

15 Critical Tibetan Studies

A Turn to Materiality

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Abstract This series of notes highlights a number of critical questions for the Tibetan studies community. It draws these from Tsering Yangzom's meditation on Tibetan lives and objects in the preface to this volume, the story of how *Among Tibetan Materialities* came into being, and our reflections as editors on the limits of what we have achieved.

Keywords Tibetan studies, critical turn, materiality, collaborative practice

Our work on this volume coincided with the publication of Tsering Yangzom's (2022) *We Measure the Earth With Our Bodies*. This fictional work weaves together the lives of a family forced to escape from Tibet and the intergenerational impact this had on their lives. Like many other readers, we were drawn to the affective qualities of one of the main protagonists, the nameless saint. Tsering Yangzom wrote this small wooden figure of immense strength and character into expansive Tibetan lifeworlds that challenge the narratives so often ascribed to Buddhist statues (*sku*) in Tibetan studies scholarship. We approached Tsering Yangzom and asked her if she would contribute to this volume. Perhaps she would write a reflective piece on the nameless saint? We initially thought of her contribution as a chance to reflect on creative practice as a method for understanding and situating Tibetan materiality, as well as a way to challenge the canon. However, Tsering Yangzom's essay goes far beyond this. It is a manifesto written for and to the Tibetan people. It is also a powerful critique of the discipline and the institutions and actors that uphold its position.

In this piece we raise a number of critical questions for the Tibetan studies community drawn from Tsering Yangzom's reflections, the story of how *Among Tibetan Materialities* came into being, and the limits of what we have achieved with this edited volume. We chose

to bookend the volume with Tsering Yangzom's essay and this final chapter as a counterpart, since these reflective pieces provide the critical, supporting framework for what is contained within. But we must emphasize that what follows should be understood to reflect our opinions as the editors of this volume and not those of the other contributors.

Configured as a series of notes, Tsering Yangzom's piece moves through and between reflections on the creative writing process and the relationship between writer, character and audience, and what it means for Tibetans to write when most of the readership is not Tibetan. She sets out the shortcomings of Tibetan studies and the cultural institutions that hold Tibet's material culture at a distance from Tibetans. Her manifesto is a call for closeness, for collapsing distance and upending notions of scholarly objectivity.

Asking what it would take for museums to reframe their position on Tibet, to act in solidarity, 'to grieve when we grieve', Tsering Yangzom sets out a speculative future for museums in which Tibetans shape Tibetan materiality for the benefit of Tibetans. These musings are not just relevant to cultural institutions. The same questions can be levelled at the Tibetan studies community. To borrow from Carole McGranahan's (2022: 290) reflections on theory as ethics, we should all be asking how we can make sure that what we do 'benefits the Tibetan community in ways that are meaningful to them and not just to me or to academia'.

What then does it mean to build care, trust and collaboration into Tibetan studies? How do we conceptualize and theorize research so that it becomes a generative rather than extractive act, and so that Tibetan scholarship and expertise is recognized on its own terms and not only as a source for established scholars? We ask you, the reader, to join us in reflecting and acting upon these questions—in solidarity, in grief, in hope.

Tsering Yangzom's introduction also offers a powerful point of reflection on the limits of what we have achieved in this volume. *Among Tibetan Materialities* began life as a commitment to carve out academic space based on principles of collegiality, generosity and friendship,

which actively encourage equal participation across status, position, institutions and national borders. Our aim as editors has been to support colleagues who have found it challenging to find a place within the current landscape of Tibetan studies, particularly within the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS), and whose research and practice did not sit comfortably within the classic fields of the discipline, namely history, religion, linguistics and art,¹ nor for that matter within the academy more broadly. A further layer to this has been our determination to support early career researchers in building networks and confidence in their research and expertise.

Our intention to build a community of practice began in 2016 in Bergen, Norway, at the 13th IATS seminar, the major triennial conference for the discipline. We recognized a synergy between our respective research areas and approaches, and this led to the beginnings of a research agenda. In 2017, we established the online platform Object Lessons from Tibet and the Himalayas (<https://objectlessonsfromtibetblog.wordpress.com/> [accessed 22 July 2025]), which provided us with a space to document early iterations of research with a particular focus on museum collections and material culture-focused case studies. This was followed by our first workshop in Manchester in June 2017, which brought clarity to our future direction.

The focus of this first workshop was on knowledge production relating to Tibetan material culture now in European museums. Our primary concern was to expose colonial-era acts of collection and the white men largely involved in those acts. In hindsight we can see that we were also privileging those acts and white men. Furthermore, all of the speakers were white. In his review of the workshop Thupten Kelsang warned against reducing Tibetans in the past to what he termed 'Sherpas' who only carry white scholarship:

Unless there is an active effort to counter this tendency on the part of researchers, the academic associations and networks will continue to function in a manner akin to the colonial paradigms which privileged the association of British Frontier Officers with Tibetan aristocratic or religious elites. (Kelsang 2017: 130)

1 The IATS website singles out these fields of research as 'prominent examples' of Tibetan studies territory (IATS n.d.).

We continued to support these conversations and critical reflections and to heed this message through small gatherings, workshops and conference panels in Copenhagen and Manchester, which gave doctoral students, museum professionals and early career academics the opportunity to present work or draft chapters for feedback and reflection outside of the conference circuit.

IATS seminars continued to be important milestones in the development of our thinking, although not always for the reasons one might expect. When the 15th IATS seminar issued its call for papers, Trine Brox and Emma Martin conceptualized and convened the panel 'Re-Narrating Tibetan Material Worlds: Other Ways of Reading Objects and Heritage'. The call for papers asked for contributions that used materially-led research to engage with questions related to the production, displacement, loss and potential recovery of different kinds of material knowledge, both in the present and in the past. On posting this call via social media channels, we received an immediate reply from an established Tibetologist: 'Please, try to utilize Tibetan-language literature.' This policing of the discipline was also felt by doctoral candidates presenting their research online during the COVID-19 pandemic. We witnessed senior colleagues dismissing students who presented visually and materially-led methodologies, insisting that they use texts in their studies as philological evidence for their arguments.

These experiences prompted us to attempt to create a positive space for discussion at the 16th IATS seminar in Prague by bringing together researchers who identify with materiality-centred research to create two panels. In addition to carving out space for Tibetan materialities as a field of study, our aim was to show a commitment to working collaboratively. We arranged multiple online feedback sessions and offered several rounds of guidance to support colleagues in developing conference papers and, from these, the chapters that are included in this volume.² In doing so we consciously rejected the lack of generosity and encouragement for new approaches and types of scholarship that we had witnessed, and which is emblematic of the wider challenges facing IATS.³ This was particularly evident before and during the 16th IATS

2 We would particularly like to thank Barbara Gerke, Mark Stevenson and Jan van der Valk for their continued and generous support of this process. We continue to learn so much from you and your spirit of collegiality.

3 During IATS seminars, there increasingly exists a wall between the scholars who practise 'Tibetology' and those who sit under the umbrella of Tibetan

seminar, where it was not possible to reach a consensus on the need for IATS to institute a set of ethical guidelines to prevent exploitative relationships. This should undoubtedly be at the core of the Tibetan studies community and the IATS ethos, but it was deemed unnecessary by a vocal minority who dominated the open debate.

Without question IATS needs renewal. What will it take for Tibetan studies to embed an ethics of care and mentorship—not to mention a code of academic conduct that recognizes the inequitable conditions under which research is produced? We call for recognition of the exclusions and biases that remain at the heart of the discipline, for equitable consideration for all methods and sources and for collective commitment to ethical conduct.

Our desire to support change is not necessarily reflected in the final list of contributors to this volume. Along the way, a number of early career researchers and particularly researchers of Colour and/or who identify as of Tibetan and Himalayan heritage have withdrawn their chapters. We have seen contributors overwhelmed by the lack of institutional support and space to discuss the ongoing violence against the Palestinian people and by crises of confidence fuelled by the question of whether they are good enough to contribute to the field of Tibetan studies. In one case, an early career researcher decided to withdraw their chapter after an attempt to blacklist them was followed by coercion.

These intersecting points of extreme and crushing pressure felt by early career researchers are of course not unique to the field of Tibetan studies; they are prevalent throughout the academy. However, it is crucial to pay attention to the unrecognized but long term implications of such global and intimate acts of violence on the future trajectories of Tibetan studies. These trajectories will inevitably determine who gets to publish, build a career and, in the coming years, decide on the direction and principles of the discipline, as well as the types of research published.

studies. The community has become a two-pronged discipline with one group of scholars, the Tibetologists, working on textual analysis and the other group more interested in applying other humanities and social science methods. There are very few scholars who manage to bridge the two.

While this volume represents a fractional step towards change, the absence of some of the innovative and inspiring research that we wanted to include exposes the inherent inequalities in the processes of academic research, publication and knowledge production. We ask you to join us in reflecting on how we might strive for greater inclusion despite the structural obstacles.

Despite the limitations of this volume, we see it as a contribution to what we describe as a ‘critical turn’ in Tibetan studies, identifiable as a growing critique of the established methodologies and academic concerns privileged by the discipline.⁴ This criticality can be traced back more than three decades to the postcolonial scholarship of Barbara Aziz (1987, 1988 [1985]), Melvyn Goldstein and Gelek Rimpoche (1989), Peter Bishop (1989), Tsering Shakya (1994, 2001), Frank Korom (1997), Donald Lopez Jr (1998), Clare Harris (1999), Peter Hansen (2003) and Martin Brauen (2004). Through differing conceptual frameworks, these scholars began to expose the colonial histories and Orientalist practices associated with the early twentieth century foundations of Tibetology and their ongoing implications for Tibetan studies in the present.⁵

4 This chapter does not provide a comprehensive literature review. Following Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne who hold that ‘citation denotes those ideas that we want to bring along with us’ (2017: 11), we have made considered choices about who to cite and why.

5 From the nineteenth century onwards, the focus of Tibetology (the science of Tibet) was not Tibet *per se*, but primarily the philological study of Buddhist scriptures, which was conducted by white European scholars. This focus on texts meant that scholars of Tibetology did not need Tibet (Lopez Jr. 1998)—they did not have to travel there or to talk with Tibetans—as they needed only their Buddhist texts to produce ‘critical’ editions, translations and exegeses. As a recognized discipline, Tibetology was regarded as having a scientific and objective methodology characterized by the systematic study of text, for which one trained under a professor at a European or North American university to qualify as a Tibetologist. Tibetology still has the status of a singular discipline in this sense, something that one has to be trained in to properly master, yet the relatively high status of this expertise has been challenged by the arrival of alternative methodologies. This has broadened

In the 2000s a growing number of scholars relied on disciplinary frameworks other than philology and religious studies, including anthropology, gender studies, Indigenous language and area studies, histories of colonialism and international relations (Anand 2002, 2007; Gyatso and Havnevik 2005; Makley 2007; McGranahan 2010; Shneiderman 2006; Yeh 2007, 2013). This research spoke to the politics and contemporary realities of undertaking Tibet and Himalaya-centred research, evidenced by research questions that increasingly addressed political violence and upheaval, insurgency and uprisings, indigenous language suppression, human rights violations, travel and trade restrictions and, intersecting with many of these issues, China's continuing occupation of Tibet.

Of particular relevance to this volume is a more recent turn towards questions of ethics, positionality, indigeneity and W/whiteness, which sits alongside a growing acknowledgement of the academic responsibility that comes with undertaking research in places devastated by ongoing and encroaching colonialism, deforestation and mineral extraction, global warming and the suppression of human rights. In 2011, Tsering Yangzom and Dawa Lokyitsang founded Lhakar Diaries (<https://lhakardiaries.com/> [accessed 22 July 2025]), a blog that serves, among other things, to "demystify ideas about Tibet", ushering in decolonial praxis among Tibetan youth well before the academic conversation in Tibetan and Himalayan studies got under way' (Gayley 2023). More than a decade ago, Cristina Michelle Kleisath (2013) asked the Tibetan studies community to flip the analytical gaze away from Tibet and onto Tibetology itself by asking questions of researcher neutrality through critical race theory. Although Kleisath questioned the discipline's inability to recognize race in its scholarship, her work appears to have gone without comment from the Tibetan studies community. It took another seven years before researchers raised such questions in a public forum. Of note are the individual contributions made by Natalie Avalos, Matthew King, Nancy G. Lin, Dawa Lokyitsang, Karin Meyers, Annabella Pitkin, Sangseraima Ujeed and Riga Shakya during the Decolonial/Anti-Racist roundtable discussion at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference in Colorado in 2019, and later published in *Waxing Moon* (Avalos et al. 2020).

the scope of the discipline, which is now more commonly understood as Tibetan studies.

Since then, notable publications include the special issue addressing marginalization and everyday lives edited by Harmandeep Kaur Gill and Theresia Hofer (2023), a special edition dedicated to centring the Tibetan language in Tibetan studies for *Yeshe*, edited by Huatse Gyal and Charlene Makley (2024), Swati Chawla's call to foreground Tibetans in Tibetan studies in India (2024), Dawa Lokitsang's reappraisal of her earlier work on Tibetan Indigeneity (2024) and Jinba Tenzin's reflective work on what it means to be a 'native anthropologist' (2024). These publications have, in various ways, rejected the notion of objectivity and the idea that Tibetan studies is unhindered by racial and gender-based bias and geopolitical influence. They push us to instead think about the subjectivity and equitability of our research, as well as to critically reflect on what counts as a primary source and what types of analytical frame are valued by the discipline.

We write in solidarity with these recent collections and initiatives that question the neutrality of the discipline and consider whose knowledge is worthy of recognition, who gets invited into the academy and who has the privilege to access academic outputs. It is no accident that most of these recent works are open access publications. This was also a primary concern for us when it came to choosing a press for *Among Tibetan Materialities*. We did not want to hide the scholarship it contains behind paywalls or exorbitant price tags, or to disadvantage contributors who do not benefit from institutional funding that covers article publication charges. Although we recognize that there are still barriers such as language and infrastructure, our aim has been to afford greater equality of access to this publication and to increase the chances that each contributor's research is read, cited and acted upon.

We hope that you, as readers, use this volume's collective and individual attempts to explore what it means to critically and ethically engage with Tibetan materialities as part of the broader critical turn in Tibetan studies—and that you will consider where to publish, who to cite and who to uplift as we continue to shape the future of this discipline.

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