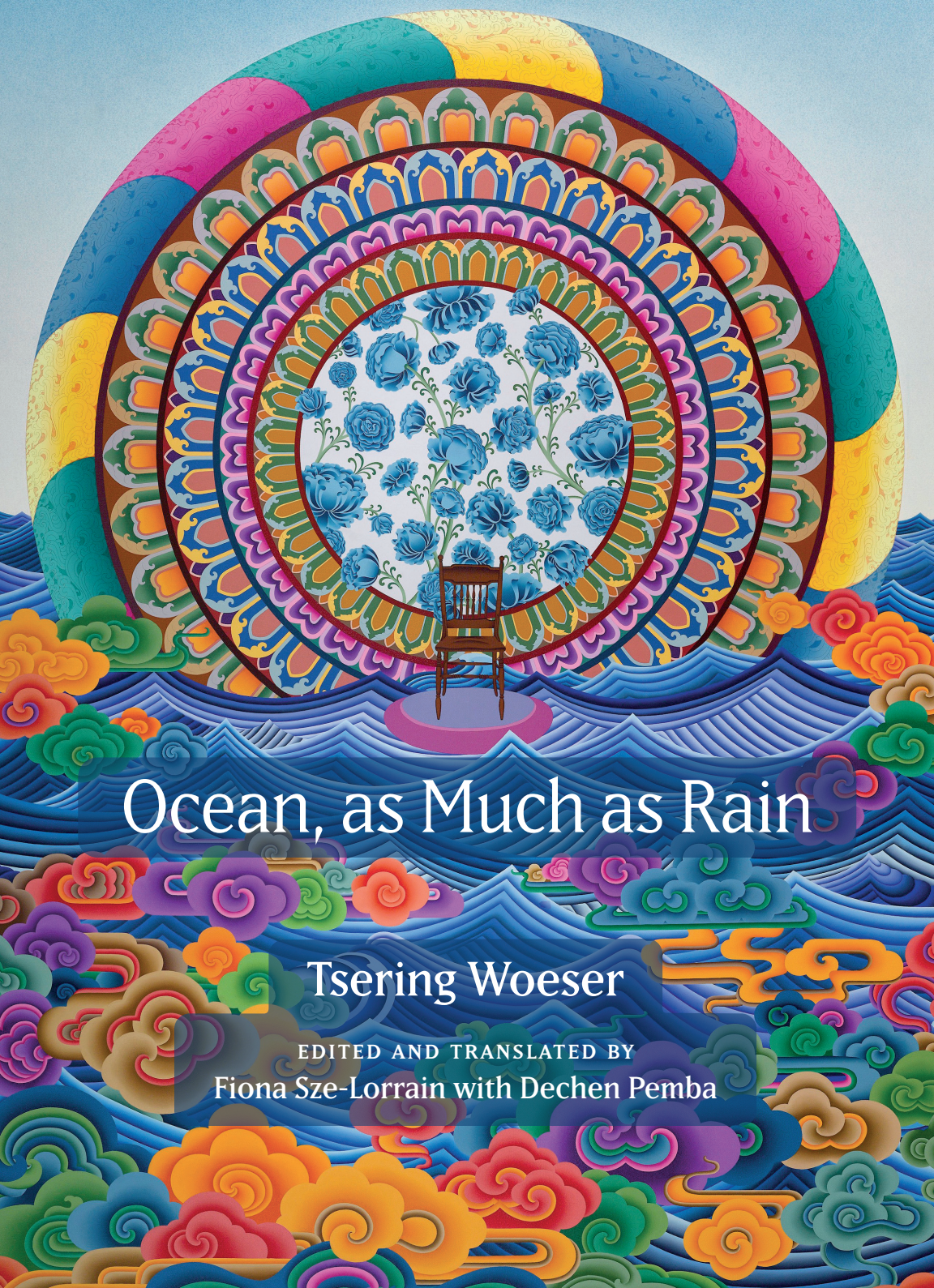


STORIES, LYRICAL PROSE, AND POEMS FROM TIBET



Ocean, as Much as Rain

Tsering Woeser

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
Fiona Sze-Lorrain with Dechen Pemba

Ocean, as Much as Rain



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Fiona Sze-Lorrain with Dechen Pemba

FOREWORD BY
Pankaj Mishra

DUKE

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2026

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Bird Williams

Designed by Dave Rainey

Typeset in Warnock Pro and Matrix II by Copperline

Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Weise, [date] author | Sze-Lorrain, Fiona editor

translator | Pemba, Dechen editor translator | Mishra, Pankaj

writer of foreword

Title: Ocean, as much as rain : stories, lyrical prose, and poems from Tibet / by Tsering Woesser ; edited and translated from the Chinese by Fiona Sze-Lorrain and Dechen Pemba ; foreword by Pankaj Mishra.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2026. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025021833 (print)

LCCN 2025021834 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478033110 paperback

ISBN 9781478029687 hardcover

ISBN 9781478061861 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Tibet Autonomous Region (China)—Fiction |

Tibet Autonomous Region (China)—Poetry | Tibet Autonomous

Region (China)—Foreign relations—China | LCGFT: Short

stories | Poetry | Essays | Fiction.

Classification: LCC PL2966.O47 a2 2026 (print)

LCC PL2966. O47 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025021833>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025021834>

Cover art: Tenzing Rigdol, *Biography of a Thought* (detail),

2022–24, acrylic on stretched canvas and woven carpet

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FOREWORD

Pankaj Mishra

One late December evening in 2007, a few hours before boarding the new Chinese train to Lhasa, I met Woesser at a hotel in Beijing. I remember she spoke with passion about what she saw as a colonial imposition, which spelled the end of Tibetan culture. And the more I learned of her background, the more impressed and moved I was.

Very little in her life had predisposed her to the role of the “dissident,” or the prominent critic of the Chinese presence in Tibet. Her half-Tibetan father had been a teenage soldier in China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) that “peacefully liberated” Tibet in 1951, establishing Communist rule over the country’s largely Buddhist population. Born in 1966, Woesser herself, as she writes in one of her poems, was “raised under the bugle of the PLA” in Tibet, and indoctrinated deeply enough as a child to burst into tears on hearing of Mao’s death in 1976.

As a young poet, she had, she told me, no interest in politics until she read, in the late 1980s, a Chinese translation of a book on Tibetan exiles by John Avedon, son of the famous photographer Richard Avedon. She had been shocked when her father and uncle, also a dedicated Tibetan Communist, confirmed that at least 60 to 70 percent of the book’s account of Chinese atrocities against Tibetans was true. But it was not until 2000, when she met her husband Wang Lixiong, the leading Han Chinese writer on Tibet, that she began to write about Tibetan politics.

In 2003, Chinese authorities banned her most popular book, *Notes on Tibet*, ostensibly for praising the Dalai Lama; they also fired her from her job as editor of *Tibetan Literature* and forbade her from leaving the country. Ordered to receive “reeducation” at one of the railway’s construction sites, Woesser left Tibet and now lives with Wang Lixiong in Beijing. Her life as a freelance writer remains precarious: Chinese internet police frequently shut down her blogs.

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Translated by Fiona Sze-Lorrain with Dechen Pemba, *Ocean, as Much as Rain* introduces us to a writer who in isolation has developed a startling range of skills. Memoirist, poet, fictionist, historian, critic, and polemicist: She assumes these different roles with serene confidence, style, and wit. Flourishing in profoundly unpromising circumstances, Woeseer ennobles the free life of the mind like few writers today.

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OCEAN CAN BE RAIN

Woeser's Poetry, Fiction, and Lyrical Prose

Fiona Sze-Lorrain

As an artist and a bilingual, educated, courageous Tibetan woman, Tsering Woeser (ཚེ་རིང་འདྲ་ཟེལ་།) is uniquely positioned to observe and comment on her society and world. Popularly known by the single name “Woeser,” she has authored more than twenty collections of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, including two of the most significant Chinese-language books on Tibet: *Notes on Tibet* (2003) and *Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution* (2006). Woeser has earned worldwide respect as much for her prolific literary work as for her sociopolitical engagement as a dissident within the borders of the current People's Republic of China. As a poet, essayist, fiction writer, and journalist, she is one of the few Tibetans who works across various literary genres. As a human rights activist, she crosses firewalls, speaking out while being physically contained inside mainland China.

Born on July 21, 1966, in Lhasa, Woeser grew up mostly in the Kham region of Tibet (in today's Sichuan province). Her father, Tsering Dorje, had been recruited into the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950 at age thirteen as Mao Zedong marched his army toward Lhasa. His position as a PLA officer and senior commander afforded Woeser an elite Chinese upbringing and education unavailable to most Tibetans. Her upbringing was stable, her family environment comfortable, with the period of China's opening up in the 1980s as a backdrop in which there were few political tensions or divisions.

Woeser graduated in 1988 with a degree in Chinese from Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu, Sichuan. She quickly found work as a journalist and an editor at *Kardze Daily*, the local newspaper in Dartsedo,¹ the capital of Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Kardze.² In 1990, she returned to Lhasa, where she served as an editor for the government-run journal *Tibetan Literature*. It was then that she experienced an existential awakening. This, in addition to her father's death a year later, made her feel

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for the first time “sinicized,” she later recalled. The anguish of becoming an alien in her own hometown left her with an acute feeling of emptiness along with her grief.

Educated solely in Chinese, Woeseer began to grow fully conscious of her Tibetan identity. Her sociocultural coming-of-age in the early 1990s led to a heightened political awareness that was later found in her cross-genre writing. Woeseer therefore writes as both an outsider and insider in all senses. On top of being discriminated against by her Chinese peers as an “ethnic minority writer,” she felt alienated from her own Tibetan selfhood through her marriage to a Han Chinese man in 2004, to say nothing of the guilt of not knowing the Tibetan language well enough to express herself in writing. Tibetan-language education was not an option for anyone of her generation.

It took her years to break free from the confines of writing only in Chinese. Doing so enabled her to leverage her native language to reaffirm her Tibetan identity and speak out against physical repression. She calls her residence in Beijing a kind of “exile” away from Lhasa, which she had felt compelled to leave. Still, it is with this conflicting sense of cultural liminality that Woeseer has written so movingly about the dilemmas often experienced by Tibetans, who must negotiate and cohabitate with their Chinese “friends,” as well as their “savage” religious rites, “primitive” customs, and long-standing taboos and superstitions, all of which remain much misunderstood not only by the foreigners and the Chinese but also by the younger and sinicized generation of Tibetans.

Apart from her journalism and editorial work, Woeseer began publishing poems in the late 1980s as a bridge to other genres. Poetry was her first passport to a literary life. The subject matter of her work became increasingly political, addressing controversial topics such as the status of Tibet, its Buddhist culture and contemporary past. As one of the few Tibetan writers who have no choice but to use Chinese as their language of expression, Woeseer routinely refers to this linguistic anomaly as her lifelong “tongue surgery” or “linguistic mutation.” Such phrases are rarely voiced by “minority” writers in China, because they are viewed as subversive in a despotic one-party regime that cracks down on any sign of civil dissent.

After her college years, Woeseer found peers from the regional writing circle to share her artistic tastes and inspirations. She has named Russian poets Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva as her poetic heroines throughout her writing life. In her younger days, she read the modernist British and American canon and was attracted to countercultural figures such as Allen

Ginsberg, even though state-endorsed establishments would consider these foreign cultural influences elitist if not radical.

Woeser reads very little Chinese contemporary writing nowadays. This is both her personal and political choice, a continuation of her own decolonization process. She explains, “The reason I don’t read contemporary Chinese writing is precisely because there are very few Chinese writers, poets, and scholars who dare to criticize totalitarianism in China today; almost all of them pander to the authorities. There are very few intellectuals in the true sense of the word in this country, plus the vast majority of Chinese writers, poets, scholars are cultural hegemonists. This is what my life experience as a Tibetan surviving in China has taught me.” Instead, she often immerses herself in translations of poets and writers from the former Soviet Union or countries that have also suffered a history of totalitarianism. Woeser cites philosopher Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Russian American cultural theorist Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* (2002) as two of the most influential books in her reading life. An aficionado of Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges, she continues to revisit Marguerite Duras’s books and films for her appealing style of narration and considers Jean-Paul Sartre a spiritual guide. Woeser’s Buddhist practice is an unassailable impetus in her writing. “Whenever I can, I read and recite prayers: *The Heart Sutra*, *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, *Tara Sutra* . . .” she shared in a personal email. “I meditate and commit myself to two hundred and sixteen full-body prostrations every night. Like osmosis, such discipline must have impacted my writing.”

As Woeser gained more recognition in China in the mid-1990s, her poems rejected a romanticized self and became more narrative. She branched out into more hybrid prose, specifically investigative writing. During an interview with the online international journal *Cerise Press* in 2012, the poet described in retrospect those changes as part of a process that had allowed her to “slowly actualize the self-expression of a ‘Tibetan identity.’” Moving back to Lhasa at age twenty-four—and getting to see and know Tibet with her own eyes—led the much-sinicized Woeser to both a spiritual and personal identity crisis, which she reconfirmed as the overarching conduit for her political fiction and journalism in subsequent years. When her best-selling book of lyrical prose *Notes on Tibet* was released in early 2003, it was banned and condemned by the Chinese government due to its “forbidden subject matter.” Her publisher in Guangzhou claimed to have selected her manuscript for publication because of its beautiful language and artistic merits.

But the editor did not even know who and what the Dalai Lama was. This is a glimpse into the sociopolitical climate of the post-Tiananmen China, whose suppression of politically “problematic” periods, incidents, and individuals had removed them all from the collective memory and replaced them with a focus on economic prosperity and development.

Following the book ban, Woesser faced aggressive persecution and immediate censorship. She was ordered to self-criticize and confess. But she put an end to the situation in a letter dated September 14, 2003, to the highest authorities at *Tibetan Literature*, in which she refused to confess, refused the reeducation, and moved into exile in Beijing. As a result, she was summarily fired from her job, was cut off from access to social welfare, and had her passport denied. Short of being thrown into prison, she was deprived of everything that could be taken away. To this day, Woesser has had every application for a passport turned down; she even resorted in 2008 to suing the Chinese government—unsuccessfully—for denying her her basic rights as a citizen. Since then, she has declared herself an independent writer and blogger, and continues to be one of the most eloquent critics of the Chinese violence, political oppression, and cultural suppression in Tibet.

Woesser was an early internet user among Tibetans. She kept two blogs in Chinese that were widely read by Tibetan and Chinese netizens. When the Chinese government shut both blogs down in 2006, she launched blogs hosted on overseas servers to evade censorship and control. One of them, *Map of Maroon Red*, came of age during the months of Tibetan uprising in 2008 and was a leading source of information for primary news about Tibet. In a time before social media and mobile phone apps became common, the blog featured Woesser’s daily updates, an invaluable resource for firsthand news when the whole of Tibet was under an information blackout.

The *Map of Maroon Red* blog was receiving 3 million hits while being translated into English by *China Digital Times*. Woesser soon became the target of Chinese nationalist hackers. A group known as Red Hackers destroyed the blog in May 2008, and all its original posts were lost. Around this time, her Skype account was also hacked and her phones tapped. The next incarnation of her blog was *Invisible Tibet* (<http://woesser.middle-way.net/>), which remains active. Woesser uses it to religiously document the next wave of protests that spread across Tibet: the self-immolation protests that began in 2009, peaked in 2012, and sporadically continue. Images and short videos she frequently posts are a mosaic of personal activities, funny everyday observations, reflections on world news such as the war in Ukraine, and reposts from Tibetan exile activities and beautiful landscapes, accompanied by

short captions. Other than maintaining her blogs and social media accounts, Woesser is a regular opinion contributor to Radio Free Asia, with her commentary pieces published and broadcast in both Tibetan and Chinese. Not even the pandemic could stop her from blogging and posting on Instagram.

The most active Tibetan blogger of our time, Woesser furnishes uncensored resources about the contemporary situation in Tibet. But she does not report from an insular, time-bound perspective. She does so with an eye on history and current international affairs. To some extent, she is idealistic about her mission as writer. In her book *Voices from Tibet* (2014), she describes the experience of giving “voice through as many channels as possible—books, blogs, radio programs, Twitter [now X], Facebook and press interviews” as tantamount to a “one-woman media” outlet and a testament to the fact that “for the powerless, the pen can be wielded as a weapon, a weapon honed by the Tibetan faith, tradition and culture.” Her social media presence now cannot be undermined socially and politically: In spite of heavy censorship and disinformation, she has almost 150,000 followers on X and a solid presence on Facebook and Instagram, all handled by herself with no marketing, publicity, or outreach management, no digital strategy or outside funding. She is also the most translated and read author on the highly profiled *High Peaks Pure Earth*, a website that offers translations, news, and commentary from Tibetan cyberspace. In 2022, *High Peaks Pure Earth* translated and published all of Woesser’s Instagram posts, depicting almost on a daily basis Lhasa’s eerie descent into a draconian COVID lockdown.

Woesser’s sustained, sometimes even round-the-clock online presence demonstrates the considerable influence she wields in shaping international opinions of Tibetan identity and broadcasting the realities of life in present-day Tibet. Yet her work is more subtle and subversive than straightforward noncompliance or opposition: It is the voice of an educated witness who has been silenced as a “Chinese subject of Tibetan ethnicity,” only to be made louder as a Tibetan locked within China proper. Her insistence on freely leaving her home in hard-line Beijing to visit Chinese-ruled Lhasa as an unauthorized journalist is a creative response that mobilizes her dissent as well as her relationship to geography and centralized state-led apparatus. As conveyed in her travel accounts and *Dossier* (2014), Chinese filmmaker Zhu Rikun’s documentary about Woesser’s closely policed life in Beijing and Tibet, it is logistically and emotionally onerous for Woesser—or any unpoliced Tibetan—to enter Tibet. Yet instead of being estranged from Tibet or the Tibetans, Woesser is drawn closer to them from Beijing. Despite being a “person of interest” ordered to “disappear” or stay out of Beijing “from time

to time,” she has found ways to stay visible, continuing to own her facts, timeline, and the events she documents.

Woeser is married to Wang Lixiong (b. 1953), an influential Chinese writer and intellectual whose arguments unusually steer clear of ideology and whose sympathy for the Tibetan cause is not without criticism of Tibetans themselves. Thirteen years Woeser’s senior, Wang appears in his wife’s writing either anonymously or specifically identified. His own work includes science fiction, along with essays and scholarship on ecological or environmental concerns and cultural and racial subjugation in China. Both Woeser and Wang have been friends with leading activist-artists and intellectuals, including Ai Weiwei (b. 1957; now in exile), Hu Jia (b. 1973; frequently placed under house arrest), and Ilham Tohti (b. 1969; now serving life imprisonment). In the *New York Review of Books*, the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Ian Johnson describes the couple as “two of China’s best-known thinkers on the government’s policy toward ethnic minorities.” Woeser is among the first signatories, with the late Liu Xiaobo, of “Charter 08.” Often placed under house arrest during “sensitive public occasions,” she is still living under close police surveillance in Beijing, Lhasa, and whenever she travels. Just after the pandemic outbreak in 2020, she was staying in Beijing. Later, though, she was able to return to Lhasa, where, just as the city was going into a harsh lockdown in August 2022, her mother, Tsering Youdon, passed away after an illness. When we reworked parts of this introduction in December 2022, China was lifting its zero-COVID policy, and Woeser was still in Lhasa for the foreseeable future.

Woeser’s work has received several international recognitions, including a nomination for the 2007 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, and been published into many languages. One of her nonfiction titles, *Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution*, was awarded the 2006 *China Times* Top Ten Best Chinese Books Award in Taiwan. She has received two Hellman/Hammett International Grants, the 2007 Freedom of Expression Prize from the Norwegian Authors’ Union, and the “Fearless Speaker” Medal from the Association of Tibetan Journalists in India. Other honors include the 2009 Lin Zhao Memorial Prize from the Independent Chinese PEN Center, the 2010 Courage in Journalism Prize from the International Women’s Media Foundation, and the Prince Claus Award in 2011. In 2013, the US State Department conferred on Woeser an International Women of Courage Award, which was presented by then–First Lady Michelle Obama and then–Secretary of State John Kerry in the writer’s absence.

Despite Woesser's recognition as a representative literary figure and moral voice of the Tibetans in mainland China, very little if any of her fiction, autofiction, and lyrical prose has been translated into English. Little is known about her humor and mischief as a storyteller. Even less is known about her cinematic descriptions of ancient townships and landscapes in Kham or the dramatic and gossipy Tibetan wives from those bittersweet love stories she wrote during her years as a journalist. For the past three decades, particularly since her persecution and house arrests, as well as the 2008 Tibetan uprisings, Woesser's eloquent literary voice has been sidelined by her more political writings and online journalism. Among the latter, 2020 saw the English translation of the book she wrote in 2006, titled *Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution*. The book contains eleven galleries of monochrome photographs taken by her father between approximately 1964 and 1976, as well as color photos taken by Woesser herself from 2001 to 2004.

Two earlier books translated into English, *Tibet on Fire: Self-Immolation Against Chinese Rule* (2016) and *Voices from Tibet* (2014), center on the more recent political struggles and resistance of Tibetans living in China. Since 2003, all of Woesser's fiction and poetry have been banned by the Chinese authorities. Even though she is able to find mainstream publication in Taiwan, it has become increasingly difficult for her to reach readers in other Sinophone areas, including the heavily oppressed "post-Umbrella Revolution" Hong Kong. Yet the honesty, acuity, and urgency of her activism implies that her literary aesthetics commands attention in its own right, even more so when Woesser regards herself as a poet and writer first and foremost.

Between memoir, fiction, and travelogue, *Ocean, as Much as Rain* is the first translated volume of Woesser's lyrical prose, stories, reportage, and poems in English. Woesser wrote the earliest piece in 2001 and has revised the latest addition in 2015 and 2016. This new collection consists of a short autobiographical piece and eight long narratives that oscillate between absurdity and realism, autobiography and testament, anecdotal reminiscence and historical sketch, meditation and cynical confession. I first began working with Woesser in 2011, and Dechen Pemba joined me on this project in 2016. Since then, both of us have worked in close collaboration and consultation with the author on multiple fronts. The choice of *Ocean, as Much as Rain* as the title of our book came to me because of its all-encompassing lyricism and implications. I have selected and curated the work presented here as well as translated them, four of which (prose pieces) are cotranslations. For the purpose of clarity, the translation credits are indicated separately before the opening poem. I edited the prose work with my colleague Dechen Pemba,

who responded to my queries and provided at least two paragraphs and important input for this introductory essay in addition to its shared editing. We also provided endnotes where necessary, in addition to translating and revising the author's notes.

Interspersed with these translated prose writings are selected poems by Tsering Woeser in my translation, of which two new pieces were originally completed in 2022. In her narratives, Woeser the narrator and protagonist recounts the fabulous lives and stories of lamas; a sky-burial master; a veteran Gar musician; an antiques dealer and businessman who promotes environmentalism, sets up a private Tibetan heritage museum, and runs, all by himself, a grassroots ecological campaign . . . These are just some of the ordinary yet otherworldly Tibetans whom Woeser has encountered during her various travels in Chinese-ruled Tibet. Through them, more crucially, she reveals an imperiled people, culture, thought, and way of life. Although Woeser seems to present herself as a character like others, she comes across as a spontaneous Brechtian raconteur who knows how to convey her skepticism and criticism of the Chinese state ideologies in an oblique but artful manner. What is therefore atypical of Woeser's narrative style is how each piece shifts whimsically in a borderland of objective and subjective realities, within their larger allegories and backstories, as well as a broader relevance. These heartbreaking chronicles also present strange and peculiar situations that challenge each personage to react humanely, sometimes against their spiritual truth.

À la W. G. Sebald and Svetlana Alexievich, Woeser's prose interweaves photographs, reportage, drama, and documentary details in an autofiction. Her voice is elegiac, provocative, polyphonic, and beautifully digressive. Earlier, in her epilogue for *Voices from Tibet*, she states, "As a writer, I have found my conviction to write coming into focus gradually: To write is to experience; to write is to pray; to write is to bear witness. Experience, prayer and bearing witness all intertwine. And to bear witness is to give voice." Bearing witness is a timeless writerly ambition and vision, once pursued by literary giants like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who finds in literature his responsibility for history. In this respect, Woeser is no less sincere about her role as storyteller. Charged with pathos and emotion, her language embraces anxiety and the untranslatables by using humor to talk seriously. In each of these stories, she uses her personal archive of photographs, brings alive characters who would otherwise be unknown or forgotten, revives places from the long-lost childhoods of her parents, and confronts wild nature as well as cultural sites

defeated by money, tourism, and pollution. She questions the ruins, monasteries, and unvisited quarters in Tibet about their present and future. What better response to ruins and transcendence in the context of a long history of political erasure than in words and pictures from a specific time?

Few contemporary writers in Chinese language approach Tibet without self-censorship or orientalism. Does this have anything to do with Chinese as the medium of expression, its inherent linguistic and cultural colonization engineering the “irony”? Tsering Woese is possibly the only woman as well as Tibetan to do so in the current political climate. But as a raconteur she is less interested in being prescient than in being relevant. Above all, she is realistic about her vulnerability as a political artist, which is why in her fiction we can catch a glimpse of her frustrations, grievances, and unanswerable prayers. For her, to write is to “experience,” to “pray,” and to “bear witness,” and all three intertwine in her work as quest for higher truths. Ultimately these manifest in an attempt to survive and think and act, but not retaliate.

An example can be seen in her postscript to “Let Me Write, the Fear of Lhasa Breaks My Heart,” a poem she wrote after being forced to leave Lhasa in the wake of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, after her traumatizing ordeal of being detained, interrogated, and humiliated for eight hours. In it Woese simply and powerfully writes, “You have guns, I have a pen.” Even in such moments when she has nothing else on her, she thinks of the pen as a weapon for peace, a tool of resistance, a shield. During those seven days of physical and emotional anguish, Woese kept a secret diary. An excerpt—the first entry—is translated and published here for the first time in English. Today this diary stands as a personal and eloquent “document” of “missing history,” to borrow the words from Alexievich: It is an extraordinary testimony of a lucid Tibetan writer who brings to light the dark, unuttered events, the uprising in Lhasa before and during the “glorious” Beijing Olympics that historic year.

Yet never once in *Ocean, as Much as Rain* has the author sought to deliberately aestheticize violence or monumentalize what’s lost for art’s sake, even if doing so might help her engage a larger and consensual mainstream audience who wants to embrace a Shangri-la fantasy. With an imaginative use of satire, parody, and self-deprecation, Woese does not give up hope of transcending the censorship levied against her writing and citizenship. Through her stories, poems, texts, images, she strives to renew her own sense of artistic freedom by writing, both poetically and politically, from the complex workings of oral history, collective memory, myths, and personal

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secrets. Ever mindful but unafraid of her—and our—contesting stream of consciousness, she redefines freedom in more ways than one, undaunted by the unknown that her writing and life may reveal.

Paris, February 2017

Revised—February 2023, September/December 2024, January 2025

NOTES

1. Kangding in Chinese.
2. Ganzi in Chinese.

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TRANSLATION CREDITS

“My Tongue Surgery,” “Celebrity Street Toilets in Lhasa,” “The Ruins of Lhasa: Yabzhi Taktser,” “Back to Lhasa, Day One, *from* Seven Days in Lhasa,” and “The Killing Trip” are translated by Fiona Sze-Lorrain.

“Rinchen the Sky-Burial Master,” “Garpon La’s Offerings,” and the author interview “An Eye from History and Reality: Woesser and Her Story of Tibet” are translated by Dechen Pemba and Fiona Sze-Lorrain.

“The King of *Dzi*” and “Ocean, as Much as Rain” are translated by Fiona Sze-Lorrain and Dechen Pemba.

The poems are translated by Fiona Sze-Lorrain.

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