

# Lhasa Street Songs : Political and Social Satire in Traditional Tibet

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The Western image of Tibet focuses on the grandeur and sophistication of Buddhist religion. Tibetan art and literature are seen as virtually synonymous with religion, and the presence of sophisticated secular expressive forms have been almost totally ignored. In this paper we shall discuss one such extraordinary secular art form: the "street song."

The traditional Tibetan state had no newspapers or radios; no political parties or elections. Yet within the midst of that feudal polity a remarkable genre of open political and social criticism thrived in the form of songs that lampooned the vice, folly and misdeeds of the mighty and summed up important political and social events, often with biting sarcasm and irony. Known as "street songs" in the West because they were sung on the streets of Lhasa and other large towns, these songs have no specific name in Tibetan where they are differentiated from other types of songs by phrases such as "songs related to politics" (*srid don dang 'brel ba'i gzhas*).

"Street songs", actually, were not new songs in the Western sense of the term. Rather, they were newly composed "political" lyrics (*gzhas tshig*) which were set to traditional melodies. Since song lyrics in Tibet almost always contained stanzas of 4 lines with 6 syllables each, these new lyrics could be set to virtually any traditional melody.

Street songs were a kind of public commentary somewhat akin to our own tradition of political cartoons, albeit in a verbal rather than a visual medium. Because they normally consisted of only one or two stanzas (4 or 8 lines), they were heavily dependent on imagery. Like political cartoons, they caricatured political, and sometimes social, events and people with a few deft strokes but here the strokes were aliterations, extended puns on names, allusions, etc. Moreover, although the songs were normally sung to well-known folk tunes, the lyrics were also recited orally and are really a brilliant form of oral verse which express scorn and ridicule at the foibles of the most powerful figures in Tibet including even the Dalai Lama and Regent.

Street songs, however, differ from Western political cartoons in several fundamental ways. One difference, of course, is the verbal medium of the songs. A second, less obvious difference, concerns the nature of the socio-political milieu in which they existed. Unlike our cartoons, street songs were

produced in an environment that did not permit public participation in political affairs and did not condone, leave alone encourage, overt criticism of either superiors or governmental decisions. The Tibetan government was controlled by a tiny elite of monk and aristocratic officials which ruled without significant input from the masses. Patterns of hierarchy and deference were strongly embedded in the culture of political Tibet and were particularly intense in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet and the location of the songs presented below.

Headed by the numerous aristocratic families, Lhasa was the center for *haute monde* in Tibet. The elaborate hierarchy of governmental ranks provided demarcation lines between statuses and these were relevant not only in the governmental sphere, but also in every-day life where they were expressed in a variety of explicit ways such as seating arrangements, the right to wear certain types of clothes or accessories, and in the types of titles and honorifics used in "polite" speech. Subordinates, whether they were aristocratic servants or aristocratic officials themselves, were expected to defer to the wishes of their superiors; verbal insubordination was unacceptable and subordinates were expected to show deference in their demeanor to superiors. This whole ethic of highly structured and formalized interpersonal etiquette was pervasive, and, e.g., it would not have been unlikely that bitter enemies meeting on the street would follow ritualized patterns of polite behavior and etiquette. An outsider would not get any inkling from the encounter of the presence of enmity between the parties, in fact, one might get just the opposite impression.

It is, therefore, remarkable that there existed in this milieu of rule by elites and elaborate deference behavior, a mode of socio-political commentary which openly and disrespectfully ridiculed the highest and most important figures in the state. The contrast between the rigid rules of polite deference and the blatant expression of disrespect, derision and ridicule in the songs is striking. On a given day in Lhasa one might well hear a group of picnickers singing merrily about the blunders and corruption of an official, and singing particularly loudly when they passed his house. Or one might hear construction workers or female water carriers singing a derogatory or ridiculing verse while they plied their trade. Hugh Richardson, former British Government Agent in Lhasa told me that once when he asked his Tibetan assistant what some female water-carriers were singing about when they passed the British consular headquarters in Lhasa, he was told they were singing a song about the Legation. At night, in the taverns of Lhasa, one might also hear a popular song about some misdeed. The humble and submissive respect which characterized face-to-face relations vanished in the anonymity of a popular song.

The origin of these 'street songs' is shrouded in myth and romanticism. Tibetans have a somewhat apochryphal tradition that the songs originate from an emanation of the protective goddess of Lhasa, Pandenlhamo (*dpal ldan lha mo*) who, it is said, manifests herself among the female water-carriers

during the New Year celebration and originates a new song. Since this obviously cannot account for the dozens of songs that begin during other times of the year, it does not help us to understand their origin.

Another explanation of the songs romanticizes them as a Tibetan form of popular protest that represents the "voice of the common people." This, however, was not usually the case and street songs were normally composed surreptitiously by government officials or others closely involved with the government such as monastic leaders in Lhasa.

Once composed, a song was anonymously transmitted to the public in a variety of ways. For example, the composer could simply sing the new verse to a servant or friend saying he had just heard it and then let events take their course. Or a trusted servant could bribe a water-carrier or house-builder to start singing it. Sometimes the songs were written in the printed (*dbu chen*) script (so that the author's handwriting could not be determined) and then scattered on the circumambulation route around the Jokhang in Lhasa. In any case, if the verse was catchy, it could spread like wildfire. After a few months, however, when the novelty wore off, the song would not be actively sung and would then enter a latent category where it would be sung only occasionally and more likely recited as verse to illustrate or enliven some point or incident in a discussion of Tibetan history. It was in this form that I first encountered these cryptic but magnificent songs in 1965 while doing research in a Tibetan resettlement camp in Karnataka, India.

Thus, rather than being a spontaneous outburst of popular protest by the common people, 'street songs' were, to a large degree, actually the product primarily of the political intelligentsia. Nonetheless, they were still an amazing expression of indignation and criticism in a society that did not normally permit such an expression. But they were also a subtle resource in the fierce competition for political power and prestige that characterized the Tibetan political system. They were a means by which the leading contenders for power and influence could publically expose the embarrassing misdeeds of political enemies, or, in some cases attempt to shift the blame for some action onto an enemy.

Because these songs refer to specific political figures and events and do so in a highly condensed and indirect way, the listener is required to fill in a tremendous amount of background information in order to comprehend the songs. A Westerner or Tibetan with no knowledge of the key political figures and events could make no sense of the songs, just as a Tibetan looking at Western political cartoons could not understand their real meaning. It would not be unusual, therefore, for a Tibetan hearing a song to ask the singer or someone else what X or Y referred to. Thus, in this essay, it will be necessary to explicate briefly the historical context and imagery of the lyrics in order to permit appreciation and comprehension.

The selections presented below include a sample of different types of songs including: "hardcore" political satire relating to people and events,

social satire concerning customs and human frailty, and finally a masterful secular verse composed by the famous lay aristocrat Kyisur (*Skyid zur*).

### THE SONGS

The first song deals with the attempted *Coup d'etat* of Lungshar; (*Lung shar*) in 1934. It exemplifies the biting wit and sarcasm of the genre and the manner in which allusions and metaphorical symbolism are used to comment on the actions of the high and mighty.

1.1 khri smon bya sde yin zer  
 dge 'phel dbu rtser slebs shag  
 nam tshod thig po byung song  
 bya skad snyan po byung song  
 lung shar bla ma yin zer  
 bká' chos gnang gin bzhugs shag  
 dri med kun ldan yin zer  
 spyen mig sbyin par btang song

1.2 Trimon (*Khri-smon*), saying he's a chicken,  
 has arrived at Gempayutse (*Dge 'phel dbu rtse*).  
 The timing was exactly right,  
 the cock's crow was pleasing.

Lunghshar, saying he's a lama,  
 is preaching a sermon.  
 And saying he's Trimaygunden (*Dri med kun ldan*),  
 has given his eyes as alms.

The historical context of this verse concerns the ill-fated *coup d'etat* organized and masterminded by the aristocratic official Lungshar in 1934. The demise of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama on the 13th of the 11th Tibetan month (December 17, 1933) left a critical power void in Tibet. The two main political figures at that time were Lungshar and Kunpela (*Kun 'phel*). The latter was a monk who had been the primary favorite of the Dalai Lama as well as his close companion. Although a regular monk at first, through his association with the ruler he had become phenomenally wealthy and powerful. Lungshar was a lay, or aristocratic, government official who had also been a favorite of the ruler, albeit not on the same personal level as has been Kunpela.

Within a matter of days following the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Lungshar set out to destroy his rival Kunpela. Lungshar based his power on the monks of the 'big three' monasteries around Lhasa and manipulated them into active support by indirectly insinuating that Kunpela, who had kept the news of the Dalai Lama's illness a secret until very late

in the illness, had acted improperly and that the entire affair leading to the death of the Dalai Lama needed thorough examination. Although Kumpela was never outwardly charged with murder, he was destroyed for his part in the affair. His wealth was confiscated and he was imprisoned in exile never to be permitted to return to Lhasa.

The first main order of business following the death of Dalai Lama was the selection of a Regent to rule until the new Dalai Lama (who he would organize the search for) reached majority rule. In January of 1934, the Tibetan General Assembly (*tshogs 'du rgyas rdzoms*) selected the young incarnation of the Reting (*Rwa sgreng*) line as the new regent. About this time Lungshar began to organize a plot to take control of the government and institute reforms which would make it more democratic. A part of his scheme was to make the Dalai Lama a figurehead ruler along the lines of the crown in England and place the main power in the Assembly. However, a major obstacle for Lungshar was the experienced and politically shrewd Council Minister Trimon. Earlier, at the time of the Kumpela affair, it had been Trimon who had blocked Lungshar's power play to have his monk supporters take over control of the government Trapchi armory after the troops deserted. Trimon and the Council of Ministers had to be eliminated if Lungshar's plans were to be successful.

Lungshar, it is said, decided to assassinate Trimon along with a number of other key figures, but unbeknownst to him, one of the government officials within his party, the lay official Kapshopa (*Ka shod pa*), informed Trimon and the Council of Ministers of Lungshar's plans. When Trimon and the other Ministers heard of the intended assassinations, they at once took the information before the Regent and Prime Minister and together they decided that Lungshar had to be arrested but that the time was not yet right. In order to assure that no leak of their plans would occur they each took a sacred oath of secrecy. Their strategy was for Trimon to flee to a friendly monastic unit (*khamtsen: khamtsen*) in the Loseling (*blo gsal gling*) college of Drepung monastery, (the largest monastery in Tibet). Trimon shocked the monk leaders there with his accounts of how Lungshar was planning to assassinate him and take over the government and asked them for their protection and support against this demonic enemy of the faith. They at once pledged this and sent him off to safety in one of their college's small hermitages nearby called *Dge 'phel dbu rtse*.

By this maneuver Trimon, in one fell swoop, alienated the backing of the largest and most powerful single monastic college and drove a wedge in Lungshar's monastic front. The next day the remaining Ministers along with the Regent and Prime Minister ordered and accomplished the arrest of Lungshar, and a number of his followers. In the ensuing trial, Lungshar was denobled, lost all his property and wealth, and finally was punished by having his eyes plucked out.

The imagery in the verse then alludes on the one hand to Trimon's acting at just the right time and being victorious in his strategy, and on the other

hand, to Lungshar preaching new ideas and to his defeat. The comparison of Lungshar to *Dri med Kun ldan* is a brilliant turn of irony. *Dri med kun ldan* was the Buddha in a previous rebirth. Born the son of an Indian king, he had all the material wealth and power he could desire. Nonetheless, he came to feel compassion for the untold suffering existing in the temporal world and began to give away all the vast riches of his father to beggars. After a tortuous series of events, he with his wife and child went into exile still continuing to give away his belongings to anyone who asked for them. Finally, when a blind beggar asked him for his eyes, *Dri med kun Idan* freely gave them as alms to the beggar. Thus, the comparison of Lungshar with *Dri med kun ldan* adds a final touch of bitter, ironic sarcasm to the verse.

The second song is a satiric commentary on the two Regents who ruled Tibet during the period between the 13th and 14th Dalai Lamas (1934-50). The song refers to the bizarre resignation of the Reting Regent in 1940 after only 6 years in office and the installation of an old and somewhat other-worldly incarnate Lama (Taktra: *stag brag*) as the new Regent. This was a startling event in Tibetan political life. Reting was a young man in good health and by all outward indications should have fought to maintain himself in power. Instead, he voluntarily turned over paramount authority of Tibet to an old and relatively unknown Lama called Taktra.

Several explanations of this have appeared in print. Shakabpha (1967: 286) states the "official" explanation that the Regent resigned on the advice of the state astrologer who predicted that Reting's life would be short if he did not go into meditation retreat (which in Tibet is commonly 3 years, 3 months and 3 days). This—to be sure—was the overt reason offered by Reting, but it seems highly unlikely that it was the actual one. Numerous religious measures could have been taken to offset or counteract the potential future harm supposedly hovering over the Regent. Richardson (1965: 158) states that the "Regent resigned because of increasing unpopularity which was intensified by his harsh treatment of the aristocratic official Khyungram." However, in a system such as Tibet, it is unlikely that mere unpopularity could have driven the ruler to relinquish his power. Nothing short of a *coup d'etat* could have dislodged the Regent if this were the only reason.

Another speculated explanation argues that Reting resigned from office rather than have to administer monastic vows (*rab byung*) to the young Dalai Lama when he himself was no longer a "pure" monk, that is, he was no longer celibate. Rather than desicrate and invalidate the ceremony of the Dalai Lama's initiation, Reting resigned. However, this resignation was not intended to be permanent. Taktra was elderly, conservative and not powerful and Reting is said to have had a tacit understanding that after a few years, when his "meditation" was finished, the Taktra Lama would resign and pass the rule of Tibet back into his hands.

Taktra, however, did no such thing. Surrounding himself with elements of the aristocratic and monastic bureaucracy who were hostile to Reting, i.e., persons who had been abused or persecuted by Reting, he took firm

control of the government and showed no intention of turning over the reins of government to Reting. The ill feeling and conflict which arose out of this situation finally came to a head in the abortive *coup* attempt of Reting and his followers in 1947.

2.1 Rwa pho dwangs bstod lang nas  
stag la 'og gzhol g.yog song  
stag pho ngo tsha med pas  
rwa pho hob te zas song

2.2 The billy-goat being showoffish,  
has put (his) beard on the tiger.  
The tiger being shameless,  
has suddenly eaten the billy-goat.

The imagery of this song puns on the names of the two Regents. The first syllable of Reting's name means "billy-goat" and the first syllable in Taktra's name means "tiger". The song ridicules Reting for thinking he could cavalierly relinquish power and then easily regain it, and Taktra for having no gratitude toward Reting who selected him to rule Tibet.

The third song is concerned with one of the major events in the reign of the 13th Dalai Lama, the British invasion of Tibet and occupation of Lhasa (the Younghusband Expedition of 1904). The song comments sarcastically on the weakness of Tibetans' resolve to oppose the enemy and the underlying reason for the amazingly rapid transformation of popular opinion regarding the invaders.

3.1 dang po bstan 'dra yin zer  
'di nas phyi gling zer gyi  
in ji'i tranka mthong dus  
sku zhabs sa hib gsung gi

3.2 At first they were known as enemies of the faith;  
And then they were known as "foreigners."  
But when (we) saw their English dollars,  
We called them Honorable Sahib.

This song makes use of some of the popular terms used to depict the British, first as evil "enemies of the faith" whose presence endangered the continuation of Buddhism in Tibet, and then derogatorily as "foreigners." However, it concludes that the change in popular opinion that occurred after the actual British occupation of Lhasa, and the use of the very honorific term "Honorable Sahib" for the Expeditionary leader Younghusband, derives from the fact that the British paid for their food and transport in silver dollars and that many Tibetans were making substantial profit from

their presence in Lhasa. Thus, these "enemies of the faith" became honorable gentlemen when people saw that they would pay for goods and services, implying, of course, how shallow was the concern with religion among the business and governmental sectors.

The next song comes from the 1910-1913 period during which Lhasa was occupied again, but this time by a Chinese army under the command of Chao Erh-feng. This song comments sarcastically on the futile action and inaction of the two largest monasteries in Tibet, Sera and Drepung. It highlights the very different responses of the monastic segment to this invasion and the lack of organization and solidarity within it.

4.1 'bras spungs a ni'i thugs pa  
bskos nas 'khol rgyu mi 'dug  
se ra sprang po'i thugs pa  
ma 'khol gong nas lud song

4.2 Drepung, (is like) a nun's gruel,  
even though you boil it won't boil.  
Sera, (is like) a beggar's soup,  
it spills over before it boils.

When the Chinese army occupied Lhasa, the monks of Drepung, even though attempts were made to get them to resist actively the Chinese presence, would not do anything. They, in particular Loseling College, were said to be sympathetic to the Chinese. Thus, the imagery of the first stanza conveys the idea that the monks of Drepung are like nuns, i.e. not brave and courageous. It uses the metaphor of *thugs pa*, a staple gruel-like soup, and the linguistic difference between active and passive verbs to convey the events mentioned above. The first verb (*bskos*) is active and connotes that someone actively tries to boil the gruel, in other words, tries to get the monks to fight the Chinese. The second verb (*'khol*) also means to boil, but is passive and connotes that the gruel did not come into a state of boiling, in other words, the monks didn't do anything.

The second stanza continues the metaphor of boiling gruel-soup. It states that the monks of Sera, like the gruel-soup of beggars, spills before it even boiled. This refers to the unorganized, uncoordinated and ill-fated attack made by Sera monks (mainly the fierce *dobdo* monks: see Goldstein 1964) on the Chinese encampment at Trapchi which resulted in heavy losses to the monks. Thus, they "spilled over" before anything was organized and wasted part of the soup, i.e. the monks.

The next three songs represent social-type criticism. The first was composed after the selection of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1877. It ridicules the behavior of one of the great ladies of the aristocracy.



- 5.1 'dzam gling skyid pa'i nyi ma  
 dag po'i nang nas shar song  
 rdo ring lha lcam sku zhabs  
 rkub la du dzag chags song
- 5.2 The sun, which is the happiness of the world,  
 has risen in Takpo.  
 Her excellency, Mrs. Doring's  
 ass, has become black with soot.

This song ridicules the consuming ambition of Mrs. Doring to have her as yet unborn child declared the next Dalai Lama. She was pregnant after the 12th Dalai Lama died and before the 13th was selected and reported having unusual dreams etc., which commonly foretell the birth of a great Lama, in this case the implication was that she bore in her stomach the next Dalai Lama. She carried this so far that she secretly burned a pot of incense under her dress so as to sanctify her genitals for the "emanation" of the Dalai Lama. While it is not uncommon for women pregnant at the time when the new Dalai Lama has to come into someone's womb to wonder and hope that she will be the lucky one, the absurd lengths to which Mrs. Doring went were famous, or infamous, in Lhasa and after the 13th was discovered in the region of southeast Tibet called Takpo, someone composed these lyrics.

The sun, of course, refers to the 13th Dalai Lama and Takpo is the region in which he was discovered. The song doesn't specify what happened but simply says that Mrs. Doring's ass has become black with soot, in other words, the smoke from the incense burner left her ass sooty. The humor and impact of the song derive from the juxtaposition of the grandiose metaphor of the sun which is the joy of the world rising in Takpo and the high honorific title of Mrs. Doring with the use of the normally impermissible vulgar and nonhonorific term "ass" for one of the highest aristocratic ladies in Tibet. Thus, the not-so subtle boasting of Mrs. Doring and her ridiculous attempt to intervene in the process by which the Dalai Lama chooses a human form into which to transmigrate, became public knowledge almost instantly.

The next two songs derive from the mid-1950's and comment on aspects of the "liberation" of Tibet. The first deals with the coming of the People's Liberation Army to Lhasa.

- 6.1 bcings bkrol dmag mi slebs song  
 sprang po'i khyu tshogs slebs song  
 thams cad bcings bkrol btang song  
 tshang ma sprang po bzos song

- 6.2 The liberation army has arrived.  
 The herd of beggars has arrived.  
 Everyone has been liberated.  
 Everyone has been made beggars.

This song sarcastically comments on the Chinese liberation of Tibet. It states that the Chinese People's Liberation Army has arrived but has come like a herd of beggars, i.e. has brought no food or supplies. It continues this theme by saying that while everyone has been "liberated," because of the inflation caused by the presence of the People's Liberation Army, everyone has become like beggars due to high prices and the inability of common people to buy foodstuffs.

The next song as indicated above, also comes from the same period.

- 7.1 nga tsho'i sku ngo chen mo  
 rdzab dong nang la phebs shag  
 phyags 'bul zhu gag phyin pas  
 slel khog dbu la mchod song
- 7.2 Our illustrious lord  
 has come to the manure pit.  
 Because I went to offer my humble greeting  
 he put a basket over his head.

This song comments on the difficult transitional period of the 1950's when the old and new systems tenuously coexisted. During this period some of the aristocracy and governmental bureaucracy, either to show their liberalism and willingness to change, or because they were virtually ordered to, volunteered to do manual labor. This song describes the tremendous embarrassment one such aristocrat experienced when one of his serfs went up to him to offer the traditional deferential greeting while he was working in a manure pit. The mortified aristocrat hid his shame by covering his head with a basket. The song wittily and effectively juxtaposes the use of honorific verbs (*phebs* and *mchod*) and titles (*sku ngo*) for the aristocrat with the image of a manure pit and a dirty basket over his head. It highlights the incongruity of this transition period and, in reality, all such periods of rapid social transformation.

The final song is actually one of a series of famous spontaneous verses composed by the poet-aristocratic official, Kyisur (*skyid zur*). The setting of this verse is said to have occurred one day when Kyisur was walking together with some friends and happened to meet one of the most powerful monk officials, the Lord Chamberlain (*drung yig chen mo*). Since Kyisur was famous for his ability to compose clever verses on the spur of the moment, the Lord Chamberlain asked him to compose a verse about him (the Lord Chamberlain). Kyisur composed a very difficult type of poem called *ka bshad*, namely a poem in which the first letter of each line corresponds to

the order of the alphabet, in this case, *ka kha ga nga*. It happened that the official was rather ugly. He was almost completely bald but had a very long moustache, something relatively rare in Tibet. Thus, the first two lines of the verse poke fun at the incongruity of his physical appearance; the luxurious moustache under a bald head. The third line continues the insult by saying he looks like a ghost, but then closes cleverly so as to preclude any retribution. In any other circumstances a minor official such as Kyisur would not have dared speak like that to such a high and powerful official. But, by the brilliant turn of a phrase, he was able to insult the official and yet not suffer dire consequences.

8.1 ka pa la nas spu zhig tog  
kha yi zur du btsug pa 'dra  
ga nas bltas kyang 'dre dra bas  
nga la gnod pa ma bskyel ang

8.2 It's as if a hair plucked from the crown of the head  
was stuck on the side of the mouth.  
Because, from whichever way I look at you, you're like a ghost,  
please do not harm me.

### Conclusion

These examples of the Lhasa "Street Song" exemplify the wit and biting sarcasm of the genre. They illustrate the manner in which events perceived to be important by Tibetans, generally the intelligentsia, were aired in public in a system which normally required deference and which possessed no radios or newspapers through which to communicate opinions. These songs, however, were more than mere "popular opinion". They were also an important weapon in the intense and bitter competition for power that existed within the Tibetan political system. Although they rarely were directly responsible for a change or reform, they were a means of embarrassing one's enemies and of shaping the opinions of others in the elite. Similarly, they were a vehicle for the expression of strong feelings and frustrations about political events and figures which could not otherwise be publically expressed. They represent a sophisticated and beautiful expressive art form which reflects the deep-seated independence and wit that is inherent in Tibetan character and culture.

### NOTE

1. These songs are part of a monograph dealing with "street songs" in Tibet which contains a corpus of almost 200 such songs spanning the period from the 18th century to the present. They were collected over the past 17 years from Tibetans in India, Nepal and North America, and most recently, during the winter of 1980-81, in India and Nepal under the sponsorship of the American Council of Learned Societies. This collection and the critical annotation of the historical context underlying each song could not have been done without the generous assistance of numerous former Tibetan officials and intellectuals, several of whom actually shared their own collections with me. I also want to thank the Inner Asia Project of the U. of Washington for providing me the opportunity to write an early draft of this work in 1968.