


Is it possible to write a “Tibetan” poem in French? Tentative reflections on Victor Segalen’s *Thibet*¹

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 When looking at the history of the reception of Asian literatures in the West, we are often intrigued by writers who, informed only by translations and travelogues, artfully reinvented the Orient using Western modes of expression. This is the case with the French naval doctor, ethnographer, poet, novelist and literary theorist Victor Segalen (1878-1919)—an intrepid practitioner of such cultural appropriation. This article deals specifically with his unfinished long poem *Thibet* in which the author brings into a single narrative Jacques Bacot’s travelogue *Le Thibet révolté, vers Népémakö: la Terre promise des Tibétains* (henceforth *Le Thibet révolté*) and Gustave-Charles Toussaint’s translation of the Tibetan classic *Padma bka’ thang*. A close look at Segalen’s strategy of rewriting his primary sources brings to light some of the most problematic aspects of cross-cultural representation, such as clichéd exoticism, literary mimesis, linguistic incommensurability between French and Tibetan, misinterpretation of underutilized sources and its consequences, and so forth.

By focusing on how Segalen reworks the tropes of *Népémakö* and *Poyul* drawn from Bacot’s *Le Thibet révolté* and the “ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus” he culls from Toussaint’s translation of *Le dict de Padma*, I seek to demonstrate in this article that (1) *Thibet* can be read as a furtherance of Bacot’s romantic conceptualization of Tibet as an “idéal inaccessible”; (2) Segalen’s adaptation of a portion of *Le dict de Padma* inadvertently avails itself of Toussaint’s misreading of the original text, which results in the forgery of a *homo viator* that eventually becomes Segalen’s *alter ego* in *Thibet*; and (3) although Segalen’s attempt to bring the rhythms of the *Padma bka’ thang* into French

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prosody creates an exotic feel, he does it cheaply.

A disclaimer of sorts must be made here: this article deals less with the intrinsic literary value of *Thibet* than with the far-reaching cross-cultural significance the poem's textual genesis entails. More precisely, it seeks to map out, from a fresh perspective, the difficulty of bridging literary traditions as different as French and Tibetan. In so doing, we may elicit some critical thoughts on the nature of such intertextuality instigated by Segalen and his followers, as well as the ideological progressiveness attributed to them by postcolonial scholars.

The textual genesis

Although many critics have noted that Victor Segalen understood Chinese culture very well through his extensive travels across China, he never reached Tibet except in his imagined journeys.² While this unfinished long poem is not based on any empirical data pertaining to Tibet, findings in recent years have foregrounded the impact of Segalen's aborted attempts to travel to Tibet on the genesis of his hymn.³ But it took shape only after the poet's encounter with the

² The circulation of *Thibet* seems rather limited until Henry Bouillier's edition of Segalen's *Œuvres Complètes* came out in 1995. Among the earlier and often fragmentary editions, we may cite in chronological order: four *séquences* (I, II, IV, et V), in Robert de la Vaissière ed., *Anthologie poétique du XXe siècle, tome 2* (Paris: Crès, 1923), 148-151; six *séquences* (X, XXVIII, XXXV, XL, XLVIII, LVII) in *France-Asie*, September 1956; eight *séquences* (XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XX), in *La Table Ronde*, October 1956; six *sequences* (VI, XIX, XXIX, XXXVIII, XLI, XLIV), in *Nouvelle Revue Française*, June 1958; Victor Segalen, *Odes, suivies de Thibet*, ed. Annie Joly-Segalen. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1963); Victor Segalen, *Thibet*, ed. Michael Taylor. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1979). Taylor's edition of *Thibet* carrying fifty-eight *séquences* was later included by Henry Bouillier in his edition of Segalen's *Œuvres Complètes*. Cf. Victor Segalen, *Œuvres Complètes, vol. II, Cycle Chinois*, ed. Henry Bouillier. (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1995). All citations of *Thibet* in this paper are from *Œuvres Complètes* unless otherwise noted.

³ Segalen makes meticulous notes of his failed attempts to attain physical contact with Tibet during his archeological missions to West China. In a letter to his wife dated September 27, 1909, from *Si-ngan-fou* (pinyin: Xi'an), Segalen informs her of his project to go to *Goumboum* (Tibetan: *sku 'bum*) and *Kou-Kou-nor* (Tibetan: *mtsho sngon po*; Mongolian: *khökh nuur*, which is a calque of the Tibetan toponym meaning "blue lake"), where he will "revoir une autre frontière de ce dernier des pays clos, le Tibet" and "se faire recevoir par le Dalai-Lama, sorte de pape du lamaïsme entier." Yet from his letter sent from *Lan-theou* (pinyin: Lanzhou) on October 31, we know that Segalen had to abandon his plan due to heavy rain. However, he announced that he would instead make a detour to *Song-pan* (Tibetan: *zung chu*), where he would have "un aperçu du Tibet beaucoup plus intéressant que celui du Kou-Kou-nor." However, once again, he had to cancel his project for practical reasons. See Victor Segalen, *Lettres de Chine*

French orientalist Gustave-Charles Toussaint in 1917, whose translation of Guru Padma Sambhava's hagiography *Le dict de Padma* instantly inspired him.⁴ As Toussaint's decisive influence on the poem makes clear, *Thibet* is by definition "the product of intertextuality and translation, rather than an accurate documentary-style depiction of Tibet."⁵ Parallel to *Le dict de Padma*, Jacques Bacot's *Le Thibet révolté* also stands out as a vital inspiration for *Thibet*. This arresting travelogue has provided Segalen the archetype of a Nietzsche-spirited mountain climber who, lured by poems and legends, searches desperately and futilely for the lost paradise of *Népémakö* in the wilds of *Poyul*.

No doubt this particular form of intertextuality that we find in *Thibet* is fundamentally ambiguous. Yet, regrettably, no scholars to date have studied this particular form of intertextuality à la Segalen in a philologically sophisticated way. Through a series of close readings, I show that although Segalen should be commended for attempting to write a "Tibetan" poem in French, his audacious enterprise falls short of its mark. Two facts may account for this. First, despite Segalen's intention to preserve the sonority of the *Padma bka' thang* in *Thibet*, he nevertheless fails to convey some key features of the Tibetan versification system. Second, *Thibet* is, from the outset, impeded yet propelled by Segalen's inability to visit Tibet in person. In response to this inaccessibility, he borrows from Bacot the tropes of *Népémakö* and *Poyul*, avails himself of Toussaint's mistranslation of an important passage of the *Padma bka' thang*, and brings these two sources into line with a self-identified, simultaneously mighty and

(Paris: Plon, 1967), 178-211. Also in chapter 16 of *Équipée-voyage au pays du réel*, Segalen relates at length how he witnessed, very likely in the Sino-Tibetan border town of Tatsienlou (Tibetan: dar rtse mdo), the murder of a young French missionary (Théodore Monbeig?) by Tibetan Lamas. The victim is described as *éventré, écorcé, brûlé, divisé, and tenaillé* by his butcher. This unexpected encounter with Tibet through a French "martyr" should have enhanced Segalen's vision of Tibet as a hazardous terrain. Segalen's longings for Tibet can also be inferred from chapter 14 of *Équipée*, dedicated to Tch'eng-tou (pinyin: Chengdu)—*la Grande ville au bout du monde* as he terms it. The poet describes Chengdu as "la Principale de celles qui s'avancent vers le Tibet, et s'opposent à lui. J'espérais y voir un reflet du Tibet..." For him, Chengdu symbolizes "la reine du pillage et des échanges entre le Tibet tributaire et la grosse impératrice chinoise..." Certainly, in Segalen's view, the splendor of Chengdu is totally reliant on its geographic closeness to Tibet, which conjures up a mystical aura. Cf: Segalen, *Œuvres Complètes*, 290-291.

⁴ Marc Gontard, *Victor Segalen, une esthétique de la différence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), 271-272.

⁵ John Stout, "Metapoetic Explorations of Tibet in Victor Segalen's *Thibet* and André Velter's *Le Haut Pays*," *The Journal of Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies revue d'études français* 5 (2001): 66.

impotent *homo viator* who embarks on the journey of conquering Tibet. This romantic montage enables Segalen, on one hand, to overcome Tibet's physical and figurative inaccessibility through literary imagination, yet on the other, it also causes his authorial self to overdo, override, and eventually trivialize the land depicted.

Arguably, oscillating between pedantic references and wild imaginings, Segalen's long poem can be seen as drawing on a series of metatextual metaphors alluding to Tibet.⁶ That said, it would be simplistic to aprioristically downplay it as merely distorting some Eastern realities. Instead, let us first look at how Segalen's poetic sensibilities enable him to weave together, with inventiveness, different strands of his miscellaneous sources.

The itinerary

Given the considerable length of *Thibet*, a brief summary of the poem's contents might be helpful. This long "hymn" dedicated to Tibet, as Segalen terms it, comprises fifty-eight *séquences* and is subdivided into three sections, namely, *Tö-böd* (*séquences* I-XXI),⁷ *Lha-Ssa* (*séquences* XXII-XLVII), and *Po-youl* (*séquences* XLVIII-LVIII). The three sections correspond respectively to what Segalen conceptualizes as "Celui qu'on atteignit déjà, qui donna son nom au pays," "Celui qu'on atteindra," and "Celui qui ne sera jamais obtenu, innommable."⁸

In the first thirteen cantos of *Tö-böd*, the narrator portrays himself engaging in a perilous-yet-celebratory ascent of Tibet. *Séquences* XIV and XV form an interlude in which the poet addresses Tibet as if the latter were his "concubine" (*séquence* XV). From *séquence* XVI onward, the poet appears to interact more intimately with the mesmeric landscape of Tibet, as attested by the repeated use of the first-person possessive determiner in expressions such as "ma coupe de monts" (*séquence* XVI) or "en mon domaine" (*séquence* XVIII). In *séquences*

⁶ Unlike *Stèles* which uses visual formatting and ideographs to convey the exotic flavoring, *Thibet* plays first and foremost with intertextuality. Amid *Thibet's* variegated sources, Michael Taylor suggests that, in addition to Western Tibetological writings, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the Bible, as well as certain passages of *The Odyssey* have also left lasting impression on Segalen. See Michael Taylor, "La création du paysage sacré dans *Thibet* de Victor Segalen et dans *Lost Horizon* de James Hilton," in *Littérature et Extrême-Orient*, ed. Muriel Détrie. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), 135-143.

⁷ *Tö-böd* is a phonetic transcription of *mtho bod*, meaning "High Tibet." At the beginning of the twentieth century, many considered *Tö-böd* to be the etymology of "Tibet" in Western languages. See for example Alexandra David-Néel, *Voyage d'une parisienne à Lhassa* (Paris: Plon, 2004), 16.

⁸ Segalen, *Ceuvres Complètes*, 607.

XIX and XX, we have the return of this feminine archetype, this “reine du royaume d’ailleurs” (*séquence* XIX) as Segalen phrases it, which he associates with Tibet’s otherness. Yet surprisingly, the triumphant tone dissolves in the last *séquence* of *Tö-böd*, where the narrator is all of a sudden entrapped by a state of ontological doubt and exasperated by the impossibility of locating his “royaume Terrien” (*séquence* XXI). This may indicate that, even though Segalen defines *Tö-böd* as “Celui qu’on atteignit déjà, qui donna son nom au pays,” we are in fact navigating in the realm of imaginings from the very outset of *Thibet*.

The subsequent section, named *Lha-Ssa*, is composed of twenty-six cantos, which can be subsumed under two main themes, namely, “les séquences lamaïques” and “les séquences qui retracent les exploits des voyageurs.”⁹ Segalen first evokes Tibet’s “âme sombre et lamaïque” in *séquence* XXII, and gradually reveals his sense of misgiving vis-à-vis Lamaism in the *séquences* ranging from XXIII to XXXI. Clearly for the poet, a spiritual journey to Tibet does not require the adoption of any form of Tibetan Buddhism. We then proceed to three transitional *séquences* (XXXII, XXXIII, and XXXIV) fraught with mystical metaphors such as “mon Outremonde” (*séquence* XXXII), “le château de l’âme exaltée” (*séquence* XXXIII) as well as a Potala palace with its “passages ne menant à rien” (*séquence* XXXIV). Noticeably, in *séquence* XXXV, the poet once again alludes to the fictional nature of his journey by conceding that “Lhā-sa, je n’irai pas à Lhā-sa!” Immediately after this disavowal, the thus far predominantly autobiographical narration gives place to the eulogy of some illustrious Western explorers of Tibet. Not until *séquence* XLIV does this first-person narrator resurface under the guise of “[un] pèlerin lassé vers Lha-sa.”

Of the three subdivisions of *Thibet*, *Po-youl* is by far the most challenging for a modern reader, partly due to its multiple narrative halts and its unfinished character. Although this “territoire ineffable” of *Po-youl* is meant to be the core of Tibet that lies outside the poet’s reach, *Tö-böd* and *Lha-Ssa* are in fact, as we have seen, equally tantalizing. Be this as it may, during the course of the last section, this self-portrayed *homo viator* seems to be caught by a delirium vis-à-vis a Tibet becoming more and more unattainable. The narrator reacts to the increasing inaccessibility by trumpeting his poem as having conquered Tibet (*séquence* LI), yet admitting at the same time that Tibet still “trône là-bas, dans l’interdit.” In fact, Segalen goes so far as to

⁹ Dominique Gournay, *Pour une poétique de Thibet de Victor Segalen* (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2004), 29.

confess in *séquence* LV that “Je n’entrerais pas au Tod-Bod! Je n’obtiendrai jamais et en rêve Lhasa métropole des Esprits!”

The Promised Land

If Tibet epitomizes an insurmountable height to be tamed by a half-alpinist, half-poet narrator in Segalen’s hymn, this thematic kernel seems to have originated in Bacot’s *Le Thibet révolté*. To be precise, despite knowing that *Népémakö* in the wilds of *Poyul* is no more than a Tibetan “Promised Land” created by legends and poems, Bacot resolves to ascertain it himself. And his ultimate failure to reach this hidden paradise doubtlessly inspired the threefold *Tö-böd, Lha-Ssa, Po-youl* itinerary presented to us by Segalen in *Thibet*. Indeed, Segalen first spells out his aspirations for *Népémakö* in the critical *séquence* XXI, just before he closes the first section of his hymn dedicated to *Tö-böd*:

XXI

Où est le sol, où est le site, où est le lieu, —le milieu,
 Où est le pays promis à l’homme ?
 Le voyageur voyage et va... Le voyant le tient sous
 ses yeux
 Où est l’innommé que l’on dénomme :
 Nepemakö dans le Poyul et Padma Skod, Knas-
 Padma-Bskor
 Aux rudes syllabes agrégées !
 Dites, dites, moine errant, moine furieux, —encor :
 Où est l’Asiatide émergée ?
 J’ai trop de fois cinglé, doublé les contours du monde
 inondé
 Où cœur ni oiseau ni pas ne pose.
 Où est le fond ? Où est le mont amoncelé
 d’apothéose,
 Où vit cet amour inabordé ?
 A quel accueil le pressentir, —à quel écueil le recon-
 naître ?
 Où trône le dieu toujours à naître ?
 Est-ce en toi-même ou plus que toi, Pôle-Thibet, Em-
 pereur-un !
 Où brûle l’Enfer promis à l’Être ?
 Le lieu de gloire et de savoir, le lieu d’aimer et de
 connaître où gît mon royaume Terrien ?¹⁰

¹⁰ Segalen, *Ceuvres Complètes*, 619.

For Segalen, *Népémakö* evokes such biblical images as the Deluge, “le voyant,” “le dieu toujours à naître,” and “le pays promis à l’homme.” Evidently, Segalen is merely borrowing from Bacot an exotic name while disregarding its content, which reduces *Népémakö* to an aggregation of “rudes syllables.” Yet for Bacot, the word has its own meaning in Tibetan:

Népémakö s’écrit *knas padma bskor* et veut dire la terre sainte de Pémakö.¹¹

Here, *Népémakö* is an abbreviation of *knas padma bskor* [gnas padma bskor],¹² which reflects the term’s accurate spelling in Tibetan.¹³ The poet see-saws in this canto between heavenly blessedness and infernal damnation, as the “sol,” the “site,” and the “lieu” waver between “le pays promis à l’homme” to “l’Enfer promis à l’Être.” This oscillation suggests that the narrator is rather skeptical, if not pessimistic, about the ambiguous nature of his “royaume Terrien,” which seems to echo Bacot’s depiction of *Népémakö* in *Le Thibet révolté*.

This arresting travelogue is a testament to Bacot’s two expeditions to East Tibet between 1906 and 1910, during which he witnessed the massive exodus of local inhabitants after their rebellion against Qing rule had been crushed by the Chinese general Zhao Erfeng. As the book’s subtitle readily suggests, Bacot perceives Tibetan realities through a biblical prism, which enables him to put together a Western past with a real yet phantasmagoric Eastern present. In the preface to his travelogue, Bacot gives an overview of his motivation to explore this notorious *Poyul* haunted by bandits and terrifying magicians of a non-Buddhist primitive religion:

¹¹ Jacques Bacot, *Le Tibet révolté, vers Népémakö : la Terre promise des Tibétains* (Paris: Hachette, 1912), 331.

¹² There was no standardized transliteration scheme for Tibetan in Bacot’s time. The Wylie scheme which is now commonly accepted by Tibetologists, results in *gnas padma bskor* and not in *knas padma bskor*.

¹³ Of the two romanized names, *knas padma bskor* is by far the trickier for non-specialist readers. In fact, Tibetan spellings represent the way in which the language was pronounced around the eighth century, and this archaism affects mostly some consonant clusters. As far as *knas padma bskor* is concerned, this is the case with the last morpheme *bskor* (literally, to surround) in which both the prefixed consonant “b” and the super-scribed consonant “s” are no longer pronounced in modern standard Tibetan. This is perhaps the reason that Bacot prefers using the phonetic transcription *Népémakö* in most of his book. For an in-depth discussion of Tibetan phonology and the transliteration systems used by Western Tibetologists, see Nicolas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje, *Manual of Standard Tibetan* (Ithaca: Snow Lion publications, 2003), 44-46.

Mais il y a encore mieux que le Tibet, car, entre Lhasa et la frontière de Chine, se trouve une autre contrée, un petit royaume ignoré, indépendant et mystérieux, au sujet duquel on ne connaît que des légendes. C'est le royaume de Poyul ou Pomi. Au XVIII^e siècle, des soldats chinois qui étaient venus guerroyer au Tibet auraient été séduits par la beauté du Poyul et y seraient demeurés. Ses habitants, maintenant habiles dresseurs de chevaux, se livrent au brigandage. Il n'est plus un voyageur ni un pèlerin, ni même une caravane bien armée qui ose traverser le Poyul dont les prêtres initiés de la religion primitive et non bouddhistes sont aussi des magiciens redoutables. [...] C'était le Poyul que j'avais voulu atteindre.¹⁴

If *Poyul* stands out as the ultimate destination of Bacot, he does, however, fail to reach it. Along his route, Bacot comes across empty houses abandoned by Tibetans who were said to have migrated to a certain *Népémakö* located in the wilds of *Poyul*. The explorer explains that *Népémakö* is a fertile and tropical wonderland lying between *Poyul* and the Himalayas prophesized by the eighth-century Buddhist guru Padma Sambhava:

Cette fois encore, je ne réussirai pas à gagner le Poyul, mais la marche d'approche m'aura fait traverser des pays inexplorés et visiter les régions les plus ensanglantées par la guerre sino-tibétaine. J'apprendrai là, en voyant des villages abandonnés, l'existence de *Népémakö*, la Terre promise des Tibétains, vers laquelle ont émigré les populations vaincues. Où se trouve au juste *Népémakö* ? Je n'ai pas pu le savoir. Derrière le Tsarong, dit-on, entre le Poyul et l'Himalaya. Les Tibétains l'ont découvert il y a huit ans. Il était alors inhabité. C'était un pays très chaud, « aussi chaud que les Indes », couvert de fleurs et si fertile, qu'il n'est pas besoin d'y travailler, mais de cueillir simplement les fruits de la terre. Avant de le découvrir, les lamas en savaient l'existence par les livres, car au VIII^e siècle, le missionnaire indou Padma Sambhava l'avait visité. Dans ses écrits, il en précise la position, en fait la

¹⁴ Bacot, *Le Tibet révolté*, 2-3.

description et annonce qu'après un cycle de milliers d'années, le bouddhisme touchant à sa fin, les lamas s'y enfermeront avec les livres sacrés.¹⁵

Since *Népémakö* is an ongoing fascination for Western scholars and the general public alike,¹⁶ it may be helpful to provide some background information regarding the unique religious and geographical features of this earthly paradise. Indeed, *Népémakö* or “the holy land of *Pémakö*” is generally considered the most famous of the hidden lands (Tibetan: *sbas yul*) that were concealed by Padma Sambhava in the eighth century as sanctuaries of peace and spiritual potency to be recovered in future times of political strife. Following the pilgrimage guidebooks (Tibetan: *gnas yig*) of their visionary lamas (Tibetan: *gter ston*), nearly two thousand Eastern Tibetans migrated to “the Land of *Pémakö*” to escape the violence instigated by the Qing dynasty official Zhao Erfeng during the first decade of the twentieth century. The descendents of these Eastern Tibetans currently form the majority of the inhabitants of *Pémakö* along with other indigenous tribes.¹⁷ Nowadays, it is commonly accepted that the region spans from Kongpo and Poyul (Tibetan: *spo yul*) in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to Arunachal Pradesh in India following the southward course of the Yarlung Tsanpo River as it leaves the Tibetan plateau and becomes the Siang and Brahmaputra.¹⁸

Despite the profusion of studies and data surrounding the land of *Pémakö* in recent decades, this region was little known to Westerners at the time of Bacot's expedition in 1909. In fact, he goes on to recount that a few years prior to the British expedition to Lhasa, a Tibetan lama rediscovered *Népémakö* and established rudimentary Buddhist settlements there. This disclosure promptly attracted thousands of Tibetan refugees fleeing the turmoil of Sino-Tibetan conflicts. At first sight, Bacot appears to be rather skeptical about the marvel of *Népémakö*, which for him is no more than a delusive shelter stemming outright from the naivety of a desperate people:

Mille familles y sont allées les premières années de la guerre chinoise. Beaucoup moururent de la

¹⁵ Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁶ For further readings on the myth of *Pémakö*, see Ian Baker, *The Heart of the World: A Journey to the Last Secret Place* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Elizabeth McDougal, “Drakngak Linpa's Pilgrimage Guides and the Progressive Openings of the Hidden Land of Pemakö,” *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 35 (2016): 5-52.

¹⁸ Kerstin Grothmann, “Population History and Identity in the Hidden Land of Pemakö,” *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 26 (2012): 21-52.

fièvre, de la chaleur que ces hommes constitués pour des froids excessifs ne peuvent supporter, et de la morsure des serpents. Beaucoup aussi sont revenus. Ils racontent qu'au bout d'une vallée fermée, une falaise se dresse dans laquelle, tout en haut, s'ouvre une caverne. Un dieu à corps humain et tête de taureau y habite. Tout homme qui l'a regardé meurt aussitôt.

Maintenant, quand des saltimbanques chargés d'oripeaux et de clochettes viennent danser dans les villages, ils chantent sur leurs *péons* des poèmes sur *Népémakö*. Voilà pourquoi tout un peuple malheureux a quitté ses vallées pour le pays des rêves, conduit par ses lamas et sans autres renseignements que des légendes, mais confiant dans le merveilleux, et avide de vivre des jours meilleurs.

Plus tard, quand je serai sur la route de cet exode, mon voyage aura un nouveau but. Tout seul, depuis des mois, parmi ces nomades mystiques, je subirai l'enchantement de leurs fables et de leur âme naïve. La nostalgie de cette terre décevante et lointaine m'empoignera à mon tour. Désespérément, moi aussi, je voudrai voir la Terre promise, dussè-je n'en jamais revenir, dussions-nous tous périr, comme le craindront mes Tibétains effrayés, ces compagnons d'épopée qui sont encore à l'époque fabuleuse de leur histoire et vivent leurs légendes.¹⁹

This excerpt is culled from the ending paragraphs of Bacot's preface. Viewed in retrospect, the narrator places himself at the starting point of his expedition, retracing the bad fortune of some naïve Tibetans migrating to *Népémakö*. This flash-back is recounted with an ironic lightness of touch, which is compounded by a sense of detachment, as borne out by the use of reported speech and the emphasis on hearsay. Nevertheless, the narrator becomes more and more sympathetic to Tibetans as the time frame switches from the past to the present, and then to the future. Ultimately, he speaks as if he were one of the unhappy Tibetan migrants setting out on the route of exodus. Finally, Bacot experiences a spiritual renewal by following the precedence of his Tibetan counterparts whose journey to the "Promised Land," however, was destined to fail.

¹⁹ Bacot, *Le Tibet révolté*, 11-12.

Most noticeably, in the last paragraph, the narrator makes it clear that he will be “tout seul” on the road by underscoring the cowardice and naivety of his “compagnons d'épopée.” The phraseology recalls a form of chivalry and romanticism, with Bacot's valor pitted against the faintheartedness of his Tibetan followers. In addition, the narrator speaks as if he were partaking in an historical event that is about to take place; yet in the meantime, we know that he relates this imminence in retrospect, from the perspective of a veteran who has already gone through it. Likewise, we may note the complexity of time frames entailed by the word “nostalgie” hinting at a remembrance of the past. In other words, before getting to “la Terre promise,” the narrator has already been there and he knows how “disappointing” it is. This near-contradiction suggests that Bacot is in fact nostalgic of this bygone and biblical “Promised Land” while dying to embrace its Eastern equivalent known as *Népémakö* that still awaits him in *Poyul*. In so doing, Bacot appears to impersonate a tragic yet intrepid Moses struggling to lead his Tibetan countrymen out of their puerile legends, albeit to no avail.²⁰

Parallel to this air of romanticism and chivalric heroism, there is also a metaphoric use of literary terms such as “poèmes,” “légendes,” “fables,” “histoire,” and “épopée,” which appear time and again throughout *Le Thibet révolté*. To cite a few examples, in chapter II, Bacot highlights the Tibetan people's predisposition for poetry, “Enfin les Tibétains, c'est pour cela que je les aime... Ils sont à la fois stoïciens et poètes.”²¹ In chapter VI, the author evokes the power exerted by poetry on the Tibetan mind: “Voilà tout ce que savaient sur Népémakö les gens de ce village : des poèmes... et ils sont partis.”²² Although this note *per se* cannot dispense with a hint of sarcasm, Bacot ends up approving the Tibetans' faith in *Népémakö* and their propensity for poems, as he confesses, “Qu'importe si je vais à une déception, pourvu que l'illusion soit belle... rien que suivre la trace de ces hommes qui sont partis, sur la foi de poèmes, vers leur Terre promise, n'est-ce pas un pèlerinage?”²³ What Bacot calls “poems” here are most likely the pilgrimage guidebooks to the land of *Pémakö* under the forms of rediscovered teachings (Tibetan: *gter ma*). And *Le dict de Padma* or the *Padma bka' thang* in Tibetan, which was recovered by the “treasure finder” (Tibetan: *gter ston*) U rgyan gling pa in the course of the fourteenth century, is perhaps the most fa-

²⁰ Moses is a central figure of nineteenth-century French Romantic literature, see for instance Alfred de Vigny's famous poem *Moïse*, in which Moses appears as a modern visionary poet.

²¹ Bacot, *Le Tibet révolté*, 92.

²² *Ibid.*, 163.

²³ *Ibid.*, 164.

mous of the concealed literatures ascribed to Padma Sambhava.²⁴ Rich in apocalyptic prophecies (Tibetan: *lung bstan*), *Le dict de Padma* surely recalled Nostradamus's *Centuries* for the turn-of-the-century French literati. As we will see, *séquence XLIII* in Segalen's *Thibet* is patterned after the opening lines of *Le dict de Padma*, in which a mysterious "ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus" is extolled for its supreme spiritual qualities.

Arguably, for Bacot, running after *Népémakö* in *Poyul* is akin to a poetic undertaking. By making the illusion of Tibetans his own fancy, Bacot portrays himself as navigating the hazardous terrain while wavering between reality and imagination. This narrative pattern seems to have lent significant influence to Segalen. Accordingly, in both *Thibet* and *Le Thibet révolté*, we have this Tibetan landscape captured through a Christian lens, a sense of romanticism and unflinching heroism leading to predestined disenchantment, a masculine narrator identifying himself with a half-alpinist, half-poet *homo viator*, and most noticeably the metaphor of poetry as guiding the spiritual journey to a lost paradise that lies beyond physical reach.

The orientalists

It is evident that both Bacot's *Le Thibet révolté* and Toussaint's rendering of *Le dict de Padma* have heavily influenced *Thibet*. Yet one may ask why Segalen chooses in particular these two authors' writings as the conceptual bedrock of his hymn. The answer seems to be: Bacot and Toussaint are for Segalen the paradigmatic orientalists to emulate. As a valiant yet hapless French explorer who failed to reach Tibet himself, Segalen projects his orientalist fantasies on Bacot and Toussaint and makes them his role models.

We know that *séquence XLIII* of *Thibet* is adapted from the opening lines of *Le dict de Padma*, in which we have this *homo viator* futilely searching for a series of abstract banal names under the "ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus." Yet does this oddly disposed "Western sky" have anything to do with Bacot's *Népémakö*? In fact, there is an inaccuracy in Bacot's transcription of *Népémakö* as *gnas padma bskor*,²⁵

²⁴ This biography, supposedly recorded by Padma Sambhava's consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal in the ninth century and rediscovered by the treasure finder U rgyan gling pa in the fourteenth century, recounts how the guru and his disciples brought Buddhism to Tibet by overcoming numerous obstacles. As the founding canon of Tibetan religious literature, the *Padma bka' thang* is widely considered a holy text in and outside Tibet. It is generally believed that this type of texts, when recited, has power to dispel obstacles as well as diseases.

²⁵ Bacot, *Le Thibet révolté*, 331.

literally meaning the “land of circling lotus.” To be precise, the last letter *bskor* (literally, to circle) seems to be a misspelling of *bkod* (literally, to array) due to the two words’ phonetic closeness. As a matter of fact, the commonly accepted transliteration used by Tibetologists nowadays for *Pémakö* is *padma bkod* (literally, the array of the lotus). In this regard, *Népémakö* in Bacot’s travelogue most likely means “the land of the array of the lotus,” which overlaps to a great extent with the *nub phyogs padma bkod pa’i zhing khams* (literally, the Western land of the array of the lotus) that we find in *Le dict de Padma* – a phrase Toussaint renders as “le ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus.” Etymological nuances notwithstanding, it seems that *Népémakö* and the “ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus” jointly epitomize, for Segalen, Tibet’s essence as an inaccessible and illusory “Promised Land.”²⁶

This metatextual abstraction of Tibet takes place throughout Segalen’s hymn, but it is particularly evident in the portion spanning *séquences* XXXVI to XLIII of the second section *Lha-Ssa*, during the course of which the first-person narrator retreats from the forefront of the scene, giving the floor to a cohort of Western explorers who made their way to Tibet. This list covers the fourteenth-century Franciscan father Odoric de Pordenone (*séquence* XXXVI), the seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit Antonio d’Andrada (*séquence* XXXVII), and the Lazarists Huc and Gabet, who carried out their voyage to Lhasa between 1844 and 1846 (*séquence* XXXVIII). If Segalen regards the Christian missionaries with a sense of reservation, nevertheless he speaks highly of Dutreuil de Rhins (*séquence* XXXIX), Jacques Bacot (*séquence* XL) and Gustave-Charles Toussaint (*séquence* XLI), who are lay adventurers contemporary to Segalen. Most spectacularly, the poet gives a lengthy description of the trophy Toussaint garnered

²⁶ Disenchantment and utopia are two recurrent tropes in Segalen’s writings. Muriel Détrie explains, for instance, that in *Équipée*, Segalen reworks the tale of the *Peach Blossom Spring* (Chinese: 桃花源记) based on a footnote in Marquis d’Hervey-Saint-Denys’s translation of Tang poems. See Marquis d’Hervey-Saint-Denys, *Poésies de l’époque des Thang* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1977), 335-336.; Segalen, *Cœuvres Complètes*, 303-306; and Muriel Détrie, “Équipée, un voyage à travers la littérature,” in *Équipée, Écritures poétiques du moi dans Stèles et Équipée de Victor Segalen*, ed. Didier Alexandre and Pierre Brunel. (Paris: Klincksieck, 2000), 37-60. For those who are curious about Chinese literature, *Peach Blossom Spring* is a story written by the poet Tao Yuanming in 421 about the chance discovery of a lost paradise where people live in perfect harmony with nature, unaware of the turmoil of the outside world for centuries. Segalen’s appropriation of the tale of the *Peach Blossom Spring* in *Équipée* has also been studied by Yvonne Hsieh and Qin Haiying. See Yvonne Hsieh, “A Frenchman’s Chinese Dream: The Long Lost Paradise in Victor Segalen’s *Équipée*,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 25 (1988): 72-85; Qin Haiying, “Réécriture du Mythe, Segalen et Récit de *Source aux Fleurs de Pêcheurs*,” in *Cultural Dialogue and Misreading*, ed. Meng Hua and Mabel Lee. (Sydney: Wild Poetry, 1997), 100-112.

during his sojourn in Tibet—the *Padma bka'i thang yig* (séquence XLII), to which he even adds a heavily modulated adaptation of a small portion of this manuscript (séquence XLIII). Evidently, Segalen, bereft of any direct contact with Tibet, is keen to appropriate the empirical data gathered by his predecessors. This strategy of rewriting eventually replaces an empirical Tibet with a figurative metatextual one.

As Dominique Gournay observes, “À l'échec représenté par l'impossibilité d'accéder à l'Être, Segalen oppose la victoire représentée par l'écriture du poème.”²⁷ It comes thus as no surprise that Segalen perceives Bacot's and Toussaint's feat as mostly residing in their capacity to possess Tibet by writing down its landscape, religion, and culture. Take for instance the four concluding lines of *séquence* XL in honor of Bacot:

Que le Voyageur soit loué pour avoir erré vers lui
sans l'atteindre,
Laisant ce mystère plus grand :
Il revient avec le regard au-delà, ce regard...
Il prend possession de son domaine :
Ce qu'il a conquis et écrit d'un verbe seul en sa
marche hautaine :
Le Thibet révolté : toutes les Marches Thibétaines.

As the last line indicates, Bacot's two travelogues, namely *Dans les Marches tibétaines* (1909)²⁸ and *Le Thibet révolté* (1912), merge and morph into a symbolic locale conquered by the explorer. In Segalen's eyes, Bacot is all the more commendable for not having reached either *Poyul* or *Népémakö*, leaving thus the hidden paradise of Tibet unspoiled. Noticeably, the poet implies that Bacot's unfulfilled mission leaves no room for regret, since the inaccessibility of the empirical Tibet does not preclude words gaining a figurative access to it. By staging Bacot as an intrepid orientalist who gets pushed back by Tibet's natural barriers while conquering it through “un verbe seul,” Segalen interprets the essence of Tibet as attainable only by literary imagination. This consecration of literature's symbolic power also applies to the subsequent *séquence* (XLI) dedicated to Toussaint. Certainly, Segalen's hyperbolic language makes Toussaint unabashedly superhuman, portraying him as a “grand dépeceur” who “va de sa très sainte folie” and “s'abreuve et dîne en esprit.” Yet for Segalen, the greatest merit of Toussaint lies in the fact that “[il] s'en revenir

²⁷ Gournay, *Pour une poésie*, 64.

²⁸ Jacques Bacot, *Dans les Marches tibétaines — autour du Dokerla, novembre 1906-janvier 1908* (Paris: Plon, 1909).

après de nous ayant accompli son oracle: Portant le manuscrit inconnu." If Toussaint is depicted as a legendary treasure hunter who fulfills his own prophecy, he is above all praised for returning with this capitalized and somewhat Mallarméen "Livre." And based on its "Colophon mystique," we know it is the liturgical version and "la traduction même sans un seul mot qui ne soit pur et magique" of a lost book (*séquence* XLII).²⁹ As one might expect, Segalen goes on to provide, in *séquence* XLIII, a sample of this sacred book duly prepared for the unraveling of its exotic attire.

The "Padma bka' thang"

As is often noted, *Thibet* grows out of Segalen's adaptation of a passage in Toussaint's translation of *Le dict de Padma*. I want to insist, however, that Toussaint grossly misinterprets the Tibetan text by forging a *homo viator* motive inexistent in the original. This journeying character further becomes, in *Thibet*, Segalen's *alter ego*; it provides Segalen the poetic license to overcome Tibet's physical inaccessibility through figurative means.

Before proceeding to a philological scrutiny of Segalen's strategy of rewriting, we must select the right corpus for comparison. Yet this is not an easy task. One major obstacle is that Toussaint does not give the exact edition of his Tibetan source.³⁰ He simply states that his translation was based on a manuscript he acquired at the lamasery of Lithang on April 3, 1911, in addition to an 1839 xylograph he stumbled upon in Peking and a Mongolian edition.³¹ But from a scholarly point of view, it must be regretted that Toussaint fails to reproduce

²⁹ Segalen, *Cœuvres Complètes*, 631.

³⁰ Blo gros rgya mtsho, who is a modern Tibetan editor of the *bKa' thang gser phreng*—one of the most widely-consulted extant editions of Padma Sambhava's biography—notes that subsumed under the generic name of the *Padma bka' thang* are numerous different "treasure texts." He specifies that the *Padma bka' thang* has more than one thousand variations if we count the incomplete editions as well. Cf. "O na pad ma bka' thang zer ba de po ti gcig yin nam po ti gnyis ying nam / po ti mang nyung ci tsam yod dam zhe na / de yang gangs can bstan pa'i byed po slob dpon chen po pad ma 'byung gnas kyi skyes rabs rnam thar pad ma bka' thang du grags pa de ni / 'dzam gling gi tshigs bcad kyi bstan bcos thams cad kyi nang nas ches ring po'am ches mang bar gyur pa de yin te / 'dir cha tshang min pa'i bsdoms rtsis ltar na / pad ma bka' thang la sna kha chig stong lhag yod / ma mtha' yang po ti rgya phrag tsam yod nges." See Blo gros rgya mtsho, introduction to *O rgyan gu ru pad ma 'byung gnas kyi rnam thar rgyas pa gser gyi phreng ba thar lam gsal byed*, rediscovered by Sangs rgyas gling pa. (Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2007), 6-7.

³¹ Gustave-Charles Toussaint, "Le Padma than yig," *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 20 (1920): 13.

his primary sources in facsimile along with an annotated list of lexicon variants.

Based on the manuscript's colophon, Toussaint provides the Tibetan title as *Padma bka'i thang yig*,³² which is a generic name applied to a myriad of Padma Sambhava's biographies, varying considerably in both length and content. Yet as the modern English editor of Toussaint's translation Tarthang Tulku insightfully infers,³³ this scarcely informed manuscript of Lithang cannot be other than the *Padma bka'i thang* recovered by the fourteenth-century treasure finder U rgyan gling pa, who himself "unearthed," or much more likely, composed this signature text of Tibetan Buddhism.³⁴

Despite being the first Western scholar to attempt a complete translation of the *Padma bka'i thang*, Toussaint's *Le dict de Padma* is regarded by most Tibetologists as amateurish, pointing out the translator's lack of expertise in esoteric Buddhism.³⁵ Indeed, a close look at Toussaint's text reveals that while it is not entirely bereft of scholarly merit, his translation could have better informed us on Tibetan Buddhism if it had been carried out in a more philologically rigorous manner. But rather than viewing Toussaint's rendering as an instance of "lost in translation," one might ask how this particular translation serves Segalen's appropriation of the *Padma bka'i thang*. In this respect, I would like to offer some suggestions.

As Bouillier explains, "*Thibet se compose de cinquante-huit*

³² Ibid., 14.

³³ Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays, trans., *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava. Padma bka'i thang*, as recorded by Yeshe Tsoqyal (eighth century), rediscovered by Terchen Urgyan lingpa (b. 1323), translated into French as *Le Dict de Padma* by Gustave-Charles Toussaint, translated into English by Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays, corrected with the original Tibetan manuscripts and with an introduction by Tarthang Tulku, two volumes. (Emeryville, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1978).

³⁴ This is the opinion of David Jackson, for whom "the text was a textual rediscovery or "treasure text" (*gter ma*), one of many such writings in Tibetan literature. As such, much of the work was very likely the composition of its 'discoverer,' O-rgyan gling-pa or Urgyan lingpa." Furthermore, Jackson thinks the *Padma bka'i thang* presents great historiographical value since "O-rgyan gling-pa brought into circulation a number of remarkable and influential texts. Some of his 'discoveries' contain sections that most likely were copied from or patterned after genuine ancient documents of the eighth century A.D., and are therefore of historical importance. In addition, his 'discoveries' reveal a great deal about the cultural and spiritual life of the period in which they were 'discovered' (c. 1350 A.D.)." See David Jackson, "Review of *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava (Padma bka'i thang)*," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (1979): 123-125.

³⁵ Giuseppe Tucci, for instance, regrets that "mere knowledge of the Tibetan language is not enough for arriving at the proper meaning of these difficult texts." See Giuseppe Tucci, "Review of *Padma thang yig*," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 3 (1937): 514-516.

poèmes nommés *séquences*, et chaque séquence se compose en général de dix-huit vers ou ; plutôt, de neuf distiques formés d'un long vers de treize, quinze ou dix-huit pieds suivi d'un vers constant de neuf pieds."³⁶ Put another way, this overarching prosodic pattern adopted by Segalen in *Thibet* rests predominantly on couplets, and each canto carries nine of them. But this metric guideline is not absolute, since *séquence* XLIII visibly carries ten couplets instead of nine. Accordingly, it is very helpful if we develop a critical apparatus assigning each of these couplets a serial number:

XLIII

Couplet 1	Suit, la séquence en son Neuvain ; puisse le Poète répondre : « A l'Esprit futur diffusé là ! »
Couplet 2	Plus mont que le Mérou des dieux ; plus palais que le Potala, Voici [le] chant qui ne se peut confondre
Couplet 3	« Apparu dans l'échiquier du sol d'or il chercha et ne trouva pas le nom Banal du carré des champs terrestres
Couplet 4	Flambant du feu personnel de l'arc-en-ciel savoir de la science, il chercha [et ne trouva pas le nom Banal des lanternes allumées
Couplet 5	Fleurant l'encens tout à fait pur, il chercha et ne trouva pas le nom Banal des fientes et des fumées
Couplet 6	Rayonnant dans les astres clairs de la science de l'espace, il chercha, et [ne trouva pas le nom Banal du soleil et de la lune...
Couplet 7	Plongeur au ciel vide et nu, par au delà des ailleurs inconnus, il chercha et [ne trouva pas le nom Banal du ciel de notre apparence
Couplet 8	Enivré par la boisson de l'extase qui soutient, il chercha et ne trouva pas [le nom Banal de la soif proprement dite
Couplet 9	Ayant mangé dans la chair ardente au penser [?] magnifique, il chercha

³⁶ Segalen, *Ceuvres Complètes*, 606.

	〔et ne trouva pas le nom Banal de la faim proprement dite
Couplet 10	Vivant à la vie adamantine de félicité, il chercha et ne trouva pas le nom Banal du déclin de ceux qui vieillissent

Semantically and stylistically, this canto may strike the reader in many respects. First, the long-windedness and repetition of “il chercha et ne trouva pas le nom banal [...]” at the end of each couplet recalls a supposedly liturgical prosody. Second, the citation of an obscure “chant qui ne se peut confondre” spanning the third couplet through the tenth creates a disjuncture in the narrative progression of *Thibet*, which is compounded by such incomprehensible phrases as “l'échiquier du sol d'or” or “la vie adamantine de félicité” that readily challenge a French reader's metaphysical vocabulary. Third, we have great trouble identifying this third-person masculine pronoun *il* that appears over and over again in this *séquence*. Last but not least, it is not clear at all why Segalen would be concerned with depicting a concatenation of seemingly meaningless actions executed by an anonymous *homo viator*. To compare, I provide Toussaint's rendering of the corresponding passage as follows:³⁷

Introduction	A celui-là le Ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus.
Couplet 1	Se délectant au sol en damiers d'or, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du Meru du sol. ³⁸
Couplet 2	Développant les feuilles annuelles et les fleurs de l'arbre de la Bhodi, ³⁹ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des arbres ⁴⁰ et des forêts

³⁷ This passage is extracted from the partial translation of the *Padma bka' thang* published by Toussaint in 1920 in *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*. Among the various editions of Toussaint's translation, this earliest version should be the closest to the one Segalen had access to in 1917. The 1933 edition, which is a complete translation of *Le Padma than yig*, presents some lexical variations, probably because Toussaint heavily reworked his translation between 1920 and 1930. For a further comparison of the two editions, see Toussaint, “Le Padma than yig,” 13-56; and Toussaint, trans., *Le dict de Padma: Padma than yig. Ms. de Lithang* (Paris: Librairie E. Leroux, 1933).

³⁸ “du Meru du terrestre” in the 1933 edition of *Le dict de Padma* (hereafter the 1933 edition).

³⁹ “Étendant frondaisons et fleurs de l'arbre de l'Éveil” in the 1933 edition.

⁴⁰ “plants fruitiers” in the 1933 edition.

Couplet 3	Plongeant au Gange huit fois excellent de l'extase, ⁴¹ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des différentes rivières. ⁴²
Couplet 4	Enflammant l'arc-en-ciel de la sagesse comprise, ⁴³ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du feu du monde
Couplet 5	Possédant la fragrance de l'encens tout à fait pur, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du vent du monde.
Couplet 6	N'ayant pas trébuché aux profondeurs ⁴⁴ de la Loi ab- sorbant toutes choses il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du ciel apparent
Couplet 7	Déployant ⁴⁵ l'astre clair de la science des degrés de l'Abîme, ⁴⁶ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du soleil et de la lune.
Couplet 8	Rayonnant ⁴⁷ dans son noble arc-en-ciel de victoire, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du jour et de la nuit.
Couplet 9	Gardant le règne lumineux ⁴⁸ et sauveur de la Loi pré- cellente, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du roi et des ministres
Couplet 10	N'ayant fait qu'un indistinctement de lui-même et d'autrui, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des querelles.
Couplet 11	Content de l'aliment de l'extase substantielle, ⁴⁹ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de l'aliment banal.
Couplet 12	Ayant bu dans la soif le flot de nectar de sa pensée, ⁵⁰ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de la soif banale.

⁴¹ "Plongeant au Gange de la concentration" in the 1933 edition.

⁴² "des rus et des fleuves" in the 1933 edition.

⁴³ "Dedans l'arc flamboyant de la sagesse comprise" in the 1933 edition.

⁴⁴ "au gouffre" in the 1933 edition.

⁴⁵ "Éployant," in the 1933 edition.

⁴⁶ "de la science d'abîme" in the 1933 edition.

⁴⁷ "Radioux" in the 1933 edition.

⁴⁸ "éclatant" in the 1933 edition.

⁴⁹ "Content de substantielle contemplation" in the 1933 edition.

⁵⁰ "Désaltéré au flot de nectar de sa pensée" in the 1933 edition.

Couplet 13	Ayant revêtu le bon vêtement de l'observance pure, ⁵¹ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du vêtement banal.
Couplet 14	Miraculeusement issu du lotus de sa naissance, ⁵² il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de l'autre naissance.
Couplet 15	Devenu puissant dans la vie adamantine de félicité, il cherche et il ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de la sénescence.
Couplet 16	Parfaitement établi dans la terre sans naissance et sans mort, ⁵³ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint de la mort de ceux qui naquirent.
Tristich	Dans ce ciel ⁵⁴ sublime de tous les Bouddha des Trois Âges, Heureux de concentrer dans l'illumination de son en- tière activité, ⁵⁵ il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du malheur et de la misère.

I have extracted this passage out of the first canto (Tibetan: *le'u*) of *Le dict de Padma* on the basis that it contains the key leitmotiv of "il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint," which seems to have initially captured Segalen's attention. To be precise, this excerpt comprises an introductory phrase, "A celui-là le Ciel occidental Disposé-en-Lotus," followed by sixteen couplets and a tristich. Through a comparison, I have ascertained that couplets 3, 4, 5, 7, 6, 9, 8, and 10 of Segalen's *séquence* XLIII are respectively patterned after couplets 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, and 15 of Toussaint's text.⁵⁶

⁵¹ "Couvert du bon habit de la droite observance" in the 1933 edition.

⁵² "Surnaturellement issu de son lotus natal" in the 1933 edition.

⁵³ "Établi en la terre où nul ne naît ni meurt" in the 1933 edition.

⁵⁴ "Au ciel" in the 1933 edition.

⁵⁵ "Heureux de vouer à l'Éveil son entière activité" in the 1933 edition.

⁵⁶ Toussaint's rendition is imbued with conspicuous inaccuracies. I content myself with citing a few of them. In the second couplet, Toussaint seems to misunderstand *lo 'dab* as two separate words, namely *lo* (literally, year) and *'dab ma* (literally, tree leaves), but this is not the case, since *lo 'dab* altogether means "tree leaves." Therefore, the qualifier "annuelles" in "les feuilles annuelles" should be crossed out. Take also, for example, the third couplet that starts with a description of the Ganges River "huis fois excellent de l'extase"; it must be admitted that Toussaint's phraseology is not quite comprehensible, whereas the Tibetan text poses no difficulty to someone who has a basic knowledge of Buddhism. To be precise, Toussaint seems to confound the Buddhist epithet *yan lag brgyad ldan chu bo*, meaning "the water possessing eight virtues," with *yan lag brgyad ltan*, which

From a logical point of view, Toussaint's rendering seems befuddling, as a skeptic might well ask: if in the eleventh couplet this masculine protagonist (Padma Sambhava?) is already content with the nourishment of the substantial ecstasy, why would he bother looking for the extinguished name of the banal nourishment? Likewise, if in the subsequent couplet the nectar of his thought has already quenched his thirst, why would he bother running after the extinguished name of the banal thirst? To elucidate such near-contradiction, we are obliged to parse the corresponding passage in Tibetan.⁵⁷

is an alternative appellation (Tibetan: *mngon brjod*) of the Ganges River. Yet since the Ganges River is a worldly reference, it should not be associated with the "Western land of the array of the lotus." Similarly, we are also baffled by the obscure expression "absorbant toutes choses" in the sixth couplet. Toussaint must have ignored here the meaning of the Tibetan set phrase *phyogs lhung med pa* denoting literally "without falling into directions," yet figuratively "without falling into biased extremes." Likewise, in the first line of the ninth couplet "Gardant le règne lumineux et sauveur de la Loi précellente," we may wonder whether "lumineux" correctly renders the Tibetan idiomatic expression *rang shar rang grol*, meaning "self-arising and self-liberating." Undoubtedly, *rang shar rang grol* implies that the rule in the "Western paradise of the array of the lotus" is a reign without *de facto* ruling, leaving thus the birth and death of the ruled totally at their own disposal. Regrettably, Toussaint fails to revise some of these inaccuracies in the 1933 edition of *Le Padma than yig* and its various reeditions. This is the case with "Gange," "absorbant toutes choses," and "lumineux," which Toussaint replaces with "éclatant" in the 1933 edition. With that said, my remarks should not be too negatively weighed against Toussaint's attempt at a first complete translation of the *Padma bka' thang* into Western languages, since in his time scholars' ignorance of Tibetan Buddhism was so profound and good dictionaries were so scarce. Furthermore, we are not entirely sure of the exact Tibetan spellings of the problematic renderings I single out here, and it is always possible that Toussaint was misled by the scribal errors or typos that his source manuscripts, like many similar Tibetan xylographs, unavoidably carry.

⁵⁷ The Tibetan text is based on the most popular edition of Guru Padma Sambhava's biographies, namely, *Padma bka' thang*, attributed to Ye shes mtsho rgyal and rediscovered by U rgyan gling pa. (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2006), 4-5. This edition is based on a Derge xylograph (Tibetan: *sde dge par khang gi shing brkos par ma*), as its colophon indicates. Concurrently, I have also consulted *O rgyan gu ru pad ma 'byung gnas kyi rnam thar rgyas pa gser gyi phreng ba thar lam gsal byed*, rediscovered by Sangs rgyas gling pa. (Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2007), 1-2. It must be noted that the second text, henceforth designated as *bKa' thang gser phreng*, is only intermittently versified. It differs occasionally from the first text in terms of prosody and lexicon. Yet respecting the opening paragraphs of the first canto, they are quite similar.

Introduction	<i>De-la nub-phyogs padma bkod-pa'i zhing-khams zhes-bya-ba/</i>
Couplet 1	<i>gser-gyi sa-gzhi mig-mangs ris-su chags-pa las/ sa-gzhi ri-rab⁵⁸ ming-yang mi-grag⁵⁹ btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 2	<i>byang-chub shing-gi lo-'dab me-tog rgyas-pa⁶⁰ las/ rtsi-shing nags-tshal ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 3	<i>ting-'dzin yan-lag brgyad-ldan-chu-bo 'bab-pa las/ sna-tshogs chu-yi ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 4	<i>rig-pa'i ye-shes 'od-lnga⁶¹ rang-me 'bar-ba las/ 'jig-rten me-yi ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 5	<i>rnam-par dag-pa spos-kyi dri-ngad ldang-ba las/ 'jig-rten rlung-gi ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 6	<i>khyab-gdal chos-kyi dbyings-la phyogs-lhung med-pa las/ 'byung-ba nam-mkha'i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 7	<i>dbyings-rig ye-shes gsal-ba'i khri-gdugs brdal-ba⁶² las/ nyi-ma zla-ba'i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 8	<i>rgyal-ba 'phags-pa'i rang-'od lnga-ru 'bar-ba las/ nyin-dan mtshan-gyi ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 9	<i>mchog-ldan chos-kyi rgyal-srid rang-shar rang-grol skyong-ba las/ rgyal-po blon-po'i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 10	<i>bdag-dang gzhan-gnyis tha-mi dad-par gcig-pa las/</i>

⁵⁸ *ri-rab* is spelled as *ri-brag* in *bKa' thang gser phreng*, meaning either "rock mountain" or "remote location," whereas *ri-rab* designates "Mount Meru." Either way, the second verse of this couplet seems to refer to *Samsāra* (Tibetan, *gling bzhi pa'i 'jig rten* or *mi mjed 'jig rten*), which is the realm where unenlightened sentient beings reside.

⁵⁹ Spelled as *grags* in the *bKa'i thang gser phreng*. *Grags* is past tense of *grag*, literally meaning "to resound."

⁶⁰ *lo 'dab me tog rgyas pa* (leaves and flowers flourish) is written as *me tog 'bras bu smin pa* (flowers and fruits ripen) in the *bKa'i thang gser phreng*.

⁶¹ 'od lnga cannot be found in the *bKa' thang gser phreng*.

⁶² Spelled as *gdal ba* in the *bKa' thang gser phreng*. That said, *brdal ba* and *gdal ba* are synonyms, both meaning "to propagate."

	<i>'thab-cing rtsod-pa'i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 11	<i>'tsho-ba ting-'dzin zas-kyi 'tsho-bas tshim-pa las/ zas-zhes⁶³ bya-ba'i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 12	<i>skom-du yid-bzhin bdud-rtsi'i chu-rgyun 'thung-ba las/ skom-zhes bya-ba'i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 13	<i>gos-su tshul-khrims gtsang-ma'i gos-bzang gyon-pa las/ gos-zhes bya-ba'i⁶⁴ ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 14	<i>skye-ba padma'i steng-du rdzus-te skye-ba las/ skye-ba gzhan⁶⁵-gyi ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 15	<i>zag-med rdo-rje lta-bu'i tshe-la mnga'-brnyes pas/ rgas-shing rgud-pa'i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Couplet 16	<i>skye-shi med-pa'i sa-la yongs-rdzogs 'jog-pa las / skye-zhing 'chi-ba'i ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/</i>
Tristich 1	<i>dus-gsum sangs-rgyas kun-gyi zhing-mchog de-na ni/ ma-lus thams-cad byang-chub la-spyod skyid-pa la/ mi-bde sdug-bsngal ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa/⁶⁶</i>

⁶³ zes (nourishment) is written as *bkres ltogs* (hunger) in the *bKa' thang gser phreng*.

⁶⁴ *gos zhes bya ba* (the so-called "clothing") is written as 'jig rten *gos zhes bya ba* (the so-called "worldly clothing") in the *bKa' thang gser phreng*.

⁶⁵ Spelled as *skye ba bzhi* (the four kinds of birth) in the *bKa' thang gser phreng*. The "four kinds of birth" include, from the best to the worst, *rdzus skye* (literally, birth from a miracle, which is applied to gods), *mngal skye* (literally, birth from a womb, which is applied to humans and livestock), *sgong skye* (literally, birth from an egg, which is applied to birds), and *drod gsher skye* (literally, birth from heat and moisture, which is applied to insects). However, since *rdzus skye* is one of the "four categories of birth," it would make better sense to keep the spelling of *skye ba gzhan* (literally, other categories of birth) as we find in the *Padma bka' thang*. As such, the fourteenth couplet literally means "with the exception that [one is] born from miracle on the surface of a lotus, the names of other kinds of births never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them."

⁶⁶ It would be helpful to provide a literalist and even slightly "wooden" translation of this passage. "In this land named the 'Western land of the array of the lotus' (introduction), with the exception that golden lands appear as orderly as squares on a chessboard, the name of the earthly Meru mountain never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 1). With the exception that the Bodhi tree's leaves and flowers flourish, the names of [common] trees and forests never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 2). With the exception that the river of *Samādhi* containing eight virtues

It is readily evident that Toussaint fails to understand the syntactic function of the particle *las* in bold (Tibetan: *las sgra*) placed at the end of the first line of each couplet (except the fifteenth),⁶⁷ which is not an

flows, the names of all kinds of common rivers never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 3). With the exception that the five wisdom lights spontaneously burn, the name of the worldly fire never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 4). With the exception that the odor of the pure essence emanates, the name of the worldly wind never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 5). With the exception that the dharma realm impartially permeates, the name of the material sky never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 6). With the exception that the sun of clear wisdom, realm, and awareness radiates, the names of sun and moon never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 7). With the exception that the five victorious and noble lights spontaneously burn, the names of night and day never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 8). With the exception that the noble dharma king rules in a self-occurring and self-liberating way, the names of kings and ministers never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 9). With the exception that self and other [are] inseparably the same, the names of fight and dispute never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 10). With the exception that the *Samādhi's* nourishment satisfies the life, the names of [common] aliments never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 11). For the sake of quenching the thirst, with the exception that [one] drinks the constant current of wish-fulfilling nectar, the name of thirst never resounds, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it (couplet 12). For the sake of dressing, with the exception that [one] wears the good clothing of the pure observance of monastic vows, the names of clothes never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 13). With the exception that [one is] born from miracle on the surface of a lotus, the names of other kinds of births never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 14). With the exception that [one] obtains mastery over a life that resembles an undefiled diamond, the names of senescence and degeneration never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 15). With the exception that [one] establishes everything on the earth bereft of birth and death, the names of birth and death never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (couplet 16). In that noble land of all Buddhas of the three times, everyone without exception practices the conduct of enlightenment and enjoys happiness, and the names of unhappiness and distress never resound, and even if one searches for them one cannot find them (tristich).” For other English translations of Padma Sambhava’s biographies, see Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Bays, trans., *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava. Padma bka’i thang*; and Erik Pema Kunsang, trans., *The Lotus-Born: The Life story of Padmasambhava* (Boston: Shambhala Books, 1992).

⁶⁷ In his review of Toussaint’s translation dating back to 1937, the Italian polymath Giuseppe Tucci bluntly concludes that “*Padma thang yig* still awaits a translator.” To justify this opprobrium, Tucci notes precisely that Toussaint’s rendering of the foregoing passage “seems to be quite unintelligible, but the Tibetan text is quite clear and contains the description of the world in which the western Paradise is situated.” He even translates the introductory sentence and the first four couplets as, “There in the western quarter there is a world called Padmavyūha: There with the exception of the golden surface appearing to the eyes even the name of (any

ablative case marker (Tibetan: *'byung khungs*) as he appears to assume, but rather a conjunction meaning “with the exception that” and equivalent to *ma gtogs* in colloquial Tibetan.⁶⁸ Arguably, Toussaint’s misunderstanding of this conjunction repeated sixteen times should account for the visible bifurcation between his rendition and the original Tibetan text.

other kind) of soil–mountains or rocks—is not known, and even if one searches for it one cannot find it. With the exception of the ripe fruits of the tree of illumination even the name of (other) gardens and fruit trees is unknown, and even if one searches for them cannot find them. With the exception of the flowing stream possessed of the eight qualities of meditation not even the name of (other) kind of water is known, and if one searches for it one cannot find it. With the exception of the flame of that fire which is the gnosis, not even the name of the mundane fire is known, and if one searches for it one cannot find it (This description is quite in accordance with that of the *Sukhāvativyūhaḥ*).” Undoubtedly, Tucci’s attested acquaintance with Classical Tibetan and his mastery of the Buddhist terminology allowed him to correct quite a few lapses in Toussaint’s text. See Giuseppe Tucci, “Review of *Padma thang yig*,” 514–516.

⁶⁸ In fact, in classical Tibetan grammar, the particle *las* is customarily associated with the fifth (ablative) case, and it indicates either the “veritable ablative case” (Tibetan: *'byung khungs dngos*), “verisimilar ablative case” (Tibetan: *'byung khungs cha 'dra po*), or the “incommensurable comparison” (Tibetan: *rigs mi mthun dgar ba*). For a fairly straightforward annotation of *las*, see the sixth-grade Tibetan textbook developed by the Central Tibetan Administration: dKar gzhung bkra shis rdo rje eds., *sKad yig 'dzin rim drug pa'i slob deb* (Delhi: Sherig Parkhang, 2011), 43–44. Regrettably, the usage of *las* as summarized in the canonic text of Tibetan grammar known as the *Legs bshad ljon dbang* is far from comprehensive. To be precise, in the *Legs bshad ljon dbang*, the quatrain regarding *'byung khungs* goes as follows: “*nas las 'byung khungs dgar sdud del 'byung khungs dngos la gang sbyar 'thus/ rigs mthun dgar nas mi mthun las/ sdud la nas sgra kho na 'jug*,” which seemingly does not contain any explanation pertaining to *las*’s usage as conjunction. With that said, we can find this usage neglected by traditional grammarians in more contemporary linguistic treatises such as Kelzang Gyumed’s *Bod kyi brda sprod rig pa'i khrid rgyun rab gsal me long*, in which *las*, when used as a conjunction, is termed a “marker of differentiation” (Tibetan: *mi mthun pa'i tshig rgyan*). Kelzang Gyumed glosses this usage as follows, “*tshig snga ma sgrub phyogs dang, phyi ma dgag phyogs yin pa'i tshig grub gzhi mi mthun pa gnyis mtshams sbyor ba'i tshe, tshig snga ma'i mthar las sgra sbyar nas phyi tshig 'dren dgos. sbyor tshul 'di phal cher phal skad kyi tshig phrad [ma gtogs] dang yig skad du ['brel sgra] yis mi mthun pa'i don ston tshul dang mtshungs*.” I have attempted an English translation as follows, “when two discordant clauses are put together, [*las sgra* is used] to approve the preceding one while negating the following one. *las sgra* is added at the end of the first clause in order to draw out the following one. The rule of adding [*las sgra*] is perhaps similar to that of adding [*ma gtogs*] in colloquial Tibetan and that of adding genitive particles [*'brel sgra*] employed as a marker of contrasting transition in literary Tibetan).” Kelzang Gyumed also supplies a few examples drawn from some important literary sources such as the *Sakya Legshe* and the famous opera *sNang sa 'od 'bum*, see sKal bzang 'gyur med, *Bod kyi brda sprod rig pa'i khrid rgyun rab gsal me long* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1992), 115–117.

Take for example the second couplet: *byang-chub shing-gi lo-'dab me-tog rgyas-pa las/ rtsi-shing nags-tshal ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa*,⁶⁹ which can be rendered word-for-word as “Bodhi tree[s]/ leaves and flowers/ flourish/ with the exception that; trees/ forests/ even name/ not resound⁷⁰/ searched for⁷¹/ but/ not find.” Alternatively, we can translate it less literally as “with the exception that the Bodhi tree’s leaves and flowers flourish, the names of [common] trees and forests never resound, and even if [one] searches [for them] [one] cannot find [them].”

In this couplet, we see an explicit line between *byang chub shing*, “Bodhi tree,” in the subordinate clause and *rtsi shing nags tshal*, “trees and forests,” in the main clause. In addition to the conjunction *las*, “with the exception that,” that syntactically articulates this incommensurability, there is also a differentiation of registers between the Buddhist term, “Bodhi tree,” and “trees and forests,” which are generic substantives. As such, in the foregoing Tibetan excerpt, the attributes of “the Western land of the array of the lotus” (Tibetan: *nub phyogs padma bkod pa'i zhing khams*), also construed by many as the land of the body of perfect enjoyment (Tibetan: *longs sku'i zhing khams*; Sanskrit: *sambhogakaya*),⁷² are pitted against the unattractive realities of the *Samsāra* occupied by unenlightened sentient beings. In the foregoing passage, this sacred–secular binary revolves around a series of metaphoric images totaling the number of seventeen, all of which consist of two contrasting yet intertwined images, one being transcendental and the other earthly, such as the “Bodhi tree” versus

⁶⁹ This remark also applies to other couplets, since they are constructed quite similarly.

⁷⁰ Since the Tibetan verb *grag* is both intransitive (Tibetan: *bya tshig tha mi dad pa*) and non-volitional (Tibetan: *bya tshig gzhan dbang can*), “to resound,” which is an intransitive verb in English, would be a better translation of *grag* than “to give off or to broadcast [the sound].”

⁷¹ In literary Tibetan, it is usual that the verb preceding the conjunction *kyang/ yang* (Tibetan: *rgyan sdud*) be inflected into past tense. However, this does not necessarily mean that the action described by the verb takes place in a past time frame.

⁷² I am deeply indebted to Gen Ganden Lobsang and Sonam Phuntso, who kindly shared with me their thoughts about “the Western land of the array of the lotus” from the perspective of the rNying ma pa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Needless to say, all the remaining mistakes are my own. Generally speaking, the body of perfect enjoyment (Tibetan: *longs sku*) is one of the three Buddha-Bodies (Tibetan: *sku gsum*), including the absolute body (Tibetan: *sangs rgyas kyi chos sku*; Sanskrit: *dharmakaya*), the body of perfect enjoyment (Tibetan: *longs sku*; Sanskrit: *sambhogakaya*), the manifested body (Tibetan: *sprul sku*; Sanskrit: *nirmanakaya*). Nevertheless, it seems unnecessary to tap any further into the meaning of the body of perfect enjoyment as adopted by esoteric Buddhism since Toussaint does not seem to be fully cognizant of it.

“common trees” in the second couplet and the “water of *Samādhi*” versus the “worldly water[s]” in the third couplet.⁷³

By contrast, in Toussaint’s version, the second couplet metamorphoses into “développant les feuilles annuelles et les fleurs de l’arbre de la Bhodi, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des arbres et des forêts.” It may hardly be necessary to point out that Toussaint’s phrasing considerably attenuates the dichotomy between “the Western land of the array of the lotus” and the earthly *Samsāra*. More concretely, Toussaint does not properly translate the conjunction *las*, but brings to the fore a third-person pronoun *il* in the second line of the couplet and turns the verb *rgyas pa* (literally, to flourish or to multiply) preceding the conjunction *las* into the present participle *développant*. In so doing, both “the Bodhi tree’s leaves and flowers” and “the names of all kinds of [common] trees” in the Tibetan text are now direct objects of the actions performed by a masculine agent designated as *il* in the French text.

Although we see that there is someone who “develops” the Bhodi tree’s “annual leaves and flowers” while “searching” in vain for some other species of trees, Toussaint’s rendering as a whole is not very comprehensible, since we are baffled by the protagonist’s intention to counter-intuitively “develop” tree leaves (instead of letting them grow by themselves), and we are keen to know what on earth motivates this character to look for, *incognito*, the extinct names of some other species of trees and forests.

These odd phrasings are evidence of Toussaint’s misinterpretation of the Tibetan text. Indeed, the verb *rgyas pa* (literally, to flourish or to multiply) is both intransitive and non-volitional in Tibetan. Thus Toussaint’s rendering of it as *développant* is misleading since *développer* is a transitive verb in French, which grammatically requires a volitional agent. Yet one may immediately realize that this shift operates in perfect tandem with the pronoun *il*, which serves as the subject of *développant*. Evidently, the metamorphosis of *rgyas pa* into *développant* is not a lapse, but a well-advised strategy of rewriting. We may cite the sixth couplet of Toussaint’s text that goes as:

⁷³ These rotating oppositions revolve around *sa gzhi* “land” (couplet 1), *shing* “trees” (couplet 2), *chu* “river” (couplet 3), *me* “fire” (couplet 4), *rlung* “wind” (couplet 5), *nam mkha’* “sky” (couplet 6), *nyi ma zla ba* “sun and moon” (couplet 7), *nyin mtshan* “day and night” (couplet 8), *rgyal po* “king” (couplet 9), *thab rtsod* “fight and dispute” (couplet 10), *zas* “food” (couplet 11), *skom* “thirst” (couplet 12), *gos* “clothing” (couplet 13), *skye ba* “birth” (couplet 14), *tshé* “life” (couplet 15), *skye shi* “birth and death” (couplet 16), *skyyid sdug* “happiness and suffering” (tristich 1).

N'ayant pas trébuché aux profondeurs de la Loi absorbant
toutes choses
il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint du ciel appa-
rent

From the various Tibetan editions of the *Padma bka' thang* available to me, I can see that *N'ayant pas trébuché*, meaning “not having tripped” or “not having stumbled,” is an erroneous rendering of the Tibetan verb *khyab gdal*, meaning “to permeate” or “to fill with.” I have come up with the hypothesis that Toussaint might either have unthinkingly mistaken the verb *gdal* for *brdab*, meaning in Tibetan “to hit against,”⁷⁴ or in a greater likelihood, he may have consciously interpreted *gdal* as denoting *trébucher*—a verb requiring an animate subject and thereby foreshadowing the advent of an anonymous male protagonist *il* in the following line of the couplet. By the same token, Toussaint should have deliberately mistranslated the polysemic verb *chags pa* as “se délectant,” which implies a sentient subject,⁷⁵ despite the fact that he could have rendered *chags pa* into “apparaissant” in the sense of “to come into being,” which better fits the context.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, one must not lose sight of the tremendous difficulty of translating religious text across languages as different as French and

⁷⁴ In modern Tibetan, *brdab* is also frequently used in the set phrase *'dred brdab shor*, meaning “to lose one’s footing” and in the collocation *brdab skyon shor*, meaning “to have an accident.”

⁷⁵ When used as a verb, *chags pa* can mean both “to come into being” and “to desire.”

⁷⁶ Hence, all the volitional present participles in Toussaint’s translation, namely, “se délectant,” “développant,” “plongeant,” “enflammant,” “possédant,” “n’ayant pas trébuché,” “ayant bu,” “ayant revêtu,” “gardant,” “déployant,” “rayonnant” and so forth need to be retranslated. For instance, instead of turning *rgyas-pa* into *développant* and assigning as its subject an oddly coined *il* non-existent in Tibetan, it makes better sense to use the pronominal form *se développer* and replace *il* with the indefinite pronoun *on* (if we want to keep the active voice, which is preferred). Likewise, it appears more appropriate to translate *ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-ba* into French as “le[s] nom[s] ne résonne[nt] pas et même si l’on le[s] cherche, on ne le[s] trouve pas.” Thus we may render the second couplet as a whole into “À part le fait que les feuilles et les fleurs de l’arbre de la Bhodi se développent, les noms des arbres et des forêts [ordinaires] ne résonnent pas et même si l’on les cherche, on ne les trouve pas.” Similarly, the third couplet, which goes as “Plongeant au Gange huit fois excellent de l’extase, il cherche et ne trouve même plus le nom éteint des différentes rivières” in Toussaint’s text, may be rephrased as “À part le fait que la rivière dotée de huit vertus de *Samādhi* s’écoule, les noms des rivières [ordinaires] ne résonnent pas et même si l’on les cherche, on ne les trouve pas.” By the same token, we may reformulate the eleventh couplet singled out above for its oddity as “À part le fait que l’aliment de *Samādhi* procure de la satisfaction à la vie, les noms des aliments [ordinaires] ne résonnent pas et même si on les cherche, on ne les trouve pas.”

Tibetan. This is perhaps the reason that, despite all its flaws, Toussaint's *Le dict of Padma*, along with Kenneth Douglas, and Gwendolyn Bays's English translation which is based on it, remains a widely-circulated primary reference for Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.

In short, Toussaint winds up adding a masculine agent to the original text via both the pronoun *il* and the attendant transformation of a series of non-volitional and intransitive Tibetan verbs into volitional and transitive French verbs in the first line of each couplet. Indeed, the Tibetan text does not display such agency. Also the avoidance of grammatical subject is not uncommon in both literary and colloquial Tibetan. Partly because of this, there is simply no epic element nor any room for the display of a heroic spirit à la Friedrich Nietzsche in the aforementioned section of the *Padma bka' thang*, which is strictly composed of metaphysical formulations. By contrast, Toussaint's rendering brings forth a considerable dose of extra drama, particularly this pervading *homo viator* who takes turns in "plongeant au Gange," "enflammant l'arc-en-ciel," "déployant l'astre clair" (to cite only a few examples), while not being able to put his finger on a series of extinct names.⁷⁷

Needless to say, this simultaneously mighty and impotent character eventually becomes Segalen's *alter ego* in *Thibet*. In both *Thibet* and *Le Thibet révolté*, we have this valiant yet hapless French poet who sets off in search of a Tibetan utopia and who ultimately gets pushed back by Tibet's insurmountable barrier. Indeed, Toussaint's mistranslation of the encomium of "the Western land of the array of the lotus" has paradoxically the advantage of offering Segalen, as does Bacot's recounting of his failed expedition to *Népémakò*, the dramatic archetype of such a male *homo viator*, who embodies the heroic spirit of Nietzsche. Hence, it is no surprise to see *Thibet* open with a first-person narrator who portrays himself *tour à tour* as "saccadant le roc" (*séquence* I), "plongeur à la mer saumâtre," or "nageur à plat dessus la plaine" (*séquence* III), and ends with some equally egocentric and dramatic formulae such as "Je monte en frappant ton sol craquant" or "Je scande le tréteau..." (*séquence* LIII). Based on this overarching trope of *homo viator*, we may even elicit the conclusion that as someone who yearns for Tibet from afar, Segalen utilizes both poetic imaginings and pedantic references as a compensation for his inability to visit Tibet in person. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the poet's strategy of rewriting in *Thibet* resembles an ecstatic projection of his *alter ego* upon a body of abstruse metaphors.

⁷⁷ Michael Taylor describes this extra dose of drama as "le souffle épique que Toussaint a si bien su rendre en français." See Segalen, *Thibet*, 11.

The untranslatability of Tibetan prosody

Indeed, *Thibet* is loaded with recondite tropes, ecstatic hyperboles, and above all relentlessly forceful rhythms. As many commentators have noted, Segalen strains to reproduce in his hymn the supposedly "Tibetan" sonority via Toussaint's conduit.⁷⁸ I want to insist, however, that as someone who knows no Tibetan, Segalen merely offers his readers some undecipherable orientalist gimmicks while passing himself off as a western writer who attempts to bring Tibetan rhythms into French prosody. In fact, Segalen's own draft notes attest to such intentionality of borrowing from what he terms as "le grand verset d'oddhyana:"

Poème: *Le Tibet*. Sur le mode du « grand verset d'oddhyana ». Ne point chercher ni redouter la forme : l'écrire ! Pékin, 10 juillet [...] Or, il n'y a pas de « grand verset Oddhyana ». – L'Udyana est un pays. J'ai pris le Lieu pour la Formule. N'importe ! Le Poème s'écrit. Hanoi, 29 août.⁷⁹

As Segalen notes with the benefit of hindsight, Oddhyana is the birthplace of Padma Sambhava and not a poetic mode of expression. This slip casts light on Segalen's perfunctory knowledge of his Tibetan source. He might have listened to Toussaint's recitation of some snippets of the *Padma bka' thang* in Tibetan, but this much-discussed exposure is by no means sufficient for someone who strives to write a "Tibetan" poem in French. However, some critics have opined with verve that Segalen dismisses alexandrine and embraces a form of "Tibetan" prosody that enables his Western audience to "capture the

⁷⁸ According to Isabelle Gros, Segalen discovered "la sonorité si différente du tibétain et le mysticisme de ce pays" by listening to Toussaint's recitation of the *Padma bka' thang* in Tibetan. She also suggests that "l'idée du poème *Thibet* est donc née de deux illuminations: l'une est visuelle aux bords du Tibet inaccessible, l'autre sonore à l'écoute d'un texte sacré racontant la vie d'un deuxième Boudha." See Isabelle Gros, "Le Thibet recréé de Victor Segalen" in *Cahier Victor Segalen No. 3, Victor Segalen, vu d'Amérique*. (Brest: Association Victor Segalen, 1997), 35.

⁷⁹ Segalen, *Thibet*, 12. The "grand verset d'oddhyana" refers to Toussaint's *Le dict de Padma*, as the Tibetologist explains that the Tibetan title of his manuscript is based on "la mention terminale de chaque chapitre" that reads as "Histoire en teneur intégrale des existences du Guru d'Oddiyana Padmasambhava." See Toussaint, "Le Padma than yig," 13-14; and Toussaint, *Le dict de Padma*, 1-2.

otherness of Tibet.”⁸⁰ Very little about this assumption survives close inspection.

To avoid hasty interpretation, let us first focus on *Thibet*'s metric pattern. As Bouillier convincingly notes, each *séquence* of *Thibet* “se compose en général de dix-huit vers ou ; plutôt, de neuf distiques formés d'un long vers de treize, quinze ou dix-huit pieds suivi d'un vers constant de neuf pieds.”⁸¹ However capricious this versification guideline may appear due to the poem's unfinished character, seemingly for Segalen the “Tibetan” sonority of the *Padma bka' thang* can be rendered into French through a wealth of couplets alternating a long-winded first line with an enneasyllabic second line.

Seemingly, the metric pattern of *Thibet* can be traced all the way back to the *Padma bka' thang*, especially to the portion of the first canto describing “the Western land of the array of the lotus” where we find a concatenation of couplets with regulated yet uneven lines. This is the case of the first couplet in the foregoing excerpt:

*gser-gyi sa-gzhi mig-mangs ris-su chags-pa las/
sa-gzhi ri-rab ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-
pa/*

Also we spot a few enneasyllables in the portion of the first canto preceding “the Western land of the array of the lotus”:

*dus-gsum 'rjid-rten khams-'dir mtshungs-med rje/
rgyal-ba'i bka'-las rtsod-med sprul-sku grags/
skyon-spangs yon-tan yid-bzhin nor-bu 'dra/
'gro-kun ma-lus dgos-pa'i don-kun 'grub/
mdzad-tshul rnam-grangs bsam-gyis mi-khyab kyang/
'di-ru spros-te ma-'ongs sems-la glan/*⁸²

Toussaint's rendering goes as follows:

Ce Bouddha n'a pas de rival,
seigneur sans pair dans cet univers des Trois Âges,
fameux dans l'incarnation où il ne débat plus les préceptes
vainqueurs,

⁸⁰ For example, John Stout suggests that “to capture the otherness of Tibet for a Western audience, Segalen consistently rejects traditional French versification based on the *alexandrin*—this is, the twelve-syllable line—here. In place of the *alexandrin*, he adopts a more eccentric system.” See Stout, “Metapoetic Explorations of Tibet,” 66-67.

⁸¹ Segalen, *Ceuvres Complètes*, 606.

⁸² *Padma bka' thang*, 4.

est semblable à la Gemme-des-Désirs aux qualités sans défaut. Pour atteindre toutes les fins nécessaires à la totalité des êtres, le nombre de modes d'actions étant inconcevable, après s'être prodigué ici, il renvoie à l'Esprit futur.⁸³

Toussaint does not seem the least preoccupied with regulating the meter of his French rendering, let alone keeping the original prosody.⁸⁴ The translator's want of metrical concern is vividly at odds with Segalen's intention to recuperate the lost feel of Tibetan prosody. Segalen's objective is very likely based on what Toussaint informs him regarding the original meter of the *Padma bka' thang* and not on what he finds in Toussaint's translation *per se*. Although Segalen should be commended for attempting such a difficult task, it would be reductive to equate the Tibetan versification, known as "*tshigs bcad*" (literally, the cutting of joints), with couplets alternating a long-winded first line with an enneasyllabic second line.

Let us use again the above-cited Tibetan verses as an exemplar: in a hendecasyllable like "*gser-gyi sa-gzhi mig-mangs ris-su chags-pa las*" (literally, gold's/ earth/ chessboard squares/ orderly/ appear/ with the exception that), there is a latent rhythm giving off the musicality of TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH, which has five disyllabic feet followed by one stressed ending rhyme *las*.⁸⁵ Idem

⁸³ Toussaint, "Le Padma than yig," 16.

⁸⁴ This translatorial stance *per se* is irreproachable, given that the foregoing Tibetan verse contains a high percentage of monosyllables, which rules out the possibility of preserving the exact identical meter in a French translation that unavoidably carries a higher ratio of multi-syllables. That said, we do know a few cases in which Western translators adopt the Tibetan prosody. Pavel Poucha notes in this regard how Heinrich Jäschke renders with painstaking care certain passages of the New Testament into decasyllabic Tibetan lines. See Pavel Poucha, "Le Vers Tibétain," *Archiv orientální* 4 (1950): 188-235. Unfortunately, the Tibetan translation on which Poucha's analysis is based, namely the 1925 Shanghai edition of the New Testament published by the British and Foreign Bible Society under the name *Dam pa'i gsung rab ces bya ba bzhugs so: zhal chad gсар ba'i mdo rnam ni* is currently unavailable to me. According to John Bray, this so-called Ghoom/Shanghai New Testament is a revision of Jäschke's initial translation by Moravian missionaries A.W. Herde, Graham Sandberg, as well as the later British agent in Tibet David Macdonald. See John Bray, "Language, tradition and the Tibetan Bible," *The Tibet Journal* 16 (1991): 28-48. We may speculate that Jäschke's target-oriented translation strategy is motivated by pragmatic rationale, as a Bible written in elegant Tibetan verses would be a better tool for missionaries to gain Tibetan converts, especially those conversant with literary Tibetan.

⁸⁵ As conjunction, *las* is grammatically and semantically unstressed, but it becomes metrically accented when placed at the end of the line. See J. Verkerdi, "Some Remarks on Tibetan Prosody," *Acta Orientalia* 2 (1952): 221-233. I have provided the scansion based on how these verses are read in modern Tibetan, which may not exactly reflect how they were pronounced in Classical Tibetan.

for the thirteen-syllabic *sa-gzhi ri-rab ming-yang mi-grag btsal-kyang mi-rnyed-pa* (literally, earth/ the Meru mountain/ even name/ not re-sound/ searched for/ but/ not find), which is reliant on a slightly differing rhythm that can be illustrated as TAH -ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ ta-ta/ TAH-ta/ ta-ta-ta with the substantive *ming* and the verb *btsal* duly accentuated.⁸⁶ In the same vein, the enneasyllable *dus-gsum 'rjid-rten khams-'dir mtshungs-med rje* (literally, three times/ world/ realm/ this/ unparalleled/ lord) presents the rhythm of TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH-ta/ TAH. Indeed, the use of hyphens in the scholarly transliteration can in most cases help delineate the scansion of Tibetan verse (Tibetan: *yig 'bru'i tsheg bar cha dang ya khel stangs* as the polymath Dungkar Lozang Thrinlé glosses on it).⁸⁷ However, unlike modern Indo-European languages, since the segmentation of words is non-existent in Tibetan typography, the scansion of Tibetan verse may thus appear extremely elusive for a Western eye. Equally important is the fact that, compared with Tibetan, it seems much harder to do syllable by syllable bounds in an inflected language like French that has a higher frequency of polysyllabic words. In sum, from a metrical point of view, the aforementioned portion of the *Padma bka' thang* is almost untranslatable due to its rhythmic pattern that differs in crucial ways from French versification.

Needless to say, however dedicated Segalen is, without being conversant with this prosodic incommensurability he cannot recuperate “the Tibetan sonority” by superficially patterning his French verse after a supposedly Tibetan meter.⁸⁸ In this respect, *Thibet* can be seen as a literary experiment that wishfully reinvents Tibetan poetic features in the French context. As for Segalen’s meticulously crafted enneasyllables, they seem to have nothing to do with the sonority of the *Padma bka' thang* but resemble more the high-flown idiolect of the turn-of-the-century French literati. Such a painstaking simulacrum may even run the risk of debunking the much-cherished definition of Segalen’s poetics as “le transfert de l’empire de Chine à l’empire de soi-même.” If this putative alterity presented under the guise of Chi-

⁸⁶ The two disyllabic feet *ming-yang* and *mi-grag* tend to merge into a tetrasyllabic foot while the disyllabic foot *btsal-kyang* and the ending trisyllabic foot *mi-rnyed-pa* tend to merge into an elongated pentasyllabic foot. In this case, the first syllable of each conjunct foot, namely *ming* and *btsal* acquire a metrical stress.

⁸⁷ For a more in-depth analysis, see Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, *sNyan ngag la 'jug tshul tshig rgyan rig pa'i sgo 'byed* (Xining: mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2012), 28-38.

⁸⁸ There are quite a few similar examples in the history of literary translation in France. This is the case with the theoretician Henri Meschonnic, who authored a strictly rhythmic translation of a quatrain written by the Tang poet Meng Haoran. See Henri Meschonnic, *Poétique du traduire* (Paris: Éditions Verdier, 1999), 180-183.

na, Maori, or Tibet turns out to be an avatar of Segalen's own French ego, such transfer would acquire no *raison d'être* in the first place.

Despite all this, no one can dismiss the fact that *Thibet* is a unique piece of turn-of-the-century French literature; it is simultaneously a yelp of ecstasy and an outcry of dismay. Born out of adaptation, it is every bit as patchy as florid, insofar as the poet feels licensed to dispense with the empirical landscape and turns instead to a handful of metatextual tropes for inspiration. Through a close investigation of how Segalen creatively reworks the metaphors of *Népémakö*, *Poyul*, and "Western land of the array of the lotus," this article has resolved some points of debate regarding *Thibet's* genesis, stylistic originalities, and, above all, the extent to which this unfinished long poem fulfils Segalen's aesthetic ambitions.

As a final note, *Thibet* advisedly emulates Bacot's pursuit of *Népémakö* and a key episode of the *Padma bka thang* that Toussaint has brought back from the wilderness of Tibet. This double-fold mimesis has uneven results. Although Segalen's reworking of Bacot's *Le Thibet révolté* can be hailed as a bold enterprise, his borrowing from *Le dict de Padma* proves to be cross-culturally deceptive in that it provides merely a stylized Western mirage of the land depicted.

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