

## Considering “The Literary” in Tibet through the Study of Recipes

In this presentation I will consider texts that would not typically be considered ‘literary’ as a way of illuminating a few issues that may be useful to discuss in our AAR seminar meeting. The textual examples I provide are attributed to Rdo rje gling pa (1347-1405), and they are part of a canon of writing on a practice known as ‘edible letters’ (*za yig*), involving the consumption of small rolls of paper inscribed with Tibetan graphemes to serve a wide range of practical needs, from increasing one’s merit or wisdom or winning arguments, to protecting against thieves, contagious disease, spirit possession or dog bite.<sup>1</sup> Edible letter instructions or ‘recipes’ typically include several components. First, each comes with an interlinear drawing of the letters to be used. The letters are stacked on top of each other vertically, and there may be a row of vertical columns. Plant, mineral or animal substances are listed, and these should be mixed into an ink to write the letters on paper. Recipes address appropriate times for doing different aspects of the practice, which involves swallowing the rolled up paper.

The study of recipes in parts of the world other than Tibet is still young, but there are a few interesting publications, and I take inspiration in particular from DiMeo & Pennell’s 2013 edited volume, *Reading & Writing Recipe Books, 1550-1800* (Manchester University Press). As in early modern Europe, Tibetan recipes are instructional texts. Most of us will be familiar with instructional manuals of some type in Tibetan, ritual manuals being probably the most commonly known. Much of what I say here about what I’m calling recipes will also pertain to ritual manuals. Looking at this kind of writing in the context of this seminar is, I think, helpful in raising some questions that might help us clarify our group’s intentions. Taking instructional manuals such as edible letter recipes as an example, for the purposes of our AAR meeting I see the following four issues as possibly productive for discussion.

### 1. The problem of authorship

Recipes may exist in a work attributed to a single author, but they may also be found in nearly identical form across centuries of texts collected by various authors. Recipes found in one author’s text may in fact come with their own separate attributions. This brings up the difficult question of authorship, which I believe we have not adequately addressed in this seminar. In *Attributing Authorship*, Harold Love rejects the idea of ‘the author’ as a text’s sole creator, proposing instead that authorship denotes “a set of linked activities (authemes) which are sometimes performed by a single person but will often be performed collaboratively or by several persons in succession.”<sup>2</sup> In a context where authorship is collaborative in this way, as we know to be the case in much Tibetan writing, what does it mean to talk about literary style? Is the concept of literature we’re working with in this AAR seminar dependent on a certain notion of an author that we might need to consider more carefully?

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<sup>1</sup> More about this topic can be found in Frances Garrett, “Eating Letters in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 32 (2011), 85-114.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Love, *Attributing Authorship: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Alun Withey, “Crossing the boundaries: domestic recipe collections in early modern Wales,” in Michelle DiMeo

<sup>2</sup> Harold Love, *Attributing Authorship: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 39.

## **2. Defining literary values in more emic ways? / The materiality of literature**

If we believe that our goal is to identify more finely, and perhaps in a more emic sense, the particular qualities or values of Tibetan writing (its 'literary qualities' or 'literary value'), then what might we do with the use of Tibetan writing, or Tibetan language, in the form of mantras or edible letters? Put plainly, what happens when you eat literature? Is being edible one of the literary qualities of a text? What might we say about the (actual, physical) materiality of texts, in terms of their being valued as 'good literature'? Good to eat? Good for you? Beneficial not only in terms of literary affect but also in terms of therapeutic effect? (I am not joking; does this sound crazy?)

Thinking in an entirely different way about the materiality of texts, do we need to consider more carefully the particular forms that Tibetan letters take, i.e., scripts or mantras? What impact do the multipurpose uses of obscure, 'magical' scripts have on the 'literary' qualities or value of a text?

## **3. The relationship between oral and written literature, or between practice and text**

Recipe texts give us the opportunity to think about the fluid relationship between orality (here, not referring to eating) and writing. Consider the case of recipe literature in early modern England:

Medical recipe collections... shed light on questions of disease taxonomy and nosology, but also exemplify the early modern knowledge economy. Early modern Britons experienced a dynamic culture of knowledge exchange; oral and literate cultures interwove in complex ways as information shifted between the spoken, written and printed word, and up and down the social scale. The capacity to memorize information and recycle verbatim was key, especially given the relatively low levels of literacy. Medical recipes were a central part of this process... People shared their medical knowledge freely and, crucially, this sharing transcended boundaries of status, literacy, geography and even acquaintance... recipe collections were a point of juncture between oral and literate medical cultures.<sup>3</sup>

It is simplistic to think that discourse patterns (recipes, songs, stories, whatever) begin orally (or with practice) and end in textual codification. To the contrary, the example of recipes (or ritual instructions in general) makes clear how much knowledge can only be transmitted orally or through bodily demonstration, as a necessary accompaniment to a written manual, and therefore how much continuing interplay there is between the oral and the written, or between practice and text. This is another issue that I believe we have not adequately addressed in this AAR seminar. To provide a timely American example, I might read instructions in a cookbook on how to prepare a Thanksgiving meal, but only by doing this with my mother would I learn that I should save the water from boiling the potatoes to use in the stuffing, and save the grease from the turkey pan to make the gravy. How much of the narrative plot that orders the making of a meal comes from a written recipe, and how much comes from oral knowledge or embodied experience? I'm not exactly suggesting that we should consider bodily movements to fall within the domain of this seminar, but

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<sup>3</sup> Alun Withey, "Crossing the boundaries: domestic recipe collections in early modern Wales," in Michelle DiMeo and Sara Pennell (eds), *Reading & Writing Recipe Books, 1550-1800* (Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 179.

the question might be, How can a piece of writing evoke a particular kind of (embodied or other) experience? Are there qualities of writing (e.g., temporal words, choice of verbs) that do this better or differently? Can the impact on embodiment that a piece of writing has, or inspires, therefore be a praiseworthy aspect of a work valued as 'literary'?

And, of course, we have not in this seminar addressed the issue of oral literature, about which there exists a large body of secondary research in other fields that would surely be helpful.

#### **4. Do we really want to let go of classifying text types?**

In our AAR seminar, we have (I think) rejected the notion that 'literature' is limited to 'imaginative' or 'fictional' writing, and we seem to have instead begun to think about finding 'the literary' in Tibetan writing, by focusing, for example, on nuances of style, rhetoric, or implicit meaning. We may therefore be able to think of recipe texts, like any texts, as holding various 'literary' qualities, as suggested above. I wonder, however, whether in so doing we are widening our scope too far, such that we are becoming simply a group focused on language learning.

Perhaps the issue of classifying text types, or discourse types, has not been thoroughly addressed in our group. The question of whether recipes can be considered 'literary' is one that also comes up in *Reading & Writing Recipe Books, 1550-1800*. Not until the late 17<sup>th</sup> century were recipes and poems "reconceived as separate cultural and textual forms," one author points out, the distinction between 'scientific' and 'literary' languages being "unthinkable" in the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, because "Operating at the interface between mind and matter, the recipe expressed the human desire to remodel the material world. Thus, early moderns were acutely alert to the symbolic, or 'poetic', potential of recipes, and, in particular, the power of verse as an aid to storing knowledge."<sup>4</sup> Should we return to issues like this in the case of Tibetan writing also?

In our AAR seminar we began with some discussion of genre, but many of us found this to be an unhelpful concept in our efforts to articulate what we mean by 'literature' or 'the literary' in Tibet. I think there are lots of theoretical approaches we have yet to explore, however. We might consider, for example, linguist Egon Werlich's five text types, which classify texts by their language features: description, narration, exposition, argumentation and instruction. Others would call this same list of five "discourse categories" concerned with a text's function, claiming that "text type" instead refers to manifestations such as novel, editorial, or letter.<sup>5</sup> My point here is simply that there are many theories of classifying oral and written language in the field of linguistics, in particular, that we haven't examined, and that we could benefit from studying more, depending on how we continue to articulate the purpose of this seminar.

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<sup>4</sup> Jayne E. Archer, "The 'Quintessence of Wit': poems and recipes in early modern women's writing," in *Reading & Writing Recipe Books*, p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> Egon Werlich, *A text grammar of English* (Heidelberg: Quelle and Meyer. Wikberg, 1976); Kay, "Discourse category and text type classification: Procedural discourse in the Brown and the LOB corpora," in Gerhard Leitner (ed), *New Directions in English Language Corpora: Methodology, Results, Software Developments* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 1992).







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The sixty-seventh volume in the new redaction of the *Rin chen gter mdzod* begins with a completion of the general types of rituals. 'Jam-mgon Kon-sprul has divided the general types of rituals into seven groups. Here we find the seventh, the homa texts (pp. 1-97).

Next we find the beginning of the various classes of rituals undertaken for specific purposes. This broad grouping is divided into specific rituals for the highest of purposes and those undertaken for mundane activity. The group begins with the rites for the highest of purposes (*mchog gi phrin las*). All of these are *bugs grol* from the famed *gter-ma* revelations of the past (pp. 99-369).

The structure now focusses upon rituals performed in the context of mundane activity. The group begins with various *za yig snyags 'bum* (pp. 371-678). This volume completes the *za yig snyags 'bum texts*.

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LC Control Number: 77900739

VOLUME 67

Type of Material: Book (Print, Microform, Electronic, etc.)

Personal Name: Kon-sprul Blo-gros-mtha'-yas, 1813-1899.

Main Title: Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo : a reproduction of the Stod-lun Mtshur-phu redaction of 'Jam-mgon Kon-sprul's great work on the unity of the gter-ma traditions of Tibet, with supplemental texts from the Dpal-spuns redaction and other manuscripts.

Published/Created: Paro : Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976-<1980 >

Description: v. <1-111 > ; 10 x 38 cm.

Notes: Title on boards: The treasury of rediscovered teachings. In Tibetan; pref. in English.

Subjects: Rñin-ma-pa (Sect)

LC Classification: BQ7662 .K66 1976

Published by Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay

Kyichu Monastery, Paro, Bhutan

and

Printed at Photo Offset Printers, Ballimaran, Delhi-6

1976