

Interpreting the post-2008 Wave of Protest and Conflict in Tibet

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Abstract:

This article examines the post-2008 wave of ethnic unrest in Tibet. It discusses different interpretations of the unrest, from political and academic perspectives. The article explains how Chinese Communist Party interpretations of the unrest are rooted in revolutionary ideology and how this has led to a stiffening of security measures. The article also compares the different scholarly approaches to interpreting Tibetan grievances and the causes of the current wave of unrest. The article argues that there is evidence of significant inter-generational and demographic variation in the sources of grievances among the Tibetan population in China, and advocates for greater scholarly sensitivity to such differences.

China's Tibetan areas have experienced several waves of ethnic unrest since the founding of the People's Republic. The first wave of unrest (1956-1962) was characterized by armed uprisings against the Chinese state. From 1962-74 there was sporadic fighting between Chinese troops and US-funded Tibetan guerrillas operating from bases inside Nepal. The third wave of unrest took place in the late 1980s and was characterized by street protests. Protests against Chinese government policies peaked in March 1989, when throngs of Tibetans took to the streets to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Tibetan Uprising Day, the failed 1959 uprising against Chinese Communist Party rule in Tibet that ended with the Dalai Lama's flight into exile and a harsh crackdown on the Tibetan independence movement. In March 1989 the anniversary of Uprising Day was marked by rioting, which included attacks on government offices and property. Martial law was declared on 8 March.¹

Nineteen years later the anniversary of Uprising Day was the trigger for a new wave of unrest. On March 10, 2008 a group of Tibetan monks gathered in Lhasa to commemorate the anniversary. It has been suggested that large demonstrations were planned for the 49th anniversary of the uprising rather than for the 50th anniversary in the following year because 2008 was the year China would host the Olympics and the world's eyes were upon it. Between March 10 and March 14, 2008 monks in Lhasa led various demonstrations against religious controls, including patriotic education campaigns and forced denunciations of the Dalai Lama. When police attempted to break up the demonstrations lay Tibetans joined the monks and the numbers of demonstrators swelled.² Some waved the Tibetan national flag. Over the following days peaceful demonstrations turned to violent protests as a number of protestors began attacking government offices, and police stations, as well as Han and Hui Muslim-owned businesses. In contrast with earlier waves of unrest, the 2008 unrest was characterized not just by "ethnic protest" against the state, but also by "ethnic conflict", inter-communal ethnic violence.³ In Lhasa Tibetan rioters targeted non-

¹ For a detailed account of these events see Tsering Shakya, *Dragon in the Land of Snows*. Street protests in Tibetan areas continued sporadically during the 1990s.

² Hillman 2008a.

³ The distinction between "ethnic protest" and "ethnic conflict" follows Suzan Olzak. Olzak

Tibetan civilians, leading to the death of 18 people.⁴ Exile Tibetan sources estimate that at least 200 Tibetans lost their lives during the subsequent crackdown by security forces.⁵

Another characteristic of the 2008 unrest was its scale. During 1987-1989 ethnic unrest was largely concentrated in Lhasa, the political and religious center of the Tibetan world. Only a very small number of demonstrations took place outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) during this period. In 2008 the unrest spread from Lhasa to Tibetan areas in Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan provinces, with as many as 30,000 Tibetans participating in more than 100 separate incidents protest actions across the plateau.⁶



Figure 1: Sites of protest on the Tibet Plateau 1987-2007

defines ethnic conflict as “a confrontation between members of two or more ethnic groups,” and ethnic protest as a demonstration of public grievance by an ethnic group that “has the general public or some office of government as its audience.” See Olzak 1992, 8-9.

⁴ See various news reports from this period. The Chinese government reports 18 civilian deaths.

⁵ Barnett 2009.

⁶ According to China’s official news agency Xinhua, there were more than 150 incidents of vandalism or burning across Tibetan areas during the two weeks from March 10 to March 25, 2008. See <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-04-01/233615271291.shtml>, accessed January 10, 2014.



Figure 2: Sites of protest and violence on the Tibet Plateau in 2008

Since Spring 2008 periodic unrest has continued in Tibetan areas. There have been frequent clashes between Tibetan citizens and the police in Ngaba (Ch. Aba) Prefecture and Kardze (Ch. Ganzi) Prefecture in Sichuan Province, leading to several deaths. There have also been regular demonstrations by monks and students in Golog (Ch. Guoluo) in Gansu Province. Since 2009 self-immolation has emerged as a new and extreme form of ethnic protest in various parts of the plateau. More than 120 Tibetans have set themselves on fire in protest against Chinese government policies and/or Communist Party rules. Self-immolators include monks, nuns and lay people.⁷

The cause of the current wave of extreme ethnic unrest that began in 2008 is the subject of ongoing political and scholarly debate. The political debate is characterized by hostile polemics between Chinese Communist Party leaders on the one hand, and representatives of exile Tibetan communities on the other. Exile groups charge that the unrest is a reaction

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the self-immolations as a new form of protest in Tibet see Shakya 2012.

to the oppressive and non-inclusive policies of the Chinese Communist Party. The exiles and their supporters charge that Tibetans are being marginalized culturally and economically in their homelands and that their rights are being systematically violated. Some have gone so far as to accuse the Chinese government of perpetrating “cultural genocide” against Tibetans by limiting avenues for the expression and development of Tibetan culture.⁸ According to this view, the unrest is a result of a deterioration of “ethnic security”—that is, Tibetans’ perceptions of their ability to preserve, express and develop their ethnic distinctiveness in everyday economic, social and cultural practices.⁹

The Chinese government vehemently rejects the view that either Tibetan culture or Tibetan ways of life are under threat. On the contrary, the Chinese government argues that its policies promote Tibetan culture. China’s leaders argue that the claim of “cultural genocide” is a lie fabricated by the exiles to support their case for Tibetan independence.¹⁰ While the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA, Tibetan government-in-exile) advocate only for genuine Tibetan autonomy within the People’s Republic of China and not full independence, the Chinese government calls their position a subterfuge, accusing the exiles of seeking independence by stealth. The Chinese government accuses the “Dalai clique”—a derogatory term for the Dalai Lama, other exile leaders and their supporters—of orchestrating the unrest since 2008, and of promoting self-immolations to foment instability and promote the separatist agenda. Speaking at a televised press conference following the 2008 riots China’s Premier Wen Jiabao declared that “there were ample facts and plenty of evidence proving that the incident was organised, premeditated, masterminded and incited by the Dalai clique.”¹¹ The Premier also publicly blamed the Dalai Lama and exiled leaders for instigating the self-immolations that began in 2009.

⁸ For an example of this perspective, see the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) publication ‘60 Years of Chinese Misrule | Arguing Cultural Genocide in Tibet’.
<https://www.savetibet.org/60-years-of-chinese-misrule-arguing-cultural-genocide-in-tibet/>, accessed November 8, 2013.

⁹ On theories of ethnic security, see Wolff 2006; Horowitz 2000.

¹⁰ See Wen Jiabao comments March 2008.

¹¹ Wen Jiabao was speaking at a televised news conference in Beijing on 18 March 2008. The quote was provided by CNN: “Report: Over 100 surrender, admit involvement in Tibet clashes”. CNN. March 19, 2008. Accessed July 3, 2008.

Chinese media outlets routinely repeated the accusation, including in English-language publications targeting an international audience. According to one such publication, the self-immolations are to be blamed on “the shameless brutality of the “Dalai clique” as the organizer and author of these crimes.”¹²

The Chinese Communist Party leadership’s framework for interpreting the unrest is rooted in Maoist-era approaches to identifying friends and foes of the Communist revolution, and by the rhetoric of class struggle. A key reference is Mao Zedong’s 1937 essay on the distinction between “contradictions among the people” and “contradictions against the people”.¹³ According to Mao, contradictions among the people are the result of ignorance or false consciousness and can be resolved through education and persuasion. Contradictions against the people, however, represent a threat that must be eliminated or subjected to absolute control.

Because the Chinese Communist Party’s position is that unrest is orchestrated by Tibetan “splittists” and their anti-China supporters in the West, incidents of unrest are now routinely identified as contradictions against the people. The Party’s categorization of the unrest as hostile provides the political justification needed for a harsh response. China has responded to the 2008 unrest by dramatically expanding its internal security apparatus. Since 2008 Chinese government expenditure on internal security has grown so dramatically that it now exceeds expenditure on external defense.¹⁴ China’s “stability maintenance” (*weiwen*) approach to governing Tibet has involved a dramatic scaling up of security forces and surveillance infrastructure. Police numbers have been increased in all Tibetan areas and People’s Armed Police reinforcements that were sent as a response to the 2008 riots have been made permanent. A local official from Ngaba Prefecture in Sichuan Province

¹² See Yeshe 2013.

¹³ Mao Zedong 1990.

¹⁴ In 2013 China’s budget for domestic security was RMB 740.6 billion; the budget for external defense was RMB 769.1 billion. See “China hikes defense budget, to spend more on internal security”, Reuters online 3 March 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/05/us-china-parliament-defence-idUSBRE92403620130305>, accessed 02 January 2014.

estimated that more than half of all state employees in his prefecture work for one of several law enforcement agencies.¹⁵ Limitations on Tibetans' movements have also been strictly enforced. Tibetans from outside the TAR are not permitted to travel to the TAR. Many Tibetans suspected of sympathies with the protest movements are barred from leaving their home counties. Many have had their passports confiscated and it is extremely difficult for Tibetans to obtain new ones. Communications in Tibetan areas are also tightly controlled. Internet services are often closed for months at a time or made available only through monitored Internet cafes. 3G networks providing Internet access to mobile phones are unavailable throughout much of the plateau. Festivals and other cultural events have been cancelled indefinitely in order to prevent large public gatherings of Tibetans.¹⁶

Since 2011 when the number of self-immolations by Tibetans began to rise, Chinese authorities further increased investment in the surveillance of Tibetan communities. In scenes reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, "red arm band" volunteers were seen patrolling in some neighborhoods looking for signs of trouble. In several rural areas, especially in parts of Sichuan Province where there has been a high number of self-immolations, local governments have stationed public servants, known as "volunteers", in every village. The volunteers' task is to gather intelligence and to report suspected preparations for protest or self-immolation. In urban areas local authorities have divided neighborhoods into grids, appointing staff to monitor each grid and to report suspicious activities to the district administration or police. Self-immolation has been made a criminal act and even family members of self-immolators are being held accountable. For CCP leaders self-immolations are contradictions against the people, serving the "black hand" of splittists and anti-China forces. As the head of Ngaba (Ch. Aba) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan asserted, "Tibetans who set themselves on fire are outcasts, criminals and mentally ill people manipulated by the exiled Dalai Lama".¹⁷

¹⁵ Interview, Chengdu, March 11, 2013.

¹⁶ An example is the famous Lithang (Sichuan Province) horse race festival that was held every summer before 2008.

¹⁷ See "Tibetan self-immolators are outcasts, criminals and mentally ill, claims China", The Guardian Online, 7 March 2012, accessed 03 January 2014.

International scholarly opinion on the causes of the recent wave of unrest can be broadly divided into two camps. One group emphasizes social and economic factors as the primary sources of grievance. According to this view, Tibetans are becoming increasingly marginalized as Tibetan areas become increasingly integrated into the Chinese national economy. China's Tibetan regions have undergone dramatic social and economic change during the past 15 years, especially since the launch of the Great Western Development (GWD, Ch. *Xibu dakaifa*) campaign in 2000. This long-term multibillion-dollar program was designed in response to increasing economic inequality between China's eastern coastal provinces and the western regions. Compared with the westward expansion of the USA in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the GWD was essentially an enormous infrastructure development program designed to integrate the resource-rich, western provinces, many parts of which are ethnographically Tibetan, with the dynamic, but resource-poor economies of the eastern provinces.¹⁸ While there has been much debate about the aims of the GWD and its benefits for the diverse communities of western China¹⁹, the scale of public investment and its impacts have been enormous. Much of the GWD-labeled investment has been channeled into large-scale infrastructure projects in such as airports, railways and gas pipelines. A flagship project was the railway to Lhasa, which opened in 2006. By 2008 all Tibetan counties were connected to the national highway network. GWD-related investments contributed to more than a decade of double-digit growth for Tibetan areas and a rapid increase in Tibetan incomes.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/07/tibetan-immolators-outcasts-criminals-china>,

¹⁸ China's remote, western regions have the country's highest concentrations of rural poverty. On China's evolving approaches to poverty alleviation in the region and policy parallels with the Great Western Development strategy, see Hillman 2003b; 2003c.

¹⁹ Some commentators have accused the Chinese government of using the Go West campaign as being little more than a civilizing project, designed to pacify restive minorities through long-term and gradual integration with Han Chinese. See Hillman 2009. Others have highlighted the connection between increased state investment and worsening official corruption at the local level. See Hillman 2014.

However, although China's western provinces have experienced more than a decade of double-digit economic growth, scholars point out that growth has been uneven, non-inclusive and destabilizing.²⁰ Approximately 85% of Tibetans live in rural areas where incomes remain low—less than a dollar a day in many places.²¹ Scholars have observed that state-led economic growth has created employment opportunities in particular economic sectors such as construction, administration and services, which has benefited only a minority of Tibetans, particularly those employed by state agencies. State-led development has also benefited non-Tibetan economic migrants who have followed state investment to the region in unprecedented numbers. There is evidence that better skilled non-Tibetan migrants have out-competed Tibetans in urban labor markets.²² Nearly all Lhasa taxi drivers are non-Tibetan, for example, and a majority of Lhasa's small businesses are operated by ethnic Han and ethnic Hui. A similar picture is emerging in Tibetan towns as non-Tibetan migrants take advantage of knowhow, networks and access to capital to set up new businesses to serve new industries. Some analysts have drawn a link between these economic factors and the targeting of non-Tibetan civilians and property during the Spring 2008 unrest.²³

The flood of non-Tibetan migrants into Tibet in recent years is also dramatically changing the character of many Tibetan towns, fueling perceptions that Tibetan culture is under threat. Indeed, many scholars argue that fears for Tibet's cultural and religious identity are the primary triggers for the recent wave of unrest. Scholars argue, for example, that increased restrictions on organized religion have angered many among the Tibetan Buddhist communities. Restrictions on monasteries include bans on worship of the Dalai Lama, compulsory attendance at 'patriotic education' sessions that often involve forced denunciations of the Dalai Lama, strict registration requirements on the number of monks

²⁰ See Fischer 2005; Hillman 2008b.

²¹ See Barnett 2009.

²² See Hillman 2013a.

²³ Economic inequality is evident even in culture tourism, an industry that has expanded rapidly in recent years due to improvements in transport infrastructure. Studies have shown that higher paid positions are often taken by non-Tibetans from other parts of China. See Ashild Kolas 2008; Hillman 2003b.

attached to a particular monastery and travel limitations for monks.²⁴ At a number of regionally significant monasteries and Buddhist training centers, monks who are not from the immediate local area are forbidden from visiting. While these restrictions apply only to the Buddhist clergy, scholars argue that the perceived injustices against monks and nuns cause much resentment among ordinary Tibetans. Robert Barnett has argued, for example, that the introduction of tighter restrictions on organized religion in parts of the plateau outside the TAR explains the spread of protests to these areas since 2008.²⁵

Scholars argue that China's cultural and education policies also stoke fears among Tibetans about the survival of their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness. Indeed, language and education issues have been at the core of several recent protests in Tibetan areas. Tibetan-medium education offers an opportunity to master Tibetan literature and the rich body of cultural and historical knowledge recorded in the Tibetan language. Attending Tibetan-medium schools, however, severely limits young people's future career opportunities as further education and employment opportunities require the skills and education that only Chinese-medium schools can provide. Entry to the civil service in Tibetan areas, for example, requires candidates to sit an examination in Chinese. Although Chinese law requires that Tibetan-area civil servants have knowledge of Tibetan language, the Tibetan language component of the exam is very basic. This is a cause of great frustration to many educated Tibetan youth who are increasingly aware that their plight is a widespread social phenomenon and not just an individual problem. Indeed there is evidence of a rising Tibetan nationalism and rights consciousness among a new generation of youth.²⁶ As Clémence Henry argues, Tibetan language and education policy is a site where Chinese Communist Party leaders' fears and Tibetan people's worries meet: a fear of resurgent nationalism on the one side, and worries of losing one's cultural identity on the other.²⁷

²⁴ For more details on religious restrictions, see Barnett 2012.

²⁵ See Barnett 2009.

²⁶ See Robin 2015.

²⁷ Henry 2015.

Other scholars have highlighted the local political dimension of ethnic unrest, including the superficiality of China's system of so-called ethnic regional autonomy (*diyu minzu zizhi*).²⁸ Other political dimensions of discontent include the tendency for local governments in Tibetan areas to recruit Sinicized ethnic Tibetan cadres who form a separate political class, and, because of their weaker Tibetan language skills, are often unable to communicate effectively with ordinary Tibetans. Scholars have also pointed to the rise in official corruption in Tibetan areas as a result of the massive increases in fiscal transfers during the 2000s.²⁹ The CCP's identification of protestors as antagonists with links to 'hostile forces' gives local authorities limited political space to show tolerance toward protestors. Sympathizers risk being accused of disloyalty. It also discourages local officials from experimenting with conflict-sensitive social and economic policies lest they be accused of stoking Tibetan ethnic consciousness or nationalism. This has also resulted in decreased cooperation between local governments and local and international NGOs, further limiting the space for public debate and policy influence.³⁰

As Emily Yeh has pointed out, interpretations of Tibetans' grievances often reflect individual scholars' backgrounds.³¹ Scholars educated in Tibetan literature, religion and history tend to emphasize cultural and religious factors in their analyses. Students of contemporary Chinese politics and society tend to emphasize social and economic factors in their analyses of the Tibetan unrest. Overall, the evidence suggests that social, economic, cultural and religious factors are all relevant in the analysis of the recent unrest in Tibet. Indeed, the relationship between language and education and economic opportunities suggests that socio-economic and cultural factors underlying Tibetan grievances are closely intertwined. The challenge for scholarship lies in understanding how different sources of grievance interrelate in different local contexts to fuel ethnic unrest. It is noteworthy that the nature of ethnic protest and ethnic conflict has varied from region to region, as has the level of violence. For example, there have been many more incidents of violence in towns

²⁸ Leibold 2015.

²⁹ Hillman 2015.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Yeh 2009.

than in rural areas. Notably also, the majority of self-immolations have occurred in the Ngaba region in northwest Sichuan Province.³² In each of the Tibetan regions local historical, demographic, cultural, geographic, institutional and economic factors interact to shape local conflict dynamics.

Although systematic surveys of the issues are impossible at the present time, anecdotal evidence suggests that sources of grievances vary not just by region, but also according to demographics. There is a noticeable difference in attitudes of young, formally educated Tibetans in their twenties and thirties and their parents' generation. Many Tibetans above the age of 50 have memories of the Cultural Revolution and periods of far worse cultural and economic deprivation and political instability. Indeed, many elderly Tibetans I have met during recent travels to the plateau openly criticize the protestors of Spring 2008 for threatening hard-won stability and improvements in material livelihoods. Many elderly Tibetans, especially those living in rural areas, express general satisfaction with recent government policies.³³ However, many younger and better-educated Tibetans are more aware of the social, economic and cultural changes underway in the People's Republic of China and are aware that they face difficult choices. Success in the Chinese world is often perceived to require turning one's back on the Tibetan world and vice versa. This dilemma appears to be heightening a sense of ethnic insecurity among young Tibetans.

Tibetan youth are also more likely than their elders to be affected by the Chinese government's restrictions on freedoms. At schools Tibetan students are monitored by thought police and disciplined if they write or say anything that challenges the Party's official line. Tibetan youth are also more likely to suffer new restrictions on communications and travel. Internet blockages, the confiscation of mobile phones, and limits on movement are fueling resentment among Tibetan youth. As a Tibetan teacher told me on a recent visit to the plateau, "the only people free to travel around Tibet are the Han Chinese".³⁴

³² Sperling 2013.

³³ See Nyima and Yeh 2015; Hillman 2013b.

³⁴ Interview, Sichuan Province, March 2013.

Such resentments have led to a rising ethnic consciousness among Tibetan youth. Whereas Tibetans in eastern parts of Tibet once lived under the more liberal policies of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan Provinces, the expansion of controls and surveillance across the entire Plateau is galvanizing a pan-Tibetan identity among people whose ancestors would not have readily identified with one another in the same way. At the same time, the 2008 unrest also triggered a Han Chinese nationalist backlash within China, which is fed by and feeds into a rising tide of Chinese nationalism on the world stage. The new Communist Party chief and PRC President Xi Jinping has already declared his intent to “smash Tibetan separatism”, and has overseen continued expansion of China’s tough security maintenance agenda in the region.³⁵ The rise of Tibetan ethnic consciousness alongside an increasingly assertive Chinese nationalism is a “contradiction” that will not be resolved anytime soon.

³⁵ Xi Jinping was speaking in Lhasa in July 2013. See “Xi Jinping: China will 'smash' Tibet separatism”, BBC online news: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14205998>, accessed 02 January 2014.

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