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## Introduction | Theorizing the Secular in Tibetan Cultural Worlds

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# Introduction | Theorizing the Secular in Tibetan Cultural Worlds

Holly Gayley  
Nicole Willock

This special issue on 'The Secular in Tibetan Cultural Worlds' originated in a panel on *The Secular in Tibet and Mongolia* at the Thirteenth Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia in 2013. To contextualize the contributions to this issue, spanning diverse temporal and geographic contexts, this Introduction raises theoretical concerns and discusses contested terminology regarding 'religion' and the 'secular' in Tibetan discourse. The authors situate *local articulations of the secular* within broader academic discussions of the varieties of Asian secularisms and offer a key intervention to complicate the secularization thesis and prevailing views of Tibet as a predominantly religious culture.

**Keywords:** religion, Tibet, secularism.

## Introduction

When one gazes at *The Hulk*, a painting by Lhasa-based artist Gadé, something hauntingly familiar and immediately jarring appears at once. Bounding out from the mandalic frame of traditional Buddhist iconography is the green and muscular comic-book hero, Hulk, in the guise of a wrathful tantric deity. Like a wrathful deity, he wears a tiger skin around his waist, grimaces at the viewer, and engages in a menacing dance. Yet the background from which the Hulk emerges is neither the comic book page nor a blackened sky illuminated by the flames of compassion and benevolent gaze of lamas and tantric deities; instead it features macabre scenes of fornication and murder suggestive of a degenerate modernity. In works of Tibetan modern art by Gadé, as Leigh Miller discusses in her contribution to this issue, religious and secular imagery collide and invite the viewer into reflection about the hybrid realities of urban life in Lhasa. Introducing Gadé's work, Rossi and Rossi suggest that *The Hulk* and other images from his Diamond Series deliver a certain "culture shock" to disrupt the enduring myth of Tibet as a Buddhist Shangri-la.<sup>1</sup>

This special issue of *HIMALAYA* on 'The Secular in Tibetan Cultural Worlds' illuminates the myriad ways that religion and the secular serve as mutually constituted categories in interaction in Tibetan contexts, amplifying each other in unpredictable ways as in Gadé's *The Hulk*. Building on the seminal anthology, *The Varieties of Secularism across Asia* edited by Nils Bubandt and Martijn van Beek (2012), this issue introduces case studies to help broaden our understanding

of Asian encounters with the secular, here specifically with respect to Tibetan cultural contexts that span the Himalaya and Central Asia. Yet we take a different approach than Bubandt and van Beek. They were primarily interested in eruptions of the ‘spiritual’ that bring to light ironic fissures in the differentiation between religion and the secular in Asian national spaces. Instead, we explore how local agents shape and respond to moments of distinction, hybridity, and synthesis in the formation of ‘religion’ (*chos lugs*) and the ‘secular’ (variously: *jigs rten*, *chos lugs ris med*, and *chos med ring lugs*) as these categories emerge in Tibetan literary, artistic, political, and religious expression.

Unlike the fantasy of Tibet as a hermetically sealed Shangri-la, we take Tibetan cultural worlds to be cosmopolitan in nature and transnational in scope, regarding Tibetan language as a *lingua franca* uniting diverse constituencies from Gangtok to Ulaanbaatar. The geographic and temporal scope of our case studies in this issue allows us to track how Tibetans (and those writing in Tibetan) have interacted with various modes of secularism in their diverse geopolitical contexts, given the lack of a unified Tibetan nation-state within which to envision and promote secularism. In doing so, we hope to illuminate secular intellectual, artistic, and literary engagements with—as well as Buddhist monastic negotiations of—the boundaries between religion and the secular at specific historical conjunctures from the seventeenth century to the present. In charting the emergent terminology for ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ in Tibetan discourse, we also survey diverse views regarding the role of religion in Tibetan society and politics.

### Local Articulations of the Secular

When considering the secular in relation to Tibetan cultural worlds, a central problematic emerges, namely the widespread conception that Tibet was an isolated and predominantly religious culture that did not encounter secularism until its abrupt entry into modernity with the invasion of the People’s Liberation Army in 1950. Tibet has been alternately hailed as an isolated Shangri-la and repository of ancient Buddhist wisdom (for a critique thereof, see Lopez 1998) or condemned as a ‘feudal theocracy’ that failed to modernize due to its ‘synthesis of religion and politics’ (Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2013). Both views simplify the complexities of pre-1950 Tibet and reflect a common trend to reify Tibet as both ‘religious’ and ‘traditional’ in contradistinction to China as ‘secular’ and ‘modern.’ Janet Gyatso (2011, 2015) has skillfully queried the tendency among scholars to date the advent of modernity in Tibet to 1950 through high-

lighting the emergence of an early modern episteme in certain instances from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Along similar lines, in this issue, we call attention to early moments in defining a secular sphere, such as the high literary culture at Mindroling during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Townsend), and early-twentieth century engagements with secularism, such as appropriations of Sumpa Khenpo’s construction of the historical Gesar in socialist Mongolia (King) and Dorjé Tarchin’s founding of the first Tibetan newspaper, the *Melong* or *Tibet Mirror*, in Kalimpong (Willock).

These moments and their implications for understanding the secular in Tibetan contexts risk being elided whenever Tibetan culture is mythologized and dislodged from specific historical and geographic contexts (Lopez 1998: 200). To move beyond this problematic, we showcase a variety of active engagements with defining and co-traversing the line between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular,’ including Buddhist appropriations of secular categories throughout the twentieth century and the deployment of religious themes in modern Tibetan art and literature today. Moreover, regarding Tibetan as a *lingua franca* which has united religious figures, aristocrats, traders, pilgrims, and refugees across the Himalayas and Central Asia in a shared intellectual and social discourse, we track responses to ‘secularism’ as an ideology throughout the twentieth century in engagement with Indian, Chinese, and Russian formulations.

This special issue of *HIMALAYA* represents one of the first sustained engagements with the secular in Tibetan contexts. Inspired by the recent theoretical contributions on the varieties of secularisms by scholars such as Nils Bubandt, Martijn van Beek, and Peter van der Veer, the contributors examine Tibetan innovations, appropriations, and responses to emergent and competing secularisms in the specific geographic, historical, and political contexts in which Tibetans have found and continue to find themselves. We address questions such as: How do ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ function as discursive formations among Tibetan speakers, writers, and artists across the trans-Himalayan region? In what ways have Tibetans understood the secular, re-inscribing it into the past or claiming it in the present, in conversation with Indian, Chinese, and Russian forms of secularism? Specifically, how does the cross-fertilization of religious and secular spheres for Tibetans—and particularly the notion of ‘synthesizing religion and politics’ (*chos srid zung ’brel*)—challenge the way discussions about the secular are framed? In addressing these questions, the contributors to this issue take as an operating premise that ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ are value-laden

terms that operate within a dense nexus of associated ideas, such as tradition and modernity, and are shaped by intellectuals as well as various institutions — educational, governmental, and monastic.

Particularly useful for this study is the notion of *local articulations of the secular*, which builds on the concept of ‘vernacular projects of secularism.’ These are the boundary-making practices involved in constructing ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ in different times and places (Bubandt and van Beek 2012: 12). We use local articulations of the secular to draw attention to specific engagements with and expressions of ambivalences toward ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ as emergent categories within a Tibetan ethno-linguistic register, situated in broader, multilingual discursive contexts. The emphasis on the local does not discount the influence of the normative global discourse on secularism, nor does it overlook the transnational character of Tibetan culture and discourse. Rather, we pay attention to the local grounds on which the discursive production of ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ emerge, as on-going processes of negotiation in specific historical and geographic contexts. Such cultural production involves both boundary-making and boundary-breaching, which Bubandt and van Beek recognize as the global-national-local nexus of secularism (2012: 13). The approach of local articulations of the secular allows us to cast a wide historical and geographical net while focusing on specific local examples, such as how Amdo writers within China are expressing ambivalence toward Buddhist ideas in literary and polemic works (Robin) or how Buddhist teachers in northern India are engaging the category of the secular in order to appropriate the prestige of modernity while emphasizing cultural continuity with the Tibetan past (Pitkin).

### Distinct but Intertwined Domains

To provide a context for the case studies presented in this issue, we call attention to several key moments in the formulation of the secular in Tibetan discourse in order to disrupt the tendency to regard Tibetan culture as predominantly religious. We find Peter van der Veer’s work helpful. Similarly to Bubandt and van Beek, he draws attention to intersections between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ as mutually constituted categories that are continuously negotiated by local historical agents. Van der Veer is particularly instructive in outlining the distinctive features of secularism in India and China, two of the main geopolitical contexts inhabited by contemporary Tibetans. Further, he reminds us that religion can be a source for ‘modern’ subject formation as well as “central to the formation of national identities” (2001: 39) in colonial and postcolonial

contexts. Recent scholarship on a range of secularisms enables us to move beyond the telos of the secularization thesis—the narrative that modernity necessitates the separation of religion from the public and political sphere (for a critique thereof, see Asad 2003; Casanova 2011). In what follows, we characterize in brief and broad terms the formation of the secular in Tibetan discourse in order to ground the case studies in this issue. While we note several formative moments, we do not intend to posit a unified or homogenous narrative nor provide a comprehensive survey of the topic. Even the very translation of the English term ‘secular’ remains contested, such the emergence of and shifts in Tibetan terminology have ideological ramifications in different historical and geographic contexts.

The early modern formulation of the secular can be traced to at least the seventeenth century with the Tibetan term *chösi* (*chos srid*) referring to two spheres, the spiritual and temporal, yet as we discuss below, this conception developed variant nuances over time. The notion of *chösi*, discussed by Ishihama as ‘Buddhist governance,’ can be found in at least three linguistic registers as shown in Tibetan, Mongolian, and Manchu sources from the mid-seventeenth century revealing that that this concept served in formal diplomacy at that time (2004: 15 ff.). In addition, as John Ardussi points out, “During the 17-year period 1625–42, three governments were formed in Tibetan cultural regions of the Himalayas that endured into the 20th century, each with a distinct religion-state basis,” namely in central Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan (2004: 11). With the unification of central Tibet under the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642, and through the writings of his regent Desi Sangyé Gyatso, another related term became significant, namely *chösi zungdrel* (*chos srid zung ’brel*) (Ardussi 2004; Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2009, vol. 21: 369), often anachronistically translated in reference to this period as the ‘union of religion and politics’.

In the phrase *chösi zungdrel*, the term *chö* (*chos*) translates the Sanskrit *dharma*. Although its implied referent would change over time, during its early usage, this term refers specifically to Buddhism. In contrast, *si* (*srid*) has the sense of a ‘temporal kingdom or polity’ (*’jig rten rgyal srid*) even though the term has a broad semantic range that includes existence, the temporal order, *saṃsāra*, society, and politics. In defining these two distinct domains, brought together in a Buddhist polity, the Tibetan notion of *chösi zungdrel* acknowledges a worldly or mundane sphere apart from the transcendent pursuits of Buddhist monastics. This notion likely evolved from the *Abhidharma* distinction between the mundane (Tib: *’jig rten pa*, Skt: *laukika*) and transcendent (Tib: *’jig rten las ’das pa*, Skt: *lokottara*), but the

relationship between the pair in Tibetan-language treatments ‘oscillates’ like a kaleidoscope, shifting at different points in historical time (Ruegg 2013: 212, 225). Nonetheless, the system of conjoining the two signaled the close connection between Buddhism and the state (Schuh 2004: 291).

The seventeenth-century Tibetan notion of *chösi zungdrel* drew legitimacy from earlier antecedents in the Sakya hegemony of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that initiated a ‘patron-priest’ (*yon mchod*, alt. *mchod yon*) model of rule by Tibetan hierarchs and their Mongol backers (Ruegg 2004) as well as from treasure texts, such as the *Mañi Kabum* (*Ma ñi bka’ ’bum*) and *Pema Khatang* (*Pad ma kha thang*). These works re-imagined Tibet’s imperial period of the seventh to ninth centuries in Buddhist terms (Ishihama 2004). David Ruegg characterizes the ‘patron-priest’ relationship as a ‘diarchic form of governance’ conjoining the ‘twin systems’ (*lugs gnyis*) of the spiritual and temporal orders (2004: 9). Alternatively, Schuh argues that the concept of ‘sacred kingship,’ based on the notion of ‘dharma-king’ or *chögyal* (*chos rgyal*), best encapsulates the form of government in Tibet historically with antecedents found in the imperial rule by the Yarlung Dynasty and the ideal of the *cakravartin* or ‘wheel-turning ruler’ documented by the Gungthang kings, both of which served as the basis for the recognition of the Dalai Lama as an emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (2004: 291–294). The notion of *chösi zungdrel* gained widespread currency in the language of Tibetan statecraft during the rule of Dalai Lamas and forms a shared understanding against which twentieth-century Tibetan-language articulations of the secular are defined.

Notably, the formulation of *chösi zungdrel* coincides with a cosmopolitan period of growth in secular fields of knowledge (*rig gnas*) in Tibet, through the expansion in medical institutions and knowledge (Gyatso 2015) and an efflorescence in literature and the arts beginning in the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama. As Tsering Gonkatsang’s translation of ‘Tibetan Woodblock Printing: An Ancient Art and Craft’ by the historian Dungkar Lobzang Trinlé (1927–1997) reveals, a highly sophisticated system of cultural production was in place in the early eighteenth century for the printing of the Narthang and Dégé Buddhist canons, involving large capital investment, a diverse labor force, and commodities exchange. Further, Dominique Townsend discusses in this issue how the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries witnessed the flourishing of Tibetan ‘high culture’ and the promulgation of the five major fields of knowledge, based on the classical Indic system of *pañcavidyāsthāna*, including the worldly (*jig rten*) topics of

logic, medicine, visual arts, and grammar and the transcendent topic of Buddhist knowledge (*nang gi rig pa*). Examining the views of key figures associated with Mindrolling Monastery near Lhasa in this period, Townsend traces “conflicting views on how worldly and religious values should be balanced” and the “slippage between the mutually defining spheres.” While there may not have been a single dominant view or consensus on the valuations and balance between these spheres, their articulation and rise to prominence in discourse as distinct signals an important moment in the formulation of a category of the secular in Tibetan contexts.

### Defining ‘Religion’ and the Secular’

While the seventeenth-century crystallization of *chösi zungdrel* originated in Tibetan conceptions of Buddhist governance, shared by Tibet’s Mongol and Manchu neighbors, other key moments and major orientations developed in the twentieth century, in interaction with Indian, Chinese, and Russian forms of secularism. That is to say, Tibetan terminologies for and understandings of the ‘secular’ have arisen in response to a variety of secularisms encountered in India, both before and after independence, and under Chinese or Russian colonial rule. This terminology is far from standardized; each term has been coined and deployed in distinctive ways in Tibetan discourse. For example, when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama speaks today about ‘secular ethics,’ he uses the phrase ‘moral conduct distinct from religion’ (*chos lugs dang ma brel ba’i bzang spyod*).<sup>2</sup> While this term differentiates secular values from religious commitments, in his broader presentations on the topic, the Dalai Lama proposes a universal ethics, compatible with Buddhist values such as compassion (2012). In his usage then, religion and secular remain distinct but compatible domains in continuity with early modern conceptions. As this example indicates, we need to be attuned to the multiple ways that terms for the ‘secular’ are deployed in Tibetan discourse and ask in each instance whether or not such terms are positioned in opposition to religion. Since each term has a distinctive connotation, genealogy, and ideological orientation, discerning local articulations of the secular requires our keen attention.

The next moment we highlight involves the emergence of a Tibetan term for religion, *chöluk* (*chos lugs*), as an ecumenical designation referring to various traditions beyond the Buddhist teachings or *dharma*. By the 1950s, the term appears in the *Melong*, the first Tibetan newspaper, and signals a shift in the approach of its founder Dorjé Tarchin from a Christian missionizing orientation toward a more ecumenical and pluralistic stance in the formation

of pan-Tibetan identity, as Nicole Willock discusses in her article in this issue. This ecumenical stance became popular among Tibetans who followed the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, into exile in 1959, as a means to promote Tibetan unity and nationalist aspirations. Ecumenism is not itself a new category in the Tibetan context, being rooted in a longstanding Tibetan vocabulary of *rimé* (*ris med*) or non-sectarianism, and given prominence by nineteenth-century masters from the eastern Tibetan region of Kham (Smith 2001). But in independent India, the ecumenical implications of the term *chöluk* were additionally inflected by the Gandhian principle of *sarva dharma sambhava* or ‘multi-religious co-existence’ (Brox 2010; van der Veer 2011), adding a new impetus of ecumenical inclusion to the Tibetan uses of the term. In the twentieth century evolution of the term *chöluk*, we see Tibetans in conversation with the dominant form of Indian secularism in the post-Independence era, which Peter van der Veer characterizes as a “moderate, pluralistic vision” based on the principle of “state noninterference with religion,” as inherited from British colonial rule and embodied the political approach of Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress Party (2011: 277-279).

The ecumenical implications of the term *chöluk* later crystallized into the term *chöluk rimé* (*chos lugs ris med*), one of the competing terms now used to translate ‘secularism’ among contemporary Tibetans. However, unlike José Casanova’s distinction of secularism as a statecraft principle that requires separation between religious and political institutions (2011: 66), Tibetans use the term *chöluk rimé* to promote a pluralistic vision of ecumenical parity within governmental institutions, such that representatives of the five major Tibetan religious traditions—Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, Géluk and Bön—all hold seats in the Tibetan Parliament in Exile. Regarding the 1991 revision of the Charter of Tibetans in Exile (*btsan byol bod mi’i bca’ khrims*), Trine Brox has charted the heated debate over whether to maintain the language of *chösi zungdrel* or substitute the term *chöluk rimé* to signal a more pluralistic vision of Tibetan religious life (2010). Even though the term *chösi zungdrel* won the day as the language finally included in the Charter’s revision, then Tibetan Prime Minister Samdong Rinpoche affirmed an ecumenical stance by reinterpreting the *chö* in *chösi zungdrel* to represent all *dharma* traditions, as Emmi Okada explains in her article in this issue (see also Brox 2010: 120). This affirms Brox’s findings that the contemporary Tibetan definition of *chö* does not include Buddhism alone (2010: 129–130), but rather that by the mid-1990s, *chösi zungdrel* can embrace an orientation of ecumenical secularism.

## Contesting the Place of Religion in the Public Domain

A third and final orientation we highlight here posits that religion, and Buddhism in particular, is a hindrance to Tibetan modernity and no longer belongs at the center of public life. This orientation can be expressed in various ways; it spans a wide range of vantage points, from the so-called ‘new thinkers’ based in Xining and Lanzhou who regard religion as an outmoded way of thinking and seek to establish a Tibetan secular culture (Hartley 2002, Wu Qi 2013), to Tibetans in exile who contest the continuing place of religion in politics (Brox 2010). At one extreme are secular intellectuals such as Jamyang Kyi who see religion as an inherently regressive and repressive force and seek its marginalization from the public domain (see Gayley’s article in this issue). This approach is neatly encapsulated in Casanova’s term ‘secularist secularism,’ which involves being “liberated from ‘religion’ as a condition for human autonomy and human flourishing” (2011: 60). At the other end of the spectrum is a milder version of this third orientation among those Tibetans (and Tibetan Studies scholar for that matter) who blame the traditionalism of the Ganden Phodrang government for its ‘failure’ to adapt to the conditions of modernity, making Tibet susceptible to invasion by foreign powers.

This latter view is entangled with the normative ‘secularization thesis’ that dominated sociological discourse throughout the twentieth century. One manifestation of this orientation emerges in historiography on modern Tibet, where the secularization thesis has had lingering effects on Tibetology as an academic discipline. Here Tibet’s religious-political system is viewed as one of the main reasons for its failure to become a nation-state. For example, with reference to the final years of the Ganden Phodrang government, which officially ended with Tibetan acceptance of Chinese sovereignty in the Seventeen Point Agreement of 1951, Melvyn Goldstein states that “the commitment to Tibet as a religious state and to the universality of religion” was a “major factor underlying Tibet’s inability to adapt to changing circumstances” (1989: 2).

The general contours of the secularization thesis are reiterated in normative Chinese state narratives on Tibetan history, as inflected by Marxist ideology. Witness the Government White Paper on “Development and Progress on Tibet” from 2013 which states:

The development and progress of Tibet is in accordance with the rules for the development of human society. From traditional agriculture and animal husbandry to a modern market economy, from the integration of political and religious powers to their

separation, from autocracy to democracy, superstition to science, and isolation to openness—these are the generic laws for the development of human society. Over the past 60 years of its development, Tibet has unfailingly followed these rules and the general trend... Observed from the macro perspective of human history, Tibet has leapt from a feudal serfdom society into one with a modern civilization within a matter of only a few decades, creating an outstanding example of regional modernization (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China 2013).

Here, as elsewhere in state discourse, the normative telos of secularization is assumed, and religion as intertwined with politics is viewed to have impeded the development of modernity. In the same Government White Paper, the system of *chösi zungdrel*, in particular, is condemned as a “feudal serfdom under a theocracy,” representative of the “darkness and backwardness of old Tibet.”

A similar orientation informs a range of violently secularizing policies of the communist era, including Soviet purges of Buddhist figures in Mongolia during the 1930s, and the Chinese destruction of Buddhist institutions during the socialist transformation of Tibetan areas in the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). In his contribution to this issue, Matthew King nuances the narrative of forced secularization in Mongolia. King focuses on knowledge production in the early- to mid-twentieth century, when Soviet and socialist Mongolian scholars selectively constructed pre-modern genealogies to create a shared value of ‘scientific knowing’ between Buddhists and scientists alike. Despite strong waves of anti-clerical violence that took place in Mongolia, Buddhist polymaths such as the eighteenth century scholar Sumpa Khenpo were later remembered for their modernist, rational knowledge production.

Chinese secularism has perhaps had the most enduring impact on Tibetans, whether they selectively embrace facets of Chinese secularism or reject it as a threat to the integrity and preservation of Tibetan culture. Emblematic in this selective embrace are ‘new thinkers’ like Shokdung who view religion as a hindrance to Tibetan modernity and oppose clerical power and influence (Hartley 2002, Wu Qi 2013). Shaped by the May 4th Movement during the Republican era in China, their vantage point accords with the more longstanding aspects of Chinese secularism which, according to Peter van der Veer, include anti-superstition, pitting scientific rationalism against magical superstition, and anti-clericalism with its deep suspicion of and antago-

nism toward religious authority (2011). These aspects can be traced from the late Qing and Republican era campaigns to ‘smash temples, build schools’ and into the violence of Maoist period. Despite movement toward the tolerance of religion in the post-Mao era, the Chinese state’s ‘civilizing mission’ toward ethnic minorities (Harrell 1995, Gladney 2004) continues to be expressed in secularizing development policies in Tibetan areas (Kolas and Thowsen 2005: 180) and an ongoing rhetoric correlating religion and backwardness (Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2013). Meanwhile, the state asserts control over religion in various ways, including the recognition of incarnate lamas (Cabezón 2008; Barnett 2012).

### Competing Terms for Secularism

With the Dalai Lama’s escape to India in 1959 and the creation of the Tibetan government-in-exile, namely the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the political landscape split exile Tibetan discourse into several camps. In addition to traditionalists promoting the continuation of *chösi zungdrel* and those advocating for an ecumenical secularism employing the term *choluk rimé* as discussed above, Trine Brox discusses a group that she calls ‘displacers’ who argue against the CTA being founded on the notion of *chösi zungdrel* (2010). In debates surrounding the 1991 revision of the Charter of Tibetans in Exile, the displacers promote the adoption of *chomé ringluk* or ‘a system without religion’ (*chos med ring lugs*) in the hope that sectarianism and regionalism could be kept out of politics (132–133). This group falls in line with the third orientation toward religion and the secular, discussed in the previous section, by seeking to displace religion from Tibetan politics.

The contested nature of terminology is an important feature of local articulations of the secular. Brox discusses several alternative terms for secularism emerging among Tibetans in exile besides *chomé ringluk* and *choluk rimé*, such as ‘disregard for religion’ (*chos la ltos med*), ‘individual choice of religious belief’ (*chos dad rang mos*), and ‘opposing religion’ (*chos la ‘gal ba*), which imply respectively neutrality toward religion in governance, the protection of religious freedom, and the mutually incompatibility of religion and state, all articulated in opposition to *chösi zungdrel* (Brox 2010: 125). From these terms, it is clear that the choice of translation for the foreign concept of ‘secularism’ implies a stance toward religion. As a parallel in the Himalayan region, competing terms for secularism were deployed in debates surrounding the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution of Nepal, particularly *dharma nirapeksata*, meaning state neutrality or ‘impartiality toward religion,’



and *dharma swatantrata*, signifying religious freedom (Letizia 2012; Wagner 2016; Dennis 2016).<sup>3</sup> These terms and their Tibetan parallels in *chomé ringluk* and *choluk rimé* might be aptly characterized as *freedom from* religion, whether political neutrality or a secularist secularism, and *freedom to* practice the religion of one's choice, more in line with a pluralistic or ecumenical secularism. In these competing terms for secularism, one can see not only a drive toward the prestige of democracy and secularism as markers of modernity, but also the attempt to forge an alternative model of secularism that is inclusive of religion.

In 2011, the Dalai Lama devolved himself of political power in favor of an elected government for Tibetans in exile, only a few years after the end of the Hindu monarchy in Nepal in 2006 and Bhutan's transition to a democratic, constitutional monarchy in 2008. Yet recent controversies over exile election procedures in late 2015 and early 2016 have shown that the terms of secularism continue to be a source of contention among Tibetans. Note, for example, an unprecedented open letter criticizing exile election procedures,<sup>4</sup> which in turn prompted a US congressional response urging CTA to operate by accepted democratic standards. Exile Tibetan intellectual Jamyang Norbu similarly has raised awareness of the harassment experienced by supporters of the *rangzen* or 'independence' (*rang btsan*) movement due to the common misperception that they are anti-Dalai Lama.<sup>5</sup> As fraught and contested as secularism remains today, understanding local articulations of the terms of discourse and related understandings of the secular is an academic imperative.

### Continuing Ramification

The three broad orientations toward 'religion' and the 'secular' in Tibetan discourse, briefly charted here, continue to influence the contested landscape regarding the role of religion in Tibetan society and politics. The first sense of the secular as the worldly sphere remains operative in contemporary discourse on the two systems (*lugs gnyis*), religious and worldly (*chos dang 'jig rten*), by Buddhist clerics at Larung Buddhist Academy on the Tibetan plateau. In works of advice to the laity, well-known cleric scholars like Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö argue for the compatibility of religious and secular vantage points, harnessing Buddhist ethics as a this-worldly rational approach to addressing contemporary social concerns (Gayley 2013). Meanwhile, the second major trend, an ecumenical secularism, remains central to the democratization of the Tibetan government in exile, which as Emmi Okada argues in her article "culminated in the Dalai Lama's complete devolution of his political powers to the elected government in

2011" and yet maintains a "unique Tibetan secularism that upholds religious pluralism." The third major orientation toward the secular, akin to that of the 'new thinkers,' continues to inform secular critiques over the role of religion in Tibetan society. In her article in this issue, Holly Gayley addresses secular critiques in the Tibetan blogosphere over a burgeoning ethical reform movement spearheaded by Buddhist clerics at Larung Buddhist Academy in Serta, on the border of Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces.

In the midst of these competing terms and understandings, several of our contributors focus on literary and artistic expressions on the Tibetan plateau, exploring stances of hybridity and ambivalence among artists. Leigh Miller's article on the Lhasa-based artist Gadé illuminates the high degree of self-reflexivity among contemporary Tibetan artists regarding cultural hybridity. As Miller argues, Gadé strategically appropriates traditional Buddhist iconography to imbue his work with a legible Tibetanness while importing international pop icons, like Mickey Mouse, Spiderman and the Hulk in order to reflect and complicate contemporary Tibetan identity. On the other hand, in her contribution, Françoise Robin chronicles a profound ambivalence among Tibetan fiction writers from Amdo toward their Buddhist heritage, who place their protagonists at the painful intersection of competing values by personifying traditional and progressive views in various characters in their work. Robin also translates the short story *Entrusted to the Wind* by Lhashamgyal, first published in 2009 in the literary journal *Light Rain* (*Sbrang char*). In Robin's own article, she analyzes this story alongside other works of fiction and film that use reincarnation as the focal point for probing tensions between the cultural inheritance of Tibetans and the secular imaginary absorbed through the Chinese education system.

As a useful point of contrast, Tibetans in exile who actively promote their Buddhist heritage have engaged in a creative appropriation of the terms of secular discourse. For example, in her article, Annabella Pitkin investigates interpretive strategies used to understand 'miraculous' displays of yogic power among exile Tibetans in the Drikung Kagyu tradition anchored in and around Dehradun. While oral and written accounts of lineage masters from the previous generation allow Tibetans to maintain a nostalgic connection to their homeland, contemporary Buddhist teachers recognize a dramatic shift between an 'age of faith' and an 'age of knowledge' and adapt pedagogically in their exegetical frameworks. What these case studies show, then, is an ongoing creative negotiation between 'religion' and the 'secular' as terms in Tibetan discourse alongside their associated epistemic frameworks.

While secularism as an ideological stance promoting the separation of religion from the public domain has been globalized through a process of European and Asian colonial expansion (cf. van der Veer 2001; Casanova 2011; Bubandt and van Beek 2012), reflecting on the secular in Tibetan contexts highlights the historical contingencies of this discourse. Such reflection also sheds light on the important role of Tibetan intellectuals and artists in negotiating and defining the ongoing tensions between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’—as palpable in literary and artistic works as they are in contemporary Buddhist exegesis. These tensions continue to flare up in Tibetan exile politics, in global academic discourse, and in heated Tibetan blogosphere debates over the role of religion in society. They are even visible in the international art world through the menacing figure of the Hulk bounding out of a Buddhist mandalic frame — the image with which we began this Introduction.

Clearly, the Tibetan case undermines the secularization thesis and reveals complex interactions between religious and secular imagery, discourses, and epistemic frameworks. The case studies in this issue exemplify some of the diverse processes of local articulations of the secular among Tibetans in distinct historical and geographic contexts, thereby adding to a growing body of literature on multiple secularisms in Asia and around the globe. Only through attention to local articulations of the secular and the specific ethno-linguistic register in which such articulations are expressed can we tease out how highly dependent ‘secularism’ is on particular local practices and actors despite global hegemonic discourse.

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## Endnotes

1. See <[www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/making.gods/information](http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/making.gods/information)> (accessed on 1 February 2016).
2. See *Chos lugs dang ma 'brel ba'i bzang spyod*, report on a lecture given by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama at Emory University, 9 October 2013 by Radio Free Asia <[www.rfa.org/tibetan/tamlenggiletsen/tamlengzhalpar/dalai-lama-talks-in-emory-10092013155953](http://www.rfa.org/tibetan/tamlenggiletsen/tamlengzhalpar/dalai-lama-talks-in-emory-10092013155953)> (accessed 17 February 2016). See also *Chos dang ma 'brel ba'i bzang spyod kyi thog nas sems skyid po bzo ba*, published on the Benzin Archives <[www.berzinarchives.com/web/bo/archives/approaching\\_buddhism/world\\_today/achieving\\_happy\\_mind\\_through\\_secular\\_ethics](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/bo/archives/approaching_buddhism/world_today/achieving_happy_mind_through_secular_ethics)> (accessed 17 February 2016).
3. Though 2006 witnessed the official ended the Hindu monarchy, when the House of Representatives declared Nepal a secular state, the specific model of secularity had not been determined (Letizia 2012). As Chiara Letizia has argued, since *dharma* exceeds the domain of 'religion' as a presumed universal category, secularism in the former sense as *dharma nirapeksata* implies for some Nepalis a loss of a moral polity (2012). With regard to Nepali articulations of *dharma swatantrata*, Dannah Dennis (2016) highlights the embedded notion of *sanatana dharma* that protects the 'primeval dharma' or traditions of South Asian origin and condemns missionizing activity by 'foreign' traditions, such as Islam and Christianity.
4. See "An Open Letter to the Sikyong, Kashag, and Election Commissioner of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, India" <[tibet.org/openletter](http://tibet.org/openletter)> (accessed 29 February 2016) with twenty-seven signatories that include leaders in the Free Tibet movement, current and former directors of humanitarian organizations, Tibetan Studies scholars, and members of organizations that support the Tibetan cause and other social justice organizations.
5. See Jamyang Norbu's 'Election by Divine Intervention' published on *Shadow Tibet* on 13 November 2015 <[www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2015/11/13/election-by-divine-intervention](http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2015/11/13/election-by-divine-intervention)> (accessed on 29 February 2016).

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