



## HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 38 | Number 1

Article 16

June 2018

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Anna Morcom

Royal Holloway, University of London, [anna.morcom@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:anna.morcom@rhul.ac.uk)

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### Recommended Citation

Morcom, Anna (2018) "The Political Potency of Tibetan Identity in Pop Music and Dunglen," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 38 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol38/iss1/16>



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# The Political Potency of Tibetan Identity in Pop Music and Dunglen

## **Acknowledgements**

The author is grateful to Thierry Dodin, Stuart Wright and Gerald Roche who provided useful input into drafts of this article and numerous helpful comments in the anonymous reviews. She remains indebted to all the Tibetans who helped during fieldwork over the years in a myriad ways. She would like to emphasize that the views expressed in this article are her own synthesis and analysis.

# The Political Potency of Tibetan Identity in Pop Music and *Dunglen*

Anna Morcom

Since their beginnings in the 1980s, Tibetan pop music and *dunglen* (lute songs of northeastern Tibet) have shown strong expressions of Tibetan identity. They also represent a flourishing area of Tibetan language cultural production. This is significant after the repetitive propaganda songs of the Cultural Revolution and given the pressures and restrictions in Tibet on language and religion in particular. However, in this article, I critique straightforward interpretations of the Tibetanness of Tibetan popular music as representing a zone of assertion or resistance, arguing instead that the political potency of Tibetan pop music and *dunglen* is far more double-edged, coopted and complex. Drawing on ethnography, I describe how state institutions and largely Tibetan cultural workers have in fact played the leading role in its genesis and production and are still a powerful force in its production

and dissemination. Moreover, while it is often said that the state is against Tibetan identity and culture, in fact, the attitude is far more ambivalent and contradictory, with China a unitary multi-ethnic state where 55 minority nationalities with distinct culture and identity are recognized, including Tibetans. I argue through the analysis of song lyrics that expressions of Tibetan identity per se are not censored; rather, it is when these expressions are linked to particular political demands. As I explore, a number of reasons can be identified as to why the state does not censor Tibetan pop music and *dunglen* more harshly, and furthermore, there are reasons why Tibetan language assertion has had so much more success in the realm of pop music than it has had in schools.

**Keywords:** Tibet, pop music, *dunglen*, politics, identity, language, censorship.

Tibetan popular music emerged in the 1980s as one of the many watershed changes of the post-Cultural Revolution era where culture no longer had to be entirely controlled and produced by the state to serve socialism. By the late 1990s, production was prolific, with a widespread live performance scene in urban bars and restaurants, rural festivals, shows on television and competitions. Tibetan popular music was thriving not just in scale of production but in terms of 'Tibetanness,' too. The folk-popular genre *dunglen* (*rdung len*, to play and sing) that emerged in Amdo always had lyrics in Tibetan, even as it extended into a more typical pop sound with computer-generated MIDI backing tracks rather than just voice and mandolin. Other Tibetan pop music had seen a rapid increase in songs in the Chinese language in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> However, from the late 2000s on, this tide dramatically turned, with the vast majority of Tibetans singing in Tibetan, even some who never or hardly ever did before.

In their lyrics, Tibetan pop music (whether in Tibetan or Chinese) and *dunglen* have been recognized as a powerful expression of Tibetan identity, in what Brubaker and Cooper would term 'hard' form—bold and proud delineations of Tibetanness in terms of land, people, culture, religion and so on (2000). This has also included some covert expressions of sentiments such as loss over the absence of the Dalai Lama or desire for independence. The expression of 'hard' Tibetan identity is perhaps even more pronounced at the level of music videos, which are subsumed with stunning footage of the Tibetan landscape and singers wearing beautiful Tibetan clothes. This is the case even with songs whose lyrics are more focused on other things like love. As I have described, the lyrical and visual imagery of pop and *dunglen* songs and videos contrasts sharply with that of older conceptions of the Tibetan land and cosmos in oral sung poetry, and rather conforms to patterns that have emerged in the context of capitalist transformation and nationalism (Morcom 2015). Hence, although ideas of a distinct Tibetan identity long predate nationalism (Jabb 2011: 14-15) and Tibetan songs may not necessarily be intended or interpreted in nationalist terms (especially not in separatist terms), nationalism and identity politics are an overarching frame. In the last few years, there has been a marked rise of love songs and also rap, the latter in particular which tends to have a more urban focus, and there are more singers wearing non-Tibetan clothes in videos. Nevertheless, songs describing and celebrating Tibetans and Tibetanness continue to form a core part of Tibetan pop and *dunglen* and are popular up to the present day. There are songs that are censored and singers that are detained and sometimes imprisoned. However, these are a tiny, though of course not insignificant, minority.

Tsering Topgyal has described the Tibet situation in China as one of interconnected and relational insecurity: despite China's power, the legitimacy of Chinese rule over the vast Tibetan areas is insecure and there are extensive problems in integrating the Tibetans successfully. In turn, following the myriad state campaigns that have repressed Tibetan language and religion in particular, and which continue into the present day, there is considerable 'identity insecurity' for Tibetans, beyond specific nationalist agendas (2016: 8-10). In the light of this situation, the thriving scenes of *dunglen* and Tibetan language pop music appear to be a highly successful example of the foregrounding of Tibetan language and cultural identity in prominent, mass-disseminated cultural forms which, moreover, are for the large part not repressed by the state. It would seem to be an arena where, in response to a situation of identity insecurity, some security has been and is being built. In an earlier publication, I described the semi-deregulated Tibetan music industry as "surprising," and "a remarkable kind of 'public sphere' in a region famous outside China for repression rather than expression" (2008: 262). In a similar vein, Lama Jabb, analyzing *dunglen* songs in terms of their nationalist potency, states: "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" (2010: 1). Other writers express similar views of the potency of Tibetan pop music and *dunglen* with regard to Tibetan identity (Morcom 2004; Henrion-Dourcy 2005; Dhondup 2008; Stirr 2008; Warner 2013; Robin 2014; Topgyal 2016) and I have spoken to many Tibetans outside of Tibet, including those who recently came from Tibet, who explicitly praise the potency of Tibetan pop and *dunglen*. In Tibet, where I have not engaged in explicit discussions concerning nationalism, identity or protest, I have nevertheless seen the passion and pride with which certain songs are received, one of which I discuss below, *Gangchanpa* (*gangs can pa*), 'Tibetan', by Dolma Kyab.

In this article, I explore the potency of Tibetan pop and *dunglen* and that of expressions of Tibetan identity more generally.<sup>2</sup> The Tibetanness expressed in *dunglen* and pop music is powerful, especially after the repetitive propaganda songs of the Cultural Revolution and given the restrictions on language and religion in particular. Songs in these genres continue to speak profoundly to Tibetans. However, state institutions and cultural workers have played the leading role in the genesis and production of popular music in Tibet. Of course, the state is not monolithic and control is never total. But, popular music is deeply connected to state institutions rather than being a

genuinely separate phenomenon, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s and early 2000s. Hence, simple notions of this music as a potent zone of Tibetan expression, let alone resistance, must be interrogated carefully.

Moreover, while it is often said that the state is against Tibetan identity and culture, in fact, the attitude is far more ambivalent and contradictory. Therefore, the political agency and potency of assertions of Tibetan identity must be examined closely. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Chinese nationalism was based on an exclusive ethnic nationalism, aimed at overthrowing the Manchu Qing Empire. However, after this was accomplished in 1911, it was soon realized that Chinese nationalism must include other ethnicities than the Han in order to retain the vast territories of non-Han peoples at the fringes of the empire (Zhao 2004: 22).<sup>3</sup> Thus the People's Republic of China (PRC), founded in 1949, was from the beginning a "unitary multiethnic state" (Zhao 2004: 165-173). Fifty-five ethnic minorities, or 'nationalities,' were identified and recognized from the early 1950s using Stalin's four criteria of common language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup (ibid: 181). The state has severely modified much traditional minority culture under agendas of progress, civilization and national unity, and aspects that threaten the state have been repressed or deprived of support. Some periods have been far more repressive than others and some aspects of culture more repressed, (most notably, religion). But, nevertheless, the state has constantly articulated Tibetan people and culture as distinct and, in albeit often superficial and stereotyped ways, celebrated this distinctness.

I explore the complexities of the political potency of pop music and *dunglen* in this article first by looking at the emergence of these genres in Lhasa and the Amdo region of north-east Tibet, focusing on the role played by state institutions and employees. I then turn to the question of Tibetanness in popular music, looking at songs that express 'hard' Tibetan identity and are seen as subversive, but are not censored, and then songs that are censored. From this analysis, it is possible to see how far the expression of intense pride in Tibetan culture and history *per se* is contested. This further enables us to consider expressions of Tibetan identity in popular songs in relation to larger movements and protests in Tibet, in particular those relating to culture, and the contrasting degree of identity assertion in pop music versus language and religion—the two arenas that have engendered the strongest feelings in response to repressive policies.

Tibetan pop and *dunglen* started to gain critical mass in a

politically volatile and repressive period in Tibet. 1987 saw pro-independence protests in Lhasa, and in 1989 martial law was declared. A hardline approach lasted until the late 1990s, when state-sponsored development became the pre-eminent focus for tackling dissidence in Tibet, giving rise to extremely rapid urbanization, inequality, and an accelerating consumer culture (Fischer 2013; Yeh 2013). More recently, there has been an increased focus on culture in grassroots movements, civil disobedience and protest. In 2006, large-scale protests broke out on the Tibetan plateau in the form of the public burning of immensely valuable pelts including of leopards and tigers that had previously been proudly worn as a sign of wealth, status and Tibetanness. As Emily Yeh analyses, these protests were multilayered. Most prominently, they showed allegiance to the exiled Dalai Lama, who shocked Tibetans by stating at the Kalachakra Buddhist initiation in India that year that if Tibetans continue wearing pelts, "I have no confidence in my rebirth and whether it will be of any use" (2013a: 323). The protests showed devotion to Buddhist morals more generally and a rejection of the intense accumulation and disparity of wealth that state-sponsored development engineered (ibid). In 2008, far more prominent and widespread protests broke out in Tibet. These expressed support of the Dalai Lama, displayed the banned Tibetan flag (implying independence) and called for religious freedom (TibetinfoNet 30 March 2010). In Lhasa, there were attacks on Han and Hui migrants and their property (Yeh 2013b). In 2009, waves of self-immolation began, and since then over 150 Tibetans have burned themselves to death to date (Mcgranahan and Litzinger eds 2012; Shakya 2012; TibetinfoNet 31 January 2012).

Also around 2008, strong movements for self-reliance and pure Tibetan language emerged (Yeh 2007; Robin 2014), and a 'ten virtues' Buddhist morals movement, which included the commitment to vegetarianism (Gayley 2013; Buffetrille 2014).<sup>4</sup> In 2010, protests by thousands of students in several counties in Qinghai broke out against a ten-year plan that would see Chinese rather than Tibetan as the primary medium of instruction across the prefecture (TibetInfoNet [prepared by Stuart Wright] 11 November 2010; Robin 2014). These extended into Sichuan and Beijing, and there were further waves of protests in 2011 and 2012 (ibid). There have also been powerful writings, poems and debates in the Tibetan blogosphere and a genre of songs focusing on the Tibetan alphabet (ibid).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, not only did Tibetan pop and *dunglen* first develop during a politically volatile time, but the tide towards singing only in Tibetan occurred in the politically repressive post-2006 to 2008 period, alongside the pure Tibetan language and culture movements. Mass-mediated

songs of 'hard' Tibetan identity would seem particularly marked at such politically sensitive times, and particularly salient. However, this begs the question of why they were not restricted. Very political songs that have been censored and resulted in arrests have increased markedly in the post-2006 to 2008 period.<sup>6</sup> But a mainstream of songs of 'hard' identity continued. How do these songs fit against or alongside the state and its drives to integrate Tibetans successfully? And what about the newer phase of urban and individualistic love songs or rap songs?

Debates on Tibetan culture in China are all too often polarized between statements that it is flourishing, (the Chinese state view), or that it is being destroyed, (a prevalent view outside of Tibet). In addition, music and performing arts are too easily interpreted in terms of 'asserting' or 'expressing' identity, since the plethora of identity-based research from the 1990s in particular. However, despite the quantity of such research, there has been a lack of analytical sharpness and criticality concerning the term itself, as has been pointed out by Timothy Rice regarding music (2010) and by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper more generally (2000). Notions of music and identity as assertion, expression and resistance have joined strands of popular music studies that have frequently focused on resistance, often against mainstream, 'commercial' pop music, or against dominant social groups and discourses, whether of ethnicity, gender or religion. It is true that popular music, in its link to newness, is highly flexible and thus a powerful tool for fashioning and combining sounds and styles to imagine and create new meanings, ideologies and group identities (Turino 1999), often connected to young people. Thus, it is an effective "social technology" (de Nora 2000) for creating or negotiating change. This has certainly been true of Tibetan pop and *dunglen*. However, in the context of multi-ethnic nation states for which ethnic and cultural identity is part of the fundamental structure and legitimization of power, the conflation of music, identity and assertion or resistance must be problematized. In addition, we must question how the arena of music, and indeed, cultural heritage more generally, compares to that of language or religion in terms of the assertion of Tibetanness or protest. Mass-mediated, audio-visual music and live performance has a different kind of visibility to language and religion in everyday life, and a different way in which it performatively constitutes social and cultural fabric. As I explore in the article, there are reasons why the state does not censor Tibetan pop music and *dunglen* more harshly. Furthermore, there are reasons why Tibetan language assertion has had so much more success in the realm of pop music than it has had in schools.

This article is based on many years of involvement in Tibetan music dating from 1990, and numerous fieldwork trips to Tibet carried out between 2004 and 2007. However, I have not been able to visit Tibet since 2007, and a very different climate has emerged there since 2008. Thus, I also rely on mediated or second-hand information from Tibet and on Tibetan pop music itself, widely available on YouTube and other internet sources.

### The Interweaving of State and Independent Production in Tibetan Popular Music

Popular music in the sense of mass-mediated music driven at least in part by audience demand and market exchange developed in China as a whole following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The planned economy quickly started to recede with the first market reforms in 1978, and the restriction on anything but socialist culture also stopped, with many traditional performing arts revived. Mass-mediated culture, however, remained controlled by the government. Thus, the recording industry grew almost entirely out of government institutions.

The first album produced in the Tibet Autonomous Region was 'Songs of the Holy Land No. 1' (*Naychog luyang 1, gnas mchog glu dbyangs 1*). Released around 1985 by the Tibet [TAR] Audio Publishing House, it featured members of the Tibet Song and Dance Troupe, including Jampa Tsering, Nyima Tsering, Dadon and Lhagdron. However, it was not until 1987 when Dadon, a violinist of the Tibet Song and Dance Troupe, released her first album of pop songs, that the first post-Cultural Revolution musical craze was born in central Tibet. This album, 'My Dondrub Tsering' (*Nga yi Dondrub Tsering, nga yi don grub tshe ring*), which sold a remarkable 20,000 copies, shot Dadon to fame. As Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy writes, in terms of musical style, it was a genuinely new style for Tibetan music, deriving not from the state styles but from Taiwan and Hong Kong, in particular, the famous singer Dèng Lìjūn (2005: 234-246). It broke the previous monopoly of the ideologically-charged style of state performing arts institutions on modern, mass-mediated music.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the musical style, the lyrics of Dadon's songs contained unprecedented expressions of Tibetan identity and emotion, as I discuss more below (ibid; Dhondup 2008).<sup>8</sup>

However, while the album was certainly radical in terms of musical style and lyrics and had a profound impact on Tibetan listeners, it was not an independent production but a production of government work units: the Tibet [TAR] Song and Dance Troupe and the Tibet Audio Publishing House (Henrion-Dourcy 2005: 241; Dhondup 2008: 7). A private sphere had not emerged at this time. Dadon, herself a member of the Tibet Song and Dance

Troupe, sang as a part of her work unit duties, for no extra money. The lyricists and composers and musicians were also employees of the government work units. The Tibet Audio Publishing House received the considerable profit from the album.<sup>9</sup> As with all albums, the lyrics of 'My Dondrub Tsering' were checked by the government offices before the album was released, a practice that still continues today.<sup>10</sup>

Although the album did come from within the government sphere, government policy towards art and culture had changed in the post-Cultural Revolution period, and just as significantly, that towards minorities. Furthermore, commercial popular music from Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China was available in society at large, notably in karaoke bars. Indeed, Dadon gained her experience from singing in karaoke bars, not from the state institutions where she studied and performed (Henrion-Dourcy 2005: 236). In addition, Dadon was influenced by an album of the Tibetan exile band Freedom Youth (*Rangtsen Zhonu, rang tsan gzhon nu*) which had been 'smuggled' into Lhasa (ibid).

The first more genuinely private album in the TAR was made in 1990 by Jampa Tsering, with a similar musical style to Dadon's.<sup>11</sup> This album, named 'Mother's Boy' (*Amai Bu, A ma'i bu*), was privately funded by Jampa Tsering, who also kept the profits. However, it was still closely linked to state institutions. Firstly, it was recorded in a state recording studio, as there were no private studios at this time. Secondly, Jampa Tsering was himself an ex-employee (primarily a pianist) of the Tibet Song and Dance Troupe; he had also sung on the album 'Songs of the Holy Land no 1'. He had been recently sacked from his work unit for singing in commercial bars. However, he had a good relationship with the composer and recordist Tenzin Penor, with whom he had previously worked, and also the personnel of the Audio Publishing House, and so was able to produce a 'private' album using facilities of the Audio Publishing House.

Access to non-government artists only gradually improved around the mid 1990s with the establishment of the first private recording studio in 1994 by Penor. Around this time, it became easier to buy the International Standard Recording Code (ISRC) necessary to legally publish an album in China from the Audio Publishing House. However, although private albums are routinely made in this way, strictly speaking the sale of ISRCs to private individuals is not allowed. Rather, all albums are supposed to be produced by the government, with outside singers contracted by the government offices. The government clearly turns a blind eye to this and de facto allows private production, and most people have no idea

it is not allowed (Morcom 2008: 262). However, because the ISRC is only available from the provincial Audio Publishing Houses (and indeed, the only private recording studio for some years was owned by a state employee), initially it was only possible for a small circle of people in government institutions or in close touch with them to make private albums.

Access to outsiders improved further since the early 2000s because of the emergence of a number of other private studios in Lhasa and Chengdu. These can arrange the ISRC and other formalities for singers through contacts they have with people in government offices. But, contacts and social capital are still important in gaining the necessary access to even private studios, as I discovered while spending time with Tibetan singers from different backgrounds (Morcom 2008). Such studios have increased far more rapidly in the 2010s, and popular music has certainly gained more autonomy from the state. The only other option to getting an ISRC is to produce and sell albums illegally. This has happened in Tibet, and is the way some very political albums are produced today as in the past, but it is not very prevalent.<sup>12</sup>

The development of popular music in Amdo followed a similar pattern, though it happened earlier and has been far more prolific. In Amdo, the main style that emerged was *dunglen*. *Dunglen* has been an exceptionally far-reaching and durable style, and a form of Amdo pop has developed from and alongside *dunglen* with MIDI accompaniment as well as or instead of mandolin or *dranyen* (*sgra snyan*). *Dunglen* or Amdo/*dunglen* pop grew to be the dominant style in Amdo as well as being popular in other nomadic areas of Tibet. As with new pop music from Lhasa, the birth, development and propagation of *dunglen* is heavily tied up with government institutions and personnel.

The lute songs in Amdo that became *dunglen* in fact derived from traditions within the Labrang monastery (Morcom 2011: 404-7). Such songs were first performed in 1956 by a singer named Jigme who was a member of a government troupe in Gannan. He had previously learned them from the monastery when he was a monk there.<sup>13</sup> However, *dunglen* really became a major musical trend in the post-Cultural Revolution era after 1981 when it was disseminated across Amdo by the Xining and Gannan Radio Offices. Jigme sang extensively on the early radio and also taught *dranyen* to many people. Slightly later, Jishi Tso and Palgon emerged as singing stars. Jishi Tso was a singer and dancer from the Gannan Song and Dance Troupe who had performed widely in state troupes in the 1950s and 1960s where the focus was, needless to say, propaganda.<sup>14</sup> Palgon, of Machu county, Gannan, learned

folk songs via his father. As a student in the Northwest Nationalities College in Lanzhou, Gansu province, in the early 1980s, he often played music with other students. He returned to Machu to be a doctor and started learning *dranyen* from Alak Gungthang Rinpoche, the second most senior religious leader of Labrang monastery.<sup>15</sup> In 1981, Pema Khar, the recordist of Gannan Radio Office, was looking for singers for a radio program. He heard of Palgon through word-of-mouth and invited him to sing on the radio show.<sup>16</sup> Pema, Palgon and Jishi Tso together composed many songs, including lyrics, adapting them from local folk songs, dance songs, and the Labrang monastery traditions. They experimented with small ensembles of instruments played by Palgon and also Pema, and Palgon adapted *dunglen* to the mandolin, which became the standard accompanying instrument.

In 1986, again looking for new singers, Pema went to Machu County and visited the secondary school there. While he was talking to the head teacher, inquiring after talented singers, he heard a young man with a particularly beautiful voice singing in the playground. He asked this man, Dube, if he knew *dunglen*, and Dube replied that he could sing (having learned songs from the radio), but did not know how to play. Pema introduced him to Palgon, who taught him—and countless subsequent singers—how to play mandolin, and Dube's songs were broadcast on the radio and released on cassette.<sup>17</sup> Dube joined the Machu government troupe and was a member for thirteen years.<sup>18</sup> He became the most famous and prolific singer of Amdo and one of Tibet's most important modern cultural icons, greatly mourned after his death in 2016. Dube sang extensively with Tashi Dolma, a female singer from the Labrang County Song and Dance Troupe, within Gannan Prefecture, also one of the very best-loved Amdo singers. Dore, another of this second wave of Amdo singing stars, also emerged in 1986. He was a teacher, and not a part of a government song and dance troupe, but like Dube and Palgon, gained the opportunity to sing on the radio and release albums through Pema. He made his first album in 1988, sponsored by the Gannan Radio Office.<sup>19</sup> Pema recounted how he was in the dorm of the Nationalities Teacher Training College in Gannan with a friend when he was intrigued to see a much-used guitar lying there, a rare sight at the time. This belonged to Dore, who had learned *dunglen* songs from the radio.<sup>20</sup> *Dunglen* has since often been accompanied on recordings and radio with a guitar playing simple, rhythmic chords along with the mandolin or *dranyen* that plays with the melody.

Thus, *dunglen* was mobilized, developed and spread via the Gannan and also Xining Radio Offices, although its root form came from Labrang monastery. While many singers belonged to government song and dance troupes, others

were scouted or discovered through contacts in the small world of the Tibetan educated elite, as with Palgon and Dore. The Gannan Radio Office issued the first cassettes in Amdo in 1983-1984, the first cassettes for the whole of Tibet.<sup>21</sup> As with Lhasa, these cassettes were produced strictly by the government office as a part of its duties to serve the public. The first private cassette was made in 1988, by Palgon, though recorded by Pema in the Radio Office in Gannan. Private production took off around the mid-1990s when it became possible to buy ISRCs. However, like the situation in the TAR, it was necessary to have good contact with the relevant government offices to be able to do this. Since the 2010s, private studios have mushroomed, making popular music more independent from the state.

Government institutions still have a strong presence in Amdo popular music, and among singers and lyricists. While Palgon and Dore were not formally a part of the Machu Song and Dance Troupe, they are associated with them and perform with them on big occasions, and they both gained exposure through collaborating with Pema. More recently, the successful pop/rock band Turquoise Dragon (Yu Drug) emerged from Machu Song and Dance Troupe around 2006. The singers Riga and Dartso are from the Serta County troupe and Dronpe sang regularly with them for many years, though she was a Tibetan doctor by profession. There are also renowned singers in the Labrang County and Gannan Prefecture troupes, such as Tashi Dolma and Gonpo Dondrub. The major recording centers remained the Gannan and Xining Radio Offices, although Chengdu became significant later. Since 2005, private recording studios in Xining have become active in *dunglen* and pop production. Key composers and lyricists also hold government jobs, such as Pema, or the lyricists Manlha Kyab, Druglha Gyal and Chone Yumtsering.<sup>22</sup> In addition, dancers from state troupes moonlight in *nangma* (*nang ma*) bars to supplement their state salaries, something common across Tibet (Morcom 2008); indeed, the state style of dance they are trained in has been adopted extensively in popular culture (Morcom 2007). Lyricists, composers and arrangers with government jobs cater extensively for independent singers.

State radio and later television, have played an immensely important role in spreading popular music and giving singers publicity and status, from the earliest singers, such as Dadon, onwards. A *dunglen* competition was held in 1994 with participation from across Amdo, in which the singer Sherten first got exposure as a child. Televised singing competitions organized by government offices have become common at different administrative levels (e.g. county or prefecture). Television offices organize New Year programs and other concerts. Festivals of Tibetan



music highlighting *dunglen* and Tibetan pop music from Amdo and other parts of Tibet also took place in 2003 in Qilian, and on a larger scale in 2005 in Machu and 2006 in Rebkong, sponsored by these county governments. The Xining Radio Office produced immensely popular Video CDs (VCDs) of these competitions and festivals. The county and prefecture governments in other Tibetan areas also support summer festivals, including horse race festivals with live music, dancing and sports. Some of these festivals involve large scale performances by famous artists with choreographed dancing by state performers, though these singers are not all members of state groups.

However, there is no doubt that there is a much larger role played by the private or commercial sphere in the 2000s and 2010s than in the 1990s, let alone the 1980s. In addition to private studios, there are now many live performance venues, in particular drinking houses known as *nanqma* bars, and restaurants with music and dance entertainment. Singers are able to gain good salaries in these establishments, making it a viable profession for many, although albums, like elsewhere in the world, are now not generally made for profit since the explosion of piracy in the digital era (Morcom 2008). Numerous successful singers have set up their own *nanqma* bars such as Yungdrung Gyal and Gangshi in Lhasa and many more in Chengdu. Yadong set up a state-of-the-art recording studio in Chengdu in the mid-2000s. In addition, Tibetan businessmen and also Buddhist clergy have supported Tibetan pop music as patrons, and are keen to help sustain Tibetan popular culture and talented singers, something that started in the 1990s if not earlier (ibid). Many monasteries and clergy also produce albums in praise of Lamas or the monastery with *dunglen* singers, which helps to support their livelihoods. This music is indistinguishable from *dunglen* or Amdo pop in general in terms of musical style (Gayley 2016).

### Constructing Tibetan Identity in Tibetan Popular Songs

Government performing arts and media institutions can be seen as forming the heart of the energy, enthusiasm and funding for popular music and *dunglen* in the early period. State performers, composers, recordists and other personnel still play an important role across the Tibetan plateau, and in terms of organizing large festivals, competitions and various televised music programs, the state holds a pre-eminent position. I now turn to the question of Tibetan pop and *dunglen* and the powerful expression of Tibetan identity that emanated first from these state institutions. I focus largely on lyrical content, since it is lyrics more than musical style where political expression takes place in today's Tibet. I begin with songs that are strong expressions of 'hard' Tibetan identity but

were not censored, or not immediately. I analyze two. In the next section, I explore songs that were censored and resulted in arrests, or could have done so, again looking at two examples. I thus look at the different ends of the spectrum of pop and *dunglen* and the degree to which articulation of 'hard' identity in Tibetan pop songs can be tolerated under government policy, or even be to some degree synergetic with it. It must be noted that songs may be acceptable in some periods and become unacceptable in others. Songs may also become unacceptable if a particular singer gets in political trouble. However, my focus here is on the abiding themes of identity in lyrics and their expression. The first song I discuss is 'Tibetan', *Gangchanpa* (literally, 'Person of the snows', i.e., of the 'snowland', *gangjong* [*gangs ljongs*]), by Dolma Kyab (lyrics: Chone Yumtsering; music: Chang Zhangtrang), an immensely popular song from 2006:<sup>23 24</sup>

Eastward in this world, a compassionate people,  
trodden under foot

Look from afar toward the realm of bliss, climbing  
the snowy peaks that hold up the sky.

Even as our lives, like sand, are carried by the wind  
across the samsaric plain of misery,

With a vast, open, unsurpassed heart, hold in mind  
beings of the six realms.

We Tibetans of the snow mountains  
descend from kings.

In happy times, I share heartfelt words.

In difficult times, I sing songs of sorrow.

The red-faced [Tibetans] who ride astride the horn  
tips of golden yaks,

On the banks of the Yarlung Tsangpo river, their  
stallion's hooves resound in the four directions.

On Ama's [mother's] face, age and distress [show]  
from years, months of the joys and sorrows of the  
three provinces [Tibet]

Even so, the sweet songs of the pristine land of our  
fathers still reverberate across the blue sky.

We Tibetans of the snow mountains  
descend from kings.

In happy times, I share heartfelt words.  
 In difficult times, I sing songs of sorrow.  
 People of the snow mountains,  
 We Tibetans of the snow mountains  
 descend from kings.

In this deeply loved song, the lyrics depict the Tibetan people in grand and epic terms, tracing them back across eons to mythical times and locating them in the vastness of the whole globe: the east of the world, the four directions, the sky, earth, mountains, rivers and animals. The Tibetan people are presented as primordially old and anciently entwined with Buddhism, and as having a clear geography, way of life and a lineage that can be traced back to kings. The poetry is made even more emotive with the Tibetans portrayed as having suffered, being ‘trodden under foot,’ and the face of the mother that personifies the motherland and the ‘joys and sorrows of the three provinces’ portrayed as aged and weary.

The three provinces refer to the Tibetan areas of Kham, Amdo and Utsang. These can be referred to uncontentionally, especially individually. The term ‘the three provinces’ (and ideas of a territorially integrated Tibet) date back to the thirteenth century at least (Jabb 2011: 14-15). In the modern day, the phrase is used to refer to an ‘original,’ unified Tibet. It is such a unified national homeland that Tibetan nationalists call for, either as a separate state or as a zone of genuine autonomy according to the Dalai Lama’s ‘Middle Way’. Under China, in contrast, the Tibetan areas are divided amongst the province of ‘Tibet’ (the Tibet Autonomous Region, Xizang) and then Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures and Counties within the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan. *Gangjong*, the ubiquitous term for Tibet, ‘land of snows’ or ‘snowy land’, which is at the heart of the song *Gangchanpa* (‘person of the land of snows’), is also an image of Tibet with deep historical and cultural roots that transcends the local (Jabb 2011: 17-19).

The song is sung by Dolma Kyab, an impressively tall, broad, long-haired nomad from Amdo, with a spectacular voice, reaching long high notes to sing the choruses and extended last syllable of *gangs chan pa*. This builds from a low and brewing beginning, with repeated chords punctuating the accompaniment, giving a pulsing and almost militaristic feel to the music. In appearance and voice, Dolma Kyab himself is an archetypal Tibetan. The song is an extremely potent expression of the Tibetan land and people, and is loved for its patriotism and its powerful assertion of Tibetanness. However, this song, in its Tibetan language version, was first performed in 2006 at a large

festival in Rebkong, Amdo, organized by the government, and where all song lyrics were vetted by censors.<sup>25</sup> The lyricist has a government job.

While songs on a number of topics exist, nevertheless, the focus on Tibetanness in Tibetan pop music and *dunglen* is ubiquitous. Terms such as the ‘land of snows’ and ‘Tibet’ (*böd, bod*) abound, as do well-worn images of the distinctive flora and fauna of Tibet and the Tibetan people as one: ‘red-faced Tibetans’ or ‘children of the snow lands’ (Morcom 2015; Roche forthcoming). Thus, a song such as *Gangchanpa* is in a sense typical. Videos also generally depict singers wearing beautiful Tibetan clothes in the spectacular Tibetan countryside (Morcom 2015).<sup>26</sup>

Such powerful expressions of Tibetanness can be traced back to the beginnings of Tibetan popular music, and indeed, Tibetan new poetry from the 1980s. Tibetan song lyrics are largely written by poet-intellectuals with a knowledge of classical Tibetan literature and poetry (Jabb 2011), most working in government offices.<sup>27</sup> The songs of Dadon are archetypal in this regard, and were well loved at the time, and are today too. The song *Riwo riwo Jomolangma* (*ri wo ri wo jo mo glang ma*), ‘Mount Everest’, from the late 1980s is such an example:<sup>28</sup>

Mount Everest (*Jomolangma*), unwavering  
 The love of those Tibetans at home and those away  
 from home [*shi che (gzhis byes)*]  
 is firmer than [the mountain] *Dorje Drag*  
 To gather together,  
 it would be so happy to be able to gather together

The river *Yarlung Tsangpo*  
 please send a message [to]  
 our own brothers and sisters who are away  
 from home [*yul gyar*]  
 there is no way we can forget you  
 To gather together,  
 it would be so happy to be able to gather together

Beautiful fatherland, land of Tibet,  
 brethren, beloved from our hearts  
 Come to greet us with the *a shi* ceremonial scarf,  
 We are here waiting for you to come

To gather together,

it would be so happy to be able to gather together

The song outlines the beauty and grandeur of the Tibetan land, the *pha yul*, with two vast, iconic features named: Mount Everest and the Yarlung Tsangpo river, the Brahmaputra. It expresses longing for the uniting of *shi che* Tibetans, those ‘at home and abroad’, or of those Tibetans at home and those who are *yul gyar*, which means ‘away from home,’ ‘refugees,’ or ‘in another country.’ Although these terms could refer to people away from a village or locality, given the focus of the song on Tibet as a whole, there is a strong, though not explicit, sense that the reference is to the exiles. In this way, this song is perhaps politically in a greyer area than *Gangchanpa*, and unlikely to be showcased on state media in today’s Tibet, which is considerably less liberal than the 1980s. However, it was also Dadon’s defection in 1992 that made the political import of her songs far more intense. Nevertheless, Dadon’s songs have been sung and heard in Tibet since she left. Indeed, a Chinese member of staff in the Tibet Audio Publishing House suggested I make an album singing her songs, because people would like them. This would have been sponsored by this government office (Morcom 2008).

I have often heard it said by Tibetans that such songs as Dadon’s were not censored because they slipped past the understanding of the censors due to their use of metaphor. It is true that metaphor is abundant in Tibetan songs, hinting at political meanings to those thinking in that way, though not necessarily obvious to those who are not.<sup>29</sup> However, even if it was the case then, which is unlikely, and would assume no censors knew Tibetan well, this is certainly not the case anymore. In addition, the two songs described above do not actually use metaphor in their expression of ‘hard’ Tibetan identity and unity of Tibetans and the Tibetan land. Needless to say, if the Chinese state wanted to, they could certainly restrict Tibetan song lyrics far more than they do.

I would argue instead that the persistence of such songs is not because potent meanings are hidden and missed by censors. Rather, it is because they are expressions of reified Tibetan culture and identity that are, in basic form, a part of Chinese nationalism—the celebration of the Tibetans as a distinct minority ethnicity within China as well as Tibetan nationalism—the desire to separate from China and form a Tibetan nation state or have real autonomy within China. They thus support China’s *minzu* or ‘ethnicity’ narrative, that of the distinct ethnicity and cultural identity of all the nationalities, and it is not surprising to see such songs coming from or circulated

by state offices. At the very least, such expressions are acceptable in China, or not unacceptable. In performing arts, ethnic difference was reified while at the same time watered down and expressed in stereotypical ways and performed in the state style, to give a socialist realist and professional, ‘modern’ version of Tibetan culture that was, importantly, similar to that of all the other minority nationalities (Morcom 2011). Thus, there are songs that celebrate Tibetanness albeit in these clichéd ways that go back to China’s socialist period. The following song from before the Cultural Revolution period, ‘Tibet is Our Fatherland’ (*Boejong ngatsoei phayul rey, bod ljongs nga tsho’i pha yul red*), is an example of this:<sup>30</sup>

To the magnificent benevolent sun

With happiness and respect we go to offer  
scarves of welcome

Tibet is our fatherland

Tibet is our fatherland

The green mountains, the place of the nomads

The white snow mountains, the good wa-  
ter fields and grass

The well-fed yak and sheep

*Soyala, soyala, soyala* [vocables]

We love our country dearly

We love the motherland dearly

You play the *dranyen*

We play the *dranyen*

We sing and dance

All the nationalities are in one accord

Sing songs for Chairman Mao

In this song, we see a clear depiction, representation and thus construction of Tibetan identity in the repetition of the fatherland (*pha yul*), the mountains, the nomads, the yak, the *dranyen* (the emblematic Tibetan lute) and the stereotypical Tibetan ‘empty’ song vocables, *so ya la*. This is all framed into a welcoming of Chairman Mao, referred to in the first line as the sun, to whom the happy Tibetans offer scarves of welcome, singing of the unity of the nationalities. Such images of minorities singing and dancing in joy are ubiquitous in the socialist period, and a key way in which minorities have been infantilized and subordinated by a paternalistic Han-majority state.<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, however, we can see ways in which there are continuities from such songs into the present day, as well as the obvious differences. If we replace Chairman Mao with a Lama (which, referred to as the sun in the first line could strongly imply the Dalai Lama), and instead of the line about the nationalities in one accord insert, say, a line about the greatness and beauty of the Tibetan land and people, this could be a contemporary song (although not the most poetically sophisticated). In addition to continuities in identity-based lyrics, *so ya la* vocables are still used extensively in contemporary Tibetan pop songs.

However, even with such adaptations, contemporary songs of Tibetan culture and identity like *Gangchanpa* or Dadon's songs express these things much more richly than this propaganda song, and are suffused with more inner emotion and pride in Tibetanness itself. But, this does not constitute any conflict with the state. Following the 1984 Law on Regional National Autonomy, protections for minorities and their culture were made more explicit. Although the state's treatment of language and religion in particular has left the relevance of this law questionable (Topgyal 2016: 68-71; Dodin 2008), there has been, relatively, far more celebration, however superficial, of Tibetan and other minority culture since the mid-1980s, and space for traditional forms or less heavily modified forms, as well as pop music.

Another important difference in contemporary songs that was seen first in Dadon's songs is the expression of sadness and longing. As Henrion-Dourcy writes, Dadon's songs "gave voice, for the first time since the 1950s, to a feeling of grief amongst Tibetans, emerging after the hardships of the previous twenty years" (2005: 237). Thus, in *Riwo riwo Jomolangma*, it is unity with the Tibetans away from home that would bring happiness, and in *Gangchanpa*, the Tibetans are described as 'trodden under foot.'<sup>32</sup> In the old socialist songs, Tibetans were always happy, rejoicing at 'peaceful liberation' and so on, and all the songs of the Cultural Revolution era were upbeat in tempo and mood.

### Censored Songs

Turning to songs that actually have been censored, or could be censored, we can see clearly that it is not proud expressions of the Tibetan land, people and culture (even religious culture) that are unacceptable. Indeed, these are abundant in most Tibetan pop songs, including those embraced by the state and showcased on state television or in state festivals. It is rather when particular political agendas are attached to this Tibetanness. The following song, 'Three Provinces,' by the singer Sonam Rinchen, released at the end of 2011, is an example:<sup>33</sup>

The beloved region of U-Tsang

Where the snow mountains of Tibet are imbued with compassion

The divine Buddha Yishin Norbu

Who Tibetans tell their happiness and sorrows to

The beloved region of Kham

Where the snow mountains of Tibet are imbued with loyalty

The courageous heroes

Who will fight for the freedom of Tibet

The beloved region of Amdo

Where the language of the snow mountains of Tibet flourishes

The compassionate Tibetan youth

Who will think about the future of Tibet

This song describes the characteristics of Tibetans of the three provinces, naming the most sacred statue, the Jowo, in Lhasa; the brave fighters of Kham; and the excellence of Tibetan language and literature that is found in Amdo. It is the lines about the freedom fighters in Kham, mentioning the freedom of Tibet and referring to the armed resistance to Chinese rule that took place from the 1950s till 1972, that is clearly unacceptable. With a small tweak to that line, to, say, a statement that the Khampas are brave and strong with rich traditions of dance (Kham is famous for dance songs), this could be a completely acceptable song sung in a state-sponsored festival. I would, however, presume it unlikely for it to be sung for an official state occasion because of the reference to the Jowo, and therefore religion, as the heart of U-Tsang.<sup>34</sup> I am not aware whether Sonam Rinchen and those involved in the album were arrested or not, but this song as it is could not be sung openly.

Other subversive songs are more slogan-like in their lyrics, for example, the song 'Victory to the Gods' by the Amdo singer Gepe, who was arrested and detained for some time following the release of an album in 2012 entirely consisting of defiant Tibetan songs:<sup>35</sup>

Today, victory to the Dalai Lama!

Today, victory to the fine leader of Tibet!

Today, victory to the coming of happiness!  
Today, victory to the Dalai Lama!  
Today, victory to the fine leader of Tibet!  
Today, victory to the coming of happiness!

Victory to the Gods!  
Victory to Tibet!  
Today, victory to the six million [Tibetans]!  
Today, victory to Tibet, the source of knowledge!  
Today, victory to Tibetans of the Snowland!

Today, victory to our great kinsmen!  
Today, victory to Tibetans around the world!  
Today, victory to the children of the Snowland!

Today, victory to an auspicious day!  
Today, wish-fulfilling day, victory to Tibet!  
For the reunification of Tibetans, home and abroad, victory to us!  
For the reunification of Tibetans, home and abroad, victory to us!

Here, although some of the typical epithets of Tibet such as ‘the snowland’ are used, as well as less-conventional ones such as Tibet as ‘the source of knowledge’, the phrases are a small part of the repeated message of victorious welcoming of the Dalai Lama as leader of Tibet and the return of Tibetans from abroad. This implies the end of the current status quo and presumably freedom or genuine autonomy in Tibet. Thus, this clear song of resistance to the current regime is not ‘about’ Tibetan identity, or particularly intensely imbued with it.

### **Conclusions: Cultural Production, Performativity, and the Political Potency of Tibet’s Identity-Based Pop Music**

I have described the emergence of popular music in Tibet as something that has come from the state realm, and still has a heavy involvement of the state. It can seem surprising that the state has nurtured, supports or at least tolerates a popular music culture with strong expressions of Tibetanness—one that has come to be to a large degree identity-based, and moreover, largely in the Tibetan

language since around 2008. Are songs such as *Gangchanpa* a form of protest or resistance, or a form of successful assertion of Tibetan identity in Tibet itself, a way in which ‘true’ Tibetan voices are able to speak out against a repressive or at least very controlling state?

The answer is complex. These songs are strong expressions of Tibetan identity and unity. However, these expressions are acceptable. It is when these messages of identity and unity are attached to political demands that they warrant censorship. The kind of identity expressed is in the discourse of nationalist identity politics, a way of displaying the characteristics of the nationality (or nation, if interpreted in separatist terms) as unique, as different from other nationalities (or nations), and expressing pride in this. This is consonant with the framing and containment of Tibetans as a nationality by the state, an intensive focus on ethnicity going back to socialist times. As Stevan Harrell has stated, the Chinese multi-ethnic state has helped to hone distinct Tibetan identity (1995: 27), at least its modern form. Thus, such a song is certainly not oppositional to the state, or at least it is not the assertion of identity that is a protest.

But, at the same time, these songs are certainly not devoid of political potency. There are ways in which they can constitute some resistance or successful assertion, yet without disturbing the overarching structure and its political force. As Holly Gayley has explored in her work on the cleric Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog’s influential 1995 book *Heart Advice to Tibetans for the 21st Century*, there is the “possibility of appropriating and redefining the dominant terms of discourse in minority publications” (2013) rather than being subject entirely to their definitions. While ‘culture and identity’ pop songs and *dunglun* do not redefine the *terms* of discourse, they do shape it strongly to add particular colors and emotions. In this way, it can be said that this is a successful negotiation or assertion within limited parameters, a maximizing of what is possible within limits; it would be worse for Tibetans if songs only delineated Tibetan ‘hard’ identity in the more demeaning or trivial terms that are found in official state discourse even to this day. These songs could in this sense be described as a form of fighting fire with fire. This can win over, or appropriate, the original discourse through a discourse that is similar to what is being resisted, but shaped in a preferable way, i.e., that Tibetan identity is asserted with intense pride and richness, and with powerful statements of Tibetan unity too (for example, the three provinces). But at the same time, it works within, and can be synergetic or reinforcing of, the basic category of discourse: that of the Tibetans as a delineated minority nationality.<sup>36</sup>

In this sense, these ‘culture and identity’ songs could arguably be seen to be a permitted form of assertion or resistance. This may be something that writers and singers, whether working within the state or beyond it, are conscious of, or it may be unconscious (and it is not something an ethnographer could ethically question). Indeed, the discourse of identity and the push and pull of what Topgyal terms the insecurity dilemma (2016) have been so prevalent that it is difficult not to internalize them to some degree. Thus, what is intended by some writers (whether within or outside of the state realm) as resistance or assertion or subversion may be similar to what others have intended as mere celebration of Tibetan culture.

However, at the same time, these songs still have an effect on a great many listeners. It is certainly the case that some Tibetans interpret such songs as expressive of a nationalist sentiment, as being subversive, or, more simply, love them in a way and for reasons that the state would not entirely approve of were this to be articulated. This is because it would be a pride in the Tibetan nationality that is too great to fit comfortably into unitary multiethnic China. But, given that these feelings and interpretations are not able to be articulated openly, the political expression of these songs can only be felt and shared in limited contexts. Such songs may well be a part of what garners some people to engage in acts that constitute a real resistance to the Chinese state and the status quo, or to believe that greater freedom, as autonomy or independence, is deserved or a right. But, at the same time, the consequences should things go too far are well known, as many cycles of protest and suppression have shown.

It is also important to note that these songs may become much more subversive in a fundamental sense and may be more restricted by the state in the future. Since the protests of 2008, questions have been raised about the whole validity of the framework of multiculturalism and the special levels of protection of minority rights and identity. There are calls to get rid of this framework and these protections (Leibold 2013) and evidence that such a process has begun, for example, in the arena of Tibetan language education.

There are further plausible reasons why the state does not clamp down on pop songs and *dunglen*. While it is commonly noted that there are pop songs that are incredibly powerful expressions of Tibetan identity, few scholars have remarked that the overall image of Tibet and Tibetans portrayed in pop music, whether ‘strong’ songs or not, is one that conforms to the government presentation of the Tibetan landscape—that is, as something beautiful, stunning and an attraction to tourists; as not spoiled

(for example through mining); and as empty of poor and working people (Morcom 2015). Urban areas in videos are also utopian. Similarly, singers are presented in exquisite ethnic clothes, and look exemplary. As I have discussed, pop songs thus present a modern, prosperous image of Tibet that is grounded in urban centers of power. This is essentially the same as nationalist folklore, similar to images found in tourist brochures, and a contrast to the folk-songs of subsistence agrarian life (ibid). The musical and vocal skills of pop singers (less so with *dunglen* singers) also typically embody a polished modernity, honed in state institutions where performing arts are professionalized. This contrasts with folk music, where most performers are amateur. This, together with the high production standards of pop and higher-end *dunglen*, gives a distinct kind of gloss. This is also the case with backing dancers in videos (it is the case of those dancing to the live performance of *Gangchanpa*). In line with global trends in music videos, such gloss and polish is desired by singers who want to look good in music videos and not sound like they have just come from the village; and who also want to present the beautiful landscape and footage of Tibet.<sup>37</sup> Thus, such images and sounds of Tibet conform firmly with the aims of the state in terms of heritage, as Martin Saxer has discussed (2012), and modernity.

An interesting exception is Gepe’s song, ‘I am Coming’. Although the song has a gloss at the level of high production standards, Gepe himself is presented as smeared with dirt, wearing dirty clothes and looking poor and humble, on the way to meet his brethren in exile. Tibet is portrayed as a place to leave and does not appear prosperous. The visual presentation of a Tibetan in this video cannot be co-opted into state discourse, and changes the terms.<sup>38</sup> High levels of inequality in Tibet and jobless or poor youth are a part of discontent there, in addition to explicitly political matters. The emphasis on Tibetan identity and identity-based ‘inclusion’ in pop songs belies these issues. Indeed, a focus on identity politics and the de-emphasis of class in the West has been associated with the rise of neoliberalism, as Daniel Zamora states, constituting an emphasis on exclusion rather than exploitation (2016). With the Tibetan videos where identity is presented in prosperous terms, this is even more the case.

Another way in which Tibetan pop songs are compatible or synergetic with state agendas, rather than being resistant, is that they show Tibetan culture to be flourishing and Tibetans able to express their identity proudly. In this sense, the intense pride of expression of Tibetan identity can serve to boost the paternalistic and propagandistic discourse that state policy in Tibet supports Tibetan

culture and identity and is overall good for Tibetans. That China is repressing or destroying Tibetan culture and identity is a common position held in Western countries and also by Tibetan exiles. In Tibet, Tibetans are certainly aware of the limitations on many aspects of their lives. The state has been publishing glossy magazines and brochures about Tibetan culture in particular since the 1980s, but propaganda about the colorful and distinct minority nationalities and the paternalistic state has been ubiquitous from the 1950s. As Saxer describes, starting in the new millennium, including from the 2008 period, the state has fought with renewed vigor to present itself as a friend of Tibetan and other minority cultures. Indeed, it was one of the first nations to ratify the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004 (2012: 71). Tibetanness, therefore, is a 'moral economy' that the state is heavily invested in, for the sake of its international image and, equally importantly, for the sake of growing domestic tourism in Tibet (ibid).

Thus, even with apparently daring presentations of Tibetan identity or unity in pop songs, the processes of appropriation, co-option or control versus assertion or resistance are complex and interwoven. Indeed, the state certainly learned if not by the end of the Cultural Revolution then at least after 1989, that entirely suppressing subversive musical scenes is counter-productive. As Nimrod Baranovitch has explored, Chinese rock music, the music of Tiananmen Square protesters, was later embraced and appropriated by the state, lessening its subversive power (2003).<sup>39</sup> With Tibetan 'culture and identity' pop music and *dunglen*, the theme of identity is thus embraced, and only songs that attach particular political imperatives to Tibetan identity are restricted. In China, as elsewhere, multiculturalism operates in the state's interests and on the state's terms, providing only limited autonomy and recognition for minorities, although it promises something more far-reaching (Povinelli 2002).<sup>40</sup>

The arena of pop music and *dunglen* can be seen to significantly support desired images of 'China's Tibet', encompassing assertions of Tibetan identity permitted by the state. It can thus be envisaged to act as a pressure valve in the ongoing insecurity dilemma. It is difficult to imagine that popular music has no agency in giving Tibetans themselves a sense that they are able, or obliged, to be Tibetan in China and to be celebrated as such. But, in this context, it is impossible not to note that while there is considerable freedom of expression in the realm of pop music, and the contained discourse of reified identity especially, there is not this level of flourishing or freedom

of expression in religious worship or Tibetan language education. Apart from areas of Amdo in Qinghai and to some extent Gansu, Tibetan language is marginalized in most school education in Tibet. Furthermore, across Tibet, Tibetan medium school and university education is increasingly irrelevant to jobs in the modern economy, with language requirements in decline in Tibet apart from in Qinghai, and 'very marginal' in the TAR and Gannan (Fischer and Zenz 2016).<sup>41</sup> Buddhism in Tibet has suffered repression from the Chinese state since the 1950s due to the atheistic stance of socialism, and more specifically, because political power in 'old Tibet' was embedded in religion (Powers 2017). The Dalai Lama, who left Tibet for exile in 1959 amidst a massive uprising, is the biggest threat to Chinese legitimacy in Tibet, and his continued absence is probably the deepest source of resentment amongst Tibetans. In addition, Tibetan society is undergoing extraordinary levels of change to traditional life, especially in nomadic areas, with extensive settlement and fencing programs,<sup>42</sup> and there are high levels of Han and Muslim Chinese migration to most major Tibetan cities or towns. The presentation of minorities as happy (with Chinese rule) via depictions of them singing and dancing is, as I have mentioned, well-worn, and continues into the present day. With the pop music and *dunglen* scenes we have something not dissimilar to this in representational power, though there are songs that express sadness and fear too.

It is important also to point out that it is relatively cheap and easy with mass media and substantial state support to make pop music 'flourish,' to be extremely prevalent in society, as long as there are appealing themes and styles for people. Furthermore, it must be noted that it is far easier to sing in a given language than speak it fluently, which requires real immersion, let alone read and write it, which requires intensive schooling and considerable investment and commitment. Thus, while the almost exclusive turn to singing only in the Tibetan language since 2008 is a sign of successful assertion, it is a limited context. The much larger problem of the weakness of Tibetan as a spoken or written language remains and, indeed, intensifies. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind the performative and representational power of music videos, and how easily this can be multiplied with mass mediation. This must be measured carefully against wider social and cultural terrains, comparing the representation in the given text to broader, on-the-ground realities. Viewing pop music as 'resistant,' at least in the Tibetan case, can give a sense of more potent resistance than is really the case in wider society; as Thomas Turino has argued, music may represent something imagined

as much as something that is actually present (1999), and while the representations of imagined realities may turn into social reality, they do not always do so. The performing arts are performative and visible over and above everyday life. But at the same time, they are somewhat separate from everyday life. This makes them powerful, but at the same time, limited and delineated in their performative potency. Their potency should not be underestimated, but neither should it be overestimated. This is not to say that there is not real protest in music. But, singers continue to produce mainstream songs that the state is happy to showcase through its media if not create in its offices. Thus, it is important to investigate the kinds of 'identity' that music is performing and its place and potency in wider society, the dynamics of power involved.

Songs celebrating Tibetan culture and identity thus need to be considered as far more ambiguous and slippery than has hitherto been recognized, and as more polyvocal in their articulation of power. Alongside the potential for Tibetan expression and assertion is the constant potential for appropriation and co-option by the state, or perhaps the inadvertent reinforcing of state discourse or at least categories. Given the utterly towering nature of state power that is in question, this is, in fact, not surprising. Given the options open to Tibetans in Tibet, popular musical forms are in many ways a success. As I have said, they are preferable to the old belittling delineations of Tibetanness. The growing number of songs that celebrate individual love, aspiration and freedom,<sup>43</sup> may well also be a sign of a decidedly un-ambivalent assimilation into the state's dream of a socialist market utopia, the promise of 'everything' for whoever will grasp the moment; it is too soon to interpret these things, and meaning is never univocal. However, real protest and resistance in song is censored, and singers, like Gepe, are arrested or detained and can pay an extremely heavy price. The fate of those involved in street protests is the same, and the vast levels of surveillance in Tibet must be noted (Human Rights Watch 18 January 2016). Even more tragic are the self-immolations, shocking individual forms of protest in Tibet, which are the most powerful negation of state discourse on minority identity.

**Anna Morcom** is Professor of Ethnomusicology at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her work focuses on Indian and Tibetan music and dance from a variety of perspectives including politics, nationalism, modern history, media, gender, and economy and development. She has written three books, the most recent, *Illicit worlds of Indian dance: Cultures of exclusion* (2013, C. Hurst and Co; OUP New York), which was awarded the Alan Merriam prize of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM). She is currently working on economic anthropological perspectives in the study of music with a recently-awarded four-year grant from the Leverhulme Trust.

**The author is grateful to Thierry Dodin, Stuart Wright and Gerald Roche who provided useful input into drafts of this article and numerous helpful comments in the anonymous reviews. She remains indebted to all the Tibetans who helped during fieldwork over the years in a myriad ways. She would like to emphasize that the views expressed in this article are her own synthesis and analysis.**

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## Endnotes

1. See Morcom (2004), chapter six. It has been claimed that singing in Chinese is a good way for Tibetans to 'advertise' their nationality and raise their profile within China, rather than it being a form of 'identity' loss. It is also very lucrative if singers are able to tap into the vast nationwide market.
2. Apart from my own recent article (Morcom 2015), Roche's article on contemporary songs, place, and identity is the only other work I know of that critically examines the discourse of identity and nationalism in Tibetan songs beyond ideas of assertion or protest on the part of Tibetans. His focus is on songs that foreground the Tibetan alphabet. As he states, these alphabet songs present "Tibetan language as the soul of Tibet and the Tibetan people" and "that by celebrating a monolingual identity, songs stigmatize and marginalize linguistic minorities without expressing aggressive or discriminatory attitudes towards them" (forthcoming).
3. In particular, the Tibetan areas, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia account for about 60% of the landmass of China today.
4. The term *Lhakar* (*lhag dkar*) or 'White Wednesdays' is the name of a movement much discussed in exile that emerged around 2009 in eastern Tibet or Kham that promoted the speaking of Tibetan with no Chinese loan words. This term is not used across Tibet, nor is the focus on Wednesdays found



across Tibet; in Amdo, for example, *Pha kã tsangma* (*Pha skad gtsang ma*), ‘Pure father speech’, is more common. The ‘ten virtues’ movement can be traced back to the influential teachings and writings of the Buddhist cleric Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog dating from 1995, in which the emphasis on preservation of Tibetan traditions was central (Gayley 2013). More broadly, support for pure Tibetan culture was part of the Cultural Revolution revival of the 1980s.

5. Roche also discusses the alphabet songs, but in a very different frame to Robin (2014), referring to them as ‘banal nationalism’ that is itself hegemonic on minority Tibetan languages and groups.

6. The exile-based website High Peaks Pure Earth has reported on many of these, providing translations of the songs in English (<<http://highpeakspureearth.com/?s=songs&lang=en>>) and also a video channel (<<https://vimeo.com/hpeaks>>) (both last accessed 15 January 2017).

7. According to the composer Tenzin Penor, involved also in ‘My Dondrub Tsering’, the album ‘Songs of the Holy Land No. 1’ was a first and rather rough attempt at making a popular music style (personal communication 26 May 07). It was not in the Taiwan-influenced style, and did not launch a new Tibetan pop music as ‘My Dondrub Tsering’ did. See Morcom (2004) chapters two and four, and Morcom (2007) for a discussion of the ‘state style’ in the context of Tibetan music.

8. It must be noted that Dadon also performed songs in praise of the Party, as a part of the government work unit.

9. Personal communication, Tenzin Penor, October 2006.

10. I was informed this was the case by Penor (ibid). In contrast, Henrion-Dourcy reports the censors were caught ‘off-guard’ by Dadon’s album, “the first time the authorities found such songs on the market” (2005: 239).

11. The music was by Penor, who had composed many of Dadon’s songs.

12. This is contrary to the situation described by Harris (2002) in the 1990s in Xinjiang.

13. Jigme, interview, 24 July 2005.

14. Jishi Tso, interview, 25 July 2005.

15. Palgon, interview, 13 July 2005.

16. Pema, interview, 26 May 2007.

17. ibid.

18. Dube, interview, 5 May 2007.

19. Dore, interview, 14 July 2005.

20. Pema, interview, 26 May 2007.

21. The Xining Radio Office produced *dunglen* cassettes later (interviews Pema Khar 15 July 05, 25 May 07).

22. These individuals are part of a whole generation of particularly productive and influential Amdo Tibetans working in the field of cultural production, many of them in state offices (Thurston 2017).

23. Interestingly, this song was in fact originally written in Chinese (but by a Tibetan author), and later translated into Tibetan which is when it gained vast popularity. This song is available on <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8GL8UQkXC0>> (last accessed 17 January 2018).

24. I am grateful to Holly Gayley for lending her expertise to this translation.

25. ‘Mentally return’, analysed by Warner in his article on songs, ‘uncivil religion’ and civil disobedience, is another song seen as extremely potent, which was, however, also performed at this state-sponsored festival.

26. Other such songs are analyzed by Jabb (2011), who focuses on *dunglen*; Warner (2013); Robin (2013); Morcom (2004; 2015); Gayley (2016); Topgyal (2016: 97; 224, fn 64); and, with a critical perspective, Roche, on the intensely nationalist ‘blood and soil’ alphabet songs (forthcoming). Warner (2013) and Morcom (2015) also include a discussion of these themes at the level of videos.

27. See Stirr’s discussion of Tso Ngonbo, ‘Blue lake’, a poem by Dondrub Gyal sung by Dadon, as a nationalist song (2008). See Thurston (2017) on this generation of Tibetan intellectuals in Amdo.

28. Translation slightly adapted from Morcom (2004: 149).

29. Interpretation plays an immense role in Tibetan modern songs, as I discuss in a chapter on ‘Protest, perceptions and ambiguities’ (2004: 137-178). Warner also discusses this (2013: 12).

30. This song was remembered by an interviewee as taught in political meetings prior to the Cultural Revolution (Morcom 2004: 99).

31. Gladney (1994). I discuss this in the context of Tibetan music in Morcom (2004: 25-30; 112-127).

32. However, it must be noted that this could refer to the yoke of serfdom, giving a Party-friendly interpretation of this line. I am grateful to Gerald Roche for this point.

33. This translation is reproduced from the website High Peaks Pure Earth, removing repetitions, <<http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/music-video-three-provinces-by-sonam-rinchen/>> (last accessed 16 July 2016). There are abundant numbers of protest songs translated with commentary about the lyrics, music and the singers on High Peaks Pure Earth, and it is the best resource to see the extent of such songs.
34. However, note that the stage of the 2006 festival in Rebkong where Gangchanpa was performed was 'decorated to resemble the shrine of the Jowo' and had an image of the Jowo at its centre (Warner 2013: 10).
35. Again, I reproduce the song here from High Peaks Pure Earth, without repetitions, which are quite extensive, <<http://highpeakspureearth.com/2012/victory-to-tibet-and-what-we-have-is-suffering-two-songs-by-gebey/>> (last accessed 16 July 2016).
36. The degree to which the discourse of ethnicity and ethnic identity (*minzu*) constitutes a pillar of state power is also illustrated by Emily Yeh, who argues that discourses of indigeneity have not been taken up in Tibet and China because to enter into discussion with the state itself requires use of the *minzu* discourse, which conflicts with that of indigeneity (2007).
37. I discuss the emergence of such an 'aristocracy of culture' in Tibet (Morcom 2007).
38. A translation and link to the song video is available on High Peaks Pure Earth, <<http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/i-am-on-my-way-and-remembering-the-place-by-tibetan-singer-gebey/>> (last accessed 17 August 2016).
39. Nooshin describes an opposite situation with Iranian pop music where censorship has greatly enhanced this music's subversive power (2005).
40. I am grateful to Gerald Roche for this point.
41. On Tibetan language and education see Badeng Nima (2008), TibetInfoNet (11 November 2010) and Zenz (2013).
42. See Levine (2015) for a longitudinal study. She describes many nomads benefitting from a mixture of urban and rural dwelling and access to schools and wage-labor jobs as well as traditional livelihoods, while poorer nomads entering much more precarious urban or peri-urban existence.
43. An example is the song 'Fly' (*Phur*) by Anu, a sweeping hit released in May 2017. For a translation, a link to the video and commentary, see <<http://highpeakspureearth.com/2017/music-video-fly-by-anu/>>.

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