


The Art of the Tibetan Actor: *A lce lha mo* in the gaze of Western Performance Theories

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1. Introduction

mong the few studies on Tibetan performing arts, opera (*a lce lha mo*, often simply called *lha mo*) has garnered a fair amount of attention.¹ Most of the research has considered the context of performances, whether cultural, historical, or socio-political, but very few publications have examined the actual work of the performers, both on-stage and off-stage. In this article, drawing on my drama training in the West, I would like to shift the focus onto aesthetics, and attempt to open the black box of how *lha mo* is made and experienced by the actors. What is the language of *lha mo*, and what are its core values? What is the specific body of knowledge, physical or otherwise, mobilised to produce the show? How is the training organised, and what are the priorities? It looks like a simple shift, but it is complicated by the internal diversity of the *lha mo* tradition. Although the overall features of Tibetan opera spectacles are constant, troupes follow different performing styles² and not all

¹ See the Bibliographic Introduction to this issue (pp. 35-40) for publications on *a lce lha mo* since 1986.

² A customary distinction differentiates between the acting style of the dBus region (*dbus 'khrab*), active and funny, and that of gTsang (*gstang 'khrab*), solemn and sedate. More precisely, before the People's Republic of China's take-over in the 1950s, styles were named after the most popular troupes, especially those who were summoned to perform at the Yoghurt Festival (*zho ston*) in Lhasa, in front of the Dalai Lama and government officials. Favoured by the audience were the Lhasa-based sKyor mo lung pa, the only troupe playing the dBus style. It comprised a large number of landless actors who roamed all over Tibet (and Darjeeling, Kalimpong,...) to perform in order to eke out a living. The particular social conditions of these actors entailed increased performance opportunities and specialization and explain their partial professionalisation during the first half of the 20th century. This has had tremendous consequences on their acting style and, consequently, on that of other troupes, be they *zho ston* troupes or less high-profile troupes of wandering beggars. The other full-fledged *lha mo* troupes

the troupes engage(d) with *lha mo* practice with the same level of commitment—most of the troupes were, and still are, amateur, but acting terminology and performance are most refined and developed among professional troupes. It is thus important to specify what tradition of a *lce lha mo* I will be portraying in the following pages.

The reflections in this paper stem from three and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork carried out over fifteen years ago for a doctoral dissertation.³ I went first to Lhasa, as a language student at Tibet University, with occasional field trips across the Tibet Autonomous Region to interview actors and record their performances. I then went to exile settlements in India and Nepal, but staying mostly in Dharamsala.⁴ My main interlocutors, on both sides of the Himalayas, were actors performing in the sKyor mo lung (the most famous pre-1950s troupe, based in Lhasa, with a funny and active style) tradition, therefore this is what will be discussed here. I spent most time with the Zhol lha mo tshogs pa in Lhasa, which was then the most respected amateur troupe. It comprised a large number of defrocked monks in their sixties and seventies, who had played *lha mo* as young monks in the 1940s under the guidance of one or another sKyor mo lung teacher. They had a strong affection for *lha mo*, which they saw in some form of personal continuity with premodern Tibet and the religious life they once engaged in. I also frequently met with some professional performers of the government-run Tibet Opera troupe, TOT (*bod ljongs lha mo tshogs pa*, Ch. *zanju tuan* 藏居团), who were the institutional inheritors of the sKyor mo lung style, since the sKyor mo lung ba had been subsumed in 1960 into the work unit that was going to become the TOT. In exile, my main contacts were with the professional actors of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), especially with *lha mo* master Nor bu tshe ring (1928-2013), himself born and trained in the sKyor mo lung troupe before he went to exile; and with the professional actors he trained, such as current artistic director Blo bzang bsam gtan, younger *lha mo* masters at TIPA, and polyvalent actor-musician Tenzin Gönpö in France. I also interviewed older actors and teachers based in Bylakuppe, who were acquainted with the sKyor mo lung

of the *zho ston* came from gTsang: the most celebrated was the rGyal mkhar ba (from Rin spungs), playing an ancient-looking and solemn style that still carries on, the gCung pa (from Ri bo che, the monastic seat of Thang stong rgyal po, the purported founder of *lha mo* in the early 15th century, a tradition still thriving today) and the Shangs pa (from rNam gling, a style that now appears extinct).

³ Now published (Henrion-Dourcy, 2017).

⁴ See Henrion-Dourcy (2013) for details about how research was carried out, and a reflexive comparison of the political conditions of fieldwork on both sides.

ba during their years in Lhasa, and I surveyed most of the amateur troupes coming to perform at the Dharamsala *zho ston*.



Fig. 1. The last teacher of the pre-1950s *sKyor mo lung* troupe, *bKra shis don grub* (?-1961) and his wife *A ma Lhag pa* (1909-1997). Undated photograph (c. 1960?), unspecified collection from the PRC. http://www.humanrights.cn/en/Messages/Focus/focus014/4/3/t20090302_421468.htm (last accessed 27 April 2009).

The ‘art of the actor’ that will be evoked below represents solely the practices of the *Zhol pa*, *TIPA*, and amateur troupes of exile, which were then very similar,⁵ and excludes the *TOT*, since its performance and training techniques, aligned with conservatory-style People’s Republic of China (PRC) practices, have profoundly altered the skills of the actors, moving towards hybridization with other techniques prevalent in mainland China. Even within this single *sKyor mo lung* style, I have noticed some differences between the Lhasa and

⁵ As I could see in 2013, the *Zhol* troupe is now comprised of very young actors and has extensively engaged in ‘modernized’ and shortened *lha mo* shows, although it still performs along traditional lines on demand, notably at the *zho ston* festival in Lhasa.

Dharamsala troupes,⁶ mostly imputable to the specific sKyor mo lung teacher they had learnt from. Except for the 'teacher' (*dge rgan*) of the troupe, who generally has a comprehensive view of the production of the show, actors have different vantage points on their troupe's tradition, according to their own acting experiences. This was especially true for the sKyor mo lung troupe, which was gradually becoming 'professional' during the first half of the 20th century, with some actors tending to specialise in given roles.

The cultural context and general features of *lha mo* performances are by now relatively well-known in Tibetan studies,⁷ so I will restrict this paper to considerations on the work of the actor. I will try and give an inside view into the making of *lha mo*, rather than echoing the voice of the scholars (historians, folklorists) who speak about *lha mo*. My aim here is to provide a reflexive account of my learning process, which may be helpful to younger scholars coming to specialized fields within Tibetan studies. How useful was my previous training in drama in apprehending Tibetan dramatic forms? I assumed that our common practice would facilitate mutual understanding, all the more since the drama techniques I had learnt, based on the body of the actor and genealogically rooted in intercultural performances, led me to believe that the body was the 'universal' core element of theatre. As with any anthropological investigation, this is a story of becoming aware of wrong assumptions, decentring the view, and opening up to new understandings.

2. From Aesthetics to Meaning and Back

The project I had set out to do twenty years ago was congruent with the training I had received in drama school (see next section). I had been encaptivated by the transformative power of body work in a performance context. I wanted to explore the most comprehensive Tibetan drama tradition, *a lce lha mo*, and engage with the discourses on participative ethnographic research and embodied reflexive practice that were then gaining popularity. I was inspired by research in this vein carried out (more by drama scholars than anthropologists) on classical Asian drama traditions,⁸ for example in Japan

⁶ For example, conventions about how the director of the troupe (*dge rgan*, 'teacher') gives a hint to the actors that they should start of a slow or a fast dance, or variations in the vocabulary pertaining to the melodies and vocal techniques.

⁷ See also Kati Fitzgerald's contribution in this issue.

⁸ See the two issues compiled in *Asian Theatre Journal* on "The Founding Fathers" of Asian drama scholarship (mostly) in north America: Vol. 28 no. 2 (Fall 2011) and Vol. 30 no. 2 (Fall 2013).

(Bethe & Brazell, 1978), India (Zarrilli 1984, 2000), China (Riley 1997, see also Li 2010), and Indonesia (Bouvier 1994), and this groundwork was yet to be done for Tibet, all the more with an immersive practice-centred approach.⁹

Anthropology was then going through a renewal process. After the ‘interpretation’ paradigm centred on meaning and semiotics, sustained by Clifford Geertz and others, came the ‘experience’ paradigm, notably in the work of Victor Turner (1986) and his followers, drawing on phenomenology and focusing on performance, embodiment, emotions, and the sensory realm. So my project was to look at “the actor *in* performance” (Riley 1997), the actual experiences of the performers on the stage. What was their specific body of knowledge, how was it acquired and transmitted? How was the scenic language organized? I wanted to circumscribe the ‘aesthetics’ of *lha mo*, both its form and feeling, or, to use Chinese opera specialist Li (2010)’s word, to circumscribe the ‘soul’ of Tibetan opera. In retrospect, this is a naive and exalted view, but at the time, it seemed sympathetic (Nascimento 2009) and most importantly a politically safe engagement with Tibetans in Lhasa, given the politics of fear that weighed on prolonged interactions with a conspicuous foreigner.

I soon found out, however, that engaging a not yet familiar culture with one’s body, so to speak, did not make any sense locally. The first obvious challenge was mutual comprehension, especially at that time in the TAR, where English speakers were extremely rare (none among the actors, who were either elders or did not enjoy a high level of schooling). This placed an urgency on learning the language to try and engage meaningfully with the actors. Second, this dramatic tradition was not yet well-known. Substantial descriptive and interpretive groundwork still had to be done. There was no way I could circumvent ‘meaning’, which absolutely preceded ‘experience’ in this case, because I first had to grasp what the actors meant, and try to minimise the misinterpretations. Consequently, it was necessary to study deeper and in all its variability the Tibetan history, religion, and folk culture to map out the place of *lha mo* in premodern and contemporary Tibetan society.

⁹ This is still largely lacking today, but we can cite British Ethnomusicologist Anna Morcom (2008) who engaged in *rdung len* songs in Amdo (yet her approach is critical and socio-economical, rather than reflecting on embodied practice). British Dance Professor Ann R. David (2013, p. 59) wrote a few passing reflections on a *cham* dance in Bhutan—she repeated the movements on her own after looking at video excerpts, and tried to grasp the experience from an embodied point of view. American Tibetologist Kati Fitzgerald (2014) is trained in drama but, in her paper, she did not reflect on that training nor engage with Tibetan actors as a performer.

Third, the kind of 'embodied practice' I was looking for is generally carried out by requesting to learn from a reputed master, recognized as the holder of his tradition. *A lce lha mo* is not a classical genre akin to other 'elite', or literate, Asian traditions. It is a folk genre (despite its recognition as a world heritage at UNESCO in 2009), fairly diverse and with no performer that would unequivocally be recognized by all as a 'master'. My work therefore became a multi-sited collection of fragments and partial recollections of *a lce lha mo*, rather than a locally rooted deep understanding of a single privileged informant's view. Finally, given the everyday preoccupations and sensitivities of the people in Lhasa at the time, caught in a very tense political climate, if I had constantly shifted the lens to decontextualized, apolitical, timeless, 'pure art' and 'embodied' aesthetics, this would have been a form of ethnographic violence imposed onto the local people, completely misrepresenting what they do and why they do it.

Hence, from drama and 'aesthetics', I moved over to Tibetology and 'meaning'. Yet, this article is an opportunity to reconsider *a lce lha mo* in the light of Western performance theories centred on the body. Let us see if something of value can still be learnt in this confrontation of views and so, for a while, let us delve again into aesthetics.

3. Western Approaches to Performance: Centrality of the Body, Geodramatics, Presence

From 1993 to 1995, I trained at the École Internationale de Théâtre Lassâad in Brussels,¹⁰ an offshoot of the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris.¹¹ It teaches 'movement theatre', building on body awareness-in-space, biomechanics, the psychophysical continuum and mime techniques during the first year, and then moves onto formal training in stylistic forms, such as mask use, *commedia dell'arte*, tragedy, buffoon and clown, among others, during the last year. Like other experimental theatre makers of the 20th century, Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999) was looking for the 'roots of theatre', and strongly believed that the body was not only this root, but beyond, that it was the core element of any form of creation.

¹⁰ <http://www.lassaad.com/> (last accessed 15 May 2017).

¹¹ <http://www.ecole-jacqueslecoq.com/> (last accessed 15 May 2017). His impact has been important on the renewal of dramatic forms in France and Europe and his students have created numerous companies all over the world, including sixty or so companies in north America and the United Kingdom.

“(…) The laws of movement, space, play and form (…) are a precise vocabulary pointing towards the sources of creation” (Lecoq, 1997, p. 12).¹² “The laws of movement stem from the human body in action: balance, imbalance, opposition, alternation, compensation, action-reaction (...). There is a collective body [*i.e.* the spectators] that knows if the spectacle is alive or not” (*id.*, p. 32). “Mime is at the very centre [of dramatic creation], as if it were the theatre’s very body: it is about being able to play at being someone else, being able to give the illusion of anything.” (*id.* p. 33). The trainees’ work involves first getting rid of the parasitic movement forms that do not belong to them, anything that hinders “finding life for what it is” within themselves (*id.*, p. 39). The initial steps of Lecoq’s training are first and foremost a “deconditioning of embodiment, of all the physical traces ‘the world’ leaves in us, in the form of automatisms” (*ibid.*). Trainees need to observe in and around them and relearn how to walk, look, think, show emotions... If anything, those years in drama school were, for me, a very good preparation for ethnographic fieldwork at large.

This is a search for the “naked gesture,” stripped of personal surplus and aligned with “life itself”. “Life is our first reading” (*id.*, p. 56). The movement of life itself is inscribed in our bodies and organizes our movements and emotions. Life is recognized through the miming body and replay, and is experienced in the abstract dimensions of space, light, colours, matters and sounds. Physical and mental attitudes are in resonance: bodies do not lie. That is the state of the “poetic body”, the common source of art for mankind, filled with memories of feelings, sensations, and movements, that can then be projected out in creation. Lecoq assumes the idealised and essentialised nature of his ideas about ‘the body’ and ‘the world’ (or life), but he fails to address their pitfalls.

From this ‘poetic body’ emerge all sorts of dramatic territories, which he calls “geodramatics” (pp. 107-109). “Melodrama is the territory of big sentiments and the spirit of justice. Commedia dell’arte is the territory of small arrangements, cheating, hunger, desire, and the urge to live. Buffoons are a caricature of the world, of the grotesque dimension of power and hierarchies. Tragedy evokes the big chant of the People, the destiny of the Hero. Mysteries bring us to look at the incomprehensible, between life and death, at the devil that is provoking the gods. And the clown provokes laughter by showing his frailties, his solitude” (*id.*, p. 108). Consequently, my original project was to discover the Tibetan geodramatics: what aspects of human nature are played, and put forth, in this *lha mo*

¹² All the translations from Lecoq’s book in French are mine.

style? What are the elements of human behaviour, across the wide spectrum of all human possibilities, that are put into movement? And then, to better describe the language of Tibetan opera: what are the tools that are used to express these stakes (masks, mime, costumes, songs)? In other words, I wished to circumscribe the “embodied imaginaries” (Pradier 2007) of *a lce lha mo*.

This system of learning is steeped in the French mime tradition. Its genealogy is different from the performance research and practice taught at university departments in the United States and the United Kingdom, which have historically delved more into intercultural performance.¹³ Yet it is convergent with another set of performance theories that have enjoyed a wide diffusion across academes, in part due to the contribution of performance theorist Richard Schechner (1985): the research carried out at the Denmark-based International School for Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) by Italian-born Eugenio Barba, one of the most well-known disciples of Jerzy Grotowski. Theatre Anthropology also has a physiological understanding of performance, the body being seen here again as the source of all expression.

Barba starts from the observation that what commands the attention of spectators is the actor's stage ‘presence’, which he thinks is remarkable in the case of all Asian drama traditions. How is presence achieved? It is achieved at the pre-expressive level (before any message is conveyed), through extra-daily body techniques (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 5). The artificiality of the performing body creates physical tensions, a surplus of energy that inevitably attracts the onlookers' attention: something is going on. These extra-daily techniques come into contrast with daily ‘techniques of the body’ (Mauss, 1973 [1936]), that try to achieve movements efficiently, with the least effort. Barba (1995, pp. 13-35) goes on to detail the “recurring principles” of ‘presence’ and these extra-daily techniques (that are reminiscent of Lecoq's laws of movement): balance in action; dance of oppositions, consistent inconsistency, and the decided body. He devotes a special attention to weight shifts and the use of the

¹³ Intercultural performances between Tibetan and Western actors/dancers/musicians are still scant to this day. Let us cite France-based artist Tenzin Gönpo's productions with choreographer Carolyn Carlson (*Man over mountain, Spiritual warriors*, 2001), horse trainer Bartabas (*Loungta, les chevaux de vent*, 2003-2005), and choreographer Yutaka Takei (*Les quatre saisons et le cycle de la vie*, 2008). We can also cite Australia-based Tenzin Choegyäl. As far as teaching *a lce lha mo* techniques to Western actors, I am only aware of two instances: Tenzin Gönpo to Italian actors during the Venice Biennale (2001) and classes taught by US-based Sharzur Tashi Dondhup (Techung) to Emory University Dance Department in 2012 and 2013.

spinal column, how it is diverted from the perpendicular axis in certain positions, to the arms and the eyes.

In this cognitive-biological approach to performance, the body of the performer is 'alive' (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 12). The extra-daily physiological work that the performer engages in to produce 'presence' involves a heightened use of the body: sharper senses, better control over articulated body parts, and increased muscular tensions to hold 'contradictory' postures (the head and arms facing in one direction, while the waist and legs face another, for instance) or to 'balance oppositions'. Barba calls this heightened state the 'dilated body' (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 25; Barba, 1995, p. 81-100), which he posits as being the essence of the theatrical experience. The body 'feels' dilated by the performer. It also dilates his presence on the stage: his body is 'perceived' dilated by the spectators, as if it were taking up more space.

4. First Look at the Art of the Tibetan Actor: Articulating Bodies?

In my first contacts with *lha mo*, I was predictably looking for body techniques that I was trained to observe. I scrutinised the actor-in-performance to isolate the neutral 'poetic body' of Lecoq, or the very expressive 'dilated body' of Barba. I observed the obvious stage presence of the most charismatic actors, carefully writing down shifts of balance, oppositions between hands and eyes... I even spotted what looked like interesting breathing techniques. I tried to engage physically with *lha mo*, learning not in open participant observation, so as not to attract too much attention from the authorities, but in the quietness of private lessons. All of these undertakings quickly proved unsatisfactory.

First, the language of *lha mo* was not self-evident, and I could not make immediately sense of what I was seeing. For most of their time on the stage, the actors were standing straight and motionless: spine deviations and oppositions surprisingly did not seem to be very frequent in this performing style. The *lha mo ba* (*lha mo* actors) looked strongly planted vertically into the ground, rather than articulating the various expressive parts of their bodies. Silent mime was absent, and gesture codification was minimal: a few terms for head and hand gestures during greetings. The identity and feelings of a character were only slightly evident in stylized movements: anatomy, which was so important in my training, was hardly relevant here. The basic dance steps (those of the slow dance, *dal 'khrab*, and of the fast dance, *mgyogs 'khrab*) were not technically or rhythmically too complex, yet

they were not that easy to reproduce. Executing them with the same degree of poise and lightness as the actors was a challenge. In short, the gestural repertoire of a *lce lha mo* appeared fairly limited, and my concerns with body language met with amazement, or rather amusement, by the actors. Clearly, to them, *lha mo* was not at all about 'dance'.



Fig. 2. Actor performing acrobatics: the minister tries to escape the punishment of the king. Zhol pa troupe performing the play Padma 'od 'bar. Lhasa, 1997 © Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy.

Second, this weird fixation with bodily engagement, and willingness to learn and show the moves, was socially awkward for local standards, especially for a young woman. In central Tibet, people are usually relaxed body-wise in private or intimate contexts, but in public come expectations to be composed and refrain from uncontrolled or disgraceful movements, since they bring shame ('hot face', *ngo tsha*).

Third, a *lce lha mo* was definitely a folk style performed mostly, and historically until probably the beginning of the 20th century, by amateurs. It was not a classical genre that required a lengthy, rigorous and organized training like *jingju* (京剧, Beijing opera, Riley 1997, Li 2013) or Kathakali (Zarrilli 1984, 2000), for example, where the best trainees started early in childhood and carried on well into

adulthood. There was not, in *lha mo*, a ready classification of skills to master, which could organize the student's learning, like the 'four skills and five canons' (*sigong wufa*, 四功五法) of *jingju*.¹⁴ Training in *lha mo* was not organized in a coherent body of knowledge that would be transmitted from teacher to student in a planned and gradual manner, not even in the Tibet Opera Troupe. Performance knowledge was disseminated throughout the performances. A performer's knowledge depended on his own curiosity to learn, his willingness to ask question and try new roles. In other words, *a lce lha mo* appeared to work organically, without a fixed actor's tool box, and I was perplexed as to how to make sense of it with my preoccupations and the vocabulary I had at my disposal.

I was realising that the performance techniques I had learnt were based on unquestioned universalist assumptions that crumbled when confronted to local realities. I was reminded of the Indian scholar Rustom Barucha's (1993) famous postcolonial critique of intercultural theatre, where he questioned the theories of theatre experimentalists, such as Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Richard Schechner, or Peter Brook. He deemed they had mythologized Asian drama's aesthetics, taken it out of their local contexts. They had "faith in universals" (Barucha, 1993, p. 32), but only those which served their own artistic pursuits in the West. This misappropriation in the realm of avant-garde performance was also denounced by British scholar Christopher Innes (1993), who compared it to 'primitive art' from Africa and elsewhere made by turn-of-the-20th century Western (mostly Parisian) painters. They knew very little about the realities on the ground, and were more interested in self-promotion.

5. The Tibetan Literate View of Drama: A Bodhisattvic Tool?

So, what was Tibetan opera all about? When I asked my performance history teacher at Tibet University, Zhol khang bsod nams dar rgyas (1922-2007), he replied in the same way with which he opened his book about Tibetan performing arts (1992, p. 1, pp. 21-24): *a lce lha mo* is a type, in some accounts even the exemplary type, of *zlos gar*, a view he held in common with most of the notable scholars from Tibet.¹⁵ That is also how Jeanette Snyder (1979) has structured her

¹⁴ The four skills are: singing, speaking, dance-acting and combat-acrobatics. The five canons are: mouth, hands, eyes, body and steps (Li, 2010, pp. 57-58).

¹⁵ Blo bzang rdo rje (1989); 'Phrin las chos grags (1989); Hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar (1989, p. 65); *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (1996, p. 3117, under *a ce lha mo*); rDo rje thar (1999, pp. 457-458); Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las (2002, p. 1818,

article, the first important description of a *lce lha mo* in a Western publication, based on scholar-informants in Dharamsala. Of course, anthropologists must not only measure their theories against local ethnography, but also, and importantly, against local theories.

Zlos gar is today a polysemic term: its premodern literary usage differs from its various current colloquial uses.¹⁶ In the presentations of *lha mo* by Tibetan scholars, *zlos gar* refers to the premodern literate understanding of 'drama' as a 'lesser science' (*rig gnas chung ba*), within the larger classical Buddhist framework of the ten 'sciences' (Skt. *vidyāsthāna*, T. *rig gnas*), literally 'sites of knowledge'.

This Indian Buddhist model of knowledge, "the cultural panoply of the *bodhisattva*" (Seyfort Rugg, 1995, pp. 102-103) maps the various types of skilful means to turn the minds towards enlightenment. Since its adoption by Tibetans in the 9th century, this model has known a number of adaptations by local scholars, the five 'lesser sciences' appearing to be a Tibetan addition to the Indian five major sciences. The model presented in Fig. 3 is that of Klong rdol bla ma Ngag dbang blo bzang (1719-1794), considered one of the most representative models, at least one of the most extensively used in dge lugs pa monastic curricula.¹⁷

The ideal Buddhist scholar must thus cultivate and master meditative contemplation,¹⁸ logic/dialectics and grammar, on top of medicine (to alleviate suffering) and technique (to create tangible and intangible works that inspire the minds towards the Dharma). Out of the five lesser sciences, four are subsumed into the major science of grammar: poetry, metrics, lexicography and drama (*zlos gar*). The fifth one is astrology.

The term *zlos gar* first appears in Sa skya Paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1181-1251)'s *Gateway for the All the Sages* (*mkhas pa rnam 'jug pa'i sgo*). He probably used (coined?) it to translate Sanskrit terms for which there was no equivalent in Tibetan society: *nāṭaka* (drama play), *natana* (dance, pantomime) and *nāṭya* (theatrical performance, or dramatic art in general). It thus covers stories, dance and music. The term shows confusion, because it is not a direct translation from

under *zlos gar*); dGe 'dun 'phel rgyas (2011, pp. 138-139); and even, early on, and unrelated to works published in the PRC, the Ladakhi scholar 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (1980-81, pp. 26-27).

¹⁶ See Henrion-Dourcy (2017, pp. 163-190) for a detailed discussion of the evolving meaning and usage of the now widely used term *zlos gar*, and of the theories about drama by Tibetan premodern and contemporary scholars.

¹⁷ For more information on Klong rdol bla ma's model, and other classification into eighteen fields of knowledge, see Sobkovyak (2015).

¹⁸ The sciences are given here in simplified form. See Fig. 3 for more translations of the Tibetan terms.

an Indian science, and yet there was no concrete counterpart in Tibetan experience. For centuries, *zlos gar* remained a purely notional Indo-Tibetan hybrid with no actual existence in society. As a field of knowledge, it occupied only a marginal place in the monks' education. In contemporary scholarly writing, *lha mo* and *zlos gar* are frequently equated, even combined (*lha mo'i zlos gar*), but this association predates the 1950s.

In Klong rdol's model, *zlos gar* appears simultaneously as a lesser science stemming from the major science of grammar,¹⁹ and as an element of the major 'science of making' (technique). Commentators to Klong rdol bla ma often add that drama is produced through the appropriate use of the body, speech and mind. Klong rdol further divides *zlos gar* into five²⁰ limbs: narration, music, costumes and props, humour and *zlos gar* (once again), that we can understand here as encompassing all the physical work on the stage: dance, mime, gestures, bearing, ways of moving across the stage.

This model offers in a way a convenient view to organize the work of the actor, both into the five types of skills on the stage and into the three levels mobilised to work: he needs to prepare physically, vocally and mentally to perform. But it is very general. Nothing is told about the hierarchy between these techniques, or how this model helps the actor in his learning. It does not open the black box of how *lha mo* is made by the actors. Essentially, this model theorizes *zlos gar* as edification. It is a skilful, linguistic and technical, means to turn the spectators' minds towards the Dharma. It portrays the ideal role of drama in society, but it overlooks the fact that *lha mo* performances are not just about lofty ideals, contemplation and morality. Humour is certainly mentioned in this *zlos gar* model, but looking at how actors cross-dress, joke about sex and farts, or satirise a wide range of public figures and social ills, we are at pains to qualify these very popular improvised insertions in the show as skilful means conducive to Enlightenment.

This discussion about the partial and purely theoretical Tibetan adaptation of Indian notions about drama leads us to consider another related body of Tibetan scholarship: the adaptation—or rather, reformulation—of the Indian *rasa* theory. *Rasa* (lit. 'taste', but

¹⁹ It is worthwhile to mention here that the Tibetan scholarly commentators often discuss *zlos gar* as "that which has the four categories of languages" (*skad rigs bzhi*), probably another Indic input—it is strangely reminiscent of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the translation into Tibetan and availability of which is not ascertained so far—with no real counterpart in social practices.

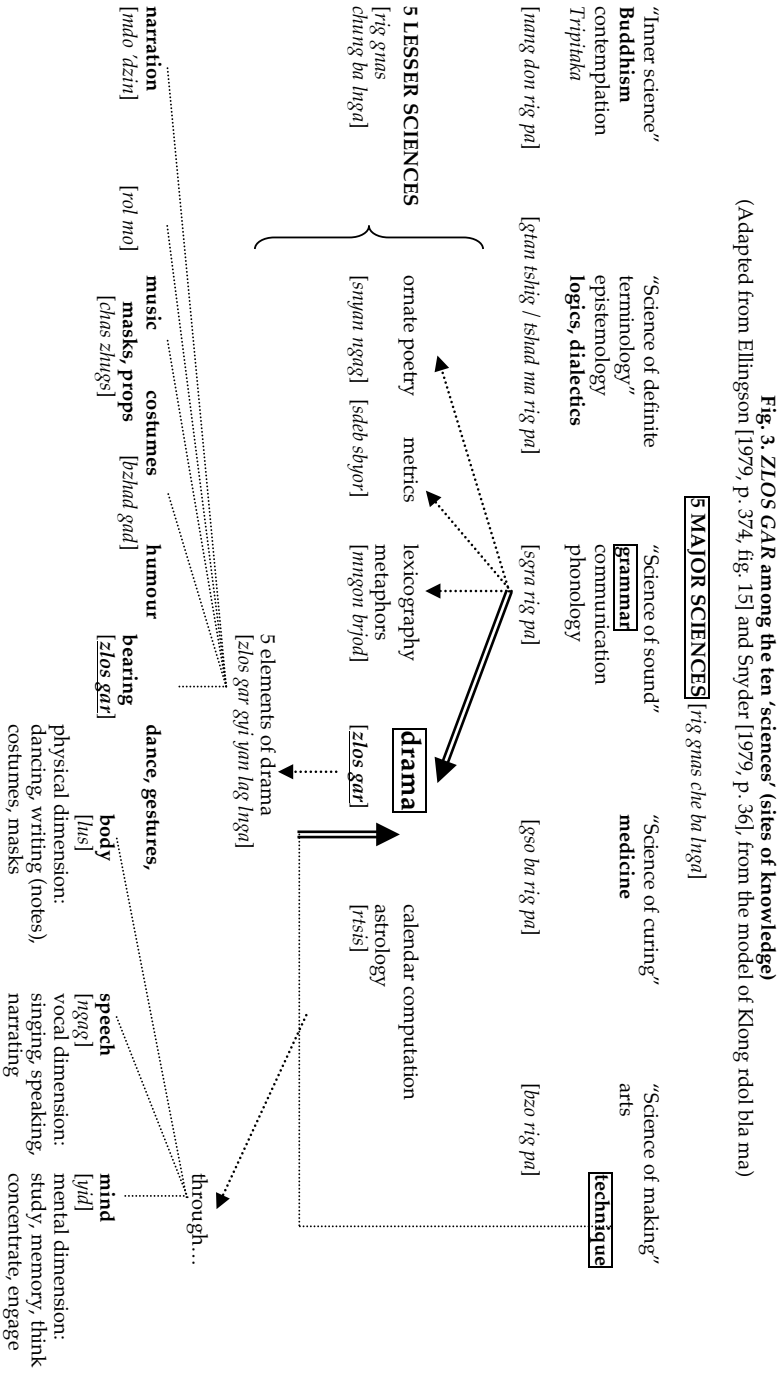
²⁰ Note variability here: other pre-1950s scholars only count four subdivisions, without the reduplication of *zlos gar*, or add a sixth one (chorus) or even a seventh one (auspicious wishes).

refers to the aesthetic experience enjoyed by the viewer/listener of an art form) is the cornerstone of Indian aesthetics.²¹ It was first developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (*Treatise on Theatre*, 2nd century BC-2nd century AD), and was then applied to other art forms, notably literary composition. Indians have long debated on the number of *rasa*: most theories count eight *rasas*, with an additional ninth *rasa* of peace/calm.

Rasa is mentioned in Sa skya Paṇḍita's *Gateway for All the Sages* and in the Tibetan translation of Daṇḍin's *Mirror of Poetry* (Skt. *Kāvyaḍarśa*, T. *snyang ngag me long*), so Tibetans have known this concept at least since the 13th century. However, *rasa* remained confined to literary theory in Tibet, and was never applied to stage aesthetics, the work of the actor or even pre-1950s reflections on *zlos gar*. It is only in the writings of contemporary Tibetan scholars that the association of *rasa* with *zlos gar* is made.²²

²¹ For a summary of the many discussions about *rasa* in Indian aesthetics, see Warder (1989).

²² Blo bzang rdo rje (1989, p. 16); Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las (2002, p. 1817, under *zlos gar*)



"In his treatment of *rasa* theory and the classification of poetic tropes, Sakya Paṇḍita, for better or for worse, cast a mold for the treatment of Indian literary theory that has endured in Tibet to the present day. The distinction between a primary emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) and the aesthetic sentiment engendered by its skillful depiction (*rasa*), all-important for the developed forms of poetic theory in India, is largely forgotten, and the primary concern is the classification of harmonious and conflicting sentiments" (Kapstein, 2003, pp. 780-781).

The Tibetan terms chosen to transpose the Indian dyad are somewhat confusing. 'Gyur (or 'gyur ba) renders the Skt. *bhāva* (emotions, rather than *sthāyibhāva*, primary emotions) and *nyams*, often written in the compound *nyams 'gyur*,²³ renders the Skt. *rasa*. The *Great Chinese-Tibetan Dictionary* indicates that 'gyur is a "movement of the mind", whereas *nyams* is "its expression through gesture and speech".²⁴ This distinction between internal feeling and external manifestation is a Tibetan innovation. It is absent from the Indian *rasa* theory, which is more keen to differentiate between the 'rough' (untouched) feeling, as experienced in everyday life, and the refined and distanced aesthetic experience of that feeling enjoyed in front of a work of art. Furthermore, the established Tibetan list of the 'Eight rasas' (*nyams brgyad*, a list usually used on its own, not in a binding association with the list of eight 'gyur) does not equate word-to-word the Indian list. The eight Indian *rasas* are commonly given as *śṛṅgāra* (erotic), *hāsyā* (comic), *karuṇa* (pathetic), *raudra* (the tragic, furious), *vīra* (heroic), *bhayānaka* (terrible), *bībhatsa* (horrible, odious), *adbhuta* (marvelous). As we can see from Fig. 4, the first *rasa* ('erotic' in India, coupled with the primary emotion of *karuṇā*, love, compassion) is transposed more chastely in the dyad felicity / charm-elegance. In the Tibetan list, compassion is a *rasa* and it is associated with the emotion of sorrow.

²³ Not to be confused with *nam* 'gyur, the bearing of a character on the stage, cf. infra

²⁴ *nyams 'gyur gnyis su phye ba'i blo'i 'char sgo la 'gyur ba zhes dangl 'gyur ba de lus ngag gi thog nas phyir mngon pa la nyams zhes zer* (Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo, 1996, p. 938, under *nyams 'gyur*).

Fig. 4. The Tibetan adaptation of the Indian *rasa* theory

Movement of the mind 'gyur [ba] (adaptation of Skt. <i>bhāva</i> , emotion)	Translation	Manifestation of the movements of the mind <i>nyams</i> ['gyur] (adaptation of Skt. <i>rasa</i> , aesthetic experience)	Translation
<i>dga' ba</i>	joy, felicity	<i>sgeg pa</i>	elegance, charm
<i>dgod bro ba</i>	mirth	<i>bzhad gad</i>	laughter
<i>mya ngan</i>	sorrow	<i>snying rje</i>	compassion, kindness
<i>khro ba</i>	anger	<i>drag shul</i>	cruelty, ruthlessness
<i>spro ba</i>	excitement	<i>dpa' ba</i>	courage
<i>'jigs pa</i>	fear	<i>'jigs rung</i>	terror
<i>skyugs bro ba</i>	disgust	<i>mi sdug pa</i>	unattractiveness
<i>ngo mtshar ba</i>	amazement	<i>rmad byung</i>	marvel

As Matthew Kapstein explained in the earlier quote, Tibetans were chiefly preoccupied with classification of feelings, not with the effects of art. In the writings of contemporary Tibetan scholars, the *nyams* are also mere lists, sometimes related to dance.²⁵ *Lha mo* specialist Blo bzang rdo rje (1989, p. 16) applies *nyams* to drama (*zlos gar*), but unfortunately does not cite his sources. He lists nine *nyams* (*zlos gar gyi nyams dgu*), divided into the three *nyams* of body (charm, courage and unattractiveness), the three *nyams* of speech (cruelty, laughter, terror) and the three *nyams* of mind (compassion, imposing [rather than marvel] and... peace). To him, all nine *nyams* have to be shown in a *lha mo* play for it to be called successful. Music composer and researcher sPen rdor (1990, p. 47) further thinks that the artistic "underdevelopment" of *lha mo* is due in great part to the non-operational theory of *rasa* in Tibet. However, characters in the *lha mo* performances do not go through such intense, paroxysmal states of mind. At least, these are not shown on the stage. Actors look mostly impassive, abiding in restraint, as if practising a continuous *rasa* of peace throughout the show.

As was the case for *zlos gar*, the concept of *rasa* has been transposed from India to Tibet in an incomplete and disconcerting way. Its use was limited to monks and scholars with an advanced

²⁵ Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las (2002, pp. 487-488), under *gar gyi nyams bryad* (the eight expressive attitudes of dance) and *gar gyi cha byad dgu* (the nine instruments of dance)

training in poetics in pre-1950s Tibet, and was not relevant to local life, let alone to the work of the actors of a *lce lha mo*. None of the performers I met had ever heard of the *nyams* theory. It clearly did not organise their acting on the stage. The Tibetan scholarly theorisations were again not useful entry points into the actual art of the performer. So it was high time that I turned towards the actors themselves and asked them what their work was all about.

6. *The Performers' Interpretation of Drama:
The Utterance of a Sacred Text?*

I first went to my *lha mo* teacher, 'Jam dbyangs blo ldan (1932-2007), the director (actually called *dge rgan*, 'teacher') of the Zhol pa troupe, hoping to learn some basic dance moves. He consistently responded by lengthy lectures on the meaning of each *lha mo* play, and substantial explanations of specific sung arias, on both their words and their melodies. His priority was to make sure that I understood the meaning of the texts. Very often, when I met new *lha mo ba* informants, especially those in the countryside that were heading regionally famous troupes, they assumed that I had come to ask them to recite part of a play. They were always very proud to show the scope and accuracy of their memory.

I was repeatedly told that the purpose of a *lha mo* performance was simply to utter a text, through either narration, for the vast majority of the stanzas, or singing—a fraction only of the stanzas. It is a Buddhist text, it illustrates in simple ways the major teachings of Buddhism for illiterate peasants, mainly the law of karma and the importance of compassion. It depicts the travails of a hero, or heroine, remaining true to their faith through adversity—generally the other characters' greed or jealousy. Actors and peasants often attribute the *lha mo* texts to the Buddha himself,²⁶ more as a general reference than a belief in the Buddha's real authorship. Therefore this text is treated with respect, like all manifestations of Buddhahood in body, speech and mind. In the Tibetan Buddhist cultural context, the perfect utterance of such revered words has ritual efficacy. It creates positive *rten 'brel*, the auspicious causal connections that produce good outcomes, such as the spread of the Doctrine. It also pleases the local mundane gods, ensuring peace and prosperity for the community.

²⁶ Except for one *lha mo* play (*Chos rgyal nor bzang*), the librettos are not signed, so their authorship, of possible successive authorships, are not known.

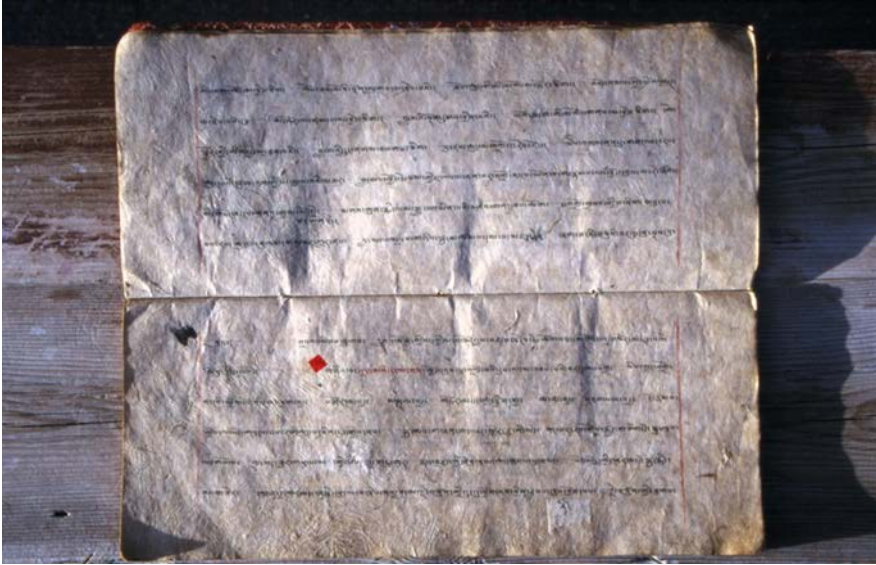


Fig. 5. Libretto of the play *Ras chung dbus la phebs* kept by the Treasury Office (rtse phyag las khungs) to check the performances of the troupes during the pre-1950s *zho ston* festival. Lhasa, Tibet Opera Troupe, 1999 © Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy.

The text that the actors follow is called *'khrab gzhung*, 'perform-text' (libretto), where *'khrab* etymologically refers to 'stamping' [here: the ground], so it alludes to dancing, or at least a physical activity. A *lha mo* performance is divided into three main parts: the prologue (*'don*),²⁷ always the same and unrelated to the story that will be played, the libretto (*gzhung*), and the auspicious conclusion (*bkra shis*). The number of librettos is limited: it is nowadays very common to read that there are 'Eight great plays' (*rnam thar chen po brgyad*, translating the Chinese *ba da zangxi* 八大藏戏), but there were at least nine different librettos performed at the *zho ston* until the end of the 1950s.²⁸ The stories are well-known and widely circulated across the Tibetan cultural world through oral transmission, books and art, therefore the spectators do not come to *lha mo* performances to discover anything new.

'Khrab gzhung are not composed *ex nihilo*. They are stage adaptations of a literary version of the play called *rnam thar*. It is thus this literary genre that has given its name to the sung arias of *lha mo*, also called *rnam thar*. *rNam thar* is a significant literary genre in Tibet. Originally, *rnam par thar pa* refers to a spiritual state, the 'complete

²⁷ See Henrion-Dourcy (2015) on this first section of the performances.

²⁸ The additional libretto being titled *Ras chung dbus la phebs*, cf. Fig. 5.

liberation' (Skt. *vimokṣa*), from the cycle of rebirths. It came to designate the biography of exemplary figures that were held to have achieved this complete liberation. It has gradually been applied to a variety of biographical genres in Tibet, among which we find the *a lce lha mo* stories. They are exemplary moral and spiritual tales of a single hero or heroine—their name is the title of the libretto. These stories are either *jātakas*, or Indian or Tibetan tales modelled on *jātaka* tales.²⁹ Therefore, *lha mo* plays are Buddhist edification narratives with a significant Indian cultural input in terms of mythologies, place and people's names, and natural features (names of plants, animals and fruit, for example). They have been tibetanised to an extent, in line with the vernacularisation of Buddhism that took place in Tibet during the second diffusion of the Doctrine, but it is quite ironic that with such a distinctively Indian imaginary, *lha mo* has nowadays become a 'Chinese' intangible cultural heritage.

The adaptation of the literary version (*rnam thar*) to the stage version ('*khraab gzhung*) consists mostly in versification, since nine-syllable-lines (*dgu tshig*), usually in stanzas of four or six lines, are the easiest to sing out.³⁰ The *gzhung* is much shorter than the *rnam thar*, but the cuts are not made uniformly: narrations in prose are heavily cut, whereas dialogues in verse are kept as such. The *gzhung* usually develops the beginning of the *rnam thar*, and condenses the final part.

I had started this research project assuming that in *a lce lha mo*, as in other documented Asian theatre traditions, making drama was an organic process, stemming from constant improvisations and improvements by actors. But I soon realised that it did not hold in the Tibetan case. Here, the text was not only central, it also came first. Tibetan drama consists in the transposition to the stage of a pre-existing text, which has been made suitable for performance in a libretto format. Actors are at the service of the text, not of the production of a spectacular show that would captivate spectators. Rather than being performers, in the Lecoq or Barba sense of the term, *lha mo* actors are first and foremost storytellers.

Tashi Tsering (2001, 2011) has underlined the common genealogy that associates *lha mo ba* and *bla ma ma ni* (or *ma ni ba*), the famed tellers of Buddhist edification tales (prominently containing the *ma ni* mantra),³¹ who roamed Tibet to narrate these stories while pointing with a stick to the scenes on an accompanying *thangka* or portable

²⁹ On the literary sources shaping the composition of the various *rnam thar*, see Henrion-Dourcy (2017, pp. 266-268).

³⁰ On this process of adaptation, see Henrion-Dourcy (2017, pp. 276-282).

³¹ *Om ma ni padme hum*.

votive structure.³² The repertoires of *lha mo ba* and *ma ni ba* show considerable overlap. Moreover, some texts mention their names as interchangeable,³³ so it may be the case that, at some point in history, or in specific regions of Tibet (most probably in gTsang), the same performers could deliver either a *bla ma ma ni* telling of a story, or a staged *a lce lha mo* version. The famed rGyal mkhar troupe from Rin spungs in gTsang comprised, until the 1950s, performers who played *lha mo* and others who recited the same stories in the *bla ma ma ni* style. Last but not least, both *lha mo ba* and *ma ni ba* revere Thang stong rgyal po (1361 [1385?]-1485 [1464?])³⁴ as the founder of their tradition (Tashi Tsering, 2001, p. 37).

However, in the course of my study, I gradually came to relativise this absolute centrality of the text as an organising principle of performance.

First, in many respects, the prologue, in which the ritual preparation of the scenic space is achieved, can also be considered the ‘key’ part of the performances (Henrion-Dourcy, 2015). As *lha mo ba* themselves often told me, “If you want to understand *lha mo*, you have to understand the ‘don first’”. This introductory section is probably older than the middle one centred on the libretto. It may even be at the very origin of Tibetan opera—if we give credit to the oral tradition. All the technical elements of *lha mo*, such as the dances, gestures and vocal skills that appear in the middle section are already present in the prologue.

Second, the idea of the centrality of the text refers, among other things, to the actors’ claim that they strictly follow the text. But which text, the *khra b gzhung*, or the literary *rnam thar*? It is the *khra b gzhung*. It is kept by the director of the troupe, usually at his home. Theoretically, it is a very important element of the transmission of *lha mo* knowledge, but in practice, transmission from teacher to student was (in pre-1950s Tibet) and still largely is, oral. In principle again, in pre-1950s Tibet, each director could adapt a *rnam thar* and compose a libretto that would be the hallmark of his troupe. In practice, librettos (and the related organisation of the show) were kept from one director to the next, and even copied from one troupe to another, often with monetary compensation. Some librettos therefore took the form of handwritten notes, with no *rnam thar* kept as reference. Cuts

³² This tradition appears to have died out in Central Tibet, and is slowly going extinct in exile (Tashi Tsering, 2011).

³³ Tashi Tsering (2001, n. 34, p. 45) quotes an excerpt from rTse gsol zur Dpal ldan shes rab, *Rgyal po sprin gyi bzhon pa'i rtogs brjod* (Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skru khang, 1983, p.3), written in 1873, where the author equates *bla ma ma ni* and *a lce lha mo*.

³⁴ On the uncertainty of Thang stong rgyal po’s dates, see Tashi Tsering (2007).

and copying mistakes would be frequent, and sometimes, after a few transmissions down the line, the exact words of the text became incomprehensible. Only the high-profile troupes that performed at the *zho ston* were controlled for their observance of the text by an official of the Treasury Office (*rtse phyag las khungs*). The official librettos were actually kept at that Office (see Fig. 5). In contemporary Tibet, the *rnam thar* have been circulating in book format since the end of the 1970s (see 'Phrin las chos grags 1989 for the reference anthology) and have somewhat standardized, or at least reshuffled, the literary material at the disposal of the actors. In other words, the text may be central to performance, imbued with an idea of sacredness, or immutability, but it is more notional than effective.

Third, do the actors really follow the libretto? The words that are uttered on the stage do not correspond to those in the libretto. There are some adumbrations and modifications on the spot—some are kept from performance to performance as a troupe tradition, without writing it down in the *'khrab gzhung*. Moreover, the text spoken out on stage exceeds the written text. There are many ad libitum improvisations, generally humorous, that are like time suspensions within the play (weddings, oracles, beggars, boatmen, monks and nuns engaging in a fight). Contrary to the lines from the libretto, these words are delivered in a non-stylized fashion, close to everyday speech. Librettos are therefore neither definite nor prescriptive; they are flexible, which confers diversity to performances. As Albert Lord (1960, p. 101) famously showed, the combination of fixity and variability is a characteristic of verbal arts.

Fourth, if the text is the most significant part, how come that in the sung arias (*rnam thar*), it is generally not the most interesting parts of the stanzas that are sung out? Stanzas typically contain four or six lines. In the first two lines, the character often introduces himself and begs to be listened to. The important meaning appears in the next lines, which are often not sung by the character, but recited quickly by the narrator.

Fifth, in pre-1950s Tibet, most of the actors were illiterate. It was frequent, but not systematic, that the directors of the troupes were literate, typically because they were defrocked monks. But many actors were peasants, and most sKyor mo lung ba were illiterate. The rGyal mkhar ba,³⁵ on the contrary, were married religious practitioners and could read and write. Accordingly, if the text is so central, is it not paradoxical that it was mostly transmitted orally between illiterate actors, who sometimes did not understand its meaning? Librettos alternate between literary Tibetan and colloquial

³⁵ See note 2.

language, so some passages can be abstruse for poorly educated performers.

Sixth, the same is true for the spectators. If the actors themselves do not fully understand the text, how could the audience? Moreover, as in most Asian literate dramas, unless one is familiar with the text (having learnt parts of it), on-the-spot literal comprehension is very difficult—this is of course not the case for the improvised humorous parts, uttered in a relaxed manner in ordinary speech. The vocal work imposed by the performers onto the words of the libretto distorts natural pronunciation. The narrator speeds up in a recto-tono voice the recitation of the *gzhung*, a style often jokingly referred to as the ‘Tibetan rap’. When singing the *rnam thar* airs, on the contrary, enunciation is extremely elongated—the emblematic ‘long air’ (*rta ring*) of the prince (*rgya lu*) of the prologue lasts for seven minutes, but only contains 28 syllables. Many meaningless interpolations (*tshig lhad*) are added to the text. It is generally on these syllables that the singer can display his full vocal artistry, namely his mastery of glottalisations (*mgrin khug*) and ornamentations (*‘gyur khug*).

For all of these reasons, although it is said to be central, the text appears to be a pretext: it is indexed rather than performed, because the actors do something else with the text. They do not simply utter the words, as ‘simple’ storytellers would do. They are on a stage, in front of a large audience, and they give a three-dimensional life to the characters. So, what are the codes along which ‘text utterance’ becomes a spectacle in the *lha mo* context?

7. Producing Characters: *Envelope, Movement, and Melody*

Since Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), Western drama has emphasized impersonation, *i.e.* acting techniques helping the actor to create the illusion that he is someone else. It involves a fair extent of psychology in the West, but conventions vary cross-culturally. In *jingju*, for example, role types are categorized through costumes, acting codes and musical systems (Li, 2010, p. 56), a triad that we also find, though with different parameters, in Tibetan opera.

It looks as if the *lha mo ba* were not interested in creating the illusion of a character on the stage. Actors go in and out of their roles continuously. For example, an actress sings a moving air (*rnam thar*) bidding farewell to her children for about three minutes, moving the audience to tears, then the scene is abruptly disbanded. The characters go back to the large circle made of all the actors waiting on the outer edge of the circular stage (or stay put if the next scene

follows with the same set-up), and everyone starts a collective dance on the beat of the percussions. The narrator then moves forward, explains the next section of the plot, and calls the same (or other) characters to come forth and act their part. These short moments, when actors impersonate characters, generally consist in solo *rnam thar* songs, performed mostly, sometimes sitting or kneeling on the floor—note that singing and dancing are typically dissociated in *lha mo*. Dialogues are cut by collective dances, the lively exchange between characters being limited to occasional short spoken dialogues. There is thus no emotional build-up across scenes. Any identification that was achieved during a scene is immediately swept away by twirling collective dances and loud drum beats.

Moreover, performers are relaxed about their roles—except for the solemn performances of the *zho ston*, even today. Fully dressed as a king or a butcher, an actor may take a little rest on the side of the stage, chat and drink beer with his relatives, then suddenly jump to his feet and run to sing his *rnam thar*. Or, he may slip out to the toilets and come back in the middle of an intense scene. It may also be an occasional spectator moving right across the stage at a tense moment. These are not perceived as disturbances. In other words, the imaginary space of 'fiction' on the stage is constantly violated by *lha mo ba* coming out of their roles. There is no clear demarcation between actor and character: it is not marked by sacredness and ritual, as in Japanese art forms, for example.



Fig. 6. Actor singing a *rnam thar*. Zhol pa troupe performing the play Padma 'od 'bar, Lhasa, 1998
© Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy.

In Tibetan terminology, actors do not ‘embody’ characters. To say that someone ‘plays’ the queen, for example, actors use the verb *thon* (to depart, to come out, to put forth). It thus indicates the reverse movement to that of embodiment: actors ‘produce’ their characters. Characters (*don cha*)³⁶ are constructed through a combination of three elements: costume (envelope), dance (movement) and melody.³⁷ The principle is that of the *leitmotiv*: each character has in theory a set costume, a set way of moving across the stage and a set melody that belongs to him or her. Anyone of these three elements should be sufficient for a *lha mo* connoisseur to immediately identify the character portrayed. In practice, borrowings and on-the-spot adaptations are frequent, especially since the *lha mo* revival at the beginning of the 1980s. Character conventions are thus not demarcated into clear classifications; there is an element of fuzziness.

First, the costumes (*‘khrab chas*)³⁸ and masks (*‘bag*)³⁹ are subsumed in a single category (*chas zhugs*). There are different types of masks (not worn by all characters) and costumes (worn over the actors’ own clothes). The visual conventions do entail some symbolism, but on the whole they are intuitive. A spectator with no knowledge of *lha mo* will at least guess the social rank and temperament of any of the characters.

It appears that costumes work like ‘masks’ in the art of the Tibetan actor. Surely, the ‘production’ of a character involves something going from the inside out: actors definitely concentrate and clarify their intention before they perform. But it also seems that there is another congruent process going from the outside in. Once their ‘envelope’ (costume, possibly a mask) is put on, once they need to get out of their passive role in the background of the stage and come forth to act as characters, it is as if the envelope gave them an impulse towards the appropriate demeanour befitting the costume/character. The envelope appears to confirm, or stabilise their character. Barba & Savarese (1991, pp. 202-203) had noted that the ‘dilated body’ is also achieved through costume, which gives amplitude and shapes or restricts movement.

³⁶ *Mi sna* is also used, but refers to the dignitaries from surrounding countries at the end of the play, coming to pay homage to the new celebrated king.

³⁷ See Henrion-Dourcy (2017, pp. 525-634) for a detailed description of the main techniques of the *lha mo* actors.

³⁸ See Henrion-Dourcy (2017, pp. 528-540) on the types of costumes and their symbolic codes.

³⁹ See Henrion-Dourcy (2017, pp. 540-554) on the categories and symbolism of the masks.



Fig. 7. Zhol pa troupe performing the play sNang sa 'od 'bum. Nyemo, 1997
© Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy.

Second, actors need to produce the *'khrab 'khyer* ('perform-carry?') of their character.⁴⁰ This comprises not only the dance-like moves made on the beat of the percussions when the character travels across the stage,⁴¹ but also the bearing dictated by the social and temperamental features of the character, as well as the requested poise (*rnam 'gyur*). There are an infinite number of *'khrab 'khyer*, based on social rank, temper and situation (a fearing minister does not move across the stage like a proud minister). But the most significant distinction is between male (*pho 'khrab*) and female (*mo 'khrab*) movement styles.⁴² Most *'khrab 'khyer* are variations of one or the other. There are very few stage conventions: a full circle around the stage indicates a long trip; a foot put onto the body of someone signifies he is vanquished; a mask taken off signifies death. Greetings are important and the

⁴⁰ The word-to-word meaning of the compound is not clear to me. See Henrion-Dourcy (2017, pp. 554-586) on the corporal work of the *lha mo* performers.

⁴¹ *'Khrab 'khyer* refers only to the movements of a single character, not to the collective dances or other movements executed during the performance. The collective dances comprise the slow dance (*dal 'khrab*) and the fast dance (*mggyogs 'khrab*), as well as their variants. Other movements include those performed in the prologue, for example the somewhat spectacular *'phag chen* ('big leaps') of the hunters, or the *byin 'bebs* ('bringing down the blessings') dance of the princes.

⁴² Barba and Savarese (1991, p. 21) assess that the distinction between male and female ways of moving in performance is the most invested by conventions throughout all cultures.

subject of long dance developments, as are the parting between mother and children.



Fig. 8. Female heroine moving across the stage on her 'khrab 'khyer dance. Zhol pa troupe performing the play *gZugs kyi nyi ma*. Lhasa, 1997 © Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy.

The verb *'khrab*, to play, denotes stamping (the ground, to the beat of percussions). So, actors are primarily stampers. The dancing body of the *lha mo* actor requires vigour in the legs, with a low centre of gravity, and lightness in the upper limbs (arms are supposed to float). Shoulders, neck and head are straight without being stiff. The head moves only for greetings, which may involve rotating the head in both directions. Hips are traditionally fixed, which contrasts with the currently prevalent 'swinging' imposed on almost all 'ethnic minority' (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) dance styles crafted in the PRC performing arts work units.

Lha mo movements are also characterised by constant gyration. Most of the performance is spent either standing straight (when narrating or singing) or circling around the stage. Actors make turns on themselves when they walk in a straight direction. Their arms and hands also engage in continuous spinning: large circular movements go from the inside towards the outside of the body, in uninterrupted movements. Openings are wider towards the right (positively

connoted) side, closer to the body on the left (negative) side. The lotus flower (*padma*) is a commonly used image in the names of these arm spins, and one can indeed imagine that these movements bloom in multiple corollas around the dancer's body. All *lha mo* movements are round and turning, there are no sharp angles and lines as in the Chinese theatrical forms.

Third, voice is undoubtedly the most emblematic and developed art of the *lha mo* performer. As I have explored it at length elsewhere,⁴³ and as this article deals with the bodily work of the actor, it will suffice to say here that melody (*gdangs, rta*) is the distinguishing feature that marks the identity of a character. In principle, a character has one melody (sometimes more), which he repeats throughout the day, regardless of the situation. In practice, at least in the sKyor mo lung tradition, melodies are borrowed between characters, and additional melodies, like the 'common melody' (*dkyus gdangs*) and the sad song (*skyo glu*) are options for the singers. The spectacular vocal skills needed to produce a *rnam thar* effortlessly and with pleasure may take years to master, especially the glottalisations (*mgrin khug*) and ornamentations (*'gyur khug*). This is the only area within the art of the Tibetan performer where virtuosity is cultivated.

It is thus not surprising that the training of body and voice are dissociated in traditional *lha mo*.⁴⁴ For movement and dance, there was no rehearsal in pre-1950s Tibet (except for the *zho ston* troupes, who could rehearse for up to two weeks): learning was done through visual observation and imitation (*mig gran*). But vocal training, as well as melody memorisation, required more focused teaching, in a one-to-one interaction between teacher and student. It is also on the voice technique and quality that most of the spectators' criticism is directed. Physical movement and demeanour, on the other hand, receive very little attention.

8. The Aesthetics of *lha mo*: *Composite, Flexible and Natural*

In the light of the discussions above, it is clear that the aesthetic language of Tibetan opera is not geared towards the enchantment of the spectators through the display of the performers' patiently cultivated extra-daily physical skills, as Eugenio Barba understands it. Yet, there are remarkable skills in *lha mo*: the vocal abilities of some

⁴³ Henrion-Dourcy (2001).

⁴⁴ See Kati Fitzgerald's article in this issue for an assessment of contemporary teaching methods.

actors definitely exhibit stunning virtuosity, refined over the course many years. And some acrobatic moves, like the *phag chen* ('great leaps'), are not easily done by ordinary people. Likewise, the purpose of Tibetan opera actors is not to create the captivating illusion that their fictitious characters are present on the stage.

Lha mo ba are first and foremost storytellers—if we look at the historical genealogy of their practice and if we listen to how the actors interpret their own work. We could say that *lha mo ba* accomplish a magnified *bla ma ma ni* performance. They bring the two-dimensional visual illustrations of the thangkas of the *ma ni ba* onto the three-dimensional space of the stage. Like the *ma ni ba*, the *lha mo* actors tell the spectators a story (which also involves singing) and show them images. A *lha mo* performance is essentially an extravagant slide show. The 'images' produced (*thon*) are relatively static, if we compare Tibetan opera with other, more dynamic, Asian performing arts. These images are short performance vignettes interspersed in the narration of the libretto (which is the thread and main reason of/for the performance). In these short capsules, lasting about five minutes, the actors display their characters as life-size icons, as if they were puppets: rather than act in a realistic manner, they parade with the 'envelope' of the character (the costume, sometimes a mask) and stylised dance moves. They evoke their characters, they let them be seen: they do not impersonate them. But, of course, the art of the actors is both visual and aural. Interestingly, these two dimensions seem disjointed in *a lce lha mo*. In most of the performance capsules, during the 'parading' on the percussions, actors do not sing—although it does occasionally happen, for example when the king first enters the stage at the beginning of the show. Likewise, when the actors sing, they do not move—a striking exception being the scenes where children are separated from their mother or when a hero is taken away by executioners.

This 'art of the Tibetan actor' is developed in aesthetic values emphasising the composite nature of the show, and the flexibility and naturalness of performance.



Fig. 9. Humorous interlude. Grib tshe mchog gling troupe performing the play 'Gro ba bzang mo. Lhasa, 1998 © Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy.

First, the fabric of the performance is akin to patchwork. The nine-hour-long performance (in a traditional setting) is a succession of disconnected scenes, featuring some repetitive patterns (not necessarily in the following order): the narrator recites the *gzhung*, followed a capsule where some performers show and sing their characters, then the troupe does a collective dance, or some actors start a humorous interlude to spice up the show. Tension and emotional tonality change all the time, but between scenes, not within them.

Second, the 'theatrical creativity' (Li, 2010) of the *lha mo* actors entails constant adaptations. *Lha mo* is like jazz, it is played with flexibility on a fixed canvas. In a traditional setting, the show is not entirely planned beforehand. The 'conductor' of the show is the director of the troupe, who typically doubles as the narrator. Before the show, as he knows the abilities of the actors, he chooses who will play which character. The rest is decided on the spot. So the actors have to repeatedly look at his signals to know what kind of collective dance, slow or fast, needs to be performed. During the show, he discreetly goes behind an actor to give instructions or remind him of his lines. Depending on the circumstances of/in the performance (the weather, the fact that an actor is unavailable—at the toilets, or having just lost his voice, the sudden departure of the show's sponsor...), the

director may decide to shorten the performance by not playing the 'capsules', and instead recite the libretto quickly. He chooses to expand or condense the show according to context, as long as the whole *'khrab gzhung* is uttered. On an individual level, actors also enjoy a great degree of freedom, especially in the demonstration of their vocal skills. Experienced singers choose melody adaptations where they can show off, or on the contrary preserve, their voice.

Third, actors are expected to perform in a relaxed, 'natural' (*rang bzhin*) and fluid (*bde po*) manner. Strain or effort, in either dancing or singing makes the spectators feel uncomfortable, to the contrary of many Chinese traditional operatic forms. Grace is strongly valued, and it is achieved by experienced actors—beginners are usually deprived of it. The point of the show is not to seek constant virtuosity. It is to create bit by bit, piece after piece of the patchwork, an overall atmosphere imbued with simplicity, suppleness, grace, devotion, humour, and an occasional demonstration of virtuosity by an individual (singing a *rnam thar*). Such is the flavour or life among Tibetans. Such is the 'dramatic territory' (Lecoq 1997, p. 107) of a *lha mo*.

9. Conclusion: Presence on the Tibetan Stage

I started this project expecting to document the bodily work of Tibetan actors. I met with a tradition that not only was steeped in a rich and complex mythological, cultural and religious context that imposed a careful consideration, but also had extensively developed vocal work, for which I had no training. The relative paucity of the gestural language in *lha mo* may be due to the pre-eminence of the text. This is not to say that a body-approach is baseless in the Tibetan context. It is simply unsuitable as an entry point into the world of *lha mo*. Now that the groundwork is done, that the main features of this performing style are understood in their cultural, religious and social context, engaging with the agentive and lived experience of the body in performance will certainly yield innovative results. A phenomenological approach to Tibetan societies is yet to be carried out. Cultural embodiment still largely begs to be understood among Tibetans.

The depiction that has been made here of the *lha mo* world has left out the contemporary historical context.⁴⁵ The last sKyor mo lung actors from before the 1950s have all died, in Tibet as in exile. The

⁴⁵ See Fitzgerald (2014) and Wojahn (2016) for a description of the current situation in Tibet and in exile.

urban amateur troupes of Tibet, who were playing a traditional style of *lha mo* twenty years ago, have now incorporated modern and sinicised performance elements into their shows. Shortened, flashy and pre-arranged 'world heritage' presentations replace earlier long-form flexible performances. Amateur troupes are financially strained, some fearing for their survival. Actors are still very attached to their art form, but interest and attendance plummet, as *lha mo* is challenged, like elsewhere, by modern digital entertainment formats. In exile, *lha mo* enjoys a sustained interest and official support, but the Dharamsala *zho ston* is mostly attended by schoolchildren on mandatory call. As is the case in Tibet, *lha mo* in exile has not been able to avoid folklorisation and the fixed pre-arrangement of performances. In the near future, emblematic *lha mo* techniques such as the singing of *rnam thar*, the three characters of the prologue (hunters, princes and goddesses), and the acrobatic 'big leaps' are not in danger of being lost—they are actually strategically used, among other cultural commodities, to defend the PRC government claims that it protects Tibetan culture. Set in fixed shows mixing various Tibetan and Chinese performance styles, these *lha mo* techniques look Tibetan, but they do not *feel* Tibetan.

Coming back to 'presence', the cornerstone of performance according to Barba, how does it play out in the Tibetan context, since it is not the "raw energy of life itself as manifested in the actor's body", as Riley (1997, p. 316) described it in the Japanese and Chinese art forms? Barba & Savarese (1991, p. 11) do not restrict 'presence' to skills that provoke amazement: more modestly, presence is what sustains the spectators' attention, a form of "communion into what makes us all human".



Fig. 10. Zhol pa troupe performing the play Padma 'od 'bar. The pivotal moment when the hero sacrifices his life. Lhasa, 1998 © Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy.

Shifting the focus to the audience is helpful to understand ‘presence’ on the (traditional) *lha mo* stage. The Tibetan spectators do not share the expectations of Western, Chinese or Japanese viewers. They read *lha mo* performances against a contextual background filled with mythological, religious, philosophical, historical, aesthetic, social and political information. They do not come to performances to discover something new, but on the contrary, to retrieve an experience, to reconnect with something familiar or deeply valued. This privileged connection is reminiscent of *chos mjal* (‘coming to meet the Dharma’, a term used when visiting lamas, monasteries and sacred places). *Chos mjal* is restricted to elevating religious encounters and would be culturally inappropriate in the secular world of the *lha mo ba*. Yet, alongside the banter and the crude jokes, *lha mo* is ambiguously positioned between the sacred and the profane, and does portray heroes and heroines who behave like exemplary religious masters, or figures who are the previous incarnations of the Buddha (Dri med kun ldan) or Padamsambhava (Padma ‘od ‘bar), and who elicit *chos mjal*-like behaviour on the part of some spectators (offering of white ceremonial scarves, prostrations...).

But the connection that is established between actors and audience covers a much wider range of experiences. Spectators recognize on the *lha mo* stage their cherished values, mythologies, modes of speaking and behaving. The ‘presence’ of *lha mo* performers is to *re-present* (to make present again) the flavour (*rasa*) of what is essential, nurturing, uplifting, heartening; of what the spectators believe in and are deeply attached to; of what they feel is slowly disappearing in a rapidly changing world. What French painter Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) said about his art, “The purpose is not to paint life, but to make painting come alive”⁴⁶, can be transposed to Tibetan performance. In *lha mo*, the purpose is not to create the illusion that characters are lifelike, but to make the imaginary world of ordinary Tibetans come alive again.

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⁴⁶ Original quote in French : “Il ne s’agit pas de peindre la vie. Il s’agit de rendre vivante la peinture.”

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