VOICELESS TIBET? PAST AND PRESENT IN TIBETAN SINOPHONE WRITING BY TSERING NORBU

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As a culturally and linguistically hybrid product emerging from specific historical and political conditions, Sinophone Tibetan literature has been often overlooked in Western academic and literary circles. Still, as argued in this article, it is a plausible voice coming from within Tibet, shedding more light on the present lived reality of the region and its inhabitants and forming a multilayered minor discourse of self-representation vis-á-vis the major Han Chinese discourse regarding not only Tibetan history and culture, but, more generally, literary creation. By analyzing the various representations of present-day Tibet in short stories by Tsering Norbu, this paper provides insights into the formation of collective historical memory and transformation of Tibetan society following the economic development of the region after the year 2000. While responding to the official call for a realistic representation of the lives of ordinary people, the author has come up with effective counterhegemonic narrative strategies of resistance to the dominant forces of ideology and brutal commercialization by including elements of religion, suppressed historical memory, and social problems in contemporary Tibetan society.

Keywords: Chinese literature, Tibetan literature, *Xizang wenxue*, minority literature, Tsering Norbu (Ciren Luobu), postcoloniality

1. Introduction

Various representations of Tibet have been subjected to both commercial and political interests, providing mutually conflicting perspectives. As a piece of land "far and high above" for most people both in the West and in China, Tibet has been represented through a range of stereotypes based on Western orientalism and Chinese colonial perspective inherited from imperial times, informed by Marxism,

and shaped by the state ideology. The most common clichés about Tibet are its perceived remoteness, mysteriousness, and deeply rooted spirituality, that bear rather positive connotations in the West, but in China relate to cultural, social, and economic backwardness. This paper examines representations of Tibet within the frames of contemporary literary discourse in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and looks at various narrative strategies used by Tibetan writers to negotiate the boundaries of the official discourse on various levels on the example of a prominent Tibetan Sinophone writer Tsering Norbu (Tib. ཚེ་རིང་ནོར་བུ *tshe ring nor bu*, Ch. 次仁罗布 Ciren Luobu, b. 1965).

Sinophone Tibetan literature can be analyzed within the theoretical framework of postcolonial, or more specifically Sinophone studies, introduced as "study of colonial language cultures" (Shih 2013, 1) specifically related to the Chinese cultural sphere. As a part of Chinese "minority literature" (少数民族文学 *shaoshu minzu wenxue*) created by ethnic minority writers within the PRC and in Chinese language, it may be as well considered as a "minor discourse" in the sense of "minor literature" discussed on the example of the German-writing Prague Jew Franz Kafka by Deleuze and Guattari (1986). For ethnic Tibetan writers addressing their readers in the major language – i.e., Chinese – the "impossibility of not writing" from a minority perspective is insurmountable. Using a clearly *deterritorialized* language, they cannot avoid always being read as representing certain collective values that inevitably bear a *political element* (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 16). Moreover, they do it in the form of a "small talk" (小说 *xiaoshuo*, the Chinese term for fiction) that originally evolved as "fragments, little sayings, and collected stories" (DeWoskin 1986, 423) seen as a marginalized complement to canonical texts and History.

At the same time, in the light of several-decades-long commercialization of literature in the PRC after introduction of "reforms and opening up" policy following Mao Zedong's death, such literature can be even interpreted as a kind of counterhegemonic discourse, subverting the *hegemony*, exercised by "dominant groups in society, through a process of 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (Gramsci 2009, 75). This *counterhegemony* can be seen not only unwinding against the backdrop of the dominant culture in ethnic, ideological, or political sense, but also, as it will be argued, as a form of negotiation of one's own cultural identity vis-á-vis widespread commercialization, monetization, and related exoticization and "othering" of "minority cultures" in state-regulated pop-cultural production, mass tourism, etc.

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2. Writing Tibetanness in Chinese

Despite initial discussions whether Sinophone works should be considered "Tibetan literature" at all (Shakya 2004), Chinese-medium works have played a significant role in giving voice to Tibetans in the PRC. The new literature emerging around the mid-1980s was closely interconnected with contemporary literary developments in inland China. Writers like Tashi Dawa (Tib. བཀྲ་ཤིས་ཟླ་བ་ *bkra shis zla ba*, Ch. 扎西达娃 Zhaxi Dawa, b. 1959), inspired by prominent Han Chinese members of the Lhasa art circle, such as Ma Yuan (马原, b. 1953), started to experiment with modernist and avant-garde narrative techniques popular in Chinese literature in that time. Tashi Dawa introduced a Tibetan version of "magical realism" (see Grünfelder 1999; Schiaffini 2002), slightly later adopted by writers of Tibetan-medium fiction as well, for example Jangbu (Tib. ལྕང་བུ་ *ljang bu*, Ch. 蒋布 Jiangbu, b. 1963) (Stoddard 2010) or Pema Tseden (Tib. པད་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན་ *pad ma tshe brtan*, Ch. 万玛才旦 Wanma Caidan, b. 1969) in his early writing (Erhard 2007).

Magical realism, which emerged in postcolonial Latin America, proved both an attractive and effective literary means to deal with the rapid modernization and transformation of Tibetan society in the reform period. It enabled the depiction of the sometimes-absurd clashes between traditional society and elements of modernity, on one hand disrupting the Shangrila-like image of Tibet while on the other hand contesting the notion of Tibet's "backwardness" (落后 *luohou*) that is driving the Chinese "civilizing mission." As explained by Heather Stoddard (2010, xxii):

> While due largely to the political and social climate, this tendency can be partly seen as a reaction against the many magical or mystical references in certain genres of classical Tibetan literature, and to the overriding necessity of coming to terms with and describing contemporary realities over which Tibetans have little control.

However, more recently, Sinophone Tibetan literature has turned into a new direction. Writers who only started to publish in the early 2000s, like Tsering Norbu, have abandoned the "magical" style, claiming that such works depicted Tibet from an outsider's perspective, as exotic and mysterious. Such representation was not something Tibetan readers could identify with. Pema Tseden has addressed this in several interviews:

> I don't think there is a need to redefine magic realism (for the Tibetan context). What we term magical realist literature must bear the marks of a certain region's historical culture or folk customs, so there are naturally distinctions between the Latin American magical realism literature and the Tibetan context. The historical culture or folk customs of these regions themselves contain things that may be full of magic in the eyes of outsiders, but to the indigenous they might not be magical at all. (Shakya 2021)

Contemporary writers, like Pema Tseden or Tsering Norbu, who are writing (also) in Chinese need to consider different types of audience than writers using exclusively the Tibetan language. Their readership includes Chinese-educated Tibetan readers, general Chinese readers, and possibly even readers in the West or elsewhere in Asia, like Japan or Korea. Therefore, they are striving to find a language that would represent the life in contemporary Tibet in a more realistic, yet subjective way. Tsering Norbu based his fictional writings in the everyday life of ordinary Tibetans, from modern city dwellers to nomads inhabiting the remote grasslands and high-altitude deserts of Changtang. The connecting topic in his short stories, collected into an anthology called *Fang sheng yang* (放生羊, *Liberated Sheep*, 2015),[1] is the notion of compassion (Ch. 悲悯 *beimin*, Tib. སྙིང་རྗེ་ *snying rje*), one of the key values in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, in the sense of empathy with the vulnerable and suffering.

The Chinese-medium "literature from Tibet" (西藏文学 *Xizang wenxue*) is a product of cultural and linguistic hybridity rooted in the geopolitical condition of Tibet in the second half of the 20th century. Writers who officially claim their "Tibetan" (藏族 *Zangzu*) identity,[2] used various narrative strategies to express the "Tibetanness" in their literary texts. For example, early poems of the senior writer Yidam Tsering (Tib. ཡི་དམ་ཚེ་རིང་ *yi dam tshe ring*, Ch. 伊丹才让 Yidan Cairang, b. 1933), as examined by Lara Maconi (2002), were characterized by extensive use of Tibetan words, which, transcribed in Chinese characters, complicate the reading experience for readers not familiar with Tibetan language, geography, and culture. Maconi (2002, 180) describes Yidam Tsering's poetry as "deeply nourished by Tibetan oral tradition" and "using symbols rich in cultural connotations that differentiate his world from the official discourse." His "tibetanization of Chinese language" (Maconi 2002, 185) proves the poet's "effort to negotiate a gap between the two 'worlds'" and his "resistance against the use of the 'imported' language, a refusal of its categories and connotations" (Maconi 2002, 186).

The generation of Sinophone Tibetan writers born already in the PRC, including Tashi Dawa and Alai (阿来, Tib. ཨ་ལེགས་ *a legs*, b. 1959), started to implement various narrative strategies to express a specifically Tibetan subjectivity or identity. Tashi Dawa's magical realism can be read as an early attempt to translate Tibetan subjective reality based in Tibetan history and culture into a "modern language" of rationality introduced by the Chinese colonial endeavor. Alai, who is a member of the Gyalrong community inhabiting the mountainous landscape around Barkham

[1] Here is the concept of "liberation" in Buddhist sense, the Chinese term *fang sheng* (放生, "liberation of life" or "life-release") refers to the Tibetan *tshe thar* (ཚེ་ཐར་) ritual. It should not be confused with the Chinese "Liberation" (解放 *jiefang*), which is the official Party jargon for the Communist subjugation of Tibet.

[2] Some of these writers – for example, Tashi Dawa, Alai, or Sebo – have in fact mixed origin.

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in northwestern Sichuan, both linguistically and culturally distinct from Central Tibet, has made notable effort to "undo the hellish stigma that the Chinese government and the Han majority have attached to 'Old Tibet'" (Baranovich 2010, 172).

Literary styles and narrative techniques used by Sinophone Tibetan writers since the 1980s should be evaluated to a certain extent as consciously or subconsciously applied strategies how to deal with censorship, as the representation of Tibet is in the PRC heavily monitored and regulated (Hladíková 2021a) and writers, even those who hold high positions in the official literary system as Tashi Dawa and Alai do, need to always keep this in mind. In the language of the postcolonial discourse, these writers appropriate the dominant/official perspective and representations of Tibet while using specific linguistic and narrative devices (like "magical realism," unreliable narrators, Tibetanisms, etc.) to reclaim their Tibetanness by narrating about significant historical events and sometimes violent clashes between tradition and modernity through a lens of Tibetan subjectivity. Compared to Tibetan-medium literature, Sinophone works more often tend to use various "modernist" (现代派 *xiandai pai*)[3] techniques to address the exoticism and "otherness" of Tibet as perceived from the Han Chinese point of view. Such narrative devices can be considered native writers' answers to the Chinese representations of themselves, and at the same time they serve as hooks to appeal to educated readers and to meet their expectations based on commonly accepted stereotypes about Tibet.

Even though such works in some way reflect the absurdity of contemporary reality in Tibet, which is increasingly becoming an open-air ethnological museum for mainland tourists, where Tibetans strive in their quest for modernization and development, the last two decades have seen more serious effort of Sinophone Tibetan writers to portray Tibet without the "magical" and "mysterious" elements now seen as "orientalist." This effort is clearly identifiable in the work of Pema Tseden, not only in his short stories, but in movies as well. The first and most successful Tibetan director whose films have been long recognized on international art scene and film festivals has recently drawn considerable attention on the PRC market with public screenings, readings, and debates with his last two movies, *Jinpa* (Tib. ལག་དམར་ *lag dmar*, Ch. 撞死了一只羊 *Zhuang si le yi zhi yang*, 2018)[4] and *Balloon* (Tib. དབུགས་ལྕང་ *dbugs lgang*, Ch. 气球 *Qiqiu*, 2020). His "demythization" of

[3] On Chinese "modernism" see, for example, Zhang (1997).

[4] The English title simply refers to the two protagonists who both happen to have the same name, Jinpa, which is also the name of the actor playing the main role. The Chinese title is the name of Pema Tseden's short story, one of the two original works adapted for the movie. Finally, the Tibetan title meaning "butcher" or "murderer," same as the name of the second source work, Tsering Norbu's short story "The Killer," refers to the taboo of killing any living creatures, which is based in the Buddhist notion of compassion.

Tibet may have initially disappointed the audience craving for the stereotypically exotic, orientalized Tibet, but gradually have found its viewers and, consequently, readers. It is not a coincidence that one of Pema Tseden's latest movies, *Jinpa*, was partially based on the short story "Shashou" (杀手, "The killer," 2006)[5] by his colleague from Lhasa, Tsering Norbu, with whom the Amdo-based director and writer seems to share a similar approach to the representation of contemporary Tibet.

3. Tsering Norbu

Tsering Norbu was born in 1965 in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and lives in Lhasa, where he graduated in 1986 from Tibetan language and literature department of Tibet University. According to his public profile on Baidu, he later taught Tibetan language at high schools in Chamdo and Lhasa and soon started to work as editor for the official newspaper *Xizang ribao* (西藏日报, *Tibet Daily*) and the official magazine published by Tibet Writer's Association, *Xizang wenxue* (西藏文学, *Tibetan Literature*). Simultaneously, he established a career in the state apparatus, first as Party secretary and later deputy head of the Department of Quality Supervision of the TAR. He started to publish short stories in the early 1990s and in 2004 was picked to join the "national minority study group" at the Lu Xun Academy of Literature in Beijing.

In 2006 his short story "Shashou" was selected for the first time to appear in a national anthology, received the Tibetan Jomolungma literary award and finally was picked for official publication in *21 shiji Zhongguo dangdai wenxue* (21世纪中国当代文学, *Contemporary Chinese Literature of the 21st Century*) and translated into English and Korean. Since 2009, several of his short stories were published in literary journals outside of Tibet (for example 芳草 *Fang cao*, 民族文学 *Minzu wenxue*, 小说月报 *Xiaoshuo yuebao*, etc.) and his short story "Fang sheng yang" (放生羊, "Liberated Sheep") gained the 5th Lu Xun Literary Award. Tsering Norbu presently serves as the executive director of Tibet Writers' Association, editor-in-chief of *Xizang wenxue*, and since 2016 is a member of the National Committee of the Chinese Writers' Association. In 2015 he published his first full-length novel *Jiyu fengzhong* (祭语风中, *Prayers in the Wind*).

Tsering Norbu has formulated his understanding of the function of literature using an often-quoted phrase inspired by the title of a novel by the prominent writer of Hui origin Zhang Chengzhi (张承志, b. 1948) *Xinling shi* (心灵史, *History of the Soul*, 1991): "Literature is the history of the soul of a nation[ality]" (Li 2017). In accordance with the objective expressed through this mantra[6] of all Chinese

[5] The story has been recently translated into English by Riga Shakya.

[6] In the official Chinese literary discourse, the "history of the soul of a nation" is connected to the struggle of the broad masses of people against (presumably feudal, but possibly also

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minority writers, his literature in general sticks to "realism," responding to the official literary circles' call for "realistic depiction of everyday reality of the masses,"[7] while his literary style employs narrative techniques that were initially connected to "modernism" in Chinese literature. Notably, almost all his stories somehow relate to the notion of compassion with – in the broader circle of Chinese or Sinophone literatures – an unusually high ratio of short stories related to illness, disability, old age, and dying. Compassion and kindheartedness have been pointed out by the author himself as the "influence of traditional Tibetan culture" (Ciren 2010).

Han Chinese literary critics tend to emphasize Tsering Norbu's use of "traditional culture" like "the stories of the Tibetan mystic Milarepa, stories of the Gesar Epic, folk Buddhist tradition, Corpse Stories, Tibetan folk stories, or mysterious Tibetan custom of sky burial" (Li 2017). But the writer himself has rather expressed his intent to go deeper under the surface and reflect the proclaimed "history of the soul," a mixture of culturally based identity and (heavily suppressed) collective memory. From the Tibetan point of view even the most "mysterious" elements have their reason and logic. That is why Tsering Norbu repeatedly addressed the employment of "magical and mysterious" elements in representation of Tibet and Tibetan culture, stating his intention to depict Tibet in a more "realistic" way. In an interview he said:

> After the opening of Tibet, many outsiders started to write about it, provided a very superficial representation of Tibetan history, culture, and present situation. As a result, they depicted Tibet as magical and mysterious. I want to return back to the original Tibetan realm of mind, to the real Tibet. (Ciren 2019)

Short stories from the collection *Fang sheng yang* can be divided into four general thematical categories: religious topics, life in contemporary society, historical topics, and what I shall call "folk tales" (Ch. 民间故事 *minjian gushi*). Except for the last category, all of them might be surprising in the context of the communist "new Tibet," where religious and historical topics are strictly monitored and affected by

ethnic) oppression. For example, Hui scholar Yang Jiguo has explained in these terms the repeated violent uprisings of the Muslim Hui during the Qing dynasty that are described in Zhang Chengzhi's novel: "In that specific time, 'religion was a sigh of an oppressed soul, emotional expression of the merciless world', 'suffering of religion was a [symbolic] expression of present suffering and at the same time a kind of resistance to that real suffering.' And because Islam is the religion of Hui people, he used this ideological cover [i.e., religion] to explain numerous uprisings of the Hui. Therefore, in Zhang Chengzhi's writing, the history of religion was in fact the history of the soul of the Hui people and his religious sentiment was in fact an expression of his empathy with the suffering of his own people" (Yang 2004). Unless specified otherwise, translations from Chinese are my own.

7 This was stressed as the main objective of literature in the PRC by the present leadership (see Xi 2014).

censorship. On the contrary, life and society in contemporary Tibet, namely urban, with all the conflicts, dilemmas, and newly arising social problems, is something that was hardly touched upon in Sinophone Tibetan literature before the year 2000. The last category, based on "folk tales" or folklore elements that are often celebrated in Chinese literary criticism of Sinophone Tibetan works, transcends the category of religious topics with which it shares interest in supernatural and magic elements. The surrealistic elements in this category are not as much connected to Buddhism (a *religion* officially recognized by the authorities) as to the folk oral tradition and to what would be classified as "superstition." It includes folk elements that can be attributed to *bön*, shamanistic, or various local cults and traditions, but it also includes popular stories from traditional literature and oral histories circulating among people. Folk tales sometimes allow the author to deal with "sensitive" topics related to identity or historical traumas that would otherwise be excluded as literary material publishable in the PRC. As Franz Xaver Erhard (2018, 134) has noted: "Folk culture and oral lore provide a ground—however limited—for the negotiation of Tibetan identity in the highly restrictive public space allowed by the Chinese state."

Erhard connected the use of folk elements in Tibetan literature to what Erich Rotermund called *concealed writing* and characterized Tibetan writing within the official system of the PRC as "inner emigration," a state, where "even though dissenting, a person decides to consent in public but secretly keeps to his or her nonconformist opinions in private" (Erhard 2018, 134). Erhard argued that the folk elements not only "cater to the folkloristic taste of the socialist state and function as a major means to achieve promoted national characteristics," but at the same time they serve "as a rare opportunity to present and sometimes celebrate Tibetan culture, language, and customs" (Erhard 2018, 143). As already argued elsewhere, such elements can be in the context of Chinese literature read in accordance with the original Chinese understanding of fiction (*xiaoshuo*) as a "minor discourse" regarding official history, collecting "fragments and little sayings" that do not fit into the orthodox ideology-based narratives (Hladíková 2021b, 3). The fantastic elements stress the fictional character of such works even more (e.g., Chinese 传奇 *chuanqi* tradition), making them ostentatiously irrelevant and thus not threatening the official discourse.

4. The solace of religion

Under the category of "religious topics" I include short stories broadly related to the above-mentioned notion of compassion. Perhaps the most representative one is the title novella "Fang sheng yang," first published in 2009. Narrated in a strongly subjective mode by a first-person narrator, a dying old man, it includes

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fantastic visions which can be rationalized as dreams or hallucinations caused by the narrator's degrading cognitive functions and dying signs. The protagonist is a widower whose wife died 12 years ago, and who had been recently disturbed by visions of her suffering in hell, from which she is unable to escape to be reborn again due to unspecified karmic causes:

> Tears filled your black hole-like eyes and you replied with trembling voice: "I am in hell, suffering endlessly." You took off the sleeves of your *chupa* and slightly lifted the rim of your blouse. Oh, Lord Buddha! Who cut off your two breasts and left the open bloody wounds swarm with worms? Fresh blood was still dripping down, and sharp stench attacked my nostrils. My heart sank and I was so devastated that I started crying. (Ciren 2015, 63)

The narrator himself is later confirmed to be in a terminal stage of cancer but feels the urge to devote his remaining time to prayers for his late wife's re-birth. To improve her *karma*, the old man decides to "liberate" a sheep in a ritual known as *tshe thar* ("liberation of life" or "life-release"), where Tibetan Buddhists buy animals, typically fish, but sometimes also sheep, to save them from being slaughtered and consumed. The events are narrated in the first person, but the narrative voice often shifts to second person narration, as large part of the story is formed by inner monologues of the narrator talking to his late wife or to the liberated sheep. Gradually, through the first-person plural and second-person narrative discourse, they merge into one precious life, symbolically compared to a lotus flower, which is also a symbol of Buddha and Dharma. The endless and repetitive religious activities – circumambulations, prostrations, incantations, and prayers – are highlighted, not only as the means of personal life fulfillment and solace for the lonely old man, but also as distinctive connecting points of pan-Tibetan identity:

> The next day we again started prostrating from the point where we had stopped yesterday. I realized that there were several dozens of people prostrating around me, from their clothing it was apparent that they were pilgrims from the far-away eastern Tibet. As the day broke, we kept moving forward amidst the monotonous rustle of crawling bodies. The sun went up and its rays shone upon us, suffusing the road ahead with gold. In their light, your white body appeared even purer and smoother, like a lotus flower without a speck of dust. (Ciren 2015, 77)

Several short stories in the collection include a motif of physical disability. One example is "Lü Dumu" (绿度母, "Green Tara," 2011), a story of a disabled girl who has not known anything else but being laughed at and discriminated against by everyone around her, including her own family. She is tragically disappointed in love when abandoned by a stranger whom she met at Barkor and who seduced

her for a few short moments of physical pleasure. After that she takes refuge from worldly life and enters a monastery, where she finally finds reconciliation and, having finished her circle in *samsara*, dies at a young age, getting rid of her imperfect, inauspicious body. As in the previous short story, the theme is obviously inspired by Buddhist philosophy: life brings suffering stemming from bad karmic conditions (physical disability, illness) and unsatisfiable desires (mistaken for love) and the only cure is compassion, sympathy with other sentients beings, and reconciliation with one's fate.

One of the most notable pieces in the collection is the award-winning novella "Jie" (界, "Boundary/Realm," 2007). It can be categorized within the Chinese genre known as "new historical fiction" (新历史小说 *xin lishi xiaoshuo*) or as an "alternative history" (Lin 2005) contesting the official historical narratives by shifting the focalization from the perspective of class-determined "heroes" to the perspective of "class enemies," aristocracy and clergy. The novella presents atrocities of the "old Tibet" from the point of view of several members and servants of a feudal aristocratic family. As expected in the works depicting the life in old feudal regime, both in inland China and Tibetan areas, the novella showcases the decadence and immorality of the upper class. The plot turns around extramarital affairs, the sexual enslavement of serf girls, and the fates of illegitimate children in the family. The events from the "pre-Liberation times" are narrated through several interchanging narrators who hold different positions on the social hierarchy within the feudal estate. The first narrator is a housekeeper, a man of low origin who managed to climb higher on the social ladder thanks to his sly and cruel personality. Initially, he shows little sympathy for the suffering of those below him and inclines to power abuse as a natural means of survival. The second narrator is an illegitimate daughter of one of the feudal lords who had an illicit love affair with another aristocrat and gave birth to a son. This affair inevitably ruined her life, as the family sent her away with her little son who was later forced to enter a monastery and become a monk.

This monk becomes the last narrator who concludes the story. His mother, having no one else to rely on, is excessively mentally dependent on her son and refuses to leave him even when he has been recognized as *tulku* or "living Buddha" (Ch. 活佛 *huofo*). To keep him by her side, she decides to poison him, so that he can never leave her. With his exceptional mental abilities, the *tulku* has realized what his mother plans to do but sees no other way out of the situation caused by bad *karma* accumulated for generations and by unrestrained desires, greed, jealousy, and other negative emotions, than to let her kill him. With his sacrifice, he can make his mother realize the true nature of her emotions and actions and can lead her to understanding and regret. Watching her beloved son dying, she finally finds the true compassion deep in her heart and vows to spend the rest of

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her life in prayers, carving *mani* stones beside her late son's monastery to repay for her wrong deeds.[8]

The novella, partly narrated in the first person by a narrator who has died in the course of the story, includes supernatural elements connected to concepts like reincarnation, rebirth, or *karma* and *karmic* reward:

> The soul had already left the main temple hall and flew towards the Yamanataka shrine, causing the offering lamps to die out at once. In the dark of the night, the monk who took care for the butter lamps could clearly see the soul flying out of the shrine, and when he followed it outside to the foot of the mountain, he could see an old woman lying there not far from Duopei's collapsed body. The news spread quickly and pilgrims from all directions started to flock to Zhari Monastery and decided to build a *chörten* for Duopei next to the pile of *mani* stones. (Ciren 2015, 136)

However, these elements certainly go beyond the function of a somehow playful narrative embellishment that the "magical" elements usually assumed in "magical realism." They are rather used to express distinctively Tibetan subjectivity such as internalized compassion, which naturally stems from understanding the laws of *samsara* and *karma*. It is what the *tulku*-son has taught his mother Tashi (Zhaxi) by the sacrifice of his body:

> When the *chörten* was finished, the housekeeper Sangye wanted to take Tashi away. But she said: "Housekeeper, I have committed many sins in this life, if you want to pity me, give me a hammer and steel knife and I am going to carve one thousand six-syllable mantras onto *mani* stones." (Ciren 2015, 136)

5. Conflicting modernity

Religious themes in the collection may be read in a certain juxtaposition to themes connected to modernity. Life in contemporary society is often characterized by an absence of religion, the kind of values, life certainty, and solace brought by faith in Buddhism or, more precisely, finding inner peace in living up to the basic notion of compassion as described above. For example, the piece called "Fen" (焚, "Burning," 2000) tells a story of an independent and educated young woman named Woeser (Weise) who decided to divorce her abusive husband and cut herself off from his family. In her quest for personal freedom, she had to give up her little son and leave him with his father. However, her "free life" soon starts to feel somewhat

[8] According to the author, this novella was inspired by a "folk tale" which was narrated to him by a monk in Sangpo Monastery near Lhasa (Xiao 2017).

dull – she has a love affair with a colleague, but it turns out that her lover is not interested in a stable relationship and is just seeking fun. Woeser gradually finds herself struggling without the pillars of traditional society, religion, and family. Her life appears as rootless, unstable, and, in the end, meaningless, very different from the life of the older generation whose members, despite living through the turbulent times of the 1950s to 1970s, still felt the connection to traditional morality and values, even when they could not be openly acknowledged as originating in Buddhist philosophy and faith during certain historical periods.

This is made clear, for example, in "Qianfang you ren dengzhe ta" (前方有人等着她, "Someone is Waiting for Her Ahead," 2004), a short story which, again, brings up the theme of old age – and generational conflict. An old upright woman spent a nice life with her late husband. They loved and respected each other despite their poverty and political turmoil, staying humble even when their material condition and social position improved. Nevertheless, their children did not live up to their parents' expectations: their daughter divorced, and their son got addicted to gambling and ended up in prison for not paying his debts. The old woman sees no more meaning in life and willingly follows her dead husband to the afterlife, happily bidding farewell to this world.

A similar topic had appeared already in Tsering Norbu's very first short story, "Luozi de chuanfu" (罗孜的船夫, "The Boatman of Luozi," 1992). Narrated as "story within a story" told in a circle of travelers, it introduces an old boatman who had lost his daughter many years ago when she escaped with a Khampa trader. The girl allured by worldly desires of love and comfortable urban life, however, did not meet a happy fate. She was left by the Khampa as soon as she got pregnant with his child and miscarried the baby later. Her father, unaware of her fate, took a trip to Lhasa to find her, but quickly ran away in terror. The city was like hell for him, without any signs of love and compassion, a bleak and cruel place. Even when his daughter finally came to bring him back to Lhasa with her, he refused and decided to live alone near the river, forgotten by the world, but free, like a hermit.

The abrupt intrusion of modernity into the idealized pastoralist life is the main theme of a longer novella called "Shen shou" (神授, "Divine Initiation," 2011). The main hero, Yargye (Ya'erjie), is an illiterate nomad who was endowed by deities with the exceptional and magical art of reciting the Gesar Epic as little boy shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution. For comparison, Riika Virtanen has recently brought to attention a Tibetan-medium short story with the same topic by Dhondup Gyal, who has been celebrated as the "founder of modern Tibetan literature." His work "Sgrung pa" (སྒྲུང་པ་, "The Storyteller," 1981) describes the fate of a Gesar Epic bard during the Cultural Revolution (Virtanen 2020, 88). Interestingly, as an early work of the post-Mao era, the short story avoids descriptions of the

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divine initiation and fails to explain how the bard attained his art. In sharp contrast, Tsering Norbu gives a detailed description of the magical scene on several pages:

> The divine army general, riding a white steed, descended from clouds, waving his banner, vast and mighty, as he was ready to turn the Sejian Grassland upside down. It happened in 1979. However, none of the people inhabiting the Sejian Grassland saw this magnificent scene and did not hear the storm-like sound of horses' hooves. This was what only a thirteen-year-old herding boy experienced. (Ciren 2015, 217)

Tsering Norbu's description is almost identical with a "real person's" experience described in "The Biography of Grags pa" in Fitzherbert's translation as quoted by Virtanen:

> It is also revealed that an event of a mystical nature was connected to his becoming a Gesar bard: namely, he disappeared for some time when he was still a child, slept for an unusually long time, and saw a dream in which his stomach was filled with stories of King Gesar. (Fitzherbert 2010, 228–229, quoted in Virtanen 2020, 94)

After his divine initiation, the bard Yargye in "Shen shou" spent several years traveling across the grasslands of Changtang, singing the epic for nomadic herdsmen. Later he was contacted by researchers coming from an ethnological institute in Lhasa who asked him to come to the city to make recordings of the whole epic for archival and research purposes. After that, he spent the next ten years reciting the epic not to live people, but to a cassette recorder, gradually losing his divine talent. When he is, after a long time, able to return to the grassland, he learns in shock about the modernization which caused a drastic change of people's interests and values, so that no one is interested in the Gesar Epic anymore.

This quick transformation is symbolically expressed in the scene, where the protector deity of the bard, a wolf whom he had met during his original initiation, clearly the symbol of the old nomadic life, roams abandoned in the grassland. The final part of the novella turns back to the surreal mode of the opening scene of the divine initiation. The protector wolf appears once again to take Yargye away, but the divine army general does not descend to the steppe anymore and the transmission of the Gesar Epic seems to be disrupted as the bard's successor fails to be sanctioned by the deities as he is watching Yargye disappearing into nowhere. Nevertheless, the ending remains open:

> The sound of the Gesar Epic drifted in the air above the Sejian Grassland, but I couldn't move. The dark shadow over the *mani* stones pile lightly descended to the steppe and you and the dark shadow [Yargye and the wolf] walked into distance. You both disappeared from my sight. Yargye! I was not able to shout, but my heart filled with worries. The dark night

> enveloped my eyes, and I could only lie there, waiting, waiting. (Ciren 2015, 262)

This ending differs notably from Dhondup Gyal's story, wherein the conveyed message was that even in the hardest times, in the 1950s and during the Cultural Revolution, the tradition managed to survive thanks to the unbreakable will and devotion of people.

6. Disturbingly "mysterious" history

In general, historical themes related to Tibet are in the PRC considered "sensitive" and are subjected to censorship and self-censorship. A few notable works have been written in Tibetan and published unofficially with personal consequences for their authors, as it is the case with the full-length novel *Rlung dmar 'ur 'ur* (རླུང་དཀར་ཨུར་ཨུར་, *Red Wind Howling*, 2009) by Tsering Dhondup (ཚེ་རིང་དོན་གྲུབ *tshe ring don grub*, b. 1961).[9] As for Sinophone works, all attempts to represent history restrain themselves on depiction of what the official narrative denotes as "old Tibet" or retell the process of the so called "Peaceful Liberation" (和平解放 *heping jiefang*) and "democratic reforms" (民主改革 *minzhu gaige*) from a Tibetan perspective, but still reflecting the official narratives based on the ideological interpretation of "backwardness" versus "civilization."[10]

Among them, Alai's "new historical fiction" *Chen'ai luoding* has drawn considerable attention outside of China thanks to its English translation under the title *Red Poppies* (2002). The existing studies (e.g., Choy 2008; Baranovich 2010) focus on the representation of specific "Tibetan subjectivity" in the novel, which re-tells the history of the "Liberation" of the Gyalrong area in what is now Barkham County in Sichuan Province from the point of view of the offspring of the local chieftains (Ch. 土司 *tusi*, known as རྒྱལ་པོ་ *rgyal po*, "king," in Tib.). It is narrated in the first person by a narrator who is clearly unreliable, an "idiot" with limited mental capacity or ability to fully understand the unfolding events leading to the fall of his chiefdom and surrender to the Chinese army. The novel described the local Gyalrong chieftain family as – from the point of view of implied Han Chinese reader – clearly barbarian, but also as degenerated and already hybridized by mixing their blood with Han Chinese, because the narrator's mother was a Chinese prostitute. In contrast, the Red Army soldiers, seen from the native perspective as

[9] The novel has been translated to French by Françoise Robin and excerpts in English appeared in Barnett, Weiner, and Robin (2020). For a detailed analysis, see Jabb (2015).

[10] For example, Yangdon's (央珍) *Wu xingbie de shen* (无性别的神, *A God without Gender*, 1994), Tashi Dawa's *Soadong de Xiangbala* (骚动的香巴拉, *Turbulent Shangbala*, 1993), or Alai's *Chen'ai luoding* (尘埃落定, *Dust Settles*, 1998).

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the intruding Other, represent the civilizing ("Liberating") force bringing modernity based on scientific world outlook.

Nimrod Baranovich has argued that Alai is deconstructing the "demonic image of the 'Old Tibet'" (Baranovich 2010, 174) by "his insistence on depicting pre-'[L]iberation' Tibet as a place full of humanness," where "brutality is only part of a much richer reality in which one can also find love, regret, friendship, and compassion, and in which these human expressions often cross the rigid boundaries of social class and status" to prove that "'Old Tibet' was not 'hell on earth' and that Tibetans were not demons" (Baranovich 2010, 176). He shows how Alai has addressed some of the common Han Chinese stereotypes and clichés about Tibet, but does not point out the obvious sarcasm with which the author portrays the "fierce Tibetans" in a more "human light," like for example in this quoted passage:

> [If you] still don't believe me, you should come to our home and eat a meal with us right after an order has been given to the executioner. Then you'll see that we drink more water and eat less than usual. The meat, in particular, will hardly be touched. Everyone will eat just a slice or two as a symbolic gesture. (quoted in Baranovich 2010, 180)

Moreover, his conclusions are based in a vision of a homogenous "Tibet" and strictly inclusive "Tibetanness," omitting the fact that Alai (himself being of mixed origin) comes from and writes about the Gyalrong community, which could hardly ever be considered as a "Tibetan" territory under the Ganden phodang government. Thus, the claim that Alai conforms to the official Chinese communist narrative "that the Tibetans were part of China long before the 1950s" (Baranovich 2010, 189) fails to acknowledge the complexity of linguistic, cultural, and historical context of Alai's homeland, as well as his fictional world. Rather than reading the work as "a rare voice to Tibetan resistance" (Baranovich 2010, 195), where "politically correct narratives are used in *Red Poppies* to hide subversive ones [...] to maintain good relations with the cultural authorities" (Baranovich 2010, 197), I suggest to interpret the novel in accordance with the author's position as an official, himself representing the cultural authorities: i.e., as a highly hybridized work blurring the sharp division between "us" and "them," the Self and the Other, and author and censor. In other words, the novel is an excellent example of the employment of specific narrative strategies, like the unreliable narrator, or sarcasm stemming from the almost grotesquely showcased mixture of excessive brutality, violence, and sex, used to deal with political taboos and censorship when addressing a "sensitive" historical topic.

A very different perspective from the Chinese "Liberation" of Tibetan areas is provided in the above mentioned novel *Rlung dmar 'ur 'ur* by writer who is officially of "Mongol nationality" (蒙古族 *Menggu zu*), Tsering Dhondup. Despite this official "nationality" label, coming from a nomadic family from Sokpo, Tsering

Dhondup is linguistically and culturally Tibetan and is one of the boldest authors writing and publishing in Tibetan. Many of his works faced problems with official publication in the PRC (Erhard 2019, 186) and the novel *Rlung dmar 'ur 'ur* had to be published unofficially through a now illegal process via Hong Kong.

Lama Jabb (2015) who also comes from a nomadic community in Sokpo has provided a detailed account of the work in his dissertation. In general, he interprets Tibetan (Tibetan-medium) literature as a means of dealing with the "cultural trauma" Tibetans have faced since the "peaceful Liberation" and suppression of the uprising(s). He writes:

> The violent takeover of Tibet in the 1950s and subsequent Communist Chinese rule have been traumatic experiences that have left indelible marks on the Tibetan psyche. The Chinese state continues to control and shape the narrative of modern Tibetan experience, but in recent times Tibetan writers have been breaking (at great personal cost) a long-held silence through poetry, prose, and visual art. (Jabb 2015, 91)

He talks about generations of Tibetans, who, just like himself "grew up listening to stories of the harrowing experiences of their parents" that mostly remain in the "private, oral sphere of the family hearth" (Jabb 2015, 91). And even when they are transformed into the written form of fictional work, it "requires at least a certain degree of cultural sensibility and Tibetan historical consciousness to decipher their hidden messages" (Jabb 2015, 95). These "hidden messages" are seen as "literary identity markers of the Tibetan people" and highlights the mutual "unintelligibility" (Jabb 2015, 110) between Tibetan and Chinese terms, concepts, and worldviews. In case of Tsering Dhondup's censored novel, it is again its "experimental mode of narrative which is deliberately disjointed, fragmentary, and confusing" (Jabb 2015, 115), "resembling oral narrative (fragments, episodes, and repetitions)" (Jabb 2015, 116) that "reflects the prohibited nature of the story, and the unspeakable horrors associated with it" (Jabb 2015, 117). In the conclusion of the chapter, Lama Jabb writes:

> In the written word contemporary Tibetan writers continue a long-running act of remembrance that starts in orality. The indelibility of cultural trauma is generated by the radical, fundamental, and shocking impact on social change. (Jabb 2015, 128)

In accordance with this statement, Tsering Norbu's representations of Tibetan history are always inspired by oral narratives and often transformed into "folk tales" including magical elements, hinting the unspeakability of certain topics. For example, the short story "Chuanshuo" (传说, "Myth," 2009) is based on popular tales about magic amulets that can protect people from weapons (Ch. 刀枪不入 *dao qiang bu ru*, literally, "neither knife nor spears can penetrate"). Several related

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legends about important figures from Tibetan history, namely Sakyapandita and Reting Rinpoche, are passed on to the first-person narrator in a pub along with liters of alcohol. After hearing the stories, the narrator-protagonist, who is later identified as a "peasant," walks out of the pub determined to try the protective power of the allegedly magic *dorje* only to be killed soon after he gets involved in a fight. The very fact of the narrator's death makes him unreliable, casting a mysterious shadow over the narrated legends, while his apparent drunkenness serves as a rationalizing element.

One of the remarkable details of this short story is the reference about a controversial figure in modern Tibetan history, regent Reting Rinpoche who was allegedly poisoned by members of the Tibetan government in 1947 and later was celebrated as a "patriotic figure" by Chinese propaganda (Ji 2012). According to one of the legends, the magical *dorje* was stolen from the Reting Monastery when it was looted by soldiers sent by the Kashag. These events are described in "Deduo" (德剁, "Dabdob," from Tib. རྡོབ་རྡོབ *ldob ldob*), a short story inspired by popular legends related to infamous Tibetan "violent monks" who defended the Reting Monastery against Tibetan army. The story plays with what is often seen as a paradox, the connection between Buddhist monks and violence. It is thematized in the plot through the interaction between an injured, dying monk defender and a government soldier who is reluctant to kill the enemy wearing monk's robe. In a gesture of compassion, the government soldier gives the seriously hurt monk water to drink, but the *dabdob* takes an advantage of the moment when the soldier relieves his alert and attempts to kill him. Now the soldier cannot avoid killing the monk despite his fear of karmic retribution for his sin.

While these two stories focus on topics that might seem to be in accordance with the stereotype of "mysterious" Tibet appealing to Han Chinese readers familiar with Ma Yuan's early "avant-garde" stories and to tourists who can hear such folklore from tour guides on their trip to Lhasa, they in fact, just as the above-mentioned historical novella "Jie," break the notorious stereotypes about the "old Tibet." What in the beginning appears as conventional depictions of the old feudal-monastic system or depraved Tibetan upper-class society gradually shifts towards questions of desire, guilt, suffering, repentance, and forgiveness, thus subverting the stereotypical perceptions stemming from mere incomprehension.

Several of Tsering Norbu's short stories even mention details or what can be described as "micro-stories" that are clearly related to the Cultural Revolution. A story called "Bakuo jie" (八廓街, "Barkor") after the main circumambulation circuit around the Jokhang Tempe in Lhasa consist of three such "micro-stories" based on the author-narrator's childhood memories. They are memories of life in old part of Lhasa in one of the traditional old Tibetan manors, which was after

1959 changed into a *siheyuan* (四合院), a courtyard providing cheap housing for low-class families. All "micro-stories" include fantastic or even horror motifs. The main hero of the first one is a young "hooligan" (流氓 *liumang*), a boy, presumably with bad class background, who often got involved in street fights and committed small crimes – a possible allusion to the rebel faction of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. His untimely death is later interpreted by the author-narrator as karmic retribution for his "sins."

The protagonist of the second "micro-story" is a young female lunatic who often appears naked in the window of an old manor on the Barkor. The author-narrator with other young boys were naturally attracted by her beautiful and mysterious figure but were repeatedly driven away by a man who appears to be her husband. Later, news spread around Barkor that the sick woman died, and her husband committed suicide by hanging himself in the manor. Surprisingly, after several years the author-narrator runs into the supposedly dead couple on the Barkor again and after telling his mother, she goes crazy and starts to undress in public too, as the young woman used to do. As the first micro-story, this one also allows a kind of hidden allegorical interpretation, linking the insanity to the period of the Cultural Revolution, which corresponds with the author's earliest childhood memories.

The connection to the Cultural Revolution is most obvious in the last micro-story, where the main protagonist is again a beautiful woman. This local beauty secretly loved by all men living in the neighborhood, is married to former monk who had been forced to disrobe after the 1959 uprising. All the kids in the courtyard look down upon the monk. However, the beautiful woman dies after giving birth to their second child, and as the neighbors in the courtyard watch him struggling to bring up the kids alone, they slowly find some sympathy for him. The climax of the monk's destiny comes, when he is persecuted and imprisoned because his little son found his old prayer-beads and took them out to play in the courtyard.[11]

One story in the collection directly links "oral narration" (言述 *yanshu*) with history and historical narratives. "Yanshu zhi huo" (言述之惑, "Perplexities of Storytelling") retells a local story from the time of the Tibetan uprising. Two journalists travel to a remote grassland area to find details about a propagandist story published in press back in 1960. It was a story about a "people's hero" named Gyalpo (Jiabu) who helped the People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops eliminate a group of rebels (叛匪 *panfei*). 60 years after the uprising, the two men arrive to the grassland to retell the story in a more realistic way. However, they find very different, even conflicting accounts from local witnesses. In the memory of local

[11] This motif was later incorporated into the Tsering Norbu's novel *Ji yu fengzhong*.

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nomads, the "hero" was a macho man who had affairs with almost every woman in the area and was an opportunist who had just taken the advantage of the situation when he was injured by the rebels by a mere coincidence. Later he made a fortune as the hero celebrated by the authorities and even as a disabled old man he lived comfortably in the big city and without the worries of the ordinary people who stayed in the grassland. After hearing these stories, the two journalists sighed over the "difficulty of [objective] expression" (Ciren 2015, 299).

The obvious sarcasm of the story is based on the juxtaposition of the eulogizing official accounts (represented by the old newspaper article and by the voice of the "hero's" Party official daughter) and of the "folk tales" – the voice of the "people." It is highlighted by contrast between the lofty vocabulary of the official propaganda and the eloquent vocabulary of the local nomads. The Han Chinese journalist at the end of the 1950s and Gyalpo's daughter in the narrative present describe him as the "hero" (英雄 *yingxiong*) and "patriot" (爱国主义者 *aiguozhuyizhe*), celebrate the heroic "Golden Army" (金珠玛米 *jinzhu mami*)[12] as "Bodhisattva soldiers" (菩萨兵 *Pusa bing*), and emphasize the "the landlord's oppression and exploitation [of the masses]" (牧场主的压迫和剥削 *muchangzhu de yapo he boxue*), using the standardized Party vocabulary. However, an old herder describes Gylapo as "pitiful" (可怜 *kelian*), the same characteristic that he later uses for the presumably evil landlord (可怜的老爷 *kelian de laoye*) when he mentions his suicide after the "democratic reforms" were implemented in the area. Finally, his description of the arrival of the "Golden Army" to the high-altitude plateau is beyond realistic:

> When the Liberation Army soldiers came here chasing [after the rebels] gasping heavily, Gyalpo showed them the direction where the rebels went. But the soldiers were so tired that they could hardly move, and their lips turned all purple. (Ciren 2015, 295)

7. Playful "folk tales"

In general, the employment of "folk tale" elements in a narrative provides space for playful or even ironic probes into the Tibetan way of life and thinking. One example is the short story "Shashou" (杀手, "The Killer," 2006). Stories of blood feuds and revenge are part of Tibetan local histories as well as the folklore around them.[13] This work gained considerable attention when it was selected for publication in

[12] The term is phonetic transcription of the Tibetan term for the People's Liberation Army, *bcings 'grol dmag mi* (བཅིངས་འགྲོལ་དམག་མི།).

[13] They were introduced to Chinese/Sinophone Tibetan literature for the first time probably by Tashi Dawa, for example, in his short story "Feng ma zhi yao" (风马之耀, "Glory of the Wind Horse," 1991).

official edited anthologies, and ten years later it was adapted – along with the director Pema Tseden's own short story – into a movie, which was internationally distributed under the title *Jinpa* and turned into the first commercial success for the director on domestic Chinese market. The film is set closer to the director's native region in north-eastern Tibet and with actors speaking Amdo Tibetan, but the original short story takes place around Saga, a high-altitude township on the road from Ü-tsang to western Tibet in the TAR. Beside the rather conventional vengeance story, the short story has a specific aesthetic value which highlights the landscape of the Tibetan high plateau, its desolation and bleakness:

> The sand picked up around my windswept trouser legs. I could picture him taking step after step out there beyond the glass of my window. The wind crashed *kacha kacha* against the truck window, and the tarpaulin covering the goods was almost swept away. The sandstorms around there are really frightful. I honked a few times into the dark, the sound carried away by the wind. (Ciren 2015, 210, trans. Riga Shakya)

However, unlike the conventional descriptions of Tibetan landscape by Han Chinese writers, this landscape, no matter how tough it looks, is described neither as a threat endangering humans who have to struggle for survival, nor are readers presented with a "typical" Tibetan landscape with green grass, blue lakes, and snow-covered peaks. Tsering Norbu's landscape possesses a completely different aesthetical value, similar to the one from Pema Tseden's films. It is described using words like "vast," "wasteland," "horizon," "boundless," "desolate," etc. Such a description induces a kind of vertigo effect resembling the one caused by the extremely high altitude that, along with amounts of alcohol, explains the blank spots in the narration and the dreamy, or even hallucinatory open ending, which was successfully rendered into the film as well.

A particularly notable novella inspired by "folk tales" is *Quguo shan shang de xue* (曲郭山上的雪, *Snow on the Quguo Mountain*). This piece was written in reaction to the Hollywood movie *2012* (directed by Roland Emmerich, 2009) and is an ironic response to both the Western orientalization of Tibet and the Chinese-constructed utopia of Communism. After watching the film *2012*, a peasant – influenced by the Tibetans' own mythology about various *beyuls* (སྦས་ཡུལ་ *sbas yul*, so-called "hidden land" considered to be terrestrial Buddhist Pure land or Paradise) and by what the uneducated villagers were taught by the Chinese propaganda – takes it literally. Upon returning to his native village, he becomes a "harbinger" for the others and motivates them to get ready for the "end of the world." With this expectation, many villagers decide to give up on all worldly things. They "liberate" (*fangsheng*) their livestock (i.e., either just let the animals go or give them away to a monastery), refuse to grow the crops and leave their fields or, again, give them away to monks. Some of them even sell their houses and all valuables below price

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for charity so that they can earn merit before the "judgement day." Having done the preparations, they just spend days celebrating, drinking, dancing, and singing.

The irony in this story stems from its narrative features – it is narrated by a senior Communist cadre to his superior. The narrator/protagonist is the village head, who is himself illiterate and never went further than to the county seat for a Party meeting. He knows he is in big trouble as his people refuse to work, so he brings the case to the county head and pleads for help. At one point, the first-person narrator himself brings up the comparison to the utopic communist society, with no ownership, where people do not have to work hard as they share everything and do not ask for more. At the same time, it can be related to the traditional Tibetan Buddhist utopias about *beyuls*, hidden valleys, where people live in idyllic state, free from the chain of cause and effect, desire, and suffering, as well as to the more recent mythology of such popular movements during some of the difficult moments of the 1950s and 1960s (Wen 2005).

> I was still wondering, isn't this the Communism that we have talked about so often? Wherever you went, they welcomed you warmly as their close relative. And they showed compassion and love not only to people, but to every living creature. When Langdün demolished his house, the villagers put all spiders, ants, and little mice into basins and took them to a safe place. They even spilled some *tsampa* around for them to eat. They were really crazy. (Ciren 2015, 205)

The village head's opinions are revealed in the form of a first-person narrative discourse, wherein the events are focalized from his perspective as he described them to the county Party chief. The narrative discourse is interlaced with marked direct speech recording what was said by the two protagonists, the village head and the Party chief, during their talk. The long narrative passages in the first person are interrupted by shorter parts of the third person account of the actual events, chronologically as they unfolded in the village, which are marked with italics. This kind of narration highlights the limited perspective of the village head and his unfulfilled effort to keep his people in order and at the same time to meet the expectations of his Party boss. In this way, the novella ironically relates to the "unintelligibility" (Jabb 2015, 110) of Chinese ideological concepts to the "Tibetan masses," who use their own logic to interpret them.

8. Conclusion

The present study has focused on Chinese-medium literature written by an ethnic Tibetan writer and thus aims to contribute to the research of Sinophone literatures or, more broadly, Sinophone studies, as well as modern Tibetan literature studies. With a lack of first-hand information from Tibet for Western researchers who have

had only very limited access to the region during the past decades, literature and more recently film can be seen as sources that help to improve our understanding of contemporary Tibetan society and social transformation. Fictional works, no matter whether they position themselves as "realistic" or otherwise, tend to reflect certain aspects of both past and present "realities," and in case of Tibet, this can provide valuable insights into contemporary intellectual discourse in the region on the background of dominant official narratives. Even the works of authors who are actively participating in the official literary/cultural establishment, as Tsering Norbu does, need to be seen more in light of counterhegemonic strategies allowing self-expression under very specific and limited conditions rather than simply conforming to the authorities.

As shown through the analysis of themes and narrative modes of Tsering Norbu's short stories, the author is carefully negotiating towards what Gramsci (2009, 76) called "a compromise equilibrium" with the "dominant ways of making the world meaningful" (Storey 2015, 92), i.e., with the "hegemonic discourses" of those in power in both political and economic terms. Intellectuals in the PRC, and those of Tibetan origin even more so, are entangled in a complex net of power relations influenced not only by ideology/politics and their ethnicity, but also by economic/market factors within the state-controlled system. The commercialization of Tibetan culture, which started around the mid-1980s, has reached new heights since the early 2000s as Tibet has become a popular destination for Han Chinese tourism. This might be the reason why contemporary Tibetan writers (and filmmakers) strive so much to represent an "authentic" Tibet, while, in the act of "figuration" through various fictional forms, they indirectly undermine *myths* (in Barthesian sense; see, e.g., Storey 2015, 80) imposed on Tibet by both Western and Chinese orientalism symbolically expressing the uneven power relations.

Tsering Norbu is using specific narrative elements (that could be called "modernist" in the Chinese literary context) to convey hidden meanings that make his representation of Tibet "authentic" in the sense of expression of shared subjectivity, culture, and historical experience. These modernist devices, like dreams and hallucinations, subjective narration with changing focalization or narrators, stream of consciousness, unreliable narrators, etc., and the use of "magical" "folk" elements symbolically confirm the fictional (*xiaoshuo*) character of narrated events, transforming them into a "minor discourse," which does not directly subvert the official narratives. The underlying "counter discourse" of such "minor/minority" literature is not expressed by the direct questioning of the dominant discourses or addressing controversial themes, but rather by the emphasis on a positive affirmation of "authentic" (and harmless) Tibetan values and frames of reference for understanding the world, in particular the notion of "compassion" as pointed out already by Françoise Robin (2008, 37).

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Compassion as the key notion of Tibetan culture based in Buddhism is acknowledged in Tsering Norbu's short stories by highlighting the topics related to aging, illness, disability, and death. In contrast to representations of suffering and death in some Han Chinese works about Tibet, like for example Ma Jian's and Ma Yuan's short stories from the 1980s, these themes are turned into a positive and highly human tales that realistically reflect the natural course of human life as something universal, without deliberate exaggerations and exoticization of Tibet. Then, the supernatural elements can be organically engaged in the otherwise realistic narratives, be it in the form of subjective perceptions of the narrator's/protagonist's consciousness or in the form of "folklore."

In conclusion, it is possible to say that Tibetan subjectivity/identity is incorporated into the text in the form of various "hidden messages" in an attempt not only to "translate [the Tibetan] world," as it has been formulated already by Lara Maconi (2002, 186), but also as "literary identity markers of the Tibetan people" (Jabb 2015, 110) sharing the same traumatic history. Such "hidden messages" are not restricted to the use of Tibetanisms in Sinophone Tibetan fictional texts, from personal and place names to the realia of Tibetan history and everyday life. In Tsering Norbu's short stories, just like in Tibetan-medium fiction, even more important are the subaltern voices of "ordinary people" (老百姓 *laobaixing*), the "people" (人民 *renmin*) or the "masses" (大众 *dazhong*) who should have gotten their voice a long time ago through the official Marxist Chinese literary discourse, however, have remained largely voiceless in both the intellectual discourse and the literature produced by it, as well as in commercialized production informed and dominated by state ideology.

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