Columbia University
Biography, Memory and Modern Tibet: The Reading and Writing of Life-stories

Lecturer: Robert Barnett
Course Type: Seminars, meeting once a week for two hours: Tuesdays 2.40-4pm
Course level: 4000 - open to all students; Points: 3. Number W4550

Course Rationale
This course seeks to develop a critical understanding of modern Tibet through its biographical literature. It looks at the forms that modern Tibetan biography takes in different spheres, regimes and periods, looking at those generated by religious leaders, officials, resistance leaders, aristocrats and radicals. In addition, it looks at the associated practices of autobiography, oral history, personal testimony, and state heroes, in order to arrive at a critical understanding of both Tibet and of these genres. These modern life-stories draw from the rich Tibetan traditional literature of religious biography and legend, and reflect at the same time current biographical practices among contemporary Chinese officials and writers. This course aims at developing a more nuanced and multi-dimensional view of modern Tibet and its cultural influences by examining the roles and perspectives of different Tibetans, questions of gender in this form, the interplay of tradition and reconstructed memory, and the capacity of Tibetans as agents and re/writers in their responses to state narratives. Comparisons will be made with biographies from Inner Mongolia, inland China and other countries, and theoretical issues will be raised from both the historical, human rights and anthropological discussions of the questions surrounding the recording of individual experience. The course will be of value to students in the social sciences, in history, religion, literature and regional studies, and particularly to those in Chinese and East Asian studies at undergraduate and graduate levels.

Course Description
The course starts by introducing the issues surrounding the role of biography and of recollected individual experience in the study of history. We will then consider some basic tools for studying modern Tibet. The first assignment requires students to present their own life-stories, or those of a close relative. We then look at different forms of life-story – those which are told about a nation as a single person, those which present model heroes, and accounts by or about religiously inspired women. The ambiguities of stories produced in a foreign language by exiles or by foreign long-term visitors are discussed, and accounts of loyal officials are viewed in terms of state narratives and selective memory. The complexities faced by Tibetans in the super-elite will be analysed through the texts dramatising their failures, while for radical intellectuals, death and suicide become the stories through which their projects are given symbolic standing. In the final section of the course, we consider the practical and theoretical issues involved in oral history. The course concludes with discussions about the role of tales of resistance to the state, of personal testimonies of oppression, and of the reporting of “ordinary people’s lives”.

The course consists of one seminar session a week, each with a student presentation, a discussion, and a lecture. The course will be conducted in co-operation with the Columbia University Oral History Research Office and will involve students in the preparation of a life-story by carrying out interviews with a person in the local community.

Access to the updated syllabus is through courseworks.columbia.edu (if you have a Columbia email address) or https://courseworks.columbia.edu/cms/outview/coursecenter.cfm?no=TIBTW4550_001_2006_1 (if you are not registered with Columbia).

Course Requirements
The course is open to all students. No previous knowledge of Tibetan or Chinese history is required. All texts will be available in translation in English; those which are hard to find will be included in the reading pack.

Assignment 1: Each week students will write a diary note commenting on two or more of the week’s readings and post it to the rest of the class by email by Monday 8pm. These should be at least one page in length.
Assignment 2: Each student will be asked to present an introduction to the readings and lead the class discussion for at least one class.
Assignment 3: For the second session each student will prepare a written life-story of her or his own life, from 1,000-1,500 words. Usually these should be send to the rest of the class by email by Monday 8pm.
Assignment 4: As a final paper, each student will carry out an interview or interviews with someone from Tibet, China or Mongolia in the local community and produce (a) a protocol for discussion with the instructor (b) a transcript of the interviews, (c) a life-story of at least 2,000 words, and (d) an analysis of the process and the historical issues involved in at least 3,000 words.
Required Text

Optional Recommended Text

Syllabus and Reading List

Selections from the optional readings will be presented to the class by a student.
An asterisk* indicates a text that is in the course reading pack.

**Week 1: Introduction - Biographies, Autobiographies, Memoirs:** an introduction to the questions surrounding the role of personal narratives in studying and shaping a culture. We look at the Tibetan traditions of biography such as the *rnam-thar*, and consider what relevance this might have to the study of modern Tibet. In this session some of the tools for studying modern Tibet are laid out: some contrasting schemes for periodisation, types of sources, forms of literature, terminology, geography, language and transliteration systems, and the academic issues and terms that are politically contested.

**Week 2: Our Lives and Other’s Lives: Writing a Life Story**
Students present and discuss their own life-stories and examine the issues of selection and memory involved in this process. We consider two basic models of Tibetan life-story: the classical hagiography and the modern resistance hero.

**Readings**
*Matthew Kapstein…., "The Royal Way of Supreme Compassion…..
*Tseso*, “Jigme Zangpo [sJigs Med bZang Po] of the Tanak [sTag sNag] family, age 67…” Guchusum, Dharmasala, 1994 (manuscript)
*Paul Spencer…*

**Assignment:** Each student will present their own life-story or that of a relative in 1,000 to 1,500 words

**Week 3: Classical-Modern Variations of Dynastic Heroes: Comics, Websites and Ancient Epics**
The recollection of individual cultural heroes has a role in both the formation of a collective identity and in the process by which a dynasty, a nation or a state establishes its legitimacy. We look at this process in accounts of the Buddhist *siddha* Padmasambhava and its modern electronic forms, in the Chinese Communist Party’s use in Tibetan comic books of model figures like Lei Feng, and in the role of the legendary King Gesar in post-Soviet Buryatia.

**Readings**
Optional/Class Presentation


**Week 4: Modern Spiritual Women: Dorje Phagmo, Ani Cho-la, Ani Lochen**

Can women’s biographies be regarded as more “personal” or “insightful”? Is there any gender distinction to be made in the writing of biographies or the telling of experience? We ask if the fact that women often have marginal or inferior roles in society and culture is reflected in accounts of their lives, and whether inferior voices have a different relation to “history” than those of more dominant players. We look at the life-stories of some classical, early-20th century and contemporary Tibetan women, including modern short stories about religious Tibetan women written by Tibetan women.

**Readings**

“Elder Sister” (name withheld): “I am the elder sister…” (manuscript, 1999; - handout)

“Ani X” (name withheld): “I have a heart sickness…” (manuscript, 1999; - handout)


*Yangdon,* “A God without Gender” in Herbert Batt (ed.), *Tales Of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels and Wind Horses,* Rowman and Littlefield, 2001, pp. 177-188


Optional/Class Presentation

Anon., *Ye shes mkha’ ’gro bsod nams ‘dren gyi skye gsum pa* … (“The biography of the Jetsunma Choegy Dronma”), manuscript, 15th century), in translation (manuscript, 2002 - handout)


**Week 5: Oral History: Techniques, Theories and Difficulties**

What is the balance between the spoken and the written record, between the individual experience and the synthesis account? Does the method of transmission change the nature of the product? How does one resolve issues of accuracy and subjective perspective?

**Readings**


*Luisa Passerini*, “Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism”, *History Workshop*, 1979, no. 8, pp. 84-92


**Optional/Class Presentation**


**Week 6: National History as a Personal Life-story: The Metonymic Demoness**

Can a nation have a personal biography? How different is this from a history? And why are many of these nation-identifications feminised? We look at versions of the story of Tibet as a demoness, including pictures, and the depictions in legend, opera, books and TV shows of China’s encounter with Tibet in the form of the Princess Wencheng.

**Readings**

*Per Soerensen* (ed.), *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies (Rgyal rab gsal ba’i me long)*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1994, pp. 242-80


*Tinley Chodag* (ed.), *Tibet, The Land and the People*, New World Press, Beijing, 1988, pp. 3-21, 281-283


**Week 7: Diasporic Dilemmas: the prevalence of biographies in exile literature**

For foreigners the dominant sources of knowledge about another place are those produced in English, and in the Tibetan case, these are often those produced by the exile community or communities. What are the dynamics of Tibetan exile literary production, and why are they often in the form of women’s autobiographies? What is the relationship between an exile perspective and an “inside” view?

**Readings**


*Laurie Hovell McMillin*, *English in Tibet, Tibet in English: Self-Presentation in Tibet and the Diaspora*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2001 [selected pages]


Optional/Class Presentation


**Dorje Yudon Yuthok**, *House of the Turquoise Roof*, Snow Lion, New York, 1990


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**Week 8: Resistance**

Resistance to the state or to oppression has an important place in foreign perceptions of history, and is closely related to accounts of individual experience. We look at resistance literature and at critics who argue that it is part of outsiders’ simplification, or of elite attempts to commandeering discourse.

Readings


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Optional/Class Presentation


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**Week 9: Foreign Visitors: Kimura, Harrer, Ford and others**

Among the genre of travel writing is a specialist group of long-term visitors, those who have learnt the host language; often they have worked for the local administration, or as spies. Are foreign writers such as these only able to write within the confines of their colonial, militarist or exoticising traditions? What differences come from knowledge of a language or involvement in the administration? We consider life-stories of British, Chinese and Japanese long-term visitors and agents working in Tibet

Readings


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Optional/Class Presentation

**Heinrich Harrer**, *Seven Years in Tibet*; Bantam Doubleday Dell Audio, 1997 (first published in English by Hart-Davies, London, 1953)


*Eric Teichman, *Travels of a Consular Officer in Eastern Tibet*, Cambridge, 1922, PP. 101-123

**Week 10: Intelligentsia Claims, Death and Suicide: Gendun Choephel, Sherab Gyatso and Dondrup Gyal**

Intelligentsia generally operate through the spoken and written word, and may be involved in projects to transform their societies. Their biographies are complicated and politicized texts, and their lives and deaths can become part of major social movements and concerns. But is this a factor of a manipulative ability to bequeath texts and to create symbolic meaning out of the lives in ways that affects successor-intelligentsia rather than society? We look at leading renaissance figures in 1940s Tibet and Mongolia, and in early 1980s Amdo.

**Readings**

*Gray Tuttle, *Chinese Support for Modern Monastic Education in the Borderlands of Tibet: Shes rab rgya mtsho's School in Rdo sbs, Qinghai*, Harvard, 2002 (manuscript; subject to permission of the author)

**Optional/Class Presentation**


**Assignment:** Students will give an oral presentation in office hours of a 2-page proposal concerning their life-story project. This project will involve interviewing a person in the local community who is from the Chinese-Tibetan-Mongolian cultural area; this includes Xinjiang (East Turkestan) and other nationality areas. The proposal will include protocols for obtaining background readings, cultural familiarization procedures, interview techniques, confidentiality issues, and interviewee’s consent.

**Week 11: Individuals Perform the State: Officials in Chinese/Tibetan Revolutionary History**

Texts produced by officials or military officers reflect state rhetoric and its projects. We consider to what extent state discourse affects the usefulness of such texts for history, and whether there are interpretative tools for reclaiming such accounts for historical study. We compare this with the “scar literature” produced in China by people who felt that their lives had been damaged by the state’s policies during the Cultural Revolution: what role does their critical airing of those experiences have, and is it as independent of state narratives as these writers claim?

**Readings**

Robert Barnett, EALAC: Biography, Memory and Modern Tibet: The Reading and Writing of Life-stories


“Person X” (name withheld), “My Father’s Arrival in Tibet and the Fourteenth Army” (manuscript, 2001, restricted circulation)


Optional/Class Presentation


*Israel Epstein*, *Tibet Transformed*, New World Press, Beijing, pp 153-179, 258-64

**Week 12: The Symbolic Failed Leader - Disputed Heroes of the Revolution And/Or the Nation: Phuntsog Wangyal, Ulanfu and the Panchen Lama**

We look in detail at two figures who were members of the state apparatus but occupied unique symbolic or leading positions. Can their texts be seen as transcending the limitations of official discourse? Is this an option only available to people with access to symbolic power? How do we know if these claims are manipulative or purely aspirational? Do these texts undermine or support the regime claims that these writers have served?

Readings


Optional/Class Presentation


*Melvyn Goldstein, Dawei Sherab, and William Siebenschu*, *A Tibetan Revolutionary: the Political Life and Times of Baba Phuentso Wangye*

**Week 13: Testimony: Life Stories as Human Rights Strategies**

In the early Cold War era, and again in the 1980s, human rights issues became a dominant mode for the discussion of Tibet and other conflict areas. These discussions came to be dominated by the testimony, the victim’s statement. We look at the role of such statements and at the debate over their significance, and over the question of veracity, in the cases of Tibet and Guatemala. What is the effect of the western production market, and of the translator-writer-editor-publisher-publicist process on these works, and does it make a difference if a bilingual native speaker controls the writing process?

Readings


Optional/Class Presentation


Week 14: The Demotic Dream: Ordinary Lives and the Fabulisation of Routine.
In literary terms, attempts at demotic transcription, at seeking to reproduce accounts of non-heroic life-stories, are among the most refreshing areas of this genre. Why? And what do these accounts tell us? Are we entranced by the writer’s description of the dispossessed as an exercise in self-definition, or do ordinary people’s lives reveal important ways of writing and understanding a society and its history?

Readings


Liu Qizhong and Chen Gengtao (eds.), *Profiles of 50 Tibetans*, Xinhua, Beijing, 1991, pp. 1-33

Assignment: Students will present a transcript of their interviews, a life-story of at least 2,000 words, and a paper discussing the historical and analytical issues involved in the project of at least 3,000 words.