

'Tibetanness' Under Threat?

Neo-Integrationism, Minority Education and Career
Strategies in Qinghai, P.R. China

By

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GLOBAL
ORIENTAL

'Tibet'—'Tibetan'—'Tibetanness'

As others have rightly pointed out, the 'Tibetan community'—an imagined pan-ethnic construct that can span from the margins of Nepal to the very northeastern corners of the zones of 'Tibetanness' claimed by the exile community—represents a stark simplification of the complex ethnic, linguistic, religious and occupational diversity found within those who refer to themselves as 'Tibetan' (Huber, 1999; Shneiderman, 2006). Huber notes that terms such as 'Tibetan' or 'Tibetans' (and by extension 'Tibetanness') are inherently problematic because "they evoke the existence of stable or unitary social and geopolitical entities that readily gloss over an enormous actual complexity and fluidity both past and present" (ibid., p. viii). The construction of essentialised notions of 'Tibet' or 'Tibetanness' can possibly be traced back several centuries when what Dreyfus (1994) refers to as Tibetan proto-nationalism arose between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries through a type of Buddhist literature called the 'Treasures' (*T. gter ma*). The Treasures reified an imagined glorious past based on the seventh century Tibetan empire under the rule of Songtsen Gampo, who is constructed as a Buddhist king and identified with Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva embodying the 'compassion of all Buddhas' and the patron deity of Tibet, as incarnated in the Dalai Lamas (cf. Kapstein, 2002, pp. 147–8).

Just how to define the 'Tibetan' people has been subject to much debate. Shakya has pointed out that in the absence of an indigenous expression for 'Tibetan', "[t]he term Tibetan, as used by Western academics, may be employed to denote populations which have common history and tradition, and share the worldviews and myths about their origins." (1993, p. 9). He argues that despite all linguistic and other differences, 'Tibetans' are united by a "strong family resemble in language, lifestyle and culture", the most salient shared identifying characteristics being Buddhism and *tsampa*, (Wylie: *rtsam pa*)—a 'traditional' Tibetan dish made of barley flour, Tibetan tea and yak butter. *Tsampa* is so strongly associated with 'Tibetanness' that Tibetans have often referred to themselves as '*tsampa* eaters', even though (or perhaps precisely because) it is mostly consumed by nomads (cf. Anand, 2006, p. 298).¹⁹ Huber has suggested a definition of 'Tibetan' as referring to the "general area throughout which are found populations sharing a manifestly high degree of linguistic similarity, cultural

¹⁹ *Tsampa* is widespread among Tibetan farmers in the TAR.

and social patterns, and historical experience" (1999, p. viii), using the expression "Tibetan cultural sphere" (*ibid.*, p. 30) to gauge this complex amalgam.

One of the intuitively most obvious and widely-shared common denominators of 'being Tibetan' would appear to be religion. Lopez (1998) has described how Western Tibetology, motivated by the quest to find 'pure' Buddhism in Tibet, "initiated a pattern of research that over-emphasised religion to the exclusion of other aspects of Tibetan sociality". The popular conception of the essence of 'Tibetanness' as defined by Buddhism is not only complicated by adherents of Bön, who view themselves as 'Tibetan' but not 'Buddhist', but also by ethnic Tibetans who believe in Islam (the 'Kache') or Christianity, pointing to the need to "question the easy equation between Buddhism and religion, and therefore Buddhism and Tibetan identity" (Shneiderman, 2006, pp. 8–9). The present-day (pan-) 'Tibetan community' is probably best described as an imagined construct based on the social memory of a glorified and essentialised past, and of an imagined spiritual-cultural-linguistic community centred around essentialised understandings of 'authentic Tibetans' as morally-upright and religiously devout *tsampa*-eaters. The increasing fluidity and amalgamation especially at the nexus of interaction between Tibetans, Han Chinese and other ethnic groups and the growth of transportation and communication infrastructure, renders the maintenance of such essentialist constructs and the production of lists of authenticity criteria of authenticity that underpin them as more and more problematic.

In what we can refer to as the current Chinese 'Tibetan' context, cultural and political dimensions have become increasingly inseparable. In exile circles, 'Tibetan' regions are often described as 'cultural' or 'ethnic' Tibet, and included in related maps of 'historic Tibet', thus imputing that they had been under the direct political control of the Dalai Lamas until the Chinese take-over. However, as, for example, Goldstein (1994) pointed out, these regions were *de facto* independent from Lhasa, and even though the major Amdo monasteries maintained close connections with and recognised the authority of the Dalai Lamas, they operated as autonomous entities. They therefore formed a heterogeneous entity, a "galactic polity"²⁰ (Tambiah, 1977) within the context of a partial, loose overlordship of the Qing emperors (cf. Ekvall, 1939). As Shakya has pointed out, until after the Chinese takeover "Tibetans had very little sense of being one group" (1993, p. 9)—and certainly much less of being a distinct national entity.

²⁰ Samuel (1993) applied Tambiah's notion to the Tibetan context.

The category of 'Tibet' as ethnocultural versus political-administrative entities is therefore a politicised construct that plays a central role in Tibetan claims to greater autonomy and coherent cross-regional policies for all Tibetans in China. At the same time, 'being Tibetan' (or 'Tibetanness' as I prefer to call it) is asserted as a distinct ethnic identity that is seen as being threatened through dilution by 'otherness', and whose purity and authenticity must be maintained. The complex, contested and essentialised nature of 'Tibet', 'Tibetan' or 'Tibetanness' (and consequently also 'Tibetan culture') is highlighted throughout this book by placing them in single inverted commas. It should also be noted that the term 'Tibetanness', which is commonly used in publications on the respective people, has no corresponding Tibetan equivalent. Here, I loosely employ it to refer to the different material and immaterial aspects of existence that various individuals and groups consider to be at the core of what it means to be 'Tibetan'. In addition to Huber's definition of 'Tibetan', I would especially highlight the dimension of identity in my use of 'Tibetanness', an identity that can even be felt and claimed by those who no longer share common linguistic, cultural or social patterns (or never did so in the first place), and who may hold a significantly different interpretation of 'Tibetan history'.

In the China context, notions of 'Tibetan' or 'Tibetans' are additionally complicated by the Chinese minority (T. *mi rigs* / Ch. *minzu*) framework which, as Harrell has pointed out, adds complexity rather than simplifying ethnic landscapes as it is being "superimposed on a complex local reality" (2001, p. 313). In recent years, the very notion of *minzu* has been subjected to much debate within Chinese academia. Ma Rong (2008) raised attention by challenging its long-standing official English translation of 'nationality', arguing that its introduction into the Chinese language in the early twentieth century via Japanese translations of Western documents did not clearly differentiate between *minzu* as a political-territorial entity, versus *minzu* as defining an ethnic group by its cultural characteristics. In the wake of the introduction of the political minority framework, which in turn was influenced by the Soviet model of minority autonomous regions, the official Chinese understanding of *minzu* as 'nationality' reinforced positive portrayals of minority self-governance (*minzu zizhi*) in the context of the Han-led Chinese nation.

Now, however, Ma Rong (along with other Chinese academics) advocates a 'de-politicisation' of the *minzu* concept by translating it as 'ethnic group' instead of 'nationality'. In that way, *minzu* is differentiated from *guozu* (nation), and rather more akin to *zuqun*, which in Chinese

anthropological usage has long been employed to denote 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic group' in a cultural (and not a political) sense (cf. Bulag, 2003).²¹ Ma Rong's argument is that *minzu* as ethnicity is much closer to the 'traditional' Chinese concept of 'ethnic groups' as cultural entities. In the wake of this debate, the State Nationality Affairs Commission, the official body responsible for the implementation of minority policies, even renamed itself the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) in 1995 (Bulag, *ibid.*, p. 761). However, official usage continues to blend cultural and political aspects of *minzu*, and it seems apparent that a 'de-politicised' understanding of *minzu* is not readily suited to the government's ongoing political emphasis on the minorities 'right' to (limited) regional autonomy. In this book, *minzu* will on purpose be used in its untranslated form in order to reflect the ambiguities of its present context.

The perhaps most significant aspect of Chinese rule and the *minzu* framework through which this rule is being exercised is how it has galvanised Tibetan ethno-nationalist sensibilities. Shakya (1993) asserts that even now terms such as '*bod pa*' ('Tibetan[s]') "can be used only restrictively" since "the person using the term Bodpa never identifies himself as part of the group" (p. 9). Traditionally, *bod pa*—which means 'farmer'—was used by the predominantly nomadic Tibetans from the Amdo and Kham regions to refer to central Tibetans, many of whom engaged in farming (cf. Stein, 1972, pp. 27, 109). Consequently, Shakya suggests that this distinction still means that this term cannot denote the 'Tibetan people' as a whole, and that there is therefore still no equivalent indigenous construct to the English term 'Tibetan'.

However, this perception is contradicted by my fieldwork experiences. One day I was chatting with my friend Rinchen from a Kham nomad region in Yulshul (Ch. Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) about the differences between Tibetan students from nomad and from farming regions, and between those who are Kham and those who are Amdo. Rinchen concluded the discussion with a statement that rang very familiar in my ears from other conversations with Tibetan students: "We are all Tibetans." During my visits to Tibetan regions and chats with Tibetan taxi drivers and local teachers, the common statement was that apart from some linguistic differences between nomads and farmers and among certain groups of nomads and farmers from different regions, as well as differences in customs, Tibetans are "essentially the same".

²¹ Bulag points out that the discussion over defining *minzu* more along the lines of *guozu* or rather akin to *zuqun* already took place in the 1920s within China's Nationalist Party.

In the campus context, the very prevalent, almost anxious presentation of 'Tibetanness' as unified 'pan-Tibetanness' very much appeared to be part of the Tibetan students' attempt to portray themselves as a distinct and internally-coherent ethnic group vis-à-vis other ethnic groups (and especially vis-à-vis the Han) at a time when the 'survival' of 'Tibetanness' as a distinct category is perceived to be in acute danger. Kalden, a Chinese-Tibetan translation major from a farming region in Yarze (Ch. Xunhua) TAC, and my closest friend and key research assistant, argued that the QUN campus environment facilitates the creation of a pan-Tibetan identity because Tibetans are in the minority (both on campus and in Xining in general). This context 'naturally' gives rise to an ethnic bond: "Against other ethnic groups we are all Tibetans [T. *bod rigs*]." This sentiment is also reflected in the expression *mi rig gcig* which means "one people" or "one ethnic group" (Prins, 2002, p. 35). Dreyfus (1994) suggested that Amdo or Kham Tibetans will not consider themselves to be *bod pa* in order to distinguish them from central Tibetans because of the "difficult relations between Eastern Tibet and the self-proclaimed centre of the Tibetan world, Lhasa" (pp. 210–11). At the same time, however, he pointed out that they do view themselves as being part of the *bod pa* category in contrast to other ethnic groups. But at present, it appears evident that the meaning and use of *bod pa* is overwhelmingly pan-Tibetan. This also coincides with an understanding of Lhasa being the undisputed 'cultural capital' of the 'Tibetan' world, and the fact that many of the (predominantly Amdo) Tibetan department students and educators felt that the central Tibetan dialect (Ü-Tsang) should replace Amdo and Kham dialects as the "Common Tibetan Language" (T. *bod kyi spyi skad* / Ch. *zangzu putonghua*).²²

The dual meanings of *bod pa* as central Tibetans versus all Tibetans is completely circumvented by the more recently created term *bod rigs*, which is based on the Chinese *minzu* (T. *rigs*) concept. *Bod rigs* is therefore connected to official minority notions such as *minzu tuanjie* which seek to define ethnic belonging as membership in China's imagined harmonious multi-ethnic "family" (*da jiating*). This link, however, seemed to matter little to my student informants, who employed *bod rigs* more often than *bod pa*, always using it as a marker of ethnic difference.²³

²² Compare Prins, 2002, p. 44. Prins also writes that at a 1992 conference on a Common Tibetan language, Tibetan scholars from the PRC and India agreed to use the Ü-Tsang dialect as the basis, although disagreements on this still remain within the Tibetan community (*ibid.*, pp. 34–5).

²³ The term *rigs* (as in *bod rigs* / Tibetans or *rygya rigs* / Chinese) tends to be value neutral and 'politically correct', while the more traditional terms *pa* or *mi* (as in *bod rigs* /

Similarly, students regularly used the government-sponsored concept of the 'unity of all ethnic groups' (Ch. *minzu tuanjie*) to refer to the unity *within* their own ethnic group rather than in the official sense of unity *between* all groups, an ironic twist in usage that has also been found within the Hui community to express a new pan-Hui ethnic identity (Gladney, 1991, pp. 169, 312–13).²⁴ In the context of Chinese rule, 'Tibetanness' has therefore come to be both politicised and 'ethnified', with state-propagated terms and concepts being appropriated and manipulated in the process. Here, rather than merely facilitating assimilation and integration, the official *minzu* framework plays a key role in the Tibetan community's efforts to shield the category of 'Tibetanness' from assimilatory, hybridising pressures.

Tibetans or *rya mi* / Chinese) tend to have 'ethnically charged' connotations. For example, the use of *rya mi* tends to carry a somewhat derogatory meaning (from personal conversations with Dr Hildegard Diemberger, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge).

²⁴ The Hui are a Muslim minority group in China.

²⁵ A brother of one of my informants had to leave middle school and returned to a nomadic lifestyle. But he did not consider himself to be 'educated' even though he could read and write.