My starting point for this paper is a study published in 1996 by Dga’ ba pa sags, a professor in the Tibetan Language Department at Tibet University.\(^1\) In his article, Dga’ ba pa sags asserts that the now popularly wielded term *rtsom rig* (usually translated in English as ‘literature’) was coined no more than sixty years ago. Though unable to pinpoint its very first use in the Tibetan lexicon, Dga’ ba pa sags observes that the term is a calque translation of the Chinese term *wenxue*.\(^2\) He further traces the etymology of the particle *rtsom* from its original meaning of ‘to make or to do’ and its appearance in the writings of Tibetan scholars since Sa skya Pandita (1182–1251) in such compound forms as *rtsom ’jug* (to engage in writing) and *rtsom pa’i rnam gzhag* (a classification of writing) or simply *rtsom* (to write). *Rig*, as Dga’ ba pa sags observes, approximates the Chinese word *xue*, which can render the sense of learning, knowledge, or study.

In this paper, I identify the earliest appearance of the Tibetan term *rtsom rig*, based on an examination of heretofore unconsulted sources. I then discuss its construction—not simply as a lexical term but as a discursive formation which serves to delimit an object of study and a national project. Finally, I shall suggest that as a result of the growing predominance of *rtsom rig* as a discursive concept, the Tibetan term

\(^1\) Dga’ ba pa sags, *Rtsom rig ces pa dang der ’brel ba’i bod kyi tha snyad ’ga’i btags don la dpyad pa* (On the meaning of *rtsom rig* and several related Tibetan terms), *Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal*, 1996(1): 73–78; and 1996(2): 70–74. This article was also published as *Rtsom rig ces pa dang de dang rtsa ’brel du gyur ba’i bod kyi tha snyad ’ga’i ming ’dogs kyi dpyad pa*, *Gangs ljongs rig gnas*, 1996(1): 64–74. In the latter journal, the article was included in *’Gran gleng ldum ra* (Controversy Corral), a feature section devoted to contested issues in literature or other fields. There are only minor differences between these two articles, probably due to editing decisions. I have followed the version as it appeared in *Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal*.

\(^2\) While this term has existed in the Chinese language for some 2,400 years, the current meaning of *wenxue* reflects a western understanding of literature that only came about in the early part of the twentieth century during the New Culture or May Fourth movement and later at the urging of Lao She in the 1950s (Dga’ ba pa sangs 1996: 75).
snyan ngag, previously used by Tibetan scholars to describe a vast store of literary writing since the twelfth century, has now narrowed in meaning such that it more closely approximates the English term ‘poem’ or the contemporary sense of the Chinese term shì 詩.3

**EARLIEST USES OF THE TERM RTSOM RIG**

As Dga’ ba pa sangs (1996) notes, the word rtsom rig does not appear in the Tibetan dictionary compiled by Dge bshes chos grags in 1946 and published in 1949.4 The earliest dictionary to include the term, according to Dga’ ba pa sangs, is the 1976 edition of the *Rgya Bod shan sbyar gyi tshig mdzod* (Chinese-Tibetan Dictionary), published by the Nationalities Publishing House in Beijing. Dga’ ba pa sangs hypothesizes that the term rtsom rig was conceived by translation teams in the 1950s and the place to look for its earliest appearance would be in a translation of Mao’s writings.

I undertook this project, beginning with Tibetan translations of Mao’s talks, at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in May 1942. My findings here are derived from three Tibetan editions of this text: 1) the first Tibetan translation of the Yan’an Forum, published as a single volume by the Nationalities Publishing House in 1955;5 2) the version included in the third volume of Mao’s collected speeches originally published by the Nationalities Publishing House in 1959, revised in 1965, and revised again in 1992;6 and 3) an excerpt reprinted in an

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3 For the purposes of this paper, I shall use the following definition of ‘poem’: “a composition characterised by the presence of imagination, emotion, truth (significant meaning), sense impressions, and concrete language; expressed rhythmically and with an orderly arrangement of parts and possessing within itself a unity; the whole written with the dominant purpose of giving aesthetic or emotional pleasure” (Holman 1972: 399).

4 *Dge bshes chos kyi grags pas brtsams ba’i brda dag ming tshig gsal ba*, Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House, 1985 [1957]. This Tibetan-only dictionary was originally published with woodblocks by Hor khang Bsod nams dpal ’bar in 1949. The 1985 edition also includes Chinese translations for each term.

5 *Ma’o tse tung, Yan an du rig rtsal skor gyi bzhugs mol tshogs ’dur gnang ba’i gsung bshad*, Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House, 1955. This translation was based on the 1953 Chinese version of the talks produced by the People’s Publishing House in Beijing (Renmin chubanshe). I am grateful to Pema Bhum of the Latse Contemporary Tibetan Cultural Library (NYC) for bringing this text to my attention.