

WATERFALL OF YOUTH -- *LANG TSHO'I RBAB CHU*

DHONDUP GYAL.¹

TRANSLATED AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE BY YOSAY WANGDI

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Introduction:

Dhondup Gyal (1953-1985), founder of New Tibetan Literature, was born in 1953 in the village of Gurong Phuba in Amdo. His education was intermittently interrupted by the chaos of Mao's Cultural Revolution. Fortunately for Gyal, his good voice and speaking skills earned him a job with the Tibetan section of the Qinghai Radio Broadcasting Station in Xining (Qinghai province). The opportunity to join the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing allowed him to further develop his intellectual standards. In 1976 upon completion of his studies, Gyal returned to the Qinghai Radio Station. After the Cultural Revolution Gyal's writings began to appear in the *Qinghai Tibetan News* under the pen-name *Radio Victory* (*Rlung 'phrin rgyal*). The Nationalities' Publishing House in Beijing published sixteen of Gyal's best works from 1979-1980 under the title *The Dawn of Clear and Simple Writing* (*Bol rtsom zhogs pa'i skya rengs*). His poem *Waterfall of Youth* (*Lang tsho'i rbab chu*) was published in the second issue of *Sbrang char* (*Light Rain*) in 1983.²

LANG TSHO'I RBAB CHU

*Clear blue sky
The warm and comforting rays of the sun,*

¹ Pema Bhum, ed. 1993 (Tibetan) *Torrents of Youth and Selected Writing of Dhondup Gyal*. Tibetan Literature Series, No. 2. *Amnye Machen*, Tibetan Cultural and Preservation center, Dharamsala. I first translated this poem in my dissertation (unpublished) *Echoes of an Agonized nation: Transformations in Tibetan Identity in Diaspora*, University of Nevada, Reno, December 2003. I would like to thank Tenzin Thinlay for his expert advice with the translation. The Tibetan phonetic rendering of the title is Langtsö bapchü.

² Pema Bhum, "The Life of Dhondup Gyal, A Shooting Star that Cleaved the Night Sky and Vanished." Translated from Tibetan by Luran Hartley in *Lungta*, Dharamsala: Winter 1995, 17-29. Also see Heather Stoddard, "Don grub rgyal (1953-1985): Suicide of a Modern Tibetan writer and scholar," in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the IATS*, ed. Per Kvaerne, Oslo/Fagernes, 1994.

*the vast and open land
the flowers beautiful and the
high and majestic mountains*

Oh!!

*But even more beautiful is the torrential waterfall
that flows over the steep rocks.*

Look!!

*The waterfall forms white frothy bubbles, clear and clean;
The sun's rays, the beautiful feathers of a peacock,
Parrot,
Picture of colorful brocade,
Rainbow colors*

Listen!!

*The sound of the waterfall flowing, pleasing to the ear,
like the melodious music of youth,
the melody of Brahma
the voice of Saraswati
like the melodious sound of the cuckoo bird... ..*

Hey!! This natural waterfall is no ordinary one;

*It is majestic
like the fearless heart,
dauntless courage,
that spreads through the body
like a beautiful, decorative ornament,
like a melodious song.*

In fact!!

*This is snow-laden Tibet and the Tibetan youth whose
exuberance is like the torrential waterfall.*

Indeed!!

*This is the Tibetan youth in the 80's of the 20th century;
their courage, and their determination
to struggle, to establish new ideas,
like the sound of the torrential waterfall.*

Hey!! Waterfall of youth,

*youth of waterfall;
Fearless, courageous,
... not discouraged, having pride,
... not lacking in spirit,*

*... having everlasting strength.
How did these attributes develop in the Tibetan youth?*

Yes!! Sources of water:

*In spring for three months, it is rainwater;
In summer for three months it is spring water from the ground;
In autumn for three months it is hailstones;
In winter for three months it is snowfall.*

Other sources:

*water from snowy mountain... rocky mountain... slate mountain... forest
covered hill water....
marshy water... hill water... valley water... from upper part of valley... lower
part of valley.*

In Brief:

*... Blessed auspicious water,
... Good karma water,
... Aim achieving water,
... Water with eight essential qualities,
... having all attributes;*

*Water with 108 different rivulets,
water of unity;*

*You dare to flow over the steep rocky slope.
Since you are the water coming from different sources,
You have the courage to fall from the slopes of the low valley;
The courage to bring different streams together.
Open minded, strong, glorious, splendor,
without pride or arrogance, flawless,
a torrent flowing ceaselessly,
with ability to discard dirt and imbibe good qualities;
Develop youthful qualities with clean body and mind.*

Oh waterfall!!

*The witness of history,
guide to the future;
The ups and downs of history are written in each droplet of your pure water;
The growth and decline of Tibet are in each particle of your droplet.*

Without you,

how do we sharpen the sword of our language?

Without you,

how do we sharpen the knife of art and craft?

Without you,

how can the saplings of medical knowledge grow and

the fruits of Buddhist philosophy flower through debates and dialectics?

Perhaps!!

*Your mirror like mind
may have suffered the injury of history,
old diseases, of war,
of ignorance,
of attachment to old customs and traditions.*

However!!

*You have youthful vigor and innate qualities;
Red earth even in three months of bitter winter,
...never can put your mind in an ice box.
Even a sharp sword-like wind
cannot cut through your flow;
Even if it blows hundred times- it cannot cut.
How can it cut!!*

Why?!

*Because your source is the snow and
you end in the ocean;
Like the flow of history,
the flow of your water is full of pride and dignity.
In modern times the sound of your flow grows melodious
giving us strength and encouragement.*

Oh waterfall!!

*Did you hear questions of the youths of snow-laden Tibet?
Like a good horse suffers and becomes weak when thirsty for long,
In the same way, when poetry declines in Tibet, what should we do?
Like an elephant suffers in hot climate,
When poetic expressions suffer in Tibet, what should we do?
Like an arrogant lion that ultimately suffers,
When an ornate diction declines in Tibet, what should we do?
Like an orphaned child who has no one to care for it,
With the passing of the older generation,
who will nurture and develop our traditional arts?
Who will fill the void left by them?
The void left by the astrological experts of the past?
The modern young bridegroom- how will he be received?
How will Tibet receive science and modern development?
Who will be the husband of the skilled girl bride?
Who will adopt and apply the technology?*

Yes waterfall!!

*The answers are in the clear, pleasing sound of your song;
...Impressed in our mind like the carving on stone.*

Truly!!

*The brilliance and shine of olden days
cannot substitute the present;
Today's thirst cannot be quenched
by the smell of yesterday's salt water.
Ancient history and culture is very important;
But without change and adaptation it becomes lifeless;
Like a body without soul;
Without soul our pulse will not vibrate;
Blood will not circulate in our heart;
We need to change with the times;
Adopt new ideas to move forward.*

Hey waterfall!!

*Your bubbling waves and
scattering water drops;*

We,

*...who are the strength of
the new generation of snow-laden Tibet;
The sound of your continuous flow
symbolizes the new generation;
...In your flow the future vision of the new generation is visible.
In our generation there is no place for
attachment to old customs, cowardice, ignorance, laziness;
Absolutely no place for
backwardness, barbarism, darkness, immoral acts...*

Waterfall, Oh waterfall!!

*Our mind moves according to your step
and our blood also flows according to your flow.
The future path
is more difficult than before;
But the youth of Tibet never fear opportunity;
This race will certainly make a new path to move forward.*

Look!!

*The people in the line are snow-laden Tibet's
new generation.*

Listen!!

*The harmonious sound
is the footsteps of Tibetan youth.*

*The bright big way,
the magnificent duty,
the happy life,
the song of struggle;
The sound of youthful waterfall does not fade away;
The vigor and energy of waterfall of youth is even more everlasting.*

This!!

*Is the voice of the new generation of Tibetans
which comes from the waterfall of youth.*

This!!

*Is the flow of the torrential waterfall;
The mind of the Tibetan youth.*

An Expression of Tibetan Identity - A Critical Perspective

In the poem *Lang tsh'i rbab chu (Waterfall of Youth)*, Dhondup Gyal uses nature as a thinly disguised metaphor for a simple, bold, and dangerous idea: the Chinese state cannot repress the vitality of Tibetan youth.³ One does not have to be a student of political allegory to surmise the latent political message of Gyal's optimistic writings. Creative and provocative in style, by the sheer forcefulness of his words, he compels the youth of Tibet to find ways of expressing deep felt concern for the future of their country.

The role of nature in poetic imagination is not new to Tibetan poems. However, when *Lang tsho'i rbab chu* was published in 1983 in Xining, China, the impact on Tibetan students was revolutionary.⁴ Throughout the poem, water is a metaphor for cultural unity and political activism. Given that the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is ever-vigilant for the subversive work of artists, especially from minority groups such as the Uighurs, Miao, and Tibetans, we will not be surprised to learn that at the time of Gyal's death in 1985, the ominous signs of official disapproval were already intruding into his daily life. Despite official surveillance, Gyal's death by sulfur dioxide asphyxiation in his home in the town of Chabcha in Amdo, cannot be laid at the door of China's security forces; it was most likely suicide. Dogged by misery and fame in equal measure this fiery writer most probably buckled under the burden of alienation and loneliness and took his own life.

Surely the poet Gyal contributed to the creation of the newly politicized Tibetan voice, and he indeed posed a small irritation within the PRC's matrix of state security, of which Tibet remains a sensitive part. Not surprisingly, the political tension surrounding Gyal's death is a sequel of the controversies that surrounded him when he was alive.

³ From here on the poem will be referred to as *Lang tsho'i rbab chu*.

⁴ Pema Bhum, "The Life of Dhondup Gyal . . .," in *Lungta*, Dharamsala: Winter 1995, 23.

Robbed of his childhood, Gyal watched his homeland disintegrate under Mao's draconian measures during the traumatic years of the Cultural Revolution. When books were banned Gyal tried to secretly salvage some books.⁵ Undaunted by his struggles, his heart belonged to Tibet, and he took recourse in promoting Tibetan language as the symbol of the country's new confidence. Consider the following:

*Without you,
how do we sharpen the sword of our language?*

*Without you
how do we sharpen the knife of art and craft?*

*Without you,
how can the saplings of medical knowledge grow and
the fruits of Buddhist philosophy flower through debates and dialectics?*

Having observed the attack on Tibetan language during "the so-called 'new high tide of enthusiasm for learning Han,'"⁶ and the marginalization and subversion of the Tibetan language by the PRC, Gyal was convinced of the need to educate the Tibetan youth in their native language. *Lang tsho'i rbab chu* represents a daring to hope. His empowerment of the Tibetan youth mirrors his own aspirations for Tibet and his fears of the threats to Tibetan identity. Though directed to the urban based literati, he argues for a rights-conscious population as necessary to withstand foreign encroachment and build a powerful, modern Tibet. His concept of rights embraces the core political rights of freedom of speech, thought and of association. Paternalistic and even condescending in manner he invokes the youth to throw off the mantle of authoritarianism and assert their rights.

Gyal's life resonates with the life of another great son of Tibet, the Tenth Panchen Lama whose compassionate concerns for the plight of the Tibetan people earned him the wrath of the Chinese leadership, while his willingness to work with the Chinese for the betterment of Tibet made him suspect in the eyes of the Tibetans. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, many Tibetans saw the Panchen Lama as a collaborator who worked with Communist China against Tibetan interest. After his death in 1989, he was hailed as the 'true son' of Tibet who devoted his life to the cause of the Tibetan people.⁷ Sadly, the

⁵ Recall Dai Sijie's touching novel, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (New York: Anchor books, 2001). The book is a reminder of the resiliency of the human spirit against all odds.

⁶ Catriona Bass, *Education in Tibet, Policy and Practice since 1950* (London: Zed Books Ltd. In association with Tibet Information Network (TIN), London, 1998), 31.

⁷ "The Panchen Lama 'A True Tibetan,'" *Tibetan Review*, August/September 1969, 9-18. Also see Tsering Shakya, "The Man who Wasn't Allowed to Tell the Truth, the 7th Panchen Lama," *Lungta* 10, Winter 1996, 24-27. Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltzen the 14th abbot of Tashilhunpo monastery was given the title of Panchen by the 5th Dalai Lama. Since he was a reincarnate lama, the previous three incarnations of Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltzen were recognized posthumously as Panchen Lamas. Hence according to Tashilhunpo records, Chökyi Gyaltzen (1938-1989) is the 10th Panchen lama while Tibetan government records designated him as the 7th Panchen Lama. The exile government has begun to subscribe to the Tashilhunpo records in following the Panchen lineage.

heroic contributions of people like the Panchen Lama and Dhondup Gyal were thwarted by their people when alive. This is a tragic shortcoming. Their ideas alienated them from their society but found glory after death.

Having suffered hostility when alive, in death Gyal was celebrated as the founder of modern Tibetan literature. Modern Tibetan poetry and literature was non-existent before him. This recognition is a testament to the transformative power of literature. *Lang tsho'i rbab chu* is his cutting edge work on Tibetan identity that underpins the frustrations, aspirations, and complexities of being a Tibetan after the invasion of 1959. His poem is a clarion call to the young generation of Tibetans to wake up and realize their aspirations as Tibetans. An extremely gifted writer who spent his short life, (he was 32 at the time of his death) between Xining and Beijing, Gyal was aware of the dangers of any expression of independent thinking. Couching his deepest thoughts behind a generous dose of metaphor, Gyal is able to give expression to his thoughts. In *Lang tsho'i rbab chu*, Gyal skillfully makes use of the waterfall to personify the Tibetan youth. He writes:

You have youthful vigor and innate qualities;

Red earth even in three months of bitter winter,

...never can put your mind in an ice box.

Even a sharp sword-like wind

cannot cut through your flow;

Even if it blows hundred times- it cannot cut.

How can it cut!!

Such groundbreaking words make Gyal a precursor of the complex realities that face the Tibetans of today. Indeed, his ideas sparked much controversy when he wrote in the 80s. Not only was he implying that no matter what, China cannot suppress the Tibetan spirit and that the Tibetan spirit is undefeatable and immortal, he also spoke about the necessity that Tibetans can no longer keep living in past glories and that they must change. This double pronged attack on the occupiers of Tibet and on the old order made Gyal into a villain in the eyes of the old generation of Tibetans.⁸ Gyal thus alienated many Tibetan readers. He bluntly criticized slavish, blind adherence to the ways of the past, to tradition (and tradition is a salient idiom in typical Tibetan self-description). New ideas for new times, that was his call, however high the cost. Consider the following:

Today's thirst cannot be quenched

by the smell of yesterday's salt water.

Ancient history and culture is very important;

But without change and adaptation it becomes lifeless;

⁸ Pema Bhum, "The Life of Dhondup Gyal," in *Lungta*, Dharamsala: Winter 1995: 22-23.

The “. . . smell of yesterday’s salt water.” For Gyal, the past is troublesome and malodorous, useless as old, rancid water.⁹ His scathing remarks and refusal to conform to age-old religious values scandalized and shocked the Tibetans. He dared to disturb the minds of both old and young Tibetans by attacking what they held closest to their hearts i.e. their religion, beliefs, rituals, and traditions. Perhaps this was the only way he could emotionally move the Tibetan people. Metaphorically, this is analogous to poking a red hot fire tong on the arm of the jaundiced Tibetans so that the latent diseased liver of Tibetan identity would jump-start to function again in order to keep the rest of the body in shape. In this respect, he is fully justified in using religion as a tool to achieve his goals. Buddhism too strongly advocates motive as being all important in making merit. It is the intention of the mind that determines the karmic outcome not the action itself. Given the stranglehold of religion in the lives of the Tibetans he has effectively used this fact to show that the “Tibetan identity” must take precedence over all else, even religion.

The conservative Tibetans hated, scorned, and condemned Gyal for his radical views. Concurrently, Tibetan students held him in admiration and awe for his writings. Through the power of his words, he attempted to inspire in the youth the belief that they can have a future wholly different from their past. His conviction that the youth must break down the old equation of the supremacy of Lamaism, of superstitious beliefs, and embrace education and science for the future of Tibet, is unshakable. While his strong expression of Tibetan identity angered the Chinese, his criticisms and his call for change alienated him from his people. His perceptive energy was seen as a threat not only by the Chinese but by Tibetans as well.

The underlying veneer of serious concern in the poem is the brutal past and a present that remains uncertain and unsettled. Despite the energy and vigor of his words, one discerns lamentation that the scourge of the past is unbelievably and unpardonably still present. Having a strong social conscience, Gyal uses literacy to awaken the new generation in order to achieve political and social realization. Indeed, Gyal was radically distinctive and without equal. His sensitivity and awareness of his Tibetan identity and the urgency he felt in making Tibetans understand the need to change and adapt--but without compromising their identity--is resonant of the frustrations experienced by the Tibetan youth today. In that sense, Gyal is representative of the new generation of Tibetans, caught—as they are--between the old expectations and the new emerging global forces. In short, Gyal is highly illustrative of the complex tensions rending the Tibetan community today.

Resentment of Gyal among Tibetans may have also had a personal source. Gyal left his Tibetan wife and re-married a Mongolian woman.¹⁰ Rejected, spurned, and condemned for his subversive thinking and overbearing pride, Gyal’s life was an interlude that no doubt leaves behind rich literature and a lesson. Consider the following:

⁹ The image of the past as useless water calls to mind, Wen Yiduo's despairing poem from 1927, following the failure of the 'First Revolution', *Sishui* "Dead Water."

¹⁰ Pema Bhum, “The Life of Dhondup Gyal...,” in *Lungta*, Dharamsala: Winter 1995, 24.

... *Blessed auspicious water,*
 ... *Good karma water,*
 ...*Aim achieving water,*
 ...*Water with eight essential qualities,*
 ...*having all attributes;*
Water with 108 different rivulets,
water of unity;
 You dare to flow over the steep rocky slope.
 Since you are the water coming from different sources,
 You have the courage to fall from the slopes of the low valley;
 The courage to bring different streams together.

The old adage, “united we stand, divided we fall” comes to mind. Guided by practical experience and observation, Gyal’s veritable pragmatism impresses on the youth the importance of being united. He puts faith in the ability and integrity of the youth to cast aside sectarian and provincial differences. In retrospect, Gyal was a courageous realist hated by a sanctimonious society. His constructive dissent echoes the dilemma of the new generation of educated Tibetans, who notwithstanding their deep reverence for the Dalai Lama, are not comfortable with the ambiguous position of the exile government. For instance, the exile government encourages democracy, yet sees dissenting views as subversive. This ambivalence encourages a false sense in any objective view of patriotism. Democracy and freedom means the right to dissent. Like Gyal, today, while more and more young Tibetans are responding to the threats and the urgency to protect their identity, they are also growing impatient with the need to be more active in liberating Tibet from Chinese rule.

Gyal’s life and work, then, is intimately related to the issues of the transformation of Tibetan identity. China’s persistent and organized attempts to destroy the Tibetan culture, tradition, and way of life, have strengthened the Tibetan people’s sense of their identity. More than ever before in their history, the Tibetan youth of today are acutely conscious of their Tibetanness. Though most of the Tibetan youth born in the diaspora have never seen Tibet, their unique historical experience helps them endure and persist as a people. Like the spirit of Gyal’s natural waterfall that lives on and cannot be contained, the Tibetan spirit, as Tibetans and their supporters hope, is not willing to rest till they are free. *Lang tsho’i rbab chu* represents Gyal’s raised expectations that regardless of the political upheaval, Tibet can flourish. Triumph comes from the lesson learned. Like Gyal’s “Waterfall,” will the Tibetan youth live up to the heroic qualities invested in them? Today, China’s silence is, to say the least, demoralizing and is viewed as a sign of failure for the exile government. Repeated attempts by the exile government to open dialogues with the PRC has been thwarted and rebuffed. There is a sense of profound political powerlessness. While the PRC treats Tibet as a commodity for global consumption through the development of tourism,¹¹ and continues to suppress the

¹¹ On the politics of ethnicity and its commoditization in China, see Susan D. Blum, *Portraits of “Primitives”: Ordering Human Kinds in the Chinese Natio* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

Tibetan voice denying basic social and political rights, Tibetans in exile are increasingly becoming mired in the race for material prosperity. Will the Tibetan spirit overcome all obstacles and rise above the entrapment? Only time will tell.