

REVIEWS

Hartley, L and P Schiaffini-Vedani (eds). 2008. *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*. Durham: Duke University Press. xxxviii+382. Photographs, spellings of Tibetan names, Chinese terms, list of Tibetan works in translation, bibliography, index. Soft cover. ISBN-13: 978-0-8223-4277-9.

Reviewed by Timothy Thurston (The Ohio State University)

Fiction, as understood in the West, was not a strong part of the Tibetan literary tradition (Stein 1972, 251-2). Although Newman (1996, 411) has argued that certain literary works existed as early as the eighteenth century, most fictional texts in Tibet belonged to folklore and oral tradition. Beginning in the twentieth century, however, modern fiction and poetry has gradually emerged and even thrives in spite of continuing issues of literacy and education. As relative newcomers to the study of Tibetan writing, western scholars, many of whom approach Tibet from disciplines that emphasize religion or philosophy, tend to overlook modern fiction. This work, edited by Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani, aims to fill this void and provide scholars with an introduction to the complexities of modern Tibetan literature and how it reflects and impacts the unique transnational and cross-cultural social context it is written in.

The idea for this book was conceived after a 2001 conference panel on the same subject at an annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies. The final product is composed of fourteen essays from thirteen scholars, including a foreword by Mathew Kapstein and an introduction by the editors. Contributors were drawn from several disciplines, and provide a critical and experiential breadth that makes the collection an important resource for

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scholars in, for example, Chinese, Tibetan, and ethnic studies. Included are essays focusing on Tibetophone literature, Sinophone Tibetan literature (literature written in Chinese by Tibetans), English language works published within the Tibetan diaspora community in India, and issues of diglossia in Modern Tibetan literature.

The essays are organized in two larger sections that place the emergence of modern Tibetan literature in a generally chronological order. Part One, 'Engaging Traditions', presents works that examine how modern Tibetan literature deals with and changes traditional forms of literature. Chapters One through Six approach this issue within the realm of modern Tibetan poetry. The focus is on how many of the first Tibetans to compose modern poetry approached meter and the very stylized allusions and metaphors characteristic of traditional Tibetan poetry (*snyan ngag*). Recognizing Tibet's relationship with China, Chapter Two examines the creative ways Sinophone Tibetan poets engage the Tibetan tradition. This poetry does not emulate or draw upon the meter and register of Tibetan poetry as influenced originally by Indic poetic tradition. Instead, these poets often refer to Tibetan folk heroes such as King Ge sar, the protagonist of the world's longest epic poem, to underscore the inherently Tibetan nature of their poetic compositions. In privileging Chinese language Tibetan poetry, beginning with the first works of Yidan Cairang (Yi dam tshe ring) and continuing to recent works of female Tibetan poet Weise and others, this section recognizes the complex issues of identity creation and maintenance the authors negotiate.

Part Two, 'Negotiating Modernities', focuses on how modern Tibetan literature understands and presents itself in the unique social and political context in which Tibetan culture now exists. Chapter Eight is entitled 'One Nation, Two Discourses' and probes the social context in which contemporary Tibetan literature emerged following the

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Cultural Revolution and outlines the debate over whether Sinophone Tibetan literature may be considered Tibetan literature.

Chapters Nine and Ten examine works by two of China's most famous Sinophone Tibetan authors: Zhaxidawa and Alai, respectively. These essays deal with the use of magical realism and issues of identity in these works. Chapter Eleven continues to discuss modernity, examining the fairly small body of literature on the life of Tibetans in urban spaces. This section recognizes the vast changes a modern lifestyle has brought to the fabric of Tibetan culture, and examines how modern authors portray this. The book ends with two examinations of Tibetan literature in the diaspora community in terms of the emergence of a modern Tibetan literature outside the People's Republic of China, away from the homeland.

The book includes many supplementary materials beneficial to those hoping to continue their studies of modern Tibetan literature. With a glossary of Tibetan spellings, an appendix of Chinese Terms, and a list of English and French translations of Tibetan literary works, these materials help make the works studied accessible to a much wider audience.

While a multitude of studies exist contributing to the understanding of Tibetan art, Buddhism, and classical literature, this book is one of the first in-depth critical studies published in English concerned with the growing body of modern Tibetan literature. As the title suggests, the purpose is to situate this literature in a larger social and cultural context. The transition from classical to modern literature has occurred on a continuum mirroring how society as a whole has evolved, impacted by many of the same historical movements shaping Tibetan experience over the last century.

This work emphasizes that modern Tibetan literature is not an abrupt disconnect from Tibet's past and its literary and oral traditions; instead, it has retained its roots and evolved as a consequence of contact with other cultures and

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other forms of literature. It recognizes contributions of such authors as Gendun Chomphel (Dge 'dun chos 'phel) and Dondrup Gyal (Don grub rgyal), two of the foremost innovators of modern Tibetan literature, who attempted to adapt the traditional bound forms and verse of the Indic Ramayana to the dictates of a modern poetry and subject matter. The articles on Sinophone Tibetan literature explore the invocation of Tibetan scenery and popular culture in fiction and poetry while simultaneously experimenting with such new forms of literature as magical realism.

The collection's inclusiveness is significant. Through first explicating the sources and positions of the debate over the appropriateness of including Sinophone Tibetan literature as Tibetan literature, the evolving social context behind the development of a modern Tibetan literature is better understood. This study opts to include all literature written by Tibetan authors under the term 'Tibetan literature', regardless of the language in which it was written, while avoiding treating works written by authors who are not ethnically Tibetan (although their contributions are recognized). It thus privileges literature that may be given the Chinese-language term *Zangzu wenxue* (Tibetan ethnic literature) regardless of the language of its composition, and is less concerned with *Xizang wenxue* (Literature about Tibet) which includes literature written by Han Chinese authors.

This work most directly engages Tibetologists and those engaged in the study of post-colonial literature, other literature written by China's ethnic minorities, and studies of culture in modern-day diaspora communities. It is accessible, remains well-balanced, and combines both larger scale issues with in-depth analysis by providing essential background and context.

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