

# Escaping Shangri-la: Literary Retranslation of Toponyms in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands

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## **Abstract**

The literary idea of “Shangri-la” has today been realized as a geographic space in the Tibetan borderlands of southwest China. The minority peoples who live within this zone that has seen a massive tourism boom are, in effect, now linguistic “prisoners of Shangri-la”: despite possessing their own minority languages, sociopolitical factors dictate that ethnic minority writers often have little choice but to write in Chinese. Nevertheless, there is a way for them to negotiate a way out of the prison-house of language: foreignizing “inner translations” that rewrite, and destabilize, the landscape itself.

This paper asserts that translation is a defining characteristic of the re-negotiation of peripheral spaces within Chinese minority literature. This study focuses on the construction of minority hometown spaces, such as Shangri-la in Yunnan and the Baima areas of northern Sichuan: both these areas are technically Tibetan according to Chinese state classification, yet they possess unique ethnic identities that are constructed in Chinese literature via phonetic translations (often re-translations or re-transcriptions) from the minority language into Chinese. The literary re-translation of local toponyms serves to contest official, Sinicized naming practices, producing nativized place names that act as markers, signposts from which we can see how meanings and mappings of ethnicity, nature, and culture can be shaped and reshaped in translation.

## **Keywords**

minority translation, place names, Sino-Tibetan, Sinophone literature