CHAPTER 5

‘Cosmic Onomatopoeia’ or the Source of The Waterfall of Youth: Chögyam Trungpa and Döndrup Gyal’s Parallel Histories of Tibetan mgur

Ruth Gamble

1 Introduction

While the categorising of many Tibetan literary works into genres generally appears to have aided its collators, librarians and polemicists,1 some literary genres have not only fulfilled these multiple purposes, but also developed a widespread popularity and even a certain mystique. Their popularity and mystique has, in turn, seen them analysed and evoked by writers and poets of succeeding generations who have drawn on these genres’ forms, crafts and audience familiarity in the creation of their own works. The continued relationship with the genre has, in turn, created a complex relationship with the genre that often transcends literary technique and becomes a matter of personal identification. One of the foremost examples of such a genre in the Tibetan milieu is the mgur (pronounced “gur”).

This term was first written down by the scribes and poets of the Tibetan Empire as either a synonym for, the honorific form of, or a subset of the Tibetan word for the culture’s most basic form of song, glu (pronounced “lu”).2 But it later became more widely associated with the songs sung by the yogis of the new tantra schools (842–1459), and particularly those songs attributed to

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1 Several articles in Cabezón and Jackson (1996) approach the topic of genre in Tibetan Literature from this fundamental and defining rather than engaged perspective, particularly Harrison 1996: 70–95. As do several of the articles within this present volume.

2 On this point Pema Bhum (Pad ma ’bum) (1997: 640–41) disagrees with Döndrup Gyal’s (Don grub rgyal) (1997a: 338) statement that the two terms were synonymous in the imperial period. Döndrup Gyal uses examples of religious songs that were called glu to illustrate his point. Pad ma ‘Bum, by contrast, argues that although the term was not always used for religious songs, it was regularly used to refer to those songs associated with royalty and was therefore an honorific form of glu. Ellingson 1979 states that the mgur were a subclass of glu that glorified the subject, and Jackson (1996: 369) notes both arguments.
Tibet’s most famous poet Milarepa (Mi la ras pa: 1052–1135). By this stage, the term *mgur* had become the designated honorific for *glu*; composers referred to their own compositions by the pejorative designation *glu*, while others called their songs, respectfully, *mgur*. The term *glu*, by contrast, became associated with everyday Tibetan life, its seasonal and festival events, or in other words its folk traditions. The two parts of the genre were also often distinguished by an arbitrary syllable count per line: secular *glu* were supposed to contain six syllables or sometimes other even numbers and the religious *mgur* were supposed to contain seven syllables or other odd numbers.

In choosing to compose *mgur*, the yogis of this period were not only following the example of their Tibetan forebears, but also their Indian lineal predecessors, who had also chosen to compose songs about their experiences in basic, accessible genres. The Tibetans’ decision to compose in an indigenous Tibetan form rather than copying the Indian forms of their gurus seems to have been made for purely practical reasons. The Indic forms may have been easy to copy and easily recognised in India, but in Tibet they were complicated forms to follow and foreign to both poets and audiences. If the yogis wanted to compose spontaneously and speak to their students directly—as was the Indian tradition—they had to use an indigenous form.

A perhaps unintended consequence of this choice, however, was that their work also preserved and promoted the usage of the indigenous genre of *mgur*/*glu*, while other traditions fell out of use in favour of Indian cultural imports. This combination of cultural and spiritual value has recently led to two separate claims being made on it by two contesting genealogical lines: one spiritual and one nationalistic. What is more, both these claims have been made more virulently in response to the precarious cultural situations of those who make them. Those who claim a spiritual genealogy for the *mgur* do so in the face of either communist oppression within the People’s Republic of China (PRC), or in political and religious exile in India or the West. Those who claim

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3 The most notable exception to this general usage is of course the term rdo rje’i glu (Skt. vajra-gīṭa), which will be described shortly in this work. The disassociation of *mgur* from *glu* and the absorption of *glu* into the broader folk tradition also meant that they have tended not to be studied by Western scholars. The most notable exception to this is Tucci 1996. See also Gamble 2015.

4 This distinction has been repeated in both Tibetan and Western accounts of the genre/s despite the fact that it is not always followed, and that even when it is the fluid state of particularly grammatical syllables in spoken Tibetan renders it virtually meaningless. Tucci 1996: 2–3 was one of the first Western scholars to make this distinction based on advice from his Tibetan informants.