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'Tibetanness' Under Threat?

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

By
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

'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 Avalokiteshvara, 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

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18 More specifically, the Mgebbu clan among the Yi.

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 overemphasised 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 Bon, who view themselves as ‘Tibetan’ but not ‘Buddhist’ (1998), 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 trans-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” (Tambiah, 1977) within the context of a partial, loose lordship 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.

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 suqun, 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”.

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 riq 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. zang zu 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 jia ting). 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

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.

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 nga 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). In the context of Chinese rule, 'Tibetanness' has therefore come to be both politicised and 'ethnicised', with state-propagated terms and concepts being appropriated and manipulated in the process. Here, rather than merely facilitating assimilation and integration, the minzu framework plays a key role in the Tibetan community's efforts to shield the category of 'Tibetanness' from assimilatory, hybridising pressures.

Within this 'educated Tibetan community', we can broadly distinguish between several different ideological camps or subgroups. During her fieldwork among Tibetan monks, students and educators in the Amdo region, Hartley's (2002) informants identified three positions with regard to the role of 'tradition' in the context of modernisation: firstly, what she translates as traditionalists or conservative modernists (T. 'srol rgyun rig gnas 'dzin dgos'), who strongly advocate the preservation of what is essentialised as 'traditional culture', combined with a cautious, selective adoption of knowledge and practices from other 'cultures'; secondly, selectivists or moderate modernists (T. 'srol rgyun rig gnas la 'dor len byed dgos'), who equally emphasise preservation and change and see a need to abandon certain 'traditional' views; and thirdly, radical modernists (T. 'srol rgyun rig gnas rtsa ba nas dor dgos'), who argue for the need to abandon much of what is 'traditional' and wholeheartedly embrace sweeping changes, often based on state-sponsored Marxist worldviews that, for example, seek to replace religion with science or perceive 'tradition' as a hindrance to 'progress'. Similarly, Shakya (2000) contrasts 'traditionalists' and 'modernists', the latter viewing 'old habits' as impediments to change while the former consider 'tradition' to be the 'most significant marker of Tibetan separateness from the colonizer' (pp. 36–7).

These English terms for labelling different camps are often renditions as they do not have directly corresponding Tibetan terms for such ideological groups. For example, Hartley's informants used phrases that describe ideological camps, such as 'srol rgyun rig gnas 'dzin dgos', which literally means 'traditional culture must be preserved'. Hartley then rendered these phrases into English nouns. An exception here is the term 'conservatism' which does have a Tibetan equivalent—bag 'khums rgyun rgyun ring rgyun lugs, from bag 'khums meaning 'shy, timid, conservative'.

But among my informants, the Tibetan expressions for tradition (srol rgyun), modernity (deng rabs, literally 'modern times' or the 'contemporary age'), or conservative[-ness] (rmying zhen, literally 'loyalty [zhen] to the old [rmying]'), were simply turned into nouns through the nominalising particle pa. Consequently, traditionalists are said to be srol rgyun pa.

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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.
26 Chapter 7 contains a critical discussion of the notions of 'tradition' versus modernity as binary constructs, as well as an etymology of related Tibetan terms, including those of development and 'backwardness'.
27 Since ring lugs is used to turn a word into an -szin, Tibetan terms for each respective concept could theoretically be formed that way.