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PEMA BHUM ON TIBETAN LITERATURE  
AND THE LATSE TIBETAN LIBRARY

AN INTERVIEW BY GRAY TUTTLE (COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY)

Writer and critic Pema Bhum is the the Director of the Latse Contemporary Tibetan Cultural Library in New York City. For further information, consult the library's Web site at <http://www.latse.org>. Pema Bhum was interviewed at Latse Library on September 7, 2003.

## I. LATSE CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN CULTURAL LIBRARY

Gray Tuttle: What is the mission of the library?

Pema Bhum: Tibetan culture has a past, present and future. We thought that many institutions and libraries focused on the past of Tibetan culture. But the present Tibetan culture is changing. It is different from the old culture in which religion, Tibetan Buddhism, was very important. The present culture is mixed up with Chinese and Western cultures. The whole world is changing; communication is much more frequent. So, we wanted to face the challenges that some part of Tibetan culture is reforming. This present part—as far as we know—is not the focus of any other library or institution. Now many people are interested in Tibetan Buddhism. In many decades, people will look back and see a gap in research on the modern Tibetan situation, and we will fill this gap when people look back. That is why we are interested in contemporary Tibet.

GT: Do you only think about looking back from twenty years in the future?

PB: Good point. These days there is a great deal of publishing activity and many writers in Tibet, but recent publications are not accessible outside of Tibet. We want people to have access to many media. We are thinking that this institute can be a bridge between Tibetans and Tibetologists in Western countries and Tibet. Each side has its own strengths. If the two strengths melt together this will move forward, improve Tibetan studies. Like this year, from November 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup>, we will host a workshop on Gedun Choephel (1903–1951). Tibet's first

critical thinker about Tibetan religion and literature, the first Tibetan to ask "Is this right or not?" and go to India to check, and the first person to encounter Western knowledge and introduce it into Tibet. We have invited six people from inside Tibet—such as Gedun Choephel's widow, daughter, and cousin—and ten from outside Tibet. We are trying to gather his materials to create an archive to make available to research scholars and everyone who wants to know about Tibetan cultures. We also plan to invite not just scholars, but also performers and artists to lecture, to exchange knowledge and thoughts. We have a biweekly movie series. Last week (July 5, 2003) we showed films on Muslims in Tibet and a documentary of Alexandra David-Neel's journey to Tibet.

GT: What are some of the other activities the library holds?

PB: We try to break the conception that a library is just books and reading materials. Tibetan culture is something we can hear and see from tapes, CDs, and real people, while paying attention to the different customs of specific areas. We hope to invite experts to demonstrate calligraphy, how we make pens, ink, and how to hold the paper. Also, we have, I think, the biggest collection of videotapes and VCDs, with over a thousand items. So we focus not just on reading but also hearing and seeing.

GT: Why is the library here in New York?

PB: The main reason is that New York is a world cultural city, a good place to share different nations' cultures. Also, I don't know if it is true, but we say that there are 5,000 Tibetans (from both China and India) in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Boston. Taken together, maybe it is true.

GT: If things changed, would you like to see the library move to Tibet?

PB: This is beyond my position to answer, as Trace has built this library. But I am sure that Trace wants to build more libraries and to support the cultural tradition in Tibet. They are aware of the lack of public libraries there.

GT: What are some of the unique holdings of the library?

PB: This library is unique for three reasons. First, most contemporary Tibetan writers' works are here, with hardly a single book missing. As far as we know, no other library has gathered as much in contemporary writers' work. Secondly, we also collect all related Chinese materials; government publications, as well as works by individual writers

and scholars. To research the contemporary population, economy or education, you won't find many materials in English. The sources are mostly in Chinese. Nowadays Chinese writers' interest in Tibet has really increased, and there is more objective and personal interest, not simply the government's views. Now individual intellectuals and writers look at the Tibetan people and environment really objectively. In the history of China, we are seeing the greatest number of objective writers now. We, of course, collect all English materials, but this is not as unique. Thirdly, we collect Tibet-related audio-visual material from all over the world. It's not just about reading books, but a form of cultural exchange or enjoyment.

## II. TIBETAN LITERATURE

GT: Could you talk about your own development and experiences as a writer?

PB: Some westerners and Tibetans have called me a scholar or writer, but in my heart I still have not accepted this. When I was a child a 'scholar' or 'writer' was considered to be an extraordinary person, something that could not be reached by normal people like me. Though I am older now, this thought still sticks in my brain, and that is why I couldn't accept it. As for being a scholar, when I think about what I know, it seems to me not much; but in terms of experience, I did grow up in Tibet, in the Tibetan culture. Nor do I consider myself a "writer" for I do not have many [finished] works. But, Tibetans like my writing style—clear, not fancy, but easier to understand. I do have a strong Tibetan language foundation. I am working on the biography of my teacher, Rdo rje tshe ring, during the Cultural Revolution, and my knowledge of Tibetan is dependent on him—I did not stop studying during the Cultural Revolution. He struggled with school authorities and to avoid criticism even used Mao Zedong's quotations to teach Tibetan grammar and spelling. He died in 1985. He was a really big influence, why I can write in Tibetan. In Rebgong, some from my generation can also do this, because he stood up first, saying sincerely that the students needed to understand Mao in Tibetan. In other Tibetan areas people from the same generation do not tend to know Tibetan as well. After 1970, Tibetan grammar was totally different. The punctuation follows Chinese; the verb terms have been simplified, just using

helping verbs; some letter combinations have been thrown out. Rdo rje the ring stood up. He was the only one. He taught traditional grammar. He tried to argue against language reforms.

I also worked for seven years in Malho Sokbo (Mongol) County. There, during the Cultural Revolution, many people lost their chance for an education. My knowledge was so poor, with only a middle-school education, but after a few months I became famous as a “scholar” there, because I could write Tibetan and Chinese. Chinese documents were broadcast at dictation speed (He mimics the slow sounding out of a Chinese sentence), and I had to translate these into Tibetan. Officials, even Tibetans, preferred to give speeches in Chinese; I translated these too. The middle school math text was in Chinese, but the nomads did not understand Chinese. So I translated it. So, even during the Cultural Revolution, when there was no normal way to learn Tibetan, my Tibetan really improved through all of this translation work. But I got tired of nomad life—rain, snow, horseback. I felt that what I knew was too limited. I took the entrance exam to the Northwestern Minority Nationality Institute in 1979. There were thirty-seven students in the Tibetan Language and Literature major, but thirty-two knew no Tibetan—not even the alphabet. Some also did not speak Tibetan. Of those five who knew Tibetan, four were from Rebgong, one from Chabcha.

GT: What is your connection to the Tibetan literature being written these days?

PB: I did not write so many Tibetan literary works while in Tibet; just two articles. In 1981, I wrote something I had no intention to write. But I read an article in Chinese about where the Tibetan national essence originated. In response to this Chinese article, I compared Tibetan historical literature, archaeological discoveries and the Chinese classical history books. This article was published in *Mtsho sngon slob gso* (Qinghai Education). Later, someone named Shes rab translated this into Chinese and published it in *Xizang yanjiu* (Tibet Studies). In 1983, I wrote my undergraduate senior thesis on songs from Dunhuang manuscripts, and this was published by the Northwestern Minority Nationality Institute. Later I wrote my master’s thesis on Tibetan literature, but it was not published for political reasons after I escaped to India.

In 1980, the literary journals “Light Rain” (*Sbrang char*) and “Tibetan Literature and Arts” (*Bod kyi rtsom rig rgyu rtsal*) started.

Before that, newspapers had published literary works. In the mid-1970s, an underground movement was organised to print classical Tibetan books and circulate them within certain circles. We would make some fifty copies of works like Gedun Choephel’s *White Annals* [of the Tibetan imperial period] and the fifth Dalai Lama’s commentary on the *Snyan ngag me long* [an Indian treatise on poetics]. In the early 1980s, I studied ‘*snyan ngag*’ [poetics] with Alak Tsetan Shabdrung. He required students to write poetry for class. I only wrote poetry for that reason...as homework. But I did not publish because I was tired of praise verse. The editors and writers were still too far to the left. Only poetry about national holidays, the anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Liberation Army, and the motherland, only work that was too political was published. Don grub rgyal was exceptional in writing in other genres, but he also praised the party, the motherland. That literature had to take social responsibility, to try to lead people’s actions, point out the dark side, the backward side. Tibetan literature is still under this influence. In poetry, essays, comedies, Tibetans criticise how Tibetans fight over the grasslands, also arranged marriage, religion—thinking, ‘stupid Tibetans’. Writers are taking responsibility for something they cannot take responsibility for. They just give free advice. But I felt, this is not my job. I cannot solve that. People just sit in the classroom and say, “That’s stupid, stupid”. I stayed many years in the grassland and know in detail the relationship between the nomads life and the grasslands. It’s not so simple as reading a few books and calling their fighting ‘stupid’.

GT: What other weaknesses do you see in modern Tibetan literature?

PB: The literary theoretical terms that Tibetans think in are too old. Most Tibetans, especially those my age, if they are good writers, they have a lot to write about because we went through so much. In 1958 the Chinese killed so many Tibetans, in the 1960s there was so much starvation, stealing food—I still have that memory—the Cultural Revolution in their own lives, their own villages. But people put aside the experiences of their own generation and instead write about things they don’t know well, trying to advise people. They don’t trust their own eye. A lot of Tibetans use other eyes, other theories, to look for something to write about. The younger generation has another weakness. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, Tibetans think the Chinese are so backwards, and the west is so great. Tibetans try to write poems that are hard to understand, introduce new terms such as ‘stream of con-

sciousness'. They are still following Chinese developments. If a poem is really good and makes sense, then they think it's backwards. But western poems do not circulate among the whole population, they have a certain readership. In "Light rain", from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the poems are hard to understand, because they are too experimental. This is fine, but it is wrong to say that the future of Tibetan poetry must follow this direction, with the assumption that experimental poetry is more advanced. Readers and editors spoiled the writers. Readers are afraid to say, "I don't understand", so the writing got worse and worse.

GT: What are the strengths of modern Tibetan literature?

PB: There are great things. And I appreciate and want to thank Tibetan writers. Because Tibetan writing cannot be used in administration and business, but writers have so much enthusiasm for literature, the biggest outpouring in our history, writing poems and short stories in the Tibetan language. They make it alive. Seventy to eighty percent of them learn traditional writing in class. Some learn it really well, and though some might not agree, I think that some even learn it better than classical scholars. Some mix the Chinese and Western eye and try their best to describe social problems and their solutions and take responsibility. It is the only forum to discuss social problems; a limited forum, but the only one available in the Tibetan language. So it is used to reform and change Tibetan society. I felt this outside the exiled community. But the Tibetan exiled government does not acknowledge this role, although the Dalai Lama once said that Tibetan writers and scholars did a good job, showing his appreciation.

GT: What about Tibetan writing in other languages (Jamyang Norbu in English, Dawa Norbu in Chinese), is it Tibetan literature?

PB: There are two points of view on this question. One group says that anything written by a Tibetan is Tibetan literature. Another group says that it must be in Tibetan. From this library's perspective, we collect everything—even English and Chinese, as long as it is related to Tibet.

GT: Are the Tibetans thinking about taking part in world literature?

PB: These days some Tibetan writers do talk about the concept of 'world literature'. Generally speaking, the number of young Tibetan intellectuals reading foreign literature through Chinese has been increasing ever since the late 1970s. By the mid-1980s, if an undergraduate student couldn't chat about foreign literature, it was as if he could-

n't join in with the intellectuals. Meanwhile, Tibetan writers were imitating Chinese literature, and Chinese writers were imitating foreign literature. In this way, Tibetan writers developed a closer relationship with world literature. Moreover, these days a group of westerners have begun researching Tibetan contemporary literature and translating works into English, thereby introducing Tibetan writers to foreign readers. Through our Latse newsletter we are trying to promote such exchange. For example, in our recent issue, we introduced a writer (*Gangs zhun*) and translated one of his poems. We also translated into Tibetan an article entitled "What is world literature?" by Professor David Damrosch. In future issues, we plan to introduce famous western writers and their works to Tibetan readers in translation.

GT: The Amnye Machen Institute where you worked in exile in Dharamsala, India translated some works from western languages into Tibetan. Why?

PB: One reason was that so many works have been translated from Tibetan into English. We strongly felt that we needed to do the reverse. Second, Tibetans in Tibet have been translating (and imitating) western works, but always through Chinese. We wanted to translate directly into Tibetan. Third, the works translated from Chinese are really old, like Shakespeare and Goethe, so there is no contemporary material to work with, like *Animal Farm*. We thought it was necessary for the Tibetan people to know about these contemporary works.

GT: What have been the effects of politics on Tibetan literature?

PB: During the Cultural Revolution, political activities had a big influence especially on young students. There is a saying, *Yi ku, si tian* (Remember suffering, think of happiness). This means that the old society before Communist control was bad, and after Communist control, so happy. Meetings would ask the old people to remember their stories of suffering, and then describe how they were happy, now they can read books, go to the hospital. The influence of this was so strong, even after the Cultural Revolution. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese writers were tired of criticising the Old Society. They instead began to write about suffering experienced during the Cultural Revolution. Tibetan writers, however, only then began to write about suffering in the 'pre-liberation' or old society. It wasn't due to a lack of freedom. Poems by Chinese writers at that time criticised the new polices and the Gang of Four, while at the same time mourning the loss of Zhou Enlai. Instead, Tibetan writers were still under the influ-

ence of the Cultural Revolution.

GT: What do you think about exiled Tibetan literature?

PB: Among the older scholars in exile, many write literature in the broad sense, not just fiction. From their writings, people outside Tibet have come to know about Tibetan culture and the Tibetan situation. Among the middle-aged generation, Tibetans now in their 40s or 50s, several have excellent Tibetan and there are even a few excellent scholars, but not many write literature. Pema Tsewang Shastri is probably the only person of this generation to have written a novel in Tibetan. I have heard that copies of his two novels have reached Tibet, and readers there enjoyed them as a way of learning about the life and struggles of a person growing up in exile.

Only a few Tibetans writing in English—such as Jamyang Norbu and Dhompa Tsering Wangmo—have gained notoriety among Western readers. If we could translate their works, I think Tibetans in Tibet would appreciate this.

Finally, several people who recently left Tibet have been starting magazines and newspapers in exile, where they publish poetry and short stories in Tibet. They are the most active in terms of any Tibetan literary movement outside of Tibet.

GT: Is ethnic literature taught in China (to Chinese)?

PB: I don't think so. It is only for Tibetans. The Chinese don't want to learn. They still look down on minority cultures. At least it used to be that way.

GT: When and why did modern Tibetan literature start?

PB: Tibetan literature started in 1980 with the founding of *Tibetan Literature and Arts*, there were only a few scattered examples before that. There are two reasons for the late start. Tibetan culture and people never had as much contact with other people as they did in the Cultural Revolution. Before, the contact with Indians, a long time ago, was only through a few scholars and for the purpose of translation. After the Chinese Communist take over, the whole nation was merged into another nation and culture. Chinese bureaucracy, language and culture became the big fashion, especially after the 1980s, for my generation. This was the first time to get a chance to go to a standard university; the first time to comprehensively get world literature and Chinese literature. We did not have novels, as descriptive stories of people's lives. This was a big influence. Secondly, some Tibetans only knew Chinese and not Tibetan, and they criticised the Tibetan language, saying it was

only for Buddhism and was incapable of being used for writing novels and short stories and new literature. When Don grub rgyal started writing short stories, this settled any doubt about the capacity of the Tibetan language for writing modern literature. Reading his stories and poems, young Tibetans were encouraged to write themselves and the number of Tibetan writers increased.

GT: Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

PB: These days, if one can find the money, then there is more chance to publish his or her work. But along with the chance to publish more good books, there is also the chance to publish poor-quality books. In any case, publishing has increased a lot in recent years. Some people consider Ljang bu, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, Byams pa dge legs, Skabs chen bde grol to be good new writers. 'Ju skal bzang wrote nice poetry, merging traditional and modern free verse, but it seems he has not been publishing new works recently. For short story writers, there are Tshe ring don grub, Stag 'bum rgyal, and Bkra shis dpal ldan (whose two novels I really enjoyed). The problem with some writings is that after a few pages you can see who the author is imitating. Some lines are written very well and I can feel the author's personality. But then he cannot sustain it. Suddenly he tries to be like classical *Inji* (English) writers or like Lu Xun and that's when the work loses quality. It's really bumpy.

GT: What are your current writing projects?

PB: My current project is also a project from a long time ago. I have started writing the biography of my teacher during the Cultural Revolution. These days my life depends on my Tibetan language. I have, I think, at least lots of Tibetan people feel, that my Tibetan language is a little stronger, and I feel the same way. As I mentioned earlier, this foundation is thanks to him. I drafted this work two or three years ago; it actually became my memoir of the Cultural Revolution. But before I got to mention the teacher, I mentioned Mao's *Red Book*. Starting off with Mao's *Red Book*, I tracked off onto the Cultural Revolution. I put the teacher's biography aside and followed my memory. Recently, I restarted the biography and finished a draft in seven days. These days I am editing, adding some more memories. I think I can finish this month. Last month, I worked together with my colleagues, Kristina Dy-Liacco, the news editor, Sonam Dhargay, who did layout and design, and my wife Luran Hartley as the literary editor, on the first issue of Latse Library Newsletter. I think we did a great job. I

translated from English two poems written by a Tibetan woman, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, who now lives in California.

GT: Her poems were written in English?

PB: Yes, originally published in English. Also, I translated one article, "What is World Literature?" into Tibetan. Last year, I wrote a short story about Tibetan life in New York based on two couples' lives in New York. I have finished an article on *sgrung glu*, a kind of drinking song, in which you ask a question and give the answer, for example, about how the world was formed, or the question: "How did the beak of this bird become red?" The answer: "A cow was killed and the bird stole his blood. If you don't believe me, look at his beak". There are hundreds of these. One well-known Chinese scholar who in the 1970s wrote about Tibetan literary history was the first to mention this genre, saying that this was primitive (*yuanshi*) Tibetan literature, this shows the Tibetan mind is not mature, a kid's mind, seeing the world so simply. And Tibetans accept this view. But how can we judge how old this literature is? With stone artifacts, if you have some skill maybe you can date their age. But still, if I send this article or other works to Dharamsala, the audience is so limited. Even if you print 500 copies, nobody buys them. Still, I feel someday we will publish them.

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LARA MACONI is an assistant research-teacher in Tibetan Studies at INALCO in Paris. Graduated in Chinese Studies from Ca' Foscari University in Venice, her personal research deals with contemporary Tibetan literature in general, with a particular focus on contemporary Tibetan literature written in Chinese, and questions of identity and diglossy. She collaborates with the literary magazine *Neige d'Aout, Lyrisme et Extrême-Orient*.