

Ascendancy of the term *rtsom-rig* in Tibetan literary discourse

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The Tibetan term "*rtsom-rig*" was coined no more than sixty years ago to roughly convey the contemporary understanding of the Chinese term *wenxue* and the English term "literature." Moreover, a survey of Tibetan literary publications in the immediate post-Mao period reveals that the term *rtsom-rig* had still not gained wide currency. Not until the late 1980s, as a new corps of secularly educated Tibetan writers and critics sought to found a unique literary history did Tibetan discourse on writing shift from a *snyan-ngag* centered paradigm to a critical formation that both constructed and centered the concept of a national "Tibetan literature" (*Bod-kyi rtsom-rig*). This discursive shift, however, raised questions regarding the classification of pre-modern writing. Were "*snyan-ngag*" and "*rtsom-rig*" mutually exclusive categories? Was one a sub-category of the other? Tibetan literary critics began to raise such questions in the late 1980s and the discussion returned with fresh vigor in the late 1990s. In this paper, I examine how the contemporary understanding of *snyan-ngag* consequently narrowed from the more comprehensive sense as "belles-lettres," which generally prevailed through the early 1980s to a literary genre approximating the constellation of concepts suggested by the English term "poem." And yet, the broader understanding of *snyan-ngag* continues to be upheld by some literary scholars, their stance now representing an oppositional strategy against the tide of a wider discursive shift with extraliterary implications.