

# Conference Notes on the Tibetan Women Writing Symposium: A Celebration of Tibetan Women's Literature

གངས་ཅན་སྐྱེས་མས་ཚུམ་རིག་གྲོང་བ། བོད་མའི་ཚུམ་རིག་མཛད་རྗེས་གཟེངས་སུ་བསྟོན་པ།

Tashi Dekyid Monet

The Tibetan Women Writing Symposium brought prominent Tibetan female authors from across Asia and North America to the University of Virginia from April 8 to 10, 2022 to celebrate and explore the renaissance of Tibetan female writers in recent years in Tibetan cultural areas, other parts of Asia, and the broader global diaspora. While women writers prior to the twentieth century were undervalued and overlooked by Tibetan Studies scholars, the last few decades have witnessed an explosion of powerful literary works across many genres by new generations of Tibetan female writers. Even so, they have received far less public and scholarly attention than their male counterparts in the West. This symposium thus intended to offer an international venue for leading women authors to come together from across the globe and dialogue with each other, as well as with prominent scholars of modern Tibetan literature. During the three days, after two opening keynote speeches by Professor Janet Gyatso (Harvard University) and Dr. Lama Jabb (Oxford University), the writers, translators, scholars, and students participated in a series of sessions to offer readings of the women's works in Tibetan and English, literary analysis and socio-culturally situated interpretation, and wide ranging discussions and reflections between the authors and their commentators. Most works were originally composed in Tibetan while a smaller number were original English and Chinese compositions. The events concluded with a fascinating roundtable discussion reflecting on the last six decades of developments in modern Tibetan literature, as well as the future prospects for women authors.

## Visiting Authors

Visiting Tibetan authors included Chimay (འཆི་མེད།) and Tsedronkyi (ཚེ་སྐྱོན་སྐྱེད།) from Tibet; Min Nangzey (སྨིན་སྣང་མངེས།) and Nyima Tso (ཉི་མ་འཚོ།) from India; and Tenzin Dickie (བསྟན་འཛིན་བདེ་སྐྱེད།), Tsering Wangmo Dhompa (ཚེ་མ་པ་ཚོ་རིང་དབང་མོ།), and Kelsang Lhamo (བསྐྱེད་ལ་བཟང་

ལྷ་མོ།) from the United States. Additionally, an essay by Baimanazhen (བཞུགས་མཚོ།), who lives in Lhasa, and video interview with the author were presented virtually.

Chimay is a poet and Tibetan language teacher from Rebgong, Amdo. She has published two books of collected poems, *The Dreams of the Moon* (ལྷ་བའི་མི་ལམ། 2012) and *The Youth of Water* (རྒྱུ་ལང་ཚོ། 2016). Her poems were awarded highest recognitions for Tibetan literature in China including the 2015 Wild Yak Prize for Literature and the 2017 Annual Award for Nationalities Literature from China Writers' Association. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Villanova University. She is the author of three collections of poetry: *My Rice Tastes Like the Lake, In the Absent Everyday*, and *Rules of the House*. Dhompa's first non-fiction book, *Coming Home to Tibet*, was published in 2016.

Tsedronkyi is a short story writer and Tibetan language teacher from Chapcha, Amdo. She has published two books of collected short stories, *A Melancholy Drama* (སྐྱོ་སྤང་གི་སྐྱོས་གར། 2005) and *Clinging* (ཞེན། 2016). Nyima Tso is a poet and short story writer from Labrang, Amdo; she now lives in Dharamshala. She has published two books of collected poems and short stories respectively: *The First Journey of This Life* (མི་ཚོ་འདིའི་འགྲུལ་བཞུད་ཐེངས་དང་པོ། 2003) and *A Fragment* (རྩུ་ཞིག་ 2007). Kelsang Lhamo is a writer and translator from Lhokha; she now lives in the US. Her publications include *Dreaming at the Sage's Abode: Biographical Sketches of Four Living Tibetan Nuns*, *Biography of Great Kalayanmitra Geshe Yeshe Topden*, *Collection of Contemporary Writings of Tibetan Women*, *A Maiden's Wandering Westward*, and *Sogyal Rinpoche's The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (Tibetan translation).

Baimanazhen has published two novels, *Tara Reincarnated* (复活的度母) and *Love in Lhasa* (拉萨红尘), along with a number of collections of essays and poetry, as well as non-fiction stories and graphic novels for children. Tenzin Dickie is a writer and a translator. She is the editor of *Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty One Short Stories from Tibet*, an anthology of short stories published in 2017. Formerly an editor at the *Treasury of Lives*, she is currently the communications officer at the Buddhist Digital Resource Center. Min Nangzey is a poet and essayist from Golok; she now lives in Dharamshala. She has published *Princess of the Snow Mountain* (གངས་ཅིའི་སྐུ་མོ། 2006), a book of collected poems, and *Songs of Emotions* (ཚོར་བའི་སྐུ་ 2015), a book of collected lyrics.

Due to it being the largest such international event to highlight Tibetan female authors from around the globe, it attracted prominent scholars from across the United States and Europe. In addition to the keynotes by Gyatso and Jabb, scholars participating in translations, presentations, and discussions included Rekjong Dhondup Tashi (རིག་འབྱུང་དོན་གྲུབ་བཟ་ཤེས། Northwestern University), Pema Bhum (པད་མ་འབྲུམ། Latse Project), Françoise Robin (Paris's National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations), Holly Gayley (University of Colorado at Boulder), Lauran Hartley (Columbia University), Annabella Pitkin (Lehigh University), Nicole Willock (Old Dominion University), Jue Liang (Denison University), Andrew Taylor (The College of St. Scho-

lastica), Tashi Dekyid Monet, Erin Burke, Charles Laughlin, Kurtis Schaeffer, and David Germano (all from the University of Virginia).

The events were co-organized by University of Virginia graduate students Tashi Dekyid Monet and Erin Burke, along with earlier help from Eben Yonetti, and former graduate students Jue Liang and Andrew Taylor, while current graduate student Heather Moody, Tibet Center Associate Director Ariana Maki, and Tibet Center staff Rongwo Lugyal offered additional assistance. Faculty advisors Janet Gyatso, Lama Jabb, Françoise Robin, David Germano, and Kurtis Schaeffer provided support throughout the lifespan of the project beginning in 2019.

## Opening Ceremony and Keynote Speeches

The symposium opened ceremonially with a reading of Chimay's poem, རྒྱུ་རིང་གི་སྐར་མ་འོད་ཆེན། "The Brilliant Star from a Distance," read by Tsedronkyi in Tibetan and David Germano, who translated it into English. It was followed by Tashi Dekyid's reading of her Tibetan translation of "My House is the Red Earth" by the Indigenous poet Joy Harjo as an extended Land Acknowledgement. Next were the keynote speeches by Janet Gyatso and Lama Jabb. Lama Jabb's keynote was entitled "Distilling Joys and Woes: An Appreciation of Contemporary Tibetan Women's Writing ( རྒྱུ་རྒྱལ་བསྐྱེད་པའི་དེང་རབས་བོད་མོའི་བརྒྱུ་རྩམས་ཚོས་ལྷོད་རྩལ།)," (published in this issue of the *Journal of Tibetan Literature*), in which he gave a brief survey of the development of women writers in Tibet. Though he recognized the continuities between contemporary writing and many aspects of classical Tibetan literature, he noted that women writers are providing new perspectives and experiences to the reading public. Chief among these were subjective female perspectives and rich depictions of issues affecting women, such as motherhood, domestic violence, and access to education.

Janet Gyatso followed him with her remarks, "What – and How – Do We Learn from Tibetan Women's Writing? Questions for the Symposium." These questions highlighted the emerging status of Tibetan women's writing, with its readership and critical reception still under development. She covered a vast number of topics from the subject matter of women's writing to how we should understand the category of Tibetan women's writing itself, citing theorists of gender studies Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous. The audience took up many of these questions in the discussion that followed. Given the emphasis on love and motherhood in both of the keynotes, one person asked if nuns would be included in this category. Another cautioned against expecting women authors to move beyond the issues of gendered experience when women writers were only just beginning to depict their own experiences. Both speakers bolstered the feeling that the participants were taking up a critical conversation at the intersection of Tibetan, literary, and Indigenous studies that was igniting around the globe among artists, readers, and scholars.

## Reading and Discussion Sessions

The main part of the Symposium then consisted of four reading and discussion sessions. Each session presented the work of two writers, which included 20 minutes of reading in both original and translated languages per writer, followed by 40 minutes for a joint discussion with both writers.

The first reading and discussion session featured powerful readings of the poems ཇམ་ལོང་། (“The Ring”) by Chimay, originally composed in Tibetan, and “Somewhere Else” (ས་ཆ་ག་གེ་མོར།), originally in English, by Tsering Wangmo Dhompa. The translators, Lama Jabb and Dhondup T. Rekjong, read their translations in English and Tibetan, respectively. Moderated by Kurtis Schaeffer and Lama Jabb, the poets then discussed how their poetry writing has been nurtured by their life circumstances and traditions of storytelling such as the Gesar epic (in Chimay’s case), the intricacies of narrating or writing one’s belonging to and longing for the distant homeland (in Dhompa’s case), and the importance of a Tibetan voice, particularly the voice of Tibetan women, in literary discourses and telling the stories of Tibet.

The second reading and discussion session presented readings of Tsedronkyi’s short story ལྷ་སེམ་པའི་ས་སྤོང། (“The Silent Dusk”), with a collaborative translation in English by Erin Burke and Eben Yonnetti, and Nyima Tso’s essay ཇའི་ཇམ་པ་དང་ཇམ་པའི་ལག་ཤེས། (“My Father’s Dexterity”) in Tibetan, with Nicole Willock’s English translation. Moderated by Holly Gayley, the authors discussed the role of place and nature in their works. The rich, shifting scenes of dusk in Tsedronkyi’s short story reveals emotions and desires of the character, while the settings in Nyima Tso’s essay are primarily inside her home and in her childhood memory. Both authors, as writers of short stories, also commented on the possibilities that the form of short story offers them. For example, for Tsedronkyi as a full time teacher and a single mother, she often writes at night and finishes one story in a single sitting.

The third reading and discussion session presented readings of three excerpts of poems from ཇའི་སྤོང་བསྟོན་གནས་ཀྱི་ཆེ་ལམ་ཡུན་ཅིག། (*Dreaming at the Sage’s Abode*) by Kelsang Lhamo and 出家的德吉, (“Dekyi, Who Left Home”) by Baimanazhen. Dhondup T. Rekjong presented his Tibetan translations of the poem excerpts, and Jue Liang and Andrew S. Taylor read their English translation of the essay. Moderated by Lama Jabb, Kelsang Lhamo commented on her experiences of writing romantic literature while she was still ordained as a nun. Baimanazhen’s pre-recorded interview included responses to questions on the meaning of *chujia* (出家), “left home,” an explanation of how the character of Dekyi the nun reacted to her writing when the essay was shared with her in spoken Ütsang Tibetan, and an outline of plans for future writing projects.

The fourth reading and discussion session featured the reading of the essays “The Lottery” (རྒྱན་ཤོག་དེ།) by Tenzin Dickie and ཇམ་པའི་ལག་རྩམ་དྲན་པ། (“Remembering My Mother’s Handmade Tsampa”) by Min-Nangzey, together with their Tibetan and English translations by Dhondup T. Rekjong and Annabella Pitkin, respectively. Moderated by Françoise Robin, the authors commented on using ordinary objects in everyday life such as a *tsampa* box as a lens or frame to tell

stories of longing, struggles, and aspirations of Tibetan diaspora communities. Participants in the audience such as Janet Gyatso and Pema Bum also commented on the particularity of writing ordinary objects in great detail and discussed whether that skill was specific to women authors.

## Concluding Roundtable Discussion

The symposium concluded with a long and fascinating roundtable discussion with all authors and translators serving as discussants. Moderators Janet Gyatso, Tenzin Dickie, Françoise Robin, and Charles Laughlin each shared a brief comment before the floor was turned over to the discussants. The writers commented on the importance of role models and support from fellow women authors for emerging women writers. Palmo (པལ་ལོ་མོ།), a poet and professor from Northwest University for Nationalities, and Tsering Wangmo Dhompa were celebrated as such examples in Tibet and the US respectively.

Chimay shared a detailed account of how her first poem was published through encouragement from a female author whose work was the first publication of modern literature by women that Chimay had read. Chimay's account of how she promoted her own very first publication of a poem (in the newspaper *Khrims lungs tshang par*) raised a lot of laughter in the audience—she would approach each new person and show them the newspaper, which she folded into the size of a matchbox and carried in her chuba pocket. Chimay also commented that, originally, dedicated spaces for women writers were very important at a time when women authors were few in number. However, now that the quantity of Tibetan women writers is no longer an issue, it is important to focus on the quality of their writing and to hold it to the same criteria of excellence applied to writing by male authors. All participants offered their appreciation for the symposium and acknowledged the importance of continued opportunities for reading, discussions, and gathering for and with Tibetan women writers.

## Post-symposium Tours and Publication Plans

Finally, due to the deep interest in the symposium, Harvard University, Columbia University, and University of Colorado at Boulder arranged follow-up talks and convenings for a subset of the authors from Asia at their own campuses over the following weeks after the UVA events. A volume is currently being prepared as an outcome of the symposium that offers a bilingual collection of contemporary Tibetan women's writings, which will be the first of its kind. Plans for other forms of publication such as an English-language collection of writings by Tibetan women writers that could reach wider audiences are also being discussed.

