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Re-Fusing Ethnicity and Religion: An Experiment on Tibetan Grounds

Martin SAXER

Abstract: The relation between ethnicity and religion has had a troubled history in the People’s Republic of China. Conflating religious practice with ethnic culture is considered to carry the risk of breeding “splittism” – especially in Tibet and Xinjiang. While in the post-Mao era the outright hostility against religion has given way to a religious revival, keeping religion and (nationality) politics separate has remained a major concern for the Chinese Communist Party. Religion is supposed to be a private matter that does not interfere with politics. Against this backdrop, a recent phenomenon in the Tibet Autonomous Region is all the more remarkable: the (re-)fusion of ethnicity and religion under the label of cultural heritage and its protection. This paper approaches this officially endorsed re-fusion ethnographically and examines its wider implications. I argue that endorsing religion as an attribute of Tibetan heritage corresponds to the concept of defining public spaces and events in which religious practice is legitimate and expected. Simultaneously, religious practices outside these dedicated spaces and events become even more problematic, leading to everyday Buddhist practices, such as circumambulation, being seen as (and performed as) political acts.

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Blessing the Skyroad

Lhasa, late August 2008. On the large square in front of Potala Palace, images from a photography competition are on display. The open-air event is titled “China’s Tibet Qomolangma Photo Exhibition” and shows photographs taken in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and the Tibetan areas of the surrounding provinces.¹

One image captures my attention. It depicts the following scene (see <www.chinahighlights.com/image/china-trains/tibettrain.jpg> and <www.chinahumanrights.org/Messages/Focus/focus014/6/W020090303422498824490.jpg> (6 February 2014)):

On an elevated track, between vast grasslands and blue Tibetan skies, a modern train approaches. A middle-aged Tibetan woman and a young girl, meticulously dressed and bravely ignoring the marsh between them and the railway line, watch the spectacle with admiration.

The train, of course, is the Qinghai–Tibet railway. Since 2006 it has connected Lhasa with China’s inland provinces. The photographer’s name is Chugor; the image won the bronze in the competition.

When I returned to Lhasa a year later, the exhibition’s second iteration was taking place. Together with a selection of award-winning photographs from the previous year, Chugor’s image was on display again. Chugor himself, the caption explained, had become a judge in the 2009 competition.

In 2011 I stumbled upon the image once more, this time on TV. It was used in the context of 60th-anniversary celebrations of Tibet’s “Peaceful Liberation”, as the arrival of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in Lhasa is called in China.

On first sight, the photograph strikes a familiar chord. It speaks the language of communist propaganda: Socialist progress reaches the rural periphery in the form of modern technology, where it is received with enthusiasm and gratitude. However, there is something more to this image. The Tibetan woman watching the train carries a

1 This paper is based on my doctoral research in Tibet between 2007 and 2009. It was written during my tenure as a postdoctoral fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, which was co-funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. I would like to thank Kabir Heimsath, Liang Yongjia, and the anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

prayer wheel. In the 2008 exhibition, the image's English caption read: "Blessing the auspicious skyroad". In 2009, alluding even more directly to religious practice, the caption was changed to "Praying for the auspicious skyroad". The original text in Mandarin remained the same both years: *zhufu jixiang tianlu*; the Tibetan translation changed from *bkra shis mkha lam gyi rten 'grel* in 2008 to *bkeris mkha lam la smon lam 'debs* in 2009, mirroring approximately the same shift as in English.

There is no doubt that Tibetan perceptions of the train were more ambiguous than this image and the captions suggested. Many were critical of the train's effects on Tibet and there was official concern that this showpiece of Chinese engineering could become a target for vandals or saboteurs, adding yet another layer of meaning to prayers and blessings. In fact, the image's power derives from dealing with precisely this issue: It purports Tibetan consent.

What I kept turning over in my mind, however, was the fact that the image cast religion as an attribute of ethnic identity.

The post-Mao era has ushered in a revival of religious practice in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Yet, the party-state has always maintained that religion was a private matter and should be kept separate from politics – especially the politics of ethnic or national identity. Here, however, a prized photograph in a public exhibition positioned religion precisely within the highly political context of Tibetan support for the PRC's ambitious development agendas.

The shift may be subtle, but I argue that the image reflects an ongoing experiment of larger scale – the re-fusion of ethnicity and religion under the label of protecting cultural heritage (*baohu wenhua yichan*). I refer to it as an "experiment" because it takes place within clearly defined spaces and events – laboratory conditions, so to speak.

The idea of heritage is not new. The particular constellation I am concerned with, however, has only recently begun to take shape. I argue that in contemporary China, at this juncture, the concept of heritage conjures up a new solution to the old dilemma of religion (in relation to secular modernism) and ethnic identity (in relation to national unity). The protocols of identifying, protecting and managing cultural heritage suggest themselves to the party-state as familiar and safe strategic responses to the ongoing political tensions in Tibet. Within the spaces and events defined by the safeguarding and promotion of heritage, religious expressions of Tibetan identity are not just

legitimate – they become the expected norm. Outside, however, everyday practices of Tibetan Buddhism risk being seen as – and are increasingly being performed as – acts of political defiance.

The Problematisation of Religion and Ethnic Identity

There is no question that communist ideology strongly favours secular modernism over religion. Marx's writings, although representing the most fundamental critique of nineteenth-century bourgeois modernity, are rife with a fascination for all things modern. As Marshall Berman (1983) convincingly demonstrates, Marx's vision was not to leave modern science and technology behind; rather, his hope was "to heal the wounds of modernity through a fuller and deeper modernity", as Berman puts it (1983). Marx identified religion as an obstacle on this path. In his critique of Hegel, he famously wrote:

Religion is the moaning of the oppressed creature, the emotion of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. Abolishing religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is demanding their *real* happiness (Marx and Engels 1976: 378f, my translation, emphasis in the original).

On the one hand, this problematisation of religion clearly shaped the agendas of communist parties around the world. The visions of a secular, modern state in which science replaces religious superstition informed notions of development in both the Soviet Union and the PRC (see Duara 1995: 85–114). On the other hand, however, the nation-building project of such large multi-ethnic states was based on imaginaries like the "unshakable friendship of people" or the "family of nationalities" in China (Warhola 1991: 262; Bulag 1999, 2006). The identity of many of these peoples/ nationalities, however, was deeply entangled with religion. Thus, the process of nation-building in both the Soviet Union and China transformed Marx's problematisation of religion into a problematisation of religion-cum-nationality or religion-cum-ethnic identity. The initial strategy in both the Soviet Union and China was to separate (unwanted) religion from (essential) ethnic identity – for example, by way of presenting "folklore" as the purest form of culture (see Gladney 2004: 28, 102–105).

The relation between religion and nationality, however, remained problematic. Over time, it triggered a variety of strategic responses. Below is a brief summary of these responses on the part of the Chinese party-state with regard to Tibet:

When the PRC established its presence in Tibet in the early 1950s, the Chinese leadership initially opted not to interfere with the practice of Buddhism and to leave the privileges of Tibetan monasteries intact. This was part of the 17-Point Agreement that the Tibetan government signed in view of the imminent threat of invasion by the PLA (Shakya 1999: 33–91). In exchange for the guarantee not to interfere with the land and privileges of monasteries and aristocracy, the agreement allowed a Chinese takeover without bloodshed – the aforementioned so-called “Peaceful Liberation”. Gaining official Tibetan agreement to become part of the newly founded PRC was more important than doing away with the very theocracy that had justified the liberation rhetoric in the first place. The “real happiness” associated with secular modernism could wait.

However, in the long run, religion was seen as an obstacle on the path toward communism. When the Dalai Lama met with Mao Zedong in 1955, the chairman – paraphrasing Marx – allegedly whispered into His Holiness’ ear, “I understand you very well. But of course, religion is poison” (His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso 1997: 117).

After the Lhasa uprising in March 1959 that resulted in the Dalai Lama’s escape to India, the party-state’s restraint quickly came to an end. In the context of the ensuing reforms and the Socialist Education Movement of the early 1960s, the monasteries were dismantled, the monks branded as parasites. And, as everywhere else in China, religion came under intense attack during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 (see Goldstein 1998; Goldstein, Jiao and Lhundrup 2009; Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 167–198).

With the beginning of the reform period in the late 1970s, the hostility against religion began to wane. Hu Yaobang’s visit to Tibet in 1980 and his outspoken criticism of the party’s achievements sparked a revitalisation in religion, arts and literature (Barnett 2006: 37). The revised constitution of 1982 finally endorsed protection for “normal religious activities” – given that they do not disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state (PRC 1982: Art. 36). The position that religious

belief is a citizen's personal affair and that religion should not be mixed with politics – especially the politics of ethnicity – has since been reiterated many times (cf. IOSC 1997).

In the early 1990s, Jiang Zemin suggested that religion, adapted where necessary, was not at odds with socialism, and in 2001 Li Ruihuan put the role of religion in an even more positive light: In a speech on 31 January of that year, he said that much of Chinese culture was, in fact, related to religion (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 325–327). While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increasingly foregrounded the positive sides of religion – social cohesion and psychological stability for the masses – its role and scope remained tightly controlled. Even as religious practice is booming in China, religion linked to the construction of ethnic identity is still regarded as highly problematic.

This is most evident in Tibet. The protests in Lhasa between 1987 and 1990 (Barnett 1994; Schwartz 1994a, 1994b), a series of smaller incidents during the 1990s, the riots and demonstrations in March 2008 and the self-immolations that have taken place since 2011 were and are typically led by monks, or at least involved monks (Wong 2012). These actions and protests have explicitly linked religious freedom with a political demand: the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Discovering Heritage

Until well into the first decade of the twenty-first century, the official response to any problem in Tibet was always: more control and accelerated development. The hope was that economically catching up with the rest of the country would finally entice Tibetans to enjoy modern life and bury their animosities. While private religious practice within certain limits was tolerated in Tibet as elsewhere in the PRC, religion as such was still conceived of as an obstacle to progress.

A 2001 white paper entitled *Tibet's March Toward Modernization* (IOSC 2001), for example, cites American anthropologist Melvyn Goldstein (rather out of context) to make the point that the

universality of religion as the core metaphor of Tibetan national identity will be seen [...] to be a major factor underlying Tibet's inability to adapt to changing circumstances (IOSC 2001: 3).

Beginning around 2005, the tone of the argument started to change. Without rejecting the idea of accelerated development, a second and much more positive discourse was carefully superimposed onto the former. For instance, reporting from the 10th National People's Congress in Beijing in 2007, government news agency *Xinhua* quoted Shi Yongxin, the abbot of the famous Shaolin Temple, who argued that Buddhism could make a substantial contribution to building a "harmonious society". "Chinese culture values the concept of harmony, which is quite similar to Buddhist doctrines", he said. "That's why Buddhism is popular in China" (Wang 2007). Christian leaders Yu Wenliang and Liu Deshen quickly chimed in, stressing the positive contribution of religion to a "harmonious society" (Wu 2007).

In this vein, Tibetan Buddhism started to be presented as something valuable, worth fostering, and in no way contrary to economic development. *China Daily* (2008) published an interview with Lei Jufang, the Chinese director of Cheezheng, the largest Tibetan medicine company. Lei Jufang, a successful business woman, is portrayed as a devout Buddhist who finds great joy in worshipping in Tibetan monasteries.

A government white paper from 2008 entitled *Protection and Development of Tibetan Culture* directly contradicts the white paper from 2001 cited above. Religion is no longer cast as just a private affair. The white paper states crisply and clearly: "The state has placed Tibetan Buddhism under effective protection *as part of traditional Tibetan culture*" (IOSC 2008, emphasis added).

The framework in which this shift took place is the notion of heritage. Note that it is not Buddhist practice as an aspect of everyday culture in Tibet that the white paper refers to; it is Tibetan Buddhism as part of traditional Tibetan culture – in other words, cultural heritage worth being preserved.

This raises two questions: Why has the concept of heritage become so important? And why has this shift taken place at this particular time? I argue that three events led to these developments:

First, in 2005 the Hu Jintao leadership declared the concept of a "harmonious society" to be the guiding principle for future development. The concept is meant to describe a holistic approach to development that takes into account not only economic growth but also social harmony, ecological balance and even spiritual development. It can be understood as a response to the negative ecological and social

side effects of rapid growth and has become a key concept of Hu Jintao's legacy. This rhetoric of a "harmonious society" sets the larger framework in which religion can be positioned as a positive force for the overall development, as Shi Yongxin did at the People's Congress in 2007.

Second, around 2005 China started to gear up much more intensively for the Beijing Olympic Games scheduled for 2008. The Games were widely perceived as a prime opportunity to show the positive face of a new China to the world. In this context, the issue of ethnic identity had gained a new dimension. The "Tibet issue" (and to a lesser extent the "Xinjiang issue") and the question of human rights were identified as major obstacles to presenting this new China to the world. Whenever a Chinese leader visits a Western country, the question of whether human rights has been properly addressed is always brought up. Whenever the Dalai Lama travels, the question is always whether a given Western leader is brave enough to meet with him despite Chinese protests and threats.

Third, in 2003 UNESCO extended its agenda from the protection of cultural heritage sites (buildings, places) to intangible cultural expressions. The *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003) encourages the listing and protection of festivals, dances, literary works, and so on. With the inclusion of intangible culture, the notion of heritage now suggests itself as a comprehensive, globally accepted approach to "culture". It establishes "culture" as a reservoir of protectable items, including religion and various aspects of ethnic identity.

China was among the very first countries to ratify the convention in 2004. Since then, the official catalogue of facets of intangible cultural heritage has been growing steadily. Many Tibetan items are listed, including religious festivals, the epic of King Gesar, and several Tibetan medicines.

The concept of heritage and its protection does not contradict development, progress or a scientific approach. The 2003 UNESCO convention explicitly calls for "the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission [... and] revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage" (UNESCO 2003: Art. 2.3). In other words, the concept renders religion and ethnicity as objects of study, promotion and management. This ties in well with official development agendas. It helps

promote ethnic displays as tourist attractions in order to generate income (see, for example, Oakes 1998: 149) and it resonates with the party-state's continuing belief in the regulation and control of religious activity (cf. Birnbaum 2003). Categorising ethnic identity and religion as aspects of heritage promises to produce results in accordance with the quest for both continuing progress and national unity and harmony.

However, this new classification ties the question of religion to the politics of ethnic identity, whether or not this was intended. The white paper *Development and Protection of Tibetan Culture* that locates religion as part of traditional Tibetan culture, for example, was explicitly written in response to the rebellion of March 2008 and the Dalai Lama's reiterated claim that a cultural genocide was going on in Tibet (Eimer and Chamberlain 2008; Coonan 2008; *Indo-Asian News Service* 2010).

"Traditional Tibetan culture" as a framework in which religion should be "protected" is by no means apolitical. It is precisely the preservation of culture, more than the political status of Tibet, that has become the core political issue of the Tibet question. Tying religion to the preservation of Tibetan culture (rather than tolerating religion as a personal affair) subverts the efforts to separate religion from politics.

Strategic Interventions

The concept of cultural heritage, of course, predates the transformation I am concerned with here. At least since UNESCO's foundation, after World War II, the notion of cultural heritage has had strong institutional backing. Safeguarding cultural heritage was primarily understood as identifying and protecting particular sites of a universal world heritage – cultural or natural. UNESCO's logo, a stylised Greek temple in which the letters UNESCO represent the columns, is a testament to this original agenda. It was, however, not until the 2003 convention on intangible cultural heritage that the organisation extended its reach beyond the protection of tangible heritage sites. This extension has implications for the actual process of heritage-making.

The older mode of defining heritage sites implies a specific kind of spatial intervention: the demarcation of territory to be safeguarded.

The demarcation of territory usually includes entry procedures, tickets, and areas off-limits to the public.

Such interventions can be described as “strategic” in de Certeau’s sense (de Certeau 1988). Embedded in institutions and their power calculations, strategies depend on a “proper” – a distinct spatial localisation such as an enterprise, scientific laboratory, clinic or factory – from which relations with an exterior environment are defined. “The ‘proper’ is a victory of space over time”, writes de Certeau (1988). In the same vein, the strategic intervention of creating a heritage site aims to protect it from the temporal effects of decay, destruction and vandalism. The strategic intervention thereby reorders relations with the exterior.

Figure 1: Potala Entry Formalities



Source: © Martin Saxer 2007.

Consider the Potala Palace in Lhasa: As a world heritage site, listed by UNESCO in 1994 (cf. Shepherd 2006), the former seat of the Dalai Lama and the symbol of the unified worldly and religious power of the Tibetan *Ganden Phodrang* (*dga' ldan pho brang*) government has become the most recognised emblem of Tibet. Its relations to the ex-

terior have been completely reordered: As a heritage site, the Potala is devoid of any connotation to its “feudal” and “theocratic” past.

The extension of the concept of heritage to include the domain of the intangible means that such interventions are no longer necessarily spatial. Temporal events such as religious festivals and rituals are now also potential targets of heritage protection.

There was no radical break in tone or method that accompanied the extension of heritage to the intangible world. Safeguarding procedures have remained more or less the same: extensive documentation, applications, committees, lists of items to be protected, and so on. This probably helped to smooth the way for the quick adoption of intangible cultural heritage. However, the inclusion of intangible objects of protection made heritage discourse much more pervasive. The notion of intangible cultural heritage is easily applied and thereby promises legitimacy to a variety of endeavours, ranging from local, grass-roots initiatives to large, state-sponsored programmes.

The point I seek to make is simple: It is this pervasive extension of heritage discourse to the domain of the intangible that promised a fresh approach to the set of problems related to religion and ethnic identity in China. It heralds a familiar, well-tested and now ethically certified “global form” (Collier and Ong 2005: 11ff) to dealing with those issues.

The modality of heritage logic remains one of segregation or compartmentalisation: Selecting a site or an event to be safeguarded, be it formally or informally, reorders its relations to the exterior; the effect of the selection is therefore felt far beyond the limits of the protected item itself.

Let me explain this modality of segregation and its effects by way of three examples.

“Living Buddhas”

One of the areas in which problems related to religion and the politics of ethnic identity has always been particularly visible and acute is the Tibetan institution of the *tulku* (*sprul sku*) – the reincarnate lama, Rinpoche, or “living Buddha”, as Chinese translations usually put it. Besides the most famous and influential reincarnate lineages of the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama, and the Karmapa, there are probably several hundred highly venerated *tulku* lineages in Tibetan Buddhism.

Tulkus not only have religious authority, they also have a large influence on worldly matters – and their authority, by definition, lies beyond the influence of the party.

The question of how incarnations should be chosen is therefore of great political significance. The party-state has invested much effort in gaining authority over the process of selection. However, these efforts have largely failed. The 17th Karmapa, although selected with Beijing's consent, chose to flee to India at the age of 14, and the official 11th Panchen Lama has not been able to gain much trust among Tibetans, as the boy that the Dalai Lama had acknowledged to be the true incarnation was taken away by Chinese authorities to an unknown location. In brief, more government control has not translated into more religious authority, and the most recent development will probably not help in this respect: In 2007, the State Administration for Religious Affairs set out guidelines for the “management of the reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism”. The guidelines require all *tulkus* to register should they intend to reincarnate any time soon (SARA 2007).

The guidelines, however, are more a reiteration of an old demand than a radically new development. The party-state has always insisted on being consulted and having the last word in the process of selection of reincarnate lamas. The main historical argument brought forward is that rulers as far back as the Manchu emperor had a customary right to give their final blessings to the selection of a new Dalai Lama or Panchen Lama. According to Chinese authorities and scholars, the only correct system of selecting the right incarnation is by drawing lots from a golden urn that the emperor had gifted the Tibetan government in the eighteenth century (Rockhill 1910: 58, 65f; Waddell 1910: 80f). The state argues that influential Tibetan lamas should pay tribute to Beijing as they did during Manchu rule and accept the party's authority (Shakya 1999: 444).

Recently, however, the reincarnation system has been embraced as part of Tibetan cultural heritage. Now, it is praised as “a unique way to pass on Tibetan Buddhism” that has “received respect from the state” (IOSC 2008: 15). From this official Chinese perspective, keeping the golden urn is a matter of “authentic Tibetanness” – regardless of the Dalai Lama's views. In 2009, the Dalai Lama stated publicly that the reincarnation system was only relevant as long as Tibetans regarded it as such, and that there were also other ways to

choose his successor. In other words, the role and title of the Dalai Lama are a political institution. The party-state quickly portrayed this as a distortion of authentic Tibetan religious and cultural practice (see Wong 2009).

The rhetoric of intangible cultural heritage has thus added a new twist to the debate: The exiled spiritual leader stands for change while the CCP presents itself as the defender of authentic Tibetanness.

Monastic Debate

The second example of the modality of compartmentalisation implicit in heritage-making is Buddhist debate in the “dharma grove”, the debating courtyard or *chöra* (*chos ra*) of a Tibetan monastery. Debate is integral to monastic education. It is part of the daily curriculum, and traditionally it serves as a means of examination. The fame of many a great scholar-monk in the history of Tibetan Buddhism was built upon his debating skills. Although only a small fraction of the monk population in old Tibet actively trained to become scholars, the greatness of a monastic institution was measured by the intellectual acuity of these few (Goldstein 1998: 21).

The setting of monastic debate is decisively simple but effective. It involves two people, the defender (*dam bca' ba*), who sits on the ground, and the challenger (*rigs lam pa*), who stands and asks questions. With the first question, the defender takes a stance, which he then defends on the grounds of Buddhist logic. The challenger continues to ask questions, trying to entangle the defender in contradictions. The challenger underscores his questions by clapping his hands, which gives the entire scene its very special atmosphere. While the defender is held accountable for everything he says, the challenger is free to change positions in order to find a crack in the defender's thesis. Other monks listen in and their reactions to the two opponents' arguments play an eminent role (cf. Perdue 1992: 28–32).

Monastic education came under pressure after 1959 and was completely abolished with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Only in the mid-1980s did the monastic dharma groves tentatively start to be used again. Even then, the Democratic Management Committees (*dmangs gtsö bdag gnyer u yon lhan khang*) proceeded with great caution. Party officials in the TAR remained suspicious of a revival of monastic education, regardless of whether Beijing's new policies would al-

low it or not (Goldstein 1998: 25ff). Monastic education and debate remained sensitive issues. In the monk-led protests at the end of the 1980s many of the young protestors, including the most gifted among them, were indeed from a new generation of scholar-monks who had studied at Drepung Monastery. Party hardliners saw their concerns confirmed: The dharma grove was a breeding ground for dissent. Monastic education sharpens a sense of logic beyond the reach of the party and a sense of commitment outside any loyalty to socialism.

Despite all these difficulties, the practice of debate has continued. As a matter of fact, watching a debate is part of the standard tourist itinerary in Tibet and many visitors get a chance to witness monks debating.

The afternoon debate at Sera Monastery in Lhasa is famous in this respect. A hundred or more monks gather in the monastery's beautiful debating courtyard. Old trees provide shade and the noise of the city is far away. Along the walls of the courtyard, scores of tourists equipped with heavy cameras line up to catch a glimpse of this old tradition that has survived amidst a rapidly modernising Lhasa, a stubborn realm of monastic, "old" Tibet amidst increasing government control. Or at least, this is how it appears.

Eighteen months after the riots of March 2008, I visited Sera Monastery with a Tibetan friend. He had brought his Tibetan girlfriend, a real estate agent. Between worshipping, drinking tea and taking pictures of debating monks, we discussed the situation in Lhasa. In autumn 2009 tensions were high. Armed patrols and checkpoints were omnipresent in the city's Tibetan quarters, and the much-despised re-education campaigns in the monasteries, which forced monks to denounce their spiritual leader, continued. I said that I was actually surprised to see that the monks were still allowed to debate. Knowing some of the monks, my friend burst out laughing and replied: "Allowed to debate? They are told to debate!"

Figure 2: Debating at Sera Monastery in Lhasa



Source: © Martin Saxer 2009.

In other words, what we were seeing was not simply traditional monastic education. It was traditional monastic education repackaged as Buddhist spectacle in the name of cultural heritage: Come see the monks debate, 3 p.m. daily at Sera's dharma grove. Also on YouTube.

But is it truly that simple? Do those who decide whether the monks' debates go on or not have any understanding of or control over its content? Do order and authority preclude opportunity and agency? Furthermore, what is the difference in monastic discipline between now and then? Regardless of these questions, the sarcastic tone of my friend's reply reflected a widespread feeling among Tibetans – namely, that “religious freedom” was an empty slogan and that the official preoccupation with presenting Tibet to outside visitors disregarded Tibetans' opinions and needs.

The latter was a feeling that had been growing for years. In 2006, the Dalai Lama appealed to all Tibetans to stop using the fur-rimmed robes usually worn at important festivals. Hunting rare wild animals was not compatible with the principle of Buddhist compassion. This appeal conflicted with demands by local authorities in the PRC that Tibetans continue wearing their festive robes, as this was an ancient

tradition. In Yushu, Tibetans were fined for not wearing their traditional dress during the annual horse-racing festival in 2006 (Macartney 2007). A similar situation resulted in 2009, when the decision of many Tibetans to forgo celebrating Losar, the traditional Tibetan New Year, was seen as act of civil disobedience by the party-state. Tibetan blogger Woesser (2009) wrote that these forms of disobedience were “the weapons of the weak”, a nod to the title of James Scott’s well-known book (Scott 1985). In 2011, eight monks from Zurmang Monastery in Yushu Prefecture (Qinghai) were arrested, allegedly for distributing flyers that called for a boycott of an upcoming festival; they argued that after the devastating earthquake in 2010 there was nothing to celebrate (RFA 2011; *Tibetan Review* 2011).

These incidents of “resisting culture” (see also Saxer 2012, 2013) suggest that the interventions in the name of safeguarding Tibetan Buddhist heritage have transformed the roles of its main actors. Debate that used to be sensitive and only barely tolerated by the state has become – within the limits of a defined heritage space – a required exercise. Dressing Tibetan and celebrating Tibetan festivals is now – within the limits of a defined heritage event – expected and encouraged behaviour.

Or, in more general and bold terms: Previously, Tibetan religion and culture could be practised only under the condition that stability and harmony were not jeopardised; today, not performing elements of Tibetan (Buddhist) heritage can be seen as jeopardising stability and harmony.

Beyond Heritage

The modalities of the subtle transformation of religion into an aspect of cultural heritage are the site and the event. As monastic debate already has an event-like character and is bound to a site (the dharma grove), it lends itself effortlessly to this transformation. Much of everyday Buddhist practice, however, is less suited for such a transformation. The questions are whether and how cultural heritage discourse affects private everyday practices outside defined events and spaces. How does the demarcation of a strategic “proper” redefine relations with the exterior?

Consider circumambulation, the practice of walking around a sacred place in a clockwise direction. Doing *kora* – *skor ba byed*, as the

Tibetans call it – can include anything from the routine morning walk of elderly Tibetans around a local stupa or the casual stroll of a group of friends around a monastery, to the strenuous practice of circumambulating Mount Kailash in a series of prostrations. Circumambulation is an integral part of everyday life in Tibet. Even the practice of keeping religious sites to one’s right when passing by them is a form of doing *kora*.

In Lhasa, there are three concentric circumambulation routes around the spiritual centre of the city, the statue of Buddha Sakyamuni known as Jowo Rinpoche (*jo bo rin po che*) in the central Jokhang Temple. The closest of these three circuits is the one around the statue inside the monastery; the second is the busy market street known as Barkor (*bar skor*, literally: the “middle circle”) that leads around the Jokhang Temple. These two paths are clearly visible as devotional routes. There is a steady stream of pilgrims using them. However, the third circuit, called Lingkor (*gling skor*), leads around the entire city along the broad boulevards that form the main axes of traffic in Lhasa.

Figure 3: On the Lingkor



Source: © Martin Saxer 2008.

Approaching Lhasa, the Jokhang, and Jowo Rinpoche, it is customary to begin with the outer circuit and then proceed to the middle and finally the inner circuit. Thus, the outer circuit remains very important. Groups of pilgrims walking along these busy roads at the beginning of their ritual approach to the spiritual centre of the Tibetan world are a very common sight. In addition, many residents of Lhasa also use the outer circuit to do *kora*. Compared to the pilgrims, who often carry prayer wheels or prayer beads and whose appearance bears the marks of their arduous journeys, they are not as easily identifiable as worshippers. A typical sight of Lhasa residents on the outer circuit would be a group of two or three middle-aged women carrying umbrellas against the sun and wearing face masks against the dust. The masks, however, serve yet another purpose – to protect the privacy of those doing *kora* from the many CCTV cameras installed in the city.

Circumambulation is not illegal. It does not convey any apparent political message, nor does it interfere with the “state’s education system”. Doing *kora* is a prototypical private religious practice explicitly protected by the PRC’s constitution. Yet, as a private religious practice performed in public, it is a potential stage for political protest and has been used as such before (Barnett 1994: 245–249; Schwartz 1994a: 26–33). Thus, whenever a special event is coming up, party members, people working in government offices, teachers and students are advised against doing *kora*. And, through a vague sense of anticipatory obedience, this advice is also taken to be valid for the families of all of the above groups.

At one point, for example, a friend who had resigned from a government job and ran his own business complained to me that his wife had begged him to stop his casual evening strolls around the Potala – another favourite circumambulation route in Lhasa – for the time being. His wife was working for China Mobile and had been advised not to do *kora* at the moment. She considered it inappropriate for any family member to do so. My friend, a business-minded man in his early thirties educated in Shanghai, was neither a particularly devout Buddhist nor an outspoken activist. Vacillating on the matter of whether he should give in to his wife’s request, he realised that *kora* had been transformed from a simple activity with a pleasant and casual religious dimension to a political expression of dissent.

Pilgrimage is another case in point. Just as doing *korā*, going on pilgrimage includes a broad palette of activities, ranging from the journey of a lifetime on foot across Tibet to casual weekend trips with family and friends to places of religious importance. And just as with circumambulation, going on pilgrimage is a private religious activity without any obvious political dimension. However, over the past few years, and especially since 2008, increasing efforts to control the movement of Tibetans in Tibet have rendered pilgrimage increasingly difficult. Many new roadside checkpoints have been erected, and stories of pilgrims having been sent back to or expelled from Lhasa abound. Pressure on hotel owners to accommodate only those with valid documentation is high. In 2009, for example, hotel owners catering to Tibetan customers were instructed to install devices that would read the new Chinese identity cards and allow for instant transmission of the data to the authorities.

Temporal restrictions on freedom of movement are nothing new in Tibet. However, their selectiveness and pervasiveness have gained a new dimension. While much is being done to facilitate easy access for Chinese (and, to a lesser extent, foreign) tourists to the sites of Tibetan Buddhist heritage, the movement of Tibetan pilgrims – especially their access to Lhasa – has become considerably more complicated.

Conclusions

The problem of religion in relation to the politics of ethnic identity has haunted the PRC since its foundation. It has triggered a variety of responses on the part of the state, ranging from outright hostility against everything religious to a more moderate position endorsing private religious practice. Including religious practices and ethnic identity under the umbrella of “heritage” is the latest of these responses.

There are several reasons why the concept of heritage – or, more concretely, its extension to the domain of the intangible – suggests itself as a new solution to an old problem. It offers a counter-thesis to the allegations that a “cultural genocide” is taking place in Tibet; the methods of management and protection do not look or feel new; and the sites and events to which heritage is confined promise a high degree of legibility and control. Under these circumstances, fusing

religion with ethnic identity – whether intentionally or simply as a side effect of other agendas – seems like a safe experiment.

However, the laboratory conditions are an illusion. The political dimension of defining religion as part of Tibetan cultural heritage does not stop at the laboratory's door. Creating heritage thoroughly reconfigures the limits of what authorities in Tibet consider to be expected and problematic behaviour – be it celebrating a religious festival, wearing certain clothes, doing *kora* or debating in the dharma grove. The strategy's "proper" redefines relations to the exterior. The bounded heritage site or event affects its surroundings, and religious practices formerly considered harmless and private become political acts of dissent.

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Contents

The Entanglement between Science and Politics

Editorial

- Karsten GIESE
Editorial 3

Introduction

- Sascha KLOTZBÜCHER
Western-Chinese Academic Collaboration in the Social Sciences 7

Analyses

- Heike HOLBIG
Shifting Ideologies of Research Funding: The CPC's National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences 13
- Doris FISCHER
The Impact of Changing Incentives in China on International Cooperation in Social Science Research on China 33
- Josef Gregory MAHONEY
Changes in International Research Cooperation in China: Positive Perspectives 47
- Sascha KLOTZBÜCHER
“Embedded Research” in Collaborative Fieldwork 65
- Christian GÖBEL
Let's Not Go There: Coping with (Pre-) Selection Bias in Collaborative Field Research 87

Research Articles

- KAO Ya-ning
Religious Revival among the Zhuang People in China:
Practising “Superstition” and Standardizing a Zhuang
Religion 107

 - Olivia KRAEF
Of Canons and Commodities: The Cultural Predicaments of
Nuosu-Yi “Bimo Culture” 145

 - **Martin SAXER**
Re-Fusing Ethnicity and Religion: An Experiment on
Tibetan Grounds 181
- Contributors 205