CHAPTER SIX
THE EARTH-OX AND THE SNOWLION

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The annual ritual dance (cham) festivals of Bon po communities in A mdo often have several different performative traditions embedded within them. Two such traditions have attracted my attention due to their particular local symbolism and interpretations.\(^1\) The first of these performances, known as the sa glang or "earth-ox", consists of a publicly staged astrological prediction concerning local weather and health conditions, which is made shortly after the Tibetan New Year. The second, and better known of the two, is the dance of the snowlion. In the Bon po context, the snowlion specifically represents the mount of the deity Rma gnyan spom ra, who dwells upon A myes rma chen, the most important regional mountain range in A mdo. The snowlion dance is also by far the most popular dance with the lay audience attending cham festivals.

Both the earth-ox rite and the snowlion dance are performed today in the Bon po community of Shar khog, which is situated in the central and northern part of modern Songpan County (Zung chu rdzong), northwest Sichuan Province (see fig.9). The inhabitants of Shar khog—the Shar ha—strongly supported the revival of both these traditions after 1980, and consider them to

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be important aspects of their local Tibetan heritage. However, the local discourses concerning their origins are a contested field of meanings, opinions, and interpretations, oscillating between either distinctly Tibetan or alleged Chinese provenances. As I will argue, this cultural dichotomy constitutes a generally reoccurring feature of Tibetan discourse related to cross-cultural production in the history of A mdo as a Sino-Tibetan borderland, and also to the complex present-day socio-political reality of the region.

Since traditions in general are “multi-vocal” and “rich in possible meanings” (Otto & Pedersen, 2000:9), their performances are apt to provoke many things simultaneously. They enable participants to reconnect themselves with a highly valued past—whether it be reshaped (old symbols filled with new meanings and interpretations) or newly imagined—through their participation in the manipulation of powerful cultural and religious symbols. Also, they usually require collective organisation and participation by members of a local community, while at the same time allowing invited state representatives to deliver the framework of state authority. Whereas the ‘Tibetan past’, as it is portrayed in state discourse, is denigrated as ‘feudal’ and ‘backward’, hence negative and anti-progressive, Tibetan festivals—at least on the community level—can resist this discourse in the sense that they are an arena for distinctive forms of socio-cultural empowerment. They offer opportunities to recollect cultural memory, to sharpen the consciousness of having a distinct culture and tradition, thereby helping to recreate collective identities (Assmann, 1997).

Among older Tibetans in Shar khog, the ‘past’, i.e. the time prior to the anti-communist rebellions of 1956 and the subsequent period of forced ‘reform’ and oppression, is still remembered as being one of political and social autonomy. This is so despite the fact of close socio-economic contacts and exchanges between the Shar ba and neighbouring Han and Hui populations in former times, and also despite close political relationships between certain local Tibetan “head men” (go ba, Chin. tu si), bla mas and Chinese state authorities. Since the past is also embodied in the performance of collective cultural traditions which evoke, even

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2 A useful discussion of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ can be found in Otto & Pedersen (2000).
for many of the younger generation (as I was able to observe), the very participation in the public display of tradition has acquired an additional inherent social value, not only in spite of the state’s discourse but maybe even because of it. Participation is an opportunity for visible cultural self-determination, ethnic pride and the enhancement of social status through public displays of—often very expensive—‘traditional’ clothing and jewellery, beautiful horses and impressive firearms, amongst other things. Thus, popular cultural performances, such as folk festivals and monastic ritual dances (cham) are important arenas for Tibetans to experience and display their ‘Tibetan-ness’ to themselves, and to others, with much enthusiasm and like-minded appreciation, by socialising in a communal setting. In fact, such performances constitute an indelible mark in contemporary negotiations of Tibetan identities.

Perceptions of identity, origins and history among present-day Amdo Tibetans in farming areas like Shar khog or Reb gong, for example, seem to be considerably influenced by ideas about the region’s former territorial significance as an ancient geo-political and ethnic frontier zone between the former Tibetan and Chinese empires. In modern times, this point was first emphasised by the Amdo scholar Dge 'dun chos 'phel (1903–51), who is without doubt one of the most highly venerated modern Tibetan culture heroes. Dge 'dun chos 'phel based his understanding of ancient Tibetan history in the area on the Old Tibetan documents discovered at Dunhuang,4 and in which today’s Songpan township (Zung chu rdzong, the modern county capital of Shar khog) is mentioned as a Tibetan military outpost named Zong chu, which was established in the 7th or 8th century.5 According to a well-known local Dge lugs pa scholar, Dmu dge bsam gタン (1914–93), the old Tibetan name for Shar khog also indicated that the area was a border post:

In the upper part of Zung chu, in the past, there were three community divisions (ru sde) ... Those three were known as the “Three Khri skyong” (khri skyong khang gsum). In the past, at the time of the war...

Moreover, in local Tibetan discourse in Shar khog, as well as in Reb gong, people are—quite independently of one another, and without being prompted—eager to point out their common heritage as defenders of this important border, proudly and reassuringly stressing their ‘original’ (or ‘authentic’) central or western Tibetan roots, dating back to imperial times. There is also convincing evidence that some cultural performances in Amdo, such as the Klu rol in Reb gong, the Hwa shang 'cham in Shar khog and, not least of all for our present purposes, the earth-ox (sa glang) of Shar khog, do celebrate and commemorate not only famous local Tibetan military leaders but also local bla mas (and hence their lineages) as important mediators for peace treaties between the two battling powers.6

Even though the territorial border between Chinese and Tibetan empires does not exist anymore, and Amdo Tibetans do live in a complex modern world of blurred socio-cultural boundaries, Amdo is still a place of ethnic border identities which stress cultural difference and ethnic authenticity, where ‘Tibetan-ness’ seems to be regularly played out against ‘Chinese-ness’. Thus, revived inter-culturally fused performances which are characteristic for this borderland—and this seems to be the case much more so in Amdo than in central Tibet—offer a popular arena for identity negotiations among Tibetans.

The Earth-Ox Almanac

The rite colloquially known as sa glang (“earth-ox”—and referred to as rgya nag glang rtsis (“Chinese ox astrology”)) in

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3 Meanings of such performances can change radically if public events are turned into ‘culture shows’ organised by state organs or tourist agencies, and staged mainly for the benefit of tourists; see, for example, Makley (1998).
4 Bacot et al. (1940:18,39).
6 Dmu dge bsam gタン (1987:303). Local Bon po monastic histories, however, interpret the name as Khri skyung, “Throne of Skyang ‘phags”, deriving it from the famous lineage holder Skyang ‘phags chen po, an important founder and propagator of Bon in the area; see Huber (1998:189,n.21).
7 Some of whom even became immortal local mountain gods in Reb gong; see Epstein & Wenbin (1998).
8 See Epstein & Wenbin (1998), and Schrempf (in press).
9 A manuscript entitled Rgya nag sa glang brtag tsul legs bshad yongs 'da’i srid dbang is classed as “Chinese divination” (rgya rtsis) in Schuh (1981:121). Since I was unable to attend the earth-ox performance myself in
written sources—is one such public performance. It is indeed extraordinary, since it appears to occur only in three Bon monasteries in Amdo each Tibetan New Year (lo gsar).  

The earth-ox is in fact an interesting Tibetan performative adaptation of a well-known Chinese farmers’ tradition staged at the time of spring festival (lichun) in Chinese villages. In the Chinese version, a clay ox (tu nia) and a clay person (gengren) were originally used as part of a ritual to drive out the winter, and then for public divination. In the Tibetan examples under study here, the earth-ox consists of a public astrological prediction about the weather and health conditions of the local community and the environment for the coming year. A monastic astrologer (rtsis pa), or his translator (lo tsä ba), proclaims his augury by interpreting a specially fabricated model ox, which is being lead by a herdsman (rda'i bo), both of which are constructed out of paper, cloth and bamboo. This farmers’ almanac was revived in Shar khog during the early 1980s, and has since been staged along with the winter masked dance performance known as Smon lam during the first month of the Tibetan New Year, at Bya dur Dga’ mal monastery.

The Earth-Ox Rite at Bya dur Dga’ mal

In the course of the post-1980 religious and cultural revival, and following explicit requests and support by some lay people from Shar khog, the performance of the almanac was reintroduced into

1996, the description here is based on the accounts of monastic and lay informants from Shar khog and from Mdood dge.

10 For background information on the revival of Bon monasticism in Shar khog since the 1980s, see Schrempf (2000), and the monastic history in Zing chu dkar chag (1993:268–70), also a list with respective Chinese names in AZZ (1994:2569). In order to match Tibetan with Chinese place-names, see SXD (1983).

11 During the Zhou dynasty, at the end of each winter, a masked dance ritual known as no or No was performed to drive out the cold and also pestilence. Later, the winter itself appears to have been represented by the clay ox, which was then beaten and destroyed. For a detailed account of the complex historical changes of the Chinese spring festival, see Jian (1998), and cf. also, Bodde (1975:75ff,201ff) and Eberhard (1972:4ff).

12 On this festival, see Schrempf (2001). On the history of the Dga’ mal monastery, see Huber (1998). Bya dur Dga’ mal (Chin. Gamisi or Chachast) is situated in upper Shar khog (Chin. Shuijing xiang) and was founded in 1378 by the Bon bla ma Rin chen rigyel mipsan.

13 Astrological texts are also contained in the Bon po Bka’ ‘grur.
Phan chu, Mdzod dge County. At A khrid skyang tshang, on the 15th day of the first Tibetan month, the weather almanac is presented in quite an elaborate way following a series of the usual Bon ritual dances and after the Gshen rab dgu cham (locally called Bag mang 'cham).

First, there is a procession led by the assistant of the dge bskos (dge g.yog), followed by a dung dkar (conch shell) player, a flag bearer (dar cha), an officiant with barley flour offering (mchod pa bul phye ma). A monk then offers a rice maddala, incense, and “white offerings” (dkar mchod, water mixed with milk, and flowers made of paper), as well as prayers to the local deities, including the earth lords (sa bdag), stars and planets (gza' skar ma), gods of the sky (gnam lha), sub aquatic serpent deities (klu), and the mountain gods (gnyan). During these offerings, the masked astrologer enters the dance ground followed by two assistants called ha phrug, who are probably the young attendants of Hwa shang, and who are adorned with peacock feathers.

The wooden figures of the earth-ox and his herder—who might be a child, a middle aged man or an old man depending upon the calculations—are led from the meditation chapel (sgrub khang) into the courtyard by being pulled along on a table. The astrologer starts to talk about his predictions, although, as at Dga' mal, no one can understand him since he uses technical astrological terms. Therefore, a masked translator appears and loudly translates the predictions into colloquial terms while giving a running commentary. As the models are led back into the assembly hall once again, offerings are made, followed by the procession returning back into the temple. After this, the very auspicious and highly venerated lion dance is performed, and the day ends with the final expulsion ritual (gtor rgyag).

Apart from certain details, we can conclude that the earth-ox almanac is performed in a very similar manner at both A khrid and Dga' mal monasteries. Interesting features of both perform-
ances are the fact that the almanacs is included in the very popular monastic New Year dances, and also that a ‘translator’ is needed as a mediator to interpret the astrological prediction for the audience. In the following, I will outline a local Tibetan history concerning the origins of the earth-ox performance, and then compare it with Chinese traditions of farmers’ almanacs and public astrological predictions.

Origins and History of the Earth-Ox

The history of the Bon monastery of Bya dur Dga’ mal in Shar khog states that about one hundred years ago, official permission to perform the earth-ox rite was bestowed as an imperial award on the prominent Dga’ mal bla ma-scholar Bstan ‘dzin Ngag dbang rnam rgyal. Due to his extensive scholarship and writing, which included works on astrology, he was also known as Mkhar yags Mkhas pa or Paṇḍita Smra dbang Rang grol blo gros. The local Tibetan history also states that the then active Qing administratove head of the nearby garrison and trading town of Songpan (Zung phan hsien), who must have been impressed by the outstanding knowledge and astrological skills of this Tibetan bla ma, bestowed a seal and certificate upon him and his monastery for the performance of “Chinese ox astrology” (rgya nag glang rtsis). It is said that from then on, the earth-ox almanac was performed for the public at this monastery for the next fifty years, and that the imperial seal and certificate were issued three times. Given the fact that elderly pupils of this learned scholar are still alive and serve as religious teachers in Shar khog today, it is likely that this performance must have been introduced in the late 19th or early 20th century.

It remains unclear whether the earth-ox performance was then transmitted from Dga’ mal monastery to A khrid skyang tshang in Mdzod dge, and also to Rtoigs ldan in Rnga ba, or if these other sites began and maintained the tradition of their own accord. However, we do know that over the centuries there were various connections between the Bon monasteries of Shar khog and those of neighbouring districts, particularly the exchange of monks for the purpose of studying with well-known scholars, such as the Mkhar yags Mkhas pa.

The Tibetan earth-ox performance was certainly highly influenced by Chinese spring festival rites and the ancient cult of the winter bull. A report by Reverend J. Hutson, from the ‘Tibetan foothills’ of Sichuan at the beginning of the 20th century, describes the Chinese custom of “meeting the spring” (ying ch‘un) as being an important form of fertility ritual in local rural communities (Hutson 1920:470f). Reverend Hutson mentions the annual procession of a Chinese magistrate, who would parade together with other officials in court costumes through town, being carried in a sedan chair to the east gate of the city and followed by farmers and townspeople. Outside the town walls, and in the local fields, the magistrate would walk behind an ‘earthen spring ox’ attached to a plough and a paper image of a man known as the ox-driver (mang shen). Then, the magistrate would repeat the same actions with a real ox and plough, returning to the town through the south or west gate.

Reverend Hutson’s report affirms the day of the spring bull cult as being one of the popular “gala days” of the year, and as being sponsored by the magistrate, who could therefore publicly appear and be acknowledged and venerated in all his glory. The earthen ox was carefully sculptured out of clay and painted in specific colours indicating the outcomes for the coming year: yellow for a bumper harvest, green for plague, red for fire and...

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15 His exact dates are presently unknown, but according to local historical texts we can estimate that he was active in the late 19th and early 20th century; see Huber (1998).
16 Zing chu dzar chag (1993:166).
calamities, and so forth. The clothing of the ox-driver and the girdle of the ox were further symbolic indicators of the time when spring would arrive, and so on. On the day following the procession, the earthen ox and paper ox-driver were taken to the Yamen courtyard, where the magistrate made offerings to the ox and then struck it with a stick, after which the audience finished it off, taking pieces of the ox back to their homes, while the paper image of the ox-driver was burnt. According to Hutson, "It is used in country towns with the idea that it will bring a full harvest for that year" (1920:480).

Bon po monks from Bya dur Dga' mal monastery claim that their earth-ox tradition originally came from Tibet, and was later transmitted to China by the founder of their religion, Ston pa Gshen rab mi bo. It was reintroduced or returned to the Tibetans of Shar khog in its present form by way of the Chinese custom, as an acknowledgement of the merits of the learned teacher Mkhar yags Mkhas pa and the Dga' mal monastery. Regardless of the interpretation, the conscious and desired Tibetan revival of this old farmer's tradition indicates the importance of its role for the local villagers and also its connection to the practices of local monasticism. The local monastery functions as the trusted repository and distributor of sought after, specialised cultural knowledge concerning the well-being of the community.

While this type of astrological performance used to be the only public method of weather prediction for the Shar ba farmers in the past, according to my informants printed regional versions in the form of small booklets (lo tho) are published by experienced lamas from all the different Tibetan religious schools. These booklets can be purchased in local bookshops and are written in Tibetan. Others can be seen occasionally in the form of charts (about 80 x 40 cm) with a central hand-drawn image of the ox and the herder, surrounded by explanations written in Tibetan script. Such Tibetan earth-ox charts are to be found posted, for the public to read, on the front doors of Tibetan monasteries in different parts of southern A mdo, for example at the large Dge lugs pa monastery of Rwa rgya in Rma chen County, Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (see fig.11). Interestingly, in the pre-communist period, this area had been partially settled by a small, displaced group of Chinese peasants who began to cultivate wasteland on a bend in the Yellow River near Rwa rgya. Thus, it is
possible that they were a source of cultural influence for their Tibetan neighbours.

In Shar khog today, Chinese vendors still walk from house to house at Tibetan New Year in order to sell their own printed Chinese earth-ox almanac charts (see fig.12). My Shar ba informants told me that these vendors can become quite rude if one does not purchase an earth-ox chart from them to attach to the front door of the house, and the vendors threaten them with bad luck.

The Snowlion Dance

The Snowlion as a Tibetan Symbol

The white snowlion, with its turquoise mane (seng dkar g.yu ral can), is the famous Tibetan emblem representing the snowy ranges and glaciers of Tibet. It symbolises power and strength and has served as a unifying national symbol for Tibetans during the modern era. As such, it adorned the banknotes and coins of the pre-1959 Dga’ ldan Pho brang Tibetan state, and also featured on the Tibetan flag which was designed by the progressive 13th Dalai Lama on the basis of old military banners. Nowadays, a pair of snowlions still feature in the centre of the national flag of the Tibetan exile community. Many Tibetan folk songs and proverbs mention the snowlion as inhabiting the highest mountains since he is the “king of beasts” (ri dwags rgyal po), towering over less powerful animals which are equated with the lower strata of the Tibetan landscape. Snowlions can also represent hermits and yogins, meditating in solitary caves high up in the mountains. Two of the most famous Tibetan culture heroes, Mi la ras pa and Ge sar, are said to have been raised by a white snowlioness, the queen of beasts, who also brings prosperity. The white lioness of the glaciers is also the mount of Ma ne ne, the celestial female advisor of Ge sar, and Vaisravana.19 Her milk is believed to be extremely potent, and is mentioned as a kind of long life elixir in folk tales and proverbs. One folk belief has it that the snowlionness’ milk, together with the egg white of the khyung bird, and the blue dragon’s spit are among the most powerful of substances.20

In the words of the A mo intellectual Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel, however, the “...snowlion is as non-existing as horns on the heads of rabbits” (2001:94). Like many other cherished Tibetan beliefs which he discussed, Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel criticised the idea of the snowlion as being a complete illusion, pointing out that lions are scientifically proven to be forest dwellers,21 who can now only be seen in Indian zoos or as symbols of royalty on Asokan pillars or as free standing guardian figures of the Yar khungs dynasty tombs. He reaffirmed that the Tibetan seng ge is clearly a loan word from the Sanskrit term sinha. Although the particular whiteness of the Tibetan snowlion icon is very likely an autchonous contribution, linking it symbolically with the ancient royal status of snow mountains and of height,22 Dge ‘dun chos ‘phel traces its turquoise mane back to the iconographic influence of the Chinese lion, which is green (2001:94). Regarding the Tibetan snowlion dance, we will see that this is not the only influence coming from China.

Secular Snowlion Dances in Shar khog

Among the Shar ba, snowlion dances are very popular types of performances in both monastic and folk contexts, since they are considered to be rten brel yag po, very ‘auspicious’. Additionally, specific animal dances, such as the seng ge and the g.yag dance, are also emblematic of certain Shar ba villages which are locally identified with them.23 At Tibetan New Year, in the streets of

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18 According to Tibetan exile accounts collected by Axel Ström (1995:124), the snowlion “...represents mi cho, the religion of men; its different parts corresponding to all fields of traditional knowledge such as cosmology, genealogies, religious doctrines, etc. ... The pair of fearless snowlions [on the Tibetan national flag] ... symbolize the complete victory over all by the deeds of the combined spiritual and secular ruling government.”

19 The latter himself rides on a lion as well, although not on a snowlion, and is the Indian Buddhist guardian king of the north. He also bestows wealth and

20 Information from the head of Bon religion in exile, Sman ri Khri ‘dzin Sangs rgyas bstan ‘dzin ljongs dong.

21 Indeed, the Indian (or Persian) lion (Panthera leo persica) does still exist today, but as an endangered species in the North Indian Gir forest.

22 The Bod rgya zhig mdzad chen mo (1993:2933), has gangs seng ge, “snowlion”, seng dkar as a short form for seng ge dkar po, “white lion”, also seng dkar g.yu ral can, “white lion with turquoise mane (i.e. Tibetan snowlion)”.

23 According to Samten Karmay, in pre-1959 Shar khog there were sometimes competitions between village dance groups represented by different animal dances at the Tibetan New Year (personal communication). During the
Shar kgom villages, one comes across young Shar ba boys clad in $gyag$ and seng ge costumes, dancing from house to house. People say they do this in order to collect money for the monasteries and for their own pockets to buy New Year presents. One of the two young lion dancers holds the lion’s mask over his head while hidden under a white cloth with many colourful ribbons, the second one is ducked behind him under the same cover, thus forming the back of the animal, with a $gyag$ tail completing the outfit. The dancers perform a short seng ge’i $’bro$ in front of each house while family members come outside to watch them and give them a few Yuan. The two dancers, who jolt around, leaping up and down in their lion costume, are accompanied by two young musicians with a hand drum and a pair of cymbals ($sbug$ chak). A fifth companion is wrapped in a sheepskin coat with the fleece turned outside, and wears a white fur mask. He resembles descriptions of the characteristic ‘dre dkar’ figures sometimes seen in Tibetan New Year rites.\footnote{See Stein (1959:391,444). Even more similar is another description by Rolf Stein referring to New Year dances in Darjeeling, where lion and g.yag dancers are accompanied by a little boy ($rdu$ bu) who is the guardian of the lion. Again, the lion is rten ’bral bzang po. He also became one of the nine auspicious symbolic animals for long life, not only representing the glaciers and mountains, but also being himself a kind of veneration to them; see Stein (1959:445).}

Secular Snowlion Dances in the Tibetan Exile

Even in the Indian exile community, in the Bon po settlement of Dolanj (Himachal Pradesh) some of whose members come from A mdo,\footnote{See Stein (1959:391,444). Even more similar is another description by Rolf Stein referring to New Year dances in Darjeeling, where lion and g.yag dancers are accompanied by a little boy ($rdu$ bu) who is the guardian of the lion. Again, the lion is rten ’bral bzang po. He also became one of the nine auspicious symbolic animals for long life, not only representing the glaciers and mountains, but also being himself a kind of veneration to them; see Stein (1959:445).} the snowlion dances are very popular. There are at least two different snowlion performances, and one of them is specifically called the “A mdo lion”, being danced by two young A mdo ba dressed in a snowlion mask and costume (see fig.13).

On the evening of the fifth day of the first Tibetan month, at the end of the monastic celebration of Mnyam med 'dus chen,\footnote{This festival is celebrated among all Bon monasteries following the original Tibetan Sman ri tradition, since it commemorates the monastery’s founder, Mnyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1356–1415).} the A mdo snowlion dancers are blessed at the statue of Mnyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan and venerated by the abbot of Sman ri himself with a kha brtags. The dancers then leave the monastic courtyard in order to leap down to the village below, where they only visit the A mdo households, which are all arranged close together in a row of houses. An assistant then collects money for an annual picnic of the local A mdo exile families, as well as for certain communal prayers for the so-called A mdo society of Dolanj.\footnote{See Cech (1987:211–13).}

In Clementstown, another Tibetan exile community in India, A mdo monks perform a snowlion dance outside their monastery on the 4th day of the Tibetan New Year. A herald with a white mask and two small attendants perform an introductory dance for the snowlion, who then appears and cavorts and chases children, entertaining the crowd.\footnote{See Ström (1995:124).} Although performed by monks, this is a purely secular event, set in the context of a communal celebration involving speeches by Government-in-Exile and local community representatives, as well as a large feast.

All these examples not only clearly demonstrate the popularity of the snowlion dance, particularly among A mdo ba, but also its meaning as a cherished symbol of A mdo collective identity which has been revived in both contexts, in exile and in post-Mao A mdo.

Chinese Lion Dances

As in the case of the earth-ox, we find a similar Chinese New Year custom comparable to that of the snowlion dance. Reverend Hutson, reporting the customs of Chinese farmers living in the “Tibetan foothills” in the early 20th century, informs us of the “lantern festival” celebrated on the 15th day of the first Chinese lunar month. During this festival, two lion dancers first visit the local temples and then, guided by a priest, proceed to the village houses, where they are invited to drive out evil and pestilence
spom ra), who otherwise, in Buddhist depictions, is mounted on a horse. This leading regional mountain god of A mdo is also one of the “guardian deities of Bon religion” (bon skyong or bka’ skyong) and appears in many Bon po monastic dances in A mdo as part of the group of Bon protective deities (Gshen rob dgu ’cham). The snowlion itself, however, enjoys a separate appearance in the dance cycle. Before he enters the monastic courtyard, propitiatory texts for Rma chen spom ra (Pom ra cho ga) are first recited.

Thus a clear ritual connection is established between the snowlion and the deity Rma chen spom ra. Typically, initially four young monks dressed in colourful costumes with pointed hats and many ribbons enter the courtyard, and dance around in an attempt to lure the snowlion out of the monastery doors. Finally, after much persuasion, he appears sporting a huge mask, which has a flexible lower jaw such that the mouth can open and close, and curiously following one of the young boys who holds a ball with a ribbon in his hand. Members of the Tibetan audience interpret this ball as being sweets, which the lion likes to eat.

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29 This dance is part of an annual village folk festival, which took place on the 6th day of the first Tibetan month in 1996.
30 See Demieville (1952:206, n.2). I thank Per Kverne for the reference; see also Stein (1972:219).
32 Note that the element spom is often spelled simply pom in Bon sources. Rma stands for the Rma chu river (i.e. the upper Yellow River in A mdo), gnyan for the wild mountain sheep; or “fierce, wild one” which is an epithet of mountain territorial gods in A mdo, and [x]pom might be related, according to Bon po monks, to the Zhang zhung word for “snow”.
33 For a beautiful image of this “worldly protector” of Bon riding on a white lion, with a rather greenish looking mane, see the thangka of “Bon Mochen Pomye” (nos.200025 and 200030) in the Rubin Collection on-line: http://www.tibetart.com.
34 At the large Bon monastery of Snang zhig in Raga ba County, at the time of the New Year Smom lam festival, the snowlion appears with four young guides or herders (rdis bo), together with the mountain god (yab) Rma chen pom ra (the Bon spelling) and his consort (yum) Gong sman la ri. They are both described as being wrathful wisdom deities and protectors of the Bon doctrine, and are heralded beforehand by an impressive procession of monks. The snowlion is explicitly mentioned as functioning as a symbol of Rma chen pom ra at Snang zhig; see Bya’ phug Nam mkha’ rgyal mtshan (1994:69).
35 Two Bon propitiatory texts (no date, place or author given) from the Bka’ skong collection describe Rma chen pom ra la’i ras as riding on a white lion (folio 471). I thank Samten Karmay for supplying these texts. On the other hand, one finds no mention of the lion mount of this deity in a Bon po guidebook, and oral sources for propitiating A rmye rma chen; see Buffetrille (2000:132-75).
36 Eberhard (1972:50) mentions a Tang source in which the lion holds a “pearl” in his mouth, which according to a folk narrative is made out of iron in order to appease demonic forces. A ball is commonly featured in the mouths of
At Rin spungs monastery in Shar khog (see fig.9), the snowlion dance is especially elaborate and colourful (see fig.14). When the snowlion dances, lay people set off firecrackers or shoot off handguns and rifles, just as they normally do at the end of the entire ritual dance performance for the rite of expulsion of evil forces (gstor rgyag). Some informants say that the snowlion dance is performed in a ‘Chinese’ way at Rin spungs monastery, whereas in other Bon monasteries of Shar khog it would be performed in a ‘Tibetan’ manner. Certainly, the use of firecrackers in connection with the lion dance could be a Chinese tradition in any case. Other informants held the opinion that the dance might have been introduced here by Chinese carpenters (shing bse ba), who were employed by Shar ba communities to rebuild most of the Tibetan monasteries in this area during the revival after 1980. These same Chinese carpenters are still attending the ‘cham performances at the various Tibetan monasteries. Like their Chinese neighbours, many Shar ba favour the snowlion dance over all the other monastic dances which are performed in the ‘cham ritual. In addition to the idea that the snowlion dance in Shar khog is Chinese, one monk claimed it to be a genuine Tibetan tradition, at least in three of the five main Bon monasteries in Shar khog. He claimed its origins are in an oral transmission introduced from Sman ri monastery in central Tibet by a high ranking bla ma named Dgra ston Shes rab gdongs rgyal. I was unable to confirm this claim, however.

In any case, we should consider these contradictory local claims of either Tibetan or Chinese origins for this performing tradition as new re-interpretations influenced by notions of cultural authenticity in the modern framework of Chinese colonialism. “Dancing in a Chinese way” is certainly not regarded as auspicious among Amdo ba. A little local tale might serve to illustrate this point. A bla ma who wanted to found his monastery nearby the town of Songpan, so it is said, danced a ‘cham at the intended site. The Tibetan audience, however, criticised it as being “too Chinese”. As a consequence the bla ma left the place and built his monastery further away from the (mainly Chinese) town in a side valley.

Figure 13: Bon po snowlion dance mask, Dolanji, India (photo M. Schrempf).

Figure 14: Snowlion dancers at Rin spungs monastery, Shar khog (photo T. Huber).
While the snowlion among Bon communities in A mdo certainly has a specific importance because of his symbolic power as mount of Rma chen spom ra, the mountain god himself is independently propitiated wherever A mdo inhabitants go or settle down, for example, by erecting a more solid presence for his worship. Outside the circuit of the famous Dga' ldan monastery of the Tibetan Buddhist Dge lugs pa school in central Tibet, for example, there is a mountain shrine (la btsas) dedicated to this deity, and it is said that it has been there since the time of Tsong kha pa—who himself an A mdo ba. At the Bon monastery of Gyeung drung gling in Gtsang, another la btsas is dedicated to this powerful A mdo mountain deity because its founder was also an A mdo ba from Shar khog. The deity also has a separate shrine at the re-established Bon po monastery of Sman ri in Indian exile, since Rma chen spom ra is also one the four special protectors of the original Sman ri monastery in central Tibet.

In relation to the question of the origins of the snowlion dance in A mdo, there is an interesting note by Li An-che concerning its introduction at the large Dge lugs pa monastery of Bla brang Bkra shis k'hyil in eastern A mdo: “The costumes for the lions were given by a chieftain’s wife of Someng, Sung-pan, Sze-chwan, to Hjam-dbyangs II. [i.e. the second Jam dbyangs bzhad pa incarnation, 1728–91]”. Thus, some Tibetan traditions seem to indicate that the snowlion dance in A mdo is truly a Sino-Tibetan borderland cultural adaptation, perhaps even originally from the Songpan area where there has long been an established Chinese population living side by side with Tibetans.

Conclusion

When the lion is dwelling on the glacier he is a lion:
When the lion enters a city he is a wandering dog.

Even if both earth-ox and snowlion performances appear to have been modelled upon Chinese (and even originally Persian) popular rites, they still remain powerful symbols, which Tibetans associate with their own ancient and glorious past. Their present-day meanings are certainly flexible enough over time and space that they can accommodate the needs of Tibetan cultural, religious, regional and sometimes even national identities, not to mention New Age sensibilities.

A mdo is still a borderland, if not a territorial one anymore, certainly a complex cultural one. Far from being peripheral, it is a modern intra-national boundary space of ethnic identity negotiations among Tibetans in relation to other groups within China. Local debates about the ‘authentic’ origins of these cultural performances are part of the self-reflexive negotiation of local identities among A mdo Tibetans today, and these are closely linked to the history and territory of this Sino-Tibetan region. They also reflect on the traditional world of the past and the present-day transformations of every-day modern life in many possible, though often ambiguous, ways.

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37 Information from Samten Karmay (personal communication).

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40 See, for example, the “Sacred Music Dance Program” of ‘Bras spungs monastery in exile at http://www.mysticalartsoftibet.org/SMSD-Frg.htm under “Seng-geh Gar-cham”: “In Tibet the snow lion symbolized the fearless and elegant quality of the enlightened mind. When a healthy and harmonious environment is established by the creative activities of human beings, such as through the performance of sacred purification and healing music, all living beings, here represented by the snow lion, rejoice”. 