

*Tibet, Self and the Tibetan Diaspora: Voices of Difference. PIATS 2000: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Leiden 2000 (2002)*, edited by P. Christiaan Klieger, published by Brill in Leiden, Boston and Köln.

## WHAT DEFINES TIBETAN-NESS?

### George van Driem

This volume is a motley bag of studies, heterogeneous in topic and quality. Yet there is a unifying theme, viz. the Tibetan sense of self amongst the Tibetans living in exile and the way Tibetans are perceived by others. This accounts for the unwieldy title of the volume. Most of the essays in the book are not remarkable, but some of them are interesting. Curiously, the contributions have, whether by design or by accident, been arranged by the editor in such a way that, after a rough start, the book gradually gets better as the reader approaches Chapter Eight. After Chapter Eight, in lieu of a dénouement, there is again a decline in style and quality, albeit just a slight one.

The first contribution is in many ways the most disappointing. Steeped in anthropobabble about 'spatialities', 'Tibetan-ness', 'essentialism' and '*identity problematique*' [sic], Dibyesh Anand attempts to say something meaningful and anthropologically theoretical about 'Little Lhasa', the seat of the Tibetan government in exile at Dharamsala, as well as the nearby 'New Age' tourist town of McLeod Ganj. The author's 'theorisation', 'discursive approach', 'problematization' and 'reconceptualisation' are based on a visit that he made to Dharamsala and McLeod Ganj funded by the British Academy Society for South Asian Studies.

In the second essay, Georges Dreyfus discusses modern Tibetan religious nationalism in terms of the traditionally tenuous division between the secular and the religious in Tibetan statecraft as well as the way that Tibetans have viewed themselves historically, particularly since their country was occupied by Communist China in 1950. He argues that Tibetan nationalism is a non-Western nationalism which cannot be properly understood in terms of 'Western orientalist fantasies about Tibet'. Few, I think, would disagree.

In the third contribution in the volume, Kevin Garratt reports on his reading of five Tibetan-language periodicals from 1995 through 1999. Three of these were published at Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile. Two periodicals were published at Peking, the capital of the occupying power. Garratt studied reports on the deaths of lamas and their rebirths as *trülkus*. After an interesting comparison, he arrives at conclusions which, I imagine, will not unduly amaze anyone. The Chinese press plays down the religious aspects of such events, highlights political aspects, and on the whole serves as a not very well concealed instrument to justify the political agenda of the foreign power which has occupied Tibet since 1950. The periodicals published in India are more free and therefore more diverse in content. Not surprisingly, the periodicals originating from Dharamsala provide a more balanced account of events, but also include rebuttals of prevarications emanating from Peking.

The fourth essay, by Nellie Grent, is a study of polyandry at Dharamsala. Polyandry in Tibet grew up in the specific ecological and economic context of pastoralism on

the sparsely populated Tibetan plateau. A woman would 'man the fort', whilst her husbands would remain itinerant for long periods, tending herds in different areas. If the timing was right, she would often have one of the alternating husbands at home. Such husbands were usually, but not always, brothers. Marriage to a bunch of siblings precluded a lot of complications which might otherwise have arisen regarding ownership and inheritance. Grent observes that 'younger generations prefer to marry monogamously' at Dharamsala, where 'polyandry might not be continued for much longer'. This trend was to be expected in view of the fact that the town of Dharamsala in India is a cultural and natural environment very different from the Tibetan plateau. Grent politely acknowledges that 'profound theories on polyandry have been developed' throughout the years by anthropologists, many of whom indeed earn their living concocting 'profound theories'. Yet she finds that 'the scope of the theories is too limited'. Instead, she observes the prevalence of 'ethical contradictions and practical temptations determined by situational factors'. Grent concludes that 'polyandry is an individual response to specific circumstances', that economic and material considerations are important in the decline of polyandry at Dharamsala, but that non-material factors also play a role.

The fifth study was written by the volume editor, Christiaan Klieger, who also wrote the introduction to the volume. The study concerns 'the construction of gender-based identities' amongst Tibetans living in exile in the city of Delhi, based on 250 questionnaires and 30 interviews conducted amongst Tibetans between 18 and 35 years of age. These youthful interviewees were found at the S.O.S. Tibetan Youth Hostel at Rohini and in Majnukatilla, a Delhi neighbourhood inhabited by 378 Tibetan families and with 'a notorious reputation as being rich with chang shops and a haven for prostitution'. According to Klieger, people have in the past either tended to eroticise the Tibetans as 'blood-thirsty kin of the Mongols and the Tartar hordes' or to sexually neuter them as 'peace-loving, spiritual ascetics'. Although Klieger battles against 'the perpetuation of the adamant essentialist paradigm of Shangri-la' with regard to Tibet, he 'was surprised that statistically valid information on gender variance and sexuality was obtained' from his questionnaires. The details of the results are certainly interesting, but essentially the findings show Tibetans to be normal, natural, thinking people just like the rest of us, holding a variety of traditional and progressive views. Anyone who consorts with Tibetans will find no cause for surprise.

The sixth essay is a discussion of a new style of Tibetan autobiographies by Laurie Hovell McMillin. Whereas old Tibetan biographies and autobiographies tended to be hagiographies following one of several well-known patterns, modern autobiographies now published in the West recount the life experiences of Tibetans who have been persecuted, tortured or coerced to flee from their motherland by the scourge of Chinese military occupation. The varied reception of these newer bibliographies reveals much about 'entrenched notions of Tibetan-ness' in the West.

Since China occupied Tibet, a segment of the young Tibetan population has been raised in Chinese rather than in their native tongue. One of these is the poet Yi dam Tshe ring. By studying his poems, Lara Maconi has attempted, in the seventh chapter of this book, 'to show that the Chinese language, if skilfully used, can be an important source of creativity and expressiveness in the hands of the Tibetan sinophone writer'.

Chapter Eight is an interesting discussion by Jan Magnusson about the Tibetan image projected internationally. Against the backdrop of what the Australian

researcher Peter Bishop in 1989 termed the 'Shangri-La' concept pervading Tibetan studies, Magnusson provides an interesting discussion about 'reverse orientalism and soft power'. Whereas Donald Lopez has written interesting studies on how Tibetans have, in a sense, been 'imprisoned' by the popular Western myths about Tibet, Magnusson argues that this image has also been skillfully and judiciously exploited as 'a power for Tibet' on 'the stages of world politics'. Arguably, this is because many aspects of Tibetan culture aggrandised in popular Western perception, inasmuch as these are rooted in fact, happen to be appealing simply because they genuinely are good things.

In Chapter Nine, Antonio Terrone stresses the continuity of tradition in the modern gTer ston 'religious revival' in Tibet and provides 'a preliminary exploration of some of the features that characterise the charismatic personality of a visionary Tantric layman at the heart of the phenomenon of "treasure discovery" operating in Tibet itself'. This man is gTer chen bDe chen rDo rje, who 'is not centered in any monastic institution', but operates 'in his country for the welfare of his fellow countryman'.

Chapter Ten is a discussion by Emily Yeh about how Tibetans recognise and accept each other as bona fide Tibetans in the San Francisco Bay area on the basis of racial and facial features and cues of language, clothing and comportment. There is an interplay of all of these features in the process of recognition, and the sum of the calculation is then interpreted against a concept of 'Tibetan-ness' based on what 'is familiar from the context of South Asian exile'.



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