

Intersecting Nations, Diverging Discourses:

The Fraught Encounter of Chinese and Tibetan Literatures in the Modern Era

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
under the Executive Committee
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2020

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Abstract

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Literatures in the Modern Era

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This is a two-pronged study of how the Chinese and Tibetan literary traditions have become intertwined in the modern era. Setting out from the contention that the study of minority literatures in China must be fundamentally multilingual in its approach, this dissertation investigates how Tibetans were written into Chinese literature, and how Tibetans themselves adopted and adapted Chinese literary discourses to their own ends. It begins with Lu Xun and the formative literary conceptions of nation in the late Qing and Republican periods – a time when the Tibetan subject was fundamentally absent from modern Chinese literature – and then moves to the 1980s, when Tibet and Tibetans belatedly, and contentiously, became valid subject matter for Han Chinese writers. The second aspect of the project situates modern Tibetan-language literature, which arose from the 1980s onwards, within the literary and intellectual context of modern China. I read Döndrup Gyel, modern Tibetan literature’s “father figure,” as working within unmistakably Lu Xun-ian paradigms, I consider the contradictions that arose when Tsering Döndrup’s short story “Ralo” was interpreted as a Tibetan equivalent of “The True Story of Ah Q,” and I analyze the rise of a “Tibetan May Fourth Movement” in the 2000s, which I argue presented a selective reading of modern China’s intellectual history. Throughout, I focus on the intersections and divergences at play and examine the ways in which these

texts navigate complex and conflicting discourses of nationalism, statism, and colonialism. The conclusions of this research point us toward significant theoretical reconceptualizations of literary practices in the People's Republic of China, which now include not only a vast body of Chinese-language writing on minority peoples, but also numerous minority-language literatures and distinct "national" literary traditions.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Nation, State, and Ethnicity at the Dawn of Modern Chinese Literature	20
1.1 Liang Qichao, National Character, and the Multi-Ethnic State.....	22
1.2 Zhang Taiyan’s Han Nation-State	28
1.3 Lu Xun and Zhang Taiyan.....	37
1.4 Lu Xun and Zou Rong	48
1.5 Nation and State in Lu Xun’s Writing.....	52
1.6 Lu Xun’s Writing on Non-Han Ethnicities	61
1.7 The Literary/Political Divide.....	66
1.8 Conclusion.....	72
Chapter 2: Döndrup Gyel and the Origins of Tibetan Literary Nationalism in Modern China	75
2.1 Awakening the Slumbering Nation	77
2.2 A Nation in Decline.....	82
2.3 Youth, Innovation, and Progress	91
2.4 Nation as History and Race	99
2.5 From Individual Pride to National Pride	107
2.6 Döndrup Gyel in Beijing	112
2.7 Chinese Nation, Tibetan Nation, Chinese State	119
2.8 Canonizing Tibetan Nationalism.....	126

2.9 Conclusion.....	130
Chapter 3: Writing Tibetans into China: Internal Orientalism and Literary State-Building in the Work of Ma Jian.....	134
3.1 The Culture of “Drifting” and Ma Jian’s Travel to Tibet.....	142
3.2 Ethnic Marking and Literary State-Building.....	146
3.3 Internal Orientalism and Literature about Tibet.....	153
3.4 Reconciling the Other with the Self.....	165
3.5 Tibetan Literatures in Modern China.....	175
3.6 Conclusion.....	186
Chapter 4: Ralo, Ah Q, and the Problem of Tibetan National Character.....	188
4.1 Ralo, Ah Q, and the Tibetan National Character.....	192
4.2 The Origins of Tibetan National Character.....	198
4.3 Rewriting National Character.....	208
4.4 Ralo the Proletarian.....	215
4.5 Rewriting the Nation(s).....	225
4.6 Conclusion.....	231
Chapter 5: Zhokdung and the Tibetan May Fourth Movement.....	233
5.1 The Tibetan Essay.....	235
5.2 Döndrup Gyel, Nationalism, and Individualism.....	239
5.3 Buddhism and Tradition.....	246
5.4 Backwardness and Civilizational Ranking.....	261
5.5 Science and Democracy.....	266
5.6 Translation and the Role of the Intellectual.....	271

5.7 “The Saffron Revolution” and the End of the Essay Movement.....	282
5.8 Conclusion.....	295
Conclusion.....	298
Bibliography.....	305

List of Illustrations

P. 92

- Figure 1: The first page of “Waterfall of Youth,” from its original publication in *Light Rain* in 1983

P. 199

- Figure 2: Illustration of Ralo from the story’s original publication in *Light Rain* (Tshe ring don grub 1991).

P. 200

- Figure 3: Illustration of Ralo from the story’s original publication in *Light Rain* (Tshe ring don grub 1991).
- Figure 4: Woodcut rendition of Ah Q by Zhao Yannian (Zhao 2010).

P. 201

- Figure 5: Ink drawing of Ah Q by Fan Zeng (Lu Xun 2017).

Introduction

The phenomenon of modern literary writing on the subject of Tibet is multi-faceted. When we discuss some notion of “Tibetan” literature, we might be talking about, among other things, writing in the Tibetan language from within the People’s Republic of China (PRC) or from exile, writing by Tibetans in and outside of China in any language (such as Chinese or English), or writing by non-Tibetans on the subject of Tibet (in several languages). This dissertation concerns itself with two of these, both in the context of modern China: Tibetan-language literature by Tibetans and Chinese-language literature about Tibet by Han writers. It is a study that deals with various beginnings: the beginning of modern Chinese literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Tibet and Tibetans were far from the minds of Chinese authors; the 1980s, when Tibetans first became a part of Chinese literary texts in a significant way; and the beginnings of modern Tibetan literature, which largely formed under the context of Chinese rule and drew extensively from modern Chinese literary and intellectual discourses. It is a study, from two perspectives, of the ways in which two distinct literary traditions became intertwined in the modern era.

In terms of Chinese literature, writing that focuses exclusively or primarily on “minority”¹ peoples and regions is by and large a very recent development. In the modern literature of the pre-PRC era, we may find mentions of the non-Han peoples who were subjects of the Qing empire and who would later be made into citizens of the Chinese state by the People’s Republic. But, where it is to be found, any such attention to non-Han peoples is likely to be cursory. There is little

¹ It should be kept in mind that the idea of the “minority” – non-Han ethnicities in the state of China – is frequently an anachronism, since the peoples it refers to were only made into minorities when formally designated as such after their incorporation into the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

evidence that Han writers in the first half of the twentieth century spent significant time in “minority” areas or produced substantive literary writings on “minority” peoples and their cultures. The non-Han subject was, in essence, absent from modern Chinese literature in its initial decades.

After the founding of the People’s Republic, a Chinese state was formed that exerted control over border regions from Yunnan, Tibet, and Xinjiang through to the non-Han regions of the northeast abutting Mongolia and Russia. Literary writing that reflected this new reality began to emerge, but it was slow in doing so. For many of these regions, it was not until the 1980s that there appeared substantial bodies of Han-authored Chinese literature that situated these places and peoples as part of the modern Chinese state. Whether it was about Tibetans or other minorities, this was a new kind of “Chinese literature” that focused on entirely new subjects and settings.

At the same time, a second and very much related development was underway: for the first time, many of the peoples now defined as “minority nationalities” (*shaoshuminzu* 少数民族) were producing writing classed as “minority literature” (*shaoshuminzu wenxue* 少数民族文学) by virtue of their having been (forcibly, in many cases) turned into Chinese citizens. Before the PRC, there were no Tibetan writers who could be described as working under some form of “Chinese” state literary rubric; nor, to the best of my knowledge, were there Uyghur writers who were creating literature that could in any way be designated as belonging to a category of literary production in “China.” These are just two examples – the same is surely true of many more present-day “minority nationalities.” This is an overview painted in broad strokes, but it points us towards a major issue in the study of Chinese literature that has yet to be fully reckoned with: in the space of the last one hundred years, what it means to write literature in the context of modern China has undergone a sea change from the perspective of both Han and non-Han writing.

The question of minority writing has, generally speaking, received much less attention in the field of modern Chinese literature than other issues (gender, class, nation, the dichotomies of tradition/modernity, urban/rural, popular/canon, to name a few). Other disciplines have focused extensively on issues of ethnicity and how they can challenge existing conceptions of Chinese culture and society. The field of “New Qing History” has radically altered our understanding of the Qing empire by rejecting the traditional narrative of Manchu “Sinicization” and instead focusing on the many ways in which the Manchus maintained their cultural distinctiveness while constructing a vast empire that ruled, in multiple languages, over multiple peoples and cultures (Crossley 1999; Elliott 2001; Rhoads 2000). Historians have also made major contributions when it comes to studying the complex questions of concepts of nation and ethnicity in the formation of subsequent modern Chinese states (Leibold 2007; Tuttle 2005; Lin 2006; Lin 2011; Mullaney 2011). Another field that has been particularly rich in the theoretical consideration of ethnicity and non-Han cultures in modern China is anthropology. Numerous anthropological studies have broken paths for new scholarship both in that field and beyond (Litzinger 2000; Mueggler 2001; Schein 2000; Gladney 1994; Bulag 2002). This dissertation does not always draw directly from these sources, but it takes inspiration from them in its effort to advance the study of minority literatures in the field of modern Chinese literature.

While minority writing and issues of ethnicity have not occupied a central role in the study of Chinese literature, there is by no means an absence of scholarship on these topics. In recent years, the subfield of Sinophone studies has emerged as the most prominent vehicle through which “minority” and “ethnic” issues in Chinese literature can be approached. Sinophone studies also draws upon the “ethnic turn in Chinese studies” signaled by New Qing History (Shih 2013: 1) and “takes as its objects of study *the Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside China as well*

as ethnic minority communities and cultures within China where Mandarin is adopted or imposed” (11). As this quote indicates, the study of China’s minority literatures is central to the Sinophone mission. However, when we interrogate the assumptions of the Sinophone and the basis on which it stakes a claim to the study of minority literatures in China, a number of serious issues begin to emerge.

Firstly, there is the problem of colonialism. Shih (2013) characterizes Chinese rule over non-Han regions and peoples as “continental colonialism,” a legacy of Qing territorial control that extended into the founding of the modern Chinese state, and therefore a “major area” of Sinophone studies is “the study of colonized peoples and their cultures – now national minority peoples or, in the official lingo, ‘minority nationalities’ – within the nation-state of China” (3). The historical and political model of colonialism is certainly relevant to the Tibetan context, and the theoretical models of postcolonialism are equally so, as we will see in my discussion of both Ma Jian and Zhokdung. However, none of these frameworks can be unproblematically transferred to the Tibetan (or minority) context. We encounter significant issues when the theoretical differences between dynastic empire and the modern state are glossed over, and the direct equating of Chinese rule in Tibet and other minority areas with colonialism is inadequate when it comes to comprehending and interpreting the complex dynamics at play.

We cannot so lightly dismiss the fact that China reconceived of itself and restructured itself as a modern state in which minority peoples intrinsically belonged as (theoretically) equal citizens. To begin with, the present Chinese government would obviously vehemently refute the label of colonialism, and very few Han Chinese citizens would be liable to describe their relationship with minority peoples as such. As I argue in Chapter Three, Han Chinese authors who wrote about Tibet in the 1980s did so with the explicit understanding that they were writing about fellow citizens of

Zhongguo 中国 in a region that was unambiguously “Chinese” territory. While they most certainly borrowed colonial representational practices of exoticizing and othering, essentially none of these writers would have thought of themselves as “colonizers” or their literary subjects as “colonized.” Regardless of whether they were critics or supporters, British writers – Forster, Kipling, Orwell – would not have hesitated to identify the nature of British rule in India as colonialism. Moreover, we cannot always assume that minority peoples would necessarily identify their situation in this way, either. Would the writer Zhaxi Dawa 扎西达娃, for instance, who is included under the Sinophone rubric, consider himself “colonized”?

The demands of nationalism also create serious complications when it comes to analyzing literary texts by Tibetans (whether in Tibetan or Chinese) according to an unproblematized colonial model. The interpretive framework of colonialism leads to the assertion that Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang “are not yet postcolonial, hence their cultural and political projects tend to be centered on anticolonial or decolonial efforts, similar to those of the indigenous peoples in the United States” (Shih 2013: 12). Again, a comparison with a colonial situation such as India’s is informative. Han Chinese authors in Tibet, unlike British colonial authors in India, would almost never describe themselves as colonists. Tibetan writers, meanwhile, are simply not *able* to openly describe themselves as colonized or to articulate any openly “anticolonial” positions in modern China (at least not without facing severe repercussions), because they are considered by the state to be Chinese citizens, or *Zhongguoren* 中国人, and any declaration to the contrary is not politically permissible. Most Tibetan writers in modern China do not, cannot, produce poetry, literature, or other writing that we could describe as anticolonial or decolonial in any obvious sense. Nor can we assume such a stance is present even where it is not articulated. Döndrup Gyel, the subject of Chapter Two, is the most celebrated writer in modern Tibet and was also the instigator

of an influential discourse of Tibetan nationalism, but, as we shall see, he was often a vocal supporter of the Chinese state.

The drive to give greater representation to minority literatures and the struggles they face in modern China is extremely laudable, but doing so through the reductive theoretical premises of colonized peoples writing anticolonial literatures is an unproductive starting point. This is a predetermined stance that renders any interpretation of a minority literary text a foregone conclusion, hindering our ability to engage with the works of literature that minority writers are actually producing, many of which do not conform so easily to the “colonial” framework assumed by Sinophone studies. Issues of colonialism and the theoretical models of postcolonialism do play a major role in this dissertation, but we must deal with these issues cautiously, always paying close attention to how colonial models are put to the ends of nation- and state-building in the Chinese context, and how Tibetan writers navigate in between these discourses of colonialism and nationalism.

But the most problematic aspect of Sinophone studies comes with the question of language, its principal organizing criterion:

Sinophone culture was and is not only produced by the Hua people but also by people of various ethnicities, and thus it is defined not by ethnicity (though ethnicity and language sometimes correspond) but by language. (7)

The language(s) it refers to are Sinitic, hence Sinophone studies involves “many languages and Sinophone literature is itself a multilingual literature” (9). This includes Tibetans and other minorities, who “speak multiple languages” and are Sinophone in that they “speak and write in Mandarin, a willingly acquired or forcefully imposed language” (11-12). Of course, Tibetans and other minorities in China not only speak multiple languages, they possess multiple writing systems. But since the Sinophone focuses solely on literature written in Chinese characters, these multiple

non-Sinitic languages and writings systems can only enter into the picture insofar as they might have an effect on the Chinese language:

When the spoken Sinitic languages are rendered in written form, the standard script is most often used, and this standard script is shared by all Sinophone communities [...] In the case of Sinophone minority literature in China, words from various minority languages such as Tibetan, Mongolian, Thai, or Arabic appear frequently either transliterated or translated, heterogenizing the standard script to a significant extent. [...] The Sinophone is therefore not only of many sounds (polyphonic) but also of multiple orthographies (polyscriptic). (10)

The phenomenon of “Tibetanizing” Chinese has been well documented by Maconi (2002), but no matter how much the language might be “Tibetanized,” the literature described in the above quotation is one written exclusively in Chinese characters. It is not “polyscriptic,” but, by definition, “monoscriptic.”

Given Sinophone studies’ goal of broadening the field of modern Chinese literature to include non-Han peoples and the critical stance inherent in its definition of “continental colonialism,” it is curious, to say the least, that its embrace of minority literatures is limited to those written in Chinese, the language of the “colonizer.” Modern China is home to numerous non-Sinitic languages that are written in several different scripts and, furthermore, a wealth of modern literary texts written in these scripts. In present day China there are, to name a few, literatures in Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur, and Yi (Nuosu). Their literatures exist, with differing levels of tension, alongside Chinese-language equivalents, but in each case, the question of preserving and developing a “mother-tongue” literature in the face of increasing pressure from Chinese has proved to be of the utmost significance.

How Tibetan writing in Chinese ought to be classified and how far it can claim to represent a kind of “Tibetan literature” are questions that have been highly controversial in the Tibetan cultural world. From the 1980s, when Tibetan-language writing began to flourish, through to the

present day, there have been extensive debates over these issues. The majority of intellectuals who received a Tibetan-medium education rejected the idea that Chinese texts could ever be considered “Tibetan literature,” and some writers have even displayed open hostility towards their “Sinophone” counterparts (Hartley 2003: 254-275; Kyabchen Dedrol 2009; Maconi 2008; Schiaffini 2004). Regardless of where one might stand on such debates, it is clear that structurally excluding Tibetan and other minority language literatures from a subfield that purports to offer greater representation to minority writing is deeply problematic, and that limiting the study of minority literatures in China to those written in Chinese further marginalizes already marginalized minority language literatures. It is certainly legitimate for Sinophone studies to stake a claim to specific forms of Tibetan literature in modern China, but it will always be necessarily limited in its ability to speak for Tibetan literary practices by its restrictive self-imposed linguistic criteria. While the phenomenon of Tibetan writing in Chinese is as equally deserving of attention as any other type of literature, the study of Tibetan literature in China as a whole must, self-evidently, take into account Tibetan-language writing. Fundamentally, the study of minority literatures in modern China must be multilingual in its approach.

This is the approach taken by this dissertation in its examination of the status of Tibetan literature in modern China. This is a two-pronged study of how two largely separate literary traditions became enmeshed in a relatively short space of time. In order to investigate the contemporary imbrication of the Chinese and Tibetan literary traditions, I work across the Chinese and Tibetan languages to investigate firstly the absorption of Tibet and Tibetans into Chinese-language literature as subject matter, and secondly the ways in which modern Tibetan-language literature has adopted and adapted Chinese literary paradigms. The research presented here asks about the important perspectives that modern Tibetan-language writing, which draws on and

reworks core aspects of modern Chinese literary discourse, can offer us as it writes back to the Chinese center. At the same time, it poses the question of how literature about Tibet, now ubiquitous in Chinese, can be reconciled with a literary tradition that has largely been thought of in exclusive ethno-national and linguistic terms.

Throughout this dissertation, there is an unavoidable problem of language and translation that it is necessary to comment on here at the outset. Readers will frequently encounter terms here such as “China,” “Chinese,” “Tibet,” and “Tibetan” – all are highly problematic. Lydia Liu (2004) has amply demonstrated the web of translingual encounters and histories of colonial conquest that lie behind terms such as “China,” *Zhongguo*, and the Japanese “Shina.” As she observes, “the English terms ‘China’ and ‘the Chinese’ do not translate the indigenous terms *hua*, *xia*, *han*, or even *zhongguo* now or at any given point in history” (80). Arif Dirlik (2019) picks up on the work of Liu and others in an informative essay on this problem. Dirlik reiterates the Qing insistence that their state was called *Da Qing Guo* 大清国 (“the Great Qing State”), and that *Zhongguo* only became *Zhongguo* in the late 19th century as a result of Western pressure to provide an equivalent of “China.” He goes on to highlight the many overlapping meanings that are now inherent in the English term “China”:

The term refers variously to the region (geography), the state ruling the region (politics), and the civilization occupying it (society and culture), which in their bundling abolish the spatial, temporal, and social complexity of the region. Similarly, “Chinese” as either noun or predicate suggests demographic and cultural homogeneity among the inhabitants of the region, their politics, society, language, culture, and religion. It refers sometimes to all who dwell in the region or hail from it, and at other times to a particular ethnic group, as in “Chinese” and “Tibetans,” both of whom are technically parts of one nation called “China” and, therefore, “Chinese” in a political sense. The term is identified tacitly in most usage with the majority Han, who themselves are homogenized in the process in the erasure of significant intra-Han local differences that have all the marks of ethnic difference. (123-124)

Given this wide range of possible referents, there is clearly little hope for achieving discursive precision when resorting to the English terms “China” and “Chinese.” In the present context, this problem is further compounded when we discuss China/Chinese and Tibet/Tibetan, terms that all, as Dirlik points out, suggest not only a deeply misleading homogeneity but also variously indicate languages, cultures, ethnicities, political states (existing or aspired to), and so on.

In scholarly studies of Tibet-related subjects, it is not uncommon to encounter clarifications as to what the author means by the term “Tibet.” This could include, for example, the distinction between the present-day province of the Tibet Autonomous Region (*Xizang* 西藏 in Chinese) and a ‘greater Tibet’ that includes the regions of Kham and Amdo (in present-day Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces). Ethnic/cultural discussions of “Tibetan” subjects could likewise spread across the current countries of the Himalayas (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan) and also into the diaspora. In the Tibetan language, the operative reference point here is often the term *bod*. Further research on the historical relationship between “Tibet” and *bod* would be highly enlightening and may even uncover dynamics similar to those revealed by Dirlik and Liu for *Zhongguo/China*. Only in recent history has the term *bod* extended in meaning beyond its traditional designation of certain geographic regions in the present-day Tibet Autonomous Region, what is often called in English “central Tibet.” Likewise, *bod pa* and the neologism *bod mi* (“people/person from *bod*”) are only now in the process of becoming terms that refer universally to all ethnically or culturally “Tibetan” people (see Tuttle 2010 and Shakya 1993). This is especially pertinent in this dissertation, since the major writers discussed (Döndrup Gyel, Tsering Döndrup, Zhokdung) are all from the eastern region of Amdo, often the heartland of modern Tibetan literary activity. They all write in the Tibetan script, but they are not from the region historically referred to as *bod*, and nor are they even all “ethnically Tibetan,” since Tsering

Döndrup is of Mongol ethnicity. In Chinese terms, all three write in *Zangwen* 藏文, but not all are *Zangzu* 藏族, and none are from *Xizang*. In English, however, they are nevertheless all understood to be “Tibetan” writers, in one sense or many. In short, the English terms “Tibet” and “Tibetan” take us down the same rabbit holes of translational politics as “China/Chinese,” with many of the same missing referents and false equivalents.

The problematic nature of “China/Chinese” and “Tibet/Tibetan” is a limitation of the English language for which there are no easy solutions. As Dirlik (2019) acknowledges, it would likely be “unreasonable to expect that they be placed in quotation marks in writing to indicate their ambiguity, and even less reasonable to qualify their use in everyday speech with irksome gestures of quotation” (142). My use of these terms is by no means free of the issues sketched out here. The “Chinese” and “Tibetan” of the dissertation’s subtitle, for instance, could, in a strict sense, be considered as referring to literatures written in the Chinese and Tibetan scripts. Clearly, though, these signifiers carry a range of associations beyond this that include ethnic groups, nations, states, and cultures. I have endeavored to maintain clarity in the moments when it is most called for through reference to the relevant terms in the original languages (though as often as not, those terms are also plagued by semantic confusion). This dissertation seeks to problematize many of our understandings of these terms, but it must also accept the linguistic limitations that are necessarily present when seeking to provide a readable narrative about literary and intellectual questions in “China” and “Tibet.” Consistently avoiding the generalized or non-qualified use of these English terms would be impractical, if not impossible. They are therefore present here in their many forms, and it is only hoped that the reader may bear in mind the complex politics of translation and the difficulties inherent in navigating around these issues with the terminology that is available to us in English.

I begin in Chapter One with an investigation of the place of non-Han “minorities” in the work of Lu Xun 鲁迅 and in early modern Chinese nationalist discourse more broadly. As the fulcrum for many of modern China’s most enduring literary concerns, the work of Lu Xun is a fruitful site on which to investigate the issue of modern Chinese literature’s relationship to non-Han peoples. I re-examine Lu Xun’s intellectual background and his work from the perspective of ethnicity, arguing that not only were non-Han ethnicities not a concern in his writing, they were actively omitted from his considerations of national issues. In contrast to the state-building politics of the late Qing and Republican eras, which sought ideological and practical means by which non-Han peoples could be included in a new conception of the Chinese state, the mainstream of literary writing did not engage with ethnically diverse conceptions of the nation and the state. Instead, the treatment of “national” issues in literature was largely limited to the issues facing a particular community – the Han. Even when these issues were associated with a state called *Zhongguo*, literary writers displayed little desire to consider the multi-ethnic nature of *Zhongguo* as a serious problem for discussion.

To all intents and purposes, this situation persisted largely unchanged for decades. Before the founding of the PRC, minority peoples were being imagined into the state in a variety of ways. These included the fields of ethnology and folkloristics (Litzinger 2000; Liu 2012), the writings of Han “explorers” (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014), and the politico-religious exchanges between Republican leaders and Tibetan Buddhists (Tuttle 2005). These endeavors represent a patchwork of different means by which Tibetans and other minorities were being written into a new conception of the Chinese state, and yet, in the realm of creative writing, Tibetans continued to be conspicuous by their absence. After China exerted complete military and political control over Tibet under Mao Zedong 毛泽东, Chinese poetry by Tibetan authors extolling the new state began

to appear in the 1950s and '60s (Yangdon Dhondup 2008), but literary works on the subject of Tibet by Han authors remained a relative rarity. In the early years of the PRC, there were examples of writing by soldiers of the People's Liberation Army who had been involved in the military campaigns to bring Tibet under Chinese rule (Ma 1998: 72-74). However, these works were few and far between, and do not appear to have had any major impact on the Chinese literary world at large. Moreover, there was little development or continuation from these seeds, as Han writing on Tibet virtually ceased due to the political turmoil in Tibet from the uprisings of 1959 through to the end of the Cultural Revolution (Ma 1998: 74).

From the late 1970s onward, this situation changed drastically. Scores of Han writers began travelling to Tibetan regions and producing literary works about their experiences, giving birth to a new branch of Chinese literature about Tibet: *Xizang wenxue* 西藏文学. Chapter Three considers this moment in time when Tibet was becoming a part of Chinese literature in a significant way. I examine the work of Ma Jian 马建, one of the authors of *Xizang wenxue*. In Ma's work, we now see a literary reflection of the processes that had been underway in other areas for decades, namely the writing of Tibetans into the Chinese state structure. Ma's writing explicitly marks Tibetans in this way as a separate ethnicity (*minzu* 民族) that nevertheless shares equal belonging to a new, multi-ethnic concept of Chinese statehood. But at the same time, Ma's fiction was notorious for its exotic, sexualized, and deeply denigrating portrayals of Tibetan people. Ma's work was not necessarily an outlier; numerous Chinese texts about Tibet have, to differing extents, engaged in similar practices, a representational regime that has been termed "internal Orientalism" or "Oriental Orientalism" (Schein 1997; Gladney 1994). As I argue in this chapter, this means that we are faced with the paradoxical phenomenon of Tibetans becoming part of the Chinese literary realm precisely through a process of othering.

The second aspect of this project considers the Sino-Tibetan encounter from the Tibetan perspective and examines how Tibetan writers and intellectuals borrowed from Chinese literary discourse in the formation of their own modern literature. During the initial period of modern Chinese literature discussed in Chapter One, Tibet was not a major concern for Chinese writers, and at the same time, there seems to be little or no evidence that there were any Tibetans interested in modern Chinese literary trends. In the modern era, there were contacts between Tibetan Buddhists and Republican leaders (Tuttle 2005) and there were Tibetan Buddhists writing about economic and political developments in China (*Sources* 2013: 711-714), but in the realm of literature, there is still nothing to suggest that Chinese writing was playing any role in Tibetan cultural and intellectual development. Gendün Chöphel (Dge 'dun chos 'phel),² Tibet's trailblazing modernist who was active in the first half of the 20th century, traveled widely in India and Sri Lanka, forging contacts with Indian communists, penning critiques of British colonialism, and experimenting with new directions in art and poetry. Yet his work shows few signs of extensive engagement with the cultural developments that were under way in China at the same time.

Even after Tibet's incorporation into the PRC, this situation, like Chinese writing about Tibet, did not change immediately. Under the initial decades of PRC rule, there were some examples of Tibetan political praise poetry that we could certainly characterize as an engagement with the new social and cultural context of China. Much like the early examples of Han Chinese writing on Tibet, however, these compositions "could be bluntly characterized as uninspired," as Hartley (2008: 14) phrases it, and also like their Chinese equivalents, they were few in number and do not appear to have had a lasting impact on the Tibetan literary world. Tibetan-language cultural production during these years continued to be defined by a sense of absence:

² There are several translations of Gendün Chöpel's work available in English (Dge 'dun chos 'phel 2009; 2014; 2018) as well as a number of major studies of his life and work (see, for instance, Stoddard 1985 and Lopez 2006).

Only one Tibetan attended the First Minority Literature Conference in Beijing in 1956, and he was not a literary writer. Danzhu Angben (Tib. Dondrup Wangbum; 2001) identifies two “regrettable lacunae” (Ch. *quehan*) during this period: the near-absence of Tibetan novels, plays, and essays; and of literature written in Tibetan. (Hartley 2008: 14)

The timelines for the upsurge in Han Chinese writing on Tibet and what we now call modern Tibetan literature were very similar. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, there was an explosion of Tibetan-language writing centered around new literary journals, most notably the pioneering publications *Tibetan Art and Literature* (*Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal*), founded in Lhasa in 1980, and *Light Rain* (*Sbrang char*), founded in Xining in 1981.³ Though recent scholarship has questioned the extent to which this period constitutes a radical break with preexisting Tibetan literary tradition (Lama Jabb 2015), the 1980s undoubtedly witnessed a surge of Tibetan writing that was self-consciously modern in one way or another, particularly in formal terms – short fiction, novels, and free-verse poetry all being significant innovations.

All of these developments came in the context of Tibetan-language literature’s forced inclusion into the Chinese literary system, a phenomenon unprecedented in the history of Tibetan letters. Before long, some Tibetan critics and writers were actively demanding recognition within this system. Hartley (2003) cites a 1989 article by Chödrak (Chos grags), in which the author points out that literary works by other ethnicities, such as Lao She’s 老舍 *Camel Xiangzi* (*Luotuo xiangzi* 骆驼祥子), are still considered to be “Chinese literature.” He goes on to protest the exclusion of minority language literatures from Chinese anthologies, concluding that “It wouldn’t be wrong to assert that the literature of China equals Han literature” (263). Another scholar, Gawa Pasang (Dga’ ba pa sangs), made similar observations in 1988:

³ Shakya (2008) and Hartley & Schiaffini-Vedani (2008) both provide helpful introductions to this initial phase of modern Tibetan literature.

[Gawa Pasang] minced no words in his criticism of You Guo'en et. al (1979)'s *China's Literary History* and Huang Xiuji's *A Brief History of Modern Literature in China*. Neither of these collections, protests [Gawa Pasang], includes any mention of literature in the minority languages of China: “One would think that the term ‘China’ refers solely to the Han Nationality. If China really consists of more than fifty nationalities, then the literature of its minorities with written languages should be included in a literary history of China.” (Hartley 2003: 245)

Though the author was making these comments in the context of offering distinct Chinese and Tibetan literary periodizations, it is impossible to imagine such an objection coming from a Tibetan writer in the pre-PRC period.

But Tibetan literature did not simply become a de facto part of the Chinese literary world by virtue of Tibetans’ inclusion in the new Chinese state; Tibetan writers actively revived and reworked many of the discourses that were at the heart of early modern Chinese writing. The most renowned of modern Tibetan authors, now enshrined as a type of ‘founding figure’ of modern Tibetan literature, is Döndrup Gyel (Don grub rgyal). Chapter Two reads Döndrup Gyel’s work as a project of constructing a self-consciously national literature. What is particularly remarkable, however, is that this project was undertaken according to the parameters of early modern Chinese literary and intellectual currents – in other words, according to the same discourses discussed in Chapter One that Tibetans played no part in. Döndrup Gyel envisaged the Tibetan nation much as the intellectuals of the late Qing and Republican eras envisaged China. That is, they were a nation in crisis, held back by conservative cultural structures that were threatening their very survival in a social Darwinist world order, and the solution to this crisis was a far-reaching social and cultural revolution. Döndrup Gyel’s work closely mirrors many of the most prominent themes of modern Chinese literature in its early phase, directing its critiques against a broad notion of cultural “backwardness” and advocating a program of national salvation through rational, scientific, humanistic modernism that would reshape and refit Tibetan traditions for modern applications.

Yet, at the same time, Döndrup Gyel was resurrecting this discourse in the context of a Chinese state which now included this Tibetan nation. His nationalist discourse was thus one of the *mirik* (*mi rigs*) or the *minzu*, a national cultural crisis occurring within the geopolitical boundaries of modern China but limited solely to the Tibetan people.

Chapter Four examines the debate surrounding Tsering Döndrup's (Tshe ring don grub) "Ralo" (*Ra lo*), a short story from 1991 that was interpreted as a Tibetan equivalent of Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q" (*A Q zhengzhuan* 阿 Q 正传). Through a number of articles penned by Tibetan scholars and critics, the character of Ralo was constructed as a representative of the Tibetan "national character," a direct parallel of the discourse discussed in Chapter One that played such a major role in the formative years of modern Chinese literature. How did Tibetans make the template of *guominxing* 国民性 relevant to their own circumstances? And what implications does this reading have, both for the place of Tibetan literature in modern China and for the original concept of Chinese national character itself? In order for this concept to be both culturally relevant and politically safe for Tibetans, it had to be edited in a number of ways. Buddhism was enlisted to play the role of Confucianism, a philosophical system with no historical connections to Tibetan civilization, and, most notably, any notion of "state" (the *guo* of *guominxing*) had to be excised from the Tibetan version, which became instead the "national" character solely of the Tibetans as an ethnicity or *minzu*. I argue that the construction of a Tibetan equivalent of national character highlights the assumptions of the original *guominxing* debate; namely, that it was applicable to the Han alone, and thus the "Chinese national character" no longer covered all the "nations" included in the modern Chinese state. Through this discourse, critics brought modern Tibetan literature under the interpretive frameworks of its Chinese counterpart, but in so doing, they simultaneously revealed Tibet's fundamental disconnection from modern Chinese literary history.

I further my investigation into the overlaps between modern Chinese and Tibetan literary-intellectual discourse in Chapter Five, which looks at the work of a group of radical intellectuals who launched a “Tibetan May Fourth Movement” in the early 2000s. These writers built on Döndrup Gyel’s pioneering nationalism, advancing his work much further by unleashing an all-out attack on Tibetan religion and traditional culture. Their preferred medium was the essay, and their intellectual agenda was explicitly inspired by May Fourth radicalism. Alongside their critiques of Tibetan traditions, they insisted upon the necessity of a range of social and cultural modernizations, all to be spearheaded by avant-garde secular intellectuals. At its peak, however, this movement took an unexpected turn prompted by the sudden outbreak of protests across Tibetan regions in 2008. Zhokdung (Zhogs dung), the leading figure of the group, published a sensational evaluation of the uprising, interpreting it as a Tibetan nationalist awakening of the sort he and his cohort had long been advocating. Their nationalist discourse, overtly inspired by and shaped by Chinese precedent, had now been directed against the Chinese state itself. In this way, a certain conclusion to the particular strain of literary and intellectual developments described in this dissertation was reached, as the dormant tensions inherent in the process of Tibetan literary culture integrating with its Chinese counterpart had been suddenly and spectacularly exposed.

Chinese- and Tibetan-language literatures have certainly crossed paths in the modern era, but more often than not, they have talked past one another. May Fourth literary discourse had no real connection with Tibet, yet it has influenced Tibetan writing enormously. There are now almost countless Han-authored literary texts about Tibet, but writers of Tibetan-language literature generally have little interest in them. And despite the role Chinese literary discourse has played in shaping Tibetan-language literature, Chinese writers, intellectuals, and the reading public are largely unaware of its existence. These two worlds overlap in many significant ways, but rarely

are they in direct conversation with one another. Perhaps their most prominent shared trait is that each of these phenomena has theoretically reshaped and redefined the scope of literature in modern China. As long as Tibet remains a part of the Chinese state, Chinese literature about Tibet and Tibetans will continue to be produced, and the currents of Chinese literary and intellectual discourse will continue to have some bearing on literature written in Tibetan. Whether or not these two forms of engagement will ever develop into a full and meaningful exchange can only remain to be seen.

Chapter 1: Nation, State, and Ethnicity at the Dawn of Modern

Chinese Literature

It is no revelation to state that Lu Xun's 鲁迅 writings deal with issues of Chinese cultural history that had little or nothing to do with the cultures of non-Han peoples in China. But how can we square this with the persistent characterization of his works as being centrally concerned with something called "China" and something called "national character," when China was being envisaged (and became) a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic state? Leo Ou-fan Lee begins his landmark study of Lu Xun with the following line: "Ever since his death in 1936, Lu Xun has been accorded the status of national hero; no other Chinese writer, past or present, has been so deified by an entire nation" (Lee 1987: 3). It is not clear if he is referring here to the *minzu* 民族 nation – the ethnic group now called the Han 汉 – or some conception of *Zhongguo* 中国. If the latter, then we are already in problematic territory, as *Zhongguo* is a state, and a state now officially comprised of fifty-six distinct ethnicities or "nationalities," groups that would be called "nations" by many theorists of nationalism. But we can only infer that it is solely to the Han that Lee refers when he says "nation," not any of the other fifty-five *minzu*.

Literature was one of the primary media through which the nascent Chinese nation was being discussed and imagined in early modern China, but we cannot assume that ideas of nation in the work of a writer like Lu Xun represent a consensus on what that nation signifies, nor that his work unproblematically reflects mainstream intellectual or political discourse of the time. His discussion of nation was in fact sharply at odds with contemporary intellectual and political imaginings of nation and state, which were consistently engaged in attempts to rationalize the Chinese state as a multi-ethnic entity. Theorists of nations and nationalism have been extremely

careful in treading the fine lines between nation and state, something that has largely been overlooked in discussions of nation in scholarship on Chinese literature. This is despite that fact that, in the late Qing, Chinese intellectuals were enormously invested in considering the different meanings of concepts such as race, statism (*guojia zhuyi* 国家主义), and (ethno-) nationalism (*minzu zhuyi* 民族主义). It is the intention of this chapter to consider the work of Lu Xun, the most influential literary writer connected with concepts of “nation,” according to the overlapping and conflicting ideologies of nation and state prominent at the time.

The intellectual environment that Lu Xun entered into was one in which questions of nation were still fiercely contested. On the one hand, there were theorists such as Liang Qichao 梁启超, who advocated a Han-dominated, multi-ethnic state; a position to all intents and purposes adopted by major political leaders in the post-Qing era. On the other hand, prior to the downfall of the Qing, there were those who understood the nation to be the Han and believed that any post-imperial state ought to be for the Han alone. Foremost among them was Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, one of the most influential thinkers of the late Qing years. Lu Xun’s discourse of national character drew heavily from Liang Qichao’s work, but did it adopt Liang’s notion of a multi-ethnic state? While Lu Xun’s discussions of nation are not explicit on such points, I argue here that his conception of nation and state is best seen in the light of the cultural, historical body of people identified by Zhang Taiyan as the Han. In other words, the nation/state imagined by Lu Xun did not reflect a broad consensus, but rather one option among many; and it was, moreover, a very different kind of entity from the one that was officially constructed in political ideology and that eventually become a reality under the People’s Republic of China.

This chapter lays the groundwork for some of the discussions to come by reconsidering these key issues at the beginnings of modern Chinese literature. In the context of this dissertation,

working with the signification of “nation” in early modern Chinese literature is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, problematizing this category from the perspective of ethnicity allows us to reshape our understanding of the field. As we will see in Chapter Three, in the 1980s Tibet became a major subject of interest to Chinese writers. In Lu Xun’s time, however, no major literary writer was giving Tibet and Tibetans serious attention as part of some notion of a shared nation (*minzu*) or state called *Zhongguo*. The significations of “nation” during the formative years of modern Chinese literary discourse were thus very different from what they are today. Secondly, when Tibetans began producing literary texts under the PRC in the 1980s, the most influential writer of the era chose to draw from Lu Xun and May Fourth discourse, resurrecting the early modern Chinese discourse of nation in the wholly new context of modern Tibet.

1.1 Liang Qichao, National Character, and the Multi-Ethnic State

A great deal has been written on Liang Qichao and his foundational ideas on Chinese nationalism. In terms of the present discussion and his relationship with Lu Xun, we might broadly divide these ideas into spheres: firstly, Liang’s concept of national character, which had a direct impact on how Lu Xun would later conceive of the problem, and secondly, his interest in defining a real-world structure for the new Chinese state through the idea of a *guomin*.

During the earlier phase of his work, Liang Qichao’s concern lay primarily with what he saw as the Chinese lack of national consciousness, and building or awakening the people to that consciousness in a new world of social Darwinist competition between nations was the task he set himself. Liang was convinced that the people were mired in a worldview of dynasty/emperor, leaving them perilously ignorant of the concept of nation/state. He lamented that the Chinese (*Zhinaren* 支那人) knew nothing of “patriotism” (*aiguo* 爱国); they didn’t know the difference between “the state” (*guojia* 国家) and “all under heaven” (*tianxia* 天下), between “the state” and

“the royal court” (*chaoting* 朝廷), or “the state” and “the nation” (*minzu*) (Liang 1999: 1: 270; Liang 1999: 1: 413-414). Central to his mission was the challenge of redefining *guo* 国, transforming it from a signifier pointing to a ruling dynastic entity to one that pointed to a modern state (Karl 2002: 69). This was only part of the problem, however; what, after all, is a state without its people? As Liang worked through his redefinition of *guo*, he simultaneously sought a new conception of *min* 民, the people, one that would pry the notion from its former Confucian connotations and insert it into a new discursive category of a people inherently unified through the bonds of nation. His interest in these two central categories of *guo* and *min* led Liang to adopt a modernized use of the term *guomin*, one that could function as “a dynamic mutually constitutive relationship between *guojia* and ‘the people’” (Karl 2002: 119).

From these core conceptual starting points, it was a short leap into the realm of “national character,” *guominxing* 国民性, a term introduced from the Japanese *kokuminsei* (Liu 1995: 47-48). For Liang, an essential component of defining the nation was identifying its uniqueness, a set of criteria that established how the Chinese as a nation possessed a character that distinguished them from other nations (Liang 1999: 2: 657). In a number of essays written after the turn of the century, Liang began to analyze the unique faults that came with a unique national character. “On the Character of the Chinese People” (*Lun Zhongguo guomin zhi pingge* 论中国国民之品格, 1903), for instance, identified a lack of patriotism (*aiguo xin* 爱国心) and a lack of independence (*duli xing* 独立性) as particular flaws of the Chinese people (*Zhongguo guomin* 中国国民) (Liang 1999: 2: 1077-1079). “On the Origins of China’s Weakness” (*Zhongguo jiruuo suyuan lun* 中国极弱溯源论, 1900) was even closer to the later May Fourth model of national character in how it analyzed various uniquely “Chinese” psychological and cultural issues, among them “servility” (*nuxing* 奴

性), “ignorance” (*yumei* 愚昧), “selfishness” (*weiwo* 唯我), and “cowardice” (*qienuo* 怯懦) (Liang 1999: 1: 415-420).

Though this intellectual interest was consistent, his approach to national character and its implications changed over time. After the 1911 revolution in particular, Liang’s initial preoccupation with fostering national consciousness gradually morphed into a desire to preserve the unique aspects of the Chinese character – rooted in history, morality, and culture – that he had been trying to identify (Foster 2006: 42-48; Furth 2002: 53). This move essentially brought his stance into harmony with “national essence” (*guocui* 国粹) thinking and set him on a collision course with Lu Xun’s very different take on national character. Nevertheless, it is clear that Lu Xun drew heavily from Liang Qichao’s ideas. We know that Lu Xun read many of Liang’s works, and his brother, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, also recalled that they were both influenced by Liang’s numerous journals, including his writings on fiction and renewing the people (Semanov 1980: 7; Zhou 1985: 91). Paul Foster and Vera Schwarcz, among others, have stressed the May Fourth generation’s intellectual inheritance of the national character discourse from Liang (Foster 2006: 41; Schwarcz 1986: 32-34; Lee 1987: 13). As Foster demonstrates, the basic vocabulary, conceptual frameworks, and critical parameters of national character took shape in the late Qing, before Lu Xun came to make his definitive contribution to the subject (3, 9, 40-48).

While the influence of Liang’s writings on national character is clear, he was equally if not more concerned with finding pragmatic solutions to China’s state-building problems. In the years after 1903, following the statist theories of Johann Bluntschli, Liang determined that the nation could not exist without a state to support it (Sun 2002: 40; Zarrow 2012: 4). He came to the conclusion that “the state is mankind’s highest form of society” (Liang 1999: 3: 1702) and he gravitated towards an emphasis on the ultimate authority of a powerful government over its people

(Huang 1972: 82-83; Zarrow 2012: 104). Liang argued that territory (*tudi* 土地) and people (*renmin* 人民) may form the key elements of the state, but they are not the state itself; a state is “a collection of people, formed together as a group with sovereignty on a given territory” (Liang 1999: 4: 2055). This maneuvered his conception of China into conflict with late Qing Confucian reformers, who had emphasized the preservation of race (*baozhong* 保种) and Confucian teaching (*baojiao* 保教), positions that he saw as unnecessary since a powerful state would accomplish their goals much more effectively (Zarrow 2012: 56-57). His statism therefore also led his conception of China to move increasingly away from concepts of the Chinese people as a race and away from an emphasis on the cultural/psychological problems of the national people.

Liang’s stance held significant repercussions for the ethnic composition of a hypothetical future China. Initially, Liang’s nationalist theories had dabbled in the anti-Manchu rhetoric and propagandizing prevalent among late Qing thinkers, but after 1903 and his adoption of Bluntschli’s ideas, this aspect of his work was dropped entirely (Chang 1971: 126-127, 166-167, 261). Liang went on to condemn anti-Manchuism in the strongest terms. What Zarrow (2012) calls his “civic nationalism” came into direct conflict with the anti-Manchu revolutionaries’ “ethnic nationalism” (76), because Liang saw anti-Manchuism as antithetical to the goal of state-building. He labelled it a “petty nationalism” (*xiao minzuzhuyi* 小民族主义), as opposed to the “broad nationalism” (*daminzuzhuyi* 大民族主义) that would allow for Manchus and other ethnicities to be included in the new China. Petty nationalism, he argued, “is the Han in opposition to the other ethnicities within the state,” whereas broad nationalism would allow for Tibetans, Mongols, Manchus, etc., to join China; it would “unite all of the ethnicities (*zu* 族) of China proper (*benbu* 本部) and its dependencies (*shubu* 属部) in opposition to all the ethnicities of other countries” (Liang 1999: 2:

1069). Liang's statism forced the people to "face squarely the multiethnic character of China and orient themselves accordingly" (Chang 1971: 261); its greatest benefit lay in creating a theoretical avenue to oppose ethno-nationalism and allow for the inclusion of non-Han peoples in a Chinese state that did not place a premium on exclusive racial, historical, linguistic, or cultural modes of national belonging.

This is not to say, however, that Liang envisioned a liberal utopia of ethnic equality. At the heart of Liang's civic nationalism there nevertheless remained "an essentialized racial core" (Leibold 2007: 33). China's other ethnicities would be subordinate to the Han majority, and subordinate to the state, which would be run by the Han majority. Liang wrote that the "greater nation" (*da minzu* 大民族), the unity of these different peoples under the Chinese state, "must have the Han people as its core" and that those to create and direct the union would be the Han (Liang 1999: 2: 1070). In his analysis of the power of Western states, Liang observed that their nationalism had grown into a "national imperialism" (*minzu diguozhuyi* 民族帝国主义) in which national power had extended outwards and turned into the domination of other states. The only way for the Chinese to counter this threat was with a nationalism of their own (Liang 1999: 1: 455-460).

An even better way to fight national imperialism would be with national imperialism itself. Liang sided with his mentor Kang Youwei 康有为 in opposing the revolutionaries, and his approach to China's non-Han peoples echoed Kang's faith in assimilation and the civilizing power of Confucianism as wielded by the Han majority (Wong 1989: 48-49; Zarrow 2012: 158-159). As Crossley (2005) observes, Liang fretted that the exclusivist stance of Zhang Taiyan and others – that "Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, Muslims, and others could not and should not become culturally Chinese" – meant in turn that "China's expansion could not be justified" (146). China

was thus to become a “Chinese national empire – an imperial order in which not an emperor but the Chinese as a class would rule over others” (Crossley 1999: 353). Liang even made practical suggestions on how to construct such a national empire. In 1910 he presented a detailed analysis of “missed opportunities” to take control of Tibet that contemplated the difficulties of mounting a military excursion in its mountainous territory. He concluded that a talented emissary must be sent to Lhasa with the support of the Changkya Khutukhtu, “otherwise Tibet will not ultimately be ours. Mongolia and Qinghai will not ultimately be ours” (Liang 1999: 4: 2225-2229). Liang’s national imperialism was no fantasy: to all intents and purposes, it accurately describes the Han-dominated multi-ethnic state that China subsequently became.

Liang’s statist, multi-ethnic turn required some theoretical reworking of the key categories involved in nation- and state-building. He could not advocate *minzuzhuyi* nationalism as it contradicted his vision of a multi-ethnic state: as he defined it – via Bluntschli – a *minzu* consisted of people from the same land who had the same blood, the same appearance, the same language, the same script, the same religion, the same customs, and the same livelihoods (Liang 1999: 2: 1069). It was this issue that led him to “broad nationalism,” though this remained a seemingly self-contradictory concept, given the fundamental tenets of a *minzu*. To reconcile these categories, he turned to the idea of *guomin*. As Karl (2002) has argued, to Liang, *guomin* provided a way to allow both *minzu* and *guojia* into the frame without necessarily reducing “China” to an exclusive identification with either one (119). *Guomin* were “citizens,” defined as a legal entity capable of expressing their will and determining their own rights. A *guomin*, as a legal category, bore no relation to a particular ethnic category. Thus, nation and state were not synonymous, and a single state/*guojia* could contain many nations/*minzu* (Liang 1999: 2: 1068). It is important to bear this in mind for, as we will see, Lu Xun may have borrowed Liang’s interest in critiquing the national

character, but in no sense was he interested in Liang's theoretical positioning of *guomin* as a means to bypass ethnic exclusivity.

1.2 Zhang Taiyan's Han Nation-State

The greatest conceptual challenge to Liang's wish for a Han-dominated, multi-ethnic state came in the form of Zhang Taiyan's⁴ mono-ethnic vision of a nation-state. Zhang was one of the most influential nationalist thinkers of the late Qing, and his ideas played a major role in Lu Xun's early conceptions of nation and revolution. Zhang's influence spread from a number of sources, notably his teaching and revolutionary activity in Japan, his many publications in the *People's Journal* (*Minbao* 民报), which he also edited, and his book *Words of Urgency* (*Qiu shu* 檄书), first published in 1900 and revised between 1913 and 1916 as *A Discourse in Searching* (*Jian shu* 检书). As Wang Hui (2000) writes of his intellectual mission, Zhang may have been an individualist with a deep suspicion of the collective, but throughout his life and work there was “no more important practical mission than the construction of a collective national identity” (234).

In sharp contrast to Liang, Zhang stressed that this national identity must be built solely on an ethnically, culturally, historically homogenous people – the Han, and the Chinese state was the rightful possession of the Han alone. Conceptually, this was achieved through Zhang's notion of a “historical nation” (*lishi minzu* 历史民族). A sense of history was crucial to his nationalism, as “if a nation (*guo*) has no history, its people will be detached from their roots” and “if its history is lost, the nature of the nation (*guoxing* 国性) will become weak” (Zhang 1982: 3: 412). This definition of nation was further refined into “national learning” (*guoxue* 国学) – “the preservation of national language, history, and custom” (Wong 1989: 82) – and an emphasis on racial lineage

⁴ Also known as Zhang Binglin 章炳麟. “Taiyan” was a self-chosen name designed to reflect his admiration for the Ming loyalists Gu Yanwu 顾炎武 and Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲 (Murthy 2011: 41-42).

through surname (*zhongxing* 种姓), the latter especially important in drawing boundaries between Han and non-Han descent (Chow 1997 41-46; Wong 1989: 28; Wong 2006: 30-31). Zhang did indeed discuss problems of state, but they were always mediated through his primary interest in ethno-nationalism – the idea that “most inhabitants of China belonged to the same race – the Han race” (Chow 1997: 35).

This ethnically exclusive nationalist thought was not developed in a vacuum; on the contrary, it arose specifically as a form of negative definition of the Han *against* other ethnicities, and one ethnicity above all: the Manchus. Zhang’s anti-Manchu thinking began in earnest after the Boxer Rebellion, when he became convinced that the Manchu court was incapable of defending China against the Western powers (Wong 1989: 24). In 1900, he symbolically cemented this new stance by cutting off his queue, a gesture which would be repeated by Lu Xun three years later. As Wong (1989) points out, this was the launching point for his ethnocentric nationalism: anti-Manchuism as a necessary step towards resisting foreign imperialism (26-27, 64, 144). In essays such as “A Critical Discussion of Anti-Manchuism” (*Paiman pingyi* 排满评议) and “An Anti-Manchu Proclamation” (*Tao manzhou ji* 讨满洲檄), Zhang painted the Manchus as outsiders, illegitimate invaders who had conquered China and enslaved the Han nation for centuries (Zhang 1982: 4: 189-194, 262-270). At a speech in Tokyo in 1906, Zhang outlined this view:

When I was young, I read the *Donghua lu* 东华录 (Records from within the Eastern flowery gate) of Mr. Jiang, which contained accounts of the cases of Dai Mingshi 戴名世, Zeng Jing 曾静, and Zha Siting 查嗣庭. I was moved to anger, thinking that an alien people had brought disorder upon China (*yizhong luan Hua* 异种乱华), something that became our greatest source of resentment. I later read books by Zheng Suonan 郑所南 and Wang Chuanshan 王船山,⁵ which are full of nothing but words [advocating] the protection of the Han race (*Hanzhong* 汉种), and my nationalistic

⁵ Dai, Zeng, and Zha were all imprisoned or executed by the Manchu government for sedition. Wang Chuanshan was a Ming loyalist who “expressed persistent opposition to non-Han rule of China” (Huters 2005: 294 [nn 3, 4]).

thought (*minzu sixiang* 民族思想) gradually developed. (Zhang 2011: 1, trans. Hutters 2005: 75)

His early revolutionary agitation in Japan entailed a historical revision whereby the “Han” Ming Dynasty had been overthrown by the “foreign” Manchus, resulting in centuries of rule by an alien, non-Chinese people. In 1902 he planned a rally to mark the 242nd year of the downfall of the Ming, or in other words, when “China” ceased being “Chinese” (Jiang 1985: 156-164). Thus, his revolution was also one of restoration (*guangfu* 光复): “ousting the Manchus and returning China to the Han people” (Shimada 1990: 36), its rightful and original owners.

Zhang set out his stall in conscious opposition to the alternative imaginings of the nation and state circulating in the late Qing. In 1902, Kang Youwei published a letter in which he supported the emperor, criticized growing anti-Manchu sentiment, and continued to adhere to his notion of assimilation through culture. Zhang issued a caustic response, “Riposte to Kang Youwei’s Views on Revolution” (*Bo Kang Youwei lun geming shu* 驳康有为论革命书), which accused Kang of pandering to the Manchus. He refuted Kang’s assertion that the Manchus had assimilated to Chinese culture, and in fact argued the opposite: that the Manchus were forcing the Han to adopt non-Chinese religion, dress, and language (Zhang 1982: 4: 174). Zhang went even further in accusing the Manchus of treating the Han on an unequal basis, of constructing a dynasty of systematic racial discrimination and oppression against the Han majority (Zhang 2011: 5). Zhang’s rejection of the “assimilation” narrative was a crucial step in cementing an ethno-exclusive discourse, as the idea of assimilationist Confucian universalism had long been used to justify the Qing mandate and to ease the potential discomfort with “outside” rule. No longer was Confucian ideology to be considered a universal civilizing force, as culture was essentially ethnic.

It is important to note that Zhang Taiyan did not limit his ethno-exclusive nationalism to a Han-Manchu binary. Zhang was keenly attuned to the problems that questions of ethnicity raised

for any potential Chinese state, and he spent considerable time discussing them. He was aware that the Qing was a multi-ethnic empire, and he feared that its reimagining as a modern state would simply replicate political structures that kept power out of Han hands. Hence, his criticisms of a proposed bicameral legislature were also based on race:

But who would comprise the members of the upper house? If it is to be the imperial clan, then it will simply consist of the emperor's relatives and princes. If it is to be the nobility, then it will simply consist of the Eight Banners and the princes of Inner and Outer Mongolia. If it is to be the important religious leaders, then it will simply consist of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama of [Central] Tibet (*Weizang* 卫藏, Tib.: *dbus gtsang*). Of all these groups, none includes any Han people in their number – there are only people of other races (*yizhong* 异种) – and so parliamentary rights will still not be given to Han people... (Zhang 1982: 4: 178; trans. *Sources* 1999: 312)

This issue of representation was particularly important to Zhang. In 1900 he had already composed a memorandum on the subject of denying membership of any future parliament to Manchus and Mongols (Murthy 2011: 67-68). Tibetans and Mongols thus represented the same problem as the Manchus: the threat of Han subordination to a non-Chinese, minority people.

Zhang's "Explaining the Republic of China" (*Zhonghua minguo jie* 中华民国解), published in the *People's Journal* in 1907, is a fascinating document with an enduring legacy, most notably in that it coined the name for China's subsequent Republics (Lu Xun also cites it specifically for this reason [Lu Xun 2005: 6: 566]). In it, Zhang discusses the problem of ethnicity in detail and lays out his vision of the Chinese state with precision. Much of the essay concerns Tibetans, Mongols, Muslims, and Manchus and how they fit into this new state. The problem, in short, was that they didn't – or rather, that they were in conflict with it to varying degrees. Zhang in fact argued, not unreasonably, that Vietnam (*Yuenan* 越南) and Korea (*Chaoxian* 朝鲜) were culturally and linguistically closer to the Han than Mongols, Tibetans, and Muslims, and therefore

the “recovery” (*guangfu*) of their territories by military means was a more pressing matter (Zhang 1982: 4: 256-257).

Territorially, the essay proposes the establishment of a Chinese state on the basis of pre-Han Dynasty commanderies (*jun* 郡) and counties (*xian* 县), the inhabitants of which were called the “*Hua* 华.” Zhang’s main concern was fundamentally that the new China should be Han controlled. To that end, his historical analysis of terminology, from which he derived his subsequent designations, privileges Han racial and territorial ownership. He therefore determined that *Hua* and *Han* were the racial-historical signs most appropriate for designating the nation-state. “If we establish Han as the name of the race,” he reasoned, “it will incorporate the meaning of the state (*bangguo* 邦国), and if we establish Hua as the name of the state, it will also incorporate the meaning of the race” (Zhang 1982: 4: 253). Zhang also provides his definition of the name of the state: the term “Central Country” (*Zhongguo*), which in India was used to demarcate the center from peripheral territories, was used in China to differentiate Chinese “territory” (*lingyu* 领域) from “other countries” (*yibang* 异邦) and is synonymous with the “land of the Han” (*Hantu* 汉土) (Zhang 1982: 4: 252-256).

The corollary of this vision was that Tibetans, Mongols, Muslims, and Manchus did not form a core part of Chinese territory, and were thus potentially free to form their own, non-Chinese states. This is also a logical result of basing his state on pre-Han dynasty borders, which did not extend to these places. Zhang was of course aware of this fact:

Not until the Ming were vassals appointed in Tibet and the Moslem areas, but although the Protector-Generals were established there during the pre-Han period and the 36 kingdoms, these areas can be considered as dependencies (*fuyong* 附庸) which did not belong to the territory (*tu* 土). [...] If you want to decide the priorities of the Three Peripheral Divisions, then the Tibetans are the most intimate because of the similarity in religion, whereas the Moslems and Mongolians simply have nothing in common with the Han. Thus from the standpoint of regulating the borders of the

Republic of China, the two prefectures, Vietnam and Korea, must be recovered, with the district Burma following slightly behind in priority. As for Tibet, the Moslem areas and Mongolia, these could either be incorporated or rejected. (Zhang 1982: 4: 256-257, trans. Zhang 1997: 28)

Zhang had stated elsewhere that the chieftains of Xinjiang bore a deep enmity towards the Manchus, which in turn had carried over to the Han, and thus their desire to separate and form an independent Turkestan (*Tujue* 突厥) was legitimate. He reiterates that statement in this essay, expressing the hope that peaceful relations may be restored in a post-Manchu world, but “if this is not to be the case, and they really want to establish their own country (*guo*), why should we keep it through plunder?” (Zhang 1982: 4: 261, trans. Zhang 1997: 38).

Perhaps needless to say, Zhang declared that the Manchus were also welcome to form their own autonomous state in Manchuria (the three northeastern provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, with a border at Russia). This was the logical culmination of the doctrine of *paiman* 排满 (or *zhuman* 逐满, Manchu expulsion): the Manchus would not only be expelled from power, they would be expelled from the Republic of China, after which they would be free to go their own way in their north-east homeland. Zhang’s support for self-determination also extended beyond China: he was a founding member of the Asian Friendship Association (*Yazhou heqin hui* 亚洲和亲会), which sought independence for other Asian states suffering under imperialism (Wong 1989: 73). Of course, the Manchus and their former non-Han subjects did not ultimately form independent states, and later in life Zhang also sharply reversed course on his standpoint. As Wong argues, his sympathy towards the “aspirations of self-determination for all races” was ultimately theoretical, as it was “impractical” to identify all “Manchus” and send them back to “Manchuria” (Wong 1989: 63-64). Zhang Taiyan’s vision was destined to be a path not taken, a historical alternative which, incidentally, was politically much closer to the position of present-day critics

and organizations who advocate self-determination and even state-formation for the PRC's minority nationalities.

Zhang also placed a very significant qualification on this stance in "Explaining the Republic of China": non-Han peoples were welcome to pursue their own national destinies, but he also expressed the hope that they would voluntarily join with China, on the all-important condition that they fully assimilated. Zhang was not, in theory, against "alien races" (*yizu* 异族) being a part of the state, so long as they were subject to Han rule (Zhang 1982: 4: 255). Their assimilation would have to come in many forms, one of the most important being linguistic, as there was no question that the Republic of China would be a strictly Chinese-language entity. For Mongols, who had supposedly "learnt to imitate the sounds of our language," this would not be a problem; but for Tibetans, who used a "Brahmin writing" that "conflicts with the Chinese language," linguistic integration would be much more difficult, thus "Tibet will require most of our efforts" (Zhang 1982: 4: 257, trans. Zhang 1997: 29). Linguistic assimilation alone was not sufficient, however. Zhang continued to fret about the potential influence of non-Han people on Chinese politics, particularly if given the right to vote. Therefore, until they had undergone a period of cultural, linguistic, and political tutelage (lasting twenty years), they should not be able to partake in the affairs of state. Zhang saw this as benevolent: he argued that without altering their language and customs, the treatment of minorities in China would be akin the treatment of African Americans in the United States (Zhang 1982: 4: 257-258). In general, however, he was confident that assimilation of all these peoples was theoretically possible with sufficient effort and guidance from the Han (Zhang 1982: 4: 257).

This major qualification aside, Wong's (1989) reading of Zhang's nationalism is reasonable: that "every nation had a distinct culture derived from its unexampled historical

experience” and that “varied cultures should co-exist yet remain autonomous and unique and should not be universalized by any particular culture” (81, 55). However, Wang Hui’s (2000) insistence that “Explaining the Republic of China” clearly rejects a territorial definition of China in favor of a racial and cultural one (244) is demonstrably flawed. It is fair to characterize Zhang as a nationalist primarily interested in race, culture, language, and history, but despite Zhang’s critique of statist concepts elsewhere, these elements could not exist in abstraction with no relationship to a state that would govern and defend this newly defined people. “Explaining the Republic of China” was an admission of this: the *guo* in Zhang’s neologism *Zhonghua minguo* had to be defined somehow, and he paid close attention to how that state was to be practically constructed in relation to other ethnicities and territories.

Zhang’s approach to these questions is one of the most important ways in which his nationalism is distinct from that of his contemporaries. There is arguably some overlap between Liang and Zhang’s stances on assimilation, though Zhang’s answer to the question of ethnicity was much simpler and more uncompromising: to become part of the state, non-Han ethnicities had to become entirely like the Han. As Peter Perdue (2005) points out, the crucial point of difference lies in Zhang Taiyan’s willingness to accept the opposite scenario, “the breakup of the Qing empire” (190). If Tibetans and others refused to submit to Han rule and Sinicization, they could form their own states. Liang’s “national empire” was multi-ethnic by definition: one state (*guojia*) containing many nations (*minzu*), all of whom would be *guomin*, “citizens” or “people of the state.” To Zhang, however, the *guo* was *Zhonghua minguo*, and its *min* were first and foremost the Han: a “China” consisting only of Han was logical, and more than acceptable to him. In retrospect, Zhang’s essay both was and was not a roadmap for how China would eventually look. On the one hand, Zhang was “a rare bird,” as Pusey (1983) calls him; the only major nationalist intellectual to

grant that non-Han peoples had an equal right to national self-determination (330-332). On the other, his opinion that multi-ethnic integration could be achieved only through cultural annihilation was in some ways prophetic: the People's Republic, from its inception to the present day, has been constantly plagued by the question of how to deal with ethnic integration, its response lurching between multi-cultural tolerance and ruthlessly enforced assimilation.

Assuming that Tibetans, Mongols, Manchus, and Muslims were unwilling to commit mass cultural suicide, then what Zhang argued for was essentially a nation-state: a single nation that possesses its own state, where the boundaries of nation and state are coterminous. This was (and is) a very rare situation which, according to Walker Connor (1994), accounted for only 9.1% of the world's states in 1971 (and even some of those 9.1% are likely questionable) (96). Despite the wealth of theoretical discussion surrounding nation and state and the distinctions drawn between the two by theorists like Connor and Smith (1991: 14-15), they are concepts that continue to be used indiscriminately, which is true in the Chinese context as much as (at times even more than) anywhere else.

The term "nation-state" is used frequently in scholarship on modern China, and more often than not it appears to indicate some form of modern state formation/structure that has some connection to a modern ideology of nationalism, as opposed to the pre-modern dynastic state. But modern China has never been a nation-state in the sense used by theorists of nation. If we were to follow Connor's taxonomy, China would most readily fall into the category of the multihomeland, multinational state (78). The complexities and contradictions of ethnicity, nation, and state that plagued late Qing thinkers were essentially never resolved and remain subject to extreme theoretical and real-world tension. Even the PRC's attempts to resolve these contradictions by reimagining the *Zhonghua minzu* variously as an anti-imperialist class union and a multi-ethnic

family still acknowledges the existence of many distinct “nationalities.” It is also abundantly clear that, to thinkers like Zhang Taiyan and Liang Qichao, the distinctions between these concepts and their related terms were of the highest importance.

1.3 Lu Xun and Zhang Taiyan

When Lu Xun began forming the ideas that would have such an enduring impact on modern Chinese literary thought, the intellectual environment in which he found himself was one of fiercely contested debates over what a new China should look like. We have seen briefly how Liang’s discussion of national character laid the groundwork for Lu Xun’s own iteration of the topic, and we are now in a position to consider more closely his relationship with thinkers such as Zhang Taiyan. Lu Xun’s conception of national character must also be linked to the prominent late Qing debate on “national essence” (*guocui*). The discussion over national essence, a neologism derived from the Japanese *kokusui*, began in earnest after the turn of the century, and was an intellectual project that, in short, “explored the origins and development of national traditions from archaic roots in land, race and culture” (Furth 2002: 43-44).

Theorists of national essence were keen to detach the nation from Confucian orthodoxy and reorient it to the “accumulated spiritual legacy of a particular people” (Furth 2002: 47-48). The “national” in “national essence” was at its core congruous with Zhang’s conception of the nation – in other words, it was “Han” essence. This was the core referent of national essence and national learning: it was the essence of the Han Chinese as opposed to “foreign” – particularly Manchu – people (Wang 2000: 242). There were several noteworthy figures involved in the national essence movement, many of whom contributed to its central publication, *The Journal of National Essence* (*Guocui xuebao* 国粹学报). Huang Jie’s 黄节 *Yellow History* (*Huang shi* 黄史) was an influential text that sought to anchor the racial and cultural origins of the Han in ancient

history (Tsu 2005: 110; Hon 2015: 60-67). Liu Shippei 刘师培, who contributed to the journal under the penname Guanghai 光汉 (“Restore the Han”), followed Zhang Taiyan in identifying the nation (*minzu*) with the Han race, associating both in turn with a territorial notion of *Zhongguo*, and depicting the Manchus as foreign rulers (Hon 2015: 43, 65). In other words, to the national essence scholars, nation, race, and state all overlapped.

It was Zhang Taiyan, however, who most defined the national essence agenda. National essence was the intellectual underpinning of his Han-centered nationalism: as he remarked at a 1906 speech in Tokyo, “Why do I advocate national essence? It is not because I want people to believe in Confucianism, it is simply because I want people to cherish the history of our Han race (*Hanzhong*)” (Zhang 2011: 5). Zhang’s belief in a “historical nation” – that a nation consisted of language, culture, and history – was also rooted in the concept of national essence. And it is through national essence that we arrive at the first, and one of the most significant, connections between Zhang Taiyan and Lu Xun’s subsequent critique of the national character.

Lu Xun studied “national learning” (*guoxue*) and Chinese philology and phonology with Zhang while in Japan in 1908 (Shimada 1990: 22-23). At its core, Lu Xun’s later discussion of national character resonated deeply with Zhang’s national essence: both posited the idea of an enduring cultural legacy inherited by a particular people through the course of history. However, the key difference between the two was, simply put, that the national essence scholars saw this psychological endowment as inherently positive and desirable, whereas Lu Xun saw it as something to be seriously critiqued. But how one sees its relative merits is essentially irrelevant here. Both ideas took for granted the same underlying assumption about immutable national traits. That Lu Xun “saw the ‘national essence’ as the negative national character” is precisely what Paul Foster argues (2006); both, he stresses, are pillars of the intellectual construction of Chinese

national identity, two sides of the same coin (22, 48). Lu Xun's answer to national essence was that it was simply unnecessary if it could do nothing to aid Chinese survival in the world: "What is 'national essence'? Judging from the characters, it must be something that one nation (*guo*) possesses and others do not. In other words, it is something special. But special is not necessarily good; why should we feel the need to keep it?" (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 321).

There is also an organic connection here with Liang's national character. As noted previously, Liang's later interest in defining and preserving national character essentially overlapped with the national essence agenda, and thus also with the critiques of May Fourth writers. As was the case with national essence, Furth (2002) notes that Liang and the intellectuals of the New Culture Movement "asked the same kind of questions" about national character while "giving sharply different answers" (54). Despite Liang's support for a multi-ethnic national empire, his concept of national character was fundamentally mono-ethnic and mono-cultural, and for that reason could harmoniously cohabitate with national essence. There is great significance, then, in the fact that it is this conception of nation that Lu Xun reworked in his own writing. If Lu Xun's national character was a darkly critical reflection of the laudatory national essence/character of Zhang and Liang, then it was, exclusively, about Han national character. Liang Qichao may have attempted some plate spinning by supporting both an ethnically and culturally exclusive national character *and* a multi-ethnic Chinese state, but Zhang Taiyan, Liu Shipei and others had no qualms whatsoever about identifying national essence solely with the Han people. In its intellectual origins, then, Lu Xun's national character is clearly indebted to an ethno-exclusive iteration of the Chinese nation.

When we look at the translingual origins of national character, this point still stands. Arthur Smith's *Chinese Characteristics*, serially published in Shanghai in 1889, was another source that

fed into Lu Xun's interest in the idea (Liu 1995: 45-76). Smith positions "Chineseness" through a variety of vague and overarching terms like "the Chinese," "the Chinese race," "the Chinese people," and so forth, and his attacks on Chinese shortcomings are based in a range of loosely constructed racial stereotypes, casual observations, and references to Confucian doctrines ("Face," "Conservatism," and "Filial Piety" being just some examples of his chapter headings) (Smith 1900). It is clear throughout that his "China" has little to do with anyone outside of a broadly conceived notion of a Confucian civilizational framework. In other words, like national essence or Liang Qichao's national character, when Smith talks about "Chinese" characteristics he is referring to the characteristics of a specific people – the people identified by the national essence scholars as the Han. Indeed, Smith contrasts the Chinese with the Mongols and the Japanese (both clearly understood as separate peoples or nations), who he sees as "comparatively free from the bias of religion" (299). Translations of Smith's work into Chinese reflect these issues: the first classical Chinese translation of 1903 renders Smith's "Chinese" as *Zhinaren*, via the Japanese *Shinajin* (Liu 1995: 53), the same term that Zhang Taiyan used in his 1902 anti-Manchu rally commemorating the fall of the Ming (Sun 2002: 25-26). Pan Guangdan's 潘光旦 1937 translation opted instead for *minzu*, which even more overtly delineates the ethno-national signification of Smith's book (Liu 1995: 53). Smith may not have been explicit about the distinctions that concern us here, but neither, as we shall see, was Lu Xun. What is clear is that Smith's work, like Liang and Zhang's, framed the concepts of "nation" and "Chinese" in terms that excluded the Qing empire's other non-Han peoples.

To return to Zhang Taiyan: as is well known, the connections between Zhang and Lu Xun run much deeper than a shared intellectual interest in national essence. Shimada Kenji (1990) points out that Zhang was, in fact, one of the only teachers for whom Lu Xun held a life-long

admiration, possibly the only other besides Mr. Fujino Genkurō (22).⁶ Lu Xun is a constant figure in the scholarly literature about Zhang Taiyan, and vice versa: Zhang is referred to as his intellectual “mentor” (Kowallis 2006: 88); Lu Xun was one of his “intellectual followers” (Wang 2000: 232); Zhang “was not a major character in Lu Xun’s life in measurable, visible ways, but he was of recurring importance” (Chou 2012: 177); there was “a spiritual, personal, ‘blood’ relationship” between the two (Shimada 1990: 27).

Lu Xun’s arrival in Tokyo in 1902 coincided with Zhang’s anti-Manchu commemoration rally for the fall of the Ming,⁷ and while in Japan the two formed a close student-teacher bond. In 1908 Lu Xun studied with Zhang Taiyan, attending a series of classes at Zhang’s home on the subject of the *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字 (*Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters*), along with Qian Xuantong 钱玄同 and others (Shimada 1990: 22-23; Wong 1989: 80). He also joined Zhang’s Restoration Society (*Guangfu hui* 光复会, i.e. restoration of Han rule), the mission of which was to “restore the Han, return our land, dedicate oneself to the country” (Abe & Wu 1996: 28). Lu Xun returned to China in 1909, but, according to Shimada Kenji (1990), “for the remainder of his life his devotion to Zhang would never waver” (23). This certainly seems to be the case. In 1908, when Zhang was arrested for his provocative anti-Manchu activities with the *People’s Journal* and refused to pay a fine, Lu Xun and Xu Shouchang 许寿裳 paid it for him (Wong 1989: 74-76), and Lu Xun later visited Zhang back in Beijing when the latter was under house arrest (Chou 2012: 177).

⁶ Lu Xun wrote a well-known essay in memory of his teacher, “Mr. Fujino” (*Tengye xiansheng* 藤野先生) (Lu Xun 2005: 2: 313-320).

⁷ Lu Xun did not attend, but there is speculation that he attended Zhang’s influential anti-Manchu speech in Tokyo in 1906 (Chou 2012: 92; Yang 2012: 389).

Though they drifted apart in later years, Lu Xun's admiration for Zhang's intellectual endeavors and revolutionary zeal never faded. There are numerous recorded instances of Zhang Taiyan's direct or indirect influence on Lu Xun's own work. Lu Xun alludes to the influence of Zhang's writing style in his introduction to *Graves* (*Fen 坟*), for instance (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 3). Shimada Kenji (1990) and Yang Fabao (2012) see Zhang Taiyan's hand in Lu Xun's influential early essays (27; 395); Theodore Hutters (2005) and Viren Murthy (2011) see Zhang's influence in Lu Xun's suspicion of the collective (257; 227); and there has even been speculation that the protagonist of "Diary of a Madman" (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记) was based on Zhang and that Lu Xun later planned to write a novel about him (Cheng 2013: 378; Semanov 1980: 82). When Zhou Zuoren turned against Zhang over the latter's support for the resurrection of an archaic practice (the *touhu* 投壺 ceremony), Lu Xun declined to criticize his erstwhile teacher, later writing that he still thought of Zhang as a teacher, and himself as his disciple (Lu Xun 2005: 12: 405; Cheng 2013: 371-373).

In 1936, shortly before he passed away, Lu Xun wrote two essays in memory of Zhang, "A Few Matters Regarding Mr. Zhang Taiyan" (*Guanyu Taiyan xiansheng er san shi* 关于太炎先生二三事) and "A Few Matters Recalled in Connection with Mr. Zhang Taiyan" (*Yin Taiyan xiansheng er xiangqi de er san shi* 因太炎先生而想起的二三事). Both of these are credited with heavily influencing later views of Zhang (Wong 1989: 141; Shimada 1990: 22).⁸ The essays were by no means without criticism, but above all, Lu Xun defended his former teacher against subsequent detractors:

But these [distancing himself from the people and participating in the *touhu* ceremony] are merely minor flaws on a piece of pure jade, not a reflection of a later

⁸ According to Xu Guangping 许广平, these were unfinished drafts, and Lu Xun was likely planning to write more about Zhang (Yang 2012: 389).

decline in his character. In assessing his life, we find no one else had the gall to dangle his big medal as an ornament on a fan⁹ or appear in front of the gates of the presidential palace loudly cursing Yuan Shikai's 袁世凯 malicious intentions; no one else had his unflagging revolutionary ardor, which he maintained even after seven arrests and three imprisonments. This is the spirit of a sage and a model for future ages. Recently some "literary philistines," colluding with the tabloids, have written essays smugly deriding Mr. Taiyan. This really is a case of "petty people not wanting others to succeed" and "an ant shaking a giant tree, ridiculously ignorant of its own limitations!" (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 567, trans. Lu Xun 2017: 100-101)

What interests me here is the ways in which Zhang Taiyan may have helped to shape Lu Xun's vision of nation in regard to ethnicity. If we are to examine the question of Lu Xun and ethnicity, it makes sense to look at his views on the Manchus, since this was another "Chinese" ethnicity that he actually spent a good deal of time discussing. Before he became renowned for his investigations of national character around the time of the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun's nationalism echoed the prevailing anti-Manchu rhetoric of the time, and it was Zhang's anti-Manchu revolutionary fervor that first drew him to his mentor. Wu Jun and Abe Kenya reinforce this point: the "erudite revolutionary" that Lu Xun fondly recalls was an erudite *anti-Manchu* revolutionary; "the common ground between teacher and student was built on the ideological foundation of anti-Manchism" (Abe & Wu 1996: 26-27). As Lu Xun recollected: "I knew of the existence of a Mr. Taiyan in China not because of his works on the Confucian classics and ancient philology, but because he had refuted Kang Youwei, had written a preface for Zou Rong's 邹容 *Revolutionary Army*, and had been incarcerated in a prison in the Shanghai concessions" (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 565, trans. Lu Xun 2017: 99). He also remained a firm admirer of Zhang's anti-Manchu poems from *Zhejiang Tide* (*Zhejiang chao* 浙江潮), two of which he reproduced in his essay (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 565-566).

⁹ A medal awarded to Zhang by Yuan Shikai (Lu Xun 2017: 302n18).

What Lu Xun most lamented was the revising of Zhang's work to exclude the early anti-Manchu, pro-Han polemics. As he recalled in an essay from 1935:

Mr. Taiyan gained renown as a valiant general who wrote essays opposing the Manchus, but in the unrevised edition of his *Compelled Writings* (*Qiu shu*), he nonetheless acknowledged the Manchus' ability to govern China, calling them "guest emperors," comparable to the "guest ministers" of the Qin empire. [...] Later, the title of the book was changed to *Investigative Essays* (*Jian lun*), but I don't know if things were handled in the same manner. Quite a number of the Chinese students in Japan searched the library for written documents from the late Ming to the early Qing that could be used to incite revolution. (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 191-192, trans. Lu Xun 2017: 58)

Lu Xun recalls that one of these documents was a volume titled *Voice of the Han* (*Han sheng* 汉声), inscribed on the cover of which was the phrase "raise the glorious voice of the great Han" (*zhen da Han zhi tian sheng* 振大汉之天声). It was this rhetoric of anti-Manchu, pro-Han nationalism from which he believed Zhang had retreated in later life. This was particularly so in the aftermath of the 1911 revolution, when Zhang gave up ethno-national revolution and turned to scholarship after the goal of anti-Manchu politics had been realized (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 566).

Lu Xun returned to the theme of the missing anti-Manchu polemics in both of his commemorative pieces. Lu Xun called Zhang's early essays with a "fighting spirit" his "greatest and most lasting accomplishments" and expressed his hope that they would be published in Zhang's posthumous collected works "so that he will be known to posterity and live in the hearts of fighters" (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 567, trans. Lu Xun 2017: 101). In the second essay, he speculated that their removal was due to Zhang's misguided "Confucian" respect for his adversaries, something that could only tarnish his reputation in the long run (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 578-579). By this point, as we will see below, Zhang had turned away from his early ethno-nationalist politics. To Lu Xun, however, Zhang's greatest failing in his later life was precisely the abandonment of

his early revolutionary fervor, and as Shimada Kenji (1990) argues, this concept of revolution was always mediated first and foremost by ethno-nationalism, or his “love of the ethnic group” (61).

The clearest example of Lu Xun’s adoption of anti-Manchu revolutionary sentiments came with the cutting of his queue – the physical symbol of Manchu loyalty – while he was in Japan in 1903. There has been some scholarly debate over the intentions of this gesture. Foster (2006) reads it as an “intentional demonstration of Han nationalism” (121), while Eva Shan Chou (2012) is more circumspect, pointing out that it is as much a sign of modernizing sentiment as anti-Manchu ethno-nationalism (85). Lu Xun himself was typically wry and self-deprecating about the significance of the act, remarking later that it was not “in the least bit revolutionary” and he simply “found the queue inconvenient” (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 579, trans. Lu Xun 2017: 106). I agree that we should not be too quick to pin a single interpretation on Lu Xun’s queue-cutting and that its political symbolism may be multi-layered. At the same time, however, it is undeniable that one of these layers was a growing conception of Han-Manchu ethnic difference. This is how Lu Xun recalls the queue:

I was born in a remote locale and didn’t have the slightest inkling of the distinction between “Manchu” and “Han.” Only on restaurant signs did I see such words as “Manchu and Han Wine Banquet,” yet it never aroused my suspicions. [...] What first prompted me to the distinction between Manchu and Han was not books, but the queue. (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 192-193, trans. Lu Xun 2017: 59)

By his own estimation, the queue functioned as a marker of ethnic difference; cutting it off was, in turn, a mark of his own ethnic difference from the Manchus. In the second of his two essays about Zhang, Lu Xun dedicates most of the text to a discussion of the importance of queue-cutting. He quotes extensively from Zhang’s essay “Ridding Myself of the Queue” (*Jie bian fa* 解辫发) (one of the “removed” essays discussed above), in which Zhang railed against the Manchus and “the compromised position into which our Han race has been forced” and declared his intention to

rid himself of the enforced “barbarian costume” and “restore the appearance of the ancients” (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 579, trans. Lu Xun 2017: 106).

That Lu Xun draws such a close connection to Zhang in his admiration for the politics of queue-cutting is telling. It marks out his own decision as possessing a similarly ethno-nationalist dimension: as with Zhang, ethnicity and revolution went hand-in-hand. While in Japan, Lu Xun abandoned the Qing gown in favor of the Japanese kimono and began to grow a moustache, which, as Shih Shu-mei (2001) points out, served not only to distance himself from Japanese racist representations of Chinese-ness, but to redefine those images as being of Manchu – not Han – qualities (77).¹⁰ As late as 1934, in another essay on the politics of attire, he still identified Manchu clothing as signifying a clear-cut ethno-national difference, equating it with the Western suit as an equally “foreign” form of dress (*waiguo fu* 外国服) (Lu Xun 2005: 5: 478-479).

The sense of ethno-national awakening in Lu Xun’s queue-cutting was reinforced in a poem, “Inscription on My Portrait” (*Ziti xiaoxiang* 自题小像), written around 1903 on the back of a photograph of himself, now queue-less, taken after the event. In the final line of the quatrain, he writes, “I shall offer my blood up for Xuan Yuan, our progenitor” (Kowallis 1996: 101-102). Xuan Yuan 轩辕 is another name for the Yellow Emperor, who at this time was being reconfigured by the national essence group as the racial progenitor of the Han. Zhang Taiyan, Liu Shipai, and Huang Jie, among others, constructed the Yellow Emperor as a mythical symbol of Han nationalism, “the first great man of nationalism (*minzuzhuyi*) in the world,” as he was described in the first issue of the *People’s Journal*, which also carried his image (*Min bao* 2006: 1: 3). The Yellow Emperor’s ‘founding of China’ even served as the basis for a new national calendar, a “Yellow Genealogy of five millennia” that would delegitimize Manchu rule (Sun 2002: 28). Lu

¹⁰ Lu Xun later composed a playful essay on his moustache and its ethno-national politics (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 183-189).

Xun's reference to the Yellow Emperor in his poem therefore carries the weight of a potent ethno-nationalist symbol in heavy circulation at the time.¹¹ Indeed, this was Zhou Zuoren's interpretation – that his brother was specifying an intent to die for the Han, not the Manchus (Chou 2012: 68). Both Semanov (1980) and Chou (2012) concur that the poem was markedly influenced by Zhang Taiyan's aforementioned poems from *Zhejiang Tide* (9; 178). Again, we cannot miss the significance of ethnicity in these many connections: as Chou points out, the Yellow Emperor reference, “which might roughly mean his fellow Chinese, is in fact restricted to his fellow Han Chinese” (94-95).

Lu Xun retained a lifelong preoccupation with the Manchu legacy in China that continued long after the fall of the dynasty. Following the revolution, most other intellectuals had moved on from a problem now considered irrelevant, but not so Lu Xun. In 1925 Lu Xun expressed his hope that someone would write a history of the founding of the Republic, as knowledge of its origins had already been lost to the younger generation, a sentiment he reiterated years later in his essays on Zhang Taiyan when he lamented that younger Chinese could not know the feeling of cutting off one's queue (Lu Xun 2005: 3: 17; Lu Xun 2005: 6: 576). Lu Xun continued to describe the Manchus as “foreigners” (*waiguoren* 外国人) who “invaded China (*Zhongguo*) as an alien race (*yizu*)” (Lu Xun 2005: 7: 323; Lu Xun 2005: 4: 12). Kangxi 康熙, Yongzheng 雍正, and Qianlong 乾隆, nowadays celebrated in nationalist rhetoric as great “Chinese” emperors, were to Lu Xun “alien rulers (*yizu de junzhu* 异族的君主) who had become proficient in Chinese writing,” or in Kangxi's case, “the master who conquered the Han Chinese” (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 59; Lu Xun 2005:

¹¹ Jon Kowallis points out that Xuan Yuan “may also be a reference to the poet's native place in Shaoxing, where the ruins of an ancient stone terrace known as the Xuanyuan Lingtai still stand” (Kowallis 2006: 84).

1: 209). As for himself, he never failed to forget that before the revolution he had been a “slave of another race” (*ta zu de nuli* 他族的奴隶) (Lu Xun 2005: 7: 240).

This sustained interest in the Manchus gives us significant information on what *Zhongguo* signified to Lu Xun. Wu Jun has directed us towards the key point here: “What is worth paying attention to is that, when Lu Xun mentions ‘Manchus,’ ‘the Manchu Qing,’ or ‘Manchurians,’ what they are used in opposition to is ideas like ‘China’ (*Zhongguo*) and ‘our China’ (*women Zhongguo* 我们中国)” (Wu 1996: 18). Stated more clearly: we may conclude from Lu Xun’s repeated comments on the subject that *Zhongguo* was not an entity that included, or should include, the fundamentally “foreign” Manchus. In the late Qing the Manchu question served as a kind of litmus test for wider conceptions of what the nation and state would or should look like. Anti-Manchism was used by Zhang Taiyan, Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 and others as a tool for Han revolution, but it was dropped after that revolution was achieved. Unlike the majority of late Qing anti-Manchu activists and intellectuals, however, Lu Xun never really left his pre-revolutionary political stance behind, and he never showed any interest in considering the Manchus as fellow participants in the Chinese nation- or state-building project.

1.4 Lu Xun and Zou Rong

Zhang Taiyan was not the only anti-Manchu nationalist writer to have an influence on Lu Xun; he also expressed great admiration for Zou Rong and his famed ethno-national political tract *The Revolutionary Army* (*Geming jun* 革命军, 1903). This is unsurprising, as *The Revolutionary Army* was one of the most influential nationalist texts of the pre-revolution era, and certainly the most widely disseminated (Wong 1989: 43). As such, it merits attention. While Zou Rong followed Zhang’s lead he was, if anything, even more radical in his views of nation, and *The Revolutionary*

Army puts anti-Manchu politics at the center of its nationalist ethos. The Manchus are consistently identified as an alien or foreign people in every sense possible:

What you, my compatriots, today call court, government or emperor are what we once called barbarians (of North, South, East or West), Xiongnu or Tartars. These tribes, living beyond Shanhaiguan, were not by origin of the same race as the illustrious descendants of our Yellow Emperor. Their land is foul land, they are of a furry race, their hearts are beast's hearts, their customs are the customs of the users of wool, their writing is different from ours, their languages are different from ours, and their clothes are different from ours. (Zou 1958: 18; trans. adapted from Zou 1968: 80)

Here, Zou Rong highlights dress as a marker of Han-Manchu ethno-national difference, just as Lu Xun would many years later; he stresses that Manchu clothes are not “the costume that is the cultural heritage of our China” but “the abhorrent clothes of the Manchu nomad bandits” (17). Zou argues against the common narrative of Confucian assimilation (in fact he uses Confucianism as a tool to further separate the Manchus from the Han), stressing that the Manchus and the Han have kept themselves to themselves for over two hundred years (15, 7). Zou Rong's rhetoric is often even more extreme than Zhang Taiyan's: he calls not just for expulsion (*paiman*), but “annihilation” (*zhujue* 诛绝) of the “the furry and horned Manchu race” (1, trans. Zou 1968: 58).

Zou Rong's anti-Manchuism is mirrored by a fervent Han nationalism, one that fully participates in the Yellow Emperor symbolism that Lu Xun also used in “Inscription on My Portrait.” The foreword follows Zhang Taiyan's convention of marking the Ming fall, expressed in exclusively ethno-national terms: it is dated “the 260th year after the fall of the state (*wangguo* 亡国) of the Great Han Nation (*huang Han minzu* 皇汉民族).” Zou, like Zhang, is extremely explicit about Han nation-statism. Throughout the text he addresses his compatriots (*tongbao* 同胞), lamenting their lack of a consciousness of both race (*zhong xing* 种性) and state (*guo xing* 国性) (Zou 1958: 4). These “compatriots” are the Han, and their country is *Zhongguo*, “the China of

the Chinese of our Han race” (*ziji de Hanzhong Zhongguoren Zhongguo* 自己的汉种中国人中国)

(34). Zou links this idea of *Zhongguo* to a notion of inherent, ancestral territorial possession, and it is a place that ought to be populated solely by the Han nation:

China must be seen as the China of the Chinese (*Zhongguoren zhi Zhongguo* 中国人之中国). The land of China has been handed down to us from our first ancestor, the Yellow Emperor, from child to grandchild in an unbroken line. They were born on it, grew up on it, were fed by it, and clothed by it. We must guard it without passing it to others. There are alien inferior peoples who lay their hands on our China, encroach on every right of our great Han nation. It is up to our compatriots to drive them out, and at the risk of their lives to restore these rights. (Zou 1958: 23; trans. adapted from Zou 1968: 101)

Zou identifies *Zhongguo* as the “eighteen provinces” (*shiba xingsheng* 十八行省), a concept distinguishing “China proper” (*Zhongguo benbu* 中国本部) from the outer colonies of the Qing empire (28) (the PRC today consists of thirty-three province-level administrative divisions). In other words, Zou Rong’s *Zhongguo* did not include places such as Mongolia, Xinjiang, or Tibet. Nor did it include regions in the northeast: Heilongjiang, Jilin, Shengjing (Shenyang): these were the Manchus’ “auspicious lands,” the “land of the nomads” (17).

While Zou’s greatest enmity is reserved for the Manchus, precisely the same logic of ethno-national boundary drawing is applied to the other ethnicities that would come to form the People’s Republic. This is laid out in detail in Chapter Four, entitled “For Revolution Race Must Be Clearly Distinguished” (*Geming bi pou qing renzhong* 革命必剖清人种). In order to fulfil the promise of his chapter heading, Zou divides the peoples of Asia according to a racial scheme.¹² The “yellow race” (*huangzhong* 黄种) breaks down into the races of *Zhongguo* (*Zhongguo renzhong* 中国人种), which further subdivides into the Han race (explicitly labelled as the people of *Zhongguo*

¹² Zou Rong was not unique in this. Other writers of the time were also invested in constructing racial schema of Asian peoples. Liu Shippei, for example, did so in his 1904 *Book of Expulsion* (Zarrow 2012: 174).

[*Zhongguoren*]), and then “others,” which includes Tibetans (*Xizangren* 西藏人), Koreans (*Chaoxianren* 朝鲜人), Japanese (*Ribenren* 日本人), etc. (26). Chinese national belonging could thus not be determined by a racial schema alone, as Japanese and Tibetans both fell under the broader category of the “yellow” and “Chinese” races.

Zou therefore stressed the importance of “China proper,” the homeland of the Han, who were “precisely our compatriots,” and the Han’s glorious history of global migration. The size of the Han population and its global civilizational influence through this migration becomes a point of ethno-national pride:

Those who emigrated beyond the Great Wall and into Qinghai and Tibet amount to over 10 million. Not less than three or four million have crossed over into Japan, or in the North encroached on the Russian border on the East bank of the Amur. They have penetrated to the south, and entered Annam, Cochin, Cambodia, Siam, Burma and the Malayan Peninsula. They have travelled beyond into the Pacific, to Hawaii, the United States, Canada, Peru and Brazil. the southern archipelago and gone into the Philippines, to Java, Borneo, Australia and Europe. (17; trans. Zou 1968: 108)

Like Japan and Korea, Qinghai and Tibet are conceived of as foreign places to which the Han Chinese have emigrated from “China proper,” as foreign to the organic concept of the Chinese nation-state as Japan or even the United States. They may be part of the “races of China,” but in no sense are they part of *Zhongguo*.

Zou Rong and Zhang Taiyan were closely connected in Lu Xun’s mind. Lu Xun remarked that one of the reasons he knew of Zhang Taiyan in the first place was because he wrote the preface to *The Revolutionary Army*, and one of Zhang’s poems that Lu Xun reproduces in his essay is Zhang’s ode to Zou Rong on the occasion of the latter cutting his queue (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 565-566). Lu Xun mentions Zou Rong in his work on several occasions, and always with great admiration (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 234; Lu Xun 2005: 4: 131-132). He does not receive as much attention as Zhang Taiyan, but this is of course understandable given both Zou’s premature death

and Zhang's personal connection with Lu Xun. Nevertheless, the two are treated with the same sense of respect, and for the same reasons. We cannot fail to notice the significance of the fact that, while Lu Xun vocally and repeatedly disagreed with Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, the nationalist intellectuals who most readily met his approval were Zhang Taiyan and Zou Rong, both of whom were known primarily (in Zou Rong's case, only) for their anti-Manchu ethno-nationalist stance.

1.5 Nation and State in Lu Xun's Writing

Lu Xun, as a literary writer, was by no means required to present the sort of coherent argument demanded by a political polemic and the question of nation in his work is, like much of his writing, fraught with ambivalence. Nevertheless, it would be patently inaccurate to suggest that no tangible discussion of these questions exists. We have already seen that in his formative, pre-revolution years his anti-Manchu political rhetoric was explicit and strongly tied to the prevailing revolutionary nationalist discourse of the time. But how did Lu Xun approach the problem of nation and ethnicity elsewhere in his writing?

In 1908, while he was in Japan, Lu Xun published two essays that dealt with issues of nation in one way or another: "On the Power of Mara Poetry" (*Moluo shili shuo* 摩罗诗力说), and "Toward a Refutation of Malevolent Voices" (*Po e sheng lun* 破恶声论). Scholars have traced a number of strands of Lu Xun's thought back to these influential pieces (Kowallis calls "Mara Poetry" an "early manifesto for his entire literary career"), including the genesis of his discourse on the national character (Kowallis 2006: 85; Cheung 2012: 411). In "Mara Poetry," Lu Xun begins with a discussion of the decline and ultimate demise of once glorious civilizations, whose fate is then linked directly to China's.

Lu Xun's hope, as expressed in both "Mara Poetry" and "Malevolent Voices," is that a lone figure of inspiration and genius will rise up to rouse the masses: "While I do not expect such a feat from the populace at large (*dazhong* 大众), I cherish the hope that one or two scholars will take a stand, setting an example for the rest and affording the people (*ren* 人) a chance to escape oblivion" (Lu Xun 2005: 8: 25; trans. Lu Xun 2011: 40). If such a person emerges, he continues, then "the people of China (*Zhongguo zhi ren* 中国之人) may yet be spared the terrible fate of national extinction" (Lu Xun 2005: 8: 26; trans. Lu Xun 2011: 43). "Mara Poetry" discusses a number of examples of such people, including the Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi and the Polish poets Juliusz Słowacki and Adam Mickiewicz. Lu Xun writes that these poets, each with their own "national styles" (*guo zhi tese* 国之特色) (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 68),

sang forth with mighty voices that they might arouse their countrymen (*guoren* 国人) to a new life and to make their nations (*guo*) great in the world. But to whom shall we turn in searching for men of their like on the soil of China (*Hua tu* 华土)? (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 101; trans. Lu Xun, forthcoming)

As we can see from these quotations, Lu Xun uses a number of terms that are loaded with potential implications about the nation. Paul Foster has scoured the essay to collect them all: they range from "national character" (*guominxing*) and "national spirit" (*guomin jingshen* 国民精神) to "national essence" (*guocui*) and "patriotic poets" (*aiguo shiren* 爱国诗人) (Foster 2006: 82). In "Mara Poetry," Lu Xun favors variations on *guo* (including *Zhongguo*) and *guomin*, revealing a clear debt to Liang Qichao's term. The term *minzu* is notably scarce, used only in a few constructions like "Slavic peoples" (*Silafu minzu* 斯拉夫民族), and never with regard to China or the Chinese. Leo Lee remarks of the essay that "his evocations of Byron, Shelley, Pushkin, and Petofe were intended for a contemporary Chinese audience – a vaguely defined collectivity which constitutes the Chinese nation and people" (Lee 1987: 70). Vague, certainly; but can we identify

who might be *excluded* from these amorphous concepts of nation when we consider the problem from the perspective of non-Han peoples and the ethno-national politics of Lu Xun's intellectual predecessors?

This issue of seeming ambiguity over who or what constitutes the nation becomes all the more acute when we examine Lu Xun's most famous works. Let us take, for example, one of the archetypal scenes of Lu Xun's fiction: the iron house metaphor, from the preface to his 1922 collection of stories, *A Call to Arms* (*Na han* 呐喊). In this metaphorical dilemma, recounted to his fellow Zhang Taiyan disciple Qian Xuantong after Qian had urged Lu Xun to return to writing, we see one of the recurring images of Lu Xun's fiction – that of the individual calling the crowd to action. The iron house metaphor was recounted as follows:

Imagine an iron house: without windows or doors, utterly indestructible, and full of sound sleepers – all about to suffocate to death. Let them die in their sleep, and they will feel nothing. Is it right to cry out, to rouse the light sleepers among them, causing them inconsolable agony before they die? (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 441; trans. Lu Xun 2009: 19).

If this is to be read as an allegory of the nation, the question is: who are the people in the iron house? Are they a *guomin*, a *minzu*? Do they represent *Zhongguo*? A standard (though as Lee rightly argues, reductive) reading of the iron house metaphor is that it may be “taken as a symbol of the structure of traditional Chinese culture and society” (Lee 1987: 86-88), a suffocating structure that oppresses those who are contained within it. The question this raises, then, is what about people who are not subject to or connected with that culture? Are those people – Hui Muslims, Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans – free from the constraints of the iron house? Are they in their own, separate iron houses? We cannot be certain, but we may infer that if the iron house is read as a prison of traditional *Chinese* culture, in the limited sense, its inhabitants are solely those who are bound by that culture.

Lu Xun was ultimately persuaded to re-enter the fray, and it was then that his bonds to a discourse of national character were forged in earnest. Part of his motivation for this intellectual project was his perception that the political revolution of 1911 had been insufficient: “The first revolution was to expel the Manchus, which was easy to achieve. The next stage of reform was for the people of the nation (*guomin*) to change their fundamentally negative characteristics, but this they were unwilling to do. So, after this, the most important thing was to reform the national character” (Lu Xun 2005: 11: 31-32). This viewpoint also resonates with Lu Xun’s appraisal of Zhang Taiyan: he lauded his initial anti-Manchu revolutionary spirit, but chastised his failure to engage in a deeper critique of Chinese culture after the revolution itself. The immediate origins of the national character concept as conceived by Lu Xun were, therefore, predicated on an ethno-exclusive basis: only once the expulsion of the Manchu outsider was achieved could the Chinese turn to the more pressing task of critiquing the (Han) national self.

Though there are many of Lu Xun’s works that are said to explore the question of national character, “The True Story of Ah Q” (*A Q Zhengzhuan* 阿 Q 正传) is his most famous fictional engagement with the issue. The plot of “Ah Q” is well-known and need not be recounted here; for the present purposes it will suffice to note that the character of Ah Q has come to represent the “staple categories of a long-standing missionary discourse about Chinese character” that include “avarice, cowardice, and callousness” (Liu 1995: 46). The interpretation of Ah Q on an allegorical level was almost immediate: Ah Q came to be seen, in one sense or another, as a “crystallization of Chinese qualities,” a “national type,” and a “‘composite photo’ of Chinese qualities” (Foster 2001: 144). Both Zhou Zuoren and Hu Shi played key roles in laying down the now standard reading of Ah Q as a representation of national character (Chou 2002: 1058), as did Lu Xun himself (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 150).

A story such as “Ah Q” could be read in an attempt to define what kind of nation we are discussing in terms of the text itself. One could highlight, for instance, the focus on Chinese textual history in the discussion of biographical naming conventions, the ironic remarks on the Romanization of the Chinese script that had brought the “national essence” into decline, references to filial piety and Confucian reverence, or to the Shang, Zhou, and Qin dynasties (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 512-515, 519-520, 524-525). One could do the same with “Diary of a Madman,” highlighting the story’s focus on Confucian principles as the root of society’s ills. But what is *not* in Lu Xun’s fiction is as relevant to us here as what is, as this delimits the definition of nation as it applies to his writing. This is a point about what is missing, about absence: one may scour “The True Story of Ah Q,” but a reference to non-Han ethnicities and their cultures is not to be found. When the narrator tells us that Ah Q is “proof of the global superiority of China’s spiritual civilization (*Zhongguo jingshen wenming* 中国精神文明),” (524) we can only conclude that the spiritual civilization being discussed consists of the kind of “national essence” traits identified by Zhang Taiyan: cultural and historical characteristics associated with the Han people.

Since the answer appears to be self-evident, subsequent scholarship has declined to ask questions about the implications of “nation” in “Ah Q.” Here we may turn to the summary judgment offered by Jameson (1986): that Ah Q is “China itself,” and the villagers of Weizhuang are “also China,” in the allegorical sense (74). But if Ah Q is “China,” then what kind of China? A racial China? A cultural China? A statist China? Could Ah Q be non-Han – a Tibetan, a Uyghur, a Mongol?¹³ The question is absurd, but its very absurdity draws attention to the implicit categories and understandings of nation that are often taken for granted when reading Lu Xun. If we refuse

¹³ There has been some scholarly discussion of Ah Q’s potential “Manchu-ness” (Tsu 2005: 125; Shih 2001: 77). The more likely explanation for any potential connection between Ah Q and Manchu-ness, however, is Lu Xun’s conviction that enslavement at the hands of the Manchus was responsible for and reflected the degradation of the Han.

to accept the possibility that the inhabitants of Weizhuang may have included people other than the Han, then we must face the embedded assumptions about nation that are at play in the discourse of national character. This is not the multi-ethnic nation envisioned by early thinkers like Liang Qichao or Kang Youwei. If national character represents a nation, then it is an ethnically and culturally homogenous whole, centered around the idea of the Han and a limited definition of Chinese civilization/culture.

From “Mara Poetry” on, Lu Xun made frequent use of state-related terms, in particular *guomin*. But did this term signify to Lu Xun the same thing it did to Liang Qichao – a marker of multi-ethnic state belonging under Han dominance, different *min* under one *guo*? The answer seems to be no. However vague his conceptions of nation may have been, Lu Xun used terms associated with the state (*guo*, *guomin*, *Zhongguo*) to signify “national” cultural issues that had nothing to do with non-Han peoples. In other words, his use of state- and nation-based terminology tended to signify the same thing. Lu Xun may have adopted Liang Qichao’s discourse of national character, but he did not follow Liang’s vision of a multi-ethnic Chinese state-empire. In an essay written in 1936, Lu Xun expressed the hope that a full translation of Arthur Smith’s work would be undertaken, so that readers may reflect on it and “come to prove what, after all, a Chinese person (*Zhongguoren*) is” (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 649). The ambiguity remains, but if Lu Xun’s understanding followed Arthur Smith, Zhang Taiyan, and Zou Rong, then we are solely discussing the question of who a *Zhongguoren* is in relation to the Han, an unequivocally mono-ethnic version of what constitutes *Zhongguo* and the *guomin*.

The turn towards a deeper cultural introspection of the nation’s issues in the form of national character almost by definition had to be ethnic-exclusive, as that national character had to be comprised of concrete and identifiable elements of behavior, culture, history, and so on that

were limited to a particular people. The national character had to be particular to the “Chinese” – it could not, and was not intended to, account for the character of say, Indians, Koreans, or Japanese, in the same way that it could not account for the character of Tibetans, Mongolians, Uyghurs, or even Manchus.

In fact, Lu Xun actually claimed on occasion that the core defects of the national character came about precisely *because* of certain other non-Han peoples. In a letter to You Bingqi 尤炳圻 in 1936, he wrote that the greatest asset of the Japanese was that “they were never invaded by the Mongols,” unlike the Chinese, a settled farming culture that had been historically “subject to the ravages of nomadic peoples” (Lu Xun 2005: 14: 410). Elsewhere, he argued that repeated defeat at the hands of alien peoples was responsible for passing down a sense of “servility” (*nuxing*) and he linked the insular, “spiritual victory”-style mentality of refusing to adopt foreign ideas to the numerous conquests that had befallen China since the Song Dynasty (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 60; Lu Xun 2005: 1: 209-211). This viewpoint goes some way to accounting for Lu Xun’s unusually persistent interest in the Manchu occupation. Unlike other nationalist intellectuals who were uninterested in the Manchus after their removal from power, Lu Xun saw Han subjugation under the foreign Qing as fundamentally tied to the origins and nature of the national character. This point is well made by Abe Kenya and Wu Jun (1996), who argue that, throughout his life, Lu Xun saw anti-Manchism and critique of the national character as intricately connected (27-28). Thus, not only did national character exclude non-Han ethnicities, its very existence was predicated on the Han/other divide.

In reading Lu Xun’s work, we must work with inference and implication, but other contemporaries who were interested in national character laid out the overlapping of national and statist notions much more explicitly. One such figure was Chen Duxiu, whose critique of the

national character Lu Xun's work closely mirrored (Foster 2006: 52-58). Chen used the term *minzuxing* 民族性 for national character, while still discussing it in the context of the state, particularly in essays such as "My Patriotism" (*Wo zhi aiguo zhuyi* 我之爱国主义) (Chen 2009: 1: 231-236). This was not unintentional conflation; in 1904, Chen clarified these points in his essay "On the State" (*Shuo guojia* 说国家):

A state must have a specific people (*renmin*). The state is founded by the people: though there is land, if it has no people it is simply a wasteland. How could it be a state? But the people of a state must be a nation (*minzu*) of the same kind/race (*zhonglei* 种类) with the same history, customs, and language. There is absolutely no sense to the idea that several nations living jumbled up in one state can harmoniously coexist. It is for this reason that all the states of the West are composed of a single people (*yi zhong ren* 一种人) who have founded an independent state and do not submit to the rule of other peoples (*ta zhong ren* 他种人). This is called "nation-statism" (*minzuguojia zhuyi* 民族国家主义). If we only speak of statism (*guojia zhuyi*) and not nation-statism, then to whom does the state belong? It is only because nations were originally different that separate states were founded. If we do not speak of nationalism, then [we are speaking of] Great Harmony within the four seas (*sihai datong* 四海大同), all under heaven are one family; why would there be a need [to delineate] this border or that boundary and establish states? Seen from this perspective, that every state must have a specific people is something we must be absolutely clear on. (Chen 2009: 1: 45)

Lu Xun is never as explicit as his contemporary Chen Duxiu on his views of the relationship between nation and state, but there is little in his writing to suggest that he did not likewise equate *Zhongguo* solely with the Han. As Connor (1994) remarks on the idea of the nation-state: "To ask a Japanese *kamikaze* pilot or a *banzai-charge* participant whether he was about to die for *Nippon* or for the Nipponese people would be an incomprehensible query since the two blurred into an inseparable whole" (96). In Lu Xun's case, it is similarly impossible to draw distinctions between the nation and the state, as the Han and the state to which they belonged – *Zhongguo* – occupied the same discursive space.

Since his death, Lu Xun has been associated with the *minzu* nation. This association, was, in fact, immediate: after he passed away, a banner reading “Soul of the Nation” (*minzu hun* 民族魂) was draped over his coffin, a phrase that has continued to be applied to him both in academic studies and the popular imagination (Huang 2013: 3-13). Lu Xun is regularly described in both Western and Chinese scholarship by some form of “national” designation that reflects his status as the nation’s pre-eminent writer, “revered not only as a nation-builder but also, and perhaps more importantly, as the voice of the nation’s conscience” (Davies 2013: 1). However, despite this identification with the *minzu* nation, Lu Xun himself did not favor the term in his discussions of national character. According to Chi Rui’s (2016) analysis, Lu Xun only used the term *minzuxing* a handful of times (eleven, by her count), and he used it largely to refer to what she calls China’s historically accumulated “inherent national spirit,” or in other words the “national essence” championed by conservative ideologues. This is as opposed to *guominxing*, Lu Xun’s preferred formula, which denoted both a nation’s positive and negative traits (i.e., traits of other nations that should be adopted, and Chinese traits that should be discarded).

On the surface, the idea of *guominxing* would seem to be state-based both etymologically and theoretically in its ties to Liang Qichao’s state-centric *guomin*. But if we were discussing Liang Qichao’s *guomin*, it would have to include multiple non-Han ethnicities. Liang’s *guomin*, as we have seen, “meant an identity defined by the state” and was in itself an intellectual weapon used to counter the ethno-nationalism of the revolutionaries (Zarrow 2012: 110). Lu Xun’s *guomin* was effectively the opposite of Liang’s, as we can identify it only with the Han. As Lu Xun once wrote, “the Han will always be the Han; when they are independent they are *guomin*, after they have fallen they are ‘slaves of a fallen state’” (Lu Xun 2005: 7: 263). To Lu Xun, the nation and state were one and the same: the Han were the *guomin*.

1.6 Lu Xun's Writing on Non-Han Ethnicities

While it would be largely fruitless to attempt a consideration of Lu Xun's creative writing in relation to non-Han ethnicities, he does, very occasionally, refer elsewhere in his work to the other peoples and places that would eventually become a part of the Chinese state. Sometimes, these are idle references that reveal very little: in an essay on the subject of gossip, for instance, he remarks that old women in the alleyways of Shanghai "wouldn't be very interested in listening if you were to tell them that some woman in Gansu was having an affair or that a woman in Xinjiang was remarrying" (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 344, trans. Lu Xun 2017: 96). Elsewhere, such references are more substantial, and more explicit about the place of other peoples in relation to the state.

Next to the Manchus, the Mongols receive the most attention. Like Zou Rong, who was equally forceful in insisting on the non-Chinese nature of the Mongols, Lu Xun draws a time-honored boundary between the settled, farming culture of the Han and the nomadic militarism of peoples on China's periphery (Zou 1958: 23-24; Lu Xun 2005: 14: 410). The chief reason for his interest is, however, that the Mongols, like the Manchus, were once 'outside' conquerors, and as such their conquest illustrates China's historical weaknesses. The Mongol conquest also suggests to Lu Xun historical antecedents for China's modern oppression at the hands of Western imperialism. This is what he calls the "feast of human flesh" that China lays on for its invaders, which was first laid on for the Tuoba, the Jurchen, the Mongols, and the Manchus, after which the time had come for China to surrender itself to Western invasion (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 226-228). Western imperialists, in this sense, represent merely the latest in a long line of foreign invaders – but they are all equally construed as "foreigners" (*waiguoren*) distinct from *Zhongguo*. As he writes elsewhere, "our China (*women Zhongguo*) has been attacked many times by other people

with weapons [...] the Mongols and Manchus used bows and arrows; and people from other countries (*bie guo ren* 别国人) used guns and cannons” (Lu Xun 2005: 7: 325).

Lu Xun is never ambiguous about these distinctions: Batu Khan, leader of major Mongol expeditions into Europe, was a “Mongol” (*Mengguren* 蒙古人); not a “Chinese” (*Zhonghuaren* 中华人) like Gaozong 高宗, emperor of the Song Dynasty when it fell to the Jurchens (Lu Xun 2005: 7: 192; Lu Xun 2005: 4: 327). Though Lu Xun’s comments on the Mongols are largely made with the intention of highlighting China’s historical weakness and drawing parallels with Western conquest, they also convey a forceful position on the relationship between the Mongols and the state called *Zhongguo*:

When I was young, I knew that in China (*Zhongguo*) after “Pangu split the Earth from the Heavens” there were the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors... [then there was] the Song Dynasty, the Yuan Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty, and “Our Great Qing.” When I turned twenty, I also heard that “our” Genghis Khan had conquered Europe, which was “our” most illustrious era. Only when I turned twenty-five did I realize that this most illustrious era that was supposedly “ours” was in fact when the Mongols conquered China and we were their slaves. And only in August of this year [1934], when I was flipping through three histories of Mongolia to look something up, did I learn that the Mongol conquest of “Russia” and their invasion of Hungary and Austria in fact preceded their conquest of the whole of China. The Genghis of that time wasn’t yet our Khan; in fact the Russians hold seniority as their claim to enslavement is older than ours, so it should be them saying “When our Genghis Khan conquered China, it was our most illustrious era.” (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 142)

Lu Xun is dismissive of claiming Mongol conquests as “ours,” as the glory of *Zhongguo* or of the Han. The Mongol conquest was, on the contrary, the shame of *Zhongguo*. His comments were not made in the interests of some blinkered racial or ethno-national animosity – the critique is aimed at the weakness of “us.” At the same time, however, it also emphasizes “our” delusion, drawing a clear distinction between Chinese and non-Chinese, and underscoring the absurdity of nationalist/statist assertions that sought to gloss over the painfully evident differences between peoples – such as the Mongols – claimed in the political realm to be equally part of *Zhongguo*.

One instance in which Lu Xun does discuss minority peoples is the brief – but revealing – essay “The Civilizing Influence” (*Wanghua* 王化). This piece was written in 1933 in response to various incidents of minority unrest that had occurred that year. Lu Xun lists these events and the Guomindang (GMD) responses to them: the widespread unrest in Xinjiang (as part of which the breakaway First East Turkestan Republic was founded) and the dispatching of Huang Musong 黄慕松 to the region as “pacification commissioner”; the “Mongolian Relief Committee” established by the GMD after the Japanese occupation of parts of Inner Mongolia; and the 13th Dalai Lama’s expansion into Xikang and Qinghai and the GMD’s co-opting of the Panchen Lama to oppose it. In the wry fashion typical of his essays, Lu Xun offers a caustic commentary on the GMD’s state-building efforts, or as he ironically phrases it, their “civilizing” mission. He is particularly scornful about the government’s savage response to a Yao rebellion in Guangxi:

But the most magnanimous policy of civilizing is surely the approach taken to the Yao in Guangxi. According to the *Evening News*, this “magnanimous policy” entailed killing three thousand out of thirty thousand Yao and the dispatching of three planes to the Yao dwellings to “lay eggs,” so that, “overawed by these heavenly gods and generals, they would willingly lay down their arms and surrender.” Later, Yao representatives were selected to come and visit the city in order to show them the culture of the superior country (*shang guo* 上国) – for instance the might of the red-turbaned Sikhs on the main roads [i.e., the British-controlled Sikh colonial police in Shanghai].

And what the red-turbaned Sikhs said was: Don’t cause such a clamor!

These “barbarians” who have long since submitted to our rule have been causing quite a clamor lately, and this is because they have their grievances. When the civilizing influence is at its height, “you campaign in the east and the western barbarians complain; you campaign in the south and the northern barbarians complain.” This is of course natural.

But we are still rushing east and running west, attacking south and striking north, not slacking off for a moment. Though it requires a bit of effort, the “spiritual victory” belongs to us.

[...]

Ah, what a wonderful age we common people live in. All we can do is listen up, cheer for joy, and rejoice at the news!

This article was censored by the News Inspection Office and wasn’t published. Fortunately, since I am not a Yao and I live in the foreign concession, I can avoid

having a Chinese-made plane come to “drop eggs” on me. However, “don’t cause such a clamor” applies without exception, so I am not even allowed to “shout for joy” – I must remain completely silent and play dead to save the state! (Lu Xun 2005: 5: 143-144)

The use of the term “spiritual victory” here cannot pass unnoticed. This is Ah Q’s infamous defect – the rationalizing of weakness as strength. In all of the incidents cited by Lu Xun, China’s punitive excursions against minority peoples are as Ah Q’s numerous attempts to gain status and self-respect by beating and humiliating others. Of course, all of Ah Q’s attempts end in miserable failure, and his defeat must be reinterpreted as success through the unique logic of “spiritual victory.” Through this parallel, Lu Xun offers a drily disparaging appraisal of the military and political campaigns to absorb minorities into the state.

Lu Xun’s tone, ironic as it may be, certainly does not convey the impression that pacifying minorities and bringing them into the fold was a noble mission or a vital political goal, as it would have been for Liang Qichao (or post-revolution Zhang Taiyan), to whom state-building and the integrity of the Republic was of the utmost importance. On the contrary, Lu Xun characterizes the GMD’s state-building attempts as the ruthless violence of colonialism, which he is fortunate enough to escape by virtue of ‘not being Yao.’ Though he rarely discusses China’s minority politics, his attitude is unsurprising, as it is consistent with his abhorrence of all imperialism, be it the Mongol and Manchu conquests of China, the evils of contemporary Western colonialism, or China’s Ah Q-esque nascent state-building projects.

Since the relationship between modern Chinese and Tibetan literatures is the primary concern of this project, a comment on Lu Xun’s thoughts on Tibetans or Tibet would certainly be appropriate. Unlike Zou Rong and Zhang Taiyan, however, Lu Xun seemingly had little to say about Tibetans. His comments on the Mongols and the Manchus were frequent due to his

conviction that their historical relationship with China had something fundamentally important to say about Chinese weaknesses. Since the Tibetans had never conquered China (Lu Xun largely discounted pre-Song conquests) there was likely nothing they, as a people, could symbolically illustrate in this regard. Liang Qichao, who did indeed comment on the status of Tibetans, once argued that a Chinese nationalism based on anti-Manchuism would logically also have to be anti-Mongol, anti-Miao, anti-Muslim, and anti-Tibetan (Levenson 1959: 161-162). We may not be able to determine with any clarity what Lu Xun thought of Tibetans' relationship to *Zhongguo*, but we can speculate that a version of Liang's logic applies. Be it in historical, ethnic, or other terms, Lu Xun consistently situated the Mongols and Manchus as distinct from "our China," and there is therefore little that would lead us to conclude that Tibetans, whose historical, geographic, and ethnic differences are equally apparent, would inevitably form a part of *Zhongguo* or be included under the rubric of the *guomin*.

During his lifetime, Lu Xun wasn't work wasn't speaking *to* Tibetans, either. It is unlikely that Lu Xun's writing circulated in Tibetan areas prior to the founding of the PRC, and Tibetan writing of the time certainly reflects no awareness of or interest in Lu Xun (as we will see in subsequent chapters, this did not happen until decades later). Even if a hypothetical Tibetan reader of the time had wanted to read Lu Xun's work it would have been impossible unless they could read Chinese. Despite the vast number of translations of Lu Xun's work into other languages, many of which were produced very rapidly (after its completion in 1922, "Ah Q" was translated into Russian in 1925, French in 1926, English in 1927, and Czech in 1937) there were almost certainly no translations of Lu Xun into Tibetan until years after the founding of the People's Republic. The earliest Tibetan version of "The True Story of Ah Q" I have been able to find was not published until 1979, followed a year later by "Diary of a Madman" (Lu Xun 1979; Lu Xun 1980). During

the 1980s a trickle of Lu Xun's essays and speeches were translated and published in the new journal *Tibetan Art and Literature (Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal)*,¹⁴ but access to Lu Xun's writing in Tibetan translation remains scarce even to this day. By the time they actually were translated it was hardly even necessary, since at that point Tibet had already been integrated into the PRC and intellectuals who subsequently wished to engage with Lu Xun's work by and large could (and indeed did) read it in the original Chinese. As with other "minority" peoples who would later be incorporated into the Chinese state, there is simply no connection between Lu Xun's thoughts on nation and the Tibetan people: they were not considered by Lu Xun to form a part of the *guomin* or of *Zhongguo*, and Tibetans, for their part, had no interest in or even awareness of Lu Xun's work at the time he was writing.

1.7 The Literary/Political Divide

The truly divergent nature of the literary discourse of nation comes when we set it in relief against its political counterpart, and moreover when we compare it to the subsequent course of Chinese history. By the time that Lu Xun came to write his most influential works on the national character, the mainstream political discourse of the time had long since embraced a multi-ethnic conception of China. Like many intellectuals and activists of the time, the founder of the Republic Sun Yat-sen began his career as an anti-Manchu agitator, but like Liang Qichao, he soon revised his opinion and championed instead a Han-dominated, multi-ethnic modern Chinese state. After the revolution, Sun consistently advocated a China of "Five Races Harmoniously Joined" (*wuzu gonghe* 五族共和), a broad and essentializing ethos of ethnic unity that built upon Qing

¹⁴ Lu Xun's 1927 lecture "The Old Tunes are Finished" (*Lao diaozi yijing chang wan* 老调子已经唱完) appeared in a 1986 issue of the journal *Tibetan Art and Literature (Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal)*. This was followed in 1987 by a translation of "Teachers" (*Daoshi* 导师), and in 1988 by "Snow" (*Xue* 雪), from *Wild Grass (Yecao* 野草). The translations may be found in *Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal* (Tibetan Art and Literature), 4 (1986), 2 (1987), and 1 (1988).

taxonomies of its imperial subjects. China's nationalist leaders essentially attempted to parlay Qing imperial constituencies into peoples and places that could constitute parts of a new republic – in other words, Sun and other nationalist leaders “proposed an empire without an emperor” (Crossley 2005: 138-139). China's success in achieving this feat makes it the only one of the collapsing Eurasian land empires that maintained its geographical boundaries under the new guise of a modern state in the international world order (Crossley 2005: 138-139). As Kirby (2005) puts it, “the Qing fell but its empire remained” (109).

It was in February 1912, on the day of formal abdication, that the concept of the “five races” received official status. The Qing abdication announcement expressed a hope that the “territories of the five ethnic groups – Manchu, Mongol, Han, Muslim, and Tibetan – would unite to form one great Republic of China” (quoted in Rhoads 2000: 226). Sun Yat-sen's inaugural presidential address in 1912 likewise stressed territorial unity and echoed the idea of the five races coming together to form a single *minzu* (Zarrow 2012: 286-287; Leibold 2007: 38). From there, this conception of China was recognized as one of the official names for the new republic (“The Republic of Five Races” [*Wuzu gongheguo* 五族共和国]) and was symbolically enshrined in both the national anthem and the national flag (Zarrow 2012: 225-226).

The flag provoked some debate as there were those advocating for the use of an eighteen-star banner with each star representing a province, but this was the same eighteen provinces referred to by Zou Rong – i.e., it excluded Tibet, Xinjiang, and other borderland areas. Instead, a flag of five horizontal bars was chosen, each bar representing one of the five races, and this served as China's national flag from 1912 to 1927 (Zarrow 2012: 226-230). In an effort to cement the place of minorities in the new state, the Republic also ratified Laws of Favorable Treatment in 1912 guaranteeing that minorities would receive the same property rights and personal protections

as Han Chinese (Crossley 2005: 147). The multi-ethnic definition of China was further enshrined in Sun Yat-sen's lectures on the Three Principles of the People (*san min zhuyi* 三民主义). Sun pushed for racial assimilation along the lines of the American "melting pot," while asserting that, in the Chinese case, it was legitimate to consider nation and state as coterminous (Zarrow 2012: 287; Leibold 2007: 43).

At the time, despite international recognition of the Republic's borders, this stance was purely aspirational, as the Republican government did not actually control the many minority areas and peoples it claimed. But those claims were maintained consistently from Sun Yat-sen through Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 and Mao Zedong 毛泽东. James Leibold (2007) has shown that there were competing and overlapping political narratives of nation in Republican China (some racial, some historical, some cultural, and so on) and contesting definitions of the *Zhonghua minzu*, but all of these narratives, in one way or another, sought to normalize the existence of other *minzus* within the Chinese state (113-146). There was no longer any question or debate about whether or not these people were part of the state, as there had been in the late Qing with theorists like Zhang Taiyan. Communist leaders had to face the added question of class in their own definitions of the *Zhonghua minzu*, but again, the inclusion of non-Han ethnicities as fundamental components of the state was beyond question (147-176). Under Mao Zedong, something like Liang Qichao's national empire did indeed become a reality, and the Republican government of Lu Xun's time in fact claimed even greater swathes of minority territory than the Communists as they asserted China's rights over what is now the independent republic of Mongolia.

In the political realm, there were persistent declarations that China was unambiguously a multi-ethnic state. However, we cannot assume that literary discussions or representations of nation held the same significations. To Lu Xun, discussions of "national" problems entailed

amorphous issues of (“Han”) culture and society that had nothing to do with how to conceive of a multi-ethnic *Zhongguo*. There is seemingly nothing in his writing to suggest that his use of national signifiers reflected what those terms were being made to mean in mainstream political discourse. Rarely do we find in literary writings a concern with imagining the kind of multi-ethnic state discussed by Liang Qichao and the political leaders of the time.

Literature was an anomaly in this regard, as other fields – particularly scholarship – were very interested in “minority” cultures and were making active efforts to rationalize and reify the multi-ethnic state. Litzinger (2000) has investigated how modern ethnology (*minzuxue* 民族学) came into being at this time under the guidance of Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 and other May Fourth intellectuals who saw it as the best medium for studying non-Han cultures, identifying and examining a multi-cultural Chinese “society” (*shehui* 社会), and writing non-Han ethnicities into the national fabric (90-93, 107-109; Leibold 2007: 131-135). In the same vein, Lydia Liu (2012) has shown how folklorists in the early twentieth century launched the discipline of *minsuxue* 民俗学, borrowing colonial methods to study the “primitive cultures” of minority ethnicities and thereby know better how to rule them. Tibetans were also a part of these new ventures. Translated Republican government journals sought to proselytize the new state to Tibetans in their own language, and there were ‘explorers’ such as Zhuang Xueben 庄学本 who traveled in Amdo in the mid-1930s documenting Tibetan dress and lifestyle with his camera and assembling his findings in ethnographic publications (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014).

By the Republican period even Zhang Taiyan, the flagbearer of Han ethno-nationalism, had entirely renounced his previous support for minorities’ rights to self-determination and had fully embraced an assimilationist, statist concept of China. As soon as the Qing dynasty fell, Zhang was issuing reassurances to Manchu students – who were reportedly seeking Japanese military

intervention – that they could become part of the new republic (Wong 1989: 84-85). In 1913, he was already lecturing in Changchun on the subject of “preserving all [Chinese] territory,” including the “three northeastern provinces” of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang (Zhang 2011: 126-128). In a move of no small irony, Yuan Shikai appointed Zhang as Frontier Commissioner to Manchuria in 1912 to secure the now Chinese border against Japanese and Russian interference (Wong 1989: 98-99). That Zhang failed in this endeavor due to increasing Japanese aggression does not matter: he was now convinced that Manchuria was part of the Republic. In proclamations that he issued following the Mukden Incident in 1931, Zhang declared Manchuria to be an integral part of the state and made territorial claims over the northeast on the basis of Ming and Han dynasty precedents (Wong 1989: 135-136).

Zhang was an ardent supporter of the new Republican regime, reportedly to the extent of requesting that his body be covered with the five-bar flag after his death (Wong 2006: 27). This seems fitting, as it was Zhang himself who coined the term for the Republic (*Zhonghua minguo*) in his essay “Explaining the Republic of China,” a fact that Lu Xun highlighted in one of his memorial pieces while expressing regret that too few people were aware of Zhang’s essay. Despite Zhang and other influential figures wholeheartedly embracing a Han-dominated, multi-ethnic state during the Republican period, there is no evidence that Lu Xun ever radically reevaluated his stance on nation and ethnicity or adopted an interest in broadening his consideration of *Zhongguo* and its problems to include non-Han peoples. In fact, as we have already seen, he was particularly harsh on Zhang for the direction his thought and activities had taken since the days of his anti-Manchu polemics. Chi Rui is right to say that Lu Xun’s use of the term *guominxing* was consistent throughout his life: it denoted negative national qualities, and those qualities were always strictly those of the Han alone (Chi 2016: 29).

As William Kirby (2005) writes in an article titled “When Did China Become China?”, the Qing “gave way not to one but to several Chinas, to at least four alternative conceptions of a republic, and to decades of contestation, still ongoing, as to what ‘China’ should or would be” (107). Putting aside the fraught question of what these “Chinas” refer to, we can perhaps suggest – rhetorically, at least – that we should consider literary interpretations of nation as yet another kind of “China.” Academic discussions of nation in early modern Chinese literature generally do not problematize the category, creating the impression that ideas about nation were fungible when it came to literary and political discourse. But this does not appear to have been the case. There were many “national” problems to consider in the Republican era, but one of the most pressing was the ethnic composition and territorial definition of the new state, a problem that politicians, militarists, academics, and others were actively engaged in resolving. This was not a central issue in literary discussions of nation, and in that sense literature was anomalous, an intellectual realm divorced from both the ideological and realpolitik concerns of political leaders.

This should not necessarily come as a surprise. Lu Xun had no love for the reactionary politics of the post-revolutionary governments, and “like most conscientious Chinese intellectuals of the time, he felt profoundly alienated from the political state” (Lee 1987: 134-135). Lu Xun said as much himself in a talk given in 1927, titled “The Divergence of Art and Politics” (*Wenyi yu zhengzhi de qitu* 文艺与政治的歧途), in which he described the artist’s role as being that of an unflinching critic of society: “I don’t know the views of all of you sitting here, but I figure they are not the same as the politicians’. Since politicians always blame the writer for ruining their social unity, such a biased view makes me unwilling to talk to them ever” (Lu Xun 2005: 7: 119; trans. Lu Xun 2017: 214). As a critical, creative, and experimental thinker, Lu Xun’s life goal did not match the “utilitarian temper of nationalism” adhered to by Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen (Lee

1987: 3). This distinction between art and politics is a significant one to make, because if we are to take seriously the idea that literature was a primary vehicle through which the nascent nation was being discussed and imagined, then Lu Xun was imagining a very different kind of *Zhongguo* from both the state that was being officially constructed in political literature and policy, and indeed the state that now exists.

1.8 Conclusion

It would not be accurate to suggest that political discourse, in contrast to literature, was always entirely clear and coherent on the problems of nation, state, and ethnicity. Nationalist intellectuals were playing a delicate balancing game that often wound up in a web of contradictions, emphasizing Han nationalism while simultaneously claiming ownership of non-Han territories and paying lip service to ideas of ethnic equality. What we can say with certainty, however, is that Chinese leaders had an obvious stake in finding some way for non-Han ethnicities to fit into the state, while literary writers were under no such obligation, and they chose to sidestep minority ethnic issues almost entirely. Literary discussions of nation ended up creating an exclusionary notion of the nation that focused on the limited interests of a constructed race/nation (Han) and a constructed civilization/culture at the expense of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural conception of Chinese statehood. This understanding of the new *Zhongguo* excluded peoples who had made up part of the Qing empire, who were claimed by the Republican government in the wake of the Qing fall, and who would forcibly be brought under Chinese rule by the PRC. National leaders from Sun Yat-sen through to Mao Zedong all advocated (and in Mao's case, realized) a state that incorporated different ethnicities. Yet we can only conclude that literary discussions of "national character" had little or nothing to say about the "character" of Mongols, Tibetans, Muslims, or any other of China's present "minority nationalities." If Lu Xun's

writing is to be interpreted as representing a concern with the question of nation, then we must conclude that this was not the form of nation or state being espoused by the political leaders of the era, and nor was it representative of the peoples, cultures, and civilizations that would eventually constitute China in its guise as the People's Republic.

This analysis shows us the benefits of looking at China with an eye towards its margins and how those margins can help us reshape our understanding of Chinese literature and China itself. National character and the literary imagination of China was, in one major sense, fundamentally out of step both with the political nationalism of its time and with the subsequent political reality of the Chinese state. In terms of our understanding of modern Chinese literature, this observation must lead us to re-evaluate the meaning of these questions across the course of the 20th century and beyond. If the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural notion of state is not present in Lu Xun's writings, then scholars' use of terms such as "national character" or "obsession with China" (Hsia 1961: 533-534) in connection with his literature implies a highly specific, limited kind of "national" character and a limited kind of "China." While few are explicit about these parameters (including Lu Xun), formulations such as "obsession with China" point towards an ethnically homogenous nation inhabiting a homogenous state. The People's Republic is none of these things, yet discussions of national issues in literature continue to take the referents of national signifiers for granted and discuss a kind of "China" that does not – and never did – exist. This is the nation-state of Zhang Taiyan, an organically whole state for the Han people.

When Lu Xun was declared to be the "Soul of the Nation" upon his death in 1936, it was not the same "nation" that he is now made to serve, a point succinctly revealed by an exhibition of his life and work held in 2012 at the Lhasa Museum in Tibet. The opening of the exhibition, organized in conjunction with the Shanghai Lu Xun Museum, was accompanied by laudatory

phrases on the “patriotic spirit” (*aiguo zhuyi jingshen* 爱国主义精神) of Lu Xun’s works. “The Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) are a great family,” announced the deputy director of the Lu Xun Museum, and “Lu Xun’s spirit is a shared treasure of the Chinese people” (“Lu Xun shengping yu chuanguo zhan” 2012) – a “Chinese people” that now includes Tibetans. As I have sought to argue here, the *minzu* emblazoned on Lu Xun’s coffin could signify nothing but the Han nation. Now, it is supposedly the *Zhonghua minzu*, the “Chinese people,” a term that covers each of the “Five Races” as well as fifty-one more. But when scholars (in China or the West) continue to describe Lu Xun in terms of his interest in national character or his obsession with China, it is certainly not the “Five Races” or the “great family” to which they refer.

At the dawn of modern Chinese literature, the subject of Tibet was of little concern to Lu Xun, and Tibetans played no significant role in formative literary debates on topics such as national character. Nor, at the time of his writing, were Tibetans interested in Lu Xun. As we will see, by the end of the century both of these situations had changed drastically. Tibetan intellectuals in the PRC launched discussions of nation that consciously paralleled May Fourth antecedents, and when Han Chinese writers came to address other “Chinese” ethnicities under the PRC, it represented a tortuous attempt to fit non-Han people into the new setting of a multi-ethnic state. In this sense, while we may talk about a continuity of concerns with “national” problems in modern Chinese literature, the context and referents of those concerns changed entirely in the post-PRC era. The modern literature of *Zhongguo*, in its initial guise, was thus an entirely different kind of “Chinese” literature from the one we have today.

Chapter 2: Döndrup Gyel and the Origins of Tibetan Literary

Nationalism in Modern China

For Tibetan readers, Döndrup Gyel (Don grub rgyal), the most renowned writer of modern Tibetan literature, requires no introduction. For almost anyone else in China, however, he most certainly does, because his language of composition makes his work virtually unknown outside of the Tibetan reading public. When a book of Chinese translations of Döndrup Gyel's short stories was published in 2008, a scene-setting introduction not unlike the present one had to be made for his potential new readers:

No matter whether it is in the field of fiction, poetry, essays, or the research of historical texts and the translation of literature, he made breakthrough achievements. [...] People say that he is the standard bearer of modern Tibetan literature, that he is the Tibetan Lu Xun 鲁迅, and I think that such a reputation is not at all exaggerated. (Don grub rgyal 2008: 2)

The fact that Döndrup Gyel would be compared to modern China's most celebrated writer and most renowned critic of national culture points us to the two concerns at the heart of this chapter: Döndrup Gyel's construction of a new conception of the Tibetan nation, and the question of how Tibetan literature relates to its new discursive surroundings in modern China.

Despite the fact that Döndrup Gyel is essentially unknown to Han Chinese readers, he lived and worked his entire life in the People's Republic. He was born in the village of Gurong Powa (*Dgu rong pho ba*) in Chentsa (*Gcan tsha*) county, Qinghai province, in 1953, three years after Qinghai had been incorporated into the newly founded PRC. He began primary level studies in his native area before moving to the Malho (*Rma lho*) Prefecture Nationalities Teacher Training School, from where he was selected to go to work at the Qinghai Radio Broadcasting Station in Xining in 1969. He continued his studies in Beijing, where he lived between 1971 and 1975 and

again from 1978 to 1984, before returning to Qinghai. In 1985, at the age of 32, Döndrup Gyel committed suicide at his then home in Chapcha (*Chab cha*).

The early decades of the People's Republic under Mao's rule saw little to no serious Tibetan literary production. A history of Tibetan-language literature in the PRC would largely reflect the timeline described in Chapter Three for Chinese-language literature on Tibet: some scattered texts appeared between the 1950s and 1970s, and it was not until the 1980s that a real body of literature emerged. Luran Hartley (2003) has detailed how China's first conference of minority writers, held in Beijing in 1956, featured only one Tibetan attendee (who wasn't even a writer) (123). Almost no fiction at all was published in Tibetan for the next 25 years, and while tentative poetic experiments were undertaken by figures such as Geshé Sherap Gyatso (Dge bshes shes rab rgya mtsho), these were primarily paeans to the Party that Hartley (2008) characterizes as rather "uninspired" (14-22). This is not a word that could ever be applied to the work Döndrup Gyel produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During his short lifetime he composed an extraordinary array of poems, essays, short stories, and academic studies, and his writing would prove to have a lasting and profound impact on the entire Tibetan literary world.

This impact came in many forms, but there is one way in particular that Döndrup Gyel left his mark: the creation of a radically new discourse of nation. I argue that Döndrup Gyel set out to restructure Tibetan literature around the organizing concept of nation, to create a distinctly *national* Tibetan literature. My reading of Döndrup Gyel's work will be eclectic, drawing from his poetry, fiction, and essays to form a unified vision of his intellectual project of Tibetan nationalism. My analysis breaks down the different aspects of this discourse: a critique of traditional culture, an emphasis on innovation and progress, interpretations of race and history, and his notion of

“national pride.” Lastly, I will consider how Tibetan-language scholarship has helped to establish Döndrup Gyel’s canonical status and his relationship to nationalist thinking.

In building this picture of Döndrup Gyel’s nationalist thought, I focus extensively on its connections with modern Chinese intellectual traditions. This is precisely because I contend that Döndrup Gyel took his cues for this nationalist discourse from the pre-existing examples of early modern Chinese literature, and Lu Xun in particular. Döndrup Gyel not only forged a Tibetan nationalist discourse, he forged it specifically according to the modes of cultural self-examination, iconoclasm, and radical progressivism characteristic of May Fourth writing. Döndrup Gyel’s work thus represents the first extensive and substantial engagement between Chinese and Tibetan literary modernity. The origins of this engagement come not just from the technicality of Döndrup Gyel’s status as a Chinese citizen, but from his immersion in the cultural environment of 1980s Beijing, where he studied and taught. This was a period of fervent cultural renewal spurred by a wave of new translations into Chinese, a time when the grand questions of modernity raised by the May Fourth generation were being discussed anew, and Döndrup Gyel wielded the knowledge of this era and transplanted many of these same grand questions to the context of modern Tibet. Through this encounter was born a body of literature that envisioned a Tibetan nation that lived as one of many within the territory of the modern Chinese state, but a nation that was beset by its own unique cultural crises and urgent questions about its future direction.

2.1 Awakening the Slumbering Nation

When reading Döndrup Gyel’s work, it is almost impossible to avoid references to and discussions of the Tibetan nation. As the critic Meché (Me lce) puts it:

No matter which of his works you read, it is as clear as the break of dawn that he has a strong attachment to his own nation (*mi rigs*) and Tibetan blood (*rus gdung*). [...] [This] is one of the main ways that he expressed his nationalism (*mi rigs ring lugs*).

It is a sign that he possessed an awakened consciousness of his race (*rigs*). (Me Ice 2014b: 307)

When Döndrup Gyel ended his life in 1985, the note he left behind conceived of his own short career as being centrally concerned with something called “nation.” This note, written in Chinese, consists of a letter written to his friend Dawa (Zla ba) followed by a long list of colleagues and friends to whom Döndrup Gyel wanted a copy to be sent. In succinct terms, it outlines Döndrup Gyel’s own vision of his literary nationalist project. The letter reads as follows:

My friend Dawa:

It is with a very heavy heart that I must bid you farewell. Perhaps you will feel that I was wrong to have chosen this path, but when you understand the reasons for my death, you will see that my parting is justified. How much I want to see you again, now that I’m leaving you! But that is impossible. I also sent you a telegram today asking you to put in for a job transfer for me. I have thought about this for a long time – our nation (*minzu* 民族) is still mired in an ignorant and backwards condition. I have written a number of pieces with the intention of awakening their consciousness, but I failed. Therefore, I will use my life to warn them:

Long live my compatriots (*tongbao* 同胞) of the snow mountains!

Please send copies of this letter to the following:

Comrade Sanggyé Rinchen (Sangjie Renqing 桑杰仁青) at the Dept. of Minority Languages of Qinghai Institute of Nationalities; Comrade Döndrup Wangbum (Danzhu Angbu 丹珠昂布) at the Research Institute for Minority Literature at the Central Institute for Nationalities; [...]¹⁵

Though a number of theories concerning Döndrup Gyel’s suicide have been put forward – and it would be both speculative and insensitive to advocate one over another here – the consensus among Tibetan intellectuals ever since has largely been that, in one form or another, Döndrup Gyel “died for the nation” (Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 147; Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 150; Dgu

¹⁵ Photographs of the original note are reprinted in the second volume of *Rangdröl Research*. See Dgu rong spun grol 2011: 1-6.

rong spun grol 2014: 302). Certainly, his request that this letter be sent to various professional colleagues indicates a desire for it to be read as a kind of testament for his work.

The fact that the ‘father figure’ of modern Tibetan literature composed his suicide note in Chinese is a fitting symbol of the extent to which modern Tibetan literature in the PRC, from its very outset, has been entangled with the linguistic and intellectual environment of modern China. Indeed, since this last testament was composed in Chinese, the “nation” which Döndrup Gyel was attempting to wake was in fact the Tibetan *minzu*. This is conceptually the same *minzu* that dominated the beginnings of modern Chinese literary discourse: the abstract people-nation, the object of the writer’s enlightenment efforts. Here, however, it is not the Han *minzu*, but the Tibetan. Despite this choice of Chinese for his final testament, Döndrup Gyel’s literary work was composed in Tibetan, and in Tibetan he expresses the idea of the Tibetan nation as *mirik* (*mi rigs*), a pre-existing term that is now firmly established as a direct linguistic and conceptual equivalent of *minzu*. If we can characterize the central concern of the May Fourth Chinese literary canon as being rational, humanist modernizing expressed through a nationally self-critical and even self-abusive narrative, then it is clear from Döndrup Gyel’s suicide note alone that the beginnings of modern Tibetan literature followed a remarkably similar course.

This text marks the tragic end of Döndrup Gyel’s literary career, and it bears a striking spiritual correspondence with the text that marked the beginning of Lu Xun’s. As he recounts in the preface to *A Call to Arms* (*Na han* 呐喊), Lu Xun is persuaded by his friend Qian Xuantong 钱玄同 to embark on a literary mission to awaken the sleepers in the iron house, the victims suffocating in the airless prison of conservatism. Though Lu Xun is skeptical, he agrees, somewhat reluctantly, as he cannot suppress a sense of hope for the future. In his letter, Döndrup Gyel reflects on his own efforts to “awaken the consciousness” of his nation, and laments his failure: his

compatriots remain “mired in an ignorant and backwards condition.” Despite Lu Xun’s inability to suppress his hope, he is forever dogged by the fear of failure. He has to be convinced to re-enter the fray precisely because of this sense of failure that his initial efforts to “change the spirit” of his compatriots through literature had been met with indifference. As I argued in Chapter One, these compatriots – the inhabitants of the iron house – were the Han; Lu Xun’s efforts at national awakening were directed at a delineated ethno-nation. With the beginnings of Tibetan literature in the PRC, Döndrup Gyel makes an appeal likewise aimed at a specific ethno-national group: the Tibetan *minzu/mirik*.

There is in the “awakening” metaphor the distinct air of what Anthony Smith (1991) calls the myth of nationalism, central to which is “the idea that nations exist from time immemorial, and that nationalists must reawaken them from a long slumber to take their place in a world of nations” (19-20). The tropes of sleep/awakening and the phrase “awaken their consciousness” (*huanxing tamen de juewu* 唤醒他们的觉悟 in the original Chinese of his letter) have become a key expression in the lexicon of nationalist thought that has grown up around Döndrup Gyel. In Tibetan, this idea is most often expressed as some variation of “to awaken from the sleep of ignorance” (*rmongs gnyid las sad*). This phrase, and versions of it, are ubiquitous in Tibetan-language studies of Döndrup Gyel, the critics’ only point of disagreement with the author being that he did indeed succeed (to some degree) in “awakening” his fellow Tibetans (Zhogs ljang 2014: 224; Me lce 2013: 194; Bde skyid 'tsho 2006: 2; Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 149; Sangs rgyas rin chen 2010: 29).

There is also, however, a subtle distinction between the more general nationalist awakening metaphor and the manner in which both Lu Xun and Döndrup Gyel employ it, a distinction that forges a deeper bond between Lu Xun and Döndrup Gyel’s rhetoric. The addition of “ignorance”

to the Tibetan phrase is telling: it is not only literature and nation that are bound together; an equally essential component of the formula is a self-critical awareness of the backwards state of the nation that must be rectified by literary enlightenment. In the European “slumbering” metaphor described by Smith, there is no sense of “backwardness”: the “sleep” is merely one of the masses being unaware of their status as a nation. This is a status to be brought to light by the nationalist intellectual-awakener, an idea much closer to the complaints of Liang Qichao 梁启超, Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 and others that the Chinese were “loose sand” unaware of their national bonds.

The idea of national awakening in colonized countries, where the “awakening” is to the plight of the nation under colonial oppression (Wimmer 2013: 69), may be more closely related to Lu Xun and Döndrup Gyel, but their use of the metaphor is also distinct from this idea. Lu Xun’s iron house does not mirror either metaphor; his awakening of the people would be to instill in them a realization of their suffocating plight under conservative socio-cultural structures. This is, nevertheless, a nationalist awakening in the sense that the sleepers in the iron house are sharers of this suffering, a unit bound together by intangible but powerful cultural and historical bonds. Döndrup Gyel’s sleep metaphor is, similarly, a sleep of “ignorance” that extends beyond simple national consciousness to a signification of suffocating conservatism and backwardness (he uses the term *luohou* 落后 in his suicide note) that must be opposed as part of the very process of establishing this consciousness of nation. For this reason, Döndrup Gyel’s move to “awaken” Tibetans is often described as an “appeal” or a “call for action” (*'bod skad, 'bod skul*) (Zhogs ljang 2014: 190; Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 97) – a close relative of Lu Xun’s “call to arms” or “outcry” (*na han*). In both, the aim is not simply to rouse people to a realization of their status as a nation; it is to awaken them to a reality in which that nation has been reduced to a desperate plight by self-inflicted social, cultural, and political conservatism.

2.2 A Nation in Decline

The plight of the nation, expressed as a sense of a racial or ethnic decline, is one of the key themes of Döndrup Gyel's renowned work "The Narrow Path" (*Rkang lam phra mo*). In this essay, Döndrup Gyel expertly crafts a metaphor for his thinking on tradition, modernity, and the Tibetan nation through concise and lyrical prose. The piece begins by describing the narrow path near the narrator's¹⁶ home village that "has witnessed the uncountable footsteps of one generation after another for many centuries" (Don grub rgyal 1997: 6: 1; trans. Rang grol 1997: 61). After coming across a group of old men arguing over the relative merits of the path and by which of their ancestors it was first made, the narrator offers his own thoughts on the brilliance of his forebears:

The person who broke this path, whether man or god, was truly great. The idea of putting a path across a steep mountain such as this is the essence of wisdom; putting the idea into practice is the essence of innovation. Though this crooked footpath is narrow, steep, and winding, how rich was the courage of our ancestors who first laid foot on it, how great was their spirit! How broadminded were the heroes who first followed this trail and arrived at the mountain's peak, how farsighted they were! (3)

These "ancestors" exhibit the merits Döndrup Gyel elsewhere attaches to Tibetan imperial history: courage (*spobs pa*), spirit (*snying stobs*), and innovation (*gsar skrun*). But "The Narrow Path" perfectly captures the duality of Döndrup Gyel's "national pride" (see below), as its meditation on this distant glory soon morphs into a scathing self-critique. In contrast to the innovation of the ancestors, the narrator has nothing but scorn for the failure of the old people who "know how to walk on the path blazed by heroes" but "fail to show respect or praise for the legacy of their deeds" (4; 63). This observation prompts a self-reflective turn in the essay:

That they were unable to leave behind them anything other than this narrow path has nothing to do with the stupidity of the people of ancient times. On the contrary, it is we who should be ashamed when we have not been able to widen and level the surface of this footpath for tens of thousands of years. [...] Recalling these things my

¹⁶ Though, in generic terms, the "I" of an essay might be assumed to be the author, the poetic narrative nature of "The Narrow Path" might make us cautious of such an assumption.

own face burned fiercely, and my mind filled with anguish and remorse. I am from that same race of red-faced Tibetans and I realized I have neither used pick nor shovel to broaden this narrow path left to us by those people of our ancient past. While countless times this narrow path has supported my steps, I have not once stopped to consider upgrading it and making it more useful and splendid. Could there be a greater source of shame and regret than this? (4-5; trans. adapted from Rang grol 1997: 63)

His critique here is directed against the stagnation and inertia of present-day Tibetan society and its failure to innovate; or, as Tibetan critics have put it, against “conservatism, cowardliness, laziness, envy” and “ignorance and backwardness” (Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 187; Bde skyid 'tsho 2006: 5).

The narrator of “The Narrow Path” flirts with nostalgia and longing for the comforts of tradition, but ultimately, and perhaps somewhat reluctantly, concludes that the failure of tradition to reinvent itself in the modern world is unforgivable. Tibetans have, he determines, been left behind by stubborn adherence to the traditions of the path: “Nowadays we have highways and railways, airways and seaways, and there are even ways to reach the moon,” he writes, “and meanwhile our people (*mi rigs*) are confined to riding their donkeys cheerfully up and down this small track” (5; trans. adapted from Rang grol 1997: 63). The few who possess the vision to act on this situation are also held back by superstition and closed-mindedness:

“Since the footpath is so narrow, why don’t you make it broader?” remarked a passer-by. The old people answered unanimously, “What! This path is inhabited by *gnyan* demons and *btsan* spirits, anyone who takes a shovel to it will be stricken with leprosy and die. This is certain.” (6; trans. adapted from Rang grol 1997: 64)

As the essay reaches its conclusion, the narrator remarks on the state-constructed highway built after “liberation” (*bcings 'grol byas rjes*, i.e., after the founding of the PRC), much larger than the narrow path, but long and winding. Standing between the peaceful path and the clamor of the highway, he is moved to “think of my nation (*mi rigs*) and our homeland (*pha yul*),” and as a “beautiful, brilliant, blazing path” appears before him, he is compelled to move towards the

highway (7).¹⁷ Despite this decision, the narrator is ambivalent about the choice between the two roads: the highway which, though practical, lacks the innovation of the historic path; and the narrow path, too long neglected and no longer fit for purpose (“the narrow path is my joy, but the narrow path is also my sorrow” [6]). Mark Stevenson (1997) sees in “The Narrow Path” the direct influence of Lu Xun’s essays (*zawen* 杂文), which he believes Döndrup Gyel almost certainly encountered in his studies (a wholly plausible claim, though difficult to substantiate): Döndrup Gyel “could not have found a better model by which to invoke a sense of foreboding and restlessness, a sense of cultural crisis” (58). The innovative nature of the *zawen*-style essay as form must also be remarked upon, as it was virtually unprecedented in Tibetan literature, and as we shall see in Chapter Five, it had an enormous impact on a whole generation of subsequent intellectuals.

Stevenson goes on to argue that Döndrup Gyel’s greatest difference from Lu Xun lies in his unwillingness to be “coercive,” in his desire to “lay open his own thoughts and weaknesses while at the same time leaving his readers to form their own conclusions” (59). This implied reading of Lu Xun is not a fair representation. Far from being didactic, Lu Xun’s writing is most often ambivalent, inhabiting a grey area between absolutes – a literary sensibility memorably captured in the title of his second collection of fiction, *Panghuang* 彷徨 (“wandering” or “hesitation”). Rather than being a distinction between the two authors, I would suggest that the standpoint signified by Döndrup Gyel’s wavering between the two paths constitutes one of the strongest affinities between his work and Lu Xun’s.

¹⁷ Nancy Lin has highlighted the importance of the wording in this final scene: that the narrator is involuntarily (*rang dbang med par*) compelled to go (*spo dgos byung*) towards the highway (Lin 2008: 105-6). This is not a choice he makes happily; it is rather forced upon him by circumstance – the failure of the narrow path to meet the needs of the present day.

“The Narrow Path” certainly resembles Lu Xun’s *zawen* in form, but the simplicity of its well-considered metaphor bears a much closer resemblance to “The Passer-by” (*Guoke* 过客).¹⁸ In Lu Xun’s brief script, an unnamed Passer-by encounters a Young Girl and an Old Man in a nondescript location. Despite the Old Man’s protestations and his uncertainty, the Passer-by insists on continuing his journey along the “faint track” (*yi tiao si lu fei lu de henji* 一条似路非路的痕迹) into the unknown, called ever forward by a voice ahead of him (Lu Xun 2003: 54-67). In “The Narrow Path,” it is likewise an anonymous passer-by (*lam 'gro ba*) who suggests to the stubborn elders that they broaden the path – the figure of the lone intellectual trying to awaken the masses that we encountered in both the iron house metaphor and Döndrup Gyel’s suicide note. “The Narrow Path” and “The Passer-by” both meditate on the difficult choices posed by a historical crossroads and the hesitation they induce, and both reach the same conclusion: their protagonists are (reluctantly) compelled to move towards the path of progress, regardless of the consequences.

The tradition/modernity divide in “The Narrow Path” is framed consciously in national terms. That is to say, it is not an abstract consideration of the relative merits of tradition and modernity in a general sense, but rather a consideration of their usefulness to the Tibetan nation. The path itself is construed as the conveyor of racial and national tradition; it “established the history of Tibet (*bod gangs can*) and carried the knowledgeable Tibetan race (*bod rigs*) to the highest peaks” (4). The majority of Tibetan scholars, in commenting on how the essay addresses the transitions and frictions of tradition and modernity, have also read “The Narrow Path” as national metaphor. The essay is described as showing “the real contradictions existing between the traditional and modern cultures of our nation (*mi rigs*),” and as embodying the “fate of the Tibetan

¹⁸ In 1983, a year before the publication of “The Narrow Path,” this theatrical vignette had also received renewed life in Beijing (where Döndrup Gyel lived at the time) when it was staged prior to performances of Gao Xingjian’s 高行健 high-profile play *Bus Stop* (*Chezhan* 车站) (Riley and Gissenwehrer 2001: 119-120).

people (*bod pa*)” (Rmog ru don grub tshe ring 2003: 131; Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 181). The critic Chökyong (Chos skyong), borrowing the narrator’s ambivalent phrase, offers a neat encapsulation: “that the narrow path brings the author joy is because of the nation (*mi rigs*); that it brings him sorrow is also because of the nation” (Chos skyong 2006: 250). There is, both in the essay and in critical readings of it, an agreement that its subjects (the bearers of tradition, the targets of critique, the people in need of development) are a unified whole and a nation facing a common problem.

“The Narrow Path” deals with tradition in the abstract, but elsewhere in his writing Döndrup Gyel explores more specific aspects of the problems he perceived. The short story “Trülku” (*Sprul sku*, “emanation body,” the Tibetan term for an incarnate lama) offers a critique of Tibet’s most obvious “tradition” – Buddhism, or, rather, the unquestioning faith in Buddhism that holds back the kind of progress advocated in “The Narrow Path.” The plot of “Trülku” centers around the elderly Akhu Nyima (A khu nyi ma) and his family, a modest rural household that is one day graced by the visit of a traveling trülku. Akhu Nyima, a former monk, is a model of faith: the story opens with him sitting cross-legged, prayer beads in hand, chanting “*om mani padme hum.*” He is, furthermore, deeply hostile to those who would challenge his religion:

Though Akhu Nyima was a man inclined to trust whatever anyone said – young or old – he did not believe for one second the propaganda of atheist views. Those who were not disposed to superstitious thinking had, on occasion, tried to educate him about the fact that there was no such thing as gods and demons. At those times, Akhu Nyima would become enraged, condemning such people as “merit-less heretics.” Any time a child asked him whether or not gods and demons really existed, Akhu Nyima would tell them that gods do exist and that demons were nothing to be afraid of, then he would show them his little copper statue of the Buddha and say, “*This* is a god.” In any case, trying to convert him to a materialist point of view was like preaching the dharma to a wolf. For over sixty years he had meditated on the Three Jewels, showed respect for lamas and trülkus as though they were the hat on his head, and never once missed a prayer or let an offering lamp go unlit. (Don grub rgyal 1997: 2: 123)

Akhu Nyima is naturally overjoyed when the trülku visits their home. Though he initially has misgivings – the trülku cannot sit cross-legged and displays a worrying lack of knowledge about key Buddhist texts and figures – he interprets these doubts as his own shortcomings and treats the visitor with the utmost reverence. Unbeknownst to Akhu Nyima, however, the trülku turns out to be a thief – and worse. He makes unsolicited advances on one of the village women, then tries to force himself on Chakmo Jam (Lcags mo byams), Akhu Nyima’s daughter-in-law. In the end, he is revealed by the brigade leader to be a con-artist masquerading as a lama and is arrested.

Upon its publication,¹⁹ “Trülku” caused something of a sensation as many Tibetans felt it was attacking their religious system; Döndrup Gyel was labeled a “heretic,” a “destroyer of the teachings,” and even received threatening letters (Dgu rong spun grol 2011: 17-18; Pema Bhum 1995: 22; 2008a: 143; Kapstein 2002: 99; Hartley 2003: 226-228). It can hardly be said that the story paints a damning picture of trülkus and lamas, since the titular trülku turns out not to be a trülku at all. Nevertheless, it does offer a serious critique of blind religious faith and the potential for organized religion to exploit ordinary Tibetans. Akhu Nyima and others are willing to place unquestioning faith in the stranger purely on the basis of his (purported) religious status, and it is because of this that they suffer. The story furthermore suggests that this blind faith is a generational issue: while some of the community’s younger members are highly skeptical, the elderly do not doubt the trülku’s credentials whatsoever. This rendering of the generation gap as a central social issue – the old tending to conservatism, the youth to progress – is strongly reminiscent of May Fourth ideology, and as we will see below, the trope of youth figures prominently elsewhere in Döndrup Gyel’s work.

¹⁹ The story was published in the third issue of *Sbrang char* in 1983, though it was actually written between 1980 and 1981.

“Trülku” ends with a type of *deus ex machina* – common to much “scar literature” (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学)²⁰ of the period – in the form of the brigade leader who arrives to announce the capture of the conman. The structure of scar fiction tended to progress from lamenting the sufferings of the Cultural Revolution to praising the overthrow of the Gang of Four and the return of liberal policies, affirming a new sense of optimism in the wake of the Party’s self-rectification. In the Tibetan case, the post-Cultural Revolution political thaw manifested itself more specifically as an easing on religious policy and the return of Buddhist practice, a social development that is described in the story by Akhu Nyima’s son (133-134). However, unlike much scar literature, Döndrup Gyel’s story presents serious misgivings about the implications of this change of tide. “Trülku” does not condemn the return of religious freedom, but it provides a stark warning that it should not equal a return to superstition or blind faith. This message is laid out quite literally at the end by the brigade leader when he mediates a brief dispute over the relative merits of trülkus and tantric practitioners:

“According to the Party’s policies, different religious doctrines must show mutual respect and mustn’t abuse one another. Anyone who has religious beliefs may adhere to their own convictions.” At that point the brigade leader’s expression became stern, and he laid grave emphasis on his point: “However, no one must forget this painful lesson.” (Don grub rgyal 1997: 2: 154)

For Döndrup Gyel, the problems of unquestioning obedience and mental stagnation embodied by Akhu Nyima ran much deeper than the political question of religious freedom. It is these underlying psychological-cultural tendencies that “Trülku” seeks to address.

²⁰ The borrowing of this plot device aside, “Trülku” could not be described as a work of “scar literature” due to its focus on the problems of religious revival (as opposed to the traumas of the Cultural Revolution). “Scar literature” did, however, play a role in Tibetan literature as a genre some years after its popularity in Chinese (see Shakya 2008: 75-76).

The perception that Döndrup Gyel was attacking Buddhism or calling for a return of Cultural Revolution-era suppression of Tibetan religion was (and perhaps still is) widespread enough that several scholars have been at pains to refute it. Drölma Gyatso (Sgrol ma rgya mtsho) quite reasonably argues that such an interpretation is a sign that “you either haven’t read his work, or you’ve read it and misunderstood it” (Sgrol ma rgya mtsho 1990: 51). Meché turns this accusation against the accusers, declaring that the real “destroyers of the narrow path of tradition” were Tibetans who burned Buddhist texts and demolished monasteries during the Cultural Revolution, a “crime of the whole Tibetan people” which he likens to the atrocities of Hitler’s Germany (Me lce 2013: 34-35). The general consensus among scholars is that Döndrup Gyel was not a radical iconoclast but a “union of the old and the new” (Bdud lha rgyal 2011: 201), or, as the poet Jangbu (Ljang bu) phrases it, he was not a “revolutionary” but an “inventor” (Ljang bu 2016).

The conclusions of these scholars are wholly reasonable. Any considered reading of “Trülku” would have to conclude that its critique of Buddhism is limited or qualified at best. It is careful to affirm the right to individual religious belief and sidestep undue offense by making the character a fake trülku, thereby refocusing the reader’s critical attentions on Akhu Nyima’s attitudes and their consequences.²¹ Döndrup Gyel’s work generally declines to make direct criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism; as in “Trülku,” his focus tends to be on a broader conception of a backwards or conservative cultural mentality that hinders progress and innovation. He certainly did not denounce Buddhism with the ferocity and directness with which May Fourth intellectuals attacked Confucianism. As we will see below, Döndrup Gyel also had a great many words of praise for (certain) aspects of Tibetan tradition, making accusations that he sought a wholesale erasure of traditional Tibetan culture highly inaccurate. His work most often strikes a balance between

²¹ Tibetan critics have also argued that the story is not an attack on the trülku system, but, via Akhu Nyima, a critique of Tibetan cultural and social attitudes (Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 167-180; Deji Cao 2013: 10).

glorification and critique, taking the approach of “adopting and discarding” (*blang rdor*) that was central to the 1980s intellectual trend of “selective tradition” (Hartley 2003: 50-51).

Matthew Kapstein, in his reflections on “Trülku,” argues that critiques of Tibetan religion were nothing new, but those critiques always came from *within* that tradition; they were not “within the domain of a bright, young, secular and sceptical author” (Kapstein 2002: 110). This is a point that resonates with Pema Bhun’s observation that Döndrup Gyel’s generation was the first in Tibetan history to witness the emergence of intellectuals who had no connection to Buddhism (Padma 'bum 2014: 360). Lama Jabb (2015b), on the other hand, contends that social criticism has always been a part of the Tibetan literary tradition and that it cannot be linked to a (Chinese-influenced) modernity. But centering the debate on the notion of social criticism and whether or not it is “new” serves to obscure a much more important point about the radical nature of Döndrup Gyel’s work. Lama Jabb concedes that the critically-minded writings of Tibetan tradition are not instances of “‘revolutionary’ genres: they do not seek systemic overhaul of Tibetan society” (232). But this is a crucial qualification.

Döndrup Gyel did not criticize Buddhist attitudes or malpractices in order to improve or correct the practice of Buddhism, just as Lu Xun did not criticize Confucianism in order to reform Confucianism. Döndrup Gyel’s critiques were made in the new context of a concern with the nation; they were intrinsically linked to a discourse of national backwardness and progress, and most assuredly did seek revolutionary change. In short, his purpose was not to reform Buddhism, but to reform the nation. The necessity of divorcing Buddhism from Tibetan identity in order to construct a new national consciousness was an argument that would take shape much more clearly in later years, but it certainly has precedent in Döndrup Gyel’s work. The critique of religious attitudes and conservative mentalities must be seen in the context of his project of national

awakening and cultural reform, which, to Döndrup Gyel, would be impossible without subjecting traditional beliefs to serious scrutiny.

2.3 Youth, Innovation, and Progress

The answer to the problems of inertia, conservatism, and backwardness lay in their antitheses: progress, innovation, and development. These sentiments are most passionately and memorably expressed in Döndrup Gyel's "Waterfall of Youth" (*Lang tsho'i rbab chu*), modern Tibet's first free-verse poem²² and one of the single most influential works of modern Tibetan literature. Before even beginning to read the poem, its freshness is striking: lines of unequal length, punctuated by vigorous exclamations, cascade down the page. Hartley (2017) ties this innovation to the influence of Mayakovsky (765), who we know Döndrup Gyel read – an example of his transcultural influences via Chinese translation in practice. In fact, one of "Waterfall's" most remarkable literary features is that it embodies, in form and language, the ideology set out by its content. Here is a short example of its flow and voice, taken from the beginning of the poem:

Kye! – No ordinary waterfall of nature, this has
A majestic and splendid appearance
Fearless heart,
Uncowering mettle,
Hale and hardy body,
Beautiful and resplendent ornaments,
Soft and pleasant refrain...

This –
Is the waterfall of youth of the young people of Tibet, Land of Snows.

This –
Is the spirit of innovation of the Tibetan youth
Of the 1980s.
It is the stance of struggle,
The song of youth.

²² This has been widely accepted among scholars of Tibetan literature, though Lobsang Yongdan has recently disputed the claim, pointing to Tibetan political poems published between 1949 and 1979 as well as translations of free-verse poetry into Tibetan during the Cultural Revolution (Blo bzang yon tan 2018).

(Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 131; trans. adapted from Hartley 2017: 767)

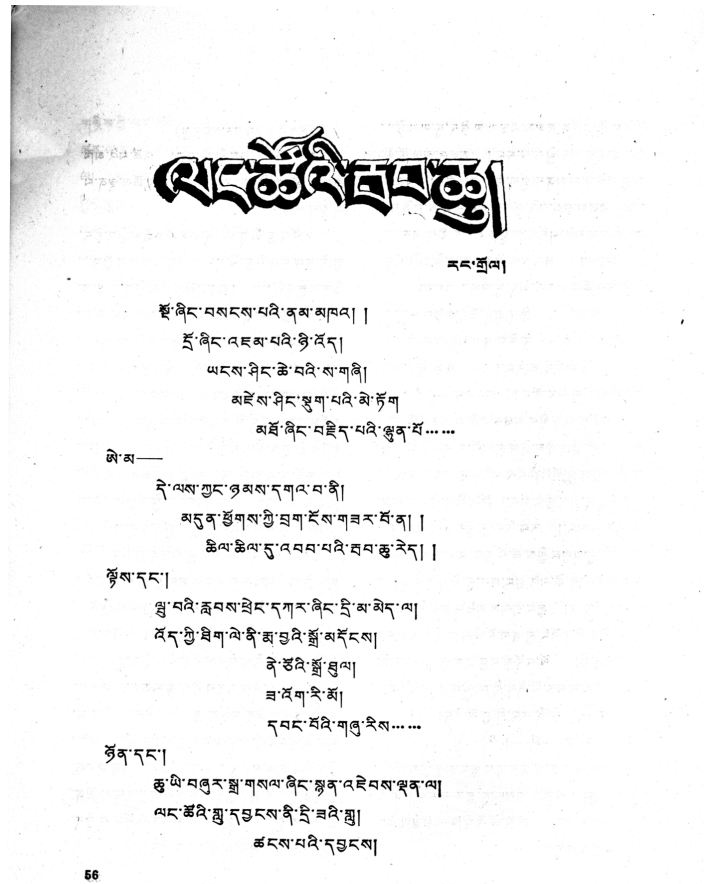


Figure 1: The first page of “Waterfall of Youth,” from its original publication in *Light Rain* in 1983

As in the May Fourth Movement, a revolution in thought is accompanied by – or rather only possible through – a revolution in literary form and style. This observation has been made by Tibetan intellectuals: both Meché and Chökyong compare the impact of “Waterfall” to Hu Shi’s essay “On New Poetry” (*Lun xin shi* 论新诗), a call for a liberation of thinking that began with a liberation of form, and the founding of a “humanist literature” (Me lce 2013: 7-8; Chos skyong 2006: 238). “Waterfall’s” innovations are many: in addition to the free-form structure and length of its lines and stanzas, it is also one of the earliest Tibetan poems to use a blend of Tibetan and non-Tibetan punctuation, specifically em dashes and ellipses. These developments were derived

from Chinese (as opposed to Western) linguistic influence: the ellipses are the six-dotted form used in modern Chinese punctuation, not the three-dotted form common in Western languages. Lobsang Yongdan, a strong critic of Döndrup Gyel and his admirers, goes so far as to deny that Döndrup Gyel's compositions can even be seen as new or modern Tibetan poetry, arguing that Döndrup Gyel borrowed so extensively from Chinese sources that his poems are nothing more than Chinese poetry written in Tibetan (Blo bzang yon tan 2015). But, whether read positively or negatively, the point remains: some of Döndrup Gyel's poetic innovations undoubtedly came through a translingual interaction with Chinese texts.

Much has been made of Döndrup Gyel's desire to break away from Indian poetic conventions, in particular those laid down in the *Kāvyaḍarśa* (*The Mirror of Poetics*). As Pema Bhum (2008b) summarizes this problem, "though you will never meet the beneficent and very familiar Tibetan yak in the poems of traditional poets, they will compose many words of praise for the unfamiliar Indian elephant" (123). Döndrup Gyel was very clear about his feelings on this matter in a letter to his close friend Sangyé (Sangs rgyas):

Our scholars have a weakness which is to rely as much as possible on India for our cultural and historical origins. In general, there is a close relationship between Tibet (*bod*) and India in all sorts of aspects. But to think that all we have come from India would mean that the Tibetan race (*bod rigs*) has nothing of its own history, own culture, own characteristics, own thinking, own customs, etc. More than thirty years have passed since liberation, but we still haven't been able to resist this view. We youth should be ashamed of this and our nation (*mi rigs*) should be ashamed as well [...] in my view, if Dandin could write a *Kavyadarsa* (*Mirror of Poetics*), why can't we write a Tibetan *Mirror of Poetics*? (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 160-161; trans. adapted from Lin 2008: 86)

In Döndrup Gyel's evaluations of Tibetan history he attaches great importance to innovation through cultural borrowing, but what is borrowed must be adapted, not imitated, and the fundamental goal must always be to create an expressly Tibetan national style of literary artistry. His interest in the problem of national literature prompted other writers and critics to follow:

Namsé (Rnam sras) and Trashi Penden (Bkra shis dpal ldan), for instance, both concur that excessive imitation of Indian literature undermined the national characteristics (*mi rigs kyi khyad chos*) of Tibetan literature. According to the latter, Tibetans' historical ability to adapt the literatures of other cultures was lost due to a slavish devotion to the *Kāvyaśāstra* and a failure to study the literatures of “advanced nations” (*sngon thon mi rigs*) (Bkra shis dpal ldan 2010: 45-47; Rnam sras 2010: 208-210). Lama Jabb (2015a) has rightly cautioned us not to ignore Döndrup Gyel's debt to *kāvya* poetics as well as the oral tradition of *mgur* (poem-songs), and there is no doubt that his poetry retains many traditional metaphors and references (59-84). But fundamentally important to Döndrup Gyel was to find ways to reinvigorate pre-existing traditions, to find ways to integrate them with contemporary global writing in order to create a new, dynamic, and recognizably Tibetan national literature.

The freshness of “Waterfall's” poetic language provided a blueprint for how Tibetan literature could move into a new era while still retaining a distinct identity. A narrative of “intelligibility” (*go bde*) has grown up around the poem, a reflection of the broader scholarly interpretation that this period is comparable to the rise of the so-called “vernacular” *baihua* 白话 in May Fourth literature (Ma 1998: 58). Tibetan literary writing had for centuries been largely the preserve of religious elites, and Döndrup Gyel's new poetic language sought to remake Tibetan literature into something that could belong to all Tibetans as a national possession. May Fourth intellectuals interpreted the replacement of Latin with vernacular languages in Europe as a prerequisite for nation-formation and borrowed this narrative in their advocacy of *baihua* over the “classical language” of *wenyan* 文言 (Shang 2014). Döndrup Gyel took this same idea in his own formation of a nationalist literary discourse, in the process injecting it with a heavy dose of socialist egalitarianism. The clearest example of this ideology in practice is his adaptation of the Ramayana.

Reinterpreting the Indian-derived epic as a product of the “wisdom and labor of the common people,” Döndrup Gyel sought to return the text to the hands of ordinary Tibetans by rewriting it in an accessible, “vernacular” style that shed the obscurities of classical (Indic) poetics (Lin 2008). He used this same ethos in his own poetic compositions, particularly “Waterfall.” This is a key element to understanding the radical nature of his project: a national literature, in his context, meant claiming the right of all Tibetans – and not a narrow, monastic elite – to direct their own cultural and social development.

Tibetan critics have echoed this nationalist reading of Döndrup Gyel’s poetic voice. As Namsé argues, since the language of “Waterfall” is clear and easily comprehensible it is accessible to the Tibetan masses, and it captures a national spirit by employing overtly Tibetan metaphors and images with “the smell of tsampa and butter” (Rnam sras 2010: 209, 230-231). The desire to move beyond Sanskrit-derived poetic metaphors has precedent in the *mgur* tradition and more recently in the poetry of Gendün Chöpel (Dge 'dun chos 'phel), but what sets Döndrup Gyel apart is the critical interpretation that he moved beyond the simple switching of metaphors to create a poetic language of the nation itself. It is easy, however, for this interpretation to be pushed in a direction that distorts his work. Namsé goes on to argue that Tibetans should follow Döndrup Gyel in using a “pure Tibetan” (*bod skad gtsang ma*); that is, “the spoken language of the Tibetan nation” with “the words of our own nation, neither borrowed nor stolen” (Rnam sras 2010: 231-234). The inherent impossibility of a discreet and purified “national language” cleansed of the influences of other “nations” aside, this is an idea that jars with Döndrup Gyel’s own literary ethos. His aim was neither to uphold tradition (“Tibetan” or Indian-derived Tibetan) nor to replace it wholesale with foreign imports. Lin (2008) makes the important point that Döndrup Gyel’s rewriting of the Ramayana served to reaffirm the value and legitimacy of classical tradition, even

as he strove for an indigenous (national) poetic theory. This is likewise how he approached his poetry: he sought ways to create a progressive synthesis that would open a space for new literary and intellectual discourse.

While the ideas of invention and dynamic progression are encoded into the very form and visual texture of “Waterfall of Youth,” they also constitute the core of its ideological thrust. In a frequently cited section of the poem, conservative attitudes and the models of the past – even those that are laudable – are disavowed:

Truly,
Yesteryear with its glorious shining sun is no substitute for
today;
And how can yesterday with its salt-water quench the thirst of
today?
If the corpse of history, which is hard to locate,
Is bereft of the life-force appropriate for the times,
 The pulse of development will never beat,
 And the heart and blood of the avant-garde will never
 flow,
 Much less the march of progress.

[...]

Conservatism, traditionalism, superstition, laziness
Have no role whatsoever in our generation.
Backwardness, barbarism, darkness, reactionary thought,
Have no place at all in our age.

(Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 135-136; trans. Hartley 2017: 768)

This latter list of undesirable attributes and the call to oppose them has become virtually programmatic in the context of Tibetan nationalist thought, as we shall see in the following chapters. “Waterfall of Youth” goes further than “The Narrow Path” in clarifying that what must be strived for is progress, and the waterfall, in its ceaseless and chaotic motion, is emblematic of this ideal. The waterfall may be rooted in Tibetan tradition – its source is “joined with the snows” and it is a “witness to history” – but its perpetual motion means that it “has the courage to gather

new rivers” and its forward march cannot be halted (132-134). The waterfall, and the river that precedes it, become the metaphorical rendering of a teleological vision of history. No matter the glories of the past, the only possibility is forward motion in time and the adoption of the new – be that literary innovation or the “youth of science” and the “maiden of technology.” “Waterfall” is also much clearer in stressing who is to be the carrier of this social progress: the youth, a logical conclusion to the view of history as a progressive temporal flow. This same concept of youth was central to Lu Xun and the May Fourth Movement in general; in “Waterfall,” it occupies precisely the same role as a trope of social and historical progress.

Throughout “Waterfall” and Döndrup Gyel’s other poetry, the rhetoric of youth and progress is married to a vocabulary of “struggle” (*’thab ’dzing*) and “competition” (*’rtsal ’gran*) grounded in a social-Darwinist conception of nations vying for position in the global order (Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 131, 136, 233, 212). In the Chinese literary and intellectual tradition, the social reading of Darwin’s theories became key in a world of inter-national competition where the threat of national extinction at the hands of more powerful nations was felt to be very real. Pusey’s description of Lu Xun’s relationship with Darwinian evolutionary theory applies just as well to Döndrup Gyel: “He wrote, let us be clear, *not* to spread the gospel of evolution, but to save his people, to wake them up, to get them to change their ways, in thought and word and deed, to save themselves – from themselves” (Pusey 1998: xi).²³ As part of this struggle, the idea of ‘science and technology’ became a field of battle in Döndrup Gyel’s modernizing nationalist ideology. His friends recall that he bemoaned the lack of academic opportunities for Tibetans, in particular the

²³ As in the modern Chinese reading of Darwin, Döndrup Gyel is interested less in the work of Darwin per se than in its social applications. Darwin and evolutionary theory do come up directly in his translation of the Chinese science-fiction writer Tong Enzheng’s 童恩正 story “The Magic Flute of the Snow Mountains” (*Xueshan mo di* 雪山魔笛, Tib. *’Dre ’bod rkang gling*), which makes reference to Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (*Skye dngos kyi ’byung gzhi*) and Huxley’s *Man’s Place in Nature* (*Rang byung khams kyi mi’i go gnas*).

fact that their sole path in university was Tibetan language and literature. It was vital, he felt, that science be taught in Tibetan (Pema Bhum 1995: 22). Döndrup Gyel's insistence on valuing tangible material (as opposed to purely spiritual or intellectual) progress through science and technology set the tone for nationalist intellectual discourse for years to come.

An academic exchange that occurred in the pages of *Tibetan Studies* (*Bod ljongs zhib 'jug*) in 1997 provides an effective example of the extent to which debates around scientific development were anchored in the figure of Döndrup Gyel and "Waterfall's" famous call to welcome the "youth of science" and the "maiden of technology." After an article on the development of civilizations was published in the second issue of that year, a response penned by Gartsé Tamdrin Gyel (Mgar rtse rta mgrin rgyal) appeared in the following issue in which the author lamented that, though Tibetans had created a glorious national culture, owing to their failure to develop in the fields of economics, science, and technology, they had become a "backwards nation" with "an extremely backwards mode of production and lifestyle." He cited low levels of literacy among nomads and a lack of theoretical scientific knowledge (of chemistry, for instance) that would help them in their work, concluding that the Tibetan nation's lack of scientific and technological expertise represented a grave danger in an era of international economic competition (Mgar rtse rta mgrin rgyal 1997: 79-84). The author based this analysis on the paradigm laid down in Döndrup Gyel's work, and prefaced the article with a discussion of Döndrup Gyel's contributions to Tibetan knowledge. We might say that one of Döndrup Gyel's most lasting contributions is the very mentality this author displays: a framing of Tibetan history and society in explicitly national terms that places social Darwinist concepts of backwardness, development, and competition as central to the very understanding of both Tibet and the world at large. As in May

Fourth China, “science” was not about science itself, it was an indexical sign pointing to an entire discursive formation of backwardness and modernization.

While the most striking aspects of “Waterfall” are its literary innovation and its ideology of youth, anti-conservatism, and material and intellectual progress, we should not miss the significance of the manner in which all of this is centered around and filtered through Döndrup Gyel’s new conception of a Tibetan nation. Ultimately, “Waterfall of Youth” represents a paradigm shift in this regard. The vision of the poem ranges across notions of shared history, language, culture, and race, with no mention of the shared religion that so often defines Tibetan identity. “Waterfall of Youth” offers us instead constructions such as “the youth of the Tibetan Land of Snows” (*bod gangs can gyi gzhon nu rnams*), “the new generation of the Tibetan Land of Snows” (*bod gangs can gyi mi rabs gsar pa*), “our nation” (*rang re’i mi rigs*), and “the youth of the Tibetan race” (*bod rigs gzhon nu rnams*). Ever since its publication, Tibetan readers and critics have overwhelmingly read the poem as national metaphor. The waterfall itself is seen by Tsedrup (Tshe grub) as a symbol of Tibetan national (*mi rigs*) or racial (*rigs rgyud*) solidarity across all divisions, a declaration of the necessity for all “people from the land of snows” (*gangs can pa rnams*) to unite, regardless of different doctrines, of whether they are farmers or nomads (Tshe grub 2010: 101). His emphasis on unity is revealing and encapsulates what is in many ways at the heart of “Waterfall”: a re-ordering of conceptual categories through a national lens that lays its greatest stress on the shared group identity of Tibetans as a nation.

2.4 Nation as History and Race

Thus far I have avoided discussing the idea of “race” in Döndrup Gyel’s conceptualization of the *mirik* nation. Theorists of nationalism are, as a rule, careful to distinguish the evolution of ‘classical’ nationalist thought from the sort of faux-biological racial discourse suggested by the

term. In Döndrup Gyel's case, however, any such distinction would be arbitrary, as some sense of biological "race" is clearly inherent in his construction of nation. There is a notable essay in which he deals directly with the concept of race vis-à-vis the Tibetan nation: "The Origin of the Tibetan Race and the Term 'Tibet'" (*Bod du 'gro ba mi'i rigs byung tshul dang bod ces pa'i tha snyad kyi 'byung khungs*). In an English translation of the essay, the translators opted for the term "Tibetan race," despite the phrase chosen by Döndrup Gyel being a somewhat unusual one: *bod du 'gro ba mi'i rigs*, literally something closer to "human beings in Tibet." The English term "race," however, remains an appropriate one, as it is clear from the essay that Darwinian evolution informs the approach he takes to his query and that biological notions of "race" are undoubtedly entering into the picture.

The essay begins with the legend of how the Tibetan people originated as the descendants of a monkey and an ogress.²⁴ Döndrup Gyel cites this tale only to dismiss it in favor of a new approach to racial origin:

Let us for a moment discard this orally transmitted myth, and try to scientifically examine the real origin of the Tibetan race. As everyone clearly knows, mankind gradually evolved from the apes. By dint of their struggle for survival, the mental capacity of these apes gradually developed more and more. They began to wear animal hides, and they learned to rub sticks together to make fire. After they discovered fire, they took advantage of many cooked and boiled forms of sustenance such as cooked meat. They learned to make various instruments from rocks and bones. Furthermore, they lost their tails and developed manual dexterity. After they stood erect, they began to walk. If one examines this argument, one will find the above discussion rational. Contrary to this point of view, the extremist belief system says that the creator of the world is Brahma, and other peoples (*mi rigs*) hold to the absurd belief that humans were created from clay. The truth has been explained here about how humans really evolved from other creatures. Furthermore, it is clear that humans evolved from no other creatures than the species of apes and monkeys who most resemble the present form of human beings. (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 195-196; trans. Dondrub Gyal 1992: 56)

²⁴ Janet Gyatso (1987) summarizes the legend as follows: "The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, incarnated as a monkey, is enjoying a life of solitude in the mountains, when he is lured into marriage by a desperate, insistent rock demoness. Their offspring become the first Tibetans" (44).

A brief note retreading the basics of Darwinian evolution written in 1982 hardly seems remarkable, but the very fact that its author felt this worth pointing out in 1982 is remarkable in itself. To Döndrup Gyel, the truth of biological evolution was something that still needed to be affirmed, despite the fact that “everyone clearly knows” it. Döndrup Gyel may not have been introducing this knowledge in Tibetan for the first time, but it is apparent that he believed it to be insufficiently established among Tibetan readers, and that a more “scientific” approach to the question of race was required. Döndrup Gyel’s interest in evolutionary biology was therefore also grounded in nationalism, since he was promoting the kind of scientific view of the world that he believed Tibetans ought to adopt.

Having demarcated the “race” aspect of his formula, Döndrup Gyel’s essay moves on to deal with the question of “Tibet.”²⁵ He begins with Gendün Chöpel’s discussion of the same problem, taking a very critical line of his predecessor’s methodology of attempting to define “Tibet” by examining the naming practices of other languages. “Except for China,” Gendün Chöpel wrote, “all other countries know Tibet as ‘*Tibet*’ (*ti b+ha da*). Furthermore, the Chinese used to call Tibet ‘*Tufan*’ (*tu’u phan*). Similarly, the word is ‘*Thubhat*’ (*thu b+had*) in Mongolian. It seems that both the Chinese and Mongolians borrowed their terms from other languages” (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 196-197; trans. Dondrub Gyal 1992: 57). Gendün Chöpel considers the possibility that the word “Tibet” (*bod*) came from *bön*, Tibet’s pre-Buddhist belief system, before positing a semi-conclusion that “there is the possibility that the word ‘Tibet’ (*bod*) has no meaning. Rather it is just a group of arbitrary sounds attached to a meaning” (197; trans. 57). Döndrup Gyel

²⁵ A second essay, “An Explanation of the Origins of the Term ‘Tibet’” (*Bod ces pa’i tha snyad kyi ’byung khungs dngos bshad pa*), expands upon his historical arguments without attention to the question of “race” (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 21-26). This difference aside, the two essays repeat much of the same content. My discussion here draws from both. Döndrup Gyel also revisits this same topic of the terminology for “Tibet” elsewhere (Don grub rgyal 1997: 6: 173-177).

is dismissive of these deductions, arguing that all Gendün Chöpel offers is “an explanation of how the term ‘Tibet’ was borrowed by other nations.” He summarizes: “Apart from the phrase ‘From a very early time, this land of ours was known in our own language as ‘the land of Tibet’ (*bod kyi yul*), he doesn’t actually clarify anything about the origins of the term ‘Tibet’” (23).

Döndrup Gyel’s own approach is to delve into Tibetan historical records, from which he concludes that *bod* was originally the name of a tribe, which, under the unification of the Tibetan empire (7th-9th century CE), came to be attached to the “consolidated area which fell under the control of this lineage of kings through their great political feats” (198; 58). Though the initial domain of these kings was the Yarlung valley, near Lhasa in what is now *dbus* (or “central Tibet”), Döndrup Gyel asserts that the name of the tribe continued to be attached to the entirety of the empire (including, at its greatest extent, the regions of Amdo and Kham) with no change. Terms in other languages, including “Tibet” and the Chinese *Tufan* or *Tubo* 吐蕃, he adds, came through the Tibetan *bod*. Thus, “the Tibetan race (*bod rigs*) is either a race (*rigs*) that comes from a primitive tribe or a race/nation (*mi rigs*) that spread from that basis” (198). The accuracy of these claims is unimportant.²⁶ What matters is that, for Döndrup Gyel to construct a coherent nationalist discourse, he felt it imperative to academically establish the appropriate vocabulary of nation and its historical validity.

From this discussion, we can see a vision of nationalism beginning to form through a blend of diverse (though, in many respects, traditionally nationalist) sources. Having set himself the task of defining a Tibetan race or nation, Döndrup Gyel first establishes a definition of race according

²⁶ Christopher Beckwith has undertaken an analysis of the historical terms relating to Tibet in several languages. His conclusion, however, is far more cautious than Döndrup Gyel’s: “the Tibetan people are probably as autochthonous as any other people of Eurasia. But knowledge of where they originally came from, and to which other peoples they are related, is now lost in the mists of time” (Beckwith 1987: 7-8, 16-20).

to evolutionary biology, to which he appends a historical-textual understanding of the term “Tibet” to create hybrid scientific-historical parameters. In Anthony Smith’s (1991: 21) framework, an ethnic community (or “ethnie”) has six primary attributes:

1. A collective proper name
2. A myth of common ancestry
3. Shared historical memories
4. One or more differentiating elements of common culture
5. An association with a specific homeland
6. A sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population

In these essays alone, Döndrup Gyel directly accounts for almost all of these factors: *bod* and *bod rigs* (a collective proper name); the legend of the monkey and the ogress (a myth of common ancestry); the unification of the Tibetan empire (shared historical memories); the cradle of Tibetan civilization in the Yarlung valley, and later the extended territory of the empire (an association with a specific homeland). “Where this syndrome of elements is present we are clearly in the presence of a community of historical culture with a sense of common identity,” writes Smith. Here, however, we must make one distinction, since Smith also tells us that “such a community must be sharply differentiated from a *race* in the sense of a social group that is held to possess unique hereditary biological traits” – a concept that, he agrees with Hobsbawm, rose late in the development of nationalism through pseudo-scientific discourses of racism and eugenics (21-22; Hobsbawm 2014: 107-109). While this might hold for the development of nationalist thought in Europe, which evidently had a much longer history, Döndrup Gyel’s essay illustrates that, to him, no such clear-cut divorce of biological thought from culture or history exists; instead we are presented with a vision of nation cutting across concepts of race, history, territory, and lineage.

To pick up on one of the themes raised in the essay, it is worth considering in greater detail Döndrup Gyel's attitudes towards Tibetan history and tradition, as this forms one of the pillars of his thinking on the Tibetan nation. If we look at his six-volume collected works, we see that his scholarly writing accounts for a significant proportion of its total, and that essays on Tibetan history account for a significant proportion of that scholarly writing. What is most striking about Döndrup Gyel's interest in Tibetan history is that he homes in on a specific era: the aforementioned Tibetan empire, a dynasty of kings from the Yarlung valley in central Tibet who ruled from the 7th to the 9th centuries and whose influence spread across the whole plateau. While this period is when Buddhism made its first appearance in Tibet, it is also perhaps the only period in Tibetan history that is not necessarily defined by it. Though Döndrup Gyel never clearly defined his motivations for this work, I believe that the Tibetan empire provided an attractive historical study for two reasons: firstly, it represents the height of Tibetan strength and influence, and secondly, it was possible to interpret it as an era (relatively) free from ties to Buddhism.

This should not lead us into the trap of drawing simplistic conclusions about Döndrup Gyel being 'anti-Buddhist'; nevertheless, finding a way to de-emphasize or side-step Buddhism was a necessary step in the process of forging a new history of the Tibetans as a nation, a *mirik*, as opposed to sharers of the same religion. It is possible that he held such a keen interest in the poetic genre of *mgur*, on which he wrote his master's thesis, partly for the same reason: as one of the few forms of Tibetan literature that pre-dated Buddhism and Indian cultural influence, it lent itself to reinterpretation as a "national" tradition (Jackson 1996: 368-374 Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 316-601).

Like Gendün Chöpel, Döndrup Gyel took a particular interest in the documents on Tibetan history and culture that emerged from Dunhuang. With his colleague Chen Qingying 陈庆英 at

the Central University for Nationalities, he also translated into Tibetan sections of the Tang annals (*Jiu Tang shu* 旧唐书, *Xin Tang shu* 新唐书) that dealt with the Tibetan empire (Don grub rgyal 1997: 4: 273-489). The historical cast of the period even crops up in his creative writing: his unfinished story “Exploring the Tombs of the Kings” (*Btsan po'i bang so myul ba'i gtam rgyud*) centers around a university student who is fixated on the imperial era and dreams of meeting the renowned king Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) (Don grub rgyal 1997: 2: 352-397). His appraisal of these figures is invariably positive. In one essay on education in early Tibet, he lauds the intellectual capacities of Songtsen Gampo and Thönmi Sambhoṭa (*thon mi sam+b+ho Ta*), the minister traditionally credited with inventing the Tibetan script. Döndrup Gyel sees in these men a reflection of his own values: they were “scientific” innovators who “studied the speech and scripts of other nations (*mi rigs*)” then founded Tibetan grammar and script through cultural borrowing. His only qualification to these achievements is that, over the course of time, Tibetan culture became monopolized by the monasteries, which left the Tibetan masses (*bod rigs mang tshogs*) mired in illiteracy and made the poetry and literature of their own language inaccessible to them (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 54, 63).

Döndrup Gyel’s interest in the perceived glories of Tibetan history is one aspect of his nationalist discourse that is very much in keeping with the classic *modus operandi* of other nationalist intellectuals. In his foundational essay, Renan (2018) remarks of the “soul” or “spiritual principle” of a nation that

The cult of ancestors is the most legitimate of all; our ancestors have made us who we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (I mean the genuine kind), this is the capital stock upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past, a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more, these are the essential preconditions for being a people. (261)

If one were to seek a “heroic past, great men, glory” in Tibetan history, then the kings of the Tibetan empire, under whom even the Tang capital of Chang’an was briefly occupied, present themselves as a logical choice. Smith identifies “the presence and/or rediscovery of a distinctive ‘ethno-history,’” the return to “an idealized image of ‘what we were,’” and a selective remembering and forgetting as central to many movements of ethnic self-determination:

The uses of ethno-history were essentially social and political. Nationalists were interested not in inquiring into ‘their’ past for its own sake, but in the reappropriation of a mythology of the territorialized past of ‘their people’. Throughout, the basic process was one of vernacular mobilization of a passive *ethnie*, and the politicization of its cultural heritage through the cultivation of its poetic spaces and the commemoration of its golden ages. (Smith 1991: 126, 140)

Döndrup Gyel’s targeted analyses of a perceived Tibetan golden age should be read as just such a project of ethno-history.

Döndrup Gyel’s ethno-historical approach went on to have a major influence on literary and intellectual discourse. As Françoise Robin (2007) argues, the later rise of historical and biographical fiction, which offered glowing portrayals of historical figures like Thönmi Sambhoṭa, must be seen as a continued search for a Tibetan identity that is rooted in the historical work of Gendün Chöpel and Döndrup Gyel (36). Intellectuals and scholars have also read this aspect of his work as ethno-history and have sought to develop it further. Meché, for example, argues that Döndrup Gyel’s focus on the imperial period was “a way of expressing his nationalist thinking (*mi rigs ring lugs kyi bsam blo*)” (Me lce 2014b: 308; Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 161) and concurs that, after the fall of the empire and the rise of Buddhism, the “spirit” of that era was lost. Nyizhön (Nyi gzhon) goes further in designating Döndrup Gyel, along with Gendün Chöpel, as one of the few inheritors of this spirit in the post-empire period (Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 159). As these interpretations indicate, Döndrup Gyel’s vivid portrait of Tibetan historical achievements did not simply follow the classical nationalist paradigm of self-glorification: it served equally, if not more

so, to condemn the failings of contemporary Tibetans. As Lu Xun's likeminded essay "On the Power of Mara Poetry" (*Moluo shili shuo* 摩罗诗力说) puts it, the proclamation of "past glories" heightens the "forlorn silence" of the present (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 67; trans. Kowallis, forthcoming).

2.5 From Individual Pride to National Pride

The centrality of the concept of *mirik* to Döndrup Gyel's thinking is by now clear, but there is in fact a more complete phrase with which he is associated, one that in certain respects has become the descriptor of his nationalist thought as a whole: "national pride" (*mi rigs kyi la rgya*). The terms "pride" and "national pride" are most often found in Döndrup Gyel's poetry. Take, for example, these lines from "Here, Too, a Living Heart Beats Wildly" (*Di na yang drag tu mchong lding byed bzhin pa'i snying gson po zhig 'dug*):

This nation of ours is indeed made up of solid corporeal form, flesh and blood,
The spirit of knowledge,
The soul of pride [*la rgya yi bla srog*]
[...]
The steam of the nation's hopes will swirl in the sky,
The blue clouds of the snowland's pride [*gangs ljongs kyi la rgya*] will glide from the south

(Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 90, 93)

Or these lines, from "In Praise of the Heroes of Knowledge" (*Rig pa'i dpa' bo rnam la phul ba'i bstod tshig*), a poem written in honor of the graduating class of the Tsolho (*mtsho lho*) Teacher Training School:

You are:
The pride of the nation [*mi rigs kyi la rgya*],
The prospects of the Tibetan race,
the hopes of the future.
The rise and fall of Tibet,
The wax and wane of the Land of Snows depends on you.
Therefore: you are the masters of the nation,
And the repository of the era's hopes
[...]
Messengers of the century, youth of the age

The pride of our nation [*rang rigs kyi la rgya*]
Masters of the Tibetan race
[...]
My esteemed students:
Pride [*la rgya*] is our life-essence,
Pride in oneself [*nga rgyal*] is our glory.
Don't let the lofty heads given by our parents
Be trampled under the feet of others.
If we can lift the arm of the snowland's pride
Over the heads of others,
It would be the glory of our race
And the pride of the motherland [*mes rgyal gyi la rgya*].

(Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 151-152)

Despite Döndrup Gyel's fondness for this array of "national pride" terminology, it is difficult to argue that it constitutes a fleshed-out, tangible concept per se. Nevertheless, the idea of "national pride" has come to form a kind of catch-all expression for Döndrup Gyel's nationalism, a summation of the various strands of his *mirik* discourse. As Tsedrup has observed, Döndrup Gyel's era was one in which terms such as "national pride" and "national spirit" (*mi rigs kyi snying stobs*) were ubiquitous to the point of becoming "specialized signs" (*ched las skad brda*) (Tshe grub 2007: 28). The phrase was used at the memorial service commemorating Döndrup Gyel's death in 1985 (Sangs rgyas rin chen *et al* 2011: 251), but it did not receive a more substantial academic treatment until 1990, when a short article was published in *Qinghai Mass Art* (*Mtsho sngon mang tshogs sgyu rtsal*) by Drölma Gyatso.²⁷ She bemoans that, faced with "advanced countries and eminent nations," Tibetans lose their sense of "pride and courage" in their own language and traditions, a tendency that is the very antithesis of Döndrup Gyel's national pride (Sgrol ma rgya mtsho 1990: 52). "Pride" clearly equates to some sense of cultural nationalism, an insistence on the validity of Tibetan traditions in the face of those would attack or abandon them,

²⁷ According to Chökyong, this is the first article to discuss Döndrup Gyel in terms of national pride (Chos skyong 2006: 18).

as exemplified in the lines quoted above (Don't let the lofty heads given by our parents/Be trampled under the feet of others/If we can lift the arm of the snowland's pride/Over the heads of others/It would be the glory of our race). Döndrup Gyel's historical research on the Tibetan empire and his academic interest in the literary genre of *mgur* – his projects of ethno-history – are perhaps the clearest examples of this form of cultural nationalism.

And yet, at the same time, Drölma Gyatso also locates his national pride precisely in his critical tendencies: its basis was “exposing and criticizing the defects and backwards nature of our nation, like performing moxibustion on a dislocated joint” (52). Thus, national pride is not unquestioning or uncritical; in fact it goes hand-in-hand with self-reflection and self-criticism. “National pride” has become a ubiquitous concept in Tibetan intellectual circles. As Lama Jabb (2015a) points out, an ideological cornerstone of the poets who comprised the “Third Generation” was their self-declared rejection of Döndrup Gyel's slogan (138). It would seem, however, that interpretations of “national pride” have increasingly come to ignore the crucial element of self-critique Drölma Gyatso highlighted so early on. Döndrup Gyel's seemingly self-contradictory ethos actually sets him apart from many other Tibetan writers, who have arguably leant much more towards cultural pride than cultural criticism. Yidam Tsering (Yi dam tshe ring, Ch. Yidan Cairang 伊丹才让), for instance, represents an intriguing potential comparative study. A Tibetan poet who wrote in Chinese and was roughly contemporaneous with Döndrup Gyel, Yidam Tsering's poems are often read along Tibetan nationalist lines; as Yangdon Dhondup argues, he was “trying to restore Tibetans' pride in their own culture and tradition” (Yangdon Dhondup 2008: 45-47). At no point, however, does Yidam Tsering's literary nationalism give an equally central role to self-criticism and the denunciation of “backwards” cultural tendencies.

In the years since the publication of Drölma Gyatso's article, the idea of "national pride" has come to occupy a pivotal role in discussions of Döndrup Gyel's thinking. A more substantive aspect of this concept is the link between Döndrup Gyel's attitudes towards individual and national pride. By "individual pride" I am referring to the Tibetan term *nga rgyal*, also translatable as "arrogance" or "conceitedness." It is this latter sense of the term that was used by Döndrup Gyel's detractors, who accused him of having a haughty, disrespectful attitude to his peers and superiors and a blinkered self-assurance of his own position. But Döndrup Gyel did not take this as a criticism – the opposite, in fact. He insisted that, without pride, one invited the contempt of others, and that fostering individual pride logically led to national pride. Pema Bhum (1995) once put it to him that pride and self-respect were easily mistaken, to which Döndrup Gyel responded with "a long monologue on why pride was the more necessary of the two" (23). In the Tibetan cultural context, an insistence on the value of individual pride is furthermore an inherently iconoclastic philosophical position, as "pride" or "arrogance" (*nga rgyal*, Sanskrit: *māna*) is one of the five poisons or kleshas (*nyon mongs*) in Mahayana Buddhism, an undesirable mental state that causes suffering.

Chökyong has compared Döndrup Gyel's thoughts on the process of individual-national-state awakening to those of Lu Xun (Chos skyong 2006: 337-338), and indeed this is a question on which Lu Xun commented directly:

Chinese people have always been a little arrogant. It's just a shame that it isn't "the arrogance of the individual," but "the arrogance of the patriotic collective." [...] "The arrogance of the individual" equals independence – it is a declaration of war against the ordinary masses. [...] "The arrogance of the collective" and "the arrogance of patriotism" equals a partisan alliance against those who are different – it is a declaration of war against a minority of geniuses. (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 327)

Lu Xun, famed for his uncompromising confrontational stance and his excoriations of intellectual peers, would no doubt have concurred with Döndrup Gyel that a kind of individualistic arrogance

can equate to an avant-garde intellectual position and a means to challenge the status quo. Here, Lu Xun's condemnation of "collective, patriotic arrogance" is a reference to that particular kind of nationalism he so abhorred: the cultural conservatism of the "national essence" group, the tyrannical cowardice of the crowd, and the type of mentality that would lead to the "restoration of tradition, monarchism, support of the Qing and the elimination of the foreign, etc. etc." (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 328). The lone individual stirring the nation to action was a constant trope of Lu Xun's work from "Mara Poetry" on, and it was always accompanied by the risk – even the inevitability – that the lone individual would be ostracized and treated as insane. Döndrup Gyel's insistence on finding sources of pride in Tibetan history sets him apart from Lu Xun to some degree – to the latter, such a mission would have veered far too close to the territory of "national essence" – but both writers find common ground in the belief that, if there was any hope for the nation, it lay in the emergence of proud individualists with stubbornly critical voices.

In the Chinese context, the discourses of individualism and nationalism operated in a shifting, often mutually reliant relationship to one another, and this is likewise the case in Döndrup Gyel's work. It is reasonable to assert that individualism does not exist in his writing as an independent value; rather, he lauds its capacity for establishing a common basis for national identity. Two decades later, his conflation of individualism and nationalism was to come in for criticism from Tibetan scholars:

Döndrup Gyel placed a great deal of importance on the "nation." He believed that if this "nation" flourishes, then not only would the state flourish, the needs of all individuals without exception could be fulfilled. However, though it is true that he was also the first to plant in our thought the idea – or the seed of the idea – that through an accumulation of individual pride national pride could be achieved [...], as a writer who existed in the environment of the 1980s he took refuge in the "object-less" abstraction of the nation. This gave the liberation of the concrete individual and the pursuit of freedom an unfashionable appearance. Therefore, it is worth analyzing that the spirit of intellectuals of the 1980s was reduced to just shouting the slogan of

“national pride” without having any concrete objectives. (Chos skyong 2006: 336-337)

These intellectuals’ critiques will be investigated in more detail in a subsequent chapter. For now, it will suffice to say that, insofar as Döndrup Gyel was interested in the problems of nation rather than the idea of individualism as an inherently valuable philosophy, their observations are indeed valid.

2.6 Döndrup Gyel in Beijing

That Döndrup Gyel’s literary interests so strikingly paralleled those of the May Fourth era does not come as such a surprise when we consider the cultural milieu in which he found himself during his most prolific creative years. Döndrup Gyel first went to Beijing in 1971, where he studied for three years at the Tibetan department of the Central Institute for Nationalities (*Krung dbyang mi rigs slob gling*, Ch. *Zhongyang Minzu Xueyuan* 中央民族学院).²⁸ During this time, he also took trips to Wuhan, Changsha, and Shaoshan (birthplace of Mao), primarily to study Chinese (Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 197). In 1978, he again left Qinghai for Beijing to take up a place as a research student at the Central Institute for Nationalities. He graduated in 1981, but remained there as a teacher until 1984, when he returned to Qinghai, where he lived until his death in 1985. His education and a significant part of his adult life was thus spent in the academic environment of China’s capital, and this was, moreover, when many of his most famous works – “Waterfall of Youth,” among others – were written.

Döndrup Gyel’s second stay in Beijing coincided with the major intellectual and cultural renaissance that was taking place in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, a time when many of the profound issues surrounding nation, society, and civilization were being discussed with a renewed

²⁸ Since renamed the Central University for Nationalities (*Krung dbyang mi rigs slob grwa chen mo*, Ch. *Zhongyang Minzu Daxue* 中央民族大学), and more recently rebranded in English as “Minzu University of China.”

enthusiasm and sense of urgency. The late 1970s witnessed the beginnings of this shift with the “Movement to Liberate Thinking” (*sixiang jiefang yundong* 思想解放运动), a campaign that began a move away from the ideology of the Cultural Revolution and towards, among other things, a materialist scientism that situated science and technology as central determinants of social development (Xu 2004: 185). In 1983, Wang Ruoshui 王若水 published an essay on the need for humanism in Marxism, sparking a “humanism fever.” Many more “fevers” (*re* 热) (culture fever, reading fever) would follow, signs of the more widespread cultural and intellectual trends that constituted a “New Enlightenment Movement” (*xin qimeng yundong* 新启蒙运动) in the 1980s (Xu 2004: 183, Davies 2017: 758-763). Whether it was the cultural politics discussed by philosophers such as Li Zehou 李泽厚 or the “Marching Toward the Future” scientism of Jin Guantao 金观涛, these were developments that Jing Wang (1996) defines as “utopian”; that is, future-oriented debates about the course that should be taken by Chinese culture and society (40). These movements continued after Döndrup Gyel left in 1984, and he missed some of their crescendos – most notably the student protests of 1989 – but his years in Beijing overlapped to a significant extent with the inception and subsequent flourishing of a radically new cultural environment. This was a moment in Chinese history where, once more, “intellectuals rather than average citizens appeared to be the unequivocal spokespeople for the Chinese modern” (48).

This consciousness of the central role of writers and thinkers in directing the nation – in other words the role that Döndrup Gyel adopted himself – was one of several specific features that have led scholars to define this era as a second May Fourth (Chen & Jin 1997: 130). There were many ways in which this connection between the 1980s and May Fourth was raised. Intellectuals such as Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu 刘再复 invoked the May Fourth precedent in broad debates over the question of tradition and modernity, arguing that the revisiting of these themes was warranted

because May Fourth thinkers had failed to resolve the problems they had raised (Wang 1996: 125). Others defended against the charge of a mere repetition of old discussions by insisting that the debates of the 1980s constituted a “higher level” return to May Fourth concerns (52). However this return was interpreted, there was a consensus that that is indeed what it was: a renewed consideration of the problems of tradition, modernity, scientism, social development, and the role of intellectuals in resolving larger social and political issues (Wang 1996: 52; Xu 2004: 188). It was in this way that the “New Enlightenment Movement” became “another “May Fourth,” that “culture fever” became May Fourth’s “contemporary counterpart” (Xu 2004: 183; Wang 1996: 71).

Tibetan scholars who write on Döndrup Gyel have underscored these same connections (while adding their own distinct vocabulary), describing the 1980s as a “second May Fourth,” a “new culture movement” in which Chinese writers were “once again issuing a call to awaken China from the sleep of ignorance” (Chos skyong 2006: 189; Zhogs ljang 2014: 183-184). As Döndrup Gyel was in Beijing between 1978 and 1984, it is widely held that he was influenced by the “new thinking” and “new viewpoints” being circulated in the capital at that time (Me lce 2013: 156-158; Zhogs ljang 2014: 183-184; Bdud lha rgyal 2014: 180-182). Döndrup Gyel’s immersion in this new intellectual environment is compared by one scholar to Itō Hirobumi and Yan Fu’s 严复 education abroad in England, from which they brought back new knowledge to their countries (Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 197-198). According to Gurong Pündröl (Dgu rong spun grol),²⁹ however, when Döndrup Gyel returned from Beijing to Qinghai armed with a new critical mentality, he discovered a people trying to “rebuild a factory of autocratic thought” (Dgu rong spun grol 2011:

²⁹ Döndrup Gyel’s half-brother, now a Döndrup Gyel scholar and a proponent of enlightenment thinking associated with the new intellectuals discussed in Chapter Five.

12-13); that is, moving not towards new knowledge, but trying to restore the religious traditions suppressed during the Cultural Revolution – the very trend Döndrup Gyel critiques in “Trülku.”

Döndrup Gyel’s association with the new intellectual developments in 1980s China comes in many forms, particularly through his attachment to the dominant themes of “enlightenment” (*blo 'byed*) and “humanism” (*mi chos ring lugs*) (Sgren po 2011; Bdud lha rgyal 2014: 166).³⁰ Beyond Döndrup Gyel himself, this era of Tibetan literature as a whole has been equated with May Fourth China (Chos skyong 2006: 65, 175). Ma Lihua 马丽华 (1998) even manages to make this comparison without any reference to Döndrup Gyel,³¹ describing the Tibetan-language literature of the 1980s as “nothing less than a revolution, a ‘May Fourth’ new culture movement” (58, 68). As Hartley (2003) notes, translations of May Fourth literature into Tibetan in the 1980s and their publication in the newly emerging journals of the time resulted in early modern Chinese literary discourse making a distinct mark on the beginnings of modern Tibetan literature (173).³²

Since it is likely that almost no Tibetans would have read May Fourth literature before the Cultural Revolution, this was the first time that such an interaction was occurring between the Chinese and Tibetan literary worlds. Herein lies an important distinction between the 1980s/May Fourth parallels as they are made by Han Chinese and Tibetan scholars. For the former, the 1980s represented a *return* to long-discussed themes of Chinese literature, but for the latter, this same

³⁰ One way in which the adoption of these ideals in the Tibetan context differs profoundly from the Chinese is in their reception and interpretation. The “humanism” debate in China from Wang Ruoshui onwards was construed as a challenge to Maoist ideology, born of the post-Cultural Revolution political thaw, that moved away from the extremities of politics and class struggle (Wang 1996: 26). Yet Döndrup Gyel’s discourse of progress, rationality, and modernity – characteristic of classical enlightenment humanism – was (and to some extent still is) read by Tibetan critics as the very opposite, i.e., as a Maoist ideology of materialism and anti-traditionalism (see, for example, Blo bzang yon tan 2015).

³¹ Ma’s study of Tibetan literature is discussed in Chapter Three. As I note there, her omission of Döndrup Gyel is most likely due to the fact that she relied entirely on Chinese translations in discussing Tibetan-language literature.

³² Tibetan translations of Lu Xun’s “The True Story of Ah Q” and “Diary of a Madman” were also published in book form in 1979 and 1980, respectively.

period was the very *beginning* of Tibetan literary modernity. In effect, Tibetan readings of the 1980s as a second May Fourth forge a double link to modern Chinese literary traditions, as Tibetan literature is being situated within China's post-Cultural Revolution literary renaissance, but since this period also constitutes the founding of a modern Tibetan literature itself, it is simultaneously seen as comparable to the original May Fourth movement.

One of the most significant ways in which Döndrup Gyel drew from this environment is his exposure to new translated literature. The new wave of literary and academic translations into Chinese in the 1980s was one of the key factors in sparking the various “fevers” and cultural debates of the decade (Davies 2017: 762), and Döndrup Gyel was inspired by these new possibilities just as much as his Chinese counterparts. It has been said that when Döndrup Gyel was at school in Qinghai in the mid- to late-1960s, there was little to read besides translations of Mao and a handful of Party documents (Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 102-103). After Döndrup Gyel moved to Beijing, this situation changed dramatically, and there can be little doubt that this was for him a period of exposure to a range of inspirational ideas and works of literature. Trying to piece together a picture of Döndrup Gyel's reading habits relies primarily on the recollections of his friends and colleagues, which are understandably sparse. Nevertheless, these recollections point to a diverse range of sources. Gurong Pündröl, for instance, recounts a meeting in 1984 when Döndrup Gyel was reading a Chinese translation of Rousseau's *Confessions* (Dgu rong spun grol 2014: 298-299). Chökyong mentions writers and texts including Mayakovsky, Sherlock Holmes stories, *War and Peace*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Chos skyong 2006: 62, 75, 121-122). Texts such as these had not formed a part of the Tibetan literary spectrum prior to this period, and any engagement Döndrup Gyel undertook with them was a result of his immersion in the cultural renaissance taking place in China at the time.

For Han Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s, translations of foreign literature and scholarship were a means to connect with new ideas and drive new cultural debates. This was also true for Döndrup Gyel, but at the same time, Chinese writing itself was equally “foreign,” and thus had the same effect as translated literature. His colleagues Gomé Dorjé Rinchen and Sangdak recall that he often read Chinese literature in addition to foreign literature in Chinese translation, the latter citing two poems in particular: “Returning to Yan’an” (*Hui Yan’an* 回延安) by He Jingzhi 贺敬之 and “The Battle of Xisha” (*Xisha zhi zhan* 西沙之战) by Zhang Yongmei 张永枚 (Sgo me rdo rje rin chen 2007; Gsang bdag 2017).³³ Chen Qingying, who studied with Döndrup Gyel at the Central Institute for Nationalities, remembers that during that time he read magazines such as *People’s Literature* (*Renmin wenxue* 人民文学), *Selected Stories* (*Xiaoshuo xuankan* 小说选刊), and *Qinghai Lake* (*Qinghai hu* 青海湖) (Chos skyong 2006: 62).

His collected works contain further evidence of his reading habits. In his writings on the subject of literary composition, he cites an array of figures. In addition to Balzac and Gorky, he references Mao Zedong 毛泽东 and Chinese writers including Lu Xun, Mao Dun 茅盾, and Qin Mu 秦牧 (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 163-167; Don grub rgyal 1997: 6: 89-125). The translations volume of his collected works furthermore features a number of translations of Chinese literary texts. There are two pieces by the Mongolian author Malqinhu (Malaqinfu 玛拉沁夫), an essay by Lao She 老舍, numerous praise poems from the “learn from Daqing” campaign, and two short stories by the pioneering science-fiction writer Tong Enzheng 童恩正. But last of all, it must also be stressed that his education also resulted in an extensive encounter with Tibetan texts. His time

³³ Though he makes the point in order to question the originality of Döndrup Gyel’s writing, Lobsang Yongdan has also written about the connections between Döndrup Gyel’s work and Chinese poetry (Blo bzang yon tan 2015; 2018).

at the Central Institute for Nationalities was a period in which Döndrup Gyel read widely in Tibetan literature and history. In addition to his interest in Gendün Chöpel, Döndrup Gyel did much of his academic work on Tibetan history and composed renowned treatises on the Ramayana and the traditional oral poetry of *mgur*, on which he wrote his master's thesis (Lin 2008; Pema Bhum 1995; Ljang bu 2016).

In order to form a fuller picture of Döndrup Gyel's work, we must appreciate the extent to which his education in Beijing and his entry into the discursive field of Chinese intellectual culture in the 1980s shaped his thinking. Given the fact that Döndrup Gyel's writing has served as a cornerstone for the subsequent development of modern Tibetan literature, this is crucial not only for the question of how we approach his work, but how we approach the study of modern Tibetan literature in China as a whole. We may be able to extend this perspective even further if we broaden our horizons beyond Tibetan writing. Perhat Tursun and Tahir Hamut, two of the most renowned contemporary Uyghur-language poets, also attended the Central Institute for Nationalities in the 1980s. Both authors were exposed to the same cultural whirlwind, immersing themselves in Chinese translations of authors from Faulkner, Kafka, and Joyce to Camus, Freud, and Schopenhauer (such texts were likewise unavailable in Uyghur translation). Equipped with this knowledge, they crafted groundbreaking works of new literature in the Uyghur language, which inspired and provoked in equal measure (Perhat, much like Döndrup Gyel, found himself labeled a heretic by conservative Islamic scholars) (Allen-Ebrahimian 2015; Byler 2016).

The similarities between their trajectories and Döndrup Gyel's, moving from radical new experiences in the capital to a re-fashioning of literary traditions back home, prompt us to reflect on the manner in which potentially all minority language literatures in China have been impacted by their encounter with the dominant culture (and global cultures through translations into the

dominant language). A significant proportion of Döndrup Gyel scholarship in the West has tended towards situating his work within the continuum of Tibetan literature, judging the extent to which it represents a break with or a continuation of Tibetan traditions (Lama Jabb 2015a, Lin 2008, Kapstein 2002, Virtanen 2014). While this approach has made substantial contributions to our knowledge of his work, we cannot overlook the extent to which his writing was informed by an engagement with new cultural worlds via the translated medium of Chinese. It was through these transcultural interactions that he reconceived of Tibetan traditions and formed an intellectual project that organized Tibetan literature around explicitly nationalist concepts.

2.7 Chinese Nation, Tibetan Nation, Chinese State

Having established a detailed picture of Döndrup Gyel's nationalist thinking, it is appropriate at this point to comment on the issue of nation versus state. The prevalence of a concept of nationalism in his writing has at times – primarily in exile – led to an interpretation of Döndrup Gyel and his work as being implicitly or even openly antagonistic towards the state of China. In a landmark essay on new poetry since “Waterfall of Youth” written in 1991, the now US-based scholar Pema Bhum writes:

All Tibetans, both inside and outside of Tibet, share a common sorrow – their homeland is occupied by another. In addition to this, Tibetans inside Tibet also bear the sorrow that comes from being forced to hide the anger they feel toward the plunderers of their homeland and the murderers of their fathers; they can never show their real face and must bow respectfully to those in power. There is also a special suffering for writers and poets. Suppressing the fire of hatred in their hearts and pretending to smile, they must use their pen, which is their soul, to sing songs of praise to the bloody hand that murdered their fathers. Tibetans in exile, though they are unable to take revenge, have the desperate satisfaction of expressing their anger by cursing and exposing the crimes of their enemies. However, poets inside Tibet are denied this satisfaction. (Pema Bhum 2008a: 114)

Pema Bhum's comments suggest that where a Tibetan writer's enmity towards China is absent, it is because it has necessarily been suppressed and replaced with a political demand to “sing songs

of praise.” It is impossible to comment on what may or may not have been suppressed in Döndrup Gyel’s consciousness. The political situation in “China’s Tibet” naturally places extreme restrictions on what one can articulate and how one can articulate it, and this was of course true in Döndrup Gyel’s time also. However, the frequency of references to the Party and the state in Döndrup Gyel’s work is such that it cannot easily be ignored or dismissed as being entirely insincere.

Let us look at an excerpt from his poem “Friendship Between Chinese and Tibetans” (*Rgya bod bar gyi mdza' mthun*), published in his first collection of poetry *The Dawn of Unstilted Composition* (*'Bol rtsom zhogs pa'i skya rengs*) in 1981:

The new state (*rgyal khab*) of China (*krung go*)
Is like a sun rising in the sky.
The unity of the Chinese and Tibetan nations
Is like lotuses flourishing on the soil.

Without the sunlight of the Party,
How can the lotus blossom?
Without unity between Chinese and Tibetans,
How can the pollen flourish?

Since nationality autonomy has been implemented,
The flower of unity has blossomed.
Since the fragrance of equality has spread,
The bee of friendship has flown.

[...]

Having lain asleep for 10,000 years,
The doors of the mines are now open,
Thus industrial production in the Land of Snows
Has risen like a waxing moon.

On the square fields
The mechanical iron ox is reaping,
Thus the harvest of wheat, barley, and beans
Is the size of a mountain.

The boundless green meadows

Have been nourished with chemical fertilizer,
Thus the mountains and plains are filled
With draught animals – horse, yak, sheep.

(Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 245-247)

Here, we are presented specifically with a consideration of the “state” (*rgyal khab*), not the “nation” (*mi rigs*), and this state is identified as China – *krung go*, the Tibetan phonetic rendering of the Chinese *Zhongguo* 中国, indicating the People’s Republic. The achievements in Tibet that he attributes to the state – mining, industrial production, increased agricultural output through technology – are highly significant, as we have seen that material and scientific progress were declared goals of his desire for national development.

This is likewise the dominant theme of the poem “A Genuine Dream of Wonder and Joy” (*Khrul min rmi lam ngo mtshar dga' skyed*), which basks in visions of the industrial, agricultural, scientific, and economic achievements made by the Party and state, including China’s production of nuclear weapons (Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 207-213). Of course, there is the argument that these declarations cannot be taken seriously, that he is merely ‘bowing respectfully to those in power,’ and his choice of stock political phrases might support such a stance. But to make such an argument would be to pick and choose, rather than viewing his work and thought as a totality. His poems in praise of Party and state achievements may often lack the vivacious creativity of his more seminal writing, but they nevertheless share the same ethos of scientific, material development that we see in landmark works such as “Waterfall of Youth” and “The Narrow Path.” One qualification that must be made, however, is that there is also a sense in which these scientific and technological achievements of the state are divorced from Tibetans. To Döndrup Gyel the fundamental condition of the Tibetan *mirik* was backwardness and the need for progress. Therefore, if Tibetans can take pride in material advancements associated with the state, it must be as a kind of reflected glory. In

other words, the achievements of the state are not necessarily those of the Tibetan *mirik*; in fact they are likely the achievements of the Han *mirik*.

Though it would be false to suggest that an idea of the state is equal in importance to nation in his thinking, there are nevertheless enough examples of state conceptions in his writing that they cannot be ignored. In 1981, after a major conference on Tibetan literature was held in Xining, Döndrup Gyel composed a poem lauding the “beautiful sunlight of the Party’s policies” that had allowed the “lotuses of literature to bloom in the Land of Snows” (Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 138). Another poem, “The Beautiful Garland of Eulogy” (*Bstod tshig me tog phreng mdzes*), is an ode to the Party leader Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇, following him through the May Fourth Movement, the Communist Youth League, the War of Resistance Against Japan, and the founding of the People’s Republic, hailing him as a “golden pillar” who erected the “beam of the state” (Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 190-194).

We can also find such views of the Chinese state beyond his poetry. In an essay co-written with his colleague Chen Qingying after their university-organized trip to Dunhuang, Döndrup Gyel refers to the Mogao caves as a past cultural center of “our country” (*rang rgyal*, equivalent of the Chinese *woguo* 我国), one of the greatest achievements of which was that it served as a cross-cultural meeting point, a place where “China/*Zhongguo*” (*krung go*) was introduced to the “countries” (*rgyal khab*) to the West and the cultures and religions of the “minority nationalities” (*grangs nyung mi rigs*) of the northwest. He rails against the Western pillagers of Dunhuang, and this is a tragedy he frames in state terms: it was “an inestimable loss in the cultural history of our country.” The Dunhuang essay represents an amalgamation of the various nationalist concepts that we have seen him exhibit in his writing, as well as some new ones (and there is certainly the possibility that this is due to the essay’s co-authorship): the murals of Dunhuang represent the

“pride” and “intelligence” of “the masses of each of the races of our country”; Dunhuang is a site that fills him with pride in the “glory of the Chinese (*krung go*) masses”; and, in an interesting and rare twist on “national pride,” it is “the pride of the Chinese people (*krung hwa mi rigs*, Ch. *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族)” (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 91-109).

An examination of these sources cannot lead us to conclude that Döndrup Gyel’s nationalism was antagonistic to the state. In other words, in no way did it contradict Tibet’s status as part of modern China. As the above examples illustrate, he did on several occasions in fact express great pride in the state. When we consider his nationalist thought as a whole, this is not necessarily surprising. Döndrup Gyel constructed a nationalist ideology centered around the *mirik*, and as China is officially a state containing numerous distinct and formally recognized *mirik*, the two concepts are able to theoretically coexist. He presents this view in his essay, describing Dunhuang as proof that the cultures of “the Chinese and Tibetan nations” (*rgya bod mi rigs*) have interacted since the distant past (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 103-104). The title of the poem “Friendship Between Chinese and Tibetans” is another case in point. The “Chinese” and “Tibetan” of the title could, at first glance, be seen as ambiguous, in that it could refer to some kind of territorial designation – *rgya* being short for *rgya nag*, the traditional (and still common) term for “China,” and *bod*, translated as “Tibet.” However, in the scheme of the poem – and Döndrup Gyel’s writing as a whole – the “Chinese” (or, rather, the Han) and the “Tibetans” are both construed as nations living within the same state (*krung go/Zhongguo*).

Döndrup Gyel extends this vision of nationhood beyond the context of China: the whole globe consists of distinct and identifiable nations or ethno-cultural people-groups. In the poem “Tradition, Hear My Heartfelt Words” (*Goms gshis lags bdag gi snying gtam 'di la gson*), Döndrup Gyel offers, in his preferred ‘staircase’ style, certain criteria for this nationhood:

Nation
 What a secret and hidden term you are!
 Tradition
 What a delightful and pleasant song you are!
 Of course, the nations of the world each have
 Their own history
 Their own speech and writing
 Their own characteristics
 Their own thinking
 Their own customs
 Their own traditions
 Their own people.

(Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 236-237)

These criteria are likewise harmonious with the conception of *minzu* in the PRC. They would only pose a challenge to the imperative of “ethnic unity” (*mi rigs mthun sgril, minzu tuanjie* 民族团结) if a nation within China expressed intra-national antagonism or laid claim to independent governance of a territory. But “Friendship Between Chinese and Tibetans” is careful to emphasize the peaceful cohabitation of the Han and Tibetan nations:

The seeds of Chinese-Tibetan union
 Are scattered in the mountains and valleys,
 The buds of ethnic friendship
 Bloom either side of the mountain.

(Don grub rgyal 1997: 1: 244)

At the memorial ceremony organized after Döndrup Gyel’s death in 1985, the participants chose to address this issue directly. They went to some length to establish what they felt was the relationship between nation and state in his thinking (“state” here expressed as “motherland” [*mes rgyal*], a “huge house in which are gathered more than fifty nations” [Sangs rgyas rin chen *et al* 2011: 249]):

Hero of knowledge, in your thinking the connection between striving for national pride and loving the motherland was extremely clear. However, some people have distorted this love of the motherland and in so doing have brought shame on the nation. Eminent sir, how different you are from them! When we look at your love of

the motherland and your affection for the nation, there is no shame in saying that you are an intellectual raised by the Party and an outstanding son of the nation. Accomplishing the work of the nation is an important part of the Party's work for the nation as a whole, and affection for the nation is an important part of loving the motherland, therefore, no matter who you are, if you are someone who can promote the development of the nation's culture and economy, are you not someone who loves the motherland? (251)

Such a statement aims at heading off an interpretation of Döndrup Gyel's work as espousing some form of separatism or anti-(Han) Chinese (or state/motherland) nationalist sentiment.³⁴ It would be unsurprising if one were to object that such speeches have the air of propaganda or politically necessary declarations, but even if that were the case, they are still perfectly in tune with what Döndrup Gyel expressed in his own writing. Meché has even felt the need to defend Döndrup Gyel against online commentators who accuse him of the very opposite: that he was a “disciple of the foreign customs of Marxism and materialism that destroyed the essence of tradition,” and that he would “be unhappy if Tibet attained freedom” (Me lce 2013: 28).

Such views fall into the extremist camp that, as we saw with the reaction to “Trülku,” unjustifiably positions Döndrup Gyel as being opposed to Tibetan tradition. But, I would argue, the opposite view – that he espoused an anti-Chinese or separatist nationalism – is equally untenable. Anna Stirr (2008), in her analysis of the popular song “Blue Lake” (*Mtsho sngon po*, Ch. *Qinghai hu* 青海湖), for which Döndrup Gyel wrote the lyrics, discusses how it has come to be seen as a kind of Tibetan “national anthem.” Some of her interlocutors (Tibetans living in New York City and Kathmandu) see words in the song such as “motherland” as ambiguous. That is, they could refer to China or Tibet, a way that Tibetans can “trick the Chinese” (320), as one

³⁴ Curiously, however, these politically correct readings also imply that an intra-state competition of nations is perfectly permissible. As Sanggyé Rinchen writes, Döndrup Gyel's wish was that “in this country of ours, where many nations are gathered, our Tibetan race from the Land of Snows must be more advanced than other nations, and must develop faster than other nations” (Sangs rgyas rin chen 2010: 14).

interviewee expresses it. Stirr therefore concludes that “the nationalism within this song is ambiguous at best” (305).

In my reading of Döndrup Gyel, there is little ambiguity to his nationalism. Terms like “motherland” may remain slippery, but overall his writing demonstrates a very clear and coherent ideology of state and nation. While the signification of Lu Xun’s “nation” may occasionally be uncertain, he could always take the territorial nature of his *minzu* and their right to a state for granted; the *minzu* nation and the *guomin* 國民 citizenry could be one and the same. This was a political luxury that Döndrup Gyel lacked. Döndrup Gyel may have been able to use cultural or historical territorial designations (e.g., the Land of Snows), but this could never be expressed as being coterminous with any Tibetan state. Though both Lu Xun and Döndrup Gyel shared common ground in their focus on the *minzu* and *mirik*, this remains a key distinction: Lu Xun could afford to be relatively indifferent to the precise correlation between his nation and the state, but for Döndrup Gyel, this was a political relationship that by necessity always had to be spelled out clearly and resolved unambiguously.

2.8 Canonizing Tibetan Nationalism

While Döndrup Gyel was a pioneer in crafting Tibetan nationalist discourse and endowing it with discursive parameters, we cannot overlook the extent to which that discourse has subsequently been made mainstream by scholars and intellectuals. Döndrup Gyel’s reading of his own life and work in his suicide note has been wholeheartedly adopted by Tibetan readers and critics alike. Just as the figure of Lu Xun was bound to the *minzu* following his death (the “Soul of the Nation”), an unbreakable bond has been formed between Döndrup Gyel and the *mirik*. Leo Lee’s (1987) study of Lu Xun concludes that it is “hard to think of any modern writer in the world so extravagantly honored by an entire nation” (190). Döndrup Gyel arguably comes close,

particularly considering the fact that his mythologizing has not been a formal, state-sanctioned (and funded) process, but rather a “grass-roots” campaign of academic and cultural work. Today, poetry readings are still held in Döndrup Gyel’s honor, art exhibitions and literary magazines are named after him and his poems, and he remains the only modern Tibetan literary writer to have a complete published works, which has been a mainstay of Tibetan bookshops since 1997.

The process of establishing Döndrup Gyel as modern Tibet’s national writer began almost immediately after his death. In December 1985 a group of his friends, including a number of distinguished authors, met in Chapcha to commemorate Döndrup Gyel’s passing. In their subsequently published eulogy, Döndrup Gyel’s work was discussed in overtly nationalist terms, with the author himself described as “the pride of the nation” (*mi rigs kyi nga rgyal*) (Sangs rgyas rin chen *et al* 2011: 251-252). Academic and critical articles on Döndrup Gyel appeared steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and in 2006, when Chökyong’s book *Rangdröl Research* (*Rang grol zhib 'jug*, named after Döndrup Gyel’s most famous penname³⁵) was published, the study of his work received further impetus.³⁶

Since that time, a number of monographs and edited volumes on his life and literature have appeared, including three more volumes of *Rangdröl Research*. This intense critical interest has played a major role in cementing Döndrup Gyel’s status as the primogenitor of modern Tibetan literature. In 1941, five years after the death of Lu Xun, the Lu Xun Research Society (*Lu Xun yanjiuhui* 鲁迅研究会) was founded, which, as David Holm points out, served as a “concrete method of fostering the ‘Lu Xun spirit’” (Quoted in Foster 2006: 231). In China, the academic

³⁵ Döndrup Gyel is known by several names. There are his pennames “Radio Victory” (Rlung 'phrin rgyal) and “Self-Liberated” (Rang grol). His name is also sometimes prefaced in scholarly writings by *dpal*, a courteous term for the deceased. For explanations of these and other titles, see Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 56-77.

³⁶ See Sprel nag pa rig 'dzin grags ldan 2015: 12-55 for a detailed list of “Rangdröl research” from the 1980s through to the late 2000s. See also Chos skyong 2006: 26-38 for another list of “Rangdröl research” in Tibetan, Chinese, and Western languages.

sub-field of “Lu Xun research” (*Lu Xun yanjiu*), promulgated through dedicated museums and journals, continues to be a primary means by which Lu Xun’s status as China’s preeminent national writer is maintained. “Rangdröl research” consciously follows this influential model of canonization (Chökyong’s pioneering volume uses “Lu Xun research” as a point of reference [Chos skyong 2006: 38]), though, in contrast to the institutionalized support for “Lu Xun research,” it has been driven by independently motivated scholars and writers. While Tibetan scholars have made offhand references to Lu Xun in the course of their studies, their concern is not with the nature or the implications of these comparisons per se; more often, they are borrowing the figure of Lu Xun in order to cast Döndrup Gyel in a similar light of mythologized ‘national writer’ or ‘father of Tibetan literature.’ However, when we examine Döndrup Gyel’s career, there is far more to these parallels than meets the eye. Despite a gap of some sixty-odd years, the beginnings of a modern Tibetan literature in the PRC in the 1980s bore many significant and intimate connections with the Chinese literary revolution of the May Fourth era.

Walker Connor (1994) long ago called for more study of “national poets” in order to probe the “the emotional/psychological dimension of ethnonationalism” (75-76). Döndrup Gyel certainly fits the mold of national poet, a writer in the vein of Byron, Mickiewicz, and Petőfi – those same writers praised by Lu Xun in “On the Power of Mara Poetry.” Unlike these figures, however, Döndrup Gyel is not simply styled as a national *poet*, but as Tibet’s first nationalist intellectual of any kind. As Meché writes,

Döndrup Gyel’s era – the 1980s – was a time in which national(ist) thinking and the fighting spirit of national pride soared like a wave. [...] He was the leading thinker and the standard-bearer of the age. He was also the person who, by means of literature, said the most about national pride, national honor, national hopes, national development, national prospects, national culture, and so on. In sum, the “nation” became like an axis of thought for Döndrup Gyel and the intellectual community of the time. (Me lce 2013: 122)

Döndrup Gyel is credited with a range of intellectual innovations beyond the literary realm. His insistence on a path of materialist development, for instance, has led critics to position him as the herald of a new age, the visionary who announced the imperative for Tibetans to study science and technology and catch up with the “advanced” (*sngon thon*) nations of the world (Sangs rgyas rin chen 2010: 16-17; Zhogs ljang 2014: 190-191). But above all, these intellectual advances revolve around nationalist thought. Döndrup Gyel was, in Jangkar’s (Byang skar) words, the first to “discover our nation” and “see that we were all mired in the sleep of ignorance” (Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 164-165).

Both Döndrup Gyel’s work itself and the subsequent scholarship focused on that work have centered around his discourse of nation, of *mirik*. We saw at the start of this chapter that Döndrup Gyel’s famous suicide note spoke instead of the Tibetan *minzu*, as it was written in Chinese. However, to him, there would have been no tension involved in this language-switching, as his *mirik* was conceived of as synonymous with the Chinese *minzu*. The equivalence of these terms had already been long established by Döndrup Gyel’s time, enshrined, for example, in official translations of the works of Mao Zedong, and indeed in the name of Döndrup Gyel’s alma mater in Beijing, the Central University for Nationalities. *Minzu* was a late Qing neologism derived from Japanese, a term that then entered into a new and complex discursive realm of ethnicity and nation (Crossley 1990: 19-20). *Mirik*, on the other hand, was a pre-existing term that had long been used to refer to different people-groups. While not a neologism, *mirik* was invested with entirely new meaning in Döndrup Gyel’s writings, and like *minzu* became bound up with an “imported vocabulary and methodology” (19) of nation and ethnicity based in new understandings of history, language, social Darwinist inter-national competition, and biological race. Döndrup Gyel’s iteration of the *mirik* was thus entirely new, because it was a nationalism intimately tied to notions

of cultural backwardness and material progress – tied, in other words, to the particularities of nationalist thinking in modern China.

2.9 Conclusion

Before concluding this chapter, it would be wise to sound a note of caution. Despite Tibetan conceptions of nation being the subject of the present chapter – and a major concern of this dissertation – it is not my intention to suggest that modern Tibetan literature demonstrates a Tibetan equivalent of C. T. Hsia’s “obsession with China,” or, in other words, a universal preoccupation with the Tibetan nation and its plight. In the context of modern Chinese literature, this academic interpretation has held sway almost since the inception of the field, and it would be unfortunate to replicate such a hegemonic narrative, particularly given that the study of modern Tibetan literature remains in a relatively fledgling state. Literary considerations of national problems and the nature of the nation itself were a hugely significant aspect of the beginnings of modern Tibetan literature, and they have remained so, but they exist alongside other concerns. What I have sought to present here is an analysis of a major – but by no means the only – trend in modern Tibetan writing.

We must also be cautious both about projecting national conceptions back in time and asserting that the “modern Tibetan literary text is itself national” (Lama Jabb 2015a: 235-237). The idea of a nation does not exist independently of a discursive framework that consciously brings it into being. Walker Connor’s (1994) insistence that the essence of the nation is “*self-awareness*” or “*self-consciousness*” (that is, a nation is not a nation until it recognizes itself as such) (104) remains one of the most simple and effective statements we can make about the convoluted nature of nationalism. We may point to a range of potential aspects of a “nation” – shared language, religion, culture, history, territory, food, clothing, etc. – but until they are consciously conceived

of as representing constituent elements of something called a nation, then it is inappropriate to speak of nations and nationalism. We may now speak of a “national” literature in the Tibetan language, but that is because writers such as Döndrup Gyel cultivated it as a discourse and actively sought to redefine Tibetan writing along national lines. Nationalism is furthermore a relevant concept to address in Döndrup Gyel’s work because it explicitly and persistently seeks to articulate the nation, to give it substance and meaning, to diagnose its issues and set its future agenda.

In a sense, the idea of nation was a convenient organizing principle for Döndrup Gyel, a rubric under which he could experiment with a whole program of reform for Tibetan society and under which he could subsume wide-ranging discussions of culture, religion, politics, and the question of tradition versus modernity. Nationalism also offered enormous emancipatory potential. It freed Tibetan writing from the cloisters of the monasteries and asserted the role of secular writers to not only make major contributions to Tibetan culture, but to be its leaders and guides. Equally if not more important is that nationalism wrested discursive control of the narrative of Tibetan modernity from Chinese hands. In the PRC, this narrative had, until Döndrup Gyel’s time, been entirely dictated to Tibetans by the Chinese state, but writers like Döndrup Gyel were reclaiming the right to discuss these issues for themselves and establish their own parameters for the development of Tibetan culture and thought.

At the same time, this was a nationalist discourse shaped according to the example of Chinese literary modernity. His writing harks back to early modern China in particular as it not only envisioned a nation, but a benighted nation tied down by economic and cultural backwardness and in need of radical reform. This crisis of the backwards nation loomed large over the birth of modern Chinese literature, and at the beginnings of modern Tibetan literature, it was recreated with uncanny likeness. Döndrup Gyel’s writing is often seen as a fulcrum, a dramatic shift into

Tibetan literary modernity. But the fact that this shift occurred within modern China represents an entirely unprecedented development in the history of both Tibetan and Chinese literatures, and its significance must reshape our understandings of both accordingly.

On the Tibetan side, the birth of modern literature in Tibet was, from its inception, imbricated with its Chinese counterpart. Modern Chinese literature, meanwhile, began as a fundamentally Han-centric enterprise, but under the PRC it came to incorporate not only different *minzus* but different languages. This is a development that has yet to be properly recognized and engaged with on a macro scale. This is partly because modern Tibetan literature has been profoundly impacted by modern Chinese writing and thought, but the same is not true the other way around. We will see in the following chapter how Han-authored texts of the 1980s drew Tibetans into the realm of Chinese literature, but on terms that had little to do with the concerns of Tibetans themselves. During this same period, Döndrup Gyel was attempting to initiate a very different kind of engagement with modern Chinese literary thought – an attempt that has unfortunately been largely ignored on the Chinese side.

Döndrup Gyel's literary and intellectual interests are in conversation with Lu Xun in particular, which is apparent when we consider the two authors' shared concerns of literary innovation, social critique, national awakening, generational renewal, and so on. Of course, if Döndrup Gyel took cues from Lu Xun, they were still translated into his own iteration of nationalist thought. His meditations on the glory of the Tibetan empire and his scholarly interest in Tibetan history and literature, for instance, have no connection to a May Fourth precedent, not simply because of the Tibetan subject matter, but also because writers like Lu Xun had no interest in glorifying aspects of Chinese history. But if there is one final comparison to be made between Lu Xun and Döndrup Gyel, it is that both writers left enduring and influential legacies in literature

and in nationalist thinking. For, as we shall see, more than any other author, Döndrup Gyel set the tone and dictated the parameters for how these topics would be dealt with by the writers and intellectuals who followed him.

Chapter 3: Writing Tibetans into China: Internal Orientalism and Literary State-Building in the Work of Ma Jian

Before arriving at Ma Jian 马建, the writer at the center of this chapter, it is necessary to comment on the enormous changes that took place with regard to ethnicity in Chinese literary writing after the situation described in Chapter One. In the formative decades of the late Qing and Republican eras, the prominent authors of modern Chinese literature had little interest in writing about Tibet or Tibetans. In fact, there seemed to be little desire to write about what are now called “minority nationalities” (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) at all.³⁷ We may be able to unearth some exceptions to the rule, but they are few and far between. There is the suggestion, for instance, that the characters of Shen Congwen’s 沈从文 novella *Border Town* (*Bian cheng* 边城, 1934) may have been Tu or Miao from western Hunan where the story is set, but this is never made explicit in the text, and ethnicity is certainly not its central concern (Shen 2009: viii-ix). Lao She 老舍, one of modern Chinese literature’s most representative writers, was a Manchu, and his novel *Beneath the Red Banner* (*Zhenghong qi xia* 正红旗下) paints a vivid picture of a multi-ethnic China in the latter days of the Qing. But the unfinished novel was not composed until the 1960s and remained unpublished until 1980. The parameters of Chinese literature changed drastically following (and because of) the establishment of the People’s Republic, but even then it was not an immediate process.

³⁷ It could also be said that modern Chinese literature was being set in other countries far sooner than in the future “minority” areas of China. There are examples of late Qing fiction that were global in scope, for instance the 1904 serial novel *Tales of the Moon Colony* (*Yueqiu zhimindi xiaoshuo* 月球殖民地小说), which spans locations from Southeast Asia and India to the Transvaal and the U.S. (see Isaacson 2013). Later examples include Yu Dafu’s 郁达夫 famous short story “Sinking” (*Chenlun* 沉沦, published 1921), which was set in Japan, and Lao She’s *The Two Mas* (*Er ma* 二马, published 1929), which depicts the lives of Chinese immigrants in the U.K.

The real paradigm shift came in the 1980s, following the Cultural Revolution. This was in part due to the Cultural Revolution itself, a period of time when thousands of Han Chinese were sent “down to the countryside” (*xia xiang* 下乡) and interacted with different peoples and different ways of life on a mass scale. Many of these people were, or later became, major literary writers, and many of them spent years in non-Han regions of the new China.³⁸ During the 1980s, literary reflections of these experiences were widespread, particularly through the movement of roots-seeking literature (*xungen wenxue* 寻根文学) (Leenhouts 2016). Within the space of but a few years, Chinese literature had quietly but comprehensively reinvented itself. All of a sudden, not only was writing about China’s minority peoples a valid undertaking for Han writers, it was widespread.

This new wave of writing concerned numerous minority nationalities of the People’s Republic, but our focus here is Tibet. Between the 1950s and early 1960s, some Han-authored Chinese-language literature about Tibet did appear, but it was extremely limited in scope. Largely written by members of the military, the few examples of this literature tended towards political declarations of ethnic and class solidarity. In addition to their sporadic nature, these texts have not had a lingering impact in the literary world and were certainly very far from coalescing into anything resembling the fully-fledged subfield of Tibetan writing in Chinese that would appear in the 1980s.³⁹ What the scholar Wang Quan calls “Writing about Tibet in modern Chinese literature”

³⁸ For example, Wang Meng 王蒙, an already established writer who later served as China’s Minister of Culture, spent many years in Xinjiang, where he was sent after being labeled a rightist (in fact before the Cultural Revolution). In subsequent decades he produced numerous literary works about the region. Zhang Chengzhi 张承志, himself a Hui author, spent time in Inner Mongolia and set some of his most famous stories there.

³⁹ Ma Lihua’s 马丽华 study of Tibetan literature devotes some attention to these military authors, who she argues “industriously broke the virgin ground of new Tibetan literature” (Ma 1998: 72). Ma is effusive about the sincerity of their work and makes a case for the extent of their impact, particularly on university students who went to Tibet in the 1970s like herself (72-73). However, her claim is based largely on her own ideological affinity with these writers, and their work seems to have had minimal lasting status in the Chinese literary world at large, including among the many writers who later went to Tibet in the 1980s, who rarely cite these works or discuss them in the same laudatory tones

(*Zhongguo dangdai wenxue de Xizang shuxie* 中国当代文学的西藏书写) was at most in “a fledgling state” during these years (Wang 2012: 16-46). Even this fledgling state soon turned into an aborted beginning, however, as the political turmoil that engulfed Tibet from the uprisings in 1959 through to the end of the Cultural Revolution meant that there was essentially no Chinese writing on Tibet whatsoever from the mid 1960s until the early 1980s (Ma 1998: 74). Even though Tibetan areas were incorporated into the People’s Republic during the 1950s, it was not until the 1980s that Tibet became a subject of Chinese literary writing in any meaningful way.

From the 1980s onwards, there was a veritable explosion of writing about Tibet. Tibet became literary material for dozens of Han authors, many of them leading figures in the Chinese literary field. The early avant-garde writers Ma Yuan 马原 and Ge Fei 格非 wrote fiction about Tibet (in fact the majority of Ma Yuan’s work is set there),⁴⁰ and the renowned poets Xi Chuan 西川, Haizi 海子, and Yang Lian 杨炼 all composed Tibet-related poems.⁴¹ Tong Enzheng 童恩正, one of China’s pioneering science-fiction writers, was setting his work in Tibet as early as 1979.⁴² The popularity of Tibet as setting and/or subject matter has only grown since and has come to cover all ranges of the literary spectrum, from intellectual experimentalism to popular mainstream novels. Ning Ken 宁肯, Chen Guanzhong 陈冠中 (Chan Koonchung), Anni Baobei 安妮宝贝,

as Ma Lihua. Ma herself also acknowledges that the real ascendance of Chinese writing about Tibet came in the 1980s (75-78), which is indeed the subject of her book.

⁴⁰ Ma Yuan’s well-known short story “A Fiction” (*Xugou* 虚构) was published in 1986 (Ma 1986). Ge Fei’s short story “Encounter” (*Xiangyu* 相遇) emerged after the author’s trip to Tibet in 1992 (Choy 2005: 76).

⁴¹ Xi Chuan’s poem “Watching the Stars at Ha’ergai” (*Zai Ha’ergai yangwang xingkong* 在哈尔盖仰望星空) was written in 1980 after the poet’s visit to Qinghai Lake. Haizi visited Tibet in the mid-80s. His poem “Tibet” (*Xizang* 西藏) was written in 1988. Yang Lian’s poem “Norlang” (*Nuorilang* 诺日朗), named after a waterfall in a Tibetan area of Sichuan, was written in 1983.

⁴² Tong’s collection *The Magic Flute of the Snow Mountains* (*Xueshan mo di* 雪山魔笛) was published in 1979 (Tong 1979). Döndrup Gyel also translated two of Tong’s stories, which are included in his collected works (Don grub rgyal 1997: 4: 205-272).

and He Ma 何马 are just some of the writers to have written full-length novels about Tibet (He Ma's being a ten-volume epic).⁴³

The ubiquity of Tibetan subject matter in contemporary Chinese-language literature is now such that there are too many examples to mention. This trend is not limited to literature; it is repeated across the spectrum of artistic production. Numerous Tibet-related films have been produced in China following the founding of the PRC, and, as in the literary realm, they have come in all forms, from state-produced historical films and big budget blockbusters to independent arthouse features and underground documentaries (see Chenaktshang 2008, Nyi gzhon 2005, Berry 1986 & 2006, Berry & Farquhar 2006, Clark 1987, and Gladney 1995). Several of China's most influential and successful artists of the post-Mao era also composed work about Tibet, Chen Danqing 陈丹青, Chen Yifei 陈逸飞, Ai Xuan 艾轩, and Zhang Xiaogang 张晓刚 being just a few of them (see Harris 1999). Tibet is even ubiquitous in the realm of music, with a number of high-profile Han Chinese singers borrowing Tibetan motifs and folk melodies (Xiao 2017).

This is a situation vastly removed from that described in Chapter One, in which Chinese literary writing displayed no concern with Tibet or Tibetans as subject matter. Over the course of the 1980s, an entirely new sub-genre of Chinese literature was founded: *Xizang wenxue* 西藏文学, nurtured in the “cradle” (Ma 1998: 75) of its eponymous journal.⁴⁴ The signification of this and other terms proved to be a highly contentious and complex question following the rise of various new kinds of “Tibetan” writing in the 1980s, when debates raged over how to classify different

⁴³ Ning Ken's novels *Masked City* (*Mengmian zhi cheng* 蒙面之城, 2001) and *Heaven/Tibet* (*Tian zang* 天·藏, 2010) are both Tibet-focused. Likewise Chen Guanzhong's *Naked Fate* (*Luo ming* 裸命, 2013), Anni Baobei's *Lotus* (*Lianhua* 莲花, 2006), and He Ma's *The Tibet Code* (*Zangdi mima* 藏地密码, 2008).

⁴⁴ The journal was founded in 1977 under the title *Xizang wenyi* 西藏文艺 (*Tibetan Literature and Arts*). In 1984 it changed its title to *Xizang wenxue* in order to avoid confusion with the major Tibetan-language literary journal *Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal* (*Tibetan Literature and Arts*) (Hladikova 2013: 34n30).

forms of “Tibetan literature” on the basis of language of composition, ethnic identity of the author, and the region that one is either from or writing about. Lara Maconi (2008) lists an almost overwhelming variety of terms for this new literature:

The classificatory labels have included *Zangzu wenxue* (literature by Tibetans), *Zangqu wenxue* (literature from Tibetan areas), *Xizang wenxue* (literature from the TAR), *Xizang difang wenxue* (literature from the area of the TAR), *Xueyu wenxue* (literature from the Land of Snow), *Zangyuwen/Hanyuwen wenxue* (Tibetophone/Sinophone literature), *yong Zangyu/Hanyu xie de Zangzu wenxue* (literature written by Tibetans in Tibetan and Chinese), *shaoshu minzu wenxue* (national minorities literature), *Xibu wenxue* (literature from the west [of China]), *Xiyu wenxue* (literature from western [China]), *Xibei wenxue* (literature from the northwest [of China]), *Xinan wenxue* (literature from the southwest [of China]). (196)

Despite these extensive attempts at boundary drawing, few definitions have proved to be stable or definitive. The term *Zangzu wenxue* 藏族文学, “ethnically Tibetan literature,” for instance, differentiated the author’s ethnicity but still failed to distinguish between works written in Chinese and those written in Tibetan.

Xizang wenxue has been perhaps the most controversial of all these terms. According to Schiaffini (2004), there was eventually some consensus that the term *Xizang wenxue* should be limited to “works about Tibet written in Chinese by Tibet-based Han authors” (87), which has led scholars in the West to render the term as “literature from Tibet” to separate it from ethnically or linguistically “Tibetan” literature. However, attempts to preserve terminological clarity have ultimately proved somewhat futile, as few authors or scholars have adhered to any rigid or universal framework. Ethnic criteria cannot be used, since numerous scholars include both Tibetan and Han authors under this rubric (see below). Even geographical designations are problematic. Reading the *Xizang* of *Xizang wenxue* as signifying only the province of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), as Maconi does above, gives us “literature from the TAR” or “literature about the TAR,” in the same way that other literatures in China might be given regional designations, e.g.,

Shandong wenxue 山东文学, “literature from (or about) Shandong.” Such an interpretation would not technically cover prominent Chinese-medium Tibetan writers from outside the TAR such as Alai 阿来 and Jampel Gyatso (Jam dpal rgya mtsho, Ch. Jiangbian Jiacao 降边嘉措), who are from Kham (Sichuan), and yet they, too, have nevertheless been subsumed under scholarly discussions of *Xizang*, for example in Wang Quan’s (2012) study of *Xizang shuxie*.

“Literature from/about Tibet (or the TAR)” may be the most technically accurate rendition of what is often indicated by *Xizang wenxue*, but it is important to bear in mind that consistently rendering it in this fashion can also be misleading, as it creates the impression that people who used the term were consistent and careful with their definitions. More importantly, it implies that the concept of *Xizang wenxue* did not necessarily lay claim to discursive authority over some notion of “Tibetan literature” more broadly defined. Many of the authors and scholars associated with the term were unfamiliar with, even completely unaware of, Tibetan-language literature, and we should not assume that they would have always considered *Xizang wenxue* with the nuance and qualifications placed on it by more specific English renditions such as “literature from/about Tibet (or the TAR).” Providing such precise qualifications has arguably been far more of a concern for Tibetan intellectuals and Western scholars than for many of the Han writers associated with *Xizang wenxue*. Rendering *Xizang wenxue* as “Tibetan literature” is of course problematic and jars with later attempts at academic clarification, but in some ways, it also reflects the problematic nature of the Chinese term itself, which casts an amorphous sense of representativeness around an idea of “Tibetan” writing in the modern era.

There are two particularly conspicuous features of *Xizang wenxue*. The first is that, while some of its writers were indeed of Tibetan ethnicity, the majority were Han (Zhang 1989: 432-433). The second, hinted at not in the meaning of the phrase but embodied in the square characters

themselves, is that it was a literature composed entirely in Chinese. Ma Lihua's book *The Culture of the Snowlands and Literature from Tibet* (*Xueyu wenhua yu Xizang wenxue* 雪域文化与西藏文学, 1998) sought to demarcate and showcase this new subfield, and in doing so conveyed many of its underlying assumptions. Ma went to Tibet in 1976, spent a number of years as an editor at the journal *Xizang Wenxue* (Gang 2004: 69), and went on to play a pivotal role in defining the newly emerging canon of "literature from Tibet." While her book does cover some Tibetan-language writing, Ma, who did not know Tibetan, was only aware of it through the extremely limited scope of translation (Ma 1998: 58).⁴⁵ The vast majority of the text, however, is given over to the study of Chinese-language literature, leading Gang Yue (2004) to opt for the phrase "Tibetan literature in Chinese" to describe the work showcased in Ma's book (74). The authors of these texts are identified as the writers of *Xizang wenxue*; Tibetan-language literature exists in an essentially separate, linguistically-defined category (*Zangwen chuangzuo* 藏文创作, *Zangwen zuojia* 藏文作家, *Zangwen wenxue* 藏文文学). Ma mixes writers of Han Chinese and Tibetan ethnicity indiscriminately,⁴⁶ and this is precisely because the new *Xizang wenxue* is fundamentally a body of writing composed in Chinese characters. Ethnicity was not a primary concern because Tibetans were now equally citizens of the PRC.

Feng Liang's 冯良 anthology *New Fiction from Tibet* (*Xizang xin xiaoshuo* 西藏新小说) (1989) was another key text in forming the emerging canon of *Xizang wenxue*. As with Ma's book, Feng mixes Han and Tibetan authors (Zhaxi Dawa, Ma Yuan, Jin Zhiguo, etc.), the organizing

⁴⁵ A revealing example of the evident limitations of this approach comes when she cites a poem published in *Tibetan Art and Literature* (*Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal*) from 1984 as "the first free-verse poem" in Tibetan (68). Almost every Tibetan scholar would accord this landmark to Döndrup Gyel's "Waterfall of Youth," which was published in 1983. Ma does not mention Döndrup Gyel's work at all, an oversight presumably resulting from lack of translations.

⁴⁶ Zhaxi Dawa 扎西达娃, Sebo 色波, Jin Zhiguo 金志国, Ma Yuan, and Liu Wei 刘伟 are some of the central figures of the study.

principal being primarily language of composition and subject matter (i.e., Tibet). A lengthy essay at the end of the collection by the critic Zhang Jun 张军 has also proved influential in establishing the boundaries of *Xizang wenxue* (Hladikova 2013: 20-21). Zhang offers a similar timeline to Ma and others for the development of literature in Tibet: “when it comes to fiction from Tibet (*Xizang de xiaoshuo* 西藏的小说), for a long time there were very few works that could be considered as literature and that left a deep impression, regardless of whether they were written by Tibetans or by Han writers in Tibet” (431). At the start of the New Era (i.e., after the Cultural Revolution), he continues, fiction from Tibet was still in a “pre-literary state,” and despite the rapid emergence of new writing in the rest of China, “in Tibet, literature seemed to have only just begun to sprout” (431-432). He traces the transformation of this state of affairs to 1982, when *Xizang Wenxue* published fiction by Zhaxi Dawa and Jin Zhiguo, but argues that it was not until 1985 that literature in Tibet truly ‘caught up’ to developments elsewhere in China (432, 443).

Despite Zhang’s claim that “a culture – or more specifically a literature – is above all connected to the language used to write it,” he has to concede that “*not one of these stories* [in the anthology] *was written in Tibetan*” (436).⁴⁷ This leads to the observation that, among these writers, “very few are natives of Tibet (*Xizangren* 西藏人)” (432), and the even more astonishing statement that “almost no modern Tibetan writers (*Xizang zuojia* 西藏作家) – at least those we are discussing here – can speak Tibetan” (437). The term used here – *Xizang zuojia* (“Tibetan authors”) – is as problematic as *Xizang wenxue*. We may offer a far more nuanced (or convoluted) translation, “writers who write about the subject of Tibet,” but Zhang’s term is vague, pointing to a broad conception of some form of “Tibetan” literature that would have to be defined through

⁴⁷ The author’s emphasis.

extensive discussion and qualification. What we can generally conclude is that, to be considered a writer of this new kind of “Tibetan” literature within the framework established by Zhang and Ma, one essentially had to meet the following criteria: 1) Write about the subject of Tibet, 2) Write in Chinese, 3) Be a Chinese citizen (in other words, a foreigner or non-Chinese citizen writing about Tibet would not be a writer of *Xizang wenxue*).

Evidently, this excludes Tibetans who were writing in Tibetan. In the inaugural years of Tibetan-language literature, which overlapped with *Xizang wenxue*, the question of language choice and literary identity was a fiercely contested critical debate (Maconi 2008, Schiaffini 2004), but writers of *Xizang wenxue* were largely oblivious to such concerns. As long as one was from China and wrote literature about Tibet in Chinese, one was writing *Xizang wenxue*. Despite the fact that modern literature in the Tibetan language was flourishing at precisely the same time, Ma Lihua and Feng Liang’s books hardly cover Tibetan-language Tibetan literature at all. These two realms – *Xizang wenxue* and *Bod kyi rtsom rig* – were strictly separated by language criteria, and to all intents and purposes they remain so today.⁴⁸ There are, therefore, at least two virtually unrelated “Tibetan literatures” in contemporary China, two “Tibetan literatures” that exist in separate discursive fields, linked by only the slightest intersection of a Venn diagram.⁴⁹

3.1 The Culture of “Drifting” and Ma Jian’s Travel to Tibet

This chapter examines one Han Chinese writer – Ma Jian – who published writing that fell under one of those Tibetan literatures: the newly emerging field of Chinese literature about Tibet.

⁴⁸ Wang Quan’s more recent (2012) survey continues the trend of privileging Chinese-language literature. Tibetan-language literature receives passing mention, but like Ma and Feng’s surveys, language is the principal organizing criterion of his book, which focuses on ethnically Han and Tibetan writers who write in Chinese.

⁴⁹ The greatest points of intersection tend to be among bilingual writers of Tibetan ethnicity who translate between Chinese and Tibetan (e.g. Long Renqing 龙仁青), who write in both languages fluently (e.g. Pema Tseten [Pad ma tshe brtan], Ch. Wanma Caidan 万玛才旦), or who write in Chinese while still being literate and/or orally proficient in Tibetan (e.g. Yangdrön [Dbyangs sgron], Ch. Yangzhen 央珍, Yidam Tsering [Yi dam tshe ring], Ch. Yidan Cairang 伊丹才让, Tsering Norbu [Tshe ring nor bu], Ch. Ciren Luobu 次仁罗布).

After departing Beijing in the early 1980s to travel around China, Ma Jian headed for the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1985. He wrote two main texts concerning Tibet: *Stick Out Your Tongue, or: Nothing at All* (*liangchu ni de shetai huo kongkongdangdang* 亮出你的舌苔或空空荡荡), a collection of short stories, and *Red Dust* (*hong chen* 红尘),⁵⁰ an account of his journey around China.⁵¹ His choice of forms is particularly representative, as both fiction and travel writing are now prevalent in Han writing about Tibet. This chapter will consider both texts in detail.

Ma's fiction is unique in the world of *Xizang wenxue* for the notorious controversy it generated, and it is perhaps for this same reason that he is usually excluded from the canonical studies of *Xizang wenxue* discussed above. Nevertheless, while his work stands apart from the crowd in certain ways, in many other respects it crystallizes some of the key issues that arose from the historical process of Tibet and Tibetans becoming enmeshed in Chinese literature. This, I will argue, was not a process of literary or cultural colonialism per se. Or, rather, seeing it solely as a dominant culture asserting discursive hegemony over a minor culture deflects our attention from the actual – and arguably more damaging – process of national assimilation that Chinese Tibetan literature represents. Unlike colonial situations, Tibet and Tibetans were never seen by Han Chinese writers as colonized territories and subjects. Quite the contrary: the absorption of Tibetans into the PRC made them, the land they inhabit, and their culture integral parts of China, integral parts of the national self. Chinese Tibetan literature thus represents a dual, and almost self-contradictory phenomenon: writing Tibetans into the national literary fabric precisely by and through a process of colonialist othering.

⁵⁰ Like most of Ma's post-exile works, *Red Dust* was first published in English translation (2001). Chinese editions were published in Hong Kong and mainland China in 2002 (the latter being a heavily edited version).

⁵¹ Ma also wrote other miscellaneous pieces of travel writing and articles about his trip that largely covered the same ground as these two texts (see Damgaard 2012: 167-169).

Ma Jian's reasons for traveling to and writing about Tibet were part of a conspicuous trend in Chinese creative circles of the 1980s. Ma arrived in Tibet as a bohemian vagabond, part of a pervasive culture of artistic drifting (*liulang* 流浪 or *mangliu* 盲流) that was memorably captured by Wu Wenguang's 吴文光 documentary *Bumming in Beijing* (*Liulang Beijing* 流浪北京, 1990). Wen Pulin 温普林, an artist and filmmaker, ascribes his many travels to Tibet to the same motivation: "I was crazy about this word 'drifting' [...] people like us would get restless living nice lives in the city; we always want to be going somewhere, searching for something" (Wen 2009b: 145). Tibet held a particular allure for these travelers, likely because, as Reynaud (2003) asserts, "more than any 'minority culture,' Tibet represented a sense of absolute Otherness." Wen, perhaps the most self-critical of all these travelers, was well aware of how his generation romanticized Tibet:

I am a practicing hippie, a visitor who passed through Tibet for ten years. Like everyone else, I fantasized about going to my own Shambhala. Since the dawn of time this has been a never-ending dream of humankind. The ideal kingdom, Utopia, the Peach Blossom Spring, the people's commune. We're always looking for it, always losing it. Always seeking fulfilment in fantasies. (Wen 2009b: 158)

Parallel to this idealization was a sense of disillusionment with urban life in eastern China. There were writers, painters, and filmmakers who all saw places like Beijing as artistically barren and politically oppressive, a city where life was "on a pretty tight leash," as the documentary filmmaker Duan Jinchuan 段锦川 recalls it; this is as opposed to Tibet, "the freest place in China" and a symbol of all that Beijing was not (Quoted in Berry 2006: 112). The result was an unprecedented wave of Han Chinese poets, painters, writers, photographers, and filmmakers settling in Tibet, some of whom formed into a loose "salon" (*shalong* 沙龙), notably memorialized in Yu Xiaodong's 于小冬 painting *A Toast for Tibet* (*Ganbei Xizang* 干杯西藏) (Maconi 2008: 178-179). Much like the "drifting" culture of Beijing, however, the political realities of the late 1980s

and early 1990s brought an end to this artistic scene. For Beijing this was the suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989; for Tibet it was the martial law imposed after the Tibetan uprisings that occurred between 1987 and 1989. The writers and artists left, and, in Wen's words, "the beautiful halo of the '80s finally dissipated before the harsh reality of the '90s" (Wen 2009b: 181).⁵²

Ma Jian's travelogue *Red Dust* traces the arc of this cultural moment. It begins in Beijing, where the author is living a bohemian life surrounded by young artists and writers with jeans and long hair. This look was a prerequisite "symbol of freedom" for rebellious artists in Tibet, as Wen wryly notes (Wen 2009b: 211), and indeed it is adopted by Ma's fictional alter-ego in *Stick Out Your Tongue*, much to the bemusement of local Tibetans ("Children and dogs slowly surrounded me. Some looked at my face and hair, others at my clothes, beard and camera" [Ma 1987: 110; trans. Ma 2007: 51]). Ma is prompted to begin his journey due to a mix of personal, creative, and political crises. Aside from troubles with his family, he was struggling from an artistic block ("none of my brush strokes feel like my own" [Ma 2002a: 59]) and was facing scrutiny from the authorities as a result of his lifestyle clashing with the campaigns against Bourgeois Liberalization and Spiritual Pollution (Ma 2002a: 5-11, 61-67). In the afterword to *Stick Out Your Tongue*, he summarizes the allure of Tibet to young artists such as himself:

At the time, the Tibetan Plateau was the most distant and remote place I could imagine. As my bus left the crowded plains of China and ascended to the clear heights of Tibet, I felt a sense of relief. I hoped that here at last I'd find a refuge from the soulless society that China had become. I wanted to escape into a different landscape and culture, and gain a deeper insight into my Buddhist faith. (Ma 2007: 82)

⁵² Wen adds that artists scattered after 1989, with some returning to the east of China, and some going abroad (163-164). Wu Wenguang's film *At Home in the World* (Si hai wei jia 四海为家, 1995) his follow-up to *Bumming in Beijing*, documents the same trend of artists heading abroad and the end of "drifting" culture in the post-Tiananmen years.

As this last remark indicates, Ma Jian also considered himself an active Buddhist practitioner, a fact that distinguishes him somewhat from other writers of the time. He attended ceremonies and took lay vows with the Jushilin association in Beijing, where he was ordained by Master Zhengguo 正果法师, a prominent figure in Chinese Buddhist associations from the Republican period through the People's Republic (Ma 2002a: 13-14, 43-44, 80, 172; Tuttle 2005: 223, 298n2). To Ma, going to Tibet was thus also a personal, religious journey – he describes his trip to Tibet as a “pilgrimage” (*chaosheng* 朝圣) – and he attempts to distance himself from the worldly motivations of other Han artists: “I didn’t come as a tourist, or a writer looking for exotic stories in a strange land” (Ma 2002a: 150, 404). The west of China offered him “new-found freedom” and liberation from the “prison” of Beijing, and Tibet promised the greatest freedom of all: “only on that plateau that I have so long yearned for can I find harmony between man and Buddha” (Ma 2002a: 198, 396).

3.2 Ethnic Marking and Literary State-Building

Despite a prevailing concern with “national” issues at the beginnings of modern Chinese literature, national signifiers were often vague or implicit, with the signification of key terms (*Zhongguo* 中国, *minzu* 民族, *guomin* 国民) often left up to the reader’s discretion. What we would now call China’s non-Han minorities were essentially invisible in the pre-PRC literary imagination; where they were included, they were certainly not yet marked explicitly as people who shared a common Chinese citizenship but differed in their “ethnic” (*minzu*) identity. After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, teams of ethnographers in the employ of the state began to strictly categorize China’s population, resulting in the fifty-six official “nationalities” of today (Mullaney 2011). When Han writers set out to Tibet in the 1980s, their writing reflected this new consciousness of national belonging. Tibetans and other minorities now existed as specifically

categorizable *minzu*-ethnicities, ethnicities who also unquestionably comprised part of the social fabric of *Zhongguo*.

The tendency toward explicit ethnic marking in post-1980s Chinese literature about Tibet is widespread, but a particularly salient example would be the very first line of Ma Yuan's well-known 1986 short story "A Fiction." The story begins with a pointed declaration: "I'm that Han Chinese Ma Yuan, I write fiction" (*Wo jiushi nei ge jiao Ma Yuan de Hanren, wo xie xiaoshuo* 我就是那个叫马原的汉人，我写小说) (Ma 1986: 49). It is difficult to imagine such a statement in Republican-era fiction. Hidden amidst its metafictional playfulness is a significant move: the narrator is immediately identified with the ethnonym "Han." Why would a Chinese author, writing in Chinese for an assumed Chinese audience, feel the need to declare his self/narrator to be Han? By marking the usually unmarked majority, the narrator immediately signals the presence of other ethnicities in his narrative through implied contradistinction. In their studies of Han representations of minorities in China, both Gladney and Blum have drawn certain parallels between the concept of "white-ness" and "Han-ness," in that both represent an ethnic category that is often unmarked and assumed, and is furthermore the ethnic category that signifies political and economic dominance (Blum 2001: 57-58; Gladney 1994: 102-103). While there may indeed be parallels for this tendency in the literary realm, what we see in literary texts about Tibet is just as often the opposite: the insistent marking not only of Tibetan (*Zang* 藏) ethnicity, but of Han ethnic identity also.

Stick Out Your Tongue abounds with such markers, both explicit and implicit. The narrator habitually describes himself, and other Han like him, as "travelers" (*liuyouzhè* 旅游者) or "outsiders" (*waidiren* 外地人) – outsiders in the sense of people not from the same province or local region (Ma 1987: 98). An alternative to *waidi* is *neidi* 内地 – the eastern 'interior' (as

opposed to the western ‘exterior’) of China, as in “The Golden Crown” (*Jin ta* 金塔), when the narrator identifies himself as “a drifter who had come from the east (*neidi*)” (Ma 1987: 109). In the latter example, he contrasts this self-identity with the “Tibetans” (*Zangmin* 藏民) of the region, and such explicit ethnic differentiators are found throughout the text. The ethnonym *Zangzu* 藏族 appears in the second paragraph of the collection (Ma 1987: 98), and Tibetan ethnicity continues to be marked throughout, most often via the alternate ethnonym *Zangmin*. Such marking occurs firstly whenever the narrator wishes to offer a comment on Tibetan culture and society, as, for example, at the beginning of “The Woman and the Blue Sky” (*Nüren lan* 女人蓝):

I had stayed in Lhasa for more than a month and had visited all the ancient monasteries and temples, but I visited the Jokhang most of all. The Jokhang is the holiest site for Tibetan Buddhism (*Zangzu fojiao* 藏族佛教). Pilgrims from all over circumambulate its walls in a steady stream, praying that in the next life they will be reborn in prosperous circumstances and no longer have to suffer. The crowds prostrating at the main entrance fell to the ground, stood up and clapped their hands, then fell to the ground again, like professional athletes in training. (Ma 1987: 98)

These ethnographic interpolations are given for the benefit of a presumed Han readership, since no Tibetan reader would require an explanation of the Jokhang’s significance. Ethnic marking also occurs when the “Tibetans” must be differentiated from the Han (usually the narrator). For instance, when the narrator encounters his Tibetan interlocutor in “The Eight-Fanged Roach” (*Guang tun ba chi xiao du* 光臀八齿小蠹), he greets him in Tibetan, but by the light of the fire the man discovers that he is a Han (*Hanren* 汉人), and the conversation switches to Chinese (Ma 1987: 107).

The practice of ethnic marking in accordance with China’s state system of categorization is even more pronounced in *Red Dust*, since Ma Jian’s travels across China brought him into contact with many more minorities than Tibetans. The text may not account for all fifty-five Chinese minorities, but it is certainly extensive: Ma writes about, among others, the Kazakh, Salar,

Dai, Jingpo, Li, Zhuang, Miao, Dong, Yi, Jino (Jinuo), Blang (Bulang), Wa, and Nakhi (Naxi) nationalities. But, likewise, Ma also marks the presence of the Han in minority areas (they are only unmarked when in non-minority territory): in Machu (Maqu), Gansu Province, he writes that the population of the county is almost entirely Tibetan (*Zangzu ren* 藏族人), and when he strikes up a conversation with a local Han worker, he is sure to point out his ethnicity (*Hanzu ren* 汉族人) (Ma 2002a: 177-180). Not included in the English translation, but particularly conspicuous in both the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese editions of the text, are the numerous photographs of his travels that accompany the narrative, many of which are ethnographic documents of the minorities he encountered, complete with captions (“the headdresses of Dong women are beautiful”; “the strains of life have caused this old Li woman to become hunchbacked”; “the teeth of Blang women from the Blang Mountains are stained black from tobacco and betel nut”; “elderly Yi people love to smoke and love even more to chat. Their lives pass by like this, day after day, year after year...” [Ma 2002b: 230, 278, 289, 304]).⁵³

Ma Jian’s representation of Han-minority relations does not always conform to the harmonious state ideal of ethnic unity (*minzu tuanjie* 民族团结) – in fact he often presents a relationship of outright hostility. In Xunhua, Qinghai, the director of the local cultural center educates him about the 1958 Amdo uprising and “the rift it opened up between the Han and Tibetans”; he advises him not to “go to Tibetan areas to see how they live, as it is too dangerous alone” (Ma 2002a: 165). In Lhasa, he describes Tibetans splashing Han people with water, spitting, and trying to steal his camera, and decides to claim he is from Hong Kong when a monk shouts

⁵³ Damgaard (2012) notes that *Ma Jian’s Road* (*Ma Jian zhi lu* 马建之路), a photography book published by the author in 1987, contains many of these same photographs, and served as a blueprint for *Red Dust* (169).

“Han man!” (*Hanzu ren*) at him in Chinese (Ma 2002a: 399-403).⁵⁴ His friend offers similar advice: “You must be careful where you take your camera, Ma Jian. You can’t go snooping around like that. Relations between Han and Tibetans are very tense in Lhasa” (Ma 2002a: 402).

In Qinghai, his experiences merely cause Ma to “feel a strange pang – the joy of entering their simple, natural lives mixed with the sadness that it isn’t my home” (Ma 2002a: 164), but by the time he reaches Lhasa at the end of his trip, his attitude has hardened, leading him to the conclusion that “Tibet’s high plateau is no place for the Han” (Ma 2002a: 429): “I have traveled all across China, but only here did I feel that there are places on this earth I am not meant to tread. Maybe people who go abroad also get this feeling of being an outsider” (Ma 2002a: 402). The experiences of inter-ethnic tension Ma describes are not limited to the Han-Tibetan relationship, either. In Hainan, an elderly Li woman is unimpressed when Ma tells her of the minorities exhibition he had organized: “The Han came here when I was a girl and took twenty-four of us to Guangzhou,” she replies, “We were exhibited in cages in a park for three whole months. They told the visitors the Li are born from monkeys and raised by lions” (Ma 2002a: 318). In Yunnan, he notes that “the Lahu people do not like the Han.” He recalls the Lahu tribes who ambushed Han road builders in the 1950s, and is dogged by the fear of attack as he explores the mountains (Ma 2002a: 372).

Yet, despite the tensions he describes, Ma Jian never suggests that the regions he is visiting are anything other than Chinese territory.⁵⁵ In fact, quite the opposite: these minorities and their

⁵⁴ Ma is here using “Han” as synonymous with mainland Chinese. This is as opposed to Hong Kong Chinese, a form of identification that he apparently believes would be more acceptable to the monk.

⁵⁵ Since Ma Jian’s departure from China, his literary career has seen him take on the status of “exile” and “dissident” author. In an afterword to the English translation of *Stick Out Your Tongue* (written after his exile, and not included in the original text), he presents a more overtly critical and politicized take on China’s rule of Tibet: “The Chinese government, which had ‘liberated’ Tibet in 1950, was launching celebrations for the twentieth anniversary of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Although the air was filled with the sound of jubilant music, the atmosphere was tense. One could sense the hostility the Tibetans felt towards their Chinese occupiers [...] the more I saw of Tibet and the damage

landscapes constitute the overlooked and underappreciated alternative margins of China that he is seeking to bring to light. Ma Jian's goal in *Red Dust* is nothing less than a mapping of modern China in the sense of the multiethnic entity now signified by *Zhongguo*, as reflected in both the book's translated subtitle and its mainland Chinese title ("A Path Through China"; *Langji Zhongguo* 浪迹中国 ["Roaming China"]). When Wen Pulin discusses the events of 1989 in his own travelogue, he is careful to banish the specter of Tibetan separatism with an unambiguous declaration of China's unity:

China has always been a unified multiethnic country (*tongyi de duominzu guojia* 统一的多民族国家). Though this is a propaganda phrase, it really is true. This is perhaps difficult for [people from] places like Europe, which have never been unified, to understand. [...] Deducing from my own status as a Manchu, I'm afraid that no Tibetan would say they are not Chinese (*Zhongguoren* 中国人). In almost ten years of contact with Tibetans and Tibetan culture, I've never come across one in person. [...] Looking at the map, I think: They say the Qing harmed the country, but the map of China now is actually very pleasing and has a nice shape. How terrible would it be if the rooster of the orient were missing its hind parts! (Wen 2009b: 168)

In much the same way, *Red Dust* never questions Tibetans' status as *Zhongguoren* – in fact the very act of its writing, of including Tibetans in a travelogue of what is explicitly the territory of *Zhongguo*, writes them into such a conception of China.

When he begins his journey, setting out by train from Beijing to Urumqi, Ma Jian invokes the same common quip about the appearance of China:

The map of China in front of me looks like a chicken, with the head facing eastwards. The route from Beijing to Urumqi is a red line heading west. I am at the neck of the chicken, and I'm setting out for the tail – the further the better, all the way to the border. (Ma 2002a: 85)

that Chinese rule had inflicted on the country, the more I understood their anger" (82-84). However, it is important to bear in mind that this framing of his text was written many years later, and for the exclusive attention of an English-reading audience with presumed sympathies for the Tibetan political cause. The text of *Stick Out Your Tongue* makes no such suggestions, nor does *Red Dust* itself, which was originally published in English translation. Somewhat ironically, since going into exile Ma has repositioned himself as a supporter of the cause of Tibetan freedom. Ma published a version of this afterword, as well as extracts from *Red Dust* under the title "a Chinese voice in support of Tibetan resistance" (Ma 2005), in an International Campaign for Tibet report on Tibetan resistance to Chinese rule.

What Ma describes here is, with the exception of the European colonial legacy, Benedict Anderson's "map-as-logo," the two-dimensional representation of "national" space that "appeared like a detachable piece of a jigsaw puzzle":

Pure sign, no longer compass to the world. In this shape, the map entered an infinitely reproducible series, available for transfer to posters, official seals, letterheads, magazine and textbook covers, tablecloths, and hotel walls. Instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, the logo-map penetrated deep into the popular imagination. (Anderson 2006: 175)

The map that Ma describes – that is displayed at the beginning of *Red Dust*'s English edition – is now emblematic, but it has not been so for long. Republican China's claim over Mongolia gave the map of China a rather different shape. And for all the political and academic discussions of nation during the Republican period, these borders were largely theoretical. They did not become a geo-political reality (in slightly different form) until the founding of the People's Republic.

Red Dust is structured almost as a literary rendering of the new map-logo of the PRC, a reification of its boundaries in prose form. In an exchange with a poet in Sichuan, he explains this motivation for his travels:

[poet]: "What is it you are looking for?"
[Ma Jian]: "I want to see what the society I live in is like."
"Why are you travelling?"
"This society is like a black hole, I want to dive into it."
[...]
"Do you want to change society?"
"I want to see it with my own eyes, to understand it."
(Ma 2002a: 236-237)

Minority peoples and their cultures are central to his endeavor, because their territory accounts for many of the edges of China's map. Throughout the text, Ma Jian displays a consistent interest in exploring China's heterogeneity and defining it as a multiethnic, multicultural space. In

Guangzhou and Yunnan, he organizes exhibitions on minority groups. When a (Han) friend questions the wisdom of his efforts, she earns a sharp rebuke:

“Yunnan is the most backwards place in China, it’s poor and dirty. What is there to see? The ordinary American family these days has all sorts of electric appliances.”

Looking at her clean, white ears, I got a bit angry. “Yunnan is the province with the most minority nationalities, and they each have their own unique culture and way of life. It’s much richer and more colorful than the modern America you dream about. China (*Zhongguo*) is not just the Han, not just socialism. If you don’t understand China, you’ll be lost when you go abroad.” (Ma 2002a: 289)

In its geographical cataloguing of Chinese life, *Red Dust* dedicates as much space to minority peoples and their cultures as it does to the Han – perhaps even more. The role of minorities in the formation of modern China had long been considered in Han-authored political tracts and academic work (ethnography and folkloristics in particular [see Litzinger 2000 and Liu 2012]), but before the 1980s, non-Han ethnicities had been conspicuously absent from modern literary works. *Red Dust* is an apt example of how radically and rapidly this situation changed. Ma Jian’s long, winding trail around the People’s Republic represents a literary mapping of *Zhongguo* that writes minority peoples into the Chinese literary imagination – a belated literary equivalent of the political and social processes that had already been underway for decades.

3.3 Internal Orientalism and Literature about Tibet

Following Tibet’s political incorporation into the People’s Republic, literature began to emerge that reflected this new geo-political reality: a multiethnic China that contained non-Han ethnicities as Chinese citizens. But writing Tibetans into Chinese literature has not been a smooth process. Tibetans had to be brought into the Chinese literary realm, but the question was: how? They may have been Chinese in terms of citizenship, but in every other sense they represented difference. Could the differences of history, culture, religion, and language be overcome in the process of making Tibet and Tibetans a legitimate part of Chinese national literature? How could

this difference be treated without threatening the sanctity of national unity and ethnic harmony? There were no easy solutions to such problems, but of all the writing about Tibet that emerged during the 1980s (and arguably since), it was Ma Jian's that most pointedly opened up these wounds and exposed the painful contradictions of these questions. And it was through these contradictions that Tibet ultimately became a part of 'literary China': writing about Tibetan 'others' also had to equal writing about the Chinese national 'self.'

Ma Jian went to Tibet filled with romantic notions, yet the Tibet that he ultimately depicted in his writing was not idealized, but demonized. In 1987, Ma Jian published a linked series of short stories about Tibet in *People's Literature* (*Renmin wenxue* 人民文学) under the title *Stick Out Your Tongue, or: Nothing at All*. The stories prompted fierce criticism from Tibetan intellectuals who felt that the author's depiction of Tibet and Tibetans was deeply offensive, and the series was in turn condemned in the Chinese press (Schiaffini 2004: 91-92, 98n37; Damgaard 2012: 80-81). In the afterword to the collection's English translation, Ma Jian himself recounts how an "official announcer" denounced his work on the TV news:

Stick Out Your Tongue is a vulgar, obscene book that defames the image of our Tibetan compatriots. Ma Jian fails to depict the great strides the Tibetan people have made in building a united, prosperous and civilised Socialist Tibet. The image of Tibet in this filthy and shameful work has nothing to do with reality, but is instead the product of the author's imagination and his obsessive desire for sex and money ... No one must be allowed to read this book. All copies of *People's Literature* must be confiscated and destroyed immediately. (Ma 2007: 85-86)

Shen Weirong (2010), now a prominent Tibetologist who was a student at the time, recalls hearing the news on the radio, and confirms that all issues of *People's Literature* containing the stories were indeed recalled – he was only able to read *Stick Out Your Tongue* by getting hold of a library copy yet to be pulled from circulation (132).

The episode led indirectly to Ma Jian leaving China and becoming an ‘exile writer’ (though by the point the controversy erupted he was already living in Hong Kong). Furthermore, Liu Xinwu 刘心武, the well-known writer who at the time was serving as editor of the journal, was removed from his post. But what Ma Jian significantly declines to mention in his afterword is that the government’s condemnation was motivated by the outrage of Tibetans themselves; it was a means to pacify a dangerously restive population and head off the possibility of the affair escalating into actual violence (Schiaffini 2004: 92). Ma Jian’s stories had, in other words, threatened the core nationalities policy of ethnic unity (*minzu tuanjie*) (Shen 2010: 132). The text’s infamy only increased its readership. Shen writes that many young Han Chinese told him it was the first banned book they had read, or their first book of “sexual awakening,” and therefore, “right through to the present, this book continues to have a huge influence on how we Han understand Tibetans and Tibetan culture” (133).

The five stories that constitute *Stick Out Your Tongue* are, by any measure, extraordinarily provocative and unflattering depictions of Tibetan society. Four of the five stories are told by an intermediary Han narrator, who is often relaying events from a second, Tibetan, narrator. Though it is never explicitly stated, the commonalities between the stories’ framing devices (a drifting Han traveler encountering Tibetans and relaying their tales) create the impression that they are all narrated by the same person – namely, a fictionalized Ma Jian, the “real-life” version of whom tells many of these same stories in *Red Dust*. The first story in *Stick Out Your Tongue*, “The Woman and the Blue Sky,” is a tragic tale of an abused young woman named Mima,⁵⁶ with much of the text dedicated to a gruesome description of Mima’s sky burial following her death in

⁵⁶ Since it is not always clear what Tibetan names Ma is referring to, I have opted to render them all in Hanyu Pinyin for the sake of consistency and clarity.

childbirth. “The Smile of Lake Drolmula” (*Duomula hu de weixiao* 多木拉湖的微笑) is the only story to forego the framing of the first-person Han narrator, instead being delivered by an omniscient third-person narrator. It follows a young Tibetan nomad who returns from school to his home region. He tries to describe the “civilized life” of the outside world to his family, but they are simply confused, and stick to their old-fashioned ways. The third story, “The Eight-Fanged Roach,” is an account of the depravities of an old Tibetan nomad who has incestuous relationships with both his mother and his daughter. “The Golden Crown” centers around a monastery in the Himalayas and a lascivious Nepalese woman who dies while attempting to steal the monastery’s prized possession. In the fifth piece, “The Final Initiation” (*Guan ding* 灌顶), the Han narrator relates the story of a nun, Sangsang Zhaxi, who is identified as the reincarnation of a “Living Buddha”⁵⁷ and must undergo a series of tantric rituals as part of her initiation. These rituals prove to be a series of degrading sex acts and cruel punishments, which ultimately lead to Sangsang Zhaxi’s death.

The anthropologists Louisa Schein and Dru Gladney have both identified the representational practices of the Han majority with regards to China’s minority peoples as what they call “internal Orientalism” or “Oriental Orientalism.” In Edward Said’s landmark study, he shows how European colonial writings produced an idea of the “Orient,” a vast body of texts consisting of scholarship, literature, political tracts, journalistic writing, travel books, and religious and philological studies that sought to create discursive dominance over their subjects (Said 1979: 3, 23). Picking up from Said’s work, both Schein and Gladney have argued that, despite the relatively insignificant ratio of the population that they represent, minorities have figured extremely prominently in both public and private culture in China (Schein 1997: 71; Gladney

⁵⁷ *Huofu* 活佛. This is the Chinese term used to refer to the Tibetan *sprul sku*, or “emanation body.”

1994: 95). Schein identifies a number of reasons for this. Following the devastation of the Cultural Revolution and the encroaching threat posed to a homogenous national identity by global capitalism, individual and state culture producers in China turned to minorities as “reservoirs of still-extant authenticity” (Schein 1997: 72). The result of this process is a discourse on Chinese minorities that has produced a feminized, traditional, and backwards Other.

As with many Han-authored texts about Tibet, *Stick Out Your Tongue* requires Tibet to play the role of traditional society, particularly in terms of its religion. As our narrator claims in the final story, “On the [Tibetan] plateau, religion permeates every inch of earth, legend and myth are all intertwined” (Ma 1987: 112). However, the text’s interest in “tradition” rarely constitutes an attempt to reflect the philosophical tenets of Tibetan Buddhism or its everyday practice. It is, rather, a form of fantasy, an obsession with ‘magic’ or ‘superstition’ that has long characterized outsider accounts of Tibetan Buddhism. In Ma’s case, these fantasies are martialled for the purposes of fictional experimentation, most often in the form of metanarratives that play with the readers’ expectations of reality. “The Golden Crown” for instance, is a fantastical tale of a woman who scales a stupa to steal the golden crown at its peak only to become stuck, the stupa’s pillar driven between her thighs, where she remains for two years until her body floats to the ground. The narrator’s interlocutor tells him that he rolled her up like a sheet of paper and took her home to hang on his wall, and the narrator confirms that between the thighs of the dried corpse “there was indeed a large black hole” (Ma 1987: 112). This metafictional twist is repeated in “The Final Initiation,” which relates the grueling tantric rituals that lead to the death of a nun. Her death is decidedly supernatural (“Everyone could see the organs inside her body, which was as transparent as ice, and a fish that had managed to find its way into her corpse was swimming around in her intestines” [116]), but the narrator hints at the tale’s veracity by revealing that he is in possession

of the ritual cup that was made from her skull. “If anyone would like to buy it from me,” the story concludes, “just get in touch. I’ll accept any offer, as long as it covers the cost of my travels to the north-east” (116; trans. Ma 2007: 81).

Ma Jian’s depictions of Tibetan religion are certainly aligned with the internal Orientalist need for minorities to signify the traditional and the authentic (even while his fantastical accounts are notably divorced from reality). The stories in *Stick Out Your Tongue* frequently equate the “traditional” with the “backward,” particularly by associating Tibetan ritual with senseless violence. “The Woman and the Blue Sky” is centered around a portrayal of the Tibetan funeral custom of sky burial that is both anthropological and voyeuristic in tone. When the narrator hears that Mima is scheduled to have a sky burial, a practice in which the body is dismembered and fed to vultures, he is insistent that he see it. The narrator gets his wish, and the remainder of the story consists of a detailed and shockingly graphic account of the burial, which he captures meticulously with his camera.⁵⁸ As with several of the details in *Stick Out Your Tongue*, this story directly parallels an episode that Ma Jian relates in *Red Dust* (the passage in *Red Dust* even has the same title as the short story [Ma 2002a: 413-429]). When read alongside the short stories, the “factual” nature of Ma Jian’s travelogue appears to lend his fiction an air of veracity, of first-hand accounts of things genuinely seen and heard. The effect created by both accounts, which include extensive, visceral detail of the corpse’s dismemberment, is that of barbarism and savagery, of a tradition based in primitive sacrificial violence.

⁵⁸ The Hong Kong edition of *Red Dust* also features a graphic image of a sky burial along with Ma’s other photographs of his journey. Sky burial has been a consistent obsession of travelers to Tibet, both Western and Chinese. At least two novels by Chinese authors are named after the practice (Xinran 2004; Ning 2010). Wen Pulin writes that sky burials “fill outsiders with curiosity and a sense of mystery. Many people who go to Tibet feel an itch if they don’t get to see a sky burial, and they feel disgusted if they do.” (Wen 2009b: 45).

Gladney asserts that Chinese artists of the 1980s conceived of the minority subject as a “noble savage,” “unsullied by Chinese political machinations and the degradations of modern society” (Gladney 1994: 109). In *Stick Out Your Tongue*, there is indeed savagery in abundance, but rarely is it noble. The Tibetan characters are described as physically unappealing, ragged, and blighted by poverty. When the degenerate nomad in “The Eight-Fanged Roach” offers the Han narrator a hatful of congealed yak’s blood, he is introduced thus:

I thought of the way he had looked just now when stuffing his fingers into his mouth and sucking the yak's blood, a look in his eyes like a greedy child. His face was horribly black, with a pile of messy hair tied up with a red thread [...] His appearance repulsed me. (Ma 1987: 108)

A sense of earthy, infantile (“like a greedy child”) backwardness runs throughout the descriptions of the collection’s cast of Tibetan characters. This impression is also reproduced uncritically by other Han characters in the text, for instance the soldier in “The Woman and the Blue Sky,” who describes his beloved Mima as “cleaner than most Tibetan girls” (101).

The sensory foreignness of Tibetans and their landscape is a consistent preoccupation of the collection’s narrator(s). In the first piece, we are told of the strange and vaguely repulsive nature of the food – raw yak meat and mutton, barley wine with husks floating on the surface – which the narrator must consume in a “room filled with the suffocating scent of burning yak dung” (100). This strangeness is developed into a full sensory assault, particularly with regards to the Tibetan landscape, which comes to denote decay and filth:

There was no breeze on the grasslands. The mixed scent of yak dung and sheep bones entered his nostrils. He saw a pile of dung beetles burrowing into the yak dung. It slowly expanded, then fell back again. (104)

At times, the narrator even imagines this unfamiliar landscape attacking him directly:

a wild yak stampeded towards me; a wild dog ran off with my rucksack, a wolf crept up behind me and silently clamped its jaw into my spindly neck; a pack of hungry

ghosts surrounded me and gnawed at my ears, nose, hands and feet as though they were chewing radishes. (107; trans. Ma 2007: 37)

Such tropes are reprised throughout Ma's fictional rendering of Tibet, conjuring an image of an alien, repulsive, and even threatening landscape.

Said describes how the Orient was conceived of as an "exotic locale," a place of "sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, [and] intense energy" (118). Schein picks up on these notions, observing that Miao women are depicted as promiscuous and inviting objects of erotic fantasy. Their unbridled and primitive sexuality was both an allure and a base moral transgression, and was discussed by Han outsiders in "tones of disapproval mixed with titillation" (Schein 1997: 77). Ma Jian, like other avant-garde writers of the time, was interested in breaking sexual taboos in literature and pushing creative boundaries (Cai and Batt 2003: 54) – indeed Shen Weirong believes this to have been the primary reason for his preoccupation with the subject of Tibet (Shen 2008: 269-270). When this literary project of experimental barrier-transgression through "deformed" sexuality (Cai and Batt 2003: 54) was transferred onto Tibet, the result was a series of derogatory and exploitative stories relayed in "a generally misinformed and irreverent tone" (Schiaffini 2004: 91-92). *Stick Out Your Tongue* certainly sexualizes Tibetans in the manner identified by Schein, and frequently pushes beyond sexualization and into the realms of perversion. Every story features these elements in some form. In "The Woman and the Blue Sky," Mima is abused by her father, and when she grows up, is married off to two brothers (an apparent reference to the historical Tibetan custom of polyandry), one of whom makes love to her while riding a horse (Ma 1987: 101). The second story, meanwhile, repeatedly suggests that the protagonist harbors an irrepressible sexual desire for his younger sister, Dawa.

The sexual deviancy of Ma's Tibetan characters is most evident in "The Eight-Fanged Roach." The life of the old Tibetan nomad, as related to the Han narrator, is a catalogue of incest

and debauchery. He begins by informing his interlocutor that he drank from his mother's breast until the age of fourteen, and that he slept with his mother at sixteen. His mother gives birth to a daughter, Maqiong, with whom the old man in turn becomes sexually obsessed, at one point sucking the udders of a ewe after seeing his daughter's bare breasts in the fields (in the story, the narrator confirms to his interlocutor that he has indeed seen Tibetan women working topless, a detail likewise noted in *Red Dust* [Ma 1987: 108; Ma 2002a: 178]). Maqiong later becomes involved with Tubu, a traveling trader. When the old man tells Tubu that Maqiong is the product of an incestuous union, Tubu becomes excited and consents to letting the old man sleep with her. Maqiong runs off and the father searches for her to no avail, later hearing of a woman he presumes to be his daughter, who has lost her mind and roams around half-naked. This reminds the narrator of the pitiful sight of a girl, possibly also Maqiong, he had seen in the Barkhor in Lhasa (a description that is once more repeated almost word-for-word in Ma Jian's travelogue [Ma 2002a: 410]):

Whenever someone stopped and looked down at her with pity, she would drop her head, pull her left breast to her mouth and suck it, then glance up and smile. Her left nipple had been in her mouth for so long that it had become swollen and translucent. As she crouched under the table, stray dogs scuttled about her feet, waiting for scraps of meat to fall from the butcher's tray. (Ma 1987: 109; trans. Ma 2007: 48)

As this tale makes clear, Ma Jian certainly eroticizes his Tibetan subjects, and in fact frequently goes beyond the parameters of sensualization described in Schein's internal Orientalism.

The Tibet imagined by Ma Jian is primitive, superstitious, violent, amoral, deformed, and culturally and economically backwards. Despite his initial romanticizing of Tibet and his need for it to serve his purposes as a spiritually enlightened alternative to Han (or "Communist") culture, Ma posits that Tibet does not represent "Shangri-La" to the Chinese, but "a barren outpost of the great Chinese empire" (Ma 2007: 89). In reality, it could and did represent both. Tibetans end up

in a representational bind: to fulfil their role as symbols of spiritual advancement and detachment from worldly concerns they must be humble, religious people; but if they are humble, religious people, then they are also a destitute people mired in superstitious savagery. They are prisoners of what Bhabha calls “fixity”:

Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated. (Bhabha 2004: 94)

In *Red Dust*, Ma has an exchange with an artist friend who asserts that, “For us Han Tibetophiles, Tibet is an escape from China,” and that they are drawn to it for “aesthetic rather than religious reasons.” And yet, since their culture is being eroded by the modern world, Tibetans have betrayed this responsibility. “The young Tibetans in our office don’t believe in Buddhism anymore,” his friend complains, “They are more westernised than us – they wear jeans and perm their hair” (Ma 2002a: 406). In Ma Jian’s writing, the rigidity of their unchanging order is known, but must be anxiously repeated. Tibetans are praised for their difference, but likewise condemned. And should they break with this difference, they are condemned still further.

That the ideas of Orientalism are indeed largely applicable to the works of many Han authors who have written about Tibet has by no means escaped the notice of Chinese critics, either. Wen Pulin, likely the most sensitive and astute observer to travel to Tibet during the 1980s and 1990s, stands out for his uncompromising and self-aware critiques. As a Manchu (a fact that he brings up with his Tibetan interlocutors [Wen 2009b: 136, 165-166]), Wen was perhaps more disposed to a nuanced understanding of inter-ethnic relations. Wen made a serious effort to engage with Tibetans and their culture (sometimes through translators [2009a: 128]) and interacted with fellow Tibetan artists (he made a film and wrote an essay about the pioneering Tibetan painter,

Amdo Jampa [2009b: 83-90]). For him, filmmaking was a way to “have a conversation with another civilization” (2009b: 147). And yet, at the same time, he was fully aware that he had created an “illusory” (*huanhua* 幻化) Tibet, as though it were his own “spiritual Shangri-la” (2009b: 161). And just as he criticizes himself, he is fully willing to censure his fellow artists for their exploitative habits:

Due to petty-bourgeois sentiment, it was extremely rare for someone to be able to enter into local cultural life. Everybody had their preconceptions, and they used them to look for the things they needed. Put more bluntly, everyone was a thief. They came here to steal some culture, steal some legends, and in passing steal some actual stuff – cultural artefacts, works of art, that sort of thing. In 1986 I was just like that. (Wen 2009b: 163)

Wen is not the only Chinese artist to have made such critiques. When opening an exhibition of contemporary Tibetan artists in Beijing in 2010, the well-known curator Li Xianting 栗宪庭 was moved to comment that Chinese art about Tibet “must thoroughly search its conscience when it comes to the outsider’s viewpoint that observes, depicts, and exoticizes” (*Lieri Xizang* 2010: 4).

The phenomenon of internal Orientalism has also received critical attention from prominent Chinese intellectuals. In an essay on the 2008 Tibetan unrest, Wang Hui (2008) frets that Orientalism is “in the process of becoming a product of our own.” Wang condemns the exploitative tourist industry and commercial culture that has turned a town in Yunnan into an actual commodified “Shangri-la,” and urges the Chinese to engage in a critical self-reflection of the “new Orientalism” that is being constructed through the exotification of minority cultures (177). Shen Weirong (2010) has also written specifically about this phenomenon with regards to Ma Jian. *Stick Out Your Tongue* he describes as a “classic example of ‘internal Orientalism (*neibu de dongfangzhuyi* 内部的东方主义)’”; Ma “intentionally ‘Orientalized’ Tibet, and what he described was in fact the image of Tibet he hoped to see, not a real Tibet” (136). Ma Jian portrays Tibetans as ignorant, backwards, and obsessed with sexual deviancy, while his stories create the impression

that Tibet “is completely different from where we live and is filled with foreign, exotic flavor” (111, 134). Shen’s argument is that Ma Jian, like many other Han writers in Chinese history, seriously “misread” (*wudu* 误读) Tibet (134), and that such misreadings have in turn had a grave impact on Tibet in real life.

Although Ma’s work sparked an uncommon degree of controversy, it is far from the only Han-authored work about Tibet to make use of internal Orientalist practices or that could be considered offensive. Nor was it the first. Shen Weirong’s (2008) claim that, “in associating Tibetans with wild and perverse sexual activity, Ma Jian was, in fact, the first Chinese author in the literary history of the PRC to create extremely negative images of minority people” (270) is not tenable. Ma Yuan’s celebrated avant-garde work “A Fiction,” published one year before *Stick Out Your Tongue*, is very much a mirror-image of Ma Jian’s writing: the story is told by a conspicuously camera-wielding Han narrator who describes ignorant Tibetans unfamiliar with the modern world, half-naked and stereotypically sexualized. “A Fiction” is arguably even more offensive than Ma’s work, given its brazen descriptions of bestiality and literally deformed Tibetans (the titular fiction is of a Han narrator visiting a colony of lepers, one of whom he sleeps with).

“Firsts” aside, there is no question that numerous other works of Tibet-related literature by Han Chinese writers exoticize, romanticize, demonize, and commodify Tibet and Tibetans. The elements of internal Orientalist depiction so conspicuous in *Stick Out Your Tongue* – superstition, magic, savagery, sexual perversion – are easily found elsewhere. Ning Ken’s 2010 novel *Heaven/Tibet* is also arguably more provocative than Ma’s work in its obsessive sexualization of Tibetans and association of tantric rituals with sadomasochistic fetishes. He Ma’s series of novels *The Tibet Code*, which first appeared in print in 2008, are saturated with the kind of magic and

mystery common to Tibet-related fiction. A form of Orientalism is arguably one of the defining features of *Xizang wenxue* as a genre; Zhang Jun's canon-defining essay even asserts that "Tibetan literature is first and foremost [defined by] its ubiquitous religious color and the illusoriness that is aroused in this mystical land" (Zhang 1989: 435). The trends found in Ma's fiction are thus far from unique, and in many ways are in fact symptomatic of much, if not the majority, of Han-authored literature on Tibet.

3.4 Reconciling the Other with the Self

Reading Ma Jian through the lens of internal Orientalism is certainly informative in the sense of gaining a broader perspective on the contours of Han majority representational practices vis-à-vis minorities. However, as a critical discourse based in anthropological study, it declines to address how we ought to approach his texts, and texts like them, from the perspective of Chinese literary history. My interest here, in other words, is in considering the further implications of these observations when we place them in the context of the literary field of modern China, its history, and its predominant concerns and discourses. As we have seen, Tibet and Tibetans as subject matter were absent from the formative stages of modern Chinese literature in the early 20th century. Though some scattered literary works on Tibet began to emerge after the founding of the PRC, it was not until the 1980s that they appeared en masse and became an established subsection of Chinese literary concerns. During this period, a form of "Tibetan literature" – *Xizang wenxue* – was, for the first time, becoming a part of Chinese *national* literature. And yet, this process of absorption, of making Tibetans a part of the national literary "self," was paradoxically occurring through the internal Orientalist practices of "othering," of producing in literature exotic and commodified strangers.

In its study of colonial representational practices, one of the most influential points made in *Orientalism* is that depictions of the minority made by the majority are often concerned far more with the “identity” of the observer than the observed. Every culture, Said argues, requires “the construction of ‘opposites’ and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’” (331-332). This resulted in the ‘idea of Europe’, “a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans” (7), a notion in which the European is invariably situated as the superior in a fixed hierarchy.

Said’s argument is borrowed by both Gladney (1994) and Schein (1997). The former argues that Han romanticization of minorities “has more to do with constructing a majority discourse, than it does with the minorities themselves” (94), while the latter concurs that Han depictions of Miao women inevitably tell us “a great deal about the producers of such representations, and little about those represented” (77). To the Han observer, the Miao represented a people in need of the civilizing mission of advanced Chinese society, while simultaneously serving as a counterpoint to modern urban culture. They were “an internal Other” whose culture became a treasure trove of traditional values, aspects of which could be “(selectively) appropriated and valorized as elements of Chinese culture” (Schein 1997: 73). This point has also been made with regard to contemporary Han literary works about minorities. Lee Haiyan (2014) writes of Jiang Rong’s 姜戎 infamous novel *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng* 狼图腾) that the author merely borrows the Mongols in order to make a “prescription for improving the Chinese race.” *Wolf Totem*, rather than being concerned with Mongols or their culture, is instead “profoundly Han-centric” (108-109).

When it comes to Han representations of Tibet, the problem of Han-centrism is well-documented. Chinese artists, often by their own admission, were keen to discover a simple,

spiritual life that stood in opposition to (Han) modernity (Heimsath 2005, Chen 2010, Harris 1999: 135-143). Wen Pulin rebukes his colleagues in the art world, as well writers and filmmakers, for treating Tibet as a “spiritual Shangri-la” designed to counteract whatever problems Chinese artists have in their own lives: “when we can't bear our lives anymore, when our jobs are so awful, when society is so degenerate, we naturally set our sights on Tibet” (Wen 2009b: 218). Ma’s work, like Jiang Rong’s and many others, juxtaposes the supposed simplicity of Tibetan culture with the modernity of the Han. All of the stories bar one are relayed by a Han I-narrator: the Tibetan characters cannot speak for themselves, rather they must be presented and interpreted by the non-Tibetan intermediary. The fictional narrator’s role as dispassionate documenter is reinforced by his ubiquitous use of a camera, which records every aspect of his travels, most prominently the sky burial in “The Woman and the Blue Sky.” The camera is the sole preserve of the observer (most Tibetans, we are told, “have never seen a camera before” [Ma 1987: 99]) and a sign of his advanced technological and material status. The camera can also be read as an assertion of the validity and objectivity of the observations on the Tibetan, a technological realization of Said’s observation that Orientalism requires “a source of information (the Oriental) and a source of knowledge (the Orientalist), in short, a writer and a subject matter otherwise inert” (308). Ma’s perspective, as Shen (2010) notes, was certainly not that of a Tibetan; he had no interest in engaging with Tibetan culture on its own terms, instead crafting stories “from the basis of the systems and values of Han culture” (147). Ma’s Han narrator is always divorced from the savage tales related by his Tibetan interlocutors, and implicitly distinguished from the backwardness they describe. Gladney’s observation that the construction of minority primitiveness “homogenizes the undefined majority as united, monoethnic and modern” (Gladney 1994: 93) is indeed valid here.

Ma regularly engages in idle national-character type comments on the nature of Tibetans, as contrasted with that of the Han. Religious faith is a key marker of difference; as one of his acquaintances notes in *Red Dust*, “Really, every one of them is dedicated to the Buddha, just like all Han are dedicated to old Mao” (Ma 2002a: 404). This is what makes Tibetans inscrutable to Ma, despite his own identification as a Buddhist. The narrator of “The Eight-Fanged Roach” muses on this point:

In Tibet, the things you see are different from the east of China (*neidi*). Firstly, Tibetans do not feel sad about death, they simply see it as a different part of human existence. But it is hard to understand those people prostrating at the temples. Why are people so afraid of retribution? (Ma 1987: 106)

Such observations are likewise found throughout *Red Dust*. The aforementioned acquaintance elaborates:

“The nature (*jingshen* 精神) of Tibetans is to live between the realms of the mortals and the gods. They have no interest in life and material possessions, so they are unwilling to apply themselves to anything. If you give them some seeds or rubber shoes, the next day they'll just trade them in for drink. But I like this simple honesty and decency that they have. I often go to talk with them to gather material, and I have met Tibetans of all ages. If they decide that you are a friend, they'll trust you implicitly. They are not crafty and sly like the Han.” (Ma 2002a: 405)

These notions about Tibetans and their difference – that they are spiritual, unconcerned with worldly affairs, and simple and honest in contrast to the devious Han – are common tropes, not limited to Ma or his interlocutor. They are in fact also common to conceptions of many other Chinese minorities. Like Bhabha's stereotype, they are known, but must always be anxiously repeated.

Shen Weirong's (2010) comment on the author's approach to his Tibetan subjects is accurate: “Ma Jian went to Tibet in the first place because he couldn't stand the monotony of Beijing, but he took the mentality of Beijing with him to Lhasa” (147). This “mentality” could be described as the self-critical preoccupation of countless Chinese writers from the May Fourth

period on: the national shortcomings of China and how to overcome them. As Lee (2014) points out, this is the same mentality that Jiang Rong took to Inner Mongolia in his novel, which “hearkens back to the century-old racial-nationalist question: how can China attain wealth and power and avert the fate of extinction in the Darwinian jungle?” (109). *Stick Out Your Tongue* and *Red Dust* both hold up Tibetans as potential alternatives to the Han character, positive and negative. They are spiritualist, not materialist, honest, not deceptive; but they are also economically backward, not advanced, and superstitious, not rational. As with Schein’s point about depictions of the Miao, we are given to believe that a selective appropriation is necessary in order to mend Han national defects. With the long view of modern Chinese literature suggested by Lee in mind, this is perhaps unsurprising. If Han Chinese writers were to continue to explore the problems that occupied their May Fourth predecessors, except while now writing about Chinese minorities, then some degree of exploitative representation, of forcing those minorities to serve as vehicles for the investigation of “Han” concerns, was inevitable. If the national character discourse operated through an essentialized version of “Chinese” traits via missionary discourse, then texts such as Ma Jian’s continue in the same vein by essentializing another *minzu* in order to reflect on an essentialized version of one’s own *minzu*.

However, it is here that we must be careful to differentiate the effects of internal Orientalist practice in Ma Jian’s fiction from what is identified by Said. Orientalism describes a process whereby European colonizers established discursive dominance over their colonies; but the dichotomy of self/other matched that of colonizer/colonized – the two were distinct, and never did the British or the French need to reconcile their colonized others with the national self. In Ma Jian’s writing, as indeed in most Han texts about Chinese minorities, the very opposite is the case: the Orientalized other is at the same time a part of the Chinese self. We must pay attention to the

significance of the “internal” in internal Orientalism: it signifies the practices of Orientalism occurring *within the boundaries of the Chinese state*. And since this is the first time that Tibetans are being incorporated into Chinese literature in any significant way, in writing such as Ma Jian’s, Tibetans are being written into a conception of the Chinese state precisely *through* a process of othering.

It should not escape our notice that Tibetans are never othered as foreign, as non-Chinese. Ma’s narrator contrasts the geographical location of “Tibet” (*Xizang*) with *neidi*, literally the “interior,” the term used to refer to the eastern ‘heartland’ of China as opposed to its ‘distant’ western regions. Likewise, Tibetans are distinguished from “us,” the Han, by virtue of being *Zangzu* (or *Zangmin* or *Zangren*). They are a separate nation(ality), but unquestionably one of China’s fifty-six recognized *minzu* nations, and still, therefore, also Chinese citizens, or *Zhongguoren*. The distinction created in the text is between *Han* and *Zang* within China’s state system of recognized nations; it is not *Zhongguoren/other*. In Lee’s (2014) terms, they are “strangers,” not “foreigners” – a “foreigner” being a noncitizen (11-12). In other words, Ma Jian’s texts construct Tibetans as being Chinese in terms of citizenship (state belonging) while simultaneously othering them as an alien ethnicity; they are internal others.

To return to the idea that Ma’s meditations on the minority other tell us primarily about the Han self: we can certainly say that *Stick Out Your Tongue*, and *Red Dust* in particular, seek to convey to the reader certain reflections on China. *Red Dust* does not limit itself to making observations on the nature of Tibetans and other minorities; it does so equally for the Han and for China as a whole. The text begins in Beijing with Ma painting an unflattering picture of his *hutong* neighborhood:

The house is surrounded on three sides by red-brick apartment blocks. When kitchen windows open, eggshells, cabbage leaves and plastic bags drop onto my roof and roll

into the yard. On one occasion I received a plate of fried kidneys – someone up there must have smelt they had gone off and wanted me to deal with them. When I hang out my clothes to dry, pigeons nesting on the third floor splatter them with shit. (Ma 2002a: 5-6; trans. Ma 2001: 3)

Ma's impressions of China do not improve with his travels, and his tour of the country becomes a catalogue of personal and national ills. In Xi'an he is incensed when he falls victim to a scam at the Terracotta Army, where a cottage industry of fake tickets and fake souvenirs has sprung up around the museum. Seeing the soldiers themselves simply prompts him to reflect that "cruel and bloody tradition lives on, and the ugly spirit of the Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) is revealed under the cold light of day" (Ma 2002a: 246).

His distaste for the unfeeling exploitation that has come with China's burgeoning capitalism is matched by his regular mockery of petty nationalism. At the same museum, he witnesses a policeman confiscate a foreigner's camera:

The Chinese tourists gathered around to watch the show. "It's not enough that we let you see the greatness of our China - you want to sneak pictures and take them back to make money!" the policeman, very proud of himself, announced to the hall. (Ma 2002a: 247)

Ma reserves his harshest critique for China's political climate. He is prompted to go on his travels in the first place in order to evade the campaigns against Bourgeois Liberalization and Spiritual Pollution, and he defines the system as the enemy of free thought and expression: "In China, the law is the only religious belief, and people can only find their so-called direction in life within set modes of thinking. If you want to rebel against this dead life, you can only paint or write" (Ma 2002a: 60). Ma Jian rails against the violence of the political system, channeling Lu Xun in a passage about executions where he decries the "vast crowds who gather to see the spectacle." Seeing an execution notice for a Sichuanese man who raped and murdered a woman, he remarks that "under a cruel political system, people become savages" (Ma 2002a: 342). Ma and his

likeminded artist friends regularly bemoan the restrictions that politics had placed on art, advocating instead a form of liberal, individualistic expression: “What is there to express in this rotten society?” one of these acquaintances complains, “Your damn patriotism? Or your affection for the proletariat? What bullshit!” (Ma 2002a: 58).

But these critiques of the state of China do not exist in a separate discursive domain from his commentary on Tibetans and other minorities. In Chinese literature of the early 20th century, the signifiers of state and nation were malleable; a discussion of the issues of the “state” (*guojia* 国家) of “China” (*Zhongguo*) and the “nation” (*minzu/guomin*) did not necessarily indicate anyone other than the Han – national and state signifiers overlapped. Republican-era writers did not need to reconcile potential contradictions or slippages between national literature, the nation, and the state. By the time of Ma Jian’s writing, however, this situation had changed entirely, as the signification of *Zhongguo* had come to unambiguously cover Tibetans and other minorities. Han and Zang/Tibetan could be distinguished, but a discussion of *Zhongguo* necessarily included both, and a critique of the nature of Tibetans could equally serve as a critique of the nature of *Zhongguo*.

This is where we must part from the theoretical structure suggested by Said, as not only do Ma Jian’s critical portrayals of Tibetans serve to reflect upon a distinct Han self, they simultaneously serve as critiques of life in *Zhongguo*, in which both Han and Tibetan are included.

Consider the following reflection from *Red Dust*:

The atheism of the Communist Party cannot wipe out Tibetan Buddhism, just as it can’t wipe out a nation’s spirit. Autocracy simply destroys individual rights – Buddhism has long since become a part of their traditions. But you cannot differentiate individuals within that tradition [Buddhism], and so it has the same effect of quelling the value of individual existence. Mostly I feel that Tibetans’ feelings have been suppressed and distorted. At the Jokhang, I saw a group of schoolchildren in Young Pioneer scarves drop their school bags and perform five prostrations. Lhasa is already a city where Sinicization (*Hanhua* 汉化) and Buddhist consciousness are mixed together. (Ma 2002a: 405)

Here, Ma offers a criticism of Communism's smothering of individuality in China (a favorite theme of the text), but does so precisely through an anecdote about Tibetans and an assertion that Tibetan Buddhism produces the same results. The problems of faith, tradition, and their conflict with modernity (here: Communism) are not construed solely as "Tibetan" issues, but as reflections of "Chinese" issues more broadly.

In fact, one of the reasons for Ma's feeling of disillusionment after visiting Tibet was that it was *not* as different as he had hoped. In *Red Dust*, he determines that Tibetan society is as hopeless as the rest of China, as the Communist Party has "removed the soul from Tibetan religion, just as they did when reforming the rest of the Chinese" (Ma 2002a: 401). He reiterates this sentiment in the afterword to *Stick Out Your Tongue*:

My hope of gaining some religious revelation also came to nothing. Tibet was a land whose spiritual heart had been ripped out. Thousands of temples lay in ruins, and the few monasteries that had survived were damaged and defaced. Most of the monks who'd returned to the monasteries seemed to have done so for economic rather than spiritual reasons. The temple gates were guarded by armed policemen, and the walls were daubed with slogans instructing the monks to 'Love the Motherland, love the Communist Party, and study Marxist-Leninism.' In this sacred land, it seemed that the Buddha couldn't even save himself, so how could I expect him to save me? (Ma 2007: 84)

Though Ma Jian certainly singles out Tibetans for particular criticism due to his perception of their 'betrayal' of their spiritually enlightened culture, his greatest source of disappointment comes from learning that the exotic land he had hoped to discover was, ultimately, just another part of China, which he saw as degraded by corruption, hypocrisy, and political campaigns just like everywhere else in the country.

Shen Weirong censures *Stick Out Your Tongue* for this very reason. He disputes the accuracy of Ma's stories because Tibet had been subject to the same policies as the rest of China since 1959 and, like the rest of the country, had recently undergone the upheavals of the Cultural

Revolution when the author traveled there, meaning it was virtually impossible for him to have witnessed or heard about the kinds of tantric rituals and religious practices that he described (Shen 2010: 146). Ma Jian already knew the Tibet he wanted to see before he left Beijing, but “Tibet was no longer an ‘alien land’ completely different from Beijing, and ‘the other’ had already long since been living among us” (148).

In so many words, this is what Ma Jian admits himself. This disenchantment results in some rather ironic advice on the author’s part: “I’ve met many people in the west who shared that romantic vision of Tibet I had. But in my experience Tibetans can be as corrupt and brutal as the rest of us. To idealize them is to deny their humanity” (Ma 2007: 89). His stories thus attempt to offer realist portrayals even as they delve into impossible mysticism, a tension Ma hints at in the afterword: “I lost all sense of reality and travelled as though in a trance. In the thin mountain air, it was hard to distinguish fact from fantasy” (83). Ma also claims that he wanted to write about Tibet “as both a reality and a state of mind” (85) – a particularly apt description, as his texts manage to create Orientalized fantasies of Tibet while also situating it in the real-world environment of 1980s China. Both *Stick Out Your Tongue* and *Red Dust* thus achieve the curiously contradictory effect of writing Tibetans into China on equal footing with the Han – “as corrupt and brutal as the rest of us” – while at the same time constructing them as Han-centric Orientalized fantasies.

The implication of this conclusion is that, through texts such as Ma Jian’s, Tibetans entered the Chinese literary realm as subjects of a colonialist practice of representation being put to use for nation/state-building ends. If Orientalism was a means of exerting discursive control over colonized territories, then internal Orientalism served to establish discursive control over territories that were considered to be integral parts of the Chinese state. Tibetans and their society

were not a serious concern for Chinese writers of the May Fourth or Republican eras. When they were brought into the realm of Chinese literary discourse decades later, it was through the colonialist methods of internal Orientalist representation. It is therefore unsurprising that the majority of Han Chinese writing about Tibet has failed to produce any literature that engages with Tibetan society or addresses the concerns of actual Tibetans in any meaningful way.

3.5 Tibetan Literatures in Modern China

As noted previously, disillusionment is one of the central themes of both *Red Dust* and *Stick Out Your Tongue*. In the former, Ma's journey to Tibet comes at the very end of the narrative, and functions as a climactic full-stop to the travelogue's growing sense of weariness and disdain. Ma writes that he stops in Tibet "not because Everest stands in the way, but because my inward journey has reached its end" (Ma 2002a: 438). His inward journey was a quest for personal, artistic, and religious revelation – a quest that ends in frustration when Ma realizes that Tibetan pilgrims "looked to heaven and saw liberation," while he "looked to the same blue sky but saw nothing" (Ma 2002a: 412). In Lhasa, he admits to his friend that his previous enthusiasm has evaporated, citing the alleged fraudulence of the lamas. The Dalai Lama must have taken the best ones with him to India, Ma speculates, and those remaining are "probably just peasants too lazy to work the land" (Ma 2002a: 401). But Ma's sense of disappointment doesn't come solely from the fact that he believes Tibet to be "Sinicized," or in other words, like the rest of China. He also provides a critique of Tibetan Buddhism on its own terms:

I became a Buddhist because I thought there was only suffering in this life, and because you cannot believe in autocracy. I was rebelling against the religion of the Communist Party, and I thought I had found liberation. But when I got to Tibet, I found that although society is controlled by the Communist Party, Buddhism still treats the source of suffering as preordained. The Communist Party has only restored Buddhism so that people can displace their resentment and enmity onto the previous or the next life. Belief in Buddhism can only abet the tyrants. Only when I realized this did I question my convictions. (Ma 2002a: 433)

Here we see a glimpse of a different kind of problem: that Tibetan Buddhists are complicit in the evils he perceives, and that Tibetan Buddhism itself as a philosophy is also flawed.

Red Dust offers several such thoughts, particularly regarding what Ma sees as the hypocrisy and the worldliness of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners: “Take Picture, 20 yuan!” a monk barks at him when he visits Tashi Lhunpo; he is likewise disturbed by the decadence of the monastery’s lavish statue of Maitreya: “seeing all the pilgrims in rags outside, and now seeing this statue covered in gold, I felt very uneasy” (Ma 2002a: 434). His criticism further extends to doctrine. In a conversation with a *tülku* he cites the punishments stipulated by Tsongkhapa for monks who break Buddhist law and asks “how a religion that promised release from misery could endorse such cruelty” (Ma 2002a: 433). Such critiques are not uncommon in travel writing on Tibet. Having arrived in Tibet with preconceived notions of the nature of Tibetan society and religion, the traveler is often shocked and outraged to discover that they do not conform to reality. Susie Rijnhart, a 19th century Canadian missionary, was scandalized to discover the “pure figment” of the vegetarian Buddhist when she saw a lama “devour several pounds of meat at one sitting” (Rijnhart 1901: 148). Rijnhart also dispels the ‘myth’ that lamas are “superior beings endowed with transcendent physical and intellectual gifts,” and decides that Tibetans are, rather, “ignorant, superstitious and intellectually atrophied” (125). She cannot help but reach a conclusion that would apply aptly to Ma Jian’s narrative: “Distance lends enchantment, but at the first contact the mirage disappears” (132).

In *Stick Out Your Tongue*, the mixture of fantastical imaginings and realist writing pushes Ma’s critique of the supposed problems of Tibetan Buddhism per se into extreme territory. In his fiction, Ma highlights the superstitious beliefs and practices that appear antithetical to his preconception of Tibetan Buddhism as an advanced spiritual tradition. His fictional Tibet is a place

where lamas and monks engage in lecherous acts shockingly contrary to their station (particularly in “The Golden Crown”). It is a world of “black arts” (*zhou shu* 咒术), “evil incantations” (*e zhou* 恶咒), “oracles” (*zhan bu* 占卜), “astrological signs” (*ming xiang* 命相), magical seeds invested with “deities” (*shen ling* 神灵), “secret mantras” (*mimi zhenyan* 秘密真言) and “ritual exorcisms” (*mo zhou* 魔咒) (Ma 1987: 104, 111-112). A preferred technique of the stories is to juxtapose descriptions of idealistic faith and high-minded philosophy with the savage ‘reality’ of its practice in everyday life. In “The Smile of Lake Drolmula,” for instance, a neighbor tells the protagonist about how he studied the “black arts” as a young boy: “He said that during his uncle’s initiation ceremony, the Living Buddha Danba Duoji Cairang ripped out his uncle’s eyes, pulled out his tongue, chopped off his hand and offered the severed parts to Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion” (Ma 1987: 104; trans. Ma 2007: 23) *Stick Out Your Tongue* transforms Ma’s disillusionment into a picture of Tibetan Buddhism as not only hypocritical and fraudulent, but a way of life founded on irrational cruelty and repulsive violence.

This theme is developed most extensively in “The Final Initiation,” which centers around the recognition of a “Living Buddha,” Sangsang Zhaxi. Throughout the story, Sangsang Zhaxi has serious misgivings about her newly assigned role and is distracted by her attraction to Gelie Banjiao, a monk at the monastery. Sangsang Zhaxi tries, and fails, to dispel these feelings with the meditation practices she is taught. An early part of her training involves the dissection of a corpse in order “to discuss the location of the subtle body’s winds, channels and drops.” But the reality of the lesson is far from enlightening for Sangsang Zhaxi:

Once the novice monks had placed the corpse on the altar, the master picked up his knife. He cut open the corpse’s chest, removed the five organs and six innards, pulled out the heart and pointed to the inner eye. The foul stench made Sangsang Zhaxi nauseous. (Ma 1987: 113; trans. Ma 2007: 68)

The students are then invited to read the master's mind. Sangsang Zhaxi struggles "since she had studied yoga for only six years" and her "inner eye was still clouded." Eventually she succeeds, and the narrator continues to present stark juxtapositions of mystical gibberish and graphic violence:

The master said, "The image you saw in my mind is the image that I saw in yours. The eye that sees the future is not the same as the inner eye." The master picked up his knife again and rammed it into the corpse's skull. [...] The master dug out the corpse's eye with his knife and pierced it. Observing the turbid liquid that flowed out, he said, "The layman sees things through this eye. Because the nature of this eye is clouded, the layman is corrupted by the five poisons and is unable to reach enlightenment." Sangsang Zhaxi gazed at the half-dismembered corpse. He was a middle-aged man, with large, white teeth. A swarm of flies hovered above his exposed innards. (114; trans. adapted from Ma 2007: 69-71)

The titular initiation, "the Union of the Two Bodies Ritual," is a tantric sex act she must perform with another monk, Larang Qiangzuo, who is also the reincarnation of her elder brother. As the ceremony nears, Sangsang Zhaxi is increasingly anxious, her meditations interrupted by visions of Gelie Banjiao, leaving her feeling "naked and ashamed" (115). Her doubts about her faith and the seeming cruelty of the life she has dedicated herself to reflect the confusion Ma describes in his own travels: "Her mind was muddled. She tried to visualize herself as her inner deity surrounded by four guardian Bodhisattvas, but failed to see herself within his image" (115; trans. Ma 2007: 76). Sangsang Zhaxi's unease proves justified in the climactic scene of the story, the ceremony itself:

When the horns sounded again, she realized that she hadn't yet entered her meditation. Quickly she tried to whisper the Tara Mantra to summon her inner deity, but the words came out in the wrong order.

It was too late now. She opened her eyes and saw Larang Qiangzuo remove his robes and walk towards her. She looked up at him pleadingly then, shaking with fear, let him push her down onto the hard cushions. Very soon, she felt a sharp pain between her legs and the suffocating weight of a body pressing down on her. She sensed that the woman who had woken inside her just a few hours ago was slowly being ripped to shreds. [...] She remembered that she must awaken her chakras if she and Larang Qiangzuo were to achieve a union of wisdom and compassion. But just

as her psychic energy was about to reach her Wisdom Chakra, Larang Qiangzuo dragged her up onto her feet, hitched her right leg to his waist, and shook her so hard that her mind went blank.

She felt herself wither and wilt as Larang Qiangzuo clung to her like a magnet, sucking the energy from her bones. At last, she collapsed on the floor. She was helpless. She had no choice but to let Larang Qiangzuo do with her as he wished. (115; trans. Ma 2007: 76-78)

The supposedly sacred ceremony turns out to be a brutal rape, with the ironic invocation of mantras and “Wisdom Chakras” serving to highlight the horror of what is actually taking place. In fact, her attempts to “achieve a union of wisdom and compassion” – which the narrative implies is possible – are foiled by the very ceremony that is supposed to actualize these values. This is Ma Jian’s ultimate critique of Tibetan Buddhism: an otherwise benevolent spiritual tradition (Buddhist philosophy) debased by superstitious practices and turned into a twisted reflection of what it ought to be. In a word, it is “Lamaism,” the long-standing Western colonialist conception of Tibetan Buddhism as a perverted, backwards form of the ‘original’ teachings of Buddhism (Lopez 1998: 15-45).⁵⁹

There is a long and well-documented history of Western colonialist representation of Tibet (which need not be recounted here),⁶⁰ and Ma Jian’s writing certainly replicates many of its tendencies in internal Orientalist form. However, in the context of the present study, the pressing question raised by his attacks on Tibetan Buddhism is the extent to which they overlap with critiques offered by Tibetan writers and intellectuals themselves. When Ma Jian was traveling around Tibet in the mid-1980s, Döndrup Gyel had already begun publishing stories and poems that would transform Tibetan literature, and he had initiated criticism of blind faith and fraudulent lamas in stories such as “Trülku” that are not dissimilar from the themes in Ma’s work (see Chapter

⁵⁹ Lamaism, a term that Lopez notes was coined in Europe and has no correlate in Tibetan, has been commonly used in Chinese as well in its translated form of *lama jiao* 喇嘛教.

⁶⁰ There are several studies of Western representations of Tibet. See Bishop 1989, Lopez 1998, Schell 2000, McMillin 2001, and Dodin & Rather 2001.

Two). Tsering Döndrup's "Ralo," which sparked a long-lasting debate about the defects of the Tibetan national character, was published only four years after *Stick Out Your Tongue* (see Chapter Four). And by the year 2000, attacks on Tibetan Buddhism were taken to an even greater extreme by Zhokdung and others, who explicitly savaged the superstition and degeneracy they perceived in the religious devotion of Tibetan society (see Chapter Five). Like Ma Jian, this last group of authors consistently upheld the values of individualism, creativity, and social critique over the perceived strictures of organized religion. There is a sense here in which Ma Jian is actually closer to these Tibetan counterparts than he is to Han writers of *Xizang wenxue*, who habitually indulged in fantasy and "shirked the major political and religious problems in Tibet" (Zhang 1989: 437). What is the relationship between the seemingly overlapping viewpoints of these two "Tibetan literatures"?

Notions of Tibetan underdevelopment, of cultural and civilizational backwardness, underpinned some of the most influential Tibetan intellectual and literary work that sprang up from the 1980s onwards. Most prominent of all was a critical reevaluation of the role of Buddhism, with several prominent writers publishing harsh fictional critiques of religious faith, clerical corruption, and even sexual abuse (see Robin 2008: 149-152). Tibetan writers were far more preoccupied with discussing these problems than Han writers, most of whom were content to engage in Orientalized fantasies, but relatively few of whom went to the extent of Ma Jian in recoiling from a supposedly backwards society. The similarities here should perhaps not be as surprising as they may seem. As I argue elsewhere in this dissertation, these strands of Tibetan intellectual development harked back to the preoccupation with national self-critique that constituted such a prominent part of the beginnings of modern Chinese literature. The incorporation of Tibetan literature into Chinese literature by Han authors writing in Chinese characters was colored by an inward-looking

discourse centering around the social and cultural concerns of Han writers – reflecting on the “self” through the “other.” But Tibetan language literature was in fact drawing on many of the same Chinese literary traditions of national introspection, and the resulting cultural/national self-critiques could not be said to be entirely unrelated in terms of their targets and their conclusions. Moreover, Ma Jian was not alone in touching a nerve with his brazen condemnation of Tibetan tradition – both Döndrup Gyel and Zhokdung faced a severe backlash within Tibetan society for the perceived heresy of their writings.⁶¹

It would be a gross distortion to suggest that these Tibetan authors would approve of Ma’s work (his obsession with Tibetans’ supposed sexual deviancy, for example, is an idiosyncrasy certainly not reflected in Tibetan literature), but some of his views on the “backwards” nature of Tibetan religion and society would likely be well taken. At a public discussion in 1991 in Shanghai, many of these very questions were debated by Nyizhön (Nyi gzhon) and other leading Tibetan intellectuals, whose work is analyzed in Chapter Five. The event was a debate about the “spirit” (*snying stobs*) of Tibetan culture as seen through non-Tibetan works such as Tian Zhuangzhuang’s 田壮壮 1986 arthouse landmark *Horse Thief* (*Dao ma zei* 盗马贼). The participants concurred that outsider representations of Tibet inevitably brought with them the views and concerns of another nation (*mi rigs*), and that it was impossible to analyze another culture free from “the specific viewpoints of one’s own culture” (Nyi gzhon 2005: 114-115). *Stick Out Your Tongue* is

⁶¹ Unlike Zhokdung, however, Ma was also condemned by the government for the threat his writing represented to ethnic unity (*minzu tuanjie*). Zhokdung’s initial critiques of Tibetan culture were seemingly deemed officially permissible, bearing out Schiaffini’s (2004) claim that “daring works about Tibet by Tibetans are rarely criticized” (92). It appears that threatening inter-ethnic unity is a sensitive issue, but intra-ethnic strife provoked by internal Tibetan cultural debates is not such a concern. Zhokdung fell afoul of the system and was arrested only when he turned his attention to the state and the Han, which likewise threatened inter-ethnic and state unity (see (Zhogs dung 2016: xx-xxi).

referenced specifically in this regard, with one contributor accusing it of “prejudiced viewpoints” born of classic Sinocentrism and the author’s “narrow cultural background” (116).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that they dismissed the perspectives of some of these works out of hand. For instance, Nyizhön argued that *Horse Thief* does not “abuse” or “belittle” Tibetan culture, rather it is an example of the tendency in (Han) Chinese art towards “reflection on cultural history” in the mold of *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地) and *Old Well* (*Lao jing* 老井) (127). Another contributor viewed Tian Zhuangzhuang’s work as a form of introspection that Tibetans urgently needed: an engagement with the historical and cultural legacies in the modern national (and human) consciousness (140-141). Nor did they feel that Tian was wrong to assert that, when he saw pilgrims outside a monastery, he “also saw the entire condition, culture, and history of Tibet” (145). When one discussant questioned why outsiders are so interested in Tibetan burial customs and in depicting Tibetans as backwards and savage, Nyizhön offered some provocative thoughts: if Tibetans cannot accept being labelled as such, he wondered, “is that not also a sign of backwardness?” (144-145).⁶²

However, it is crucial that we do not equate these two (Chinese and Tibetan) literary-intellectual developments, for while they may indeed resemble one another in many respects, their purposes and effects were and are fundamentally different. Here, Said’s observation in *Orientalism* that outsider representations do not ultimately concern the subject being described is indeed

⁶² Some years later, the essayist Meché (Me lce), who became connected with these intellectuals, made similar points in a different context. In 2006, the Taiwanese intellectual Li Ao 李敖 discussed “the Tibet question” on his Hong Kong TV show *Li Ao Has Something to Say* (*Li Ao you hua shuo* 李敖有话说). Li’s stance was largely in accord with the official historiographical line in China, and he presented familiar arguments about Tibetan backwardness, the oppressive rule of religion and lamas, and the advancements provided by the Chinese Communist Party. Meché recounts the fierce online backlash against Li among Tibetan monks and students. While he doesn’t condone Li’s lecture, Meché comments that the controversy was caused partly because some of Li’s points “hit the nail on the head” (*rnag thog gtsags khel*). He likewise believes that Tibetans need the ability to hear criticisms from outsiders. “We only ever have eyes to see the faults of others,” he remarks, “and never a mirror to see our own” (Me lce 2008: 110-115).

relevant. Ma's fiction features Han narrator-analysts who are disconnected from their subjects not only in terms of the observer-observed relationship, but also in terms of their marked ethnicity. This is in contrast to the (implicit or explicit) Tibetan narrator in self-critical fiction (or more unambiguously, essays) by Tibetans. There is never any sense in which the literary voice in *Red Dust* or *Stick Out Your Tongue* speaks with the hope of provoking cultural introspection and change in Tibetan society, and Ma Jian's writing never concerns itself with Tibetan problems for the sake of Tibetans themselves. In this sense the two discourses are actually in direct conflict, as Ma's unrealized wish was to discover a pure and traditional Buddhist society, whereas the Tibetan critiques discussed elsewhere in this dissertation aimed to bring about the exact kind of modernization – be it socialist or capitalist – that Ma so despises.

Both of these Chinese- and Tibetan-language discourses are fundamentally ethnocentric. As I argued above, Ma Jian often blurs national and state lines, equating a discussion of social and political issues in Tibet with a discussion of the problems of *Zhongguo*. But Ma, like many Han traveler-writers, demonstrates little understanding of or concern with Tibetan society itself. By contrast, this is precisely what Tibetan writers were interested in: “Tibetan,” not “Han,” cultural issues. Tibetan critiques of Tibetan religion, social structures, and so on were made with the intention of revolutionizing the Tibetan cultural world; these were ethno-specific issues, not “Chinese” problems on a country-wide level.

And despite the shared qualities of these two discourses, it must also be stressed that they were never in direct conversation with one another. The likes of Döndrup Gyel and Zhokdung were certainly not drawing from texts such as *Stick Out Your Tongue* in their analyses of Tibetan society; Ma Jian, for his part, clearly had no awareness of these Tibetan intellectual and literary developments. In fact, the Tibetan language discourse described elsewhere in this dissertation was

(and still is) essentially unknown to the Chinese literary world. One of Wen Pulin's Tibetan travelogues offers a revealing point on this absence of exchange:

I believe that no matter what, the only ones who can truly give full expression to the deepest, most hidden aspects of this nationality [Tibetans], the most captivating, the most aesthetically beautiful aspects, are Tibetan writers themselves. I look forward enormously to them producing good work. Because, up until now, the work I have seen by [Chinese-language] Tibetan writers is basically all Sinicized (*Hanzuhua* 汉族化), with some that imitates [literature from] Latin America and the West with some Tibetan customs thrown in. As for the work of outsider authors, it's essentially one third hearsay, one third academic footnotes, and one third sentimental flights of fancy. Later on, we set up a prize to encourage Tibetan-language writing. I desperately long for Tibetans to write in their own language, and to truly present their inner worlds. We are all but fleeting passers-by. At most we produce some little personal emotional reflections, record some little personal impulses, little experiences, and that's it. I don't even dare claim to be a Tibetologist, much less an anthropologist. I don't have the nerve to use the life I experienced in Tibet as source material for literary writing. (Wen 2009a: 172-173)

Wen is absolutely correct that it must be Tibetan writers who first and foremost represent Tibet in literature. But while Wen is certainly well meaning here, what he doesn't realize is that, by the time his book was first published in 2000, modern Tibetan-language literature had already been flourishing for at least two decades. Still, his unflinchingly self-critical appraisal of Chinese-language Tibetan literature remains insightful on precisely this point of how the two worlds have passed each other by: "I've discovered that intellectuals in the east (*neidi*) know far more about the U.S. than they do about Tibet. When I said 'Tibet' to intellectuals in Nanjing and Shanghai, they knew nothing except for the impression that Tibet was a mystical place" (Wen 2009b: 220). The renowned Tibetan poet Jangbu is right to say that, of all the Han writers and artists who went to Tibet (he cites Ma Yuan, Chen Danqing, Ma Lihua, and Wen Pulin), "it is difficult to count any in this group who really rubbed shoulders with Tibetans apart from [the Chinese-language Tibetan writers] Tashi Dawa and Alai" (Chenaktshang 2008: 279).

Ma Jian's literary exchanges in Tibet were limited strictly to the realm of *Xizang wenxue* – the subset of Chinese-language literature about Tibet outlined at the beginning of this chapter. In Lhasa, he spends time with Ma Yuan (under the pseudonym “Mo Yuan” [Damgaard 2012: 167]) and discusses the question of “Tibetan literature” with a writer named “Liu Ren.” Ma asks him what he has gained from his years in Tibet, and Liu responds:

“I gained a lot. In the east (*neidi*) there's nothing to write about; it's all the contradictions of the Reform era and memoirs of the Cultural Revolution. Living here, I really have got a lot of creative material. Relations between man and man, man and spirits, the primitive and the civilized – so much. *Tibetan Literature (Xizang Wenxue)* is about to publish some of our work, and I think it might have a big influence. The journal's idea is to showcase Eastern Magical Realism.”

“Not a bad idea, but be sure not to form a group – that's how you lose individual style. There's no search for individual values whatsoever in Roots-seeking literature.” (Ma 2002a: 403-404)

“Liu Ren” is likely Liu Wei,⁶³ one of the leading figures of *Xizang wenxue* along with Ma Yuan. Both are major figures in Ma Lihua's foundational study of the field. Magical realism and the influence of Latin American writing was a central feature of *Xizang wenxue* as a genre (Zhang 1989: 440-442), and the issue mentioned by Liu is likely the sixth issue of 1985, a special feature on magical realist writing that both Ma (1998) and Feng (1989) highlight as a milestone of Chinese-language Tibetan literature (78-80; 469).⁶⁴ Ma's cultural contacts in Tibet were other Han writers of “Tibetan literature,” precisely the kind of authors decried by Jangbu for having minimal contact with actual Tibetans. The context of Ma and Liu's discussion is entirely that of mainland Chinese-language literature in the 1980s: Scar Literature, Magical Realism, Roots-seeking. It is an

⁶³ As Ma Jian uses a pseudonym for Ma Yuan, it is probable that Liu Ren is also a fictional alias. Ma mentions that Liu was a reporter who worked for the Tibet Autonomous Region radio station (Ma 2001: 295-296), which matches the real-life Liu Wei (Ma 1998: 121-123).

⁶⁴ This issue featured fiction by Liu Wei, Zhaxi Dawa, Sebo, Jin Zhiguo, and Li Qida 李启达. Liu's story was titled “An Unoiled Canvas” (*Mei shang youcaide huabu* 没上油彩的画布).

exchange on the subject of literature in Tibet in which little need is felt to consider the interests of Tibetans or Tibetan writers themselves.

In the contemporary era, Chinese- and Tibetan-language literatures have always talked past one another. Despite his extensive travels in Tibetan areas, Ma never mentions meeting any *Tibetan* writers of Tibetan literature. Ma goes through Xining (home of the journal *Light Rain*), heads south through Qinghai and into Gansu (passing near Chentsa [*Gcan tsha*], the birthplace of Döndrup Gyel), and goes on to Lhasa – all the epicenters of the Tibetan literary renaissance that was flourishing precisely at the time he was there. And yet, despite his quest for cultural novelty, he never describes any attempt to inquire or learn about Tibetan literary and intellectual activity in the modern era. He seeks only tradition, and even this he does not find. When Ma Jian was in Qinghai prior to his trip to Lhasa in 1985, Döndrup Gyel was likely in Beijing (where he studied and taught between 1978 and 1984) – the city that Ma had left to escape his feeling of oppression and discover creative inspiration. *Red Dust* ends with an unwittingly fitting image of the Chinese and Tibetan cultural worlds almost literally passing in opposite directions. As Ma boards the bus to leave Lhasa, a young man sits next to him:

He clutched his bundle – complete with washbasin and plimsolls – and stared straight ahead. Behind his ears there was dirt that hadn't been washed off. I asked: “Where are you going?”

With a bashful expression, he replied: “To the Central University of Nationalities in Beijing.”

“You're going to Beijing? You got into university? That's great! Beijing is a political and cultural center, very lively – you'll change a lot. I live in Beijing, on Nanxiao Street, number 53.” (Ma 2002a: 443)

The young Tibetan man was heading to Döndrup Gyel's alma mater, and like Döndrup Gyel, his trajectory was the exact opposite of Ma Jian's. Unfortunately for Ma, the opportunity to meaningfully engage with Tibet and its culture had long since passed him by.

3.6 Conclusion

Making Tibet and Tibetans a part of Chinese literature inevitably entailed a degree of intellectual violence, as it meant the forcible incorporation of Tibet into a modern literary tradition in which it had played no previous part and whose major traditions and discourses had developed along entirely separate paths. The actual political incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic over the 1950s and '60s was not immediately reflected in literature, and when it was, the process could hardly help but embody the tensions inherent in the shifting definitions of China's nation and state over the course of the 20th century. When Tibetans were written about under the umbrella of modern Chinese literature, Han Chinese writers displayed little interest in Tibetans themselves; in the work of Ma Jian and many others, Tibetans instead became subject to internal Orientalist depictions. But at the same time, writing about non-Han peoples, however they may be portrayed, was an equally valid way of reflecting on "Chinese" concerns, as the state had now been redefined as a multiethnic entity that incorporated Tibetans and other minorities.

The work of Ma Jian (and of many authors who have written about Tibet since) very rarely reflects any shared intellectual concerns with the work of Tibetan-language writers. Even when there are some overlaps between Ma Jian and certain prominent Tibetan writers – criticizing the role of Buddhism in Tibetan society, for example – they are essentially accidental, and do not constitute anything resembling a genuine cultural exchange. Ironically, writers such as Döndrup Gyel – who was working at the time of Ma's travels – and many others since, have demonstrated a profound interest in the intellectual figures and discourses that had been so pivotal in revolutionizing modern Chinese writing decades previously. Ma Jian's attempts to engage Chinese writing in a dialogue with Tibetan culture ended in failure, his work condemned by Tibetans and the Chinese government alike. As we will continue to see, the conversation that Tibetan writers undertook with Chinese literature was of a very different nature.

Chapter 4: Ralo, Ah Q, and the Problem of Tibetan National

Character

When Lu Xun's 鲁迅 "The True Story of Ah Q" (*A Q zhengzhuan* 阿 Q 正传, hereafter "Ah Q") was published in 1921-1922, it represented the high tide of Chinese literary inquiries into the nature and problems of nation. At the time of its writing, the intellectual environment of modern China bore little resemblance to that of Tibet, and the cultural storm created by Lu Xun's masterpiece did not affect the Land of Snows in the least. And yet "Ralo" (*Ra lo*), a Tibetan-language short story published in 1991, and a critical reaction to it that continues to this day, have transplanted one of the most influential discourses of modern Chinese literature into the wholly unfamiliar territory of contemporary Tibet. "Ralo" is one of the greatest works of fiction to have emerged from the new Tibetan literature that began in the years after the Cultural Revolution. Around this work there has crystallized an intellectual examination of potent questions about the deep-seated flaws of Tibetan society, culture, and nation – an examination, in other words, of national character. That this analysis mirrors the crisis that arose in response to Lu Xun's work is no coincidence, because many Tibetan critics have indeed interpreted Ralo as the Tibetan equivalent of Ah Q. But what happens when one literary tradition decides to interpret itself in the terms of another? What do Tibetans have to add to, or remove from, the Chinese discourse of national character in order for it to resonate with their own circumstances, and can it function unproblematically in the Tibetan context? And finally, how does the discourse of Tibetan national character change our perception of modern Chinese literary history, and the place of Tibetan literature within it?

This chapter investigates the critical discourse of national character that has grown up around "Ralo" and considers its implications for Tibetan literature in modern China. I begin by

looking at how Tibetan critics have established an equivalence between the two stories before moving on to examine the discursive environment and transcultural connections that produced a discourse of Tibetan national character in the context of modern China. I interrogate this discourse by considering the work of its most influential theorist, Dülha Gyel (Bdud lha rgyal), and demonstrate how his argument mirrors its Chinese predecessor by substituting Buddhism for Confucianism. I then critique the idea of Tibetan national character from two angles. Firstly, I present a reading of “Ralo” that situates the story not as an analysis of the defects of national character, but as a commentary on the failings of the state to address the social and economic needs of Tibetans – a reading I argue the story guides us to with its overt referencing of the proletarian hero Lei Feng 雷锋.

Secondly, I analyze the broader theoretical problems raised by this discourse. In order to create a viable discursive space in the political environment of contemporary China, Tibetan critics had to cut out any sense of the “state” from their iteration of national character (implicit in the Chinese equivalent), thereby rewriting national character into an exclusively ethno-national concept. At the same time, the original Chinese discourse had to be reinterpreted as referring solely to the national character of the Han Chinese. This move allowed Tibetans to craft their own iteration, an iteration that forced Tibetan literature into an engagement with its Chinese counterpart even as it unwittingly highlighted the vast gulf between the two.

“Ralo” has had an enormous impact in Tibetan literary and intellectual circles. The story’s author, Tsering Döndrup (Tshe ring don grub), was born in 1961 in Malho (rma lho, Ch.: Henan) Mongolian Autonomous County in Qinghai Province. He is one of modern Tibet’s most renowned writers, and up to the present has penned numerous short stories, novellas, and full-length novels. “Ralo” was first published as a short story in the literary magazine *Light Rain* (*sbrang char*) in

1991. Tsering Döndrup subsequently penned a sequel, which was added to the original and the two were published together as a novella in 1997. “Ralo” follows its eponymous nomad protagonist through a vagabond existence, documenting his failures in education, work, the monastic life, and marriage.

The narrative begins by establishing Ralo’s solitude: “since Ralo came into this world, his mother was the only family he’d ever known.” A stepfather soon enters his life, but has little love for the boy: he recoils in disgust from the “thick yellow snot” that comes from Ralo’s nose “like running water.” The snot, along with his short braid (“like a marmot’s tail”), is a constant feature of Ralo’s appearance, even after he becomes an adult. When Ralo’s mother passes away, he is sent off to a boarding school, where he initially performs well: “Everyone should learn from Ralo,” his teacher declares when Ralo memorizes the thirty Tibetan consonants before any of his classmates. Soon, however, his success turns to regression. When later asked to write the letters on the board, he cannot reproduce a single one, which leads to an inversion of the teacher’s initial advice, and a phrase that perpetually plagues him: “No one should learn from Ralo.” The narrative then brings us to the present day, where an older Ralo is at the criminal court to report the “theft” of his wife. He meets Döndrup, an old classmate and now a cadre at the court, who is revealed as our narrator. Before he helps Ralo with his case, Döndrup asks Ralo to recount what has happened to him in the intervening years, and the narrative continues.

Ralo is eventually expelled and, with no home to return to, he becomes a drifter. A family for whom he performs odd jobs takes him in as a *mag pa* (a husband who moves in with his wife’s family). Ralo eases into a life of laziness and the exasperated father marries off his daughter to somebody else. At the wedding, Ralo causes a scene and has his braid ripped out in a humiliating fight. The family drives him off as he madly proclaims the glory of his imagined aristocratic

heritage, snot dripping into his mouth all the while. Ralo then enters into a monastery, taking as his Dharma name “Chöying Drakpa.” Once again, his initial diligence quickly dissolves, and he begins to drink, smoke, and chase after girls in the nearby town. Later, Ralo sneaks off from the monastery and strikes up a relationship with another woman. Of course, it doesn’t take long for the “seeds of his laziness to bloom again” and she leaves Ralo for another man, at which point Ralo resorts to the courts. Ralo loses his case when it transpires that they were not legally married, and thus he learns the significance of so-called “marriage certificate.” Finally, Ralo meets another woman while out drinking and immediately suggests to her that they get married. She protests that she has a husband, but accedes when Ralo explains the legal workings of the marriage certificate. Their relationship blooms and Ralo begins to change his ways, but their marital bliss is abruptly interrupted when the police arrive to arrest his wife on a charge of bigamy.

Thus concludes the first part of “Ralo,” initially published in 1991. Though the second part, published in 1997, is significantly longer than the first, it has generally attracted less critical attention. Narratively, it is much more expansive than its predecessor, jumping between different times and locations and focusing on a variety of characters other than Ralo. The sequel begins with a metafictional intervention. Döndrup, the narrator, finds himself in jail after a colleague lodges a false accusation against him. There he reencounters Ralo, who is likewise in jail on trumped-up charges. Döndrup relates how he was asked by the editors of *Light Rain* to continue “Ralo,” so he makes use of this chance encounter to see the story through to its conclusion. Piece by piece, Ralo explains how he ended up in his present situation. Ralo had invited the revered Alak Drong to his home to perform religious services, and as the lama was leaving, Ralo complimented his horse. The idea of Ralo being honored by the lama’s visit was too much to bear for the others in

community, and when Alak Drong's horse went missing, they reported Ralo to the Public Security Bureau.

After describing life in the prison, the narrative flashes forward to relate a pilgrimage to Lhasa later undertaken by the narrator, Ralo, and their families (Ralo and his wife Dekyi have had a son, and Ralo also brings a decrepit stray dog, which he believes to be the reincarnation of his mother). In Lhasa, Döndrup's friend treats them to a meal, which becomes a source of great pride for Ralo ("I, Ralo, once ate a meal worth five hundred yuan!"). On the way to visit Samyé Monastery they encounter two Norwegian tourists who become fascinated by Ralo's "mother" (the dog) and are besotted by his son, Little Ralo. But on the drive home, tragedy strikes: as Ralo holds up his son so he can get a better view of the scenery, Little Ralo is decapitated by an oncoming truck. Back at the prison, Ralo is found guilty and sentenced to two years, but a newly arrived cellmate turns out to be the actual perpetrator of the crime. He owns up to the theft of Alak Drong's horse, Ralo is released, and the remainder of the story relays the events of his life following the Lhasa trip. Dekyi, driven to madness by the death of her son, commits suicide, and Ralo becomes reliant on the charity of his neighbors. He becomes close to one of these neighbors, Guru Kyi, and thoughts of marriage again form in his mind. Ralo gives the remainder of his property to her family in anticipation of their imminent wedding, only to discover that he was tricked, and that Guru Kyi has become a nun. In the end, Ralo dies alone and penniless. The sympathetic villagers light butter lamps in his memory, and, recovering the meager remains of his property, donate it all to the monastery.

4.1 Ralo, Ah Q, and the Tibetan National Character

Since its publication, Tsering Döndrup's story has been a subject of great interest to both Tibetan intellectuals and the reading public alike. As its author has remarked, the amount of critical

commentary attracted by “Ralo” is rare for an individual work in modern Tibetan literature, “given the usual serious lack of reviews in the Tibetan literary world” (Tshe ring don grub 2003: 91). It has been discussed in dozens of scholarly articles, studied in academic theses, translated into five languages,⁶⁵ adapted into radio plays, and has featured as the topic of TV programs. There are even cafés and restaurants in China’s Tibetan regions named after its eponymous “hero.”⁶⁶ In short, it is a work that has resonated deeply with Tibetan readers, and is rightly considered “one of the few classics in contemporary Tibetan literature” (Tshe ring don grub 2003: 92).

As an entry point to understanding the reasons for this attention and the crux of the critical response to the story, we may consider one of its most frequently remarked-upon traits: the focus on character over plot. The literary scholar Dülha Gyel is particularly clear on this point:

In the history of new Tibetan fiction, “Ralo” has an immense literary status. Compared to other works, either from before “Ralo” was published or in the time since, it has a unique or especially outstanding quality. That quality, speaking simply from an artistic point of view, is that the story places the nature of its character (*mi sna'i gshis ka*) first and foremost [...] (2010: 62)

The entire work, according to Dülha Gyel, is bound together by Ralo. There is nothing in the plot itself that causes the narrative to move from one scene to another; the action is driven solely by the logic of Ralo’s character. In his estimation, this attribute makes “Ralo” the first work in the history of new Tibetan fiction to focus centrally on the nature of its protagonist (2010: 66). This viewpoint is given further credence by the author himself, who has suggested that one of his

⁶⁵ Japanese, German, Mongolian, Chinese, and English. My English translation of the first part of “Ralo” was published in *Old Demons, New Deities: 21 Short Stories from Tibet* (Tshe ring don grub 2017). The complete story was published in my translated collection of his fiction, *The Handsome Monk and Other Stories* (Tshe ring don grub 2019)

⁶⁶ The author mentions one in Nagchu (TAR) and another in Ngawa (Sichuan) (Tshe ring don grub 2016). This unusual form of tribute is – perhaps not coincidentally – likewise bestowed on Lu Xun: there are numerous eateries named after Ah Q in contemporary China.

primary motivations in writing “Ralo” was to create a distinct or prominent literary character (*gshis ka 'bur du thon pa'i mi sna*) (Btsun po don 'grub 2014: 265).

This straightforward observation on literary innovation then leads us into the problem at the heart of this chapter: that the character so evocatively depicted in “Ralo” is not just any fictional character, but a fictional character that embodies the nature of Tibetans and epitomizes their plight in the modern world. To readers of Chinese literature, this will immediately call to mind the most famous character in China’s modern literary canon – and quite rightly so, as Tibetan critics have indeed interpreted Ralo as the Tibetan equivalent of Ah Q. The notion of focusing on character over plot lays the groundwork for many of these comparisons. In a thesis dedicated to comparing the two stories, Delek (Bde legs) identifies this prioritizing of literary character as a shared concern of both “Ralo” and “The True Story of Ah Q” (2010: 37). Elsewhere, Lu Xun’s own comments on the nature of literary creation are invoked in relation to “Ralo.” Yungdrung Gyel (G.yung drung rgyal) cites Lu Xun’s recommendation that a writer should strive to focus first on a character, and that this must come from joining the character to a larger social group. “Ralo,” he asserts, was written precisely according to Lu Xun’s method: the model for a character must “take a mouth from Zhejiang, a face from Beijing, clothes from Shanxi and stick them together into one role” (2010: 96; Lu Xun 2005: 4: 527).⁶⁷

Though not all responses to “Ralo” overtly reference “Ah Q,” critical appraisals of Tsering Döndrup’s story almost always exist under the long shadow cast by Lu Xun’s masterpiece. One of the principal ways this manifests itself is through the idea that Ralo is representative of Tibetans as a whole, and thus a distillation of the most concerning traits of the Tibetan character. He is referred to variously as a “typical character” (*dpe mtshon mi sna*) (G.yung drung rgyal 2010: 95),

⁶⁷ Döndrup Gyel also makes use of this same Lu Xun quote in an essay on the techniques of literary expression (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 166-167).

an “embodiment” (*spyi gzugs*) (Gdugs dkar tshe ring 2010: 120), and as a representative of the “consciousness” (*’du shes*) and “character” (*gshis rgyud*) of the nation (*mi rigs*) (Mgon po rnam rgyal 2012: 12). Dülha Gyel’s observation that the story’s uniqueness is in its privileging of character over plot does not mean that Ralo is an idiosyncratic figure; on the contrary, Ralo is not a specific individual, but a character with “widespread significance” who epitomizes “the character of society.” Therefore, he argues, “through the power of Ralo, we can find the shadow or the seed of our nationality wherever and whenever we look” (2010: 78).

From this point, it is a short step into the discourse of national character. The analytical progression from “character over plot” to “typical character” to “Tibetan national character,” which is the structure of several critiques (see Bsod nams rgyal 2013: 73-75; Phun tshogs blo gros 2013: 103), creates the necessary conditions for Ah Q to serve as Ralo’s theoretical proxy. A deeper connection can now be drawn between the two, since they are both construed as the “foremost representative characters of the dark side of a specific era” (Skya b+ha 2010: 257). Delek is particularly emphatic about the story’s connections to the work of Lu Xun. To him, both writers share a concern with the powerless, with those at the bottom rungs of the social ladder (2010: 6). But most of all, both Lu Xun and Tsering Döndrup use literature to “operate⁶⁸ on a backwards and sick character” while simultaneously pursuing “the ideal of fostering a healthy national character (*rgyal dmangs gshis ka*)” (9). Delek further calls upon the Jungian notion of the collective unconscious to establish a reading of Ralo as a pervasive symbol of Tibetan defects. This collective unconscious, which is formed of an “ethnic egomania” (*mi rigs rang rlom can*, Ch.

⁶⁸ *Gshag bcos*, a common term in discussions of the Tibetan national character that overtly evokes the language of its Chinese counterpart. As Liu remarks, “dissect” was “Lu Xun’s favorite verb,” part of a broader trope in modern Chinese literature that equated writing with a surgical tool used to penetrate an individual’s psychology and operate on the sick (Chinese) national body (Liu 1995: 50, 128).

minzu zikuang xing 民族自狂性) and an “ethnic centrism” (*mi rigs dkyil snying can*, Ch. *minzu ziwo zhongxin* 民族自我中心) (18-21), plays out in the text through Ralo’s deluded rants on the glory of his ancestry. In this way, Ralo becomes a product of a historical and cultural collective unconscious that affects all Tibetans alike (19-21). Like Ah Q, the story of Ralo as an individual becomes “the story of our people’s tragedy” (11).

To many critics, it is the “typical” (*dpe thub*, Ch. *dianxing* 典型) quality of Ralo’s character that allows him to stand in for others. Readers can substitute themselves for the protagonist, especially since his life runs the gamut of everyday Tibetan male occupations and experiences: he is a student, a *mag pa*, a monk, an occasional petty trader and laborer, a herdsman, and so on (Mkha' 'gro rgyal 2007: 31-32). This ability to see the protagonist in those around you, or the fear that you may in fact *be* the protagonist, was also a prominent feature of how intellectuals reacted to “Ah Q.” In an article published in 1926, later quoted by Lu Xun himself, Gao Yihan 高一涵 recalled that the publication of each episode was accompanied by widespread anxiety about who would be reprimanded next (Foster 2006: 191; Lu Xun 2005: 3: 396). This self-reflective function was likewise how Lu Xun envisioned his story:

My method was to make the readers suspect that the story could be about no one else but themselves, to make them unable to simply avoid this question and become bystanders. They would wonder if the story is describing them, describing every person, and this would break a new path for introspection. (Lu Xun 2005: 6: 150)

Dzesé (Mdzes se), a prominent essayist and translator of the Chinese version of “Ralo,” perceived in Tsering Döndrup’s story a similar potency: “people saw much of Ralo’s character (*xingge* 性格) in Tibetans in general; people felt that Ralo was by their side.” Like “Ah Q,” “Ralo” promoted introspection among its readers, as “many people, while they were reading it, reflected on both themselves and their nation (*minzu* 民族)” (Mdzes se 2016). Dzesé cemented this perceived textual

connection in the title of his translation. The title of the Tibetan original is simply the protagonist's name; to this he appended a *zhengzhuan* 正传, turning it into “The True Story of Ralo” (*Reluo zhengzhuan* 热洛正传), a direct equivalent of “The True Story of Ah Q” (*A Q zhengzhuan*) (Jiumei Duojie 2004: 196-237).⁶⁹

Almost all critical reactions to “Ralo” feature an exhaustive list of Ralo's personality traits. Concisely put, he is “weak and impotent, ignorant and stubborn, conservative and faint-hearted” (Mdzes se 2010: 59). At his core is a type of “misconception” (*phyin ci log pa*) (Bdud lha rgyal 2010: 70-71) or “false thinking” (*log par bsam pa*) (Mkha' 'gro rgyal 2007: 32) about life, which manifests itself in his backwards priorities. While the young Ralo's classmates are graduating without him, for instance, his only concern is having nowhere to go for the summer vacation and having no source of cigarettes when his classmates leave. Furthermore, Ralo lacks a basic understanding of the society in which he lives and the mechanisms that drive it, as indicated by the prolonged affair of the marriage certificate (Bdud lha rgyal 2010: 72-73). This “confused and comical” way of thinking is also identified as one of his many Ah Q-esque qualities (Bde legs 2010: 14-16). A number of critics have identified the types of “mentality” or “consciousness” that underpin his actions. A recurring theme is Ralo's “solitary” (*kher rkyang*) nature. From the very beginning of the text, his rapid transition from bastard to orphan sets a pattern in which “life shuts all doors on him” and “from every new opportunity [...] he emerges with his head bent and is left on his own,” so much so that he is not even able to muster the cold comfort of Ah Q's “spiritual victory” and instead faces “defeat” everywhere he turns (Gdugs dkar tshe ring 2010: 113-114). Another frequently cited defect is his inability to see things through to their conclusion (*mthar*

⁶⁹ A later Chinese version of the story by a different translator mirrored the Tibetan original by rendering the title simply as “Ralo” (*Ranluo* 然洛) (Tshe ring don grub 2013: 7-50).

'khyol). In other words, he takes up an occupation (school, marriage, the monastic life) and through the flaws of his own character ultimately fails to succeed in it (Bdud lha rgyal 2010: 68-70). Yungdrung Gyel argues that Ralo's many deplorable attributes – weakness, laziness, stupidity, and so on – “must indeed be taken from the example of Ah Q,” and he further suggests that we can hear echoes of Kong Yiji 孔乙己 in the proverbs and antiquated sayings Ralo is fond of using (2010: 97).

This reading of Tsering Döndrup's story is even reflected in Western scholarship. In her survey of Tibetan literary trends, *The Exotic Other and Negotiation of Tibetan Self* (2013), Kamila Hladíkova remarks that Tsering Döndrup, like Lu Xun, “uses his literature to teach people about the Tibetan ‘national character’” and that his penchant for biting satire makes him “closer to Lu Xun than any other Tibetophone writer” (124). This assertion is made with reference to “Ralo,” and like the Tibetan critics discussed above, it relies primarily on a comparative observation of his similarities with Ah Q (“He is simple, naïve, not only uneducated, but uneducable and uncivilized” [125]). Hladíkova's conclusion is entirely congruous with the dominant reading set forth in Tibetan scholarship: that Ralo, “just like Ah Q for the Chinese, represents the typical negative features of Tibetans” (125).

4.2 The Origins of Tibetan National Character

It is evident that a number of connections can be drawn between “Ralo” and “Ah Q.” On a surface level, there are many similarities between the stories, including several not mentioned by Tibetan critics. The very first line of each story is a declaration of the narrator's reluctance to tell the tale in the first place: “I have been wanting to write the story of Ah Q for a number of years now, but kept having second thoughts” (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 512); “Setting down this blank page before me to write the story of Ralo is not a pleasant task” (Tshe ring don grub 1997: 95). Both

Ah Q and Ralo are transient laborers (515; 102-103). Both come into money then lose it, and then go hungry from lack of work (518-519, 529; 116-118). Both have opaque family backgrounds but rant about the glory of their ancestry nonetheless (Ah Q: “My family was much richer than yours! Who the hell are you!” [512] Ralo: “Haha! Have you never heard of the royal genealogies of the Ralo family? I come from a line of kings and queens!” [105]). They face the same farcical humiliations in love (520; 109-110) and are equally tormented by desire (Ah Q: “Woman! Woman...” [524], Ralo: “*I really need to get a woman*” [169]), and ultimately, both Ah Q and Ralo are arrested for robberies they didn’t commit, perpetrated against figures of authority (the Zhaos and Alak Drong, respectively) (547; 129-130). When we place the illustrations that accompanied the original publication of “Ralo” alongside the ink and woodcut renderings of Ah Q by Fan Zeng 范曾 and Zhao Yannian 赵延年, even the physical appearances of the two characters – each sporting his trademark braid (or queue) and a dull-witted expression – are strikingly similar.

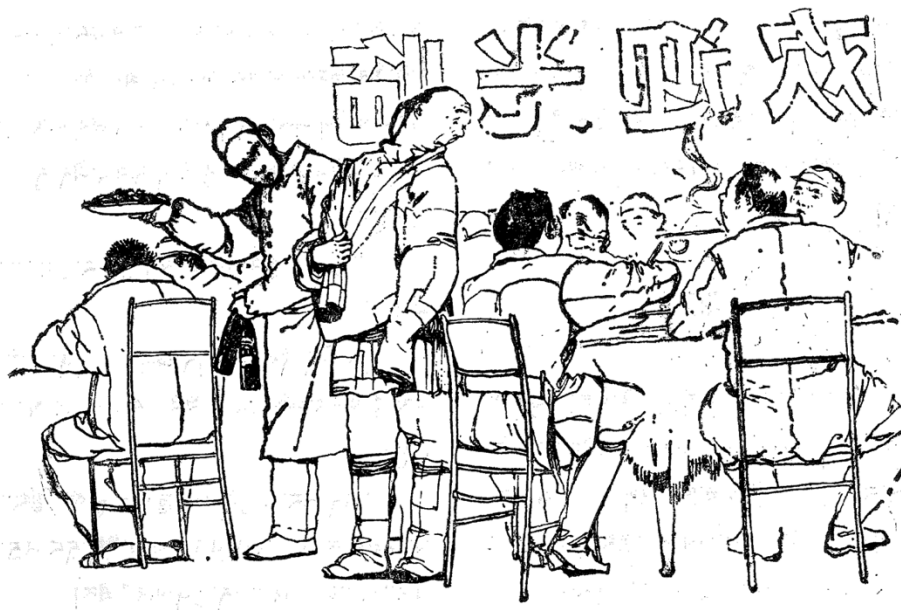


Figure 2: Illustration of Ralo from the story’s original publication in *Light Rain* (Tshe ring don grub 1991).



Figure 3: Illustration of Ralo from the story's original publication in *Light Rain* (Tshe ring don grub 1991).



Figure 4: Woodcut rendition of Ah Q by Zhao Yannian (Zhao 2010).

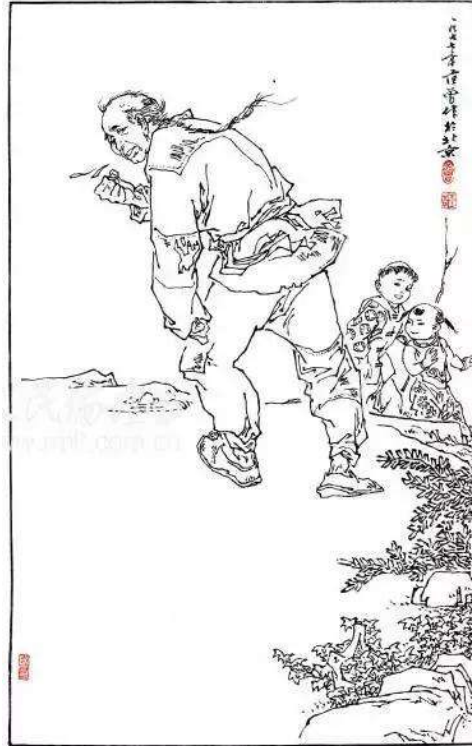


Figure 5: Ink drawing of Ah Q by Fan Zeng (Lu Xun 2017).

But are there more compelling reasons beyond similarities in the texts themselves to explain why comparisons between the two arose? Are there tangible connections between Lu Xun and Tsering Döndrup as authors? Tsering Döndrup is, in fact, open about his admiration for Lu Xun and his works. Like many students who received a formal education in China, he first encountered Lu Xun in the classroom (Tshe ring don grub 2016). Dzesé, “Ralo’s” Chinese translator, likewise read Lu Xun’s essays (*sanwen* 散文) in the standard textbooks of middle school language and literature classes (*yuwen ke* 语文课) (Mdzes se 2016). It is worth noting that, from the Tibetan side, modern Tibetan literature’s interaction with its Chinese counterpart has not necessarily needed to come through translation. Modern Tibetan literature in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has always existed in an era when spoken and written Chinese have been enforced as the dominant media of education and employment, meaning that most Tibetan writers and

intellectuals are subject to a condition of “‘necessary’ bilingualism” (Maconi 2008: 182), and should they wish to read literature written in Chinese, they can read it in the original.⁷⁰ Chinese writing has, furthermore, provided a bridge to global literary and intellectual currents through translations of world literature, which are sorely lacking in the Tibetan language (Stoddard 1994: 154; Maconi 2008: 182). To some extent we might say that Chinese has performed a similar function for Tibetan writers as Japanese did for intellectuals of the May Fourth era, albeit with the fundamentally important caveat that May Fourth intellectuals such as Lu Xun knew Japanese through voluntary study.

Tsering Döndrup is very aware of the debate that his literary creation has stimulated. Reflecting on the reception of his story, he writes that some readers “think *Ralo* is an imitation of ‘The true story of Ah Q,’ while some other people think *Ralo* mirrors the naked soul of a Tibetan, that is, all the evil habits of the Tibetan people are embodied in the personage *Ralo*” (2003: 92). The operative phrase is “some people”: although Tsering Döndrup is a great admirer of Lu Xun and says that he has read “Ah Q” more than any other work of Chinese fiction (Btsun po don 'grub 2014: 265-266), he is reluctant to accept direct equivalences drawn between Ah Q and his own character (Tshe ring don grub 2016). Tsering Döndrup’s influences derive from many sources, not least from Tibet’s own rich literary traditions. It is impossible, he has stated, for a modern Tibetan writer not to read Tibetan literature, and he has cited the influence of numerous Tibetan classics,

⁷⁰ Maconi argues that diglossia, the coexistence of Chinese and Tibetan with the latter forced into a subordinate status, is a defining feature of contemporary Tibetan society in the PRC (Maconi 2008: 174-176). In general, illiteracy rates in many Tibetan areas are extremely high. In the early 2000s, illiteracy in the Tibet Autonomous Region was between 42% and 45%, compared to a national average of 11%, a situation compounded by the fact that many Tibetans struggle to get access to Tibetan-language education (TIN 2001; Hartley & Schiaffini-Vedani 2008: xxiv-xxv). For Tibetan literature, this means that there is “a relatively small population of potential readers for Tibetan literary works and an even smaller pool of potential writers” (Hartley & Schiaffini-Vedani 2008: xxv). For those who have been able to receive an education in Tibetan sufficient for them to compose literary works, it is highly likely that they will have been exposed to Chinese either through bilingual education, through their jobs in state institutions (as editors, for example), or both, as was the case for Tsering Döndrup.

including *The Tale of the Incomparable Prince* (*Gzhon nu zla med kyi gtam rgyud*), *The Epic of Gesar* (*Ge sar rgyal po'i grung*), and the works of Milarepa and Shabkar (Btsun po don 'grub 2014: 256).⁷¹ This point is reinforced by Lama Jabb's work (2015a) on the continuities between premodern and modern Tibetan literatures, which amply demonstrates Tsering Döndrup's debt to traditional oral sources (69-83, 91-128). Moreover, Tsering Döndrup is right to suggest that, for all their potential similarities, Ralo and Ah Q have many fundamental differences (Tshe ring don grub 2016). An important observation to draw from this is that the debate over Tibetan national character was solely a product of critical reactions to the initial work. The author himself has remained ambivalent about this analysis and has largely declined to engage with it, a contrast to Lu Xun, who often discussed the concept of national character (including in relation to his own story).

Beyond the fiction of Lu Xun and the classics of Tibetan literature, Tsering Döndrup has pointed to the works of 19th century Russian writers (which he read in Chinese translation) as being of great significance to him. He holds Gogol's *Dead Souls* in particularly high regard and has written a commentary on the novel in Chinese (Btsun po don 'grub 2014: 257). Above all, it was the figure of the "superfluous man" that occupied Tsering Döndrup's thoughts at the time of writing "Ralo." The superfluous man novel, which depicts the idle existence and roguish adventures of the Russian upper classes in the mid-19th century, had a major influence on Tsering Döndrup's writing through two classics of the genre: Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* and Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (Tshe ring don grub 2016). Despite their vast differences in wealth and social status (among many other things), the spiritual connection between Ralo and these characters is indeed apparent. Oblomov, a man who can barely get out of bed to compose a

⁷¹ There are various English translations of these exemplary works: Tshe ring dbang rgyal (1996); *The Epic of Gesar* (2012); Tsangnyön Heruka (2010); Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol (2001).

letter, certainly resonates with Ralo in his indifferent lethargy and his aimless drifting. At the end of Goncharov's novel, Oblomov comes to ruin through the self-imposed disease of "Oblomovitis" (485), a clear forerunner of the "old affliction" (*nad rnying*) (1997: 132) that incessantly plagues Ralo.

While the influence of classical Tibetan literature on Tsering Döndrup's work may temper an overemphasis on the connections between "Ralo" and "Ah Q," the same cannot be said for these works of 19th century Russian literature. On the contrary, the Russian texts cited by Tsering Döndrup all have profound connections to Lu Xun's writing and serve to create a complex transcultural bond spanning Russian, Chinese, and Tibetan fiction. Lu Xun was an avid admirer of Lermontov and Gogol, even borrowing from the latter the title for "Diary of a Madman" (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记) (Lee 2002: 188; Semanov 1980: 21). Lu Xun translated *Dead Souls* into Chinese from its German edition (Sun 2015: 119) and (like Tsering Döndrup) wrote commentaries on the novel (Lu Xun 2005: 10: 453-456; 6: 460-462), while his brother, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, detected Gogol's humor and critical spirit in Lu Xun's fiction (Sun 2015: 118). In the 1920s, the renowned writers Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎 and Mao Dun 茅盾 both compared Ah Q to Oblomov (Foster 2006: 179, 192), the character Tsering Döndrup cites as his most direct inspiration for Ralo. As was the case for Ah Q – and, later, Ralo – the characters of these novels came to be seen as somehow typical or universal. Like Lu Xun, Gogol provided influential readings of his own creation. Chichikov, the protagonist of *Dead Souls*, was described by Gogol (2008) as "a type to show forth the vices and the failings, rather than the merits and the virtues, of the commonplace Russian individual"; a literary character whose function was to illustrate "our national weaknesses and shortcomings."

Rather than distancing Tsering Döndrup from Lu Xun, the literary ties between Ralo and his Russian precedents thus serve to strengthen the “Ah Q” connection. In terms of the discourse of Tibetan national character, these linkages also allow critics to present the idea of national character as a transcultural phenomenon of world literature and a prerequisite of discrete national literary traditions. Dukkar Tsering (2010) points to this with a rhetorical question about the three national traditions: “If Gogol’s *Dead Souls* represents the working classes of Czarist Russia in the 19th century and Lu Xun’s ‘The True Story of Ah Q’ represents the peasant masses of China at the start of the 20th century, then what does ‘Ralo’ represent for the Land of Snows at the end of the 20th century?” (111). By placing “Ralo” alongside “Ah Q” and these works of Russian literature, this reading allows Tibetan literature to join the ranks of modern national literatures by providing its own iteration of literary national character.

When we consider the discursive environment in China at the time that Tsering Döndrup – and more pertinently, the theorists of Tibetan national character – were publishing, a clearer answer emerges to the question of why a discourse on Tibetan national character occurred when it did. By the 1980s, discussion of the Chinese national character had lain dormant for years, but the initial decades of the post-Mao era witnessed an enormous revival of interest in the subject. In 1981 there were numerous academic conferences centering around Lu Xun and the national character, culminating in Bao Jing’s 鲍晶 1982 volume *Collected Discussions of Lu Xun’s “National Character Thought”* (*Lu Xun “guominxing sixiang” taolun ji* 鲁迅 ‘国民思想’ 讨论集) (Foster 2006: 4). Jing Tsu (2005) highlights a range of major publications on the topic of national character that appeared over the course of the 1980s, including Ouyang Lun’s 欧阳仑 *The*

*Chinese Character*⁷² (*Zhongguoren de xingge* 中国人的性格, 1989), while the 1990s witnessed new translations of Arthur Smith’s *Chinese Characteristics* in addition to numerous other volumes such as *Worries Over the National Character* (*guomin suzhi yousilu* 国民素质忧思录, 1998) and *Reflecting on the Chinese* (*fanxing Zhongguoren* 反省中国人, 1999) (232 [nn21, 22]). By this point, Foster notes that Ah Q discourse had become so pervasive that it had moved beyond the academy and “entered the popular consciousness” (2006: 4). Ah Q was once again at the forefront of the Chinese literary and intellectual sphere both when “Ralo” was released in 1991 and when Dülha Gyel’s work on the Tibetan national character was first published in 2001. Rather than say that Tibetan intellectuals reached back to the 1920s in adapting this discourse, it is therefore more accurate to say that it was resurrected in Chinese intellectual circles and from there further transplanted into the Tibetan context.

Perhaps the two most prominent cultural phenomena to emerge from this renewed interest in national character were the 1988 television series *River Elegy* (*Heshang* 河殇), which stoked controversy with its sweeping critique of the decline of Chinese civilization, and Bo Yang’s 柏杨 *The Ugly Chinaman* (*Choulou de Zhongguoren* 丑陋的中国人), which likewise sparked heated debate in the late 1980s.⁷³ The popularity of the latter text is cited specifically by Dülha Gyel (2016) as an influence on the nascent discourse of Tibetan national character, most notably in that it inspired a Tibetan version – *The Ugly Tibetan* (*Choulou de Zangzuren* 丑陋的藏族人) – penned

⁷² This text in particular is cited by Chökyong, one of the pioneers of “Rangdröl research” discussed in Chapter Two (Chos skyong 2006: 334).

⁷³ Bo Yang still situates his critique as being in the tradition of May Fourth iconoclasm and refers specifically to Lu Xun and Ah Q (1992: 49, 85). His interlocutors likewise invoke Lu Xun, including his translator, who compares Bo Yang’s essays (*zawen* 杂文) to those of Lu Xun (xi). Bo Yang’s blunt thesis retreads early 20th century anti-Confucian discourses, conceiving of China as a “soy paste vat” of conservative traditions and the Chinese national character as deformed and backwards.

by a professor at the Southwest University for Nationalities and circulated informally.⁷⁴ The discussion of these questions was, Dülha Gyel recalls, especially fervent among Tibetan university students in the 1980s, and he argues that the work of Döndrup Gyel (Don grub rgyal) paved the way for these critiques (2016). Dülha Gyel himself was writing his analysis of “Ralo” in the wake of Zhokdung’s (Zhogs dung) infamous 1999 article on Tibetan defects that heralded a new wave of intellectual attacks on Tibetan tradition (discussed in Chapter Five), a cultural movement in which Dülha Gyel played a prominent role. “Ralo” and its later critiques were planted in fertile soil: extensive debates over national character were being held in both Chinese and Tibetan intellectual circles prior to the emergence of both. Like “Ah Q,” “Ralo” did not initiate the concept of national character, but nevertheless came to be seen as its quintessential manifestation.

These are some of the most significant historical and intertextual connections underpinning the intellectual crisis precipitated by “Ralo.” Fundamentally, however, the discourse of Tibetan national character must always come back to Lu Xun. Despite the reservations of the author, Tibetan commentaries on “Ralo” are explicit in connecting it either to Lu Xun’s work, to some notion of Ralo being a representative national character, or both. Ultimately, without the existence of “Ah Q” and the Chinese debate over national character, there would almost certainly be no such debate in Tibetan. “Ralo” could be read in many different ways, but the fact that the overwhelming majority of intellectual responses to “Ralo” are framed in these terms shows us that, more than anything else, “Ah Q” and the Chinese discourse of national character have provided the interpretive model used to understand and discuss Tsering Döndrup’s story.

⁷⁴ The limited availability of this particular text puts a question mark over the extent of its influence. However, the subject of “the ugly Tibetan” continues to be a topic of contentious discussion online. The influence of Bo Yang’s book was not limited to Tibetans, either: in 2005 the Korean-Chinese author Jin Wenxue 金文学 released *The Ugly Korean* (*Choulou de Hanguoren* 丑陋的韩国人), an analysis of the defects of the Korean national character (Jin 2005). Bo Yang’s text itself is the product of translingual exchanges, having been inspired by *The Ugly American* and *The Ugly Japanese* (Bo Yang 1992: 3).

4.3 Rewriting National Character

Comparisons between “Ah Q” and “Ralo” began shortly after the latter’s publication,⁷⁵ but the origins of this intellectual discourse can largely be traced to one source in particular: Dülha Gyel’s article “Ralo – The Embodiment of Tibetan Consciousness” (*Bod mi'i rnam shes kyi rang gzugs – ra lo*). First published in the Academic Journal of the Northwest University for Nationalities in 2001, this critique remains the most elaborate and influential exploration of the problem of Tibetan national character.⁷⁶ As its author expressed to me, to all intents and purposes the discourse of Ralo and the Tibetan national character stems from this initial commentary (Bdud lha rgyal 2016). After laying out his analysis of Ralo’s various emblematic defects, Dülha Gyel boils the issue down to an essential underlying problem, which he calls the “base and the root” of Ralo’s character: his lack of “self-consciousness” (*rang gi 'dzin pa*, Ch. *ziwo yishi* 自我意识) and lack of “subjective consciousness” (*yul can pa'i 'dzin pa*, Ch. *zhuti yishi* 主体意识) (Bdud lha rgyal 2010: 75). Ralo is completely incapable of analyzing his own situation, thus every event in his life seems to be driven by karma, and without an understanding of the mechanisms at play in the world around him, he has no hope of developing or advancing in society. This absence of self- or subjective-consciousness did not occur spontaneously, or recently, Dülha Gyel argues; it is rather the result of how Tibetan society and culture have developed over the course of hundreds of years.

⁷⁵ Dzesé’s Chinese translation of “Ralo,” which references “Ah Q” in its title, was completed in 1994, three years after the story’s initial publication (Jiumei Duoje 2004: 210).

⁷⁶ In his status as a professor at the Northwest University for Nationalities, Dülha Gyel has also played a major role in disseminating new thought to Tibetan students alongside Zhokdung and other radical intellectuals (see Chapter Five). His followers have even been called “the demon children of Dülha Gyel” (*Bdud lha rgyal gyi bdud phrug*) by culturally conservative Tibetan students (a pun on his name, *Dü* or *Bdud* literally meaning “demon” or “evil”) (Wu 2013: 237).

But what caused Tibetan culture to be this way? Dülha Gyel identifies two interlinked factors in his effort to unearth the roots of this crisis. The first is the “lower” aspect of Tibetan society, which is to say the lifestyle and culture produced by its agricultural economy. The second, and, for our purposes, more significant factor, is Buddhism. For a civilization that has been so heavily defined by its religion, it is hardly surprising that this must come into play when discussing the concept of a Tibetan national character, and indeed Dülha Gyel treats Buddhism as the thread that binds everything together:

All nationalities have a certain character or “consciousness,” and there is a reason for this. That is, as cultural anthropologists say, the fact that “people create culture, and people are a product of culture.” Therefore, whether we are analyzing Ralo’s character or the basis of Ralo’s character, or whether we are analyzing the Tibetan character or consciousness, in order to examine their root causes, one must grasp the culture of the Tibetan people. When discussing the culture of the Tibetan people, it is impossible to avoid Buddhism. It goes without saying that it is the basis of the views on life, values, aesthetics and so on held by us Tibetans. Indeed, this character has a direct connection to Buddhism and above all to its doctrines. (83-84)

To Dülha Gyel, the fundamental issues with the Tibetan national character are the inevitable product of one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism: the principle of inherent non-existence (*rang bzhin gyis ma grub*) or emptiness (*stong ba nyid*). It is the principle of emptiness that is responsible for Tibetans’ inability to establish a concept of “self” or a notion of “self-consciousness.” If all is empty – including, or rather especially, the self – how can Tibetans form self-consciousness? Since Buddhism rejects both the self and the illusory nature of the mundane world, Tibetan civilization has developed a culture of renunciation that scorns investment in material pursuits. The problem of emptiness in Dülha Gyel’s analysis thus becomes a problem of not facing reality: if the goal is tangible social progress, then a belief in emptiness becomes a major impediment, as it rejects the benefits of worldly gain (Bdud lha rgyal 2016). The paradigm established by Dülha Gyel has proved influential: Delek, among others, has likewise read Ralo’s

faults as being caused by Buddhist principles such as the karmic law of cause and effect (2010: 25-28, 44-45).

Placing Buddhism center stage in the discourse on Tibetan national character is an almost inevitable result of interpreting modern Tibetan literature according to the parameters of its perceived Chinese equivalent. The defects of the Chinese national character – conservatism, obedience (or servility), reverence for the past and senior generations, male dominance – were largely identified as problems created by Confucian philosophy, and Confucianism as a system of thought and means of social governance was therefore charged with responsibility for China’s national crisis. For the discourse of national character to make sense in the Tibetan context, a monolithic and oppressive system of thought had to be found that could stand in place of Confucianism, which has played no part in the development of Tibetan civilization. For Tibetans, this could be nothing but Buddhism. If the problems of the Chinese national character were primarily problems relating to the philosophical and social principles of Confucian doctrine, then these had to be replaced in the Tibetan context with the philosophical and social principles of Buddhist doctrine. Delek’s thesis, for instance, pays close attention to the many differences between the eras, societies, and cultures in which Ralo, Ah Q, and their respective authors lived, but fundamentally these two works emerge as expressions of the same root problems that have manifested in different ways. In other words, the Tibetan national character may have its own idiosyncrasies, but it is still a form of national character – the logic and viability of the original concept is left unchallenged. “Ah Q” and the intellectual criteria according to which it was received remain the operative point of reference for “Ralo,” leading Tibetan critics to demand that Tsering Döndrup’s work perform the same function as Lu Xun’s: to demonstrate that Tibetans have a national character, that this character is flawed, and that it must be fixed.

The extent to which the concept of national character was adopted as a template, an empty container that could be filled with new contents, becomes even more pronounced when we consider Lu Xun's attitudes towards Buddhism. In "Ah Q," Buddhism is treated only briefly in the form of the Little Nun and the convent to which she belongs. If anything, the Buddhists in the story are the victims, first of Ah Q, and later of the revolutionaries. In the third chapter, "A Further Account of Ah Q's Victories," Ah Q is humiliated by beatings at the hands of Whiskers Wang and the Fake Foreign Devil. Having failed to find an opponent he is able to overcome, he consoles himself by harassing the helpless and meek figure of the Little Nun, rubbing her head and making lewd insinuations (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 522-523). Ah Q later steals some vegetables from the convent's vegetable patch (531-532), then returns one last time to gleefully bring the revolution to the nuns, only to discover that the Foreign Devil and the *Xiucan* Scholar have beaten him to it. The "revolutionizing" they carried out there consisted of destroying a tablet with the inscription of "Long Live the Emperor," beating the elderly nun who tried to remonstrate with them, and making off with a valuable incense burner (541-542).

None of this strikes the reader as possessing any particular critical intent towards Buddhist philosophy or Buddhist institutions, and indeed, attacking Buddhism was never high on the agenda of the critique of national character anyway.⁷⁷ However, if we see this in the light of other approaches to Buddhism in Lu Xun's work, it may bear more significance. In his influential early essay "Toward a Refutation of Malevolent Voices" (*Po e sheng lun* 破恶声论, 1908), Lu Xun takes aim at those who "clad themselves in scientific jargon about elements and cells like armor" and thereby seek to "deprive others of their faith" (Lu Xun 2005: 8: 31; trans. Lu Xun 2011: 52).

⁷⁷ One exception to this is Hu Shi 胡适, who on occasion did indeed charge Buddhism with having had a harmful influence on Chinese civilization (Lin 1972: 53-54).

The most “despicable” of all are those who “take the destruction of Buddhist temples as their sacred mission” (31; 52). Not unlike the *Xiucan* Scholar and the Foreign Devil, these are proponents of the “eradication of superstition” who smash idols and convert temples into modern schools. Lu Xun offers an unequivocal judgement of such people, as well as the place of Buddhism in Chinese society:

The value of Buddhism is universally accepted by all persons of insight, so what grievance could they possibly nurture against Cathay that would put them into such a rush to eradicate its doctrines from our soil? Before we seek to assert that Buddhism has made no contribution to the populace, we should first reflect upon the decline of their moral character, and realize that if we want to save them, instead of trying to destroy Buddhism, we should hasten to spread it. (31; 52)

Lydia Liu’s (2009) reading of “Prayers for Blessing” (*zhufu* 祝福, also known in English as “New Year’s Sacrifice”) pushes this aspect of Lu Xun’s thinking even further by demonstrating that he displayed a serious interest in Buddhist theology as a critically productive mode of thinking. The story pits the apparent superstition of Xianglin’s Wife against the voice of scientific reason in the guise of the intellectual narrator. Liu argues that Lu Xun adapted the character of Xianglin’s Wife from the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* (46-49) in order to stage a fictional encounter between science and metaphysics that ultimately undermines the certainty of the narrator’s rationalist convictions. Lu Xun, while not a Buddhist, held a lifelong interest in Buddhism. And so, it seems, in sharp contrast to the rational facing of reality advocated by the analysts of Tibetan national character, the flag bearing critic of its Chinese counterpart was in fact more interested in the “place for death, silence, and shadows” (49) reserved in religion and literature. In this sense, in order to make the idea of national character fit the Tibetan context, readings of “Ralo” as a condemnation of Buddhist ideology actually upend some of Lu Xun’s most closely held convictions.

Despite Lu Xun's interest in Buddhism and skepticism towards scientism, Tibetan readings of national character have condemned the former while lauding the latter. As a rule, the Tibetan discourse of national character has emphasized what we might call a more traditional understanding of late Qing and May Fourth intellectual currents: namely, social criticism, iconoclasm, and the general promotion of an idea of modern, progressive, rational beliefs over the perceived failings of traditional, conservative, and superstitious (or religious) thinking. At the heart of this reading lies the resurgence of a social theory that drove many of the fundamental debates of early modern China, including the debate on national character: social Darwinism. In the same way that Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 advocated "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" over "Mr. Confucius," Dülha Gyel supplements his critique of the failings of Buddhist thinking by lamenting the absence of economic and scientific development in Tibetan society. In stark contrast to the outsider's romanticized perceptions of Tibet, he contends that "wherever one travels in the Land of Snows, we reach only one ultimate conclusion: destitution (*med phongs*)" (Bdud lha rgyal 2010: 79-80). To address deficiencies in material advancement, he urges radical changes in thought, and above all in education:

We should have an introspective attitude towards traditional culture. Whether it's the living environment or the living standards of Tibetans, these things have to change. This cannot be denied. If we want to change this situation, then we must adopt new thinking or new knowledge. Look at Tibetan universities now – all people study is language and literature, language and literature, language and literature. If society is to develop, then we must have new knowledge: industry, science, engineering – things that are closely connected to our survival. We need to study these disciplines, and moreover the concepts of these disciplines. Nowadays our academics don't talk about this type of thinking and they rarely face these practical problems. [...] Many [Han people] study these practical disciplines, and the majors that are popular with their students are all closely connected to their own livelihood. [...] Tibetans don't study science and engineering. They want to study philosophy and Buddhism. (Bdud lha rgyal 2016)

Dülha Gyel's views build on the ideology of scientism and materialist progress laid out by Döndrup Gyel in the early 1980s and are aligned with the arguments set forth by Zhokdung and other intellectuals in the 2000s, a group of which he was a part. In his view, the sense of crisis and the imperative to develop felt by Tibetan intellectuals of the 1980s was comparable to the sense of crisis in Lu Xun's time (Bdud lha rgyal 2016), and in Ralo this crisis was refined to its essence. Tibetans in the modern era, he argues, still "have extremely little awareness of our own and our nation's real problems and real needs. For this reason, we too, like Ralo, exist in an undetermined state without clear goals in life" (Bdud lha rgyal 2010: 83).

This leads us to the ultimate emergency of the survival of the fittest principle: the threat of the extinction of the Tibetans as a people. This is a crisis of national survival (*minzu shengcun weiji* 民族生存危机) (Bdud lha rgyal 2016), and Dülha Gyel's warning on its consequences is stark: if Tibetans continue along their current path, they "will gradually be driven to the lowest ranks of the world and become 'the marginalized of the marginalized'" (Bdud lha rgyal 2010: 88). Dülha Gyel's concerns would by no means be out of place if transferred to late Qing or early Republican China, when social Darwinist ideas raised the threat of racial/national extinction (Karl 2002: 32-38). Unlike the Chinese fear of loss of the state (*wangguo* 亡国), however, the social Darwinist national crisis in the Tibetan context is solely one of *mi rigs/minzu* (nation[ality], ethnicity) – the idea that Tibetans, as a people, could perish, even while being *within* an already strong state. Dülha Gyel thus ends his article on "Ralo" with an appeal aimed at resolving this national crisis:

In conclusion, the progress of the Tibetan people depends on the members of the Tibetan nation – each individual Tibetan him/herself. As this is also ultimately reliant on the quality of the Tibetan people, in order to elevate the quality of our own nation we must discard the Ralo-like character that we formerly possessed and seek to foster self-consciousness and subjective consciousness, which is the impetus and foundation of progress. (2010: 89)

4.4 Ralo the Proletarian

The very act of taking intellectual models from late Qing and early Republican China and applying them to modern day Tibet is rife with complex and pointed implications. The temporal transfer of literary problems believed (or hoped) to be past their relevance is a phenomenon that has also concerned Chinese thinkers throughout the 20th century. As early as 1928 the Marxist critic Qian Xingcun 钱杏村 was eager to declare the era of Ah Q a thing of the past, a literary model no longer relevant in a society where peasants had made great forward strides in political consciousness (Qian 1996: 276-288). Most notably, in 1942 Mao Zedong 毛泽东 directly addressed the question of Lu Xun's writing style being used in the new society in his formative "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (*Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua* 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话). Responding to the assertion that Lu Xun's style of essay writing was still needed, Mao stressed the different nature of his era, as "Lu Xun lived under the rule of the forces of darkness, where there was no freedom of speech, and it was therefore absolutely correct of Lu Xun to use the essay form, with its cold ridicule and burning satire, to do battle." His conclusion was that, under the current regime of democratic freedom, satire had to be handled with careful attention to how it was constructed and at whom it was aimed (McDougall 1980: 80-81). Despite these objections, the ghost of Ah Q continued and continues to haunt Chinese literature, with works of "Ah Q progeny" springing up in the 1980s and 1990s, some of which even used Ah Q as an allegorical critique of Mao himself (Foster 2006: 302-319).

The differences between the May Fourth era and 1980s China by no means go unnoticed in commentaries on "Ralo." Delek echoes Mao Zedong's argument by clarifying that the social environments of the two characters are not at all similar, in part because Ah Q lived in the pre-liberation, semi-feudal era of "invasion by foreign enemies and the oppression of internal

dictatorships,” a “dark age” of “servility and defeat, conservatism and obstinacy, cowardice and transformations, corruption and fratricide” (2010: 18, 23). Ralo, by contrast, lives not only in the socially liberated New China, but also the economic opportunity-laden China of the reform era. So what are we to conclude when it turns out that Ah Q is alive and well in the supposedly different social and economic context of 1980s China, living in the guise of a Tibetan nomad?

Part two of “Ralo” in fact begins with a real-life anecdote drawn from Tsering Döndrup’s own experience⁷⁸ in which the editors of *Light Rain* express their hope that the author can turn Ralo into “a successful entrepreneur or a wealthy businessman.” Needless to say, the author/narrator deems this preposterous, as there is no chance that even the “spring wind of Reform and Opening up” could turn Ralo into some kind of model capitalist (1997: 124-125). According to Delek, the great changes of the reform era simply pass Ralo by and have no relevance to his life: despite the fact that the period after the fall of the Gang of Four was a time in which the country returned to the safe, stable and all-encompassing rule of law, this makes no difference to Ralo, because “while his body is in the new society, his mind still cannot escape from the backwardness and darkness of a closed (*kha rub*) society” (2010: 16-17). Ralo’s failures thus continue to be read as the inescapable and perpetual result of the failings of his character. To the critic Yungdrung Gyel, the fact that Ralo is still a failure in these surroundings makes him even more wretched than his Chinese equivalent. Ah Q is “an oppressed person, an impoverished beggar beset by a mentality of ‘spiritual victory’ whose social status is so low that he doesn’t even have the right to use the name ‘Zhao,’” whereas Ralo enjoys “the freedom to become a monk and the freedom to be a layman” (2010: 97-98). In these readings, Ralo becomes the target of further censure for his failure to take advantage of the social and economic opportunities provided by both

⁷⁸ Personal communication from the author.

socialist and postsocialist societies – in other words, he is both a bad communist and a bad capitalist.

The logic of national character dictates that Ralo's failings are the result of his character, which in turn is the product of underlying civilizational maladies. But here we encounter a troubling contradiction: how can Ralo, a proletarian Tibetan reflection of Ah Q, exist in a revolutionary society that has dedicated itself to fighting imperialism, ending class inequality, and upholding the political interests and material wellbeing of the disenfranchised masses? Tibetan critics are right to point out that Ralo does not live in the era of Ah Q, but this draws our attention to the society that he does live in. The Ralo-Ah Q parallel lays the blame for the economic and social plight of contemporary Tibetans at the feet of a Tibetan "character" shaped by the social structures and philosophical systems of Tibetan civilization, but can Tibetan "character" be responsible for poverty, especially when there is a powerful and centralized government that meticulously plans economic development on Tibetans' behalf?

This becomes an even more pertinent question when we consider the extent to which narratives of economic development have played a central role in recent state discourse on Tibet. Despite the trumpeting of efforts to raise Tibetans' living standards through investment in infrastructure and social services, Tibetan areas of China remain among the country's most drastically impoverished and "on a par with the poorest areas in the world" (Tuttle 2010: 224). Urban-rural inequality is severe, and levels of education extremely low (Fischer 2009). Is Ralo truly liable for his own destitution? Is his tragedy not one that should engender empathy as much as criticism? Despite the dominant reading put forth in Tibetan scholarship, there are several aspects of "Ralo," and of Tsering Döndrup's fiction more broadly, that guide us towards very different conclusions from those reached by the Tibetan theorists of national character. Rather than

being the representative and the architect of Tibetans' national failings, "Ralo" suggests that its protagonist can be read as a proletarian let down by a socialist state, in which case his "character" has little or nothing to do with bringing about the socio-economic conditions in which he finds himself.

Part one of "Ralo" pits a poor, uneducated Tibetan orphan against the incomprehensibility and indifference of the Chinese legal system, and Ralo emerges the loser: his second marriage is declared null and void due to the absence of the "marriage certificate," and his third marriage results in the arrest of his wife on charges of bigamy (1997: 116, 122). In part two, Ralo once again falls foul of the system. He spends much of the story incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit, languishing in a jail where he is abused by the guard and suffers for his inability to speak Chinese (131):

The practice of referring to oneself with the Chinese word for "criminal" was something that Ralo had already mastered. He would face the sentry standing bolt upright, throw back his head, suck in his snot, and say, "Reporting to the *banzhang* [class monitor]! The criminal would like to enter (or 'leave')!" When he said this it sounded just like the braying of a magnificent donkey. I heard, though, that when Ralo first arrived he didn't even know the Chinese for "report," which caused him great difficulties, so much so that things sank to the level of that phrase from his youth: "No one should learn from Ralo." Countless times the "class monitor" (the sentry) made him stand at the foot of the wall as punishment, I heard. (Tshe ring don grub 1997: 131)

The jail is an explicitly "Chinese" space, a state institution where the dominant language of Mandarin is enforced, and where Ralo is made to declare himself a "criminal" in Chinese (which, it transpires, he is not). Ralo is fully aware of the difficulties his inability to speak Mandarin has imposed upon him: "Eh – it really helps to know Chinese" (128), he laments to the narrator when recounting the sentry's persecutions. For Ralo, a virtually illiterate Tibetan nomad, fluency in Chinese is clearly an impossible and unreasonable demand: he masters "criminal," but still cannot muster the correct Chinese word for "sentry." Despite the humor of this, the joke is not on Ralo,

as we know that this is a result of the incarceration and unfamiliar linguistic environment that has been unjustly forced upon him. When Ralo is finally exonerated and released from prison, the narrator reminds us of the extent of this injustice:

The next morning Ralo sat up in bed, and when he'd finished his chanting he scratched the wall with his fingernail. Since he had no prayer beads, he put a mark like this on the wall every morning when he was done with his recitations. After he was released that afternoon I counted all the marks on the wall – there were sixty in total. This meant that Ralo had referred to himself as a “criminal” at least one hundred and eighty times. (158)

Not only does the text highlight Ralo's position as a victim of the bureaucratic state, it highlights that Ralo is a proletarian – the very class this state ought to support. Ralo twice invokes his status as a proletarian in the face of the machinery of state: first when he informs the narrator that he doesn't know the difference between criminal and civil court and demands to know whether “your People's Court” is going to help “Ralo the proletarian” (102), and again when he unsuccessfully attempts to defend himself against bogus charges in court by declaring that “in the entire family history of Ralo the proletarian no one has ever stolen anything!” (154). The failure of China's socialist institutions to address the needs of underprivileged Tibetans and the manner in which its officials have exploited the masses is one of Tsering Döndrup's most enduring literary concerns, both in “Ralo” and elsewhere. It is no coincidence that George Orwell is one of his favorite writers (he calls *Nineteen Eighty-Four*⁷⁹ a “timeless work” [2010: 192]) and his fiction is tirelessly critical of the injustices Tibetans face in modern China. The devastation wrought by the government's nomad relocation policy (“Black Fox Valley” [*Wa nag lung pa*, 2014]) and the atrocities committed against Tibetans in the 1958 Amdo uprising (*The Red Wind Howls* [*Rlung dmar 'ur 'ur*, 2009]) are but two prominent examples. In all of these cases, the oppression of the

⁷⁹ 1984 is one of the relatively small number of foreign-language novels to have been translated into Tibetan (Orwell 2014). There are also at least two translations of *Animal Farm* (Orwell 2011; Orwell 2013).

disenfranchised is consistently made more egregious by its perpetrator's role as a self-declared socialist state.

The emphasis on science and technology in the Tibetan discourse of national character only serves to emphasize the role of the state even further. Though Dülha Gyel's arguments about Tibetans' lack of technological knowledge are extrapolations rather than a focus of "Ralo" per se, the story does provide some reinforcement on this point, such as when Ralo and Döndrup visit Samyé Monastery:

At the bank of the Yarlung Tsangpo River we got on a wooden boat equipped with a tractor engine, which took half an hour to get us to the other side. "*Ah tsi ah tsi*, this technology stuff is amazing!" Looking at the expressions of wonder on the pilgrims' faces, you could be sure they'd be telling their relatives about the marvels of this technology for years to come. (Tshe ring don grub 1997: 147)

A gentle satirical take on the pilgrims' naivety to be sure, but a condemnation of the shortcomings of Tibetan national character? Even if we accept that "Ralo" shows us a worrying lack of technical expertise in Tibetan society, it is difficult to interpret this as a problem of Tibetan character when responsibility for such areas once again falls under the more prosaic domain of state policy. Access to China's elite institutions of technical education is severely curtailed for Tibetans given the enormous educational disadvantages they face relative to the Han majority (Fischer 2009; Kolås & Thowsen 2005: 100-106). An even more acute problem is that of language. Tibetan-medium education was not officially sanctioned until the 1980s, and access to Tibetan schooling remained (and in many cases remains) difficult even at the primary and secondary levels (Stites 1999). Furthermore, Tibetan speakers must already struggle in a society professionally dominated by Chinese. Ralo's own trajectory is an effective demonstration of the limited access to Tibetan language education in modern Chinese society, as well as its limited professional applications. Ralo receives only a cursory primary education, and the only real venue for him to use his Tibetan

is at the monastery. Döndrup, a successful graduate and the story's enlightened narrator, fares much better, but as a local government cadre even he has reached the limits of the kind of career possible with a Tibetan-language education in China (and indeed, his job already demands knowledge of Chinese).⁸⁰

Even where Tibetan-medium education is possible, technical subjects remain largely under the purview of the Chinese language, and Tibetan scholars have bemoaned the lack of opportunity to study such subjects in Tibetan (Badeng Nima 2001). At the university level and beyond, higher education in the fields of science and technology is essentially unavailable in minority languages. This situation is the result of state education policies; there is no room to interpret it as being caused by Tibetan cultural predispositions or the failings of an Ah Q-esque national character. Moreover, while Dülha Gyel's advocacy of scientism and material progress may be in line with the politics of a writer like Döndrup Gyel, it is not necessarily shared by the author of "Ralo." There is little in the story itself to suggest such a stance, and elsewhere Tsering Döndrup's fiction is often concerned with the environmental degradation and wanton destruction that China's industrialization drive has brought to Tibet and its traditional nomad life (in "Black Fox Valley," especially). His dystopian "The Story of the Moon" (*Zla ba'i gtam rgyud*, Tshe ring don grub 2010: 7-10) goes even further by painting a brief and bleak picture of a world reduced to ruin by unquestioning faith in science. It is unlikely, then, that our author would see the solution to Ralo's problems as being the kind of wholesale materialist modernization advocated by theorists of the Tibetan national character.

None of this is to say that Tsering Döndrup is not, as the discourse of national character suggests, a fierce critic of Tibetan traditions and Buddhism specifically. He most certainly is.

⁸⁰ Training minority nationalities to work in the government bureaucracy was, according to Costello (2002), one of the main reasons that Tibetan-language education in the PRC was initially established.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the person of Alak Drong, the corrupt lama who makes regular appearances in Tsering Döndrup's fictional world of Tsezhung County, including in "Ralo." In part two, realizing that his own monastery's income is suffering as a result of Ralo's freelance divinations, Alak Drong declares Ralo to be a fraud, rendering Ralo unemployed and once more reducing him to the level of "No one should learn from Ralo" (Tshe ring don grub 1997: 132). Ralo is then sent to jail on the trumped-up charge of stealing Alak Drong's horse, and when Ralo's son is decapitated by a passing truck, the protection cord given to the boy by Alak Drong does nothing but soak up his blood (150). Despite this, Ralo's faith in the lama remains unwavering: he continues to address his prayers and oaths to him regardless, and when Ralo dies penniless and alone, his remaining possessions and livestock are still donated to Alak Drong and his monastery (174-175). Ralo's unquestioning faith is a target of emphatic censure and satire, and it is contrasted starkly with the viewpoint of Döndrup, the skeptical narrator⁸¹:

But unlike me, whether Ralo met with fortune or tragedy, he'd never ask 'Why?' as he had a clear answer: 'Karma.' Ralo didn't know who his father was, but he must have had some ancestors at any rate, and this irrefutable logic was what they had bequeathed to him. (156)

This logic rarely rewards him, however, as the karma Ralo believes in simply toys with him, treating him "just like a stray dog" (158). The hypocrisy of Buddhist institutions and the folly of misplaced faith are critiqued throughout Tsering Döndrup's fiction. However, the author's concern is always with the ways in which these institutions and the blind loyalty they command have exploited and hoodwinked the most vulnerable in society. He condemns abuse, corruption, and needless suffering, but not Buddhist philosophy or the notion of faith itself. In this way, his depiction of state and Buddhist institutions is in fact analogous, and Ralo is the victim of both.

⁸¹ It bears noting that Liu's observation on the narrator of "Ah Q" also holds up equally for "Ralo": the existence of a perceptive, skeptical author/narrator in the story who is able to comment critically on his subject seriously undermines the validity of an all-encompassing notion of national character (Liu 1995: 73-76).

To gain a better understanding of “Ralo,” we would be wise to pay attention to another of modern China’s typical characters: Lei Feng, the proletarian hero who was first exalted by the party in the 1960s and who remains to this day a standard of patriotism and good citizenship. While Ah Q has often been read as a model in that he is a cautionary tale, an example of everything one should *not* be, Lei Feng is the very opposite: the proletarian elevated to their rightful place as a shining exemplar. Following his death in 1962, Lei Feng was made into a cornerstone of party propaganda, and remains so to this day. Xining, where Tsering Döndrup now lives, is still dotted with posters extolling the virtues of the “Lei Feng spirit” (*Lei Feng jingshen* 雷锋精神), as are countless other cities in China. Lei Feng was a fictional model carved from real life materials, a living example of Mao’s revolutionary romanticist ideal that socialist art should be “more typical and more idealized, and therefore have greater universality” (McDougall 1980: 70). The remarkable array of virtues that constituted Lei Feng’s character included, among other things, diligence, charity, moral purity, self-improvement, self-sacrifice, sense of duty, and unwavering devotion to the Party and to socialism. Such qualities made him the center of a campaign to “Learn from Comrade Lei Feng” (*xiang Lei Feng tongzhi xuexi* 向雷锋同志学习), a slogan still promoted in contemporary China, particularly in education, where Lei Feng is held up as a role model for the young.

The enumeration of Ralo’s character traits provided by Tibetan critics almost always reads as an inverse list of Lei Feng’s virtues – though none of the critics ever makes the comparison. Like Lei Feng, Ralo is orphaned at an early age, but there the similarities end: their relationship is one of opposites, of utterly inverted character traits. Where Lei Feng is selfless, dedicated to communist ideals, and relentless in his pursuit of self-improvement and carrying out his duty, Ralo is conservative, stubborn, solitary, lazy, and incapable of completing any task. This juxtaposition

in fact carries with it yet another Ah Q connection, as Ah Q and Lei Feng have likewise been read as “two sides of the same coin, as doppelgangers, or as mutual ‘others’” (Larson 2009: 110-114). The similarities (or rather oppositions) of Lei Feng and Ralo would seem merely coincidental were it not for one particularly prominent feature of the story: the refrain of “Everyone/No one should learn from Ralo.”

It is impossible not to see in the phrase “Everyone should learn from Ralo” (*tshang mas ra lor slob sbyong byos*) a reflection of the famous Lei Feng slogan, a slogan reversed with a dark irony in Tsering Döndrup’s story: “No one should learn from Ralo” (*tshang mas ra lor slob sbyong byed mi rung*). The rhetorical “learn from” is laden with connotations of Mao-era political campaigns, and was also a phrase directly transplanted into Tibetan. “Learn from Comrade Lei Feng” was translated in a 1977 Tibetan edition of the Lei Feng story as *blo mthun le hpheng la slob sbyong byed dgos* (*Blo mthun le hpheng* 1977), a construction syntactically comparable with Tsering Döndrup’s. As with his editing of the story’s title, the translator Dzesé once again renders this parallel clearer in Chinese by translating the phrase as *dajia yao xiang Reluo tongxue xuexi* 大家要向热洛同学学习; his addition of a *tongxue* 同学 (student) – for which there is no equivalent in the Tibetan – brings his translation even closer to the Lei Feng slogan than the original by mirroring the Chinese *tongzhi* 同志 (comrade) (Jiumei Duojie 2004: 198). In the story, after the phrase is first used by Ralo’s teacher (and Ralo’s classmates taunt him with it), it is borrowed by the narrator as a kind of proverbial summary of Ralo’s life. It is employed when Ralo (or rather Chöying Drakpa) slides into bad habits at the monastery, when he is tormented by the prison guard for not knowing Chinese, and when Alak Drong condemns his fraudulent divinations.

The Lei Feng analogy constructed in the story allows us to read Ralo in a different light, one that liberates him from sole responsibility for his plight, and indeed the representative burden

of the flawed national character. As we saw above, Delek and Yungdrung Gyel highlight the differences between Ralo and Ah Q's respective eras, but conclude that this is further evidence of the failings of his (and the Tibetan) character. But when we read Ralo instead as an inverse Lei Feng, we see a satirical portrait of a Tibetan nomad in the 1980s whose thinking and actions have not been changed for the better despite years of Chinese rule. Ralo has neither the noble socialist ideology of Lei Feng, nor the burgeoning capitalist spirit of Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 China. Rather than the failings of the Tibetan national character, "Ralo" illustrates the failings of a socialist state to meaningfully aid the material circumstances and social attitudes of one its most disadvantaged citizens. Ralo does indeed maintain a naïve and self-destructive faith in religion and superstition (both to Alak Drong and his inaccurate divinations), but his continuing adherence to old ways, and his continuing poverty, speak rather to the failure of Chinese rule to create Tibetan Lei Fengs – to create, in other words, economically and psychologically "liberated" Tibetan citizens of socialist China. In order to read Ralo and his failings as being due to a defective Tibetan national character, critics of the story have had to discount the declared responsibility of the Chinese state to achieve social and material progress for Tibetans – progress that in theory ought to have solved many of the problems they identify (weakness, ignorance, poverty, superstition, and so on). If we read Ralo instead as a failed Lei Feng, then Tsering Döndrup's story paints a very different picture, one that points to the state's inability to meaningfully improve the life of a disadvantaged Tibetan just as much as any notion of Tibetan national character.

4.5 Rewriting the Nation(s)

We have seen how Tibetan intellectuals have adapted the Chinese discourse of national character to fit their own purposes, but in the process of doing so they have also altered our understanding of the Chinese discourse itself. In carving out its own discursive space, the Tibetan

version of national character necessitated an act of interpretation and an implicit stabilizing of the original referents of the national character debate. The Tibetan discourse of national character requires the modifier “Tibetan” (*bod mi*), it cannot simply be a “national character” free from any specific ethnic markers, as is the case with the Chinese formula *guominxing* 国民性. Despite the theoretical equivalences that Tibetan critics draw between the two discourses, the impossibility of logically reconciling them is always apparent, and a range of lexical tensions exists between the terms used to refer to the two. Sönam Gyel (Bsod nams rgyal), for instance, describes Ralo as exposing faults in the Tibetan character (*bod mi'i mi gshis*), whereas Ah Q is a representative of the failings of *krung go*, the Tibetan phonetic rendition, and officially mandated translation of, *Zhongguo* 中国 (2013: 73).⁸² The author would no doubt agree that Tibetans are part of *krung go/Zhongguo*, yet they are not covered by the literary representation of the flaws of its “citizens” (*guomin* 国民/*mi ser*), just as Tsering Döndrup’s creation applies only to “Tibetans.” The first implication of these tensions is that *guominxing* did not apply to or cover the national character of Tibetans, requiring them to create their own iteration. In turn, this new Tibetan iteration dispels any lingering doubt about whether or not we could apply *guominxing* to other non-Han nationalities of the PRC. The Tibetan analysis of national character underscores that the designation of *guomin* in its initial guise carries a tacit connotation of a single Chineseness. Whether this Chineseness is cultural, ethnic, or something else in nature remains ambiguous, but

⁸² *Krung go* has been used since the founding of the PRC to designate a shared concept of “China” to which Tibetans (as well as China’s other official minority groups) belong. *Rgya nag*, a term for “China” or “Chinese” with a much longer history that is still in use today, is generally avoided in official discourse, likely due to its connotations of distinctness from an idea of “Tibet” or “Tibetan.” *Krung go* as used in this context projects a new signifier for “China” back into a historical period when such a term would not have been used in Tibetan, a common practice in contemporary intellectual writing that highlights the tensions inherent in attempting to enforce historical and semantic stability on the notion of “China’s Tibet.”

what is certain is that it has nothing to do with Tibetanness. In other words, *guomin* pointed to a particular *minzu* (nation or ethnicity).

While it limits Ah Q's scope of national signification to the Han, the Tibetan discourse of national character is also predicated on a broadened and flattened understanding of "Tibetan." Tsering Döndrup, the author of the perceived embodiment of Tibetan national character, is, under the official ethnic classification system of the PRC, a Mongol (*Mengguzu* 蒙古族). Tsering Döndrup is from Malho Mongolian Autonomous County, an ethnically Mongol region whose inhabitants gradually adopted Tibetan culture and language, but retained a distinctive sense of Mongol identity (Mongolian remains an official language of the county, despite its limited use). As Wallenböck (2016) has shown, many Mongol inhabitants of Malho have enacted a "strategic self-marginalization" to maintain their distinctiveness from both Tibetan and Han cultural domination. While Tsering Döndrup's choice of Tibetan as his language of composition has fixed him firmly in the realm of "Tibetan literature," his in-between status has not been without its complications. Yangdon Dhondup (2002) has argued that, despite their self-identifying as culturally Tibetan, authors like Tsering Döndrup still face a "double marginalization" from both Chinese and Tibetan societies, since they are never included without qualification in either (234). Though his ethnic identity is certainly known to Tibetan critics, its potential to disrupt the reductive notion of national character is never discussed. Could Ralo not also possess a more complex, hybrid ethnic identity, like his creator? The discourse of Tibetan national character denies such a possibility as it subsumes all nuances of regional, gender, linguistic, class, and even ethnic identities under the super-sign of "*bod mi/Zangzu* 藏族/Tibetan."

This term is used in most constructions of Tibetan national character. Literally the "people" (*mi*) of "Tibet" (*bod*), it is the signifier of national identity in the formulae "Tibetan consciousness"

(*bod mi'i rnam shes*) and “Tibetan character” (*bod mi'i gshis ka*). It is also, however, a term that has only recently come to designate a shared Tibetan national identity, as Gray Tuttle (2010) has pointed out:

Remarkably, Tibetans were so divided prior to 1950 that they did not have a single term that referred to all Tibetan people, especially not one that was acceptable to eastern Tibetans. While today some Tibetans in eastern Tibet might willingly call themselves “Bömi” (*bod mi*) or, less likely, “Böpa” (*bod pa*), such terms historically meant people from central Tibet, a region at the center of the current TAR, including Lhasa, Shigatsé, and parts of Lhoka and Kongpo. In fact, at the beginning of the Tibetan popular nationalist movement in 1957, no term could be agreed upon by all of those whom we today call “Tibetans,” so they called themselves simply “tsampa eaters” as this conveyed a distinct sense of their shared identity (as opposed to the Chinese “rice eaters”), without privileging any one regional designation. (221)

Bod mi and the second term in this quote (*bod pa*) would not have historically incorporated people from Amdo (where Tsering Döndrup is from) or Kham, who would likely have identified with different regional designations (Shakya 1993). Now, however, both are generally considered to be broad signifiers of “Tibetan” ethnic belonging, which according to Tuttle is an exceptional situation as Tibetans in the PRC “are probably the first in history to have embraced the previously regional-specific terms Böpa (*bod pa*) or Bömi (*bod mi*) as self-descriptive for Tibetans from all over the Tibetan plateau” (222). The Tibetan discourse of national character is likewise exceptional in that it proceeds from here to posit a unifying national condition for all of the people now considered to be *bod mi*, including, however contradictorily, ethnic Mongols like Tsering Döndrup. Requiring Ralo to play the role of Ah Q demands the concomitant universality of national identity; without it Ralo could not fulfill his function as a type, a comprehensive representative of national character.

Isolating “Chinese” and “Tibetan” characteristics and identifying a broad national signifier are key steps in establishing a functioning discourse of Tibetan national character. The third, and arguably most important step, is what must be removed from the Chinese equivalent in order to

make it politically viable in the contemporary PRC. In substituting the original formula's unmarked national (*guomin*) with the explicitly Tibetan (*bod mi*), Tibetan intellectuals have also had to excise a core part of its original meaning: Tibetan national character can only refer to a *min* 民 (people), and not a *guo* 国 (state). Under the PRC, *minzu* now denotes many different nationalities who are united through the slogan of ethnic unity (*minzu tuanjie* 民族团结) into the umbrella concept of the single *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族, or (greater) Chinese people (see Bulag 2002: 1-28). The latter is a fascinatingly ambiguous and contradictory term that suggests a link on the basis of people (*minzu*), but as all the *minzu* of China are culturally and ethnically different, the only glue that can logically bind the *Zhonghua minzu* together is the state.⁸³ As Rebecca Karl (2002) argues, in the latter years of the Qing dynasty, Liang Qichao's political notion of *guomin* sought to bridge the divide between a people (*minzu*) and a state (*guojia*) (119). The later literary discourse of national character, *guominxing*, enjoyed the luxury of not having to concern itself with these distinctions of nation/state. It may have addressed "Chinese" flaws on a cultural, ethno-national level, but at the same time it could take the concept of state for granted. In other words, the nation and the state were coterminous: the character of the nation/*minzu* was synonymous with the character (*xing*) of the people (*min*) who inhabited the state (*guo*).

In the Tibetan interpretation of national character, the idea of state is cut out entirely, leaving us with the consciousness (*rnam shes*) or the character (*gshis ka*) of the Tibetan people (*bod mi*). Despite the equivalence created between this formula and *guominxing*, the absence of its state component remains glaring. Delek is one of the only critics to employ the term *rgyal dmangs gshis ka* (2010: 4), the most direct rendering of the Chinese *guominxing*: the character (*gshis ka*)

⁸³ Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, who coined the term *Zhonghua minguo* 中华民国 ("the Republic of China"), actually conceived of his theoretical creation as a Han-dominated state, in which *hua* 华 was a racial-historical sign that explicitly designated the Han (Zhang 1984: 4: 253).

of the people (*dmangs*) of a state (*rgyal khab*). The incongruity of such a translation is immediately apparent: it literally implies that Ralo and his defects are representative of all Chinese citizens – Han, Uyghur, Mongol, and so on – a patently absurd notion and clearly not the author’s intention. The majority of writers, therefore, opt for a designation of national character free from any sense of state. Indeed, how could Tibetan writers and intellectuals in the PRC discuss any other kind of “national”? As the *guo* (state) to which Tibetans belong is *Zhongguo*, there could be no hint of “national” character in Tibetan literature referring to any other kind of *guo*, so the whole notion of state is bypassed in favor of an interpretation of national character that privileges the idea of *mi rigs/minzu* and *bod mi* as an ethnicity or nation(ality). *Guominxing* is thereby redefined as being something closer to *minzuxing* 民族性 (nationality or ethnic character), allowing Tibetan intellectuals to discuss the concept safely within the boundaries of the state they now inhabit.

The concept of Tibetan national character forces us to reevaluate modern China from its margins and in the process allows us to uncover a significant and unnoticed divide in modern Chinese literature: one of modern China’s foundational discourses has been made to change drastically in meaning over the course of the 20th century. Or, more accurately, a discourse that was initially taken to be universal in the sense of its application to all of “China” or the “Chinese” now only refers to one part of the ethnic composition of the People’s Republic’s (i.e., the Han). At the time of the debate on national character, many of the territories and peoples currently included in the PRC were not only missing from the nascent state created in the wake of the Qing fall, they were also missing from discussions that were cementing ideas of nation, people, and citizenship. Here there are multiple layers of irony and contradiction: The Tibetan discourse of national character retrospectively inserts Tibetans into an intellectual tradition of which they were never a part and brings Tibetan literature under the umbrella of modern Chinese intellectual history, but

by trying to fit the square peg of national character into the round hole of contemporary Tibet, it simultaneously reveals just how fundamentally disconnected Tibetans have been from that history.

4.6 Conclusion

These are the complex and politically charged consequences of one modern national literature so-conceived (in this case Tibetan) having to develop in the shadow of another (in this case Chinese). Under these circumstances, it is not surprising, and is perhaps even inevitable, that the intellectual concerns of the society which Tibetans became a part of over the course of the 1950s and 1960s would eventually filter into Tibetan writing. But the act of reconciling Tibetan writing with its new surroundings has produced a tangled web of often incendiary implications about Tibet's status in China. The decision to name modern China's foremost writer and his most famous literary character as relevant models of comparison forces us to consider whether China's historical experiences and intellectual discourses are in any way appropriate yardsticks by which to measure Tibetan literary works. For the idea of *guominxing* to play a part in the Tibetan intellectual environment, it to undergo such a major overhaul that it became almost unrecognizable. Buddhism was required to play the role of Confucianism, a philosophical system entirely alien to Tibetan civilization, and, most notably, the idea of state had to be both terminologically and conceptually removed.

We encounter further issues when Ralo is conceived of as an Ah Q proxy and charged with responsibility for Tibetans' backwardness. The national character reading of "Ralo" is first and foremost problematic because, in order to make Ralo the representative of Tibetan failings, it must ignore all the other ways in which he has been brought low by the inability of a powerful state to meet his needs – a state that is in no sense historically or culturally "Tibetan." While Ah Q could be tied to a perception of long-standing deficiencies in Chinese culture, the "old society" of Tibet

was supposed to have become a thing of the past after the communist revolution, and the persistence of traits associated with it raises more questions about China's failure to address the social and economic concerns of Tibetans in the modern era than about the failings of a Tibetan national character. The discourse of Tibetan national character furthermore forces us to confront the idea of numerous discrete "national characters" all simultaneously coexisting, with equal representational value for their respective nations, within one state; *guominxing* or "the Chinese national character" is no longer sufficient to represent all the nationalities who now constitute "China." China's rule of Tibet means that Tibetan literature is now formally considered a minority offshoot of the literature of *Zhongguo*, but in attempting to reconcile the two modern literary traditions by drawing a direct parallel between the characters of Ah Q and Ralo, the discourse of Tibetan national character has served most of all to bring a host of irreconcilable contradictions to the fore.

Chapter 5: Zhokdung and the Tibetan May Fourth Movement

At a lecture given at the Northwest University for Nationalities in 2002 on the subject of Gendün Chöpel, Döndrup Gyel, and enlightenment thinking, the editor and essayist Meché (Me Ice, “Tongue of Flame,” pen name of Gcod pa klu rgyal) asked himself a rhetorical question about who represented enlightenment thinking in modern China. “Yu Jie! Yu Jie!” the audience cried. Meché concurred that the young Chinese intellectual’s work was a “ray of thought” and essential reading for university students in Tibet (Me Ice 2013: 141-142). In a Q&A session following the talk, one student remarked that modern day writers like Yu Jie 余杰 were picking up the baton of enlightenment thinking from the representative figures of the May Fourth Movement (Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, Hu Shi 胡适, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培). Who, the questioner asked, do we have like Yu Jie in Tibet, who is continuing the enlightenment tradition of Gendün Chöpel and Döndrup Gyel? Meché replied,

If I had to choose a representative figure of enlightenment thinking in Tibet now, in terms of the first to put pen to paper and write texts, it would have to be Zhokdung [Zhogs dung]. He is a true thinker. Also, there are his intellectual allies – Nyizhön [Nyi gzhon, “Morning Sun,” pen name of Sgang tshang Phag mo bkra shis], Jangkar [Byang skar, “North Star,” pen name of Be’u brgya Lha mo skyabs], Bardeu [’Bar rde’u, pen name of Mdo smad pa Sman bla skyabs] and so on. They are preaching, and practicing what they preach. It is appropriate to say that Zhokdung, in particular, is the spokesman of new culture. At present they are in the process of thinking and writing a great deal. And they will continue to write. (179-180)

Meché recalls that he first read Zhokdung’s work while at university in 1999. So deep was the impact of Zhokdung’s writing that, after graduation, Meché went on to follow in his footsteps and later became an influential intellectual in his own right (Wu 2013: 263).

Zhokdung – and this cohort of like-minded writers⁸⁴ – are the subject of this chapter. I set out firstly to present a detailed examination of the work of Zhokung and his colleagues, an intellectual history of their movement that will expand on the studies thus far available in English.⁸⁵ At the same time, however, my reading of their work seeks to demonstrate how, in the process of building on and advancing Döndrup Gyel’s discourse of *mirik* nationalism, these writers drew deeply from the well of early modern Chinese thought, forging a movement that drew on classic May Fourth themes of nationalism, individualism, iconoclasm, social Darwinism, scientism, liberalism, translation, youth, and intellectualism. Most of all, their movement was centered around a profound and extensive cultural self-critique inspired by modern Chinese paradigms.

Unlike the case of Döndrup Gyel, where a reading of his work as a reappropriation of May Fourth discourse must largely be our own, these writers are explicit about their indebtedness to China’s modern intellectual tradition and have pushed Tibetan literature into an even closer engagement with that of modern China. I will argue, in Chatterjee’s terms, that in crafting their own movement based on the Chinese model, these writers present a “selective reading” of modern Chinese intellectual trends, adopting, adapting, and, crucially, rejecting certain elements in the constitution of their own discourse. Specifically, they emphasize the liberal humanist aspects of May Fourth while disregarding the socialist politics that have dominated China ever since. I conclude with a discussion of the dramatic decline of the movement following the Tibetan uprising of 2008, in which this selectivity became even more evident, as Zhokdung openly condemned the

⁸⁴ This collective of writers has been called by several names, some of them derogatory designations given by their detractors. While “the New Thinkers” (Wu 2013) is a reasonable and relatively neutral term, I have chosen to refer to them collectively as “intellectuals” (one of their preferred terms) and “essayists” (after their preferred form). Wu estimates that the group comprised eight to nine members in total (219).

⁸⁵ Hartley (2002), Wu Qi (2013), Yü (2013), and the introductory essays to Zhogs dung (2016).

Communist Party's rule, thereby turning his Chinese-inspired nationalist discourse against the state of China itself.

5.1 The Tibetan Essay

Zhokdung (“Morning Conch”) is the penname of Tragyal (Bkra rgyal), a social, cultural, and political commentator born in 1963.⁸⁶ He first came to prominence in 1999 with the publication of a provocative article in the *Qinghai Tibetan News* (*Mtsho sngon bod yig gсар 'gyur*) – “Blood-letting that will Overcome the Tumor of Ignorance”⁸⁷ – and over the next ten years rose to the forefront of the Tibetan intellectual sphere, publishing four books and editing several more. His stance, broadly summarized, is that of a critical, modernizing, secular intellectual, an “awakener (*rtogs sad pa*) of the youth” (Nyi gzhon 2005: 92). Zhokdung’s article was timed to mark the 80th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, and it reads as a May Fourth manifesto for modern Tibet. Over the weeks and months that followed, *Qinghai Tibetan News* published numerous more articles on the May Fourth theme debating the points that Zhokdung had raised,⁸⁸ and over the decade that followed, a veritable movement of Chinese-inspired intellectual activity was unleashed.

⁸⁶ Like many of the figures associated with radical intellectual and literary activity in Tibet, Zhokdung attended the Northwest University for Nationalities in Lanzhou. After graduating in 1990, he worked as an editor at the Qinghai Nationalities Press. He held this job until his detention in 2010, though he was able to return upon his release in 2011 (Wu 2013: 216-219).

⁸⁷ “Rmongs skran 'joms pa'i gтар kha.” Zhokdung’s original title for the essay was “The Cry of Struggle” (*Phag 'tshag gi nga ro*); “Blood-letting” was the title given by the editor of *Qinghai Tibetan News* (Hartley 2002: 1n2). When Zhokdung reprinted the essay in his first book, *The Call of Reason* (*Dpyod shes rgyang 'bod*), he restored his original title.

⁸⁸ For some time, the newspaper had a special column dedicated to the discussion, featuring articles with titles such as “A Manifesto for 21st Century Youth: A Discourse Inspired by May Fourth” (*Dus rabs nyer gcig pa'i lang tsho'i bsgrags gtam: lnga bzhi las byung ba'i gtam*) (Wu 2013: 236-240).

Now, in tracing the arc of Tibetan nationalist thought that began with Döndrup Gyel, we are moving away from literary writings per se and into the territory of social and cultural commentary. Why such a move? During Meché's lecture, he addressed this very question:

Normally, expressing new thoughts and points of view is something that relies on the tool of literature. Nowadays there are many people writing new literature in Tibet. However, in the case of the Tibetan people, deficient in literary cultivation and poor at critical thinking, gaining comprehension and intellectual awakening from literary works alone is a very difficult thing. Take, for example, a work like Tsering Döndrup's "Ralo": all we understand of Ralo is that he is a snot-nosed, stupid, dim-witted man. Thanks to Professor Dü Lhagyel's article "Ralo – The Embodiment of Tibetan Consciousness," we now know that Ralo is the embodiment of Tibetan consciousness. It's very clear if we read that essay. But how many years passed from when Tsering Döndrup wrote "Ralo" to last year, when Dü Lhagyel wrote his analysis of "Ralo"? Ah – it's like that. So, to engage in enlightenment thinking, it's best to write clear and intelligible essays (*'bol rtsom*), social commentaries, cultural commentaries, and so on. (Me lce 2013: 180-181)

Medium is not the issue here – he goes on to classify the musician Cui Jian 崔健 as an enlightenment thinker – the issue is, rather, what Meché perceives as an absence in Tibetan literature of serious, socially and politically engaged work. Tibet in the 1980s was, he asserts, a time similar to the May Fourth Movement, a time when authors like Döndrup Gyel began to reassess tradition and when writers drove a debate between eastern and western knowledge. By the 2000s, the number of authors had greatly increased, but, in Meché's view, the literary scene had become a "dry spring" with "very few broad and deep thinkers" (Me lce 2003: 45-49). The fiction of Rangdra (Rang sgra) and Repong Dorjekhar (Reb gong rdo rje mkhar), for instance, he dismisses as possessing all the intellectual value of a Hong Kong action movie (50). The renowned poets Jangbu (Ljang bu) and Ju Kelzang ('Ju skal bzang) are likewise condemned for shirking the dark side of society, betraying their poetic talents by ignoring "the welfare of the common people" and acting as "bystanders with their hands in their sleeves" (Me lce 2008: 8). Even *Light Rain*, one

of the journals that helped launch modern Tibetan literature, comes in for criticism, along with its prestigious literary prize (Me lce 2003: 30; Me lce 2008: 108-109).

During the May Fourth era, a debate raged between the rival schools of “art for art’s sake” and “art for life’s sake,” a debate that Meché resurrects in the context of contemporary Tibetan writing. He reserves some of his fiercest criticism for Kyabchen Dadröl (Skyabs chen bde grol) and other writers of the Third Generation of poets, a literary group whose 2005 ‘manifesto’ outlined an ethos of iconoclasm and individualism, a literature of “gibberish, ennui, and aimlessness” that ran consciously counter to both the grand sense of purpose embodied in the poetry of Döndrup Gyel and the styles of established poets like Jangbu (Lama Jabb 2015a: 135-136). Zhokdung decries the willful opposition to “responsibility” proclaimed by this group (Zhogs dung 2008: 192), and Meché agrees: he dubs them the “Degenerate Generation” (*rgud pa’i mi rabs*) and dismisses their writing, obsessed as it is with sex, alcohol, and general taboo-breaking, as “nothing more than a garbage ‘poetry’ of playing around with words” (Me lce 2008: 106-107). He frames this as precisely a problem of “art for art’s sake” (*sgyu rtsal gyi ched du sgyu rtsal byed pa*) and “aestheticism” (*mdzes gtso ring lugs*) versus writing with a social mission. Lu Xun 鲁迅 recollected that he first began writing fiction because of an opposition to the “art for art’s sake” mentality, and at the time had “still cherished the ideas of ‘enlightenment’” and wanted “to change life in the world for the better” (Lu Xun 2017: 55). The Tibetan essayists are in firm agreement with such a stance. Writers nowadays “raise the banner of ‘XX ism’ and ‘XX theory,’” writes Meché, but “isn’t it shameful, when faced with our backwards society, our wretched masses (*mi ser*), and the suffering of life, to simply dash off a few poems?” Such writers, who pay no attention to the “suffering, hunger, thirst, disease, and ignorance of the nation (*mi rigs*),” are “the enemies of art” (Me lce 2008: 14-15).

Given that, in Meché's assessment, contemporary literature is failing to meet these standards, the burden of socially engaged writing has therefore passed to Zhokdung and his colleagues, whose preferred medium is not fiction or poetry, but the essay. Specifically, it is *'bol rtsom*, literally "soft writing," and *thol rtsom*, "spontaneous writing." The latter is seemingly a neologism, which Meché equates to the Chinese *suibi* 随笔 ("informal essay"); *'bol rtsom* is a pre-existing term, but Meché conceives of it as a new form, equivalent to the Chinese *zawen* 杂文 (Me lce 2014a: 101-105). The *zawen* is the incisive, topical essay that was popular in the Republican period and famously favored by Lu Xun (Pollard 2000: 19), and indeed, Meché cites May Fourth essays, specifically those of Lu Xun, as the primary inspirations for their borrowing of the form (Me lce 2014a: 103). Meché hails the essay as a "weapon of thought" indispensable for its "sharpness and acuity" and for its capacity for "critique, criticism, exposure, and surgical operation⁸⁹." In the Tibetan context, Meché dates the inception of the essay (or rather, their use of the form) to the publication of Zhokdung's book *The Cry of Reason* (*Dpyod shes rgyang 'bod*) in 2001. In the following years, its popularity bloomed, both through book publications and individual essays in new journals including *Eastern Conch Mountain* (*Shar dung ri*), *The I of the Age* (*Dus rabs kyi nga*), *New Youth* (*Na gzhon gsar ba*), *Qinghai Tibetan News*, *Enlightenment* (*Blo 'byed*), and numerous others (Me lce 2014a: 102-105). According to Jangkar, another central figure of this intellectual movement,⁹⁰ this was a major change in course for Tibetan literature, a

⁸⁹ *Gshag bcos*. As noted in Chapter Four, this is a trope that is also closely associated with Lu Xun and his writing style (see Liu 1995: 50, 128).

⁹⁰ Jangkar studied at the Northwest University for Nationalities in the 1980s, where he wrote a thesis critical of the restrictions that traditional Tibetan literary theory had placed on contemporary literature. His thesis proved controversial and was harshly criticized by his teacher, the former lama Alak Dorzhi (A lags dor zhi), during his defense (Wu 2013: 207-208, 212).

move away from the dominance of poetry and towards the socially-conscious essay (Wu 2013: 268-269).

To Meché, it is lamentable that Tibetans have never had anything comparable to the European Enlightenment or the May Fourth Movement and that their understanding of a “movement” is limited to political campaigns (i.e., those of the Mao era). Despite undergoing enormous social upheavals under Mao, it seems that, to the essayists, Chinese rule had produced no underlying change in Tibetan cultural attitudes. This is precisely the state of affairs that this group sought to change, and Meché sees the essays of Zhokdung as the beginning of this process (Me lce 2014a: 85-93; 2008: 141; 2003: 52). To effect this change, these intellectuals reached back to the beginnings of modern China: their goal was no less than the launching of a Tibetan May Fourth Movement, a “thought revolution” through the form of the essay – both the “critical” essay of Lu Xun and the “constructive” essay of Hu Shi (Me lce 2008: 126-143). This was the ‘age of the essay,’ and it is perhaps appropriate to speak of it in the past tense, as for all its energy and productivity, it lasted little longer than a decade, drawing to a gradual halt after 2008 as the authors who favored the form came under increasing restrictions in the wake of the political upheavals of that year.

5.2 Döndrup Gyel, Nationalism, and Individualism

Regardless of whether or not we agree with Meché’s assessment that the contemporary Tibetan literary landscape is populated with “garbage literature” (*rtsom rig gi gad snyigs*) (Me lce 2008: 32), we can certainly concur that Zhokdung and his followers are the most obvious inheritors of Döndrup Gyel’s intellectual tradition in the modern day. As Hartley (2002) found in her survey of Tibetan students’ reactions to Zhokdung’s initial articles in 1999, many felt that his work was unprecedented, but others saw it as building on the legacies of Gendün Chöpel and Döndrup Gyel

(6-7). This narrative of inheritance has, in part, been actively cultivated by the writers themselves. We saw in Chapter Two how a robust analytical discourse helped to fix Döndrup Gyel's status as a writer of national literature and a promoter of enlightenment thinking. The publication of many of the research volumes on Döndrup Gyel overlaps with the intellectual activity discussed in this chapter – and indeed, many of the writers that will be discussed here penned or were involved with those volumes. Zhokdung himself cites Döndrup Gyel as the flagbearer of new culture (Zhogs dung 2001: 20), and in a discussion held in 2005 on the 20th anniversary of the writer's death between some of the central figures of this chapter (Zhokdung, Jangkar, Meché, and Nyizhön), Döndrup Gyel was framed as a pathbreaker of nationalist and enlightenment thinking in Tibet (Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 136-198). This reading of Döndrup Gyel in turn serves as an inspiration and a basis for their own intellectual project. Several of these research articles on Döndrup Gyel trace a direct path from the works of the famous author to those of Zhokdung (Sgren po 2011: 187; Me lce 2013: 123; Me lce 2008: 116). Elsewhere, Meché frames their connection explicitly in the terms of nationalism, or their consciousness of the race/nation (*rigs*): Gendün Chöpel was “the first to awaken the consciousness of the nation,” in Döndrup Gyel's time “the consciousness of nation became clearer,” and in the time of Zhokdung it became “three-dimensional” (Me lce 2014b: 307).

Despite their lionizing of Döndrup Gyel, the essayists reserve criticism for his particular brand of nationalism, criticisms that can guide us towards how intellectual nationalist writing has developed and been modified in the work of Zhokdung and others. Zhokdung, while not attacking Döndrup Gyel *per se*, declared in a 2002 lecture that the era of his “national pride” (*mi rigs kyi la rgya*) was past and that it was time for a new generation of writers and thinkers to get to work (Zhogs dung 2005: 243). Others are more forthcoming about what they perceive as Döndrup Gyel's shortfalls. Meché argues that while Döndrup Gyel wrote a great deal about history, he did

little “reflecting” (*phyir rtog*) on history – he knew that Tibetans were “backwards,” but he never analyzed how they had become so. In short, while he may have been a brilliant and critical thinker, “his vision was obscured by the majestic, dazzling, pretty gauze of nation, national pride, and Tibetan culture of that time, which became an impediment to him being a true thinker” (Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 141).

Such critiques recast Döndrup Gyel’s “national pride” and his entire discourse of *mirik* as a once-useful but now limited and limiting philosophy that needed to be transcended if progress was to be made down the path he first broke. Their biggest criticism is that it was an overarching discourse of “nation” and “culture” that failed to make room for the individual; his literature failed to recognize that “the life of the individual, the liberty of the individual, the rights of the individual, the value of the individual and so on are above the state, the nation, society, the collective, and everything else” (Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 142). In the conclusion to his “Rangdröl research” volume, Chökyong offers a critique of Döndrup Gyel that positions his thinking in a similar way, arguing that the literary and intellectual preoccupation with “nation” in the 1980s has become an obstacle to progress. Calling upon Chen Duxiu’s views, he asserts that the nation must be “destroyed” to make way for the development of the I/self (*nga'am bdag*) (Chos skyong 2006: 333-340). In sum, the stance of this new generation of writers is that students and young intellectuals in the 21st century should strive to “surpass Döndrup Gyel” (Me lce 2013: 167).

As these critiques make clear, a concept of “individualism” is a core intellectual concern of the group. Zhokdung provides the following summary of his own view on individualism:

What I mean by the “self” is the self of you as an individual, the national self, the human self, the self that produces history, the self that produces culture – everything is gathered in the self. To put it more clearly, it is a consciousness of esteem and self-appreciation. It is having esteem for yourself and having appreciation for yourself; saying “I, too, am a person” and taking control of myself. I think that this is how we should understand the “self.” (Zhogs dung 2005: 287)

The centrality of individualism to the group was enshrined in the title of their 2005 *Series of the Self* (*Bdag dpe tshogs*), edited by Zhokdung and published through the Yunnan Nationalities Press.⁹¹ These volumes, each authored by a different member of the collective and each named after a certain kind of “spirit” (critique, skepticism, truth-seeking, character, exploration, and culture), represent some of the central contributions to the intellectual movement described in this chapter. Though their definitions of individualism differ, in almost all of the essayists’ writings, the re-examination of the self and one’s own values serves as a foundation on which other values can be built. Zhokdung references Lu Xun’s early view that the raising up of the individual must precede all other developments (Zhogs dung 2008: 174),⁹² and declares in his very first essay that the destruction of the old and the construction of the new can only occur by beginning with the individual’s thinking (Zhogs dung 1999). This theme of “beginning from oneself” (*rang nyid nas 'go rtsom*) is revisited time and again by the essayists (Me lce 2013: 123; Byang skar 2005: 57, 90; 'Gyan sangs rgyas don grub 2005: 6) and always suggests individualism’s capacity to lead to other intellectual and social developments. Nyizhön, one of the leading new intellectuals, penned an essay under the title of this phrase, in which he posits that people without a consciousness of self can never possess the qualities that stem from the self: self-appreciation, self-regard, self-esteem, liberty⁹³, and self-reliance (Nyi gzhon 2005: 3).

Despite this insistent emphasis, individualism does not exist as an autonomous discourse in the essayists’ writings – it must always reckon with nationalism, its perpetual (if sometimes

⁹¹ Several influential works of new thought have also been published in a separate series titled the *Series of Life* (*Bla dpe tshogs*).

⁹² Zhokdung is most likely referring to *liren* 立人 (raising up or establishing the individual, translated by Foster [2006] as “cultivating talented people” [80-81]), as discussed in Lu Xun’s 1907 essay “Aberrations in Cultural Development” (*Wenhua pian zhi lun* 文化偏至论) (Lu Xun 2005: 1: 58). Jangkar also refers to Lu Xun’s *liren* in his discussion of individualism (Byang skar 2005: 35).

⁹³ *Rang dbang*, etymologically also linked to the Tibetan *rang* (“self”).

implicit) referent. In Meché's view, there has been a clear intellectual trajectory from Döndrup Gyel's "nation" to Zhokdung's "self":

This discovery – the seeking of a self in the realm of thought and the finding of this self – is a major advancement (*thod brgal*) in the history of Tibetan thought. It also has the historical significance of representing the demarcation of an era. Not only was it a major advancement in thought from the "nation" of Döndrup Gyel's time to the "self" of the present day, it was also an advancement in the understanding of thought. This was an advancement from the nation, composed of the group and the collective, to the "self" composed of individual human beings. (Me lce 2013: 124)

In the essayists' schema, however, the fostering of a national consciousness ought to be one of the developments that flows *from* individualism. Nyizhön thus charges Tibetans with having reversed the order of these 'isms', of "starting from the abstract concepts of state and nation" and heading down the "wrong path." Trying to achieve such goals without individual rights and equalities, he asserts, "is like planning to build a mansion with no pillars or beams," and thus the individual person, not the nation, must be the "fundamental root" of all things (Nyi gzhon 2005: 12, 39).

Meché argues that, in the wake of the protests of 2008, the discourse of nation instituted by Döndrup Gyel has in fact become the mainstream, so much so that "over ninety-nine percent" of Tibetans now accept and advocate the ideas of nationalism, whereas only "around one percent" accept the ideas that he believes should now be of fundamental importance to Tibetans: liberalism (*rang dbang ring lugs*) and individualism (*mi sger ring lugs*) (Me lce 2014a: 95). There is thus a curious reverse logic to this conception of the individual/nation relationship. Meché describes a *development* of thought from Döndrup Gyel to Zhokdung, but simultaneously insists upon the need for individualism to *precede* nationalism. In a sense, the essayists call for an unpicking of modern Tibetan intellectual history, a re-ordering and editing of priorities that seeks not to do away with Döndrup Gyel's nationalism, but to insert into it the more vital concept of liberal individualism, and thereby strengthen it. In this way, the individual and the nation become an organic (inorganic,

in the following metaphor) whole: “If the state, the nation, and the collective are a machine, then the individual, the self, and the I are each of its specific parts, its screws. If the parts and the screws are not tough and durable, then it is impossible for the machine to function properly” (Me Lee 2014a: 98).

In many ways, this discourse of individualism replays some of the most significant debates that occurred in modern Chinese thought, and not simply because it cites some of modern China’s foremost thinkers (Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, etc.). Individualism in the writings of Meché, Zhokdung, Jangkar, and Nyizhön enters into a mutually constitutive relationship – though often a fractious one – with nationalism. Proponents (and opponents) of individualism in modern China likewise brought these two concepts into a discursive relationship, and scholarship on Chinese literature has followed suit in situating the one as dependent on the other. This is what happened, as Liu (1995) remarks, when China’s encounter with the West “force[d] modern nationhood upon selfhood, and vice versa,” and it led to the subsequent accusation that China’s twentieth century intellectuals had cultivated an “inauthentic” individualism by placing “the highest premium on society, nation, people, and the state but never on the individual” (82-84).

On the surface, the essayists charge their predecessors with precisely the same crime. However, their individual is still intrinsically tied to the national: individualism is something that other, stronger nations possess, and now Tibetans need it to improve Tibetan society. It is hard to suggest that individualism in these writings possesses an independent value; rather, the rhetoric of starting from the self implies that individualism must *lead* somewhere; it is a means to alter one’s fundamental thinking patterns and achieve social change. In a similar way, Chen Duxiu initially advocated individualism not out of a conviction in the abstraction of romantic liberty, but because the “pulse of modern life is economic and the basic principle of economic production is individual

independence” (Quoted in Furth 2002: 90). As in the May Fourth era, in the Tibetan discourse of individualism, the tangible goals in social, cultural, and political development to be achieved through this desired individualist mindset would be achievements in *national* social, cultural, and political development. As Meché writes, quoting modern China’s preeminent liberal individualist Hu Shi, “if you strive for your own liberty then you are striving for the liberty of the state, if you are striving for your own rights then you are striving for the rights of the state” (Me lce 2014a: 97). Individualism arrived later on the Tibetan intellectual scene than nationalism, and its proponents then sought a theoretical reorganization of Tibetan intellectual history in which individualism would, all at once, precede, supersede, and reinforce Döndrup Gyel’s pioneering nationalism. In this formulation, individualism may challenge the preeminence of nationalism, but it does not oppose or repudiate it; in fact it supports it.

As Liu (1995) reminds us, rather than paying attention to the claims and counterclaims of authenticity and inauthenticity in Chinese interpretations of individualism, we would do well to consider instead what sorts of claims were made *with* individualism, how it was weaponized and wielded against particular targets in intellectual battles. In the Chinese case, the meaning of individualism changed drastically over the course of just a few decades, being construed firstly as the progressive remedy to tradition (Confucianism) and then as the obstacle to a superior form of social development (Socialism) (87-99; also Lin 1972: 24). Thinking about the uses of the discourse of individualism is particularly helpful in the Tibetan context, as there is no doubt that it presented to these writers an opportunity to spearhead an intellectual attack against what they perceived as backwards Tibetan traditions, and above all, against Buddhist philosophy and its dominance over Tibetan thought. We saw in Chapter Four how Dü Lhagyel’s⁹⁴ critique of the

⁹⁴ Dü Lhagyel can also be considered a member of this group of intellectuals, and indeed he contributed a volume to the *Series of the Self (The Spirit of Exploration)*. Unlike the other books of the series, however, his focuses largely on

Tibetan national character centered in large part around a critique of Buddhism and the belief in *anātman* or no-self. The essayists consciously posit individualism as the opposite of *anātman*; as an idea it becomes a potent tool in constructing a critique of one of Buddhism's most central tenets. In *The Spirit of Skepticism*, Zhokdung argues that the *nga*, the I, and the *bdag*, the self, existed as a concept in the time of the pre-Buddhist Tibetan empire but came to be eroded by the introduction of Buddhism, which views the human as a mere “tool,” a “boat that can traverse the samsaric ocean of suffering.” Now, he says, it is time to restore this self, *bdag*, in the face of no-self, *bdag med* (Zhogs dung 2005: 277-281).

5.3 Buddhism and Tradition

While individualism, a central pillar of the essay movement's discourse, served as a conceptual inverse to the Buddhist tenet of *anātman*, the essayists' critique of Buddhism – and tradition as a whole – went much deeper. If there is one stance above all with which these writers are associated in the minds of Tibetan readers, it is their iconoclasm. Before a suite of new, modernist ideas could be advocated, a whole range of pre-existing beliefs had to be repudiated, and there is no doubting that Zhokdung and his colleagues mounted an intellectual attack on Tibetan cultural values in a manner and to an extent that few, if none, had before them.⁹⁵ Again, this intellectual spirit of iconoclasm is tied directly to the precedent of May Fourth China, when the Confucian social order – and countless aspects of “tradition” more broadly conceived – were condemned as impediments to the establishment of a new society. Jangkar draws on Lu Xun, Hu

literary criticism, reflecting Dū Lhagyel's own rather unique status within the group as a professor of literature at the Northwest University for Nationalities.

⁹⁵ Wu (2013) notes that there were certain articles of a similar tone that preceded Zhokdung's by several years. None of them, however, sparked the kind of heated discussion that Zhokdung's work did (206-210). Hartley's (2002) respondents also reached this same conclusion (6-7). While Zhokdung and his colleagues had been interested in these topics for some years (Wu 2013: 221), it was not until the publication of “Blood-letting” that a movement began in earnest.

Shi, and Chen Duxiu, praising their critical approach to the monolith of “tradition,” particularly in Lu Xun’s critique of the national character (Byang skar 2005: 34-36). Chen Duxiu’s seminal 1915 essay “A Call to Youth” (*Jinggao qingnian* 敬告青年), directly quoted by Meché, serves equally well as a manifesto for the Tibetan essay movement: “Be independent, not servile; Be progressive, not conservative; Be scientific, not superstitious” (Me lce 2003: 167).

“Blood-letting,” Zhokdung’s initial article from 1999, set the tone for all of the work that followed by unleashing a bold and broad-ranging condemnation of what he called negative “old tendencies” (*bag chags rnying pa*)⁹⁶ in Tibetan society. As he elaborates in his first book, *The Call of Reason* (2001), Tibetans have “blundered through” (*hol rgyug thod rgal*) history, meaning that, while Europe developed in gradual stages, Tibet stagnated, then in one leap passed from “slave society” to “socialist society” without the intervening periods of feudalism or capitalism (Zhogs dung 2001: 76-86). A crucial exception in their historical analysis must be noted, however, and that is the essayists’ view of the Tibetan empire. We need not go into length on this point, as, to all intents and purposes, the reasons for their preoccupation with this period of Tibetan history are precisely the same as Döndrup Gyel’s (see Chapter Two). That is to say, in a classically nationalist sense, they construct it as a golden age when Tibet was powerful, innovative, progressive, meritocratic, and open to the world – in short, it conforms to virtually all of their ideals and present aspirations. In their view, Tibet was not *always* weak and impotent; rather, it suffered a steep decline after the imperial period, and the most significant cause of this decline was the rise of Buddhism. I suggested previously that the empire appealed to Döndrup Gyel as a time of ‘secular’ power on which to anchor a Tibetan national identity divorced from religion. With the essayists,

⁹⁶ As with much of the essayists’ vocabulary, their use of this term *bag chags* is often rather idiosyncratic and it could be rendered in a number of ways (“mentality,” “dispositions,” “habits,” etc.). Hartley (2002) translates the term as “propensities.” Wu (2013) uses both “thought” and “schema” (222-223).

this is unquestionably the case, as they equate the period explicitly with a “humanist” spirit that was ruined, along with Tibetans’ national stature, by the subsequent dominance of Buddhist thought (Zhogs dung 2001: 42, 64; 2005: 100, 249; Nyi gzhon 2005: 47-55, 167-212; Me lce 2014a: 6; Byang skar 2005: 59). Following Döndrup Gyel’s lead, the essayists adopt a more typical form of nationalist connection with an idealized past, here breaking with the atypical (from the perspective of nationalist theory) strains of May Fourth tradition that by and large rejected China’s historical heritage wholesale.

The past aside, Zhokdung contends that Tibetans now find themselves in the same historical situation as native Americans 300 years ago, or as the (Han) Chinese 100 years ago (Zhogs dung 2001: 82-83). In other words, Zhokdung argues in “Blood-letting” that Tibet is in a state of crisis, mired in the old, which represents “ruin, exhaustion, decline, degeneration, decay,” and in desperate need of moving towards the new, which represents “birth, development, flourishing, perseverance, repletion” (Zhogs dung 2001: 2). He calls for a “revolt in thought” (*bsam blo'i steng gi 'os langs*) and a concerted “struggle” (*phag 'tshags*) through which Tibetans must “make a new wound on this old cancer of our tendencies” (3-4). Zhokdung singles out a number of Tibetan cultural habits for attack beyond what we might call strictly ‘Buddhist’ elements (though, as Martin Mills’ [2003] theory of “chthonic consciousness” shows, local cultural ideologies are inextricably bound to, and often control, Buddhist practices in Tibet). Zhokdung discusses these tendencies at length, and the targets of his attack include Tibetans’ belief in “primitive gods and demons” (*ya thog lha 'dre*) and Tibet’s “primitive civilization” (*ya thog shes rig*) (Zhogs dung 2001: 27-34).

The critique of Tibetan Buddhism presented by Zhokdung and his colleagues is wide-ranging, encompassing both its philosophical principles and its social realities. A specific instance

of the essayists' critique of Döndrup Gyel can also be found in this regard, as Meché reads Döndrup Gyel's famed story "Trülku" (discussed in Chapter Two) as flawed because its antagonist turns out to be a *fake* trülku, and therefore the real trülku system, its origins, historical background, and consequences for Tibetan society, escapes critical reflection (Nyi gzhon *et al* 2010: 141). It thus falls to the essayists to pick up the baton and push what Döndrup Gyel started through to its conclusion. The trülku system, as a religious and social institution unique to Tibet, is a prime subject of their scrutiny. In *The Spirit of Critique*, Gyen Sanggyé Döndrup devotes a whole chapter to the system of recognizing reincarnations. He argues that ordinary Tibetans are in the thrall of the trülku, a clear sign of "backwardness," "ignorance," and a "nation lacking in rationality," and what Tibet really needs is not trülkus, but artists, scientists, and "humanist" thinkers like Gandhi, Einstein, Lincoln, Shakespeare, and Beethoven ('Gyan sangs rgyas don grub 2005: 164-165). Jangkar, with a sense of almost bemused exasperation, bemoans Tibetans' unshakeable conviction in the concept of reincarnation, citing the contemporaneous claims that Queen Victoria was an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Jetsun Dolma and that Bill Clinton was an incarnation of the Jamyang Shepa (Byang skar 2005: 2-3). Zhokdung's first book addresses the history and social implications of the trülku system head on. Lamas and trülkus, he asserts, have "become 'universal kings' who control the entirety of Tibetan society," a "dominant class" that has created a self-perpetuating system of profit and power. His final word on the matter is unequivocal: "The day the continuity (*rgyun*) of that system is cut from its roots is the day the seeds of the Tibetan people's hopes bloom" (Zhogs dung 2001: 150-153).

At a lecture in Lanzhou, Zhokdung was asked to explain the oppositional stance set forth in his essay, and he offered a supplement to his original analysis: the trülku is an "object of prostration," and the act of prostration is a symbol of inequality. Would anyone prostrate to the

president of the United States, he reasons, or to Jiang Zemin 江泽民? Zhokdung tells his audience he would not prostrate even to the Panchen and Dalai lamas – he would shake their hands (Zhogs dung 2005: 246-248). In a later essay, “Prostration Is the Nature of Slavery Itself,” he expands on this theme, taking prostration as a metonymy for Tibet’s psychological ills: it signifies fear of the spirits controlling the natural environment, fear of lamas and trülkus, and represents precisely the equality, rights, and freedoms that Tibetans lack and need to pursue (Zhogs dung 2008: 100-118). To Zhokdung, prostration embodies, quite simply, “a master-slave relationship”⁹⁷ (Zhogs dung 2005: 247).

The idea of “slavery” or “servility” as the Tibetans’ root affliction is a recurring theme in all of these works. Zhokdung uses the term “slavish mentality” (*bran g.yog gi 'du shes*) in his initial essay and it resurfaces throughout the essayists’ writings. The term in its various guises functions as a shorthand indicating a mode of thinking bequeathed by Tibetan (Buddhist) history, manifest in practices and concepts such as prostration and refuge, that restricts innovation, denies fundamental rights, and reduces Tibetans to a reliance on their religio-cultural “masters” (Zhogs dung 2001: 10-11, 86-89; Byang skar 2005: 31). This notion of Tibetan “slavery” is closely bound to one of the most prominent and perennial concerns of the late Qing and Republican eras. Not only did “slavery” seem to provide thinkers of that time with an appropriate designation for China’s subjugation in the global order, under the guise of “slave mentality,” it also developed into a metaphor for the deep-structure faults of the Chinese psyche that allowed that subjugation to take place. Following Liang Qichao’s discussion of China’s “slave character,” it became ubiquitous among leading revolutionaries such as Chen Duxiu and Zou Rong 邹容 (Sun 21-22; Tsu 2005: 74). The idea of “slavery” also played a major role in literary discourse. Lin Shu’s 林纾 translation

⁹⁷ *Bran g.yog dang bran g.yog bdag po bar gyi 'brel ba.*

of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which rendered the title as *The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven* (*Heinu yutian lu* 黑奴吁天录), was adapted into a play of the same name performed by the Spring Willow Society (*Chunliu she* 春柳社) in 1907, a moment widely recognized as the birth of modern Chinese drama (Ammirati 2019: 165-166; Tsu 2005: 56-58). Of course, one of the most significant examples is Ah Q, whose servile mentality rarely fails to pass without mention. Lu Xun (2017) also likened Chinese history to one of slavery (145), and the prominence of the idea in national character critiques picked up where Liang Qichao left off (Foster 2006: 45). The late Qing/Republican provenance of the essayists' "slavery" discourse is unmistakable, and as we will see below, it lent itself equally well to the logical next step of civilizational comparisons.

As the arguments above suggest, Zhokdung's approach to Tibetan religion, and Tibetan culture in general, can be described in largely binary terms. One binary above all others is at the heart of the essay movement: the opposition between *lha chos* (the religious) and *mi chos* or *'jig rten*⁹⁸ (the human or the worldly). As Zhokdung writes in *The Call of Reason*, Tibetans "know absolutely nothing but religious culture. What we have is religious culture, and religious culture is our everything" (Zhogs dung 2001: 84). *Lha chos* is used as a catch-all concept, what Nyizhön, employing one of their preferred terms, describes as a "cultural mentality" or "spirit" (*snying stobs*) that essentially represents the entire spectrum of Tibetan religious and spiritual culture (Nyi gzhon 2005: 167). Zhokdung defines *lha chos* as backwards, even pre-civilizational – in the hyperbolic fashion that is sometimes his wont, he claims that, out of the thousands of nations of the world, "the very last to become familiar with humanistic civilization (*mi chos dpal yon*) were the Tibetans" (Zhogs dung 2001: 84-85).

⁹⁸ In "Blood-letting," Zhokdung makes this distinction using the term *mi chos*. In his later work the term *'jig rten* becomes more common.

If *lha chos* stands for everything that is wrong with Tibet, then the “worldly” or “human/humanistic” represents its salvation. In his earliest work, Zhokdung sets up this opposition and declares the human and worldly to be the guiding lights of his thinking:

What I’m talking about I say from the perspective of the worldly (*jig rten*), not from the perspective of the religious (*chos*). What I’m talking about I say from the perspective of life (*tsho gnas*), not from the perspective of nirvana. What I’m talking about I say from the perspective of the humanistic (*mi chos*), not from the perspective of the spiritual (*lha chos*). What I’m talking about is the question of the progress and development of the nation (*mi rigs*). [...] No matter what, the humanist person must have the following kind of mentality: my living in this world is for the sake of myself (*bdag*) and not for the no-self (*bdag med*). My living in this world is for the sake of my body and mind and not for my consciousness. My living in this world is for the sake of the individual human (*mi bu*⁹⁹ *rang nyid*) and not for the sake of gods and demons. (Zhogs dung 2001: 73-74)

When discussing the Tibetan national character, Dū Lhagyel conceived of *anātmān* as an obstacle to Tibetan development because it denies reality. In his work, Zhokdung extends that to every aspect of Buddhism. “Faith,” he says, “is simply in contradiction with the tradition of worldly humanism (*jig rten mi chos*)” (Zhogs dung 2005: 6). To the Buddhist, life is but a means to the end of liberation; but to the humanist, life is the end in itself (98).

Zhokdung’s binary of the religious and the worldly entails a radical transvaluation of what is signified by these terms in Buddhist philosophy. Zhokdung does not use alternatives to Buddhist terminology: *jig rten* is the transitory, physical universe of Buddhist cosmology, the mundane realm that one seeks to transcend. In a note on his use of the term, Zhokdung also adds the possible synonyms *’khor pa* (someone from the cycle of samsara) and *khyim pa* (“householder” or layman), the former being a distinctly Buddhist concept, the latter also possessing a religious connotation by omission (i.e., layman as opposed to clergy) (Zhogs dung 2005: 43). Zhokdung does not attempt

⁹⁹ One of a number of neologisms used by the essayists. Literally “human” (*mi*) and “son/child” (*bu*). According to Wu (2013), this term is taken from the Chinese *renzi* 人子, and its intention is to show “that they place their faith in human capacity rather than in any nonhuman entity” (268).

to sidestep the Buddhist connotations of the vocabulary he uses – on the contrary, he welcomes them (Zhogs dung 2001: 61-62; 2008: 215-216). He does this intentionally, in order to invest the Buddhist terms for the samsaric world with new meaning by associating them with modern, secular humanism, thereby transforming them into positive concepts and desirable goals. Simultaneously, the most sacred goals of Buddhist practice – liberation/nirvana – are recast as possessing indifference, often outright hostility, towards basic humanistic happiness. In this manner, the religious-worldly binary as it is used by these writers borrows the terminological and conceptual logic of the Buddhist world order only to completely invert its value system.

As indicated by Zhokdung’s initial category of “old tendencies,” another frequently employed binary is that of the “old” and the “new” (sometimes also the “traditional” [*srol rgyun*] and the “modern” [*deng rabs*]). In another nod to the May Fourth inspirations of his first essay, Zhokdung revives Lu Xun’s famed “outcry/call to arms” (*nahan* 呐喊), calling on Tibetans to “destroy the fortress of the old tendencies of our minds” and to establish a new culture through a “powerful struggle” led by a “great cry” (Zhogs dung 2001: 7) – indeed, “The Cry of Struggle” (*Phag 'tshag gi nga ro*) was Zhokdung’s initial and preferred title for the essay (Hartley 2002: 1n2). In another significant adoption of May Fourth ideology and rhetoric, Zhokdung’s polarization of the old and the new is also conceptualized as a generational struggle. In two essays on the subject of parents and education, he charges the older generation with responsibility for passing on the tendencies he so forcefully denounces. Zhokdung sees parents as the conduits of *lha chos* culture; it is from them that children first learn about incense offerings, prayer flags, and tantric empowerments, and most of all it is parents that inculcate the “servile mentality” of

prostration (Zhogs dung 2001: 99-131).¹⁰⁰ For May Fourth writers, generational conflict was arguably a more logical issue to tackle due to the primacy of filial piety in Confucian culture, and the extent to which it is stressed by Zhokdung and others serves to highlight the imprint of May Fourth culture on their work. Throughout their essays, we see the advocacy of youth as a symbol of socio-political rejuvenation and hear the Madman's call to "save the children." Even the title of one of the primary journals to have arisen out of the movement, *New Youth* (*Na gzhon gzar ba*), takes its name from its famed predecessor, *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (*La Jeunesse* or *New Youth*).¹⁰¹

Zhokdung further subsumes his analysis of the maladies of Tibetan tradition under the umbrella of "unique culture" (*thun mong ma yin pa'i rigs gnas*), a catch-all term for much of what has been discussed above: the personification and reverence of mountains, the use of prayer flags, smoke and dough offerings, the depiction of deities in thangka paintings, and above all, reincarnation and its reification in the form of the trülku (Zhogs dung 2001: 96-98). Zhokdung's understanding of "unique culture" adopts categories of Tibetan tradition that would be valorized by Tibetan cultural conservatives, only to then condemn them, in much the same way that "national essence" (*guocui* 国粹) scholars attempted to preserve an essentialized notion of China's unique culture, which was then overturned by the self-critical essentialization of May Fourth intellectuals. The "unique culture" argument also serves another purpose: to sever the idea of a Tibetan nation from Tibetan Buddhism. As I argued in Chapter Two, part of Döndrup Gyel's nationalist project can be understood as an attempt to forge the idea of a Tibetan nation, a *mirik*, that exists independently from Tibet's most prominent form of in-group identity: its religion. If Döndrup Gyel

¹⁰⁰ Lu Xun was also concerned with the question of how to emancipate the younger generation through reformed parenting, a problem he treated in "How to Conduct Ourselves as Fathers Today" (*Women xianzai zenme zuo fuqin* 我们现在怎么做父亲) (2005: 1: 134-149).

¹⁰¹ Nyizhön also compares the journal *Eastern Conch Mountain* to the May Fourth publications *New Youth* and *The Renaissance* (*Xin chao* 新潮) (Nyi gzhon 2005: 81-82).

planted the seeds for this idea, there is no doubt that it grew to fruition in the works of the essayists. Addressing the association of Tibetan “unique culture” with Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism, Zhokdung counters that this is *Buddhist* culture, a pan-national form of identity like Christianity or Islam, meaning “there is nothing more laughable” than to claim it as one’s own “unique culture” (Zhogs dung 2001: 95-96). Jangkar reinforces this point with his own mordant touch: if being a Buddhist is a sign of being a Tibetan (*bod pa*), he reasons, then Buddhists in China, India, and South Asia are Tibetan – even some Caucasian Westerners are Tibetan. Conversely, ethnically Tibetan Christians in Yunnan are presumably not Tibetan (nor, we might add, are ethnically Tibetan Muslims) (Byang skar 2005: 64, 107).

Both Jangkar and Zhokdung seek to pry the concept of “faith” (*dad pa*) from the nation, which according to Jangkar predates the arrival of Buddhism, thus making religion a “personal” and non-national affair (Byang skar 2005: 64-65; Zhogs dung 2005: 1-3). Their challenge was to establish the primacy of the “Tibetan” (*bod pa*) as a free-standing nationalist signifier divorced from the “Buddhist” (*nang pa*). This problem of separating a pan-national religion from the specifics of national identity was common to many nationalist movements, particularly in Islamic societies such as Turkey. It is, however, also a way in which Tibetan intellectual nationalism is distinct from its Chinese counterpart. While late Qing intellectuals lamented the Chinese lack of national consciousness and May Fourth writers attacked Confucian philosophy, Confucianism did not operate as a monolithic form of in-group identity to the same extent that Buddhism did (and does) in Tibet (though there are also numerous deep divisions within the broader framework of ‘Tibetan Buddhism’). Nevertheless, it was Chinese nation-building experiences that remained the touchstone for the Tibetan essayists. To the view that without “Tibet’s unique culture” there is no “Tibetan nation” (*bod mi rigs*) Meché retorts that without the creation of new culture there will be

no “Tibet” (*bod*) left in the world, and above all, it is this lesson that Tibetans must learn from the spirit of May Fourth: the imperative of innovation (Me lce 2003: 168-169).

It is said that Döndrup Gyel received threats for the supposedly anti-religious nature of his story “Trülku,” so it is unsurprising that there were negative reactions to Zhokdung’s much more extreme articles. What the authors perhaps did not expect was the intensity of the backlash. Luran Hartley (2002) reports that, following the publication of Zhokdung’s first two essays in *Qinghai Tibetan News*, the newspaper received more than forty articles and letters in response, as well as two death threats by telephone (2). By May 2000, a year after their publication, Party officials instructed the editors of the paper to curb the discussion (15-16). Soon after, however, Zhokdung and his colleagues moved on to other fora, notably book publishing and public lecturing, but, if anything, the backlash only grew. In a lecture given in 2006, Meché remarked that their *Series of the Self* and other texts had been published in order to foment “a healthy and open environment of cultural critique,” yet, much to his surprise, it resulted in people “disparaging, harassing, provoking, picking fault with us and casting aspersions on our backgrounds.” He adds that the criticism had spread beyond themselves as individual writers, highlighting online attacks on the journal *Eastern Conch Mountain* and the Northwest University for Nationalities in Lanzhou. This institution is closely associated with the essayists and with radical thinking in general,¹⁰² and opponents of the movement labelled its students “disgraces to Tibet” (*bod kyi zhabs 'dren mkhan*) and “heretics” (*lta log pa*) (Me lce 2008: 160-163). Some teachers and students, Zhokdung also acknowledges, were unhappy with his binary divisions of Tibetan society, and most students found

¹⁰² The Northwest University for Nationalities was one of the epicenters of new intellectual activity, renowned for its progressive leanings and vibrant culture of debate (see Wu 2013: 195-198). In addition to Dū Lhagyel, who is a professor of literature at the university, many of the essayists were connected to it (Zhokdung, for instance, studied there from 1986 to 1990). *Eastern Conch Mountain* was founded by students at the university, and after the emergence of Zhokdung’s articles it became one of the prime venues for critical essays on “new thought.”

his tone “too extreme” (Zhogs dung 2001: 60-62). This was in fact the social group least likely to be averse to his point of view; “stupid,” (*col chung*) “ignorant,” (*shes med*), and “crazy talk” (*smyon gtam*) were some of the epithets directed at him by others (Zhogs dung 2005: 356).

Some took it further still, comparing the group to the Red Guards and labelling them “the Dharma destroyers of Xining” (*zi ling gi chos gtor tshogs pa*) (Nyi gzhon 2005: 250). The Red Guard comparisons are more than merely passing; there has been a perception that these writers were actively trying to revive the politics, and indeed the policies, of the Cultural Revolution. Publicly, Zhokdung’s call to destroy the old was interpreted quite literally by some, and the group found themselves combatting charges that they wanted to burn books, destroy monasteries, and disrobe monks (Byang skar 2005: 68). In the academic realm, too, the essayists have faced harsh censure from those who see their ideas as nothing more than a reheating of Maoist ideology. Though he acknowledges the May Fourth influence, Wu Qi (2013) nevertheless insists that “the basic foundation of the New Thinkers is in accord with that of the Chinese Cultural Revolution” (228). This argument is made firstly on the basis of their upbringing (Zhokdung was three years old when the Cultural Revolution began, and thirteen when it ended) (227). Zhokdung’s materialist philosophy was essentially Marxist, Wu contends, while the Cultural Revolution itself gave them “the courage to attack their own traditional culture and norms” (213). Further comparisons are made between the ideology and terminology employed by Zhokdung and that of Mao’s political campaigns. Wu (2013) equates the four “old tendencies” that Zhokdung identifies with the “four olds” (*si jiu* 四旧) (225), while Lobsang Yongdan believes that most of the essayists’ key terms (“conservatism” [*rnying zhen*], “youth” [*gzhon nu*], “spirit” [*snying stobs*]) were products of the Cultural Revolution (Blo bzang yon tan 2015). On a surface level, there appears to be some validity to these terminological connections. The notion of “slavery” (or serfdom) was a pillar of Chinese

Communist discourse on Tibet, perhaps most notably captured in the 1963 film *The Serf* (*Nongnu* 农奴, Tib. *Zhing bran*). We might also consider the idea of Tibetan “backwardness” (*rjes lus*), which Tsering Shakya (2008) sees as fundamental to understanding Chinese rule in Tibet (61).

However, while we may not completely dismiss some of these provenances, these readings do not hold up to closer scrutiny. The connections drawn between Zhokdung’s discourse and the Cultural Revolution are superficial; where it really matters – on a political and intellectual level – these claims are not plausible. From the very beginning, Zhokdung declared the provenance of his ideology in no uncertain terms by tying his first article to the anniversary of May Fourth, and as we shall see below, his later work openly attacked Chinese Communism and opposed it to May Fourth values. Much of what they called for was in fact fundamentally in opposition to Maoism: the rejuvenation of society via an elite intellectual vanguard, educated in liberal Western humanist theory and in favor of an individualist/nationalist cultural revival. The Tibetan essayists adopted the positions of May Fourth humanism from before left-wing ideology came to dominate Chinese thought, and the ideals they espoused were the kinds that had already been rejected by Mao in the Yan’an talks (1942). Mao condemned petty bourgeois liberalism, intellectuals and “specialists” who sought to dictate to the masses rather than learn from them, and writers who still held to the notions of “abstract freedom, abstract truth, abstract human nature” (McDougall 1980): all points that describe the standpoint of Zhokdung and his colleagues.

The essayists have also addressed these accusations directly, denying the influence of Marxism and the Cultural Revolution on their thought (Wu 2013: 228). These denials are indeed persuasive, as they interpret the Cultural Revolution as fundamentally opposed to their ideas due to its attack on innate human rights and the freedom to criticize (Nyi gzhon 2005: 94-95, 250-251). Nyizhön, turning the tables on his accusers, responds that during the Cultural Revolution the

destruction of religion became a religion in itself, and that the label of “class enemy” was no different from “heretic” or “*kafir*.” As they are the victims of labelling, he reasons, it would be more appropriate to say that their critics are the ones resurrecting the spirit of the Cultural Revolution (Nyi gzhon 2005: 255-256). Zhokdung has also vehemently rejected these comparisons and has defended his critiques as being motivated by a strong attachment to his own people (Zhogs dung 2001: 48). Such was the intensity of the objection to Zhokdung’s work that his first book contains no less than three essays of clarifying remarks on his positions. “When I say that we must change our old tendencies, I mean from the point of view of mental or thought culture” (Zhogs dung 2001: 74), he stresses. In other words, their “struggle” is not a Maoist class struggle or a call to political action, it is an intellectual-cultural “struggle.” In a later essay confronting these lingering perceptions, Zhokdung tells the story of a youth he encountered in 2002 who proudly informed him that he had destroyed a traditional altar. When Zhokdung asked him why, the man replied, “because I am a follower of your thought.” Zhokdung proceeds to chastise him for his misunderstanding, explaining that destroying the *physical* artefacts of old culture is “no different from the Cultural Revolution,” and concludes his essay with the undeniably innocuous suggestion to “start from oneself, dedicate oneself to knowledge, read books, and in addition, consider things carefully” (Zhogs dung 2005: 155-161).

We must also be careful not to assume predictable directions for Tibetan intellectual development to take. Simply because Tibetans came under the rule of China, it was not therefore inevitable that Tibetan literary and intellectual culture would become defined by Chinese thought, be it Maoist or May Fourth. While it is natural that Tibetans’ inclusion in Chinese society might lead to a disproportionate influence of Chinese thinkers, there is nothing to suggest that other avenues of intellectual expression were not available. By way of illustrating this point, we might

look to the strategies of nationalist self-assertion employed by other minorities in the PRC. Litzinger (2000) and Mueggler (2001) both offer alternative pictures of non-Han Chinese peoples negotiating the role of their cultures in the modern world and their relationship to the Chinese state. In what Litzinger describes as a complex process of “post-socialist belonging,” Yao elites in the 1980s began to write themselves into the history of modern China through re-presentations of their own traditional history as well as their role in the Chinese revolution. Mueggler shows how the popular beliefs and practices of the Yi helped them to exorcize the traumas of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, thereby finding new functions for their tradition, as well as finding their peace with and their place in the modern Chinese state.

Both examples illustrate how tradition can coexist with an assertion of ethnic pride – or even form the basis of it. By contrast, Zhokdung asserts a radical May Fourth-style agenda of self-critique that positions Tibetan tradition as the obstacle to modernity. His argument is, in a sense, both a cooptation and a rejection of the Chinese state narrative of diverse ethnicities each with their own unique, safe, and packageable cultures – the phenomenon of internal orientalism described by Schein (1997) and Gladney (1994). Zhokdung is not concerned with the essentialization of his culture by Han outsiders, but he is deeply concerned by the manner in which Tibetans valorize that culture, and he responds by offering an essentialized version of his own which he then repudiates. In other words, his form of nationalism is built around a vehement rejection of the very pride in traditional ethnic culture that the official state narrative suggests he should have.

In taking this iconoclastic approach to a monolithic conception of Tibetan tradition, Zhokdung signals the unmistakable manner in which his critique is founded in the particularities of China’s May Fourth legacy. Scholars have offered a number of broad definitions of this cultural

attitude. At a basic level, it is the writer's "obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease" (Hsia 1961; Lee 2002: 142-143), which has been seen by many as a novel, even unique, phenomenon (Lin 1972: 26-27). Beyond this well-known conception, we can also highlight that this singular "cultural masochism" characterized Chinese national self-definition; what Tsu (2005) calls the mentality of "failure," a "mode of nationalistic and cultural sensibility through which 'nation' as an identity is experienced" (31, 231n18). This is what Foster (2006), in a similar vein, terms "ironic nationalism," a "distinctly different" version of nationalist discourse in which intellectuals engaged in conceptual nation building efforts precisely *through* negative critiques of Chinese culture (19-20). Zhokdung and his colleagues have followed in the footsteps of this tradition by forging a Tibetan nationalist discourse out of cultural self-criticism. Of all the choices available to them, these writers elected to shape a Tibetan nationalism inspired neither by Tibetan tradition (the Tibetan empire aside) nor by Maoism, but by the self-critique of China's early modern nationalist thought.

5.4 Backwardness and Civilizational Ranking

Inherent in all of these arguments about traditional Tibetan culture is a narrative that we encountered both in the work of Döndrup Gyel and in the discourse of Tibetan national character: in a word, backwardness. In most cases the essayists do not make a case for Tibetan backwardness, they take what Döndrup Gyel called the "ignorant and backwards condition" (Dgu rong spun grol 2011: 1) of the Tibetan nation as a given and build their arguments on that assumption. They also view the world in social Darwinist terms as one of competing nations and civilizations, some "advanced" (*sngon thon*) and some "backwards" (*rjes lus*), where it is possible, through great struggle, for a nation to advance its position in the world order. What they add to Döndrup Gyel's nationalism is an element of direct civilizational comparison that, in line with their chosen medium

of the essay, seeks to back up these claims with the ‘empirical’ approach of a social scientist, as opposed to the rhetorical voice of a poet. This is a core argument of Zhokdung’s first essay, presented with a twist reminiscent of China’s nationalist narrative of “one hundred years of national humiliation” (*bainian guochi* 百年国耻):

More than 400 years have passed since the Renaissance of European civilization, and more than 100 years have passed since the beginning of the Japanese civilization's Meiji Restoration. Similarly, if we compare ourselves to the New Culture Movement in China, undertaken with an axis of new thought fastened to the wings of Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science, who can deny that our defeat and loss has now lasted nearly 100 years? (Zhogs dung 1999; trans. adapted from Hartley 2002: 21-22)

The most obvious examples of “advanced nations” in this model are any countries of “the West” (Europe, North America, Australia, etc.), as well as Japan (the Meiji Restoration is one of their most frequently cited historical periods). However, China and India are also now included in the advanced category (Zhogs dung 2001: 5-6, 58). China, having undergone cultural modernization in the early 20th century, and having become since then an economic powerhouse, earns the title of “advanced,” and this, as I argued was the case with Döndrup Gyel, underscores the extent to which the essayists stress a discourse of nation that treats Tibetans as entirely separate from their state. In other words, the “advanced” nature of China as a state is entirely unrelated to the “backwardness” of Tibetans as a nation.

Where does this leave Tibetans on the scale? Zhokdung contends that the skipping of historical stages caused by Tibet’s sudden absorption into the People’s Republic (and by extrapolation the modern world) has done nothing to alter the “backwards” Tibetan mindset. Tibetans are, in short, at the lowest possible rung of the civilizational ladder. In an essay on the subject of religious offerings, Zhokdung sets out his view of appropriate civilizational comparisons for Tibet. After offering a historical survey of the ritual offering practices of Native Americans (*en tis 'an pa* – “Indians”) including animal and human sacrifices, he concludes that “in the modern

world there is probably no-one on earth apart from Indians and Tibetans who cling to the offering traditions of primitive peoples and who are idiotic enough to burn animals alive for the sake of faith” (Zhogs dung 2005: 136). He even compares Tibetan and Native American clothing to make his point. Tibetan jewelry and Tibetan attire, he says, “always remind me of the savage peoples (*dmu rgod mi rigs*) who live in the jungles and mountains of Africa and the Indians of America” (171). The preference for ornaments of stone or bone and clothes of animal skin represents to Zhokdung a lag in human development, an unsettling echo of primordial life; it “can represent nothing but the primitive, the historical, the barbaric, ignorance (*mun 'thoms*), savagery, backwardness, a lack of civilization, and a lack of thought” (172). He goes on to bemoan the insistent link that television, radio, magazines, and so on form between Tibetanness and traditional costume and makes an impassioned call for Tibetans to give up wearing animal skin, particularly the skins of endangered species, which he argues is out of step with modern environmentalism (Zhogs dung 2005: 177).¹⁰³

At the beginning of his fourth book, *The Division of Heaven and Earth* (*Gnam sa go 'byed*, discussed below), Zhokdung recaps his earliest comparisons between the dynamic development of Euro-America and the closed, conservative stagnation of Tibet (Zhogs dung 2009: 4-10; 2001: 76-85). In a foreword to the English edition of the book, Françoise Robin warns the “well-wishing and perhaps naïve Western reader” about the dubiousness of these claims:

This ranking of cultures according to their rank of ‘civilization’ is not accepted in the West anymore, but is still prevalent in China. It is no wonder that [Zhokdung], having lived in a Chinese environment and read books available in Chinese translation, has to some extent interiorized some features of the dominant gaze. (Zhogs dung 2016: xxv)

¹⁰³ In 2006, four years after this article was written, the Dalai Lama called for Tibetans to renounce the practice of wearing animal skin on the grounds of wildlife conservation and Buddhist compassion towards animals. Unlike Zhokdung’s article, the Dalai Lama’s comments had an enormous impact, leading to the mass burning of animal-skin clothing across Tibetan areas in China (see Yeh 2013).

What is the meaning of the connection with this alleged Chinese viewpoint, the “dominant gaze”? Is it the socialist gaze that labels Tibetans as backwards in materialist, developmental terms? Is it the post-socialist, internal orientalist gaze that exoticizes and commodifies? Perhaps it is both, and, as was the case with the discourse of Tibetan national character, it is certainly likely that Chinese representations of Tibetan backwardness filtered into their subsequent self-critique. But do either of these gazes imply a “Chinese” habit of civilizational ranking that ranges from the developed West to the savage Tibetan?

Such a view did indeed exist at one time, but in a specific historical context, and that is the period of Chinese history from which Zhokdung draws most inspiration: the late Qing and Republican intellectual encounter with the colonialist Western world. It is the dominant gaze of Western imperialism as refracted through its Chinese reproduction that Zhokdung’s civilizational ranking most resembles. Civilizational – or more accurately, racial – ranking, inspired by social and historical readings of the theory of evolution (Pusey 1983), was ubiquitous in late Qing and Republican intellectual discourse. Social Darwinist thinking inspired the construction of a worldview in which the white race was globally dominant, the black, red, and brown races were “inferior” (*liezhong* 劣种), and the yellow race occupied a middle ground. The goal was thus to push the Chinese race towards the apex of the rankings, i.e., towards the white race and away from the black, red, and brown races (Tsu 2005: 68-78). Evolutionary views of racial development and competition, in one form or another, were held by virtually all major late Qing thinkers, including Liang Qichao, Tang Caichang 唐才常, Yan Fu 严复, and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎. Lin Shu’s interest in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, noted above, came about precisely due to his reading of the black slave’s fate as a warning to China. Zhokdung’s worldview parallels Chinese social Darwinist thinking extremely closely, though with one major difference: Tibetans in fact assign themselves a position

even lower than the self-image of Chinese intellectuals. To the latter, inferior races existed as cautionary tales of what might befall the Chinese should they fail to advance. To Zhokdung, however, Tibetans are already at the very bottom of the order, on a par with the downtrodden “savages” of the world, the people Liang Qichao identified as the “nonhistorical races” (Sun 2002: 45).

The contrasting and ranking of civilizations points us directly toward colonialist thinking. Despite his tactic of self-denigration via the denigration of other colonized peoples, Zhokdung stops short of making comparisons between colonial situations. If China’s fear of civilizational inferiority in the late Qing and early Republican period was driven by the colonial encounter with the West, it is not a stretch to see Zhokdung’s fear of backwardness as driven by Tibet’s encounter with modern China. This is not a narrative of colonial resistance, however; his comparisons with Native Americans are fully immersed in a racialized, colonialist discourse in which Indigenous Australians, Native Americans, African tribes, and Inuit peoples simply function as terrifying mirrors of Tibetan primitiveness. The goal is not to challenge this narrative or to provide a different one, but to participate in it, distancing the Tibetan nation from the specter of the savage by moving towards Western (and Chinese) modernity.

This is what Chatterjee (1986) calls an “inherent contradictoriness” in nationalist thinking of the colonized world, a move that accepts the orientalist logic of the superiority of Western rationalism, while concurrently trying to overthrow the very system it stands for (38):

Nationalist texts were addressed both to ‘the people’ who were said to constitute the nation and to the colonial masters whose claim to rule nationalism questioned. To both, nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the conditions of the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could ‘modernize’ itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the

colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ on which colonial domination was based. (30)

In Zhokdung’s nationalism, however, he readily accepts the inferiority of his people but says little about modernizing while retaining their cultural identity. Tibet is not under Western political domination, so his work embraces its “intellectual premises” while challenging it not in the least. Substituting Western political domination with Chinese might get us closer to the phenomenon Chatterjee describes, but still, Zhokdung (at this stage) does not even consider targeting Chinese rule.

Fundamentally, the first part of the above quotation cannot apply: these Tibetan nationalist texts were not aimed at their “colonial masters” and certainly did not question their rule. By virtue of being written in Tibetan alone, they are aimed first and foremost at a Tibetan-reading public. Herein lies another aspect that ties Zhokdung’s nationalist discourse into the peculiarities of modern China. This is also an unusual feature of modern Chinese nationalism: it resembles the fraught relationship of colonialism and nationalism described by Chatterjee in its selective adoption of Western rationalism in order to challenge Western colonial domination. But on the other hand, while the ire of Chinese nationalism in its initial stages was directed outward towards colonial powers, it was directed much more forcefully towards the shortcomings of Chinese culture and the national self (Tsu 2005: 22). Tibetan intellectuals of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have followed the same path as their Chinese predecessors. Though they were (and are) more thoroughly “colonized” than their late Qing or Republican Chinese counterparts (though a type of “colonialism” that cannot be openly identified as colonial, much less condemned), their nationalism likewise turned inward and was characterized by the negative identity of “failure” and cultural self-condemnation.

5.5 Science and Democracy

The means by which Tibetans are to move up in the civilizational order (a Western-oriented rationalist modernization) were alluded to above, but there are two slogans that stand out in particular: “science” and “democracy.” Science is meant, first of all, in a very literal sense; that is, scientific knowledge, and more importantly, the material gains that would flow from an increase in scientific knowledge. In a 2002 lecture at the Northwest University for Nationalities, Jangkar declared Tibetans to be “consumers” (Byang skar 2005: 96) who do not produce things of their own:

[The Han Chinese] have things like the Four Great Inventions, and they [can] say that “this is our contribution to humanity.” From the distant past we Tibetans have done nothing but benefit from, and in the future will simply continue to benefit from, the innovative achievements of other races/nations (*rigs*). Is that not to our shame? (55)

He continues: the steel and concrete building they are sitting in, the buses and trains they took to the university, the electric lights they are using – all of these are the inventions and products of other nations. Even the clothes they wear and the beer they drink were made by the Han Chinese (96). Zhokdung, reflecting on Tibet’s history of civilizational borrowing from India, also concludes that Tibetans “have a spirit of importing culture but not a spirit of inventing culture” (Zhogs dung 2001: 167). Jangkar looks enviously to the West, whose countries were able to achieve rapid development through innovation, science, and technology (16). And yet, late 20th and early 21st century China is awash with such advancements, begging the question: why is this a pressing issue for Tibetan intellectuals? I suggested in Chapter Two that Döndrup Gyel’s pride in the technological achievements of China as a state was necessarily diminished by the fact that they were not the achievements of his nation. Once again, these writers take Döndrup Gyel’s initial observations and expand them. Now, this problem is framed fundamentally and unambiguously as a problem of the *agents* of development. The essayists can take no pride in China’s material achievements. To Jangkar and Zhokdung, living in a state where science and technology have led

to material wealth is not enough – in fact, it is not even relevant. If Tibetans benefit from that material wealth, then it is actually to their shame, as their nation had no hand in producing it.

Equally as important as the tangible benefits of economic progress is the mindset that the writers of the essay movement attribute to science. Many Tibetans, according to Meché, see science simply as material technology, as nothing more than “cars, lights, and phones.” He argues, however, that its greatest significance is “scientific thought” or the “scientific spirit”; the former incorporating “skepticism, rationality, and critique,” the latter “seeking truth from facts” and “innovation” (Me lce 2003: 172). In other words, the essayists adopt Chen Duxiu’s “faith in science” as a “positivistic method of verification controlling standards of truth about nature and society” (Furth 2002: 89). This is precisely what Zhokdung is most keen to emphasize about their interest in science: its use as a “spirit.” He goes further than Meché in defending science against its detractors, those who argue that science has also harmed humanity: “Nuclear weapons and so on were produced by scientific technology, but science is not nuclear weapons. Nor is it aeroplanes, or ships, or trains, and nor is it cars. Science is a spirit. A spirit of truth-seeking” (Zhogs dung 2005: 312-313).

Science is described elsewhere as a “culture” (*rig gnas*), a “viewpoint” (*lta stangs*), a “way of behaving” (*spyod tshul*), and a “way of thinking” (*bsam blo gtong stang*), but “spirit” remains his preferred term (Zhogs dung 2005: 22-27; Byang skar 2005: 94). This is also the term used in all of the *Series of the Self* titles, and indeed the title of Zhokdung’s volume, *The Spirit of Skepticism*, is directly linked to this scientific worldview. Its eponymous essay (Zhogs dung 2005: 9-27) argues that Tibetan Buddhist knowledge is based on concepts like faith (*dad pa*) and meditation (*sgom pa*); doubt (*the tshom*), on the other hand, is considered a “root affliction” (*rtsa nyon*) that needs to be dispelled. This sets up a binary in which religion and science become

irreconcilable opposites because Tibetan Buddhist epistemology is construed as the opposite of scientific method, which is based on empiricism, and above all, on skepticism. Zhokdung breaks the relationship down into a formula: in science, “skepticism + critique = relative truth,” in religion, “faith + spiritual practice = enlightenment” (20). Science is thus much more than the basis of material development, it is the very intellectual weapon with which religious thinking will be defeated.

As Chen Duxiu famously declared in 1919, the attack on old culture had to be two pronged: the other half of the “Mr. Science” coin was “Mr. Democracy.”¹⁰⁴ The Tibetan essay movement revives Chen’s formula whole, forging the two together as interdependent concepts: science is important, writes Jangkar, “but it cannot transform backwardness on its own. We also require democracy. Science and democracy are like a pair of wings; one wing alone cannot fly” (Byang skar 2005: 95). For him, science and democracy serve as a basis, the soil from which liberty, equality and rationality will grow (82). The term “democracy” (*dmangs gtso*) here should not be read as a call for a multiparty political system with democratic elections. It could be argued that shirking such a stance was due to political expediency, and all of these authors would certainly be aware of the danger of discussing such a thing in contemporary China. However, at the same time, the notion of “democracy” constituting a “spirit,” a political attitude as opposed to simply a political system, is also entirely in line with their discourse as a whole. Either way, this is how Jangkar defines “the essence of democracy”: as a union of the abstract ideals of “equality” and “liberty” (80). In turn, Zhokdung defines equality and liberty in terms of the individual as “something that is attained through rationality and something that is based in rationality” (Zhogs dung 2008: 257). Added to this is also a conception of “innate rights” in the classical Western

¹⁰⁴ Zhokdung also cites Chen’s famous quote in his first book (Zhogs dung 2001: 6).

liberal sense (Zhokdung cites the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the English Bill of Rights, the US Declaration of Independence, and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights [270]). As with "science," "democracy" parallels or summarizes a number of concepts, all of which are linked to the suite of elite intellectual ideals of the May Fourth Movement: as Meché defines it, May Fourth stood against "dictatorship, authority, slavishness, and ignorance" and for "liberty, equality, independence, values, the individual, rights, broad-mindedness, rationality, constitutionalism, and the rule of law" (Me lce 2014a: 89-90).

As is the case with their writings on "science," what is more significant than how they define these concepts is how they mobilize them as intellectual weapons. Democracy and the liberal, rational society the term symbolizes is fashioned into an inverse value system to Buddhism, just as Chen Duxiu crafted science and democracy into the inverse of Confucianism. In an essay on the concept of karma, for instance, Zhokdung relates a story about a Tibetan ("I") whose father has some money stolen from him in Xining. The father, unperturbed, decides it is simply his karmic lot due to his actions in a past life and does nothing. Zhokdung contrasts this with a Westerner ("He") who, upon getting his car stolen, reports it immediately to the police. Therefore, Zhokdung argues, karma "obstructs a consciousness of law," tolerates criminality, and possesses "no concept of nation, society, state, law, or even human conduct" (Zhogs dung 2008: 90-99). Of course, when treated in this manner, almost any aspect of Buddhist philosophy or culture can be posed as the opposite of any facet of Western liberalism. Jangkar does this by declaring Buddhist thought to be antithetical to equality and liberty, citing prostration and refuge as contrary to the former and the authority of lamas as contrary to the latter, which in turn allows him to conclude that "our traditional culture is an obstacle to democracy" (Byang skar 2005: 80-81).

“There is a sense,” writes C. T. Hsia, “in which modern Chinese literature is modern because it stands for progress and modernization.” Such traits may define Western civilization, but the modern literature of the West, rooted in a “repudiation of the pieties and assumptions” underlying that civilization, “betrays little joy in those positive achievements that have been the envy of every Chinese patriot.” Thus, “insofar as modern Chinese literature implicitly endorses the rational ideals of democracy and science, it would seem to have little in common with modern Western literature” (Hsia 1961: 534-536). The extent to which the essayists’ rational, scientific modernity follows the contours of modern China’s intellectual traditions is such that Hsia’s description of the overarching ideology of modern Chinese literature at its initial phase could equally apply to the intellectual movement crafted by Zhokdung and his colleagues. A Western-leaning modernism to be sure, but one that views the material, economic progress of the West through the distinctly self-critical, aspirational, even utopian lens of early Chinese modernity.

5.6 Translation and the Role of the Intellectual

There is one final parallel to draw between the works of these writers and late Qing/Republican intellectual currents, and that is the significance of *by whom* all this great social change is to be carried out. Dan Yü (2013) notes that one of the evident similarities between Zhokdung and 20th century Chinese intellectuals is the extent to which modernization can only occur through the guidance of an intellectual vanguard (161). His preliminary observation is correct, but must be pushed further. Meché identifies the arrival of what he calls the “free intellectual” (*rang dbang shes yon can*) at the start of the 21st century and the concurrent rise of a climate of radical new thought and theoretical discourse as an early sign of national development in social and civilizational terms, just “as the rain is to the soil and the seed is to the harvest.” But

intellectuals do not just herald social change – they are its instigators and leaders. He goes to some lengths to define the intellectual and their social role:

Intellectuals have taken up an important role in modern society. They dedicate themselves to society, are rich in the courage of critique, they stand on the side of truth, care about the public, possess an independent character, are free thinkers, and have a clear morality. They struggle with reality, forever standing up against the darkness of society and seek the light that dispels the dark. This is the strength of intellectuals now, and it is the ultimate value of the intellectual's "struggle." Because we have intellectuals like this, society is developing democratically, freely, equally, and peacefully. Because we have intellectuals like this, the value of the human, human rights, and human dignity are sure to become the crown of the human world. (Me lce 2008: 1-2)

Despite his optimism, he concludes his essay with a note of caution, warning that Tibetan intellectuals must choose whether or not to "shoulder the weighty duties" of society and history (9).

It is not only May Fourth ideology that serves an inspirational role for these writers, it is the very figure of the May Fourth intellectual itself. Without the intellectuals, writes Meché, there would have been no New Culture Movement in China; the May Fourth Movement was driven by intellectuals in their role as mentors to the youth and the students (Me lce 2014a: 88-92). In his early writing, Lu Xun also expressed the hope that "the people of China may yet be spared the terrible fate of national extinction through reliance on this company of learned men" (Lu Xun 2011: 43). He lauded the nationalist poet-awakeners of the West, and his description of their virtues would meet fully with Meché's approval:

they were, to a man, steadfast and unyielding guardians of truth who cherished sincerity, refusing to pander to the public or go along with established convention. Instead, they sang forth with mighty voices that they might arouse their countrymen to a new life and to make their nations great in the world. (Lu Xun forthcoming)

Now, the intellectuals and writers of early modern China are themselves added to the pantheon by Tibetans drawing inspiration from them as Lu Xun drew from Petőfi, Mickiewicz, Byron and others.

Meché argues that, as in the May Fourth Movement when intellectuals drove social change, transformations in Tibet must likewise be spearheaded by intellectuals and students (Me Ice 2003: 115, 172). To underscore just how far this vision of the intellectual harks back to the May Fourth model, it is worth recalling the role the intellectual was assigned for the first thirty years of PRC history. Mao Zedong 毛泽东 viewed the May Fourth pioneering intellectual model as a bourgeois conceit that ignored both the wisdom, and in many cases the welfare, of the masses, and numerous campaigns during his rule actively targeted the very kind of elite intellectual discussed here. In the post-socialist era, these Tibetan writers have re-assigned the masses to a role of benighted superstition and conservatism, a passive *lumpen* awaiting the intellectual awakener-guide. To Jangkar, the Tibetan masses are stubborn, uneducated, and illiterate; “they are as if blind, and have no choice but to rely on the leaders of the blind [i.e., lamas and the diktats of tradition]” (Byang skar 2005: 6-7). The essayists’ ideology certainly does not reflect that of Mao Zedong (the intellectual learning from the masses first-hand and reflecting their experiences back to them in literature), it is instead in line with the ideology of prominent late Qing and Republican thinkers of the intellectual as vanguard.

The essayists are unanimous in their regret that such figures have been so lacking in Tibetan society. There are nevertheless two prominent exceptions: Gendün Chöpel and Döndrup Gyel, both of whom are identified as their forerunners and are cast in the role of Tibet’s own May Fourth-

style pioneering intellectuals.¹⁰⁵ Meché argues that Gendün Chöpel first broke a path for the Tibetan “humanist intellectual” (*mi tshul shes yon can*, Ch. *renwen zhishifenzi* 人文知识分子), while Döndrup Gyel did the same for the “free intellectual” (*rang dbang shes yon can*, Ch. *ziyou zhishifenzi* 自由知识分子) (Me lce 2008: 2-3). With Zhokdung, Meché sees the arrival of the fully realized intellectual who is deeply concerned with the problems of nation, society, culture, and history, but at the same time “also interrogates and operates upon the flaws of the individual’s consciousness.” In other words, Zhokdung does what Meché calls “choosing the path of benefiting both the public and the individual” (Me lce 2008: 6-7). Meché argues that the whole notion of the intellectual is something new to Tibet, since Tibet never had a “revolution of knowledge.” He is careful to distinguish the concept from traditional Tibetan alternatives such as the “wise” or the “learned” one (*mkhas pa*) as encountered in Sakya Pandita’s *Entrance Gate for the Wise* (*Mkhas pa ’jug pa’i sgo*), or the various kinds of academic title and status conferred by monasteries (which account for the majority of traditional Tibet’s “learned ones”). These roles are not, in short, equatable to an “intellectual,” whose responsibility it is to instill the nation and humanity with a new, progressive consciousness (Me lce 2003: 116-120).

As with the concept of the “worldly,” a terminological transvaluation of the “intellectual” is precisely what Zhokdung aims for. He begins with the term *yon tan pa* – a knowledgeable or learned person: “Some terms must be changed and some must be invented, and still others must have new life given to their old significations. The term I am talking about here – *yon tan pa* – belongs in the latter category.” The problem, he argues, is that the Tibetan language lacks (or

¹⁰⁵ The government minister Lungshar (Lung shar rdo rje tshe rgyal) is sometimes also mentioned in this context due to his role as a modernizing politician (Nyi gzhon 2005: 34, 236; Me lce 2014a: 80; Dgu rong spun grol 2012: 75, 82-87), but the essayists are, generally speaking, far more interested in the intellectual contributions to Tibetan modernity made by Gendün Chöpel and Döndrup Gyel.

lacked) terms to describe “humanist” knowledge. In the pre-modern era, the only kind of knowledge valued in Tibetan society was religious knowledge, therefore a *yon tan pa* was someone learned solely in religious affairs. Now, he calls for a redefinition of the term as someone who has been trained or educated in a particular field of knowledge and possesses a certain intelligence or ability. If society is a house, then the *yon tan pa* are the raw materials – its concrete, wood, and steel. They are the politicians, artists, writers, teachers, engineers, scientists, doctors, journalists, and lawyers. Intellectuals (*shes yon can*), meanwhile, are the “pillars” of society, they are the architects and the supervisors of the project. They, in the modern era, are the ones that should lead society – not the reincarnate lamas or diviners of eras past (Zhogs dung 2008: 217-219). In a less metaphorical tone, he defines the intellectual as “a mental laborer who possesses a certain knowledge of culture and science” (Zhogs dung 2005: 50). This, in fact, is a definition he takes from the Chinese dictionary, as the term *shes yon can* itself is a neologism taken from the Chinese *zhishifenzi*. What becomes most significant to Zhokdung in this exchange is the potential to divorce secular and religious knowledge, and moreover to devalue religious knowledge in the process of reassigning primacy to the new humanist intellectual. This is the whole point of the *shes yon can/zhishifenzi/intellectual*: they strive not for religious knowledge, but for the humanist, the worldly. Moreover, they possess all the desired qualities with which we are now familiar: independence, a critical and skeptical spirit towards the flaws of society, a moral commitment to upholding truth, a mentality of social commitment, and so on (Zhogs dung 2005: 45-96).

I have argued so far that the work of these essayists represents a serious engagement with some of the primary strains of late Qing and May Fourth Chinese thinking. What we must not overlook, however, is that their work also represents an extensive engagement with the world at

large, which, in another sense, also lends this movement the air of the May Fourth global perspective:

As the Chinese thinker Lu Xun said, when I read Chinese (*krung go*) books,¹⁰⁶ I sink into contentment and wish to detach myself from life. When I read foreign books, I experience life and wish to take action... I think that we should read fewer Chinese books, or perhaps not read them at all, and we should read more foreign books. (Zhogs dung 2008: 85)

Zhokdung here roughly reworks Lu Xun's suggestion as he believes Tibet's intellectual climate is comparable:

As a writer, when I read Tibetan books, I read them primarily for their style or language. If I'm lucky I might get some materials for my writing, which gives me a great sense of happiness. When I read books by Chinese or foreign authors, I read primarily for content and thought. Supposing I have some small ability to think critically, I must say it is because they taught me. (Zhogs dung 2008: 86)

Zhokdung and his colleagues took Lu Xun's advice to heart, though with the ironic twist that the status of Chinese books has swapped sides.

At the start of each book in the *Series of the Self* there is a translation (from the Chinese) of the prologue to *The Liberation of Mankind* by Hendrik Willem van Loon, a Dutch-American writer, historian, and illustrator. This prologue consists of a distinctly Lu Xunian parable (it speaks to "The Passer-by" [*Guo ke* 过客] in particular) in which the "Valley of Ignorance," a place beholden to the "Old Men Who Knew" and their ancient texts and prophecies, is shaken by the return of a lone Wanderer who tells Mankind of the rich world beyond the Valley. The Old Men, crying blasphemy, have him executed. In fact, even more than Lu Xun's work, the Valley of Ignorance parable bears striking similarities to the imagery and ideology of Döndrup Gyel's "Waterfall of Youth" and "The Narrow Path." The Valley also contains a "little stream of Knowledge" trickling from the "Mountains of the Past" and making its way to the "Marshes of the

¹⁰⁶ *Zhongguo shu* 中国书 in the Chinese original (Lu Xun 2005: 3: 12).

Future.” After the river runs dry, forcing Mankind to leave the Valley, they follow the trail blazed by the Wanderer through the woods and the wilderness to the new land. The pilgrims, now living in prosperity thanks to the “brave pioneer,” return to lay a memorial stone on the path, which has since turned into a “magnificent highway.” It is by no means unlikely that Döndrup Gyel was exposed to this work, as van Loon’s writing has proved popular in Chinese translation since as early as 1929 (Van Loon 1929), with many editions of his books since appearing in translation on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

The reasons for Zhokdung’s interest in the tale are clear, but the very act of its translation is just as significant as the story’s content, because Zhokdung sees the introduction of new knowledge through translation as the very key to escaping the Valley of Ignorance. The essayists’ books are filled with references to all manner of global philosophers, historians, scientists, literary writers, politicians, artists, economists, and so on, almost all of whom they encountered in Chinese translation. Each volume of the *Series of the Self* contains a meticulous bibliography, organized alphabetically in Tibetan, citing every foreign and Chinese figure referenced in the series. There are far too many to enumerate, but for the sake of convenience we might divide them into certain distinct groups. There are the Greeks (Plato, Aristotle, Socrates); scientific and religious reformers of the European Renaissance and Reformation (Galileo, Martin Luther); European Enlightenment thinkers and American revolutionaries (Kant, Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke, Washington); Tokugawa unifiers and Meiji reformers (Oda Nobunaga, Tokugawa Ieyasu, Fukuzawa Yukichi); and late Qing and Republican intellectual and political figures (Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong 譚嗣同, Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, Cai Yuanpei, Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙, etc.). For each of these groups, there is a certain logic binding them into the narrative arc of the essayists’ agendas, starting with Greek philosophers, as it is argued that they laid the foundations for Western humanism and

rationalism. The Renaissance is stressed largely due to individuals challenging the Catholic Church's hold on knowledge through empirical means. Enlightenment thinkers receive particular attention, as it is liberal, rationalist individualism that the essay movement stresses above all. Finally, the cases of Meiji Japan and late Qing/Republican China are framed as successful (to varying degrees) East Asian adaptations and implementations of this thought.

Zhokdung and his colleagues were not content to simply absorb these influences into their own writing. A central pillar of their intellectual project was to spread and raise awareness of these works among Tibetans, particularly the youth – a very real response to the Madman's call to “save the children.” They were, in other words, also dedicated to translation and education, a corollary of their vision of the intellectual's role as the vanguard of social development. It is no stretch to say that the resulting output constitutes a full-blown movement of translation – Luran Hartley (2002) noted as much when writing about Zhokdung's emergence, referring to this as a “new wave of Tibetan translators” (14). These translations have come in a variety of forms, and almost all are from the Chinese (thus, in many cases, they are translations of translations). Meché, Nyizhön, Dü Lhagyel, and Drukmo Jam have edited a series of “enlightenment readers” for primary, middle, and university levels containing both original Tibetan and translated texts, with numerous translations from historical figures, philosophers, scholars, and so on from the West (Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Václav Havel, Einstein, Elizabeth Cady Stanton), India (Gandhi), Japan (Fukuzawa Yukichi), and China (Hu Shi, Liu Junning 刘军宁, Li Dazhao 李大钊, Yin Haiguang 殷海光, Mo Luo 摩罗) (*Blo 'byed klog deb dpe tshogs*, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c).

Further to their interest in educational reform, Zhokdung has also edited a series of translated books on Western educational practices and theories, including *The Education of Karl*

*Witte*¹⁰⁷ and *Lessons from Jewish Education*¹⁰⁸. Yet another edited series provides translations of biographies of well-known Western figures such as Helen Keller (Keller 2013). In addition, numerous individual book-length translations have also appeared, among them Rousseau's (2014) *The Social Contract* (by Gurong Pundrol, from the English translation), John Dewey's (2002) *On Education*, and the essays of Francis Bacon (2010) (both by Dü Lhagyel, from the Chinese). It also bears mentioning that pirated editions of other translations are widely available in the bookshops of Qinghai and Gansu, among them the writings of Gandhi (*Gan d+hi* n.d.) and Malcolm X (n.d.), James T. De Kay's (2017) *Meet Martin Luther King*, and Arri Eisen's¹⁰⁹ (n.d.) writings on evolution. As in the late Qing, new intellectual developments and large-scale translation go hand in hand in the Tibetan essay movement; though, rather than saying the essayists' work was driven by exposure to new material, it is more accurate to say that they themselves drove the production of that new material and drew from it simultaneously. We should not read this development as somehow reinforcing the false conception of Tibet's historical isolation from global intellectual currents, but at the same time its significance should not be missed, as much of this material is being translated into Tibetan for the first time, and as such it represents an entirely new form of Tibetan intellectual engagement with the world.

There is one final group of thinkers that makes frequent appearances in the essayists' work, and their prominence provides an appropriate conclusion to this section of our discussion. In the Tibetan reading of the modern Chinese intellectual tradition, the Chinese enlightenment did not stop with May Fourth – it was revived in the 1980s and 1990s by a group of young (Han) Chinese

¹⁰⁷ Translated by Zhokdung as *Lessons from an Education of Self-Cultivation* (*Sbyangs thob slob gso'i man ngag*) (Witte 2013).

¹⁰⁸ *Ya hu dA pa'i slob gso'i man ngag*, translated by Nyizhön (Nyi gzhon 2014). An edited selection of articles about Jewish education.

¹⁰⁹ Professor of Biology at Emory University and major figure in the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative, a program that aims to integrate scientific teaching and method with the Tibetan Buddhist curriculum.

intellectuals who began “peeling back the skin of old traditions” (Nyi gzhon 2005: 93). These are, by and large, the prominent liberals who clustered around the major universities of Beijing: Mo Luo, Yu Jie, He Xiongfei 贺雄飞, Wang Kailing 王开岭, Liu Junning and the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波.¹¹⁰ Liu Xiaobo and Yu Jie – with whom this chapter began – are particularly emphasized as the torch bearers of Chinese enlightenment thinking, especially in Meché’s writing.¹¹¹ This narrative of inheritance is by no means simply the interpretation of Tibetan intellectuals; on the contrary, these contemporary Chinese essayists were themselves very keen to stress their indebtedness to May Fourth thinking, and to Lu Xun in particular: Mo Luo’s penname is taken from Lu Xun’s essay “On the Power of Mara Poetry,” and one of Yu Jie’s most well-known books, *Cries from the Iron House* (*Tiewu zhong de nahan* 铁屋中的呐喊, 1998), takes its title from Lu Xun’s famous short story collection (and its preface).¹¹² Liu Xiaobo’s trajectory is in fact extremely reminiscent of Zhokdung’s: he came to prominence on the intellectual scene as a “black horse” known for his iconoclastic critiques of Chinese society, moved into advocacy of liberal democratic values, and eventually ran afoul of the state (Liu 2012: xiv-xxii).

What I want to emphasize here is that the work of Zhokdung and his colleagues presents a particular reading and adaptation of Chinese modernism. It begins with a selective reading of the May Fourth tradition that emphasizes a strain of liberal, nationalist, humanist values, then moves

¹¹⁰ Another writer sometimes discussed in this fashion is Bo Yang 柏杨, who resonates with the essayists for his rejection of fiction in favor of essays and his revival of a May Fourth-inspired discourse of national character, complete with the familiar aspects of slave mentality, civilizational ranking, and the fear of a social Darwinist extinction of the Chinese race (Bo Yang 1992; Nyi gzhon 2005: 126-127).

¹¹¹ The group has been accused by critics of parroting the writing of Yu Jie in particular. Allegedly, however, Yu Jie later fell out of favor with the essayists when they discovered that he had converted to Christianity (Wu 2013: 202-203). Liu Xiaobo, while not a declared Christian, also wrote about Christianity and often praised the figure of Jesus Christ (Liu 2012: 128-133).

¹¹² This title is also reflected in the original name of Zhokdung’s first article, “The Cry of Struggle,” (*Phag 'tshag gi nga ro*), as well in Meché’s book *Cries from the Thorny Path* (*Tsher ma'i lam gyi nga ro*).

directly to post-1980s liberal intellectuals – skipping, in effect, the left-wing political tradition that grew out of the May Fourth Movement and went on to dominate the entirety of 20th century Chinese politics and society. Indeed, it seems curious that, living in a socialist society that historically set itself against religion and the “four olds,” the Tibetan essayists could condemn those same things with virtually no mention of Maoist, socialist, or left-wing thought whatsoever. However, this seemingly contradictory stance makes much more sense when we see it in the light of a selective reading of modern Chinese thought.

Chatterjee is careful to point out that the connection between nationalist discourse and Western rational thought is “not a simple relation of correspondence, even of derivation”:

nationalist thought is selective about what it takes from Western rational thought. Indeed it is deliberately and necessarily selective. Its political burden, as we have said, is to oppose colonial rule. It must therefore reject the immediate political implications of colonialist thought and argue in favour of political possibilities which colonialist thought refuses to admit. [...] Thus nationalist texts will question the veracity of colonialist knowledge, dispute its arguments, point out contradictions, reject its moral claims. Even when it adopts, as we will see it does, the modes of thought characteristic of rational knowledge in the post-Enlightenment age, it cannot adopt them in their entirety, for then it would not constitute itself as a *nationalist* discourse. (Chatterjee 1986: 41-42)

If we read “Chinese” for “Western,” these observations get us very close to the dynamics of Zhokdung’s writing. Zhokdung is highly selective in how he appropriates modern Chinese thought in the creation of his own nationalist discourse. He draws extensively from May Fourth liberal traditions, yet entirely ignores Maoist theory and politics, despite the apparent overlaps between some of their positions. Zhokdung was necessarily selective in seeking to form a specifically Tibetan nationalist discourse, but was this because of the “political burden” to oppose colonial (or here, Chinese) rule? In the work I have discussed thus far, it is impossible to make such an argument; Zhokdung did not “question the veracity of colonialist knowledge” (be it May Fourth or Maoist), and nor did he “reject its moral claims.” But in 2009, with the publication of his fourth

book, that situation changed. We have seen throughout this chapter how the Tibetan essayists fashioned this selective reading into a critical discourse aimed at Tibetan tradition. It is now time to examine what happened when this discourse came into conflict with the Chinese state.

5.7 “The Saffron Revolution” and the End of the Essay Movement

At this point, our narrative must take a dramatic turn. In March 2008, major unrest swept across the Tibetan regions of China, with Tibetans participating in organized protests and marches that quickly erupted into violent clashes. It was the 49th anniversary of the 1959 uprising that drove the Dalai Lama into exile, and in the region of Amdo, it was also the 50th anniversary of the lesser-discussed, but enormously significant, 1958 Amdo uprising,¹¹³ in which Tibetans in Qinghai and Gansu had revolted against the state’s economic and social reforms and had in turn been met with brutally violent suppression from the People’s Liberation Army. Within days the unrest had spread across almost all of China’s Tibetan regions and there were protests throughout Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and the Tibet Autonomous Region.¹¹⁴

In 2009, Zhokdung released *The Division of Heaven and Earth*.¹¹⁵ The book, never formally published due to its extraordinarily incendiary content, sets out his analysis of the 2008 unrest: a celebration of Tibetan revolutionary awakening, an unflinching excoriation of the violent response, and a call for peaceful resistance to the Chinese state. He described the events of 2008 as “the Tibetan Saffron Revolution,” after the color of the monks’ robes, and “the Tibetan peaceful revolution in the Year of the Earth Mouse” after its designation in the traditional Tibetan calendar

¹¹³ As is noted in the introduction to *Division*, memory of the 1958 uprising still runs deep in Amdo (Zhogs dung 2016: xxxiii-xxxiv). In the text itself, Zhokdung cites Tsering Döndrup’s novel *The Red Wind Howls* (*Rlung dmar 'ur 'ur*, 2009) and Naktsang Nulo’s (2014) memoir *My Tibetan Childhood*, both of which discuss the events of 1958.

¹¹⁴ For more on the protests, see Barnett 2009.

¹¹⁵ This is the title used by Matthew Akester in his 2016 English translation, which features extensive introductory essays. The title points to Zhokdung’s reading of the events of 2008 as a historical watershed for Tibet and a monumental shift in cultural and political attitudes.

(Zhogs dung 2009: 1, 18). With subchapter titles such as “The Nature of Totalitarianism” and “How Tibet Became the Lord of Death’s Slaughterhouse,” it is not surprising that the author would come into conflict with the authorities; indeed he predicted as much in the book itself (“I may lose my head because of my mouth” [151]). The text circulated throughout China’s Tibetan regions and caused a sensation both at home and abroad, but within six months of its printing, copies of the book were confiscated, Zhokdung’s bookshop in Xining was shut down, and on 23 April 2010, Zhokdung was arrested on charges of “splittism” (*fenliezhuyi* 分裂主义) (Zhogs dung 2016: xx-xxi).

Division essentially offers us a concise summary of Zhokdung’s thinking up to that point. Most of his major themes are accounted for: the glorification of the Tibetan empire (14-15); the argument that Tibet lagged in historical development and belatedly woke up to the modern world in the mid-20th century (he repeats the comparative East-West historical chronology used in his first book) (6-10); critiques of Buddhism, the binary opposition of the worldly and the religious (5-6, 29, 104); the notion of Tibetans as a people with a “primitive psychology” (146-147); the awakening of the “self” (here the “racial/ethnic [*rigs rgyud*] and territorial [*sa khongs*] self” [14-15]); the cultivation of a particular “spirit” (especially the “ethnic” and “heroic” spirit of the Tibetan empire [16, 21]); and finally, the necessity of intellectuals leading social change through the dissemination of new ideas (53-55). What is remarkable about the text, however, is the new direction in which Zhokdung takes his established arguments.

Through numerous self-reflexive and self-critical turns, *Division* provides a re-evaluation of many of Zhokdung’s convictions, inspired in large part by the fact that the events of 2008 took him completely by surprise:

We are always going on about awakening, about spirit, but for it to manifest visibly and tangibly in so short a time was unimaginable. [...] this peaceful revolution threw

all my ideas into disorder and upset things in all respects. Objectively, my earlier views that Tibetans have a mean outlook and low level of awareness were completely wrong and have gone the way of all fallacies, which led me to doubt myself too. To speak with too much confidence is not just wrong but shameful, and has to be corrected with due contrition. (132-133; trans. adapted from Zhogs dung 2016: 65-66)

Zhokdung's lack of participation in the uprising left him with a sense of guilt and a drive to offer his own intellectual contribution (261). In *Division*, the repetition and affirmation of many of his previous views on Tibetan backwardness serves, in fact, to underscore that they have been overturned. Now, he defines 2008 as a turning point in Tibetan history (52), as a struggle for human rights,¹¹⁶ and secondarily a struggle for “national integrity and pride” (*mi rigs kyi khog dpung la rgya*) (4). To Zhokdung, the Saffron Revolution demonstrates that Tibetans have “discovered a consciousness of statehood, sovereignty, politics, territory, nation, and the human,” and have a newfound “awareness of liberty, equality, rights, the self, and democracy” (23).¹¹⁷ In other words, they have fulfilled his long-held aspirations for the Tibetan nation. Put in terms of the perpetual rhetoric of Tibetan intellectual nationalism from Döndrup Gyel onward, Zhokdung believed that Tibetans had finally ‘woken up.’

It could reasonably be argued that this does not exactly represent a repudiation of his convictions; on the contrary, it affirms them, arguing simply that 2008 represented the beginning of their realization. Nevertheless, *Division* also contains a major intellectual shift in Zhokdung's writing, one that has serious implications for the narrative of Tibetan nationalist discourse in China. The fourth section of the book is given over to an extensive discussion of civil disobedience

¹¹⁶ Robin (2016) notes that Zhokdung briefly discussed the concept of human rights in *Liberation Through Reasoning* (*Rigs shes kun grol*, 2008), but it did not form an important part of his thinking until *Division* (68-69). In general, a discourse of human rights in Tibetan was beginning to form within the PRC in 2008 as a reaction to the uprisings, notably in the June 2008 issue of *Eastern Conch Mountain* (72-75) and, of course, in *Division*. It deserves mentioning, however, that there were some precedents for this discussion among the essayists (e.g., Nyi gzhon 2005: 12-13).

¹¹⁷ As Wu (2013) notes, however, in his interpretation of the uprising, Zhokdung conspicuously declines to mention the extent to which it revolved around issues of religious freedom and the figure of the Dalai Lama (218).

and non-violent resistance, inspired by Gandhi and his doctrine of *satyagraha*, translated by Zhokdung as “truth-insistence” (*bden pa'i u tshugs*). On a practical level, his analysis of the Tibetan situation leads him to reject violence as a viable means for a Tibetan revolution, reasoning that the state would simply use it to justify further crackdowns, on top of which the potential designation of a violent Tibetan resistance as “terrorism” (as, indeed, has been the case with the Uyghurs) would sap international support (144-151). Thus, Zhokdung calls for a particularly “Tibetan” peaceful revolution of “*khata*, rosaries, or butter lamps” (262); a revolution that, in a striking departure from his previous arguments, would accord with, perhaps even draw from, Buddhist practices. It is perhaps due more to this ideological stance than anything else that Zhokdung insists that the Tibetan uprising was entirely peaceful. He concedes that rioting took place, but describes it as “small-scale” (119). The characterization of the uprising as a violent riot is one that he attributes to the biased rhetoric of the state; he instead endorses descriptions such as “great peaceful uprising,” “peaceful uprising in the Year of the Earth Mouse,” “peaceful rising,” or “mass rising.” His own formulation, “the peaceful revolution in the Year of the Earth Mouse,” is designed to underscore that it was “peaceful in character and revolutionary in nature,” as well as to draw attention to its coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Amdo uprising (1). His other designation, the Tibetan “Saffron Revolution,” is further intended to link the Tibetan uprising to a global anti-authoritarian movement, in particular the color revolutions of Czechoslovakia (1989), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005), and Myanmar (2007) (16-17).

But Zhokdung’s invocation of Gandhi’s *satyagraha* goes far beyond method. He champions it above all as political philosophy, a reconceptualization of how Tibetans ought to engage with the Chinese state. This is reflected in his rejection of the Chinese translation *feibaoli* 非暴力 (*zhuyi* 主义) (non-violence) and his preference for a term that parallels the Sanskrit

etymology – *bden pa* (“truth”) for *satya* and *u tshugs* (“insistence”) for *agraha* – thereby capturing both the “theoretical aspect” and the “practical aspect” (181-188). Likewise, his lengthy discussion of the origins and definitions of civil disobedience (*spyi dmangs kyi mi rton pa*) revisits some familiar sources – Socrates, Locke, Hobbes, Hume, and Thoreau – but ultimately it is Gandhi’s iteration that most interests him (155-181). He sees Gandhi’s as a “unique” (181) form of political action, but one that has also pointed the way for individual luminaries (Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Aung San Suu Kyi) and global national revolutions (Chile, Myanmar, Poland), thus providing a historical roadmap for Tibetans to follow (183, 248-249).

In a radical shift in his nationalist discourse, Zhokdung now places the Chinese state unambiguously in the role of the colonizer. He draws a direct contrast between the contemporaneous rises of Gandhi and the Chinese Communist Party (234), and through the analytical rubric of non-violence, positions the CCP as antithetical to Gandhi and the concept of *satyagraha*. “‘Violent proletarian revolution’ in China,” he writes, “threw up a mountain of corpses and an ocean of blood, open battles in which millions lost their lives. But who can deny that India was spared these horrors, due to the ‘Great Bodhisattva,’ Mahatma Gandhi?” He argues, however, that the Party sees Gandhi’s methodology of anti-colonial resistance as philosophically invalid because it contravenes the principles of proletarian struggle and revolution (236-237; trans. Zhogs dung 2016: 113). Zhokdung takes this comparison a step further, drawing a direct contrast between Mao Zedong and Gandhi as anti-colonial thinkers and leaders. He sets them at odds with one another on the basis of their positions on the axis of violence/non-violence: “those professing that ‘Power grows out from the barrel of the gun’ [a famous Mao quote], those who believe that victory is won through bloodshed, those who wield control through denying human rights, who

jump at the chance to use violence clearly have no time for peaceful resistance” (232-233; trans. Zhogs dung 2016: 111).

Zhokdung pushes his opposition of Maoist ideology and Gandhism to possibly the most provocative of conclusions; namely, that if Tibetans are pursuing a peaceful, Gandhian uprising, its suppression by the Chinese state casts the latter in the role of colonial oppressor:

The India of Gandhi’s time, with the predominance of traditional religions, the way the colonial rulers considered Indians to be ‘barbaric, superstitious, dark and backward,’ and their uncontrolled brutality and oppression, is superficially identical with today’s Tibet. The differences are that powerful political parties were developed in India, but not in Tibet; that the British rulers of India had some degree of moral conscience, which is not the case in Tibet; and that a Gandhi (a leader), equipped for the freedom struggle, appeared within India, while none has appeared in Tibet. (252; trans Zhogs dung 2016: 120)

The significance of such a comparison can hardly be overstated: Zhokdung condemns the CCP, founded on principles of anti-imperialism, as possessing less moral conscience than the worst of imperialist powers.

Zhokdung’s discussion of Gandhi and *satyagraha* brings the Tibetan intellectual discourse of nationalism into serious conversation with colonialism for the first time in our narrative. It may seem that this is addressing the elephant in the room, but, as I argued previously, Döndrup Gyel’s *mirik* nationalism, which has reigned supreme in Tibetan literary and intellectual conceptions of nation in the PRC, was not fundamentally contradictory to the state-sanctioned rhetoric of a multi-ethnic China. Now, however, Zhokdung, himself enormously influenced by Döndrup Gyel, has taken *mirik* nationalism in a direction that sets it on a collision course with the Chinese state and the sacrosanct doctrine of national/ethnic unity (*minzu tuanjie* 民族团结).

Above, I discussed Zhokdung’s wholehearted embrace of the discourse of Tibetan backwardness, highlighting the absence of the contradictoriness of nationalist thought described by Chatterjee – i.e., that he accepted the (Chinese/Western) narrative of modernity, but in no way

were his writings aimed at questioning the rule of “colonial masters.” In *Division*, Zhokdung’s thought takes such a radical turn that Chatterjee’s description becomes distinctly relevant. Now, wielding those same tools of rational thought, Zhokdung does indeed question the “alleged inferiority” of his people, the idea that they are incapable of ruling themselves, and the legitimacy of Chinese political domination. In Chatterjee’s (1986) terms, the “thematic” of nationalism accepts and selectively borrows from Western rationalist modernism, but the “problematic” of nationalism – specific expressions made within that framework – rejects the inferior status assigned to those subjugated by that framework and begins to work against it, expressing a polemical resistance that Chatterjee sees as central to nationalist thought – its opposition to the counter-discourse of colonialism (38-41). Zhokdung’s choice of Gandhi and his thought as a guiding influence is enormously significant, as it places Tibetan nationalism in an antagonistic relationship with the Chinese state, now identified as playing the role of the colonial power. Furthermore, we cannot ignore that, while he does not repudiate his Western influences, Zhokdung supersedes them with a non-Western mode of thought and resistance that is intrinsically bound up with the problems of colonial rule.

As part of this major reconceptualization of his approach to nationalist thought, Zhokdung now directly addresses the problem of Tibetans’ relationship with both the Chinese state and the Han Chinese people. The *mirik* nationalism constructed by Döndrup Gyel was able to theoretically coexist with the Chinese state, but as a nationalist discourse, it certainly had the *potential* to become antagonistic towards other nations. In *Division*, the essentializing logic of nation and national character begins to pit the Tibetans and the Chinese against one another as *mirik/minzu*:

Tibetans have a saying, ‘Better to die defiant as a tiger than to survive as a fugitive fox’; the Chinese have a comparable saying that translates as ‘Better to survive as a fugitive fox than to die defiant as a tiger,’ and these reversed points of view typify

Tibetan and Chinese values, and attitudes to life and death, which are in complete opposition. (Zhogs dung 2009: 35; trans. Zhogs dung 2016: 16)

In one extraordinary section, Zhokdung provides an extensive list of historical Chinese torture methods (disembowelment [*pou fu* 剖腹], death by a thousand cuts [*ling chi* 凌迟], skinning [*bao pi* 剥皮], boiling alive [*peng zhu* 烹煮], etc.), concluding that, though such methods are no longer in use, a people who devised such “cruel and hellish punishments” would carry with them that kind of “tendency” and thus “cannot be trusted” (135-139). The national character of the Han Chinese is thus conceived of as cruel, selfish, and cowardly (indeed, not unlike Ah Q). Zhokdung expresses a particular fear of Han Chinese “extreme nationalism” (*mi rigs ring lugs thal mtha' pa*) (123-130), which, in the wake of the Tibetan unrest, manifested itself in the form of demonstrations and online postings (he recalls comments such as “All Tibetans should be killed, thrown out, eliminated!” [126; trans. Zhogs dung 2016: 62]). By contrast, in his view the Saffron Revolution has demonstrated that Tibetans are now “heroes and heroines” who embody “the dormant tiger- and leopard-like heroic spirit of the imperial age” (21), a spirit that “cannot be matched by the Chinamen¹¹⁸ or the Chinese, who are content with merely filling their bellies” (22).

But the primary target of *Division's* censure is undoubtedly the authoritarian Chinese state. Zhokdung defines the ruling mode of the state as “totalitarianism” or “totalitarian autocracy” (*dbang mtha' sger gcod ring lugs*, a calque he creates from the Chinese *jiquan zhuanzhi zhuyi* 极权专制主义) (68) and refers throughout the book to the rule of the “dictators” or “autocrats” (*sger gcod dbang sgyur pa*) (122). He rails against the violence Tibetans have endured from the state since the 1950s (12, 120-122), and in yet another departure from his previous work (recall his

¹¹⁸ *Tsi na*, a term used for China found in Buddhist texts but no longer in common usage. It is equivalent to the characters *zhi na*, used in Japan as a derogatory reference to China in the imperial era (Sun 2002: 32). Here, Zhokdung appears to use *tsi na* in a similarly derogatory fashion.

thoughts on reading Tibetan books), grounds his case against state brutality specifically in Tibetan texts. He cites an array of works, many published underground or illegally, that recount Tibetan suffering under PRC campaigns, including Naktsang Nulo's (2014) memoir *My Tibetan Childhood* and Tsering Döndrup's novel *The Red Wind Howls* (2009), both of which caused a sensation among Tibetan readers for their frank and daring content, and in particular for their coverage of the silenced 1958 PLA suppression in Amdo. Zhokdung is critical of the authorities' obsessive sensitivity with anything concerning the "state" (*rgyal khab*) or "state power" (*rgyal khab kyi mnga' dbang*), observing that all those charged in the wake of the 2008 unrest were accused of some manner of crime against the state ("splittism," "inciting subversion of state power," etc.) (93).

While Zhokdung does draw a brief distinction between the "dictators" and the "state," accusing the Party of wielding the rhetoric of "state" and "state authority" for its own gain (94), one certainly does not get the impression that he holds out hope for the establishment of a hypothetical benevolent state that might exist apart from the Party. In fact, he perceives a terrifying confluence of statism and nationalism, with the Party's mobilization of patriotic (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义, i.e., love of the state) sentiment firing up national or ethnic (Han) sentiment against Tibetans. Zhokdung goes so far as to imagine a crisis of nation that would exceed Liang Qichao's worst fears of *wang guo* 亡国: ethnic cleansing and even genocide (123, 77-78). One of the defining features of the modern totalitarian state as Zhokdung sees it is that through "racial supremacism and superiority" it seeks to "violently annihilate and exterminate other races" (77-78). Zhokdung compares the Chinese Communist Party's killing of Tibetans and other minorities to the Holocaust and to Japanese atrocities against China during World War Two (78), and sees a genuine threat

that, should Tibetans respond to state oppression with violence, they will be giving the state the excuse to “annihilate the entire [Tibetan] nation” (148).

Condemnations of the Chinese state pushed the literary-intellectual discourse of the Tibetan nation into new and politically dangerous territory, but there is one way above all in which Zhokdung tested the limits of what Tibetan nationalism may articulate in contemporary China, and that is the concept of Tibetan statehood. We have now come very far indeed from Döndrup Gyel’s *mirik* nationalism, a ‘benign’ ethno-centric discourse in which Han and Tibetans can live in harmony as part of the *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族 family of nations. Throughout *Division*, we encounter a conscious and sustained discussion of territorial, state-based notions of nation that is unprecedented in the intellectual trajectory thus far analyzed. Zhokdung’s critique of Tibetan failings prior to the Saffron Revolution now includes the charge that they “had no history of struggling for their country/region (*yul lung*)” (47), and the reason they were “divided and ruled by having their land partitioned between five provinces and autonomous regions” is that they lacked “territorial and national consciousness” (40; trans. Zhogs dung 2016: 18). This latter formula is telling: there is nothing surprising about its “national” (*mi rigs*) aspect, but the idea that a consciousness of “territory” (*sa khongs*) should also be crucial to Tibetans transforms the discourse of *mirik* nationalism. This term, “territory,” and its inclusion as a crucial element of this new nationalist discourse, is ubiquitous in *Division*, and is moreover married to the notion of “sovereignty” (*mnga' dbang*) or “rule” over that territory (19).¹¹⁹ For centuries, Zhokdung argues, this secular (*khyim srid*) consciousness of both nation and territory, along with a consciousness of the individual and of rights, has lain suppressed under Buddhist thought, but in the wake of the

¹¹⁹ At one point in the text, Zhokdung expresses this explicitly as a “consciousness of statehood” (*rgyal khab kyi 'du shes*) (124).

Saffron Revolution, it has finally been “awakened” (107). It is just unfortunate to him that Tibetans have awakened to discover “the ewe’s breast¹²⁰ of our territory (*rang sa*) divided and torn apart, the gold nugget of our land (*rang thang*) trampled and crushed, and our race exhausted of strength and in decline” (107).

This instigation of a state-based nationalist discourse is one of the most remarkable aspects of *Division*. There is a large section of the text that deals directly with international law, definitions of sovereignty and self-determination, and examples of successful global independence movements. Zhokdung’s discussion of international treaties is extensive and he presents a veritable armada of evidence to support his case, particularly from UN resolutions¹²¹ (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Resolution on the Right of Peoples and Nations to Self-Determination, and the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples), which, he points out, the Chinese government is a signatory to. A typical example of the sections that interest him, taken from the last of these examples, runs thus:

‘All peoples have the right to self-determination (*rang thag rang gcod*). By this right, they shall freely decide their own political affairs, and pursue the development of their own economy, society and culture’; [...] ‘By handing over all powers, in accord with the freely expressed wishes and aspirations of the peoples of those territories, with no distinction as to race, creed or skin colour, unconditionally and irrevocably, they shall enjoy full independence (*rang btsan*).’ (110; trans. Zhogs dung 2016: 54-55)

His citation of the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933) is unequivocal in its call for Tibetan statehood. Referring to the “Uncle-Nephew” pillar inscription of 823, which stated that “the Tibetans are happy in the Tibetan land and the Chinese are happy in the Chinese land” (see *Sources* 2013: 76-78), he adds that Tibet both then and now meets the

¹²⁰ A particularly prized cut of meat. Used as a phrase to indicate something highly valuable.

¹²¹ A few years before the publication of the book, Zhokdung had discovered the Dharamsala Tibetan translation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After consulting the Chinese version, he composed his own edited Tibetan translation, which he included as an appendix to the book (Robin 2016: 68, 89).

criteria of the convention: a settled population, a distinct territory with its own government, and an ability to conduct relations with other states (116-117). He constructs his arguments with numerous examples of autonomy and referenda, including Corsica, Quebec, and the Basque Country, and in particular highlights the cases of independent countries established and recognized in accord with the UN Charter, including East Timor, Montenegro, and Kosovo (112-115, 144). Zhokdung states, quite unambiguously, that it is an established political principle that any “ordinary nation” (*mi rigs spyir btang pa*) may form a “sovereign state” (*mnga' dbang can gyi rgyal khab*) (108).

Division is at once a radical departure from, and a crystallization of, Zhokdung’s previous thought. Even that which is carried over from his previous work, however, is now taken in an entirely new direction in that it is no longer applied to the abstract, stateless conception of the Tibetan *mirik*-nation, but to the concrete circumstances of the Tibetan nation as it exists within the state of China. Zhokdung’s repurposing of his previous work is particularly acute when it comes to his relationship with modern Chinese thought. I argued above that he presents a selective reading of the modern Chinese intellectual tradition, and that same reading reappears in the pages of *Division*, where his case against totalitarianism and for democracy is bolstered by references to Hu Shi’s characteristics of totalitarianism¹²² and Liu Xiaobo’s¹²³ Charter 08 (69-71, 26). In his

¹²² Originally enumerated in a 1941 speech given in English, titled “The Conflict of Ideologies” (Hu 1941).

¹²³ It is unclear if Zhokdung was aware of it, but Liu Xiaobo had already published articles about the Tibetan uprisings of 2008 prior to the release of *Division*. Despite many of the essayists’ positions overlapping with and even being directly inspired by Liu’s work, his take on the issue was starkly removed from Zhokdung’s and stands as another example of Chinese and Tibetan discourses talking past one another. Liu claimed that the roots of the problem were “the same as the roots of the crisis in all of China,” i.e., a conflict “between dictatorship and freedom.” Nevertheless, he takes the Chinese right to rule Tibet for granted and frets about “the very real danger that ethnic strife might escalate into large-scale separatist movements.” His proposed solution to the problem revolves largely around the return of the Dalai Lama, who, to Tibetans, “is a god and his word is law.” He suggests that the Dalai Lama could even be invited back to China “to serve as our nation’s president, our Barack Obama.” Perhaps needless to say, centering Tibetan political activism around reverence for the Dalai Lama would hardly be harmonious with Zhokdung’s agenda of secular rights-based humanism, particularly when Liu’s stated end goal was for the Dalai Lama to “marginalize radical

previous work, his reference to Chinese thought simply skipped from May Fourth straight to the 1980s, passing over the decades in between without comment. Now, however, he fills in the gap:

During the May Fourth movement of eighty-nine years ago, there were some calls for democracy, but in the many years after that and the passage from one autocracy to another, the issue of ignoring the cost of this form of rule was never resolved, and eventually with the victory of the violent revolution and the cycle of bloodletting, an even more terrifying form of autocratic rule was instituted. With one struggle following another, one crackdown on top of another, in a planned, organized and targeted series of campaigns, people were turned into machines, and tens of millions of innocents sent to their deaths. (36-37; trans. Zhokdung 2016: 17)

In this way, his selective appropriation of modern Chinese thought becomes complete. He draws an arc from the liberal humanist traditions of May Fourth through to present-day democracy activists, and China's entire history of revolutionary left-wing thought and praxis is essentially repudiated, cast as a betrayal of the best of May Fourth values.

There is even a certain sense in which Zhokdung's condemnation of the Chinese state pushes his nationalist discourse into closer engagement with its May Fourth precedent. The May Fourth Movement was, after all, an anti-imperialist movement; its self-critical spirit was sparked by the threat of increasing colonial encroachment. In the Tibetan essay movement, this fundamental aspect of May Fourth was only ever conspicuous by its absence. *Division* fills in this missing piece, providing the Tibetan nationalist intellectual movement an 'imperialism' to rail against, an 'external' threat the existence of which makes the need for 'internal' social and cultural reform all the more urgent.

In *Division*, Zhokdung takes the legacy of modern Chinese nationalist thought and turns it against China itself. Once again, such a move draws the specter of colonialism irresistibly into the frame. As Ashis Nandy (2009) defines it, colonialism is a "shared culture," one in which the

Tibetan separatist groups by convincing Tibetans to allow Tibet to remain part of China as an autonomous region" (see Liu 2012: 262-266 and 271-274).

colonized see their salvation as becoming more like the colonizer, “in friendship or in enmity.” “It is not an accident,” he writes, “that the specific variants of the concepts with which many anti-colonial movements in our times have worked have often been the products of the imperial culture itself” (2-7). This is, likewise, the essence of what Chatterjee (1986) sees in nationalism: its struggle, while working within the parameters of a colonial knowledge that seeks to dominate it, to wield that knowledge, challenge it, subvert it, and ultimately, to establish itself as a distinct discourse (42). The cultural self-examination of May Fourth literature was hardly a type of knowledge that sought to ‘dominate’ Tibet. Its preoccupation with the failings of the national character and the place of China and the Chinese on the global stage was internationalist, but also decidedly Han-centric. Nevertheless, political leaders from Sun Yat-sen onwards certainly sought domination over Tibet, and under Mao Zedong, achieved it. In this way, despite its fundamental lack of concern with Tibet, May Fourth discourse did end up becoming a form of “colonial” knowledge in that it was an intellectual heritage of the state that came to exert control over Tibetans. In *The Division of Heaven and Earth*, Zhokdung thus enacted a version of the dynamics described by Nandy and Chatterjee: he forged a distinctly Tibetan nationalist discourse using Chinese sources, and, above all, he wielded a form of Chinese “colonial” knowledge to challenge the claims of Chinese political domination.

5.8 Conclusion

Zhokdung was released from prison in 2011, but has not published essays since. Zhokdung’s influence could still be felt in the poetry and essays of some younger writers, particularly Theurang (The’u rang) and Zhokjang (Zhogs ljang). Both could in fact be counted as belated members of Zhokdung’s group, or as inheritors of his legacy. They were heavily involved in the vibrant intellectual atmosphere at the Northwest University for Nationalities in the late

2000s, which included the regular ‘salons’ and the journal they edited, *Eastern Conch Mountain*. Zhokjang situates himself in the same intellectual tradition that began with Döndrup Gyel – indeed, he penned a book of essays on Döndrup Gyel, *The Spirit of Rangdröl (Rang grol snying stobs)*, the title of which also references Zhokdung’s *Series of the Self*.¹²⁴ However, both writers also met similar fates to Zhokdung due to their radical work and their daring attacks on the Chinese state. Zhokjang and Theurang were detained together in 2010. Theurang was handed a four-year prison sentence; Zhokjang was released, but was arrested again in 2015 and held until 2018. Strict political controls in the wake of the events of 2008 meant the end of the relatively free intellectual atmosphere at the Northwest University for Nationalities, with *Eastern Conch Mountain* quickly shut down.¹²⁵ After 2008, many of the essayists redoubled their efforts in the more politically benign realm of translation, and some works of ‘new thought’ have still emerged since. Nevertheless, it is clear that the events of that year took a toll on the essay movement, and the repressive political environment that followed marked a certain ending to the ten years of radical intellectual writing described in this chapter.

It is too early to say whether or not May Fourth traditions will continue to play a role in Tibetan literary and intellectual discourse, or if they do, what forms they might take. On the one hand, given the enduring influence of Döndrup Gyel in the Tibetan literary world and the extent to which his writing was informed by May Fourth precedents, it is reasonable to speculate that this particular strain of Tibetan intellectual development has yet to run its course. On the other hand, the May Fourth influence is even more pronounced in the work of Zhokdung and his colleagues than it was with Döndrup Gyel, but to a large extent, it was his adaptation of both its liberal

¹²⁴ According to Robin, a book of essays in honor of Zhokdung was also published in 2011, titled, in reference to his *Series of the Self*, *The Spirit of Zhokdung (Zhogs dung snying stobs)* (Robin 2016: 78).

¹²⁵ For more details on these events, see Jagda 2015, Theurang 2018, Palden Gyel 2018, and *Tibetan Writer Tashi Rabten* 2011.

humanist and anti-imperialist values that led to conflict with the state, so it is also possible that we have reached the limits of what Tibetan writers are allowed to do with May Fourth thinking in the political climate of contemporary China. Tibetan writing may go on to form different types of engagements with Chinese literary modernity, and it may shun Chinese models altogether. Regardless, it is clear from the work examined both in this chapter and elsewhere in this dissertation that Tibetan writers have – and will continue to have – major critical contributions to offer when it comes to our understanding of literary, intellectual, and political developments in modern China as a whole.

Conclusion

The findings of this dissertation suggest a number of ways in which we must re-orient our approaches to both Chinese and Tibetan literary practices in the modern era. Firstly, from the perspective of Chinese literature, there are two major developments that must be reckoned with: 1) the incorporation of Tibet and Tibetans as subject matter under a national rubric of “Chinese” writing, and 2) the emergence of literatures in non-Sinitic languages under the umbrella of literary practices in China.

With regards to the former, the appearance of Tibet-related subjects in Chinese literature was a relatively sudden development. It is possible that future research will bring to light modern Chinese literary texts on Tibet from the first half of the twentieth century. If such texts are to be found, however, they would likely still be outliers. There is nothing yet to suggest that prominent authors of modern Chinese literature in the pre-PRC period wrote about Tibet, nor indeed that there were significant numbers of authors – prominent or otherwise – who gave their literary works a Tibetan setting. As discussed in Chapter Three, scholars such as Ma Lihua who have made this their primary field of study trace the origins of Chinese literature in Tibet only as far back as the 1950s, and even those texts were relatively few and remain largely unknown to a wider, non-specialist audience. What we can say with certainty is that the late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a sudden explosion of Chinese literary writing about Tibet on an unprecedented scale, and it has continued ever since.

This development poses some significant challenges to traditional scholarly conceptions of the field of modern Chinese literature, particularly the idea that it can be representative of a culturally homogeneous national whole. C. T. Hsia’s (1961) contention was that the “modern” of modern Chinese literature was, in large part, distinguished by the rise of nationalist thought; its

“obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease” (533) represented a new concept of the Chinese as a nation as well as the plight that many writers ascribed to that nation. From the perspective of nations and nationalism, this interpretation relies on a certain kind of exclusivity – in other words, that there is an identifiable “Chinese” nation with specifically “Chinese” cultural issues that can be addressed in literature. Hsia did not address the question of how non-Han ethnicities might complicate this reading, but insofar as the writers he discusses appear to have been equally unconcerned with these problems, we cannot fault his assumption on those grounds. But this is where literature begins to appear anomalous in comparison to other areas. Numerous prominent statesmen, political writers, and academics of the late Qing and Republican eras were seriously invested in the practical question of how non-Han ethnicities would fit into the new China, but not so leading literary writers, who conceived of China’s “national” issues as being solely those of a particular imagined community – a people now officially categorized as the Han.

Since the national concerns in literature described by Hsia have nothing to do with Tibetans, the subsequent and widespread appearance of Chinese literature about Tibet in the 1980s forces us to reconsider these issues. Firstly, it limits the previous literary discourses of nation, highlighting the assumptions and implications about what kind of nation was being discussed. Secondly, it shifted what and who was now being signified by discussions of nation in literature. Concerns about the nation or about China as a state were not set aside when Han authors began writing about Tibet. As Ma Jian’s work makes clear, Chinese writers continued to deal with these issues even as they were writing about non-Han peoples and cultures. In this way, Tibetans were unwittingly pulled into literary discourses in which they had played no previous part. Even as they were ‘othered,’ they were othered as people whose belonging to the Chinese state, and therefore

also their belonging to what is covered by Chinese literary writing, was never in question. Edward Said's observation that such texts tell us more about the representors than the represented still holds, since such literature remains fundamentally Han-centric in that it is not primarily concerned with the thoughts, feelings, or politics of Tibetans themselves. But we cannot overlook the fact that representing Tibetans now meant forcing them into a shared discourse of nation, even if Tibetans had historically had nothing to do with considerations of nation in Chinese literature. In short, a Han Chinese author writing in Chinese about life in modern China could now consider themselves to be doing all those things even as they wrote entirely about a non-Han people and culture.

The appearance of Tibet on the scene alters our perceptions of literary practices in China in other significant ways. Now, we cannot account for the scope of literature produced in China by studying Chinese-language literature alone – literature in modern China is multilingual and multiscriptual. This is arguably not a modern development. We could consider, for example, texts written in Tangut, a non-Sinitic language with a separate (*Hanzi*-derived) writing system. In more recent times, we have numerous examples of Manchu literature written in both Manchu and Chinese, which it would be difficult if not impossible to separate from the study of literature in China, particularly given the intimate relationship between Chinese and Manchu texts.¹²⁶ In the 20th century, the existence of non-Sinitic literatures in the realm of literary production in China became unequivocal. After the establishment of the People's Republic, several non-Sinitic literatures became a *de facto* part of the Chinese literary realm, since the people who wrote them

¹²⁶ Giovanni Stary (2002) provides a helpful overview of literature written in the Manchu language. Durrant (1979) has studied the extensive translations of Chinese texts into Manchu, which included legal and military texts, and later, translations of literary and philosophical classics for the purposes of providing textual exegesis that was regarded by the Manchu rulers as surpassing existing Chinese commentaries. Chiu's (2007) study of Manchu "bannermen tales" (*Zidishu* 子弟书), which were written in Chinese, positions the genre as an exemplification of cultural hybridization in Manchu literature.

had been made into citizens of China. Nowadays, numerous publishers, literary journals, and websites in the People's Republic publish literatures about modern China in a range of languages, including Tibetan, Uyghur, Mongolian, and Yi.

Of course, the effects of these multifaceted encounters go both ways: they have likewise brought far-reaching changes to how we understand modern Tibetan literature. Firstly, Tibetans in the PRC now find themselves labeled a “minority nationality” and their literature therefore also labeled a “minority literature.” In terms of production, Tibetan creative writing in the PRC is entirely integrated into China's state and private literary systems. Tibetan authors publish through journals and publishers organized under Chinese state practices, and likewise, online literature is largely circulated on websites and platforms hosted in China. However, as I have sought to demonstrate in this dissertation, Tibetan literature did not enter into a relationship with the Chinese literary world simply by virtue of Tibetans' inclusion in the new Chinese state – many of modern Tibet's foremost writers and intellectuals actively revived and reworked some of the discourses that were at the heart of early modern Chinese literature.

This influence of Chinese discourses in modern Tibetan writing, unprecedented in Tibetan literary history, is naturally a consequence of Tibet's forced incorporation into the Chinese state, but it was never an explicitly intended or planned consequence. There was nothing inevitable about the literary sources that Tibetan writers chose to draw from, nor was there anything necessarily predictable about how they chose to adapt them. Döndrup Gyel was immersed in Maoist political and cultural theory, but his writing borrowed even more extensively from late Qing and May Fourth discourses of cultural backwardness and national crisis. That he should conceive of the Tibetan nation in this way in fact unwittingly flies in the face of Maoist discourse on Tibet, central to which was the claim that Tibetans had been liberated from the social, cultural, and economic

plight that Döndrup Gyel puts at the center of his Tibetan nationalism. As he wrote when criticizing the idea that all Tibetan culture originates from India, “It has been more than 30 years since liberation, but we are still unable to oppose these views. Not only is this to the shame of us youth, it is to the shame of our nation” (Don grub rgyal 1997: 3: 160). Even as he drew on Chinese nationalism, he was underscoring just how little meaningful effect he believed that Chinese rule had had on Tibetans’ mindsets, a dynamic of Tibetan literature that became even more apparent with the arrival of Zhokdung some fifteen years later. Their work may have been inspired by Chinese precedents, but it took those discourses in entirely unexpected directions, demonstrating that genuine cultural change could not be enforced – it had to be carried out by self-motivated Tibetan thinkers operating on their own terms.

The rise of modern Tibetan literature also highlights that it is not possible to identify a single “national literature” in present-day China, in the sense of a literature that can claim some representative value for a single national culture or people. There are writers from numerous distinct *minzu* who assert their adherence to separate national literatures within China’s present borders, and many of them write in Chinese, meaning that not even language criteria can be used to demarcate a specifically “Chinese” literature. In his afterword to *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy (2009) addresses some of these tensions inherent in China and India’s state- and nation-building projects:

It is just not possible to reconceptualize India as only a nation-state with a single, identifiable national culture. Most of India still lives outside its urban middle class and resigned to – I almost wrote ‘proud of’ – being a tapestry of thousands of cultures and communities with their own real or imaginary pasts and distinctive ideas of the future. It is not possible to easily snuff out that diversity. [...] The poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore said nearly a century ago that the attempt to build a nation in India was like Switzerland trying to build a navy. The metaphor still holds. (120)

China has likewise faced enormous difficulties in attempting to construct a recognizably homogeneous national culture. A consequence of the People's Republic being a multinational state that insists on the shared role of non-Han peoples in the national project is that those peoples may also insist on having their own national cultures that will hold ambiguous relationships to the idea of an over-arching, all-inclusive "Chinese" national culture. Even when Tibetan nationalist discourse in the PRC reveals a late Qing and May Fourth genealogy, it ends up significantly rupturing narratives of the Chinese nation and state. The more it draws upon Chinese sources, the more it underscores Tibet's historical absence from national discourses in Chinese literature, and the more it emphasizes the divergence of Tibetan intellectual opinion from current state narratives about Tibet's advancement under Chinese rule.

Modern Tibetan literature in the People's Republic thus works both with and against Chinese state narratives and discourses of nation. As this dissertation has sought to illustrate, the study of minority literature in China cannot set out from the standpoint suggested by Sinophone studies, which assumes a condition of pure "colonialism" and therefore pre-emptively reads minority cultural projects as straightforwardly "anticolonial" or "decolonial" (Shih 2013: 12). The work of Zhokdung and others shows us that theoretical models of colonialism certainly are relevant in the Tibetan context, and anticolonial discourses become even more apparent if we take into account Tibetan exile literature. But overall, when considering ethnically Tibetan writing in the PRC (whether in Chinese or Tibetan), taking an "anticolonial" standpoint is essentially impossible – unless, as in Zhokdung's case, the author is willing to face the consequences. Tibetan intellectuals and creative writers must therefore take different approaches, and the actual work they produce often ends up having necessarily complex and ambivalent relationships to discourses of nationalism, statism, and colonialism.

Erik Mueggler's (2001) study of how the Yi narrate their own history in modern China insists that there is neither a unified (Han) Chinese culture, nor are there discrete, isolated ethnic cultures within China's territory, but rather

an open and flexible field of cultural practices, fashioned in the interaction of many different peoples. [...] In this view, present-day "minority nationalities" are neither outside a cohesive entity called "Chinese culture" nor in any simple process of being assimilated by it. Instead, these peoples seed a diverse cultural field with fresh influences; they selectively appropriate its elements, reworking or embellishing them; they imagine coherent versions of it against which to pose self-consciously, inventing themselves as different. (19).

Anthropologists such as Mueggler, Litzinger (2000), and Bulag (2002) reject simple binaries of dominance and resistance in order to investigate how minority peoples carve out a place for themselves within the Chinese state, working with, against, and in-between dominant discourses, and providing their own alternative histories and oppositional narratives. The nuance of these approaches is equally beneficial when considering the multitude of complex literary practices in modern China. Döndrup Gyel's work and the discourse of Tibetan national character both forge a relationship with modern Chinese literary traditions, but do so by insisting on the right of Tibetans to construct their own intellectual traditions and narratives of nation. Zhokdung's work did indeed clash with state ideology, but it did so by basing itself in part on the modern traditions of Chinese liberal humanism. The study of minority literatures in China must carefully work through these intersections and divergences, and in order to do so thoroughly, it must work across different languages. This is the approach this study has sought to take, and in doing so, it is hoped that it may contribute to a translingual study of minority literatures in China as a whole, a field in which there is enormous potential for scholarship that can reshape our understanding and appreciation of the many diverse literatures that are now produced within the boundaries of modern China.

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