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*Le Théâtre Ache Lhamo, Jeux et Enjeux D'Une Tradition
Tibétaine* by Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy (review)

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Himalaya

LE THÉÂTRE ACHE LHAMO, JEUX ET ENJEUX D'UNE TRADITION TIBÉTAINE. By Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, vol. 33. Leuven, Paris, Bristol (CT): Peeters, XXV + 940 pp., 39 pages of photos and 2 maps. €115.

The word Tibet, for many Westerners, brings to mind Tantric Buddhism and the difficulties for Tibetans to retain their cultural identity after the 1950 invasion of the People's Republic of China. But, except for specialists, the word *lhamo* or *ache lhamo* might still not be well recognized. It can be translated as "Tibetan opera," the term used by the UNESCO in 2009, because of the importance of singing and instrumental music, but the author prefers the word "theatre" (p. 5). It is a popular opera, not reserved for an elite. With the exception of translations of some librettos in French by Jacques Bacot (1921 [English 1990]) and in English by Marion H. Duncan (1955, 1967), only a limited number of articles were available (cf. Henrion-Dourcy's bibliography at the end of the book), as well as two books written by people who did not even know Tibetan and only had a superficial knowledge of Tibetan civilization. Now, thanks to Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy, we have a description of this theatre, which leaves no aspect of it neglected. The subject of this book is the *lhamo* up to 1950, before the transformations imposed by Chinese interference, though, at the end, there is an account of *lhamo*'s recent evolution in Tibet and among the Tibetans in exile. I do not think there exists in a single book a study of a type of theatre as complete as this one on *lhamo*. This work covers its history, its theatrical technique, and its links with Tibetan society,

mentality, and religion. The thirteen-page table of contents shows that no aspect has been forgotten. Such a book was possible because its author is perspicacious, erudite in Tibetan language and civilization, a remarkable musicologist, and a clear-sighted anthropologist specialized in dramatic entertainments.

The book is the reference on Tibetan opera for anybody interested in Tibetan culture and theatre, and it is more than just a work by a specialist only for specialists. It is accessible and inviting to even general readers who know nothing of Tibet. Moreover, it is not only a book on *thamo*, it is also a fascinating book on Tibetan civilization. This is not a simple introduction—such volumes are often marred by questionable generalities. Instead this is a detailed exploration of a precise subject—the place of this theatre in Tibetan society and culture. This provides an opportunity for the author to take on wider topics: social organization (more domainial than feudal), justice (which is responsibility of the village chief, except in serious cases), taxation (the troupes paid their tax by giving performances for the State, cf. the table p. 307), relations between texts and orality, the coexistence of Buddhism with earlier creeds anterior to Buddhism's arrival from India, power (and Tibetan evolutions from the period of ancient kings to the power taken by the Dalai Lama in the fifteenth century), the mentalities of different social classes, and religion as it is lived by people (“For each valley, its own dialect; for each lama, its own religion,” p. 214). And the term “religion without name” that the author takes from the famed Tibetologist Rolf Stein is much more adequate than the frequently used “popular religion.” From this book, I learnt the Tibetan meaning of “blessing,” and that theatre is linked with the pleasure of picnics—certainly more convivial than Western halls where it is strictly forbidden to talk, to move, or even to cough. This book by Henrion-Dourcy and those of Rolf Stein (1959, 1987) are the best texts from which to obtain solid knowledge of Tibetan culture.

The influence of Indian theatre, which is at the origin of *thamo*, and the limits of what was borrowed from India, are clearly explained. A possible link with Chinese *xiqu* is also considered, but the characteristics of *xiqu* that are mentioned are drawn from the book by Hsü (1985), which is more misleading than useful. In fact, similarities between these two types of opera—they are both a mixture of music, singing, spoken parts and dances—is due to their common origin in Indian theatre (see Zheng 1932 on the Indian origin of Chinese opera), but there is no indication of direct influence of *xiqu* on *thamo*. I regret the absence of a comparison with ancient Greek theatre given that Greeks were the creators of theatre, and this art, through kingdoms established by the generals of Alexander, reached India, and from there went to the rest of Asia. I find the main subject of Greek tragedies is to raise the question of the values on which society is based: Antigone, for instance, defends an

ethics higher than the reason of state, while *lhamo* and other traditional Asian theatres, may ridicule the defects of characters, but never contest the basic values of society.

Henrion-Dourcy has a great quality: she includes the ideas of Tibetan actors and scholars. In the past their viewpoints on their own culture has often been ignored, as if Westerners were the only ones able to understand.

Henrion-Dourcy is correct to confront Tibetan theatre with Western theories, but I find too many pages are devoted to it. Shamanism and trance, as expounded by performance theorists such as Ernest Kirby (1975), may have had an influence on certain types of theatre, but to make this a scientific explanation of theatre is to go too far, human creation is free and not determined. The Freudian interpretation of Santem Karmay and others of the arrow held by a character of *lhamo* as a phallic symbol, strikes me as a good example of the analyst being more obsessed by sex than the analyzed. Such theories pretend to reduce an art to discursive reasoning, while the purpose of any art is to express what the usual use of words cannot.

Chapter 7, on the prologue of every performance, which can also be performed independently of the play, is particularly interesting, for it gives the deep meaning of these dances. About thirty years ago, I was in Lhasa during the Shotön, the Yoghurt Festival, and I saw performances of *lhamo* by different troupes in the former Summer Palace of the Dalai Lama. Reading this chapter reminded me of that experience and suggested a personal interpretation (but is not the merit of a good book to suggest different ideas?) of these dances: they recount the history of man. At first, come the hunters who are also called fishermen (their meaning is ambiguous). It is an evocation of man before agriculture and livestock breeding. Then the kings arrive, who bless the audience evoking passage to a new social organization supposed to bring peace and prosperity. The third element of this prologue is the dances of female deities, to recall that the history of man is inseparable from the female energy that allows the evolution of humanity, female energy personified.

I shall always remember a Tibetan expression I learned in this book: “To say *beautiful*, the expression is *one who has compassion*.” This idea—that compassion gives beauty to a woman—the more I think of it, the more I find it convincing.

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