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Macho Minority

Masculinity and Ethnicity on the Edge of Tibet

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This article explores the role of masculinity in articulating ethnic Tibetan identity in China. Based on interviews with Tibetans and Han Chinese in a Tibetan autonomous prefecture in China's southwest and on an examination of recent Chinese publications, the study explores the dialogue between Tibetans' own perceptions of their ethnic identity and public representations of that identity. While previous scholarship has highlighted the role that ethnic minorities play in constructing a Chinese national identity, the authors demonstrate that minorities, too, construct their ethnic identities in contradistinction to a majority Other. This process is integral to the production of a local knowledge and history that runs parallel to state-sponsored discourses of the nation and its composite nationalities.

Keywords: *Tibet, China, ethnic minority, gender identity*

Within contemporary Chinese art, literature, and cinema, the ethnic minorities are generally portrayed as primitive and exotic in contrast with the "norms" of the modern Han Chinese citizen (Zhang, 1997; Blum, 2001). Researchers have also observed that ethnic minorities are frequently feminized in contradistinction to the Han Chinese, reflecting the application of gender hierarchies to ethnic groups within the nation (Gladney, 1994; Schein, 2000). In this article, we build on that previous research to investigate another aspect of the relationship between gender and ethnicity in China. Exploring contemporary representations of Tibetans in China, we show that unlike the minority groups featured by earlier studies, Tibetans are routinely masculinized. More important, we examine how Tibetan masculinity is perceived both by Han Chinese and by ethnic Tibetans in a Tibetan

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autonomous region in China, thereby demonstrating the importance of gender in articulating ethnic difference at the level of representation as well as in the lived experience of ethnic identity.

This study consists of two parts. In the first part, we explore the symbols and icons that feature prominently in Han Chinese representations of Tibet and Tibetan men,¹ and in the second part, we compare those symbols and icons with contemporary self-images of Tibetans in China. We conducted interviews among Han Chinese visitors to the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in northwest Yunnan province. It is an area that has witnessed an explosion in tourism since its opening in 1994,² and a place where there are frequent encounters between local Tibetans and Han Chinese tourists. As we did not have the means to conduct statistically relevant surveys, we opted for in-depth interviews of a random selection of tourists. In all, we interviewed 18 Han Chinese women and 19 Han Chinese men. Participants were volunteers who were introduced by the owners of the hotels in which they were staying. Lee-Anne Henfry interviewed the women and Ben Hillman interviewed the male respondents. These interviews were conducted in Chinese.

Finally, we extended our semistructured and in-depth interviews to local Tibetans, whom we invited to discuss their own perceptions of Tibetan masculinity. We interviewed a variety of Tibetan men and women from rural and urban backgrounds. Unlike the tourists, whom we had not previously met, Ben Hillman knew most of the Tibetan respondents through his longer-term fieldwork in the region. Because of the very personal nature of the subject matter, these preexisting relationships facilitated a more frank and lively discussion. Some of the interviews were one-on-one, and some took the form of group discussions in which we encouraged the Tibetan respondents to discuss gender traits and masculine ideals among themselves. We interviewed 21 women and 25 men, each for between one and three hours. The interviews were conducted in a mixture of Chinese and Tibetan. The interviews that form the primary basis of this study took place in April and May of 2003, although the analysis draws on observations from Ben Hillman's more than three years of fieldwork in Tibetan areas from 2001 to 2005.

Ethnicity and Masculinity in the Chinese Nation

Studies of ethnic identity in China have been crucial to our understanding of China's nation-building project since the end of empire. We know that the mobilization of a people called the "Han" was central to the building of a modern nationalism targeted at the overthrow of the ethnic Manchu

rulers of the crumbling Qing dynasty. Despite tremendous diversity among this broad and dubious ethnic category, the Han became the personification of the new nation and a symbol of modernity and progress. The new Communist Party leaders continued this project, presenting the Han peoples as the harbingers of modernity and progress, a beacon to the non-Han peoples of the political periphery who found themselves unwitting members of a new nation-state defined by clear borders (Gladney, 2004).

Ethnic minorities entered the national imagination as the primitive Other against which China's modern national identity could be constructed. For political purposes, China's ethnic classification project of the 1950s labeled groups according to their stages of economic development on a linear path toward communism. But China's ethnic minorities were also differentiated according to social systems, including kinship patterns and marriage customs. The ethnic minorities were often characterized as sexually less restrained in contrast to the strictly monogamous modern Han citizen. As Dru Gladney (1994) and others have pointed out, in recent decades the image of this primitive sexuality has contributed to an eroticization of minority groups, which has been commodified for the titillation of Han Chinese audiences. With more space for cultural and artistic expression and with imaginations stimulated by new opportunities for travel, the real and assumed "primitive promiscuity" of China's ethnic minority groups has provided an endless source of material for art, literature, movies, television documentaries, and advertising.

Since the 1980s, a number of observers have drawn the connection between this "primitive promiscuity" and the gendering of ethnic identity. Borrowing from postcolonial literature—most notably, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)—they have argued that majority-minority relations in China could also be characterized as orientalist or "internal orientalist" (Gladney, 1994; McLaren, 1994; Zhang, 1997; Schein, 1997, 2000). Gladney suggests that "minority is to majority as female is to male, as 'Third World' is to 'First,' as subjectivized is to objectivized identity" (Gladney, 1994: 93). The Chinese discourse on ethnic relations is thus characterized by a metaphorical domination of the modern Han male over the primitive minority female.

Continuing in this project of exploring the relationship between gender, ethnicity, and national identity in China, Louisa Schein (1997) has explored representations of the Miao. Schein starts from the premise that images of ethnic difference have centered on an eroticized female subject. For Schein, the sexual metaphor is also one of domination, in which the literal or figurative femaleness of minority peoples defines them as subordinate to the Han majority. Schein analyzes the Han fascination with ethnic minorities as a process of "internal orientalism" in which ethnic encounters are "most

commonly structured by a class-gender asymmetry in which minorities [are] represented chiefly by rural women, while Han observers [appear] characteristically as male urban sophisticates.” Minority men serve merely “as a foil to highlight the women’s distinctiveness and allure” or to “redirec[t] the consumer’s gaze from the indeterminate panorama of colorful culture to the body of the minority woman” (Schein, 1997: 70, 87).

However, because studies such as this were concerned with the largely quiescent minorities of the southwest, few of these writings noted an important variation in the representations of minorities in Chinese discourse. Most notably, it became increasingly apparent that Mongols and Tibetans, the formerly nomadic peoples of China’s northern and western borderlands, were more frequently masculinized. Gladney (1994: 97) observed that in contrast to minority women, minority men “are generally exoticized as strong and virile . . . or possessing extraordinary powers,” but the masculinization of ethnic categories was not explored more fully until Almaz Khan demonstrated that the Mongols in China are frequently represented by men who are “robust and tough, broadminded and uninhibited, brave, and pure and simple” (Khan, 1996: 148). Khan suggests that the Han Chinese (male) attraction to the “virile” image of the Mongol male on horseback represents a latent desire among them to be like such an Other.

Other research has since shown that the masculinization of the Inner Asians has a long history among the sedentary people of the Chinese empire. Emma Jinhua Teng’s (1998) study of the literature of the Six Dynasties (220-589) and Tang (618-907) periods reveals a tendency to feminize the southern barbarians and masculinize the northerners. This, she surmises, is a result of the former’s association with matrilineal society and the latter’s association with warfare and conquest. Teng notes that “the feminization of southern peoples and the masculinization of northern peoples served to center the ideal ‘Han’ self of the central plains as a normative identity” (Teng, 1998: 362-63; quotation, 363). Picking up on this theme, Uradyn Bulag stresses that Han Chinese responses to the masculinity of the northern barbarians have been very different from their responses to the southern peoples. According to Bulag, “a new world of Chinese identity, morality and consciousness unfolds as we move towards the northern frontier” (Bulag, 2002: 64). He argues convincingly that the metaphorical response has been one of self-feminization and anxiety.

The relationship between the metaphorical masculinization of Inner Asians and majority male anxiety is a common theme in analyses of contemporary Chinese literature. A number of literary critics have argued that male writers in the post-Mao era are preoccupied with male impotency (Barr, 2003). The most recent of such works is *Masculinity Besieged*, in which Xueping Zhong

analyzes a number of short stories and novels to illuminate a pervasive theme of a “male search for a more manly image of the self” (Zhong, 2000: 71). Interestingly, in her final chapter Zhong ties the search for a new Chinese masculinity to the “searching for roots” *xungen* literature of the 1980s, a literary movement that explored the “roots” of Chinese culture by eulogizing the primitive and the ancient. Not surprisingly, as “reservoirs of still-extant authenticity” (Schein, 1997: 72), China’s ethnic minorities have played a central role in this literature. Kam Louie (1992) has observed that one collection of stories from the roots-seeking genre used minority males to explore the constitutive characteristics of masculinity. He finds that a persistent theme in *Strange Tales from Strange Lands*, a compilation of stories whose characters are ethnic Oroqen (also former frontier nomads), is the “concern with being a ‘real man’ in a rapidly changing world” (Louie, 1992: 1122). Louie argues that the stories never stray from the standard macho script, which—according to the sexologists Donald Mosher and Sylvia Tomkins (1988), whom he cites—consists of (1) the danger scene, (2) the fight scene, and (3) the callous sex scene. As we will see below, danger, fighting, and sexuality are defining elements of majority representations of Tibetan men in China.

The means by which men differentiate themselves from other men is receiving increasing attention in the social sciences. From a growing body of literature in men’s studies, we understand that variant social constructions of masculinity are based on power relations between men, in the same way that gender relations are constructed between men and women (Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994; Hearn and Collinson, 1994). While we have long recognized that gender constructs are hierarchical, it is interesting to observe that masculinity constructs can also serve to erect and enforce hierarchies between men. These new insights have begun to influence students of premodern and contemporary China. In a recent study of masculinity construction in premodern China, for example, Song Geng (2004) argues that masculine ideals were conceived homosocially within hierarchies of social and political power rather than in opposition to women. The idea of competing masculinities similarly underlies Kam Louie’s efforts to theorize a Chinese masculinity. Louie notes that Chinese men typically do not conform to the dominant Western masculine ideal: while acknowledging the existence of a physical machismo in China, he argues persuasively that the “cerebral male tradition—the *caizi* (the talented scholar) and the *wenren* (cultured man)—tends to dominate that of the macho, brawny male” (Louie, 2002: 8).

Louie’s framework for conceptualizing masculine ideals is the binary opposition between *wen*, the mental and civil, and *wu*, the physical and

martial aspects of masculinity. Louie accepts that Chinese masculinity contains elements of both, but he holds that over the *longue durée*, *wen* represents the dominant masculine ideal in China. While Louie was contrasting Chinese masculinities with those in the West, we argue that the *wen-wu* model is useful for exploring cross-cultural masculinities *within* China.

Tibet on Display

The research project from which this article emerged began as an investigation into the politics of representing Tibetan ethnicity in China. Our first step was contemplating contemporary images of Tibet that appeared to be flooding bookstores, television programs, and advertising, in what James Scott (1990) would call “official” transcripts.³ In the Maoist and early reform periods, the mainstream media tended to portray Tibetans as backward and ignorant, a people who would have been lost forever to feudalism and slavery if not for the Communist Revolution. From the 1950s onward, the Propaganda Department of the People’s Liberation Army published a series of novels in which the standard script revolved around Han Chinese characters helping the backward Tibetans transform into modern and civilized citizens.⁴ The same imagery of the uncivilized Tibetan is evident in Susan Blum’s (2001) interesting study of Han Chinese perceptions of different ethnic minority groups, in which she observes that Tibetans were typically seen as primitive, wild, and dirty. Finding that her Han Chinese respondents had little else to say about Tibetans, Blum notes a distinct lack of photographic representation of Tibetans in the Chinese press. Blum speculates that this must be either the result of a deliberate policy of withholding information about the true situation in Tibet or simply a reflection of a general lack of interest in the place (Blum, 2001: 128).

However, by the end of the 1990s, just ten years after Blum conducted her research, Tibetan culture and religion had become the object of a growing fascination among urban Han Chinese. Today, television documentaries and lifestyle magazines seem obsessed with images of Tibet, stressing its rugged mountain beauty and its spirituality. Every one of the nine issues to date of the English-language journal *China’s Ethnic Groups*, published quarterly since 2003 by China’s National Unity Press (Zhongguo minzu tuanjie chubanshe), has included idealized images of Tibetan landscapes and glamorous images of Tibetan people. The cover stories of the first three issues focused on Tibetan places and Tibetan cultural heritage, and all have included content on Tibetan areas. The only photograph on the main page of

the journal's Web site is of an elegant Tibetan woman wearing an elaborate costume and jewelry (see <http://www.ceg.com.cn>, accessed 20 June 2005). In-flight magazines on China Eastern Airlines regularly include features on Tibet and Tibetan areas in China, and they are always promoted as exciting and romantic places to visit. A new glossy magazine called *Shangri-la* is devoted to the culture and landscape of the Tibetan Plateau.

Mainstream Chinese directors have also turned their attention to Tibet in recent years, producing romanticized documentaries and feature films for urban Han audiences. Tibetan singers such as Jamyang Drolma and Dechen Wangmo have broken into the mainstream music industry. Matthew Kapstein describes the latter's popular music video as full of "travel-brochure imagery," suggesting a "nostalgic and idealized Tibet" (Kapstein, 2004: 258). When we lived in Shanghai in 1999-2000, a visit to Tibet seemed to have become a rite of passage for the city's newly wealthy, with economic growth and improved communications making these visits easier. During conversations with Ben Hillman in 2000, students at one of Shanghai's leading universities frequently spoke of Tibet as a place of spirituality and freedom, far from the competitive striving and commercialism of contemporary urban life. In 1999, a travel agent in Shanghai told us that tour packages to Tibet were selling like hotcakes and that tickets were hard to come by.

Tibet was further catapulted into the limelight of the popular imagination when a county in northwest Yunnan officially changed its name to "Shangri-la," the mythical paradise of the Himalayas (Hillman, 2003). While Shangri-la (Xianggelila) is a word that entered Chinese from a translation of James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, the fame of the ethnically Tibetan county quickly spread, and the publicity stunt saw the number of visitors to this area from the eastern seaboard skyrocket to more than one million annually (*Diqing nianjian*, 2002: 42). Between 2001 and 2004, no fewer than fifteen books (nonfiction and pictorial) on Shangri-la were published and available in bookstores. As Kapstein notes, "if the 'shangrilafication' of Tibet is a cultural phenomenon that is sufficiently advanced in the West as to have drawn deconstructive criticism, it is a phenomenon just now beginning in China" (Kapstein, 2004: 258).

Interestingly, Tibetan writers were also contributing to the shangrilafication of Tibet. By the 1980s, a new generation of writers who had been educated in the Chinese system began writing in the Chinese language for a Han Chinese audience. The ethnic Tibetan Alai, for example, is one of only three ethnic minority authors to have won the Mao Dun Prize, the most prestigious literary prize in China; it was awarded for his 1998 novel *Chen'ai luoding* (*When the Dust Settles*), which was subsequently published in English

translation as *Red Poppies* (Alai, 2002). Tashi Dawa is one of the best-known writers of this generation, and his later works are known for their magical realist style (Dawa, 1992).⁵ Critics have suggested that his writing sustains a mystical view of Tibet (Pema, 1999). Indeed, his stories weave images of religion and science, and the traditional and the modern, in a magical realist style reminiscent of Gabriel García Márquez's.⁶

Representing Tibetan Men

In discussing the recent Han fascination with the “magic” of Tibet, Kapstein makes an intriguing observation: many of the sex shops in China's cities and towns prominently display a “Tibetan” male-potency-enhancing product called Vajra Divinity Oil (Jingang shen you). On the packaging of this virility oil is a picture of the Potala palace, above which is superimposed “a blonde couple in a steamy embrace” (Kapstein, 2004: 258). While Kapstein places this marketing in a context of Chinese imaginings of Tibet's “uncanny powers,” another interpretation of Vajra Divinity Oil's strategy is the Chinese association of Tibetan men with a virile masculinity.

In the many recent Chinese publications on Tibet, we discovered this to be a familiar theme. Like the nomadic Mongols, the Tibetan people are frequently represented by a robust masculine image. Dru Gladney (2004: 45) reports that when he visited the China Folk Cultural Park in 1995, he found that the Tibetan exhibit was the only one staffed entirely by men. Similarly, in the most popular books on sale in the Xinhua Bookstore in Diqing in 2003, many of the photographs of Tibetan people show men engaged in a variety of physically challenging activities, including dangerous horseback stunts, or looking appropriately fierce by gripping the handles of very large knives. Tibetan women, by contrast, are typically shown engaged in household tasks such as preparing food, as well as posing in traditional attire and dancing, and actually appear much less sexualized in many of these images than do the men.⁷

Other Chinese Web sites and tourist advertising literature depict Tibetan men as rough, wild horsemen. In the colorful illustrations of different ethnic minority peoples on one Web site, the Tibetan and Mongol nationalities were each represented by a young man in traditional attire on horseback, wielding a magnificent knife, and, in another picture, by a bare-chested, warrior-like man (China Tibet Information, 2003). In other tourism advertising, Tibetans are described as being “known for their strong will to survive and sturdy physique.” According to one Chinese Web site, “Male Tibetans generally wear leather hats, Tibetan robes, and high boots and carry Tibetan knives by

the waist and hunting rifles on the back for masculinity [*sic*”]; another reported that Tibetan “hunters usually hang up beast skull [*sic*] on their porch to show masculinity.” Tibetan women, we are informed, “yearn for young men who are sturdy, brave and clever” (see, e.g., China Window, 2003).

The romantic, masculine image of the Tibetan man is increasingly visible in the pages of contemporary fiction. In one popular short story, which won the prestigious Lu Xun Literary Award, Chi Li offers us a glimpse of the Han Chinese male inadequacy that Zhong (2000) explored—but this time, from a female perspective. The protagonist of the story is a young Han Chinese woman who travels to Tibet with four friends (three men and one woman). She falls ill and stays behind in Lhasa to recover while her friends spend a few days traveling. Alone in Lhasa, she takes great delight in watching from her hotel room window the “robust Khampa men” riding their horses.⁸ Eventually she meets one of them when he comes to her hotel room door “horsewhip in hand, steaming and sweaty” (Chi, 1999: 8).

The protagonist describes Khampa Tibetan men as “the finest men on earth[,] . . . of a towering height, with broad shoulders, slim waist, and sturdy long legs. Each threw his chest out and held his head high. Their complexion was dark and shone with the luster of silk[;] . . . they had a valiant, swinging stride.” By contrast, she describes one of her Han male companions as having a “slight build and a sallow complexion” and being “not quite confident of himself as a man”; she complains that another never treats her as his equal and always patronizes her. Her third Han male friend (who is her former boyfriend) is characterized as “snobbish, honey-mouthed, and dagger-hearted” (Chi, 1999: 5, 19).

The popularity and success of Chi Li’s story lies in the power of its imagery of both male and female yearnings for a “real” man. Chi Li’s rugged Tibetan man represents the passion, purity, and free-spiritedness of nature, while her Han man represents the boredom, superficiality, and frustration of modern urban living. Throughout the story, her male Han friends are depicted as shallow, uncaring, and faithless in comparison to the noble, valiant, tender, and generous Tibetan man. She describes the Tibetan as having “the blood of a real Khampa,” a strongman of the mountains. When the Han girl is at the airport about to depart, her handsome Tibetan horseman emerges like a knight in shining armor from the grassland on his “magnificent golden steed” and lifts her up into the saddle “as if he were picking up a lamb,” taking her for one last invigorating ride with him across the open grassland before gently delivering her back to the airport. She later reflects that “deep within every woman there lay a dormant dream of being carried off by a handsome man riding a fine horse” and that her Tibetan

friend was bestowing on her, “as a woman, the most classic of honors” (Chi, 1999: 8, 25, 29).

Han Chinese Perceptions of Tibetan Men

Such representations of Tibetan men in the various media correspond very closely with *wu* masculine ideals. We did not encounter images of Tibetan men as learned scholars or wise sages despite the sophisticated literary and religious heritage of the Tibetan Plateau, and despite the prevalence of such imagery in the West (Lopez, 1998). The same “*wu*” images of Tibetan men dominated the impressions among the Han Chinese tourists whom we interviewed. Han Chinese men emphasized Tibetan men’s physical abilities, and most noted that Tibetan men are skilled at horsemanship. They described Tibetan men as very tough, brave, wild, and free-spirited. Most noted that Tibetan men had a reputation as good drinkers, were prone to fighting, and always carried a large knife.

Female Han Chinese respondents also emphasized physicality in their descriptions of Tibetan men, whom they described as having strong bodies and as being very manly, handsome, and brave. The women viewed the Tibetans as bigger, taller, stronger, darker-skinned, rougher, more masculine, and more loyal than other men. Other expressions they applied to Tibetan men included “open-minded,” “generous,” “unpretentious,” and “decisive.” Some Han women admitted to being excited by but also afraid of Tibetan male sexuality. One female respondent told us of a Han friend who had an affair with a Tibetan man in Beijing. According to the woman, the man was extremely “forward” on their first date, and while her friend did not welcome the man’s advances, she was excited by his “brutish masculinity.” Another woman said that she had dreamed of having a Tibetan boyfriend but thought that it probably would not work because he would have “too many other girlfriends.” Of the 18 female Han respondents, 16 thought that Tibetan men were more masculine than all other men, including other ethnic groups in China and foreign nationals.

Notably, however, Han Chinese respondents did not always envy or romanticize Tibetan masculinity, and they sometimes saw it as dangerous. Charlene Makley made a similar observation in her discussion of “the recent fascination among [Han] Chinese men and women with Tibetan masculinity.” She notes that for some Han Chinese, Tibetan men can represent “tender sexuality in contradistinction to uncaring Han men,” while other Han Chinese associate Tibetan men with “a virile but brutish sexuality”

(Makley, 2002: 609, 629). Together, the Han Chinese male and female respondents reconstructed the macho script that Louie (1992) discusses in his analysis of the book of short stories *Strange Tales from Strange Lands*, in which we find that Han Chinese impressions of Tibetan men never stray far from “danger,” “fighting,” and “sexual conquest,” the ingredients of a hypermasculinization.

If, following Louie (2002), we accept that the wen masculine ideals of the learned scholar have been dominant in China, then we must assume that the routine wu-masculinization of Tibetan men represents a metaphorical and actual process of subordination. If this inference is accurate, then the masculinization of Tibetans could be premised on the same internal colonialist foundations as the feminization of the peoples of the southwest. Both the feminization of the quiescent ethnic groups and the hypermasculinization of the belligerent ethnic groups serve to reinforce Han male superiority in the hierarchies of genders and ethnicities. This important question is further explored below in the context of the hidden transcripts of Tibetan male identity.

Masculinity According to Tibetans

In our very first interview with a local Tibetan tour guide, we were introduced to the Tibetan word *phokhyokha*, the closest the Tibetan language comes to a word for masculinity. Melvyn Goldstein’s *New Tibetan-English Dictionary of Modern Tibetan* (2001) translates it as a “real man, a he-man, a brave/bold man.” Throughout ethnographic Tibet, including the Tibet Autonomous Region and eastern Tibet, the word is used to mean a “manly man.” It carries a strong normative element—it refers not just to an ideal, the way a superior man should behave, but also to a masculine worldview and philosophy of life.

Tibetan men were enthusiastic in discussing the meaning of *phokhyokha* and their perceptions of masculinity. Words that respondents used to describe the *phokhyokha* male included “frank,” “loyal,” “tough,” and “courageous.” We were not surprised to find clear parallels between the way Tibetan men described their masculinity and the majority Han representations of Tibetan ethnicity and masculinity that we had encountered. But unexpectedly, instead of describing the masculine in reference to the feminine, Tibetan men repeatedly contrasted their masculinity with that of Han Chinese men. Tibetan women also observed that Tibetan men were very different from other men, particularly Han Chinese men. All the Tibetan women we interviewed considered Tibetan men to be more masculine than men from other

ethnic backgrounds. The examples and descriptions that Tibetans used to differentiate themselves from Han Chinese men can be organized under four main themes: large-mindedness versus small-mindedness, gender relations, tradition, and physical strength.

Large-Mindedness versus Small-Mindedness

Tibetan men frequently criticized Han Chinese men for their concern for petty things such as money and food. According to one respondent, “A phokhyokha man would never show his concern for what his next meal would consist of or when he ate it.” One group of Tibetan men joked that Han men were always complaining about the taste of food—that it was too salty or too sweet. These Tibetans all agreed that real men just ate their food and did not worry about how good it tasted. One member of the group observed that a real man should be like King Gesar, a great warrior and statesman who united the Tibetan Kingdom in the eighth century C.E. and who, in mythical exploits recounted in many tales, heroically restored order and prosperity throughout the land (Shakya, 1999: 346). The Tibetan men repeated a popular Tibetan expression: “When men of low level come together they speak of eating and drinking, but when men of a high level come together they speak of Gesar.”

Another Tibetan respondent said that a real man does not worry about how much money he has or the price of things. “If my brother or my friend needs money, I will give it to him if I can.” The man’s companion added, “Also, if a man wants something he will get it no matter the price. You will not see a real Tibetan man bargaining for something in the market—that is for the women. But you always see Han Chinese men arguing over money matters.” Importantly also, the Tibetans all agreed that a real man is generous. If a man has something that you like, he might just give it to you, no matter what its value. Tibetan women, too, considered such generosity to be very masculine (although one joked that Tibetan men were not interested in money because they could not count).

Our Tibetan respondents were quick to point out that while the phokhyokha male can be generous, he also has the power to take what he wants. He is bold, decisive, and does not hesitate. One respondent, the part owner of a travel agency that organizes overland treks for foreigners, delighted in telling us the following story. Some years back he had taken a group of Swiss tourists on a trek. One day, they were picnicking in an alpine pasture when they noticed a Tibetan cowboy approaching on horseback. The group became nervous when

the man began pacing a short distance from their camp. After a short time, he stopped pacing and strode directly toward the group of tourists. Frightened, everyone froze. When the Tibetan man reached them, he bent down and grabbed a hunk of bread from their picnic. Without saying a word, he walked back to his horse. The tour operator explained, "The man was hungry. He waited for a while expecting an invitation to join the group for something to eat. When the tourists ignored him he had no choice but to just take what he wanted." The other Tibetan men laughed when they heard this story, and all agreed that it would have been beneath a real man to beg for food.

The phokhyokha man's boldness is reflected in many aspects of gendered behavior, including the very simple act of singing. Our Tibetan respondents not only considered a good singing voice to be very masculine but stressed that a phokhyokha man could sing anytime, anywhere. To sing and dance in public was a sign of confidence. The Tibetan women all agreed that they thought a man to be very phokhyokha if he could spontaneously entertain a group with song or dance. The Tibetan men said that a Tibetan man must perform if called upon by his friends—to be shy about it invites ridicule. As noted by Gladney (1994) and Schein (2000), images of singing and dancing are frequently associated with minorities, viewed as an aspect of their naïve primitiveness. But Tibetan men spoke proudly of their singing and dancing prowess—it was something that enabled them to express themselves both as Tibetans and as men.

Gender Relations

Our Tibetan respondents agreed that it is not appropriate for a phokhyokha man to fuss over small things or to get involved in domestic quarrels—such behavior was for the women. The same extended to domestic duties. All Tibetan men concurred that a real man would never be seen in the kitchen. Housework and the preparation of food were women's duties, and several men noted disapprovingly what they believed to be Han Chinese men's proclivity for housework. Tibetan women often laughed when they spoke about Tibetan men being hopeless at domestic duties. However, when asked if her ideal man would do more work around the house, one woman said, "No, it would not be manly enough (*buxiang nanren*)."² It was important for her, too, to protect her husband's masculinity.

Tibetan men also considered public displays of affection to be very unmanly. Tibetans noticed that young Han Chinese visiting the area in couples were physically affectionate with one another. According to several

respondents, a masculine man would never show affection to his wife, even in the form of inquiring about her comfort or well-being. He should never, for example, ask her if she is hungry or cold. One respondent said that while a man can love his wife in his heart, it was not manly to show it. Tibetan women agreed that it was inappropriate for a man to show affection in public, and some respondents commented that they found many Han Chinese tourists to be immodest. This scorning of public physical affection is not unknown to Han society, but in light of the erotic representations of minorities in Han Chinese discourse and the widely held Han perception that minority peoples are more liberal in their sexual practices, the Tibetans' view of the Han is certainly ironic.

Tibetan men also considered it more *phokhyokha* for a man to spend time in male company rather than at home with his family. They valued loyalty to their male friends highly. This shunning of female affection and strong bonding with other men is something that Louie (2002) observes to be closely connected with *wu* masculinity. Among Tibetan men, it represented a certain toughness that they indicated was needed in order to conquer the harsh upland terrain of the Tibetan Plateau. It also reflected the Tibetan tradition of men traveling for long periods to trade so as to contribute to their household's economy. The male tendency to wander helps to explain why fraternal polyandry can be found in many parts of the Tibetan Plateau. When two brothers marry the same woman, one usually stays to mind the property and work the fields while the other goes off in search of money.⁹

Tibetan men associated adventures and hardships with the *phokhyokha* masculine ideal. Most Tibetan male respondents mentioned that real Tibetan men were travelers, good horsemen, and masters of the mountains. A real man can travel for days in the mountains without food or comfort and never complain. This stoic image is well expressed by the Tibetan writer Alai in a short story: "A man keeps going! He bent his body against the wind, jerked the reins, and climbed up the mountain. . . . [T]he ferocious wind swept the earth with no obstacle to block it. . . . [T]he young man felt like weeping, but quickly controlled himself. Crying would look bad. Girls would cover their mouths with their hands, laugh, say, Ha ha, some man!" (Alai, 2001: 191).

Tibetan women admired men who could leave with nothing and return with provisions. They considered resourcefulness to be an extremely masculine trait—an attitude that is not surprising, given the harshness of the terrain in many Tibetan areas. The women said that Tibetan men were sometimes too proud, and this masculine pride was often the subject of their jokes. Two Tibetan women told us that teasing young men is one of the favorite pastimes

of older Tibetan women in rural areas. In one village, we were witness to such an event. An old woman was teasing her nephew about his virginity and how he should find ways to prove himself a man. She suggested potential partners for him (including an older woman whose husband had died many years earlier), to the raucous laughter of other family members.

When Tibetan men talked about relationships with women outside the family, they were lighthearted. They viewed sexual conquest as a measure of man's virility. Interestingly, nearly all the young Tibetan men aged 20 to 30 with whom we spoke claimed that Han Chinese and Western women were more valuable conquests than Tibetan women. A group of Tibetans agreed among themselves that Han Chinese women, particularly from the cities, were attractive because they wore fashionable clothes and makeup. One man told us about a friend who was the envy of all the young men in the village. He was a farmer, but he had a Han girlfriend from the town, whom he had met while competing in a horse-racing festival in town. A skilled horseman, he had won his event with great flair, and apparently many girls from the nearby town had wanted to meet him that day. The other men envied him because such urban women would normally be out of reach for a rural Tibetan man. Tibetans also confirmed proudly that they thought Western women found them attractive. One young man said he heard that foreign women were coming to China to "look for" Tibetan men and that a group of French women once came to western Sichuan with the express purpose of seeking romantic encounters with Tibetans. His friends agreed that they had heard the story too.

Tradition

When we showed photographs of Tibetan men in various forms of attire to Tibetan interviewees, they more readily associated the "traditional" attire with masculinity. Tibetan men and women all agreed that traditional Tibetan clothing, which includes a fur-trimmed or broad-rimmed hat, high boots, and a big ornamental belt to which a large knife is attached, was more masculine than Western clothing. Indeed, in contemporary "cool" Tibetan music videos, karaoke video discs, and television programs, Tibetan performers regularly combine elements of traditional apparel with a few "modern" additions. In one popular collection of video hits, one of the lead singers wore his traditional *chupa* (fur-trimmed robe-like coat) off one shoulder to reveal a tight black sleeveless T-shirt underneath. The Tibetans with whom we watched the video all agreed that the popular singer made himself more phokhyokha by wearing the *chupa*.

One of the most potent Tibetan symbols of masculinity is the knife.¹⁰ As one of our respondents observed, “A knife to a man is like fangs to a tiger,” suggesting not just that the knife was essential to a man’s strength but also that it was inseparable from his manhood. Tibetan knives are an essential component of traditional male attire, but even when Tibetan men dress in modern, non-Tibetan clothing, many still wear a knife—which may be more than 50 centimeters long—attached to their belt. Even when peeling fruit, Tibetan men joked, a Tibetan would rather use his enormous blade than a simple pocketknife. In fact, knives and their frequent use in fights have prompted a number of Tibetan towns to outlaw wearing them in public. Lithang in Sichuan province was the first to implement such a ban in 2003. The county in which this research was conducted was also considering such a ban, out of concern that knife-carrying men scared away tourists.

Physical Strength

Tibetan men and women all agreed that physical strength was an important aspect of masculinity. This notion of strength included the ability to handle large animals such as yak bulls and horses, to cut and carry timber, and to endure long treks in the mountains. Tibetan men considered fighting ability an important attribute of the manly man, a view held less strongly by the women. But Tibetan respondents did not associate the fighting per se with their masculine ideal so much as the integrity, bravery, and determination displayed in a fight. As one man explained, “If you are in a fight and you show the steel of your blade you must draw blood.” The manly Tibetan man did not necessarily seek a fight, but he did not back down when confronted. This martial masculinity even extended to Tibetan monks. In the past, Tibetan monasteries cultivated warrior monks to defend their sects against the encroachments of others, and physical battles over theological differences continue within Tibetan monasteries today. Some monks have even fought with Chinese government officials to defend their values (Hillman, 2005). Our Tibetan respondents considered monks to be very *phokhyokha*, showing great strength by living according to their vows and abstaining from certain worldly pleasures. In Tibetan eyes, this abstinence and stoicism, together with the willingness to fight for one’s beliefs, places the Tibetan monk firmly within the *wu* masculine ideal.

In discussing Tibetan men’s reputation as good fighters, Tibetans agreed that this reputation might intimidate other ethnic groups—including but not only the Han. In Lhasa in 2001, Ben Hillman took a taxi to a bar to meet some Tibetan friends. When he asked the driver if he had been there before,

the driver said that would be impossible because it was a place for Tibetans. "If I go in there," he said, "they'll beat me up." Other Han Chinese in Lhasa said that they were afraid to go out after dark for fear of being attacked by Tibetans. During three years of fieldwork in Tibetan areas, Hillman often heard other ethnic groups speak of Tibetan men's propensity to fight. One ethnic Naxi man mentioned a refrain popular among non-Tibetans in the area: "Rather than greet a Tibetan with words, better to greet him with a punch" (*Jing manzi yifen, buru chui manzi yidun*).¹¹ While the extent of Tibetan male pugnacity is impossible to quantify, many, including Tibetans themselves, reported to us Tibetan men's willingness to use force to settle a dispute or defend against a perceived insult.

In other societies, a growing body of literature has noted the phenomenon of violence among ethnic minority men. Robert Connell explains it as "protest masculinity," which involves "exaggerated claims to potency" by marginalized men (Connell, 1995: 109, 111). Other works have noted the importance of race relations in the social construction of masculinities. Avtar Brah argues that "structures of class, racism, gender and sexuality cannot be treated as 'independent variables' because the oppression of each is inscribed within the other and is constituted by and is constitutive of the other" (Brah, 1996: 109).

We have shown that there is a clear relationship between constructions of masculinity and constructions of ethnicity. Gladney (1994) and Schein (2000) have argued that the feminization of ethnic minorities reflects the application of gender hierarchies to ethnic relations, subordinating those minority groups to the Han Chinese. However, it is less clear whether the attribution of a wu masculinity to Tibetan men represents a similar application of hierarchy to Han-Tibetan relations. While we are aware that Chinese history generally favors the wen over the wu (Louie, 2002), it is important to observe that these ideals are historically contingent, varying according to social, economic, and cultural contexts. When we explored the context within which Tibetans constructed their masculine ideals, we learned that Tibetan men and women embrace the wu masculine ideal not because of the pervasive influence of majority discourse but because these people of the high plateau consider it to be a superior masculinity. It is not a "protest masculinity" that emerges in resistance to a hegemonic masculinity, but a masculine ideal that draws from Tibetans' own heritage and cultural norms.

Herein lies an irony: both Tibetan men and majority Han attribute a wu masculinity to Tibetan men. As Louie has noted elsewhere, the general inferiority of wu masculinities throughout Chinese history suggests that such an attribution subordinates the Tibetan to the Han Chinese man. However,

Tibetan men embrace the wu masculine ideal because they believe it to be superior, expressing it as a means of resistance against the majority male—what Scott (1990) would call a “weapon of the weak.” Yet we did not find that Tibetan men demonstrated a “protest masculinity.” That is, their masculine ideals did not emerge entirely as a reaction to the hegemonic masculinity, but drew from Tibetans’ own heritage and cultural norms. When it came to heavy drinking, for example, an activity associated with protest masculinities (Connell, 1995), our Tibetan respondents admitted that it was an attribute of a manly man. In the analysis framed by the idea of protest masculinity, this gendered behavior is understood as compensation for powerlessness in other domains, a restoration of self-esteem. However, within the local context, the place where Tibetans live their lives, it is difficult to infer such clear-cut relations of domination and subordination. In fact, Tibetan men enjoyed competing in drinking games because it was an opportunity for male bonding; such games were frequently also complemented by Tibetan songs, which often serve as an expression of both gender and ethnic identities.

One of the most popular songs in eastern Tibet is “The Khampa Man” (“Kangba Hanzi” in Chinese). Its chorus runs, “I’m a Khampa man in my heart—In my breast the wild and beloved grassland. . . . With barley wine in my veins, the whole world is in my hand. . . . Even if the women hate me, I fly free.” The song rings out from karaoke bars across eastern Tibet and is sung with gusto by Tibetan men who readily identify with the lyrics. It does not seem to matter that the song is in Chinese and not Tibetan. Interestingly, in 2002 local Tibetan officials in Diqing decided that the lyrics created a negative image of Tibetans in the eyes of Han Chinese and other tourists. They demanded that future recordings of the song change the lyrics from “with barley wine in my veins” to “with song in my heart.” Karaoke bars and music stores in the Tibetan autonomous prefecture are encouraged to play the new version, but Tibetan men continue to sing the original version, drowning out the official lyrics. In this example, the masculinity expressed in the song serves as an important source of ethnic and male pride.

The discussion above has shown that both majority representations of Tibetan men and Tibetan men’s own perception of masculinity conform strongly to the wu masculine ideal. In some contexts, such a characterization might be exploited to portray the Tibetan man as dangerous; in other public contexts, he might be depicted as virile and passionate. In either case, the natural or the primitive nature of the Tibetan man—and by extension the Tibetan woman—is reified, reminding us of the ethnic hierarchy in China’s Marxist social science that locates Han Chinese at the advanced

end of a modernization trajectory along which the backward minorities must inevitably follow. Some have interpreted this reification of Han Chinese modernity as the conceptual ballast of a civilizing mission (Harrell, 1995), while others have seen it as essential to the construction of a Chinese national identity (Gladney, 2004). But while the official transcripts of ethnic identity continue to influence the popular imagination, including that among ethnic minorities themselves, it is important to recognize that hegemonic categorizations are only one way of understanding what it means to be ethnic. By giving voice to Tibetan perceptions of masculinity, this article has revealed a dimension of local knowledge and an ethnic history that runs parallel to official and other public representations of Tibetans in China.

Just as the majority Han Chinese might construct their own national identities by making contrasts with minority Others, so minority Others are apt to do the same. Han men serve as a reference against which Tibetan men and women construct masculine ideals. Furthermore, Tibetans clearly consider their masculine ideals to be superior to those of other masculinities, especially those held by Han Chinese men. This dynamic highlights the role of gender in articulating ethnic identity, but it also reminds us that ordinary Tibetans experience that identity in ways that simultaneously challenge and co-opt official discourse and public representations. It is in the dialogue between these two idioms of identity that ethnicity is constantly being negotiated. Further research into the ways in which minority peoples such as China's ethnic Tibetans distinguish themselves from others will help us to understand the often-silent side of that dialogue and the cultural and national imaginings from which it emerges.

Notes

1. Although the category "Han Chinese" is problematic, the vast majority of Chinese, including Tibetan Chinese, accept it as an ethnic marker, and thus it is still useful for the purposes of this analysis. For a discussion of contested notions of Han Chinese identity, see Gladney (2004).

2. Until the 1990s, many of China's ethnic minority areas—particularly sensitive Tibetan, Mongol, and Uyghur zones—were off-limits to tourism and to foreigners. Several counties in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Xinjiang remain off-limits to this day.

3. Scott (1990) refers to the two idioms of identity as the "official transcript" and the "hidden transcript." The official transcript articulates and legitimizes the position of the superior, reinforcing the mechanisms (such as ethnic identification) by which subordinates are controlled. The hidden transcript is expressed offstage, where deviation from the dominant norms is safe. Ethnicity, like other aspects of identity, is contested between these different idioms, in a process of continuous negotiation over the defining characteristics of the ethnic community.

4. Examples of such novels are *Chun dao Yalujiang* (*Spring Comes to the Yarlung Tsangpo River*) by Lei Jia (1984) and *Zangbei kaige* (*Northern Tibet Paeon*) by Yan Keqin (1979).

5. Other Tibetan writers working in the Chinese language include Alai, Yidam Tsering, Sebo, Yangdon, and Medon; among them, only Alai won the Mao Dun Prize. Dhongul Gyal is an example of an ethnic Tibetan writer who continues to write in Tibetan.

6. Tashi Dawa's magical realist portrayal of Tibetan society can be seen in *A Soul in Bondage* (1992). Two more of Tashi Dawa's stories (2001a, 2001b) appear in a recent English-language of Tibetan short stories (Batt, 2001), all of which were originally published in the Chinese language. For a detailed analysis of Tashi Dawa's magical realist style, see Schiaffini (2002).

7. Examples of books representing local Tibetan culture are *Shangrila* (Zheng, 2002), *Diqing Shangri-la* (Li, 2001), and *Eternal Shangri-la* (Che, 2002). All three books were published with material support from the Diqing prefecture government and were available at bookstores in Diqing and at large bookstores in Kunming and Beijing.

8. Kham is one of the three main regions of ethnographic Tibet, the others being Amdo and U-Tsang. Kham is the southeastern part of Tibet, an area now incorporated into northwest Yunnan, western Sichuan, and southwest Qinghai provinces. "Khampas" are the Tibetans of Kham.

9. Another important reason for the social institution of fraternal polyandry is that it avoids the necessity of dividing the inheritance of a family's meager estate between competing brethren.

10. For a discussion of the phallic symbolism of the knife and male sexuality in the context of the "root-seeking literature" of the 1980s, see Louie (1991: 172).

11. "Manzi" is a slightly derogatory term for Tibetans used by other ethnic groups in the region.

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