


Lyrics Matter: Reconsidering Agency in the Discourses and Practices of Tibetan Pop Music among Tibetan Refugees¹

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1. Introduction

n this paper, I aim to reflect on the social and cultural changes in Tibetan refugee societies in India and Nepal by focusing on the practices of singers and audiences. Special attention will be devoted to the lyrics of Tibetan pop music prevalent in Dharamsala and Kathmandu. I shall focus on the current situation and countermeasures against the declining Tibetan literacy in refugee societies. For a long time, there has been a pressure within refugee societies to preserve Tibetan culture and language. In this paper, I will consider how Tibetan pop engages with lyrics to promote that preservation. I will also look into how new music media play a crucial role in those changes.

Recently, among Tibetan refugees, audiences have exerted an influence on pop song creation. Singers create products that meet with the demands of the audience in order to both earn a living and gain fame. What I aim to look at in this paper is the unexpected consequences of the singers' creativity, more precisely their agency.² Moreover, the new refugees' insistence on the cultural authenticity of Tibetan pop lyrics can also be considered as a way to exercise agency. These are connected and they form the current context of Tibetan pop. This context is of course not unrelated to the problems faced by refugee societies in Dharamsala and Kathmandu and agency is

¹ This paper is a revised and enlarged version of an article originally published in Japanese in the *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology* entitled "Katachi wo kaeteiku Kashi: Tibet Nanmin Shakai niokeru Tibetan Pop no Sakushi Jissen wo Jireini" (The Changing form of Lyrics: A Case Study of Lyric Writing Practice by Tibetan Pop Singers in Tibetan Refugee Society, Vol. 40, no. 2, 2015, pp. 311-347). I am thankful to the National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka) for granting permission to reprint the original paper and allowing the current additions.

² The term "agency" refers to "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2010: 28), given to subjects and groups.

certainly not a sufficient concept to account for all that they are going through.

2. Previous studies

Tibetan pop is influenced by Western pop genres, Indian film music, and Nepalese folk songs and pop music, particularly since the 1980s. Normally the songs classified as 'Tibetan pop' are sung in Tibetan. However, sometimes songs sung by non-Tibetans are also considered as Tibetan pop and conversely, Tibetan pop does not always include songs sung by Tibetans. The lyrics of Tibetan songs are not always in Tibetan. Hindi, Nepali, English and Chinese are used, depending on the context. Making Tibetan pop pertains to a larger context, the preservation of Tibetan culture in exile, sometimes conceptually referred to as the "Shangri-la-ization of pre-1950s Tibet" (Swank 2014, p. 5). Keila Diehl is a well-known researcher on Tibetan pop and the discussion in this paper heavily relies on her analysis. She was involved in creating Tibetan pop herself. She and other researchers have pointed out that the preservation of Tibetan language has been one of the most pressing issues in exile (Ardley 2002; Diehl 2004; Stirr 2008; Swank 2014). This affects the overall daily work of Tibetan refugees and more specifically, within the scope of this paper, the production of music. This manifests, for example, in being conspicuously careful about grammatical terms, pronunciation, and accuracy in the use of Tibetan language.

However, the context of Tibetan pop between the 1990s, when Diehl conducted her research, and the present situation has changed tremendously. The number of singers who engage in Tibetan pop has been increasing since the 2000s, whereas socially accepted singers were less than ten in the 1990s. The tastes of the audience have been changing and technical developments have supported and contributed significantly to the development of Tibetan pop in recent years. Singers have started facing the competition to attract the audience and become more popular than others in the small market in refugee societies. As a result, Tibetan pop has changed from a seller's to a buyer's market, as the singers need to meet their audience's demands to be accepted. The influence of the audience on the singers is much greater than in the 1990s, when the singers relatively freely conducted their musical activities.

The lyrical content of pop songs has also undergone a transition since the work Diehl conducted in the 1990s. Diehl presented "the freedom struggle, rigorous Red China-bashing, and nostalgic recalling of the solemn past (the golden era of the three ancestral

spiritual kings)" as the thematic foundation of the lyrics of Tibetan pop and she identified Tibetan pop as "modern Tibetan songs deriving their inspiration from the patriotic sentiments of Tibetans [which], in turn, often confirm and augment those same sentiments in performance, thereby strengthening the community's shared memories and goals" (Diehl 2002, p. 222). Writing in the late 2000s, Stirr adds nuance to Diehl's argument, but continues to focus her attention on Tibetan pop's ability to express nationalism. She analyzed 'Blue Lake' (*mtsho sngon po*), a song that skillfully expressed nationalism for those both in the homeland and in exile, discussed the diversity of interpretations of the lyrics and images, as well as how Tibetan pop music relates to Tibetan national identity.³ The diversity of interpretations does not impair Tibetan unity and eventually it contributes to the creation of self-reflections concerning identity among people (Stirr 2008). Stirr's argument, focusing on how interpretations are produced, or even constrained, in context, referring to the diversity of open interpretations, adopts a stimulating viewpoint in the progress of Tibetan pop research.

However, as I will try to show in this paper, the current situation surrounding the production and consumption of Tibetan pop does not necessarily entail focusing the discussion on the nationalistic features of the lyrics. For instance, the framework of interpretation diversity, as proposed by Stirr, does not take into account the thoughts of the singers who aim to contribute to the Tibetan refugee society, how they are received by the audience and how they reflect the social situation. Listening to Tibetan pop is not necessarily reproducing Tibetan identity in a progressive manner. First, while the social meaning of music is defined by the context in which people live, there are as many interpretations as the number of listeners and as the same person repeatedly listens to the same song, different interpretations can emerge. Interpretation is constantly exposed to the possibility of change. In this process, the meaning of music and lyrics is constrained by the context of the music industry and changes in technology. The position and meaning of music in society go far beyond the singers' beliefs or lyrics. This point of course also applies to research in other fields. In popular music studies or even in anthropology, there is a tendency to associate musical activities with the creation and maintenance of identity, or with resistance to hegemony (e.g. Peggie 2006; Biddle and Knight 2007). However,

³ "Acknowledging the existence of multiple perspectives may not dissolve the fantasy of a unifying, essential Tibetan identity or replace it with anything 'better', but it may lead someone to ask the question: what work does this identity do, and why is it important?" (Stirr 2008, p. 329) .

making, and listening to music involves unintended events, beyond an intended oppositional stance given to music by singers. This paper will try to account for this underresearched dimension.

Furthermore, as the discussion here focuses on the practice of lyric writing, let us quickly review previous studies discussing the pros and cons of lyric analysis. Frith (1988) was critical about the method of popular music studies, which he found too biased towards the analysis of lyrics. Many studies are critical of research centered on lyric analysis (e.g. Moore 2004; Longhurst 2007; Brabazon 2012). In fact, popular music studies with strong ties to cultural studies tended to overvalue lyric analysis and to overinterpret the meaning of those lyrics as political resistance. As a result, analyzing the complex environment of popular music consisting of music producers, audiences and industries has been disregarded (Longhurst 2007, p. 158). Keeping in mind the recent discussions that have refined Frith's criticism of lyric-centric analysis and shifting the focus over to the singers and the audience, this paper may appear to be a sort of regression. However, the lyric analysis in this paper differs greatly from lyric analysis of older research. The latter interprets the meaning from what is written, and considers it as a 'text' suitable for reading. It talks about power and resistance, but in many cases, the production practices of popular music are disregarded; it in fact positions the lyrics outside the social web of power relationships. In this paper, I will attempt to analyze the practice of writing lyrics by focusing on the transformation of lyrics writing practices and I will try to position Tibetan pop within social power relations and worldwide technological innovations. I would like to propose in this paper that lyric analysis is an effective tool in studying the relationship between popular music and society, or the context of popular music.

In addition, in order to clarify the argument, I will also need to look at how popular music studies looks at the audience. Since the 1990s, the audience has been positively positioned as an entity that reads and consumes texts of popular music creatively and actively, especially since the spread of electronic media (Thornton 1995; Cavicci 1998; DeNora 2000; Kusek & Leonhard 2005; Longhurst 2007; Brabazon 2012). The role played by the audience is definitely important in the production of popular music. Besides, as discussed by Finnegan (1989) and Cohen (1992), musicians not only produce music but also consume it. Like the audience, they are positioned in a reciprocating movement of consuming other artists' work. Therefore, it is clear that viewing the singers' role as merely offering music to the audience in a one-sided manner does not hold: the audience is

producing something in return, and creative activities are enmeshed in a complex web of relations.

In this way, the trend of praising active and creative audiences, who favor experimental and collaborative music, shows certain affinities with the discussion about agency in cultural anthropology (e.g. Ahearn 2010; Madhok 2013; Ortner 2006), because this trend emphasises action in the social and cultural dynamics. Although this paper largely follows the above-mentioned studies, I think that we need to reconsider the validity of praising the audience and musicians, without a deeper consideration. If popular music is created in the constraints of its context, the practice of consuming is also context-dependent and reflexive. As will be described later, from the mid 2000s, when technological innovation brought a great blow to the singers, the audience of Tibetan pop came to influence the lyrics written by the singers. Also, the singers want to secure an audience by consciously creating lyrics that the audience desires. This is linked to changes in the cultural context of the refugee society. In the case of Tibetan refugees, we cannot make this simple commendation of audiences, because the transformations in lyric-writing has further heightened the differences and divisions between the 'new refugees' (*gsar 'byor*) and the 'settled' or old refugees (*gzhis chags*). Some singers play a major role in the transformation of these writing practices, and their comments can be negative. So we need to position them back into their social situation to make sense of their opinions and practices. But first, I will outline the major characteristics of Tibetan refugee society.

3. *An outline of Tibetan refugee society*

As a result of the 14th Dalai Lama's exile to India in 1959, Tibetans from the three regions (*chol kha gsum*), consisting of Amdo (*a mdo*), Kham (*kham*s) and Ü-Tsang (*dbus gtsang*) fled as refugees to countries neighboring Tibet, such as India, Nepal, Bhutan and later to various Western countries. According to the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA 2010), as of 2010, there are 127,935 Tibetan refugees, among whom 94,203, the majority, reside in India, followed by 13,514 people living in Nepal. Moreover, since 1992, the number of migrants to the United States has increased and now 9,135 people live there, in what has become the third largest Tibetan settlement after Nepal. The cultural environment of Tibetan refugees has thus greatly changed.

Since the exile of Dalai Lama, the CTA, setting him as the leader, has ascribed to Tibetan refugees the role of embodying Tibetan culture before the 1950s. There was a provision that the culture of the

refugee society was authentic and Tibetan culture was destroyed under China's rule. The pre-1950s Tibetan culture in refugee society has been positioned as the root of Tibetan nationalism and identity (Calkowski 1997; Diehl 2002; Dreyfus 2002; Lau 2009 etc.). Buddhism has been established as the root of Tibetan culture protected by the refugee society and until now Tibetan culture has been protected and transmitted with support from overseas. At the same time, the Tibetan refugees have actively adapted to perceived images of themselves from Western countries. In other words, for a good identity formation as Tibetan refugees, the Western gaze, good or bad, was indispensable (Anand 2007; Moran 2004; Prost 2006).

However, exile nationalism based on culture brought about an unexpected side-effect. People in the refugee societies explicitly downplayed the culture presented by 'new refugees', who came from Tibet after the 1990s, as 'sinicized Tibetan culture' (Diehl 2002; Yamamoto 2013). These policies have become a major factor of conflict between new and settled refugees.

Since it values authentic Tibetan culture from before the 1950s, social and cultural transformation should be avoided as much as possible in refugee society. To accomplish this objective, each Tibetan refugee is supposed to be responsible for preserving and spreading the 'true' Tibetan culture, asserting that individual actions are directly linked to social situations. The ideal is to engage in a career that contributes to the CTA and Tibetan refugee society; occupations such as CTA staff and teachers are socially valued. Refusing change in the name of tradition has created an ideology that criticizes young people's new activities and denies them legitimacy (Diehl 2002; Harris 1999; Lau 2009). Although this rigid discourse has tended to decline in recent years, people's creative activities were largely restricted until the 1990s. However, viewpoints linking individual practices and social consequences in a causal relationship still have great power, as far as I have heard in my research.

As mentioned earlier, language preservation was one of the focal points of preserving pre-1950s Tibetan culture. As can be seen from the CTA's assertion that the educational opportunities are deprived in the homeland (Tibet) and that Tibetan language is being suppressed, the exile linguistic consciousness is extremely strong and preserving the language properly has been said to be a political act (Diehl 2002). For instance, it encourages people to speak Tibetan

⁴ See, for example, Swank's (2014) discussion on the discourse of "contribution" to the refugee society (*shapshu/ zhabs zhu*) and that of "enjoyment of personal leisure" (*kyamkyam/ kyam kyam*).

correctly in both grammar and pronunciation, and if one speaks odd Tibetan, that person will be ridiculed behind their back.⁵

However, despite the atmosphere and high demands placed on the Tibetan language among refugees, schools emphasize modern science and English education to adapt to the times. They use English as a medium in many classes, for example in history. As young people “frequently use Indian and English loanwords” (Bangsbo 2008, p. 205), it is extremely difficult to find anyone who speaks only in Tibetan. In addition, the constraints of a competitive job market for the younger generation cause them to use less Tibetan. In the past young people found work as school teachers or officials in the CTA. However, in recent years, Tibetan refugee society has not been able to adequately absorb young people into the labor force (Bangsbo 2009, p. 206; Swank 2014, p. 84-85). Therefore, the places where Tibetan young people who graduated from university turn to look for employment are Indian companies and foreign-affiliated companies, where they have to compete side-by-side with Indians. Thus, “the Tibetan language is in the process of becoming devalued” (Bangsbo 2008, p. 205) and Hindi and English are becoming more important.

Also, contrary to the policy of emphasizing the conservation of the Tibetan language, the refugee schools did not emphasize the reading and writing of the Tibetan language and did not firmly incorporate those skills into education until 1995 (Bangsbo 2008, p. 201).⁶ Originally, reading and writing in Tibetan was limited to aristocratic classes and monks and it is said that the literacy rate of the general people was low. This tendency was also the case in the refugee society. The importance of literacy in Tibetan has not been appreciated enough. It resulted in many people being illiterate in Tibetan. For instance, Diehl wrote “the written Tibetan word is still confined to government offices, schoolbooks, and monasteries in this refugee community” (Diehl 2002, p. 213).

However, in 1999, under the name of the ‘Tibetanization Program’, the CTA reviewed the education system and promoted reading and writing in Tibetan (Swank 2014, p. 27).⁷ Also due to the uprisings in Lhasa and other areas of Tibet in 2008 and the wave of

⁵ For instance, residents of Dharamsala frequently accuse the Sikkimese of speaking Tibetan effeminately.

⁶ According to Swank, the decline of literacy in refugee society had been a problem since 1986. However Tibetan textbooks began to be used in some schools including Tibetan Children Villages (TCV) under the CTA control and by 1991, 14 kinds of text books on various topics were used in the classrooms (Swank 2014, p. 27).

⁷ Diehl suggests that the CTA started a mail service in 2001 to encourage reading and writing in Tibetan and that it was linked to the improvement of a consciousness for language preservation (Diehl 2002, p. 213).

recent self-immolations, a number of language preservation projects have emerged in and outside Tibet. Since 2012, every Wednesday (*lha dkar*) is regarded as the day of encouraging Tibetan culture. The ‘Speak pure Tibetan’ (*bod skad gtsang ma shod*) directive has also become popular and has been thoroughly practiced at schools in exile (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Campaign card “Speak pure Tibetan (*bod skad gtsang ma shod dang*)”

While Tibetan language education is provided in schools, competence in Tibetan language is not always acquired via traditional education. ‘Literacy’, in this paper refers to the ability to read/listen and compose in Tibetan. This definition of literacy does not take into account the importance of synonyms (*mngon brjod*), poetic expressions (*snyan ngag*), and training for reading comprehension. The first generation of refugees, who could not read or write Tibetan, communicated almost exclusively in Tibetan. Because they were not able to write, they memorized esoteric phrases, endowing them with a certain degree of literary Tibetan comprehension (Diehl 2002, p. 213). In contrast, current young people are mandated to acquire Tibetan reading and writing skills at school, but they do not enjoy the same contact with the language, as did the first generation. Some say that the current refugees have a literacy rate of almost 100 percent (Bangsbo 2008, p. 201).⁸ According to Swank’s paper, “Over 60% of

⁸ According to Swank’s survey (no date given), the Tibetan literacy rate was more than 40 percent for Tibetans in their 20s and less than 70 percent for Tibetans in their 30s (Swank 2014, p. 29). Diehl also said “Most Tibetan refugees over the age of forty-five are illiterate” (Diehl 2002, p. 213). Therefore, it seems that Bangsbo’s 100 percent literacy rate is unrealistic.

individuals in the 30-39 age group reported that they most frequently write in Tibetan. However, only about 40% of those in the youngest age group gave the same answer, instead giving English as their preferred written language" (Swank 2014, p. 29). In Swank's ethnography, the young Tibetan refugees born and raised in India are preferentially writing in English and from my own research experience, people born in India take notes and write in English. In this regard, it can be said that the ability to write and read complex expressions in Tibetan is declining. At present, it appears that the positions requiring full Tibetan writing skills, such as at the CTA, higher education institutions and NGOs, are filled with 'new-comers' native from Tibet, whereas only a few people born in exile can work in those positions.⁹

Tibetan pop has gradually developed not only in a context of tradition-centred ideology but also, especially since the late 1990s, in a cultural environment in which English and Hindi are increasingly popular. So pop music has become one important Tibetan-language media used by artists to relate to local Tibetan audiences (Diehl 2002). With the emphasis on individual responsibility for the preservation of culture and identity, Tibetan pop singers also strive to contribute to their refugee society. For instance, Kelsang Kes told me: "What we are doing is not just enjoying ourselves and entertaining the audience, but we are also protecting the Tibetan culture. Tibetan pop is a fine Tibetan culture and it also contributes to the creation of people's unity".¹⁰ In the face of the struggles prevalent in Tibet, such as self-immolations, singers are actively involved in documenting and raising the issues. They hold performances to raise consciousness and release music related to these incidents.¹¹ In 2012 when the Tibetan Singers Union hosted a debate linking their music activities to political issues such as self-immolations in Tibet, the CTA permitted these activities including their musical performances on stages as contributing to the spread of Tibetan culture. This means that singers trying to spread a new Tibetan culture have been recognized as being integrated with the government's promoted cultural policy. Their activities got the seal of the CTA, so they were

⁹ Looking at the data explicitly described in Swank's book, almost all new refugees were recorded and spoke in Tibetan (Swank 2014, pp. 143-155), whereas settled refugees of the same age were recorded and spoke in English.

¹⁰ Interview, 6 September 2013.

¹¹ There may be a chance of misjudging the situation if reading only the political meaning in such involvement. For example, the debut song of a singer was about immolation. However, he told me that "It was easy to gather the audience's attention if I was singing a political theme that matched the concerns of the time" (name withheld).

able to resume performance activities from which they were previously requested to refrain.

4. History of Tibetan pop

I will now briefly look back at the history of Tibetan pop, reviewing the extant literature in light of my fieldwork¹². Although “not long after 1959, new Tibetan songs lamenting the experience of exile, praising the Dalai Lama, and reminiscing about the landscape of the homeland began to circulate throughout the communities of exiled Tibetans” (Diehl 2004, p. 9), it is generally said the history of Tibetan pop started in the 1970s. In the 1970s, Western pop had arrived in the refugee society and it had an influence on music listening habits (Diehl 2004, p. 9). However Tibetan refugees did not create new music by themselves because of the tradition-centred ideology and the lack of equipment to create, play and record music by themselves. Accordingly, modern music (*deng dus gzhas*)¹³ sung in Tibetan was introduced in the refugee societies in India, Nepal, and especially in Dharamsala for the first time from the outside.

According to Diehl’s summary (Diehl 2002, pp. 178-186), modern Tibetan music was first introduced into the refugee society in Dharamsala when Tibetan refugee students came back from a study trip to Norway (or Japan).¹⁴ The students created a song called ‘my dearest Lhamo’ (*nga’i btse ba’i lha mo*) for the Dharamsala audience. It was well received and became legendary. During the same period, people started creating and arranging music by themselves. It started with members of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), an institution affiliated with the CTA. As with ‘My dearest Lhamo’, these songs met with applause and acceptance. Among the songs, ‘This land is our land’ (*pha yul ‘di nga tsho tshang ma’i red*) adapted from an English song by Jamyang Norbu, then director of TIPA, is still being taught in refugee schools. It was in the same period that a song called ‘Beautiful Rinzin Wangmo’ (*mdzes ba’i rig ‘dzin dbang mo*) was introduced. That was the first instance of modern music created in the refugee society.

¹² I conducted research in Dharamsala for six months in 2012 and 2013, and in Kathmandu for two months in 2012 and 2013.

¹³ The contemporary music mentioned here is contrasted with the traditional music (*gna’ snga mo’i gzhas*) in Tibetan refugee society and it is defined in the relative position to the tradition (= ‘Shangri-Laized Tibetan culture before 1950’).

¹⁴ Descriptions such as year of publication are based on the description of Diehl (2002).

In the 1980s, some western Buddhist bands such as the 'Dharma Bums' began full-fledged activities in Dharamsala. Contrasting with traditional music, they played rock music with political lyrics. Through them, Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala were able to directly experience contemporary music. Furthermore, in 1985, the influential 'Trinkhor' (*drin 'khor*), a Tibetan band from Switzerland, released a cassette and a new genre of contemporary music was born among Tibetans. Trinkhor is still popular today, and it exerted a big influence in India and Nepal.

In the same year, bands creating and playing contemporary music also appeared in India and Nepal. 'Rangzen Shönu' (Freedom Youth), a three-man-group originating from Darjeeling but living in Dharamsala, released an cassette also titled 'Rangzen Shönu'. They started a division of labour system still adopted by singers and groups today, that is, requesting high lamas (in Darjeeling in their case) to write the lyrics. Their work also had a major influence in Tibet: Dadön, one of the very first pop singers in Tibet, mentioned this band in an interview about her Lhasa years (Henrion-Dourcy 2005, p. 236).

After the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, TIPA released albums greatly influenced by European and American popular music under the name of 'Tibetan songs'. The predecessor of the band the 'Aa-Ka-Ma' (a representative presence in Tibetan refugee societies until around 2005) was playing on these albums. Aa-Ka-Ma was trying to find ways to perform contemporary music while using traditional Tibetan music elements such as instruments and singing styles.

In 1995, two of Tibetan refugee society's most significant works were released¹⁵. One was 'Rangzen' (Freedom) from the 'Yak Band' (*g.yag kyi rol tshogs*) to which Diehl belonged; and the other was the debut album 'Modern Tibetan Songs', from Aa-Ka-Ma. According to Diehl, both albums can be considered 'rock and roll'. It can be said that these two albums have fashioned the music scene of the present refugee society to a certain extent. Although the Yak Band was disbanded after this one album, the Aa-Ka-Ma band released seven albums, roughly every other year until 2006.

Meanwhile, Tibetan pop moved away from group performance and toward individual artists. For example Tsering Gyurmey (Figure 2) who temporarily played at TIPA and Phurbu. T. Namgyal, who started his career when he was in the TCV and now is based in the US, have become stars representing the Tibetan pop world. The

¹⁵ Diehl (2004: 10) writes that it was the end of 1994, but my research indicates a little later.

nature of their music is popular music with a strong dance color, and performed in a karaoke style singing over a recorded sound source, rather than the live instrumentation of 'Aa-Ka-Ma' or the 'Yak Band'. Many singers have since then adopted the performance technique of Tsering Gyurme and Phurbu T. Namgyal.



(Figure 2) Tsering Gyurmey a.k.a the King of Tibetan pop

In the 2000s, as the number of singers increased, the genre range expanded and the quality of the music improved. In particular, Tenzin Woser debuted in 2001, Pemsu made his debut in 2004 and became a R&B singer representing the Tibetan pop world, Kunga Tenzin made his debut in 2005, Choedak [Choedak Lobsang] made his debut in 2007 (Figure 3) and Kelsang Kes made his debut in 2012. These artists are leading the next generation.



(Figure 3) Next generation Tibetan Pop star, Lobsang Delek

5. The *shifting context of Tibetan pop*

The history of Tibetan pop is inseparable from the evolution of production methods and changes in the socio-cultural context. In the 1990s, most Tibetan pop music was composed by the singers and the lyrics were written by masters of literary and metaphorical expressions, such as lamas and highly educated lay people, who usually were not involved in music. The reason why the lyrics were outsourced in this manner was because of consideration for accurate Tibetan expression, in addition to the problem of illiteracy of the singers (Diehl 2002). Here, I would like to quote the lyrics of 'Friendship song', written by the lay doctor and scholar Jampa Gyaltzen Dakton for Aa-Ka-Ma in the 1990s, from Diehl's work.

Friendship song (Lyrics : Jampa Gyaltzen Dakton)

Little jolmo bird in the willow grove
 With a sweet-sounding voice,
 Please think deeply.
 I wonder if it is really as it seems.

Little fish belonging to the Turquoise Lake
 With golden eyes,
 You are flexing to please me
 Is it really true?

Little bird in the willow grove
 If you really want to stay here,
 I will certainly allow you, bird of the willow garden,
 To be its owner

Fish with golden eyes and quick movements
 If you really want to go to the lake,
 Of course, I will take care of you.¹⁶

As we can see, the lyrics requested by singers to Dakton are close to traditional Tibetan poetry. Grammatical accuracy, and rich poetic metaphors are deployed, requiring the listeners to use their imagination. Today, those who are able to understand the meaning of lyrics written at that time are very limited. A former monk (aged 26)

¹⁶ Diehl (2002, p. 208).

said about these lyrics “It is too difficult to understand what the singer is saying. It feels like reading a *sutra*”.¹⁷

In addition to outsourcing lyrics, Tsering Gyurmey used lyrics and textbooks from Tibet. Tsering Gyurmey said that these lyrics contained life lessons and educational meanings, and that they were high quality. Many Tibetan pop lyrics in the 1990s came from either outsourcing or borrowing from existing sources.

Although CDs are commonly distributed among Tibetan refugees today, the music media in the 1990s were cassette tapes. Tsering Gyurmey recalls that the new albums were released on the Dalai Lama’s birthday, during Buddhist prayer rituals and during the Tibetan New Year. This is when many people purchased them. Tibetan pop was an important entertainment for consumers in the 1990s, when there was not much entertainment available, contrary to the present. Although the spread of cassette tapes simultaneously brought pirated products into the market, the damage was relatively small compared to the present. Singers were able to earn money by selling their genuine copies.

In the 2000s, the situation of Tibetan pop changed greatly. Cassettes tapes began to fall out of favour. CDs became popular and then MP3 appeared and completely occupied the market. The appearance of CDs and MP3 was very significant for the singers. If you had a computer with a drive to read CDs, it was possible for anyone to infinitely reproduce sound data without any deterioration in sound quality. Pirated cassette tapes had required special equipment, which was difficult to get, and the outcome was a deteriorated sound quality. But as MP3 players and mobile phones with built-in MP3 functions became popular, illegal exchange between friends and acquaintances spread. Depending on the popularity of the singers, especially after 2006, this pirating technology had a great impact on artists’ livelihoods. For example, I asked 18 students and young people in Dharamsala and Kathmandu whether they purchased Tibetan pop CDs. They said that “My friends got the music as electronic data, and I did not buy a CD”, “I got the data from a store on my mobile phone, it is cheaper than buying a CD”. None of them bought CDs. One of my friends saved his favorite songs to a USB flashdrive and distributed the data to his friends.

As of 2014, personal internet was not yet well developed in Dharamsala and Kathmandu, except for those who operated cyber-café. The number of personal computers owned by individuals was larger than ever, but given the fact that most people are not aware of

¹⁷ Informal conversation, 28 September 2011.

the transfer system, exchanging data using P2P and free download sites was not a big problem for the singers. However, illegal copying of CDs between friends and illegal sale of MP3 data by cyber cafés and mobile phone distributors had become a big issue. According to the singers, despite the fact that the audiences increase, sales of CDs has been decreasing. Listeners do not translate into buyers. As a result, current singers cannot support themselves with CD sales.

At the same time, from the 2000s, Tibetan pop from Tibet has flowed into exile in large quantities, in the form of pirated products and illegal copies. They are listened to especially by 'new refugees'. Since these productions are also exchanged between people as MP3 data, their circulation in exile has not benefitted the singers back in Tibet, but in exile, it has constituted a source of competition for refugee singers, making the range of exile pop singers seem narrow, inferior. It can be said that the singers have been plagued by the free trade of the data resulting from the changes in media technology, prompting them to change their position about CDs.

As Choedak said, "CDs are like a business card. There is no profit with this. The important thing is the income from the performances."¹⁸ The place to earn money has shifted to performances, and CDs are made only to entice people to attend performances. Singers then listen to the audience's opinions more actively than ever before in order to entice more people to the performances. It is now in lyric practice that the effort is noticeable and those changes are not small. For instance, in Dharamsala in 2005, I heard a voice saying "The 'JJI band'¹⁹ are good because they sing in colloquial Tibetan and they are easy to understand. The lyrics of the other bands are literary and I sometimes don't know what they are singing about",²⁰ Or, "What is important in Tibetan music is lyrics, there is no point if we do not understand. Singers should create lyrics we understand, then we listen to them."²¹ In order to capture a young Tibetan pop audience, one who listens to a wide spectrum of music through various media such as television and the internet, singers changed their practices of lyric-writing according to the audience's demand. For example, Choedak told me, "I try to write easy-to-understand colloquial lyrics for the audience, because they do not

¹⁸ Interview, 12 February 2012.

¹⁹ A three-member-band who has been active in Dharamsala and have been highly appreciated by overseas tourists in recent years.

²⁰ Informal conversation with a man born in India (aged of 25), 3 September 2005.

²¹ Informal conversation with a woman born in India (aged of 31), 29 September 2011. Also see Stirr's case related to the understanding of lyrics (Stirr 2008, p. 321, p. 325).

show their interest if the lyrics are difficult.”²² In the following example, we can read the lyrics of ‘Jewel in my heart’, written in 2012 by Kelsang Kes, a contemporary of Choedak.²³

Jewel in my heart (*sems nang gi nor bu*, Lyrics: Kelsang Kes)²⁴

Jewel in my heart, the root guru, the wish-fulfilling jewel
Is him. I take refuge.

My root guru with kindness and compassion
For all Tibetans in Tibet and outside,
He works hard day and night.
In the Root guru, I take refuge.

Jewel in my heart, the Dalai Lama,
I remember his grace. I take refuge.

Jewel in my heart, the root guru, the wish-fulfilling jewel
Is him. I take refuge.

I hope your activities be widespread
Long live for one hundred aeon
The place of refuge in this life and beyond,
I take refuge.

Direct and colloquial expressions are used for the lyrics of this song showing reverence for the Dalai Lama. This song was well received and helped shape the current popularity of this singer. It is interesting to note that, before that song, when he was composing songs for his debut album, Kelsang Kes received lyrics from the head of a monastery. Those lyrics were full of literary expressions; considerable cultural knowledge was necessary to understand them. Although Kelsang Kes, who was a thangka teacher at a monastery, had relatively high literary Tibetan skills, he himself did not readily understand the meaning of the lyrics. As a result, he gave up using the lyrics, thinking the audience would not understand. He then decided to write the lyrics by himself, so that the listeners could understand immediately.²⁵

²² Interview, 12 February 2012.

²³ Most of the exile Tibetan pop songs since the 2000s are monolingual. Only a few songs have mixed Tibetan and English lyrics.

²⁴ A video of the song can be watched here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0G0Fj5wdvI> (last accessed 28 May 2017).

²⁵ Interview, 5 February 2012.

The tendency to deliberately simplify lyrics according to the audience's preferences is seen with many singers engaged in Tibetan pop. Unlike previously, when outsourcing was usual, many singers now write the lyrics themselves.

Summarizing the discussion so far, the technical transition of cassette tapes to CDs and MP3 has brought about major changes in the cultural context of Tibetan refugee society and Tibetan pop. Despite the fact that Tibetan pop finally became an industry at the end of the 1990s and the number of singers has gradually increased, the CDs and MP3s that appeared in the 2000s greatly changed music consumption. For singers, CD creation and sales have been given a new meaning. Singers who cannot earn a living by selling CDs consciously create songs that can make performances the main source of earnings. One of the implications is that the lyrics, which were previously outsourced and complex, became intentionally direct and simple, written by the singers themselves. By doing this, singers tried to connect to the audience to boost attendance of performances and sell tickets.

6. Tibetan pop highlighting differences among refugees

In the current situation, singers' efforts to secure audiences by simplifying lyrics have had a certain degree of success. However, as they simplify the lyrics, other concerns arise, such as the acceptance by new refugees.

'New refugees' refer to Tibetans who have come to India and Nepal since the 1990s, many of them being from Amdo and Kham. They have been criticized by settled refugees as 'sinicized' and therefore socially isolated. The environment in which they grew up differed greatly²⁶ from the settled refugees, composed mostly of people from Ü-Tsang. Numerous conflicts have occurred between them. As a result, the new refugees are stigmatized by the settled refugees.

One of the factors that separate new and settled refugees is their taste for Tibetan pop. New refugees enjoy listening to Tibetan pop more than settled ones do. However most of them listen to Tibetan pop from Tibet, not from exile. For the new refugees who normally listen to homeland Tibetan pop, exile Tibetan pop appears "totally

²⁶ According to Kharat, according to exile government data from 1991, 70% of the settled refugees are from Ü-Tsang, 25% from Kham and 5% from Amdo (Kharat 2003, p. 79). According to Gupta (2005: 86), who carried out research in the 2000s, 68.5% from Ü-Tsang (39% from Lhasa), 15% from Kham and, 16.5% from Amdo. The ratio of Amdo and Kham has thus been reversed.

meaningless – it is like singing a song written by children. The lyrics of the homeland songs are deep, but the lyrics of exile [songs] are shallow and I cannot listen to them”²⁷. Or, “I don’t want to listen to exile Tibetan pop. I don’t want to listen to them because the lyrics are too bad”²⁸. That was how they talked about the music.²⁹

The major difference that people see between homeland and exile pop music is whether or not there is a division of labour. Inside Tibet, songs are frequently sung, composed and written by different artists. This is in contrast to music produced in exile, where artists have been writing most of their own lyrics, to the taste of the audience, since the 2000s. Lyrics written by homeland songwriters have literary hues and educational meanings; they are the subject of praise. Many new refugees believe that the division of labour, where experts produce the best in their respective fields, guarantees the quality of music, in contrast to the low quality of exile Tibetan pop.³⁰

Lyrical differences between songs produced in Tibet and in exile also emerge because the political context is also different. As previous scholars have noted, self-expression is very limited in Tibet, due to repression and censorship (TIN 2004; Henrion- Dourcy 2005; Stirr 2008). For that reason, songwriters use metaphors and *double-entendre*, encoding superficial lyrics with deeper meanings. However, these lyrics do not always use esoteric literary expressions. Let us read ‘Blue Lake’, translated by Tsering Shakya.

Blue Lake (*mtsho sngon po*, Lyrics: Dondrub Gyal)³¹

Blue Lake,
Honoured by the people,
Pride of the motherland,
Protector of the people,
Happiness of the people.

When waves are blowing
It brings joy to the geese.
When the lake is frozen,

²⁷ Conversation with a male from Ü-Tsang (aged of 41), 8 June 2012.

²⁸ Conversation with a male from Amdo (aged of 32), 25 July 2013.

²⁹ When I was talking with a Tibetan man who illegally sells music in Lhasa, he said that the difference between Tibetan pop in Tibet and in exile was “whether the lyrics are good or bad” (30 August 2014).

³⁰ Exile singers also share the viewpoint that division of labour yields higher music quality.

³¹ A video of this song, by Dadön (zla sgron) can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LDZ5V9jZH8> (last accessed 28 May 2017).

The geese are saddened.
 The frozen lake
 Drives the golden fish beneath.
 When the ice melts,
 It brings joy to the sheep

Ai Ma! Blue Lake,
 You bear witness to history,
 You are the hope of the future,
 You are the source of happiness.

Ai Ma! Blue Lake,
 Today's happiness,
 Hope of the future,
 You are the possessor of all life forms,
 Honour of the motherland.³²

As Stirr's argument shows, the lyrics can be interpreted in numerous ways and various 'tricky' (ambiguous) words³³ are included. Tibetans from Tibet would read Tibetan nationalism, although at first glance, it could be read as praising China. In contrast many young exiles try to understand the lyrics literally and it is difficult for them to understand the hidden message without explanation (Stirr 2008: 319-321).

Richness of expression brought by the division of labour and the political situation in the homeland requires a type of literacy acquired in daily life in Tibet. In exile, new refugees possess excellent skills in that type of literacy, even with little formal education, and they use Tibetan on a daily basis.³⁴ They compare their capacities with the settled refugees and they are proud of their Tibetan language abilities. For example, a new refugee from Kham proudly said "I am absolutely better at reading and writing Tibetan than the settled refugees".³⁵ Other new refugees also said "I went to school after coming to exile to India. Although my course grades were not good, my Tibetan was always the best in the class."³⁶ Or, "People in

³² Quoted by Stirr (2008, p. 309).

³³ "Tsering and Phurbu, both men who had lived most their lives in Tibet and thus spoke fluent Chinese as well as Tibetan, pointed out what they called 'tricky words' such as 'motherland,' which according to Phurbu, Chinese people would understand as referring to all of China, but Tibetans would understand as referencing Tibet" (Stirr 2008, p. 320).

³⁴ Of course it must be added that some Tibetans can only speak Chinese.

³⁵ Conversation with a man from Kham (aged of 32), 26 August 2011.

³⁶ Conversation with a man from Kham (aged of 26), 12 June 2012.

the refugee society have freedom in education, however their Tibetan language is not good at all."³⁷ Conversations about Tibetan language abilities are frequent and young exile Tibetans admit that "Tibetans born in the homeland have better literacy skills".³⁸

For new refugees, one indicator showing the decline in language ability in exile are the lyrics of pop music, too simplified to flatter the audience's own low literacy in Tibetan and taste for plain statements. Their hearts are rarely captured by exile Tibetan pop.

7. A vicious circle in refugee societies?

Tibetan exile singers also listen to Tibetan pop from Tibet and they are keenly aware of the differences. Even the celebrated Tsering Gyurmey, who does not often listen to Tibetan pop from Tibet, recognizes that the quality of the lyrics is different in Tibet and that "given the process of training by Tibetan pop singers in the homeland, it is natural that their work is better than the work from the refugees"³⁹. Also, Mingyur Dorjee, who has left the spotlight of Tibetan pop and now concentrates on educational activities, lamented the decline of the quality in lyrics in recent Tibetan pop and pointed out that "this was occurring due to the lack of education for both the singers and audience".⁴⁰

In this situation, new refugee singers such as Choedak and Lobsang Delek, born in Tibet, but schooled in India, are in an uncomfortable position. They are now leading exile Tibetan pop, as the next generation after Tsering Gyurmey and Phurbu. T. Namgyal, and both of them are heavily influenced by Tibetan pop in Tibet. It is noteworthy that both of them are good at reading and writing in Tibetan, especially Lobsang Delek, who graduated from the College for Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarah. Although they have the literary background, Choedak chose to write plain and direct lyrics tailored to the audience's tastes in order to draw their attention. Lobsang Delek also said, "I write lyrics that the audience understands as soon as they listen to them"⁴¹.

Tailoring song-writing to the tastes of the audience and not fully demonstrating their Tibetan language abilities reproduces Tibetan language and sustains identity in a multicultural exile world. While

³⁷ Conversation with a man from Kham (aged of 34), 13 October 2011.

³⁸ Conversation with a Tibetan woman raised in India (aged of 38), 23 August 2008 ; conversation with Tsering Gyurmey, 29 August 2013; and many others.

³⁹ Interview, 16 February 2012.

⁴⁰ Interview, 11 February 2012.

⁴¹ Interview, 14 July 2012.

the production of more Tibetan pop listeners might preserve Tibetan language, it does so in a deteriorated fashion. Choedak said, "We understand that the listeners' ability in Tibetan will get worse as we simplify the lyrics, but otherwise the audience will not listen to our music".⁴² Their choice to simplify the wording for economic benefit is a reflection of and accelerating force for the current decline in Tibetan literacy.

In other words, the simplification of lyrics by songwriters such as Choedak has garnered more listeners among refugees born in exile, or sometimes new refugees from Ü-Tsang, but it fails to capture the hearts of the new refugees. Even Lobsang Delek, who uses moderate metaphorical expressions, is only "just better than the other songwriters".⁴³

8. Authenticity on trial

Changes in lyric-writing by Tibetan pop singers who have tried to engage in music as a livelihood are linked to the innovation of media technology (widespread use of illegal copying) and the demands of the audience born and raised in exile. The biggest demand from the audience is for colloquial lyrics. Underlying this demand is the notion of freedom of expression,⁴⁴ supported by multiple factors. In a context where they have to communicate in English, Hindi and Nepali, Tibetan literacy has declined and the audience can not relate to the lyrics unless they are simple. Also in educational policy of refugee society, Tibetan literacy skills were not highly regarded until the mid-1980s and the preservation of Tibetan language was not put into effect until the 1990s.

However, writing lyrics according to the demands of the audience produced unexpected side-effects. Making direct and colloquial lyrics acknowledge and even encourage the audience's declining Tibetan literacy, at odds with the CTA's attempt to improve Tibetan language education since the late 1990s. Since 2012, the CTA has endorsed Tibetan pop music, but in reality, these two positions are not readily compatible.

Tibetan pop also highlights differences between settled and new refugees. Many new refugees do not appreciate exile Tibetan pop, mainly because of its poor lyrics. However, the present situation is quite ironic. The CTA and exiles have regarded the culture of Tibet as

⁴² Interview, 25 August 2013.

⁴³ Conversation with a woman from Kham (aged of 18), 26 June 2012. She showed disgust with the lyrics and songs of Phurbu. T. Namgyal and Tsering Gyurmey.

⁴⁴ Nevertheless I would like to point out that in recent years in Nepal, it has become difficult to extensively make political arguments about Tibet.

'sinicized' in order to authenticate the Tibetan culture before the 1950s as genuine. The framework of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' assigned to exile society and Tibet can also be applied to new refugees who are regarded as embodying the homeland culture. They attract sympathy when they are under China's repression, but, even after their perilous journey across the mountains when they arrive in exile, they are negatively judged as "sinicized." These are the remarks of a new refugee from Kham, who has lived in Dharamsala for ten years: "People from Ü-Tsang and who have been in Dharamsala for a long time are terrible. If we were not here, there would be no one who could prove the legitimacy of their claim that 'China is bad', 'China is destroying Tibetan culture'. Besides, when they try to bring out support from overseas, they always bring new refugee orphans in front of the supporters and ask for a donation 'Please give us a donation to save these poor children', but in daily life they do not care about us. Only because we are 'new refugees', they say different things and they discriminate against us".⁴⁵

In this way, new refugees have been deprived of the opportunity to have their culture evaluated as legitimate, because of the stigma of 'sinicization'. Yet, the situation surrounding the lyrics of Tibetan pop has the potential to turn around the 'cultural' superiority (based on the culture before the 1950s) of settled refugees. The settled refugees are supposed to have kept their authenticity through cultural preservation, but their argument is weakened by the high Tibetan literacy of the new refugees criticized as 'sinicized'. The equation between 'refugee culture' and 'authentic', and 'homeland culture' and 'inauthentic', comes to be questioned.

At the same time, it creates further discontinuity between the new and settled refugees, as we can see in Tibetan pop. Currently, there is a tendency to see a clivage between two audiences for two kinds of music (settled/new refugee), fitting their respective frameworks and inclinations. Of course this tendency can be overcome, notably by a homeland singer, Sherten, with his 'Song of Unity' (*mthun sgril gyi rang sgra*). It was a hit for both settled and new refugees.

Although exile singers understand this situation, adapting to the new refugees' preferences is not an option for them, as they run the risk of losing the settled refugee audience. Therefore, they rely on their traditional supporters. However, their choice has resulted in alienating the new refugees and it has reinforced the understanding that the music of the settled refugees is the authentic Tibetan pop. Conflict over the lyrics of Choedak and Lobsang Delek, who are from

⁴⁵ Conversation with a man from Kham (aged 34), 6 September 2011.

Tibet and now live in exile, will show an aspect of the painful situation they are currently in.

9. Conclusion : Critique of 'Agency-Enthusiasm'

Returning back to the question of agency in artistic production and consumption I raised at the beginning of this paper, I now turn to Ahearn (2010) and Madhok (2013). Ahearn reminds of the importance of context in discussions of agency. "It is therefore important for scholars to ask themselves how conceptions of agency may differ from society to society, and how these conceptions might be related to notions of personhood and causality" (Ahearn 2010, p. 28). She also insists that the oppositional agency represented by resistance is only one aspect of agency (Ahearn 2010, p. 30) and advocates a meta-agentive discourse analysis (Ahearn 2010, pp. 38-41), analyzing how actors talk about their own agency. She promotes analyzing the agency from three intertwined viewpoints: agency as encoded in, and shaped by, linguistic structure; agency as embedded within large-scale socio-historical processes; and agency as emerging from discourse (Ahearn 2010, pp. 44-45). Madhok likewise insists on "the need to shift our focus from actions and free acts as the governing standard of agency to an analysis of speech practices as a site of self-reflexive activity" (Madhok 2013, p. 63). Taking a similar meta-discourse analysis approach to agency, Madhok writes that "persons do not perform acontextual, ahistorical, isolated acts, but instead engage in a stream of acts that are linked to each other in certain ways" (Madhok 2013, p. 38). Agency is bound by context and constructed through discourse.

Tibetan pop is consumed via illegal and cheap avenues prompted by the free trade of music, mediated by new technologies and brought about by the movement of capital. The audience simultaneously forces the singers into economic hardship, while gaining a relatively strong influence over the production of lyrics by the artists. The singers respond with flexibility to the situation, in order to survive, by creating songs with simple lyrics. However, for new refugees, the exile pop lyrics prove that the settled refugees who criticize them for having a 'sinicized Tibetan culture' cannot 'properly' preserve Tibetan culture either. This case shows that each actor responds with flexibility, by taking advantage of the circumstances under their purview. While this can be interpreted as exercising agency, we must be careful not to blindly praise agency. Anna Tsing reminds us that, "hybridity is not all promise, and neither is agency. Destruction too requires agency. To tell its stories,

we cannot avoid the viewpoint of despair” (Tsing 2005, p. 26). Agency is the ability to produce something, good or bad. However, there is a feeling that many discussions on agency have been used as a way to describe ‘positive’ practices, favorably presenting the dynamics of culture and society under the gaze of what I would like to call ‘agency-enthusiasm’.

Considering the above points, I wish to turn away from this over-enthusiastic view of agency and analyze the situation that these chains of action have caused in the society. I have shown that the original intentions first of Tibetan singers on one side, and then of their audience, have deviated from their original stance, and produced unintended consequences highlighting the decline of literacy in the exile community. I believe that it is important to describe the chain of actions, rather than simply praise ‘agents’, whatever action they take.

Transliteration of Tibetan names

Simplified transcription	Transliteration in Wylie
Choedak	chos grags
Dondrub Gyal	don grub rgyal
Jampa Gyaltzen Dakton	brag mthon byams pa rgyal mtshan
Kelsang Kes	skal bzang Kes
Kunga Tenzin	kun dga' bstan 'dzin
Lobsang Delek	blo bzang bde legs
Mingyur Dorjee	mi 'gyur rdo rje
Pemsi	spen tshe
Phurbu T. Namgyal	phur bu tshe ring nam rgyal
Rangzen Shönu	rang btsan gzhon nu
Tenzin Woser	bstan 'dzin 'od zer
Tsering Gyurmey	tshe ring 'gyur med

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