Faith and Identity in Pema Tseden's "Orgyan's Teeth" (ཨོར་རྒྱན་གྱི་སོ།)

Erin Burke

Abstract : Pema Tseden (1969–2023) was Tibet's most influential filmmaker at the time of his recent death. He also composed short stories that, like his celebrated films, reflect the deep influence traditional forms of Tibetan storytelling, including oral folktales, the Gesar epic, Buddhist narratives, and Tibetan opera, had on his creative work. This essay analyzes one of his more well-known stories, "Orgyan's Teeth," written in Tibetan language and first published in 2012. In it, a first-person narrator recounts his relationship with a childhood friend who was recognized as a reincarnated lama as a teenager and died at the age of twenty. It is a puzzling story that raises more questions than it answers, from Orgyan's unusual obsession with a math equation to the narrator's ambiguous conclusion of the story. I offer a reading that identifies two intertextual references that set up expectations for interpretative resolutions, only to thwart them. The first is a didactic Buddhist narrative about faith, and the second is a type of character that appears in oral traditions, the advice of Buddhist teachers, and modern fiction: lamas of questionable knowledge and morals. It further asks how the narrator's grieving process, his conspicuous omission of the cause of Orgyan's death, and the

seemingly nonsensical numerical references introduce novel contexts in which to think with those familiar narratives and characters. I argue that the story goes beyond depicting ambivalence between modern and traditional frameworks of meaning by demonstrating how they come to be in conversation with each other.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, Tibetan literature, Buddhism, reincarnation, grief

Pema Tseden is internationally known for his celebrated films which portray Tibetan life with both authenticity and singular creativity. He was also a prolific writer of short stories and novels, which, though garnering less attention than his films, are also well-loved and have been translated into several languages, including French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Czech, and English.[35] He engaged in translation of his own work, composing stories in both Tibetan and Chinese, and even translating, or re-writing, some of his Tibetan stories into Chinese.[36] Many of his Tibetan language stories are strange, or even fantastical. A talking corpse introduces a man to firearms in "Golden Corpse-Gun," where Pema Tseden builds on an extended excerpt of a classical Golden Corpse tale. A transparent girl appears in the snow one night in "Gang," and a musician spends years chasing the woman from his recurring dream until the dream crosses over into reality and ends tragically in "The Dream of a Wandering

[35] For English translations see *Enticement* (2018), an anthology of Pema Tseden's stories edited by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Michael Monhart. An English translation of "The Dream of a Wandering Minstrel" appears in the anthology, *Old Demons, New Deities* (2017).

[36] Schiaffini-Vedani "Translator's Introduction" in *Enticement* (viii–ix).

Minstrel."[37] He also wrote stories about the everyday lives of ordinary Tibetans in contemporary social settings, and "Orgyan's Teeth" is one such story.

"Orgyan's Teeth" (ཨོ་རྒྱན་གྱི་སོ།) a Tibetan language story, was originally published in 2012 in the literary journal *Drangchar* (སྒྲང་ཆར།, Soft Rain).[38] In a series of vignettes, a first-person narrator remembers his friend, Orgyan, who died at the age of twenty. The two boys attend their first five years of school together, until the narrator continues on to middle- and high school in town, as their village only has a primary school. Orgyan, who did not continue his education, is recognized as a *tulku*, or reincarnated lama, at the age of eighteen. The narrator frankly describes his initial reluctance to treat his old school friend as a revered spiritual figure, refusing to prostrate at Orgyan's enthronement ceremony and using the common phrase, "to pass on from life" (ཚེ་ལས་འདས་པ་) to refer to Orgyan's death, instead of the respectful expression, "to pass into nirvana" (སྐུ་སྐྱ་ངན་ལས་འདས་པ་). The narrator goes on to explain how he began to develop faith in Orgyan before he died. The story ends with the narrator's realization that among the relics enshrined in the stupa memorializing Orgyan is one of his own baby teeth that was discarded at Orgyan's home when they were both just ordinary young boys playing together.

---

[37] The Golden Corpse, or corpse tales (རོ་སྒྲུང་།) refers to a popular corpus of folk tales, the early Sanskrit versions of which are attributed to Nagarjuna. After these were translated into Tibetan, they entered the oral tradition, and Tibetan storytellers have continued to add to the genre.

[38] Although electronic copies of *Drangchar* are difficult to access, the original Tibetan and the English translation by Michael Monhart that appears in *Enticement* are available on Machik Khabda's website. https://www.machikkhabda.org/enticement.html. Accessed April 20, 2024.

While not a biting critique, the imposter tooth 'relic' and the narrator's awkward transition—from feeling intellectually superior to Orgyan to requesting blessings from him—reflects the ambivalence some contemporary educated Tibetans feel toward traditional religious practices and institutions. It is possible to read this story, as some have, as a lighthearted reminder not to take religion too seriously.[39] It is a testament to Pema Tseden's gift for creating vivid characters with humor and texture that the story can be read this way. But "Orgyan's Teeth" is also a confounding little story that resists interpretive resolution and subtly unsettles the reader.

The narrator repeats a refrain, indicating what the 'main thing' about the story is several times, each time referring to Orgyan's death from a different perspective. As the story moves from a mildly irreverent sketch of Orgyan as a bad student through memories that cast him in a more favorable light, the qualities of the relationship between the two men change, as does the effect of the story and the grief it conveys. The tone of the story oscillates between lighthearted bemusement and ponderous disclosure. Intertextual appearances including a Buddhist didactic story, a trope in modern Tibetan fiction, and even a strange math equation send the reader's attention down a maze of paths, managing to obscure the direct referent of the repeated interjections about Orgyan's death—the actual circumstances of the death itself.[40]

[39] For example, one reviewer of *Enticement* (2018) said of "Orgyan's Teeth," "This is not a story of philosophical questions but, instead, is told with a chuckle and a gentle irreverence toward those who put too much weight on the idea of pure holiness" (Suleski, 233).

[40] At this point, the uses and abuses of Kristeva's term, *intertextuality*, which she first introduced

This essay offers a close reading of this story which attempts to make sense of some of its more perplexing moments. The religious, artistic, and social elements listed above do not serve only as allusions or influences. The story creates a space for the reader to reimagine these texts and their interpretative frameworks, which is to say to use them to think *with*.

The story does not follow a tidy progression. Reading it is a bit like being shown close-ups of details of a larger picture, each of which makes forming an image of the whole more difficult but also more interesting.

In the following, I explore how the story accomplishes that effect and how it deploys familiar literary elements in the service of augmenting the kinds of subjectivities and interpretative strategies we might expect from them. I discuss two intertextual references that complicate and enrich the short vignettes of the narrator's memories. I then conclude with a more speculative reading of the significance of two numerical elements of the story that stand out as non-sequiturs. The first is Orgyan's preoccupation with the mathematical equation 1+1=3. The second is the last "main thing" the narrator asserts, that the contents of the stupa built to memorialize Orgyan include fifty-eight teeth.

---

in "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966), have been debated extensively by literary scholars. Kristeva herself began using another term, transposition, to emphasize the phenomena that went beyond allusion, reference, or influence to transform the 'original' texts. I use the term *intertextual* here to emphasize the argument that the presence of these other texts defies the expected effects of allusions to them. Thus to make sense of why they appear, the reader begins to transform her understanding of those texts themselves as well in the course of interpreting Pema Tseden's story. See Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, for a clear and thorough discussion of the evolution of Kristeva's thinking and her intellectual interlocutors.

In this reading, I center the narrator's experience of grief as a catalyst for interpretive revisioning, both for the character of the narrator himself as well as for the reader. I argue that the intertextuality of multiple elements in the story works to defy neat resolutions and invites repeated and unconventional applications of all available interpretative resources, much like the experience of grief can.

Tulkus and Teeth

The narrator's account of his relationship with Orgyan contains intertextual references to two captivating character types from Tibetan literature: indecorous tulkus and lamas and an old woman with unwavering faith. The second sentence of the story introduces the title character as a tulku who was recognized at the age of eighteen, and the narrator's first anecdote about Orgyan explains that he could not prostrate the first time he saw his friend as a newly enthroned tulku. He follows this by explaining that Orgyan was so bad at math in primary school that he had to copy the narrator's homework for five years. Thus, he does not consider Orgyan to be more intelligent than himself—higher intelligence being a justification for reverence in his estimation.

While his character sketch does not accuse Orgyan of an egregious moral failing, his skepticism draws to mind a number of questionable lamas from popular modern Tibetan literature. Perhaps the most notorious example of these is the title character of the story "Tulku" (སྤྲུལ་སྐུ།) by Dondrup Gyel, published in the literary magazine

Drangchar in 1981.[41] The story depicts a con-man who passes himself off as a reincarnated lama to a small community, giving dubious blessings and teachings, all the while sexually harassing young women and stealing valuables from the families who trusted him, infamously earning Dondrup Gyel not only harsh criticism but death threats as well.[42] Revered scholars and religious leaders too have warned the public about individuals who exploit religious titles and authority for their own gain, differentiating between genuine religious teachers and opportunists.[43] At the same time, some Tibetan intellectuals have critiqued religion as a whole, citing these forms of authority and the opportunities for abuse they provide.[44]

Religious scoundrels come to life in all their colorful shamelessness and cruelty in modern Tibetan fiction, both comic and tragic forms.[45] Thus, when the narrator begins with a reason *not*

[41] An English translation by Kate Hartmann and Sangye Tendar Naga was published in *The Tibet Journal* in 2013.

[42] Matthew Kapstein's"The Tulku's Miserable Lot"has been widely cited. In it, he acknowledges that references to immoral or deceptive religious authorities are not new phenomena in Tibetan literature but argues that Dondrup Gyel's timing and status as a layperson provoked this vigorous criticism. His story was published not long after the violent anti-religious years of the Cultural Revolution. In the decades since 1981, tolerance for such characters has grown. See also Lama Jabb, "Tibet's Critical Tradition and Modern Tibetan Literature," for a discussion of criticism that explores a diversity of genres, including the corpse tales mentioned above.

[43] See for example Nicole Willock, "The Revival of the Tulku Institution in Modern China: Narratives and Practices."

[44] Tragyal, who publishes under the pseudonym Shokdung (བཤད་རྒྱལ། ཞོག་གསར་དུང་། b. 1963), is perhaps the most well-known of these figures.

[45] I am confining this essay to a brief analysis of one story, but for a thorough discussion of images of problematic lamas, see Gayley and Bhum, "Parody and Pathos: Sexual Transgression by 'Fake' Lamas in Tibetan Short Stories." They contrast comedic figures created by male authors with female writers' attention to the victims of fake lamas' sexual deceptions and aggressions.

to accept Orgyan's authenticity as a religious authority, the reader anticipates any number of unsavory possibilities ahead. Yet, the anticipation of scandal or impropriety comes to nothing in "Orgyan's Teeth." The narrator's initial criticism seems to mean less and less as his memories of Orgyan's compassion and purity move into the foreground. He observes the devotion of others and takes it, too, as proof of Orgyan's enlightened qualities.

The intertextuality has paid off, though. The reader's imagination has already begun tracing paths of intriguing possibility rather than dwelling on the opening 'main point' of the story that directly precedes the narrator's indignant objection to Orgyan's newfound prestige. The first lines of the story read:

> Orgyan was a friend of mine from primary school. All that is well known. Later on, Orgyan was identified as a reincarnate lama. All that is likewise well known. These are not the main things. The main thing is that when Orgyan reached the age of twenty, he died.[46]

The narrator continues to punctuate his recollections throughout the story with clarifications about "the main thing" (གཙོ་བོ་). These are frank reminders that Orgyan's death occurred as the narrator was

Tsering Dondrup's shameless Alak Drongtsang is also worth mentioning here as a character who comes to mind in association with possible tulku misbehavior. English translations of a collection of Tsering Dondrup's stories can be found in Christopher Peacock's *The Handsome Monk.*

[46] Unless otherwise indicated, I cite Michael Monhart's lovely translation from the anthology, *Enticement* (5).

reimagining their relationship and coming to terms with his friend's new status. Indeed, rather than the tulku institution's possibilities for corruption in the social sphere, the issue at the center of the story seems to be 'identity.' To be recognized as the reincarnation of a particular person poses serious questions of selfhood, particularly when the person recognized has already had years to develop a personality and social identity of his own, as is the case for Orgyan in the story.

Even without the transfer of property, religious charisma, and often political authority entailed in many tulku lineages, recognition of a close friend or family member can require someone to reassess not only their own sense of identity but their neighbors' and family members' expectations and emotional needs as well. The issue in these cases is less the sway of a religious institution imbued with social, political, and economic power than one of individual struggle with the clash between a personal sense of identity and religious and familial pressures.[47]

In an analysis of short fiction and films that depict examples of ordinary people addressing the attendant conflicts and questions of reincarnation, Françoise Robin argues that fiction is a medium that

[47] Of course, this experience is not unheard of in contemporary Tibetan society. Dawa Ghoso, a reader of "Orgyan's Teeth," who organized a reading group through Machik Khabda, saw his own experience in the story. He describes feeling confused when one of his relatives was recognized as a tulku as an adult and remembers wondering "whether I can still call him 'chocho' as he was my favourite cousin brother." The question of having faith in the authenticity of the individual's spiritual bonafides does not exclude, or necessarily overshadow, the question of what happens to the original relationship, or the original identity of that person. https://www.machikkhabda.org/khabda-blog/thoughts-on-orgyans-teeth. Accessed April 20, 2024.

allows for a space to "suspend belief" in doctrines such as rebirth. A story can present various perspectives in the voices of young and elder characters, as well as that of the author.[48] In the stories she discusses, ordinary people are recognized as deceased family members, for example. The younger person recognized as the new seat of that reborn consciousness must grapple with the plausibility of the concept of rebirth itself as well as the burden of the new, or additional, identity.

The first time the narrator sees Orgyan *as* a tulku is amidst an audience of devoted followers, and he balks at his parents' insistence that he must prostrate, prompting the explanation of Orgyan's lack of basic mathematical comprehension. This scene resembles the kind of juxtaposition Robin identifies, and like her examples, it is the older generation who voices the traditional view, while the younger generation questions its relevance in a specific context. The narrator's stances on Orgyan's spiritual authenticity and personal identity are not fixed.

When Orgyan's followers ask the narrator about Orgyan's qualities as a child, he begins to recall moments of moral purity and unusual compassion. He starts to talk about faith. The narrator does not reveal that his tooth is enshrined with Orgyan's until the end of the story, but the "teeth" of the title paired with the topic of faith evoke a widely known story about a faithful old woman who unknowingly worships the tooth of a dog, which she believes to be a relic of the

[48] Robin, "Souls Gone in the Wind? Suspending Belief about Rebirth in Contemporary Artistic Works in the Tibetan World." In his reading of "Orgyan's Teeth," Dawa Ghoso identifies feelings of ambivalence toward traditional views similar to the ones Robin observes.

Buddha. The story's popularity is due at least in part to its inclusion in Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, a commentary on the preliminary practices for the Longchen Nyingthik tradition. The story appears in the section on faith in the beginning of the extraordinary preliminaries, as part of the instructions on taking refuge.

The subject of the story is confident faith, which is an unwavering faith in the three jewels as the only reliable source of refuge. It follows Patrul Rinpoche's claim that one can receive no compassion from the three jewels without faith and conversely illustrates that the Buddha's compassion can reach a person with confident faith by any means. In the story, a devout old woman has a son who travels to Bodh Gaya often as a merchant, and she has asked him many times to bring her a special relic of the Buddha. This time, she says, if he does not bring one, she will kill herself in front of him. Of course, the careless son forgets this request yet again. He only remembers it when he is nearly home, and seeing a dog's skull on the ground, he takes one of the teeth and presents it to his mother as the Buddha's canine tooth. Even though the dog's tooth has none of the qualities of a genuine relic, because the old woman worships it with faith, it miraculously begins to produce tiny pearl relics (རིང་བསྲེལ་), as an authentic relic would. Her faith not only transforms the ordinary, even unclean, dog tooth into a conduit for the Buddha's compassion and blessings but her as well. When she dies, a halo of rainbow light appears around her body.[49]

[49] Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (173–174).

Faith and Relations

Not unlike the intertextual effect of the tulku character, the connection to the lesson about confident faith does not parallel the behavior of the narrator. The point of the story of the old woman is that she is a model of confident faith. By invoking her with these elements of her story, does Pema Tseden mean to compare or contrast the narrator to her? The narrator in this story is neither a paragon of faith nor is he an example of someone who does not accept the value of faith. Moreover, the narrator's relationship to faith is not necessarily a consequence of ambivalence produced in the juxtaposition of modern education and religious tradition.

The story of the old woman appears in the context of instructions for practice. The commentary on the preliminary practices is also a form of doctrine—a text communicating what Buddhists 'believe,' you might say. But the practice is necessary to make that worldview *real* for an individual. If practicing them is necessary, they should have some effect on the practitioner; something should change. But in the commentary, we often see exemplars of the before and after, rather than the process.

The allusion to this well-known story might serve to resolve or at least point us in the direction of an interpretation of the narrator's final realization that his tooth is included with the relics in the stupa. In that case, the lesson conveyed in the allusion to the story would seem to be that if the prayers and practices of the people circumambulating the stupa are performed with faith, the origin of the teeth is irrelevant. The teeth in "Orgyan's Teeth," though, are not the only supports of practice

the narrator is pondering. There is also the question of Orgyan himself. In the didactic story, there are two characters: the son who sees only the dog's tooth, and the mother who possesses the confident faith capable of receiving the Buddha's compassion that can transform that dog's tooth into a precious relic.

Pema Tseden's story imagines a version of the process that transforms an individual from a son disinterested in faith to someone more like the old woman. There is nothing new or modern about the necessity of that process, per se. It is built into the Buddhist path, which requires a shift in how a practitioner sees the world, regardless of what the competing epistemological or cosmological frameworks are. In this story, though, we see a complex example of how specific contexts pose their own challenges to the process of cultivating faith.

Unlike the old woman who seeks support for her practice of faith in the Buddha—distant, gone from the world—the narrator is wrestling with the possibility of faith in his friend.[50] The complication of this personal relationship is also not new to a traditional Tibetan Buddhist narrative that includes recognized reincarnated individuals. However, in the story, the narrator is not only puzzling through the implications of that tradition, but he is doing so in the wake of an untimely death, both of his friend and of who his friend has recently become.

[50] Thinking about the story of the old woman in light of *this* story, though, one wonders what effect the halo seen at her death had on her son.

Faith and Numbers

When the narrator visits him for the first time in private, Orgyan says that he has recently heard that someone had proven that 1+1=3. He wants his friend, the one who could actually do the math homework in school, to explain this to him, but the narrator can only say that this is a profound problem beyond his comprehension. During a second visit, Orgyan tells his friend that their old math teacher came to ask him for a blessing, and he also asked her this question. Her reply was similar to the narrator's—how could a primary school math teacher comprehend such a thing?

Orgyan's preoccupation with this math equation is strange. Here is a young man who was never good at math, obsessed with a math problem that is not actually a math problem, but a way of talking about phenomena that do not behave in ways that adhere to arithmetic. From adding one drop of water to one bucket of water, to jingoistic corporate slogans about synergy, it can be applied in many contexts, but it cannot be proven. In a lighthearted reading of this story, the narrator and the math teacher are bemused, and the reader can be, too. The comic relief is really driven home the first time Orgyan asks this question, when he elaborates on how odd this seems to him by reciting the arithmetic he *does* know: "1+1=2; 2+2=4; 3+3=6" and so forth. The narrator admits that he was worried Orgyan would keep counting up to a 100+100, and he can only manage to say, "really fast," when Orgyan stops at 10+10=20.[51]

[51] *Enticement* 10.

If we take the meaning of this math problem seriously, one way to interpret its purpose is to contextualize it in relation to the two forces of intertextuality discussed above. Orgyan tells the narrator during both visits that he need not prostrate "between the the two of us."[52] The first time, the narrator feels uncomfortable with not prostrating, but he only offers white silk scarves. The second time he prostrates three times against Orgyan's insistence that he need not do so.

In light of the math problem, the reader can take Orgyan's insistence that there are only the two of them there more literally. The narrator is uncomfortable because there are glimpses of the old Orgyan the narrator grew up with, but Orgyan-the-tulku is there as well. In the narrative, he works on reconciling those two people as he shares bits of memories about young Orgyan, but he is still unsure. It is not only a question of whether Orgyan is endowed with extraordinary spiritual qualities but one of identity. Rather than indicating that no one else is there to see the narrator's behavior, Orgyan is assuring him that there is really no difference between the narrator's young classmate and the tulku before him. His inability to accept the math equation is an incredulity that a third person has somehow appeared between them.[53]

[52] *Enticement* 13. The first time the narrator visits Orgyan alone, he also says there is no need to prostrate "as there is no one else here but us two," 9.

[53] On the one hand, this might seem to contradict the Buddhist doctrine of "no self," one of the arguments for which is that a person changes over time. A young child is clearly different from the adult they become, and from all of the moments in between. In the context of the math problem, though, I take this reassurance as a warning against the reification of multiple entities, or conversely, a nod to the concept of emptiness. The point is similar to the metaphors used to explain Buddhanature. They point out that the nature of enlightened mind is already within each person. Thus the Orgyan who cheats on his math homework is no different from the enlightened tulku Orgyan.

The signposts stating the "the main thing" punctuate both of the meetings. The main thing changes as the narrator's view of Orgyan shifts and his faith in him grows. At the beginning of the story, when the main point is that Orgyan died at the age of twenty, the narrator explains that his parents and others chastise him for saying that Orgyan "died" rather than "passed away into nirvana."[54]

After his first private visit and the first instance of the math problem, the narrator repeats:

> Orgyan separated from the world of humans when he was twenty years old. I, however, have lived in the world of humans past the age of twenty. I know it is not proper to say of Orgyan that he died, separating from the world of humans, but I can't inwardly accustom myself to say of a friend of the same age that he "passed away into nirvana." Still, this is not the main point. The main point is that now our ways have parted forever."[55]

He had begun to see another Orgyan—someone other than his friend who copied his homework in primary school, two Orgyans, as it were. He can acknowledge that, but the main thing, the loss he feels, is expressed as friends parting forever. The traditional religious narrative that, as a tulku, Orgyan has control over his movements in and out of the cycle of rebirth is not completely unbelievable to the narrator, but what feels real to him is that his friend is dead.

[54] *Enticement* 5.

[55] *Enticement* 10.

During their second private meeting, after remembering an example of Orgyan's unusual compassion, the narrator decides to ask Orgyan for blessings to alleviate some troubles in his life. At this point, he experiences "a spontaneous sense of faith" in Orgyan.[56] Despite this surge of spontaneous faith, in the final scene of the story, the narrator remembers losing his tooth at Orgyan's house and realizes that it is among the relics. The narrator does not tell us what he thinks about his tooth sitting amongst the sacred objects in the stupa. He does not interpret that realization for us—neither with an affirmative religious conviction nor a dismissive denial of belief in the blessings of relics.

The foregoing interpretation, that Orgyan's strange math problem plays with Buddhist teachings on the nature of the self and the Tibetan tulku institution, represents a "religious interpretative framework" that continues to speak in the same discursive space as interpretative frameworks that have accrued through modern education, media, and so forth, what Robin calls a "secularizing literary narrative corpus."[57] While this is not the confident voice that insists on a traditional narrative that *explains* the world conclusively through the perspective of religious doctrine, it is convincing as one depiction of what the process of cultivating faith might look like for an ordinary individual. There are moments of certainty, and moments of doubt, assurances, and questions.

[56] *Enticement* 11–12. The act of compassion he remembers happens at a place near the Machu River, where they used to play. Orgyan runs a very long way back to the river in order to save a big fish they found lying in the road, even though the narrator himself insisted they could sell it and it would die anyway. The fish is revived after Orgyan returns it to the water, and the narrator admits that Orgyan showed great compassion. He also remembers that the area by the river Orgyan favored playing in was a holy place associated with Padmasambhava.

[57] Robin, "Souls" 124–125.

The narrator is feeling drawn toward a traditional religious view sporadically, but he also represents what Robin describes as "the world and training of an emerging lay elite, one who does not totally discard a believer's interpretation of events but offers other angles of interpretation."[58] These two frameworks can exist alongside each other without one having to annihilate the other. They can even inform and inspire one another. The allusions to corrupt and ideal religious figures in the story do not carry the expository power one expects, but rather the circumstances of the narrator and his friend invite the reader to reimagine or adapt these references to make sense of their place in the story. This is a reminder that 'a believer's interpretation' is not an immutable script. What may be called secularizing forces can also be occasions for religious narratives to adapt, as they often do in response to social change, or as its instigator.

The Mundane Experience of a Tulku in Contemporary Amdo

Though the above analysis addresses some aspects of the question, I am not satisfied that this interpretation of the math problem accounts for all that it accomplishes in the story. This reading primarily considers the narrator's positionality in the relationship between the two men and takes Orgyan's math question as a response to the narrator's struggles with his friends' new status and identity. In this context, the math problem is a skillful means that Orgyan knowingly uses to gently challenge or guide the narrator, and by extension, the author uses to affect or communicate to the reader. It serves more to

[58] Robin, "Souls" 124–125.

articulate the shape of the narrator's confusion than it does to illuminate Orgyan's state of mind.

The narrator's revelation of the truth about his baby tooth is not the only thread left to ponder at the end of the story. For one, Orgyan repeats his frustration with the nonsensical math problem. And secondly, the narrator conspicuously omits the circumstances of Orgyan's death at the beginning of the story and never returns to them.

The omission invites the reader to imagine scenarios of Orgyan's death at the age of twenty. The details of the story influence the possible causes of death that come to mind, but in imagining a particular possibility, the reader also re-assesses the significance of events and details in the story. I offer one such speculative thought experiment here in order to demonstrate the capacity this story has to work with traditional narratives while creating space for new subjectivities in them.

The conspicuous omission of otherwise relevant information suggests that the circumstances of Orgyan's death are a taboo topic, either in the world of the story or in the context of publication. When the narrator makes the last "main point," he corrects himself repeatedly, saying that the language he uses is not the point; the main point is that a stupa will be built, and Orgyan's teeth will be placed inside—no, that is not the main point either. "The important point (གཅོ་བོ་ནང་གི་གཅོ་བོ་)," he says, "is that they prepared to insert fifty-eight of Orgyan's teeth into the memorial stupa."[59]

[59] *Enticement* 15.

This is the last important point the narrator stipulates, and it bookends the first, that Orgyan died at age twenty. The number fifty-eight is recognizable, in Amdo at least, as a reference to the year 1958, during which rebellions against Mao's collectivization policies resulted in massive trauma and loss of life in that region. It has become a symbol of resistance and tragedy in everyday life, as well as in fiction, music, and film.[60] In a story written by an author from Amdo and set near the Machu River, the connection between this number and death, particularly death in the course of resisting the state, is strong.

Contemplating a version of the story in which Orgyan's death resulted from involvement in resistance against the state, *as* a religious exemplar, expands the implications of many aspects of the story. For example, might his incredulity that someone could prove that 1+1=3 reflect his frustration with propaganda? As a recognized tulku, the requirement to attend mandatory re-education programs and be subjected to a number of bureaucratic management processes would have been part of his new reality, along with the new religious training he would receive.[61] I do not intend this suggestion to subvert, or even diminish, the

[60] A concise account of the events of 1958 in Amdo, including testimony from in Tibetans' own words and references to longer first-person accounts, can be found in the section, "La révolte en Amdo en 1958" (45–56), authored by Françoise Robin, in the report to the French Senate: L'histoire du Tibet du XVIIème au XXIème siècle, Rapport de groupe interparlementaire d'amitié 104, edited by Katia Buffetrille and Françoise Robin. https://www.senat.fr/ga/ga104/ga104.html. Accessed April 20, 2024. Robin also addresses references to 1958 in creative genres in "Souls" (123) and "The Events of Amdo '58 and the Emergence of Literary Postmemory among Tibetans." See also Weiner (2021) for a history of the Chinese policies and political project affecting the region in the years leading up to the 1958 revolt, beginning in 1949.

[61] Various "orders" giving the state power to manage and re-educate the residents of monasteries and nunneries have been passed since the early 2000s, including order no. 5, which regulates the reincarnation of individuals through an application process.

validity of reading the math problem as a way to contend with Tibetan Buddhist concepts of selfhood and identity. From Orgyan's perspective as a newly recognized tulku training in Buddhist education and receiving communist party re-education at the same time, these two interpretations convincingly address two different existential problems, one based on Buddhist teachings on the nature of the self, and the other raised by a clash between what Buddhist tradition described Orgyan's role as a Buddhist leader should be, and what state policy would allow it to be.

Beyond the math problem, when the narrator realizes his tooth is entombed with Orgyan's, does he feel honored or blessed by the association? In that case, the final realization about his tooth might be comforting. What might the miraculous stories about Orgyan and the continued devotion his followers have for him after his death say about the relationship between faith and acts of resistance? These are not questions that the story explicitly asks, much less answers. It *does* explicitly raise the issue of faith and devotion through the voice of a layperson who ambivalently reflects on a revered religious figure. And moreover, it situates that narrative within a process of grieving that is left open to contend with still more voices, even hostile ones that challenge the existence of traditional narratives, not just their plausibility. In effect, the story asks traditional narratives to accommodate new interpretive challenges, rather than pitting them against other interpretative frameworks.

Conclusions

"Orgyan's Teeth" is so compelling in part because Pema Tseden does not make it easy, and this is not simply because he leaves the interpretation of an outcome up to the reader or populates the story with obscure references. There is no real plot to speak of in this short story, yet it is crowded with intertextual references and shifts temporally between memories with various emotional atmospheres. The story lets the confusion and disorientation of grief stand and does not obscure the inelegant, sometimes inadequate attempts at finding meaning that follow the death of a loved one, or a role model.

I offered a thought experiment in which Orgyan's death involved him having to make sense of political resistance in relation to his religious role. While there are numerous examples of religious figures doing just that in Tibet's recent history, a particularly intense series of protests, overwhelmingly performed by monks at the outset, was growing as this story was published. Beginning with a monk named Tapey, who set himself on fire at Kirti monastery in Ngawa on the third day of Losar, Feb 27, 2009, well over a hundred people self-immolated in protest by the end of 2014. The protests were covered extensively in international media, and the effect on Tibetan communities all over the world cannot be understated.[62]

[62] A series on the Society for Cultural Anthropology website includes a diverse selection of pieces by writers from a number of fields, including anthropologists, historians, journalists, art historians, as well as Tibetan intellectuals, examining many facets of this crisis from a variety of angles. It also includes a list of links to other websites with information about self-immolations, including news articles, opinion pieces, reports, and Chinese media. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet. Accessed April 20, 2024.

I raise this subject here because the events provoked discussions about the religious implications of the protests among Buddhist leaders, as well as international journalists. Not limited to examinations of Buddhist doctrine and ethics, the interpretative force of narrative was also in question. On January 8, 2012, Lama Sobha was the first tulku to self-immolate, and he left an audio recording of his last statement to his fellow Tibetans. In it, he analogizes the intention of his action to the moment "the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress." [63]

The reference here is to another story that appears in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, this time a jataka tale of one of the Buddha's lives before his final birth and enlightenment.[64] He sacrifices himself to prevent the starving tigress and her cubs from incurring the negative karma of eating one another. The sacrifice in the story is a moving depiction of generosity, and the gift of food is immediately beneficial to the tigress and her young. The protests, though affirmed as a noble sacrifice by the Buddhist community, have garnered insufficient inattention from people and governments with the power to change the suffering at its root, which strains the narrative satisfaction of that analogy.[65]

---

[63] In the English translation of this message, the translators inserted a clarification because the story is so familiar to Tibetans (and many Buddhists) that Lama Sobha needed only to use shorthand: "I am sacrificing my body with the firm conviction and a pure heart just as the Buddha bravely gave his body to a hungry tigress [to stop her from eating her cubs]." https://savetibet.org/harrowing-images-and-last-message-from-tibet-of-first-lama-to-self-immolate/. Accessed April 20, 2024.

[64] As in Lama Sobha's message, Patrul Rinpoche merely has to say "Examples are Prince Great Courage giving his body to a starving tigress, …" in his commentary on the practice of cultivating the perfection of generosity (236).

[65] Tenzin Mingyur Paldron, in "Virtue and the Remaking of Suffering," gives a nuanced reading

There are many interpretative frameworks individuals and communities draw on to contend with such moments. While the elliptical disclosure of the false relic at the end of "Orgyan's Teeth" could be read as writing off the validity of the traditional religious narrative, this does not do justice to the entirety of the story, particularly the indications of the narrator's faith and his insistence on navigating the language of his passing. Nor does the allusion to the old woman seem to confirm the narrator's unquestioning faith in Orgyan and the power of relics. It is complicated enough to create a character who is contemplating the difference between passing from life and passing into nirvana in the wake of losing a friend—who was also becoming an object of faith. Factoring in whatever struggle that friend might also have had in inhabiting his new position is going to stretch the well-worn grooves that traditional narratives are used to traveling. Still, they have not lost their interpretive force yet.

Whatever the cause of Orgyan's death, "Orgyan's Teeth" provides an occasion to mourn and to imagine how certain events cause individuals and communities to strain against, plead with, and expand the scope of inherited narratives. The story demonstrates that fiction is a productive arena for that interpretive work, and it is with no small amount of grief that I regret not having had the opportunity to discuss it with the author. It should inspire us all to read more, and think with, Tibetan fiction.

---

of Lama Sobha's message, including an interpretation of the significance of the tigress story. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/virtue-and-the-remaking-of-suffering. Accessed April 20, 2024.

Works Cited

Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. Routledge, 2011.

Dondrup Gyel. "Tulku." Kate Hartmann and Sangye Tendar Naga, trans. *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 38, no. 3–4, 2013, pp. 35–55.

Gayley, Holly, and Somtso Bhum. "Parody and Pathos: Sexual Transgression by 'Fake' Lamas in Tibetan Short Stories." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, vol. 63, 2022, pp. 62–94.

Kapstein, Matthew. "The Tulku's Miserable Lot: Critical Voices from Eastern Tibet." A*mdo Tibetans in Transition: Society and Culture in the Post-Mao Era*, edited by Toni Huber, Brill, 2002, pp. 99–111.

Lama Jabb. "Tibet's Critical Tradition and Modern Tibetan Literature." *Tibetan Literary Genres, Texts, and Text Types*, edited by Jim Rheingans, Brill, 2015, pp. 229–69.

Pema Tseden. *Enticement: Stories of Tibet*. SUNY Press, 2018.

Robin, Francoise. "Souls Gone in the Wind? Suspending Belief about Rebirth in Contemporary Artistic Works in the Tibetan World." *Himalaya*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2016, pp. 116–29.

———. "The Events of Amdo '58 and the Emergence of Literary Postmemory among Tibetans." *Conflicting Memories: Tibetan History under Mao Retold*, Brill, 2020.

Suleski, Ronald. "Enticement: Stories of Tibet, Written by Pema Tsenden." [sic] Journal *of Chinese Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2, Mar. 2019, pp. 232–35.

Tenzin Dickie. *Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty-One Short Stories from Tibet*. OR Books, 2017.

Tsering Dondrup. *The Handsome Monk and Other Stories*. Translated by Christopher Peacock, Columbia University Press, 2019.

Weiner, Benno. *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier*. Cornell

University Press, 2021.

Willock, Nicole. "The Revival of the Tulku Institution in Modern China: Narratives and Practices." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, vol. 38, Février 2017, pp. 183–201.