



Magical realism in Tibetan literature: the prose narrative of Ijang-bu.

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The notion of magical realism is repeatedly mentioned in connection with Tibetan contemporary literature (*gsar-rtsoṃ*). I would like to pursue the question of the existence of magical realism in Tibet and what the extensively theorized notion of ‘magical realism’ can add to our understanding of Tibetan literature.

Even though magical-realistic literature has a long tradition, it only became known in Tibet (and China) through translations from Latin-American works in the genre, especially by Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* at the beginning of the 1980s.

It was also in the 1980s that the *gsar-rtsoṃ* literature gradually emancipated itself from the tight boundaries of affirmative socialist realism in the course of the liberalization policy of the Deng era in literary magazines (e.g. *sbrang-char*, *bod-kyi rtsom-rig sgyu-rtsal*, *lho-kha’i rtsom-rig sgyu-rtsal*). The socialist aesthetic had already broadened the context of Tibetan literature, which was traditionally confined within the framework of the poetics of Dandin (*snyan-ngag me-long*), to the language and subject matter of everyday life.

The dual influences of traditional poetry and social realism are both absorbed and transformed through the magical-realistic genre of writing. Next to people like sTag-’bum-rgyal, rDo-rje-mkhar and Glu-smyon He-ru-ka the author Chab-brag rDo-rje Tshe-ring, writing under the pseudonym Ijang-bu, is an outstanding representative of Tibetan magical realism (*sGyu-’phrul dngos-yod ring-lugs*). Ijang-bu, who was born in Sog-po county in Amdo at the beginning of the 1960s, belongs to the generation of intellectuals who grew up at the time of the Cultural Revolution and were educated in the state Nationalities Universities. Ijang-bu currently works as an editor with the literary magazine *Bod-ljongs rtsom-rig sgyu-rtsal* in Lhasa. Through an examination of his short stories “*sog-rus las mched pa’i rnam-shes*” (1986) and “*shi gson*” (1987) I hope to demonstrate how magical-realist writing is undermining both the (high) Buddhist tradition as well as the poetic conventions of Socialist Realism.

Magical-realistic texts contain an irreducible magical element, something outside the conventional perception of the world that cannot be rationally explained. Thus the textual world refers to the real world external to the text. This real world that provides that frame of reference is enlarged through a fictional, irrational world, based on axioms that are accepted by the characters and the readers alike. A border-crossing continuity spanning two or more worlds is created, resulting in an ambiguity between the texts that calls into question the conventional concepts of space, time, identity and truth.

Magical-realistic writing, which is based on pre-modern belief-systems, local myths and legends, can be considered as an ex-centric antithesis to the central concepts of the dominant culture. In contrast to the dominant culture, whose hegemonic claims introduce modernity, the magical and irrational elements of the narration represent local and often oral traditions, which stand in diametric opposition to the concepts of modernity. However, these texts should not be interpreted as conveying an anti-modern position. On the contrary, magical-realistic literature does offer the possibility of a modernity that is aware of local history, tradition and culture and allows this awareness to influence the construction of a modern identity.

This theory of magical-realistic literature, based largely on postcolonial literature, cannot be applied uncritically to contemporary Tibetan literature. For example, Tibetan authors write in their own language whereas postcolonial authors usually use the colonial language. Nevertheless this theoretical approach may also be used in the context of Tibetan literature, to the extent that the Tibetan culture is marginalized by the dominant Chinese culture and Tibetan society modernised according to Chinese socialist principles. The Chinese representation of Tibetan society and culture as backward, superstitious and altogether pre-modern, combined with the Chinese wish to modernise Tibetan society – meaning, essentially, to adapt it to Chinese society – is similar to the intellectual claim of European colonials.

I hope to demonstrate how Tibetan authors are present in the hegemonic position of (Han) Chinese culture, in their conscious use of the Tibetan language to situate themselves at the periphery of Chinese literature. The literary 'technique' of magical realism makes subversive writing possible by breaking up any rational and realistic concept of linearity, space and time and thereby radically calling any truth into question. However, Tibetan magical realism cannot merely be considered in relation to (Han) Chinese literature and culture, but is also an expression of the hybridisation of Tibetan culture. For this reason modern authors question the idea that either Buddhism or (Han) Chinese-imposed socialism provides the central paradigm for Tibetan culture. The radical scepticism of magical-realistic writing creates a third dimension (space), within which modern Tibetan identity can be articulated. It therefore comes as little surprise that Ijang-bu's narratives should use folk-religious beliefs rather than Buddhism or its philosophical schools to represent local traditions.