


Looking Back at Tibetan Performing Arts Research by Tibetans in the People's Republic of China: Advocating for an Anthropological Approach

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 Although Tibetan performing arts have a long history and a rich tradition, academic research by Tibetans in the People's Republic of China (PRC) on this topic has started fairly recently, and the process is both complex and unusual. Contextual factors, such as personal life experience, education level, type of academic training received and language in which research is written, have influenced and shaped the researchers' approaches to Tibetan performing arts. These factors explain the current diversity of viewpoints within the field. At the very start, the perception and definition of what constitutes 'performing arts' is problematic, especially considering Tibet's vast geographical and cultural diversity. In this article, I will present a general overview of previous studies and will close with a discussion of future opportunities and challenges in Tibetan performing arts research today. I will advocate for an approach that has been neglected until recently by most scholars in the PRC, that is, an anthropological perspective.

1 – The Category of 'Performing Arts'

Tibet has probably always been a place rife with 'performances'. Whether or not these events belong to the category of 'art' is debatable, but they all contain the basic elements of 'performing arts': time, space, physical movement, agents and audiences. However, in the Tibetan language, there is no equivalent to the English 'performing arts', which covers each and every type of performance. Rather, all performing styles are relatively independent from each

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other. In addition, in this sparsely populated, vast territory, social and cultural differences are significant, so it is difficult to formulate a concept or definition large enough to encompass all forms of performance. We could translate 'performing arts' as '*khrab ston sgyu rtsal* (lit. performance-showing-art), for example, but such a formulation does not appear in classical texts. In colloquial Tibetan, *glu gar* refers to 'song and dance', but it excludes drama and other forms of spectacle. *Ltad mo* means 'performance' or 'show' (it is derived from *lta ba*, 'to look at'), but its use goes well beyond performing arts, the adjective *ltad mo chen po* (lit. 'big spectacle') referring to anything worth looking at. *Zlos gar* is used in written and classical Tibetan to translate the Indic category of 'drama' (Skt. *nāṭya*, *nāṭaka*), but its use in colloquial Tibetan is rather recent and, at least in Dbus gtsang, it differs from its literary meaning. In everyday spoken usage, it has come to designate a broad category of song and dance performances, of a modern style, and purely for entertainment. The colloquial usage thus excludes drama, for example *a lce lha mo*, in contrast with the literary usage that sometimes associated *zlos gar* and *a lce lhamo* explicitly. Terms such as *ltad mo* and *zlos gar* describe types of entertaining performances devoid of religious or ritual content, but most Tibetan traditional performing arts *do* include a religious dimension, for example '*cham* (the monastic dances), or various forms of ritual. It is culturally inappropriate to characterize these religious rituals as mere *ltad mo* or *zlos gar*.

Other concepts, such as *rtsed sna* (lit. 'various games') or *rtsed rigs* (lit. 'types of games'), are not specific to performances; rather, they refer to entertainment (*rtsed* is derived from *rtse ba*, 'to play', 'to have fun') and can even include sports. The term *rig rtsal* appears in pre-1950s Tibetan texts, but had a different meaning than the one currently in use. In its modern usage, the term is an approximate equivalent to the English 'performing arts'. *Rig rtsal* translates the Chinese *wenyi* (文艺), condensing two words, literature (*wenxue* 文学, T. *rtsom rig*) and art (*yishu* 艺术, T. *sgyu rtsal*). The original meaning of *rig rtsal* translated to 'level of knowledge'. Its modern use is rather artificial, limited to official denominations, such as in the 1980s journal *Tibetan Popular Arts* (*Bod kyi mang tshogs rig rtsal*) and having no currency in everyday life. In parts of Amdo, *glu len gar rtsed* (lit. 'singing and dancing') is used to refer to secular performing arts, but it is not known when the term was coined.

Traditional Tibetan arts could, in a way, be divided into two categories, sacred and secular. The former is related to religion, to the ultimate preoccupations of liberation from the cycle of rebirths and compassion, while the latter refers to this-worldly preoccupations, such as prosperity. However, a stark contrast does not hold in a

Tibetan context, since most 'secular' performing arts have religious components, and likewise, many 'religious' rituals attended by laypeople feature games and bawdy behaviour. I hold the view² that what runs through the whole range of traditional Tibetan performing arts, whether sacred or secular, are two important and culturally fundamental concepts difficult to render in English: *rten 'brel* (auspicious causal connections), which is sought after, and *rnam rtog* (suspicion of bad omens, a form of unrest in the mind), which is to be avoided. *Rten 'brel* is composed of two parts, *rten* (support) and *'brel* (linkage, reliance). The doublet, stemming from Indian philosophy (translating the Sanskrit *Pratītyasamutpāda*, dependent origination) implies that all phenomena are interconnected and interdependent. But the term is also widely used in laypeople's everyday conversations, where it connotes fortunate causation, or the notion that events unfold in a chain that brings auspiciousness. The term *rnam rtog* has the completely opposite connotation. Whereas *rten 'brel* is about attracting fortune, *rnam rtog* is about dispelling misfortune. They are based on Tibetan conceptions of luck (*phvya, g.yang*). *Rnam rtog* refers to a state of mind in which one fears adversity (illness, pollution, bad luck, etc.). A variety of rituals are deployed to avert the unfortunate events that are feared, for example *sgye dang sgye mo* rituals in western Tibet (Bian duo 1991), or some aspects of the *dgu tor 'cham* dances. These are very old Tibetan conceptions, maybe predating the advent of Buddhism, and, I believe they are the cultural matrix of performing arts in Tibet, the reason why Tibetans engage in performing activities. Of course, the social, cultural and religious characteristics of the successive historical periods, especially since Buddhism became the dominant cultural force in Tibet, have further enriched and improved the content and form of Tibetan performing arts.

2 – Performances Through Social and Artistic Changes

Over the course of their long history, Tibetan performing arts have consisted of various forms of singing and dancing presentations, verbal art performances, plays, and sacred or secular rituals, each with their own characteristics. Since the 1950s, Tibetan society has undergone tremendous changes, significantly affecting the material and organisational aspects of the traditional performing arts. Besides, state troupes have been established, where state narratives have become the main artistic theme to be depicted. For instance, *a lce lha*

² This is what I have argued in my book (Sangji Dongzhi, 2015, pp.205-209).

mo, or simply *lha mo*, the Tibetan traditional opera, transitioned from being a 'local' tradition deeply rooted in Tibetan culture to a 'national' tradition contextualized in the State narrative. With the professionalization of artistry in state-run troupes, performers have become state employees, sometimes national-level cadres with substantial monthly wages. Compared with the itinerant performing troupes such as the sKyor mo lung pa of the past, we see that performers have experienced radical changes. During the Mao era (1950s-end of 1970s), performances contained abundant references to revolutionary aesthetics in literature and art (Ch. *geming wenyi* 革命文艺), featuring 'class struggle' (Ch. *jieji douzheng* 阶级斗争) and 'contrast between the old and the new' (Ch. *xinjiu duibi* 新旧对比) prevailing over all other themes.

During the 10-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), revolutionary model plays became the standard. As a result, traditional *lha mo* was replaced with "The [Legend of the] Red Lantern" (*hong dengji* 红灯记, T. *lgang zhu dmar po'i gtam rgyud*), significantly altering the aesthetic features and content of Tibetan performance. The impact of this revolutionary play on the whole of the Tibetan performing arts is significant. All styles created during that period were modelled on its performance techniques and revolutionary aesthetics. Arm and hand gestures, facial expressions, eye movements, and the expansive use of linear stage space, have left a trace that is still patent in current performance styles in Tibet.

At the end of the 1970s, under the 'Reform and Opening-up' campaign, Tibetan performing arts underwent a new period of development, during which national policies tolerated more diversity in the performing arts. A few years later, the advent of a State-led market economy allowed for performing arts to establish close ties with commercial ventures. Furthermore, the widespread use of new media such as cassettes, CDs or television, meant that other types of performances—both from the PRC and from abroad—have had an unprecedented impact on traditional performing arts. The emergence and circulation of contemporary pop music is an obvious example of cultural production in an era marked jointly by economic reform, new technology, and openness to outside influences with Chinese lyrics sung to Tibetan melodies, or Tibetan lyrics sung to pop tunes. During that period, the vast Tibetan rural areas, whether agricultural or pastoral, maintained their relatively traditional way of life. This social and cultural context was conducive to the sustenance of traditional performing arts. However, with the launch of first the PRC (2005), then the UNESCO (2009) Intangible Cultural Heritage projects, these traditional performing arts—still relatively confined to

rural areas—have once again become the focal point of nation-wide cultural policies. The considerable input of human (professional), material and financial resources, along with high visibility in the media, have suddenly made ‘intangible cultural heritage’ (Ch. *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物质文化遗产, Tib. *mngon med rig gnas shul shags*) a popular concept. As the core of the project, traditional performing arts face both opportunities and challenges in this new era.

3 – Overview of the Studies on Tibetan Performing Arts

Despite a long history of performing arts within Tibet, the academic study of performance by Tibetan scholars has started only recently. From a traditional scholarly point of view, in the Buddhist-based classification of ‘Sciences’ into five ‘Five Major Sciences’ (*rig gnas che ba lnga*) and ‘Five Minor Sciences’ (*rig gnas chung ba lnga*), one finds *zlos gar* (drama) among the latter, but this term is merely a conceptual translation from Indic sources, with no practical use among performers. In Tibetan history, very few works have offered an analysis of music. A relatively complete summary of theories about music started with Sa skya paṇḍita Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan (1182-1251)’s *Treatise on Music (rol mo’i bstan bcos)*. This opus discussed the creation, performance and the aesthetic standards of traditional Tibetan music, outlining, among other elements, melodies, lyrics and the rules for combining melodies and lyrics. In the 17th century, Regent (*sde srid*) Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653-1705), in his *Feast for the eyes, the mind and the ears (Mig yid rna ba’i dga’ ston)*, documented the categorization, ancient musical notations, history and evolution of *gar*, a ceremonial style performed by a troupe of young boys for the Dalai Lamas. This work has become an indispensable resource on the formation and development of *gar* music. Besides these two important texts, many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, from various sects, have also developed their specific ‘*cham yig*’, detailed ritual texts that include descriptions of monastic dance, including specific instructions for dance steps and body movements. Despite the plethora of literary production of Tibetans on other topics, performing arts have never been considered a worthwhile research subject in traditional Tibetan knowledge production.

One could argue that systematic interest in and research about Tibetan performing arts started in China in the 1930s. There have been three key periods of academic production. First, from the 1930s until the mid-1960s, the Gesar epic, *a lce lha mo* plays and music were the objects of publications in newspapers, magazines and other

written media. In the 1940s, magazines, such as *Frontier Affairs* (*bianzheng gonglun* 边政公论) and *Monthly Guide to Kham* (*kangdao yuekan* 康导月刊), included articles and photographic reports about the epic and drama plays from Kham, Eastern Tibet. Beginning in the late 1950s, several Chinese journalists and writers started conducting preliminary research on Tibetan traditional drama, songs and dances: noteworthy are Mao Jizeng (1959, 1960), Cai Donghua (1960), Yin Falu (1962), Tong Jinhua (1963) and Wang Yao (1963). Publications of this period were mostly produced by journalists and writers who could not speak Tibetan, who coined enduring Chinese terms for words belonging to the realm of Tibetan performing arts: 囊玛 (*nang ma*), 堆谐 (*duixie*, for *stod gzhas*), 朗萨姑娘 (*langsa guniang*, for *snang sa 'od-'bum*, the title and heroin of a *lha mo* play). The term 藏剧 (*zangju*), for Tibetan opera, was also coined then.³ The state-run Tibet Song and Dance Troupe (Ch. 西藏歌舞团, T. *bod ljongs glu gar tshogs pa*) was established at the beginning of 1960 in Lhasa. The troupe was divided into three sections, namely 'song and dance' (*glu gar*), 'drama' (*gtam brjod zlos gar*) and 'Tibetan Opera' (*lha mo*), which soon became independent work units. A number of party and government cadres, as well as new workers in 'literature and art' (Ch. *wenyi*), were dispatched to collaborate with the Troupe. Among them were Huang Wenhuan, Hu Jinan, Li Caisheng, Wu Zhaofeng, You Qingshu and Tang Jiafu. The troupe also included a group of Tibetan folk artists and Party-trained ethnic literature and art cadres.

After the founding of the Tibet Opera Troupe (Ch. *zangju tuan* 藏剧团, T. *bod ljongs lha mo tshogs pa*) around 1960, Bkra shis don grub, performer and former director of the famous pre-1950s Skyor mo lung troupe, became the director of the new Tibet Opera Troupe and Huang Wenhuan the deputy director. At the end of that same year, Bkra shis don grub was invited to participate in the Third Session of the National Congress of the Chinese Literature and Art Workers (Ch. *zhongguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe disanci daibiao dahui* 中国文学艺术工作者第三次代表大会), where he was elected member of the Standing Committee of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, as well as director of the China Theatre Association. He made a speech entitled "The Arrival of the Sunny Days" (风和日暖花重开). At the same Congress, the dancer Ngag dbang mkhas btsun made a

³ Note that, since the very end of the 1980s, *zangxi* (藏戏) has become the standard Chinese translation for all traditions of Tibetan opera in the PRC, and that *zangju* is infrequently used, except in the official name of the TAR Opera Troupe (*zangju tuan*).

speech entitled “Yesterday’s Slaves, Today’s Masters” (昔日的奴隶-今日的主人), marking the beginning of a new era for the content of Tibetan performing arts. From the mid-1960s until the early 1980s, hardly any research article was published on the Tibetan performing arts, due, among other factors, to the regulations on academic and artistic production enforced during the Cultural Revolution.

The most important period for studies of Tibetan performing arts began in the early 1980s. This period marked the beginning of articles and analyses put forward by Tibetan scholars, bilingual publications in both Tibetan and Chinese, and the emergence of an ‘insider’s perspective’, which differed both in its research angles and approaches from the previous ‘outsider’s perspective’. There has been cooperation and communication among researchers from perspectives, as well as disagreement, negotiation and mutual correction.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the contribution of Tibetan scholars was very significant. Despite their lack of academic training, they had a very solid foundation in literary Tibetan, had grown up in traditional Tibetan society before the 1950s, had been immersed in traditional culture and had accumulated experience and practice in that environment. Not only were these scholars committed to fairly representing the traditions that they knew,, more importantly, as ‘insiders’, they were familiar with those performing arts—they had even, to some extent, participated as performers in pre-1950s Tibet. Zhol khang bsod nams dar rgyas, for example, had played with the *nang ma’i skyid sdug*. As such, their voices were both authoritative and able to counter some of the inaccurate views expressed in the 1950s and 1960s by non-Tibetan scholars.

Taking advantage of this new historical period, with its rising interest and focus on traditional Tibetan performing arts, those Tibetan scholars resolutely decided to compose numerous articles covering the historical origin, evolution and artistic features of their traditional arts. For instance, someone like Blo bzang rdo rje (1923-1990) in his 1982 article⁴, corrected the view expressed by scholars since the 1960s, that a *lce lha mo* originated in monastic ‘*cham*. Another article by the same author (1988-a) thoroughly discussed the categories and symbolic meanings of the costumes and masks used in

⁴ For ease of reading, I have shortened the references in the text to a mention of the author and year of publication. The full references, including their translation in English, are found in the bibliography. When a Tibetan author has published in Tibetan, I have left his name transliterated in Wylie, followed by the year. When a Tibetan author has published in Chinese, I have indicated his name first in pinyin, then in Wylie transliteration in square brackets. I have separated publications in Tibetan and Chinese in the bibliography.

lha-mo. He also examined in detail (1988-b) the origin, development and evolution of the traditional Yoghurt Festival (*zho ston*) in Lhasa, featuring numerous *lha mo* performances, and its relation to Tibetan performing arts.

Zhol khang bsod nams dar rgyas (1922-2007) published the first articles of that period on *stod gzhas* and *nang ma* song styles, more precisely on the famed musician of the pre-1950s *nang ma'i skyid sdug* (nangma association) A jo rnam gyal who (1980); on the name and historical development of *stod gzhas* and *nang ma*, and their main artistic features (1984); or on the classification of melodies (1986). His most comprehensive work is his 1992 book titled *The Pure Traditions of Songs and Dances (Glu gar tshangs pa'i chabs rgyun)*, and he continued publishing research articles until 2003. Spen rdor (1932-2016) published an article (1986), in which he not only refuted and corrected earlier views on the origin of *lha mo* expressed by Tong Jinhua, Liu Zhiqun, Wang Yao, and He Qansan, but he also presented his own views on the topic. Hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar (1919-1995) also published two noteworthy articles related to *lha mo*, on the genealogy of the plays and on the famed singer Mig dmar rgyal mtshan (see Hor khang 1989, 1991).

The aforementioned scholars are unique in the history of research on the Tibetan performing arts. Based on their personal knowledge and practice of those arts, they discussed in detail, in Tibetan language, the Tibetan performing arts' history, evolution and artistic features, positioning themselves within the Tibetan performing arts' own historical, cultural and linguistic context. Many of these articles were simultaneously translated into Chinese, providing basic academic information for later scholars writing in Tibetan and Chinese.

In 1986, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Bureau of Cultural Affairs (Ch. *wenhua ting* 文化厅) established the Tibet Ethnic Arts Research Institute (Ch. *xizang minzu yishu yanjiu suo* 西藏民族艺术研究所, T. *bod ljongs mi rigs sgyu rtsal zhib 'jug khang*), which is my work unit. In the same year, the Institute founded an academic journal in Chinese, initially intended for internal circulation, *Trends in arts research (yiyán dòngtài* 艺研动态). It later became the main research journal on performing arts in Tibet. Six issues were published between 1986 and 1988. From 1988 onwards, the Tibetan Arts Research Institute has been publishing the academic journal *Tibetan Arts Studies*. Its Chinese version (*xizang yishu yanjiu* 西藏艺术研究) is published quarterly, and its Tibetan version (*Bod ljongs sgyu rtsal zhib 'jug*) is published biannually. The articles are not translations: different articles appear in the Tibetan and in the Chinese journals.

The launch of these two journals has provided an important platform for Tibetan performing arts studies. To this day, these two have remained the only academic publications in the PRC dedicated to research on the Tibetan arts.

The Tibet Arts Research Institute was also founded to assist with the mission to compile the seven Anthologies⁵ that would come to be integrated in the massive compilation of the “Ten Great Works in Literature and Art” (*shida wenyi jicheng zhishu* 十大文艺集成志书).⁶ This has been a key national-level research project, which extended over a period of over ten years in other regions and over thirty years in Tibet. The Institute was thus divided and organized into music, dance, and drama editing sections, to implement the mission. Their task was to produce seven Anthologies devoted to folk songs, narrative singing (music), narrative singing (monograph), opera (music), opera (monograph), instrumental music and dance.⁷ This national project, along with the additional research work undertaken and achieved by the Tibetan Arts Research Institute, not only opened the door for the field of Tibetan performing arts studies, but also prompted the training of a number of scholars, whose research results have had an enormous influence on later scholarship. During that same period (1986-mid-1990s), other Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties outside the TAR have also implemented the same survey program in their respective jurisdictions, allowing researchers from different regions to communicate, exchange, and connect in their study of Tibetan performing arts. The editorial staff of the Tibetan Arts Research Institute also visited, during that period, all the townships and counties of the TAR to survey, collect, and organize materials related to the traditional performing arts. This led to the publication of several research articles during this period, by authors such as Dgra lha zla ba bzang po in Tibetan (1991-a, 1991-b) and, in Chinese, Gequ [Skal bzang chos rgyal] (1992), Bianduo [Spen rdor] (1993), Danzeng ciren [Bstan 'dzin tshe ring] (1988, 1990, 1991, 1996), who also dedicated some of his writing to traditional dances from different regions of Tibet (2014). Other researchers of that time include Wang Xihua (1943-2015) [Yon tshong Bsod nams tshe ring] (1987, 1993, 1996, 2005) and Suo ci (1945-2014) [Bsod tshe] (2006).

⁵ Beginning in 1981, each province, autonomous region and municipality of China had to compile its own volume of each one of these Anthologies.

⁶ For an analysis of the significance of these ten Anthologies across the whole of China, see Jones (2003).

⁷ These are the standard English translations of the topics of these Chinese Anthologies (see Jones, 2003, p. 292). For the remaining three Anthologies that completed the Ten Volumes, see *infra*, the compilation done by the Tibet Federation of Literature and Art.

Scholars from other work units (than the TAR Ethnic Arts Research Institute) also published important works, such as Tu ga [Thub dga'] & Li Guangde (1988), Tu ga [Thub dga'] (1990), dKon lo (1990), Da er ji [Dar rgyas] (1999), Pad ma rdo rje (1994), A lo Rin chen rgyal & rdo rje thar (1994, 1995), and Suo dai [Bsod te] (1995), to name but a few.

This was an active period for Tibetan performing arts studies, as the "Compilation of the Ten Great Works in Literature and Art" laid the ground for relatively comprehensive and in-depth field research. Many researchers have had access to firsthand materials that allowed them to write numerous introductory articles. In hindsight, one can only lament that these articles were mere introductions. Unlike those researchers active in the 1980s, researchers of this period received their artistic education, not in traditional Tibet, but in post-1950s music or dance academies in the PRC. This shaped their experience and understanding of artistic expression in Tibet. As such, they brought their personal visions and standards to bear upon their research. Most of them were not trained scholars: their level of writing was average, they were never trained in fieldwork techniques, and had to train themselves in all sorts of methods very quickly and simultaneously. Furthermore, the compilation of the "Ten Great Works of Literature and Art" imposed all across China a unified framework and categorization of the various art forms that were sometimes remote from local understandings.

During this period, the vast majority of Tibetan scholars started writing in Chinese, leading to the emergence of an abundant number of Chinese terms translated from Tibetan. Besides, starting from 1983, the Tibet Federation of Literature and Art (Ch. *xizang wen[xue yishu] jie lian [he hui]* 西藏自治区文学艺术界联合会) was assigned the task of compiling and organising the primary data for the remaining three Anthologies of the "Ten Great Works in Literature and Art": the volumes dedicated to folk stories, ballads, and proverbs. These three topics are related to performing arts, but in terms of research, they were attributed to a different work unit. As a consequence, to certain degree, the attention of those compilers has shifted to folk literature, and consequently, performance per se has lacked sufficient focus.

The Gesar Epic is the most representative piece of Tibetan oral performing arts. As such, it has been actively studied both at home and abroad. In the 1930s, Ren Naiqiang published "Records of Strange Kham" (*xikang guiyi lu* 西康诡异录) in *Sichuan Daily*, in which he refers to the epic as "The Barbarians' Three Kingdoms" (*man san guo* 蛮三国). Later, he further examined questions such as the origin of the Gesar Epic. After the 1950s, cultural offices in Qinghai province and other areas started surveying and collecting field data about the

epic, including analyses of its origin and geographical spreading, content, versions, number of episodes, etc.

The 1980s saw the peak of the Chinese translations of the Gesar Epic. Wang Yiyan translated a dozen episodes of the epic. In 1986, China's first study on the epic was published by Jianbian jiacuo ['Jam 'phel rgya mtsho] (1986). In the 1990s, studies on the epic reached further development, with more publications by Jianbian Jiacuo ['Jam 'phel rgya mtsho] (1994), Yang Enhong (1995), Spyod pa don grub and chab 'gag rta mgrin (1994), among others. Gesar studies have become a field of their own in the PRC, renamed 'Gesarology' (Ch. *gexue* 格学) in English-language pamphlets produced by various research institutes. An examination of the activities and evolution of these institutes reveals that most of their research has focused either on the compilation, analysis and interpretation of the literary aspect of the epic, or on the personal histories of Gesar bards. Especially popular is research on bards who recite the epic in an 'inspired' state, when the gods have descended upon them (*babs sgrung*). Nevertheless, these researchers have devoted little attention to the performative dimension of the epic as a storytelling event.

After 2000, academic studies on Tibetan performing arts in Tibet and China have witnessed more changes. First, scholars, that is, professors, as well as M.A. and Ph.D. graduates from different fields and academic institutions, replaced the former generation of researchers trained in Music or Dance Academies or Conservatories. Being academics trained in Chinese universities, the new generation of scholars brings a different lens, sets of assumptions, and diverging opinions about Tibetan performing arts. Most of these scholars, but far from all of them, are trained in arts departments of various universities. They try to expand the scope of research, away from a narrow focus on the intricacies of technical execution (in music or dance), and incorporate broader historical or cultural notions in their writing. Among these scholars, we can cite Gengdeng peijie [Dge 'dun 'phel rgyas](2003), Jue ga [Jo dkar](2005, 2007), Sangji dongzhi [Sang rgyas don grub] (2006, 2012), Jiayong qunpei ['Jam dbyang chos 'phel](2006, 2007), Dka' thub rgyal (2006), Wandai ji [Ban te skyid](2006), Geng deng pei jie [Dge 'dun 'phel rgyas](2009), Phun tshogs yon tan (2009), Qiangba qujie & Ciren langjie [Byang pa chos rgyal & Tshe ring nam rgyal](2011), Jia la [Rgyal lags](2012), Sgrol ma tshe ring (2012), Gesang qujie [Skal bzang chos rgyal](2015), Wanma jia & Jimao cuo [Pad ma rgyal & Lcags mo mtsho](2015), Cai bei [Tshe sbe] (2016) and Li Na [Klu mo mtsho] (2016) among others.

This current period, characterised by the input of professors and graduates from arts and other academic departments, has yielded more diversity, comprehensiveness and depth, in terms of both

research angle and scope, compared with the work of the 1990s, which was more introductory in nature. This is the first generation of 'academic' publications, but as far as academic discipline is concerned, these works hail predominantly from Art departments. Only a handful of this third generation of researchers come from non-artistic academic disciplines such as Tibetology or Anthropology. Their publications are mostly in Chinese, and work in Tibetan accounts for a small minority of the field.

4 – Opportunities and Challenges

The examination of the development of Tibetan performing arts studies shows that we are witnessing a special historical process. First, when the research started, it was a period during which the Tibetan social system was undergoing tremendous change. The social and cultural backgrounds of many performing artists were changing, and the writers or researchers were initially non-Tibetans. The fact that the studies of this period were conducted by 'others'—non-Tibetan authors—has made this era unique.

Second, from 1964 until the beginning of the 1980s, because of historical factors such as the Cultural Revolution, researchers lost the opportunity to physically access places where such arts had been performed before the onset of Maoism.

Third, since 1980, Tibetan scholars have started writing about Tibetan performing arts, an interest that was nearly absent in pre-1950s Tibet. Despite their knowledge and embodied experience of traditional Tibetan society and art, the impact of their work has unfortunately remained limited due to factors such as their lack of rigorous academic training, the small number of their publications and the fact that they wrote in Tibetan language, in a context of growing literacy in Chinese. As such, notwithstanding the value of their research—which ought to become the basis of the Tibetan performing arts studies on the whole—their work has not been able to draw sufficient attention from the later generations.

Fourth, after 1986, with the establishment of the "Compilation of Top Ten literary and artistic works" project and the establishment of the Tibetan Arts Research Institute, studies on Tibetan performing arts have shifted towards the categorization of different types of artistic traditions and the research on the arts themselves. Researchers during this period were mostly actors, players and teachers, who had received less academic than technical training. For instance, the Tibet volume of *The Anthology of China's Ethnic Folk Dances* (*Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng xizang juan* 中国民族民

间舞蹈集成—西藏卷) features very few cultural and historical explanations of the featured dances, but includes numerous drawings of specific dance postures. It is fair to say that apart from the researchers who drew these sketches themselves, the average academic reader can barely comprehend the movements, and despairs to know more about the social, cultural and linguistic contexts of these performances. As a matter of fact, research done by those scholars did yield considerable field data, but the published results unfortunately lack constructive content and potential for analytic discussion.

Fifth, since 2000, the researchers' profiles have shifted to being professional academics, professors and students from colleges and universities, mostly trained in Chinese. Comparatively speaking, while they have better academic training and general knowledge of the subject, the background of the vast majority of these researchers is anchored in music, dance, or drama, due to their specific training. As each discipline has its own priorities, there has been little interdisciplinary communication or cooperation. Disciplines other than music, dance and drama have considered performing arts studies irrelevant to their own fields.

Sixth, currently, the main language of publication in the field of Tibetan performance studies is Chinese. This writing practice entails the immediate translation of Tibetan concepts into Chinese, bypassing a useful discussion of the philological and historical dimensions of the Tibetan terminology. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, expressing oneself directly in Chinese entails that the writer uses Chinese concepts and categories to explain Tibetan realities on the ground. This can lead to confusion, especially for the younger Tibetan generations who may have never witnessed those traditions firsthand. If we add to this the widespread practice in China to copy convenient summaries that are readily available (on the web, for instance), we find ourselves in a situation where simplistic ideas and categories are amplified on a very large scale, acquiring through popularity a form of solidity that is difficult to debunk. In *lha mo* research, for example, we read everywhere that *lha mo* is a living fossil (Ch. *huohuashi* 活化石), that there are eight main librettos, that the purported founder Thang stong rgyal po trained seven 'sisters' (*spun bdun*, why female?), that there are two main traditions called the 'white mask' tradition' and the 'blue mask' tradition, or that drama was secularized at the time of the 5th Dalai Lama. These assertions need careful revising.

Seventh, most studies on Tibetan performing arts tend to focus on 'traditional' performing arts, with little attention paid to contemporary genres, such as pop music, current dance shows or all

the creativity allowed by electronic media. There is not much history in researching modern performances in PRC universities, and, for the ethnic minority (Ch. *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) regions, 'traditions' are more congruent with the State ideology and practice than modern expressions.

These are some of the most prominent problems faced in the study of Tibetan performing arts in the PRC. Are there ways to overcome these problems? Some inspiration may come from research experiences of Western scholars, including Tibetan scholars trained in the West. Western scholars started research on the Tibetan performing arts at the beginning of the 20th century, and so far they have focused on textual translation (of *lha mo* libretti, e.g.), monastic music, religious poetic 'songs' (*mgur glu*), 'cham, the Gesar epic, oral performances of storytelling, contemporary pop music, the performative aspects of a *lce lha mo*, and so on.⁸ These studies stem from Buddhist studies, Tibetology, Anthropology, Comparative Literature, Ethnomusicology, and Ethnochoreology, among others. The diversity in both their research scope and professional fields has allowed Western scholars to focus on the interconnection between performing arts and history, culture, society, religion, politics and economics. On the whole, their approach has tried to understand the performing arts *in context*, rather than *out of context*. This approach is what Tibetan performing arts studies in Tibet have lost or are currently lacking.

After 30 years, the compilation of the "Ten Great Works in Literature and Art" in Tibet finally came to an end in 2016. Since 2005, the Chinese government has initiated work on heritage and the protection of oral and intangible cultural heritage, investing abundant financial resources and manpower in this project. Traditional performing arts have once again become the focus of media and academia. At this historical juncture, where opportunities and challenges intersect, where should Tibetan performing arts studies go? I think taking an anthropological approach may be a good option.

Since the 1950s, academic disciplines such as Ethnomusicology and the Anthropology of music have emerged as a response to previous musical research that, under the influence of the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the 19th century, took music and dance as two distinct research subjects. Those previous studies had moreover focused solely on European classic music and as such had completely

⁸ See Henrion-Dourcy's « Bibliographic Introduction (1986-2017) » to this issue for a comprehensive survey of research produced in Western languages in these various fields over the last 30 years.

neglected folk music. In 1964, Alan Merriam, member of the Society for Ethnomusicology, published *The Anthropology of Music* (Merriam 1964), where he argued that the study of music must have an anthropological basis, and that ethnomusicologists should not only study sound, but also the broad background within which sounds are found. In 1977, Anya Peterson Royce published *The Anthropology of Dance*. Following some of Merriam's ideas and methods, she argued that studies on dance should not be limited to movement, but should also enquire on cultural concepts related to human motion, which requires long-term field research.

Since the 1980s, the focus of anthropology has seen a significant change, namely from structure to process, from technique to performance, from the logic of the social and cultural systems to the dialectical relationship between social and cultural processes (Turner, 1988). It is this dialectical relationship that I am hoping to see emerge in Tibetan performance studies. Building on Singer Milton's (1972) notion of 'cultural performance', Turner emphasized the 'reflexivity' of performance, that is, the relationship between everyday social processes and cultural displays, which is dialectical and speculative (Turner 1979).

Turner challenged Western society's perception that arts are superfluous, useless or meaningless, set apart from 'more significant' social processes. Instead, he stressed that, in order to truly understand the artistic work of a given time, it is necessary to contextualize it in the society, as well as in the culture and beliefs of the time and people. Turner has not only provided a novel vision to scholars studying drama, but has also opened a new area for anthropologists to examine social and cultural life.

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