most revolutions, in time the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Tibet turned to the use of terror. Initially, this took the form of Robespierrean education: mass imprisonment and public executions. But by the mid-1960s the dominant form of political violence had become the ritualized humiliation of teachers, scholars, landlords and others whom the revolutionaries identified as their enemies. These "struggle sessions" and "speaking bitterness" events, along with ultra-leftist policies, factional conflict and rebellions, were defining features of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet as well as the rest of China, from May 1966 until the death of Mao in September 1976, 10 years later.



In the early 1980s, the Party itself condemned the Cultural Revolution, and allowed many Chinese writers to record their experiences. However, besides some academic studies and more recent works, little has been recorded of the Cultural Revolution's impact in Tibet. First-hand accounts of that time by Tibetans who remained within China are almost non-existent. Only a handful of refugee reports attested to what had happened when the Cultural Revolution was exported by the Chinese to a distinct culture in what was, in effect, an internal colony.

In 1999, Tsering Woeser, a Tibetan poetess and dissident living in Beijing, began to study a set of photo negatives that her father Tsering Dorje (1937-1991), who had served as a PLA officer and photographer in Tibet, had left with the family. The photographs included hundreds of images of events in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution. Over the next six years, Woeser interviewed some 70 Tibetans and Chinese who had witnessed those events, showing them her father's photographs and documenting their responses. None of this work could be published within mainland China, of course, but in 2006 the Taiwanese publishing house Locus produced *Shajie* (殺劫), Woeser's book-length essay in Chinese about these interviews, together with the photographs and extended captions. In *Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution*, myself and the translator Susan Chen revised and updated the text, publishing the work in English. For the first time, the rest of the world saw uncensored images of how the Cultural Revolution had been carried out in Tibet.

Tseing Woeser as a child with her father, Tsering Dorje, in Lhasa, 1966 *(photographer unknown)*

The photo essay below features 15 of the more than 300 photographs in the book, accompanied by Woeser's captions, translated by Susan Chen. All images were taken by her father in Lhasa, in 1966 and 1967. In a Q&A below, we asked Woeser to look back at her process, and to reflect on the significance of her father's photographs today. Together, this is the only known visual record of the struggle sessions, humiliation parades and mass rallies staged during the Cultural Revolution in Tibet.

– Robert Barnett

> "My father had a long career in the Chinese army. … And yet he took photos of the disasters that the CCP brought to his beloved homeland. I cannot help but wonder: Why?"
>
> — *Tsering Woeser*

Tibetan Red Guards with armbands lined up in the Sungchöra, the teaching courtyard beside the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, just before or just after going into the temple to smash much of its contents. They are holding red-tasseled spears, an insignia of the Red Guards. The woman in the foreground was from a wealthy trading family and normally would not have been able to join the Red Guards, but an exception seems to have been made in her case. After the Cultural Revolution, she is said to have have become a devout Buddhist practitioner.

Targets of struggle sessions are paraded along an alley leading from the Tsemonling temple to the Ramoche temple in Lhasa. The man in the foreground was a famous lama from Sera Monastery, Ribur Rinpoche, who was the target of some 35 struggle sessions. On this occasion his face has been daubed with paint to make him look like a villain, and he has been made to carry a small Buddhist shrine in his hands, with a set of ritual cymbals draped around his neck. The words "ox-demon-snake-spirit" are legible on the tall hat he has been made to wear as a sign of criminality. He was released from prison in 1976 and fled to India 11 years later, where he spent the rest of his life teaching Buddhism.

A former aristocrat-official, Phunkhang Tsering Dondrub, is paraded through the streets of Lhasa. A mustache has been painted on his face, and he has been made to wear the single long earring in his left ear that was a traditional mark of nobility in Tibet, and well as to carry a case of knives and forks, probably with ivory handles, to show that he was a member of the exploiting class or attracted to foreign lifestyles. His father had been a *kalon*, or minister, in the four-person cabinet of the government of the Dalai Lama in the 1940s, and his older brother was a son-in-law of the king of Sikkim, but he had held only a mid-level position in the Tibetan government when it was disbanded in 1959. After the Cultural Revolution ended, he was rehabilitated and given token positions in the Chinese system until his death in 1990. His house is now a Chinese-owned hotel.

Tsadi Tseten Dorje, the former mayor of Lhasa, is denounced during a struggle session in Lhasa. The poster hung from Tsadi's neck lists his crimes: "Counter-revolutionary, deceptive ringleader and promoter of turmoil, butcher, murderer and slaughterer of the working masses." The Tibetan communist activist denouncing him from the table is named Tsamchö or "Lugu Aja" (Elder Sister from Lugu). She had been a beggar before 1959, then after the Cultural Revolution ended she ran a small business, and is said to have become a religious devotee. Written in Chinese on the board below the eaves of the Jokhang temple wall is the new name for the Sungchöra teaching courtyard: *Lixin Guangchang*, "Establish-the-New Square."

A crowd of accusers conduct a struggle session against Samding Dorje Phagmo (in the center of the frame, with head lowered), the best known of female reincarnate lamas in Tibet, in the courtyard of her house in Lhasa. The banner behind her reads "Carry out the Great Cultural Revolution in Tibet." She was 24 years old at the time, and had given birth to her third child less than two months earlier. Previously, she had been hailed across China as a "patriot" for returning to Tibet in late 1959, just six months after following the Dalai Lama into exile in India, and was a guest of honor at the 10th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, received by Mao himself. After the death of Mao in 1976, she was again given honorary positions in the government, and appeared in public praising the Party's policies, a role known in Tibetan as "performing as a political flower-vase."

Samding Dorje Phagmo, the female reincarnated lama from the previous image, is struggled against in Lhasa. She has been made to hold a *ga'u*, or amulet box, on top of a *bumpa* or ornamental vase. To her left is her father, Rigdzin Gyalpo, a former steward to a noble family, who had not joined the Lhasa uprising against China in 1959 and had been recognized by the Chinese as an "outstanding patriot." He was still a target during the Cultural Revolution, because of a rumor he had once said something while drunk about Chairman Mao needing to eat shit; he was beaten so severely that his shoulders were fractured, and died in 1977 or 1978. To her right is her mother, who was supposedly timid, and did not say anything while attending daily reform-through-labor sessions.

Two Red Guards hold down Kashö Chögyal Nyima, a cabinet minister in the former Tibetan government, during a struggle session in Lhasa. He was popularly seen as a collaborator with the Chinese regime, but he was still a target during the Cultural Revolution. The words on the hat read "Kashöpa, an ox-demon-snake-spirit, a power-seizing bad person, to be completely destroyed." He is dressed in official silks with jewelry usually worn by Tibetan noblewomen draped round his neck, and has been made to carry a wad of Tibetan paper currency, together with a *damaru*, a two-sided drum used in religious rituals. After the Cultural Revolution, he was used again by the Communist Party as a token Tibetan dignitary, until he died in 1986 at the age of 83.

Sampo Tsewang Rigdzin, the former commander in chief of the Tibetan army before the PLA invaded in 1950, is paraded in public during a struggle session in Lhasa. After 1950, he had been given a token position in the PLA as a major general, and in the 1959 Tibetan uprising he was nearly killed when a crowd of Tibetans tried to stone him, accusing him of collaboration. But in August 1966, Sampo was accused of "organizing rebellion, aiding foreign powers, and opposing the Party and the dictatorship of the proletariat." He and his wife were repeatedly struggled against and all their property was confiscated. He died in 1973, deeply depressed. His wife passed away not long after. Here he has been dressed in *khalkhasug*, the richly embroidered brocade robes worn by lay officials in the traditional Tibetan government, with a *chagda* featuring gold braid and precious stones, and a single

long earring or *sogchil*, as symbols of his status. The Tibetan Red Guard on the left, known as "One Eyed" Thubten, became an official in the Barkor Neighborhood Committee after 1987.

A struggle session in an alleyway near Tengyeling monastery in Lhasa. against three traditional Tibetan doctors (wearing the white hats). The oldest of the three, Tsojé Rigdzin Lhundrub Paljor, known as Dr. Nyarongshag, had founded the largest lay school in Tibet before the Chinese take-over. The young woman on his right is his third daughter, Tsephel; she had given birth to her daughter just three or four days earlier. The man on his left is his second son, Kungyur, who later fled to India where he served as the personal doctor to the Dalai Lama in exile. All three have been made to carry small but heavy medicine pouches called *menku* around their necks. The stacks of Indian banknotes hung from the neck of Dr. Nyarongshag were fees that he had been paid when he practiced medicine in India. On this occasion the three doctors were paraded through the streets, then forced to smash a prayer-wheel shrine. Dr. Nyarongshag was severely beaten in the struggle sessions and remained more or less bedridden (but still treated patients) until he passed away in 1979 at the age of 82.

An unknown village woman is paraded in a struggle session in a rural area outside Lhasa. She is holding a two-sided drum or *damaru* in one hand, and in the other a portable shrine with *tsatsa* or clay figures of the protectress Palden Lhamo and the *gonpo* protector deity. She was probably an oracle who would go into trances when requested to perform divinations, and so had been branded as a "swindler" or "vampire" by Cultural Revolution activists.

A representative of the "emancipated serfs" is calling out slogans at a rally for the crowd to repeat. He has a piece of paper in one hand, probably with the slogans written on it; in the other hand he holds up a bouquet of flowers made out of colored crepe paper, tied onto a stick. Paper flowers were common accessories at Cultural Revolution events, and can be seen in many of the photographs of rallies in this period. The pen clipped inside the breast pocket of his white shirt, worn as a jacket, was a widely envied status symbol at that time and indicate that this man was probably a cadre.

A boy holds a scrap of paper, shouting slogans at a rally or struggle session in the teaching courtyard of the Jokhang temple in Lhasa. He was later made a leader in the local militia. After the Cultural Revolution, when he was in his fifties, he is said to have become a religious practitioner. The man sitting just behind the boy's left shoulder, wearing a sun hat or *topee*, is Pomda Topgyal, a member of a leading business family. Though currently a member of the crowd, he would be taken away to be struggled against himself, soon after this photo was taken.

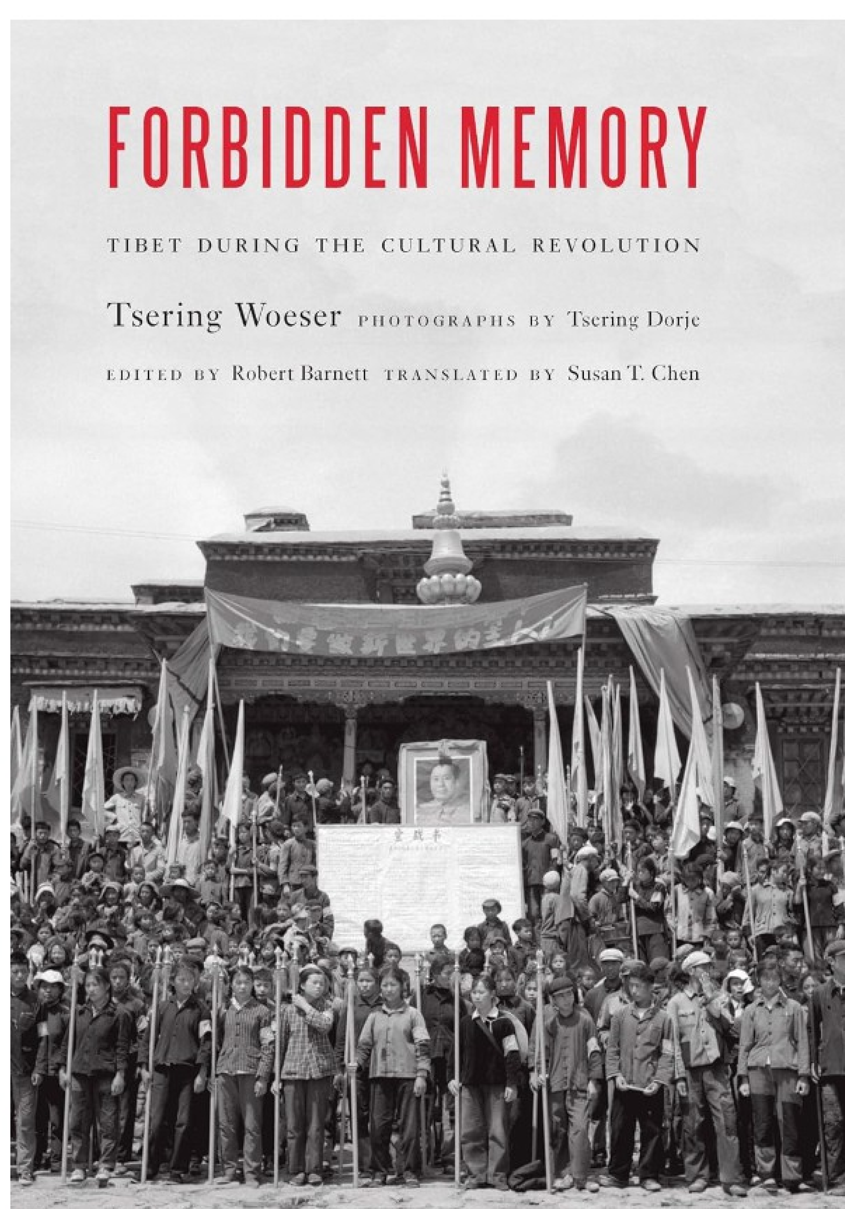
The smiling man pointing his finger, who from his appearance seems to be Han Chinese, and probably a cadre, directs a struggle session against a Tibetan lama in Lhasa. The Tibetan Red Guard whose hand is on the left shoulder of the lama appears to be sticking out his tongue, the traditional gesture of respect, suggesting that he might feel uncomfortable about abusing the lama. The writing on the hat worn by the lama tells us that one part of his name was Gyatso. A stack of pages from sacred texts has been tied to his shoulders, and the cart in front of him is full of Buddhist scroll paintings and other ritual objects, which the lama would have had to push through the streets.

Red Guards and communist activists in Lhasa burn Buddhist religious texts that were taken from temples and private homes. This fire was set in the Sungchöra, the former teaching courtyard outside the Jokhang temple, the most famous shrine in the Tibetan Buddhist world.

Tibetan women march past the Chinese leaders of Tibet after a rally in Lhasa on October 1, 1966, held to mark the 17th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The marchers carry pictures of Mao Zedong, placards with his quotations, and Chinese national flags. On the panel to the left of the stage is written: "Study Chairman Mao's writings, obey what Chairman Mao says, behave according to Chairman Mao's instructions, be good warriors of Chairman Mao."

Q&A with Tsering Woeser

Robert Barnett: *Forbidden Memory* is a unique record of an episode in Tibetan history some 50 years ago. How would you describe that episode, and what did you learn about it that was not known before?



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Tsering Woeser: The most important insight that I drew from the 300 or more of my father's photographs that I've put in *Forbidden Memory* was about the amount of damage done to monasteries, Buddhist statues and texts, as well as the name changes that were imposed on places and buildings. These are all so important to traditional Tibetan culture and history. There was also the abuse and humiliation that the photos showed. This was done to Tibetan high lamas, aristocrats, officials from the former government, wealthier merchants, doctors of traditional medicine and others — even though many of them had collaborated publicly with the occupation forces of the PRC. The photos show the form of rule that the Chinese Communist Party imposed on Tibet — what I would call military imperialism. To me, these were realities that had been hidden. They were buried pains and sorrows.

The state narrative is that this was all caused by Tibetans themselves. On the surface, this is true, and you can see some of that in my father's photos. However, when I interviewed people who actually remembered the violence in those photos, and when I dug into the official publications and internal

documents, I realized that many facts have been hidden by the Party. Through writing the original and now working on the English version, I have learned also that, however powerful they are, the authorities cannot arbitrarily rewrite history.

Apart from documenting Tibet's recent history, what makes the book significant for today's readers outside Tibet? Particularly for those who are interested in learning about China, but whose knowledge of Tibet is limited. What relevance and what insights do you think it might offer to them?

Forbidden Memory makes it impossible to deny that the Cultural Revolution was catastrophic in its impact on Tibet. It was certainly destructive all over China, but in Tibet, it exacerbated the damage done by the Party during the PLA's occupation in the 1950s. The devastation of the Cultural Revolution was far-reaching and traumatic in terms of how it affected Tibetan culture, beliefs, economy and society. You can see it even now, for example, with the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa or Ganden Monastery just outside the city. They have been renovated or rebuilt so that, on the surface, their prior destruction is no longer immediately visible. But it's generally agreed among critical scholars and intellectuals that Mao's death in 1976 didn't bring an end to the Cultural Revolution in Tibet like it did elsewhere. Many Chinese and Tibetan officials in Tibet whose careers were made during the Cultural Revolution remained in high positions, and their efforts at self-promotion have only continued. They have now become political role models for younger opportunists. They may look very different on the outside from their "revolutionary" predecessors, but many of the things they have done are patterned on what activists did when they followed Mao's directives in the Cultural Revolution.

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Could you talk more about the similarities and differences you noticed between official behavior during the Cultural Revolution and official behavior today?

You don't see today's officials directly attacking Tibet's cultural tradition in the way the Maoist activists did during the Cultural Revolution, but there are huge propaganda hoardings on mountain slopes and hillsides all over Tibet. The portraits of CCP leaders from Mao to Xi Jinping are put on the walls of monasteries and private homes, and the Chinese five-star flag flies from the Potala Palace [the Dalai Lama's residence in Lhasa]. This is all the logic of the Cultural Revolution. It permeates every corner of Tibet today.

I have watched carefully the changes in Lhasa and other places in Tibet. Overall, despite repackaging by the state, I see the Cultural Revolution as still ongoing in Tibet, albeit in a much less obvious version. You can see it, for example, in the current official project to "renovate" Lhasa in the name of modernization. The city has been drastically remade so as to rewrite history, to encourage Tibetans to take on a Chinese identity, and to promote commercialization and Han immigration. The old city of Lhasa was closely bound up with Tibetans' spiritual and secular lives; now it has become an exotic theme park for tourists. Any presentation or expression of Tibetan culture or history has to be shown as a subset of "Chinese values" or it won't be allowed.

You researched and wrote the first version of the book over a decade ago. What has changed since then? If you were starting again now, what would you do differently?

Before I worked on *Forbidden Memory*, my writing was mainly poetry and imaginative prose. This has deeply influenced my nonfiction writing. I embed poetic aspects of my work in narratives of specific events, identifiable places, and connections between the past and the present.

To start the project for *Forbidden Memory* again now? I think I would want to deepen my

understanding of every theme and detail that emerges from my father's photos. I would want to say more to contextualize what happened to particular individuals. The major obstacle now would be finding people who experienced and remembered the Cultural Revolution. In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, I was able to find more than 70 of them. Some of them were [communist] activists involved in the attacks, and others were victims or unwilling participants. More than half of them have died since then. Without them, or strictly speaking without the memories they related to me, it would be very hard to write this book. They are the true authors here.

In many ways, *Forbidden Memory* is about your efforts to understand the feelings and thinking of the former political idealists you interviewed. What did you learn about political zeal, and about subsequent rethinking and regrets, from your interviews for the book? How did this affect the way you have come to see the Maoist era in general?

The idealists are my elders — my parents, my parents' siblings and their spouses, my teachers in school, and my superiors and senior colleagues where I used to be employed. Some of them I have known since I was a child, others I was close to as a young adult. From what I was able to hear and observe, sometimes even without directly talking with them, I could understand the actions and the thinking of their generation. Rather than say that they were political idealists or activists, I think, more precisely, many of them are what I would call "double-thinkers." Only a minority of them, my father included, might have been genuinely idealistic about the political principles they said they believed in. Yet, whether they were idealists or not, the lives they lived were full of tragedy. The more I tried to understand them, the more I realized how they had been engulfed, destroyed, wasted by the regime in so many inhuman ways.

I once wrote about this — that an entire generation of them (and perhaps more than just their generation) are a unique outcome in history. For decades, their lives were so entangled with political turbulence over which they had no control that they metamorphosed into a kind of extreme dependency, a kind of parasitism. Their spiritual world was full of scars, trapped inside a gigantic net built by the Chinese state. Most of them could do nothing but follow its momentum. They are now fragile and old. Looking at their faces — Tibetan, familiar, but marked with confusion and alienation — makes me feel deeply saddened. I feel an almost inexpressible aversion to the monstrous state that has controlled and manipulated their spirit.

“[The Tibetan Maoist activists'] spiritual world was full of scars, trapped inside a gigantic net built by the Chinese state.”

The photos your father took in Tibet during the Cultural Revolution are central to *Forbidden Memory*. Has his photographic work, and the history you discovered, helped you understand him and Tibetans of his generation who were part of the Cultural Revolution?

Yes, I didn't publish the photo of my father in his army suit until 2016, when the second Chinese edition of *Forbidden Memory* came out. It has not been easy for me to talk about him publicly. My father had a long career in the Chinese army. At a time when joining the army was seen as an honor, he enlisted when he was 13 in the 18th Army, the part of the PLA which first went into Tibet and ran the occupation in the 1950s. When he suddenly fell ill and died in 1991, he was 54. He had been with the army for 41 years. By then, he was a deputy commander of the PLA forces in Lhasa. I remember that at least once he refused promotion to a civilian position simply because he was unwilling to let go of his military uniform. And yet he took photos of the disasters that the CCP brought to his beloved homeland. I cannot help but wonder: Why did he take these photos? Why did he preserve them so carefully?

It seems to me now that he was very intentional in using his camera to document what was happening. I talked about this with my mother. She thought that my father was simply zealous about photography. "He took photos of everything," she said. I didn't completely agree with her. But I was only 25 when my father passed away. I was too young, too immersed in my own far-from-

reality universe of poetry and art to have asked him about the photos he'd taken. That's been an irreversible regret for me. Some 20 years after he died, I began to use his camera to take photographs in many of the same locations where he had taken his photos. Those are in the book as a postscript.

But who was he keeping records for? I am not him and I can't speak for him, but I know that if he was still alive, he wouldn't be content with the current order of things in Tibet — though I'm sure that he wouldn't have become a dissident, a "traitor," like me. I have often imagined that if military service had not been his profession, my father would have chosen to be a professional photographer. But it was his destiny to be a professional soldier instead. It's the same destiny that has connected me with his photographic work — as if he had kept those photos for me to complete a puzzle about the saddest chapter of Tibetan history. ∎

All images by Tsering Dorje, Lhasa, 1966/67, courtesy of Tsering Woeser. Captions are adapted from Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Chinese Revolution (Potomac Books, 2020) by Tsering Woeser, tr. Susan Chen, ed. Robert Barnett.

Tsering Woeser, born in Lhasa in 1966, is a Tibetan poet and essayist. She has written 21 books in Chinese, with 18 translations of her work published in nine other languages, including *Voices from Tibet* (2014) and *Tibet on Fire* (2016) in English. Woeser has received the Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands, and the U.S. Department of State's International Women of Courage Award. A prominent commentator on the Tibet issue, she lives under close surveillance in Beijing.

Robert Barnett is a writer and researcher focused on modern Tibetan history, politics and culture, at SOAS, University of London. He founded the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University. His books and edited volumes include *Conflicting Memories* (2019) with Benno Weiner and Françoise Robin, *Tibetan Modernities* (2008) with Ronald Schwartz, and *Lhasa* (2006).