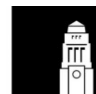

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A Korean, an Australian, a Nomad and a Martial Artist meet on the Tibetan Plateau: Encounters with Foreigners in a Tibetan Comedy from Amdo*

Abstract:

This article examines the complex processes by which a Tibetan comedy reaches State-sponsored stages in Western China's Qinghai Province. Through reflecting on my own participation in a Tibetan sketch comedy for a Tibetan-language, provincial version of the Chunjie wanhui, Chinese CCTV's annual New Year's Gala, I examine the Tibetan sketch comedy as a staged vernacular ethnography of a transnational encounter. Juxtaposing Tibetan nomads with characters of Korean and Australian origin, such staged encounters create a productive friction that provides a space for public meditation on politically and culturally sensitive issues central to the negotiation of Tibetan-ness in the 21st century, including cultural preservation and ecological conservation.

Key words: A mdo Tibet, China's Tibet, Comedy, Encounter, gar chung

On 20 November 2014, I went to a teahouse to meet with Zhi bde nyi ma (who often writes his name more like it is pronounced: Shidé Nyima),[1] a tall, graying comedian/poet/film director from Mang ra County,[2] Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture,[3] Mtsho sngon province,[4] in the Tibetan ethno-linguistic region traditionally referred to as A mdo.[5] Though he studied film directing at the Xi'an Film Academy,[6] he was and is most famous for his acting both on stage and screen. As I walked to the booth at which he was seated, he looked almost comical with his tall frame hunched over a small laptop. After a few minutes of small talk, he switched to business, and asked me to take part in a gar chung—a kind of sketch comedy similar to Chinese xiaopin, and frequently evaluated for its satirical social critique—he was writing for Qinghai Tibetan Television Station's New Year's Gala.[7] This was to be Zhi bde nyi ma's first comedic stage performance in several years (though I had seen him perform an innovative tragic one-act a few months earlier), and my first opportunity to perform in the Tibetan comedic tradition I had been studying for the last few years.

Eight days later, the cast met with our director—Zhi bde nyi ma's daughter and award winning film director, Dud rtsi skyid—in an office in Xining City, the capital of Qinghai Province. We received the script of "When Worshipping at the Snow Mountain lab tse,"[8] read through it once, and were told to go home and memorize it. Rehearsals would begin a week later. The sketch was to have four characters: a "Korean" kha rtsal pa 'beatboxer/vocal mimic' (played by a Tibetan who grew up in Qinghai's capital of Xining, and speaks little Tibetan), an old Tibetan man (performed by Zhi bde nyi ma), a young Tibetan martial artist (played by Sangs rgyas don grub, one of the first Tibetans to train at China's famous Shaolin monastery), and a foreign researcher (played by this author). A Korean, an Australian, an elderly Tibetan nomad, and a Tibetan martial artist meet on the Tibetan Plateau. By chance, these four characters would

meet en route to a lab tse—a mountaintop cairn for worshipping local autochthonous deities.[9] Misunderstandings, fights, hijinks, and verbal art would ensue.

This paper uses my experience performing in "When Worshipping at the Snow Mountain lab tse" to take a "behind the scenes" look at how ethnic minority cultural production reaches official stages and airwaves in Western China's tightly controlled mediascape. I argue that attention to the negotiation of script in performance and the juxtaposition of and encounters between non-Tibetan and Tibetan characters sheds light on the tactics performers use to embed social critique into comedy in a sensitive part of China. I begin by examining the theoretical literature on ethnographies of encounter, positing that gar chung be viewed as "vernacular ethnographies" of encounter, and suggest the importance of stereotypes and character types to these encounters. Next, I discuss the staging of this sketch and the co-creation of the script as a way of understanding the political and artistic demands performers negotiate in order to reach the stage. I finish with an examination of how this comedy's encounters juxtapose different characters in order to promote specific cultural stances important for Tibetans in the 21st century. In the end, however, I posit that, although the comedy was positively evaluated for its humor, its social critique is frequently overlooked.

THEORIZING THE STAGED ENCOUNTER

Scholars have long recognized that members of the academy are not the only ones who engage in ethnography. In western Apache communities, for example, jokes may sometimes serve as natively produced ethnographies that highlight behaviors typical to and interactions with the white man (Basso 1979, 35-76), and in the northern Irish Aghyaran region, "oral narrative serves as a community study initiated by locals" (Cashman 2008, 8) in which people from the

community tell stories about themselves to themselves. At the same time, local narratives of the encounter are not constrained by the same reporting standards as the anthropologist or folklorist. Instead, as Ian Brodie notices in advancing the concept of “vernacular ethnography” in his groundbreaking study of stand-up comedy, “verisimilitude” is more important in that the “account is expressly subjective but implies a recognizable truthfulness therein” (Brodie 2014, 142-143). The comedian is judged relevant by the audience in part by the accuracy of the worldview presented: it needs to be credible. I suggest that “vernacular ethnography,” with its corresponding requirements of “verisimilitude” might similarly be applied to Tibetan sketch comedies, as they comment on society through displaying the encounters between characters of different backgrounds.

Faier and Rofel (2014, 364) define the term “encounter” as, "engagements across difference: a chance meeting, a sensory exchange, an extended confrontation, a passionate tryst." Faier further suggests that these sorts of encounters “include interpersonal encounters, but also involve historical interactions that extend beyond single individuals or cultural groups” (Faier 2009, 1). Ethnographies of encounter examine the generative friction that arises from these sorts of encounters, particularly transnational encounters. Such encounters rarely (if ever) feature actors who are socio-political equals. As a result, friction is an apt metaphor, because it "reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (Tsing 2005, 5). Indeed, critical examination of locally produced ethnographies of encounter can provide significant insight into the sites of culture making in an increasingly globalized world.

And yet, the disconnect between staged, “vernacular ethnographies” of encounter and Faier and Rofel's ethnography of encounter rests not least upon the principle of verisimilitude

suggested above. Verisimilitude suggests a socially produced (and socially productive) intertextual relationship between the staged account and the expectations of the audience. The encounters described in this article, and in scripted and staged encounters more generally, are not chance meetings, or naturally occurring interactions. Instead they are parodies—defined as the "ludic or inversive transformation of a prior text or genre" (Bauman 2004, 3)—of the putative encounter. Because "the anticipated conditions of reception are part of the conditions of production" (Bauman 1977, 649), each parodic line is carefully scripted and scrutinized for its entertainment value, political acceptability, and message before being included in the performance. Staged encounters are, then, at best, a simulacrum of the quotidian international grassland encounter (if such a thing really exists).

As simulacrum, the encounter portrayed in comedy acquires extra valences through deploying socially recognizable character types, which can (ideally) index entire identities for audiences. Herzfeld (2005, 27) recognizes that "all social performance reifies people in culturally coded roles or identities." This reification means that characters in staged encounters become—as Barthes (1970, 178-181) has argued for characters more broadly—linguistic constructs, acting as agents of the discourse of which they are a part.[10]

Placed on stage, stereotyped characters, encountering each other in socially recognizable (and socially generative) situations provide Tibetan comedians and artists with the tools to embed important cultural critique. These critiques are approved by representatives of the Chinese state, but are intended primarily directed inwards towards other Tibetans. To understand the comedic critique, then, it is important to understand how the concept of international encounters, and the stereotyped character fits within Tibetans' existing cultural frameworks.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF A TIBETAN KIND

The generative nature of the encounter has also been noticed for scholars of China and Tibet. For Tibetans in China, "moments of everyday interaction are the foundation of the ongoing construction of an alternative Tibetan identity" (Makley 1998, 45). 20-minute comedic performances, however, are ill-suited to the development of characters with psychological depth. Instead, the plot develops quickly with characters that are easily placed into socially recognizable cultural categories. These categories may include phyi rgyal pa '(Caucasian) foreigner,'[11] *'brog* pa 'nomad,' rong ba 'farmer,' dpon po 'leader,' pho gsar 'modern Tibetan (man),' and more. It may be worth pointing out that, across a corpus of nearly 100 comedies, the presence of foreign characters is a rarity, I have never seen a Han Chinese character included, and only very rarely have comedies discussed a member of another Chinese ethnic minority group.

On stage, the encounters of stereotyped characters become important ways for artists to articulate social critiques. Though such encounters do not require interactions between foreign characters and Tibetans for such social critique, foreigners do make for particularly illustrative and memorable cases, and these comedies linger in the social memory longer than others. Foreigners, and particularly Caucasian foreigners, may provide both models of modern behavior (couched in the greater cultural capital often afforded Western foreigners) and incompetent comic fodder for audiences. Indeed, Makley (2007, 4) has observed that Western foreigners serve as both "the models of powerful and pleasurable consumption to both cultivate and emulate," and culturally incompetent interlopers. Schein has further noted how foreigners can also sometimes be viewed as "joint standard-bearers of a kind of modernizing normativity" along with the Chinese state (Schein 1998, 388n10). All of these definitions contrast markedly with views many Tibetans hold of Tibetan pastoralists—who occupy an ambivalent social space in

which they are both lionized as essence of Tibetan culture and denigrated as backwards—in relation to modernity.[12]

Similar to the importance of character types in folk narratives from other cultures (described above), Huber has recognized that for Tibetan imaginations of India, Tibetan constructs of these nationalities are more important then direct experience (see Huber 2008). One might argue that this is equally true of the comedies discussed below, where an audience member's personal experience of interactions with foreigners is less important than broader Tibetan imaginings of the behavior, interests, and backgrounds of the foreigners often seen on the Tibetan Plateau (partly constructed intertextually through other comedies).

In socially motivated and state-sponsored satire, moreover, the utility of these stereotypes relies on the audience's recognition of the unequal social positions of all the characters involved. In staged comedic performance, then, foreign characters are deployed for their cultural backgrounds and may embody the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, 85) associated with their foreignness. The perceived wealth, education, and access to modern technologies associated with foreigners—grounded in occasional Tibetan interactions with foreign tourists and researchers—has also been noticed for Westerners in the PRC more generally, with Mao suggesting that this may "align with an admiration of advanced science and technology of the Western countries" (Mao 2015, 2136). The stereotyped characters and their cultural capital, however, all operate in the background, allowing the encounters to take precedence. This, in turn, authorizes (Bauman 2004, 150, cf. Kuipers 2013) conversations that might otherwise be either too politically sensitive to air on state stages, or that might go unstated in conversation between Tibetans.

The combination of cultural capital and cultural distance is key to Tibetan performers, who can deploy the foreigners' presence to create a rupture to daily routines that allows—and

indeed requires—explicit discussion of issues that might otherwise be assumed. This, in turn, further drives home the performance's didactic goals. At the same time, this prestige associated with the foreign helps to insulate performers and authors from state opprobrium. Such insulation is necessary, because "the fear of state violence among Tibetans in the PRC leads to linguistic and metalinguistic strategies of protection or insulation" (Makley 1998, 44). "When Worshipping at the Snow Mountain Lab tse" provides a way to recognize how Tibetan sketch comedies use these encounters to encourage Tibetan cultural preservation and ecological conservation in Western China.

When Worshipping at the Snow Mountain lab tse

As When Worshipping at the Snow Mountain Lab tse begins, an elderly man enters stage left carrying a large wooden arrow and a bag of juniper leaves, clearly on his way to a midsummer community ritual at the village's mountaintop shrine. The automobile sounds played through speakers suggests that this is no longer a rural area. The image on the jumbotron screen that serves as backdrop shows a village of cement houses of the sort associated with housing the government provides to resettled pastoralists. As the car sounds fade, he hears birdsongs. Not since he moved into the new government-built village—an image of which is displayed on a screen behind him—has he heard such beautiful sounds. Five long years.[13]

The old man's reminiscences are interrupted when he spies a young man grasping a small, black field recorder. Afraid that this young man will scare the birds away, the elder tells him to stop, not realizing that the young man is the one making the bird sounds. The two cannot communicate well, and it turns out that the young man is "Korean" and has come to Tibet to research birdsongs. The old man thinks he is speaking of eating bird meat and becomes

combative.[14] The elderly man attacks the researcher, but trips, and is too old to fight the young Korean. He then calls out to his martial artist "grandson" who literally flips onto the stage. Mistaking the phonetically similar Tibetan terms for kidnapper (*zha yi'i* rkun, literally 'thief of children') and bird thief (*byi'u rkun*)—which, when spoken quickly both sound like /shixkun/—attacks the Korean. Fortunately, the elder stops him before too much damage is done.

As the miscommunications between the Korean and the local pair are gradually clarified, and the group seems set to go up the mountain together, they are again waylaid, this time by a Caucasian foreigner who walks onto the stage reciting Tibetan poet Don grub rgyal's famous free-verse poem, 'The Waterfall of Youth."[15] He loses his place midway through, and then notices the other three listening nearby. They chat. The Westerner tells them that he is Tom, from Australia, and has come to research Tibetan art and culture. The elder wonders at the number of researchers on the grasslands these days, and suggests that the foreigner will capitalize on his knowledge to make money back in his homeland. "Tom," however, protests that he is interested only in researching and preserving Tibetan language and culture.

Learning that the group is heading to the community's mountaintop shrine, Tom asks to join the village at their lab tse, stating that he "likes" lab tse. Although the elder is reticent, thinking it might not be appropriate for an outsider to visit the shrine, the Australian attempts to justify his attendance by performing part of a bsang mchod—a prayer chanted when making fumigation offerings to local deities. In the end, the elder says that he must ask the village, as he cannot decide whether or not the foreigners may join. Addressing the audience, who have been drafted into the performance as "villagers," he asks if the foreigners should be allowed to join them at the lab tse. Amidst audience applause and choruses of "yes!" and "no!" a plant in the audience stands up and suggests that they prove themselves by giving a performance. The

Australian, “Tom” sings while the Korean beatboxes, and the martial artist shows off his skills. The village having been satisfied, the group leaves the stage in the direction of the lab tse (to the audience’s left) while “Tom” asks the elder why the lab tse is so far away. The elder says that the story is a long one, and that he will tell them along the way.

Preparation and Performance

On 11 December, after two days reading the script in Zhi bde nyi ma’s office at the Xining branch of the Beijing Land of Snows Media Company,[16] we moved to a hotel across the street from the television station. Almost all participants in the Losar show stayed in the hotel and ate their meals in the hotel’s spacious banquet hall. We focused initially on the script, then, on our second day at the hotel we began practicing movement. From morning until evening every line and movement was dissected as we rehearsed on a small stage in the hotel’s banquet hall with hotel workers looking on during their breaks. As the performance drew near, famous singers began appearing, and dancers from local dance troupes began walking in as well. Some of the singers had flown in from Beijing or Shanghai, others from Sichuan, Yunnan, the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and other parts of Qinghai.

Then on 13 December, we were given our first opportunity to practice on the television station’s stage. Finding that space to be much larger than the original rehearsal space, much of that rehearsal was spent determining appropriate stage orientation. That same evening we performed a dry run in front of the directors. Though far from perfect, the directors were optimistic that with more practice it would be ready for performance on the stage, and officially decided to include it in the show.

Finally, on 14 and 15 December 2016, we were set to perform. Both evenings Tibetans poured into the television station, generally dressed in traditional attire. They presented tickets at the door, went through metal detectors, and piled into their assigned seats. Cameras recorded the audience applauding before the beginning, and then the Variety show began with a host of dancers, a group of children dressed as sheep, other dancers in "traditional" Tibetan costume, and the night's emcees (members of the television station's main newsreading team accompanied by representatives from other Tibetan television stations) entering the stage singing.

The emcees introduced each act: singers and dancers from across the greater Tibetan region performed for the primarily A mdo Tibetan audience. Finally, a little over an hour into the 2.5 hour event, two of the emcees—a man and a woman—stand before the audience saying:

> A: Dear Guests, say, in the annual New Year's show, what's the performance that you most enjoy and want to see?
> B; Yes, everyone tell us, what's the performance that you most enjoy and want to see? [audience shouts]
> A: Oh right, right. I think most of them said dialogues and sketch comedies. Everyone was talking so I didn't really hear.
> B: Yes. And so, all of you friends sitting here, put your hands together and with welcoming applause, in accordance with everyone's wishes, invite a famous artist [Tibetan: sgyu rtsal pa] to the stage!
> A: Hold on! Saying an introduction like that, you don't really have someone to invite to do you? Tell us his name! Who is it?
> B: Hey, you're asking me to say his name, but I don't know either. However, they say that an artist is coming to tonight's show.
> A: Well, friends, although we still don't know who this artist is who's coming to tonight's show, with high spirits, how about you all clap your hands, and welcome this artist to the stage! [applause]

The emcees' introduction specifically notes "a" performer (using the Tibetan zhig), and the single performer to whom the emcees refer can only be Zhi bde nyi ma. It is his sketch, and the performance hinges upon him. Zhi bde nyi ma is the author, and he is the star. The roar that greeted Zhi bde nyi ma's entry onto the stage speaks to his immense popularity, and also to the popularity of the gar chung performance genre. While audiences are relatively subdued during

musical and dancing performance, which tend to change little from year to year, the crowd becomes noticeably more animated during the comedy. Interestingly, gar chung scripts must be approved by censors and television station leadership, and many performers told me that there was no room for spontaneity in performance, there remained significant room for micro-level negotiation after the approval of the script. As discussed in greater detail below, we negotiated some aspects of the script as a group, including the voicing of individual lines, stage movements, and how to maximize the humor of certain sections.

CO-CREATING THE SCRIPT

Beyond memorizing the script in preparation for stage performance, those seeking access to China's official stages, and the privileged airwaves on which staged performances are broadcast must also navigate a host of interested parties and concerns.[17] These include, but are not necessarily limited to, the state's censorship apparatus and audience expectations of both humor and social critique. To gain the approval of both groups, scripts undergo an intricate review process. Informally, the author may seek feedback from other actors and comedians, and peers, before submitting the script officially for leaders, and censors.[18] Primary concerns in this informal review may include the audience's enjoyment and any potential political complications that might arise from the performance. In this section, I discuss some of the ways in which different social actors helped to create the script and the performance and the ways in which the performance itself differed from the script. I point specifically to three examples in which changes were made between scripting and performance: the written script's more literary form and the performance's more natural oral form; the Western foreigner's name and national background; and a line that appears to have been changed in anticipation of possible political

concerns. All three of these changes happened away from the public eye, but effected how the audience received and understood the performances.

Although the scripts, after receiving official approval, are meant to be followed exactly, performers may still alter the lines in performance. This is in part because of the considerable distance between yig skad 'literary Tibetan' and kha skad 'colloquial Tibetan.'[19] The scripts themselves tend to be written in a combination of literary and colloquial Tibetan, while the performances must be purely colloquial (with the exception of any quotations of literary or religious work). Actors, then, are responsible for taking the script's semi-literary language and voicing it in a purely colloquial fashion. Such minor variation is permissible so long as the ideas expressed do not change. Almost every line of the performance exhibits this sort of relatively innocuous change as the performers turn the scripts into living speech. One example would be the elder's initial monologue. In the script, Zhi bde nyi ma wrote:

> *A ya mtshan, sde gsar 'di ru* **spar ba** *lo lnga 'gor song, de'i ring* **la** lnga gi ring la bya skad ma dgos khyi skad **yag pa zhig kyang** go **rgyu med**/ de ring da bya skad snyan mo **zhig** grags dang thal
>
> Amazing! Five years have passed since I moved to the new village, and during that time there hasn't been the bark of a dog let alone birdsong. Today a melodious bird is singing.

Compare this with the version he actually spoke in performance:

> A ya mtshan **skya gang** gi sde gsar ra **yong ngas** *lo lnga 'gor song, lo lnga gi ring* **nga** bya skad **snyan mo gzig** ma dgos, khyi skad **yag ba gzig ra** go **ma myong.** A ya! De ring da bya skad snyan mo **gzig** grags dang thal

Although Zhi bde nyi ma has written parts of the script in something resembling the A mdo dialect of Tibetan (his use of grags dang thal at the end of both phrases is a literary rendering of colloquial A mdo), the actual performance differs significantly from the hybridized colloquial and written Tibetan of the script. In performance, the la particle becomes nga in accordance with

A mdo Tibetan's preference for homophony with the end of the previous syllable ring. Zhig becomes gzig, and kyang becomes ra. These changes are standard variations between literary Tibetan and the A mdo dialect. Such changes, though minor, suggest that Tibetan sketch comedy performances, like many other performance forms in the People's Republic of China, are best considered to be what the late folklorist John Miles Foley called "voiced texts," meaning that they "aim solely at oral performance and are by definition incomplete without that performance" (Foley 2002, 43; Shepherd 2011, 44). The Tibetan sketch, in its combination of literary and colloquial Tibetan, was incomplete without its performance on stage.

More substantive changes also entered the text between script and performance. When we resumed reading the script on 7 December 2014, we made several small changes to it. Firstly, my character's name changed from "Tim" to "Tom." "Tim," I was told, is not a funny name, meaning that it lacked a Tibetan pun to entertain the audience. Remembering a humorous mistake that had been made with my name one evening several years previously, I suggested "Tom" to deploy the punning potential of khrom (pronounced /Trom/, with an unvoiced, aspirated Tr), and everyone agreed. This played on the misunderstanding of the foreign name for a ram that does not get neutered so that it can be used for breeding purposes.

The Westerner's nationality was also scrutinized. The New Year is a time to rejoice in auspicious new beginnings, and to create that auspiciousness through both word and deed. Audience expectations of auspiciousness had to also be taken into account as we discussed the script. The script originally wrote my character's nationality as American, using the pun *a ma'i* ro sgam, 'mother's coffin.'[20] Speaking of coffins on the New Year, however, was considered inauspicious and therefore unacceptable. Several country names were then discussed for their punning potential, but Zhi bde nyi ma ultimately chose Australia, because its pronunciation

allowed the elder to misunderstand the Westerner as saying *'od zer 'phrod sa* 'the place where light shines,' and postulate that the foreigner might be from heaven. This was considered a far more auspicious option, and allowed the elder to ask "are you from heaven?" (lha yul nas yin na min na), which was also not included in the original script but was well-received by audiences.

If the Western character's name was selected with the audience's entertainment in mind, his country of origin suggests that performers must also anticipate the audience's cultural concerns as well. In particular, comedians share an uneasy space with economies of fortune, the intertwined phenomenological forces present under the surface of everyday action.[21] The New Year is a time for creating and maintaining auspicious circumstances in both deed and word, and although I have elsewhere suggested that the performance frame can undermine some of the associations between speech and economies of fortune (see Thurston 2015, 196-197), the demands of the New Year festival, in this case, trumped the performance frame.

The alterations to the script described thus far have both been relatively minor. The first was to meet the demands of voicing the script, the second to meet audience expectations of humor (required for a performance in this genre) and auspiciousness (required of the performance's context). Some changes, however, carry greater political significance. In the original script, which seems to have initially been approved, the foreign researcher asks the elderly Tibetan man where he is from. Nga tsho bod gyi yin 'We are from Tibet,' the old man responds. In China's Tibet, this response is redolent with cultural and political meaning, and has important scalar implications.[22] By employing the term bod, the performance would link the elder to a single national or pan-ethnic rather than local, regional, or Chinese national identity.

But the notion that all Tibetans in the PRC would self-identify as being from bod 'Tibet,' and use this term for its scalar implications is quite a new phenomenon. Indeed, until recently,

bod was a term used only for Tibetans from the Central Tibetan regions of Dbus and Gtsang (roughly akin to modern-day Lhasa and Gzhis ka rtse and their environs). Tuttle notes that, “Some young PRC Tibetans today are probably the first in history to have embraced the previously regional-specific terms Böpa [bod pa] or Bömi [bod mi] as a self-descriptive for Tibetans from all over the Tibetan Plateau, including those from eastern Tibetan regions (Amdo and Kham)" (Tuttle 2010, 222).[23] Despite being a direct result of Chinese state policies that have identified all Tibetans with this single term, the Chinese state is also quite wary of the potential dangers associated with such mass-identification in the context of rising Tibetan ethnic nationalism since a series of protests swept through Tibetan regions in 2008.

I read the change from Tibet to the new village as an intentional one that has significant political implications. Although the village’s newness still relates the location obliquely to modern Chinese sedentarization policies on the Tibetan Plateau, it lacks the more overt political overtones of the name “Tibet” and fails to explicitly link the audience to a larger, Tibetan identity (and imagined community). Instead, “the new village” carries the innocuous appearance of being a generic local term while also suggesting to Tibetan audiences that the elder could be from any rural—and most likely pastoral— Tibetan community resettled as part of the Chinese government’s Open Up the West’ campaign,[24] with its accompanying policies ostensibly aimed at protecting the grassland.

Performers, then, navigate a variety of political, artistic, and phenomenological considerations in bringing their scripts to life on stage. These include audience expectations of the event in which the sketch is to be performed and its role in the creation of auspicious circumstances, audience entertainment, and the need to please a variety of different political actors including the television station leadership. Additionally, the performances do not

necessarily reflect the sole input of the author (though they are attributed solely to the author and the author's reputation is evaluated relative to these performances), but rather the performance is based on the input of several different people including other performers, state actors, and friends. The final product broadcast on the variety show, meanwhile, is even more complex, being a combination of three recorded performances, edited together by the television station.

And yet, despite such a complicated system for managing content, performers still embed important cultural messages—akin to what Scott (1990) might call hidden transcripts—in their performances. They accomplish this primarily through the clever juxtaposition of characters of different social backgrounds, the humorous encounters that ensue from them, and the social backgrounds these characters index. The elderly Tibetan's interactions with the two foreigners, in particular, merit further attention in this regard.

Ecological Migration and the Korean

In his initial interaction with the Korean researcher, Zhi bde nyi ma, as the old man, discusses his amazement that he can hear the mellifluous songs of birds. It has been five years, he says, since he has moved to the government's resettlement village and in that time he has not heard the song of a single bird. He is enjoying these songs when he seas the "Korean." Later, when the Korean asks where he can find these elusive birds, the elder uses a series of parallel phrases (a common rhetorical choice for eloquent speakers in A mdo) saying *'phur song ni red, sad btang ni red, zas* btang ni red, tshar son g ni red 'They flew away, they were killed, they were eaten, and they are finished.' When juxtaposed with his statements on the new village, and the image of the new style village displayed in the background, this eloquent line articulates a pointed critique about

the intense environmental degradation that has accompanied the fast pace of development in Tibetan areas of China.

This comes up again, and even more explicitly, when the "Korean" asks whether the lab tse is nearby, and the elder says: "It used to be close, but now it's far away."[25] The physical distance from the lab tse also suggests a spiritual and cultural distance from the cultural anchors that had until recently saved it from being swept away by the seeming onslaught of China's first socialist and then market-oriented modernity. The Korean character's presence provides the opportunity to openly discuss the environmental and social change facing Tibetan populations in the 21st century through oblique discussion of the very different lives of those who have moved to the resettlement villages. These government-built houses are officially part of the Chinese government's attempts to preserve the integrity of the grassland. Despite a wealth of scientific and academic literature questioning the benefit of ecological migration (Dbang 'dus sgrol ma, et al 2012), the government continues to encourage pastoralists to move into fixed dwellings, and any overt criticism of the negative social changes these policies may have brought can be a dangerous endeavor. This discourse is safely framed in conversation with a Korean—a foreign researcher. Blame is never directly placed, and any time anyone asks why the village is so far away from the mountain, the elder only says " it's a long story. I'll tell you on the way." Through framing potential criticisms in the context of a dialogue between the elderly herder and a Korean, Zhi bde nyi ma undermines any potentially subversive readings in which Tibetans are seen to lack appropriate appreciation for the "gift of development" (Yeh 2013, 17) bestowed upon Tibetans by the Chinese state.

Audiences immediately recognize these conversations as taking place within the large socio-historical context of a massive, government-led effort to move Tibetan pastoralists into

fixed dwellings in the name of ecological conservation. These "ecological migrants"[26] are undergoing massive lifestyle changes as they adjust to fixed dwellings in peri-urban and urban environments. It seems, then, that the elderly man's encounter with the foreigner is mobilized to "authorize" discussions that might, in other circumstances, be seen as critical of the Chinese government's development policies. This is also true for culture, as the encounter with Tom, the Australian, makes clear.

Cultural Preservation and the Australian

The (Caucasian) foreign researcher refocuses the performance away from the environment and towards issues of cultural preservation and change. The Australian is heard reciting Don grub rgyal's iconic free-verse poem 'The Waterfall of Youth," before even setting foot on stage. When he finally appears, he continues reciting the poem until losing his spot. This choice is significant for its strong metonymic resonances. First published in 1983, the Waterfall of Youth "fervently appealed to Tibetans to embrace modernism as a means of regenerating their culture and national pride" (Shakya 2000, 36). Over the last three decades, the poem has become perhaps the most easily and instantly recognizable pieces of modern Tibetan literature, and is required memorization for almost every Tibetan student. The poem is recited at cultural events, analyzed by both Western and Tibetan scholars[27] and influenced many young poets to write free verse poetry instead of traditional metered verse (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008, xxiii-xxiv). In reciting the poem loudly as he traverses the grassland, the foreigner is marked, even before entering the stage, as intellectual, and possessing a cultural capital that combines an obvious (though somewhat obtuse) knowledge of Tibetan culture with the socio-economic status of the foreigner in general.

Immediately the Australian begins to speak of researching art and traditional culture, and of the need for cultural preservation. But the elderly Tibetan is far from convinced. He insinuates that the foreigner talks of preservation, but will actually seek to make a profit from his work. The foreigner, however, rejoins: "I really wish to research and preserve the value of history and culture."[28] Up to this point, the foreigner seems to be advocating cultural preservation with the assumption that the importance of this preservation must be clearly articulated to the audience. This reaches its climax when the western foreigner asks the elder to take him to the lab tse and repeatedly emphasizes the importance and value of lab tse worship as a cultural phenomenon. The elder suggests that the gzhi bdag—the deity propitiated by the lab tse—might not be pleased by the presence of a foreigner. The Australia rallies immediately. This is not a problem, the Australian feels, because he can perform a bsang mchod, a prayer chanted when making fumigation offerings to local deities.

Without hesitation, the foreigner then begins to perform such a 'fumigation offering speech,'[29] before being stopped mid-speech by the elder who turns to the audience and says: "Look! He has researched where to raise his voice, and where to fall, but in the end, he doesn't know that you mustn't call the deity with empty words."[30] The foreign character, despite his knowledge of the genre and obvious linguistic competence, is clearly unaware of the importance of context to this religious speech: he does not know that a bsang mchod cannot be performed without simultaneously offering bsang. Indeed, bsang mchod are highly contextually rigorous, only performed in the context of actually making fumigation offerings (Thurston 2012, 55).

In a world where Tibetans increasingly live in cities or periurban housing settlements and are (it is generally assumed) being seduced by the allure of modern technologies, the Australian's interest in the lab tse and its renewal—the lab tse referring metonymically[31] to the entirety of

Tibetan folk, and particularly folk religious culture—emphasizes and valorizes the importance of preserving not only this ritual and other traditional practices like it, but of all traditional Tibetan culture. Nevertheless, this high-point also becomes the very point at which the foreigner's capital is undermined. The recitation of Don grub rgyal's "Waterfall of Youth" and his desire to research Tibetan painting traditions suggests a high degree of cultural knowledge to accompany the foreigner's presumed economic and social capital, and therefore allows him to speak authoritatively on the importance of Tibetan cultural preservation.

This second recitation, however, underscores just how limited the foreigner's cultural knowledge is. He speaks of Tibetan culture's importance, but in performing the bsang mchod without making the contextually necessary fumigation offerings, he provides the elder with an opportunity to explicitly remark upon the foreigner's incomplete cultural competence, revealing him to be a less-ideal cultural conservator. The foreigner can tell Tibetan audiences about the importance of cultural preservation and valorize this discourse, the performance seems to say, but rather than wait for an outsider to provide the impetus, this performance would encourage Tibetans to take ownership of preserving their own cultural heritage.

Through strategically deploying the foreigner's cultural capital and voice, while simultaneously undermining the foreigner and explicitly remarking upon his cultural distance from Tibetan audiences, Zhi bde nyi ma is able to safely discuss the sometimes sensitive issue of preserving Tibet's cultural heritage, while also placing the burden of cultural preservation on Tibetans. This issue is increasingly important to Tibetans in China. And yet, in a cultural world in which the Chinese government and Communist Party takes increasing responsibility as the conservators of the entire Chinese nation's varied cultural heritages,[32] encouraging Tibetans to

be proactive in preserving their own cultures can also be construed as a decidedly political turn on this humorous form.

EPILOGUE

"When Worshipping at the Snow Mountain Lab tse" aired on Qinghai Tibetan Television Station on the eve of the 2015 lunar New Year. Across the Tibetan Plateau, and particularly in A mdo, families huddled around their televisions to watch the television station welcome the year of the female wood sheep.[33] Throughout the evening, my phone lit up with messages from friends reacting to the performance. In the ensuing months, I would get stopped for pictures in shops or walking down the street, and friends would joke about elders marveling at my Tibetan. Some (including one other Tibetan comedian) suggested that the performance lacked sufficiently penetrating critique, but the majority of responses were friendly and positive. Beyond the occasional comment to the effect that "if a foreigner can speak our language so well, why can't our children?" my friends only rarely spoke of how the performance encouraged Tibetans to think about linguistic and cultural preservation. Perhaps it is the polysemy inherent in satire, or the density of not just one but two transnational cultural encounters in a single performance (unprecedented in other Tibetan comedy), but the performance's message seems to have largely been lost on the average Tibetan viewer.

Indeed, in "When Worshipping at the Snow Mountain lab tse" the encounter between foreigners and Tibetans serves several purposes. From one perspective, the careful framing of the script and the nature of the encounter reveals issues perceived to be at the center of appropriate Tibetan engagement with modernity, specifically the preservation of Tibetan traditions (broadly and explicitly construed to include everything from religious painting to folk ritual, though

carefully avoiding any overtly Buddhist terminology) and ecological conservation. To the government, its carefully crafted dialogues send messages of modernity to a group discursively labeled as backwards. To many viewers it also brings mirth to the sometimes-staid offerings of the carefully curated New Year's variety show.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have suggested that staged, vernacular ethnographies of encounter deploy the cultural capital of stereotyped characters to articulate cultural critique. I first described the process by which a Tibetan sketch comedy reaches Western China's state-sponsored stages and airwaves. Though frequently considered to be faithful to the scripts, I have shown how performers may seek input from a variety of sources to co-create the script in anticipation of audience and censorship responses. Then, by focusing on a sketch comedy performance in which Tibetans and foreigners meet on the grassland in Western China, I have argued that Tibetan encounters with foreigners, in satirical comedic performance, may be culturally productive. In this case, they comment on cultural change and encourage Tibetans to actively engage in preserving their own traditions. Placing these critiques in the mouths of foreign characters, meanwhile, creates a safe public space for openly discussing issues of intense concern to Tibetan public intellectuals in 21st century China without associating these discourses with the Chinese State. This is true not only for Tibetan comedies featuring encounters with foreigners. Instead, it holds true for Tibetan comedy more generally. Further attention to the staged encounter, and to the comedic performance as a vernacular ethnography of this staged encounte, meanwhile, can lend new analytic perspective to the analysis of the interactional processes beneath humorous expressive culture.

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[1] I use the Extended Wylie Transliteration System to render all Tibetan terms, and Pinyin for Chinese terms. For terms having currency in both Chinese and Tibetan, I provide the Wylie first,

Pinyin and Chinese characters are then embedded in a note, for example: Zhi bde nyi ma, Ch: Xi de ni ma, 西德尼玛.

[2] Ch: Guinan 贵南

[3] Ch: Hainan 海南

[4] Ch: Qinghai 青海

[5] A mdo, along with Khams and Dbus gtsang is one of Tibet's three emic ethnolinguistic regions of Tibet. A mdo is comprised of Tibetan areas of Western China's Qinghai Province (with the exception of Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province's Kan lho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and northern Sichuan Province's Rnga ba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture Autonomous Prefecture and Gser rta (Ch: Seda) County, Dkar mdzes (Ch: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. For basic definitions of A mdo, see Huber 2002, xi-xxiii; and Samuel 2013, 5-22.

[6] Ch: Xi'an dianying xueyuan 西安电影学院

[7] For more on Chinese xiaopin 小品, see Du 1998: 382-99; Gao and Pugsley 2008, 451-76; and Mu 2004, 3-34. For more on the origins and development of gar chung, see Thurston 2015, 220-223 and Thurston 2013, 157-8.

[8]Gangs dkar por lab tse bstod dus, Ch: xianghui zai shenshan shang (Ch: 相会在神山上). The performance analyzed in this article is freely available online at: http://www.qhtb.cn/yinyue/mv/2015-02-17/16824.html

[9] Lab tse are generally "renewed" in the summer, as part of the worship of protective deities, often called "mountain deities" (T: gzhi bdag).

[10] In this way, Tibetan sketches are similar to such other folkloric genres as legend (Briggs 1988, 233-288) and anecdote (Mullen 1978, 113-129) for which "character is foremost because thematic concerns and plot dominates over character development" (Cashman 2008, 162).

[11] Kleisath (2012, 180) points out that the category of phyi rgyal pa and phyi gling ba, both literally meaning "foreigner," "are used in much the same way that the term 'Western' is used in English to refer tacitly to white people" and thus to specifically European foreigners.

[12] For a discussion on the ambivalent place of nomads in the eyes of Tibetan intellectuals, see Upton 1996, 99.

[13] For more on the creation of new fixed dwelling settlement villages for Tibetan nomads, see Ptackova 2012: 217-234 and 2013: 67-77; and Robin 2009: 56-64. It is interesting to recognize that Sulek (2012: 235-55) notes that some informants have mentioned how birds have come back after they have moved into these resettlement homes. The veracity of the performance's claims are, however, less important than their discursive goals relating the birds to issues of the environment.

[14] Tibetans rarely eat birds, and the elder is simply aghast that this young man would.

[15] *Lang tsho'i rbab chu*. For a translation, see Dhondup Gyal and Tsering Shakya 2000, 9-13.

[16] Beijing ka wa jian yingshi gongsi, 北京卡哇尖影视公司

[17] See Morcom 2008 for a similar examination of the complex politics singers must navigate to get heard in Tibet.

[18] If this makes the censorship apparatus seem a frustratingly monolithic straw man, this is, I believe, by design. None of the performers with whom I spoke identified precisely who would decide on a script's acceptability, although television station leadership was generally considered to be part of the equation.

[19] For more on the interplay of colloquial and literary language in modern Tibetan cultural production, see Green 2012, 5-49; and Lama Jabb 2011, 23-4. Both of these sources, however, deal less with the colloquial pronunciation of forms written in a more literary Tibetan.
[20] Using a foreigner character's name and nationality for humorous effect is not new to Tibetan comedy. Most Tibetans in A mdo are familiar with Sman bla skyabs's comedy in which he describes and shares the stage with a foreigner. These comedies also deploy the punning potential of the different languages, names, and countries, as with the character "Mr. Jersey" (whose name rhymes with rgyu rdzas 'stuff'), or when a Tibetan misunderstands a foreigner's pronunciation of the word lo rgyus 'history' as Rdo rje, a personal name (see Thurston 2015, 224-64).
[21] For more on the notion of "economies of fortune" on the Tibetan Plateau, see Da Col 2007, 215-35; Thurston 2012, 51-4; and Sam tsho skyid and Roche 2011, 235-84.
[22] For more on sociolinguist scales, see Blommaert 2007, 1-19.
[23] I would, however, encourage a softer take on this. Tibetan oral and literary traditions both use the term *bod* to refer to people from the greater Tibetan cultural region. In Tibetan oral tradition, for example, it is common for orators from A mdo to refer to themselves and their communities as *mgo nag bod* 'black-headed Tibetans' and *gdong mar bod* 'red-faced Tibetans.' Tibetan scriptures, meanwhile, frequently open with a sanskrit phrase, and then repeat its meaning in Tibetan prefaced by *bod skad du* 'in Tibetan…" Tuttle is correct, however, in asserting that both the identification as *bod* and the pressure to identify as a united *bod* 'Tibetan' are indicative of a different form of identity pressures than those affecting Tibetans previously
[24] Xi bu da kai fa 西部大开发 (T: nub phyogs gsar spel chen mo). I follow Goodman (2004a) and Fischer (2013) in opting to translate the campaign as, "Open up the West" despite most Chinese media translations using variations on "Develop the West." Beginning in 2000, this program provided extensive subsidies to impoverished Western regions (of which the Tibetan Plateau is a part) to projects developing infrastructure, afforestation programs, transportation, a natural gas pipeline (Goodman 2004b), and particularly education (see Clothey and McKinlay 2012). It also included encouraging "ecological migration" (Ch: *shengtai yimin*), encouraging many pastoralists to move off the grassland in the name of preserving the environment (see Ptackova 2013).
[25] sngon chad thag nye ni red, da bar thag ring ni red
[26] Ch: shengtai yimin 生态移民
[27] By way of example, fully half of the chapters in Lauran Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani's (2008) Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change (seven of fourteen, not including the introduction) have at least one reference to "Waterfall of Youth."
[28] *lo rgyus ra rig gnas gi rin thang ngo ma zhib 'jug ra srung skyob* byed bsam ni red
[29] bsang rtsi go no gi skad
[30] Da ltos, kha yar rgyag ga zhib mj*ug ra, kha mar rgyag ga zhib mjug ze, mtha' na kha skam po gzhi bdag 'bod mi nyan no ra shes gi med gi*
[31] For more on metonymic referentiality in verbal art, see Foley 1995, 5.
[32] For more on Intangible Cultural Heritage in China, see You 2015, and Blumenfield and Silverman 2013.
[33] Tibetan calendar is composed of sixty year cycles in which each year is associated with one of five elements: *shing* 'wood,' *lcags* 'iron,' *chu* 'water,' *me* 'fire,' and *sa* 'earth,' and

twelve animals of the “Chinese” zodiac. This results in sixty year cycles combinations. Years are also given a gender. 2015 was the female wood sheep year.