

# Red Tibet

Monday 24 March 2008, by [ASTHANA Anant K.](#) (Date first published: 15 September 2007).

World knows little about the communists Tibet produced and certainly not much about Bapa Phuntso Wangye alias 'Phunwang', one of the most important Tibetan revolutionary figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in 1922, Phunwang grew up in a region inhabited mainly by ethnic Tibetans but not considered part of 'political' Tibet. During his schooling in Nanjing, the capital of China under Guomindang, he developed an inclination towards the writings of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. There he founded a secret Tibetan Communist Party and in his early days resisted Chinese domination over his homeland through guerrilla techniques. In 1949, when communists took control over China, he merged his independent Tibetan Communist Party with Mao's Chinese Communist Party. He was the translator for the young Dalai Lama during his famous 1954-55 meetings with Mao Zedong. In spite of his devotion to socialism and staunch faith in the Communist Party, Phunwang's persistent commitment to the welfare of Tibetans and strong advocacy for the interests of Tibetan nationality made him a suspect in the eyes of Han Chinese party colleagues. In 1958, he was secretly detained then imprisoned for 18 years in solitary confinement. From 1985 to 1993, Phunwang served as a deputy director of the Nationalities Committee of the National People's Congress and was an advisor to the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. In 1990, Tibetan People's Publishing House published his major study *New Explorations of Dialectics* that attracted wide appreciation throughout China. This led to a conference focusing on his works. In his late 1980s, he continues to work with Chinese government and holds a good reputation even among most anti-communist Tibetans.

Devastation of Tibet under communist rule, is often described and explained in a dominant context of struggle between two opposing ideologies based on religion and atheistic communism but with Phunwang, Tibet as he describes 'Tibetan nationality' stands as a victim of 'Han majoritarianism' for which he claims there is no scope under Marxism. In 1979, in a conversation with a delegation sent by the Dalai Lama, Comrade Phuntso Wangye declared, "I was and am still a communist who believes in Marxism. I am a communist, true, but I was also in solitary confinement in a communist prison for as long as 18 years and suffered from both mental and physical torture" but then he does not blame party, at all, rather he says, "I was put into prison by people who executed the laws, broke the laws and violated party discipline and the laws of the country." Prominent Tibetans, of course in exile, accuse him of being a 'Red Tibetan' who led the 'Red Han' into Tibet and he, unhesitatingly admits, "To be accurate, I led the People's Liberation Army. I was the Tibetan who guided the people, who in the words of Chairman Mao, were there to help the Tibetans - the brotherly Tibetans - to stand up, be the masters of their homes, reform themselves, and be engaged in construction to improve the living standards of the people and build a happy new society. But I never meant to lead the Han people into Tibet to establish rule over Tibetans by the Han people." Few months back in July 2007, in Beijing, he accused Chinese government hawks of closing the door on dialogue with the Dalai Lama and misleading the leadership about the exiled Buddhist monk's influence.

Contemporary discourse on Tibet tends to depict realities in black and white, where all the Tibetans are oppressed and the very term 'Chinese' stands for 'oppressor' but Phunwang differs on such bland categorisation. He wants the world to believe that there were people in China who wanted to help Tibetans as brothers and that he made alliance with such brotherly Chinese only, not with Hans who wanted to rule over Tibet. He was a staunch communist who thought that the people whom he is helping to enter Tibet will be as staunch communists as himself and, therefore, would help creating a new Tibet as they did in case of China.

Phunwang, an admirer of Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach, continues to speak out for Tibet intelligently and forcefully without fear and holds a view that there are no major differences between the Dalai Lama, who wants autonomy, and the Chinese government, which cherishes national unification. In an interview with Melvyn Goldstein in 2002, Phuwang describes, "First, in the decade between 1939 and 1949, we struggled to achieve progress and development for the Tibetan nationality, social reforms in Tibet, the happiness of the Tibetan people, and the reunification and liberation of the entire Tibetan nationality. Although we did our best, under the prevailing historical conditions, we failed to make much progress. After the new China was founded in 1949, I continued to work unwaveringly for the progress and development of the Tibetan nationality through new channels, in new ways, and with new methods under the new historical conditions. I believe that under today's historical conditions, Tibetans and other minority nationalities should unite with the powerful Han nationality for their mutual benefit. This has been my basic point of view since the founding of new China."

Contemporary discourse on Tibet tends to depict realities in black and white, where all the Tibetans are oppressed and the very term 'Chinese' stands for 'oppressor' but Phunwang differs on such bland categorization.

He accuses 'Wrongful line of Leftism' for causing harm and destruction to Tibet and its unique culture in the late 1950s but all his defence of 'Real communism' goes unattended and unappreciated by exile intellectuals who perceive Phunwang as a traitor. "Therefore, if the essence and goal of our guiding the Han into Tibet was for the Han people to rule the Tibetans or that the Han themselves wanted to rule the Tibetans, we would have been traitors to Marxism and traitors to the Tibetan Nationality and people," says Phunwang in a powerful rebuttal of accusations made against him.

Gelek Namgyal, a staff from Tibetan Parliamentary and Policy Research Centre, New Delhi on being asked to describe Phunwang's general reputation among Tibetan in exile says, "He is a Tibetan nationalist who wanted to reform feudal system in Tibet."

There is no doubt that story of 'Phunwang' gives wonderful perspectives and insights about Tibet's occupation by communist forces and what actually went wrong. "Phunwang sees China as a multiethnic state where large minorities like Tibetans constitutionally have the right to cultural, economic and a modicum of political autonomy, and should be considered equal in all ways to the Han (majority ethnic) Chinese. The issue for Phunwang is not that Tibetans demand to separate from China, but that they want the Han Chinese to treat them as equals. And it was to say this to people in China and throughout the world, that Phunwang took a great risk and gave me interviews over many years," says Melvyn Goldstein. He exposed Phunwang to the modern world by his wonderful biographical book on Phunwang A Tibetan Revolutionary: The Political Life and Times of Bapa Phuntso Wangye written with the help of William Siebenschuh and Dawei Sherap.

In spite of growing curiosity about the life and personality of Phunwang, he by and large remains a controversial figure in Tibetan world, whose loyalty towards Tibetans is often disputed on the grounds of his contribution in facilitating Chinese occupation over Tibet.

---

## **P.S.**

\* From Phayul [Monday, October 15, 2007 13:29]:

<http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=18229&t=1&c=1>.

\* Writer is a Campaigner for Tibet and a Human Rights Lawyer with Human Rights Law Network.

Contact: [asthana.anant@gmail.com](mailto:asthana.anant@gmail.com)