



## Tibet's challenging place in contemporary literary studies

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Literary critics inevitably situate works of Tibetan literature on maps already informed, not only by popular opinion and official policies, but by motivated interpretations of global trends in literary theory. The pigeonholes that stand to contain scholarly discussions of Tibetan literature, I would argue, principally include those formed by existing debates on third-world literature, minority literature, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. In my paper, I offer a critical examination of these contexts for reading Tibetan literature and the ways in which Tibetan literature both supports and challenges these perspectives.

While I argue that works of Tibetan literature are productively approached by way of existing critical theories – which have generally been developed without regard for Tibetan literature – the unique aspects of Tibetan works should lead us to re-evaluate and revise these approaches, particularly with regard to their implicit assumptions of national identity and their insufficient attention to the history of non-Western colonialism. Tibetan literature's presence is growing on the world stage, but as an increasing number of critics acknowledge this body of work – particularly in English and through English translation – the challenges facing existing debates in literary theory begin to multiply.

At present, scholarly study of Tibetan literature is largely conducted by Tibet specialists in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, religious studies, sociology, and Asian studies. The International Association for Tibetan Studies has, over the past decade, devoted increasing attention to the importance of studying contemporary Tibetan literature. Seminar panels and publications sponsored by the IATS, as well as volumes produced by affiliated organizations and IATS members, have led to significant cross-fertilization of disciplinary approaches and an appreciable expansion of the scope of traditional Tibetological concerns. However, the same cannot be said of literary studies as such, where Tibetan literature remains acutely underexplored, in part because of the relative dearth of accessible texts, and in part because of the difficult institutional decisions – demanded of Western and Chinese critics alike – involving Tibet's status within China.

Yet I believe we are at a turning point of sorts, and by addressing the issue of Tibet's place in literary studies, I hope to show that while the field of Tibetan studies continues to be influenced by other disciplines, Tibetan studies also serves to influence other disciplines. This is particularly true with regard to theories of minority literature, postmodernist literature and postcolonial writing, which have yet to meaningfully acknowledge Tibet's history, politics, and literature as elements of debate and discussion of a globally informed literary criticism.