

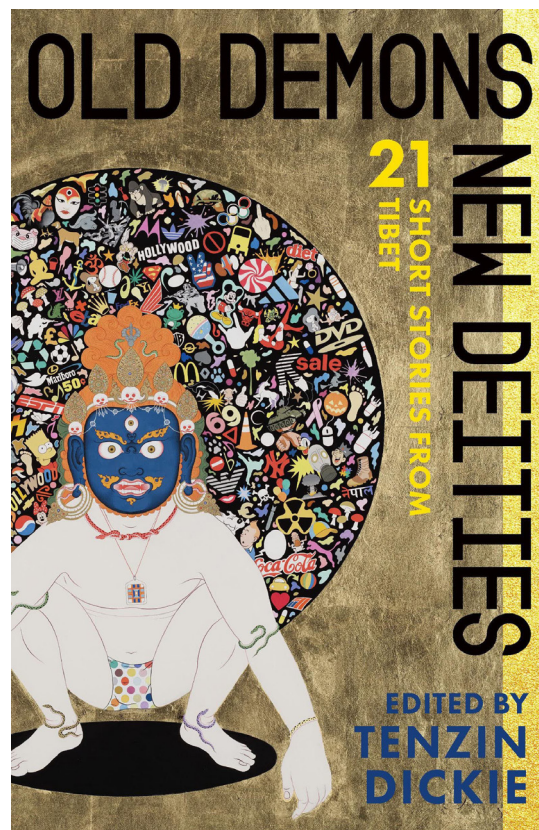
Book Review

Review of *Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty-One Short Stories from Tibet* edited by Tenzin Dickie

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On a recent afternoon in Kathmandu, some friends were discussing the new collection of short stories edited by Tenzin Dickie, *Old Demons, New Deities*. A senior scholar quipped in reference to the cover image, “Maybe they should have called it ‘Old Deities in Underpants’”. The comment was crass but fitting—there is something disturbing about the face of a wrathful protector squatting with an all-too-human torso. Most of the 21 stories that follow also convey a sense of impropriety, as if we are seeing a part of Tibet, its people, and gods that we should not. In her introduction Tenzin Dickie writes, “fiction, of course, begins with desire” (p. 3), yet the desires conveyed here are decidedly *not* about independence, enlightenment, or other sentiments we have come to associate with Tibet.

Prior scholarly work on Tibetan literature has focused on the ‘Tibetan’ aspect being either regionally or linguistically defined (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008). Given her background as an exile Tibetan as well as a literary scholar, we can be sure that Tenzin Dickie is more than aware of the political issues at stake with these distinctions. But instead of providing a structural designation of Chinese or exile, Tibetan or English, Dickie dissolves prior discursive boundaries and allows the authors to tell their own stories. In a particularly sophisticated contribution, Tsering Wangmo Dhompas’s “Letter for Love” ingeniously juggles tropes of love, mistaken identity, and infatuation within a girlish mimicry of Cyrano de Bergerac. The trans-national, bi-cultural love affair not only questions norms of family, friendship, and marriage, it also turns language and authorship into contested terrain. Tsering Woesser’s “Nyima Tsering’s Tears” addresses the question of identity most explicitly when a monk from the Jokhang temple in Lhasa accompanies a state-authorized visit to Europe and encounters exiled Tibet supporters for the

first time. The eponymous tears come as the monk confronts layers of misunderstanding between exiles and foreigners, officials and monks, Chinese and Tibetans. Both stories grapple with the questions of identity politics that scholars debate, but are narrated here with compelling prose, personal experience, and metaphor.

“... the high quality of translation done by Tenzin Dickie and others in this volume brings an edgy, youthful voice to stories originally written in three different languages.”

- Kabir Mansingh Heimsath on *Old Demons, New Deities*

Another issue shaping prevalent discourse on contemporary Tibetan literature is the tension between traditional and modern antecedents (Shakya 2000, Jabb 2015). Again, the current volume does not conform to the customary opposition between tradition and modernity. Instead, many of the stories overtly blur boundaries and mix conceptual distinctions into lived events in which the binary makes no sense. Pema Tsewang Shatri’s “The Flight of the Wind Horse” transforms the traditional offering of prayers (*rlung rta*) into helium balloons and a message-in-a-bottle type of story that brings two teenage doppelgängers from across the plateau together in Lhasa. Pema Bum’s “Wink” subverts reputed Tibetan fascination for puns, prophecies, and amulets into a Kafkaesque story of iconoclastic politics and childish obsession with a Mao badge. “The New Road Controversy” by Takbum Gyal deliberately pokes fun at non-violent forms of protest for which Tibetans are celebrated but that were borrowed from Gandhi’s anti-colonial movement. It’s no surprise that these tactics are most-often ineffectual against the mechanized imperatives of Chinese infrastructure development. The majority of stories collected here are blatantly contemporary in their context and concerns. The situations they convey are often unique to a very particular time and place in India,

Nepal, Tibet, or the USA. But the underlying oddness, if not absurdity, present in many of the contributions certainly blow open the classical dichotomy of tradition and modernity.

Jamyang Norbu's "The Silence" typifies a sort of nostalgia that characterized earlier depictions of Tibet. The hero is an old Tibetan man and sole-survivor of a guerrilla raid against the Chinese army who knows he has fought the good fight. He recites *Om Mani Padme Hum* and longs for the white crane from the east to take him away. This rendering may have appealed to a previous generation, but it is no surprise that the hero dies at the end. The naivety of Norbu's approach is at odds with the rest of this collection. The remaining stories are more humorous, nuanced and cynical even as they portray death. In search of childhood friendship at his old school, Buchung Sonam's character in "Under the Shadow" watches the execution of a soul-tree (*bla shing*), is disparaging towards the construction of a stupa that prompted this murder, and begins to have ghostly visions before seemingly throwing himself into a river. Pema Tsenden's "The Dream of Wandering Minstrel" also contains visions, this time of an unreachable lover, as well as death in a river. The paranormal sightings continue: ghosts during a cosmopolitan political workshop; manifestations of Aamir Khan in a Kathmandu movie house; imaginary affairs with a pop icon on the Amdo steppes; mythical or fabricated snow lions in the hills above Dharamsala. We read of a childhood love who grows into both a slut and a pilgrim; a wife who may, or may not, be a prostitute; a prostitute who conveys AIDS just as she falls in love for the first time. The range of characters running through these

stories seem to be aware of their misplaced hopes and confused perceptions. Instead of bemoaning the impossibility of love or the loss of faith, they poke fun at themselves and the shifting, often disturbing, expectations of their social condition.

By dissolving major categories present in Tibetan studies, this volume provides a significant contribution to our understanding of contemporary Tibetans. At a recent book launch in Kathmandu, Tenzin Dickie made the point that Tibetan fiction, "is a deterritorialized literature that's obsessed with territory". Dickie's own presentation at the event as a US Fulbright scholar studying her Tibetan family living in Nepal embodied a hybridity in which conventional notions of identity and territory no longer apply. Speaking English to a primarily Nepali audience about Tibetan literature also crossed linguistic boundaries in a way that is familiar to anyone living in this part of the world. Finally, the high quality of translation done by Tenzin Dickie and others in this volume brings an edgy, youthful voice to stories originally written in three different languages. For this reason alone, we should pay attention to the writing here and open ourselves to the desires, and deaths, this volume depicts.

Kabir Mansingh Heimsath teaches *Anthropology and Asian Studies* at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. His research focuses on urban space, visual culture, and development in Tibet and the Himalaya. He has lived and worked for several years in Kathmandu and Lhasa as tour guide, development expert, and director of academic programs.