

Tsering Woese with her
husband, Wang Lixiong,
at their home in Beijing.



Wang & Woesser

United by their passion for a new China, the outspoken literary couple have become a force to be reckoned with. **Violet S. Law** reports.

Wang Lixiong and Tsering Woesser, arguably China's most famous dissident literary couple, could hardly be more different as individuals. A Han Chinese hailing from the Manchurian northeast, Wang, 60, aired his budding interest in political reform as early as 1978-79, during the Democracy Wall movement. Born into an army family in the heady first year of the Cultural Revolution, Tibetan poet Woesser, 47, rediscovered her heritage as a young adult but only much later eschewed poetry for polemics. Wang is as vaguely pensive as Woesser is blithely vivacious. He seems to be shouldering the heft of China's future while she appears little scared, or scarred, by the constant surveillance and occasional house arrest she is subject to.

By choice Wang acts the part of the traditional Chinese intellectual, sounding alarm about his country's looming woes. Woesser, it often seems, has been thrust into the role of fearless, feted chronicler of Tibet's tumults.

Long before their marriage, in 2004, though, Wang and Woesser were united by their passion for the nation, as well as an unflappable faith in their freedom to speak truth to power.

Their first co-authored book, the non-fiction *Voices from Tibet* (2009), was published in English in Hong Kong in November. As editor and translator of that book, I've been in the privileged position of being able to not only render their prose but also observe their literary lives together in Beijing.

The tortuous trails they have blazed to become noted writers have tracked the turmoils of modern China itself.

ALTHOUGH BORN IN LHASA, Woesser was raised in the predominantly Han Chinese cocoon of a People's Liberation Army barracks in Sichuan province. Her half-Tibetan, half-Han father gave his Chinese name in public but, in private, held dear to his Tibetan identity.

At 15, Woesser fought to go to the big city, to attend boarding school. She enrolled in a school for ethnic minorities in Chengdu, Sichuan. There, she received a heavy dose of patriotic education; nearly every day, she says, she and her classmates watched television shows about the heroic deeds of Chairman Mao, Lei Feng, et al.

"It's going on to this day," says Woesser. "The goal is to inculcate in us minorities a strong sense of recognition with the Communist Party."

Back then, as an impressionable young woman who loved a good story, Woesser was enthralled, and sometimes even moved to tears.

At the Southwest University for Nationalities, in Chengdu, she blossomed into a poet – albeit one who, in her classmates' eyes, was still a Tibetan who excelled in writing lyrics in a language not her own. Yet, her fellow poets assured her, there was no need to worry about ethnicities or politics.

"At that time my identity as a poet was paramount and transcendental," Woesser recalls, "but it proved to be no panacea."

One of her first poems in university was a political act. She penned it in protest, and in defence of her place (and that of her people) in the world, after getting into an argument with Han-Chinese classmates.

*Perhaps a natural sense of superiority bloats your life
But I won't offer a complying smile
Sun shines on you, shines on me
On a blue planet we are equal!*

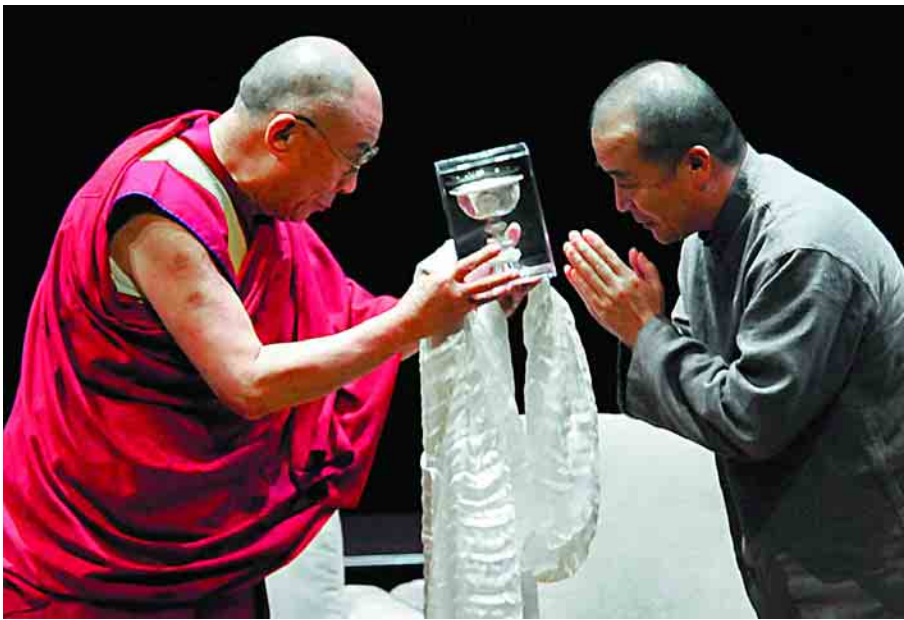
Print – For Certain Prejudices contained these lines (translated from the Chinese by Fiona Sze-Lorrain).

WANG NEVER HAD TO fend for his place in society. However, he believed very early on that China would one day be fighting for its survival.

Wang moved to Beijing in the late 1980s because, he says, he wanted to be in the cultural and political centre of the country. In 1990, he completed his first novel, *Yellow Peril* (*Huang huo* in pinyin), under the pen name Hush-hush. In his undaunted imagining, China was rocked by an epic flood of the Yellow River, crushing debts, political assassination and, at the end, the collapse of the Communist Party.

Aged 38, the car factory worker-turned-writer demonstrated nerves of steel in *Yellow Peril*, which was released barely a year after the Tiananmen Square democracy protests were bloodily crushed. Even after having spent four years in the countryside as a "sent-down youth" – one of the millions of urban youngsters who were punished for their family backgrounds – and been deemed sufficiently indoctrinated to be released, Wang was determined to broadcast his unorthodox ideas.

"I wrote the manuscript longhand, and then I spent 500 yuan – at the time about half of my year's income – to get it typeset on a computer," Wang recalls. "The typeset text was copied onto five-inch floppies. Then I gave out the diskettes to anyone I knew." >>



Clockwise from above: a protester holds up a poster of Woeser during the Tibetan Freedom March in London on March 10 last year; the Dalai Lama presents the 2009 Light of Truth Award to Wang, in Washington; monks shout anti-Chinese slogans at the Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, on March 5, 1988; the English translation of Wang and Woeser's first co-authored book

Published in Hong Kong but banned in the mainland, *Yellow Peril* proved a sensation among overseas Chinese readers. He estimates that as many as a million pirated copies of the book were in circulation.

At heart, Wang is less a radical revolutionary than a moderate reformist. He has penned a few treatises on implementing gradual, incremental democracy in China, but he has never been involved in political organising. Unlike those intellectuals who favour strategising and speechifying, Wang has been consumed by a solitary pursuit of the truth, sometimes at great risk.

A daring adventurer, he once sailed from the source of the Yellow River to its mouth on a raft fashioned from the inner tubes of tyres. The Yellow River rises on the Tibetan Plateau, and it was here that he became exposed to a world beyond that of homogenised Han China.

In 1998, he published a book based on his two years of living in Tibetan regions: *Sky Burial: The Destiny of Tibet* (Tianzang: Xizang de mingyun). In it, Wang went where few other Chinese intellectuals had dared to tread: into the controversies of Beijing's rule in Tibet.

Because of his Chinese-centric perspective, however, Wang was accused of cultural condescension, most notably by exiled Tibetan scholar Tsering Shakya, then a doctoral candidate at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

Wang found a more admiring, though no less critical, reader in Woeser, whom he met through a friend and who would later introduce him to ordinary Tibetans.

In 1990, Woeser had returned to Lhasa from Chengdu, to work at a literary magazine. Her arrival in the city of her birth led to personal epiphanies and public trauma.

Not particularly religious and certainly unschooled in Tibetan tradition, Woeser made an obligatory first visit to the Jokhang Monastery. Tibet's most sacred and important temple had been turned into a pigsty during the Cultural Revolution. Once inside, she became so moved she burst into tears.

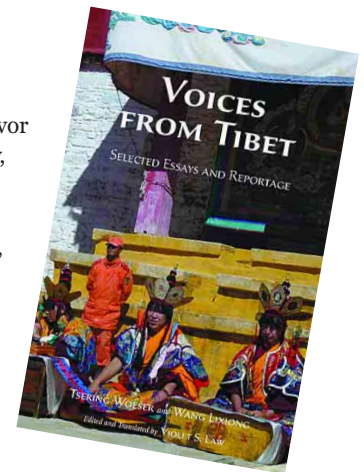
"I'm home," Woeser remembers telling herself. "I'm truly home."

Soon enough, she struck up a friendship with the lamas, who began

to confide in her about the horrors of the late 80s: forced renunciation of faith, suppression, slaughter.

Invoking Nazi concentration-camp survivor Elie Wiesel, who wrote in his autobiography, *Night*: "For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living", Woeser says, "I'm very willing to listen to others' stories and to record them."

Besides documenting the experiences of others, Woeser steered her poetic allusions towards politics.



*"Hear ye!" The big lie shall blot the sky
Two sparrows in the wood shall fall
"Tibet," he says, "Tibet is fine and flourishing!"
The furious girl will not bite her tongue
Everywhere the monastic robe has lost its colour
They say: It's to save our skin.*

From *December*, translated from the Chinese by A.E. Clark

UNLIKE BEIJING'S LITERATI, Woeser's Tibetan colleagues could read between the lines, warning her against publishing such loaded lyrics. But it was when she won a national award for this very poem that she realised her ultimate defeat.

"I felt that poetry was useless. Poetry fell short of expressing what is happening," she says.

She decided to eschew poems for essays. Then she came upon a trove of material that would prove perfect for that switch: nearly 300 photographs her father had taken in Lhasa during the Cultural Revolution.

With Wang's encouragement and tutelage, Woeser went about recording the oral history of scores of those who could be identified in the pictures – all survivors of the most tumultuous decade Tibet had ever seen.

"I cried many times, but my tears were worth something," she recalls.



From left: Woeser looks at family photos; a young Tsering (third from left on second row from the bottom) at her Sichuan kindergarten; toddler Tsering in her nanny's arms, with her father and her mother (seated) cradling an infant sister; the Democracy Wall on Changan Avenue, Beijing, on December 5, 1978.

“Under this regime, there are many ways to resist and protest. Some people choose to scream slogans. My method of choice is to protest in an aesthetic manner, through my written words.”

Soon, however, Woesser found that the repercussions from her prose were far more serious than she had bargained for. In 2003, after several rejections in Beijing, her *Notes on Tibet* found an admiring, if unwitting, publisher in Guangzhou. In this, her first non-fiction book, she detailed her observations from pilgrimages to Tibetan regions, as well as her newfound reverence for the Dalai Lama.

When news of the publication reached Lhasa, Woesser was fired from her work unit, the Tibetan branch of the Chinese Writers’ Association, where she was by then working as an editor. She was also under enormous pressure to publicly denounce the Dalai Lama, to save her own skin. This proved too much to bear: she fled Lhasa and took refuge in Wang’s home, in suburban Beijing.

They married a year later.

In Beijing, Woesser has found not only more creative freedom but also an expanded social circle, which includes Tibetan exiles and China’s most famous dissident artist, Ai Weiwei (who designed the cover of her latest book, commissioned by a French publisher).

Through Woesser, Wang has found a more visceral appreciation of all things Tibetan.

“Before, there was a lot about the Tibetans that eluded me; there were a lot of prejudices,” Wang says. It was, after all, the belief that genuine democracy must not be the tyranny of the Han majority but should protect the minorities’ interests that spurred him to traverse the regions inhabited by Tibetans and Uygurs: 60 per cent of Chinese territory. “But now, as I’ve come to know the Tibetans as living, breathing human beings, I understand their demands so much better.”

These demands, unheeded by the authorities, burst to the fore in March 2008. Protests led by monks, followed by violent conflict between Chinese and Tibetans, roiled the Tibet autonomous region and beyond. Authorities suppressed the unrest by imposing a lockdown.

Woesser’s website, Invisible Tibet, emerged as a clearing house for news submitted by Tibetan locals and exiles. Her courage in defying the blackout was lauded the world over, from Amsterdam to Washington (see sidebar). The authorities retaliated by putting Woesser under constant surveillance. She and Wang remain subject to house arrest when high-ranking officials from North America and Europe visit Beijing.

Although Woesser is free to travel to Lhasa to see her family, she is constantly tailed by minders. And as every friend she visits has been interrogated by authorities, she says she now avoids most personal contact.

Just as Wang follows his head, steadfast in his conviction that only with democratic reform can China ensure peaceful development, Woesser is the scribe who always follows her heart.

“Sometimes, I feel hopeless because, as a writer, I can’t change anything,” Woesser says. “Ultimately, all I have to answer to are my feelings. If I didn’t keep writing I’d feel the void inside.” ■



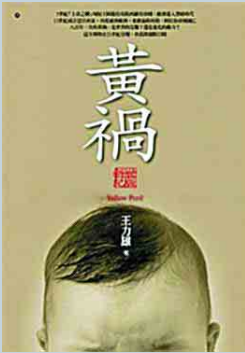
POWER OF THE PEN

Violet S. Law

Wang Lixiong

Renowned as one of the most vocal, vigilant commentators on Chinese-Tibetan relations and ethnic-minorities issues within China, Wang Lixiong has been recognised with the Freedom of Expression Award from the Independent Chinese PEN Centre. His works are considered to be among the most authoritative and balanced on the subject by a native Chinese writer.

- Body of work:
- *Drifting* (1988)
 - *Yellow Peril* (1991; pictured, translated into English as *China Tidal Wave*)
 - *Sky Burial: The Destiny of Tibet* (1998)
 - “Dissolution of a Dictatorship: A Progressive Multi-Level Electoral System” (A 1998 essay)
 - “Dialogue with Dalai Lama” (2002)
 - “The Spiritual Journey of a Free Spirit” (2002)
 - “Bottom-up Democracy” (2006)
 - *Unlocking Tibet* (2006)
 - *My Western China; Your East Turkestan* (2007)
 - *The Struggle for Tibet* (2009; co-authored with Tsering Shakya of the University of British Columbia, Canada)
 - *Voices from Tibet* (2009; published in English in November last year)
 - *Reincarnation: A Sequel to Yellow Peril* (2013; online)



VOICE OF TIBET

Violet S. Law

Tsering Woesser

Having discovered her heritage as a young adult, journalist-poet Tsering Woesser now occupies a unique position as chronicler of modern Tibetan memory. Her writings are widely regarded as the voice of Tibet. Woesser received the Netherlands’ Prince Claus Prize in 2011 for her compelling blend of literary treatment and political reportage, and the International Women of Courage Award from the US Department of State last year.

- Body of work:
- *Tibet Above* (1999; translated into English as *Tibet’s True Heart: Selected Poems*)
 - *Notes on Tibet* (2003)
 - *Maroon Map* (2003)
 - *Vicissitudes on the Barkhor* (2004)
 - *Tibet Memories* (2006)
 - *Forbidden Memories: Tibet during the Cultural Revolution* (2006; French: *Mémoire interdite: Témoignages sur la Révolution culturelle au Tibet*)
 - *Prayer Beads Tales* (2007)
 - *Voices from Tibet* (2009; published in English in November last year)
 - *Tibet: 2008* (2011; French: *El Tibet trenca el seu silenci*; Spanish: *El Tibet rompe su silencio*)
 - *Files on Tibetan Self-immolations* (2013; French: *Immolations au Tibet: La Honte du monde*)

