

## Interview with Bhuchung D Sonam

JTL Editors

Bhuchung D Sonam is an exile Tibetan poet, writer, translator and publisher living in Dharamshala, India. His books include *Songs from Dewachen* and *Yak Horns: Notes on Contemporary Tibetan Writing, Music and Film & Politics*. He edited *Muses in Exile: An Anthology of Tibetan Poetry* and has compiled and translated *Burning the Sun's Braids: New Poetry from Tibet*. He is a founding member and editor of TibetWrites and its imprint Blackneck Books, which promotes and publishes the creative works of Tibetans.

His writings have been published in the Washington Post, Asahi Weekly, Journal of Indian Literature, HIMAL Southasian and Hindustan Times among others.

**JTL:** Bhuchung D. Sonam welcome, we're very excited that you're able to come and speak with us today about your work and your thoughts about Tibetan literature.

We have some questions for you about your own writing, your activities as a publisher, translator and editor, as someone who's been an organizer in various communities bringing together artists across art forms. And, also where you think the future of Tibetan literature is headed. But all that said, we hope this will be a kind of an informal conversation.

To begin, we would love to hear a reading. Two of your poems that particularly struck us as interesting openers are "Claim" and "Yonrupon's Daughter" with the latter being a particular favorite. Would you be kind enough to share a reading?

### **Yonrupon's Daughter**

And then I saw Lhadon  
coming from afar  
A golden sceptre in her hand  
thunder flashed, sky blackened  
A fog entered my mind  
fear shook my heart  
tears stung my eyes  
For a moment I thought  
She was going to strike me into fragmentation

My useless self splattered in ten directions  
I pinched myself  
I punched myself  
I kicked myself  
I was looking for a runaway exit  
The Great Wall of China stood behind me -  
I was locked, shocked  
There was nothing I could do  
In desperation I faced her  
She was still coming towards me  
Now holding a bouquet of white roses  
Seeing me she raised her hand  
And the roses disappeared  
Petals swirled in the sky  
Thorns rained down -  
thud thud thud heavy heavy heavy  
I gaped my mouth  
My heart pounded on a  
Chopping board  
The sun shone in the sky  
Light streamed into my head  
I wanted to jump, shout, cry, pounce  
Wozila! Wozila!  
illusion...delusion...hallucination...  
I banged my head on the wall  
Focused my eyes straight forward  
And saw Lhadon...  
Now dashing towards me  
Locks of hair waving in the wind  
Her boots pounding the dry earth  
Puffs of dust flying in air  
She was a wild yak in the Himalayas  
Blood raging in her veins like Yarlung River  
I stared into the sky and prayed  
Prayed to a million gods and goddesses I knew

### Claim

I am a dog  
A Tibetan dog from Kyegu  
A few days before the earth shook  
And the mountains rumbled - sky darkened  
storm thundered, dust rained.  
In the night when all were asleep  
I saw them on the march  
Protector deities, gods, goddesses and the spirits  
They quietly left our town.

**JTL:** Both poems offer unique ways to start our conversation. “Claim” evokes a solitary dog bearing witness to protected deities leaving the scene of a natural disaster, possibly a reference to the 2010 Kyegudo earthquake. On the other hand, “Yonrupon’s Daughter” features a powerful image of a goddess-like woman grasping a handful of broken yellow stars. These poems, rich with historical and literary references to Tibet’s past, highlight your engagement with Tibet’s imperiled present as well as the richness and vitality of Tibetan culture and history. We’d love to hear a little more about either “Yonrupon’s Daughter” or “Claim.”

**Bhuchung D. Sonam:** I grew up in a very small village in Tibet where we had no access to books or other forms of entertainment. Our primary form of entertainment was through Ling Gesar stories. I knew an elderly woman—who despite not being able to read or write—would enter storytelling trances every night. Her stories were so vivid and captivating.

When I first left Tibet and began my studies in refugee school, I could still recall one of these Gesar stories by heart. I would retell it, and it would go on for an hour or two. Unfortunately, I’ve since forgotten most of it. Ling Gesar stories nonetheless have had a significant influence on how I view storytelling.

For example, the flow of “Yonrupon’s Daughter” is heavily influenced by Tibetan storytelling traditions, especially those found in Gesar tales. The rhythmic quality of the poem, which I wrote rather quickly, is shaped by the cadence of bardic storytelling and the sensation of horse-riding across the Tibetan plateau. As for the subject matter, I feel it’s up to the reader to interpret, so I prefer not to share too much in that regard.

You’re right, “Claim” was written in the aftermath of the April 2010 earthquake in Gyegudo. The earthquake was a devastating event with great losses suffered by the Tibetan people in that region. At the same time, the earthquake became a significant opportunity for the Chinese propaganda apparatus. At that time WeChat hadn’t yet been banned by the Indian state, so we were still able to access some information and photographs from inside Tibet. One image in particular

stood out to me: a single, solitary dog sitting alone on top of a mountain, surrounded by nothing but the mountain and the blue sky.

I drew on this image to tell the story of that moment in time through the eyes of the dog. That's how "Claim" came into being.

**JTL:** We will return to dogs later in the conversation, as we've noted how they feature heavily in your work. But we first have a technical follow up about "Yonrupon's Daughter". Given the early influence of the Gesar tradition and its style on your work, we're curious how you might take a line that might flow naturally in Tibetan and put that into English. In short, we'd like to hear about the process of translating that kind of bardic flow from Tibetan into English.

**BDS:** Well technically, I've never really studied literature at all. My formal study of English stopped at high school. In university I studied economics, so I have absolutely no idea about technique, literature, style, and, structure. Everything that I write, I write because I read, and I hear things from people. For example, with "Yonrupon's Daughter," I read with a dead rhythm in my mind. I wasn't really thinking of transposing things from one language to another, you know, this part must be like that and so on. It's a kind of a natural process.

When I was learning English in the refugee school here, one of my English teachers said, if you really want to master the language, "you have to eat the language, you have to sleep with a language, you have to shit with the language." So that's what I've been trying to do for many years.

Now, so much of my writing and reading is being done in English, I think I have enough grasp of the language to kind of make it work on its own without thinking back to exactly what I want to write.

**JTL:** We'd like to ask you about your work as a writer, but also a publisher and translator of other people's writing in a very specific social and political context. One of your most recent publications, *Under the Blue Skies: A Tibetan Reader*, a 2022 anthology of Anglophone Tibetan literature, you write that "our new generation born and raised in exile, is stranded between two – and in some cases several – social and political circumstances, with little daily access to their culture and language to fulfill their need to assert themselves as Tibetans." You then go on to envision literature as "bridge to connect these deepening chasms and provide some signposts to existential questions." We want to ask you about the place of literature in contemporary exile Tibetan social and political life. Could you walk us into that world a little bit?

**BDS:** Storytelling is essential for human beings. From the very beginning, when we were old enough to understand we were told stories. It's very much part of human existence. Especially for Tibetans living now, as you said, for us. I've never had the luxury to say "oh I study language and

that love literature... that's why I'm into this". For me, writing is a part of resistance itself, an act to not be forgotten. There's a very real danger that if we do not tell our stories in the way we experience them we will be faced with a very fundamental problem. That's one aspect of it.

On the other hand, from when the Tibetan written script was devised around the seventh century, through the 20th century and after Tibet was occupied, most literature was Buddhist literature by and large. We haven't really had much secular writing. So, when we came into exile, I think suddenly we were bombarded with this need to tell our stories in a way we experience life. Because we never had that tradition, it took us a bit of time. Our early storytellers were people who went to British medium schools in India or, you know, put these Buddhist masters who had access to English education in the West. Our start or beginning to tell our secular stories is a recent development.

Of course, there is so much propaganda coming from both sides of the Himalayas. So I think between all these different human circumstances, sometimes, ordinary Tibetan experience—how I, for example, as an ordinary refugee feel each day of my life—is kind of subsumed in a larger set of things which do not reflect me and my worldview. That's the reason why we started TibetWrites 20 years ago. One thing we were very clear about was that we were going to focus only on secular Tibetan literature.

Since the early nineties, we have had many Tibetans moving out of the Indian subcontinent to Australia, Canada, USA, and now increasingly to Europe. The fourth and fifth generation of Tibetans may speak Tibetan, but may not be familiar with literary Tibetan. What we are trying to do in our own way is making sure that we tell our stories in a language that they can understand.

**JTL:** Let's move on to the issue of translation as a part of this social and political work. The word existential was particularly resonant for us. You spoke to the existential importance of creating an identity. How does translation play into that work today for yourself as someone who's fully bilingual, but also for people who are not writing or reading in Tibetan. How is translation important and how have you worked with translation to help this generation?

**BDS:** I started translating, in the mid 1990s, for Tibet Information Network (TIN). TIN used to interview a lot of political prisoners who had escaped from Tibet and other refugees who were to India. I started doing translation for them to make some money and that's how I got started with translating.

Later I realized that there was a considerable investment in translating Buddhist texts into English and other languages, but secular human stories were by and large neglected by Western scholars and by the Tibetan exile government as well. We have promoted what you might call this image of a peaceful and compassionate Buddhist civilization as part of the official narrative. Which sets aside some of the more murky and complex parts of our history. The armed resistance

from in the '60s, through 1974, for example. We have at least seven to eight thousand Tibetan soldiers within the Indian Army even now.

In addition to the community in India, and diasporic communities in the West, we also have Tibetan writers inside Tibet writing in Tibetan and in Chinese. These groups seem to be islands, who appear to be operating by themselves. The only way to foster mutual understanding is through the English language. This is where the translation becomes so essential because the new generation of Tibetans in exile do not seem to understand that there is a huge body of literature produced from inside Tibet. These works are produced by writers who might go to jail for as long as ten or fifteen years for writing a book. This lack of awareness is first and foremost because books are not easily accessible. And second, many Tibetans, even those who go to refugee schools here in India, where Tibetan is taught, might not develop the level of literacy to understand literature produced from inside Tibet. So, translation becomes vital.

That's one of the reasons why in 2013, I collected the works of thirteen Tibetan writers and poets and started translating them. Sadly, nobody wanted to help me with either the translation or publication. I approached many individuals, organizations and people who were donating money to other projects. But even though these were Tibetan writers writing in Tibet and six of them at the time were in jail there seemed to be a sense of disconnect. I think translation is fundamentally important because without understanding what is happening inside of Tibet, especially the expressions and aspirations of intellectuals, I think we will have a big problem here (on the outside).

**JTL:** When you sit down to work on a new translation, do you have any broad guiding principles that help to steer your approach to translation?

**BDS:** First and foremost, I need to read and understand the work, and I have to be comfortable enough to say, OK, I can do this. For example, one of the writers that I like from inside Tibet is Re Kangling. Re Kangling has an absolutely amazing poem entitled "For Sex Worker Sangye Drolma" that I've tried many times to translate. But I just can't. The poem has so many layers, so many different things going on that I think it's best left in the original Tibetan. The primary thing that I look for is to be confident enough in my understanding to say that, OK, maybe I can do this in another language. I find Chen Metak's work rather easy to translate because his writing is so earthly, so ordinary, but says so much in the process. Somehow, I've found his works easy to translate. But unfortunately, he passed away just a couple of years ago.

**JTL:** We know that you read widely and that you have a range of influences that range from the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish to French intellectuals like Camus. We want to ask you a little bit about your early experiences in reading and writing and about your early influences. You spoke

earlier about growing up in the context of an oral literary tradition. Do you remember the first works you read that really moved you as a reader, and perhaps inspired you to think that writing might be a path for you.

**BDS:** When I was in school at TCV the library was absolutely rudimentary. At lower TCV, we had a couple of cabinets filled with old *Time* and *National Geographic* magazines. The Sherig Parkhang had published some *namthars*, you know, *Norsang* and *Drowa Sangmo* and such. So, my earliest recollection of reading in Tibetan is the *Norsang namthar*. Because the library had so few books, especially Tibetan books, I remember reading *Norsang namthar* many times. Even now, I can remember some of the verses.

I don't know if the style of storytelling left much of an influence on me, but it certainly enriched my vocabulary. I read *Drowa Sangmo* maybe forty times because we simply had no other books. After class, I would start the text and by the lights out, I would finish it. Repeatedly reading these books gave me a strong Tibetan vocabulary.

When I was in school, I hardly ever wrote in English. I wrote only in Tibetan. In the late 1980s, the Department of Education started this children's magazine called *Phayul*. So I would write a few verses inspired by the Sixth Dalai Lama and I would send it to them. In fact, I remember they published two of them and I was really happy and I was really inspired because I never thought it would be possible. So, in short, in Tibetan I started by reading the *namthars* repeatedly. Of course, now I have access to literature from inside Tibet and from other places.

In English, I remember we had abridged versions of classics like *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, things like that. But these were not the original texts, but just 50- to 60-page long abridged versions.

**JTL:** You have mentioned the importance of stories and storytelling in your own experience and in your own work. You write short stories and other forms of prose, but you're also deeply interested in reading, writing, and translating poetry. We'd like to hear your thoughts about the different resonances between prose and poetry and your own work in these two distinct forms.

**BDS:** Poetry, I think, is very spontaneous. If something comes to you, you must write it down or it gets stuck in your head. It's almost like scratching an itch. For example, I was in Boston in 2008 when I wrote *Songs From a Distance*.

So many things were happening in Tibet and Woesser was the only writer who had some kind of access and communication with Tibet and she was based in Beijing at the time. She was writing constantly, and I was on a bus to my university and all of a sudden, this song from a distance came to me. Instead of going to my class, I went to the library and wrote the poem out in one sitting. So, I think poetry is very spontaneous and you have to kind of catch it as it comes.

My poetry writing in English and poetry writing in Tibetan are two entirely different things though, because everything that I write in English is somehow darker. I don't know if this has anything to do with the fact that I was forced to learn this language when I was separated from my homeland. I had no choice in the matter, I had to learn the English language, whereas Tibetan is my mother tongue, it's the language that I've spoken since when I was a child. Every time I do a reading of my Tibetan poems for a Tibetan audience, everybody laughs and points at each other with a smile.

My writing has a lot to do with how the language came to me or with the circumstances which I found myself. One of the things that I can't do, and I don't do, is to translate my own work. If I write in Tibetan, it remains in Tibetan. If I write in English, it remains in English because I cannot translate it since I write it with so much thought and so much feeling. There's no way for me to replicate that initial spontaneous experience. I tried once, but it became a very mechanical thing. Whereas when I translate Chen Metak's poem from Tibetan to English, I feel more at ease as I didn't write it myself. I didn't have the initial experience of reading and writing it. That's how I look at myself as a reader and translator.

### **Dog Dead**

There is no such thing  
as middle path.  
We all gravitate to our sides.

If there is a path in the middle  
I would be the first to find it.  
I'm neither here nor there...  
To her right  
To your left  
Far from their centre.

There is a dog chewing a bone  
In the middle of the path.

A truck comes  
Speeding

**JTL:** While we're on the topic of your poetry, we would like to return to another close reading of "Dog Dead," another poem that stuck out to us from *Songs of the Arrow* and reflects a lot of fraught political tensions within the exile community. Despite tracing the Tibetan exile experience, which

is shaped by loss, displacement and yearning, your writing over the years is characteristic for its sense of humor. Can you speak to the role of humor and irreverence and wit in your work broadly?

**BDS:** If you've lived long in the Tibetan community, humor becomes part of you because all Tibetans are humorous people. They make fun of people, the way they look, how they speak and what not. Everything becomes a joke. It's not that they don't take life seriously, but I think that's how they approach life. So perhaps some of that has rubbed off onto me. That's one part of it.

But more importantly, I think humor and how we find the capacity to look at life during difficult situations and try to find some sense of comedy and satire is really important. If we look at the political circumstances and now also the cultural and linguistic, everything seems very hopeless sometimes. And for us we don't have the luxury to say that everything is hopeless and give up. So, I think trying to find some sense of humor, especially in our writing, is useful. I think in that way people get the message and they get a chance to laugh.

When I was writing "Dog Dead," I was certainly thinking of the exile political context, but I was also thinking of Nagarjuna in the second century. The Buddha died and here was this South Indian guy trying to figure out the philosophical legacy of the Buddha and trying to make sense of his own understanding of Buddhism and what the philosophical really meant. Closer to our own time, we had Gedun Chopel and his polemical essay on the Middle Way, and how much doubt, confusion and fear that it caused.

I'm not a very courageous person myself. If there's a choice to be made, I always err on the safer side. I want to be in the middle, which I don't really like at all. I appreciate and truly admire people like Che Guevara who believed in something and did what they did and faced the consequences. This poem was written with all these complexities in mind. I tried to squeeze the essence of the issue and to make it as funny and as simple as possible.

**JTL:** Following your poetry across various volumes many of your readers might notice the prevalence of dogs and canine imagery. Dogs are barking, speaking, whining, talking with people and with spirits. Sometimes the poems are told from the perspective of a dog. In *Songs of the Arrow*, a dog receives instruction from Gandhi and a nun gives birth to a dog-faced baby. Can you speak to the role of dogs in your work?

**BDS:** When I was in Tibet, we had a dog called Jachung. We were very close. I was the middle sibling, so the older ones had responsibilities, and younger ones were closer to the grandparents. I was the rascal of the family. I spent a lot of time with the dog. And when my parents eventually decided to send me to India, I was suddenly cut off from my family, but also my beloved pet dog. That may have something to do with how I look at dogs and try to get into their psyche. Making them speak so that I can articulate things that would otherwise be quite pointed in many ways.

Lines that wouldn't be quite as funny if they came from a human being. In that sense, dogs are a kind of device that I use and it comes in handy every now and then.

**JTL:** You write poetry, you write essays and in addition you write a lot of literary criticism as well. We wanted to ask you how you see literary criticism writing about art and literature, playing out in Tibetan social and political life today, because it's something that seems like it's distinctive from poetry especially.

**BDS:** I write about books, contemporary events or poems without a specialized technical background. I have never studied literature formally. So I don't really work under literary categories. But one thing I look for is writing that strikes me. For example, I write about Theurang's *Written in Blood* because his poems and his essays deeply touched me. He was a college student in North-eastern Tibet and immediately after his book was published, he was sentenced to four years in jail. What really struck me was how somebody could write with such strength and such sharpness while living under circumstances so entirely different from mine.

Later I wrote about Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* because her writing is so different. She's writing about a life that is filled with loss and longing and distance between the homeland and where she is. She was born here in India, then lived in Nepal and now lives in the US. Her mother was born in Tibet and she traveled to Tibet. You'd think all of this should make for a really, stark, sad, melancholy, dark text, but it is not. Her work is written with such compassion, such subtlety that you feel love and resonance with how she expresses herself, what she says. Things that I've never even thought about. If something that touches me or if something that hits me hard, then writing about it is kind of a natural response.

I wrote a piece about Tibetan fiction for *Himal Magazine* several years ago. I found that the late Tsewang Yeshe Pemba wrote arguably the first Tibetan novel in 1966. Between 1966 and 2022 we had about 10 novels. Apart from two or three, in all of them the principal character ends up becoming a monk, and if not, the authors were in one way or another either politicians or activists. Politics and religion. These two things have defined whatever little literary fiction that we produced. Which I find strange because with literature you have infinite possibilities to create anything that you can imagine. But politics is part of our lives. So is religion. It has been a huge influence in Tibetan civilization, but if the literature also ends up with these same themes, then what are we thinking about? What are we writing about? What do the writers want to convey about life? These are some of the questions that I have tried to write about.

**JTL:** We'd like to close by thinking about the current state of things and also looking towards the future. Tibet Writes, the publishing project you helped to establish, has been deeply influential in producing, promoting, publishing works of Tibetan authors and Tibetan literature, especially

in India. Could you reflect on the difficulties, the challenges, but also the successes of producing, publishing, disseminating, cultivating Tibetan literature in India. And then think a little bit about where the future lies. What does the future of that kind of work look like?

**BDS:** When we started in 2003, we had no publications. I published my first book and Tenzin Tsundue had just published his first book and we had another Tibetan editor who was working at the Department of Information and International Relations. So the three of us, we got together and said, let's start an online literary platform because in those days, the internet was this emerging thing. So, we started a website, but then soon we started getting a lot of submissions from young Tibetans. We had more than 30 poems. That's when we started thinking about publishing.

We had no idea about the publishing world. We just said let's try. So for the first ten to fifteen years, we decided to invest our own time in the design and layout and book launches, with the condition that the printing cost had to be paid by the writer. We worked this way for fifteen years because we couldn't find anyone to support us. Then in the last few years, we've had Tibet Fund support us with our publications. So now we have at least some money for the publishing, editing and for promotion as well.

One of the things that we are most happy about is that most of our readers are young Tibetans. We get a lot of inquiries through our social media. So by and large, we get messages from young Tibetans asking for this title or that title. We've also had some submissions from non-Tibetans as well, but this is something that we don't do, and we can't do. So yeah, so it's been a real experience even though we don't get paid for what we do.

What we do is purely because we think this work is important and necessary and something that nobody seems to be doing. The project is ongoing. A lot of libraries ask for our books, and a lot of Indian universities. All our titles go to the US Library of Congress and the University of Tokyo and other places. There seems to be some promise.

**JTL:** Any current trends in the work that you're seeing being produced these days?

**BDS:** We are getting a lot of poetry submissions. We just published two last year, and we have one this year and we have two next year. There seems to be writing a lot of poetry out there. I don't know why but that's what we're getting into.

**JTL:** And finally, what about your own work? What are you working on currently?

**BDS:** I want to do a short story collection, but my own writing has suffered in the last few years because I end up doing all these other things. I hope anyone involved in editing and publication

can sympathize. Let's see... I have a lot of ideas. I keep a diary where I write a lot of things that I want to use in my short stories and longer pieces. Perhaps from this year onward I have to focus more on my own writing.