Foreword

For at least for the last century, Tibet has been chiefly known in the West as a seat of spiritual mastery. As social and political tensions and conflicts have accumulated throughout the world, Tibet has been increasingly admired for the reputed accomplishments of its lamas and yogis. But this reputation has had some disadvantages for its people: it has tended, according to the strange logic of the human mind, to fuel presumptions amongst outsiders that Tibetans did not also include figures who excelled at secular arts and skills. In fact, there were many Tibetans, long before Chinese troops took over the country in 1950, who had distinguished themselves in such areas of expertise as medicine, literature, art, commerce, photography, history, politics and international affairs.

Among the most prominent in the last four of these fields was the exceptionally capable and widely admired *Tsipon* or Finance Minister, Wangchuk Deden Shakabpa. In 1948 he had led a famous delegation sent by the Tibetan government to India, Great Britain, the United States and China to seek international recognition for the country's status. The delegation demonstrated considerable diplomatic and strategic capability merely in gaining admittance to these countries, since they had succeeded in doing so on Tibetan passports despite the energetic protests of the Chinese government. Over two decades, later after the Dalai Lama and some 80,000 followers had fled to India In 1959, he went on to produce the first comprehensive modern history of the nation, *Tibet: A Political History*, published by Yale University Press in English in 1967, and a two-volume version in Tibetan entitled, *Bod kyi srid don rgyal rabs ("An Advanced Political History of Tibet")*. These works are still among the major texts to be consulted in any study of Tibet's past.

Now, in a new location and in the English language, another Tibetan from the same family has shown an enduring interest in the arts, in this case the art of poetry. Tsoltim Ngima Shakabpa, the youngest son of the late *Tsipon*, first published a volume of his poems in 2002, when he was in his 59th year. He had been seven years old when the People's Liberation Army arrived in his hometown, Lhasa. The uprising that led to the flight of the Dalai Lama to India had taken place when he was sixteen, if we use the western method of counting age. By this time he had already gained considerable proficiency in English language, having been sent, like many children (including some girls) of the Tibetan elite from the 1940s onwards, to study in British-run schools in northern India. Later he was to work for the Tibetan Government-in-exile from its base in India, before moving to America and becoming the first Tibetan to pursue a career in international banking as a senior executive in a major American bank.

His career as a writer emerged only after the onset of cancer in 1993, which was followed by a stroke six years later that has since left him partially immobilized. He published a

volume of poems in the Catalan language called *Records D'un Tibeta* in 2002 and in English in 2003 under the title *Recollections of a Tibetan*. Two years later he produced an account of his own history, *Winds of Change – An Autobiography of a Tibetan*. In 2006 he published the collection of poems entitled, *Odds and Ends*. The present volume is his fifth collection of poetry, and establishes him as a prolific writer with a distinctive style and repertoire.

He is not, however, the first Tibetan poet to write in English, though he is among the most productive and wide-ranging. There is a tradition of English-language poetry dating back to the late 1930s, when the celebrated 20th century Tibetan intellectual, the radical monk-scholar Gendun Choephel, wrote a number of poems in the style of late nineteenth century romanticism. As Melvyn Goldstein and others showed some 30 years ago, ordinary Tibetans were prolific users and creators of verse famous well before the turn of the 20th century, and Lhasa was famous for the circulation of street verses, quatrains of often impromptu wit that usually contained pointed political satire. For centuries, Tibetan culture has been noted for the extensive use and importance of proverbs; the Bon scholar Namkhai Norbu has shown that *de'u* or riddles were central to Tibetan culture in the era before Buddhism was introduced some 1,400 years ago. But written poetry among Tibetans remained largely the work of scholars until the exile to India in 1959. At that time a new, more popular cohort emerged of Tibetan writers using the English language.

For the first generation of younger refugees, educated in elite English-medium schools in India, especially before the shift to a Hindi-based curriculum in 1975, it seemed natural that English should serve as their lingua franca. Since then; their options may have narrowed further as the facility to write in Tibetan becomes less common among the younger exiles. From 1979 three editions of an English-language literary journal were produced by Tibetans in India under the title *Lotus Fields*. It included work by K. Dhondup (the founder of the Tibetan Communist Party in exile and an important writer), Tenzing Sonam (later to become a noted documentary film director), the essayist and activist Lhasang Tsering, the government official Thubten Samphel, Gyalpo Tsering, and others. In the United States the renegade Tibetan lama, Chogyam Trungpa, working closely with Allen Ginsburg, published a book of his English-language poems in 1983. More recently, publications have emerged in India showcasing work by younger, lay writers such as Buchung D. Sonam, Tenzin Tsundue, Thubten Chakrishar, Tsamchoe Dolma and others. Since 2002 the work of Tsering Wangmo Dhompa has attracted increasing attention in the United States. Bhuchung Sonam has edited an anthology of exile Tibetan verse (*Muses in* Exile, Paljor, 2004) containing work by 30 Tibetan poets writing in English, and has estimated that two to three hundred Tibetans may have written or published English-language verse in India and elsewhere.

As Tsering Wangmo Dhompa noted in her essay "Nostalgia in Contemporary Tibetan Poetics", these poems are largely about the experience of exile and of the loss that defines that condition. "We are entrusting a language different from our mother tongue to speak

of the loss or the absence of a country”, Ms Dhompa has written. “These are complex negotiations.” The work of Tsoltim Shakabpa, the most senior of the current group of exile poets, exemplifies this predicament. His own views on this issue are presented in an essay, originally written for the *Tibetan Bulletin* but included in this volume, entitled “The Role of English in Poetry by Tibetans”. There he suggests that the Tibetan writer should “first write down what the heart feels in whatever language the writer feels most comfortable with and then use the English language to interpret that feeling”. Reflecting an openness that is relatively new to the exile community, he goes on to welcome the use of Chinese as a language of expression by Tibetans writing in China: English is no longer the only option for Tibetans aiming to reach a wider audience. Tibetans now write in modes that reflect the places and societies in which they find themselves, and Shakabpa’s own poems have been described (not, apparently, unfavourably) by the Tibetan journalist T. N. Khortsa as “nostalgic yet very American”.

In essence, however, they are characteristic of Tibetan exile poetry: they too focus on the loss of nationhood, admiration for the Dalai Lama, animosity and pain concerning China’s role in Tibet, and fascination with the concepts of karma and impermanence. Above all, they share a privilege given to the importance of emotional recollection. Shakabpa’s poems, however, have a very particular style and energy. They are organized according to two principal devices, those of parallelism and antithesis. Framed as sets of parallel clauses, they offer sharply opposing concepts: “The Dalai Lama seeks Buddhism / The Chinese seek colonialism”. In some cases, the contrast is made sharper by the use of radically contracted forms, where verbs, punctuation and other parts of speech are omitted: “China is / racially Han / historically ancient / politically communist / economically capitalist”. Punctuation is sparse or non-existent. The contrasts are paradoxical: an element of shock is involved. Other surprises come with the content: some poems are discussions of terrorism, or echoes of American popular songs and speeches by President Kennedy; one is a series of mock nursery rhymes about the fall of Saddam Hussein. All the pieces are marked by an energetic, didactic force in which words are tools, consciously shifted or displaced to achieve sharpened, pedagogic impact.

Thus we see reflected throughout this work the continuing sense of urgency that dominates the exile experience. As the sense of loss accumulates, now approaching sixty years, concomitant anxieties about long-term deprivation and uncertainty arise, always within the context and vocabulary of the culture within which the exile writers currently find themselves. But those transnational echoes and references, and the use of a foreign language, conceal permutations of a longer historical drive that is central to these poems, for behind the work of Tsoltim Shakabpa and his peers resonate, in very different, contemporary and deracinated terms, many of the vital concerns and fears that must have preoccupied his father in the final delegation sent by Lhasa to the Indian, American, British and Chinese capitals in 1948. The publication of these poems therefore represents both an innovation and a continuity in the efforts of exile Tibetans to call for recognition of their identity and their situation in a rapidly changing, globalised world.

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