"Heavy Curtains and Deep Sleep Within Darkness"

By Woeser

1.
My Jowo Buddha sat
  cross-legged in the seething
  and ardent chaos of fire.
No time to write a poem, cry,
or even allow me to search for the countless treasures
  behind those hurriedly hung curtains,
even though the ultimate truth
  is actually impermanence
as personally manifested by Jowo Rinpoche.

2.
Those heavy curtains are a metaphor.
On the second day after the fire
  they took a piece of yellow silk
  covered with red flowers,
  almost without a wrinkle,
  cut without a trace,
  and draped it behind what was reportedly
  the “completely intact” body
  of Jowo Shakyamuni.
It seemed like a dense and seamless wall.
Who knew what was behind it?
Or what could still be there?
Those who persevere, you actually know
  that invisible fire has been burning unabated,
  and those heavy curtains
  concealed the world
  long ago.

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1  Tsering Woeser, “Heavy Curtains and Deep Sleep Within Darkness”, High Peaks Pure Earth, 28 March 2018  http://highpeakspureearth.com/2018/poem-heavy-curtains-and-deep-sleep-within-darkness-by-woeser/  This poem was written in three sections, part 3 on 14 February 2018, three days before the fire, and parts 1 and 2 written on 18 February 2018 and 3 March 2018 respectively.
3.

Deep sleep within darkness.
One can not but sleep deeply within darkness.
One can not but rely on a dream
in deep sleep within the darkness….
But isn’t darkness also diverse?

It’s like these words (was it me who said them?):
“You may think there is darkness in this world,
but in fact, darkness does not exist.”
And so, you can try and describe
different forms of brightness—
glimmering light, dim light, brilliant light…
soft light, warm light, intense light…
as well as the flash of light,

that time the light extinguished
more quickly than lightning,
did you see it?

as well as the flaming light,
that time the unquenched light
burned longer than fireworks,
did you see it?

Suppose there is no eternal light, then what?
Suppose there is not a single ray of light, then what?
Slowly entering sleep? Gradually dying?
And how, in this endless bardo,
can one be spared
the invisible temptations of every wrong turn?
A single drop of water falls on the eyelid
of the one who is fast asleep.
A single teardrop in the darkness laments
the death of the soul that lost its mind.
But some people say, as if in the whisper
of a country a lifetime ago:
“If you want to know how much
darkness there is around you,
you must sharpen your eyes,
peering at the faint lights in the distance…”

— Woeser, Beijing 2018 —
Behind the Curtain
The Jokhang fire six months on

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Background

On the evening of 17 February 2018, a fire broke out at the Jokhang Temple in the centre of old Lhasa. The blaze was captured on camera and made international news. It also raised fears of serious damage to the Jokhang, one of the most revered sites in all of Tibetan Buddhism.

Despite the seemingly clear evidence of the fire, the events of that evening quickly became contested, with a range of competing claims over the location of the fire and its effects on the Jokhang. Information about the incident was quickly suppressed by the Chinese authorities and has been restricted ever since, apparently in the hope that the official narrative would be adopted: that there was a fire, but it was quickly contained and that no lasting harm was caused to the site or any of the historical and cultural artefacts within. In practice, the secrecy around the fire and its aftermath has served to sow further doubt.

This short investigation, six months after the fire, brings together the details that we do know, including satellite imagery of the Jokhang a week after the fire, which appears to show extensive damage to the site. This investigation also gathers concerns about the attempts to cover up the extent of the damage and allegations that restoration efforts may have caused further harm to the site.

In the meantime, there has been no clarity from authorities over the condition of the Jokhang and its relics. These concerns, and the lack of reliable information from the Chinese authorities, emphasise the need for an impartial outside investigation to the Jokhang to assess the damage and ascertain what measures need to be taken to protect or restore the site. They also provide yet another indictment of China’s policy of maintaining Tibet as one of the most closed and heavily-restricted places in the world.
Timeline

17 February
Fire breaks out at Jokhang at 6:40 pm. Footage on social media purports to show the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel in flames. The fire is extinguished almost 90 minutes later.

Images, videos and reports of the fire are subsequently taken down from social media.

The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), based in India, states that the fire did not affect the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel and expresses relief. The CTA claims that the fire had instead broken out at another building within the Jokhang complex.

18 February
The Jokhang reopens to visitors. Large areas are blocked off to visitors including the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel.

The pro-government Tibet Daily newspaper publishes several photos of devotees visiting the Jokhang which purportedly show no damage to either the interior or exterior, including the Jokhang’s historic Jowo statue.

19-22 February
Losar (Tibetan New Year) concludes on 19 February. The Jokhang closes for three days.

22 February
Xinhua, China’s official press agency, publishes a detailed account of the fire based on a preliminary investigation. It concludes the fire was not caused by human factors and asserts once again that the Jowo statue was unaffected by the fire.

5 March:
The CTA reassesses its initial claims and states that, according to new sources, the damage caused by the fire was far more extensive than Chinese authorities have claimed. The Sikyong, Dr Lobsang Sangay, calls for UNESCO and independent journalists to be granted access to carry out an investigation.

16 March
China responds to a request from UNESCO for information about the fire and the state of the Jokhang. China reiterates its claim that emergency measures were immediately put in place, that the Jowo statue was not damaged and that the building was largely undamaged.

4 July
The World Heritage Committee, part of UNESCO, expresses regret at the fire in a routine report published in July 2018. In the report the body asks China for more detailed reports on the fire damage as well as access for a monitoring mission to examine the damage and restoration efforts.

19 July
Gyaincain Norbu (the Beijing installed Panchen Lama) visits the Jokhang to carry out religious rituals and meet the monks. He visits the temples on-site and pays homage to the Jowo statue.

26 July
Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, on a rare visit to Tibet, met with Buddhist leaders at the Jokhang and urged them to defend national ethnic unity.
The Jokhang: Layout and orientation

The Jokhang is located in the centre of old Lhasa, surrounded by the Barkor, a square and circuit of streets that pilgrims and locals circumambulate for religious purposes. Nearby historical buildings include Muru Ningba Monastery and the Jamkhang, the residence of the 5th Dalai Lama. Around 1,000 metres to the east lies the Potala Palace, the historic residence of the Dalai Lama.

The Jokhang complex is 25,100 square meters and its buildings have up to four floors which are topped with traditional, Tibetan, gilded copper roofing. It is made up of courtyards, monks’ quarters, offices, kitchens and temple buildings, all of which have been built at different stages since the 7th century as and when rebuilding and extensions have taken place.

The main gate is located on the west side of the Jokhang. Further into the complex, beyond the Kyamra Chenmo Courtyard, is a square of chapels surrounded by a narrow circuit known as the Nangkor. The Jowo Rinpoche Chapel is located on the eastern side of this. It has three floors, the lowest of which houses the Jowo Shakyamuni statue. This life-sized statue depicts the young Buddha and is the most important religious icon in all of Tibet. When dressed, the statue is presented with a jewelled crown and robes. It sits in front of a high, gilded, copper screen decorated with figures. On the second level of the building the Jowo statue can be viewed from above and on the third floor there are fragments of historic art.2

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History of the Jokhang

The Jokhang was established in the 7th century by King Songtsen Gampo, the 33rd King of Tibet and founder of the Tibetan Empire. Its oldest structures date back to 652 and over the centuries since then it has grown in size to take its present form. It assumed its current name of Jokhang (Temple of the Lord) after King Songsten’s death.

According to tradition, the temple was built for King Songtsen’s two brides, Princess Bhrikuti of Nepal and Princess Wencheng of the Chinese Tang dynasty. The latter, as part of her dowry, is said to have brought the Jowo Shakyamuni statue with her in a wooden cart.

Throughout the following centuries, the Jokhang accumulated further significance. In front of the temple there is a stone pillar which bears an inscription of the Sino-Tibetan Treaty, 821/823, which concluded a running conflict between the Tibetan Empire and Tang China. In 1409 the Lama Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, initiated the Monlam, or Great Prayer Festival. Taking place immediately after Tibetan new year and traditionally lasting two weeks, these festivities were hosted at the Jokhang every year until 1959.

As well as the Jowo statue, the Jokhang has also become home to a variety of Buddhist relics and manuscripts. It was used by the 10th Panchen Lama to protect treasures from other monasteries in the early years of Chinese Communist Party rule over Tibet.

During Mao Zedong’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, launched in August 1966, there was no worship at the Jokhang. The prayer square was instead used to hold struggle sessions where those accused of being “class enemies” or “counter-revolutionaries” would be publicly humiliated, denounced and sometimes executed. Numerous relics and scriptures stored there were removed or destroyed on the spot by Red Guards, a student movement mobilised and encouraged by Mao to purge symbols of China’s pre-communist past.

Tibetologist Hugh Edward Richardson noted that while precious artefacts and religious images were looted or damaged during the Cultural Revolution, ancient wooden pillars, carvings and wall paintings remained undamaged and that, unlike several other historic places in Lhasa, the building remained structurally intact. This meant that towards the end of the Cultural Revolution efforts to restore the Jokhang could begin, including efforts to rebuild replicas of sacred artefacts and paintings that had been destroyed.

From the late 1970s onwards, the Jokhang was opened up to the public. It also remained a site for Tibetan political gatherings. In 1979, when the Dalai Lama’s brother led a party to Lhasa as part of a fact finding mission, Tibetans broke through the iron gates at the Jokhang to greet the

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4 The treaty states, amongst other things: “Both Tibet and China shall keep the country and frontiers of which they are now in possession … Tibetans shall be happy in Tibet and Chinese shall be happy in China”. [http://www.tibetjustice.org/materials/treaties/treaties1.html](http://www.tibetjustice.org/materials/treaties/treaties1.html)
delegation. Chinese authorities ran into similar problems during subsequent fact-finding missions. One of these other delegations received an “enthusiastic reception” from Tibetans outside the Jokhang, some of whom raised pro-independence slogans.

The Barkor, the road and area surrounding the temple, was the scene of protests in the late 1980s, many of which were supported by monks from the Jokhang. These protests peaked in the late 1980s. On 5 March 1988 armed forces began beating the protesters outside the Jokhang before storming inside to beat the monks. According to Tibetan witnesses, between eight and fifteen monks may have been beaten to death by People’s Armed Police personnel inside the Jokhang.

In 1994 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) granted World Heritage Site status to the Potala Palace. In 2000 UNESCO enlarged this status to include the Jokhang. Today the Jokhang remains an active religious site and, like many other religious sites in Tibet, has also been opened to mass tourism.

Destruction of Buddhist artefacts at the Jokhang during the Cultural Revolution, August 1966 (High Peaks Pure Earth).

8 Smith, *Tibetan Nation*, p.567
11 Ibid.
The fire

News about the fire broke on Saturday 17 February as it was still burning. Footage taken from multiple sources inside Lhasa and then shared online showed the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel and the building’s immediate surroundings engulfed in flames. The wooden beams underneath the chapel’s roof could be seen between the flames. The videos showed that the fire was visible from hundreds of metres away across the city.

Official news sources were comparatively slow to report the fire. Xinhua, the Chinese government’s official news agency, later confirmed that the fire had broken out at 6:40 pm. This report claimed that the fire had been quickly extinguished and that there had been no casualties.12

The same evening as the fire, social media posts about events at the Jokhang, including images and videos of the blaze, began to be censored. Robert Barnett, former Professor of Contemporary Tibetan Studies at Columbia University, shared the news that sources in Lhasa claim police have threatened anyone found distributing pictures or unofficial news about the fire. According to the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), monks and staff working at the Jokhang were also ordered not to speak about the fire.13 Posts about the fire on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform like Twitter, disappeared. The ability to re-post and comment on other posts was disabled by the afternoon of Monday 19 February. The censorship was even more extensive on the messaging application WeChat, from which references to the fire almost entirely vanished.

The Barkor was reopened to pilgrims the day after the fire, Sunday 18 February. The Jokhang itself also reopened on the Sunday. Tibet Daily, the official newspaper run by the government in the Tibet Autonomous Region, published several photos of devotees visiting the Jokhang on 18 February, which suggested that there had been no damage to the interior or exterior caused by the fire.14 The Jokhang was then closed again between 19 and 22 February.

On 21 February, Xinhua published a more detailed account of the fire, claiming that it had broken out on the second floor of the building and restating that it had been quickly put out. The fire originated from a ventilation chamber that was installed in the 1980s. The report cited claims from the regional Cultural Relics Bureau that all 6,510 registered cultural relics were intact, emphasising that the statue of the Shakyamuni Buddha was “intact”. It also stated that the main building was undamaged, although the roof had been removed to prevent it collapsing or catching fire again.15

Controversies

The lack of access to Tibet for foreign journalists and censorship of Chinese social media have fed doubts among Tibetans regarding the official reports from Chinese media about the impact of the fire.

Response time

While the official reports in Xinhua claimed that the fire was put out “soon” after it started, video footage shows that it was still raging after sunset at 7:45 pm. This is supported by material leaked from China’s public security ministry which states that the fire was not extinguished until 8:05 pm, meaning that the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel was on fire for at least 85 minutes (having started at 6:40 pm). This internal report, originally posted online by the Institute of Fire Science and Engineering, Nanjing Tech University, and shared by Tibetan activist and writer Tsering Woeser, states that authorities were notified of the fire at 7:07 pm local time, 26 minutes after it began. It states that 37 fire vehicles and over 200 soldiers were dispatched to the Jokhang almost immediately, to protect the relics and put out the fire.

Tsering Woeser posted on her Twitter account a notification released by China’s Public Security Ministry on 18 February. The notification, also originally posted online by the Institute of Fire Science and Engineering at Nanjing Tech University, revealed more information about the Jokhang fire and some of that information seemed to contradict Xinhua’s reports, particularly regarding the start time and location of the blaze.

The delayed response to the fire is made all the more curious by the fact that, according to Chinese authorities, the Jokhang has its own fire brigade. In a State of Conservation submission to UNESCO in November 2017, the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage stated that the Jokhang has its own fire brigade permanently based at the site, as well as security monitoring rooms and staff on duty 24 hours a day for the “safety and protection of cultural relics”. The submission also stated that, in 2017, the Bureau of Cultural Relics of the Tibet Autonomous Region commissioned the Ministry of Public Security to prepare a safety plan for the Jokhang and the Chinese Academy to prepare a fire control plan, both of which had been approved by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China. This project was due to be implemented in 2018.\(^\text{16}\)

The location of the fire and damage to the temple

Despite video footage appearing to show the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel in flames and admissions by the Chinese authorities that there had been a fire at the Jokhang; in the days following 17 February there was a range of reporting on exactly where the fire took place.

The first information that reached the CTA in Dharamsala, India, stated that the fire had taken place in a building adjacent to, but distinct from, the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel. Based on this information, the Sikyong expressed relief that the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel and the Jowo Shakyamuni statue inside were unaffected. He also expressed hope that more information would emerge in the following days.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^\text{16}\) [https://whc.unesco.org/document/165238](https://whc.unesco.org/document/165238)

Three days later, relying on more detailed information from new sources, the CTA stated that the extent of the damage was far greater than initially reported. Its sources found that the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel had been affected and, although the status of the Jowo Shakyamuni was unclear, the wall behind the statue and the murals in the chapel had sustained fire damage, along with the roof of the building. It also reaffirmed that there had been extensive damage to other buildings, listing four chapels that had been damaged: the Palden Lhamo Yum Drakmo Chapel, the Songtsen Chapel, the Mani Chapel and the Namsey Chapel.18

Although the Jokhang reopened on Sunday 18 February, before closing again for the following three days, there was limited public access that Sunday. The second floor of the temple compound was closed and devotees were not given access to the Jowo Rinpoche.19 Tourists attempting to find out about damage from the travel website TripAdvisor were met with responses that the Jokhang had not been damaged, save for some monks’ dormitories.

In order to clarify the location of the fire, Free Tibet worked with satellite mapping organisation Apollo Mapping. This image of the Jokhang, taken on 24 February, one week after the fire, clearly shows that it was the Jowo Rinpoche Chapel that was affected. The imagery shows an expanse of black where the roof would usually be, covering an area of around 150 square metres. If the roof has been removed, as some reports claim, then this image implies significant charring to the upper level of the building as a result of the fire. If the roof has not been removed then this image suggests significant charring and extensive damage to the roof itself.

While satellite imagery from above can pinpoint the location of the fire, there are also questions of how far down the fire extended and whether the ground floor, containing the Jowo statue and several other statues, carvings and murals, were significantly affected.

18 Central Tibetan Administration, CTA President Calls for Independent Investigation into Jokhang Fire Aftermath, 5 March 2018, http://tibet.net/2018/03/cta-president-calls-for-independent-investigation-into-jokhang-fire-aftermath/
**Damage to the Jowo statue**

Since the fire, a number of photos of the Jowo statue, and the rest of the temple, have emerged which, if taken at face value, appear to support the authorities’ claim that the temple’s relics have remained intact.

There are several reasons for concern. Firstly, the date of the photos has not been verified. Secondly, and of greater concern to Tibetans, the picture of the room is unfamiliar. When the pictures released by Chinese news sources are compared to photos taken before the fire, one can see that the Jowo statue is wearing a different type of crown and that the intricately detailed background, consisting of other statues, carvings and jewels, is now covered with yellow drapes. In one photo a pillar previously bejewelled appears to be bare.

The drapes were unrecognisable to Tibetans familiar with the Jokhang and heightened concerns that part of the chapel had been lost to the fire. These concerns were reflected in a poem, *Heavy Curtains and Deep Sleep Within Darkness*, written by Tsering Woeser and released three weeks after the fire.20 In accompanying comments, Woeser added: “After the fire of 17th, I wonder what’s behind the yellow drapery behind the sacred Jowo...Traditionally the Jowo has never had such hangings. I've been to the Jokhang many times since March 1990 and haven't ever seen a veil around it like this.”21

Writing on social media, Tibetologist Robert Barnett, citing an eyewitness, said the Jowo statue’s crown had melted and its robes been destroyed, while surrounding images and objects were badly damaged.22 The eyewitness also said the monks in the Jokhang had worked all night after the fire to clean up the Jowo and prepare it for photographs by the morning, replacing its robes and putting up fabric to hide surrounding damage.23 Barnett added that the statue’s crown had been replaced weeks before the fire, a common occurrence. He compared two photos, one from recently before the fire, in which the statue was wearing a crown with a blue trim, and the official photo released on 19 February, in which the statue had reverted to wearing the old crown. He summarised the release of the images as being “part of a ‘drip-feed’ strategy to reassure people that the Jowo is intact and divert attention from other damage.”24

22 Robert Barnett. 20 February 2018 [https://twitter.com/RobbieBarnett/status/966490191442710528](https://twitter.com/RobbieBarnett/status/966490191442710528)
23 Robert Barnett. 20 February 2018 [https://twitter.com/RobbieBarnett/status/966490192914927618](https://twitter.com/RobbieBarnett/status/966490192914927618)
24 Robert Barnett. 20 February 2018 [https://twitter.com/RobbieBarnett/status/966490214242967552](https://twitter.com/RobbieBarnett/status/966490214242967552)
China’s response

On 16 March, the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage responded to a request from UNESCO for information about the fire and the state of the Jokhang. In its submission, China reiterated its claim that emergency measures were immediately put in place, that the Jowo Shakayamuni statue was not damaged and that the building was largely undamaged, save for some partial burn damage to the ventilation chamber, its ceiling, some wooden columns and beams and some murals. The response also stated that that the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage and the People’s Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region were both working to assess the damage with a view to carrying out repair work.

The response from UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee and Advisory Bodies acknowledged the work carried out after the fire and requested that China submit more detailed information to the World Heritage Centre so that its Advisory Bodies could review it. It also recommended to the World Heritage Committee that it request that China invite the World Heritage Centre, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) to assess the damage themselves, along with China’s proposals for the restoration of those parts affected by the fire.25

In June 2018, the World Heritage Committee met in Bahrain for its 42nd session. The Committee, which is made up of UNESCO members, has the task of monitoring sites on UNESCO’s World Heritage List to ensure that they are being adequately conserved. The Jokhang was added to this list in 2000.

During the session, the World Heritage Committee reiterated its request that China provide the World Heritage Centre with detailed reports of the fire damage, damage assessments and plans for restoration. It also requested an invitation from China to the World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS and ICCROM so that they could carry out a joint Reactive Monitoring mission.26 There has been no sign of a response by China to this request at the time of this report being released.

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Uncovering the truth

Since the 7th century the Jokhang has survived wars, Mao’s Cultural Revolution and numerous uprisings against the Chinese occupation in Lhasa. It is treasured by Tibetans, many of whom remain in the dark about its present condition.

The lack of information about the Jokhang fire has again highlighted the ability of the occupying Chinese government to hide events in Tibet from external scrutiny. The damage to one of the most important and recognisable sites in all of Lhasa has been surrounded with so much secrecy that concerned Tibetans have struggled to confirm whether or not the fire took place within the temple, the extent of the damage and the condition of its many precious artefacts. Although this report has been able to outline some of the main controversies around the fire, prove the location of the fire and give a sense of its scale, only an impartial, external investigation, conducted by experts with unimpeded access, can uncover the full truth.

It is vital that the Chinese authorities allow such an investigation to take place and that UNESCO, the World Heritage Committee and other governments push for it to happen. Tibetans must be allowed to know what damage has been done and what efforts, if any, have been made to repair the site. Restoration work without the guidance of experts could compound the harm already done by the fire.
About Free Tibet

Free Tibet is a London-based international campaign organisation. Our vision is a free Tibet in which Tibetans are able to determine their own future and the human rights of all are respected. We campaign for an end to China’s occupation of Tibet and for international recognition of Tibetans’ right to freedom.

www.freetibet.org

About Tibet Watch

Tibet Watch works to promote the human rights of the Tibetan people through monitoring, research and advocacy. We are a UK registered charity with an office in London and a field office in Dharamsala, India. We believe in the power of bearing witness, the power of truth.

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