

## Aboriginal Chinese Warrior-Poet Learning About U.S. Aboriginals

■ Aku Wuwu is the first to write poetry and perform its translation in the ritual language of the Yi minority.

By Ron Karten

Aku Wuwu has an easy smile, and when he reads his poetry, he has a singer's voice. Not perhaps what one expects of a warrior, but Wuwu and the indigenous Yi people of southwest China have been warriors for centuries.



Photos by Toby McClary

**Warrior And A Poet** — Aku Wuwu is one of the great poets of the Chinese Yi minority. He writes in both Chinese and his native Nuosu language, addressing local concerns and also reflecting the experiences of the larger Chinese community. His success has enabled him to travel, where his interests have focused on other aboriginal societies, and the common experiences that all share. Wuwu sports a necklace given to him by Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle Kennedy.

The Yi have "always been warriors at heart," he said through translator Mark Bender, an Asian Studies Professor from Ohio State University. "The warrior spirit is still respected, but it is only during festivals that some men dress up in the old-style warrior garb."

The seven million Yi are among China's largest indigenous minorities. They maintained an independent kingdom until the 1950s, according to Bender, when political upheaval swept across China.

"Nobody came in. Nobody went out," said Bender of the centuries of Yi history.

Bender is the first American translator of Wuwu's poetry and one of two translators who accompanied him during his five-week American tour. Juwen Zhang, Professor of Asian Studies at

Willamette University, also accompanied Wuwu and translated here in Oregon.

For centuries, the majority Han Chinese have migrated down into the southwest border areas where the Yi have long lived, and pushed the Yi further and further into the mountainous border areas.

It is the clash of the two cultures that is the subject of Wuwu's poetry, said Bender. From his poem, "The Last Bimo (ritualist, priest) in the Village," translated by Bender in the 2004 book, *The Poem Behind The Poem/ Translating Asian Poetry*:

Ancestor, ah  
I will use my  
two old teeth  
To exchange  
for your two  
new teeth.

On this, his first tour of America, Wuwu wanted to see Indians, said Bender. Indians and Yi are peoples with similar experiences, said Wuwu. The scenery also is similar, he said.

"As far as he can see," translated Zhang, "there are quite a few commonalities: the way the society is organized, belief systems, personalities, people's relationships."

Before the Yi go hunting, said Wuwu, there is a ritual to be performed to the Mountain God, to the Tree God. "Only after the ritual can they go up and hunt," said Zhang.

"After they've killed something, they ask forgiveness. When they cut up the animal, there are rules about how and where to make the cuts," said Zhang.

While touring the Grand Ronde facilities, Wuwu met with Tribal Council member Chris Mercier,

who had just finished the only book on China he has read: *Soul Mountain*. It turned out that the book included the Yi country and people. (Mercier has since donated the book to the Tribal library.)

Wuwu also met Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle Kennedy, who gave him the beaded necklace that she was wearing. He received other gifts as well, including a framed photograph taken during pow-wow and a Grand Ronde jacket.

Wuwu performed his poetry for a small group at Grand Ronde, and later in the day at Willamette University, he was to join Janice Gould (Konkow), a Native American poet, for a reading. He also read his work locally at Chemeketa Community College.

In his travels as far east as Ohio, Wuwu met with Cherokee, Ojibwe and Choctaw Tribes in addition to the Grand Rondes.

And during these visits, at least during his visit to Grand Ronde, Wuwu asked as much as he answered. He wanted to know whether casino money goes to Tribal members. He asked whether the federal government provided money to the Tribe. He asked about the relationship between and among Tribes, about changes in the culture over the years, about efforts to preserve the aboriginal language.

Wuwu saw "some sort of connection beyond all the similar experiences," said Bender, and pieces of this experience already are making their way into poetry written since his arrival.

"In the past, what I knew was

from TV and other people's eyes," said Wuwu. One of the "greatest achievements" of his trip, was that he has now seen "in my own eyes this reality of the land, people, everyday life, faces."

He comes from a family of singers, he said, who left for future generations the epics they used to sing about: basic stuff like "the origins of heaven and earth."

And today, Wuwu carries on with traditional writing both in his native Nuosu (a branch of the Yi) language, (that he won't allow to be translated into Chinese), and in the major Chinese language itself.

"Aku Wuwu sees his works on one level functioning as textbooks on traditional lore for those younger Yi, especially those caught between tradition and modern urban lifeways," wrote Bender in his essay, "The



**Greetings** — Wuwu meets Tribal Council member Valorie Sheker-Robertson. In the middle is Juwen Zhang, Professor of Asian Studies at Willamette University, who also translated for Wuwu in his Oregon travels.

Spirit of Zhyge Alu: Translations of Aku Wuwu's Nuosu Poetry."

Sponsors of the trip included the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at Ohio State University, along with the Oregon State University (OSU) East Asian Studies Center, the OSU Center for Folklore Studies, and the Institute for Collaborative Research and Public Humanities.

## Floyd Red Crow Westerman Visits Tribal Council

Photo by Heather Boylan



Photo by Heather Boylan



Photo by Angie Sears

**Hollywood Comes To The Rez** — Floyd "Red Crow" Westerman (far right), pictured with Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle Kennedy, recently visited with Tribal Council members to learn more about the history of Indians in the region in order to accurately depict local Tribal people in his upcoming movie, *Tillamook Treasure*. The movie takes place in Manzanita, Oregon and depicts the spiritual journey of a 14-year-old girl as she searches for treasure. Tribal Council members Valorie Shaker-Robertson (above, left) and Jan Reibach (above, right) pose with Actor Maxwell Gail (known for his role as Stan Wojciehowicz on *Barney Miller*).

