1 Feeling, knowing, interpreting
On Tibetan lives and objects

Tsering Yangzom

1.

A person is born into a crevice between a nomadic past and a nomadic future. Their belongings are temporary and contingent before an ever-changeable land/identity/language/name/story. The person carries their belongings from place to place, even when the objects no longer make sense in the next life. No one carries more on their back than a nomad far from their pastures.

2.

The simplest way to categorize Tibetans is to say there are those of us in exile and those in Tibet. This distinction is not merely a statement of geographic location. It is deployed politically.

As a college student in the early 2000s, I saw prominent Tibet scholars differentiate us in this way. One unfortunate metaphor (of the 'tail wagging the dog') sticks in my mind. The scholar used it to describe how exile Tibetans protested or spoke on behalf of those inside Tibet. This metaphor served to negate our connection with our kin and, ironically, to further silence people inside Tibet. This distinction also mirrors Chinese state rhetoric, which blames exile 'separatists' for unrest they encounter in Tibet. Of course, the 2008 uprising, which erupted spontaneously across historical Tibet even after five decades of iron-fisted colonial rule, revealed the profound and persistent unity of our shared feelings and wishes.

This categorization of Tibetans causes a double bind that precludes any voice from legitimately expressing the will of the Tibetan people.

Tsering Yangzom: Feeling, knowing, interpreting. On Tibetan lives and objects, in Martin, Emma, Brox, Trine and Lange, Diana (eds): Among Tibetan Materialities. Materials and Material Cultures of Tibet and the Himalayas, Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2025, pp. 1–12. https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1522.c23977

It also reflects the state lens because it denies our experience, what it feels like to be alive today as a Tibetan.

It seems to me that every Tibetan alive today is an exile. Whether in the diaspora or in our homeland (where Tibetans cannot move, speak or live freely), displacement is our unifying state of being. Exile is not only a matter of physical deracination, but also of psychological, cultural and spiritual displacement.

3.

Let us agree on this: Tibetan materialities exist as part of a history and experience of ongoing settler colonialism and exile. Anyone who owns, uses and theorizes Tibetan materialities is thus engaged in actions charged with the political and material conditions of the Tibetan people.

To put it plainly, here is a civilization facing its slow annihilation, a people fighting for our survival.

What does it mean to study Tibetan lives, objects and ideas in such a time? What does studying Tibetan lives, objects and ideas *do*?

4.

The colonizer is preoccupied with possession. They seek to possess the land, objects, bodies and even the minds of the colonized. But the colonizer does not want to be close to the colonized. Proximity threatens their fictions about the colonized as well as themselves.

5.

Closeness comes from an embodied understanding of self and other, a recognition of the fullness of being alive as a person. Closeness also recognizes the limits of completely knowing someone else's existence. It generates and enlivens an understanding that manifests as epistemic humility or even silence—an understanding that reveals itself as awe, gratitude, veneration.

6.

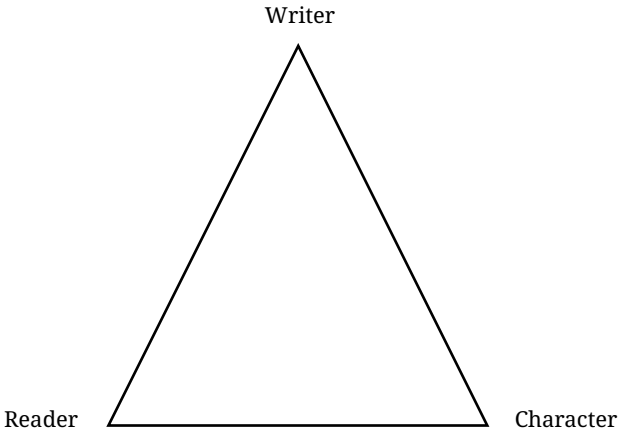
All text is potential. A reader comes to the text with a certain state of receptivity. If they cultivate the receptivity owed to the story, the reader regenerates it. Whether or not they cultivate the ideal receptivity, the reader changes the story. Before long, through their participation and labour, they have created a text that belongs to them, a text for which they are responsible.

7.

It is said that every work of literature is a triangulation between three people—the reader, the writer and the character of a story. All three are agents in the story. A perfect triangle comes to mind. Lines of even length so that the distances between the writer, reader and character are identical. Each body exerts the same pull; each is an equal participant in the story.

8.

Question: What is a ‘fiction’?
Answer: That it is possible to have story like this:



9.

Over the years, I have visited dozens of museums across the world that hold the material culture of colonized, enslaved and eradicated peoples. These monumental cabinets of curiosities present a chronological history of humankind, a teleology that leads to modernity. Like other visitors, I have engaged in brief observations of the world's great civilizations, moving from display to display, catching glimmers of vast worlds but never entering them.

At the end of each visit, I feel empty and vaguely ashamed. After taking in so much so quickly, all while seeing nothing of the violence and injustice behind these acquisitions, I wonder what I am meant to do. Why should I access so many sacred objects while giving almost nothing of myself? What is the message here? These questions are most poignant on the rare occasions when I come upon Tibetan objects. At first, there is a flash of joy. We exist, I think. We are included.

But then a familiar ambivalence sets in as I consider the terms and conditions of our inclusion. Our objects are rarely called Tibetan. Instead, they are either attributed to China or categorized under the tepid designation of 'Himalayan', which erases us nonetheless. The selection of objects is limited to our ancient past, without any hint of our present conditions or existence—as though our fossils are all that remain of us. As though we only existed briefly.

Of course, it is the very colonization of Tibet that has made it possible for a museum to decide whether and how one of the world's great civilizations now exists.

10.

Just like the life of a person, the life of an object depends on the vitality and cooperation of whole communities. When an object is in community with people, it does not exist as a static historical thing, a fossil under glass. Its uses and meanings reflect the lifeworld of a community. It becomes sentient, dynamic, an agent in our lives.

11.

I understand that museum staff and scholars are well-meaning. I understand that there have been strides to include more Tibetan voices

in these spaces. But the fact remains: Tibetans are vastly underrepresented in spaces of power that shape discourses about us, our history and our material culture.

So long as discourses about Tibet are determined by non-Tibetans for non-Tibetan consumption in the service of non-Tibetan ends, they will have little to do with our desires and fates. At their worst, they will reflect a colonial logic of parasitism.

12.

In October 2016, a panel gathered at Harvard's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies entitled 'China's Tibetan and Uighur Nationalities', featuring scholars of Tibetan and Uyghur studies (Shen et al. 2016).[1] None of the speakers was Tibetan or Uyghur—a fact not lost on the final speaker, historian Rian Thum, who critiqued the term 'minority' as applied to Uyghurs. He argued that since no Uyghur considers themself a minority, it is wrong for Western scholars to uncritically apply the Chinese state's term to Uyghurs. Furthermore, he went on to say:

> Whether you accept the term 'colony' or not, Tibet and Altishahr[2] are large, ethnically homogenous regions, roughly, ruled from outside without the consent of their inhabitants and subject to demographic and ethnic engineering via a strong settler policy. And I should say that there's a consensus emerging in English language scholarship of a willingness to call Xinjiang at least a colonial project or a colonial situation if not directly a colony. (Shen et al. 2016: 1:10:34–1:11:08)

I wondered: Are Tibetologists forming a similar consensus? Are Tibetologists collectively rejecting the colonizer's fictions? And if not, what further evidence do they need?

---

1 I use the spelling 'Uyghur' rather than 'Uighur', since this is the Romanized spelling commonly used by Uyghur scholars, organizations and community groups.

2 Altishahr (meaning 'six cities') is the southern half of what is commonly known as East Turkistan or Xinjiang, the latter being the colonial name used by successive China-based powers since the eighteenth century.

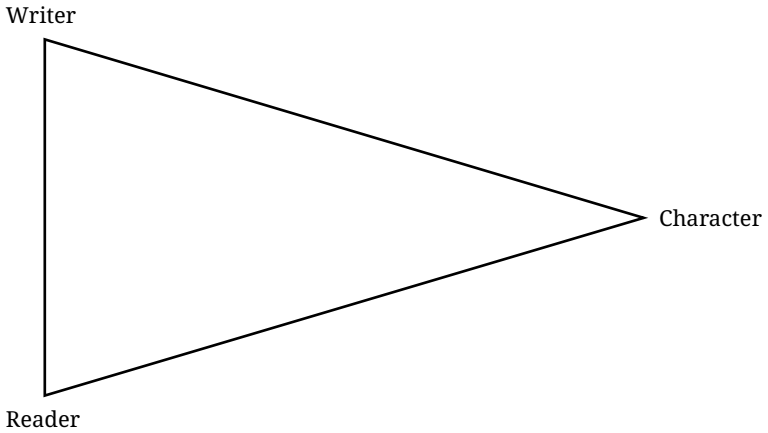
The Chinese scholar on the Fairbank panel gave a long, mealy-mouthed apologia for the poor condition of Tibetan studies in his country (ibid.: 1:38–20:08). When asked by an audience member about methodological changes he would advise to improve the scholarship in China, he replied that methodology was not the real issue. It was the interpretation of history, in particular the focus on ancient Chinese dealings with Tibet (ibid: 1:30:05–1:31:58). I took him to mean that their research was centred around proving China's historical claim over Tibet—thus propaganda, not actual scholarship.

Yet, over the years, I have observed many Tibet scholars accept the terms set by the Chinese state. These panels, lectures and papers sputtered on without stating the basic facts of Chinese state violence, human rights abuses and cultural genocide in Tibet—not to mention the will and desire of the Tibetan people. I was perplexed by the absurd terms of the discourse. It seemed like they were playing word games while Tibetans were dying. Most of all, it was plain to me that if so many Tibet scholars were willing to treat a people's survival and self-sovereignty as distinct from their study of those very people, the discipline was choosing a deliberate distance from its subject. A profound distance indeed.

13.

Question: What is the shape of the novel, *Lost Horizon* (2015 [1933]), which tells the story of an imagined Tibetan city and was written by an Englishman for Western readers?

Answer: The writer and reader are close, but the character (Shangri-La and its people) is distant. The writer and reader assert their shared will, fantasy and desire upon the character. So it is a triangle that looks like an icicle or a shard of glass. A story that looks like a weapon.



14.

In 'Against Interpretation', Susan Sontag (1966: 3–14) laments the way Western thought has severed art from its ancient role in ritual. She recognizes that our distant ancestors viewed art as 'incantatory, magical' (3)—something to be experienced.

Western theorization has led us to see interpretation (or translation) as the primary mode of engagement with art. When we look at a work of art, we try to decipher its hidden meanings, as if it is a code that needs to be cracked. This theorization takes us away from the potentiality of art to act upon us and our lives, to make us *feel* something.

Ritual is an experience made possible through our whole bodies, not just our minds. Whether it involves singing, dancing, walking, gesturing, visualising, it involves the whole self.

Buddhism does not separate the phenomenal world from the metaphysical. The material realm—our bodies, other beings and the world at large—is neither our enemy nor our servant. Even the Buddha had to come to this understanding. After starving himself to no avail, like the ascetics of his day, he finally attained enlightenment when he accepted rice porridge from a village girl. He fed his body and gained Nirvana with his body, not despite it. Liberation is embodied, not theoretical.

Whether it is tangkha paintings that aid in meditative practice or gorshey, the circle dance that Tibetans love to hold for every party's ending, I see Tibetan art as something that cannot be accessed through theoretical means alone.[3] It is aimed at our full being—intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical. It is art created for living within the community and the world.

15.

Stories perform a kind of magic. They are portals to other existences, immersing us in different minds and bodies. They give us a means of achieving closeness, healing, learning and even liberation.

---

3 I have chosen not to follow the conventions for the spelling and italicisation of Tibetan terms generally used in this volume. I wish these words to be spelled how I always write them and for them to exist typographically in the same way as English words (i.e., non-italicized), for this reflects my relationship with them. In my voice, Tibetan terms are no more alien than English.

But there are perils for the Tibetan storyteller today. Many people know about the extreme dangers faced by Tibetan writers working under occupation, but we writers outside Tibet face our own quieter perils.

Edward Said writes that in literary works, exile is largely conceptualized as 'enriching' and 'beneficially humanistic' (2000: 173–4). This romantic notion is derived from the association of exile with spiritual alienation or self-selected separation from one's homeland (think Joyce, Hemingway). But the vast scale and profound deprivation of displacement in the present day makes the romantic, literary notion of exile an unfit, banalizing motif.

Within this milieu, the exiled writer is troubled in multiple ways. On the one hand, we must navigate a reading public that insists on receiving a story of suffering as something dignified, affirming, even triumphant. Literature of exile, like immigrant literature, is consumed as something 'good for us'—that is, good for the society that hosts the exiled writer. It teaches and builds empathy within the host society.

On the other hand, the exiled writer must navigate the national narrative. They feel 'an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people' (Said 2000: 199). This narrative sweeps away stories that do not fit its form and frustrates the possibility of genuine artistic expression.

But the other state of being—the profound loneliness of the solitary exile—is unbearable and perhaps not survivable.

16.

Question: What does it look like when a Tibetan writer produces a story about a Tibetan character? Now imagine that there are both Tibetan and non-Tibetan readers, though the former are far outnumbered by the latter.

Answer: A disassembled and unstable triangle.

W r i t e r

Character/ Tibetan Reader

Non-Tib
e
t
a
n Reader

17.

Said, who was an academic rather than a creative writer, suggested that we must look beyond iconic exile writers of the past like Joyce and Nabokov, and reflect instead on the masses of unknown exiles around the world.

I often think of a little-known short story by Nabokov called 'The Visit to the Museum' (Nabokov 1997: 277–285). I'm convinced that if Said had read this story, he would not have so readily discounted the Russian exile, for this story captures the horror of exile with terrifying sharpness.

In the story, an unnamed Russian exile visits a museum in France and discovers that it contains a portrait that once belonged to his friend, also a Russian exile. Seeking to purchase the portrait, the character approaches the director of the museum, who repeatedly denies that they possess the portrait. When the director is confronted with the artwork, he draws the Russian exile through the museum, which transforms before him, becoming an increasingly surreal and frightening maze full of strange objects. The Russian exile runs outside to find that he is no longer in France. Instead, he is back in Russia, where he is in danger. Despite his best efforts, he is soon discovered and arrested by the authorities, suffering unspecified 'ordeals' until he is inexplicably able to escape and return to exile in France.

This story is often dismissed as one of Nabokov's less successful works, but it takes an exile to appreciate its power and precision. In it we see the psychic dislocation of encountering an object of one's homeland, as well as the maddening distress of facing institutional denial. We see how these events revive trauma and disassemble the fragile solidity of the exile's new life. In this story, Nabokov does something unrecognizable, perhaps incomprehensible to many readers. But only a speculative work of horror can capture the perilous absurdity of exile.

Walking through a museum with other Tibetans, I have seen complex emotions on their faces. A silence hangs over us as we lean into the glass cases full of deities. We see tangible evidence of the violence done to us by history, yet these incalculable losses are never acknowledged. In that moment, we are witness to the displacement of our sacred objects—and of ourselves.

18.

Finally, because institutional power can lay a path for actualizing new futures with a community, because power can be a liberating force for a genuine politics of solidarity, I will close this essay with the following musings.

Thought experiments for museums* as spaces of potentialities

*Insert universities, governments, corporations or other institutions.

- What if museums deliberated on and accepted their significance for peoples engaged in liberation struggles, for peoples fighting to assert their existence and narratives?
- What if, understanding the real stakes of the moment, museums raised their standards for what they want to achieve within a society?
- What if museums redesigned the governing principles for organizing and displaying objects, moving away from a Western-centric logic?
- What if Tibetan objects were placed in conversation with objects of other colonized and displaced peoples?

- What if museums were organized to celebrate the materialities of resistance, survival and creativity in the face of hegemonic annihilation?
- What if Tibetan objects were presented not only for interpretation but for experience?
- What if encountering a Tibetan object required participation and embodiment, the viewer being invited to give of themself? What if the viewer experienced loss, retrieval, preservation, sacrifice, reverence and more?
- What if museums centred the Tibetan worldview and de-centred or contested the dominant cultural order?
- What if museums celebrated Tibetan resilience, intelligence and creativity?
- What if museums grieved when we grieve?
- What if the distinction between secular and religious culture was recognized as a colonial fabrication?
- What if museums preserved the things Tibetans consider valuable, not just 'exotic' objects?
- What if museums acknowledged the gap between objects and their interpretation?
- What if every single display placard could be revised by Tibetans?
- What if museums abandoned their desire to possess?
- What if museums held Tibetan objects on a basis of trust with Tibetans? What if museums committed to return all objects to Tibet when the occupation ends?
- What if museums taught visitors about the injustices faced by the Tibetan people?
- What if museums taught people about Western profiteering, participation and complicity in the ongoing occupation of Tibet?
- What if museums sought to inspire collective liberation, solidarity and action under Tibetan leadership?
- What if museums understood that the Tibetan struggle is not just about Tibet?
- What if museums saw that the Tibetan struggle can free the world?
- What if museums admitted that they need us?

Note on the author

Tsering Yangzom's bestselling debut novel, *We Measure the Earth with our Bodies* (published under the name "Tsering Yangzom Lama"), was nominated for nine prizes including the Giller Prize, and won the Banff Mountain Book Prize for Fiction/Poetry and the Great Lakes College Association New Writers Award. It is published or forthcoming in ten countries and eight languages.

References

Hilton, J. (2015 [1933]), *Lost Horizon*, London: Vintage.

Nabokov, V. (1997), *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, New York: Vintage.

Said, E. W. (2000), *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Shen, W., B. Sullivan, R. Kobayashi, and R. Thum (2016), 'China's Tibetan and Uighur Nationalities: Fairbank Center 60th Anniversary Symposium Panel', Harvard University, 7-8 October, https://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/events/60th-anniversary-symposium/ (accessed 21 March 2025)

Sontag, S. (1966), *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.