

Ama Adhe: The Voice That Remembers

The Heroic Story of a Woman's Fight to Free Tibet

by Adhe Tapontsang
as told to Joy Blakeslee

BOSTON: WISDOM PUBLICATIONS, 1997
241 PAGES + APPENDIX + GLOSSARY + BIBLIOGRAPHY

The story that Ama Adhe (*Ama* means mother and is used as a form of address) tells is not one that most people will want to hear. It depicts in graphic detail the capacity for inhumanity that besieges us, reminding us of our collective failure at creating a sensible world. Ama Adhe's story documents the particular tragedy that is the story of Tibetan peoples since their country was invaded by communist China in the 1950s. It is the story of the brutal subjugation, political repression, and cultural destruction that has continued apace, with but brief periods of respite, to the present.

In this book, Ama Adhe tells us of the 27 years of torture, abuse and near-death she experienced as a political prisoner of the People's Republic of China. Adhe, from a prominent family in the Nyarong district in the Tibetan province of Kham, was an organizer of the village resistance against Chinese occupation in the mid 1950s. She had been planning to flee to Lhasa with her husband and their first child, a son named Chimi Wangyal, when suddenly, at a party before their departure, her husband died of poisoning. They suspected that the Chinese had tainted the meat he had eaten. Unable to make the journey alone because she was two months pregnant, plans to leave for Lhasa were canceled. The men of the village decided shortly afterward to take to the nearby forested hills to conduct a campaign of resistance. Adhe organized the women of the village in gathering information about Chinese activities in town and relaying this along with food and supplies to the men.

Through Ama Adhe, we hear the story of a heroic showdown between Khampa resistance fighters from the region who, accompanied by women, children and the elderly, and armed essentially only with their long swords, took their last stand against three infantry divisions of Chinese soldiers on the plains of Bu na thang in Nyarong. "Many Tibetans of our region who were able to fight were killed in this battle," Adhe recalls. "It was found that when they died, the grip of their hands on their swords had been so tight, so intense, that their hands turned brown from the blood" (77).

In 1956, a particularly ruthless Chinese commander named Xian Zhang was assigned to her village. His murdering of villagers became intolerable to the Tibetans. One night, Ama Adhe's brother-in-law Pema Gyaltsen and four others came out of the forest and killed Xian Zhang. Adhe's brother Ochoe, who had been under house arrest at the time, was accused and sentenced to be executed. Pema Gyaltsen and the four turned themselves in. A short time later, one of these men, under torture, gave Ama Adhe's name to the Chinese authorities.

One morning about six months after the death of her husband, Adhe heard a commotion outside, and soon several People's Liberation Army soldiers entered her home. They chastised her, kicked her, and took her away from her life. She left her son and one-year-old daughter, Tashi Khando. And so began Ama Adhe's 27 years of detention and "re-education." She was tortured to give up the names of others involved in the resistance, but Adhe refused, thinking: "After suffering tremendously and undergoing so many atrocities, I

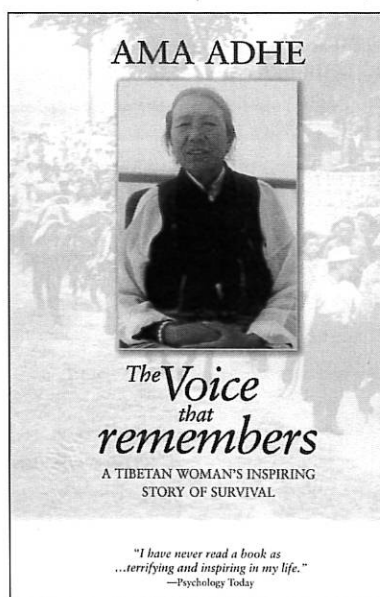
couldn't bear the thought of inflicting this on my friends. Every night, I reaffirmed my resolve to be silent, no matter what" (92).

Ama Adhe details the experience of hard labor, starvation, torture, and persistent ill treatment of the prisoners in seven different prison facilities. The story of corpse-like bodies in the prison Gothang Gyalgo, a lead mining facility, of the nearly starved-to-death "hungry ghosts" and the mass grave of those who did finally succumb, is particularly chilling. Ama Adhe talks about her continuing resistance to the will of her Chinese captors and the punishments she received. She describes surviving by stealing food meant for the pigs, maintaining a religious practice by praying to her tutelary deity, *Dolma*, praying for the dead, aiding others when she could, and being aided by others, including some of the Tibetan prison guards. And similarly, she reveals the treachery of some of her prison mates, who informed on prisoners' conversations and activities, of the thieving guards, and of the prison warden who systematically raped young Tibetan women.

The anonymity which typically shrouds the functionaries who perpetrate crimes against political prisoners gives way in Ama Adhe's narrative, and we come to know the names of such people as the rapist warden at the prison at Dartsedo (the Ngachoe monastery was converted into a prison), Zhang Su-dui. We also learn the names of Adhe's cell mates who became her friends, of the lamas and rinpoches she was with at the prison camps.

Although her sentence of 16 years of "Reform through Labor" was over in 1974, Adhe continued to be detained until 1985. In 1989, having received permission from Chinese authorities to go to Nepal to bring her brother Jughuma back but unable to secure the necessary visa, she fled to Nepal and eventually to India.

The story Ama Adhe tells does not end with her release from prison and subsequent escape to India. We get information about the arrest and torture of political prisoners in Tibet almost on a weekly basis. This is not propaganda created by the Tibetan exile government in Dharamsala. What we must be wary of is that in the



BOOK REVIEWS

name of "objective" scholarship and impartiality, we either by default or design, favor the policies of a repressive, immoral regime. "Objective" in the case of the Tibet issue typically plays out to mean "pro-Chinese" and often "anti-Dharamsala." Under the banner of cultural relativism, we begin to believe the Chinese rhetoric that says that how China deals with Tibetans is an "internal" matter. With the Tibet movement having become "Hollywood chic" and the Dalai Lama nearly a household word, it is easy to slip into cynicism and discount the story of Ama Adhe, or that of the dozens of other Tibetans who have recounted their own stories, as part of California hyperbole or Dharamsala public relations.

We would be doing a disservice to Ama Adhe to take her story only as a particularistic account. For Adhe, the accomplishment of this book is not ego enhancement, but rather the fulfilling of a promise she made to the thousands of Tibetans who have not survived the 48-year Chinese occupation of their country. Hers is the voice of the silenced. Through the publishing of this book, Ama Adhe fulfills her obligation to the men and particularly the women whose story she shares. Ama Adhe's story has been repeated thousands of times in recent Tibetan history, and certainly tens of thousands of times in human history during this century alone. Ama Adhe ends her book with a message to the reader: "May the necessity of peace in this world be realized, and may people come to understand that conflicts cannot possibly be resolved by force. I hope that the readers of this book will come to the aid of the Tibetan people, for all who live on this small planet are interrelated, and the suffering of one is, on some level, the suffering of many" (241).

As educators, perhaps Ama Adhe's story challenges us to raise issues with our students that call into question the callousness and cynicism or predictability and triteness with which we react to stories of human suffering and the rampant inhumanity perpetrated by human beings against one another. How are each of us accomplices in the perpetuation, if not creation, of such regimes and practices of power? And how can we respond through our own life choices in a meaningful way?

Obviously, the material in this book is for audiences of some maturity—college level and upper levels of high school. While I do not see this as a primary text, it should certainly be used as supplemental reading to teach about the peoples and history of the state of China. It would also be an excellent complementary resource for the teaching of world or global issues, particularly in the area of repressive regimes and human rights and about women's roles in political struggle. ■

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Books listed here were recently received by the editors. Normally, we do not plan reviews of titles on this list.

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