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Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change

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Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, editors. *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. xxxviii, 382 pp. \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-8223-4277-9.

The study of contemporary Tibetan literature is among the youngest and least developed domains within Tibetan studies. Although not the first publication dealing with contemporary Tibetan literature (cf., e.g., Venturino 2007), this volume will be remembered as the book that legitimized Tibetan literature.

The book familiarizes the reader with the major figures and movements in Tibetan literature in the twentieth century. The historical focus is reflected in the overall structure of the work, which is divided into two parts, “Engaging Tradition” and “Negotiating Modernities.” The papers fall uncomfortably into these two categories: chapter 12 is a historical overview similar to chapter 3, but the two are put into different sections. Although all the essays are presented in English, four of the contributions (chapters 5, 6, 12, and 13) are translated from Tibetan. The inclusion of such translations adds enormously to the value of the work. In addition to the new contributions, the volume anthologizes important essays published elsewhere (chapters 3, 5, 6, 11, and 12). Most of the articles are schematic, outlining major themes such as Tibetan literature in the early twentieth century (chapter 1), poetry in Chinese by Tibetan authors (chapter 2), Tibetan magical realism (chapter 9), and Tibetan literature in the diaspora (chapter 13). Only

three chapters (4, 10, and 14) focus on an extended analysis of a single specific work of literature. The placement side-by-side of historical overviews and more detailed studies gives the anthology as whole a heterogeneous quality. However, the recurrence of the same writers, works, and themes in different chapters and from different perspectives exposes the reader to some of the central concerns of contemporary Tibetan literature. For example, two works of Don grub rgyal (1953–1985), “Waterfall of Youth” (*Lang tsho’i rbab chu*) and “A Narrow Footpath” (*Rkang lam phra mo*), Tsering Shakya analyzes as rejecting tradition (pp. 77–81) but Nancy Lin sees as revitalizing tradition (pp. 104–105). The conjunction of such differing interpretations reveals that the major works of contemporary Tibetan literature are as ambiguous and laden with meaning as great works of literature in any language.

A preoccupation running throughout the volume is the status of writings by Tibetans in Chinese (especially chapters 2, 8, 9, and 10). Yangdon Dhondup gives a historical overview of poetry in Chinese by Tibetan authors (chapter 2). Lara Maconi addresses the relationship between Sinophone and Tibetophone authors and publishing (chapter 8). Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Howard Choy provide detailed discussions of specific works in Chinese (chapters 9 and 10). In these discussions, the meaningfulness of the author being Tibetan is taken surprisingly for granted (pp. 56, 176). Considerable attention is given to the question of whether Sinophone literature by ethnic Tibetans can be considered Tibetan literature at all. According to Tsering Shakya, the longest-running Tibetan literary journal *Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal* does not hesitate to include work in Chinese or translations from Chinese under the rubric of Tibetan literature, whereas the more influential journal *Sbrang char* includes only work originally written in Tibetan (pp. 64–66). According to Maconi, *Sbrang char* does publish works translated from Chinese, but suppresses the original place of publication and identity of the translator of works by Tibetan authors (p. 182). Despite these discussions, almost no attention is given to the questions of whether Sinophone literature by Tibetans can be considered Chinese literature, or whether Sinophone literature by Chinese can ever be considered Tibetan literature. Maconi acknowledges that there are Chinese writers who live in Tibet (p. 178) and that they are considered in the PRC as writers of *Xizang wenxue* (Tibetan regional literature) but not *Zangzu wenxue* (Tibetan ethnic literature).

Although one of the major theses in this volume is the engagement of contemporary Tibetan literature with tradition, the authors do not sufficiently demonstrate familiarity with traditional Sanskrit and Tibetan literature. Despite various assertions such as that Shel-dkar gling-pa “draws his style and select metaphors from Indic Kāvya” (p. 14), no examples, citations, or analyses are provided. In her detailed discussion of the use of the “metaphor of doubt” (*the tshom gi dpe*) in a poem by Gsung-rab Rgya-mtsho, Luran Hartley mentions that such metaphors are enumerated in the second chapter of the *Kāvyaadarśa* (more specifically

2.26), but fails to cite an edition of this text or to provide the Sanskrit equivalent term *saṃśayopamā* (p. 22). This inattentiveness to Sanskrit also results in a number of unfortunate inconsistencies and spelling mistakes, including vacillation between the incorrect “Ramayana” (pp. xxvii, 70, 92) and the correct “Rāmāyaṇa” (pp. 8, 91) as well as the incorrect use of “Tara” for “Tāra” (p. 51) and “alaṅkāra” for “alankāra” (p. 90).

For a volume that seeks to find a wide audience for contemporary Tibetan literature, this book surprisingly appears to regard the Tibetan language itself as something of an embarrassment to Tibetan literature. All citations of Tibetan sources are given in translation with the original text omitted. One cannot imagine a collection of essays on French literature that assiduously avoided the direct quotation of texts in French. The only exception appears to be Maconi’s provision of the poems she discusses in the original Tibetan, transliterated, in the footnotes. This lack of attention to the Tibetan language itself requires that almost all of the analysis in the book be thematic rather than formal. In some instances, the thematic analysis achieved is insightful and sophisticated (p. 44), but the reader confronted only with translations is left unable to appreciate the beauty of Tibetan literature itself. On the rare occasions when formal criticism is undertaken, the restriction to translations becomes cumbersome. Maconi describes a poem as having a strict traditional meter (p. 187, text on p. 191) without discussing Tibetan metrics. The original text does not consist of lines of matching numbers of syllables, and the translation is in free verse. Only a more detailed discussion of Tibetan metrics would confirm her claim. In one of the most extensive treatments of literary technique in the book, Hartley points out that in a poem by Gsung-rab Rgya-mtsho, “The kenning ‘holder of wealth’ (*nor ’dzin*) is used for the earth” (p. 21). However, her translation does not reflect the kenning.

Another example of this embarrassment of the Tibetan language is the choice to use David Germano’s transcription system throughout the volume. Germano’s system is based on the pronunciation of Lhasa dialect. However, by failing to distinguish the vowels *e* and *ä*, it fails to depict accurately even the pronunciation of this dialect. The system makes bizarre use of an acute accent to indicate that a vowel is not silent, where it might have been in if the string of letters in question were pronounced as a normal English word. Forcing the Tibetan language into the mold of the Lhasa dialect and the prejudices of an Anglophone eye is most regrettable in a book that is celebrating the literature of a people who are very much the victims of linguistic imperialism.¹

The volume is completed with three appendices, a bibliography, information about the contributors, and an index. The appendices consist of a glossary with transliterations of Tibetan words in the Wylie system based on their phonetic renderings in the Germano system, a glossary that gives Chinese characters for terms written in *pinyin*, and a helpful guide to published translations from Tibetan and Chinese into European languages (mostly English and French). The bibliography

is divided into separate sections for Chinese, Tibetan, and Western languages. Although useful, this back matter makes access to primary sources needlessly complicated. If interested in consulting a work discussed in one of the essays, the reader must first look up the author's name in the Germano transcription in order to discover the Wylie transliteration of his name, and then look up the author's name in the Wylie transcription in the bibliography to find the full reference. A short addendum to each article listing publication information for the primary texts discussed in that chapter would have been easier to use. Given the rarity of contemporary Tibetan literature outside of Tibet and India, a discussion of libraries that have particularly strong holdings for contemporary Tibetan literature would have been welcome. Even the contributors Françoise Robin (p. 168) and Lara Maconi (p. 193 n. 69) mention being unable to access particular works of Tibetan literature; how can a neophyte expect to manage on his own? The complexity of the reference system and back matter has caused problems for the editors themselves. Two of the Tibetan authors mentioned in this review, Gsung-rab Rgya-mtsho (Sungrab Gyatso) and Shel-dkar gling-pa (Shelkarlingpa), among others, are missing from the glossary of Tibetan names. Not all works mentioned in the text are included in the bibliography (e.g., Shakya [2004] mentioned on page 67 n. 11). Bibliographic entries by a single author are not ordered chronologically (cf., for example, Hartley).

An invigorating range of perspectives and topics is gathered in this volume. Overstating the impact this book will have on a nascent field would be difficult. Within the confines of such a pioneering work, it is clearly not possible to explore all potential avenues of inquiry. However, it is useful, nonetheless, to consider a number of directions in which future works can build on the groundwork laid here. Two topics deserving future scrutiny are the reception of Tibetan literature among Tibetan critics and the literature of ethnically Tibetan regions outside the People's Republic of China (PRC). Although the editors include articles translated from Tibetan, literary criticism is most often discussed in general terms. Several contributors comment on the reception of particular works of literature, noting, for instance, that they were "controversial" (p. 83), but only Maconi discusses specific authors of and essays in Tibetan literary criticism (pp. 184, 195). Despite the explicitly inclusive approach to Tibetan literature avowed in the introduction (p. xiii), the book treats only the works of ethnic Tibetans within the PRC or living outside of traditionally Tibetan areas, excluding a significant segment of the Tibetan cultural area. No treatment at all is given to the contemporary literatures of Bhutan, Ladakh, Baltistan, or the Tibetan-speaking populations of Sikkim and Nepal. This oversight is excusable in such a trailblazing work, but one hopes it will not become a hallmark of contemporary Tibetan literary studies.

Further treatment of the relationship between Tibetan literature and the literatures of other PRC nationalities and the placement of Tibetan literature among the literatures of Tibet's neighbors would have provided welcome contextualiza-

tion for contemporary Tibetan literature. Contemporary Tibetan literature is located throughout the volume in terms of several sets of oppositions, including Chinese versus Tibetan, old versus new, and local versus international (Western). In their introduction, Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani write, “As Tibetan writers seek to carve out a unique literary space, they must distinguish themselves vis-à-vis two fronts—the so-called Indianization of their ancestral writing and the Sinocentric or western models prevailing in the Chinese literary world” (p. xxiv). To some extent these dichotomies inhibit rather than aid the contextualization of Tibetan literature. Contemporary literature by ethnic Tibetans living in the PRC exists within the larger context of PRC nationalities policy. Because the socio-political circumstances that gave rise to contemporary Tibetan literature would have been shared by writers in other languages (e.g., Mongolian, Uyghur, Naxi, Qiang), considering the authors and works discussed in this volume in relationship to their counterparts of other nationalities should be at least as revealing as the oppositions treated. Within an even wider context, an investigation of contemporary Tibetan literature focusing on the post-Soviet national literatures of the Republic of Mongolia or the independent republics of Central Asia would also be of value.

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NOTE 1. In the same vein, one may question the intended political implication of incorrectly referring to Khri Srong brtsan as “king” (p. 53, Tibetan *rgyal-po*) rather than as “emperor” (Tibetan *btsan-po*, cf. Beckwith 1993, 218–219).

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