34

Studying Tibetan Identity

Ben Hillman

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the various ways in which Tibetan identity in contemporary China has been studied and understood, paying close attention to how historical circumstances and evolving trends in the social sciences have shaped different perspectives on the subject. The focus is on the available Anglophone literature, but includes references to translations of Tibetan and Chinese sources. The chapter covers debates about (i) Tibetan nationhood that emerged in the pre-People's Republic of China period and intensified following the PRC's annexation of Tibetan territories in 1949–51, (ii) the 'mythical Tibet' literature that accompanied the nationalist discourse, (iii) the post-colonial literature of the 1980s and 1990s that sought to demystify Tibetan identity, (iv) the post-2000s critical Tibetan studies literature that interrogates the meaning of 'Tibetan-ness' and explores the relationship between ethnic identity and other forms of identity, including gender, religion, language and locality and (v) the ethnic awakening literature that examines the changing contours of Tibetan identity and cultural life following the recent wave of political protests. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the different theoretical approaches used in the study of ethnic identity.

APPROACHES TO STUDYING TIBETAN IDENTITY

The subject of Tibetan identity began to attract scholarly interest in the early part of the twentieth century during China's transition from empire to

(multi-) nation-state. Whereas previously only religious scholars had shown much interest in Tibetan culture, the question of 'who are the Tibetans?' gained new currency as borders were being redrawn to make way for emerging nation-states. The first intellectuals to address the question of Tibetan identity were Tibetan and Chinese nationalists, foreign diplomats and Tibetologists. In the second half of the twentieth century, following the annexation[1] of Tibetan territories by the PRC, the subject of Tibetan identity began to attract attention from scholars working in a wider variety of disciplines, including anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, sociology and political science. Each of these disciplines offers different perspectives on the subject of Tibetan identity and its evolution within the PRC and in Tibetan areas outside of the PRC.

A recurring theme across the disciplines is the tension between a vision of Tibet as a unified, ancient and relatively homogenous civilization, on the one hand, and a more heterogeneous and contingent understanding of Tibet, which questions the usefulness of speaking of such things as 'Tibetan identity' or 'Tibetan-ness.' These contrasting visions of Tibetan cultural identity have been informed and shaped by different theoretical approaches in the social sciences. Primordialists assume that ethnic and national identities are ancient and natural phenomena that are assigned at birth (Smith 1998), and are interested to identify defining group characteristics. This view, with origins traceable to eighteenth-century German romanticism, was influential in early European writings about Tibet and the 'Orient' more broadly, and continued to be influential through the mid twentieth century when the Tibet Question was thrust into the international spotlight following the PRC's annexation of Tibetan areas in 1950–51 and the Dalai Lama's flight into exile in 1959.

Even though primordial perspectives are today largely discredited for being ahistoric, primordial assumptions about ethnic identity continue to permeate general debates about ethnic politics and ethnic conflict (Chandra 2012). As Clifford Geertz (1973) observed, ethnic identity might not be primordial per se, but humans very often perceive their identities in such a way because they experience blood ties, language, culture and territorial attachments as givens that infuse their everyday life with meaning. In such a way, Tibetans in China might point to the geography of the plateau, yak herding and barley cultivation, religion, origin myths and a shared written language and culture and territory as evidence of the existence of a distinct ethnic or cultural group, but the question remains how the diverse peoples we know as Tibetans today came to see themselves as members of a wider group.

Instrumentalist perspectives on ethnic identity suggest that ethnicity is not natural, but is mobilized or manipulated by elites as part of strategies for obtaining economic or political power. The instrumentalist approach is more common among political scientists, especially those working in the subfield of conflict studies (e.g., Collier and Hoefller 2004). The approach helps to situate ethnicity within wider social, economic and political frameworks, and, in the Tibet case it is helpful for understanding discourse about Tibetan identity between rival political groups during the Republican and post-1949 periods. However, a weakness of the

instrumental approach is that it does not explain why peoples are so easily mobilized along ethnic lines, such as in periodic street demonstrations and protests.

Constructivists move even further away from the primordial position to hold that identity is a social construct. In the footsteps of Max Weber (1968), constructivists view ethnic identities as the products of historical forces that become 'sticky' over time (Varshney 2009). Some argue that ethnic identities have been socially constructed for most of human history. Others consider ethnic identity to be a more modern construct that emerged with the advent of communication and transport media, enabling peoples to identify for the first time with a wider group perceived to be of common descent (Anderson 1991). Constructivists hold that identity evolves from a constant process of negotiation between self-identification and external ascription, reminding us that ethnic identity is shaped as much by the out-group (the 'other') as by the in-group (Barth 1969). Some constructivists argue that these processes take place constantly such that ethnic identity is always on the move (Brubaker 2004). For constructivists ethnicity is more about what peoples *do* – the practices that express ethnicity or identify someone as belonging to a particular group – rather than what peoples *are*. Constructivist approaches are today predominant in anthropology, history and literary criticism, and, as we shall see, are influential in the recent critical Tibetan studies literature.

Institutionalism provides yet another perspective on ethnic identities in the contemporary world. According to this perspective states play a powerful role in shaping ethnic identity by the way in which ethnicity is 'governed' (Posner 2005). Ethnicity becomes institutionalized, or 'sticky,' in official discourses about identity, and in the institutions through which ethnic difference is managed, including through systems of regional autonomy, elections and political parties. In the China context the institutionalist perspective is particularly useful in understanding the impact of the state's codification of Tibetan and other 'national ethnicities' (*shaoshu minzu*). The perspective also informs recent Chinese scholarship that criticizes the current system of ethnic regional autonomy for hardening ethnic boundaries and preventing integration – the so-called second generation of ethnic policies (Ma 2014).

Although no single theory or disciplinary approach is sufficient in explaining the salience of ethnic identity in our world today, one important dimension of ethnicity cuts across all perspectives and approaches: the drawing of ethnic boundaries. In studying ethnic identity social scientists generally agree that it is important to understand where boundaries between groups are drawn, who draws them and for what reasons. These are key questions to bear in mind when studying Tibetan identity in contemporary China.

TIBETAN IDENTITY IN THE PRE-MODERN PERIOD

The available literature on Tibetan culture and society from the pre-modern period consists mostly of outsider accounts by European, Chinese, Indian and

Japanese observers. The largest number of publications concerned with the subject of 'Tibetan identity' is arguably European, and many are reviewed in Lopez (1998), Dodin and Räther (2001) and Schell (2007). Early European accounts of Tibet were generally preoccupied with religion. This is because early European scholars typically came to study Tibet via religious manuscripts. Many scholars were devout Christians who had an interest in studying Tibetan Buddhism in order to debunk it, and to justify missions to Tibet. Early accounts by Christian scholars and missionaries highlighted the peculiarities of Tibetan Buddhism, including its 'Lamaism and shamanic rituals,' which the foreign observers often did not understand, but which were nevertheless identified as a shared characteristic of the peoples of the Tibet Plateau. In the words of the famous Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733), who was one of the first Europeans to study Tibetan and Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetans were the peoples who practiced the 'false and peculiar religion' (1931: 199).

The religion-centric approach to observing Tibetans continued to feature in the writings of later missionaries and adventurers who journeyed to Tibet. Some observers such as the British missionary and Tibetologist L. Austine Waddell (1895) continued to present Tibetan Buddhism as an ideological enemy that needed to be conquered. By the early twentieth century, however, missionaries, perhaps influenced by the embryonic new disciplines of the social sciences that fissured from philosophy and religion, were beginning to show a more nuanced understanding of, and respect for, Tibetan culture and religious practices. Nevertheless, Tibetan Buddhism, with its exotic fascination for European audiences, continued to be a primary focus, and thus continued to paint a culturally homogenous picture of the Tibetan Plateau.[2]

In the pre-modern period religion is likely to have featured prominently in Tibetans' self-identity through people's close association with local monasteries, deities, sacred landscapes and rituals. However, modernists/constructivists would argue that religious identity in the pre-modern period was localized and vertical – i.e., limited to relationships with local practices and religious leaders, and did not lead to identification with a wider population. Although religion is today a unifying feature of a pan-ethnic identity, some constructivists would argue that such horizontal identification with a wider community only become possible with modern communication technologies (Anderson 1991).

The view of Tibetans as culturally homogenous was perpetuated by the influential writings of the few British officials who lived and worked in central Tibet in the early part of the twentieth century. Some of these officials had close relationships with Tibetan elites, and their writings thus reflected Lhasa-centric views about the reach of the Tibetan Government's religious, if not always political, influence across the wider plateau. In *The Peoples of Tibet* (1928) British diplomat Sir Charles Bell referred to the various peoples of the plateau as Tibetan 'tribes.' Bell (143) described the culturally and linguistically diverse Gyalrong region in eastern Tibet, for example, as 'a large province containing eighteen

Tibetan tribes on the Sino-Tibetan border.' Today, scholars are examining more closely the diverse cultural identities of the peoples of the eastern plateau, with some arguing that such groups have only recently been 'Tibetanized' by scholarly and political discourse (Jinba 2014; Roche 2016), which is discussed further below.

During the Qing Empire (1644–1911), the Tibet Plateau was a mosaic of small states, kingdoms and tribal federations over which Qing control fluctuated (Samuels 1993). Central and west Tibet (U-Tsang) was largely self-governing under the titular authority of the Ganden Phodrang of the Dalai Lamas, however the Qing began stationing imperial residents (*amban*) in Lhasa from the early 1700s.[3] Other parts of the plateau, including parts of Amdo and Kham, had been nominally ruled through the native chieftain (*tusi*) system.[4] Qing control over its Tibetan protectorate diminished significantly in the nineteenth century as other domestic problems, including a series of rebellions, took priority and consumed resources. In the very latter part of the Qing Dynasty, following the violent British expedition to Lhasa in 1903–4, the Qing moved to reassert their authority in the region, bringing a small number of Tibetan areas under direct control via court-appointed county magistrates. The diplomat Eric Teichman (1922: 7–8) described the governing arrangements of the Tibet Plateau in the early twentieth century as follows:

> At the beginning of the present [20th] century, before the British expedition to Lhasa in 1904 and the subsequent Chinese forward movement in Kam [Kham], that portion of High Asia inhabited by Tibetan-speaking peoples, and labeled *Tibet* on European maps, consisted of three separate entities, firstly, the Lama Kingdom of Tibet with its provinces and dependencies, secondly, the semi-independent Native States of Kam under Chinese protection, and thirdly, the Kokonor [Amdo] Territory under the control of the Chinese Amban residing at Sining [Xining] in Kansu [Gansu].

The British historian and diplomat Sir Hugh Richardson (1984: 1) promoted the idea of 'ethnographic Tibet' as a means of distinguishing the wider area 'which peoples of Tibetan race once inhabited exclusively and where they are still in the majority' from 'political Tibet,' which Richardson described as the territory that had been continuously ruled by the Tibetan Government in Lhasa. Richardson (1984: 1–2) explained the relationship between the two entities in the following way:

> In that wider area [of ethnographic Tibet], 'political' Tibet exercised jurisdiction *only in certain places and at irregular intervals*; for the most part, local lay or monastic chiefs were in control of districts of varying size. From the 18th century onwards the region was subject to sporadic Chinese infiltration. But in whatever hands actual authority might lie, the religious influence of Lhasa was a long-standing and all-pervasive force and large donations of money and valuable goods were annually sent to the Dalai Lama.

Following the collapse of the Qing Empire debates about Tibet's post-imperial political status became informed by new imaginings of the ethnic community. Rinchen Lhamo, who was married to British Consul Louis King,

was one of the first Tibetans to write on the subject of Tibetan cultural identity. Claiming that 'Tibetan traditions go back to the dawn of time,' Rinchen Lhamo (1926: 12) asserted:

> [t]he Tibetan Government had proved, by a mass of administrative records, what is indeed self-evident, that all this country was an integral part of the Dalai Lama's realm. All Eastern Tibet is inhabited by Tibetans, and the Eastern Tibetan is as much a Tibetan as a Yorkshireman is an Englishman. The Tibetans are a homogenous nation, bound together by the ties of race, of historical tradition and of a distinctive social, political and material civilization held in common. (60)[5]

Rinchen Lhamo's representation of the Tibetan nation was clearly rooted in a primordial understanding of ethnic identity, but can also be understood from an instrumentalist perspective. Aware of the rising global tide of nationalism that was shaping world politics in the aftermath of the Great War, and Tibet's unclear political status at this time, Rinchen Lhamo was motivated to make a case for a Tibetan national identity. Historical evidence suggests, however, that Rinchen Lhamo's view of where the boundary lay was not shared by all Tibetans, including by other members of central Tibet's political class (Tsomu 2006). As Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya (1993: 2) notes:

> [r]ight up until 1959, the Tibetans had very little sense of being one group. When the Chinese first crossed the Yangtse, then marking the border between Tibet and China, it was the Khampa militia recruited by the Chinese which attacked and ransacked Chamdo. There was no sense among the militia that their brethren were bring invaded by the Chinese.

Accounts of the Republican period by founder of the Tibetan Communist Party Phüntso Wangye suggest ethnic identities were as fractured as the polities on the plateau. In his biography (Goldstein, Sherap and Siebenschuh 2004), Phüntso, an educated Tibetan nationalist from Batang in Kham, recounts his efforts to rally Tibetans around the nationalist and communist causes, and to persuade the elites of the urgent need for reform to ensure Tibet's survival as a nation. However, Phüntso repeatedly failed to find common cause and identification with Tibetans from other areas, notably political elites from across the River Dri (upper Yangtze) in central Tibet. Phüntso's experiences with Lhasa-appointed officials suggest that they did not consider Khampas like Phüntso as one of their own kind, highlighting Tibetans' different perspectives on where boundaries were drawn.[6] Phüntso's experience is corroborated by Wang Juan's (2013) study of elite Tibetan and Chinese understandings of Tibetan identity in the Republican period. Wang found that Nationalist Party bosses, warlord Liu Wenhui's Xikang government and local Khampa leaders all harbored different perceptions of who was and who was not Tibetan. Historians are only just beginning to uncover the reasons why different actors drew the boundaries in different places.

As Tsering Shakya (1993) reminds us, one of the reasons a pan-ethnic identity could not exist, was the absence in the Tibetan language of a group name for all 'Tibetans.' The closest Tibetan-language term is *bod-pa (pronounced per ba)*, but

this term is understood in Kham and Amdo to refer only to peoples in central Tibet. Historically, central Tibetans also only used the term to refer to themselves, and not to Khampas (peoples from Kham) or Amdowas (peoples from Amdo) or the tribes of Gyarong, although this practice has noticeably changed in recent years, and is discussed further below. Shakya (1993: 1) notes an even narrower usage of *bodpa* – the nomads of central Tibet use the term to refer to the peoples of the Lhasa Valley. In Kham and Amdo there is little evidence from the pre-PRC period that peoples had a sense of belonging to a wider Tibetan community. Many of the peoples of southeastern Tibet identified as *Khampas*, and were recognized as such by central Tibetans and *Amdowa*. First-hand accounts from eastern parts of Tibet during the Republican period confirm the salience of local and religious identities over wider ethnic community identities.[7] Across the plateau sub-regional identities or notions of belonging to particular Buddhist sects (Nyingma, Kargyu, Sakya, Geluk and Bon) were far more prominent than national identities (Mortensen 2016; Hillman 2010). As political scientist Dawa Norbu (1992: 10) observes:

> Regionally, Tibetans identified themselves as Khampa, Topa, Tsangpa and Amdo-wa of Kham, Toi, Tsang (Shigatse) and Amdo regions. Sectarian identity is rooted in the different traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and is particularly powerful among the lamas. Regional identities and attachments to homelands (*phayul*) are more popular among the laity. In practice, of course, sectarian and territorial identities may overlap and reinforce each other … Before the politicization of Tibetan ethnicity 'we' and 'they,' or 'Tibetan' and 'non-Tibetan' was a Buddhist differentiation between believers and non-believers, *phyipa* and *nangpa*.

The inhabitants of eastern parts of the plateau may have identified with Lhasa in a religious sense, but many held the central Tibetan Government and its officials in contempt, and the Tibetan army as much a threat as Chinese armies from the east. A vivid account of these perceptions of regional difference is found in Naktsang Nulo's (2014) *My Tibetan Childhood*. In his memoir Nakstang notes that he was called a 'Golok' by other Tibetans, in reference to the region near to where he was born (the territory of Golog in Amdo is now administered as the Guoluo Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province).

Chinese sources from the late Qing and early Republican period use a variety of ethnonyms, and not all of them flattering, to describe the various peoples, particularly peoples in the eastern parts of the plateau, whom we would today know as Tibetans. For centuries Chinese referred to Tibetans from Tsang as 'tufan' 吐番. However, these terms did not apply to peoples from outside the two main provinces of central Tibet. The modern Chinese term for Tibet – 'Xizang' – is likely to have emerged as a truncated phonetic transliteration of U-Tsang, which today still only refers to western and central Tibet – the present-day Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), thus maintaining a distinction between 'political' Tibet and what others call 'ethnographic' Tibet or 'zangqu' (Tibetan regions) in Chinese. Imperial Chinese administrators had different terms for the peoples known today as Tibetans, including the derogatory terms 'xifan' 西番 (western barbarian), 'heifan' 黑番 (black barbarian) and 'shengfan' 生番 (raw barbarian), which

referred to Tibetans as well as other peoples today known by different names such as Nuosu, Lisu, Zhuang and Qiang (Rockhill 1891). In southern Kham along the present Yunnan-Sichuan border Han Chinese and other ethnic groups referred to local Tibetans as 'Kangba' (from Tib. Khampa) or used sub-regional descriptors. Peoples from Kham also frequently referred to themselves as 'Khampa' when outside their region (Goullart 1955). However, there has never been a collective Tibetan or Chinese-language term for all the peoples of the eastern plateau.

Recent scholarship, including by historians working in the New Qing History school, has highlighted different perspectives on ethnic and cultural identities in the Qing Empire, prompting students of ethnic identity and ethnic politics to rethink the way we identify and conceptualize different peoples during the period (Rawski 1996; Crossley 2000; Elliot 2001). Historians and anthropologists, in particular, are moving the gaze away from the center of empire to the periphery where they are unearthing new knowledge about the diversity of local societies across the Tibet Plateau (Dai 2009; Wellens 2010; Dhondup 2011; Hartley 2013; Tsomu 2014; Giersch 2016; Buffetrille 2017) and how peoples perceived themselves and others. Recent historical scholarship supports the idea that a pan-Tibetan identity is a much more recent phenomenon than previously thought, and emphasizes the profound impact of Chinese state-building, Tibet's incorporation into the People's Republic of China and social and economic change on the formation of a pan-Tibetan ethnic and ethnonational identity.

TIBET AS A NATION

In 1949 the new People's Republic asserted its sovereignty over most of the area claimed by the Qing as part of its realm, including the Tibet Plateau. Initially Beijing promised self-rule to central Tibet under the political leadership of the Dalai Lama's government while the eastern parts of the plateau were incorporated into neighboring provinces with which they had been tied administratively since the eighteenth century.[8] Central ('political') Tibet was to be spared from the CCP's more radical social and economic reforms. However, in eastern parts of Tibet that were outside of the Tibetan Government's jurisdiction the CCP began introducing land reforms, which caused major social upheaval and a series of rebellions. Following major rebellions in eastern Tibet in 1956 (Kham) and 1958 (Amdo), large numbers of rebels and refugees fled to Lhasa. Tales of the experience of Communist Party rule in eastern Tibet heightened tensions and fears in Lhasa about the future. By early 1959 senior members of the Dalai Lama's government became convinced that Beijing could not be trusted to preserve Tibetan religious and political institutions. Rumors swirled in the capital that the People's Liberation Army was planning to kidnap the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama's senior advisers convinced him that he should flee to India and establish a government in exile that would advocate for Tibet's independence.

On March 17 1959 the Dalai Lama and senior members of the Tibetan Government left for India. Approximately 80,000 Tibetans followed. The PRC's annexation of Tibet and the Tibetan Government's exile intensified debates about Tibetan identity – specifically, whether the Tibetan peoples constituted a nation, which would, under principles of international law and practice, entitle Tibetans to some form of political sovereignty.

The Dalai Lama's exile prompted new debate about Tibetan national identity. The debate was driven largely by exiled elites who were interested to promote pan-Tibetan solidarity. Tibetan nationalists sought to cultivate a pan-Tibetan national identity by appealing to sources of a shared heritage. Tsering Shakya (1993: 1) highlights a 1959 article that appeared in the Indian journal *Tibetan Mirror*, which was 'symbolically addressed to "all tsampa: eaters.' According to Shakya:

> [t]he writer had gone down to the staple, barley, as the most basic element which united the Tibetan-speaking world. If Buddhism provided the atom of Tibetanness, then tsampa provided the sub-particles of Tibetanness. The use of tsampa transcended dialect, sect and regionalism.

Other scholars have pointed to an emerging pan-Tibetan consciousness in the post-1959 period. Dawa Norbu (1992: 10), for example, observes during the post-1959 period 'a growing consciousness, particularly among "urban" Tibetans, about a pan-Tibetan identity that sharply differentiates itself from *rgya-rigs* or *rgya-mi* – the Chinese/Han. The "in-group" is increasingly identified as *bodpa* or *bod-rigs*.' However, while a pan-Tibetan identity was clearly forming among exiles, there is little available evidence to demonstrate the extent to which this ethnic consciousness was being embraced by Tibetans in China.

Western academics also began contributing to debates about the identity aspect of the 'Tibet Question,' as the issue of Tibet's political status came to be known. A 1960 article by the missionary Robert Ekvall sparked a generation of inquiry into Tibetan cultural identity as the basis of a national identity. Ekvall, who was writing soon after the Dalai Lama's flight into exile, opened his article with the following observation (375):

> Recent conversations with Mr. Norbu, the eldest brother of the Dalai Lama, have suggested that the Tibetans, for the first time (or with a new insistence), are asking themselves, 'What does it mean to be a Tibetan?' In other words, by what criteria do they identify themselves as different from the Chinese, and how do those differences constitute a distinctive whole, which they want to preserve against the change which the Chinese now seek to impose on them? … It is clear that they realize how relatively unstable the national entity of Tibet has been and the degree to which the fragmented political structure contributed to, or at least invited part of, the disaster which has come upon them. But at the same time they feel that the Tibetan way of life – Tibetan culture as they newly recognize the concept – is something coherent and distinctive for which they are willing to struggle and risk much in a very unequal conflict.

Based on his conversations with Tibetans in Amdo, Ekvall determined that there were several traits through which Tibetans identified with other Tibetans

and distinguished themselves from non-Tibetans: religion, folkways, language, ancestry and land. These attributes are contiguous with the attributes used by twentieth-century scholars to define the ethnic basis of nations. Joseph Stalin provided the classic definition during debates about the status of the Soviet Union's different ethnic communities. In Stalin's words (1954: 16–17):

> [a] nation is a historically evolved community of language, territorial, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture … It must be emphasized that none of the above characteristics is by itself sufficient to define a nation. On the other hand, it is sufficient for any one of the above characteristics to be absent and the nation ceases to be a nation.

Even though Stalin's definition highlighted the 'psychological' dimension of national identity – in contrast with the idea of 'class' – his definition was influential among scholars from the primordialist camp. Anthony Smith, one of the founders of nationalism studies, elaborated on Stalin's criteria. Smith (1986) defined nations as groups that shared (i) a group name, (ii) a myth of common ancestry, (iii) shared historical memories, (iv) shared cultural attributes (e.g., religion, language), (v) attachment to a common territory and (vi) a sense of solidarity. Applying the criteria to the peoples of the Tibet Plateau yields debatable results. There are a number of cultural attributes shared by Tibetans across the plateau. However, it is difficult to aruge that the peoples of central Tibet were attached to the territories of Amdo and Kham. And the languages spoken by central Tibetans and Amdowa are not mutually intelligible.

Ekvall's article on Tibetans' self-image and the emerging literature on nations and nationalism inspired a generation of scholarship on Tibetan national identity. Many of these works had a political bent in that their authors supported recognition of Tibet as an independent state, even after the exiled Tibetan Government abandoned in 1988 its pursuit of independence. In *Tibetan Nation*, Warren Smith (1996) argues that Tibet existed for centuries as a nation and thus deserves the right to self-determination.[9] In the same vein, Dawa Norbu (2001) offers a detailed account of Tibet's historical status to prove the existence of an ethnonational political community. Ronald Schwartz (1994) also draws on historical sources in his discussion of Tibetan national identity and its expression in the 1980s street protests.

For different reasons the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took a similar approach to identifying Tibetans as a nation. The CCP was influenced by Soviet approaches to governing the different ethnic groups that lived within the borders of the new state, borrowing Stalin's criteria to identify and codify national groups. The CCP recognized Tibetans as one the PRC's minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*). However, the Chinese term *minzu* had different connotations to the English-language word 'nation' – i.e., it did not suggest a right to self-determination. According to the Chinese formulation, Tibetans were a sub-group of the greater Chinese (*zhonghua*) family of ethnic groups. The

idea built on Sun Yatsen's Republican-era nation-building concept of the 'five Chinese races' – Han, Tibetan, Mongol, Manchu and Uyghur – who would join together in the creation of a post-imperial nation and China's republic . The Communist Party recognized a larger number of ethnic groups, although it provided special concessions to a select few. For territorially concentrated groups such as the Tibetans the Communist Party introduced a system of regional ethnic autonomy to ensure, in theory, a greater voice for Tibetans in the governing of local affairs, particularly in the area of social and cultural policy. The CCP had made such promises to ethnic groups during the civil war in order to enlist their support. However, unlike in the Soviet Union, the new Chinese constitution did not grant such groups the right to secede from the PRC.

Although China's *minzu* identification subordinated Tibetans within a multiethnic Chinese nation, the project also contributed powerfully to a pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness. The official Chinese determination that several million peoples on the plateau belonged to the 'zang' ethnicity was an action by the out-group, but it began to shape Tibetan in-group perceptions. Like other official minority ethnicities, Tibetans were identified as 'zang' on their national identification cards, a status that would carry significant social and economic consequences over the coming decades. As more Tibetans, especially young peoples, began to undertake formal education and to learn Chinese, many became increasingly aware of their status as ethnic Tibetans, even in the absence of a Tibetan-language name for the wider group, and even though many young peoples, particularly in eastern Tibet, belonged to communities that spoke non-Tibetan languages (Roche and Suzuki 2018). Some Tibetan 'tribes' were also classified as belonging to other ethnic groups (Wallenböck 2017).

China's school curricula, designed to support nation-building goals and to reflect Marxist-inspired official ideologies about the development of human societies from primitive communism to slavery, to feudalism and capitalism, and ultimately to socialism, also tended towards a monolithic view of Tibetan history. Textbook treatment of the nature of traditional Tibetan society and Tibet's relations with China (Hillman 2003) subordinated the Tibetan experience within the larger Han Chinese-dominated historical narrative, but, in doing so, conflated diverse Tibetan experiences. More recent CCP efforts to promote integration by educating Tibetan students in special schools in Han Chinese cities (Ch. *neidiban*) have also sometimes had the unintended consequence of galvanizing a pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness (Ch. *minzu yishi*). Although the program is designed to assimilate and groom a new generation of educated professionals in the Chinese-speaking world, by participating in the program Tibetan students from different parts of the plateau become aware of their common experiences, values and fates, which are easily contrasted with those of Han Chinese students. In a similar vein, Yang (2017) found that Tibetan students' experience of China's *minzu* university system, which was designed to 'civilize' and 'integrate' minorities, strengthened Tibetan group unity.[10]

THE MYTH OF TIBET AND CRITICAL RESPONSES

The nationalism studies literature that promoted a unified view of Tibetan cultural identity was accompanied by a body of (mostly Western) literature that romanticized Tibet as an unchanging land of spirituality and mystery that lay at the end of the earth (Klieger 1992; Bishop 1993). The orientalist image of Tibet, to which many Western and Chinese tourists, travel writers and journalists still cling, was inspired by travel writings from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that highlighted the mysteriousness of the 'forbidden' kingdom. Donald Lopez (1998: 3) argues that the myth-making project goes back even further to 'the earliest encounters of Venetian travelers and Catholic missionaries with Tibetan monks at the Mongol court.' Since then 'tales of the mysteries of [Tibetans'] mountain homeland and the magic of their strange – yet strangely familiar – religion have had a peculiar hold on the Western imagination (3).' The captivation is encapsulated in a quote from Christmas Humphreys' widely read 1951 survey of Buddhism, in which the author writes 'The great spaces … and the silence where men are scarce and wildlife is rarer still, all lend themselves to introverted thought, to the development of abnormal ways of thought, to the practice of the best and worst of the manifold powers of the mind' (Lopez 1998: 4).

Travel writing took off in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as adventurers followed in the path of colonial expansion and conquest (Dodin and Räther 2001; Schell 2007). At the time many in the West were intrigued by Tibet's self-imposed isolation, its ban on foreign visitors, including official foreign missions and its apparent rejection of modernity (and colonization). As adventurer Alexandra David-Néel (1927: xii) confessed, 'what decided me to go to Lhasa was, above all, the absurd prohibition which closes Tibet.' Writings by David-Néel and others fed a myth of Tibet as a place of 'happy, peaceful peoples devoted to the practice of Buddhism, whose remote and ecologically enlightened land, ruled by a god-king, was invaded by the forces of evil' in the form of a red peril (Lopez 1998: 11). This myth was nurtured through the 1950s and 1960s by Tibetans in exile who understood that the pure land myth attracted international attention and sympathy for the exiles' cause (Anand 2007). Western Tibetologists contributed to the myth as they dissected the trove of (previously unseen outside of Tibet) literary works the exiles carried with them, which were hailed as a 'repository of ancient wisdom whose lineage, as the Dalai Lama himself claimed, could be traced back to the Buddha himself' (Lopez 1998: 42).

The Shangrilafication of Tibet was an imaginary exercise that many Tibetans found difficult to resist, and reproduction of the myth is today often on display during encounters with tourists both in exile enclaves and in the Tibetan areas of China, which have become increasingly exposed to foreign and Chinese domestic tourism (Kolås 2008; Hillman 2010). Since the rapid growth of China's domestic tourism industry beginning from the early 2000s Han Chinese have also developed a fascination with Tibet based on the same myths of Tibet as Shangrila – a

name that first appears in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton (Hillman 2003). The Chinese embrace of the Tibet myth can be seen in many contemporary novels, films and travel writings. Nowadays it is common for wealthy Chinese businesspeoples and movie stars to have a personal Tibetan lama, and the rapid expansion and renovation of many Tibetan monasteries across the plateau in recent years can be attributed in part to generous donations from Han Chinese devotees (Hillman 2005; Smyer Yu 2012). The image of Tibetans as full of spirituality and free of the stresses and material obsessions of the modern world contrasts with earlier Chinese images of Tibetans and other peoples of the step as uncivilized barbarians (Hillman and Henfry 2006), and with official portrayals of pre-1949 life in Tibet as nasty, brutish and short – a politically constructed narrative designed to highlight the benefits brought by the Chinese Communist Party since 1950. Bifurcated Chinese perceptions of Tibetans – dangerous/uncivilized versus spiritual/free continue to this day, with both contrasting images serving to reinforce notions of a homogenous Tibetan identity.

Because the subject of Tibetan identity had become so politicized, it is no surprise that the Tibet-as-myth literature encountered a backlash from Tibetan nationalists and their sympathizers in the scholarly world. Georges Dreyfus (2005) offers a considered critique of Lopez and proponents of the Tibet-as-myth literature. He rejects the idea that a pan-Tibetan identity was hijacked by Western fantasies, arguing that through religion Tibetans had a sense of collective identity long before 1950 that can be understood as a form of proto-nationalism. Renowned Tibetan Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman (2001) took a more extreme position against the myth literature, famously accusing Donald Lopez of being an apologist for China. Thurman's scholarly outburst is a reminder of how polarized positions on the status of Tibet have narrowed the space for scholarly inquiry about what it means to be Tibetan, but it also highlights a difference between scholars who are spiritually and emotionally engaged in Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan cultural world and scholars who maintain a greater distance from their subject. Religious scholars and practitioners have tended to emphasize homogeneity among Tibetans by pointing to shared religious traditions and doctrines whereas scholars working in other disciplines such as anthropology and history increasingly emphasize local difference.[11]

A number of works in the 1990s and 2000s by Lopez (1998), Goldstein (1997), Makley (1999), Shakya (1999) and others have sought to navigate the polarized space for debating Tibetan identity. These works have sought to demystify Tibet by painting a more nuanced and realistic picture of Tibetan society in the PRC. These efforts have paved the way for a new generation of scholars to further interrogate the boundaries and categories that have been promoted and reified by both sides of the political divide. Partly in response to the politically charged debates about Tibetan unity and identity, a new body of literature has emerged to critically examine Tibetan identity in China today. Led by anthropologists, but with contributions from geography, history, literary studies, political science

and sociology, critical Tibetan-ness studies seeks to understand the changing meanings of being Tibetan in China today (Shneiderman 2006). Influenced by constructivist understandings of identity and by interpretive approaches, and influenced by the category and label iconoclasm of the New Qing History school, critical Tibetan-ness studies have highlighted regional diversity (Roche 2015), local context (van Spengen 2006; Roche 2016) and gender differences (Makley 1999 & 2007; Hillman and Henfry 2006; Jinba 2013; Rajan 2015) in the contingent and evolving construction of Tibetan identity.

POST-2008 ETHNIC AWAKENING

Other recent developments in the study of Tibetan identity have followed the impact of the street protests of March 2008 and the accompanying wave of political mobilization. Numerous scholars have argued that the protests – the largest outpouring of anti-government sentiment since the rebellions of the 1950s – triggered a pan-ethnic 'awakening' among Tibetans in China. On March 10, 2008, the anniversary of the uprising that precipitated the Dalai Lama's flight into exile, monks from Drepung and Sera, two of Lhasa's three great monasteries, were intercepted when attempting to march on the city center. Some of the monks were reportedly beaten and arrested. On the following day another group of monks attempted to march to demand the release of their colleagues. More monks were reportedly beaten and detained. Security forces surrounded Drepung and Sera, as well as Ganden, the third great monastery of Lhasa, to prevent further mobilization. However, lay peoples began to demonstrate in the streets in support of the monks and in opposition to China's policies (Smith 2010). 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. In contrast with the protests of 1987–89, the 2008 protests were characterized not only by 'ethnic protest' against the state, but also by 'ethnic conflict,' inter-communal ethnic violence targeted at non-Tibetans (Barnett 2009; Hillman 2016a).

Street protests quickly spread across the plateau to Tibetan areas in Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan provinces. As many as 30,000 Tibetans participated in more than 100 separate 'mass incidents' (Ch. *quntixing shijian*) – a broad Communist Party term for any form of social unrest, including protests, the public airing of grievances and physical skirmishes that arise from 'internal contradictions.'[12] The unprecedented scale of political mobilization across the plateau highlighted a united sense of disaffection among Tibetans from all regions, disaffection that was shared via social media, facilitating horizontal connections among Tibetans from different parts of the plateau. In all of the protests for which records are available peoples called for the return of the Dalai Lama, highlighting the religious leader's continued significance as a rallying point for Tibetan identity and ethnic mobilization despite six decades in exile.

Scholars generally agree that the 2008 street protests (known in Chinese and Tibetan by the shorthand 'March 14' [3.14]) had a galvanizing effect on a pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness (Smith 2010; Warner 2013; Hillman 2014). It was arguably the first time that Tibetans from all regions had voiced common grievances in such a mass mobilization. The protests also brought together Tibetans from diverse backgrounds. Whereas most participants in the demonstrations of the late 1980s were monks and nuns, the 2008 street protests were led and joined by Tibetans from all walks of life. Discussion of the protests and their meaning on social media increased horizontal connections among Tibetans in China and between Tibetans in China and the Tibetan diaspora.

The authorities' response to the protests also had a great impact on pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness. A security crackdown on Tibetans involved mass arrests and incarcerations. Harsh sentences for vague offences were meted out to Tibetans across the plateau, causing widespread anger. In the wake of the protests Tibetans of all walks of life experienced various forms of discrimination, which also served to galvanize a pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness, even among Tibetan Communist Party members and state employees (Grant 2016; Hillman 2016b). Airports introduced special security lanes for screening Tibetan passengers, and many hotels in major cities such as Beijing refused accommodation to Tibetans. Ethnic Tibetan public servants, including policemen, were subjected to the same treatment, reminding peoples that their ethnic status trumped other forms of identity and that Tibetans were 'persons of interest' regardless of their years of service to the state or loyalty to the CCP. Propaganda and patriotic education campaigns further targeted Tibetans and Tibetan areas (Terrone 2016).[13] Tibetans from Kham and Amdo were required to obtain special permits to travel to the TAR and to stay in government-assigned accommodation.

In the wake of March 14 other forms of surveillance were introduced and strengthened in Tibetan areas, including grid surveillance in cities and the deployment of 'volunteer' observers in villages whose job is to report on suspicious activities. As the security crackdown successfully shut down street protests, political protest took on a new and terrible form. Although the first self-immolation took place in 2009, from 2011 the number of self-immolations dramatically increased (Buffetrille and Robin 2012; Woeser 2016). Like the street protests that preceded them, the self-immolations generated much discussion about the issues at the heart of the political protest, particularly on social media. The actions forced Tibetans from diverse backgrounds, including those who had previously shown little interest in politics or policy, to confront questions of Tibetan cultural identity and its future in the People's Republic of China.

The events of 2008 appear to have energized Tibetan cultural life in the PRC. New debates about Tibetan unity and identity can be seen in the burgeoning blogosphere and via social media platforms such as *Wechat* (Kehoe 2015; Gayley 2016; Yangzom 2016). A movement led by writers, comedians and singers and religious figures emerged to 'purify' or re-Tibetanize the Tibetan language by

replacing words borrowed from Chinese with Tibetan constructs. Examples include the exhortation to use the word *Glog klad* instead of the Chinese word *diannao* for computer and *glog brnyan* instead of the Chinese word *dianying* for movie. Both of these Tibetan neologisms are direct translations of the Chinese terms – 'electric brain' in the case of the former, and 'electric shadow' in case of the latter (Thurston 2018). There are further reports in the wake of March 14 of Tibetans of all generations taking greater interest in preserving their language through grassroots language associations (Robin 2014; McConnel 2015; Henry 2016) and promoting aspects of Tibetan cultural heritage such as dress (Yeh 2013) and festivals (High Peaks Pure Earth 2012).

Scholars have documented Tibetans' increasing use of social media to engage in Tibetan-language debates about developments in Tibet, human rights, Chinese policies and laws and Tibetan ethics, and in the process forging new links among Tibetans from across the plateau as well as with Tibetans outside China (Buffetrille 2014; Robin 2016). Such debates serve to reinforce a sense of nationhood across the plateau. Artists and writers have also responded to recent events with musical and poetic works that rally Tibetan readers around unifying themes, and which cleverly employ traditional metaphors to express cultural identities, and to evade detection by online censors (Morcom 2015). According to Lama Jabb (2015: 137) 'the frequent use of metaphors such as "red wind," and "wild yak," and their status as unifying imageries, demonstrate how cultural trauma serves as a rallying point for the Tibetan peoples … these figurative expressions reinforce Tibetan solidarity.'[14]

The events of 2008 also prompted new debates among Chinese scholars and policymakers about the effectiveness of China's ethnic policies, in particular the system of ethnic regional autonomy. Using an institutionalist approach to the study of identity formation, some Chinese scholars have argued that the ethnic regional autonomy system has led to a hardening of ethnic boundaries, and reinforces local nationalism (Ma 2014). Several Chinese scholars have proposed a 'second generation' of ethnic policies that emphasizes individual rights and multiculturalism over regional ethnic autonomy (Leibold 2016; Elliot 2015). Such changes, although unlikely at the present time, would have an unpredictable impact on Tibetan identity formation in the PRC.

The events of 2008 and their aftermath have exposed a deep tension between competing versions of Tibetan cultural identity and approaches to governing Tibetan areas. The Party-state sponsors highly sanitized forms of cultural expression that treat ethnic identity as a subset of Chinese identity. Ethnic markers such as differences in foods, dress, song and dance are widely celebrated as long as they can be perceived as an exotic variation of Chinese-ness and not as markers of a separate nation or civilization. Expressions of cultural identity that challenge state-sanctioned versions of ethnicity in China are likely to be branded as 'local nationalism,' which is treated as a threat to China's national integrity and security. The framing of the problem, which has its roots both in the CCP's nationalist

ideology and in Maoist approaches to identifying potential friends and enemies of the revolution, thus delegitimizes certain forms of ethnic expression and all forms of Tibetan political mobilization (Hillman 2016b).

CONCLUSION

The Tibetan ethnic awakening since 2008 highlights the ongoing challenge of integrating Tibetans into the Chinese nation – a problem that is likely to persist well into the twenty-first century (Shokdung 2017). Tibetans in China are citizens of the PRC, but most Tibetans do not consider themselves to be Chinese in the cultural sense. When speaking in Tibetan, Tibetans do not use the term Han Chinese to distinguish this cultural group from minority groups in the PRC; Tibetans simply refer to the Han Chinese as 'Chinese' (Tib. *rgya mi*). The conflation of Chinese cultural identity (Ch. *Zhonghua*) with Chinese citizenship (Ch. *Zhongguo*) is a practice that predates the PRC – it represents nationalist efforts to include diverse groups in the modern Chinese nation in the transition from empire, a project begun by the nationalists under Sun Yatsen and continued by the Chinese Communist Party after 1949. The ideological challenge is further compounded by the PRC's more recent promotion of a rejuvenated Greater China (also referred to as the China Dream), which is clearly rooted in Han conceptualizations of China, Chinese civilization and Chinese history. The key unanswered question, and a promising direction for future research, is how Tibetan identity will evolve in response to these ideological challenges, current policy settings and China's rapid social and economic change. To address this question, scholarship will need to continue to draw on multiple disciplinary and theoretical perspectives.

Notes

1 I use the neutral term 'annexation' for the military conquest of Tibetan territories at the end of the Chinese civil war. The official Chinese account refers to the 'liberation' of Tibet. Many Tibetans and Western observers use the word 'invasion' to describe the People's Republic of China's conquest of the region.
2 A useful analysis of early and contemporary European writing on Tibetan culture can be found in Dodin and Räther (2001).
3 The Ganden Phodrang was the government of Tibet headed by the Dalai Lamas. It was established by the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82) and lasted until 2011 when the 14th and current Dalai Lama relinquished his political authority.
4 The nature of Manchu (Qing) and earlier dynastic rule in Tibetan areas is the subject of significant scholarly debate. It is a highly politicized subject because it relates to debates about Tibet's historical 'belonging' to China (Goldstein 1997; Shakya 1999). Beijing claims that Tibet was incorporated into China during the Yuan Dynasty. Tibetan exiled government characterizes the relationship between Beijing and Lhasa as that of 'patron' and 'priest,' which emphasizes equality over subordination (Powers 2007 and 2016).

5 The author made these remarks in reference to the 'abortive Simla conference of 1913–1914' at which British, Chinese and Tibetan representatives sought to demarcate Tibet's boundaries and political status. At the conference the Tibetan Government claimed jurisdiction over all of ethnographic Tibet, including the regions of Kham and Amdo.
6 Another helpful source on Tibetan perspectives on group boundaries is Sarah Jacoby (2016).
7 See Geoffrey Samuels (1993) for an excellent guide to the diversity of Tibetan societies over multiple centuries.
8 For a comprehensive history of this period and analysis of the Seventeen Point Agreement that outlined the shared powers and responsibilities of Beijing and Lhasa, see Shakya (1999).
9 See Smith (2009) for a more recent articulation of the argument.
10 On the relationship between education strategies and Tibetan identity see also Zenz (2014). On education as the frontline in the battle for the preservation of Tibetan cultural identity see Henry (2016).
11 See Snellgrove (1966) for an earlier debate on this same point, and Dreyfus (1994).
12 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.
13 On the role of history and propaganda in PRC efforts to shape Tibetan identity and self-perception, see Powers (2004).
14 On the role of music in Tibetan identity among Tibetans in the diaspora see Diehl (2002). Another useful source on identity in the Tibetan diaspora is Swank (2014).

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