

The Alphabetical Order of Things: The Language of Place and the Place of Language in Tibetan Song¹

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Introduction: the nation, singing²

They applaud. The words she has just sung seem mundane – banal even – yet they applaud: *I, a child of Tibet, speak Tibetan*. However, her preceding words hint as to why they applaud: *My life force is a glacial mountain/ My blood is clear glacial water/ My name is 'Glacial Tibetan'*. The singer is not just a Tibetan, she is Tibet itself – the land, its geobody – and in her seemingly self-evident statement that she speaks Tibetan she is asserting links between land and language, confirming the proper place of the Tibetan language as sprung from the soil itself. When they applaud, the audience applauds the nation, not the singer; they celebrate the centrality of language to their identity.

This song, 'Soul of the Tibetan People',³ is sung by Tsewang Lhamo,⁴ a popular contemporary singer. In the video, she stands on stage before a seated audience; posture, dress, and movements modest. Following the applause, she continues singing: *My joy is Tibetan Buddhism/ My joy is Tibetan culture/ My name is*

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² This subtitle was inspired by Lama Jabb's 2011 article.

³ *bod mi'i bla srog*. The video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgU8wuxDRAY>.

⁴ *tshe dbang lha mo*. All Tibetan proper names are given in the text according to an approximation of their pronunciation in Amdo Tibetan, while spellings in modern literary Tibetan are given in footnotes using the Wylie transliteration system.

'Devout Tibetan' / I, a child of Tibet, study Tibetan. Here, she refers explicitly to the written Tibetan language,⁵ and the crowd, once again, applauds. Spoken and written language are now firmly planted in the land and linked to a culture that is a source of joy.

My name is 'Highland Tibetan' / I, a Tibetan woman, love Tibet / My paternal ancestor is the Bodhisattva Monkey / My maternal ancestor is the Wise Ogress / My name is Purgyal⁶ Tibetan. In this final verse she not only declares a personal patriotism to Tibet, the land she loves, but also enlivens links between land, language, and culture with ties of blood, referring to the mythical ancestors of the Tibetan people – a monkey and an ogress – and to the founding dynasty, the Purgyal Empire. The circle is complete; the lyrical arc has carried us from blood, through soil, to language and religion, and back to the land and blood again.

These lyrics encapsulate my topic in this article: the links between place, language and identity as expressed in contemporary Tibetan song. In exploring this, I draw on a rich literature on music, place, and identity (Perris 1985; Stokes 1994; Leyshon, Matless and Revill 1995; Bohlman 2004; Hudson 2006; Largey 2006), and add to it by looking at how place-based identities expressed in music can be connected to specific languages. Furthermore, I look beyond the *construction* of place and identity through music, and draw on literature looking at music's potentially *destructive* capacity; how it can stigmatise, marginalise, and oppress (Cloonan and Johnson 2002; Hirsch 2007; Gordon 2010; Chastagner 2012; Baker 2013; Klimczyk and Świerzowska 2015). In the Tibetan context, I build on prior research on expressions of place in traditional music (Ramble 1995; Quintman 2008; Gamble 2011), and acts of identification in contemporary Tibetan music (Gayley 2016; Stirr 2008; Morcom 2007, 2008, 2011, 2015; Yangdon Dhondup 2008; Tsering Drolma and Wilson 2009; Lama Jabb 2011; Warner 2013). I examine how language can be erased and destroyed in the process of music-mediated identity formation, and how contemporary Tibetan music asserts what I call an 'alphabetical order' – a discourse

⁵ *bod yig*.

⁶ *pur rgyud*, meaning 'descendant' (*rgyud*) of the Purgyal (*pur rgyal*) empire.

that conflates place, language, and identity by valorizing the Tibetan language as the soul of Tibet and the Tibetan people. I argue that by celebrating a monolingual identity, songs stigmatise and marginalise linguistic minorities without expressing aggressive or discriminatory attitudes towards them. The effects of this seem clear: at present, two thirds of Tibet's minority languages are endangered (Roche and Suzuki 2017). I also argue that the stigmatisation arising from the alphabetical order is a source of individual suffering for speakers of minority languages. Contemporary pop music, in valorising the Tibetan language and its ties to place, therefore helps to displace minority languages from Tibet, perhaps even leading to their eventual replacement. My study serves as a reminder that in constructing a sense of place, music does not need to be explicitly aggressive or discriminatory in order to exclude certain populations; in fact, it often excludes and oppresses through the use of 'positive images, recollections and repertoires which ... confirm individuals' sense of themselves, their culture, their history, their society, and their place in it' (Klimczyk and Świerzowska 2015: 59).

Tibet's *Sing-gua Franca*: linguistic diversity and pluralistic ideologies in traditional Tibetan song

Although Tibet is often represented as ethnically and linguistically homogenous, a growing body of literature contests this. To begin with, I note that the consensus amongst linguists is that what is called 'the' Tibetan language is, in fact, a cluster of closely related languages (Tournadre 2014; Zeisler 2004; Hyslop 2014; DeLancey 2003). Additionally, Roche and Suzuki (2017), in surveying recent linguistic literature, find that an additional 60 spoken varieties, not closely related to Tibetan, are documented. These minority languages are spoken by Tibetans and by members of other ethnic groups; about half are spoken by people who are classified as, or consider themselves to be, Tibetan. These Tibetans who speak non-Tibetan languages make up about four per cent of the total population. Contrary to popular wisdom,

then, Tibet is both linguistically and ethnically diverse. If this is so, we must ask what defines Tibet and what defines Tibetanness?

Religion is typically represented as the great unifying force of Tibetan society. While this is true in some ways, it misses the fact that religion has served to divide Tibetans along sectarian lines. And yet, even when divided by sectarian infighting, Tibetans were still united by a common sacred language in written Tibetan, even though the use of written Tibetan in religious contexts was patchy and skewed (for example, men were far more likely than women to participate in institutional, text-based religion). But, there is one use of written Tibetan that exceeds its use in scripture, and that is in the oral tradition. This may seem like a contradiction, but as in many other places, a complex relation existed between the written and spoken word in Tibet. A large part of the oral corpus was made up of memorised and performed written texts, often transmitted by word of mouth along chains of transmission that left vast expanses of time and space separating text and performance. And, among the oral traditions of speeches, riddles, stories, jokes, proverbs and so on, song stood out as the most widely practiced of all. Prior to the advent of mass media, song was something that practically everybody in Tibet did on a regular, if not daily, basis. Furthermore, melodies and lyrics were prestige items traded across long distances. Prior to the age of mechanical reproduction, song was, in many ways, a form of mass media that served to circulate common values, ideals, beliefs, and concerns amongst the diverse population, and thus integrated these populations into a somewhat coherent whole. Songs functioned in this way to populations that did not speak Tibetan because a general sense of meaning was often transmitted along with texts. Even though singers and audiences may not have understood texts word-for-word, they were typically able to break down the meaning of texts at a line-by-line or verse-by-verse level, rather than simply at the level of the text as a whole.

The integrative power of song can be seen most clearly in the many linguistic minorities who sang in Tibetan. Indeed, Tibetan song crossed both ethnic and linguistic boundaries, establishing a situation that sociolinguists describe as diglossia, where a high prestige, formal literary version exists alongside any number of lower

prestige, informal, spoken varieties (Ferguson 1959). We therefore find that speakers of the Khroskyabs language, in the canyons of the Gyalrong region, sang entirely in Tibetan (G.yu lha 2012), as did speakers of Nyarong Minyak (Bkra shis bzang po 2012). In both cases, the lyrics were in a high literary variety of Tibetan that even locals fluent in spoken Tibetan could not understand well. Tibetans who speak the Gochang language sang almost their entire repertoire in Tibetan, except when reciting epics (which had spoken sections in Gochang, and sung segments in Tibetan; Roche and Yudru Tsomu, forthcoming). In Henan, in the grasslands of the northeast Tibetan Plateau, speakers of the local variety of the Oirat language sang almost entirely in Tibetan, except during New Year celebrations held in the royal house, when songs were sung in Oirat (Roche 2016). Among the Mongghul who farmed the valleys to the north of Ziling⁷ City on the northeast Tibetan Plateau, songs were performed in Chinese, Mongghul and Tibetan, sometimes with two languages appearing in a single song (Qi and Levy 2015). Meanwhile, speakers of Salar and Mangghuer, living to the south and north of the Yellow River on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, sang in their own languages but used melodies and vocables borrowed from Tibetan templates (Zhu, Qi and Stuart 1997; Dwyer 2007).⁸

In most of the situations just described, the capacity to sing in Tibetan was more widespread than the capacity to speak it. This suggests that, rather than a *lingua franca*, Tibet was characterized by the use of a *sing-gua franca*. Not only was a common literary language the basis for song lyrics, but also a common musical language, where elements and styles could be borrowed from Tibetan templates even when the Tibetan language was not used. This *sing-gua franca* enabled populations speaking different languages to communicate, providing an avenue through which a politically powerful center could propagate its culture, and also created common but non-ethnic senses of belonging, based on a shared worldview. Implicit in this were several ‘models of spatialization’ – different ways of perceiving the physical

⁷ *zi ling*/Xining.

⁸ There were also exceptions to the dominance of Tibetan language in song. For instance, groups such as the Namuyi, living in the bend of the Yalong River in southern Sichuan, identify as Tibetans but had musical traditions that were unique within the Tibetan world.

landscape and making it meaningful (Roche 2014). These models of spatialization, I argue, included models of how human difference was spatially organized. Since the models of spatialization and their presence in song have been documented elsewhere (Ramble 1995; Quintman 2008; Gamble 2011), I will just briefly discuss the main models here.

First, was a ‘multiple sovereigns’ model. Within this, space was divided into multiple places: discrete territories under various regimes of explicit, restricted sovereignty. In some instances, these were territories of patron deities of the soil, known in Tibetan as *gzhi bdag*, *yul lha*, and so on, who reigned over, protected and ensured prosperity for the inhabitants of their territory (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996; Blondeau 1998). In other cases, the sovereign might be explicitly worldly and political: local chiefs, princes, and other forms of rulers. Finally, more subtle forms of sovereignty could be expressed in song in hagiographic music describing the connection between sacred figures, the landscape they not only inhabited but also enlivened, as well as a community of clients and worshippers. While the sovereignty of deities was timeless, and that of secular leaders renewed through patrilineal descent, the sense of sovereignty associated with holy Buddhist figures was constantly renewed by rebirth, pilgrimage and practices of collective memory.

The second model of spatialization found in Tibetan songs, was the ‘mandalic’ model (after MacDonald 1997). This imagined space as recursive and hierarchical – a series of horizontal and vertical compartments climaxing in an ideal center that was the apex of all good things: purity, fortune, power, auspiciousness, and so on. Thurston (2012), in his discussion of place-praising speeches, demonstrates how this center could be treated as peripatetic, thus creating a cosmos where every given place was simultaneously a center and a periphery. Mandalic imagery appears to build on earlier, pre-Buddhist models of spatialization based on vertical hierarchies, with space being divided into upper, middle, and lower realms (Ramble 1995; Dinnerstein 2012; Morcom 2015). This tripartite universe was also mapped onto other domains, for example the social world, divided into lamas, leaders, and the people, or the economic realm, with a value hierarchy for gold, silver,

and jade. Additionally, horizontal divisions also existed in space according to the four cardinal directions (sometimes with a fifth: center), or to outer, middle, and inner spaces.

Importantly, both models allowed for space to be conceived of as compartmentalised, differentiated, and multi-polar, and for places to be integrated into a larger cosmic order while retaining distinct identities. This perception of space as containing multiple places, in turn, allowed Tibetan society to be imagined as coherent yet diverse. We see here an expression of pluralism, in the sense of ‘a goal that may make it possible for diverse language groups to live together ... a doctrine, a theory, in short a goal’ (Haugen 1985:4). May (2001:68) finds such an ideology to be typical of empires which existed prior to the evolution of nation states, and which ‘made little, if any, demands for cultural and linguistic homogeneity.’ Pluralism is what Neustupný (cited by Cameron 1996:28), calls a ‘variation ideology,’ which ‘valorizes linguistic (and ethnic) diversity as a social good in itself.’

In Tibet, this pluralistic ideology of variation did not enable diversity by valorising or promoting specific languages. Indeed, the musical practices that allowed it to circulate across ethnic and linguistic boundaries are indicative of a degree of social subordination of minority language speakers, and the exclusion of spoken vernaculars from prestigious domains of performance. Hierarchical and exclusionary as it was, however, this diglossia at least promoted clear functional differentiation between languages: Tibetan in song (oratory, chant, and so on), and other languages in daily communication. Furthermore, by promulgating views of Tibetan space as consisting of multiple places that were interconnected but autonomous, the pluralistic ideologies of variation gave Tibet’s minority languages a place. What we see, then, is an example of what Canagarajah and Liyanage (2012) call ‘pre-colonial multilingualism’: the existence of ideologies, institutions and practices prior to the nation-state that supported linguistic diversity.

Such forms of multilingualism can be contrasted with the standard language ideology of modern (particularly Western) nation-states, ‘...which proposes that an idealized nation-state has one perfect, homogenous language’ (Lippi-Green 1997:

64). Not only does ideology propose a single standard language for the nation, but it typically also expresses ‘less tolerant attitudes towards subordinate languages’ (Dorian 2014: 266), leading to these languages being ‘ignored and suppressed’ (Shohamy 2006: 27). In the following section, I demonstrate that contemporary Tibetan songs express ideologies of standardisation commonly associated with the nation-state. Indeed, identity expressions in Tibet can be considered nationalist, in the sense that they promote an ‘imagined community’ united by language, territory and history (after Anderson 2006). Tibetan nationalism posits that the Tibetan people, as the sole legitimate inhabitants of a specific territory, speak a single language, and that contemporary songs valorise this language, portraying it as the soul of the Tibetan people and exhorting Tibetans to speak it in order to maintain the nation.

The alphabetical order: banal nationalism in contemporary Tibetan song

Tibetan nationalism does not necessarily promote independence, or even autonomy. Its ideological core affirms Tibetan identity and its exclusive relation to a national geobody that is not merely a territory but, more importantly, ‘a source of pride, loyalty, love, passion, bias, hatred, reason, unreason’ (Winichakul 1994: 17). Morcom has examined how musical nationalism involved a transformation of how landscape is imagined. She describes how contemporary Tibetan pop music is pervaded by ‘an overarching nationalism that presents the land as owned, in a territorial and political sense, by the Tibetan nation or nationality’ (2015: 173). In comparing this to ways of relating to landscape found in traditional music, she describes ‘a breakdown of the “vertical” integration of the traditional cosmic order [which] is replaced with a more “horizontal” and sweeping territorial delineation of Tibetan culture and people’ (2015: 172). This transformation of the relationship between nation and land renders the former natural by conflation with the latter (Dibben 2009).

The theme of nationalism in music, and imagery of a national geobody, has gradually evolved. Starting in the mid-1980s, in the era of more open religious and ethnic policies following the end of the Cultural Revolution in China, ambiguous,

seemingly crypto-nationalist Tibetan songs began to appear (Stirr 2008). Although some were banned in the wake of pro-independence protests in 1989, Tibetan nationalist songs grew in number and explicitness through the 1990s and into the new century (Morcom 2006, 2007, 2008; Yangdon Dhondup 2008; Tsering Drolma and Wilson 2009; Lama Jabb 2011). Warner (2013: 543) argues that in the years leading up to widespread protests across Tibet in 2008, pop music formed an integral part of a Tibetan protest language, as an ‘uncivil religion ... which emphasizes Tibetan cultural, linguistic, and religious autonomy within China.’

Nationalism is now ubiquitous within Tibet’s ubiquitous pop music, making it a key venue for ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995), in unmarked, everyday assertions of national belonging. It cuts across musical genres and the social divides of taste they represent, and is found in folksy, bucolic *dunglen* music, typified by performers singing accompanied by mandolin (Lama Jabb 2011), as well as in mainstream, urban pop and dance music, in rock, and in the gritty, edgy worlds of Tibetan rap (Thurston 2017). Expressions of nationalism are found in both the diaspora and inside China, with themes and tropes circulating, despite censorship, via an ‘informational underground railroad’ (Whalen-Bridge 2015: 46). Whether produced in China or the diaspora, whether urban or rural, conservative or progressive, folk, pop, or rap, contemporary songs focusing on the fate of the Tibetan nation are all equally earnest and didactic. There is little room for irony or frivolity.

In the majority of such hymns to the nation, language – a single Tibetan language, represented by the written standard – is portrayed as the essence,⁹ soul,¹⁰ or life-force¹¹ of the Tibetan geobody. In the past decade, dozens of songs have appeared in which the Tibetan alphabet¹² is rapped, whispered, and sung. It is valorised, anthropomorphised, and even addressed directly. Songs clearly establish the language as a pillar of Tibetan identity. In Françoise Robin’s work on contemporary language politics, she quotes similar sentiments, poets describing the

⁹ *bla srog*.

¹⁰ *bla*.

¹¹ *tshe srog*.

¹² More accurately, a syllabary, since the letters have an inherent vowel that is modified by diacritic vowels.

Tibetan alphabet as ‘the life force of the Land of Snows’ (Robin 2014: 220) and ‘the 30 unchanging, ever-present mountains’ (2014:221). When singers make similar connections, positing language as both the life force of the nation and as an element of the landscape, they establish what I call an alphabetical order¹³ in which the alphabet represents the language, and the language, in turn, stands for the people, the land, and their essential unity in the nation. Songs promoting the alphabetical order typically address the listener as a member of a national, biological collective, using poetic terms rather than the more direct ‘Tibetans’ (though this is used¹⁴). Lyrics use such terms as ‘brothers of the three regions,’¹⁵ ‘dear co-ethnic brothers,’¹⁶ ‘brothers sharing the same karma,’¹⁷ ‘red-faced Tibetans,’¹⁸ ‘people of the Tibetan snowlands,’¹⁹ ‘sons of Tibet’²⁰ and ‘dear children of the snows.’²¹ One song provides a gendered, place-based description of Tibetans, with males as sons of the snows, and women as flowers born of the grasslands.²² It mixes biological and territorial metaphors – blood and soil – thus, not only establishing a link between the Tibetan collective and the land, but also between the singer, the listener and the collective.

In the same way that indirect poetic references are preferred to the more direct ‘Tibetans,’ the language of the collective is typically identified indirectly, for example, as ‘our own language,’ in contrast to ‘the language of others’.²³ A commonly used term is *pha skad* or ‘father tongue,’ which not only emphasizes the patrilineal association between bloodline and identity but also ties language to land through resonance with terms such as *pha yul* ‘fatherland,’ *pha gzhis* ‘paternal estate,’ and *pha nor* ‘patrimony’. In one song, the singularity of the father tongue is explicitly

¹³ Here, ‘order’ implies both a conceptual and a political order.

¹⁴ For example, in Kalzang Yarpel (Skal bzang yar ‘phel 2014). Meanwhile, Pema Bhum (2006) notes similar poetic references to Tibet as a common element of contemporary authors’ pen names, such as *gangs sras* (Snow Son), *gangs phrug* (Snow Child) and *gangs dga’* (Fond of the Snows).

¹⁵ Mgontso 2012; referring to the three traditional cultural regions of Amdo, Kham and U-Tsang.

¹⁶ Amchok Pulshung (A mchog phul byung) 2012.

¹⁷ Antren (A ‘phren) 2012.

¹⁸ Tsemindrol (Rtse smin grol) 2012.

¹⁹ Rigzin Drolma (Rig ‘dzin sgrol ma) 2012.

²⁰ Various 2011.

²¹ Shertan (Sher bstan) 2011.

²² Kalzang Tanzin (Skal bzang bstan ‘dzin) 2010.

²³ rang skad versus gzhan skad.

referenced, as ‘one spoken and written language,’²⁴ but this unity is more commonly assumed than stated. This singularity of language, people and territory is naturalised through frequent declarations that elide linguistic diversity, such as ‘Tibetans: we study Tibetan and speak Tibetan.’²⁵

Tibetan nationalist songs not only link blood, soil and language, but also valorise all three. The language (and often, specifically, the alphabet) is described variously as ‘my eternal cry’ and ‘my heart and soul’;²⁶ ‘the essence of the nation’;²⁷ ‘our jewel’;²⁸ ‘the foundation of Tibetan people’s unique jewel-like religious culture’;²⁹ ‘the path forward for the people of the snows’;³⁰ and so on. Several songs recite the alphabet, praising individual letters, as in the following example:

Ka, kha, ga, nga are our letters.³¹

Ca, cha, ja, nya are the soul of the nation.

Oh! The garland of letters,

You are a lamp illuminating the darkness.

Ta, tha, da, na are the gleaming light of pearls.

Pa, pha, ba, ma are the key to our intellectual path.

Oh! The Tibetan writing system,

You are the foundation of our way of life.

Tsa, tsha, dza, wa are the dream of childhood.

Zha, za, a ya are a wreath of flowers

Oh! You are the apple of my eye.³²

You are Mother’s guidance.

²⁴ *skad dang yi ge gcig red.*

²⁵ Gar Kandro (Mgar mkha’ ‘gro) 2016.

²⁶ Chimpel (Chos ‘phel) 2011.

²⁷ Rinchen Dorji (Rin chen rdo rje) 2014.

²⁸ Joni Nyingmoji (Co ne snying mo skyid) 2012.

²⁹ Amchok Pulshung (A mchog phul byung) 2012.

³⁰ Rigzin Drolma (Rig ‘dzin sgrol ma) and Karma Tendar (Kar+ma bstan dar) 2017.

³¹ Rinchen Dorji (Rin chen rdo rje) 2014. Lyrics at http://blog.amdotibet.cn/Tibetan_song/archives/121165.aspx.

³² Literally, my heart’s eyes.

Ra, la, sha, sa are the inner mind's wisdom.

Ha and *A* are the secret of education.

Oh! The verbal expression of grammar,

You are the soul of the nation!

The thirty consonants are a pure offering.

The four vowels are the music of grammar.

Oh! The beautiful Tibetan consonants,

You are all of my heart.

Song lyrics typically exhort listeners to behave in certain ways towards this valorised language, encouraging them to 'speak pure Tibetan and not mix it with other languages',³³ 'to maintain our language together',³⁴ to 'study [written] Tibetan and speak Tibetan',³⁵ 'to study Tibetan well'.³⁶ The father tongue is often mentioned in the context of exhortations to speak purely, for example to 'speak pure father tongue if you feel proud to be Tibetan'.³⁷ This exhortation references a campaign for linguistic purism, part of a broader movement to assert a modern but distinctly Tibetan identity (Gayley 2013), aiming to rid the language of Chinese loanwords and promoting the use of Tibetan neologisms. In addition to the exhortations, there are also appeals for Tibetans not to forget their language. This is predicated on the false assumption that all Tibetans already know the language, thus again naturalizing the alphabetical order.

Finally, many songs imply consequences, both individual and collective, of failure to comply with the exhortations. Although these are sometimes phrased in terms of the development of Tibetan culture, or the future of the Tibetan people, the most commonly expressed sanctions are aimed at the individual and are based on a sense of shame: it would be shameful to forget one's language, shameful to defend

³³ Amchok Pulshung 2012.

³⁴ Antren 2012.

³⁵ Rinchen Dorji (Rin chen rdo rje) 2014.

³⁶ Kadra Drawang (Ka pra bkra dbang) 2011.

³⁷ Go Jowo Tsande (Sgo jo bo tshan sde) 2012.

the language of others, shameful to forget one's love for Tibet.³⁸ Often the spectre of shame is raised in the form of a quotation, attributed to the Panchen Lama but actually originating with another lama, Shangton Danpa Jyamtso (1825–1897).³⁹ In the following chorus to a rap song by Kalzang Tenzin,⁴⁰ the quote is naturalised as an aspect of un-authored, timeless tradition:

Dear children of the Snowlands,
Tibetans have our own proverb,
It's good to know all sorts of languages, but
It's shameful to forget your own father tongue.

The sense of shame subjectivises the link between language, land and nation, and identifies the individual listener as the site where the link must be embodied and performed. The fate of the nation and its language, though rooted in the soil, bound by the geobody, and passed through the bloodline, ultimately resides in the individual.

The sense of responsibility and the possibility for shame does not apply to individual places, but only to the Tibetan geobody as a whole. This is made evident in numerous songs praising specific locations in which *pha yul*, or a fatherland, might be a valley, county, prefecture or other region. They are sung about in songs known as *pha yul dran glu* or *bstod glu*, songs of praise or nostalgia for the fatherland. In such songs, fatherlands are praised and adored, valorised as, for example, 'the source of ancient tradition'⁴¹ or 'the place where dreams are realized.'⁴² But never are they linked to language: only the national geobody is enlivened by language. Therefore, only the national geobody requires the active participation of individual Tibetans, and there is no shame associated with overlooking the language of one's *pha yul*.

This, then, is the alphabetical order of things, as expressed in contemporary Tibetan pop music: the Tibetan language, the Tibetan nation, its geobody, and the body of individual Tibetans; all equivalent. Since the beloved and praiseworthy

³⁸ See Makley 2007 on gender and shame.

³⁹ Shang ston bstan pa rgya mtsho.

⁴⁰ Skal bzang bstan 'dzin.

⁴¹ Karjen Drolma (Skar rgyan sgrol ma) 2016.

⁴² Norba (Nor b+ha) 2013.

Tibetan language is equivalent to the Tibetan alphabet, and is the essence of the Tibetan nation, Tibetans should study, protect, use and *not forget* the Tibetan alphabet. If they do these things, the nation will survive and Tibetans will collectively benefit, but if they should fail, individual Tibetans should be ashamed.

The alphabetical order: policy or fantasy?

‘A worldview is not a plan,’ remarks the historian Timothy Snyder (2015: 29), reminding us that an ideology needs to be translated into action to impact human lives. The worldview expressed in contemporary Tibetan songs, the alphabetical order that links land and people through a single language, is clearly a problematic ideology in a multilingual region; it is, at least in theory, inimical to linguistic diversity. But, history is full of such ideologies that were not, or could not, be acted on. This section therefore examines to what extent the alphabetical order expressed in popular music impacts the linguistic diversity of Tibet, and the lives of minority language speakers.

An important starting point is to reflect on the fact that Tibet is a stateless nation: it lacks the institutional capacity to enforce the alphabetical order. However, the People’s Republic of China has established a policy regime that not only permits, but also encourages, reproduces and enables the alphabetical order. It has, firstly, recognised Tibetans as one of 55 official ethnic minorities, each granted the constitutional freedom to use and develop their language (Zhou 2004). *Which* language they have the freedom to use and develop is not specified in legal instruments, whereas the national language, Putonghua, is (Rohsenow 2004). In this ambivalent context, and in thrall to a Stalinist heritage linking ethnicity and language, the Tibetan written language is promoted by the state as an iconic standard for a single Tibetan language (Roche 2017). Furthermore, within China’s framework for ethnic management, it becomes not the language of a specific people, or of individuals, but rather of a defined territory, since all ethnic autonomy and concordant language freedoms are delivered territorially. Within formally recognized Tibetan autonomous areas, the Tibetan language is then reproduced and its position reinforced through education, the media, public signage, and so on. Therefore it is, somewhat

ironically, China that is responsible for actualising the alphabetical order expressed in contemporary Tibetan song.

The irony is particularly evident in the blowback resulting from the institutionalisation of Tibetan nationalism by the Chinese state. This has seen the emergence and vindication of an Other for Tibet – the Han Chinese, or *rgya* – as seen in a recent controversy when, in order to promote the cinematic release of the Tibetan film *Tharlo*⁴³ in late 2016, a number of famous Tibetan singers featured in a short film encouraging Tibetans to go see the movie. Some singers spoke in Tibetan, while others spoke Chinese. Social media soon bristled with denunciations of the Chinese-speaking Tibetan singers. They were referred to as Chinese dogs,⁴⁴ Chinese kids,⁴⁵ and Chinese lovers,⁴⁶ the last a denunciation of treachery dating back at least to the anti-Communist uprisings of 1958 (Orgyen Nyima 2016). An online poll found that 79 per cent of respondents rejected their decision to speak Chinese in the video. This is but one example of widespread Sinophobia (Billé 2015) among Tibetans in today's China, and is an ironic and obviously unintended effect of the state reproduction of Tibetan nationalism.

Beyond the production of Sinophobia, China's system of ethnic classification has had far broader outcomes. In a country where about half of the languages are endangered (Moseley 2010; Lewis et al. 2016; Xu 2013; Liu and Zhang 2015) – that is, they have a declining number of speakers and declining transmission – Tibet has even higher rates of endangerment. About two thirds of the region's languages are endangered, and all minority languages spoken by Tibetans are endangered (Roche and Suzuki 2017). Among these, some are being replaced by Chinese, but many are being replaced by Tibetan. Therefore, the language endangerment in Tibet is not simply a matter of a dominant state language sweeping away subordinate minority languages, but rather of a state-sponsored minority language replacing unrecognised languages within its state-defined territorial prerogative.

⁴³ *thar lo*.

⁴⁴ *rgya khyi*.

⁴⁵ *rgya phrug*.

⁴⁶ *rgya dga'*.

At the root of this shift, and the loss of languages it entails, is a fundamental failure of recognition. The state's ethnic classification program recognises only 55 ethnic minorities and assigns, implicitly, a single language to each, in a country with approximately 300 languages. For Tibetans, their single monoglot group contains some 30 languages, in addition to around 16 Tibetan varieties (according to Tourandre 2014). None of this diversity is recognized, nor is it reproduced or supported by any formal institutions, and thus speakers of minority languages are effectively excluded from public life. In Fraser's (2000) words, the tragedy of such misrecognition is not simply the 'depreciation and deformation of group identity, but social subordination – in the sense of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life.' Perhaps as a reaction to this, the misrecognized tend to engage in their own misrecognition, in Bourdieu's (1991) sense; that is, they tend to normalize the state's gaze as natural rather than as an outcome of unequal power distribution. The effort to assimilate and inhabit state categories is never fully successful, however, because the reality of linguistic diversity within the nation remains. This contradiction becomes a source of psychological suffering, the psycho-affective expression of colonialism (Fanon 1952, 1963), or a double consciousness of being two mutually exclusive things at once (DuBois 2007). The sense of self-alienation is intensified by the 'web of *common sense* arguments' (Lippi-Green 1997: 66) that expressions of banal nationalism in contemporary Tibetan pop promote.

Conflict between language practice and ascribed identity appears widespread among Tibetans who speak minority languages. Despite feeling deeply Tibetan, they know that their language is not 'real' Tibetan, and 'know' that the essence of being Tibetan is speaking the language (that is, the pure language) and knowing the written language. Young Ersu speakers therefore call their language 'Tibetan' whilst seeking to eradicate traces of non-standard identity, including their language (Zhang 2016). Fried (2010) reports how one young man on the northeast Tibetan Plateau used 'our Tibetan language' to refer to his minority language as well as the local variety of spoken Tibetan and the written Tibetan language, interchangeably. Tunzhi (2017) describes how speakers of the Rta'u language, in valorising Tibetan as a 'source of

inspiration in life’ providing answers to ‘philosophical questions such as the purpose of life and sources of happiness’ lack ‘pride in their own language’. Kehoe (2015: 323), in an examination of online expressions of identity among Tibetans in China, refers to a post by a Baima-speaking Tibetan that asks, ‘After all is said and done, am I or am I not Tibetan?’ Kehoe sees this as indicative of ‘a sense of anxiety and confusion over the disjuncture between ethnic classification ... and local self-awareness’ based, at least partly, in the disjuncture between language practice and ascribed identity.⁴⁷ Therefore, Tibetan nationalism has psycho-affective impacts on minority language speakers. In my conclusion, I examine the impacts of this in the context of a specific song, and return to the broader questions of the relationship between music, place and identity.

Conclusion: singing to the nation

There is no applause. Hwajyil,⁴⁸ singer of the song ‘Gyalrong⁴⁹ Woman’ and a speaker of one of Tibet’s minority languages, Tsovdun, smiles into the camera throughout the video. She lyrically and musically mimics Tsewang Lhamo’s famous song ‘Soul of the Tibetan People’. The melody is identical, though slowed, and somewhat more whimsical, less grave. The lyrics, sung in Tibetan, follow a similar structure to Tsewang Lhamo’s, but tell a very different story:

My fatherland is Amdo Gyalrong/ My lama is Rongchen Cheejee⁵⁰/ My name is Rose Flower/ I, a Gyalrong Woman, sing a song.

The one I venerate is Tara/ The one I adore is the ancestors’ dream/ My name is Spring of Youth/ I, a Gyalrong woman, do a dance.

⁴⁷ Such identity ambiguity among Tibetans who do not speak ‘standard’ Tibetan is not confined to China: Dawa Lokyitsang (2014), for example, discusses how diasporic Tibetans ‘of racially mixed backgrounds and/or [who] engage in speaking Tibetan mixed with other languages’ develop an ambiguous sense of belonging to the broader Tibetan community.

⁴⁸ *dpa’ skyid*.

⁴⁹ *rgyal rong*.

⁵⁰ *rong chen chos rje*.

My monastery is Trashi Cheeling⁵¹/ My village is Tsovdun⁵² Town/ I am a
descendant of Songtsen Ganpo's⁵³ soldiers/ I, a Gyalrong woman, love you/
My name is 'Niece of Emperors'/ I, a Gyalrong woman, love you.

Rather than embodying the nation, as did Tsewang Lhamo before her, Hwajyil petitions it. She attempts to display her 'national capital', through indexing her belonging, through the 'looks, accent, demeanour, taste, nationally valued social and cultural preferences and behaviour' (Hage 1996: 466). The lyrics, in both form and content, bend towards this aim. Her choice of language, Tibetan, rather than Tsovdun, confirm the song's status as petition – the nation must be addressed in the national language (Butler and Spivak 2007).

Hwajyil starts by situating her Gyalrong identity within the Tibetan spatial framework of the 'three regions'; she is from Amdo Gyalrong. This spatial clarification is necessary not just because Gyalrong sits astride an unclear boundary between two cultural regions – Amdo and Kham – but also because it sits on the margins of the Tibetan world, bordering the Han-dominated lowlands (Tenzin Jinba 2013). She continues by grounding her identity in a pan-Tibetan religious base, referencing her lama, and later continues by referencing her patron deity and monastery. The remaining imagery, the self-descriptive metaphors, mostly diminutize the singer: she is a rose who sings and dances. At the end, Hwajyil makes a small gesture towards a larger community, namely, her hometown, Tshovdun, and then explains she is a descendent of Songtsen Ganpo's soldiers, suggestively binding herself and her community to ties of descent with the broader Tibetan community, a position she emphasizes by naming herself as niece to the emperors. These are the same emperors who founded the Purgyal Empire that Tsewang Lhamo claimed descent from.

The final refrain, 'I, a Gyalrong woman, love you' contains an ambiguous referent: you. Given that the whole song to this point has been about establishing Hwajyil's national capital, her desire to belong, to be incorporated into the Tibetan

⁵¹ *bkra shis chos gling.*

⁵² *tsho bdun.*

⁵³ *srong btsan sgam po.*

geobody and bloodline, there can be only one ‘you’ addressed: the same listener who is exhorted to reproduce the nation through speech and study, the listener who must be addressed in Tibetan. However, whereas Tsewang Lhamo is able to say she ‘loves Tibet’, Hwajyil can only say she loves ‘you’, the listener, the nation. She lays out her national capital, saying ‘I love you’, and begging the question, ‘Do you love me?’ It is precisely because this question remains unanswered that there can be no applause.

This tenuous petition, this plea sung to the Tibetan nation by a minority language speaker, is the result of the alphabetical order expressed in Tibetan song, a ubiquitous form of banal nationalism. While song is only one part of a much broader ideological context, today the plight of Tibet’s linguistic minorities exemplifies the ways in which musical community-building can also be a source of suffering, alienation and, perhaps, destruction.

It is important to understand where contemporary Tibetan pop, and the alphabetical order it expresses, fits into the broader scheme of music’s potentially nefarious use. To start, there is no evidence of music being used to incite or accompany violence, unlike, for example, in the former Yugoslavia (Baker 2013), or being used as a weapon of torture (after Hirsch 2007). Nor is there any such thing as Tibetan ‘hate music’ (after Chastagner 2012) that denounces and dehumanizes specific people. Suggestions of violence and antipathy are conspicuously absent from the rhetoric of contemporary Tibetan pop, which remains overwhelmingly positive, overflowing with praise rather than bristling with hate. As already noted, we can describe contemporary Tibetan music as being full of positive images, recollections and repertoires which confirm individuals’ sense of self, culture, history, society, and place. These words are adapted from Klimczyk and Świerzowska’s (2015: 59) description of the imagery of National Socialist music, from their exploration of music in genocide. They argue that the intriguing thing about genocidal music is that it ‘is not necessarily as extreme in tone as we might expect’ (2015: 60). Hage (1997) makes sense of this apparent contradiction in his exploration of how nationalist valorisation encodes potential calls to violence against Others, arguing that ‘the logic of extermination and valorization do not belong to different nationalisms but are

generated by the same nationalist imaginary' (1997: 477). Therefore, although the alphabetical order expressed in contemporary Tibetan music is not hateful in content, discriminatory in intent, or violent in use, this does not necessarily mean that it is, or will remain, harmless.

I have argued that the rhetoric currently alienates Tibet's minority language speakers from the Tibetan geobody, causes psycho-affective suffering, and probably contributes to the gradual loss of minority languages. Tibet's linguistic minorities are subject to a regime of what has been called 'civilized oppression': an everyday, trivialised regime of discrimination and marginalisation 'that involves neither violence, nor the use of law' (Harvey 2015: 1). The result is that speakers of minority languages are, at present, *displaced* in Tibet, as strangers in their own land. However, were conditions to change, it is possible that they may come to be *replaced*, as the alphabetical order, in promoting an exclusionary, nationalist rhetoric, contains the logic for the extermination of Others. What this should alert us to is that music, in creating a sense of place, can both include and exclude. Importantly, music that excludes, stigmatises, and marginalises need not be overtly hateful, aggressive or discriminatory. It may, in fact, be overwhelmingly positive, full of praise for a place and its people. My conclusion, then, is that we need to consider such music in its broader ideological and social context, and carefully interrogate seemingly benign rhetoric to understand how the destructive potential of music can be both realised and avoided.

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