

From *Tibetan Modernities* (ed. Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz). Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp. 305-332.

### ***Blue Lake: Tibetan Popular Music, Place and Fantasies of the Nation***

Anna Stirr

A woman in a Tibetan *chuba* stands at the rail of a motorboat, moving slowly across a wide lake. Shading her eyes with her hand, she gazes into the sunset. Her voice can be heard in the background, singing:

Ai Ma! Blue Lake,  
Today's happiness,  
Hope of the future,  
You are the possessor of all life forms,  
Honour of the motherland.

This scene is from the music video of the Tibetan singer, Dechen Wangmo (Bde chen dbang mo), featuring the popular song *Blue Lake* (*Tsho ngon po*). It was written in Tibet in 1984 by the poet Dondrub Gyal (Don gdrub rgyal ) and composer Chopathar Wayemache (Chod pa thar ba ye ma khye), and has come to be seen as an “unofficial anthem” of Tibet, according to one Tibetan scholar (Tsering Shakya, forthcoming). Many hear a strong Tibetan nationalist message in the song and it was banned from 1989 to 1992, the height of the Tibetan pro-independence movement. Although a report on music and politics in contemporary Tibet names *Blue Lake* “the most famous Tibetan nationalist song” (TIN 2004:149, see also Shakya 2002), the nationalism within this song is ambiguous at best.<sup>1</sup> For example, the song begins by identifying the lake with “the people”, but never specifies who “the people” are; the word “motherland” could just as well refer to China as to Tibet. Among Tibetans who claim *Blue Lake* as an anthem of national unity,

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<sup>1</sup> TIN lists *Blue Lake* under the heading of “songs with ‘clear,’ probable and possible political meanings”.

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this ambiguity is seen as a way to express, and thus to maintain, a sense of Tibetan national feeling under a regime of censorship. Yet the song and its multiple media incarnations are full of ambiguities, with possible interpretations that cannot be so clearly stated. In addition to the lyrics connecting a people to a place, musical sounds and vocal timbres, the sounds of different languages, and video images chosen to illustrate versions of *Blue Lake* offer many possible meanings, and thus contribute to various streams of discussion about defining and representing what it means to be Tibetan.

The diverse conversations regarding Tibetan nationalism and identity that circulate within Tibet and throughout the Tibetan diaspora have one thing in common: they are based on the idea of a nation closely tied to a place, Tibet. Perhaps the greatest divides in this imagined ‘nation without a state’ are the differences in ways of expressing Tibetan identity among Tibetans in Chinese-run Tibet on the one hand, and Tibetans in diaspora communities on the other. As Kiela Diehl (2002) and Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy (2005) note, diaspora Tibetans often view new arrivals from Tibet as sinicised and less fully Tibetan than those who have grown up under ‘freedom’. Musical and visual media have been shown to play an important role in diaspora contexts, allowing for connections to be made across time and space, and providing points of reference for conversations about self-representation and definition (Anderson 1991; Diehl 2002; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994; Schein 2003). At the same time, local cultures and discourses contribute to different diaspora groups’ ideas about who they are as a collective (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

The circulation of media such as these music videos, operating in conjunction with local and internationally circulating discourses of Tibetan nationalism and identity, offers visual, sonic and lyrical imagery that sparks both contestation and assertion of shared qualities. With an

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account of the creation and the nationalist history of *Blue Lake*, I show how the song has come to embody a “fantasy” of Tibetan unity in many respects (Žižek 1995; 1997).<sup>2</sup> I then turn to the ways that Tibetans in different diaspora communities interpret two music videos of *Blue Lake*, examining how these videos contribute to defining an imagined Tibetan nation, tied to a physical place, in which the possible expressions of national identity are multivalent and complex.

### **Geographic Symbolism and Tibetan National Identity**

The song *Blue Lake* is about a specific lake in an ethnically Tibetan area of what is now northwestern China. Known as *Tsho ngon po* in Tibetan, *Kokonor* in Mongolian and *Qinghai* in Chinese, the lake’s names have also been adopted for the larger area, since 1928 a province of Western China, within which it is located. According to an older Tibetan version of geography, Blue Lake lies at the heart of Do-med (mdo smad) or Amdo, one of the three major regions that comprised pre-1959 Tibet. As one of its most prevalent geographic features, the Blue Lake has historically been considered, along with others such as Mount Kailash in the far southwest, as both a regional and national symbol of Tibet, figuring prominently in representations of Tibetan identity and national unity. For example, a popular poster commissioned by the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama depicts the Tibetan emperor Srongtsen Gampo, who in the 7<sup>th</sup> century unified Tibet and expanded its frontiers into something resembling an empire.<sup>3</sup> In this poster, Srongtsen Gampo is shown in the martial pose usually used to represent King Gesar, hero of the epic *King Gesar of Ling*.<sup>4</sup> Behind his mounted figure are Amdo’s Blue Lake, the mountain ranges of central Tibet,

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<sup>2</sup> The work of fantasy, according to Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan, generates unconscious psychic attachments to the very objects that are consciously known to be socially and ideologically constructed; in other words, fantasy escapes deconstruction.

<sup>3</sup> Thank you to Robbie Barnett for calling my attention to this poster, and to Tenzin Norbu for explaining its significance.

<sup>4</sup> Blue Lake’s composer, Chopathar, is best known for his opera version of this epic.

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and the sacred mountain Kailash, in far western Tibet. Images such as this locate the Blue Lake among Tibet's most important geographical symbols, linking them all to an imperial national past.

It is such associations that Dondrub Gyal and Chopathar, the creators of *Blue Lake*, may have had in mind in choosing this lake as a topic for a song that was intended to express sentiments of Tibetan national identity. Working in the early 1980s just after the Cultural Revolution, Dondrub Gyal and Chopathar seem to have been engaged in a project to find new ways to express ideas of Tibetan cultural identity, moving away from both Chinese communist and Tibetan Buddhist rhetoric in their endeavour to create works that could be defined as “modern Tibetan” (Shakya forthcoming; Chopathar, personal communication).

### **Dondrub Gyal, New Tibetan Poetry, and the Lyrics of *Blue Lake***

At that time I smoked a lot. We were in my room smoking and drinking. I was sitting on my bed, and he sat in the desk chair. Behind him was my piano. We smoked, drank a lot. And I said, you should write a poem for me to make a song. So he got my paper—not normal paper, my big book for notes, you know with five lines, and he sat down—in twenty minutes he wrote that poem.

Chopathar on the creation of *Blue Lake* in his Amdo apartment in 1984 (Interview, April 2004)

Chopathar's anecdote describes Dondrub Gyal as many people knew him: a hard-drinking, hard-living artist who wrote in fits of inspiration, here dashing off on staff paper the poem that would become both beloved and politically notorious. Famous as both a champion and iconoclast of Tibetan culture in his poems and short stories, Dondrub Gyal wrote in Tibetan and published in the Tibetan literary journals that began to flourish after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978. He criticized attachment to traditions, yet expressed a strong cultural nationalism that was and continues to be interpreted as conjoined with political nationalism, though Dondrub Gyal did not publicly express sentiments favoring Tibetan political independence. Part of his continued association with Tibetan nationalism may come from the circumstances of his death: after his

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suicide in 1985, he has come to be viewed by some Tibetans as a martyr for the cause of Tibetan national identity.<sup>5</sup> Perceptions of Dondrub Gyal as a nationalist hero continue to influence the ways in which his work is interpreted today (cf. Wangdi 2005:130).

Tsering Shakya, in his studies of Tibetan literature since 1950, has placed a major emphasis on Dondrub Gyal as “the founder of modern Tibetan literature” (Shakya 2001: 2). With Dondrub Gyal’s writings, argues Shakya, “for the first time, the possibility emerged that, through the medium of poetry and fiction, a genuine discourse on Tibetan modernity could occur. At stake were the future direction of Tibet and Tibetan identity in the latter half of the twentieth century” (2). Shakya sees Dondrub Gyal’s work as a turning point in Tibetan literature also because he demonstrated that, in an atmosphere where direct criticism was unacceptable to the Chinese authorities, it was possible to speak implicitly about Tibetan suffering and aspirations (3).

Pema Bhum describes Dondrub Gyal’s work and the genre of New Poetry in Tibet as characterised by a disappointment with both Marxist and Buddhist ideologies, which are perceived as having failed to provide explanation for the suffering Tibetans have undergone in the past five decades. In his view, the deepest suffering is not material deprivation but the suffering of the mind: Tibetans living in Tibet bear the burden of having to hide their anger against the Chinese takeover, and writers and poets must “use their pen, which is their soul, to sing songs of praise to the bloody hand that murdered their fathers” (Bhum 1999:3). Tibetans in the diaspora, while they still share the “common sorrow” brought on by the occupation of their

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<sup>5</sup> A rumour had circulated in Tibet at that time that Dondrub Gyal’s suicide had in fact been a political assassination; regardless of the factual basis for this rumor, its existence demonstrates the deep identification that many Tibetans felt with Dondrub Gyal and his writings as symbolic of Tibetan unity against Chinese domination (Chopathar Wayemache, personal communication). Chopathar also discussed reasons why the suspicion and political feeling aroused by Dondrub Gyal’s death was not adopted by the Dharamsala exile government as a rallying point against the Chinese state; according to Chopathar, Dondrub Gyal’s nearest relative, an uncle, went to Dharamsala to persuade the Dalai Lama that any investigation into Dondrub Gyal’s death would only make things worse for his friends and associates who were still living in Tibet.

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homeland, can achieve the satisfaction of expressing their anger (Bhum 1999:3). Thus, Bhum argues, “the psychology revealed by the New Poetry is determined by the modern condition” (Bhum 2). The “modern condition” can be understood not only as Tibet’s current status within China, but also as the conflict between older ways of life and the social, economic and political changes occurring throughout the world; the intellectual in Tibet must come to terms with all of these changes in order to negotiate a Tibetan modernity. Heather Stoddard writes of Dondrub Gyal that, “in his conflict with the authorities and with society at large, he ruffled the susceptibilities of the Tibetans, because he was critical of the negative aspects of Buddhism and the effect it had on the Tibetan mentality, and he angered the Chinese because of his strong expression of Tibetan identity” (Stoddard 1994: 826). Despite his notoriety among both Tibetans and Chinese, Dondrub Gyal is remembered as a hero by Tibetans who see him as a champion of Tibetan identity, and by progressives who admire his attempt to discover his own voice, independent of Marxist or Buddhist ideology, as a modern expression of literary self-determination.

**Blue Lake (*Mtsho sngon po*)**

Trans. Tsering Shakya

Blue Lake,  
Honoured by the people,  
Pride of the motherland,  
Protector of the people,  
Happiness of the people.

When waves are blowing  
It brings joy to the geese.  
When the lake is frozen,  
The geese are saddened.

The frozen lake  
Drives the golden fish beneath.  
When the ice melts,  
It brings joy to the sheep

Ai Ma! Blue Lake,  
You bear witness to history,  
You are the hope of the future,  
You are the source of happiness.

Ai Ma! Blue Lake,  
Today's happiness,  
Hope of the future,  
You are the possessor of all life forms,  
Honour of the motherland.

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The history of Dondrub Gyal's life and the interpretations of his work, then, have important bearing on the way in which Tibetans aware of these have understood the song *Blue Lake*. Chopathar stated that the lake in *Blue Lake* was indeed intended to signify Tibet, that performers and listeners in Tibet were quick to identify Blue Lake as a nationalist song, and that the phrase "witness to history" in the fourth verse was often taken as a reference to recent episodes of oppression. Chopathar never discussed his opinion of the exact intent behind this phrase, preferring instead to emphasize the way that Tibetans have interpreted the lyrics of *Blue Lake*. As Tsering Shakya has noted, the allusion to Tibetan history is a way of invoking space as "an element in mobilizing and affirming unity" among Tibetans as a people, asserting the existence of a deeply rooted connection between Tibetans and their homeland. Shakya interprets the frozen lake as a metaphor for the brutality of Chinese rule, but given Dondrub Gyal's sentiments expressed in his other writings such as his famous poem *The Waterfall of Youth* and the short story *The Narrow Footpath*, both of which criticize blind faith in tradition (also discussed in Shakya 2000), he may have been referring to the negative aspects of Tibetan society that stood in the way of innovation. Nevertheless, widespread interpretations of Blue Lake as deeply Tibetan nationalist led to its 1989 censorship. Yet, perhaps due to differing interpretations of the song's message, the ban has been lifted since 1992 and *Blue Lake* continues to be recorded by a growing number of artists. Chopathar, who has lived in exile since 1990, welcomes these recordings as affirmations of his view of a unified Tibetan identity, and his description of the composition process illustrates his intention for the sound and lyrics to convey a unifying, though somewhat hidden, message of Tibetan nationalism.

## **Chopathar**

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“I have written more than forty songs, and I spent more time on this one than any others. I spent one year writing this song. I asked everyone their opinion to make it sound good. I asked farmers, nomads, singers, dancers, students, teachers. You know, Tibetan people know what is good. They may not have a formal education but they know what is good — they are very good singers. They spoke plainly with me and I listened, and made corrections until they said it was good.”

Ambiguity is important to Chopathar’s efforts to express sentiments in music regarding Tibetan identity. In his view, “to be a musician in Tibet you must think about rules. If you don’t watch the rules, they will be like a big stone and fall down on your feet or head.” When Chopathar and Dondrub Gyal had begun composing *Blue Lake* in 1984, though Dondrub Gyal had written the first draft of the lyrics in twenty minutes, the two of them worked together for a year, meeting several times a month, to perfect the music and lyrics. Though they were writing according to the “rules” constraining direct expression of national feeling, Chopathar’s description, quoted above, of his quest to ground *Blue Lake* in the aesthetic preferences of Tibetans from multiple backgrounds further illustrates his perception of his song as an anthem of national unity.

Chopathar says that he spent so much time on *Blue Lake* compared to his other songs, because of its deep personal and political significance: this song is “very important to the Tibetan people.... It talks about history, it talks about feeling, it talks about the future, it talks about the situation in Tibet. Not any individual word is political, but ... it has a very deep political meaning.” The music was written “following the words”, in an attempt to ensure that the overall effect of the song would convey the emotions that he and Dondrub Gyal felt, and in consultation with Tibetans from many backgrounds. For a song of this type to be written or performed well, according to Chopathar, “you must think about what the poem says, you must think about where you live, and ask yourself ‘Who are you?’” Thus he understands this song as written by and for the Tibetan people, sonically embodying deeply felt connections to the idea of a nation that the lake represents, expressing both people’s suffering in recent history and under the conditions of

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that time, and their yearning for a future in which “the ice has melted”. The lyrics may remain ambiguous, but in Chopathar’s opinion the message of the song as a whole is clear.

Since 1998, Chopathar has worked as a librarian in the Tibetan collection at the library of Columbia University in New York. He has retained an idea of a future when he can return to Tibet. This dream is characteristically connected to music - specifically, to musical innovation that he sees as occupying a particularly Tibetan progressive space. He muses:

My dream is to retire at 65, then become an American citizen. Then I will return to Tibet and meet my friends, and start a Tibetan country band. We’ll sing new modern Tibetan songs, and travel around Tibet, China and maybe the world.

American country music has become important to Chopathar’s vision of Tibet’s future. Its common themes of yearning and connection to place resonate with his vision for modern Tibetan expression in music and poetry, and to his recollection of Dondrub Gyal’s ideals. Perhaps more importantly to Chopathar, one instrument used in American country music — the mandolin — is similar to the most common Tibetan instrument, the dranyen (*dra mnyan*), and has not been taken up by any Chinese music genre. The mandolin has become a standard instrument in contemporary Amdo popular music, since its popularization throughout the 1980s and 1990s by the famous performer Palden Gong.<sup>6</sup> This new Tibetan “country” music with the mandolin, says Chopathar, provides a way for Tibetans to modernize, through a sound that is not too foreign to Tibetans, but that is neither Chinese nor tied too closely to the more rigid Tibetan traditions that Dondrup Gyal and many of the modernists opposed.

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<sup>6</sup> Palden Gong performed at Columbia University with two aspiring diaspora mandolinists in 2004. Another Amdo mandolin player is Nyima Donma, whose recordings can be heard online at the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library’s Audio and Video archive: <http://www.thdl.org/collections/index.html>.

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This idea of “suitably modernizing” Tibetan culture<sup>7</sup> in Tibet and in the diaspora echoes through Chopathar’s and Dondrub Gyal’s lives and work, and also comes to the fore in diaspora Tibetans’ discussions of *Blue Lake*. Such conversations rest on the premise that there exists a Tibetan nation, with a shared culture whose suitable course of modernization can be subject to debate. Chopathar’s and Dondrub Gyal’s status as well-known intellectuals or artists dedicated to promoting Tibetan unity continues to have bearing on the meaning that others assign to new productions of *Blue Lake*, thus contributing to notions that support this idea of a Tibetan nation, culturally conceived. Dondrub Gyal’s work is acclaimed by intellectuals in Tibet and in the diaspora, and his name is familiar to many who have not read his work. Chopathar’s opera version of the Gesar epic also brought him high acclaim as a composer in Tibet and throughout China in the 1980s, and outside of Tibet, he has retained some standing within the Tibetans community in New York, which expanded rapidly through migration in the late 1990s to become the largest centre of Tibetan population in the West. Most of these people are aware that he has written a book entitled *Tibetan Nation*, which supports the case for Tibetan independence using Chinese historical documents.<sup>8</sup> Thus their relationships with Chopathar and knowledge of his political views may affect the ways they interpret his song. Finally, Chopathar’s participation in the production of meaning related to *Blue Lake* does not end with the melodies he wrote. He joins other diaspora Tibetans in viewing and listening to other artists’ renditions of his song, in the consumption and interpretation of visual and sonic images, and in using these images in the production of new meanings, always in relation to his commitment to Tibetan national identity. His interpretations of these music videos are included alongside those of others.

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase “suitably modern” is from Liechty 2003.

<sup>8</sup> This book remains unpublished because of Chopathar’s uncertainty about its possible ramifications. Chopathar distributed copies of this book to the Dalai Lama, the office of then U.S. president Bill Clinton, and other influential figures. A copy of the manuscript is in the Indiana University libraries.

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### **Watching and Listening to Tibet from Afar**

As China has shifted to a market economy, explains ethnomusicologist Nimrod Baranovitch, popular music has become one of the fastest-circulating commodities on Chinese markets due to the portable nature of audio and video technology, and to the growing popularity of Chinese MTV (Baranovitch 2003: 3). Since 1992, when *Blue Lake* again became legal to record and perform, it has circulated in many forms through the Tibetan and wider Chinese media markets. Recorded by at least eight musicians and available on cassettes, cds, vcds, dvds, streaming audio files and downloadable mp3s, as well as on radio and television broadcasts and as background to tourist videos about Qinghai province, *Blue Lake* has become widely known throughout Tibet and China and thus open to many new meanings, interpretations, and appropriations. While the uses to which *Blue Lake* has been put in China provides an interesting topic of study, such as has been partially begun in TIN's report on music in contemporary Tibet (TIN 2004:149), my analysis focuses on the Tibetan diasporic settings of New York City and Kathmandu. Though available in various forms on the international market - including a recording by the famous Tibetan singer Dadon, now living in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> - *Blue Lake* is much less known in the Tibetan diaspora. Examining diaspora Tibetans' discussions about two music videos of *Blue Lake* turns our attention to diasporic interpretations of a product of their homeland, and their role in the construction of national identity among members of a transnationally located community.

In both these videos, *Blue Lake* is performed by Tibetan singer Dechen Wangmo, and the recording and footage were carried out by the same studio in Chengdu. The first, sung in Chinese, was released in 1998 on Dechen Wangmo's debut album, *Tanggula Feng* (*Tanggula*

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<sup>9</sup> This singer, Dadon, is probably the most famous singer who has recorded *Blue Lake*; her 1987 Lhasa recording was the first recorded version, and her 1997 Connecticut recording is the only one to date that has been produced in the diaspora.

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*Wind*),<sup>10</sup> which contained mostly covers of well-known Tibetan and Chinese songs, sung in Chinese. The second, sung in Tibetan, was released in 2000 on her second album *Brtse Shing Gdung Bi Rang Khyim / Qinqing de Jiayuan (Lovely Hometown)*, which contained more Tibetan songs sung in Tibetan, including several covers of songs which had been sung by Dadon during her days as Lhasa's first pop star in the early 1990s (see Dhondup, this volume). In 2004, Dechen Wangmo's albums and videos were available on the market in Lhasa and Kathmandu, and some songs were also available for download on the web.<sup>11</sup> In New York, several friends owned copies of one album or the other; these had been brought to the U.S. through the informal circulation networks of friends traveling from Tibet or Nepal. Though there are other recordings of the song, these two videos of *Blue Lake* by Dechen Wangmo offer useful possibilities for discussion because they are recordings of the same song by the same singer, but in different languages and accompanied by different video images.

Dechen Wangmo's 1998 video of *Blue Lake* is sung in Chinese; the translator of the lyrics is not noted on the album cover. Karaoke renderings of the lyrics scroll across the bottom of the screen in a simplified Chinese font. The opening shot features, instead of Amdo's Blue Lake, a relatively small lake nestled in a high mountain valley surrounded by snowy peaks. According to one of my interlocutors who lived most of his life in Tibet, this lake is probably located in southern Amdo or northern Kham; he speculates that the studio used this particular footage because they already had it in stock, rather than undertaking the expense of shooting on location. Scenes that follow include birds flying over the lake and resting on rocks in the water, nomads, in clothing that appears to be typical of Kham, leading their horses to water near a chorten or stupa with Buddhist prayer flags flying in the wind, and the same men taking snuff

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<sup>10</sup> Tanggula is the name of a mountain range in eastern Tibet.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see <http://zt.tibet.cn/english/yinyue>.

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from a yak-horn container. Dechen Wangmo does not appear in the video; the scenes provide a visual backdrop to her voice. Backed by synthesized string and flute melodies, Dechen Wangmo sings in the soft, sweet vocal style typical of 1980s Chinese popular music, a style first popularized by the Taiwanese singer Deng Lijun (Baranovitch 2003). The musical rendition, performed as Chopathar had written it, begins with a long, unmetered introduction followed by five verses according to the poem's strophic structure. The introduction begins with quick descending arpeggios in a synthesized flute sound, creating an effect reminiscent of ripples across a lake. The vocal line then enters on a slow, drawn-out "*Ai Ma!* Qinghai Hu!" (Ai Ma! Blue Lake!), followed by an instrumental interlude that introduces a meter, and which returns between each of the verses. The final verse is followed by a repetition of the words "Qinghai Hu" (Blue Lake), reproducing the verses' cadential V-I figure an octave higher, perhaps to highlight the importance of the lake and all that it might stand for.

Dechen Wangmo's second music video of *Blue Lake* differs significantly from the first. Indeed, it was this video that sparked my early interest in this song, because it was the first Tibetan music video I had seen that was filmed on location. Dechen Wangmo performs *Blue Lake* in Tibetan while standing at the rail of a shiny new boat, motoring across the Blue Lake itself. She is dressed in a *chuba* with dangling earrings and a many-stranded necklace of large coral beads, and her long hair hangs down her back — all aspects of Tibetan women's 'national dress'.<sup>12</sup> Her appearance here contrasts with her other performances on the same album, in which she is shown in the studio wearing either a Western-style summer dress, or a T-shirt and jeans. Sometimes the *Blue Lake* video features her singing; other times she is pictured staring across the lake. As in the earlier version, the birds in the lyrics are referenced by shots of birds on the lake. During the final verse, the sky changes to a yellow sunset and, after a brief shot of a flock

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the importance of dress to Tibetan identity in the diaspora, see Yeh 2000.

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of sheep moving by a chorten with prayer flags on a mountainside, Dechen Wangmo is pictured superimposed over this scene, gazing into the distance to the backdrop of the sunset. The form of the song has been changed in this recording, with the introduction metered, cut short and repeated in the middle—so that the song’s overall form is now A B A B, where A is the introduction, and B represents a group of verses. Though Dechen Wangmo is singing in Tibetan, her vocal style and the combination of synthesized flute and string sounds to a light beat remains the same as in the previous recording.

In New York City and in Kathmandu, I watched these two music videos of *Blue Lake* with several groups of Tibetans. Following Louisa Schein’s approach in her work on Hmong-American “homeland videos”, I take these particular people’s opinions about Dechen Wangmo’s videos, expressed in conversation with me and with each other, as instances of individual production and negotiation of collective Tibetan identity (Schein 2000).<sup>13</sup> While acknowledging the diversity of my interlocutors, some general statements can be made about them as a group. They include five women and eight men, between 20 and 50 years of age. They can be divided into three groups: those who came to New York directly from Tibet; those who came to New York from India or Nepal; and those who remain in Nepal. For twelve of these thirteen, I have used pseudonyms at their requests; the thirteenth is *Blue Lake’s* composer, Chopathar.

### **“Tricky words”: Interpreting Lyrical Ambiguity**

“This song is so famous. Everyone knows it, and whenever a group of Tibetans gets together someone will sing this song. Of course we try to get the good singers to sing it, because it’s a little bit high, it’s a hard melody...I think it’s the most famous song of Tibet, a national anthem.”

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<sup>13</sup> For a study that uses more quantitative methods, among others, to demonstrate diaspora Tibetans’ views on certain aspects of collective identity, see Hess 2003.

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Over a dinner of Tibetan *momos*, Rinchen praised *Blue Lake* for its popularity, its nationalist message, and its musical complexity that requires “good singers.” A student in her early 30s, she had come to New York from Tibet to study cultural policy. Though she would return to Tibet, she enjoyed the community of Tibetans here, especially those her age who had also grown up in Tibet. Talking with Rinchen and her friends and colleagues, a picture of *Blue Lake* emerged as a universally popular song. This particular group of Tibetans, who had left Tibet in the 1990s, were all in their teens or early twenties during the pro-independence movement of the late 1980s and the banning of *Blue Lake*; having grown up in this context, they interpreted *Blue Lake* as a nationalist song. Tsering and Phurbu, both men who had lived most of their lives in Tibet and thus spoke fluent Chinese as well as Tibetan, pointed out what they called “tricky words,” such as “motherland,” which according to Phurbu Chinese people would understand as referencing all of China, but Tibetans would understand as referencing Tibet. This way, said Phurbu, “we can trick the Chinese.” Yangzom, a woman who had grown up in Tibet, had not understood *Blue Lake* as a nationalist song until coming to New York, but she nevertheless noted the word “motherland” as referring to either China or Tibet depending on interpretation. Chopathar clarified the intended meaning of the lyrics within this nationalist framework, explaining that “under the ice of the Chinese, Tibetans go deep like fish.”

Talking to Tibetans who had grown up in Nepal and India demonstrated that *Blue Lake* did not enjoy the same degree of popularity in the diaspora, and that often the “tricky words” and their ambiguous meanings held no nationalist significance for the younger generation. In New York, several of the Tibetans from Nepal told me they had come to know of *Blue Lake* and its importance not through hearing recordings or watching VCDs, but because of Chopathar’s presence in the city and his association with respected members of the Tibetan community. They

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knew about the song's nationalist significance, but had never actually heard it. Thus when I showed them Dechen Wangmo's videos, their first response was to look for expressions of Tibetan nationalism in the sound of the music, the lyrics and the videos, and for those who understood neither Chinese nor Dechen Wangmo's Tibetan, in the English translation of the lyrics. Drolma, a young Nepali Tibetan in New York, read the English lyrics with great interest and decided, "I think the birds are supposed to be the Tibetans, and they're happy when the wind is blowing the wave, like the wind of freedom, and then when the lake is frozen that is when the Chinese took over Tibet." Pema, her cousin, who had not enjoyed the song, looked on with indifference and later told me, "you should ask my cousin Drolma if you want that kind of interpretation — she's good for that kind of thing." Here, the knowledge that *Blue Lake* was Chopathar's famous nationalist song may have significantly informed this group's interpretations.

In Kathmandu, Dawa, an older intellectual and entrepreneur, had read and admired Dondrub Gyal's poetry. However, he had to explain to his two younger Tibetan employees that Dondrub Gyal's lyrics were actually about more than just a Tibetan lake. The two younger men, Lhakpa and Lobsang, raised in Nepal's relative freedom of expression (at least, in terms of musical and literary expression regarding Tibetan nationalism), were used to songs that overtly praised the greatness of Tibet and the Dalai Lama without fear. In these lyrics, they heard only praise for a lake, a relatively tame and hardly nationalist subject in their opinions. Without a historical and cultural context in which to place these lyrics, *Blue Lake's* nationalist significance was lost.

As Phurbu understood it, the message of this song was "to encourage Tibetans to have their identity." When I asked what it was about the song that explicitly pointed to Tibetan

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identity or nationalism, most people began with the lyrics. Yet as Lhakpa and Lobsang's reaction demonstrates, the lyrics were not always understood as clear, though metaphoric, references to a unified Tibetan nation. Such interpretations depended on the lyrics' contextualization within local nationalist discourses, and on knowledge of the song's history—even the presence of strong Tibetan nationalist rhetoric in the everyday lives of all of these groups did not automatically lead to nationalist interpretations of *Blue Lake*, when lyrics alone were taken into account. Yet along with the lyrics, musical sound, language and image all prompted people to comment on aspects of Tibetan identity, and to pass judgment on how Tibet was represented in the videos. Though the lyrics were not always perceived as nationalist, the videos were almost universally approached from a point of view emphasizing Tibetan identity, as my interlocutors debated their value as representations of a Tibetan nation.

### **“We feel a little bit sad”: Sound, Language and the Articulation of Difference**

*Blue Lake*'s musical arrangement, Dechen Wangmo's vocal style, and the sound of the language in which the song was performed raised many questions about what constituted an accurate or desirable representation of Tibet. Chopathar's reaction was that of a composer judging whether or not his intended effect had been achieved; he praised Dechen Wangmo's first, Chinese language recording highly for staying faithful to his conception of text-music unity. On the other hand, he argued that in her Tibetan language recording, the change in musical form destroyed the unity of the music and the words and thus curtailed the possibility of this performance to move Tibetans in the way Chopathar had desired. He did not blame Dechen Wangmo, instead railing against the producers and what he judged to be their money-minded decisions made with no knowledge of art or “Tibetan sensibilities.”

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Chopathar's reaction, with his emphasis on form as the key to the text-music unity he was trying to achieve in his composition, was unique compared to the others, which concentrated on the appropriateness of this pop genre for a song representing Tibet. To those raised in Tibet, the overall sound of this song was easily identified as pop; they generally admired Chopathar's melody and Dondrub Gyal's lyrics, if not Dechen Wangmo's performances. Yangzom, however, stated that the melody was too soft and sweet to be considered a "national anthem"; by her standards, a nationalist song even with ambiguous lyrics should have a more martial feel. The Nepali Tibetans generally felt that this slow melody with synthesizer accompaniment and a soft, sweet vocal style was a sound that belonged particularly to *Chinese* pop, and that songs using "traditional" Tibetan melodies and instruments, such as those promoted by the the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in Dharamsala, would be a better way to represent Tibet in a music video. Drolma, Tenzin and Lhakpa preferred the folk songs they learned at school in India and those of the popular singer Tsering Gyurme, a Kathmandu Tibetan who had recently performed in New York, singing modern songs in a style considered traditional and accompanying himself on the dranyen. Lhakpa also liked Tsering Gyurme but insisted that "better songs can be found in Dharamsala. The tone of this song [*Blue Lake*] is Chinese, so that's why most of the young guys here [in Kathmandu] won't want to listen." No one thought that the musical arrangement of *Blue Lake* sounded at all like Tibetan traditional music; with martial sound or traditional music as the implicit standards for what a Tibetan "national anthem" should be, Chopathar's concept of a text-music unity that expressed a universally acknowledged concept of Tibetan national unity was rendered irrelevant.

It was not only the sounds of the synthesizer and Dechen Wangmo's 1980s-pop vocal style that sparked discussions of identity issues regarding sound. Dechen Wangmo's

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pronunciation of Tibetan, and the fact that she as a Tibetan would record a song in Chinese, led to discussions of both “sinicisation” within contemporary Tibet, and the loss of Tibetan language in the diaspora. Chopathar’s reaction was instructive on this subject. Himself educated in Chinese, he had no problem with Dechen Wangmo’s Chinese-language recording, which he viewed as a translation of his song into a foreign language; he was more interested in its musical faithfulness to his composition. However, he condemned Dechen Wangmo’s second recording because of her “imperfect” Tibetan pronunciation. As a native of the same area of Tibet as Dechen Wangmo, Chopathar was sure that her unclear pronunciation of Tibetan words was not due to a difference in dialect or to the fact that she was singing rather than speaking, but rather to her limited knowledge of the language. He understood her “substandard” Tibetan as embodying a denial of her Tibetan identity. In his view she had every right to speak and sing in Chinese or any other foreign language, but as a Tibetan performer, representing Tibet, she should above all speak her “own” language well.

Phurbu and Tsering, who had both been educated in Chinese, had conflicting opinions on the quality of the Chinese translation, but both concluded that hearing this song sung in Chinese was “a little upsetting” and that they would rather hear it in Tibetan. Phurbu, though fluent in Chinese, got much more excited about explaining the meanings of the lyrics when he heard them in his mother tongue. Our conversations took place in English, but it was clear that had my Tibetan been better, they would have preferred Tibetan.

One of the most interesting conversations I had about language in relation to these videos took place with Yangzom. Yangzom accepted Chinese rule and planned to return to live in Tibet. However, she discussed Tibetan language and identity with the same passion as those who could unambiguously be considered as members of the diaspora. Like Chopathar, she objected to

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Dechen Wangmo's "imperfect" Tibetan in her second recording of *Blue Lake*, dismissing her as "not a very good singer." Yangzom said that she had first become aware of her own Tibetan identity as important when she attended college in Beijing. She and her fellow Tibetan students found themselves more and more concerned with expressing themselves as Tibetan, with a unique Tibetan culture, in cosmopolitan Beijing. It was among this group that Yangzom came to value Tibetan songs and to study Tibetan language in earnest. At the forefront of her mind when she discusses returning to Tibet is the opportunity to increase her skill at Tibetan language. She describes her elementary education, saying that in the 1980s when the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama had had significant influence on policies in the TAR, even Chinese children attending primary school in the region had been required to learn Tibetan. Gradually this has changed, and she had no longer been able to study Tibetan in school. She was disappointed at this, but continued to pursue Chinese-medium education as the best opportunity for obtaining a college degree and a stable career. While in Beijing and later in New York, her separation from Tibet led her to join others in creating a sort of diasporic—though not exilic—community, with the aims of retaining their "Tibetanness" though far away from their homeland, and to place increased importance on Tibetan language, music and other cultural forms such as sung drinking toasts to friends. It was among her Beijing group of Tibetan friends that Yangzom had first learned *Blue Lake*, as an appropriate song with which to toast Tibet and Tibetans.

While those Tibetans who grew up speaking Chinese in much of their daily life expressed strong preferences *for Tibetan*, those who grew up speaking other languages expressed their preference for Tibetan as strongly *against Chinese*. To these Nepali/Indian Tibetans, Chinese was the language of the oppressor and thus a language to protest against; as they did not experience pressure to use Chinese in their daily lives, it was much easier to oppose it. However,

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in New York, Kathmandu, and the high schools of north India, much of these Tibetans' daily lives were spent speaking Nepali and English. Thus, in practice, they also struggled with the importance of maintaining their Tibetan language as a marker of Tibetan identity. The three men in Kathmandu initially refused to watch Dechen Wangmo's Chinese vcd. Dawa stated, "We don't know Chinese, so why should we watch?" It was clear that their linguistic bias was mainly against Chinese, as they talked among themselves and with me in a liberal mixture of Nepali, English, and of course Tibetan. While the English may have been mostly for my benefit, it was clear that Nepali was a primary language of daily life outside the immediate family setting.

When I showed the Chinese language video to a group of Tibetans from Nepal in New York, one woman, Drolma, echoed Tsering's words: "when we hear Tibetan songs sung in Chinese, we feel a little bit sad, but," she continued, "we are no better, because our Tibetan is not that good." After viewing the Tibetan language recording, Pema commented, "even though we are Tibetan, we don't understand." Instead of criticising Dechen Wangmo for singing unintelligibly, Pema and her friends blamed their own imperfect knowledge of Tibetan for the fact that they did not understand. This led to a discussion, conducted in Nepali, about the language opportunities available in Nepali and northern Indian high schools, and how most did not offer Tibetan as a formal subject. Drolma's brother-in-law Dorje recounted how he had learned to write Tibetan only after switching schools in the ninth grade. Dolma and her sister Tenzin admitted that their English was now better than their Tibetan and Nepali, and that they were embarrassed when they met their older relatives who criticised their Tibetan. Among themselves and their Tibetan friends, they told me, they tried to speak mostly in Tibetan. I met with this group on several occasions, at the home of a Tibetan woman from Darjeeling married to a non-Tibetan Nepali man. The group included Nepalis and Indians of non-Tibetan

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background, as well as myself and sometimes another Anglo-American woman. Thus, by social necessity, as in the case of the Tibetans in Nepal, daily life for the Tibetans in this group was conducted in a mixture of Tibetan, Nepali and English. While they all felt the need to improve their Tibetan, they had no particular animosity toward any of the other languages they spoke.

Thus Dechen Wangmo's struggle with linguistic positioning, as represented by the juxtaposition of her two recordings in Chinese and in "imperfect" Tibetan, elicited discussions of diaspora Tibetans' own struggles with the relationship between language and identity. Reactions to Dechen Wangmo's singing in Chinese differed between those who had grown up in Tibet and those who had not; for those who had grown up in Nepal and north India in a climate of more overt Tibetan nationalism, Chinese signified the language of the oppressor and thus provoked strong reactions in some cases. While in some instances these diaspora Tibetans rejected Dechen Wangmo's Chinese performance in addition to criticising her "imperfect" Tibetan, others took these characteristics of her performances as opportunities to reflect on their own situations. Among those who had grown up in Tibet, some, such as Tsering and Phurbu, also expressed their sadness at hearing a Tibetan singing in Chinese. However, their discussions of the importance of Tibetan for Tibetans' identity had much in common with those of the Nepali Tibetans; they struggled with the desire to preserve their language in situations where daily life demanded that they use one or more of their 'non-native' tongues. Just as Drolma and her relatives grew up speaking Nepali, Hindi and English in addition to Tibetan, Chopathar, Tsering, Phurbu, Rinchen and Yangzom grew up speaking Chinese. In their respective linguistic environments, negotiating between multiple languages has been a part of all these Tibetans' identity-forming experiences. Their discussions upon viewing Dechen Wangmo's two recordings of *Blue Lake* foreground the tension that the linkage of Tibetan language with national identity,

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and the necessity of using other languages in daily life, creates not only in the lives of diaspora Tibetans but also in the lives of those in Tibet.

### **Visualising Tibet**

Beyond the images of a homeland evoked in the lyrics of *Blue Lake*, and the identification of Tibetan language with a unified Tibetan people, the conversations that unfolded around the visual images of Tibetan landscapes in Dechen Wangmo's two music videos were most saliently indicative of these diaspora Tibetans' commitment to maintaining an idea of a collective Tibetan identity. Discussion of how Tibet should be visually represented in the media paid particular attention to the portrayal of things seen as particularly 'traditional' as icons of Tibetan cultural autonomy. In Nepal, Dawa praised Dechen Wangmo's choice to appear in Tibetan dress in her second video, saying that it was important to make the Chinese aware of the uniqueness of Tibetan culture. Tsering and Yangzom, raised and educated in Tibet, liked the images of nomads in Dechen Wangmo's first video. They commented that their style of dress and use of snuff was very traditional and that those particular customs were dying out as Tibet became more urbanised. Drolma and Tenzin interpreted almost all aspects of every video image as carrying some nationalist significance. Drolma exclaimed at one point, "those [yellow, blue and red] flowers are exactly the colour of our flag!" Some judgments of the video images were critical; Lhakpa and Lobsang in Kathmandu objected to the use of the motorboat in the second video, likening it to Hong Kong and suggesting that portrayals of Tibet should show "traditional" leather boats. As with the discussions of Tibetan language, these conversations about representation centered around ideas of cultural loss and changes perceived as negative, returning to natural formations such as the mountains and the Blue Lake itself as symbols of

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continuity and unity of a Tibetan culture imagined to exist across the disparate places in which Tibetans now find themselves.

These Tibetan landscapes acted as touchstones for the idea of unity, reminding some people of the home they had left behind, and leading those born in diaspora communities to express longing for a place they might never see. Nyima, from Nepal but now residing in New York, proudly recounted to me his own journey to the Blue Lake, accompanying a group of foreigners when he worked as a Darjeeling-based guide. Envious of her uncle's having been to Tibet, Tenzin spoke for her husband Dorje, cousin Pema and sister Drolma when she told me, "even though this song is in Chinese we are very interested to watch, we feel, 'is this what Tibet is like?' You see, even though we are Tibetan, we've never even been there." Even if they did not like the song itself, everyone with whom I viewed these videos expressed happiness upon seeing images of Tibet. Pema had no use for the music or lyrics, but conceded that she liked the scenes in both videos. In Kathmandu, Lhakpa related how his father, a former political prisoner and member of the Nepal-based resistance movement in the 1960s, would watch the new Kathmandu broadcasts of Chinese TV hoping for images of Tibet; no matter what the story, no one was allowed to change the channel. Such appeals to the unifying role of the video images relied on the perception, however momentary, of these images as reality — the lakes, mountains, birds, nomads, stone houses, flocks of sheep, prayer flags, chortens and Tibetan traditional dress in the videos served as material reminders of a homeland some had never seen.

## **Conclusion**

This homeland exists only as it is imagined, and the discussions above demonstrate that it is imagined in multiple ways. Fantasy makes room, within an imagined Tibet, for all of the

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different perceptions of what Tibet should be. Along with varying levels of awareness that images, like sound, are manipulated by people with particular ideologies; that disagreements occur over how Tibet should be represented sonically and visually; that contrasting ideas exist about what is “Tibetan” and what is “Chinese”, the idea of a Tibetan nation physically present in the relationships between land and people, symbolised by unique mountains and bodies of water, remains a powerful, functioning symbol of unity. It is an imagined place where Tibetans in the diaspora conceive of themselves as a nation united and whole, with a homeland to which they will someday return. But their simultaneous constructions of difference are influenced greatly by the dominant discourses and symbolic languages of the places where “Tibetan Tibetans” and “Nepali Tibetans” spent their formative years. The diaspora Tibetans that I talked with, in New York and Kathmandu, all expressed identification with the Tibetan nation symbolised by sonic and visual images of the homeland, but disagreed on appropriate ways of representing Tibet. While those raised in Chinese-ruled Tibet understood *Blue Lake*’s nationalist significance according to their own experiences interacting with Chinese as the dominant culture, those raised in India and Nepal had visceral reactions against anything Chinese. The general division of interpretations and opinions along the lines of where people were educated, rather than where they currently reside, demonstrate the salience of claims such as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s (1994) assertion that community in diaspora is determined by topics of conversation rather than geographic location, and Gupta and Ferguson’s (1997) emphasis on the relevance of local discourses.

The ambiguity of *Blue Lake*’s lyrics allows for many possible interpretations, which are always influenced by other aspects of the song as a mediated commodity, including sound and video image. *Blue Lake* is thus both a point of articulation for different, locally-influenced

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expressions of Tibetan national identity, and a sign that points in multiple directions. As such, *Blue Lake* and other popular media representations of Tibet simultaneously contribute to the perpetuation of the fantasy of a unified Tibetan identity, and offer a site for multifaceted and conflicting ideas of what is important about being Tibetan to enter into dialogue. Some scholars express a desire for popular music to act as a public sphere where different ideas can interact with each other on an equal plane, in an idealistic move that smoothes over the concrete hierarchies of power that influence popular music circulation. Tsering Shakya espouses a similar hope for Dondrub Gyal's poetry, when he asserts that its circulation in forms such as the various recordings of *Blue Lake* will lead to the formation of a progressive Tibetan modernity in which Tibetans critically examine their own nationalist discourses, including their divisive aspects, and move toward a productive sense of unity (Shakya, forthcoming). Shakya is aware of the hierarchical organisation of differences, yet he hopes they can be overcome. Perhaps media representations of Tibet such as these videos of *Blue Lake* have the potential to contribute to productive change by bringing these contested elements of Tibetan identity to the fore.

Acknowledging the existence of multiple perspectives may not dissolve the fantasy of a unifying, essential Tibetan identity or replace it with anything 'better', but it may lead some to ask the question: what work does this identity do, and why is it important? I close with a quote from Lobsang, a Nepali Tibetan living in Nepal, who told me: "It's nice to see some modern Tibetan songs. It's like Hindi songs—they're mixing Tibetan and Chinese things, just like Hindi and English." Lobsang's perception of these videos of *Blue Lake* as modern Tibetan, neither Chinese nor thinly disguised overt nationalism of the diasporic variety, signals a readiness to engage with the broader reality of people's lives in Tibet, beyond the particular landscapes of nationalist fantasy that ignore contemporary changes. In a time when the circulation of people,

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sounds and images between Tibet and diaspora communities is rapidly increasing, such attitudes have the possibility to contribute to a greater acknowledgement of Tibetan diversity, across multiple locales.

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