

Series of Basic Information of Tibet of China

TIBETAN LITERATURE

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BY WU WEI & GENG YUFANG



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TIBETAN LITERATURE



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Snowland scenery.

Preface

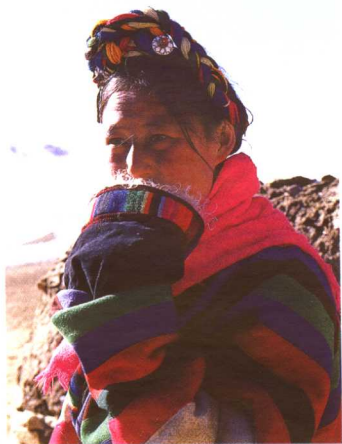
The severe conditions that often imperil survival on the towering Tibetan Plateau have helped form its unique culture, along with its close ties with the Central Plains. Tibetan literature not only reflects the life, thoughts, and esthetics of different levels at various phases in Tibetan history, but also provides an important reference for the study of the Tibetan language and origin of words, social history, religion and belief, morality and behavior, the spiritual world, as well as local conditions and customs.

The developing process of Tibetan literature appears to have the following characteristics:

Strong Temporal Background

Tibetan folklore and authorial literature provide living pictures of Tibetan life and development at various stages in history. They include the following:

The Song of Siba Butchering Cows, the *Biographies of Tsampo Kings*, the *Story*



Girl from northern Tibet.

of *Songtsan Gambo Greeting Princess Wencheng*, as well as the rare Tibetan literary works unearthed at Dunhuang, the *Records of the Bamiya Monastery*, etc., were mythic stories of the important figures and issues in primitive and later feudal society.

The works reflecting the days when several kingdoms thrived. The birth of a number of works handed down from ancient times, including the *Collected Works of Manyi* and the *Five Volumes of Biography* that mainly described the social history and culture of the Tubo Kingdom; the *Songs of Milha Raba* that focused on Buddhist teachings; the *Sagya's Mottoes* targeted at learning, pursuit of politics and the ways getting along with others; and especially the *Biography of King Gesar*, the epic ballad about a national hero, helped Tibetan literature to spring into full flower;

The literature of history, biography and drama was especially outstanding, such as the works that focused on feudal serfdom, indicating a new breakthrough either in terms of content or in writing techniques. *A General Record of Tibetan Kings* and *A Feast of Scholars* are supreme examples of history-themed lit-



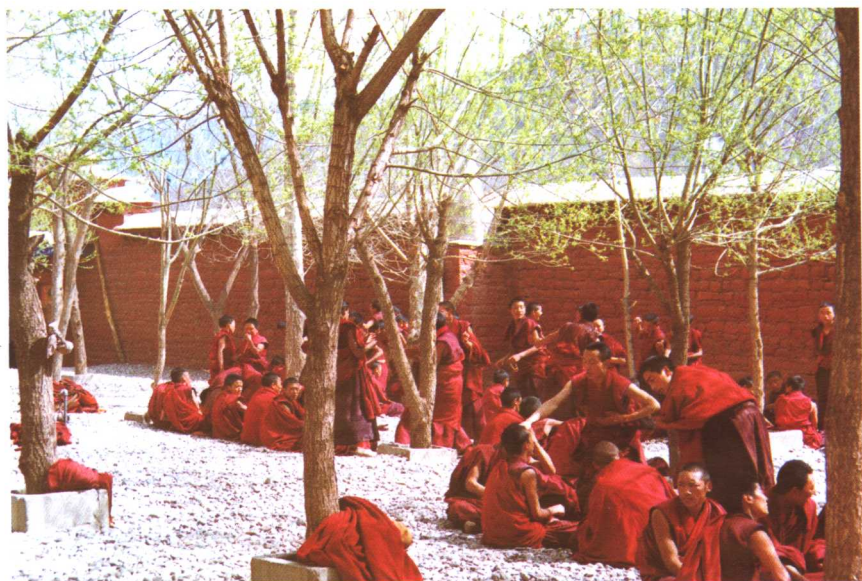
erary works, and the *Biography of Milha Raba* leads in biographical literature. The dramatic eight major Tibetan opera items are still popular today.

River novels started to appear in literary writings that reflected the late feudal serfdom, such as the representative *Xunnu Darma* and *Zhengwan Darwa*.

After the establishment of new China, especially in late 1978, when the Central Government introduced the reform and opening-up program, Tibetan literature achieved much; Tibetan and Chinese literary works developed equally, authorial literature and folk literature ran side by side, literary writing and criticism made simultaneous progress, and poetry, the novel, prose,



A giant portrait of Buddha unfolded at the Zhaibung Monastery.



Lamas debating on doctrine of Buddhism.

drama, movies as well as quyi (Chinese folk art forms including ballad singing, story telling, comic dialogues, clapper talk, cross talk, etc.) bloomed at the same time. The achievement of novel was especially eye-catching.

Folklore and Authorial Literature Promoted Each Other

The folklore and authorial literature were the two necessary wings of Tibetan literature. Among the folklore, the great epic *Biography of King Gesar* was known publicly as the culmination of Tibetan literature and a masterpiece among world literary works. It was also a encyclopedia for researching Tibetan social life, national history, economic culture, class relations, national intercourse, ideology, morality, cus-

toms and habits, as well as religion and belief.

Tibetan authorial literary writing has enjoyed a long history, with abundant works, unique style, skillful practice, a profound base and wide influence, based on its strong roots in folklore. There were a lot of authorial works that took the reference of folklore, for instance, the *Songs of Milha Raba* based on Tibetan folk songs, *A General Record of Tibetan Kings*, *Annotated Book on Tibetan Kings* and *A Feast of Scholars* injected with such fables as how the macaque became human, as well as the stories about Princess Wencheng and Princess Jincheng, the tale of building the Jokhang Monastery, etc; the *Love Songs of Cangyang Gyaico* and the eight major Tibetan opera items handed down through the generations *Prince Norsang*, *Princess Wencheng*, *Girl Namsa*, *Baima Wenba*, *Denyu Toinzhu*, *Zholwa Sangmo*, *Sugyi Nyima* and *Trimai Gundain* adopted all materials from historical tales, folk tales and sutras.

Art, History and Philosophy Proceed Side by Side

Over quite a long period, Tibet had no the concept of “literature” in today’s sense of the word, so it had relatively few pure literary works. These were generally a fusion of history and philosophy, such as the *Biographies of Tubo Kings* found in Dunhuang, the historical works like *Records of Bamyā Monastery*, *Collected Works of Manyi*, *Five Volumes of Biography*, biographical works like *Biography of Marba*, *Biogra-*

phy of Riqoinba, Biography of Tongdong Gyibo, Biography of Pholhanas, and gnomic verses like Saga's Mottoes, Sayings of Gedain, Mottoes on Water and Trees and How the King Cultivates His Personal Virtues. These deeply influential works handed down from ancient times were not pure literature in the literal sense, but were recorded in Tibetan literary history due to their literary grace, splendid rhetoric, lively plots and their mix deal of folk songs, proverbs and folk stories related to the seeking of Tao (The Way).

Close Relation With Religion

Given the long history of Tibetan Buddhism and the implementation of a combined religious and temporal administrative system, in addition to some writers either being religious followers or even eminent monks, Tibetan literature, especially authorial liter-

Iron certificate bearing golden words in Pagba script, reading: "Relying on the imperial edict issued by the emperor and blessed with the strength bestowed by the Heaven, the certificate holder would punish whoever disobeys". This is a certificate the Yuan emperor issued to leader of the Saga Sect.



ary works, contains a strong religious imprint. Some works were originally drawn from Buddhist tales.

Learn From Each Other and Develop Step by Step

Tibet has been dealing with various ethnic groups in inland China and the surrounding areas in politics, economy and culture since ancient times. During the Tubo Kingdom in the 7th century A.D., the language scholar Tomi Sangbozha invented the Tibetan script according to the characteristics of Tibetan language, after investigating several kinds of Indian scripts. Soon after, some Tibetan scholars successfully translated *Canons of Yao and Shun—Book of History, Military Strategy of the Warring States* and some famous articles forming part of the scriptures of Han Chinese Buddhism into Tibetan script. In the early 13th century, the great Tibetan great scholar Gonggar Gyaincain introduced into Tibet the Indian rhetorical masterpiece *Mirror of Rhetoric*. Later, on the strong call of Pagba, it was fully translated into Tibetan script. Hence, Tibetan scholars studied and applied it, popularizing the study of good articles and use of carefully considered rhetoric for a certain period of time. The successful works were the *History of Kings and Ministers of the 5th Dalai Lama* and the *Youth Darma of Cering Wanggyia*. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, communication between the Tibetan races and other ethnic

groups were increasing. The four famous classical Chinese novels, *Water Margin*, *Three Kingdoms*, *A Pilgrimage to the West* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, were completely or partially translated into Tibetan. Other world-renowned works were also translated in succession. Meanwhile, Tibetan literary masterpieces, either classical or modern, were translated into Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Russian, Hungarian, Czech and other languages, which aroused great interest among readers of different races and nations, enabling Tibetan literature to make further progress.



Tibetan dance.

Poems

Tibetan poems came into being before the Tibetan civilization, and originated from the ancient people's recognition of the world and their labors and life. Tibetan people need singing and dancing the way they need sunshine, *zanba* (roasted highland barley flour) and butter tea, without which they cannot live even for one moment. Along with the changes of the times and the progress of civilization, ancient Tibetan folk songs developed into modern poems. Tracing the development of literature, we can find the following periods in the history of Tibetan poetry.

1. Traditional Folk Songs

According to the contents, the earliest recorded folk songs fall into different categories: songs about the creation of the world, work songs, songs about the political situation, love songs, and songs of the local conditions and customs, among which

the songs of the creating of the world and work songs are the best known. For example, *Song of Siba* and *Song of Siba Butchering Cows* explained the origin of the sky, the earth, mountains and all the natural creatures.

Song of Siba

Questions:

*Before Siba was born,
The sky was mixed with the earth,
Tell me: Who separated them?
Before Siba was born,
The feminine was mixed with the masculine,
Tell me: Who separated them?*

Answers & Questions:

*Before Siba was born,
The sky was mixed with the earth,*



Happy birthday to the cute baby.