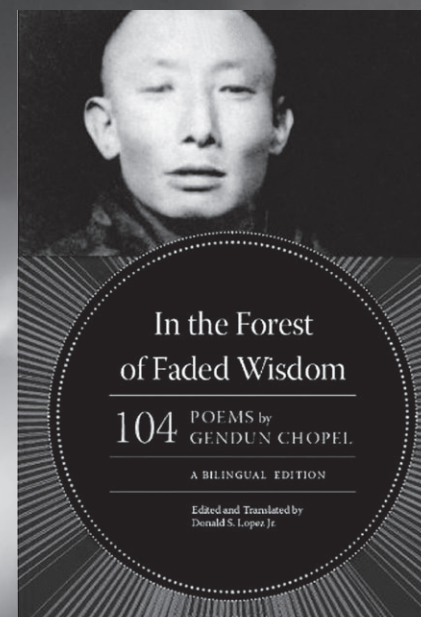


Gedun Chopel, 20th century Tibet's finest writer



This bilingual edition of the poems of Amdo Gedun Chopel (1903-1951),¹ *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom*, is a welcome addition to the ever-growing corpus of writings by and on the most outstanding, controversial figure of 20th century Tibet.

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Donald S. Lopez Jr., editor and translator, 2009.

In the Forest of Faded Wisdom, 104 Poems by Gedun Chopel. A Bilingual Edition.
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PROF. LOPEZ'S PREVIOUS STUDY and translation of Gedun Chopel's commentary on Nagarjuna, *The Madman's Middle Way (MMW)*, 2006, is the first analysis in English of the Amdo scholar's notorious philosophical commentary, *The Middle Way. An Ornament on the Thought of Nagarjuna (dBu ma Klu grub dgongs rgyan)*. In that book, Lopez gives an overview of the life of Gedun Chopel, followed by a literal translation of this brilliant philosophical treatise – the most controversial piece of writing to emerge from modern Tibet, and a superbly written text.

In the Forest of Faded Wisdom (FFW) is quite a different kettle of fish. This too is a pioneering work. Lopez has put before us a selection of previously untranslated 'poems', many of which contain difficult classical and vernacular references. The introduction provides a biographical context to some of the texts, as well as a short literary analysis of classical Tibetan 'poetry'. The selection is presented in a convenient bilingual form for students of Tibetan language and literature, and since Gedun Chopel has the reputation of being the finest poet of 20th century Tibet, this in itself is a major initiative.

Lopez's lofty goal in publishing the book is entirely laudable. His aim is to open up the field to a broader public. However, going through *FFW*, this reviewer would like to challenge several fundamental issues with regard to Gedun Chopel's life, the nature of the original texts and the act of translation, particularly the translation of fine 20th century Tibetan poetry into English.

The title and the contents

The cover and title of the book *'In the Forest of Faded Wisdom'* leave the reader with a sense of gloom. It is true that Gedun Chopel had a tragic destiny, facing in the latter fifteen years of his life considerable hardship, indeed the whole gamut of indignities: poverty, abandonment and exploitation, then false accusation, treachery, the whip, imprisonment,

alcoholism, and an untimely death immediately following the Chinese PLA invasion in the summer of 1951. All this began when he left Tibet in 1934, gaining in intensity after his return in 1946 when he underwent what was well-nigh a political assassination on the part of his own government. This was just after he had begun to write the first modern political history of Tibet, from a critical point of view and armed with a clear understanding of what research is all about. 'Faded wisdom' clearly does not refer to Gedun Chopel, nor is it an appropriate term – from the reviewer's point of view – to describe the intense and often partisan thicket of philosophical debate from which he emerged.

In contrast, what struck me when I was doing research on the life of the 'Amdo Beggar' in the 1970s and 1980s was the mischievous delight that emanates from his writings, the roars of appreciative laughter of his audience when reading or reciting his work, and the endless humorous anecdotes I was told about him by all and sundry during my decade of research on his life.² There is also a clever and haughty side to Gedun Chopel – as a brilliant dialectician from the great Gelukpa monastery of Labrang Tashikyil, he had a biting wit, a humorous jesting spirit, an 'habitual tendency' towards exaggerated scathing mockery of the adversary, but rarely was he sad. He could beat anyone in philosophical debate, wrote sublime poetry and drew extremely well. He was a great traveller and adventurer, a wry observer of human nature and society, a would-be encyclopaedist of India and Sri Lanka, a Sanskrit-Tibetan translator of great talent, a lover of women and wine, Tibet's first modern historian, and an intellectual with a strong social conscience. Yet all these qualities seem to disappear into the dark cover of the book.

The number 104 is a puzzle too. The classical Buddhist auspicious number is 108. So in presenting "all the poems of Gedun Chopel that I have been able to locate" (*FFW*, p. 16), is Lopez attempting to avoid the cliché? Gedun Chopel was a great one for that, but even a cursory analysis of the contents of *FFW* shows that there are several more poems than 104, and, as Lopez himself admits, the 'poems' included in the last theme 'Precepts on Passion' are just a few extracts taken from Gedun Chopel's famous 100-page *Treatise on Desire ('Dod pa'i bstan bcos)* written entirely in 'poetry', or to be more precise, in 'metrical verse'.

The mood

In the *FFW*, as in *MMW*, Lopez uses words like bitter, caustic, melancholy and cynical to describe Gedun Chopel's writings and his attitude to life.³ One wonders if these terms echo reactions from the orthodox Gelukpas who wrote counter-attacks to *The Middle Way*, objecting, with considerable panache (Doyi geshe Sherab Gyatso, Gedun Chopel's own teacher, early 1950s) or with great vulgarity (Dzemey tulku, 1970s), and indeed with deep disdain, to the Amdo Beggar's mocking words?

Let us examine an example of what Lopez considers as Gedun Chopel's 'bitterness', in one of his oft-cited alphabetical poems (*FFW* 31, *ka bshad: Ka ye kho bo gzhan du song rjes su...*). Lopez had already used this word in *MMW* (p.9), with regard to the same context, i.e. Gedun Chopel's departure in 1926 from Labrang Tashikyil (in the far northeast of the historic Tibetan province of Amdo, Chinese Qinghai, Xiahe). But Lopez's interpretation appears to the reviewer to be a misunderstanding of the poem which is full of light humour and ribald mockery against the labyrinth of Gelukpa orthodoxy, protector deities (here referring to Nechung, main protector of Labrang) and the illiterate, roving trader monks, who were part and parcel of the rich and vital monastic scene in Tibet, especially in the context of the great monastic universities.

On the contrary, Dorje Gyal gives quite a different reason for his departure, affirming that since "he knew Tibetan, Chinese (sic!) and English and was very clever, the famous warlord of Qinghai (Amdo), Ma Pufeng, wanted to take him on as private secretary. This was not a career that the Amdo scholar would relish".⁴ Be this as it may, there were more ordinary reasons for leaving Labrang and going to Central Tibet. As Gedun Chopel remarked before he left, "A big fish like me cannot fit into a soup ladle!" and "How can a cuckoo stay amongst crows?"⁵ Like many aspiring young men from the territories all around the high plateau – whatever their geographic, ethnic, sectarian or religious affiliations – the 'Amdo Beggar' wanted to move on to pursue higher studies by joining one of the three great monastic universities around Lhasa: Drepung, Ganden or Sera.

Moreover, if he had been ejected from Labrang by the 'doctors of divinity' for his famous attack on the Manual of Study, would he have gone straight to Drepung Gomang College, where the Manual was mandatory and where its author, Jamyang Sheba

(1648-1721) the founder of Labrang, had been a famous student? Would Gedun Chopel have chosen Geshe Sherab Gyatso, an ardent and orthodox defender of the Manual, as his main teacher in Drepung? And if he had no choice in the matter, does this not suggest a certain rigidity in the system?

The uncertainty

It is also the organisation of the book that is being questioned here. In Lopez's presentation of Gedun Chopel's life, writing and philosophy, emphasis is laid on the theme of 'uncertainty' with regard to 'everything' about him. This theme first appears in *MMW*: "A Middle Way that calls *everything* we know into question, because of, rather than in spite of, the enlightenment of the Buddha" (p. xi) and: "Having given an account of the *uncertainties* of his life, now I turn to his text on *uncertainty*" (*MMW* p. 46).⁵ The same jesting—which may be interpreted as a means of avoiding the task of actually sitting down and constructing a proper timeline—continues in the organisation of *FFW*. With regard to this approach, Lopez makes two somewhat contradictory statements: "much of Gedun Chopel's verse is autobiographical" (*FFW*, introduction p.1), and "the circumstances and the composition date of a given poem are rarely known". Thus, he writes, the 'poems' are "organised rather crudely by theme" (*FFW* 17). This would be fine if the themes were coherent and certain are, especially the last three, but these account for only the last 30 pages, whereas the first three 'themes' are vague and cover 120 pages, i.e. the major part of the book.

Indeed, with regard to chronology, although the exact day, month and year of a text may be difficult to establish, the specific period and context in which many of the verses were written is often clear. Thus if they are mostly 'autobiographical' as Lopez suggests, then surely it would be reasonable—given the fact that this is the first attempt to present the poems of 20th century Tibet's finest writer to the Western public—to provide the background context from which each one emerged, and the date or period when this is known. It is true that a number of them are put into context in the introduction and some notes are useful, but the majority are simply bibliographical references.

Verse v. poetry

Another aspect of the book is the aim to present Gedun Chopel's widely scattered 'poems' in the form of a previously uncollated corpus. Lopez queries the omission as if it were unusual: "Gedun Chopel did not gather his poems into a single volume, nor have they been gathered since his death in 1951. The largest group (30 poems) was published in Tibet in 2005, in vol. 5 of his *Collected Writings*, in a chapter entitled 'On Poetry' *snyan rtsom gyi skor*." (*FFW* p.16)

What is meant by 'poems' here, and indeed how many Tibetan poets have gathered their poems together into one book? Is Lopez referring to the opposition between traditional or classical 'genre' and new categories that have emerged over the last half century (and more), with the advent of contemporary Tibetan literature? 'Poetry' *snyan rtsom*, as it appears in the above-mentioned title, is one of the new terms for 'poetry' in the Western sense. This is certainly relevant with regard to an ongoing discussion amongst Tibetan intellectuals as to whether Gedun Chopel belongs to the classical or to the modern world (and of course he belongs to both). Yet, in spite of the use of this term and the examples presented in context in the introduction, no mention is made of the modern period, nor of the nature of modern Tibetan poetry in Lopez's analysis.

If Gedun Chopel is indeed the greatest poet of 20th century Tibet, then surely it would be appropriate to explain why. How did he express himself? Is it possible to make an appraisal of the language of his 'poems'? Of the different styles he used? In what ways was he modern and/or classical? Furthermore, it is essential to address the question of Gedun Chopel's widespread and intimate use of 'alternating of verse (*tshig su bcad pa*) with prose' (*lhug rtsom*), since this forms a genre in itself, known as *bcad lhug spel ma*, found already in Dandin's *Mirror of Poetry* (Tib. *Me long ma*), translated into Tibetan by Shongtön (ca 1270). This genre needs to be discussed, as well as Gedun Chopel's use of it. According to Jangbu, another term for it is 'verse-and-prose' or 'both verse-and-prose' or 'neither verse nor prose' (*tshig ma lhug*), referring to a deliberate and polished literary strategy in which the verses that surge in the midst of a text, or at the end of a chapter, are called 'intermediary verses' (*bar skabs kyi tshig su bcad pa*).⁷ They are considered to be a welcome 'pause' (*bar skabs*), a moment of rest (*ngal gso'i tshig su bcad pa*), of suspended 'responsibility' (*'gan bskur med pa*), allowing the author and the reader to get beyond the 'prosaic' nature of prose. It is a moment when the author can sublimate thought, express the essence of the text in a lofty, elegant fashion, or simply let the tension go a little within the general framework. Alternation is a vital aspect of this genre, and

it was part and parcel of Tibetan literature at least from the 13th century—but one day some scholar made an especially approving remark about its effect, and from then on the genre developed as authors competed to produce ever more remarkable verses to complement and alternate with their prose.⁸

In Gedun Chopel's case, this is a key element in many of his works. A certain theatrical *mise en scène* is involved and although these versified asides are often moments of self-expression, of delight, admiration, humility etc., in Gedun Chopel's case they are used more to express self-justification or 'pride' with regard to the new ideas he is setting down, as well as teasing mockery of tradition and orthodoxy.

104 poems or 22?

According to the contemporary Tibetan count there are twenty-two or twenty-three real 'poems' in Gedun Chopel's corpus that stand by themselves, including the poetic chessboard games (*kun-bzang 'khor-lo*, *FFW* 15), the acrostic, alphabetical poems ka-bshad (*FFW* 31, 53, 54, 61, 74, 79), and the satirical lampoons (*FFW* 35 v3, 58 v1, 59 v3, etc.). Thus the 'prose-and-verse' genre is much more important than the few fine independent 'poems' from his pen. It is the latter that fall more clearly into the realms of modernity in that they are imbued with a new expression of deep personal feeling. The poem 'Wealth in this World - Mist on the Pass' (*Srid pa'i 'byor ba la kha'i na bun*), dedicated to a beloved friend who had just died, is no doubt the finest example (*FFW* 33 and Lopez's note).⁹

Gedun Chopel's 'White Annals' (*Deb ther dkar po*), on the political history of the Pugyal Empire of Tibet (7th-9th centuries), uses the 'verse-and-prose' genre to present spirited remarks at the end of each chapter. One well-known and oft cited example is found on the last page of his unfinished work. In the second verse, each of the four lines begin with the word 'rang', using its different meanings: *our* (people) / *(my) natural* (heart) / *my* (land), and *my* (ability), expressing seriously and sincerely the author's motifs in proposing such an unorthodox version of Tibetan history.

Such asides are truly 'versification', for the Tibetan language is particularly elastic and eminently suited to transposition from one mode of writing into the other. A few particles or semantemes added or subtracted here and there, and presto, we have a 'verse' or a piece of 'prose', using the same vocabulary, basic structure and content. Similarly, verses of praise or a comment may be added to an original work by the reader after having finished a book, or by the artist when signing a painting. In two cases, in 1927 and 1928, Gedun Chopel did precisely that.

Thus, to isolate verses from their original context, as is largely done in this book, without giving any indication of the original, in place or time, in context or meaning, beyond a thematic attribution, appears as a modernist misappropriation of the original source, based on the widespread opinion of Gedun Chopel as a great poet.

Vernacular

Another aspect of Tibetan literature and of many great literary traditions is the subtle interweaving of the spoken vernacular with the classical literary language in both poetry and prose. To comprehend a major literary text in Tibetan requires a range of competences including a good knowledge of poetics, of the spoken language, and in Gedun Chopel's case a certain familiarity with monastic life and philosophical terms, as well as some knowledge of the dialect and society of educated Amdowas from northern Tibet. In this regard, in *FFW* as in *MMW*, a number of Lopez's translations may be queried, apparently due to unfamiliarity with the spoken vernacular. On top of all that, Tibetan verse is often extremely dense, precise and technical, needing as many as double the number of syllables to express the same meaning in English. Thus the hapless translator is obliged either to abandon the strong rhythmic structure of the original or to leave out some of the essential semantemes. In either case, betrayal of the original is on the agenda. But this, anyway, is the usual lot of the translator of poetry.

Lampoons and social comment

One of the widespread popular verse forms in Tibetan is the satirical lampoon, sung and written as a six-syllable four-line verse—in much the same vein as *The Sixth Dalai Lama's Love Songs*. Taking the form of jottings or musings, they were before 1959 sung out loudly in the streets of Lhasa early in the morning for all to hear, by the water-carrier women who worked for the well-to-do families of the holy city. They sang outrageous, scandalous gossip at the tops of their voices with full impunity (an exercise which may cost one's life in the PRC today), this being one way in which ordinary people could let off steam with regard to the misdoings of their lay or ecclesiastical masters. These lampoons certainly stood by themselves, most often as single verses, outside any adjacent literary context. They were an integral part of social discourse, and once sung out loud they were learnt by heart, repeated and modulated on with relish,

expanding the repertory of satirical verses with which almost any Tibetan was, until very recently, richly endowed. Yet again, these short one-verse songs belong to a highly specific insider context. Several of Gedun Chopel's most widely known verses are of this kind. To quote them simply as 'poems' without giving the context, time and place, to join them together as if they were part of one single composition—as some re-editions of Gedun Chopel's works are now doing—is misleading.

Take for example Lopez's poem 35. This is presented as one 'poem' made up of four verses. Of verses 1 and 2 the latter in particular appears as a weaker, modified version of verse 7 in 'Sad Song' *sKyo glu* (poem 32), written no doubt in Bengal probably not too long after Gedun Chopel's arrival in 1935 (*FFW* 68). Verses 3 and 4 are of different origins. Verse 3 is a lampoon that was circulating in Lhasa from the time of Gedun Chopel's return from India *before* his arrest (1946-47). This affirmation comes from the lion's mouth, since Chief Minister Surkhang (interviewed in Taipei 1974) wrote down the poem for the reviewer in a shaky hand, declaring forcefully that the Amdo Beggar deserved his imprisonment, since he wanted to bring about a "French-style Revolution" and cut the heads off all the Tibetan nobility. The fourth verse belongs to the period *after* his release from prison (1950-51). It is a reply to his noble friends and Amdo buddies who were trying to stop him from drinking himself to death. Thus, this one 'poem' in fact consists of material from at least three distinct contexts and periods, ranging over fifteen years or so. Other similar collages may be found. Thus, 'poems' 58 and 59 form an uneasy association of five distinct 'verses', from five different contexts, not two 'poems', as Lopez actually admits in the notes.

One last remark, though much more could be said. Lopez is at present translating *The Plain of Gold Dust* (*gSer gyi thang ma*), the four hundred pages written by Gedun Chopel during his sojourn in India (1935-1945). This rich source is a complex, wide-ranging, unpolished collation of research notes that demands careful, well-informed and elegant translation. It is much easier to criticise than to do, but it is useful to have an attentive critic. Lopez has the considerable merit of presenting us with preliminary translations of Gedun Chopel's *Treatise on the Middle Way*, as well as many of his well-loved verses, lampoons and a few poems. This is a useful beginning and it is to be hoped, in view of the Amdo Beggar's reputation, that a golden goose will emerge, a true poet in English who is familiar with the living Tibetan world, with the vernacular and with the classical texts, and with the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism, who will be able, like André Gide did with Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, not just to translate but to transpose Gedun Chopel's superb prose-and-verse into fine literary English (or French, or German, etc.)—and put them into context.

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References

- 1 Here I shall use the phonetic rendering 'Gedun Chopel' according to his own Amdo pronunciation, without the nazalisation between the syllables of the two parts of his name, as found in his early English correspondence. The earliest known to the reviewer is: 'Gytun Chhephel' (in a letter to Rahul Sankrityayan, 1934). In the *Madman's Middle Way* (p. 3) Lopez enumerates an astonishing eighteen phonetic versions of the name. This is due not to incompetence on the part of Western scholars, but rather to the large number of Tibetan dialects that are still very much alive today, with many nuances in pronunciation. In Wiley transliteration (as in written Tibetan), whatever the dialect may be, the spelling comes out as *dGe' 'dun chos 'phel*, illegible for anyone but a Tibetologist.
- 2 See H. Stoddard 1985, *Le Mendiant de l'Amdo*, Société d'ethnographie, Université de Paris X, Nanterre (in French, 395 pp.), for a comprehensive life of Gedun Chopel.
- 3 *FFW* p. 7.
- 4 rDo rje rgyal, 1997. *dGe 'dun chos 'phel (Biography of Ge Dun Qu Pel)*, Gansu Nationalities Press, p. 18. It is widely held that Gedun Chopel began to study English and clock mechanics with the American missionary Griebenow who was stationed in Labrang from 1922-1949 and who enjoyed debating with the monks in Tibetan.
- 5 The cuckoo is a sacred bird in the Tibetan Bon religion, and here it is no doubt its melodious call (his own verbal virtuosity) that Gedun Chopel is comparing with that of the crow.
- 6 See also *MMW* pp. 1, 2, 3, 46.
- 7 See *dGe 'dun chos 'phel gyi gsum rtsom, deb gsum pa, Gangs can rig mdzod*, 1990, vol.12, p. 235.
- 8 Thanks to Chenaktsang Dorje Tsering, *alias* Jangbu, for this whole section, 14.9.2010.
- 9 Thanks again to Jangbu for this information, 21.9.2010.