

# TALES FROM TIBETAN OPERA

Edited by Wang Yao



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## **Preface to the Second Edition**

This is an old work of mine completed more than 20 years ago. It was sold out soon after it was published by the New World Press and, for the time being, can hardly be found on the market. Now, having won the approval from the competent publishing authorities, I have made the decision to have it reprinted, and I would like to take this opportunity to speak my mind:

1. This book, having suffered from numerous criticisms during the Cultural Revolution, almost went into extinction. Indubitably, I myself went through harsh criticism and accusation, most of which were, as it turned out, utterly false. Luckily, all this is gone. Now that everything has developed along the right lines, we might just as well let that pass.

2. Currently, Tibetan opera has become a striking symbol of the cultural development on the Chinese mainland and a dazzlingly beautiful flower in the blossoming garden of Chinese opera, which is, in essence, the fruit of the unremitting efforts of Tibetan writers and actors. Apart from the innovations in form, aria, masks, costume, music, etc, the plots of Tibetan opera themselves are marvelous spectacles with salient national traits which have won great popularity among the Chinese people. In view of this, I, as a promoter and translator of Tibetan opera, feel fairly gratified. Never shall we forget that since the 13th century, writers of successive dynasties have spared no efforts in adapting stories of the Buddhist scriptures to Tibetan opera. Thanks to their originality and superb artistic taste, unique aria and dance have been formed to express the fairly complex emotions

of the characters of the opera which strike a sentimental chord in the audience, hence a complete pattern of Tibetan opera taking shape.

Undergoing vigorous development and promotion, Tibetan opera, one of the important inheritors of Tibetan culture, has played a crucial role in carrying forward our national culture. Thanks to the performances of Tibetan opera touring the rural and urban areas of Tibet and its continuous development, it has become more and more popular throughout China. What is to be introduced here is just the stories about the eight major Tibetan operas, and new repertoires remain to be collected and brought forth.

Also, the forms of Tibetan opera have witnessed tremendous changes. To be more exact, performances are staged in theaters rather than on squares; previously, the audience was just composed of farmers and herdsmen. Now, almost all rural and urban residents have become Tibetan opera fans. Moreover, music and costumes in the opera have been greatly improved. Getting close to the actual conditions, daily life and the common people has become the new developmental orientation of Tibetan opera. To develop a strong socialist culture in China, it is critical to inspire the cultural creativity of the whole nation. On the part of myself, I think Tibetan opera has a promising future. In this sense, the reprinting of this book *Tales from Tibetan Opera* serves to be a small gift of mine.

Recently, Mr. Tsering Namgyal, a teacher from the University of Tibet, paid a visit to me. He has been working for his doctorate in the Tibetan opera program in the Central Conservatory of Music, which further shows that Tibetan opera has won its due attention in the research field.

## Preface

The English edition of *Tales from Tibetan Opera* presented here is a collection of eight Tibetan stories frequently performed in Tibet.

The book is a first attempt to give the reader a thorough explanation of the main performance content of Tibetan opera. Previously the only studies available in French and English were the French Tibetologist Professor J. Bacot's introduction to three stories of Tibetan opera, and Professor T. Norbu's account of one Tibetan opera. Their work has undoubtedly been of great help to later studies. As for my contribution to Tibetan studies, I can only quote a Tibetan proverb, "What I know is only a drop in the oceans of knowledge."

I hope this book will be of help to the reader, especially to those interested in the magnificent natural scenery of the Tibetan pastures, and in the simple life, religious beliefs and unique customs of the Tibetan people. In addition, it will help the reader gain an understanding of the artistic creativity and taste of the people and understand how the study of Tibetan opera can be enjoyable and interesting.

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Barbara N. Aziz for inviting me to attend the Third International Seminar on Tibetology, sponsored by Columbia University of New York in the summer of 1982. It was Dr. Aziz who gave me the opportunity to present my thesis, *Tibetan Opera and Tales from Tibetan Opera*. The warm reception and extensive interest of colleagues attending the meeting spurred me to write this English edition. Dr. Aziz also discussed the manuscript with me in person, for which I offer my thanks.

Mrs. Ouyang Caiwei, though in her 70s, extended meticulous and constructive help with the English translation of the book. Such generosity was indeed overwhelming.

Additionally, Professor Ernst Steinkellner, president of the Faculty of Tibetology and Buddhology of Vienna University, did the revision of the manuscript while I was a visiting professor there from 1982 to 1983. He put forward perceptive suggestions on the entire book and improved its English.

Last but not least I would like to thank Mr. Sna-kha-rtse-blo-bzang-rdo-rje, my old friend and colleague. It would have been impossible to bring this book into being without his kind assistance. His profound and erudite knowledge of Tibetan opera and performing art and his rich experience in directing opera have been indispensable to this project.

I welcome readers' opinions and of course remain responsible for any errors in this book.

The principles of writing the Tibetan language followed in this book are as follows:

ka, kha, ga, nga/ca, cha, ja, nya/  
ta, tha, da, ha/ pa, pha, ba, ma/  
tsa, tsha, dza, wa/ zha, za, va, ya/  
fa, la, sha, sa/ha, a/ i, u, e, o.

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# **TIBETAN OPERA AND TALES**

## **FROM TIBETAN OPERA**

*by Wang Yao*

### **I**

Tibetan opera is a comprehensive performing art which presents stories through the media of singing and dancing. It is prevalent not only in Tibet but in Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu and Qinghai provinces. Wherever there are large communities of Tibetans, it is popular.

In the Tibetan language, opera is called A-lce-lhamo, the actor lha-mo-ba and the script khrab-gzhung.

Tibetan opera is one of the oldest drama forms among the people of Central Asia. Artists, playwrights and others believe that opera was introduced by Thang-stong-rgyal-po, a monk of the Bkav-rgyud Sect (the White Sect) of Tibetan Buddhism, whose religious teachings were handed down orally from generation to generation. As the playwright of the opera “Prince Spring-gzhon” said in its preface: “In the old days, Vphrin-las-rje-btsun, called Thang-stong rgyal-po, who had a good command of the principles of life, was the most accomplished person in our snowy land. His Holiness Vphrin-las used performances to educate the people. He spread marvelous songs and dances like a canopy over the people of all tribes and influenced their minds with holy religious teachings and biographies of great men. Hence, the

Tibetan opera, superb in skills, rites and systems, emerged.”\* This opinion is rather widespread.

According to the book *Chronological Table of Great Events of Orthodox White Gem*,\*\* Thang-stong-rgyal-po was born in the year of the Female Wood Ox in the sixth cycle of sixty years in the Tibetan calendar (1385 A.D.). In accordance with the above-mentioned opinion, Tibetan opera originated between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But, judging by the records of the earlier period, it was first only pantomime with an emphasis on dancing.\*\*\* Only after absorbing and building literary content did it become a performing art that focused on acting and singing. Evidence from surviving murals and historical records shows that at the latest, in the period of Ngagdbang-blo-bzang-rgya-mtsho, the fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682), Tibetan opera had developed into the kind of performance seen today.

The text, dance, melodies, masks and costumes of Tibetan opera seem to have gradually taken shape by assimilating some religious

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\* In the collection of the Central Institute of Nationalities.

\*\* Written by Sangs-rgyas rgya-mtsho in the seventeenth century, in the collection of the Central Institute of Nationalities.

\*\*\* There was a lost theatrical item entitled “Dpav-Vkhum” in Sa-skya, in western Tibet. According to artist Dbang-rgyal’s narration, it was pantomime that stressed dancing. In addition, the book *Sa-skya Gynealogy* contained the following record: “Vkhon, Treasure-king, was born in the Male Wood Dog year of the Tibetan calendar (1034 A.D.). In his early days he listened to and became well-acquainted with the teachings of his father and elder brother. He admired new and old Tantra (Buddhist religious writings that are mystical in nature). He attended a large temple fair in Vbro, which was held at that time. Among acrobatics and other theatrical shows, many sorcerers and twenty-eight women who had a good command of the principles of life put on masks and carried weapons and presented diverse dances, to the accompaniment of the beating of drums by women with long queues. Really splendid! All this illustrates that it was in the stage of pantomime.

rites exorcising evil spirits and propitiating the gods, and episodes from folk tales and Buddhist Sutras, based on Tibetan folk dances, songs, ballad-singing and story narration. In the course of its development, countless artists, playwrights and other groups of people, as well as drama lovers in the upper social strata, constantly refined and enriched its form. As a result, it evolved into the Tibetan opera of today, richly colored with the style and distinctive characteristics of its own nationality.\*

In the old days, Tibetan opera was mainly performed in public squares except for the area of Bla-brang (Xiahe) in southern Gansu Province, where the performances were presented on stages due to the influence of Han\*\* operatic forms. The actors used simple make-up and masks so the audience could distinguish whether the characters were good, bad, loyal or vicious from the shape and color of the masks. Narrators told the audience the plots of the operas in short ballads.

When the actors came on stage, they danced to the rhythm of percussion instruments. While an actor sang, other actors behind the stage sang in chorus. As the performances were in public squares outdoors, the actors sang in high, resonant, powerful voices, and the melodies vibrated in the robust style of the highland people. This tradition continues today in indoor performances.

At least twenty melodies have been found in scripts read by the author. They expressed the ideas and feelings of men, women, old and

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\* Shown in the murals of the Potala Palace and on page 95 in the book *History of Kings and Ministers in Tibet* (dpyid-kyi-rgyal-movi-glu-dbyangs in the edition of the Nationalities Publishing House).

\*\* China's majority nationality, which makes up over 93 percent of China's total population.

## TALES FROM TIBETAN OPERA

young: joy, sorrow, grief and ecstasy. The following table shows four of them:

<i>Melody</i>	<i>Mood presented in operas</i>
gdang-ring	joy, ease of mind
skyo-glu	sorrow, grief
gdang-thung	narration in general
gdang-log	emotional change, undulating moods

During performances, actors often changed the melodies, varying them with the development of the plot, which subtly expressed the emotions of the characters and portrayed the thoughts deep in their hearts. For instance, in “Maiden Snang-sa,” the heroine uses several different melodies to express changes in her surroundings and diverse moods. In the opera “Prince Nor-bzang,” the melody sung in his going-out-to-battle differs from that sung on his return to the palace.

Dancing movements in Tibetan opera go well with the lyrics and melodies and are linked to the development of the plot. In general, they are drawn from movements in everyday life but are refined and exaggerated, giving the audience an aesthetic sense of harmony and vigor. Some movements, such as bowing with hands clasped, and salutation, show traces of the religious rites of the early period. The dancing movements may be classified into the following six types according to postures and rhythms:

## TIBETAN OPERA AND TALES FROM TIBETAN OPERA

<i>Name of dance</i>	<i>Style</i>	<i>Content presented</i>
don-vdar	from slow to quick tempo; moving up and down	on entering the stage
phye-ling	turning in half circles, first to the right, then to the left	in marching forward
phyag-vbul	raising hand to salute, bowing with hands clasped	in salutation
gar-che	turning in whole circles; moving in a ring	treading on a long journey
dal-gtong	slow steps	with all musical instruments at a standstill for an intermission
vphar-chen	turning large circles, spinning with arms extended at an angle of 60 degrees to the ground	martial skills; acrobatics

Except for presentations of selected extracts from full-length operas, Tibetan opera is divided into three parts in performances.

First part: *Don or rngon-pa don*. It serves as a prologue to the performance, introducing all actors to the audience; performing some songs, dances and comical acts designed to draw in the audience and prepare for the performance of the opera.

Second part: The main body of the opera, the *gzhung*.

Third part: *Btera-shis*, or the epilogue. It refers to the rite for blessing or good augury at the end of the opera. Actors also render

songs and dances while accepting donations from the audience.

Performances of Tibetan opera in Tibet begin during the Zhol-ston Festival in the seventh and eighth months of the Tibetan calendar, an annual Tibetan opera festival held in Nor-bu-gling-kha, Lhasa. Theatrical troupes gather in Lhasa to give performances and then go on a performance tour. Amateur theatrical troupes also start their performances during this period.

In the feudal society of serfdom, the actors of the Tibetan opera led as miserable a life as other serfs. Apart from the usual corvee, or duty, they were also burdened with a “performance corvee.” Even the Tibetan opera performances at the Zhol-ston Festival were also a sort of U-lag (corvee). But they (actors and actresses) eked out their livelihood on scanty donations and by farming a small plot of land which the manorial lords rented to them. They had to give the lords a part or even the whole of their crop and do corvee labor for them whenever ordered to do so. They were menaced by starvation and diseases and suffered humiliation from officials and aristocrats. This seriously affected the development of opera and the improvement of its artistry. Many opera troupes declined, but thanks to the consistent efforts of a few actors who remained faithful to theatrical art in precarious times, this precious artistic heritage survived.

The artists did not make their painstaking efforts in vain. Since the 1950s, Tibetan opera has bloomed with a new vitality. Owing to the attention of the artists and the people, a state-owned Tibetan opera troupe was formed in Tibet. Bkra-shis-don-grub (who died in 1965) and other famous artists became leaders of theatrical troupes. Privately owned and amateur theatrical troupes have also made vigorous progress.

Actors have been respected more than ever before. Bkra-shis-don-

grub attended the Third National Congress of Writers and Artists and was elected a standing committee member of the All-China Federation of the Literary and Art Circles in 1960. Many veteran actors have been elected members of the local political consultative conferences and deputies to the local people's congresses and have taken an active part in the political activities of the country. A number of pieces chosen from the Tibetan opera for the program of national theatrical festivals have been popular among the people of China's various groups, very different from the days before 1949. As Bkra-shis-don-grub said, "Spring comes to the withered tree and flowers blossom again."

Guided by the principle in literature and art of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and weeding the old to bring forth the new," writers and artists have studied and rearranged the traditional features of Tibetan opera. They have improved costumes, stage props, settings and make-up by assimilating elements of the classical operas of the Han culture. Just as Tibetan opera has been influenced by the Han operas, its traditions have affected operatic forms and stories in the provinces of Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai. And in the past, Chinese operatic art has also had an effect on Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese operas, while itself borrowing from certain Indian traditions.

With social progress and the development of production in Tibet, economic prosperity and cultural efflorescence will inevitably affect Tibetan opera, which reflects social life and is bound to respond to the new cultural development in Tibet.

## II

To appreciate the legacy and study the history of Tibetan opera, it

is necessary to delve into the stories of the operas. They are mostly drawn from folk tales, history, legends, Buddhist scriptures and social customs.

The famous opera “Princess Wencheng” is a representative piece with a historical theme. Princess Wencheng, Srongb-tsan Sgam-po and Blon-ston-btsan were heroic personages who had great influence in history. Princess Wencheng’s arrival in Tibet played a great role in the material and cultural development of Tibetan society. The playwright wrote an opera about her marriage to Srongb-tsan Sgam-po, for performance, portraying the people’s praises of the couple, who mirror their own aspirations and feelings. Even today, we find verses in praise of Princess Wencheng among the folk songs, for example:

On the fifteenth day of the lunar calendar,  
Princess Wencheng promises to come to Tibet,  
Be not afraid of the vast Lotus Flatland,  
One hundred fine horses will come to welcome you;  
Be not afraid of mountain peaks towering into clouds,  
One hundred ox-yak offspring will come to welcome you;  
Be not afraid of broad and rapid river currents,  
One hundred cattle-hide rafts will come to welcome you.\*

People’s esteem and admiration for Princess Wencheng were mentioned more than once in historical records. For instance, “Records on Tubo” (today’s Tibet) in the *New Annals of Tang Dynasty* (618-907) reports:

Srongb-tsan Sgam-po, king of Tibet, sent minister Blon-ston-btsan as an envoy to the capital to pay a tribute of five

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\* *Folk Rhymes of Tibet*, Tibetan edition, p.111.

thousand taels of gold and other highly valued treasures as gifts for betrothal. In 641, the Emperor gave Princess Wencheng of the royal house in marriage to King Srongb-tsan Sgam-po. He issued an imperial edict to appoint the Prince of Jiangxia, Li Daozong, to escort the Princess to Tibet with an imperial scepter. The Prince built a hostel in the kingdom of the Prince of Heyuan.

Srongb-tsan Sgam-po led troops to Bohai, the White Lake, to welcome the Princess. He greeted Li Daozong respectfully, observing the proprieties of a son-in-law. He felt timid and bashful at the sight of the splendid Chinese costumes and ornaments. When he returned to Tibet, he reflected that no king in Tibet had ever married the daughter of an emperor, so he built a citadel and a palace for the princess as a demonstration for later generations....

He sent brothers and sons of nobles to the Imperial Academy to study the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of History*. He requested scholars to annotate books and translate them into the Tibetan language. He also requested silkworm seeds, wine brewers, grain millers and other artisans. An imperial edict confirmed all these requests....

Srongb-tsan came to pay tribute at the Chinese court. He replied with wit and intelligence to the Emperor's questions. Satisfied, Emperor Taizong promoted him to be Right Senior General.

In addition, the *History of Royal Lineage in Tibet*, a book completed in 1388 by Tibetan scholar Bsod-nams-rgyal-mtshan, an abbot of the Sa-skya Sect, contains the following record:

Minister Mgar again came to the King's presence, asking his