

Translating Tibet: Pema Tseden's Translations of Takbum Gyal's Works

Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani

Abstract: This essay constitutes an initial exploration into the pivotal role that Pema Tseden played as a translator to promote Tibetophone literature in China and beyond. Pema's translation of literature represented his initial foray into creative literary pursuits, prior to venturing into writing literary works and making films. Pema's translations, predominantly from Tibetan to Chinese, yielded three anthologies of stories from the Tibetan oral tradition known as the *Tales of the Golden Corpse*, as well as numerous translations of contemporary Tibetophone short stories that he has published for over thirty years in the most famous Chinese literary journals. His two Chinese-language anthologies of Takbum Gyal's stories brought his fellow Tibetophone writer much-deserved recognition in China.⁶⁶

Keywords: Pema Tseden, translation, Tibetophone literature, *Tales of the Golden Corpse*, Takbum Gyal

⁶⁶ An early form of this essay was presented at the *Symposium on Pema Tseden: Tibetan Writer, Filmmaker and Translator*, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China (October 2014).

Pema Tseden's important contributions as a translator of Tibetophone literature in Chinese have been eclipsed by his tremendous success as a filmmaker and writer. However, literary translation was Pema's first form of engagement with storytelling.

The first literary work that Pema remembered translating from Tibetan to Chinese, just as an exercise and a pastime, was the oral *Tales of the Golden Corpse* (མི་རྩི་ཆེ་སྤྱད་།) to which he grew up listening.⁶⁷ This happened during the 1980s after he had graduated from the Tibetan Teacher's Training College (མི་རིགས་དགེ་ཐོན་སློབ་གྲྭ།) in Chabcha county (ཆབ་ཆེན་།). He somehow found time through the years to revise those old translations, translate even more stories, and successively publish three anthologies of the *Tales of the Golden Corpse* in 2009, 2014, and one posthumously in 2024. This effort unquestionably demonstrates Pema's unwavering dedication to making Tibetan literature accessible in languages beyond Tibetan.

Translation held great importance for Pema since his college years. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Tibetan language and literature at Lanzhou's Northwest Nationalities University and working for a few years at a governmental office in his hometown, he decided to return to the same university to pursue a master's degree in Tibetan-Chinese translation. During his graduate studies, Pema engaged in translations from Chinese to Tibetan and Tibetan to Chinese but did not receive training to become a translator of literature per se, as most of the texts he translated in his classes were about "more

⁶⁷ Personal interview with Pema Tseden. 11 December 2011, New York.

practical subjects”.⁶⁸

As a translator, and as a writer, he acknowledged being influenced by the Chinese translations of foreign literature he began reading in the 1980s, among them Kafka, and García Márquez, and different literary styles and techniques such as surrealism, magic realism, and stream of consciousness. But when avidly reading these earlier Chinese translations of Western literature, Pema felt that some of them were rather stale. He came to the realization that many Chinese translators of the time did not understand literature, so they translated the plot, not its style. He concluded that bilingual writers like him were better suited for translating literature because they could grasp the literary beauty and the aesthetic value of a work. Never academically trained as a literary translator, Pema relied on his own knowledge of the Tibetan and Chinese languages and cultures besides his individual literary sensibility.⁶⁹

As one of the few truly bilingual Tibetan writers in China at the time, Pema was in a unique position to engage in literary translation. As a result of the Chinese government’s contradictory language policies and practices in Tibetan-populated areas, and the subsequent chaos of the Cultural Revolution, many Tibetans were unable to learn their native language at schools. Writers such as Ozer (Weise, འོ་ཟེ་ཤེ།) or Pema Nördron (Baima Nazhen, བཤམ་མོ་རྩོ་ན།), educated in Sichuan, were raised in a Chinese academic environment with no access to a Tibetan

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

education, while writers like Pema Bhum (པེམ་བུམ་) and Dorje Tsering Chenaktsang (ཏོར་ཇེ་ཙེ་རིང་ཙེ་ནང་མཆོག་མཆོག་མཆོག་) in Amdo Tibet were, by the special characteristics of their hometowns, able to benefit from excellent training in the Tibetan language. In this regard, Pema Tseden was very lucky to be educated in both languages; and conscious of this privilege, he has always used his bilingualism and biculturalism to build a bridge between the two cultures.

The call to translation is stronger in bilingual writers who grew up in colonial or postcolonial situations. Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré has written about what she calls the phenomenon of “cultural suicide,” the “irreparable loss” that happens when minority children are not able to learn the language of their parents at school, and due to societal pressures refuse to speak it at home. She believes it is her duty, being privileged by bilingualism, to try to alleviate this situation by translating her own works, and those of other Spanish-speaking writers so as to preserve the culture for that generation of Puerto Ricans that are not able to master their own language (Ferré, 2012).

Pema Tseden’s drive to translate stemmed from several factors. He desired to make Tibetophone literature available to Tibetans who could only read in Chinese and to the Chinese public at large, and he wished to see books on the market that moved away from fantasies that otherized Tibet, a point he made in many interviews :

I think Tibet has always been mythologized and worshipped and made more remote....People’s psychological expectations and experiences of Tibet are

stuck in the past. They don't understand the new Tibet.⁷⁰

His translations of Tibetophone literature gave a voice to his fellow Tibetophone writers so they could also share their own visions of this new Tibet.

Cultural Translation: Pema Tseden's Translations of His Own Stories

His bilingual writing process differs from that of the other few bilingual Tibetan writers in China. He says that he is comfortable writing his stories in Chinese or Tibetan languages if the stories deal with universal values. However, stories that are too related to the Tibetan way of thinking, or those dealing with a problem that directly affects the Tibetan people, which may be written with the idea of eliciting reflection on the part of the Tibetan reader, can only be written in Tibetan. He believes that a Han readership would not be interested in or benefit from these kinds of stories.⁷¹ Pema Tseden is not alone in this regard. The “certain things stay at home” approach was also pointed out during a series of interviews I conducted with Tibetophone writer Puntshog Tashi (པུན་ཤོག་ཐམས་པུ་ཤེས་པ།). His acclaimed series of comical sketches critical of alcoholism and other social maladies were directed to a Tibetan audience and so written in Tibetan, while the author has often chosen the Chinese language to write more general essays about Tibetan culture directed to a Chinese audience (Schiaffini, 64).

⁷⁰ Lim, Louisa. “Director Seeks To Capture Life In Modern Tibet.” *All Things Considered*, NPR, 30 June 2009, 10:50 AM ET.

⁷¹ Personal interview with Pema Tseden. 11 December 2011, New York.

In this regard, Pema Tsenden, both as a writer and as a translator, first made a conscious choice in deciding whether or not the Chinese-language readers would be able to relate to a given story, this previous mental process being already a conceptual “translation” of Tibet even before starting the actual linguistic one. Even though he chose to translate only stories he believed Chinese audiences would be able to understand, he encountered challenges in deciding how to translate Tibetan customs, ways of life, or religious beliefs. In the case of translation of his own stories, he admitted he preferred to change the story slightly than resorting to explanatory footnotes, often so present in earlier Chinese translations of Tibetan texts.

Without lengthy cultural explanations, Pema Tsenden embedded the meaning of Tibetan cultural objects or customs in the translation itself, by “subtly rubbing them into the specific details of the plot so as to create the desired atmosphere.”⁷² What characterized Pema Tsenden’s translations from Tibetan into Chinese, as well as his own Chinese-language stories, was the subtlety by which he introduced Tibetan culture and ways of life in a way that seemed very natural. While his fellow Tibetan bilingual writer and translator, Tsedor, did not translate his own Tibetan language stories in the belief they would not be understood by the Chinese readers, Pema Tsenden thought that all stories could be translated as long as the topic was appealing to the given audience. Consequently, the way in which both authors shared topics with both linguistic audiences was different as well. For example, Tsedor (ཆེན་པོ་) published two essays on Lhasa’s Barkor street, studied

⁷² Email correspondence with Pema Tsenden. 10 August 2010.

by Lara Maconi. While the Tibetan one is more “intimate,” directed to those who are familiar with it, as if trying to “establish a sympathetic dialogue with the reader,” the Chinese version of the essay is explanatory and descriptive, aimed at informing the Chinese reader (Maconi, 2008). On the contrary, when Pema Tseden translated his Tibetophone stories into Chinese, he preferred to let the Chinese reader guess and make an effort in trying to understand the cultural background rather than burdening the reader with explanations and descriptions that would undoubtedly interrupt the natural literary flow of the piece. Coincidentally, this is also a characteristic present in Pema’s films. He did not want to ‘spoon-feed’ Tibet into Chinese mouths. He wanted his Chinese readers and audiences to adapt to his own portrayal of Tibet, even if this required a bit of work on their part to understand the cultural differences. This was most evident in his refusal to dub his films into Chinese.

Translating Others

Translation was for Pema yet another avenue of artistic creation. He was often drawn to authors who shared some of his aesthetic and stylistic choices, especially the translations he made of the works of Tibetan writer Takbum Gyal (Ch. Debenjia 德本加 ལྷུག་འབྲུག་རྒྱལ།) in the last decade.

Both in his writing and in the stories by Takbum Gyal’s that he translated, there was an abundance of quotidian dialogue that brought Tibetans closer to the Chinese readership. Françoise Robin pointed out this phenomenon in the case of the dialogues in *Silent Holy Stones* (Pema Tseden, 2006):

I believe that the great part played by dialogues aims at re-humanising Tibetans, showing them as fully-fledged humans interacting within their own, coherent society, rather than as voiceless, dependent, semi-silent, subaltern, wild, half-human creatures—what they appear in the case of an unequal relationship between an ‘alien’ filmmaker and ‘native’ actors (Robin, 2008).

Some of the most interesting dialogues reflect changing values, mistrust, or misunderstandings. One of the first instances that come to mind is a scene in *Silent Holy Stones* when a Tibetan child summarizes the usefulness of his school subjects like this: “when you study math you can be an accountant, and when you study Chinese, you can live in the big city.” However, when asked what you can do when you study Tibetan, he replies “I don’t know.” In Pema’s translated stories we can see similar instances of that same cultural dislocation. In his translation of Takbum Gyal’s story “A Misty Sunset” there is a funny short dialogue in which the Sinicized Tibetan protagonist, a writer, is mistaken as a Chinese by an old Tibetan storyteller he has befriended in the mountains.

Another topic of interest in Pema’s movies, especially in *The Search* (Pema Tseden, 2009), also appears in his translation of “A Misty Sunset”: the juxtaposition of urban and rural worlds when modern, educated Tibetans search for authenticity in rural Tibet. The Tibetan writer protagonist of “A Misty Sunset”—the one the locals mistake for Chinese—often travels to some remote Tibetan mountains to look for literary inspiration, infatuated with the mountain’s beauty and “primitivism.” The urban Tibetan writer retreats to the mountains to

see a Tibet he thinks has not changed in thousands of years Borrowing Louisa Schein's term, we could call this attitude "internal orientalism" (Schein, 1997).

For obvious reasons, Pema Tseden did not openly address political or sensitive ethnic topics, but his movies and some of his novels point to those changing values and tensions in Tibetan society. As a translator, however, Pema did not shy away from stories that reflected on ethnic discrimination or implicitly criticized Han Chinese. Earlier in Pema's translation career, he translated "Long Live Room 218!" a short story written by Lhasa-based Sinophone Tibetan writer Tonga and published in the journal *Literature of Tibet* in 1984. This is one of the very few stories Pema translated from Chinese into Tibetan in the 1990s. Although the story ends in a positive ethnic reconciliatory tone, which Tonga told me was required by the journal,⁷³ it is full of humiliating instances in which Han students refer to Tibetans as backward and patronize or humiliate their Tibetan classmate (Tonga, 1984).

In 2010 Pema translated Takbum Gyal's highly political satire "The Story of How I Adopted the Pekingese Dog," which was originally published by Takbum Gyal in the Tibetophone journal *Light Rain* (ལྷ་ཁ་ཆར།) in 2006.⁷⁴

⁷³ Personal interview with Tonga. Lhasa, 20 October 1999.

⁷⁴ Pema's Chinese translation was published first in the website Tibetcul, and later on reproduced in the anthologies of Takbum Gyal's stories that Pema published. The full translated story can be found here: <https://www.tibetcul.com/wx/zuopin/xs/27642.html>. This story, as well as all of Takbum Gyal's stories mentioned in this essay can be found in both of anthologies of Takbum Gyal's that Pema published in Chinese in 2012 and 2017 (see bibliography).

It is the tale of a treacherous Pekingese dog who takes advantage of his human Tibetan co-workers and receives promotions as a result of his manipulative tactics. Besides the obvious ethnic reading of the Pekingese dog representing Han Chinese and the Tibetan mastiff symbolizing Tibetans, this story directly denounces how the CCP and power itself have corrupted Tibetan officials. For example, the Tibetan County Head Commissioner in the story drinks imported liquor, smokes expensive cigarettes, and ends up killing his Tibetan mastiff. After killing the Tibetan mastiff, the Tibetan County Head Commissioner feasts on it over dinner with his new friend, the opportunistic Pekingese dog. The story's ending powerfully reinforces the ethnic tension: the Tibetan narrator, still horrified at the scene of the commissioner and the Pekingese dog eating the meat of the Tibetan mastiff, leaves the house of the commissioner and realizes in shock that the city is full of Pekingese dogs:

Listening to the recurring barking of so many Pekingese dogs in this dark corner of the city, not illuminated by streetlights, I cannot help but think about the Tibetan mastiffs, in the deep twilight of a night at a remote village, risking their lives fighting against the jackals.⁷⁵

Pema was attracted to Takbum Gyal's stories because of their multilayered meanings; stories that you need to read several times in

⁷⁵ Ibid. Interestingly, the word that Pema chooses to translate “wolf”, the usual enemies of Tibetan mastiffs when they defend the livestock, is 豺狼 which can both mean the animal (a jackal or a wolf) but also an evil person or a vicious tyrant.

order to unearth the myriad of allusions contained in them.⁷⁶ “A Misty Sunset” could be simply the story of the friendship between an urban educated Tibetan writer and an old Tibetan storyteller from the mountains. Yet, the writer gains fame because he is retelling in writing the stories told by the old man, without giving him any public credit. Not coincidentally, this fictional Tibetan author’s most acclaimed story titled “The Soul Tied to a *Khata*” resembles closely the title of the most famous short story by the real Sinophone Tibetan writer Tashi Dawa (བཟ་ཤིས་ལྷ་བ།), “The Soul Tied to a Leather Rope (Tashi Dawa, 1986).” The story includes an implicit comparison of the fictional character with the real Tashi Dawa (A.K.A. Zhang Niansheng), a controversial figure for some educated Tibetans who doubted his Tibetanness on the grounds of his mixed Han-Tibetan heritage, his Chinese upbringing and his lack of knowledge of the Tibetan language. “A Misty Sunset” could be a cautionary tale to Tibetan intellectuals reminding them of how much of their Tibetan identity has been already lost in their urban Sinicized life (Takbum Gyal, 2012, 2017). The old Tibetan storyteller, who does not have a name, appears in Takbum Gyal’s story and in Pema’s translation as a vindication of the “otherized,” anonymous Tibetans whose stories satisfy our thirst for the exotic.

As a translator of Takbum Gyal’s stories, Pema seemed to be most drawn to cyclical plots, with repetitive, almost rhythmic grammatical structures, and reiterated messages, which coincidentally are also characteristics of his stories and films.

⁷⁶ Interview with Pema Tsenden. 14 June 2018, Beijing.

One of the examples is Takbum Gyal's "The Dream of Three Generations," subdivided into ten stories, all of them repeating the same expression 阿嘖嘖, the Chinese transliteration of the sound of clicking the tongue. "A Misty Sunset" starts with the mention of how famous the writer's short story has become and ends with the short story receiving a prize. "A Misty Sunset" uses the repetition of a single event—the recollection of how the old storyteller saved the life of the writer once (two paragraphs repeated word by word) as a divisor in between the different trips made by the writer to the mountains. In other words, the repetition of that paragraph or event serves to remind us of the importance of the old storyteller in the life of the writer, but also as a time marker to signal to the reader that what comes afterward belongs to a different time, another visit by the writer to the same place. "The Story of How I Adopted the Pekingese Dog" is in itself a repetition of different instances in which the dog manipulates his coworkers and the leaders to climb up the power ladder. The dog's behavior is portrayed over and over in similar terms—how he licks the shoes of the leaders to clean them, how he presents them with gifts, how he flatters them. The overstating of these details adds a certain humor to the story, while reinforcing the story's critique.

Cyclical plots, as well as repetition of actions, words, and grammatical structures are clear features of Pema's Chinese language stories. Many examples of this come to mind. In "Enticement," every time the protagonist opens the sacred scriptures the attraction that he feels is described with the exact same adjectives over and over again (Pema Tsenden, 2018). The comings and goings of lambs and clouds thorough the story "Eight Sheep," the frequent miscommunications between the Tibetan boy shepherd and the foreigner, and the repetition

of actions by the young shepherd, namely playing with the little lambs and eating his dry meat are but a few examples (Pema Tseden, 2018). This rhythmic repetition can be also seen in some of his Tibetan-language stories, especially so in “Doctor,” in which the cyclical story and the dialogue repetitions are taken to the extreme in the manner of the theater of the absurd (Pema Tseden, 2018).

Coincidentally, the overstating of concepts and the repetition of shots can also be seen in Pema’s movies. Dan Sallitt’s analysis of Pema Tseden’s films accounts for repetitions as well, some examples being *The Search*, with its tendency to “circulat[e] the same stories through different media, as well as the same reactions through different characters,” or the repetition of shots in “Old Dog” in what Sallitt sees as Pema’s conscious decision to “underline its repetitive aspects instead of minimizing them” to achieve sometimes a sense of comedy, and sometimes a distancing effect (Sallitt, 2014).

As a result of translating so many stories by Takbum Gyal in the last decade, Pema’s approach to translation underwent some changes. While during the 1980s and 1990s, he preferred to translate stories he liked by different writers and publish them in Chinese literary journals, he decided later on to focus on one author at the time. Pema believed that concentrating on translating several stories by a given author to be published in book format would be more helpful in letting the work of Tibetophone authors be known and recognized.⁷⁷ Pema enjoyed concentrating on translating Takbum Gyal’s stories for long periods of

⁷⁷ Interview with Pema Tseden. 14 June 2018, Beijing.

time, and I am sure he would have agreed with García Márquez that translation is the deepest kind of reading. A focus on Takbum Gyal's stories for several years allowed him to internalize his Tibetan language style, in order to better render it into Chinese.

Fruit of these translations was also a collaborative script, and the last time I interviewed Pema in person in the summer of 2018, he mentioned his desire to make some of Takbum Gyal's stories into scripts for future films. On that occasion, Pema also told me of another exciting translation project: not satisfied with having published already two anthologies of translations of Takbum Gyal's short stories, he wanted to publish a third book just devoted to Takbum Gyal's dog stories. Pema had already publicly volunteered to do this in the course of an interview he conducted with Takbum Gyal in January 2016 (see picture and accompanying note).



Takbum Gyal and Pema Tseden, 2016⁷⁸

⁷⁸ This picture illustrated Pema Tseden's interview of Takbum Gyal conducted in January 2016. It was originally published in *Qinghai Lake* but immediately circulated in WeChat and was also

Pema's untimely passing did not allow him to realize these projects, but the success of his translations finally gave Takbum Gyal the recognition he deserved in China, which has translated into awards, invitations to participate in literary conferences, an international trip, as well as membership of the Chinese Writers' Association.

Conclusion

Translation theorist Douglas Robinson questions the premise of translators being merely "borrowed bodies" for the writing of writers. As a translator himself, Robinson affirms:

My imagination has to be hard at work when I translate, too; and since I am choosing the target-language words, everything I write has to be filtered through my experience, my interpretations.⁷⁹

Pema carefully chose to translate the Tibetan works that resonated with the Tibet he wanted to portray. By choosing these works we may say he was not only translating Tibet for a Chinese audience but 'writing Tibet' through his translations.

posted in Tibet Web Digest. Two years later, the interview was published in English in High Peaks Pure Earth: <https://highpeakspureearth.com/pema-tsedon-interviews-takbum-gyal-in-my-previous-life-i-may-have-been-a-dog/>

⁷⁹ Robinson, Douglas. *Who Translates: Translator Subjectivities Beyond Reason*. Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2001, p.3.



Songs of Life, anthology of Takbum Gyal's short stories translated by Pema Tseden

Works Cited

- 德本加. 人生歌谣 [*Songs of Life*]. 青海民族出版社, 2012.
- 《哈巴狗收养记》[“The Story of How I Adopted the Pekingese Dog”] 德本加中篇小说集 [*Anthology of Takbum Gyal's Mid-Length Novels*]. 作家出版社, 2017. pp.1-22.
- 《一个梦冷的黄昏》 德本加中篇小说集 [*Anthology of Takbum Gyal's Mid-Length Novels*]. 作家出版社, 2017. pp. 178-201.
- 《三代人梦》 德本加中篇小说集 [*Anthology of Takbum Gyal's Mid-Length Novels*]. 作家出版社, 2017. pp.99-113.
- Ferré, Rosario. “On Destiny, Language and Translation, or Ophelia Adrift the C. & O. Canal.” *Voice-Overs: Translation in Latin American Literature*, edited by Daniel Balderston and Marcy E. Schwartz. SUNY Press, 2012, pp.30-32.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. “The Desire to Translate”, *Voice-Overs*:

- Translation in Latin American Literature*, edited by Daniel Balderston and Marcy E. Schwartz. SUNY Press, 2012, p. 23-25.
- Maconi, Lara. “One Nation, Two Discourses: Tibetan New Era Literature and the Language Debate”, *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, edited by Laurant Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, Duke University Press, 2008, p. 173-201.
- Pema Tsenden. “Pema Tsenden Interviews Takbum Gyal: ‘In My Previous Life I May Have Been a Dog.’” *High Peaks Pure Earth*, 23 May 2018. <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2016/pema-tsenden-interviews-takbum-gyal-in-my-previous-life-i-may-have-been-a-dog/>
- 万玛才旦。如意故事集 [*Auspicious Stories*] 中信出版社. 2024.
- 万玛才旦。说不完的故事---西藏民间文学经典 [*The Story that Never Ends: Classic Tibetan Folk Stories*]. 甘肃民族出版社. 2009.
- 万玛才旦。西藏：说不完的故事. [*Tibet: The Story that Never Ends*]. 青海人民出版社, 2014.
- Phuntshog Tashi, Interview. By Patricia Schiaffini. “Realism, Humor, and Social Commitment: An Interview with Phuntshog Tashi.” *World Literature Today*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2004, pp. 67-69.
- Robin, Françoise. “Silent Stones as Minority Discourse: Agency and Representation in Padma tshe brtan’s *The Silent Holy Stones* (*Lhing ’jags kyi ma ni rdo ’bum*)” 2008, unpublished paper. p.11.
- Robinson, Douglas. *Who Translates: Translator Subjectivities Beyond Reason*. Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2001.
- Sallitt, Dan. “The Spiritual and the Mundane” written for the 2014 Punto de Vista International Seminar in Pamplona, Spain, and reproduced in Sallitt’s blog:<http://sallitt.blogspot.com/2014/Pema-Tsenden.html>

Schein, Louisa. "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China." *Modern China*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1997, pp.69-98.

Pema Tsenden "Enticement." *Enticement: Stories of Tibet*. Translated and edited by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Michael Monhart. SUNY Press, 2018.

Schiaffini Vedani, Patricia. "Realism, Humor and Social Commitment: An Interview with the Tibetan Writer Phuntshog Tashi," *World Literature Today*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2004, pp.67-69.

Tonga, 痛嘎。218 万岁 [*Long Life to Room 218*]. 西藏文学, 第六期, 1984.

Tashi Dawa, 扎西达娃。"系在皮绳结上的魂"。西藏, 系在皮绳结上的魂 [*Tibet: The Soul Tied to a Leather Rope*]. 百花文艺出版社, 174-198.