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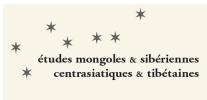
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Interaction, followed by Varia

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Glimpses of reading practices in Tibetan pastoral areas. A case study in Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Aperçus de pratiques de lecture en milieu pastoral tibétain. Une étude de cas dans la Préfecture autonome tibétaine de Golok

Xénia de Heering

*I am grateful to all the readers in T** township who made this case study possible by sharing glimpses of their reading practices with me. I also wish to thank my thesis supervisors Isabelle Thireau and Françoise Robin, as well as Stéphane Baciocchi and the participants of the “Atelier collectif de description et d’écriture scientifique de l’action humaine” at the EHESS, to whom this data was presented for the first time in 2017, and whose encouragements and advice have been decisive. I also express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers solicited by EMSCAT for their constructive comments. All mistakes and approximations, of course, remain mine.*

Introduction

- 1 In recent years, several studies of book and printing cultures in Tibet have appeared, primarily concerned with historical and current practices related to sacred texts (Schaeffer 2009; Diemberger *et al.* 2016; Diemberger 2014, 2012b). There exists a growing body of studies on modern Tibetan literature, its authors, themes, literary forms and styles. It has been suggested that literature functioned as a “proxy public forum” (Hartley & Schiaffini 2008a, p. xvi), although the pool of potential readers remained relatively small:

All indicators point to a relatively small population of potential readers for Tibetan literary works [...]. Indeed our fieldwork suggests that the primary consumers of Tibetan literature are lay students, monks, and teachers, many of whom have tried their own hand at writing. (Hartley & Schiaffini 2008a, p. xxv)

- 2 Over the last century, and in particular since the Open up the West campaign was launched in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2000, economic and social changes have deeply affected Tibet's language ecology (Roche 2017). Increased schooling and literacy rates have transformed the boundaries of the Tibetan reading public, while the output of both state publishing houses and private publishing initiatives has resulted in the diversification of available printed materials, which have come to include a growing number of secular works. The study of culturally specific attitudes towards books, however, has not yet been extended to include such texts, and our knowledge about ordinary Tibetan readers' reading practices to this day remains quite limited.
- 3 This paper proposes to examine some of the uses of literature in contemporary Tibet outside a purely religious context, considering literacy as a social practice. My inspiration for this study comes mainly from works in book history, and in particular those of Roger Chartier. Although studying the written culture of modern and pre-modern Europe, Chartier's works provide important analytical and methodological guidance for the study of reading practices in any given context due to the remarkable plasticity of the developed model. In particular, Chartier reminds us that reading always takes place as a specific act and habit, and in specific places, so that our task, as social scientists, is to identify the distinctive traits of communities of readers, reading traditions, and ways of reading (Chartier 1992, pp. 13-34). Summarising this approach, Christine Pawley writes that it is "only by investigating the empirical details of real, historically and geographically situated readers" that we can "discover the shape of their reading practices" (Pawley 2002, p. 144). This paper approaches reading practices in contemporary Tibet¹ through a case study. Based on data collected in Qinghai Province between 2008 and 2012, it focuses on reading practices encountered among readers from pastoral communities residing in a remote township of Golok (Tib. Mgo log, Ch. Guoluo 果洛) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (T.A.P.). The following questions shall be addressed: How are printed texts accessed in such remote locations where no bookshops are to be found? For what purposes does one read? What texts are read, and how? Tracing the paths of access to texts and analysing the corpus of texts known and circulated within the studied community will allow us to shed light on the social networks that sustain and/or stimulate the observed reading practices, but also to sketch a set of literary references shared both within and beyond this specific community of readers. In this way, this paper hopes to make a modest contribution to the study of uses of literature in contemporary Tibet. After introducing the case study and its context, our description of the studied community of readers will focus on three main themes: access to texts and aims of reading; patterns of book circulation and reading sociabilities; literary references shared within (and beyond) this community of readers.

A circumscribed, yet empirical, study of a readers' community in pastoral context

Context of the case study

- 4 The present study originated in the context of my PhD dissertation fieldwork. Studying the circulations and receptions of the book *Joys and Sorrows of the Naktsang Boy* (*Nags tshang zhi lu'i skyid sdug*), which was published in Xining in 2007 and quickly became a

best-seller on the regional tibetophone literary market, I was faced with a conundrum. I was often told, and at times witnessed myself, that the book's social area of reception was quite untypical, including a higher-than-average number of infrequent readers, namely among Tibetan pastoralists, and even many people who "did not read". Given the linguistic varieties used in Naktsang Nülo's testimony², the book's *potential* area of reception virtually included all the northeastern section of the Tibetan linguistic area – the ethno-linguistic area of Amdo and part of that of Kham. The estimated number of speakers of Amdo varieties of Tibetan alone ranges from 810 000 (Calvet & Calvet 2012) to 1,5 million speakers ('Brug rgyal mkhar 2007, p. 1). These are scattered across a territory roughly twice as big as France. In this northeastern section of the Tibetan Plateau, the terrain is rugged, and, outside towns and cities, the population density is very low. Accounting for the circulation of *Joys and Sorrows* in rural areas thus constituted a challenge. How to study this circulation, beyond a few anecdotal observations, across such a huge territory? How to forge a convincing, and empirical, picture of reading in milieus that were less accessible due to fieldwork constraints, yet greatly differed from those I could more easily encounter in urban contexts?

- 5 The task was all the more challenging for while an increasing number of works have dealt with modern Tibetan literature in the past few decades, contemporary reading practices, namely in secular milieus, to the best of my knowledge, had never been studied as such. Current studies of Tibetan literature manifest a definite interest for its social dimensions, but mainly consider the uses of literature shared by a lettered elite. In general, research focuses on writers' activities of literary production, considered from stylistic, historical, thematic, or other perspectives (e.g. Hartley & Schiaffini 2008b), or on controversies taking place, in writing, most often among a lettered elite³. Ordinary people's reading practices, however, are seldom put under the spotlight.
- 6 In Tibet as elsewhere, the practices of such readers remain less studied than those of cultural elites, and less is known about "ordinary" (as opposed to "expert"), everyday reading practices, than about those occurring in institutional settings. When their existence is mentioned, less expert readings are at times disqualified in a somewhat hasty manner. The Tibetan literary critic Shazhung Yangbha (Tib. Bya gzhung yang bha) thus deems that "new literature" (i.e. tibetophone literature produced since the 1970s and 1980s) has a very limited impact on society:

When we questioned teachers and students of secondary and higher educational institutions in Ü [i.e. Central Tibet], Kham and Amdo – the main category targeted by the new Tibetan literature – the common ideas were that "new literature is hard to understand, there is no pleasure in reading (*klog pa'i spro shugs mi 'dug*)". From this situation, one can see that a great distance separates readers from new literature, and one can also have the impression that the system of activities of new literature in reality simply consists in the production of new texts by writers, and then in their appreciation by these same writers. Thus, those who individualise (*gsed bkrol byed mkhan*) the significance and value of the new Tibetan literature, or, at a somewhat higher level, those who appreciate this production (*myong rol byed mkhan*), are a group of writers and critics with diverse levels of literary culture (*rtsom rig gi blo sbyong*): they monopolise "the share of the cultural aristocracy", while the area of influence and benefit (*shugs rkyen dang phan nus 'byin yul*) of the new Tibetan literature remains extremely limited. (Bya gzhung yang bha 2008, pp. 102-103, my translation)

- 7 The position of this Tibetan literary critic illustrates a bias against which several social scientists have warned, that is locating and measuring "popular" reading practices by

the yardstick of the invisible norm constituted by those of a lettered elite. As the historian Anne-Marie Thiesse underlines, “measuring all practices by the yardstick of the socially dominant group [...] leads to presenting those of other groups as gaps or deficits” (Thiesse 1991, p. 57, my translation). By talking about “popular” readers, my intention is neither to distance these readers nor to exoticise them, and even less to signal the illegitimacy of their practices⁴. In the context of this paper, “popular” is simply to be understood in the social and economic sense, as designating the most modest layers of society and ordinary people: the least wealthy Tibetans, who are often also the least educated and the most rural ones – although, obviously, one encounters “popular”, working-class readers in urban contexts too. Whether their practices and the works they read may be termed “popular” is a question to which we will return below.

- 8 Norms and usages of the written word vary across readers’ communities whose reading skills, possibilities of access to print, reading traditions and interests, and relational networks, give access to and orientate towards different objects of reading. The case study presented here, that of a community of readers in a township of Golok T.A.P., is specific and does not claim to be representative in a statistical sense. Rather, it provides the chance to explore a type of reading situation and a range of patterns of access to texts. Very circumscribed, it nevertheless provides a first set of empirical knowledge about the practices of rural Tibetan readers, the modalities of text circulation among them, the titles they read, and even appreciate, in milieus whose cultural practices, other than religious, have seldom been studied to this day.
- 9 In order to locate the determinants that govern reading practices, in differentiated ways, Chartier recommends identifying specific dispositions that distinguish readers’ communities and reading traditions, by observing three series of contrasts: between reading skills, which forge different relations to the written word (more or less skilful, comfortable only with this or that textual or typographic form, etc.); between reading norms and conventions, which define legitimate uses of the book, ways of reading, and tools and procedures of interpretation, for each community of readers; between varied expectations and interests invested in the practice of reading (Chartier 1992, pp. 13-34). This definition of readers’ communities, formulated as a research programme, guided both my inquiry and my analysis of collected data. For our purpose, however, it appeared relevant to add to these three criteria that of the practical modalities of access to texts – in other words, the relative availability of printed matter.

A community of readers in Golok T.A.P.

- 10 The case of T** township, where the case study presented in this paper was conducted, reveals types of contexts in which the majority of Tibetans, residing in rural areas in the early 2000s, accessed books, and, more generally, printed matter⁵. While urbanisation processes have profoundly affected Tibetan pastoralists since the 2000s (Yeh & Makley 2018), the majority of China’s Tibetan population at the time of my inquiry still resided in areas classifying as rural. In 2000, nine out of ten Tibetans in Qinghai resided in rural areas, just like the majority of Tibetans in other provinces (Fischer 2008). In such situations where one easily imagines numerous obstacles to accessing texts – geographical with the remoteness of book-selling places, financial with the cost of books which can be considerable in regard to local monetary revenues,

linguistic with high illiteracy rates still prevailing in rural areas – reading, as we shall see, is nevertheless eagerly practised.

- 11 T** township is located in Golok T.A.P., in the south of Qinghai Province, where the population density is below 2 inhabitants/square kilometre. Eighty percent of the prefecture’s territory is 4 000 to 5 000 metres above sea level (“Guoluo Zangzu zizhi zhou gaikuang” bianxie zu 2009, p. 5). In 2010, the township seat presented itself as an alignment of houses on both parts of an unpaved road, along a distance of about 2 kilometres. According to official statistics, the population of the township seat comprised 2 000 people, 99 percent of whom were Tibetan. Over 95 percent of the township’s population was classified as “agricultural”. The main economic activity was herding, the collection of caterpillar fungus (Tib. *dbyar rtsa dgun ’bu*, *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), as elsewhere in Golok, constituting an important source of revenue (Sulek 2019). The county to which T** township belongs was officially designated as a poor county of Qinghai Province.

- 12 T** township was home to a vocational boarding school, recently established with the support of a local monastery’s head. Around one hundred teenagers and young adults, aged between 14 and 24, frequented the school. This private charitable institution represented an opportunity of instruction for these out-of-school youths, some of whom had little (or never) frequented formal schooling institutions, while others among them had quit studies after graduating from junior middle school. The young men and women enrolled at the school came from neighbouring pastoral areas of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan Provinces. I sojourned in this school twice, in 2010 and 2011, for a total of about six weeks, serving as a volunteer English teacher. At the time, the school was not connected to the local electricity network, but did dispose of a generator that was activated for a few hours each evening to dispense electricity in the school buildings. A few small businesses were to be found at T** township seat, but none of them sold books. The school did not have a library. In 2009, a Xinhua bookshop had opened at the county town, some three hours away by car⁶. The provincial capital Xining, with its numerous bookshops, including a dozen private Tibetan bookshops, was nearly 700 kilometres away, with no public transportation service available between T** township (or the local county seat) and the provincial capital. While books may be difficult to get hold of in this context, it soon appeared that several students did read, and indeed enjoyed this practice.

- 13 In order to document these practices, I circulated a written questionnaire in Tibetan to students and teachers of the school in the spring of 2011⁷. Although I was primarily interested in the circulation and readings of *Joys and Sorrows*, I believed, as explained above, that it was important to inquire about reading practices more generally. I also deemed that this approach was preferable given that *Joys and Sorrows* was usually regarded as a sensitive topic. Conducting semi-structured interviews, and longer fieldwork allowing for multiplied observations would have been very adequate inquiry methods, but due to practical and time constraints, I opted for the written questionnaire method. The students received the questionnaire with great enthusiasm. Among the teachers, I gave out the questionnaire to those I was most acquainted with and who were willing to answer. One of them also asked for extra copies to pass them on to colleagues from another school. A week later, however, as my departure from T** township was nearing, out of some sixty copies given out, only twelve questionnaires had been returned.

- 14 The “sampling” may be termed spontaneous, explained only by the will of some respondents to answer the posed questions and their ability and/or willingness to do so in Tibetan. The sample considered is of limited size, and the information collected of declarative nature. The answers provided at times remained vague, relying on people’s memory, potentially impacted by legitimacy and political effects, and tributary of the care and time respondents were willing to devote to answering my questions. In spite of all these limitations, it is nevertheless quite instructive to assemble and systematically analyse the information thus gathered. In addition to the answers themselves, the hand-filled surveys also convey information of other natures, such as clues about the respondents’ mastery of literary Tibetan. Combined with on-site observations and a few more occasional observations made in other rural contexts, these twelve questionnaires allow us to draw an empirical sketch of readers living very far from urban centers where books are easily accessible in bookshops. It is to be hoped that more observations, interviews, inventories of private or communal libraries and readings, readers’ biographies and budget analyses, will in future complement the preliminary findings exposed in the following pages.
- 15 Eleven students and one teacher replied to the circulated questionnaire. In the context of this paper, I will refer to them as “reader no.1”, “reader no.2”, etc. Basic information about each of the respondents is summarised in table 1. References to their answers include both translated quotations and reformulations of the answers given, drawn from the sketches of readers’ biographies that were produced on the basis of responses to the questionnaires.

Table 1. Overview of readers surveyed in T** township (2011)

No.	Age	Sex	Status	Learned to read at age...	Declares reading in...
1	ca. 25	Male	Teacher	12	Tibetan
2	17	Male	Student	14-16	Tibetan, Chinese
3	19	Male	Student	8-9	Tibetan, Chinese (?)
4	22	Male	Student, Monk	13	Tibetan, Chinese
5	20	Male	Student, Monk	14	Tibetan, Chinese, English
6	19	Male	Student	n/a	Tibetan, Chinese, English
7	n/a	Male	Student	10	Tibetan
8	19	Female	Student	9	Tibetan, Chinese
9	20	Female	Student	8	Tibetan
10	18	Female	Student	13	Tibetan, English
11	17	Female	Student	7	Tibetan, Chinese
12	22	Female	Student	9	Tibetan, Chinese, English

- 16 The readers observed in T** township may be considered as a community of readers. Indeed, they share ways of reading and modalities of access to texts; written works, as well as their reputations, circulate among them; their interpretations of texts are at times collectively elaborated⁸. Our description of this readers' community will focus on three main themes: access to texts and aims of reading; book circulation and reading sociabilities; literary references shared within and beyond this community of "popular" readers.

Patterns of access to texts and aims of reading

Obstacles and constraints on the path of access to texts

- 17 One of the questions posed in the questionnaire concerned the places where books and other reading materials were purchased. The answers provided draw attention to the great geographical distance that may exist between places of residence and places of book purchase. In this regard, we may consider T** township as representative of the experience of the majority of Tibetans in Amdo, who live in rural areas. As mentioned, no bookselling place existed in T** township, but print was the privileged, or even the exclusive, support of reading as there were no Internet or touchscreen phones at the site and time of inquiry, in 2010-2011.
- 18 Among the eleven people who answered this question, three explicitly indicated that they purchased books in Xining, the provincial capital, and one mentioned Chengdu, capital of neighbouring Sichuan Province. Both cities are several hundred kilometres away. Five procured books at prefecture seats, those nominally cited being located from 150 to 350 kilometres away from T** township. Some of the readers indicated they bought books in both prefecture or county seats, while five readers indicated they bought books exclusively in county seats.
- 19 Generally speaking, these readers may be described as being in a situation of local shortage of access to texts, in part due to geographical factors, as underlined by reader no. 1: "The best books are extremely difficult to get hold of in a place with such a rugged terrain as this one". There is every reason to suppose that books are purchased at the occasion of trips to towns or cities (county and prefecture seats, provincial capitals) that combine several objectives. Lhasa, mentioned as a place of book purchase by reader no. 11, could well correspond to a purchase made on the occasion of a pilgrimage to the most sacred places of Tibetan Buddhism, a typical reason for ordinary Amdo Tibetans to visit the Tibetan capital. The idea that Xining, the provincial capital, is the right place to procure books, or that books not on sale elsewhere may be purchased there, is quite widespread, and in part justified. On one occasion, I accompanied members of the school personnel to a nearby county seat (several hours away by car), where they were to purchase food supplies for the boarding school. When I expressed the desire to visit the local bookshops, the school's manager exclaimed in astonishment: "Bookshops?! Haven't you been to bookshops while you were in Xining?"⁹
- 20 Further investigation would be necessary to study book purchasing practices, expenses, and temporalities, in more detail. Economic constraints are put forward by reader no. 3, who explains that "as [his] family's conditions are precarious (*khyim tshang gi cha*

rkyen zhan pa'i stabs kyis)”, he also borrows books from friends. The unavailability of this or that specific title may also encourage borrowing practices: “I like reading the books that everyone appreciates, in this or that regard, and that have everyone’s trust. When I am not able to purchase them, I borrow such books from others” (reader no. 9). The books difficult to get hold of, mentioned by this reader, could be banned books, as this same reader indicates that she possesses “political” books¹⁰. Scarcity of books may be mitigated by book borrowing, but it also gives rise to practices of rereading and of collective readings, as I was able to observe.

Last Friday, I was supervising a study period. Some of the students were reading: the book *Gangs ri'i spyan chab* (*Tears of the Snow Mountain*) was passing from hand to hand. The students on the first row were reading another collection of poems in prose, composed by a monk of Serta monastery (Tib. Gser rta or Gser thar), the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in eastern Tibet (located in Kandze T.A.P., Sichuan Province). The book is in bad condition, the cover is all blackened by having been manipulated so much. It does not have an ISBN nor a colophon, but the publication is dated December 2008. A student explained that he received the book from a khenpo (Tib. *mkhan po*)¹¹, in P***. A price is indicated on the book, as “cost of fabrication”, in Chinese characters (*gongben fei* 工本费): 8 RMB (about 1 € at the time)¹².

Two days ago, a student came to see me in my room. She was carrying a literary journal in Tibetan. After some banal conversation, she asked me whether I could lend her some money, to buy notebooks and the like. Today the same student came to see me again to ask whether she could borrow some books in Tibetan from me. Besides *Joys and Sorrows*, I only had a collection of short stories by Dondrupgyal (Tib. Don grub rgyal). She said that she liked his short stories, and that she had already read them, during class breaks and study periods, and borrowed the book¹³. During the English language class, some students read poetry journals. I confiscated a very worn-out issue of the journal *Gangs rgyan me tog* (*Flower of the Snowlands*), dated 2006. A student who won the school’s poetry competition a few days ago was busy composing verses. The printed works that I see circulating among the students are mainly literary journals, “unofficial” journals published by monasteries or other institutions, and mainly poetry¹⁴.

- 21 Geographical, economic, commercial or political constraints on reading practices are also temporal. Nine out of twelve respondents declared that reading was a daily practice for them. The school context constrains reading times (respondents who give precise information about their moments of reading indicate that they read during breaks: at midday, in the evening), and imposes times for study. For some readers, school constitutes a particularly favourable environment for accessing texts. Reader no. 12 thus writes: “During the last two years, as I didn’t go to school, I was not able to read”. We can suppose that this was probably for lack of time rather than for lack of books, as the same reader indicates that her household possesses “a lot” of books, and that she is the only one who reads these. Others, on the contrary, indicate that they read more when they are at home: reader no. 3, for example, who reports reading at noon, in the evenings, and during the weekends, as well as when he has nothing else to do, declares that he read “a lot” during the last two years, especially during the winter vacations. The quantity of books that he reads is difficult to estimate for him, because, as he states, “I read when I have the time or the opportunity to”. Reader no. 9, for her part, seems to suggest that she would read more if she could: she says she likes reading, but only reads “when [she has] free time”; however, as she does not have that much, she has to read books in more than one go. The insistence of this reader on the lack of spare time that she can devote to reading, which is repeated in several of her

responses, suggests that she is kept busy with other obligations – which could be related to school, family or household tasks: “When I have a little time, I manage to read a book or two (*khom pa cung tsam re byung skabs deb gcig gnyis bar lta thub gyin yod*); in one year, I manage to read ten or eleven”. It is necessary to recall here the multiple household tasks that generally rest upon Tibetan women, in agricultural as in pastoral areas: fetching water, gathering dung and other fuels, house cleaning, cooking, etc.

- 22 The last type of constraint conditioning access to texts that may be mentioned here are limited linguistic skills in literary Tibetan – a written language which is related to, but distinct from the many spoken varieties of Tibetan, and whose mastery requires several years of dedicated study¹⁵. Reader no. 8 thus indicates that she can read a work up to five or six times, “because the meaning of some works is difficult to grasp”. Reader no. 12, too, rereads books in case of comprehension difficulties: “This is because when I read them only once, I don’t understand well, so I read them a second time”. The continued practice of reading may, however, bring about progress: “Before, I had to read books several times, but today reading them once is enough”, writes reader no. 4.
- 23 The different constraints we have identified are rarely absolute: trips, borrowing and gifts compensate the local shortage of books; rereadings allow one to progressively appropriate complex texts; temporal constraints constitute changing frames in which reading practices fit into. Surmountable and often surmounted, these obstacles in reality give form to specific practices, which we shall now describe from three additional perspectives – reading skills, the auto-evaluation of reading practices, and the different forms and aims of the activity called “reading”.

Reading skills and family contexts of reading

- 24 Among the readers who provided precise answers about their acquisition of literacy, three learned to read only three to six years ago, the others have known how to read for some ten years. Out of eleven readers who replied, all except one learned to read at school (or perhaps at the monastery, in the case of monks)¹⁶. Only one reader indicates that he learned to read exclusively in the family circle: his elder brother, a monk, taught him to read when he was twelve years old (reader no. 1). Learning to read in or outside school contexts, however, do not constitute mutually exclusive situations: reader no. 3 indicates he learned to read with his parents and at school; reader no. 7 that he learned to read at school, and then on his own; reader no. 8 that her father taught her to read when she was eight years’ old, and that she later pursued this learning at school, from the age of twelve. Four of the readers interrogated learned to read before the age of eight (seven, at the earliest), three between ages nine and twelve, and five at the age of twelve or more (between fourteen and sixteen, at the latest). It should be noted that learning at a later age does not necessarily correspond to learning outside the school context. These questionnaires filled by hand also provide information on the degree of the students’ mastery of written Tibetan. The writing of reader no. 6, for example, is characterised by a rather unstable orthography. The title of his favourite book, cited twice, is written differently each time, and neither of these spellings correspond exactly to the title of the book in question.
- 25 The family profiles of these readers are quite diverse, presenting a contrasted distribution of reading skills, both between and inside families, in terms of generations and gender. In six out of twelve households, all the household members are literate. In

the six households including illiterate members, the illiterate household member is the mother, to whom are sometimes added an elder sister (two cases), a sister-in-law (one case), a father (one case), an uncle (one case), or a grandfather (in one case). Younger brothers and sisters, when present in the household, always know how to read. These observations are not surprising in view of existing literacy statistics, which show that illiteracy is more widespread among women and that illiteracy rates increase with age (Fischer 2005, p. 139; Qinghai tongji ju 2012).

- 26 The literate members of the household do not necessarily read. Only two readers answered that all their family members read the books possessed by the household (readers no. 3 and no. 7). Two readers state that reading is an activity shared with their father (readers no. 4 and no. 8). In at least one case, the younger generation only reads the books owned by the household (reader no. 2). Three readers, regardless of the fact their household does or does not include other literate members, declare they are the only ones who read at home (readers no. 1, no. 9, and no. 12). In many cases the readers are thus a minority within their households.
- 27 Several respondents mention self-taught reading, thus highlighting skills transmission in family contexts. While such transmission has tended to decrease with the generalisation of compulsory schooling, it was still a reality for the readers interviewed (readers no. 1, no. 3, and no. 8), or for their family members (reader no. 2). In some cases, domestic and school learning were combined, simultaneously (reader no. 3), or successively (reader no. 8). Reader no. 5 first wrote, and then crossed out, that he taught his mother to read, when she was forty years old. A doubt thus subsists on the circumstances in which this woman learned to read: she may also (or in parallel) have learned to read at the occasion of one of the illiteracy eradication campaigns that have been implemented since the mid-1990s¹⁷. These probably explain, at least in part, the spectacular decrease of illiteracy rates registered in Golok T.A.P., which leapt from 34,81 percent in 2000 to 11,84 percent in 2010 (Qinghai tongji ju 2012)¹⁸. Thanks to the research of Minglang Zhou, we know that in Golok T.A.P. Tibetan and not Chinese was the language taught in rural areas during these campaigns¹⁹.
- 28 For the readers surveyed in T** township, we lack more precise information about these processes of learning to read outside school contexts. Two brief narratives of self-taught learning by readers from Amdo, born in the 1960s and 1970s (thus belonging to the generation of the surveyed students' parents), allow us to shed some additional light on this practice.

In his 40s, R** is a primary school teacher in Tsolho T.A.P. (Qinghai Province). He himself has never attended school, but learned to read and write on his own. He told me he is one of the two only teachers, out of some sixty (mainly Tibetan) colleagues, who have never been to school. I was quite surprised by R**'s erudition. He spoke as a connoisseur about literary language, its reforms, Sanskrit loanwords, or honorific terminology, a register of very limited use in spoken Amdo Tibetan. On the other hand, he told me that he had studied on his own, while grazing sheep, and that he considered himself as not very cultivated (*rig gnas dma' gi*). The next time we met, I thus asked him again about his process of learning.

"I learned by myself", R** repeated. I had to insist in order to get more details. He was a herder, and until the age of fourteen, he did not know how to read at all. He hadn't been able to attend school, where both Tibetan and Chinese were taught at the time. In 1981, there were some other herders who could read, just a little bit, and the Gesar epic had just been republished. In the past it had been banned, because its contents were considered to be related to religion. R** enjoyed the epic

a lot, and this triggered his desire to learn to read. He learned like that, asking questions to people here and there. Then he read a lot. After about a year, he became able to decipher writing (*yi ge 'don*), but he did not understand the meaning. Then, by dint of reading – he read a lot, started reading the literary journals *Mangs tshogs sgyu rtsal/Folk Arts & Literature* and *Sbrang char* (“Light rain”), history books... In this way, he learned. He keeps repeating that his level is very poor. A few years later, he became a so-called *minban* teacher (i.e. working in a *minban* 民办 or “operated by the people” school), the salary was very low, 200 RMB. But he was not doing it for the salary, he really liked this job. And he kept reading. When the *minban* school system was terminated, all the *minban* teachers had to take an examination. He was among the few who succeeded, thus continuing to exercise his profession in a government school. R** also says that he does not know Chinese; he understands it a little, but is ashamed to talk²⁰.

N** is in his 40s and comes from Malho T.A.P. (Qinghai Province). His father taught him the alphabet when he was nine years old, but “only *ka-kha-ga-nga*” (i.e. the Tibetan alphabet). When he was grazing sheep, he always tried to read, and little by little, on his own, he learned to decipher the writing. That was in the autumn; the following summer, he had become better at it than his father. Before, N** used to ask him questions, but later, the roles were inverted! Once he had learned to read, he started to read the Gesar epic, and in the course of one year, he read several volumes. As he could read, his parents then said that it would be good if he became a monk. His father brought him a lamp and, in the evenings, when the other boys of his age were getting interested in girls, starting to smoke, etc., he stayed (had to stay?) at home, reading. By dint of reading, he came to know the stories almost by heart. In the evenings, the elderly women of his village came to see him, begging him to tell them the epic, so he read it for them... He read it so many times that, even today, he still knows whole passages by heart. When he eventually joined the monastery, later on, the other novices had to learn to read, but he could read already!²¹

- 29 It is striking that in both of these cases, the same work – the Gesar epic – seems to have played an important role in the learning process. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Qinghai Nationalities Publishing House published a first episode of the epic in 1977, followed by several others. These works met with an important success, soon reaching cumulated print runs of around 50 000 copies (Hartley 2005, p. 242). The arduous character of the task to which R** and N** committed themselves should be stressed here, as in written Tibetan there exists no correspondence between phoneme and grapheme. The capacity to recognise the thirty consonants and four vowels of the alphabet is by no means sufficient to be able to read. Written Tibetan is indeed governed by a complex orthography reflecting archaic pronunciations, and spellings combine letters horizontally (with prefixes, suffixes and second suffixes), as well as vertically (with superscript and subscript letters). Sentences are often long, and, in addition, words are not separated by spaces. More importantly, the syntax and lexicon in part specific to written Tibetan (more or less depending on registers and genres of writing), as already noted, make it a specific variety of the Tibetan language, entirely distinct from all of the spoken varieties of Tibetan. The degree of difficulty of teaching oneself literary Tibetan and the high degrees of competence acquired by R** and N** highlight the potency of the attraction exerted by the written upon these readers, which played a major role in their learning.

Evaluations: considering one reads “(too) little”, or “a lot”

- 30 In addition to the factors limiting their reading practices that we have already mentioned (lack of economic means, lack of time, lack of book supply), several evaluations expressed in the questionnaires point to the fact that these readers read less than they would like to.

“I read very few books. In a year, I can’t manage to read more than seven or eight books of two or three hundred pages. Between last year and this year, last year was slightly better, I more or less read (*lta khul byas*) the following titles: [...]”. (reader no. 1)

“I love reading (*nga rang dpe cha klog par ha cang dga’*)”, states this student, although he considers he “[does] not read much”: just “one book every two or three months”, or about six books per year, mainly poetry over the past few years. (reader no. 4)

“I somewhat like reading (*nga rang cung tsam zhig klog rgyu dga’*)”. In total, he “[doesn’t] manage to read more than four or five books a year”. Some of these are not immediately read from beginning to end, out of laziness or because of the difficulty to remain concentrated (*rnam g.yeng dang le lo shin tu che bas [sic] skabs thog*), but eventually they are read entirely, between one and three times. (reader no. 5)

This student considers he does not read much: “about five proper books (*dpe cha tshad ldan*) per year”. Last year he read “four and a half books”, the year before five. (reader no. 7)

In total, this reader considers she has read “only very few books (*dpe cha nyung nyung re ma gtogs klog ma myong*)”. In one year, she read the *Sum rtag rtags gsum* [inaccurate reference to *Sum cu pa dang rtags kyi jug pa* (*The Thirty and the Signs*), two texts exposing the basics of Tibetan spelling and grammar, whose titles are often abbreviated into *Sum rtags*], philosophy (*tshad ma rig pa*), English (*dbyin yig*), and Chinese (*rgya yig*) – she appears here to be enumerating textbooks corresponding to the school’s curriculum. Besides, she reads “a lot of *rtsom deb* [literally “books of texts/written creations]”. (reader no. 12)

- 31 Among our respondents, only two readers on the contrary consider that they read “a lot”. Reader no. 6 states the quantity of books he reads is “somewhat considerable” (*mang nyung cong [sic] tsam mang*): he generally reads two books a year, but last year he read four books. Reader no. 11 declares that she reads “a very great deal” (*ha cang mang po zhig klog gi yod*). She has read over thirty books during the last two years, but unfortunately provides very little detail about the works she read.
- 32 In the absence of other data about Tibetan reading practices, it is not possible to propose a typology of the surveyed readers according to the quantities of their declared readings. Resorting to a typology devised in another context would not make much sense. If we borrowed, for example, the categories employed by the French National Centre for the Book (Centre national du livre or CNL, see Vincent Gérard & Poncet 2019), one could state that our population of inquirers includes eight “average readers” (5-19 books read per year) and two “small readers” (1-4 books)²². Such a categorisation, however, would obscure locally significant distinctions, such as that between a person reading 16-18 books per year (reader no. 11) and another one who reads 4-5 (reader no. 5), who would both end up in the “average reader” category. More importantly, such a classification also erases readers’ nuances of what is counted as books read, and obscures the practice of reading one book several times (see table 2).

Table 2: Declared quantities of books read per year by readers surveyed in T** township (2011)

Reader no.	Number of books read per year
1	7-8 books of 200-300 pages
2	5 (each book read once or twice)
3	n/a (books appreciated are reread)
4	6
5	4-5 (some of these read 2 or 3 times)
6	2 in general (4 last year)
7	5 “proper books” (<i>dpe cha tshad ldan</i>)
8	7 books/genres listed for the last 12 months (difficult books read 5 to 6 times)
9	10-11
10	1-2 (books on Tibetan history are reread)
11	16-18
12	n/a (books read once or twice)

- 33 Declared quantities of books read per year thus provide only a first approximation of our inquirers’ reading practices. For the reasons already mentioned above, these amounts remain difficult to quantify precisely. In addition, read books are sometimes referred to by references to a category of books rather to specific titles. Moreover, interpreting this (however approximate) data would call for comparisons with other communities of readers, but, as stated earlier, no comparable studies have been conducted to this day among Tibetan readers. The evaluations that these readers formulate about their practices nevertheless deserve to be dwelt upon: what are their implicit terms of comparison? Those who state they read “a lot” or “little” indeed do not differ so much in terms of numbers of declared readings, as by the points of view they adopt on their reading practices.
- 34 Those who declare that they read “a lot” may, first of all, express this evaluation in relation to their usual practices: four books read last year, rather than the average of two books per year (reader no. 6); if daily life leaves little time for reading, one can nevertheless have “read a lot during the winter holidays” (reader no. 3). In the case of reader no. 11, quoted above, she might consider that she reads “a great deal” as compared to her own past reading practices, but perhaps also in comparison with people of her entourage. Her older brother and younger sister, just like her, learned to read at school, but their mother is illiterate. One can also imagine that she is comparing herself to schoolmates who read less than she does, or not at all.
- 35 The few elements gathered on family contexts of reading and my observations in T** township suggest that readers who declare they do not read much are perhaps

referring less to their immediate social environment (in their school or families) than to a certain ideal of reading, associated with erudition²³. Reader no. 12, quoted above, thus at the same time declares that she reads “very few books” and “a lot of *rtsom deb*”. The generic term *rtsom deb* (made up of *rtsom*, “written composition, text”, and *deb*, “book”) could refer to works of fiction, poetry, essays, or any other kind of texts, bound together in a book or literary journal. Reader no. 7 also declares that he does not read much, only four or five “proper books” (*dpe cha tshad ldan*) per year. The exact meaning of the qualifier *tshad ldan*, that I translate as “proper”, is hard to interpret. *Tshad* is a term meaning “measure, size, standard, level”; the suffix *ldan* apposed to it has the meaning of “endowed with”. Tibetan-English dictionaries that include this term translate *tshad ldan* as “authentic, complete, correct, competent, qualified [...]”. More generally, this qualifier may be understood as signifying the satisfaction of a certain norm. The *dpe cha tshad ldan* referred to by reader no. 7 are thus items worthy of being called books – hence my translation by “proper”, or “real books” –, perhaps due to their length, their depth, or the importance of their themes. When reader no. 12 talks of *rtsom deb* by opposing this category to that of “books” (*dpe cha*), we could deduce that the first ones do not pertain to the category of *dpe cha tshad ldan*, or “proper books”. These evaluations thus point to a hierarchy of literary writings, which remains to be mapped.

- 36 Are these declared readings to be “treated with suspicion”, as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, because of a “legitimacy effect” necessarily making them biased (Chartier & Bourdieu 2003, p. 284)? These modest auto-evaluations of our inquirers, as well as that of Teacher R** cited above, denote the importance of modesty in any presentation of oneself according to the social conventions prevalent in the Tibetan world, all the more marked for people of a young age. They also reflect a posture of humility vis-à-vis the written word, dictated by a sense of respect for writing and erudition²⁴. They may also echo an aspiration, among these readers, to read more than they do. Whatever its causes, the widespread humble attitude towards the written word may trigger what appears as stark under-evaluations of declared reading skills. A group of pastoralists busy preparing for their drivers’ licence examination with the help of a textbook in Tibetan may at the same time describe themselves as illiterate or “unable to read” (*yi ge mi shes gi*), just as a village head whose responsibilities imply drawing up lists and other kinds of written documents²⁵. I interpret such modest auto-evaluations primarily as signs of the prestige, respect and admiration that mastering the written language implies in Tibetan context. The respondent who appears to be the most expert reader among our sample of twelve readers in T** township also presents his readings and the fruits he draws from them with an extreme modesty. I describe this reader as an expert on the basis of the information he provides about his different ways of reading according to the books he reads and what he is seeking therein, of the quantity of books he possesses (some five hundred), and of the variety of his readings, which include works about pedagogy, neuroscience, Tibetan and foreign history, philosophy (including works by d’Holbac and Schopenhauer in Tibetan translation), as well as essays by contemporary Tibetan thinkers, both lay and religious. This teacher thus presents his different ways of reading:

I can read books in whole or not, everything happens. The reason is that for some books, it is enough to leaf through them (*bam klog byas*), for some books, it is sufficient to read the preface/headings (*mgo brjod*), and for some books, I read them in their entirety. With books that I like a lot, it has already happened to me to read

them several times. I read those books just like that, to get some approximative understandings out of them, according to my own impressions (*rang gi myong snang ltar don rag rim gyi go ba re len byed du*). (reader no. 1)

- 37 The historian Anne-Marie Thiesse reports that she encountered numerous instances of what she terms “self-censorship” in the course of the oral history work that she conducted about popular readers’ reading practices in late 19th and early 20th century France. Readers she interviewed spontaneously declared that they never read, but subsequently acknowledged having read many of the titles that she mentioned to them. Thiesse interprets such cases of “self-censorship” as signifying the ratification of a system of social conventions according to which reading was not an attribute of popular classes (“We didn’t read”, said some of her informants, “all of this was not for us”). According to Thiesse, it is in fact the combination (real) presence/(perceived) absence of books and reading that best defines the situation of popular reading practices (Thiesse 2000, p. 31). The readers I surveyed in T** township, being careful to not present themselves as great readers or scholars, are certainly conforming themselves to social conventions too. It bears reminding, however, that most of our respondents did declare that they read, often daily, and that they enjoyed this practice – talking of self-censorship would thus, in this case, be exaggerated. Popular reading practices may perhaps be largely absent in the perception of Tibetan cultural elites (and seldom described in academic research), but they are not from the point of view of the “popular” readers themselves. The modesty of expressed auto-evaluations, in our case, needs to be considered first and foremost in the context of the great deference to and prestige associated with the written word.

What is called “reading”?

- 38 A first way to approach the activity called “reading” (*dpe cha klog pa, dpe cha lta ba*) by our respondents is to make an inventory of their declared reading languages. Three respondents declare they read exclusively in Tibetan, one of them adding this is a source of profound regret for him: “Besides the language of my own nationality, I am not familiar with any other language: this is a great loss (*gyong gud chen po*)” (reader no. 1). Four respondents declare they read in both Tibetan and Chinese (readers no. 2, 4, 8 and 11). Reader no. 6 states that he reads in Tibetan, Chinese and English, but mainly in Tibetan. Reader no. 10 notes that over the last two years, she had the opportunity to study “English and Tibetan books” quite well. These reported readings in different languages correspond to varied levels of reading skills, diverse types and different uses of books. Judging from the titles provided by our respondents, besides school textbooks of Chinese and English languages and bilingual or trilingual vocabularies, the great majority of readings occur in Tibetan. Note that this is not necessarily the case for all of the school’s students: some, who did not reply to my survey (because it was written in Tibetan?), read Chinese more easily and/or eagerly than Tibetan, and are interested mainly in learning that language.
- 39 The reported modalities of reading include both silent, solitary reading, and collective readings, as a group or in company. Seven out of twelve readers state an exclusive practice of solitary reading, or strong preference for it.

When I read, I look for a small environment where I can be alone [followed by the crossed out but nevertheless decipherable mention: I don’t really like reading with friends or family]. (reader no. 1)

She reads alone, remaining concentrated on her reading, but always discusses her readings with someone, be they friends, kin or teachers. (reader no. 11)

Most of the time, he reads alone, but sometimes he reads with classmates. (reader no. 4)

He always reads on his own; the only person who can be present at that time is his master (*dpe cha blta na/ rang nyid gcig pus las gzhan slob dpon ma gtogs mi gzhan pa gcig kyang yod srid pa ma red/*). (reader no. 5)

- 40 Some readers seem to have the habit of reading either alone or in company, as readers no. 6, 10 or 9, this last one declaring “I read with others when they have time; when they don’t, I read on my own, when I have time”. Two readers express a marked preference for collective reading (readers no. 2 and no. 12). Reader no. 7, for his part, explains that reading alone or collectively depends on the type of book read: “History and the like (*lo rgyus sogs*), I read alone. Ancient books and the like (*gna’ dpe sogs*), I read with family members”. This response draws attention to the fact that some books probably lend themselves more to collective usages, such as “ancient books”, but also vocabularies and encyclopedias. Solitary and collective reading may thus pursue different aims, as for this reader, who associates reading with her father to study, and reading on her own with leisure:

Sometimes she reads with her parents, and sometimes alone. “When I was at home, my father and I studied together”. She adds: “Usually, I love leading a solitary life (*dus rgyun kher rkyang gi ’tsho ba rol rgyur ha cang dga’*)”. She doesn’t talk about her readings with others, and she doesn’t like being in crowded places. This is why, usually, she quietly (*kha rog ger*) reads when she is at home. After reading, she listens to some music she likes (*dpe cha klog tshar rjes/ rang nyid dga’ sa’i sgra rer nyan pa yin*). (reader no. 8)

- 41 It is interesting to note that while reader no. 8 does not mention her mother as one of the people who read in her household, she is nevertheless associated with moments of collective reading. In this context, this could imply reading aloud, or refer to a collective “reading” consisting in leafing through a book together, as documented in a scene to which I took part in the area of Gepasumdo (Tib. Gad pa sum mdo, Ch. Tongde 同德), in Tsolho T.A.P., Qinghai Province:

Spent the evening with a 23-year-old monk and his 30-year-old sister. She told me that she can read a little, but does not understand literary Tibetan (*yig skad*). Sitting beside the stove, we spent some time looking at an illustrated book about medicine that the monk took out to explain to me the meaning of the word *gla rtsi* (musc). We mainly looked at the illustrations, I showed them which animals we also have in Europe, we looked at the names and aspects of things. Then we spent some time leafing through an illustrated compilation of neologisms, here chiefly paying attention to the Tibetan names given to things²⁶.

- 42 Because of the way I phrased “reading together” in my questionnaire²⁷, positive responses can refer to situations where a book is read aloud for someone, or to situations where a single book is simultaneously consulted by several people, but not necessarily read aloud, as in the scene described above, or when several students are reading a book together during their study time, as mentioned earlier. Lastly, they could also refer to situations where several people are each reading their own book, but accomplishing this activity side by side.
- 43 The aims of these readings may partly be deduced from the categories of cited books: grammar and vocabulary books are associated with study, with the will to improve one’s skills in Tibetan or acquire more vocabulary, in Tibetan, Chinese, or English, while reading fiction or poetry is probably more associated with leisure. The succinct

commentaries the readers provide about their practices in their responses allow us to specify these statements, but also to highlight other aims and perceived benefits of reading. Reader no. 10 thus seems to suggest, in spite of a somewhat clumsy phrasing, that she appreciates her readings for their recreational aspect but also because they allow her, at the same time, to improve her Tibetan language skills:

She enjoys reading, and “what is pleasing, is that reading books of texts in Tibetan, or fictions/narratives, to study my own language, that’s what I like studying best. I love Tibetan fiction narratives (*dga’ os pa ni bod kyi rtsom yig gi dpe cha dang yang na rtsom sgrong [sic] rang skad slob sbyong byed rgyu ni ngas ches dga’ ba’i slob sbyong yin/ nga ni bod kyi rtsom sgrung la ha cang dga’ ba yin/*). (reader no. 10)

- 44 A monk student among our respondents points to the pleasure of reading but also to the moral benefits derived from such reading:

His favourite books are poetry books and books that deal with morals (*snyan ngag dang bsam blo kun spyod*). Reading these books has brought him feelings of joy and sadness, and made him feel [the importance of] always [having] pure intentions (*dga’ skyo ba’i myong tshor dang dus rgyun du sems dkar po’i myong tshor zhig gter ba yin*). (reader no. 4)

- 45 Other readers, yet, seem to be driven by a desire to learn things about the world, and namely about Tibet:

“Besides textbooks, I read of everything (*slob grwa’i deb ma gtogs ci yang la lta gi yod*)”. Talking about his favourite books, he states: “After reading these books, I had many impressions. I learned that the language of our nationality was in great danger (*deb de dag bklags rjes nga la myong tshor mang po zhig skyes byung/ de ni nga tsho’i mi rigs kyi skad yig ’di la nyen kha chen po zhig yod ba shes/*). (reader no. 2)

“I love reading: literature, Chinese”. Her favourite books are *Treaty for the Youth* (*Gzhan nu’i rab byams [sic]*), *Women’s Joys and Sorrows: Mixed Rain and Snow* (*Za ma mo’i skyid sdug gang [sic] ma char*), *Water Margin* (*Chu mog [sic] gtam rgyud*) and a collection by Dudlhargyal (Tib. Bdud lha rgyal). “After reading these books, I started loving to read. The reason is that they allowed me to learn a lot of history” (*de dag klog rjes/ nga rang dpe cha klog par ha cang dga’ bar gyur/ rgyu mtshan/ lo rgyus mang po zhig shes thub/*). (reader no. 8)

He indicates that he likes reading “first of all Tibetan history (*bod kyi lo rgyus gto byas nas*)”, and then “the history of the Chinese and of other nationalities, etc. (*rgya’i lo rgyus dang mi rigs gzhan pa’i lo rgyus sogs*)”. Besides school textbooks, he also read *A Concise History of the Birth and Death of Languages: The Call of the Old Shepherd* (*Skad yig skye ’chi’i lo rgyus bstus [sic] pa lug rdzi rgan po’i ki sgra*) and the *Illustrated Vocabulary of Common Neologisms in Chinese, Tibetan and English* (*Rgya bod dbyin gsum gsar byung rgyun bkod ris ’grel ming mdzod*), etc. Commenting on his favourite book: “Reading this book exercised an extraordinary impression on my ideas and feelings. Those who are of Tibetan nationality bear the responsibility to speak their language in a pure fashion. About the causes and conditions of a nationality’s existence, etc., [this book] clearly left an imprint on my mind” (*deb de klags [sic] rjes nga’i sems tshul dang tshor snang la ya mtshan pa’i myong tshor zhig ’char kyi ’dug/ rang mi rigs bod rigs zhig yin pa la rang skad gtsang ma zhig smra ba ’os ’gan red/ mi rigs shig gnas pa’i rgyu mtshan sogs gsal bos bag chags zhig bzhags yod/*). (reader no. 5)

- 46 Responsibility towards the Tibetan language, associated with the survival of the Tibetan nationality and culture, is a theme which comes back in several questionnaires. Perhaps this results, in part, from the calls of the school to pay attention to “nationality matters [*mi rigs kyi don dag*]” rather than to “small/unimportant matters [*don dag chung chung*]”²⁸. Such admonitions were in the mood of the times, and had nothing specific to T** township. In addition, they surpassed the sole educational context and were carried by religious figures and intellectuals, as well as by simple citizens, Internet users and

numerous local associations set up with the aim of “protecting the mother tongue” (Thurston 2018; Robin 2014).

“Reading those books (i.e. favourite books) left me a few impressions, ideas and traces. I wondered what would prevent me from also becoming an example that all would confidently turn to. That is why, by learning from them, I want to move forward by distinguishing between things, adopting the good and leaving aside the bad”. (reader no. 9)

“Two years ago, I read *The Universe in a Single Atom* (*Rdul phran gcig kho na'i steng gi 'jigs rten*), and last year, the *Biography of Gandhi*. After reading *The Universe in a Single Atom*, [I realised] there were people in this world with such bodhisattva spirits, and [having also read] the *Biography of Gandhi*, I realised that such people, endowed with such an unwavering love of their nationality and such determination, were worthy of all our prayers”. (reader no. 1)

- 47 From a very general perspective, we could say that these readers look for and appreciate readings which transform them: thanks to which they improve this or that skill (Tibetan vocabulary, foreign languages...), thanks to which they learn things about the world, thanks to which they discover and appropriate novel ideas, thanks to which they develop a sense of responsibility as Tibetans, thanks to which they find examples worthy of being followed, inspirational figures towards whom to turn collectively. Some respondents identify very strongly with their readings: when I gave out my questionnaire in his class, a student remarked that if they answered, I would know 60 or 70 percent of their thoughts²⁹.

Circulations: in the wake of reading sociabilities

- 48 As sociologist Joëlle Bahloul observed, the path followed by a reader to access the book is a social trajectory that inscribes him or her in a range of social relationships, and networks of access to texts often overlap with networks of information about books (Bahloul 1990, pp. 25-26). Networks related to reading practices include those drawn by the circulation of concrete objects, meanings and reputations. The collective dimension of reading practices thus intervenes not only in the activity of reading together, but also upstream, in the choice of readings, and downstream, in the collective appropriation of objects read.

She likes reading “history books that enjoy everyone’s trust” (*mi tham [sic] cad kyi [sic] re ltos byed pa'i lo rgyus dpe deb dag*). This idea is further elaborated as follows: “I like reading the books that everyone praises in any regard, and that enjoy everyone’s trust. When I can’t purchase these, I borrow them from others to read them” (*mi thams cad kyi [sic] phyogs gang thad nas bstod bsnags dang re ltos byed bzhin pa'i dpe deb dag klog rgyur dga'/ dpe deb de dag nyo rgyu ma lon na/ gzhan la g.yar nas bklags pa yin/*). (reader no. 9)

This student usually reads alone, in a calm place. Sometimes he rereads books that he enjoyed (*spro ba yod pa*) and that correspond to his own ideas (*rang gi bsam blo dang mthun pa*), but never the ones he doesn’t like that much. After reading a book, he ponders its meaning (*nang don la bsam zhig byas nas*) and talks about it with his friends. He asks them questions about things he didn’t understand and they exchange ideas about the book’s contents. (reader no. 3)

- 49 These two examples show the importance of the work of collective interpretation in the studied reading practices³⁰. Discussions about books read most often take place with friends or schoolmates (a practice mentioned by nine out of twelve readers), but also with family members (mentioned by four readers), and teachers (mentioned by

three readers). Such exchanges, added to the collective readings described above, also indicate that the same works are read, or at least known, within these groups of discussion. One can't rule out, moreover, that collective reading and discussion at times occur concomitantly. The only teacher who took part in our survey constitutes a somewhat isolated case, which nevertheless confirms the importance given to exchanges with others in the appropriation of books. In this case, it is the absence of the desired interlocutors which is regretted:

"I love talking [about my readings], but I haven't found satisfying partners for discussion (*gleng mol yid mgu re byed sa*). I've discussed my impressions with some teachers and monks in the past, but between our points of view, besides contradictions, there is not much common ground. I still believe this is valuable, because me and them, we are all [different] persons, so I'm glad that each has their own positions (*nga dang khong tsho ni mi rer yin pas/ lang phyogs re yod pa'i dga' spro skye gi yod/*). (reader no. 1)

- 50 Only two of the titles this teacher read during the last two years also appear among the titles cited by the eleven students who answered my questionnaire. These are the *White Annals* (*Deb ther dkar po*), a political history of imperial Tibet, also cited by reader no. 6, and an essay by the modernist Amdo intellectual Shokdung (Tib. Zhogs dung), *Awakening of Intelligence* (*Rig shes kun grol*), which is part of the "Life series (*Bla dpe tshogs*)" collection cited by reader no. 3. This teacher's readings are more numerous and more specialised than the students' ones; he is also one of the respondents who answered my questionnaire in greatest detail. These elements set him somewhat aside within the studied readers' community, but don't necessarily rule out circulation of books or books' reputations between this teacher and some of the students.
- 51 As noted by Bahloul, objects and their reputations often circulate together, for example, when a book is discovered by the intermediary of someone who might give or lend the recommended book. Several readers thus discovered, and at times obtained, their favourite works by someone's intermediary:

Among all the books that she's read, the one by Hortsang Jigme [Tib. Hor gtsang 'jigs med, born in 1967, this writer from Amdo has published both in Tibet and in India, after going into exile, in 1992] is her favourite. She does not provide a title, but adds that she borrowed it from one of her classmates, who had brought the book back with her from Ragma (Tib. Rwa rgya, Ch. Lajia 拉加, Golok T.A.P.). (reader no. 10)

This student has talked about the books he reads with friends and relatives in the past, but he's never discussed them with his teachers. He likes reading, books like *My Hometown: Listening Carefully* (*Nga'i pha yul dang zab [sic] nyen*), that's the kind of thing he likes reading and feels like reading. This is indeed his favourite book. A classmate who was reading it first told him a little about it, so he started reading it too, but because he hadn't finished the book, he took it home with him during the winter holidays, and that's where he read it. The student then adds: "Loyalty/love (*dong zhen [sic]*, i.e., *gdung zhen*) for the nationality and respect (*rtsi 'jog*) for our own Tibetan nationality arose in my mind (*nga rang mi rig [sic] la dong [sic] zhen pa dang rang gi bod mi rig [sic] la rtsi 'jog byed pa sogs rang rgyud la skyes so/!*)" (reader no. 6)

His favourite book is *A Concise History of the Birth and Death of Languages: The Call of the Old Shepherd* (*Skad yig skye 'chi'i lo rgyus bstus [sic] pa lug rdzi rgan po'i ki sgra*), a popularising work composed by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö (Tib. Mkhan po Tshul khriims blo gros), one of Amdo's most famous lamas, who is very active in the realm of Tibetan language promotion and preservation. He first heard about this book from the great Khenpo T**, thanks to whom he also obtained the book, which he read on December 23rd, 2010. (reader no. 5)

This student states his favourite books are *sgrung gtam*, which can be translated as “stories” or “narratives”. He first discovered these because a schoolmate had some. Then he purchased a few *sgrung gtam* in a bookshop. He read them this year, so we can suppose that he discovered these books through a schoolmate at T** township. (reader no. 2)

“Among the books that I’ve read, my favourite ones are *The Universe in a Single Atom* (*Rdul phran gcig kho na’i steng gi ’jigs rten*) and the *Biography of Gandhi* (*Gandi’i rnam thar*). I heard about these two books from a schoolmate. I borrowed *The Universe in a Single Atom* in order to copy it [could refer to copying by hand or making photocopies], and then I read it. As for the *Biography of Gandhi*, I purchased it in a bookshop”. (reader no. 1)

- 52 Borrowed books, just as purchased ones, sometimes travel great distances. Schools, just as monasteries, constitute privileged loci of reading and book circulation, but they are also places from which printed matter is circulated. Reader no. 6, who borrows a book from a schoolmate to read it at home during the holidays, illustrates this pattern. His borrowing of *My Hometown: Listening Carefully* probably contributed to making this work known to members of his family (all are literate) or to friends in his native village; perhaps it even allowed them to leaf through it or read parts of it. Books and their reputations thus circulate by proximate steps, as the following example also shows:

R** tells me that he read *Joys and Sorrows of the Naksang Boy* last summer, so I ask him how he got hold of the book.

–X.: Did you purchase it at the township seat?

–R**: No, no, there is no bookshop at the township seat!

–X.: At the county seat, then?

–R**: No, I don’t believe it’s for sale there. You can find the book in Xining. [...]

R** did not know about *Joys and Sorrows* (“Had I seen it, I wouldn’t have known what it was!”) until his elder son, who attends a private school in another Tibetan prefecture, brought the book home during the holidays³¹.

- 53 R** subsequently purchased the book and brought it to the school where he works, where he talked about it with his colleagues and students and offered to lend it to them, encountering more (among the students) or less (among his colleagues) success.
- 54 One can also observe slightly more formalised microcircuits of distribution of print. While I was staying at T** township, one of the teachers brought back ten copies of a journal issue to the school. He said he wanted to sell them, although he did not seem to deploy any significant effort towards achieving this goal.

Sunday evening, Teacher D** came back from a weekend spent at the county seat. He brought back a book, a journal and some newspapers. Another teacher, a monk, asked D** whether these were all in Tibetan, and upon hearing D**’s positive reply, expressed his approval: “Ah, that’s very good!” After dinner, we went to have tea in D**’s room. He has a subscription to the newspaper *Qinghai Legal News* (*Mtsho sngon khirms lugs tshags par*, the Tibetan version of *Qinghai fazhi bao* 青海法制报), of which he brought back a few issues. He also brought with him an issue of a journal called *Lam* (path), part of which was devoted to the expression of condolences and grief for the victims of the earthquake that hit Yushu (Tib. Yul shul, Ch. Yushu 玉树) on April 14, 2010. The book he brought back is Sangdor’s (Tib. Seng rdor) recently published latest book, *Voice of an Ordinary Person* (*So skyes skad sgra*).

A few days later, while helping D** install some programmes and dictionaries on his computer, I spent the evening in his room, along with other teachers he had invited to share some boiled meat. D** explained that the ten copies of the journal that he purchased were in fact intended for reselling. But “I don’t do any advertising”, said D** – indeed the journal copies remained piled up on his desk, and served to plant candles, judging from the wax marks on the copy on top of the pile. When I asked

him whether he found the journal interesting, he replied that he did, “there are a lot of texts in there”. At the same time, his brother exclaimed “He hasn’t read it!” D**’s rather vague response, indeed, allows to suppose so. He paid 10 RMB per copy, which corresponds to the price indicated on the journal’s cover, thus spending 100 RMB in total³².

- 55 These observations testify to the capillary nature of the distribution of print, which espouses readers’ mobility patterns. They also reveal that the possession of books may be publicised and made the object of moral judgements, such as when the monk teacher approves of the fact that all the reading materials that D** brought back with him were in Tibetan³³. Given the limited interest D** shows for the journal, I surmise that someone he knows might have entrusted him, or sold him, these issues requesting his help to distribute them.
- 56 The circulation of reading materials very often occurs outside the commercial circuit, be it in bookshops, bazaars, or transactions between individuals. Seven out of twelve readers stated that they read borrowed books, and eight of them that they read books they had received as gifts. Such gifts most often originate with friends, but sometimes with the school or teachers too. The range of objects read, in this situation of relative shortage of access to print, is constrained by the titles possessed by the readers, their families and people of their more or less close entourage. Knowing that someone owns a copy of this or that title, keeping abreast of rare books brought back to one’s village or school by neighbours or schoolmates and teachers, thus allows making plans to borrow books.
- 57 In the context of this limited case study, a statistical data analysis would not make much sense: the number of respondents is limited, responses are at times missing, others remain vague. The data assembled nevertheless allows establishing the very common character of borrowing and offering books. The micro-chains of distribution (sometimes characterised by chains of successive loans) observed in the course of my investigation about *Joys and Sorrows*’ area of reception also confirm the role of hearsay, book borrowing and gifts in the distribution of the book. The circulation of books and their reputations, all the more so when places where books are sold are far from those where readers reside, occurs by proximate steps, in a geographical but even more so in a social sense, from person to person, following networks of sociability. Of course, reading does not result automatically from such circulation: each reader’s dispositions and interests orient his or her reading practices just as much as the physical availability of books or other people’s recommendations.

Glimpses of a shared literary universe

Taxonomies

- 58 Before commenting upon the corpus of books in circulation among the students surveyed in T** township, a few words need to be said about the ways they structure this literary universe. What are the taxonomies mobilised by the students to describe the books they read? Are readings identified by reference to an author, a title, or a generic category? Does a system of implicit classification and a hierarchy of literary works emerge from the observed taxonomies? At this stage, although this certainly constitutes an important area of inquiry, my data does not allow us to measure to what extent the taxonomies mobilised by the students conform to the ways literature is

taught and to the legitimate systems of identification of literary works conveyed by school education.

- 59 One reader only (reader no. 6) avoids any kind of generic designation, and refers to books owned and read by giving two titles. Reader no. 10 employs some generic designations, but her responses stand out in that she refers to books owned or read exclusively by authors' names: Dondrupgyal, Tseten Zhabdrung (Tib. Tse tan zhab drung, 1910-1985), and Sakya Kunga Gyaltzen (Tib. Sa skya kun dga' rgyal mtshan) are thus some of the books owned in her household; Hortsang Jigme (Hor gtsang 'jigs med) is her favourite book, and she also enjoys reading Dong Yontan Gyatso (Tib. Ldong Yon tan rgya mtsho). Could this usage be explained by the fact that these are all quite famous authors? It is still worth remarking that except for her, all the other respondents identify books they own or read by reference to a category or by giving their titles.
- 60 Both in the descriptions of possessed books and in those of the most enjoyed readings, history (*lo rgyus*) stands out as a well-established category, and as a category mentioned with a remarkable frequency: eight of the readers surveyed mention it among their recent and enjoyed readings, and two additional ones indicate that they have history books at home. In the questionnaires, this label either appears alone (in the usage of three readers), or, more often, accompanied by a specification: five readers use the category of "Tibetan history" (*bod kyi lo rgyus*), while others mention "the history of the Chinese and of other nationalities" (*rgya'i lo rgyus dang mi rigs gzhan pa'i lo rgyus*), "history of foreign countries" (*phyi rgyal khab kyi lo rgyus*), "the history of times past" (*sngon gyi lo rgyus*), "histories of bygone scholars" (*sngon gyi mkhas pa rnam gyi lo rgyus*), "histories of the birth of languages and nationalities, of their existence, and of their deaths, etc." (*skad dang mi rigs skyes pa'i lo rgyus/ gnas pa'i lo rgyus/ 'chi pa'i lo rgyus sogs/*). With increasing specifications, we slip from what at first appeared to be a generic classification to a thematic one. Furthermore, several of the titles mentioned, although they are not the work of historians (see table 3), may also be included in the thematic meta-category of books about history.
- 61 The second meta-category that we can distinguish is the admittedly rather vague one of "literature" (*rtsom rig*)³⁴, used as such by two readers. Three other expressions appearing in responses may be related to it. Poetry (*snyan ngag*) is a category cited by two readers. A subset relative to fiction writing also stands out. Several denominations refer to it: *sgrung gtam*, "fictional narrative" (readers no. 2, no. 3, and no. 4); *sgrung deb*, "work of fiction/collection of short stories" (reader no. 7); *rtsom [sic] sgrung*, "short story/novel" (reader no. 10). It should be noted that the term *sgrung*, although it serves to name the Gesar epic (*Sgrung*, or *Ge sar sgrung*) as well as the *The Corpse's Playful Tales* (*Mi ro rtse sgrung*), and most often connotes fiction, more generally refers to narratives of human affairs, fictional or not³⁵. Lastly, three readers employ very general designations that we nevertheless group within the overarching category of "literature", given their etymological proximity to the term *rtsom rig*: *rtsom deb*, or "collections of texts", *rtsom yig*, "texts" (including texts written by classmates, mentioned by reader no. 12), and lastly *bod kyi rstom yig*, or "Tibetan texts" (reader no. 10). Without further specification, these labels could refer all sorts of texts (fiction, essays, poetry...), or perhaps to journals and collections such as those that we saw circulating among the students. There is a striking contrast between the number of students mentioning fiction among their readings and the absence of any author or

title that could be related to this category, with the exception of Dondrupgyal. Although this question calls for further investigation, this could be a sign of the lower status given to fictional texts.

- 62 The other expressions referring to generic categories used in responses to my questionnaire are the following: *gna' dpe*, “ancient books” (reader no. 7); *rgya yig*, “[in] Chinese” (among the readings reader no. 8 enjoys); *chab srid*, “politics” (among the books possessed by the household of reader no. 9); *bsam blo'i skor*, “about ideas” (enjoyed by reader no. 1); *mi'i bsam blo dang lta ba mi rigs'du shes sogs*, “[about] human ideas and opinions, [Tibetan] national feelings, etc.” (readings enjoyed by reader no. 3).
- 63 The taxonomy employed thus appears as relatively weakly structured and little formalised. Does the tendency to put on the same footing designations of works by reference to titles, themes, languages and other heterogeneous categories result from our inquirers' relatively low level of formal education? The classification of Tibetan literature into genres, both historically and nowadays, is a domain where categories remain fluctuant. The question thus remains open until more studies of locally employed taxonomies come forth.

A “reading revolution”?

- 64 We have until now considered what appeared in the responses to our questionnaire, but we should also account for what does not. The absence of any religious or devotional books indeed comes as somewhat of a surprise. The students surveyed also possess prayer books – prayers are recited collectively every morning in the schoolyard. With the exception of *gna' dpe*, or “ancient books”, mentioned by reader no. 7 – which could refer to books of religious usage –, no reader mentions any devotional books among his or her readings, nor among the books and other printed materials possessed by their household. This could be explained by the phrasing of my questionnaire, where I translated “reading” by *dpe deb klog pa* or *dpe deb lta ba*. Devotional readings are indeed more often referred to by the expression *chos 'don*, where *chos* designates religion, and *'don*, in this context, refers to “reciting, chanting, reading”³⁶. Could this absence (also?) be explained by the respondents' assumption that religious uses of books were not what I was interested in? Could it be due to a relatively clear distinction established by these inquirers between religious or devotional uses of books and their worldly usages, thus signalling an ongoing process of secularisation?
- 65 One of the rare accounts of reading practices in pastoral areas of Amdo that we have are the observations made by the missionary and anthropologist Robert B. Ekvall (1898-1983) in the beginning of the 20th century (Ekvall 1964). Compared to our observations in the early 21st century, these allow us to highlight several evolutions in the realm of “popular” reading practices. Changes concern both reading skills and the variety of their uses. According to Ekvall, it could then be estimated that about 50 percent of lay men could read, or, at the least, decipher Tibetan writing, while the majority of women remained illiterate³⁷. Ekvall also remarks that the literacy rates were systematically higher among pastoralists than among agriculturalists (Ekvall 1964, p. 124, n. 34). The American diplomat and explorer William W. Rockhill (1854-1914), who travelled through parts of Amdo and Kham in the late 1880s, also remarked that:

the people in the more civilised parts of eastern Tibet are not entirely devoid of some elementary education. Reading and writing is, however, about as far as they get, [...] most people can read both the capital script (*wu chān*), and the cursive character (*wu méd*), the latter not without difficulties, on account of the numerous abbreviations introduced in it. At Ta-chien-lu [Tib. Dar rtse mdo, nowadays Ch. Kangding 康定] and other large places the girls attend school as well as a few of the boys, learning to read and write letters [...]. (Rockhill 1891, pp. 245-246)

- 66 As for aims and learning contexts, Ekvall notes the principal reason for learning to read was religious (“the desire to read the many prayers, charms, and sermons of the Buddhist scriptures and religious manuals”), and that reading was taught primarily by monks (Ekvall 1964, p.125). Learning contexts and aims of reading have thus undergone a notable diversification, and secular usages, although attested before 1950 (Ekvall 1964, p. 144), have progressively gained in importance.
- 67 This is absolutely not to say that devotional uses of religious books have disappeared from the Amdo of the 2000s. Tibetan students in Xining more than once told me that the capacity to read and recite prayers was the main benefit their parents and grandparents saw to their learning to read Tibetan at school. Devotional books produced by state publishing houses occupy a prominent place on the book market. The *Collection of Prayers and Praises (Bstod smon phyogs bsgrigs)*, for example, is the absolute bestseller among the books produced by the Qinghai nationalities’ publishing house³⁸, closely followed by *Heap of Goodness (Bkra shis brtsegs pa)*, which is another collection of prayers. Religious usages of books in illiterate or little-literate milieus (among others) remain very much alive. With regard to religious books (*chos dpe*), “even if you don’t know how to read, you need to have some!”, summarised a Tibetan primary school teacher who worked at the county seat of a pastoral area in Kanlho T.A.P. (Ch. Gannan 甘南, Gansu Province)³⁹. It appears that reading and owning books should be considered separately. For devotional books, in particular, the symbolic importance and ritual efficacy of their simple possession and manipulations other than reading should not be underestimated (Diemberger 2014, 2012a, 2012b). One should also bear in mind that illiteracy is far from being synonymous with lack of familiarity with the written, all the less so in the “culture of universal literacy” that developed in Tibet, to borrow Matthew Kaptsein’s expression (Kapstein 2006, p. 26).
- 68 It is in the variety of materials read that the most marked changes appear in comparison with the mainly devotional reading practices described by Ekvall. Should this evolution be regarded as an equivalent of the “reading revolution” that occurred in western Europe at the end of the 18th century? According to this theory, reading then shifted from the repeated and intensive use of a limited number of works, often of devotional nature, to an extensive form of reading, with a larger number of different texts being read more superficially. Originally proposed by Rolf Engelsing (1974) to describe the evolution of German society, the analysis in terms of a “reading revolution” cannot be extended without precautions to other contexts. The historian Robert Darnton thus questions its relevance to analyse reading in 18th century France. Examining the case of an “ordinary” reader of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean Ranson, Darnton notes that while modern readers such as Ranson read many newspapers and novels (and thus practised “extensive reading”), this did not prevent them from the continued intensive reading of classics, newspapers, or novels (Darnton 2003).
- 69 In consequence, we should not conclude too hastily that a “reading revolution” occurred in Tibet during the second half of the 20th century. While Ekvall reports that

written works in circulation were essentially devotional, the fact remains that we still know too little about the books that circulated before 1950, their distribution, and their usages, namely in secular contexts, and especially in popular milieus⁴⁰. It is certain that the growth of state and private publishing, in particular since the 1980s for the former, and since the 1990s and 2000s for the latter, together with the spread of computers and of Unicode technology, have allowed for a multiplication and diversification of Tibetan language publishing. However, the limits of the commercial book distribution system that existed in the 2010s still strongly constrained access to texts. In a context of shortage, some of the readers observed in T** township are restrained to the repeated frequenting of the same texts; others reread books, up to five or six times, to better appropriate their meanings. Others yet reread books that they like, by pleasure. Intensive reading is far from having disappeared. Reading skills are, however, put to use for the purpose of reading works of diverse natures and with different aims. This will appear from a brief examination of the corpus of works in circulation among the studied community of readers, elaborated on the basis of the students' responses to our questionnaire.

The literary universe of a community of readers in a remote pastoral area

70 An inventory of all the books cited by the student respondents to my questionnaire, including the books they read during the last two years, the ones they own and the ones they like most, allows to highlight the diversity of their reading practices (see table 3). It also allows drawing an incomplete, yet empirical, corpus of works in circulation among this community of “popular” readers. Information provided by how respondents designated these books (by title or otherwise) was whenever possible supplemented with bibliographical details discovered during fieldwork or found by searching in library catalogues and bibliographic databases (in particular Latse Library's catalogue and the Buddhist Digital Resource Center), and by consulting a website specialising in the sale of Tibetan books (the late Tibetbook.net) as well as Tibetan language websites and blogs.

Table 3. Bibliography of works read during the last two years, owned and/or appreciated, cited by eleven students in T township (2011)**

Whenever possible, I have reconstituted complete bibliographical references for the works in circulation. When it was not possible to identify the works mentioned, references are given in quotation marks, as they appeared in the questionnaires

Tibetan history

GENDUN CHÖPHEL (DGE 'DUN CHOS 'PHEL, 1903-1951), *Deb ther dkar po* [The white annals], Beijing, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2002 [1946], 7 RMB, 117 p. Its first edition in the PRC was an “internal document” published in 1978 (Lanzhou, Kan lho gсар 'gyur khang yig sgyur tshan khag). The first “open” edition was produced by the Nationalities Publishing House in 2002.

NAKTSANG NÜLO (NAGS TSHANG NUS BLO, born 1948), *Nags tshang zhi lu'i skyid sdug* [Joys and sorrows of the Naktsang boy], Xining, Qinghai Xining yinshuachang, 2007, 15 RMB, 491 p.

<p>SHAMDO RINZANG (BYA MDO RIN BZANG, born?), <i>Nga'i pha yul dang gzab nyan</i> [My hometown: listening carefully], (coll. “<i>Rin bzang gi mu 'brel zin tho</i> [Rinzang's Continuous Notes]”), s.l. [Xining?], n.d. [2008], 13 RMB, 206 p.</p>
<p>General knowledge</p> <p>KHENPO TSULTRIM LODRÖ (MKHAN PO TSHUL KHRIMS BLO GROS, born 1967), <i>'Dzam gling skad yig gi skye 'chi'i lo rgyus bsdus pa lug rdzi rgan po'i ki sgra</i> [A concise history of the birth and death of languages: The call of the old shepherd], s.l., 2009, 6 RMB, 72 p.</p> <p>“<i>Gzhon nu'i rab byams khag gnyis</i>”. Unidentified work. Could be a reference to NYIZHÖN (NYI GZHON, born ?) (ed.), <i>Gzhon nu'i rab byad</i> [Treaty for the youth], (Coll. “<i>Blo 'byed klog deb dpe tshogs</i> [Books to open up the mind]”), Lanzhou, Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2010. Works of this type – <i>byis pa'i rab byed</i> (treaties for the children) and <i>gzhon nu rab byed</i> (treaties for the youth) – typically consist of a collection of articles synthesizing general knowledge (<i>rgyun shes</i>) on diverse topics, such as Tibetan history, agricultural and pastoral ways of life, Tibetan proverbs and songs, etc.</p>
<p>Language & vocabulary, Tibetan grammar</p> <p>GANGS LJONGS SHES RIG NOR BU'I SLOB GLING [Jewel of the knowledge of the Land of Snows Institute], <i>Rgyun bkod tha snyad phyogs bsgrigs</i> [Collection of common vocabulary], s.l., 2009, 6,80 RMB, 294 p. Bilingual Tibetan and Chinese, illustrated.</p> <p>KHENPO TSULTRIM LODRÖ (MKHAN PO TSHUL KHRIMS BLO GROS, born 1962) (ed.), <i>Rgya bod dbyin gsum gсар byung rgyun bkod ris 'grel ming mdzod</i> [Illustrated vocabulary of common neologisms in Chinese, Tibetan and English], Chengdu, Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2007, 15 yuans, 145 p. This thematic vocabulary, containing color illustrations for each of the terms and neologisms listed, was very successful in the few years that followed its publication. Its elaboration has involved, under the direction of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö, scholars from all of Tibet's linguistic areas in China.</p> <p><i>Skad gsum lo tsa ba</i> [The trilingual translator], Kunming, Yun nan mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2010. Conversation manual accompanied by an audio disk in Tibetan, Chinese and English.</p> <p><i>Sum cu pa dang rtags kyi 'jug pa</i> [The thirty and the signs]. <i>The Thirty</i> and <i>The Signs</i> are two essential works for learning Tibetan orthography and grammar, attributed to Thönmi Sambhota (Tib. Thon mi sam bho ta, born 619?), who is considered as the creator of the Tibetan alphabet. The shortened expression <i>sum rtags</i> designates two treatises attributed to Thönmi Sambhota: the “Fundamental grammar in thirty stanzas” (<i>Lung ston pa rtsa ba sum cu pa</i>) and the “Guide to signs” (<i>Lung du ston pa rtags kyi 'jug pa</i>). Very numerous commented editions of these two texts exist (Thönmi's treatises being very dense and hard to understand), most often in the form of pocket format books comprising a few tens of pages, sold at a very accessible price.</p> <p>“<i>Tshe tan zhabs drung</i>”. No title provided. The author referred to is in all likelihood the 6th Tseten Zhabdrung, Jigme Rigpai Lodrö (Tib. 'jigs med rigs pa'i blo gros, 1910-1985), famous scholar who published a great number of works in the 1950s and after 1978, including historical works as well as didactic works on Tibetan language, grammar, and poetry. An edition of his collected works was published in 2007 by the Beijing-based Nationalities Publishing House.</p>
<p>Essays on contemporary Tibetan society and culture</p> <p><i>Bdag dpe tshogs</i> [Self book series], comprising six volumes edited by Shokdung (Tib. Zhogs dung, real name Bkra rgyal, born in 1963), published by the Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House between 2003 and 2005.</p>

“*Bdud lha rgyal gyi rtsom rigs phyogs bsdus* [Collection of literature by Dudlhagyal]”. This edition of collected texts by Dudlhagyal (Tib. Bdud lha rgyal, born in 1965) has not been identified. It could refer to Bdud lha rgyal (ed.), *Bod kyi rtsom rig gсар ba’i brtsams chos bdams bkod dang de dag gi bshad pa* [Selection and analysis of texts of Tibetan new literature], Lanzhou, Kan su’u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1998, 462 p. Dudlhagyal teaches literature at the Lanzhou Northwestern Nationalities’ University and is considered as one of today’s best literary critics.

“*Bla dpe tshogs* [Life book series]”. Series comprising eight titles edited by Melce (Tib. Me lce, born in?) and published in Lanzhou by the Gansu Nationalities Publishing House in 2008.

RADZA JAMYANGKYI (RA RDZA ’JAM DBYANGS SKYID, born in 1965), *Za ma mo’i skyid sdug gangs ma char* [Women’s joys and sorrows: mixed rain and snow], Lanzhou, Kan su’u mi rigs dpe skrun khang (coll. “Bla dpe tshogs [Life book series]”), 2008, 18 RMB, 257 p.

“*Rtsom rig dang mi gshis*.” Unidentified work. Could perhaps be a reference to: BYA GZHUNG DBYANGS BHA, *Rtsom rig dang mi* [Literature and man], Lanzhou, Kan su’u mi rigs dpe skrun khang (coll. “Bla dpe tshogs” [Life book series]”), 2008 (reprinted in 2010), or to: ’GYAN SANGS RGYAS DON GRUB, *Rig gnas dang mi gshis* [Culture and character], Lanzhou, Kan su’u mi rigs dpe skrun khang (coll. “Bla dpe tshogs” [Life book series]”), 2008.

Fiction

“*Don grub rgyal*”. No title is given for Dondrupgyal (Tib. Don grub rgyal, 1953-1985), but this mention could refer to his short stories. Considered as one of the founders of modern Tibetan literature, Dondrupgyal durably marked the Tibetan cultural scene by his poems (namely in free verse), his shorts stories, his *kha shag* (comedic dialogues), but also by his research on classical Tibetan literature and on the history of the Tibetan Empire.

Classics and folk literature

Chu ngogs gtam rgyud [Water margin]. Classical work of 14th century Chinese literature (Ch. *Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传), this adventure novel was translated into Tibetan in the 1960-1970s. Several editions of this work exist: Lhasa, Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang (4 vols, published between 1978 and 1980, republished in 2001-2002), Chengdu, Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun tshogs pa 2011, 314 p.

’Gro ba bzang mo’i rnam thar [The namthar of Drowa Zangmo]. Several editions of this Tibetan drama (sometimes called “opera”) booklet have been produced in the PCR since the 1980s, e.g.: Lhasa, Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1980, 2004, 2007; Beijing, Krung go’i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2011.

“*Sa skya kun dga’ rgyal mtshan*”. No title is provided for the author Sakya Kunga Gyaltzen (Tib. Sa skya kun dga’ rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251), also known as Sakya Pandita. Could refer to *Mkhas pa rnam’s jug pa’i sgo* [The entrance gate for the wise] or to a collection of aphorisms (*Sa skya legs bshad*), which are among his most circulated writings.

Poetry

“*Don grub rgyal*”. No title is provided, but this could refer to Dondrupgyal’s poetry.

“*Ldong yon tan rgya mtsho*”. No title provided. The Buddhist figure Dong Yontan Gyamtso (Tib. Ldong Yon tan rgya mtsho, born in 1974) has published over twenty works on diverse topics (education, didactics, astronomy, etc.) and is particularly renowned for his poetry.

CHENMETAK (Tib. Gcan me stag, born in 1970), <i>Lho bzhud kyi chu 'dzin</i> [The boat sailing towards the south], Xining, Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2004.
“ <i>Hor gtsang 'jigs med</i> ”. No title provided. Hortsang Jigmé (born in 1967) published several collections of poetry in Tibet, before going into exile in 1992. In India, he also published a brief autobiography and essays’ collections, and edited a history of Amdo in six volumes, which was published in 2009.
<u>Textbooks</u>
“ <i>Dbyin yig</i> [English language]”.
“ <i>Grangs rig</i> [Mathematics]”.
“ <i>Rgya yig</i> [Chinese language]”.
“ <i>Tshad ma rig pa</i> [Logic/epistemology]”.
<u>Other</u>
“ <i>Rang gis rang la 'dzub ston byed pa</i> [Guiding oneself on one’s own].” Unidentified work.
“ <i>So kham</i> [?]”. Unidentified work.

- 71 Thanks to this inventory, we can further enrich our observations about the reading practices observed, by giving them concrete contents. The classification employed in table 3 derives only in part from the locally used taxonomies. It aims to allow for an initial exploration of the data, and does not correspond univocally to a repertoire of reading practices that would differ according to their aims. If we refer, for example, to the four categories of reading aims proposed by Gérard Mauger and Claude Poliak (1999) – i.e. didactic reading (reading in order to learn), reading for entertainment (reading in order to get away), reading for salvation (reading in order to perfect oneself), and aesthetic reading (reading for the sake of reading) – it quickly appears that the students’ readings often pursue more than one aim at a time. We have already noted this: this reader enjoys reading poetry (aesthetic reading), while insisting on its moral benefits (reading for salvation) (reader no. 4); that reader stresses that reading *A Concise History of the Birth and Death of the World’s Languages* (didactic reading) triggered in him a sense of collective responsibility as a Tibetan for the preservation of his mother tongue (reading for salvation) (reader no. 5); another reader yet notes that reading a collection of interviews about experiences of the 1950s and 1960s in the area of Shamdo (Tib. Bya mdo) (didactic reading) arose “loyalty/love” and “respect” for his nationality in him (reading for salvation) (reader no. 6); another one yet states she loves reading Tibetan fiction writings (reading for entertainment), also to “study [her] own language” (didactic reading) (reader no. 10).
- 72 Some readings, didactic at first sight, such as works about Tibetan language and history, may thus also take on a salvation-related dimension, denoting a belief that “reading allows to act well or to act better, to be well or to be better” (Mauger & Poliak 1999, p. 417, my translation). Many discourses in circulation at the time of my inquiry construed knowledge and preservation of the Tibetan language and of the history of past generations as a condition of survival of the Tibetan people, Tibetan language being assimilated to their “vital principle” (Tib. *bla srog*), and the transmission of

history to a condition of existence⁴¹. As Naktsang Nülo writes in his preface to *Joys and Sorrows*: “If, at the time of the sons and nephews, the history of the times of their fathers and uncles is not known anymore, a day will come when this family and this nationality, having forgotten their own history, will sink into the unknown without leaving a trace” (Nags tshang nus blo 2007, p. 2, my translation). Maybe the frontiers between different reading repertoires are all the more blurred when available reading materials are scarce. Maybe they are, also, under the influence of teachers encouraging students to think about “nationality matters” (Tib. *mi rigs kyi don dag*), and of the exhortations carried by some of these texts themselves.

- 73 Concerning the category of “Tibetan history”, which as we have seen appears with a remarkable frequency, it should be underlined that the titles listed cover a matter which is not taught at school. When Tibetan history is tackled in the curricula of government schools, it is only through the very politicised prism of the history of the PRC. The *White Annals*, for example, cited by readers no. 1 and no. 8, is a work by Gendun Chöphel, an early 20th-century figure who was quite controversial at the time but has become a sort of cultural icon today. It deals with the political history of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries), a period of great military and diplomatic expansion, and of unprecedented cultural flourishing, marked namely by the creation of the Tibetan alphabet. The two other titles cited that pertain to the category of “Tibetan history” deal with a more recent past and geographically closer places: both relate personal experiences of the 1950s and 1960s in pastoral areas of Qinghai and neighbouring Gansu, providing detailed accounts of the revolts and repression of the year 1958. *My Hometown: Listening Carefully* was an unauthorised publication without ISBN that appeared in 2008, while *Joys and Sorrows* was published in 2007 with an authorisation to print (Ch. *zhun yin zheng* 准印证), but nevertheless condemned by the authorities some two years later. Both titles were often identified as “political books” and were sold under the counter in Xining Tibetan bookshops in the autumn of 2009.
- 74 The number of references to recently published essays about Tibetan culture and society is quite striking. The two collections cited by reader no. 3, to which titles cited by readers no. 1 and no. 8 also pertain, gather writings by modernist Tibetan intellectuals, most of whom were born in the 1960s and promoted a “new culture”. Wu Qi underlines that the titles chosen for these two collections explicitly aim to demarcate these thinkers from a Buddhist vision of the world⁴². Intellectuals who belong to this movement, which developed in the 1990s, called themselves “new thinkers” (*bsam blo gsar ba*) and advocated radical cultural reforms, criticising the Buddhist belief system and questioning the value of “traditional” Tibetan culture. Their writings, namely those of their leader Shokdung (see Hartley 2002), triggered important controversies and remain frowned upon by the most conservative sections of Tibetan society. The reading and possession of these books indicate that although they are both geographically isolated and socially distant from the Tibetan urban intellectual elite, it doesn’t mean for all that that “popular” readers in T** township are totally disconnected from the debates in which the cultural elite is engaged, namely, through the medium of writing. The forms of book circulation and the modalities of reading that we have described allow us to specify how they access them.
- 75 The works listed in the “poetry” section probably constitute only the tip of the iceberg. As Françoise Robin has written, Tibet poetry “is not at all marginal or restricted to some passionate or hard-core individuals. On the contrary, of good or poor quality,

poetic creation is bountiful” (Robin 2011, my translation). I observed students in T** township reading – and composing – poetry more than once. This practice is also encouraged by the school, which organised a poetry recitation contest during one of my stays there, where students read both from famous contemporary poetry works and their own compositions. Connected to current intellectual debates and reading modern poetry works, these students nevertheless also read “classics”, be they reference works on Tibetan language, such as the writings of the scholar Tseten Zhabdrung or works attributed to Sakya Pandita, or works pertaining to the Tibetan drama tradition (Tib. *a lce lha mo, rnam thar*).

- 76 While five out of eleven students mention works of fiction among the books they have read or possess, the only element in our bibliography which may be related to this category is the name of Dondrupgyal. Considered as one of the founders of modern Tibetan literature, initiator of free verse poetry in Tibetan, and author of numerous short stories, this writer who committed suicide at the age of 32 profoundly and lastingly marked the Tibetan literary scene. In his short stories, he criticised many aspects of Tibetan culture, but called his compatriots to be proud of and devoted to it (to have *la rgya*), and to engage with modernity while drawing from their rich cultural heritage. As with Gendun Chöphel, one can say that Dondrupgyal has become a sort of cultural icon in Amdo: his writings continue to be the object of research and analysis, posters of him are sold in bookshops, his works are republished by state publishing houses and pirated by unofficial publishers (sign that they sell well). In 2010, the Tibetan rap group Yudruk (G.yu 'brug, or “turquoise dragon”) did homage to Dondrupgyal and his 1983 poem, “waterfall of youth” (*Lang tsho'i 'bab chu*). The absence of details about readings of fiction, or about readings in Chinese, could be a sign of the inferior status given to these books⁴³.
- 77 The bibliography of books in circulation produced in the context of this case study cannot be considered to be an exhaustive inventory of the readings of the students surveyed in T** township. What Bourdieu calls a “legitimacy effect” (“As soon as we ask someone what he reads, he hears: what do I read which is worthy of being declared?”, Chartier & Bourdieu 2003, p. 284) seems to have played a role in the responses given, perhaps associated to a “political effect” leading to an under-declaration or allusive evocations (such as “Tibetan history”) for readings that could be labelled “political”. In some cases, I know that respondents have read and enjoyed *Joys and Sorrows* or Tsering Dondrup’s *The Red Wind Scream* (Tshe ring don grub, *Rlung dmar 'ur 'ur*) a historical novel published without authorisation in 2009 and quickly banned, but these titles do not appear in their responses to the questionnaire. My observations and informal exchanges with respondents thus allow, to a certain degree, to contextualise and assess the information gathered with the help of the circulated questionnaire. The obvious limitations of this inquiry method, in sum, do not disqualify the information that has been gathered. On the one hand, the works that are cited may be considered as being effectively read, owned, or at least known among this readers’ community. On the other hand, their analysis suggests relevant directions for further inquiry (for example, the status given to fiction writing).
- 78 In an admittedly partial way, this bibliography thus provides us with an empirical glimpse into a shared literary universe, where writers from Amdo dominate. This universe includes older and more recent works, “classics” as well as books by modernist and/or controversial intellectuals, books with or without ISBNs, authorised,

tolerated or banned by the authorities. The investigation conducted in Xining, in private Tibetan bookshops as well as among more educated readers, allows us to assert that this list is not made of books that would be specifically “popular” in and of themselves. Given the difficulties of access to print, it is indeed quite remarkable that the surveyed community of readers should not be entirely disconnected from the latest developments taking place on the tibetophone literary and intellectual scenes. The readings of the more educated cultural elite may well be more numerous and varied, namely for readers who live in cities where books are more readily accessible in nearby bookshops. Different ways of reading characterising distinct communities of readers remain to be better studied. The case study presented here nevertheless shows the existence of a corpus of texts circulating throughout society as a whole.

Conclusion

- 79 Given the dearth of empirical data on reading practices in contemporary Tibet, the topic has been approached by way of a case study. We have attempted to highlight the diversity of reading trajectories among a community of readers in a remote pastoral area of Amdo, and to shed light on some of the concrete uses and forms of sociability that give shape to the areas of reception of books and other written works in Tibet. It is to be hoped that more case studies in different social milieus will emerge in the future to complement the first observations presented in this paper, to understand how representative they might be, to define patterns of variation, and to describe how reading practices have evolved over time. Preliminary as they are, our observations nevertheless allow us to draw a number of findings and suggest several directions for further inquiry. Some of these findings are not necessarily new in the general context of the history and sociology of reading, but the case study presented here for the first time provides empirical data on these questions in the Tibetan context.
- 80 The relative character of constraints – be they geographical, economic, commercial, political, temporal, or related to linguistic skills – weighing upon access to texts in the studied community is one of our key observations. Rather than impeding reading practices, these constraints give them specific forms, which should be compared to those prevailing among other communities of readers. Although we may loosely describe the observed readers, and hence their practices, as “popular”, the sacrality associated with Tibetan writing and the community-building dimension of reading imply that the reading activities described in this paper are much more than simply a “popular practice”. Comparative data is indeed required to determine whether it is really relevant to describe the reading practices observed in T** township as “popular”, as we provisionally have, and, if so, what aspects of the observed practices may be termed specifically “popular”.
- 81 My exchanges, between 2008 and 2012, with more educated readers living in Xining – often “avid” readers, such as university students, professors, editors or writers – suggest that such a comparison would bring forth both contrasts and similarities⁴⁴. In terms of similarities, my observations in Xining show an imbrication of networks of sociability and uses of the book comparable to the one noted in T** township, including the importance of book loans and gifts in the patterns of book circulation. In Xining as elsewhere, educational institutions are privileged loci for the circulation of written works, and of their reputations. The density of mutual acquaintance networks in

learned milieus, however, allows for easier access to texts, at times compensating the limitations of commercial distribution circuits⁴⁵. Analogies between the observed “popular” and more “lettered” reading practices, according to my preliminary observations, also include the shared use of literature as a reservoir of figures of reference and sources of inspiration for conduct, amongst which at least some are shared. At a dinner with friends, mentioning the most famous poem composed by the one considered as the founder of Tibetan new poetry, whose works are also read in T** township, a famous actor and poet thus commented: “What is [Dondrupgyal’s] ‘Waterfall of youth’? It is courage (Tib. *snying stobs*)! Dondrupgyal is a hero (Tib. *dpa’ bo*)!”⁴⁶. The collective aspect of reading practices in themselves, in some cases, as well as of processes of interpretation and appropriation of texts, should thus be further investigated in different social milieus.

- 82 As for contrasts, the relative abundance and ease of access to print for readers based in Xining, a city concentrating many Tibetan bookshops, should, of course, be underlined. Readers’ mobility and sociability patterns are thus likely to have less impact on the networks of print distribution, and access to print, among readers living in the provincial capital. At the time this case study was conducted, in addition, the range of texts accessible to educated readers in Xining was broadened by on- and off-line access to texts in digital format. This contrast has probably diminished over time, with the diffusion of Internet access and touchscreen phones connected thereto, including in rural areas. Another factor considerably increases the variety of texts accessed by educated Tibetan readers in Xining: reading skills in Chinese. The usages and types of texts read in different languages call for further research. We can, however, note one type of written matter read in Xining but virtually absent from T** township: this is the daily newspaper, read in Chinese by some readers, often with a marked critical distance.
- 83 Our case study also points to the existence of a hierarchy of literary writings, which remains to be better discerned. With regard to this question, the possible evolution of the status of fiction writing over the past few decades should be examined with particular attention. More generally, the prestige associated with the written word should also be scrutinised: how has it evolved in the recent past? Does one observe variations according to professional or social milieus, and/or according to different contexts of usage of the written? Building on an analytical frame proposed by Roger Chartier, and originally not designed for the observed situation, we have observed that for the readers surveyed in T** township, reading practices developed in a context of scarcity and, to a certain extent, of sacrality, given the embeddedness of reading in religious contexts. Chartier’s model was developed for mostly secularised contexts and further inquiry is needed to take into account and articulate both secular and religious uses of reading in the Tibetan case, and to determine how, or to what degree, religious conceptions and usages influence contemporary reading practices, including the readings of secular texts.
- 84 Lastly, while the possible variety of their uses remains to be documented, our case study shows the existence of a corpus of texts circulating throughout society. This paper has attempted to describe some of the concrete modalities that give rise to what some Tibet specialists have termed a “proxy public forum”, made up of literature and other forms of cultural creation. While the relevance of referring to the concept of “public sphere” may be debated in the context of a non-democratic political regime, it

does appear that we are dealing with a public. One that is subject to important political limitations, and thus differs from political publics characteristic of democratic public spheres. The publics observed in Tibet, and the one described in this paper, nevertheless constitute instances of the specifically modern form of a relationship between strangers, permeated by the consciousness of being part of a public and permitted by the multiplied circulation of printed texts (and, today, of texts in digital format)⁴⁷. This case study shows how the most modest of readers take part in this public, underlining the necessity not to limit our studies of reading practices, and more generally of usages of the written, to their most expert practitioners.

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NOTES

1. I use "Tibet" to refer to Tibet as a cultural area, which is sometimes designated as "ethnographic Tibet". Referring to today's administrative divisions in the People's Republic of China (PRC), this includes the Tibet Autonomous Region (T.A.R.), but also the areas densely populated by Tibetans in the neighbouring provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan, home to more than half of the people officially classified as Tibetans by the Chinese authorities.

2. On the influence of the linguistic varieties used in the book on its area of reception, see de Heering 2014 and 2019.
3. The development of the Internet has however democratised acts of public writing (see, for example, Gayley 2016). Written debates and other literary activities of literary elites have, moreover, been examined in a number of PhD dissertations (Hartley 2003; Maconi 2008; Peacock 2020).
4. The relevance of “popular culture” as an analytical category remains debated (Certeau *et al.* 1993, pp. 45-72; Revel 2006; Kalifa 2005). Following Roger Chartier, I do not suppose that cultural divides are necessarily organised according to pre-existing boundaries or to a single grid of social divisions (Chartier 1992). While the historian recuses the notion of “popular culture”, as referring to a distinct category of cultural objects, he does employ those of “popular readers” and “popular readings” to refer to socioeconomic groups and their distinct ways of reading (Chartier 1987, 1996).
5. The exact location of T** township, as well as a number of other proper nouns, are withheld for the purpose of anonymisation.
6. Several Xinhua bookstores were opened in county seats of Golok T.A.P. in 2009 (“Guoluo Zangzu zishi zhou gaikuang” bianxie zu 2009, p. 357).
7. The questionnaire employed is provided in Appendix 1, along with its translation into English.
8. The students are also likely to share the condition of being exposed to common reading injunctions on the part of their schooling institution, but I lack information about the texts they are encouraged to read, and how.
9. Fieldnotes, 19 October 2010.
10. In this context, following a widespread local usage, the adjective “political” qualifies any subject whose discussion is considered politically sensitive, any action likely to be prohibited by the Chinese state or interpreted by the authorities as going against their position.
11. *Khenpo* (Tib. *mkhan po*) is the highest degree in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.
12. Fieldnotes, 23 October 2010.
13. Fieldnotes, 24 April 2011.
14. Fieldnotes, early May 2011. Luran Hartley (1999) already underlined the importance of journals as medium of publication in the Tibetan context, due to the high costs of book production (often supported by authors rather than publishing houses) and to the limited number of contemporary authors having enough texts to publish in book form. These observations remained valid some ten years later. On the importance of literary journals in the Tibetan context, see also Pema Bhum (2015) and Erhard (2018).
15. A situation of diglossia characterises, from the sociolinguistic point of view, the relationship between literary Tibetan and the multiple varieties of (often mutually unintelligible) spoken Tibetic languages. In a unique study looking at the comprehension of literary Tibetan among little-educated Amdo Tibetan speakers (having attended between 0 and 6 years of schooling), Jeffrey Green (2012) found that their understanding of literary Tibetan was extremely limited.
16. Some answers explicitly identify school as the place of learning, but others identify teachers by name. I have supposed that the people identified as “Teacher X” intervened in an institutional context, such as a school or a monastery. This interpretation remains debatable, as “Teacher” (Tib. *dge rgan*) is also an honorific term of address used beyond institutional or educational contexts.
17. As Minglang Zhou explains, after decades of fighting illiteracy by means of “campaigns”, a legislative approach has been privileged at the national level of the PRC since the 1980s. Campaigns targeting adults, however, remain a key feature in the fight against illiteracy, namely in areas where rates are the highest, as the one considered here (Zhou 2007, pp. 120-121).
18. Interpreting these statistics is quite delicate without disposing of further information about their conditions of production. The decrease could reflect a change in measurement criteria, the

will of local cadres to display their success in implementing the eradication of illiteracy policy, a real rise in alphabetisation, or a combination of two or more of these phenomena. We suppose, nevertheless, that the displayed decrease reflects a real tendency, although difficult to quantify precisely.

19. The model generally privileging the teaching of Chinese indeed allows for significant local variations. Analysing how provincial, prefecture and county-level administrations adapted the dispositions of the 1995 national law on education, Minglang Zhou distinguishes three attitudes: permission, tolerance, and promotion of “minority languages”. In his view, Golok T.A.P. illustrates the third scenario: its 1997 “Regulations on the eradication of illiteracy” stipulated that Tibetan was the language to be taught during the campaigns, with the exception of urban areas, where Chinese could be taught (Zhou 2007, p. 114).

20. Fieldnotes, 28 February 2009 and 1 December 2009.

21. Fieldnotes, 12 February 2009.

22. Two of the respondents do not provide a quantity of books read during the past twelve months, and would fall into a category (not considered by the CNL) of “quantity of books read unknown”.

23. Answers may also have been influenced by the fact they were destined to a university student, of whom it was supposed that she read a lot.

24. The extent to which this attitude is related to the inherently sacred dimension traditionally attributed to Tibetan script itself (Diemberger 2012b) is an important question which remains to be explored.

25. I thank Maria Coma for sharing these observations drawn from her fieldwork in Sokdzong (Tib. Sog rdzong, Ch. Henan xian 河南县, in Malho T.A.P., Qinghai Province) between 2016 and 2018.

26. Fieldnotes, 4 November 2009. The illustrated trilingual vocabulary in question, published in 2007, was among the regional bestsellers while I was doing this fieldwork. As we will see, this work edited by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö was also among the books cited by readers of T** township.

27. “If you read, do you read alone, or with friends or members of your family?” in Tibetan: *dpe cha bltas na/ rang nyid gcig pus dpe cha klog gi yod dam/ yang na grogs po'am khyim mi mnyam du klog gi yod dam/*.

28. Fieldnotes, 29 April 2011. During a morning gathering of all the students, one of the teachers emphasised the importance of mutually helping one another: “You all think about small matters (*don dag chung chung*), but here we should think about nationality matters (*mi rigs kyi don dag*)”.

29. Fieldnotes, 30 April 2011.

30. Processes of collective interpretation of readings have namely been studied in the institutionalised context of reading groups in the United States (Radway 1991; Long 1993). But the collective character of interpretations of literary works, as Stanley Fish and others have shown, is a constant: any given text’s meaning is not constructed by an isolated reader or by the text alone, but by historically situated interpretive communities (Fish 1980, see also Goulemot 2003).

31. Fieldnotes, 28 February 2009.

32. Fieldnotes, 12 October 2010 and 19 October 2010.

33. On the moral dimensions of Tibetan language use and their public evaluations, see Thurston (2018).

34. This term is a relatively recent creation (1955) introduced to translate the Chinese term *wenxue* 文学, and its understandings are not homogeneous (Hartley 2006). More generally speaking, the notion of literary genres in Tibetan context is much more recent and much less codified than it is in Western traditions. As shown by Ulrike Roesler (2015), historically the classification of texts in Tibet (essentially those of monastic production, thus excluding a large

part of written and oral literary production) had more to do with the organisation of knowledge than with a generic approach. Over the last few decades, several generic typologies have been proposed to describe the ensemble of “literature” (*rtsom rig*), but these are neither unified nor homogeneous. On the diversity of generic classifications of Tibetan literature historically proposed by Tibetan scholars, as well as by modern Tibetan and Western researchers, see Robin 2003 (pp. 38-72).

35. The dictionary *Dag yig gсар bsgrigs* thus defines *sgrung* as “the name of a literary form which relates stories of people” (*mi'i gtam rgyud brjod byar byas pa'i rstom rig gi rnam pa zhig gi ming*) (Padma rdo rje 2008, p. 175). Although this usage clearly appeared as a contested one, I met several readers, both in Tibet and in India, who referred to *Joys and Sorrows* as a *sgrung*, a *sgrung deb* or *sgrung dpe* (lit. “book of *sgrung*”) – which did not imply at all that they considered this narrative to be fictional. These diverse uses of *sgrung*, like those of any generic label, would need to be better contextualised, historically, geographically and socially. Natasha Mikles (2019) has for example argued that the designation of the Gesar epic by the term *sgrung* (which she translates as “story”) results from the efforts of state publishers in Tibet and China aimed at distinguishing it from Buddhist genres, and thus, ultimately, at secularising this narrative tradition.

36. I thank Katie Fitzgerald for attracting my attention on this point, at the 2018 International Seminar of Young Tibetologists (ISYT). On the practice of *chos 'don* (to “express verbalised religion”, following Robert Ekvall’s wording), which is far from being limited to the form of reading, see Ekvall (1964, in particular, pp. 103-105).

37. Contrary to a widespread assumption, Tibetans who did not belong to the aristocratic elite or the monastic community were thus not in great majority illiterate before 1950. As Ekvall underlines, however, contrasts between regions, communities and social classes remained important: “Most of the women are illiterate, but literacy of the male lay population varies greatly from district to district and from community to community, as well as according to class or position. I have found isolated communities, both nomadic and sedentary, in which most of the men, the nobility, the tribal rulers, and the very wealthy – both men and women – could read. I have also found communities quite equal to the former in material well-being in which only a very small minority of the men could read. Thus, stray and sporadic reports by travelers concerning literacy have varied enormously. One Tibetan estimate, based on wide experience and a breakdown into percentages of the lay population in a number of regions, maintains that an overall average of approximately 50 percent of the Tibetan male lay population can read to the extent of being able to identify the letters of the alphabet and to approximate the sound of the combinations. They are thus able to follow the lines of familiar prayers and even haltingly to learn new ones” (Ekvall 1964, p. 124).

38. Reprinted nineteen times between 1989 and 2008, this is also the publishing house’s most pirated work.

39. Fieldnotes, 21 August 2012.

40. William Rockhill, who describes some non-devotional books circulating in eastern Tibet at the end of the 19th century, provides a first counterpoint to Ekvall’s observations (Rockhill 1891, p. 246).

41. On the question of language, see Zenz 2013 (in particular pp. 197-199), and Robin 2014.

42. “The New Thinkers highlight ‘self’ because they assume Buddhism ignores ‘self’ because Buddhists hold the notion of ‘no self’; “The New Thinkers use the term ‘life’ to contradict the Buddhist notion of the next life” (Wu Qi 2013, p. 241, n. 78 and n. 79).

43. According to Françoise Robin, the relatively late development of fiction writing in Tibet, and namely of the novel, is in part explained by the inferior status of fiction from a religious point of view (Robin 2003, p. 261 sq.).

44. Only around 5 percent of Xining's population were Tibetan at the time, according to official statistics. The capital of Qinghai Province nevertheless occupied an important place on the Tibetan cultural scene, with its concentration of cultural institutions such as universities, publishing houses, and bookshops.

45. Here is an example of this type of short circuit: I was looking for a Tibetan title published in Beijing, which was not for sale in Xining. When I told a researcher and acquaintance of mine about this situation, he immediately called the author of the book over the phone; a few days later he had received the book in question and gave it to me (Fieldnotes, 19 February 2012). The next time I visited the Tibetan bookshops near the Xining bus station, I noticed that the book had become available there too.

46. Fieldnotes, 31 March 2012.

47. On the question of publics, see Warner 2002.

ABSTRACTS

Over the last decades, political, economic and social changes have deeply affected Tibet's language ecology, transforming the boundaries of the Tibetan reading public, while available printed materials have become much more diverse. Our knowledge about ordinary Tibetan readers' reading practices, however, remains quite limited. This paper aims to contribute to the study of social uses of literature in contemporary Tibet by means of a case study on the practices of a readers' community in Golok Tibetan autonomous prefecture.

Les changements politiques, économiques et sociaux des dernières décennies ont profondément affecté l'écologie linguistique du Tibet et les frontières du lectorat tibétain. Les imprimés disponibles se sont grandement diversifiés. Notre connaissance des pratiques de lecture de lecteurs tibétains ordinaires demeure cependant limitée. Cet article vise à contribuer à l'étude des usages sociaux de la littérature au Tibet contemporain en proposant une étude de cas d'une communauté de lecteurs dans la Préfecture autonome tibétaine de Golok.

INDEX

Keywords: reading practices, popular, reader, book, Tibetan, literature, Amdo, Tibet, China

Mots-clés: pratiques de lecture, lecteur, populaire, livre, littérature, tibétain, Amdo, Tibet, Chine

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