

Signifiers of modernity in contemporary Lhasa

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A conspicuous feature of the cultural landscape of contemporary Lhasa is the variety of indicators of modernity. These take the form of television ads and billboards, radio and television programs, popular music, and sites where modern pleasures and entertainment are provided such as restaurants, discos and Tibetan “nangma.” Signifiers of a “cosmopolitan” modernity exist alongside a still dominant official version of Chinese/Tibetan society that highlights economic progress and national goals. Tibetans in turn attempt to align elements of traditional culture with their own perceptions of modern life. As Lhasa Tibetans negotiate their way through this layered cultural landscape a number of contradictory practices emerge which simultaneously serve to affirm the value of modernity while preserving a sense of Tibetan agency and identity. Nangma, for instance, which originated as a response to Chinese karaoke and disco, mixes traditional Tibetan music and dance, Chinese and Western popular music (and, in the last couple of years, Hindi popular music and dance). The audience is almost exclusively Tibetan. Nangma is a pastiche of modern popular musical culture through which Tibetans can demonstrate their cultural competence. Television is a ubiquitous feature of life in Lhasa – watched in private homes, as well as in restaurants, bars, and shops. Programming is available in both Tibetan and Chinese, but many Tibetans who are bilingual prefer the Chinese channels not just for the greater variety, but because the material has not been “selected” for translation. As an “official” outlet Lhasa Tibetan-language broadcasting attempts to harness Tibetan modernity to its own aims. The paper will examine these and other practices surrounding signifiers of modernity in the Tibetan urban cultural landscape. The analysis will be based on conversations with Tibetans in a number of sites where signifiers of modernity intersect Tibetan lives.