

Techung: A Tibetan Singer

By Woesser

Translated by High Peaks Pure Earth

By no means have I heard all the songs by Techung but I know that he is an outstanding musician. This is because of the space in which we are both in; like the Himalayas that stretch along the borderline that was created by outside aggressors and that block off the Tibetan people, resulting in the existence of the separation between "internal" and "external" Tibet. But music has wings, it can fly across any man-made obstacles. Just like the group of birds, including the tung-tung, jha-goe and the khuyu, that, in an era not so long ago, followed the solar terms of nature and flew to and fro the secure and safe Tibet. This was possible because of the aesthetics of kindness of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings that taught never to kill an animal or boil it alive for culinary purposes.

Today, Techung, whose hometown is Lhasa but who was born in India, is a middle-aged man who resides in the United States. Both of his parents experienced the same fate that has befallen tens of thousands of Tibetan people whose homeland was occupied, whose monasteries were destroyed and whose Lamas were forced into exile; they have experienced the difficulties of living in foreign lands, trying to pass on the essence of their culture. The first time I heard Techung's music was in some films, for example in "Dreaming Lhasa" and in the documentary "Tibet: Cry of the Snow Lion" etc. His singing possesses the rhymes and sounds of traditional Tibetan musical expression such as Kalu, Nangma and Toshey but because of the loss and pain of Tibetan people, his music is full of sadness.

In 2008, the protests across Tibet were smashed to pieces by bullets, were rolled over by armoured cars but the entire world heard the long and sustained cries of "Ka Hee Hee". Tibetans, regardless of whether they were inside or outside Tibet, could hear the voices from the heart - "Tibetan people live together in happiness and sorrow" (བོད་མི་སྤྱིན་སྲུག་མཉམ་ཚུངས་ལྟོང་།) . That year on December 10, Techung held the "Tibet Freedom Concert" in Taiwan and the host commented on Facebook: "Techung's resonant and melodious voice gives people the feeling of standing in the cool breeze on the Tibetan Plateau. This event happens to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights... I hope that Techung will deliver a message of peace to Taiwanese, Tibetans and even anyone in the world who supports human rights."

I watched this music festival on the internet and had an idea. I have written several song lyrics, one of them being "On the Road" that I wrote many years ago in Lhasa and that expresses the longing for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I was thinking that if

Techung could add music to it and perform it that would be the perfect consecration. I asked a friend from Amdo to translate the lyrics into Tibetan and then contacted Techung to present him with my idea and he happily agreed to do it. After some time had passed, he sent the basically completed song to me and it was exactly the song that I had hoped for with all my heart - relying mainly on the melody and rhythm of the dramnyen, Techung sang in a deep but affectionate voice: "On the road / Ah, on the road / My eyes are brimming with tears / I clutch a flower not of this world / Hurrying before it dies / searching in all directions / That I may present it to an old man in a deep red robe // He is our Yeshe Norbu / He is our Kundun / Our Gongsachog / Our Gyalwa Rinpoche..."

In 2010, Techung released a new record, "Semshae - Heart Songs", that he had been working on for many years and that contains 16 nursery rhymes especially written for children. When he was interviewed by the Tibetan service of Radio Free Asia, Techung explained that the reason for making this record was his own daughters who are growing up in the US and are slowly becoming Americanised and he hopes that his daughters from a when they are young, will never forget that they are Tibetan, that Tibet is their homeland. That's why he played the dramnyen and sang together with his children "In Tsuglakhang we can give an audience, in Tsuglakhang we can prostrate, let's go to Tsuglakhang together..." and let his children sing "Amala, I have a wish, please teach me Tibetan..."

I really like these songs and when I went back to Lhasa, almost every day I played them to my little niece; they are such nice songs that every time she heard them, my niece, even though she cannot yet walk or speak, would move to the rhythm of songs, especially to those whose lyrics describe the characteristics of each one of the four seasons.

This year, Techung initiated a musical event in support of the freedom of two Tibetans, Dhondup Wangchen and Tashi Dhondup. Dhondup Wangchen was sentenced to six years in prison by the Chinese government for shooting a documentary that expressed the thoughts and feelings of the Tibetan people, Tashi Dhondup was sentenced to 13 months in prison for singing a song that expressed the thoughts and feelings of the Tibetan people. To make the world hear about the suffering of Tibetan people, Techung and many other exiled Tibetan singers held various concerts in the US and in India to show their solidarity with the Tibetans who are suffering.

In the flames that ignited all across Tibet in the past few years, each and every one of our Tibetan sons and daughters "gave up their lives for righteousness, for the truth and freedom" by bathing their bodies in those flames. Techung's new song "Lama Khen" expresses the feelings of these self-immolators, he expresses their last words, singing out the suffering and resistance of the Tibetan people. This is not a sad or angry song, it is as tranquil as a someone who has lived through many changes and thinks of the Lama in a monastery, praying in silence; but it portrays the religious believers, the martyrs who set themselves on fire and it makes people

show respect and it is difficult to hold back one's tears - "Thousand Buddhas Chenno, Lama Chenno, Lama Gyalwa Tenzin Gyatso Chenno, resistance, nonviolent resistance, I burn my own body, Lama la. Protect us, protect us, Lama la, protect us!"

In fact, even though Techung cannot return to Tibet to play his dramnyen and sing, but the wings of his songs have carried his music back to his homeland, which enjoys a high reputation among Tibetan young people and is described like this: "The singing of the exiled Tibetan artist, Techung, gives one the feeling as if he is carefully telling us the secrets of Tibet's past, they have a magnificent message, but even more does he carry the individual spirit of a bard, with a touch of sadness, without giving up his ideals and with a silent tenacity of the "bone of the heart".

"Bone of the heart" (སྤོང་རྩལ།) is a Tibetan metaphor and we all know what it stands for. For Tibetans living inside and outside Tibet, even though manners and morals change, the power indulges in wanton massacre and persecution, and dignity is treated with contempt, but the "bone of the heart" can never be broken. The music of the Tibetan singer, Techung, reveals this scene to the grim and callous world.

2011-2012, Beijing

<http://woeser.middle-way.net/>