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## **Souls Gone in the Wind? Suspending Belief about Rebirth in Contemporary Artistic Works in the Tibetan World**

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# Souls Gone in the Wind? Suspending Belief about Rebirth in Contemporary Artistic Works in the Tibetan World

Françoise Robin

Belief in rebirth constitutes a core tenet of Tibetan Buddhism and has thus structured social and political power in Tibetan society for centuries through the *tulku* (reincarnate lama lineage) institution. Still, it appears to be questioned in a selection of recent short stories and films emanating from Tibet, in which the authorial voices point to a lack of certainty about reincarnation, opting for a suspension of belief.

After a brief overview of the literary scene in Tibet today, and an analysis of the surveyed works, several hypotheses will be made to account for what may be seen as the beginning of a process of secularization at work among at least lay educated Tibetans, reflecting the growing intellectual prominence of a new elite.

**Keywords:** education, literature, Tibet, ethnicity, film, social transformation, Buddhism, religion, reincarnation.

The existence of something called ‘next life’ is not to be feared

But personally I dread its non-existence.

— ‘Ju Skal bzang, “Illusion” (2014)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Belief in reincarnation (or rebirth),<sup>2</sup> and the institution that ensued, that of the *tulku* (*sprul sku*) or reincarnate Buddhist teacher,<sup>3</sup> are two pillars of Tibetan civilization. Due to their centrality in the Tibetan world and their connections with power, religion and politics, the topic and characters of *tulku* have appeared early and regularly in Tibetan-language contemporary fiction, while that of rebirth by ordinary beings has been slower to surface. In select examples of recent Tibetan literary and cinematographic works, the principle of rebirth, which undergirds the *tulku* system, has come under question. As I demonstrate in this article, some Tibetan lay artists approach this topic with ambivalence, distancing themselves from adopting a definitive stance towards this belief religion, neither adhering to it nor rejecting it. I contend that the public expression of this ‘suspension of belief’ is emblematic of a generation equipped with a new type of cultural and intellectual capital: modern, literary or artistic, lay and urban. I argue that this ‘suspension of belief’ in a Tibetan literary context, for such a central tenet as belief in rebirth, may herald the

beginning of a process of secularization at work among at least some educated Tibetans, reflecting the growing intellectual prominence of a new elite. This represents an incipient moment of lay Tibetans challenging the residual and renewed authority of Buddhist clerics in the post-Mao era without rejecting it altogether.

Terms for the secular and secularism are elusive in Tibetan.<sup>4</sup> A cursory search on Tibetan websites offers a variety of translations for 'secularism': in 2011, on the popular opinion and news website *Khabdha* (*Kha brda*, Conversation), one could find 'this-worldly and human custom' (*jig rten mi chos*). The leading exile newspaper *Tibet Times* shifted from 'not mixed with religion' (*chos dang ma 'dres pa*) in 2013 to 'unrelated to religion' (*chos lugs dang ma 'brel ba*) in 2014, which Radio Free Asia adopted that same year. The Dalai Lama's own website opts for 'religiously unbiased' (*chos lugs ris med*), echoing the loaded term used to describe the non-sectarian Buddhist revival movement that spread from Eastern Tibet in the 19th century. In his Tibetan-language address to Tibetans in New York on 5 November 2014, the Dalai Lama used the expression "secular ethics" in English,<sup>5</sup> a not uncommon code-switching, testifying to the novelty and lack of standardized Tibetan version of the word. Latest to date, Naga Sangye Tandar (Na ga Sangs rgyas Bstan dar), an editor at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, has suggested 'the system of safety to carry gold' (*gser 'khur ring lugs*), a term that conflates a phonemic similarity with the English word 'secularism' and a reference to a famed time of peace in imperial Tibet (7th-9th c.), when one could carry gold in complete safety. As such, it is an allusion to the atmosphere of peace and tolerance that is supposed to prevail once a society has secularized, according to Naga.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, I adopt a particular definition of the term 'secularism': neither the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, nor a state policy of equality towards all religions, as the word sometimes implies. I take secularism in a contemporary Tibetan literary context to mean the possibility of a distanced individual stance toward religion (here Buddhism) and hitherto core and seldom publicly unquestioned tenets. I will illustrate this emergent form of secularism through two short stories, *The Silver Main Bead of the Rosary* by Yangtsokyi (G.yang mtsho skyid),<sup>7</sup> published in the late 1980s, and *Entrusted to the Wind* by Lhashamgyal (Lha byams rgyal), published in 2009.<sup>8</sup> My analysis will be complemented by comparisons with the documentary, *They Are One Hundred Years Old* by Dukar Tserang (Gdugs dkar tshe ring, 2014). After a brief introduction to trends in contemporary Tibetan literature in the People's Republic

of China (PRC), I will offer a summary and analysis of the works mentioned above and will conclude with several hypotheses regarding a shift towards secularization.

### Trends in Contemporary Tibetan Literature

What is now commonly referred to as contemporary Tibetan literature emerged in the early 1980s in the wake of the Cultural Revolution and cultural liberalization brought about by Deng Xiaoping's reforms. It began under the guidance and with the support of the Chinese authorities' cultural administrative body, as well as through the agency of the Tibetan intellectual elite. The support of contemporary Tibetan literature by Chinese cultural authorities can be interpreted as a two-fold goodwill gesture: to rekindle the flame of intellectual life and to secure a badly needed legitimacy in the eyes of educated Tibetans, many of whom had suffered from Maoist policies.<sup>9</sup> This apologetic support came in the guise of about ten state-supported literary journals created in the 1980s,<sup>10</sup> several provincial- or national-level conferences dedicated to 'minority nationality' literature,<sup>11</sup> an intensive program of state-sponsored book publications in Tibetan language, allotment of literary prizes to Tibetan and 'minority nationality' works of literature, and creative writing workshops organized on the Tibetan plateau,<sup>12</sup> among other noteworthy initiatives.

In the early 1980s, the influence of Chinese state rhetoric was often perceptible in the subtext of works printed in these officially-sanctioned literary magazines, which were almost the only venue for publication of creative writing until the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup> The overall message was unambiguous: Tibetans were now embarking, within the newly-styled PRC, upon a new and radiant socialist path, leaving behind the bitter tragedy of the Maoist fever (officially attributed to the Gang of Four, thus conveniently sparing Mao) but also that of their supposed feudal past. Literary creativity was officially welcome as long as it reflected an acceptance of the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and an adherence to the new socialist path and its values in the PRC. Religious beliefs had to be represented in a light preferable to the party, i.e. as a remnant of a past feudal age, as an epitome of backward thinking, or as an impediment towards 'progress,' be it understood as political (socialism) or civilizational (scientism). A number of short stories in these early days attacked what was then labeled as 'superstitious beliefs,' however unclear the definition of this concept was, although quite a number managed to adopt a more restrained tone.<sup>14</sup>

In the early to mid-1980s, as far as I can tell, it was difficult to encounter a short story that dealt with belief (or not) in rebirth, possibly because it was considered too religious a theme to be included in the new literature that was supposed to accompany and anchor Tibetans in their search for their new modernity within the PRC.<sup>15</sup> While few short stories, if any, dealt with the topic of rebirth *per se*, the *tulku* institution was tackled in one short story that is still vividly remembered. In 1981, Tibetan readers and apparently some clerics heavily criticized the writer Döndrup Gyal (Don grub rgyal, 1953–1985), the tutelary figure of Tibetan literature in the post-Mao era, when he denounced a fake, impostor *tulku* in his fictional short story *The Tulku (Sprul sku)*.<sup>16</sup> This short story tells of the unexpected arrival, right after the Cultural Revolution, of a wandering yogi in a small Tibetan village. His demeanor and speech inspire respect and faith in the religion-thirsty Tibetan hamlet, although old Akhu Nyima (Uncle Nyima), who hosts him, notices some inconsistencies in the yogi's religious sermons. Having secured the trust of the family that feels honored to host him, he steals a precious old copper statue that belongs to Akhu Nyima and seduces a young and single woman before disappearing. The police finally catch him. The negative reception of this literary piece was in part obviously due to the fact that, at the time of its publication, most Tibetans still harbored fresh memories of violent attacks on religious hierarchs and institutions by the CCP. Time was not ripe for critical comments about one of the core institutions of Tibetan Buddhism. Matthew Kapstein posits that this negative reception was also accountable to Döndrup Gyal's lack of legitimacy as an authority in expressing skepticism or doubts about *tulku* (not being a *tulku* nor a cleric himself), a right which was "the sole prerogative of the religious elite" (Kapstein 2002: 110).

This bitter dispute took place thirty years ago. Now that the dust of Maoist policies has settled and that religion has resumed a partial, if not complete, recovery while yet to be freely practiced in the PRC, we may wonder how *tulku* and its corollary, belief in reincarnation, are represented in Tibetan contemporary literature by lay Tibetan authors. I will deliberately leave aside here criticism of the *tulku* institution or religious beliefs that have been published in increasing numbers in essays, under the aegis of Tragyal (Bkra rgyal, pseudonym Zhogs dung, b. 1963). Since the 1990s, influenced by European Enlightenment thinkers and the May Fourth movement in China,<sup>17</sup> he and a group of writers have undertaken the self-imposed task of 'modernizing' Tibetan culture, by denouncing the ascendancy of religious beliefs on Tibetans in this modern era. The rationale is that, for Tragyal and his colleagues, the strong

religiosity among Tibetans has hampered the development of national or ethnic consciousness and bears a responsibility for the poor state of Tibet in the present era. Among their favorite targets rank *tulku*, and belief in reincarnation and *karma*.<sup>18</sup> This school of thought is still quite influential among young graduates from nationality universities and their works cannot be discarded too quickly. But harsh critics such as Tragyal publish their views almost exclusively in strongly-worded opinion and polemical essays, a new genre that has developed since the late 1990s due in large part to the rise of independent and self-financed cultural and literary journals and, more recently, Tibetan opinion websites.<sup>19</sup> While these 'radical modernists' have been forceful voices in the public sphere, their attacks on traditional belief in reincarnation and *karma* are more extreme than anything we find in Tibetan fiction

In the field of fiction, at least among established writers criticism towards the belief in rebirth appears to be much less stringent, with one important exception. This is the literary works of Tsering Döndrup (Tshe ring don grub, b. 1961), one of the most enduring, controversial and successful Tibetan writers, as he has been writing uninterruptedly since 1982. Many of his numerous short stories and novels over the last thirty years have included a character called Alak Drong (A lags 'Brong). Wild Yak Rinpoche, to translate his name, is notable neither for his kindness, nor for his wisdom, and even less for his knowledge. On the contrary, he is the embodiment of human weaknesses: venal, mean, and cowardly, indulging in carnal relationships at times. In other words, he is not commendable and embodies negative characteristics that are usually associated with ordinary humans, not with highly spiritually accomplished Buddhist hierarchs. Tsering Döndrup's hallmark sense of irony and delight in human ridicule must be interpreted in his case, it seems, not so much as an indictment of the institution of *tulku* or as a condemnation of the belief in rebirth *per se*, but as a reminder to readers that all human power systems are prone to mishaps and mishandling.

### Rebirth and Reincarnation in Tibetan Fiction and Film

Later writers who tread the fictional path tend to adopt a more nuanced and ambivalent stance towards belief in reincarnation.<sup>20</sup> To show this, I begin here a close reading of two short stories that deal directly with the rebirth of ordinary human beings. The first work is *The Silver Main Bead of the Rosary (Dngul dkar gyi 'phreng dpon, late 1980s)*,<sup>21</sup> by Yangtsokyi. This female writer was born in 1962 in a nomadic community from Badzong ('Ba' rdzong; Ch. Tongde, Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province), decimated by the 1958 Amdo rebellion, an event

to which I will return towards the end of this article. She acquired a relative fame among Tibetan specialists after Lauran Hartley translated her short story *Journal of the Grassland* (*Rtswa thang gi nyin tho*), the much-acclaimed first-person monologue of a young female Tibetan herder who is to be married off in her husband's family.<sup>22</sup> The second short story is *Entrusted to the Wind* (*Rlung la bcol ba*, 2009).<sup>23</sup> Its author, Lhashamgyal (b. 1978, in Khri ka, Ch. Guide, Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province), is considered by many writers and editors as one of the most promising talents of today's Tibetan language fiction literature. I spent time with both authors, in summer 2014, in Xining and Beijing respectively. Published twenty years apart, these two short stories share four common points: (1) they are based upon autobiographical memories; (2) they opt for a first-person narrative mode; (3) their first-person narrator is recognized by the community as the reincarnation of a family elder (grandfather and great uncle respectively); and (4) their author/narrator avoids emitting a clear opinion about the belief in rebirth that concerns the main character.<sup>24</sup> Reflections on these two short stories will be rounded out by references to the documentary film *They Are One Hundred Years Old* (*Lo brgya*, lit. *One Hundred Years*, 2014) by Dukar Tserang, the portrayal of a young adult who is identified by his community as the reincarnation of his own grandfather. Although this is not a feature film, and thus does not belong to the realm of fictional representation, I have added it here as an extra element in my ongoing reflection on the representation of reincarnation of ordinary people as it fits well with the autobiographical, quasi-documentary nature of the two short stories described here.

Yangtsokyi's *The Silver Main Bead of the Rosary* was published in the early 1990s in the state-supported literary journal *Riwo Nyinda* (*Ri bo nyi zla*, *Sun and Moon Mountain*, founded 1991). As with her *Journal of the Grassland*, this short story is written with style and originality, especially when it anthropomorphizes the main bead of the rosary. Partly autobiographical, it revolves around the fate of a rosary that was given to the narrator by her mother. This religious artifact is no ordinary one: it is made of precious coral, turquoise, with a silver main bead (*'phreng dpon*). But it is above all endowed with social and symbolic value: its original owner was a lama, so it is imbued with blessings from his spiritual practice. It landed into the hands of the narrator's mother because that lama offered it to her grandfather, a man who saved the lama's life. The mother in turn salvaged the rosary when the grandfather underwent political struggle. She passed it on defiantly and in utter secret to her very young daughter, in the middle of politically troubled times, when the possession of such

an artifact could mean torture (i.e. during the Cultural Revolution). But the short story does not focus on an already extraordinary – in the political context of the time – transmission of a family valuable from one generation to the other.<sup>25</sup> Rather, the mother holds the strong belief that her daughter is the grandfather's reincarnation.<sup>26</sup> And this is precisely the point with which the author chooses to begin her narration and with which the narrator struggles along the way: "My mother has repeated countless times to me that I am the reincarnation of my grandfather." By attributing this belief to her mother, the narrator begins the story with a careful distancing.

As the story unfolds, the narrator changes views about this belief and her own sense of self-identity. As a small girl, she initially finds difficulty relating her own young feminine self with that of an old wrinkled man, which is the way all other grandpas look like. And, like the young narrator of *Entrusted to the Wind*, the little girl does not fathom at first what *namshé* (*rnam shes*, lit. 'consciousness,' but connoting in these cases the entity that reincarnates or takes rebirth)<sup>27</sup> means. With the advent of the Cultural Revolution, the rosary, and more precisely its main bead, becomes a synonymy of 'old thinking' and, as a consequence, is a source of trouble for the girl, who consequently tries to get rid of it. But, through her mother's insistence (and an unforgettable slap on the face), she gradually grows fond of it and becomes "persuaded that I am my grandfather's reincarnation, that is, my grandfather." As the Cultural Revolution recedes, the narrator, previously ostracized due to her 'wrong' class background, is at last allowed to attend university. There her self-identity is again shaken when the slogan 'a backward nationality values history; an advanced nationality cherishes future' (*lo rgyus la gtsigs pa ni rjes lus kyi mi rigs dang / ma 'ongs par sred pa ni ngon thon gyi mi rigs yin*) is drummed in her ears. She then feels a growing aversion for what symbolizes her connection to the past: the rosary. But, at the end of the short story, recalling her mother's tears during the Cultural Revolution, she is moved back into re-appropriating the bead and re-integrating her self-identity as a Tibetan, although the abrupt final sentence ("A curse seems to make me stop my narration here.") provides little clue as to her real state of mind, as if to show her still wavering between two worlds and two value systems, and offering no guidance to the reader as to which belief to prioritize.

Lhashamgyal's *Entrusted to the Wind* is also imbued with ambiguity. The story was originally published in the leading state-supported literary magazine *Drangchar* (*Sbrang char*, *Soft Rain*) in 2009 and has been republished many times online since then.<sup>28</sup> It too is partly autobiographic:



Lhashamgyal was, he told me, “like almost every child in [his] village,” identified as the reincarnation of a recently deceased elder of the community. Rebirth was a cultural given for him, not a strange, imported, intellectual or ideological construct. The twenty-page story intertwines the fate of three main male characters at two different times: (1) Uncle Tantrist (A khu Dpon), who died one year before the young narrator’s birth; (2) Old monk Lobzang (Grwa rgan Blo bzang) who in his youth was close to the old tantrist and acts as a bridge between the past and the present, the tantrist and the narrator; (3) the narrator “I,” Uncle Tantrist’s grandnephew and reincarnation, and the old monk’s friend. In our conversation in September 2014, Lhashamgyal made it clear that these three characters had been chosen to represent three approaches to the belief of reincarnation: the utterly unshaken belief (the tantrist), the unquestionable belief that is aware of the possibility of hesitation, especially among young people (the old monk), and the uncertainty (“I”), typical of the author’s generation.

The story unfolds around the narrator’s return to his village, after two years’ absence due to his having secured a position in a faraway Chinese city. Paying a visit to the old monk Lobzang, he marvels at how little things seem to have changed in the village: “The isolated and quiet cell, this neat and clean room, the fragrance of incense, the pale wooden floor, the chest shining for so much polishing, the oven, the low table, the book, the monk, all and everything, how familiar they are to me! Even the sun drops that shine across the window, the particles swiftly moving in each sun drop, the dragon motif on the cup, all are utterly unchanged, they remain as they were before.” But Lobzang, the old monk, notices changes in the young man, as if drawing him back into the past: “You increasingly resemble your great uncle,” he comments. He then goes on to ask him: “Do you remember the tantrist’s sky funeral?” Here, one is taken aback: how could the narrator recall it, since he was born one year after the tantrist’s death? But the following page brings the beginning of a double explanation: the young narrator has been identified by the community elders, since he was born, as the reincarnation of the old tantrist, his great uncle. Furthermore, the tantrist was an accomplished yogi (*sngags pa*), as the reader learns later on in the narrative, and as such, on his deliberate way to his new life, he may have retained supernormal control over his consciousness, and retained the memory of his own reincarnation process as well as of his funeral.

The narrator recalls how, as a small boy, old people would gather in the *manikhang* (*ma ni khang*, a village collective praying hall) and most naturally call him by his ‘previous’

name: “Tantrist of the Zurtsa family, come here and recite *mani* with us!” But, writes the narrator, “I would not pay attention. I did not know then what *namshé* [i.e. reincarnation] was.” The elliptic narrative switches between the past and the present, sometimes leaving the reader puzzled, providing the text with its aesthetic ambiguity, connecting memories of the old monk Lobzang and that of the narrator. The story ends with the narrator quoting the old monk Lobzang imaginatively describing the process of rebirth: “[Lobzang said:] ‘The next year [after the tantrist’s death], a baby boy, as round as a golden pebble, was born in your family. The bee-like consciousness of the tantrist had fallen unto you.’ Through his words again, the old tantrist from the Zurtsa family and myself had been reunited in one.” Here, as with Yangtsoiky’s narrative, the narrator relates with restraint to his attributed previous existence: the fusion of two different persons into one only is expressed “through his [Lobzang’s] words again,” and the narrator does not appropriate them. Still, inserting Lobzang’s own words, memories and beliefs in the narrative may be interpreted as giving them a certain validity. Ambivalence becomes a literary and heuristic device to offer the reader two differing attitudes towards rebirth between which they may choose their own stance.

Reincarnation has also been dealt with by Tibetan or Tibet-related cinema. Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin’s pioneering documentary *The Reincarnation Of Khensur Rinpoche* (1991) describes the process of seeking the little boy in whom a deceased lama in exile is thought to have been reborn, and the relationship that slowly builds up between the boy and Chonzey, the monk who served as his main disciple in his previous incarnation. At least three other documentary films on a similar topic have surfaced in exile and in the West since then, testifying to its popularity. *Unmistaken Child* by Nati Baratz (Israel, 2008) examines, in a fashion close to that of Khensur Rinpoche, the search for the reincarnation of a learned monk, Geshe Lama Konchog (Dge bshes Bla ma Dkon mchog), in remote Tibetan valleys of Nepal, under his disciple’s anxious responsibility. *Tulku* by Gesar Mukpo (2009), son of the famous and controversial Chögyam Trungpa (Chos rgyam Drung pa, 1939-1987), surveys several cases of ethnically ‘hybrid’ *tulku*, born from a Tibetan father and a Western mother, like Gesar Mukpo himself. The film underscores the difficulty to accept this identity, and the doubts that are harbored by youngsters torn between two irreconcilable worlds (Tibet vs. the West) and two eras (their attributed previous identity vs. their current existence). *My Reincarnation* by Jennifer Fox (2012) is the latest to date made outside Tibet, and portrays the difficult relationship between the famed Tibetan lama Namkhai Norbu (Nam mkha’i nor bu, b. 1938) and

his son Khyentse Yeshe (Mkhyen brtse ye shes, b. 1970), recognized as the reincarnation of Namkhai Norbu's own maternal uncle. Khyentse Yeshe struggles for a long time with his assigned identity, and with his father, before finally endorsing it upon traveling to his family's Tibetan homeland. In the first two works, the filmmakers appear to accept the Tibetan belief almost unquestionably. The two latter films offer a more nuanced approach, basically due to the protagonists, their age and their cultural hybridity: both are offsprings of famous lamas, half Western by birth, living in the West, and they harbor more doubts than certainties as to their fate and identity as *tulku* themselves when they reach adulthood. But, in spite of their differences, they all share one commonality: they are reincarnations of spiritually accomplished practitioners, not of common ordinary human beings.

The documentary film *They Are One Hundred Years Old* (2016), made in Tibet proper, favors another angle: it focuses on an ordinary eighteen year-old young man, the filmmaker's own cousin Guru (Gu ru), considered by all in the local community as the reincarnation of his own grandfather, a lay person with no exceptional spiritual achievement. Dukar Tserang's intimacy with his character, which accounts for the fluidity of his camera, depicts someone who is torn between his three identities: as a young man from a herding background; as an educated Tibetan schooled in a modern town; and as the reincarnation of his grandfather, at least in the community's eyes.<sup>29</sup> The tension between Guru's own sense of self-identity and the one that is projected onto him by his relatives, especially his grandmother, is informed by the tension between the two worlds he inhabits: that of his relatives, a herding family whose world is coming to an end and that of his friends, neo-urbanites who drive cars, waste time in cafes, gamble and play video games, whose future is compromised by average school achievements. A slow wide angle shot at the end of the movie (at least according to a pre-final cut version that I saw in 2014) shows a compound for resettled nomads. Followed by Guru's inability to blow into a conch, it ends with one last shot of the grandmother turning her prayer wheel despondently in her bed. She seems to be waiting for her grandson/husband's return, or to await death, as she looks very weak. This last focus on an aged, fragile, elderly woman, can be interpreted to convey the message that the perpetuation of the family and its way of life is doomed.

But there is more to it than a mere generational shift. Guru's self-identity problem is rendered more acute because he is supposed to embody, in the actual sense, continuity between two apparently irreconcilable eras, pre-1958 and post-1980 Tibet, and more precisely Amdo.<sup>30</sup> While Guru's

relatives are convinced of his identity as his grandfather's reincarnation, Guru is more circumspect. The filmmaker does not take sides, only recording elements in a rather neutral way, resorting to indecision and ambiguity rather than assertion, in the same fashion and *modus operandi* as the short stories described above.

### Suspension of Belief as a Narrative Device

The three works briefly surveyed here share some common features: the young adults portrayed have been educated in the modern mass education system that has been set up in the Qinghai province since the late 1970s and have gained full momentum in the 1980s, as in most Tibetan areas in China. Craig Calhoun appropriately described school, courts, hospitals, etc., as systems that "operate within the terms of secular imaginary" (Calhoun 2010: 4) hence as a place where secularization is 'in the air.' In *The Silver Main Bead of the Rosary* it is university that shakes the narrator's self-identification as a Tibetan and, it can be surmised, her identity as her grandfather's reincarnation. In *Entrusted to the Wind*, the narrator has gone for schooling in a faraway place and then returns home to confront the past. In *They Are One Hundred Years Old*, Guru also goes to high school in a nearby town, where he also encounters difficulties

In Tibetan contexts in the PRC today, schools are the locus of training that presents a new social environment, new sets of beliefs and a new regime of truth to young Tibetans. But even before discussing the content of the curriculum offered in such schools, it must be emphasized that, due to the low density of Tibetan population, post-primary schooling in Tibetan areas (and primary schools increasingly) implies physical uprooting from one's familiar ethnic and communal surroundings, and confrontation with the ethnic Other (Han or Hui in Qinghai province). The author/narrator in *The Silver Main Bead of the Rosary* explicitly mentions the gaze of Han Chinese persons, even that of uneducated beggars, as a reason for her unease about her ethnicity and herself, although theoretically she might rank higher than them on the social scale, being a university graduate. Guru also navigates uneasily between the world of schooling in town, a world over which his community has little control and even knowledge, and the familiar herding milieu into which he was born and from which he gradually becomes estranged. In *Entrusted to the Wind*, the narrator lives in a faraway "big Eastern city" (*shar phyogs kyi grong khyer chen mo*), i.e. Han mainland China, and seldom returns to his home village. Lhashamgyal, who comes from a farming background, admitted that being transplanted as a small boy from one almost purely ethnically Tibetan milieu to that of a mixed, multi-ethnic,



multilingual school environment in high school, was a radical and disturbing experience, shared by most other Tibetan youth in his region and generation. The sudden clash of language, values and beliefs created a new awareness about one's hitherto unquestioned "self-referential notion of belonging" (Butler 2011: 86). He explained: "Young people are all educated [formally], now. Education changes everything. We move to new places, we go to colleges, and even for primary schools now, we have to go far. The environment is Chinese. The small bowl (*dkar yol*) is suddenly mixed into a big bowl. We switch languages, we change values (*khral dang ngo tsha*, literally 'sense of shame'). For instance, in the villages, women and girls do not wear underwear. They begin doing so when they settle in towns." One could retort that this is nothing specific to this generation of writers, and that the Uncle Tantrist and the old monk Lobzang have both experienced the confrontation with a different set of values in the 1950s and 60s, and quite a violent one at that. This is correct, but their worldview was not as shattered or shaken as that of the narrator's, because the shock of the encounter occurred at an age when both were relatively advanced in life and had acquired a *habitus* that was already deeply engrained. While an adult can cope with such ruptures and become "a person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity," because "she has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively" (Giddens 1991: 154), someone whose biographical continuity was interrupted at an early age by modern schooling in an ethnically, linguistically and culturally different milieu will struggle to develop that very "reasonably stable sense of self-identity."

Although the influence of science does not appear in the works surveyed here, Lhashamgyal mentioned it to me as playing a crucial reference point to establish truth in school: "Rebirth and *karma* have not been scientifically proven. So, how are we to consider them?"<sup>31</sup> In today's schools, the state-operated curriculum relies on scientific, non-religious premises that often shatter or clash with the students' initial culturally ingrained system of knowledge. In Tibetan areas of the PRC, since the inception of modern mass education, lay Tibetans are taught math and science (physics, chemistry, biology) from an early age. But valorization of science is not the monopoly of the Chinese state: the Dalai Lama is a staunch supporter of the spread of Western scientific knowledge among Tibetan laymen and clerics and he has engaged in discursive exchanges with Western-trained scientists, some of them being translated into Tibetan. These have led to dialogues and publications where the nature of mind, and as a consequence reincarnation, features prominently but so far has remained an unresolved issue.<sup>32</sup> For instance, in *The Universe in a Single Atom* (2005), the Dalai Lama wrote: "The view that all men-

tal processes are necessarily physical processes is a metaphysical assumption, not a scientific fact. I feel that, in the spirit of scientific inquiry, it is critical that we allow the question to remain open, and not conflate our assumptions with empirical fact" (Dalai Lama 2005: 128). Regarding the topic of rebirth more specifically, Thubten Jinpa underlines that the Dalai Lama, whom he regularly translates for, "reminds us not to conflate the two processes of *not finding* something and *finding its nonexistence*. For example, through current scientific analysis so far we may have not found evidence for rebirth, but this does not imply by any means that science has somehow *negated* the existence of rebirth" (Jinpa 2003: 77-78).

In *Tibetanness Under Threat?* Adrian Zenz (2014) offers a detailed survey of the present generation of educated Tibetans in Qinghai province. He finds that questions about the relationship between Buddhism and science are common in this milieu. The quest for scientific validation of Buddhist tenets, especially reincarnation and *karma*, has become a vexed question both in exile and in Tibet proper. Tibetans who follow the Tibetan-medium track education system, he writes, tend to creatively adapt scientific discourse for their own agenda, contrary to Tibetans who major in the Chinese-medium track, who tend to dismiss Buddhist tenets as a system of belief not validated by science. The former individuals claim that Buddhism is scientific, or that Buddhism and science are mutually compatible. Zenz explains: "by presenting Buddhism as 'science,' the 'educated Tibetan community' is strategically appropriating state discourses with the purpose of manipulating conceptual associations and domain boundaries. Suddenly, the 'traditional' has become 'modern'... At the same time, Buddhism-science discourses reflect a desire of the Tibetan community to place itself in the world" (Zenz 2014: 286-287). While state discourses certainly play a part in this 'Buddhism-science' attitude, one cannot discard the Dalai Lama's influence: in Tibet, despite the media black out of anything related to him, Tibetans are well aware of his views, movements and activities.<sup>33</sup> Nor should one ignore proponents of counter-hegemonic views from within Tibet, such as those of Khenpo Jigmé Phuntsok (Mkhan po 'jigs med phun tshogs, 1933-2004), whose *Heart Advice to Tibetans for the 21st Century* (1995) and subsequent works by his successors have been widely disseminated among Tibetans as Holly Gayley has shown. *Heart Advice* dedicates more than a third of its content (38 pages out of 104) to presenting quasi-scientific evidence for the belief in rebirth (*skye ba snga phyi la yid ches bya ba*), the first out of four beliefs (*yid ches*, translated by Gayley as "conviction") to be upheld by 21st century Tibetans as worthy traditions from the past as far as religion is concerned (see Gayley 2011: 452).<sup>34</sup>

The suspension of belief regarding rebirth that characterizes the three literary works discussed here can be interpreted as a reflection of an increased focus on present time, on present temporality, which is archetypal of modernity,<sup>35</sup> and it is not too far-fetched to claim that Lhasamgyal's suspension of belief is not unique to him but is shared by some educated, lay Tibetans today.<sup>36</sup> Another characteristic of modernity is the "constant, profound and rapid momentum of change" (Giddens 1991: 133) leading to unsettling of certainties about the future, which is "recognized to be intrinsically unknowable" (*ibid*). This increased concern with the present, as a consequence, postpones or obscures projections about future in this very life and pushes further into the background concern for one's future rebirth, which traditionally haunts Tibetans as they grow older. This is even truer in the political context of the PRC, where citizens, kept away from general policy-making, are beneficiaries of unpredictable decisions. This applies with even greater intensity for Tibetans and other ethnic minorities, left outside of most decision-making procedures. Formulating modernity, implying projecting oneself into a decipherable future in Tibetan terms, thus presents specific challenges for Tibetans in the PRC context.

But there is more than the mere and obvious unpredictability of future times for a politically dominated population in the grips of modernity. The current adult generation of Amdo Tibetan-medium writers and filmmakers surveyed here (born in the 1960s and 1970s) are aware that they are a key generation for the preservation and transmission of the Tibet-centered memories they have received from witnesses and survivors of the Maoist period, memories of the devastation of human communities within a few months of 1958, which state-controlled national history or politics in China are careful to conceal.<sup>37</sup> As a consequence, projecting oneself into the future, and even further imagining one's future rebirth, is a postponed activity as long as the recent past is not dealt with. Those endowed with cultural and linguistic capital, i.e. those who have been trained in Tibetan language, are in a position to take upon themselves the task of publicly remembering and narrating, having being brought up with the "memory of suffering from another time" (Butler 2011: 15) or "postmemory,"<sup>38</sup> that of the survivors and direct witnesses of those painful days. This responsibility of postmemory is more strongly felt in most cases as, according to numerous observations I was able to make, quite a number of these contemporary writers and artists, and many Amdo intellectuals in general, are the offspring of forcibly disrobed monks, heavily suppressed elites, or ordinary Tibetans who

took to arms in 1958. Nostalgic memories of life in pre-PRC Tibet, painful first-hand narratives of camps and imprisonment, death and famine (the Great Leap Forward immediately followed 1958, adding famine to destruction), are part and parcel of childhood memories among adults.

It is then no coincidence that the three works surveyed here each dedicate a passage to 1958. In the case of Yangtsokyi's short story, the narrator's claimed previous incarnation, i.e. her grandfather, must have died in 1958 or shortly after, due to tortures inflicted during the uprising in the region or ensuing struggle sessions for those who participated, but this is never explicitly stated.<sup>39</sup> In *Entrusted to the Wind*, the old monk Lobzang recalls, using the euphemism 'movement' (*las 'gul*) to describe the upheaval and massive rebellion of 1958, how shattered the tantrist was when he returned from the camps: "The 1958 movement occurred, and the old tantrist was taken away to a camp in the Tsaidam basin... When he returned from the camp, his tantric braided hairstyle had been completely shaven. The impressive tantric of yesteryear had become emaciated. He told me that he had been released from the prison in the Tsaidam basin because of stomach condition due to the extreme heat, hunger, thirst, and endless toil. *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*.... He was released after ten years, but it coincided with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Considered a class enemy for petty and bigger reasons, he was submitted to struggle sessions, was labeled a reactionary, and underwent a lot of torture." In *They Are One Hundred Years Old*, mention is made of Guru's grandfather's troubles during 1958, although he did not die at that time. The discretion about this topic in the film might be explained by the fact that alluding to 1958, tolerated in fiction writing if understated, is more problematic in films which are more carefully controlled, due to their potentially wider audience. 1958 has left an enduring imprint on the current Amdo adult generation. I argue that those endowed with cultural capital in Tibetan language strive to settle accounts with it, expressing both ambivalence and a deeply felt connection to the past. As a result, future prospects, future life and rebirth recede in the background of their immediate concerns and interests.

### Shifting Winds

Having returned from the camp and undergone struggle sessions during the Cultural Revolution, the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family settles in a room attached to the house of the yet-to-be-born-narrator's parents. There, he absorbs himself secretly for two years in meditation, although the Cultural Revolution is raging. Foreseeing his imminent death, he calls his relatives, the narrators' parents-to-

be, and tells them: “This short human life is like a small breeze. Consciousness is like wind. So, after I’m gone, please entrust my corpse to the wind.” He then expires in a meditation posture. Far from marveling at this spiritual feat, his relatives feel extreme anxiety, as all external signs of faith are forbidden during that time and could mean political disaster to the family. With the help of Lobzang, who then is a young monk forcibly returned to lay life as a sheep herder in the commune, they try with all their might to stretch out the rigid corpse into a less ostensibly and compromising religious posture, but to no avail—the body won’t yield. This can be read as a likely symbol of the tenacity of tradition as embodied in elders, which creates both anxiety and tensions for those attempting to survive and assimilate into a Chinese modernity, like Lobzang and the narrator’s family at that time. When recalling this scene thirty years later, Lobzang still cries from remorse for having resorted to such an inadequate gesture: the old tantrist had entered into *tukdam* (*thugs dam*), a meditative absorption at the time of death and a sure indication of spiritual mastery during which period of time the body should be left untouched. The family decides to secretly transport the meditator to the sky funeral ground for vultures to eat it in a typical Tibetan funeral. But vultures fail to come—generating a double anxiety among relatives as it is usually considered a bad omen, but also and above all because of the ban on religious activities. Lobzang is called in again secretly and requested to whisper to the old tantrist, sitting cross-legged at the burial site, to let go of this life: he threatens to bury him (“entrust [him] to the earth”). Hardly has Lobzang spoken that the corpse tumbles down, blood running from his nose. The first vultures approach at last. One year later, the narrator is born in the family of the deceased tantrist. No one doubts he is the *namshé* of the old tantrist, who had predicted his return to the narrator’s parents, at the point of dying.

Addressing a Tibetan audience, the authorial voice does not marvel at the spiritual feat attributed to his previous incarnation’s death. He keeps a distance and does not invoke any religious meaning to make sense, explain or celebrate the old tantrist’s extraordinary death, or instruct readers about the technical word *tukdam* that appears in the text thrice, or about the importance of one’s mental state at the time of death. He chooses to offer a secular narrative, not a hagiographical one. But he also provides a believer’s interpretation via the voice of the old monk Lobzang who recalls, thirty years on, the events in great detail. Religious messages about impermanence are also left to Lobzang. Could this be a subtle reaffirmation of the possibility of reincarnation, juxtaposed by the narrator’s continued ambivalence? The authorial voice then asks one-

self – or the reader? – questions that remain unanswered: “As I was facing the old monk Lobzang, quietly, I thought once again of the invisible wind. Wind-like movements had now vanished in this part of the territory... What kind of trouble had the wind brought? And, still, in what direction of time had the wind carried away my great uncle? This was now impossible to see.” And, as the short story nears its end, the narrator adds: “I stood for a little while in the wind. The feeling of standing in the wind was beyond words. It was the feeling of a visible entity confronted with an invisible power. What had the wind taken away? In other words, what had time taken away? Where was the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family? Had he been entrusted to the wind?”

The confrontation between the “visible entity” and the “invisible power” brings to mind the confrontation of the narrator with the “wind.” This omnipresent yet invisible wind is named more than forty times in the narrative. It is the wind that carries away the tantrist’s *pecha* pages. It is the wind that has whitened the old monk Lobzang’s face and eyebrows. It is the wind that runs “like a madman across the funeral site.” It is the “red wind of terror ... blowing” during the Maoist years.<sup>40</sup> What does this polymorphous wind stand for? Wind proper? Or time? Or changes? Or politics? Or, to use a simile of the Tibetan tradition, the wind of *karma* (*las kyî rlung*)?

This plethora of potential meanings is not surprising *per se*. Indecision is an inherent trait of both fictional literature and its archetypal form, the novel, as J. Bouveresse writes: “The novelist, contrary to the philosopher... tends to appreciate and systematically seek diversity, ambiguity and indecision” (Bouveresse 2008: 181-2, my translation). It is also particularly well suited in the present case to the suspension of belief that the author conveys about his attitude towards rebirth. A “secular narrative establishing the nation” (Calhoun 2010: 7) could be the apt description of such fiction texts that lay educated Tibetans have produced in hundreds and thousands since the mid-1980s to narrate ‘their’ new Tibet. Taking their distance from the primacy of a Buddhist prism of interpretation, but still giving space to a Buddhist worldview, they present the reader with two forces acting upon her, just as they act upon the protagonist: a secular framework expressed in the ambivalent voice of the author and the assertion of the elders, i.e. the unyielding voice of the Tibetan past, framed in religious terms. By bringing to the fore, alongside the traditional narrative, a new heuristic frame, they may contribute to a gradually secularizing literary narrative corpus that reflects the world and training of an emerging lay elite, one who does not totally discard a believer’s

interpretation of events but offers other angles of interpretation. This is not to say that a religious interpretative framework is altogether absent from this new cultural elite's production and that the forces are uni-directionally secularizing. The sheer fact that the short story was at first rejected by the editors of the state-run, Beijing-based, Tibetan-language literary magazine called *Nationalities Literature* (*Mi rigs rtsom rig*), on the basis that it was "too religious," indicates clearly enough that it retains a strong Buddhist content.<sup>41</sup>

These authors, navigating between secular and religious worldviews, produce different imaginary narrative and alternative representations from works by clerics within the current Tibetan-language "cultural nexus."<sup>42</sup> This type of literary narrative appeals more to "imagination and sensibility [which] are essential *instruments* of practical reasoning" (Putman 1976: 491) as opposed to philosophical or ethical treatises or even poetic renderings of spiritual experiences (songs of experiences, *mgur*), which do include elements of the everyday experience but are always Buddhist-oriented. Divided between the family values of their upbringing, on the one hand, and a secular education on the other, I suggest here that these literati virtuosi promote a partly secularizing literary narration of Tibetanness, which may include some core tenets of Buddhism, but which also expresses uncertainties or at least gives equal weight to two opposite views (belief and disbelief). Milan Kundera once said that Robert Musil and Hermann Broch saw the novel "as the supreme intellectual synthesis, the last place where man could still question the world as a whole."<sup>43</sup> This definition would certainly delight committed Tibetan novelists, and at the same time would put them in direct competition with authors of the other discourse of knowledge currently prevailing in Tibet, that of Buddhism. It would be an exaggeration to claim that these literati are displaying a "separation between religion and other dimensions of culture and ethnicity" (Calhoun 2010: 10) which is one definition of secularism. Indeed, the authors discussed here grapple with the past explicitly around the widely-held Buddhist belief in reincarnation. Yet they appear to resort more to culture and ethnicity than to religion to narrate and search for their individual and collective self-identity in the modern world, mirroring the unsolved predicament of modern-educated Tibetans in negotiating past and present.

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## Endnotes

1. Source: <<http://ti.zangdiy.com/index.php?s=/Article/detail/id/1415.html>>.
2. In this article, I use both terms indiscriminately, although, according to Geoffrey Samuel, "some authors make a distinction between 'rebirth,' implying the continuity of *karma* and/or consciousness (*vijñāna*) from one life to the next, and 'reincarnation,' involving the continuity of personality and personal identity" (Samuel 2014: note 6, p. 564).
3. That term, which means literally 'emanation body,' refers to Buddhist tantric masters who, according to believers, are able to control at the moment of their death the process of *bardo* (*bar do*) and ensuing rebirth, due to a life-long training in yogic practices and spiritual teachings. As such, they are often recognized as religious virtuosi and may embody religious, social and worldly power.
4. See Trine Brox (2010) for a discussion of the difficulty in adopting and rendering such concepts and terms as 'secularism' and 'secular' in the Tibetan context in exile.
5. See <<http://www.khabdha.org/?p=64747>> (accessed 14 11 2014).
6. Personal communication, Paris, 13 January 2015. The poem where this newly-coined term appears can be found in <<https://asies.hypotheses.org/296>> (accessed 17 01 2015).
7. A French translation of the text, along with an introduction, can be found in Yangtsokyi (2015).
8. A translation of *Entrusted to the Wind* is offered in this issue of HIMALAYA.
9. The period from 1957 to 1976 was characterized by the disruption of social structures due to intense class struggle, confiscation and communization of private and monastic property, closing down of monastic centers, struggle sessions targeting secular and religious elite, jailing, harsh treatments and tortures inflicted to persons of all social



origins labelled as counter-revolutionaries or rebels, including and especially Buddhist masters, destruction of the 'four olds' during the Cultural Revolution (old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits), including Tibet's rich literary heritage, and interruption of Tibetan-medium tuition in a number of schools.

10. This figure comes from the TBRC journals database. To these ten literary journals should be added about five 'scientific' or 'academic' journals (mainly about Buddhism and Tibetan studies) also published in the same decade.

11. Mackerras (1995): 186 reports that the first conference on literary creation among national minorities of China took place in July 1980 in Beijing. According to the writer Jangbu (Ljang bu, real name Rdo rje tshe ring), the first conference convened on new Tibetan literature met in Xining, one year later, on 17-27 August 1981 (personal communication, September 2003).

12. *Dranchar* (*Sbrang char*), the then leading literary journal in Amdo, set up 60 creative writing workshops, which gathered between 5,000 and 6,000 participants (Dpal ldan 2001:105; Yi dam tshe ring 2001:13). The first such literary workshop started in Xining in 1985 (personal communication, Jangbu, Paris, September 2003).

13. Padma 'bum (2010) writes that apart from a handle of short-lived, unofficial private-run magazines, all literary journals in the 1980s were state-sponsored. See Hartley 2005 for confirmation. On the new literature emerging in the 1980s, see Shaky 2008.

14. See Robin (2008) for an assessment of the evolution of representation of Buddhism in Tibetan contemporary literature from the 1980s to the 2000s.

15. As we will see in the conclusion, unease about too overtly religious topics still prevailed in the late 2000s.

16. Don grub rgyal (1981).

17. This movement takes its names from the anti-imperialist, anti-Japanese, youth-led protest movement that started on 4 May 1919 in Beijing, and gradually turned into a modernist, scientist movement among educated Han Chinese. It is still celebrated in China as "Youth Day."

18. For a pioneering study of this group of thinkers, see Hartley (2002). See also Wu (2013) and Yü (2013) for enlightening comments on Zhogs dung and the "New School of Thought" as Wu labels it.

19. These new venues are available thanks to some Tibetans' interest in new technologies and thirst for debate, to technological progress and to the national-level encouragement of private cultural ventures on the part of the Chinese state.

20. After embarking upon this research, I read a few short stories where reincarnation of ordinary people features prominently: among them, *The Tragic Death of a Young Herder* (*Lug rdzi gzhon nu zhig gi'das rkyen*) by Pema Tsenden (Padma tshe brtan, original date of publication unknown), and *A Dog, Its Master, and Their Relatives* (*Khyi dang bdag po / da dung gnyen tshan dag*) by Takbum gyal (Tib. Stag 'bum rgyal), published in 2004 (I thank my MA student V. Gossot for introducing this story with me). In the former, the main character, a young herder refuses to join a monastery as he claims he was a butcher in his previous life and feels his *karma* is still too heavily stained by his previous life's activity. His father in the present life insists, not believing him, but when he takes him to the nearby monastery to have him take religious vows, the local *rinpoche* (*a lags*) refuses him, concurring with the young herder's claims: "You cruel person, I forbid you from joining the monastery. In your previous life, you killed 500 yaks and 1,000 sheep." Reincarnation features as a prominent element in the short story, since the young herder also believes that one of their old ewes is the reincarnation of his paternal grandmother, another claim his father refuses to adhere to. In *A Dog, Its Master, and Their Relatives*, the main character, also a young herder, claims to be the reincarnation of a red dog killed during the Cultural Revolution. Ordinary reincarnation or *namshé* can also be found in short non-fictional essays. For instance, on the website *Khabdha* posted on February 18, 2015, a man from Amdo posted a family group picture, featuring him with his four brothers and sisters. The post is about looking back at his siblings 28 years back, as its title suggests ("A picture from 28 years back", *Mi lo 28 sngon gyi 'dra par zhig*). One of the author's brothers, called Khandro Tsering (Mkha' 'gro tshe ring), was nicknamed Akhu (Monk) as a child, for the following reason: "According to my grandmother, when he was a small child, he would say 'I am a monk. I have a monastery (*sgar*).' 'So, if you are a monk, we'll go to your monastery,' and he would point his finger in the direction of Rongwo Monastery and say 'My monastery is in Rongwo.'" The author adds, also suspending belief at the time of posting this piece on the internet: "My grandmother and my parents believed (*vid ches*) that he had been a monk at Rongwo Monastery in Rebkong in his previous life and I thought (*bsam*) so too as a child." With this choice of words, one can feel that the author seems to distance himself from what was commonly believed by his elders or thought to be so, by himself (<<http://www.khabdha.org/?p=68739>>, accessed 21 February 2015).

21. I could not find the exact date of first publication of this work, and the author herself could not remember, when I met her in August 2014. The version of the text I am referring to here is G.yang mtsho skyid (2012).

22. Yangtsokyi (1998).



23. Lha byams rgyal (2009).
24. *Re smon* (Hope) by Trabha (Bkra bha), a short story published in 1995, centers around a dying grandmother who has been told by a local lama that her grandson Tsering is the reincarnation of her late husband and who, consequently, asks her grandson not to marry before she returns to marry him in her next life (for a French translation, see Trabha (2011)). It was not included here because of its apparent lack of autobiographical content.
25. Transmission of family belongings, even minor ones, was almost impossible due to the extent of the confiscation and destruction of material artifacts during the Cultural Revolution, under the campaign of the ‘destruction of the four olds.’ For a Tibetan testimony, see Woesser 2010: 183 sqq. In *The Silver main bead*, the once rich family of the narrator is left with a miserable little tent as their sole possession.
26. On the issue of taking rebirth in the family, see Obeyesekere 2002: 27, 33-47, 336-337.
27. With the risk of simplifying, we can specify here that this Buddhist term describes the flow of consciousness that goes from one life to the next. In popular parlance, it also refers to the reincarnated person resulting from the rebirth process (“X is the *namshé* of Y”). For elevated spiritual masters (*tulku*), the term is different: *yangsi* (*yang srid*), meaning “newly coming into existence.” As a consequence, the term *yangsi* is never found in the three works surveyed for the present article.
28. Republished online in <<http://www.ranggrol.com/literature/fiction/2012-10-01/323.html>> . Available also on <<http://www.tbnewyouth.com/article/paradise/2009/12/08/288/>> and <<http://www.trikaculture.com/wenxue/xiaoshuo/2012-12-15/11152.html>> (all three accessed 20 01 2015). Also republished in Lha byams rgyal (2010).
29. Interviews with neighbours and relatives provide interesting elements for the identification of Guru as his grandfather’s reincarnation: bodily elements (scars), personal tastes (love of horses), and behavior. For instance, a neighbor recalls how Guru, as a child, would never enter into his car. The car owner rationalizes this refusal by remarking that the car had served to transport the grandfather’s corpse to the funeral ground.
30. Regarding the 1958 upheaval in Amdo, see note 37.
31. Links between development of scientific knowledge in modern education was already mentioned in a 1982 interview with the exiled Buddhist hierarch Sakya Trizin as one possible reason for young Tibetans in exile to reject the institution of *tulku*: “we leave them [the exile Tibetan youth] educated in modern schools with science and things but they don’t believe, some don’t believe... They don’t believe the Tulku system” (Bärlocher 1982: 135 my emphasis). The interview does not mention belief in rebirth but, the *tulku* system being based on belief in reincarnation, the remark made by Sakya Trizin in 1982 can be considered to be relevant for our purpose here.
32. The Dalai Lama’s website includes a section dedicated to “Buddhism and Science”, see <<http://www.gyalwarinpoche.com/node/153>> and <<http://www.gyalwarinpoche.com/node/154>>. For assessments of what these dialogues have reached (or not) so far, see Samuel (2014) and Hogendoorn (2014).
33. When an exile Tibetan visited his family from Rebkong (Amdo) in the early 2010s, he purchased a book containing discourses and writings by the Dalai Lama about Buddhism and science. Originally available in exile and the West in English, they had been translated into Tibetan and published under a fake cover for a Tibetan audience in China (personal communication, Paris, early 2010s).
34. Gayley also mentions a book by the Khenpo’s chief disciple and now spiritual inheritor, Tsultrim Lodrö (Tshul khriims blo gros), about rebirth alone, published in Hong Kong in 2004 (*ibid.* 466). The importance of being a Buddhist, for a 21st Tibetan, according to Khenpo Jigmé Phuntsok, obviously excludes non-believers. This clearly poses challenges to a secularizing society.
35. Gayley (2011) has shown that prominent Tibetan clerics are very active in defining a Buddhist modernity, anchored in present time.
36. Cursory conversations with young educated Tibetans in summer 2015 confirmed how Lhashamgyal’s short stories echo their own experiences. One of my interviewees even added, concerning the story surveyed here, that this short story expressed exactly the doubts that characterized those of his generation.
37. See Robin (2012) and Weiner (2012) for a preliminary survey of the 1958 upheaval. For a rare first-person account, see Naktsang 2014. For a study of how the year 1958 was described in that text, fifty years later, through the eyes of a child, see de Heering forthcoming.
38. ‘Postmemory’ is the term chosen by Marianne Hirsch to express the “mediated knowledge of those who were born after [trauma]” (Hirsch 2012: 80), a “form of heteropathic memory in which the self and the other are more closely connected through familiar or group relations” (*ibid.* 86). In Robin forthcoming, I show the specific usage and form of ‘postmemory’ in the case of Tibetans from Amdo, in their relation with the 1958 trauma.

39. In Yangtsoyki's text, the fatidic 1958 year is euphemistically called "the period of the turning upside down of sky and earth" (*gnam sa mgo 'jug ldog pa'i skabs*) a code name which every Tibetan from Amdo would easily decipher. Straight references to the year 1958 only started to appear in fictional texts in 1992 (on this topic, see Robin forthcoming).

40. The "red wind" is a phrase that originally conveys no political innuendo. In Tibetan, it refers to a strong, howling dust-storm, taking its hue from the sands of northern China. Gradually, though, and given the situation over the last 60 years, it has acquired a political meaning.

41. Personal communication from the author, Beijing, September 2014.

42. This expression, coined by Prasenjit Duara, involves a dimension of political power. In the present case, there is no such thing, as politics are a monopoly of the CCP and the PRC, but different groups of cultural power holders are competing for symbolic supremacy and authority on the Tibetan scene, such as clerics, lay writers, radical modernists, filmmakers, etc

43. Kundera (1984), no page given.

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