

Dancing to the beat of modernity: the rise and development of Tibetan pop music

T. Yangdon Dhondup

Present-day Tibet is going through a transition marked by contradictions and dilemmas. This paper aims to portray some aspects of the changes that have taken place in cultural production in Tibet from the mid-eighties onwards, focusing on the production of popular music in Tibet. In particular, I am focusing on the transition from the past to the present, from revolutionary songs to romantic ballads, and on the challenges that such a passage entails, reflecting the socio-political changes in Tibet during the 1980s. In my paper I hope to chronicle the cultural scene of this aspect of culture production and to show how the people involved in this cultural scene struggle for Tibet's modernisation.

Tseten Dolma was the first Tibetan woman who represented Tibet in the musical world throughout China. Between 1950 and 1980 in China, her name became synonymous with Tibet. Although the lyrics of her songs were mainly eulogies for the Communist Party or for Mao Zedong, her songs are widely loved and sung by Tibetans. *Zai Beijing de jinshan shang* (On Top of the Golden Mountain in Beijing), probably her most famous song, is not only known by Tibetans, but even Chinese audiences can sing along with her. Tseten Dolma was, however, a state-sponsored artist and her lyrics and background conformed to Beijing's idea of 'minority' representation.

A sudden change of wind came when Dadron appeared on the music scene in the early 1980s. Dadron's songs freed popular culture from the Party's control and her lyrics stunned the public with their freshness and with their references to Tibet as the native land. The rhythms and the lyrics had changed and she brought Tibetan music to another level – Tibetan pop music was born and Dadron became the first genuine Tibetan popstar known throughout the Tibetan areas. Her popularity, however, brought new tensions between the state-sponsored artist and the independent artist involved in the production of popular culture. Unfortunately, her career did not last long as she escaped into exile. It is clear, however, that she prepared the stage for other artists and soon other Tibetan singers, mostly women, tried to live up to Dadron's image. Dechen Drolma, a singer from Amdo, is considered the nearest to her but it is clear that her audience does not match the one that followed Dadron. After Dadron, artists from Kham and Amdo overtook the musical production taking place in central Tibet. This meant that popular culture was disintegrating at the centre and was revived from the periphery. The same phenomenon can be seen in the field of literature, and the eighties saw a powerful group of writers emerging from east Tibet.

Even nowadays, the cultural agenda is set by the periphery. Among the most well-known is Yadong, a former truck driver from Ganze, whose songs such as *Qingzang gaoyuan*

(The Tibetan Plateau) or *Shenyang* (Divine Eagle) have become popular with millions of listeners in Tibet and China.

Changes became visible in the musical scene by the late eighties. Modern technology facilitated the making of music videos and Tibetan artists favoured singing songs in Chinese in order to reach a wider audience. The music videos depicting colourful Tibetan festivals or picturesque Tibetan scenery became popular. The fusion of an image of an unspoilt Tibet with contemporary songs shows the attempt to mould the traditional with the modern. The makers of the videos seem to struggle as to how to portray Tibet and its changing face in the wake of an ever-increasing social transformation.

The latest music videos emerging from Tibet with Tibetans in traditional dress dancing to the beat of disco music, and the publication of Zhogs dung's infamous article raise interesting questions about the modernising process in Tibet. Is it desirable to wage an attack on traditional culture in order to modernise Tibet or does modernisation enhance Tibetan culture? What effect does the new capitalism visible in China have on Tibetan culture and how does this change Tibetans' perceptions of themselves and their culture?