

SALC 25200 Intro to Tibetan Literature
Week 8:

**Gendun Chopel, Dhondup Gyal and the
Trajectory of Modern Tibetan
Literature**

Gendün Chöphel (1903–1951)



A portrait of Gendun Chopel in India 1936

Life of Gendün Chöphel

- He lived a life bracketed by two of the defining moments in modern Tibetan history, the entry of British troops into Lhasa in 1904 and the entry of Chinese troops into Lhasa in 1951
- Many questions remain concerning the most basic events of his life.
- We know from his writings that he traveled extensively and was in South Asia (India and Sri Lanka) for approximately 12 years, but his itinerary was unclear as are the dates for his return to Tibet and subsequent incarceration.

(Uncertain) Life of Gendün Chöphel

- Born in Amdo 1903. Prior to his birth, a prominent Nyingma Lama known as the Tulku of Dodak Monastery (Rdo rje brag Monastery) had visited Chophel's parents and announced that he, the lama, would be reborn as their son, leaving behind his ceremonial hat as an omen.
- Chophel's parents subsequently set out on a long pilgrimage from their home in Amdo to the holy city of Lhasa, a journey of many months. Chophel was conceived en route! Parents returned home to Amdo to raise him there
- He was regarded, at least locally, as the incarnation of Dodak Tulku and was known by that name.
- His birth nam was Rigzin Namgyal. When he was seven years old, he was invested as an incarnate lama in a ceremony at the Nyingma monastery of Trashikhyil
- He continued to study, both with his father and other local lamas, gaining particular recognition for his skills as a poet.
- At age fourteen Chophel entered a local Dge lugs monastery of 500 monks, called Rdi tsha, where he studied Buddhist logic for 3-4 years and developed a reputation as an excellent debater.
- It was at Rdi tsha that he was ordained as a Buddhist monk and was given the ordination name Dge 'dun chos 'phel

Pilgrimage years (1934?-1945?)

- Spent 12 years in India, Sri Lanka from 1934 (?) to 1945(?)
Went to India for pilgrimage (Varanasi, Bodhgaya)
- Sri Lanka: Admired the monks for their monastic discipline.
Translated *Dhammapada* from Pali in a team with Dhammananda.
- Worked with Russian Tibetologist George Roerich on the translation of the Blue Annals
- Stayed in Calcutta after translation work. This was when he studied erotica
- Then Kalimpong, Darjeeling near Sikkim 1944-5 (last 2 years of stay in India?)
- Chopel was critical of the Tibetan government and in particular of the Gelukpa monasteries.
- Returned to Tibet 1945, arriving January 1946.
- Accessed some Dunhuang texts and the Tang Annals (with the aid of a Chinese scholar) and started composing his *White Annals*
- Was popular for a short time after his return to Lhasa. People requested teachings.

Return to Lhasa (1946-1951)

- Was popular for a short time after his return to Lhasa. People requested teachings.
- In 1946 he was arrested on charges of distributing counterfeit currency (later discovered to be fabricated)
- Put in a separate room, and given access to food and bedding (from his friends), but interrogated repeatedly.
- Given 3 year sentence. Released 1949 or 1950.
- Was given housing behind the Potala and a stipend to continue writing his *White Annals*..but he never did.
- Died soon after his release in 1951.
- Not certain whether alcoholism started before or during his jail stint, but it was rumored he displayed signs of alcoholism in jail and so his disciples sneaked in alcohol to him in jail. He was in bad shape by the time he was released from jail.

Literary Life of Gendün Chöphel

- When in Tibet, he was a monk –engaged in debate and memorization of texts; no time for writing
- Wrote extensively during his 12 years in South Asia
- Some of his writings are missing—allgedly left in his room when he was arrested but were gone when he was released.
- Composed poems in jail
- After released from jail (1948/9) was given a stipen to finish writing his *White Annals*...but he never did.

Literary Life of Gendün Chöphel

So what did he write?

- Travel journal: *The Golden Surface, the Story of a Cosmopolitan's Pilgrimage*
- Guidebook to Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India
- Work on erotica (*Treatise on Passion*)
- *The White Annals* (unfinished)--Chophel's attempt to demythologize the Yarlung kingdom
- Various poems recorded from within his various writings and found on pieces of paper in jail.
- Sometime either shortly after his release from jail or shortly before his incarceration he gave teachings on the Middle way to students which was published shortly after his death. (Ornament of the Middle Way)
- Translated the *Dhammapada* from Pali to Tibetan, translated other texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan, Tibetan to English

What features distinguish Gendün Chöphel's poetry from what we have read so far?

What were your reactions?

What surprised you in particular?

Poem 2

Your form, the deeds of all the victors of the three times;
Friend to the host of beings seeking liberation;
Mother who loves all miserable migrators.
I pray at the feet of lady Tara.

Your beautiful body, the color of turquoise, restores health;
Your sweet speech dispels the longing for existence and peace;
Your compassionate mind purifies the stains of the two obstructions.
I pray at the feet of lady Tara.

You serve as a guide, showing me the path in an unknown land;
You serve as an escort, protecting me on a frightening precipice;
You grant the resources I need when I'm impoverished.
I pray at the feet of lady Tara....

Poem 11

Striking the palms together in debate
Proudly making distinctions in the truth
Found in conflicting scriptures on obscure topics;
This does not adorn the king of reasoning's
teaching.

Poem 16

Homage to the Lady of Speech.

This supreme intellect Sarasvati
Illuminator of speech;
May you adorn my throat
With words to clarify the world.

An ocean bears her, leading followers
To the supreme path
Of sacred diligence and reflection
Upon the auspicious puranas.

The expanse of her intelligence
Is a sky free of stars;
This is no place for a ladder
Leading to the shining sun.

Poem 20

Who would reproach the shining of the full moon?
Who would not bow at the feet of Suddhodana's son?
What peacock does not rejoice at the thunderclap?
Why would my mind be unsatisfied with the ambrosia of
true dharma?

Poem 21

Like a bee circling again and again
Around a gently swaying lotus,
In the vast and splendid temple,
I am moved by devotion again and again.

Poem 23

In order to refute their opponents over some fragments,
Our learned ones set up the target and pierce it with a
weapon.
Yet by singing songs of praise to the gods of war,
The hero of the other side is still not slain.

Poem 31

Hey! After I had gone away
Some nonsense-talking lamas
Said that Nechung, king of deeds,
Did not let me stay because I was too proud.
If he is a protector who purifies,
How could he permit those impure monks to stay,
Wandering all over, the known and unknown,
Selling tea, beer, and dried mutton?
Their lower robe hiked up, folded like palm leaves,
The worst carry weapons, knives, and clubs.
If they'd been expelled, it would be fine;
Between last year and this, there are more and more.
Because I lacked faith, pure as Venus,
Some say I was banished to far-off lands.
Why weren't impure beings banished
Like cows, female yaks, birds, and bugs?

...

Poem 34

Up to the Kachu and down to the Nagchu
There are many men whose rhetoric is lofty.
Yet, if I think about it carefully,
This pride of mine, a lover of words, is true pride.

Poem 42

Walking with weary feet to the plains of the sandy south,
Traversing the boundary of a land surrounded by the pit of dark seas,
Pulling the thread of my life-precious and cherished-across a sword's sharp blade,
Consuming long years and months of hardship, I have somehow finished this book.

Although there is no one to beseech me
With mandates from on high or mandalas of gold,
I have taken on the burden of hardship alone and written this,
Concerned that the treasury of knowledge will be lost.

Though terrified by the orange eye of envy
In the burning flame of those bloodthirsty for power,
Accustomed to the habit of gathering what I have learned,
My mind is attached to reasonable talk.

If it somehow enters the door of a wise person, intent on learning,
Then the fruit of my labor will have been achieved.
For the smiles of the stupid and the approval of the rich,
I have never yearned even in my dreams.

When this ink-stained body's need for food and drink is finished,
When this collection of bones-its thread of hope for gain and honor snapped-is scattered,
Then may the forms of these letters, a pile of much learning amassed through hardship,
Reveal the path of vast benefit in the presence of my unseen friends.

Poem 44

...

Completing the whole cycle of twelve years
Without seeing my delightful homeland and
Most of all, not meeting my kind old mother;
When I think about this, I feel pangs of separation.

...

At the monastery of the glorious and incomparable Narthang
I met the omniscient supreme incarnation.
Not regarding me as an inferior person,
He generously engaged in pleasing conversation.

The commentaries on the Bodhicaryavatara,
Of Chu-mig-pa, Yang-gon-pa, and so forth
Fell into my hands, I, a seasoned lover of words.
If they arrived, they would be the monastery's centerpiece.

The heat of the plain of India is hard to imagine,
For those who have only heard of it.
Unless they have gone there and felt it,
You may ponder it, but it does not appear to the mind.

Even when the breeze blows, it is like a tongue of flame
Even when you drink cool water, it is like black tea.

...

Poem 44

...

My longtime pundit friends
Set out to act for the welfare of all beings.
To the writing of this unrequested book
They may respond with criticism and derision.

More than that, there is a sense of loss;
Although I have gone on pilgrimage to India and Tibet
I have not felt my obstructions being purified,
Though my wisdom has clearly increased.

With two-thirds of my life now gone,
I have the teaching on achievement but not the teaching on conduct.
Because I am a person from a faraway land
My affection for my homeland is stronger than before.
What is it that will show me the love of my friends?
I yearn to return quickly to my own land.

...

Poem 52

In my youth, I did not take a delightful bride;
In old age, I did not amass the needed wealth.
That the life of this beggar ends with his pen,
This is what makes me feel so sad.

Poem 59

Wherever the bee flies
There the eye moves
Today suddenly this frightening flesh
Engulfs you in the form of an ugly woman.

On a cloth of stainless white silk
Filled with magical electric light
Is the queen of illusion, laughing and crying,
Making a show for visitors of the three realms.

Lacking the oil of compassion that benefits others,
Those skilled in the arts, with the sorcery of electricity,
Show the crooked path to honest humans.
Beware the race of golden-haired monkeys.

Poem 90

Because men and women are so different,
If they were not joined by coupling,
The world would be split into two factions
Always in quarrels and war.

Poem 91

If coupling was abandoned in the realm of humans,
It would surely become empty in an instant.
And if there were no human beings
How could there be monks and the Buddha's teachings?

Poem 92

Of course, these days I am a madman.
Those who are not mad might wish to laugh.
But the experience of bliss is not of small meaning;
The creation of families is not of small meaning.
To sustain the path of passion in a state of bliss and
emptiness,
How could that be of small meaning?

Poem 97

To excellent beings, you display the nature of reality
To benighted children, you play tricks
Indefinable, you have defining marks
I bow down to the god of self-arisen pleasure.

You appear to nonmeditators and to the mind of a fool,
You befriend all and all are your friend.
Seen by everyone, understood by no one,
I bow down to the god of self-arisen pleasure.

Dancer in the sky, unclothed by convention,
Magical forms, all without color or shape,
Casting the meteor of awareness, glimpsed but not grasped,
I bow down to the god of self-arisen pleasure.

Where the rainbow of diverse emanations dissolves,
Where the ocean of illusion is free from waves,
Where even the wavering mind does not waver.
I bow down to self-arisen great bliss.

The eyes of the Buddha see without blinking,
The learned know it by severing speech,
The ungrasping mind meets it, without concepts.
I bow down to the sphere of self-arisen bliss.

Poem 99

With little shame in myself and great faith in women
I am the kind who chooses the bad and discards the good.
Although I have not had the vows in my head for some time
The guts of pretense were destroyed only recently.

The customs of river fish are deep in the water;
What one has experienced is most familiar.
With this in mind, it was my lot
To strive to write this treatise.

If monks condemn it, that's not untoward,
If tantrikas praise it, that's not unfitting.
To the old man, its meaning is small;
To the young man, its meaning is great.

The author is Gendun Chopel,
The place it was written is the city of Mathura,
The difficult texts were explained by an old Brahmin,
The practical lessons were given by a Muslim girl.

The explanation is rooted in the Indian treatises;
The verses are arranged in Tibetan style, easy to understand.
Thus, from causes cumulated completely,
I feel a marvelous fruit is certain to appear.

The monk Mi pham wrote from reading.
The wanton Chopel wrote from experience.
The difference in the power of their blessings
A passionate man and woman will know through practice.

Poem 99 continued

Yet if there are faults of excess or deficiency here, Being too much for
those without desire,
Being too little for the passionate,
I confess it from my heart, concealing or hiding nothing.

Do not lay on a lowly person [like me]
Whatever your own faults might be:
Destroying the ways of monastic friends and
Debunking pretense and deceit.

By this virtue, may all like-minded friends
Cross the dark road of vague desires
And see the sky of the meaning of reality
From the summit of Sixteen Pleasures Peak.

Yudon, Ganga, Asali, and the others,
The women who joined with my body,
May they persist on the path, from bliss to bliss
To arrive at great bliss, the place of the dharmakaya.

May all humble people who live on the broad earth
Be delivered from the pit of merciless laws
And be able to indulge, with freedom,
In common enjoyments, so useful and right.

(English composition)- Repkong

My feet are wandering neath alien stars,
My native land,-the road is far and long.
Yet the same light of Venus and Mars
Falls on the small green valley of Repkong.

Repkong,-I left thee and my heart behind,
My boyhood's dusty plays,-in far Tibet.
Karma, that restless stallion made of wind,
In tossing me; where will it land me yet?

Like autumn cloud I float, soon, there, soon here,
I know not what the fleeting moons may bring.
Here in this land of roses, fair Cashmere,
My years are closing round me like a ring,

(English composition)- Repkong

Fate sternly sits at Destiny's hard loom
And irrevoked her tangled pattern weaves
The winds are blowing round my father's tomb
And I but dream of those still summer eves,
When-child-I listened to my mother's voice,
Whose stories made my youthful heart rejoice.

So far, so far I may not see those graves,
Ah, friend, these separation pangs are sore.
My heart is thrown upon the ocean waves
Where shall at last I reach a peaceful shore?

I've drunk of holy Ganges glistening wave,
I've sat beneath the sacred Bodhi tree,
Whose leaves the wanderer's weary spirit lave.
Thou sacred land of Ind, I honour thee,
But, oh, that little valley of Repkong,
The sylvan brook which flows that vale along.

(English composition)- Milareppa's Reply

The earth and the sky held counsel one night,
And called their messengers from northern height.
And came they, the stormfiends, the bleak and the cold,
They, who the stormwinds in grim fingers hold.

They swept o'er the earth, and then they called forth
That glist'ning maid from the far Polar North
In white trailing robe, the Queen of the Snow
And she sent her flutt'ring plumed children below

And downward they flew in wild, whirling showers,
While in black masses hung the threat'ning sky.
Some were like large cruel sharp-stinging flowers
Some pierced his chest with a fierce-cutting eye.

(English composition)- Milareppa's Reply

Thus stormfiends, snow and icy frost blending,
Came cold and sharply upon him descending.
On his half nude from these shapes did alight
And tried with his single thin garment to fight.

But, Melareppa, the Snow-mountain's child,
Feared not their onslaughts, so cruel and wild.
Though they attacked him most fiercely and grim,
He only smiled,-they had no power over him.

Next class:

**Dhondup Gyal and the Trajectory of
Modern Tibetan Literature**

Dhondup Gyal and the Trajectory of Modern Tibetan Literature

What have you come to expect about Tibetan Literature prior to the 20th century?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

What of those expectations have been thwarted or challenged in some way by the readings you read for this week?

Recap:

Features of Gendün Chöphel's writings

- Passion for travel and a desire to share with Tibetans aspects of modern life outside of Tibet: science, modern Indian culture, the lives of Sri Lankan Buddhists, travel guide books, pilgrimage guide books, erotica
- Reflect a dedication to Tibet's cultural heritage (White Annals)
- Reflect a dedication more generally to scholarship: (White Annals, translation work)
- Reflect critical engagement with Buddhist dharma independent of doctrine and religious institutions
- Critique Gelukpa monks and practices (institution of debate, political machinations)
- Written in a variety of styles and registers ranging from formal to informal, high literary to colloquial.
- Poetry varies vastly: often ethnographic and/or autobiographical in tone, especially regarding his various experiences in India; at times critical of political or religious institutions/practices; sometimes reflect his interpretations of Tibetan Buddhist history, literature, or Buddhist doctrine; or alternatively of scholarship more generally

Dhondup Gyal (1953–1985)

- Considered the first modern Tibetan poet breaking through traditional Tibetan formalist elements
- widely regarded in Tibet as the founder of Modern Tibetan Poetry
- Composed numerous poems and several short stories despite his short life
- Committed suicide in 1985 (age 32)



Elementary Education and Early Life

- After his primary school education, Dhondup Gyal went to a Teacher's Training School in the area of Rebgong.
- He was successful in his studies, whereas the other six persons who went to the same school from their village dropped their studies and returned to their village.
- After his studies at Rebgong, when he was about 15 years old, Dhondup Gyal obtained work at Qinghai Radio in Xining.
- For the Radio station, he read the news and translated from Chinese to Tibetan.
- Published works also in Tibetan language newspaper in Qinghai mid to late 70s
- Married first wife (Rinchen Kyi) in 1977, had son named Choedar

Higher education and post-education life

- Studied at the Nationalities Institute, completing his M.A. studies in 1981
- M.A. Thesis on the history of Tibetan lyrics entitled *mGur glu'i lo rgyus dang khyad chos* ("*The History and Characteristics of Songs*"), which contains a separate chapter on poetic figures (*rgyan*) His MA was published later in 1985.
- Additionally in July 1981 Dhondup Gyal together with Chen Qingying completed a scholarly book about the ancient Tibetan king Thride Songtsen (Khri lde srong btsan
- After completing his M.A. studies in 1981, Dhondup Gyal started to work as a teacher at the same institute in Beijing.
- Taught a special class of 25 students (which included his wife Rinchen Kyi) from 1982-84, studying with them as Zhangzhungwa Choewang version of the Ramayana, *the Fifth Dalai Lama's* historical work, *The Song of the Queen of Spring*, and *The Life Story of Milarepa*

1983-1985 period

- Dhondup Gyal and his first wife Rinchen Kyi were divorced in 1983, allegedly due to his excessive drinking.
- While still working at the Nationalities Institute in Beijing, Dhondup Gyal met his second wife, Yumkyi who is Mongolian.
- Left Beijing in 1984 for Chabcha, where he became a Tibetan language teacher in the Teacher's Training School in Tsholho.
- After a couple of months in Chabcha and after Yumkyi had completed her studies at Beijing, they got married in 1984 and lived together in a small house near the school.
- They had a daughter, Ganglha Dolma (Gangs lha sgrol ma).
- Apparently he was frustrated with his teaching job in Chabcha and sought work in other institutions (but was unsuccessful)
- November 1985 he was found dead in his house. According to most of the earlier scholarly sources in both Tibetan and English he committed suicide, which is also suggested by he notes or letters of testament (*kha chems yi ge*) the writer left.
- Otherwise it is unknown precisely what factors contributed to his tragically early death.

Dhondup Gyal's Literary Influences

- Read extensively in both Chinese and Tibetan, including Buddhist treatises and other treatises on traditional learning (poetry, poetics, grammar, etc.),
- His first wife indicated he was particularly influenced by *The Songs of Milarepa*, and *The Stories of Gesar*
- Other influences include Gendun Chopel's writings (in particular his unfinished *White Annals*) , and the works of Mongolian writer Malchin HUU, some of whose works he translated into Tibetan

'Bol rtsom zhogs pa'i skya rengs ("The Writings of the Dawn")

- First book, published 1981 by Qinghai Nationalities Press
- Allegedly the first collection of writings of modern Tibetan Literature
- Contains 13 pieces of writing from different genres:
- 9 poems written in traditional verse form; topics generally concerned diligence and the importance of studying
- 3 short stories, unique (in part) for their secular focus

Novella: *Sad kyis bcom pa'i me tog* ("A Flower Destroyed by Frost")

- A love story which deals with relations between the sexes and the problems caused by the custom of arranged marriage.
- A work that is socially critical.
- In the Tibetan literary context it is considered to have had an important role in the development of modern Tibetan prose writing and especially middle-length stories

Lhakyi and I were tiny flowerbuds maturing in the same garden. The roots of our minds were connected together by one thread of life and affection from our childhood times. Moreover, the petals of our love unfolded and bloomed together. But, this young flower girl's blossoming youth, her zest for life and her hopes for the future were suddenly destroyed by the frost of a merciless custom. I, the bee who had hovered round the flower with attachment, sank into an ocean of misery. --(Dhondup Gyal, "A Flower Destroyed by Frost")

Compare to:

Song of the Sixth Dalai Lama

Oh, magnificent hollyhock
if you went to the temple as
an offering
would you please take me, a
young turquoise bee,
with you inside the temple.

Song of Kalden Gyatso (17th cent)

Although the flower of good
behavior
Was watered again and again
By the river of faith and respect,
[It] was helplessly vanquished
By the hailstorm of laziness. Hey!

Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger* 2.80

But, with me, her companion, far away,
the sweet-voiced girl, as dear to me as life,
will be like a lonely *chakravaka* hen,
and with the passing of the days,
their intense longing weighing her down,
I think she will have changed,
like a lotus laid waste by frost.

Novel: Tulku

- "sPrul sku" is a story about a fake lama who one day appears in a small mountain village in Amdo.
- The people put their faith in him, but at the end it is revealed that the main character is a criminal who thieves and deceives women and is not a real lama at all
- The short story includes a song that the tulku sings to his audience and it is in the style of yogic songs, mimicking them in a slightly parodical manner.
- The song, that the false tulku sings in response to people's questions about his native place of birth, bears certain resemblances to the songs of Milarepa

Dhondup Gyal's Literary Style

- Highly influenced by Indian literary styles and use of imagery, but re-invented in the modern Tibetan context
- Preference for free verse
- Considerable animal, celestial, river, flower, and cloud imagery
- Secular themes including love, householder life—several of his short stories center around female characters
- Critique of institution of arranged marriage shows influence from Chinese literature at the time

Dhondup Gyal's “Waterfall of Youth” and Story of Rāmaṇa

*In what ways do Dhondup Gyal's writings
challenge the boundaries of Tibetan poetry?*

- How does the “Waterfall of Youth” exemplify this? What boundaries does it challenge specifically? What does it reveal about the changing of Tibetan views towards poetry?
- Is Dhondup's *Story of Rāmaṇa* a ‘Tibetan’ piece of literature?

How would you differentiate Gendun Chopel's writings from Dhondup Gyal's?

In what ways do both authors challenge previous conceptions of 'Tibetan' knowledge and 'Tibetan' literature? In what ways can their aims and strategies be seen to align?

In what ways might the authors be seen to have different aims and strategies?

Trajectory of Modern Tibetan Literature

- Away from the formal and topical ‘restrictions’ of Indian literary conventions
- Emphasis on free verse poetry (aided by Dhondup Gyal)
- Emergence of new genres (novels, travelogues, free-verse poetry, etc.)
- Move towards secular topics and themes
- Increased openness to criticism of social, political, and religious political institutions
- Greater influence from Chinese, Mongolian, and more generally, World Literatures

In the modern context what makes Tibetan literature ‘Tibetan’?

Given the features of Tibetan literature we’ve discussed so far over the quarter, can we speak of features that are uniquely ‘Tibetan’ in Tibetan literature?

Given the readings so far, how would you define ‘Tibetan’ Literature?

Recall from week 1:

How define boundaries of “Tibetan”?

- Geographical
- Linguistic
- Political
- “Literary”
- Religious
- Cultural
- Ethnicity/Identity

Next week:

Jamyang Norbu's
*The Mandala of
Sherlock Holmes*

