



Actor and human rights activist, Richard Gere and Adhe Tapontsang protest the religious persecution in China at a rally in Lafayette Park across from The White House in Washington, D.C. on October 29, circa 1997. Alamy

PROFILE

## *Profile of courage* *'Ama' Adhe Tapontsang (1932–2020)*

*The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) recently observed the passing of torture survivor Adhe Tapontsang, one of the longest-serving Tibetan political prisoners in exile. In common with the late Nelson Mandela, she endured 27 years in prison for her resistance against China's military occupation of Tibet in the late 1950s. Reflecting on the quality of her courage, KAREN COLLIER spoke with Tibetan elders and human rights defenders about how they remember her.*

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DHE TAPONTSANG was the embodiment of resistance to Tibetans. On 3 August 2020, the woman affectionately known as 'Ama' (Mother) Adhe to Tibetans died at 88 of natural causes in Dharamsala India, her home in exile. She was a freedom fighter until her last breath. COVID-19 restrictions prevented Australian Tibetans from gathering to pay their respects to one of the last resistance fighters of her generation, yet the community observed Ama Adhe's passing with solemn reverence inside their homes.

Activist groups held candlelight vigils in Dharamsala and other cities in honour of her legacy and role in the Tibetan struggle. The Gu-chu-sum Movement Association of Tibet, a global association of Tibetan political prisoners, paid respect "to the soul that has continued to encourage all those who are a part of the Tibetan freedom movement and defenders of human rights all over the world". Adhe was to experience the horrific transformation of her country under a ruthless colonial regime. As Chinese expansionism was met with fierce Tibetan resistance, violent and oppressive campaigns against ethnic Tibetans ensued, changing the fate of 6 million of Adhe's countrymen forever. Author Mikel Dunham described it aptly in *Buddha's Warriors*: "The Han Chinese introduced whole new worlds of cruelty and there was no one to stop them."

Ama Adhe was born in Nyarong in Kham Province, eastern Tibet, in 1932 to a nomadic family. Her birthplace became the first place in Tibet where Chinese military were stationed. China's invasion of Kham became a gateway for incursions into larger parts of Tibet to establish Chinese dominance. Ama Adhe and her husband had planned an escape to Tibet's capital, Lhasa, yet tragically, when her first child was one year old and she was pregnant with the second, her husband was poisoned by Chinese authorities. Shortly thereafter, Adhe joined the Chushi Gangdruk of the Khampas, a resistance movement that began in 1950. She led and inspired other women to help by supplying food and provisions to the Tibetan men who fought the Chinese. In 1958 the rebellion was crushed and Adhe was arrested and separated from her two young children forever.

It was not until 1985 that she was released from prison, when then Chinese president Deng Xiaoping pardoned political prisoners during a period of short-lived reforms. Of the 300 women who were imprisoned, she was one of only four who survived a system where prisoners were starved to death.

The passing of Ama Adhe marks the closing of a significant chapter in modern Tibetan history. The history

of Tibet's freedom struggle was intertwined with the operations of the guerrilla outfit Chushi Gangdruk, formed as a national volunteer defence army in protection of their homeland and way of life. Chushi Gangdruk is an ancient Tibetan name for Kham, meaning "land of four rivers and six ranges", and refers to Kham and Amdo. It was comprised of Tibetans from those eastern Tibet regions, whose aim was to drive Chinese forces out of Tibet.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, as the guerrilla force battled the occupying Chinese, the most remarkable feat of Chushi Gangdruk was ensuring the safe passage of Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, who escaped from Tibet's capital, Lhasa, to India in 1959 after learning of a threat to his life. The profundity of this event in world history and its significance to Tibetans was best expressed by Dunham in 2005: "For most Khampas, Amdoans and Goloks, their last ray of hope was anchored to the safety of the Dalai Lama."

In the early stages of the Battle of Chamdo in 1950, Tibetan rebels defeated the Chinese troops. The Chinese were quickly reinforced by 15,000 soldiers of the Eighteenth Army and the outnumbered Tibetan warriors had to flee into the mountains. The few who survived were forced into exile. Ama Adhe played an important role at that juncture when she formed an underground resistance movement with more than 60 Tibetan women. Today, women of the Tibetan movement credit Adhe and many other Tibetan heroines who succeeded in blurring the gender distinction between those actively participating in the resistance movement.

In exile, the group conducted guerrilla operations from the northern Nepalese region of Mustang up to 1974, following then President Richard Nixon's rapprochement with China. The CIA had provided the group with limited material assistance and aid, as well as training for members of Chushi Gangdruk and other guerrilla groups. The CIA's covert mission, called Shadow Circus, was said to have been organised without the Dalai Lama's blessing.

The US involvement with Tibet came about during the Cold War period and the unfinished project of decolonisation in world history. As the temporal leader of Tibetans at the time, the Dalai Lama taped a message appealing to Khampas of the resistance and all Tibetans to lay down their weapons and surrender peacefully. The Tibetan people have adhered to the principle and practice of non-violence (*ahimsa*) ever since.

A former political prisoner and member of Chushi Gangdruk, Sok Shabdrung Dujom Dorjee Rinpoche, shared some thoughts of the few remaining resistance fighters with me one winter afternoon on Sydney's

*“Ama Adhe’s advocacy for Tibet was like a tree with strong roots. Now, after her passing, it’s like the tree has fallen,”*

— Sok Shabdrung Dujom Dorjee Rinpoche

Central Coast. “Ama Adhe’s advocacy for Tibet was like a tree with strong roots. Now, after her passing, it’s like the tree has fallen,” he said stoically. There is no more fitting analogy for such a courageous woman. Tibetans from Kham consider trees “jewellery of the mountains”. Rinpoche, a torture survivor himself, served a sentence amounting to 13 years in a Chinese prison – including patriotic “re-education” through forced labour – before his release in 1973. He was held on “death row” several times. After resettling in Nepal, he later sought political asylum and arrived in Sydney in 2002 with his family. Most Tibetans in Australia, about 2000 are former political prisoners who were resettled via the Humanitarian Entrants Scheme set up in the 1980s. “Ama Adhe is from my generation of Tibetans who saw China’s invasion and struggled through the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward,” Rinpoche recalled. “Her passing closes a chapter for that generation.” Rinpoche said that Adhe had been offered political asylum in Australia, but was so committed to the Tibetan struggle she chose to remain in Dharamsala, the headquarters of the Tibetan freedom movement in exile.

Rinpoche spoke with a heavy heart when he described how the elders of his generation feel when survivors of the Tibetan resistance such as Ama Adhe do not achieve their desire to see the end of Tibetan suffering in their lifetime: “Her passing without seeing that day is one regret for the remaining elders still in exile.” Adhe had been among the few Tibetan women who actually fought the Chinese. She was brave, Rinpoche said, “because she knew how to ride a horse and use a gun”. Adhe’s family name, Tapontsang, means ‘commander of horses’ in Tibetan. In 2012 the Dalai Lama requested that her

story be documented for the Tibetan Oral History Project. The Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees.

Over the years of living in exile, Ama Adhe shared her experiences with people from all over the world who visited her home. I was honoured to meet her in 2005 as part of an Australian delegation and research trip prior to the official Australian visit of then-Tibetan Prime Minister in Exile, Professor Samdhong Rinpoche. I met with Ama Adhe at the Tibetan Reception Centre in McLeod Ganj, a former British hill station and suburb of Dharamsala, where Tibetan refugees are eventually settled after their arduous journey escaping from Tibet via Nepal. It’s the final destination for Tibetan refugees seeking an audience with their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. In her late 70s at the time, Ama Adhe’s physical stature and presence remained warrior-like, yet she had the most profound lightness of being.

She was the embodiment of resistance to all Tibetans. Speaking of her ordeal, the only time she cried was when she recalled the suffering of others. As we spoke, Adhe honoured the memory of those colleagues who perished in prison from starvation in the first three years of captivity. Every tear she shed for those Tibetan women was evidence of their existence, a testament of Tibetans’ resilience and their unceasing desire for freedom.

Adhe was permitted to leave Tibet on condition that she remain silent about her 27 years in Chinese prisons, yet she made a promise to herself and to the Tibetans who did not survive that she would not let the truth about China’s military occupation go unheard or unchallenged. The inspiring and deeply personal account of her life was recorded in the book, *Ama Adhe: The Voice that Remembers*. It is an engrossing record of a crucial time in modern Tibetan history, describing the inhuman conditions that she and countless Tibetans were forced to endure after the Chinese invasion. Her memories evoke sorrowful imagery of Tibet’s fall. “All the snow-covered mountains turned red with blood,” she wrote. When Adhe met the Dalai Lama upon her arrival into exile in Dharamsala, the spiritual leader of 6 million Tibetans advised: “As long as you are able, speak on behalf of the dead.” She never ceased to do so. In the foreword to her book, the Dalai Lama commended her courage in public life and acknowledged how Tibetan women have equally sacrificed and participated in the struggle for justice and freedom.

Up until her 80s Ama Adhe travelled the world as an advocate for human rights and Tibet’s freedom. Her story is a testament to the resistance and resilience of Tibetan women, for whom religious and cultural identity



The Dalai Lama escapes Tibet into exile where his retinue and Khampa bodyguards, following the 1959 people's uprising. Circa 1959. Photo: courtesy: OHHDL

are important to their sense of agency. In her final years in exile she devoted herself to creating art in memory of those who died in the Chinese camps, and served as the director of Art Refuge, a children's trauma intervention program at the Tibetan Refugee Reception Centre in McLeod Ganj. "Even if I die I shall be satisfied that I had the chance to relate the story about my colleagues," she said in an interview in 2012. "I have been around the world telling my story. I have been to 10 countries of the world and all the people have supported me ... millions have sent me letters saying that I speak the truth and that they support me. While they [prisoners] are dead, I have survived and His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that I am their representative ... I have already spoken about everything [to the world]; I have related everything to His Holiness and now if I die, I am fulfilled."

Tenzin Phuntsok Atisha, a Tibetan diplomat and representative of the Dalai Lama for Australia, New Zealand and South-East Asia from 2003-2009, described his first meeting with Adhe to me recently with great warmth and reverence. Atisha was a member of the last fact-finding delegation to visit Tibet in 1985. "When I heard the news, I was really sad because Ama Adhe was at the forefront of Tibetan freedom fighters under China's occupation." As is traditional for Tibetans – and one of the many denied to Tibetans in Tibet – Atisha's family lit butter lamps in front of the Dalai Lama's photo upon hearing the news. "I was very lucky to have known Ama during my time serving in the Department of Information and International Relations" he said.

Tenzin Atisha had the opportunity to accompany Ama Adhe on a visit to Denmark during an international hearing and human rights conference in the European winter of 1989. "Ama Adhe had been invited to tell her

story to an international audience and the Tibetan community, and I was her translator," he said. Atisha said it was a sad and emotional time: "She cried and I cried and all the Tibetans cried. This was my precious moment in time with Ama Adhe."

After that trip, Atisha said all Tibetans were encouraged by Ama Adhe's sacrifice. "She was tough to withstand the notorious Chinese 'struggle sessions' (thamzing)". The physical and psychological torture endured by Tibetans in the struggle sessions, or demonstrations of public humiliation, were beyond comprehension. According to the Central Tibetan Administration, at least 92,000 Tibetans subjected to struggle sessions died or committed suicide, and an estimated 173,000 Tibetans died in prison or "Reform Through Labour" camps" (laogai).

"The resilience of Tibetans is an extraordinary attribute of their personal traits, deeply incorporated in the cultural view and the Tibetan philosophy of life and religion, which help them overcome evil and dark times of torture, traumas and humiliation," said Gordana Hol, STARTTS Direct Services Coordinator.

Over the course of 25 years following China's annexation of Tibet from 1950, the Tibet Information Office in Australia estimates that 1.2 million Tibetans died as a direct result of Chinese Government policy. Resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly in 1961 and 1965 explicitly recognised the Tibetan people's right to self-determination and called on China to respect this right. ར

*In January this year, Nepal and China signed a contentious extradition treaty that condemns captured Tibetan refugees in Nepal to the penal system of mainland China.*

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