MAGICAL REALISM AND TIBETAN LITERATURE

FRANZ XAVER ERHARD

Thus reflects August Herrman Francke in a report published in 1906 in the Missionsblatt der Brüdergemeine upon the various obstacles he encounters in editing what was the first Tibetan-language newspaper, the *La dvags ag bar*. One of the main problems in compiling an interesting (and hence commercially successful) paper, he noted, was the lack of entertaining and complex literature in Tibetan. He would have certainly been surprised, and maybe even pleased, to see the development of Tibetan literature over the last two decades.

In fact, in Tibet a secular, or more precisely a fictional literature—apart from a few exceptions, such as *Gshon nu zla med kyi gtam rgyud*, *Gzhon nu drug gi rtogs brjod* or *Bya mgrin sngon zla ba’i rtogs brjod*—has only developed within the last 50 years under the influence of Chinese political campaigns in Tibet. Mao Zedong had laid down the guidelines for a new Chinese literature in his Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art in May 1942. This literature was named Socialist Realism and was meant to support the party spirit and to serve the politics of the Communist Party. After the so-called peaceful liberation, Socialist Realist literature was also promoted in Tibet. Today the basic principles of the Yan’an Talks are still valid.

However, the liberalisation of the 1980s brought more social and cultural freedoms to the whole of China, and normative and affirmative

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1 Francke, August Hermann 1906. Vom Redaktionspult der tibetischen Zeitung. *Missionsblatt der Brüdergemeine* 70 11, 359: “In Tibet nothing equivalent to the European novel exists. We even have to say, despite all interest in religious history it claims, one cannot deny that lamaistic literature is the most boring thing one could think of”.

2 For more examples see van der Kuijp, Leonard W.J. 2002. Die tibetische Literatur. *In: Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*. Wiebelsheim: Aula, 115-32. While giving an overview of the Tibetan novel, van der Kuijp also emphasises both the Sanskrit origins and the primarily religious function of these works of fiction.
Socialist Realism gave way to a range of literary modes. In Tibet a ‘modern literature’ (gsar rtsom) started to emerge. Tibetan authors emancipated themselves from both traditional poetics and the political function of literature, and started to experiment with different literary techniques. A set of new genres came into existence, and since the 1980s, one can observe beside the still dominant (socialist and critical) realistic literature, free verse poetry, reportage, magical realistic literature, and a great variety of stories written in a highly subjective mode.\(^3\) The major innovation of gsar rtsom is its departure from the traditional normative poetics of the Indian writer Dandin, a change which seemingly only became possible through the influence of Maoist aesthetics. In the early 1980s, the Tibetan literary canon was for the first time in centuries opened up for technical and thematic innovation. However, more traditional writers continue to follow the classical norms of poetics and are active in reviving classical literary genres, as can be seen from the numerous literary journals published by monasteries throughout Amdo and Khams.

Traces of literature’s overt political function, however, can still be found. For example, some texts were written to expose the errors and misdeeds of the ‘Gang of Four’, as part of the so called ‘literature of the wounded’ or ‘scar literature’ throughout China in the early 1980s. Some of the stories of Don grub rgyal may be included in this category, as could stories which accuse cadres of abusive behaviour\(^4\) or Tibetans of stubborn traditionalism.\(^5\) In textbooks and theoretical articles in literary journals, the social benefit and didactic values of literature are still being discussed.

In the following pages, however, I will first try to establish the notion of magical realism as one among the newly adopted literary modes in Tibetan literary discourse. Secondly, I will take a closer look at two stories by the Amdowan writer Ljang bu which are repeatedly mentioned in Tibetan sources. Finally I will attempt to offer an interpretation of magical realism in Tibetan literature based on these texts in order to show magical realism as literary technique understood by Tibetans as a

\(^3\) A Tibetan term might be nang gi ’jig rten (the inner world) or sms kham, derived from rtsom sms kham rig pa or literary psychology.

\(^4\) E.g. O rgyan rdo rje 1987. Sgo brdung ba’i sgra. [22.03.1987], Bod ljongs nyin re’i tshags par.

\(^5\) E.g. Don grub rgyal’s Sad kyis bcom pa’i me tog or Rdo rje mkhar, <Reb gong> 2001: Ca ne. In: Sgrungs gtam ralbs kyi gzugs ma., Sangs rgyas (ed.) Zi ling: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 151–54.