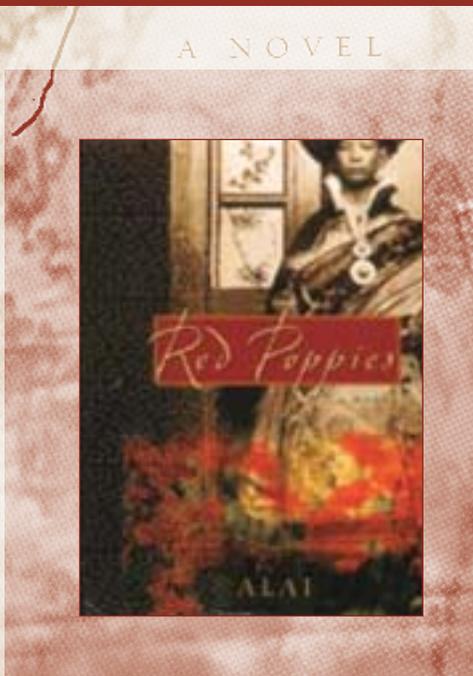


CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN LITERATURE—writing that reflects the variety of Tibetan experience in the world—is beginning to attract the kind of attention that promises both to intrigue and infuriate. Tibet’s ambivalent place in the world of literature is even suggested by a recent issue of *World Literature Today* in which the “literature in review” section included, among categories for countries such as Algeria, New Zealand, and China, the heading “Tibet.” Beneath this heading is a review of *Tales of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels, and Wind Horses*, in which the reviewer notes that after decades of communist Chinese control, writers in Tibet are beginning to publish in the Tibetan language, “although some of those writing in the Tibetan language are, in fact, Chinese.” Lost in this welcome response to “Tibetan literature,” however, are the facts that *Tales of Tibet* only includes stories originally written in Chinese, not Tibetan, and that no Chinese writer writes in Tibetan, unless by “Chinese writer” is meant a citizen of the People’s Republic of China, which, in fact, is what all Tibetans living in China are considered, both by the Chinese government and by unanimous consent of the world’s nations. One such writer, a Tibetan named Alai, is considered in another review in the same *WLT* issue for his novel *Chen’ai luo ding* (“When the Dust Settles,” translated as *Red Poppies* by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin), written in Chinese, and following the fate of a wealthy

Where Is Tibet in World Literature?

STEVEN J. VENTURINO



Tibetan family before the communist era. Rather than falling under the category of “Tibetan” literature, however, the review for this novel falls under the category of “China.”

What are we to make of this? Is Tibetan literature Tibetan literature, or is it Chinese literature? Does it matter in which language the works are originally composed, or should we categorize by the ethnicity of the writer? Do categories even matter? Before getting to the answer to the final question, which is “yes,” we might begin by backing up to the first question and asking, who are “we”?

Readers and teachers of world literature, at least as they are reflected in the pages of *World Literature Today* and through international dialogue on comparative literature, appear willing to acknowledge and question the unequal political forces at work in literary production. Dominant languages and dominating political policies are scrutinized, and the oppositional nature of, for example, Syrian writing, Palestinian writing, Cuban

Pictured above and left: Covers of *Tales of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels, and Wind Horses* (2001) and *Red Poppies* (2002), by Alai
Courtesy: Rowman & Littlefield and Houghton Mifflin

literature, or Native American writing offer insights into the lives of people for whom literature remains, to quote Peter Brooks, “a challenge to other forms of discourse with which it is in dialogue.” Indeed, *Tales of Tibet* is recommended “to those readers interested in the emergence of Tibetan literature from the twin shadows of Chinese censorship and Tibetan sacred discourse.” The book’s cover also announces that “these literary gems—several banned in China itself—will captivate students and general readers looking for a unique encounter with a Tibet struggling to maintain its age-old civilization under the Chinese cultural onslaught.”

Another important recent volume is the special issue of *Manoa* titled *Song of the Snow Lion: New Writing from Tibet* (2000). In the introduction to this collection (which does include some selections originally written in Tibetan, along with Chinese works), the editor and publisher claim even more by arguing that,

Since the Chinese invasion of the country in 1950, Tibetans have struggled to preserve their ancient culture and identity while also changing and modernizing. Despite Chinese censorship, Tibetan authors who have remained within their country have developed a vibrant literature that explores the difficult questions facing Tibet today. (back cover)

While it is possible that an official Chinese reading of the *Tales of Tibet* cover might result in grudging agreement that “struggling with Chinese culture” may serve as an acceptable area of criticism for minority groups in China today, the phrase “Chinese invasion of the country” from the *Manoa* volume can only be singled out as yet another instance of what the official Chinese press regularly calls the West’s (or simply America’s) “misunderstanding” of the situation in Tibet and its interference in China’s domestic affairs.

From the perspective, then, of Chinese institutions and literary organizations—all of which remain mindful of the official line on criticism of Chinese policies—the approach to Tibetan literature that suggests a body of work unified by its resistance to Chinese rule is simply untenable. And what of Tibetan writers themselves? The “Tibetan writers who have remained in their country” may not be the first ones to advocate subversive or resistant interpretations of their works, as a Western critic or publisher may do, precisely because of the immediate threat of punishment for producing subversive literature. Writers in exile from Tibet, as Pema Bhum has remarked, “have the desperate satisfaction of expressing their anger by cursing and exposing the crimes of their enemies,” while those who live in Tibet are “forced to hide the anger they feel toward the plunderers of their homeland and the murderers of their fathers.” There may certainly arise in



Cover of *Song of the Snow Lion: New Writing from Tibet*, a special issue of *Manoa* (2000)

Tibet examples of what Leo Strauss has called the “writing of the persecuted,” in which authors “write between the lines” in order to reach those who understand their “private communication” yet remain under the radar of less astute censors, but might not well-meaning Western criticism actually serve to expose these writers to closer scrutiny or even punishment at home?

These questions regarding official Chinese reactions to Tibetan literature, Western approaches to conceptualizing and reading Tibetan writing, and the variety of Tibetan writers themselves all lead us to revisit some of the core concerns of reading literature from “global” perspectives, not because these concerns are misplaced, but

because they remind us that it is the worldliness of world literature that poses the most vital challenges.

If, as David Damrosch reminds us, world literature is “always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture,” then recent offerings in Tibetan literature challenge us to respond to a growing body of literature whose relationship to “host” and “source” is itself a site of tension. Contemporary Tibetan literature’s “source cultures” includes centuries of a distinct Tibetan nation, the culture of Tibetans living under Chinese colonialism, the culture of Tibetans in India (where the world’s most visible emblem of Tibetanness, the Dalai Lama, has lived in exile since 1959), and the cultures of Tibetans in a worldwide diaspora. Equally as challenging, Tibet’s “host cultures” not only include those of a South Asian, North American, and European readership, but the culture(s) of China itself, including its variants in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and around the world. In other words, the source and host cultures in which Tibetan literature is written and read often overlap, making discussion of a “national” literature a matter of political debate played out in the cultural sphere.

It is certainly difficult to speak of contemporary Tibetan writing as forming a “national literature,” since Tibet is nowhere recognized as an independent country, but as a part of the People’s Republic of China. Yet, I believe, it is crucial that we do so. By recognizing the growing body of work written by Tibetans—in Tibetan, Chinese, English, and other languages—as a *Tibetan national literature*, readers of world literature help to acknowledge the integrity of a Tibetanness that has been transformed through historical circumstances, as many nations have, bringing a fundamental sense of identity to the diversity of its people. Mohja Kahf has argued that there is great value in “bundling together” the diverse literatures of Syria, since “such a harvesting allows us to become aware of patterns and to experience esthetic pleasures

otherwise undetectable." Indeed, reading texts as "Syrian literature" serves an important purpose, since "having a literature is crucial to the survival of this uprooted and embattled community."

Of course, Syria is already recognized as a sovereign nation-state. Speculating on the existence or nonexistence of a Syrian national literature does not directly threaten, say, Egypt, Lebanon, or Great Britain. If, on the other hand, readers (including teachers and the institutions that support their livelihoods) approach Tibetan literature as a national literature, they confront another nation-state claiming sovereignty over Tibetan politics and culture. Will it be possible to conduct truly global discussions of Tibetan literature, or will readers and scholars have to settle for dialogue that must "side" with either the official Chinese position or the (various) Tibetan exile positions, or simply ignore the problems altogether?

Controlling representations of China and "China's Tibet" are of great concern to Chinese officials and, by extension, to many academic and cultural institutions in China. *China's Tibet*, the bold title of a magazine (and several official Internet sites) published in Beijing for foreign audiences, features articles on culture, history, and current development, all reflecting official policies and routinely critical of the Dalai Lama and Western meddling in Tibet. The Chinese government regularly protests invitations to the Dalai Lama to visit heads of state, claiming that he does not represent the Tibetan people. Performing groups and museum exhibits are organized by the Chinese government and travel to countries around the world, where Tibetan support groups accuse China of manufacturing misleading images of Tibet. Of course, in 2000 Gao Xingjian was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, angering Chinese officials (and others) who accused the Swedish Academy of interfering in China's domestic affairs by drawing international attention to "a Frenchman with a Chinese name" critical of China's leadership.

Criticism of Gao's Nobel was yet another manifestation—though one directly related to world literature as such—of anxiety over China's place in the cultural world. It is ironic that critics continue to focus on what they see as the hegemonic and even imperial "westernization" of China when Chinese policies involving language, education, culture, and modernization, according to Uradyn Bulag, aim to solve what China calls its "nationality problem" by sinicizing and assimilating China's national minorities, including the Tibetans. Yi Dan, for example, asks: "Where and how can Chinese knowledge define itself when the nation's educational system, curriculum, and knowledge paradigms have been a result of remodeling of the Western norms?" Yi's resigned answer is simply that, "if to search for a Chinese experience is to get rid of the Western influence, the effort

shall never be successful." Similarly, in a volume devoted to Chinese comparative literature, Yingjin Zhang characterizes the current generation of Chinese critics as one in which there is no "either/or" choice between Western theory and Chinese literature: we can no longer return to a pristine state of Chinese literature, uncontaminated by any critical language, nor can we aspire to be anything but cross-cultural, comparative critics as we approach the new millennium."

There seems to be enough anxiety to go around. Chinese critics seek to navigate the hybrid forms of literature and criticism arising from the varieties of Chinese experience and the diverse forms of "foreign" influence, hegemonic and otherwise. Similarly, Tibetans attempt to identify what they write *as Tibetan*, while exploring the various strands of "foreign" influence and identification, including those from China. Significantly different, however, is that while issues of Chineseness have been taken up with considerable vigor and sophistication, serving as the basis for publications, conferences, international exchanges, and college courses, there are at present no similar efforts to openly investigate Tibetanness. Raising questions of Tibet at literary conferences held in China is still a very difficult thing to do: even for foreign presenters, diverging from the current list of allowed subjects for criticism (which does not yet include discussing Tibetan identity) can lead to problems ranging from embarrassment of the hosts to the presenter's exclusion from the program. When Beijing was offered as a potential site for the 2000 Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, concerns were raised regarding the ability of scholars to freely debate questions of ethnicity, minority discourse, and national identity. In the end, the ICLA chose Pretoria, South Africa, as the site of that meeting. In 2004, however, the ICLA will gather in Hong Kong, offering a welcome opportunity for transnational scholarly debate to further consider China's "one country, many literatures" predicament.

For Tibetan specialists, the problems can be more serious. The seminars of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, held at a different institution every three years, are each attended by Chinese minders, keeping a close watch on the activities of scholars traveling from Tibet and seeking out information from Western scholars regarding the activities of Tibetan support groups and even the locations of important Tibetan figures who have fled China. At these meetings, communication between writers and scholars from Tibet and those living in exile is frustrated by official Chinese guidelines and suspicion on both sides. Still, the conditions are improving for open discussion among Tibetans "from both sides of the Himalayas," but there remains a long way to go to reach meaningful transnational dialogue on issues of cultural comparatism.

Mary Louise Pratt describes the (partially achieved) goals of comparative literature and global citizenship, from

the perspective of the Western academy, as the task of globalizing, democratizing, and decolonizing. I would add that Chinese comparative approaches reflect a similar interest, but with a difference. While the prospects of globalizing economic and cultural flows, democratizing global cultural exchange, and exposing the colonizing tendencies of the West (the United States) all feature in official publications and scholarly work alike, there remains a program of directing these interests only toward *international* relations and away from *intra-* or *transnational* matters. When this tendency arises in Western comparatist work, Rey Chow identifies it as a symptom of a culture “based on the modern European notion of the nation-state” in which selected, strong nation-states are singled out to represent “the best,” while “cultures of lesser prominence in Western reception such as Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Tibet, and others simply fall by the wayside—as marginalized ‘others’ to the ‘other’ that is the ‘great’ Asian civilizations.” Chow counters this Eurocentric “passion for the nation-state” with an approach to literature in which “theory is used to put the very concept of the nation in crisis, and with that, the concept of the nation as the origin of a particular literature.”

If Eurocentric in its formulation, however, the passion for the nation-state also figures very highly in China’s own official attitude toward self-examination, and this poses a significant challenge to world literature. There are few more serious offenses in China than that of attempting to “put the very concept of the nation in crisis,” and this is particularly true with regard to Tibet. While it may be true that critics today, as Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu points out, examine not only the “deconstruction of the textual meaning of a poem about China, but the very undoing of the Chinese historical subject,” the same type of investigation rarely extends to anything suggesting the undoing—theoretical or otherwise—of the actual Chinese nation-

state. Concurrent with the rise of modern Tibetan literature, an international audience has been persistently reminded that “splittism” (*fenliezhuyi*) will not be tolerated from Tibetans or foreigners alike. Recent pronouncements regarding the Communist Party of China’s “Three Represents” campaign make it clear that China’s twenty-first-century “advanced culture” will be unified, univocal, and directed by the party, not the subject of literary debate. On the other hand, literature has always attempted to influence politics, and political policies cannot be enacted successfully without an awareness of actually existing cultural production.

For example, as literature produced in the Chinese language is influenced by Tibetan writers, official Chinese criticism acknowledges innovation but also attempts to undercut any potentially subversive readings. Chinua Achebe, in a widely read essay, has argued that the use of English in African literature becomes an instance of writing in a language that has been “inherited” by African writers. And while Achebe charges that English may be “the world language which history has forced down our throats,” he identifies it as a medium capable of genuinely articulating indigenous experience, all the while experiencing its own transformation: “The English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience” he writes, “but it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.” Perhaps the most widely read writer of Tibetan literature in Chinese is Tashi Dawa, whose collection of short stories (in English translation), *A Soul in Bondage*, held a prominent spot in bookstores catering to foreigners in China in the 1990s. Tashi Dawa’s work has been criticized as unself-consciously presenting the colonizer’s view of Tibet and

Tibetans and catering to a Chinese readership predisposed to look down upon Tibetans. Other critics, however, have examined Tashi Dawa’s fiction with regard to its magical-realist qualities. The introduction to *A Soul in Bondage* directly links Tashi Dawa with Latin American magical realism, noting his expressed interest in the works of Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges: “Tashi Dawa,” writes Dondrup Wangbum, “has put his finger on the pulse of Tibetan society, where religion and science, the new and the old, and the advanced and the backward co-exist.” Then, remarking on worldwide popular interest in Tibet’s “mysterious” nature, Dondrup Wangbum notes: “Actually, the ‘mystery’ of Tibet is the ‘mystery’ of Tibetan culture, and this

mystery stems from ignorance. Once it is understood, it is no longer mysterious. A Tibetan never thinks of himself or his life as a mystery.” In other words, suggests the critic, Tibet’s mystery is solved by simply learning more, in a way, by “just going there,” a refrain very familiar to Western critics who are told that their views of Tibet’s oppression are incorrect and can be put right through “correct understanding.”

Readers of world literature, however, may recognize that this maneuver also forecloses on opportunities to consider the specifically colonial implications of magical realism. That is, while a dominant discourse may be unable and unwilling to articulate the reality of a colonized society, narratives written



Alai

Photo: Fritz Hoffmann

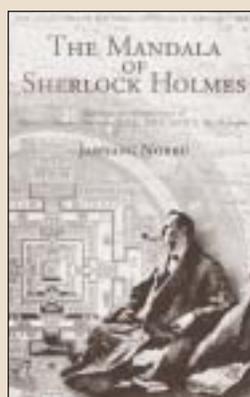
by colonial subjects, using this artificial, interested discourse, may seem, by definition, “unreal” or “magical.” A critical reading, then, may highlight the overlapping discourses that unsettle a dominant culture based on stable representations. What Dondrup Wangbum, the reader’s Tibetan specialist, has done is to deflect the subversive potential of Tashi Dawa’s “magical realist” stories, replacing it with the assurance that the mystery of Tibet and Tibetan literature must be approached in an empirical manner more in line with official policies. This deflection might also alert us to the ideological charge inherent in David Damrosch’s reminder that “even a modicum of specialized knowledge can do wonders to attune us to a work’s inner workings, and an effective reading of world literature requires a leavening of local knowledge.” Clearly, when considering literature of, by, and about Tibetans, specialized “local knowledge” does not emanate from only one hometown.

While Chinese is one “foreign language” in which Tibetan writers can make reach a broad audience, English is another. Not long after the Mao Dun award was given to Alai for *Red Poppies*, it was announced that a novel written in English and based on Tibetan history, Sherlock Holmes, and Kipling’s *Kim* would receive India’s Crossword Award for best English fiction. Is this, therefore, Tibetan literature or Indian literature? The novel’s author, Tibet’s foremost political essayist and activist in exile, Jamyang Norbu, emphasized the Indian aspects in his acceptance speech, suggesting that, “writers of English fiction in India are not limited by the constraints of culture, geography and experience.” In fact, as both an Indian novel and a Tibetan novel, *Mandala* actively engages two systems of colonialism.

“With its interrogation of cultural subjectivity and attention to the tenuous bonds between identity and national language,” Emily Apter writes, “postcolonialism quite naturally inherits the mantle of comparative literature’s historical legacy.” Jamyang Norbu’s novel suggests that Tibetan history is a matter of openly acknowledging both British and Chinese colonialism. *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* illustrates that “Tibetan history” cannot be revisited without also revisiting the British colonialist texts that forcibly shaped history by inspiring the imaginations of military and political figures who aspired to “realize” their fantasies of empire in



Jamyang Norbu



Cover of *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*, by Jamyang Norbu (New Delhi, 1999; New York, 2003)

colonialist programs. At the same time, the novel is explicitly prompted by China’s own colonial missions, past and present. *Mandala* suggests that contemporary Tibetan literature, as a national literature, describes the actual contours of the contemporary Tibetan nation, which, with the Tibetan homeland as its center, comprises the breadth of Tibetan experience in the world and in the text.

“For the early part of the nineteenth century in India,” explains Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “the literary critic must turn to the archives of imperial governance to supplement the consolidation of what will come to be recognized as ‘nationalist’ literature.”

For the reader of Tibetan literature in English, it is important to acknowledge the effect, narrativized in *Mandala*, of literary texts in the historical archive. Jamyang Norbu’s novel, which is both a masterful adventure story and a deadly serious indictment of Chinese aggression against Tibet, suggests that for Tibetan history, the “archives of imperial governance” are comprised of texts not always considered “serious fiction,” such as the Holmes stories and even *Kim*, along with “serious” Tibetan histories and long-standing myths of Tibet in the Western imagination. A reading of these interlaced texts suspends an overdetermined “bundling together” of Tibetan literature based only on “indigenous” writing. Instead, we find that seemingly “non-Tibetan” aspects of Tibetan history are integral aspects of that history, even as a distinct “Tibetan literature” emerges. Historically, politically, and textually, Tibet is in the world, and much of the world is in Tibet.

Literature produced in the Tibetan language, as Tsering Shakya explains in one of his two invaluable introductions to Tibetan literature, “is still in its infancy,” and yet “literature has become the main arena for intellectual confrontation among competing ideas in Tibet today.” Recalling Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o’s position on composing literature only in his native language of Gikuyu, Tibetan writers find themselves mining other languages—particularly Chinese and English—for the development of the Tibetan language itself. By asking, “How can we enrich our languages? How can we ‘prey’ on the rich humanist and democratic heritage in the struggles of other peoples in other times and other places to enrich our own?” Ngūgĩ argues that a nondominant language may become a preferred means of articulating

contemporary narratives, since it helps to bring the outside world into the language and to those who speak it.

Tsering Shakya argues that the most famous of new Tibetan poems, written by Dhondup Gyal, “the founder of modern Tibetan literature,” brought “literary innovation,” “a genuine discourse on Tibetan modernity,” and “a bold nationalistic political statement” to Tibetan writing. In “Waterfall of Youth,” it is also clear that as the poet addresses the young people of Tibet, he emphasizes the central role of the Tibetan language:

You are witness to history,
The way of the future—
The breathing and lifting of the snow land
are written on every droplet,
the rise and development of the Land of Snows
shine in each of your rays,
Without you!
Where can we whet the sword of language?
Where can we sharpen the sword of our skills,
Without you!
(tr. Tsering Shakya)

An insightful review by Henry Zhao concludes with the claim that contemporary Tibetan literature encourages “diversified readings, political as well as any other.” Indeed, the diversified readings facilitated by the perspectives of world literature should invite Tibet into an existing discussion among equals. What may not yet be permitted for the politician or the diplomat is possible for readers of literature as they openly speculate on the national place for Tibetan writing. **WLT**

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