


**Lineage in the Digital Age:  
Didactic Practices of the Nepal Tibetan Lhamo Association and  
Tibet University Arts Department Tibetan Opera Class<sup>1</sup>**

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ibetan opera (*lha mo; a lce lha mo*) is a performance form that utilizes a variety of didactic techniques ranging from oral repetition to script use, from teacher-to-student long-term apprenticeship to contemporary, institutionalized courses. In this paper, I analyze didactic techniques of two different teaching centers, alongside interviews of Tibetan opera artists in Tibet and the United States. I examine the Nepal Tibetan Lhamo Association (*bal yul bod kyi lha mo tshogs pa*) located just outside Kathmandu, Nepal and Lhasa's Tibet University Arts Department's Tibetan Opera Performance Major 2010-2012.<sup>2</sup> While transmission has traditionally been conceived of as strictly hierarchical, with authority derived from the teacher, my findings suggest a more student-centered, defused model of lineage transmission. Peer-to-peer teaching models, advancement in communicative and reproductive technology and the centrality of the students in their own lineage narratives force us to re-conceptualize the material and imaginative conditions for transmission. It would be easy, perhaps, to point to increased commercialization of Tibetan opera and the increasing distribution of audio-visual material as responsible for the demise of the student-teacher relationship. Although new media and commercial interests are certainly affecting the transmission of Tibetan opera, contemporary practices escape simple categorization.

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<sup>2</sup> bod ljongs slob grwa chen mo'i sgyu rtsal slob gling gi lha mo sde tshan; 西藏大学艺术学院的藏戏表演系.

### 1. Tibetan Opera in Context

Tibetan opera, a performance tradition hailing from Central Tibet (*dbus gtsang*), is performed both within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), as well as throughout China, India, Nepal, Europe and the United States. Tibetan opera scripts are based on traditional Buddhist *namthar* (*rnam thar*), a literary genre often translated as biography. Some of these originate from Indian sources and some are indigenous to Tibet.<sup>3</sup> These scripts have been canonized in written form through the production of official anthologies, but their performed versions represent a continuously fluid and ever-changing form of vernacular performance. While scholars of Tibetan performance have focused on transmission of monastic ritual music, as well as called attention to the rapid changes to Tibetan performance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>4</sup> very little attention has been given to the transmission practices of Tibetan opera. Tibetan opera has been described and historicized in a few important European-language works<sup>5</sup> and translations and summaries of the librettos have been made available by a larger group of scholars.<sup>6</sup> Despite the high quality of these sources, until the publication of Henrion-Dourcy's 2017 work, there has been very little work on didactic practices of contemporary opera troupes.

In order to address this lack of data, I carried out four months of intensive study with the Nepal Tibetan Lhamo Association (NTLA) in 2010. The NTLA is based out of Jorpati, Kathmandu, Nepal and just celebrated their 40-year anniversary as a troupe in 2016. In 2010, rehearsals of the NTLA occurred weekly on Saturdays from morning to evening. The performance space was a single room with concrete walls and floors. One wall was lined with benches and the other with a floor-length mirror. Mounted above the mirror was a simple altar, upon which water, food and incense was offered before rehearsal began and before lunch was served. A single lightbulb hung from the center of the room and a storage closet, sometimes used as a meeting space, was located in the back corner of the space. Meals were prepared in the performance space using enormous pots and camp

<sup>3</sup> These include the *rnam thar* (religious biography) of *rgya bza' bal bza'*, *snang sa 'od 'bum*, *dri med kun ldan*, *'gro ba bzang mo*, *gzugs kyi nyi ma*, *gcung po don yod dang don grub*, *chos rgyal nor bzang*, *pad ma 'od 'bar* and *ras chung dbus la phebs*.

<sup>4</sup> Jamyang Norbu (1986) and Morcom (2007, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> See Henrion-Dourcy (2017), Calkowski (1991), Ahamed (2006), Foley et al. (1988), Henrion-Dourcy and Tsering (2001), Dorjee, Josayma, and Tsering (1984), Drokar (2008), Hulton-Baker (1987), and Stein (1961).

<sup>6</sup> See Waddell (1895), Bacot (1921), Cunningham (1940), Duncan (1955, 1967), Wang (1963, 1986), Thubten Jigme Norbu (1969), Blondeau (1973), Ross (1995), and Hulton-Baker (2008).

stoves. As the day wore on and the stamping feet of the dancers stirred up a cloud of dust, a silver-colored tea kettle would be filled with water and used to dampen the dusty, concrete ground. Group membership has risen in recent years, but in 2010, there were approximately 25 regular performers.

From 2010-2012, I also conducted eighteen months of fieldwork with the Tibet University Arts Department's Tibetan Opera Performance majors (referred to henceforth as TU students), led by Professors Tsering Woebum (tshe ring 'od 'bum) and Pasang (pa sangs). Tibet University is located in Lhasa, and their Arts Department is located east of Lhasa on the university's new campus. My understanding of the history and tradition of Tibetan opera was also derived from independent classes with Tibet University's Professor Gyala (rgyal lags), as well as interviews with an ex-member of the Shol Lhamo troupe (*zhol lha mo tshogs pa*).<sup>7</sup>

Students at Tibet University generally take 40 hours of courses per week. Typical of Chinese universities, students are also enrolled in physical education and daily study periods and have very little time that is not occupied by pre-described courses. Tibetan opera courses for students majoring in the arts meet anywhere from one to three times per week in the Arts Department building on Tibet University's East campus. Students also take performance-related courses, such as vocal training and ballet and have special rehearsals for mandatory university-wide and city government performances. Students meet in a high-ceilinged, large performance space, walled on two sides by floor-length mirrors and ballet bars. Long, narrow windows brighten the space during day-time courses.



Fig. 1 - TU Students in their role call lines at the beginning of a typical rehearsal. Photo by Kati Fitzgerald September 22, 2011.

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<sup>7</sup> This troupe was at the time giving tourist performances in the Himalayan Hotel in east Lhasa. The performer's name is purposely redacted.

I followed one class of students (11 women and 7 men) through their last year and a half of courses, through to their final performance before graduation. It must be noted that since graduation, most of the students have not pursued careers in the arts. While a number of the students auditioned for performance troupes in Lhasa and touring troupes, the students were not offered positions in those troupes and have since married, had children and found work in the education or civil sectors.

Finally, during the summer of 2015, I conducted interviews with Tibetan artists, Norbu Namgyal (rnam rgyal nor bu), Techung (Tashi Dhondup Sharzur; bkra shis don grub shar zur), Tashi Tsering (bkra zhis tshe ring) and Rinchen Dolma (rin chen sgrol ma), residing in the United States.<sup>8</sup> All of these artists were trained at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) in Dharamsala. Born in Bylakuppe, Namgyal Norbu was influenced by the Bylakuppe Lhamo troupe, receiving her education at the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies in Varanasi, India. She was given the opportunity to study at TIPA for two summer sessions. She arrived in New York City in 2010 and has since been an active member of New York New Jersey Cholsum Doegar (*chol gsum zlos gar*). Norbu Namgyal now teaches Tibetan singing and dance to a new generation of Tibetan children in New York City.

Techung was born in Sikkim and began his studies as a performer of Tibetan arts at the age of 9 at TIPA, which was at that time called the Tibetan Dance and Drama Society. There he was taught by Norbu Tsering (nor bu tshe ring) (from the *skyor mo lung* lhamo troupe), as well as Purbu Tsering (phur bu tshe ring) (from Darjeeling). Originally from Lhasa, the Kyomolungpa (*skyor mo lung pa*) troupe has been highly influential in the formation of Tibetan opera in Nepal and India. During Techung's time at TIPA, the troupe also attempted to learn the Gyangara (*rgyal mkhar ba*)<sup>9</sup> style of Tibetan opera by inviting the monk Chabdam Orgyan (chab dam o rgyan) to teach.<sup>10</sup> Techung remained at TIPA as a student and performer until 1983-4, when he became a junior teacher, finally leaving TIPA in 1986. He arrived in the United States in 1987 and has since cofounded Chaksampa Lhamo troupe (*lcags zam lha mo tshogs pa*) in California and taught at

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<sup>8</sup> This project was made possible by the generous Robert L and Phyllis J Iles Award for Graduate Study of Myth and has been given IRB exempt status (Protocol #2015E0407).

<sup>9</sup> Hailing from Gyalgar Choedzong (rgyal mkhar chos rdzong), near Rinpung (rin spungs).

<sup>10</sup> For more on the influence of the Kyomolungpa troupe on Tibetan opera of Nepal and India, as well as information on Chabdam Orgyan, see Jamyang Norbu (2001).

Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. He was instrumental in the staging of the Tibetan opera Sukyi Nyima (*gzugs kyi nyi ma*) at Emory in 2013.

Tashi Tsering received his early education in the Tibetan Settlement in Mundgod, Karnataka, India. As a child, Tashi Tsering was influenced by the performances of the Mundgod Doeguling Tibetan Opera Association (*mon gho 'dod rgu gling gzhis spyi lha mo tshogs pa*). In 1996, Tashi Tsering entered TIPA. After moving to the United States in 2008, Tashi Tsering performs with Taktser Band (*stag 'tsher rol tshogs*), which frequently combines elements of American rock with traditional Tibetan folk music, including *namthar*.<sup>11</sup> Tashi Tsering's wife, Rinchen Dolma, was born in Ladakh to a nomadic family. She attended a Tibetan Children's Village school in Ladakh before getting the opportunity to begin her musical studies at TIPA in 1996. She immigrated to the United States in 2013 and focuses on the musical ambitions of her son and husband.

## 2. Idealized Lineage

Before starting my fieldwork, and to be honest until around 2015, my understanding of transmission and lineage in Tibetan opera was largely hierarchical. I imagined that cross pollination between schools was minimal and that the teachers were the solitary source of authority. I imagined this authority could be passed down to students and that peer relationships were limited to learning partners. This model of lineage is typical of oral tradition, including oral transmission of Buddhist teachings. The presupposition is that there is a source, who teaches to a limited number of students, who in turn found new schools and pass on their knowledge to passively receptive students. Allusions to teachers are seen as claims to authority, authority which is held in the hands of revered teachers. Jan-Ulrich Sobisch describes the Tibetan literary *thob yig* genre, in which lists of tantric teachings, teachers and texts are meticulously and chronologically recorded.<sup>12</sup> David Jackson describes the deeply hierarchical manner in which lineage is depicted in Tibetan *thang ka* painting.<sup>13</sup> Dan Martin terms the Tibetan Buddhist concern for lineage as “a highly historical preoccupation”.<sup>14</sup> When dealing with textual and

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<sup>11</sup> Beyond its use as a genre of Tibetan literature, the term *namthar* is used to signify a sung aria within a libretto, as well as the specific style of high-register singing used in *lhamo* performances.

<sup>12</sup> Sobisch (2000).

<sup>13</sup> D. Jackson (2005).

<sup>14</sup> Martin (1997, pp. 15).

illustrated versions of lineage, it is understandable to take the hierarchical and chronological nature of these models as simple representations of reality. The following three sections explicate the way in which oral transmission and bodily didactic practices demonstrate how over-simplified this model of lineage and transmission is. The fifth section suggests a revised model.

While lineage may be conceived of in various ways, I approach this concept from the point of view of religious studies. Tibetan opera is frequently categorized as a secular performance form. Nevertheless, I argue that the deeply interwoven Buddhist tropes and history of the form render it religious in nature.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that performance of Tibetan opera is equivalent to ritual performance, but that the religious aspects of performing and viewing Tibetan opera cannot be clearly separated from the aspects of performance that operate as entertainment. The scripts of Tibetan opera (*rnam thar*) express a deeply Buddhist worldview and the rituals surrounding the performance, as well as its relationship with festivals of the Buddhist calendar, suggest that performance and viewing of Tibetan operas operate within a merit-making, Tibetan Buddhist ontology. The connection between Buddhism and opera is also a view expressed by many performers and audience members; performing or viewing the operas can be act of offering (*mchod pa 'bul ba*) or merit accumulation (*bsod nams gsog pa*). This might be seen less as an indication that opera is somehow equivalent to Buddhist teachings or philosophy, but more that preservation of Tibetan culture (including elements that are specifically un-Buddhist) is frequently framed as a religiously beneficial act.

In that sense, I understand lineage to mean the imaginative conduit by which students receive teachings. I assert that oral transmission, regardless of its relationship to religious doctrine, participates in lineages. Despite the fact that these lineages are often conceived of in linear, hierarchical fashion, I believe that the idea of lineage is not unproductive for thinking about transmission of Tibetan opera. Performers frequently identify themselves by their relationship to where and from whom they received their training (and where and to whom they conduct their teaching). The revision I attempt to make is not to throw away the concept of lineage in the oral transmission of Tibetan opera, but to suggest a diffused model that takes into account the realities of embodied practice.

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<sup>15</sup> Fitzgerald (2014).

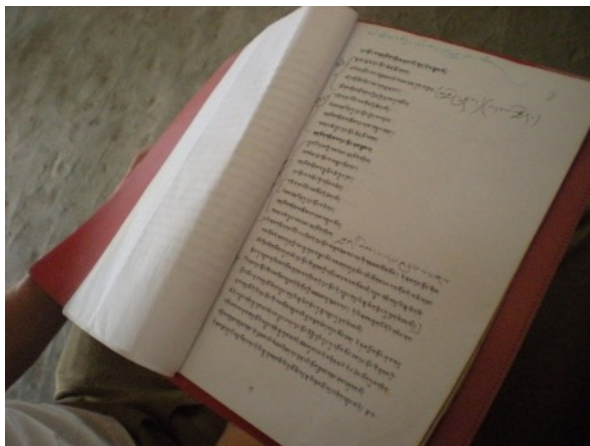
### 3. One Didactic Technique: Peer-to-Peer Learning

When the NTLA was learning a new play (defined as a script that the majority of the performers had not yet performed), the students sat in front of an oversized tripod whiteboard. Singing teacher Tenzin Namgyal, trained at TIPA, writes a line of the *namthar* on the board and students copy the lyrics (to the best of their ability) in their own notebooks or on scraps of paper. Most students have an advanced to moderate knowledge of the Tibetan written language. Some students can easily copy (from the board or from memory) the verses in a variety of Tibetan scripts. Younger students (as well as those who never attended Tibetan schools) had more trouble with spelling and grammar, but managed to copy the text nonetheless. The teacher then sang the line of music and the students repeated after him. In this way, students learned all parts of the new opera before auditioning for specific roles. The teacher asks students to repeat lines over and over until he is satisfied with the result.

After this period of formal learning, students begin a process of peer-to-peer education. As might be expected, seniority does not always equate to talent. Sometimes students who are younger in age have a stronger command of the Tibetan written language, a more powerful voice or a larger vocal range. These students frequently take on a teaching position for students with less experience or less developed voices. The learning process does not end after the songs have been taught. In fact, it is the reciprocal practice amongst students that has the greatest effect on the students' ability to memorize the *namthar* and develop their own performance styles.



Fig. 2 - The Nepal Tibetan Lhamo Association in rehearsal July 23, 2010. Photo by Kati Fitzgerald.



*Fig. 3 - A copy of the script in use in rehearsal. Note mark-ups made by elder members of organization.  
Photo by Kati Fitzgerald on July 23, 2010.*

If an opera being rehearsed has already been performed, the learning process is somewhat different. During my time with the NTLA, the troupe enacted both of these rehearsal processes (learning a new opera and rehashing a previously performed opera) once. Starting from the beginning, the scenes are played for the teachers of dance, music and the elders of the group. The scenes are stopped when there is a dropped line, a missed entrance or a muddled dance step. In this way, the teachers and students interact directly in a trial and error schema. Younger members of the NTLA are expected to stand aside and watch, practicing the dance steps and singing the accompanying parts throughout rehearsal. The younger students witness hours and hours of peer performances, which serve as their model for performance. As might be expected, this process takes time and involves many discussions among senior performers, non-performing elders and the group leaders. Good-natured controversies often arise concerning the manner in which certain scenes or dialogues should be performed. Again, seniority is not always the marker of authority in these didactic interactions. Especially athletic and refined dancers are frequently less experienced, younger members of the troupe. Additionally, performance talent is not always equally distributed and the best singers are infrequently the best dancers. This means that authority to teach is not permanently manifest in one performer. Rather, power flows between various members of the troupe as the rehearsal process progresses.





Fig. 4 - Rehearsal process of the NTLA. Photo by Kati Fitzgerald July 31, 2010.

Although the main focus of the NTLA is performing *lhamo*, they also act as a general performing arts company for the community. They are called upon during festivals, weddings and celebrations to perform a repertoire of traditional Tibetan songs and dances. When such an event is on the calendar, the association takes a few hours out of their rehearsal time to go over a select number of non-opera pieces. Some involve the entire association, while others are specific to men, women, or those members of the group who possess special skills (i.e. songs featuring the lute (*sgra snyan*), fiddle (*pi wang*), a technically advanced *rnam thar* or a regional song). These performances are another instance in which talent and authority is redistributed amongst various group members. In the NTLA, for example, the best *sgra snyan* players did not necessarily possess great singing voices. This allowed young musicians to take on both authoritative and receptive roles successively, acting sometimes as teachers and other times as novice learners.

In contrast to the relatively high number of group elders in the NTLA, TU students, who had access to only two Tibetan opera teachers, relied even more heavily upon peer-to-peer training techniques. Tibetan opera classes were frequently the last period of the day, meaning that students had time to remain in the rehearsal space after class to work on their routines. Students practiced their routines together, using the floor-to-ceiling mirror in the rehearsal space to watch themselves and their peers. While students did not frequently directly criticize their peers, as a group, they ran through scenes, dance numbers and songs multiple times until a sense of group cohesion had been achieved.

For the TU students, parts are chosen based on a once-per-semester audition, in which each student prepares an arrangement that highlights their ability to sing a select *namthar*, as well as to speak a comic or dramatic line of dialogue. Students stand in role call lines, approach the front of the mirrored classroom one-by-one and sing and act their piece. Critiques are given only in the case that the class as a whole does especially poorly. Part selection is discussed by the teachers, while the students change, and parts are distributed at the end of the class period. The preparation of these audition pieces is highly collaborative. In Chinese universities, student dormitories are sometimes arranged by major. This means that many of the TU students shared dorms (6 students to a room), as well as class time. During my visits to the female dorms, students utilized recordings on SD cards to audition for each other. Sometimes the students even broke out performance costumes and engaged in mock performances to the delight and annoyance of their bunkmates.



Fig. 5 - Example of a 512 MB Micro SD that could be inserted into flip phones as external storage. Photo by Kati Fitzgerald December 3, 2016.

TU students were also expected to participate in performances within Tibet University, at Lhasa's many national pride festivals each month and occasionally travel to other regions of Tibet and China to participate in 56 nationalities expos.<sup>16</sup> Rehearsals for such events were often

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<sup>16</sup> Performance events and expos showcasing the particularities of China's minority nationalities are common events, both at the nationalities museums, as well as in tandem with governmental and cultural festivals. For more, see Harrell (2001) and McCarthy (2009).

performed in the presence of the Tibetan opera professors, but were most often conducted by other teachers. Students were required to perform for school events (Tibet University sports competition) and city government events (celebration of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC, etc.). During the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary performance, students worked collaboratively to write a new *namthar*. Using the singing and dancing style of Tibetan opera, students broke into groups to write small scenes. Each group was given the chance to audition their contemporary *namthar* and one group was chosen to perform at the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.<sup>17</sup> This is an instance in which students are not only learning together, they are also collaborating to produce new material in the lineage of Tibetan opera.



Fig. 6 - TU Student performance in Tibet University auditorium in celebration of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party. The screen reads 'Celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Communist Party of China.' Photos by Kati Fitzgerald on June 21, 2011.

#### 4. The Role of Technology

I start this section with an anecdote about technology's role in connecting these two geographically distant groups. The trip between

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<sup>17</sup> The plot of this story was a Tibetan student bringing home a Chinese boyfriend to her Tibetan parents' home. Although the parents are uncertain about this arrangement, the *namthar* concludes with the boyfriend proving the benefit he can be (he was studying to be a doctor) to Tibetan communities.

Kathmandu and Lhasa covers a little over 1100 kilometers and takes about an hour and a half by plane. The overland trip, however, generally takes more than one day. Travelers between Kathmandu and Lhasa most frequently cross the border in Dram ('gram; 樟木), a small border-town set on the side of a steep mountain between the arid, stark landscape of southern Tibet and the lush forests of northern Nepal. Some degree of import-export passes through Dram, mostly in the form of clothing (knitted hats, gloves, scarves, etc.), lentils, spices and snack-foods moving from India and Nepal to a few shops in Tibet. Specialty items such as yak products (wool, 'bri milk, butter, yogurt, cheese, etc.), Tibetan tubers (*gro ma*) and Tibetan medicinal herbs (most expensive of which is *dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*). Print and media are, however, infrequently transported via official import-export routes. This information sets the scene for the anecdote below.

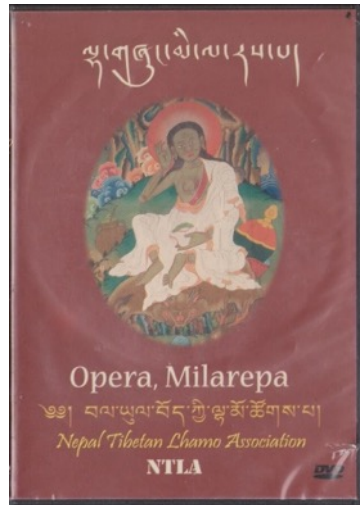


Fig. 7 - Nepal Tibetan Lhamo Association DVD of their July 2010 performance of Milarepa

During my time with the NTLA, the group performed the opera Milarepa (*mi la ras pa*) and commissioned a DVD of the performance. Having received one of these DVDs, I wanted to share the performance material with friends and teachers in Lhasa. I brought the DVD to a small print store just outside Lhasa's Barkhor and asked the owner, a friend of a friend, if he could help me copy the DVD. He looked at the cover, popped the disc into a computer and promptly told me that he had already seen the video and others had come by to make copies. Anyone familiar with Lhasa's thriving DVD/CD/VCD

grey-market will likely be unsurprised by this interaction,<sup>18</sup> but I had been under the impression that no one was aware of the NTLA's work inside the TAR. Even if the students and teachers I interviewed were not in direct contact, there were certainly connections and a flow of Tibetan opera material between Lhasa and performance centers of Nepal and India.



*Fig. 8 – There were two videographers responsible for capturing the footage for the DVD. Note that the videographers were often on stage with the performers and frequently blocked sightlines. Photo by Kati Fitzgerald on July 5, 2010.*

Despite the fact that the NTLA worked to archive and sell DVDs of their performances, in 2010 the NTLA rehearsed without the aid of much technology. Electricity in Nepal was and continues to be sporadic, with load shedding occurring for up to 15 hours per day. Large institutes and corporations are able to buy and maintain costly generators, but groups such as the NTLA are unable to plan rehearsals, meetings or performances that rely heavily upon the need for electricity. The group did own a small sound mixer, with a few microphones and amps, which were sometimes used during rehearsal, but most of the learning process occurred without technological intervention. The lack of technology meant that group elders were an essential part of the learning process; these elders did not always participate directly

<sup>18</sup> Morcom (2008, pp. 270–72).

in the rehearsals, but acted as consultants and sources of knowledge. Additionally, all members, including school-aged children, were expected to attend rehearsals regardless of whether their specific scenes or pieces would be rehearsed. This structure set up an environment of direct lineage transmission from elderly teacher to novice student.

During performances, the NTLA relies upon amplification when available and commissions a videographer to record the event. The incorporation of technology into the performances was a point of debate in the group. Older group members experienced technology as something inconvenient and troublesome. During a performance I witnessed, for example, heavy winds knocked over scenery and speakers on the stage, causing an interruption in the performance. Because electricity is unreliable, technology use in rehearsals and performance tends to be more of a hindrance than a boon. On the other hand, NTLA president Tashi Tseten (bkra shis tshe brtan) wished for more advanced amplification and lighting technology. Junior performer Ngawang Tsering was also engaged in plans for a social media platform that would link Tibetan opera troupes across India and Nepal (these plans, unfortunately, never came to fruition). This generational divide actually illustrates the way in which transmission occurred for the NTLA. Group elders and young performers were engaged in a dialectical process, marrying tradition with contemporary ideas.

TU students, on the other hand, relied heavily upon technology during their rehearsal and performance processes. During rehearsals of new material, the teachers utilized one of two DVD/CD/VCD box sets<sup>19</sup> to teach the students snippets from the most famous and recognizable scenes in the *lhamo* repertoire.<sup>20</sup> The class did not learn any entire opera scripts, only learning famous sections from select operas. While most students could not read or write Tibetan, they used a system of vocal tone transcription and a combination of Chinese and Tibetan sound symbols to take notes. Other students forwent notes completely, sticking solely to their mobile device recordings and astute memory. All students are united in use of their mobile device to record their teacher singing the parts for which they will later be re-

<sup>19</sup> These two box sets were published and distributed as part of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Project. Tibetan opera was inscribed into the list in 2009 and has since become the object of increased government funding, academic interest and commercialization. The CD box set: dpal ldan dbang phyug (2010). The DVD box set: *lha gzhung nor bu brgyad: krung gó'i bod ljong kyi srol rgyun "khrab gzhung nor bu brgyad [Eight Precious Opera Scripts: China's Eight, Precious, Tibetan, Traditional Scripts]* (2012).

<sup>20</sup> For summaries of what are now considered the eight classic operas refer to: skal bzang don grub (1997). For English-language summaries, refer to: Ross (1995). For Party-accepted summaries in Chinese, see Wang (1963).

sponsible. Using these CDs on portable stereos, along with the aid of the teachers for difficult passages, the students collect the written and electronic resources necessary to learn their parts outside the classroom. After class, the teachers leave together and students stay in the rehearsal space. At this time, a process of what is traditionally viewed as 'rehearsal' begins. A large TV in the back of the rehearsal room is utilized to watch recordings of various Tibetan dance and song performances. These are generally the concerts pre-recorded and shown on Tibetan New Year (*lo gsar*) both in and outside the TAR on Tibetan language television station XZTV.

Beyond the use of technology in the rehearsal process, students at TU performed using the latest in stage lighting, sound equipment, LED backdrops and fog machines. I watched two formal performances in front of outside audiences. The first was the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary performance mentioned above. The second was the final performance of the year conducted before graduation. This particular performance occurred off campus and was presented in front of a panel of directors from Lhasa's various performance troupes. The students lip-synched their vocal parts and exhibited ballet and modern dance pieces in between the *lhamo* excerpts they had been rehearsing all year. The performances are meant to showcase the physical strength and stamina of the actors rather than convey the stories of the *rnam thar*.



Fig. 9 - Final graduation performance of the TU Students. This photo shows the performers with their instructors and school leaders. Photo by Kati Fitzgerald on December 11, 2011.

I should note that my fieldwork in Nepal and Tibet occurred right on the cusp of what I somewhat playfully term the WeChat Revolution. During my time in Lhasa, the iPhone 4 appeared on the market and people began the switch from using QQ (a desktop-based instant messaging application popular in China) to WeChat. The use of iPhones, which offer an integrated Tibetan keyboard as a standard feature of the phone, as well as the increased popularity of WeChat, really revolutionized information sharing amongst Tibetan communities.<sup>21</sup> Prior to the widespread use of the iPhone amongst Tibetans, there were very few electronic avenues available to communicate using written Tibetan. This meant that most long-distance communication (especially international communication) occurred via telephone. The QQ interface required some knowledge of Chinese (a knowledge that most Tibetans living abroad do not possess) and applications such as Facebook and Twitter (and more recently SnapChat, Instagram, WhatsApp & Viber) are not accessible in China without the use of a VPN. WeChat presented the first application that allowed English, Chinese and Tibetan speakers easy access to one interface.

Contemporary Tibetan artists sometimes express uncertainty about the payoffs of technology in their art. Yu, for example, interprets famous Tibetan director Pema Tsenden's corpus of films as an expression of anxiety about the effects of modernization and globalization.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that when Tibetan opera artists discuss technology outside the frame of globalization or interregional relationships, they view technology as a positive influence on their art. The NTLA viewed technology as a means to both widen the reach of their art, as well as to engage the younger generation through modernization of performance modes. TU students, even with prodding, never expressed concern with their use of technology. Students felt that their rigorous training was best exhibited by accompaniment of the latest in stage technology.

US-based performers expressed a similarly practical position, Rinchen Dolma, when asked directly about the effects of technology on lineage, stated, "We Ex-TIPA women have a WeChat group and we all share old songs and lyrics. There are no younger performers in these group, but what we learn in this group we might teach to our students".<sup>23</sup> Both Rinchen Dolma and Tashi Tsering mentioned using Facebook, WeChat, Viber, YouTube and telephone calls to both teach and learn Tibetan opera. Rinchen Dolma sees WeChat as a beneficial tool, stating, "The best thing about WeChat is that you can repeat the

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<sup>21</sup> See Chatalic (2014, pp. 96–101) and Grant (2016).

<sup>22</sup> Smyer Yu (2015, 115).

<sup>23</sup> Tashi Tsering and Rinchen Dolma (2015).



recording again and again. You don't have to ask the teacher to repeat themselves."<sup>24</sup> Techung, when asked about the effects of technology on the student-teacher relationship, expressed a similar antipathy.

It's just natural. It's not changed as drastically as in the west, but still the mind is wandering everything. Are you my teacher? The teacher is right in front of you. Your mind is like ... When we were growing up you were completely soaked into your teacher. Even though the mind was traveling but not as distracted as right now.<sup>25</sup>

Techung and other artists expressed a resigned attitude toward increased technological influence. Namgyal Norbu stated, "If there are good sources, then it is good, but we do not have many good sources."<sup>26</sup> The artists hoped for the proliferation of good didactic resources online in the future.

There exists a complex relationship between promotion of art via dissemination technology, enhancement of modes of performance via audio-visual technology and the loss that traditional culture incurs at the hands of foreign technology. This attitude of yearning toward and repulsion from "modern"<sup>27</sup> performance modes is captured in Anna Morcom's work on post-1950s dance in Tibet (Morcom 2007). This antipathy can also be seen in the intergenerational conflicts over technology use in the NTLA. Younger performers feel excited about the prospect of disseminating their performances and yearn for more stable integration of amplification and lighting into their work. Older teachers worry, not about the foreign influence of technology, but about the distractions that technology can incur when it does not function properly. TU students embrace technology wholeheartedly and feel proud of the ways in which they transform Tibetan opera into a modern art form. They do not conceive of their own performances, fog-machines and all, as an aberration of tradition, but rather a creative continuation of it.

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<sup>24</sup> Tashi Tsering and Rinchen Dolma (2015).

<sup>25</sup> Techung (2015).

<sup>26</sup> Namgyal Norbu (2015).

<sup>27</sup> I take my definition of modernity from Janet Gyatso, not as a distinct moment in Tibetan history, nor purely as an influence from outside sources. Gyatso writes, "Methodological self-consciousness is one sign that helps us distinguish between an uncritical repetition of past tradition and an intentional redeployment of such inheritance for new purposes" (Gyatso 2015, 403). It is this definition of modernity, one that is in constant flux, that I find most helpful in conceptualizing Tibetan opera lineage.

Theorists of globalization and modernization, such as Arjun Appadurai, suggest that it is precisely the introduction of mass media and migration that facilitate the popularization of imagination. This popularization entails the removal of prophetic power from one charismatic individual and places that power into the hands of ordinary students.<sup>28</sup> New technology may be facilitating the dispersal of transmission authority, opening avenues of study outside of geographic localities and giving a platform for transmission that does not necessarily rely upon prestige or physical mobility. I add that there is also a sense in which the model of dispersed lineage can be read backwards through history. If contemporary transmission methods are so diffuse and interconnected, in what ways have we been reading the archive (those documents that record who taught who, who received which initiation from whom) too simplistically? In what ways does a new model of diffused lineage encourage us to ask whether the direct, hierarchical lineage model of the past could have ever existed in reality?

##### *5. Centrality of the Student: Imagination & bag chags*

Beyond the material effects of technology (now it is louder, now I can record my teacher), human imagination is an essential element of lineage formation. I see imagination operating in two ways in this project. The first is in the relationship to Tibetan geography and history, as it is imagined by performers themselves. While many Tibetan opera artists in Nepal, India and the United States have never been to Tibet, they express a romanticized vision of the Tibetan landscape that coincides with their performance styles. One performer, when asked how Tibetan opera singing styles are influenced by their environment stated,

The geography makes a difference. I think India or Tibet, places in the Himalayas, are such wide and spacious places, so the environment helps. The environment is very clean, so the singing is unobstructed. When you sing you need openness, whatever you have you can express, which makes the singing better. Slowly, slowly practice, practice and it gets better. In the US we need a big space. In a small space, you can't really sing loudly. If you try to take all that is inside of you and express yourself freely, you can't. Out-

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<sup>28</sup> Appadurai (1996, pp. 5–11).

side are you neighbors and they will think, “What’s going on!”<sup>29</sup>

In this conceptualization, the artist imagines a Tibetan landscape that is clean, unobstructed and wide open. She makes direct lineage connections between the style in which she performs and the landscape of Tibet. Following Colleen McDannell, landscape here might be productively defined as “cultivated nature,” but in this case the cultivation is not a matter of building roads and sky scrapers.<sup>30</sup> Rather the cultivation of nature is occurring within the mind of the performer. The artist recognizes the trans-global connections wrought by migration, communicative technology and ethnic identity formation, while marking the localized conditions that limit her current performance modes. She takes inspiration for her own contemporary singing from a landscape with which she imagines herself physically connected. These imaginative connections to Tibetan landscapes that span time and space force us to reconsider the prominence of singular, geographically-specific teaching models.



*Fig. 10 - View from meditation caves near Samye Monastery. Photo by Kati Fitzgerald June 2, 2011.*

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<sup>29</sup> Namgyal Norbu (2015).

<sup>30</sup> McDannell (1995, pp. 3).

Artists take influence not only from their actual teachers, those individuals with whom they memorize or rehearse a new selection, but also from stories, narratives of past and distant performers with whom they may or may not have had any physical connection. With the increasing availability of images, videos, audio recordings and oral narratives passing between the TAR and Tibetan communities around the globe, performers can witness and learn from a wide range of teachers. Beyond this more direct didactic relationship, performers of Tibetan opera imagine themselves into idealized lineage models that do not rely upon historical reality. When asked about the training of their main teachers, for example, no performer I encountered could trace their lineage beyond one generation. The artists might remember the name of some of their teacher's teachers (most did not), but none recalled any teachers before that generation. This is not to say that the performers did not feel connected to the past, but rather that this connection was creative and flexible in ways not reflected in our hierarchical lineage model.

This creative relationship with the past might be conceived of through Jackson's "digital Diaspora."<sup>31</sup> Speaking about his own work with African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, Jackson argues that "Digital and 'new media' technologies provide the glue that keeps their deterritorialized spiritual community together."<sup>32</sup> It is true that technologies such as YouTube, Vimeo, and especially Facebook and Twitter, allow Tibetan artists in Nepal, India, Europe and the Americas to share work, offer critiques and construct communal histories. WeChat and Weibo in the PRC offer similar opportunities for collaborative work, translocal teaching and pathways to popular renown. Nevertheless, creative understandings of Tibetan geography and its connections with performance developed before the advent of the iPhone and, I argue, are not entirely dependent upon new media.

The second way in which imagination challenges our hierarchical model of lineage does not rely upon technology at all, but on the Buddhist concept of *bag chags*. *Bag chags* is often translated as karmic imprint, predisposition, or habitual tendencies. *Bag chags* is different from karma (*las*) because *bag chags* are dormant impressions within the inner mind (*nang sems*) or consciousness (*rnam shes*) that might manifest as action (i.e. karma), but may not.<sup>33</sup> In his own personal ethnography, Topden Tsering describes *bag chags* as, "the familiarity that comes from earnest perseverance and the inevitability of one's

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<sup>31</sup> Jackson (2012).

<sup>32</sup> Jackson (2012, pp. 485).

<sup>33</sup> Zhang (1984).

hard work meeting its reward.”<sup>34</sup> This sense of familiarity is effected by karma and, if acted upon, produces new karma, but may also remain dormant and never find expression.

This category of experience was one brought up by artists when asked about their own performance abilities. Interviewee Namgyal Norbu, when pressed to identify which of her teachers exerted the most influence over her singing stated,

Watching performances, like the 5-6 day continuous performances, from morning to night, of Tibetan New Year, we went to watch, but we did not really understand the meaning. From this I accumulated a kind of *bag chags* [...] I think it is a little easier for me to perform namthar because of a kind of familial homeland connection – for example, my parents are from U-tsang and for them there is a kind of familiarity with the style of singing, the way of vocalizing, the sound. This makes a difference I think. For example, people from Kham do not really sing *rnam thar*, so there is a difference, I think. When we sing *rnam thar*, it is not only what the teacher tells you. It is one’s own strength, or talent of the individual performer.<sup>35</sup>

This karmic imprint can come from the activities of a previous life, but it can also manifest in relationship to experiences accumulated within one’s current lifetime. The theological or ontological belief in reincarnation aids in reliance on *bag chags* as a formative element, but it is not essential. One can understand *bag chags* as a predisposition, which can be connected to karma accumulated over many lifetimes or simply collected experiences within this life.

Despite a definite respect for their teachers and elders, the artists repeatedly told me that the quality of the performer is not produced by the teacher; it is something self-produced, karmic and inherent. This might be where my evaluation of lineage in Tibetan opera must depart from lineage in a religious context. This is not because the religious student does not stand at the center of transmission, but rather because there is much more at stake for a religious novice to claim their own talent, authority or importance. Artists are able to make socially-acceptable, rhetorical claims to greatness and centrality that would be very difficult for a religious student to make without seemingly contradicting religious precepts. Artists are not held to the

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<sup>34</sup> Topden Tsering (2012).

<sup>35</sup> Namgyal Norbu (2015).

same standard of renunciation and are not expected to act as model bodhisattvas.

### 6. Conclusion: Diffused Lineage

Instead of the teacher acting as the grounding, catalytic force for achievement, how would our conception of lineage in Tibetan opera change if we flipped the formula on its head? If the individual skills of the student (precipitated by their karmic accumulations) was placed at the center of our formulation, the prominence of a single teacher becomes less necessary. Although hierarchies of power and prestige always operate on some level, by thinking about lineage alongside *bag chags*, we work against a hierarchical understanding of lineage that passes (via the agency of the teacher) unto waiting students. Instead the individual student might be seen as a magnetic center to which many influential teachers, peers and styles are attracted. The strength of this force of attraction is determined by the skill of the artist, which is in turn determined by the *bag chags* of that individual.

In this model, multiple teachers, including peers and institutions, are karmically drawn to the student, who acts as the foundation for transmission. This model is not dependent upon physical migration or communicative technology and therefore is not a product of modernization or globalization. The centrality of the student and the flexibility of lineage are key to oral transmission. Extensive use of peer-to-peer teaching models, creative incorporation of technology as didactic tools of transmission and students' own imaginative understandings of lineage all point toward a need to unsettle the hierarchical lineage model. Instead of understanding power and performative authority as flowing top-down from sanctioned teachers to passive students, I suggest that performance authority flows from multiple sources into the hands of students. The degree to which the student receives and maintains teachers is dependent upon their individual talent, as well as their willingness to utilize peers and communicative technology in productive ways. The predisposition that some performers have to attract teachings can be conceived of through the notion of *bag chags*. The talent of the individual student is not only a sum of the teachings they receive, but exceeds the individual influences she attracts.

Although hierarchical and chronological lineage conceptualizations might continue to persist throughout the broad range of Tibetan cultural production via lineage invocations, lineage paintings and *thog yig* texts, analysis of oral transmission and didactic techniques

force us to understand lineage through a diffuse lens – a lens that takes into account the powerful and generative force of imagination. This imaginative ability of performers and practitioners means that the past is never fully relegated to the past. It also means that land and kinship play important roles in transmission. Finally, as technology continues to shape the archive and forge new transmission conduits, the centrality of the student becomes more and more important for the continual propagation of oral art.

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