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ARTICLE



On artistic and cultural generations in Northeastern Tibet

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the 1980s, and continuing for over three decades since, a particular generation of Tibetans from the Northeastern Tibetan region known as Amdo, and particularly from the northern parts of China's Qinghai province, has proven extremely productive. Why has this generation, born primarily between 1959 and 1967, been so incredibly successful? This article examines the contextual factors that may have contributed to the incredible success of this generation. This ranges from the policies and circumstances that affected their births, and the state of the cultural field at the time they reached adulthood. Personal experience narratives, autobiographies, and scholarly studies then reveal how this generation was able to access the intellectual field. Finally, I briefly discuss how the Amdo Tibetan intellectual field compares with other Tibetan and ethnic experiences in the People's Republic of China.

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Introduction

Beginning in 1980, as the narrative widely accepted among Western scholars goes, with Hu Yaobang's historic visit to Tibet in which he encouraged Tibetans to exercise more national autonomy,¹ Tibetan society experienced an unprecedented period of liberalism,² and secularism.³ Among other things, this liberalism opened new avenues of secular education that had previously been closed⁴ and paved the way for new, modern Tibetan literature,⁵ music,⁶ and comedy.⁷ And yet, although this newly receptive climate undoubtedly contributed to the flourishing of modern Tibetan cultural production,⁸ less attention is given to how the period's cultural producers must also have been influenced by the events preceding 1980.

Several months into conducting research on Tibetan comedy in the post-Mao period, I began to realize that many of the most active cultural producers between 1980 and the twenty-first century were born around the same time period between 1959 and 1967. And yet, no studies have sought to define this incredibly productive – though controversial – generation, nor have they used a generational perspective to ask: who are these cultural producers, and why were they able to take advantage of this newly receptive climate (as opposed to others born earlier or later)? What social, political, and demographic conditions helped people born in this period to cultivate the skills

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and the opportunities to so heavily influence the form and function of cultural production in Tibet, and what are the terms around which *this* generation defines itself?

This article develops a theory of Tibetan cultural generations that helps explain the influence of the generation of intellectuals and cultural producers who came of age in the newly liberal atmosphere of the post-Mao reform era. I begin with a brief review of sociological and ethnographic studies on generations, and a discussion of how these studies apply in Chinese and Tibetan contexts. Next, I define the cohort to be examined here and compare it with those born immediately before and after. Born in the relative calm between the 1958 Amdo Rebellion and the 1966 beginning of the Cultural Revolution, reaching adulthood in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and witnessing firsthand a rapidly changing society, I suggest that this generation came through the crucible of the Cultural Revolution to emerge as creative and educational leaders in an unprecedentedly denuded cultural sphere. While scholars commonly accept that these cultural producers achieve their influence in spite of the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, I suggest that, for this generation, the Cultural Revolution and other historical and political features of the Maoist period provided this generation with unique opportunities for innovative cultural production once the post-Mao period began. Through examining personal experience narratives, memoirs, and autobiographies, I suggest that this generation, specifically from the Northeastern Tibetan region of Amdo, gained early access to excellent Tibetan language education, as well as tertiary educational opportunities and were thus able to take advantage of the liberalism of the 1980s in ways that other generations were unable to do.

Before continuing, I would point out that generational analyses require significant generalization. In doing so, I in no way seek to diminish the significant endeavor and talents of each of the cultural producers listed here or of the diversity of their work. Instead I seek the social and political factors that unite them. My data rely primarily on the published work of others, while much of my information about individual Tibetan cultural producers is drawn from autobiographies, memories, or personal experience narratives elicited during interviews. This analysis focuses primarily on the *secular* cultural producers in the Northeastern Tibetan region known as Amdo – comprised of parts of Qinghai 青海, Gansu 甘肃, and Sichuan 四川 Provinces. This partly reflects my own greater experience working in Amdo, but I believe it reflects some dominant trends in Tibetan society, particularly as relates to Tibetophone cultural production.⁹

Sociological generations

Sociologist, Karl Mannheim, in one of the first sociological examinations of generations, suggests that generations, ‘are endowed ... with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process’ that, through this common location have ‘certain definite modes of behavior, feeling, and thought.’¹⁰ In particular, an age cohort’s pre-adult years are extremely influential, and the historical, social, and biological factors to which a group is exposed during these pre-adult years mold a generation’s responses to future stimuli, and these responses will remain stable over the group’s lifetime.¹¹

In a study of abortion activists in North Dakota, for example, Ginsburg also recognizes generational divides in pro-life and pro-choice activists, where pro-choice activists at the time of her research came of age in the 1960s at the height of the feminist movement, and pro-life activists were born primarily in the 1920s and 1950s, coming of

age when the feminist movement was less robust. Ginsburg thus observed that, ‘social activists may hold different positions due not only to social and ideological differences. Differing views may be produced also by historical changes.’¹²

This observation is a useful beginning for understanding some of the issues examined below. Before advancing, however, I would further suggest that ‘societies,’ nations, or even ‘cultures’ provide attractive, though not always helpful units of comparison, as is the often assumption that a single age group will react similarly to the same stimuli. Indeed, as we shall see below, not all regions or even communities experience the same social processes in the same way and at the same moments. Nor are the attitudes and creative practices of a single generation necessarily static throughout their productive careers.

Tibetan notions of generation in post-Mao China

The Tibetan word for generation, *mi rabs*, derives from the terms *mi* ‘person/people’ and *rabs* ‘succession, lineage, or history.’ The latter term appears also in *dus rabs* ‘century,’ *lo rabs* ‘decade,’ and *rgyal rabs* ‘royal lineage.’ A *mi rabs* is a historically grouped collection of people, though what this means in contemporary Tibetan society is less exact, and generational discourses appear in multiple languages and contexts. One of the most important of these is the decade-based generational stereotypes popular in China, and it is common to hear people attribute personality traits and orientations toward family and money to the decade in which one was born (for example, *baling hou* 八零后 ‘post-80’, and *jiuling hou* 九零后 ‘post-90’). The *baling hou* ‘post-80s’ generation, for example, are considered ‘self-centered,’¹³ individualistic, and materialistic, compared to older generations. The *jiuling hou*, generation, meanwhile, are considered even more self-centered than the *baling hou* generation. Both generations are often dubbed ‘little emperors,’ because many have no siblings due to China’s ‘One Child Policy.’

While the notion of *baling hou* and *jiuling hou* have currency with many (particularly young) Tibetans, Tibetans have also developed emic generational distinctions, particularly in the art world, where a group of poets style themselves as the *mi rabs gsum pa* ‘third generation.’ This term is similar to the Chinese filmmakers who identify fourth, fifth, and sixth generations in the post-Mao era judged not solely by age, but by artistic style and the years during which they received their film training.¹⁴ The Tibetan ‘third generation’ refers both to a loosely identified cohort of people who formed together in 2005 with the stated aim of making an ideological and esthetic break from the modern poets who came before.¹⁵ Similarly, Pema Bhum places the adjective ‘new’ alongside ‘generation’ to suggest a rupture with the past, but he does not analyze the characteristics or definitions of the generation any further.¹⁶ Here, Pema Bhum and Sangyé Gyatso suggest that these generations are concerned with articulating an esthetic, formal, and stylistic rupture with previous generations of artists.

In other cases, the term ‘generation’ has been used in academic literature to designate an age cohort that lacks explicit definition. In their account of a folk-religious festival called *klu rol* in Amdo’s Reb gong (Ch: Tongren 同仁) region, for example, Epstein and Peng point out that, in the early 1990s, young people who had received ‘modern educations,’ with its combined emphasis on Chinese versions of history and the development of societies, viewed the ritual as superstitious and only danced in the ritual because elders forced them to do so. They were concerned that it might ‘reveal an

unseemly and suspect backwardness lurking in the breast of modernity.¹⁷ Again, generation is used to distinguish young from old and to articulate the rupture between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional.’ Iselin, moreover, recognizes a subtler shift when she writes of the fundamental change in the discursive strategies of Tibetan college graduates in pastoral areas between 2003 and 2008.¹⁸ In just five years, the discourses students used to justify their adult roles in their pastoral home areas changed from one of modernization in the name of progress and development to cultural preservation.

Particularly germane to this study is Luran Hartley’s analysis of Tibetan literary discourse in the first two decades of the post-Mao era. Using Mannheim’s emphasis on the social location of different generations, Hartley distinguishes generally between older and monastically educated scholars with more traditional views, and the more radical views of younger intellectuals (roughly the same as the generation suggested in this article), with the caveat that the generation is not a stable unit, but comprises generation units united by ‘the activity of cultural production in which individuals engage and thus learn, shape and commit themselves to... ideologies and discourses.’¹⁹ But in the examination that follows, I do not seek only to elaborate some of the characteristics of a particular age cohort, nor do I view one productive generation’s three-decades-long contributions to the Tibetan political and cultural field as only being the results of momentary allegories of a space of social and cultural relations. Instead I seek to develop a theory of generations that accounts for the (often tragic) social and political conditions that incubated this generation’s development relative to others, without closing off the dynamic nature of their productive work as they continue to respond to developments in the cultural field.

A generation of cultural producers

I have already suggested that a great number of Tibet’s most prominent modern cultural producers were born between 1959 and 1967, and who have exerted a pronounced influence on Tibetan cultural production for over 30 years. This distinguished list includes:

Name (birth year)	Home County (Wylie/Pinyin)
Ljang bu (b. 1959)	Sog po/Henan 河南
‘Ju Skal bzang (b. 1960)	Mgo log/Guoluo 果洛
Tshe ring don grub (b. 1961)	Sog po/Henan
Phag mo bkra shis (b. 1962)	Gcan tsha/Jianzha
Bkra b+ha (b.1963)	Chab cha/Gonghe 共和
Chab brag lha mo skyabs (b. 1963)	Sog po/Henan
‘Jigs med rgyal mtshan (b. 1963)	Mgo log/Guoluo
Zhogs dung (b. 1963)	Gcan tsha/Jianzha
Sman bla skyabs (b.1963)	Mang ra/Guinan 贵南
Rang sgra (b. 1964)	‘Ba’ rdzong/Tongde 同德
‘Brug lha rgyal (b. 1964)	Chab cha/Gonghe
‘Jams dbyangs skyid (b. 1965)	Mang ra/Guinan
Meizhuo (b.1966)	Dpa’ lung/Hualong 化龙
Stag ‘bum rgyal (b.1966)	Mang ra/Guinan
Zhi bde nyi ma (b. 1966)	Mang ra/Guinan
Hor gtsang ‘Jigs med (b. 1967)	Bsang chu/Xiahe 夏河
A smyon bkra shis don grub (b. 1967)	Khri ka/Guide 贵德
Bde skyid sgrol ma (b. 1967)	Sog po/Henan

This list is representative, rather than exhaustive. And yet, it suggests an impressive generation of talented cultural producers that includes editors, authors, poets, authors-turned-filmmakers, comedians, comedians-turned-lyricists-turned-filmmakers, public intellectuals, and bloggers.²⁰ To one familiar with the post-Mao Tibetan intellectual field, it gives some sense of the extent and influence of this generation within contemporary Tibetan society. Indeed, this list includes a prominent Sinophone²¹ author in Meizhuo (Chair of the Qinghai Writers' Association and winner of the China's prestigious *Junma* Literature Prize)²²; Tibetophone authors and poets like Stag 'bum rgyal – a pioneer of Tibetan language magical realism – Tshe ring don grub, and Ljang bu²³; comedians like Sman bla skyabs, Phag mo bkra shis,²⁴ and Zhi bde nyi ma²⁵; and such controversial and vocal social critics as Zhogs dung²⁶ and 'Jam dbyangs skyid. Not only influential in China's Tibet, this generation of Amdo Tibetans has also produced a number of individuals who have left China and become influential in the international Tibetan community, France-based poet and politician Lhamo skyabs (b. 1963, Sog po) who writes under the sobriquet of Chab brag pho nya has been influential in the exile community.

While the greatest concentration of secular cultural producers seems born between these years, we can also extend this generation to include those born after 1953, when the People's Liberation Army had finally succeed in quelling a series of rebellions in Qinghai.²⁷ Some of the most influential Tibetan cultural producers of the post-Mao period were born during these years, including authors Don grub rgyal (b. 1953, Gcan tsha/Jianzha), Nag po skal bzang (b. 1955, Reb gong/Tongren), and US-based writer, historian, and cultural activist Pema Bhum (b. 1956, Reb gong). All three are highly influential actors in modern Tibet. Don grub rgyal is considered one of the founders of modern Tibetan literature, and his poems, essays, and short stories are practically required reading for Tibetan students and have been the subject of considerable scholarly exegesis.²⁸ Nag po skal bzang, meanwhile, wrote the popular folktale-inspired novel *Klu 'bum mi rgod*, which was later adapted as a radio program.²⁹ Prior to this, however, the number of contemporary writers and cultural producers thins out dramatically.

In the decade *after* 1967, we see many promising cultural producers, but one might argue that most have not attained the same national and international attention as the generation that preceded them. These include comedian-director-actor-poet 'Jam dbyangs blo gros (b. 1974, Mgo log), award winning filmmakers Pad ma tshe brtan (b.1969, Khri ka/Guide) and Zon thar rgyal (b. 1974, 'ba' rdzong/Tongde), and authors Skyabs chen bde grol (b. 1977, Rma chu/Maqu), Ye shes sgröl ma (b. 1971), and Ge Yang (b. 1972). The list is impressive, and yet, with the exception of Pad ma tshe brtan, and these cultural producers have yet to attain the same heady levels as their predecessors, and a number of them are still considered to be 'emerging.'³⁰ This is not meant to fault the younger generation in Amdo, so much as to emphasize the extraordinary productivity of the generation preceding it.

Identifying the generations, however, is only the first step. Why does this generation stand out? What factors have led to its development and enabled its members to engage so productively in the cultural field? It is unlikely that this generation or the inhabitants of this region was suddenly more talented than those immediately preceding or following. Equally unlikely is the notion that Tibetans in this generation and particularly in the Northeastern Tibetan region of Amdo had some genetic advantage in producing innovative literature and film. Instead, it is useful to examine which

contextual factors that explain this generation's emergence and influence. To begin, I contextualize this generation within the major political movements affecting Amdo Tibetans in China during the second half of the twentieth century. Then, through examining oral historical sources, memoirs, and educational data, I examine specific regional conditions that allowed Amdo, in particular, to become a haven of cultural production.

Of policies and demographics

Perhaps the most significant factor is that this generation entered an unprecedentedly bare and secularized cultural and intellectual field. When looking for events, policies, and campaigns that would have shaped the generation's experiences, few stand out more than the political upheavals that bookend this period: the 1958 rebellion, and the 1966 beginning of the Cultural Revolution (Ch: *wenhua da geming* 文化大革命, T: *rig gnas gsar brje*). The 1980s period of 'reform and opening up' (Ch: *gaige kaifang* 改革开放), with its liberal educational and cultural policies also looms large as the context in which these cultural producers reached adulthood. This section interrogates these dates and their potential to influence Tibetan generational experience.

One of the most important dates of the contemporary Tibetan experience is 1958, a year which is often referenced as a 'point of historical rupture leading to unprecedented fear and suffering.'³¹ Although this was also the beginning of the Great Leap Forward and devastating famine that ravaged the entirety of China,³² for Tibetans it carries still deeper significance. In the Tibetan context, 1958 saw the uprising that led thousands of Tibetans, including His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama, to flee into exile in India. In the immediate aftermath, many of the pre-Liberation secular and religious elites were imprisoned, and the Chinese government discarded the United Front and began instituting socialist reforms, including religious reforms that linger in the Tibetan memory.³³ In Qinghai, for example, which had once boasted a robust 722 monasteries and nearly 60,000 monks and reincarnate *bla mas* prior to 1958, only 11 monasteries remained open after this date. In neighboring Gansu province, meanwhile, 369 pre-1958 monasteries were reduced to only 8 after that date.³⁴ The number would rise to 137 and 107 for Qinghai and Gansu respectively after 1962, but the psychological damage had already been done. Similar stories apply to other Tibetan regions as well. For many Tibetans, the rupture of 1958 is considered so complete that it has been called a 'change in worlds' from old society (Ch: *jiu shehui* 旧社会, T: *'jig rten rnying pa*) to incorporation in a new society (Ch: *xin shehui* 新社会, T: *'jig rten gsar pa*).³⁵ For those old enough to remember these difficult years, the memories remain quite painful to this day. The oldest of the generation I have suggested above were born in 1953. They were, at most, young children in the 1958, and they grew up in a world in which Buddhism played a much less significant role in the lived experiences of Tibetans than it had before 1958.

The youngest of the group, meanwhile, were born before or immediately after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and the 10 years of chaos (Ch: *shinian dongluan* 十年动乱) that affected not only Tibetan regions but the entirety of the People's Republic of China. Tibet's Cultural Revolution experience was, in many ways, similar to the iconoclastic horrors that gripped the entire nation at that time.

As part of the campaign against the ‘Four Olds’ (Ch: *si ge jiu* 四个旧 T: *rnying ba bzhi*)³⁶ monasteries were closed, relics destroyed, traditional elites persecuted, monks defrocked, and forced to marry.³⁷

Those children who survived between 1959 and 1966 and those born immediately after were able to enjoy early childhood in the comparatively stable environment in the immediate aftermath of the unsuccessful 1958 uprising and preceding the Cultural Revolution. Of equal significance is the fact that this generation was between 10 and 17 years old in 1976.³⁸ Unlike the generation immediately preceding them, they were young enough to study in newly opened schools (though schooling was sometimes inconsistent), but not so old as to already have jobs, wives, and family obligations that would prevent them having time for education.

Fast forward to the 1980s, and one finds a perfect storm that serves as an incubator for a generation of talented cultural producers: the wealth of educational opportunities (and educators) and the dearth of established cultural producers in the early reform years, the proliferation of literary journals that provided venues for honing their crafts,³⁹ the relaxed cultural policies that allowed experimentation with form and style (including magical realism⁴⁰), and the great prestige afforded artists and other cultural producers in China more generally.

Demographically, this generation entered a field of cultural production traditionally dominated by religion (and men) just at a moment when there were very few religious clerics (again, overwhelmingly male) to participate in it. The religious establishment that for so long had been the sole source of education and a key source of cultural production had been severely undermined by the Cultural Revolution.⁴¹ A number of monasteries had been closed and were slowly reopening. Others had been utterly destroyed. Many monks were required to renounce their vows, marry, and make families.⁴² Others were imprisoned.⁴³ Thus, although the power and influence of the religious establishment in the cultural realm had not completely vanished, and also that Buddhism certainly experienced a strong revival in the 1980s,⁴⁴ the creation of a secular space for cultural production with some state-backing constituted a significant shift in the modes and norms of cultural production in Tibetan culture.

Moreover, by the 1980s, there were few adult men – with religious backgrounds or otherwise – at all. At a seminar in 2016, for example, Jianglin Li cited a Xinhua News report from 1962 stating ‘Many places in Golok and Yulshul, male-female ratio is one man for seven young and middle-age women; in certain areas it is one (man) for more than 10 (women).’⁴⁵ At the same event, one speaker confirmed that travelling in nomadic areas in the 1980s, people would say that if you saw any adult man, you could be sure he was likely just out of prison. While Wu Qi reports that people could become teachers with only a high school diploma.⁴⁶ The sheer lack of men – and particularly literate men – ready to take advantage of new liberal policies, then, meant that there was considerable room for young and ambitious cultural producers seeking to help the Tibetan ethnic group in ways they considered necessary.

Finally, there was a new cultural language for their work. The term *rtsom rig* ‘literature,’ for example, did not exist in Tibetan until 1955.⁴⁷ Comedic dialogs, *kha shags*,⁴⁸ meanwhile, also only came into existence through the work of the state’s propaganda teams beginning in the 1950s. The state, then, introduced a number of other terms, styles, and genres that paved the way for this generation to radically change

the face of Tibetan culture in the modern era, and then educated a new generation of cultural producers to fill these fields.

This state-level support, in turn, provided Tibetans the opportunity for ambitious and talented individuals to engage with a variety of cultural forms, some (like poetry) with links to Tibetan oral and literary traditions,⁴⁹ and others (like film) entirely novel. For literature, in particular, the proliferation of Tibetan literary journals languages – many supported by the CCP,⁵⁰ some privately funded by individual investors and monasteries⁵¹ – aimed at fostering this sort of cultural production at exactly the moment that these young intellectuals were breaking through the ranks is a defining feature of the intellectual field in the 1980s.

Bourdieu suggests that an intellectual field only becomes possible ‘as creative artists began to liberate themselves economically and socially from the patronage of the aristocracy and the Church and from their ethical and aesthetic values.’⁵² This division has some currency for discussing China and Tibet if the definition is slightly changed. Although many of these cultural producers also held positions in state-run offices, they were also relatively free to ignore the socialist realism that had guided cultural production in the Maoist period and also from the patronage of a religious system that had long controlled access to literacy prior to Tibetan regions’ incorporation into the PRC. These journals allowed experimentation with style and genre. A number of literary journals began publication as early as 1980 (Tibetan Art and Literature) in Lhasa and 1981 (Light Rain, T: *sbrang char*) in Amdo, and gained momentum around 1984.⁵³ The development of this literature also, however, relied heavily on the combination of traditional linguistic forms,⁵⁴ use of Tibetan vernacular (T: *phal skad*),⁵⁵ and new metadiscursive regimes that developed in response to the Maoist period.

This state-supported cultural liberalism also extended to other media. New music production began in 1983–1984 in Amdo and 1985 in Lhasa,⁵⁶ while *kha shags*, Tibetan comedies, were also becoming popular at this time. Indeed, the earliest comedic dialog script I have found in Amdo is Don grub rgyal’s *Bod yig slob pa* ‘Studying Tibetan,’ written in 1980.⁵⁷ Additionally, a collection of comedies published in 1993⁵⁸ and the 1985 publication of Sman bla skyabs’s *sgyu rtsal pa* ‘the artist’ in the serial *Mtsho sngon mang tshogs sgyu rtsal*, ‘Qinghai Folk Art,’⁵⁹ indicate that comedy was already popular in the early 1980s. These examples suggest the many opportunities for Tibetophone cultural production in Amdo in the 1980s.

Why Amdo? Why then?

How did Amdo’s generation of budding intellectuals and cultural producers take advantage of these new opportunities? Looking at the original list again, one sees that many of Amdo’s most active and sustained cultural producers hail from counties in Qinghai Province’s Huangnan 黄南 (T: Rma lho) and Hainan 海南 (T: Mtsho lho) Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures. Understanding the processes underpinning this development requires a further level of examination. In interviews and conversations with a number of intellectuals from this list, I have noticed education, in particular, is an oft-cited reason for this phenomenon. I believe that the answer lies, at least in part, with the early date at which education returned to certain regions of Amdo, and the charismatic educators and religious leaders who encouraged education as a way forward

for the Tibetan people. Hainan and Huangnan not only had elementary schools opened prior to 1976, but also offered Tibetan medium education in some fashion. Official documents speaking to this effect are scarce, but personal experience narratives recorded in other scholarly studies and in autobiographies help to recognize how Amdo in general, and Hainan and Huangnan in particular, became such important hubs of education.

These were not the first secular educational institutions on the Tibetan Plateau. Prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the nationalist government had already established schools.⁶⁰ More recently, Weiner notes that tent schools were established in pastoral areas of Tongren (Reb gong) as early as 1952.⁶¹ However, schooling during the Maoist period was inconsistent (many adult Tibetans either died or were imprisoned both after 1958, and many schools closed or did not teach Tibetan in the early years of the Cultural Revolution). As children from this generation were beginning to go to school, despite a dearth of qualified teachers at every level, Amdo Tibetans in this period *were* able to receive Tibetan language educations, thanks to the hard work of a few dedicated teachers. This runs counter to the commonly accepted narrative that all cultural work and education came to a standstill throughout that period.

One notable cultural producer of this generation, for example, describes his early education as follows:

After I was a little older than ten, after that I went to elementary school. Uh, at first, there wasn't a clear school in our village, and they pitched a tent, a cloth tent, and I went to school.⁶² Then, for one or two years, I went to the elementary school in the township, which is called the *xiang*. Then I went to the county middle school. Then I attended Mtsho lho Nationalities Normal School. And then at 17, I directly received a job, and came to Ziling and have been working here in this post since.⁶³

This consultant would have been 10 before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Although schools during the Cultural Revolution were closed and opened, and interrupted by various educational campaigns, this narrative suggests that education was slowly resuming in Amdo before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Yangdon Dhondup, meanwhile, points out that, although many schools in Henan Mongolian Autonomous County (in Huangnan Prefecture) closed during the Cultural Revolution, five remained open as of 1972, and that two students were able to attend university in Qinghai Province's Xining City as early as 1973.⁶⁴ Pema Bhum's memoirs, meanwhile, suggest a similar experience in Reb gong.⁶⁵ Despite being officially designated a Mongolian County, however, instruction was conducted almost exclusively in Tibetan.⁶⁶ Those fortunate enough to attend these primary schools even as the Cultural Revolution still raged were then well positioned to enter into prefectural teacher training schools (Ch: *minzu shifan xuexiao*).

Both Hainan and Huangnan also had Prefectural schools dedicated to teaching future teachers, but they also produced a number of incredibly famous intellectuals and artists. Famous alumni of the Hainan Prefecture Nationalities Normal School (T: *Mtsho lho mi rigs dge 'os slob grwa* Ch: *Hainan minzu shifan xuexiao*), for example, include Zhi bde nyi ma, Sman bla skyabs, and the almost criminally underrated author Stag 'bum rgyal. In neighboring Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, meanwhile, a young man named Bkra rgyal, who in the future would be known more by his sobriquet Zhogs dung, attended a Tibetan primary school between 1972 and 1976

before attending the Huangnan Prefecture Nationalities Normal School (T: *Rma lho mi rigs dge 'os slob grwa* Ch: *Huangnan zhou minzu shi fan xuexiao*).⁶⁷ These schools seem to have offered both the educational freedom and infrastructure to learn Tibetan language even in a period when schools (and particularly Tibetan-medium education) were difficult to access.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, universities too re-opened in time for people like Zhogs dung, and Phag mo bkra shis to attend Northwest University for the Nationalities (T: *nub byang mi rigs slob grwa chen mo*) – at that time still known as *xibei minzu xueyuan*, Northwest Institute for Nationalities – in the early 1980s.⁶⁸ This school remains an incubator for progressive Tibetans in terms of social, cultural, and technological ideas. In addition to minority-serving institutions like Northwest University of the nationalities, several other students also obtained educations at institutions in *rgya nang* ‘Inner China.’ Zhi bde nyi ma, for example, attended film academy in Xi’an. In other cases, public intellectuals got their start *before* obtaining higher education as with comedian Sman bla skyabs who was already an established performer by the time he attended the Shanghai Theatre academy in the early 1990s,

Though not every graduate of the newly re-established Tibetan-medium education system became a famous cultural producer, the concentration of such a large number of writers, born in this period, in these two prefectures, attending these schools suggests that schools – in addition to their established mission of training teachers – were important incubators of talents who would be well-placed to become influential cultural producers. Perhaps the most famous example is the ‘Class of writers’ that studied together in the Hainan Nationalities Normal School and included ‘Brug lha rgyal (pen name ‘Brong), Bkra b+ha, and Stag ‘bum rgyal.⁶⁹

The educational situation in Amdo during the 1970s and 1980s, meanwhile, seems to contrast sharply with what we know about education in, for example, the Tibet Autonomous Region, where Catriona Bass reports that the late tenth Panchen Lama (who was also originally from Amdo) drew up a plan for Tibetan medium education only in 1987.⁷⁰ Amdo’s educational advancement in the early years was possible, in part, thanks to the presence of a few charismatic teachers who helped to influence these budding cultural producers. In many cases, these were monks and *bla mas* who had survived the ravages of the Maoist period and were among those best suited to teach the next generation of learners about Tibetan writing. For Northwest University of the Nationalities, it was (and remains) the inimitable Tshe tan Zhabs drung⁷¹ and A lags Dor zhi.⁷² Indeed, A lags Dor zhi has heavily influenced the modern Tibetan development of a number of fields, including literature, having once hosted a ‘Study Class for Writers in Tibetan Language’ (T: *bod yig rtsom bris mkhan gyi slob sbyong 'dzin grwa*) in 1985 at what was then called the Qinghai Normal School (T: *mtsho sngon dge 'os slob grwa*).⁷³ In the Hainan Nationalities Normal School – which was founded by the 10th Panchen Lama – the monk A khu bshad grub⁷⁴ and the secular author Don grub rgyal both helped to mold young minds.⁷⁵ In the aforementioned Huangnan Prefecture Nationalities Normal School, Rdo rje tshe ring (called Rdoring) passionately encouraged students to learn Tibetan even at the height of the Cultural Revolution,⁷⁶ while students at Qinghai Nationalities University (T: *Mtsho sngon mi rigs slob chen* Ch: *Qinghai minzu daxue*) learned from monks Rdo rgyal sku lo and Shar gdong blo bzang bshad grub rgya mtsho. The shadow of the late Tenth Panchen Lama also looms large

here as he lobbied heavily for Tibetan medium education and established several schools across Amdo (including a quite famous school in his birthplace in Rdo sbis, Xunhua County).

This confluence of circumstances may help explain why this generation had an inherent advantage over the one that came immediately before it. Still, it does not entirely explain why the generation that came *afterwards* had so much trouble attaining similar success. This younger generation benefited from far more consistent educations in a less turbulent political environment than those growing up in the Maoist period. This has certainly been a good thing, but the years of more consistent education also meant that this younger generation spent more time in school than immersed in the everyday life on the Tibetan Plateau.

Several Tibetan cultural producers have emphasized the value of these uneven educations and life experiences in their own artistic development. One comedian, for example, told me in a 2014 conversation, *sgyu rtsal pa gzig byed na 'dod na, myi ngan pa gzig yin dgos ni red*/If you wish to be an artist,⁷⁷ you have to be a bad person.' A few years earlier, Sinophone Tibetan author Alai (b. 1959), meanwhile, tells a similar story when relating his development, which places heavy emphasis both upon a youth spent listening to folktales and an early adulthood spent *liulang* 'drifting' in influencing his development as a writer (from an interview on 1 May 2010). With these narratives, these cultural producers recognize that, while conditions are, in many ways 'better' in the twenty-first century, their diversity of experience and relative lack of early formal education actually helped this generation attain the life experiences and exposure to different viewpoints necessary for the creation of meaningful and sometimes revolutionary art.

Yangdon Dhondup corroborates this view from a different angle, noting that, '[m]ost younger Sinophone poets also have limited experience of Tibetan life in the countryside, as they attended schools in metropolitan areas.'⁷⁸ While she refers to those born just after the Cultural Revolution, the landscape in Amdo has changed significantly enough to extend this discussion to still younger groups who attended boarding schools in county and prefectural seats under more recent bilingual education programs, as well as children of Tibetan intellectuals (many of whom have grown up in urban environments). Although many in this younger group are able to write in Tibetan, they are considered to be more distanced from traditional Tibetan life, or too lacking in life experience, in ways that negatively affect their artistic work.

Perhaps the most important moments for this grouping of generations lie in the social and historical moments of their births, and of their reaching adulthood. Many of the Tibetan cultural producers listed above appear to have been born immediately after the rebellion and famine of 1958 that remains so deeply etched into popular memory as the true date of rupture from the old society. They were, meanwhile, mostly born before the second period of upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. Sandwiched between these two traumatic events is a generation of people who were able to pass the critical childhood mortality moments in a period of relative calm. At the same time, many of them were of school age when schools reopened and were young adults, before careers as farmers or pastoralists had become all-encompassing parts of their lives at the moment economic reforms and government support for the arts resumed in the early 1980s. Combining demographic opportunity and political support for the arts in the 1980s with Amdo's educational opportunities, this generation was well-placed for

success in artistic and cultural realms. Those born earlier might not have had the educational or social opportunities to pursue writing as a career before settling down to more conventional lives, while those born later entered a cultural field already saturated with talented authors and artists from this generation.

A dynamic generation

The unusual combination of varied experiences and novel opportunities undoubtedly shaped this generation and paved the way for its impressively sustained influence, but what are the attitudes that developed from this unique set of factors? And how have they affected Tibetan cultural production in the Post-Mao era? Space does not permit a complete examination of this question, but I will hazard a brief analysis based primarily on my work on Tibetan comedy in Amdo.

Firstly, the individuals mentioned for this generation are renowned both for their experimentations with new styles and genres, but also through their attempts to foster and promote a national identity based in promoting modernization and *mi rigs kyi la rgya*, ‘national pride’.⁷⁹ Particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, cultural producers sought to achieve these goals through an emphasis on secularism and rupture with traditional practices perceived as backward. Comedian Sman bla skyabs, for example, was famous for his scathing satirical critiques of Tibetan tradition and particularly of religious clerics.⁸⁰ His *Careful Village* (T: *sems chung sde ba*), a series of four comedies about a village struggling to cope with a variety of modern problems plaguing the village including a grassland dispute, a rash of thievery, and a villager wanting to take an American bride. Believing that a comedian who visits their village is actually a religious cleric, the villagers ask him to mediate on their behalf. The comedian then exploits their gullibility to help them solve their problems, while also satirizing their technological illiteracy, arranged marriages, lack of education, and willingness to engage in violent disputes. These then come across as issues facing Tibet more generally.

At the same time, it would be folly to suggest that these attitudes were immune to change. In fact, the twenty-first century sees many cultural producers shift away from a concern with perceived social backwardness toward anxiety over cultural loss. Indeed, whether in response to the campaign to ‘Open Up the West’ (Ch: Xi bu da kai fa, T: *nub rgyud gсар spel chen mo*)⁸¹ and the increasing sedentarization of Tibetan pastoralists,⁸² or the Chinese government’s increased focus on the identifying and preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage (see, for example, Blumenfield and Silverman 2013), Tibetan cultural producers began promoting rather than satirizing Tibetan traditions. After scathing critiques of backward country bumpkins in the 1980s and 1990s, some (though not all) 21st century comedies began to satirize educated urbanites who had, in their search for modernity, abandoned their own culture. In these 21st century works, culturally ignorant urbanites are juxtaposed with pastoralists and others in the countryside who are valorized for these very qualities. Sman bla skyabs, again, provides an excellent example. In one popular comedy entitled *Gesar’s Horse Herder* (T: *Ge sar rta rdzi*)⁸³ a Tibetan pastoralist, a foreign researcher, and a local teacher meet on the Tibetan Plateau. Through their interactions, the teacher, though Tibetan, appears ignorant of Tibet’s religious and ecological traditions, with her inability to form several sentences in pure Tibetan especially prominent.

In this way, some of Sman bla skyabs's twenty-first century comedies begin to emphasize the importance of traditional knowledge and valorize pastoralists. This stands in stark contrast to 1980s and 1990 comedies in which comedians satirize country bumpkins. Beyond comedians, moreover, similar trends also appear to happen around that moment in Tibetan poetry and film. Focusing specifically on portrayals of black tents, Françoise Robin notices that the change came around 2004.⁸⁴ That is four years into implementation of the campaign to 'Open Up the West', and a single year after China ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the black tent changes from a symbol of backwardness to a symbol of a disappearing way of life worthy of preservation and (perhaps) sustaining.

Though this brief example obscures the continued presence of more modernist tropes in contemporary Tibetan cultural production, and overlooks the number of traditionalist Tibetan intellectuals who are also very active in the Tibetan cultural field, it is illustrative of this generation's continued and evolving views on cultural engagements.⁸⁵ For example, the very album in which 'Gesar's Horse Herder' appears also features performances in which country bumpkins are the butt of jokes. Contrary to scholarship suggesting that generational attitudes remain relatively constant after reaching adulthood, then, these examples also suggest that generational attitudes can change within a single generation, and, in the Tibetan case, did, particularly among Amdo's post-Mao secular intellectuals.

Conclusion

In this article, I have identified a single generation of Tibetan cultural producers, born between 1959 and 1966 that has heavily influenced the development of the contemporary Tibetan cultural and intellectual field. I have discussed how being born during this period creates a sort of demographic eye of the storm between Mao-era upheavals that allowed many young Tibetans to take advantage of the Post-Mao period's relatively liberal cultural policies in a field bereft of established cultural producers. Judging by their own personal narratives, moreover, they also 'enjoyed' the sort of diverse life experiences that provides material for their continued artistic production. The reputations, once made in the reform era, meanwhile, gave them further opportunities to continue engaging in cultural production. Additionally, I have also suggested that narratives of static generational characteristics overlook the potential for generational attitudes to change over time in response to a variety of conditions. The example of comedians who critiqued tradition in their earlier works only to satirize those without knowledge of traditional culture in the later work was evoked to suggest that this generation changed in some significant respects over the course of a career engaged in cultural production. I conclude with two caveats. Firstly, I do not suggest that these attitudes or artistic characteristics necessarily extend beyond cultural producers to the general public (though they may). Secondly, due to constraints of space and personal experience, however, I have focused primarily on the Northeastern Tibetan region of Amdo, with only brief mention made of Khams and Dbus gtsang, where the specific educational and religious restrictions, natural geographic barriers, and different religious institutions may lead to different conclusions. Future study would benefit from closer examination of the Tibetan region more broadly and in more detailed fashion.

Notes

1. For more on this trip, see Wang “Hu Yaobang’s Visit,” 285–289 .
2. Willock, “A Tibetan Buddhist Polymath,” 24; and Bauer, “Development and the Enclosure Movement,” 53–81.
3. Gayley and Willock, “Introduction,” Article 8.
4. Zenz, “Beyond Assimilation,” 295–315; and Zenz, *Tibetanness’ Under Threat?*
5. Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani, “Introduction,” xiii–xxxviii.
6. Morcom, “Getting Heard in Tibet,” 259–85.
7. Thurston, “‘Careful Village’s Grassland Dispute’,” 156–181; and Thurston, “Laughter on the Grassland.”
8. For this article, I define cultural production broadly to include traditional forms like ritual, myth, festival, and traditional music. Modern cultural production, meanwhile, includes new forms like literature, art, film, theatre, and even museum curation. I do not include teachers or editors, and scholars as cultural producers unless they engage significantly in more creative pursuits.
9. Similarly Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani have observed, ‘a disproportionate number of Tibetophone writers today were born in Qinghai and Gansu Provinces,’ see Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, “Introduction,” xiv.
10. See Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, 290–291. For more on Mannheim’s work on generations, see Pilcher, “Mannheim’s Sociology of Generations,” 481–495; and Kertzer, “Generation as a Sociological Problem,” 125–149.
11. See Ergi and Ralston, “Generation Cohorts and Personal Values,” 210–220, and Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*.
12. Ginsburg “Procreation Stories,” 625.
13. Cheng and Berman, “Globalization and Identity Development,” 105.
14. The fourth generation, for example, was famous for melodrama, and the fifth was characterized by more ethnographic and historical subjects, while the sixth is famous for its urban focus. Sources for this abound, but are largely beyond the purview of this study. For a brief over of these generations, see Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*.
15. For a fuller description of the third generation and their iconoclastic orientations, artistic trends, and the continued role of tradition in their work, see Lama Jabb, *The Inescapable Nation*, 135–182; and Sangyé Gyatso, “Modern Tibetan Literature and the Rise of Writer Coteries,” 278.
16. Pema Bhum, “Heartbeat of a New Generation,” 135–147.
17. Epstein and Peng, “Ritual, Ethnicity, and Generational Identity,” 135.
18. Iselin, “Modern Education and Changing Identity,” Article 17.
19. See Hartley, “Contextually Speaking,” 210–214.
20. In this article, I do not include singers in my definition of cultural producers. The particular phenomenon at issue here is related to fields that require an education, whereas this is not often considered a required skill for Tibetan singers who are frequently illiterate or receive less formal education. The resulting timeline differs from literate cultural producers. For example, the two most famous Rdung len singers are born on either side of the generation identified here and on the outskirts of Amdo, with Dpal mgon (b. 1949, Maqu/Rma chu) born before the generation and Bdud b+he (1968–2016) born shortly after it.
21. Tibetophone refers to literature that is composed in Tibetan, while Sinophone refers to literature composed in Chinese. A small number of authors write in both Chinese and Tibetan. For more on the development of the two literatures see the essays in Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*.
22. Meizhuo is a poet, essayist, and fiction writer who writes exclusively in Chinese. For a brief introduction to Meizhuo and her work, see Yangdon Dhondup, “Translator’s Note,” 144–145; and Su, “Portrayals of Tibetanness.”
23. For more on Ljang bu, see Jangbu, *The Nine-Eyed Agate*; and Yangdon Dhondup, “Writers at the Crossroads,” 225–240.

24. For more on the partnership between Sman bla skyabs and Phag mo bkra shis, see Thurston, “‘Careful Village’s Grassland Dispute,’”
25. For an analysis of one of Zhi bde nyi ma’s comedies, see Thurston, “Encounters with Foreigners.”
26. For more on Zhogs dung, see Hartley, “Inventing Modernity in Amdo,” 1–25; and Shokdung and Akester, *Division of Heaven and Earth*.
27. Weiner “The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier,” 43–44.
28. For a fuller description of the author’s work and early years, see Virtanen, “Tibetan Written Images,” 37–51.
29. Hor gtsang Klu rgyal, *Deng rabs bod kyi rtsom pa po’i lo rgyus*.
30. Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani, “Introduction,” xxv.
31. Makley, *The Violence of Liberation*, 104. Not limited to Tibetans 1958 is also a point of rupture for Qinghai’s surrounding (and mostly Buddhist) ethnic groups like the Tu (Mangghuer), while I have also heard Mongolians in Henan County refer to 1958 in this fashion. For more, see Roche and Wen, “Modernist Iconoclasm,” 85–117.
32. For more on this famine, see Dikotter, *Mao’s Great Famine*.
33. See Weiner, “The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier,” 44.
34. Statistics from Pu, *Gan-Qing Zangchuan fojiao* 3 and 504. See also Kolås and Thowsen, *On the Margins of Tibet*, 46. For specific discussion of religious and political change in the immediate aftermath of 1958, see Weiner, “The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier,” 398–435 and Nietupski, “The Fourth Belmang,” 201–202. For more on 1958 and its aftermath in Tibet, Li, *Tibet in Agony*.
35. For more, see Hayes, *A Change in Worlds*.
36. A campaign that began in about 1967 as part of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution called upon society to smash traditional (meaning old) ideas, culture, morals, and customs.
37. Pu, *Gan-Qing Zangchuan fojiao*, 3 and 503, notes, for example, that in Qinghai and Gansu only two monasteries in each province remained open in some capacity during the Cultural Revolution, from a pre-1958 number of over 1,000.
38. Into the twenty-first century, many Tibetans, particularly from nomadic regions, began attending school between the ages of 8 and 10.
39. Tsering Shayka, “The Development of Modern Literature,” 66.
40. For more, see Schiaffini-Vedani, “The ‘Condor’ Flies over Tibet,” 202–224.
41. Cabezon and Jackson, “Editors’ Introduction,” 15, for example, assert that the élite who were the major source of written literature in any traditional society were, in Tibet, mostly the religious élite, and the works that these literati produced primarily focused on topics that interested monks, namely the Buddhist religion.
42. Goldstein and Kapstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet* provides several essays discussing the difficulties Buddhist clerics experienced during the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent revival of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism during the reform period.
43. Willock, “A Tibetan Buddhist Polymath,” 20.
44. For a discussion of Buddhist revival in Amdo, and for the bla ma Tse tan zhabs drung’s role in it, see Willock, “A Tibetan Buddhist Polymath.” For more on post-Mao Buddhist revival across Tibet, see Goldstein and Kapstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*.
45. Li, “The SAIS Grassroots China Initiative”.
46. Wu, “Tradition and Modernity.”
47. Hartley, “Heterodox Views,” 3–32.
48. For more on *kha shags* in Amdo, see Thurston, “‘Careful Village’s Grassland Dispute,’”; Thurston, “Laughter on the Grassland”; and Thurston, “A Careful Village.”
49. See Lama Jabb, *Oral and Literary Continuities*.
50. Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani, “Introduction,” xxxii.
51. Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani, “Introduction,” xxv.
52. Bourdieu, “Intellectual Field,” 90.
53. Tsering Shayka, “Development of Tibetan Literature,” 67.
54. See Lama Jabb, *Oral and Literary Continuities*.

55. See Mog chung phur kho, *Pha mas bdag la 'di skad gsungs*.
56. Morcom, "Getting Heard in Tibet," 262.
57. Don grub rgyal, "Bod yig slob pa," 43–50.
58. See Phur ba, *Amdo'i kha shags*.
59. Sman bla skyabs, "Sgyu rtsal pa," 70–75.
60. Tuttle, *Tibetan Buddhists in the Making of Modern China*, 135–139 and 193–220.
61. Weiner, "The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier," 145.
62. Bangsbo, for example, notes that tent elementary schools began to be established at least during the Cultural Revolution, and new schools continued to be established into the late 1990s. For more, see Bangsbo, "Schooling for Knowledge," 74.
63. Anonymous, Personal Communication 11 March 2013, the Tibetan is: lo bcu lhag gzig gi rjes red da de mo gzig gi rjes nas slob chung song, a, dang thog sde ba gi nang nas da cig slob grwa gzig dmigs gsal gi yod ni ma red, ras gur phub btang, gur phub btang nas de slob grwar song. De nas cig, lo gcig gnyis gzig gi da yul 'tsho zhang zer go no 'di gi slob grwa nang nga slob chung nga song. De nas rdzong gi slob 'bring. De nas dang Mtsho lho mi rigs dge thon slob grwa chen po de brgyud. De nas thad kar gi lo bcu bdun gi thog bya ba thog ga zhugs, zi ling nga yong. 'di nas da lta gi las gnas 'dir bsdad nas las ka las.
64. Yangdon Dhondup, "Writers at the Crossroads," 230.
65. Bhum, *Six Stars*.
66. For more on Tibetan language in Henan County, see Roche, "The Tibetanization of Henan," 1–22; and Wallenböck, "Marginalisation at China's Multi-Ethnic Frontier," 149–182.
67. Wu, "Tradition and Modernity," 216.
68. Wu, "Tradition and Modernity," 195–98.
69. My thanks to Françoise Robin and Tsering Samdrup for alerting me to the fact that these writers were part of the same class.
70. Bass, "Tibetan Primary Curriculum," 39.
71. See Willock, "A Tibetan Buddhist Polymath."
72. See Wu, "Tradition and Modernity."
73. Jangbu, *The Nine-Eyed Agate*, 178, n. 45.
74. A khu, which literally means 'uncle,' is a term of respect for monks in Amdo.
75. Don grub rgyal taught at the school from 1983 until his passing in 1985.
76. For more on Rdo rje tshes ring's outsized influence on students in Huangnan, see Bhum's "How Dorje Tsering Saved Tibetan." See also Bhum, *Dran tho rdo ring ma*.
77. Here sgyu rtsal pa, artist, refers to someone who engages in a variety of forms of cultural production.
78. Yangdon Dhondup, "Roar of the Snow Lion," 49.
79. For more on *la rgya*, see Hortsang, "Tibetan Literature in the Diaspora," 281–300; Tsering Shakya, "The Development of Tibetan Literature," 61–85; Yü, "Emotions Under Local Nationalism,"; and Thurston, "Laughter on the Grassland."
80. See Thurston, "A Careful Village." It is worth emphasizing that these scholars are not without considerable controversy as well. Hartley, "Inventing Modernity in Amdo,"; and Wu, "Tradition and Modernity," show how these modernists met considerable resistance from audiences.
81. For more on the Great Open the West Campaign, see Goodman, "Qinghai and the Emergence of the West," 379–99; Goodman, "The Campaign to 'Open Up the West,'" 317–34; Fischer, *The Disempowered Development of Tibet*, 43; and Ptackova, "Sedentarisation of Tibetan Pastoralists."
82. For more on sedentarisation, see Ptackova, "Implementation of Resettlement Programmes," 217–34 and Sulek, "Everybody Likes Houses," 235–55.
83. For a more thorough analysis of this performance, see Timothy Thurston, "Laughter on the Grassland."
84. See Robin, "The Increasing Presence."
85. For more on the responses to the traditional and the modern in 1990s Tibetan literature, see Hartley, "Themes of Tradition and Change," 29–44.

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