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Of Books, Bloggers, and the Buddha

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With the anniversaries of the 1959 (and 2008) Tibetan Uprisings just past, Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism has been much in the news in the past few months. But Buddhism more generally has been popping up in world news. A few readings on the topic...

1) “Six episodes” are distilled from Donald Lopez’s new book Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed at University of Chicago Press’s website. Here’s one:

Although hailed in Victorian Europe for its rejection of the Indian caste system and its championing of the spiritual potential of all social classes, Buddhism also played a role in the science of race during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1914, the Sinhalese Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala described the Buddha as “the great Aryan Savior,” while explaining that “the life of the Nazarene Jew was not of cosmic usefulness.” In 1937, the Chinese Buddhist monk Taixu wrote a letter to Adolf Hitler, recommending Buddhism as the ideal religion for the Aryan race.

Lopez also took the “Page 99 test” on the book for Campaign for the American Reader.

2) Pankaj Mishra did an intriguing interview about “the Buddha in the World” for the NPR show, Speaking of Faith.

3) At the Washington Post last month, Maureen Fan reported on the increasing pull of Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese:

While statistics are hard to come by, monks, followers and experts say that growing numbers of middle-class Chinese are turning to Tibetan Buddhism, driven by the perception of a spiritual vacuum in society and aided by the voluminous information available on the Internet. Communist Party officials and celebrities alike have embraced Tibetan Buddhism, despite having to worship at home, meet their lamas at night and run the risk of attending officially unauthorized events, such as the fish release and “fire sacrifice” at Huangsongyu Reservoir.

China’s Communist Party tightly regulates religious activity, especially the banned Falun Gong sect, but allows wide latitude for many law-abiding Catholics and Protestants who meet in unofficial house churches. Tibetan Buddhists however, are in a different category...

For now, most Chinese who practice Tibetan Buddhism are able to worship under the radar because their numbers remain comparatively small and their movement is not organized. Followers meet in private homes to recite sutras and compare knowledge or gather in apartments where wealthy benefactors have set up elaborate shrines. Many appear to be unaware of regulations intended to restrict their worship.

4) Tsering Woeser, the brave Buddhist blogger (and poet), turned up in many stories over the past month. The London Times ran a nice profile of her:

By birth, upbringing and education, Woeser should be a Tibetan at ease in the Chinese system, a successful member of the Tibetan elite. But this vivacious woman, who looks much younger than her 44 years, is the most outspoken Tibetan voice in China, a fierce critic of Beijing rule in the deeply Buddhist Himalayan region. Her views have won her widespread fame among Tibetans in exile – and, not surprisingly, the attention of the Chinese security apparatus. These days, her books are banned and her movements are monitored. She was detained by police last year during a trip to her birthplace to see her mother. None of this deters her. “If it happens, it happens. I write what I write.”

What she writes is not only poetry but a blog that openly criticises Chinese rule in Tibet. It is already in its fifth incarnation. After it was closed down repeatedly by the authorities in 2006 and 2007, she posted it on an overseas server. Then, after the riots a year ago in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, in which
22 people were killed – mostly ethnic Han Chinese – and unrest spread across Tibetan regions, the overseas blog was hacked and closed down twice. Undaunted, she resumed writing about “Invisible Tibet” on woeser.middle-way.net.

Figures compiled overseas show more than three million hits on her blog in the past year, mostly after the March unrest, when it was the main source of information for Tibetans looking for an alternative to propaganda. Now her account of the unrest, with photographs, is to be published in Taiwan to coincide with the first anniversary of the riots. “It seems that people look to me,” she says, humbly.