

Fall 2005

“Oh Uncle Pema!” The Role of Musical Agency in the Creation of a Modern Tibetan Identity

Tracy Ellwanger
SIT Study Abroad

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“Oh Uncle Pema!”

The Role of Musical Agency
in the Creation of a Modern Tibetan Identity

Tracy Ellwanger
SIT Tibetan Studies
Fall 2005

Abstract

“Aku¹ Pema,” a widely popular song in both Tibet and exile, is a useful vehicle for comparing the agency of Tibetan musicians and audiences, as they interact with dominating cultures (Chinese, Hindi, and Western) and official paradigms (espoused by the Chinese government and the Tibetan government-in-exile). After examining the role and implications of “Aku Pema” as a “political” song in both locales, I will look at notions of modernity and tradition, especially in the context of the growing sinocization of Tibetan culture in Tibet and the resulting exile views of pure versus impure Tibetan music.

At the heart of this complex issue lies the question of what constitutes a truly Tibetan identity in this modern era, and for some, the very stakes of the freedom struggle. These questions of agency and identity are wrought with contradictions, misconceptions and complexities too intricate to be fully examined here, but answers will continue to unfold as future generations of Tibetans in exile and Tibet define for themselves what is truly traditional and modern Tibetan music—and by extension, a modern Tibetan identity.

¹ Please see “The Glossary of Tibetan Terms” in Appendix A for the definition and Tibetan spelling of all Tibetan words in this paper.

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http://mapwing.gsu.edu/projects/Tibetan_settlements/allsettlements.html

*My family in South India:
Tenzin Phuntsok, Choedon Tsering, Sonam Gyalpo, and Tenzin Rangdol*

An Introduction

This paper is a product of observations and interviews conducted over the course of the semester in Dharamsala and Tibet, as well as settlements in South India, where I spent my ISP period living with my friend's family at the Gurupura Tibetan Rabgyaling Settlement in Karnataka State, South India. In addition to my own fieldwork, this paper draws on two important studies: *Echoes from Dharamsala*, Keila Diehl's comprehensive look at the music in the life of Tibetans in exile, and *Unity and Discord: Music and Politics in contemporary Tibet*, a recent report from the Tibet Information Network.

This study comes out of several questions concerning the role of agency in creating and preserving Tibetan music and the role of this music in constructing a modern Tibetan identity. In speaking with Tibetans in exile and Tibet, I noticed many discrepancies between the reality inside Tibet and the perceptions of those in exile. While this gap is partially due to a lack of information, it also results from the hopes and fears of the exile community that are projected onto the Tibetans inside Tibet. Although this is only a preliminary study, I hope to shed some light on these discrepancies, by observing the similarities and differences of musical agency in Tibet and exile, and thereby scratching the surface of the underlying issue—how to construct a Tibetan identity in a modern era.

“Oh Uncle Pema!”
The Man behind the Music

“Aku Pema” was written by Palgon, a famous Tibetan artist who was not only the first *dranyen* player in Amdo, but also the man responsible for introducing the mandolin to that region of Eastern Tibet (TIN 86). Palgon initially studied *dranyen* under the late Gungthang Rinpoche, an abbot of Labrang Tashikyil monastery in Gansu province, who has also trained other Amdo Tibetan musicians. Palgon became famous after the Cultural Revolution ended, when artists from local communities began to perform for local radio stations and extend their musical audiences from beyond their immediate areas (55). Soon thereafter, he was one of the first musicians to produce cassettes, and eventually, VCDs (87).

“Aku Pema” has been called “one of the most popular Tibetan songs of the last five years, sung by Tibetans in exile and central Tibet as well as Amdo singers” (TIN 86). This song, composed in a traditional style with highly metaphoric lyrics. Some sources claim that this song was composed for a friend of Palgon’s (a man named Pema) who was leaving town, although as we will soon see, this interpretation is subject to much debate (141).

“Songs of shackle and struggle shall surely survive”
Aku Pema as a Political Statement

*I also remember
 how they took away everything
 and left only a handful of
 joyless songs on our trembling lips.*

...

*Yet songs of shackle and struggle
 shall surely survive,*

*When the dawn breaks over the grey winter
The sun will return to
totter their tower of power.*

-From “Broken Tune,” K. Dhondup (*Muses* 31).

According to a Tibet Information Network (TIN) report, (*Unity and Discord: Music and politics in contemporary Tibet*), “Aku Pema” is a politicised song—one that has political meaning imposed upon it by the listener, rather than inherently written into the song by the author, who may have never intended such an interpretation (141). This political reading of Tibetan songs is enabled by the highly metaphorical language of traditional Tibetan song lyrics and by the highly repressive climate in Tibet, where “virtually anything that is praised and venerated in a song can be taken [as a metaphor for the Dalai Lama] (142).

*Uncle Pema?
(Photo taken in Tibet)*

An Indian journalist noted this ability of seemingly “innocent” songs to carry political meaning in Tibet.

Among the Tibetan society at large too, there are many innocent looking songs like “Agu [sic] Pema” (Uncle Pema) which quickly do rounds in the community and disappear before the Chinese authorities realize that the song had a political message embedded intelligently between the notes. This particular song which looks like one sung in the memory of a lost dear uncle is actually dedicated to the exiled Dalai Lama who is also revered as “Pema”(meaning “Lotus”) among the Tibetans ... (Kranti 8/9/02).

Although many people believe *Aku Pema* was written specifically about His Holiness, it is most likely that Palgon, the author of *Aku Pema*, did not purposefully this “political message” as Kranti noted.

Through the “ornamental poetry” and ambiguous nature of song lyrics like "*Aku Pema*," it is virtually impossible to effectively censor Tibetan songs, although there are restrictions prohibiting explicit political references (TIN 142). Indeed, this ambiguity gives both composer and listener musical and political room to maneuver.

The potential for political interpretation in such songs creates a grey area in a political climate that requires clear-cut political correctness. This blurring of boundaries is itself a form of protest or resistance (TIN 143).

This “grey area” gives the listener agency, not only to discover hidden political meaning, but just as importantly, to *not* find such meaning in Tibetan songs and to simply judge a song based on its artistic merits.

For instance, Tenzin² did not think that “*Aku Pema*” was about His Holiness, and even appeared a bit incredulous when I suggested that interpretation. Although he

² The names have been changed for all interviewees in Tibet, in order to protect their safety. Please see the list of interviews for Tibetan spellings of all names

admitted that it is possible to interpret the lyrics in that way, he said that there are many other “more political songs” they could sing, such as “White Stupa” or “Blue Lake” (Lake Kokonor)³ (Conversation 11/7/05). Tashi, however, felt differently about “Aku Pema.” When I inquired about the song’s meaning, he replied that he could not explain its message—it was “too dangerous.” But he continued to briefly explain, saying that it is “about His Holiness” (Interview 11/9/05).

Many people also don’t understand the lyrics of “Aku Pema,” which are sung in the Amdo dialect, and therefore claim to have no knowledge of the song’s meaning, and presumably enjoy it only for the song’s purely musical qualities. Tashi’s three co-workers uniformly replied that they did not know what “Aku Pema” is about, explaining that they couldn’t understand the words.⁴ In this case, “Aku Pema” was definitely not perceived as a political song. The above examples illustrate the varying degrees of meaning that may or may not be found in Tibetan songs. A “dangerous” song may be perceived as having very little if any political meaning—if the lyrics are even understood at all.

Although “Aku Pema” was temporarily banned in Tibet,⁵ it is no longer restricted, possibly because it is not uniformly regarded as a political song, as the above examples illustrate. Potentially “dangerous” songs like “Aku Pema” are only restricted if they are very popular and have a widely recognized political meaning. Even so, they are only banned from performance at places where large crowds of Tibetans gather, (such as

³ See the appendix for a translation of all lyrics.

⁴ While this may be true, it is also possible that they did not trust me as much as Tashi, whom I knew better than his co-workers, as they offered only sparse replies to all of my questions. Additionally, when I requested a picture, my translator laughed and told me “they don’t want their picture taken. They think you might be a Chinese spy.

⁵ Someone was reportedly imprisoned for one year for singing it, although the details are unknown (TIN 141).

nangma bars and festivals), for fear that the politically sensitive content could threaten security of the state (TIN 140).

Indeed, the potential of songs to ignite feelings for freedom is quite high. As Tenzin related to me, at weddings and other parties in Tibet, sometimes people will “have courage”(especially after drinking) to sing songs, specifically “White Stupa,” “Lake Kokonor,⁶” and “Little Brother with Deep Feelings”—in his opinion, “the most political songs a person could sing,” as mentioned earlier. He told me that if one person refuses to sing, the others will single him out for not singing, (and sometimes even start a fight), afraid that he will get the other participants in trouble⁷ (Conversation 11/7/05). This example illustrates the power of such songs, as they become vehicles for a person’s otherwise unexpressed desires and political feelings, which are reinforced by the experience of communal singing. Lack of participation, in addition to posing a security threat, is therefore also looked down upon for disrupting that community bond.

While some people in Tibet may not consider “Aku Pema” political, in exile there is no debate concerning its meaning. For example, Khando, the local TIPA-trained music teacher at the Central Tibetan School in the Tibetan Rabgyaling Settlement, told me in no uncertain terms how “Aku Pema” is “an admiration song for His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” She continued to explain that

In Tibet, they cannot say “Dalai Lama,” so they say "Aku Pema" instead. [The lyrics mean] “When you’re not here, the oceans are empty. When you’re here we have everything.” It’s for His Holiness.

⁶ There are two versions of Lake Kokonor, and it is unclear to which he was referring. The more popular version is translated in the appendix.

⁷ The question remains as to the extent of female participation in this singing at community gatherings, as my informant only referred used the masculine pronoun, “he,” in our discussion.

Similarly, when my *dranyen gen la*, Tsewang Choden, taught me “Aku Pema” in Dharamsala, he explained (in very broken English) that “Aku Pema” was written for the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama⁸. He translated the last verse of the song to mean, “When we have no god, our heart is empty,” although that is not the literal translation of the verse, which contains no such reference to “god” (Conversation 9/21/05).

Tsewang Choden, my dranyen gen la in Dharamsala

Sonam Gyalpo, my *pa.la* during my stay in South India, also regards “Aku Pema” politically, as he interprets the lyrics to mean, “When Dalai Lama is not in Tibet, Tibet is empty.” He had heard about “Aku Pema” on a Voice of America (VOA) radio program that explained how it was banned in Tibet for its (hidden) reference to His Holiness. Initially, he told me, “*gya mi ha go ma song*” (Chinese people don’t understand), but after two or three years of circulation and careful listening to the words, they understood the meaning and censored “Aku Pema.”

This unquestionable view in exile that “Aku Pema” was specifically written as a metaphor for Dalai Lama’s absence from Tibet most likely results from exiled Tibetans

⁸ He actually said it was written *by* both of them, and I initially puzzled over this seemingly strange collaboration. However, because his English was very poor, I believe he meant it was written *for* the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama.

regarded everything in terms of the political struggle. In this political light, “Aku Pema” reflects the commitment to the *rangzen* struggle of their brothers and sisters in Tibet. An Indian journalist echoes these speculations, which account for the popularity of “Aku Pema” in exile:

This song [“Aku Pema”] is already out of circulation inside China’s Tibet but it is still a hot number among the exiled Tibetans who are always eager to hear any *political statement* that emanates occasionally from their colonized motherland [emphasis added] (Kranti 8/9/02).

Exiled Tibetans choose to recognize it as a “political statement,” because it gives them hope for the future, as they are reassured that Tibetans in Tibet are still politically aware and that the political struggle is not dead inside Tibet. Sonam later related the superb quality of the lyrics, (an important component to traditional Tibetan music) to the supposed political message of the song. He praised the author “Aku Pema,” who he believes “knows everything that happened in Tibet and [about] Dalai Lama, that’s why he wrote this song ... [and] collect[ed] good words” (Conversation 12/5/05). This simplistic reading of “Aku Pema” (and of the atmosphere in Tibet in general), precludes any agency for those Tibetans inside Tibet who do not choose to interpret such songs politically, but enjoy them based on their inherent artistic merit. This imposes exile’s own desires, hopes, and fantasies onto Tibetans inside Tibet by viewing their musical consumption solely in a politicized manner.

Aku Pema with “Chinese tuning”
Exile Views of the Sinocization of Tibetan Music

One evening, Thubten, the middle-aged owner of the local restaurant in J village, took a break from making *thukpa* to tell me about music in Tibet, which he thinks is “not good.” To demonstrate its poor quality, he played an example for me from his large

collection of Tibetan CDs (the preferred genre of his customers). The song was a traditional Tibetan tune, barely audible over a booming bass and Chinese-sounding electronic instrumentation. Listening with a look of disgust, he told me how music in Tibet, just like this song, was all mixed with “Chinese tuning ... [and] Chinese words.” When I asked him about “Aku Pema,” he told me that it was “different” in Tibet and India. Although the lyrics were the same, apparently the version in Tibet was done in “Chinese style.” I played a VCD I bought in Lhasa for him to see if its version of “Aku Pema” was actually as different as he had said. Not even halfway through the first verse, he said that this was “Chinese tuning” and that he didn’t like it at all (Interview 12/8/05).

VCD stall in the Barkhor in Lhasa

To my untrained ear, it was difficult to hear the differences, as it didn’t sound so unlike Tsering Gyurmey’s (exile) rendition of “Aku Pema,” which features a similar disco beat. It is possible that Thubten’s response partially stemmed from an automatic association of anything new or modern (such as disco) with China (the enemy), and is

therefore bad or impure (Kabir 10/26/05). This common association in exile even extends itself to “new arrivals”—Tibetans who have come into exile in the last one or two decades. These Tibetans are (ironically) viewed as somehow less Tibetan than their exile counterparts, who left Tibet half a century ago or who were born in exile and have never even seen Tibet (Diehl 64). At the very least, these new arrivals are seen as objects of curiosity and a bit backward. Choedon remarked on seeing many Tibetans from Tibet in Mysore for the upcoming Kalachakra and laughed at them wearing thick wool *chubas* in the heat of a South Indian city. She referred to them as “*Kacha*,” a Hindi word that loosely translated as “half-boiled” or “not ripe” (Conversation 11/22/05).

Although most exile Tibetans view these new arrivals with disdain, they also regard them (and Tibetans still in Tibet), with a contradicting mixture of sympathy. They feel sorry for their lack of freedom and rights—a lack that they believe extends not only into the political realm, but also extends into the musical realm of the performing arts.

These confusing mixed feelings are expressed by Khando, my 27 year old *dranyen gen la*, who is the local TIPA-trained music teacher at the Gurupura Central Tibetan School. She explained that although Tibetans in Tibet still know and perform traditional songs, such as the classical genres of *nangma* and *toeshay*, these styles are

not typical. ... They don't have a *right* to show [perform] them ... because China doesn't like to preserve Tibetan culture (Interview 11/26/05).

Although there are restrictions and challenges in place for aspiring Tibetan performers in Tibet, this perceived lack of agency or lack of legal rights to perform traditional Tibetan music contradicts the current reality in Tibet, as will be examined later.

Khando's sympathy for Tibetans in Tibet, however, quickly moved to distaste for their sino-adaptations. She explained rather indignantly, almost to the point of outrage, how

Some [are] even wearing Amdo or Kham *chuba*, but with U-Tsang *shamo* [headdress] ... and look at their shoes! They should be leather, [but] they're not! (Interview 11/26/05).

For Khando, these changes in costume reflect the overall changes in Tibetan music and dance, which she believes is "mixed" and "not pure." She continued to explain how

Amdo people [new arrivals] say this is traditional dance: [flails arms up and down, *right-left-right-left*, while moving hips side-to-side in an affected manner]. But it's not traditional. It's all mixed up ... Their costume, song, and dance is [sic] not pure (Interview 11/26/05).

Performers at a nangma bar in Lhasa

Based on these remarks, it appears that Khando's biggest problem with this development lies in calling this impure form "traditional" Tibetan dance instead of a modern or Chinese interpretation of traditional Tibetan dance.

She probably would have been appalled to see the video footage of a large (presumably state-funded) concert in Amdo that I watched at a small *sa khang* in Lhasa. One of the numbers was a dance that told a traditional Tibetan story in a style reminiscent of Western modern dance, à la Martha Graham. I was talking with two young Amdo guys (one Tibetan and one Chinese), and being rather confused, I asked what type of dance we were watching. The Tibetan guy told me matter-of-factly that this was “traditional Tibetan dance,” and in response to my disbelief, reassured me repeatedly that this was true (Conversation 10/24/05).

There are exceptions to this disdain for Sino-Tibetan music, however, as I observed at Choedon’s friend Tenyang’s house in Bylakuppe. She turned off the Hindi movie that we rented for the night to play me VCD from Tibet. Both Tenyang and her *pa.la* were eager to show me the musical performance from their country, despite the “developed” sino-style of the costumes and music (most likely a government-sponsored troupe). With evident pride, her father told me, “This is [from] our place”—referring to their village of Purang in Western Tibet. Tenyang seemed similarly proud of this display of culture from her homeland (that she has never seen), as she sat and watched with a smile, echoing her father’s remarks. When I asked her later about what she thought about music in Tibet, she told me that the dances and songs are the same, but have Chinese words. Unlike my other interviewees, however, she was not quick to qualify this as “bad” or “not pure,” and simply left her answer at that (Interview 12/9/05).

The *momo.la* next door, however, had an opinion about these changes, as she echoed Khando’s thoughts about the mixing of Chinese influences in Tibetan music, which she also thinks is “not good.” Unlike Khando, though, she was more concerned

about the intentions of the state than about an inherent purity. She believes that these sino-influences are not result of Tibetan reformers' choice, but mandated by the state.

Chinese people steal Tibetan words and Tibetan songs ... to show up to other countries that Tibetans are happy [under Chinese rule] ... and that Tibet and China have a relationship ... [in which they] are the same" (Interview 12/1/05).

Although this "stealing" is not true in a literal sense and many Tibetans actively incorporate sino-music styles and lyrics by choice, her statement reflects the indirect propaganda in Chinese government support of Tibetan music. As the TIN report notes, the image of the singing and dancing Tibetan is used "as a symbol of the spontaneous joy of the Tibetans at their 'liberation' from feudal serfdom," demonstrating that they are now "happy and prospering under Chinese rule" (TIN 112). This image depicts them as childish, almost inarticulate, (thereby justifying the need for Chinese guidance), with no room for the expression of sorrow. The TIN report astutely notes how

The logic of the image of the happy, singing, dancing Tibetan, however, attempts to rob Tibetan music of all but one emotional meaning, and like the regime itself, thereby attempts to preclude even the smallest hint of dissent (114).

The popularity of sad songs, like "Aku Pema," may be an example of one way Tibetans exert agency and counter this stereotypical image (114).

The "politically unthreatening music" of an "ethnic minority" **The Role of the Chinese Government in Tibetan music**

Although the Chinese government currently manipulates Tibetan music for the purposes of mostly subtle propaganda, during the Cultural Revolution, the relationship between music and propaganda was more explicit. During that time, traditional culture (including all traditional music) was banned as one of the "Four Olds," and Chinese

propaganda songs were the only (public) forms of music allowed⁹. However, since the 1980s, there has been

... an unprecedented level of real tolerance for Tibetan non-religious culture. ... This includes genuine enthusiasm for Tibetan music at least in the form of sinified performances by Chinese-trained performers or certain genres of “timeless” and “history-less” (and hence politically unthreatening) folk music (133).

This change in climate has left Tibetans free to perform modern song and dance, with the only restrictions being on any explicit political lyrics. Indeed, to refute outside claims of the destruction of Tibetan culture and to manipulate traditional Tibetan culture for tourism, it is in China’s

... national interest to allow Tibetan culture to flourish in a way that is not politically threatening (Kabir 10/26/05).

What constitutes “politically threatening,” however, is subject to much interpretation, as we have seen in the government’s response to “Aku Pema,” a song with no explicitly political lyrics that was once banned and is no longer restricted. This label is very ambiguous and changes often to meet the changing political climate in Tibet, as well as the government’s own needs for a stable political situation¹⁰.

Although Tibetans in Tibet have enough agency and “rights” to perform “politically unthreatening traditional music,” the Chinese government also appropriates this agency by manipulating the performance of traditional Tibetan music for its own use. The state-run dance troupes, which are required to perform both traditional Tibetan and

⁹ See Pema Bhum’s memoirs, *Six Stars with a Crooked Neck*, and the TIN report for a discussion on music (and musical forms of protest) during the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁰ The question remains, however, whether or not it is possible for Tibetan culture to “flourish” (in a “politically non-threatening way”) under these circumstances, especially considering the larger-than-life presence of His Holiness in Tibetan culture—a presence that is decidedly “politically threatening,” and how much agency Tibetans in Tibet have to enable is flourishing.

Chinese song and dance, may be seen as simultaneously a public expression of support for (and a threat to) traditional Tibetan music. These troupes showcase a “developed” style of music, created by the state, which has been “the standard for professional music since the 1950s.” These ensembles often include Western instruments and harmonies, formally staged performances, and Western and Chinese operatic styles (sung by “scientifically trained” voices). Through these changes,

folksongs and other traditional Tibetan music [are] being refined from their “crude” and “raw” form into “true” art ... In this way, this music is not just a vehicle for propaganda ... but itself constitutes a form of propaganda through its embodiment of state-defined progress and its association with state institutions (108).

This “developed” style of music is typical among all of China’s “ethnic minorities,” as the government imposes a “common gloss” on the portrayals of all the (very different) minority cultures to highlight some constructed similarity between all of them as “inalienable” parts of the motherland. Through this gloss, the state hopes to achieve

A fine balance of celebration of ethnic character on the one hand, and avoidance of the political alienation of the minority nationalities from the motherland on the other (109).

Music is only one aspect of this process, as the dancing and even the costumes are altered. I recall being shocked and slightly horrified the first time I saw one such dance group featured on the “Lhasa TV” station in Dharamsala; along with their plastered smiles, the men were wearing bright blue sequined traditional style shirts, and the women were wearing sequined aprons with their *chubas*. In retrospect, these performers were most likely members of a government-run dance troupe.

“Facing the threat of extinction”
Cultural Preservation in Exile

In exile, many Tibetans (like my *gen la* Khando), feel a great deal of “anxiety” over these changes, as they feel they are “upholders of something that has been destroyed,” or at least significantly altered and “not pure” (Kabir 10/26/05). For these reasons, there is an enormous focus on the preservation of Tibetan culture and performing arts, especially because His Holiness the Dalai Lama has extensively promoted these preservation efforts.

Today, we are going through a critical period of time. We are a nation with an ancient culture, which is now facing the threat of extinction. We need your help, the international community’s help, to protect our culture. Our culture is one of the heritages of the world. Protecting an ancient culture like this is the responsibility not only of the concerned nation, but also of the world community as a whole¹¹.

These words are featured on the homepage of the Tibetan Institute for the Performing Arts (TIPA). Currently located in Dharamsala, TIPA was founded in 1959, just four months after His Holiness came into exile, in order to “preserve the traditional performing arts before it was lost forever” (www.tibetanarts.org/whatistipa.html).

In addition to training performers and presenting international displays of Tibetan culture, TIPA’s other main function is to train performing arts teachers for the exile school system (Diehl 69). The job of a music teacher is especially important, and especially stressful, because of the exile community’s focus on preserving Tibetan performing arts. As Keila Diehl notes in her comprehensive study on exile music entitled *Echoes from Dharamsala*,

¹¹ The date and context of this quote is not provided, unfortunately.

Because of their performative, public format, the performing arts in particular have come to be closely scrutinized measuring sticks of the success of cultural preservation in exile (77).

This places a great deal of pressure on both the teacher and students, who must perfect long routines of traditional song and dance for the various holiday performances and competitions that occur throughout the school year.

Khando related to me how she was so angry with her students, who forgot parts of their song and dance for the 16th anniversary celebration of His Holiness' Nobel Peace Prize on December 10th. She told me with a laugh how she “beat them¹²” during their last-minute rehearsals—including even the older boys who tower over her tiny (under 5 foot) frame. According to my *pa.la*, however, their performance of a *nangma* was “*pe yag po dug*,” although his compliments were not directed to the students, but to Khando, as the students' performance is seen mostly as a reflection of the teacher. (Conversation 12/12/05). Khando herself was also happy with the performance, and she told me how her students, eager to please, asked how they did, and she told them they were “good, but not too good” (Conversation 12/11/05).

These performances are not limited to students, however, as many adults form their own amateur groups to perform at these annual functions. Thubten, (the restaurant owner discussed earlier), was “very interested” in Tibetan traditional dance, so he joined such a group in 1996. He searched through a tall stack of photos until he found of from their annual July 6th performance (in honor of Dalai Lama's birthday), which he showed em with evident pride. When asked why he participated, he said, “because I am Tibetan and this is my culture” (Interview 12/8/05). By participating in these performances,

Thubten's prime motivation is seemingly not preservation, but the (public) demonstration and reaffirmation of his identity as a Tibetan living in exile.

This strong sense of a Tibetan identity is exactly what all teachers in exile, but particularly music teachers, must instill in their students. In this way, matters of preservation and identity are closely linked, as teachers are

Responsible not only for preserving culture per se, but also for fostering in their students (and *then* preserving) a relationship with and investment in their homeland (Diehl 76).

This investment in a homeland that most have never seen is crucial to the continuation of the political struggle carried out in exile on behalf of their brothers and sisters in Tibet.

Diehl notes that

Keeping alive the possibility of returning to the homeland requires keeping alive the memory and lived experience of Tibetan-ness ... [of which music is an integral part] (66).

Tenyang was thinking about this possibility of return when she expressed her concerns about the need to preserve Tibetan music. "When we get freedom," she explained, "they [the young Tibetans] have to know Tibetan songs." But she also felt that the next generation of exile Tibetans are in good hands, as she told me how even children at the nursery school (up to 6 years old) are taught traditional song and dance, and even perform them in competitions (Interview 12/9/05).

¹² Corporal punishment is common in studying Tibetan performing arts. Khando related to me with a laugh, several anecdotes about how "they would beat us" when she was studying at TIPA.

*Two young girls sitting in front of the Jokhang in Lhasa,
Playing around with my dranyen that they have received no training in*

The children living in nearby houses demonstrated these skills for me, performing many verses of traditional Tibetan song with the rhythmic foot stomping of the accompanying dances. I recall being very impressed at these impromptu performances, given by four and five year olds, who were evidently pleased with their performances. On December 10th, these children showcased their talents in a more official setting than the palm-tree shaded patio in front of my family's house. Dressed in the vibrant costumes and elaborate headdresses of all three regions, the girls wearing eyeliner and lipstick, children from the nursery school through grade 12 presented traditional song and dance, accompanied by their teachers on *dranyen*. The representation of all three regions through each of their distinct dress and musical styles are powerful visual and aural embodiments of the pan-Tibetan identity that has been created as a result of the special conditions of exile. This construct attempts to gloss over (in a way not unlike the Chinese's glossing over of ethnic minorities) the often-intense regional differences and

loyalties between the various regions, now that all Tibetans are together in the (continually expanding) locale of “exile.” This pan-Tibetan identity also serves a political purpose, as well, as it strives to portray pre-1959 Tibet as a strong, politically unified entity to counter China’s own propaganda of Tibet as a historically integral part of China¹³.

*Performers at a nangma bar in Lhasa
Displaying the dress from all regions of Tibet, during their final number*

The December 10th celebration featured some of the older generation as well. A short, very condensed version of *lhamo*, Tibetan opera, was performed, much to the delight of the older generation in the audience, who most likely recall seeing *lhamo* from their childhood in Tibet. My *acha.la* sat and watched with her two-year-old son asleep in her lap. She told me how their singing gives her “goosebumps” (a word I supplied as she motioned to her arm). Tenyang helped clarify: “she means it touches her heart.” According to Marcia Calkowski, an expert on *lhamo*,

¹³ The popularity of “Aku Pema” may be a product of this new identity, as it is enjoyed by Tibetans from all parts of Tibet, despite being an Amdo song. Also interesting to note how China displays this pan-Tibetan identity through music and costumes as well, as part of their propaganda campaign, (discussed earlier in this paper).

Tibetans share a particular affection for their opera, which they view as an enduring symbol of their unique cultural identity (quoted in Diehl, 70).

While this may be true, this affinity for *lhamo* may be changing as the new generations grow up. Despite Choedon's earlier comments, she told me later that night how she doesn't particularly enjoy *lhamo*. "I can't understand the words," she said, proceeding to imitate their highly affected style of singing. In between our bursts of laughter, she explained her feelings in more detail.

My father always tells me what it's about, and I say "*kha tsoom!*" because everyone can hear his shouting [laughs]. ... Last year [at] *Losar*, there was a big *lhamo* competition. Five of six days [for each group]! ... I go just to have fun [laughs]. But sometimes I like to listen, like when there's a story about a family, you know, a boy and a girl, and something happens—I like that. So nice [smiles] (12/10/05).

Choedon's remarks on *lhamo* clarify some of these important issues concerning preservation and change. Even though she cannot fully understand the opera's words and is sometimes more interested in having fun with her friends, she still enjoys the parts that are relevant to her own life, namely, those concerning family relations, which she can emotionally relate to. As Dell Hymes notes in his discussion on preservation of culture, "What has survived ... [is] material relevant to the community's moral and psychological concerns" (quoted in Diehl 98). It is possible that in the future, these portions of *lhamo* and other areas of traditional culture, are what will survive, or as will be examined later, may be updated and changed to keep it relevant for the community, and thereby, paradoxically preserving aspects of Tibetan culture for future generations to enjoy.

*Traditional lhamo being performed at the Tibetan Music Festival
Bylakuppe, February 2005. (From www.music Tibet.com)*

As she mentioned, *lhamo* and other cultural performances, like December 10th, are opportunities for “fun” and socializing, and sometimes the primary motivation in attending. For these reasons, Diehl observed how the intermission at *lhamo* performances is a crucial component to the experience of attending the actual performance itself. But Choedon’s *pa.la* obviously felt somewhat differently, as he deemed the performance so important for her to understand that he persisted in explaining it to her despite her continual protests. His Holiness has also publicly expressed the importance of *lhamo*, as Choedon went on to address:

Dalai Lama says the young generation should learn *lhamo* ... [because] it’s very difficult when this old generation dies. He says, you know, [that] it’s very important. He likes the *popo.la*’s [who perform *lhamo*] very much. Sometimes he does like this to them [touches their foreheads in a blessing].

His Holiness would have been very pleased, then, to see a few young women performing *lhamo* at Bylakuppe on December 10th, although the majority of the performers were still quite old and possibly learned *lhamo* in Tibet before 1959. But it is true that most

of the younger generation is uninterested in learning such a demanding and seemingly out-dated style of music likes *lhamo*.

A few of the local *chang ma*, Tibetan women who sing at weddings and encourage the partygoers to drink *chang* (barley beer), confirmed these observations. They told me that the *chang ma* tradition (one that is loved by most Tibetans and considered an integral part to the enjoyment of weddings) might not continue, as the younger Tibetans' are not interested in learning it. Despite this situation, one of the women told me that she "doesn't care" that the tradition might die. She only participates because she "likes to sing" (Interview 11/21/05).

This statement was quite startling for me to hear, as I had incorrectly assumed that most exile Tibetans, especially older ones, performed traditional songs simply to preserve them. Although that is certainly the case for some, I had forgotten that people also perform or listen to these old songs for sheer pleasure, like Thubten who was so "interested" in Tibetan dance that he joined the local amateur troupe¹⁴. Many older Tibetans are simply trying to continue following the way of life that they recall from Tibet. And for the younger generations born in exile, who have no lived memory of life in Tibet, these live performances, whether they're of *nangma*, *lhamo*, or *chang shay*, is still part of their actual life experience from the time of childhood in exile.

Diehl argues that these performances "contribute significantly to a shared sense of history and identity"—an identity that seems to be relatively secure among the youth in exile, who have a strong sense of their Tibetan identity (Diehl 99). Then the question

¹⁴ But he, too, was concerned about traditional music "disappearing," although he did not directly relate this to his participation in the dance group. It's difficult to separate people's motivations as purely for "enjoyment" or "preservation," as they all intertwine, especially because the overarching rhetoric of cultural preservation is so strong that it seems to be in almost everyone's consciousness somewhat.

remains as to why there is not more youth initiative in learning these genres on their own accord. As mentioned earlier, this discrepancy largely results from the peculiar situation of exile life in general, which encompasses a much broader range of experiences and sounds that are very relevant to the young exile Tibetan's life.

“Singing alien songs”
Foreign Musical Influences on Tibetans in Exile

*For long you have wandered over alien seas
 Singing alien songs; stoned in discotheques.
 But in your eyes I see the longing
 for the Cold Mountain songs and
 The long march back to our long lost home...*

- From “A Poem of Separation,” K. Dhondup (Muses 29).

Every morning, the monks' first prayers of the day floated through the windows of our house. After their chanting evaporated with the rising sun, a transistor radio somewhere nearby was switched on and screeching sounds of Hindi film music accompanied our breakfast meal. Upon inquiring, I was surprised to learn that the *momo.la* next door was the person behind the radio, enjoying her daily fill of Hindi music while she went about her morning chores.

I spoke with her one afternoon about her musical tastes. My *acha.la*, who was translating, told me that

When she was young, she used to go see Hindi films and liked the songs. ... When something sad happens, she feels so sad. ... When something bad happens, like [a] husband beating his wife, then she cries. [But] something happy, [then] she feels so happy (Interview 12/1/05).

Like most Indians, Tibetans, and other Bollywood-filmgoers, she finds resonance in the (melodramatic) display of emotions that are expressed via song and dance in Hindi films.

Although she also enjoys singing *chang shay* and old Tibetan songs, when she feels sad, Hindi songs make her heart feel happy—“*sempai kyipo dug.*”

My friend Rigdzin expressed the relationship Tibetans in exile have with Hindi music in a phone call during my stay at his brother’s house.

I want to sing you a Hindi song. <Why?> Because I lived there for 30 years. ... For a while, I tried to avoid it. I thought, “I’m Tibetan.” But I lived 30 years of my life there. ... When I sing Hindi songs, I feel joy
(Correspondence 12/11/05).

His statement clearly reflects the tensions Tibetans feel between the appeal of Hindi music and the necessity of preserving Tibetan music. This tension is a result of conflicting messages of the Tibetan government-in-exile, linking the preservation of Tibetan culture with isolation from Indian society that could be a potentially corrupting force. At the heart of this issue are questions about what it means to be a Tibetan living in India in exile, and what is proper to incorporate into that identity. Although Rigdzin, and presumably many others, felt a sense of guilt for his musical tastes, he eventually realized that it was still possible to be a “Tibetan” and enjoy Hindi music, despite the official paradigm that promotes a purity of culture (rather unrealistically).

This musical agency extends beyond Hindi film music, as Tibetans have a strong affinity for Western music as well. Keila Diehl notes this phenomenon of the West becoming a “surrogate Shangri-La,” as their homeland—the original site of the “Shangri-La” myth—is presently inaccessible to them (144).

Although I heard some American music in settlements in South India, Dharamsala is a particularly interesting place to discuss the influence of Western music on Tibetans. Pirated CDs of Western music are readily sold or loaned to the Amdo boys who pass their

days at local teashops, while CDs of sacred Tibetan chants by the Gyuto monks or spiritual flute renditions by Nawang Khechong are sold from the same CD vendors to the numerous *inji* tourists¹⁵. At the weekly open-mike nights in Dharamsala, young Tibetans try out their skills on the acoustic guitar and *injis* perform their own compositions, sing Hindi chants or attempt to play the *dranyen*. One night, Lobsang, well-known for his regular renditions of “Hotel California”—ubiquitous among most Tibetan settlements and most of Asia—performed a song he wrote on the guitar that he dedicated to his mother, whom he has not seen since leaving Amdo three years ago for India. The song’s lyrics (“*Ama*, I miss you...*Ama*, I love you...”) touched everyone’s hearts and was followed by a rendition of Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song,” and then a group of Amdo boys closed the evening by singing a lively traditional Amdo tune.

A few Amdo boys hanging out at their regular spot in Dharamsala

Although Bob Marley T-shirts coupled with red-yellow-green striped Rastafarian pants are a regular dress code for these young Tibetans, hip-hop is fast becoming a larger

¹⁵ The cultural interest goes both ways of course. The West’s obsession with Tibet as a spiritual Shangri-la

musical influence than reggae these days. The rhythmic sounds of hip-hop and rap, which have had a growing presence in Western mainstream culture in the last decade, has also reached the shores of India and other countries around the globe, as musical trends travel easier through the phenomenon of globalization. Although many Tibetans probably enjoy hip-hop because of the popular status it currently enjoys in mainstream America, it seems plausible that they also find emotional resonance in its original function—as a vehicle for resistance, as it originally functioned in the urban ghettos of America. In this way, their preference for hip-hop may be seen as resisting the rhetoric of cultural preservation that looms especially close in Dharamsala due to the presence of TIPA, CTA, and the Dalai Lama himself.

“Modern songs for a modern people”
The Creation of Modern Tibetan Music in Exile

As a musical language of resistance, hip-hop may be particularly useful in articulating the hopes and desires for a “Free Tibet.” In this way, hip-hop may be valuable to the community’s united efforts in the freedom struggle, especially in its power to ignite the passions of an otherwise (somewhat) complacent youth who find more relevance in this genre’s sound and message than in some traditional Tibetan music. This is particularly true when Tibetans appropriate these sounds and experiment with hip-hop to make it their own, and in the process, create a new genre of “Tibetan hip-hop.”¹⁶

has been well-documented elsewhere and is beyond the scope of my paper.

¹⁶ I discovered the appeal of Tibetan hip-hop this past summer, when I participated in the International Tibet Independence Movement (ITIM) “March for Tibet’s Independence” from Boston to New York City with many young Tibetan teenagers as well as adults. During the walk, “Rewa” became a sort of political anthem for us all.

One such innovator is Pemsi (Penpa Tsering), whose album, “Rewa,” won best debut album at the 2005 Tibetan Music Awards held this past October in Dharamsala. The title track is a widely popular hip-hop tune that addresses the hope (*rewa*) Tibetans have for freedom.

In Tibet the sun of happiness will shine, if such a thing
 [freedom] were to happen ...
(Puh la kyipe nyima sha wai doe chi gi chong na ...)
 In the snowy land of Tibet, we are the owners ...
*(Puh kawa cheng gi shing kam di, dag po nga tso
 him ba ma che gya ...)*
 Tibetan people have hope from the bottom of our hearts
(Puh mi, rewa, rewa sempa ting nge joe)¹⁷

As demonstrated in the above lyrics, the political message is expressed through traditional metaphors, such as the sun. Additionally, like many traditional (and modern) Tibetan songs, he also pays homage to His Holiness, who is the Tibetan people’s root lama (“*tsa wai lama*”).

*Pemsi (Penpa Tsering) performing his other hit song (“Ama Jetsun Pema”)
 at the 2005 Tibetan Music Festival in Bylakuppe (www.music Tibet.com)*

¹⁷ The full translation of this song is forthcoming, as I was unable to get it fully translated. See the appendix for the Tibetan lyrics (in English phonetics).

Although these metaphors and topics (of the Dalai Lama and freedom) are not original and comprise most of the lyrics of modern Tibetan music, “Rewa” is still an interesting development in the progression of this relatively new genre. By including these elements, Pemsu can experiment with new styles, such as hip-hop, while still keeping it “Tibetan,” until Tibetan musicians can figure out a way of developing a distinctly modern Tibetan style of music. Indeed, the influence of Western hip-hop still looms large in the song, as “Rewa” even samples a few raps in English from an unknown rapper to support Pemsu’s singing and lend the song more credence as a hip-hop tune. Songs like “Rewa” are really only an initial starting point, since modern Tibetan music in general is still very nascent (let alone Tibetan hip-hop).

Although there is no hip-hop version of “Aku Pema,” I would not be surprised if a remake in this style appears in the near future, especially because there are many versions of this song already. While “Rewa” reflects the growing popularity of a new type of modern Tibetan music, “Aku Pema” reflects the more typical directions that contemporary Tibetan music has taken thus far. “Aku Pema” is found on numerous exile albums produced by renowned artists like Techung, Tsering Wangmo, and Kelsang Chuckie Tethong. However, I will examine two very popular renditions in particular, namely, those sung by Tsering Gyurmey and Sonam Tashi (known as Acho Danny).

Tsering Gyurmey, beloved by exiled Tibetans everywhere, included a pop version of “Aku Pema” on his compilation album, “The Best of Tsering Gyurmey.” His remake features a disco beat—a sound that figures prominently in most modern Tibetan songs. The roots of this style are found in the popular Hindi film music, a genre whose appeal was discussed earlier. By sticking to this well-worn formula of adopting traditional or

new Tibetan songs to a “modern” (Hindi) disco beat, Tsering Gyurmey is not taking many musical risks, unlike Pemsu and a few other musicians. But nonetheless, he was rewarded with the title of “Best Male Singer” at the recent 2005 Tibetan Music Awards.

In contrast to this pop version, Acho Danny’s rendition of “Aku Pema” is a bit less formulaic, through its use of rock and roll influences, such as a well-played electric guitar backed by a *dranyen*. Acho Danny, a founding member of the highly esteemed Chaksampa Opera Company, released his first solo album in 2004, in which he experiments with new ways of playing the *dranyen*. The prevalence of Western musical influences on his album (which also features more traditional style songs) may partially result from the fact that he resides in New York City. Additionally, the historical legacy of rock and roll as a genre of rebellion may also motivate his use of this style. As Simon Frith states

Rock, in contrast to pop, carries intimations of sincerity, authenticity, art—noncommercial concerns” (quoted by Diehl 169).

These connotations of pure motivation, along with political rebellion, “remind the community of [Tibetan musicians’] commitment to liberation” (Diehl 169).

Acho Danny’s CD release cover for “My Dranyen” (www.achodanny.com)

Indeed, although he is well regarded for his commitment to the political struggle and for decades of contribution to Tibetan music, not everyone is fond of this “acclaimed

modern Tibetan music” (www.achodanny.com). Tsewang Choden (my *dranyen* teacher from Dharamsala) is Acho Danny’s contemporary from their years of study at TIPAs, and he occasionally plays with him in the United States and India—despite his professed dislike for Acho Danny’s untraditional way of playing *dranyen* (Conversation 9/21/05).

Despite these controversial developments in Tibetan music, many people realize their potential benefits. Khando, for instance, thought these developments in Tibetan music were largely positive, (despite her earlier emphasis on cultural purity and preservation from Chinese influences).

I think it’s very good, Tibetan hip-hop. The old songs are important, but times are changing, and we’re a modern people, so we need modern songs. They’re good for Tibetan society (Interview 11/26/05).

Although she recognizes the need to preserve traditional songs, she believes that it is possible and even beneficial, for modern songs to be created alongside the old ones.

Some Tibetans however feel that the development of modern Tibetan music (and by extension, of a modern Tibetan identity), threaten the very fabric of exile life, which is based on the hope of returning to life in Tibet where traditional culture would once again flourish. Diehl observes that

... an openness to new, more nomadic ways of “being Tibetan” is healthy, modern, and creative; to the latter, such openness to the fruits of unintended mobility indicates a weakening of commitment to community, with the blurring of boundaries signaling the end of the struggle and the fading away of any hope of returning to the homeland (29).

For those Tibetans who feel this way, the stakes of creating modern Tibetan music are too high, as they not only endanger the preservation of culture, but also the political struggle itself.

Other Tibetans believe that this new, modern genre may actually be necessary for the continued preservation of Tibetan culture in general. Lobsang Wangyal, a controversial figure who has organized the Miss Tibet contents and Tibetan Music Awards of the last few years is one of many Tibetans who feel this way. I quote his thoughts at length because it sums it up this paradox (of changing to preserve culture) quite well:

Tibetan music is performed and recorded on albums. No government departments or organisations do anything further to develop it. ... If you want to preserve a culture it is not enough to just keep it as it was before; you have to improve it—otherwise it will get lost. We have to develop it as much as we can so that we are preserving our culture. [...] Tibetan culture is changing and it is a big change but no one can stop it from changing [...] some people do worry about the changes that take place in our culture and they think that Tibetan culture is disappearing but I don't think it is disappearing; it is in the middle of an evolution. ... If there are no new things in the Tibetan culture, then the people will be bored of the old things, therefore it is very important to create new things in the culture (quoted by TIN 183).

Wangyal's comments articulate clearly how Tibetan culture is in danger of getting "lost" if it is not allowed to evolve. Without a viable option of modern Tibetan music, younger generations must look elsewhere to find contemporary music that resonates with their specific experiences of exile, such as Hindi or Western music (or Chinese music for Tibetans in Tibet).

“When I sang ‘Aku Pema’ ... they laughed at me”
Perspectives of Tibetans in Tibet on Sinocization and Modernity

The exterior of a nangma bar in Lhasa

Tibetans in Tibet have also recognized the need for modern Tibetan music, as they update traditional songs or create entirely new ones in their own style—a practice initiated by Tibetans themselves, and not imposed on them by the Chinese government, an assumption that was addressed earlier. Like their counterparts in exile, Tibetans also listen to Hindi and Western music (although they do not seem to utilize these influences in their own creations thus far¹⁸). The recent growth in the popularity of Hindi films and music may be partially seen as an expression of reverence for India, the present home of the Dalai Lama. In that same light, Tibetans’ affinity for Western music, the sonic embodiment of freedom and democracy, may result from the affinity Tibetans feel for Westerners in general, who they regard unilaterally as friends and supporters in the

¹⁸ At the last minute, I discovered, however, an intriguing article on the “First Rock Band in Tibet.” I was unfortunately unable to utilize it in my paper, but I’ve included it in the appendix.

feredom struggle¹⁹. At the *nangma* bar I attended, these influences were demonstrated when both Hindi and Western songs were performed towards the end of the show.

Singing an American pop song at a nangma bar in Lhasa

Despite these growing influences, the predominant musical style currently being incorporated into Tibetan music is Chinese. Although in exile, as examined earlier, these sino-influences are viewed as impure musical manifestations of the Chinese occupation, Tibetans in Tibet largely do not define sinocization in such political terms. This apolitical view partially results from the association of China with modernity, by which Chinese contemporary music is the sonic embodiment of this modernity. By extension, Tibet and its musical traditions are seen as backward, as evident in this statement by a Tibetan singer who participated in one of the many musical competitions in Tibet.

They [told us] that our songs should be in praise of the PRC. ... [On advice from a friend] I sang “Aku Pema” and one other song. When I sang “Aku Pema” there were many Chinese and they laughed at me (TIN 72).

In its unaltered form, this popular song is seen as backward, just as Tibetan culture must be “developed” from its raw form, via the government-run dance troupes. It

¹⁹ This was made clear to me in Lhasa, as young Tibetans spoke quite openly with me (of their own accord) around the Barkhor.

appears that the Tibetans have also internalized some of these Chinese perspectives, especially as they understand that Tibet was largely “backward” by many standards, until China (forcefully) imposed modernity on the country after the full occupation in 1959²⁰. Despite these notions of backwardness, Tibetans in Tibet still feel much pride for their culture, as “Aku Pema” may also be a vehicle for. During my evening at the *nangma* bar, most Tibetan songs were sung in Chinese and accompanied by a disco beat, but “Aku Pema” was one of two songs sung in the Tibetan language. During this song, many audience members offered *khatas* to the singer—a strong indication of their approval and possibly an indication of a political interpretation of the song.

*At my friend's insistence, I offered a khata
To the man singing “Aku Pema” at a nangma bar in Lhasa*

Although the forces of the dominant Chinese culture act upon Tibetans, they in turn can manipulate those forces for their own use. Indeed, when young Tibetan musicians create “modern Tibetan music” in Tibet, they actively choose to incorporate these modern influences that permeate their daily lives (in a process not so dissimilar to

²⁰ However, Tibet was also beginning to modernize on its own, prior to the Chinese invasion, although with

that found in exile). This creation of modern Tibetan music was first enabled by the emergence of cassette technology in the 1980s and the liberal atmosphere at that time. These developments engendered freedom of choice in music for the first time, as music became a commodity that was driven largely by demand rather than controlled by the state (TIN 59).

However, ironically, this increased degree of freedom of choice has done more for the “integration” and “assimilation” of Tibetans into the PRC in musical terms than 20-30 years of heavy-handed top-down policies (60).

The TIN report astutely notes this paradox, by which Chinese musical influences are seen as the result of Tibetans’ own “freedom of choice.” As examined earlier, this contradicts the perceptions of exiled Tibetans, who believe that Tibetans lack this “right” and by these forced influences, assimilated into Chinese culture while Tibetan culture itself is destroyed or at least tainted. It is important, however, to understand that Tibetans in Tibet view these influences as are fashionable, current, and synonymous with modernity, and they do not view them as contradictory to a “Tibetan” identity.

These sino-cultural influences are not even seen as contradictory to political feelings for freedom. Even some of exile’s own heroines, (the 14 nuns formerly imprisoned at Drapchi Prison in Tibet), adopted sino-musical influences, but no one would ever claim that they are any less Tibetan or patriotic or have “lost their culture.” Ngawang Sangdrol, one of these now infamous nuns who secretly recorded explicit protest songs while in prison, remarked on the influence of Chinese pop influence in their freedom songs.

In Tibet, we would mostly hear Chinese songs and we recorded our songs to the tunes of the Chinese style songs

the help of Great Britain. Jamyang Norbu as written extensively on this topic.

that we knew. We like these songs. Since I was young, I always heard songs like Chinese Hong Kong songs and therefore we composed some of our songs on these tunes (TIN 184).

In addition to political prisoners like the Drapchi 14 nuns, many contemporary Tibetan artists are demonstrating this possibility of being distinctly Tibetan and even strongly nationalistic, even though they utilize Chinese musical styles and language in their songs. Yadong, the one of the most successful pop musicians in Tibet, is a prime example of this seemingly contradictory phenomenon (TIN 88). The fact that Yadong sings mostly in Chinese has not diminished his Tibetan mage or widespread popularity. This Khampa musician wrote the (currently censored) songs (“White Stupa” and “Little Brother with Deep Feelings”) that Tenzin had mentioned were the “most political” songs they could sing in Tibet—although he failed to mention that the lyrics are in Chinese, a fact that is apparently of little consequence to him and many other Tibetans. Indeed, Yadong, “a truly modern Tibetan performer,” is well regarded as a “Tibetan patriot” who is deeply religious and has enjoyed immense success of his own accord (and not by patronizing the PRC) (TIN 88).

Maybe for these reasons, (and because he has started singing more in the Tibetan language), he is well regarded in exile. Yadong actually won the 2003 award for Best Tibetan Male Singer and Best Song at the Tibetan Music Awards in Dharamsala, which is a very strong indication of the exile community's approval (<http://www.music Tibet.com>). In South India, Thubten, the owner of the local J-village restaurant, also likes Yadong, and he played me a few songs from his VCD from Tibet. Although he told me earlier that music in Tibet is *yag po min dug* because it has “Chinese tuning” and “Chinese words,” he likes many of Yadong's songs. The TIN report notes that

In the era of the VCD, songs such as Yadong's have immense scope for visual imagery showing off the stunning natural beauty of the Tibetan landscape, which contributes to their success (88).

This scenery is one of the reasons Thubten gave for liking the song so much. While we watched a song on the VCD, he said with a smile that it has “Tibetan scene, Tibetan tuning, and Tibetan dress—I like this” (Conversation 12/8/05).

“Aku Pema” as a Bridge
Concluding Thoughts on Musical Agency and Tibetan Identity

*You are a bridge to the future
 for the poets and patriots:
 You sing songs of sacrifice
 And you beat the drums of destiny*

-From “A Poem of Separation,” K. Dhondup (*Muses* 29).

“Aku Pema” may be seen as a bridge connecting the two different directions that modern Tibetan music is currently following. Not only have different interpretations

been carried over this bridge, (fulfilling either a desire or lack thereof to find political meaning in song), but at either side of the bridge, in exile and Tibet, “Aku Pema” has been adapted differently to suit the musical tastes of each shore. On both ends, the amount of musical agency of local Tibetans is not so dissimilar, as they are both influenced and manipulated by their respective governments, dominating cultures, and global trends. Yet Tibetans in Tibet and exile have managed to exert agency on these forces to a certain degree, as they maneuver around the obstacles and sometimes even appropriate them for their own interests. In this way, they have been able to both preserve traditional Tibetan songs and to create modern Tibetan music, although these categories are themselves a subject of much debate—a debate whose underlying concern is what a new, modern Tibetan identity should look like (and sound like). By attempting to impose their own views on what they think modern Tibetan music should be, Tibetans in exile preclude the agency of those Tibetans still in Tibet to have differing opinions. There are exceptions, however, as I happily heard from my *pa.la*. I asked him what he thought of the singer Yadong, and he replied

If all Tibetans [in Tibet] love him, means I also love him ...
Because he’s very famous, you know, in Tibet. Singing
Chinese songs and Tibetan songs very nicely, everyone
likes him. So I like him.

Instead of questioning the musical tastes of Tibetans in Tibet, he has simply put his faith in them to have the best judgement concerning their musical choices. Voices like his are refreshing, but unfortunately, a minority, as these debates over culture and identity are so controversial and politically charged. This issues will continue to evolve as subsequent generations of Tibetans in exile and Tibet decide for themselves what it means to be “Tibetan” in a modern era. By that time, “Aku Pema” may no longer

resound from *nangma* bars in Lhasa or from stereos in Southern India, but the issues that this particular song embodies will not disappear, as cultures and identities constantly change and adapt in order to simultaneously preserve and renew themselves against all odds.

With the children from next door (Tibetan Rabgyaling Settlement)

Appendix A

Glossary of Tibetan Terms

Acha – sister

Acho - cousin

Aku - uncle

Ama - mother

Chaksampa – Tibetan opera and musical group

Chang – Tibetan barley beer

Chang ma – women who sing *chang* songs
and encourage wedding guests to drink

Doe gar – performing arts

Dranyen – Tibetan lute

Ha go song – understand

Gen la – teacher

Gya mi – Chinese people

Inji – Westerners

Ka tsoom – “shut up”

Khata – a traditional white scarf offered as a sign of respect

La – an honorific term of respect added at the end
of people’s names

Lhasa – the capital of Tibet and former seat of the
Dalai Lama and Tibetan government

Lhamo – Tibetan opera

Momo – grandmother

Nangma – 1) a genre of classical Tibetan music of Muslim origins
2) a nightclub in urban areas of Tibet where disco

versions of Tibetan songs are performed

Pa – father

Pema – 1) lotus 2) a common Tibetan name

Purang – a region in Western Tibet

Rangzen – independence

Rewa – hope

Sa khang – restaurant

Sempai kyipo dug – feeling happy in one's heart

Shamo – hat

Shay – song

Thukpa – noodles

Tsa wai lama – root lama
(a common reference for the Dalai Lama)

Toeshay – a genre of classical Tibetan music

Yag po dug – good

Yag po min dug – bad

Appendix B

Song Lyrics

“Uncle Pema”

By Palgon (original in Tibetan)

Sometimes interpreted as a metaphor for the Dalai Lama

Oh Uncle Pema!

Oh mighty Eagle adorned with a conch-white stripe!

If you soar up heavenwards, you adorn the azure sky,

If you descend earthwards, you gladden the craggy mountains.

And, your absence makes the craggy ledges bereft of any life!

Oh Uncle Pema!

Duck with the golden rosary

If you fly out of the water, you adorn the meadows,

If you swim in the water, you gladden the water's spirits

And, your absence makes the lake bereft of life and spirit!

Oh Uncle Pema!

Oh handsome Youth, adorned with conch-white teeth like a tiger!

If you go [a]way, you are a credit to your fellow townsfolk, and

If you come this way, you are a star amongst your peers.

And, your absence makes my heart bereft of love and meaning!

“Little Brother with Deep Feelings”**By Yadong (original in Chinese)***Commonly interpreted as a metaphor for the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama*

Who has dispersed your flock of sheep,
 Leaving you to guard the last grassland,
 Not being able to reach the hands of the ones you love,
 Not being able to make a sound or shed a tear?
 Your dreams are growing over there,
 The coloured rain and silvery river,
 Homes built on the green hills,
 Lifting a bright lamp with a pair of little hands.
 Little brother is filled with deep feelings.
 Little brother must walk on the chosen path.
 Let's us take each other by the hand and walk forward.

“White Stupa”**By Yadong (original in Chinese)***Commonly interpreted as a metaphor for the Dalai Lama*

Looking at the pure and clear sky, remembering an ancient song,
 A song mother sang for the sun.
 Despite the dark clouds, your white shadow brightens up sincere hearts.
 When the sky is bright and clear,
 Your majestic shadow spreads peace in the human realm.
 Oh “Quden gapu” [“white stupa”]
 You are the stars in the sky shining over the grassland.
 “Quden gapu,” you are the sun of my heart.

Tso Ngonpo – “Blue Lake” (Lake Kokonor)

Original poem by Dondrub Gyal, sung by many Tibetan singers

Interpreted as a metaphor for the suffering of the Tibetans under Chinese rule

Aima! Blue Lake, Blue Lake, Blue Lake

Legacy of the nationality

Glory of the land of the ancestors

When the waves surge the geese are happy

Blue Lake! When the edges of the blue lake freeze the geese are saddened

Aima! You are the witness of history

Blue Lake, you are the hope of the nationality

You are the hope of happiness and future life,

Blue Lake, happiness of the motherland,

Guardian of the nationality

When Blue Lake is frozen over, the golden-eyed fish go under the lake

Blue Lake, when the edges of the Blue Lake freeze up, the clean, white sheep are happy

Aima! You are the happiness of the present,

Blue Lake, [you] are the hope of the future

You are the owner of this world, you are the legacy of the nationality,

Blue Lake, Blue Lake

“Rewa” (“Hope”) – by Pemsî (Penpa Tsering)*

Tsa tu nge la se shi puh mi se gi yong gi nye lam
 Yeng gi shu tru nyi no
 Tsa wai lama kentü gompo kang kyi sum pe kar lab
 Ma ma sempa nang da
 Rang du ko na du pe le la tsuh na puh mi
 Lani yay
 Puh la kyipe nyima sha wai doe chi gi chong na
 (“In Tibet the sun of happiness will shine if such a thing were to happen”)
 Rangdun lun gi drup yang

Puh kawa cheng gi shing kam di (“In the snowy land of Tibet”)
 Dag po nga tso him ba ma che gya (“We are the owners”)
 Ma po tro pe pu chung te
 Tso le len tap nang tang

Puh mi Rewa (“Tibetan people”)
 Rewa sempa ting nge joe (“Have hope from the bottom of our hearts”)

* Full translation forthcoming.

Transcribed and translated with the help of Passang Bhuti and Choedon Tsering,
 (12/2/05).

Appendix C

Additional Information

Biography:

Chondhen, A.K.A. Tsewang Chondhen, was born in Sakya, Tibet, in March 1959, when China was completely taking over the country. His parents brought him to India that same year. In 1969 he was enrolled in Central School for Tibetans (CST) in Mussoorie. From 1979, he taught traditional Tibetan Dance and Music in Rajpur, near Dehra Dun, although he was an amateur artiste then. He taught at the school for seven years.

In 1985, in wanting to be a professional musician, Chondhen joined the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) in Mcleod Ganj, completing a three-year diploma course in traditional Tibetan dance, music and Lhamo (play and opera). He was then assigned to teach dance and music in CST Tenzin Gang in Bomdila, where he taught for 9 years. Bomdila is a small Tibetan settlement bordering Tibet in the northeastern India.

While in Bomdila, Chondhen was invited to perform Dekar (Tibetan Jester) at Inter Design Fukoura in Japan. Soon after the Japan tour Chondhen had an accident, which forced him to cease teaching for a few years. But he continued to learn and research Dekar, under the guidance of Opera Master Norbu Tsering of TIPA for a long time.

Dekar is always present at auspicious occasions and it is believed that their presence brings good fortune. The concept of Dekar existed in Tibet for centuries, but its first origins are unclear. The fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) is said to have been the first to formally patronise the Dekar.

Dekar appeared only on significant occasions, such as Losar, the Tibetan New Year, weddings and occasions when new officials were appointed to the government. Dekar's verses include both devotional praises and humorous entertainment. These provided both amusement, and inspired faith in the Buddhist religion. The costumes of Dekar were specific to their trade. They consisted of black and white masks ringed with goat's hair, decorated with shells, and a mirror on the forehead.

Dekar is a fast vanishing performing art. Chondhen is specialised in Dekar performance as he have done a great deal of research in the art. He has to his credit: Voice of Tsewang Chondhen, an audio cassette of verses or narration of Dekar that he produced in 2000.

He has performed at various venues on different occasions in India. He has also performed in a few European countries and in the US.

He is currently living in Mcleod Ganj, tutoring Tibetan dance, music, and opera for Tibetan students and also for other enthusiasts from around the world. He is preparing to produce a classical Tibetan music album in 2006 and is also working on an easy-to-use book of Tibetan music notation.

A story on the First Rock Group in Tibet – Heavenly Club Band

by Dechen Paldon (Ch: Deqen Baizin) published in China's Tibet No. 3, 2004.
http://www.musictibet.com/news/20041103-first_rockgroup-chinas_tibet.html

In the early winter last year, the busiest downtown street in Lhasa buzzed with excitement as the Heavenly Club Band, Tibet's first rock group began selling their first record – Vajara. The six-member band includes two music majors: Tenzin Dawa, the drummer, and Tashi Phuntsok, the bass guitarist.

Tenzin Dawa is the key member. A lover of rock music since he was young, he has been given the title of “the first person of rock in Tibet”. Five years ago, he founded the Non-Plug Music Bar in Lhasa, the first of its type in Tibet. Tashi Phuntsok is a middle school music teacher who studied music for five years in the Tibet University. Lead singer Sonam Tenzin is also a dancer/actor in the song and dance ensemble of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, having studied dancing from childhood.

Sonam Namgyal is the principal guitarist, as well as a German-speaking guide. Sonam Nyima is the rhythm guitar player, as well as an auditor.

As to the band's name, they explained: “According to a sutra, the 'heavenly club' is a musical instrument used to defeat evil spirits in a Buddhist mass, so it can represent the local culture or customs of Tibet. This is the original reason for the name. On the other hand, it signifies the band's musical style: very sharp, original and radical. Our music aims at showing the real beauty of life and exposing the other face of society and the human race.” The band's musical works include those created on the basis of existing folk songs, such as Aspiration, Rinzin Wangmo and Potala Palace.

Lhabu Dabu is a popular fictitious character in a Tibetan legend, which talks about a little hero who joined the army to replace his father. However, they take Lhabu Dabu as a hero to criticise those people that only dream of becoming successful and wealthy. The song adopts a hip-hop style so that the tart satire is transformed into humorous teasing with more profound meaning. Lhabu Dabu introduces a Tibetan children's song into the modern musical genre, so listeners get both a fresh and familiar feeling.

Chang (Ch: Qingke) Wine Toast Song is the most characteristic, being a well-known toasting song in the Shigatse area. The Heavenly Club Band transforms it into rap, and this is the first time a Tibetan song has transformed to such a modern musical genre.

When introducing their original intention of recomposing this folk song, band members explained that, “that folk song has been sung for hundreds of years in the same style, while we want to add something original. So, we tried to add some Western musical style and tempo to it and we feel very good.”

In Tibet, the Heavenly Club Band created the first song in Tibetan for Tibetan antelopes. “We have never heard any song in Tibetan about protecting Tibetan antelopes. There is only one Tibetan hero, Sonam Dhargay, who sacrificed his life for antelopes. As singers,

we are not able to go there to catch those poachers. But, we are satisfied to write a song for those who do.”

When their songs began creating resonance within society, they decided to record them and their first recording was born.

The issue of the first album, its songs resounding through these streets of Lhasa, has drawn much attention. Five or six of the songs are based on traditional folk songs. Bianlho, the famous writer of words and songs in Tibet, commented that, “the band contributes much to Tibetan music. I feel it uncommon that they have made use of rock style and taken their own role from history. It is very hard that they have intergrated Tibetan music with new words. I feel their bold attempt is very successful.”

Of course, some people criticised them at the time for changing or “spoiling” folk songs. In response, the band argues that, while “some people think we are spoiling folk songs, this is only their own opinion. Chang Toast Song is an ancient folk song that has gradually been forgotten by people. Today's youth even cannot sing it. Thanks to our efforts, after re-composition, its melody can be heard in many situations. Fairly speaking, we are carrying forward folk music.”

“A folk song can have many different styles so long as its essence does not change, just like human beings who can wear different clothes so long as their belief and soul does not change.”

The six musicians in the Heavenly Club Band regard each piece of the gifted earth in Tibet as their endless creation source. They have much confidence in the future of their musical journey.

In the early 1990s, someone tried rock music in Tibet, but failed to make it popular. The Heavenly Club Band integrates the special musical elements in Tibet with current hip-hop, rap, r&b, blues and other musical styles, and this results in their own character. The application of Tibetan guitar is the peak of perfection. The Tibetan guitar is a particular ethnic musical instrument easily recognisable when heard. It plays a special role in the whole album, showing these songs consisting of modern musical elements are from the primitive highlands.

Cui Jian, a rock musician in the hinterland, adopted the suona horn and Chinese zither with 25 strings into rock music in the 1980s. Askal, a rock group in Xinjiang, also integrated the tamboura in their songs successfully. In Tibet, the Heavenly Club Band is first to integrate ethnic musical instruments into rock music.

Contact the band: vajarasony@yahoo.com.cn

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Suggestions for Further Research

Further research is necessary into the gendered aspects of Tibetan musical agency and identity. Keila Diehl notes the need to study the phenomenon in exile of gendered divisions between playing instruments and singing (the former usually the realm of men, and the latter, of women). I would like to extend this question to gendered musical roles in Tibet, particularly in the area of political singing, as my informant implied that only men participated in such actions. Additionally, the Western influences on the creation of modern Tibetan music in Tibet, a recent development, would be an interesting topic of study.

Contact information

My *dranyen* teachers:

Tsewang Choden — Dharamsala, Bhagsu Road
Email: hitsewang@yahoo.com
Mobile: 981-628-6683

Khando – Gurupura, Tibetan Rabgyaling Settlement, Teachers' Quarters
Email: khando222@yahoo.co.in
Mobile: 944-802-0695