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# Greater Tibet and Cultural Nationalism

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Chinese Strategies & Local Responses

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## About "Inside China" Series

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*The China Research Program (CRP) within the Institute, as a part of its activities, undertake research and organise events under "Inside China," aimed at exploring issues and challenges in contemporary China covering economic aspects of China's growth, political development and emerging social tensions and fault lines. This essay was a part of the first annual conference in 2011.*

# Greater Tibet and Cultural Nationalism

## Chinese Strategies and Local Responses

Jigme Yeshe Lama

Ngaba County in the province of Sichuan, China, is one of those areas placed under the aegis of the Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) where the dominant populations are Tibetans, one among the 55 ethnic national minorities present in China. Recently, much of these areas have been in the eye of a storm and witnessed numerous acts of self immolations, mostly by monks and nuns. Much of these have been understood as acts of resistance against the Chinese state, which is clarified by the cries of “freedom” and the “support for the exiled Dalai Lama” which were pronounced by ones prior to the act.

Self immolation has always been seen as a last resort albeit an effective one in voicing despair and angst. This violence to the self has been a strong weapon in the hands of many, seen recently as one of the immediate cause of the Arab Spring, the series of popular demonstrations in West Asia, which has led to regime changes in numerous nations in the region. The self immolation by Mohammad Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia has been seen as one of the primary causes for the wave of popular demonstrations throughout West Asia.

Although, it has not percolated to a drastic change in China’s policies in Tibet, the immolations have raised the issue of Tibet, thus emerging as a problem for Beijing as it questions China’s legitimacy and also the very model of development that it has implemented in Tibet. Ngaba and the neighbouring regions have a historical connection to “ethnic Tibet” or “cholka – sum” (Amdo, Kham and Utsang) as the Tibetans call it. The latter is central Tibet,

whereas the former two constitute Eastern and North eastern Tibet, which were under the influence of Lhasa prior to 1949, which changed with the coming in of the People’s Republic of China.

### I HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PATRIOTIC EDUCATION, STRIKE HARD CAMPIAGNS AND THE HANIZATION

In 1951, the 17 Point Agreement was signed in between the local government in Lhasa and Beijing, which eventually led to the regions of Ngaba and others in Eastern Tibet to be included in the provinces of Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan. This was the first brush of these regions with the modern nation state, which led to a rupture in the historical pattern that was present in between them and Lhasa. With the integration of these regions, there has been an attempt of the dissolution of the earlier cultural and civilizational ties that it had with Lhasa, which however have not been completely successful. This has been demonstrated through the cries of independence for Tibet, protests and also acts of immolations recently from the region.

The failed uprising by the Tibetans in 1959 and the subsequent fleeing of the Dalai Lama into exile, the presence of a vibrant exile Tibetan community has also displaced the idea of the Tibetan nation from its physical location and has internationalized it, with the Dalai Lama becoming the symbol of the Tibetan nation. This is also seen in the form of support for Tibet and pressure on China from the European parliament, the US Congress and numerous other world leaders.

The “Tibet Question” has thus dented the image of a peaceful rise of China in the West. Therefore much of its diplomatic machinery is geared to combat the Tibetan issue along with the issues of Taiwan and Xinjiang. These three have been placed under the ambit of the “Three Evils” which in the earlier Party Congresses of the Communist Party of China have been considered to be the primal threat to the People’s Republic of China. The recent spates of immolations have shifted the focus back on China and its policies in these restive regions.

Numerous analysts and scholars have seen the policies implemented by Beijing as a mode of assimilation and integration of Tibetans into the PRC which has also raised cries of dissolution of the Tibetan culture and identity. There has also been the transfer of Han population into Tibet, to aid the backward region. This also stems the notion that the Han culture and work ethics are much more superior to that of the minorities, which is also seen as a process of Sinicisation or “Hanization”. It has been seen as the alienation of the Tibetans which has further increased their disillusionment towards Beijing and its policies. Beijing through its socio economic and political policies in Tibet has much altered the socio cultural fabric of the Tibetans as well as the indigenous economic structure that was present prior to the coming of the Communist Chinese.

Dawa Norbu in “China’s Tibet Policy” drew an important point in Sino Tibetan relations where Tibetan Buddhism has been closely associated to the Tibetan identity, and it has been the single most important factor that has kept Buddhist Tibet away from being assimilated by Confucian China. Beijing aims at the complete assimilation and integration of Tibet through a systematic undermining of Tibetan Buddhism and especially through curbing of the monks, monasteries and their reincarnated tulkus or as the Chinese calls them the “Living Buddhas.” They are the breathing, living symbols of Tibetan Buddhism, the fountainhead among them being the Dalai Lama. Thus, the entire gamut of state power is geared towards vilifying the persona of the Dalai Lama, which is having a negative effect. China also spends much of its energies in condemning

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and preventing the meeting of the Dalai Lama with numerous world leaders, terming him as a splittist of the motherland, whereas the Dalai Lama seeks genuine autonomy under Chinese rule and much of his highly publicized visits are on the capacity of a religious leader.

It is through the Patriotic Education and the Strike Hard campaigns that monasteries, monks and the general population in Tibet are regulated. It also reaffirms the supremacy and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and their version of Tibetan history as it is seen in the syllabus of the Patriotic Education Act. It entails the following for Tibet –

- Agree to the historical unity of China and Tibet.
- Recognise the Chinese appointed Panchen Lama.
- Deny Tibet would ever be independent.
- Denounce the Dalai Lama as a traitor and a splittist.
- Declare opposition to splittism.

Hence, in Tibet much of it is directed towards the person of the Dalai Lama, which has been a major cause of angst against Chinese legitimacy in Tibet. The Dalai Lama, after his flight to India in 1959 has been reviled by Beijing as a traitor to the motherland, who through the establishment of the government in exile in India has been plotting against overthrowing the Chinese from Tibet. Since 1996, a ban has been imposed on keeping the image of the Dalai Lama in Tibet Autonomous Region whereas this has not been so in the provinces with a sizeable Tibetan population, such as in Sichuan, Gansu and

Qinghai.

The image of the Dalai Lama has changed from a religious figurehead to a more political one where he is symbolized as a focal point against China's rule in Tibet. With, the Lama's high profile visits packed as lectures on Buddhism, popular support for Tibet has been growing which has dented the image of China Rise in the West. Among the Tibetans, both in Tibet as well as in exile, the Dalai Lama is held in the highest regard, both as a spiritual as well as their political leader. Recently, with him resigning from his political responsibilities, his stature among Tibetans and non Tibetans has risen considerably. The Dalai Lama is also the rallying point for almost all protests in Tibet. This has also been seen with the recent immolations, where a major demand among all of them has been the "return of the Dalai Lama" to Tibet.

## II ETHNIC TIBET

Kham and Amdo have reverberated with a strong angst against China's rule in the region. The Tibetan protests in 1988-89 were restricted much to the Tibet Autonomous Region especially to Lhasa, but the March 2008 incident spread like wild fire to these regions which culturally are a part of Tibet, but due to the compulsions of the modern day nation state, areas of Kham and Amdo were placed under the neighbouring provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan, although much of the areas dominated by ethnic Tibetans have been granted legitimate autonomy. The Tibetans from these areas had offered much resistance in the initial stages

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when China was consolidating its rule over Tibet. They were the pioneers as well as recruits for the "Chu Shi Gang Druk" (The 4 Rivers 6 Ranges), named after the geographical features present in the region of Amdo and Kham, the resistance force which was formed and fought against the Chinese for a long period of time until it was disbanded in the mid 1970's.

Historically, the region is known for its brave, free spirited individuals who fought against the Chinese as well as rebelled against the central government of Lhasa. Much of these areas were autonomous in the pre modern period, before notions of the nation state and sovereignty had intruded into the psyche of the people. With the coming of the People's Liberation Army and Communism as an ideology, it heralded the dawn of modernity in these regions where governance was still deeply steeped in feudal theocratic beliefs and institutions which faced enormous strain under the new competing ideology of Communism.

Numerous analysts are of the view that it is through the compulsions of the modern nation state—the Han nation state, that the regions of Kham and Amdo have become closer to their ethnic counterparts in Central Tibet. This was not the case in pre modern Tibet, where it was only ethnic and religious ties which bound them together and now it is more the aspiration of common rights, of freedom and self determination of a common destiny which brings all Tibetans irrespective of their region together. Some of the important protests that have taken place in these regions apart from the Kirti monastery incident had been the Language protests in Ngaba Amdo by school students against implementing Mandarin as the sole language.

The recent mass protests in Kardze Kham Sichuan held during the Buddhist holy month of "Saga Dawa" (the birth of the Buddha), which also coincided with the birthday of the exiled Dalai Lama on the 6th of July, are all strong examples of discontent against China's policies in the region, which albeit are mostly cultural in nature. There also has been much protests against the economic policies implemented by

Beijing in these regions, such as against the mining activities by numerous domestic as well as foreign corporations in these regions, which have brought about more income inequality among the locals as well as a feeling that the rightful owners of the natural resources have not received their rightful share. Much of the protests have been facilitated through swift communication, the internet, mobile technology, micro blogging etc.

The protests are much a manifestation of the cultural and religious anxiety that the population share against China's policies which have led to a process of coercive integration of the Tibetans through Sinification. The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, an exile based rights group documented that since the 2008 incident, more than 1500 Tibetans have been arrested by the authorities in connection to the riots, which however may be a much larger number.

Thus, areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region has witnessed maximum number of protests post 2008, which is corroborated by the large number of legal convictions and also displays the fact that in the future these areas which had relative freedom will now be made more tighter. This does not augur well for the authorities as a pan- Tibetan movement in Tibet (TAR, Kham and Amdo) would put enormous strain on the resources of the state and also does strengthen the resolve among the Tibetans to strive for their goal of independence and self determination. The earlier tactic by Beijing of dividing the Tibetan dominated areas into the neighbouring provinces of the Tibet Autonomous Region is seen to be having negative repercussions as much of the calls for a Tibetan Nation and strong solidarity for the Tibetan race has risen from these areas. Although the authorities have tried to monitor and prevent the movement of people from these areas to the TAR, still strong anti Chinese sentiments are brewing in the horizon.

### III

#### CULTURAL NATIONALISM

Much of the protests in Ethnic Tibet, albeit the

tacit ones can be all linked to the Tibetan religion, its culture and social traditions. It is seen as through the observance of "Lha-kar" on every Wednesday, the day when the present Dalai Lama was born, whereby much of the Tibetans especially in Lhasa are seen offering prayers as well as burning juniper for the long life of the Dalai Lama. Even when, the Dalai Lama was conferred the Congressional Gold Medal in 2007 by the United States, there were reports that the monks of Sera, Ganden and Drepung, the monastic institutions in Lhasa had burst into revelry as well as had whitewashed their monastic complex, which is reserved for the Tibetan New Year or for other occasions. Earlier personal devotion were not seen as a threat, but now the Chinese officials relegated independent Buddhist acts to a manifestation of a solidarity faction.

For instance, circumambulation around the Jokhang and the throwing of "tsampa" or barley flour has been seen as a show of protest against China's rule. The Tibetan music world has also been rife with songs of dissent. The literary world has also been curtailed much by the Chinese authorities, which are all signs of tacit dissent against the Chinese state. Thus in Tibet there is a strong emergence of cultural nationalism which is also further expressed through the renewed vigour towards Tibetan Buddhism especially seen in the increased devotion towards the Dalai Lama, who is the fountainhead of Tibetan Buddhism.

In Tibet, religion had played an important role where Buddhism had penetrated into each and every aspect of life. Daily life was geared towards Buddhism and it was the legitimate force which helped in the creation of a unique political system, where the lama was the ruler and religion gave the mandate to rule. The dominating factor in the life of the average Tibetan was Buddhism and it became an identity marker for Tibetans irrespective of their regional affiliations. This has come under severe strain in the present period.

The Communists in China have also given a one sided picture of religious phenomena which has much shaped their understanding of Sino Tibetan



relations which has emerged out of a strong ideological commitment in them to resist any understanding of religion in human affairs. Thus, there is a strong presence of enormous cultural barriers that obstruct Sino Tibetan understanding. Another aspect that has strongly influenced Chinese policy over Tibet has been the influential role that religion played in the lives of the people, capturing the faith of the millions which is truly the ground for major competition in between the Communist state and Buddhism in Tibet. The Chinese scholar and critic Wang Lixiong, writes this as a major reason for Beijing to curb the activities of the charismatic lamas in Tibet, thus monitor their activities closely. Much of the reincarnated lamas have also been involved in numerous social welfare activities in the Tibetan regions which have also garnered immense support from the locals further alerting the Chinese state towards their activities leading to much confrontation in between them and Beijing.

Tulku Tenzin Delek, a highly influential reincarnated monk from Sichuan, was involved with numerous philanthropic activities and had also brought about substantial change in the life style of the Tibetans in that region. In the year 2003, he was charged with sedition and implicated in a series of bombings in Chengdu. Arrested and facing capital punishment, international outcry and much pressure made the authorities revert their sentence to life imprisonment. The recent case of Tulku Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche of Kardze, another influential religious leader who was also involved in social welfare measures in the area was subsequently arrested on possession of weapons and incitement of violence in 2008 in the region, all are examples of how China views the exponents of Tibetan Buddhism, the "Living Buddhas" as threats to their legitimacy to rule. A major tool through which Beijing has tried to control the basic essence of Tibetan Buddhism has been through the 2005 "Living Buddha" Act, whereby all reincarnated lamas have to be recognised by Beijing to be accepted by the larger society. This move is seen as an act to curb the influences of the exiled Dalai Lama. It is also a practice in Tibetan Buddhism, especially in the "act of reincarnation", to seek aid and recognition from

a higher spiritual realized being, in this case the Dalai Lama, who is also the spiritual leader of the Tibetans.

Thus much of the reincarnated lamas are recognised by the Dalai Lama or by other senior lamas, which was the case with the Panchen Lama, the second highest reincarnated monk in Tibetan Buddhism, who plays an important role in the succession of the next Dalai Lama. But with two candidates, chosen respectively by Beijing and by the Dalai Lama, the former being instated and the latter's whereabouts being unknown, is precisely the major strains that are present in Tibetan Buddhism, through Chinese involvement. This is truly leading to a negative effect as it has led to a stronger organic reaction against China and a sharpening of identity consciousness as well as the need to rebel. At present in Tibet and in the Tibetan dominated areas, there is an emergence of a strong wave of cultural nationalism which is also precisely what can even be deduced from the self immolations especially the ones which started in Kirti monastery, Ngaba province as well as in the monasteries in Tawu county Sichuan province.

The security clampdown and the ensuing "legal education" among the monks in the monastery has also caught international attention especially with the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances seeking to know about the whereabouts of the 300 monks whom China claims to have placed under the spectrum of "legal education". Also, during the EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights 2011, the European delegation sought China to provide "full information on the fate and whereabouts of the monks who have disappeared from Kirti monastery." Beijing on the other hand has raised the ante by terming the whole activity as legal education to discipline the monks who are seen to have been involved in anti social activities such as gambling, prostitution etc.

However, the irony lies in the fact that the radicalization of Tibetan culture can be prevented by the Dalai Lama, who historically as mentioned earlier has also played the role of a peace maker for the earlier dynasties of China. But, in the present it is the Dalai Lama, who is

the focal point for the Strike Hard campaigns and Beijing has single handedly converted the Question of Tibet into one of the Dalai Lama; of his person and future. He is seen as the inciter of "splittism" from the motherland. Thus, Beijing terms it as a law and order problem which can be resolved through the use of state violence; manifested in the form of massive suppression, the crackdowns and the "Strike Hard campaigns".

### CONCLUSION

The question of Tibet is also seen by China through the prism of class struggle, especially one where the Dalai clique is supported by hostile Western forces, thus seen as a class struggle on an international scale. History has also been oriented to display the Tibetan past as being a dark feudal theocratic period, where there was much exploitation by the ruling classes headed by the Dalai Lama and at present there is an attempt by the same forces to return to those dark days. The Communist regime strongly portrays a picture of liberation brought about by them for the Tibetans through socialist construction. The living standards of the Tibetans have risen rapidly under the Communist regime and there has been remarkable growth in the GDP figures of Tibet in the recent years, bringing about much prosperity in the region.

In 1980 and 1984, respectively, the Central Authorities held the First and Second Tibet Work Forums, setting the guiding principles for work in the region - focusing on economic development, changing from a closed economy to an open one and from a planned economy to a market one. The central government also formulated a series of special policies for economic development in Tibet, such as "long-term right to use and independently operate land by individual households" and "long-term right to have, raise and manage livestock by individual households," to promote the reform of the region's economic

system and its opening-up program. Since 1994 the central government has organized 60 state organs, 18 provinces and municipalities and 17 state-owned enterprises to provide aid to Tibet in the fields of human resources, finance and materials, technology and management in a paired-up way to cover all the cities at the prefectural level and 73 counties (including cities and districts at the county level) in Tibet. In recent years, there has been an emphasis on a "leap frog" development of Tibet, which does herald the dawn of a stronger economic growth for Tibet and Tibetans.

However, grievances among the Tibetans have increased which has led to violent outbursts as seen in the 2008 riots as well as in the form of immolations in the ethnic Tibetan regions of China. This has been due to the economic as well as cultural alienation that the Tibetans have faced from the influx of Han Chinese migrants as well as the Hui Muslims who have created an economic and political niche for themselves. The angst of the Tibetans against the Han and Hui migrants were seen in the March 14th incident where Tibetans rampaged on the street and burnt as well as ransacked the business establishments of the migrants. All of these acts as further fuel to the rising cultural nationalism among Tibetans in China, which further complicates the issue of Tibet for the Tibetans as well as for Beijing, which have also led to a stalling of the dialogue in between the exiled Dalai Lama and Beijing. In such a situation, a solution out of the imbroglio is truly seen in the form of the demands for "Genuine Autonomy" as raised by the present Dalai Lama, who can temper the growing frustrations of the Tibetans in Tibet as well as in exile, but with his advanced age and Beijing waiting for him to no longer be physically present on the Tibetan scene, the Question of Tibet will undoubtedly vex China for the years to come.

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