

# Letter from the Editors

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On the question of defining literature, Laurent Dubreuil begins his 2007 essay “What is Literature’s Now” with the suggestion, “Of course it is impossible. To define literature—if by this we mean finding a sense that is fixed or given once and for all—nobody’ll do it. ‘Literature is—’ has nothing of an easy beginning.” With this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Tibetan Literature*, we present a space for considering the contours of literature and the literary across the landscape of Tibetan expression, and we aspire for an easy beginning even as we resolutely refrain from definitions that are either fixed or given once and for all.

The *Journal of Tibetan Literature* (JTL) is an open-access, peer-reviewed publication dedicated to research, translation, and appreciative criticism of Tibetan literature. The journal approaches the subject of Tibetan literature in a capacious way. In the broadest sense, we use the phrase “Tibetan literature” to refer to any Tibet-language text, oral or written, from the beginnings of Tibetan composition to the present day, as well as literary works by Tibetan authors in other languages. More narrowly, the journal’s name is meant to direct attention to the literary qualities of Tibetan texts—that is, to places where a self-awareness of forms, structures, and styles seems to break through the page, and in which those attributes become central to the creation of meaning and its impact on readers. This rather open-ended definition is also meant to expand the genre-bound taxonomies that often replicate static categories of literary types (poetry, fiction, drama, philosophy) or maintain predetermined notions of *belles lettres*, or “fine writing.” The foundational work of José Cabezón and Roger Jackson in the introduction to their book, *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (1995), provides firm footing for exploring strategies for working with “genre” in Tibetan contexts. They suggest that, even as Tibetan composition lacks a precise equivalent to Western notions of genre, Tibetan writers seem to have implicitly accepted the concept of genre, one based largely on subject matter and less so on qualities of form or function (*Tibetan Literature*, 20–26). It is upon Cabezón and Jackson’s work that we have based our efforts to focus more intently upon issues of literary composition and style.

The expansiveness of our operational definition of literature—perhaps stated briefly as “texts in which form and content both matter”—has the obvious advantage of inclusivity, even as it creates a challenge for making choices about what to include and what to leave out. In response to this challenge, we might consider how Tibetan writers have exploited the intricacies and richness

of language to evoke a vivid and diverse range of human experiences. We might further scrutinize how to read such works so as to attend to ways in which they might “convey feelings and experiences and kinds of knowledge beyond the purely documentary, or descriptive,” as Janet Gyatso suggests in her essay in this issue. These considerations remain ongoing tasks, to be sure, in both Tibetological scholarship and in the publication of a new journal. But we hope the challenge will prove generative in the pages and issues that follow.

With the launch of JTL we aspire to develop a distinctive arena for considering a wide range of Tibetan writing as literature. Our interest in curating this space in the form of a peer-reviewed academic journal has developed over an almost two-decade period (as we describe below) and, more recently, in the context of the growth of publications dedicated to Tibetan literature, arts, and culture, including blogs and journals such as *High Peaks Pure Earth*, *TibShelf*, *Waxing Moon*, and *Yeshe*. Of course, the field of Tibetan studies, both inside and outside of Tibet, has been intensely concerned with texts since its earliest days. Much of this work—especially on materials created prior to the twentieth-century—has been rooted in text-critical methodologies, and has therefore paid less attention to questions arising from the perspective of literary criticism. Where literary criticism has so far figured into the study of Tibetan literature, it has often focused on late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century texts, to the exclusion of earlier writing. Indigenous forms of literary critical writing have much to offer in our understanding of Tibetan forms of expression. Numerous recent multi-volume Tibetan-language publications on the topics of literature (*rtsom rig*) and classical poetics (*snyan ngag*) will help contemporary readers better understand the Tibetan notions of the literary, as will attention to the category “domains of knowledge” (*rig gnas*), understood as a broad swath of cultural production that is deeply connected to writing and reading in Tibet. Our hope is that JTL can serve as a venue where multiple types of textual study—from text criticism and philology to translation and forms of literary theory—can work synergistically in an effort to better understand and appreciate Tibetan literature.

JTL accepts and publishes contributions under three broad rubrics: research, translation, and criticism. Scholarly research on all aspects of Tibetan literature constitutes a key component of JTL’s offerings. The journal offers a peer-reviewed academic venue exclusively dedicated to the study of Tibetan writing, Tibetan authors, and Tibetan literary activities. While the practice of translation has long been central to the study of Tibetan literature, it has frequently been undervalued or overlooked in the academy as a productive form of scholarship. Accordingly, there have been few venues for peer-reviewed publication of translations. JTL seeks to highlight not only the final products of academic translation but asks translators to reflect on their approaches, contexts, problems, and practices in their work. Finally, under the rubric of criticism, the journal invites both critical and appreciative perspectives on issues of relevance to the reading and research of Tibetan literature. These include opinion pieces, explorations of recent scholarship in multiple

languages, or constructive essays that offer productive viewpoints on contemporary engagement with Tibetan literature.

The *Journal of Tibetan Literature* builds on the work done by a network of scholars extending back to the mid-2000s, beginning with a series of conference panels on biography and autobiography at conferences of the American Academy of Religion, the Association for Asian Studies, and the International Association of Buddhist Studies, as well as a pair of workshops organized at Columbia and Princeton Universities by Sarah Jacoby and Andrew Quintman. These activities eventually led us to propose a 5-year seminar at the AAR (2010–2014) titled “Religion and the Literary in Tibet.” This gathering included a group of some twenty participants, and the meetings were productive enough that we held an additional series of five meetings at the University of Virginia, University of Toronto, Harvard University, University of California, Berkeley, and Latse Library. Participants in these early discussions of Tibetan literature included: Benjamin Bogin, Lara Braitstein, Pema Bhum, José Cabezón, Bryan Cuevas, Jacob Dalton, Brandon Dotson, Holly Gayley, Frances Garrett, David Germano, Jonathan Gold, Janet Gyatso, Luran Hartley, Roger Jackson, Sarah Jacoby, Nancy Lin, Gedun Rabsal, Jann Ronis, E. Gene Smith, Antonio Terrone, Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp, Nicole Willock, and Carl Yamamoto. We would like to offer our profound gratitude to each of our colleagues who took part in these workshops and seminars. Their contributions were instrumental to the development of this journal, and the first few issues will profile work done during those seminars.

At the 2019 International Association of Tibetan Studies Seminar convened in Paris, then-president Tsering Shakya called on participants to center the voices of native Tibetan researchers and to bridge the frequently segregated worlds of Tibetan and non-Tibetan scholarship. Recognizing that the journal’s origins lie largely in the work of American and European scholars, we hope that this new venue can play a role in enacting the work that Tsering Shakya provokes by bringing Tibetan academics, scholars, and writers into conversation with scholars around the globe. In its early issues, JTL will publish in English with abstracts translated into Tibetan. It will also profile contemporary Tibetan scholars and writers through interviews and commissioned essays. We hope that at some point JTL will be able to simultaneously publish English and Tibetan versions of every article, though this remains beyond the journal’s present means. The cover of each issue will incorporate original artwork commissioned from Tibetan artists, together with an artist statement. The inaugural issue’s cover features art by Tenzing Rigdol. The cover also features the journal’s Tibetan title, བོད་ཀྱི་རྩོམ་རིག་དུས་དེབ། (*Bod kyi rtsom rig dus deb*), in Tibetan calligraphy penned by Pema Bhum.

In this inaugural issue we are pleased to present a wide spectrum of work under the three rubrics of research, translation, and criticism. In Research, Gedun Rabsal and Nicole Willock’s article “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers: A Discussion on Decolonization and Anti-Colonial Translation Practices for Tibetan Poetry” chronicles Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s use of poetry in rees-



JTL's managing editor Tenzin Dickie, who is an accomplished author and translator in her own right. She has been involved in every phase of the journal's development and without her input this issue would not have made it into print.

We hope you will find the pages that follow engaging. And we warmly encourage scholars and translators of Tibetan literature to submit work for possible publication in future issues of the journal.

Andy & Kurtis