

A Genre to Remember:
Tibetan popular poetry & song as remembrance

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Funeral procession with Tibetan flag, Dharamsala, India, 1998

It snowed at Thupten Ngodrup's funeral pyre
Flakes of his ashes covering those
Standing near
Warm snow flakes for a hero from the
Land of snows.

The snow flakes rising
From the fury of the fire
Flames of pain, of suffering
Leaping out to be heard
Among the deafening din
Of an indifferent world.

...And standing here
Humbled mightily
In the sear of your fire for truth
I cannot forget.

Losang Chodron, in Gyal (1998)
1-5-98, Forsyth Ganj, India

Early in 1998, a group of Tibetan refugees began an “until death” hunger strike in New Delhi to try to compel the United Nations to honour its Jurists’ report calling for Tibetan self-determination. I visited the hunger strikers early that April in their encampment in downtown Delhi and found many of the protestors in poor health but noble spirits. The United Nations was continuing to ignore their protests, and I could only think their sacrifices wasted on such bureaucratic indifference. Later that month, the Indian government interrupted the strike by forcibly hospitalizing the emaciated strikers, cutting short what was to be a continuous series of hunger strikes to death. The strikers’ replacements were standing by that day, one of whom was an elderly cook named Thupten Ngodrup from a monastery near Dharamsala. As the strikers were carried off on stretchers, Thupten Ngodrup poured gasoline over his body, lit himself on fire, and died several days later.



Funeral procession for Thupten Ngodrup, Dharamsala, India, May, 1998

On May 5th, 1998, I joined thousands of other Tibetans in Forsyth Ganj near Dharamsala, India to witness the cremation of Thupten Ngodrup’s remains. The sun shone brilliantly that day, as the smoke rose from his pyre and wound around our bodies like incense, drifting upwards towards the distant, still-white peaks of the Himalayas. School children, teachers, monks, nuns, laypeople, and interlopers like myself all congregated to mourn, lining the side of a ravine and an adjacent bridge to witness the dissolution of Thupten Ngodrup into dust. Many tears were shed that morning, so many that by noon twenty-five Tibetans were hospitalized for hyperventilation. Others channelled their anguish in elegies and poems to mark the martyrdom, and posted their words throughout Dharamsala. The local newspaper received so many poems in honour of Thupten Ngodrup’s sacrifice that a commemorative edition of these poems was published, which included two English submissions (one of which is excerpted above).



Commemorative funeral display

This paper explores the unique historical roots and shifting contemporary roles of popular poetry and song in Tibetan society. In particular, I focus on their pedagogical implications and roles to understand better the complex relationship between language, genres, and socio-cultural contexts. As an ESL teacher and scholar, I have long believed poetry to be one of the most difficult and inaccessible genres to read or write in the process of learning a second language. Not only does poetry tend to use ambiguous language by manipulating signifiers to refer to several referents simultaneously, so too can the cultural relativism of poetic metaphors and images make their significance opaque to cultural outsiders. After all, poetry tends to be one of the most culturally encoded forms of language, in which complex contexts are condensed into signifying images. So, I was most intrigued to discover how readily even beginner level Tibetan refugee students of English communicated effectively in the poetic genre. Even in the unfamiliar language and culture, they were adept at conveying deeply felt experiences and ideas. This paper is an attempt to understand the complex historical, cultural, and pedagogical factors that may have contributed to this genre sensitivity or readiness.

For Tibetans, poetry serves a key cultural genre to enact personal and collective remembrance. The popular form of Tibetan poetical songs are composed and/or sung quite democratically by literate and non-literate alike. In his autobiography, for example, HH the Dalai Lama (Gyatso, 1991) recounts how, as a young leader, he would gauge public opinion by what the women were singing in the streets of Lhasa. Indeed, until recently, and arguably still, much of Tibetan secular and lay culture was transmitted and experienced orally through poetry and especially “song,” which offered a way to represent events and experiences in condensed, rhythmic patterns easy to memorize and recall. This enabled “news” and culturally relevant ideas to be rapidly disseminated and transmitted among the non-literate peoples of Tibet who, though they lacked advanced communicative technology, benefited from a penchant for travel as nomads, traders, or pilgrims sharing songs relevant to the news of the day. Today, these traditions persist under very different circumstances and motivations, yet poetry and song in Tibetan society continue to conserve a highly democratic form of communication that allows

marginal voices and views to be expressed, with distinctive political, spiritual, therapeutic, and pedagogical implications.



Tibetan singers, dancers and musicians

I. Historical Roots: *Indigenous Tibetan songs meet ornate Indian Sanskrit poetry*

There are three main poetic genres in Tibetan literature: songs (*glu*), poetical songs (*mgur*), and ornate poetry (*snyan ngag*). “Songs” (*glu*) are an indigenous, largely oral genre in Tibet whose origins predate the arrival of Buddhism from India in the 9th century. The indigenous Tibetan song traditions were of two types: popular and royal. These songs were integral to particular performative rituals, music and dances, with only limited textual representations (Jackson, 1996, p. 368-374). The popular variety included songs dealing with love and marriage, planting and harvesting, or general spiritual and practical advice. As songs of common, uneducated people, they were transmitted orally. As a consequence, knowledge of their origins and development are difficult to trace through written texts. Royal songs, on the other hand, left more textual tracks because they affected the more educated elite and dealt with the lives of famous figures. There were two main forms of royal songs: *mgur*, which accentuate “positive personal experience” and accomplishment, and *mchid*, “songs of provocation and dispute” (Ellingson, 67-69).

These royal songs became the basis for the development of the poetical songs or *mgur* that are the central topic of this paper, which developed under the influence of Buddhism into a refined, hybrid genre of popular spiritual, and more recently political, literature. Historically, these biographical or autobiographical poetical accounts of the suffering, struggles, and spiritual awakening of Tibetan lamas, yogi/nis, and heroes evolved as a key genre in the popular culture of Tibet, and helped catapult their spiritual and historical figures into the popular imagination and cultural memory. The most notable example is the much-beloved 11th century yogi and founding lama of the Kargyupa sect, Milarepa, whose poetic autobiography is recounted in his “Life” and “Songs,” which continue to be read and remembered widely, now in diverse translations (e.g. MacGregor, 1988/1992). Milarepa’s youth was immersed in the traditional animistic Tibetan religion (*Bon*) and culture, so it is no surprise that the indigenous tradition of songs or *glu* left their mark throughout his songs. Yet, at the same time, Milarepa’s songs are more pedagogical and didactic, with evidence of classical Sanskrit metaphors and images linking them with the later Indian Vajrayana tradition that dominated his tutelage under Marpa, student of the Indian yogi Tilopa. The use of repetition, short sentences and stanzas, autobiographical contents and the (metaphorical) account of an epic journey align it with the pre-existing traditions of the popular *glu* and royal *mgur*, but with a much deeper pedagogical and

spiritual intent. Here is one among many such passages illustrating the emerging hybrid genre (Milarepa, 1978, p. 75-76):

Homage to my holy lama!
I, the yogi Milarepa,
Offer my experience and realization
To all meditators of the ten directions.

My mind is relaxed in its natural state
Without rigidity or tension
Through gentle, undistracted cultivation.

...Know that having traveled this good meditation path,
I see it now with insight.
Know I've arrived in the untraveled country,
Know I have flour without grinding.



Milarepa, Tibetan yogi and poet of 11th century

Another Tibetan figure immortalized through such autobiographical poetic songs (*mgur*) was HH the Sixth Dalai Lama, who lived between 1683 and 1706 CE. Just as Milarepa was celebrated in part *because* he was a common peasant and traditional (black) magician who found redemption, peace and enlightenment as testified to in his songs, the Sixth Dalai Lama, while holding the highest office in the land, also became a hero of the common people through his poems. Yet, rather than “accomplishments” in the conventional sense, his poems convey a deeply felt confusion and struggle to maintain the reclusive, scholarly, meditative and celibate life allotted him as a Buddhist monk in the face of very “common” sensual attractions and desires. In these poems, the Sixth Dalai Lama’s temples and lamas are the taverns and lovers he visits surreptitiously, and the spiritual *path* he describes is dominated as much by sensual bliss as enlightenment *per se*. These spiritual-sensual parallels give the poems a certain Tantric Buddhist aspect, where the path to enlightenment is explicitly described as passing through both bliss and

emptiness. Yet, they are also a sign of protest and resistance to Buddhist orthodoxy, which may explain the immense popularity both of the poems and of the author, who died prematurely at the age of 23 from an apparent assassination. He was an iconoclastic and renegade figure who nonetheless won the love of his people in his brief life through his endearingly romantic and sometimes ribald poems. The following are some examples of the style and content of these popular poems by the Sixth Dalai Lama (Dhondup, 1990):

If I could meditate upon the dharma [Buddhist teachings]
As intensely as I must on my beloved
I would certainly attain enlightenment
Surely, in this one life-time.

Or,

Even if meditated upon
The face of my lama comes not to me
But again and again comes to me
The smiling face of my beloved.



His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama foregrounding 5 – 12th century Indian Buddhist scholars

These poetic songs or *mgur* emerged historically in Tibet as a hybrid literary genre, combining the native oral tradition of songs known as *glu* with the ornate and elaborate Buddhist belletrist poetry known as *snyan ngag*. The latter ornate tradition was based on the Sanskrit poetic tradition called *kavya*. As one of the five minor cultural sciences in classical Indian education (Cabezón & Jackson, 1996, p. 18), this ornate Sanskrit *kavya* and later Tibetan *snyan ngag* poetic genres relied on recurring images or emblems and complex metrical and semantic patterns to evoke one or more of the traditional affect-states of Sanskrit aesthetics: charm, heroism, disgust, merriment, wrath, fear, pity, wonderment and peace, through the formal and verbal ornaments that help to produce those states (Jackson, 1996, p. 336). When Buddhism spread to Tibet, this highly stylized literary practice travelled with it, finding its way into the composition of high Tibetan

Buddhist treatises and Vajrayana meditational texts, in mark contrast to the dialectical style of the philosophical commentaries and debate manuals. Like the poetic songs, these more elaborate poems were also pedagogical in nature, but were reserved in most cases for elite monastic readers and audiences.

The content of these hybrid poetic songs or *mgur* invariably involved the experiences of the poet rather than abstract, disembodied philosophies, and were designed to invoke faith in the hearer. In the case of the most popular sub-genre, *nyam mgur* or “songs about the way in which experiential realizations arise from one’s having meditated on the guru’s instructions,” or, for short, “songs of experience,” they offered testament to the poet’s accomplishments and a chronicle of the causes and conditions that gave rise to her or his spiritual realizations. Although it was refined and popularized in Tibet, the *mgur* tradition of personalized and subjective poems of experience do share some precedent in early Indian Buddhist literature. One example is found in the *Therigatha*, the “songs” or poems of realization purported to be composed by the women students of the historical Buddha (circa 500 BCE). This introduces a particularly interesting aspect of these hybrid poetic genres. Unlike the philosophical texts, which were invariably authored by men, the poetical songs of realizations and experiences were often composed by or about women and other disenfranchised or marginalized people. Here is one such example from India, from the *Therigatha* song composed by Baddha Kundalakesa, the first nun ordained by the historical Buddha (Murcott, 1991, p. 46-47):

I cut my hair and wore the dust,
and I wandered in my one robe,
finding fault where there was none,
and finding no fault where there was.

Then I came from my rest one day
at Vulture Peak
and saw the pure Buddha
with his monks.

I bent my knee,
paid homage,
pressed my palms together.
We were face to face.

“Come, Baddha,” he said;
that was my ordination...



Dolma Ling Nunnery, Dharamsala, India

II. Contemporary Poetic Songs: *Remembering history, protest, trauma, and love*

In the face of the trauma of the post-1950 Chinese occupation, and the exiles and accelerated modernizations it instigated, large numbers of Tibetans found themselves pushed to the margins, even within their own country. So, it is not surprising to find that the Tibetan poetic song or *mgur* genre, with its tradition of expressing suffering and experiences of heroism, is serving an expanding role within contemporary Tibetan society. Also, whereas historically the largely non-literate lay society relied on oral songs or *glu*, today they are turning with increased frequency to the part oral, part literary genre of *mgur* and sub-genre of *nyam mgur* or “songs of experience,” as more and more of them become literate and able to appreciate and compose within this tradition.

To help clarify the expanded role of this literary genre in contemporary Tibetan culture and education, I will turn to four broad areas of relevance, looking at these emerging songs of experience as: 1) political resistance, 2) spiritual insight, 3) therapy, and 4) pedagogy. Throughout, I will consider how the idea of remembrance plays underlies the power of the genre in all four functions, and finish with some attention to the implications for literacy and literacy education beyond the Tibetan context.



Tibetan protesters, Dharamsala, India

Tibetan Poetic Songs as Political Resistance:

In the past decades, popular musical song traditions like the Tibetan *glu* have served a liberatory function for semi-literate peoples struggling against oppression around the globe, such as in the high-profile case of South Africa. Tibetans have similarly used musical songs to promote their solidarity and resistance against the Chinese occupation.

Yet, Tibetan liberatory songs have a spiritual dimension linking them with their earlier religious and spiritual poetic predecessors (e.g. the popular and patriotic song “Tsewa Lama,” meaning *root lama*, a reference to HH the Dalai Lama). The politicization of Tibetan music, song and poetry in support of its plight for self-determination has even spread to the West, where some of the most politicizing events for Tibet in the last decades have been the Free Tibet Concerts organized by popular musicians like Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys, or CD’s supported by the Grateful Dead. This, in turn, helped to fuel the emergence of the *Students for a Free Tibet* movement, one of the most rapidly expanding student organizations in North America.

Songs of protest conveying nationalist sympathies have been common in the Tibetan resistance to the Chinese occupation for decades, and have on occasion been the cause of imprisonment and torture (TCHRD, 1998). Lhakpa Dhondrup, for example, was arrested and detained for singing a patriotic song in the Barkhor in Lhasa in 1993 (p. 38). While singing for independence, he and his companion were arrested, beaten, and tortured using electric batons, and then interrogated concerning the songs. History for most Tibetans is personal and intimate, conveyed through caring communities and families who serve as deeply trustworthy witnesses to truth and powerful antidotes to Chinese propaganda. So, these nationalistic songs seem closer to love songs than patriotic or war anthems. The resistance movement is intricately connected with appeals to devotion both to one’s parents and to HH the Dalai Lama. Indeed, often the two are conflated as emblems of the nation itself, as indicated in this excerpt from the other song Lhakpa Dhondrup sang that day (p. 42):

...Tibetan brothers and sisters should work for Tibetan independence.
A person who thinks in the right way will think that
His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the parents of his parents:

Parents’ parents are parents,
Parents’ parents are parents.



Tibetan protesters, Dharamsala, India

Like songs, poetry is playing a similar role in articulating and unifying Tibetan resistance to the Chinese occupation. Palden Gyal (1995), a leading poet in the exile community who left Tibet in the early 1990s, offers a strong secular, nationalist voice that is characteristic of the changing genre. His work reflects the empowerment of lay Tibetan society through the expansion of secular education and literacy, as well as their sense of solidarity and common purpose across the globe:

As I gaze behind me at history's road
I see a gaping wound which is bleeding still.
However,
There is no need to be despondent.
Even less to be discouraged.

Today we need new vigour
Because history will be made today.
The news of the past is today's history.
The news of today will be tomorrow's.
We are therefore the makers of history.

Palden Gyal, *London*, 1993
Poet & Radio Free Asia correspondent



Tibetan protesters, Dharamsala, India

This politicization of the *nyam mgur* poetic songs of experience tradition is reflected in some poetic “songs” that surfaced in exile composed by Tibetan Buddhist nuns imprisoned in Drapchi prison. These political prisoners included Ngawang Sangdrol, a 21-year-old nun from Garu Nunnery who was first arrested at 10 years of age for demonstrating. At 13 she was again detained without charge for nine months, and a year

later, in 1992, was arrested for demonstrating and received a three-year prison term. This was extended by an additional six years when she was found covertly recording songs and poems, like those below, in Drapchi prison. Later, she demonstrated inside the prison against the detention of the child lama, HH Panchen Lama, and another nine years was added to her sentence. In total, her sentence stands at 18 years, making her the longest standing female political prisoner in detention in Tibet. The poetic songs from the nuns in Drapchi prison show many of the conventions of both the song and literary Tibetan poetic traditions. Though structured as songs, they include highly stylized metaphors common in ornate Buddhist poetry, such as the reference to *parents* (responsibility, history, remembrance, all sentient beings), *jewel* (compassion, freedom), *sun* (Tibet, freedom, enlightenment, HH the Dalai Lama), and *the cloud from the east* (China, Chinese):

Looking from the window
Seeing nothing but the sky
The clouds that float in the sky
I wish were my parents.

We, the captured friends in spirit,
We might be the ones to fetch the jewel.
No matter how hard we are beaten
Our linked arms cannot be separated.

The cloud from the east
Is not a patch that is sewn;
The time will come when the sun
From beneath the clouds shall appear.

I am not sad.
If asked why,
Days will follow days
And the time to release
From here will occur.



A Tibetan nun & former protester in exile

Contemporary Tibetan Poetry as Spiritual Insight:

The aforementioned poetic songs use imagery and spiritual contents that closely align them with their religious forerunners. In Palden Gyal's (1995) poem "My Mind," composed while he was still living in Tibet, we find many of the same emblematic images common to the earlier religious tradition of poetic songs. We find the use of an opening flower spreading its scent, which originally connoted enlightened compassion and liberation. Yet here, the liberation is political, and what is yearned for is the freedom of the people as much as the poet's introspective mind. The focus on the mind signals an association with earlier Buddhist spiritual poetry, but here the mind is as much collective as introspective, as much nationalistic as spiritual:

My mind,
Contented in deep sleep
Wanders to the realm of dreams
The birds are singing,
The sun shines across the land
Don't go to the realm of dream and deep sleep
My mind.
Breathe the fresh air of the morning,
Today's priceless jewel.
The petals of the flowers open.
Their scent spreads across the land.
Open your eyes and look around you.

Palden Gyal, Xining, 1988



Even the more classical Tibetan Buddhist poetry or *snyan ngag* tradition shifted to embrace themes of politics interwoven with spiritual contents following the Chinese occupation. As Tibetans' culture and traditional monastic education confronted the spectre of possible extinction, their spiritual and political lives became more conflated.

This conflation can be explicit or subtler, especially when composed inside Tibet where explicit pro-independence literature faces severe sanctions. In the following poem composed by the 14 year old reincarnate lama-head of the Kargyud-pa lineage, for example, the political content is masked behind ornate metaphors praising the Buddhist path, yet indirectly alluding to the contemporary threat facing Tibet by highlighting what is at stake, that is, *the brilliant and calm flow of culture*:

The most excellent virtue is the brilliant and calm flow of culture.
Those with fine minds play in a clear lotus lake.
Through this excellent path, a song line sweet like the pollen's honey,
May they sip the fragrant dew of glorious knowledge.

---H.H. The 17th Karmapa



Child bearing traditional text in Long Life Procession for HH the Dalai Lama

Contemporary Tibetan Poetic Songs as Therapeutic Remembering:

The enormous appeal of the poetic song genre for Tibetans, and in particular the genre of *nyam mgur* or poetic songs of experience, can be explained at least in part by their ability to facilitate both remembrance and emotional expression. They facilitate remembrance both through their forms and contents. Not only do the rhythms and repetitions assist people to remember the texts, the specialized metaphors and cultural allusions and forms help the reader or audience to remember both their culture and history. Yet even more significant is their ability to express and to convey liminal emotional and experiential contents in highly condensed linguistic images and signs. As the most personal of all Tibetan literary genres, they offer the poets and their audiences a space for exploring the complex feelings and traumas they continue to face from the events and dramatic changes of the last fifty years.

Like other societies influenced by Buddhist values, the Tibetan culture emphasizes subduing self-centredness. This poses a certain challenge for those facing severe personal psychological suffering and trauma. In this respect, the Tibetan genre of poetic songs, founded on the idea that even our most intimate and deeply personal lives and experience have collective resonance, offers an effective and culturally appropriate expressive avenue to deal with the deep pain of their recent history—both personal and collective. Interestingly, some of the leading poets of this popular genre are people from

groups excluded from literacy until very recently: non-aristocratic laypeople and nuns. Just as oral cultural genres like songs can serve a subversive and socially cohesive role in the face of colonization by a literate culture, so can this transitional or hybrid genre of poetic songs, located as it is between oral and literate poetic forms. Its attraction lies in part because, like songs, it is able to express the strong emotional contents that underlie both group identification and healing processes.

So, it is not surprising that the genre of poetic songs have become a key mode of therapeutic expression in the Tibetan society in exile, and possibly within Tibet as well. In exile, nowhere was this therapeutic role more apparent than on the day of Thupten Ngodrup's cremation, when so many historical traumas resurfaced in the tears and poems of those present. There are few Tibetans who have not suffered from the loss of family members and loved ones during the last fifty years, leaving scars close in memory and only too ready to resurface with the right provocation. The sacrifice of Thupten Ngodrup was just such a provocation, a sign of the many deaths and sacrifices Tibetans have endured for the well-being of their culture, history, and people. His actions were a defiant gesture against the modern indifference and forgetfulness seeping into the Tibetan exile community, even in their isolated Indian Himalayan enclave. The poems marking his death are referred to as "a lamp" to remember the past and heal from its pain: "We offer these poems to him as a lamp so that his wishes may be fulfilled and so that people will always remember his sacrifice" (Gyal, 1998).

Such remembrance is part cultural and part therapeutic. It is a way both to honour and to heal history, a history that is simultaneously personal and collective. It is in this respect that these poetic expressions are "therapeutic," not in the highly subjective Western sense associated with modern poets like Sylvia Plath. The Tibetan poems are deeply cultural and historical, not just personal. This therapeutic form of cultural remembrance is reiterated by Palden Gyal (1995), the editor of the Thupten Ngodup tribute poems: "Though this book does not have the power of prayer to lead him to heaven, yet, I will pray that this collection will help keep the lamp of his life always burning brightly in the hearts of Tibetans and people around the world" (p. x). Even the Tibetan title for the collection, *Fire Offering (mchod me)*, in contrast to the English title, *A Lamp*, is laden with cultural significance, insofar as fire offerings are "therapeutic" purifying rituals in Tantric Buddhist meditations. As a collective act of therapy, the poems helped empower and reconstruct Tibetans' confidence in their culture, while counteracting the despondency and depression from the disappointment of the hunger strike and the extremity of Thupten Ngodrup's reaction. This is suggested by a passage in the preface (Gyal, 1998, p. vii):

A human life has value – and power: Throughout the winding path of history with its turns of sadness and happiness, we, as the people who settled on the roof of the world, have offered countless lamps for the purpose of decreasing sadness and heightening human happiness. However, until now the only individual who has been able to offer himself as a lamp for our people has been Thupten Ngodup. His offering was made for freedom and justice and for lighting a future for our nation. Before the eyes of the world, Thubten Ngodup has created a new image of Tibet and Tibetans.



Commemorative tribute to Thupten Ngodrup immolation & protest, 1998

The recent history of Tibet is fraught with suffering and trauma that defy rational representation and understanding. Yet, for Tibetans, the need to share and remember these experiences and histories persists in the face of the failure of rational thought and institutions to offer redress. It is in such a gap between experience and reason that the songs of experience have so much to contribute, for the very fact that their imagistic representations are closer to the emotions and images of the direct experiences. For this reason, poetic songs above all other genres carry such therapeutic promise.

Tibetan Poetic Songs as Pedagogical Doors to New Languages and Knowledge:

In providing a way to communicate in language and images that closely approximate felt, sensed experience, poetic songs offer an effective genre to realize, represent, and share emerging knowledge and experiences. So, it is not surprising to find that in exile, Tibetans are highly motivated to share experiences in this genre. The relative freedom of exile removes some of the state-sanctioned inhibitions to communication in Tibet, and in such a milieu many Tibetans are keen to communicate more openly both with one another and with Western visitors, perceived to be key allies in their plight for liberation. Yet, the motivation behind such communication is not only strategic, but reflects a keen interest to make sense out of the extremity of their recent personal and collective histories, and the dramatic changes they are witnessing in their lives and culture within one short generation.

This desire to bear witness to the suffering of their own and other Tibetans' lives, and to the deep devotion and love they feel for their culture and country, is channelled in part once Tibetans come into exile through their experiences in education. Tibetan refugees in India have relatively easy access to education, and many receive literacy education for the first time in their lives. Even young adults are able to attend special newcomer programs for basic education, including English language studies. In the process of attending these programs, many are exposed to reading and writing poetry in both Tibetan and English. Indeed, poetry often serves as a key motivator, for to read and write poetry was historically associated with the highest accomplishments in the study of language. Even beyond this, however, is the aforementioned political, spiritual, and therapeutic rewards offered students when they write in this genre. Accordingly, the use

of poetry both in reading and writing has assumed pedagogical significance above and beyond its social and psychological effects.



Tibetan refugee nuns learning English, *Dolma Ling*, India

Furthermore, I was most surprised to discover young refugees newly-arrived from Tibet ready and able to write effective poetry in English even before they could communicate orally with competence. This poetic readiness appeared to be related to all the reasons previously outlined. The net effect, however, was to provide a highly rewarding task for students and second language learners in the Tibetan exile community. As an example, below is a poem written in English by a newcomer from Amdo, Tibet. He was literate in Tibetan before coming into exile, but had only been in India studying English for less than a year when he wrote this poem. At the time, he spoke English in broken sentences with very simple contents, in marked contrast to the sophisticated use of English language and content in this poem, which he entitled “White Moon:”

Where are you coming from?
Everybody said you came in the East.
I think you came from in the snow mountains
Because your colour is just like white snow
Mountains
White Moon.

May I ask you to something?
Have you seen palace Potala
Now that it is empty?

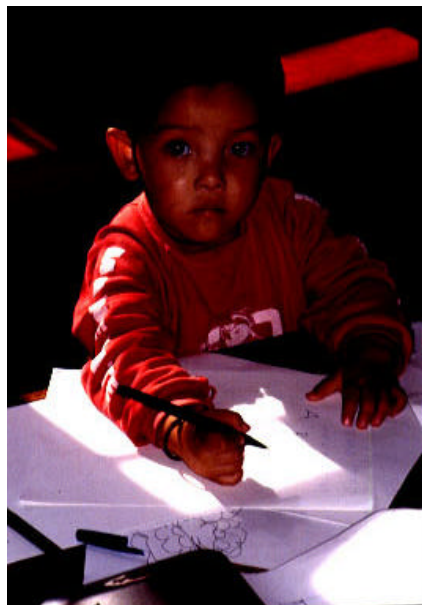
Have you seen living people?
Now they very suffer
White Moon.

Sometimes you are full then you are very beautiful.
Sometimes you are half and then you are harmful.
Sometimes you are like a star,
Then everyone mentions you.
White Moon.
You are like snowland.

I love you.
White Moon.
You are my country.

Tsedup, intermediate ESL student
Evening Yongling School, Dharamsala

Witnessing the potency of poetry as a tool in Tibetan education, both in a second language and in Tibetan, made me better appreciate the pedagogical potential of poetry and songs to serve a comparable role in other, non-Tibetan educational contexts. To understand more fully that potential will require researchers to move away from strict textual studies to look at ethnographies of language use across cultures, as I have attempted to do here, including an examination of how particular genres and forms of literacy and language serve people in the process of dealing with the struggles of living and learning outside of classrooms. As a genre that opens a space for communicating emotion, images, and representations of experience closer to felt memory, poetry can open a door to allow students to use literacy to help heal and empower their lives, even when composing in a second language.



Three-year-old Tibetan girl learning to write in English as a second language

Beyond Poetics: Non-verbal Acts of Remembrance and Representation

Then there are the representations of suffering and memory that don't come in the form of words at all. They are representations of the body and the flesh—the offering of lives in the prisons of Tibet and on its streets, in hunger strikes and in immolations. The natural, inarticulate signs in the tears and cries I am bathed in as I wait to meet HH the Dalai Lama in his Dharamsala office, as he met with Tibetans newly-arrived from Tibet and with those about to return. He continued to speak through their anguished sounds, offering what comfort and encouragement he could. I'll never forget those sounds and their rhythms, the best witness I have yet heard testify to the truth of the Tibetan cause.

Their cries defy abstract representation, yet, if they became words, those voices might repeat the prayer of the anonymous Lhasa monk (Schwartz, 1994, p. 244-245):

...Now when the melodious sound of the wheel of Dharma
is spoken everywhere in foreign lands,
Look with your eye of wisdom on those who have stayed behind,
like the corpse of a dead lion.
...Like the agony of a baby bird whose training is not yet complete,
Look soon with your eye of wisdom upon the suffering of these sentient
beings...



Author with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Dharamsala, India, May, 1998

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