

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE PAST IN THE CREATIVITY OF THE PRESENT: MODERN TIBETAN LITERATURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change.

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*When schooled too poorly in verse
'Ts premature to speak of Tibetan Studies;
With too inadequate a grasp of verse
Hasten not to censure works of Tibetan scholars¹*

Thus sings Sangdhor in a metrical poem in praise of Tibetan versification, countering an anti-verse sentiment that is prevalent on the contemporary Tibetan literary scene. Since the flourishing of free verse form in the 1980s, thanks to the pioneering works of Dhondup Gyal, many Tibetan writers have attacked metrical composition for its perceived inflexible, archaic and inadaptable form and uniformity of content. Sangdhor, one of the most iconoclastic and forward-thinking intellectuals writing in Tibetan today, vehemently refutes such a stance on the grounds that the bulk of great Tibetan works, literary or otherwise, are set in verse. To underscore his point he writes the cited poem in a “leaping and flying” style of the *mgur* (‘poem-songs’) genre. In fact, most of his many innovative poems are written in an eclectic style drawing on Tibet’s rich literary tradition, Buddhist texts, oral sources and contemporary writings. Their content is equally diverse yet most of all current. It is infused with social and religious criticism, themes of romance and eroticism, critical literary commentary and current Tibetan affairs. His poems, like those of many other writers, show that metered poetry is very much a part of modern Tibetan literature. As he draws on classical literature and indigenous oral traditions for his own literary innovation, to borrow

1 Sangdhor, *rdo rje glu la nam 'gyur zad mtha' med* (‘Inexhaustible Are the Forms of Vijara Songs’, accessed online 12 February 2010). This and many of Sangdhor’s new poems can be accessed at his website: www.sangdhor.com. All the translations in this article are by the author.

a concept from Northrop Frye, in Sangdhor's work we can "see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance" that is a complication of Tibetan literary formulas stretching to the narratives of the distant past.² Therefore, it must be borne in mind that modern Tibetan literature transcends a theory of rupture which many scholars overstress to the point of overlooking its deep, outspread roots. Some parts of these roots predate both the 1980s, which saw a flourishing of new Tibetan writing, and the Chinese takeover of Tibet in the 1950s that has had a profound impact on Tibetan cultural production.

Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change, a must-read book for all students of contemporary Tibet, contains some noteworthy essays that opportunely address this oversight. In a characteristically insightful paper Luran Hartley undermines the theory of rupture through the study of Tibetan writers in the early and mid-twentieth century. She draws our attention to the works of traditional Tibetan scholars which display literary continuities as well as innovative qualities that have undoubtedly contributed to the development of modern Tibetan literature. Her observations of literary greats in the period immediately preceding the Communist era, the likes of Gedun Choepel, Giteng Rinpoche and Shelkarlingpa, compel her to conclude that "the literary imagination of Tibetan writers in the pre-Communist era dispels the assumption that it was the so-called 'liberation of Tibet' which paved the way for intellectual innovation."³ She detects modern aspects in these authors' attention to the vernacular, lucid and succinct writing style and use of contemporary non-religious subject matter. Of course, these qualities can be found in the works attributed to Milarepa, Tsangyang Gyatso, Drukpa Kunlek and Za Paltrul, to name but a few great singers of *mgur*, who long predate the aforementioned authors, and whose influence on contemporary Tibetan literature is little explored.

Hartley also acknowledges the contribution made to modern Tibetan literature by some monastically trained scholars who co-operated with the new Chinese Communist regime in the 1950s and 1960s. The Chinese Communist Party, which lacked legitimacy in Tibet, referred to these traditional scholars as "important patriotic personages" because of their ability to command obedience from ordinary Tibetans, and their vital revolutionary role in conveying the Chinese communist ideology. Noting their role in political indoctrination and their contribution to Tibetan language reform and literary production under Chinese Communist rule, Hartley aptly calls them "the Monastic Vanguard".⁴ These Tibetan scholars practised what Robert Barnett calls "strategic concealment" in order to promote Tibetan culture and language. Through strategic manoeuvring some Tibetan intellectuals and officials sought to secure private and public gain without appearing to be in opposition to the Chinese authorities.⁵ Whilst playing the role of "important patriotic personages" for the colonial power these scholars achieved a great deal: the publication of Tibetan books, promotion of Tibetan-medium education and, most relevant to our topic, a prodigious artistic and literary output. Modern Tibetan literature would be unimaginable without the contribution of these traditional scholars working under colonial conditions.

2 Frye 1957, p. 17.

3 Hartley 2008, p. 3.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–24.

5 Barnett 2005, pp. 25–66.

Their role in the evolution of modern Tibetan literature along with that of oral forms of narrative deserves sustained scholarly attention.

Tibetan intellectuals in Tibet were the first to have observed the continuing influence of Tibetan literary traditions upon new literary practices. Sangye Kyab, a Tibetan editor, acknowledges this productive interplay in a preface written for a series of anthologies of modern Tibetan literature, which includes a volume of literary criticism – the first of its kind. Sangye Kyab celebrates modern Tibetan literature for its aesthetic achievements, literary creativity and for drawing on Tibetan traditional literature, social conditions and cultural history. He believes the innovative use of Tibetan spoken and written language by modern Tibetan writers not only preserves Tibetan literature as a whole but acts as an inspiration for its further advancement.⁶ Literary innovations are not seen as a radical break with the past; rather, modern Tibetan literature is thought to be an effective way of preserving Tibetan language, culture and history in the aftermath of the nightmarish Cultural Revolution.

Dhondup Gyal, although credited with being the father of modern Tibetan literature, himself contends in his seminal work on *mgur* that literary innovation entails a tremendous collective labour on the part of generations of writers and artists, as well as a process of critical evaluation. In his view no individual author could achieve such a grand task by himself without having recourse to literary traditions:

An innovative literary form cannot be established within a short period of time. Neither can it be formulated by a person of distinction. The birth and development of an innovative literary form requires sustained evaluation of all the experiences regarding literary practices and a reliance upon the laborious toil of numerous artists and writers. Furthermore, it is also conditioned by several factors, such as traditional literature and the artistic quality of a writer. The establishment of an innovative literary form is contingent upon the collective effort of a generation or many generations.⁷

This is not dissimilar to T. S. Eliot's idea of historical sense or "the consciousness of the past" which he sees as a *sine qua non* for the making of a great poet.⁸ Alak Gungthang underscores a similar point in his famous tongue-in-cheek, self-critical comment that "All scholars are thieves / I am the king of thieves".⁹ This suggests that the ability to borrow from great literary traditions and scholars for the creation of one's own work is the defining hallmark of erudition: to be an outstanding artist takes a certain degree of depersonalization, entailing the appreciation of past literary luminaries. In spite of his avant-garde credentials it is difficult to deny apparent continuities in Dhondup Gyal's work. Neither can such continuities be denied in modern Tibetan literary production.

6 Sanggye Kyab 1993, pp. 2–5.

7 Dhondup Gyal 1997 [1985], pp. 519–20.

8 Eliot 2001[1919], pp. 1092–98.

9 This famous phrase has acquired a proverbial status in Amdo. It is attributed to the great Lama scholar, Gungthang Tenpai Dronme (1762–1822), but doubts remain as to its origin. It is generally interpreted as a self-critical, derisive remark condemning scholarly compositions that make spurious claims to originality.

In an excellent essay in this volume Nancy G. Lin takes issue with the established belief that Dhondup Gyal is purely a modernizing hero by shifting our focus onto his transitional role in reviving and re-introducing Tibetan classical literature to a new generation. His writings on classical Tibetan literature occupy a considerable part of his entire oeuvre, which includes retelling and translation of the *Ramayana* tale, commentary notes on classical texts and his own compositions (including metered poems) influenced by the *Kavya* tradition. Lin sees his work on the *Ramayana* as part of an ambitious project to revive as well as reform Tibetan literature in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. She observes that he regarded the *Ramayana* as “a suitable narrative to affirm the legitimacy and continuity of the classical Tibetan literary tradition”.¹⁰ Most of all Dhondup Gyal’s immersion in Tibetan literary classics helps to dispel the notion that he rejected traditional authority so as to embrace a modern genre of literature. Although he is critical of classical Tibetan literature, he sees it as a vital ingredient for the reconstruction of Tibetan literary identity in a modern age. Lin is right to suggest that Dhondup Gyal acts as a bridge between classical Tibetan scholars and modern writers. She astutely points out that his commitment to Tibet’s literary heritage is even apparent in his innovative free verse poems.

Even Dhondup Gyal’s most pioneering poem, *Waterfall of Youth*, which introduced the genre of free verse as a defining feature of modern Tibetan poetry, could not escape the poetic tentacles of the *Kavya* tradition. In fact, the majority of his poems are written in the classical style, be it at times informed by *mgur* genre and traditional oral compositions. Even some of the images and phrases he uses to invoke the visual and aural sense of splendid beauty and the sweet melody of the *Waterfall* are Indic.

Behold!
Foamy waves, white and pure
Ringlets of light, peacock feather tips
Parrot plumage
Patterned brocade
The bow of Indra
 Hearken!
The sound of the flowing water, clear and sweet
The melody of youth, songs of the fragrance-eaters
Strains of Brahma
Voice of Sarasvati
*Chords of the cuckoo*¹¹

Compound expressions like peacock feather tips, parrot plumage, patterned brocade, and the bow of Indra (rainbow) are employed to induce the visual beauty of the sparkling and spraying *Waterfall*. Songs of the fragrance-eaters (Tib: *dri za*; Skt: *gandhaarva*), strains of Brahma, the voice of Sarasvati, and chords of the cuckoo invoke the melodious sound of the cascading *Waterfall*. These are recurring motifs and kennings of classical Tibetan

¹⁰ Lin 2008, p. 88.

¹¹ Dhondup Gyal 1997 [1983], vol. 1, pp. 130–31.

literature, employed to convey visual and aural beauty. Admittedly these images here refer to the beauty of a new and promising generation, but they nonetheless remain stereotypical representations. These are images only familiar to a literate elite, whose taste has been shaped by classical literature. These features of Dhondup Gyal's most innovative poem have not been underlined to question his avant-garde credentials, but to underscore the continuity of the classical past. Alongside an aspiration to progress, innovation and commitment to action, *Waterfall* conveys his ideal of change based on preserving and reinforcing the strengths of the past whilst also embracing the opportunities of the present for a better Tibet. This synthetic approach can be detected underneath the rhetoric of progress and relentless forward march of the poem. The poem lists the ten traditional Tibetan sciences (i.e., fields of knowledge), and asks what should be done to advance them. The *Waterfall's* answer is to embrace modern scientific and technological progress and ideas of change. We should not therefore be surprised to hear more than a rumbling echo of classical Tibetan literature in the works of an author who sought to refine Tibetan literary production through preservation as well as reform.

It is refreshing to point out the hitherto neglected influence of classical Tibetan literature, but as can be seen in this collection of essays, modern Tibetan literature cannot be appreciated through a single lens. This book serves as an introductory text. Its lettered contributors, with a variety of academic and linguistic backgrounds, give the book intellectual depth and diversity. It is a unique publication in that it is not only the first serious Western language book on modern Tibetan literature but it also examines the works of Tibetan writers in languages other than Tibetan. Whether literature written by Tibetans in non-Tibetan languages can be called Tibetan literature or not is a moot question. What is clear is that Tibetan literature cannot be studied without a considerable grasp of imaginative writing in Tibetan. Professor Eliot Sperling's maxim is, as ever, applicable here: "Without the ability to work in Tibetan there is no serious Tibetan Studies."¹² However, this is not to downplay the merits of papers covering Tibetans writing in non-Tibetan languages. They indeed enrich Tibetan literary studies by bringing in a global and multicultural approach as well as exploring those productive twilight zones called cultural interstices. As a result this volume sheds light on the intricate interplay between literary activities and socio-political, historical forces as well as intercultural exchanges. Most of all it indicates that a multiplicity of causes have contributed to the birth of modern Tibetan literature.

This already praiseworthy volume would have been even more well rounded had it included a chapter or two on the legacy of Tibet's rich oral tradition. The impact of different forms of Tibetan oral narrative on contemporary creative writing evinces an intricate interaction between past and present resulting in literary innovations. Leading Tibetan writers such as Dhondup Gyal and Tsering Dhondup resort to oral narrative devices and infuse their writing with proverbs, idioms and expressive set formulas directly inherited from folksongs, folklore, the Gesar epic and ordinary speech. The influence of the Tibetan epic and other traditional modes of narrative are pronounced in an unfinished story by Dhondup Gyal entitled *A Journey Through the Royal Tombs of the Warrior Kings*.¹³ This

¹² Sperling 2009.

¹³ Dhondup Gyal 1997, vol. 2, pp. 352–97.

beautifully written fictional narrative borrows heavily from the Gesar epic, Milarepa, classical Tibetan poetry, Indic mythology, Tibetan folk culture, and colloquial speech. Traditional literary conventions and elements of oral narrative shape the overall form and structure of the story and heighten the magical elements of the content. In his short satirical story called *A Show to Delight the Masses*, Tsering Dhondup not only extracts the plot and structure from an entire episode of the Gesar epic, but also closely mimics its proverbial, rhythmic and playful narrative style with finesse.¹⁴ Oral sources provide narrative devices and lyrical style while also serving as critical vehicles for expressing discontent with the socio-political status quo. The following extract from a blog poem by a young Tibetan poet is just one of many examples of the endurance of Tibet's oral tradition. It is composed in the style of the Sixth Dalai Lama's *mgur* and traditional Lhasa love-songs. This genre predominantly features four-line stanzas with each line constituted of three trochaic feet. Its subject is topical and deals with the repressive situation in Tibet following the immediate aftermath of the protests that rippled across the Tibetan Plateau in 2008:

*Yesterday we screamed out cries
Before the iron fortress, gateless
Today we pour out our hearts
Before the old lady, toothless¹⁵*

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14 Tsering Dhondup 1996, pp. 171–201. For an English translation of this short story and a brief introduction to the author see Hartley and Bum 2001, pp. 58–77.

15 Due to the subversive nature of this poem its author remains anonymous.

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