rNgon-pa'i 'don... : A few thoughts on the preliminary section of a-lce lha-mo performances in Central Tibet

rNgon-p'ai 'don... : Quelques réflexions au sujet de la section introductive des représentations d'a-lce-lha-mo au Tibet central

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*rNgon-pa'i 'don... : A few thoughts on the preliminary section of a-lce lha-mo performances in Central Tibet*¹

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Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy

- 1 *A-lce lha-mo*, often simply called *lha-mo*, as it will be used hereafter, is generally translated in English as 'Tibetan opera'. 'Tibetan drama' would arguably be a more suitable evocation of this style of performance, since it bears no resemblance to Chinese operatic forms and is more reminiscent of forms associated in the Western imagination with 'Asian drama'. It is, amongst the traditional Tibetan performing arts the most established style, prevalent mainly in Central Tibet². Its masks have become one of the most prominent visual icons for Tibet, especially mobilised in the tourism industry, yet this tradition has yet to receive serious scholarly attention.
- 2 The focus of this paper is the preliminary section of the performances commonly called *rngon-pa'i 'don*, 'the exordium of the hunters'. Rather than the word 'prologue', which does not translate any Tibetan terminology nor corresponds to a real plot acted out before the main play, the terminology 'preliminary section' seems best suited. *rNgon-pa'i don* is a convenient simplification used by the actors to shorten the lengthy name given to this introduction. This name is actually a description of the three types of actions performed on stage : "the exordium of the hunters, the [calling] down of the blessings by the princes and the songs and dances of the goddesses" (*rngon-pa'i 'don, rgya-lu'i byin-bebs, lha-mo'i glu-gar*). Only the first action is mentioned, the other two being implied in an unspoken *etcetera*³. In this paper, after a sequential description of the actions performed by the actors, I will address two main issues : the ritual nature of this part of the performance and the significance of one particular play, *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*.

- 3 As in most traditional theatrical productions worldwide, *lha-mo* cannot be acted without an introductory piece. It is, with some minor variations, the same introduction throughout Central Tibet and whatever the main play to be performed, with the same three types of characters, similar dances and song themes. As one actor warned : “If you want to understand *lha-mo*, you have to understand the *rngon-pa'i 'don* first.” The preliminary section is more than just a series of songs and dances that bear no relationship with the main theme of the play. It is to be understood as the core of *lha-mo* : not that it is ‘central’ in the chronological unfolding of the performance (it opens the show), but it contains essential characteristics of *lha-mo* performances. Moreover, it is held by performers to be the historical origin of *lha-mo*.
- 4 The first discussions of the preliminary section are articles in Tibetan by Blo-bzang rdo-rje (1982, 1989, pp.10-14) and in an English translation (Lobsang Dordje 1984, pp. 17-21). He mentioned the sequences of the preliminary section, part of the text sung by the actors and the terminology for a few movements, but he did not provide a general interpretation for the elements he collected. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) of Dharamsala has also published a leaflet in Tibetan, in which the author and TIPA artistic director Blo-bzang bsam-gtan (Bod kyi zlos-gar 1994) wrote down for the first time the whole text sung and recited by the actors during the preliminary section, following the oral tradition and performing style of one specific *lha-mo* troupe, the famed sKyor-mo-lung-ba troupe based in Lhasa. This TIPA leaflet does not, however, provide any interpretation of the meaning of the words uttered and actions performed. It has been translated into English by Henrion-Dourcy and Puchung Tsering (2001), with abundant annotations and explanations in footnotes. These textual elements of analysis will therefore not be presented again here. The approach chosen here is rather performative, in that I will look into the ritual aspect of the preliminary section, and I will also delve on the seminal role of one *lha-mo* play in particular in shaping this preliminary section. The four elements of analysis include : ideas about the history of *lha-mo*, the context of performances in place and time, the structural mould of the shows, and finally the three types of characters and their actions on the stage.
- 5 Whereas in the main part of the performance the actors strive to stick perfectly to the libretto, a written text called *'khrab-gzhung* (“performance-text”),⁴ the preliminary section does not refer to a text, and was never written down. It was, and still is, passed down orally through the generations. TIPA’s leaflet (1994) is the first attempt to fix it on paper, and it is unknown in Tibet itself. On the whole, the *lha-mo* actors I interviewed in Central Tibet perform the set of lyrics, even after the near-twenty year ban that affected *a-lce lha-mo* in the sixties and seventies.

A look into the purported origins of *lha-mo*

- 6 There is no written track of the history of *lha-mo*. In the mist surrounding its origins, the consistent account is the well-known story of Thang-stong rgyal-po (1361-1485 ?⁵). He was both a scholar and an accomplished yogi (*grub-thob*). To my knowledge, none of his biographies⁶ has ever mentioned his involvement with *lha-mo*⁷. His role as ‘bodhisattva as artist’ (Gyatso 1984) seems to be a later construction. However, his application of the *bodhisattva* ideal to civil engineering is ascertained : he is credited with the construction of iron-chain suspension bridges all over the Tibetan plateau.

Picture 1. Bridge attributed to Thang stong rgyal po

Katia Buffetrille (rTa dbang, 2009)

- 7 Tibetan oral tradition associates the beginning of *lha-mo* with the building of bridges. This is the purported origin of the theatrical genre, of its name, and of one of the three characters of the preliminary section. The story, though it has some variants,⁸ is well-known and need only be summarized here : Thang-stong rgyal-po lacked funds for building a bridge over the gTsang-po in Chu-shur, some 35 miles southwest of Lhasa. He devised a new begging technique by inviting some of his workers, seven cousins⁹ (*spun-bdun*), to put up a show mixing folk songs and dances with religious themes he was familiar with. The audience was so enthralled by the seven cousins' performance that they likened them to goddesses (*lha-mo*) descended from the sky. As for the first term designating the drama tradition, *a-lce* ("elder sister"), it does not refer here to a strict kinship bond, but it merely denotes affection. *A-lce lha-mo* can therefore be understood as those "lovely goddesses". Reliable historical materials are sorely needed to examine the historical plausibility of this story and the attributed paternity of the genre to Thang-stong rgyal-po.¹⁰ Actors pay homage to him in *lha-mo* performances by placing a statue of him on the stage's altar and by singing praises to him in the preliminary section.
- 8 The origin of the second characters of the preliminary section, the princes (*rgya-lu*) is also considered to be contemporary to this unconventional yogi. As he was building another iron-chain bridge in bKra-shis-rste village, in the region of 'Jal-po-gong in Western Tibet, the elder household chiefs, supposedly called *rgya-lu* in that region,¹¹ enjoyed so much the goddesses' show that they sprung up from the audience and improvised songs and dances in spite of their great age. Their extemporaneous performance is said to have been kept as an integral part of the preliminary section.

- 9 The third characters of this section, the *rngon-pa* (ambivalently understood as “hunters” or “fishermen”) have come to epitomize *lha-mo* : their mask and their ample movements have actually become a hallmark for Tibetan performing arts as a whole, as much in Tibet as in exile. The oral tradition has not kept the story of their origin, but they are identical with characters of the *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*, which leads me to believe in the seminal role played by this story in retracing the genealogy of the hunters on the stage.

Picture 2. The three main types of characters of the preliminary section

Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy (Zhol pa troupe, Drak Yerpa, August 2013)

The importance of one *lha-mo* play in particular : *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*

- 10 Before describing the actual performance and the actions of the three characters, we have to introduce one *lha-mo* libretto in particular : *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*¹² (“The *dharmarāja* Nor-bzang”). It is considered one of the first, if not the first ever, composed libretti of *a-lce lha-mo*, and the only one where the author is mentioned in the colophon : sDing-chen smyon-pa Tshe-ring dBang-'dus (Tshe-ring dBang'dus, “the Madman of sDing-chen”). He was a government official at the time of the Eighth Dalai Lama (1758-1804)¹³, chief of the district (*rdzong-dpon*) of Shel-dkar when he composed the libretto, sometime between 1770 and 1780 (Smith 2001, p. 176). It was thus written three centuries after the purported founding of *lha-mo* by Thang-stong rgyal-po. Since *lha-mo*'s history rests upon oral tradition, it is practically impossible to retrace its genealogy precisely, but given the fact that symbols and excerpts of the *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang* story are important elements of the preliminary section, we can propose that this preliminary section, at least as it stands now, is posterior to Tshe-ring dBang-'dus' composition of the *lha-mo* libretto.

- 11 The story was actually well-known before the 18th c. : it is an adaptation of a famous *jātaka*, with the same hero Nor-bzang, found in the 64th chapter of the *Āvadānakalpalatā* (*dPag-bsam 'khri-shing*), composed by Kśemendra, and augmented by his son Somendra. The Tibetan translation of this work was achieved under the patronage of Si-tu Byang-chub rgyal-mtshan (1302-1364), and is found in the *bsTan-'gyur* of Beijing. Another version of this story can also be found in the *Vinaya* of Mulasarvastivadin (Panglung 1981, pp. 39-40).¹⁴ As is the case for the whole *lha-mo* repertoire, this version was recycling well-known literary elements that had been circulating in literate and folk circles for several centuries in the wake of the edification literature that spread on the Himalayan plateau.
- 12 I would like to propose that the popularity of this play, in this achieved form at the end of the 18th c., may have initiated a reshaping of the *lha-mo* performances' preliminary section. Many informants have equated the *rngon-pa*, *rgya-lu* and *lha-mo* to respectively the hunter, the prince Nor-bzang and his bride Yid-phrog lha-mo ("Fascinating goddess"), three prominent characters of the beginning of this story (summarized below). It is also explicitly said so in the actors' "talk" (*kha-bshad*¹⁵) uttered during the preliminary section. Moreover, the songs of the auspicious conclusion in the evening, at the very end of a performance (*bkra-shis*), are all excerpts from the same *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang* libretto.
- 13 This story features a hunter, named *Pang-leb 'dzin-pa* ("the holder of the wooden board"¹⁶), who dwells near a lake where he sometimes fishes, hence his ambivalent status as a hunter or fisherman, just as the *rngon-pa* in the preliminary section of *lha-mo* (hereafter, *rngon-pa* will be simply translated as hunter). As he promised to protect the queen of the *klu* who live in the lake, he kills an evil magician who came to poison her. In gratitude, the queen of the *klu* gives him a magical lasso, which enables him to catch celestial beings. He entraps Yid-phrog lha-mo, who happened to be bathing in a nearby lake. Nevertheless, he is advised to give her over to his prince Nor-bzang, who is a *dharmarāja*, the only human being deserving of such a celestial spouse.

Picture 3. Chos rgyal Nor bzang

Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy (Zhos ton in Lhasa, August 2013)

- 14 This is merely the beginning of the libretto, but it is the only section that is of relevance to the *rngon-pa'i 'don*. The reference is not made to the story itself (it is neither told nor acted during the preliminary section), but only to the three main protagonists of the beginning of the play. They serve to characterise by their status and demeanour the ritual actions performed by the actors on the stage during the *rngon-pa'i 'don*. The three parts of the preliminary section will now be described below in separate sections, after an examination of the structural mould of the performances.

Setting of performances in time and space

- 15 In Central Tibet, *lha-mo* is usually played during the *'ong-bskor* festivals (the circumambulation of the fields that precedes the harvesting). It is thus a key moment in the agricultural cycle, leading some Western observers¹⁷ to call the performances “harvest festivals”. It is a first indication of the relationship between *lha-mo* and prosperity, especially from the soil. However, *lha-mo* is played mainly in winter in Western Tibet, and is thought of as a begging device in the slack season. But the relationship with the soil is also established there, as they say that crops grow better where *lha-mo* has been performed.
- 16 *Lha-mo* is played in the day-time. The length of the preliminary section varies according to the time allotted to the whole performance. Until the nineteenth century, informants said that a single opera could take up to seven days, in which case the preliminary section would last for a whole day. Nowadays, as in pre-1959 Tibet, performances last for one day (about eight hours) and the preliminary section takes approximately one hour. When performances are shortened to a half-day, the preliminary section lasts for half an hour.

- 17 In villages, *lha-mo* is played in an open space, in the middle or at the border of the village, often a threshing ground. It is also played in the courtyard of monastic or (before the 1950s) aristocratic dwellings, or on a formal stage during the “yoghurt feast” (*zho-ston*), the prominent festival held at the turn of the seventh lunar month in Lhasa, featuring numerous *lha-mo* performances to be delivered in front of the Dalai Lama and government officials (before 1959), or Lhasa city officials after the takeover from the People’s Republic of China (PRC).
- 18 Before the beginning of the performance, the altar (simply called “table”, *sgrog-rtse*) is prepared. It is not specific to *lha-mo* performances. It resembles household altars, such as the ones used during lay ceremonies like New Year (*lo-gsar*) and weddings. It is placed at the centre of the circular stage, next to the central pillar (*ka-ba*) holding the awning. It supports offerings and sacred images : the actors bring their statue¹⁸ of Thang-stong rgyal-po, which they place at the centre of the table, and an image of the astrological diagram (*srid-pa-ho*) which they hang high on the pillar. The sponsor of the performance brings all the rest : a *gro-so phyé-mar* (wooden pail containing wheat on one side and roasted barley flour — *rtsam-pa* — on the other), with large lumps of butter, denoting affluence, in which he plants a few straws of fresh wheat and auspicious sculptures made of butter (*rtse-gro*) ; and two silver jars for the barley beer (*chang*), that have to remain empty in the Dalai Lama’s presence. To the central pillar, he attaches a wheat sheaf and a freshly cut willow sapling¹⁹ (*lcang-ma*), or sometimes juniper branches, with ceremonial scarves (*kha-btags*), and also a frame with religious icons like postcards of *thang-ka* and pictures of important lamas. He also lights a bunch of incense. All these offerings, around which the actors are going to dance during the whole day, are supposed to bring good luck (*bkra-shis*).

The structural mould of Tibetan performances

- 19 A recurring pattern can be seen amongst traditional performances of Tibet, such as *a-lce lha-mo*, *bla-ma ma-ni*, *bro*, *ral-pa* and *bkra-shis zhol-pa* : they are structured in three parts. First : the ‘don, the introductory section to prepare the stage, designed to get rid of bad influences threatening the show and the community, often also comprising a taking refuge (*skyabs-gro*) and a call for blessings. Second : the main part of the performance, called “text” (*gzhung*) for *lha-mo*, the story. And finally : the *bkra-shis*, the “auspicious” [conclusion] bringing wishes of prosperity to the sponsor or the honoured guest, and the whole community. This threefold partition parallels the three sections usually composing religious rituals (Kvaerne 1988, pp.151-152)²⁰ : the preparation (*sngon-gro*), the ritual itself (*dnegos-gzhi*), and the conclusion, generally a dedication of merit to all sentient beings (*bsngo-ba*). The three-part division (*‘don — gzhung — bkra-shis*) can be considered the ritual structure of *lha-mo* performances, in the sense that it is a necessary and repetitive arrangement. It is unthinkable to act the main play without its usual introduction and conclusion. On the other hand, it is possible to play just the preliminary section and the auspicious conclusion, skipping the *gzhung*. It is actually quite a common occurrence : when the sponsor wishes so, or does not have time or financial means for a whole performance. The performance would then be called an “offering of songs” (*gzhas-phud*). This indicates how important this first section is, perhaps more important than the *gzhung* itself.

- 20 Inside the preliminary section of *lha-mo* itself, we find again a triple division, where three types of characters perform their part one after another : five or seven hunters-fishermen (*rgnon-pa*), two princes (*rgya-lu*) and seven or nine goddesses (*lha-mo*), also called *mkha'-gro* (*dākinī*), or *rigs-linga* (associated with the Buddhas of the five families)²¹. After each of their respective part, all these characters end with a concluding auspicious prayer (*chod-mtshams*).
- 21 Let us now examine in turns each of the three parts of the preliminary section.

First : the hunters' exordium

- 22 Late in the morning, the drums and cymbals call the audience to the stage by beating a special rhythm called "the drum signal" (*rnga-brda*). The stage is empty, except the youngest goddess waiting at the entrance holding out a five-coloured-arrow (*mda'-dar*). A second drum-beat warns the actors to get ready. After the third drum signal, the main hunter, the chief of the troupe, called "teacher" (*dge-rgan*) in *lha-mo*, comes onto the stage. He seizes the arrow from the goddess, lifts it over his head and shouts "*Phyva-shog* !" ("May luck come !"). In some troupes, the initial shout may take the sound of "*Chos-chos* !" (meaning unclear), "*mChod-bzhes* !" ("Please accept this offering !"), or even "*mChod-zhig* !" ("Let's offer !"). He then leads onto the stage all the other hunters, who all carry their own arrow and who all shout the same cry upon arrival. They then all bow in respect. They move silently their bodies and their head adorned with a huge mask until the last hunter has reached the stage (*gdong-ston*, "to show the face"). In Western Tibet, if the teacher considers that the moment is not ripe, he thrusts all the actors into the backstage and they will all come back again onstage. Such an unsuccessful first appearance on the stage could never happen in the presence of the Dalai Lama, since no imperfection is allowed. The two other types of characters, the princes and the goddesses, enter the stage and stay discretely in the background as the hunters' performance starts.
- 23 The hunters' section is divided into four consecutive performance parts (*'khrab-khyer*) : 1- *sa-sbyang* ("cleansing the earth", sometimes called *sa-bcag*, stamping the earth to make it smooth) ; 2- *sa-'dul* ("subjugating the earth") ; 3- *chas-sor*²² (meaning unclear), possibly *chas-gsol*²³ ("celebration of the origin") ; and finally 4- *chod-mtshams* ("conclusion").
- 24 The first two parts, the cleansing and the subjugation of the earth, refer to all the dance until the first sung aria (*rnam-thar*). The actors need to be solemn, fearless and strong. First : cleansing the earth (*sa-sbyang*). They walk slowly around the stage, pointing their arrow to the ground, while the teacher howls meaningless sounds (*skad-stong*, "empty sound"). During the whole hunters' part, the only actor to sing is the teacher. The other ones support him in a chorus (*ram-skyor*). The teacher also recites some talks (*kha-bshad*) where he mentions the troupe's joy at being there that day, and sends good wishes to all. References to animals are mentioned in this part : the *skad-stong* of the teacher is sometimes likened to the bellowing of a bull²⁴ and the hopping jumps they make are called "bird walk (*bya'-gros*), alluding to the raven (*pho-roq*). Also, their spacious wild movements are referred to as "having the wings of the white vulture spread out" (*bya thang-dkar rgod-po'i gshog-pa lding-ba*). After a full stop and total silence, the actors start again : it is the subjugation of the earth (*sa-'dul*). They all spin round and the pace accelerates, which is supposed to level the ground and get rid of all the

obstacles that might hinder further performance : it is supposed to get rid of the dust (that is also why they spread water on the stage before the start of the performance), and of the small stones. It is also said to prevent the subsequent dizziness of the actors, by making the first spins performed as fast and acrobatic as possible. They also agitate their arrows like swords fighting off invisible enemies, or making stylised gestures evoking the shooting of an arrow (*mda'-phen*). This is designed to get rid of the potential malevolence of *numina* that could cause an accident on the stage. The teacher still howls sounds and the other actors shout loudly. The swirling accelerates in a mesmerising atmosphere. The teacher utters another talk (*kha-bshad*), they all stop, and the hunters bow in respect.

- 25 The teacher then starts the first *lha-mo* song (*rnam-thar*). It is an ode to nature, possibly the village where Thang-stong rgyal-po built his iron-chain bridge and created *a-lce lha-mo*. He praises the delicious smell of juniper incense pervading to the realms of the gods, and the sweetness of the voice of the pheasant. This aria ends the first two sections of the hunters' exordium.
- 26 The last two sections of the hunters' exordium, contrary to the first ones, rely only on the meaning of the *rnam-thar* performed, rather than on a performative action. There is a canon of songs common to all the *lha-mo* troupes I have interviewed in Tibet so far. As it would take over a day to sing the totality of the *rnam-thar* of the *rngon-pa'i 'don*, the teacher selects just one or two airs from each section. In the next section, for example, the *chas-sor*, the ritual of origin (?), the hunters say that they are proud to come from the three-layered realms of the gods (*lha*) above, the middle realm spirits (*btsan*) in the middle, and the naga (*klu*) below. Usually, just one of the origins (the realm of the *lha* above) is sung out, and the other two are omitted. There aren't any special dance movements associated with this triple origin of the hunters. When it is finished, all the troupe carries out stereotyped interlude-dances that will be repeated throughout the whole *lha-mo* performance : a slow dance (*dal-'khrab*) or a fast dance (*mg-yogs-'khrab*). Then comes the conclusion (*chod-mtshams*), where the teacher sings that he wishes these songs and dances of the hunters will entice those who hear them towards the pure Dharma.
- 27 Let us now have a closer look at this *rngon-pa* character. As in the story *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*, he is ambiguously a hunter (*rngon-pa*) and/or a fisherman (*nya-pa*). His costume bears the symbolism of the latter : his mask is embroidered with shell fish and his belt with long tassels (*thig-rag*) looks like a fishing net and symbolises a row of fish hanging down from his waist to his feet. He is at the same time a killer and a protector of the *klu*, warrantors of the region's prosperity and fertility²⁵. The recurrent description of him is that he is an incarnation of *Phya-nag rdo-rje* (*Vajrapāṇi*), "the one who wields the vajra", personifying power, protection²⁶ and even fierceness in the Buddhist pantheon. Dark blue is his colour, as for the hunter's mask²⁷. This colour symbolises violence and heroism (Blo-bzang rdo-rje 1989, p. 23). Their jacket is striped in black and white (although multi-coloured stripes are nowadays more common), and it symbolises the separation between white (positive) *karma* and black (negative) *karma*.
- 28 This characterisation of the hunter may help us understand the meaning of the word 'don, applied to his actions. It does not imply the "monotonous recitation of a text" (Das 1992, p. 694 ; Ellingson 1979, p. 150), as is the case for religious 'don. There isn't any such text here. Das (*ibid.*) further gives for 'don "to cause to come out, to expel". The hunters' task is to "cleanse and subjugate the earth"²⁸ (*sa-sbyang, sa-'dul*), a seizure

which involves fierceness, conferred to them by their costume, their identification to both Vajrapāni and Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang's hunter, as well as their songs, but not clearly something to "come out". Rather than translation 'exhortation' (Lobsang Dordje 1984), I propose the word 'exordium', to encompass at once a plurality of meanings : that of 'out' [ex], 'beginning' [*ordiri*] and 'discourse preparing an audience for a main recitation'²⁹. It is a call for something to come out, although no informant so far has clarified whether it is for the rest of the performance to come out, or for the spirit entities residing at that place to be warned and pacified. It is also unclear whether *sa-bdag*, *klu*, *bdud*³⁰ or other *numina* are addressed here.

- 29 At the end of their section, the hunters join hands and bow again. The youngest goddess³¹ goes round all the hunters to gather their arrow and plants them in the pail of wheat on the altar. Every hunter utters a talk (*kha-bshad*) and then the teacher invites the remaining characters on the foreground of the stage : the two princes (*rgya-lu*) and the (often seven, sometimes nine) goddesses (*lha-mo*).

Second : the call of blessings by the princes

- 30 Contrasting with the hunters' wild movements, the princes, a senior and a junior one, embody the self-control and wisdom of elder responsible household chiefs. Their dance movements are adapted to their great age and moral standing : reserve and solemnity. They quiet down the hunters' excitement, for example when they tease the princes for their old men's manners, or the goddesses for their erotic appeal. Their part is called "the [calling] by the princes for blessings to come down" (*rgya-lu'i byin-'bebs*). It comprises a ceremonious dance (also called *byin-'bebs*) where they move in a straight line backwards and forwards (they are the only characters not to circle around the stage), holding their walking stick (*od-ma*) horizontally and transmitting blessings to the earth.
- 31 After the hunters' cleansing, the performance space is ready for the princes to call blessings onto the stage. Contrary to the religious rituals where the term *byin-'beb* appears, it is not preceded in this secular context by a specific invitation (*spyen-'dren*) of deities, who would be generated (*bskyed*) by the officiants³². The princes merely sing praises to major Buddhist treasures : the Buddha, the Dalai Lama, the major pilgrimage sites of Tibet and the head lamas of important monasteries, as well as Thang-stong rgyal-po. They also sing about their happiness to be there that day, and the beauty of their country. This section comprises a series of *rnam-thar*, which are considered by Tibetans the most beautiful of the preliminary section, if not of the whole of *lha-mo*. These songs require a stunning beautiful voice, so it is generally the eldest prince, vice-teacher of the troupe, who sings that part. It embodies the melodic offering (*mchod-dbyangs*) *par excellence*. These are actually the words they use in most of the *rgya-lu* airs : *mchod-dbyangs 'bul-lo* ("[to the Buddha, the Dalai Lama,...] I present this melodic offering"). Meanwhile, the goddesses spin their arms in gracious offering movements (*phyag-'bul*, "offering of the hands"), typically acting out a female dance (*mo-'khrab*) which, according to informants, is likened to the spinning of a rosary (*'phreng-ba bskor-ba*) or to the traditional activity of spinning wool (*bal-las*, sPen-rdor 1990, p. 28). As was the case in the hunters' section, the various *rnam-thar* are separated by interlude-dances carried out by the whole troupe, and the princes conclude their part with a conclusion (*chod-mtshams*).

- 32 As for the characterisation of the *rgya-lu*, their name means “prince” (*Bod-rgya tshig-mdzod chen-mo*, p. 538), conferring to them a dignified charisma (see note 11). The dress they wear is supposedly the ancient dress of the old people of Western Tibet, with no belt. Their distinctive mark is their huge and round yellow hat, *'bog-chen* or *ser-chen 'bog-tho* (“big *'bog-tho*”, an artistic magnification of the hat worn by pre-1959 Tibet government officials).³³ The *lha-mo* troupe from gCung Ri-bo-che, one of the four main troupes of pre-1959 Tibet, has been awarded by the 13th Dalai Lama the privilege to wear a smaller white hat, *ar-kong* (or *ar-kon*), like that worn by the government officials (*drung-'khor*) during their parade at the time of New Year, when they had to wear the purportedly ancient *rgya-lu-chas* (costume of the princes of imperial Tibet) (Richardson 1993, pp. 14-17). Together with the fact that the princes of Tibetan opera are often equated with the *dharmarāja* Nor-bzang, this confirms their attributes of power, solemnity and dignity. They embody the law, the perfect behaviour, necessary for their task of calling for blessings to come down. Both of the actors who play the role of the princes must have a good heart (*sems bzang-po*). But the princes of Tibetan opera are not young and forceful like Nor-bzang or the officials for the New Year celebrations. They are played as old men with slowed down movements. A further discrepancy with the libretto is that, in the story, Yid-'phrog lha-mo is married to Nor-bzang, but no goddess has this special relationship with any prince.

Third : the songs and dances of the goddesses

- 33 Then comes the time for the goddesses to introduce themselves : one after another, and with much teasing on the part of the hunters, they spin around the stage in a clockwise circle, like all the dances performed in *a-lce lha-mo*. This particular spin is called, “the circumambulation of the sacred/soul lake³⁴ Pema” (*mtsho-chen Padma bla-mtsho'i mtsho-b skor*). This alludes to the *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang* libretto. The goddesses need to be gracious and charming. They are followed by similar but more acrobatic tumbling movements by the hunters called “big jumps” (*'phag-chen*), with their bodies on a horizontal plane and their legs thrown over towards the sky. The whole goddesses' part is called “the songs and dances of the goddesses” (*lha-mo'i glu-gar*). After the cleansing of the stage by the hunters, and the call of blessings upon it by the princes, the goddesses celebrate the success and joy of the event by offering their songs and dances. When it is their turn to sing, they stretch down the paper rainbow that falls from their crown to their ears. Several explanations have been given : they descend from heaven on a rainbow to deliver their song (*rnam-thar*) ; they listen to the invisible ; as for Milarepa and the epic bards, their gesture “expresses (...) receiving revelations from the gods, (...) inspiration, both religious and poetic, and symbolises at the same time the oral transmission” (Stein 1987, p. 193). Their first song is their most famous aria : the six-syllable mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*. They can also sing, depending on the songs selected, prayers to Thang-song rgyal-po, their fascination for the Buddha's teachings and the holy scriptures, and also lyrics with reference to the *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang* play. The customary procedure for their singing is to start from the bottom of the row, with the least experienced actor/actress, and move up step by step with each song until the last goddess in the row, the most experienced one, sings the conclusion (*chod-mtshams*). This hopping process is called “the ascent of the staircase of auspiciousness” (*bkra-shis them-pa yar-'dzegs*).

- 34 The goddesses of Tibetan opera are characterised along the lines of the *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang* play : they represent the goddesses of the three superposed realms bathing in the lake where the hunter caught Yid-'phrog lha-mo. The two goddesses coming from the *klu* wear a green shirt under their dress, colour of the water where these creatures live. They also sing a *lha-mo* song (*rnam-thar*) excerpted from the *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang* libretto, where they identify themselves with a *klu-mo*. The two goddesses from the middle *btsan* level wear a red shirt, for the *btsan* are violent and are attributed a red colour. Finally, the two goddesses coming from the upper realm of the gods (*lha*) wear a blue shirt, evoking the sky. The last goddess, the most experienced one, chooses the colour of his/her shirt and is equated to Yid-'phrog lha-mo. The designation "five families" (*rigs-nga*) applied to these characters, refers to the *'phrog-zhu*, the five-part-crown with the Dhyani Buddhas that they wear on their heads. They are also called "the *dākinīs* of the five directions" (*mkha'-'gro sde-nga*), associated with the five Dhyani Buddhas. The other occurrences where such a crown is worn like a cosmic mandala on the head are with spirit mediums (*lha-pa*, *lha-mo*) and during monks' tantric rituals. Yid-'phrog lha-mo, as performed in the libretto *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*, does not have such a head ornament.
- 35 After the goddesses' performance, and another interlude-dance performed by the whole troupe, the preliminary section is finished. The teacher summarises the main story that will be played (*gzhung*), sets the plot and invites the first character of the play to come onto the stage.

Conclusion

- 36 *Lha-mo* performances display ritualised features³⁵. First, they follow a patterned structure : they are divided in three consecutive parts (*'don*, *gzhung*, *bkra-shis*). So the preliminary section *'don* is the necessary preparation before the main libretto (*gzhung*) is acted out. Wishes of prosperity are sent to everyone at the end of the show (*bkra-shis*). Because this drama play tells of the holy deeds of a *bodhisattva*, it cannot be told on a mundane ground. The purpose of the preliminary section is to provide an appropriate setting to the performance. A mundane space, where every day profane activities happen, needs to be transformed into a sacred performance space suitable to receive a holy story. This is the second ritualised aspect of *lha-mo* performances. Three characters carry out this transformation. First, the hunters cleanse and subjugate the earth, subduing the possibly malevolent entities that might harm the performance and the community. The stage is then cleared, but needs the second characters, the princes, to call blessings upon it, by making pure melodic offerings to holy men and holy places. Finally, the stage receives the charming songs and dances of the otherworldly goddesses. The dramatised "transformation of space" (Schrempf 1999) carried out in the preliminary section of *lha-mo* has common themes with other Tibetan religious rituals³⁶, but without their esoteric aspects. This preliminary section is not explicitly meant for the transformation of consciousness of the performers, nor develop their own spiritual powers.
- 37 Finally, the ritualised features of this preliminary section can also be understood in a relationship with the community where it is performed. It is clear from the altar, from the time of the year when it is performed (key moments of the agricultural cycle), and for the evocation of the *klu* (connected with treasures, amongst which the fields'

fertility) in the preliminary section, that *lha-mo* performances are connected with the place's prosperity. In gTsang, *lha-mo* performers say that there are better harvests on the soil where *lha-mo* has been performed. It doesn't have a curing effect in case of calamities, but it simply has a propitiatory character : it is an offering. What is hoped for in return is the prosperity, peace and general well-being for the place and the people, as it is wished in the *bkra-shis*. The whole performance ('*don*, *gzhung*, *bkra-shis*) is actually seen as an offering : pleasing through entertainment. But who are the recipients of this offering ? Information is discordant, but tries not to miss anyone out : the spirits of the three superposed realms (the *lha* above, the *btsan* in the middle, and the *klu* below), possibly the soil's owners (*sa-bdag*), but also emphasize the appeal to blessings (*byin-rlabs*) from the buddhas, *bodhisattvas* and religious teachers. During the *gzhung*, the audience is expected to take refuge in the moral virtues and spiritual faith of the heroes depicted.

- 38 In a general interpretation, *a-lce lha-mo*, and especially its preliminary section, is a propitiation ceremony for the general wellbeing of the place where it is performed. As everywhere on the Tibetan plateau, this quest is two-pronged : it needs not only the quelling or pleasing of the worldly (*jig-rten*) spirits, but also the blessings of the representatives of the Dharma.

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NOTES

1. This is an updated version of the paper delivered at the 8th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (Bloomington, Indiana, July 25th-31st 1998). Thanks are due to Katia Buffetrille, Fernand Meyer and Nicolas Sihlé for the stimulating suggestions they then provided. This article relies on data collected in Tibet in 1996-1997, thanks to a scholarship provided by the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS). Given the rapid changes affecting this drama tradition in Tibet, including the way in which it is portrayed in official discourse, this publication of old research materials aims at providing grounds for a discussion on the main symbolic elements of *a-lce lha-mo*. The analysis carried out in this paper is based on data gathered among three main amateur troupes in Central Tibet : in Lhasa, rGyal-mkhar Chos-

rdzong, and gCung Ri-bo-che. These places hosted the most famous *lha-mo* troupes in pre-1950s Tibet. The official Tibetan Autonomous Region *lha-mo* troupe (*Bod-ljongs lha-mo tshogs-pa*), based in Lhasa, also performs 'traditional plays', *i.e.* based on traditional librettos. This troupe has undertaken many reforms in style and content, shortening the preliminary section to a mere five-minute evocation. This troupe's performing style won't therefore be taken into consideration here.

2. This dramatic tradition also exists, though in a much simpler form, in peripheral regions, most notably among Mon-pa communities (in the mTsho-sna district in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, in the rTa-dbang district in Arunachal Pradesh in India, and also in Me-rag Sag-steng in Bhutan), among Sherdukpen (gSher-stug-spen) communities (also in Arunachal Pradesh) and in Limi (in Humla district, Nepal). *A-lce lha-mo* has also disseminated at a later stage (late 19th c. and first half of the 20th c.) from Lhasa to some Kham and Amdo locations, through lamas from these regions who had to come to Lhasa for their studies and brought elements of *lha-mo* back to their native regions. On all these peripheral traditions of Tibetan drama, see Henrion-Dourcy (2015).

3. This is why an ellipsis was added after the name of the hunters' section in the title of this article.

4. The '*khra-b-gzhung* consists in the adaptation for the stage of a *rnam-thar* ("full liberation"), a term usually used for the spiritual biography of high lamas. Even when illiterate, *lha-mo* performers and spectators consider the theatrical text sacred, because it is a written account of a *bodhisattva's* deeds. The words of this text, in themselves, are imbued with power and blessings, as is documented for Buddhist texts throughout the Tibetan plateau.

5. The dates of Thang-stong rgyal-po's lifespan are subject to debate among Tibetologists. I am following here Stearns (2007, pp. 11-14) and Gyatso (1986, pp. 92-93, 102-103), who also discuss alternative birth and death dates, as well as Zhol-khang (1992, p. 13). Tashi Tsering (2007) has discussed at length both the longevity practices attributed to the saint and the hypothesis that his death was concealed for a long time for political reasons.

6. See especially Tashi Tsering (2001, 2007) and Stearns (2007), who have listed and analysed many biographies of Thang-stong rgyal-po.

7. Zhol-khang bSod-nams dar-rgyas (1992, p. 13) claims that he saw more than fifty years ago a Tibetan book (*dpe-cha*) kept in the monastery of Chu-bo-ri, where Thang-stong rgyal-po built his supposedly first iron-bridge : this *dpe-cha* was the biography of the *grub-thob*, written by his seventh reincarnation, thus approximately three hundred years after Thang-stong rgyal-po's death. Approximate references : Grub-thob sku-phreng bdun-pa bsTan-'dzin ye-shes lhun-'grub, *Thang-stong rgyal-po'i skyes-rabs*. This biography, if it did exist, is now lost, since the monastery has been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Zhol-khang writes that this text firmly established Thang-stong rgyal-po as the founder of *a-lce lha-mo*, along with the exact dates and events that surrounded this creation.

8. The story told by *bkra-shis zhol-pa* performers who also play a somewhat lesser tradition of *a-lce lhamo* (see Pema Dundrup 1996, *e.g.*) doesn't mention the seven cousins, for example, but the goddess Tāra (sGrol-ma).

9. The informants interviewed consistently said that the seven cousins were women, although *lha-mo* as it was observed in the 20th c. was played chiefly by male actors (Richardson 1993, p. 98), but not solely so. Whether Thang-stong rgyal-po's bridge workers were male or female is impossible to verify. One could imagine that the workers-performers were males, that they crossed dressed as females and that the result was likened to "goddesses", yet such an interpretation would be impossible to ascertain. However, an intriguing entry to the Mongolian scholar dGe-bshes Chos-grags's dictionary (composed in 1949, so more than five centuries after Thang-stong rgyal-po), goes along similar lines : "*a-chi lha-mo* [sic.] : men wearing female clothes" (mentioned in Tashi Tsering, 2001, p. 47).

10. Tashi Tsering (2001) offers the most comprehensive discussion on this topic.

11. I asked whether such a terminology did exist when I went to gCung Ri-bo-che, in the same area. All informants denied any colloquial use for the term *rgya-lu* and reserved it to *lha-mo*. The story comes from *lha-mo* actors and fans in Lhasa.
12. The full title is *Chos kyi rgyal-po Nor-bu bzang-po'i rnam-thar phyogs-bsgrigs byas-pa thos-chung yid kyi dga'-ston*, "The story of the *dharmarāja* Nor-bu bZang-po, a feast for the minds of the lowly educated [i.e. the common people]", but it is most well-known under its short title *Chos-ryal Nor-bzang*. It is surprising that, given the importance of this libretto, it has never been translated into Western languages. The available version in English (Pema Dundhrup 1996) is not based on Tshe-ring dbang-'dus' text, but on the text performed by a troupe of *bkra-shis zhol-pa*. This type of performing style has been renamed, after the Chinese take-over, and probably to follow Chinese-style folklore writings, "white mask *lha-mo*" (*'bag dkar-po'i lha-mo*), referring to the colour of the hunters' masks, by contrast with the blue masks worn by the troupes who perform the more elaborate style of *a-lce lha-mo* described in the present paper.
13. Hor-khang 1991, Blo-bzang rdo-rje 1989.
14. This information was kindly brought to my attention by Pr. Fernand Meyer.
15. *Kha-bshad* : "talk, gossip" (Das 1992, p. 136), but in a *lha-mo* context, it refers to set utterances in a sentential tone, often comments that are more or less improvised, but are not always comic, and are not considered as belonging to the performance
16. No informant or scholar has so far been able to explain the meaning of this name.
17. See Duncan M., *Harvest Festival Dramas of Tibet*. Hong Kong : Orient Publishing Co., 1955 ; and Duncan M., *More Harvest Festival Dramas of Tibet*. Londres : The Mitre Press, 1967. In Kham, he observed that these performances were called *dbyar-gnas-'cham* (summer retreat dances) but, in Central Tibet, no *lha-mo* performance is evoked by a seasonal terminology.
18. It can also be a *thangka* (painted scroll) depicting him, as is often the case nowadays, but Tibetans tend to think that *bla-ma ma-ni* should carry *thangkas*, and *lha-mo* actors should carry statues. No specific explanation was gathered so far.
19. Michael Aris kindly mentioned to me in 1998 that it is necessary to enshrine the *srid-pa-ho* diagram in green leaves for its efficiency.
20. This parallelism was occasionally underlined by the actors themselves, only if they had had previous monastic education. It is not a common view amongst *lha-mo* amateurs.
21. These figures for characters are ideal. They are often adapted to the available number of performers present that day.
22. Blo-bzang rdo-rje 1989, and all the informants' oral information. I haven't managed to find a satisfying explanation for this term *chas-sor*. *Chas* : to depart, to set forth, to start (Das, p. 412), but *sor* does not have a clear meaning here (*Bod-rgya tshig-mdzod chen-mo*, 2963-2965). The only other occurrence of this term is for the entrance of the butchers (*shan-pa*) in the main part of *lhamo* plays (*gzhung*) : it is also called *chas-sor* (in the '*Gro-ba bZang-mo* and *gZugs kyi Nyi-ma lha-mo* plays).
23. Lhalungpa 1962, p. 3.
24. Informants from *rGyal-mkhar lha-mo* troupe. See also sPen-rdor 1990, p. 28.
25. In the play *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*, the Northern country is prosperous because it made offerings to the *klu*, and the southern country suffers famine because it didn't.
26. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 12 p. 235, mentions that *Vajrapāni* is believed to be the protector of the *nagas* (*klu*), but D. Snellgrove does not mention anything about this particular aspect of his protection. (1987, pp. 135-141, 175-176).
27. Whereas the actors of *bkra-shis zhol-pa*, another yet related performing style of Central Tibet, describe their mask in their songs, the *rngon-pa* don't describe the meaning of their mask in what they sing. See Stein 1987, p. 193 for the Gesar epic's bards' description of their hats.
28. See Cantwell (2005) and Gardner (2006) for a detailed presentation of such a ritual when carried out in a religious context.

29. Exordium : “a beginning ; an introduction ; especially, the introductory part of a discourse or written composition, which prepares the audience for the main subject ; the opening part of an oration” (*Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*).

30. The mythological theme of taming a malevolent spirit (*bdud*) with/by a performance is a recurrent one : for example with dance (*bro*) during the foundation of bSam-yas monastery or with various shows during Lhasa’s yoghurt feast (*zho-ston*).

31. The reason for this task to be given to the youngest goddess is the fact that this actor/actress is the latest recruit of the troupe, and so can be sent about on various odd jobs by all members of the troupe. Moreover, outside the context of performances, the latest recruits would prepare the tea and the meals for the troupe, and observe the usual precedence rules of the elders.

32. See dPal mo skyid (2013, pp. 39-43) for a discussion of *byin-'bebs* in the context of a religious dance (*'chams*) of the Bon-po tradition. She also gives photographs (pp. 40, 41, 53) of lay audience members, mostly women, who fell into what she calls “ecstatic trance” upon receiving these *byin-'bebs* blessings generated by the presence of the main deity.

33. For an overview of Tibetan hats, see Karma smon-lam & sKal-bzang mkhas-grub 2005.

34. *Bla-mtsho*, “soul lake”, refers to a lake considered to be the support of the life-spirit of a deity.

35. All Tibetans interviewed have rejected the terms *cho-ga* or *rim-gro* (Blondeau & Karmay 1988, p. 125), that are the most usual terms translated as ‘ritual’, as appropriate in the context of *lha-mo* performances. *Lha-mo* does not have that level of seriousness nor efficiency.

36. See Cantwell 2005, Gardner 2005, Schrempf 1999, Blondeau & Karmay 1988, Kvaerne 1988.

ABSTRACTS

The purpose of this paper is to provide a structural and performative analysis of the preliminary section of the *a-lce lha-mo* (Tibetan drama) performances as they are held in Central Tibet. Three types of characters take to the stage successively and carry out specific actions destined to prepare the ground for the main part of the performance. First, the hunters stamp and subjugate the earth. Second, the princes call for blessings, and third, the goddesses index the otherworldly nature of the performance ground by their songs and dances. The ritual nature and the symbolism of each of these three characters is analysed, underlying the significance of one *lha-mo* play in particular, *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*.

Le propos de cet article est de fournir une analyse structurelle et performative de la section introductive des représentations d'*a-lce lha-mo* (théâtre tibétain) au Tibet central. Trois types de personnages effectuent tour à tour sur scène des actions spécifiques destinées à préparer l'espace scénique pour la pièce principale. D'abord, les chasseurs piétinent et soumettent la terre. Ensuite, les princes appellent des bénédictions. Enfin, les déesses accomplissent par leurs chants et leurs danses la transformation de l'espace en un lieu hors de ce monde. La nature rituelle et le symbolisme de ces trois personnages sont analysés, en montrant l'apport significatif de la pièce *Chos-rgyal Nor-bzang*.

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Mots-clés: Tibet, théâtre, section introductive, rituel, soumission de la terre, chasseur, prince, déesse

Keywords: Tibet, drama, preliminary section, ritual, earth subjugation, hunter, prince, goddess

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