


Introduction

Lucia Galli and Peter Schwieger

For the first time she looked him in the face. For the first time Flush looked at the lady lying on the sofa. Each was surprised. [...] There was likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: But how different! [...] Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been—all that; and he—But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one human being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was a woman; he was a dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other.

Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography*

 choice of opening a collected volume on the theme of social status in Tibet—albeit confined to the literary milieu on one hand and human-animal interactions on the other—with an extract from Virginia Woolf's experiment in genre may appear bizarre, if not outright preposterous. What connection is to be drawn between the fictional life story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's canine companion and the way Tibetans perceived and conveyed social stratifications both in their textual productions—be they historiographical, biographical or fictional narratives—and in their relationships with, and representations of, the animal world? The answer can only be deceptively simple. Woolf's purported biography of a dog combines most of the features upon which the present volume is built, namely narrative (more precisely a fictional text disguised as a non-fictional one), animals, and hinted reflections on the status ascribed to each being, human and nonhuman alike, within the author's society.¹ Any narrative persona is in fact nothing else but a reflection, to a greater or lesser extent, of the human predicament. In the light of this, all narrations, whether about ancestors, remarkable individuals or animals, are to be understood as the result

¹ Woolf's novel has recently received renewed scholarly attention. Although opinions on the literary quality of the work diverge, a return to the centrality of the dog has lately shed light on its implications in the human perception of man-animal relationships and exposed the artificiality entailed in the enforced application of taxonomic hierarchies thereupon. For some recent studies of *Flush: A Biography*, see, among others, Smith (2002) and Macadré (2018).

of a deep-seated desire to give meaning to oneself and one's place in the world, and that is a truism for every society. It is therefore in the way that the ever-evolving concept of status emerges in the different texts examined by our contributors that the *fil rouge* binding the present volume must be sought.

For the sake of convenience, the articles have been divided into two parts. The first section contains papers presented at the workshop "Social Status in the Tibetan World: Social Status as Reflected in Tibetan Fictional Narrative Literature, Biographies and Memoirs", held in Bonn on 30–31 May 2017, whereas the second section accommodates the outcome of "Animals and Social Status", held in Paris 15–16 June 2018. Both events were conducted within the framework of the ANR/DFG research project "TibStat", with which most of the authors are closely associated.

Although there is no lack of scholarship on the social structure of pre-modern Tibetan society,² any in-depth analysis of such a multifaceted reality is still in its infancy. Studies purporting to reduce the intricacies of Tibetan history to a simplistic dichotomous tension between centre and peripheries, or land-owners and serfs, have been gradually discarded in favour of a more nuanced scholarly approach, whereby archival documents, material culture, and contemporary literature are used as legitimate source of socio-historical information.³ Recent studies on social status within pre-modern Tibetan societies have mainly focused on the material and symbolic value of goods-exchange and gift-giving, attesting to the importance of these practices as indicators of prestige and honour.⁴ The present volume aims to elaborate further on the topic by taking into consideration how social stratifications seeped into indigenous textual productions and shaped human's interactions with, and conceptions of, animals.

The first section opens with Lewis Doney's analysis of the progressive devaluation of the imperial figure, a "degradation" that the author ascribes to a narrativisation of the remembered past, wherein the royal history is gradually replaced by a religious version of it. By addressing historiographical and biographical sources on

² The sheer amount of scholarship on the topic prevents a complete list. To track the evolution of the discourse on Tibetan social structure within Western academia, see, among others, Goldstein (1968, 1971, 1986, 1988), Miller (1987, 1988), Schuh (1988), Samuel (1993), Bischoff (2013, 2017), Travers (2013).

³ Particularly relevant in this regard are the volumes published within the research project "Social History of Tibetan Societies, 17th–20th Centuries" (SHTS). See Ramble, Schwieger and Travers (eds, 2013), Bischoff and Mullard (eds, 2017), Bischoff and Travers (2018).

⁴ See Bischoff and Travers (eds, 2018).

Khri Srong lde brtsan (r. 756–c.800) and Khri gTsong lde brtsan (r. 815–841), Doney illuminates the gradual shifting of values that occurred within the Tibetan society between the imperial period (c. 600–850) and the “second diffusion” (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism. The emperor, depicted first as *primus inter pares*, assumes in the post-imperial period the character of a bodhisattva, upstaged in the 11th-12th-century narratives by the religious masters, either South Asian or indigenous. Doney structures his article upon a refined theoretical discussion of types of fiction, mythology, and historiography, thus uncovering “the narrative mechanisms which enabled a shift from status based upon kinship, military endeavour, and fealty to the emperor as the highest member of Tibet to religious status drawing on Indic social structures.” It is this shift towards Buddhist values and norms, the author argues, that made possible, if not inevitable, the progressive decline of the social (and symbolic) status of the emperor from an “instantiation of indigenous divine kingship” to a mere “mundane ruler”.

Specular and opposite reflection of the instances of status degradation presented by Doney is Lobsang Yongdan’s investigation of the “invention” of Bla ma dkar po (1835–1895) as “lama general”. Expounding on the political finesse and military genius of an apparently “ordinary” monk, the author dwells on those happenstances that led to Bla ma dkar po’s elevation to “one of the most important *ho thog thu* in the Qing empire.” Further elaborating on the concept of *sprul sku*, Yongdan contends that the social status of a reincarnate, far from being the sole outcome of past religious achievements and cultural norms, could also be achieved through war, violence, and destruction. To support his argument, the author produces large extracts from Bla ma dkar po’s biography, thus confirming the value of contemporary textual sources to deepen scholars’ understanding of the indigenous view of social norms and stratifications.

A similar socio-historical approach is proposed by Franz Xaver Erhard in his reading of *rDo ring paṇḍita’i rnam thar*, one of the earliest examples of Tibetan secular (auto)biography. Erhard ascribes the difficult genre attribution to the deceptively clear intent animating the author of the work. Although purportedly centred on the figure of rDo ring Paṇḍita mGon po dngos grub rab brtan (1721–1793), the real protagonist is in fact the biographer himself, his son bSod nams bstan ’dzin dpal ’byor tshe ring (b. 1760). Taking his cue from Umberto Eco’s semiotics, Erhard discards any superficial reading of the work to focus on the *intentio operis*, thus arguing that, in departing from the narrative programme expected from a traditional *rnam thar*, bSod nams bstan ’dzin dpal ’byor tshe ring

creates “the new literary genre of secular autobiography”, the intent of which is to repeatedly “assess, defend, and ascertain the social status of the rDo ring family.”

The first section ends with two articles reflecting on the value of Tibetan literary fiction as a source of social history. In her contribution, Lucia Galli suggests the adoption of New Historicism as a methodological tool for the analysis of Tibetan literary productions, thus moving the scholars’ attention “from the centre—that is, the text—to the borders where the text connects with the material world.” To do so, Galli asserts, will make for “a process of reconstruction of the past that, going beyond the literary text, recreates the complex socio-historical and intertextual networks in which the work and its author are embedded.” Structuring her article upon Lhag pa don grub’s *Drel pa’i mi tshe*, Galli corroborates the information contained in the novel with contemporary non-literary sources, such as personal records, legal documents, and Tibetan-medium journals, casting some light on the social and economic conditions of porters, muleteers, and low-medium traders between the 1940s-early 1950s.

The dramatic events that followed the 1959 uprising and the flight of the Dalai Lama to India—left tellingly unspoken in *Drel pa’i mi tshe*—find their voice in Trashi Palden’s *Phal pa’i khyim tshang gi skyid sdug*, the novel at the core of Charles Ramble’s article. The author unravels the intricacies of the plot by comparing it to Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, a beloved classic of English literature. Such an exercise is not a mere pandering to the Western reader’s tastes; on the contrary, by choosing the English novelist as a referent, Ramble reinforces his reading of *Phal pa* as a source of social historical information. In providing “[some] of the most subtle accounts of social hierarchy, social order and social struggle of her time”,⁵ Austen’s writings have assumed in the eyes of many a scholar of undisputable sociological value. Although lacking the stylistic elegance of Austen’s masterpiece, *Phal pa* has the merit of presenting “village life through the eyes of farmers and herders, without the prism of a social or political project”, and it is in this detached observation and recording that, Ramble argues, the socio-historical importance of Trashi Palden’s work lies. While the analogy with *Pride and Prejudice* may be a helpful way of grasping the dynamics among the protagonists in *Phal pa*, Ramble suggests that a more significant comparison may be drawn with the work of Thomas Hardy, whose novels are widely regarded as important sources for the social history of 19th-century rural England.

⁵ Wilkes (2009: 2).

Peter Schwieger's contribution eases the passage between sections: by leading the reader into the marvellous world of folktales, he seamlessly merges textual production and animal world, the two *fulcra* of the present volume. Schwieger opens his article by questioning the same definition of animals in Tibetan society and observing how the latter appears based on dualisms, the most important of which regards human beings at one end and animals at the other. Yet, such a categorical boundary, the author remarks, is not an ontological one, due to the Buddhist belief in rebirth; despite being subject to the same process of salvation as human beings, animals' inability to receive and understand the *dharma* makes them virtually insignificant in the eyes of Buddhist scholars. If the animal world fails to gain recognition in Buddhist scholarship, it fares better within narrative literature and oral folklore. It is to the latter that Schwieger devotes most of his paper: examining those stories that have an animal as a protagonist, the author concludes that the line between human and animal is fluid and porous, a testimony to a time where the civilisation and wilderness were two faces of the same coin.

Moving away from narrative, the following two contributions delve deeper into the topic of status and hierarchical stratifications of the animal world by discussing the social value of horses. The first article, by Petra Maurer, examines the various classes men assigned to animals in general, and equines in particular. In investigating the existence of "social" categories applied to horses, the author expands her study geographically, culturally, and chronologically, encompassing in her discourse on Tibetan hippology a wide array of sources, dating from the 8th to the 17th centuries, thus tracing the development of a taxonomic system in which Indo-Greek concepts blended with Central Asiatic models. Through her careful reading of the indigenous hippiatric texts, Maurer notes in fact the coexistence of *varṇa*-like social classes and elemental categories, whereby a specific element is assigned to each Tibetan horse type. Among the latter, a place of pre-eminence is accorded to the *gyi ling*, a renowned eastern Tibetan breed at the core of the joint contribution by Hildegard and Yancen Diemberger. Combining textual analysis and ethnographic materials, the authors enrich our knowledge of *gyi ling* horses, at once a breed and a symbol, illuminating the fundamental role that horses and horse knowledge had, and still have, among nomadic communities across the plateau, as they acted as indicators of prestige as well as an important component in the enactment of the cult of the territory.

The spiritual and symbolic function of animals in the Tibetan religious and socio-cultural fabric is further explored by Alexander

Smith. In his article, the author presents a 14th-century narrative that plays a central role in the origin mythology of *ju thig*, a form of rope divination unique to the g.Yung drung Bon tradition. Smith's translation of the text—*de facto* an allegory of the primordial domestication of sheep—supports his reading of the episode as an expression of “the hierarchical social taxonomies that structure the performance of a number of cleromantic practices encountered in Bon cultural milieus.” In the tale, the economic and propitiatory value of the sheep is conveyed by the composite nature of the primordial sheep itself, which is crafted from the essence of thirteen different substances, thus “tak[ing] on a chimeric quality, with the various parts of its body composed using a type of thaumaturgic bricolage.

The volume ends with Olaf Czaja's preliminary remarks on the use of human and animal *materia medica* in Tibetan medicine. In the effort to discern to which animal substances Tibetans ascribed therapeutical and pharmacological properties, the author examines five clinically-oriented treatises from the 11th to the 15th centuries and two drug lists from the 19th and 20th centuries, providing for each of the works a list of the types of *materia medica* and the frequency of their occurrence within the texts. In his concluding observations, Czaja notes how, in Tibetan pharmacopeia, “medicinal resources from domestic and wild animals, together with human *materia medica*, formed a unified whole”, thus suggesting that they are considered equally important in treating diseases and preserving good health.

In an ideal closure of the circle, our journey through the ways in which social status is expressed in Tibetan literature and human-animal interactions ends where it started, namely Woolf's *Flush*. When creating her version of Elizabeth Barrett's canine companion, the English novelist did not simply recount the woman's life through the eyes of her dog. Rather she embarked on a quest, retracing the private correspondence between the cocker spaniel's owner and her beau, Robert Browning, and using this material to afford her work the breath of life.⁶ The same could be said for the textual productions examined by our contributors in the first section of this volume: regardless of their being historiographical accounts, biographical writings or folktales, each work conveys, to a greater or lesser degree, the idiosyncrasies of the society that created it. As the articles contained in the second section demonstrate, the human need to apply taxonomic classifications extends to the animal world as well, thus translating into horizontal and vertical hierarchies mirroring

⁶ Smith (2002: 352).

those in force in the socio-cultural fabric that produced them.

Contrary to Woolf's detached and unsentimental third-voice narrator, it is the editors' hope that the present volume may contribute to bridge that "widest gulf", leading the reader one step closer to understand the fascinating complexities of pre-modern Tibetan societies.

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