

Afterword: The Lotus Garden of Literary Translation

མཇུག་གཏམ་ ཚེས་སྐྱུར་པ་སྐྱེའི་དགའ་ཚལ།

ལྷ་མ་སྐྱབས། *Lama Jabb*

ཚིག་གི་དག་ཆས་དོན་གྱི་གནད་འབྲིན་ཞིང་།
དོན་གྱི་གོ་བས་ཚིག་གི་དག་ཐོན་པ།
སྐྱེས་སྐྱེས་རིག་ཆལ་ལྷ་ཡི་ལྷང་འདྲ་བས།
ཚེས་སྐྱུར་པ་སྐྱེའི་དགའ་ཚལ་འཕེལ་གྱུར་ཅིག།

རྗེ་བཙུན་ཤེས་རབ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།¹

Huatse Gyal and Charlene Makley organized a unique roundtable on translation *Centering the Richness of Tibetan Language in Tibetan Studies* at the 16th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies in Prague in 2022. The panellists were encouraged to reflect upon the challenges, rewards, and politics of translation as well as their own experience as translators while they engage with Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o’s and my work on language and translation.

¹ རྗེ་བཙུན་ཤེས་རབ་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Jetsun Sherab Gyatso) 1980: 456. For an English translation of this verse please read through the essay.

It was an unbelievable honour and inexpressibly humbling to have my name mentioned, let alone my work discussed, alongside such a peerless and impactful global intellectual giant. My own chastening experience and stings of imposter syndrome aside, the packed-out roundtable was one of the most dynamic, engaging and constructive events of the entire conference. The insightful and critical presentations and the animated and thoughtful responses made it abundantly apparent that all the scholars at the gathering were preoccupied with the successful translation of Tibetan language materials into other tongues.

As can be seen in the published versions of their talks here, the overwhelming concern of the panellists is to do justice to the richness and musicality of the Tibetan language, especially when attempting literary translation. The accomplishment of such a lofty objective – if ever possible – entails prioritising Tibetan ways of thinking and vocabularies of conceptualization, which requires not only a deep cultural immersion but also the cultivation of a critical socio-political and historical awareness about Tibet. Without reiterating the convincing arguments laid out in this special issue, here I will briefly touch upon some of the aspects that foreground Tibetan lived experience and epistemology.

Language of Self-expression

The Chinese Communist invasion of Tibet in the 1950s was a long-drawn-out bloody process, although the oppressive endurance of the subsequent colonial occupation makes one neglect this fact. The Tibetan survivors and their immediate descendants had put into words this traumatic event to make sense of it and record it for posterity. In a way they had to translate an unprecedented tragedy into new utterances that bear witness to history. Yet it is no exaggeration to point out that in contemporary scholarship on modern Tibet, few scholars give precedence to the actual vocabulary Tibetans themselves came up with to communicate their colonised reality. The Tibetan language of self-expression is either totally ignored or glossed over with purportedly neutral terms. Even worse, it is replaced with the very language invented by the colonial power for the sole purpose of erasing Tibetan history, denying colonial oppression, and indoctrinating everyone who studies Tibet.

Such intellectual malpractice is prevalent, but it will suffice to cite just one glaring instance here—the descriptions of the violent encounter between the Dalai Lama’s Tibet and Mao’s China. With slight variances in wording, uncoerced Tibetans described and still describe this encounter simply as “invasion” (བཅན་འཛུལ།). For example, it is recounted as “the Red Chinese invasion of Tibet” (རྒྱ་དམར་གྱིས་བོད་དུ་བཅན་འཛུལ།), “the Chinese military invasion of Tibet” (རྒྱ་དམག་གིས་བོད་ལ་བཅན་འཛུལ།), “the Chinese invasion of Tibet” (བོད་དུ་རྒྱ་མིས་བཅན་འཛུལ།) and “China’s invasion of Tibet” (རྒྱ་ནག་གིས་བོད་ལ་བཅན་འཛུལ།). However, this self-representing Tibetan voice is lost when the defining historical moment is translated or reformulated as the “arrival” of the Chinese Communists in Tibet or the “incorporation” of Tibet into the People’s Republic of China. Worse still, it is completely disregarded when the same historical event is explained through the regurgitation of CCP-speak as “the peaceful liberation of Tibet (བོད་ཞི་བའི་བཅེངས་གྲོལ།).”

With characteristic perception Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s states: “The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.”² When the language of the Chinese colonial power (both Mandarin Chinese and CCP-speak) is elevated over that of Tibetans in works on Tibet, one cannot help but think that such works assist in perfecting the mental control of the colonised and those beyond. Therefore, a crucial task of the translator of Tibetan materials, literary or otherwise, must be to eschew such complicity in colonialism. This calls for, among other necessities, an acute consciousness of lived Tibetan experience and the uncurbed Tibetan ways of uttering it, a heightened critical awareness of the Tibetan colonial condition, and the rigorous avoidance of the language of the perpetrator when chronicling the victimised.

Travails of Translation

The scrupulous cultivation of a deeply critical and empathetic awareness is part and parcel of the arduous dimension of translation that demands time,

2 Thiong’o 1986: 16.

patience, struggle, vigilance, and endless studying. Elsewhere, I have compared translation to an act of *bardo* because it operates in a liminal realm between at least two languages and enables communication among different worlds that engender as well as embed these languages.³ Particularly in the translation of poetry both concerned languages are compelled to experience something like slow death and rebirth. They are both deconstructed into the minutest units before the original substance and beauty are reborn in the now meticulously reassembled target language. One of the significances of the *bardo* metaphor is to heighten our attention to this long laborious process and its indispensability.

In *Angry in Piraeus*, an illuminating personal reflection on translation, Maureen Freely states: “Translating is for me the slowest, deepest, and most intimate form of reading: closer than close reading. I sometimes think of it as immersed reading.”⁴ The *bardo* metaphor also carries a similar sentiment that successful translation rebirths can only come about as a result of slow, patient, and frequent close reading accompanied by cultural immersion. Without a mental disposition to rigorously engage and struggle with specifically the source language over an immensely long time, good translation would be almost impossible. With this being the case, it would be quite foolhardy and disrespectful to attempt the translation of any literary text, let alone great Tibetan classics, after only a brief stint of studying Tibetan language and culture.

Eternal Translation for a Plural World

The great irony of translation is that even after the investment of a huge amount of time, hard work, learning, and constant struggle for accuracy, some dimensions of meaning and style of the source texts are inevitably left out or betrayed. The act of translation is never-ending and remains forever unsatisfactory. Hence, we have the unrivalled status of the original text, which is itself not an unchanging and fixed entity. No matter how talented and studious

³ Lama Jabb 2024: 32-51.

⁴ Freely 2014: 32.

translators are, the simple fact is that there are too many things to be translated. Moreover, what is translated is incomplete and open to contestation and retranslation. Herein lies an overlooked quality of translation that helps address the serious elements of erasure, betrayal, and violence it entails. Jacques Derrida underscores this when in the Tower of Babel story, he sees God's interruption of "the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism."⁵ The denial of a universal language condemns humans to perennial confusion but neutralises the tyranny of a single language. This in turn permits the continuance of linguistic diversity that cries out for eternal translation. I believe it is vital to embrace such a critical consciousness when it comes to the translation of Tibetan literary texts. No language should be universally dominant, and no translation can be definitive or final. Translation of Tibetan literature should serve to generate cross-cultural dialogue and creativity while countering any form of linguistic imperialism that might snuff out the Tibetan language.

In his atmospheric and contemplative poem "Snow," Louis MacNeice observes that the world is "incorrigibly plural" and celebrates "the drunkenness of things being various."⁶ The goal of translation is to enable communication between distinct languages while neither undermining nor erasing equally priceless systems of communication. By fostering conversations across cultures, translation upholds and enhances the ecstasy of plurality in the world. All the articles in this special issue are written in English. All of them, except for Tsehuajab Washul's contribution, treat translation from Tibetan into other major languages. This grave imbalance of scholarship, which mostly benefits the readers of powerful colonial languages, was discussed with passion, insight, and ethical commitment at the roundtable. I fervently wish that similarly galvanising critical and creative attention will be turned on translation from other languages into Tibetan along with discussions of translation theory and practice in Tibetan. This will help make Tibetans themselves beneficiaries by rectifying some of the inequalities in knowledge production in Tibetan studies, bolstering Tibetan intellectual advancement, and enriching Tibetan cultural diversity.

5 Derrida 1992: 226.

6 MacNeice 1999: 611.

Translation as Treasure Substitute

In the Tibetan treasure tradition, it is customary for treasure revealers to leave what are known as གཉེར་ཚབ། “treasure substitutes” in exchange for the extracted texts and objects at the exact sacred spot. This custom is for the appeasement of the treasure guardians, territorial deities, and other local spirits as well as for the protection and renourishment of the natural environment.⁷ Translations of great literary works from English and other languages into Tibetan will undoubtedly be a nourishing repayment for the fine literary treasures mined out of Tibet through translation over the decades. Such intellectual pursuits will also be an apt and novel implementation of the Tibetan notion of treasure substitute in the realm of contemporary knowledge production. Translations from and into Tibetan are also indeed an invaluable cultural exchange that will ensure the world will continue to be “incorrigibly plural” and thus pleasurable.

Towards these noble ends, let us aspire with the great Tibetan Buddhist master, poet, scholar, and translator Jetsun Sherab Gyatso (1884-1968) that our endeavours here and elsewhere may contribute to the thriving of the garden of literary translation in Tibet and elsewhere:

The accuracy of words draws out the essence of meaning
And the sense of meaning brings out the accuracy of words.
May divine authority-like intellectual power of talent and learning
Make the lotus pleasure garden of literary translation flourish

⁷ For an insightful and ecologically conscious discussion of this practice see Terrone 2014: 460-482.

Works Cited

- Derrida, Jacques. 1992. “From Des Tours de Babel”, in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (ed.), *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 218-227.
- Freely, Maureen. 2014. *Angry in Piraeus*, illustrated by Rie Iwatake. London: Sylph Editions.
- རྩེ་བཙུན་ཤེས་རབ་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Jetsun Sherab Gyatso). 1984. དུས་གསུམ་གྱི་རྣམ་གཞག་རྩོ་ལྷན་སེལ་བའི་འོད་སྤང་ལ་བྱུང་བ་གནད་བའི་སྐབས་ཀྱི་དབྱེད་གཏམ། རྩེ་བཙུན་ཤེས་རབ་རྒྱ་མཚོ་འཇམ་དཔལ་དབྱེས་པའི་རྩོ་གྲོས་ཀྱི་གསུང་རྩོམ་པོ་དག་གསུམ་པ། ལེ་ལོ་ལྷོ་མཚོ་སྐྱོན་མི་རིགས་དབེ་སྐྱོན་ཁང་། Ziling: Tsongon Nationalities Publishing House, 452-456.
- Lama Jabb. 2024 “An Act of Bardo: Translating Tibetan Poetry”, in *Longing to Awaken: Buddhist Devotion in Poetry and Song*, edited by Holly Gayley and Dominique Townsend, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 32-51.
- MacNeice, Louis. 1999. “Snow”, in Christopher Ricks (ed.), *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 611.
- Terrone, Antonio. 2014. “The Earth as Treasure in Tibetan Buddhism: Visionary Revelation and its Interactions with the Environment”, in *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*. 8.4, 460-882.
- Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ wa. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey.