

## Book review

**Thurston, Timothy (2025). *Satirical Tibet: The Politics of Humour in Contemporary Tibet*. University of Washington Press.**

Timothy Thurston has written what is probably the first study in which Tibetans are seen through the study of humour, laughter and satire. The topic of the book reviewed here is refreshing and adds significantly to our knowledge of the diversity of contemporary Tibetan culture and ways of life, unlike books dealing with the Tibetans' struggle under the Chinese Communist Party or with Tibetan Buddhism, subjects which have dominated Tibetan studies for decades.

I have myself worked on Tibetan political cartoons in the Tibetan diaspora (Choedon 2023). Although the cartoons may appear to be just humorous critique, the cartoonists themselves are serious in targeting young people and making them understand the meaning of democracy in the Tibetan diaspora. This aligns with comedy and satire produced by Tibetans inside Tibet, where satire (*zurza*) must be even more important.

Choosing the literary term *zurza* and calling themselves *gyutselpa* (p. 16), 'artists', that is, contemporary Tibetan humourists, give importance to this form of comedy. Thurston writes that "Tibetans use *zurza* in relation to obscure oral traditions, socially critical works of modern Tibetan literature, and the latest in Tibetan hip-hop. To hear the comedians and rappers tell it, *zurza* is part of what makes their work in new genres and emerging media uniquely Tibetan" (p. 6).

Thurston's study contains so many new insights that it deserves a chapter-by-chapter presentation. In Chapter 1 titled "Dokwa", the author discusses the forms, scenario and function of *zurza* and *dokwa*. Whereas *zurza* ('satire') has been a literary term for a long time in Tibet, to be seen in the poetry of writers and scholars like Gendun Chomphel (p. 38), it can also be seen in popular folk culture as *dokwa*, that is, extemporaneous verses where the satire is directed to a general audience. Like any satirical work, to completely understand and enjoy these verses one must be well versed not just in the Tibetan language but also in the cultural context. Translations from Tibetan to English take much of the puns, and hence fun, out of this form of satire. However, while the translation, however excellent, may not do full justice to the flavour of the humour, it helps readers to understand the meaning of the satire, aided by the well-researched commentaries that follow.

While the different forms of satire discussed in the book can be meaningful and educative, in a wider social and national context gendered terms and interpretations can pass under the radar. For example, in the *dokwa* entitled "You won't get far" (p. 28), the concept of *khabe*, 'good mouth', is an important term in which gender plays a crucial role. While *khabe* regarding men could be translated as 'eloquent' and 'witty', as Thurston points out, it is used in a denigrating sense when applied to women. Here unwritten gender-related codes come into play, whereby women who speak less are generally considered to be well-mannered and feminine. This and other forms of accepted behaviour for Tibetan women are codified in the nine characteristics of a *zhangma* ('a wise and well-behaved woman').<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in the *dokwa*, I see

---

<sup>1</sup> The subject of gendered codes is discussed in Choedon (2021).

a man not just putting a poor nomad in his place, but also a woman being put in her supposed place: silence.

The second chapter deals with *khashag*, from *kha*, ‘mouth’, and *shag*, ‘joke, jest’, but also ‘quarrel’ (pp. 51-52). In a narrow sense the word refers to verbal contests or duels between a set of speakers who do their best to provoke each other. The chapter opens with the *khashag* “Studying Tibetan”, written in 1980 by Amdowa Dondrup Jya, a poet and author regarded as one of the founders of modern Tibetan literature (p. 51). The script for the *khashag* “Studying Tibetan” is a “comic dialogue” between two speakers, namely Ka and Kha (the two first letters of the Tibetan alphabet) discussing the importance of learning Tibetan although one lives in a modern world (p. 50). It is generally accepted, also by the comedians themselves, that *khashag* is a modern cultural production based on the Chinese *xiangshen* (‘crosstalk’) tradition in which two performers, standing before an audience, tell jokes, sing songs, do humorous imitations, recite tongue twisters, etc., and in general do their best to provoke laughter (p. 52). Whatever the term’s origin, of greater interest is how *khashag* arose and became uniquely Tibetan. Mao, being a fan of *xiangshen*, shortly after the formation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 used comic dialogues to spread the social and political ideology of the Communist Party. The comic dialogue also spread among ethnic minorities, including Tibetans. However, it was only in the early 1980s that Tibetans developed their own *xiangshen*, written in Tibetan and targeting a Tibetan audience. However, since *khashag* was performed on the stage, it had to be blessed by the government and had no room for improvisation (p. 56).

Tibetan comedians in Amdo (i.e. the northeast part of the Tibetan plateau) and beyond believe that they are creating something uniquely Tibetan, because the Tibetan sense of humour is very different from that of the Chinese. Thurston points out that this is due to the concepts of *zurza* and *larjya* (‘pride, dignity, honour’) which became increasingly important in the 1980s (p. 56). According to the context, *larjya* may be translated as ‘(ethnic) pride’, ‘honour’, or ‘dignity’ (p. 58).

With the arrival (albeit late compared to other parts of China) of the cultural and economic reforms in Tibet in the late 1970s, Tibetan intellectuals became more numerous. In the 1980s, they

tried to image a new Tibetan style of cultural production – broadly to include music, literature, comedy, and more – that would simultaneously meet Chinese state demands for new (and secular) cultural production, and Tibetan-audience expectations that this content be meaningful (pp. 57-58).

Furthermore, the availability of technologies for recording, reproducing, and broadcasting sound media further popularised the *khashag* by bringing this comedic form from the stage to people’s homes (p. 77). Chapter 3, “*Khashag* on Air”, deals with the spread of *kashag* on cassettes and radio. “Careful Village’s grassland dispute” (*semchung déwee sahtsod*) was “the first of a series of four wildly popular comic dialogues written and performed between 1992 and 1996 and later sold on audiocassette as an album entitled *The Colourful Nomad Camp*” (p. 68). The series examines “a variety of emergent problems facing communities in contemporary Tibet” (p. 68). Menla Jyab, raises a host of social issues, such as “the influx of counterfeit goods, the negative effects of alcohol, and the bad behaviour of students and monks” (p. 75). More than just laughter, Tibetans also found meaning and social critique in the comedic dialogues (p. 77).

The Chinese government’s implementation of decollectivisation and privatisation of pastureland on the Tibetan Plateau and the subsequent sedentarisation of the pastoralists at the end of the century, did not improve their economy but instead caused violent disputes over access to water and land resources. Having grown up in a pastoral area, Menla Jyab’s comedies made people laugh, but he was equally successful in resonating the severity of problems caused

by government policies among Tibetans (pp. 79-80). Moreover, he also valued education and was concerned about the state of the Tibetan language. Not just a comedian, but also an accomplished poet and essayist (p. 81), he emphasised the importance of modern secular education and criticised misplaced faith in religion and religious institutions (p. 83).

A group of young Tibetans (including Menla Jyab), styling themselves “New Thinkers” (*samlo sarwa*), promoted the controversial ideas of the prominent Amdo author-intellectual Shokdung. He advocated a rupture with the seemingly “backward” and overly religious past “through education, scientific advancement, marriage by choice, and rational human agency in a progressive and secular present” (p. 83). However, these New Thinkers remained controversial for the “perceived antireligious tone of their modernist intellectual cultural producers” (p. 84).

The book gives rise to the thought that, although Tibetans inside and outside Tibet are subject to different political conditions and restrictions, it seems that they face similar difficulties in finding their place in the modern world. If the New Thinkers inside Tibet were regarded as controversial, the same applies to Tibetan intellectuals in the Tibetan diaspora in India as well, whose freedom of expression was and is limited in terms of religious and political identity and ideology. The New Thinkers inside Tibet, including Menla Jyab, used humour to create a more open and, in their terms, more ‘modern’ society, which, they maintained, could be done only by breaking with the traditional religious society. However, Tibetans having suffered immense destructions of their culture and religion, it is of course given that these scholars and artists both inside and outside Tibet faced great difficulties in promoting new ideas. In such circumstances and moments of history, humour seems to have served as one of the few ways in which they might attempt to change society.

Menla Jyab also promoted the oneness of Tibetans by quoting their mythical origin from the divine monkey and the rock ogress and using the concept of ‘Careful Village’ as a metaphor of all the inhabitants of the Tibetan Plateau, regarding not only India but also China as a foreign land (pp. 94-95). As Thurston points out, both *zurza* and *larjya* are integral parts of a *khashag*: “The combination of traditional verbal art, pride, and satire enables a comedy that might otherwise be treated as pure entertainment, or as a very localised phenomenon, to speak to broader social issues considered relevant to communities living on the Tibetan plateau in post-Mao China” (p. 96).

The fourth chapter discusses *garchung*, namely a visual, performed comedy which is played (*htsé wa*), while *khashag* is spoken (*shed pa*) (p. 104). To Amdo comedians, this distinction between *khashag* comedic dialogues and *garchung* sketches recognises that the latter is a newer, more visual form of expression which needs different artistic material and technological capacities, reaching audiences through state television stations and later by means of VCDs and the internet. Unlike *khashag*, *garchung* “satirise a host of new issues, a testament to how rapidly conditions have changed in the Amdo’s intellectual sphere” (p. 104).

In the 1990s, Shidé Nyima and Soktruk Sherab engaged in what Thurston calls “traditionalisation”, defined as “the (re)invention of tradition to distinguish Tibetan identity from the Han”. He argues that this ‘cultural turn’ “focuses on issues like language, tradition, ritual, and environment, in support of a growing Tibetan nationalism” (pp. 104-105). Here one might add that similar nation building was happening in exile, although not through comedy, but through historical ritual, political talks and ideology (Choedon 2023).

Over time, the artists’ ideology changed. Thus, if in his *khashag* Menla Jyab was a modern man imparting his appreciation of modern technology, scientific progress, and secular society, in “Gesar’s horse herder”, he is the nomad herder who is protecting the environment through limiting human access to his land and satirising the teacher and his ignorance in both the Tibetan language and traditional knowledge concerning the natural environment (pp. 109-110). Unlike Thurston, however, I believe that the traditional view of the environment as a space filled with

both human and nonhuman agents is in fact very Buddhist (pp. 109-110). This change of ideology from promoting modern ideology (*samlo sarwa*) back to safeguarding one's traditional cultures has to do with the rapid and damaging consequences to the landscape as well as the lives of pastoralists due to "new sedentarisation and urbanisation policies moving pastoralists into fixed dwellings – often in the name of the environment protection and better grassland management – traditional ways of living in and moving through the natural world changed almost overnight" (p. 112).

Thus, due to the change in the perception of nomadic life and traditional Buddhism, now no longer viewed as backward, traditional ways of living are seen as important and in a positive light. Moreover, the inability to speak Tibetan is seen as matter of laughter and therefore satirised in the comedy. This change in attitude is seen in the Tibetan diaspora, too. In the beginning, other languages (especially English) were given high importance to build one's lives in new land, such as India and Nepal. However, advocating non-Tibetan languages in turn made the generation growing up in the diaspora unable to speak in their mother tongue. Therefore, in the same way as inside Tibet, a complete turn took place in the diaspora towards propagating one's own language. The striving to preserve and revive the endangered 'pure' Tibetan language, not mixed with other languages, is still taking place. Thus, in 2016 Miss Tibet, Tenzin Sangnyi, was sharply criticised for her inability to speak correct Tibetan (Choedon 2023). Similarly, in the *khashag*, the lady teacher is surely a representative of modern Tibetans having limited traditional knowledge and a lack of fluency in spoken Tibetan. This fits with the comedians' insistence on 'pure' Tibetan, characterised by the absence of Chinese terminology (p. 111).

Thus, propagating the use of one's own language instead of Chinese and adopting the culture and religion that was once neglected and scorned, have now become the *larjya* of Tibetans and hence the moral theme of Menla Jyab's comedies. In the final chapter, "Zheematom: Tibetan Hip Hop in the digital world", we see such views continued in the form of modern songs termed as *zheematom* (*gshas ma gtam*) 'neither verse nor speech' (Chinese *shouchang* 'speaking singing'; (p. 121). Although this new performance style

is less humorous than the sketches and comic dialogues of preceding decades, the performers still see themselves as "doing *zurza*" and providing a new generation of artists with opportunities to rework oral traditions and emerging cultural practices – in conjunction with modern concerns about linguistic and cultural loss – into new and emerging art forms (pp. 121-122).

With the political and cultural restrictions, it has become clear that language is the most effective tool to counter the Sinicisation of Tibetans (p. 123). Efforts to promote and preserve Tibetan language and culture are seen in the *zheematom* "Vowels and consonants". Given the development of technology and the availability of social media, the younger generation of Tibetans are more interested in music and film which, as Thurston writes,

seems to present fewer barriers to entry in the years after 2008 and allowed performers to remain somewhat on the peripheries of state space [...] and music is a highly effective vehicle for expressing and circulating popular ideas. Film, meanwhile, seemed to be a new frontier, with directors like the late Pema Tsetan and Zonthar Gyal earning honours at international film festivals (p. 125).

Music from all these forms has taken a leading role in promoting a specific Tibetan nationalism in Amdo, with modern Amdo music divided into the categories of pop-music and the tradition-inspired genre called *dunglen*, where a singer or group of singers perform while playing a mandolin or a stringed instrument called a *dranyen*. Music videos help to promote Tibetan lyrics by means of the visual language of common Tibetan identity. The form of music Thurston

mentions in the book is a new genre of singing, inspired by black American rap, enabling young cultural producers to express themselves and reach larger audiences (p. 126).

For example, the rap video of Ludrub Jyamtso, known as Uncle Buddhist, shows *tsampa* (flour made from roasted barley) as representing the Tibetan identity, reminding Tibetans not to forget their roots, which is the ability to make their staple food. The rapper alludes to *tsampa* as “a golden belt that ties all regions” (p. 128) and to Tibetans as black-haired *tsampa*-eaters (p. 128). Having grown up in urban environments and only learned Tibetan as an adult, the artist feels deeply about both mental and physical separation from his language and culture (p. 131). The author explains the theme of the song “Tsampa” as “[t]he vision of a changing society in which foodways—and, by extension their very identities as Tibetan—as people move and become physically distanced from the grassland is a key theme in Uncle Buddhist’s work” (p. 131).

His rap video “City Tibetans”, which is a critique of younger generation Tibetans like himself (as in the music video “Tsampa”), shows the negligence which stems from the separation from “the grasslands and divorced from the sites of language and culture” and, therefore, “people in cities have become ill in body, speech and mind” (p. 134). His reference to ill in body, speech and mind is a critique of the Tibetan youth who no longer can speak in Tibetan and wear traditional clothes. The rapper identifies urbanisation as one of the key sources for this loss of linguistic and cultural identity (p. 134). Thurston points out how the rap artist in his music videos is making fun of urban Tibetans like himself for their language incompetence. In this sense of shaming and exposing oneself, one sees satire made through songs supported by a music video. Although raps are western influenced, they have become uniquely Tibetan with their use of Tibetan language, a Tibetan music instrument played in the background, and the Tibetan landscape embracing the three unified traditional regions.

Another example of social critique through rap is “Alalamo” by Jason J, who instead of literary texts uses simple colloquial forms of language in his lyrics to reach a wider audience. Like Ludrub Jyamtso, he too criticises modernist ideas in his rap, although he has a more “indirect critique of the broader epistemic positions for which they stand” (p. 140). Both artists – sometimes explicitly and at other times implicitly – exhort Tibetans to adopt their own culture and language. As Thurston writes, “[I]ike the comedies in previous decades that used it to shape popular attitudes, *zurza* serves as one essential ingredient that helps to simultaneously access new media and authorise a trenchant form of critique” (p. 142). He further claims that “rap artists in Amdo use it to localise this new art form, and to shape popular attitudes toward Tibetan language and culture” (p.142). The author ends the chapter by saying that *zurza* in the form of hip-hop songs “ceases to be humorous or playful. Instead, it uses indirection to articulate an (at time) almost angry cultural nationalism directed both at the current conditions of Tibetan life and of the intellectual foundations of Tibetan modernism” (p. 143).

Although the author claims that the humour and satire is focused on Amdo (northeastern Tibet), many comedies and especially hip-hop music mentioned in the book encompasses the wider movement of identity and culture of the whole of the Tibetan plateau. The book illuminates the trajectory of Tibetan humour and satire from the traditional forms to the modern ones. Thurston’s *Satirical Tibet* is a well-researched, original and eloquent study. It is a solid academic work, and at the same time reader friendly, reflecting the author’s perceptive narrative of having lived in Amdo for considerable lengths of time. Its usefulness is further enhanced by extensive references spanning 31 pages (from which, as far as I can see, only my publication from 2023, noted above, is missing) and a very helpful index. It is a book that will fascinate not only readers engaged in Tibetan studies, but anyone interested in contemporary East Asian popular culture.

**Pema Choedon**  
Independent researcher  
[happypemalak@gmail.com](mailto:happypemalak@gmail.com)

## **References**

- Choedon, P. (2023). *Unseen homeland: The construction of Tibet in the diaspora*. University of Tartu Press.
- Choedon, P. (2021). Miss Tibet. Representing Tibet and Tibetan culture on the global stage. *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* 52. <https://journals.openedition.org/emscat/5447>