
Henrion-Dourcy Isabelle, *Le théâtre ache lhamo.
Jeux et enjeux d'une tradition tibétaine*

Leuven, Peeters, Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques 33, 2017, 940 pages,
ISBN 978-90-429-3339-2

Per Kværne



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/4167>

DOI: [10.4000/emscat.4167](https://doi.org/10.4000/emscat.4167)

ISSN: 2101-0013

Publisher

Centre d'Etudes Mongoles & Sibériennes / École Pratique des Hautes Études

Electronic reference

Per Kværne, « Henrion-Dourcy Isabelle, *Le théâtre ache lhamo. Jeux et enjeux d'une tradition tibétaine* », *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [Online], 51 | 2020, Online since 09 December 2020, connection on 11 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/4167> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/emscat.4167>

This text was automatically generated on 11 December 2020.

© Tous droits réservés

Henrion-Dourcy Isabelle, *Le théâtre ache lhamo. Jeux et enjeux d'une tradition tibétaine*

Leuven, Peeters, *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 33, 2017, 940 pages, ISBN 978-90-429-3339-2

Per Kværne

REFERENCES

Henrion-Dourcy Isabelle, *Le théâtre ache lhamo. Jeux et enjeux d'une tradition tibétaine*, Leuven, Peeters, *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 33, 2017

- 1 Seldom indeed is it appropriate to use the term “definitive work”. In the case of this massive volume, the fruit of ten years of focused research by the Belgian anthropologist Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, it is entirely justified. It is more than unlikely that it will be replaced by a similar work in the future, for several reasons, the most important one being that the performance of Tibetan “opera” (*ache lhamo* or *lhamo*), in its traditional, i.e. pre-1959 form – the subject of her book – would now seem to be vanishing in Tibet; another compelling reason is that long-term access to Lhasa and Central Tibet – which was crucial to her research – has become extremely difficult if not impossible for Western scholars, not least anthropologists, with no improvement in sight with regard to this situation.
- 2 One can therefore only be grateful to Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy for having vastly enriched our insight into an important Tibetan cultural phenomenon, Tibetan “opera” – according to the author “one of the cultural pillars of the farmers of Central Tibet” (p. 4, reviewer’s translation). The Tibetan term *ache lhamo* literally signifies “elder sister-goddess”, referring to the myth of the inception of the theatrical performance, according to which the first actors were compared to beautiful goddesses (p. 67). A traditional Tibetan opera performance, invariably lasting many hours,

consists, briefly stated, of a small number of characters, featuring a narrative, partly spoken but for the most part sung in a characteristic, long drawn-out manner. There are also interludes formed by dances, as well as antics by clowns providing comic relief. The narratives, chosen from a fixed repertoire, are mainly versions of Buddhist *jātaka* stories (the previous lives of the Buddha), i.e. stories of the Buddha's former lives, highlighting the Buddhist doctrine of karma and Buddhist virtues such as compassion, selflessness, generosity and patience.

- 3 The book deals with Tibetan opera, both before and after the final Chinese take-over in 1959. The titles of the three main sections into which the book is divided, are (English translation by the reviewer): (1) "Texts and contexts: the cultural frame of *lhamo* in the pre-modern period" – essentially referring to pre-1959 Tibet; (2) "The sociological grounding of *lhamo*"; (3) "On stage: the art and the knowledge of the actors". Each section consists of three chapters, nine in all, numbered consecutively throughout. The chapter titles give a clear picture of the book's impressive range of topics: "The versions of the origin legend [of Tibetan opera] (chap. 1)"; "The historical perspective (chap. 2)", including the sub-chapters "Development of *lhamo* [the author regularly uses this short form] from the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama to the mid-twentieth century", and "Diffusion of *lhamo* in peripheral districts" – dealing with the Tibetan opera tradition in the Tibetan Himalayan region, Kham (eastern Tibet), and Amdo (north-eastern Tibet); "The 'spectacle' in Tibetan civilization: three perspectives (chap. 3)", including "The perspective of native scholars", "The anthropological perspective: the spectacle as entertainment", and "The ethno-scenological perspective: the place of *lhamo* in the totality of Tibetan stories, songs and (non-monastic) dances" (the term "ethno-scenological" is apparently coined by the author, p. 212); "The repertoire (chap. 4)"; "The troupes: actors, lords, and sponsors (chap. 5)"; "The monks and *lhamo* (chap. 6)"; "Establishing the space of the play: the prologue to the performances (chap. 7)"; "Performance techniques: visible and sound language of *lhamo* (chap. 8)" – including a discussion of costumes, masks, dances, voice, melodies, and instruments; "To see and to display: what the *lhamo* presents (chap. 9)".
- 4 An impressive list of sources in Tibetan, Chinese, and western languages, containing only translations and works dealing specifically with Tibetan opera, runs to 30 pages; there is also a general bibliography covering no less than 60 pages. At the end of the volume is a series of forty plates, including some pre-1959 archive photos but mostly the author's own colour photos from Lhasa in the late 1990s.
- 5 The author's ambition has been to unite several strands of research and dimensions of understanding in order to explore and describe pre-1959 Tibetan opera through a form of historical anthropology, conducting in-depth interviews over a period of several years of the last surviving (in the late 1990s) representatives of Tibetan opera as it was before the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution and the more recent hybridization, touristification, and general folklorization in Tibet of this art form. Her basic methodological premise is that, "It is imperative that one knows one's point of departure in order to know what is undergoing change, and to assess what changes as well as continuities imply" (p. 45). This reviewer regards this as a timely warning in the face of the sometimes loose and easy use of buzzwords such as "social and economic change", "development" and "tradition" which are now routinely applied to Tibetan in anthropological and sociological studies.

- 6 To her vast monographic undertaking Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy has brought a double qualification: not only is she, as already pointed out, an anthropologist, but she also has an academic background from theatre studies. Throughout the work she not only reveals a sharp eye for the technical and expressionistic aspects of Tibetan opera as theatre and performance, but also an acute awareness of the psychological and aesthetic dimensions of this traditional Tibetan art form. Equally important, the range of topics covered in this book, as is apparent from the sketchy chapter list provided above, could only have been successfully dealt with by an anthropologist who, like Henrion-Dourcy, not only has intimate familiarity with the experience of the actors of Tibetan opera performances, but who is also trained in a historical-philological approach and who consequently is able to read, analyse, and contextualise literary sources, viz. the text books in which the various narratives of Tibetan opera are contained, as well as a wide range of historiographical and ritual textual sources. In this respect she is at the forefront of current Tibet-related anthropology, together with others who have the same dual competence.
- 7 Although the narratives which confer coherence on the performance of Tibetan opera are perfectly attuned to mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhist ideas and are intended to inspire the audience to adhere to Buddhist values – Henrion-Dourcy uses the term “Dharma drama” to characterise them (p. 273) – the performances as such are also believed to “gladden” the local gods, worshipped as givers of fertility, health, and prosperity by the local community. As Henrion-Dourcy points out, it is not a coincidence that the harvest season used to be the time of Tibetan opera performances (p. 77). The Tibetan opera was significant for the ordinary, largely rural lay people as one of several ritual means to secure vital mundane benefits such as a plentiful harvest, and hence was a striking example of how Buddhist orthodoxy and popular, local and basically non-Buddhist religion tended to merge in pre-1959 Tibet (pp. 196-202).
- 8 The relationship between the monasteries and Tibetan opera performances was, accordingly, ambiguous, and is the subject of an entire chapter (chap. 6, pp. 385 ff.). While monks were, in theory, barred from even attending theatrical shows, in practice they in some cases even performed *lhamo* themselves, and in the Lhasa the monastery of Kundeling maintained its own Tibetan opera troupe from 1945-1952 (pp. 397 ff.). The Lhasa government dissolved it in 1952, but some of its actors played pivotal roles in re-establishing Tibetan opera in the early 1970s, a development that the author studies in detail.
- 9 One of the many topics systematically dealt with as part of the vast canvas of the social background painted by the author, is that of the taxation system in traditional Tibet, an institution not only of great interest in its own right, but also of crucial importance for the existence of Tibetan opera as the majority of the actors performed as part of a tax obligation to manorial lords (pp. 303 ff.). Each of the troupes on record are carefully discussed by Henrion-Dourcy from this point of view, providing completely new insight not only to the social and economic basis of the pre-1959 Tibetan opera, but of Tibetan, especially Central Tibetan, society as a whole. At the same time, special attention is paid to the one troupe which performed in relative independence, as full-time semi-professionals (pp. 348 ff.). This troupe, known as the Kyomolunga troupe after its place of origin, is of particular importance, as its style formed became hugely influential already in the first half of the 20th century, and later became the basis of the re-establishment and renewal of the Tibetan opera towards the end of that century, in

Tibet itself as well as in the diaspora. Based on her interviews with old performers of the Kyomolunga troupe and others, as well as her recourse to written sources, the author is able to show how, in specific ways, Tibetan opera evolved and changed over the first sixty years of the 20th century (p. 130 ff.), leading one to assume that such change was in fact an on-going process through several centuries.

- 10 Against this background, Henrion-Dourcy posits a demarcation between two present-day kinds of Tibetan opera troupes: professional troupes in Tibet itself, and amateur groups not only in Tibet – in Lhasa and elsewhere – but also in the diaspora. Troupes belonging to the first category, among which the Regional Lhamo Troupe of Lhasa is the most prominent, have undergone far-ranging changes in their style of performance with regard to dress, gestural repertoire, and music (p. 413). Having since the early years of this millennium obtained the status “cultural heritage” in Tibet, Tibetan opera has been reified as a “cultural performance” and hence forms part of the larger packaging of Tibetan culture as a marketable product in the tourist industry. The other category, that of amateurs, has remained more conservative, more “traditional”, in its formal aspects; this is also true of the troupe of TIPA (Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts), based in Dharamsala, although in this case, too, Tibetan opera is regarded as “heritage”, and is, naturally, no longer an integrated part of the annual sequence of events in a local, village-based society, as was the case in pre-1959 Tibet.
- 11 Part 3 of the book consists of a detailed study of all aspects of the performance of Tibetan opera of the second, traditional kind in Lhasa, as practised in the 1990s. This is the result of long and frequent interviewing, during the same period, of key actors, still living in the 1990s, who were familiar with pre-1959 practices. The result is a unique essay reflecting research and presence in Lhasa over a long period of time, based on deep trust between the author and her chief informants. This part of the book, comprising almost 300 pages, would have been an impressive monograph in itself.
- 12 The “Epilogue” at the end of the text of the book (followed by almost 200 pages of appendices, indexes, and bibliographies) leads to a thought-provoking conclusion. As Henrion-Dourcy’s presentation of Tibetan opera does not go beyond the end of the 1990s, the first two decades of the new millennium lie, on the whole, outside the scope of her book. They are nevertheless addressed in the final part of the epilogue. In Tibet, Tibetan opera has undergone changes so radical as to render it almost unrecognizable. In Lhasa it has become a completely commodified, song-and-dance commercial product for the tourist industry, an object of economic investment for large Chinese companies: the lyrics are in Chinese, the costumes garish, the style of dance and song indistinguishable from that of Chinese trends in general. This is the version of Tibetan opera that is promoted by television, thus creating or reinforcing certain expectations, especially among the younger generation. Even local, more traditional performances of the opera are undergoing a process of standardization. The sinicized version, on the other hand, is the one that was included in UNESCO’s list of intangible world cultural heritage in 2009, ensuring its wholehearted support by the Chinese government. As Henrion-Dourcy points out, Tibetan opera now simultaneously means different things to different people: it serves the Chinese government’s propaganda of benevolently developing minority culture; it promotes a product of Tibetan “tradition” and “folklore” for the benefit of the tourist industry (mainly catering to Chinese); and, in spite of everything, it enables some Tibetans, for the time being at least, to assert their cultural uniqueness (p. 736), by attempting to keep traditional forms of Tibetan opera

alive. In this way, Tibetan opera becomes yet an example of contested cultural expressions in Tibet.

- 13 While Henrion-Dourcy's work, as maintained at the beginning of this review, may be regarded as a definitive work with regard to the topic it sets out to deal with, Tibetan opera is nevertheless not necessarily exhausted as a field of research. Looking ahead, I suggest that Henrion-Dourcy's work should inspire other scholars to undertake two distinct research projects. The first is to explore further the present development of the "official" version of Tibetan opera in Tibet in its aesthetic, social, and economic aspects, not least in connection with tourism. This would not be an easy task, but perhaps one of the younger Tibetan or Chinese scholars might venture to take it on. The other project is to see how Tibetan opera is presented, understood and appreciated in the Tibetan diaspora, especially as performed by the TIPPA troupe in India, which, in turn, could be a significant element in a broader study of the concept of "Tibetanness" in the diaspora.
- 14 To take on, as a reader, a research book of more than 900 pages may seem daunting. That would be a pity, for Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy's work can be studied – and enjoyed – in portions, over time. This reviewer certainly spent a long time reading it. The effort is, however, rewarded, for the reader will gain a deeper understanding of little-researched dimensions of Tibet culture.

AUTHORS

PER KVÆRNE

University of Oslo