

Beyond Representation and Identity: Opening Ways for Tibetan Studies¹

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I. This lecture begins with great sadness and sorrow. We are saying farewell tonight to our great friend and supporter of Tibetology, Anthony Aris. We have suffered a great, mournful loss.

It is one thing to bear the inevitable, another to bear its untimeliness. Anthony passed just a few days before this event, the first in a series of annual lectures on Tibetan and Himalayan Studies dedicated to him and his brother Michael Aris. He really should have been here. I will say for myself that I accepted the considerable honour to give this talk tonight primarily so as to honour him. It was him alone whom I had in mind when conceiving it. He was my “ideal audience.” I really need for him to be here tonight for this talk to make sense. Or for me to remember what sense I am trying to make. I will say that I am bold enough to believe that Anthony supported the sentiments I am trying to express in what follows. But of course that is easy for me to say now, since he is not here to challenge me. And now I can imagine his smiling face at this comment.

It is probably too soon to talk about Anthony with humor, but on the other hand I am pretty sure he would have liked it if we could think of him on this occasion not only with sadness but also with happiness. And so I want to share this photo of him in a punting boat, a year and a half ago, during the weekend celebration here at Wolfson of Samten Karmay’s wonderful new book on the Fifth Dalai Lama’s autobiography. (That’s Cathy Cantwell in the back. Marie-Laure, Samten, and I were also in the boat, and Anthony’s granddaughter Laura was steering).



This is quintessential Anthony, I am sure all will agree.

I also mean to honor Michael Aris with this talk tonight. I knew Michael for a very long time. I met him first in Kathmandu in 1973, along with his young wife, their infant first son Alexander, and their dog. I proceeded to see Michael at every meeting of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) until he died in 1999 – way too young. I had the quite undeserved privilege of serving on the Board of Advisors of IATS throughout that period as its most junior member, and Michael of course was also on the Board as one of the leading figures in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies in the world. I clearly recall Michael's outstanding courage and moral conviction in the Board's deliberations over the years, alone in resisting our perhaps too-hasty desire to placate Beijing, and insisting the organization must not meet there while Tibetan political prisoners are still incarcerated.

Most of all I want to honor Michael's work, and the fine humanistic slant he put on everything he wrote. The one work with which, in my younger days, I took issue was Michael's book on Pema Lingpa, where he seemed to be suggesting that the discovery of apocryphal texts known as "Treasure" (*gter ma*), both by Pema Lingpa and in general, was fraudulent.² I gained a different perspective on Michael's personal attitude to religion, however, when in the course of discussing the book and my reservations with him some years later, during the time he was teaching at Harvard, he told me of his utter devotion to Dingo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the last great Treasure discoverers, whose acquaintance Michael had the fortune to make during his years in Bhutan. Michael recalled for me with brimming eyes an occasion years back, when an exuberant Dingo Khyentse performed a spontaneous, inspired dance in front of the Queen Mother of Bhutan, and apparently also Michael himself, following a revelatory vision.

But even quite beyond this insight into Michael's personal sentiments, my appreciation of Michael's study of Pema Lingpa has vastly increased over the period of my own development as a scholar. The book reflects his methodological sophistication and nuance, as much as any work that he produced. I would just like to cite a passage from another book by Michael Aris to bring into high relief the superlative purview of his analysis: a few brief lines that I would like to hold out as a model for the way we can write and think in Tibetan Studies. Michael's style was certainly a model to which I myself have long aspired. The lines come from his splendid study of Jigme Lingpa, the 18th century visionary, who saw it within the purview of his scholarly curiosity to write an essay on India – its people, geography, customs, economy, trade – based only on the oral account of a friend who had travelled there. Jigme Lingpa never went there himself. Aris writes,

Jigme Lingpa's account of India reveals an all-embracing curiosity in an expanding, cosmopolitan world – a curiosity tempered by genuine skepticism and rationality, though the door is left wide open to the mysterious and the magical. The text is also imbued with a robust anti-clericalism aimed ... as much against certain Hindus and Muslims as against some Buddhist priests too. We can also note a certain sense of cultural relativism in the enthusiastic descriptions of many peculiar and exotic rituals ...

Now is it too facile to point out that these elements in the author's stance and viewpoint are precisely those we associate with the exactly contemporary European enlightenment? One senses that the *Encyclopédistes* of France, Voltaire among them, would have had much to say to Jigme Lingpa and vice versa ... It is not an affinity one would wish to labour too heavily, but the text does seem to carry a strange resonance with certain attitudes and ideas we ... take for granted in the west ...³

The writing here is superb, especially for its appreciation of complexity. We see that in the very first line: Jigme Lingpa is a multi-layered intellect with an ability to appreciate both the rational and the magical. Michael is bold enough to suggest a parallel with modern European writers – and yet he also knows that such an observation might be facile. He notices the strangeness but also the familiarity of the resonances. Above all he looks at Jigme Lingpa as a human being – a unique human being who cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs and doctrines. Pedestrian as such a perspective might seem to be, I believe it is not easy to achieve. I want to turn now to some critical reflections on the state of the realm in Tibetology, using what I understand to be both Michael and Anthony Aris's passionate investment in a humanistic perspective as a guiding light.

II. This talk is going to be about Tibetan Studies as an area of academic inquiry, and is mainly directed at professional scholars in the field. It will be touching on a range of examples as we go along, some hypothetical, some from my own recent experience, and finally some which come out of my reflections and struggles in the course of writing a recently-published book on Tibetan medical learning.⁴ Anthony himself specifically requested that I talk about my book for this lecture, and I agreed to do so, as long as I could frame it in larger issues for the field.

I feel that the field is at an important crossroads. In a variety of sub-disciplines, Tibetan Studies is starting to reckon with major shifts that have been taking place in the larger world of academic discourse. Another new dimension to our field is that we are starting to see the work of Tibetan colleagues from universities in China, colleagues who regularly participate in the meetings of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. For the last ten years or more, they have been doing so in large numbers, usually more than a hundred. It is particularly

in hopes of encouraging the latter to consider the significance of certain recent academic conversations across the humanities and social sciences internationally that I would like to explore some of the basic challenges I feel our field is facing as we move into the next generation of our work. While I will mostly be focused on bad habits, I will also try to give some sense of what could lie before us if we manage to break them.

As a field, we are still in the process of assessing the scope of Tibetan literature and how much of it is extant. What we know of already comprises an enormous library, but as I speak many new important collections and individual works are being recognized and new materials copied and reprinted. This is happening partly because people inside Tibet are becoming more and more aware of the importance of their collections, be these held by monastic libraries, governmental offices, or individual families. But perhaps an even more important factor in the quick expansion of our archive is that the field overall is becoming increasingly interested in types of writings that are outside the canon, formal historiography, and institutionalized collections, and are rather more idiosyncratic, and everyday. One good example would be autobiography, the object of much study in recent years, which while certainly containing classic religious content, sometimes lets us glimpse how individual people actually viewed their own lives, and really lived them, rather than the grand principles espoused in more standardized literature. Another example would be personal letters, so many of which have been preserved for centuries, and which are being studied more and more not only for their precious historical data but also for what they tell us about human relationships and their etiquette, rhetoric, emotions, intimacies. The objects of increasing interest also include materials in which religion may be only tangential at best, such as law, astronomy/astrology, and medicine (I will say more on the last one, the focus of my own recent work, later). We are looking at such materials from new angles and with broader cultural questions than ever before. Even seemingly prosaic geographical writings reveal much more than the mere facts of the Tibetan landscape. The same is true of governmental documents of all kinds, research on which has been carried out to great effect in recent years. The focus of current Tibetology is also turning

increasingly to source materials that are not textual at all, and even in those cases where we have long considered such materials, such as the visual arts, we are subjecting them to new kinds of analysis that go far beyond the art historical as such. Many of us are also paying attention to manuscript culture, which adds a very different and often revealing dimension to the previously dominant Tibetological focus upon textual study. We are certainly seeing a great explosion in the anthropology of Tibet, with excellent recent boundary-crossing work around society, economics, trade, politics, gender, and even the very nature of knowledge as such. A big and very promising area of research has also opened up on various kinds of Tibetan literature, including poetics and especially modern literature, with all of the complex social, political and cultural issues that attend its production today. And that is not to mention contemporary internet culture, with a burgeoning scene in Tibetan language blogs, chat-groups and more, all ripe for the industrious cultural historian or anthropologist.

Why are we moving in these varied kinds of directions in Tibetan Studies? Part of the answer has to do with our desire to present a fuller picture of Tibetan civilization than what we have painted so far. Following larger trends across the humanities and social sciences, Tibetologists are realizing how much more there is to glean about Tibetan civilization beyond the often idealized picture that we get in the doctrinal, or eulogistic, or mystical, or mythological, or even historiographical work that makes up so much of Tibetan writing. But we can also say more about what is driving this turn to the vernacular and the everyday. My way of putting it would be that we are curious how a society with such an extraordinary set of ideas about visions and magical powers and ultimate emptiness and lamas with immense power and amounts of gold actually lived their lives in such an environment. We want to know the details about their societies and how these details connected – or not – to the big ticket items in religious philosophy and ethics and ritual. I would also add that despite the immense differences between modern life today and that of traditional Tibet, there are many rich insights to be had from the latter's culture and literature that we moderns (and this includes non-Tibetan and Tibetan alike) can

learn – things about life, and love, and coping, and sadness, and of course all things philosophical.

I should quickly add that many people in the field today would not put what they are doing that way. What I just said is really just the way I think things should be, or what we should be curious about. Many would probably rather make the more straightforward claim that what we are doing in the field overall is primarily the history of Tibet: its religion, its culture, its language, its political institutions, its wars, and its knowledge systems – and simply trying to do that as well as we can.

But to the extent that we do indeed want to know more than that, that is, that we want to connect with our objects of study as fellow human beings, and to subject Tibetan materials to forms of analysis common in other academic fields that are indeed well aware of the larger human interest of their topics of study, I would say that Tibetology is in a kind of crisis. I have already suggested that Tibetologists today, especially in the younger generation, want new modes of investigation and new ways of writing. Not that we should abandon our older philological, doxographical, and historical modes, for these remain crucial methods for any meaningful investigation of the Tibetan past. But to the degree that we really do want to enter into literary criticism, or philosophy, or theology, or ethics, or art criticism, or even cultural history or anthropology, I would say the field is in a crisis because it is barely equipped to do such things. It largely still does not know how to engage in the approaches I just listed in the way scholars in other parts of the academy do. And one very big sign that this is true can be posed in very simple terms. How many times has anyone outside of Tibetan Studies – even people in as closely aligned fields as Indology or Sinology – cited *any* book or article in Tibetan Studies for an insight or principle or pattern or concept or mode of analysis that is relevant to their own work? And this is not to even think about people in European Studies, or any other part of the world for that matter. If our work is only consumed by Tibet specialists it means it has relevance only for a particular time and place, and cannot participate in larger discussions in the academy. That is what I mean by a crisis.

III. The challenge as I see it right now in Tibetan Studies is not just about the *kinds* of sources we use, as mentioned above, but also that our approach in dealing with *any* of the sources we draw upon – canonical, vernacular, and scientific alike – needs expansion. At the minimum I feel we need to become aware of some of the assumptions and habits in our field that may be preventing us from presenting our work in meaningful ways to an audience beyond Tibetologists. One way of putting what these habits are has to do with the broad “problem of representation,” a problem long recognized in fields from physics and neuroscience to literature and anthropology. But although they may be well-recognized, habits don’t die easily, even if our intellectual appreciation of the point is strong.

The problem is manifold. Representation refers to an object that is more complex and unstable than the categories used to represent it would suggest. Representation most commonly goes astray and becomes misleading when we say things about very large entities, say, “Tibet” or “Tibetan Buddhism” or some category like that. Claims that are made about “Tibetan Buddhism,” for example, so often do not sufficiently take into account all the diversity that could reasonably be included under that category. What is more, representational discourse tends to enter into polemics even as it considers itself to be objective. In other words, the things I say about “Tibetan Buddhism” will reflect what *I think* it is, even advance a claim about what I think it *should* be, which also implies what should be left out, i.e., what does *not* qualify legitimately as “Tibetan Buddhism.”

I have just mentioned two grounds on which representation is problematic: It is not accurate in terms of what it is purporting to describe, and it is often tainted by an agenda, conscious or not, of the one who makes the claim. These problems alone could lead us to advise great caution and restraint, or even to avoid the big and contested categories altogether. Of course the latter will never be entirely possible. It won’t take much wit to point out that my own talk tonight is littered with such terms, including of course “Tibetan.” I have already probably begged the very question of what that means at least thirty times. But it might be helpful nonetheless to explore the problem in more detail, in the hope of weaning us as much as is possible off some of the grosser missteps in our current scholarly practice.

One subtype of misleading representation, not infrequently encountered in Tibetan Studies, occurs when sectarian identity is assigned to a particular phenomenon. The culprit is usually old habits and a general scholarly desire to assign identity-labels, but such a move often slips the moniker into an inappropriate domain where it does not belong. Here is an example from my current research on *kāvya*, or poetic discourse in literature based on Indic models, in Tibet. One of the really interesting things I have realized is to be attributed to my recent collaboration with the poet and literary critic Pema Bhum over the last few months. Pema Bhum pointed me to a quite distinctive use to which Tibetan writers put skill in creating artful figures of poetic “ornamentation.” This is to be recognized in their exercise books (*dpe brjod*), a uniquely Tibetan genre wherein students of *kāvya* write 4-line examples in Tibetan of each of the figures described in Daṇḍin’s *Kāvyaḍarśa*, the great classic work on poetics in South Asia, in order to demonstrate their mastery of the text. But what sometimes happens is that people use these exercises to voice personal feelings about current issues in their lives, which includes casting aspersions and verbally dueling with enemies. One of the most famous cases of this is the Fifth Dalai Lama’s examples of *kāvya* figures in his own exercise book, where he attacks the careers and poetical knowledge of his rivals. The most frequent rivals to whom he refers, in thinly veiled language, are the Karmapas. The bad blood can be traced to both political and military conflicts between the supporters of the Dalai Lama and the Karmapas, and to rivalry around cultural capital and prowess. Certain commentators on the *Kāvyaḍarśa* responded in kind with their own jabs, some clearly directed at the Dalai Lama’s person or his views on poetics. The ones to whom I am referring were themselves Kagyupas loyal to the Karmapas. But does this history mean that we can talk about the Kagyupa position on poetics, and the Gelugpa one? For example, there is a debate about whether or not it is important to talk about the “soul” (Tib. *srog*) of poetry, a category not highlighted in the original *Kāvyaḍarśa*. Is one position Gelugpa and the other Kagyupa? Or does making the issue into one of sectarian affiliation serve to occlude what is really going on in these disputes, where, I would note, the actual content of argument is almost exclusively *ad hominem*? I am not going to provide you with the evidence tonight that this is so,

but if you will allow me to posit such a situation where seemingly intellectual debate is really only about personal rivalry as a hypothetical example (and everyone who is in Tibetology will know that there are many real examples of that, even if I have not documented the particular case I have just invoked) it will serve to make my larger point. We really need to avoid jumping to sectarian rivalry in order to explain so many things in Tibetan history, when such an account is misleading, over-generalizes, obscures the real human drama that is going on, and only serves to further reify what the “sects” of Tibetan religion really were about in the first place. For me, the real interest in this case is the human drama, how intellectuals used poetry to wrestle for prestige and fame, and if we tie it all up as the familiar story of Gelugpas vs. Kagyupas we are likely to miss the rich insights that are there to be had around literature and culture.

Here is another kind of representational problem, not unrelated to the case just explored: the fallacy of functionalism. This is talked about in a variety of fields in the academy but let us just think about what it can mean in Tibetan Studies. Functionalism assumes too often that things have conscious purposes, and frequently looks for those purposes in economic terms, or in political terms, terms that can be at odds with the overt intention of a given action or statement. An example would be the claim that so-and-so lama probably wrote about his impending death in his autobiography in order to get his disciples to take control of his monastery’s finances. This would be a functional interpretation: the lama deliberately mentioned these matters in order to get a specific response from his readers. But that would be to ignore the possibility that the lama might also have actually been worrying about his death with no particular agenda in mind. He was just worrying, as humans do, and he wrote about it. Of course, both motivations might be in play at the same time. But I contend that the more we can slow down our race to identify function, the more we are open to, say, a literary appreciation of the texts we study – and again, thereby to speak to topics of human import and to an audience outside our field.

Now don’t get me wrong. I am not adverse to speculating that what is happening in a given instance might be different from what an actor says she is

doing. I have nothing against imputing ulterior motive – for example, the familiar one that the Qianlong emperor represented himself as Buddhist in order to control the Tibetans – but if and only if we can present evidence for that skeptical reading. And as the last example suggests, this is often very tricky. I often find in contemporary Tibetan scholarship – not to mention Religious Studies in general, this is hardly unique to Tibetan Studies – that we go too far in this direction. We always feel we have really made a great breakthrough if we can show that what said event or text was really about was not what it said about itself but rather about power, or, say, inter-sectarian competition, and it is that which *really* explains the item in question.

A closely related problem in scholarship, and another subtype of the problem of representation, is what we call reductionism. To “reduce” something to mere economic concerns, or hunger for power, is to miss its singular, and possibly creative or even artistic features. To accuse someone, for example, of giving a Dharma talk in order to make money, or to increase their reputation, is to miss their own investment in the content of the talk, which is what makes it valuable in the first place. And once more, it is to miss that which makes the talk of interest to a much wider swath of scholars beyond economic historians. This is not to say of course that there aren’t tons of cases where teachers give Dharma talks to make money. That is why none of this is easy. How to tell the difference is a subtle process. Or even more so, to keep both interpretations in the air at once, even if they seem to be in direct contradiction, without one cancelling the other out.

To avoid reductionism we need to get good at dealing with a complex set of things at work in a text or image or event, rather than trying to reduce it to a single formulation. Why try to tie things up, or explain them, or come up with the “real” reason or cause? Who ever said we were supposed to do that? Every time we say things like “Tibetan Buddhists believe that the self is an illusion,” or that they believe that after one dies an intermediate state and then rebirth ensue, we fail to take account of the fact that there are many different takes on the matter, and not only because there are various “schools” of interpretation, like the “other-emptiness” (*gzhan stong*) view, or the varying systems on how many intermediate states (*bar do*)

there are. There are also a slew of psychological, epistemological, and practice-based complexities around the category of “belief” or even “faith” (*dad pa*). To be honest, I do not even know what I myself believe. I do believe some things, but am I sure I do? And in what ways? I definitely don’t believe in ghosts, or in any sort of life after death for that matter, but I still feel quite spooked when walking down a dark strange hallway in a strange house at night – and that is not because I fear actual humans lurking in the shadows. I dare say that there are ways that even in the pre-modern period, Tibetan Buddhists had similar complexities in how they related to Buddhist ideas such as “no self” or reincarnation or the existence of spirits. Why do the lamas keep emphasizing and insisting on the importance of *dad pa*, if it were not a difficult thing to achieve? And in any event, how do we really know what anyone believes inside? Is there a way we can tell? Actually I think there are ways we *can* tell, but only partially, and only by doing what is often a very difficult and subtle rhetorical analysis, looking at things like tone and sarcasm and emphasis and emotional appeals and appeals to authority and intentional dodges and unintentional dodges and so on and so on. But that is far from easy. How do we recognize when someone is paying lip service to an accepted belief even while feeling or thinking the very thing against which he is warning others? How do we tell the difference between selfish self-absorption and an intentional display of one’s own foibles in order to model self-awareness? That is the subtle and delicate part. At least one way we can start is to avoid assuming that our author simply “believes” everything she has learned and espoused, and to contemplate the possibility that she is rather still in the process of learning it, and playing with it. How she does so is far more interesting than what she actually believes – if anything – fully. Why else does Ju Mipham rail against Yeshe Tsogyal’s failure to protect him in his prayer to her? And why does the hermit Godrakpa say that he has never seen a song help anyone, even as he sings his own song, if this were not a real perplexity for him?

The last term I want to introduce into this discussion of method is “culturalism.” This too has many sides. One which impacts the way we do Tibetan Studies has to do with the identity of the researcher. There is an assumption that there is an actual thing called Tibetan culture, and that anyone not born into it must

therefore be an outsider, from “another” culture. The reason that this is a faulty view is that Tibetan culture – and *any* culture – is very porous and is constantly shifting, with much borrowed and adapted from other cultures. Culturalism is insidious because it can lead us to assume a boundary between anyone who is “not Tibetan,” and the “Tibetan” material they are studying. This implies in turn that anyone who is Tibetan is automatically a better reader of a Tibetan text than anyone not Tibetan. (Believe me, I used to participate in this fallacy myself. In fact I still do, all the time, unless I catch myself.) This can further mean that someone like myself, who was born in the United States to an eastern European family, cannot really say anything about reader response to a Tibetan text because I am from a different culture. Actually I have never participated in *that* fallacy. I have always felt that I have some purchase on how readers receive a text that I have learned to read. And even the right to critique it. By spending many years reading Tibetan texts, living in Tibetan areas, being friends with Tibetan people, I have at least something of an insider’s view. So do many of us in this room, even if other parts of our backgrounds and experience are very American, say, or British, or German, etc. I always think of myself as partially “Tibetan” even though I am “not.” I have picked up too many bodily and verbal habits, and forms of etiquette, and kinds of imagination, and certain mentalities not to think that, at least some of the time.

We have to learn how to readily recognize and avoid the pitfalls of functionalism, reductionism, culturalism, and many others around representation, if we want our work to have any impact on anything other than Tibetan Studies itself. These habits close us off from the richness of whatever material we are looking at. And again let me be clear that I am not saying that there is *nothing* that we can represent, or figure out the function of, or say about a particular culture. What I am saying is that these habits of mind often snowball, and also become relatively unconscious, and when that happens it makes our work dull and arcane and esoteric to everyone but our own little tribe.

Most of all for my purposes tonight, the very act of representation puts the object at a distance. The very act of representation itself entails that I the scholar am standing over here, and am talking about that thing over there. And that means that

my own relationship to the object becomes occluded in the process. That might seem to render me “objective,” a high ideal in traditional academic discourse. But in the same stroke it also puts my reader at a distance, and thus unlikely to be drawn into what I am saying, unless she already has a specific interest in Tibetan Studies for some reason of her own.

IV. Let me give some more concrete examples of what I am trying to get at, from recent experience. I am part of a group of scholars at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) who are trying to teach ourselves how to write about a Tibetan text as a literary critic. To bring out its literary merits. To avoid the kind of Tibetology that drowns itself in facts and figures such that it is entirely uninteresting to anyone other than me, myself, and I. The purpose of the group is to make the many treasures in Tibetan literature known and attractive to people in the broader world.

We are going to try to publish a volume of essays of literary criticism, written by the group members themselves, on various Tibetan works. One night we were sitting at dinner at the AAR, and we were joined by a colleague whom many of us know, even though he is not in Tibetan Studies. We were talking about the title of the volume. I had proposed some kind of ridiculous idea like “Mystery and Fun: Literature at its Finest”. My main point was in the negative. Let’s *not* call the book “Tibetan Literature”. Let’s not have the word “Tibet” in the title at all. Why do we have to? But our non-Tibetological colleague spoke right up. “It *is* about Tibetan literature, isn’t it? Why not call the book what it is?” This so well illustrates my point. If I was publishing a collection of writings on, say, ethics, and all of the authors were American, would I have to specify in the title of the book that these are American essays? Only if there were something specifically American about those essays. But not if they were simply great essays on ethics in the grand philosophical tradition. The same should hold true in our case. In fact what we are trying to do with this publication, at least as much as possible, is to explore the insights on literature that will be thought-provoking and relevant to other people in the world who are interested in literature, but not Tibet. You might say that we are trying to find out how literature from Tibet rises out of its local conditions and speaks trans-

locally – as literature as such. This is not to say that we will not talk about that local context. But the emphasis will be on, say, love, and frustration, and respect, and desire, and beauty, and wisdom – how these are expressed and developed in literature. That is the emphasis. So why not call the volume “Writing Mystery, Sadness, and Devotion,” or something like that?

We will see if I get out-voted or not when we actually publish the volume, that is, if we actually pull this project off. I mention it now to draw attention to the problem of representation, and specifically the vexed issue of identity and how we use the label “Tibetan.” Certainly, the label “Tibetan literature” would be appropriate if the volume was instead about the modern literary movement going on among Tibetan writers. There, to name something as Tibetan literature makes a rhetorical point – we have literature too, we are participating in a modern trend to write certain kinds of poetry and novels, and we are doing it in a specifically Tibetan way, i.e., not Chinese, not English, not Indian. And so there the label Tibetan has a particular salience, and identity is clearly an issue. But it isn’t always. If we are talking about the long-standing question of whether the literary arts should be taught in the monasteries, this is not a question of Tibetan religion vs. Tibetan literature, it is a question of religion vs. literature. The issues have to do with those phenomena, and *unless* you are making a point about something specifically due to Tibetan circumstances that was also part of what people at the time were concerned about, the label Tibetan is irrelevant, even though strictly speaking it is true.

I know what I am saying may seem overly pedantic and to be splitting hairs perhaps, but I suggest it needs driving home. At the least I am suggesting that we should try to be self-conscious when we are using a term like “Tibetan” and think about why the label is needed. A really good test or exercise would be to see how often we can take the word Tibetan out of something we are writing. Try it. It might not be missed, and in fact a new insight might open up just because you did that.

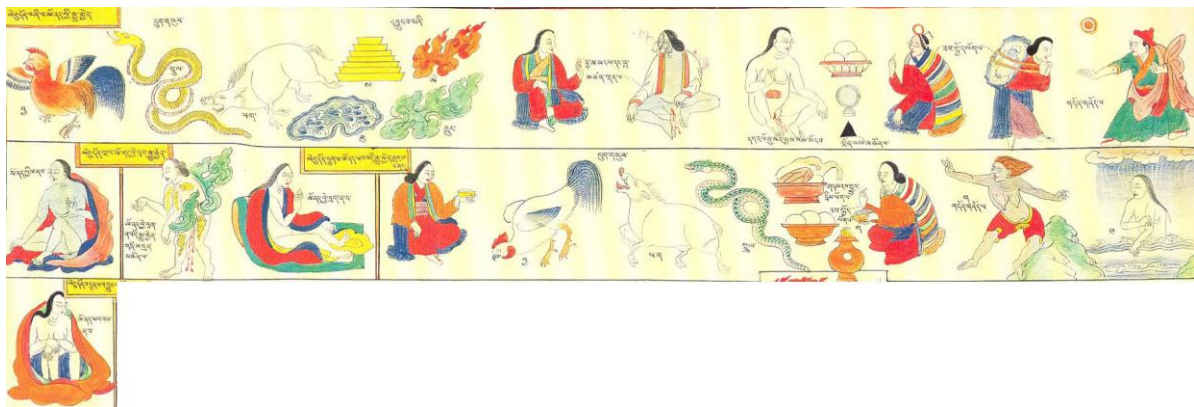
Here is one more case to consider from our most recent workshop on the Tibetan literature project, which we held in Berkeley. To the extent that the group is trying to treat Tibetan literature like world literature, we are reading examples of contemporary literary theory outside Tibetan Studies. The reason we are doing that

is to help us shed light on the rhetoric, and the narrative strategies, and the use of voice, and metaphor, and irony, and so on in the Tibetan texts themselves. At the workshop last week someone asked why are we not talking about *Tibetan* literary theory, wouldn't that be more appropriate, perhaps most appropriate, in order to analyze Tibetan literature? I, a big champion of modern literary theory, immediately jumped on this challenge (in my mind only, luckily I didn't say it out loud) to shoot back, "What is Tibetan literary theory? Actually it is the *Kāvyaśāstra*, but that's an *Indian* text, you fool!! Gotcha!" But then I realized that if the questioner had just said local, or contemporaneous literary theory instead of invoking the identity category, the point would really stand. For Tibetans, the *Kāvyaśāstra* was a great text and they really ran with it. What is more, it talks all about irony and voice and so on. The fact that it is strictly speaking Indian may not be relevant. It is the case, historically speaking, that Tibetan intellectuals tended to regard anything coming from India as authoritative and a sign of high culture, but we must not fail to realize that the *Kāvyaśāstra* was also simply a great work of literary criticism, and Tibetans found it theoretically sophisticated and interesting, quite beyond its coveted "Indian origins." Whether or not any given Tibetan writer has the *Kāvyaśāstra* in mind when she writes literature remains an open question and can only be answered individually and with evidence. But in the end I really think that all good literary theory, the traditional *and* the contemporary, the "Eastern" *and* the "Western" can educate our imaginations and fuel our appreciation of literature – be that from Tibet or many other places around the world.

V. Let me finally close with a few examples from my recent work on the intellectual history of medicine in Tibet, and make good on my promise to Anthony. I will also show a few illustrations from the book, which reproduce a version of the medical paintings originally produced in the late 17th century under the direction of the regent of Tibet, Sangye Gyatso.⁵ It is no doubt precisely because of the problems that I ran into in finishing up that book that I have become so sensitive – perhaps overly so – to issues around representation and identity in our field.

The book is about the twelfth-century medical work *Four Treatises (Rgyud bzhi)*, written Yutok Yontan Gonpo, and its reception by physicians, historians, politicians, and Buddhist monastics in Tibet from the 12th through the 18th century. Scholars used to think the *Four Treatises* was mostly a restatement of the famous Sanskrit Āyurveda work *Aṣṭāṅgaḥṛdaya*, but now we know that only about 15% of the text is adapted from that work. The rest of it is Yutok’s creative combination of all sorts of medical knowledge from Tibet, South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and West Asia. That makes the work even more interesting to Tibetologists, because it gives us a chance to see how an author could combine the usually authoritative tradition from India with other knowledge he deemed to be just as important.

One of the things that the *Four Treatises* did borrow from Indian Āyurveda is to divide medical knowledge into eight “branches” (*aṅga*). For the classic Āyurvedic works, these are: the body (i.e., general internal medicine); pediatrics; demon possession; upper body; surgery; poison; geriatrics; and virility and fertility. But the author(s) of the *Four Treatises*, in contrast, found it necessary to conceive of female pathology as its own branch.



*Illustrations for the Female Pathology Section of the Four Treatises.
From Parfionovitch et al 1992, plate 46, detail.*

They substituted a female pathology (*mo nad*) branch for Āyurveda's “upper body” branch, which focuses on eye, ear, nose, and throat. In the *Four Treatises* system, that branch is incorporated into the more general “body branch” in order to make room for female pathology. Thus the *Four Treatises* lists its eight sections as body;

pediatrics; female pathology; demon possession; wounds and surgery; poison; geriatrics; and virility/fertility.

Now this is quite a feat, from the feminist perspective; even modern medicine today is still the object of criticism for its strong androcentric bias, at the expense of adequate knowledge of female physiology. And yes, this only happened in Tibet, and is a distinctive departure from the authoritative Āyurvedic sources. So it is appropriate to ask what the historical and cultural background was that made for this rare gesture *away* from androcentrism.

And yet what is Tibetan about all this? The shift in the eight *aṅga* list is Tibetan, but is it “Tibetan”? In the same stroke, we must also wonder about the many parts of the *Four Treatises*’ women’s medicine chapters that are indeed directly borrowed from the *Aṣṭāṅgahr̥daya*: does that make these parts of the text thereby *not* Tibetan?

In looking for what is distinctive and historically specific, however, we should avoid easy assumptions. In adopting and adapting Indic and other imported medical concepts throughout the *Four Treatises* – and Yutok selected and restated all such material judiciously – the Tibetan doctors were making it their own. The knowledge so deployed worked for them, and it accorded with what they already knew or suspected about the human body. Those occasions where Tibetan medical writers found the need to challenge what they were inheriting were rarely about foreignness *per se*.

This is what I mean about paying attention to issues that are not necessarily about Tibetan-ness itself. Tibetan medicine has interesting things to tell us about the general conditions for innovation, way beyond the particular question of the specifically Tibetan conditions thereof. Once more, it is just these that could conceivably make our work of relevance and importance to a wider range of scholars.

My second example about the problem of representation from my own recent struggles came up around another category. Besides being a particularly tricky example of what I am trying to get at, it hopefully will also show that this entire talk is not a diatribe against using the word “Tibetan” *per se*. However, my alternate

case is one that is equally fraught, and deserves the same kind of reflection that I have been developing in the foregoing. This is the category of “Buddhism.”

I can tell you that I only realized this issue at the very end of the ten-year period of writing the book, at the final revision stage, after the book had already been reviewed by the press. I really had to struggle to revise my argument without having to change the entire text. But I realized it was absolutely essential.

To give some background: One of the things that I was trying to accomplish in this book is to point out the existence of, and explore forms of, knowledge in Tibet that were not primarily Buddhist. One of these, I contend, was academic medicine in Tibet. Even though it does have Buddhist elements in it, it primarily, I argue, has little to do with Buddhism. However, it has been recently the case that many scholars in Buddhist Studies, not only in Tibetan Buddhism but also especially in Chinese, Japanese, and Indian Buddhism, have been working on what they are calling “Buddhist medicine.” In my view that is a misnomer. What I understand to go under the rubric of Buddhist medicine has primarily to do with ritual healing – a better term, in my view. Ritual healing with mantras, prayers, and visualizations is quite different from the very large majority of what the *Four Treatises* is talking about, which is rather physical medicine. I think it is important to recognize the difference between ritual healing and healing based on physical remedies (drugs, surgery, blood-letting, moxibustion, purgatives), and I would rather reserve the word medicine for the latter. It is important to know that traditional Asian healing was not only religious, it also had the kind of medicine that is of a piece with, even if far less precise than, modern biomedicine, which includes reliance on empirical, physicalistic evidence and substances. To argue otherwise is a kind of culturalism if not Orientalism in itself.

You may have noticed that I have gotten distracted by yet another category: “medicine.” Labels matter! But let me get back to the category of Buddhism, and/or “Buddhist.” The complication in what I was trying to say in my book is that some of the Tibetan medical writers *themselves* were invested in claiming that the medical science they were using is indeed “Buddhist” and was originally taught by the Buddha. Now, in fact, other traditional Tibetan medical writers took issue with that

claim, as most modern historians would do too. And so first of all it is important to see that issues around Buddhist affiliation for medicine is not just a modern question but has a relatively long history. But more importantly for my purposes now, this case shows how critical it is for us to be clear on the difference between our own historiographical categories and what categories were mobilized by actors on the ground.

So back to the actors on the ground. It is somewhat confusing that despite making the entire medical treatise into the teachings of the Buddha, the *Four Treatises'* wonderful chapter on medical ethics draws a very basic distinction between two kinds of doctors: those that follow the "Pure Dharma" (*dam chos*) and those that follow "Human Dharma" (*mi chos*). In other words, they are distinguishing a kind of Buddhist medical ethics from a more secular kind.

The term "Human Dharma" has no real Sanskrit equivalent. It is rather a very old Tibetan term, most likely predating the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, when *chos* referred not to Buddhism per se but rather to a general set of principles or way of living. Indeed, it is more accurately translated as the Human Way than as a kind of Indically-influenced "Dharma" as such. In the context of medicine, *mi chos* refers to the pragmatic career of the doctor. For example, how to blow your own horn about your accomplishments, so as to attract more business.



*"When you know the diagnosis, announce it publically like blowing a conch."
From Parfionovitch et al, plate 37, detail.*

Or, how to speak in such a way that whatever you predict as the outcome of a patient's illness will appear to be accurate after the fact, even if you yourself were not sure when you made the prediction:



*"If the illness does not match your experience, speak with the forked tongue of a snake."
From Parfionovitch et al, plate 37, detail.*

Both of these suggestions, while developed at length in the *Four Treatises* and its early commentary, will be rather jarring to readers used to reading Tibetan Buddhist works for the ethics of the bodhisattva. In fact I would argue that is true both for the texts' contemporary readers and for us in the modern world. It is quite clear that the texts are contrasting the instrumental and somewhat cynical approach in the human way with practicing medicine in a "Pure Dharma" way. The latter is a well-known term, in both Sanskrit (*saddharma*) and Tibetan, to describe the Buddha's teaching. The Pure Dharma doctor does *not* brag, does *not* seek high wages, and does not engage in double-speak, the texts clarify.

And so it would seem to be the case that the Tibetan texts are considering this latter approach to be "Buddhist" medical practice, as opposed to the other, more instrumental approach to medical practice. But there are a few complicating issues to raise before we adopt these rubrics ourselves, that is, in our own description of Tibetan medical ethics. For one, we should note that the text deliberately uses the hot-button term *chos* to describe *both* the seemingly ambitious and selfish kind of

medical practice, and the altruistic one. There is clearly some ambiguity about fully separating a “Buddhist” way from the “human” one.

In fact the text and its commentaries go out of their way to point out the morality of the human way as well: It too is trained on the welfare of the patient, and demands strict discipline and education even if the doctor’s professional career is being cared for in the same stroke. So perhaps keeping the word *chos* on both sides of the distinction between the human way and the pure way reflects medicine’s guilty conscience that everyday medical practice may not always adhere to the sublime ethics of the Buddhist saint. Perhaps the early medical theorists were attempting to make up for that by still calling the human way a kind of “Dharma”. Nonetheless, we do see here a flip side of the attempt to insist that the Buddha really taught the *Four Treatises*. Instead, now the doctors are trying to justify a more pragmatic kind of medical practice than that which would be too strictly limited by religious ethics. But again, on the other hand, they are also demonstrating some cognizance of the human way’s departure from the self-abnegating ethics of Buddhism.

But here is where I want to drive home my basic point. Are the Tibetan medical writers correct in implying that the human way is not a Buddhist pure way? From the perspective of the modern Buddhologist, we know very well that certain *sūtras* and other canonical works do counsel people to take care of their livelihood and to use many kinds of everyday common sense in their lives.⁶ So, in fact, as a historian one might say that there may be no real principled basis to separate the *Four Treatises’* human way from “Buddhist” ethics, and certainly that the latter category begs the question of what it actually means. In other words, when historical actors say something is *not* Buddhist, but the scholar from the academic perspective would say that it *is* Buddhist, or at least could easily be said to be, who is right? More to the point yet, in my book, should I gloss the Pure Dharma way as the Buddhist way of medicine or not? Clearly the answer to the first question is that the question is not a good one, since there is no right answer in this matter, or at least none that would hold up to historical scrutiny. And the answer to my second question is, it depends on whether I am reporting what the Tibetan commentators

said, or whether I am defining and using the term from my own perspective. The latter distinction is what I had overlooked in writing my book until the very final version, when some close Buddhist Studies friends pointed it out to me, sending me into what we used to call in Philadelphia “conniptions.”

VI. The real reason why I am so passionate about questions of representation and identity – and have gone on so long about it tonight – is my own desire to get away from them. Or as much as is humanly possible. What really interested me in the medical chapter on the human way was not whether it is properly Buddhist or not. I rather am simply fascinated by any discussion of how people learn in bodily and interpersonal ways. There is a long discussion of “artistry” in the *Four Treatises’* section on *mi chos*, considered to be a crucial skill in everything the doctor does, and especially how he deals with patients. There is a special virtue that the chapter calls “familiarity” (*goms pa*), which has to do with how the physician relates to his teacher and how he becomes familiar with the practice of medicine in a bodily way. The chapter even makes use of the term *saṃskāra*, which in Buddhist psychology is usually seen as something that works against enlightenment. The *saṃskāras* are the bodily and mental habits that collect and perpetuate karma. But in medicine the *saṃskāras* are good because they provide a template for the student to imbibe the teacher’s bodily and personality habits and traits.

Here is another image from the medical paintings. It is the one I examined in my essay for the Festschrift for Anthony that was published earlier this year.⁷ I believe it shows something about the bodily grace and care of the physician.



Physician Feeling the Pulse of a Patient. From Parfionovitch et al 1992, plate 61, detail.

The humanity I see in this image is the reason I wanted to study Tibetan medicine, whether it is actually “Tibetan” or “Buddhist” or whatever. I love the way that the doctor looks away as he concentrates on the pulse, how delicately he holds the patient’s hand, and how receptive and trusting the patient is looking. I am interested in how people learn from each other, how they form bonds, and how so much of that is transmitted below the conceptual level, and rather through bodily position, suggestion, intimation, and other things like that. And I feel that to the degree we can put aside our labels, or at least dramatically relativize them, we will be freer, much freer, to get to what is most important of all in what we do.

I will close with one more image, one of my favorites, which illustrates how medicine in Tibet itself was able to manipulate categories and especially to relativize religion.



This is an image of five random patients who can be cured by a certain kind of pill that can treat five patients. The text just mentions the number of five patients and says nothing about who they are or what kind of illness they have. The illustration is one of many cases where the paintings add visual detail that is basically coming out of the artists' own imagination, that is, the ones who worked on this set under the direction of Sangye Gyatso.

What is so striking about it is that among the five people, one is clearly a monk. You can tell from his dress. But the fact that he is a monk is completely irrelevant to the medicine being illustrated. The image just shows five human beings, one of whom happens to be a monk. What I love about it, and what I think is really rare in all of Tibetan art, is that here we have a monk depicted whose religious practice we could say is entirely irrelevant to why he is being depicted. Or maybe the painters were deliberate in this, and actually trying to make that very point themselves. Either way, the image shows that whatever is Buddhist (or whatever other label we should put on him; I am assuming he is a Buddhist monk but of course he could be a Bonpo monk too) about this person is marginal at best. It brings to the fore what is most important about him of all, from the perspective of medicine, namely that he is a mortal, vulnerable, but treatable human being. Buddhist, Bonpo, Tibetan ... or not.

¹ The oral form of this talk was titled "Tibetan Studies and its Possible Futures." All illustrations are from Parfionovitch et al, 1992 (see n. 5 below).

² Michael Aris, *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives: A Study of Pemalingpa (1450–1521) and the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683–1706)*. London: Kegan Paul, 1989.

³ Quotation from p. 12 in Michael Aris, "India and the British According to a Tibetan Text of the Later Eighteenth Century," in *Tibetan Studies*, edited by Per Kvaerne. Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994, 7-15.

⁴ Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

⁵ Yuri Parfionovitch, Fernand Meyer, and Gyurme Dorje, eds, *Tibetan Medical Paintings: Illustrations to the Blue Beryl Treatise of Sangyé Gyamtso (1653-1705)*. 2 vols. London: Serindia, 1992.

⁶ A number of such passages are found, for example, in the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, see Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005, 124-6; 127-8.

⁷ Janet Gyatso, "One Picture," in *Tibetan and Himalayan Healing: An Anthology for Anthony Aris*, edited by Charles Ramble and Ulrike Roesler. Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2015, 273-8.