

**THE CREATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST:
'TREASURE TEXTS' IN TIBETAN-ENGLISH NOVELS**

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***Abstract:** Tibetan English fiction emerges with Tibetan exile and, like other postcolonial writings, is deeply concerned with national construction and the retelling of Tibetan recent history. In their historiographic ways, both Tsewang Pemba's *Idols on the Path* (1966) and Jamyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999), engage the Tibetan Buddhist heritage to tell the histories of Tibet in a heterodox, self-reflective and playful manner. More recent works of fiction are no exception and Thubien Samphel's *Falling through the Roof* (2008) and Tsering Namgyal Khortsa's *The Tibetan Suitcase* (2013) also engage their Tibetan Buddhist heritage to mediate the recent, and less often, the remote past. This paper focuses on how the singularly Tibetan Buddhist *gter ma* (lit. treasure, i.e. a text written in the past that has been 'unearthed' or 'discovered') is re-appropriated and re-engaged in contemporary Tibetan English fiction.*

***Keywords:** diaspora, exile, historiographic metafiction, invention of tradition, *gter ma*, Tibetan-English fiction*

1. Introduction

Tibetan identity in exile has found many pathways of expressing the complexities and ambiguities of the "modern [Tibetan] condition" (Bhum 2008: 114). An example of moving away from the paradigm of preservation and taking the approach that Tibetan culture ought to be not only celebrated, and even maintained as it once was, but also developed is the birth of Tibetan English literature. Sometimes a matter of necessity, as some Tibetans born and educated in exile are not literate in Tibetan, sometimes a matter of choice, Tibetan English literature can be said to be born with Gendün Chopel (1903-1951), whose poems can be found in *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom* (2009). However, Tibetan English recently has certainly become a more significant phenomenon since the inception of the Tibetan exile and diaspora. Moreover, although writers like Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987) (*Timely Rain: Selected Poetry of Chögyam Trungpa* 1998, and *Mudra: Early Poems and Songs* 2001) or Tsewang Pemba (1932-2011) started writing in English as early as the 1960s, the number of Tibetans writing prose or poetry in English seems to have substantially increased in the 21st century. Not a small number of Tibetans who have chosen English as a language of literary expression are poets, such as the abovementioned Chögyam Trungpa, the poet-activist Tenzin Tsundue (born 1975), whose best-known collection is *Kora: Stories and Poems* (2006), or Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, by far the most recognized

Tibetan English poet. Although Tsering Wangmo Dhompa (born 1969) has recently published non-fiction (*Revolute* 2021) and has also authored various volumes on travel prose (*My Rice Tastes Like the Lake* 2011; *A Home in Tibet* 2013; *Coming Home to Tibet* 2016), she is most acclaimed for her poetic production (*Rules of the House* 2002; *In the Absent Everyday* 2005), which reflects her academic training in creative writing and has received significant critical attention (to mention but a few: Galvan-Alvarez 2020; D’Rozario 2022; Goswami 2022). Nonetheless, there is also a slowly growing number of Tibetans writing novels and short stories in English, as well as a sizeable non-fiction production.

Beginning with Tsewang Pemba’s *Idols on the Path* (1966) and counting in its fold celebrated writers like Jamyang Norbu (born 1949), author *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999), the lineage of Tibetan English novelists seems haunted by common concerns and analogous ways of articulating identity and conflict. The necessity of re-telling the story of Tibet as an act of resistance that counteracts Chinese accounts of Tibetan history is one central theme. Sometimes this re-telling might be focused on a particularly significant period of Tibetan history, e.g. *Idols on the Path* focuses on the period from the Younghusband expedition to the early years of exile in India, or *The Mandala of Sherlock Homes* on the turbulent final decade of the 19th century. However, some Tibetan English novels cover many different and disparate periods of Tibetan history, as it is the case in Thubten Samphel (1956-2022)’s remarkable fiction *Falling through the Roof* (2008). The creative and semi-fictional retelling of history places these novels in the genre of historiographic metafiction, a popular one in post-colonial South Asia and in the English speaking world in general. Nonetheless, as much as these narratives respond to global and transnational trends, they are also deeply preoccupied with expressing something uniquely Tibetan. After all, as counter-accounts of official histories, the Tibetan English novels are telling the story of Tibet from a Tibetan perspective, which, in the context of diaspora, is a peculiarly global and hybrid one. But, how does one craft a narrative that is at once Tibetan and global/hybrid?

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on the notion of post-Buddhism, a term of my invention (Galvan-Alvarez 2014), which aims to explain how contemporary Tibetan English writers use the traditional Buddhist narratives of their heritage in a playful, creative and humorous fashion. The tone of this narrative treatment resembles the way in which myth is dealt with in contemporary metafiction, magical realism and other forms of postmodern and postcolonial writing. On the other hand, the presence of traditional Tibetan Buddhist narratives fulfils the purpose of performing an identity that is ancestrally Tibetan, a mode of telling stories that is well rooted in the history and worldview of old Tibet. As transnational and diasporic subjects, Tibetan writers negotiate two or more identities and the hybrid nature of the Tibetan English novel attests to this contemporary reality. Hybridity is not only limited to the use of (Tibetanized) English, but can be appreciated throughout the structures and themes of these novels. Although other novels, particularly Norbu’s *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*, have attracted scholarly analysis (Venturino 2008; Guest 2010; Bhoil 2013; Galvan-Alvarez 2014), Samphel’s *Falling through the Roof* remains largely undiscussed. For this reason, I will focus on *Falling through the Roof*, which artfully interweaves stories from the protest generation (1980s-1990s) with Tibet’s semi-legendary past, by freely using the traditional narratives of *gter ma* discovery and *sprul ku*, or the reincarnation of lamas.

2. Modern iterations of *gter ma* and *sprul ku* narratives

Departing from the more serious and self-critical tone of Tsewang Pemba in *Idols on the Path* and the passionate patriotism of Jamyang Norbu in *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*, Thubten Samphel's *Falling through the Roof* offers a playful and at times ironic account of Tibetan history, mediated through traditional narratives. Also far from trying to counteract the solid and official quality of modern Chinese historiography on Tibet with an equally solid narrative, Samphel offers a truly postmodern, decidedly hybrid and humorous account that is not devoid of self-criticism and which often exposes the contradictions, tensions and conflicts of exiled Tibet. Unlike Norbu or Pemba, Samphel presents a wide range of Tibetan characters, from young enthusiastic communists to conservative and devout lamas. Although male characters are more prominent, there are also a number of significant female characters from different generations and regional backgrounds. The differences between more established exiles and new arrivals or Tibetans living in Tibet is not overlooked, and neither are the regional or tribal identities of Amdowas, Khampas, Central Tibetans, Ladakhis, Topas, Monpas or Goloks. *Falling through the Roof*, despite its relatively small size (300 pages) and accessible language, accomplishes a thorough reappraisal of the Tibetan recent and distant past. Moreover, *Falling through the Roof* is written in a conceptual language that openly dialogues with the Tibetan heritage and with a very global and contemporary *Zeitgeist*.

Key to the success of *Falling through the Roof* in fulfilling this hybrid construction of identity is Samphel's strategic redeployment of narratives and narrative modes from Tibet's Buddhist heritage in the language of historiographic metafiction and magical realism. This peculiar re-engagement of the Buddhist lore, common in Tibetan English literature, can be arguably called post-Buddhist. Post-Buddhism aims to describe re-appropriations of Buddhist narratives in literary contexts that are not strictly Buddhist, soteriological or even religious. Therefore, post-Buddhism does not imply a rejection or overcoming of Buddhism, but an often playful and contestive re-deployment of some of its motifs for non-Buddhist purposes. In the context of Tibetan English fiction, post-Buddhist narratives are used for making political and identity statements, since the narratives of Buddhist Tibet offer a way of grounding modern Tibetan identities and adopting a uniquely Tibetan worldview. However, these narratives are rewritten with much critical distance, opening a space of playful ambiguity in which the Buddhist ideological message is neither fully embraced nor discarded. The Buddhist structures remain, but their traditional thrust is emptied out, allowing the voice of the hybrid, conflicted and, why not, post-Buddhist Tibetan exile to speak. The peculiar way in which these traditional narratives are redeployed illustrates how Tibetan-English authors renegotiate and reinvent their religious and cultural heritage in exile. A good example is Jamyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*, which is framed as a discovered text and it skillfully weaves the narratives of reincarnation (*sprul ku*) and treasure texts (*gter ma*) in a post-modern, historically metafictional fashion. Also, the often complex, complicated and multilayered structure of novels like *Falling Through the Roof* or *The Mandala* expresses the diasporic Tibetans' ambivalence towards the culture of their ancestors, as it offers an implicit contestation or reformulation of their ancient values, as I will discuss later in more detail. In fact, not unlike *The Mandala*, Samphel's novel is articulated as a collection of many unearthed, (re)discovered or hidden stories.

The narratives of *gter ma* and *sprul ku* have been revalorized in exiled fiction as a way of talking about two important issues for the Tibetan diaspora: the rediscovery of tradition and the quest for identity. *gTer ma* texts are a peculiarly Tibetan (or not) cultural strategy for a phenomenon that can be identified in many other locations across the world: the construction of innovation as an expression of established tradition. By presenting a text written in a certain age as a mere discovery of an allegedly older text, the new becomes aligned with the old and acquires its authority and cultural value. From this perspective, the endeavor that preoccupies many exiled Tibetan writers is, metaphorically speaking, that of the *gter ston*: to unearth a culture or a story that has been buried and forgotten and to spread its message in the present time. For a community that has suffered displacement and has seen its links to land and history violently disrupted, this is a crucial matter. It is also a way of introducing innovation, new cultural forms and expressions, as part of the older and legitimating cultural matrix the innovators want to depart from, but also belong to. *gTer ma* texts are ambiguous cultural products that embody both continuation and disruption. There could be no better symbol for diasporic writers, who often experience the conflicted desires of both returning to their cultural tradition and reformulating it, so it can respond to the new realities of exile.

The *sprul ku* narrative instantiates very similar dynamics, as they enable the continuation of an established lineage, while leaving some freedom and agency to the current incarnation to reformulate the tradition. The stories of *sprul ku bla ma* (i.e. incarnate lama) often contain elements that repeat themselves in the lives of each individual, but also the unique and personal input that each teacher brings to the tradition. The ambiguity that marks *gter ma* is also present in *sprul ku* stories, as the new incarnation discovers his (less often her) true identity in that of his predecessor, but that “true” identity needs to be expressed in new times and therefore in new ways. The authority of the *sprul ku* rests with his or her predecessor(s), but such authority also contains the license, and the necessity, to innovate and convey the teachings of the lineage in slightly different ways. The inherent deferral and displacement embodied by the *sprul ku* institution also speaks to the Tibetan modern condition. On one hand, the exiles need to legitimate their cultural expressions by linking them to the matrix of established Tibetan culture, to the lineage that connects them with their ancestors and predecessors. On the other hand, by acquiring the authority of the tradition, they can also introduce new and disruptive elements. This is perfectly instantiated in *Falling through the Roof* through the story of Tashi, the rebel youth who wants to turn Tibetan culture upside down, and who is recognized as the *sprul ku* of the Drubtop Rinpoche (a fictional lineage and title). Although Tashi abandons his communist ideals and conforms to Buddhist etiquette somewhat, he also retains a unique outlook and reformulates the Tibetan Buddhist message in such a way that it still expresses his political concerns. By being reencountered with his “true” identity, Tashi at once obtains and loses such identity. The enormous authority of his position, as the incarnation of the inventor of the Tibetan alphabet, earns him the respect of the Tibetan Buddhist establishment and gives him agency to reformulate the tradition.

Although the fundamental intent of the *gter ma* and the *sprul ku* narratives is not inherently Buddhist, or Tibetan for that matter, they can be said to have shaped the history and identity of Tibetan Buddhism in a substantial way. Similar narrative patterns can be found in other Asian or even non-Asian cultures, and their dynamics, the tension and negotiation between the new and the old, can be said to

be universal. However, the peculiar way in which they have been deployed in Tibetan culture, informing the development of Tibetan Buddhist textual and human lineages makes them a significant cultural trademark. Hence, the explicit way in which Tibetan English fiction acknowledges them as Tibetan Buddhist signifiers and also ambiguously plays with the secular implications of their message can be said to be post-Buddhist.

3. *Falling through the Roof*

Thubten Samphel deploys these narratives in his historiographic metafictional novel. *Falling through the Roof* unfolds as the first person narration of Dhondup Kunga, a second generation Tibetan born in India, who has recently obtained a history degree. Like many others from his generation, who grew up in India in the late 70s and 80s, Dhondup is obsessed with digging up and recording the “lost” history of Tibet. One way of reading the novel’s narrative development is as a collection of recovered and rewritten texts that shed light on many different perspectives and periods of Tibetan history. The connection to the *gter ma* pattern seems evident and Dhondup’s words often make this link stronger at various junctions. The novel begins with the sudden appearance of a *snags pa bla ma* (i.e. a non-monastic, ordained Tantric teacher or lama) from Kham in Majnu Ka Tilla, where he meets the recent history graduates Tashi and Dhondup, at a derelict Chang bar. It is in the little shack that, with a mix of enthusiasm and skepticism, Dhondup begins writing down the stories of the Drubchen Rinpoche, who offers a peculiarly semi-historical account of Tibet’s past from the perspective of his lineage. The Drubchen Rinpoche presents his story about the Drubtop lineage as an authoritative treasure that holds the key to the Tibetan past: “The history of Tibet is encapsulated in the life of Drubtop Rinpoche” (10). Dhondup, however, is more ambivalent and at times proclaims that “the whole history of Tibet will be contained in these pages” pointing “with a smug, satisfied smile, [...] to the notebooks which filled [his] cotton bag” (33). But at other times, he acknowledges his personal motivation and willingness to believe, which implicitly question, or at least relativize, the veracity of the Lama’s tale:

Perhaps I thought the certainties of the lama’s Tibet would rub on me and I could get on with my life, without any of the nagging doubts and questions which followed my refugee existence like a pair of nervous shadows scared of being reduced to irrelevance by the gathering darkness of collective forgetfulness. [...] I thought I would be able to discover a piece of myself, my reflection, in the stories the lama told me. (Samphel 2008: 65-66)

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Tashi, the future Drubtop Rinpoche, dismisses the lama’s narration as “the fable of rinpoches, gods and ghosts, all reincarnating with exasperating frequency” (33).

The conflicting claims and attitudes around this first dug up narration from Tibet’s past highlight the unreliable, malleable and subjective quality of history, one of the underlying themes of Samphel’s book. The Lama’s narratives are semi-fictional short stories that begin with the civilizational missions of Songtsen Gampo, who sent Tibetans to India to import an alphabet and the Buddhist teachings, and cover the “Tiblomatic” (i.e. a term of Samphel’s invention that combines the words ‘Tibetan’ and ‘diplomatic’) intrigues at the Khan’s court,

featuring Marco Polo, tales of revenge from the Golok grasslands in Amdo, and accounts of domination and oppression during the Cultural Revolution. All these stories are brought together through the common thread of the Drubtop Rinpoche's many incarnations, who happened to appear at crucial junctures of Tibetan history. In a humorous and playful tone, fiction and history are intermingled, as it is the banal and the profound, combining regional stories of bloody personal feuds and more pan-Tibetan narratives that celebrate a glorious sense of civilization and belonging. This post-Buddhist *gter ma* convey an ambiguous and conflicted message to the ambivalent and paradoxical times of Dhondup and Tashi. The Lama's stories still convey messages from the past, but their texture and reception reflect the complexity and confusion of the time in which they are being revealed. However, the lama's narratorial voice is not devoid of contradictions, Freudian slips or tribal fears that militate against his composed Buddhist demeanor.

There are many other instances of texts being recovered, discovered, uncovered or, literally, unearthed, so I will limit myself to provide a short account of them and leave a more thorough discussion of their texture and features for another space. After telling his stories, the Drubchen Rinpoche, the lama, reveals that he is in the process of searching for the next Drubtop Rinpoche and sets a challenge or ordeal in disguise for Tashi and Dhondup: to travel to Kashmir and find the cave where the first Drubtop Rinpoche met his guru Birupa and where he invented the Tibetan script. The adventurous search for the cave, where the alphabet lies carved in stone, fulfils many of the traits of the genre of *gter ma* discovery, as Gyatso (1996: 147-155) has discussed at length. And by this, I do not mean the genre of *gter ma* itself, but the stories told about their discovery. Furthermore, the question of agency in the process of *gter ma* writing is a complex one, since, as, again, Gyatso (1998: 145-153) has outlined at length, the *gter ston* (i.e. the writer or 'revealer' of *gter ma*) is neither a mere empty channel possessed by the spirit of a past lama, nor is he said to be contriving the whole process through his own efforts. Analogously in *Falling through the Roof*, the two male characters receive inspiration for deciphering symbolic language from a female muse (Tashi's wife, who acts like *dakini*) and the instructions of a wrathful male mentor, Professor Bamzai, a retired Indian archeologist, who is described in ways akin to how Birupa is also described in the novel, thus evoking a second civilizational encounter between the Indian guru and the Tibetan seeker(s). Further, Tashi and Dhondup dream about windhorses and journeys to Shambhala, experience all kinds of mishaps and adverse circumstances in their search, but eventually, seemingly by accident, they stumble upon their coveted treasure. Tashi loses balance and falls off the cliff, landing inside the cave where the first Drubtop R. met Birupa. After regaining consciousness from the fall, he discovers the foundational carvings of Tibetan civilization.

The discovery, like the treasure itself, is interpreted differently by each character involved in the search. Tashi and Dhondup are fascinated by the personal and political implications of having found the origins of their culture. However, the Drubchen Rinpoche dwells on the religious significance of the discovery and Professor Bamzai is largely pleased about having his erudition confirmed after having formally retired from academic life. An ecstatic Drubchen Rinpoche further acknowledges professor Bamzai as a *gter ston*. The event is opened up to multiple readings, highlighting again that significance and interpretation differ from subject to subject. This event leads the lama to enthrone Tashi as the current Drubtop Rinpoche, which paves the way for Tashi's transformation. However, the former

communist enthusiast does not simply shed his political convictions and blindly embraces Tibetan religious conservatism. Again, offering a myriad of perspectives on the event, Samphel presents the lama's attitude towards Tashi/Drubtop Rinpoche as one of unflinching devotion, which leads him to rationalize his communist tendencies in the following manner: "It's the lingering effect of his [the previous Drubtop R.] two years' stay in Beijing. Remember, the last Drubtop Rinpoche had two years of communist education. It's natural" (232). Dhondup, as usual, remains ambivalent about his friend's new status and his feelings oscillate between anger, jealousy and acceptance. On one hand, he wishes he had been recognized as *sprul ku*, and on the other, he questions Tashi's honesty and integrity at accepting a title from an institution he did not believe in. Eventually, he comes to terms with Tashi's new status and presents him a white khata with a sense of relaxed and friendly respect.

However, Tashi's take on his title is very pragmatic and "Tiblomatic". As a political man, he sees the possibilities his role can offer for pursuing the Tibetan cause. Tashi becomes a very peculiar and hybrid *sprul ku*, who does not seem to believe in his new found identity with the same conviction as the lama, but who does not dismiss it either. The story of Tashi's gradual conversion and spiritual quest appears in yet another hidden text, written while travelling in Tibet, and gifted to Dhondup, the master narrator and scribe of the novel. In this last *gter ma*, written and unconcealed in hostile circumstances, Tashi narrates his disillusionment with the Communist establishment and reconnects with a very basic Tibetan sense of belonging: one that is not just spiritual, but material. The account of Tashi's travels throughout Lhasa and Shigatse offers no hints of his new religious identity; he regards these places as underwhelming and unremarkable, and he describes them merely as instances of Chinese oppression. However, in Mount Kailash, he experiences some sort of spiritual awakening, but one that is not mediated through Buddhist terms, but through a semi-anthropological rationalization of Bonpo. Turning away from the narrative of class struggle, Tashi is deeply moved by the landscape and life-giving qualities of "Mother Earth", the "Precious Mountain" and the "Eternal Lake" (275-6). Thus, he writes: "Let me just say I have demoted myself from being a communist to an animist, someone who worships Nature and our homegrown religion called Bon" (276). Furthermore, he recasts the Marxist narrative of class struggle in the light of his new consciousness: "The real issue is not class struggle, the battle between the exploiters and the exploited. The real struggle is species struggle. It is about how long man, the ultimate exploiter, will hold dominion over Earth" (ibid).

Underlying his newly acquired spiritual connection to the Tibetan landscape and to "Mother Earth", there is a strong material component, which will resurface in his teachings to his many Chinese students, who come from all part of the "Mainland". Ironically enough, his Chinese disciples are moved by similar concerns to those of his Tibetan friends in India: the discovery and preservation of their culture, also damaged and maimed after the Cultural Revolution. Thus, the former communist youth turned *sprul ku* addresses a large number of Feng-shui, astrology and calligraphy enthusiasts, giving them "a lesson on the sacred geography of Tibet [through] a celebration of Tibet, the source of the life-blood of Asia" (298). The Drubtop Rinpoche makes the point that "China is nourished by Tibetan waters" (300), in fact, in his own words "the rivers of Tibet and the mountains that feed these rivers sustain much of Asia. Here, I am talking about basic physical sustenance, not cultural, not spiritual" (299). However, physical

dependence also leads to some form of spiritual bond, again in the words of the Drubtop Rinpoche:

The fact that in Tibet these rivers are unspoiled and remain pristine is a testimony to our people's innate reverence for the environment that has sustained us, and our belief in the basic sacredness of Mother Earth. It is our Bon and Buddhist heritage that provided us the spiritual means to look after our land and your water. For this you owe a great debt of gratitude to our land and our culture because you owe your physical existence to Tibet. (Samphel 2008: 300)

In this peculiarly hybrid way, Tashi/Drubtop Rinpoche rereads Tibetan and Chinese cultural narratives from a political angle. Quoting the Chinese poet Li Bai, who wrote that "Torrents from the Yellow River flow/Down from Heaven" (299), Tashi makes the point that "Heaven" is "here in minority territory [...] here in what you used to call barbarian territory" (299). In this way, the civilizational hierarchy that construes China as the elder brother and Tibet as the younger one is reversed and Tibet becomes the superior partner, the one to whom, in Confucian terms, gratitude is due.

On the subject of materiality, Tashi/Drubtop R.'s comments are by no means isolated in *Falling through the Roof*, as the novel contains many other interesting meditations on materiality as an important identity marker for Tibetans. Thus, when Dhondup is in Bodh Gaya at the Kalachakra empowerment, he finds Tibet not in the spiritual teachings of the Dalai Lama, but in the bodies of "Tibetan refugees, freshly arrived Tibetans [...] bringing the smell of Tibet, of yak dung, of butter tea and unwashed bodies" (241). Dhondup also realizes, at the site where the Buddha found his enlightenment, his own private enlightenment through a vision of Tibetan identity and material abundance by means of "a scruffy Tibetan in a dark woolen chuba [who] took out a dried mutton leg from the enormous folds of his chuba and raised it high above the heads of the mantra-murmuring pilgrims and shouted, 'Mutton leg from Tibet. Two hundred rupees'" (242). Dhondup's playful reverence towards the scene conveys his post-Buddhist and material reappraisal of Tibetanness: "I bowed deeply before this vision of freedom from hunger. But then as always, the price was too steep. I comforted myself with the thought that I was fortunate to see every refugee's vision of enough food on the table in flesh" (ibid). Though very vividly present in the teachings of the Drubtop Rinpoche, these celebrations of Tibetan identity through materiality are spread throughout *Falling through the Roof*, and seem to counterbalance the centrality given to the spiritual Buddhist identity of Tibet in some exiled discourses.

Furthermore, and returning to the final and innovative speech of the Drubtop Rinpoche, we find yet another *gter ma* text. The words of the Drubtop Rinpoche appear buried in a narration smuggled out of Tibet, not as a written text in this case, but as the oral story of Tsering Migmar, a Tibetan who escapes disguised as a monk (more layers of concealment). Thus the novel ends by entwining and rewriting the *gter ma* and *sprul ku* narratives in a political and post-Buddhist fashion. Tashi's enthronement and conversion do not render him apolitical, but much in the spirit of the Tiblomats of the past, who used religion and religious authority in order to harness and channel the military might of Mongol rulers, he uses his position, and the narratives attached to it, to further the Tibetan cause. He becomes a peculiarly hybrid *sprul ku*, one who combines his Tibetan Buddhist heritage with environmental concerns, Bonpo beliefs, and a very pragmatic and material

rereading of the power dynamics that have historically governed the relations between Tibet and China. Through these renegotiations, Tashi discovers his true identity as the artful Drubtop Rinpoche, the legendary discoverer of the Tibetan alphabet, but this discovery does not fully subsume his modern and resistant identity as a Tibetan exile. One identity flows into the other, producing a new subjectivity that does not limit itself to preserve Tibetan culture, but also reformulates it in accordance with the times.

4. Conclusion

Analogously, and to conclude, the *gter ma* and *sprul ku* narratives offer a way of renegotiating Tibetan identity in a way that speaks to and about the modern Tibetan condition. Dhondup's many unearthed texts do not convey pristine, unmediated messages from the (recent or distant) past, but spark controversy, generate debate and offer multiple, conflicting perspectives on the present. The Buddhist structures remain, but their content is recast in a way that reflects on the hybrid, complicated and conflicted feelings of a community in the process of rethinking its identity through the realities of exile and diaspora. In the final analysis, the certainty of Buddhist enlightenment is replaced by the plural uncertainties and refuted tales of unconventional and divergent characters. Also, the spiritual centrality of Tibetan identity is challenged by emphasizing the materiality of Tibetan culture, both through its relations of power with other cultures and through its symbolic identifiers.

By framing contemporary, exile stories as *gter ma* and *sprul ku* discoveries, Samphel moves away from the preservationist paradigm that regards Tibetan culture and religion as a rare and static object that ought to be kept intact. Instead, he offers a distinctly (post-)modern and hybrid Tibetan cultural product. In this manner, he resists two paradoxically parallel cultural forces: Tibetan exiled conservatism, which considers innovation un-Tibetan, and Chinese/Western/Indian voices, who either expect Tibetans to assimilate to other cultures or to perform their culture in a scripted, stereotypical and pre-modern way.

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