Chapter 3: Ushering Society into Modernity: Tibetan Comedy in the 1990s

In 1996, two men stepped on the stage to perform their *kha shags* 'comedic dialogue.' They were a duo well known in A mdo: Sman bla skyabs and Phag mo bkra shis. They had been important in the cultural sphere for some years now, but this series of four dialogues they were about to record before a live audience would propel them to stardom within the larger Tibetan community. With these four performances, Sman bla skyabs and Phag mo bkra shis went from budding performers to important cultural brokers. These performances represent the brilliant zenith of the comedic dialogue genre.

In the first performance, Sman bla skyabs tells Phag mo bkra shis of his recent trip to (fictitious) Careful Village, where he was misrecognized as a *bla ma*, despite his protests to the contrary.[1] The villagers then pleaded with him to settle a grassland dispute with a neighboring village that had turned deadly (see Thurston 2013). In the second performance, he returns from another trip to Careful Village somewhat depressed. When Phag mo bkra shis presses him, he reveals that Careful Village has left him bothered because one young villager named Za le rgyal is determined to marry a foreign woman. The village is in an uproar. Again the villagers turn to their trusted *"bla ma"* to help resolve this unprecedented situation. Next, he gives a rendition of a wedding speech he had previously given at Careful Village, and describes the audience's reaction. In the fourth and final performance, Sman bla skyabs gives a scathing critique of blind faith in

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[1] The comedy of the performance thus hinges on the misrecognition that Sman bla skyabs a *bla ma*. He ultimately accepts this misrecognition and uses is to trick the village into resolving its conflict. Rea (2008) has noticed how this is not entirely novel in China's culturescape, pointing out that Xu Zhuodai uses the hoax to recognize arenas that had been made humorous by cultural agents who, like Sman bla skyabs, were adept at a variety of modes of cultural production.

religion (as if their belief in him being a *bla ma* was not enough) when the people of Careful Village beseech him to help fight off a rash of thievery. They had previously asked a *bla ma* from Khams for aid. The first *bla ma*'s advice—building a stupa (T: *mchod rten*) at the mouth of the valley where the thieves had lived—not only fails to deter any thieves, but also proves very expensive. The *bla ma* also takes monetary offerings from the community. In the end, it is revealed that the *bla ma* from Khams has himself been arrested for thievery. Together, these performances describe a variety of issues linked to modernity in Tibet, including alcohol consumption, language, the emergence of modern technologies, gender equality/inequality, and education.

This chapter focuses on the third installment of the Careful Village series in which Sman bla skyabs performs a traditional Tibetan wedding speech for the audience. The linguistic economy and semantic density of Tibetan wedding speeches allow Sman bla skyabs to touch on several social issues that he and his contemporaries considered essential to the Tibetan ethnic group's movement toward modernity. I first describe China and Tibet in the 1990s, before introducing the Tibetan wedding speech, how Sman bla skyabs's wedding speech differs from others (primarily by "simplifying" an otherwise complex tradition). Next, I examine the social issues this performance introduces, drawing attention to the construction of a series of binaries that bring it into discussion with China's modern project. Finally, I analyze the role of language in this modern project, and how the 1990s comedic dialogues played an essential role in the creation of language ideologies and metadiscursive regimes that helped define a uniquely A mdo

Tibetan modernity that, while outwardly similar to Chinese state-sponsored modernity, differs significantly.[2]

3.1 A mdo after Tian'anmen

Xudong Zhang (2008: 1) argues that "the Chinese 1990s, as a cultural-historical decade… spans not ten but twelve years." For him, it begins with the events of Tian'anmen Square in 1989, when after a decade of experimentation with relatively liberal economic and cultural policies, the 1980s ended with tragedy. Tibet's experience of the 1990s, as a cultural historical period, may also be traced to the end of the 1980s. Lhasa saw a series of demonstrations and riots between 1987 and 1989, at which point "Beijing decided Tibet was out of control and declared martial law" (Goldstein 1998: 88). This marked the end of a brief period of liberalism in the Tibetan Autonomous Region that reached its high water mark between 1985 and 1988 while Rdo rje tshe ring served as the leader of the TAR's regional government (Karmel 1995). Dissatisfaction, however, was not limited to the Tibetan Plateau. Just six months later, on June Fourth of the same year, student protests were tragically and violently suppressed in Tian'anmen Square (see

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[2] There is a burgeoning scholarship on Tibetan modernity that mainly focuses on a single aspect of this modernity, or on a particular medium like literature. I shall cite that literature *en masse* before dealing with it individually in ensuing sections: On education and modernity, see Iselin (2010), Upton (1999) Bass (1998 and 2008), Seeberg (2008), Postigilone (2008), Clothey and McKinlay (2012), and Bangsbo (2008). For discussions of alternative Tibetan modernities, see Tuttle (2010). For discussions of modernity in other media, see Lama Jabb (2011), Yangdon Dondhup (2008b), Adams (1996), Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani (2008), Virtanen (2011), Janes (1999), Robin (2007, 2008, and 2014), Hartley (1999, 2002, and 2003), Morcom (2007), Wu (2013), and Erhard (2011). For discussions of economic transformation in Modern Tibet, see Fischer (2012) and Horlemann (2002). For culture conditions in twentieth and twenty-first century A mdo, see Makley (2007 and 2013a and 2013b), Huber (2002), Upton (1996), and Willock (2011).

Pieke 1995, and Han 1990). The government significantly constricted its previously liberal cultural policies in response to these traumatic events, and more closely examined all new cultural production. By the spring of 1992, after Deng's southern tour, the economic policies of the 1980s were taken off hold and continued with growing momentum under Deng and then Jiang Zemin. The economy grew at unprecedented rates. Cultural policies loosened again as the 1990s proceeded, though the 1980s eventually came to be regarded as a special time.

These liberal economic policies, however, did not enrich Qinghai in the same way they did China's coastal regions. In fact, while the littoral, and particularly southern coastal areas saw an enormous economic boom—often called an "economic miracle" (see Lee 1995: 381 Wu 2004: *passim*)—Qinghai Province, and other Tibetan areas consistently lagged behind, with per capita GDP well below the national average (Wang 2013). The gap between the ethnically plural and underdeveloped interior and the advanced, relatively homogenous littoral regions continued to widen throughout the 1990s until things began to gradually shift as the spotlight of the "Develop the West" or "Open the West" (Ch: *xibu da kaifa*) campaign was initiated by then-President Hu Jintao in the early 2000s (Potter 2011).

The Tibetan Plateau's most remote areas—many of them inhabited primarily by Tibetans (Fischer 2008: 639)—were among the most impoverished in the nation. Indeed, by the end of the decade, "39 of Qinghai's 46 county-level jurisdictions had become officially classified as 'poverty stricken'" (Goodman 2004b: 379). The region's population remained overwhelmingly rural, with two-thirds of the multi-ethnic population living in rural areas. Bangsbo (2008: 71) estimates this number to be 85

percent for Tibetans (regardless of region). The percentage would have been even higher for Qinghai's Tibetan populations.[3] Horlemann (2002: 244) meanwhile recognizes that Tibetan pastoralists were among the poorest in one of the poorest provinces in the PRC during this same time period.

There were also a number of related problems. Education suffered as many schools lacked qualified teachers, the existing policy mandating nine years of education was only loosely enforced, and many parents often saw no benefit in putting their child through school.[4] For those who did go to school, the poor infrastructure made attendance difficult. By 2000, for example, Horlemann (2002: 244-5) notes that in Mgo log (Ch: Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture roads were still rudimentary at best, electricity and telecommunication facilities were available only in county seats and townships, and that "one pastoralist whom I met in Dga' bde [Ch: Gande, name of a county] had to ride on horseback for two days to take his sick baby from his home to the hospital in Dga' bde County seat." And although Dga' bde is one of the remotest counties in Qinghai Province, the point this quote illustrates holds true for much of A mdo (and particularly its pastoral areas) in the 1990s.[5]

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[3] Zenz (2014: 129) cites the percentage of urban-based Tibetans to be 8.6% according to the 2000 census, thus suggesting that 91.4% would be considered as rural at that time.
[4] I see two potential reasons for this: firstly, there is a tendency among Tibetans to blame backwards parents who did not appreciate the value of education. At the same time, student autobiographies suggest that many schools were poorly maintained and very dirty (Kondro Tsering 2012). Additionally, they consistently describe some teachers as cruelly abusive (see Tsering Bum 2013, Rdo rje tshe brtan 2013, and Huatse Gyal 2014), irresponsible drinkers and gamblers. Fischer (2009) corroborates this, speaking specifically about one inebriated and serially absent teacher in Yushu.
[5] Chos bstan rgyal (2014), corroborates this, remembering that—for his pastoralist community in Brag dkar (Ch: Xinghai) County—"When I began school, Father sent me to the county seat on horseback, taking at least two days."

Additionally, this period was also characterized by serious and divisive land disputes in Tibetan pastoral areas (see, for example, Yeh 2003; Pirie 2006, 2009, 2012, and 2013) and the partial implementation of a variety of poverty alleviation programs like the *si peitao* 'four allocations' (Horlemann 2002: 258 and Dbang 'dus sgrol ma et al 2012: *passim*). Government attempts to settle pastoralists into specially constructed settlement communitites, towns, and cities in the name of grassland conservation and economic development began during this time with the stated aim of settling all of Qinghai's pastoralists by 2011 (Goodman 2004b: 396 and Sulek 2012).

Meanwhile, adventurous foreigners were increasingly finding their way to the distant reaches of the Tibetan Plateau. While most foreign tourists did (and still do) not make it further west than Chengdu, an ever-increasing number began taking advantage of favorable exchange rates, a booming world economy, and a lack of institutional presence regulating foreign tourists to travel to the Tibetan Plateau. Their presence in Tibetan communities of Western China, meanwhile, highlighted their wealth and mobility relative to the pastoralists and farmers living there.

Furthermore, if literacy was generally low among Tibetans in A mdo (Fischer 2009: 15), technological literacy was almost certainly lower. Technologies like telephones, televisions, and even automobiles were known, but not necessarily a part of many A mdo Tibetans' daily lives. Well into the twenty-first century, many pastoral areas still lacked basic infrastructure, such as running water, paved roads, and connection to the national power grid well into the twenty-first century. In 2010, I stayed in Stong skor Village, Mangra (Ch: Guinan) County, where lined electricity had arrived the previous year, running water had yet to arrive, and the basic dirt road meant that the 20 kilometer

drive to the county town required at least an hour. This kind of situation was more the rule than the exception in pastoralist communities.

Meanwhile published autobiographies of university students from nearby areas describe seeing a television for the first time only after the age of ten or twelve years old in the mid-1990s (see Kondro Tsering 2012: 95-98). In the 1990s, the lack of familiarity with and limited ownership of televisions, telephones (and particularly cellular telephones), let alone personal computers, were pressing issues for young, socially and geographically mobile Tibetan intellectuals confronted with the comparative modernity of the cities in other regions where modern electronic devices had been popularized throughout the 1980s) in which many of them received their education.

Thus, for Tibetan comedians, many of whom worked in urban work units and had received educations in China's booming coastal areas,[6] the inability to compete with other ethnic groups economically, educationally, and technologically was a source of great consternation. Hartley (1999: 30) recognizes this trend in many (but certainly not all) "writers [who] offer outright critiques of traditional society with no vision of cultural regeneration, viewing their culture as predominantly 'backwards.'" The slow emergence, in the 1990s of new broadcast technologies, however, allowed cosmopolitan comedians the opportunity to both bemoan the lack of technological literacy among the greater population and utilize technologies for spreading their critiques.

Thus, many Tibetans saw and heard performances primarily on stage, over the radio, or on newly available cassette tapes. The dissemination via modern technologies contributed to their immense popularity and high visibility across A mdo. Additionally,

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[6] For more on this policy see Postiglione (2006 and 2008).

reference to these technologies added to the "fresh" quality of the performances. In many

ways, then, these performances serve as a bridge between technology and society, and

between a society simultaneously dealing with the rhetoric (but incomplete reality) of a

rupture between pre-modern lifeways and a modern, scientifically enlightened, and

technologically advanced world. This chapter examines the role of A mdo crosstalks

from the 1990s in creating this bridge between society and emergent technologies during

the last decade of the twenty-first century through cajoling, educating, and verbally

dragging Tibetans into greater engagement with the modern world. Any such discussion

must certainly center on the intriguingly named fictional location, *Sems chung sde ba*

"Careful Village."

3.2 Wedding Speeches

On the surface, Sman bla skyabs's wedding speech appears to be no different

from a typical wedding speech in A mdo (a genre introduced in greater detail below). A

majority of the stanzas uses a traditional theme readily recognizable to local Tibetan

audiences (for example, his descriptions of the *skyes pho rab, skyes pho 'bring,* and *skyes*

pho ngan '"ideal man," "middling man," and "inferior man" respectively, found between

turns 39 and 43).[7] Sman bla skyabs's vocal pitch follows the lilt of traditional speeches,

rising towards the end of each line before dropping again in the last two or three

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[7] I use the term "turn" to refer to distinct parts of the performance. Any amount of speech
unbroken by another interlocutor is considered a "turn." In the wedding speech this may
include several lines of verse, or single syllables by the second speaker.

syllables, and stanzas end with *zer rgyu red* 'it should be said that,' prompting a long and

hearty *Ye!* from audience members in confirmation of the form's familiarity.[8] Moreover,

much of the language is drawn directly from the traditional repertoire of genre-specific

multiforms (cf. Foley 1995; Honko 2000) speakers utilize in secular oratory. His

performance style is also drawn directly from the conventions of traditional Tibetan

secular oratory.

But there's a catch: it is not an actual wedding speech. Sman bla skyabs is

recounting the telling of a wedding speech, ostensibly to a friend, but actually in state-

sponsored contexts. Additionally, he is not content to give an old-style wedding speech,

with its extensive religious imagery and obscure historical and geographic references.

Instead, his wedding speech is an updated version intended to be unique and memorable,

a parody involving "the ludic or inversive transformation of a prior text or genre"

(Bauman 2004:3), in this case, a wedding speech.[9]

Quickly, confusion emerges. Is it a wedding speech? Despite having all the

hallmarks of secular oratory, something is missing. This leads Careful Village's village

leader (also performed by Sman bla skyabs) to remark: *de mo ston bshad bzo mo/ de mo*

ston bshad thag nye/ This wedding speech is really close to a[n actual] wedding speech"

(Turn 13). The unspoken implication is that, although the speech bears all the

performative keys of a wedding speech, it is not quite right. A parody only retains its

illocutionary force if the performance is recognizable as a transformation of the original,

as this speech is. But what is missing? What has changed? The answer lies primarily in

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[8] See Thurston (2012) for a fuller description of speech performances in A mdo.
[9] For more on parody as an art, as educational tool, and important part of media
constructions, see Gray (2005), Shugart (2001), Kreuz and Roberts (1993) and Morris
(1987).

the speech's content, which is uniquely modern, sprinkled with borrowed terms for technology and social concepts that did not exist on the Plateau before the 1980s.

Sman bla skyabs explicitly points out that the speech has different goals from a wedding speech. Whereas the normal wedding speech seeks to create the auspicious circumstances of the wedding event (Thurston forthcoming 2015), Sman bla skyabs is bound by no such restrictions. He even attempts to make this explicit, stating, "The form of my wedding speech is fresh to be in tune with a new era, and its meaning is easy to understand as it's close to material reality" *nga'i ston bshad rnam pa so ma yin nas dus rabs gsar ba mthun ni red, nang don go ba blangs na dngos yod 'tsho ba nye ni red ya* (Turn 15). Sman bla skyabs has modernized his wedding speech, to deal both with the modern situation on the Tibetan Plateau, and the serious issues confronting Tibetan communities in A mdo. The terms of his modernization are, notably, linguistic: that the language of the speech should be more understandable—as opposed to the more opaque poetic register of traditional wedding speeches—and in tune with the complexities of modern life. It also implies the use of less explicitly religious language and places greater emphasis on modern technologies. Such simplification and making the illegible legible is part and parcel of many modernizing projects in other parts of the world (see Scott 1998).

Over the next few minutes, Sman bla skyabs speaks first in more general terms, beginning just as most Tibetan wedding speeches do, praising the natural world, describing various types of people, and more.[10] When Phag mo bkra shis tires of these seemingly endless traditional style praises, he encourages Sman bla to move on to a

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[10] For more on Tibetan weddings and wedding speeches, see Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. (2009), Blo brtan rdo rje et al. (2008), Bkra shis bzang po et al. (2012), Jixiancairang (2012), Skal Bzang Nor Bu and Stuart (1996), and Aziz (1985).

different section. Sman bla skyabs then gives disclaimers, before starting in again on

praises, saying:

> Now, if I give a speech that like a butterfly's wing has no inside or out/
> I'm not one of the elders who speaks folktales/ nor am I a scholar of
> speeches/ First, it doesn't come to my mind./ Then, it doesn't come from
> my mouth,/ And in the end it will go from my chest down into my body
> (turns 35-37).

> *da phye ma leb tse 'dra 'dra'i phyi nang med nis gtam gzig bshad na// nga
> gna' gtam bshad kyi gna' myi ma red/ da gtam bshad kyi mkhas pa ma
> red//... dang po yid la mi yong gi/ de'I 'phro kha nas mi yong gi/ mtha' ma
> khog nas lus 'gro gi/*

At each turn, despite their conventional appearance, Phag mo bkra shis is forced to admit

that there is something new about them: traditional objects are replaced with modern

technologies, arranged marriages are replaced with free-choice marriages, and real praise

is substituted with sarcasm.

Sman bla skyabs seems prepared to continue in this vein *ad infinitum*. Finally,

however, Phag mo bkra shis grows weary of the speech. This happens to be the exact

point at which the village leader stops Sman bla skyabs, saying that it was time for the

bride's family to return home, and asks their forgiveness for cutting him off.

Interestingly, this happens also in Phur ba's published comedy about wedding speeches

where he recounts giving a similar traditional oration, but is cut off when the audience

tires of his long-winded disquisition (see Phur ba 1993). Sman bla skyabs has thus

mobilized the extremely economical expressive register of secular oratory for the

deployment of new ideas about modernity. In the next section, I draw out certain themes

of Tibetan modernity as expressed briefly in this performance and more extensively in

others.

3.3 Key Themes in "Careful Village's Wedding"

"Careful Village's Wedding" introduces several key themes, each of which

articulates at least one aspect of modern life in reform era A mdo. In the following

sections, I introduce how "Careful Village's Wedding" discusses Tibetan interaction with

a variety of aspects of life on the Tibetan Plateau, including: modern technology, gender

inequality and free choice marriage, religious practitioners, tobacco and alcohol,

education and language.

3.3.1 Key Theme: Modern technology

There is perhaps no more visible index of participation in the modern world than

access to and knowledge of modern technologies. As a new and non-native performance

genre only introduced to the Tibetan Plateau after the establishment of the People's

Republic of China, it is unsurprising that there is a deeply ingrained relationship between

comedy and these new devices. The popularity of Tibetan crosstalks coincides with a

moment in which the fruits of modern life were still new to China's hinterlands (as

discussed above). First telephones and automobiles become signifiers of modernity, then

in the twenty-first century cellular phones feature in these performances as well.[11] Radios

and, later, televisions also make their appearances.

At the beginning of the performance, Sman bla skyabs suggests that mentioning

modern technologies makes the speech easier to understand and closer to the realities of

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[11] For more on the appearance and adoption of mobile phones on the Tibetan Plateau,
their rapid integration into Tibetan life between 2002 and 2006, and especially for a
discussion of the way they have been used to index modernity, see Roudanjia (2011).

material life. This is despite the fact that the names of such new technologies probably

seemed more alien to audiences than the traditional Tibetan oratory to which audience

members at the time would have long been accustomed. Nevertheless, a pervasive theme

in Tibetan comedy, and one that underpins the entirety of the crosstalk and sketch corpus,

is that of modern technology, and it duly appears at the very beginning of his speech:

> Ya, Now praise e ma ho praise e ma ho, praise e ma ho.
> Praise, praise, praise, praise the azure blue sky.
> If you don't speak praises to the azure blue sky,
> People will say that there is no place for satellites to orbit the earth, ◊[12]
> And they'll say that there's no place for these airplanes to fly in the sky.
> And it should be said that they'll say that they don't know that this earth is
> > round.

> *ya/ da bstod e ma ho/ e ma ho// e ma ho//*
> *bstod bstod bstod la dgung a sngon bstod//*
> *dgung a sngon 'di ma bstod ma brjod na//*
> *mis bzos 'khor skar ra 'khor re 'dug sa med nis zer gi/*
> *nam mkha' gnam gru 'di'i 'phur re 'gro sa med nis zer gi/*
> *sa'i go la 'di kir kor gzig yin no ra mi shes nis zer gi//* (Turn 21)

The invocation and discussion of modern technologies foregrounds the modernity of

Tibetan comedic dialogues and that of the comedians who produce them. And comedic

dialogues were also one of the first completely new Tibetan art forms to rely primarily on

new technologies for their dissemination.

Indeed, it is impossible to separate the then burgeoning popularity of these

comedic dialogues from the simultaneous advent of new technologies to Tibetan

communities. The conditions of the 1990s meant that these technologies were, at that

historical moment, both emergent and reasonably well known, even if personal

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[12] These are the only two diacritics I use to suggest unique performative features from the recording. The diamond (◊) indicates audience laughter. The triangle (Δ) indicates applause, bold type indicates words spoken with strong emphasis.

ownership was not yet widespread. In the 1990s, telephones, radios, motor vehicles, machines used for agricultural and pastoral production, and less common devices known primarily from propaganda like satellites and airplanes feature in 1990s comedies. Later, in the twenty-first century, televisions, VCDs, and radios made the mass consumption of these comedies possible for the first time. Other technologies such as cameras and telephones also make strong reference points for Tibetan sketch comedies in lampooning those who are unaware of these technologies.

For 1990s comedic dialogues, technological literacy provides a shibboleth for Tibetan modernity and portrayals of people unaccustomed to these technologies become a powerful device for distinguishing modern and backward identities. Those unable to understand the benefits of new technologies, while at the same time trying to engage with them, seem backwards and lacking in modernity. Those with the requisite technological literacy were ready to engage in imagined constructions of the rational, scientific, and technologically advanced modern world advocated by radicals like Zhogs dung advocated (see Hartley 2002: 1-18). That many of these same people happen to hail from rural and pastoral areas, becomes an essential part of the critique.

Beyond this individual wedding speech, comedic dialogues and sketches—from the 1980s to present day—continue to focus on the issue of technologies. In the 1980s, Phur ba performed a comedic dialogue entitled *pha yul gyi 'pho 'gyur* 'the changes in my homeland,' in which he enumerates the changes he noticed on a trip back to his hometown in Them chen County (Ch: Tianjun). This included a wide range of new technologies. He commented:

> There are so many changes that you can't say them all: just within the
> realm of machines there are milking machines, shearing machines, wind

power machines, radios, audio recorders, uh (as if thinking) and then there are tractors, hand tractors, cars. Hey! There are even private cars these days in our home area! And then there are trains…

'gyur ldog mang no bshad las tshar ni ma red/ da 'phrul 'khor gi rigs gcig go bshad na/ 'o bshig 'phrul 'khor/ bal 'breg 'phrul 'khor/ rlung shugs glogs 'don 'phrul 'khor/ sgra sdud 'phrul 'khor/ sgra len 'phrul 'khor/ ang ('dang rgyag zhor du) de min nas 'drud 'then 'phrul 'khor lag skyor 'drud 'then 'prhul 'khor/ rlangs 'khor/ a ro/ da bar nged tsho'i yul phyogs na sger ra rlangs 'khor yod ni yod gi/ de min nas me 'khor…

In the end he is cut off by his speaking partner who has gotten the feeling that, if left unchecked, he might speak all day. Here, as in other parts of the wedding speech, the act of cutting the first speaker off may practically save the author from the need to admit that he has run out of new technologies to mention, while simultaneously suggesting that the list does in fact go on. This listing or mentioning of modern technologies further emphasizes the rupture on which modernity relies by explicitly labeling them as "changes." These technologies did not exist on the Tibetan Plateau until very recently, through their enumeration, then, indexes the thorough changes to Tibetan lived experience in the reform era. They are emblems and indexes of this modern rupture.

In the 1990s, rather than praising it (and, by association, the Party that takes credit for bringing them to the Tibetan Plateau), technology had become a useful way of articulating social critique. The performers have turned away from the presence of modern technology as indexical of modernity, to the use of modern technology as a way of showing an individual's proper participation in modern life.[13] In their performance

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[13] It is important to recognize that the Chinese term *xiandai* and its official Tibetan gloss, *deng rabs*, as well as its variants, frequently used to translate the English "modern" does not map directly onto Western ideas of modernity. As a historical term, scholars in China generally demarcate 1949 as the beginning of "modern China" (Godley 1989: 39). *Deng rabs* began as a propaganda term, but gradually came to be just as conceptually fuzzy as

"The telephone" (T: *kha par*), for example, Sman bla skyabs and Phags mo bkra shis discuss the different types of telephone calls one may make, initially describing people who are relatively unfamiliar with the technology and shout into the receiver as if they were shouting at each other from two opposite mountain passes. They also describe the humorous ways people may act when making telephone calls, tricking eachother.

The role of modern technologies in shaping life on the Tibetan Plateau is one of the most important, obvious, and life-altering changes to have reached populations in A mdo in the reform era. In 2010, while staying in Sman bla skaybs's own Mang ra (Ch: Guinan) County, Mtsho lho (Ch: Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, I observed that roads were generally unpaved, and cellular phone signals were poor. Locals had had electricity from solar power beginning in the 1990s, but lined electricity arrived only in 2008 (Thurston and Tsering Samdrup 2012: 37), and running water in 2010 (Thurston and Tsering Samdrup 2012: 62). This change is clearly documented in "Careful Village's Wedding Speech" and other comedic dialogues from the period.

Still more recently, several comedic performances have structured the entirety of their action around new technologies. Zhi bde nyi ma's "Taking Pictures" (T: *par len pa*) centers on the camera. Sman bla skyabs's "Telephone" (T: *kha par*) and "Cordless Phones" (T: *sku med kha par*) deal with telephones. His "Sending a Message" *skad gtong* 'sending a message' and "Call-in" (T: *thad gtong*)—a 2011 performance in which people call into a radio show—focus on the radio. Other performances, like Mgo log Zla b+he's 'The Jewel' (T: *rin po che*) uses telephone technology to illustrate the potential issues of

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its Standard Mandarin counterpart, finding expression in multiple discursive contexts, primarily as a "semiotic counterpart to 'tradition'" well (Kolås 2003: 21).

language and language change. At a 2014 series of performances, comedians Gnam lha 'bum, 'Jam dbyangs blo gros, and Sog phrug shes rab all performed sketches satirizing the way people use their smart phones and the highly popular social networking application "WeChat" (Ch: *weixin*, T: *skad 'phrin*).

The disruptive changes these emergent technologies caused have also been written into other forms of cultural production. "Yesterday's Story" (T: *Kha sang gi gtam rgyud*) a very popular miniseries, depicts the advent of technology in one herding community over the course of several years, and the way it disrupted it traditional lifeways and oral traditions. Student autobiographies from across the Tibetan Plateau testify to this, with many devoting an entire chapter to the sudden appearance of television and how it changed the fabric of their lives.[14] Even elders, they claim, feel the old stories are unimpressive: how can culture heroes like A khu ston pa or King Gesar possibly compete with someone like film star Jackie Chan (Ch: *cheng long*), or Sun Wukong the Monkey King in the *Journey to the West* (Ch: *xi you ji*) (see Kondro Tsering 2012: 96)? Meanwhile the debut film from acclaimed author and filmmaker Pad+ma tshe brtan (Ch: Wanma Caidan), *Lhing 'jags kyi ma Ni rdo 'bum* 'The Silent Holy Stones' discusses similar issues and shows one young monk playing joyfully while wearing a mask of Sun Wukong, visually emphasizing the intense changes brought on by mass television ownership.[15] These twenty-first century texts, however, seem to focus more on

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[14] See Kondro Tsering (2012) for one such example.
[15] Sun Wukong is a character from the famous Chinese tale *Xi you ji* 'Journey to the West' (T: *nub phyogs la skyod pa'i rnam thar*). This tale has been the subject of numerous movies and television series and has tended to reach Tibetan audiences primarily through these television series, sometimes translated into Tibetan. See Robin (2008) for further discussion of *The Silent Mani Stones*.

cultural loss (more on this later) than the comedic dialogues of the 1990s which portrayed the advent of electronic devices as a positive development linked with modernity.

In this section, I have shown the importance of technology as a key theme in Tibetan comedy more generally, and not simply in this particular performance. For many A mdo Tibetan communities in the 1990s, these technologies were new and emergent, and Tibetans possessed varying degrees of technological literacy. But pereceiving that the technologies discussed are viewed positively is crucially achieved through the use and audience expectation of satire. Satire ensured that references to modern technology were read as encouraging technological literacy in the 1990s, by making those incapable of using these technologies seem hopelessly out of touch. This is also part of the larger contemporaneous Tibetan discussion of modernity.

3.3.2 Key theme: Religion and Religious Practitioners

At the beginning of the wedding speech, when discussing how his own wedding speech is uniquely modern, Sman bla skyabs suggests that he feels the traditional Tibetan wedding speech is too complicated and convoluted to be fully comprehensible to the average listener. This provides the performer the justification to intervene and simplify and modernize the wedding speech. One of many ways Sman bla skyabs accomplishes this is removing religious content from the speech, specifically the Buddhist content. The other is through negatively portraying the work of religious practitioners.

Removing the religious content from this speech may be necessary to gain approval for public performance, but it also coincides with the anti-clerical sentiments many of A mdo's opinion leaders profess (see Hartley 2002), and which Wu (2013)

associates with Phag mo bkra shis (Sman bla skyabs's co-performer in the Careful

Village performances). The language of many Tibetan wedding speeches only provides

obliquely religious references. However, for Sman bla skyabs, even his use of oath-taking

in the other Careful Village performances (see below) suggests that he refuses to use

some of the more commonly sworn oaths in favor of less directly religious ones, e.g., *a

rgya'i sha* 'by my grandfather's flesh*,*' or *zhi lu'i sha* 'by my son's flesh.' Both oaths are

common in Sman bla skyabs's performances, but rare in the daily parlance of A mdo

Tibetans in the twenty-first century, who frequently employ more directly religious oaths

like *yum*, or *bka' 'gyur*, both of which refer to sets of important religious books and

teachings.

A comparison between traditional Tibetan wedding speeches and Sman bla

skyabs's comedic dialogue quickly shows the lengths to which Sman bla skyabs has gone

to eliminate religious references from his own rendition. Though, as mentioned above,

similar in structure, employing the same parallelism and performance keys as any other

traditional speech, and featuring many of the same types of stanzas of traditional Tibetan

wedding speeches, the language is devoid of overtly Buddhist reference. Compare the

following example from a wedding speech in Ne'u na Village,[16] in which the speech

begins with mantras and the praising of several Buddhist deities:

> [38]Worship! Worship! Worship! Worship the blue sky again and again.
> [39]Should we not worship and venerate this azure sky?
> [40]The blue sky is the place where the high holy mountain is worshipped.
> [41]Worship! Worship! Worship! Worship the vast heavens again and again.
> [42]Should we not worship and venerate the heavens?
> [43]The abode of the heavens is the place where three-wheeled silk clothing
>   is worshipped.

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[16] Khri ka (Ch: Guide) County, Mtsho lho (Ch: Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Provence, PR China.

[44]Worship! Worship! Worship! Worship the solid earth again and again.
[45]Should we not worship and venerate solid earth?
[46]The abode of the earth is the place where the green leather boot is
    worshipped.

[37]*Ya mchod oM a hUM mchod oM a hUM mchod oM a hUM*
[38]*mchod mchod mchod la dgung a sngon mchod*
[39]*dgung a sngon 'di ma mchod ma bkur na*
[40]*mgo lha ri'I stod sa dung snon gnam red*
[41]*mchod mchod mchod la bar snang yangs pa mchod*
[42]*bar snang yangs pa ma mchod ma bkur na*
[43]*gos 'khor gsum gyi stod sa snang khams red*
[44]*mchod mchod mchod la sa dog mo mchod*
[45]*sa dog mo 'di ma mchod ma bkur na*
[46]*rkang sag lham gyi stod sa dog mo red*

Sman bla skyabs's wedding speech, meanwhile, does away with the *mchod*
'worship' and replaces it with *stod* 'praise.' He deletes *bkur* 'respect' and substitutes
brjod 'to talk about.' He replaces the seed syllables *oM, a*, and *hUM*—which serve to
immediately raise the ensuing speech to a more sacral level (see Ekvall 1964: 116 and
Thurston 2012: 53)—with *e ma ho*—which, though phonetically similar and used in some
religious texts,[17] lacks the same sacred overtones of the seed mantras—and replaces
religious imagery with secular ones. Although he manages to maintain the positive terms
of the wedding speech, he deletes any religious associations:

Ya, Now praise e ma ho praise e ma ho, praise e ma ho.
Praise, praise, praise, praise the azure blue sky.
If you don't speak praises to the azure blue sky,
People will say that there is no place for satellites to orbit the earth,◊
And they'll say that there's no place for these airplanes to fly in the sky.
And it should be said that they'll say that they don't know that this earth is
round. (Turn 21)

ya da bstod e ma ho bstod e ma ho
bstod bstod bstod la dgung a sngon bstod/

---

dgung a sngon 'di ma bstod ma brjod na
mis bzos 'khor skar ra 'khor re 'dug sa med nis zer gi
nam mkha' gnam gru 'di'I 'phur re 'gro sa med nis zer gi
sa'I go la 'di kor kor gzig yin no ra mi shes ni zer gi zer rgyu

and

Ya! Now praise, praise, praise, praise the earth.
If we don't speak the praises to this green earth,
It's said that there will be no place for this white snow mountain to tower imposingly,
It's said that there will be no place to travel over the green meadows,
And it should be said that there's no place for herders to sleep. (Turn 22)

ya bstod bstod bstod la sa dog mo bstod
sa dog mo 'di ma bstod ma brjod na
gangs ri dkar po 'di 'gyang ngas 'dug sa med nis zer gi
spang ljongs sngon mo 'di 'da' ye 'dug sa med nis zer gi
lug rdzi nor rdzi cho nyal ye 'dug sa med nis zer rgyu

Whereas the religious imagery and praise in the traditional wedding speech is important for the creation of auspiciousness on the wedding day, Sman bla skyabs has no such concerns—partly, one might believe, because he is not actually performing at a wedding though he suggests, at the beginning of the performance, he did perform in that context at one point. Instead, he is more concerned with the articulation of modernity and, therefore, replaces references to religion and deities with modern gadgetry and secular notions.

The silencing of religious imagery and language also effectively excludes religion from his previously articulated dual criteria of understandability and closeness to material reality. It also suggests that such religiosity has no place in Tibetan modernity. Sman bla skyabs cannot, however, openly criticize Tibetan religion without risking censure from

his target audience. Instead, his wedding speech and, indeed, the entire Careful Village series more generally, targets religious practitioners.

Sman bla skyabs's negative portrayals of religious practitioners, some of whom are charlatans, is another theme that stands out both in the Careful Village series and in the larger modern intellectual project. In the wedding speech, Sman bla skyabs speaks directly of monks playing billiards (turn 95), and dharma-less monks (turn 101). In these two instances, Sman bla skyabs speaks repeatedly about religious practitioners who do not dispatch their duties of religious service to the larger community. Speaking of the things that are few (turn 91), Sman bla skyabs orates: *chos khrims gtsang can gi dgon pa nyung nis zer gi* 'there are few monasteries that maintain pure religious doctrine,' and *da rig ma yag ma med nis bla ma nyung nis zer gi* 'there are few upright *bla ma*.' Then again in turn 95, he says *grwa ba gzan gos can gyis the cig brgyab na mi mdza' zer gi* 'it's bad if monks with jackets play pool.' Finally, he remarks, under the heading of the three kinds of usless things, *ban chos med lag ga Ta ru bzhag na hang nis zer gi* 'It's useless if a *taru*[18] is placed in the hand of a dharma-less monk' (turn 101). In each of these cases, there are prescriptions about what monks should do, in a world in which theory and practice are not always the same (both traditionally and in present day).

This is, however, only the beginning of Careful Village's criticism of religion in modern Tibetan culture. In fact, the Careful Village series revolves around the village's misrecognition of Sman bla skyabs as a *bla ma* who can help them resolve serious problems their village faces. In "Careful Village's Grassland Dispute," Sman bla skyabs' role as a fake *bla ma* is significant: he hoodwinks people into living in peace with one

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[18] A *Ta ru* is a drum used in religious practice.

another. But Sman bla skyabs' fake *bla ma* is not a complete scoundrel. Indeed, after

initially pretending to take the money they offer him, he gives it all back at the end for

the construction of a school. This prompts his disbelieving interlocutor, Phag mo bkra

shis, to state that this would be difficult for even a real *bla ma* to accomplish. In the

ensuing performances, he is not so much tricking people, as relying on the social capital

that accompanies such misrecognition to help them continue to solve various problems: a

sudden proliferation of thieves, and a dispute that has arisen over a foreign women trying

to marry a local man.

One performer, speculating somewhat negatively about the role of the fake *bla ma*

in the four Careful Village performances, noted in an interview that this was an attempt to

satirize the way religious clerics frequently under-utilize their extensive social capital in

A mdo (while also subtly suggesting that the Chinese government is powerless to control

at least some aspects of Tibetan life):

> So primarily, at that time… these Tibetan problems, couldn't be solved by
> China's laws. Tibet's own, uh, people alone can't solve them. Most of
> them can be, and if that's the case, monasteries and monks all of them, in
> certain grassland disputes and the like, a lot of the popular things like this
> can be solved by *bla ma* [TT: right], but they don't do it…
>
> *da gtso bo skabs de… bod gi gnad don 'di rgya gi khrims gi ra thag gi mi*
> *chod, bod rang gi, a, dmangs khrod rkyang rkyang gis thag gi mi chod,*
> *mang nga bzo da a lags bzo gi bsam pa dkar ro lhags bsam kyang ngas 'di*
> *yin btang na, dgon pa dang dgon dag gi a lags 'di thams cad po 'di gi*
> *snang sgos su rtswa sa rtsod gleng la sogs pa 'di mo yin rgyu na dmangs*
> *khrod gi don dag mang nga gzig a lags gzo gis thag chod thub gi ze* [TT:
> 'o le] *yin na yang khichos las gi med gi* (pers. comm. PB 11-21-2013).

Ekvall (1960: 376), writing on the basis of his own rich personal experience in A

mdo and interviews with Tibetans in exile, argues that the single most important part of

the Tibetan self-image is religion. But, as Chapter 2 discusses, the Cultural Revolution

severely undermined this perception for many Tibetans in the PRC, not least for A mdo's intellectuals. Thus, while Buddhism has indeed experienced a massive revitalization in the reform era (see Goldstein and Kapstein 1998), there remained a cultural power vacuum into which A mdo's public intellectuals asserted themselves and their anti-clerical agendas. This comedic dialgoue, then, is part of a larger trend that temporarily gained momentum in the late twentieth century of narratives portraying corrupt and fake religious practitioners. Don grub rgyal's "Sprul sku" (The Tulku; 1981),[19] in which a fake, lecherous holy man preys on women and steals money from pious villagers, is the most notable of these. It is often seen as a broadside against religion and an indictment of those who put their faith in religious institutions.

Indeed, the ambivalent *bla ma* is not simply a literary or artistic trope. I have spoken with Tibetan women who report having been approached by lecherous holy men, and a number of Tibetans are quick to cast aspersions on wealthy *bla ma* with patrons from China's primarily Han urban centers. This is not a recent phenomenon. Sujata, for instance, pointed out that Skal ldan rgya mtsho (1607-1677), a *bla ma* from an important religious and cultural center in A mdo, sang songs of spiritual enlightenment (*mgur glu*) chastising clerics for their impure ways (cf. Sujata 2005 and Makley 2007), while Tibet's most famous tricksters have also been known to impersonate clerics in their exploits.[20]

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[19] See Don grub rgyal (1997: 119-155). See Virtanen (2011) for more on Don grub rgyal. Kapstein (2002) meanwhile, writes on the poor reputation of clerics during the reform era as well.

[20] For more on Tibetan tricksters, see Dkon mchog dge legs et al. (1999), Orofino (2011), Aris (1987), and Ra se dkon mchog rgya mtsho (1996). For an important, albeit sanitized, collection of A khu ston pa tales collected and printed in China, see Sichuan sheng minjian wenyi yanjiu hui (1980). For more on A khu ston pa's more ribald exploits, see Rinjing Dorje (1997) and Aris (1987: 143-144). An interesting addendum might be that the Sixth Dalai *bla ma* Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho was famous for donning street

Significantly, most Tibetans I interviewed say that Sman bla skyabs, in imitating a fake *bla ma*, was not so much articulating a negative opinion of religion as demonstrating that even a scoundrel can do good and that the performance left space for a positive interpretation of religion. Similarly, despite never directly mentioning the state, several lines from the performance may be considered as pointed commentaries on the state's intervention in people's lives. For instance, in turn 123 of "Careful Village's Grassland Dispute" performance, Sman bla skyabs says of the people in the locality, "At that time they had disputes over territory, but they didn't fight over grass. Now, they fight over grass but not territory." He seems to be implying that the drastic loss of territorial autonomy Tibetans have experienced because of the state's policies has reduced them to fighting over something as basic and plentiful on the grassland as fodder.[21]

In other performances, religious practitioners again become the focus of Sman bla skyabs's social critiques in "Careful Village's Thief". In this instance, the audiences finds that another *bla ma*, called Ra zi mna' ma, has hoodwinked Careful Village by taking money in return for helping rid them of thieves, and is eventually recognized as a thief himself. At the end of the performance, Sman bla skyabs says that Ra zi mna' ma had been arrested and jailed. This last detail is significant in showing that the state is (finally) able to protect people against such false religious practitioners better than the people themselves (even though it is shown, in the first performance, as being incapable of ensuring civil order).

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clothes and sneaking out at night to enjoy life with the local populace (for an introduction to the Sixth Dalai *bla ma*, see Sørenson 1990).

[21] I thank an anonymous reviewer of my corresponding publication in *CHINOPERL* (Thurston 2013) for astutely pointing out this aspect of the performance.

The issue of the fake *bla ma* and the ambivalent place of religion reminds one of the highly publicized debate over the place of tradition—and especially religion—in a modern, Tibetan society that raged through A mdo in 1999-2000. Lauran Hartley has analyzed the spread and nature of this debate, which was sparked when an author using the penname Zhogs dung published two articles in a Tibetan-language newspaper calling for "the separation of religious education and modern secular education" (Hartley 2002:1). In his advocacy of secular education as a key to the continued progress of the Tibetan people, Zhogs dung participates in a discourse on education as a modern form of social change that is not limited to anti-religionists, but advocated across a wide range of scholars coming from various disciplinary backgrounds. Although not addressed in the performance, religious education has been tied to difficulties Tibetans have met while competing economically with non-Tibetan migrants.

In some cases on the Plateau, being a "fake monk," has to do with behavior considered unbecoming of a monk. Tsering Bum illustrates another, "Most monks were kind and thought helping others was their responsibility. Still, some monks always fooled around, watching movies in the county seat every night, going here and there without any purpose, and seldom doing their monastic work" (2013: 86). In this way the "fake monk" is not necessarily a mere charlatan, but may be a person who does not live to the standards expected of a monk.

Furthermore, Tibetans cast a significant amount of suspicion toward "real" monks and *bla ma* in everyday life. It is not uncommon to hear negative comments about a certain personage or even generalizations about holy men of a specific region because their wealthy patrons from Inner China have purchased them expensive vehicles the likes

of which belonged, until very recently, only to the most wealthy of lay Tibetans. A family can also accrue considerable holdings thanks to the prestige and monetary offerings that come a *bla ma's* way, particularly now that many *bla ma* have wealthy patrons in inner China. This contemporary phenomenon also has historical precedents. Nietupski (2009), for example, describes the family of the Fourth Dbal mang and Fifth 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa (1916-1947) as having accrued considerable wealth, temporal power, and prestige in the early twentieth century.

In the wake of two decades of modernizing campaigns that vilified the Tibetan religious establishment while lionizing a secular, atheist cultural and governmental modernity, many Tibetan cultural producers internalized this attitude. Their works similarly focused on fake religious practitioners seeking to dupe trusting Tibetan pastoralists. The acceptability of this critique hinged on the notion of *zur za* and its humor, and the related notion of indirect critique. Too direct a critique can—and does—provoke hostile reactions from other Tibetans. I heard, for example, one (third hand) account of a performer being run out of the town of Rebgong on the heels of one performance that offered an overly direct criticism of Tibetan monastics.

3.3.3 Key theme: Tobacco and Alcohol

A minor theme in this performance, but one that recurs frequently in the sketch comedy corpus in general is the danger of alcohol and tobacco. In turn 75, Sman bla skyabs talks about how a little drinking might clear one's mind, but excessive drinking makes one fat:

Ya, now if I drink a mouthful of this *chang,*[22] my mind becomes clear like
     an eaglet.
If I drink two cups my bravery increases like a tiger cub.◊
If I drink three cups, my stomach grows large like a piglet. ◊Δ

ya da chang 'di hub gang 'thung na rnam shes gsal nas glag phrug gi log
     'gro zer gi/
hub do 'thung na snying stobs rgyas re stag phrug gi log 'gro zer gi
hub gsum 'thung na ho phu ra mi khyeg hag phrug gi log 'gro zer gi zer
     rgyus

In turn 79, meanwhile, Sman bla skyabs speaks of how excessive drinking turns liquor

from a "medicinal nectar" into a "poison":

Now if these elders don't drink, they can't see the path.
If grownups don't drink, they won't complete their work.
And if youths don't drink they won't grasp prosperity.
If cadres don't drink they won't do good work.
If students don't drink, they won't get good marks.◊
If they know to drink this, the nectar is medicinal;
If they don't know how to drink it, the nectar is poison. Δ◊

da 'di lo lon gzos ma 'thung lam sne mi rig
dar ma gzos ma 'thung don dag mi 'grub
gzhon pa gzos ma 'thung khyim gzhis mi zin
'di las byed gzos ma 'thung kha las mi dge
slob ma gzos ma 'thung skar ma mi longs
'di 'thung shes na 'dud rtsi sman rdzas yin ra
'thung mi shes ma rabs dug rdzas yin zer rgyus

This treatment stands in stark contrast to the almost exclusively positive language about

alcohol in other genres of the Tibetan oral tradition in which it is described as *sbrang*

rtsi'i snying khu 'essence of honey', which, when drunk, fulfills ones desires (e.g., Tshe

dbang rdo rje et al 2009). In the wedding ceremony, meanwhile, alcohol points to proper

hosting protocol, is offered to the bride's family before they even arrive at the home in

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[22] *Chang* is a barley-based beer traditionally drunk on the Tibetan Plateau. For the
brewing of *chang* in Bhutan (and my experience in A mdo and Khams generally suggests
that that this description is accurate for other regions), see Wilkes (1968: 350-1).

which the marriage is held, and features in wedding orations in which the quality of the liquor on offer is often praised and indexes the quality of the hosting.

Compared with other sketches, the above discussion of alcohol in Tibetan comedy is a relatively muted criticism of the dangers of alcohol, but one that has become more prominent in recent years. This early discussion of alcohol allows for potential positive uses of the substance. Later performances like Sman bla skyabs's *chang lha* seem more overt in criticizing alcohol consumption. And yet, nearly anyone who has spent time in Qinghai since the early 1990s has recognized a vibrant—often unhealthy—drinking culture revolving around a combination of beer, wine, and a barley-based liquor referred to locally (and by some code-switching Tibetans) as *la jiu* 辣酒 'spicy liquor' (T: *chang dkar* 'white alcohol') due to its harsh after-taste. In the mid-2000s, after many years of unhealthy drinking at parties and banquets, a number of prominent Tibetans developed liver ailments compounded by widespread Hepatitis. In response, public figures including scholars and clerics began denouncing drinking.[23]

Drinking has also been pinpointed as a source of violence in and among Tibetan communities on the Plateau. Prominent *bla ma* often ask people to swear oaths saying that they will not drink. Most recently, Mkhan po Tshul khrims blo gros, arguably the most influential Tibetan religious personage in China at present, has included abstaining from the consumption of alcohol as one of the highly debated new ten virtues.[24] Though

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[23] One acquaintance, for example, was asked to stop drinking for a period of three years, the time his brother (a monk) was to be in retreat, while another acquaintance claimed that a *bla ma* asked everyone in her village to foreswear meat and alcohol for a period of three years. For the public intellectuals, it might also be noted that this is more of a "do as I say, and not as I do" situation, than a true proscription.
[24] Since 2011, the new ten virtues have been the subject of much recent debate in the Tibetan blogosphere. These virtues: not butchering and selling meat, not stealing, not

less common in literature, music, or film, the cause has also found supporters in the Tibetan blogosphere (see Yumtso 2012). Yumtso is far from alone in asserting that alcohol can lead to neglecting family, laziness, and ultimately to a nationality that cannot progress: "[i]f we love our nation, and if we want to do something to contribute to the nation, we should start with drinking less alcohol." At present, the denunciation of alcohol consumption has both religious and secular supporters, which suggests that secular intellectuals and clerics are not always at odds.

Smoking cigarettes does not arouse the same levels of public scrutiny or outrage as drinking. In general, women and children are discouraged from smoking, and religious clerics should not smoke because it is considered unbecoming of a holy person.[25] Tobacco is mentioned in passing in each of the Careful Village performances, but never receives the same attention as alcohol. In the wedding speech, a single line of a single stanza states that *bu chung lo brgyad can gyis kha du 'then na mi mdza' zer gi* 'it's said that it's bad if a boy of eight years smokes.' The issue appears also in Careful Village's "Bride," where the performers are trying to figure out exactly what will happen at a village meeting, but only see tobacco pouches in their hands. They had been told that there would be "tearing" something, and they wonder if the village elders are considering

fighting with weapons, not prostituting one's body, not selling guns and opium, not smoking opium or cigarettes, not drinking alcohol, not gambling, not hunting, and not wearing the skins or fur of animals (see Mkhan chen tshul khrims blo gros, n.d). Of these ten, the majority of blogospheric consternation and debate has focused on the proscription against butchering and selling meat, especially the very fundamentalist interpretation. For a representative (though hardly exhaustive) group of blog posts related to this debate, see Degasang (2011), Sgo yon (2013), Dhondup Tashi Rekjong (2013), Smin drug (2012), Various (2013), Rdo me 'bud (2013), Brag rdo (2014).

[25] Stories of religious leaders smoking, however, abound. In 2014, I personally witnessed one *bla ma* drinking *baijiu* and smoking cigarettes in a tent in Northern Sichuan.

tearing up their tobacco pouches (meaning giving up tobacco). This is considered a

positive development, but it quickly transpires that they are not intending to do anything

quite so drastic. Smoking and drinking are again treated as bad behaviors in "Careful

Village's Grassland Dispute." These behaviors are considered especially reprehensible

for religious practitioners, and Sman bla skyabs points to his own habits as proof that he

is not a *bla ma*. In desperation he turns to alcohol and tobacco saying:

> "If I were a *bla ma*, then my monastery would be a distillery, ◊ my
> monks' perfection of wisdom studies wouldn't have been perfected, and
> they would have attained perfection only in smoking cigarettes. ◊ Will
> any of those who've come before or will come after recognize a *bla ma*
> like this?"

> *nga bla ma gzig yin dus nga'i dgon pa de chang btsags sa gzig yin/ nga
> grwa ba tsho ra phar phyin sbyangs de pha rol du phyin song ni min tha
> mag 'then nas thar phyin song ni yin/ de mo bla ma gzig yod dus phyi ma
> dgo gong ma tshang ma gis ra khas len nis* (Turn 57)

Figure 1: Alcohol: the stone that blocks future, the source of domestic disputes, the enemy of harmony, the king of lamentations (circulated on WeChat, August 19, 2014).

Drinking and smoking are, then, considered to be harmful for both clergy and the

lay population. Moreover, it must be recognized that the consumption of alcohol and

tobacco was also common at that time, both for recreation and for the altogether more

serious matter of business, especially for men. Although the consumption of alcohol was not unique to the late twentieth-century (Tibetans have made and drunk their own alcohol for centuries),[26] it became a key modern issue for public intellectuals at this time.

The potenitial danger of alcohol and tobacco is of key importance to a number of modern public intellectuals both secular and religious at least since the 1990s. It seems one criticism that, until recently has been muted, with many of the same performers regularly ignoring their own advice. If discouraging the consumption of alcohol and tobacco is seen as important, pointing us towards the creation of a modern moral system in A mdo, gender and equality are articulated even more clearly in the performances.

3.3.4 Key Theme: Gender and Equality

A major theme from "Careful Village's Wedding," for Tibetan modernizers, and state-supported modernity more generally, is that of gender. This performance explicitly takes on questions of gender on the Tibetan Plateau, while other performances in the series generally skate over such questions. Indeed, female characters are rarely voiced in the other performances, and when they are it is frequently for the humor value of the male Sman bla skyabs imitating the voices and speech-styles of women. This section details certain ways in which issues of gender and gender equality work their way into Tibetan crosstalks.

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[26] This led the authors of one Chinese-language article to opine that, *hejiu shi zangzu ren bu ke queshao de yi zhong shenghuo fangshi* 'drinking alcohol is a type of lifestyle that Tibetans cannot do without' (Wang and An 2012: 248). Tibetans are far from the only inhabitants of Qinghai with prodigious drinking cultures. Indeed, in my own experience, all of the non-Islamic peoples in the region boast robust drinking cultures including elaborate drinking games and speeches, including the Han, Monghuors, and Mongols.

For the wedding speech, the issue of gender equality appears most vividly in the description of how a woman cannot be bought, and how men are losing their power. Turn 129 begins by saying:

> *Ya*, so this wife for whom you gave your wealth, will not be a cook for life; and this valuable human body isn't bought at any price. And it should be said that when you have "equality," this wife won't be subject to your power. [chuckles] ∴Δ

> *ya da byin gyi chung ma 'di tshe gang gi ja ma min no/ rin chen gi mi lus 'di gong chen gi nyo rgyu med no/ 'dra mnyam dbang mnyam mnyam dus rgan mo 'di khyod gyi dbang 'dug mi shes zer rgyus/*

Makley notes that "in China, early CCP leaders drew on the strong link between notions of women's liberation and signs of modernity that had been forged in the nationalist discourses of the twentieth century" (2007: 90). This was not limited to the early period; as many post-Mao Tibetan public intellectuals also employed this discourse in their work.

And yet, despite the hard work of a number of comedians, other Tibetan cultural producers (like blogger 'Jams dbyangs skyid), NGO workers, and government propagandists[27] (to name a few), education for women still purportedly lags far behind that of men (Fischer 2009: 19-20) and domestic abuse remains common, as does (predominantly male) marital infidelity. The sheer number of performances dedicated to issues of gender equality over the last thirty years speaks to both to the continued perception of the importance of this issue among intellectuals, but also the perceived lack of change in gender equality. Tibetan from Phur ba's 1980s era comedic dialogue *Pho mo*

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[27] It is important to remember that the discourse of gender equality is state-supported in China. It is not the exception, but rather the rule. The state sponsors numerous organizations dedicated to women's issues.

'dra mnyam "Gender Equality" to Zhi bde nyi ma's twenty-first century sketch *Rgyan gos* "Clothes and Jewels" in the twenty-first century have all taken on the issue of gender in relation to modern life.

A corollary to the notion of gender equality in the 1990s is that of free choice in marriage. This particular issue is a key part of Tibetan modernist intellectual movements, just as it had become a rallying cry for May Fourth Movement intellectuals in inner China some 60-70 years previously.[28] Towards the beginning of his wedding speech performance, Sman bla skyabs very quickly adds an interesting comment before several times emphasizing the bride's rights as a person. In turn 25, he extolls free-choice marriage in a series of praises that otherwise look like a traditional part of Tibetan wedding speeches saying: "Praise the silk knot of love, praise the creamy-colored path of free marriage" *brtse dung dar gi mdud pa stod/ rang dbang rang 'grig gnyen lam rag mo bstod.* Free choice marriage is, then, praiseworthy and another trait included in A mdo Tibetan intellectuals' conceptions of modernity.

The ability to marry for love is important to the modern project of many Tibetan intellectuals. In both Chinese Communist rhetoric and in the eyes of Tibetan intellectuals, few aspects of culture more directly and visibly symbolize the backwardness of old society than arranged marriage. Though the practice continues even into the twenty-first century (Thurston and Tsering Samdrup 2012: 55), the CCP, as well as a number of Han Chinese and Tibetan intellectuals have generally discouraged the practice. In Han terms,

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[28] So too with other cultures engaging with incipient modernity, and the massive social changes it brings. Ahearn (2003 and 2004), for example, recognizes a sharp increase in the number of elopements (equivalent to free choice marriages) in the Magar community in Nepal in the 1980s, which she links explicitly with a contemporaneous surge in literacy rates.

the effort to stigmatize arranged marriage dates back at least to the May Fourth

movement of 1919, and Hu Shi's *Zhongshen da shi* 'The Greatest Even of One's Life'

(Hu 2013: 33-37), which was originally written in 1919 in English before being later

translated into Chinese (Hu 2013: 33). On the Tibetan Plateau, numerous cultural

producers take up this issue in a variety of media. In the 1980s, Phur ba also performed a

comedic dialogue that included a wedding speech placing heavy emphasis on free choice

marriages, praising the hypothetical couple for having married after they were both 18

years old, receiving their marriage certificates, and for marrying by choice. Iconic author

Don grub rgyal also turned his considerable talents to the pitfalls of this practice in his

novella *Sad kyis bcom pa'i me tog* "A Blighted Flower" (published originally in serial

format between 1982 and 1983) in which a woman in love with the brother of her

betrothed is raped while on pilgrimage, and then flees to another area to become a nun

(see Virtanen 2000 and Don grub rgyal 1982 and 1983). The woman's inability to choose

her marriage partners is implicitly linked to an entire series of tragic events, each of

which could conceivably have been avoided by allowing them to marry for love.[29]

     "Careful Village's Bride" also examines this question. In this performance, a

village has gathered to decide whether or not to allow a local man to marry a foreign

woman. After being told that the whole village wishes to decide the matter as a group, the

modern Phag mo bkra shis states: *da za le rgyal gis blor babs btang na de red mo/ sems*

chung sde bar ma babs ni gzig red/ 'But Za le rgyal loves her, and that's what counts. It's

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[29] So also with Bkra shis don grub, who despite his sympathy for tradition in most of his
literature, attacks the custom of arranged marriage in *Nga dang sgrol ma rnam gsum gyi
gtam rgyud* 'The Tale of me and the Three Sgrol mas" (see Virtanen 2008: 251). See
Makley (2007: 201-203) for a discussion arranged marriage, love, and free-choice
marriages in relation to the social pressures this brings on women.

none of Careful Village's business' (turn 26). Sman bla skyabs then quickly steps out of his story to concur. In each case modernity requires accepting romantic love and free choice marriage.

When it comes to this topic, Sman bla skyabs does not rest at this performance. He includes a number of oblique references to both gender equality and arranged marriage in numerous other comedies, including *ma bos mgron po* 'the uninvited guest' in which two men go to the school principle to lobby him for two very different purposes. One wishes to remove his daughter from the school, whereas the other wishes to enroll his son in the school. The man from one of the area's most remote and inaccessible villages sees no purpose in securing an education for his daughter. He suggests that he is taking his fifteen-year-old daughter out of school for the express purpose of marrying her off to another family.[30] The modern, city-educated principal refuses to give the girl a leave of absence, and cows the girl's father into allowing her to continue her education.

In each of these performances, then, arranged marriage as well as the inability to understand modern marriage laws, and the importance of marriage by choice all index backwardness, or a lack of successful engagement with modernity. The performers seek to satirize such ostensibly backward attitudes and tendencies by portraying villagers as not understanding these modern attitudes. In the wedding speech, free choice marriage is

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[30] The alignment of free choice marriage with modernity is not new to China more generally. Several May Fourth Movement Han Chinese writers interpreted arranged marriages as indexing backwardness. Hu Shi's *Zhongshen dashi* 'Marriage' or 'The Greatest Event in One's Life,' (which was originally written in English while he studied at Columbia) is a prominent example (He 2008). The CCP, meanwhile, made marriage a key to its modernizing program, portraying arranged marriages as backwards, feudalist, or un-modern. See Yan (2003) and Mackerras (2006) for more on marriage in China. Scholars have also emphasized the importance of free-choice marriages and romantic love in early modernizing movements in Nigeria (Griswold 2000), Nepal (Ahearn 2003 and 2004).

directly praised in the course of the speech's performance. In other performances, the focus on romantic love and education for women articulate modern goals that directly link to state discourses on gender and marriage.

3.3.5 Key Theme: Education

Perhaps one of the most important and prominent themes in both Careful Village, and the corpus of 1990s Tibetan comedies is that of education.[31] Extolling the values of a secular education underlies much of the A mdo Tibetan modernizing movement. The importance of education features from the first Careful Village performance and continues throughout Sman bla skyabs's larger corpus. In "Careful Village's Grassland Dispute", Sman bla skyabs tells the villagers to build a school, and then emphasizes to a child the importance of education. Indeed, he appears to view the kind of resolutions of inter-social conflict that *bla ma*, real or fake, are able to affect as only stopgap solutions that might be able to forestall violence for a short time, but do not fundamentally change peoples' attitudes, something he seems to believe that only a modern-style education can do. At the end of the piece, the village leader, as voiced by Sman bla skyabs in turn 263 (Thurston 2013: 181), suggests that now that they have made peace between them, the two villages can collaborate against other villages. Ultimately, it is education—and specifically, in this case, a school that crosses village boundaries—that improves people's lives and makes lasting change to this violent cycle.

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[31] For more on education in Tibetan areas, including policy and practice see Clothey and McKinlay (2012) Bangsbo (2008), Bass (2008), Zenz (2010 and 2014) and Postiglione (2008). Wang (2011) meanwhile, provides a critical examination of the state of vocational training in Tibetan areas of China. Critical engagement with this literature is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, it is the invocation of education in the modern project that I emphasize.

Education appears again in "Careful Village's Wedding," where, in the course of his wedding speech Sman bla skyabs exhorts people to respect teachers, a stance with which Phag mo bkra shis wholeheartedly concurs. Sman bla skyabs also bemoans that school environments are poor (turn 91) and that there are few children who speak Tibetan (also turn 91). In "Careful Village's Thief," meanwhile, education is referred to less explicitly in the form of the village leader suggesting that he doesn't know anything other than Tibetan so where could he go to search for these thieves. Learning other languages, including Chinese, is something that comes with education, and Sman bla skyabs criticizes those who fail to recognize that the world is much larger and more diverse than it was before, and that only being able to communicate in Tibetan is not enough.

Beyond the Careful Village series, Sman bla skyabs's "The Uninvited Guest" (T: *ma bos mgron po*) also takes on the issue of education in A mdo. As two parents go to the local school to meet the principal, they express aapprehension because the new principal has earned a reputation for scolding parents rather than children for the lack of educational achievement in the region. At one point early in the conversation he derisively notes that one village has a number of monks and no students. The parents' lack of basic, modern-world knowledge is illustrated to audiences through the confusion caused when a student shouts *bao gao* 'reporting' (equivalent to saying, "May I come in?") before entering the principal's office. Not knowing any Chinese, they assume that this is the teacher's name, and repeatedly call him Teacher *Bao gao* (T: *dge rgan bao gao*) throughout the rest of the performance amidst much swearing of oaths. The three characters each illustrate a different stance towards education: the teacher represents modern urban attitudes, the elder from closer to the school (who wishes to enroll his

extremely young son in the school) evinces a progressive stance, and the second paent, from far in the country (who wishes to withdraw his daughter so that she can get married) maintains a wary, and "backwards" view.

Moreover, in 'The Uninvited Guest' Sman bla skyabs specifically continues the discussion of gender, through advocating education for girls. Again, two fathers go to a school, one is seeking to enroll his son early, the other to remove his daughter from school so that he can marry her off to another family. The girl's father suggests that education is not beneficial, particularly for a girl. The attitude of the girl's father reflects some dominant trends in rural Tibetan education in the early part of the reform era, in which education for girls is not considered to be as important as it is for boys.[32] The enlightened school principal, however, rejects the girl's father—ensuring that the girl can continue her education—and accepts the other man's young son. In doing so, the principal and the boy's father provide a foil for the girl's father's backwardness.

Other performances provide less explicit, but just as salient, representations of education. It is common for at least one character in a comedy to be uneducated, and for this stance to be verbally indexed through a variety of speech styles (more on this below). In Mgo log Zla b+he's *Rin po che* 'the jewel,' for example, the first situation the performers act out in relation to questions of language is that of a Tibetan girl at school receiving a phone call from her father. Her command of the Tibetan language far outstripsthat of her father, who cannot even say a phone number in Tibetan.

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[32] Bangsbo (2008: 70) writes that, "studies of pastoral communities in Amdo [sic] show that the main reason for keeping children out of school is a need for labour in the household. It is often the girls who are kept at home, and most of the women among the pastoral herders are illiterate." Seeberg (2008), however, argues that this situation had significantly changed by the early twenty-first century.

Education is no less significant for other intellectual culture brokers in A mdo. The idea that education (and specifically a modern-style education, as opposed to one that is dependent upon the Tibetan traditional monastic system) has the power to overcome misunderstandings that are a part of traditional life resembles a mantra repeated by scholars and authors across the Plateau. Tsering Bum (2013), for example, in his autobiography writes about a dispute between members of the Tibetan and Hui ethnic groups in his home village: "After seeing what had happened in my village, I became more aware of the importance of education. I thought it was the only way to

Figure 2: Image of 'Jigs med rgyal mtshan and one of his more famous quotes about education in a college classroom (photo by Nyi ma rgyal mtshan).

eradicate such ideas. The world has changed and people should compete with each other over how much they know and not in fighting skills." Meanwhile, several religious leaders have opened private schools associated with monasteries throughout the Plateau (cf. Bangsbo 2008), while their famous sayings on the value of education are immortalized on posters hung in classrooms. For example, in one university classroom in Xining, I saw a quote from Mgo log-based 'Jigs med rgyal mtshan, founder and principal of the famous Rwa rgya girls' school, saying *bu mo'i slob gso ni a ma'i slob gso yin la a ma'i slob gso ni mi'i rigs kyi ches thog ma'i slob gso yin* 'girls' education is the education of mothers, and mothers' education is humanity's earliest education' (see figure 3 on the previous page). Education and educators, then, are central to the modern ideologies of Tibet's cultural authorities.

It is also worth noticing that the link between education and a nascent modernity is not limited to Tibetan areas in China, or even to China more generally. Cashman (2008: 180) recognizes the role of education as a modern shibboleth in the North of Ireland, with lack of education associated with a pre-modern past. Education was also an essential to Weber's understanding of the creation of a modern, unified France. Indeed, "[p]eople went to school not because school was offered or imposed, but because it was useful. The world had to change before this came about" (Weber 1976: 303). Furthermore education is a key for many minority ethnic groups or colonized peoples. Bourdieu (1977: 652) suggests that "[t]he educational system is a crucial object of struggle, because it has a monopoly over the production of the mass of producers and consumers, and hence over the reproduction of the market on which the value of linguistic competence depends." At the end of his definition, Bourdieu brings us back to

the primary theme of this dissertation: language. Linguistic competence, meaning here competence of the codes and terms of modernity, is reliant upon schooling. Schooling, in turn, is also the point from which the moral base of modernity (including free-choice marriage, gender equality, etc.) is taught. Gaining this linguistic competence and moral knowledge, one might suggest, is the very purpose of modern secular education.

3.3.6 Key theme: Language

In Chapter 2, I discussed the development of a linguistic hygiene campaign through which comedians and other intellectuals sought to positively affect the prestige of Tibetan amongst the greater populace in the 1980s. Although this remained important to Tibetan intellectuals in the 1990s, I read the peformances from this later period as providing a much more nuanced expression of language in A mdo. Just as in "Studying Tibetan," mastery of a particular linguistic code is essential to modernity. It is not only through the discussion *of* language, but through examining how language is *used*, that these newer comedies' metadiscursive message emerges. "Careful Village's Wedding," also suggests the importance of learning Tibetan. Sman bla skyabs's 1990s comedic dialogues also broach other linguistic notions worthy of consideration, including the need to learn Chinese.

Rather than a complete rupture with the language ideologies of the 1980s (see Chapter 2), the 1990s see a continuation of these ideologies and the spread of new language-related ideologies in Sman bla skyabs's 1990s comedic dialogues. The four Careful Village performances explicitly advocate the need to learn both Tibetan and Chinese. In line 91 of the wedding speech, Sman bla skyabs avers that, *deng sang bod*

skad shes nis bu phrug nyung [gi] "there are few children these days who speak Tibetan," clearly bemoaning the fact that so many children were unable to speak in their native tongue. Meanwhile the village leader's inability to speak other languages—as he laments in "Careful Village's Thief"—limits his options should he pursue the thieves despoiling Careful Village that fourth and final installment. He notes:

> *de gang nga bud thal zer rgyus deng rabs gi rkun ma red mo/ stod rgya*
> *gar ra song gi smad rgya nag ga song na nga bod skad min nas mi shes ni*
> *gzig gang nga btsal gi 'gro rgyus*

> 'As for where they went, they're **modern** thieves! They might have gone
> to India, or China. But one like me who doesn't speak anything but
> Tibetan, where would I go to look for them?' (turn 161).

Here mobility, multilingual-ness, and transnationality are all characteristics the village leader explicitly relates with modernity and, importantly, *not* with the people of Careful Village. If the overall work of Tibetan comedic dialogues in the 1980s and 1990s is to encourage greater interaction with and define a Tibetan version of "modernity," then the inability to speak another language is considered a distinct hindrance.

The 1990s performance *'di rmi lam yin nam* 'Is this a Dream' also suggests the importance of Chinese language learning as part of this multilingual modernity. This comedic performance features two men and a nurse. The two men, one a farmer and the other a herder, are seeking medical care for a stricken man. Their poor command of Standard Mandarin Chinese causes the nurse to look down on them, only to find out that the man they have brought in is her father. In fact, the nurse is Tibetan, and speaks Tibetan, but refuses to speak her own tongue with the two good Samaritans. In this performance, we see what I perceive to be the fullest explication of this moralizing

metadiscursive theme: that an inability to speak Standard Chinese hinders many Tibetans from engaging with modernity, but refusal to speak Tibetan is also not the way to go.

Again, this issue is not limited to Tibetan comedy, but has been taken up by a number of other Tibetan cultural producers. Before becoming a filmmaker, Pad ma tshe brtan published a number of short stories in both Chinese and Tibetan, including his novella "Life in Town" (see Virtanen 2008: 252-256). In this work, the family ponders the consequences of educating their child in Chinese or in Tibetan. After choosing Chinese, they become concerned with their child's physical, linguistic, and cultural distance from their native Tibetan. It is a distance that is ultimately only bridged when the family takes the child to the countryside during holidays.

The question of Tibetan language, Chinese language, and their combined place in modern life leads to an avalanche of inquiry that appears time and again in Tibetan crosstalk performances and characterizes energetic public intellectual debate on the Tibetan Plateau. Zenz (2014), for example, notes that many Tibetan intellectuals have helped to advocate the gradual "Tibetanization" of education in Qinghai Province's Tibetan areas, while at the same time recognizing that many Tibetans choose to learn Chinese ostensibly for the sake of their ethnic group. If the explicit references to language mentioned above point toward questions of language use in late twentieth century A mdo, examining the importance of language in Tibetan comedy both as medium and as social issue requires looking beyond the explicit discussions of the topic, to how the discussions are structured. In the ensuing discussion, I employ theories of enregisterment to the linguistic maneuvers of 1990s comedic dialogues in order to shed

light on the creation of metadiscursive regimes that further the societal work of Tibetan

comedic dialogues and provide power to the social issues they describe.

3.4 Voices, Characters, Enregisterment, and Comedy

So far, I have tracked a variety of important tropes—called "key themes"—which

have featured in 1990s comedic dialogues. Ultimately, these "key themes" or "social

issues" represent binaries juxtaposing different types of behavior in the face of modernity.

The following chart illustrates the binary oppositions that we have discussed above as

being "key themes" in Tibetan comedic dialogues of the 1980s and 1990s.

Backwards	Modern
Nomad/Farmer	Urban
lacking technology	having technology
gender inequality	having gender equality
traditions	laws
bandits[33]	thieves
grassland disputes	no grassland disputes
religious faith	agnosticism/ rationalism
no foreigners	foreigners
uneducated	educated

Bauman and Briggs note that the notion of a great cultural divide separating pre-

modern and modern life became "the foundation of a poetics of Otherness, a means of

identifying the premodern Others" (2003: 14, see also Duara 1991 and 1995). This, in

turn, justified the interventionist project that Duara notes in early twentieth century

China, and suggested in Kaske's (2008) recognition of the importance of education in the

imperial missives of late-Qing officials, and vernacular language for May Fourth era

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[33] This is part of *Sems chung sde ba'i rkun ma "Careful Village's Thief,"* and another
performance entitled *Lha sar 'gro 'Going to Lhasa,'* in which Tibetans opine that in the
past, there were many bandits, but now there are thieves. The role of banditry in Pre-
Liberation Tibetan culture is discussed more fully in Lama Jabb's (2009) article on the
legendary bandit Yidak Kela.

writers. In these modernizing movements, urban, educated, technologically advanced life is advocated, whereas folkloric forms are relegated to the past.

These binaries also correspond to Bauman and Feaster's (2005: 53) observation that early comedic sound recordings, in portraying the incompetence of marginalized ethnicities in the United States, suggest that they "are not fully competent to participate in the American political process," as well as the assertion that "these comic representations… are centrifugal, their thrust is divisive, and the interest they serve is that of the dominant white, mainstream, modern, urban—and male, of course—sector of the society" (Bauman and Feaster 2005: 54). For Bauman and Feaster, then, technology—and therefore modernity—exist to exclude tradition, while for Noyes, "neither traditions nor their bearers are admitted to coevalness with the modern subject" (Noyes 2009: 240). Indeed, the very basis of European modernity is that it is a rupture from traditions. The concept of "tradition" meanwhile, only exists in opposition to modernity.

Such assertions may be valid for representations of Western cultural contexts, but they are insufficiently nuanced for Tibetan comedic dialogues produced during a technological moment of incipient modernity similar to that of Bauman's and Feaster's early sound recordings (though temporally separate by several decades). The depictions of Tibetan nomads in A mdo's comedic dialogues *do* suggest that members of this group are not fully competent to participate in the specifically Tibetan modern society these performers promote. At the same time, however, these messages are coming from inside the Tibetan ethnic group. This is a key distinction, not least for the comedians themselves who intend these performances to be pedagogical rather than simple entertainment. Most Tibetan audience members read these negative portrayals as forms of benevolent

education, but they also reinforce fundamental asymmetries in society.

This set of binaries might equally be mapped onto a similar set of binaries emanating from the Chinese state's discourse in regards to modernity. There is a "purity" (in Latour's terms) in these representations bolstered by the suggestion of a rupture that separates the old society and the new. The salient date of this rupture, at least for most Tibetans in A mdo, in this regard, was 1958, the year that divides "the old world" (T: *'jig rten rnying ba*) and "the new world" (T: *'jig rten gsar pa*), and as such separates pre-modern and modern life so thoroughly in Tibetan discourse that it may be called a "change in worlds" (Hayes 2008 and 2014).[34] In Tibetan comedy, and everyday discourse more generally, this divide is taken for granted. Nevertheless, Latour (1993: 12) contends that, "the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids [mixes between the past and the present, between nature and society] the more possible their interbreeding becomes." The assumption of a historical turning point is directly undermined by the continuing presence of traditions, and linguistic practices that bridge the divide. The very clear existence of the pre-modern Other in a society striving for modernity provides the justification for intellectual intervention. The intellectual intervention in the form of the very "social ills" (T: *spyi tshogs kyi gnad don*) Tibetan comedies discuss are most frequently "relics" of the old era that continue to exist in "modern times" and that are seen as hindering full participation in a true modernity. Their hybridity is vexing to Tibetan intellectuals, and forms the basis of these many social ills, because the hybridity

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[34] For more on 1958, see Makley (2013b: 192) who notes that "The great trauma and sociopolitical rupture of the 1958 'Democratic Reforms''—for most Tibetans I spoke to who remembered that time, that year, and *not* 1949 was when the revolution really hit the region" (italics in original. For the importance of 1958 for the Tu ethnic group, see Roche and Wen (2013: 90).

undermines the discourse of rupture.

Interestingly and humorously, "Careful Village's Grassland Dispute" makes explicit the hybridity that flourishes precisely *because* of modernizers' insistence on purity, e.g., the village leader states "For us, there's no old and new. If it weren't for the hiatus of '58 and the Cultural Revolution, more than a few people from both sides would be no more [meaning, the feud would have been ongoing from before 1958, and many would have died]" *ngi cho bar ra gsar rnying gi cang dgo ni ma red/ nga brgyad ra rig gnas gsar brje gis dal 'gor mi byed rgyu na phar tshur rag sod res byas cig gag tugs ge bzhag yod* (Turn 141). This statement, which the audience greets with appreciative laughter, serves several purposes. First, it questions the discourse of a divide and rupture with 1958 in daily life. The village leader begins by explicitly stating that 'For us there's no old and new.' Secondly, rather than a rupture, it is merely a *dal 'gor* "hiatus." For rural populations, the massive change from old to new is muted. Together, the statements positing a rupture between the new and old worlds on the one hand, and then those suggesting this rupture is merely a "hiatus" on the other combine to foreground the continued presence of traditional lifestyles in modern China. In this way, Sman bla skyabs hints at Careful Village's continued backwardness, and inability to fully engage with modernity.

Bauman and Briggs (2003) remind us that language is an extremely powerful tool for the creation and evaluation of hybrids, and it is certainly central to the creation of hybrids in the example above. Language ideologies and metadiscursive regimes mix with science and with culture while insisting upon the appearance of purity to create important ideas about modernity. More generally, comedic dialogues in 1990s A mdo played an

important role in using language to link certain speech styles and forms to social groups and their (stereotypically perceived) values. This is accomplished primarily through the careful manipulation of existing speech styles and associating them with different social groups.

In some cases, for example, Sman bla skyabs deftly shifts both the words he uses and the speech styles he employs to imitate the speech of people with different social and educational backgrounds. In others, he changes pitch to voice the ideas of female characters, while in still others he allows his speaking partner, 'Phags mo bkra shis, to add extra commentary on a person or on what that person says. These shifts are immediately recognizable to culturally competent audiences and are rich with meaning. Through careful examination of these speech styles, it becomes possible to recognize the ways in which new values become attached to these same registers in the course of these performances.[35] In this section, I examine the language Sman bla skyabs employs in his performances, focusing on his characters and manipulation of these characters' voices.

3.5 Characters

Comedic dialogues are a genre motivated primarily by plot, and the articulation of social themes outweighs character development. These qualities place it in a category similar to legend (see Briggs 1988 and Degh 2001), anecdote (Cashman 2008, Mullen 1978: 113-129), and other genres for which "character type is foremost because thematic

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[35] Agha (2000: 216) defines register as "a linguistic repertoire that is associated, culture internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices." Hymes (1974: 59) notes that register is the accepted term for a language style restricted to "situation-specific [context-dependent] use." Biber and Finegan (1994: 4) define it as "a language variety viewed with respect to its context of use." All three point toward a definition of register as a context- and group-dependent linguistic repertoire.

concerns and plot dominates over character development" (Cashman 2008: 162). Sman bla skyabs's A mdo Tibetan comedic dialogues similarly privilege plot and theme over character development. The great variety of thematic concerns treated in these 1990s performances has already been discussed above, but attention to the importance of character will reveal much about this art form's expressive work.

To this end, it is useful to recognize that "all social performance reifies people in culturally coded roles or identities" (Herzfeld 2005: 1997). Comedic dialogues, as social performances intended for Tibetan consumption, present such culturally coded roles or identities at their extremes and their most influential. It stands to reason, then, that in discussing the verbal art of Tibetan comedy, the issue of character should precede that of voice (the latter being unable to really exist without the former). In this section I briefly introduce some of the important literature on issues of character and some of the best ways for understanding the characters in Tibetan comedic dialogues.

Each intstallment of the Careful Village Series sees Sman bla skyabs voice a variety of "characters": his imitations of himself and of the village leader stand out as the most prominent examples, but in *Careful Village's Thief*, he affects the speech styles of an old woman, and a variety of men. In "Careful Village's Grassland Dispute," he again takes on the speech of a variety of men, and even (briefly) that of a child. These characters, however, are not enriched with psychological depth and motivations. They are best understood as types used to further the meditation on social concerns.

Although the Tibetan folk tradition does have numerous tales of tricksters—like the aforementioned A khu ston pa, and Nyi chos bzang po, Mchig gnes (see Zla ba sgrol ma 2011), and occasionally King Gesar—and fools—like A rig glen pa (Makley 2007)—

the characters impersonated in these performances are not so much modern embodiments of these traditional types as personifications of social roles in contemporary Tibetan society. Many of them are elderly and conservative. All of them are pastoralists, in contrast to Sman bla skyabs and his speaking partner, who are urban.

The characters of Sman bla skyabs's comedies are, as Barthes (1970:178-181, cf. Cashman 2008) has argued for characters more broadly, linguistic constructs, acting as agents of the discourse of which they are a part. As such they serve the discursive goals of the performance itself: the articulation of social issues the performers perceive to be of utmost importance to the audience and the Tibetan ethnic group at that particular moment, including, but not limited to, language and corruption (see Chapter 2), the dangers of tobacco and alcohol, the benefits of modern technology, education, and the importance of gender equality and free-choice marriages (see above).

Tibetan comedies in the 1990s were typically two person-performances. The polyvocal performance, then, requires that at least one (and occasionally both) performers take on the speech styles of a variety of different performers. In short, the characters come into being through being voiced. Sman bla skyabs is a master of vocal imitation. In his Careful Village performances, much of the laughter and applause he elicits comes from his clever and artistic use of language and ability to create a variety of different characters and rapidly shift between them.[36] Agha (2005: 43-44) recognizes that different voices can be distinguished through "contrastive individuation…contrasting the voices of different figures through text-metrical variations," "biographic identification…when proper names can be used to associate textual scopes with biographical identities," and

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[36] See Bender (1999) for more on the phenomenon of shifting and audience enjoyment.

"social characterization," which amounts to assigning a social characterization to an individual voice.

A comedian might well employ all three of these in a single dialogue. In his "Careful Village" series, for example, Sman bla skyabs switches seamlessly between his own natural character and speaking voice and a variety of other voices that are separate from his own. In Careful Village's wedding speech, audiences only hear Sman bla skyabs voicing himself (performing the wedding speech) and the village leader, but in the other performances in the series, he voices several adult men (young and old), two separate old women, and a child. In some cases, Sman bla skyabs explicitly names them (providing biographical identification), as with Daddy Cheche in "Careful Village's Bride." In others he modulates the pitch of his voices (contrastive individuation), most obviously with his performances of various different women or children's voices but also of a variety of different male voices. But the ability to separate his performed characters from his own speaking voice (and that of his speaking partner) also relies heavily on "social characterization." Though Agha (1998) suggests that this is primarily done using a metalanguage of social types,[37] Sman bla skyabs's performances only provide such commentary occasionally (and usually from the mouth of his speaking partner). "Careful Village's Thief" (T: *Sems chung sde ba'i rkun ma*) for example, describes one speaker as "a bold old man covered in oil and dirt and wearing glasses with curled temples connected with a long piece of yak-hair rope" *rgan po mgo rdo snum log ga myig ra gi lung ngo rtsid skud can gzig.* On another occasion, in the same performance (Turn 113),

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[37] Swinehart (2012: 83) also recognizes the importance of stereotypes, and links them to enregisterment in Bolivian comedies, in a case of symbolic elites creating discourses under conditions not dissimilar to the Tibetan Plateau.

Sman bla skyabs describes a villager whose name he didn't know, but "I clearly saw that his front two teeth were covered with metal" *mdun so gnyis ka lcags gis shan no la gsal bo gzig rig gi.* In both examples, the descriptions amount to social characterizations of Sman bla skyabs's characters—from the pastoral margins of society. They can be assumed to be less educated, and associated more with the "old society" than the new.

That all of the people he voices are from the same village suggests that this characterization can be extended beyond the two individuals mentioned above to apply to the village as a whole. This social characterization of different individual voices point to something more extensive: indexing the *same* 'social voice.' Indexing a single 'social voice' further relies on linking the characters to individual speech styles, to engaging in enregisterment.

3.6 Enregisterment

The ability of Sman bla skyabs's various voices to index the speech patterns of different social and geographic background—to index different registers—is especially important to understanding the discursive element of his cultural critiques. This is because "encounters with registers are encounters with characterological figures stereotypically linked to speech repertoires… by a population of users" (Agha 2005: 45). I will proceed using Agha's definition of enregisterment as "processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms" (2003: 231), and Newell's (2009) recognition that enregistered forms can be essential in a group's formulation of alternative and local definitions of modernity.

While these performances enregister particular linguistic forms (as I shall show below) to formulate an A mdo Tibetan modernity, it is important to recognize another layer of complexity in them: namely that these comedic dialogues are scripted, subjected to close readings from the censors before reaching audiences through some form of mass media. They are not exact portrayals of daily dialogue, but a combination of artistic language and everyday speech. Goebel (2007: 528) argues that, "[p]ortrayals of …[languages] in language policy, the media, and educational settings can lead to enregisterment." In doing so, he extends discussions beyond daily speech, recognizing instead the stereotyping about language that often occurs in media, policy, and education. This is the case in Tibetan comedic dialogues, which have been performed and broadcast via a variety of media, where multiple language ideologies and associations are already in place, and used by performers to create new ones.

Negative associations with swearing, as we shall see below, predate the appearance of Tibetan crosstalks, but are an important resource for performers of comedic dialogues. Selectively using such oaths in comedic performances attaches them to a place identity (pastoralist), age group, and also with a specific rung on the ladder of economic development. So, too, with the absence of such linguistic forms, which are associated with modern, urban-based, educated people.

But these negative assocations of oath-swearing, do not appear on their own. Instead, they rely on various actors within A mdo's syncretic nexus of cultural authority for their expression. Indeed, Goebel (2007: 512) recognizes that the "process of attaching cultural value to linguistic forms is dependent on individuals' access to or participation in speech chains [which] consists of a speech event containing [a] type of metadiscourse…

along with senders and receivers." The discursive authority conferred by the state, by education, and by ability to participate in cultural production provides Tibetan performers of comedic dialogues with precisely this sort of access to speech chains and allow them the scope to engage actively in the process of attaching cultural value to these linguistic forms. Furthermore, their access to linguistic chains, to perceptions of the performers' *la rgya*, and to the media propagate certain conceptions about language and other social issues, that gives them influence in affecting popular language ideologies and other key *spyi tshogs kyi gnad don* 'social ills.' Goebel further points out that "just as a role model's usage of an enregistered variety can play a role in the reproduction of this variety, subtle changes in the meaning of an enregistered variety can also occur when this variety is appropriated for other purposes" (Goebel 2007: 513). Thus the performer can influence the reproduction of an enregistered form through positively portraying it in performance. The performer can also change audience perception of enregistered forms through juxtaposing two such enregistered forms.

More specifically relevant to China and the Tibetan Plateau, Dong (2010) notices how institutional and media backing has helped ensure the place of Chinese Putonghua as a prestige dialect in Beijing. State-run media in China enregisters a certain accent and way of speaking, Putonghua, that is perceived as most correct, educated, and modern while regional dialects are discursively cast as backwards or indicative of less education. The unspoken backdrop for the discussions of language is that of China's monoglot language ideologies (Dong 2010). The terms of this ideology associate Putonghua with scientifically enlightened socialist modernity and the officially sanctioned language of media. Putonghua is also associated primarily with the Han nationality, which is in turn

discussed as the eldest brother within the family that is China's configuration of the *zhonghua minzu*. The Han are then tasked with helping the minority nationalities that must catch up to the superior Han (Mackerras 1984: 190).

It is also worth recognizing that extant research on enregisterment in China tends to mostly examine accents and dialects spoken by Han Chinese. Dong (2010) for example, compares the accents of Putonghua standard Mandarin, used to index modernity and education, with regional dialect. She concludes by showing that Putonghua, spoken with regional accents, is negatively valued due to a perception that it indexes lack of education, lack of *suzhi,* and lack of (officially recognized) urban identification in the form of their *hukou*. I seek to expand the discussion on enregisterment in China to also examine how speech styles and lexical items, in addition to perceived accent, can also index cultural, regional, and social identities within a single sub-group of an ethnic minority nationality, and again, within the larger monoglot language ideology of the PRC.

This use of particular speech styles and lexical items is especially important when dealing with performers who themselves grew up in the countryside, and whose performances *must* of necessity use a high degree of colloquial language. In these performances, accent is only one of many ways in which enregisterment can be studied. Instead, enregisterment takes place in other ways, including the use of metaphor and verse, the swearing of oaths, and other culturally significant speech styles.

Grehan (2009) suggests that one can understand these language ideologies and the enregisterment processes through which these ideologies are created through portrayals in policy and mass media. In this section I look at issues of enregisterment and the ways register is used to stand for a variety of social values in Tibetan comedic dialogues, not

least through the selective and careful juxtaposition of people from different linguistic and regional backgrounds. Specifically, I examine the enregisterment of the literary and spoken lexical registers of Tibetan, cursing and swearing, metaphor, and verse.

3.6.1 Spoken Tibetan (kha skad) and Written Tibetan (yig skad)

The differences between spoken Tibetan (T: *kha skad*), and written Tibetan (T: *yig skad*) provide opportunities for a performer to lexically associate a person with a given educational and social background. Recognizing who employs these forms in comedic dialogues performances is a first step in this process of understanding. Specifically, comparing Sman bla skyabs speaking as himself to Phag mo bkra shis, and Sman bla skyabs imitating different villagers is enlightening. In this section, I examine the comparative uses of colloquial and literary Tibetan in the Careful Village series of performances.

Green's (2012) discussion of A mdo dialect as spoken in broadcast media provides an excellent point of entry for discussions of Tibetan speech styles in A mdo. Green points out that linguists in China generally distinguish four types of Amdo Tibetan dialects, drawing on the more emic distinction between "Nomad dialect" (T: *'brog skad*) and "farming dialect" (T: *rong skad*). These are northern and southern nomad and northern and southern farming dialects. He also extends beyond this to introduce new distinctions that Chinese scholarship frequently overlooks, including high, mid-level, and low media Amdo Tibetan, according to the amount of literary language each employs. While the more traditionally-accepted four-level division is based primarily on linguistic

similarities in sub-regional groups noticeable in communities with different subsistence styles,[38] Green's (2012: 8) proposed tripartite division of high, mid-level, and low media Amdo Tibetan is based more on the frequency in which "literary language" (T: *yig skad*) is employed in broadcasts. The highest level uses many literary terms and is difficult for many less-educated Tibetans to understand.

Becker (2009: 653) argues that, "individual speakers… construct a place identity through micro-variation in the use of… feature[s] in a local context." It is worth noting that such micro-variation—"practiced based variation" focusing on "micro-shifts in the rate of a linguistic variable as talk unfolds in time" (Becker 2009: 637, cf. Mendoza-Denton 2002) can also index social status, or more. I focus on several types of variation and what they can index. In cases such as Becker's study of rhoticity[39] or, more precisely, its absence, in New York City, micro-variations in accent and lexical items suggest place identities, while in others they may index social or class identities. In A mdo, a combination of accent and lexical items index both place and social identities.

Generally, Sman bla skyabs's skillful imitations of the people from Careful Village are recognizable to Tibetan audience members as being of pastoral origin and lacking in education, whereas he uses a distinctly more "educated" spoken register when speaking as himself. Phag mo bkra shis, meanwhile, uses primarily a more literary and educated register when he speaks. This is not to say that they are speaking literary Tibetan. Indeed, their speech remains extremely colloquial, though sprinkled with a few

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[38] It should be noted that the notion of a single sub-regional farming dialect is dubious. While pastoral dialects may be relatively uniform across large geographic regions, farming dialects vary widely.

[39] Rounding of the /r/ sound.

words from the literary register. Audiences immediately recognize the use of literary language and its implications. Green (2012: 7) points out that "[e]ducation is reported to mitigate this difficulty [in comprehending people from other dialect regions], because educated A mdo Tibetans will choose lexical items from the written language over those they know to belong only to their own vernacular." This also works in reverse, in comedic dialogues using such lexical items from the written language indexes education.

From the first turn of the first performance, "Careful Village's Grassland Dispute," Sman bla skyabs uses literary terms like *ched du* 'in order to,' *gang ltar* 'whatever' (turn 31, 61, 65, 265), *'grel bshad* 'to explain,' and *tha mag* 'cigarettes.' This last term is not the colloquial term in A mdo, though it is in Lha sa dialect (the commonly-used term in A mdo is *du ba*). Yet again, in "Careful Village's Bride" Sman bla skyabs uses *ha ma go* 'to not understand' (turn 61). Though common in Lha sa dialect, this phrase is again considered literary language to most people in A mdo (or when speaking to a foreigner who they assume will be more comfortable with Lha sa dialect than with their A mdo dialect). These words are completely absent from Sman bla skyabs's imitations of villagers. Phags mo bkra shis also includes instances of literary Tibetan lexical items in his speech. For example, he says *drag* in *Careful Village's Thief* (turn 4) and *tshul* instead of the more colloquial *srol,* but his identification as educated and urban stems more from the frame tale[40] in which Sman bla skyabs always speaks of having gone to the village and returned, implying the place of residence is urban and not rural, and the people living there are therefore modern.

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[40] The frame tale "is a fictional narrative composed for the purpose of presenting other tales" (Irwin 1998: 391).

These instances of literary Tibetan are only a small portion of the dialogues that employ an overwhelmingly colloquial register, but they do set the performers, speaking as themselves, and the educational and social backgrounds *they* represent (urban, educated, modern) in a relationship with Sman bla skyabs's imitations of villagers, discursively labeling them as rural, uneducated, and backwards. In addition to enregisterment through different phonological features, lexical items evoke an individual's education, home area, and personal background in relation to culture. Cursing and the swearing of specific types of oaths, the topic to which I turn next, are uniquely evocative for Tibetan audience members and play a crucial role in these social goals of these Tibetan comedic dialogues.

3.6.2 Cursing and Oath-swearing

From my very first engagement with comedy, I was struck by the ubiquity of cursing and oath-swearing in A mdo dialect conversations; especially the latter. These oaths and curses, many of which begin or end phrases, could not be explained by dictionary definitions, nor was I conscious of having heard them in my classroom discussions or coffeehouse meetings with local, mostly educated, friends. As time passed, I recognized the frequency with which people swore, and the great variety of choices people had in swearing and cursing. It struck me that these oaths were being used to deepen the social impact of Tibetan comedic dialogues.

Though linked in twenty-first century American English, Tibetans view cursing and swearing as two very different categories of speech. Swearing remains linked to oaths, which in turn relates to the making of promises (Schlesinger 2008). In the Western

context, oaths may be sworn as part of a code of ethics (Banks 2003). The oath is intended, in these instances, to lend gravity to the performance situation.[41] In daily speech, meanwhile, oaths may be either sacred or profane, going so far as to even sometimes be scatological (Humez et al 2010). Moreover, oaths may be considered genres of power, in that they are "ways of speaking which have an implicit hierarchy of social power in their utterance" (Kratz 1989: 636). The direct link between the action and the intended consequences lends great power to the oaths themselves.

The curse, however, is a very different sort of communicative act. Indeed, "the strict and traditional meanings of *curse* are the appeal to a supernatural power to inflict harm or evil on a specific person, the form of words itself and the sense that a person or place is harmed or blighted by being 'under a curse'" (Hughes 2006:114-5, italics in original). Importantly, and building off of the distinction between literary language (*yig skad*) and colloquial speech styles (*kha skad*), swearing and cursing both tend to rely heavily on the colloquial register in a number of languages (Allan and Burridge 2006), and this is true of Tibetan.

In Tibetan, 'swearing oaths' (T: *mna' skyal ba*) and 'curses' (T: *dmod tshig*) are two significantly different categories of speech acts}. The former, as the above-stated definitions suggest, include both sacred and profane statements entailing some sort of promise that if conditions are (or are not) met, there will be some sort of serious consequence.[42] They most often add the weight of truth to the speaker's testimonies. The

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[41] For cross-cultural studies on oaths, see Serruys (1958) and Kratz (1989); in ancient Greece, see Dillon (1995). In the English context, see Spurr (2001), McEnery (2006), and Kelly (1973).

[42] Ljung (2011: 2) notes that several languages, including English, French, and Swedish, employ a single term for both sacred and profane swearing.

latter are maledictions frequently comprised of "epithets derived from tabooed bodily organs… bodily effluvia… and sexual behaviours" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 80). Each traditionally relates to notions of fortune, although most agree that the performative frame renders them inert in the context of the Tibetan comedic dialogue. Moreover, *dmod tshig* 'curses' are similar to the traditional western notion that "the strict and traditional meanings of *curse* are the appeal to a supernatural power to inflict harm or evil on a specific person, the form of words itself and the sense that a person or place is harmed or blighted by being 'under a curse'" (Hughes 2006: 114-5, italics in original). The *dmod tshig* then may also be a genre of power in that it seeks to mobilize the power of sympathetic magic to inflict harm on the recipient of the curse.

Swearing oaths and cursing brings us into contact with economies of fortune.[43] Economies of fortune, the umbrella term for a variety of overlapping and mutually influencing fortune-related forces in the Tibetan worldview, including, but not limited to *rten 'brel*—translated variously as 'omen' (Ekvall 1964), 'interdependence,' 'material prosperity' (Clarke 1990)—*dge ba* 'virtue', *bsod nams* 'merit,' and *rlung rta* 'luck," are an important part of understanding Tibetan oaths, the swearing of which draws upon all of these simultaneously, especially the first two. I have elsewhere suggested that *rten 'brel*, as conceived in A mdo, is essentially performative in nature, meaning that the word, once uttered, is thought to have real world efficacy (see Thurston 2013). This notion is a key to understanding the social valence that accompanies the swearing of such oaths.

Despite my initial interest in oath-lore, it was only much later that I noticed the

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[43] For more on "economies of fortune" on the Tibetan Plateau, see Da Col (2007), Thurston (2012), and Sam tsho skyid and Roche (2011).

importance of *who* was swearing these oaths. In the Careful Village performances, it appears that swearing marks uneducated speech in the same way that literary language marks the speech of people who have received education. And yet, I have heard people of all backgrounds swear regularly and freely. Indeed, *mna' skyal ba* "oath swearing" is an important part of everyday speech for Amdo Tibetans across the region.

In A mdo Tibetan regions, there are two types of oaths: "village oaths" (T: *sde mna'*) and "individual oaths" (T: *sger mna'*) The former are oaths taken between two villages and are considered to be more important than the latter (Ljang skya dge 'dun bkra shis 2011). Oathswearing serves an important social and economic function, allowing different families and villages to form alliances. Ekvall (1964: 37) describes oaths linguistically as, "attestations or appeals to concepts of great or supreme sanctity." His list includes some oaths that remain popular today (e.g. *dkon mchog gsum*, *Yum btum pa bcu gnyis*, and *dgon pa* 'monastery'), and others that seem to have fallen out of everyday linguistic usage, at least in A mdo (e.g. *gnam* 'sky' *gnam rtag pa* 'sky eternal' and *'phrul rin po che* 'great precious magic). But this characterization is insufficient to understand the functions of oathtaking both traditionally and within the comedic dialogues's parody.

Tibetan oaths take a variety of forms. Some are regionally popular, while others are spoken across a wide swathe of the Amdo region. For example, "by Rong bo Monastery" (T: *Rong bo dgon*) is an oath unique to inhabitants of the Reb gong region of which Rong bo is the primary monastery,[44] whereas *bka' 'gyur* and *bstan 'gyur* (the

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[44] For more on Reb gong, see Thurston (2012), Yangdon Dondhup (2011), Dpal mo skyid (2013), Sujata (2005), Stevenson (2002), Kalsang Norbu et al. (1999), Dpal-ldan-bkra-

names of two sets of religious scriptures of special importance to Tibetans) are more typical of people from nomadic areas. While travelling in Rma lho Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture, I heard in the course of a single week and from a variety of different people, *bka' 'gyur,* "by my mother's flesh" (T: *a ma'i sha*), *yum* and *yum btum pa* (both of which refer to the name of an important twelve volume scripture).

Not only are some oaths potentially regionally specific, others are also specific to certain age groups, with different generations traditionally favoring different oaths. Among Tibetan twenty-somethings, for example, *yum* is very popular, whereas older people might swear with "By Chairman Mao" (T and Ch: *Mao zhuxi*). In both cases, these index locations in time and space, and also might serve as solidary signals between different groups (Daly et al. 2004).

In the "Careful Village" series, a majority of the oaths sworn relate to family rather than religion. This point is instructive on two levels. As discussed previously, there is a general omission of religion from the performances. It might also have been that authors and performers felt the discussion of religion to be a "catch 22": publically discussing religion in a positive fashion would be unacceptable on state broadcasts, while negative portrayals of religion might incur cultural censure from local audiences for their seemingly blasé usage of such language.

Oaths are frequently religious in nature or draw on bodily images. For oaths relating to the body, however, the association is usually with the notion of eating flesh, drinking blood, or of other spiritually unclean, viscerally repulsive, and impure acts. In the case of the former, the speaker suggests that they will do something unclean or

shis and Stuart (1998), Makley (2013b), and Snying bo rgyal and Rino (2010) and Danzang Cairang (2009).

inappropriate to a holy personage, deity, or scripture. In "Careful Village's Thief," a number of different oaths are sworn as villagers try to describe the severity of the rash of thievery plaguing their pastoral community. These oaths include *zha yis cho'i khrag* "by my children's blood" (turn 55), *pha ma gnyis ka'i sha* "by the flesh of both my parents" (turns 107 and 109), *a rgya'i sha* 'by my grandfather's flesh' (turns 189, 195, and 197), and *ru rdo'i sha* 'by Ru rdo's flesh' (turn 205).[45] In each instance, they swear in order to add the weight of religious consequences to their statements. In the other Careful Village performances one can see a number of other, similar, oaths, all used in similar fashion.

It is worth noting that each oath in this performance is specific to a single character whose participation in the narrated event Sman bla skyabs is affecting. "By my children's blood" (T: *zha yis cho'i khrag*) is placed in the mouth of an unnamed bald elder. Another unnamed character, described as having "two front teeth covered with iron," uses "by both my parents' flesh" (T: *pha ma gnyis ka'i sha*) on two occasions. A younger man, when being forced to admit having stolen things in the past, is so embarrassed that he says "by my grandfather's flesh" (T: *a rgya'i sha*) several times before finally confessing his sin. A man identified as "Uncle Mgon tho" swears with "By Ru rdo's flesh" (T: *ru rdo'i sha*). One might notice that each such instance of swearing is associated with rural characters.

Beyond the comedy itself, similar associations weave their way into urban intellectual Tibetan descriptions of oath-swearing practices in A mdo. J suggests that oaths can identify a person's social background and regional origin, thanks to their place-specific nature. The oaths most frequently employed by Sman bla skyabs indicate that his

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[45] Here "Ru rdo" is a nickname for a villager who is understood to be a member of the speaker's family.

characters are predominantly from pastoral areas. Though J did not expand on this, I found that this was code for "uneducated." The suggestion was that people from farming areas use different oaths. Pastoralists are also shown to be some of the most marginalized by modernization, and "by uttering a curse, individuals who have been driven to the social margin acquire the power of exercising pressure and of attempting to improve their unfavorable position" (Avdikos 2011: 93). Yet, while Avdikos writes in the Christian context, in which one can invoke either God or the Devil to exact retribution, there is no single analogous apparatus in the Tibetan Buddhist (or Bon) schema. There is karma, which will work itself out regardless of the uttering of any curse and thus not of concern, and other concepts related to fortune which, taken together can work within an economy with real-world effects. Curses are linguistic forms of communication deployed to transfer the negative energy of the counterstructure's threat of social marginalization and stigmatization to those persons seen to deviate from the local cultural capital (Avdikos 2011: 109).

Tshe brtan rgyal (2010: 196) devotes all of one page to the topic of oathtaking, first describing some of the oaths people might swear (including some discussed above), and then briefly introducing the logic of the oath:

> Tibetans consider these oaths to be very important and sensitive. If you break your oath [literally "eat your oath"], not only will you fall into the hell regions in your next life, but you'll really eat the flesh of your father or mother, etc. be reborn as an animal, and in this life you won't accomplish anything… your father, uncles, and all your relatives won't believe you, your friends won't trust you, and all will certainly scoff at you and look down on you.

> *bod kyis mna' tshig 'di shin tu gal chen dang gnyan par brtsi/ gal te mna'*
> *zos tshe tshe phyi mar dmyal ba bar lhung 'gro ba ma zad/ dngos su rang*
> *gi pha ma sogs kyi sha za ba/ phyugs zog sogs dud 'gror skye ba dang/*
> *skye ba 'dir yang by aba ci yang mi 'grub pa dang/ … pha khu zhang*

*gsum sogs gnyen 'brel kun gyis yid ches mi byed/ grogs po rnams kyis blo
rton mi bcol/ mna' za dug 'thung zhes kun gyis 'phya smod dang mthong
chung byed nges yin*

The author then proceeds to invoke (half of) a Tibetan proverb stating that *bod
kyis mi za ba mna' yin* "What Tibetans don't eat is their words [literally 'oaths']." Even if
this interpretation is perhaps more normative and pious than peoples' daily speech would
suggest, it is one that interview respondents repeated consistently when suggesting that
people who swore many oaths were considered lest trustworthy and argued that oaths
were intended to add the weight of truth to one's statements precisely because of the
grievous effects a broken oath was expected to incur.[46]

In the absence of mass literacy, Tibetans expected the oath, with its grievous
consequences, to be a binding pact. The dire consequences associated with these oaths
are expected to ensure that people really are telling the truth. And yet, oaths are not only
religiously important; in the hands of Tibetan performers they also accomplish significant
work in society, lending both colloquial authenticity to their dialogues and encoding
important messages about the speakers who swear them.

These pious and normative interpretations of the oath, however fail to account for
the real frequency with which oaths tend to be sworn in daily speech. My experiences in
conversations with Tibetans in A mdo suggest that Tibetan comedic sketches reflect a
similar normative characterization when imitating people from different regions:
characters from the city, urban sophisticates, and people with education do not frequently

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[46] Ljang skya Dge 'dun bkra shis (2011) further describes a difference between *sger mna'*
'private or individual oaths,' and *sde mna'* 'village oaths.' The oath-taking behavior he
describes, however, is a more elaborate form of oath, such as those made in front of the
bla ma in Careful Village's Grassland Dispute (Thurston 2013).

swear oaths and curse, whereas people from the countryside use such oaths liberally. Beyond simply one's geographic location, however, there are a number of moral and social implications to swearing oaths. In the entire "Careful Village" corpus, Sman bla skyabs only swears as himself once. At the beginning of "Careful Village's Grassland Dispute" when Careful Village's leader is pressing him to admit that he is first a doctor he swears *Picasso!* It is significant that the only oath he swears is an entirely novel one, and one that indexes a more modern, urban experience, and Sman bla skyabs's own status as a *sgyu rtsal pa* 'artist.'

The swearer of too many oaths is considered untrustworthy and not especially moral. Moreover, the breaking (literally eating) of one's oath *mna' za ba*, is considered to be a grievous occurrence, because it will make the words come true, and so the swearing of oaths should be something that is done only infrequently and occasionally. Though many interviewees were loath to speak definitively on the topic, often citing a lack of sufficient cultural knowledge or authority, many believe that the implications of sympathetic magic in Sman bla skyabs's oath-taking are lessened by the performance frame in which he is speaking. This points to an interesting and at present unstudied element of Tibetan economies of fortune: though they remain important to many modern situations, the stage performance frame takes precedence over economies of fortune, and the performers are thus safe from the potentially harmful effects of swearing oaths that are certain to be broken.

The staged dialogue, then, frees the oath from its cosmogonic associations, and opens it to use as a referentially pregnant index of social background. In the four "Careful Village" performances, one gets the feeling that the performers' lack of swearing when

speaking themselves stems not so much from some traditional sensibility as the attempt to portray an educated sensibility, moving towards an urban modernity that shuns the sort of superstitious, non-rational, and unscientific speech theyestablish through their words and their speech styles, as characteristic of the uneducated countryside.

Dmod tshig "curses" are rare in the sketch comedy corpus, in part because they are something of a gendered genre; curses are considered to be more appropriate to female speech, while the performers are predominantly male. Tibetan curses frequently center on the issue of physical and spiritual pollution. While political justice is often out of reach for the average person, the ability to inflict real harm on an offender with words is familiar. Indeed, while the emic way of understanding curses as related to *rten 'brel* "dependent origination," Avdikos's (2011) etic suggestion of disease-like transfer also helps to understand the connections between the curse and its intended consequences. The spoken curse causes the impurity to infect the cursed person's body. In A mdo, many feel curses have power to make a verbalized situation literally come to be.

The primary function of both swearing and cursing in Tibetan comedic dialogues, however, is to align the speakers with certain educational and social backgrounds. Swearing oaths is, with the exception of the bizarre 'Picasso' indexical of uneducated, folk speech. Curses, despite being a very different speech genre, are used to evoke similar stances, while also occasionally employing humorously colorful language.

3.6.3 Metaphor and Verse

Sman bla skyabs's characters also are notable for their consistent use of metaphoric language and breakthroughs into mini-performances of verse-genres like

gtam dpe "proverbs." In this section, I discuss the instances in which characters break into verse and metaphoric language, the purposes of this language, and the way it is used to further separate rural people from urbanites, whose speech is more frequently unmarked by such genres.

Dpe, commonly translated as "example," "illustration" (Sørensen and Erhard 2013b), or "metaphor," are an important element of traditional speech. In *gtam dpe* 'exemplary speech' or 'proverbs,' two usually parallel statements are juxtaposed so that one is an example and the other is a more direct application of the example. In common speech one might often be asked to give an example of a general situation they previously described.

If the use of well-timed artistic phrases is characteristic of verbal virtuosity in some of A mdo's rural areas, it should hold that Sman bla skyabs, as a master of imitation and representation, of witticisms and joking around, should also employ such speech styles when he imitates villager reactions to the unique situations they face over the course of his four visits to Careful Village.

Indeed, the preponderance of metaphors in these performances is seen to lead to an inexactness in understanding, leaving Phag mo bkra shis and the audience at a loss on several occasions, and requiring Sman bla skyabs, who frequently admits that he too did not initially understand what had been meant by certain phrases, to clarify with his after-the-fact knowledge. Such humorous misunderstandings occur prominently in "Careful Village's Thief" when villagers consistently refer to the thieves as *khyi rkun* 'thieving dogs.' Phag mo bkra shis initially believes that the villagers seem to have a problem with the number of stray dogs living in their area. It is only much later (turns 63-64) that he

realizes the term "thieving dogs" is merely the local way of denigrating the thieves

plaguing their area:

> [63]A: [as the village leader] "These so-called thieving dogs are human
> thieves. While they are 'human thieves' they are also 'thieving dogs.'
> Excepting that some have tails and some don't, they're all still thieves. ◊
> Now if they're not thieving dogs, then what are they? Do you understand
> now?
> [64]B: [with a voice of sudden realization] Oooh, now I understand. Those
> so-called thieving dogs are human thieves. The so-called human thieves
> are thieving dogs. Actually, they are both thieves.
>
> *Ka: khyi rkun bzes no myi rkun red/ myi rkun bzes rung khyi rkun red/*
> *rnga ma yod med gzig gi khyad par min nas tshang ma rkun ma red/ da*
> *khir kun ma ra chi gzig red/ da e go thal/*
> *Kha: O da go thal/ khyi rkun bzes no myi rkun red/ myi rkun bzes no khyi*
> *rkun red/ ngo ma bshad na rkun ma red la/*

Even after the initial misunderstandings brought on by the use of overly metaphorical

language are resolved, the metaphor is not put to rest. Instead, it is re-hashed time and

again in the course of the performance, with descriptions of the "wolves" (T: *spyang ki*)

and "dogs" (T: *khyi*) used to refer to "outside thieves" (T: *phyi rkun*) and "internal/local

thieves" (T: *nang rkun*) respectively.

Such misunderstandings are common throughout the "Careful Village" series,

each time owing to a lack of clarity on the part of rural speakers caused by their overuse

of metaphorical language that effectively excludes outsiders from following the

conversation. In "Careful Village's Grassland Dispute," for example, as villagers

describe their conflict with the opposing village, Phag mo bkra shis gets lost as to what

exactly is happening, thinking that they are talking about slaughtering people, when in

fact they are speaking of slaughtering the other village's livestock.

> [157]A: "We slaughtered them! We slaughtered as many as we could catch.
> If we couldn't catch them, then they got away." Δ

[158]B: (to the Village Leader) Oh, so if one rode a great horse one would escape?
[159]A: "Ah? What did he say? Where can you find livestock that ride horses?"
[160]B: Who's saying that? Does your livestock ride horses?
[161]A: (interceding) Eh, The village elder was talking about [slaughtering] livestock!
[162]B: (addressing A again) Oh, I thought that he was talking about slaughtering people. Δ
[163]A: (under his breath) Wouldn't that be a hospital?

Ka: Bsha' ni red/
du zin ni du bsha' ni red//
ma zin na shor 'gro ni red//
kha: o/ da rta btsa' ya gzig ga zhon yod dus shor rgyu red/
ka: a/ 'dis chi zer/ zog rta zhon gzig gang na yod nis chi go/
kha: sus de zer/ khyed kyi zog da rta zhon ni yin rgyu'o red/
ka: e/ des gi rgad pos zog zer go ni red/
kha: o/ ngi bzos myi bsha' nis na 'dod la/
ka: sman khang yin sa yod gi ra/

In this second instance, one sees that the villagers use a parallel verse-like phrase. These are considered *kha bde no* 'eloquent,' but the use of such highly economical verse, confuses the audience, and the urbanized Phag mo bkra shis, because they lack the villagers' inside knowledge of the situation.

One final example may complete this discussion. In the wedding speech, the ability to intelligibly use Tibetan language appears explicitly as part of the process of modernizing the Tibetan language and culture for a mass audience. Sman bla skyabs takes a break from his speech to tell Phag mo bkra shis: "*nga'i ston bshad rnam pa so ma yin nas dus rabs gsar ba mthun ni red/ nang don go ba blangs na dngos yod 'tsho ba nye ni red/* The form of my wedding speech is fresh so as to be in tune with a new era, and its meaning is easy to understand because it's close to material reality" (Turn 15). Again, the implication could not be any clearer, traditional language—and particularly wedding

speeches, with their heavy use of metaphor—is distanced from material reality and not up to the task of communicating modern ideas. Instead, a more straightforward language, shorn of such traditional metaphor is necessary. This stands in striking contrast to the traditional proverb stating that "speech (*gtam*) without illustration (*dpe*) is difficult to understand. A vessel without a handle is difficult to hold" (Sørensen and Erhard 2013b: 282). Sman bla skyabs's statement on the the qualities of his new wedding speech may also be a gentle poke at religion whose language usually dominates wedding speeches, but is noticeably absent from this performance. Another implication is that intelligibility is essential to the formulation of Tibetan modernity.

At the same time, Sman bla skyabs speaks in verse extensively as himself while performing the wedding speech. But this can be explained by the demands of the genre he is appropriating. It is impossible to perform a wedding speech without employing some figurative language and verse. Nonetheless, it remains significant that his figurative language directly relates to the modern world, and when he breaks out of the speech frame to make comments with his urban confrere, he rarely employs such language, instead favoring more direct and less artistic speech. But Sman bla skyabs *can* perform the versified wedding speech precisely because he has modernized its content. Thus, in addition to language, the wedding speech genre itself is inadequate without the direct intervention of the secular intellectual in the name of modernity who provides it with this intelligible, useful form. This allows him to retain his modern and educated persona, safely distancing him from the tradition, while at the same time performing this tradition.

Finally, my experience with the speech patterns of urban-based intellectuals shows a relative lack of such artistic language. In teaching classes, or in public question

and answer sessions, situations in which a speaker in the countryside might show verbal virtuosity through use of metaphor, proverbs, and the like, one notices a relative lack of such linguistic adornments. At least, people carefully negotiate their speech styles based on context. When speaking with another intellectual, they may employ fewer metaphors, but in speaking with a high school classmate, they may employ a very different speech style. The key, however, is that the language used to establish these identities acquires social valences, such that all the words spoken by these characters is taken as emblematic of the group this person represents.

Formulated in these ways, the discursive practices and cultural stances of both the modern, educated, sophisticated, urban person and their discursively constructed opposite—the "backwards," uneducated, unsophisticated rural speaker—are placed side-by-side for the audience's enjoyment. At the same time, they allow one to see how a variety of other cultural footings are discursively associated with these types of people.

The views articulated relative to the herder are far more complex in these performances, and in Tibetan culture more generally, than this suggests. While someone can pejoratively be referred to as a *'brog pa* 'nomad,' thereby suggesting backwardness, lack of education and literacy, unquestioning religious faith, and dirtiness, a number of Tibetans also look to pastoralism as the touchstone of their culture, where a more primordial and real sense of Tibetan-ness resides, even though it is generally considered scientifically to have been a secondary adaptation (see for example Upton 1996).

Upton notices how the grasslands are treated "not only as a place of backwardness to be transcended, but also as a repository of Tibetan tradition" that must be preserved and lionized (1996: 99). The former is the dominant idea in many comedic dialogues. In

particular, it is the purpose of this unique form of enregisterment in which the nomadic

populations are associated with a lack of education, impure speech practices, and the like.

Collectively, they signal backwardness. It should, however, be noted that this is not

uniform across all performers, or even across a single performer's entire repertoire. With

the advent of *gar chung* 'comedic sketches,' attitudes towards language, culture, and

modernity, as portrayed in these performed sketches, changed perceptibly.

3.6.4 A specifically Tibetan Modernity

   The skillfully crafted links between character types, their social backgrounds, and

speech styles herald the inception of new metadiscursive regimes and linguistic

ideologies to accompany a specifically Tibetan modernity. Thus, while the list of binaries

given above initially suggests that performers are simply reproducing the modern

ideologies of the Chinese state, the discussion of language provides a second set of

dialectics is necessary in light of the preceding discussion of enregisterment:

backwards	Modern
verse	plain speech
traditional genres	comedy/ *kha shags*
monolingual	bilingual
oaths and curses	lacking oaths
vernacular	written language

   The metadiscursive side of this project provides a blueprint for A mdo Tibetan

engagement in modernity. It is, in many ways, similar to the ideal versions of language

set forth by John Locke in the seventeenth century, and to the Chinese state's own

creations of linguistic modernity. But by arguing for the continued place of Tibetan

language, of a minority language, in this modernity, Tibetan comedians and public

intellectuals discursively construct a uniquely Tibetan modernity that differs significantly from the Chinese state's. Tibetans, in these performances, *can* be modern, although many are not. Entering into modernity is predicated on mastery of the requisite codes and linguistic competences: the ability to speak plainly, bilingualism, direct speech lacking in oaths, and written language.

3.7 Understanding Tibet's Careful Village

Careful Village is not a real place. The term *sems chung*, literally "mind small" implies timidity, and, when used in certain contexts may signify meek and cowardly. It is a pointed and clear critique of problems that the performers, and many other Tibetan intellectuals feel that Tibetan culture faces in the twenty-first century: that the people are increasingly insular, afraid of the outside world, fearful of thieves and the like, but figuratively shooting themselves in the foot with their reluctance to engage the modern world on its own terms. In describing the village's shortcomings and the difficulties they face in interacting with modern life, the performers are exposing existing problems, lampooning existing attitudes, and (crucially) providing models for the resolution of such challenges. Not all of the problems are solved in fashions that are particularly elegant or practical, but all provide resolutions and new ideas.

If there is any sense that these performances are intended to limit their concerns to A mdo residents, the language of this performance immediately dispels such notions. A number of phrases throughout the series of performances discursively link the village metonymically to the entire ethnic group (for more on the idea of metonymic referentiality, see Foley 1995: 5-11). These scalar moves are not lost on Tibetan

audiences. A number of interview respondents explicitly linked Careful Village

allegorically to the entire Plateau. For example, E stated that:

> *sems chung sde ba zer go no, bod tshang ma, bod tshang ma gi mying nga*
> *da sems chung sde ba, bod yul tshang ma gi mying sems chung sde ba zer*
>
> What's called Careful Village, all of Tibet, the name of the whole of Tibet
> is Careful Village, Careful Village is the name of the entire Tibetan area.
> (E Pers. comm. 3-24-2013)

These performances, then, describe not the unique issues facing a single village, but

rather those plaguing the entire Tibetan Plateau. The social issues these performances

raise must be read accordingly. Thus, Careful Village's Grassland Dispute is a sort of

internal dispute:

> The biggest part of these internal feuds[47] is mutual fighting. So when you
> talk about making war, that's fighting. Moreover, if you're one ethnic
> group and within it there is mutual fighting, if you're one ethnic group and
> two villages don't trust each other, if you're one ethnic group and two
> villages don't care for each other, these are all internal feuds on both sides.
>
> *nang dme byed no gi phyogs che bo 'di phan tshun 'dung res rgyag go no*
> *'di red. Da 'khrugs ba rgyag go no zer go dus 'dung res yin ni red, de*
> *thab gi da mi rigs gcig yin na ra, de'I nang nas phan tshun na dung res*
> *rgyag go no, mi rigs gcig yin na ra, sde ba gnyis phan tshun yid ches ma*
> *byas no, mi rigs gcig yin ni ra, sde ba gnyis phan tshun na sems khur ma*
> *byas no, de da tshang ma har der song na nang dme yin ni red.* (E, pers.
> comm. 7-31-2013)

This can be seen further through a number of elements of Careful Village's

dialogues in which Sman bla skyabs and his characters explicitly and discursively scale

up from the village to the ethnic group. In *Careful Village's Grassland Dispute*, for

example, when Phag mo bkra shis realizes that all of the targets Sman bla skyabs has

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[47] *Nang dme*, which I define here as internal feuds, can also be defined as "family feuds"
or "fratricidal conflicts" (cf. Kunsang 2003: 1495).

arranged for people are relatives, Sman bla skyabs responds by saying *tshang ma spre'u dang byang chub sems dpa' ra brag srin mo nas chad ni red mo* "Didn't they all arise from the Bodhisattva monkey and the rock ogress?" (turn 229). Sman bla skyabs turns to the creation myth again in "Careful Village's Wedding" when he says *spre'u byang chub sems bpa' bstod/ mi gcig brag gi lha mo bstod/* 'Praise the monkey bodhisattva, praise the human-creating rock goddess' (turn 25). In doing so, Sman bla skyabs links the people of Careful Village to the mythic progenitors of all Tibetans, allowing the performance to jump scale from the village to the ethnic in a single sentence, and in a way that Tibetan audiences recognize immediately (see Mukherji 1999).

This scalar jump is achieved again in Careful Village's Bride when the villagers speak of their credentials to the foreign matchmakers, saying "We are descended from Lha lung dpal rdor" (T: *nged ka lha lung dpal rdor tshang gi gdung rgyud yin*) referencing Tibet's most famous assassin, the monk Lha lung dpal rdor, who is renowned for having slain Glang dar ma, the last king of the Tibetan dynastic period, who played an active role in oppressing a then still-nascent Buddhist faith in Tibet. Though he fled to A mdo, Lha lung dpal rdor is claimed as a hero by Buddhists in almost all Tibetan regions.

Previous examples show references to culture, myth, and history being used to achieve a scalar jump. Other performances achieve such jumps in other fashions. In Careful Village's Thief, for example, the village leader says:

> "As for where they went, they're **modern** thieves. They might have gone to India or China. But me, I don't speak anything but Tibetan, where would I go to look for them?" (turn 161).

> *de gang nga bud thal zer rgyus deng rabs gi rkun ma red mo/ stod rgya gar ra song gi smad rgya nag ga song na nga bod skad min nas mi shes ni gzig gang nga btsal gi 'gro rgyus*

In choosing India and China, Sman bla skyabs sets Careful Village as a metaphor that is equivalent to the entirety of the Tibetan Plateau. China and India, meanwhile, comprise different cultural systems, different civilizations between which Tibetans have long felt caught. It also points to the fact that "[a]rticulate, multilingual [or multi-registered] individuals could be come inarticulate and 'language-less' by moving from a space in which their linguistic resources were valued and recognized into one in which they didn't count as valuable and understandable" (Blommaert 2007: 2). In moving to other countries, and the other linguistic and cultural systems these countries represent, the village leader loses the authority of his position. He states this most specifically in linguistic terms, emphasizing that he will be inarticulate and therefore incapable of dealing with these modern thieves.

The discursively scalar nature of these performances is important to understanding how Tibetan audiences react to the messages propagated in these performances. These messages are not meant to be only locally meaningful, but to be examined and learned beyond the immediate context of certain villages, and of the A mdo cultural region. Furthermore, audience members do not, for various reasons, contest Sman bla skyabs's discursive authority to speak for all of Tibet. In part, perceptions of the performer's status as intellectual and as possessing *la rgya* are important. Additionally, however, the ability to manipulate the generic intertextuality of dispute mediation ("Careful Village's Grassland Dispute" and "Careful Village's Bride"), or wedding speeches ("Careful Village's Wedding") provide significant discursive authority and social power over the tradition (Briggs and Bauman 1992). The implication,

immediately evident to Tibetan audiences, is that these are issues facing the entire ethnic group.

But proper reception of these issues also depends on the performers' ability not merely to explicitly describe different orientations to modern life, but also on the audience expectation of satire. Otherwise, the inherently polysemic or polyvalent nature of comedy (Perks 2008: 13, Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002: 98, and Gring-Pemble and Watson 2003: 146) can lead to a multiplicity of competing interpretations. And yet, my informants tended to have remarkably similar answers about the meanings or goals of particular performances.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has used the example of "Careful Village's Wedding" to examine the way 1990s comic dialogues and the intellectual-celebrities who created them articulated appropriate Tibetan engagements with modernity. Though the discussions focuses primarily on Sman bla skyabs's performance of a "wedding speech," because of its topical breadth and communicative economy, I have also discussed other 1990s performances that are associated with the work of modernity.

The chapter was in two parts. In the first, I examined individual themes around which 1990s comedic dialogues revolved. These themes were shown to relate not only to "Careful Village's Wedding," but also to 1990s comedic dialogues more generally. Together, they helped to generate a list of binaries that generally demonstrates the nature of the temporal and cultural rupture that is an important part of the Chinese Communist State's definition of modernity. Through discursively defining modernity as urban,

educated, rational, technologically advanced, and gender neutral, A mdo's comedians have interpreted modernity in a way that appears, on the surface, to be in line with the state's own definition.

But the explicitly articulated themes alone tell only part of the story. The second-half of the chapter, then, looks beyond what is said to how it is said and by whom. In doing so, it looks at the use of character types and the discursive styles these different characters employ to show that these performances simultaneously support and undermine this state-defined modernity. Through linking certain speech styles with individual character types, these comedians are able to guide audience reception of the key themes articulated. At the same time, however, they carefully allow Tibetan language an important place in this modernity, thereby undermining the suggestion that these performers directly or unthinkingly parrot state-articulated modernity.

The story of Tibetan comedy, however, does not end with the 1990s, nor does the development of complex interactions between social actor, genre, and language. By the dawn of the twenty-first century the art form had undergone significant changes, and the social messages were changing as well. The following engages questions of language in the twenty-first century and the development of *bzhad gar* 'comedic sketches'. This new, and more visual, form allows performers to index character backgrounds visually as well as auditorily. Furthermore, as we shall see below, these sketch comedies interact with an emerging social milieu and public discourse to move away from bilingual modernity, to cultural preservation and linguistic purism, and the recent, almost viral spread of this purism since 2008.