**MYSTIFICATION, RELIGIOUS IMAGERY, AND FANTASY IN MODERN TIBETAN LITERATURE**

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Tibet is synonymous with mysticism and fantasy. The Lost Kingdom in the Himalayas has stimulated the imaginations of explorers, academics, travelers, and spiritualists and has been evoked in various artistic and literary works over the years. As Tsering Shakya has observed “Tibet has become a source of adventure and mystery in a world where there is little magic and mystery. Everything about Tibet is esoteric and beyond ‘ordinariness.’” [[1]](#footnote-1) Even the complex political reality gripping the country in recent decades does not detract from the “exotic” appeal of Tibet.

The current situation in Tibet, an autonomous region of China, has its roots in the Cultural Revolution (1966–196) when the Chinese government introduced new policies in Tibet to promote economic reform. However, Tibet’s ensuing economic growth during the 1990s led to tension between Chinese immigrants and the local Tibetan population, which intensified at the beginning of the 21st century. On the one hand, Tibet enjoyed improvements in infrastructure, enhanced tourism, and local economic growth. On the other hand, it experienced Sinicization of the culture, language, and daily life.[[2]](#footnote-2) Even with these changes, compared to China, with its rapid and intense modernization, Tibet continued to represent an imaginary space. Given, In a world of increasing materialism, Tibet remained a source of dreams and fantasy. At the same time, Tibetans and Chinese alike were searching for the “authenticity” and “roots” of their past in the midst of such turbulent changes.

The literature of Tibet of these years reflected this complex reality. Written in the Chinese language mainly by Tibetan authors who had been raised and educated outside Tibet, these works express the myths and stereotypes about Tibet that the writers had absorbed from the Chinese culture. Thus, this new Tibetan literature was preoccupied with primitivism, mysticism, and sexuality, among other things, because these were the demands of the Chinese readers and publishers who aspired to read about the “other” and the “different” as an alternative to their prosaic everyday reality (see: Maconi, 2008; Schiaffini-Vedani, 2002).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The artistic value of this literature was enhanced by its integration of stereotypes about Tibet into a contemporary narrative. Its emphasis on the modernity and urbanization of Tibet, sometimes in an extreme manner, as a background for the plots, created a stark contrast with the mysticism and exoticism of the Tibetan characters and protagonists. This literature reflects the complexity of modern Tibetan identity, in which traditional beliefs, myths, and religion coexist, albeit often uncomfortably, with modern values of progress, innovation, and rationalism.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This chapter focuses on the mythologizing of Tibet as a spiritual ideal. Tibetan authors, mostly educated in China and speaking, were nonetheless ethnically Tibetan. Their writing naturally incorporated Tibetan Buddhist myths and their representations into Chinese culture; their works abound with what can be perceived as exotic, primitive, sensory descriptions of Tibet. As Huggan observes “while exoticism describes the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings and associations to unfamiliar things, it also denotes an expanded, if inevitably distorted, comprehension of diversity which effectively limits assimilation [...] Exoticism describes a political as much as an aesthetic practice. But this politics is often concealed, hidden beneath layers of mystification.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Tibetan fantasy literature, written mainly in Chinese, is more popular than the literature written in the Tibetan language, which, while aimed at the local population, plays a central political role in the representation of Tibetans in China. However, as Huggan explained, the usage of myths and legends in the fantasy literature creates, in a way, a fictitious encounter between the reader and the Tibetan culture. The fantastic elements preserve Tibet as an imagined and out-of-reach space in which the real and unreal reside together. Many of the best-known Tibetan authors of contemporary fantasy literature were born in China proper and found their way to the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, in the 1980s, driven by curiosity, a thirst for adventure, and a strong urge to experience the unfamiliar.[[6]](#footnote-6) Starting in the early 1990s, the city became an attractive destination for avant-garde creators,[[7]](#footnote-7) offering an alternative to China’s materialistic lifestyle and constant drive for money. Among these are two outstanding authors, Tashi Dawa (1959–) and Sebo

(1956–), who both command broad readership in China. Yet, for many in Tibet, they are perceived as “inauthentic” because they do not write in the Tibetan language, and their works appeal to a Chinese rather than to local Tibetan readers.

This disconnect between Tibet and those writing fantasy literature about it inevitably raises the question of what makes a work one of modern Tibetan literature? What are its characteristics? How is it characterized. Is it the author’s ethnicity, language, or content of the literary work? Modern Tibetan authors writing in the native language claimed ownership not only of their own work but of “Tibetanism” in general.

The Tibetan ethnic origins of authors writing in Chinese became secondary to the ability to write in Tibetan.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Still, this dispute over authenticity remains, differentiating between Tibetan literature written by Tibetan authors and literature from Tibet, which emphasizes Tibet as a theme, regardless of the author’s origin.

Another controversy arising in modern Tibetan literature revolves around the place of religion. Tibetans consider religion as a reflection of traditional past culture; some, mostly urban intellectuals, blame tradition and religion for weakening Tibet and leading it to its current troubled state.[[9]](#footnote-9) Throughout the 1980s, these intellectuals feared that the religious system’s inflexibility could prevent the creation of a renewed Tibetan national identity based on progress and economic stability rather than religious awe. However, rapid economic development and political processes that risk sweeping away traditional Tibetan heritage have resulted in pressures throughout Tibetan society to preserve and protect the country’s religion and tradition. For this reason, many Tibetans are critical of the mystic depiction of Tibet in modern fantasy literature and the misrepresentations of Tibetan Buddhism, considering such depictions simplistic and misrepresentative of their rich traditions.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Starting in the seventeenth century, the Dalai Lama was Tibet’s religious and political leader. The traditional link between governance and religion deeply affected Tibetan culture, which was essentially Buddhist in nature. But this began changing after Tibet was annexed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1951 and then defined as the Tibet Autonomous Region since 1965. This autonomy, however, was limited, referring only to the cultural sphere, permitting Tibetan leadership to uphold the Tibetan way of life in accordance with their culture and language, and even then, only if Tibetans did not contradict the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) official policy.

With the imposition of Communist doctrine in Tibet, Tibetans were unable to practice their religion until the reforms began in 1978. Given the religious nature of Tibet’s government until the PRC took control as well as the particularly rigid political limitations during Mao Zedong’s rule (1949–1976), any allusions to or discussions of Tibetan religion began appearing in modern Tibetan literature only during the current era of reforms.

In the absence of freedom of expression in the PRC, literature has served as a primary tool for expressing views and spreading ideas related to sensitive issues, such as Tibetan religion and its place in current society. Throughout Chinese history, literature has been a moral, political, and social compass,[[11]](#footnote-11) its role to convey intellectual, didactic, and value-based messages aimed at shaping readers’ worldviews. This role was reinforced following the rise of Communism, as the CCP used literature as a tool for changing national social awareness and implementing political indoctrination.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Cultural creation and consumption became less restrictive following Mao’s rule and the start of a period of liberalization, including the introduction of a free market economy. Nonetheless, the Chinese government, well aware of the political power literature can wield, continued supervising the all cultural discourse by controlling all Chinese media outlets (internet, TV, radio, journalism, and publications). As with other areas of life and culture, literature today, even in a “reformed” PRC, remains under governmental supervision, although much attenuated in manner and scope compared to what prevailed under Mao. These shifts strongly influenced modern Tibetan literature, which began developing only in the 1980s and which reflected the complexity of Tibetan religious issues, many of them expressed in the emerging genre of fantasy literature.

**The development of modern Tibetan literature**

Modern literature is a relatively new phenomenon in Tibet. Tibet’s ancient literature shows little, if any, evidence of either Chinese or western influence. Tibetan local literature was essentially religious, dealing with Buddhist texts and philosophy and influenced by Sanskrit texts. Compared to the abundance of Buddhist literature, Tibetan historical chronicles and folktales were limited,[[13]](#footnote-13) with the first modern Tibetan novel published in the eighteenth century.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, after this first book, there are hardly any novels or short stories to be found for the next 200 years. As noted above, numerous researchers claim that modern Tibetan literature began to develop only in the 1980s.[[15]](#footnote-15)

During the 1980s and 1990s, modern Tibetan literature echoed modern and secular life. It was written by intellectuals and aimed at the small local elite, as the majority of Tibetans remained illiterate.[[16]](#footnote-16) Even monks and nuns, chiefly in central Tibet, possessed only the most basic rudiments of reading and writing skills, since religious education focused on memorization and oral recitation of religious texts.[[17]](#footnote-17) The methods of religious education, primarily taking place in the monasteries and meant only for monks, along with Tibet’s geographical isolation and the Buddhist regime’s policy of seclusion until the 1950s, prevented a public education system and modern literature from developing.[[18]](#footnote-18) As a result, modernity and secular concepts entered Tibet only after 1951 via the Chinese Communist education system.

This system, based on repetition and memorization, was devoid of discussion, interpretation, or critical review. In the PCP, students learned how to read and write but were not permitted to interpret texts or express opinions counter to the official party line. Thus, throughout Mao’s reign, not only was very little Tibetan literature produced, but what did emerge was political in nature, written to support party policy.[[19]](#footnote-19) Religion during this period was viewed as a vestige of feudalism, which was used historically by the Tibetan nobility historically to dominate their serfs. Until 1951, 80% of Tibet’s population was desperately poor and totally uneducated, either still yoked in serfdom or nomads.[[20]](#footnote-20) The traditional local culture, so steeped in religion, provided the population with no means to withstand the atheist Communist regime, making it difficult for the population to preserve its identity during this time.

The post-Mao reforms and liberations in the 1980s included reviving religious institutions in Tibet. The increased interest in regional minorities, and the arrival of the New Age movement in China in the 1990s increased the value of Tibetan culture among the Chinese, and a precipitated a simultaneous change among Tibetans towards their own religion.[[21]](#footnote-21)The more modern Tibet became, absorbing influences from China and the world, the more pressing preserving and accentuating unique, authentic Tibetan ethnic characteristics became. Many people began delving into their roots in search of identity, while others were attracted to mysticism and fantasy, seeking escapism from daily life in alternative universes.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Tibetan literature, which started flourishing in the 1980s, reflected a search for modern Tibetan identity. Most authors supported adopting a modern identity, a new concept in Tibet identified with progress. Authors adopting this approach were, from the outset, more open to modernization and innovation.[[23]](#footnote-23) Those who promoted a return to religious tradition were mostly part of the religious elite that had begun reestablishing its status. Their fear of the influence of secular culture on Tibetan youth derived primarily from China’s interest in strengthening a modern Tibetan identity by supporting the already emergent secular culture while continuing to weaken traditional religion as a way of[[24]](#footnote-24) The conflict between supporters and opponents of tradition was reflected in the Tibetan literature of that time, along with the flourishing of new literary genres, such as magic realism, fantasy, and avant-garde literature.

**The Fantasy of Tibet**

A classy Land Rover back from Lhasa roared up and stopped. Two young lamas in monastic robes and sun hats scrambled out, waved to the driver, and started climbing up the path. One wearing earphones babbled a song in tune with his pocket radio.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This extract from Sebo’s ,, is emblematic of the striking clash of modernity and traditionalism in the Tibet of the 90s that characterizes the burgeoning modern Tibetan writing Lhasa, as described by Sebo, is modern, thriving, cosmopolitan. In his work, Tibet’s capital bustles with western tourists, Chinese, youngsters, monks, motorbikes, and beggars in a sensory riot. The story follows a materialistic young Tibetan woman whose mother promises to buy her a fashionable gym outfit. The mother dashes from store to store trying to keep her promise but ends up empty handed; all the outfits have been sold. The story describes a relatively banal reality, although at the time new to Tibet, of a parent trying to keep up with her child’s demands in the context of consumer capitalism with its constantly changing fashions.

The end of the story, however, is anything but banal. As the day draws to a close, and the mother is still unable to find what her daughter wants, she sees an old beggar woman dressed in the sought after apparel. The author describes the contrast between the bright red top and the woman’s shrunken, wrinkled body. Surprised, the mother approaches the beggar and puts the money intended for the purchase into the overturned hat placed in front of the woman.

The story thus brings to life the pursuit of materialism and exposes the blindness it causes, ending with the object of desire being found on the old woman. By wearing it as clothing rather than as a fashion statement, she erases any meaning attached to the clothing. The mother, who had reached a point of despair in her search for the particular item, acknowledges the item’s triviality and redirects her money to a more humane purpose. Giving to beggars and pilgrims is part of Tibetan tradition: this transforms the mother’s action into a victory for tradition over consumerism. It is a victory that, in retrospect, is perfectly suited to Tibet’s spiritual capital. This story belongs to the fantasy genre in the sense that, as in magical realism, behind the ostensible plot lies a deeper message about Tibet; a combination of reality and fantasy, the natural and the supernatural. This story could also fall under the category of whatcalls

Yet, in the story, Tibet is described as an alternative space, sometimes fantastical, where economic reality merges with spiritual realization. Simultaneously, “The Circular Day” offers a cynical description of traditional Tibetans encompassing lamas, pilgrims and beggars, and explicit sexuality, such as a detailed depiction of a rural man sitting next to his wife on the street while publicly stroking her breasts as she gazes indifferently around, continuing to chew her gum. Eroticism expressed in the plot by repeated sexual references to the girl by passers-by (including a monk who, after examining her body when she asks to come with him, decides that she is too young), a naked woman in a dim shop that is implied to be a brothel, and other descriptions of extroverted sexuality that can be considered dystopian to some degree. The story emphasizes the avant-garde style pervasive of that era in China, evident in works by Chinese authors in Tibet, such as Ma Jian and Ma Yuan. Also alluded to is the idea of traditional Tibetan compassion for all living creatures in a country where monks beg for food daily in order to experience detachment from the material and compassion for the poor. The father of the girl, the story’s protagonist, is none other than a lama from a local shrine, and the withered beggar woman, is presented in neither a spiritual nor a human light as she sips from a bottle of cheap liquor. Critically reading the story reveals the common stereotypes about Tibetans cloaked in new robes. Tibetans are presented as primitives, infantile, and animalistic, thus reinforcing the common perception in China whereby Tibetans need the cultured modern Chinese to assist them. Such stereotypes are part of the rhetoric used to justify the Chinese regime’s rule in Tibet.[[26]](#footnote-28)

Sebo is among those Tibetan authors who “discovered” and re-adopted their ethnic origin in order to highlight their uniqueness in China’s literary world. His father was Chinese; his mother, Tibetan. Yet he himself is unfamiliar with the Tibetan language and culture. Following his parents’ divorce, he grew up with his father in China’s Sichuan and Hunan provinces.[[27]](#footnote-29) Arriving in Tibet in the 1980s, he assumed the sobriquet “Sebo,” a free translation of his Chinese name, Xu Mingliang, into Tibetan. But despite his efforts to adopt a Tibetan identity, he notes that he never felt a sense of belonging to Tibet: “I never felt I belonged to that place, I never felt I was like the Tibetan people around me; I only felt I belonged to the intellectual circle of my friends.”[[28]](#footnote-30) As a Tibetan author writing in Chinese, he felt obligated to write about the lives of Tibetans; but since he was not deeply familiar with Tibetan culture, he began to weave Buddhist motifs into his works, infusing them with a sense of the exotic and the mystical.

Sebo, educated in China, assimilated the representations of Tibet common in China, but by using them he actually points a critical finger at Chinese society, for which the story is intended. The focus on sexuality and consumerism by the narrative’s protagonists and the plot’s urban background emphasize both the absurd pursuit of money and objects and the alternative space Tibet offers. The story begins from the daughter’s perspective: her wanderings through the streets of Lhasa leads to encounters with various archetypes. As she jots down poetry and snippets in her notebook, she offers the reader a view of the city and its residents. The teen girl represents Lhasa itself, as the author perceives it:

There’s a furry, blond guy from America,

a photographer. All day long, he takes

so many pictures of me there’s no space

in my room to hang them all. I know

he wants to attract me. There are so,

so many guys all trying to attract me,

American, Germans, Italians. They all

Take my picture.[[29]](#footnote-31)

The poem emphasizes the teen’s external image. Western tourists photograph her as a way of “courting” her to obtain something, hinted at as sexual favors. Lhasa itself is considered a desired destination by westerners, its sensuous image as *Shangri-La* enhancing its charm. Westerners try to capture the city through the camera lens, perpetuating their attraction to the city’s exotic attractions. Ultimately, however, they do not succeed in corrupting the young woman or the city, as evidenced in the story’s ending and the mother’s act of generosity expressing kindness and compassion. This ending highlights the difference between Tibet and the rest of China and joins in the criticism leveled at Chinese society that rather than encouraging individualism (manifested in the mother’s action in the novel) it actually promotes, if not glorifies, following the rules, thereby falling victim, among other things, to changing fads and fashions.

In the broadest sense, Sebo turns a universal narrative of the fruitlessness of materialistic pursuits into one of alienating urban modernity infused with traces of Tibetan folklore. The story’s name relates to the circular route of Barkhor Street in the heart of ancient Lhasa. A further reference is to the cycles of life experienced by the figures peopling that street, magnified by a description of sunrise and sunset which is present throughout the plot. Other than the young teen who has no idea who her father is, the reader meets pilgrims, a hunchback, a cripple, a crazy woman and an old beggar woman. The beggar is the one wearing the object the young woman wants: the red track suit with its low neckline:

She’d pulled down her sheepskin robe. Beneath it she wore a tracksuit. Its overlarge v-neck exposed two triangular mounds of shrunken, shriveled skin that were her breasts. Dried, cracked, glittering scales shone among the wrinkles like metal in a desert, golden in the rays of the setting sun.[[30]](#footnote-32)

This detail in the plot can be interpreted as criticism of the pursuit of consumer goods and the fickle temporary nature of fashion, but it also presents a new perception of Tibet. Sebo shows how, despite the ancient religious Tibetan traditions, modernization is indeed taking place, as the mother frantically searches for the modern clothing. However, it does not yet fit Tibet’s changing society, with the garment found – remarkably – only on an old beggar woman who doesn’t even realize what it is. Together, these women represent Tibet’s complexity with Westerners drawn to its exotic, enticing elements, while the Chinese view them as ancient, irrelevant remnants of the past.

**Is Tibet a Shangri-la?**

Tashi Dawa’s (1959-)[[31]](#footnote-33) “Tibet: A Soul in Bondage” (Chinese: *Xizang: Jihad zai pisheng jieshang de hun*) is a further expression of the modern genre that integrates the exotic and mystic with realism. Tashi Dawa writes in a magic realist style. Like Sebo, Tashi Dawa is of mixed origin and lived most of his life in the Tibetan parts of Sichuan. In the 1980s, he discovered Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, who influenced his style and works.[[32]](#footnote-34)

Many Latin American authors, chief among them in this regard Gabriel Garcia Márquez, use the magic realist style to express political protest, integrating realist motifs with mystical motifs unique to their cultures.[[33]](#footnote-35) Most of these authors were educated in Europe and adopted this writing style in order to critique the social order upon returning to their homelands. Foreign influences and backgrounds allowed these authors to observe their own culture in a different light, their perceptions then manifested in their works. Much like these authors, Tashi Dawa was also educated outside Tibet, but unlike them, he does not delve into the issues of burning interest to Tibetans. This may be explained by his distance from Tibetan culture growing up in the PRC and his lack of knowledge of the Tibetan language. Dawa even claimed that Tibetan was well suited to religious texts but lacked sufficient variety to make it suited to modern literature, and therefore was not sophisticated enough to express the concepts in his stories.[[34]](#footnote-36)

Counterbalancing the criticism leveled at Tashi Dawa for emulating the Latin American magic realism style, Schiaffini-Vedani claimed that the source of Dawa’s inspiration derives from both the Tibetan traditions and beliefs, and his secular education; together, these helped him see the magical in Tibetan culture.[[35]](#footnote-37) The author himself states that his stories: “ (…) are comparable to ancient Tibetan chronicles, which contain both factual history and mythical narrative.”[[36]](#footnote-38) In addition to the artistic value, magic realism is important for its representation of Tibet. Integrating fiction and reality, magic realism allows Tashi Dawa to successfully represent both Tibet and Tibetans in an extreme fashion that exposes and clarifies their stereotypical nature so familiar to the reader; basic words take on different meanings in light of the mystical and fictional motifs used.

Written in 1984, “Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong” describes a Tibet sixteen years in the future. The story won first place in the China Short Story competition of 1986, garnering Tashi Dawa much esteem. It was translated into English and French, and can be found in all the author’s anthologies. Taking place in the year 2000, the story depicts the author meeting a dying lama whose soul will not reincarnate following his death. The lama describes a cosmic battle, apparently taken from an ancient Buddhist prophecy: a war between devils and the *Shangri-La* warriors. The latter come from a mythical place, a kind of paradise which no person can locate, but on his deathbed, the lama details two figures making their way towards him. The author identifies the characters: they reference his own work. In 1984, Dawa began writing a story about these two figures making their way somewhere, but he was forced to put it aside because he had no idea where they were headed. The story is replete with descriptions of a reviving Tibet which the protagonists meet on their way to this unknown location, as does the author who begins and ends the story in the first person.

The narrative’s focus is the place of tradition in a rapidly modernizing Tibet. The lama at the story’s start dies and no one is found to inherit the role. Thus, a long Buddhist tradition of reincarnation comes to a halt. The lama’s death signifies the end of Tibet’s religious era and the transition to modernity. The author’s two fictional characters are brought back to life and set out from his earlier shelved story; they represent traditional Tibet. The man and woman reach the region of Kham, where they represent the old generation according to the common stereotypes the Chinese hold about Tibetan primitiveness and ignorance. The woman, having joined the man in order to escape from a future of hard labor where she lived, fills the traditional role of preparing food and drink for the man. Her character is likened to that of an animal, or more precisely, a dog. She wears a leather strap much like a dog’s collar, on which she marks the journey’s days in scratches.

The leather strap provides the story with its title and links the woman to her home and her past. When she explains to the man that she is marking each day’s passing since leaving her home, he answers with contempt, saying he has had no home since his birth.[[37]](#footnote-39) In this way he is perhaps alluding to the loss of his homeland. Throughout the plot, the woman, like a work animal, lugs the cooking equipment on her back and is not allowed to leave by the man even when she tires of his

attitude. In one part of the story, the woman reaches a small town and, like a stray dog, is stoned by children. Despite being injured, she does not react, her character remaining passive and obedient. This stereotypical figure provides the foreign or exotic element, through which are presented motifs perceived as Tibetan for Chinese readers. Further on, Tashi Dawa tries, unsuccessfully, to challenge the stereotypes and lead the figures through a transformation in order for them to modernize.

The encounters between tradition and modernity, and between religion and secularity, weave the fabric of the story’s plot. Despite Tashi Dawa’s attempts at describing Tibet’s technological advances in the year 2000, his imagination is limited to the reality familiar to him in the 1980s. Tradition is predominantly identified with the primitive, for example: the encounter takes place in a village reached by the protagonists, where residents include a shepherd and an accountant:

“If you don’t have anything to eat you can have dinner with us. I’ve got firewood to boil tea.”

“Damn, did you just walk out of the Middle Ages? Are you one of those extraterrestrials?”

“I come from a place far away. I’ve walked…”

She held up the thong again.

“How many days did you count?”

“Let me see…eighty-five days.”

“I walked eighty-five days? That’s not right. Just now you said ninety-two. You’re tricking me,” Chung started to giggle.

“Oh, tsk, tsk! Buddhas and bodhisattvas,” he shut his eyes and murmured, “you’re driving me crazy.”

“Do you want to have supper here with me? I still have some dried meat.”

“Girl, let me take you to a place where young people have fun. There’s music, beer, disco music. Throw away that rotten tree branch in your hand.[[38]](#footnote-40)

Tashi Dawa employs the accepted Tibetan stereotype, apparently accepting the way minorities are presented in China. His critical stance reinforces his status as an innovative avant-garde author. But, in fact, the extreme way in which these stereotypes are drawn and their integration into the futuristic story empties them of all meaning, as they are perceived as fictitious representations that do not correspond with reality. This extreme vision, coupled with the duo’s fate in the future, can be viewed as a protest against accelerated modernization and loss of simplicity, and the novel attempts to take a critical stance against Tibetan tradition while simultaneously reinforcing the perception of Tibet as a fantastical destination where the future and past coexist.

The climax of the plot is the arrival of the couple in a nameless village, X. Following a drought, the seer had prophesied that a couple would arrive that morning from the east, bringing rain with them. The couple was therefore received by the locals with great fanfare and transported on a lavishly outfitted tractor into the village square. After noticing the woman’s face, the townsfolk decide she is the embodiment of the goddess of compassion. For the first time in her life, she is showered with attention and gifts. The man, by contrast, is left alone. He goes off to provoke an argument for the purpose of getting killed and ending his suffering. His rough character and lack of roots is a cynical, extreme representation of Buddhist believers. At the beginning of the story, the man, known as Tabei, steals money and gives it to a local shrine. Despite claims of religiosity, his attitude towards the woman lacks compassion, treating her like a beast of burden. While the village locals wonder at her beauty, he feels disgusted by her ugliness. Despite his many sins, he seeks a place that will provide him with religious salvation without needing to change his ways.

The paradise Tabei seeks is a myth that the author chooses to identify with Communism. He recalled:

In 1964, they started the people’s communes. Everybody talked about the communist road, but nobody then could say just what communism was…some kind of heaven. But where? They asked people who came from western Tibet- ‘Not there’. Asked people from Ngari – “Not there.” People from the Qinghai border hadn’t seen it. The only place left nobody’s ever been was Kelong Mountain. A few people in the village sold their belongings, said they were taking the road to communism…set off across Kelong Mountain, and never came back. After that not a single villager headed up that way, no matter how hard things got.[[39]](#footnote-41)

Communism, according to this quote, or more precisely, Communist propaganda, is a myth that never materialized in these parts of Tibet. Communism did not improve Tibetans’ lives, nor did the promised paradise ever appear. A further criticism is leveled at those who set out seeking the path to Communism and paying with their lives. Since these views are spoken by an ancient Tibetan man, they can be understood in China as ignorance rather than separatism.

The unachievable Communist utopia is identified in the story with the Buddhist myth of “paradise on earth” sought by the protagonist. The Tibetan myth of a paradise hidden in the Himalayas is called “*Shambala*.” The myth was picked up by British author, James Hilton, in his 1933 novel, “Lost Horizon.” It describes a hidden valley in the Himalayas, known as *Shangri-La*, a concept identified with isolated, exotic locations. The story’s message is that belief in paradise led to ruin. The protagonists discover that no such Communist paradise exists, nor is there a Buddhist paradise, and the suffering of their journey was in vain.

Exiled Tibetan researcher Pema Bhum presents similar claims to those of Tashi Dawa. Bhum notes how Tibetan intellectuals active in the 1980s sought a new doctrine, feeling that Buddhism had disappointed them by leading to Tibet’s weakened status, which in turn enabled the Communist doctrine to be forcibly imposed on them through the political party and the military. The intellectuals’ objective is to “liberate” themselves from these doctrines.[[40]](#footnote-42)

In “Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong,” the protagonists arrive in a village where the locals have adopted modernization. To the female protagonist, they appear “as happy as gods.” The local residents show pride in their new agricultural technologies, digital wrist watches, Walkmans and yellow tractors, one of which accidentally runs over Tabei and injures him as he makes his way to the mountains in search of paradise and redemption. At the end of the story, Tashi Dawa meets these protagonists. He turns himself into a literary figure, emphasizing his role as the Creator. On his journey from the world of reality to that of fantasy where the story takes place, he passes by an abandoned field where an epic war had occurred, and he imagines the act of re-creation in which a man and a woman would be the new Adam and Eve. These new figures are meant to replace the stereotypical characters of the story with new, modern representations.

While trying to save the injured male protagonist, Tashi Dawa encounters the female protagonist who treats his wounds. The couple enter into a dialogue with him and are freed of his authority when they express independent desires. The author tortures himself over having created the characters:

Letting Chung and Tabei walk out of that manila envelope had been an irreparable mistake. Why to this day have I been unable to portray the image of the “new man,” the “new woman”? Now that I’ve created these characters, their every action has become an unalterable fact.[[41]](#footnote-43)

Tashi Dawa is unable to create new characters. Perhaps his failure derives from not being able to alter his perception relative to Tibetans. Or perhaps he is not interested in really creating a “new man” and “new woman” because he does not really want Tibetan culture to change. The first option presumes that Tibetan society is too primitive at that stage (the 1980s) to undergo any change. By contrast, the second possibility is that the author may not want Tibetan tradition to lose its spiritual uniqueness, and therefore chooses to perpetuate it through mystical and exotic representations.

At the end of the story the author, changed into yet another protagonist in the plot, attempts to persuade Tabei to realize the delusion of searching for utopia, since utopia does not exist. The traditional sound of chimes heard shattering the fantastical space in which they find themselves restores them to the global reality. The American voice, which Tabei erroneously thinks is the voice of the god, declares that the Los Angeles 1984 Olympics is now officially opened, stressing the perception that America is “paradise on earth.”

*Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong* contains similar messages to those appearing in Sebo’s *The Circular Day* Alongside criticism of the consumerist lifestyle and the pursuit of objects and brand names, Tashi Dawa emphasizes the United State\s rising status as a model worthy of emulation for many in China. Unlike Sebo in *The Circular Day*, Tashi Dawa does not offer an alternative to this state of mind, and the way he presents his protagonists makes it harder for the reader to identify with them. Magic realism makes Tashi Dawa’s protagonists alien rather than realistic images. Both Tashi Dawa and Sebo present bold, new writing that merges religion and secularism, reality and fantasy, old and new. For this reason, these two authors chose to present their protagonists in an extreme form, their unique methods establishing their status as authors.

**Conclusion**

Tibet’s mystification as a desirable spiritual destination is common among many of Tashi Dawa’s works, and a central motif in his writing. The modern literature produced by Tashi Dawa, Sebo and others is directed at Chinese readership and integrated into the “searching for roots” trend that dominated China in the 1980s. Minorities symbolized the “authenticity” and “rootedness” sought after by Chinese intellectuals as interest in minorities grew in Chinese society.[[42]](#footnote-44) “Discovering” and “adopting” the Tibetan identity is one stage in the process of seeking that authenticity, and an alternative to the accelerated pace of life during the period of reforms in the PRC.

Tibetan literature in Chinese is more popular than that in the Tibetan language and plays a central role in representing Tibetans in China. These modern authors were educated outside Tibet, and some lack fluency in both the Tibetan language and in Tibetan history and culture.[[43]](#footnote-45) Nonetheless, this fantasy genre of literature is important for the way it represents Tibet to Chinese readers, and its ability to shape Tibet’s and Tibetans’ perception in the broader context of the PRC. Authors are aware of their power as representatives of the Tibetan minority, and choose to emphasize their ethnic origins.

The main reason for this situation is that Tibetan readership is of a limited scope and did not show interest in Tashi Dawa’s and Sebo’s work due to the way these authors perceive Tibetan culture. Explaining the phenomenon is Dondrup Wangbum (1995–):[[44]](#footnote-46) “Actually, the ‘mystery’ of Tibet is the ‘mystery’ of Tibetan culture, and this mystery stems from ignorance. Once it is understood, it is no longer mysterious. A Tibetan never thinks of himself or his life as a mystery.”[[45]](#footnote-47) Their occupation with the realm where tradition meets modernization, using the Chinese language in Tibetan literature derives, to a great degree, from the authors’ personal experiences on arriving in Tibet.

The increasing popularity in China of regions dedicated to minorities, Tibet among them, enabled authors writing in Chinese to stand out by using the fantasy genre which merged ethnic motifs with mysticism. This is how these literary works present the “other” and the different to the Chinese reader. In contrast, because Tibetan literature in Chinese did not reflect the burning issues in Tibet, nor the daily lives of Tibetans, it became irrelevant for Tibetans. The artistic value of such literature is increasingly strengthened with the integration of stereotypes relating to Tibet, sometimes in an extreme form, as the background to the literary plots, constituting a contrast to the mystical and exotic elements in the represented images.

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1. Tsering Shakya, “Tibet and the Occident: The Myth of Shangri-La,” *Lungta* (1991): 20. On Tibet’s myth in the west see Donald S. Lopez Jr, “New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 3*,* no. 3 (1994): 36–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robin Iredale, Naran Bilik, and Wang Su, *Contemporary Minority Migration, Education, and Ethnicity in China*, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2001): 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Schiaffini-Vedani, *Tashi Dawa: Magical Realism and Contested Identity in Modern Tibet*, PhD diss., (University of Pennsylvania, 2002); Lara Maconi, “One Nation, Two Discourses: Tibetan New Era Literature and the Language Debate,” in Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (eds.), *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008): 172–201. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Franz Xaver Erhard, “Magical Realism and Tibetan Literature,” in Steven J. Venturino (ed.), *Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the IATS 2003*, Vol. 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2007): 135–137.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002): 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gang Yue, “Echoes from the Himalayas: The Quest of Ma Lihua, Chinese Intellectual in Tibet,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 38 (2004): 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, “The Language Divide: Identity and Literary Choices in Modern Tibet,” *Journal of International Affairs* 57, no. 2 (2004): 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michal Zelcer-Lavid, “Modern Education and Literary Traditions: A Comparative View on the Development of Modern Uyghur and Tibetan Literature,” *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 4 (2018): 572. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pema Bhum, “The Heart-Beat of New Generation: A Discussion of the New Poetry,” *Lungta, special issue on Modern Tibetan Literature* 12 (1999): 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Zelcer-Lavid, “Modern Education and Literary Traditions,” 572–573; Tsering Shakya,

    “The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers: The Development of Tibetan Literature Since 1950,” in Frank Stewart (ed.), *Manöa: Song of the Snow Lion* 12, no. 2, (Winter 2000): 35–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 104–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Changtai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 181–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tsering Shakya, “Language, Literature, and Representation in Tibet,” in Herbert J. Batt (ed.) *Tales of Tibet* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Pub, 2001), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The novel *The Legend of the Prince Who Was Unlike Himself* (Tibetan: *Gzhon nu zla med kyi gtam rgyud*) was written by Dokhar Tsering Wanggyel (1689–1763). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Shakya, “Language, Literature, and Representation in Tibet,” 29; Matthew T. Kapstein, "Foreword,” in Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (eds.), *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Tibet’s illiteracy is the highest in China, at 35.2% in 2018, see: National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook 2018* (Beijing: China Statistic Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Zelcer-Lavid, "Modern Education and Literary Traditions”, 574. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 574-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Adrian A. Moon, "Modern Tibetan Fiction, Part 1," *Tibetan Review* 26, no.10 (1991): 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Tom A. Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet*, Revised Edition (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 8-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hongyi Harry Lai, “The Religious Revival of China,” *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 18 (2003): 52–55. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 116-117; Nimrod Baranovitch, *China's* *New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender and Politics, 1978-1997* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. A prominent example is the author, Dhondup Gyal. For others see Tsering Shakya,

    “The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers,” 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows, A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, (New York: Penguin Compass, 1999), 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Sebo, “The Circular Day,” in Herbert J. Batt(ed.), *Tales of Tibet* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Pub., 2001), 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For minorities representation and stereotypes in China, see Dru. C. Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no.1 (February, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
27. Herbert J. Batt (ed.), *Tales of Tibet*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Pub., 2001), 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
28. Schiaffini-Vedani, *Tashi Dawa*, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
29. Sebo, “The Circular Day,” 211. This is the original poem’s construction. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
30. Sebo, “The Circular Day,” 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
31. Tashi Dawa is the nom de plume used by Zhang Niansheng. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
32. Danzhu Angben, “Tashi Dawa and His Work,” *Chinese Literature* 3 (1991): 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
33. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, “Introduction: Daiquiri birds and Flaubertian parrot(ie)s,” in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 3–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
34. Schiaffini-Vedani, “The Language Divide,” 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
35. Schiaffini-Vedani, *Tashi Dawa*, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
36. Batt, *Tales of Tibet*, 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
37. Tashi Dawa, “Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong,” in Herbert J. Batt (ed.), *Tales of Tibet* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Pub., 2001), 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
38. ibid., 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
39. ibid., 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
40. Pema Bhum, “The Heart-Beat of New Generation,” 3–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
41. Tashi Dawa, “Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong,” 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
42. Baranovitch, *China's* *New Voices*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
43. Sebo testifies to the fact that he and other authors, such as Tashi Dawa, who grew up outside Tibet, still do not understand Tibetan culture despite having spent 20 years in Tibet, see Sebo, "Yaoyuan de jiyi" [Reflections from a Far], *Xizang wenxue* [Tibetan Literature] 1 (2006): 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
44. The author is also known by his Chinese name, Danzhu Angben. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
45. Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, “The ‘Condor' Flies Over Tibet: Zhaxi Dawa and the Significance of Tibetan Magical Realism,” in Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (eds.), *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)