TransBuddhism

Transmission, Translation, Transformation

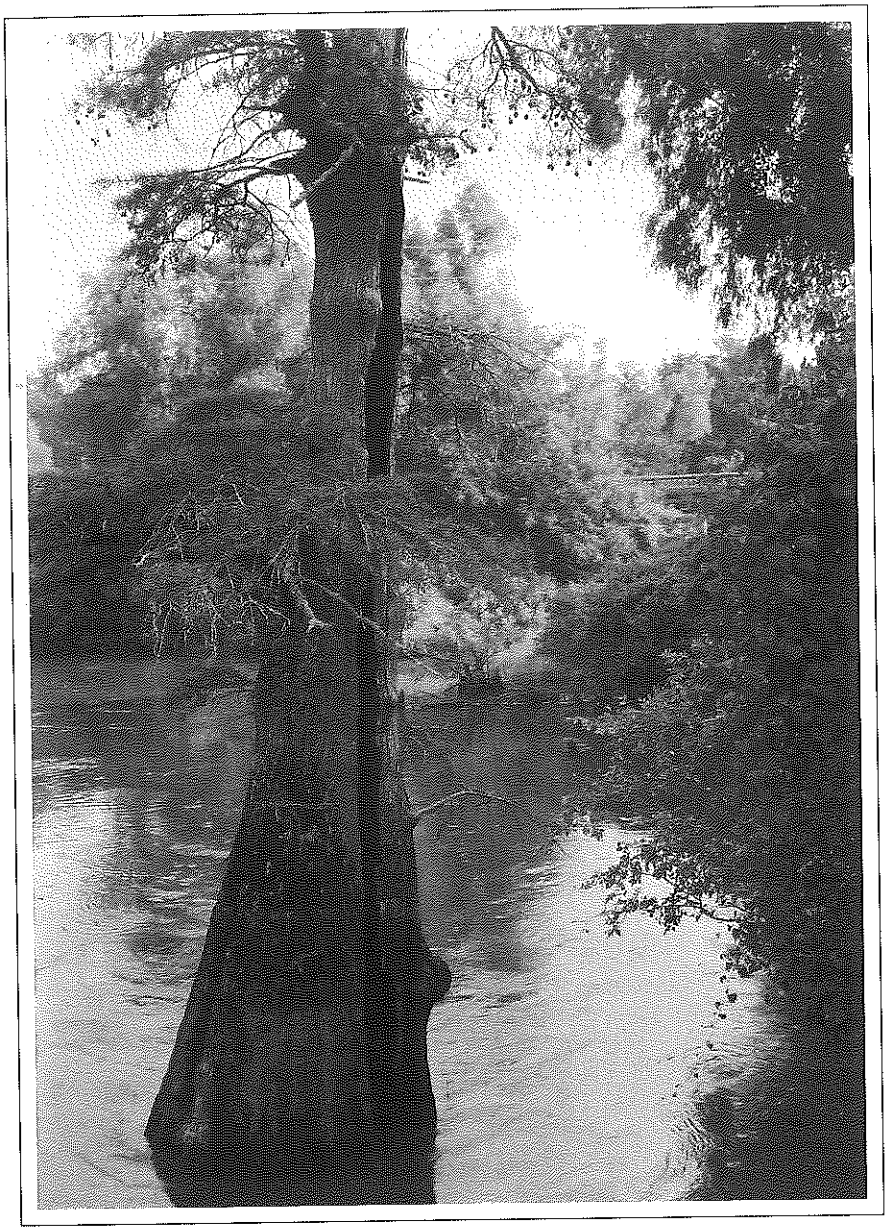
EDITED BY

NALINI BHUSHAN, JAY L. GARFIELD, AND ABRAHAM ZABLOCKI

University of Massachusetts Press · Amherst

in association with the

Kahn Liberal Arts Institute of Smith College · Northampton



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CHAPTER 2

Transnational *Tulkus*

The Globalization of Tibetan Buddhist Reincarnation

ABRAHAM ZABLOCKI

TIBETANS AND their culture often seem to inspire fascination in their Others. Monks are used in advertising to signify otherworldliness, purity, or the simple life. Religious rituals are transformed into museum installations and concert recitals. Tibetan-inspired material culture is used to express certain kinds of subject positions, such as countercultural (through the deployment of Tibetan art), politically progressive (through the wearing of a Free Tibet T-shirt), or spiritual (by wearing the latest fashion accoutrement, the Tibetan rosary-as-bracelet).

In each of these instances, Westerners utilize and consume Tibetan culture in order to participate in, and establish affinity with, the special qualities which Tibetans are presumed to have: such as being holy, exotic, or premodern. In this chapter I focus on one quite distinctive object of appropriation, that of Tibetan identity itself. In the cases of "*tulku* envy" I describe below, the would-be reincarnates are not so much striving to establish their affinity and sympathy with Tibetan culture, as much as they want to *be* Tibetan. This raises challenging issues about the nature of cultural appropriation, cross-cultural borrowing, and religious change.

As Tibetan Buddhism has expanded beyond its historical boundaries to acquire new converts in the West, Taiwan, and elsewhere around the world, the issue of what constitutes "authentic" Tibetan Buddhism has become a matter of some dispute. New transnational organizations, dedicated to the spread of Tibetan religion, have each had to grapple with this tension. On one hand, for these groups to succeed in transmitting Tibetan Buddhist practice and doctrine into radically new sociocultural contexts, they have often needed to adapt, either by altering Tibetan forms to suit their new converts, or by creating entirely new practices and institutions. On the other hand, the requirement to preserve the

unbroken Tibetan lineage of authentic Buddhist insight—already conceived of as seriously threatened by Chinese occupation—and which, in any case, is imagined to be independent of cultural values, presents a serious impediment to altering Tibetan Buddhism just because it happens to (now) exist among non-Tibetan populations. In short, contemporary transnational Tibetan Buddhism finds itself pulled between the need to adapt itself and the need to preserve itself.

Of course, the same dilemma has faced every missionary religion as it has crossed into new territories, but in the Tibetan case this tension is heightened by several factors. The impulse to preserve Tibetan Buddhism is strengthened by the Chinese control of Tibet, with the consequent loss of a locus of normative Tibetan religion, against which transnational adaptations, modifications, and aberrations could be measured, and resisted. The preservation impulse is further strengthened by the Shangri-La fantasies of Western patrons eager to engage in cultural salvage operations. On the other hand, the pressure to adapt is likewise more intense than perhaps has been the case in other missionary encounters. The sheer magnitude of differences between the culture that the Tibetan exiles carried into their diaspora, and the cultures into which they have now carried their religion, is surely greater than has been previously experienced in the history of Buddhist missionary activity. And, in contrast to, for example, Christian missionaries, who *have* made similarly great leaps across cultural universes, Tibetan missionary successes in the West have not been built through the exercise of political, economic, or military power. On the contrary, Tibetan missionaries, the vast majority of them refugees, have achieved their impressive success *despite* their relatively powerless position, and this may, at times, have presented pressure toward adaptation.

In this chapter I consider the question of how Tibetan religion is changing as a result of these developments, with particular attention to the Western fascination with the Tibetan institution of reincarnation and Tibetan attempts to recruit Western reincarnates. I also examine the historical constructions of "Tibet" that created the fertile ground for this interaction, as well as contemporary representations of Tibetan reincarnation that continue to sustain these imaginings. The *tulku* (*sprul sku*) system, whereby individuals are recognized, usually while very young, as the reincarnation of a deceased Buddhist master, and then raised to be masters themselves, has proven to be particularly attractive to Tibet's Western interlocutors. In particular, some Westerners seem highly drawn to the system's implications of an esoteric and exotic "secret identity," one which parallels heroic narratives found in Western pop culture but with a specifically Buddhist religious cast. Ironically, for some would-be *tulkus*, the system's prospect of a unique identity—one marked as culturally exotic (at least in Western terms) and indicative of personally exceptional

qualities—can be highly ego-aggrandizing, despite Buddhism's own thoroughgoing rejection of egotism.

Tibetans themselves have many reasons for recruiting non-Tibetan *tulkus* and this has been an important element of Tibetan Buddhist missionary efforts since at least the sixteenth century, when the reincarnation of the third Dalai Lama was identified as the grandson of Altan Khan, the Mongol ruler who had originally dispensed the Dalai Lama title in the first place. By identifying the fourth Dalai Lama as a Mongol prince, the Tibetans helped foster the growing interest of the Mongols in Tibetan Buddhism and the budding political alliance between the Dalai Lamas and their Mongol patrons. Both of these factors contributed to Mongol involvement in Tibet's internal political struggles a century later when, with the military assistance of his Mongol allies, the fifth Dalai Lama—once again reincarnated in a Tibetan body—defeated his Tibetan rivals to establish the political rule of the Dalai Lama lineage over the Tibetan state.

More recently, as various Tibetan Buddhist lineages have spread around the world, a number of non-Tibetan *tulkus* have been identified (Mackenzie 1996). Some of these *tulkus*—such as Lama Osel, the Spanish reincarnation of Lama Yeshe, a major figure in the global spread of Tibetan Buddhism (Mackenzie 1988)—have been given more-or-less traditional monastic training in an effort to prepare them to be Tibetan Buddhist teachers in their own right. In other high-profile *tulku* cases, such as the American actor Steven Seagal (Penor Rinpoche 1999) or *Jetsunma* Catherine Burroughs (Sherrill 2000)—both of whom were, unusually, recognized as *tulkus* as adults—such traditional training has not taken place, with the result that although these *tulkus* have received considerable symbolic capital from their recognition, they operate only marginally within the established spectrum of Tibetan Buddhism.

Thus, the recruitment of non-Tibetan *tulkus* has a long-established history in Tibetan Buddhism's efforts to spread into new geographic, cultural, and national spaces. Nevertheless, Western desires to participate in the *tulku* system strike many Tibetans as funny or unseemly, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of one Tibetan's response to the phenomenon of Western *tulkus*. The literary efforts of the Tibetan author Jamyang Norbu to engage in counter-appropriation of a Western culture-hero, Sherlock Holmes, reveal a complex logic of cultural authenticity that both parodies and mimics Western longings to occupy Tibetan bodies.

Tulku Envy

Several years ago while conducting research in Taiwan on diasporic Tibetan Buddhism, I met another Western researcher, a woman I'll call Susan, who

had been living in India for the past six years, ostensibly pursuing academic studies in Tibetan philosophy, but actually devoting herself to her personal meditation practice. Her money had run out and, like many of the Tibetan lamas with whom she studied, she had come to Taiwan to raise funds. Meanwhile, her fifteen-year-old son was back in North America being raised by his grandparents. She told me this story about her son:

> Two years ago, the "Mafia" from [such-and-such famous Gelukpa monastery] recognized my son as a *tulku*. But they just wanted to get money. It's an investment. They figure they'll get money from me, or from my family, or from people coming to see him. They said they would pay for the enthronement and everything, but they're just trying to make an investment. One monk came all the way to see me and complained that he had already spent 25,000 rupees . . . but anyway, I gave him 500 for his train fare so he would go away. . . . Later the Nyingmas also wanted to recognize my son as a *tulku*.

Although Susan resented the possibility that the monasteries were trying to manipulate her and her son for their own gain, she clearly believed that they were right to identify him as an exceptional boy. She confided:

> He has great gentleness. And a very special air about him. When he was young he would enter deep meditation during *pujas* [rituals] and initiations. He said he doesn't care about being a *tulku*. He just wants to meditate like me.

Although her son apparently didn't care whether he was identified as a reincarnate Tibetan lama or not, Susan seemed more ambivalent, saying,

> When he was young the Kagyus tested him as a *tulku*, but he failed the test. So I always tease him: "You failed your *tulku* test."

Susan, it seemed to me, was torn between her growing recognition of the ways in which the *tulku* system can be manipulated for financial or political ends and her attraction to the system's doctrine of exotic exceptionalism.

Over the next several years, as I continued my research on the globalization of Tibetan Buddhism, I frequently encountered non-Tibetans who were fascinated by the *tulku* system and filled with longing to participate in it. One Western woman, herself a member of her country's ruling elite, dressed her six-year-old son in Tibetan monastic robes—at his insistence, she said—and brought him to meet a high-ranking Tibetan lama. "Tell Rinpoche about your dream," she urged him, obviously hoping to set the machinery of institutional recognition and approval in motion. Indeed, as I did my fieldwork, it seemed that I was continually running into Western women and men who were convinced that their young sons were *tulku*s. Some of the time the Tibetans agreed

with these assessments, sometimes they did not, and much time appeared to be spent trying to convince the relevant hierarchs to bestow recognition.

Interestingly, when I told Susan about a particular American New Age figure who had Tibetan pretensions and had identified his own son as the reincarnation of a particularly high Tibetan lama, with whom Susan had a close connection, she became incensed. "I have no faith in people who recognize their *own* children as *tulkus*," she exclaimed. This led her to an extended denunciation of the quality of the Buddha dharma as it is practiced in the West, which she saw as superficial and materialistic. Although this was a common complaint from almost all Tibetan Buddhists I met, whether they were ethnic Tibetan or not, it was striking coming from her given that she had previously told me all about her son in tones which suggested that if he wasn't a *tulku*, he was certainly "special." When I asked her whether she, too, was interpreting Tibetan Buddhism to suit her own cultural sensibility, and was thus not so different from the other Westerners of whom she was so critical, she strenuously denied it, pointing out that she had been living in Asia for several years, seeming to intimate that this meant that she had become, if not Tibetan, at least less tied to her Western sensibility. The notion that one could become less Western and more Tibetan was a recurring theme during my fieldwork. It is an interesting question why one should even desire this, to say nothing of thinking that it is possible. But it is also curious that so few of the Westerners I met who expressed such views recognized the culturally specific history of appropriation and fascination in which these desires were rooted. Yet it does not seem a huge stretch to see in this view—that one's Western identity may be shed like a set of clothes and exchanged for one more appealing—the root of the desire that culminates in the wish to actually *be* Tibetan, or at least to occupy a Tibetan body.

The ex-husband of an American woman who *had* been identified as a *tulku* by the Tibetan monastic establishment, told me bitterly that his ex-wife had known nothing about Buddhism and that he had done all the leg work that led to her recognition. Then, at the urging of her Tibetan advisors, she had thrown him out in the cold. But now, he told me with satisfaction and a slightly secretive air, other Tibetan lamas had informed him that he too was a *tulku*; they were just awaiting the proper moment to make his status public.

Others expressed similar desires for recognition for themselves rather than for their children. One English woman explained to me that "after the Chinese took over Tibet, thousands of Himalayan yogis incarnated in the West. They're suffering greatly because they're out of place." Her teacher, an American who himself claims to be the incarnation of the Buddha Maitreya, Lama Tsong Khapa, Christ, Krishna, and King Arthur, among others, is helping these lost *tulkus* to "recapitulate," or return to, their previous situation. He

had told her that she was a *tulku* too, although he hadn't yet revealed of whom.

I never met Maitreya Buddha, as his followers call him, but they were a regular presence in the Boudhanath neighborhood of Kathmandu during my fieldwork. They were immediately recognizable because, in addition to wearing Tibetan monastic robes, they always bore enormous crystal *dorjés* (*rdo rje*). The *dorjé* is a well-known symbol in Tantric (Vajrayāna) Buddhism. Among other uses, it refers to a small metal implement used by Tibetans as part of religious practice. While there is some accepted variation in the artistic design of these implements, the *dorjés* borne by the Buddha Maitreya's followers were well outside these restrictions. At the center of the *dorjé* was a large piece of crystal, around which various pieces of copper wire were wrapped, usually with some other decorations. Each piece that I saw was unique, and impressively large, large enough to attract attention when they were carried out into the street, which they invariably were. The crystal *dorjés* were immediately recognizable to any Buddhist as *dorjés*, but they were also clearly nothing like the normal *dorjés* of Tibetan Buddhist ritual practice. As one of the Buddha Maitreya's followers put it to me, "the Buddhists developed *dorjés*, but *dorjés* aren't Buddhist. It is an ancient wisdom which they tapped into." This comment echoes a long tradition of Western engagement with Tibet in which Tibet is simultaneously seen as the repository of wisdom and a repository that invites, by Western lights, its own transcendence. This attitude is not shared by the Tibetans themselves. The followers of Buddha Maitreya, for example, rented a house in Boudhanath where they established a dharma center. Although they were tolerated by the residents of Boudhanath (who are particularly accustomed to all sorts of people coming and going, and who economically depend on this traffic), it seemed quite clear that few Tibetans took them seriously. Indeed, though some were amused or intrigued by the *dorjés* of crystal and copper, others clearly took offense at this appropriation (and alteration) of an important sacred ritual object. Thus, while Tibetans welcomed non-Tibetans to participate in the global mandala of Tibetan Buddhism, some also felt threatened and angry when non-Tibetans sought to refashion the practices or identities of Tibetan Buddhism in accord with their own aspirations. Certainly, Tibetans I spoke with found Buddha Maitreya's self-recognition of his *tulku* status, and his re-imagining of the *dorjé*, to be offensive, and his Western followers' willingness to believe in him absurd.

The Super-Heroic Tibetan Body

What is the architecture of this desire to participate in Tibetan Buddhist culture to such a degree that one's very identity, one's very body, holds—one

hopes or imagines—a secret self, a Tibetan self, waiting to be discovered? To understand this fascination we must recall the ways in which Tibet has been represented by Westerners. In the nineteenth century, with the filling-in of uncharted areas on the global map, and with the increasing hegemony of European colonial domination, Tibet emerged in Western consciousness as the untamed space, par excellence, the place in which pre-scientific mystery still held sway. One of the first Westerners to popularize ideas about Tibet was the Russian mystic and founder of the influential Theosophical Society, Madame Helena Blavatsky. Blavatsky claimed there was a global order of initiated masters who possessed secret esoteric knowledge, but who were under pressure from the increasing magnetism associated with industrial society, and who therefore were taking refuge in remote locations, such as Tibet. It was from Tibet, she claimed, that she received transmissions from her master who was, it should be noted, not himself a Tibetan.

Over the following century, Tibet has become the preferred icon for expressing longing and fascination for the hidden, the mysterious, and the premodern. James Hilton's best-selling novel (and later film) *Lost Horizon* continued the theme of Tibet-as-utopia, suggesting that the best of human inspiration—which in his case was all European—had been stored away in a remote Himalayan valley to protect it from the ravages of twentieth-century history (Hilton 1933). For many in the West, their first encounter with the notion of Tibet came through the popular books by Lobsang Rampa, such as the *Third Eye*; the author of these books, Cyril Hoskin, claimed to be a Tibetan whose consciousness had been mysteriously transposed into an English body (Lopez 1998).

My own first encounters with notions of Tibetan exceptionalism occurred while reading comic books as a child. In one series, a group of superheroes lived in a hidden Himalayan vale, protected by a giant bubble that kept them invisible. From time to time events would call them out of their refuge to fight villains and save the world. Perhaps no series of comic books more vividly expresses the conflation in Western imaginations of the concept of the superhero and the concept of the *tulku,* than the *White Lama* series (Jodorowsky 2000). The series draws upon the life story of the Tibetan culture-hero, Milarepa, combining traditional Tibetan elements with odd pieces from Rampa's narratives, such as his not-very-Tibetan preoccupation with cats. The story's hero, the White Lama, is a white boy who becomes the *tulku* of a high lama when the lama and the boy's parents—who are proto-hippie "seekers" in Tibet—are slain by the forces of the evil (Tibetan) lama who has taken over the monastery. The White Lama is then raised as a Tibetan, unaware of his powers until, like Milarepa, the tremendous injustice passed on to his family inspires him to take revenge. Also like Milarepa, and many classic superheroes as well, the White Lama's

vengeance fills him with disgust and remorse and he turns thereafter to the cause of good. Yet, just as Hilton's Shangri-La was positioned as a space in which European goodness could reach its true fulfillment, so too, in the White Lama comic books—although the pinnacle of mystical power initially resides with Tibetan lamas, eventually it is the White Lama, whose identity is both Tibetan and not Tibetan, who heroically defeats the magic of the evil Tibetan lama.

Tibetans Strike Back: Counter-Appropriation and the Seizing of Sherlock Holmes

Such narrative arcs leave many Tibetans shaking their heads in puzzlement and bemusement. I want to conclude this chapter by suggesting that a 1999 novel, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (later released with the alternative title *Sherlock Holmes: The Missing Years*) by Jamyang Norbu, a well-known Tibetan intellectual and critic of efforts to romanticize Tibetan culture, can be read as an effort at counter-appropriation (for an alternative reading see Venturino 2008). The novel recounts the story of Sherlock Holmes's two years in Tibet. Arthur Conan Doyle, it may be recalled, having grown sick of the famous detective, killed him off in a struggle with his archenemy, Moriarty, at Reichenbach Falls. Public outcry was intense and a few years later Doyle succumbed to the pressure and brought him back for further adventures. He explained his absence to Dr. Watson with these brief remarks in the story "The Adventure of the Empty House," published in the *Strand Magazine* in October 1903:

> I traveled for two years in Tibet, therefore, and amused myself by visiting Lhassa [*sic*], and spending some days with the head Lama. You may have read of the remarkable exploration of a Norwegian named Sigerson, but I am sure that it never occurred to you that you were receiving news of your friend. (Doyle 1984, 344)

Norbu's novel fills in the details of these two years with an adventure tale that takes Holmes from India to Thibet [*sic*] and "Beyond." In many respects the story is a classic Sherlock Holmes detective romp, yet as Holmes gets closer to Tibet, the logical analyses that are his hallmark give way to a more intuitive style of sleuthing. After preventing a murder, Holmes gives the following explanation to his sidekick, Hurree:

> "You would not call me an irrational man, would you, Hurree?"
>
> "Of course not, Sir. If I may say so you are the most rational, most scientific man I have ever had the privilege of meeting."
>
> "Yet reason or science had nothing to do with what I did last night."
>
> "Please?"

"I just *knew*. One moment I was smoking my last pipe for the night and thinking about our meeting with the Lama Yonten, and the next moment I knew for certain that a dangerous assassin was going to enter the Grand Lama's Summer Palace."

"Like a premonition, Sir?"

"There was nothing vague about it. The singular thing was the absolute assurance I felt about this startling revelation. Yet there was no way to explain it in logical terms. It was a most peculiar experience." (Norbu 1999, 191)

In the Holmes canon, of course, such a suggestion borders on the absurd: as a literary figure, Holmes is constructed to be nothing but the personification of rationality, empiricism, and logic. To suggest that the detective who symbolizes the capacity of science to discover almost *anything* through the powers of deductive reasoning would, instead, prevent a terrible crime through a *premonition,* is to turn the Holmes myth on its head.

By the time of the climactic battle in the Ice Temple of Shambhala, Holmes has fallen further under the sway of Tibet, so much so that, in their moment of desperation one of his Tibetan allies cries to him: "Listen to me! . . . You are not really English. You are one of us. You have the power too. . . . You are the renowned Gangsar *tulku*" (ibid., 242). His true identity rediscovered, Holmes also recovers his lost powers:

> Sherlock Holmes raised his hands and—as if he had been doing it all his life (which, in a manner of speaking, he probably had)—moved his fingers in a strange manner to form tantric gestures (Skt. mudra). Immediately, a barely visible barrier, a kind of curtain of shimmering energy, seemed to form. . . . The force wave smashed into the psychic shield with the noise of a thunderclap. (ibid., 245)

In Norbu's hands, Sherlock Holmes, like every other Westerner touched by Tibet—at least in the domain of *tulku* envy that he is satirizing—is transformed. By making the journey to Tibet (and like so many other fantastic Tibet narratives, eventually *beyond* Tibet, in this case to the Ice Temple of Shambhala, thereby echoing Tibetan culture's own utopian dreamscape), Holmes discovers his *true* self. And his truest self, revealed by this journey of self-discovery, turns out to be Tibetan. And not just any Tibetan, but a Tibetan superhero, complete with esoteric hand gestures that produce waves of force. The Western superhero detective of Victorian rationality has found himself, and he is actually a Tibetan superhero sorcerer of Tibetan Buddhism.

While such a plot twist may seem outrageous, Norbu points out the many ways in which Holmes shares the ideal characteristics of a *tulku*:

> Mr. Holmes a former lama? Why ever not? He was celibate, of noble mien and great wisdom. In accordance with the Mahayanic precepts of altruism and compassion he had devoted his life to aiding the weak, the poor and the helpless against the powers of evil. He fasted regularly to clear the vital channels and bring about clarity of insight; and he had powers of concentration that would make many a practicing yogi look like a rank novice. Never was an incarnate lama truer, or more deserving of his monastic robe and cap of office, than my dear friend. (ibid., 243–44)

Norbu concludes by deploying the familiar trope of Tibet-as-refuge for a secret community of esoteric knowledge that protects the world:

> They have always watched over our world, and through a small community of fellow seekers in the remoteness of the Thibetan highlands, they have maintained a bond with humankind. (ibid., 255)
>
> . . .
>
> [Holmes] had decided to stay a year more in Thibet to complete his studies. But after that he would return to England to finish his task of destroying Moriarty's criminal empire and removing his baleful influence once and for all from the cities of Europe. Only on the conclusion of this task would he finally return to Thibet. "I have my orders," said Holmes, "and I must obey." He did not elaborate about who had given those orders, and I did not ask. (ibid., 259)

Thus, by the end of his novel, Norbu has appropriated—or perhaps counter-appropriated—one of the West's greatest literary superheroes and given him a new, higher, identity. Just as Madame Blavatsky, in real life, built her precursor of New Age spirituality on the foundation of a secret group of adepts living in Tibet, Norbu, in literature, builds his satire of Western *tulku* envy on the foundation of Holmes and his Tibetan brethren, hidden away in their Tibetan solitude but keeping a careful and watchful eye over the outside world. It would be easy to dismiss all of this as a too-bizarre transformation of Sherlock Holmes from the very icon of scientific materialism and logical empiricism to a comic book caricature of Tibetan exotic supernaturalism. But I think the book—which won India's highest award for English fiction, the Crossword Book Award, in 2000—is more subtle than that. Norbu clearly aims to satirize the phenomena of *tulku* envy, poking fun at the tendency of some non-Tibetans to discover Tibetan-ness within themselves.

I recognize it is a tremendous oversimplification to see all transnational *tulku*s as manifestations of *tulku* envy. As noted above, there are precedents for non-

Tibetan *tulkus* in Tibetan history. Most Tibetans regard non-Tibetan *tulkus*, particularly if their recognition has been validated by the Buddhist establishment and if they have received traditional religious training, as affirming and strengthening Tibetan Buddhism in its hour of great need. Indeed, most of the non-Tibetan *tulkus* who have been recognized during Tibetan Buddhism's current wave of global expansion have led fairly uncontroversial careers. Some have become Tibetan Buddhist teachers, while others have adopted more low-key ways of living their *tulku* status (and in this respect, their experiences mirror that of many Tibetan *tulkus*, some of whom decline to lead lives of religious leadership, at least overtly). And, in addition to and outnumbering non-Tibetan *tulkus*, there are now numerous Western (and other convert) Buddhist teachers in the global Buddhist landscape. In short, the striking thing about the phenomena of *tulku* envy is not the growing participation of non-Tibetans in the social and imagined worlds of Tibetan Buddhism as practitioners, patrons, teachers, and even reincarnated Tibetans; the existence of these roles for non-Tibetans in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism is simply a reflection of the religion's newly transnational character.

Rather, the phenomena of *tulku* envy points toward another parallel dynamic, whereby the reproduction of Tibetan Buddhist institutions in non-Tibetan spaces has been linked to the growing power of the Tibet-of-the-imagination. This imagined or fantasized Tibet is not new—as noted above it has a long pedigree in the history of the representation of Tibet—but it is as strong and powerful as ever. The longing for a Tibetan body, or more precisely, the longing to discover that one's Western body is actually a vessel holding a Tibetan identity, reveals something of the symbolic potency that Tibetan-ness continues to hold for so many in the West. In this sense, the desire for a Tibetan identity appears like the desire for so many other forms of symbolic capital, albeit that *tulku* status renders this capital in a unique way.

Against this dynamic, Norbu's satire is an act of counter-appropriation, responding to the appropriation of Tibetan culture heroes with a comparable theft of a Western mythic figure. And just as such an act calls our attention to the fact that Sherlock Holmes is, after all, just a storybook character, whose powers of deduction are perhaps an artistic expression of the spirit of the age of scientific materialism, but which are not meant to be taken literally, so too, perhaps, Norbu seeks to gently mock those in the West who wish to make Tibetan culture heroes *their* culture heroes, or perhaps even a constitutive part of their *identities*.