


Preservation and Continuity: The *Ache Lhamo* Tradition Inside and Outside the Tibet Autonomous Region

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 The Tibetan performing art *A lce lha mo* (hereafter *ache lhamo*)—a form of opera accompanied by cymbals and drums—has been subject to continuous contestation since its first development in the fourteenth century CE. The aim of this paper is to show that *ache lhamo* has become the centre of hegemonic interests and cultural policies—a contested site. By looking at the different methods of preservation it becomes evident that thereby new Tibetan identities are constructed. In order to generate authenticity claims of continuity within the *ache lhamo* traditions are (re-)developed and used as an economic tool in terms of tourism and a unifying one in the creation of identities.

1. Introduction

In order to understand the various assertions of continuity it is important to first briefly outline the history of *ache lhamo*.

Intended as a creative way to communicate basic Buddhist morality, *ache lhamo* became institutionalized in the seventeenth century by the fifth Dalai Lama. He had new masks and costumes designed in accordance with a dream he had about the future of these performances. Manufactured from silk, precious stones and embroidery these were all paid for by the state bursary. From then on the bursary's officers in charge of the subsidization ordered the various opera troupes to perform for them once a year as a form of tax. At the same time, they could review the quality and content of the plays. When actors could not keep up with the expectations of

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their patrons they were replaced. These inspections also led to the advent of an annual event, the *Zhotön festival* (*Zho ston dus chen*),² which was held from the eighteenth century CE in the Dalai Lama's summer residence Norbulingka (*Nor bu gling kha*).³ From all parts of Tibet people undertook pilgrimage to these festivities which also promoted the exchange of goods and information. A central meeting point was thereby established where most of the scattered population of the Tibetan plateau could come together and at which organizers could mediate specific content since they were also managing the performing groups. Dieter Schuh reports that the thirteenth Dalai Lama would consult with the partaking *ache lhamo* troupes and decide on the plays which should be performed.⁴

The troupes were also encouraged to travel to Tibet's more remote areas. Since consistent access to monasteries and a working information system had yet to be firmly established, the *ache lhamo* groups functioned as transmitters of the latest news from Lhasa and served as a medium for moral and spiritual instruction.⁵

For the eighteenth century there is a lack of source material for *ache lhamo*. This could be explained by a shift of focus towards spiritual liberation and away from mind-distracting activities, as Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy has suggested.⁶ It is only from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards that there are detailed documents from the state bursary that describe the systematic levy of taxes on performing arts and its performers.⁷ Through the control of almost every aspect of these performances the Tibetan government was explicitly involved in the imparting of Buddhist education to lay people with otherwise limited access to educational institutions.

According to Nicolas Cull "the spread of controversial attitudes is propaganda, the spread of accepted attitudes and skills is education."⁸ Although *ache lhamo* was contested in its function as a medium for moral instruction it cannot be seen to have served as a mere propagandistic tool.

² See Snyder 2001 for an account of the legendary circumstances.

³ See Wang 1986: 24; Fromaget 1991: 324; Schuh 2001: 97–101.

⁴ Schuh 2001: 115.

⁵ Norbu 1986: 2.

⁶ Henrion-Dourcy 2005: 198–99.

⁷ Schuh 2001: 106–08.

⁸ Cull 2003: 319.

2. *Challenging Authenticity and Methods of Preservation*

A new level of contestation became apparent in the aftermath of Tibet's forceful integration into the People's Republic of China in 1949. Shortly after the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's flight into Indian exile he established a number of institutions, such as the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (hereafter TIPA) and other institutions to safeguard and rebuild Tibetan culture in exile. One of the art directors of TIPA, Jamyang Norbu, describes the first years as follows:

When I joined, the Society was then only performing propaganda plays, folk dances and so-called 'historical plays' (*rgyal rabs*) which were rather wooden dramatizations of Tibetan history, interspersed with song and dance routines that seemed jointly inspired both by Chinese opera and by the musical routines of Hindi Films.⁹

An essential function of performing arts, as noted by the musicologist Keith Howard, is its supporting role "in our exercises of collective memory and our efforts to retain memory as something alive."¹⁰ This is also acknowledged by Norbu when he describes these early attempts by TIPA as an "effective morale booster to the refugee population" and as "an elementary history lesson on Tibet's glorious imperial past."¹¹

Due to the protest of Jamyang Norbu and others these 'historical plays' were soon abandoned and traditional plays¹² found their way back into the repertoire. But this undertaking turned out to be more difficult than expected. Because the actors involved with *ache lhamo* were invariably illiterate they had to memorize the verses and melodies of full operas. Only a handful of manuscripts (*'khrab gzhung*) were ever written down and were kept in the state bursary in Lhasa. Since it was impossible to save them in the commotion of the 1950s the team of TIPA would ask refugees if they would remember certain passages and lines from the operas in order to restore the performances. One of the few actors who succeeded in arriving in India was Norbu Tsering. In 1962 he was appointed new art director of TIPA, a position he once held in the renowned *ache lhamo* troupe Kyormo Lungpa (*sKyor mo rlung pa*).¹³

⁹ Norbu 2001: 143. The predecessor of TIPA was then called the Drama and Dance Society.

¹⁰ Howard 2012: 3.

¹¹ Norbu 2001: 143.

¹² This means the traditional way of singing, dancing and costume-making.

¹³ See Norbu 2001; Schuh 2001; Ama Tsering 2009.

In the years that followed TIPA's agenda was to preserve and recreate the operas as "traditional" and "authentic" thus inventing a unified tradition of *ache lhamo* which became homogenized and canonized although actually compiled from different traditions. The preservation of a uniform lineage is rather a folkloristic concept which was fabricated by the government-in-exile and its cultural politics to serve the present.¹⁴

Let us now look briefly at the situation under which *ache lhamo* is approached by the Central Tibetan Administration (hereafter CTA) nowadays, and at two aspects that characterize the political activities of the government-in-exile in general as theorized by Yossi Shain. On the one hand, the CTA presents itself as a lawfully elected organization that enjoys a legitimate status to rule a nation—its people and territory. On the other hand, it claims a "traditional representation," an argument that emphasizes the legitimacy of its political aims.¹⁵ In this context, the CTA is in a weak position as it lacks effective power over its claimed territory and people. Effectively, the CTA only has an unenforceable claim over what is "traditional and authentic" in Tibetan tradition.

But a performance is seen by Richard Handler and William Saxton as experiential authenticity that focuses upon a replication of a past and a structural form "between a living history activity or event, and that piece of the past it is meant to re-create."¹⁶

It is the TIPA's approach not only to preserve the performing arts for future generations but also to authenticate what constitutes "Tibetan" and what does not. From my own field visits¹⁷ and the results of other field research by Divya Chandramouli,¹⁸ it is apparent that there is a popular understanding that the transformation of Tibetan art forms in occupied Tibet is altering the very Tibetan-ness of these art forms. The one thing that can counteract this transformation is, according to TIPA and its members, a dedicated

¹⁴ Ahmed 2006: 168–71; Morcom 2011: 413.

¹⁵ Shain 1989: 27–28; see also Römer 2008.

¹⁶ Handler and Saxton 1988: 242.

¹⁷ The author conducted these interviews in English in March 2012 at TIPA with various staff members and two actors by the age of 22–51 and in March–April 2016 at Esukhia Institute in Tibetan. The first set of interviews at TIPA dealt with the history of the Performing Arts Institute, its organization and daily routine in terms of rehearsals, costume-making and stage design. The second set of interviews which were carried out at Esukhia, were conducted with two former actors of TIPA aged 27 and 28. The two informants talked about their personal opinion towards the *ache lhamo* tradition in India and the transforming music culture in Tibet and in exile.

¹⁸ Divya Chandramouli carried out her interviews in March 2013 in English at TIPA. This was an independent study project for SIT Study Abroad/ Graduate Institute. See Chandramouli 2013.

reassertion of cultural preservation. As a former student at TIPA states:

Performing [*ache*] *lhamo* is my small service to the Tibetan community and to Buddhism. It is also about preserving my culture. These days, everyone is on their mobile phones getting the latest songs from Tibet and China. Nobody seem to care about what's right in front of you. Because of that we are in danger of extinction.¹⁹

It is because of this new responsibility affixed to the art form that the artists at TIPA have determined to professionalize their performances. A senior opera instructor says:

In older times, when we performed Tibetan opera, or circular dance, people had their own freedom. If you want to sing, you can sing, if you don't want to sing, you don't. But nowadays, we have to put it in regulation, since people are watching you. You are entertaining these people [...] so one cannot stare with mouth like this, like that.²⁰

These adjustments to *ache lhamo* should not be seen as unfavourable alterations to a tradition since "the nature of tradition is not to preserve intact a heritage from the past, but to enrich it according to present circumstances and transmit the result to future generations."²¹

This has also been attested by another opera instructor of TIPA who mentioned *ache lhamo's* improvisational character and its constant reflection on and relation to the current period:

It has [a] lot of improvisation which is not related to the story. [...] You're telling a story of twentieth century, and in the improvisation you'll find these days what's happening—sometimes they'll talk about politicians, sometimes they'll talk about health issues, sometimes about human rights. It might not be related with the story. Like this, a lot of things are involved in Tibetan opera.²²

Despite this stated openness to new developments in *ache lhamo* a new opera by Jamyang Norbu, outside of the 'traditional eight',²³ faced harsh criticism and made the invention of new plays virtually impossible. Norbu sees the problem also in the appointment of TIPA directors, after his departure in 1985, solely from within the ranks of

¹⁹ Ngawang Choeden at Esukhia Institute Dharamsala 04/05/16.

²⁰ Sonam Phuntsok 4/22/13 at TIPA in Chandramouli 2013: 17.

²¹ Aubert 2007: 10.

²² Samten Dhondup 4/16/13 at TIPA in Chandramouli 2013: 8.

²³ Originally there are eight different stories that were adapted into *ache lhamo* performances. See TIPA 2015; Snyder 2001; Schuh 2001.

the bureaucracy, with no background in the performing arts required. Furthermore, TIPA's autonomous status was revoked and the Institute was put under the Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs.²⁴

The scholar of theatre Antonio Attisani remarks that "lhamo risks becoming obsolete if it is considered by the exiled government as something to be 'conserved,' a mere aspect of cultural identity and loyalty to tradition."²⁵ Although four new operas were adapted into TIPA's repertoire *ache lhamo* is still the focus of bureaucratic control. Therefore, its status as state property also implies its application defined and directed by law.

3. *Unity Through Continuity of ache lhamo in China*

A similar trend towards standardisation can be seen in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC). After the successful annexation of Tibet *ache lhamo* became a decisive tool in re-educating the Tibetan people from 1954 onwards.

Although the Chinese party convention in 1949 stated that "all minorities shall have the freedom [...] to preserve or reform their traditions, customs and religious beliefs,"²⁶ attitudes became more restrictive in the years that followed. A complete assimilation of all minorities within the PRC could only be brought about through education and propaganda. In face of the vast variety of languages, religions and customs the PRC leaders required pliable and comprehensible means to communicate their political objectives: the unity of all minorities within China. Henrion-Dourcy résumés:

[...] lhamo has been seen in a favourable light by the government. In its mind-boggling search for entirely secular elements within Tibetan Culture, it saw in Tibetan Opera the instrumental token it was looking for, probably because it appeared as the most established 'lay' performing tradition, with [...] the largest scope of popularity in Central Tibet.²⁷

The Communist Party of China began to systematically organizing art, literature and theatre. Out of eight traditional *ache lhamo* plays, it was the text *Gyasa Belsa Namthar* (*rGya bza' bal bza' rnam thar*) that was preferred as the basis for the rewriting of scripts in order to serve the

²⁴ See Norbu 2001.

²⁵ Attisani 1999: 3.

²⁶ Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, September 1949; cited in Meserve and Meserve 1979: 104.

²⁷ Henrion-Dourcy 2001: 4.

new communist ideology. Originally composed as a clever role-play between a crafty Tibetan minister and his Asian counterparts in soliciting Chinese and Nepalese princesses for his king, the revised text became a symbol of the long friendship between China and Tibet. Now simply called *Princess Wencheng*, and excluding the kingdom of Nepal, it emphasized the Tibetan dependency on China for economic and technological development. As Byung-Ho Lee argues, this demonstrates China's approach to assimilating *ache lhamo* in order to create a Chinese identity:

China has a long history of imagining primordial kinship ties modelled on the myth of common descent. The Chinese have constructed a sense of "imagined commonalities" with non-Chinese, [...] The *mentalité* of conceiving commonalities through fictive kinship ties, which endures into the present, is a mainstay of modern Chinese nationalism.²⁸

In other words, the past no longer serves a revolutionary purpose but a nationalistic one.

Soon after the death of Chairman Mao and the end of what Trevor Sofield and Fung Li call "cultural vandalism", Deng Xiaoping started his new "open-door" policy in 1978. This not only allowed tourism to flourish but also enabled the rehabilitation of China's heritage as an economic resource. Although in 1949 the PRC disapproved of tourism as an appropriate form of economy, tourism became a revitalizing factor and an acceptable form of development. This led to the Heritage Conservation Act in 1982. The introducing paragraph states that the Act is designed "to strengthen the conservation of China's heritage" and "to carry out nationalism, to promote revolutionary traditions, and to build up socialism and modernization".²⁹

This shift in China's attitude continued with the ratification of the World Heritage Convention of the UNESCO in 1985. Further to the Chinese state's first National Cultural Heritage Survey and Registration in the 1950s, a second one was conducted in the 1980s and a third was recently completed in 2011.³⁰

In 2004, *ache lhamo* became part of the Preservation Programme of the National and Folk Culture of China, alongside all performing arts under which *ache lhamo* is generally subsumed.³¹ This was based on a UNESCO provision, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the

²⁸ Lee 2013: 74–75.

²⁹ Sofield and Li 1998: 368–70.

³⁰ Silverman and Blumfield 2013: 6.

³¹ China Heritage Project 2006.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter ICH), issued the previous year.

In 2005 the Tibetan Autonomous Region's Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Centre was established which employs twelve 'survey teams' and according to vice director Ngawang Tenzin "published a lot of books, audios and videos dealing with the protection on intangible cultural heritage such as 'the History of China Tibetan Opera'."³² Then, in 2006, *ache lhamo* was listed as "intangible cultural heritage property no. 224" by the Chinese state administration.

In the following year the Ministry of Culture of China held an exhibition with the title 'Festival of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage' at UNESCO Headquarters in April 2007. The accompanying catalogue explains the main goals of China's cultural heritage politics:

[It] is the symbol of the Chinese nation, the precious source for fostering the self identity of the Chinese nation, the solid basis for promoting unity of nationalities and safeguarding the unification of the country as well as the important force of unifying all peoples.³³

A closer look at Chinese opera—a synthesis of literature, music, dance, acrobatics and fine arts—reveals how this unification can be achieved. Although all the components give it a Chinese identity it is composed of a variety of 'ethnic operas', including *ache lhamo*.³⁴ Dawson Munjeri, a member of UNESCO and the Experts Draft Group of the ICH Convention states that "the linkage between the local, provincial and the national ensures consistency and unity of the country's cultural expressions."³⁵ This implies that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is synonymous with safeguarding the unity of the People's Republic of China.

Former Minister of Culture Sun Jianzheng expounded that the protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage should be undertaken "in good faith instead of with the sole goal of fueling [*sic*] local tourism or enhancing publicity."³⁶

As part of tourism on the Tibetan high plateau, *ache lhamo* has become a valuable economic resource and an attractive element of the "traditional Tibetan performing arts experience," as documented by Ellen Bangsbo.³⁷ The show *O²—Himalaya* in Lhasa combines *ache*

³² China Tibet News 2015.

³³ Ministry of Culture, PRC 2007: 30; cited in Munjeri 2009: 145.

³⁴ Ministry of Culture, PRC 2007: 28; cited in *ibid*.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ China Daily 2005.

³⁷ Bangsbo 2013: 9–26.

lhamo and other Chinese elements into a two-hour long performance that showcases the long history of unity between Tibet and China. Another recent example is the grandiose staging of *Princess Wencheng* in Lhasa since April 2013, in a version which is demanding on requisites and actors. With an average entrance fee of RMB300 this is more suitable for rich tourists than for the average local population. The newly built stage, which cost RMB750 million and holds up to 500 actors per performance, is part of the new wave of tourist attractions in Tibet proper.³⁸ With a total revenue of USD4.3 billion and roughly 20 million tourists in 2015 in Lhasa alone, Tibet has become a new market in the Sino-Tibetan enterprise.³⁹ But this consumption also generates a range of contradictions, such as the praise for the Tibetan civilization but not for the Tibetan society. This becomes even more apparent from the Tourism Law of the People's Republic of China from 2013. The first article deals with the protection and rational usage of tourism resources and the promotion of a "sustainable and sound development of the tourist industry." It is further explained in the eighth article that the organizations responsible are subject to self-regulation. No mention is made of the local inhabitants who are subject to tourism as well. Article ten affirms the respect towards the "tourists' human dignity, ethnic customs and religious beliefs" but does not include the local's protection thereof.⁴⁰

Fundamental issues attend to the management of this form of tourism. While the Chinese state authorities define tourism in Tibet as a tool of economic development, outside critics condemn it as an assimilation policy designed to erase Tibetan cultural identity. In the critics' view, state-directed tourism aims to transform "Tibet" as a semiotic image into a depoliticized space of "culture" and "tradition" securely embedded within the People's Republic of China.⁴¹

The cultural anthropologist Robert Shepherd questions the assumption that mass tourism in Tibetan cultural areas promotes the disappearance or dilution of Tibetan culture. But he too sees it as part of "a state strategy aimed at the pacification of Tibet through the simultaneous aesthetisation [*sic*] of Tibetan culture."⁴²

The anthropologist Pál Nyíri employs more critical tones and calls Chinese tourism 'indoctrainment'.⁴³ When asked about the *Princess Wencheng* performance in Lhasa a former dance instructor who was

³⁸ Woeser 2013.

³⁹ CNC News 2016.

⁴⁰ Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 2013.

⁴¹ Buffetrille and Blondeau 2008: 280–83.

⁴² Shepherd 2006: 246.

⁴³ Nyíri 2009: 159.

invited to the show and is the mother of a partaking Tibetan actress is cited by the newspaper China Daily:

Through this performance, I was transported back to the Tang Dynasty, and able to experience the cultural communication between Tang Dynasty and Tubo Kingdom with my own eyes. It was quite thrilling!⁴⁴

Many performing arts today are seen by social scientists as cultural endorsement and as attractions for tourists. Although this may bring tourist revenues to a country or community and offer a glimpse onto its culture, it creates new forms of presenting the performing arts in the process and transforms certain elements important to the tradition. Performances recorded by twentieth century travellers in Tibet are described as being held under a tent to guard the actors and audience from the sun since it is an all-day event, and being staged with minimal stage design which was limited to masks, costumes and a handful of additional papier-mâché stage props as the imagination of the audience was crucial to the performance.⁴⁵ This stands in stark juxtaposition to the grand staging of Princess Wencheng in Lhasa with its 500 actors, the use of 70 cows and 30 horses as stage props and its playtime of simply 90 minutes.⁴⁶

4. UNESCO and the Application of Heritage

The aforementioned presentation of *Princess Wencheng*, labelled as *ache lhamo*, employs the notion of heritage. Heritage is an interpretative process that often tries to portray a desired past and is aimed at a specific audience. In the postmodern approach to heritage, the concept of objectivity is challenged. Representing this position, David Lowenthal states:

[H]eritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes. But heritage, no less than history, is essential to knowing and acting. Its many faults are inseparable from heritage's essential role in husbanding community, identity, continuity, indeed history itself.⁴⁷

In the context of what Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson call the assumption that "in totalitarian regimes power is maintained in part

⁴⁴ China Daily 2015.

⁴⁵ See Maraini 1952.

⁴⁶ TripAdvisor 2015.

⁴⁷ Lowenthal 1998: xv.

through the control of memory,"⁴⁸ it seems striking that the Communist Party of China (CPC) embraced UNESCO's proposal of adding intangible heritage to its roster of responsibilities. The Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as

the practices and representations [...] that communities [...] recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups [...] and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity. [...] For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements [...] of sustainable development.⁴⁹

The purpose of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention is to a) safeguard, b) ensure respect, c) raise awareness, and d) provide for international cooperation and assistance.⁵⁰ By designating *ache lhamo* as intangible cultural heritage, according to Shepherd, UNESCO is internationally affirming China's control of Tibet. He argues that "UNESCO plays into the ongoing Chinese state project of creating an 'imagined community' across space and through time."⁵¹ In addition, since UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as having "the requirements of sustainable development," the political questions of what precisely is "sustainable development" and, more importantly, who has a right to take part in this discussion are ignored.

Moreover, China's heritage trend reveals aspects of its cultural policy. On the one hand China has been employing a national strategy of cultural soft power on the global stage. By setting up a mechanism that brings 'properties' of 'Outstanding Universal Value' (UNESCO's terminology) "into the national cultural treasury through a comprehensive national system of heritage administration and then by placement in the international repository of wonders."⁵² UNESCO's system facilitates China's strategy, for it is states (states parties) that nominate sites to the Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

Thereby UNESCO reaffirms that China has the absolute and exclusive rights over Tibet's creative works and therefore partially over its history. But then again, any effort to reduce it to solely a form of commodity would be merely exclusionary, estranging it from anyone who might enjoy it, enrich it, inhabit it.⁵³

⁴⁸ Perks and Thompson 1998: 185.

⁴⁹ UNESCO 2003: Paragraph 1, Article 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: Article 1.

⁵¹ Shepherd 2009: 64.

⁵² Silverman and Blumfield 2013: 6.

⁵³ See Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 30–31.

5. Conclusion

The fact that there are flourishing traditions both inside Tibet's borders and in exile creates many dichotomies. The entire project of preserving a culture and civilization is theoretically problematic since it posits culture as something that can be identified, mapped, practiced, and preserved.⁵⁴

The aim of this article has been to show that *ache lhamo* has become the centre of hegemonic interests and cultural policies—a contested site. In cultural policy debate, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts asserts a Tibetan identity through the preservation of “how-it-once-was” prior to 1949 by constructing a unified Tibetan *ache lhamo* tradition in exile. But preservation itself can be seen to be a means of stifling its further development through the constant employment in official and public rhetoric of notions of cultural continuity and ‘authentic’ heritage, and may render it less attractive to future generations.⁵⁵

The Communist Party of China is subsuming the different ethnic minorities under the patronage of China and is thus trying to create a unified Chinese identity within its multi-ethnic nation-state. This is approached in part through developing the performing arts, such as *ache lhamo* which not only serves as an economic tool in terms of tourism but also fits the dominant narrative of Chinese civilization.

As for UNESCO, the state support of heritage preservation is taken as a good, in and of itself, thus ignoring the political question of why certain state authorities seek world heritage status for particular item(s). As Wade Davis wrote in his novel *Light at the Edge of the World*:

Cultural survival is not about preservation. Change itself does not destroy a culture, since all societies are constantly evolving. Indeed, a culture survives [...] when it has enough confidence in its past and enough say in its future to maintain its spirit and essence through all the changes it will inevitably undergo.⁵⁶

The different means of preservation and continuity face a variety of threats. On the one hand from things that are artificially recreated for fear of becoming extinct, and on the other hand of being endorsed as a mere attraction for tourists.

⁵⁴ See Ahmed 2006; Fitzgerald 2014.

⁵⁵ Pyburn 2007: 172.

⁵⁶ Davis 2007: 127.

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