

Chapter Three

Music in a socialist market economy: The musical culture of Tibet today

When they organise a song competition for the minority peoples, if you are a Tibetan, you go there as a representative of the Tibetans to perform, but if you don't sing in the Chinese language, then there is no chance that you will win the contest. [...] You won't get second or third position. The judges will be predominantly Chinese, so if you don't sing lyrics in Chinese and if your tune isn't Chinese, then the judges won't be able to give you marks. – TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002

In our area, the local county dance troupe performs at occasions like after Losar. They generally don't perform Chinese songs; they mostly perform Tibetan songs. But then they sometimes perform Chinese propaganda songs, wearing the Mao suit etc. When they do this, the public shouts 'galiba', which is a local word, [...] which means something like 'mixed up', 'not pure'. – TIN interview TIN 03-1080, 20 March 2003

The emergence of pop music in Tibet



Singer Chungshol Dolma'

The end of the Cultural Revolution heralded a revival of traditional music in Tibet and the PRC as a whole. Subsequently, the late 1980s saw the emergence of a new era of modern, popular Tibetan music, which took roots in the climate of liberalisation and general development of the time.

Chinese musical styles and language are immensely influential in contemporary Tibetan pop music due to the dominance of Chinese popular culture (itself largely influenced by

Taiwan and Hong Kong) and the economic force of attraction of its large market. Moreover, many Tibetans today perceive Chinese popular culture as 'modern' and therefore fashionable, and it is this perception rather than political pressures which give birth to Chinese influence upon contemporary Tibetan music.

Significant catalysts for this advent of Tibetan pop music were the popular accessibility to new music recording technologies, as well as the opening of karaoke clubs, discos and music bars in urban areas. Despite continuing censorship of lyrics, musical production and distribution have escaped total state control, and the creation of a modern Tibetan musical identity by Tibetans themselves became possible.

In order to understand how Tibetan pop music has emerged it is useful to take a look at the channels through which recorded music and songs have been made available to Tibetans since the early 1950s.

The spread of state controlled broadcast media in Tibet from 1951

The spread of the modern non-print media in Tibet effectively began in 1951 as the Chinese communists took control of Tibet. Prior to 1951, only the few British who were present in Tibet and some of the aristocrats and Muslims in Lhasa owned radios, but could receive only foreign broadcasts, since there were none in Tibet. There was a cinema in Lhasa where people went to see films and newsreels (from India), but these were in English. The timeline below outlines the arrival of wired and wireless broadcasting and cable and satellite television in Tibet.¹

The development of broadcast media in the TAR

1953, July	The first wired broadcasting station is founded by the PLA, and six loudspeakers are installed on the roofs of the houses on the Barkhor
1959, January	Radio broadcasting station, the 'Tibetan People's Broadcasting Station', starts airing programmes
1978	Black and white television programmes transmitted
1979	Colour television programmes transmitted
1985	The first television station, 'Tibet Television Station', established
1993	'Tibet Cable Television Station' established
1994	'Lhasa Television Station' established
1995	'Tibet Broadcasting and Television Translating and Producing Centre' established, which greatly increased the level of producing and transmission of television in the TAR.

¹ See TIN Publication 3 May 2000 'Different Voices: The Media in Tibet' which also describes the print media in Tibet and the dissemination of news and information. <http://www.tibetinfo.net/publications/media.htm>.

² See *China Tibet Information Centre* series of five reports on modern media in Tibet (no publication date): 'Tibet, Once a Mysterious, Isolated, Forbidden Zone', 'The Modern Media on the Roof of the World', 'A Glimpse of Tibet's Media Today', 'The Central News Media's Long Stay in Tibet' and 'Modern Media, an Inseparable Part of the Life of Plateau Residents', all links at http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/english/reports/soc_tech/menu.htm.

The mass media was an ideal device for China's government and the Party, for 'reaching the masses' and 'serving' them with education and politically correct art. Radio, television and also gramophone records were particularly suitable because they were almost entirely controllable, constituting a one-way means of information dissemination.³ Besides the issue of political control, the level of capital investment needed to set up a radio or television station or a gramophone record factory made it impossible for grass roots groups to use these media in a region like Tibet. Gramophone players were only owned by government institutions and were often wired up to loudspeakers and used to broadcast propaganda songs. Radio was also used extensively during the Cultural Revolution, again, often wired up to loudspeakers, in order to disseminate news and revolutionary songs. Despite recent advances towards market forces in the media, all broadcasting remains strictly under state control in the PRC.⁴ State control of radio and television has only been subverted through people tuning into foreign radio stations,⁵ or in the last ten years, accessing non-state controlled cable and satellite television channels.⁶

The revolutionary songs broadcast over radio and loudspeaker prior to and during the Cultural Revolution constituted the first form of modern music in Tibet and, in contrast to the pop music that has emerged since the late 1980s, were entirely state created. These revolutionary songs exemplified state ideals of modern, 'developed' music: the vocal style was the 'advanced' and 'scientific' mixture of Chinese and Western operatic style still taught in state-owned conservatoires across China and the accompaniment consisted of large orchestral ensembles and often Western-style harmonies. Many of the melodies were folk melodies, collected by cadres as raw material, and transformed into modern, 'socialist art' through orchestral arrangement and rendition by 'properly' trained vocalists.

Following the radical change in policy after the end of the Cultural Revolution, these revolutionary songs were played far less frequently and traditional music began to be broadcast on radio. A number of artistes who were popular in their local communities began to be called on to perform for local radio stations and were able to become known beyond their immediate communities. One example of this is Palgon, the famous *dranyen* (Tibetan lute) and mandolin player from Amdo. However, although radio, and later television, began to offer a wider choice of music following the Cultural Revolution, they still remained completely under state control – the wider choice available on radio and, as it spread, television, was due to the loosening of official policy towards the arts

3 See Peter Manuel 1993 *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*: 3-4. See also Roger Wallis and Krister Malm 1984 *Big Sounds from Small Peoples: The Music Industry in Small Countries*.

4 See William Brent 12 December 1999 'China's TV Revolution' and Steve Donohue 29 October 2001 'AOL Time Warner Net Gains Access to China', both *Multichannel News International* <http://www.multichannel.com/article/CA179804?display=Top+Stories>.

5 Radio Free Asia (established 1996), Voice of Tibet (established 1996) and Voice of America (began Tibetan broadcasting in 1991), are widely listened to in Tibet, but the authorities continue to jam their broadcasts. See TIN News Update 28 February 2001 'Jamming of foreign broadcasts stepped up in propaganda drive' <http://www.tibetinfo.co.uk/news-updates/nu280201.htm>. See also TIN Publication 3 May 2000 'Different voices: The media in Tibet' <http://www.tibetinfo.co.uk/publications/media.htm>.

6 Underground companies in major cities in China such as Shanghai have been illegally providing foreign satellite channels to subscribers; despite a major clampdown in May 1999 such underground companies continue to operate, yet there have been no reports of their presence in Tibet. See William Brent 12 December 1999 'China's TV Revolution'.

rather than the direct wishes of the listeners. Radio and television still broadcast a large amount of the state's choice of music, such as political festivals and performances of the government dance troupes.

Despite the saturation of radio and TV broadcasts with sinicised styles, such as the revolutionary songs and the government dance troupe performances, or the extensive use of loud speakers by revolutionary committees to disseminate revolutionary songs during the Cultural Revolution, these sinicised styles had virtually no influence on the traditional music of rural Tibet, although the singing campaigns and political meetings of the Cultural Revolution had great social impact. This lack of impression on traditional music genres is largely due to the fact that until the late 1980s and late 1990s, radio and television respectively had little presence in rural areas, and broadcasts were unreliable, limited in scope and of poor quality. For example, strong winds used to seriously impair the reception of radio,⁷ and many rural areas were not served by electricity, making radio or television impossible, although the revolutionary committees of the Cultural Revolution used portable generators to reach remote areas. Another important reason for the limited influence of such sinicised music in Tibet is that it was music that suited the taste and ideology of the state and had little relevance to traditional communities who had no role in its creation, although some songs did become popular, particularly in cities. Many find the sinicised, Western operatic or Soviet-style singing of singers like Tsetan Dolma and the nationalist songs they sing old fashioned at best, and deeply distasteful at worst. It is certainly not a style that rural Tibetans, for example, have ever emulated. It remains the preserve only of those trained in government conservatoires. Ethnomusicologist Rachel Harris makes the same observation about the state sponsored conservatoire music in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China:

Although this music is the most prominent and readily available of all the musical styles emanating from Xinjiang, it is rather distanced from both the musical traditions and the people it is supposed to represent. [...] During my time in Xinjiang, I never heard it played by choice in Uyghur homes or in the bazaars that serve as barometers of popular musical taste.⁸

During the 1990s, the reach and scope of radio and television in Tibet underwent a rapid expansion as a result of the increasing availability of television, radio and electricity, the rising salaries and purchasing power of many urban Tibetans and government sponsored initiatives.⁹ The Party continues to pour money into media expansion, seeing it as essential for economic, social and cultural development, "a bridge between people and society".¹⁰ The government launched a project in September 2000 to bring about

7 Interview, anon, September 2003

8 2002 'Cassettes, Bazaars, and Saving the Nation: The Uyghur Music Industry in Xinjiang, China': 268.

9 See TIN Publication *China's Great Leap West* for a study of the recent western development drive and its impact on Tibet http://www.tibetinfo.co.uk/publications/bbp/chinas_great_leap_west.htm. See also TIN Reports from Tibet: Economy <http://www.tibetinfo.co.uk/reports/trecon.htm>.

10 'Tibet, Once a Forbidden, Mysterious, Isolated Zone',

http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/english/reports/soc_tech/media/media_01_01.htm

wider coverage for radio in the TAR and Xinjiang in order to better promote the Party view. Furthermore, it aims to have brought TV and radio to every village in Tibet by 2010,¹¹ and also to have switched to digital TV by this date and to have a receiver in each village.¹² In a 2003 feature, *China Tibet Information Centre* claimed 65% and 55% for radio and television coverage respectively in the TAR. In Lhasa, television reaches around 75% of people.¹³ It is unclear whether these figures refer to television/radio ownership or the ability to receive signals.

Television and radio in Nyingtri Prefecture, TAR

In Nyingtri Prefecture, TAR, the first Prefectural Relay Station was not established until 1985. This Station only relayed three programmes each day, one from CCTV [China Central Television] and one from Tibet TV until late 1995, when it underwent expansion. It now offers 16,000 hours of television in Tibetan and Chinese each year, about 45 hours a day. Whilst most of the material is relayed from CCTV and Tibet TV, Nyingtri Prefectural Relay Station also began to create its own programmes dealing with local news and other items of interest, 1825 hours per year in 2001, which are in turn relayed to Tibet TV. A further expansion of available programmes occurred in October 1997, when the Nyingtri Prefectural Cable TV Relay Station was established offering 22 programmes per week. By the end of 1999, television broadcasting was said to cover 77% of the population of Nyingtri Prefecture and 97.6 of the population of Nyingtri County. Radio was said to reach 70% and 92% of Nyingtri Prefecture and County respectively.¹⁴

However, despite the increased willingness on the part of the authorities to broadcast non-propaganda and non-state created or influenced music since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the extensive spread of radio and television in the late 1990s, a further development was necessary to launch modern Tibetan music that was largely independent of the state and that would begin to make an impact, for better or worse, on a far greater proportion of Tibetan areas in the PRC.

The spread of new recording media and the loosening of state control from the 1980s

The catalyst in the creation of Tibetan pop music was the advent of cassette technology. Unlike television, radio or gramophone, anyone owning a cassette recorder has the means to record music and reproduce tapes. In other words, consumers can potentially

11 'Three-Fourths of Tibetans Accessible to TV, Radio Services', *People's Daily* 5 October 2001, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/13247.htm>

12 'Digital TV Broadcasting Standard Decided', 23 July 2003, *China Tibet Information Centre* <http://www.tibetinfo.com/english/news/2003-7-23/News0200372384652.htm>

13 '100 Questions and Answers About Tibet', question 73, 'Living on the Plateau, Do the People Have Access to the Latest News and Information' http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/tibetz-en/question_e/4/073.htm. *China Tibet Information Centre's* 2001 feature 'Media' claimed 55% coverage for radio and 50% for television http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/english/reports/soc_tech/menu.htm.

14 See *China Tibet Information Centre* 2001 'Cultural Life Colourful for Villagers' http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/tibetz/tibet50-en/story/doc/story_513.htm.

become producers. This was illustrated clearly by the case of the nuns in Drapchi prison who, in 1993, recorded a cassette of pro-independence songs that was smuggled out of prison and became known across the world.¹⁵ It is for this reason that cassette recordings have been described as "*democratic-participative*" in tendency, in contrast to the "*one-way, monopolistic, homogenizing tendencies*" of television, radio and gramophone records.¹⁶ The question of who has the most resources, power and means to produce, promote and disseminate their choice of music most widely though, is still significant to which styles gain the greatest exposure and influence. However, for the first time, cassettes enabled people to record and disseminate, (at first largely illegally,) the music of their choice rather than the music of the Party's choice, and it enabled music to become a commodity, the availability of which would be largely governed by market forces rather than the state. Unlike radio and television, these new recording media are virtually impossible to control in entirety. Piracy of cassettes and later recorded media such as CDs, VCDs (Video CDs) and DVDs, which are similarly cheap and easy to reproduce, is extensive, representing about 80% of the official market.¹⁷

Cassette players began to become available in Tibet in the late 1970s, and were initially owned by government departments, where they were used for propaganda purposes. But as the restrictions on private ownership began to be lifted with the new liberalisation, and as incomes rose, cadres began to be able to purchase cassette players from the



Cassette stall in Lhasa'

¹⁵ See chapter 5 See Appendix A for the full texts and English translations of these songs.

¹⁶ Manuel 1993: 2

¹⁷ Interview anon, September 2003. The Internet offers unprecedented potential access to music and information about music (including from exile sites). However, it is not as yet a significant media for music in Tibet.

early 1980s. By around 1986-87, virtually all cadres owned cassette players, and by the late 1980s, cassette players were widely available in rural areas too.

During the mid 1980s, 'backyard' recordings of live concerts and private performances began to appear in markets. Copies of cassettes recorded by Tibetans living in exile also began to emerge in Tibet around this time. For example, the song *Yingki gang ri karmo*, 'The Place of White Snow', by the Potala Band from Germany, became popular. Officially authorised cassettes were also produced by the provincial-level propaganda departments, out of which grew the official recording industry. Musicians who had gained a following in their local communities and had gone on to perform on radio had cassettes officially produced in this way. The singer and *dranyen* player Palgon was one of the first, releasing a cassette in 1984/5.¹⁸

It was in this new climate of access to technology that Tibetan popular music was able to emerge, beginning in earnest with the immensely popular cassette produced by the singer Dadon around 1987.¹⁹ Dadon sang in a style heavily influenced by Deng Lijun, the famous Taiwanese singer also known as Teresa Teng, whose sentimental and lushly



Dadon's second album *chepai Pha Yul*

orchestrated (with synthesised instruments) Chinese language songs swept East Asia in the late 70s and 80s. Deng Lijun's songs and those of other pop singers from Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China became extremely popular in Tibet around this time, initially through Chinese immigrants, and were featured not just on cassettes and radio but also in the karaoke bars that began to appear in Lhasa and other major cities in the late 1980s. Dadon's songs mixed this fashionable musical style with well-written Tibetan lyrics on themes that expressed pride in Tibet and Tibetan culture as opposed to the old, stilted propaganda songs.²⁰ Dadon's style remains popular and many new artistes, particularly from central Tibet, continue to emulate her. However, many other styles have also emerged, most notably the Amdo singers such as Dore, Dube and Yungdrung Gyal based in Xining. Their style is much closer to traditional Tibetan singing, avoiding the characteristic vocal inflexion and the lyrical delivery of Taiwan and Hong Kong pop music, and also the sentimental string accompaniment. The lyrics, however, have a similar focus on pride in the Tibetan landscape and identity.

Cassette technology has exposed Tibetans to an unprecedented range of musical styles from within the PRC and across the world. Apart from the now ubiquitous Hong Kong,

¹⁸ Interview, anon, September 2003

¹⁹ This was definitely the most successful pop album produced, but may not have been the first. Other singers such as Jampa Tsering were also producing albums at this time.

²⁰ Yangdon Dhundup 2003



Cassette of Tibetan and Hindi music, bought in Lhasa

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Taiwan and Chinese pop music, Hindi film music, introduced by Tibetan and Nepali traders, is also very popular in Tibet, which is surprising considering the language barrier for all except the minority of Tibetans who have been schooled in or regularly visit India or Nepal. Tibetans are also now able to hear traditional and popular music from all the Tibetan regions – central and western Tibet, Kham and Amdo, and also to some extent from Tibetans in exile. Many professionals and amateurs now learn songs from cassettes, radio and television as much as through traditional methods of learning,²¹ and are able to incorporate these different styles into their music. Yadong is the most creative of Tibet's new pop stars in terms of stylistic fusion, mixing traditional Tibetan singing styles with Central Asian sounds (probably drawing on Uyghur or Kazakh music from Xinjiang), rock music (which is popular in big cities in mainland China) and other global styles. A 20-year-old singer from Golog, Amdo stated, when asked about her role models, *"I like Michael Jackson and Dadon. They really sing very well"*.²²

Unlike the revolutionary 'folksongs' or the pan-PRC style of the government conservatoires, the popularity of the Hong Kong and Taiwan style music (in Chinese or Tibetan language), Hindi film songs, the current music coming from across the Tibetan areas of the PRC and music from the west, is driven largely by audience demand. The access to recording technology also enables a much greater variety of people to record albums. 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, and has created a substantial overlap in taste between Tibetans and Chinese: many Tibetan artistes now sing Chinese songs, eager to reach out into larger markets, Chinese artistes have started to record albums

21 TIN interview TIN 03-1247, 1 April 2003.

22 TIN interview TIN 03-1080, 20 March 2003.



Singer Sonam Wangmo on front cover of September 2002 issue of *Potala*

influenced by Tibetan themes,²³ and the Chinese singing style of the Hong Kong and Taiwan music is emulated by Tibetans from all over Tibet and even in exile, in contrast to the conservatoire style of singing.²⁴ In apparent recognition of this opportune development, the government, gives a lot of publicity to the new pop stars of Tibet, particularly those that show loyalty to the state but also others, on TV and radio, in glossy magazines, official Internet sites²⁵ and live performances at festivals and competitions.

23 See Janet Upton 2002 'The politics and poetics of *Sister Drum*: "Tibetan" music in the global marketplace', in Craig and King (eds.) *Global goes local: Popular Culture in Asia*: 99-119.

24 In a parallel situation, Hindi films and film songs have done infinitely more for national integration in India and the propagation of Hindi as the national language than government campaigns ever have or could.

25 See for example China Tibet Information Centre http://www.tibetinfofor.com.cn/tibetz-en/zyfy/zyfy_3_si.htm.

As discussed in the next chapter, the authorities are also keen to parade these new musicians as a symbol of China's encouragement of diversity and minority culture ('letting a hundred flowers bloom'), and the modernisation of Tibet. In this way, the pop music revolution has influenced the state controlled media, but is at the same time being harnessed and assimilated to some extent by this massive machine for the Party's own aims.

The pop music culture of Tibet and its relation to that of mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan remains controversial, particularly amongst exile Tibetans.²⁶ Yet the current popular music culture does represent an unprecedented level of freedom for Tibetans to develop their own music rather than have it 'developed' or 'improved' by government institutions, and this freedom has resulted in the emergence of new styles that are distinctly Tibetan. However, whereas the heavy influence of Chinese popular music styles was not forced upon Tibetans, as was the political music of the Cultural Revolution, it is still the result of five decades of language and education policy in Tibet, which were imposed through force. These policies have created a bilingual youth for whom Chinese music is familiar whereas it was unknown before 1951.

With the Tibetans forced to become a 'minority' within the PRC, Tibetan music became a 'minority music' that is, even in the absence of political pressure, subjected to, at least, subliminal Chinese influences. Also, in terms of the quantity of music produced, production standards, financial backing and levels of exposure, Tibetan music finds itself unable to compete with Chinese music. This situation is in fact not unique to Tibetans in Tibet. Tibetan exiles find themselves in a very similar situation vis-à-vis the ubiquitous Hindi film music, Nepali music and Western pop music, which strongly influence the new music they produce.

The end of restrictions on Tibetan musical traditions and the increased popular access to recording technologies, did not allow Tibetans in Tibet the outright freedom to make the music of their choice. Yet, besides the continued censorship of lyrics and the overwhelming influence of Chinese pop music, Tibetans in Tibet today have found some space to express their own musical identity. Many determined Tibetan musicians do their best to maximise this space and perceive themselves as composing modern music that is very definitely Tibetan in character.

The music industry today

Cassettes are still widespread in Tibet, but in the last few years, they have become regarded as obsolete in urban areas. The favourite medium has become the VCD since the accompanying visuals offer greater scope for karaoke performance and playing in clubs. DVD ownership is still limited, though becoming more common, and CDs have never been very widespread in Tibetan areas. 'Backyard' production of albums still exists, but the quality is poor and it is strictly speaking illegal to sell such recordings. To

26 These issues are discussed in chapter 6

produce an album entirely legally involves having it produced and handled completely by one of the state record companies.²⁷ However, the vast majority of albums are produced in a manner that is less strictly legal. To make an album a 'legal' commodity requires a serial number or barcode, which is only available from one of the official recording companies. Many artistes simply buy or bribe the barcode from the official company (which costs about 2-3,000 yuan (£140-210; US\$242-362; €210-315) or less or may even be free with the right contacts), and then record, print and distribute the 'legal' album through other channels.²⁸

The actual recording of an album can be undertaken by a variety of private companies and individuals with their own equipment. To record a VCD and print 1,000 copies costs, at the cheap end (a single sheet rather than a booklet and videos filmed in one location), around 5-6,000 yuan (£350-420; US\$604-725; €525-630). At the expensive end (with a booklet, different locations for the videos, and filming on a good digital camera, but not film), the costs are around 10,000 yuan (£700; US\$1,208; €1050). This is still vastly cheaper than the budgets for albums in Beijing or Shanghai, which are of far higher quality, with videos shot on film, and can cost over 500,000 yuan (£35,000 or US\$60,400 €52,500). In this way, there is no real obstacle to anyone producing an album 'legally', as long as they have the contacts or the financial resources. Given that singers in big clubs in Lhasa are able to earn as much as 6,000 yuan per month (£420; US\$725; €630), the costs are not prohibitive for many urban artistes, especially if, thanks to 'connections', they are able to obtain album serial numbers for free. On the whole, talented artistes do find the means to produce albums in Tibet. Many are sponsored by friends, family or contacts gained through one's own community or through the world of *nangma* bars (urban drinking houses where music is performed – see below). Tsering, from Sershul county, for example, recorded an album which was paid for by a local lama.²⁹ Dolma from Golog, Qinghai, recorded an album with a number of other artistes that was produced and paid for by the *Dung kar dra nyan par trun khang*, 'White Conch Music Recording Company', in Siling, which produces albums for many artistes. Manlha Kyab, the famous Tibetan comedian, works for this office, and is also known to the family of Dolma, hence her contact and the opportunity to record the album.³⁰

Whilst there has not been any restriction on musical styles since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the lyrical content of songs remains restricted and new albums are checked by government offices. However, it is largely the responsibility of the sponsors or producers of the album to check the lyrics, since they are accountable in case the authorities would find anything seriously amiss. In practice, artistes on the whole know the boundaries. However, the fuzzy implementation of existing regulations by the recording industry (as well as their frequent impracticability) has led to significant numbers of song releases with often only thinly veiled Tibetan nationalist meaning.

27 The most important of these companies are: Xizang Yin Xiang Chu Ban She (in Lhasa), Qinghai Xihai Yin Xiang Chu Ban She, Qinghai Kun Lun Yin Xiang Chu Ban She, Gansu Yin Xiang Chu Ban She and Zhong Guo Chang Pian Gong She (in Chengdu).

28 Interview anon, September 2003.

29 TIN interview TIN 03-1082, 20 March 2003

30 TIN interview TIN 03-1080 01 April 2004

Although it is relatively easy to make even VCDs, let alone cassettes, selling music albums is not highly profitable because piracy of cassettes, VCDs, CDs and DVDs is extensive.³¹ Furthermore, the Tibetan market is very small – the total Tibetan population in the PRC is about 4.6 million, and poverty is widespread.³² Apart from the very famous musicians, such as Yadong, most Tibetan musicians produce a maximum of 5,000 copies of a given album.³³ Dadon's initial hit album sold an exceptional 100,000 copies, including pirated copies.³⁴ Some of the albums of the well-known Amdo musicians such as Dore, Dube and Yungdrung Gyal sell a total of around 10,000 copies, including pirated copies.³⁵ Most Tibetan musicians distribute their albums themselves, selling them to shops that then sell them on to other sources, which often reach Nepal and India too, since to pay for a distributor is too expensive with such a small market.³⁶

Apart from dance troupe members who receive a regular salary, or musicians who perform in clubs, most musicians cannot survive on making music albums, performing at festivals and taking part in competitions and therefore have other jobs in order to earn a living. The famous Amdo *dranyen* player and singer Palgon is a doctor in Machu county People's Hospital and also the president (Ch: *Yuan Zhang*) of the hospital, and Dore – Dorje Tsetan, another famous *dranyen* and mandolin player – is a schoolteacher. The famous names of Tibetan music are able to survive as independent artistes by also producing Chinese language albums. The Chinese market is vast, open to a large proportion of China's one billion plus population, and Tibetan artists (albeit singing in Chinese) are growing in popularity amongst Chinese as ethnic culture has become highly fashionable in recent years.³⁷ It is therefore financially viable to distribute Chinese language albums professionally.

Musical contexts and opportunities in Tibet today

This section describes some of the most important arenas and opportunities for music making in today's Tibet, the involvement of the modern media and how amateur and professional musicians are able to engage in music and make musical careers for themselves in addition to recording albums.

31 The government is trying to clamp down on piracy, and scenes of the burning of illegal VCDs are common in Lhasa. Shops have been raided and their owners have had to pay fines of five times the cost of each illegal VCD/DVD/CD, and many have closed down (interview, anon, September 2003). See also 'Helped by Technology, Piracy of DVDs Runs Rampant in China', New York Times 18 August 2003 <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/18/business/media/18PIRA.html> and 'China Destroys 42 Million Smuggled, Pirated CDs', People's Daily 13 August 2003 http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200308/13/eng20030813_122200.shtml and 32 See TIN News Updates 30 September 2003 'Overview of the Tibetan Population in the PRC from the 2000 census'

<http://www.tibetinfo.net/news-updates/2003/3009.htm>, 31 May 2003 'The Rich Get Richer, and the Poor? Rural Poverty and Inequality in Tibet – Indications from Recent Official Surveys' <http://www.tibetinfo.net/news-updates/2003/3105.htm>, 6 February 2003 'Despite Economic Boom, Rural Standards of Living in the Tibet Autonomous Region Still Below 1992 Levels' <http://www.tibetinfo.net/news-updates/2003/0602.htm>, and TIN Special Report 8 April 2003 'Deciphering Economic Growth in the Tibet Autonomous Region' <http://www.tibetinfo.net/news-updates/2003/0804.htm>.

33 Personal communication, Tsering Shakya, October 2002.

34 *ibid.*

35 *ibid.*

36 *ibid.*

37 Tibetan singers also sing in Chinese from choice and the wish to reach out to this huge audience - this is discussed in chapter 6.

Special occasions and festivals

Anything ranging from private parties, picnics, gatherings or small-scale village celebrations to county and province-level festivals in Tibet has always involved musical performance.³⁸ Rural festivals, sometimes known as *Tsemo*, 'games', or *Trigton* ('prefecture performance') and horse racing festivals also involve a range of traditional arts and sports, from music and dance performances and competitions (described



Informal singing and drinking'



Girls on the left singing *chang shay* to the horseman seen on the right

³⁸ Some religious festivals involve only sacred music, but, over time, many have come to incorporate wider celebrations including secular music performance.

below) to stone lifting, archery and tug of war. The culture of Tibetan parties and celebrations is closely connected to singing, with a tradition of *chang gzas*, 'beer songs', which are sung as Tibetan beer, *chang*, is offered to guests. There is also a strong tradition of ad-hoc performances by individuals at festive gatherings, with people volunteering, or being volunteered, to sing.³⁹ The festivals that take place in Tibet provide seasonal work for semi-professional and professional musicians and dance troupes, opportunities for up-and-coming performers to gain publicity and enjoyment for amateurs.

Since the revival of traditional music following the end of the Cultural Revolution, many festivals have greatly expanded in scale, involving performances by Tibet's new singing stars.⁴⁰ For example, Sonam Wangmo, a new star following her winning of a nationwide television singing competition, performed at the Changthang horse-racing festival in August 2003.⁴¹ These festivals are also broadcast on television and radio and are covered in the government-controlled magazines, newspapers and websites, and recordings are widely available on VCDs and DVDs.

What were previously purely religious festivals have also expanded to include secular performing arts and sports. According to a *Xinhua* article, the *Phapang thangka* festival, which takes place in Lhundrub county, Lhasa Municipality, every 12 years in the sheep



Dancing at *Phapang thangka* festival, 2003'

39 See Anton-Luca 2000 '*Glu and La ye* in A mdo: An Introduction to Contemporary Tibetan Folksongs' for a detailed account of these singing traditions in Amdo.

40 The cancellation of festivals, as of other non-official public gatherings, in politically critical times is, though, not infrequent.

41 *China Tibet Information Centre* 18 August 2003 'Sing a Song for Town Fellows'. Sonam Wangmo is also said to have denounced the Dalai Lama, which certainly will have contributed to the level of press attention she has received (TIN interview JW 1291, 2 February 2004).

year, “was a pure scripture-reciting ritual in its early days. As time goes by, trade fair and performances are added into it”.⁴² The secular aspect of the opera festival, Shoton, was also greatly expanded in the climate of economic development in 1997 by the TAR authorities, by combining it with an economic trade fair. The musical and other activities also grew to include “a performance gala, [...] folk songs and dance, horsemanship, concerts, a fashion show and an exhibition of native products of Tibet”, and in 2003, a folk song competition.⁴³ This was not the first secular expansion of this festival. Shoton has grown out of a summer feast of that name at Drepung monastery mentioned in the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama as early as 1635. It was then an entirely religious function, with monastic dances (cham) and the state oracle entering a trance. Later on, the ceremony came to incorporate the appointment of the two Shaengo, ('discipline masters') of Drepung monastery, which gave the feast some political connotations. Celebrations including musical performance and some opera were held in their honour. These performances gradually grew in importance, and when a new palace was built for the Dalai Lamas in 1848, the Drepung *Shoton* came to be followed by an extension in the Norbulingka, where the sovereign was then residing. From then on, the religious and political aspects of the feast dwindled and its more 'secular' aspects of songs and dances performances became the focus of attention. From the end of the nineteenth century (during the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's reign) until 1959, opera performances were the most prominent element of the feast, with big crowds of Lhasa residents coming to watch.⁴⁴



Tibetan dancers in Hauyan Shen, Sichuan Province

⁴² *China Tibet Information Centre* 19 August 2003 'Dance to the Rhythm of ras pa'.

⁴³ *China Tibet Information Centre* 21 August 2003 'Tibet Folk Singers Contest is on'.

⁴⁴ Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, personal communication March 2004.

Festivals exist at different administrative levels, from village to township or group of villages (Ch: *xiang*, Tib: *shang*), county (Ch: *xian*, Tib: *shen*) and province, and many are also celebrated in people's own homes. Occasions such as Tibetan New Year (*Losar*), the most important festival, are celebrated in Tibetan areas at all levels. National festivals also exist, such as Chinese New Year and National Day (1st October), which are celebrated at county level and above in Tibet, and Children's Day (1st June), which is celebrated at all levels. In many townships, dance competitions, involving traditional and modern dance, between school troupes from each village of the township are held on children's day. These county or province level festivals attract tens of thousands of people. Political festivals, such as the anniversary of the founding of the TAR or the 'liberation' of Tibet, also involve music and dance performance in huge propaganda spectacles (see chapter 4).



Girls dancing at Derge festival

The performances that take place at these festivals are staged by amateur or semi-professional singers and dancers from villages, township, county, etc. Penpa, a 22-year old man from a village in Damshung county, Lhasa Municipality, TAR, who was interviewed by TIN, described his involvement with the annual horse racing festival organised by Damshung county:

I am from a nomad family. In January, February and March of the Tibetan month, I worked at home. In summer, June, July and August of the Tibetan month, we have song competitions and the song competitions are held in Damshung County. We have a festival called Nagchu Pa Yi [Ch: Nagchu 'Army Day Festival'] and during this time we perform songs and dances in the county. Ten boys and ten girls from each village have to get ready to go for the performances in the county. Then the county selects ten boys and ten girls from each township. We also have horse racing, rope pulling, stone-lifting stone and running competitions.⁴⁵

45 TIN interview TIN 03-1247, 1 April 2003.



Girls watching audience at festival

A semi-professional singer from Sersshul County, Kardze province, described how for the 'Kangding Festival of Love Songs' (Ch: *Kangding qing ge jie*) in Kangding county (Tib: Dartsedo) in 1999, one boy and one girl from each of 18 counties were chosen to attend. Yadong and Yungdrung Gyal were also present at this festival, as well as Thang Gar, a Mongolian singer who is famous across the PRC. The interviewee described how the singers at this high-profile festival had to show the songs they planned to sing to officials from the Kangding theatrical group before they could perform. While the recording industry largely operates through self-censorship, large festivals such as this involve direct official censorship of lyrics, since with such large gatherings of Tibetans, the potential for unrest is considerable. Tsering stated:

They asked me for the names of the songs [I would sing] and the meaning of the songs and they also wrote them down. After that, they allowed me to sing. (...) We had to show the lyrics to those officials who first registered our names. After they noted down our names they introduced us when we sang.⁴⁶

Another interviewee similarly described how their songs were censored at performances:

It is our choice what kind of song we would like to sing. We are not allowed to sing any songs related to [Tibetan] politics. If I am singing a song, I have to write an introduction to the song and then they check this. We have to hand over the song lyrics etc. before we sing. They check very carefully and then let us sing.⁴⁷

46 TIN interview TIN 03-1082, 1 April 2003

47 TIN interview JW 1094, 11 September 2003.

However, the same interview reports how the authorities did not usually restrict songs with hidden or symbolic meaning, whether due to the inherent difficulties in censoring metaphors chosen from everyday life (the sun or the moon can for instance bear political connotations), or because the mainly Chinese officials did not understand the possible symbolic meanings:

They don't pay much attention to [hidden meanings]. When we sing songs we don't sing songs openly. They don't pay attention to the songs which use symbols like the sun, the moon and the snow mountains. They only pay attention to the direct meaning of the song and don't check exactly what is meant by the sun and the moon.⁴⁸

Competitions

Song and dance competitions have become an important part of festivals in Tibet, and they take place at different administrative levels in regions. Even at the county level, the prize money for these competitions is significant, and groups and individuals compete vigorously. Larger scale competitions organised by government organisations and television stations exist at provincial or nationwide level. Festivals from county level upwards may be televised and featured on government media. In theory, anyone can work his or her way up to the big, nationwide competitions, but in practice, there is considerable partiality in the judging process (see below). It is also difficult to enter into competitions at county level and above without being a member of an official dance troupe, although this situation is changing as people are increasingly able to launch careers as artistes and make contacts through recording albums funded privately and singing in clubs. For the provincial or nationwide competitions, it is necessary to have been selected from lower-level competitions, or recommended by government offices.

On the lower end of the scale, Penpa, the 22 year-old from Damshung County, who was not a member of a dance troupe, described how he took part in the competition in the festival in Damshung County. The competitions begin at the village, move up to township levels and can lead up to provincial-level competitions. These competitions can earn significant amounts of money for the township and county, and people are pressured by the officials to participate. Penpa explained:

First, you have to participate in the village songs and dances and then township songs and dances and then Damshung county. After this, the first and second winners of the Damshung county singers and dancers are sent on to Lhasa. [...] The township officials [largely Tibetan] call the people to come to learn the songs and dances and they say that if someone doesn't come to learn the songs and dances then that person will lose.⁴⁹

48 *ibid.* See chapter 5 for further discussion of the political implications of metaphoric language in Tibetan and to some extent Chinese songs, and examples of song texts.

49 TIN interview TIN 03-1247, 1 April 2003

He also mentioned that these competitions have become particularly popular recently, and in particular, that Tibetan dances and songs are more popular than before, which creates an image of a thriving musical culture. They also have to perform new songs and dances in the competitions, and hence are forced to keep generating new material.

Most of the songs that we sing and dance are the Tibetan nomad songs. They are Tibetan songs. They are very nice songs. We have songs like 'The Lotus on the Lawn', 'King Gesar of the World', 'The White and Yellow Snow Lions are the Sons of the Same Parents'. We sing these songs with girls and dance holding scarves in our hands. Our songs and dances have been shown on TV in Lhasa. [...] The songs and dances are very popular in Damshung county. These songs and dances have become very popular in recent years. [...] We sing and dance in July for almost a month during the competitions. We also go to the county to participate in the competition. The people really love singing and livestock herders sometimes neglect their animals because of it. Children often have to look after the animals, but if they are caught up in the singing and dancing, then their uncles and aunties have to go to look after the animals.⁵⁰

Such competitions and festivals as these clearly represent a very high degree of official support for Tibetan music and dance as well as other traditional recreational activities such as horse-racing, wrestling or stone-lifting. However, reports of bias towards Chinese language songs and sinicised style, or songs that praise the local leaders or China at the higher levels, illustrate the political context and ultimately control of these occasions and the drive towards at least 'integration' if not 'assimilation' of the state sponsored musical events.⁵¹

Penpa also explained how they praise the leaders of the county in the county competitions, or else sing songs about the environment that have no direct political meaning:

If you go to sing and dance in Damshung county, then we mostly sing and dance songs like praising the leaders of the county. We also have the songs like telling the importance of a mountain etc. [...] We have songs like 'The Sun Rises in the Sky and it Shines on the 30 Leaders of the County and the 30 leaders of the County are Coloured by the Five Coloured Clothes'.⁵²

Tenpa, from Amdo, described the emphasis of Tibetan over Chinese songs at the lower administrative levels and Chinese over Tibetan songs at the higher administrative levels:

When it comes to the Tibetan environments, the Tibetan dzong and township, for example in our township, we sing songs during festivals like Tibetan New Year. There are not that many Tibetan festivals. However, whatever songs are sung during those occasions will be Tibetan songs, not a single Chinese song will be played. But when you look at the county, under which comes the

50 ibid

51 This supports the work of the dance troupes described in chapter 2.

52 TIN interview TIN 03-1247, 1 April 2003.

*township, under which there are several offices. When they organise a competition, then all the participants of the competition will be Tibetans, but it is certain that they will have to sing Chinese songs though they love Tibetan songs. In the county it will be Chinese songs that are played [during contests]; at the township level, mostly Tibetan songs are played [during contests].*⁵³

He went on to describe the national level song competitions:

When they organise a song competition for the minority peoples, then if you are a Tibetan, you go there as a representative of the Tibetans to perform, but if you don't sing in Chinese language, then there is no chance that you will win the contest. (...) You won't get second or third position. The judges will be predominantly Chinese, so if you don't sing lyrics in Chinese and if your tune isn't Chinese, then the judges won't be able to give you marks.

He also described his experience of a competition in 1999 for young singers from all the minorities held in Lhasa:

Before we took part in the competition they [told us] that our songs should be in praise of the PRC. [...]

[On advice from a friend] I sang Aku Pema ('Uncle Pema') and one other song. When I sang Aku Pema there were many Chinese and they laughed at me. [...] I did get selected amongst the 40 singers [out of 200] but I got dropped from there. A girl sang the song that says 'Both China and Tibet are from One Mother'. She got selected. [...] There were many singers who had better voices than her and who could sing better, but they got dropped and she got selected because of her lyrics.

Another interviewee also reported that it was the 'official singers' who sing in praise of the state, such as Tsetan Dolma, who win prizes at the big competitions. He described how the political pressure often extends also to judges being instructed by officials to select certain singers.⁵⁴

At the higher level, the pressure towards cultural 'integration' with China or direct praise of leaders is clear, yet at the lower level, where the Tibetans are in charge, they are able to impose their own bias towards Tibetan culture and their own leaders. TIN interviewee 1080 describes music in a village:

*[We perform Tibetan songs.] We don't sing Chinese songs. Wherever we stage our performances, we don't do Chinese songs and dances. Our village doesn't like us to sing Chinese songs. If we sing songs in praise of lamas, they are very happy.*⁵⁵

53 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002.

54 Interview anon, September 2003.

55 TIN interview TIN 03-1080, 20 March 2003.

Furthermore, although pressures certainly exist at the higher levels, it is possible to achieve success without singing Chinese songs, as Dolma emphasised,

Dube and Lugu Gyal [a popular singer from Machu] became famous from singing Tibetan songs and they didn't become famous from singing Chinese songs.⁵⁶

The hierarchical structure of the competitions does seem to have given some singers from small villages publicity at the provincial or even national level, as long as they are able to make the right contacts. A Xinhua feature on the new generation of Tibetan singers describes how Sonam Wangmo, a singer from a small village in Nagchu, recently hit the headlines for winning first prize at the 10th National TV Contest of Young Singers in May 2002 with her Tibetan language song 'Golden Hometown'.⁵⁷ She was also featured on the cover of the September 2002 issue of the glossy Tibetan magazine *Potala* produced in Tibet. A Tibetan describes how he was able to enter the first music and songs competition of singers from all Tibetan areas of the PRC organised in 1996 by the government and further supported by donations from some private businessmen who were keen to support Tibetan culture:

[The singers and lute players] came from the three choelka [the traditional three provinces of Tibet: Kham, Amdo and U-Tsang] and there were three people from Qinghai, three people from Gansu, three people from Sichuan, three people from Kham, and three people from [the TAR]. I was included in the three people from Sichuan. [...] I was [initially] selected from [my] Township and then selected in Hongyuan County. I got the top position in [my] Township and then in Hongyuan County. [...] We were four people [from different counties] and went for the competition as representatives from Sichuan.⁵⁸

The biographies of selected Tibetan musicians in the sections below demonstrate how regional and national competitions can form stepping-stones to successful musical careers.

Dance troupes, concerts and tours

The establishment of a structure of dance troupes across China from the 1950s and their propagation of a sinicised musical and performance style across the PRC has been described in chapter 2. Here, aspects of what and how they currently teach and the opportunities they provide for performers will be described from the point of view of performers from Tibet.

The government dance troupes are run by the Chinese authorities according to Chinese taste and Chinese assumptions of what Tibetan music should be. One Tibetan, although not in a dance troupe herself, commented that the performers in the troupe "have to learn

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ China Tibet Information Centre http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/tibetzn-en/zyfy/zyfy_3_si_slwm.htm

⁵⁸ TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002.

mainly what the Chinese leaders tell them to learn”.⁵⁹ Another singer, who was a member of a *lugar* group in Amdo for one to two years around 2000, describes this in more detail, explaining that Chinese music, singing and dancing have to be taught as well as Tibetan:

We can't only do Tibetan cultural shows because we 'eat Chinese food' [are paid by the Chinese authorities]. In that way we have to practise both Tibetan and Chinese dances together. [...] There are both Tibetan and Chinese teachers in our theatre group. A Chinese teacher taught us a Chinese song. The song is Tai Yang He Yue Liang shi yi ge mama de ne er, zang zu he han zu shi yi ge mama de nu er ('The Sun and the Moon are Sons of the Same Mother, Both Tibetans and Chinese are the Children of the Same mother'). [...] They take more interest in [us learning] Chinese than Tibetan because sometimes when we have to go to China for theatre performance, we should know Chinese. We go all over China like to Lanzhou [capital of Gansu Province], Chengdu [capital of Sichuan], then Beijing.⁶⁰



Nightclub in Lhasa

© International Campaign for Tibet

59 TIN interview TIN 03-1082, 1 April 2003.

60 TIN interview TIN 03-1080, 20 March 2003.



Tibetan *Nangma* bar, *Gesar*, in Beijing'

Apart from questions of the style of music they perform, the government troupes provide stable employment for musicians, and modest but reasonable salaries. Another interviewee reported receiving 600 yuan (£42; US\$72.50; €63) per month as a starting salary, while other members' salaries exceeded this.

These government troupes also teach musicians skills that are useful for careers in the modern music industry such as microphone technique and singing with musical accompaniment (a lot of traditional Tibetan music is unaccompanied). They also learn instruments for solo or accompanied music. Another person described how he learned musical composition and lyric writing during a year's course at Shanghai Conservatoire, which has been useful for writing his own songs in Tibet and later in exile.⁶¹

Government groups are also a platform for further careers. Dance troupes have formed stepping-stones in the careers of many of Tibet's new pop musicians and some continue

61 TIN interview TIN 03-753, 17 November 2003.



Performer in *Gesar Nangma* bar in Beijing'

to be employed by them. Dadon (prior to leaving Tibet in 1992), Jampa Tsering and Sonam Wangmo are three examples. The dance troupes enable performers to gain easy access to competitions where they can gain fame across the Tibetan regions.

Although in government groups it is compulsory to learn Chinese dances and musical techniques alongside Tibetan ones, people are able to form themselves into amateur groups or privately funded groups, which are not under the same pressure to adopt a Chinese style as the government groups. The only restriction is on lyrics with a Tibetan nationalist content. An interviewee described a group in Songpan county in Sichuan, which was established, by a group of

businessmen involved in hotels. All the artistes were paid good salaries and the group earned an income largely from performing for tourists:

Close to Songpan there is Shardung ri [a famous mountain and national park] (Ch: Ju Zhai Gu). Many western and Chinese tourists come there for sight seeing. The dancing troupe show dance presentations and offer chang [Tibetan beer] to these tourists. [...] They make bonfire, roast mutton over the fire and dance around it. They do a sort of kordro [a circle dance from eastern Tibet] and they sing along with the dance.⁶²

The group performed songs and dances from their own region and in their own dialect. Such new tourist-oriented functions for Tibetan music may prove to be an important medium for encouraging Tibetan performing arts, since Western, and increasingly Chinese, tourists are fascinated by ethnic arts and an 'exotic' way of life. They are also a good potential source of income for Tibetan performers.⁶³

Musicians may also form more informal or temporary groups in order to perform ad hoc concerts or tours. In 1996, an amateur singer toured around 8 counties in Tsolho and Kanlho prefectures, giving about 20 performances in total with a group of a group of friends during the school summer holidays. They performed in the big halls in the county, where, the singer reported, they were able to get permission without difficulty, having to pay approximately 6-700 yuan (£45; US\$73; 68) to the county office. The singer told TIN

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ An article in *People's Daily* on 11 November 2001, 'West China Provinces Boost Tourism Featuring Ethnic Minorities' Culture', also refers to a Tibetan earning 6,000 yuan (£420 or US\$735 or €630) in four months from performing dances for tourists.

that they were able to earn about 3-4,000 yuan (£210; US\$362 ;€315) for one public performance, charging tickets for three, four or five yuan. They advertised their shows by making banners and pasting leaflets on walls and handing them out in advance of the performances. He reports that they each made around 2000 yuan (£140; US\$242) after all expenses. Whilst the group of friends were apparently motivated by making some extra money and enjoying themselves, the interviewee himself used this as a vehicle for expressing Tibetan nationalist views in song, describing himself as “*a freedom fighter at heart*”, and was eventually arrested.⁶⁴

An interviewee also organised a group of musicians to tour remote villages in Amdo in September 1998 in order to show the inhabitants of the villages aspects of Tibetan musical culture they had not seen before. He performed widely, including small nomadic areas where people had never seen the Tibetan lute, only having heard it on the radio.⁶⁵

However, for the very well known Tibetan musicians, obtaining permission for independent concerts or tours can be very difficult due to the very large numbers of Tibetans that would be drawn to these occasions and the potential for unrest inspired by what are often perceived as nationalist songs. Yadong, in particular, is said to be restricted by the authorities in terms of live performances because a number of his songs can and have been read in terms of Tibetan nationalism.⁶⁶



Performer in *Nangma* bar in Lhasa'

64 TIN interviews TIN 97-40, 5 May 1997, 13 VPS, 21 April 1997, and PR 13, 14 April 1997.

65 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002.

66 Ethnomusicologist Rachel Harris also reports on the reluctance of the authorities to give permission for big concerts in Xinjiang due to the potential for stirring up Uyghur nationalist emotion. 2002 'Cassettes, Bazaars, and Saving the Nation: The Uyghur Music Industry in Xinjiang, China': 272 and 279-280.

Karaoke, disco and *nangma* bars

Since the early to mid 1990s, bars or nightclubs that involve live or recorded music and dancing have emerged in Tibetan cities, and along with the official and unofficial recording industries and broadcast media, are a pivotal part of the new popular music culture in Tibet. These include clubs, where Western, Chinese or modern Tibetan music is played (recorded rather than live) and people dance, and karaoke bars. From around 1998/1999, drinking houses known as *nangma khangs* ('*nangma* houses'⁶⁷) or *nangma* bars also became established in Lhasa, where music is performed live by paid musicians and singers, as opposed to members of the public like in karaoke bars. Stand-up comics also perform in *nangma* bars. Singing is closely connected with partying and drinking in Tibet, and was already popular in the drinking houses of pre-1959 Lhasa. Goldstein reports that the 'street songs' of Lhasa, consisting of political commentary and criticism, used also to be sung in the taverns at night.⁶⁸ However, the establishment of *nangma khangs* as entertainment venues with paid performers is a new development.

The first *nangma* bars were opened in Lhasa in the 1980s by the comedians Thubten la and Migmar la, but were closed down in 1987 amidst the demonstrations in Lhasa. *Nangma* bars again began to resurface in the late 1990s, and by 1999 and 2000 there were many of them in Lhasa, and the phenomenon started to spread to other cities. Recently, the number of *nangma* bars is said to have decreased due to financial pressures on the owners who have to pay the government a fixed amount of money for the license, which has proved impossible for many small bars.⁶⁹ There is also plenty of competition among places to drink and meet members of the opposite sex and prostitutes in Lhasa. The *nangma* bars are expensive for many young people, but some still spend time there, smuggling in their own drinks to save money. Some establishments used to charge a small entrance fee, but admission to most is now free.

The *nangma* bars were initially established as places to perform traditional Tibetan music such as *korshey* ('round songs', where groups of people dance and sing in a circle), and to a lesser extent *namthar* (arias from Tibetan opera), apparently as a form of resistance to the tide of Chinese pop music, but later karaoke and disco began to take place in the *nangma* bars too, due to their popularity with young people. However, there are still certain *nangma* bars where traditional music is performed, frequented by the older generation. *Nangma* bars all include some live music, nowadays a mixture of traditional and modern Tibetan music, Chinese music, Western music and Hindi film songs. However, the performers and the waitresses usually wear traditional Tibetan clothes. The *nangma* bars play an important role in maintaining a vibrant traditional and modern musical culture in Tibetan cities, being venues for new artistes as well as contexts for recorded music. Although they are set up primarily as business ventures, many of the owners, who are virtually all Tibetan, have at least some interest in Tibetan music and its propagation.⁷⁰ People visit *nangma* bars for different reasons, ranging from an interest in

67 *Nangma* is the name of a song genre traditionally performed in Lhasa and Shigatse.

68 See Goldstein 1982 'Lhasa Street Songs: Political and Social Satire in Traditional Tibet': 56-66.

69 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002. This kind of 'natural selection' benefits the bigger, glossier, more expensive and easier to control *nangma* bars and therefore may be seen as a part of the official 'Spiritual Civilization' campaign, which is aimed at promoting 'clean living'.

70 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002.

music, a place to pass time and meet friends or a desire to meet members of the opposite sex. *Nangma* bars, discos and karaoke bars are places where new social norms are emerging, with a certain degree of promiscuity. In addition, they also play host to violence, heavy alcohol consumption, gangs, and prostitutes, although they are not brothels.

Lhasa has a large number of *nangma* bars, *Ren Da*, *Ding Feng*, *Sha Long*, *Ming Zu*, *Qing Nia* [Julubub], *Qi Yu Kang*, *Zhi Zu*, *Sha Long Ye Zong Hui*, *Zhi Lian Gong* and *Ju Lu Bu* are just some of them. Small numbers of *nangma* bars have also been reported in Shigatse, Purang, Kongpo, Dram and Chengdu. As with nightclubs, discos and pubs in cities across the world, the different *nangma* bars cater to different groups of people. In Tibet, the most common divisions are between Chinese and Tibetans as well as regional divisions (Khampa, Amdo and central Tibetan) and age divisions. Singers and musicians are able to earn good wages from performing in *nangma* bars, much higher than the typical dance troupe wages. Singers can earn 50 yuan (£3.50; US\$6.00; €5.25) per night and dancers 40 yuan (£2.80; US\$4.80; €4.20) per night, depending on experience.⁷¹ Monthly wages for singers range from around 2 – 6,000 yuan (£140-422; US\$242-725; €210-633) again depending on experience,⁷² and room rent and expenses for meals may also be included. *Nangma* bars may poach popular singers from other bars by offering them more money. Singers normally sing three or four songs a night, alternating with other singers. *Nangma* bars may also offer training for singers from a ‘song manager’ (Tib: *shey kyi godrig jenyen*). One interviewee reported that “they taught us how to raise the voice and how to lower our voice etc”.⁷³

The song manager is also responsible for deciding the programme of songs to be performed each night. Apart from traditional songs like *korshey* or *namthar*, singers mostly sing songs of popular Tibetan artists, most commonly Yadong, who sings largely in Chinese and is popular with both Tibetans and Chinese, and also Dube and Yungdrung Gyal (both from Amdo). Some also sing songs they have written themselves, and some songs from exile Tibetans are popular. The singers are almost all Tibetan, and in the Lhasa *nangmas*, come from all regions of Tibet with a wide variety of training, some with nomadic backgrounds (where there is a strong tradition of singing), some amateurs and others who have been through dance troupes. ‘Patriotic’ songs are sung to a small extent in some *nangma* bars, but these songs are not generally popular. One exception is ‘Over the Golden Mountain of Beijing’, which is performed quite frequently. Hindi film songs and dances are becoming increasingly popular, being sung even by Tibetans who do not speak Hindi.⁷⁴

The song managers are also supposed to ensure that the songs performed are free from ‘splittist’ political content. Since 1999, the lyrics of songs have been carefully inspected in Lhasa and, if necessary, banned from *nangmas* by the Lhasa Culture and Art Centre, which issue lists of the songs that are forbidden. Recently banned songs include two by

71 TIN interview TIN 02-1222, 6 December 2002.

72 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002, and interview anon, September 2003.

73 TIN interview TIN 02-1222, 6 December 2002.

74 TIN interview TIN 03-1231, 3 February 2003.

Yadong: *Baita* 'White Stupa' and *Shen qin de didi* 'Little Brother, With Deep Feelings'. Songs from exiles in India have been banned in the past, but are not currently restricted, except, naturally, those with explicit separatist content.⁷⁵ Since 1999, singers have also had to obtain licences to be able to perform in *nangma* bars or to give ad-hoc performances around other Tibetan areas.⁷⁶ These licenses are issued by the county-level Culture Office, (Ch: *Wen Hua Guan*) only if certain requirements are met:

*The main requirements are your formal education in music, whether and what local prizes you have won; then certificates of your graduation in singing and composing. They also look at the content of your songs. What is important is that when you sing, it should be in praise of the Chinese. Other than that, if you sing about regions and places and things like that, then you will get the license.*⁷⁷

Most *nangma* bars open late evening till the next morning, but some are open during the day as well, and many children visit them at weekends where they dance to disco music and drink soft drinks or beer. This is not popular with many parents, as a 17-year old boy who frequents *nangma* bars explained:

*Many fathers and mothers come to nangma bars to look for their children and many of them say that they don't want nangma bars because their children always go to nangma bars. Some of the mothers and fathers of the children sent letters to Lhasa Municipality Office. [...] The families said that their children didn't study well and they wanted nangma bars to be stopped.*⁷⁸

As well as disturbing children's studies, the level of violence found in *nangma* bars is also a cause for concern for parents. *Nangma* bars hire guards (Ch: *Bao an*). A young Tibetan, described one of the *nangma* bars in Lhasa:

*All young boys and girls that steal and fight are in this nangma. Each of them tries to prove their guts. [The boys] wear a knife [around their waist] and they are without clothes showing off the tattoos on their bodies.*⁷⁹

Lhasa *nangma* bars also play host to Tibetan and Chinese gangs. The boy quoted above described how Tibetans stopped going to *Yin Tu nangma* in Lhasa after a Chinese gang started frequenting it:

[The Chinese in the west of Lhasa] have a gang and they come to Yin-tu and they pick fights. Since they are with many people, the Tibetan people can't fight with them. Therefore the Tibetan people don't go there. [...] [The Chinese gang] [...] have dyed their hair yellow and keep it very long. They are hanging around. They take the knives like the knives that are used to cut open watermelon. [...]

75 TIN interview TIN 02-961, 27 December 2002.

76 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002.

77 *ibid*

78 TIN interview TIN 02-1221, 28 November 2002.

79 TIN interview TIN 03-1231, 3 February 2003.

They have also got tattoos on their bodies. [...] Sometimes there are ten people in a group and while some other times there are twenty people in a group. [...] When they get drunk, they fight and throw chairs around.⁸⁰

He went on to describe how he was nearly killed in Ji-shao nangma bar:

I was stabbed here with a knife. I had eight stitches on my body. I went to Ji-shao nangma bar four times and every time there were fights. [...] I was sitting there and some people told me to move away and I asked why. Then a big man came to me and they started beating me everywhere. I didn't know what happened. Finally I was in hospital. Two people got arrested. There had been no reason to start a fight and it was only because they were drunk.⁸¹

Nangma bars are also places where men go to pick up girls, some of whom may be prostitutes. Phuntsog described the atmosphere present in nangma bars:

When [some] men get drunk and when they don't get girls they then go to a nangma bar and take a girl from the nangma bar. There are many girls who get drunk in the bar and who then fall asleep on the sofas [in the bar]. These men then take these girls who are sleeping on the sofas and chairs telling these girls that they had already met or that they knew each other. If [later] in his room the girl doesn't let him sleep with her then he will beat her. [...] There are many girls like this. These girls don't go to their families and they don't go to school. [...] They rent rooms and one room costs about 300 Yuan per month for them.⁸²

Today's Tibetan artistes and their music

A selection of today's artistes, some famous and some little known, is introduced here, with outlines of their musical style and influences and the ways in which they have developed their careers. Amongst the newer artistes, there is an increasing variety of backgrounds, not all of them emerging via dance troupes and training in mainland China. The styles are also varied, with some much closer to Chinese singing styles. Interestingly, this does not depend entirely on whether they have been trained in Chinese institutions, as illustrated by the case of Han Hong, a singer of mixed, Tibetan and Chinese, parentage, who manages to adapt her voice to a range of different styles.

The standard of poetry in Tibetan songs lyrics from Tibet is very high, which is frequently acknowledged by Tibetan exiles. Many singers in Tibet do not have the specialist skill in literary Tibetan required to compose lyrics, having concentrated on musical training rather than academic education. Writers and poets are therefore in great demand, and most singers pay for the composition of lyrics for their songs.

⁸⁰ TIN interview TIN 02-1221, 28 November 2002.

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² *ibid*

• Tsetan Dolma (Ch: Cedain Zhoima), 1937 -

Tsetan Dolma is probably the most controversial Tibetan singer. She gained nationwide fame for singing Chinese propaganda songs in the 50s and 60s, and parallel to her singing career had a successful political career. She now holds the positions of Vice-chairman, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Tibet Regional Committee, Executive Vice-chairman, China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and Member of the TAR Party Committee. She still performs at political festivals and has been an ideal Party mouthpiece, encompassing the political ideology of the Party down to the smallest details. In a 1995 interview in *China's Tibet* she spoke of her shame that her mother was married to more than one husband, a traditional Tibetan practice which the Chinese authorities have outlawed and, to a certain extent, managed to make socially reprehensible.⁸³ At the same time, she has embraced the Chinese singing style taught in the government dance troupes. From the Chinese point of view she exemplifies a Tibetan perfectly integrated into the motherland and refined by Chinese culture. Even Tibetans who loathe the ideology she propagates admire her vocal skills.

- 1937 Born in Shigatse, TAR, to a pastoralist family⁸⁴
- 1956 Joined Shigatse Cultural Troupe
- 1958 Studied in Xianyang, Shaanxi Province
- 1959 As part of the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, performed as a singer in Zhongnanhai and met Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and other Party and State leaders.
- 1961 Joined CCP
- 1963 August, singer at a guest performance of a singing and dancing troupe in the USSR
- 1964 Graduated from Vocal Music Department of Shanghai Conservatory of Music having studied under Professor Wang Pingsu. Joined the chorus of 'The East is Red' and sang the song 'The Brilliance of Chairman Mao'
- 1964 Served as a singer in the TAR Ensemble
- 1964 Member of CPPCC 4th National Committee
- 1978 Member of 2nd Council of Chinese Musicians' Association and Vice-chairman of 3rd Council of Chinese Musicians' Association; member of Standing Committee of 5th NPC
- 1979 June, member of the Presidium, 2nd Session of the 5th NPC
- 1980 August, member of the Presidium, 3rd Session of the 5th NPC
- 1981-83 Member of Presidium, 4th and 5th Sessions of 5th NPC, 1st Session of 6th NPC
- 1983 Deputy to 6th NPC
- 1984 October, head of an artists' delegation to Congo and Zaire. Also headed an art delegation to Macao; during their performance tour the Macao Zhongtian Co. Ltd. invested 200,000 yuan to found the Tseten Drolma Art Foundation.

⁸³ 'An adobe house named Xaqen', *China's Tibet* no. 3 1995: 37-38

⁸⁴ Biography from Conner and Barnett 1997 *Leaders in Tibet: A Directory*: 100-101. London: Tibet Information Network.

- 1986/7: Member of Presidium, 4th and 5th Sessions of 6th NPC
- 1987 July–November, member of Standing Committee of 4th term of CPPCC Tibet Regional Committee
- 1983–1993: Deputy Director of Cultural Bureau, TAR. Chairman of Federation of Literary and Art Circles of Tibet, Vice-chairman of CPPCC 4th, 5th and 6th TAR Committee
- 1988 Member of 4th National Committee, Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles; vice executive chairman of 5th National Committee, Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles
- 1988 Member of CPPCC 7th National Committee
- 1993 Member of CPPCC 8th National Committee

A number of other Tibetan ‘official’ singers have followed in Tsetan Dolma’s footsteps, for example Yeshi Dolma, Dekyi Metok, Tenzin, Dhondrup Tsering, Nyima Tsering, Lobsang Tashi and Kelsang Choedren. These singers perform at official occasions and are said to receive favourable treatment at competitions, thereby enhancing their careers.

It is a sign of the changed political climate regarding non-religious culture in Tibet and the spread of the new recording media that Tibet has many highly successful performers who have no involvement in politics and have never gained fame from singing songs in praise of the Party.

• Dadon (full name Dawa Dolma), 1968 –⁸⁵

Dadon is Tibet’s first pop star, and remains one of the most successful to this day. She was born in Lhasa and both her parents were singers and performed in the Tibet Song-and-Dance Ensemble. In 1980, like her mother, she went to study at the Central Minorities Institute, Music Department, in Beijing. There she learned violin and piano, not singing, but had already excelled in singing whilst at school. She graduated in 1985 and joined the Tibet Song-and-Dance Ensemble as a violinist.

In 1986, Dadon began singing Chinese pop songs in karaoke bars in Lhasa. Henrion-Dourcy describes how she found her role as a violin player in the Tibet Song-and-Dance Ensemble unchallenging, and felt the need for a form of modern Tibetan music that the youth could



Dadon performing in San Francisco, 2000

⁸⁵ The biographical details presented here for Dadon are drawn on the account of her career by Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy (forthcoming) ‘Women in Performing Arts: Portraits of Six Contemporary Singers’, in Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik (eds.) *Women in Tibet: Past and Present*. London/New York: Hurst and Co./Columbia University Press.

identify with. She was inspired by the Taiwanese singer Deng Lijun, known as Teresa Teng, and emulated her singing style. However, as Henrion-Dourcy reports, another point of inspiration was *Modern Tibetan songs*, the 1995 cassette of the Dharamsala-based band *Rangzen Shonu*, 'Freedom Youth', which was smuggled into Lhasa in 1988. The cassette is one of the first pop albums recorded in exile, and is strongly nationalistic, with songs that call openly for freedom and denounce Chinese rule of Tibet. With other members of Tibet Song-and-Dance Ensemble, Dadon began to work with these different influences to create the first widely successful Tibetan pop music, and produced her first album, 'The beautiful melodies of Dadon' (*Dadon Nyenyang*) in 1987. She had released two more Tibetan albums by 1992, and all three of her albums were translated into Chinese.

Dadon's lyrics are probably the most significant aspect of her remarkable success. They speak of Tibetan national pride, are written in a poetic Tibetan and contain many thinly veiled politically relevant metaphors. Some of her songs are said to have been restricted at least in Lhasa in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁸⁶ Moreover, in their general sadness, they seemed to capture the imagination of Tibetans, as Henrion-Dourcy writes:

*These songs gave voice, for the first time since the 1950s, to a feeling of grief amongst Tibetans, emerging after the hardships of the previous twenty years.*⁸⁷

The attraction to sad songs has also been noted in the Uyghur pop music of Xinjiang, where ethnomusicologist Rachel Harris has related it to a reaction against the enforced happy mood of propaganda songs and the relentless portrayal of happy, singing and dancing minorities.⁸⁸ Such an attraction to sadness would be equally relevant in the Tibetan case.

In 1988 Dadon returned to the Central Minorities Institute in Beijing for a one-year 'refresher' course.

Between 1988 and 1990, she participated in three national contemporary song competitions, singing in Tibetan and Chinese, and came amongst the top.

She performed in the New Year celebrations in Beijing in 1991 and 1992.

Later in 1992, she defected, and arrived in exile. She stayed briefly at TIPA, in Dharamsala, but problems arose with her singing style, which was seen as too sinicised and incompatible with TIPA's own style.⁸⁹ She has since settled in America, and continues to perform live and campaign for Tibet. She produced a Tibetan CD in 1997, but it was not widely distributed. She appeared in the film *Windhorse* in 1998, playing a character close to herself, a Tibetan pop singer in Tibet.

⁸⁶ Lyrics of several of her songs are given in chapter 5.

⁸⁷ *ibid*

⁸⁸ 2002 'Cassettes, bazaars, and saving the nation: The Uyghur music industry in Xinjiang, China', in Craig and King (eds.) *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia*: 265-283. UBC Press: Vancouver.

⁸⁹ See chapter 6 for a discussion of the controversies surrounding change and sinicisation of Tibetan music.

• Jampa Tsering, early 1960s – 1997



Jampa Tsering's album *Melody of Tanglha*

Jampa Tsering was born in Lhasa in the early 1960s. He became famous at the same time as Dadon in the late 1980s and early 1990s, releasing an immensely popular album *Naychog gi luyang*, 'Songs of the Holy Land', including what are now classic songs, such as: *Aro Khampa* ('Hey, Khampa'): *Ngai tsewai Lhasa* ('My Beloved Lhasa'); and *Cha chig yinna samchung* ('I Wished, "If Only I Was A Bird"').

He studied music in the Shanghai conservatoire for about seven years, learning piano. Like Dadon, he was a member of the Tibet Song-and-Dance Ensemble, but began to gain a following in Lhasa from singing in karaoke bars. He was eventually expelled from the dance troupe because of doing too much private singing and continued to sing in karaoke and *nangma* bars. Also, like Dadon, he assimilated much of the style of 1980s Chinese language pop into his singing and the synthesised orchestral accompaniments of his songs. He was clearly a product of the new media rather than of traditional Tibetan singing, using a soft crooning voice rather than the loud, projecting voice of traditional Tibetan singing, yet the melodies of the songs he sang inherited a strong Tibetan character, with their wide vocal range and long phrases.

Like Dadon, many of his songs have hidden political meanings, such as *Ri de Himalaya* ('Mountains of the Himalaya'),⁹⁰ and they all express a strong pride in Tibetan identity, Tibetan traditions and the Tibetan countryside. Like Dadon, some of Jampa Tsering's songs were restricted in Lhasa in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to their political nature.

Jampa Tsering died in a car crash around 1997.

• Karma Tendar

Karma was born in Gurom township in Toelung Dechen county, Lhasa municipality prefecture. His parents both died when he was young, and he went to live in Lhasa. He briefly visited India, and then returned to Tibet. He sang in karaoke and *nangma* bars in Lhasa, and released a cassette, *Sangsol*, 'Burning incense', around 1992. Due to the political nature of some of the songs he recorded, he was banned from issuing any new

⁹⁰ See chapter 5 for the text of this song and of *Cha chig yinna samchung* ('I Wished, "If Only I Was A Bird"').



Karma Tendar's cassette *Bsang Gsol*

cassettes. Yet he still sings in *nangma* bars in Lhasa and owns a drinking house himself where music is performed. He has never sung Chinese songs.

• Palgon and other Amdo *dranyen* and mandolin players



Karma Tendar's cassette *Bsang Gsol*

Palgon was born in Machu county in Kanlho Prefecture, Gansu province. He is a doctor by profession, the president of Machu county hospital, and music is a 'hobby'. He was the first *dranyen* ('Tibetan lute') player in Amdo and is also responsible for introducing the mandolin into Amdo, which is now a ubiquitous part of Amdo music. He composed the song *Akhu Pema* ('Uncle Pema'), 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.

Palgon was very close to the late Gungthang Rinpoche, an abbot of Labrang Tashikyil monastery in Gansu province.⁹¹ Gungthang Rinpoche had initially taught Palgon *dranyen* (there is a tradition of monks of Labrang monastery playing what are typically lay instruments), and also encouraged and taught other Amdo Tibetan musicians. For example, he bought a *dranyen* for Gonpo Dondrup and sent him to Palgon for lessons.

91 See TIN News Update 3 March 2000 'Death of a "Great Scholar and Patriot": Obituary of Gungthang Rinpoche' <http://www.tibetinfo.co.uk/news-updates/nu03032000.htm>.



Dore's cassette *Langtsoi choepa*

Palgon originally become famous beyond his local area through radio, with his songs being broadcast in the early 1980s in the first few years of revival after the Cultural Revolution. He was one of the first artistes to produce cassettes and VCDs.



Dube's VCD *Lha Cha Trung Trung Karmo*



Palgon has trained many of the new generation of singer/lute players, such as Dube, who is the most successful of the new generation of Amdo singer/lute players, Dore, Yungdrung Gyal, Gonpo Dondrup (now in exile), and Sonam Gonpo (now in exile).

Yungdrung Gyal performing

• Yadong, 1963 -

Born into a poor family from Dege county, Sichuan province, in the traditional Tibetan area of Kham, Yadong has become the most successful Tibetan pop musician since Dadon. Yadong is said to have been interested in singing from his childhood, and worked in Dege Cultural Centre (*Derge Dzong Rignaykhang*) and then in Kardze Prefecture People's Art Company (*Kardzekhul Mangtsog Yultsekhang*). He is also said to have worked as a truck driver. Yadong gained exposure on the media and also MTV from the early 1990s through singing songs commissioned by various companies for advertising purposes, for example Lhonub Airline and a beer company. He later went to Lhasa and sang in *nangma* bars, from which he built up a following. He released several cassettes, but first became famous around 1993 with the Chinese language song *Xiang Wang Shen Ying*, 'The God-Bird Flies Ahead'.



Yadong's cassette

Yadong's popularity is particularly remarkable because he has, until recently, sung mostly in Chinese, and is said to have a poor knowledge of Tibetan. However, despite the fact that he has sung so much in Chinese, he has gained the image of a strong Tibetan patriot inside and outside Tibet, and is considered as very religious, someone who has come up through his own talent rather than voicing Chinese political views and someone who is utterly loyal to Tibet. His songs, following in the tradition of Dadon and Jampa Tsering, strongly praise Tibet and Tibet's traditions. 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. Beyond his patriotic image, several sources have reported that he has been questioned by the authorities due to the supposedly political content his songs. There is also at least one unconfirmed report of his being detained while performing in Lhasa, allegedly for refusing to sing at a

function following the denunciation of the Dalai Lama by an official.⁹² He is also reported to be hampered by the authorities in performing live because his image as a Tibetan patriot, and the perception that his songs are political, could potentially cause social unrest amongst large gatherings of Tibetans. At least two of his songs have been restricted in Tibet due to their supposed political content, and their performance in *nangma* bars or before any large gatherings of Tibetans has been banned. He can be seen as a truly modern Tibetan performer, not just in terms of the global mix of his stylistic palette, which uniquely fuses traditional Tibetan, Chinese, Western and Central Asian styles, but also in terms of his lack of affiliation with any state institutions and lack of a formal Chinese conservatoire training.

• Sonam Wangmo, 1977 -

Sonam Wangmo has achieved success across Tibetan regions of the PRC and also nationwide. The opportunities that brought her fame were made possible through her being a member of dance troupes, first at county level and then at prefecture level. The levels of exposure and opportunity she has received have also been underpinned by the fact that she has shown herself to be a 'patriotic' singer, denouncing the Dalai Lama. One source claims she has lost popularity in her home village because of this, and her relations with her brother, Lodroe Gyatso, a prisoner in Drapchi prison, have also deteriorated.⁹³ Her brother was arrested for murder in 1993 (accounts differ as to the nature of the killing) and later carried out a demonstration for independence in prison in 1995, for which he received a six-year extension on his 15-year sentence. However, despite her pro-Chinese political affiliation, she is able to sing in a strongly traditional and un-sinicised Tibetan nomadic style, and does not sing in Chinese.

- | | |
|------|---|
| 1977 | Born in a village in Nagchu, Sonam Wangmo used to be a herder, and learned to sing in the traditional way from other herders, while working. |
| 1991 | Recruited by the Sog county song and dance troupe. |
| 1992 | Sent to take part in the National Ethnic Minority Singing Contest, held in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang. Her herding song won first prize. Following this success, she was recruited into the Nagchu Prefectural Song and Dance Troupe, about 300km from her home. |
| 2002 | January, sang 'Golden hometown' at the Tibet TV Spring Festival Evening Party. The song is a traditional <i>lu</i> ('mountain song') followed by a dance song, traditional in terms of singing style, vocal production, and melody, accompanied by electronic and acoustic instruments. Her performance was a success and enabled her to enter the 10th National TV Contest for Young Singers held in Beijing five or six months later, where she won the first prize with 'Golden Hometown'. ⁹⁴ |

⁹² TCHRD 15 October 1997 reports him as missing, presumed detained, following this singing incident in Lhasa which took place in the context of the handover of Hong Kong to China. The details of this report have not been confirmed.

⁹³ TIN interview JW 1291, 2 February 2004

⁹⁴ See *China Tibet Information Centre* 'Sonam Wangmo: A Rising Singing Star' www.tibetinfo.com.cn/tibetz-en/zyfy/zyfy_3_si_slwm.htm for a more detailed biography, and see click on the 'songs' tab for a link to hear her winning song 'Golden hometown'.

• Tenpa 1974 -

Tenpa has had an unusual singing career in Tibet. He managed to gain considerable success without being a member of a dance troupe through traditional training, the support during childhood of a local lama, a friend of the family, who taught him Amdo opera, and later the support of Gungthang Rinpoche, who sent him to Palgon to learn the *dranyen*. Later, he studied for a year in Shanghai. He got into trouble with the authorities and eventually fled Tibet and went to India, where he continues to perform. He did not release any albums while in Tibet.

Tenpa was born into a nomad family in Hongyuan county, Sichuan, and learned a typical Amdo style of singing, in the traditional setting of herding animals. He recalled: "*When I was in Tibet, I was someone who went with yaks and horses singing Amdo lu*". The traditional vocal style and melodies are still very much at the core of his music.

From the age of 12, Tenpa was taught to sing Tibetan opera by a *Trulku* (incarnate lama) in his local area, and performed from this time. The lama encouraged him, saying he had a good voice, and he therefore focused on singing and did not go to school. As he became increasingly skilled, the lama asked his parents to put him in his care so he could train him to be a *Lhamo* (Tibetan opera) performer.

When aged about 17, because he had not grown tall enough to play lead roles in opera, he decided to go to school and learn (written) Tibetan, the Lama who had taught him enrolled him in a middle school where he studied for two years.

By the time he was 19, Tenpa was so far behind the other students at his school that he felt ashamed; he thought he would be unable to learn Tibetan and that his family would not allow him to go to China to study music. He knew many people who were going to, or had been to India and so decided to go there himself. He told this to the late Gungthang Rinpoche, who persuaded him to stay in Tibet and study music, and brought him to Machu county to learn the *dranyen* from Palgon (Gungthang Rinpoche had also taught Palgon – see above). Gungthang Rinpoche bought Tenpa a *dranyen*, and he studied with Palgon for eight months. He then returned home and recalled impressing the local people with his playing.

He then received *dranyen* and mandolin tuition from Dore (Dorje Tsetan, another famous *dranyen* player from Amdo) for about eight months, and again returned home.

In 1996, following his training with Palgon and Dore, Tenpa was able to take part in the first music and dance competition for Tibetans, open to people from all areas of the PRC, held in Tsongon in Qinghai. He was selected from the people in his township, and then from those in his county, and was chosen to participate.

He then went to India briefly and, on his return in 1998, joined Shanghai Music University for one year in order to learn composition. His parents provided the funds for him to do this.

After finishing his course in Shanghai, a friend encouraged him to tour remote areas where people had not seen the Tibetan lute before. This friend also provided financial support for this tour. Tenpa's motivations in embarking upon this tour appear to have been Tibetan nationalistic, in the sense of taking pride in Tibetan traditions and performing them to people rather than encouraging 'splittism', but he soon ran into trouble. The authorities became suspicious of the enthusiastic response he received in Ngapa county in particular, and he was taken in for questioning but released afterwards. The real trouble seems to have come from a dispute with the leader of a dance troupe, also a Tibetan, from whom Tenpa had hired musicians, who reported him to the authorities. The authorities then distributed 'wanted' notices all over Tibet to try to track him down. He fled his hometown and went to Lhasa, where he sang in *nangma* bars for several months. However, as the owners of *nangma* bars received letters about him, he was forced to flee Lhasa and join a dance troupe in a remote area.

He finally fled Tibet in 2000 because of the trouble with the authorities and arrived in India. There he met the Dalai Lama who encouraged him to join TIPA, where he teaches traditional Amdo songs. He has also composed many new songs and recorded seven albums while at TIPA.

• Dolma, 1983 –

Born in a nomadic area in Pema county in Golog prefecture, Qinghai province, Dolma's family raise livestock and also farm and her father is in the army.

She initially learned songs in the traditional way in the context of her nomadic community. She learned instrumental music in Xining when she was aged about 15 from personal contacts and also from members of the dance troupe.

In 1995, when she was 15, she sang on two music albums along with other singers. She got this opportunity because her father and sister had connections with Manlha, a famous comedian, and other comedians and composers from Xining. Manlha works for the state-owned publisher and music producer known as 'The White conch organisation', the Haishi National Music Publishing Organisation, in Xining. This company produced both the albums she was involved with.

After the albums came out, she joined the Golog Tabu Prefecture dance troupe, where she stayed as a member for about a year and a half and then left for India. Presently in India, she is a member of the Akhu Pema dance troupe, which specialises in the musical traditions of Amdo.

• Tsering, 1979 –

Born in Sershul county, Kandze prefecture, Tsering's family are nomads. She never went to school. She learned to sing in a traditional environment from the age of about 12 or 13. She began by learning traditional Tibetan nomadic songs from her mother and uncle, who in turn had learned them from their parents. She then became interested in the songs of singers like Dube, Yungdrung Gyal and Yardung, which she learned from the radio and from listening to recordings of their albums. She also learned Chinese songs. The melodies that her mother and uncle taught her were the most important source for her music.

Tsering became seriously interested in singing in 1996 when Sershul county organised the *Gangjong monlam chenmo* festival, the 'great prayer festival of Tibet', for five years.

In 1997, Tsering released two albums with Dore and Sangtshe, a singer from Zachukha. She gained this opportunity because a lama from the area where she grew up knew a female vocalist was needed for the albums and put her name forward.

In 1999, she was selected, with another boy, to go and sing in Kangding (Tib: *Dartsedo*) prefecture. She also sang in Sichuan and Chengdu.

She left for India in 2001 in order to study. She has had offers to record albums in India, but at present wants to focus on studying.

• Han Hong, 1971 –

PIC3-21 Han Hong was born in Shigatse, TAR, to a Tibetan mother and Chinese father, her Tibetan name is Kelsang Dolma. She has become a highly successful singer. Han Hong's mother was a singer, and she describes being inspired to become a singer herself when, as a child, she saw her mother perform. Despite the fact that Han Hong has received extensive formal vocal training through government conservatoires, she has not adopted the typical Chinese singing style. Rather, she adapts her voice to a remarkably broad range of vocal styles. In her recent hit song 'Brilliant Rays on a Snowy Landscape', she sings an arrangement of *Yarkai pang gi teng la* ('On the Summer Meadow') from the 1999 Tibetan film *Windhorse* in Tibetan in a Tibetan singing style, including a chorus of Tibetan singers and mixing it with Chinese vocals and Tibetan style *so ya la lani so* chorus, but sung in a largely vibrato-less style similar to a western folk singer. In a recent album *Langla shang qin* 'The Feeling of the Mountain', she sings songs in African-American styles like soul and gospel, rock, western pop, and Chinese styles such as the Taiwan/Hong Kong pop style. She also sings Tsetan Dolma's famous song 'Over the Golden Mountain of Beijing' in the style of the original. She also attempts to sing in the Tibetan *lu* or 'mountain song' style but, unlike her other styles, she does not do this wholly convincingly. The cosmopolitan nature of Beijing, and the influence of her Tibetan



Han Hong's CD *Langla shang qin*

roots, have certainly instilled in her a wide range of different styles. Her ability to render and adapt her voice to so many styles from China and the rest of the world convincingly makes her a very new kind of Chinese singer, and illustrates an emerging mindset in the new musical market economy of China where difference is possible and even desirable: rather than imposing one singing style on different types of music like the old officially trained singers such as Tsetan Dolma, Han Hong adapts her voice to these styles.

In 1980, at the age of nine, she came to Beijing to receive professional vocal training in a children's chorus. In 1986 she won her first prize in a national singing competition. In 1987 she joined the PLA as a military singer, and later trained at the Central Conservatory of Music and the Art Institute of the PLA. In 1993 she started composing music, even though she hadn't received training in composition.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ See China Tibet Information Centre 'Han Hong profile' www.tibetinfo.com.cn/tibetzn-en/zyfy/zyfy_3_si_hanhong_f.htm for fuller biography.