

***Lineages of the Literary: Tibetan Buddhist Polymaths of Socialist China.*** By Nicole Willock. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. Pp. xv + 320. \$140.00 hardcover, \$35.00 paperback.

It is widely thought that, following China's absorption of Tibet in 1950, and, in particular, in the wake of the Tibetan Uprising of March 1959, traditional Tibetan religion, custom, and learning were effectively eradicated, preserved primarily amongst Tibetans who had fled abroad. Although those familiar with Tibetan affairs understand that this picture is far too simple and that the Tibetan religious and cultural revival that took place beginning in the late 1970s was made possible in large measure by exemplars of Tibetan tradition who had weathered the storm in their homeland, the lives and careers of such figures remain largely unknown to current scholarship on Tibet and China. Nicole Willock's *Lineages of the Literary: Tibetan Buddhist Polymaths of Socialist China* takes a significant step in introducing readers to three prominent Tibetan Buddhist intellectuals who sought to contribute to the project of constructing a new China (and a new Tibet) under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, while at the same time advocating Tibetan traditional learning in several spheres, including history, literature, and Buddhist thought.

The three persons on whom Willock's work is focused are all well known, at least in name, to students of contemporary Tibet: Tséten Zhabdrung (1910–1985), Mugé Samten (1914–1993), and Dungkar Lozang Trinlé (1927–1997). As will be shown below, the three are sometimes known in recent Tibetan writing as the “three learned men” (the “three polymaths” in Willock's rendering), so that their treatment together makes good sense here. At the same time, however, it is a grouping that immediately problematizes just what we mean by “Tibet,” for only the last of the trio, Dungkar Rinpoché, hailed from and was active in what is now known as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (T.A.R.), with its administrative centre in Lhasa. Tséten Zhabdrung and Mugé Samten were, by contrast, Amdo Tibetans, whose educations and subsequent activities were primarily undertaken in Qinghai, Gansu, and northwestern Sichuan. Under the People's Republic of China (PRC), all three, however, spent parts of their careers in Beijing and were engaged in leadership roles in forging new resources in the Tibetan language—including educational materials and translations of major official documents and writings, such as the 1951 “Seventeen-Point Agreement” between the old Central Tibetan Government and the PRC, the Chinese Constitution, and the *Collected Works of Mao Zedong* (see pp. 52, 75, 98, etc.).

An evident difficulty that arises for anyone investigating the troubled period of Tibet's (including “greater” Tibet's) incorporation into modern China is to navigate between tendencies to praise some Tibetans as righteous rebels who fought valiantly for the freedom of their land and to disparage others as collaborators who acted as toadies of the Chinese regime, or, oppositely, to castigate the rebels as reactionary

elements while embracing those who cooperated as loyal patriots. As Willock rightly emphasizes, such binaries obscure the real complexities that were felt on the ground and the resulting diversity of responses amongst the persons involved (pp. 6–7). Even the Dalai Lama, among other Tibetan leaders, saw prospects for developing worthwhile connections between Marxist and Buddhist thought and sang the praises of Mao as one who might advance this common project (pp. 104–11). Of the three figures who are central to the present work, it is Dungkar Rinpoché who emerges as having most clearly espoused a considered ideological adherence to Marxism, though in his case, like the other two, Willock seeks to demonstrate that this would not obscure a lifelong commitment to Tibetan learned traditions (pp. 154–57). It was their clear exemplification of distinctly Tibetan values, in fact, that led to the three being celebrated as heroes of the post-Cultural Revolution generation of Tibetans in China who struggled to reconnect with Tibet's rich cultural past.

The key term “polymath,” used to characterize the trio throughout the book, seems to me in some instances to be problematic. The Tibetan word Willock translates in this way is *mkhas pa*, literally meaning “learned, skilled.” It does not reference polymathic learning in particular; in West Tibet, for instance, it is regularly used as a title of respect for painters and other specialized craftsmen. When one needs to designate polymathic learning, Tibetan does have more precise expressions for this, e.g., *kun mkhyen* (“all-knowing”) or *dka' bcu pa* (“master of the ten difficult subjects”). While such conceptions might well be applied to the three modern figures studied here, so that Willock's paraphrase of *mkhas pa* when referring to them is in itself unobjectionable, her projection of this understanding into the distant past is perhaps not justified. It is true that, in Tibetan references to the three subjects of *Lineages of the Literary* as the “three *mkhas pa*,” there is an deliberate reference to another group of “three *mkhas pa*,” who lived during the late tenth century and were responsible for continuing Tibet's Buddhist ordination lineage, or Vinaya, following a period of persecution (p. 3). But any assumption that these earlier figures were polymaths, or that the phrase *mkhas pa* is understood to mean this when referring to them, is unwarranted. In fact, because we know almost nothing about them besides their names, despite their evident role in the maintenance of Buddhist Vinaya traditions, it is impossible to judge the nature or extent of their learning or their contributions, if any, to subsequent Tibetan scholarship.

Two of Willock's subjects, Tséten Zhabdrung and Mugé Samten, left autobiographical accounts that are rightly treated as sources of primary importance for their lives and attitudes (and that are accordingly discussed in some detail in ch. 2, “Telling What Happened,” and ch. 3, “Mellifluous Words”). Both have strikingly little to say about the hardships they endured during the period, following the Tibetan Uprising of 1959 and continuing through the Cultural Revolution, when they fell out of favour and were persecuted and imprisoned, or about the state agencies

that were responsible for their travails. Willock seeks to demonstrate here a pattern of authorial choices reflecting Buddhist values and contrasts their accounts with other Tibetan narratives, including some by refugees, in which oppression by the Chinese Communist Party and its agents is very much in the foreground (pp. 117–23). But while the differences in approach that she highlights are indeed noteworthy and reveal important facets of the moral/religious/reflective orientations of the subjects concerned, I believe that the differing contexts in which these works were written and published account for much more than Willock allows. The fact that, among Tibetans writing their stories outside of Tibet and working often in collaboration with non-Tibetan scholars or editors, the sufferings experienced under Chinese domination are highlighted, while they tend to be minimized in works written and published in China, especially during the early years of the “liberalization” that began under Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, should be of no surprise. To this reviewer, at least, it is not clear whether Willock’s assertion that “Mugé Samten and Tséten Zhabdrung write about their lived experiences within the parameters of Buddhist truth and the Tibetan literary arts” (p. 123) should be taken as a celebration or a lament.

However this may be, Willock does appropriately devote substantial discussion to her subjects’ engagements in the Tibetan literary arts, in particular, in the refined and difficult theory and practice of poetics and poetry inspired by Sanskrit *kāvya* (Tib. *snyan ngag*). All three of the figures she studies endeavoured to promote this field and to establish its prominence in Tibetan language education in post-Cultural Revolution China; the revival of sanskritized literary forms among contemporary Tibetan writers certainly owes much to their efforts (pp. 211–22). Willock’s discussions throughout the book of this aspect of their work are among its richest contributions, though a few problems may nonetheless be noted. Key to the theory of *kāvya* is the important distinction between *bhāva* (Tib. *’gyur*), the basic emotional register of a work of art, and *rasa* (Tib. *ro* or *nyams*), the aesthetic sentiment aroused in the sympathetic audience in response to it. In India, the theory of *bhāva* and *rasa* evolved with various modifications over the course of centuries, so it should come as no surprise that Tibetan interpretations had their own history, too, and may depart in some respects from their Indian sources. Nevertheless, I believe that Willock goes wrong in identifying *nyams/rasa*, as it is explained in some Tibetan works, with the external manifestation of the sentiment concerned, for instance, identifying the comic sentiment with laughter (p. 139). Consulting one of the main sources to which she refers on this topic, Tséten Zhabdrung’s *General Explanation of Poetry* (*snyan ngag spyi don*), the author distinguishes unambiguously between the sentiment (*nyams*) and the *externalization* of the sentiment (*nyams thon pa*). His discussions of such physical responses as laughter, horripilation, and grimacing concern the latter category, the external signs of emotion, but nowhere does he identify these as aesthetic sentiments

themselves. Difficulties with the sanskritized register of Tibetan writing are also seen in Willock's treatment of a stanza from the Fifth Dalai Lama, which she translates:

Heaps of impure, exaggerated talk in a literary work  
bring together word and meaning, poetically becoming a precious ornament.  
To express with babbling tongue, transforming the drama of falsehoods,  
how, at the heart, is conceit not the result of this jewel? (p. 83)

This garbles the sense of the verse, which analogizes the effect of poetic form on ordinary, careless speech to the action of the wishing gem of Indian myth. This, like philosopher's stone, transforms base matter into something pure and precious. The "conceit" referred to in the final line is the error of misattributing what is essential (the "heart") to the original base matter of common speech rather than to the transformative gem of poetic art.

In the case of the third in the book's trio of notables, Dungkar Rinpoché, given the absence of a detailed autobiographical record, Willock (in ch. 4, "Dungkar Rinpoché on Tibetan History") considers him primarily through one of his chief works of scholarship, *An Explanation of the Merging of Religious and Secular Rule in Tibet*, commissioned by the United Front of the Chinese Communist Party in 1977 and published in Beijing in 1981.<sup>1</sup> Willock seeks to show that, despite the author's explicit adherence there to a Marxist-Leninist framework for the interpretation of Tibetan history and an acceptance of Tibet's status under China, subtle terminological cues suggest a departure from officially sanctioned views at crucial points. However, her arguments about this strike me as often contrived and unconvincing. For instance, Willock lays much weight on the idea that, for Dungkar Rinpoché "the Yuan Dynasty' cannot be equated with the People's Republic of China" (p. 164) and that he thereby subtly questions China's claims regarding the historical status of Tibet. But no responsible historian in China, Tibetan, Han or otherwise, would simply "equate" the PRC with earlier Chinese regimes. As Dungkar Rinpoché cannot be said to have challenged the notion that Yuan authority in Tibet offers a historical precedent for China's claim to Tibet, it is not clear to me what mileage is gained by asserting a supposed lack of equation.

In the same section, contrasted with Dungkar Rinpoché, Willock states (p. 165) that the contemporary Tibetan historian W. D. Shakabpa (1907–1989)—a minister of the old Tibetan government who chose exile in India—held that "Tibet became independent in 1253," during the period of Mongol rule. But Shakabpa, as cited by

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<sup>1</sup> Dung dkar Blo-bzang' phrin las, *Bod kyi chos srid zung' brel skor bshad pa* (*An Explanation of the Merging of Religious and Secular Rule in Tibet*) (Beijing: Mi-rigs Dpe-skrun Khang, 1981).

Willock, says nothing about *becoming* independent. His text, which she quotes accurately, asserts that Tibet has *remained* independent since that date, which is something quite different. Later, in discussing at length Dungkar Rinpoché's use of the terms *chos* (dharma), and *chos lugs* (dharma-system), she seeks to demonstrate that "Dungkar Rinpoche's effort to create a domain for 'religion' in the Tibetan context is not a matter of simply conforming to Chinese-Marxist ideology" and that he "drew from Tibetan traditional texts and from ongoing state translation projects to reinvent *chöluk* [*chos lugs*] in state discourse on 'religion'" (p. 172). While it is clear that, like other modern scholars writing in the Tibetan language, Dungkar Rinpoché used traditional terminology in contemporary contexts, I do not see the promised "reinvention" of usage occurring in this case; for, by the eighteenth century, at the latest, *chos lugs* had already been used in Tibetan to designate not just Buddhist traditions but also Daoism and Christianity, among others.

As a further contrast to Dungkar Rinpoché's work, Willock also introduces Mugé Samten's *A History of Traditional Fields of Learning*,<sup>2</sup> saying that it "does not use the word *chöluk* for 'religion,' which indicates that these two scholars took different approaches to promoting Tibetan Buddhist culture in the PRC" (p. 171) and characterizing it as a "comprehensive approach to Tibetan history" (p. 172). Both of these assertions are misleading. The first, because there is no word for "religion" at all in the text in question, so that nothing at all seems to follow from the absence of the term *chos lugs* there. The second, because it is quite clear, on examining Mugé Samten's oeuvre, that *A History of Traditional Fields of Learning* had no pretense of offering an approach to Tibetan history overall, but was intended only to serve as a broad introduction to Tibetan learned traditions, and, in particular, the foundational role of Tibetan language studies. The author also wrote a far more extensive *Explanation of the History of Tibet in General* (*Bod spyi'i lo rgyus bshad pa*, in vol. 3 of his Collected Works, pp. 1–383). This latter work might have provided a sharper point of comparison with Dungkar Rinpoché's *An Explanation of the Merging of Religious and Secular Rule in Tibet*. In discussing Tibet during the period of Mongol rule in the thirteen and fourteen centuries, for instance, Mugé Samten, in line with many traditional Tibetan historians, never mentions China or the Yuan dynasty at all. Even the fourth Karmapa hierarch's mission to Emperor Toghon Temür (Huizong 惠宗) in 1360 is described there as a journey to the "palace of the Mongol emperor" (*hor gong mai' pho brang*).

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<sup>2</sup> Mugé Samten, *A History of Traditional Fields of Learning: A Concise History of Dissemination of Traditional Fields of Learning in Tibet*, translated by Sangye Tandar Naga (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2005).

Willock's achievement in *Lineages of the Literary* is a valuable and original one, despite my reservations about some particular points. These should not detract from my strong recommendation of her book to all those concerned with modern Tibetan Studies and, more broadly, ethnic affairs in China today. Willock is to be warmly congratulated for opening up the study of an important, still largely overlooked, facet of Tibetan life in contemporary China.

DOI: 10.29708/JCS.CUHK.202301\_(76).0009

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