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MUSIC OF THE TIBETAN DIASPORA



Ngodup, drummer for the Yak Band, jokes with young fans in Dharamsala, India, 1995 PHOTO: KEILA DIEHL

INTRODUCTION

For many reasons, the deep, guttural sound of Tibetan Buddhist monks chanting generally comes to mind in association with the word “Tibet.” One explanation for the widespread familiarity of this multiphonic chanting is that it is, in fact, a fabulous human phenomenon, apparently perfected only by residents of the Tibetan plateau and Mongolia. But, there are many fabulous human sounds being made around the world that most Americans have never heard. Tibetan chanting has, for a number of interesting reasons, found a place in this country’s spiritual and commercial soundscapes: on New Age recordings, in Hollywood movies, in ads for Nike and Apple, and in the Bureau of Tobacco and Firearm’s arsenal (as in Waco, Texas where law enforcement officials blared Tibetan chanting to flush out David Koresh and his followers). The result is that, for many, Tibetan ritual chanting is one and the same with Tibetan music. This is only one instance of a wider trend that reduces our understandings and expectations of Tibetan people to our experience of the Dalai Lama and our images

of the Tibetan landscape to a postcard image of the Potala Palace. Just as the people and landscape of Tibet are in fact *peoples* and *landscapes*, Tibetan music is also remarkably diverse.

In order to understand the role of music in the lives of Tibetans today, the boundaries must be expanded even further. In addition to traditional Tibetan musical genres, Nepali folk songs, Chinese pop music, Hindi film songs, Western rock and roll, reggae and rap, and, most recently, the modern Tibetan music being made by Tibetan youth all play an important part in the cultural, aesthetic, and political expression of Tibetans both in Tibet and in exile.

Studying the relationships Tibetans have with all the kinds of music that filter through their towns and camps in South Asia reveals a lot about the relationships they have with the various traditions that deeply influence their lives as refugees. I am especially interested in how Tibetan youth are choosing from this flow of sounds (and, more broadly, cultures) in the process of forming their own personal and political identities in exile. Understanding these processes is crucial to deconstructing some of the

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more romantic ideas about and expectations of Tibetans that are circulating around the world today.

Before exploring the ways Tibetan refugees make and listen to different kinds of music (and why this matters), I'll briefly provide some background about the creation and characteristics of the Tibetan diaspora.

THE TIBETAN DIASPORA

The Tibetan diaspora began in 1959, when an estimated 80,000 Tibetans escaped from Tibet over the Himalayas. Travelling mostly on foot, they were following their leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, into exile after a failed uprising against Chinese rule. For the past 40 years, Tibetans have continued to escape from their homeland in an erratic flow that can be divided into three waves of migration. The first escapees (between 1959 and the mid-1960s) came mostly from Lhasa and southern border areas of Tibet. Many of these refugees, who are now elderly, escaped to Nepal and India thinking they would stay for only a few months. Few Tibetans escaped during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but in the 1980s a second wave of refugees, many of whom had been imprisoned during the first decades of Tibet's occupation, fled Tibet. Since the early 1990s, a third wave of refugees from northeastern Tibet has arrived in exile. Many of these so-called "new arrivals" are children or young adults who have been sent out of Tibet by their parents at great risk to be educated in one of the schools run by the Tibetan government-in-exile in India.

The capital-in-exile of the Tibetan diaspora is Dharamsala, a former British hill station located in a narrow finger of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, squeezed between Pakistan and the mountains that create India's border with Tibet. It was in this setting, amid Pahari-speaking shepherds and other Hindu townspeople, that the Dalai Lama settled and established his government-in-exile in 1960. Other important settlement centers for Tibetan refugees, including Darjeeling, Delhi and Kathmandu, are scattered throughout India and Nepal. A recent wave of re-settlement—some legal, some illegal—has resulted in the establishment of significant Tibetan communities in cities throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, that have created a great diversity of experience for refugees and pose new challenges to maintaining a sense of community among Tibetans living in exile.

CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND CHANGE

Nearly all accounts of Tibetans living in exile acknowledge the remarkable extent to which these refugees have been able to maintain their traditional culture, attributing their success to a conscious resistance to assimilation, the continuity of the Dalai Lama's leadership in exile, and remarkable amounts

of support from international aid agencies and individual foreign sponsors. Since 1959, one of the primary concerns of the exiled Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugee community has specifically been to preserve what is often referred to as "the rich cultural heritage of Tibet." This attention to the preservation of linguistic, religious and artistic knowledge—through both documentation and education—was prompted by two very legitimate threats: 1) The threat of the disappearance of Tibetan culture in the homeland under Chinese rule and; 2) the threat of the assimilation of exiled Tibetans into their host societies.

Regarding the performing arts specifically, it was feared that traditional lay or "folk" dance, drama and music would not survive the sweeping reforms and prohibitions of Chinese "liberation" policies in Tibet, and, further, that if they did survive, the indigenous performance genres would be influenced beyond recognition by classical and "pop" Chinese aesthetic styles (and, indeed, this is happening). Particularly noticeable today are the influence of Peking Opera vocal techniques on Tibetan opera performers trained in Tibet, and the influence of modern Chinese music on the popular Tibetan singing featured on cassettes/CDs and performed in the numerous karaoke bars in Lhasa.

Tibetans living in exile are particularly sensitive to Chinese-influenced sounds—whether spoken, sung, or instrumental—and explicitly reject musicians who are deemed to be not authentically Tibetan. (This extends even to hand gestures, etc.) This is a criticism frequently made of the singer Dadon, whose life story may be familiar to some from the movie "Windhorse." Another example was the late Jampa Tsering, a popular Tibetan songwriter from Lhasa whose patriotism was conveyed in his lyrics, but whose musical training in Shanghai was evident.

Of course, opinions about what is "authentically Tibetan" vary widely, depending on the life experiences of different refugees. Young Tibetans who were raised in Chinese-run Tibet and have escaped only recently are less likely to hear the differences that so offend the ears of those raised in exile. Similarly, youth raised in South Asia have become accustomed to Indian sounds and customs, which strike new arrivals as bizarre and inauthentic. It is important to note that sounds that are rejected are, in fact, as important to understanding the role of music in the Tibetan diaspora as those sounds that are readily enjoyed.

Like the adoption of Chinese aesthetic sensibilities by Tibetans in Tibet, some adaptation by Tibetan refugees to their host societies in South Asia and elsewhere has also been inevitable. This adaptation has also been erratic, selective, difficult to explain to outsiders, and increasingly difficult to justify to each other, given the growing pressure to "stay Tibetan" (a challenge that becomes more difficult to meet or even define).



While Tibetan refugees have attempted, over the past 45 years, to preserve their traditional cultural heritage, they have also been concerned with obtaining the education and skills necessary to participate successfully in their host societies. The result is the co-existence of the dual goals of cultural preservation and modernization—of drawing on traditional Tibetan resources *and* learning from contemporary, non-Tibetan cultures. These can compliment one another, but they can also conflict. One of the hottest points of contention in the struggle between preservation and change in the Tibetan diaspora involves the arts. The arts, such as opera, dance, and music, are highly visible (or audible) and are often used as a measuring stick of Tibetan cultural survival in exile.

One of the young Dalai Lama's first priorities in exile was to set up an institution dedicated to the preservation of traditional Tibetan music and dance. The Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts (TIPA) in Dharamsala, with its opera company, instrument and costume making sections, and teacher training program, has contributed greatly to the appreciation and perpetuation of traditional performance genres by Tibetan refugee youth raised outside of the homeland. Other formal and informal groups have also contributed to the preservation effort. In Dharamsala and other settlements, for example, groups of older women offer themselves as traditional *chang ma* (beer hostesses) at local weddings, keeping alive a long-respected singing custom guaranteed to keep every guest thoroughly embarrassed and intoxicated [they prick reluctant drinkers with a pin until their glass is empty]. In San Francisco, a group of former TIPA students has performed traditional opera and dance for more than a decade under the name Chaksam-pa. This group has toured extensively and performed at Carnegie Hall and the Smithsonian, as well as sponsoring a Tibetan music camp for refugee kids living in the Bay Area, giving them hands-on experience with the traditional instruments and dances they would learn if they were being schooled in India or, ideally, raised in an unoccupied Tibet.



Tibetan refugee children singing with their music teacher, Mundgod, India, 1995

PHOTO: KEILA. DIEHL

In these ways, traditional art forms are, indeed, being preserved despite the diaspora, but inevitably this is happening side by side the creation of new and hybrid forms of Tibetan culture that have arisen directly out of the refugee experience—modern

painting, rock-and-roll, new dialects, and decontextualized rituals (I'm thinking here of the sand mandalas being made in all kinds of settings and even distributed in vials to audience members, rather than being destroyed). To some, these new cultural phenomena represent a threatening reality—a failure to “stay Tibetan”; to others, they are evidence that Tibetan

exilic culture is a living, dynamic force, rather than a fragile museum artifact.

“MODERN” TIBETAN MUSIC

Due to the multi-local nature of refugee life and the global circulation of music videos and cassettes, many non-traditional and foreign forms of music, such as Hindi film music, Western rock-and-roll, and Nepali pop music, have, as I have said, found a receptive audience among Tibetans of all ages who are living in exile. One result of this musical *mélange* has been the development of a new genre of modern Tibetan songs by young refugees living throughout the world. These songs bring together the foreign and the familiar, the modern and the traditional, and effectively challenge the usefulness of those categories.

Not long after 1959, new Tibetan songs lamenting the experience of exile, praising the Dalai Lama, and reminiscing about the landscape of the homeland began to circulate throughout the communities of exiled Tibetans. These songs were usually accompanied by simple chord progressions on a Western guitar or paralleled by a melody line plucked on the *dramnyen*, the six-stringed Tibetan lute. Tibetans in South Asian refugee camps were listening to cassettes of Western pop music by the early 1970s and were even occasionally exposed to live rock music played by groups of visiting Western Buddhists who jammed under names like



“The Dharma Bums.”

In the 1980s, a handful of Tibetan teenagers from the first generation of refugees raised in exile pulled bands together, plugged into India’s unreliable power supply, and began *producing* rock-and-roll, learning to play covers of their favorite hit songs by ear from cassettes. Before long, a few of these musicians started to write what have come to be known as “modern Tibetan songs,” setting original Tibetan lyrics to electronic Western or “Inji” music. The first cassette of original Tibetan songs inspired by Western music was recorded in Delhi in 1988 by three young men calling themselves “Rangzen Shonu” (“Freedom Youth”). Entitled “Modern Tibetan Folk Songs,” this cassette featured songs accompanied by acoustic guitars and simple vocal harmonies, with topics ranging from political independence to the eating habits of Tibetan nomads.

Tsering Paljor Phurpatsang, the group’s highly accomplished self-taught guitarist, went on to produce a solo cassette called “Rangzen Söntsa” (“Seed and Root of Freedom”) in 1990 and eventually became the lead guitarist and singer/songwriter of the Tibetan rock group called the Yak Band.

Since 1990, a number of other individual musicians and groups throughout the Tibetan exile communities have produced cassettes, revealing several subgenres of these “modern” Tibetan songs:

- 1) those imitative of Paljor’s mellow acoustic sound,
- 2) those inspired by smooth Hong Kong or pan-Asian pop music featuring keyboard synthesizers and heavy echo effects on vocals,
- 3) those inspired by Hindi film music, and
- 4) those that make an effort to incorporate traditional Tibetan vocal techniques, melodies, and instruments.

At the end of 1994, two new cassettes were released in Dharamsala: “Modern Tibetan Songs” by Ah-Ka-Ma, a new rock group comprised of performers from TIPA’s opera company, and “Rangzen” (“Freedom”) by the Yak Band. These two cassettes represented a new turn in Tibetan music, fitting firmly as they do into the category of “rock-and-roll,” with their electric lead, rhythm and bass guitars, electric keyboards and drum sets.

WESTERN INFLUENCES

The Western influences on “modern Tibetan music” are clear. Rock-and-roll is useful and enjoyable to Tibetans as a style and as an ideology. Although rock music feels satisfyingly naughty and oppositional to young Tibetans (and, indeed, can lead to radical styles and behavior), certain genres of rock are also appealing precisely because they are politically acceptable; many rock lyrics ideologically align with many of the Tibetan refugee community’s concerns, such as justice, freedom of expression, and world peace. Politically, listening to and producing rock-and-roll is a way for young Tibetans to express solidarity with a wider, global struggle through sounds—such as rock, reggae and rap—that have a historical relationship with social change. Hence the particular fondness Tibetan youth have for music from the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Rock music offers a way for them to feel part of a larger world community—a generation bound together by sounds and styles—and remind themselves of the international relevance of their own situation.



PHOTO: KEILA DIEHL
Thubten, lead singer for the Yak Band, Dharamsala, India, 1994

Although they are enacting their struggle with these issues in a more public way than most, the musicians in the former Yak Band with whom I worked for a year were typical of the younger generation in exile in many ways. What follows is a brief discussion of the way *they* chose to keep alive the independence struggle for a homeland none of them had ever seen and at the same time move on with their lives.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE YAK BAND

As a graduate student in anthropology and ethnomusicology, I had not anticipated focusing on rock-and-roll in my doctoral research on Tibetan music. Before leaving to do my fieldwork I *had*, however, heard Paljor’s cassette “Seed and Root of Freedom,” which I bought in Dharamsala on a previous trip. The last song on the second side caught my attention, because it was so unexpected and seemed so out of place to me.

“Tashi Delek Blues,”—a Tibetan singing in Tibetan and



playing Mississippi Delta blues guitar—was the piece of music that really got me wondering about how the refugee experience was affecting youth culture in the Tibetan exile community. How were Tibetan kids balancing their highly politicized responsibility and desire to stay Tibetan—to preserve their culture in exile—with their inevitable interest in all the new ideas, sounds, and people they were being exposed to in their new lives? What was going on in this song? Was it one musician’s quirky idea or a trend? Was it evidence that Tibetan youth had completely succumbed to Western cultural imperialism? Or, was it parody? Two years later, I did my fieldwork in Dharamsala, met Paljor right away, and ended up joining the Yak Band as its keyboard player.

Typical of the modern Tibetan music being made throughout the diaspora today is the Yak Band’s popular song “*Rang-zen*.” The song’s lyrics translate as follows:

The main responsibility of we, the Tibetan people
Is to regain our national independence.
All of us Tibetan people must do
What we are required to do.

Regaining independence,
That is the one and only thing.
Not only must it be achieved,
It is worth doing, and it can be done.

Independence! Independence! Independence!

One wonders, after seeing endless blood
flowing like a waterfall
And the whole countryside filled with human corpses.
Generally, that is the way.

But we, according to His Holiness’s wishes,
By the peaceful, nonviolent way of truth and honesty,
We must endeavor to the ultimate end.
Independence! Independence! Independence! . . .

These lyrics tap into the main themes typically evoked by young refugee musicians. These include patriotic calls for Tibetans to put aside their differences, unite, and fight for independence; expressions of sadness over the loss of a beautiful homeland and loved ones who have passed away or been left behind; and devotional poems for the Dalai Lama and other religious figures. Whereas folk songs in pre-1950 Tibet addressed a wide variety of topics and served many purposes (accompanying work, negotiating marriage arrangements, expressing political satire, and so on), the few themes I’ve mentioned dominate most genres of expressive culture being created in exile.

[Interestingly, the limited range of acceptable topics for modern Tibetan song lyrics and the limited ability of the young generations in exile to compose formal, poetic lyrics in the Tibetan language greatly complicate the contemporary songwriter’s task. As Hindi and English are not considered

appropriate languages for addressing the topics of modern songs, young songwriters commonly depend on older, erudite aristocrats or monks to compose lyrics for them.]

HINDI FILM MUSIC

Although more and more Tibetan performers are writing romantic songs in recent years, Tibetan refugees have generally turned to Bombay for songs of unbridled love and playfulness, more often than to the homeland or even the West. Indeed, the flirtatious lyrics and catchy tunes of Hindi film songs seem to be as irresistible to Tibetan refugees as they are to the rest of South and Southeast Asia. Tibetans eagerly line up with local Indians to see the latest films at the “Himalaya Talkies” cinema hall in Dharamsala’s lower bazaar, transcribe song lyrics into ruled notebooks, and crowd around the doors of dark video halls or their own cable televisions to catch a glimpse or a tune. Tibetan children throughout India and Nepal know the words and sexy dance movements to all the top film hits and are often called upon to perform these routines for the amusement of visitors and relatives. And, Tibetan music groups, like the Ah-Ka-Ma Band, liberally pepper their concert set lists with film hits to the delight of their audiences.

Hindi films are so popular among Tibetan refugees for many of the same reasons that they are popular among Indians of all castes, classes, and regions, including the extent and ease of exposure to films, the cross-cultural accessibility of the genre, and the satisfying correspondence between the actual content of Hindi films and the psychological needs of their audiences. There are also, of course, many ways in which Tibetans enjoy and use Hindi films that are unique and can only be understood from an ethnographically-informed perspective concerned with what this particular genre “means” to Tibetan refugees. It is interesting to explore the ways Tibetan refugees consciously and unconsciously maintain Hindi film songs as “foreign” or Indian, even as it is clear that they are very much a part of their personal lives.

Considered within the wider context of Tibetan concerns with cultural purity, preservation, and non-assimilation and the rhetorical casting of India as a polluting context within which to live, live performances of Hindi film songs by Tibetans are considered by some to be acts of transgression, despite the delight they provide their audiences. Taking the heat for accommodating their community’s politically incorrect desires is only one of many challenges Tibetan musicians face.

CONSTRAINTS ON MUSICAL INNOVATION

Despite the seeming diversity and energy behind this story of the development of modern Tibetan music, the number of



musicians involved in the movement has been very small, and the amount of new music being produced has been limited, due to a number of social, cultural, and financial constraints that face aspiring musicians both in Tibet and in the Tibetan refugee community.

Other constraints on the modern song genre include:

- 1) the overarching challenge of innovating within a community that is deeply concerned about cultural preservation;
- 2) the historically-informed perception of music-making and any form of entertainment work as an inferior position of service;
- 3) the stigma in Tibetan society of immodestly setting oneself apart from the group;
- 4) the difficulty of justifying to families and employers the time needed for rehearsals and the money needed for equipment or to finance recordings; and
- 5) in the case of musicians working in the TAR or China, the surveillance by Chinese authorities of the lyrics and activities of musicians feared to be encouraging Tibetan nationalism.

Significantly, no single Tibetan performer or band has yet caught the hearts of the young generation in exile by overcoming all of the challenges mentioned and finding the perfect balance between old and new, unique and shared, sounds (although Tenzin Wöser and Phurbu T. Namgyal are enjoying unprecedented stardom following their successful U.S. tour in 2005).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the popular music being made by Tibetans living outside of their homeland provides an interesting case study of what happens to culture “on the road,” of musical creativity unhooked from a particular geographical place. In fact, the boundaries of cultural practices rarely coincide, of course, with the lines drawn on maps. So, refugee culture is, then, just an extreme example of the very common 21st-century experience of living multi-local, multi-cultural, hybrid lives. Paradoxically, due to the pressure to preserve Tibetan culture in exile, Tibetan refugee musicians may be *less* free to borrow from foreign cultures and genres than others whose communities are not threatened by the dual forces of colonization in the homeland and assimilation in the diaspora. Underlying these dynamics is a call to reexamine the meaning and usefulness of the concept of “cultural preservation,” including the risks of canonizing particular traditional practices as “authentic” and dismissing contemporary or popular innovations as “inauthentic” or even threatening to the community’s cultural and ethnic integrity.

In other words, those really interested in Tibetan music today need to make room on the shelf beside their recordings of the Gyuto Monks for songs like the contemporary praise song for the Dalai Lama, “Shiway Lamsang” by Ah-Ka-Ma and “Ooh Baby” by Tenzin Wöser and think about the complicated issues their juxtaposition raises.



Mural

PHOTO: KEILA DIEHL