

# **The Prisoner — memoir of a Tibetan Revolutionary**

Monday 24 March 2008, by [TSERING Shakya](#) (Date first published: July 2005).

**Tsering Shakya on Melvyn Goldstein et al, *A Tibetan Revolutionary. Memoirs of an indigenous Lenin from the Land of Snows*, and his long imprisonment by the Mao government.**

In 1979 an article entitled 'The Twentieth-Century Bastille' appeared in a Chinese dissident magazine. It described the fate of two Tibetan prisoners languishing in Beijing's Qingchen Number One Prison, where high-ranking Communists had been incarcerated during the Cultural Revolution. The two were Phüntso Wangye, the founder of the Tibetan Communist Party in the 1940s, and his close comrade Ngawang Kesang. The article was the first sign we had that they were still alive. Phünwang, as he is most commonly known, had disappeared from the public scene in 1958 after playing a leading role in Tibetan affairs, and had spent 18 years in the notorious prison, most of the time in solitary confinement.

Phünwang—the title of the book under review uses an affectionate and familiar version of his name—is a prominent figure in the Tibetan community, yet relatively little is known about his life and political work. A brief biography in Tibetan by Dawei Sherap, one of the co-authors of the present book, was published privately and with a limited distribution. *A Tibetan Revolutionary* provides a much fuller account, and one that will be required reading for anyone interested in the history of modern Tibet. There is a sizable bibliography of Tibetan lives in English, but most follow the familiar narrative of happy natives living in an idealized community before the annexation by China. Phünwang's memoir—the book is the product of many long interviews conducted by Melvyn Goldstein, and is told in the first person—provides a far more complex account. It reveals the thinking and inspirations of a small group of Tibetans who wanted to bring reform and revolution to the Land of Snows and offers a wealth of information that will come as a revelation to readers.

Popular views of Phünwang fall into two camps: for traditionalists he is a collaborator and the man responsible for bringing the People's Liberation Army to Tibet; for the liberal section of the Tibetan community he is the leader we never had, and his personal loss was a loss to the nation. Goldstein has done more than any other scholar to bring the complexity of modern Tibetan history, warts and all, to the public arena. This new biography is being eagerly read and internet postings already show that Phünwang has found followers among a younger generation of Tibetans, who will no doubt look to him for inspiration and mourn the wasted years.

Phünwang was born in 1922 in Batang, a small town—'remote and beautiful'—in the Kham province of Eastern Tibet, some 500 miles east of Lhasa in what is now eastern Sichuan, then under the control of the Chinese warlord Liu Wenhui. A garrison town under the late Manchu dynasty, Batang had a modern government school that sent a stream of students, Phünwang's uncle among them, to train as Chinese administrators in Nanjing. The boy's baptism of fire in the turbulent politics of the region is vividly described. In 1932 Kesang Tsering, a local Nanjing-educated commander supposedly acting for the Guomindang, led an uprising in Batang against Liu Wenhui and proclaimed

Tibetan rule. 'Tall and strong, with a dark moustache, Kesang was a heroic figure to me and other youths'. Phünwang recalls him summoning the schoolboys to sing the 'Song of the New Kham' on the lines of Sun Yatsen's slogan 'nationalism, democracy, livelihood'. The victory was short-lived. Liu's returning army exacted retribution, executing local leaders. The ten-year-old and his friends were knocking walnuts down from a tree when they heard the gunshots: Phünwang's playmate's father had been killed. Further revolts followed in 1935, with Phünwang's uncle, Lobsang Thundrup, besieging the Chinese garrison at Batang, again in the name of the GMD, while Red Army units traversed the mountain ridge above the town on the Long March to the north-west. By the age of fourteen, Phünwang was determined to follow in the footsteps of Kesang and Lobsang, to study in Nanjing

*so that I too could become a leader in the fight for freedom for our Tibetan people . . . I didn't admire Kesang Tsering and my uncle simply because they had defied the Chinese [but] because they were educated, sophisticated and modern, as well as committed to the belief that Khampas had to rule Kham.*

It was a teacher, Mr Wang, at the special academy run by Chiang Kaishek's Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission, who first introduced the sixteen-year-old Phünwang to Lenin's *Nationality and the Right to Self-Determination*. With the Japanese invasion the academy was evacuated west to the temporary capital of Chongqing in Sichuan. Discipline loosened and political debate increased. For Phünwang and his fellow Tibetan students, Lenin's formulations on national self-determination came as a revelation:

*I understood what Lenin meant when he talked about the inevitable tension between the nationality that has power and the ones that do not . . . that the strong nationality would often use its power to oppress the smaller, weaker one, and that the smaller ones would fight bitterly against this. I felt sometimes as if Lenin knew exactly what I was thinking, what I cared about most.*

Phünwang's first attempts to organize his schoolfriends into a clandestine Tibetan Communist Revolutionary Group, and to petition around student issues, saw him expelled from the academy. Though shaken, he marched out of the school grounds singing at the top of his voice, vowing that he would not 'slink away'.

Now nineteen, Phünwang returned to Kham, initially working as a Chinese language and music teacher while vigorously pursuing his political goals. The strategy of the tiny Tibetan Communist Party under his leadership during the 1940s was twofold: to win over progressive elements among the students and aristocracy in 'political Tibet'—the kingdom of the Dalai Lama—to a programme of modernization and democratic reform, while building support for a guerrilla struggle to overthrow Liu Wenhui's rule in Kham. The ultimate goal was a united independent Tibet, its feudal social structure fundamentally transformed. Phünwang gives a lively critical account of the arrogance of certain members of the traditional elite, the cruelty of some of the monks he encountered during his travels and the poverty of the peasants—worse than in China itself—under the heavy taxes and corvée labour system.

His story makes a riveting read. In Lhasa, Phünwang tried to persuade the youngest member of the Kashag, Tibet's Council of Ministers, to provide rifles for the armed struggle in Kham. But the Kashag was pinning its hopes on an Axis victory: 'When Japan conquers China, they will leave Tibet alone. They are a Buddhist country, and we are far away', Phünwang was told. His next move was to try to contact the Indian Communist Party, with a view to reaching the Soviet Union. Travelling to Kalimpong with a trading caravan organized by his comrade Ngawang Kesang, and then by train to Calcutta, Phünwang was given a friendly welcome by the CPI but discouraged from making the trip across the North West Frontier into Soviet Central Asia: there were too many British troops in the

area. Back in Lhasa, the Kashag was still unwilling to help, although Allied victory was now in sight. Phünwang and his comrades instead set out for Deqen, a Khampa area in Yunnan province, where a local militia leader, Gombo Tsering, was willing to join them in an uprising against Liu Wenhui. Betrayed and attacked by Gombo Tsering's enemies, they were forced to flee back across the Driчу River into Tibet, hiding in the mountains and living on snow until Phünwang could finally make his way to the relative safety of his uncle's house in Lhasa, at the end of 1947.

The political situation was in flux. In the spring of 1949 the Tibetan Communists heard that the Chinese CP had established guerrilla bases in Khampa areas of Yunnan, and that the Burmese CP also had a strong force in the area. While making plans to join them, Phünwang and his comrades were expelled from Lhasa by the Tibetan government, now jumpy at the prospect of imminent Communist victory in China. Travelling via India, the Tibetan Communists reached the field headquarters of the Western Yunnan forces in August 1949. Here, however, the Red Army commander, a Bai named Ou Gen, demanded that the Tibetans dissolve their party into the CCP as a condition of joint guerrilla activity. After much argument, Phünwang agreed. Forced to abandon his goal of 'self-rule as an independent communist Tibet', he explains here that he still hoped that working through the Chinese Communist Party would lead to 'the restructuring of Kham, and possibly the whole Tibetan area on both sides of the Driчу River, as an autonomous republic that would function in a similar way to the autonomous socialist republics in the Soviet Union . . . it would be under Chinese sovereignty, but it would be controlled by Tibetans.'

Thus it was that, early in 1950, Phünwang—now a Party leader in liberated Batang—was summoned to a meeting in Chongqing with Deng Xiaoping, He Long and other commanders of the Southwest Bureau's 18<sup>th</sup> Army, and appointed a leading advisor for the PLA entry into Tibet. (Symbolically perhaps, the plane to Chongqing encountered such turbulence that Phünwang became airsick, and could find no other receptacle in which to throw up than his brand-new PLA cap.) He played a key diplomatic role in negotiations over the Seventeen-Point Agreement between Beijing and Lhasa, and in winning acceptance for it from members of the Tibetan aristocracy. Almost from the start, he was critical of the chauvinism and 'top-down' attitude of many of the CCP cadres. Yet he was proud to have opened a secular school in Lhasa—earlier attempts to do so had been shut down by the monasteries—and established a newspaper, drawing in leading Tibetan intellectuals to write for it. Crucially, Phünwang sided with Deng's Southwest Bureau in backing a cautious approach to social reform and winning the support of the Dalai Lama and monastic elite, against the leftism of the Northwest Bureau under Fan Ming, which favoured the Panchen Lama. Phünwang's secondment to an official posting in Beijing from 1953 was the result, he argues here, of Fan Ming's manoeuvring to get him out of Lhasa.

Phünwang was the trusted translator for talks between Mao and the 19-year-old Dalai Lama in Beijing in 1956 (taking it as his duty to make sure the boy did not get up to dance the foxtrot with the ladies of the State Dance troupe, as the CCP cadres liked to do). He recounts an unannounced visit by Mao to the Dalai Lama's residence one evening, during which the former raised the matter of the Snow Lion flag still carried by the Tibetan Army, and which Fan Ming wished to ban. 'There is no problem. You may keep your national flag', Mao told him, according to Phünwang. 'In the future, we can also let Xinjiang have their own flag, and Inner Mongolia too. Would it be OK to carry the national flag of the People's Republic of China in addition to that flag?' The Dalai Lama apparently nodded his head. For Phünwang, this was evidence that the CCP leadership was contemplating adopting the Soviet model of autonomous republics, at least for these three nationalities.

Yet the political climate was already shifting. Phünwang deplored the reforms imposed by fiat in Kham that would lead to the 1958-59 uprising, brutally crushed by the PLA, and lamented the fact that the central government did not understand the relationship between Kham and Tibet. As a delegate to the 1957 National People's Congress he was openly critical of Fan Ming's policies. The

following year he was summoned before a disciplinary committee and ordered to 'cleanse his thinking'. The anti-rightist campaign was getting under way, and Phünwang became a non-person at the Nationalities Institute. In August 1960 he was arrested, accused of 'counter-revolutionary acts'. He was thirty-eight. When he was finally released from the 'Beijing Bastille', after several periods of insanity, he was fifty-seven. The worst of many tortures he recalled was being bombarded by 'electronic waves' in his cell, which produced excruciating headaches. For months after his release he could not stop himself drooling. Impressively, after a year's recovery, he returned to the fray, drafting proposals for an 'autonomous republic' model for the 1980 debate on the PRC Constitution, and arguing powerfully that the PLA should not be used for police work in the minority nationality regions, where its role was all too comparable to that of an army of occupation. When his suggestions drew down a damning 10-thousand-character attack from Party officials, Phünwang responded with a 25-thousand-character rebuttal. Now in his eighties and officially rehabilitated, he remains a critical voice, still attentively following developments in the Land of Snows.

Phünwang's nationalist identity and assertion of the rights of the Tibetans presented a problem for the CCP. The Communist revolution in China was also, in its own way, an assertion of nationalism, and a desire to restore China's greatness. In the pursuit of this, the aspirations of other groups were mere obstacles. Phünwang and other young radical Tibetans allied themselves with the CCP as a means of bringing reform and social change to Tibet; yet once China had established firm control over the region, the Tibetan Communists were deposed and replaced with Han officials. A leading political figure in the 1950s, Phünwang was the only Tibetan to possess any degree of authority during the first decade of Chinese rule. His knowledge of the language and his position as a socially aware figure made him into a vital cultural and political mediator, a role that gave him access to the highest levels of the CCP as well as to the Dalai Lama (who wrote of him affectionately in his autobiography). Yet Phünwang's active political life was over by 1958. His fate and those of his comrades reveal the continuing problems of Beijing's rule: after fifty years, the Party has not managed to promote a Tibetan to the top leadership in Lhasa. The dangerous accusation of 'local nationalism' pinned on Phünwang is still applied to any Tibetan who opposes the CCP's policy. Such threats continue to silence indigenous leaders.

The use of the first-person narrative makes *A Tibetan Revolutionary* more of an autobiography than a biography, in the strict sense of the term. Phünwang's voice carries the narrative forward and there is no attempt at critical or analytical judgement of his account. It is clear to readers that this is Phünwang's view of events, and this is one of the book's strengths. As such, however, it remains subject to debate and scrutiny. The PRC is changing; the publication of this book is one indication of that, and of the increasing access now gained by scholars to materials in China and Tibet. Much of the information presented here has yet to be tested against historical and archival sources, and there may be differing versions still to appear. This in no way diminishes the importance of the book. It is quite likely that even after examining other sources, we will find Phünwang's voice carries a greater degree of truth and accuracy than any other testimony published so far. There is a sense of authenticity in the narrative, established by a tone that does not dwell on recrimination over the lost years. Despite his personal suffering, Phünwang maintains a balanced outlook and never descends to self-pity. To some, his lack of anger will appear naïve, but careful reading reveals the strength of his character. Phünwang remains hopeful that China and Tibet may find a way to coexist. In talks with a delegation sent by the Dalai Lama in 1979, published here as an appendix, Phünwang discussed the Tibetan exiles' characterization of him as 'the red Tibetan who led the red Han into Tibet' and defended his goals. The Communists—'in the words of Chairman Mao'—were there

*to help the Tibetans to stand up, to be the masters in their own home, reform themselves, engage in construction to improve the living standard of the people and build a happy new society. But I never meant to lead the Han people into Tibet to establish rule over the Tibetans by the Han people. If so,*

*the 'red Han', the Liberation Army, and the 'red Tibetans' who were their guides are all phony communists.*

The strategy, he insisted, must be judged on its upshot—how much further Tibetans have moved towards an improved living standard and being 'masters of their home' under the PRC. It is such achievements as these that would make him, in his own words, one of the 'good guys'. Indeed, one of the questions that this book poses is whether reforms would have occurred in Tibet if China had not intervened in 1950. Phünwang's account allows us to trace the efforts of the small group of radicals who were working towards the creation of an indigenous social movement. Like his boyhood hero, Phünwang composed songs as much to educate his people as to inspire them. One stirring anthem from the 1940s begins:

Rise up, rise up, rise up,

Tibetan brothers.

The time for fighting has come but

Still haven't you awoken from sleep?

We can no longer bear to live

Under the oppression of powerful officials.

Tsampa eaters, rise up,

Seize control of your own land.

Seize political power.

What is clear is that Phünwang was the victim of a revolution betrayed. This excellent, detailed account of his life will help future generations to decide for themselves whether he was indeed a good guy or not.

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## **P.S.**

\* Review article published under the title "The Prisoner" by New Left Review 34, July-August 2005.

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