

Introduction: Translating Across the Bardo

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This special issue about centering the richness of Tibetan language in Tibetan Studies is born from a roundtable for the 16th International Association for Tibetan Studies seminar in Prague, Czech Republic, in 2022. Inspired by the pathbreaking works of two non-western scholars of literature, Lama Jabb in Tibetan Studies and Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o in African Studies, we invited both senior and emerging scholars in the field to engage with the works of these two scholars and consider how we might center the Tibetan language in Tibetan Studies in general and in our translation practices in particular. In order to include a wide range of voices and free discussion, we invited our participants to offer concise thought pieces in a roundtable format instead of a panel in which scholars read standard academic papers. The fleshed-out essays in this special issue take up our initial concern to spark conversations on language and translation in Tibetan Studies.

1 I thank Charlene Makley for tirelessly working on this collaborative project with me, especially during times when I was not able to directly set the project in motion due to external circumstances. My heartfelt thanks to the authors, who shared their insightful thoughts on issues of translation and centering Tibetan language in Tibetan Studies. Deep gratitude to Lama Jabb for inspiring us to embark on this project in the first place. I also thank two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback, comments, and suggestions. Many thanks to Shelly Bhoil and Patricia Schiaaffini Vedani for their editorial assistance, intellectual labor of love, and the curation of the entire issue.

As a first source of inspiration for our roundtable, Dr. Lama Jabb's publications on Tibetan language and literature and his series of lectures on translation in recent years have heightened Tibet scholars' awareness of translation as a highly fraught, "liminal bardo zone" (2024) between languages, in which translators must navigate a life-and-death process of partially dismantling both languages in order to bring about the felicitous rebirth of new texts. He tells us that the journey of translation from the Tibetan language is like crossing the *Bardo*, full of potential pitfalls and even the possibility of destructive violence, the erasure of the very memory of an already threatened Tibetan language and culture. And yet, he argues, if one pays arduous attention to the formal beauty and complex histories of the Tibetan language, one can produce translations that support the "continued life of the original" (2024).

Lama Jabb's work has been a constant source of inspiration for many Tibetan scholars both in the West and in Tibet. Young Tibetan scholars and students from Tibet particularly find his work inspirational because one can viscerally feel in his analyses of Tibetan literature and language the richness of Tibetan language not only at the level of meaning but also musicality and form. The richness of Tibetan language that Lama Jabb endorses in his publications and lectures starkly contrasts with many western analyses of Tibetan language literature, which reduce it to a few terms, or merely treat it as a means to extract data, or as the object of certain theoretical frameworks.

In his keynote speech delivered at the 14th International Association for Tibetan Studies seminar in 2016, Lama Jabb stated, "Language is not just a mere mode of communication. It does not only convey thoughts, feelings, and information but it also affects the ability to think, feel and communicate in profound ways at both individual and social levels" (2016). Thus, taking language seriously also means taking the speakers of that language seriously, including how they think and feel, both collectively and individually. By pointing out some of the flaws of his seminal book on Tibetan literature, *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature: The Inescapable Nation* (2015), Lama Jabb emphasized the importance of honest critique aimed at bettering our scholarship and creating a more just society. For example, in his speech he

acknowledged that Tibetan literature is not immune to issues such as gender inequality and patriarchal injustices—themes, he said, he had not systematically and rigorously addressed in his book. Perhaps with a Tibetan audience in mind, Lama Jabb insisted, “Our scholarly pursuits would be more rewarding if we confront our many social challenges ahead, such as gender inequality, tribal and sectarian disputes, rampant gambling and alcoholism, environmental degradation, corruption of the clergy, and the power of elite intellectuals.” His speech struck a deep chord with both Tibetan and non-Tibetan scholars in the audience.

Besides Lama Jabb’s powerful statements on the status of Tibetan Studies and its future development in his keynote speech, the audience, particularly the Tibetan audience, was also deeply inspired by his passion, vivacity, command of both English and Tibetan, the seeming ease with which Tibetan poetry came to him, as well as his creative oral delivery of musically arranged Tibetan words—all of which contributed to what we mean by the richness of Tibetan language, or of any other languages. Languages in practice have a formal beauty of their own beyond any referential meaning they may convey.

The second source of inspiration for our roundtable was the renowned Kenyan scholar and writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s book, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). Ngũgĩ writes, “Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next” (15). Ngũgĩ’s central argument, or to put it more aptly, his main cause is that African writers would have to write in African languages if they were serious about decolonization. In a similar way, the contributors to this issue of *Yeshe*, especially the Tibetan scholars, have concerns that go beyond the merely beautiful translations of Tibetan literature into English, for such an effort is narrow, offering more to the ever-expanding metaphysical empire of the English language while adding little to the vitality of the Tibetan language.

After the publication of *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ himself bid farewell to English as a vehicle for his thoughts and feelings, and until this

day, he has been committed to writing in his mother tongue, *Gikũyũ*. In a 2018 interview, Ngũgĩ said, “We the older generation, the wrong thing we have done is we have made the languages of Europe as if they are the only ones which can bear knowledge, intelligence, and everything else. This is very wrong.” Ngũgĩ argues that if only English or French are learnt, decolonization of the mind could never take place because “knowing only English and French creates an attitude that knowledge comes from outside. That all that is good and everything else comes from outside and you can see it has created a mentality in Africa where even African leaders look for validation from the West. If initiative comes from within the country, they are suspicious of it unless there is validation, and it is never the other way around.”²

The perspective of the decolonization of mind vis-à-vis languages foregrounds to us the inseparability of the very language we use in our work or translation and the unequal power and prestige of world languages. We thus invited the participants to be in conversation with current prevalent paradigms related to decolonization with a special focus on the Tibetan language, while acknowledging the hegemony of the English language or other dominant languages in Tibetan Studies’ translation practices.

In this special issue on Translation in Tibetan Studies, we offer a variety of perspectives on translation and center the richness of the Tibetan language in scholarly work. We deliberately kept the essays short and pithy to maximize their accessibility to wider audiences. In the following sections, we do not aim to summarize all the creative and caring ways in which the authors presented their methods of engaging concepts, theories, and methodologies contained in the treasury of the Tibetan language, in order to grapple with and explicate unequally situated Tibetan and non-Tibetan epistemologies in their respective fields. We leave the pleasure of discovery and in-depth exploration to the readers.

2 Quotes in this paragraph are from Ngũgĩ’s 2018 interview, entitled, *African Languages Need to Talk to Each Other* <https://www.dw.com/en/ngugi-wa-thiongo-african-languages-need-to-talk-to-each-other/a-44297656> (Accessed in January 2024)

ལོ་ལྷོ་དང་དབང་ལྷགས། Translation and Power Relations

In Tibetan Buddhist canons, great Tibetan translators are often referred as the “eye of the world” (འཇིག་རྟེན་གྱི་མིག), a term of great respect for the translators and their profession. This societal respect was often accompanied by institutional support over a long period of time. The rich Buddhist texts that we see today thereby should be seen as a product of certain historical and political institutions with resources and support. Who has the resources to translate? In whose interests do we translate? Who has the power to shape and wield translations? Whose works qualify as worthy of translation? Both Charlene Makley and Sarah Jacoby draw our attention to the politics of translation and unequal power relations. Jacoby, for example, claims that the Tibetan Buddhist studies has paid scant attention to Tibetan Buddhist women’s writings, while mainly translating the works authored by male Buddhist elites. Makley critically reflects on her own position as an American anthropologist and a tenured professor with access to resources for translation as a reality afforded by colonial institutions and powerful nation-states. What stands out in their respective essays is their humility and courage to find limitations within their (also our) collaborative translation projects by acknowledging the ever-expanding empire of the English language, and how that could shape our thinking in ways that we take for granted.

ལོ་ལྷོ་དང་ལོ་ལྷོ་བྱེད་ལུབ་མེད་བའི་ཆ། Translation and Untranslatability

Translation is an open-ended process, and no translation can be said to be perfect. Whether we can replicate one language’s distinctions with all its complexities into another language is a perennial question. Cameron Warner poignantly reflects on the question of untranslatability and incommensurability as an essential feature of translation. For example, a single term in one language may retain irreconcilable meanings resolvable only by introducing or even imposing a coherent order absent in the original language (Hanks and Severi 2015). What factors then influence the decisions of a translator? Warner argues that the audience plays an important role in our translation practices, and there

is no perfect translation that can satisfy all readers. By focusing on his efforts to translate *Collective Topics* (བསྐྱུས་གྲགས་), a genre of Tibetan scholastic writing focused on epistemology, Forman shows us how interactions and a certain degree of mutual intelligibility can proceed in translation, and that translators can also gain insights from seeing the ambiguity and the open-endedness of translation not as something to resolve but as its precondition.

ལོ་རྒྱུ་སྲིད་ཆེད་དུ་བྱེད། Translating for whom?

In an interview in 2018, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o says, summing up his philosophy: “If you know all, and I mean all, the languages of the world and you do not know your mother tongue, that is enslavement. If you know your mother tongue and add all the languages of the world to it, that is empowerment”. Of course, we should understand that there are many people who do not have the opportunity to study their mother tongue due to reasons beyond their control. We should also ask a difficult question, that is, by translating literatures from marginalized languages into dominant languages such as English, are we actively contributing to the ever-expanding reach of the English language while at the same time reinforcing the attitude that the English language is the only one that, in Thiong’o’s words, “can bear knowledge, intelligence, and everything else.” (2018)

As Makley points out, in recent years, with the rise of Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Land Back movements in the United States and other indigenous cultural and political revitalization movements beyond the North American context, many academic institutions and associations are discussing and developing ways to center native and marginalized voices and cultures. An important part of that larger discussion is to develop ways to do university research that can support communities in which we work and the cultural treasures that we study.

Another important context to understand is that the Tibetan scholars contributing to this volume, all of whom are sons and daughters of Tibetan nomads and farmers, went into academia as a means of helping their people, no matter in what field, and they are aware of their privileges and rare access to world-class

universities with a deep sense of personal and collective responsibility. In that respect, the ethical and political protocols that inform our academic practices can be said to be a little different from those of non-Tibetan scholars.

For example, Tsehuajab Washul raises the importance of translating non-Tibetan academic research methods and writing into Tibetan by inviting both Tibetan and non-Tibetan scholars to create more knowledge (and can we also say a different kind of attitude?) in the Tibetan language. Tashi Dekyid Monet invites us to think of research or scholarship as an opportunity to act within an ethical and place-based network of reciprocal relations. My contribution to this volume calls into question some Tibetologists' lack of respect towards Tibetan language teachers and Tibetan language pedagogies as well as the common practice of non-Tibetan scholars' reading, translating, and analyzing some of the most sophisticated Tibetan Buddhist texts after they have learned Tibetan just for a few years.

ལོ་རྒྱུ་དང་ས་གནས་བརྟེན་པའི་འཛིག་རྟེན། Translating Land-based Lifeworld(s)

Since the Maoist years (1950s-1970s), the reframing of Tibetan land as the sovereign property of the Chinese state has also entailed a process of erasing the Tibetans affective and historical relationships to their ancestral land. Today, the Tibetan-inhabited landscape is blanketed with state nomenclatures and definitions of land; land is translated in fundamental ways that affect its inhabitants everyday lives and subjectivities. Even in academic writings, for example, one can commonly find administrative terms such as province, prefecture, county, township, and village, all ranked in a hierarchical and spatial order. Eveline Washul claims that place names carry histories, memories, social relations, and relational ties to more-than-human beings. She points out that a place name like Golok is more than just a label that can be easily translated into languages such as the English, as it embodies a particular land-based articulation of a world. Washul's article is also a call for Tibetan studies scholars to be conscientious of the ways in which we translate place names and all the memories and histories ingrained in them.

Today, Critical Indigenous Studies scholars see the revitalization of Indigenous ways of relating to land and language as essential to the mission of empowering Indigenous communities and unmaking settler colonialisms (Perley 2012; Tuck 2014; Morten-Robinson 2016; LaDuke 2016; Simpson 2017; Kimmerer 2022). Drawing insights from this strand of scholarship as a source of inspiration, Tashi Dekyid’s paper powerfully shows the affective relationship between the Tibetan people, their ancestral land, and their language. She is also concerned with the ways in which our translations could erase Tibetans’ particular relationality with their ancestral lands. Her own decision to leave untranslated the invocation text of her community’s ancestral mountain is powerful because if one truly would like to understand this land-based relationship, then one has to attend to not only the meaning of such a text but also to its formal musicality and the affective experience of reciting it. It’s also a way of saying that we are not going to translate everything for you unless you take the richness of Tibetan language seriously. One may disregard such analysis as just an act of romanticization, but for many Tibetans this is largely about raising awareness of indigenous histories and place-based existences as part of a continuing struggle against external powers.

Conclusion: Adding Vitality to the Tibetan Language

Our translation practices are inseparable from our respective ethical commitments. For example, some may claim the importance of translating Tibetan Buddhist texts into English with the aim of spreading the Buddha’s teachings to a larger audience, or simply advancing human knowledge. Others may claim the need to translate the works of Tibetan women into English with the goal of representing marginalized voices. All are meaningful ethical commitments. For many Tibetan scholars and students, we would like to point out that adding vitality to the Tibetan language by translating a wide range of subjects *into Tibetan* is of urgent need and should be a deep ethical commitment in the increasingly fraught political context.

To conclude, as Lama Jabb pointed out in his keynote speech, “Without serious engagement with Tibetan language in all its expressive complexities,

our attempt to understand how Tibetans think, feel, dream, imagine, act and live will suffer.” Somehow, our ancestors on the Tibetan plateau managed to live a life with dignity and resilience in one of the coldest places in the world. In spite of the external threats and pressures that we face today, finding a way to flourish is the task for a new generation of Tibetan Studies scholars. Adding vitality to the Tibetan language through critical, collaborative translation practices is one crucial way forward.

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