Workshop

GESTURE, BODY AND LANGUAGE IN TIBET AND THE HIMALAYAS

25th of June 2019

Wolfson College, University of Oxford, Wolfson College, Linton Road, OX2 6UD, UK

Seminar Room 2

Organisers:

Dr. Theresia Hofer, University of Bristol & Prof. Elisabeth Hsu, University of Oxford

Hosts and Funders:

Figure 1: Illustration of the TSL sign BÖ/BÖ PA meaning "Tibetan" (*bod pa*, the person and the adjective) and "Tibet" (*bod*, the place). Cover of the *Tibetan Alphabetical Tibetan Sign Language Dictionary* (TDPF & HI 2002).

The action of the sign BÖ/BÖ PA resembles and ironically depicts the forming of *pak*, which are fist-sized balls made from *tsampa* (roasted barley flour) and tea.

Figure 2: A Tibetan forming *tsampa* dough balls, or *pak*.
https://highpeakspureearth.com/2011/tsampa- eaters-and-sweet-tea-drinkers-tibetan-identity- assertion-through-food/ (accessed 15 June 2019)

Forming and then eating *pak* with ones' hands is how *tsampa* is eaten as a daily meal in Lhasa and in Central Tibet, the area where Tibetan Sign Language (TSL) has been documented since the early 2000s.

CONTENTS

1. Workshop Purpose and Logistics

Workshop Purpose

This workshop is a cross-disciplinary exploration of the relationships between gesture and language, and the role of signifying embodied movements more broadly, in culturally Tibetan and related areas of the Himalayas.

Research on gesture, body and language is still scarce, even though this theme has recently attracted increasing attention among linguists, historians and anthropologists. Research on the role of gesture in spoken and signed Tibetan languages is almost non-existent, although many aspects of spoken and written languages of the region are being documented. As the research by Theresia Hofer, the initiator of this workshop, has demonstrated, the Tibetan Sign Language (TSL), which only recently has been formalized, evidently bears traces of wider Central Tibetan gestural repertoires.

In this workshop, we will explore three main topics. One is how Tibetan and Himalayan repertoires of gesturing, speaking and signing are related to patterns of visual and bodily communication in everyday life and other domains. A second is how gesture specifically relates to and functions together with other categories, such as speech, dance, Buddhist debate, ritual and trade in the region of the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayas, and how these forms and combinations of expressions and modes create social relations, distinct ways of being and forms of knowledge. And, third, how do these forms of communication relate to written texts, historical narratives and/or visual records? Spanning these topics is an exploration of the various affordances of the visual-gestural modality for communicative purposes, and how they are modified to accommodate diverse sets of meanings and recreate asymmetrical relations, as our aim is not to lose sight of the wider social processes and political history of the region.

The workshop comprises the three following parts, each with two presentations and a discussion:

I. Gesture and Buddhist Debate
II. Gesture and Sign Language
III. Gesture and Dance

The keynote lecture will be given by Prof. Mara E. Green of Barnard College, NYC on the shared linguistic resources between deaf and hearing people in Nepal. In the evening, the forum will open up to a wider audience through the public screening of the ethnographic film "Ishaare – Gestures and Signs in Mumbai", by Dr. Annelies Kusters, Hariot-Watt University, on gesture and communication between familiar and unfamiliar deaf, deaf-blind and hearing vendors and customers in Mumbai markets.

Workshop Logistics

Paper Length and BSL Interpretation

Presentations in the sessions will be 30 minutes, the keynote 50 minutes, followed by discussion. The event is BSL interpreted by Naomi Bearne and Dr Christopher Stone.

Filming and Photographs

The proceedings will be video recorded for documentation purposes only - they will not be uploaded or shared, unless you are contacted and have provided express, written permission for any specific purpose that may arise in the future. We will take some images of the workshop and a group photo at the end of Session III, at 17:30 in Seminar Room 2. Unless I receive a written email from you to express that you would not like to be on any of the photos, by Monday the 24th of June, I will assume you are happy to go ahead and for a couple of photos to potentially be used on internal as well as online reports of the workshop.

Oxford and Wolfson College

Oxford is home to one of the world's leading and the world's oldest universities. It boasts 38 Colleges and Halls, some of which were founded as far back as the mid-13th century, while others, like Wolfson College are modern foundations, dating to 1966 and featuring purpose-built modernist architecture.

Wolfson College is a constituent college of the University of Oxford in England and one of the university's largest graduate colleges. Its ethos is egalitarian and the current director is Sir Tim Hitchens. Students and researchers come from all over the world. Wolfson is located in north Oxford along the River Cherwell, a 20-minute walk from the Oxford city centre, at the end of Linton Road. A taxi from Oxford train station or the bus terminal (on Gloucester Green, buses to and from the London airports) to the College costs about 8 GBP one way. During the weekdays, the Wolfson Minibus runs in the morning, lunch time and evenings between the College and Broad Street (the centre of town opposite the Bodleian Library, timetable to be collected at the College lodge, i.e. reception). The Workshop, registration and coffee breaks all take place in the Academic Wing, First Floor.
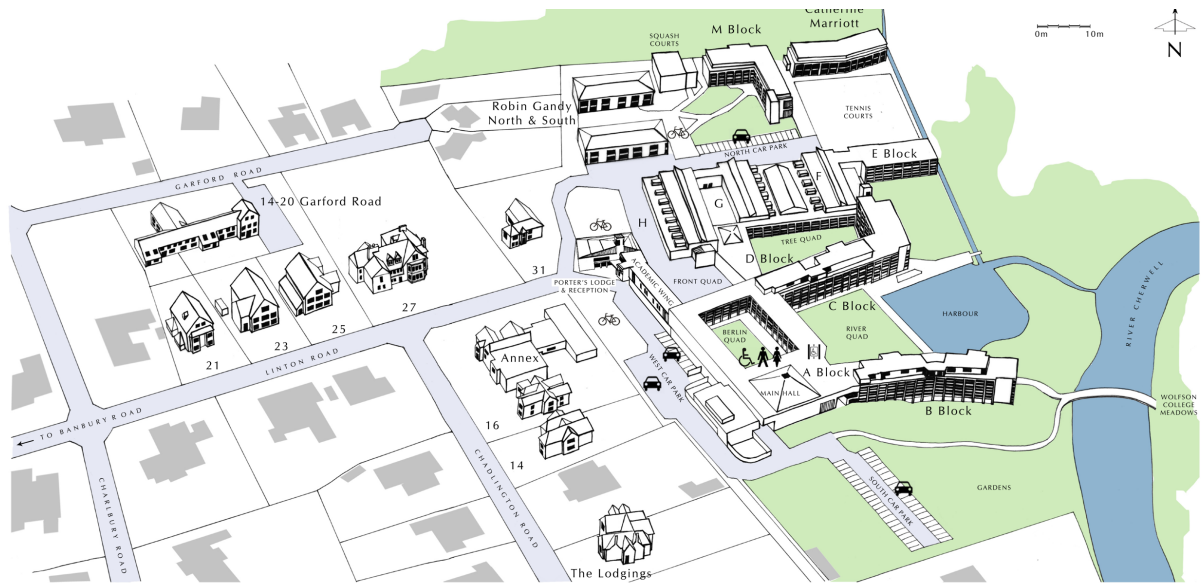
Wolfson College has its own public café (for those who stay in College, this is your best breakfast option) and a dining hall for students, staff and visitors, for lunch and dinner. As Wolfson is situated in a residential area, there are no shops in the immediate environment. The closest shops are in North Parade or in Summer Town, each a good 15-minute walk, from the College.

Fine dining, drinks and ice cream are available at the Cherwell Boat House (5-minute walk) - cheaper dining options are available in Summer Town and on North Parade (a Japanese and an Indian restaurant as well as several cafes).

Most Oxford Colleges can be visited during specified hours, so please check their individual websites, to avoid disappointment. The Bodleian Library is the second-largest library in the UK. Its historic courtyard can be freely accessed, but the inside of the historic buildings can only be seen by joining a tour. There are 30, 60 and 90 minute tours, which have to be booked in advance, online and they sell out fast during peak tourist season: https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/whatson/visit/tours/info - mini_tour

The University Church tower can be accessed for a small fee and provides stunning views of the city. Nearby are the Cotswolds and just across from Wolfson there are also fields and a picturesque walk along the Cherwell River to University Parks and into town. Do bring good shoes if you are planning any walking in the area.

2. Detailed Schedule and Abstracts of Presentations

<u>TUESDAY, 25th OF JUNE 2019, WOLFSON COLLEGE</u>

8:00 – 9:00 Registration and Coffee & Croissants, Library Breakout Area, Academic Wing, First Floor

9:00 – 9:30 WELCOME AND GENERAL INTRODUCTION, Lama Jabb (Head of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies Cluster at Wolfson) and Theresia Hofer, Seminar Room 2, Academic Wing, First Floor

9:30 – 11:00 SESSION I: GESTURE AND BUDDHIST DEBATE, Seminar Room 2, Academic Wing, First Floor

Tenzin Choephel & Jonathan Samuels, Wolfson JRF	**Practical Demonstration of Tibetan Buddhist Debate Gestures**
Jonathan Samuels, Wolfson JRF	**Animated Discussions: Reflections on the Place and History of Tibetan Debate Gestures**
Chair: Jan Westerhoff, Oxford Theology	Discussion

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee, Library Breakout Area, Academic Wing, First Floor

11:30 – 13:00 KEYNOTE LECTURE, Seminar Room 2, Academic Wing, First Floor

Mara Green Barnard College, NYC	**Studying Deaf Communication in Nepal: Notes on Theories and Methods**

This talk focuses on *natural sign*, a term I take from Nepali Sign Language (NSL) that refers to less conventionalized modes of signing used by deaf Nepalis who are not NSL signers. Drawing on over a decade of involvement with both deaf and hearing worlds in Nepal, I examine how intensive participant observation and attention to deaf signers' metalinguistic categories and insights have been critical to my understanding of natural sign as a phenomenon distinct from the classifications familiar from the (English-language) literature on signing. Natural sign is socially and linguistically distinct from co-speech gesture, home sign, village sign languages, and national sign languages. In addition, I show, natural sign conversations are characterized by a seemingly-unique mixture of fluency and frequent mis- or non-understanding. I argue that both the affordances and limits of natural sign as semiotic system and the shifting stances of signers toward the very possibility of interaction must be taken into account, revealing the importance of interaction-focused research.

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch, Wolfson Dining Hall (Please use your food ticket and join designated lunch table)

14:00 – 15:30 SESSION II: GESTURE AND SIGN, Seminar Room 2, Academic Wing, First Floor

Theresia Hofer, University of Bristol and Wolfson College

"Spontaneous Sign" within and beyond Lhasa Tibetan Si Language Interactions

Kelly Fagan Robinson, Cambridge & UCL

Thoughts as Space: Witnessing Deaf-centric Mind-maps

Chair: David Cram, Oxford Linguistics Discussion

15:30 – 16:00 Tea, Academic Wing, First Floor

16:00 – 17:30, SESSION III: GESTURE AND DANCE, Seminar Room 2, Academic Wing, First Floor

Ann David,
University of Roehampton

Bodily Behaviours in Bhutan: Dance, Movement and Gesture in the Himalayan Region

Dawn Collins, Independent Scholar

Moving the Mountain Gods - *Cham* and *Gar* in Rebgong, Amdo

Chair: Elisabeth Hsu, ISCA Discussion

17:30 to 17:40 Group Photograph, Seminar Room 2

17:40 to 18:30 Reception with Tibetan / Nepali Fingerfood in Wolfson Café Area, Academic Wing, Ground Floor

18:30 – 20:30 PUBLIC FILM SCREENING: ISHAARE - GESTURES AND SIGNS IN MUMBAI

Directed by Annelies Kusters - in Leonard Wolfson Auditorium, Academic Wing

"Ishaare" has a double meaning: it means "gestures" in Hindi and Marathi, but it also means "signs", as such indicating that there cannot be made a strict distinction between them. However, whilst there seems to be overlap between gestures and sign language, they differ too, as the protagonists of the movie show and tell us. The film "Ishaare" documents how six deaf signers communicate with familiar and unfamiliar hearing shopkeepers, street vendors, customers, waiters, ticket conductors and fellow travellers in Mumbai. Reena and Pradip, who is deaf blind, go grocery shopping along local streets, in markets and in shops. Sujit, our guide throughout the movie, communicates in public transport. Mahesh is a retail businessman who sells stocks of pens to stationery shops. Komal runs an accessory shop with her husband Sanjay, where most customers are schoolgirls. Durga is the manager of a branch of Café Coffee Day, an upmarket coffee chain. When enquiring, selling, bargaining and chitchatting, these deaf and hearing people use gestures and signs, and they also lipread, mouthe, read and write in different spoken languages. In the film, they share how they experience these ways of communication.

ABSTRACTS OF PRESENTATIONS

SESSION I: GESTURE AND BUDDHIST DEBATE

Animated Discussions: Reflections on the Place and History of Tibetan Debate Gestures

by Jonathan Samuels, Wolfson College, JRF, University of Oxford

One of the most visually arresting (and for the uninitiated, bewildering) sights for those entering the environs of certain Tibetan monasteries is that of monks (and increasingly, nuns) wildly gesticulating and shouting, apparently in the throes of some major dispute. Despite the initial impression that the scene is one of chaos, after some moments of scrutiny, one may realise that the movements follow what resembles an organised pattern. The sight is that of monastics engaging in religious debate, as part of their scholastic training.

Given its prominence in some of Tibet's religious schools, this form of debate, as practice, is one about which there is surprisingly little academic literature. In particular, the set of gestures accompanying the verbal exchanges have not received much attention. The gestures have been mentioned by Perdue, Dreyfus, and Lempert, in the course of their discussions about debate. But no studies have been devoted to them, or questions raised about their origin and role. This seems puzzling, as tradition ascribes them almost a millennium of history, attributing their creation to the father of Tibetan scholasticism, Chapa Chökyi Senge, 1109-1169.

This presentation will put these gestures centre-stage. Following on from the preceding practical demonstration with commentary, there will be a basic description of the gestures and the context of their usage. Consideration will then be given to where, in the general typologies of gesture, they might be said to fit, and how accommodating these typologies are to their inclusion. Finally, the issue of the gestures' origins will be discussed. Locating mentions of them in historical documents is far from easy. Should this lead to scepticism about claims regarding their heritage? Or, should we instead question how reliable a guide historical documents are to practices primarily conceived of as performative (in terms of learning and usage)? Might there be a more profound set of questions here, regarding the relation between physical practice and historical evidence?

SESSION II: GESTURE AND SIGN LANGUAGE

"Spontaneous Sign" Within and Beyond Lhasa Tibetan Sign Language Interactions

by Theresia Hofer, University of Bristol and Wolfson College

At the centre of this presentation stands the phenomenon of *spontaneous sign*. The term *spontaneous sign* derives from the Tibetan Sign Language (TSL), a recently emergent sign language used by about 150 to 200 deaf signers in Lhasa, the administrative capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region. *Spontaneous sign* denotes ad-hoc sign communication of deaf people from different places and with different native sign language backgrounds, as well as less formalised signing of Tibetans in and from rural areas, who have not come in contact with Lhasa TSL. Lhasa TSL signers see *spontaneous sign* at the root of many, if not most

items in the TSL lexicon, which underwent first codification and standardisation efforts in the early 2000s. But they also increasingly acknowledge the continued co-existence of *spontaneous sign* and TSL (as well as Chinese sign language) in their own day-to-day linguistic repertoires. How do TSL signers' ideas about *spontaneous sign* map onto the historical and methodological processes that characterised in particular the "TSL Project" that took place in Lhasa between 2000 and 2014 and aimed to formalise TSL? What happened to TSL signers' use and attitudes towards *spontaneous sign*, since this project ended and the teaching of formalised TSL to newcomers and younger signers has almost entirely stopped?

Thoughts as Space: Witnessing Deaf-centric Mind-maps

by Kelly Fagan Robinson, University College London

Visual Vernacular ('VV') is a performance praxis in which deaf people externally map thoughts-in-space, constructing specific instants, people, landscapes, emotions & musings-made-flesh in order to consider or help others understand their thinking. Born from the visual-tactile dominance of deaf condition, these performances enact specific instants, people, landscapes, emotions & musings via each individual deaf person's body. Such performance is explicitly informed by each person's own sensorium, perspectives, and embodied memories of living a deaf life-way. They therefore externally re-make unique 'DEAF'[1] interior worlds via witnessable fleshy instantiation.

This paper examines the visible external shapes of deaf people's individually-generated interior worlds and the entities which populate them. It considers the inimitable social and physical elements that inform each unique performer-teller, and what can be lost when these body-maps are subjected to entextualisation, transduction, or interpretation. It also draws on structural equivalents between VV and Tibetan Buddhist conceptions of *tulpas* (*sprul pa*)*,* beings conceived "in the imagination but [which acquire] a tangible reality and sentience [...] either through a deliberate act of individual will or unintentionally from the thoughts of numerous people" (Mikeles & Laycock 2015).

Drawing from ethnographic examples of VV and other forms of 'witnessable thinking', I explore how deaf people offer lenses onto the 'poesis' (Agamben 1999) of DEAF world-production through these representations, thereby reframing such performers not as interlocutors, but as auto-ethnographers who highlight communicative fault-lines through their thought-performances, thereby problematising rigid hegemonic listening practices and frontline applications of equalities policies.

<u>**SESSION III: SIGN AND DANCE**</u>

Bodily Behaviours in Bhutan: Dance, Movement and Gesture in the Himalayan Region

by Ann R David, University of Roehampton

This paper examines gesture and movement in the Himalayan Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan, focussing on communication, meaning and forms of knowledge. Based on fieldwork carried out in Bhutan, it discusses the gestural language of the Buddhist dance '*cham,* performed by monks at ritual festival occasions. These rituals are driven by concerns for enculturation of

cultural values, and religious precepts and the accrual of merit or power. The paper considers the place of such 'sacred' action in public performance and questions as such whether these are performances of memory or are still able to speak to today's cosmopolitan audiences in periods of rapid social, political and economic change. I suggest too that embodied 'performance' is seen in Bhutan in all walks of life, such as the spontaneous breaking into song and dance at most festive occasions, the celebratory poetic singing, gesture and dance at archery competitions, the folk dance performed by men and women at ceremonial and local occasions, and the exquisite hand gestures of the traffic policemen controlling the cars in the capital, Thimphu. All these elements, as well as the codified bodily behaviours required in formal situations, create a culturally accepted movementscape, specific to this small country in the Himalayan region. What layered, complex understandings are being conveyed through these embodied performances of movement and gesture?

Moving the Mountain Gods - *Cham* and *Gar* in Rebgong, Amdo, Eastern Tibet

by Dawn Collins, Independent

The villages of the Rebgong Valley on the Tibetan plateau hold annual rituals for the Mountain Gods known as the *laru*, focal to which are dances whose gestural styles fall somewhere between the formal religious ritual dance of the monastic traditions (*cham*) and those of popular entertainment in Tibetan cultural regions (*gar*). Their signifying embodied movements performatively express relations between humans and the divine presences whose protection and blessing they hope to secure. Whilst being ritual offerings evoking these powerful presences and moving them to bless and protect, the dances of the *laru*, their spacial and participatory boundaries, are also site for the renegotiation of power structures within the social sphere. Thus social relations in the Tibetan cultural regions of Rebgong are both formed by each villages socio-historical contexts and are site for the reformulation of them. This paper will explore the gestural borderlands between *cham* and *gar* found in *laru* and how they move deity and human realms.

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