

## Chapter Six

# Tibetan music and the music of Tibetans

*“Tibetan culture has not changed, it has developed”* – Tibetan leader of dance troupe from Lhasa during a visit to the UK in 1991, Party member

*“There is no question of preserving Tibetan culture in Tibet, because it has already been completely destroyed. Fortunately, in exile, in a free country, we are cultivating the seeds of Tibetan Buddhist Culture outside Tibet [...] [The Chinese authorities] can tell the world that singing ‘Long live Mao Zedong’ is Tibetan culture, but it is not.”* – Tubten T. Anyetsang, Secretary of the Department of Religion and Culture Tibetan Government in Exile (TIN interview TIN 04-778, 23 January 2004)

This book has outlined 50 years of unprecedented change in Tibetan musical culture in Tibet, resulting firstly from direct state intervention and then subsequently from the withdrawal of that control from the 1980s giving way to rapid cultural change. It has described the use of music as a device to convey Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology, and also the Tibetan political or politicised songs that have emerged in the shadow of Party policy and propaganda. This concluding chapter moves from the direct effects of policy on music and the use of music to convey policy or to counter and resist policy, to examine the reactions of Tibetans to the changes that have occurred and the impact of these changes on modern Tibetan cultural identity. These issues are considered in the light of one of the most important consequences of Chinese rule in Tibet: the establishment of the Tibetan exile community, where musical culture has taken a very different course to that inside Tibet. Cultural change is rarely uncontroversial, but with the separation of a Tibetan exile community from the main Tibetan population in Tibet, a situation has emerged in which the two sides, isolated from each other to a great extent and existing in a highly politicised environment, have produced musical cultures that are very different from each other in form and content. In this situation, the discussion over cultural change has become particularly complex and heated with spoken and unspoken issues of what is true and authentic Tibetan music, what change is positive and what change is negative, and what artistic expression should fit a modern Tibetan identity. Here, some points of view are examined surrounding the issues of change and sinicisation in modern Tibetan music in Tibet and exile.

## **Destruction, preservation, change and development**

The perceived threat to Tibetan culture from the Chinese occupation has become a central theme in expressions of dissatisfaction with Chinese rule over Tibet both among the Tibetan exile community as well as foreign supporters. Apart from issues surrounding human rights and the safety of Tibetans inside Tibet who criticise or oppose Chinese rule, the perceived threats which Tibetan culture in Tibet has been and is exposed to have become essential elements of the argument that legitimises the struggle for independence by the exile Tibetan government and community. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, the institutions of the exile government were set up to preserve Tibetan culture, the most significant to Tibetan music being the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), founded in 1959, and the Tibetan schools.

Before and during the Cultural Revolution, very real attempts were made in Tibet to obliterate Tibetan traditional music and other culture, which was seen as 'backward' and 'feudal'. The fact-finding missions of the Tibetan government in exile which visited Tibet three times between 1979 and 1980 and the then-Party Secretary Hu Yaobang who visited Tibet in 1980, despite being on opposite sides of the political fence regarding Tibet, were both similarly shocked at the devastation they saw. If the Cultural Revolution had not ended in 1976 and if a radical change of policy had not then followed, Tibetan traditional culture may have been entirely annihilated. During this era, therefore, preserving Tibetan culture was a task clearly laid out for the exile government institutions, and indeed, from the early 1960s until the end of the Cultural Revolution, it was only in exile that traditional Tibetan culture was being practised and kept alive.

As post-Cultural Revolution policy was implemented in Tibet from 1980, the threat to Tibetan culture has become less stark. In the case of the arts, instead of banning any form of traditional Tibetan music as was the Cultural Revolution policy, immense enthusiasm for Tibet's performing arts was expressed by the Chinese government and large amounts of state sponsorship poured into professional troupes across Tibetan areas. However, this state sponsorship of Tibetan arts has been a powerful tool for the state to control Tibetan music, at least at the professional level, and to 'develop' it according to its own ideology of 'integration' with the motherland. The spread of the mass media and the emergence of independent pop music, although not a direct manifestation of state control, has brought about considerable sinicisation of Tibetan music. However, these post-Cultural Revolution developments, although politically motivated or at least politically opportune, do not constitute out and out cultural destruction, and Tibetans in Tibet do feel able to practice and create what in their opinion is Tibetan music, despite certain restrictions and pressures. The need to preserve Tibetan music in exile therefore now involves preserving it against powerful forces of change and influence as opposed to outright destruction. This is controversial from the point of view of both Tibetans coming from Tibet who have absorbed Chinese influences

in their music as well as young Tibetans in exile who also live and create music in a changing environment with non-traditional influences. It is impossible to deny that there is a musical culture thriving in Tibet today and indeed in exile. But debate centres on the question of whether this can really be called a *Tibetan* musical culture, whether this musical culture has retained or lost its Tibetan identity due to change and outside influence. Before exploring the specific outside influences that are seen by various groups of Tibetans as threatening Tibetan culture, the attitudes to the principle of change are examined.

For the most conservative minority of the exile government and community, all change is dismissed as “*corruption*”,<sup>1</sup> whether this is sinicisation taking place in Tibet (due to government policy, market forces and modernisation, or Chinese immigration) or other changes that people are attempting to bring about in exile. Such an extreme position is rare, more usually a debating point than a reality. Most people hold more balanced views, particularly regarding modern music. However, regarding traditional music and other culture, the Dharamsala establishment does tend towards conservatism. For example, Tubten T. Anyetsang, Secretary of the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government in Exile, differentiated between traditional and modern music in this way:

*I am not against any changes in culture. We can't stop people from changing. [...] In India, Tibetan youngsters are influenced by Hindi music, [whereas] a Tibetan living in the USA grows in that culture. People are influenced and change. But what must not change is what we have in terms of our own traditional songs. They must not change and they must not disappear.*<sup>2</sup>

At the other extreme, the Chinese government appears relentless in its reforming zeal when it comes to art and literature, even though in recent years, the performing arts are increasingly subject to market forces. Chen Kuiyuan, then Party Secretary of the TAR, made a particularly strong statement illustrating this in 1997. Quoting Mao's famous dictum on art and literature made in 1942, he stated:

*We should adopt the attitude of “developing what is useful or healthy and discarding what is not”. In other words, we should discard the dross, select the essence, and continue to create something new.*<sup>3</sup>

Other statements coming from Tibetans in Tibet, both those loyal to China and those that oppose China, tend to be accepting of change and in favour of the development of Tibetan music, seeing development as essential if Tibetan culture is to remain alive and relevant. When it was suggested that Tibetan culture had changed as a result of the Chinese presence in Tibet, a Tibetan official and Party member travelling with the Tibetan Performing Arts Troupe of China that performed in the UK in July 1991, replied:

1 Henrion-Dourcy, discussing the position of Tibetan opera in the exile Tibetan community, 2001: 138.

2 TIN interview TIN 04-778, 23 January 2004.

3 *Xizang Ribao*, Lhasa, in Chinese 16 July 97, SWB AS1 AsPol mk

*No, Tibetan culture has not changed; it has developed. Our nationality should be developed, always developed. China is a country with many minority nationalities and they will learn from each other and as a country and also from the world.<sup>4</sup>*

Tsering, not loyal to the Chinese administration, as demonstrated by her singing songs in praise of the Dalai Lama while in Tibet, described development as inevitable. When asked if traditional songs in Tibet are changing, she replied:

*They do get changed. The very old songs are old now. For instance, when our clothes become old they become useless. It is the same here that ancient songs become old and they are already sung. If they are sung again, the lyrics and tune are altered. It is better to make a music album with new lyrics and new tunes instead of singing old songs.<sup>5</sup>*

Tenpa also described the inevitability and necessity for cultural change, and explained that now he is in exile, he adapts his music to exile tastes:

*The reason why the melody of a song becomes new is that the singers sing the song according to the way the people think, the way the people listen and according to their tastes [at any given time]. This is the same way in which composers of songs create a tune. It is for this reason I think the melody and the lyrics of songs are automatically changing. [...] As time changes, the thoughts and characteristics of the people will change, and along with this the way their ears perceive songs will change. [...]*

*Since my arrival in the exile community I have seen the life of the exile community and in accordance with their taste in music and melody I find out what kind of melody and music they like. Accordingly I feel that it is excellent to sing in that tune.*

He also pointed out what he perceives as the exile government's lack of contemporary focus:

*In Dharamsala there are many organisations as well as individual people who are working for Tibetan culture but there are few people or organisations who are working in a modern way.<sup>6</sup>*

Although the Dharamsala establishment is seen as being conservative, there are some dissenting elements too. Criticism of conservatism is common amongst Tibetans born in India, as well as those from Tibet. Lobsang Wangyal, for example, who organised the Free Spirit Festivals of 2002 and 2003, the Miss Tibet contests of 2002 and 2003, and

4 TIN interview 24 July 1991 at Bloomsbury Theatre, London, excerpts published in TIN News Update 30 August 1991, Reports from Tibet: March-August 1991, part 2: 45-48.

5 TIN interview TIN 03-1082, 1 April 2003.

6 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002.

the 2003 Tibetan music awards in Dharamsala, criticised the lack of government encouragement for developing Tibetan music in exile, leaving new music only to emerge in the form of private albums. He stated the well-known paradox that a culture must change or evolve if it is to be preserved, that is, to continue. Such ideas about music are shared by many of the younger generation in the exile community, for whom traditional music alone does not express their identity as Tibetans living in exile communities today.

*Tibetan music is performed and recorded on albums. No government departments or organisations do anything further to develop it. [...] In this way our culture has been compiled on a yearly basis but we also need to do something to develop our culture. [...] If you want to preserve a culture it is not enough to just keep it as it was before; you have to improve it – otherwise it will get lost. We have to develop it as much as we can so that we are preserving our culture. [...] Tibetan culture is changing and it is a big change but no one can stop it from changing [...] some people do worry about the changes that take place in our culture and they think that Tibetan culture is disappearing but I don't think it is disappearing; it is in the middle of an evolution. Earlier we were doing our counting on wooden frames but these days it is very easy to calculate on calculators. We don't miss the wooden counting boards. [...] If there are no new things in the Tibetan culture, then the people will be bored of the old things, therefore it is very important to create new things in the culture.<sup>7</sup>*

A Tibetan working as a drama teacher at TIPA who left Tibet, where he was working as a dance composer for Lhasa Song and Dance Troupe, in the mid 1990s, neatly summed up the problems with the extreme positions on both sides. He criticised both the Chinese authorities obsession with 'progress' and the marked conservatism in parts of the exile community and TIPA as being out of touch with the people:

*In Tibet, the art has been going so fast the peoples' mindsets can't keep up with it while in exile art can't keep up with the development and change of peoples' mindsets.<sup>8</sup>*

## **Sinicisation and other outside influences**

While the principle of cultural change and development in a balanced form is accepted by most Tibetans from Tibet and those in exile, the question of what kind of development and outside influence is appropriate is a far more thorny issue. The most controversial aspect of change in Tibetan music in contemporary Tibet is sinicisation. Although sinicisation is an inevitable part of music from Tibet, the exiles find it extremely difficult to accept. Because the Tibetans born in exile have not grown up hearing Chinese music and are not accustomed to it, they feel alienated from sinicised Tibetan music and find

<sup>7</sup> TIN interview TIN 03-1268, 19 September 2003.

<sup>8</sup> TIN interview TIN 03-1264, 3 August 2003.

it difficult to integrate it within their perception of Tibetan culture. However, by far the most significant issue for the exiles is that sinicisation most strongly symbolises China's occupation of Tibet, which they reject virtually unanimously, and the Chinese control of Tibetan culture. The Chinese authorities and with them a vast majority of Chinese, with at best a kind of naïve, paternalistic goodwill, see it as their duty to 'develop' and 'improve' Tibetan culture through Chinese culture, and are surprised by what they see as the ungrateful attitude of Tibetans. However, this assumed ownership or right to guide the future of Tibetan culture is extremely problematic for Tibetans not just in exile but in Tibet too. Although there are ways that exiles accept Chinese influence in Tibetan music (through understanding the position of Tibetans from Tibet and, more importantly, through a sense of the restrictions on and patriotism of various performers), the most extreme position to sinicised Tibetan music sees it as the destruction of Tibetan culture, a change or corruption equivalent to cultural annihilation.

That sinicised music is viewed as destroyed culture in turn is difficult to accept for Tibetans coming from Tibet who have absorbed much sinicised Tibetan music. The idea that often gets expressed in exile that *"the Chinese have destroyed Tibetan culture"* is personally upsetting for Tibetans from Tibet, since it implies that *their* musical culture is not genuine, that they are Tibetans who have lost their identity and hence in a sense their value as Tibetans, which is not the way they see themselves. Most Tibetans from Tibet view sinicisation in far less politicised terms. While the overriding association of sinicisation for Tibetans in exile is that of the hated Chinese occupation of Tibet, for Tibetans growing up in Tibet, even those who are staunchly against the PRC regime, Chinese music and Chinese influenced music are a part of their background, associated with many facets of their life, not just the Chinese presence. For example, many Tibetans who have arrived in exile like to listen to Chinese songs out of sheer nostalgia since they remind them of Tibet, despite the fact that they have chosen to leave, usually due to dissatisfaction with Chinese rule. Tenpa explained that *"there is a lot psychologically and emotionally and through experience that is connected to [Chinese] music [for Tibetans from Tibet]"*.<sup>9</sup> As we have seen, Chinese language may be used in songs that are seen as defying the Chinese view of Tibet. Even the nuns of Drapchi prison who in 1993 recorded songs explicitly protesting the Chinese occupation used in part a Chinese influenced musical style. Ngawang Sangdrol, one of these nuns, stated:

*In Tibet, we would mostly hear Chinese style songs and we recorded our songs to the tunes of the Chinese style songs that we knew. We like these songs. Since I was young, I always heard songs like Chinese Hong Kong songs and therefore we composed some of our songs on these tunes.*<sup>10</sup>

A number of individual Tibetans similarly expressed their familiarity with and liking for Chinese songs. A Tibetan singer, patriotic (and reckless) enough to openly sing in praise of the Dalai Lama while in Tibet stated:

9 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002.

10 TIN interview AM 4, 5 January 2004.

*I sing Chinese songs. There are good songs in Chinese. We are brought up under Chinese communism and therefore Chinese songs are melodious to our ears.<sup>11</sup>*

Another young female singer from Golog, eastern Tibet, also described her feelings for Chinese songs:

*From both Tibetan songs and Chinese songs, I like Tibetan songs more. However, I lived under China for a long time, therefore when I was with my friends I sometimes would sing Chinese songs.<sup>12</sup>*

A young Tibetan from Lhasa expressed how exposure to Chinese songs in Lhasa has made them appeal to him. The slip of the tongue perfectly expresses why Tibetans in Tibet become familiar with, and grow to like Chinese songs, as well as the reason the exiles resent sinicisation so strongly:

*I like Chinese songs. I don't know many Tibetan songs and Tibetan songs didn't catch my interest because I was growing up in the country of China. No, I mean in Tibet, but there are many Chinese people. I was born in Tibet where there are many Chinese and therefore I came to like Chinese songs.<sup>13</sup>*

Tenpa also claimed that there were Chinese songs that expressed feelings relevant to the Tibetan situation in particular, and to human beings, including Tibetans, in general. However, he defended the Tibetans' interest in Chinese songs, clearly separating it from interest in China and Chinese culture *per se*:

*You can say that there is probably no Tibetan who really listens to Chinese songs because they want to listen in particular to Chinese traditional culture or to songs in praise of the Chinese or songs that proclaim that Tibet is part of China or out of interest in Chinese culture. Here [in India] some Tibetans that came from Tibet listen to Chinese songs. It is nothing bad to listen to Chinese songs. [...]*

*Some of our needs are reflected in the lyrics of Chinese songs as well. The songs advise people against mistakes, and these apply as much to Tibetans in Tibet as to Tibetans in exile as well. [...] One of the performers Tibetans listen to a lot is the Chinese singer called Chi Chun [from Hong Kong]. The messages of his songs fit with our political ideas. He is a singer who if he were Tibetan would be considered a singer that has political messages in his songs. One of the songs he sang was titled 'I am like a roaming wolf on a plateau'. He sings of how the wolf is without shelter because no one takes care of him. There are not many Tibetans who understand Chinese songs who don't listen to his songs. I think if he were a Tibetan the Chinese probably wouldn't allow him to sing. [...]*

11 TIN interview TIN 03-1082, 1 April 2003

12 TIN interview TIN 03-1080, 20 March 2003

13 TIN interview TIN 02-1221, 18 November 2002

*When a Chinese sings about love, then whether the tune is Chinese or not, Tibetans just can't [help] but listen to it. Every Tibetan has feelings of love. [...]*

*So when Tibetans listen to Chinese songs, they do so because it has some meaning for them emotionally; they don't listen to it thinking that this is part of our Tibetan traditional culture.<sup>14</sup>*

Another singer, from Labrang, who came into exile in 1997, found nothing wrong with Tibetans singing Chinese songs as long as this was in addition to, rather than instead of, Tibetan songs:

*It is shameful to sing the songs of another nationality if you can't sing the songs of your own nationality. But if you know how to sing the songs of your own nationality then it is nice if on top of that you sing the songs of another nationality.<sup>15</sup>*

The thought that Chinese songs may replace Tibetan songs or that Tibetan songs may become so influenced by Chinese songs that they will lose their character is what worries Tibetans in exile and to a lesser extent in Tibet, rather than Tibetans listening to Chinese songs *per se*. Although the censorship of traditional Tibetan culture has been lifted since the 1980s, with the swamping of Tibet by Chinese language pop music through the increasingly far-reaching mass media, the fear that Tibetan music may dissolve in the vast sea of modern China is not surprising. This fear underlies much hostility to and suspicion of change, which in turn becomes problematic particularly for those Tibetans in Tibet who are trying to be innovative with their music, since their work is viewed with suspicion and often seen only from the point of view of being under Chinese influence, rather than creation of its own. Harsh criticisms are heard from Tibetans recently arrived from Tibet, reflecting their sense of frustration and alienation in exile where a large amount of music they see as being Tibetan and created by them as Tibetans is dismissed as Chinese. One singer from Labrang, for example, stated:

*[TIPA] actually don't know Tibetan songs. The songs sung in Tibet are not at all similar to Chinese songs. For example, listen to a song of Yadong. You will feel that it is a Tibetan song.<sup>16</sup>*

A similar opinion was expressed by Ngodrub, a Tibetan from Tibet who is particularly interested in the development and creation of new culture, and feels that anything new created by Tibetans in Tibet is dismissed as being Chinese:

*Earlier I told TIPA that I was going to exchange the useful knowledge that I had gained in Tibet at TIPA so that we could improve things but they always think that whatever I performed would be Chinese.*

14 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002

15 TIN interview TIN 03-1084, 28 April 2003

16 TIN interview TIN 03-1084, 28 April 2003



*How can you criticise newly created dances [for not being traditional]? They are new creations. As long as you don't pretend or say that they are traditional dances then no one can say anything. If you say that you are performing a traditional dance, however, you should stick to its original form, you can't just change it. The problem now is that because Tibet is occupied by China, any new creation in Tibet will be disregarded as something Chinese, even if it was created by Tibetans only. Were Tibet an independent country then the same song wouldn't receive the same criticism of it being sinicised. In Tibet we have a dranyen [Tibetan lute] with four strings, it is a traditional Tibetan instrument but with a modern modification. From the exile point of view it will definitely be seen as the destruction of our culture, though.<sup>17</sup>*

However, although traditional music in exile is largely preserved without major changes, unlike the performances of the professional troupes in Tibet, the new pop music has absorbed extensive influence from western music, Nepali music, in the case of the Tibetans in Nepal, and to a lesser extent, Hindi film music. This is invariably pointed out by Tibetans who have recently come from Tibet, especially when they are put in the defensive position of having to explain or account for Chinese influence in music from Tibet. Ngawang Sangdrol commented on the Chinese influence of the songs she and her fellow nuns recorded, for example:

*When we were in Tibet, we didn't even notice that the tunes of the songs we were singing had a Chinese influence. Since I came [into exile], I found out that our songs have a Chinese influence. I didn't even know this. [...] However, the changes of Tibetan music can be understood by the people here [in exile] because we can't notice because we were growing up in Tibet under the Chinese. Therefore I worry about the changes. I think everywhere there is change. In Tibet we have Chinese influence in our songs and when we came here [in exile] we notice the songs here have a bit of Indian influence. [...] Wherever you are you get the influence of that society.<sup>18</sup>*

Some exile Tibetans also note the parallel. Lobsang Wangyal, for example, stated:

*As I said, [...] it is OK for the Tibetan people to listen to Chinese music so that they will increase their knowledge. It is the same as with [Hindi and western music].<sup>19</sup>*

Tubten T. Anyetsang of the Tibetan government in exile stated similarly:

*Here in exile, when there is a party, youngsters are attracted by western and Indian music. When songs are being sung, the number of Tibetan songs sung might be less than the Indian and western songs sung. But everybody enjoys. If I am in Tibet, and if under the Chinese, I see someone sing a Chinese song,*

<sup>17</sup> TIN interview TIN 03-1264, 4 August 2003

<sup>18</sup> TIN interview AM 4, 5 January 2004.

<sup>19</sup> TIN interview TIN 03-1268, 19 September 2003

*then I might be disappointed, I might feel that they changed our culture. But it is not right of me to think in that way. Because there is influence, they are influenced. It is the same as here, through innocence and through chance; people are influenced, not in a planned manner. Here we preserve our traditional culture without being against other influences.<sup>20</sup>*

However, the difference between Chinese influence in Tibet and Hindi, Nepali and western influence in exile that is pointed out by Tibetans from exile and less commonly from Tibet, is that of force. Tashi, who came from Tibet to exile around 1999 stated:

*Since [the Chinese occupied Tibet] there was much [Chinese] influence in Tibet. Whether Tibetan culture is entirely destroyed or not, and whether there is an influence of Chinese culture in Tibet or not, the point is that it happens in a situation of force.<sup>21</sup>*

A Tibetan musician who came to India as a small child stated:

*[There is] no natural evolution in Tibet. China came out of the blue, destroyed everything, put mics everywhere, broadcast Chinese music. [...] They introduced a new culture that they forced Tibetans to listen to and practice. [...] ] That's how they brought Tibetans into modern society.<sup>22</sup>*

Lobsang Wangyal contrasted force in Tibet with free choice in exile:

*The changes in Tibet are changes that don't come from free choices made by Tibetan people in Tibet. They are forced changes whereas in exile the changes are according to free choices.<sup>23</sup>*

Tenpa criticised exile Tibetans for absorbing outside influences when they are not forced to like Tibetans in Tibet:

*In the case of songs in Lhasa, there many songs are mixed with Chinese tunes. The reason for this is that the people were educated in school [Chinese education] when they were very young and although they can't claim that they don't have any responsibility at all, it is difficult for them to resist the flow of society. Here in exile we only have to be in tune with our Tibetan society, there is no reason why we should go with the flow of Indian society or of any other countries. Tibetans should be able to produce songs that stay close to their traditional cultural heritage. No one forces them to perform songs from other countries.<sup>24</sup>*

20 TIN interview TIN 03-778, 23 January 2003

21 TIN interview TIN 03-1084, 28 April 2003.

22 Personal communication 2 November 2003.

23 TIN interview TIN 03-1268, 19 September 2003

24 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002

The idea that the exiles exercise free choice in their musical tastes and Tibetans in Tibet are forced is very questionable. In the *present* climate in Tibet, the choices of the Tibetans in Tibet and those in exile are not far off being as free or 'un-free' as each other. Although the foundations of Chinese cultural influence were laid in Tibet during at least 20 years of intense, forced exposure, including 10 years of total censorship of Tibetan music, the direct force is no longer present in today's Tibet, and Tibetans are largely 'free' to create and listen to the music of their choice (lyrics are censored). And indeed they largely do not feel their musical creations are the result of Chinese force, but rather their own taste. The fact that they 'choose' to like Chinese music and incorporate Chinese style music and language in their own creations is due to the Chinese presence in Tibet, as explained by the interviewees above. Similarly, there is certainly no direct force on Tibetans in India, Nepal or the west to adopt the music of their host countries, yet like the Tibetans in China, Tibetans in exile are a tiny minority. The pressure of the cultural forces of the dominant popular cultures of modern India, Nepal, the west and China is immense, and affects Tibetans and the kind of music they like in all these countries.

Possibly the most controversial development in Tibetan music in Tibet is Tibetans singing in Chinese language. Not only is Chinese language music alienating for Tibetan exiles due to the language barrier, but language is such a key indicator of national identity that it is incomprehensible to most exiles how a song can be Tibetan if it is sung in Chinese, even though they are sympathetic to singers in Tibet being pressured to sing in Chinese. Lobsang Wangyal, for example, although not voicing direct objection to Tibetan songs in Chinese, stated:

*When we talk about Tibetan music, this is the music that is played in Tibetan language.<sup>25</sup>*

However, Tibetans from Tibet state that the Chinese language songs of singers like Yadong are very definitely Tibetan, and that they are instantly distinguishable from the Chinese songs of Chinese singers or some of the Tibetans trained in the Chinese way. Tenpa stated that there are Tibetans trained in Chinese institutions who sing Chinese songs like Chinese singers do, but differentiates them from Yadong:

*If you listen to Chinese songs and Yadong's songs together, they are different. Chinese songs have Chinese taste and Yadong's songs have Tibetan taste. For instance, it is like a western singer who sings a western song and a Tibetan singer who sings a western song. If a [Tibetan] who had a Chinese education and a Chinese person sing karaoke, it is difficult to make out who is the Tibetan. They are given rigorous education. When these Tibetans that have had a Chinese education sing a Tibetan song, they sing [it] like a Chinese song. Yadong isn't like that. He sings in accordance with Tibetan taste.*

What is it that makes Yadong's songs distinctively Tibetan, despite the fact that he sings in Chinese? It is partly a matter of style, the fact that Yadong did not study at a Chinese conservatoire and has not adopted a typical Chinese singing style.<sup>26</sup> But what is more important is the content of the lyrics he sings which are always seen as indicating Tibetan national pride and patriotism. Tenpa continued:

*Since [Yadong] is a Tibetan and his songs are about the beautiful scenery of Tibet, praising the landscape of Tibet, I regard all his songs as pure Tibetan songs. Since he began to sing he released 40 to 50 music albums. In these 40 to 50 music albums, he didn't have any song that glorifies the Chinese, whereas other singers could have songs in praise of the Chinese even if they have released only one CD album.*

Tashi echoed this view, also defending singers who were forced to sing in Chinese:

*Most of [Yadong's] songs are Chinese but his lyrics are in praise of the landscapes of Tibet and he takes leaders of Tibet as examples and he never praises China in his songs. [...] I feel it is best if a person sings songs in his own language. If compelled under Chinese rule he sings the song in Chinese but with a distinctly Tibetan meaning, then I feel it comes down to the same thing. Anyway, he cannot sing the songs in his own language. Only the lyrics are written in Chinese but the meaning is solidly pro Tibet. In that way it helps our culture.<sup>27</sup>*

Tenpa also discussed a performance by the famous Tibetan singer Yungdrung Gyal during a national level minorities competition. In such a competition, participants will sing in Chinese since there is no hope of winning if they sing in their native languages. Yet within these restrictions, Tenpa describes how he saw Yungdrung Gyal asserting his national identity:

*Last year one of our singers, Yungdrung Gyal, went to participate in a minorities contest. [...] We knew before that he would sing in Chinese. [...] Why did I watch him? Not because there was any hope that he would get first position. [...] But the main thing is that he should participate in the contest. However, he then should wear Tibetan dress without even the slightest Chinese influence. Therefore I watched and there he was. He appeared wearing an Amdo chuba with all accessories. Mixed with the participants of 54 other nationalities he was the smallest in posture, but he came with his earrings in and his rosary around his neck, wearing all his ornaments, and despite his small body, his appearance was very grand. I really liked this, and sitting alone in front of my TV set I cried out. Then he spoke. I thought, "If he is now going to praise the Chinese or something then it is all spoiled". However, he didn't praise the Chinese. He*

26 Not all singers educated at Chinese conservatoires sing in a typical Chinese voice, as discussed in chapter 3.

27 TIN interview TIN 03-1084, 28 April 2003

*explained how he had learned to sing, and then he said, "I am a Tibetan", and then he continued saying, "I offer you all my Tashi delek". I loved it! [...] So it is enough that he was able to present that part of Tibet and to use these few Tibetan words. I was very happy to see his performance there. Then he got second position.<sup>28</sup>*

On a more practical level, Tibetans in Tibet are very supportive of Tibetans singing in Chinese, because they see it as a means to introduce Tibetan culture and Tibetans' distinct cultural identity to the vast Chinese audience, a way for the Tibetan minority nationality to make its mark on China and make its presence felt. Tibetans are particularly proud of Yadong for his achievement of nationwide fame. For example, Tenpa stated:

*Here in exile we talk about the importance for the Chinese public to understand what Tibet is and who are Tibetans. I think that much of the understanding among Chinese people about what Tibet is and who Tibetans are is because of the promotion through singer performers inside Tibet and China. [...]*

*Here in exile, when we publicise the problems of our Tibet to the world, we sometimes choose to publish a book in Tibetan, sometimes we choose to publish a book in English. Which one has a wider reach? Thinking about it in this way, I think that the importance of performers who sing in Chinese is not to be underestimated.<sup>29</sup>*

Ngawang Sangdrol also praised Yadong's ability to sing so well and with such success in a language which is not his native tongue, and pointed out the fact that there are no Chinese who can sing equivalently well in Tibetan:

*Yadong sings very well in Tibetan as well as in another language. We [Tibetans] are able to sing really good songs in Chinese but no Chinese can sing so well in Tibetan. I think we should be proud of [Yadong] for being able to sing [in Chinese].<sup>30</sup>*

## Chinese music and Tibetan identity

*I am living in India and I am wearing the things that India makes but this doesn't mean that I am not a Tibetan. To say "I am a Tibetan" is the strongest point to prove that you are a Tibetan. Then only the question arises of how and why you are a Tibetan, and then Tibetan culture is very important. – Lobsang Wangyal, Tibetan born in India<sup>31</sup>*

28 TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002

29 *ibid*

30 TIN interview AM 4, 5 January 2004.

31 TIN interview TIN 03-1268, 19 September 2003

The tumultuous changes in Tibetan musical culture that have come about as a result of political pressures, the spread of the mass media across Tibet and the rest of the world and the migration of tens of thousands of Tibetans into new contexts in exile have resulted in heated debates over cultural identity. The central issue in these debates is how to define a Tibetan identity in the modern world and how a distinct Tibetan cultural identity can be preserved into the future. There is a thriving musical culture in Tibet as well as in exile, but how much of this music is truly Tibetan? Has the 'essence' been discarded (through repression, modernity, 'development' or the swamping by majority cultures) and 'dross' introduced? Or has Tibetan music managed to hold onto its 'essence'? Is the music of Tibet, the homeland, more Tibetan, or is it less Tibetan, due to 'corruption' by Chinese influence? Has true Tibetan music been preserved in exile, has conservatism stifled it, or has it been swamped by Hindi, Nepali and western music?

The definition of 'authentic' Tibetan music and the question of how new forms of Tibetan music relate to Tibetan identity evokes strong responses from Tibetans. Some exiles react emotionally when they hear music influenced by Chinese musical or vocal styles, and then presented as Tibetan, especially when sung in the Chinese language. One Tibetan musician who grew up in exile commented:

*That's the most dangerous thing, [what] I don't want to see, [what] makes me angry more than anything else, when they sing those kinds of songs and they think it's their identity. I hate it.<sup>32</sup>*

Yet many Tibetans from Tibet, as they enter the supposedly 'pure' Tibetan culture in exile, feel utterly alienated from it. Tsetan, who arrived from Tibet in 1996, commented "*I feel so far away from [exile songs] [...] I can't feel close, can't get interested in the songs*", and said he felt more drawn to Hindi music.<sup>33</sup> While there is often a sense from Tibetans in exile and Western supporters that 'all is lost' in Tibet itself, and that 'real' Tibetan music survives and thrives in exile only, the experience of Tibetans from Tibet as they come into exile presents a very different picture. Apart from the question of what music can be described as 'truly' Tibetan, Tibetans from Tibet sense a lack of basic knowledge among exiles of the extent and depth of cultural revival in Tibet and the continuing musical creativity of the Tibetans from Tibet. Tenpa referred to these issues when he expressed his regrets about coming into exile:

*However much freedom and rights we have in exile, nothing compares to the richness in poetry and metaphor of songs written inside Tibet.<sup>34</sup>*

These and the other opinions of Tibetans presented in this chapter indicate the divergence in musical cultures in Tibet and in exile, which has emerged as a result of the 'liberation' of Tibet and the ensuing political struggle, and the problems this divergence is causing for modern Tibetan identity. A glance at the music collections of Tibetans born

<sup>32</sup> TIN interview 2 November 2003

<sup>33</sup> TIN interview AM1 7 August 2003

<sup>34</sup> TIN interview TIN 02-753, 17 November 2002. The superior quality of lyrics in songs from Tibet is widely recognised now by Tibetans born in exile as well as those from Tibet such as Tenpa.

in exile and those born in Tibet will typically indicate that the music that these two groups of Tibetans listen to and identify with is markedly different.

It appears that whereas the political struggle between Tibetans and Chinese has unified Tibetans beyond traditionally strong regional differences, cultural change has divided Tibetans in Tibet from those in exile. The formers' partial absorption of Chinese influences alienates the latter. This has made the definition of an overreaching modern Tibetan cultural identity problematic.

There are a number of ways in which Tibetans attempt to deal with this disagreement over what is authentically Tibetan. The first, which is widespread, is denial that there is any disagreement. Beyond this, a relatively small number of Tibetans in exile try to understand the reality of life in modern Tibet and the cultural pressures there, and try to enter into the musical tastes of Tibetans from Tibet. This has been further helped by the easy availability of recorded music since the late 1980s.

However, the most important means for negotiating the problem of musical authenticity is a sense of patriotism, which can override Chinese language or influence to mark a given song or singer as definitely Tibetan in the opinion of Tibetans from Tibet and exile, as seen in the above comments about Yadong and Yungdrung Gyal. This same patriotic intention in fact underpins the denial of the disagreement over authenticity in the first place, and the attempts by exiles to understand and enter into the new music coming from Tibet. It also underpins similar attempts by Tibetans from Tibet to enter into the music of their new environment. Many modern songs composed in Tibet have lyrics that can be read in Tibetan nationalist ways, as described in chapter 5, and a number of singers in Tibet are surrounded by rumours of confrontations with the Chinese authorities. Yadong is rumoured to have been detained after refusing to sing at a function where the Dalai Lama was denounced, and Dube is also rumoured to have been detained at least once. These reports are unconfirmed, yet whether in fact true or not, they are significant to the strongly patriotic image of these performers and their popularity in Tibet and exile. Yadong has also had at least two of his Chinese language songs banned from *nangma* bars, and is widely seen as being very religious, another manifestation of his patriotism. Dadon, Tibet's most famous pop singer before Yadong, left Tibet dramatically in 1992, and has since openly criticised China. The popular singer Karma Tendar was banned from releasing cassettes after his first album, released in 1992, was found to be politically sensitive.

That Yadong is currently Tibet's most popular singer and is attracting increasing attention in exile communities despite the fact that he sings largely in Chinese is, talent aside, due to his strongly patriotic image, especially for the exile Tibetans. Similarly, the fact that Dadon, who sang in a style heavily influenced by Chinese language pop singers from Hong Kong and Taiwan, is extremely popular in exile as well as Tibet, is due to the recognition of political meaning in her songs, and subsequently, her defection and open denunciation of the Chinese in exile in addition to her formidable talent and

determination. Politics aside, Tibetan songs from Tibet are also admired in exile due to the high quality of their poetry, which helps counterbalance their Tibetan-ness against sinicised musical style.

The ambivalence over foreign influence, in particular, Chinese influence, on Tibetan music tends to ignore the fact that Tibetan music has absorbed foreign cultural influence before. As Lobsang Wangyal explains, what are seen as two of Tibet's most traditional musical genres are the result of foreign influence or wholesale foreign importation:

*When we talk about Tibetan songs, there is not anything concrete to show; it is very much debatable. For example, we say that nangma is a traditional form of Tibetan singing, but in fact it has a Muslim root and it is an Urdu word pronounced nagma which means 'song'. There is proof for this link because earlier in Tibet the people who would sing nangma songs were Muslims. The Tibetan Muslims originated from Kashmir and they would come to Tibet to sell fruits and do business in Tibet and then they started to marry Tibetans etc. Therefore, the so-called nangma has its origination in Urdu [Muslim culture]. Later it became Tibetan. Therefore I say that Tibetan culture was derived from other countries. [...] Another example is [...] the instruments that we usually play for the Dalai Lama in the morning [...]. These instruments came from Iraq and Iran to Ladakh and then spread to Tibet [...].<sup>35</sup> These all have become a part of our cultural heritage now, and we say and we are able to say that these are Tibetan culture.<sup>36</sup>*

In other words, Tibetans have assimilated aspects of foreign cultures and have transformed them into what is now seen as authentic Tibetan culture. Is it possible that rather than being assimilated by China or the cultures of the countries where Tibetans live in exile, the foreign influences on Tibetan culture will now become authentic Tibetan culture of the future, because it is enhanced with Tibetan styles, sung in Tibetan language, expressive of a patriotic Tibetan spirit, or, quite simply, performed by Tibetans? Lobsang Wangyal explained how this occurred in Tibet's assimilation of Indian Buddhism:

*The Buddha was born in India and he was an Indian man but when Tibetan people make an image of him, they make a Tibetan face for the image. This is because the Tibetans want to show that [the Buddha and Bodhisattvas] are Tibetan.*

<sup>35</sup> Wangyal is talking of the shawms and the drums of the *Gar* ensemble. According to Trewin these instruments came from what is currently the Middle East and were introduced into India by the Muslim invaders. They reached Ladakh and Baltistan in several phases during the time of the Mughal Empire following wars, conquests and treaties between the Mughals and the rulers of Ladakh and Baltistan. The instruments are believed to have first reached Lhasa in 1642 following the Ladakh-Tibet treaty, when musicians were sent to the Fifth Dalai Lama's court in Lhasa. See Mark Trewin 1995 'On the history and origin of 'gar': The court ceremonial music of Tibet', *CHIME Journal* No. 8 Spring: 4-31.

<sup>36</sup> TIN interview JW 1268, 19 September 2003.



Questions of authenticity and Tibetan identity will remain disputed and highly politicised even after any possible satisfactory settlement of the 'Tibet issue'. Yet Tibetan musicians continue to compose songs that will become the future cultural heritage of Tibetans, with varying degrees of foreign influence. Tenpa, who grew up in a traditional rural Amdo Tibetan environment, was trained by local Tibetans and later at a Chinese conservatoire, and has since come into exile, expressed his determination to keep working for a vibrant and modern Tibetan culture:

*I will compose as many songs as possible so that these songs will be the traditional Tibetan songs of the future. It will be said that those songs were the songs during the time of the [14th] Dalai Lama and [the time] when [the Tibetan people] came into exile. They will be in praise of the environment and of educated people of that time, and they will be advice for those who are uneducated and who spend their time smoking and so on. These will definitely be a part of our cultural heritage in ten years or one hundred years in the future. Keeping this in mind, I compose new songs and I am sure many Tibetan people inside Tibet are also creating many new songs for the future of the Tibetan tradition.<sup>37</sup>*

