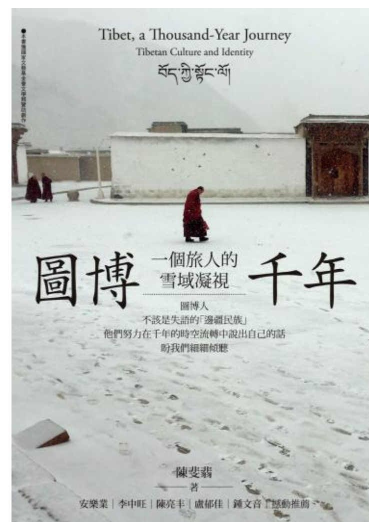
NATION ON ICE:
A TRAVELER'S OBSERVATIONS ON TIBET'S TODAY AND YESTERDAY
圖博千年：
一個旅人的雪域凝視



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Driven to test and overcome her limits as a writer and adventurer, travel author Chen Fei-Fei has made multiple visits to Tibet over two decades, witnessing its changing cultural and social tapestries and using history to better understand this ancient nation's history and the desires and aspirations of its people.

Nation on Ice is the culmination of over a dozen years of work and exploration by seasoned traveler and author Chen Fei-Fei. When protests and demonstrations erupt across Tibet in 2008, she scraps a nearly finished manuscript on her experiences in the region to truly research its rich culture and history. Her return visit in 2019 focuses on bringing to light the heritage treasures of this once-proud nation and on witnessing the changes over the past twenty years.

This work tracks Chen's 2019 return journey through Tibet, recording chronologically her observations and interactions at each stop on the way as well as how things have changed over just two decades. By comparing and contrasting her own observations with the oft-differing perspectives of Western and Chinese scholars on the details of Tibetan history, she crafts a refreshingly readable, honest, and enlightening take on timeless Tibet.

Her 2019 excursion through the Roof of the World overlaps with both Chinese and Tibetan New Years – a time of year rife with social and

political tensions when Chinese public security agencies closely monitor the activities of both Tibetans and foreign visitors. Different from 2008, she finds temples bereft of monks, former grazing lands occupied by shopping arcades and mines, rich touchstones of Tibetan heritage and culture trinketized for tourist consumption, and local history contorted and skewed to fit the official Party line. Tibetans, now second-class citizens in their own country and concerned about losing even more, are clearly more guarded about voicing their true feelings.

Chen Fei-Fei writes of Tibet's present and past and about her own observations over two decades in flowing, well-constructed prose. Today, China's heightened restrictions on travel to the region make it difficult to explore. The palpable image of Tibet presented in *Nation on Ice* gives readers rare insight into a land too-often off today's travel radar, creating new and emotive connections with the outside world.

Chen Fei-Fei 陳斐翡

This professional author's rich resume of travel experience includes multiple journeys to Tibet, southwestern China, and Southeast Asia. Her travelogues include *Singing All the Way*, *Nepal and Its Deco Buses*, *Must-See Ladakh*, and (her latest) *Nation on Ice*.

NATION ON ICE

By Chen Fei-Fei
Translated by Petula Parris

Foreword: Please Write Your Name

"For he who no longer has a homeland,
writing becomes a place to live."
– Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

It was in 2019 while en route from Labrang to Rebgong[1] that I crossed paths with Yongten. This young thangka artist – still only in his twenties – informed me that he already had his own thangka painting studio, as well as a number of apprentices.

Yongten's eyes lit up the minute he learned we were foreigners. He wanted to find out all he could, with his constant stream of questioning covering everything from our hometown to world affairs. He asked about our usual modes of transport, the weather, our religious beliefs, national holidays, and art galleries. He appeared spellbound by all we told him. Of course, we were equally fascinated by his work as a thangka artist. At one point, Yongten stopped the car he was driving, took out his phone, and brought up several photos of his paintings, explaining each one to us in great detail.

During this heartwarming exchange, Yongten couldn't help saying that he "lacked culture" and "wasn't very cultured". While, at first, I took this as a sign of humility, it wasn't long before I realized that he truly meant it. In his eyes, he had spent too little time in the formal Chinese education system.

Since he was a boy, Yongten had been immersed in the study of thangka. He was also required to study Buddhist scriptures and was thus well-versed in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the meanings of the myriad of symbols and colors used in thangka paintings. But Yongten was raised in a society that equates culture with fluency in Mandarin Chinese and with higher education received from mainstream Chinese institutions. I was immediately struck by how this concept of "culture" was entirely disconnected from the cultural heritage of Tibet.

Speaking to Yongten that day made me question my own inherent beliefs. I started to wonder: "What biases have I unknowingly acquired over the years as a result of the culture that raised me?"

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[1] Rebgong is called Tongren City in China's official adminstrative system.

Changing Places: Adopting a Different Cultural Stance

In the summer of 2005, I was eating at a Tibetan *momo* and noodle restaurant in Dharamsala, India. An image from that day remains etched in my mind. In the restaurant, as I started to chat in Chinese, I immediately noticed a sudden change in the face of an *amala* – an elderly Tibetan woman. Gone was the warmth in her eyes. Instead, her new expression conveyed an awkward mixture of surprise, revulsion, and pain. Later, when I bumped into her again around town, she made a concerted effort to avoid eye contact and simply ignored me. After this, one of my local friends, Konchok, told me how this amala had lost countless family members and friends in Tibet in the 1950s as they fled the Chinese army.

Konchok was working for a Dharamsala-based NGO. Born and raised in India, he is a second-generation Tibetan exile who speaks fluent Tibetan, English, and Hindi as well as a smattering of French and Chinese. He was working several odd jobs at the time: web developer, translator, and graphic designer – and he would even occasionally help out as a server and baker of vegetable flatbreads at his friend's café.

Konchok was forthright, open, and unfailingly generous in answering my questions about Tibet. He was also unafraid to ask me equally probing questions in return. "What is the difference between *zhōnghuá* culture and Han Chinese culture…and why do some Chinese speakers call their language *huáwén*? And if *zhōnghuá* refers to Chinese civilization as a whole, then does *huáwén* include other languages spoken in China, such as Uighur, Mongolian, and Tibetan?" He didn't stop there. "If *zhōnghuá mínzú* means the 'Chinese nation' or the 'peoples of China,' and includes different ethnic groups, such as Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan, then don't you think school textbooks in China ought to not only teach the tenets of Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi but also the Quran of China's Hui Muslims and the sacred Lamrim Chenmo of the Mongols and Tibetans?"

Though I had long been aware that the Confucian texts I had memorized at school and the national identity I had been spoon-fed throughout my youth were both part of a narrow, ethnocentric education, hearing these questions out loud felt deeply jarring. I could feel my scalp tingle and my cheeks flush with color.

2005 also happened to be the year I first read the Orkhon Inscriptions.[2] More than a millenium ago, these ancient Turkic texts were carved onto stone monuments to commemorate the lives of Bilge Khagan and Kul Tigin, leaders of the Turkic khaganate that once governed the Central Asian steppes. The inscriptions not only lauded the military achievements of these men but also served as a stark reminder to all Turks of why Han Chinese were their eternal foes: "Because of want of harmony between the begs and the people, and because of the Chinese people's cunning and craft and its intrigues, […] they brought the old realm of the Turkish people to dissolution, and brought destruction on its lawful kagans. The sons of the nobles became the bondsmen of the Chinese people, their unsullied daughters became its slaves…"[3]

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[2] The Orkhon Inscriptions are Old Turkic texts carved into stone memorial steles that were erected by the Göktürks in the Orkhon Valley (now part of modern-day Mongolia) during the eighth century.

[3] Saunders, 2001.

However, Chinese historical records paint a totally different story – one of unity and friendship. Emperor Xuanzong, ruler of the Tang Dynasty at the time, had supposedly formed a "father-son alliance" with Bilge Khagan. He even supplied the stone stele for the Turkic leader, inscribing upon it the following heartfelt words: "Kul Tigin, the Khagan's younger brother, and the Khagan himself, are as sons to me […] Both are beloved as sons. I am moved once more by deep affection; hence this monument is erected."[4]

Is There Ever a True Side to History?

Here we have the same stone pillar: on one hand dedicated as a proud symbol of imperial greatness for China's Tang Dynasty, while on the other etched with a narrative lamenting the suffering of the Turkic people. More than twelve hundred years on, this stone monument stands as a testament to the fact that history is never one-sided. No matter how plentiful or detailed Chinese historical records may be, they provide only one perspective and, as such, should not be taken as historical gospel.

Meanwhile, as the Turks became subservient to the Imperial Tang – as "a son to his father", another steppe-based empire was on the rise, namely the "Kingdom of Bod" (better known in English as the Tibetan Empire). Tibetan steppe forces first encroached on the central plains of Tang Dynasty-controlled China in 638. Yet, over the centuries that followed, Chinese historical discourse routinely brushed the Tibetans into a corner as the peripheral "other", without ever according them a voice of their own. In the modern era, politics have interfered even more, further stripping Tibet of its right to speak.

I heard this sentiment echoed again and again – not only by my friend Konchok in Dharamsala, but also by the many other Tibetans encountered during my travels. Here is but a sample of the many things I heard: "In 1959, when the People's Liberation Army entered Lhasa, we Tibetans lost our country"; "Tibetans are Tibetans, Chinese are Chinese"[5]; "Tibetan culture is distinct from Chinese culture – it's certainly not part of it"; "When Han Chinese speak of their history, what they describe is different from our Tibetan history."

Despite the paucity of first-hand historical records from Tibet, it is noteable that scholars outside of China often present versions of events that diverge distinctly from the traditional Chinese narrative. Take, for example, the marriage of Princess Wencheng to the Tibetan King during the seventh century. Was this a cordial bestowing of marital ties by the Tang Dynasty, as described in the *New Book of Tang*, or rather an attempt by the Tang Emperor to broker peace once his army had been besieged by Tibetan forces? Christopher I. Beckwith, a prominent scholar

[4] "The Biography of the Turks" in the *Old Book of Tang*.

[5] The original sentence, spoken in Mandarin Chinese was: 博是博，加是加 Bó shì bó, jiā shì jiā. Here, 博 is a phonetic rendering of the Tibetan word "bo", meaning Tibetans; while 加 is a phonetic rendering of the Tibetan word "rgya", meaning "Han Chinese". The speaker therefore intended to convey that "Tibetans are totally different from Han Chinese."

of Tibetan history, certainly interprets it as the latter based on his research into ancient Chinese, Arabic, and Tibetan texts.[6]

Interactions between the Tang Dynasty and Tibetan Empire – wars fought, treaties formed, political alliances pledged through marriage – are recorded by Han Chinese historians in works such as the *Books of Tang (new and old)* and the *Zizhi Tongjian*. Viewing history through either a Tang-tinted historical lens or a more modern Chinese perspective (purposefully constructed in the early twentieth century with new political objectives in mind) gives us a narrative that differs starkly from those posited by non-Chinese scholars such as Beckwith. This difference in perspectives is by no means an anomaly. The same is true even when we travel back two millenia and look at how Chinese historical records describe interactions during the Shang and Zhou dynasties between the Han Chinese of the central plains and the nomadic Xianyun[7] tribes to the north.

Cultural critic Edward Said argued that all cultures create a binary structure to distinguish the "self" from the "other": "Heroes and monsters, founding fathers and barbarians… This kind of binary opposition does well in shaping national identity and patriotism, but falters due to its crude chauvinism, xenophobia, and exclusivism."[8] Therefore, if we don't view the world through the eyes of others and thus fail to understand and respect their historical perspectives and subjectivities, we are simply creating roadblocks to communication. This in turn, of course, makes it harder to gain a rational and objective understanding of ourselves.

Travel and Writing

Travel – much like reading – is an exploration of the human condition. More than simply visiting a foreign land, travel compels us to consider within the broad river of history our own brief journey, the journeys of others, and the journeys we share with our contemporaries. Travel also encourages us to revisit the questions and reflections left by those who came before us.

I began traveling independently a little over twenty years ago, when I started out from Gyalthang[9] on the southeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, crossed through border checks to travel onto Lhasa, and continued westward into Ngari Prefecture. On a separate occasion, I entered Tibet from the north, passing through Amdo and the Tsong Chu Valley and then across

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[6] Beckwith, 1978.

[7] Xiányǔn (獫狁) was a term used during the Shang and Zhou dynasties to refer to nomadic tribes in the north. In the *Book of Songs*, a poem titled "Gathering Wild Ferns" laments: "No house, no home – all because of the Xianyun." The original meaning of Xianyun is "dog." *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字), a Chinese dictionary from 100CE, defines the first character "xián 獫" as: *A dog with a long muzzle. Also, a black dog with a yellow head.*

[8] Said, Liang Yongan 梁永安 (tr. 2010). This quote has been translated from Chinese translation of the original English quote.

[9] Gyalthang, meaning "the Royal Plains," is called Shangri-La City (Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province) in China's official administrative system.

the northern Tibetan Plateau back down to Lhasa. I have also taken a southern route, leaving Tibet via the Nepalese border and visiting Sikkim, Darjeeling, Ladakh, and Dharamsala (home to the Tibetan government-in-exile). I once even went to Saint Petersburg to visit the Datsan Gunzechoinei[10] – Europe's oldest Tibetan Buddhist datsan! Along the way, I recorded a myriad of new experiences and self-reflections, and noted how these clashed with my cultural background.

My original intention for this book was to write about my travels through the greater Tibetan cultural region. In fact, my initial manuscript was already pretty much complete by the end of 2008. Then, during the Tibetan New Year of 2008, intense protests erupted across Chinese-ruled Tibet. Unarmed Tibetans raised their fists and chanted "Free Tibet", with some even embracing the added risk of raising the Tibetan Snow Lion Flag. What was it that had driven Tibetan nomads, monks, senior citizens, and children to march in the streets in the face of the Chinese military and police? Perplexed, I shelved my almost-complete manuscript and dove headfirst into all the historical literature I could find. Through two millennia of history, from the *Records of the Grand Historian* to the *History of the Qing Dynasty*, I gradually worked out the origins of the dissonance between Chinese and foreign narratives – the dissonance, that is, between the historical perspective of the Tibetans and the Chinese version of history that I was taught.

When I first began traveling and writing, my goal was to answer my own deep questions. However, as I journeyed through unfamiliar lands, the endless experiences I amassed gradually shifted my perspective away from "myself" toward a common "us"…an "us" that witnessed, respected, and embraced the culture of others. What I mean by this is that, through my travels, the "self" with whom I had been trying to converse expanded into a much larger "us" (an "us" that may be understood as a shared society, culture, history, or ethnicity).

This book combines what I have discovered by both traveling through and studying modern-day and historical Tibet, along with reflections on my own culture. Thus, contained herein are three distinct journeys. The first overlaps with the Tibetan New Year in 2019. The second draws on my experiences gained over multiple stays in Tibet over the past twenty-odd years. The third is a historical narrative beginning 1,300 years ago in the ancient Kingdom of Bod and continuing up through the early twentieth century (a critical period in the establishment of Tibet as a modern nation) and the Chinese invasion until the present day.

In my retellings, I adopt a *dual-perspective* approach that enables the events of 2019, my past travel experiences, and historical scenes to intertwine and be presented together, interwoven in the same spatial domain…. This allows voices from both past and present the chance either to echo one another or to clash and disagree. In doing so, I also hope to give new perspectives a chance to shine through.

[10] The Datsan Gunzechoinei, meaning "Source of Buddhist Teachings and Compassion," opened in 1915.

On Naming Tibet

As this book was originally published in Chinese, I would like to briefly visit the topic of Chinese naming conventions. In my original book, I use the term 圖博 Túbó for Tibet, rather than the more common Chinese term 西藏 Xīzàng. The reason for this is twofold: first, the term 西藏 Xīzàng has no relation to the way Tibetans refer to their own homeland; and second, the character 藏 zàng in fact only refers to the modern-day Shigatse region – not the entirety of Tibet.[11] When the name first appeared in the Qing Dynasty palace memorials[12], the term 西藏 Xīzàng (literally meaning the "Zang Land to the West") reflected the Sino-centric mindset of the central plain empire and its tendency to marginalize other ethnic groups.

That said, the Chinese term 圖博 Túbó is also not without its shortcomings. Not all Tibetans[13] use this term, and the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala has yet to formally declare any change from Tibet's official Chinese name. Nonetheless, it was only after careful deliberation that I settled on the term 圖博 Túbó. My reasoning for this is as follows: First, Tibetans refer to themselves as "bod" (博 bó in Chinese) in their own language. Second, the pronunciation of 圖博 Túbó is similar to "Tubbat" (from which the English "Tibet" is derived). Third, some Tibetologists assert that 圖博 Túbó was the name for Tibet used by the ancient nomadic peoples of Central Asia.[14]

Another important consideration is that many young Tibetans have fought to make known their desire – to both the Chinese government and the international community – for greater freedoms for Tibet. This fight has taught Tibetans the pitfalls of using the term 西藏 Xīzàng to refer to their country and people. In the late twentieth century, the Tibetan Parliament in Dharamsala approved the change of Tibet's name in Chinese from 西藏 Xīzàng to 圖博 Túbó. However, news of this was never widely publicized to the Chinese-speaking world. My decision to use the term 圖博 Túbó thus takes into account that 圖博 Túbó is the only Chinese-language name officially deliberated and adopted by the Tibetan parliament-in-exile.

Although the *New Book of Tang* and other Chinese historical texts refer to Tibet derogatorily as 吐蕃 Tǔbō[15], historical Tibetan manuscripts unearthed in Dunhuang record that the ancient kingdom which unified the Tibetan Plateau in the seventh century referred to itself as "Bod chen po" [བོད་ཆེན་པོ] – a term that translates as "Great Bod" or "Great Tibet." Therefore, except

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[11] Tibet comprises the areas of U-Tsang (including Lhasa), Tsang, Ngari, Kham, and Amdo.

[12] Chen Qingying 陳慶英, 1999.

[13] Xie Weimin 謝惟敏, 2009.

[14] Some Tibetologists argue that the English term "Tibet" and the Tang Dynasty Chinese term 吐蕃 Tǔbō might both have been borrowed from the Turkic word "Tubbat," or from the Arabic and Sogdian word "Tüpüt." (Stein, 1972).

[15] In Chinese historical texts, while Tibet was referred to with the derogatory 吐蕃 Tǔbō (with 吐 meaning "to spit or vomit" and 蕃 signifying "foreign or barbarian"), other non-Han peoples were also labeled with derogatory terms. For example, the Xiongnu, Xianyun, Jie, Qiang, and Rouran were all called names derived from animals or insects.

when quoting external sources, the Chinese-language edition of this book uses the terms 古博王國 gǔbó wángguó [meaning the "Ancient Kingdom of Bod"] and 博國 bóguó [meaning "Bod Kingdom"] to refer to the ancient Tibetan Empire.

In the same vein, I have made the utmost effort – using transliterations wherever possible – to retain the original names and meanings of Tibet's mountains, rivers, regions, villages, monasteries, and people. I am deeply cognizant of the fact that how people refer to their natural surroundings and the elements within reflects their deep-rooted relationship with the land they have inhabited for generations. It tells us how they have been sustained by its streams, valleys, and grassy steppes and how they have gazed toward its snow-capped mountains in devotional prayer…. These very names encapsulate the worldview of the Tibetan people and offer a lens into how Tibetans view not only themselves but also the world.

On the Ordinary and the Extraordinary

Before setting off for Tibet in January 2019, I thought I had pretty much wrapped up the manuscript for my book as originally envisioned. I planned my itinerary so that I would be retracing its contents, in other words, places where protests were still ongoing as well as the historic battlefields where Tibetan forces had clashed with imperial Chinese armies. As it turns out, these two destinations overlapped nearly completely…such as Garze in Kham and Ngawa and Labrang in Amdo. They were also largely clustered along Tibet's eastern border.

Having visited these places numerous times, my travel companion and I decided to stick to our tried-and-trusted method of getting around on public transportation, as this affords insight into the lives of the local people. When there were no buses, we[16] would walk or hitchhike, with the goal of travelling as deep into Tibet as possible.

During Chinese New Year in 2019, slogans championing President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" were prominently displayed, as it was the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. As fate would have it, 2019 was also a highly symbolic year for Tibetans.

Tibetan New Year – or Losar – in 2019[17] marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Tibetan Uprising. In 1959, people across Tibet rose up against the People's Liberation Army (PLA). However, their inferior military strength caused the Tibetan resistance to retreat to Lhasa, where many Tibetans subsequently lost their lives or were taken prisoner, while others fled to India with the fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. Since then, the Tibetan people have been deprived of freedom and national sovereignty in their own land. Losar in 2019 also marked the anniversary of Tibet's declaration of independence over a century earlier in 1913, when the thirteenth Dalai Lama proclaimed the independence of all of Tibet. He then enacted

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[16] Editor's note: The author traveled with her partner, a photographer from South Korea.

[17] In 2019, Losar happened to fall on the first day of the Chinese lunar New Year.

modern reforms and repeatedly asserted Tibet's independent status to the international community.

In Chinese-ruled Tibet, violent protests for freedom broke out in Lhasa between 1987 and 1989. Then, on the eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, demonstrations again swept through Tibet. There have been 159 recorded instances of self-immolation in Tibet since 2009, many of which were timed to coincide with the anniversaries of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising and Tibet's declaration of independence.

During the planning phase for my trip, I anticipated encountering various obstacles. I was aware I might end up in a local public security bureau office if things turned particularly sour. I also thought about how, at this politically sensitive time, it would be impossible to reach Lhasa in the same unfettered way I had a decade ago – even with a Tibet Travel Permit. I knew many key destinations on my route could temporarily be declared off-limit. These included areas known for self-immolations and fierce protests (such as Garze, Ngawa, and Labrang), areas where Buddhist monks and nuns had been aggressively expelled (like Larung Gar and Yarchen Gar[18]), and Takster (the birthplace of the fourteenth Dalai Lama).

With this in mind, I felt mentally prepared for the worst-case scenario of being unable to visit a single one of those places.

As expected, during my 2019 trip to Tibet, I met with frequent checkpoint inspections. In areas prone to self-immolation protests, we were required to register with the local public security bureau before checking into our hotel. We were, on occasion, followed by plainclothes officers; we sometimes had police conduct unannounced searches of our rooms; and we were also invited to "have tea" with officers in public security bureau buildings. Perhaps it was because this particular New Year was symbolic in so many ways that there were increased checks and lockdowns to prevent a repeat of past protests? Or, on the other hand, perhaps this was just the norm for the Tibetan people?

Either way, one thing that couldn't go unnoticed was the way in which local Tibetans steered well clear of us Taiwanese and other foreign travelers. Even though I found many more Tibetans were able to speak Chinese than before, much fewer of them were willing to talk to us. An uneasy silence thus permeated our entire journey. As such, I am especially grateful to the few people who *were* willing to share their views with us and to risk the dangers inherent in revealing their true feelings. It was because of these individuals that I realized my almost-finished manuscript needed revising – the result of which is the book you are currently reading.

Chapter One: Goodbye Tibet (Chengdu)

"Dawn will not arrive too late, the delays will never last too long
The vast universe at sunset, it cannot
be too late

[18] In Tibetan, the word "Gar" means something similar to "sacred retreat."

Neither will the knocking at the door…
Your return, it will never be too late"
– B. Yavuukhulan, *For Me, You Will Return*[19]

At some time after midnight, our plane touched down on the tarmac at Chengdu Shuangliu Airport. In no time at all, we were whisked by shuttle bus to the customs area – a small, brightly lit space that was sparsely furnished. Thanks to the neat lines painted on the floor, and airport staff issuing orders, the Chinese passengers were smoothly siphoned off from those traveling on foreign travel documents.

The main defining feature in the room was those passport control booths, each enclosed by thick steel bars and raised a good distance from the ground. Customs officers were perched inside, giving them a bird's-eye view of the area through small windows while largely obscuring their bodies behind partitions. Overall, the layout of the room exuded an imposing presence. All of the other passengers there had taken the same flight as me, which had set off from Seoul just a few hours earlier. There were Chinese tour groups returning home, overseas tourists travelling in twos and threes, and the odd foreigner travelling on business. The excitement I'd felt as I waited to board the plane in Seoul evaporated the moment I set foot in this new place. Instead, I began to feel on edge.

The immigration inspections proceeded at a suffocatingly slow pace. Apart from the airport staff walking around, gesticulating with their hands and shouting at us, everyone else was silent. I noticed how the Chinese passengers uniformly lowered their gaze, with even young children standing obediently in line. At last, it was my turn. The customs officer took a good look at my Taiwan Compatriot Permit, then at my face, and then at the permit again. He punched a few words into his computer, then just sat staring at the screen, motionless, as if a mysterious file in front of him suddenly required his undivided attention…. Finally, he moved, pressing his lips together slightly. Just as I thought he was going to say something, he picked up my permit between his fingers and flung it back in my direction.

I went on my way, with neither of us having muttered a single word.

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[19] B. Yavuukhulan, 1929-1982, Mongolian poet.