

Tibetan literary movements

In the new edited collection *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, editors Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and their contributors have developed a bold and comprehensive vision of modern Tibetan literature and the cultural discourse that surrounds its creation, dissemination and reception.

Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa

Hartley, Lauran R. and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, eds. with a foreword by Matthew T. Kapstein. 2008. *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*. Durham: Duke University Press. Xxxviii+ 382 pages. ISBN 978 0 8223 4277 9 (pbk.)

THIS PROJECT FILLS A LONG NECESSARY GAP not only in the study of Tibetan language and literature, but also in modern Tibetan cultural studies. It succeeds admirably in a task that is not attempted nearly often enough: of bringing Tibetan-related topics into meaningful dialogue with other areas and disciplines. This book positions modern Tibetan literature as part of several wider conversations regarding the modern history of Tibet; significant writers and critics of Tibetan literature, and their influences; issues of Tibetan identity, for both Tibetans who are part of the modern People's Republic of China as well as exile communities that stretch from South Asia to North America; and theoretical considerations of Tibetan literature as a form of World literature. While these themes represent over-arching concepts developed throughout the essays, the book is divided into two broad sections. The first part of the book, 'Engaging Traditions' sets out the broad social and historical contexts and key players that have informed the development of modern Tibetan literature. The second part, 'Negotiating Modernities,' develops case studies of particular works of literature and important themes in order to flesh out some of the theories developed earlier in the book. The essays can be read fruitfully through a thematic prism as well, and indeed, through this reading the wider significance of the essays as stand-alone pieces of research is also highlighted.

A rich and sophisticated literary movement

A number of articles within the book explore the influence of modern Tibetan history on the development of the genre of modern Tibetan literature. The Foreword, by Matthew T. Kapstein, and the Introduction by the editors both succinctly contextualise why the continuity of Tibetan literature has been so vital for Tibetans in the modern era. As Kapstein points out, in the early years of exile, language was seen as a bastion for all things culturally Tibetan and thus of special importance for preservation in the face of Chinese colonialism (p.vii). In the Introduction, the editors set out the traditional understanding of Tibetan literature as mostly derivative of Indian literature and tied closely with Buddhism (p.xvii), as literature was influenced by wider cultural events around the import of Buddhism into Tibet. Taking this into account, the appearance of vernacular literature that deals with modern themes in the 1980s appears all the more extraordinary (p.xx), as we are reminded throughout the book that, although modern Tibetan literature is a very new literary movement, it is already very rich and sophisticated.

In the Introduction, the editors emphasise the themes of development and 'a literary fixation on the grassland' and other pastoral modes within modern Tibetan literature as representative of the way that writers used symbolism and types of 'anticipatory nostalgia' to create resonating depictions of Tibetan society (p.xxviii). Riika J. Virtanen returns to the depiction of development in modern Tibetan writing in her article 'Development and Urban Space in Contemporary Literature.' In 'Oracles and Demons' in Tibetan Literature Today,' Françoise Robin also considers how culturally powerful images in Tibetan culture, and in particular religion, have been treated in modern Tibetan fiction. She suggests that the attitude of young Tibetan intellectuals who have rejected 'superstitious' aspects of Buddhism over what they consider to be 'universal' elements of religion have been significantly influenced by governmental attitudes and treatment of religion in different parts of the Tibetan Autonomous Region and other culturally Tibetan areas in western China (pp.152-153).

The essays in this book establish a very strong case for why Tibetan literature should be included in World literature categories and given consideration for its artistic and literary quality as well as its political content.

These papers are particularly important, for they un-pack images in Tibetan fiction that may otherwise be construed as stereotypically Tibetan, and add new dimensions to such works. Tsering Shakya's article, 'The Development of Modern Tibetan Literature in the People's Republic of China in the 1980's,' also addresses the historical context in which modern Tibetan literature appeared. His consideration of the appearance of literature journals, novels and Tibetan 'scar' literature in the midst of the enormous change in the 1980s endows Tibetan literature with a heightened political depth. According to Shakya, understanding literature in modern Tibet is essential to understanding modern history, as literature has become a crucial venue for competing and dissident ideas in contemporary Tibet to the extent that '[F]or Tibetan writers and intellectuals, the Tibetan language alone has the power to preserve and reinvent Tibet,' as opposed to any other potential forum (p.83).

Shakya's article mentions how the political aftermath of the 1970s and reforms in the 1980s laid way for a new form of literature to be developed, and how one figure particularly influenced this development. Döndrup Gyel (1953-1985) casts an important shadow throughout this collection as a prolific savant who challenged conventions of Tibetan literature through his unconventional use of 'free verse' poetic forms. Rather than eulogising him though, several articles actually bring to light unexpected new information about his writing. Nancy G. Lin, for example, writes of his fascination with classical Tibetan poetry as well, as evidenced in his work on the story of the Ramayana, and convincingly creates the case that he saw the tale as 'a suitable narrative to affirm the legitimacy and continuity of the classical Tibetan literary tradition' following the Cultural Revolution (p.88). Such an argument is a departure from studies that depict Döndrup Gyel as an iconoclastic rebel, but lead us to further appreciate his tragically short-lived talent and lasting influence. Lauran R. Hartley also provides a treatment of several well known Tibetan intellectuals, including Gendün Chömpel (1903-1951), Giteng Rinpoché (1881-1944), Shelkarlingpa (1876-1913) and Geshé Sherap Gyatso (1884-1968). She places them at an important crossroads for Tibetan literature, and explores how they situated themselves in regard to Communist policy that aimed to increase Tibetan literacy (pp.23-24) before they were disrupted by the Cultural Revolution. Writer Sangye Gyatso (also known as Gangzhün) contextualises the legacy of these figures in the modern TAR and surrounding Tibetan areas through exploring the rise of modern writing groups, and how these teams of writers have influenced the development of modern literature. The book also includes resources that have themselves influenced Tibetan literary culture – for instance, Pema Bhum's iconic article on the development of modern Tibetan poetry, 'Heartbeat of a New Generation,' has also been re-printed here, along with a new article that revisits its themes.

The importance of these figures in contributing to modern Tibetan literature is enormous, but more recent and well-known ethnically Tibetan writers have also written in Chinese language. The book outlines 'the language debate' in all its complexity, and refuses to trivialise the importance of the issue of language to the concept of modern Tibetan identity by making a judgment regarding the authenticity of Sinophone Tibetan literature as a part of modern Tibetan literature. Instead, several articles develop sophisticated treatments of the polemics of the issue. Yangdon Dhondup's article explores the historical development of modern Tibetan poetry in Chinese from the works of Yidan Cairang (Tib. Yidam Tsering, 1933-2004) through to the appearance of modern literature in the 1980s. She focuses on Yidan Cairang's works as exemplary of the ability for ethnically Tibetan writers to use Chinese language mediums to express concepts of cultural national-

ism through the deployment of Tibetan imagery and ideas. The article seems particularly pertinent considering the well-publicised case of the banned writer Weise (Tib. Öser), and is nuanced in its treatment of a sensitive issue. Lara Maconi explores how the term diglossia is more appropriate in the modern TAR than bilingualism, as Tibetan language remains inferior to Chinese language socio-politically and economically (pp.175-176). Maconi carefully looks at all perspectives of the issue, and concludes that new frameworks are needed to really understand modern Tibetan literature that incorporate 'plurality, hybridity, and 'otherness'' (p.196). Maconi's conceptualisation of this subject may indeed be useful in wider contexts to understand modern Tibet.

Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change also situates modern Tibetan literature in a wider context of international literature, and the article by Maconi above as well as contributions by Howard Y.F. Choy, Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Steven J. Venturino regarding some of the more famous recent Tibetan literary movements add theoretical richness to the book. These articles consider Tibetan literature in the context of discussions about magical realism, postcolonial literature and postmodernism. These studies also importantly disrupt the concept that world literature can only emerge from the context of modern nation states, and persuasively develop how, considering the multi-sited locality of the modern Tibetan community, Tibetan literature challenges concepts of 'international postmodernism' (Venturino, p.307). While most of the works and authors explored in this book are writers based in the People's Republic of China, there is a historical reason for this. Hortsang Jigme's article develops the literary scene in exile by considering ethnically Tibetan writers in South Asia as well as North American and Italian exile communities. He argues that members of these communities may not have access to Tibetan language education in early exile days as they struggled for survival, or may have more immediate impetus to learn languages from their local areas, and that therefore the literary scene in exile has not yet flourished. It appears from his more recent research however that there is interest in literature among the Tibetan community in India, and Tibetan writers are also publishing in other languages as well. These facts, along with the continuing strength of Tibetan writers in the People's Republic of China, act as indicators that modern Tibetan literature will only continue to grow stronger. Hopefully, this book will lead to the further studies, as the implications of internet publishing and blogging technologies for the development of new literature are pertinent topics that would be fascinating to explore further.

A new world literature?

The essays in this book establish a very strong case for why Tibetan literature should be included in World literature categories and given consideration for its artistic and literary quality as well as its political content. *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* moves far beyond this audience however, as its mature and thought-provoking meditation on concepts of identity, ethnicity, language, and the limitations of the modern nation state in conceptualising culture will not only make it a useful text for courses on modern Tibetan history and culture, but also generally interesting for readers interested in postcolonial/ postmodern cultural studies. The editors should be applauded for putting together a selection of exciting and stimulating papers that represent the cutting edge of research in this emerging field. Hopefully this project represents only the beginning of more inter-disciplinary adventures in Tibetan cultural history.

Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa
University of Alabama
aholmes12@bama.ua.edu

Fig. 1 (above)
The Potala Palace,
Lhasa, Tibet.