

“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers:” A Discussion on Decolonization and Anti-Colonial Translation Practices for Tibetan Poetry¹

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Abstract Our translation and analysis of sections of the epic poem, “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” showcases Tibetan-language poetics or “nyen-ngak” (snyan ngag). In this case, this mode of fine writing serves to reestablish the authority of Tibetan lamas as integral to the revival of Tibetan Buddhist culture in the aftermath of decades of state-sanctioned violence against Tibetans in the People’s Republic of China. Within the context of the early 1980s in China, the use of Tibetan *belles-lettres* flouts the nation-state’s purported civilizing mission which legitimizes its rule by disparaging Tibetan culture as inferior or backward. Evading this denigrating discourse, the poem’s author, the Buddhist monastic scholar, Alak Tséten Zhabdrung, creates a literary mandala radiating from his birthplace that centers on the subject of the poem, the Géluk Buddhist hierarch, the Tenth Panchen Lama, who was also born in Xunhua County, and was a key figure in the survival and continuance of Tibetan culture in the early Deng Xiaoping era. We translate sections of the twenty-page epic poem and discuss our translation choices as an ethical imperative to bring attention to the particularities of Tibetan poetics in terms of style and subject matter. We view this as part of a larger discourse on decolonization and anti-colonial translation practices because this foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies of literary aesthetics. In order to make these heuristic moves, we are indebted to insights from *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and from a claim in the philosophy of aesthetics that decouples objective values from aesthetic principles, which help us open up discursive space for Tibetan Indigenous aesthetic and epistemic values in English translation. After establishing our theoretical basis, we analyze the intertextual literary figures in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” by drawing upon Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s *General Commentary on Poetics* (snyan ngag spyi don) to develop an appreciation for the specifics of Tibetan poetics and enrich the English language with new types of wordplay.

1. We express our thanks to an external reviewer for their comments on a draft of this paper and Emily Yeh for insightful discussions on decolonization and anti-colonial practices.

“And I always sing the same song: Let every language in the world express its unique musicality.”²

Ngūgī wa Thiong’o

Introduction

If we literary aficionados agree with PEN Award winner Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s aspiration to “let every language in the world express its unique musicality,” then one must recognize that reading, writing, and translation practices are embedded in systems of power. This abstract notion becomes grounded in everyday life when we look at the lived experiences of Indigenous writers and scholars. Alak Tséten Zhabdrung, the author of thirteen volumes of Tibetan-language texts including the poem “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” was jailed in China from 1965 until 1976 for writing in his native Tibetan and for his subject position as a Tibetan Buddhist incarnate lama.³ In 1978 when Tséten Zhabdrung finished composing his autobiography, Ngūgī wa Thiong’o was in jail in his native Kenya for writing in his mother tongue of Gikūyū and his subject position as an author-activist. Although their perspectives, literary oeuvres, and approaches to writing are vastly different from one another, both men were imprisoned for writing in their native languages within hegemonic regimes that systematically suppressed Indigenous languages (spoken and written) and cultures. With respect for and as allies of Indigenous writers, we highlight Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s invocation to “let every language in the world express its unique musicality” to advocate for Indigenous languages and to promote world literature in translation. This article on the poem “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” (*rtogs brjod dngul gyi me tog*) in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Tibetan Literature* focuses on Tibetan poetics, i.e. *nyen-ngak* (*snyan ngag*), by taking an interdisciplinary approach that draws in part on Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind*, an argument within the philosophy of aesthetics, and aspects of Tibetan literary criticism by the poem’s author.

Whereas Ngūgī wa Thiong’o marshalled the politics of language, perhaps most formidably in his *Decolonising the Mind*, to advocate for publishing and writing in his mother tongue but eventually was forced to live in exile,⁴ Alak Tséten Zhabdrung promoted Tibetan language education and publishing within the People’s Republic of China (PRC), in particular, within its discourse on ethnic-national minorities (*minzu*), and he never went overseas.⁵ Further, Alak Tséten Zhabdrung did

2. Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s acceptance speech for the 2022 PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature. <https://brittlepaper.com/2022/03/pen-made-me-return-to-gikuyu-ngugi-wa-thiongos-acceptance-speech-at-the-pen-nabokov-award-ceremony2/> Accessed March 15, 2022.

3. Willock 2021, 44.

4. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/an-interview-with-ngugi-wa-thiongo>. Accessed March 16, 2022.

5. Willock 2021, 219–227.

not identify the PRC as a colonial regime vis-à-vis Tibet and throughout his life upheld the notion that Tibetan language and culture would be supported by the nation-state. So why place this text written by a Buddhist monk in China within the discourse on decolonization especially since we are aware of the pitfalls of using “decolonization” as a metaphor for all social justice issues?⁶ In this study of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” decolonization theory, in particular aspects of Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind*, can be useful for three reasons: 1) to establish the conditions to act as allies to those writing in Indigenous languages and to recognize the deep connections between Indigenous languages and land rights; 2) to counter the ideological tendencies of hegemonic regimes that disparage Indigenous languages and literature; and 3) to connect Tibetan writings with other Indigenous writers around the world even though the case of Tibet vis-à-vis colonization is complex.

Placing “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” within the decolonization discourse of Ngūgī wa Thiong’o also points to a way of addressing negative evaluations of Tibetan literature and poetics. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngūgī identifies the phenomena of “colonial alienation” which “starts with a deliberate dissociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and the community.”⁷ This results in part from a systematic denigration of Indigenous languages and cultures in formal education. “In schools and universities our Kenyan languages,” Ngūgī wa Thiong’o explains, “...were associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation, and punishment.”⁸ In Tibetan areas of China, the situation is very similar to that of Kenya. While Tséten Zhabdrung was in jail, education in Tibetan language was forbidden and all Tibetan literature and writings were banned as “poisonous weeds.”⁹ Even after liberalization under Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, state rhetoric denigrates Tibet as “backward” and “underdeveloped” as its civilizing mission is one of the ways it legitimizes its rule over Tibet as benefactors.¹⁰ The editors of a volume on Tibetan literature which published “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” recognize how scholars in China (presumably both Chinese and Tibetan) devalue this rich literary tradition.¹¹ When it comes to Tibetan poetics or *nyen-ngak* in particular, Western scholars also express their distaste of this style of writing¹² and rarely pay attention to the vast commentarial tradition on poetics that allows one to understand this system of lit-

6. “Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools.” Tuck and Yang 2012, 1.

7. Ngūgī wa Thiong’o 1986, 28.

8. Ngūgī wa Thiong’o 1986, 28.

9. Pema Bhum 2001.

10. On Chinese state civilizing projects vis-à-vis ethnic minorities, see Harrell 1995: 4–7; On how narratives of the benevolence of Chinese-state altruism mask asymmetrical power relations between Tibetan citizens and the state on land development projects and personhood see Yeh 2013: 264–267 and Makley 2018: 46–56.

11. Kapstein 2003, 790.

12. See also Nancy Lin, forthcoming, “What Language We Dare Learn and Speak: Decolonizing the Study of Tibetan Poetry.”

erary aesthetics on its own terms. For Ngūgī, the answer to the problem of colonial alienation was to abandon writing in the language of the colonizer and to write in his native language.¹³ He also advocated for paying attention to the specifics of languages when he wrote, “Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.”¹⁴ Tséten Zhabdrung similarly disregarded the hegemonic language, which in his case was Chinese,¹⁵ and wrote in Tibetan. His “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” showcases Tibetan-language poetics or *nyen-ngak*. This mode of fine writing serves to reestablish the authority of Tibetan lamas as integral to the revival of Tibetan Buddhist culture in the aftermath of decades of state-sanctioned violence against Tibetans in the People’s Republic of China.

The complexity involved in any discussion on Tibetan literature vis-à-vis colonization has to do with the contested historical status of Tibet’s sovereignty. The Chinese Communist Party vehemently denies that it has colonized Tibet and insists that Tibet has been part of the Motherland “since ancient times.”¹⁶ In opposition to this claim, some American scholars and Tibetan historians identify Tibet as a colony of China since the People’s Liberation Army seized control over Tibetan territories.¹⁷ For example, Carole McGranahan makes the case for identifying the PRC regime as an “empire” and recognizes its colonial presence in Tibet as settler colonialism and not internal colonialism.¹⁸ In his description of the social conditions that gave rise to modern Tibetan literature in the mid-late 20th century (“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” was written in 1981), Tsering Shakya foregrounds the role of Chinese colonialism:

The consolidation of Chinese rule in Tibet resulted not only in political and administrative control of the region but also in Tibet’s first encounter with the modern world—that is, with engagement with a technologically-advanced society imbued with a modern and materialistic ideology. One also has to take into account the missionary zeal of the new Communist regime in China, which focused not only on the incorporation of Tibet into the great ‘Motherland’ of China but also on a colonial mission of ‘civilising’ the backward region. The structural displacement of Tibetan society by Chinese colonial rule has proved to be the most signif-

13. Ngūgī wa Thiong’o 1986, 28.

14. Ngūgī wa Thiong’o 1986, 28.

15. Interestingly both Ngūgī wa Thiong’o and Tséten Zhabdrung were proficient in the dominant language of their respective countries, English and Chinese respectively.

16. Sperling 2009.

17. This terminology refers to ethnic or cultural Tibet in recognition that the Lhasa Podrang Government did not have control over all territories inhabited by Tibetans. On western academic arguments on the contested terrain of Tibet, see McGranahan 2010, 48–52.

18. McGranahan 2019, 521–522.

icant factor in the creation of the Tibetan experience of the modern world.¹⁹

To be clear, “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” does not even mention the Chinese state and does not call attention to the status of Tibet’s sovereignty vis-à-vis China. However, the poem discursively repatriates Tibetan territory by creating a literary mandala—a sacred landscape that transforms state-controlled land into a terrain that supports the authority of Tibetan Buddhist lamas. While the text makes this decolonizing move, we authors recognize that our analysis is not calling for the return of Indigenous land, and therefore we view our heuristic moves as both anti-colonial and anti-Orientalist practices.²⁰ Within the context of the early 1980s in China, the use of Tibetan *belles-lettres* flouts the nation-state’s purported civilizing mission which legitimizes its rule by disparaging Tibetan culture as inferior or backward. “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” has not been translated into English before, therefore this analysis is made possible through acts of translation.

Since Lama Jabb’s path-breaking keynote speech “An Act of Bardo: Translating Tibetan Poetry,” which systematically theorized “translation practices”²¹ for Tibetan Studies, our attention has turned to ways to mitigate the violence committed against Tibetan texts, especially poetry due to the erasure of sound, cadence, and mood in English language translations. To diminish this, we begin by contextualizing the formal aspects of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers.” Another approach that we use to do this is to provide the Tibetan original next to the English translation. Another strategy in translation theory known as “foreignization” maintains the foreignness of the original text by resisting the dominance of the target language and its culture as an ethical imperative for the translator.²² We also view the technique of “foreignizing” as an ethical imperative; however, we move away from employing this term because we view English language as capacious enough to include Tibetan Indigenous aesthetic and epistemic values within it. In order to open up the possibility of developing an appreciation for Tibetan poetics in English, we make the theoretical move to decouple aesthetic principles from objective values to view good taste as a capacity. With this in mind, readers can perhaps develop an appreciation of Tibetan literary figures, similar to the way in which, for example, the Haiku is appreciated in English as it is in Japanese. “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” provides a valuable opportunity to explore Tibetan literary forms because the author annotates stanzas with the types of literary figures he draws upon as a poet. In the last section of our essay, we analyze these literary embellishments such as types of simile and metaphor in light of the author’s *A General Commentary on Poetics* (*snyan ngag spyi don*). The insertion of literary figures coupled with Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s commentary on them enable us translators to dive into the specifics of Tibetan poetics enriching the English language with new types of wordplay.

19. Tsering Shakya 2004, 43.

20. See Tuck and Yang 2012; Liboiron 2021, 8–10.

21. On translation practices, see Venuti 2017; Bassnett 2011; Bellos 2011.

22. Venuti 2017.

Contextualizing “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers”

Prior to presenting our translation of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” we contextualize formal aspects of the poem and consider some of the varying approaches available to readers of this long poem.²³ Some readers may be able to read the Tibetan text alongside its English translation. The presence of the Tibetan text helps to lessen some of the violence committed against the Tibetan language through the erasure of syntax, meter, and phonics in its translation as mentioned above.²⁴ Some who read Tibetan, like those who do not, may find its ornate style difficult to understand. Further, due to intertextual insertions of poetic figures and Indic-inspired narratives, a reader not versed in Tibetan adaptations of Sanskrit *kāvya* may find this disorientating. For others the literary mastery of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” will become more apparent through textual analysis.

The poem’s title “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” its sections, verse structure, and literary inspirations situate it within a literary tradition in Tibet that developed after Sanskrit *kāvya* was translated into Tibetan in the 13th century. Its author is the Tibetan Buddhist polymath Alak Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rigpai Lodrö (A lags Tshe tan zhabs drung ’jigs med rigs pa’i blo gros, 1910–1985); in short, Alak Tséten Zhabdrung, whereby Alak is an honorific title in Amdo Tibetan dialect. He was among the few monastically-trained Tibetan scholars who survived the tumultuous twenty-years of social and political chaos (ca. 1958–78) that decimated Tibetan society and culture in China. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Alak Tséten Zhabdrung became renowned for his contributions to the academic study of Tibetan language, history, and literature, as well as the revival of Buddhist monasteries and monastic ordination lineages in eastern Tibet (Amdo).²⁵ During the waxing moon of the 11th month of the iron-monkey year (winter of 1980/1981), despite the relative political liberalization under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, continued restrictions on religious practice forced the author to compose this poem not within his monastic quarters, but at his familial residence.²⁶ The subject of his poem is the esteemed Buddhist hierarch of the Géluk school of Tibetan Buddhism,

23. Bronner and Hallisey (2022, 4) point out the importance of being attentive to our reading practices when approaching world literature: “Sometimes we read to get something that we can use, other times our reading is an end in itself. This means that when we read translations, sometimes we read to learn more about a culture in a different time or place, while sometimes we read translations just for the pleasure that the text in translation will hopefully give us. We can also remind ourselves that we approach a text in different ways. We can try to get nearer by gathering knowledge about the context and about the other texts that the original assumed its readers would know. We can also read while remaining afar, unfazed by our lack of such knowhow.”

24. Lama Jabb’s keynote speech, “An Act of Bardo: Translating Tibetan Poetry,” at the Lotsawa Translation Workshop University of Colorado Boulder, October 5–8, 2018. Tsadra Foundation Media Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZRJnPCP5Z8>.

25. Willock 2021.

26. Tshe ten zhabs drung 2007, 3: 278; Willock 2021, p. 211.

the Tenth Panchen Lama Losang Trinley Chökyi Gyaltzen (Blo bzang phrin las chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1938–1989), who was born in the same county as Alak Tséten Zhabdrung. The poem commemorates the Panchen Lama’s tour of Amdo in the summer of 1980.

“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” was published multiple times in the People’s Republic of China between 1985 and 2007.²⁷ An excerpt of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” was first published in *Light Rain*,²⁸ the literary magazine which is credited with launching modern Tibetan literature.²⁹ Then it was published in its entirety in the Tibetan-language volumes: *Ingots of Gold* (1988)³⁰ and *The Collected Works of Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rigpai Lodrö*. We referred to the latter publication for our translation.³¹

“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” is divided into eight sections. Following Tibetan literary conventions, each chapter title concludes that section. Our translation follows standard English-language conventions, whereby a section’s title precedes its content. The title and length of each section are as follows: 1) Offering Verses to the Field of Holy Persons, Wondrous Words Setting the Stage for a Perfect Topic in eleven stanzas; 2) Wondrous Words on The Mountains and Forests of the Birthplace of the Holy One, a Leader of Gods and People in eighteen stanzas; 3) Wondrous Words on the Miraculous Achievements of Early Buddhists in this Area in nine stanzas; 4) Wondrous Words in Praise of the Environment and the Inhabitants South of the Machu River in eight stanzas; 5) Wondrous Words on the Merit of the All-Seeing One at Bīdo Monastery in sixteen stanzas; 6) Wondrous Words, Soft Rain Falling from the Sky, and the Benefit of Visiting the Ewam Retreat at Karing Monastery (Ka ring) in nineteen stanzas; 7) Wondrous Words on Traveling to Gyashu (Rgya zhu) at the Invitation of the Common People and the Community of Dentik (Dan tig) Monastery, the First Sacred Place in Amdo in thirty-two stanzas; and the final section: 8) Wondrous Words on Visiting the Family Residence of Jikmé Rigpai Lodrö, a Buddhist monk, in eighteen stanzas.

Following the rules of Tibetan *kāvya*-style meter, each stanza consists of four lines and has the same number of syllables per line. From stanza to stanza, the syllable count varies throughout the poem. The majority of lines are nine-syllables long and the longest are fifteen.

Due to the length of this poem, we selected a minimum of two stanzas from each section, prioritizing those selected based on content and the intertextual literary figure annotated by the author in the stanza. The poem ends with a colophon written in prose within which Alak Tséten Zhabdrung details his literary inspiration for this work—an *avadāna* composed by his teacher,

27. Tshe tan zhabs drung 1985: 29–30; 1988, 2166–2197; 2007, 3: 263–278.

28. Tshe tan zhabs drung 1985, 29–30.

29. Tsering Shakya 2008, 64–66.

30. Tshe tan zhabs drung 1988, 2166–2197.

31. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2007, 3: 263–278.

Giteng Losang Palden (Sgis steng blo bzang dpal ldan, 1881–1944), who penned “*Avadāna* of Golden Flowers,” in a mix of verse and prose.

The colophon to “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” tells us that “*Avadāna* of Golden Flowers” commemorates the visit of the Tenth Panchen Lama’s previous incarnation, the Ninth Panchen Lama Thupten Chökyi Nyima (Thub bstan chos kyi nyi ma, 1883–1937) to Rongwo Monastery in Reb-gong at the behest of its head incarnate lama, Shar Kalden Losang Trinley Lungtok Gyatso (Shar skal ldan blo bzang ’phrin las lung rtogs rgya mtsho, 1916–1978); a.k.a. Shar Kalden Gyatso.³² Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s teacher Giteng Rinpoché proclaimed in the first stanzas of his poem that the Seventh Shar Kalden Gyatso was the reincarnation of Dromtönpa (1004/5–1064) and the Ninth Panchen Rinpoche was the emanation of the great Indian Paṇḍita Atīśa Dīpaṃkara (982–1054), who is accredited with initiating the Buddhist renaissance in the 11th century. Drawing upon Tibetan Buddhist history, Giteng Rinpoché compares the devotion of the disciple Dromtönpa who organized Atīśa’s teaching circuit in Central Tibet with that of Shar Kalden Gyatso, who welcomed his guru, the Ninth Panchen Lama, to his monastery with great fanfare.

Likewise, the story told in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” honors the Tenth Panchen Lama’s visit to the region at a key historical juncture marking the beginning of a Buddhist revival in the post-Mao era. Like a mandala radiating outward from the birthplace of the poet and his subject, the area, referred to as “South-North” (*lho byang*) throughout the poem is the territory north and south of the divide caused by the Machu River. On the south side lies Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, the Chinese political name for the county of their birthplaces.

32. See also ’Jam dbyang grags pa 1999, 204.

Selected stanzas from “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*”

1) Offering Verses to the Field of Holy Persons, Wondrous Words Setting the Stage for a Perfect Topic:	
<p>མཚན་དབེ་ལྷན་པའི་སངས་རྒྱལ་ཀུན་གྱིས་ཀྱང་།། སྤྱ་ལའི་སྣངས་འདི་ཅི་དགར་བོར་བ་ན།། མུགས་རྗེའི་གཏིར་མཛོད་རྒྱ་བལ་ཁྱོད་གཅིག་ལུས།། རྒྱན་རས་བཅས་པའི་བཀའ་དྲིན་བསམ་ལས་འདས།།</p>	<p>As all Buddhas with their characteristic marks voluntarily left this land of the sal tree,³³ you alone, Matchless Treasure of Compassion, transcend kindness by looking upon us! (1.5)</p>
<p>འདི་ནི་མ་བརྟགས་ཉམས་དགའི་སྤྱ་ངག་མ་ཡིན་ལྟ་ ཆེན་ཚངས་པའི་གེ་འལྱར་ཏེ།། གང་བྱང་ཚིག་སྒྲེབ་བཅོས་མའི་ངག་ཚོམ་མ་ཡིན་མཚོ་ བྱང་སྒྲེག་མོ་དབྱེས་པའི་དབྱངས།། འབྲེལ་མེད་བྱང་རྒྱལ་སྤྱོད་པའི་ཅ་ཙོ་མ་ཡིན་འཕགས་ཆེན་ དམ་པའི་རྟོགས་པ་བརྗོད།། རབ་བཏགས་སུལ་བྱང་ཚིག་གིས་འུད་སྒྲོག་མ་ཡིན་ བདེན་དོན་ལྷག་པའི་བརྗོད་བྱས་ལྷག། བསྟོན་དོར་གཟུགས་ཅན་གྱི་རྒྱན།།</p>	<p>This is not some happy, naive lyrical song, but is the reverberations of Lord Brahmā’s vocals. It is not an artificial mumbo jumbo rambling of words, but is the Lotus-born goddess³⁴ joyous melody. It is not the jibber jabber of indiscriminate noise, but is an avadāna about a great holy being. It is not boasting with fine exaggerations, but is replete with topics pouring out the truth! (1.10) Metaphor that conceals reality (<i>tattvāpahnava rūpaka</i>).</p>
<p>རོ་འཛིན་སྒྲོག་ཞགས་འལྱག་པ་དོན་ཡོད་ཕྱིར།། ཐམས་ཅད་གཟིགས་པའི་རྟོགས་བརྗོད་ཆ་ཙམ་ཞིག། དབྱངས་ཅན་མང་འགྲོའི་རྒྱུད་དུ་བྲངས་པ་ལ།། དད་ལྷན་ན་བས་ཡུད་ཙམ་གསན་པར་རིགས།།</p>	<p>For this darting flash, a ribbon lightning of a taste-organ to be purposeful, on the strings of Sarasvatī’s lute, I play a little avadāna song to the Omniscient One. Faithful ones, prick up your ears! (1.11)</p>

33. The “land of the sal tree” refers to Tibet.

34. An epithet for Sarasvatī, the goddess of literature and music. She is called Yangchenma in Tibetan.

2) Wondrous Words on The Mountains and Forests of the Birthplace of the Holy One, a Leader of Gods and People:	
<p>བྱང་ན་རྒྱལ་སྐུ་གཞོན་ལྷ་དོན་གྲུབ་ཀྱིས།། རྒྱུན་པའི་ཕར་རྒྱུན་སྤོང་མཚོག་རྫོགས་མཛད་པའི།། དན་ཏིག་ཤེལ་གྱི་རི་བོ་གྲུབ་པའི་གནས།། གནོད་རྒྱུན་ཁོས་པའི་ཉམས་བརྒྱུན་གྱིས་གྲུབ།།</p>	<p>In the north young prince Döndrup³⁵ accomplished the Perfection of Generosity at Dentik, the Crystal Mountain, the sacred place of siddhas, where forms of fearsome yakṣa appear naturally. (2.5)</p>
<p>མཛེས་པར་བྲས་སོ་ལྷོ་བྱང་འཛིན་མའི་ཁྱེན།། ཚངས་ཆེན་སློ་སྐྱོས་མེ་ལོང་ཕང་བར་ཏེ།། མཚོ་རིས་རྒྱུད་ཚལ་སྣང་དུ་སྲུག་པའི་དབྱིད།། མདོ་ཁམས་ལྷོ་བྱང་འཛིན་མའི་ཐིག་ལེར་རོ།།</p> <p>བྱ་བ་ཐོག་མའི་གསལ་བྱེད་གྱི་རྒྱན།</p>	<p>Exquisitely made are: the “South-North” expanse of mother-earth³⁶ in the lap of Great Brahmā’s paradise, the Wisdom Mirror,³⁷ and likewise, springtime in the glorious gardens of the heavenly realm, the essence of mother-earth’s “South-North” in Dokham (2.8)</p> <p>Illuminator (<i>dīpaka alamkāra</i>) of action in the initial foot</p>
<p>ཅི་འདི་སྐབས་གསུམ་དབང་པོའི་ཡུལ་སྤྲོངས་སུ།། བདག་ཅག་མཚོ་རིས་སྐྱས་ཁར་འཛོགས་སམ་ཅི།། ཡང་ན་གདེངས་ཅན་སྤོང་གི་རྒྱུད་ཚལ་གྱི།། གནམ་སློ་བྱེ་སྐྱམ་བདག་ཡིད་ཁྱོགས་ལ་འཕྱང་།།</p> <p>ཐེ་ཚོམ་གྱི་དཔེ་རྒྱན།</p>	<p>What’s this? Have we climbed the ladder to higher realms—to the land of Indra, Lord of the Triple World, or have we opened the gateway to the gardens in the city of the Nāga? My mind sways to and fro like a palanquin. (2.12)</p> <p>Simile expressing doubt (<i>saṃśayopamā</i>)</p>

35. Name of the main protagonist in a Tibetan remake of the Vessantara jāataka tale. Young prince/Bodhisattva Döndrup is a previous incarnation of Siddhartha Gautama.

36. “Lho byang” is the region “south” (lho) and “north” (byang) of the Ma Chu/ River. Xunhua lies on the southern banks of the Ma Chu.

37. The lap of Brahmā’s Wisdom Mirror is an epithet for heavenly realms parallel to “*mtho ris*” in the second couplet.

<p>གནས་འདིར་ཉིན་མོ་ཚ་ཟེར་རྒྱ་བྱེད་ཅིང་།། མཚན་མོ་བསེལ་སྤྱིན་དབང་པོ་འཆར་བའི་ཕྱིར།། ལྷ་སྤྱིའི་འཇིག་རྟེན་མཐོང་བ་མ་ཡིན་ཏེ།། མ་སྤང་ལྷོ་རྒྱུད་འཇིན་མའི་ལྷོངས་སུ་ངེས།།</p> <p>གཏན་འབེབས་ཀྱི་དཔེ།</p>	<p>Since in this place the sun causes heat of the day and the moon bestows coolness at night, I saw neither the realms of Gods nor Nāga so this certainly is the land south of the Machu. (2.13)</p> <p>Simile expressing decisiveness (<i>nirṇayopamā</i>)</p>
<p>3) Wondrous Words on the Miraculous Achievements of Early Buddhists in this Area</p>	
<p>ལྷང་དོར་འཁྲལ་མེད་འདོམས་པའི་འཆད་པ་དང་།། ལྷ་ངན་ལོག་རྟོག་དྲུངས་འབྱིན་ཚོད་པའི་དཔལ།། ཚོས་ཀུན་དྲི་བའི་ང་དོར་འགྲུགས་པའི་ཚོམ།། མཁས་པའི་བྱ་བ་རྣམ་གསུམ་འགྲན་བཞིན་འཕེལ།།</p>	<p>Teachings expound true discernment; Glorious debates uproot mistaken views and negative talk; Compositions summon all phenomena as the voice of celestial musicians; These three activities of the scholars prosper in competition. (3.2)</p>
<p>གསང་ཆེན་རྒྱུད་མེ་རྣམ་བཞིའི་བུམ་བཟང་ལས།། ཚོ་གཅིག་ཉིད་ལ་སངས་རྒྱས་སར་འགོད་པའི།། ཉེ་ལམ་བདུད་ཅི་རོ་བརྒྱས་ཕྱོས་པའི་བྲུ།། མཁས་པ་སྤྱོད་ཞིང་དུ་འཕུར་བའི་མཐའ་མི་ལང་།།</p>	<p>Countless are the yogis who flew to the Pureland of Vajrayoginī by imbibing the potent ambrosia of the quick path to reach the bhūmi of Buddhahood in one lifetime—a path from the perfect vessel of the four classes of Tantra, the Vajrayāna. (3.9)</p>

<p>4) Wondrous Words in Praise of the Environment and the Inhabitants South of the Machu River</p>	
<p>ཡ་མཚན་བཟོ་རིག་དགུ་ཕྱག་རྒྱུང་ལྡན་པའི། འཇམ་དཔལ་གདུལ་ཞིང་མ་རྒྱ་ཚོ་ནའི་སྲོང་། བྱད་འཕགས་གྲགས་པའི་རྗེ་རྒྱུང་ནམ་མཁའི་མཐར། འགོག་མེད་འཕྱར་བའི་ངོ་མཚར་མཛད་དུ་བྱུང་།</p>	<p>Yadzi astounds with its myriad arts and crafts, a city of China, the realm of Mañjuśrī. The wind of its fame for excellence flies unhindered into the vast sky; wonderful and marvelous! (4.1)</p>
<p>གཞན་ཕྱི་ཟེལ་གཞོན་སང་གའི་དཔའ་རྩལ་ཅན། རིགས་གཞུགས་ལང་ཚོས་སྣེ་མས་པའི་འགོ་འདི་དག། ཚོས་རྒྱལ་མེས་དབོན་དུས་སུ་སོ་སྤང་དུ། མངགས་པའི་སྟོ་ཏ་རང་གི་འབྲུལ་མེད་རྒྱུད།</p>	<p>With the strength and courage of a lion that overpowers outsiders, a people who take pride in their lineage, stature, and youthfulness, are Bho-ta, unmistakably of Tibetan descent, sent as border guards at the time of our ancestral Dharma Kings. (4.8)</p>
<p>5) Wondrous Words on the Merit of the All-Seeing One at Bīdo Monastery</p>	
<p>དེ་ཚོ་མིག་སྟོང་ལྡན་པ་གཟིགས་མོའི་སྲིར། དགུང་སྟོན་སྤྱི་གྱི་ཡོལ་བ་རྣམ་བསལ་ཏེ། ཉིན་མོར་བྱེད་པའི་སྟོན་མེ་ལག་ཐོགས་ནས། ས་ཐོག་འགྲིམ་པའི་ཚོ་འཕྲུལ་གཞུགས་སུ་ཤར། མེབས་པའི་ཉིན་ཏུ་ཅང་གནམ་ཐང་བ་ལ་དམིགས་པའི་ རབ་བཏགས་ཀྱི་རྒྱན།</p>	<p>At that time for the show, “The One Endowed with a Thousand-Eyes”³⁸ removed the curtain of clouds to reveal a blue sky and held the lamp that made it day. You appear as a magical display to wander the earth. (5.7)</p> <p>Postulation (<i>utprekṣā alaṃkāra</i>) written with focus on the great weather on the arrival day.</p>

38. This is an epithet of the deity, Indra.

<p>སྐྱུ་མཚོག་གསེར་གྱི་ལྷན་པོ་མཚོང་བ་དང་།། གསུང་དབྱངས་ཚོས་གྱི་གརྩི་ཐོས་པའི་དགོས།། བསྐང་ཡས་སྐལ་ལྷན་སྐྱེས་དགུའི་ཡིད་གྱི་མཚོར།། ལེགས་ཚོགས་པད་མའི་ལྷོན་བཟང་སྐྱེད་དུ་བསྐྱེདས།།</p>	<p>The virtue of seeing the glorious golden mountain, your holy body, and hearing the percussive <i>gandhi</i> woodblock of the Dharma, the melody of your teaching voice, has brought to creation the lotus groves of virtues in the lake of the mind of countless fortunate people. (5.16)</p>
<p>6) Wondrous Words, Soft Rain Falling from the Sky, and the Benefit of Visiting the Ewam Retreat at Karing Monastery (270–272)</p>	
<p>མི་འཇིགས་བཞི་ལྷན་དྲི་མེད་ལོར་གྱིས་གཏམས།། དམ་པའི་རྒྱབས་ཤིང་ཚོས་གྱི་གཟེགས་མས་ལྷག། རྒྱ་ཚེན་ཡོན་ཏན་གཏིང་དཔག་དཀའ་བའི་སྐྱོང་།། བསྐྱེད་པའི་མཚོ་ཚེན་གང་དེ་བདག་གི་སྐྱབས།།</p>	<p>Filled with pure jewels possessing the Four Fearlessnesses,³⁹ Replete with drops of Dharma, a series of waves of sacredness, I find refuge in the unfathomable depth of extensive virtues, the great ocean of the Dharma: Jigme Damchö Gyatso. (6.2).</p>
<p>དེ་ལྟ་ན་ཡང་བརྗེ་མེད་དུས་གྱི་སྲིན།། ཁྲོས་པའི་བུ་བྱེད་གནམ་ས་གདངས་པའི་ཁྲོན།། མཚེ་བའི་མཚོན་ཆ་གཅིགས་པའི་གཙོང་རོང་དུ།། བསྐྱོག་མེད་རྩམས་ཟའི་ཚུལ་དེ་ཡ་རེ་ང་།། འཇིགས་རུང་གི་ཉམས་གྱི་རྒྱན།།</p>	<p>Despite this, the monster of the era of cruelty, Opened its wrathful mouth as wide as the space between the earth and sky, Between this gap--its teeth, weapons of fangs, Ate irrevocably and ferociously! Terrifying! (6.9)</p> <p>Laden with the affective state of fear (<i>bhayāna-karasavat</i>)</p>

39. The Four Fearlessnesses are: (1) realization, (2) relinquishment, (3) teaching the overcoming of obstacles and (4) teaching the path of renunciation. Jamgon Kongtrul 2007, 345, n. 479.

<p>སྐྱ་ཡི་མཚན་དཔེ་མངལ་བས་མི་ངོམས་ཤིང་།། གསུང་གི་རྒྱད་མངས་ཉན་པས་མི་ཚོམ་པ།། འདི་འདྲི་དགའ་སྟོན་ཚོད་མིན་སུ་ཡིས་སྤྱིན།། ད་དུང་ཡང་ཡང་སྟོན་དང་ཐུགས་རྗེའི་གཏོར།།</p> <p>རེ་བཅས་གྱི་དགའ་བའི་རྒྱན།</p>	<p>Not satiated by seeing the marks of your Buddha body; Not contented with listening to the sitar's sound of your speech; Such a feast as this can only be provided by you O Treasure of Compassion, please, come, again and again! (6.19)</p> <p>An affectionate utterance with hope (<i>preyas alamkāra</i>)</p>
<p>7) Wondrous Words on Traveling to Gyashu at the Invitation of the Common People and the Community of Dentik Monastery, the First Sacred Place in Amdo</p>	
<p>གང་ཚོ་ལང་ཚོ་ཡོལ་བའི་ལུང་གྱིས་མནན།། མགྲིན་པའི་ལུ་བྱུག་མོན་གྱི་ནགས་སུ་ཡིབ།། དེ་ལྟ་ན་ཡང་དད་གཏུང་ལྷགས་དྲག་སྒོས།། གསོལ་འདེབས་དབྱངས་གྱི་རོལ་མོ་བདག་གིས་དཀྲོལ།།</p> <p>ཆ་ཤས་གཟུགས་ཅན་གྱི་རྒྱན།</p>	<p>When pressed down by the burden of my passing youth, The cuckoo bird of my throat hid in the Mon Forests; However, by my mind, faith, and strong yearning, I performed this melodious instrument for dedication prayers. (7.26)</p> <p>Metaphor of attributes (<i>avayava rūpaka</i>)</p>
<p>དེ་ནས་སྐབས་བབ་ཡིད་ལ་བརྟགས་པའི་འབྲས།། ཚིག་གི་ལོ་འདབ་སྐྱུག་པོས་མ་བརྒྱབས་པར།། གང་ལྟས་གསན་དགོངས་མཛད་པའི་དགའ་སྟོན་གྱིས།། སྐལ་བཟང་ཡིད་ལ་དད་གུས་ཚོབ་པའི་མཐར།།</p>	<p>After that, the moment befell when the fruits of what was on my mind were reported without obscuring these thoughts thick with vines of words. With a feast of listening and reflecting, the fortunate obtained faith and veneration in their minds, and then said: (7.28)</p>
<p>བལྟན་པ་རིན་ཆེན་ཉིན་མོའི་མགོན་ལྟར་གསལ།། འགྲོ་བའི་བདེ་སྤྱིད་པ་དང་ཚལ་ལྟར་རྒྱས་སྤྲོད།། སྤང་བ་མཐའ་ཡས་པའི་ཆེན་མཐོན་ཅད་མཁྱེན།། སྐྱ་ཚོ་ཞབས་པད་བསྐལ་བརྒྱར་བརྟན་པར་སྟོན།།</p>	<p>“For the sake of enriching the lotus grove, all sentient beings, and the precious Dharma, luminous as the sun, Boundless Light, Amitābha, the exalted Panchen, may your lotus feet remain for hundreds of eons!” (7.29)</p>

<p>ཞེས་པའི་དྲང་སྲོང་བདེན་ཚིག་གྲུབ་པའི་ངག། གརྗེའི་སྐྱ་དབྱངས་རྗེས་འགོས་མདུན་བསྟུས་ནས།། ཏུས་བཞི་སྐྱ་མའི་གསང་ཚེན་དགྲིལ་འཁོར་ཏུ།། རྗེས་འཛིན་ཞལ་བཞེས་སྟོལ་བར་གསོལ་བ་བཏབ།།</p>	<p>Uttering this, speech that manifests the truth of a sage’s words, and then with a welcoming melody similar to the sounds of the <i>gandhi</i> woodblock, I supplicated you to bestow the promise to guide us as the Vajrayāna Mandala in the Fourth Era.⁴⁰ (7.30)</p>
<p>དེ་ཚེ་ཀུན་གཟིགས་ཚེན་པོས་ལེགས་སོའི་དབྱངས།། བཀའ་སྐྱུལ་གསུང་གིས་བསྐྱེད་པའི་བརྗོད་མཛད་དང་ ལྷན།། སྐྱ་ཚར་ས་ལ་རེག་པའི་ལྷ་གོས་ཀྱིས།། བདག་མགོན་བརྒྱན་པའི་བཀའ་དྲིན་ཚད་བྱང་ཐོབ།།</p>	<p>Then the All-Seeing One melodiously proclaimed, “Of course!” Along with words of praise, He adorned my neck with a <i>katag</i>⁴¹ so long its ends touched the ground, and I received a marvelous kindness. (7.31)</p>
<p>ཕན་བདེ་འབྱུང་གནས་རྒྱལ་བསྟན་འཕེལ་སྦྱར་དང་།། ཡངས་པའི་རྒྱལ་ཁམས་དགའ་བདེས་འཚོ་བའི་སྣང།། སྦྱོགས་དང་མཚམས་སུ་བཀྲ་ཤིས་མེ་ཉོག་ཆར།། ཅི་དགར་འབབ་པའི་ཉེན་འབྲེལ་ཡིད་བཞིན་གྲུབ།།</p>	<p>In order to spread Buddhist teachings, the source of benefit and happiness, and for the sake of expanding joy and happiness for the entire country, the serendipitous, wish-fulfilling moment fin- ished with auspicious flowers of summer rain in all directions! (7.32)</p>

40. The editors of *Ingots of Gold* note that in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” “the fourth era” refers to the periods of the Shambhala Kings. The Panchen Lamas are understood to be emanations of the Shambhala Kings. They remain for a total of one thousand eight hundred years, and each time period is split into four sets of four hundred and fifty years, each time has its own name. The “fourth era” is the name of the final time period. Blo bzang chos grags and Bsod nams rtse mo 1988, 2197, n. 49.

41. A white ceremonial scarf frequently made of silk. The longer the scarf the more respect conveyed.

8) Wondrous Words on Visiting the Family Residence of Jikmé Rigpai Lodrö, a Buddhist monk	
<p>སྲས་ཀྱང་མ་བསྐྱལ་བུ་མོའི་གམ་དུ་བྱོན།། གནས་བབ་མ་ཞུས་གསུང་གིས་དབུགས་དབྱུང་མཛད།། གནང་བར་མ་གསོལ་འཇོར་འབྲུ་གཙུག་ཏུ་བཀོད།། འདི་ཕྱིར་དགེ་བའི་ཕྱག་དབང་བཀའ་རིན་བསྐྱེལ།།</p>	<p>Without anyone asking, he approached the girl, Without describing the situation, his voice soothed her, Without being asked to bestow it, he placed blessed-barley on her crown. A blessing, for the benefit of this and future lives, was graciously granted. (8.14)</p>
<p>གང་འདི་རང་གིས་དངོས་སུ་མཐོང་མ་གཏོགས།། བརྗུད་དེ་སྐྱེས་པས་སུ་ཞིག་ཡིད་ཚིན་བྱེད།། འཕགས་ཆེན་མཛད་སྤྱོད་ལྷན་མོ་འདི་ཙམ་ཡང་།། མངོན་སུམ་ལ་མཇལ་བདག་ཅག་སྐལ་བ་སྣོན།།</p>	<p>This occurrence, unless personally witnessed who would believe it, if this was told by someone else? With this small act of great being, we are fortunate to see this in person. (8.15)</p>

Anti-Colonial Translation Practice: Theorizing Good Taste as a Capacity

Whether one finds “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” aesthetically pleasing or not can be said to be a matter of taste. The problem inherent in reading a Tibetan literary epic poem in translation, such as “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” might be framed in a simple way: how can we use the English language to think outside American-English literary discourse? Consider, for example, the challenge of comprehending the opening verse of our translation:

As all Buddhas with their characteristic marks
voluntarily left this land of the sal tree,
you alone, Matchless Treasure of Compassion,
transcend kindness by looking upon us! (1.5)

What is meant by “all Buddhas” and why did they leave? Where is this land of a sal tree? Who is the Matchless Treasure of Compassion? Such queries point to the epistemic discursive structures within which Tibetan language practices are embedded. This verse like others in the

first section of “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” sets the stage for the rest of the poem. Based on this context, “Matchless Treasure of Compassion” becomes an epithet for The Tenth Panchen Lama who stayed in Tibet to “look upon” those who had remained after “all Buddhas,” a reference to Buddhist teachers such as the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, left “the land of the Sal tree,” a moniker for Tibet, as refugees. The writing style employed throughout “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*,” is called *nyen-ngak* in Tibetan, which literally means “mellifluous words” or “sweet-sounding expressions.” Due to its reliance on literary forms and specific cultural references, some scholars have devalued Tibetan poetics as distasteful.

In approaching “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*,” we suggest removing objective values from taste because such evaluations thwart efforts to develop a capacity for understanding the aesthetic theories and epistemic systems which undergird literary masterpieces written in this style. Indebted to insights from Indigenous poets and scholars to decolonize the field of world literature, we give attention to culturally specific references and uses of Tibetan language. Before diving into those, we begin our analysis by building on a theory of good taste as a capacity in order to open up discursive space for Tibetan Indigenous aesthetic and epistemic values.

The Tibetan term *nyen-ngak* (*snyan ngag*) is the translation of the Sanskrit term *kāvya*. In the Tibetan context, the term connotes both “poetry” and “poetics.”⁴² Although on the Indian subcontinent there were many texts and fervent debates on the parameters of literary aesthetics, one Sanskrit treatise, *The Mirror of Poetry* (Skt.: *Kāvya-darśa*, Tib. *Snyan ngag me long*) by Indian pundit Daṇḍin (fl. 8th century) came to dominate Tibetan literary discourse. Tibetan translations and commentaries thereof, such as Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s *A General Commentary on Poetics* (*Snyan ngag spyi don*), follow the three-chapter structure of Daṇḍin’s *The Mirror of Poetry*. The first chapter focuses on literary criticism by defining *kāvya* and aesthetic principles on what constitutes tasteful or beautiful writing. The next two chapters provide descriptions and examples of Sanskrit literary devices—some of which Alak Tséten Zhabdrung identifies in “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*.” The general moniker for these literary devices is “embellishment” or “ornamentation” (Skt. *alamkāra*, Tib. *rgyan*). Daṇḍin’s second chapter describes and provides examples of literary “embellishments” or rhetorical figures (*arthālamkāra*, *don rgyan*). The final chapter elaborates on

42. The pioneering work by Yigal Bronner, David Shulman, Gary Tubb (2014) has shown how robust *kāvya* literature is in varying cultural contexts. This points to a need for a history of *kāvya* in the Tibetan context. For example, Janet Gyatso and Pema Bhum (2022 forthcoming) highlight the didactic importance of example “dpe brjod” texts in teaching *kāvya* in Tibet. In the South Asian context, Pollock (2016, xvii–iii) views *kāvya* in two ways—as a superordinate term “literature” or “belles-lettres” and as a subordinate term “poetry.” Pollock uses the term “rasa theory” to discuss literary aesthetics encompassing a variety of issues from reader-response theory to philosophical theories on aesthetics and linguistic techniques in poetry and literature. More research needs to be done on this in the Tibetan context in order to evaluate the degree of influence that Daṇḍin’s *rasa* theory had vis-a-vis intellectual and philosophical developments of Buddhism; cf. Gold 2007, 120–130; Martin 2014. It is the point of view of the authors that it would be categorically incorrect to interpret Tibetan *kāvya* poetics as unoriginal or simply derivative of the Indic model.

phonetically-based literary devices (*śabdālamkāra*, *sgra rgyan*). “Embellishment” or “ornamentation” was the key element to Daṇḍin’s aesthetic theory on the literary arts, i.e., poets should adorn poetry with literary devices as one would decorate the body with jewelry—to make it more beautiful.⁴³ Whether a reader perceives this style of writing as beautiful can be said to be a matter of taste.

Because the metaphor of “taste” for aesthetic sensibility can be found across cultures in treatises by Hume, Daṇḍin, and Tséten Zhabdrung alike,⁴⁴ it can help to make sense of what is experienced when reading *kāvya*-style writing in a poem, such as that found in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers.” For Alak Tséten Zhabdrung “taste” makes a poem particularly exceptional,⁴⁵ and this involves the proper use of literary figures as we detail below. We dedicate much of this essay to show how his poem “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” exemplifies the cultivation of literary “taste” (*nyams*) through the skillful application of literary figures.

In the philosophy of aesthetics Alan Goldman decouples objective values from aesthetic principles as he argues: “[Good] taste as a capacity develops through its exercise, as do other capacities.”⁴⁶ For Goldman, bad taste is not developed as a capacity. This hermeneutic places “taste” within concepts of agency and suggests that a person develops good taste through its practice. Goldman’s research lies within Euro-American philosophy of aesthetics, and therefore does not address how aesthetic principles within knowledge regimes from other cultures might be cultivated.⁴⁷

In western academic discourse, particularly in the fields of Buddhist Studies and Tibetan Studies, a common negative evaluation of *nyen-ngak* style is that it is artificial.⁴⁸ One western critic of *nyen-ngak* was Rolf Alfred Stein, a German-born French Tibetologist, who as Dan Martin points out, assessed Tibetan *kāvya* as follows: “Numerous works ... are written in an ornate, flowery style, modeled on the Indian *alamkāra*. Although this style certainly strikes us as turgid, and its ponderous tone and lengthy sentences are the translator’s despair, it possesses a stylistic refinement which is undoubtedly much appreciated by Tibetans.”⁴⁹ It seems since Stein’s judgements nearly fifty years ago, assessments of Tibetan *kāvya*-writings have not changed much in the Academy.

Nancy Lin reflected on such evaluations of *kāvya* in a roundtable discussion on decolonizing the field of Tibetan Studies: “I noted the neglect of *snyan ngag* in western language scholarship, as well as expressions of distaste colleagues have shared with me: that it is contrived, artificial,

43. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 11; Eppling 1989, 333–335.

44. Although Hume doesn’t seem to be the first to use the analogy of taste, he leans heavily upon this analogy. Cf. Singer and Dunn 2000, 94–96; Pollock 2016, 43; Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 15–16.

45. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 22.

46. Goldman 2019, 14.

47. For a critic thereof, see van Norden 2017, 6.

48. See also Lin forthcoming.

49. Cited in Martin 2014, 568.

baroque, pedantic.”⁵⁰ Similar to Lin, Ngūgī wa Thiong’o and postcolonial Indigenous scholars and poets underscore structural systemic biases,⁵¹ especially those in academia, that treat Indigenous forms of literature and knowledge as inferior by ignoring them or misrepresenting them. For example, Cree poet Neal McLeod charges that academia continues to commit narrative violence against Indigenous epistemologies.⁵² In the case of Tibetan poetry, Lin suggests that there is a tendency in western scholarship to favor the tastes of the Songs by the Sixth Dalai Lama or those of Milarepa that align with the sensibilities of English poetry, such as the “valorization of subjectivity, naturalness, and freedom from formal verse conventions.”⁵³ Evaluations such as these underscore the ethics of decoupling objective values from notions of taste.

We suggest, that “to let every language sing” as Ngūgī wa Thiong’o intones, involves appreciating the diversity of cultural and linguistic particularities as articulated in *Decolonising the Mind*:

Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and the written language, that is through a specific language. In other words, the capacity to speak, the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension between human beings is universal. This is the universality of language, a quality specific to human beings. It corresponds to the universality of the struggle against nature and that between human beings. But the particularity of the sounds, the words, the word order into phrases and sentences, and the specific manner, or laws, of their ordering is what distinguishes one language from another. Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.⁵⁴

Cree poet and scholar Neal McLeod similarly advocates for embracing a more inclusive and wider understanding of poetics in English literature: “By drawing upon the epic and traditional narratives of our [Cree] people, we can ground ourselves in cultural-specific references and linguistic anchors, allowing us, in turn, to resist the onslaught of modernity and colonialism, which, while

50. Lin 2021, 144. See also Lin forthcoming. I am grateful to Nancy Lin for sharing this draft.

51. McLeod 2014, 89. Cf. Comelo (2018) notes the epistemic violence against indigenous peoples of Columbia and articulates that “Indigenous language practices involve an ethical and political aesthetic; their beauty is not simply in the beauty of the words, but more importantly, in the beauty of thinking and acting according to a set of values” (196).

52. McLeod 2014, 89–90.

53. Lin 2021, 144–145. See also Lin forthcoming.

54. Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986, 15.

related, are not the same.”⁵⁵ We propose that by paying attention to the “cultural-specific references” and “linguistic anchors,” we can develop an appreciation of the literary aesthetic theories and knowledge systems that lie at the foundation of literary works, such as “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers”. This happens by decoupling evaluative judgements from aesthetic principles. Through our translation and analysis of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” we aim to sharpen our senses to develop capacities to value this literary style in its cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. We now turn to examine some of these.

Reclaiming Tibetan Ways of Knowing in Post-Mao China

By marshalling the Indo-Tibetan literary heritage of *kāvya* and *avadāna* in this composition, “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” imagines a poetic landscape in which Buddhist authority reigns. In the context of 1980s China, this serves both to flout state propaganda on the backwardness of Tibetan culture and to reinscribe territory scarred by socialist collectivism with a mandala of Buddhist sanctity necessary for a revival of Tibetan Buddhist practices. At the center of this literary mandala is the Panchen Lama, a key figure involved in the revival process. The first section of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” sets the stage for the Tenth Panchen Lama’s journey through the “South-North” region and also reminds readers of India, the home of *kāvya*, *avadāna*, and Buddhism. The poet invokes the Indic god, Brahmā, and his daughter, Sarasvatī, the goddess of literature and song, to announce the poem’s genre: “It is not the jibber jabber of indiscriminate noise, but an *avadāna* about a great holy being” (1.10). By maintaining the Sanskrit term “*avadāna*” in our translation, we draw attention to the Sanskrit roots of this literary form, which became thoroughly integrated into Tibetan literary discourse over a millennium. At the end of the second couplet, we find the first example of the author’s annotation of a literary figure at the end of a stanza: “[This poem] is not boasting with fine exaggerations; but is replete with topics pouring out the truth! (Metaphor of concealing reality)” (1.10). Poetic flow is interrupted by the insertion of the name of a literary figure i.e., “metaphor of concealing reality” (*bsnyon dor gzugs can gyi rgyan*; *Skt.: tattvāpabhava rūpaka*). The poet annotates the type of the literary figure after the stanza, but does not provide the Sanskrit terminology. We identified the Sanskrit term by comparing Tséten Zhabdrung’s *A General Commentary on Poetics* with translations of Daṇḍin’s *Kāvyaḍarśa*. We added the Sanskrit to our translation to highlight the Indic origins of this literary art form. The poet’s *A General Commentary on Poetics* is key to our analysis of specific literary figures in the final section of this essay.

Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s choice of the *avadāna* genre connects the Panchen Lama’s tour of this area of eastern Tibet in summer 1980 with a form of biographical literature that recounts

55. McLeod 2014, 91.

the lives of the Buddha and his disciples or major historical figures, such as the emperor Aśoka.⁵⁶ Based on the Pali and Sanskrit recensions of the *Aśokāvadāna*, John Strong describes *avadāna* literature as a “[...] narrative of the religious deeds of an individual and is primarily intended to illustrate the workings of karma and the values of faith and devotion.”⁵⁷ *Avadāna* literature is considered one of the “twelve branches of exalted speech” (Tib. *gsung rab yan lag bcu gnyis*).⁵⁸ The Dergé (Sde dge) edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon contains around fourteen titles across the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* located in different sections. Some texts are found in the section devoted to past lives of the Buddha or *jātaka* (*skyes rabs*), while others are in the sutra (*mdo sde*) section. The Tibetan term *rtogs pa brjod pa* appears as early as the late 8th - early 9th century in Zhang Yeshe Dé’s (Zhang ye shes sde) translation of *Sukarikāvadāna-nāma-sūtra* (*Phag mo’i rtogs pa brjod pa*) and in the 10th century in the *Kuṇalāvadāna* (*Ku na’ la’i rtogs pa brjod pa*) by Rinchen Sangpo (Rin chen bzang po). This is around the same time that the Tibetan term for *kāvya* was coined by the learned translators.⁵⁹ Based on early Tibetan translations of eulogies to Sarasvatī, Dan Martin points out that the influence of *kāvya* had started prior to the Tibetan translation of Daṇḍin’s *The Mirror of Poetry*.⁶⁰

“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” draws attention to the historical prestige of this literary genre and the elite writing style of *nyen-ngak* among educated monastics. The prominence of Indic forms and styles increased after the Indian system of categorizing knowledge known as *rikné* (*rig gnas*, Skt: *pañcavidyāsthāna*) was introduced into Tibet in the twelfth century. The most important domain of knowledge in Tibet was the “inner science” of Buddhism, one of the five major *rikné*.⁶¹ The literary arts dominates the five types of minor *rikné*: *kāvya* poetics (*snyan ngag*), composition (*sdeb sbyor*), kennings (*mngon brjod*), drama (*zlos gar*), and astrology (*skar rtsis*). In the twelfth century, Sanskrit literary culture became intertwined with scholarly ideals of moral and intellectual refinement that “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” revives in the twentieth century.⁶²

56. Quintman 2014, 6–7.

57. Strong 1983, 22.

58. The Twelve Branches of Excellent Speech (*gsung rab yan lag bcu gnyis*) are: 1) condensed, Tib. *mdo sde*, Skt. *sūtra*; 2) melodious, *dbyang kyis bsnyad pa, geya*; 3) prophetic, *lung du bstan pa, vyākaraṅga*; 4) verse, *tshigs su bcad pa, gātā*; 5) spoken with purpose, *chad du brjod pa, udāna*; 6) conversatory, *gleng gzhi, nidāna*; 7) biographical or expressing realization, *rtogs pa brjod pa, avadāna*; 8) historical, *de lta bu byung ba, itivṛttaka*; 9) concerning past lives, *skyes pa rabs, jātaḥ*; 10) very detailed, *shin tu rgyas pa, vaipulya*; 11) marvelous, *rmad du byung ba, adbhutadharmā*; 12) establishing a truth, *gtan la phab pa, upadeśa*. In O rgyan ’Jigs med chos kyi dbang po (Patrul Rinpoche) 1998, 438.

59. Kapstein (2003, 758) notes both the term for *kavi* (*snyan ngag mkhan*) and *kāvya* (*snyan dngags*) were coined at this time. Dan Martin (2014) cites Kapstein and also highlights the change in the spelling of *kāvya* in Tibetan to *snyan ngag*.

60. Martin 2014, 573.

61. The five major fields of knowledge are logic (*gtan tshigs kyi rig pa*), medicine (*gso ba’i rig pa*), visual arts (*bzo gnas rig pa*), grammar (*sgra’i rig pa*), and inner knowledge (*nang gyi rig pa*), which refers to Buddhism, Dung dkar blo bzang ’phrin las 2002, 1900.

62. Kapstein 2003, 777.

Poetic excellence as integral to the life of a scholar (*mkhas pa*) traces back to the influence of Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) who introduced *rikné* and the ideals that it carried to Tibetans in his *Gateway to Learning* (*Mkhas pa rnams 'jug pa'i sgo*).⁶³ Another text, *Complete Knowledge of Rikné* (*Rig gnas kun shes*) written by Taktsang Lotsawa Sherab Rinchen (Stag tshang lo tsa wa shes rab rin chen) and dated to 1477 argues that the five minor *rikné* were not found in Tibet until Sakya Paṇḍita (Sapan).⁶⁴ Drawing upon Sapan's biographical information, Taktsang Lotsawa explains that Sakya Paṇḍita was twenty-three when his father passed away and he went to Kyangtur (Rkyang thur) to make offerings to the monks for performing the funerary rites. On the way, he met the Kashmiri scholar Śākyaśrībhadrā and nine other Indian pundits, who instructed him in *rikné*. Some of these scholars stayed longer in Tibet and became fluent in Tibetan language. One of these scholars, Danasila, has about 25 texts credited to him for his translations in the Tibetan canon.⁶⁵ Sakya Paṇḍita also introduced Daṇḍin's *The Mirror of Poetry* to Tibetan scholars in his lifetime, but it was about two decades after his death that the translation was complete.

It was during this time that a cultural renaissance took place in Tibet due in part to the creative impulse brought about by translations of texts from India.⁶⁶ Susan Bassnett observes: "If we consider literary history in broad sweeps, then what becomes obvious straightaway is the central significance of translation in the movement of writing from one context to another. Great periods of innovation and change in writing are always linked to translation in some way."⁶⁷ In the realm of *kāvya* literary theory in Tibet, Tibetan scholars acknowledge the efforts of the translators Shongtön Dorjé Gyaltzen (Shong ston rdo rje rgyal mtshan, 1235?–1280?) and Pang Lodro Tenpa (Dpang blo gros brtan pa, 1276–1342) for bringing this art form to Tibet, as Alak Tséten Zhabdrung argues "their translation [of Daṇḍin's *Kāvyaḍarśa*] gradually led to a great development in the art of poetics [in Tibet]."⁶⁸ Shongtön Dorjé Gyaltzen also translated Kṣemendra's *Wish-Fulfilling Vine of Bodhisattva Avadānas* (Skt: *Avadānakalpalatā*, Tib. *Byang chub sems dpa'i rtogs pa brjod pa dpag bsam 'khri shing*) around 1270.⁶⁹

For much of Tibet's literary history, *nyen-ngak* was an elite form of writing associated with

63. Cf. Gold 2007.

64. *Stag tshang lo tsa ba she rab rin chen gyi gsung 'bum* 2007, 1: 11. Cf. Gedun Rabsal 2015.

65. Taktsang Lotsawa provides detailed information on the education that Sapan received, including which texts he studied with each Indian Pandit. Taktsang Lotsawa's sources included Sapan's own letter to Chag lo chos rje dpal (1197–1263/4). Among the teachers, he studied texts on the literary arts of the five minor fields of knowledge with Sugatasri, Sanghasri and Danasila. See also Sa paN kun dga' rgyal mtshan gyi gsung 'bum, 1992, 3: 535–557.

66. For more on the role of complex political and social history of Buddhist rulers during this period of time, see Kapstein 2006, 84–123.

67. Bassnett 2011, 33.

68. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 24.

69. Cf. Lin 2011; Schaeffer 2009, 89–90.

the prestige of *lotsāwa*, translators of the Buddhist canon, and monastic scholars. Alak Tséten Zhabdrung recognizes that polymaths in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism used *nyen-ngak*, but he particularly praised scholars within his own Geluk tradition as “masters of speech.” Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), posthumously considered the founder of the Geluk,⁷⁰ wrote two famous *avadāna* in *kāvya*-style writing including: *The Wish-fulfilling Tree of Poetics: An Avadāna of the Perpetually Crying Bodhisattva* (*Byang chub sems dpa’ rtag ngu’i rtogs brjod snyan dngags dpag bsam gyi ljon pa*) and *A Mountain of Poetic Blessings: An Avadāna of Bodhisattva Drakpa Jangchup* (1356–1386) (*Spyan snga grags pa byang chub dpal bzang po’i rtogs brjod snyan dngags byin rlabs kyī lhun po*). Other famous works of *avadāna* written in *kāvya* include: Rinpungpa Ngawang Jigdrak’s (Rin spungs pa ngag dbang ’jig grags, 1482–1595?) *Auspicious Path in the Fortunate Eon: An Avadāna of Sakya Pandita* (*Sa paN rtogs brjod bskal legs lam*) and Dokharwa Tséring Wangyal’s (Mdo mkhar ba tshe ring dbang rgyal, 1697–1763) *Biography of Polhané Miwang Sonam Topgyal* (*Dpal mi’i dbang po’i rtogs pa brjod pa ’jig rten kun tu dga’ ba’i gtam*).⁷¹ This short list of Tibetan literary masterpieces indicates some of the prestige that *avadāna* and *kāvya* enjoyed among Tibet’s Buddhist monastic elite.⁷² “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” taps into this poetic fount of Buddhist knowledge and literary prestige.

In the first section of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” after elliptically lamenting the loss of Buddhist teachers in Tibet, the author reiterates the genre invoking the goddess of poetry and song—Sarasvatī:

For this darting flash, ribbon lightning of a taste-organ to be purposeful,
on the strings of Sarasvatī’s lute, I play
a little *avadāna* song to the Omniscient One.
Faithful ones, prick your ears up! (1.11)

In this stanza, the implied subject, the act of poetic composition, is expressed through the metaphor of playing the lute of Sarasvatī. The Indian goddess of poetry and knowledge orients the reader toward India, the origin of *kāvya*, *avadāna*, and Buddhism. This stanza also showcases another type of literary technique that emerged in Tibetan discourse around the same time as the first translations of *avadāna*: the use of *ngön jö* (*mngon brjod*) or “kennings,” one of the minor fields of learning. Also found in ancient Nordic poetry, kennings use circumlocution so that, for example, a compound noun expressed in figurative language represents something else, such as “rain-holder” (*chu ’dzin*) for “cloud”. The kenning “taste-organ” (*ro ’dzin*) is another word for

70. Cf. Lopez 1997, 28; Dreyfus 2003, 25–29.

71. See also Gyatso 1998, 6.

72. Martin (2014, 570–571) points out some scholars were ambivalent about *kāvya* on doctrinal grounds so much so that Daṅḍin who was synonymous with this writing style was re-imagined as a Buddhist by some scholars.

“tongue.” This verse seems to indicate that this *avadāna* should be sung like a song accompanying the lute, as if a degree of orality was involved in the poem’s composition—perhaps a voicing of the written verses. The first section of the poem sets the stage, introduces the subject and genre, and also addresses potential audience of this text, Buddhists familiar with Indo-Tibetan literary conventions.

The content of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” creates a literary mandala surrounding the shared birthplace of Panchen Lama and the poet. The perimeter is set by mountains, the topic of five stanzas of section two. Each stanza begins with a compass direction followed by depictions of a particular peak or mountain range in that location. The compass points are relative to the Panchen Lama’s birthplace at the center of Amdo, one of the three *cholka* (chol kha) (2.1) of the Tibetan cultural realm. Tongri (Stong-ri) Mountain Range lies to the east (2.3) and the craggy Trabchen (Khrab-chen) Mountain is to the south (2.4). The holy Tsongkha Mountain Range rests in the west (2.5) and Dentik Mountain and retreat center is in the north (2.6). Within the mandala, sections three and four highlight the Buddhist history of this area and how Tibetans came to live here. Alak Tséten Zhabdrung poetically explains how *Bho ta*, a Tibetanized Sanskrit rendering of “Tibetan,” “were sent as border guards at the time of our ancestral Dharma Kings” (4.8). These stanzas create a sacred literary space for meeting “the glorious golden mountain, the holy body,” of the Panchen Lama at his birthplace in Bīdo Monastery in section five. In section six, Alak Tséten Zhabdrung and the Panchen Lama travel to Ewam Retreat at Karing Monastery, the former monastic center of Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s guru, Marnang Dorjé chang Jigme Damchö Gyatso (Mar nang Rdo rje ‘chang ‘Jig med dam chos rgya mtsho) who had passed away in 1946.

Reoccurring motifs of beautiful objects, such as flowers and jewels, become literary offerings to show veneration of the Buddha, Dharma, sangha, and the guru. Oceans serve as representations of the expansive knowledge of the guru, the author’s teachers—a prominent theme throughout the poem. *Kāvya* wordplay creates the Buddhist landscape in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” a literary and cultural world that wouldn’t have been possible without acts of translation. As Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s commentary on Daṇḍin’s classic argues, “before the *Kāvyaḍarśa* was translated into Tibetan, it was as difficult as embroidering silk on to coarsely-woven Tibetan flannel to apply literary devices such as puns and caesura in Tibetan-language.”⁷³ The poet draws upon phonetic word play to show his veneration toward his guru. By placing dots under the syllables of his teacher’s name Jik-mé-dam-chö-gya-tso (‘Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho), he poetically underscores Buddhist values embodied by his teacher. Our translation underlines the English word which corresponds to the syllables of his name in Tibetan and includes the phonetic transcription of his name at the end of the stanza.

73. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 24.

Filled with pure jewels possessing the Four Fearlessnesses,
Replete with drops of Dharma, a series of waves of sacredness,
I find refuge in the unfathomable depth of extensive virtues,
the great ocean of the Dharma, Jigme Damchö Gyatso. (6.2).

The choice in genre, topic, writing style, and intended audience of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” all underscore the prestige of Tibetan Buddhist literary history.

The narrative of the Panchen Lama’s journey throughout the sacred Buddhist landscape of Amdo is interrupted by a brief reminder of the real political situation in section six, when a monster “opened its wrathful mouth as wide as the space between the earth and sky” and “its teeth, weapons of fangs, ate irrevocably and ferociously!” (6.9).

This stanza reminds us that Alak Tséten Zhabdrung and the Tenth Panchen Lama were among the few of the educated monastic elite to survive relentless political campaigns of the Maoist era. Prior to their reunion in the summer of 1980, they had last shared each other’s company approximately twenty years earlier, in 1961, when the Panchen Lama had last toured the area around his birthplace. At that time, he found people starving—a tragic result of the failed socialist policies of 1958. After detailing these findings to Mao Zedong and other Chinese Communist Party leaders in his 70,000 Character Petition, the Panchen Lama was purged, defrocked, and publicly humiliated in struggle sessions in Beijing and then disappeared.⁷⁴ During the high point of Maoism, only Mao Zedong’s works in Tibetan were permitted to be published. Countless sacred texts were destroyed and all Tibetan language works were labeled as “poisonous weeds,” as something to be discarded.⁷⁵ The Panchen Lama was released in October 1977. Alak Tséten Zhabdrung met a similar fate; he was jailed at Nantan Prison in the provincial capital of Xining from 1965 until 1976, when he was released for medical parole. After they each physically recovered from illnesses due to imprisonment and were rehabilitated politically, they like a few other living lamas became beacons of hope that Tibetan culture could and would survive in the People’s Republic of China—even though the terms of this survival were contested and would remain so long after their deaths.⁷⁶ By the summer of 1980, the two Buddhist lamas could meet again even though outer displays of religious life were still controlled.

In the 1980s, The Panchen Lama himself was a key figure in supporting the revival of Tibetan literature and language arts. The visceral tone of a 1988 speech exemplifies how he dismisses the rhetoric of “backwardness” and advocates taking pride in Tibetan traditional epistemologies:⁷⁷

74. Cf. Barnett 1997, i–10.

75. Cf. Pema Bhum 2001.

76. Cf. Makley 2007.

77. Cf. Tsering Shakya 2004, for how ethnic-national pride becomes a major theme in modern Tibetan literature.

Tibetan written language was developed about 1,300 years ago. From then to 1959—whether we remained backward or made mistakes—we managed our life on the world’s highest plateau by using only Tibetan. Whether the Tibetan written language is adequate or not, we had everything written in our own language, be it Buddhism, crafts, astronomy, astrology, poems, logic. All administrative works were also done in Tibetan.⁷⁸

In the same year a volume dedicated to Tibetan literature, *Ingots of Gold* (1988), published “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” in full alongside annotations. Its editors call out those scholars who claim that there is no such thing as Tibetan literature:

Under these circumstances, there have been some immature intellectuals, narrow in their learning and prejudiced, who have said that the Tibetan nationality has no traditions of literary composition. And some others have said that the literary traditions of the Tibetan nationality are limited to the aphorisms of Sakya Paṇḍita, the Vetala stories, or perhaps some historical tales.⁷⁹

“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” exemplifies the revival of Indic-Tibetan forms of literature in the post-Mao era and how Buddhist lamas rekindled the remaining ashes of the Dharma to begin the *yang dar* era, a period of the re-diffusion of the Dharma.⁸⁰ In the final section of this essay, we closely examine particular examples of *kāvya* literary figures in *Avadāna* of Silver Flowers.”

The Ethics of Literary Translation in Tibetan Studies

Above we presented a bilingual translation of sections of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers.” We also recognized that it may be a challenging text to understand for Tibetan and Anglophone readers alike. As part of a larger effort to implement anti-colonial practices in world literature, we suggested decoupling objective values from aesthetic principles and that “good taste” is a capacity that develops with practice. This can serve to open up discursive pathways to highlight and appreciate Tibetan Indigenous aesthetic and epistemic values on their own terms. In this case, translation becomes the gateway to develop sensory appreciation of Tibetan *kāvya* style poetry. Encompass-

78. Panchen Lama, “Tibetan religion and culture should be the foundation of Tibetology,” in DIIR 2003, 72.

79. Translated and cited in Kapstein 2003, 790.

80. Willock 2021, 66-68; Makley 2018, 60-61.

ing complex and creative processes, literary translation provides the means by which to access often fruitful exchanges of ideas and systems of knowledge.⁸¹

A unique and fascinating translation opportunity presents itself due to the degree of intertextuality found within “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers.” Although this poem is modeled after “*Avadāna* of Golden Flowers,” and they are similar in terms of style, subject matter, and genre, there is also a stark difference between them. Unlike its literary model, the poetic flow of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” is occasionally interrupted with the annotation of a particular literary embellishment used within the stanza. By providing this detail, the poet thereby alludes to his *A General Commentary on Poetics* (*Snyan ngag spyi don*), a commentary and textbook on Daṇḍin’s classic.⁸² The point of this deliberate intertextuality seems to showcase Tibetan literary aesthetics for a readership that was unfamiliar with these techniques, that is the generation of students whom the poet himself educated in *nyen-ngak* at universities in China.⁸³

This literary intertextuality provides us translators with a valuable tool that can be used to highlight the particular uses of language in those stanzas. This is significant because most *kāvya* masters will use a variety of figures within a composition without explicitly identifying them. The one type of text that explicitly shows and mentions these types of literary figures is a genre called “expressions of examples” (*dper brjod*), which is known for its didactic purpose.⁸⁴ The insertion of the literary figures within “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” indicates that the poet has a didactic purpose. This is also helpful for our translation practice because by drawing upon Tséten Zhabdrung’s explanation of these literary figures in *A General Commentary on Poetics*, we are able to hone our translation in a way that highlights the particular attributes of the literary figure that might otherwise go undetected. Dawa Lodrö, the head editor of *Light Rain* literary magazine described his experience of learning about these literary figures from Tséten Zhabdrung as follows: “It was like suddenly being awoken from a deep sleep. These *śloka* [couplets in his *A Commentary on Poetics*] were like keys. Once you had the key in your hands, then you could open any lock.”⁸⁵ Our translation of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers,” particularly the stanzas with intertextual insertions of literary figures, hands us translators these keys. In other words, as an ethical imperative, we consciously approach our translation practice with a focus on the particular linguistic features of Tibetan language. These include interesting uses of familiar poetic techniques such as metaphor and similes as well as other literary techniques not found in English poetics, some of which are easily understood in the English language.

“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” features two of twenty different types of metaphor (*rūpaka*

81. Cf. Venuti 2017; Bassnett 2011; Bellos 2011.

82. Willock 2021, 29–30.

83. Willock 2021, 211–216.

84. Pema Bhum and Janet Gyatso 2022. I am grateful to Janet Gyatso for sharing a draft of this with me.

85. Cited in Willock 2021, 215–216.

alamkāra, gzugs rgyan).⁸⁶ A metaphor in Tibetan discourse consists of two basic parts: a “tenor” (*upameya, dpe can*), which is a technical term for the subject of the metaphor that can be either explicitly mentioned or implied; and a “vehicle” (*upamāna, dpe*), which is the technical term for the way to illustrate the metaphor and usually can’t be taken literally. Often in English we refer to the vehicle and metaphor synonymously; however, in Tibetan language usage, the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle is crucial to understanding the differences between types of metaphors.

As noted above, the first example of literary intertextuality in “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” is a “metaphor of concealing reality” (*tattvāpahnava rūpaka, bsnyon dor gzugs can gyi rgyan*). This type of metaphor switches the anticipated role between tenor and the vehicle for emphasis as it changes perspective on the subject. The following example from an English translation of Daṇḍin’s treatise illustrates this well: “A face is not a face, but is a lotus.”⁸⁷ In this type of metaphor, the expected tenor, “a face,” is deliberately denied, and instead a vehicle that often is used to illustrate the tenor, e.g., a “lotus” becomes the tenor. Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s textbook provides another example:

This is not your body, but a lotus grove;
it is not your voice, but the songs of *gandharvas*;
it is not your primordial wisdom, but the vastness of the sky;
it is not a common person, but an emanation of a deva.⁸⁸

The verse in “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” uses the metaphor of concealing reality to shift the focus from the poem to the power of speech. The usual vehicles to describe poetry such as Lord Brahmā’s vocals or the Lotus-born goddess Sarasvatī’s melody become tenors:

This is not some happy, naive lyrical song,
but is the reverberations of Lord Brahmā’s vocals.
It is not an artificial mumbo jumbo rambling of words,
but is the Lotus-born goddess⁸⁹ joyous melody.
It is not the jibber jabber of indiscriminate noise,
but is an *avadāna* about a great holy being.
It is not boasting with fine exaggerations,

86. This enumeration is found in Tseten Zhabdrung’s *A General Commentary on Poetics*. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 71–75.

87. Eppling (1989, 667) explains “the actuality of an object serving as a *upameya* is denied” and “its conceived *upamāna* is explicitly confirmed,” e.g., “a face is not a face, but a lotus.”

88. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 75: འདི་ནི་ཚོད་ལུས་མ་ཡིན་པ་ལྟའི་ལྷོན།། ངག་གི་སྒྲ་གདངས་མ་ཡིན་དྲི་བའི་གྲུ།། སེམས་ཀྱི་རིག་པ་མ་ཡིན་ནམ་མཁའི་སྐོང་།། སོ་སྟེ་ཕལ་བ་མ་ཡིན་ལྟའི་སྐུལ་བ།།

89. An epithet for Sarasvatī, the goddess of literature and music. She is called Yangchenma in Tibetan.

but is replete with topics pouring out the truth! (1.10)
Metaphor that conceals reality (*tattvāpahna rūpaka*).

In this way, Lord Brahmā and his daughter, the Lotus-born goddess, Sarasvatī lend their voices to give this *avadāna* the spiritual power to pour out the truth.

“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” crescendos in the longest part of the poem, “section seven: the Wondrous Words on Traveling to Gyashu at the Invitation of the Common People and the Community of Dentik Monastery, the First Sacred Place in Amdo.” Many of these verses are not “thick with vines of words” (7.28), that is they lack the literary flourishes that otherwise pepper “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers.” These verses are written in a straightforward way to describe the poignancy of the Buddhist ceremonies held at Gyashu, the birthplace of Gongpa Rab sel (Dgong pa rab gsal, fl. 10th century), a key figure in the Buddhist renaissance.⁹⁰ In the lead-up to this ritual, Alak Tséten Zhabdrung uses a “metaphor of attributes” (*cha shas gzugs can gyi rgyan*):⁹¹

When pressed down by the burden of my passing youth,
The cuckoo bird of my throat hid in the Mon forest;⁹²
However, by my mind, faith, and strong yearning,
I played the melodious instrument for dedication prayers. (7.26)
(Metaphor of attributes (Skt. *avayava rūpaka*).)

In this literary figure, the actual tenor of the metaphor is implied based on parallel characteristics. “My throat” is an attribute of the implied tenor of the metaphor, Alak Tséten Zhabdrung’s aging body. Similar to how the cuckoo bird is hidden far-away in the forest of Mon in southern Tibet, and therefore cannot be heard clearly, his voice is not as clear and resonant as it once was in his youth. Nonetheless, motivated by his faith and the desire to see his guru, he finds the strength to use his voice, a melodious instrument, for reciting prayers before the Panchen Lama—the high-point of this poem.

Section two, as noted above, creates the literary mandala around the Panchen Lama’s birthplace. Three different literary figures are featured in this section of the poem to describe this sacred landscape. One of these is called an “illuminator,” which Tséten Zhabdrung defines as “a word or phrase, which is either a genus, action, attribute, or substance, so that when connected to the

90. Davidson 2005, 88–89.

91. Eppling (1989) explains that according to Daṇḍin’s treatise this type of metaphor uses “parallels that invoke attributes of an unexpressed *upamāna*” (613).

92. Here Mon Forests indicates that his voice is no longer strong.

remaining phrases illuminates or clarifies the entire stanza. The illuminator, the word or phrase that clarifies, can be located in any position: the beginning, middle, or end of a line.”⁹³ Our translation follows Tibetan syntax closely:

Exquisitely made are:
the “South-North” expanse of mother-earth⁹⁴
 in the lap of Great Brahmā’s paradise, the Wisdom Mirror,⁹⁵
and likewise, springtime in the glorious gardens of the heavenly realm,
 the essence of mother-earth’s “South-North” in Dokham (2.8)
(Illuminator of action in the initial foot)

This beautiful landscape north and south of the Machu River replete with enduring Buddhist traditions is compared using two phrases. The first describes the heavenly realm of the deity Brahmā and the second refers to the springtime gardens in heaven. “Exquisitely made...” serves as the verbal “illuminator” that ties the two other incomplete ideas together in a stanza. Here is another example of a verbal illuminator in the first foot:

Expanding are:
thick vines of moonflowers
 by the dripping of the moon’s cooling rays;
discriminating awareness of all intelligent people
 by the key of your good teachings.⁹⁶

This figure connects two different ideas through a common verbal action, which is placed in the first line to clarify two other ideas in the stanza. Bringing them together serves to enhance the

93. Tshe tan Zhab drung 2005, 75–76; Cf. Eppling (1989, 672) explains *dīpaka* in Daṇḍin’s *Kāvyaadarśa*, as “this is a word or phrase that completes or illuminates or connects a series of incomplete parallel thoughts.” Understanding the “genus” (Skt. *jāti*, Tib. *rigs*), “action” (*kriya*, *bya ba*), “attribute” (*guṇa*, *yon tan*) or “substance” (*dravya*, *rdzas*) quadripartite division of objects for comparison is a key component of Daṇḍin’s *kāvya* theory. Tshe tan zhab drung (2005, 38–41) explains these in the section on “*rang bzhin brjod pa’i rgyan*” (Skt. *svabhāvokti alamkāra*), which translates as “expressing inherent nature [of the referent/tenor].”

94. “lho byang” is the region “south” (lho) and north (byang) of the Ma Chu (River). Xunhua lies on the southern banks of the Ma Chu.

95. see note 37.

96. Tshe tan Zhab drung 2005, 76: ལྷུ་མ་པ་བྱས་སོ་གྲན་དེའི་ནྤགས་སྒྲང་ཆེ།། བསིལ་བའི་བཟུ་འཇག་པའི་ལྷ་བས་ཉི།། ལྷོ་གསལ་གྲན་གྱི་རྣམ་པར་དཔྱད་པ་ཡང་།། ལྷོ་གྱི་ལེགས་པར་བཤད་པའི་ལྷུ་མས་སོ།།

appreciation of the main topic, the mandala of sacred space that is the shared birthplace of the Panchen Lama and Tséten Zhabdrung.

The next type of literary annotation involves a pair of similes describing this mandala as a heavenly realm. The first stanza is written with the “simile expressing doubt” (*samśaya upamā*, *the tshom gyi dpe*) and the second is penned with the “simile expressing decisiveness” (*nirṇaya upamā*, *gtan ’bebs kyi dpe*). The first type of simile creates confusion, which is then clarified by the decisiveness of the second:

What’s this? Have we climbed the ladder
to higher realms—to the land of Indra, Lord of the Triple World,
or have we opened the gateway to the gardens
in the city of the Nāga?
My mind sways to and fro like a palanquin. (2.12)
(Simile expressing doubt)

Since in this place, the sun causes heat of the day,
and the moon bestows coolness at night,
I neither saw the realms of Gods nor Nāga, so
This certainly is the land south of the Machu. (2.13)
(Simile expressing decisiveness)

By comparing the landscape with a heavenly realm, he creates a sense of wonder in the first stanza. The second stanza brings this divine land to earth as the Panchen Lama’s birthplace south of the Machu (Rma klung, a branch of the Yellow River). Tséten Zhabdrung’s textbook also presents these two similes as a pair:

This movement--flashes uninterruptedly,
Is not lightning since it’s on the ground,
Since handwriting appears in flashing traces,
It must be your fingertips moving.⁹⁷

The first simile identifies and denies a possible topic—it can’t be lightning. The second simile decisively clarifies the actual subject—the flashing pen of a writer.

Section six of “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” features two intertextual literary figures. According

97. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 52–53. མ་ཐོགས་འཁྲུག་པའི་རྣམ་འགྱུར་འདི། ས་ན་ཡོད་ཕྱིར་སློག་ཞགས་མིན། འཁྲུགས་ལྷལ་ཡིག་རིས་
འཆར་བས་ན། རྩོད་ཀྱི་མཚུང་ཚེ་བསྐྱོད་པར་ངེས།

to *The Mirror of Poetry*, they are part of a trinity of literary embellishments that Daṇḍin argues “display excellent intensity.”⁹⁸ These three are: “affectionate utterance,” “rasa-laden statement,” and “haughty declaration.”⁹⁹ Two literary figures of this trio are found in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers”: “affectionate utterance” (*preyas*, *dga’ ba’i rgyan*) and “laden with affective states” (*rasavat*, *nyams ldan*). Both serve to intensify emotions or psychological states according to Daṇḍin’s treatise.

As noted above, the narrative flow with its focus on the Buddhist landscape is interrupted by a stanza in section six that indirectly addresses the Maoist years using the metaphor of a monster. Alak Tséten Zhabdrung however does not identify the literary figure at work in this stanza as a type of metaphor. After the stanza “on the monster of the era of cruelty” (6.9), he inserts that this is a literary figure that is “laden with a *rasa* of fear” (Tib. *’jigs rung gi nyams kyi rgyan*). This is one of eight different types of *rasavat* or “rasa-laden” literary figures. Daṇḍin was an early theorist of the magnificent *rasa* aesthetic tradition in classical India.¹⁰⁰ Tséten Zhabdrung’s *A General Commentary on Poetics* follows Daṇḍin’s treatment of *rasa* as related to the “eight dramatic rasas.” Emotions are intensified when that state of mind is made manifest through either a verbal or physical reaction. Each affective statement has a corresponding physical reaction so the emotion of fear will manifest as gestures of timidity or fear in the body or speech.¹⁰¹ The physical reaction to that inner emotion becomes the ‘taste’ of the aesthetic experience. Tséten Zhabdrung describes this as “when the body and speech can’t help but expressing those emotions through erratic breathing, smiling automatically, or crinkling one’s brow.”¹⁰² The use of the “fear-laden” literary figure may remind readers of the corporeal fear caused by the violence of the Maoist era.

“*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” features another type of literary embellishment that heightens emotion called “affectionate utterance” (*preyas alamkāra*, *dga’ ba’i rgyan*).¹⁰³ *A General Commentary on Poetics* describes this as “through the expression of an extraordinary joy, this figure of speech makes its meaning understood or known.”¹⁰⁴ Two subtypes of “affectionate utterances” are

98. Eppling 1989, 1089.

99. The third member of this trio: the embellishment of “the haughty declaration” (Skt.: *ūrjasvin*) is not mentioned in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers.” Cf. Pollock 2016, 59; Eppling 1989, 1147.

100. More research is needed to determine how and if *rasa* theory developed further beyond Daṇḍin’s interpretation in Tibet. Pollock (2016, 59) explains that Daṇḍin *uses* *rasa* in “three largely unrelated senses: as a general term for ‘tasteful’ or sweet, poetic style; second, as a term referring to any ‘sophisticated’ turn of phrase, both usages being part of a broader literary theory of poetic language; third, as a technical term [...]” This technical term is *rasavat*, “rasa-laden” (Pollock 2016, 61); this is the poetic example given in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers.”

101. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 15–16.

102. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 15.

103. Translation by Pollock 2014, 61.

104. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 87.

identified: one with hope (*re ba dang bcas pa'i dga' ba*) and one without (*re ba med pa'i dga' ba*). Tséten Zhabdrung's example similar to “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” expresses the joy of a reunion:

Merely a glimpse lets loose a joyful smile and
prior karmic ties of a close friend are restored instantly.
My friend, it is hard to find another example to match this
joy of your arrival before me.¹⁰⁵

Utmost delight in this stanza is intensified¹⁰⁶ when he writes he can't find another example of joy that compares with that experienced by the arrival of his friend. In this type of literary figure comparisons are exaggerated to highlight that nothing else compares to the feast before his eyes—the magnificent grace offered by the presence of His Holiness Panchen Rinpoche:

Not satiated by seeing the marks of your Buddha body;
Not contented with listening to the Sitar's sound of your speech;
Such a feast as this can only be provided by you
O Treasure of Compassion, please, come, again and again! (6.19)

This affectionate utterance serves to intensify the joy of seeing the Treasure of Compassion, the Panchen Lama. As noted above, for Alak Tséten Zhabdrung when a poem effectively evokes a physical sensation associated with an emotion, then a poem “has taste” (*nyams dang ldan pa*) and by increasing “taste” (*nyams*) poetry becomes particularly exceptional.”¹⁰⁷

Other examples of intertextuality found in “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” are not so easily conveyed through translation. These include allusions to sutra (*mdo*) from the great treasures of Buddhist literature in the Tibetan cultural world. Consider for example, this stanza on Dentik Monastery:

North of the Machu, young prince Döndrup
accomplished the Perfection of Generosity at
Dentik, the Crystal Mountain, the sacred place of siddhas,
where forms of fearsome yakṣa appear naturally. (2.5)

105. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 87.

106. Although it is beyond the scope of this project to make any real comparisons between the reception of Daṇḍin's work in India and that in Tibet, it is interesting that Ratnashrijnana's commentary mentions that the comparative suffix is used to denote intensity (Pollock 2016, 61). Both of the Tibetan examples also use comparison, but there is no comparative suffix in Tibetan language.

107. Tshe tan zhabs drung 2005, 22: ལྷན་ངག་གི་ཉམས་ཆེས་བྱང་པར་དུ་འཕགས་པར་འགྱུར།

The Young Bodhisattva Döndrup refers to a previous life of the Siddhartha Gautama in the *Sutra on Bodhisattva Arthasiddhi*.¹⁰⁸ This is one version of the famous *jātaka* tales or rebirth stories which center on Vessantara as the main protagonist. Here Vessantara/Prince Döndrup was exiled to Dentik Monastery for his excessive largesse in giving away his father's entire kingdom. This act was necessary to prove that he mastered generosity, one of the Six Perfections. Tséten Zhabdrung's personal residence at Dentik Monastery is built in front of the Prince's Cave (*raja phug*), where the monks of Dentik believe that Prince Döndrup achieved the meditative accomplishments preparing the bodhisattva for the future birth where he would attain enlightenment. In fact a copy of this sūtra in a Tibetan manuscript from Dunhuang (IOL Tib J 76) attests to the fact that this story and the occurrence of the name of Dentik (Dantig) in it was known in the tenth century.¹⁰⁹

The final section of “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” also has intertextual references that are not easily translated. We find in this section allusions to the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* (*Mdo mdzangs blun*). Stanley Frye points out in his introduction to the translation of the Tibetan version that these narratives highlight the karma created by a misdeed in a former life. Frye states, “The theme of each narrative is the same: the tragedy of the human condition, the reason for this tragedy, and the possibility of transcending it.”¹¹⁰ Alak Tséten Zhabdrung makes comparisons between the story of “Vajra, the Daughter of King Prasenjit” (*Rgyal po gsal rgyal gyi bu mo do rje ma*) and the visit of Panchen Rinpoche to his family residence (8.10–8.15). In the *jātaka*, Vajra calls to the Buddha in order to realize her past karma. By having faith, she is graced with insight into a past life, which we learn had to do with her negative speech about the body of *pratyekabuddha*. Upon having insight into her former sins, she is transformed into a beautiful woman. A female familial member of Tséten Zhabdrung's, perhaps his sister or cousin, who was born with a physical disability, is compared to Vajra. The Panchen Lama similarly acts compassionately toward her:

This occurrence, unless personally witnessed
 who would believe it, if this was told through someone else?
 With this small act of great being,
 we are fortunate to see this in person.(8.15)

After acknowledging the preciousness of the moment of seeing the Panchen Lama's compassion in person, “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” concludes with prayers for the long-life of Panchen Lama (8.16–18). These later two examples are allusions to stories in the Tibetan Buddhist canon and highlight how cultural references present a different kind of difficulty for translators. Nonethe-

108. Tib. “Phags pa rgyal bu don grub kyi mdo” in *Bka' gyur (sde dge par phud)*, mdo sde, volume aH (76). BDRC W22084.

109. Galabos and van Schaik 2015, 479–481.

110. Stanley Frye 1981, vii.

less, by giving attention to cultural references and particular literary figures found in these verses, the rich literary world of Tibet becomes more accessible to Anglophone readers.

Concluding Remarks

Continuing a long tradition of poetic excellence for Buddhist monastic scholars, “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” is one of the earliest examples of the revival of Tibetan literature in the post-Mao era. Situated at once within an elite discursive lineage, “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” also lies on the margins of a nation-state discourse which disparaged literary Tibetan traditions as feudal and backward.

The decade after it was written saw renewed activity of Tibetan language publishing houses and an emphasis on the language arts of five minor *rikné*. “*Kāvya*, as it turns out,” Matthew Kapstein emphasizes, “has been one of the areas in which Tibetan cultural confrontation with the Tibetan past and with the challenges of modernity has been keenly felt.”¹¹¹ Tibetan intellectuals who were the first to graduate with degrees in Tibetan Studies and had received formal training in the Tibetan language from the great scholars of the previous generation (such as Tséten Zhabdrung, Dungkar Losang Trinley, and Mugé Samten, among others) also began to debate the parameters of “literature” vis-à-vis *kāvya* at this time. Luran Hartley’s brilliant dissertation details the key figures and debates in the discursive formation of “literature” (*rtsom yig*) in Tibetan language discourse.¹¹² As Tibetan intellectuals debated on how to reassess the parameters of literature and culture in the post-Mao era, they also had to constantly legitimize their efforts within state-sanctioned discourse. By elevating Tibetan literary aesthetics embedded within the epistemic system of *rikné*, “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” was one of the earliest texts to glorify Tibetan civilization at this time, and thereby flout the Chinese state’s rhetoric on the backwardness of Tibet. Tibetans are not alone in their resistance to the hegemony of colonialism.

We view the example “*Avadāna of Silver Flowers*” as part of a larger discourse on decolonization because this foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies of literary aesthetics. We are indebted to insights from *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and from an argument in philosophy of aesthetics that decouples objective values from aesthetic principles, which help us open up discursive space for Tibetan Indigenous aesthetic and epistemic values in English translation. In the post-Mao era, Alak Tséten Zhabdrung and the Panchen Lama, among other Tibetan Buddhist elites, rekindled the remaining ashes of the Dharma to usher in a new Buddhist era, the re-diffu-

111. Kapstein 2003, 788.

112. Hartley 2003, 276–310.

sion of the Dharma. “*Avadāna* of Silver Flowers” recreates the enduring Buddhist landscape with the Panchen Lama at the center of this literary mandala to reclaim Tibetan territory.

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