Interview with Pema Bhum

JTL Editors

Pema Bhum is an intellectual, writer, editor, and publisher who has authored numerous essays and two memoirs of the Cultural Revolution. He recently published his first novel *Jalam Tramo: The Rainbow Path of Many Hues*. He served for almost two decades as Director of Latse Contemporary Tibetan Library in New York City, and currently directs Latse Project and teaches Tibetan literature and language at Harvard University and Stanford University.

Journal of Tibetan Literature: What is the first encounter with literature that you can remember? What's the first thing you remember reading that inspired you as a work of literature?

Pema Bhum: I grew up during the Cultural Revolution so my first encounter with literature was revolutionary literature. I don't remember which work I read first, but I can tell you about one work that made a strong impression on my mind. I think this writer's name was Weiwei. He was a journalist who went to North Korea to cover the frontlines of the Korean war with America. He wrote an article titled "Who is the Most Beloved Person?" about the Chinese army fighting on the front lines against the Americans and American imperialism. That article really moved me a lot. I still remember it, and I remember lines from the piece. It was in our textbooks. I was probably around ten at the time. The article said that because of the heroes on the front line who protected us, we all could have a peaceful life. In the morning people could happily go to the office or to the fields, all because of these heroes on the frontline who sacrificed their peace for everyone else.

JTL: How did that interest in literature then develop? And were there moments in your education that you feel were important to learning about and understanding literature? Can you talk about your encounter with Tibetan literature more specifically?

PB: All this revolutionary literature was in Tibetan language because I didn't read Chinese at that time. But in terms of Tibetan literature, much later, when I was around fifteen or sixteen, I got a chance to read the *Sakya Lekshé* by Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182–1251), and when I read *Sakya Lekshé*, it made me want to write. I had a monk uncle who wasn't allowed to live in the monastery, so he lived in a small retreat house outside the village.

Our village was a village of many Tantric masters, and above the village, there was a hermitage. That's where my uncle lived, and I usually went there to spend some time with him. My uncle had a handwritten copy of *Sakya Lekshé*, and he read a little bit to me, which interested me. So I read his copy of *Sakya Lekshé*, and I copied it so I could have my own personal copy. And reading and copying it, I even thought to myself, I can write like this. This was too ambitious, of course, but that's what I thought at the time. That was my first encounter with Tibetan literature.

After the *Sakya Lekshé*, my uncle showed me another book which really grabbed my attention. That one was by Shar Kalden Gyatso (shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, 1607–1677), the biggest lama in Rebkong. It was Shar Kalden Gyatso's *gurbum* (*mgur 'bum*), his book of poetry. I read it and found it so strong and powerful and beautifully written. That really stayed in my mind. Actually, some of it has still remained in my mind to this day. I imitated that *gur* a lot, writing my own poetry in that style. Of course, at that time we could not publish, and anyway we weren't thinking about publishing. I was just writing *gur* and sharing with my friends. Sometimes I read my work to them, and some of the *gur* were jokes. My circle of friends liked my writing very much.

One of my friends, whose name was also Pema Bhum, was very handsome but we joked about his mouth, saying that it was too big. I still remember this line that I wrote in jest, "When he opens his mouth, bugs crawl into his mouth" (*sma byed gdangs tshe srin bu rang 'khor rgyag*). Last December I went to Amdo, and some of my friends still remember some lines of my *gur* from those days.

The first essay I wrote was called "An Analysis of the Origin of the Tibetan People" and it was published in the *Qinghai Education* journal around 1982 or 1983. It was actually translated into Chinese by Sherab and published in *Tibet Research* as well. Someone had written an article claiming that Tibetans originated from the Chinese, and this was my rebuttal saying that Tibetans had their own separate origin.

JTL: We have a question about your translation of Elie Wiesel's book *Night*. But first, when did you start translating as a formal practice, and how? Was it Chinese to Tibetan?

PB: I started translating in 1974. I was in the nomadic areas, in a really rural place and not many people in the town could read or understand Chinese. But all the official documents were in Chinese, and all of these documents needed to be translated into Tibetan. Sometimes there were conventions and conferences, where people from the commune level and the county level gathered together for big meetings. I interpreted at these conferences, translating the lectures and talks of different leaders. Sometimes I went around with the leaders as their personal interpreter. Other times, I was translating documents. I started that work in 1974. I started work very early, at the age of seventeen. That year was also the twentieth anniversary of that county, and there was a

big exhibit, and it was all bilingual. We got all the exhibit content in Chinese, and translated it to Tibetan. I was one of the main translators on that project.

As for the Elie Wiesel book, I started translating *Night* in 1994. I got a chance to come to Indiana University and study English through an intensive program. Previously at Amnye Machen Institute in Dharamsala, we had a translation project, and this book was included in that. At Indiana, I wanted to improve my English, so every day I would read a page of *Night* and then translate that one page. I spent a lot of time on that little book. Every day I read one page, checked with my teachers and friends to see if I understood the text correctly, and then I translated the page. It took me about six or seven months to do my first draft. Then we couldn't get the copyright for a long time. But luckily I met Elie Wiesel at an event, and he was really happy to hear that I had translated the book into Tibetan. Then and there, he gave me a letter saying that I had permission and could publish the translation. I gave this letter of permission to Amnye Machen, who was going to publish the book but this letter got lost. So the translation never got published. Then much later, Latse Project finally published *Night*.

JTL: You mentioned in an earlier interview that *Night* had an influence on your own writing. That book is now famous for introducing ideas of trauma and human suffering, especially collective suffering, to readers. In terms of those subjects, were there things that you thought you could use to talk about your experiences as a young man?

PB: That's true. I had read and reread Elie Wiesel. Later when I was writing my memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, I felt some of my lines and paragraphs, especially my dialogue, had been influenced by Elie Wiesel's writing in *Night*. My Cultural Revolution books are mainly about the Tibetan language. They are about Tibetan language as affected and influenced by Chinese policy. I wanted to talk about what happened in Tibet.[1]

JTL: Last year you published *Jalam Tramo*: *The Rainbow Path of Many Hues*. This is your first long form piece of writing. You've written memoirs, essays, and short stories, but this was your first novel. Why did you write a novel? Did you find new opportunities in the novel as a writer?

PB: My main concern in writing the novel is the Tibetan language. There is a lot of writing out there these days, whether it's scholarly or literary. So far, there are about fifty novels total in Tibetan. I have always thought that if Tibetan language is to survive, we need books and people need to keep reading in Tibetan language. I wanted to write a novel that people would want to read. I don't care

1. These are *Dran tho smin drug ske 'khyog* (*Six Stars with a Crooked Neck*), 2001; *Dran tho rdo ring ma* (*Remembering Dorje Tsering*), 2006, both published by Bod kyi dus bab (Tibet Times).

about writing in high level Tibetan or very literary Tibetan. I am more interested in something people want to read, something people want to hold in their hands. From the 1980s to the 1990s, a lot of Tibetans were concerned with how to write, but not so much with what to write. They weren't really concerned with what people wanted to read. They just wanted to reach a certain level of skill and show off a certain level of skill. But I have always thought that one should write something that Tibetans want to read. For a language to survive, people have to keep reading and using that language. What is it that I can do? I can do some writing. Writing that's not scholarly or difficult, but writing that people want to read. That's the reason that I am writing a novel.

JTL: While you were working on the book, what did you learn as a writer?

PB: A writer needs confidence. I know my novel looks really long, but I finished my first draft in five or six months. But after that I lost all my confidence. I wasn't sure if people would read it or not, if the novel made sense or not. I myself didn't want to read it; I kept seeing negative things in it. So I just put it aside. I had drafted it so fast, writing down whatever came to my mind. But then after I finished it, I lost confidence in the work. Finally, I had some friends visiting me who asked what I was writing. I showed them the draft, and everybody who read it really liked it. They said it's such a good story and that I should really publish it. So they gave me courage and confidence. Then COVID started and Latse Library closed down, so I lost my job and I had time. I sat down to work on the novel again and to redraft and revise it. Secondly, what I learned in that process is that you really have to sit down and write constantly. Everyday, you have to sit down and write. Even if you can't write anything, you still have to sit there, waiting. The story is on its way to you but it takes time, and if you don't sit and wait, if you don't sit down for that time, then it won't come. First you need confidence, and then you have to spend the time and sit and write. Thirdly, when you are writing, you shouldn't worry about the language and the writing at all. Whatever comes, just write it down, in dialect or whatever style and kind of language. Later you can polish it, but at first just write. So that's my experience.

JTL: Did you have a long round of editing? Can you talk about the editing process and what it's like for you to reread your writing and to polish it?

PB: My editing time was much longer than my writing time. I wrote my first draft in the mornings before work. Every morning I wrote from five to seven, for two hours every day, for about five months. Finally I had nothing more to write. Then I stopped. Then I put the book aside, for about six or seven years, because I had lost confidence in the work. After I had shown it to some friends and they encouraged me to get back to it, I finally went back to the novel and worked on it for

two years. Maybe I didn't work on it everyday but most days I worked on it, editing it, reworking the language and the structure, and developing the characters. That took time.

JTL: It's been twenty-five years now since you wrote your survey "The Heartbeat of a New Generation," first published in 1999 (*Lungta* 12). You wrote an update in 2008, which was included in the volume *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Duke University Press). It's now been fifteen years since that last update. Are there changes and developments in Tibetan composition and publishing that you've seen that have taken place in the fifteen years since that last assessment?

PB: When I wrote "The Heartbeat of a New Generation," at that time you could actually read everything that was being published. You knew all the writers, you knew what they were writing, and it was possible to catch up on everybody's writing without missing a single piece. It was easier to read everything then, and I did read everything back then. From maybe '95 onwards, after the spread of the internet and computers, there were so many more writers and there was so much more writing that it was no longer possible to read everything. You could only read a small part—especially living in America, where life is so busy.

There are also two kinds of publications, official publications and private publications, and in general there are more private publications than official publications. How long the private publications stay on the market depends on Chinese policy. Sometimes, they are just around for a few months and then they disappear. So it's harder now to tell what's happening in Tibetan poetry. During the time I wrote "Heartbeat," there was a big trend towards free verse poetry. Also, Tibetans tried to write their poems in a Western way. They learned from the Chinese, who were following Western poetry. That was a big thing. Now there are many more styles of poetry around, and people have a taste for a much wider range of poetry—they are also writing traditional poetry, meter poetry, and *gur* poetry along with free verse. People also write poetry to express their own feelings, sometimes even personal feelings for or against someone. Before poetry was used to express high-level feelings, very elevated and refined feelings and thoughts, but now poetry is used to express even low-level and vulgar feelings. In general, there's a much wider range of usage for poetry than back in the '80s and '90s.

JTL: In one of the literature seminars (hosted by Quintman and Schaeffer) at Latse Library in 2017, both you and Gedun Rabsal used *kāvya* concepts to talk about a poem even though the poem was not a *kāvya* poem. Can you talk a little bit about how you think about Tibetan poetry through *nyenngak* even though the poem is not formally a *nyenngak* piece? And in terms of what the poetry can express, can you say the same things in Mila style or Shar Kalden Gyatso style, or free verse poetry, that you can in *nyenngak* style?

PB: The *Nyenngak Melong, The Mirror of Poetics*, even after 1600 years, is so important to Tibetans. As Gedun Chöpel noted, Daṇḍin lived in the time of King Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century. And yet Daṇḍin is still alive in Tibetan literature. His style of poetry is still being taught. People are learning his *kāvya* in middle school and university. His work is still in the textbooks, students today still study *Nyenngak Melong*. People are still writing in that style and expressing their feelings in that style.

People are trying different ways of writing poetry, they are experimenting. In *gur*, for instance, the meter is the same, there are six syllables or eight syllables, and the way that people use the words, using metaphors and similes, comes from Daṇḍin's teaching in the *Nyenngak Melong*. "Waterfall of Youth," by Dhondup Gyal is considered the very first free verse poem. Now his style doesn't come from *Nyenngak Melong*, it's a mixed style. Traditional literature is all meter and fixed syllables, but now people sometimes try to use free verse and other styles. They try and experiment.

JTL: As a writer, publisher, intellectual, and also as director of Latse Library, you have worked to serve as a bridge between Tibetans in Tibet, China, India, and the U.S. You have also done a lot of publishing work in your life, including your work with *Jangshon*, Amnye Machen, *Mangtso* newspaper, and of course *Latse Journal*. What do you see as your successes in Tibetan publishing? What do you see as future challenges for Tibetan publishing?

PB: As far as successes in Tibetan publishing goes, I think the newspapers are the success story. *Mangtso* newspaper, for instance, which we started in 1990, became so popular and influential. It really opened the door for the Tibetan community in exile. For the Tibetan language especially, that newspaper was so important. And even now *Mangtso* newspaper is still alive—*Tibet Times* newspaper is a continuation of *Mangtso* newspaper, and it's one of the most popular newspapers today.

That's one of the successful things that is still alive. Another one is Latse Library. Latse Library played a big role inside Tibet and outside Tibet in the intellectual sphere. We created really meaningful connections between the intellectuals inside and outside Tibet, getting them together for parties and for conferences, so that people were having fun together and also learning together. *Latse Journal* published writings from outside and inside, and it was a very successful journal. It's unfortunate that it couldn't continue.

Our 108 Translation Project is another successful project, and it's quite popular in Tibet as well. But the really important thing is that when Latse launches a project, others get inspired to carry out similar projects, and so the impact is much greater. When people inside Tibet are inspired to carry out similar projects, they have even more money and staff for their projects. After Latse started the 108 Translation Project with ten books, the very next year Qinghai Nationalities Printing House launched their translation project with twenty books. When we do something, it's not

just for us to do the work, but also to inspire others with the confidence and courage to carry out these projects. Back when we launched *Tibet Times* newspaper, that inspired the launch of other newspapers as well. Seeing a successful project gives people the courage and inspiration to start their own projects.

One of my own favorite projects has been *Jalam Tramo*. It's one of my most successful works, and it's one of Latse Project's most successful novels. We published it last year, it sold out, and we are doing another printing. I am confident that inside Tibet and out, a lot of people will read this novel.

JTL: Your work has been a real model for other Tibetans and institutions of what is possible. Can you talk about some examples of what you consider to be creative expression, creative forms of writing in contemporary Tibetan literature—anything that's exciting or new or unusual?

PB: For the past few years, I have been reading mostly classical literature. I didn't read much contemporary literature. As for classical literature, there are a lot of really good writers. But personally, one writer that I really like is Lelung Shepai Dorjé (sle lung bzhad pa'i rdo rje, 1697–1740). He's a bit crazy. He's so open in what he writes, and he has a wide variety of different writings. Some of them are still secret writings, meaning that these are restricted texts. In Lelung Shepai Dorjé's writing, he doesn't hold back at all, he fully expresses himself.

Gungthang Tenpai Drönmé (gung thang bstan pa'i sgron me, 1762–1823) is also a very good writer and he's interesting in that he really encourages other people to think independently. Usually people follow their lamas or follow whatever the Buddha said, and that's what they are told to do. But Gunthang Rinpoché insists that you need to think and make up your own mind. Of course, they are all monks. Actually Lelung Shepai Dorjé gave up being a monk. The thing about Lelung was he wrote about things that other people tried to hide and not write.

JTL: You've taught many of us informally, and you also teach formally at American universities. How can we improve the teaching of Tibetan literature in Western colleges and universities?

PB: I don't know. First you need a Tibetan language teacher, that's for sure. If possible, what you need is a Tibetan who grew up in the rural area, in the country, in the nomadic areas. People who grew up in the city and went to university usually don't have strong enough Tibetan language. We need someone who is steeped in Tibetan culture, someone who knows Tibetan language and Tibetan culture and grew up in Tibetan culture. That's what I would say.

JTL: What are you working on at the moment? Do you have a new writing project or new reading interests?

PB: I am teaching two classes, at Harvard and Stanford. And I am now writing my second novel. I can't tell you what it's about—that's still a secret. I hope it won't take more than three years. It's going really well. I am almost finished with one third of the novel, of my first draft. Hopefully in 2025 or 2026, it will come out. I have a lot of time, and I want to write. So many people really liked my first novel, and the first print run sold out. This gave me a lot of encouragement. So last October, I started the second novel. If people are reading, then I will write.