

SINGING THE NATION:
MODERN TIBETAN MUSIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY¹

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*I'll sing you a song today
Not to flaunt my voice
But I'll sing to please you*
From a traditional Tibetan song²

An unwelcome effect of the scholarly preoccupation and public fascination in the West with Tibetan Buddhism is that other salient aspects of contemporary Tibetan culture are often neglected. Modern Tibetan music is one such overlooked cultural phenomenon which offers many insights onto a people undergoing drastic transformations, while also illuminating the complex influence of Buddhism on the creative output of the contemporary Tibetan laity. In tandem with modern Tibetan literature, popular music indicates the tentative formation of an embryonic public space within which Tibetans are expressing their common concerns and collective identity under difficult political circumstances. Popular songs provide a channel for voicing dissent, while also reinforcing Tibetan national identity by evoking images of a shared history, culture, and territory, bemoaning the current plight of Tibetans and expressing aspirations for a collective destiny. To use a concept of Karl Deutsch, popular music is an effective and wide-reaching “communicative facility” that stores, recalls and transmits information and ideas in a predominantly oral society like Tibet. As with poetry, its power lies in its inherent ability to effect delight in the audience. Tibetan popular music, like contemporary literature, is one of the artistic means through which Tibetans imagine themselves as a nation. It is also a mode of subversive narrative that counters the master narrative of Chinese state power and its colonial conception of Tibetan history and society. This paper provides a close reading of a sample of typical lyrics, drawn from contemporary songs, to support such an assertion.

¹ With humility and gratitude I dedicate this paper to Chapdak Lhamokyab and Dhatsenpa Gonpo Tsering.

² *Ngas de ring khyed tsho glu zhig len/ skad yod gi zer nas blangs ni min/ khyed dga' gi zer nas blangs ni yin.* All the translations in this paper are by the author.

Strumming Songs

Modern Tibetan music has a comparatively short history. Like all modern music, it is in a state of constant change and development. Although its roots can be found in traditional musical instruments, melodies, and folksongs, it largely departs from Tibetan folk music traditions and can safely be deemed a distinct genre.³ In its embryonic stage, modern Tibetan music was deployed to serve Chinese state propagandist purposes during the 1960s and 1970s. Tseten Drolma's (Tshe brtan sgröl ma) songs in praise of Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Revolution exemplify this early phase.⁴ In the 1980s, Tibetan music, like modern Tibetan literature, found a breathing space and tentatively freed itself from serving purely propagandist purposes. With an incremental assertiveness it began to express the collective concerns and identity of a people under colonial conditions. Palgon (Dpal mgon) from Amdo and Dadron (Zla sgron) from Lhasa [along with great Tibetan exile singers like Tawo Lobsang Palden] were pioneering figures of the 1980s and 1990s who blazed a path for later Tibetan singers and musicians.

Modern Tibetan music comes in a variety of forms. It ranges from songs sung in Tibetan and Chinese accompanied by Western musical instruments such as electronic synthesizers, and fusions of traditional Tibetan music with Indian or Western melodies, to subversive Tibetan rap. This paper focuses on a type of popular Tibetan music called *Dranyen Dunglen* (*sgra snyan rdung len*) from the Amdo region of Tibet, which I would argue is one of the most potent artistic modes of communication in contemporary Tibet.⁵ The name means "strumming and singing" (*rdung len*) and it is performed with the musical accompaniment of a traditional Tibetan guitar (*sgra snyen*) or mandolin. The genre is commonly referred to simply as *Dunglen*. Palgon, widely considered the father of this genre (picture 1), started playing and mentoring some exceptional protégés like Dubei (Bdud bhe) and Doray (Rdo red) during the early 1980s. *Dunglen's* popularity spread far and wide through radio and cassette tapes in the 1980s and multimedia formats in the new millennium. Palgon's catchy melodies and nationally-conscious lyrics have served as an inspiration to thousands of aspiring *Dunglen* players across Eastern Tibet. *Dunglen* music has spread beyond Amdo all over Tibet and even among the Tibetan diaspora.

³ Having stated this like many things modern Tibetan music is not completely independent of the past. The link with the past is much subtler. There is a harmonious, be it at times faint, echo which links it to traditional Tibetan music in terms of both melodies and lyric composition.

⁴ Yangdon Dhondup 2008: 287–289.

⁵ See Yangdon Dhondup (2008: 285–304) and Stirr (2008: 305–331) for discussions of other types of popular Tibetan music.



Picture 1: Palgon's collected *Dunglen Songs* 1989.

Tibet: An Aggregate of Components

Before analysing three *Dunglen* songs, I will briefly clarify how national identity is conceptualised in this paper. Identity is what a person or thing is, or what an entity is constituted of. Identity is defined in part by what psychologists refer to as the distinctiveness theory, according to which identity is formed by distinguishing one entity from another and emphasising perceived contrasting features (i.e. Tibetans being defined in opposition to the Chinese). However, it can also be established through common objective elements shared with others such as history, language, or tradition. As the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson posits, identity “connotes both a persistent sameness (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others.”⁶ Applied to a collective entity, shared values and characteristics are not confined within a so-called nation but link different peoples. Tibetans tend to identify themselves with India as the sacred home of the Buddha, while acknowledging that India is a distinct civilisation.

The identity of a people is therefore defined by both what they are, and are not. This is somewhat akin to the way that identity can be conceptualised through the lens of Buddhist philosophy. If we look at identity through the Buddhist concept of dependent origination (*rten 'brel*), it arises dependent on a multiplicity of interacting causal factors and cannot exist on its own as an independent entity. Like all natural phenomena it is an aggregated entity (*'du byed kyi phung po*).⁷ Among the multiple factors that shape a collective Tibetan identity it is necessary to look to both China and India as well as other contacts. To borrow a phrase from post-colonialist discourse, Tibetans “find the self within the other.”⁸ Therefore, Tibet's cultural, historical and political encounters with

⁶ Erikson 1956: 57.

⁷ Charles Ramble (1990: 196–197) uses a similar analogy in his anthropological account of the social tradition in Buddhist societies.

⁸ A phrase cited by Professor Elleke Boehmer in a lecture on “Gandhi and Mandela” delivered at Wolfson College, University of Oxford, 3 December 2008.

other civilisations are pivotal in the formation of Tibetan national identity.

In its project to identify and fix ethnic groups as minority nationalities (*shǎoshù mínzú*) within the modern Chinese state, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) drew on what Joseph Stalin called “four commons” when he defined a nation as “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”⁹ By “psychological make-up” Stalin can be interpreted as meaning “national character” which is shown through the unique culture of a people. On top of these essential characteristics, the CCP added “customs and historical traditions” as shown by the following statement, which still informs its concept of nation: “The distinctive attributes of a nation as represented by modern scientific research are commonality of language, culture, customs and historical tradition, a certain stage of socio-economic development, and a certain pattern of territorial distribution.”¹⁰ In his definition of nation Anthony D. Smith also stresses similar features when he categorises it as “a named human community residing in a perceived homeland, and having common myths and a shared history, a distinct public culture and common laws and customs for all members.”¹¹ Tibetan possession of these national attributes is fairly evident but understanding Tibetan national identity requires looking beyond these to collective memory and public will.

Formation of a nation entails more than a few essential features. In his celebrated essay, *What is a nation?*, French political theorist Ernest Renan did not accord much importance to such common features and instead defined nation as, “a soul or spiritual principle” that is constituted by collective memories of the past and the collective will in the present to live as a community “to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.”¹² Victories, defeats, happiness and suffering of a people form what he refers to as “a rich legacy of memories.”¹³ Remembrances of past victories and tragedies play a crucial role in the construction of contemporary Tibetan identity. Stressing that common suffering is more cohesive than joy, Renan states, “Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose

⁹ Cited in Dawa Norbu 1988: 338; and also see Gladney 2004: 9–10.

¹⁰ Dawa Norbu 1988. For the influence and endurance of this definition see Chinese state documents such as the one published by Rgyal khab mi rigs las don Au yon lhan khang gi srid jus shib 'jug khang gis rtsom sgrig byas pa (1979) and Bawa Phuntsok Wangyal's (2009) reflection *On Marxist Theory of Nationality, mar khe si ring lugs kyi mi rigs lta ba'i skor* at http://www.sangdhor.com/pics_c.asp?id=618, 20 June 2009.

¹¹ Smith 2010: 13.

¹² Renan 1990: 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 19.

duties, and require a common effort.”¹⁴ Plaintive songs constantly remind Tibetans of past and present tragedies and call for national unity and a concerted effort to change the political status quo. Spirited songs celebrate a common cultural identity among Tibetans and express an aspiration for a shared future.

This aspiration for a shared future often takes the form of a political community. Max Weber, while stressing the vital role of common memories in the formation of national identity, notes that a collective will to live together entails an ambition for a political community, which for him means a state. Acknowledging the ambiguity of the term nation, Weber defines it as “a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence, a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own.”¹⁵ In a similar vein, Ernest Gellner sees the realisation of a political community in the form of the centralised modern state as inextricably linked to nation formation. Nationalism, he states is “primarily a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent.”¹⁶ As will be shown in my analysis of *Dunglen* songs, Tibetans’ longing for a shared future plays a crucial part in the formation of their national identity. Nevertheless, the political manifestation of this aspiration is not as straightforward as Gellner’s and Weber’s state-centric approaches suggest. In terms of political institutions, this aspiration is manifested either through a desire for a sovereign state (*rang btsan*), or a devolutionary demand for a meaningful autonomy (*don dang ldan pa’i rang skyong ljong*) that guarantees a high degree of self-rule for Tibetans in a community of their own within the constitutional framework of People’s Republic of China.

National movements do not always seek to realise what Gellner describes as a “marriage of the state and culture” so as to ensure that the former protects and diffuses the latter.¹⁷ Political communication and cultural socialisation can of course be undertaken by agencies other than a Weberian state laying claim to the monopoly of legitimate violence within a specific territory. Czech-American social scientist Karl Deutsch agrees that a people with shared values and aspirations do pursue political power, but he gives greater prominence to the fact that their community is made possible by effective “communicative facilities”¹⁸ such as beliefs, customs and language subsumed under a socially standardised system of symbols. Modern Tibetan music is one such facility that stores, recalls, interprets, reapplies and transmits information and ideas about a particular community that does not possess a centralised political authority of its own.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 19.

¹⁵ Weber 1994: 25.

¹⁶ Gellner 2006: 1.

¹⁷ Gellner 1998: 50–58.

¹⁸ Deutsch 1994: 26–29.

To sum up, national identity is constituted of a common sense of history, culture, territory, collective memory and a will to live in a community of shared values. Modern Tibetan music as a “communicative facility” encapsulates all these constitutive elements and thus reinforces Tibetan national consciousness. Tibetans, through their shared historical and cultural experiences, are the principal agents in the construction of a pan-Tibetan identity. Contemporary Tibetan music, by glorifying, mythologising, and celebrating historical achievements, evoking past and present sufferings and the real or perceived uniqueness of a Tibetan plateau culture steeped in Buddhism, is an important medium or vehicle in this process of national construction. This will be demonstrated through an analysis of extracts from three *Dunglen* music videos.

Savouring Songs

Although Tibet has boasted a literate “high culture” over centuries, it remains a predominantly oral society in which the sung word has a wider scope and more profound impact than the printed word. Few rural Tibetans, who make up the large majority of Tibetan population and are the target audience of *Dunglen* music, are capable of understanding the complex symbolism or coded intellectual idiom used by literary poets. However, the popularity of contemporary music with its novelty and catchy melodies helps to spread the message of even highly literary lyrics far and wide. This is enhanced by the use of colloquial language, clear enunciation of sentences against the backing of a single, simple yet rhythmic instrument like *dranyen*, Tibetan guitar or mandolin.

The first *Dunglen* extract I will look at is taken from a song entitled *An Ingrained Dream*, sung by one of the most influential and politically conscious of *Dunglen* singers.¹⁹ This song is far more complex than it first appears. The folksy, slow-paced melody of the song, combined with an optimistically prophetic voice tinged with sadness, evokes intense emotions. However, as with other songs in the *Dunglen* genre, it is the lyrics that ultimately determine a song’s popularity. Audiences pay particular attention to the expressiveness, poetic quality, and currency of *Dunglen* lyrics and, increasingly, their patriotic elements or public-spiritedness. In the following extract, the lyric is a *mélange* of literary topoi and vernacular speech.

¹⁹ Due to the subversive elements of the songs explored here, the identity of this and other singers are kept anonymous throughout this paper.

An Ingrained Dream

Last night in my first dream I dreamt
At the peak of the Machen snow mountain in the east
Two turquoise-maned snow lion cubs at play
With a Golden Wheel in their clasp

Last night in my second dream I dreamt
On the Golden Throne of the Sacred Fortress
A Lama imbued with compassion
Gave me a Dharmic sermon

Last night in my third dream I dreamt
In this snowy land of Tibet
I sang a little song of celebration
Upon the reunion of Tibetans

Last night in my fourth dream I dreamt
To this region of snowy Tibet
Returned its Lord of the Realm
Emerging from the sublime Potala Palace

Like most songs of the patriotically-informed *Dunglen* genre, this song is rich in symbolism of political and historical import. The singer is very well known and was detained by the Chinese authorities several times for singing politically suggestive songs. Employing symbols that reinforce Tibetan national identity, he begins by evoking the image of the banned Tibetan national flag, which is itself a rich system of symbols.²⁰ The Tibetan national flag is popularly known as the Snow Lion Flag (*gangs seng dar cha*) because it displays a snow-capped mountain and two snow lions as its centrepiece (picture 2).²¹ Machen, also known as Amnye Machen, is regarded as one of the most sacred mountains of Tibet.²² Reference to it in the song under review is an obvious allusion to the snow mountain depicted on the Tibetan flag. In Amdo, where Amnye Machen is situated, many people refer to it as “the soul mountain of snowy Tibet” (*bod gangs can gyi bla ri*). As a historic and popular pilgrim site, it is a sacred hub attracting Tibetans from afar and functions as a nationally cohesive force. Amnye Machen, also known as, Magyal Bomra (Rma rgyal sbom ra), the ancient mountain deity and mythical ancestral figure who is believed to

²⁰ For an explanation of the symbolism visit “The Tibetan national flag”: <http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php?id=10&rmenuid=8>, 27 July 2009.

²¹ For an informative piece on the provenance of the Tibetan national flag, see Jamyang Norbu 2007.

²² Some of the sacred and ritual texts on Amnye Machen can be found in A bu dkar lo *et al.*: 2008. For the significance of Amnye Machen as a pilgrimage site see Buffetrille: 1997 and 2004.

reside there, is worshiped daily across Tibet.²³ It must be noted that the name of the mountain and that of the deity are interchangeable. The Tibetan Bon religion regards him as one of the Nine Primordial Tibetan Deities in charge of guarding Tibet (*bod srid pa chags pa'i lha dgu*). Amnye Machen is also regarded as the soul mountain (*bla ri*) of the legendary Gesar, the supernatural hero of the Tibetan epic narrative, which is itself another Tibetan national marrow. When the Dalai Lama was awarded the US Congressional Gold Medal in 2007, many Tibetans celebrated the occasion by flocking to this holy mountain.



Picture 2: The Tibetan National Flag which is also known as the Snow Lion Flag

The two young lions with “a Golden Wheel in their clasp” evoke the image of the pair of snow lions on the Tibetan national flag, the mythical national totems of Tibet. On the Tibetan flag the snow lions are depicted hoisting up a blazing tricolored jewel with one pair of arms, whilst holding a swirling jewel of wish-fulfilment at ground level with the other pair. The former denotes Tibetan reverence for Buddhism and the latter signifies adherence to the divine and secular ethical codes grounded in Buddhism. In the song, the “Golden Wheel” grasped by the snow lions as they play has a similar significance in that it is a well-known motif for the teachings of the historical Buddha. The Dharmic wheel and youthful energy of the lions are suggestive of an emergence of a new generation of Tibetans conscious of their cultural and historical heritage.

Similar allusions are made to the Tibetan flag in other forms of popular art as demonstrated by a typical poster displayed in many

²³ In Denkhok area of Kham (in today's Degé, Sichuan province) every year a sacred dance, *'cham*, is performed featuring Magyal Bomra surrounded by lesser local deities on Tibetan New Year's Eve. He is regarded as the principal regional deity and as such the Amnye Machen mountain remains an object of daily worship and occasional pilgrimage for the local Khampas. I am grateful to Jamji, a Tibetan artist from Denkhok, for this information.

family homes in Amdo (picture 3).²⁴ The collage of a snow mountain, snow lions, and the Dharmic wheel echoes the images visualised at the outset of the song. The poster also features superimposed pictures of the Dalai Lama and the disappeared Eleventh Panchen Lama (images banned in Tibet),²⁵ who flank the snow-clad peak under the arch of a magnificent rainbow, which signifies the fulfilment of wishes. The rainbow as a Buddhist symbol denotes spiritual liberation (i.e. the attainment of the rainbow body, *'ja' lus thob pa*), but here it implies an earthly political liberation. This rainbow corresponds to the leitmotif of the song, which entertains the realisation of a “dream” for Tibetans. It is a very similar “dream” that the poster and its caption refer to:

In the sacred realm encircled by snow mountains
 May the stringed jewels of infinite wonder and profundity,
 The twinned Dalai and Panchen Lamas
 Assume the religious and secular powers of Tibet,
 And may all sentient beings be graced with peace.



Picture 3: A Popular poster from Amdo 2007

²⁴ I am indebted to Emilia Sulek for drawing my attention to this poster.

²⁵ This is the child, Gedun Choekyi Nyima; recognised by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Tenth Panchen Lama on 14 May 1995. The Chinese authorities rejected this recognition and immediately seized the boy and his parents, whose whereabouts are still unknown. Through an elaborately-staged ceremony the CCP recognised another boy, Gyaltzen Norbu, as the reincarnation of the Tenth Panchen Lama on 12 November 1995. For issues and events surrounding the Panchen Lama dispute see Tibetan Information Network and Human Rights Watch/ Asia (1996: 52–66) and an illuminating paper by Barnett (2008: 353–421) on the complex selection procedure and the use of new technologies of cultural communication and production by both parties for legitimating authority.

The significance of the song's dream motif becomes more apparent in the second, third and fourth stanzas, which allude to the Dalai Lama and his return to the Potala Palace, the seat of political and religious power in Tibet. The Dalai Lama returns home to reassume the combined political and spiritual authority (*chos srid zung 'brel kyi bdag dbang*). He gives a "Dharmic sermon" and returns to the Potala Palace as the rightful "Lord of the Realm," that is Tibet. With his return the Tibetan longing for the reunion of Tibetans who have been separated since the Tibetan uprisings in the 1950s is also materialised. As already noted, the song is entitled *An Ingrained Dream* and dream is the reoccurring motif of the lyric. This motif emphasises a deeply embedded aspiration to regain a homeland, or what Renan and Weber refer to as the strong will of a people to live in a collectively cherished community of their own. It also entails a desire to give political expression to a cultural identity.

Tibet's past, present and future converge in this "dream." The song-writer's evocation of Amnye Machen, and by extension its mythic deity, is not simply retrieval of ancient myth for public-spirited artistic use, which the Irish man of letters Standish O'Grady sees as a form of restoring myth to the people.²⁶ Amnye Machen has a mythic origin but, as already mentioned, is still worshipped daily and remains a unifying part of a living culture. Juxtaposition of powerful and prevalent Tibetan symbols both in the lyric and the visual images that accompany the song on the music video (i.e. soaring snow mountains, sweeping grasslands, blue skies, the Potala Palace, massive religious gatherings, and devout *khatak*-offering pilgrims) link this living present to an immemorial past and fuses both with a vision of a better future Tibet. Even Benedict Anderson, who embraces a modernist concept of nationalism, acknowledges that "[I]f nation-states are widely conceded to be "new" and "historical," the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and still more important, glide into a limitless future."²⁷ This song expresses a political aspiration for the stateless nation of Tibet, first and foremost by invoking the Tibetan national flag, and an ancient and living Tibetan national deity. This is immediately followed by a spiritual and political longing for its highest incarnate lama, in whom once again Tibet's past, present, and future, come together.

Such an observation makes one take notice of the ambivalent role of Buddhism with regard to the formation of Tibetan national consciousness. Buddhism remains a defining attribute of Tibetanness and is one of the central forces that inform popular *Dunglen* songs. This is despite the fact that the central tenets of Buddhism contradict the concept of an exclusive identity be it national or otherwise. Concepts such as emptiness, dependent

²⁶ Eagleton 1999: 33–34.

²⁷ Anderson 1991: 11–12.

origination (interdependence) and universal compassion negate the existence of the unique self upon which the modern notions of individual and national sovereignty are premised. *Rang med*, or non-existence of self, can hardly be reconciled to the modern political concept of *rang btsan*, or supremacy of self, which is the Tibetan term for national sovereignty. The Buddhist cosmological concepts of karmic justice and interdependence inform Tibetan understandings of the world. From early childhood Tibetans are repeatedly told to be altruistic, adhere to the laws of causality, and uphold ideals like “loving others before oneself” (*rang las gzhan gces*) and generating prayers for all cosmic beings, all of whom have at one stage been our mothers (*ma gyur sems can thams cad*).

Nevertheless, despite this propagation of Buddhist universalism, Tibetans retain a strong sense of communitarian distinctiveness and a passion to govern a community of their own. There is therefore a tension between Buddhist ideals and the construction of a Tibetan identity centred around Buddhism. Although Buddhist teachings stress the interdependence of all sentient beings and negate unique identities of individual and collective entities, Buddhism as a shared system of beliefs and practices continues to be one of the central forces of a Tibetan national consciousness that seeks the right to form a unique self-governing community, if not national sovereignty.²⁸ Association of Buddhism with Tibetans’ shared sense of consciousness is not a modern phenomenon. It can be traced back to the distant past. The idea of Tibet as the divine dominion of Avalokiteśvara (*spyang ras gzigs kyi gdul zhing*) has its genesis in the Dharma kings of the Tibetan empire.²⁹ In the contemporary age the relationship between Tibetan identity and Buddhism remains undiminished if not redoubled, as evidenced by the nationally unifying leadership of the Dalai Lama and the series of protests across the Tibetan plateau in 2008 initiated by Buddhist clergy. One finds the creation of an exclusive identity, which many modern Tibetan songs celebrate, thanks partly to a religion with a cosmic worldview of intricate interdependence.

The second song extract demonstrates how *Dunglen* can act as an effective vehicle for conveying the current socio-political issues of Tibet. It is by a young, prolific singer noted for his expressive lyrics and distinct voice. This song is once again slow-paced and sung in a deliberately quiet melodious voice. It carries a deferential tone with

²⁸ Analytical literature on the role of Buddhism in the formation of Tibetan national identity and Tibetan political struggle, and Chinese reaction against it see: Schwartz 1994; Dreyfus 2003: 492–522, 2002: 37–56; TCHRD 2008; Sperling 1994: 267–84; Germano 1998: 53–94; Kapstein 1998: 95–119; and Tibetan Information Network and Human Rights Watch/ Asia 1996.

²⁹ For early Buddhist mythological accounts of Avalokiteśvara’s spiritual conquest of Tibet see Dpa’ bo gtsug lag phreng ba 1986: 105–146; Smon lam rgya mtsho 1989: 1–57; and Davidson 2004: 64–83. Also see Dreyfus 2003: 492–522 for the importance of treasure texts and Buddhist deities such as Avalokiteśvara in the formation of an early Tibetan collective identity.

an assertive undercurrent. The lyrics are written in a vernacular idiom and wilfully reiterative to hammer home its central message.

Tibetan Finery

I'm a singer who loves Tibet
 I sing pure Tibetan songs
 Not that I can't sing in a foreign tongue
 But within my heart resides Tibetan pride

I'm a singer born in Tibet
 I wear rosaries around my neck
 Not out of a lack of gold, turquoise or coral
 But within my heart lies the behest of the Lama

I'm a singer in the Land of Tibet
 What I wear is woven of cotton and wool
 Not that I don't possess the skins of leopards and otters
 But because our Venerable Lama advised us so

Once again the song demonstrates and encourages Tibetan attachment to a nation or common cultural territory called Tibet, as the primary refrain of the song. The singer reminds the audience that he was born in Tibet, lives in Tibet, speaks Tibetan, loves Tibet and sings in Tibetan. Every single line of the first stanza features the term *Bod*, Tibet or Tibetan. Thanks to this repetition the very being of the singer and, by extension, that of Tibetan listeners, becomes infused by Tibet. This subjective consciousness of being Tibetan through language, territory and "love" for a cultural entity is instrumental in forming national sentiments. The song also contrasts "pure Tibetan songs" against those sung in "a foreign tongue" thus expressing attachment to Tibetan language as well as mocking those Tibetans who sing in foreign languages, especially Chinese. This contrast reinforces an ideal of pureness or authenticity, appealing to deeply embedded emotions, wherein lies its strength. It also shows Tibetan resistance against the assimilationist policies of the Chinese state, which exercises a hitherto unknown foreign stranglehold on Tibetan cultural production. The gentle pace of the song and silver-toned voice belies the assertiveness and resolution of the lyrics. This particular singer is widely admired for deliberately choosing not to sing in Chinese.

The central symbol of the song, expressed in its second refrain, is the word lama. It is a clear reference to the Dalai Lama. This explains the overall deferential tone of the singing voice, which a Tibetan would usually reserve for paying homage to a senior Buddhist lama. This song is a celebration of a wide-scale political and environmental movement on the Tibetan plateau, which started

in February 2006, prefiguring the protests across Tibet in spring 2008 in all its intensity, geographical scale and composition of participants. In January 2006, at a public teaching in India, the Dalai Lama denounced the Tibetan tradition of adorning *chubas* (*phyu pa*)³⁰ with endangered animal fur and urged all Tibetans to cease the practice. He dramatically declared to a gathering of over ten thousand devotees, “I am ashamed and don’t feel like living when I see all those pictures of people decorating themselves with skins and furs.”³¹ One should not underestimate the gravity of this message to Tibetan devotees, who could not bring themselves to even contemplate the natural demise of their exiled leader let alone to be a cause of it. Although the Dalai Lama’s teachings are banned in China, there were many pilgrims from Tibet among the worshipers who would carry the news back. The Tibetan response to the message of their exiled leader was immediate.

As a show of obedience, public burnings of endangered animal furs started the following month in Amdo Rebgong, in today’s Qinghai province. This sparked off an intense Tibet-wide campaign, and put an end to an age-old tradition in a matter of a few months. As this campaign combined environmental activism with Tibetan political dissent it was widely reported in the international media.³² Renunciation of a traditional chic fashion was correctly interpreted as an expression of unfailing allegiance to the Dalai Lama. Conscious of this fact, the Chinese authorities resorted to coercing Tibetans to wear fur in an effort to counter the Dalai Lama’s influence.³³ The lyrics of this *Dunglen* song are a reiteration of this allegiance and a pledge to carry on the anti-fur campaign. Unlike the Tibetan *Dunglen* artists who, prior to the public burning of animal furs, used to dress lavishly, the music video that accompanies the song features the singer in simple modern attire without excessive jewellery. The projection of this unpretentious self-image underscores the immediate impact of the Dalai Lama’s words in the very person of the singer, not to mention his fellow countrymen. As the lyrics demonstrate, the song also advocates that Tibetan identity can be kept alive by dressing humbly in traditional clothes “woven of cotton and wool” and wearing a rosary, without the need to fall back upon the traditional fur-trimmed costumes and jewellery, which had become frivolously extravagant.

This dress code of humility is also observed by our next *Dunglen* singer who sings a beseeching song, *Lady*, addressed to Tibetan women in general. Although the singer is a newcomer to the

³⁰ Traditional Tibetan overgarment.

³¹ Quoted in Ridder and Collins 2006.

³² Many international news media outlets saw this anti-fur movement in terms of Tibetan discontent with the Chinese rule in Tibet and their show of loyalty to the Dalai Lama: Hilton 2006; Spencer 2006; Phayul 2006; and Wildlifeextra.com 2009.

³³ Ridder and Collins 2006; Macartney 2007.

Dunglen scene his song is worth examining for it typifies many of the politically charged songs inside Tibet. It has simple yet memorable lyrics and an upbeat melody. The music, voice, and words fuse into a rhythmic collage reminiscent of the hoof-beats of mounted horses breaking into a canter. It is tempting for a Tibetan listener to imagine that the riders are none other than the legendary Tibetan armies the song evokes.

Lady

Lady, Lady
 Lady of Utsang!
 Please don't go, please don't go,
 Listen to me! Listen to your big brother!
 For it's time to safeguard the political sovereignty
 Of Ganden Phodrang, the "Blissful Palace."
 Please Lady don't go,
 And stay with me.
 Please stay with me.

Lady, Lady
 Lady of Kham!
 Please don't go, please don't go,
 Listen to me! Listen to your big brother!
 For it's time to command the armies of Chushi Gangdrug,
 The "Four Rivers and Six Ranges."
 Please Lady don't go,
 And stay with me.
 Please stay with me.

Lady, Lady
 Lady of Amdo!
 Please don't go, please don't go,
 Listen to me! Listen to your big brother!
 It's time to behold the blessed face of the Wish-fulfilling Gem.
 Please Lady don't go,
 And stay with me.
 Please stay with me.

This song evokes the prevalent and unifying notion of Tibet as an integrated territory, constituted of three provinces or *cholka-sum* (*Bod chol kha gsum*). The geographical division of Tibet into three principal components has its origins in the distant past. According to written records, the term *cholka-sum* appears to have been used at the latest by the mid thirteenth century during the height of the Sakya rule. It is quite apparent that this term is modelled on even earlier sources. When *Kachem Kakholma* (*Bka' chems ka khol ma*), one of the oldest and most cited Tibetan history books, identifies Tibet as

the divine dominion of Avalokiteśvara it describes Tibet as composed of three regions rich in biodiversity. This book, which is believed to have been written no later than 1049,³⁴ conjures up a pre-human civilisation Tibet: the upper region is a terrain of snow and rock mountains with roaming carnivores and herbivores; the middle part is a zone of rocky meadows and woods teeming with primates and ursine species; and the lower area is an expanse of lakes, forests, and grasslands abounding in species of birds and quadrupeds including elephants and semi-aquatic mammals.³⁵ Many Tibetan historical texts echo this earlier description of Tibet when they refer to the upper part of Tibet as Three Rings of Ngari, the middle part as Four Horns of U-Tsang, and the lower section as the Six Ranges of Dokham or Three Zones of Dokham, denoting the regions of Kham and Amdo. Metaphorically, Ngari is said to resemble a reservoir lake, U-Tsang channels and Dokham fields. This symbolic irrigation system fuses *cholka-sum* into Tibet giving it a territorial integrity as life-giving waters flow from Ngari through U-Tsang to the fertile fields of Kham and Amdo.³⁶

As the song shows, the idea of a territorially-integrated Tibet is an enduring one. It was this Tibet that in 1253 Kublai Khan offered to Sakya Pakpa Lodro Gyaltzen (Sa skya 'phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan) as the latter's dominion after receiving a tantric initiation from the Tibetan Lama for the second time.³⁷ It was this Tibet that the Great Fifth and Thirteenth Dalai Lamas aspired to restore and rule, following in the footsteps of the Tibetan imperial kings. As will be shown in the following section, there is absolutely no doubt that Tibet, constituted of *cholka-sum*, was etched into the Tibetan imagination and part of common parlance well before the establishment of Communist Chinese rule. Such a Tibet roughly corresponds to the Tibetan plateau and is what Tibetans mean by Bod even today. The *Dunglun* song, *Lady*, utilises such a perception of Tibet to remind Tibetans of a glorious past and to call for a concerted effort for its emulation. A unique feature of each Tibetan province is evoked in order to make this appeal.

At the very outset the song jogs the collective historical memory of Tibetans by recalling the Great Fifth Dalai Lama's Ganden

³⁴ This book is believed to be a treasure text which contains the testament of the Tibetan emperor, Songtsen Gampo. It is said to have been concealed in one of the pillars inside Lhasa Jokhang Temple and later discovered by Atisha in 1049. See editor Smon lam rgya mtsho's preface 1989: 1–3 and Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 2002: 1–2 for a brief description and dating of the text. In his analysis of Tibetan kingly cosmogonic narrative Davidson (2004: 67, 78–80) dates it to the twelfth century.

³⁵ Smon lam rgya mtsho 1989: 47.

³⁶ For an explanation of *cholka-sum* and the internal territorial divisions of respective provinces see Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 2002: 1430–1431; Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982: 1–2 and Shwa sgab pa dbang phyug bde ldan 1976: 26–7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 281–83 and Shing bza' skal bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan 1992: 653.

Phodrang government (Dga' ldan pho brang, the Blissful Palace), which was situated in Lhasa, U-Tsang. The Fifth Dalai Lama is a nationally unifying figure. He is renowned for his distinguished service to Tibet including its reunification in the mid seventeenth century.³⁸ By evoking the image of this celebrated Tibetan political institution, which was established in 1642 and persisted until 1959, the song not only remembers a political community of the past, it also entertains an idea of its restoration in the future. This is what many theorists of nation recognise as the will to live in a political community of shared values. In fact, the song refuses to acknowledge the current political reality that Ganden Phodrang has been exiled and its power sapped. The lyrics imply that it is still in charge of Tibet although its sovereignty or sovereign jurisdiction, *srid mtha'*, is in dire need of protection.

The second stanza recalls a very recent event in Tibetan history—the military campaigns of Chushi Gangdrug (Chu bzhi sgang drug) against the advancing Chinese Communist forces in the 1950s and 1960s. The lyricist selects this historic movement for its evocative power as well as its association with the second Tibetan province of Kham. Its name translates as “Four Rivers and Six Ranges,”³⁹ indicating that its members were predominantly from Kham where most of these famous Tibetan landmarks can be located. This organisation is also known as Tensung Danglang Magar (Bstan srung dang blangs dmag sgar), the “Voluntary Force for the Defence of Dharma.” This guerrilla movement was initiated as a reaction against the bloody crackdown on Tibetan resistance to CCP reforms in Kham and Amdo in the mid 1950s. It was formed in 1956 and its military campaigns finally came to an end in 1974. It was partly financed by the CIA from 1957 until 1968.⁴⁰ The military operations carried out by the agents of Four Rivers and Six Ranges, former Tibetan nomads, farmers and traders, have acquired a mythic status and continue to fire the imagination of young Tibetans. Although the soldiers of Chushi Gangdrug laid down their arms long ago, this song imagines commanding its armies once more, yet again expressing an aspiration to recapture an imagined sovereign nation, through violent means if necessary.

The song concludes by invoking the name of the exiled Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who was born in the third Tibetan province Amdo. As in the previous songs, the Dalai Lama is not mentioned

³⁸ The legacy of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama is acknowledged by many scholars but to name a few: Karmay 1998: 504–522; Dawa Norbu 2001: 65–85; Shwa sgab pa 1976: 397–463; Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 2002: 677–678; and Laird 2006: 152–184.

³⁹ For a breakdown of this list of names see Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 2002: 824.

⁴⁰ Aspects of this violent Tibetan resistance are still shrouded in mystery but recent accounts can be found in Andrugtsang 1973; Sarin and Sonam 1998; Knaus 1999; Dunham 2004; and Tsong kha lha mo tse ring 1992, 1998, 2002, and 2003.

by name to avoid Chinese censorship and political trouble for the singer, but as the “Wish-fulfilling Gem” (Yid bzhin nor bu).⁴¹ Although this is an epithet usually associated with the Dalai Lama, it is sufficiently ambiguous to allow for an argument that it refers to another senior lama in case of political interrogation over the lyrics. The music video of the song synchronises an image of the late Tenth Panchen Lama with the utterance of this honorific title as another deflection. He is paying homage to Jowo Shakyamuni, the most venerated statue of Buddha in Tibet, which is also known as the “Wish-fulfilling Gem” (Jo bo yid bzhin nor bu). Despite these deflections, the identity of the holy person is clear for a devout Tibetan listener in tune with the political message of this song. That the producers go to such great length to conceal the identity of their exiled leader when the song openly calls for the resurgence of “the armies of Chushi Gangdrug” may seem perplexing but it reflects the hidden nature of Tibetan subversion within contemporary China. Like James Scott’s “hidden transcripts” assertive messages are conveyed, but only to their targeted audience “behind the back of the dominant.”⁴² They do not seek open confrontation but build tacit community solidarity. The central message of the song is a call to Tibetans to regain a Tibet constituted of three *cholkas* by restoring Ganden Phodrang, enthroning the Dalai Lama and safeguarding it by military means, Chushi Gangdrug.

That Sweet Home of Snow

There is a common intellectual consensus that the concept of native territory or homeland plays a pivotal role in the formation of national consciousness as can be seen in the already cited “objective” definition of nation given by Stalin. Distinguishing nation from a state or an ethnic community Anthony D. Smith too places emphasis on its territorial dimension when he writes that a nation “must reside in a perceived homeland of its own, at least for a long period of time, in order to constitute itself as a nation” with a shared culture and an aspiration for nationhood.⁴³ It is also this attachment to a sacred, ancient, and uniquely sublime land, which is a reoccurring theme in many of today’s *Dunglen* songs. The Tibetan concept of homeland transcends immediate tribal and regional boundaries as well as the administrative demarcations established by the Chinese state. This “delocalisation in the imagination”⁴⁴ of Tibetans can be traced as far back as the Tibetan empire and has also been reinforced by the current collective experience of Chinese rule. The idea of Tibet as a “land of snow” or a “land encircled by snow-

⁴¹ Yid bzhin nor bu is an honorific term signifying reverence to a sacred entity.

⁴² Scott 1990: xii.

⁴³ Smith 2010: 13.

⁴⁴ Bulag 1998: 173–179.

capped mountains” permeates historical and religious texts, classical and contemporary Tibetan literature, and traditional oral narratives and ordinary speech. For example, a passage from *The Old Tibetan Chronicle*, which describes the descent of the first Tibetan mythic king, Nyaktri Tsenpo (Gnya’ khri btsan po), displays a self-centric spatial representation of Tibet, characteristic of pre-Buddhist Tibetan thinking, when it celebrates Tibet as:

Centre of the sky
 Middle of the earth
 Core of the continent
 Ring of snow mountains
 Source of all rivers
 High peaks, pure earth⁴⁵
 A great land where
 Men are born wise, brave and devout
 Where flourish horses ever so swift.⁴⁶

The *Kachem Kakholma*, another early Tibetan historical source intersperses its text with the phrase “Tibet—the Land of Snow” so frequently that it resonates in the ear long after reading. For instance, the chapter on the origin of the Tibetan race uses the phrase no less than sixteen times with slight variations.⁴⁷ Another frequently cited verse gives what is typical in Tibetan histories: a depiction of the Snow Land of Tibet as divinely-chosen—the dominion of Avalokiteśvara, indicating the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet:

To the north of Eastern Bodhgaya
 Lies the Purgyal⁴⁸ land of Tibet
 High mountains like celestial pillars
 Low lakes like turquoise *maṇḍala*
 Snow mountains like crystal *stūpa*
 Golden mountains of amber meadows
 Sweet fragrance of medicinal incense

⁴⁵ This is a borrowing of Hugh Richardson’s translation of the Tibetan phrase *ri mtho sa gtsang*.

⁴⁶ This extract can be found in PT1286 and its Tibetan transcription as follow: *Gnam gyi ni dbus / sa ’I ni dkyil / glng gi ni snying (36) po / gangs kyi ni ra ba / chu bo kun kyi ni mgo bo / rI mtho sa gtsang / yul bzang / myi ’dzangs shing (37) dpa’ du skye / chos bzang du byed / rta mgyogs su ’phel ba ’I gnasu*—as found at http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp/archives.cgi?p=Pt_1286. For a translation of a longer passage from PT1286 including this extract see Snellgrove and Richardson 1995: 24. For similar quotations expressing Tibetan geo-spiritual self-representations see Shwa sgab pa 1976: 17–18 and Macdonald 1971: 190–391.

⁴⁷ Smon lam rgya mtsho 1989: 45–57.

⁴⁸ Purgyal, *pur rgyal*, is an old epithet for Tibet. Tibetan scholars disagree over the etymology of the term but for an analysis of it see Don grub rgyal 1997, volume 3: 1–13.

In autumn bloom, flowers golden
 In summer bloom, flowers turquoise
 Oh! Avalokiteśvara!
 The Lord of snow mountains
 Your dominion lies in that land
 In that dominion live your converts-to-be!⁴⁹

As already noted the idea of Tibet as a land of snow is not confined to historical or religious texts. It is also pervasive in oral expressions, the impact and reach of which, given that Tibet is still a primarily oral society, far transcends that of textual sources. A stereotypical Amdo wedding recital (*gnyen bshad*) gives prominence to the snowy features of Tibet, reiterating metaphorical idioms found in the above verse:

Yes! Let me praise the lie of the solid land, the flow of the pristine rivers and the formation of the high snow mountains of Tibet—this Land of Snows. In its upper region, the Three Rings of Ngari resemble a crystal *stūpa*-like snow mountain; in its middle region, the Four Horns of U-Tsang⁵⁰ are like a snow lion flaunting its turquoise mane around its neck; in its lower region, the Six Ranges of Dokham blaze like a tigress and her cub. The majestic Machen snow mountain is like a crystal pillar soaring into the azure sky. The Snow Mountain of Ultimate Victories⁵¹ is like a silver banner fluttering in the wind. The runaway expanse of the Blue Lake⁵² is like the azure sky fallen upon the earth.⁵³

Within these grandiose, archetypical images are allusions to Tibet's snow-peaked sacred landscape and past military prowess. U-Tsang known for its association with the four great divisions of the Tibetan imperial army and Dokham, where many imperial battles were

⁴⁹ Quoted in Shwa sgab pa dbang phyug bde ldan 1976: 17.

⁵⁰ *Dbus gtsang ri bzhi* can alternatively be rendered into English as Four Divisions of U-Tsang reflecting its initial military connotation.

⁵¹ This is the name of a mountain in Northeastern Tibet (Gangs dkar phyogs las rnam rgyal). It appears to be an outlier of Kulun Mountains (Khu nu la'i ri ryud) and can be located in today's Themchen county, Qinghai. Some argue that it is called Gangs dkar phyogs las rnam bgyad, the Eight-peaked Snow-mountain. For a discussion of this mountain initiated by Mda' tshan pa visit: www.khabdha.org/?p=7601, 10 May 2010. I am grateful to all the contributors.

⁵² *Mtsho sngon khri shor rgyal mo* is another Tibetan term for *Mtsho sngon po*, the Blue Lake (Kokonor). A more literal translation would be "The Blue Lake that Caused Ten Thousand Losses" or "The Blue Lake that Flooded the Land of Ten Thousand Families." Legend has it that when its primordial waters first gushed out of the earth to form a lake it burst forth to deluge a massive expanse of land inhabited by ten thousand nomadic families.

⁵³ A written version of this nuptial recital can be found in Karma mkha' 'bum and Bkra shis rgyal mtshan 1995a: 65.

fought, garrisons stationed and later settled, are likened to the physical beauty and ferocity of feline beasts. Ngari, the home of holy Mt Kailash represents Tibet's snow enshrined sacredness. This sacredness is emphasised further as the nuptial recital continues listing one great snow mountain of Tibet after another before launching into the main section. Many Tibetan ballads contain similar passages. One of the most famous bandit ballads begins as follows:

Beneath the celestial stars, moon and sun
Lies Tibet where high mountains compete
Looking up, beholding that mountain
There in that misty mountain
Reside I, Long-necked Yedak⁵⁴
Whose tale is endless to tell
Whose deeds are never done.⁵⁵

A traditional oral ode to the tribal land of Mayshul (Dme shul) in the Upper Rebgong region of Amdo, once again demonstrates the centrality of the Tibet image in its narrative. Before praising the beauty, natural resources and the bravery of its people, first and foremost it locates their land:

Beneath the tent of the azure sky
Atop the fine mat of the solid earth
Inside Tibet, the land of snow mounts.⁵⁶

These citations could be expanded upon endlessly and form an inexhaustible repertoire of enduring historical concepts and symbols which call into question the fashionable notion that the national concept is an invention of the moderns.⁵⁷ Versed in the discourse that views nation and nationalism as products of modern invention Gellner states: "The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shreds and patches would have served as well."⁵⁸ There are, of course, many cases of deliberate "inventions of tradition" involving re-appropriations of long lost symbols and rituals for nationalistic ends as demonstrated

⁵⁴ The real name of this particular bandit was Bsam grub rgya mtsho but he was and is better known by the nickname Yi dwags ske la meaning the "long-necked" or "scrawny-necked hungry ghost."

⁵⁵ For a written version of this ballad see Karma mkha' 'bum and Bkra shis rgyal mtshan 1995b: 47. For an account of this bandit and his socio-political milieu see Lama Jabb 2009.

⁵⁶ Karma mkha' 'bum and Bkra shis rgyal mtshan 1995b: 87.

⁵⁷ See Dreyfus 2003: 492–522 for an account of Tibetan collective sense of identity predating the modern age that critiques this extreme modernist conception of national identity.

⁵⁸ Gellner 2006: 55.

by Eric Hobsbawm and others.⁵⁹ However, as shown by the concept of Tibet found in the above examples and the cited *Dunglen* lyrics, this is not always the case. The conceptualisation of Tibet as a vast snowy land constituted of three zones has been embedded in the Tibetan psyche for a long time. This continuity with the past cannot be dismissed as mere use of ancient material for novel nationalistic purposes. Whether or not such an idealised, mythologised Tibet conforms to historical facts is a moot point. Time-honoured affection for an ancestral homeland provokes emotive political loyalty and generates a sense of national solidarity. It is this and similarly-overlooked fluid continuities from the past that partially explain Tibet's enduring cohesive dynamism in the absence of a state of its own to, in the idiom of Gellner, provide a "political roof" for preserving its national culture.⁶⁰

Closely associated with this concept of Tibet is the political reality and idea of exile, which entails if not total loss then partial loss of that idealised home. An exile's predicament, sense of alienation, and acute homesickness are commonly recognised features of a forced life in a foreign land. What is little acknowledged is the other side of the exile coin, at least in the case of Tibetans: the sense of loss, anguish, and predicament experienced by those who are left behind in a troubled homeland. This experience of exile by those who are not in exile is characterised by pain of separation, the current plight, and a longing for a banished leader and reunion with exiled fellow countrymen. Exile thus plays an influential role in the formation of modern Tibetan national consciousness as evident in its impact upon contemporary Tibetan artistic output such as songs, poetry, and fictive narratives. These artistic productions make it plain that exile is a powerful transnational force in the reconstruction of Tibetan national identity inside contemporary Tibet. Homeland, exile, and loss of identity are inextricably intermeshed as shown by the following prose poem by Jangbu, one of the most acclaimed modern Tibetan poets.

Homeland

Our homeland is the liberating property of a term in the dictionary of the future that may only reach us from a remote place after many years. Inside that term the river is forever ebbing away while the fish, seizing the opportunity presented by the distant flow of the river, are pursuing already formed particularities in the distance. After many years, when they meet in a foreign land they

⁵⁹ Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

⁶⁰ Gellner 1998: 53.

will nurture a new home by an old philosophy⁶¹ and will have forgotten the past intimidations, massacres and betrayals, and may speak to their children of a distant river of ancient times and a distant borrowed home of the future. Upon pondering this, those who lost their homeland may only then pay attention to their homeland. In essence, homeland is our own body and the fragmentary explanation upon which the body itself relies.⁶²

Following the advice of Cleanth Brooks, I will not maul and distort the meanings this poem communicates through clumsy paraphrases.⁶³ Allowing the poem to speak for itself, it is sufficient to say that loss of political power at home results in an experience of exile akin to that felt by Tibetan refugees in foreign lands, even if one corporeally exists in Tibet. The acclaimed Tibetan writer Woenser speaks of a similar national psychology when she opines that regardless of their place of residence all Tibetans are exiles “in body and spirit.”⁶⁴ The exiling of the Dalai Lama is a constant reminder of that assault on the Tibetan body in the 1950s and Woenser underscores this when she writes: “Every time His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaks to Tibetans in India or in other countries he frequently repeats the words *tseñjol* (exile) and *tseñjolpa* (an exile), and the deep impression left by these two words has become a significant identifier of the Tibetan people post-1959.”⁶⁵ The Dalai Lama, the Tibetan community and government in exile indeed occupy a special place in the imagination of Tibetans still inside Tibet. Many follow the incessant global travels of His Holiness and his every deed unflinchingly. The naming of Dharamsala as “Little Lhasa” is not a mere cliché. With the flight of Tibetan refugees to India, the centre of Tibetan political identity shifted, to use a Tibetan flourish, beyond the Himalayas. Although Dharamsala possesses no economic and military hard power, it does enjoy soft power. In the eyes of many Tibetans, political legitimacy to rule Tibet resides there.

Charles Ramble has traced the shifting centres of Tibetan identity throughout the ages and noted the pivotal role India still plays.⁶⁶ Influenced by Bon cosmology, pre-Buddhist Tibetans saw Tibet occupying the centre of the world, as evident in the extract from *The Old Tibetan Chronicle* cited above. The advent of Buddhism turned Tibet into a self-styled “Region of Barbarians” (*mtha' 'khob kyī yul*) in

⁶¹ *Byed thabs snying ba shig* can be more literally translated as “an old method.” Here philosophy in its connotation as a theory or attitude that guides one’s behaviour is preferred.

⁶² Ljang bu 2001: 23.

⁶³ Brooks 1959: 256.

⁶⁴ Woenser 2009: 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 10.

⁶⁶ Ramble: 2009.

dire need of a Buddhist liberation. Tibet's spiritual centre shifted to India, the "Land of Spiritually Exalted Beings" (*rgya gar 'phags pa'i yul*). I would argue that the flight of the Dalai Lama and the Ganden Phodrang government has reinforced this spiritual locus by also shifting the centre of political legitimacy. India captured and still captures the imagination of Tibetan Buddhist devotees, but it now also fuels the political imagination of Tibetan artists and activists. Under colonial conditions the narration of exile in Tibetan imaginative writing, including songs and poetry, becomes a form of remembrance, resistance, and living. "The struggle of man against power," writes Milan Kundera "is the struggle of memory against forgetting."⁶⁷ *Dunglen* songs are part of this struggle. They counter the Chinese colonial narrative of Tibetan history and society by remembering the silenced tragedies of a very recent past and a living present. Singers and song writers remember through a creative fusion of music and oral and literary arts, with far-reaching consequences.

Fusing Literary and Ordinary Speech

Dunglen songs have a popular reach even though many of the impassioned lyrics are at times conspicuously literary. This popular reception is achieved through a fusion of literary and ordinary speech in lyric writing, and in performance through enunciation of the words in the most prevalent accent accompanied by explanatory visual images. The contrived style of some *Dunglen* lyrics seems to exemplify the Formalist definition of literature as an "organised violence committed on ordinary speech."⁶⁸ Through the use of literary devices and deliberate crafting, ordinary language is transformed, intensified, condensed, inverted and made unfamiliar to a plain speaker. For instance, the lyrics of *An Ingrained Dream* are versified using a combination of formal phraseology and spoken language, with greater emphasis on the latter. However, even this song employs the complex classical synonym "Harbour Palace of the Pure Realm" (*zhing dag pa gru 'dzin pho brang*) as a substitute for the Potala Palace. This is the classical Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term *Potala*, but it is only in circulation among literate Tibetans. According to Buddhist mythology, Mount Potala is the abode of Avalokiteśvara and situated on an island south of Sri Lanka.⁶⁹ The Potala Palace in Lhasa was named after it. This mythological allusion would fail to signify the Potala Palace to non-literate Tibetans if it was not accompanied by the term Phodrang for palace and the music video featuring the signified. Although an

⁶⁷ Kundera 1982: 3.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Eagleton 1996: 2.

⁶⁹ Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 2002: 562.

excessive reliance on formal phraseology and classical Tibetan poetics would no doubt undermine the popular reach of *Dunglen*, moderate use of highly literary terms is valuable in articulating politically sensitive issues and ideas.

A synthesis of literary and ordinary speech enables *Dunglen* songs to function as a communication link between Tibetan intellectuals and the ordinary people, thereby bringing them into a cohesive discourse. Something akin to Antonio Gramsci's "democratic centralism" is in operation here, with an "organic unity" between the intellectuals and ordinary people ensured through constant communication and interaction.⁷⁰ The intellectual keeps abreast of the concrete realities and basic necessities on the ground through "active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser," and as "permanent persuader."⁷¹ Through a combination of formal phraseology and ordinary speech many *Dunglen* songs express deep emotions, anxieties and grievances that concern ordinary Tibetan people. It is this ability to organise and coherently articulate many unexpressed feelings, ideas, and issues of the ordinary people that makes *Dunglen* an effective mode of communication in contemporary Tibet. The intellectual lyricists are highly sensitive to the current situation in Tibet and conscious of Tibetan historical experience and cultural heritage. As a result, their songs not only express a variety of emotions but also convey political ideas and ideals, such as national pride and national liberation, back to the listening masses.

Conclusion

The *Dunglen* genre has been flourishing since the early 1980s. Although this paper emphasises the politically suggestive songs, these constitute only a part of the *Dunglen* genre and the variety of subject matter it tackles. Yet, for nearly three decades there has been a proliferation of nationally-expressive songs and even a cursory overview of some of the lyrics produced since the birth of the *Dunglen* reveals that its patriotic content augments as the years progress. In the songs of the early 1980s, one finds many archetypal images and tropes referring to Tibet and Tibetans as a collective identity, but less frequent and less explicit than is the case today. Songs have progressively become more audacious and expressive over the decades. The coded language and ambiguity of earlier songs have given way to more explicit expressions of nostalgia for past glories and aspirations for their emulation. These songs are informed by complex systems of beliefs and values deeply embedded in Tibetan society alongside textual knowledge and

⁷⁰ Gramsci 1971: 188–190.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*: 10.

traditional oral narratives. They in turn inform the Tibetan audience and have become a vital mode of cultural communication and production serving a patriotic socialisation of contemporary Tibetans. The expressiveness of modern Tibetan music and its preoccupation with common concerns make it one of what Durkheim, following Albert Schaeffle, refers to as social “tissues” or “social bonds” that facilitate national solidarity.⁷²

Modern Tibetan music is one of the many communicative modes currently deployed to narrate the Tibetan nation from the margins of the contemporary Chinese state. This process of narration entails a reconstruction of Tibetan national consciousness that draws on Tibet’s past, present, and future. Whilst appreciating the significance of this role we should also not forget that the communicative efficacy of *Dunglun* resides in its ability to delight its audience. Ultimately it adheres to the old Tibetan adage:

When happy sing songs of tea, wine, and mirth
When sad sing songs of self-consolation.⁷³

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2012 "Singing the Nation: Modern Tibetan Music and National Identity". In Tim Myatt et al (eds), *Revisiting Tibetan Culture and History*. Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute, pp. 1-29. This essay was first published online in *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, No. 21 (Oct 2011), pp. 1-29. 2011 "The Consciousness of the past in the creativity of the present: Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change". In *International Journal of Asian Studies*, No 8, 1, pp. 89-95. Books: 2015 *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature: The Inescapable Nation*. New York: Lexington Books. 2009 *Studies in Singing the nation: modern tibetan music and national identity*. 1. Lama Jabb. I'll sing you a song today. Not to flaunt my voice. Finally, talking about the relationship between music and (national) collective identity, Bohlman (2004) points out how nationalistic music plays a significant role in the formation of ethnic consciousness. In particular, music can serve a nation state in its competition with other nation states and contribute to the struggle over contested territory such as border regions: in this view, possessing music becomes possessing land. For the author, nationalist music relies on the symbolism of structures that defines the nation, creates and fabricates an image of the state and enters into public and National identity is a person's identity or sense of belonging to one state or to one nation. It is the sense of "a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, and language." National identity may refer to the subjective feeling one shares with a group of people about a nation, regardless of one's legal citizenship status. National identity is viewed in psychological terms as "an awareness of difference", a "feeling and recognition of 'we' and 'they'".