

Letter from the Editors

Andrew Quintman & Kurtis R. Schaeffer

In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Tibetan Literature*, we suggested that the journal's name "is meant to direct attention to the literary qualities of Tibetan texts—that is, to places where a self-awareness of forms, structures, and styles seems to break through the page, and in which those attributes become central to the creation of meaning and its impact on readers." Moreover, we reflected that one response to the challenge of determining such literary qualities might be to "consider how Tibetan writers have exploited the intricacies and richness of language to evoke a vivid and diverse range of human experiences." The contributions to the present issue nicely illustrate the richness and variety of Tibetan expression across a range of genres and historical periods. Through them we see no less than four different types of intellectual work that literary concerns bear upon: philosophy, historiography, politics, and translation theory and practice. In each of these realms, aesthetic and literary qualities of the written word emerge front and center, albeit in distinctive ways.

In his essay "History for the Future: Politics and Aesthetics in the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Cuckoo's Song*," Ian MacCormack reflects on the self-conscious and self-reflective poetic qualities in the Fifth Dalai Lama's 1643 political history the *Cuckoo's Song* (*Dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs*), a work long recognized for its complexity, erudition, and style. In doing so, he makes the case that this example of "literary historiography" adopts a high aesthetic register in pursuit of specific political ends. The piece foregrounds the text's careful deployment of language, which—MacCormack argues—serves "as a means for not only documenting but also making history." The recording of the past and the aesthetic modes for doing so are, in this case, inextricably intertwined.

Khenpo Yeshe's article, "The Origins of the *Dzogchen Eleven Words and Meanings*: Comparing Nyima Bum, Longchenpa, and Rikzin Gödemchen," details the deft playfulness at work in a little-known twelfth-century treatise on Great Perfection thought, and its unacknowledged impact on later, better-known Great Perfection writers such as Longchenpa (1308–1364) and Gödemchen (1337–1408). Nyima Bum, for instance, takes up the common rubric for identifying and defining Indian Buddhist scripture, the five "excellences" of speaker, audience, teaching, setting, and time to link his own writings to the authoritative past of Indian Buddhist writing, only to turn this five-fold rubric on its head. The setting is in fact no-setting, the audience is no-audience,

the time no-time. “The teacher,” as Nyima Bum challenges his readers to use language to critique itself, “is the primal mode of existence, since it lacks even a word that could be a basis for elaborating.” He goes further in destabilizing the first order claims of this list, averring that “not even the name for elaboration can be established!” Khenpo Yeshe’s article signals the extent to which Longchenpa’s famous philosophical writing, the *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, is based on Nyima Bum’s work, thereby giving us a concrete example of the continuities of style and content within philosophical writing.

Turning to a contemporary composition, Tsering Woese’s extended poem-cycle “Notes on a Plague Year,” translated by Ian Boyden, illustrates the power of language as written and published in real time. Beginning in early 2021, and over the course of 43 consecutive days, Woese composed and then posted to Twitter discrete poems—one per day—reflecting the physical and emotional turmoil caused by the emerging Covid pandemic in China. Boyden translated each poem in turn as it was posted. Collectively, the poem-cycle encapsulates Woese’s experience during the pandemic, reflecting the fear, heartache, anger, and uncertainty shared by many around the globe. But it does so with a distinctive Tibetan voice, steeped in Buddhist imagery and refracting the looming presence of China. Like most of Woese’s work, the poems were composed in Chinese, but they are repeatedly punctuated by Tibetan words that force “her Chinese readers to hold those words for a moment on their own tongue, a reminder of what it is that they are actively erasing.” Ultimately, Boyden notes, the poems seem to adopt the ritual function of prayer that offer “an opportunity to discern good and evil, and in that discernment decide who we are, and what kind of world we wish to live in.”

Patrick Dowd and Khenpo Kelsang Dhondup’s translation of the latter’s own work, “Incomparable Guide,” offers a contemporary take on a classic genre, the Buddhist poem of praise. While many praise poems of the past highlight the celestial nature and attributes of their objects of praise, Khenpo Kelsang Dhondup’s poem concentrates instead on the philosophical and ethical deeds of the Buddha. No Heaven of the Thirty-Three begins this poem. The Buddha does not descend on a celestial staircase after teaching his deceased mother, nor does he grow to the height of seven tall trees in the final moments of his life on earth. Rather, Khenpo Kelsang Dhondup’s Buddha addresses the existential challenges of human beings, the suffering and ignorance that are foundational to modernist global portrayals of what Buddhism is all about. In this sense, Dhondup’s poem provides a wonderful example of how old literary forms can shape new content to meet the exigencies of the author’s time.

In his essay “On the House: Twenty Years of Online Tibetan Translation,” Adam S. Pearcey traces the history of Lotsawa House from its inception two decades ago to its current polyglot repository of translations into Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, along with the original Tibetan. He reflects on the processes and practices of translating Tibetan Buddhist literature as well as the complexities of editing a web-based library that holds

2,500 discrete translations of works by more than 300 authors and spanning some 200 topics. Pearcey stresses the importance of editorial consistency across the corpus of publications even as each individual translation reflects the specific linguistic and stylistic considerations of text and translator.

The issue includes a transcript of JTL's interview with leading Bhutanese scholar Karma Phuntsho, from a wide-ranging conversation about the golden age of Bhutanese literary production, the continuing prominence of oral literature in Bhutan's cultural landscape, and the category of "Tibetan literature" itself. The issue concludes with an artist's statement by Tsering Wooser, whose stunning photograph appears on the cover.

Andy & Kurtis

