

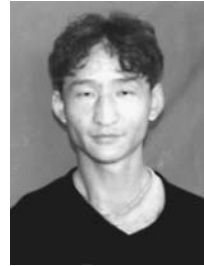


## SILENCED VOICES: DOLMA KYAB

by Sara Whyatt

It is hard to believe that of all the topics that could bring a writer trouble, geography and the environment would be among them. But writing on these issues led the Tibetan scholar, Dolma Kyab, to be imprisoned in March 2005. He is not due to be released for another seven years.

Over the centuries, Tibet has seen its influence expand to neighboring countries, while the country itself has come under the rule of other powers, including the Mongols, the Manchus, and, in the early 1900s, the British. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was able to function as an independent state until 1951 when Chinese troops entered Tibet, and the region was annexed. In 1959, the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, fled into exile. In the 1960s, Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution was rigorously enforced—Tibetan religion was banned, monasteries closed, and its language and culture suppressed. Thousands of Tibetans were imprisoned, and many more fled the



*Dolma Kyab*

repression. Today the Dalai Lama remains exiled, and the Tibetan independence movement continues to be a thorn in the Chinese government's side.

In light of this turbulent history, it is not surprising that Kyab, now aged thirty-two, is one of many Tibetans held in prison today. He is described as a highly educated intellectual who studied history and geography at the Qinghai Normal University, graduating in 1999 to go on to do a master's at Beijing University. He left China in 2003 for Dharamsala, India, where the exiled Tibetan government, headed by the Dalai Lama, has had its base since 1960. Here Kyab studied English and Hindi, before going to Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, in 2004, where he took up a post as a history teacher at a middle school.

While in India, Kyab started work on a comprehensive study of Tibet, written in Chinese, entitled *The Restless Himalayas*. Its fifty-seven chapters cover the region's geography, history, and religion. Kyab's studies were much admired by Tibetans in exile, for writing in philosophical terms about Tibetan identity, the call for the Dalai Lama's return from exile, and the relationship between Tibetans and Chinese. He is said to have been friendly with Chinese intellectuals, some of whom have publicly protested his arrest. At the time of his arrest, he was working on a second, shorter manuscript, where he touched on the sensitive topic of the location of Chinese military bases in the Tibetan region.

One of Kyab's particular concerns is for Tibetan nomadic communities living under a Chinese policy that has led to the division and fencing up of land, and the settlement of nomads. A June 2007 report by Human Rights Watch states: *The Chinese government explains forced relocations as a necessary policy to protect the environment and to "develop," "civilize," and "modernize" both these areas and the people living there. Some Chinese officials have promoted the concentration of herders in urban areas as a way to improve the herders' access to social and medical services, and also stimulate the growth of urban economies in the poorer, western regions of China. But others arguably have less lofty motives of wanting to suppress Tibetan culture and forcibly assimilate Tibetans into Han Chinese society.* The environmental impact of the relocations is also cause for alarm, with fears that ending the herders' traditional grassland management will damage

bio-diversity, as well as have disastrous socioeconomic effects on their communities, bringing to an end a centuries-old way of life.

Tibet has the largest uranium reserves in the world, and Dolma Kyab has written of the acute pollution that mining has brought to the region. Birth defects, cancers, contaminated drinking water, and high mortality rates for both cattle and humans have been reported. Protests against the mines and the ruination of the environment have led to persecution and arrests. Across China, deaths directly attributed to pollution are said to be in the hundreds of thousands each year. In recent years this has become a leading cause of riots and disturbances, which are in turn severely repressed. Publication of the extensive and alarming data on the pollution is banned for fear of exacerbating social unrest. In June 2007, a draft of a World Health Organization report, which cites 750,000 pollution-related deaths a year, was reportedly censored by the Chinese, who requested that this figure be reduced for fear of raising alarm, especially as the 2008 Olympic Games near.

On March 9, 2005, Kyab was himself arrested, charged with “endangering state security,” and imprisoned. In September that year, he was sentenced to ten years in prison, a sentence that was upheld the following November. The Chinese authorities rarely release political prisoners early, so he is likely to have to serve his full term.

Dolma Kyab was tried in a closed court and no information was given to explain his conviction, although it appears that charges are centered on his research and his writings about the environment and the people living around Chinese military bases in the Tibet region. In November 2005, in a letter smuggled out of prison, Kyab wrote: *[Chinese officials] think that what I wrote about nature and geography was also connected to Tibetan independence... this is the main reason for my conviction, but according to Chinese law the book alone would not justify such a sentence. So they announced that I am guilty of the crime of espionage.*

At the time of this writing, Kyab is held in Xining, Qinghai province. In July 2007, a former Xining detainee who had recently been freed told of meeting Kyab a few days before he left, and of his fears for his friend's health. It is known that Kyab had suffered tuberculosis some time during the first year of his imprisonment, for which he eventually

received treatment. In March 2007, the International Committee of the Red Cross issued an alert stating that the disease is one hundred times more common in prisons than among the general public. Overcrowding, inadequate ventilation, and lack of medical resources are the main reasons for its prevalence in jails. Many prisoners in China have contracted the disease, and, in Kyab's case, it is thought that he did not get treated for some time, which meant that he became seriously ill and may not have recovered fully.

It is Kyab's writings that express his love for his country, his concern for the environment, and for the nomadic community amongst whom he grew up, which have led to his imprisonment. The accusation that he is a danger to national security is clearly not the case, and can only be seen as a means of suppressing views that call for Tibetan independence, and a voice that has never used or advocated violence. The irony is that it's not individuals such as Dolma Kyab who are dangerous, but the extreme and frightening levels of pollution across the whole of China, including the Tibet region, that is the real danger to the people who live there. Banning studies and commentary on this ever-growing calamity, suppressing the evidence, and imprisoning those who question the damage to their ways of life, can do nothing but deepen the problems.

Appeals calling for the release of Dolma Kyab can be sent to:

His Excellency Hu Jintao  
President of the People's Republic of China  
State Council  
Beijing 100032, China

Or use this [sample letter](#) to write or fax the Chinese ambassador in the U.S.

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