

Ava Kamb

Selfhood Between Borders: Tibetan Identity in Jangbu's *The Nine-Eyed Agate*

Simple dichotomies between self and other, tradition and modernity, or past and present are not particularly useful when considering much of the contemporary literature to come out of Tibet. Many Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet struggle with the malleability of selfhood and identity that arises under trying circumstances of occupation, exile, and the globalizing forces of the international world. A significant voice in this discussion is the poet and director Dorje Tsering Chenaktsang (b. 1963), also known as Jangbu, who was born in Tibet though now resides in France. His writing is collected for the first time in book form in *The Nine-Eyed Agate: Poems and Stories* (2010). The collection, translated into English by Heather Stoddard, describes a life punctuated by loss, fear, and a sense of homelessness, complemented by a love for Tibetan culture and the search for an elusive pure Tibetan identity. Jangbu's poetry and short stories shed light on the experiences of Tibetans living in China and abroad, whose conceptions of their Tibetan identity are not necessarily located in a specific place or idea but rather cross between boundaries and exist, at times, within them. What emerges is an ongoing process of identification that is neither unitary nor essentialized but characterized by fluidity, multiplicity, and bricolage. The phenomenon of border-crossing and border-dwelling identities is not unique to the Tibetan experience but is part of a larger process of identification in which the perception of neatly delineated boundaries is challenged by the lived experiences of various peoples worldwide.

Before considering the specific role of Jangbu in this contemporary interpretation of Tibetan culture, it is useful to understand the global context from which he comes. The

particularities of Tibetan self-identification develop from a series of ongoing historical, social, and political dialogues among Western powers, the People's Republic of China, and Tibetans in exile. These dialogues are heavy with political and economic imbalances and a dynamics of power in which Tibetan voices are often unheard.

The early twentieth-century British view of Tibet as a Shangri-La is encapsulated in American director Frank Capra's 1937 film "Lost Horizon," in which Tibet is "just a blank on the map," a picturesque background for the stories of the primarily white characters. Tibet emerges from this film as an isolated, peaceful, and mystical land, a repository of ancient perennial wisdom, and an escape from the tensions and terrors of the modernizing world. It is collapsed into a projection of Western desires and needs in which the voices of actual Tibetans are conspicuously absent. The perseverance of this narrative is evident in several recent films (for example "Seven Years in Tibet," 1998, and "Blindsight," 2006) wherein Tibet provides a scenic setting for the moral and emotional dramas of Westerners, while Tibetans hold secondary roles at best. Nonetheless, this particular portrayal of Tibet has been capitalized upon by the current Tibetan government-in-exile as a politically beneficial position that can accrue Western support for Tibetan independence.

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) invaded Central Tibet in 1951, setting up a military occupation that remains today, Chinese propaganda endeavored to counter this romantic portrayal of Tibetans. The propaganda was in direct dialogue with the early British fantasies: it took elements of that image of Tibet (i.e. Tibet as primeval, alien, and other) but drew very different conclusions. Communist Party rhetoric argued that development in the form of infrastructure and economics was "liberation" from feudal

serfdom, which stemmed from the theocratic rule of the Dalai Lama (PRC State Council 2009). Propaganda focused the attention of Chinese citizens, the majority ethnically Han, on representations of Tibetans that ranged from erotic to paternalistic to primitive (Heberer 2001) but were always situated hierarchically lower on the racial and ethnic ladder than the Han Chinese. Since 1959, thousands of Tibetans have followed the 14th Dalai Lama into exile, though many remain in what is now called the Tibetan Autonomous Republic (TAR) in China under an oftentimes repressive and violent military regime. Although open protests have become more widespread since the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the first self-immolation of a Tibetan monk in 2009 (Makley 2015), for many of those living in Tibet, compliance with the party line is a prerequisite for survival.

It is into this tense climate that Jangbu's publication appears, and these constructions and reconstructions of "Tibet" and "Tibetans" by outsiders that he must contend with in his exploration of Tibetan identity. The pendulum of global imagination regarding Tibet continues to swing between mystical dreamland and degenerate medievalism. Both of these oppositional representations of Tibet are based on the compartmentalization of Tibetans as an Other, whose real benefit—and ultimate flaw—lies in the nature of fantasy: an aura of perfection that can be shattered upon its realization as unreal (Norbu 2001, 375). Edward Said's criticism of Orientalism focuses on the way in which knowledge, equated with power, contains and represents the Oriental through the dominant frameworks of colonialism (Said 1978). This Orientalist paradigm of knowledge, in which the only legitimate information is that which is accepted by the colonizers as "objective" and "empirical," is challenged by the voices of actual Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet. Jangbu's life and writing complicate the Oriental/Occidental opposition and add another

voice into the global discourse: specifically, a Tibetan's understanding of what it means to be Tibetan.

Yet his Tibetanness is not easily defined, for Jangbu strikes a unique figure within Tibetan culture and abroad. Raised in the nomad lands of Sokpo, Malho in northeastern Tibet by his father, a former monk and county prefect, and his mother, an illiterate nomad woman, Jangbu and his nine siblings were able to receive a “modern” education in both Tibetan and Chinese through his father's high position (Stoddard 2010). He continues to retain a surprising amount of artistic freedom: he can travel among Tibet, China, and Western countries while producing documentaries and works of literature on Tibet, treading thin lines that could provoke the Communist government in other contexts. His translator Heather Stoddard describes him as a mysterious, humble individual, “one of the most charismatic and creative Tibetan intellectuals of the post-Cultural Revolution period” (Stoddard 2010, xv), and cites his rare upbringing, bilingual education, and interest in world literature as features that distinguish him. After Jangbu left Tibet, Gönpo Kyap, a Professor of Tibetan Language and Literature in Lanzhou, China, wrote that “the man called Jangbu could no longer be described as belonging to our ancestral heritage. He no longer ranks amongst those who dare not take a single step outside the homeland of tradition...He has courage and capacity. He gallops on unerringly, leaping from one platform to the next, toward his goal” (Kyap 2010, xxxii-xxxiii). Jangbu's temperament, upbringing, and restless spirit identify him; even within the community of Tibetan intellectuals, Jangbu appears to stand apart.

So to what extent can his poetry represent a “Tibetan” identity? For one, Jangbu identifies strongly as Tibetan. The influence of Tibetan culture on his work is noticeable in his imagery and rhetorical devices (e.g. references to Tibetan dress and customs), and he deliberately writes in the

Tibetan language rather than the locally dominant Chinese. His commitment to the preservation of Tibetan culture allows him, as an insider, to voice social critique and express the difficulties of a multifaceted Tibetan-Chinese identity that might appear disingenuous from another author. Yet he is also a “global” Tibetan in the sense of his internationality: his upbringing, interests, and connections well situate him to interact with the larger world; the translation of his poetry into English allows a Tibetan author to be read and appreciated far beyond his birthplace. The limitations of translation are mitigated through his belief, expressed in his preface, that “wherever one goes, whatever dialect spoken...a certain natural poetic disposition is manifest everywhere” (Jangbu 2010, xi). His explicit awareness and acceptance of the politics of translation allow his work to be understood as presented for a foreign audience: a Tibetan in discussion with other members of the global world.

Jangbu adds to this discussion three themes from *The Nine-Eyed Agate* that relate directly to issues of Tibetan identity: the experience of deterritorialization, the search for an essential Tibetan culture, and self-expression through the amalgamation of many voices, styles, and subjects. Surprisingly absent in this collection of his work are overt nationalistic or political goals and explicit religious imagery. Both are widely employed by the Tibetan government-in-exile, who describe Tibet as a “zone of *Ahimsa*,” or nonviolence, based on Buddhism, “a religion of peace and love” (Dalai Lama 1987). Although Jangbu may be hesitant to draw the ire of the authorities in China, he has criticized communist policies in his other works, particularly his recent documentaries (such as “Kokonor,” 2005). Whatever his motivation for neutrality in this particular collection, Jangbu is far from indifferent toward Tibetan culture and autonomy. His work is firmly pro-Tibetan though it may toe the Communist party line; it may be best understood

as resting in between the politically polar positions of for/against China/Tibet, shaped in the context of foreign occupation with the attendant complications of censorship, acculturation, and mixed nationalisms.

In Jangbu's poem "When You Returned" (see Appendix), for instance, he articulates the emotional toll of a dual heritage as he returns home to a Tibet that has been transformed through industrial development. The criticism toward the architect of this change, the PRC, is deliberately implicit:

When you came back
You searched in vain for the clear eyes of yesterday
The first sweet odor of spring amongst green buds.
They have disappeared into sharp steel and concrete cracks.

In fact, there is no moment of return
No place to return to.
(This life is not our own
This speech is not our own tongue.)

The first stanza contrasts the peace and fertility of Tibet yesterday to the harsh artificial constructions that have displaced it, a juxtaposition often used by Tibetan leaders in exile to combat the Communist narrative of industrialization and progress. The fourth point of the Dalai Lama's "Five Point Peace Plan for Tibet" refers to the restoration of Tibet's natural environment (Dalai Lama 1987), and Jamyang Norbu, a Tibetan in exile, asserts in his "Rangzen Charter" that "Few people in the world are so distinctly defined by the kind of land they live in as the Tibetans"

(Norbu 2009). But what happens when that land becomes unrecognizable, or when it is claimed by another? The tendency to equate peoples and cultures with land, to collapse the distinctions between nation, state, territory, and people, pathologizes those who are displaced or homeless (Malkki 1992). Tibetans are sometimes identified as a “nation without a state,” and are arguably most united in their efforts to legitimize their survival as an autonomous nation-state. All Tibetans experience some sense of displacement, rendered either through exile or through foreign occupation of their homeland. Jangbu describes the effects of this dislocation as a crisis of self and faith, a lack of certainty in concrete meaning: “You take off your hat and kneel on the ground/Where? To whom do you prostrate three times?/What is the unrevealed meaning?” But while this experience of dislocation is undeniably a painful one for Jangbu, it enables him to explore the possibility of a culture not rooted in a single unchanging place. The search for culture and identity beyond the confines of a bordered territory leads him next to the pieces of his material heritage.

The title of the collection *The Nine-Eyed Agate* refers to *gzi* beads, valuable banded agate stones worn as protective amulets, each with a number of white “eyes”—nine being the most auspicious (Beer 2004). The agate in the title and poetry becomes a metonym for Tibetan culture, particularly in the poem “Agate—9” (see Appendix). Written in Lhasa in 2001, the poem explores the strains of living on the Tibetan plateau under Communist administration. Jangbu describes his struggle to find tangible meaning amidst “decades of lies”:

I want to search for meanings that can be seen, touched, experienced
Melting these into butter, I want to make separate drops of essence.

Have I really found you? Have I really captured the meaning of
the discourse about you, the harmonious joining of words?
From this form, I can see two round piebald eyes
The rise and fall of this external and internal world.

His inability to capture in words—or even to adequately comprehend—some definite core of the Tibetan experience frustrates him. He sees himself suffering and helpless, poised between a retreating past and an uncertain future (“What did I see? What did I leave behind?/.../A pair of young eyes coming from the future toward me/Wounds, uncertainties, the certainties that become the obscurities of history”). His thoughts oscillate between hope and despair; he describes himself as wounded, his naked body the piebald stone, “A cold stone, a dead stone.” Yet throughout the poem, between stanzas of despair, Jangbu paints a scene vivid with references to Tibetan culture: the geography of the plateau, young girls in *chubas*, chiefs, merchants, monks, and lamas. Anthropologist Ana Maria Alonso, quoting Renato Rosaldo, argues for a “renewed concept of culture that ‘refers less to a unified entity...than to the mundane practices of everyday life’” (Alonso 1994, 400). Along these lines, the carved agate stone becomes a tangible symbol of Tibetan culture, something that can be experienced but never fully captured, and the poem – its setting, description, and scenery – articulates a life that Jangbu sees as under threat.

Throughout *The Nine-Eyed Agate* he is able to explore means of communicating his Tibetan identity in a world in which multiple cultures, belief systems, and ways of life collide. The final section contains selected stories written in a mixture of styles, particularly magical realism. Many contemporary Tibetan authors write in the style of Latin American magical realism, perhaps due to the similarities in the cultures’ recent histories and the environment of hybridity following the

colonization of indigenous communities by dominant Western ones (Erhard 2007). Magical realism can facilitate the creation of a reality that embraces other systems of belief: a “traditional” local world represented by myth and religion and the “real” world characterized by Western rationality. In “The Tale of the Golden Fish,” co-written with Nyida, the narrator searches for a mythical fish that survived in a man’s stomach for years before he died. Its story is a piece of Tibetan folklore: “When a child eats ravenously in Sokpo the adults exclaim, ‘You’ve eaten such a lot and you’re still hungry!’ The child replies: ‘I’ve got a golden fish in my tummy!’” (Jangbu 2010, 130). In the end, the fish is found to be “an imaginary tale” (Jangbu, 139) made up by the man suspected of murdering the other. Notable in the story is the ambiguity of truth in these multiple contexts, which the narrator seems to resolve by concluding, “This is why there is nothing at all to be surprised at in this world. Nothing” (Jangbu, 140). The story urges the suspension of belief as it plays between two understandings of reality, and it evokes a form of modernity that embraces both international influence and Tibetan tradition. The adoption of Latin American magical realism is not coincidental; as anthropologist Vincanne Adams notes, “Pastiche and blurred genres are for many not simply an aesthetic commentary on resisting modernity but an accurate representation of the experiences of modernity” (Adams 1996, 537).

In his concluding remarks on this collection, Jangbu writes that poetry is “an endless enduring breathing discourse” that “cannot be dominated by any system of thought” (Jangbu 2010, 64-65). Poetry’s significance shifts for different readers in different contexts, and that flexibility is what makes it universally meaningful. His writing on Tibet complicates the reification of Tibetan culture by both outsiders and the government-in-exile that has supported its commodification and consumption in the global market. His rejection of essentialism and mixing

of genres push against the classification of identity into one bounded zone or another, which has previously allowed for the hierarchical positioning of nationalities and ethnicities. Instead, Jangbu's presentation of his identity is best characterized by its ambiguity and hybridity, and his ethnicity understood as a situational rather than essential process of identification that rests, at times, in the incommensurable borderlands between states. Jangbu's Tibetan identity emerges from this collection of work as an ongoing process of mixture and creation that incorporates understandings of Tibetanness from both himself and others.

As anthropologists can use the margins to understand the state (Das and Poole 2004), an examination of such delocalized identities as Jangbu's can be helpful in exploring the contemporary process of self-identification. Rather than approaching the modern nation-state as a homogenous entity with a single archetypal subject, focusing on the writings of particular Tibetans allows for an understanding of the nation-state as constituted by individual persons in whom identity and culture are constantly being renegotiated and reconstructed. Such an understanding of identity, peoplehood, and modernity has resonance for all members of the globalizing world whose identities are neither fixed nor unitary but contested, situational, and complex. Perhaps privileging the voices of these "liminal" or "refugee" populations, not as exotic others or passive victims, but as key players in a global drama enacted over space, time, and bodies, would allow Tibet and Tibetans to be appreciated as fully complex members of a world in which they have long been a part.

Appendix

(From *The Nine-Eyed Agate: Poems and Stories by Jangbu*, translated by Heather Stoddard. Lanham,

MD: Lexington Books, 2010.)

WHEN YOU RETURNED

Matö, July 27, 1992

Revised, Lhasa, September 23, 1995

When you came back

You searched in vain for the clear eyes of yesterday

The first sweet odor of spring amongst green buds.

They have disappeared into sharp steel and concrete cracks.

In fact, there is no moment of return

No place to return to.

(This life is not our own

This speech is not our own tongue.)

A few wanderers like you

Did go against the river

They did not meet at the spring

Nor at the snow mountain

Where the spring weeps.

You take off your hat and kneel on the ground

Where? To whom do you prostrate three times?

What is the unrevealed meaning?

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AGATE—9

The Forge, Lhasa, December 2001

Beneath the revolving sun and moon From the heights of the plateau

Seated among the misty clouds of morning and the winds of evening

Seated facing that place where several decades of lies have lived quietly

I want to search for meanings that can be seen, touched, experienced

Melting these into butter, I want to make separate drops of essence.

Have I really found you? Have I really captured the meaning of

the discourse about you, the harmonious joining of words?

From this form, I can see two round piebald eyes

The rise and fall of this external and internal world

The salt and nutrients of this world. Minerals and mountain torrents

The tigers and lambs of this world. The ultimate root shaped by tongues of fire.

From the abyss between the day and night of sleeping, living, thinking,

Desire and hope wander and spy along the halls of my nervous system,

Lost in the forest

Each grain of barley grows from beneath the earth, burning, dying.

I saw the sunlight writing the sign language of winter and wintry snow

mountains

What did I see? What did I leave behind?

My clan name amidst my flesh, blood and bones, the white ferment [of culture]

A pair of young eyes coming from the future toward me

Wounds, uncertainties, the certainties that become the obscurities of history

Stars strung on a string, eyes strung on a string

Though the stars would speak, they hold secrets I cannot hear

The empty symbolism of doors and windows more ancient than the writing of

Shangshung

The example of enclosed guts and organs

Young girls wearing their rainbow *chubas* torturing me

Bringing hope and despair like rays of light penetrating between my fingers

The founding of a village, the origin of a camp,

Skyscrapers that are just now being built,

A railway station, a plastic mask,

Lights by the roadside, a great mirror rusty with this age

Flowers from the meadow, bees among the crocuses, from whatever direction

My large lump of painful thoughts, my eyes watching between hope and despair

My deep wound, a humble wound like a stone that I cannot see and cannot feel

My faults alone, like armor and helmet, like charcoal and fire

My scattered testament, that I never want to see again, shining with light rays

even in the night

The piebald stone that symbolizes the matter that is my naked body

A cold stone, a dead stone.

The kiss of life. The organ that brings bliss in the feast of union

Chiefs, merchants, villagers, shepherds, bandits, monks and lamas

Anyone and everyone, grappling for a thousand years over our material heritage

An old woman falsely accused, full of love,

A cancerous sickness that no one mentioned from the start

A young boy, born from a philosopher's dream, who will never grow up.

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