Tibetan Literature: An Analysis

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Abstract: Literature communicates the socio-cultural status of a group of human being, in every part of the world; literature has been more or less a mirror of the society because it’s where we find a clear reflection of the ancient social, political, religious as well as the cultural history of various countries. Apart from the Buddhist point of view, their Tibetan literature divided into four sections. Literature belonging to Early Period (Up to 10th century C.E.), Middle Period (11th to 18th century C.E.), Modern Period (Up to 1950 C.E.) and Contemporary Period (1950 C.E. downwards).

In this article, I have tried to give little light upon the meaning to literature and the Buddhist Tibetan literature of these four periods from 7th century C.E. (At the time of Thonmi Sambhota) to 20th century C.E. (At the time 14th Dalai Lama Ven. Tenzin Gyatso) and show the development of Buddhist Tibetan literature in course of time.

Key Words: Thonmi Sambhota, Padmasambhava, Sāntarakṣita, Kagyur-Tangyur, Four Buddhist School, 14th Dalai Lama Ven. Tenzin Gyatso.

Literature communicates the socio-cultural status of a group of human being to describe its mind and face. In every part of the world, literature has been more or less a mirror of the society because it’s where we find a clear reflection of the ancient social, political, religious as well as the cultural history of various countries.

Literature consists of written productions, often restricted to those deemed to have artistic or intellectual value. Etymologically, the term derives from Latin root literatura/litteratura ("learning, writing, grammar," originally "writing formed with letters," from litera/littera "letter" or handwriting) was used to refer to all written accounts, but intertwined with the Roman concept of cultura: learning or cultivation.

The concept has changed meaning over time: nowadays it can broaden to include non-written verbal art forms, and thus it is difficult to agree on its origin, which can be paired with that of language or writing itself.

In content, Indian literature comprises everything which is included in the word ‘literature’ in the broadest sense of the term: religious and mundane, epic and lyric, dramatic and didactic poetry as well as narrative and scientific prose. Developments in print technology have allowed an ever growing distribution and proliferation of written works, culminating in electronic literature.

Different interpretation of definition of Literature

There have been various attempts to define “literature”. Simon and Delyse Ryan begin their attempt to answer the question “What is Literature?” with the observation:

“The quest to discover a befitting definition for "literature" is a road that is much travelled, though the point of arrival, if ever reached, is seldom satisfactory. Most attempted definitions are broad and vague, and they inevitably change over time. In fact, the only thing that is certain about defining literature is that the definition will change. Concepts of what is literature change over time as well.

Definitions of literature have varied over time: In Western Europe prior to the eighteenth century, literature as a term indicated all books and writing. A more restricted sense of the term emerged during the Romantic period, in which it began to demarcate "imaginative" literature. Contemporary debates over what constitutes literature can be seen as returning to the older, more inclusive notion of what constitutes literature. Cultural studies, for instance, takes as its subject of analysis both popular and minority genres, in addition to canonical works.

3 Ross, "The Emergence of "Literature": Making and Reading the English Canon in the Eighteenth Century", 406
The value judgment definition of literature considers it to exclusively include writing that possesses high quality or distinction, forming part of the so-called belles-lettres ('fine writing') tradition. This is the definition used in the Encyclopedia Britannica Eleventh Edition (1910–11) when it classifies literature as "the best expression of the best thought reduced to writing." However, this has the result that there is no objective definition of what constitutes "literature"; anything can be literature, and anything which is universally regarded as literature has the potential to be excluded, since value-judgments can change over time.

Jim Meyer considers this a useful characteristic in explaining the use of the term to mean published material in a particular field (e.g., "scientific literature"), as such writing must use language according to particular standards. The problem with the formalist definition is that in order to say that literature deviates from ordinary uses of language, those uses must first be identified; this is difficult because "ordinary language" is an unstable category, differing according to social categories and across history.7

The Tibetan literature divided into four sections:

i. Literature belonging to Early Period (Up to 10th century C.E.)
ii. Literature belonging to Middle Period (11th to 18th century C.E.)
iii. Literature belonging to Modern Period (Up to 1950 C.E.)
iv. Literature belonging to Contemporary Period (1950 C.E. downwards)

Literature belonging to Early Period

The stories of Ling Gesar which had been popular in oral traditions may claim the early phase of creative composition among the Tibetans and others Tibetan speaking people of Mongolia, China and some people of Indian Himalayas side. The scriptures which fall on the roof of the royal palace of Lha-Tho-Tho-Ri (Wyl. lha tho tho ri; 4th century C.E.) probably was a symbolic myth. At that time the scriptures were in which language no one knows.

The entrance of Bon carried by the priests in the south-west Tibet, as the tradition speaks, during the early consolidation of Yar-lungs leadership leaves small literary records to construct a separate chapter. A chapter dealing with the Tibetan literature regarding the ecclesiastic Bon precepts does not narrate its early period. The use of Zhang-Zhung scripts in the model of ranjana-lipi (lanchana or lanche), as claimed by the Bonpo priests prior to the innovation of Tibetan scripts (7th century C.E.), may be hard to substantiate. The Bonpo priests in Dusa (Wyl. 'bru zha; a district in Tibet) might claim their semblance with the speech Brukshi which might have been in Vogue by 2nd century C.E. in the Western County in between the down course of the Sindhru and the north-eastern border of Iran.

In 7th century C.E. Thonmi Sambhota (Wyl. thon mi sam bHo ta) is accredited with the authorship of Triññšika Text (Wyl. sum cu pa) and verse treatise on grammar (Wyl. rtag kyi 'jug pa) as he endeavoured to systematize the Trans-Himalayan speeches spoken by the inhabitants of Western Tibet (Wyl. stod bod). Numerous oral traditions about 'dre, srin, khi, gdon, btsan, sgrra gtsam, 'bran etc make one inquisitive regarding the nomenclature of the early Tibetan Literature prior to the growth of ecclesiastism in Tibet.

The advent of Buddhist literature in Central Tibet and its predominant role through the patronization of the Btsan rulers was well documented. Also the support of the T’ang emperors of China, the assistance of the Buddhist teachers from Nepal with the source materials and the influx of the Buddhist erudition for centuries paved the path for the Early-Spread (Wyl. snga dar) of Buddhism in Tibet. It was the glamorous period of the Tibetans when they could control over the Central Asian silk routes on the north and the Ugyurs and the Arabs in the West. As a result of that the Tibetan language and literature obtained a wide scope to grow.

The Buddhist literature in Tibetan extends in three sections, e.g. translation work (Wyl. yig bsgyur), revelations (Wyl. ger ma) and elucidatory compilations (Wyl. bstan bcos) by the Tibetan Buddhist scholars.

In 8th century C.E. Padmasambhava (Wyl. pad ma 'byung gnas) visit Tibet and succeeded in application of the old tantra (Wyl. rnying rgyud) to subdue his opponents. He therefore ensured the base of Buddhism in Tibet by installing the Samya Monastery in Tibet. He and Sántarākṣita took active part in building this monastery. Padmasambhava carried some Sanskrit Tantric texts from India and translated there into Tibetan, like Vajramantra-bhira-sandhimaka-tantra text. It was translated by him in collaboration with Vairocana. On the other hand Sántarākṣita

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4 Eagleton, Literary theory: an introduction, 9
5 Biswas, Critique of Poetics, 538
7 Eagleton, Literary theory: an introduction, 4
preaching the Buddha’s teaching to the people of Tibet.

The teachings of Śākyamuni the Buddha were carried to Tibet in India original since the introduction of Buddhism by the Indian Buddhist missionaries. The Tibetans also paid high regard to those sayings by preserving them in Tibetan translation and by codifying them as the sacred texts of the India. Those texts are generally known as the Buddhavacana (Tib. Kagyur; Wyl. Bka’ 'gyur) and the Sastra (Tib. Tangyur; Wyl. bstan ’gyur). The Kagyur collection includes the Vinaya, Sūtra and Tantra texts. It is also known as Three Baskets of teaching (Tripitaka). Here Abhidharma replace the Tantra. Those gave great importance in the Ideological Studies.

Vinaya:

Vinaya texts mostly comprise literatures that deal with monastic discipline. These texts also deal with origin of these rules and their further development. Apart from monastic rules, the Vinaya texts also include doctrinal expositions, ritual and liturgical texts, biographical stories, and some elements of the “Jatakas”, or birth stories. There are six Vinayas that exist in their entirety. These include the Vinaya of Therevada School, Mula-Sarvastivada, Mahasanghika, Sarvastivada, Mahahasika, and Dharmagupta. The first of these was written in Pali and exists in the same way. The others were originally written in Sanskrit but survive completely only in Tibetan (second one) and Chinese translations (last four). Other Vinaya texts exist in various languages but only in parts.

Sūtra:

These texts are those that include discourses given by the Buddha himself or anyone of his close disciple. These texts are known as Buddhavacana or the word of the Buddha. These discourses were arranged on the basis of the manner in which they were delivered. Originally they were nine, later on became twelve. These include Satra, Geya, Vyakaranas, Gatha, Udana, Ityukta, Jataka, Abhutadharma, Vaipulya, Nidana, and Avadana and Upadhesha

Abhidharma:

Known as Abhidhama in Pali language, Abhidharma implies ‘further dharma’ and deals with the analysis of phenomena and relationship between them. It originally emerged out of the list of teachings such as the Bodhipakṣa-dharmas or the 37 Factors leading to Awakening. Abhidharma is not taken as canonical by many Buddhist schools. For example, the Sautrantika do not include Abhidharma, they consider only Vinaya and sutra as canonical.

In the span of two hundred years starting from Emperor Songtsen Gampo (Wyl. srong btsan sgam po) to Khri Ralpacan (Wyl. khri ral pa can), in this period over five hundred and fifty one Tibetan and Indian scholars had contributed in the translation works. And the later period of the great translator Rinchen Sangpo (Wyl. lo tsa ba rin chen bzung po, 958-1055 C.E.) to Lochen Dharmaśrī (1654-1717 C.E.), spanning over seven hundred eighteen years, there were more than hundred and seventy scholars involved. According to the Derge (Wyl. sde dge) edition of Dharma publication, there are 870 scholars involved in translation works figuring, 250 in Kagyur collection containing 1,115 texts and 620 in Tangyur having some 3387 texts with additional 607 supplementary copies of texts.

Individual historical works in Tibetan language already existed in this early period. There also existed Tibetan translations of some works of historical significance-particularly such as Gosṅgwa-va'yakraṭa, Vimalaprabhā-paripṛṣṭchā and Arhat-saṅghavardhāna-va'yakraṭa, which give interesting on the history of Khotan. The reference of those translations find in one of the earliest catalogues of Tibetan canon (Wyl. ston than ldan dkar ma) compiled towards the end of the 8th century.

The latter collections of the works composed by the Indian Buddhist exponents like Nāgārjuna (1st-2nd century C.E.), Āryadeva (2nd century C.E.), Asaṅga and his brother Vasubandhu (4th century C.E.), Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita (8th century C.E.), Kamalaśila (8th century C.E.).

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8 Tshalpa Kunga Dorje (Wyl. tshal pa kun dga’ rdo rje), Red Annals (Wyl. deb ther dmar po), annotated by Dunkar Blozang Thinlas (Wyl. dngos dkar blo bzang ’phrin las), Kokonor Nationalities Languages Press (Wyl. mtho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang), 1981, 331 p.
11 Ibid, vol. xv (ba), fols. 211a 1-259b 7.
12 See Tangyur, Peking edition, commentary of Sūtra (Wyl. mdo ’grel), vol. xciv (ne), fols. 435a 8-444b 2.
13 This catalogue entitled pho bnran ston than ldan dkar gyi ba ka dan bstan bcos ’gur ro cog gi dkar chag is available in Tangyur (Wyl. bstan ’gur), commentary of Sūtra (Wyl. mdo ’grel), vol. cxxxvi (cho), fols. 352b 5 – 373a 8. The works on the history of Khotan, indicated here, are mentioned in the catalogue on fols. 361a 2, 356a 8 and 371b 1.
century C.E.), Naropa (9th century C.E.), Virupa (10th century C.E.), Atiśa Dipānṭkara (11th century C.E.) and many other Indian teachers. In this way a relationship was established between the India and the Tibetan Buddhists.

**Literature belonging to Middle Period**

The inhabitants of Central Tibet had the occasion to be in touch of the Yuan emperors of China as well as the vast population of the Kokonor Mongols. Again, a fusion in the Tibetan culture could generate a new dimension of the Tibetan literature through patronage and hostility.

Besides the translation works from the India, the Chinese and the Central Asian sources, the Buddhist teachers and authors belonging to the Tibet and Mongolia are accredited with the literary contribution in Tibetan about different aspects of the Buddhist thought. Those are divided into five parts:

i. Annotations, elucidations and commentary works of the Tibetan translated works which led to further division in the Buddhist order of Tibet.
   a. Nyêfung School advocated by Padmasambhava in the 8th century C.E.
   b. Kagyü School reformed by Lama Marpa in the 11th century C.E.
   c. Sakya School founded by Khön Konchok Gyalo in the 11th century C.E.
   d. Gelug School propounded by Tsongkhapa in the 15th century C.E.

Those are the major Schools of Tibetan Buddhism, there are also some minor schools like Karmapa founded by Rinchen dorje (Wyl. rin chen rdo rje), Dikhung Pa, Talung Pa, Shije Pa grew subsequently.

ii. Esoteric experiences with or without ritualistic formulae prescribed in the Tantra as related to deities in singular or in multiple. Such as, Stages of the Path (Wyl. lam rim), Rathid (Wyl. ra khris), Sādhana Maṇḍala (Wyl. sgrub dkyil) texts were composed by eminent Buddhist teachers in their collected works (Wyl. gsung ’bum). The Miskodki Khorgyi Chong (Wyl. mi bsod dkyi ’khor gyi chong) and Bandon Rabgsal (Wyl. dban don rab gsal) ascribed to Tsongkhapa belong to the Guhyasamājā class. Similarly, Chanchan Gabi Bodos (Wyl. dbyangs can dga’ ba’i blo gros) composed on the Guhyasamājā practice in his work Lamsha Legsad (Wyl. lam gzhas legs bshad). Tsongkhapa wrote rin po che’i phyag chen ba and dpal gzhin rje gzed tha beu gsum ma mams kyi dkyil khor du dcan bsur has grub pa’i thabs kyi cho ga etc.

iii. Epistemological analysis and doctrinal interpretations for general understanding. Several Buddhist philosophers like Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Šantarākṣita and Kamalaśila have comprehended in conformity of the logical ground of Śunyatā among the Abhidharmikas, the Madhyamikas and the Yogacara-Vijñaptimātrata standpoints. Also some philosophical texts basing on the Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras were composed with a tendency of compromise in Madhyamika Sautrāntika, Yogācāra-Madhyamika (Svātantrika) standpoints. Like Abhisamayālaṃkāra ascribed to Maitreyanāth lays emphasis on such assimilation of Yogācāra-Madhyamika. Tatvavasthrgraaha of Šantarākṣita with its commentary of Kamalaśila a comprehensive attempt in this respect.

Similar endeavors are also observed among the Buddhist philosophers of Tibet like Sakya Pandita (12th century C.E.), Nag Lotsawa (13th century C.E.), Tsongkhapa (15th century C.E.), Fifth Dalai Lama (Tib. Ngawang Lozang Gyatso; Wyl. ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617-1682 C.E.). They followed the legacy of the Buddhist philosophers of India.

iv. The historical annals (Wyl. de’b ther) including biographies (Wyl. rnam thar) didactic deliberations spiritual correspondence, those of pilgrimage account on Buddhist culture were composed. With reference to four major doctrine of Buddhist thought which developed in Tibet since the 11th century C.E.

The triangular political struggles among the Chiness, the Mongols and the Tibetans in the medieval period could bring forth a new dimension of the Tibetan literature when ecclesiastical authorities like Ngawang Lozang Gyatso produced important political memoirs through epistles and correspondence.

The history of literature in Tibetan has a wide scope to cover various aspects of literary contributions. In that respect the historical writings and philosophical texts of the Buddhists and the Bon Po teachers enrich the literature during its Middle period. The grammatical compositions and lexicons in Tibetan provide the base in building up the elevated literary spread in Tibet.

The teachings of Śākyaputra Gautama the Buddha flourished in Mongolia since the inhabitants accepted Buddhism from the Sakya teacher Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltseten (Wyl. kun dga’ rgyal mtshar, 1182-1251 C.E.) and his nephew Chögyal Phagpa (Wyl. chos rgyal ’phags pa, 1235-86 C.E.). In this way a good cultural relationship was build up between Tibet and Mongol.

The Tibetan monks were the source of inspiration to the Mongols erudite who devoted to extensive writings on the Buddhist scriptures, especially those of the Kagyur and the Tangyur. The royal family members preferred to hold the Buddhist faith avowedly at the early phase. In due course Buddhism became so popular as many authors in Mongolia composed indigenous
Buddhist texts in Tibetan as well as in Mongolian. As a result of that, the Buddhist literature in Tibetan focused in a new dimension for no less than seven hundred years up to the century.

In Tibetan literature the literary contributions of the eminent Mongolian teachers like Spyansha Rinpoche (Wyl. blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1390 to 1448 C.E.), Leon Skya Hutaqu (Wyl. nag dban blo bstan chos ldon, 1642 to 1714 C.E.), Jam Dbyans Bzhadpa (Wyl. nag dban brtson grus, 1648 to 1721 C.E.), Lean Skya Hutaqu (Wyl. rol po’i rdo rje, 1717 to 1768 C.E.) achieved prominence.

The founder of the Jonangpa (Wyl. jo nang pa) lineage grub chen yo mo mti bskyod rdo rje (11th century C.E.) became well known for his Collected works. In respect of the Gelugpa lineage Tsongkapa (1357-1419 C.E.) was the mastermind personality accredited with a large number of Buddhist works in different aspects. Among the successor of the lineage the collected works of The First Dalai Lama (Tib. Gendun Drub; Wyl. dge ‘dun grub, 1391-1474 C.E.), The Second Dalai Lama (Tib. Gendun Gyatso; Wyl. dge ‘dun rgya mtsho, 1475-1542 C.E.), The Third Dalai Lama (Tib. Sonam Gyatso; Wyl. bsod nams rgya mtsho, 1543-1588 C.E.), The fifth Dalai Lama (Tib. Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso; Wyl. ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617-1682 C.E.), The Seventh Dalai Lama (Tib. Kelzang Gyatso; Wyl. bskal bzang rgya mtsho, 1708-1757) enrich the Tibetan Buddhist literature.

Literature belonging to Modern Period

The proselytism of Christianity and Islam leaves a room for diversion in the Tibetan literature. As a result of that the Buddhist and the Christian translation of literature in the Tibetan from external sources tended to mutual tolerance and harmony. Such tendency makes the Tibetan literature not only comprehensive but also universal.

The Christian Missionaries in India took an active part by translating the Bible in Tibetan for Tibetan speaking people. It may be mentioned that the first Tibetan Dictionary in European Languages in India was composed by an Indian Missionary from Serampur of Bengal in 1926 C.E. A Roman Catholic Indian Missionary while working in the frontiers of Bhutan, ventured to collect Tibetan vocabularies with brief grammatical notes for the use of the Europeans. The name of the said Indian missionary has been now lost but his papers were edited by Mr. Schroter, a missionary of Bengal H.A. Jaschke, a member of the Moravian Missionary, who worked at Kyelang of British Lahoul published his Tibetan-English Dictionary in 1881 C.E. and his Tibetan Grammar was printed later on in 1890 C.E.

The Tibetan literature had a new turn when the Gospel of Mathew of the Holy Bible was translated in the first half of the 19th century C.E. by Rev. William.

On the other hand, the Tibetan Scholars like Mi Pham, Chogla Nampar Gyalba (Wyl. phyogs las rnam par rgyal ba), Gendün Chöpel (Wyl. dge ‘dun chos ’phel, 1905-1951 C.E.), Thirteen Dalai Lama (Tib. Thubten Gyatso; Wyl. thub bstan rgya mtsho, 1876-1933 C.E.) start reformation against the orthodox outlook.

Several Mongolian Buddhist authors however continued the tradition of earlier composition. Such as, Khrchen Rabtanpa Chophel (Wyl. mkhan chen rab bstan pa chos ’phel, 1840-1908 C.E.), Jamyang Khientse Wangpo (Wyl. ’jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse’i dbang po, 1820-1892 C.E.), followed the tradition. Lokesh Chandra has enumerated their literary works in his Materials of the Tibetan History of Literature.

Literature belonging to Contemporary Period

The Contemporary Tibetan Literature bifurcates from the traditional trends by the change of human values as One Worldism expands with the hallo of modernity. Ven. Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama XIV administration in exile and the traditionally learned Tibetans outside Tibet endeavour to maintain the standard literary trend by adapting some reformed style in composition as far as practicable, in their writing by compromise with the modernism. Obviously, that makes them aware how to adjust the literary style in the changed conditions. Thus a transitional phase goes in the Contemporary Tibetan literature for the last few decades.

The Tibetans residing in TAR (Tibet Autonomous Region) have also been enthusiastic in creative composition with their latest political trend towards socialism and Marxism. Several Journals and news papers have been published from Lhasa and Beijing since 1950.

The contest of Tibetan literature may claim its distinction between monkish rigorist and the commoners in expressing the human feelings and emotions tends to a broad bifurcation in the Mediaeval Tibetan literature.

As one of the prominent literatures of the world, the Tibetan literature has a multidimensional
growth within the span of about one thousand five hundred years in East Asia. The Tibetan literature becomes a varied exposition of a culture complex which has been contributed by diverse ethnic groups.

The Tibetans also endeavoured to enrich their ways of life by assimilation and compromise with the neighboring peoples. Those are verily presented in classical Tibetan literature.

Bibliography