



# Disciplinary theatrics: Public reprimand and the textual performance of affect at Sera Monastery, India

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## Abstract

This article examines ‘public reprimand’ (*tshogs gtam*) at Sera Monastery, a major Tibetan Buddhist monastery of the Geluk sect in India. This disciplinary practice is shown to be of duplex textual and theatrical complexity. In this form of reprimand, the Disciplinarian seeks to (re)form the dispositions of monastic subjects by textually projecting, juxtaposing, and evaluating morally weighted voices. As the Disciplinarian stages this moral-didactic drama – this ‘serious theatre’, to borrow Foucault’s expression – he adopts a culturally prescribed stance on his own affective performance. In investigating the textuality of voice, stance, and affectivity in this form of public reprimand, this article seeks to rekindle interest in ‘penal semiotics’, a vector of inquiry that Foucault initiated.

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**Keywords:** Voice; Text; Discipline; Affectivity; Performance; Tibetan

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## 1. Introduction

While Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1979) has attracted its fair share of critics since its publication in the 1970s, it deserves renewed attention for its forays into an area that might be called, to use Foucault’s own suggestive term, ‘penal semiotics’ (p. 98). By this, he meant, of course, something quite narrow and historically specific: the program

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of the reforming jurists who, in the 18th century, sought to replace the sovereign's spectacles of public execution with a gentler, punitive art that would 'rest on a whole technology of representation' (p. 104). In place of rituals that leave 'retaliatory marks' on the malefactor's body, marks that index monarchical wrath and power, one finds 'serious theatre' (pp. 104, 113). In serious theatre, punishment is designed not to exact revenge, but to rehabilitate the subject's soul by way of signs. In Foucault's account, this was rapidly replaced by the modern technology of power, exemplified by the prison, and especially by Jeremy Bentham's infamous architectural figure, the Panopticon. Understood broadly, Foucault's entire work is, *inter alia*, an exercise in penal semiotics. As such, it recommends itself for reanalysis by those influenced by Peircian semiotics and related research programs. I do not attempt a reanalysis of his own empirical materials here. Instead, I take as my point of departure Foucault's discussion of 'serious theatre', and pursue, in particular, his proposition that disciplinary practices can be pedagogical by virtue of their semiotic properties. I do so by drawing on contemporary developments in linguistic anthropology, especially work on the textuality of 'voice' (in Bakhtin's sense), stance, and affectivity.

The empirical focus of this article is a speech practice I witnessed during fieldwork at Sera Mey monastic-college in rural south India.<sup>1</sup> The original Sera Monastery was founded on the outskirts of Lhasa in 1419. After the PRC's violent annexation of Tibet in 1959, the Geluk sect replicated this monastery in Byllakupe, Karnataka State, where it now boasts several thousand monks. At Sera Mey in India, Disciplinaryans (*dge skos*)<sup>2</sup> perform a speech practice termed *tshogs gtam*, which translates literally and euphemistically as 'assembly talk', but which is better glossed as 'public reprimand'.<sup>3</sup> In this prac-

<sup>1</sup> While I examine a single event of reprimand in this article, I observed other examples of this practice by the same Disciplinaryian during fieldwork at Sera Mey monastic-college in 2000. I conducted interviews about this practice with this Disciplinaryian, the Venerable Geshe Losang Thardo, with his assistant, and with other monks from the college. I also consulted a prescriptive manual on *tshogs gtam* authored by Geshe Losang Thardo (2000) himself.

<sup>2</sup> I alternate in this article between orthographic and phonemic transcription. In cases where I mine stretches of discourse for their denotational content (e.g., extended quotations from interviews and citations of words and expressions), I use orthographic transcription – specifically, the Romanized Wylie (1959) transliteration system adopted by most Tibetologists. When I analyze the public reprimand itself, I use a narrower form of transcription, specifically, phonemic transcription with lexeme-by-lexeme glosses and parallel free translation (on Lhasa Tibetan phonology, see especially the classic work by Kun Chang and Betty Shefts Chang (1964)).

<sup>3</sup> 'Assembly' (*tshogs*) 'talk' (*gtam*). I do not wish to suggest that the form of *tshogs gtam* practiced here is identical to *tshogs gtam chen mo*, a genre which Cabezon (1997) has discussed for Sera Monastery's other college, Jey. Cabezon translates *tshogs gtam chen mo* as the 'Great Exhortation'. The Great Exhortation is a fixed recitation delivered by the Disciplinaryian several times a year in a marked ritual register of Tibetan. Unlike the Great Exhortation described by Cabezon, the *tshogs gtam* practice I analyze here is highly improvisational and is not rigidly scheduled.

The motivation for glossing *tshogs gtam* as 'public reprimand' derives from transcript evidence (analyzed below), as well as from interviews. Informants at Sera often claimed that *tshogs gtam* was synonymous with 'scolding' (*bshad bshad btang*). In follow-up interviews with the Disciplinaryian who delivered this *tshogs gtam*, he too glossed this event-type as 'scolding'. Names for genres are, of course, only one type of metadiscursive instrument for casting a discursive event as a distinct, recognizable 'type'. The variability across instances or 'tokens' of this interactional genre is not an issue I address here.

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