At the end of the 1970s, after decades of political isolation, China entered a new era of reforms and open-door policies. On the agenda of Deng Xiaoping’s government was revitalising the cultures of China’s ethnic minorities, which had suffered heavy damage during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). This included the creation of journals and publishing houses where minority writers could publish works reflecting their own cultures and traditions. Although modern Tibetan literature would flourish from the 1980s on, its beginnings during the late 1970s were very slowly emerging. Partly because of the devastating effects of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet, and partly because of the lack of a secular tradition in Tibetan literature, by the end of the Cultural Revolution it was extremely difficult to find Tibetan writers. A strong belief in Deng Xiaoping’s directives, mixed with a sense of Socialist ‘civilising’ duty and a regret for the damages Chinese politics had inflicted upon Tibetan culture inspired a group of Han editors based in Tibet to actively seek Tibetan intellectuals who could develop a body of modern literature. When some ethnically hybrid intellectuals, who have been previously considered as Han, showed strong literary potential, editors pressed them to write under Tibetan names, so as to serve as role models for new generations of Tibetan intellectuals. This paper explores how two of these writers, Sebo and Tashi Dawa, decided to follow the Chinese editors’ lead and embarked on an arduous personal and literary journey in search of their Tibetan identities.

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1 A short version of this paper was presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (Washington, DC, April 2002).
1. The Creation of Tibetan Identities

In the late 1970s, after a decade of Han political and cultural assimilation, the rights of China’s ethnic minorities re-entered the official discourse. In 1977, following official directives, the Chinese-language journal Literature and Arts from Tibet [Xizang wenyi] was created with the only purpose of publishing literature about Tibet. However, the key factor in the revitalisation of Tibetan culture was Hu Yaobang’s visit to Tibet in 1980. In his Lhasa speech on May 29th 1980, Hu acknowledged the inadequacy of the Chinese policy regarding Tibet. For the first time, a leader from the People’s Republic of China admitted that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was to be blamed for the poor situation of modern Tibet:

[…] Tibetans still live in poverty. In some areas living standards have even gone down. We comrades in the Central Committee […] feel that our party has let the Tibetan people down. We feel very bad! The sole purpose of our Communist Party is to work for the happiness of people, to do good things for them. We have worked nearly thirty years, but the life of the Tibetan people has not been notably improved. Are we not to blame?²

While during the Cultural Revolution Han cadres in Tibet had been instructed in doing away with local culture in order to promote the homogenising ideas of Communist China, they now were officially told to promote Tibetan culture at all costs. The blooming of a modern Tibetan literature seemed one of the logical steps towards this new goal and, for the most part, Han editors in Tibet confronted this task enthusiastically.³ After a decade of forced silence, educated people all over China burst into a spontaneous and almost therapeutic writing of literature, known as ‘scar literature’ [shanghen wenxue], which allowed them the sharing of tragic experiences and the beginning of a collective healing process.⁴ Although Han editors in Tibet expected a similar pop-

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² Quoted in Wang 1994: 287. This is Wang’s own translation. In the course of several interviews I conducted in the TAR during Fall 1999, many Tibetan writers, as well as Han authors residing in Tibet, referred to Hu Yaobang’s speech as ‘honest’ and ‘deeply moving’.
³ At the time, most editors in Tibet were Han cadres who had been sent to Lhasa in the 1950s or during the 1970s.
⁴ This literary movement is also known in English as ‘literature of the wounded’.