

Ethnic Tourism and Ethnic Politics in Tibetan China

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Economic development in Tibetan China over the past two decades has brought Tibetans and non-Tibetans into the most extensive direct contact in history. The process began in the 1980s and accelerated during the 1990s with increasingly large state-led investment in the region. The Great Western Development Campaign, launched in 2000, sought to further the integration of China's western regions through even larger investments in infrastructure and communications.¹ As a result, non-Tibetan migrants in search of higher-paid jobs have poured into urban Tibetan areas on an unprecedented scale.² More recently, economic migrants have been joined by China's mobile middle classes. Rapid developments in transport and communications, coupled with government policies promoting leisure and consumer spending, have triggered a boom in domestic tourism.³ Since the 1990s, millions of newly wealthy Chinese from the east have visited Tibetan areas for the first time.

Tourism's westward expansion poses a set of interesting challenges for ethnic identity formation and ethnic relations in China. On

the one hand, tourism is a force for consolidating national unity. Expanding in concert with infrastructure and markets, domestic tourism provides a vehicle for the government to explore the boundaries of the nation and tame the periphery—a civilizing project by which frontier peoples become incorporated into the nation.⁴ Indeed, government policies and tourism marketing in China are designed to reinforce the concept of unity among China's 56 nationalities—55 of which are minorities. The peoples and destinations are marketed as China's cultural treasures and the people as *Chinese* ethnic groups. Tibet, for example, is commonly referred to as China's Tibet (*Zhongguo de Xizang*).

Not surprisingly, many of the early studies of ethnic tourism in China interpreted tourism as a mechanism for reinforcing rigid ethnic hierarchies.⁵ Inspired by official Chinese discourse, a number of studies examined the way minority cultures were represented in

mainstream education, media, and film. Drawing on theories of internal orientalism, much of this English-language literature argued that the commodification of ethnic minorities for tourist consumption reinforced patterns of domination by the Han Chinese, who make up 92% of the population. According to the orientalist logic, tourism allows ethnic minorities to be exploited at the hands of urban elites who control the distribution of capital. Ethnic minorities merely perform their cultural heritage in a way that reinforces their inferior or backward status.⁶

A number of studies have shown that many books, novels, and films do tend to depict ethnic minorities—Tibetans included—as primitive in comparison to the more civilized Han Chinese. But there are also interesting differences in the way different ethnic minorities are represented in China. Minorities in the tropical regions of southwest China are frequently represented by non-threatening feminine images, whereas minority cultures such as Tibetans, Mongols, and other groups from the steppe with a history of threatening the Chinese

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interior are more often portrayed as masculine and aggressive.⁷ The different representations probably reflect historical relations between the Chinese heartlands and the periphery. The lands of China have been conquered numerous times by the peoples of the steppe—Tibetan, Mongol, and Manchu.

In spite of these lingering stereotypes, it is remarkable how fast stereotypes are changing in contemporary and evolving China. Information now comes from more sources, and people are generally better-educated and freer to travel. In fact, as I have been visiting China since the early 1990s, I have noticed a considerable rise in interest in all things Tibetan. Mainstream Chinese film directors have produced a number of romanticized documentaries and feature films about Tibet for Han audiences; Tibetan pop stars have also broken into the mainstream music industry. Images of an idealized Tibet as a place of natural and spiritual purity seem



The opening of the Qinghai-Lhasa Railway in 2006 has brought a new surge of tourists to Tibet.

to have replaced earlier images of backwardness and uncleanness, and appeal to members of China's new middle class looking for escape from the competition and congestion of their urban working lives. By the late 1990s, Tibet had become chic in China's east coast cities. In 2000, many in Shanghai considered a trip to Tibet as a *sine qua non* for the wealthy.⁸

For many years, Lhasa was the main target of domestic tourists. Then a little known Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in northwest Yunnan launched a publicity offensive, officially renaming one of its counties "Shangri-la"—the fabled Himalayan paradise.⁹ Derived from the 1933 James Hilton novel *Lost Horizon* in which a group of Westerners escaping a military coup on India crash-land in a mysterious part of the Himalayas, the name "Shangri-la" has become synonymous with paradise on earth.

As visitors to Shangri-la (*Xianggelila*) swelled to more than a million a year, dozens of books on Shangri-la and Tibetan culture began to hit the bookshelves. The town began to rebuild itself according to a contemporary interpretation of Tibetan architecture. All edifices (even those already standing) were built following the new building code, using grey bricks and painted window frames that slope inwards at the top in the style of local Tibetan farmhouses. A local ordinance now requires that all signs on streets, public buildings and store fronts be written in Tibetan as well as Chinese. Mistakes were made in the rush to comply—one beauty salon called itself a "leprosy clinic" until the mistake was pointed

out by a passerby.¹⁰ As Matthew 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."¹¹

But what is the impact of this tourism-driven shangrilafication of Tibet? Some would see it merely as a contrived "authenticity"—a performance staged to conform to the visitor's expectations, reinforcing Tibetans' quaintness or backwardness.¹² But such approaches to the impact of ethnic tourism on cultural identity tend to assume a loss of agency on the part of ethnic minorities in the reinvention of their cultural heritage and ethnic identities. They sometimes overlook the potential for tourism to actually enhance local agency. My observations of ethnic tourism development in Tibetan China suggest a multitude of opportunities for Tibetans to engage in the reproduction of their cultural identity—even in its commodified forms. In Diqing, Tibetans are often complicit in the shangrilafication project—embracing idealized images of Tibet and Tibetans to enhance their status in China's ethnic hierarchy. An example of this is the celebration of Tibetans' masculine feats on horseback as showcased at revived local festivals.¹³ Other examples of locally-promoted idealized imagery can be seen in tourism marketing literature, photographic exhibitions, and cultural performances, staged in a newly built cultural center.

Tourism often provides the incentives and resources for the rediscovery and revitalization of cultural her-

itage. Today in Diqing, anything uniquely Tibetan has shot up in value. The local maker of traditional knives has become one of the richest men in the region—often seen driving around in his gas-guzzling Hummer. Local artisans whose traditional pottery had largely been replaced by cheap factory-made plastics were suddenly in big demand, prompting young people in the community who might otherwise not have shown interest, to learn the techniques of the trade. Across town, Tibetan music played more frequently—even if lyrics had been translated into Chinese to increase the songs’ appeal. One of the most popular songs, heard everywhere, was about the Khampa—the eastern Tibetan male. In a distinct marker of cultural identity, men would sing with gusto, “with barley wine in my veins, I fly free.”

Despite its supposed role in nation building, ethnic tourism sometimes provides political cover for expressions of ethnic distinctiveness. As a matter of fact, one of the best-known observers of ethnic tourism has likened it to a form of ethnic separatism. According to one scholar, in promoting the restoration of ethnic markers, strategies for ethnic tourism development are similar to strategies of political mobilization deployed by ethnic

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separatist leaders.¹⁴ Indeed, leaders of ethnic separatist movements often appeal to primordial sentiments and romanticized or glorified versions of cultural legacy. Tibetans complicit in shangrilafication are certainly not all separatists—many are undoubtedly in it for the money. But their participation nevertheless reflects a rising ethnic consciousness and a renewed pride in their cultural heritage.

Ethnic consciousness is further enhanced by the frequent Tibetan-non-Tibetan encounters that tourism brings. Ethnic consciousness may rise through the pleasant experience of discovering different attitudes, tastes, or customs in others, or less pleasantly through the experience of missing out on higher-paying work that goes to non-Tibetans. Because of the rapid pace of economic development and the low level of skills and education in Tibetan areas, non-Tibetan migrants often out-compete Tibetans for jobs in the new economy.¹⁵

Indeed, tourism development has lured many economic migrants and petty traders to the region. Although many of these migrants are non-Tibetans, a large portion of them are Tibetans from other Tibetan areas. This influx of non-local Tibetans creates another



Monks and tourists alike wait in line to enter one of Tibet’s many spiritual centers.

interesting dynamic in the workplace and in the public sphere where Tibetans mix, share stories, and exchange information—something that has also contributed to an increasing pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness across a region long divided by geography, dialect, custom, religious practice, and politics, as I have argued elsewhere.¹⁶

Another striking aspect of ethnic tourism has been its role in the revival of Tibetan Buddhist religion. Religious revival had been gaining speed since the 1980s, when religious policies were liberalized in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. While the Chinese party-state continues to exercise control over organized religion (number of monks, compulsory patriotic education, etc.), policies since the 1980s, including compensation and direct state funding of monasteries, have allowed for a sustained revitalization of monastic life. There are now an estimated 120,000 Tibetan monks and nuns in China out of a total population of approximately 5.4 million Tibetans.¹⁸

By placing additional value on cultural heritage, tourism has given Tibetan Buddhism a boost in profile. While the situation varies from region to region, in Shangri-la, where Tibetan culture is celebrated as the keystone of local development strategies, the local monastery has enjoyed growing influence in the local area. As a showcase of the region's cultural heritage, the monastery is a prime tourism asset. Local government has pumped millions of dollars into its renovation and expansion. It has become increasingly popular for young men to join the monastery, and many applicants are turned away. Senior monks command more and more resources and enjoy increasing clout with local authorities. An early dispute over control of gate revenues at the monastery was eventually resolved in the monastery's favor. During the dispute, several monks physically attacked government officials and were not charged. Local officials are increasingly reluctant to upset the monks, because their views have significant influence over local public opinion.¹⁸ The situation is arguably different in Lhasa and some parts of eastern Tibet where monasteries have been hotbeds of Tibetan nationalism. In those places monastic activities tend to be more curtailed, resulting in periodic outbursts such as the recent protests in March 2008. But the potential for ethnic tourism, when fully embraced by a locality, to strengthen the position of religious institutions vis-a-vis local government remains undiminished.

The inherent tension between ethnic tourism as a vehicle for both Chinese nation building and local eth-

nic consciousness raising is well expressed in the form of a giant prayer wheel, erected by the Shangri-la County government in 2002 to commemorate the changing of the county's name to Shangri-la. The giant golden prayer wheel is inscribed with images of all of China's 56 nationalities, symbolizing the unity of the nation. Named the "Fortunate Victory" Prayer Wheel, it also serves as a reminder of the victory of the People's Liberation Army in 1949. But the giant golden prayer wheel also serves as a reminder of the centrality of Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism in the local community—something to be celebrated and embraced.

This is significant. It was not that long ago in China that displays of ethnicity were actively discouraged and sometimes persecuted. Minority children were taught that their cultural heritage was backward—something to be ashamed of—and this was true for most minority nationalities in China. Ethnic tourism, as kitsch as some of the cultural hybrids may appear to be, contributes to a process of ethnic identity formation and reformulation, prompting a reevaluation of people once thought backward or barbaric. Ethnic tourism has the power to raise ethnic consciousness and rekindle a sense of pride in one's cultural heritage.

This process is certainly underway in Shangri-la where ethnic identity is articulated in concert with state policies, rather than in opposition to them as remains

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the case in some other parts of Tibetan China. For those regions, ethnic tourism might still offer a platform for greater recognition of minority identities and rights in the future. Majority Han Chi-

nese who visit Tibetan areas—the ones I have spoken with at least—generally return home with a new sense of appreciation for Tibet, its rich heritage and its distinctiveness. Following the horrific social upheavals across Tibetan China in early 2008, we can only hope that greater contact between Chinese from the east and Tibetans will lead to greater understanding and sensitivity. Ethnic tourism could provide part of the solution to changing public opinion among China's increasingly prosperous and educated middle classes. This might pave the way for more enlightened Chinese government policies in the region—policies that enable Tibetans to reconcile their dual identities as ethnic Tibetans and as Chinese citizens.

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