

## BEYOND THE POSTCOLONIAL PARADIGM? TIBETANS WRITING POETRY IN ENGLISH

Enrique Galván-Álvarez  
Universidad de Alcalá  
[enrique.galvan@uah.es](mailto:enrique.galvan@uah.es)

This paper aims to offer a methodological reflection on the hybrid literature written by Tibetan exiles in English after 1959. One of the most interesting aspects of this relatively new literature, and particularly of its poetry, is the way it resists pre-existing methodological categories. Thus, authors like Chögyam Trungpa (1939-1987), Jamyang Norbu (1949), Tsering Wangmo Dhompa (1969) or Tenzin Tsundue (1970) are not generally considered part of the English contemporary canon, not even of its most postcolonial versions. Analogously, they are rarely acknowledged in Tibetan Literary Studies, since they do not write in Tibetan. Consequently this paper attempts to locate, or rather dis-locate, Tibetan-English voices by exploring the (im)possibility of reading them in terms of various interpretive frameworks that negotiate, move away or explode the postcolonial paradigm.

*Keywords:* Tibet, exile, Tibetan Literature in English, Postcolonialism, poetry

The aim of this paper is to offer some methodological reflections on the hybrid poetry written by Tibetan exiles in English. One of the most interesting aspects of this relatively new poetry, whose origins can be traced back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century though has developed very quickly in the last decade, is the way it resists being placed in any pre-existent methodological pigeonhole. The methodological challenge that Tibetan-English poetry poses goes hand in hand with the little attention it receives from literary critics. Writers like Chögyam Trungpa (1939-1987), Jamyang Norbu (1949), Tenzin Tsundue (1970) or Tsering Wangmo Dhompa (1969) are not generally considered part of the English literary canon, not even of its more postcolonial versions. Analogously, they are rarely acknowledged in Tibetan literary studies, since they do not write in Tibetan. What follows is an attempt to locate, or rather dis-locate, Tibetan-English poetry by exploring hermeneutical roads taken and not taken and by suggesting new interpretive horizons that might go beyond the postcolonial paradigm.

When approaching “contemporary Tibetan poetry”, that is, the poetry written by Tibetans in recent times, we need to pay heed to Maconi’s explanation of her use of the label “post-Liberation” instead of “contemporary” in the context of Tibetans writing in the PRC (i.e. China):

My use of the expression ‘post-Liberation’ instead of ‘contemporary’ allows me to avoid a simplistic use of the word ‘contemporary’ (ch. *dangdai*), a word that, as it is used in political and cultural discourses in the PRC, not only contains temporal denotations, but also, normative connotations. According to socialist evolutionist theories, *dangdai* means not only ‘contemporary’ (that is, the ‘present period’) but also the new socialist epoch, a step forward on the road to revolution. In the same way, *dangdai wenxue* means not only ‘contemporary literature’ (that is, the

'present-day literature'), but also the 'new', 'more advanced' socialist literature after the 1950s (2002: 168, fn 217)

Thus the term 'contemporary' has completely different connotations when applied to writers in Tibet and in exile. Since my paper is about Tibetan exiled writers I need not worry about the use of the word, but such a discussion is very relevant when trying to use methodological approaches that are applied to a context different from the one in which they were originally constructed. The tools employed for looking at Tibetan writers in the PRC are grounded in a world of references and connotations that does not apply to those in Exile, especially to those who left Tibet at the time of "Liberation" (Trungpa) or where born in exile (Tsendue, Dhompa).

Analogously, when reading the literature written in exile, and especially the poetry written in English, the usage of notions in the context of the English-speaking world needs to be borne in mind. Furthermore, in the case of Maconi's discussion, she is dealing with a Tibetan poet (Yidam Tsering) who not only writes in the PRC, but also writes in Chinese. Not unlike our selected poets, Tsering appropriates Chinese and by so doing contributes to the "'Tibetanisation' of Sinophone literature, both in its contents and in its language" (Maconi 190), a process that "challenges the established structures and the authoritative exclusivity of Chinese expressions" (190). The same could be said of Trungpa, Tsendue and Dhompa, who are making English sound more (syntactically) Tibetan and speak about Tibetan concerns. This aspect of Tibetan-English literature, the Tibetanisation of the English language, not only mirrors the situation of Tibetan Sinophone writers, but it could also locate Tibetan-English in the domain of the post-colonial predicament.

Can we see novels like *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* as an example of the 'Empire writing back'? Can we regard Norbu's appropriation of Holmes as an instance of reading the archive and re-writing its narratives as an act of contestation? Venturino argues so and adds that the postcolonial "notion of 'reading the archive' recalls discussions of postmodern rewriting and suggesting that texts of all types help to shape historical memory and contemporary politics" (2008: 316). Thus, Norbu is using the narrative of (a Tibetanised) Holmes for the purpose of exposing (Chinese) colonialism; he is engaging a story that belongs to a particular colonial archive and using it to contest another colonial archive. This crisscrossed form of literary resistance seems to echo those of other postcolonial projects. Funnily enough, a British colonial narrative becomes the anti-colonial tool against another colonial project and in the process its original colonial connotations are dismantled. This "suggests that for Tibetan history, the 'archives of imperial governance' include texts such as Kim and the Holmes stories, in addition to-and in collusion and contestation with- Tibetan archival materials and narratives from the western imagination" (317).

Such a dialogical approach to the 'Tibetan archive' enables us to read Tibetan literature as post-colonial or postcolonial, as engaged in a conversation (an argument, perhaps) with other global narratives and histories. However, Tibet was never a British colony and, although the relationship between Tibet and the British Empire at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might be deemed semi-colonial, Tibet's history is very different from that of India or post-British Africa. In order to approach Tibetan literature from a postcolonial standpoint we "must negotiate the discursive and social colonizing of the East as well as the West" (Venturino: 304). To pay more attention to non-Western forms of colonialism seems to be the key to read Tibetan literature as postcolonial. This is what Maconi does when she tries to use the term 'post-Liberation' as an asymmetric equivalent of 'postcolonial' in the Tibetan-Chinese case. However, whereas Tibetans

writing in the PRC seem to respond mostly to Chinese colonialism, Tibetans writing in exile (an exile mostly located in Anglophone or English-speaking countries) responds both to Chinese colonialism and English speaking (Anglo-American) imperialism.

The relationship to each side of the equation is, nevertheless, strongly dissimilar. On one hand the Chinese are generally seen as an oppressive force to be contested (even though they might have brought some good things to Tibet) and on the other hand the English speaking world is, also falling into very broad generalisations, seen as a source of political and economic support. Thus, even though Tibetans write about themselves and to themselves in both Chinese and English, the dynamics animating those two apparently parallel processes of appropriation bear some remarkable dissimilarities. All this complicates a conventional postcolonial reading of Tibetan literature or, we might say, Tibetan literatures. Prose texts like *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* respond to the postcolonial paradigm in a more explicit fashion. However, Trungpa's peculiar relationship to Englishness or Dhompa's negotiation of "the hyphen between Tibetan and American" (Belflower) might not so easily be fitted in a post(-)colonial pigeonhole.

We need to take into account that postcolonial theory develops mostly in the context of the British and French colonial projects and that it has only been extrapolated, to some extent and in some depth, to the Portuguese colonial project. Such a shortcoming makes us wonder whether the postcolonial theory model is applicable to all forms of colonial domination and also whether applying such a model around the world is not a form of neo-colonialism. An option is to explode the postcolonial pigeonhole so it can accommodate other forms of colonialism and their resultant literatures. However, we might as well decide to move on to different methodological horizons that are, perhaps, more fitting for Tibetan-English poetry. Although works like *The Mandala* are overtly engaging a (post-)colonial narrative, the colonial or semicolonial encounters featuring Britons and Tibetans in the 19th and 20th century are rarely engaged in poetry. In fact, English is often regarded as another Tibetan language and not as the ambivalent legacy of a colonial master. Thus, by refusing to use a conventional postcolonial paradigm for looking at Tibetan-English poetry, other interpretive possibilities ought to be explored.

An unquestionable referent in contemporary Tibetan poetics is Pema Bhum's "Heartbeat of the New Generation". This is an article that despite being concerned with Tibetan poets writing (in Tibetan) in the PRC can offer a solid foundation (even though through negation and opposition) for reading exilic poetry. Bhum's essay caused a considerable stir in exilic society after he first delivered it publicly in Italy in 1991. In it he exposes the conservative prejudice of people like Samdhong Rinpoche, now prime minister of the Government in Exile, who in 1983 expressed "his irritation at the lack of development in Tibetan poetry" (2008: 113) and yet never chose to pay attention to the (then) recent developments of Tibetan letters. That same year (1983) Dhondup Gyal's masterpiece "Waterfall of Youth" was published but, as Bhum's notes, Samdhong remained "silent on this subject" (2008: 113). Samdhong's culturally conservative attitude does not seem to have changed much since those times, as his reaction to the Miss Tibet pageant exemplifies (Namgyal 2006: 74). It is interesting to note how the reaction of the exile (monastic) elites towards the 'New Poetry' coming from Tibet resembles the way in which the new exilic forms of writing will also be met. Let me look at Bhum's argument and assess its relevance to the Tibetan-English poets.

For a start, Bhum considers an essential feature of the 'New Generation' the "disappointment poets feel now toward both Marxism and Buddhism" (115), a dyad that he sometimes phrases as "religion and politics". The joining of religion and politics, echoes the motto of traditional Tibetan systems of governance, that is, to wed Buddhist

idea(l)s with political activity. However, the politics Bhum's poets are tired about are not those of "Old Tibet", but those of Chinese Marxism. Whereas some Tibetans wrote revolutionary poetry (e.g. Yidam Tsering) in the aftermath of the 'Peaceful Liberation of Tibet', the post-Cultural Revolution generation seems weary of such conventions. Even though Bhum speaks of politics as synonymous to Chinese Marxism, we should not discard the possibility of including other definitions of politics, especially when trying to apply Bhum's approach to an exilic context. After all, exile poets might also feel disenchanting with the normative politics of their community, even though they might not be Chinese dominated or Marxist oriented.

The second object of disappointment is Buddhism, something that is highly regarded in exile and a system poets like Trungpa, Tsundue or Dhompa subscribe to, though in different ways. We might wonder whether disenchantment with Buddhism is really a feature of Tibetan-English poetry. However, we need to question what Bhum means by Buddhism or, in other words, what is the Buddhism the 'New Generation' is disappointed about. It is important to note how Bhum considers Buddhism to be synonymous to Buddhist monasticism:

When they [i.e. traditional Tibetan Buddhist poets] looked at the world and at their own lives, they were not able to look through their natural human eye. Not only did they see the outer world as if through saffron-colored glass [i.e. the color of monasticism], but they also viewed their own minds in the same way. Because the eye was always saffron-colored, every subject of composition was saffron (120)

Probably unwilling, or perhaps drawing on post-Liberation notions of what Buddhism was, Bhum reduces Tibetan Buddhism to its more monastic and politically normative forms. Thus, the non-monastic side of Tibetan Buddhism, the *yogins* who behaved unconventionally are left unrepresented and their poetry is obliterated. If we identify Buddhism with its most politically conservative and monastic oriented forms we will, obviously, see the project of the new poets (both in Tibet and in exile) as going against Buddhism.

However, if we look at the ways non-monastic Buddhism has imagined itself—in dialogic opposition to monastic institutionalism—we might find valuable parallelisms with the new poets. The first of these similarities may be found in the very metaphor employed by Bhum for expressing the "disrobing" the new literature is engaged in: "their ancestors succeeded in covering the real nature of the mind of the Tibetan people in saffron. Now, these efforts have been interrupted for just a short time and the new literature arrives, tearing away the covering". (122) The metaphor of disrobing as an act of going forth, moving further, is in fact frequently engaged in non-monastic Buddhism. Not unlike the Buddha, who decided to forsake his princely robes in order to pursue a simpler life, his later followers also decided to abandon the imprisonment that the highly institutionalised monasteries represented in order to explore the Buddhist teachings through a different lifestyle. In this way, the Buddha's *parivrajra* (i.e. going forth) is used as a Buddhist a model for mediating resistance against monastic institutions. Therefore, rejecting monasticism and its conventions (e.g. celibacy, scholarship, rigid and elaborate social hierarchies) is not synonymous with rejecting Buddhism.

Such a movement, away from or beyond monastic institutions, can be seen at the root of the rise of the Mahayana in India (circa 2nd BCE). Also, the origins of Tantric Buddhism in India (circa 6th CE) are strongly associated with leaving the monastery and adopting unconventional lifestyles in order to further one's understanding of the teachings. In this manner, the monasteries and their saffron eye become another

hindrance in the adept's path rather than a way forward; they become the Buddha's delusive palace. Thus, disrobing and breaking monastic conventions becomes a significant step in the path of the Buddhist yogin. Such a tradition and its narratives were transplanted to Tibet, where a number of yogic disrobements also took place, but the monastic side became eventually more influential and socially powerful due to their close relationship with the political centres. A contemporary example of a monk and poet who gave up his robes is Chögyam Trungpa, whose poetry was also drastically disrobed and un-saffroned, and who far from abandoning Buddhism was actively engaged in its spread in the United States (see Trungpa).

To conclude, the methodological challenge posed by Tibetan-English poetry requires us to stop imagining Tibetan, English and Buddhist literature as distinct and clearly defined categories. As a contact zone where those three bodies dialogue and miscegenate, Tibetan-English literature, and poetry in particular, demands us to come up with new methods that are rooted in its complex context. For this purpose, rather than adopting a somewhat mechanical postcolonial approach, the mirror reflection of literature written by Tibetans in other non-Tibetan languages (e.g. Mandarin) provides a useful paradigm. Despite their different social contexts and attitudes towards Tibetan culture, these rebirths of Tibetan literature through non-Tibetan tongues seem to bear the common feature of dislocation as a central trademark. Trademark that goes along to reformulate and reinvent what it means to be a Tibetan writer.

### Works Cited

- Belflower, William n.d.: "Tsering Wangmo Dhompa. *In the Absent Everyday*" (review). *Octopus Magazine*, 8, [http://www.octopusmagazine.com/Issue08/reviews/james\\_belflower.htm](http://www.octopusmagazine.com/Issue08/reviews/james_belflower.htm)
- Bhum, Pema 2008 [1983]: "'Heartbeat of a New Generation': A Discussion of the New Poetry". Trans. Ronald Schwartz. Luran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, eds. *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*. Durham: Duke University Press. 112-134.
- Maconi, Lara 2002: "Lion of the Snowy Mountains: The Tibetan Poet Yi dam Tse ring and his Chinese Poetry: Reconstructing Tibetan Cultural Identity in Chinese" in P.C. Klieger, ed. *Tibet, Self, and the Tibetan Diaspora: Voices of Difference*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 165-194.
- Namgyal, Tsering 2006: *Little Lhasa. Reflections on Exiled Tibet*. Mumbai: Indus Source Books.
- Norbu, Jamyang 2003: *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes. The Adventures of the Great Detective in India and Tibet*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Trungpa, Chögyam 2004 [1966]: "Born in Tibet". *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*. Ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian. Vol. 1. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1-287.
- Venturino, Steven J. 2008: "Placing Tibetan Fiction in a World of Literary Studies: Jamyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*" in Lauren R. Heartly and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, eds. *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 301-326.



**THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:**

**Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain.* Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from [www.aedean.org](http://www.aedean.org)**